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I Map Therefore I Am Modern

Cartography and global modernity in the visual arts

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Summary

I Map Therefore I Am Modern: Cartography and Global Modernity in the Visual Arts

Over the last century a multitude of artists have turned to mapping for their work's formal and thematic substance. This study is devoted to this field of arts practice, which is often termed "map art". Using a method of cultural analysis informed by geographical theory, my approach to map art foregrounds how mapmaking is tied up with institutions and processes of global modernity. As such, it contrasts sharply with the perspective for which mapping is common across human cultures and moments of history. Katherine Harmon sums up this perspective by redirecting René Descartes' ubiquitous statement on subjectivity's basis in thought, "I think therefore I am", such that it reads: "I map therefore I am". In opposition to this universalist view of mapping, this study proposes a counter *détournement* of Descartes: "I map therefore I am modern". Modernity is not conceived, here, as a closed period that has now been succeeded by an era of globalisation. Instead, I use Arif Dirlik's term "global modernity", which stresses dynamic global transformations in recent decades while also acknowledging that modernity has always been tendentially global in scope.

Recognising cartography's role in the articulation of global modernity indicates how map art is uniquely placed to explore themes relating to utopian urbanism, colonialism, uneven development, globalisation, the disenchantment of the world, state formation, positivist rhetorics of science and specialism, and the calculability of society and space, and raises a number of questions pursued throughout the study. How have map artists grasped the underlying geographical imaginations, as well as the internal disjunctures, that shape global modernity? How have they interrupted, troubled and reimagined modern constructions of space? Are artistic mapping practices bound to recapitulate the distanced and calculative ontology of modern mapping? Is map art as coextensive with, or

distinct from, the broader diversification of mapping consequent on digitisation? And what does map art add to existing theories of maps and modernity?

In addressing these problematics, the study puts forward two main arguments, which correspond to its two parts. **Part I** makes the claim that map art plays out, and puts to the test, some of the founding figures and narratives of rupture through which global modernity differentiates itself from received pasts and surroundings. To begin, **Chapter One** attends to *The Old and the New* (1935), a painting by the Soviet artist Solomon Nikritin. It depicts a starkly blank geographical globe between figures symbolising tradition and modernity in a desolate landscape. Drawing on Peter Sloterdijk's phenomenology of globalisation, I argue that the mapped globe inculcates a modern, disenchanted apprehension of the world as lacking inherent meaning. Although Nikritin's disenchanted globe is profoundly daunting in that it lacks the closure and comfort of premodern worldviews, I argue that it is also empowering in that it compels modern cultures to recognise themselves as the origin of order and value. Accordingly, the three subsequent chapters thematise how modern cartography projects conformed orders onto the times and spaces of a disenchanted world. **Chapter Two** analyses *Forthrights and Meanders* (2008-9), a series of map artworks by the US artist Alison Hildreth. These obscure geographies not only throw into relief the uniform temporality with which modern cartography has conventionally enwrapped the earth, but unfold a new configuration of maps and time. Whereas most maps present simultaneous snapshots of geography, Hildreth creates what I term "polychronous" mappings, in which different moments of history coexist. Given this multiplicity of times, I show how *Forthrights and Meanders* is well constituted to represent the clashing temporalities arising from uneven development and the encroaching ecological crisis.

Having examined a series that reimagines modern constructions of time, in **Chapter Three** I turn to one that addresses extreme modernist attempts to reconstitute social space. In the *Depictions* (2011-ongoing), Dutch artist Gert Jan Kocken layers together hundreds of found maps and plans used by states during the Second World War to create digital collages. I analyse the series alongside Zygmunt Bauman's conception of modern states as "gardeners" of society, stressing the *Depictions'* presentation of how communist, liberal-capitalist and fascist states vied to realise cartographic visions of modernity. Yet if Kocken's artworks show states struggling to totally reshape human reality in conditions of extremity, my analysis also emphasises how top-down spatial orderings are not only diffused and diffracted in practice, but actually precipitate many of the forms of disorder that they set out to "garden" in the first place. **Chapter Four** continues the theme of cartography

and statehood, focusing on how maps performatively constitute the shape or “geo-body” of modern polities. It attends to *Utopia* (1998), a map by Japanese artist Satomi Matoba in which Pearl Harbour and Hiroshima are sited together on an imaginary island state. I show how *Utopia* revisits an early modern discourse in which the image of the bounded geographical island provides a model for the nation-state. But rather than simply recapitulating received constructions of statehood, Matoba’s *Utopia* foregrounds the transcultural hybridity and difference that persists, unacknowledged, inside state geo-bodies and athwart state borders. The result is a uniquely complex and plural imagination of insular statehood.

In analysing these artistic visions of maps and modern world-making, **Part I** builds an account of the ontology - the underlying grasp of the world - articulated through cartography. Time and again map artists return to what I, following Stuart Elden, term the “ontology of calculable extension”. This ontology casts the world as a measurable, simultaneous, uniformly extended space, which exists objectively, can be represented precisely and does not admit multiple correct representations. On the basis of this ontology, cartographic professionals have laid claim to scientific authority; capital has synchronised distant markets and rendered diverse geographies uniformly calculable; and states have established the transparency and malleability of social space.

Having described the ontology of calculability, **Part II** identifies map art’s unique significance in relation to broader shifts in contemporary mapping. Several writers focus on how map art reclaims mapping from professional and institutional control. As such, map art has been situated as part of a broader diffusion and diversification of cartography consequent on digitisation, after which mapping is performed by non-specialists in a variety of social contexts. I take up these connections among map art, digitisation and democratisation in **Chapter Five**, which analyses two map-based performances by US-born artist Jeremy Wood. *My Ghost* (2000-ongoing) and *Meridians* (2005) enrol Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to transform walking into a means of cartographic inscription. Contrasting these works with Michel de Certeau’s account of cartography as an exclusive and elevated visuality that regiments urban practice from above, I stress how Wood’s mappings conflate synoptic cartography with grounded urban mobility. Extending mapping to the street, *My Ghost* exemplifies mapping’s expansion beyond institutional domains.

Here however my position differs from existing scholarship. While I concur that map art combines with digitisation in taking the map back from institutional control, I also stress that, despite prevailing rhetorics of discontinuity, digital mapping largely reproduces the ontology of

calculability. On this basis, the second main argument of this study is that map art's specific value rests less in how it reclaims mapping from institutional control than in how it might imagine alternative cartographic ontologies, which diverge from the measurable and malleable extension that digital mapping is only further entrenching through a broad social field. Though I show how *Meridians* exposes slippages and contradictions in digital mapping's worldview of securely calculated locations, Wood's mappings do not ultimately transcend the ontology of calculability. To close my argument, therefore, **Chapter Six** turns to a work that imagines an alternative ontology of mapping: British filmmaker Peter Greenaway's experimental film *A Walk Through H* (1978), which focuses almost entirely on a series of fantastic maps. Narrating the posthumous travels of a recently deceased ornithologist through the afterlife, the film offers a qualitatively different determination of mapping. No longer bound to represent a singular preexisting reality, in *A Walk Through H* maps performatively manifest and unfold multiple rich and incalculable geographies. In this way, Greenaway's film not only participates in the wider process of "taking the map back" from institutional control, but also displaces the ontological assumptions of objectivity and representationalism through which modern institutions, professionals and states laid claim to exclusivity authority in mapping in the first place.