

Mapping Uncertain [non-existent(?)] Territory

By April Durham

Cartogram -- A presentation of statistical data in a geographic distribution on a map.

Cartography -- The art or technique of making maps.

People have always had an extreme urgeⁱ to name and categorize the data of the physical world. The drive to contain what we see, to tame the seen and the unseen, define it and make it manageable is the compulsion behind the tradition of cartography.

From the earliest Babylonian clay tablets describing trade routes, to Ptolemy's earth-oriented depiction of the universe, to Mercator's rhumb line (the tool that allowed Amerigo Vespucci to navigate the watery desolation between Europe and the New World), to the international effort to map DNA sequencing, human beings have managed a good show of reducing the world to points, lines, and areas.

Similarly, in a long-term effort to plot the coordinates of Truth, Western philosophy has provided massive volumes considering ethics, existence, epistemology, and so on. Looking to prod the mind, Freud, Jung, Lacan, Irigaray, and many others have diligently charted the psychology of public and private behavior often called madness. Then there is the lengthy tradition of religions providing rigid and fantastical rhetorical schema defining paths of right and wrong as convoluted as the flight of the African honey bee searching for nectar to make her life-giving foodstuff.

These diverse mapping labors, ancient and contemporary, demonstrate that people are indeed driven to describe what they see and experience, asserting a structure of meaning to what they are describing. In the past, mapping has *fixed* the perception and relentlessly ascribed finality to what is understood.

But the contemporary person knows about exceeding the speed of light, unending change, virtual relativity, and a reality that is constructed and shifts with waves of fashion and trend: a situation that is anything but fixed. The contemporary cartographer is working in provisional space that may be one, 10 or 26 dimensions and follows a path that exists in the patterns of chaos.

In his book about Los Angeles ("and other real and imaginary spaces"), Edward Soja refigures the traditional approach to spatial thinking. Customarily space is either seen as concrete material form to be mapped, analyzed, and explained or as an ideological construct that represents space and its social significance. Soja, a professor in the urban planning department at UCLA, offers a trialectic method (rather than a dialectic one) where resolution is not a necessary component of progress, as with the Hegelian model. Rather,

thinking trialectically [where a variety of components inform being] is a necessary part of understanding [the] . . . limitless composition of lifeworlds that are radically open and openly radicalizable; that are all-inclusive and transdisciplinary in scope yet . . . focused and susceptible to strategic choice; that are never completely knowable but whose knowledge none the less guides our search for emancipatory change and freedom from domination.ⁱⁱ

It is a confusing venture at the beginning of the 21st century to make sense of the constant shifts and the incessantly redefined Reality that comprises everyday life, whether we admit our participation in this scenario or not. In his article *Dust Breeding*, Jean Beaudrillard discusses this Disneyland reality that is

neither a real world nor a completely false one, but “gives an illusion of a real world, a world out-there, whereas both [its] world and the world outside of it are mirror images of one another.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We can say that stereotypical notions of Hollywood or the Beverly Hills plastic surgery set support this assertion about Los Angeles, but Beaudrillard asserts quite directly that “all of the United States is in Disneyland.”^{iv} Right away, my response was, “Well, that certainly doesn’t include me. I grow my own tomatoes for God’s sake.” But then honest consideration renders visible the highly constructed situations comprising much of social, political, and business interaction, filling my days and evenings, where I strain to meet caricatured expectations I and others have fabricated for each encounter and where determining responses or moves becomes like a chess game in which the rules are known but often inverted or where new and unexpected sets of conventions are introduced at random and unpredicted intervals. The unpredictability is exhilarating and unnerving, exigent and terrifying, fantastic and terrifying.

Considering the irregularity of reality and the lack of virgin frontier (both literal and theoretical) available for exploration, in a world where everything is known and everything has been digested to the point of banality beyond Proustian dreams (of madelines or isolation or bizarre manners or endless description or otherwise), it seems a likely activity that people, artists, would engage in charting and mapping this unlikely existence we find ourselves navigating. The danger is in committing the highly seductive crime of reduction, naming to assert certainty, assuming too much, and creating a thing that is easily and superficially dismissed.

Attempting to ascertain and reveal information with the ultimate goal of exposure, leading to simplified understanding is not the challenge for the contemporary cartographer. Rather sorting and detailing and participating in the ever-changing navigation of a constantly reconstructed and therefore very demanding reality is a better description of the task. Employment that requires constant vigilance, extreme flexibility, and complete belief in the value of one’s action (whatever that might be) are the demands of this affair. In keeping with Arthur Danto’s description of art “after art history”^v, the job is to playfully, seriously, and wondrously interrogate the state of the body, the mind, and the environment with an outlook that is not about fixing definitions but opening up possibilities.

Notes:

ⁱ In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant offers the notion that the most effective way to make empirical inquiry is to use ideas in such a way that we group them by species and subspecies in an ever more clearly defined structure of categories.

ⁱⁱ Soja, Edward S. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell Publishers. Massachusetts. 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ From a translation of “L’Elevage de Poussiere,” *Liberation*, May 29, 2001. The title is borrowed from one of Duchamp’s works from 1920 and is the title of one of Man Ray’s photographs.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Danto, Arthur C., *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1997