

GEOHUMANITIES

Art, history, text at the edge of place

Edited by

Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum,
Sarah Luria, and Douglas Richardson

Disorientation guide

Cartography as artistic medium

Lize Mogel

Maps have become part of a pop culture kit-of-parts within the cultural sphere, used as a form, an aesthetic, or a methodology. The rising number of college-level art, architecture, and design courses that teach “mapping” is a testament to this, as is the number of art exhibitions about maps concentrated in the last few years.

Why maps, and why now? This mapping impulse results from a convergence of a number of shifts in the way we think about representation and space. This trajectory has art historical roots in movements ranging from Surrealism to land art to institutional critique to interventionist practices. The way we visualize spatial and personal relationships has also radically changed—the absolute centrality of the internet to metropolitan citizens, saturation of electronic communication, and increased mobility have taught us to understand information as embodied in map/networked form.

For artists and designers, maps are a highly aesthetic form, able to articulate and spatialize complexity. However, much of contemporary art and design using maps only pays lip service to a key aspect of maps—their inherent politics. This work merely *represents* the political, but does not *produce* it.

Several recent cultural projects are able to successfully unleash the political aspects of the map. *Million Dollar Blocks* maps criminal justice data onto urban centers; the *disOrientation Guide* to the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill provides a new representation of the “global” university; and *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* presents different artistic and cartographic strategies for political education. These three case studies share common elements. All are interdisciplinary projects, merging art and design, geography and cartography, and an activist intent. All set out to engage multiple publics. All are examples of critical or counter-cartography, making and using maps as a form of resistance.

Million dollar blocks

Project Team: Eric Cadora, Justice Mapping Center; Laura Kurgan, Columbia University; David Reinfurt, Graphic Designer; Sarah Williams, Columbia University.

Million Dollar Blocks is a mapping of data sets onto American cities that reframe questions of criminal justice and place. It is a collaboration between Eric Cadora and the Justice Mapping Center (JMC) and Laura Kurgan and the Spatial Information Design Lab (SIDL) at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation and Planning and others.

The concept of "million dollar blocks" looks at the cumulative amount of government spending to incarcerate and reincarcerate individual residents at the scale of a single city block to an entire neighborhood. Criminal justice advocates suggest that there should be more accountability for this spending, often in millions of dollars for a single block. They propose that these millions should be invested directly into improving the social conditions in that neighborhood in order to decrease the amount of incarceration.

Urban crime maps most often show that crime is spread out throughout the city. Cadora asked "What would it look like if we instead mapped where people lived—how would that change the conversation [around criminal justice]?" The million dollar blocks maps first created by the JMC in 1998 and subsequently with the SIDL showed that incarceration is concentrated in very few areas, usually the lowest income areas with the highest percentage of people of color.

The JMC used million dollar blocks maps to help persuade state and local legislators and government agencies to initiate new practices in prisoner re-entry, sometimes with marked success.¹ The collaboration with Kurgan and the SIDL was meant to expand this work by creating a more finely honed set of tools for communication, and to reach another audience—the architecture and planning fields, and the general public. This happened in part through exhibitions of the maps in architecture and art venues, including in New York at the Architecture League (2007) and the Museum of Modern Art (2008), in art exhibitions in Syracuse (2007) and Los Angeles (2006), and at the Venice Architecture Biennale (2008).

Additionally, a day-long "Scenario Planning" workshop at the Architecture League activated the map even further. The workshop brought together professionals from architecture and planning, education, prisoner advocacy, housing advocacy, homeless and family services, and the Department of Corrections. They analyzed and compared geographic data for a single block in the New York City neighborhood of Brownsville, including location of social services, demographics, and prison and jail admissions, and created scenarios for the "reprogramming" of urban space to alleviate the concentration of incarceration and poverty.

By reframing the discussion in terms of the design of urban space, the *Million Dollar Blocks* project creates an awareness of the social and political conditions of that space. For example, "The Pattern," a SIDL publication on the project, zooms in on individual blocks in Phoenix, New York City, Wichita, and New Orleans. These share common characteristics including a large percentage of people of color and living in poverty, a large number of prison admissions, and certain physical characteristics that create social and physical isolation in a neighborhood—such as adjacency to a major highway, and visible disinvestment in the area in the amount of vacant land and deterioration of housing stock.

The challenge posed by the project to the people and agencies who design the physical components of the city, its infrastructure, and policies, is not only to understand

how incarceration deeply affects the social fabric of the city, but more so to “initiate regenerative, even if incremental, forms of urban change.”²

disOrientation Guide

Project Team: Counter-Cartographies Collective: Maribel Casas-Cortes, Sebastian Cobarrubias, Craig Dalton, Liz Mason-Deese, Tim Stallman.

The *disOrientation Guide* to UNC-Chapel Hill was produced by the Counter-Cartographies Collective (3Cs) in 2006. The collective, made up of politically active undergraduate and graduate students from geography, anthropology, and math, came together initially to discuss and organize around labor issues on campus. The *disOrientation Guide* came out of their interest in creating a different kind of political awareness—one that was not focused on a singular issue and using a particular activist language, but one that created more of a sense of the “big picture” and self-reflexiveness on the part of university students, and the university itself.

Disorientation guides have been popular on US university campuses since the 1960s, when they were used to protest university-wide investments and involvement in the Vietnam War. Today, many progressive student groups on campuses produce these guides, in zine, booklet, or newsletter form. Unlike orientation materials that help new students find basic services in the university community, the disorientation guides draw attention to institutional racism and sexism, conservative curricular agendas, and university ties to global finance, gentrification, and defense research.

The UNC *disOrientation Guide* diverges from the historical form and function of other guides. First, it takes the form of a map, spatializing information and the reader’s relationship to it. Second, it eschews activist vernacular in favor of a more theoretically informed questioning of students’ and the university’s subjectivity. This guide is political, but in a way that is inclusive rather than exclusive in terms of language and perceived intent.

The front of the folded *disOrientation Guide* features an antipodal projection in which Chapel Hill surrounds or contains the rest of the world. Unfolded, this visual metaphor is furthered by the use of world maps which riff off of the idea of the “global campus” and its relationships to other places—not just in where students are from and where they visit during a study-abroad semester; but also in how the world is produced for students through course titles and areas of study.

The *disOrientation Guide* reads like a kind of Situationist *dérive*³ through UNC-Chapel Hill and its global interests. It looks at the university from a number of scales and from a number of subject positions. The 3Cs describe the organizing principles of the front of the map as based on three theoretical poles—Deleuze and Guattari (the university as “a functioning body...”), Marx (“a factory...”), and Foucault (“...producing your world”). While conventional design employs an information hierarchy and is meant to communicate a singular, clear message, the design of this project is anti-hierarchical. It reproduces the methodology and multiple voices of the collective.

The map simultaneously considers aspects of the university’s representation, infrastructure, and its environs from labor to curriculum to research dollars to fair

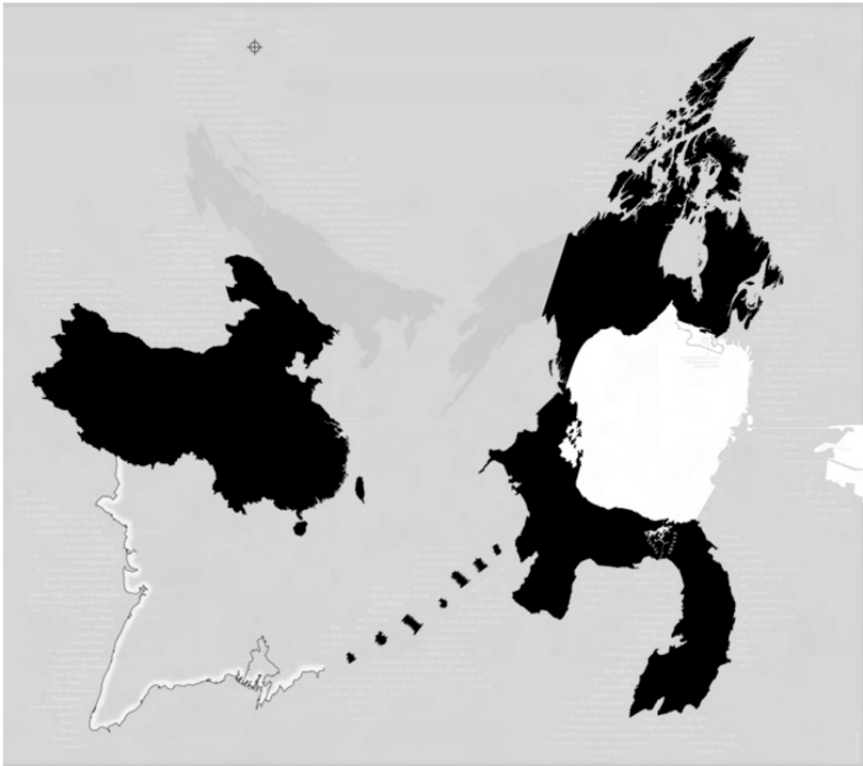


Figure 20.2 *From South to North*, 2006, Lize Mogel.

trade coffee shop locations. Counter to UNC-Chapel Hill's own image-making, the *disOrientation Guide* reveals the university as a complex and conflicted organism.

Over 1500 *disOrientation Guides* were distributed, many to students in geography and other departments at UNC-Chapel Hill and elsewhere. It is used as a teaching tool by graduate students and faculty throughout the USA. The most visible impact however is the interest in the guide from students and groups in other cities who want to create their own disorientation map. Even certain offices of the university have embraced the guide to an extent. For example, the study abroad office finds the specific maps about the international student body useful to visualize where the gaps in their study abroad programs are. And while the Guide is critical of the university, the university also uses it to demonstrate its own openness.

An atlas of radical cartography

An Atlas of Radical Cartography is a counter-cartographic project in three parts, organized by myself and artist/writer Alexis Bhagat.⁴ The intent of the entire project is to

discuss maps as an inherently political form, and to draw attention to the issues described—including migration, globalization, extraordinary rendition, surveillance, urban ecology, and waste management.

This grassroots project began with a book of 10 essays and 10 maps about social and political issues, published in December 2007. The contributors include artists, designers, geographers, architects, scholars, community organizers, and collectives who all have an activist practice. “Map” is defined broadly to include diagrams, plans, and drawings. The 10 maps are unbound, to be further distributed or displayed as posters. An internationally traveling exhibition, titled *An Atlas*, showcases these maps and others, and has allowed us to expand the book project in a number of directions. The maps are reproduced as large prints, giving the viewer a different physical relationship to the information. The exhibition has also included participatory mapping projects, audio tours, and documentary films. A third, discursive aspect of the project evolved as we presented the project in dozens of lectures and workshops to disciplinary specific audiences from art to geography to activism, and the general public. The book is also used in high school and college classrooms to teach socially engaged design, cartography, and geography, and the political ramifications of spatial practices.

The project as a whole presents 10 different conceptual and design strategies for visualizing social justice issues using maps. These 10 projects naturally form thematic linkages to each other, creating a broader conversation about the issues at-hand and the political uses and limits of mapping. The underpinning “data” is sometimes very different from that of the other projects described in this essay. It is produced by local knowledge, personal experience, and collective action, as well as by more traditional research methods. The maps use recognizable geography, but also conceptual image-making, experiments with cartographic form, and thought diagrams. Several of the maps in the collection employ cartographic conventions as a strategy to critique existing power structures and the map itself. The three maps described below exemplify different strategies of representation and function.

The map “Selected CIA Aircraft Routes, 2001-2006” is by artist/geographer Trevor Paglen in collaboration with activist graphic designer John Emerson. The data were generated through Paglen’s research into covert government projects. He identified dozens of planes leased or owned by the CIA through front companies that were used in extraordinary rendition flights. Many of these flights were further linked to the CIA program via news stories about citizens who were mistakenly renditioned and eventually released. These “torture taxis,” as Paglen calls them, are used to transport people to countries where they are interrogated using methods that are not legal in the USA.

The map makes visible a geographic aspect of the covert extraordinary rendition program, one that is not commonly seen in the mass media coverage which focuses more on human rights issues. It diagrams a specific set of relationships between places such as Washington DC, Guantánamo Bay, Cairo, and Kabul. By depicting these data as a kind of airline route map, Paglen and Emerson reveal just one small part of a sizable transportation infrastructure, but one that is entirely secret—a shadow aeronautics industry.

This map was also produced as a public artwork, installed on a billboard on a major Los Angeles boulevard, part of a series of billboards presenting alternative and critical images of the effects of the war in Iraq, commissioned by the organization Clockshop.

Artist Pedro Lasch's "Guías de Rutas/Route Guides" is a map of North and South America, pictured as a singular landmass with no marked borders, imprinted with the words "Latino/a America." This map names, and thus symbolically claims, the entire American continent for Latinos and Latinas. This act of naming is aggressive, although in keeping with historic practices of cartography linked with colonization. It also recognizes a growing demographic shift as massive northern migration continues, and a shifting *Latinidad* identity.

Lasch created this project while working as a cultural educator with migrant populations in Queens, NY, and elsewhere. He gave two of these maps each to 20 individuals who he knew were crossing the US-Mexico border for work, commerce, immigration, leisure, and other purposes. The few that were returned to him bear traces of their journey from coffee rings to dirt stains. In *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*, Alejandro de Acosta describes Lasch's project as

"...a synthesis of the idea of an abstract, conceptual map and the concrete and ephemeral ones that are always being drawn in our lives, in our most minute moments. Lasch's maps are, as maps, quite useless. None of the wanderers that carried them could have used them to guide their movements. Instead, they suggest a spiritual aspect of the journey."⁵

The maps mark the physical and politically symbolic passage of a wide range of migrants. In exhibition, the maps are displayed with excerpts from interviews about the process of migration and how that affects one's own and cultural identity by the people who carried them.

My own contribution to the project, "From South to North," reorganizes the familiar territory of the world map so that it better describes the processes of globalization. This work layers Canada, San Francisco and its 1915 World's Fair site, Panama, and a "mothballed" navy fleet in Suisun Bay, east of San Francisco. The geographic forms are mirrored by text that relates shared narratives of sovereignty, shipping, and displacement.

"From South to North" relates how global geography was relocated onto a local map for the World's Fair in San Francisco. The Fair put its host city "on the map" as a key US port, and celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal a year earlier. The Panama Canal created a shipping route through the South American isthmus, changing the course of the global shipping industry. Panama was bisected by the Canal Zone, which was a US territory from 1903 until 1979. The Northwest Passage is a potential new shipping route that bisects the Canadian Arctic, now navigable in the summer because of climate change. A dispute over whether it lies in Canadian internal waters or international waters will determine its future use. The Mothball Fleet represents the end of the life cycle of a ship. The fleet consists of more than 70 decommissioned US Navy ships waiting to be scrapped or recycled, many in shipbreaking yards in South Asia where labor conditions are deplorable. This "geography lesson"

describes a new set of geopolitical relationships that a standard world map cannot contain. However, as globalization brings part of the world closer together, the map becomes more difficult to read, and more disorienting.

The *disOrientation Guide*, *Million Dollar Blocks* maps, and *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* shift between art/design, geography, and activism. Their relationship to these fields can be simultaneously uneasy and expansive. These projects look back to a time when cartography was an art form, only now these maps serve to rebalance power structures instead of reinforce them. They also work against the value system of art and design in which the singular, collectible object is a prize above all else. Instead, they operate within a larger context of interpretation and action—which is what makes them politically relevant. These projects' hybrid nature helps them to move beyond mere representation of place or politics, and to actively seek out and produce social change.

Notes

- 1 J. L. St. John, "A Road Map to Prevention," *Time*, March 26, 2007, 56.
- 2 Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, *Spatial Information Design Lab: Scenario Planning Workshop*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 4.
- 3 The Situationist International was a European avant-garde cultural and political group (1957–72) whose activities and writings are highly influential in contemporary art and architecture fields. The *dérive* [French: *drift*] is a Situationist technique, where a group or individual wanders through the city without apparent aim, the course influenced by the city's "psychogeographic effects" for the purpose of "studying the terrain or to emotionally disorient oneself..." G.-E. Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," *International Situationniste* 2, 1958, tr. by Ken Knabb, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/314>
- 4 A. Bhagat and L. Mogel, Eds. *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*. Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Press, 2007.
- 5 A. de Acosta, "Latino/A America: A Geophilosophy for Wanderers," in A. Bhagat, and L. Mogel, (eds.), *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*, Los Angeles, CA: Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Press, 2007, p. 73.
Paglen, Trevor, and A.C. Thompson, *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights*. (Hoboken: Melville House Publishing, 2006).
Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, *Spatial Information Design Lab: Architecture and Justice*. (New York: Columbia University, 2008).
Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, *Spatial Information Design Lab: The Pattern*. (New York: Columbia University, 2008).
Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, *Spatial Information Design Lab: Scenario Planning Workshop*. (New York: Columbia University, 2008).
Interviews with: Tim Stallman, Craig Dalton, Liz Mason-Deese, Laura Kurgan, Eric Cadora.