

I Am Here: Artists Making Maps as Autobiographical Geographies

by Doris Caçoilo

I was driving west towards the city of Salamanca in Spain, on a gorgeous scorching summer day. The land was flat and empty. We would stop in Salamanca to refuel and then turn north on our way to Bilbao. Sean is navigating from the passenger seat. In the long expanses between turns he would explore our road map, explaining many of his discoveries, clarifying anything we might be seeing and may want to stop for. We had luckily found the map in a drawer of my bedroom, a very good road map, detailed and extensive. My brother must have left it behind the summer before when he had driven to Spain from our summer home in Portugal. The windows in the car are open, the air rushing into the car fluttering the paper of the map, twisting and folding it in his hands. "Be careful with the map," I tell him, "we don't want to lose it." We arrived in Salamanca and switched, Sean gets into the driver's seat. We find our way out of the city and onto the road north to Bilbao. We still have many hours left to travel in the scorching sun, before sundown will give us some relief.

I am fanning myself with our folded road map, neglecting my own earlier warning to Sean. A huge gust of air sweeps in through the open window and grabs hold of the corner of the folded map. The map explodes open and is sucked out into the air above the highway. A tractor-trailer cab behind us instantly collects the map, it is glued to the grill, frozen perfectly covering the front of the truck. It is unfolded and entirely vulnerable. Sean and I are silent. My mouth has flown open and as I stare at the map, glued to the truck behind us, I cannot say a word. Sean does not dare say a thing, but I know what he is thinking. We sit in silence, the map following behind us for what seems like an eternity. "I miss the map," I eventually mutter, and I did.

Maps play an important role in our lives, giving us security, guidance and the power to explore. They give us a factual, unquestionable reality that allows us to faithfully follow their instructions, believe their representations and trust their paths, even and especially into unknown territories. They allow us a view into worlds we may not know and help us feel the courage to venture out to new places, better understanding them as we go, giving us a bird's eye view of our location, giving us a bigger picture. The maps in our lives contextualize our spaces, our location and our time. They give us a picture of space, guide us through it, and help us record it. Maps become personal assistants, navigators, political tools,

illustrations of boundaries and ownership, historical documents, records of experience and even road companions. In all of their roles they seem to provide us service and we trust in the service they provide. When we are suddenly without them, we may feel lost.

Traditionally, map making is a scientifically driven art with the purpose of organizing and representing information. This information is usually associated with geographic boundaries, history, natural landscape, topography and transportation. Many contemporary artists use the tools cartography provides, to achieve personal expressions which often appear as maps, recognizable by the iconography of the tools.

Many creative uses of maps today involve the application of new technologies: GoogleMaps API and GPS technology. These are about labeling traditional maps, tweaking them and adding personal/collective information to them. This is a new way of using the traditional map so that they do not only convey place names or topographies, but community networks and locations of specific people, their interests and often details of their daily routines. The maps look the same, but have new layers of information. The lines, shapes and masses are the same, with new layers of experiences, moments and people injected. These maps are augmented traditional maps, still accurate, but layered with non-traditionally mapped information and disseminated and networked in non-traditional ways.

Some artists seem to have gone further in the reorder and restructuring of maps and the information they provide. They have used maps to express personal artistic process and creation. Beyond the layering on of non-traditional information, these artists have appropriated these symbols and used them in various ways to express new stories, personal ones. They have employed the map and its systems into their own creative process and the results retain the language of maps, a familiar landscape of signs the viewer can respond to.

This essay explores a few artists who have use traditional tools and systems to present maps in a non-traditional, many times non-factual way. Going beyond adding new layers, these artists are creating new ways of representation, finding personal motivations to create maps with personal narratives and presenting these as creative, artistic expressions. The artists I have chosen for the purposes of this essay have a reverence for mapmaking and maps themselves, and use them in the expressions they create. These artists use the iconography provided by maps, even often times transforming, dissecting and appropriating maps to represent a personal geography.

Denis Wood in his book, *The Power of Maps*, explains the relationship of the map and its creator. In its existence as representation, the map shows us a world intended for illustration but also illustrates the geography of the creator.

“A map is *always of* something, always has a subject, even when that something is a fiction, alive exclusively in the map that is of it. It refers out from itself to another map, to the world, to the Nature of which it is not. Of *something* (its subject), it is also through *someone* (its author), for its presence in the world is ever a function of the representing mind...This is no more than to say that the map is *about* the world in a way that reveals, not the world—or just the world—but also (and sometimes especially) the agency of the mapper.” (Wood, 23–24)

It follows themes through maps made as personal creative records of time, space, interpretation, emotion, and relationships. The maps created serve as unique personal expressions of these artists, seemingly far from the historical, academic and practical applications of maps, they are actually very similar to what we are entirely familiar with as maps, but turned to represent a personal investment and intimate expression.

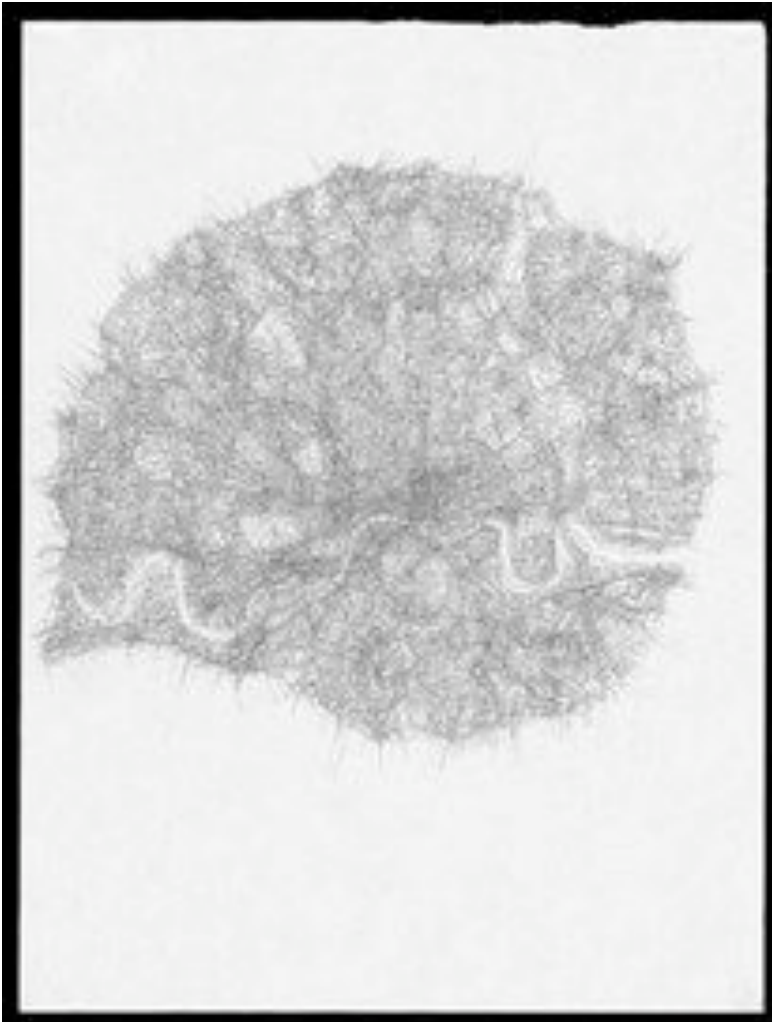
These artists have used maps and mapmaking elements to create highly personal narratives and imagined worlds. The artists inject the details, sensibilities, emotions and data of their daily lives into these personal geographies. These examples show us details of the artists lives: dislocation, longing, exploration, vulnerability, national identity, ownership, ritual, fantasy and imagination. In all of these examples the artists show us a personal interpretation of an iconography they are certain we will understand. We are keyed into the symbols and signs of this language. The artist is able to apply symbol and sign to his own narrative and speak in this language of personal location, time, space, emotion and understanding.

Armed with these signs and symbols familiar to the viewer the artist is able to communicate a range of stories. It is in these personal narratives in which we find common themes, ideas and issues. In looking at examples of artists using maps one can pick out themes prevalent in the work -- ideas and messages that seem to become focal points of the pieces. I have chose four themes to discuss here and use to organize and

illustrate the examples of work. These are: Mutating Body, Repurposing Home, Time and Fabrication.

Mutating Body

Kathy Prendergast



Kathy Prendergast City Drawings Series (London), 1997
Photo: Kerlin Gallery © Kathy Prendergast

Kathy Prendergast's meticulously detailed maps of cities, are beautiful delicate representations of the ever changing, mutating metropolis. Her drawings, fragile and seemingly vulnerable, portray the intricacy and complexity of the living city. She shows us only the most crucial information, repeating and representing only the life arteries: roads, the lines of movement and flow. We can recognize a familiar shape, a main highway or waterway. The drawings fade and end at the city limits,

floating like an organism trapped under a scientist's microscope, intricate and complex.

In a review of Prendergast's *City Drawings* series titled *Art Now: Kathy Prendergast: City Drawings* on the Tate Modern website, Frances Morris writes,

“Prendergast offers this as a form of knowledge, derived through curiosity and imagination, in place of the kind of factual information we normally associate with maps. Each drawing traces the imprint of history, recording a moment in a process of organic growth. As cities continually evolve, each drawing remains in a sense unfinished and this ambitious project, currently a work-in-progress, could continue for as long as there are borders of national identity to redefine.”
(Morris)

The drawings show these cities as unlabeled, unnamed collections of lines and intersections, masses of coiled paths forming a unique delicate organism, dissected and diagrammed. These anatomical drawings remind us that the city too is living, changing, evolving and moving. The artist uses her hand, her meticulous talent and patience of tedious replication, to show us her own conquering of these organisms, amassing an entire collection of moments in time and place. Entire cities are frozen, captured. She is claiming ownership of them, one by one, until each capital is recorded by her hand -- each line owned and represented by her interpretation.

Nina Katchadourian



Nina Katchadourian, Austria, Photo: www.ninakatchadourian.com

Nina Katchadourian's painstakingly dissected road maps metamorphose into intricate biological sculptures. She cuts everything from road maps leaving only the main arteries: the roads. She then reinterprets this material to form installations that mimic biological/scientific displays. Road intersections she has selected based on aesthetics are placed into glass slides and arranged carefully on a shelf. She also shows the map of the continental United States as a dissection of just its main arteries, pressed between two large pieces of glass and hung so that it could be viewed from both sides.

Austria is a road map of Austria similarly dissected and transformed from its flatness into a 3D form resembling a human heart (Austria is referred to as "the heart of Europe"). The lines of the road map mutate into a 3D object referencing other forms. The map ceases to function its original service and is instead transformed, by concept, process and the creative act into a reinterpretation of the map and sculpture.

Places from his native Philippines appear alongside American cities, states may appear correctly, but in an entirely incorrect scale and location. Rhode Island may exist in Kentucky and Arkansas may border the state of Internet.

Rodriguez glorifies the formal aspects of cartographic composition by employing its tools and standards with meticulous care. His interpretation, however, is quite different. He is dismantling and restructuring the representation of the American geography, creating a new land in his own experience. Rodriguez seems intent on weaving this meticulous adherence to the tools and structure of cartography with personal narrative to reflect on and represent a geography of his own construction. He creates his own places and relationships that seem to satisfy his own longings. In her review of Lordy Rodriguez's work at the Clementine Gallery, Katie Stone Sonnenborn writes:

“Lordy Rodriguez takes our modern-day premise and reinvests it with the spirit of willful exploration. His maps are factual and wholly fictitious: guided by a combination of knowledge and imagination, he both represents and renounces American geography as we know it. “(Sonnenborn)

These map are at once entirely familiar and absurd. In deciphering his new arrangements we begin to recognize his experience. We recognize issues of dislocation, identity, his place as an outsider, longing, family, place. We fill in the details of his geography and imagine his realities. We too can identify with spending time in the state of Internet. Hollywood often does feel as if it has its own statehood. We respond to his humor and begin to imagine the narrative he is portraying. Megan Daily describes this repurposing of the US map in this way:

“Representational but not pictographic in the usual sense, maps constitute a singular visual domain. Rodriguez takes the inherent formlessness of cartographic practices to an extreme. The result is a fantasy country in which, for instance, the residents of Jersey City, Roswell, and Del Boca Vista would form a single constituency. (Dailey)

In his manipulation of the US map he is able to take power from the official story of the US and repurpose it. In repurposing and restructuring it he begins to own it, making a new narrative. We can recognize his ownership of these repurposed lines and imagine him living, existing in its boundaries.

Time

Joyce Kozloff



Joyce Kozloff, Targets, 2002 Photo: Artnet

Joyce Kozloff is creating representations of an evolution of time, historical shifts in society and geography simultaneously. She illustrates for the viewer a new point of view of the age of discovery, of war and of time. She brings us into the amalgamation of time she presents and allows us the space to contemplate, feel and understand her criticism. She collages all of these elements together to show her version of the story – a critical look at a familiar narrative. She changes the rules, the order, the chronology and asks us to reexamine the documents.

Her project, *Boys_Art*, combines quotes of historical maps, with collage elements derived from her son's childhood combat drawings and other narrative elements. She is making maps, incorporating time, history, space, interpretation and ornament to tell her story. Her maps transcend time and place and merge generations, artist, and history. In an interview with Vicki Goldberg in *Art Journal* in 2000 Kozloff says,

“I would not enjoy a world in which cultures became homogeneous and lost their singularity. All my work is appropriated from outside sources; I create a hybrid, a fusion of diverse materials, but I don't disguise their uniqueness or stylize them beyond recognition. We are flooded with imagery from everywhere: in our museums, our libraries, our media. For years, I've been trying to put it together for myself.”
(Goldberg)

In *Targets* (2002) Kozloff created a huge walk-in globe that stands nine feet tall. The interior walls of the globe are covered with painted military maps that are based on areas around the world that have been targeted by U.S. aerial attacks since World War II -- maps marking where U.S. bombs hit civilian populations between 1945 and 2000.

In an article about Kozloff's work Eleanor Munro writes about Kozloff's process, her political motivations and her dealings with time. Munro also quotes Kozloff stating her intentions and understanding of maps.

“Mapping almost seamlessly arose out of public art,” she says, “working with diagrams and floor plans, layering my own content onto them. In the beginning I worked only with places I knew intimately, but later my choices were based on other things.” The other things were conceptual and crossed boundaries of historical time. The many suites of map works here carry that kind of layered information. Upon topographical maps and nautical charts, she marked the routes of explorers and invaders, silk and slave traders; on contemporary aeronautical charts she outlined the tracks of bombing attacks on cities in the news in the 1980s and 1990s. She worked with celestial maps to describe the glowing and dimming of the planet as sun and stars compete with electric systems on earth for dominance of the skies. She

showed how the outlines of great cities expand, merge and collapse. She found ways to represent spheres of knowledge, their spread and deforming misconstructions, their widening and shrinking spheres of influence. And her uses of materials trace a history of traditional technologies, fresco giving way to watercolor, collage to oil on canvas. (Munro)

Roger Welch



Roger Welch, *The ground under my studio*, 2003 Photo: rogerwelch.com

Roger Welch's works are factual representations tweaked by his sensibilities to inform the viewer of his personal motivation. In an early project from 1973, *Memory Maps*, Welch created maps of wood and ink drawn from interviews with elderly individuals as they recalled their childhood hometowns. These maps portray places

that have been reshaped by time and exist only in a combination of memory and forgetfulness.

His work portrays not entirely a chronology of the past, but instead a combination of nostalgia, history, memory and personal experience. His projects draw on place, personal narrative, and memory.

In a much later work from 2003, *The ground under my studio* Welch draws on his own place in time and space to create a map of the history below his studio. He shows us that by looking into the earth we can assess the time before us, supporting us, holding us up.

“Standing in my studio on the corner of Houston Street and the Bowery in new York, I looked down at the floor and imagined all of the levels under it through the building, into the basement, sub basement, pipes, cables, wires and then to the remains of English and Dutch settlements. Then continuing for another 30 or 40 feet through the reddish brown soil to hit granite bedrock at approximately 100 feet below my studio floor.” From, a note by the artist on the work *The ground under my studio*, 2003

Fabrication

Julie Mehretu



Julie Mehretu, Local Calm, 2005 Photo: Crown Point Press

Julie Mehretu's large-scale paintings and drawings combine maps and diagrams of spaces layered with the artist's own language of signs and symbols. She combines a personal library of line, symbol and collage to create representations of places which exist as creatures of her own fabrication, but which also motivate critical dialogue about its intended message.

The text summarizing the exhibition *Julie Mehretu: Drawing into Painting* at the Walker Art Center on the center's website describes her work in this way:

"Mehretu combines a personal language of signs and symbols with architectural imagery to create her elaborate semi-abstractions. Simultaneously engaged with the formal concerns of color and line and the social concerns of power, history, globalism, and personal narrative, she is interested in "the multifaceted layers of place, space, and time that impact the formation of personal and

communal identity." The underlying structure of her work consists of socially charged public spaces--government buildings, museums, stadiums, schools, and airports--drawn in the form of maps and diagrams. She inscribes her own narrative into these decontextualized, highly controlled spaces through the layering of personal markings."

Making maps as autobiographical geographies

Artist, viewer, maker and audience, each of us has experience with and preconceived notions of maps. We arrive at them with an amount of knowledge, understanding, language and images in tow. Artists too have a history of experience with maps, their shapes, functions and rules. In drawing on these icons and symbols we may all share, the artists here, through many different approaches, have used maps to allow us a glimpse into their own stories. Armed with a language of symbols, signs and actuators they create images based on a form of familiarity, memory, history, home and place. The audience is allowed to use these signs to look into the narrative of the artist.

In these few examples of maps made by artists we begin to see now only the various ways in which artists chose to use or create maps, but also the many themes, messages and notions that artists using maps are able to touch upon. Maps, prevalent, historically crucial, familiar, exhaustive and simple in and of themselves are a merger of art and science calling on both for their creation and interpretation. Artists use this prevalence, this familiarity, to shape, reform and reappropriate the power of the maps to tell new stories, and we read them with a twinge aptitude and confidence in the language.

Works Cited

Chaplin, Heather. "Epidemic of Extravagance." Salon 19 February 1999. 12 July 1999 <<http://ww1.salon.com/money/1999/02/19chap.html>>.

Dailey, Meghan, *Lordy Rodriguez*, ArtForum, Jan, 2001
<http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_5_39/ai_75577258>

Goldberg, Vicki. *An Interview with Joyce and Max Kozloff*, Art Journal, Fall, 2000
<http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0425/is_3_59/ai_66238373>

Léith, Caoimhín Mac Giolla "Kathy Prendergast", Art Forum
<<http://www.artforum.com/archive/id=320&search=artist%20maps>>

Munro , Eleanor. "Joyce Kozloff: Exterior and Interior Cartographies" 2006
<<http://www2.kenyon.edu/ArtGallery/exhibitions/0607/photo%20link%20kozloff.html>>

Morris, Frances. "Art Now: Kathy Prendergast: City Drawings" Tate Gallery
<<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/artnow/kathyprendergast/default.shtm>>

Sonnenborn, Katie Stone. "Lordy Rodriquez, Clementine Gallery, The Brooklyn Rail"
<<http://www.thebrooklynrail.org/archives/nov05/ART/ASrodriquez.htm>>

Walker Art Gallery "Julie Mehretu: Drawing into Painting"
<<http://www.walkerart.org/archive/2/AF7361E991C363206165.htm>>.

Welch, Roger. From, a note by the artist on the work "The ground under my studio, 2003" <<http://www.rogerwelch.com/>>

Wood, Denis with John Fels. The Power of Maps. New York: The Guilford Press, 1992

Note:

Title inspired by: *You are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination*. Katharine Harmon. 2004