

Review of Simonetta Moro, *Mapping Paradigms in Modern and Contemporary Art* (2022)

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When international air travel plummeted by around 96% during the global pandemic, travel magazines began advising readers on how to ‘travel the world without leaving home’. Alongside recommendations of poetry, travel writing and films, maps were often featured in these articles as a means of imagining beyond the physical constraints of lockdown. Whether by taking a virtual journey in Google Earth, plotting past and intended destinations, or ‘drawing or painting maps’, confinement led many to engage creatively with mapping as expressions of a geographical imagination, and a means of escape.

Maps are more than geometric abstractions; they are propositions about the world that act to shape how individuals and societies relate to one another and the places they inhabit and traverse. For New York-based artist, Simonetta Moro, however, the imaginative potential this thinking unlocks is too often downplayed in histories of map-making, which tend to emphasise the forward march of cartographic systems towards increasing geometric accuracy. In *Mapping Paradigms in Modern and Contemporary Art*, Moro sets out to disrupt this dominant, scientific narrative. Questioning what it might mean to think cartographically within arts practices, the book introduces a range of archival, philosophical, and cultural sources to highlight the poetic – that is, the “mythical, affective, and topological” – dimensions of mapping within a predominantly Western cultural context. With this attention to the *poetics* of cartography, Moro advances a theory of “carto-aesthetics” to argue for the return of the imaginary in practices of mapping as enabling a multiplicity of worldviews, experiences, and configurations of place.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, *Archaeologies*, advances a genealogy of euro-centric cartographies plotted through Western art historical periods, from the Ancient and Medieval, through to the Renaissance, Baroque and proto-Romantic. The thrust of the argument here is that premodern maps reveal a multiplicity of overlapping and intersecting views of the world, which can be understood with Ricoeur in terms of a “narrative of movement”. Rendered from the shifting perspective of itinerant cartographers, examples such as the Peutinger Map, showing routes from the East to the West of the Roman Empire, are presented as aesthetic translations of durational and subjective experiences. By contrast, Moro goes on to demonstrate how the move towards greater technical accuracy in mapping during the early modern period and Renaissance reflects the logic of the unified world picture, as a universal worldview that would be “adopted by cultures worldwide”. This argument is underpinned with a reading of Heidegger, in particular his analysis of modern paradigms of control in the *The Age of the World Picture* (1938). An unexpected but welcome analysis of Peter Greenaway’s 1982 film, *The Draughtsman Contract*, set in the 1600s, allows Moro to discuss the mechanics of the grid in drawing as in mapping and to gesture to new ideas of relational space during the Baroque era.

Part II, *Topologies*, attempts a definition of poetic cartography as “the obverse of the (scientific) unified world picture”, more aligned with the multiplicity of premodern mapping, and therefore open to different perspectives and views of the world. The main focus here is on Euro-American postmodern and contemporary arts practices that draw upon mapping in

a bid to critique and disrupt spatialised systems of dominance. Unsurprisingly, the Situationists make an appearance, with the *dérive* discussed as an example of poetic cartography based on durational experiences of urban space. For Moro, Situationist maps, with their hubs and directions of flow, represent a move from the topographic to topological schema, mirrored in the philosophical orientation towards rhizomatic thinking with Deleuze and Guattari. Other examples include Robert Smithson's *Monuments of Passaic* (1967), Julie Mehretu's layered and shattered painting, *Bombing Babylon* (2001), and Aga Ousseinov's witty, non-spherical globes. Joyce Kozloff's use of Google Earth and Daphne Le Sergent's video installations incorporating satellite imagery are notable for their engagement with digital mapping technologies. While Moro acknowledges that artists have found poetic opportunities in the digital, she is critical of the "overly technologized environment dominated by GPS" and "the impact of technology on a planetary scale". Poetic cartography is therefore positioned as a departure from Western, modern systems of cartographic possession and control. Most of her chosen examples make for ineffective navigation guides, and in a project that seeks in effect to deterritorialise cartography and embrace the unknown, this is perhaps the point. By casting light on the poetic, imaginative, affective and performative dimensions of mapping, carto-aesthetics speaks to fragmented ways of being and opportunities for reconfiguring global politics and ecologies. What is less clear is how far the given examples can be said to meaningfully enact such reconfigurations.

Despite the impressive range and historical sweep of material covered in this book, the focus on theories and practices from within Europe and the US sits uneasily with the orientation of her argument towards deterritorialisation and ecological justice. Theoretically, we are on well-trodden ground, with a rollcall of philosophers including Benjamin, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Latour, Krauss, and Braidotti. Moro's project here is to chart the "fundamental philosophical issues at the core of our current crisis of globalisation" – a task undertaken from the centre. However, her attempts to engage with postcolonial thinking reveal the risks of this approach. In one of the later chapters, Moro moves to claim the Mediterranean as an archipelago in the sense set out by Glissant. Her underlying point that European culture cannot be considered as a monolith is a valid one, but her reading does damage to Glissant. His archipelagic thinking draws on the geography of the Caribbean to provide a powerful counterpoint to dominant, Eurocentric spatial imaginaries and culture enacted through the slave trade. When he suggests the Mediterranean cannot be properly considered an archipelago, it is not as Moro identifies only because the Mediterranean is bounded, but also, more importantly, because Glissant is writing in a post Middle Passage context to oppose the inward concentration of the Mediterranean as a colonial construction. Glissant's conception of the archipelago poses a fundamental challenge to the dominance of European culture in describing the utopian meeting, exchange, and change of different cultures in a Caribbean context to produce something new. With Glissant, archipelagic thinking opens and conforms diversity, not in search of unity, but as a prelude to being in relation.

This gestures to the core tension with the book, which concerns the notion that we are living in an increasingly borderless world. The question immediately arises, borderless for whom? Who is the nomadic figure woven through Moro's text? She suggests the nomad can be extended to incorporate "the figures of the migrant, the foreigner, the refugee" (and

perhaps also the artist) as 'diasporic' subjects, without any acknowledgement of the differences between them in terms of resources, access, and capacities to challenge and shape dominant imaginaries. In claiming that "borders are for the most part fictitious", the intention is presumably to highlight that territorial borders are established and policed by people (though of course many borders also follow geological features such as rivers). The ineffectiveness of borders at restricting pathogens and extreme weather events to nation state territories is called upon as evidence, without any recognition that the impacts of global events like the pandemic on individuals, communities, and societies vary wildly depending on actions taken at the national level. Narratives around territory and nationhood are unevenly experienced, intersecting with geo-politics and environmental crises to produce spatialised inequalities and vulnerabilities. In other words, fictions (like borders) exert a powerful force in and on the world, and in fact this where poetic cartographies draw their potential.

It is in the discussion of premodern mythological and narrative maps and their relationship to the work of her contemporaries that Moro's argument really comes alive. The comparison between an eighteenth-century illustration of Achilles' shield as described in Homer's Iliad and Gal Weinstein's *Marble Sun* (2014), a cartographic installation based on Richard Kaufmann's utopian plan for the village of Nahalal, is particularly memorable. Likewise, in describing Michail Rybakov's algorithmic process – "a mash-up between block diagrams of landscapes illustrating where animals and plants may live, and historical [ecological] illustrations" – Moro touches on the exclusions of more-than-human life within dominant cartographic systems as expressions of an anthropogenic worldview, and the opportunities for reimagining human-nonhuman relationships through creative approaches to mapping. Moro herself makes beautiful, layered drawings, prints, performative traces, and psychogeographical maps exploring the affective, temporal, and relational dimensions of places, which would have made a welcome addition here. As it is, *Mapping Paradigms in Modern and Contemporary Art* provides rich context to contemporary arts practices that engage cartographic thinking, which will undoubtedly be of interest to researchers, artists, and cartographers alike.