

Artist Mona Caron and cartographer Ben Pease joined forces to create *Monarchs and Queens*, 2010, a map of San Francisco juxtaposing butterfly habitats and gay hangouts, part of an exhibition-and-book project by author Rebecca Solnit.

Blending fact, fantasy, and a dose of social commentary, artists are charting the world in new and unusual ways

Remaking the Map

EARLIER THIS DECADE CIA AIRPLANES FLEW SECRET rendition missions again and again to Kabul, Afghanistan; Adana, Turkey; Frankfurt, Germany; and Washington, D.C. On Oakland-based artist and geographer Trevor Paglen's map tracking CIA destinations between 2001 and 2006, thin orange lines stretch across black continents and gray oceans to link

these nodes and other cities, including Amman,

Jordan; Doha, Qatar; Tripoli, Libya; and even West Palm Beach.

His ominous map is one of ten posters that form *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*, a 2007 book project by artist-curators Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat that has since turned into a traveling exhibition. Like classroom maps pinned to the bulletin board, all ten works hang at MoMA P.S.1 in Queens



through October 18, as part of the museum's "Greater New York" show. Almost uniformly rendered in clean computer graphics and often packed with texts, they chart such seemingly disparate streams of data as U.S. oil-consumption patterns and the sizes and functions of contemporary European Union camps for migrants without documents.

From Vermeer to Jasper Johns, artists have long been fascinated by maps. Contemporary artists, however, are charting the world in new and unusual ways, aided by the prodigious amount of information available on Google Maps and other publicly accessible data troves. "The idea of mapping and even calling it cartography refers to an 18th-century practice that, in its contemporary form, is completely transformed by the Internet," says Connie Butler, Museum of Modern Art



drawings curator, who worked with Mogel and Bhagat on their "Greater New York" contribution.

Sometimes called radical cartography, counter cartography, or experimental geography, the new field is populated by geographers, cartographers, artists, and designers who want to convey the kinds of information usually omitted in conventional maps. The approaches range from Paglen's three-dimensional room-size, globe-like installation tracking spy satellites in orbit to the Center for Urban Pedagogy's compact, diagrammatic flowchart tracing the New York garbage trade to San Francisco-based artist Amy Franceschini's *Intentional Communities in Silicon Valley* (2008), which places pastel-hued drawings of '60s and '70s communes near tags identifying the locations of present-day defense contractors.

The traveling group show "Experimental Geography"—organized by Creative Time chief curator Nato Thompson, on view at Museum London in Ontario through January 2—includes works by Mogel, Paglen, and others who deploy data suggestively. Historian-geographer-designer Bill Rankin created *The United States* (2003–7), featuring two side-by-side outline maps of the country. One rendered Native American reservations in the background color of white, essentially removing them from the political boundaries, while the other showed a grayscale depiction of actual Native American populations.

Such works make use of data that was once difficult to find, hidden in government tables and footnotes, but is now easily accessible online. Much information is even available on mobile phones, many of which themselves create more data with GPS tracking software. "We used to think of the Internet as a separate sphere of the world—Web-based new-media projects, they all lived on the Internet," says Thompson. "But increasingly, the most interesting tools live between online and real space."

Cartography itself has been reinvented by its transformation from a hand-drawn medium to a computer-driven one that relies primarily on Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which analyze and manipulate geographic data on the computer. "The cartographic departments in every newspaper have grown so much since the '90s," says Bhagat. "It's so easy, and it's expected to communicate in maps and charts. People think in maps now." Because artists are using these same digital tools, their maps feature mostly clean contemporary graphic design as well, where much of the artistry lies in the selection and categorization of information.

Art historian Svetlana Alpers noted in her 1980 essay "The Mapping Impulse in Dutch Art" that cartography in 17th-century Holland served as "an analogue for painting" in its attempts to visually describe the world. More recently, artists such as Jasper Johns, Alighiero Boetti, and Jules de Balincourt have used maps as visual symbols. But today's artist-mapmakers are more akin to Land Artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer in their desire to change the way landscapes are perceived.

"Geography as a way of reading the world, via actual places, is very exciting now for artists," says Thompson. He points to a geographical frame of mind, which takes into account real people and how they interact in real space, as a possible antidote to theory-driven art criticism. "Of course, artists are also poetic." The best artist-created maps manage to be at once realistic and imaginative. The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), headquartered in Los Angeles, is a collective, artist-driven organization that reveals hidden or little-understood land-use practices. CLUI's online land-use database covers public-art locations, waste sites, desert opera houses, Robert Smithson's Earthworks, and nuclear-test sites. An Internet user can roll the cursor over an image of New Jersey and find details about *Sky Mound* (1988–present), Nancy Holt's Earthwork in the Meadowlands, and Fort Dix, "the largest military installation in the Northeast," as the site terms it.

CLUI's particular choices of what to feature are idiosyncratic,

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but maps have always offered limited presentations of selected data—one charts roads, another topography, a third population size. A good map is always to some degree a work of imagination by cartographers, who pick which aspects to highlight and how. A map's beauty lies in its limits, in its ability to focus attention, to shape perception. A good map stimulates the imaginations of users who invent road trips, battles, and love stories as they follow the long spindly highway lines and pools of blue water. "The map represents something that is ungraphable or unknowable for all of us—you can never understand a whole continent or place," says Butler.

In the past, cartography created borders and defined terri-

Center for Urban Pedagogy's *New York City Garbage Machine*, 2002, tracks the movement of trash, then adds anecdotes that show how the system affects people's lives.

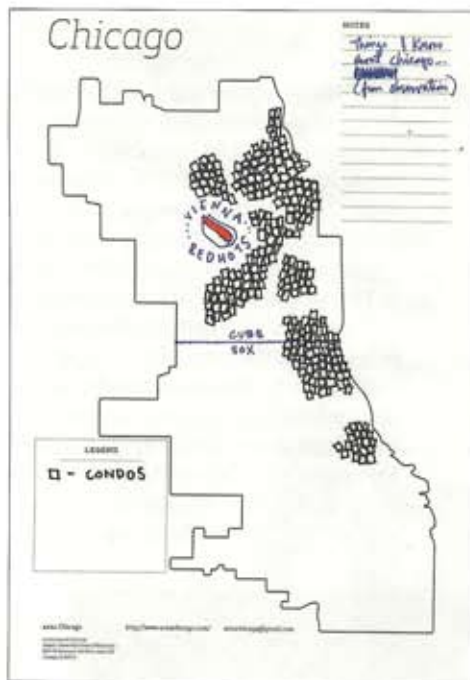
ories as much as it reflected existing conditions: European adventurers set out for unknown lands and named them after their sponsoring monarchs. And, for some artists, this history-as-tools-of-empire taints maps as a form. "I had said publicly I would never do a map," says Paglen, who is also included in "Free," a group exhibition about public art and intellectual property, opening at New York's New Museum on October 20 and running through January 23. "I am much more interested in different ways of seeing the earth." But Mogel convinced him to put his geographic training to use for *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*.

Mogel says the project sought to work against the history of maps as "tools of power" by using them to highlight

progressive issues and the plight of the disenfranchised. Bhagat notes they were riding a wave. "There was a shift around 1999 when the kind of committed activist-artists who would have made agitprop in the '60s started making maps," he says. Just how widespread maps as propaganda is in the art world will soon be visible on a map itself. The New York artist collective 16Beaver maintains a list of "counter cartography" projects on its Web site and is collating, along with British collective C.CRED, a map of groups who "work with notions of resistance and social engagement." Similarly, the collective And And is creating a map of "emergent positions" for Documenta 13 in June 2012.

This activist impulse has led some artists to show their maps outside of the art world, distributing copies to the communities whose concerns are being charted. "Part of what transforms information into meaning is how embedded it is in a social context," says artist Damon Rich, an urban designer for the city of Newark, who founded the Brooklyn-based Center for Urban Pedagogy. Similar to CLUI, the group makes engaging exhibitions and maps out of potentially dull information such as New York City building codes, often in collaboration with city high schoolers.

To translate maps into social change, CUP devised a program in 2008 called "Making Policy Public," which asks non-profit advocates to suggest issues that could benefit from visual explanations and then matches them up with designers and artists. The Longshore Workers' Coalition, for instance, received an elegant map of the global shipping network. Hubs and spokes in orange dotting and crisscrossing a light blue earth drew attention to major ports where workers could most influence job conditions. Usually CUP produces 2000 prints of 22-by-34-inch maps for each "Making Policy Public" project, says current executive director Christine Gaspar. For the "Cargo Chain" project, the union group



Since 2006, AREA Chicago, an organization dedicated to researching local activist history, has distributed outline maps of the city for individuals to fill in, here with "condos," a line defining the town's baseball rivalry, and a landmark hot dog stand.

printed and distributed 10,000.

Dour as they may seem, even politically motivated maps often wield a dry, deadpan humor. Franceschini's *Intentional Communities in Silicon Valley*, for instance, combines loose gestural drawings of hippie-era communes with dense, annotated type locating and describing today's defense contractors. Unexpected contrasts also pervade "Infinite City," an alternative atlas of San Francisco.

Commissioned by writer Rebecca Solnit, it features 22 artist-and-cartographer collaborations, which are available as large posters for the taking at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through December.

Solnit's collaborations for the project deploy the factual and fantastical in equal measure. Each map started with a template that gave the regions outlines on what looked like aged parchment; artists then added colorful drawings of butterflies and brains, hipsters and mermaids. One map of San Francisco's Mission District, undertaken with cartographer Shizue Seigel and organizer Adriana Camarena, charts where both day laborers and gangs congregate, while another map of the city, done with artist Mona Caron and cartographer Ben

Pease, overlays butterfly habitats and public spaces known to be frequented by gays. "I've written a lot about San Francisco but there's a way that maps make events and actualities visible that prose doesn't," says Solnit. "Even maps of places I've never been have some kind of appeal. These maps say, 'This is the world you live in even though you may not see this.'"

Another of her collaborative maps, *The Lost World* (2010), resuscitates a neglected history by charting the Market Street area of 1960, which was razed for a convention center and urban development in the '70s. "I got to show a blue-collar world that was destroyed for tourists, conventioners, and shoppers," says Solnit. "This map deployed power not on behalf of the emperor but on behalf of people who had been forgotten." ■



Artist kanarinka ran the official 26 disaster evacuation routes in Boston, recording her breathing for *It Takes 154,000 Breaths to Evacuate Boston*, 2007, a sound installation included in the "Experimental Geography" exhibition.