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To cite this version:

Gloria Lanci. Translating Cities: Urban Spaces in Contemporary Art Maps. CIST2018 - Représenter les territoires / Representing territories, Collège international des sciences territoriales (CIST), Mar 2018, Rouen, France. pp.236-242. hal-01854509

HAL Id: hal-01854509

https://hal.science/hal-01854509v1

Submitted on 6 Aug 2018

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Translating Cities: Urban Spaces in Contemporary Art Maps

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ABSTRACT
This paper will present a project that investigates how cities are perceived and represented in contemporary art maps. The research approaches current mapping practices through interviews with artists, enquiring how they apprehend, process and re-create urban spaces. Our focus is on the *performative* dimensions of art maps rather than their *representational* aspects, and their capacity to re-shape territories along imaginary geographies. We will discuss the map as *practice* that can unfold personal and collective narratives, contestation and play. Four art maps produced for the city of Liverpool after 2008 will illustrate our discussion of how contemporary art works can be related to traditional and non-traditional cartographies and how they contribute to engage on new ways of understanding, experiencing and imagining cities.

KEYWORDS
Contemporary Art, Cartography, Urban Spaces, Liverpool

RÉSUMÉ
Cet article présentera un projet qui étudie comment les villes sont perçues et représentées dans les cartes d'art contemporain. La recherche aborde les pratiques courantes en cartographie à travers des entretiens avec des artistes, en leur demandant comment ils considèrent, traitent et recréent les espaces urbains. Nous soulignons les dimensions *performatives* des cartes d'art plutôt que leurs aspects de représentation, et leur capacité à donner de nouvelles formes aux territoires en suivant des géographies imaginaires. Nous discuterons la carte en tant que *pratique* pouvant dévoiler les récits personnels et collectifs, la contestation et le jeu. Quatre cartes artistiques produites pour la ville de Liverpool depuis 2008 illustreront notre discussion sur la façon dont les œuvres d'art contemporain peuvent être liées aux cartographies traditionnelles et non traditionnelles et comment elles contribuent à s'engager dans de nouvelles façons de comprendre, d'expérimenter et d'imaginer les villes.

MOTS CLÉS
Art contemporain, cartographie, espaces urbaines, Liverpool

INTRODUCTION

Cities have been subject to mapping throughout history in the most diverse ways, from the early clay tablets and rock engravings, to the intricate printings of the Renaissance and the current hyperreal digital visualisations. Beyond documental purposes urban maps are embedded with human culture –they are manifestations of ideologies and societies, technology and power. They also have a long association with the planning and design of cities and utopian visions of urban life.

However, no matter how diverse in techniques, materials used and information gathered, the topographical perspective "from above" has been paramount in representing cities in the form of diagrams, panoramas, bird's eye views and urban plans. The technological advances of the 20th century in aerial photography, satellite imagery and remote sensing only reinforced this

surveying approach to cartography, where a map is a synonym of accurate visual representation of the land.

The understanding of map as an objective device for representing reality, disconnected from historical and cultural frameworks, and of mapping being a scientific and political neutral practice, has been questioned in the past decades among academics and artists alike (Cosgrove, 2005). Considering a creative practice mapping has the potential to "uncovering realities" (Corner, 1999) and on this capacity relies its imaginative power: it creates multiple narratives of historical events and physical features, of cultural traits and economic conditions. Artists are thus lured to maps as they see their prospective visual qualities to communicate, to tell stories and to explore space in creative ways.

1. INFLUENCES IN CONTEMPORARY ART MAPS

The contemporary[1] art practices of mapping are very linked to a legacy of previous art movements that, especially in the case of representing urban spaces, can be traced back to the 19th century and the Baudelairian figure of the flâneur, roaming the streets of Paris. The Surrealism and Dada movements of the 1910s and 1920s, the Lettrism of Isidore Isou in the mid-1940s, the COBRA movement of late 1940s and the Situationist International founded in the late 1950s were foundational art movements and groups that influenced a whole generation of artists that incorporated cartography in their practices.

The Land Art and Conceptual movements that followed in the 1960s and 1970s included then emergent artists as Jasper Johnson and Yoko Ono who engaged in creating map pieces. Robert Smithson, Richard Long, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude, to name few, became internationally recognised as "earth artists" who took landscape and the Earth's surface as raw material to produce art works and interventions. As maps and map-making became ubiquitous towards the 1980s and 1990s, featuring across different media, so in the art world we observe a growing interest in the field, with art curators and institutions giving "map artists" more visibility and opportunities for exhibition (Wood, 2006; Watson, 2009).

In parallel with these art movements, intellectuals engaged in debates around society and territories were shifting their attention to cartography as a way to better understand relations of power. The work of the geographer William Bunge in the 1960s and 1970s, mapping disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Detroit, is exemplary of what later was recognised as a "counter mapping" or "radical cartography" which also inspired artists in practices that combined aesthetic defiance and activism (Mogel & Bhagat, 2008).

New digital technologies developed from the 1970s onwards by artists and academics likewise converge in the exploration of the map as aesthetic and informative medium to questioning, using technology to their purposes of experiment, creativeness. The novelty of these art, research and technological practices founded in the mid-20th century is the engagement "from below" with the urban space, against the traditional detached view that homogenise perceptions.

2. MAPPING LIVERPOOL: AN ANALYSIS IN FOUR ART MAPS

Liverpool is a city with a wealthy past, once regarded the second city of Empire, after London, by early 20th century. Having its main economic activity concentrated around the port, the city

1 This project considered the production of living artists.

was badly affected by the bombings during the Second World War and the decline of the British manufacturing industry from the 1960s onwards. There was a sharp decrease in population, a rising number of derelict buildings and an atmosphere of complete defeat by the 1980s, when local authorities were eligible for applying for external funding, mostly from the European Union, as it was considered one of the poorest urban areas in the continent (Couch, 2003).

In 2008 the city of Liverpool was about to stage the European Capital of Culture year and a map previously commissioned in 2005 was ready to be exhibited to the public. Ben Johnson's *Liverpool Cityscape* (fig. 1) is a large painting that depicts a classical bird's eye view of Liverpool city centre, its most iconic buildings and its surroundings. During three years, the artist and five assistants worked full time in the studio, along forty-three people who collaborated intermittently; more than three thousand photographs were taken, almost twenty-three stencils were used and seven hundred individual colours mixed (Bukantas, 2008). The production process is mostly based in photographic documentation taken by the artist in the city, which were then used for creating computer-generated drawings from what stencils were produced to apply the painting on the canvas.

This intriguing work seems to have two distinctive natures: a very formal one, where the production process is committed to detail and perfection, and a fantasy-like one. Ben comments: "What I'm painting is perhaps a fantasy of the city. It is a city seen at a great distance. […] There are no people, there are no cars. There is an invitation for somebody to enter that dreamlike world and inhabit it"[2].

After three years, the painting moved from artist's studio in London to be finished at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, under public view. According to the artist "it was always my intention to finish it in public so that people could see that the work didn't come out of an ivory tower; it's actually made by very ordinary people"[2]. In 2011 the painting was moved to the Museum of Liverpool where it is in permanent exhibition.

Figure 1. *Liverpool Cityscape* by Ben Johnson

While Ben Johnson's map was being inaugurated, another artist was wandering the streets of the city registering his experience in a map. Stephen Walter's *Liverpool 2008-09* (fig. 2) is a

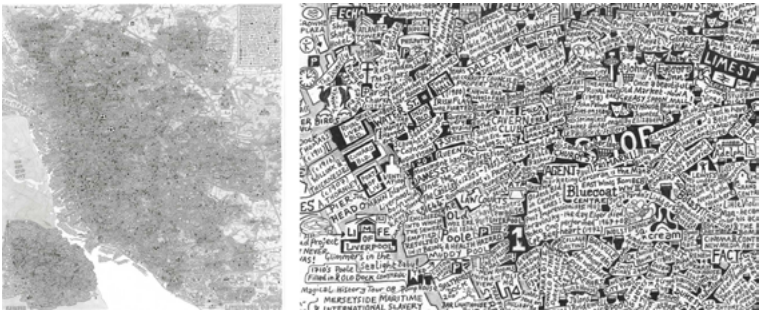
2 See www.benjohnsonartist.com/cityscapes-2/2015/8/28/the-liverpool-cityscape accessed 31/03/17.

hand-drawn map made during six months. From his own account during his initial visit to the city, he fell in love with a woman from Liverpool and this chance meeting led him to further explore the local history and people, resulting in a map “far larger and more detailed than was initially planned”[3].

The map is a product of the first-hand experience of the artist in the city, web-based research and historical maps and books. Public figures, historical events, folklore, built infrastructure, pubs, football stadia and green spaces were placed accurately, using an up-to-date Ordnance Survey map as cartographic base. “I began to translate Liverpool’s character on to paper, its quirks, idiosyncrasies and its stereotypes into a celebration of the masonry and hearts of Liverpool”[3].

The detail and array of information is vast and displayed in what may appear as a cacophony of notations but looking closer the map reveals more of its structure. It depicts a choice for the picturesque and curious, political commentary and humour. The extensive legend located at the top right corner of the map is suggestive of the mix of historical and geographical survey, anecdotal facts and personal observation of the urban landscape. Thus among pictograms for “museum”, “hospital” and “supermarket” we find “questionable fact (Wikipedia)” “public hangings took place here” and “reference to boobs or fit women”. The map is in permanent exhibition at the Bluecoat Art Centre in Liverpool.

Figure 2. *Liverpool 2008-09* by Stephen Walter. Full map (left) and detail (right)

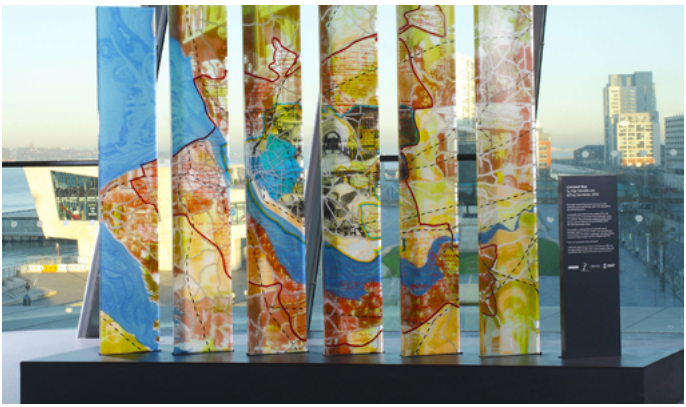


The *Map of Liverpool* (fig. 3) started with a national competition launched in June 2008 asking for a cultural map of Liverpool to celebrate its European Capital of Culture year. The map would be placed in the new Museum of Liverpool and integrate its permanent collection. Inge Panneels and Jeffrey Sarmiento, artists both based at the National Glass Centre in Sunderland, won the competition proposing a large sculpture, to stand two metres high, constructed from stacks of fused sheet glass. This technique would allow representing a “multi-layered snapshot of Liverpool in 2008”, which the artists describe as “a true team effort” that received many contributions its concept, development and production (Davis, 2013).

At first glance, the *Map of Liverpool* has the look of a “traditional” map but deeper inspection reveals the many layers within its geography. The information inscribed on the map was gathered by public survey conducted by a local newspaper in Liverpool and is a result of the public’s choices on the most representative people and places of the city.

3 See stephenwalter.co.uk/the-maps accessed 31/03/17.

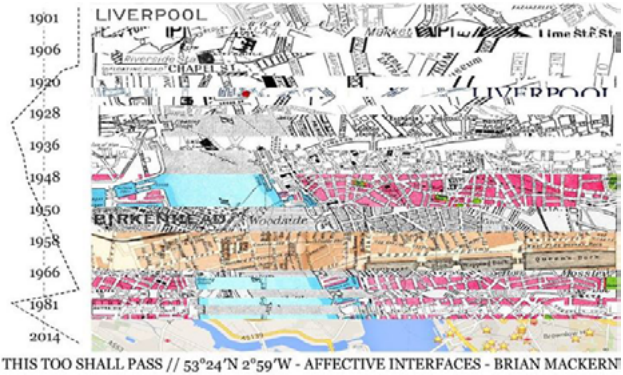
Figure 3. *The Map of Liverpool* by Inge Panneels and Jeffrey Sarmiento, as exhibited in the Museum of Liverpool



This too shall pass: Memories and noises from the Waterfront // 53°24'N 2°59'W - Liverpool. The City as an Affective Interface (fig. 4) is the full title of the media artist Brian Mackern's project developed during his residency at the University of Liverpool and FACT in October 2014. The artist recollected video footage from his derives in the city and then remixed sound and image in studio. The parameters for remixing are guided by a "socio economic historic curve" of Liverpool, which was built upon readings and conversations with the people from the city[4].

The curve represents the ups and downs of the city in the last century, what defines its "signature"[4]. The final work is a digital collage of urban snapshots, music, maps and graphic animation, which were assembled for a public exhibition at FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology).

Figure 4. *This too shall pass* by Brian Mackern (screenshot)



4 Digital Latin America Cultures Network website: latamcyber.wordpress.com/2014/10/19/new-residence-artwork-by-brian-mackern (accessed 31/03/17).

3. TRANSLATING CITIES: SOME REFLECTIONS

On conducting this project, interviewing artists and analysing their practices, we have oriented our enquiry towards the performative dimensions of art maps rather than their representational aspects. When analysing the Liverpool maps we face a group of works that utilise different techniques, styles and materials while all being products of similar cultural and historical circumstances. We also want to emphasise in each work the different aspects of the map as an artefact and the map as process (mapping).

Ben Johnson's painting, and Panneels and Sarmiento's glass sculpture, are both commissioned works, chosen by a board of sponsors and local representatives of government and civil societies in Liverpool to celebrate the Cultural Capital year. Johnson's cityscape is an architectural compendium of the city and its iconic buildings –the two cathedrals, the three graces and the Museum of Liverpool are in much evidence, surrounded by other ordinary buildings. The public somehow participated in the process as observers but did not have a concrete influence on the final work. The map/panorama can be considered as a view "from above", despised as "traditional" or even "authoritarian" in the art movements commented previously in this paper. Panneels and Sarmiento's map, on the other hand, seems to result from a more participatory and collaborative practice, between the artists themselves and between the artists and the public –even though this last was a mediate relation, *via* the survey collected by the commissioners.

Stephen Walter's drawing and Brian Mackern's digital installation are individual enterprises, where resourced historical documentation in old maps, photographs and history books (also used in Johnson's and Panneels-Sarmiento research) is complemented by direct experience within the urban environment. Story telling is a central theme in both maps, and historical perspective (more evident in Mackern's work) is explicit in many references to dates and personalities.

Although approaching the same city, the maps are very different in terms of the actual territory covered: Johnson's and Mackern's works focus on the city centre; they are cropped views of Liverpool. Walter's goes as far as the urban landscape ends and the rural begins, making sure the entirety of the urbanised area is included. Panneels-Sarmiento's map has a city-region view as it includes the Wirral and further surroundings.

The artists interviewed mentioned the expectations that maps induce in people, the importance that maps reflect peoples' places and histories and that somehow they want to be able to recognise themselves in the artwork, to identify, to use the map as a mirror for identity. The artists reported having personal experiences of engagement with the place and the people of Liverpool, even if they were not in direct contact with them. In this sense, the Liverpool maps are successful in transposing the geographical boundaries and enacting more subjective values. Perceptions like a sense of pride for the city and its people, a common attitude of resilience and defiance facing economic and social struggles, associated with a welcoming and friendly approach to strangers, were the main characteristics that these "outsider" artists mentioned in relation to local inhabitants and that in many ways were impressed in the art works produced.

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