

Decolonizing Cartography? Visual Imagination and the Poetics of Space in Critical Contemporary Art

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“It has been long recognized that mapping is a tool of empire.”¹ With these simple words, Elizabeth Sutton summarized the political, social, and economic implications of Dutch cartography in North America and Africa and its entanglements with imperialism and capitalism. Since the seventeenth century, territories were not mapped for their inhabitants, but for their empowered, imperial audiences. Legal historian Lauren Benton has also noted how maps performed the role of evidence for imperial powers and supported their claims to ownership and occupation.² By the end of the seventeenth century in Europe, the definition of land as a thing to be possessed and the necessity of a global economic expansion in order to sustain economic growth were already being articulated and enforced by maps as a form of legal visual rhetoric. Dutch mapmakers presented maps as empirical systems, obscuring the subjective and conventionalized aspects of mapping and of the systems used to organize the land depicted.³ The ethnographic vignette introduced in the Dutch printmaking practice was an important colonial tool, presenting images of cultural and morphological difference that functioned as indices of “abstract cultural concepts.” Beyond their decorative value, the images inscribed on map borders exoticized and marginalized the non-European.⁴ Figures were selected, extracted, decontextualized, and distilled through visual stereotypes. They served as an inventory of civility and became, ultimately, propagandistic, informational, and moralistic tools.⁵

Can cartography be decolonized? In attempting to respond to this question, I draw on artistic rather than art historical methodologies, analyzing contemporary examples which advance a politically emancipatory artistic practice, aimed at subverting the representational frameworks

through which cultural identities and subjectivities in the mapped territories are constructed. Such a critical engagement may be labeled as experimental geography.⁶ The term, borrowed from artist and geographer Trevor Paglen and popularized by curator Nato Thompson, describes “artists who employ and reference multiple conceptual and physical sources, spanning across history, economy, politics, culture.”⁷ Drawing on the imaginative resources of conceptual art in order to shape new poetics of spatial representation, many contemporary artists contest the positivist epistemology of mapping, revealing its culturally and politically constructed character, deflecting its political stakes in the field of visual representation and revealing its complicities with global systems of economic and political domination. Unlike postcolonial writers on mapping and territory who focus on cultural imperialism and regard them as historical artifacts, these artists assert, on the one hand, that new projects and processes of economic and epistemic colonization are constantly being charted, and on the other hand, that unearthing local and particular material histories may contribute to renegotiating the empowered perspective from which the world continues to be represented. Many of them believe that cartographic language continues to mask difference and to produce homogeneity. Consequently, they disturb the tectonic (scalar or topological) level of cartographic representation.

Often their critical engagement takes into account the visual and political implications of relational geography, concerned with contemporary processes of capitalist expansion, dispossession, and accumulation. Such artists reveal how processes of cultural displacement create new types of relational locality. Relational geography looks at the relation between inhabited places and how it is constituted by movements that traverse places.⁸ It describes “fluid, unfixed and transitional structures,” determined by economic and historical interests.⁹ It also advances an understanding of borders as permeable nonspaces rather than as fixed

territorial limits. However, it is obvious that a description of globalization as unrestricted circulation only pertains to the privileged first world. New political restrictions created invisible or neglected “spaces of exception” that exist beyond legality, whose charting is important in order to disclose the shortcomings of mainstream visual culture. Artworks inspired by relational geography also document the creative means by which subjects attempt to negotiate these constraints and reveal how material spaces are inextricable from the circulation of images.

A major topic in experimental geography is the denaturalization and the imaginative reinvention of borders. Artists are attempting not only to trace the invisible trajectories (of people, goods, and ideas) but also to reveal the inherent flexibility of borders and, thus, to incite us to ignore or transform them. In this respect, many artists act in an emancipatory way in order to endorse a different cosmopolitan or egalitarian imaginary, which takes into account local microhistories and tensions, by rewriting existing borders or excavating the past in order to reveal erased and reinstated frontiers and expose their historically overlapping and shifting morphologies. For instance, using a cartographic system that combines space and time and visualizes the relation between culture and the nation-states, the Société Réaliste art collective constructed an imaginary institution, the *Ministère de l'Architecture* (Fig. 1). The latter issued cartographic representations of deep historical processes of European identity and national (re)construction, such as the project, *Culture States: The Future Is the Extension of the Past by Other Means* (2008), and *Superimposition of Political Frontiers at the Turn of Each Century between Year 0 and Year 2000 on the European Peninsula and Its Surroundings* (2008).¹⁰

2 Anca Benera and Arnold Estefan, *The World Is Bound with Secret Knots*, 2016, installation (thread, military accessories, wall drawing, world map), 157 3/8 x 909/16 in.

Depicting the political equator as a corridor of global conflict, they imagined that the equatorial line has shifted, has been distorted, and thus geography is expanded to generate a new equator. The flexibility of the crochet thread allows it to shift its path according to the changing borders throughout time and around the world, while its depiction also allows us to reclaim power over fabricated territorial layouts now grounded in North-South economic differences.

Since the late 1960s, Latin American conceptual artists like Horacio Zabala and Elda Cerrato also fought against the potential of mapping to confine political imagination, paying heed to the inherent relation between geography and political tensions and revealing the resulting discrepancies between visual representations and the actual mapped territory.

Today, confinement takes place not only by providing a rationalized hierarchization of existing nations as economies (categorized into first, second and third world), but also by naturalizing and fixing representations of locational identity. In its critical stance, experimental geography not only “provincializes the West” as a cultural center, but also challenges existing economic maps by showing how imperial power is inextricably tied to global capitalism. For instance, through their materialist insistence on the exploitation of land resources as opposed to advanced service economies and industrial production of first-world economies, Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor (Fig. 3) contribute to the recognition of the increasing dominance of differentiation over equalization within global capitalism, which leads to uneven development and, thus, to “uneven geographies.”¹²



3 Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor, *Le monde et les choses*, 2014, textile, 118 x 59 in. (300 x 150 cm).

Last, but not least, many artists who poetically approach cartographic representations are engaged in advancing a transnational imaginary that ultimately aims to liberate the political imagination. Although they operate in many ways that I do not have the space to fully describe here, reclaiming agency is a central concern of their critical and ultimately decolonial practice. I understand “coloniality” to be different from “colonialism.” It denotes not actual colonial histories (and their cultural or material traces), but rather the discursive framework within which current subjectivities are produced and reproduced, and within which they are linked to collective forms of self-identification (nation, class, and others) and representational categories (racial, ethnic, gender, and others). In this context, decolonization becomes a practice of contestation of hegemonic cultural representations and forms of discrimination inscribed in various visual epistemologies. For imperialism cannot be reduced to territorial expansion; it also incorporates the production and reproduction of spatial imaginaries and

representations. Of equal importance, artists as experimental geographers aim to empower the viewer through cartographic representations that are equally addressed to the inhabitants of these territories, subjected to the power relations that their maps bring to light.

An emblematic critical strategy can be found in Julie Mehretu's disturbance of the Mercator cartographic projection in monumental paintings that depict an abstract space, a representational nonplace. The political potential of her paintings, which instigate the reclamation of agency, is amplified by their archival and palimpsestic qualities, superimposing architectural drawings of public buildings and squares associated with civil unrest. The artworks seem to encapsulate Dorren Massey's geographic views leveled at an intertwining space and time, constructed from a flux of social relations.¹³ Concomitantly, it denies the possibility of mastering visual representation while preserving echoes of civil resistance. In short, it acts like a dialectical drive on contemporary history.

By presenting these diverse case studies, I hope to point out the disjunction between art history as an analysis of cultural discourses and material practices embedded in the latent colonial imaginary and a form of writing reporting artistic representations and contestations of current global transformations. Art-historical knowledge becomes a politically engaged and prospective practice of cultural and social criticism, grounded in new materialisms. It presents artistic examples that parallel academic research in fields such as geography and visual studies. They alter entrenched representational codes and classification systems and aim to produce "epistemic disobedience." These examples show that postcolonialism is not homogeneous and should not be restricted to unmasking cultural difference; it should also be understood differently in various parts of the world, according to the situated perspective of the critical cartographer. They also indicate that colonialism should be recognized as an

unfinished, transnational process, linked with capitalist globalization and economic segregation. Such a translocal and comparative art-historical approach, which situates itself at the crossroads between the power structures in contemporary world, and indicates zones of exception without speaking in the name of the Other, echoes Walter Mignolo's idea of a "cosmopolitan localism."¹⁴ By focusing on experimental geography, it may rethink geographic knowledge as a spatialization of dynamic economic and social relationships in the age of transnational capitalism. In the visual field, countergeographies of space may imagine alternative representational tools or investigate the material and political histories of drawing.

Notes

¹ Elizabeth A. Sutton, *Capitalism and Cartography in the Dutch Golden Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ Elizabeth A. Sutton, *Early Modern Dutch Prints of Africa* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 175–81.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁶ Nato Thompson, *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography and Urbanism*, Kindle edition (New York: Melville and International Curators Association, 2009).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Société Réaliste is an art collective founded by Ferenc Grof and Jean-Baptiste Naudy in 2004. The artworks in the series "Culture States," while seemingly alluding to the Universal Exhibition taking place in Paris in 1937, recall territorial expansion in an infinite loop as a continuous process of accumulation and dispossession and remind us of formerly independent states that no longer exist today. For the connection with the 1937 Paris exhibition and the disruption of the relation between modernism and nationalism see Andrew Stephan Weiner, "'Shapes I Remember from Maps': Tracking the New Geographies," *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (2010), <http://x-traonline.org/article/the-shapes-i-remember-from-maps/>.

¹¹ Simon Dalby, "The Pentagon's New Imperial Cartography," in *Violent Geographies*, ed. Derek Gregory and Allan Pred (New York: Routledge, 2007), 295–308.

¹² T. J. Demos, “Another World and Another... Notes on Uneven Geographies,” in *Uneven Geographies*, ed. Alex Farquarson and Jim Waters (Nottingham, UK: Nottingham Contemporary, 2010), 11–20.

¹³ Doreen Massey, “Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place,” in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. J. Bird et al. (London: Routledge, 2012), 59–69.

¹⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 270–285.