

Cartography of Excess by Brian Holmes

Utopian ideas - like "Spaceship Earth" - are round, multidimensional, interrelated: their archetypal map is the Milky Way, the infinite constellations. But rational thinking is instrumental, linear, it distorts: and that's exactly the problem with the Mercator map, the most common world projection. Buckminster Fuller, inventor of the geodesic dome, created a "Dymaxion map" to undo those distortions. First the earth becomes a geometric figure, an isocahedron: its 20 triangles are then disjointed and laid flat, so the land masses radiate from a nexus in the north, without splitting continents or enlarging the polar regions. Fuller based his politics on this map: at the '67 World Expo in Montreal, in the dome of the U.S. pavilion, he wanted to lay out a vast Dymaxion projection, and animate it with the most up-to-date statistics, so visitors could watch the flow of resources across the earth - and identify the patterns, the inequalities, the most wasteful and efficient solutions. Delegations from different regions would meet for cooperative sessions, in a problem-solving process called the "World Peace Game."¹ The idea was simple: radical democracy. "Make the world work, for 100% of humanity, in the shortest possible time, through spontaneous cooperation, without ecological offense or the disadvantage of anyone."²

Gerardus Mercator was a Protestant scholar from Flanders; he published his map in 1569, to help European merchants plot routes to distant shores. The ability to sail in straight lines led to a capitalist world-economy. Oyvind Fahlström was a Swedish artist who spent his childhood in Brazil, and died in the U.S.A. His World Map was painted in 1972, not long after Fuller imagined his utopia. Fahlström's map recalls the Mercator projection: but the oceans have practically disappeared, the continents are crushed or swollen by the political pressures that the world-economy brings. Space overflows with clashes between the wealthy and the downtrodden, the CIA and the freedom-fighters, the capitalists, the communists, the revolutionaries. Fahlström was interested in resistance and excess: by which I mean politics plus overflowing subjectivity, figurative invention. For him, a map was a flat, rule-governed space for a strict social game; but it also was an open territory for imaginary play.³ In the early seventies he created a series of Monopoly sets (CIA Monopoly, World Trade Monopoly, Indochina, etc.), where political and economic information provides inflexible rules, whatever our passion, whatever our creativity. Yet a work like his Pentagon Puzzle - including a detail of a square earth, wrapped in chains - could also be taken apart, dispersed, its pieces reinserted into another game.

Fuller's utopia was not accepted for the U.S. pavilion in 1967: at the entryway, officials placed a huge golden eagle. But today, Internet access has brought tremendous information within our reach. Now everyone can play at mapping resources. "The communications aspect of my work can be vastly augmented by the use of computers and by the use of television, video and the miniaturizing trend of cassettes of video communication.... millions of people and multi-billions of dollars are at work in developing just such equipment, personnel and know-how," wrote Fuller in 1970.⁴ Part of Bucky's heritage is "osEarth Inc.," a think-tank and data-base compiler which organizes World Game sessions on a huge Dymaxion map, as a learning experience for youth. However, that experience is also sold to negotiating teams from Fortune 500 corporations. "Global civil society," with all its complicities, is squarely on the map in 2002.

Does anyone doubt that Fahlström's Monopoly paintings, with their focus on political confrontation, come much closer to the games the world really plays? Yet the recent round of counter-summits and global demonstrations still recall Fuller's basic idea, radical democracy. And one begins to wonder: where are the artist-cartographers of today?

Power Lines

The Paris-based conceptual group, Bureau d'études, works intensively in two dimensions. For a recent exhibition called "Planet of the Apes" they have created integrated wall charts of the

ownership ties between transnational organizations, a synoptic view of the world monetary game. Against a black ground, shield-like forms are emblazoned with the names of states, regulatory bodies, think tanks, financial firms and corporations. Texts on privatization and flexibilization are posted among the circuit-like arrays. A few spots give way to blue zones, humorous and surreal, like word-balloons or psychic oceans: these hold counter-information from autonomous groups, manifestos, constitutions, calls to action...

Instead of a catalogue, the visitor gets three "Wartime Chronicles," single sheets that divide the power players into overlapping regions. One is a finance pole, with pension funds, portfolio managers and banks, plus gray zones of legitimating foundations. Another shows telcoms, media groups, networks of consumer distribution. So you want to call the police on these criminals? Military institutions, intelligence agencies, weapon makers and satellite companies complete the picture. A few quotes run along the sides of the sheets, like this one from the artist Fabrice Hybert: "My first collector, well, big collector... was a mediator for NATO and the big structures like that, NATO and the African or South American countries, something like that, another one is a mediator for all the arms industries, well, you know, it's horrible but he has this capacity to abstract himself in that scene... Me, I like people like that."⁵

If artists are talking like that, where can you escape? There's a wager here: paint a totalitarian picture, crystal clear, and people will look for the cracks into some other dimension. Another giveaway, the eight-page text called "Potentials," explores "autonomous knowledge/power" - i.e. the deconstruction and unconventional reconstruction of complex machines - with a political analysis of different anarchist positions, as well as maps or figures listing dissident knowledge producers, squats and hacklabs, and a chart that relates various forms of non-capitalist exchange. A non-price (0 euros) and a contractual note figures on each of the sheets: "The present publication cannot be acquired, sold or destroyed. All persons may nonetheless use it as long as they please, with an obligation to give it to others if no longer desired."

This last detail has its importance: as Bruce Sterling recently put it: "Information Wants To Be Worthless" - worthless in monetary terms, that is.⁶ And far beyond the computer logic of Open Source, the great alternative project of the last decade has been mapping the transnational space invested primarily by the corporations, and distributing that knowledge for free. This is the real power of "spontaneous cooperation," in a global information project like Indymedia. Across a decade and more, from the early '80s to the mid-90s, the rules of the neoliberal economy were hidden in the back holes of offshore operations. Today, a multitude of projects like "Planet of the Apes" are making them increasingly visible.⁷ To the point where a new resistance means that we can start imagining - or exploring - a radically different map of the planet again.

Fuller would have loved the design of the Internet, which makes information-sharing possible for the World Game. Fahlström, the admirer of cartoonist Robert Crumb, would have loved the crowd at the Days of Global Action: autonomous and wild, intelligent and quick on their feet. Bureau d'études is in that crowd: by collaborating with squats, jobless people and sans papiers, by operating a self-organizing space in Strasbourg, the "Syndicat Potentiel," and combining it with "Université Tangente," a project for autonomous knowledge production, they have begun quietly broadcasting a pragmatic intransigence to the younger artists on a French art scene, dominated by the likes of Fabrice Hybert. This summer, they will meet the No-Border Network in attempts to subvert one of the strongest power-lines: the Schengen Information System. Activities like those simply can't appear on the walls of the art world. In this sense, half the work of Bureau d'études remains underground: the refusals and denunciations are clear, the cooperation and subjective play remains almost invisible. And maybe it's better that way: how could you successfully represent an alternative, radically democratic experience?

Uncertain Uses

A sophisticated mapping project has tried to answer just that question. The screen before you

shows a purple-black mass, spangled with mesmerizing constellations: slowly you realize it's a night-photo of urbanized Europe, with white rectangles marking zones of potential activity. The scene breaks: music plays, letters dance and roll, spelling out words; and you begin to wander within a matrix of slightly elevated, freestanding screens. You find yourself surrounded by distinct sets of imposing, static black-and-white images of architectural arrays; then snapshot color pics of people mingling freely in a everyday scenes; then sustained interviews in black-and-white with huge talking heads; then lyrical video strolls through some personal warp in the urban terrain. Stop in front of one screen, and a specific, localized story unfolds: architectural setting, actors, individual story, subjective path through the city. Until the scene breaks, the language rolls, the music plays, and the permutations begin differently again. On the fringes of the art world, a group of urbanists has created one of the most impressive systems of visual representation to appear in recent years: USE, or the "Uncertain States of Europe," a project by Stefano Boeri and Multiplicity. Multiplicity is a networked research team, exploring the European territory as it changes, in twenty-six different sites from Athens to Espoo, from Porto to Bucharest or Moscow. The basic premise is that borders are ungraspable, that architectural programs and urban limits are unstable - but everywhere, the subjective excess of "autopoetic innovations" creates recognizable patterns of change, at least for the observer who mingles with them. For Boeri, whose aim is to deconstruct an outdated urban planner's gaze, what we are seeing is "the triumph of the multitude": consistently mutating but thoroughly unpredictable patterns of self-organization, niching in built environments that have increasingly lost their predetermined function. Thus one of the sequences (keyword: *détournement*) recounts how the uses of the Chinese community have completely transformed the ideal program of a huge modern housing slab in the 13th district of Paris. Another (keyword: *eruption*) deals with the careful organization of chaotic raves, "nomadic flames": "The paths of the millions of ravers and tribes that invade Europe's streets every weekend bring us ever further away from a precise, functional destination."⁸

The reference to the multitude in Boeri's text, and indeed, on the screens of USE, recalls the political thinking of Italian Autonomia, with their central theme of "exodus," or conscious withdrawal from modernist planning and salaried labor. Obviously it's a dilemma for the traditional urbanist, or for any politician wanting to exercise control: "Escaping this condition of powerlessness simply implies accepting the ungovernability of a great deal of the contemporary territory," writes Boeri. This in its turn would mean "learning to act in a context directed by different, highly variable subjects."⁹ Or in what I'd call a situation of radical democracy. But the big question that remains is how to use an installation like USE, and how to use the operational model of a networked, collaborative research group like Multiplicity. The exhibition device itself, elaborated outside the typical gallery-museum circuit, is the best installation I've yet seen on interactive social process: with its extensive matrix of screens, it opens up a real-and-imaginary territory, a multidimensional, interrelated world of subjective freedoms. But to what extent is it effectively political? "To resist is not to be against, any more, but to singularize," writes Suely Rolnik, reflecting on the changing meanings of artistic practice since the Great Refusal of the 1960s. "All and any acts of resistance are acts of creation and not acts of negation."¹⁰ Beautifully said - but I'm not certain. The great theoretical swing of the past three decades, from critical negation to use value and subversive affirmation, has left "progressive" practices wide open to every complicity. Despite the autopoetic processes that an installation like USE so brilliantly lets us see, the entire planet - Spaceship Earth - is prey to a resurgence of repressive authority, within the perfectly legible game of the capitalist world-economy. Berlusconi's Italy, where the project has been shown, is hardly an exception: and yet it is also one of the laboratories for new forms of political mobilization. Can we imagine artistic representations of self-organizing processes, in open confrontation with the economic game? "Rules oppose and derail subjectivity, loosen the imprinted circuits of the individual," wrote Oyvind Fahlström. Only then does a deeper territory emerge, a more complex interplay: power lines/radical democracy.

Notes

This text was originally published in German in the journal Springerin, Vienna, March 2002.

1. "The common assumption of ultimate war by the major political powers of our planet brought about the development of World WAR Gaming Science by the great powers' respective military strategists. World War Gaming Science involved all terrestrial resources. My World PEACE Gaming Science changes the basic assumption of fundamental inadequacy of total life support and applies total capability toward the success of all humans." Buckminster Fuller, "Preamble and Memorandum to those interested in playing World Game," in *The World Game: Integrative Resource Planning Tool* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University, typescript, 1971), p. 2, available at: . Fuller is, of course, the coiner of the expression "Spaceship Earth."
2. Quoted in Medard Gabel, "Buckminster Fuller and the Game of the World," at . Thanks to Hubert Salden for putting me on this track.
3. I use Suely Rolnik's distinction between "playing-the-game" and "just-playing," in "Oyvind Fahlström's Changing Maps," exhib. cat. *Oyvind Fahlström: Another Space for Painting*, MACBA, Barcelona, 2001.
4. Buckminster Fuller, "Preamble and Memorandum," op. cit., p. 6.
5. Interview on May 2, 1996, with Fabrice Hybert, artist representing France at the Venice Biennial, in Bureau d'études, *Chroniques de guerre 2*, brochure, February 2002.
6. Bruce Sterling, "Information Wants To Be Worthless," distributed free over Nettime, March 6, 2002, archive at ; let me recall that one of the richest Nettime threads over the years has concerned "the high-tech gift economy."
7. Mark Lombardi's sketch diagrams and index cards on banking scandals, or the website "TheyRule" by Josh On and Futurefarmers (www.theyrule.net), are close to the recent projects by Bureau d'études. "TheyRule" introduces a DIY side to corporate tracking: users can build up diagrams of a single CEO's participation in interlocking corporate boards. However, neither project has the synoptic ambitions of Bureau d'études.
8. Paolo Vari, "USE.04 Raves," in exhib. cat. *Mutations*, arc en rêve centre d'architecture, Bordeaux, 2000.
9. Stefano Boeri, "Notes for a Research Program," in *Mutations*, op. cit.
10. Suely Rolnik, "Oyvind Fahlström's Changing Maps," op. cit.

Websites

Bureau d'études:

<http://utangente.free.fr> (includes maps)

<http://syndicatpotentiel.free.fr>

<http://bureaudetudes.free.fr>

Multiplicity:

www.multiplicity.it

www.classic.archined.nl/extra/archi_tv/tv3/eng/hoofdframe1.html

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- * Commons-based political production:
 - * about("empowerment"); (Bluescreen)
 - * Interview with a Photocopier (Matthew Fuller)
 - * Empowerment as practice. (Kris Rutten)

Further Reading

- * Cartography of Excess
- * L'utilisation de sujets politiques par le monde de l'art
- * Unleashing the Collective Phantom
- * Create or be Created: How the Internet Cultural Renaissance is Turning Audience Members into Artists
- * Open Source Intelligence
- * Paper Dolls
- * A Cut and Paste Conversation

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