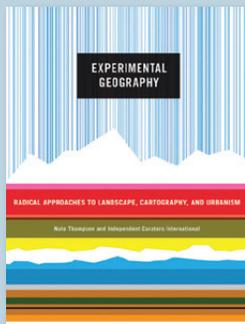


EXPERIMENTAL GEOGRAPHY: RADICAL APPROACHES TO LANDSCAPE, CARTOGRAPHY, AND URBANISM.



By Nato Thompson and Independent Curators International.

Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2008. 168 pages. \$29.95 US, softcover.

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Review by: Margaret Wickens Pearce

Experimental geography is the book accompanying the traveling exhibit of the same name, produced by Independent Curators International (iCI) and curated by Nato Thompson of the New York arts organization Creative Time. The exhibit showed at four venues in the United States over a two year period, ending at Colby College Museum of Art in May 2010. The book devotes a spread to each artist in the exhibit, bundled with essays by Thompson, artist and geographer Trevor Paglen, and Jeffrey Kastner of *Cabinet* magazine, along with comments from Matthew Coolidge, Iain Kerr, Lize Mogel, and Damon Rich.

Both book and exhibit present a particular neighborhood of the metropolis of work that is “map art” (and for more on the history and ideas of this genre, see the beautiful essays by Denis Wood, kanarinka, John Krygier, and Dalia Varanka in CP 53, Winter 2006). It was Paglen who originally coined the term “experimental geography” to represent works created with a particular awareness of space: that to participate in theories of the production of space is to be engaged in the production of new spaces of inquiry. “Put simply,” he writes, “geographers don’t just study geography, they create geographies.” This revelation that geographical inquiry carries productive power is old news to geographers and cartographers, but Paglen has a reason for making this new label. It is to show artists that geography could be useful to activate the social change they seek to make, and that an awareness of the new geographies one is already making can lead also to proactively aligning those geographies with one’s political vision. “If human activities are inextricably spatial,” he explains, “then new forms of freedom and democracy can only emerge in dialectical relation to the production of new spaces.”

That Paglen’s definition of experimental geography does not actually include the word “mapping” is insightful: he is describing a practice which may be shaped by or result in any kind of spatial production. These results could be maps, but also walks, photographs, laboratories, and various inscriptions, installations, and interventions in the landscape. The word “experimental,” as he explains

it, represents the optimistic or hopeful nature of this practice—one must have a fundamental belief that change is possible in order to engage in experimentation. At the same time, the word “experimental” de-emphasizes actual outcomes or products from the work, framing it instead as “production without guarantees.” In other words, Paglen is describing for us a participatory method which may or may not include actual change as either a mode or outcome of inquiry.

These terms powerfully describe the practice in which Paglen himself is engaged, and help us appreciate the underlying connections between his projects. For this exhibition, Thompson uses “experimental geography” as an umbrella term for a diverse array of artists experimenting with the representation of space in a diagrammatic way and through a variety of materials and actions. Thompson conceives of these projects as ranging along two axes, one of the poetic to the didactic, and one of the geologic to the urban, that are linked as part of “a growing body of culturally inspired work that deals with human interaction with the land.” Although this might seem like the exhibit addresses map art generally, the works he has curated for us all claim activism as a goal, and situate at a certain end of the political spectrum.

Thompson locates experimental geography’s roots in two philosophical schools: in the Situationists’ practice during the 1950s–60s to disrupt and intervene in the oppressive forces of capitalism in the city through psychogeography, and in Michel de Certeau’s writings in the 1970s–80s on walking as the production of spaces of meaning and resistance in the city.¹ Thompson then delineates the way in which these concepts inspire or are developed by the works of the exhibition, and explores what this might mean for the fields of art and geography and their intersections. In a follow-up essay, Kastner develops another thread of influence among these artists, the Land Art works of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the writings and installations of Robert Smithson.

These opening essays frame the catalogue of spreads for each of the 18 artists, collectives, and institutions of the exhibition, arranged according to themes developed in the essays. The artists are predominantly young, white, and with one exception, European or of the Americas. “Landscape is a metaphor” presents artists working in the mode of experimental geography as rendering landscapes visible through embodied practices; “Research and development” includes works in the participatory research mode of Paglen and Spurse; and “We are the city” organizes the urban embodied interventions of artists such as kanarinka and the Center for Urban Pedagogy. “Cartography” is the final section and includes more than half of the works in the exhibition, some of whose artists have also appeared in CP or presentations at the NACIS annual conference, such as the work of the Counter-Cartographies Collective, Hackitectura, and Ecotrust Canada. In her introductory comments, Lize Mogel again locates this particular blend of art, activism

and mapping in Surrealism, Situationism, and Land art, but adds that it is now invigorated or reawakened by the networks and mobilities of contemporary popular and digital cultures. “These practices have an uneasy relationship to the art world,” notes Mogel, “as their value lies in their usefulness and social function over anything else.”

To this I would add that they have an uneasy relationship to the cartographic world as well. Viewed through a cartographic lens, many of the works here are merely locational, presumably included for their renderings of the invisible geographies of control and oppression, but otherwise pushing neither an aesthetic nor conceptual boundary for cartography. In fact, some of the mischievous embodied mappings of previous chapters, such as kanarinka’s *It Takes 154,000 Breaths to Evacuate Boston*, and Deborah Stratman’s *Park*, are far more cartographically compelling than many of the maps-as-objects in the Cartography section. Leader lines prevail; indeed, in the world of maps, experimental geography has its own private cartographic aesthetic, confident with type and color yet often crushing the faintest tracings of geographical linework. As Mark Denil pointed out in “What is a radical cartography?” (NACIS annual meeting, 2009), within this cohort of artists, it is the cartographers as activists, and not the cartography itself, where radicalism is located.

But there are exceptions. Three works are included from the Los Angeles Urban Rangers, who wonderfully appropriate the typography, symbolization aesthetic, and layout of National Park Service cartography to map narratives of L.A.’s environmental injustices and the cultural, ecological, and agricultural underbelly of the County Fair. *The People’s Guide to the RNC*, produced by Friends of William Blake in 2004, is presumably included for its political remapping of Manhattan; cartographically, however, it is the digital redesign of Blake detailing in the marginalia that sets this map apart in beauty.

For artists whose work in motion and sound is more difficult to display visually in a printed book, little compensatory explanation or diagramming is provided. In the case of some of these artists, such as Julia Meltzer and David Thorne’s take into the air my quiet breath, and Yin Xiuzhen’s *Portable Cities: Singapore*, even a basic understanding of the work requires a simultaneous search online for information about the work. In these sections, the book, like some maps, seems to serve primarily as a mnemonic device for the exhibition, the dance card without the stories of what transpired during each of those encounters.

From this cartographer’s perspective, the ideas about mapping presented in the essays alternate between the revelatory and the banal. Revelatory, for example, when Thompson writes that to draw attention to any kind of controlling structure or force in space (parking meter,

hydroelectric dam, science lab, wall) through some kind of engagement with it (walking, mapping, bus touring) is to begin to subvert and dismantle the controlling power of that structure. Through this explanation, he illuminates for us a common spirit of intention among these collected projects to “point at” spatiality and move beyond passive engagement with theory to theoretically informed actions in space.

Such passages, though, are interspersed with more mundane matter, and in fact few additional thematic connections are explored between works in the exhibit (readers interested in those connections should re-read kanarinka’s “Art-machines, body-ovens, and map-recipes” in CP 53). Some concepts presented as radical within this volume are concepts easily picked up in *Geography 101*, as for example when Thompson states that “The core idea at the heart of experimental geography is that we make the world and, in turn, the world makes us.” I also feel compelled to defend my discipline when I read that a bus tour, accompanied by maps, to visit the hidden structures of the military-industrial complex is a radical act. I would counter that such a tour is simply a good human geography field trip.

I point this out because statements such as these reveal stereotypes about cartography and geography within which many artists continue to operate, and which in turn frame or influence their works about cartography. Such stereotypes are blind to the nuances of cartographic history, and to that passion for revealing the invisible by engaging in the spaces of those invisibilities through reading, questioning, and mapping the landscape that is a thread which runs through all the many geography subfields and is fundamental to our identities as cartographers. I’m hopeful that someday Thompson and the others will inquire further into the “geography” part of their practice, by looking at geography’s tradition of social change-driven experimental mapping and field tripping (as practiced by Kevin Lynch or William Bunge, for example, or as documented in the pages of *Antipode* and *ACME*), or work framed by ironic engagement with cartography’s problematic practices and tools (notably, John Krygier’s *unMaking maps* project, still viewable on YouTube, and John Cloud’s delineations of the military and corporate paths and intersections embedded in the remote sensing industry).

Attention to these projects, and the techniques to be found there, would be useful for their work, and it’s exciting to think about the new work which might come out of that engagement. Since this exhibit was implemented, Thompson has curated another traveling exhibition and book, *Democracy in America: The National Campaign*, a collection focused on American democracy and activism; he also has a book on art and activism forthcoming from the publisher and “autonomous zone for arts radicals” *Autonomedia*. Kastner continues as Senior Editor at *Cabinet*, writing

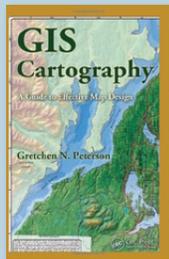
on topics across the natural sciences (see his feature on the Alpine maps and watercolors of Swiss geologist Hans Conrad Escher von der Linth in *Cabinet 27*, Fall 2007). Paglen was named one of the “50 visionaries who are changing your world” by *Utne Reader* in 2009 for his project to expose the geographies of the military-industrial complex on earth and in the sky. Some of the artists of the exhibition continue to map, when relevant to their activism.

What will happen next? I hope that some experimental geographers become more interested in geography, but I also hope that experimental geography can serve as both reminder and revitalization for those cartographers who have lost their sense of the political and social responsibilities which their talents carry with them. Spending some time with this book might do just that.

Notes

1. For the differences between these techniques and experimental mapping in geography, see Denis Wood’s “Lynch Debord,” presented at the Association of American Geographers annual meeting in 2007, available online at: http://krygier.owu.edu/krygier_html/geog_222/geog_222_lo/Lynch_Debord_Carto.45.3.003.pdf

GIS CARTOGRAPHY: A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE MAP DESIGN



By Gretchen N. Peterson.

Boca Raton, Florida: CRC Press, 2009. 246 pages, color illustrations, index. \$89.95, hardcover.

ISBN: 978-1420082135

Review by: Ian Muehlenhaus, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

Finally, here is the book that has been missing in GIS classrooms and work cubicles. Even more excitingly, it is written in layperson’s English for professionals and non-academics. Do not let its title, *GIS Cartography*, fool you. This is not a GIS book. It is a cartographic design book written by and for users of GIS who do not have the time, interest, or experience to read scientific treatises on cartography. There are some who will say that this book represents a terrible development. Surely, a cartographic text that completely ignores any discussion of projections, generalization, and thematic symbolization is anathema to the role of academic cartography within the GIS profession. However, for the horde of us that regularly attempt to interpret cognitively indecipherable maps coming out of GIS labs on a regular

basis, the publication of this text offers light at the end of the tunnel—assuming GIS users read it. In this reviewer’s opinion, read it they should.

The premise framing the text is straightforward. A practicing “GISer” (as the author refers to herself and others in the GIS profession) realizes she is making abstruse and unattractive maps. Over the years, she begins experimenting, reading, and testing different design methods. She creates a catalog of techniques that work very effectively in different situations with different clients, as well as a list of methods and layout designs that should never be used again. She writes a book with the intent of helping GISers design better maps. Not only does she write a very engaging and—shock, horror—humorous text, but she presents her content in a manner that allows the book to double as a quick reference guide for anyone struggling with map layout or design.

The purpose of the book is not to be a comprehensive compendium on cartography, but a resource to help GIS users become better at map design through experiential learning. Thus, unlike several other books on the market that deal with only a single company’s GIS software, this book is software neutral. The book is about designing effective maps regardless of whether you are using an antiquated drawing program or the newest GIS. The applications and methodological chicanery you use to achieve effective design is up to you. This book presents a potpourri of cartographic ends and lets you figure out the cartographic means. This seems a remarkably simple idea for a map design book, a concept that one would think would have been done 100 times already; yet, to the best of this reader’s knowledge, Gretchen Peterson is the first to pull it off so successfully.

The layout of the book is extremely effective. It is one of the most readable and useful cartography texts I have ever come across. The book is split into seven succinct chapters, five of which deal with specific topics in map design, including: layout, font use, color selection, feature representation, and designing for different media. The chapters themselves are divided into very compact subsections dealing with a particular element of the chapter topic. A majority of the subsections are of two paragraphs’ length or shorter. Nearly all are accompanied by visual examples of what they are explaining. In fact, the book is a visual cornucopia, providing high-quality, color examples throughout.

On top of being full of useful and well organized content, the production quality of this book also needs to be lauded. I first became interested in reading this book while perusing a black-and-white proof at a geography conference. Even before realizing the book had color, I thought the content was likely worth the book’s cost. I had no idea just how superb the production quality would be. The paper is of high stock and satin quality. Vibrantly colored graphs, charts, palettes, and maps litter