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MAPS

Meet the Explorer Solving the Mysteries of Google Maps

A French multimedia artist invites your web-map queries with the promise to (eventually) provide a real-world answer.

LAURA BLISS | [@mslaurabliss](#) | Jan 12, 2015 | [Comments](#)



[Diane Goes for You](#)

Perusing the world on Google Maps, especially in "Earth" mode, invites as many questions as it answers. Why does that island disappear when you

change to "map" view? Is that an outcropping of rocks or a herd of cows in that little town? How does it feel to stand where those three national borders converge?

French artist Diane Rabreau is on a mission to solve these visual mysteries. On her site, [Diane Goes For You](#), she asks "players" from around the world to submit location-specific Google Maps queries, with the promise that, one day, she'll travel to the coordinates and produce a response. The one rule: The answer can't already be found on the web.

Using a combination of video, photo, text, and animation, Rabreau's results are at turns dreamy, scientific, and strangely moving. (Evocative, even, of the German novelist [W.G. Sebald](#), and his mix of memoir, travelogue, and history.)

Swamp estonia



Having moved from Paris to Ghent, Belgium, to study multimedia arts, Rabreau found herself wanting to know the area better. Exploring the region on Google Maps in early January 2013, she noticed an [island](#) situated in the Netherlands' Scheldt river which appeared in satellite mode but vanished in the simplified "map" view. Rabreau tells CityLab by email:

I took my bike and I went to see if it existed or not. I took many detours and biked for 10 hours. When I arrived, it was night, so too dark on the horizon to see if the island was there or not. I spent the

night walking through a city, meeting people, and ended at a punk party in the harbor. The idea grew during the whole time I was biking, walking, and thinking about how I could find a reason to do what I am doing right now—questioning, exploring, discovering, sharing, in life for the long term.

"This section of road could be of huge interest or it could be nothing, whatever, we just want to know."

Since then, she has responded to more than 24 queries to her "living search engine for unknown destinations" on two separate trips: the first around Belgium and France, and the second, thanks to help from the [Rotterdam International Film Festival](#), throughout Europe. Now, she has calculated the "[time of day](#)" shown by pivoting irrigation arms on circular wheat fields in Spain. She has touched the [walls of a women's prison](#) in England. She's gone beneath a [massive cloud](#) in France to verify one man's childhood memory.

Prison prison2



By her own account, Rabreau has risked arrest and her own safety on these long, at times impossible journeys (weather and terrain have prevented a couple of answers). "Every experience was hellish and fulfilling," she says. Yet, "The more hellish the experience was, the more I felt emotional when I got there."

Why do it? In part, to demonstrate the unknowability of the world as seen from a laptop, even with Google's near-complete cartographic conquest. But also to raise questions about what destinations are "worth" traveling to, when most tourist places are readily "knowable" online. "Oddly, there's no information about what here looks like a [section of a road](#) in a Parisian building site," Rabreau writes on her site. "This 'section of road' could be of a huge interest or it could be nothing, whatever, we just want to know."

So if ever you've had a burning question about Google Maps imagery, send it [Rabreau's way](#)—especially if it has to do with Japan. That's where Rabreau's gearing up to travel for a full month in February. Patience, of course, is key: She's got a [long list of mysteries](#) already in the queue.

About the Author



Laura Bliss is a staff writer at CityLab. She writes about public utilities, education, and cartography, among other topics.

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