

A Mapping Practice of Everyday Life

About the power of map making and
alternative strategies of perceiving the world

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Users and Abusers

Introduction

Since the introduction of digital mapping tools and access to online maps, cartography seems to have a renaissance in terms of popularity not only within the scientific community but also among users. Having continuously changed over time, cartographic theory and praxis gain new actuality and are implementing new ways of usage. By overcoming the scientific endeavor to measure our physical environment as pure surface, relationships and processes can be revealed.

As Janet Abrams and Peter Hall suggest in their publication *Else/Where: Mapping – New Cartographies of Networks and Territories*, maps seem to be the “conceptual glue linking the tangible world of buildings, cities and landscapes with the intangible world of social networks and electronic communications” (Abrams / Hall, 2006, p.12). However, mapping technologies are as diverse as the complex agendas that come with it. Together they frame perspectives on how we see and interpret the world, yet remaining a visual image with “rhetorical power” (Dodge / Kitchin / Perkins, 2009a, p.2).

The following essay is trying to navigate through the process of map making, thereby questioning how knowledge is created and power relations can be challenged. Based on critical cartography, I am seeking to explore maps as social documents, rethink modes of representation, and fathom the limits of traditional map making. By examining various mapping projects, I will introduce an expanded notion of the *Praxis of Everyday Life*. As Michel de Certeau demands, the user needs to formulate his own strategies to read and respond to the world. Only then new ways of mapping can be developed and expand the way we perceive the world in order to make “the complex accessible, the hidden visible, [and] the unmappable mappable” (Abrams / Hall, 2006, p.12).

Writing History

Maps can be defined as graphical tools that “classify, represent and communicate spatial relations; a concentrated database of information on the location, shape and size of key features of the landscape and the connections between them” (Hodgkiss quoted in Dodge / Kitchin, 2001, p.65). Developed over centuries, maps have been evolving along with humankind, storing geographic knowledge, providing navigational tools but also delineating history. Cartography is a method to visualize a world that is “too large and too complex to be seen directly” (MacEachren quoted in Dodge / Kitchin, 2001, p.65), hence needs to be compressed and generalized to fit the dimensions of the medium.

However, cartography is not a fixed system, in fact its visual nature has been changing dramatically over time. Traditional maps displaying the physical terrain may vary in scale, era, location, style and technique of reproduction – starting with ancient illustrated approaches to 3D-scans of our built environment today. Yet cartography seems to be confronted with similar demands throughout history – spatial accuracy, symbolizing metaphors and abstraction of what needs to be represented. Even seemingly trivial decisions about line thickness and orientation can have a serious impact on people’s lives. Israeli architect Eyal Weizman notes, that apparently incidental inflections of a line drawn on a geographical map, are “carving through property, shifting the balance of power to one side of the line or the other. Once translated to the built world, lines become hard scorings, etched into territory.” (quoted in Abrams / Hall, 2006, p.15)

Reality is extremely big and, not to forget, three-dimensional. Of course we could create a map in such detail that it would literally cover the whole world. But besides this vast challenge, all maps are necessarily smaller than the reality they represent and geometrical distortion along with graphic generalization of data are unavoidable elements of cartographic representation. In “Lying with Maps”, Mark Monmonier claims, that “map users understand this [distortion of reality] and trust the map-maker to select relevant facts and highlight what’s important, even if the map must grossly distort the earth’s geometry as well as lump together dissimilar features” (2005, p.215). But the society’s naive acceptance of maps as objective representations reinforces a certain view on the world, one usually being introduced by history’s victors, and hence, partitioning the world

into certain groups instead of neutral grounds. Maps are therefore social constructions of the world, indicating a political and economical agenda. As J. B. Harley stresses: “Far from holding up a simple mirror of nature that is true or false, maps re-describe the world – like any other document – in terms of relations of power and cultural practices, preferences, and priorities.” (quoted in Abrams / Hall, 2006, p.12)

Locating the Border

Since much of the reality has to be neglected to produce a readable image, it becomes even more important which aspects are chosen to be represented. In 2002, the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem, released a map of Israel’s West Bank settlement (Fig. 1), showing the precise contours of the settlements and plans for future expansions. The map was designed as part of a B’Tselem report with the intention to be presented at the world congress of architecture in Berlin the same year. The visualization resulted in a heated discussion about land, religion and identity, and was eventually withdrawn from the exhibition. These “facts on the ground” of the settlements’ actual and prospective dimensions “placed the map at the center of a global debate on the relationship between architecture and politics” (Abrams / Hall, 2006, p.220).

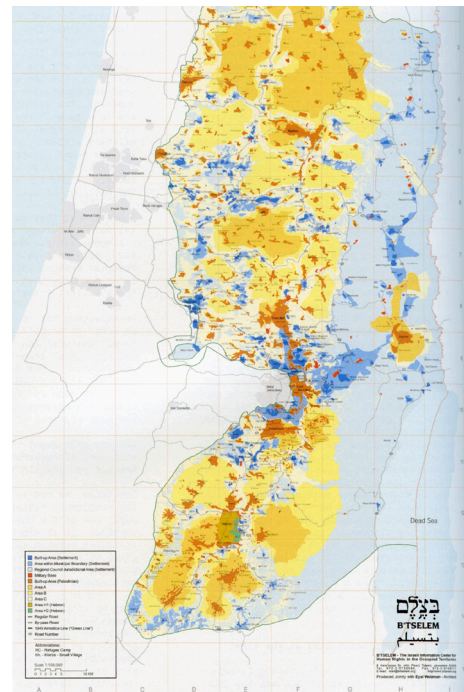


Fig. 1: B’Tselem, Jewish Settlements in the West Bank (2002)

Back in 1949 Israeli military commander Moshe Dayan used a green pencil to draw a line on a map, introducing the historic border between Israel and the West Bank still enshrined into people’s minds today. In 2005, artist Alban Biaisat decided to respond to the dispute between Israel and Palestine by transferring this virtual line into the actual landscape and taking a series of photographs titled *The Green(er) Side of the Line* (Fig. 2). Using a thirty-nine-foot long green ribbon and portable green balls, he highlighted the borderline’s artificiality and arbitrary principle.

More recently, Google Maps was dragged into political disputes about the mutual border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua (Fig. 3). After centuries of shifting between the two countries, the borderline was determined by the course of the river San Juan. The conflict was brought up again in 2005 when Nicaragua was unfairly restricting access to the river, however, the official map and border were never in question. Nevertheless, in 2010, Nicaraguan troops crossed the river to claim a terrain dating back to the course of the river in the 1850s. (Pearson, 2010) What appeared to be a conflict over a false border set by Google Maps, turned out to be a reflexion of ongoing problems between two countries rather than the inaccuracy of the online data. Gregory Bateson suggests a notion he borrowed from Alfred Korzybski, who argues that “[t]he map is not the territory” and he added, “the name is not the thing named” either. (Weelden, 2005, p.98)



Fig. 2: Alban Biauxsat, The Green(er) Side of the Line (2005)

The process of map making cannot be neutral, or objective, but is rather laden with power. Following Michel Foucault, Harley argues, that the process of mapping consists of creating, rather than simply revealing knowledge (quoted in Dodge / Kitchin / Perkins, 2009a, p.9). As a result maps are always individual and subjective representations, whose creators may or may not be aware of their power. Economic geographer John Pickles elaborates this thought when saying, we could “focus on the ways in which mapping and the cartographic gaze have coded subjects and produced identities” (quoted in Crampton / Krygier, 2006, p.15). Maps can never illustrate full truth, after all the process of representing is itself part of the world they attempt to represent (Perkins quoted in Harris / Hazen, 2009, p.53). Moreover, the world is constantly changing and so is our perception of it. Whereas initially focusing on measuring and displaying areas, distances and political arrangements, contemporary mapping imagines the world as dynamic data. These new maps can lead to different perspectives, provoke social change, and even reinvent the world itself.

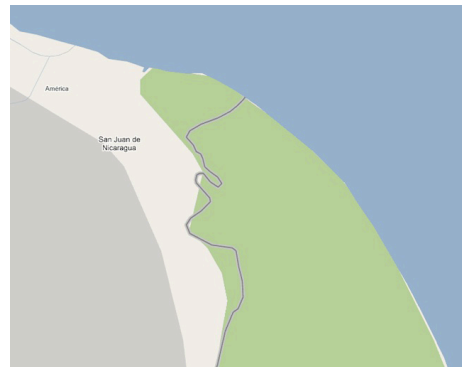


Fig. 3: Google Maps, Costa Rica and Nicaragua (2010)

(Re-)Creating the World

To make new interpretations possible, it is important to reclaim the streets, or in other words, reclaim the source to participate in the meaning-making process of cartography. Whereas for centuries scientific elites and trained cartographers occupied the field, the digital revolution of the late 1980s and early 1990s have changed geographic space and consequently transferred mapping online. From aerial photography and satellite imagery to interactive, hyper-media maps and real-time data visualizations, new maps have been taking over the online territory and moved into the hands of non-technically trained people. Jeremy Crampton emphasizes that “allowing non-cartographers access to data and to produce their own maps, [breaks] one of the major principles of traditional map-making theory, that there is a clear separation between the cartographer and the user” (quoted in Dodge / Kitchin, p.68).

This user-dominated labour is determined by a generation of networked services and collaborative, crowd sourced and shared creation of online resources. Whereas old media used to provide pre-packaged information, the new media offer an “open-source, messier and more fragmentary version of events” (Abrams / Hall, 2006, p.14). But it is a world we learned to cope with, a place, where we can experience information as unfixed data, that allows critique, discourse and modification.

Reading the City

Not only the creation, but also the practice of reading and using a map can produce new meanings and interpretations. Maps are therefore both representations and practices. As Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge note “[m]aps are of-the-moment, brought into being through practices (embodied, social, technical), always re-made every time they are engaged with; mapping is a process of constant re-territorialization. As such, maps are transitory and fleeting, being contingent, relational and context-dependent” (2009a, p.21).

Various artists have been exploring maps, thereby questioning the politics of representation. In the early 1960s the Situationists sought to radically transform urban space by subverting cartography as part of a project of political resistance

(Harmon quoted in Crampton / Krygier, 2006, p.18). With the invention of the *dérive* (Fig. 4), a new way of experiencing everyday life in the city, they redefined the urban environment using a performative approach. The Situationist critique and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* have later been revised by Michel de Certeau, celebrating the idea of urban mapping as an artistic art form. In his book *Practice of Everyday Life*, he dedicated one chapter to Walking in the City, where he describes the way individuals unconsciously navigate through the city. De Certeau argues that instead of using maps as representations that institutions seek to impose upon ordinary people, the walker should form his own strategies in approaching the environment, and therefore refuse the means and rules imposed by others. De Certeau's critique of scientific mapping's distant and totalizing vision of the city was based on the view of Manhattan from the top of the World Trade Center. (Abrams / Hall, 2006, p.156) When this monumental building was erased from the ground on September 11, 2001 new maps were needed to deal with the impact of the rapid changes introduced to the world on that day. With her pocket-sized, fold-out map *Around Ground Zero* (Fig. 5), designer Laura Kurgan mapped the Ground Zero during the winter of 2001–2002 and provided an updated orientation to the changing construction site to the *walkers*.

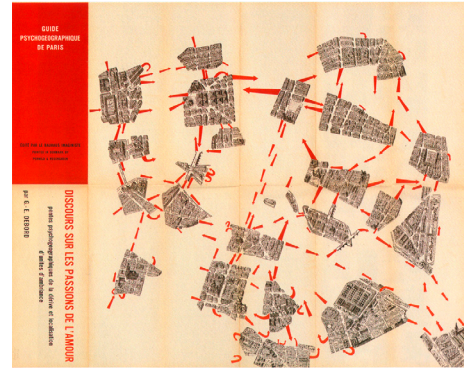


Fig. 4: Situationist International, Psychogeography (1957)



Fig. 5: Laura Kurgan, Around Ground Zero (2001–2002)

The considerations of active participation and performative approaches to explore the city were perpetuated by various artists, designers and collectives from the 1980s and found its way into the 21st Century. In 2002, the New York based studio, Antenna Design developed a prototype in-car navigation system for Nissan, based on the notion of *dérive*, that entitled the driver to get lost in the city instead of providing

a destination tool leading from A to B. Antenna's *Enhanced Navigation System* allows the user to add personal annotations to the electronic map and therefore create a unique route.

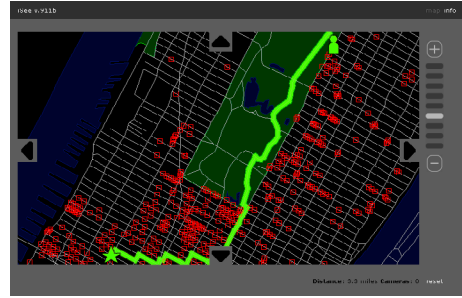


Fig. 6: Institute of Applied Autonomy, iSee Interface (2002)

Another map to navigate the city was launched by the Institute of Applied Arts in 2001. In order to question the meaning of video monitoring in public space, the web-based application *iSee* (Fig. 6) is charting the location of CCTV surveillance cameras in urban space. Users can therefore, in a situationist manner, find their own routes through the city, avoiding the cameras by using a “path of least surveillance” (IAA, 2005).

Playing with Maps

Based on the discussed paradigms, J. B. Harley and David Woodward adopted a new definition in order to include new formats of maps as “graphic representations that facilitate a spatial understanding of things, concepts, conditions, processes, or events in the human world” (quoted in Crampton / Krygier, 2006, p.17). By emphasizing the role of maps in human experience, they introduced contemporary forms of mapping to the discourse, linking geographic knowledge with power and practice. By rejecting or even playing with the authority claimed by canonic maps, alternative methods can provide a different view on our everyday experience and link data with its context.

Based on this idea, the Parisian conceptual group *Bureau d'études* has been engaged in mapping contemporary capitalism (Fig. 7), practicing a contra-cartography and revealing invisible information to society. Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu and the Frankfurt School, *Bureau d'études* started mapping the world in order to allocate a critical picture of the system of meaning-producing economies and created various organizational maps that allow the user to orient himself in “social or symbolic complexity” (Weelden, 2005, p.98). As they describe, “although the informationalization of society implies an enormous

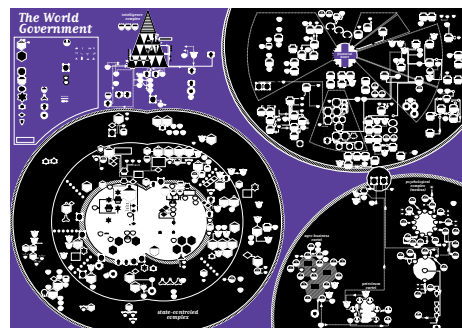


Fig. 7: Bureau d'études, The World Government (2003)

increase in the traceability of the doings and dealings of the powerful, the descriptive power of the exposure of these activities is still remarkably small” (Weelden, 2005, p.94).

Another example dealing with the complexity of systems and history is the project *Frisia Conflict* (Fig. 8), a map designed by Ruiter Janssen showing a hypothetical conflict between the Netherlands and Friesland in order to give a lively comparison to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Based on the book *Het zijn net mensen* by Joris Luyendijk, the translation of information from the Middle-East to The Netherlands, brings the conflict closer to the West and questions the objectivity of data.

These mapping projects are among many other interesting approaches, providing innovative concepts of redefining how we interpret and interact with the world. By using various techniques – from psychogeography to data analysis and visualization – they are remodeling the territory, and redefine maps as common ground for discussion.

Conclusion

For a long time map making was concerned with imagining the world as a product of physical geography, focusing on location, scales and distances. But with its power of drawing lines and defining the political directions of the world, maps are also *writing history*. As social constructions of the world, they are inevitably hiding political and economical power, that might have a direct impact on people’s lives. Since the transfer of physical maps into the digital, and consequently the online field, users can be co-authors and participate in creating and rewriting these paradigms. In order to unfold practices and enhance our personal experience, new ways of reading, researching and creating maps are necessary. Various researches, artists and designers presented in this essay, have introduced a wide range of maps that don’t necessarily help you navigate anywhere, but might help looking at the world from a different perspective and therefore understand it just a little bit better.

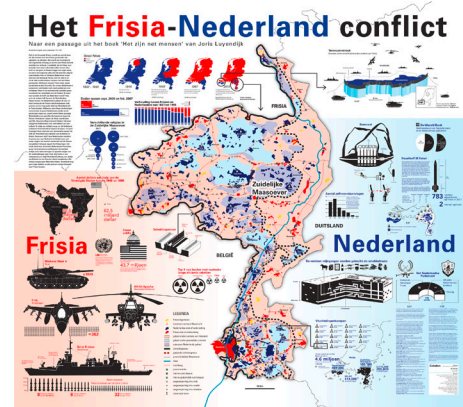


Fig. 8: Ruiter Janssen, Frisia Conflict (2010)

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Illustrations

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Fig. 4: Debord, G (1957) *Guide Psychogeographique de Paris*,
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Fig. 5: Kurgan, L (2002) *Around Ground Zero*, [map] in: Abrams, J / Hall, P (2006)
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Fig. 6: Institute of Applied Autonomy (2002), *iSee Interface*, [online]
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