

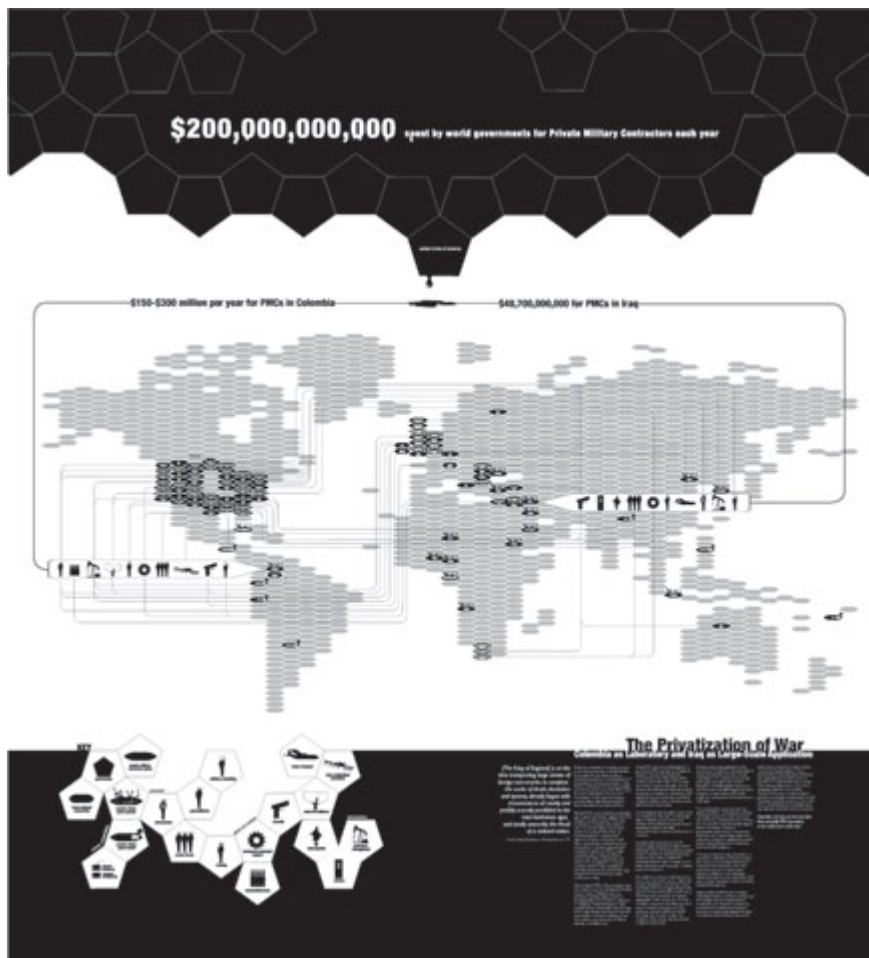
Interview with Lize Mogel

by Trevor Paglen

Lize Mogel is an artist working with geography and cartography. Her projects, often site-specific and distributed in public space, use the map as political agent. She is interviewed by artist and geographer Trevor Paglen.

Trevor Paglen: How did you come to work on your most recent project, which is about mapping the corporate structure of this new age of global war?

Lize Mogel: “The Privatization of War: Colombia as Laboratory and Iraq as Large-Scale Application” was originally commissioned by Cira Pascual-Marquina and Chris Gilbert for the Gwangju Biennial in South Korea. It diagrams the relationships between the United States and private military contractors (PMCs); and their activities in Colombia and Iraq. This was a sort of “blind date” collaboration- where Cira/Chris emailed me and asked if I wanted to do a mapping project with writer/researcher Dario Azzellini who had done a large amount of work on the “business of war” (while I had been involved in some research on American military interests while working with the Center for Land Use Interpretation). It was a somewhat globalized project- I’m in NYC, Cira and Chris live in Venezuela, Dario is in Berlin, and the show is in South Korea—and the **project itself** is about global flows, centered on Iraq and Colombia.



"The Privatization of War" (version 2), 2006.

TP: Can you tell us a little bit about working with Dario Azzellini? What were some of the challenges you faced in terms of figuring out how to organize all of this material?

LM: Initially Dario sent me a huge amount of information about PMC operations and operators worldwide—including bases of operations in Angola, South Africa, etcetera. The initial impulse was to include it all—to show the total state of PMC and government connections, and how that plays out “on the ground.” In the end, we narrowed it down to just Iraq and Colombia—partly because that was the most detailed set of information, but also because the web of connections among PMCs for the most part passed through these two countries. The role of the US government in mobilizing PMCs in Iraq and Colombia represent two different modes of operation but with a similar underlying purpose—to protect economic (and thus military) interests in that country. I also wanted to create a cohesive narrative for the viewer—somewhere in between the complexity of Bureau d’Etudes work and the more linear style of Mark Lombardi’s diagrams.

I have to say that I consider this work unfinished- or impossible to finish. It, like many maps, exists as a snapshot of the moment. PMC corporations-- especially in the (violently) shifting conditions of the occupation in Iraq—frequently incorporate, fold, merge, change names or missions. Even in the month and a half from the start of this project to the end, information about several of the PMCs we diagrammed had changed. So while the “privatization of war” transmits an air of authority (both as a map and as a large-scale artwork), it diagrams corporate bodies that are constantly in flux.

TP: I think that this speaks to one of the limitations of cartographic kinds of representation. They’re not very good at being able to describe the flux of politics, money, people, or what-have-you. The world changes far faster than one can describe it.

LM: Many static maps are designed obsolescence—the information is ‘current’ only for a brief moment. However, the social and political context described by this and other mapping projects are less mutable. With “The Privatization of War,” the conditions for people affected by the conflicts in Iraq and Colombia will remain the same for a long time- regardless of how many times a corporation undergoes a name change.

This project would make sense as a real-time online map that could be updated—much in the way that “Terminal Air” (your collaboration with the Institute of Applied Autonomy) functions. However, I don’t know of any databases (online or otherwise) about PMC movement that could be data-mined for an interactive map- so all the information would have to be collected “by hand” –a full-time job in itself. Dario and I are hoping to continue with the project, though- we’d like to produce a version which can be easily distributed (and for free)—either as a standard-size paper map or online. I’m also hoping to add more layers of detail which will help viewers understand how PMC activities affect social conditions.

TP: On the subject of cartography: you’ve been involved in these sorts of “mapping” projects for quite a long time now – at least since your project Public Green from 2001-2002 and of course your early work with the Center for Land Use Interpretation when they were still a pretty new organization. What is your attraction to cartography?

LM: Cartography encompasses all of my interests: in geography, geopolitics, architecture, landscape, urban issues, didacticism, and potential for widespread distribution. While mapping is a subjective practice, the map itself is culturally understood as presenting an objective truth. I use the familiarity of geographic information and cartographic design strategically, to present “counter-knowledges.” These underscore the social/political construction of the physical/social landscape, whether it is city parks, World’s Fair sites, or the art world itself.

We’re living in a very map-literate society, so maps are ideal aesthetic/informational objects that can be used for public address. The map as a form allows me to engage a public beyond a cultural audience—such as Los Angeles bus riders (**Public Green**, 2001); residents of a San Francisco neighborhood (**Panama-Pacific**, 2003); and in touristic/recreational landscapes (ongoing work on former World’s Fair sites). Several of my projects have been inserted into public space through everyday distribution networks—as bus shelter advertising; or like restaurant menus.



Left: "Public Green," installation view, Los Angeles, 2002. Right: "Panama-Pacific," map distribution in the Marina District, San Francisco, 2004.

Maps also suggest "users" rather than "viewers;" although I don't make claims that the viewers of my projects take action, this is one of the possible outcomes of certain works.

My carto-fetish evolved from earlier work about the social construction of recreational, institutional, and domestic landscapes; and my involvement with the Center for Land Use Interpretation. Through CLUI I met geographer Chris Kahle, who was doing parallel research on Los Angeles urban green spaces. We collaborated on an exhibition (*Genius Loci*, 2002) about mapping and subjectivity, with LA as the mapped subject.

Chris and I were struck by the overlaps in conceptual/theoretical frameworks between art and cultural/humanist geography. For a while I considered getting a degree in geography, but realized that most institutions would not support my working methods as academic practice- I was more interested in producing visual/experiential works than academic texts.

TP: You've been working on a kind of "meta-project" about worlds fairs – a pretty in-depth research project that manifests itself in a number of cultural works. Can you describe that work and tell us about what kinds of relationships exist between the various themes you've been working on (i.e. "rights to the city" and public space in the case of *Public Green*, nationalism and spectacle in the case of the world fairs, and land use in the case of the work with CLUI)?

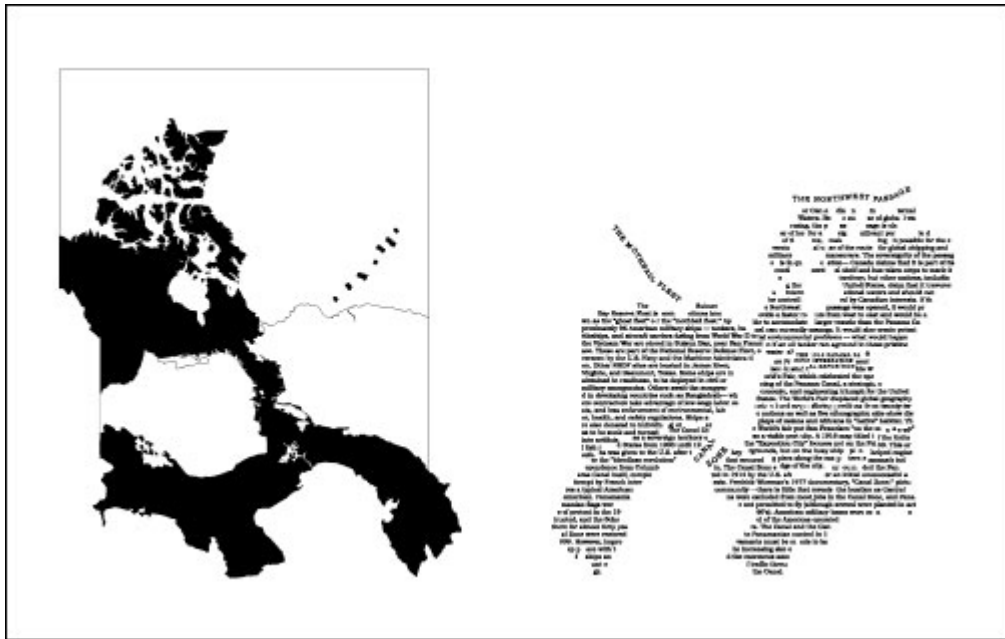
LM: I think it's appropriate to describe this as a meta-project, especially since World's Fairs themselves are a meta-spectacle. I've been thinking about and researching World's Fairs since 2000, when I went to Expo 2000 in Hanover; and then returned two years later to see how the site was being used. Since then I've visited and documented 11 (out of 15 or so) former Fair sites in North America—this year alone I've visited Portland (1905 Lewis & Clark Centennial Exposition), Chicago (1893 World's Columbia Exposition and 1933 Century of Progress), St Louis (1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition) and Knoxville (Expo '82).

This work came out of my interest in public space, urban development, and land use. Worlds Fairs require a large amount of acreage—many of them were held on former swampland (or even bodies of

water) that were filled in; or on the fringes or less-developed areas of the city. When a fair was put into an existing area, slum clearance, eminent domain, and other kinds of displacement ensued. After the fair was over, the site usually became a significant recreational/touristic/public space. Initially I was interested in how the city grew up around these sites- how the fairs put cities "on the map", and how that attention functioned within urban development and revitalization plans.

While I am still interested in the development history of these places, I also want to use physical traces of the fair to bring forth more complex geopolitical narratives. The former fairgrounds often hint at their "global pasts"—through fair-era iconic structures (like the Space Needle or the Unisphere), historic markers, street names, layout of pathways, etcetera. However, these rarely transmit anything more than a lingering nostalgia.

I see former World's Fairgrounds as both archeological sites and as ideal places to talk about globalization. The remnants of the global geography that was displaced onto host cities during the Fairs can be re-purposed and made relevant to contemporary life, and contemporary thinking about "the World." This has been manifested in **map series** where I reconfigure the (ubiquitous) world map and link it to specific World's Fair sites or site plans to complicate the representation of what "global" is; or create an associative geography—where nation-shapes relate stories of territoriality, displacement, and flows of global capital. There are also a couple of performances in the works.



"From South to North," 2006

TP: Mapping and cartographic practices have become quite popular among different artists over the last couple of years. How do you explain that? Is this just a trend, or is there something deeper going on culturally that a lot of this work is responding or contributing to? .

LM: I think that it is both a progression/culmination of art historical movements/moments (including Situationism, conceptual art, land art, institutional critique, site-specific practices, tactical media/interventionist practices, perhaps even identity politics) and a result of the fact that many first-world citizens now think in networks... The absolute centrality of the Internet, saturation of electronic communication and increased mobility have taught us to understand information as embodied in map/networked form, rather than “old-school” linearity of historical narratives.

It’s important to note that geographic information itself is now mainstream, thanks to Mapquest, On Star, and Google Earth—this kind of visualization is now ubiquitous for a certain demographic. (I recently went to a panel discussion where the man in charge of infographics for CBS talked about Google Earth as if it would save the world...or at least redeem mass media) The current “cult of information” causes a great deal of anxiety about being able to comprehend our (globalized) existence—what better tool to break it all down than a map? I think this trend also arises out of increasing interest in spatial practices within disciplines like geography, architecture, planning, landscape studies and urban studies. The entrance of groups like CLUI into the mainstream certainly push this along.

Recently, I’ve also noticed a trend in curatorial projects that revolve around maps. There were two “map shows” up in NYC this fall, I know of two other exhibitions being planned, and I’m organizing one myself. Also artists’ mapping practices have entered the purview of academic geography—mostly through inclusion in conferences and publications. There seems to be critical mass in the use of the map at this point—it will be interesting to see how it evolves.

I am currently very interested in cultural producers using maps/mapping as the hybrids that they are—artworks as well as social/political activators. For example recent projects like your billboard with John Emerson that maps routes of CIA “**torture planes**,” Laura Kurgan/Eric Cadora’s mapping of “**million dollar blocks**,” European projects on migration and on anti-globalization efforts, and many others. I am also interested in non-artists using community-based mapping –or “mapping from the ground up”-- to affect precarious situations through direct action and public policy. I’m exploring some of these ideas in an upcoming publication on radical cartography, co-edited with Lex Bhagat. The map has always been a political agent—so projects that are politically engaged (within and beyond the confines of institutional presentation) really use the medium well, and overcome the limitations of the huge amount of relatively uncritical cartographic/geographic practices out there.

Copyleft: Trevor Paglen and Lize Mogel

Lize Mogel: www.publicgreen.com/projects

Trevor Paglen: www.paglen.com

Lize Mogel is an interdisciplinary artist who works with the interstices between art and cultural geography. She inserts and distributes and cartographic projects into public space, including in Los Angeles (*Public Green*, 2001) and San Francisco (*Panama-Pacific*, 2003). In collaboration with geographer Chris Kahle, she co-organized Genius Loci, an exhibition of conceptual mappings of Los Angeles that was on view at Sci-Arc and the California Museum of Photography (titled Alternate Routes). She has also worked with groups including the Center for Land Use Interpretation, the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, and the Center for Urban Pedagogy.

Exhibitions include the Gwangju Biennale (South Korea,) PS122 (NYC), Mess Hall (Chicago), and Eyebeam (NYC). She has presented her work within the disciplines of art, architecture, and geography, including at UCLA, USC, Art Institute of Chicago, Apex Art, the Municipal Art Society, and the UCLA Hammer Museum. Her also work appears in *Surface Tensions: Problematics of Site* (Errant Bodies Press, 2003).

Trevor Paglen is an artist and geographer whose work deliberately blurs the lines between social science, contemporary art, and a host of even more obscure disciplines in order to construct unfamiliar, yet meticulously researched ways to interpret the world around us. His most recent projects take up secret military bases, the California prison system, and the CIA's practice of "extraordinary rendition." Paglen's artwork has been shown at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, the California College of the Arts (2002), MASSMOCA, Diverse Works, the LAB, and Bellwether gallery (upcoming). His first book *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights* (co-authored with AC Thompson) was recently released.