

Diaries Archipelagos Maps etc.

The archipelago is a passage, not a wall (E. Glissant)

By Hans-Urlich Obrist

Everything started with Alighiero Boetti. When I was 17, I met this great visionary artist, and he changed my life in many ways, and very importantly, he introduced me to ideas around cartography, maps and mapping. It was Boetti who first told me about the thought of Edouard Glissant and the implications of his concept of the mondialité and, through his mapping projects, assimilated these ideas into his practice. Edouard Glissant conceives of the mondialité as a new way of operating within the global world, one in opposition to the fraught values of globalization and the market economy, as the worldwide dialogue that produces rather than abolishes difference:

Mondialité is the extraordinary adventure whereby we all live today in a world which, for the first time, in real and in immediate, sudden ways, without wait, is simultaneously multiple and unique. (E. Glissant)

Boetti's extraordinary collaborations in Afghanistan and, later, Pakistan, intertwined aesthetic and political concerns, craftsmanship and the physical journey of the artist, as well as the negotiation of linguistic and physical borders.

'With the embroidered Maps of the World', Boetti stated, 'I didn't invent anything, neither the shapes nor the colours.'

Our 2010 Serpentine Gallery Map Marathon explored and interrogated the practices and potentials of mapping in the world today, and its relation to multiple forms of expression, from the arts, architecture, science, literature and film. All these worlds meet and converse over a two-day event. Developments in cartographic research in the twentieth century have highlighted the impossibility of objectivity in mapping. We all know that maps of the world, that attempt to plot the globe on a two-dimensional surface as an illustration, are at once truthful and inescapably false – distortion is inescapable, but so is truth.

Numerous subjective layers and structures affect, modify, and shift a map, from individual and collective identities, to the manifest problems of representation, to the production of reality.

If, as Boetti said, poetry puts back into play the relationships between object and object and between forms and their meaning, then the space of the library, akin to Borges's Library of Babel, is a map of the conceivable universe. Borges writes of the Universe/Library as a space that is describable but infinite, and therefore not fully mappable:

The Universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. (...) In the hallway there is a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances. Men usually infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it really were, why this illusory duplication?);

I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite... Light is provided by some spherical fruit which bear the name of lamps. There are two, transversally placed, in each hexagon. The light they emit is insufficient, incessant. Like all men of the Library, I have travelled in my youth; I have wandered in search of a book, perhaps the catalogue of catalogues; now that my eyes can hardly decipher what I write, I am preparing to die just a few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born. (J.L. Borges)

Conversely, maps as classifications and inventions of knowledge create libraries of space. There is a constant relationship between the finite and infinite at play in a map, between the visible and the invisible. A library gives us a scale of human creation that cannot be experienced in full. Similarly there are elements of a map which, though created through human action, cannot be physically experienced. Mapping, reading, writing: these are impossible, endless tasks. Yet it seems to me all the more urgent that we demand the impossible, and seek to map the present as well as the near future. An important influence in thinking about mapping has been sociologist, anthropologist and thinker Bruno Latour. We started to collaborate with Bruno Latour on the notion of the laboratory inviting him to curate The Theatre of Proof, a lecture series of demonstrations aiming at rendering public what happens in the laboratory. Since then, Latour has pursued his interest in mapping, and has continued to write about navigational and cartographic strategies. In his text 'Entering a Risky Territory: Space in the Age of Digital Navigation' (written with Valérie November and Eduardo CamachoHübner), Latour investigates the relationship between the 'base map' and the overlaying of secondary levels of contingent factors over this base, as well as the distinction made between 'physical' and 'human' geographies. The advent of digital technologies, he argues, has revealed that all these layers belong equally to the idea of 'territory'. The implications of this are wide in both cartography and exhibitionmaking practices. The relationships between what is durational or static, repetitive or repeated, and punctual or ephemeral come to be re-evaluated in this light.

The development of digital networks has created new forms of dialogue that exist because of new technological platforms. On the one hand, these dialogues expand beyond geographical and national borders. On the other, it is interesting to see how being completely connected also leads to a de-linking which in turn provokes feelings of longing and detachment. The twenty-first century, characterized by notions such as increasing displacement, migration and globality, is the age of the Internet. Google Earth and digital mapping challenge the understanding of a map as a representation of territory – the idea of which, Latour reminds us, derives from an art-historical perspective on cartography. Similarly, as this project develops, it will invite its own revising, and as it evolves, it will change. Its truths will become distortions, and its distortions truths. The orientation of maps necessarily changes as one travels through the spaces that they represent. There is a point when everything could become a map. Maps can be totalizing visions, but they always invite their own revision. As the eminent astronomer Dimitar Sasselov suggested, it might be that the question we need to ask now is: 'What is not a map?'