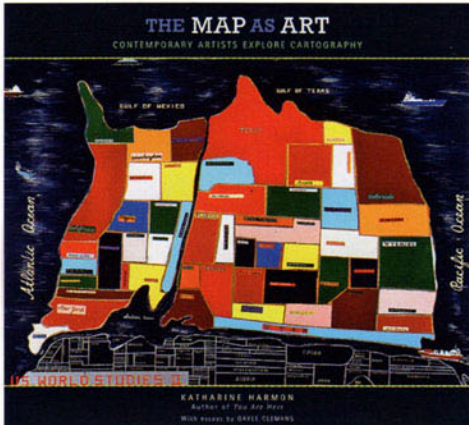


# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

## BOOK REVIEWS



**The Map as Art: Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography**, by Katharine Harmon, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2009; 256 pages, \$45.

### SEEING THE WORLD BY DAVID COGGINS

Once elaborate maps were rare and precious—vital, often state-owned documents considered key to war and exploration. Now you can locate any address you like on Google Earth, and be continuously guided there by GPS. While maps have changed in precision and accessibility, they remain fraught with cultural and individual meaning. In her striking new book *The Map as Art: Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography*, freelance author Katharine Harmon brings together a wide selection of maps clearly meant to be more psychologically expressive than geographically correct. Her survey reminds us that although mapmakers ostensibly aim at objectivity, their deeply ingrained—and often unexamined—assumptions and desires always affect their descriptions of the world. Spurred by the postmodernist notion that (as she puts it) “all truths are suspect,” Harmon focuses on international artists coming to terms with this era of dislocation, and her account is at once invigorating and unsettling. By the end of the book,

you wonder just which way is up.

The abundantly illustrated volume includes an introduction by Harmon, profiles of five well-established artists (Joyce Kozloff, Landon Mackenzie, Ingrid Calame, Guillermo Kuitca and Maya Lin) by Seattle-based critic Gayle Clemans and short entries on some 155 others. The artists treated at length each exemplify the theme of their respective sections: “Conflict and Sorrow,” “Global Reckoning,” “Animal, Vegetable, Mineral,” “Personal Terrain” and “Inner Visions.” All the artworks date from the 1990s to the present, and their creators range from major figures (Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, Vik Muniz, Olafur Eliasson, Jane Hammond, Richard Long, Francis Alÿs) to emerging talents (Lordy Rodriguez, Dannielle Tegender). Wisely, Harmon also includes at least a few artists (Congo’s Bodys Isek Kingelez, China’s Ai Weiwei and Qin Ga, Mexico’s Pedro Lasch and Enrique Chagoya) from non-Western—and underdeveloped Western—countries once sliced, diced, subsumed or wholly invented by dominant Euro-American powers. And her sense of “maps” and “cartography” (unlike her sense of “contemporary”) is capacious, stretching beyond flat diagrams to encompass reliefs, three-dimensional models and large installations. One minor shortcoming is that the brief entries, highlighting one or two illustrated works by each artist, contain no substantial biographical information or exhibition history, no map of the maker’s past, as it were.

Harmon, whose earlier books include *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination* (2003), holds that the widespread use of map imagery in modern art began with the Surrealists in the 1920s and fully burgeoned in the 1960s, with Jasper Johns and others. It’s logical that maps should appeal to artists, she writes, since “like artworks, maps are selective about what they represent, and call out differences between

collective knowledge and individual experience.” Artists also see inherent authority in maps that they can subvert or use for their own ends.

Consider the Dutch photographer Corriette Schoenaerts, whose *South America* (2005) depicts clothes laid out on her mattress in the shape of that continent. The configuration is both personal and public: we’re looking at what could be her laundry, but we immediately recognize the shapes of the landmass and its countries. A twisted swimsuit is not simply that; it also evokes the southern tip of Patagonia. In mapping, relationships are critical: another shot features what looks at first like a mere scattering of garments on the floor; only when we make the visual association of a brown boot with Italy does the multicolored pattern of *Europe* (2005) snap into view.

British artist Simon Elvins’s 2005 piece *Silent London* is an embossed white map that reflects decibel levels across the English capital, as reported by a government agency monitoring compliance with European Union regulations. The noise volumes are translated into Braille-like dots, the quietest raised the highest. Discreet visual and (if permitted) tactile effects result from this unusual form of topography. The metropolis is, in effect, overlaid with what might be called the sight—and fingertip feel—of sound.

Susan Stockwell, also from the UK, offers the delicate *London Subway* (2007), consisting of red cotton stitched onto rice paper. Formally, the work can be viewed and enjoyed as a simple linear abstraction. But for those who recognize the interplay of lines, it’s also a map of the London underground, a system that helps knit together the urban fabric.

French-born, U.S.-based painter Jules de Balincourt’s *US World Studies II* (2005), reproduced on the cover of the book, is an inverted map of the United States—more or less. Each state is reduced to an extreme, sometimes wildly

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Matthew Cusick: *Fiona's Wave*, 2005, collaged maps on wood panel, 48 by 76 inches.

inaccurate, geometric simplification, and may or may not be where, by name, it belongs. Foreign countries, even more stylized and misplaced, occupy a long irregular grid across the bottom of the picture. The earth's great waters are treated in an equally bizarre fashion. A narrow Indian Ocean is bordered by New York and Mexico, the adjacent Red Sea by Ohio and Turkey. De Balincourt's highly subjective image—much indebted to Joaquín Torres-García's famous upside-down map of South America (1936), an emblem of prideful cultural realignment—sets the tone for the entire book: the map and its maker are inextricably intertwined.

The final section of *The Map as Art* is devoted to Maya Lin, an artist known for charting history and loss as well as place. Lin has an unusual gift for evoking our fundamental relationship with the earth. In Clemans's essay, we find Lin's observation (from her book *Boundaries*, 2000) that her work "originates from a simple desire to make people aware of their surroundings, not just the physical world but the psychological world we live in."

Lin's pieces describe land in ways that are both graceful and eerie. *Water Line* (2006) is a room-filling grid of thin aluminum tubing arranged in

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an undulating topography based on sonar mapping of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. We see—and can walk under and around—the skeleton of a physical form, a submerged landmass that is normally inaccessible to human sight. For *2 x 4 Landscape* (2006), Lin arranged 65,000 wooden blocks into a mound that rises and spreads across the gallery. There's an implicit swelling energy in this work that's impossible to name—one reminiscent of those buried subjective forces to which maps, no matter how scientific or how idiosyncratic, can only silently allude. ○