the architect

RETHINKING MAPS:
A COUNTER-GEOGRAPHY OF
BORDER REGIMES

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Contemporary visual regimes of modelling and mapping are producing representations of worlds that are all encompassing. From NASA's Blue Marble, which is a composite image of our planet to computational models produced through data aggregation and the virtual realms of computer games, there is a certain sense that we inhabit a world of totalities where the horizon beyond which things might remain uncertain or incalculable seems to have disappeared. As the practice of architecture embraces these technologies, what critical questions emerge around the political potential of such methods? Rather than focusing the discussion on how technological advances might transform architectural practice for architects, debates that usually revolve around anxieties related to the deskilling of architects or the loss of a design sensibility, I am interested in how digital technologies are affecting spatial analyses and what exclusions this might produce for those who inhabit such spaces, and how we can use forms of mapmaking to reveal the workings of power and forms of life that resist. I will consider these questions in relation to the project, Topological Atlas, which responds to the challenges of visualisation in the context of migration and border areas. Through deploying techniques of mapping, spatial analysis and ethnographic methods we are producing a digital atlas of border areas that seeks to critically engage with the politics and complicities of mapmaking, as well as the power and spatial relations of border regimes.

While the genealogy of geographical maps can be traced to the colonial endeavour of charting and appropriating new territories, architectural mapping could claim a different starting point. Since architecture at its most traditional deals with the design and construction of buildings, forms of drawing and working with buildings have been constitutive of what architectural mapping is today. Architecture embraced the axonometric drawing as a mode of visualising buildings and objects from two different sides but with a view from nowhere. This was not the bird's eye view of the geographic map but a composite image that created a view that no one could see, it could be considered an early precursor to the totalising models discussed above. Yet one crucial difference remains, which is that in most architectural mapping there is no claim to represent 'reality' instead reality is always constructed through the act of drawing, meaning that maps become propositional devices. Architectural drawings are also made with the purpose of communication, traditionally between architects, craftsmen and builders, and today between more diverse communities of practice. Architectural maps can range from the scale of regions and territories to that of a building interior and the intimate scale of the body. This ease with and necessity of switching and combining scales and views in a seamless manner is central to the use of maps in architecture. For studying spatial and geographic phenomena, such mapping can be a powerful form of visual representation that allows the complexity gleaned from ethnographic methods to be reproduced visually in ways that can produce speculative forms of analysis.

BORDER ENTANGLEMENTS AND TOPOLOGICAL MAPS

For the last year the Topological Atlas project team has been working on the Pakistan-Iran border to understand the nature of the territorial formations being produced and reproduced through the movement of people and goods, seasonal and climatic changes and the knotted entanglements of these flows and exchanges. We have explored these at key locations along the border, such as the Taftan border crossing which is the only formal border post between Pakistan and Iran. But our main focus has been on the smaller crossings where inhabitants of the area can pass with a rahdaari[1] – a word used for tolls or transit duties but also for the piece of paper required to pass the border at these smaller local crossings. It can only be used by those who can prove residence in close proximity to the border and allows for short stays of up to 15 days within 60km of the border. These small outposts are where grey border trade occurs, for example the roughly 40,000 litres of cheap Iranian diesel that flows into Pakistan in small barrels on the back of pickup trucks and motorcycles every day, or the narcotics trade that connects Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.[2] These are also the places where undocumented migrants can cross the border on their way to Iran, Turkey or further into Europe. In using mapping, visualisation and spatial analysis to consider these phenomena, the aim is not to reveal the routes and strategies of those who are evading the border regime in order to make their way to what they consider to be more prosperous lives in Europe, nor is it to reveal the partially hidden practices of low-level smugglers who are often trying to make ends meet in an area that has long been neglected by both the Pakistani and Iranian states. Instead the aim is to make sense of the entanglements of power not through the language of sovereignty, as Elizabeth Povinelli has cautioned,[3] and which is the usual modality in which exchanges at the geopolitical border are understood, but through the tension between terrain, technology and subjectivity. In concrete terms this means, for example, understanding how ethnicity affects experiences of crossing the border – Pashtuns, Punjabi or Baloch will have completely different experiences of the technologies of border management including how they are treated at the frequent checkpoints along the highways. The system of 'lines' (bribes) and favours that allow some to pass through and others not are often brokered through low-level agents who are also drivers or conductors of buses or are in the guise of passengers. Their ethnicity as well as the informal networks they have managed to cultivate will ensure their survival in this dangerous business – it is an example of what AbdouMaliq Simone calls 'people as infrastructure'.[4] The infrastructural relations in these border areas are less to do with the road, fence and wall building that we would normally associate with hardened borders (although these are also present), instead the state modulates flows across the border that it anyway never intended to stop and it relies on this infrastructural capacity of people to

find a way through the various obstacles it places in the way, some intended others not. Of course the system of 'lines' ensures monetary value not only for those whose ingenuity allows them 'to derive maximal outcomes from a minimal set of elements',[5] but also, for the state at large that derives economic benefit from the cheap oil and other goods that move across the border.

The informal nature of how oil is transported means there is spillage everywhere, the pristine coastline along the Arabian Sea in Balochistan is often polluted by the small boats that carry and use the diesel. To trace the lines of toxins that seep into the land and the sea from the small scale industry that this diesel supports and that is crucial to so many livelihoods, is to map out the ways in which our lives are interconnected across geopolitical borders. 'As we stretch the local across these seeping transits we need not scale up to the Human or the global, but we cannot remain in the local. We can only remain hereish.'[6] This concept of the 'hereish' is what drives the types of maps we are producing that not only visualise from the perspective of human relations and are not only local or global, but are glimpses into these complex entanglements that can only ever make sense from a situated perspective rather than the god's eye view of something like the Blue Marble or the total immersion of virtual reality type models. Some principles for producing 'hereish' maps for a topological atlas would be: to make patchy models that allow for moments of uncertainty and unknowing rather than producing totalising worlds; to privilege intensities of experience and relationalities over an attempt to produce a unifying vision; to use narrative as a device to navigate through such complex representations; and perhaps most importantly, to follow Katherine McKittrick's argument relating to 'a black sense of place',[7] where she warns against analysing spatial violence in a way that perpetuates such narratives and instead asks us to produce analyses that not only reveal spatial violence, but also, the forms of life that resist and to contribute towards supporting those.

1   The word rah means path or way and daar means responsibility for or possessing.

2   Nausheen H. Anwar, 'Asian Mobilities and State Governance at the Geographic Margins: Geopolitics and Oil Tales from Karachi to Taftan', Environment and Planning A, 48.6 (2016), 1047-63.

3   Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016).

4   A. M. Simone, 'People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg', Public Culture, 16.3 (2004), 407-29.

5   Simone, p. 411.

6   Povinelli, p. 13.

7   Katherine McKittrick, 'On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place', Social & Cultural Geography, 12.8 (2011), 947-63.
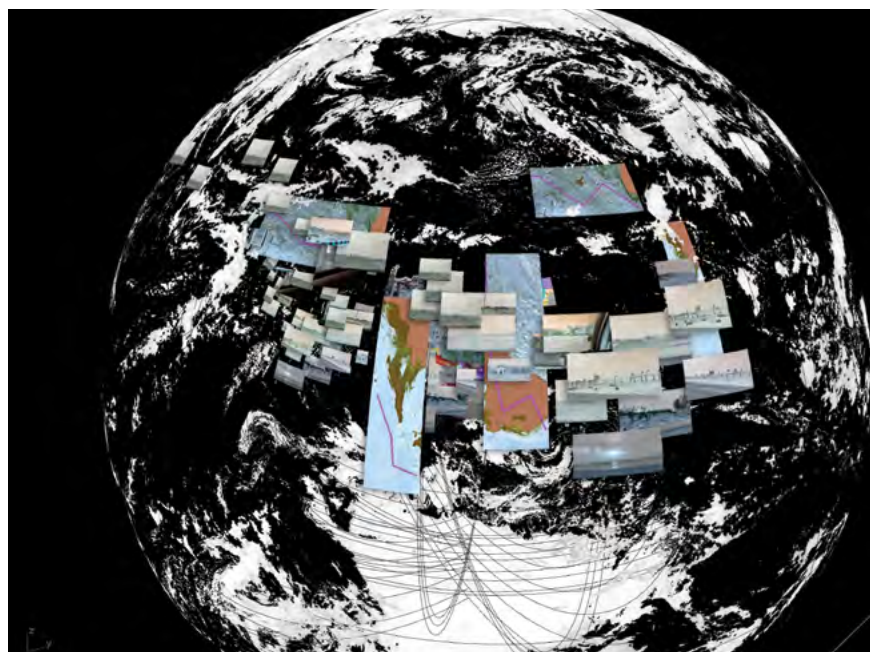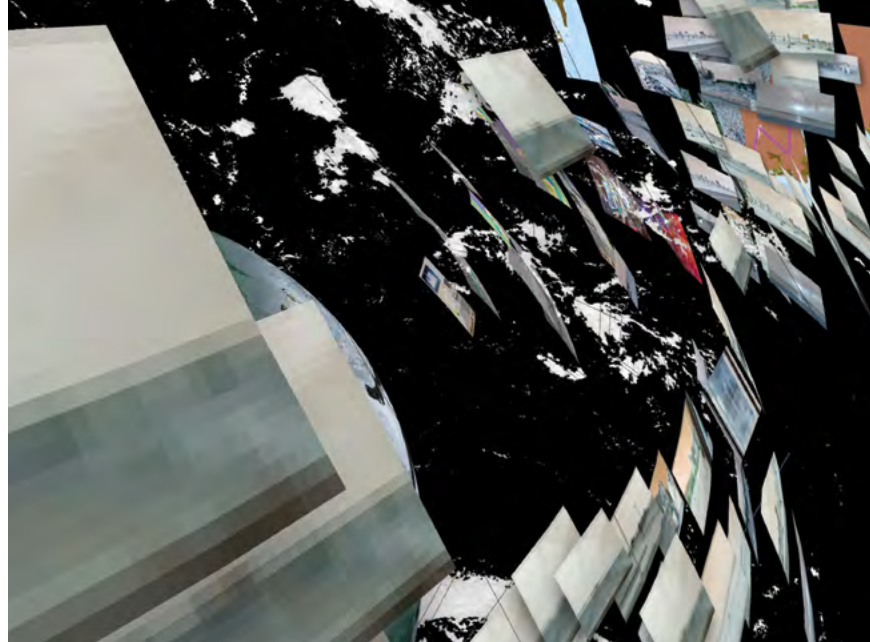
Kultani crossing at the Pakistan-Iran border that only those possessing a rahdaari can use. Photo: author
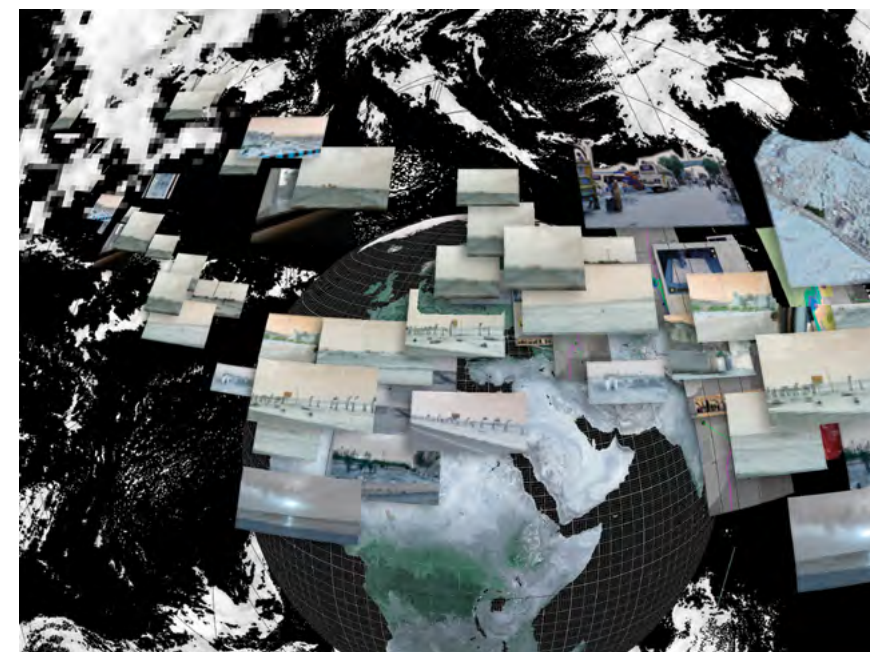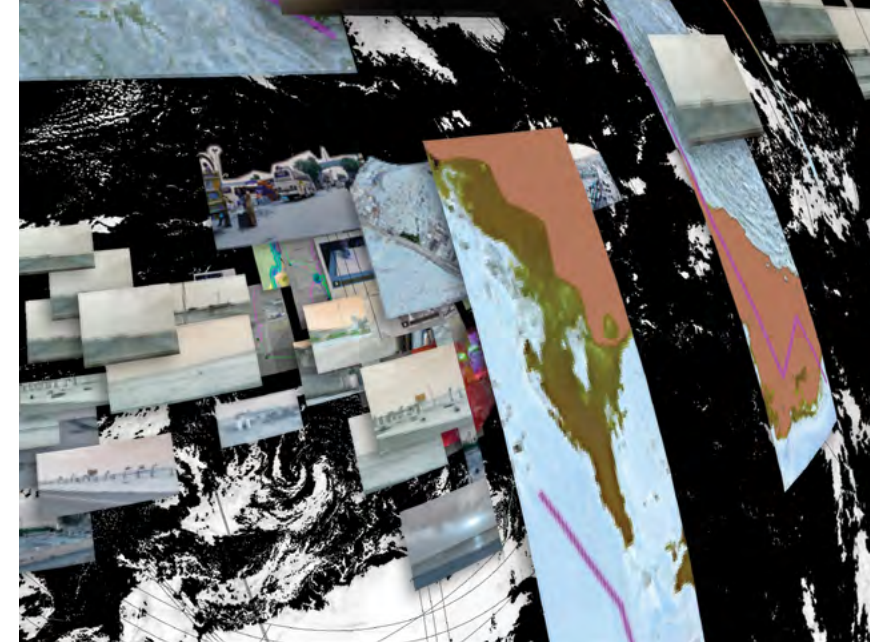

Checkpoints along the coastal highway leading to the border with Iran, where deals can be made to pass through. Photo: author

Pakistan Iran Smuggling

Patchy representations of topological maps privilege intensities and relations over scale and distance. Image: Yelta Köm

They require a situated perspective to orientate oneself and narrative as a device to navigate through the complexity. Image: Yelta Köm