



Lize Mogel, *Mappa Mundi*, 2008. Digital print, 52 x 48 in.

“Experimental Geography: Empiricism Expanded”

—by Greg Barton

“Experimental Geography,” a term coined by artist/geographer Trevor Paglen in 2002, is a hybridized discipline exploring humanity’s engagement with the Earth’s surface. The subject of a traveling exhibition organized by iCI (Independent Curators International), and curated by Nato Thompson, experimental geography has, as a method, become a tool for exploring the distinctions between geographical study and artistic experience of the Earth, as well as the juncture where the two realms collide and, possibly, make a new field altogether.

Currently on view at the Carnegie Mellon University’s Miller Gallery in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Experimental Geography exhibits works ranging from interactive media, to sound, to video, to cartography, created by 19 artists or artist teams from seven countries, including USA.

The increasing democratization of technology, including Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Global Positioning Systems (GPS), and Google Maps, has proved a fruitful ground for the bottom-

up mobilization of mapmaking tools. Particularly illuminating is Jeffrey Warren’s *Armsflow*, which charts the global arms transactions from 1950-2006, implicating 228 government entities.

Similarly, Lize Mogel (co-editor of *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*) and Dario Azzellini’s map *The Privatization of War: Colombia as Laboratory and Iraq as Large-Scale Application* (2007-2008) details the monetary expenses by world governments on private military contractors.

The introduction of geo-spatial relationships into data organization and visualization updates the influential, Deleuzian networks of Mark Lombardi’s drawings from the 1990s, which intricately chartered flows of capital.

Similar to Lombardi, many of the artists in the exhibition make use of a narrative framework to help structure their investigations. The New York-based Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), working with high school students, produced *Garbage Problems* (2002-08), which, through a series of maps, interviews, and video, draws attention to



Ilana Halperin, *Boiling Milk (Solfataras)*, 2000.
Chromogenic print, 19 5/8 x 30 in.

New York City's waste removal infrastructure following the closure of the Fresh Kills, the largest landfill in the world.

Reaching back decades prior to Lombardi, in an attempt to trace experimental geography's origins, two important precursors emerge: the Situationist and Earthworks movements. The influence of Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord, especially the latter's refinement of "psychogeography," defined as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals," [1] is palpable in the works found in Experimental Geography.

The Situationist *dérive* proves to be a significant development, evident in the contemporary practices of the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) and artist collective e-Xplo. Utilizing bus and GPS-based audio tours, CLUI leads audiences through sites gaining unforeseen knowledge and appreciation of both the landscape and built environment. Perhaps historically linked to the walkie-talkie enabled *dérives* of the Dutch Situationists, [2] the reconstitution of an increasingly fragmented society becomes a playful experiment, while providing insight into the oft-concealed infrastructures that manage our cities.

The transnational group Multiplicity's contribution to the exhibition, *The Road Map* (2003), convincingly demonstrates the manner in which moving through the same physical landscape drastically changes based on cultural composition. Driving between identical latitudinal points in the West Bank territories, a traveler with an Israeli passport reaches their destination in an hour, while the equivalent journey with a Palestinian passport necessitates five hours. Making use of multiple-channel videos, and cartographic evidence, Multiplicity empirically reveals the hidden structures producing divergent routes between zones and checkpoints in a highly politicized environment.

While the legacy of the Earthworks movement is latent in Experimental Geographies, Robert Smithson's early production is particularly vital to any conversation attempting to delineate the discipline. In the December, 1967 issue of *Artforum*, Smithson published "The Monuments of Passaic," ostensibly acting as a tour guide of Passaic, New Jersey. The work included a Negative Map Showing Region of the Monuments along the Passaic River among other photographic documentation.

A year later saw the development of Smithson's *Non-sites* (all produced in 1968) which began to combine topographic

information, photographic representation, and geologic samples. Smithson's work sought to reconcile multiple modes of representation, from mapping to photography, to investigate spatial ideas repressed at the time of Clement Greenberg's formalism. [3] The Non-Sites, operating at both literal and metaphorical levels, provide antecedental insight into the more poetic treatment of landscape in experimental geography.

Artists Ilana Halperin and Francis Alÿs offer projects with a distinctly lyrical handling of one's relationship to landscape. Halperin's *Boiling Milk (Solfataras)* (2000), in a self-described act of "geologic intimacy," shows the artist boiling milk in a natural hot spring. Alÿs, in collaboration with Cuauhtémoc Medina, Rafael Ortega, and 500 volunteers, orchestrated the displacement of a Peruvian sand dune by approximately four inches. Documented in the film, *The Making of Lima* (2002), the absurdity of the act resonates with powerful allegory.

Curator Nato Thompson describes ambiguity as often feeling "antithetical to a practice of empiricism, but in fields where the post-modern turn has truly sunk in its teeth (like geography), ambiguity becomes a productive tool for engaging a variety of perspectives." [4]

In today's global context, Experimental Geography probes humanity's connections to landscape and its subsequent representation. Rather than making cartography unattainable, the artists critically reflect on the pervasiveness of geography in our lives, all too aware that maps are hardly always neutral, or created without self-interest. From the micro-scale of parking lots, to border networks, the exhibition begins to clarify and confront the embedded mechanisms of control—architectural, socio-political, geographical—inherent in society with an alchemical mix of empiricism, didacticism, and allegory.

REFERENCES

- [1] Guy-Ernest Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," Originally published in *Les Lèvres Nues* #6, 1955. Retrieved from the Situationist International Text Library at www.nothingness.org.
- [2] Henri Lefebvre and Kristin Ross, "Henri Lefebvre on the Situationist International," *October* #79, Winter 1997.
- [3] Mark Linder, "Sitely Windows: Robert Smithson's Architectural Criticism," *Assemblage*, No. 39, August 1999, p. 8.
- [4] Lauren Cornell and Nato Thompson, "Interview with Nato Thompson," *Rhizome.org*, February 27th, 2008.