

musings

Maps for Maps' Sake

A debate that has been revolving around cartography for many years concerns its status as an art or a science or both. As I explained earlier there is and generally has to be some form of subjectivity performed by the cartographer when making a map. It is this subjectivity that some believe bring it into the realm of art. A cartographer can decide what to include/exclude, what colours work best, how much to generalise contours and so on. These can be seen as creative decisions. Others see cartography as purely scientific in that it is the cartographer's job to portray geographic information visually as accurately and legibly as possible. They see the subjective decision as essential to the success of the map and in no way creative. Yet others see it as a combination of both. All tend to agree though that the ever increasing dependency on computer-generated mapping is slowly eradicating the individuality of maps. Too many untrained map-makers rely on software default settings when assigning colours and symbols creating generic uninspiring products ¹

Personally I see cartography as an aesthetically aware science. It is visual communication not unlike graphic design. Where graphic design is concerned with client/product image cartography is concerned with helping us understand the world around us. Both can fail. Art for me cannot fail and thus an artist map cannot fail. Good art allows and encourages viewer interpretation, be it rejection or embrace while cartography and graphic design don't. We can appreciate a well-made map or logo merely for its composition, line and form but if it doesn't communicate its intended message clearly then the designer has failed. But I guess when it comes down to it they are all a form of communication

A great many artists across the world find inspiration in maps. Not surprisingly something most of them have in common is physical place, location in the real world. Through maps they offer alternate ways to look upon the world and our place within it. Especially where GPS (Global Positioning Systems) inspired art is concerned we are seeing the use of technology to help us understand our place in a world that technology itself has alienated us from.

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Never before have we been better able to physically locate ourselves on the earth yet never have we been so lost.

The way artists utilize GIS varies as greatly as the technology's conventional applications. Some use it to provide fantastic levels of interactivity, some as a medium with which to draw and paint and some to open our eyes to the excesses of society. ⁴

London based artist Thorsten Knaub used GIS to create a diary that he calls GPSDiary (2003). Knaub has documented his movements over the course of a year via the coordinates collected by his constantly carried handheld GPS. The result is an online diary that allows the viewer to access his travels on any day.. His paths appear as an abstract wandering line with very little in the way of geographic referencing. This is a very personal record of someone's life for a year even though lacking comments and thoughts. A presented diary offers voyeuristic temptation, a look at someones most personal inner world. Is only knowing the authors location any less voyeuristic? ⁵

Surface Patterns: Audio Tours (2004) is a project by Jen Southern and part of UK collective Blink's wider project, Surface Patterns, wherein Huddersfield University and surrounding areas are mapped complete with memories of particular featured places. These memories are provided by 10 individuals who visited the sites and recorded their memories via phone. The local or visitor to Huddersfield is able to use this map and with their phone (text or voice) experience a very personal and unique tour. I would love to see this concept taken up by cities around the world, it would completely redefine the tourist map. Surface Patterns records the usually hidden history of a place, a patchwork map of personal experiences of a location available to all. ⁶

A particularly ambitious project by American Jack Ox and a team of computer experts titled CAVE (2000) attempts to map music within a 3d environment. Ox uses pencil drawings of different landscapes which he associates with different tonal ranges as the virtual landscape while multi-layered strips of varying colours dance around the atmosphere in unison with varying aspects of the musical composition. Essentially one could see this as a glorified music visualization not unlike your computers media player produces. They would be right as what else is a Windows Media Player Visualisation but a real-time map of dynamic data (with frilly bits). The project is also an interesting interpretation of synaesthesia, seeing sound. ⁷

Even with the ascendancy of digitally aided mapping there are still a great many of us that prefer the physical printed map. ⁸

In *Boy's Art*, 2003, American-based artist Joyce Kozloff presented hand-reproduced maps of historic military conflicts. These maps are peopled with superheroes, gods and legends, just the sort of thing male children are encouraged to play with. Her 2001 exhibition titled *Targets* presented globes of military maps and a large walk-in wooden sphere which has its interior covered in historic US military maps. Kozloff's globe seems to offer an opportunity to enter the Earth to view its inner workings. Pessimistically/realistically Kozloff appears to insinuate it is conflict that has made the world what it is today. She uses maps to symbolize this continual global conflict, the very objects that helped make it a reality. ^{9, 10}

Kathy Prendergast references cultural identity and political power in her work. A particularly large work entitled *City Drawings* comprises 180 hand-drawn maps of the world's major cities. Another work entitled *Lost Map* at first appearing as a normal map of the US on closer inspection turns out to only include place names that include the word lost. A similar work is an *Emotional Atlas of the World* (1999) that only includes place names that include feelings. ¹¹

Philipino Lordy Rodriguez uses pen and ink to recreate maps of places he has lived or been. His colourful work distorts borders and features depending on his own subjective experience of the places represented. Are these striking images glimpses into Lordy's own cognitive maps or is he highlighting the sometimes misleading subjectivity that maps can be subject to? Maybe both and how our own maps can mislead ourselves? ¹²

REFERENCE

1 J.B.Krygier: [Cartography as an Art and a Science?](#)

An indepth look at the current and historical state of this ongoing debate.

2 [The Fine Art of GIS Cartography](#)

David J. Endelman presents his thoughts on the possibilities of GIS as an artistic medium. A little dated (1999) yet interesting if you compare it with current GIS inspired artists.

3 [Data Art and the Anti-sublime](#)

An insightful essay looking at, critiquing and theorising data art and artists. Lev Manovich makes some interesting historicl parralells and divergences and offers his own views on the future direction of Data Mapping.

4 [Conceptual Design/Info Arts Links](#)

An incredibly comprehensive list of links to all things digital art including projects, individual artists/collectives and theory. This would have to be the definitive digital art reference online.

5 [GPSdiary.org](#)

A GPS inspired project by London based artist Thorsten Knaub.

6 [Surface Patterns](#)

A project by the collective Blink wherein the audience can listen and contribute an audio database of memories centred around 10 mapped sites in Huddersfield, UK .

7 [Front door for New Color Organ Site](#)

A ambitious project by Jack Ox and a team of computer experts wherein music is visualized within a virtual environment.

8 [Uncharted Territory](#)

The catalogue for a group show of map-inspired art at Julie Saul Gallery, 2004.

9 [Joyce Kozloff](#)

Joyce Kozloff's 'Boy's Art' again using the language of the military map but this time peopled by childrens toys.

10 [Joyce Kozloff: Globes](#)

Images of Kozloff's 2001 exhibition, *Targets*.

11 [Kathy Predergast](#)

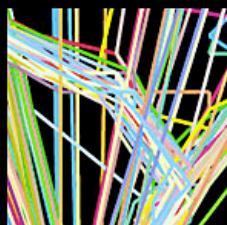
Traditional map inspired work centering around the artist and her place in the world and history.

12 [Lordy Rodriguez](#)

Meticulously drawn maps of American states reimagined through the artists own experiences of the locations.

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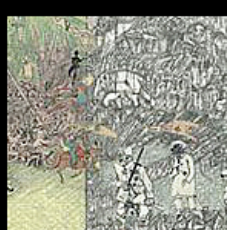
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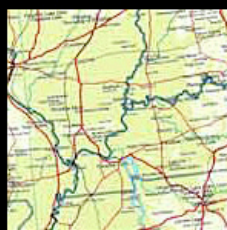
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