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Conjunctions of the Literary and the Philosophical in
Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century American Writing

Larisa Dryansky, *Cartophotographies. De l'art conceptuel au Land Art*

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Larisa Dryansky, *Cartophotographies. De l'art conceptuel au Land Art*, Paris : Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques/Institut national d'histoire de l'art, collection *L'art et l'essai*, 2017, 335 pages, ISBN 978-2735508501, 39€

- 1 Larisa Dryansky's *Cartophotographies* is an original and ambitious exploration of the intersections between cartography and photography in the period that extends from the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s. Her analysis focuses on the work of five American artists: Ed Ruscha, Robert Smithson, Dennis Oppenheim, Douglas Huebler, and Mel Bochner. What are the cartophotographies in the title? They refer to artistic practices that combine photographs and maps in a variety of ways: artists taking photographs in the context of trajectories and itineraries; artists combining photographs and maps in a given work; artists using the principles of cartography and photography as conceptual models underlying their works. The book is divided into three parts devoted to time, the landscape, and space seen as distinct perspectives on the same topic, framed by an introduction and a conclusion.
- 2 Part 1, devoted to time, brings forth the fundamental connection between photography and cartography in relation to time. To put it very simply, maps delimit spatial and temporal zones, and photographs capture temporal instants. More generally, the introduction of temporality in the arts is a hallmark of the rupture with modernism that the five artists enacted. By examining the association of photographs and maps, Dryansky shows that these artists were fascinated with temporality and experimented with its possible modes of expression in art. She thus questions the view that the art of this period is marked by "chronophobia" (a view supported by Pamela Lee) to emphasize a perspective that questions the "phobia" and suggests a "melancholy

feeling of time's unreality" (68, my translation). Dryansky analyses in detail Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), Bochner's *Twelve Sets* (1967) and *36 Photographs and 12 Diagrams* (1966), Smithson's *Monuments of Passaic* (1967), some of Huebler's *Duration Pieces* and *Location Pieces*, and Oppenheim's *Time Line* (1968). They all converge towards a questioning of empirical time and the assertion of the fictional nature of temporality (for instance, Oppenheim straddling two time zones across the US–Canada border). The stratified character of time is unveiled in Smithson's ephemeral maps or in his cartographic representations informed by notions borrowed from crystallography.

- 3 Part 2, focusing on landscape, starts with an exploration of Smithson's nonsites, their conflicted kinship with the tradition of landscape painting and their reliance on maps. The analysis of Smithson's reflection on crystals is particularly detailed and compelling. For Dryansky, the genealogy of the picturesque is essential in understanding these artists' relationship to nature and their attraction to contemporary American environments. Ruscha's interest in urban or suburban scenes, highways, parking lots, and gas stations and Smithson's fascination with suburbs, abandoned quarries, and postindustrial sites suggest a revisited picturesque tradition in a degraded and parodic vein (127). Larisa Dryansky points out that the aesthetics of the picturesque has had a privileged relationship with both cartography and photography. In Ruscha's work, echoes of the picturesque can be found in his embrace of the road trip and the universe of the automobile, two pervasive aspects of American culture which are particularly prominent in cultural representations of the 1950s and 1960s in both literature and art. Certain dimensions of Smithson's work are also interpreted as a parody of the picturesque, notably the Grand Tour tradition in *The Monuments of Passaic*. These artists contributed to the emergence of an architectural brand of picturesqueness. Ruscha's photographs were a source of inspiration for Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) not only from a thematic point of view, but also as far as the cartographic method is concerned, in response to the complicated question of how to map the chaotic architectural environment of Las Vegas. Ruscha's answer is the focus on the "façade-ness" of this contemporary landscape (139), which finds its way into Venturi's work. Dryansky argues that Ruscha's photographs both document postwar American landscapes and suggest their lack of substance, thus reproducing the ambiguity of the picturesque, which celebrates nature and reflects on its status as copy. Finally, Larisa Dryansky highlights the ways in which these artists revisit framing devices and processes in their relationship to the environment, framing being a central issue in both cartography and photography. She uncovers various operations that seek to question the conventional role of the frame without relinquishing it completely, leading to decentering and disorienting effects.
- 4 Part 3, on space, begins with a contextualization of the polemical arguments about the space of the work of art in postwar American art, between the modernist celebration of the bi-dimensionality of the canvas (Greenberg) and the embrace of three-dimensionality that is synonymous with "real space" (Judd). Larisa Dryansky sets out to identify the ways in which the artists in her corpus employ cartography and photography in conjunction with perspective, although the latter seemed to have been abandoned, with the rise of modernism, as a mode of representation associated with a homogeneous and rational space. Dryansky notes the fascination with perspective as an artifice and methodology visible in certain works by Bochner and Smithson. Both artists seek to explore the "antinaturalism" of perspective (197) in works that combine

photographic material with gridded or geometrically fragmented constructions reminiscent of maps. A further chapter is devoted to aerial perspective and its kinship with both photography and cartography. Historically, this emphasis on aerial perspective is related to Pollock's and Rauschenberg's paradigm of the horizontal canvas, to the popularization of the archaeological research on the Nazca lines thanks to aerial photographs, to the growing availability of mass airborne travel, and to the photographs of Earth from space. Examples of works by Huebler adopting the axonometric perspective are also discussed (possibly inspired by Albers's *Structural Constellations*, 1953-1958, with which Huebler was familiar). In the final chapter of Part 3, Dryansky explores the relationship between the map and the territory starting from Borges's *On Exactitude in Science* (1960). Oppenheim's "transplants" of fragments of maps to sites that have nothing to do with the former are interpreted as operating a deterritorialization of site. Dryansky complexifies Miwon Kwon's typology of site in contemporary art (discussed in Kwon's *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*) by adding Oppenheim's effect of reconnecting the abstraction of the map with the materiality of site. Because map and site are disconnected (the map represents a totally different space elsewhere), the work escapes the logic of site-specificity (274-275). To qualify Oppenheim's endeavour, Dryansky resorts to Louis Marin's arguments about the "utopia" of the map, which insist on indeterminacy rather than derealization. Oppenheim produces a hybrid interaction between map and site marked by tension, contradiction, and disjunction. Oppenheim's *Site-Markers* are also discussed in relation to the surveyor's tactics of mapping. Finally, Oppenheim's transition towards body art, for instance in *A Feed-Back Situation* (1971), which illustrates the book cover opens up a new interpretation of the map as pattern of genetic code that is transmitted from one body to another.

- 5 Through these five American artists and their interweaving of cartography and photography, a whole period in American art is reassessed, notably in its articulation of representation as a middle ground between the drive towards abstraction and the anchorage in reality, both negotiated subtly in maps and photographs. Thus, the dominant binary terms of the art historical debate (abstraction/reality) about the period under scrutiny (the 1960s) are recast as more flexible interlocutors, less marked in their supposedly irreducible opposition.
- 6 Clearly written, extremely well documented, informed by interviews with Oppenheim and Bochner, richly illustrated, and beautifully nuanced in its arguments, Larisa Dryansky's book sheds new light not only on the work of the artists examined here, but also on the concepts and disciplinary fields she investigates. Here, I will focus specifically on cartography, which has undergone extensive critical scrutiny over the past decades, especially due to the rise of critical cartography in the 1980s, with its emphasis on maps as constructs that are selective, manipulative, complicit with power, and entangled with both the production of knowledge and the influences of ideology. An influential article by geographer J.B. Harley is emblematic of the deconstructive approach to the map ("Deconstructing the Map," 1989). In a different, but related vein, Denis Wood and John Fels insisted on "the power of maps" (*The Power of Maps*, 1992). Mark Monmonier laid bare the manipulative and propagandistic mechanisms embedded in maps (*How to Lie with Maps*, 1991). These readings foregrounded the political and epistemological performativity of maps and ushered cartography into an age of suspicion. Dryansky's research demonstrates that for the five American artists she examines and the specific period she considers, the manipulative and ideological

aspects are less relevant than the issue of rethinking representation in relation to experimentation, in order to find a balance between an aspiration towards abstraction and the need to confront the materiality of earth and the terrain. At the same time, it is precisely the reflection on maps and the integration of maps in the artistic projects of these artists (and others) that contributed to the critical reassessment of cartography by geographers and cartographers in the 1980s (302). Dryansky singles out a reference that marks a divergent opinion among geographers: that of John Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping and the Geo-Coded World* (2004), whose work unpacks the “postrepresentational” nature of maps (rather than their “antirepresentational” nature) and mobilizes their imaginary and polysemic significance. Gilles Tiberghien’s work is also highly relevant along the lines of the cartographic imagination (*Finis Terrae. Imaginaires et imaginations cartographiques*, 2007).

- 7 Larisa Dryansky’s concern with the fascination exerted by maps, the creativity they unleash, and their artistic potential shifts the debates about cartography from the attitude of distrust to a constructive paradigm where close reading is combined with historical contextualization and critical scholarship, to reveal the sophistication and complexity of artistic practices that resort to maps in the 1960s. Larisa Dryansky successfully demonstrates that close analysis, together with the contextualization of specific artists in specific contexts, is conducive to new and subtle insights that are bound to alter our understanding of the artists in question and existing theories. What Larisa Dryansky achieves in a very elegant way is a very nuanced thinking through theory, which is truly the hallmark of her handling of existing interpretations and leads her to articulate her original take on the corpus and the intersections between cartography and photography. She introduces nuance in existing readings of art historians and theorists as far as the artists in her corpus are concerned, for instance Rosalind Krauss about the indexical nature of Oppenheim’s *Identity Stretch* (290, 292), Miwon Kwon about the typology of site (274-275), Pamela Lee about chronophobia (68). She also questions Deleuze and Guattari’s well-known distinction between the map and the tracing in *Mille plateaux* (1980) which associates photography with the supposedly static and inert tracing, a view which, as Dryansky convincingly argues, is contradicted by the photographic practices of the two preceding decades (16-17).
- 8 The conclusion to her book sets out to give further temporal perspective to the nexus of cartography and photography in the 1970s and beyond. Dryansky argues that the true posterity of the artists she examines (in particular Land Artists) lies in our electronic age (303). She has in mind the ramified conceptions of site elaborated in Land Art, which propel the site as a third term between abstraction and an existing space. In her reading (informed by certain remarks from Anne Cauquelin’s *L’invention du paysage*), the understanding of site as network in Land Art seems to be echoed by the networks of the internet. I could not help contextualizing this argument and thinking about our current lockdown situation throughout much of 2020. Seen from this defamiliarizing perspective, the hybrid practices of Land Art appear quite far removed from our exclusively virtual networking. Willy-nilly, the pandemic has made most of us more firmly established inhabitants of the internet. From the midst of our isolation and social distancing, what has emerged is a daily acculturation to the many possibilities of online activity combined, for some, with a growing yearning for presence, actuality, and in-person mappings. As far as I am concerned, walking on the *Spiral Jetty* on the Great Salt Lake in Utah would cure part of that yearning for concreteness and materiality (a naive response to our current constraints). Unless the *Spiral Jetty* is

submerged, of course, which would further enhance its elusive character and its status as a hybrid object, between the material and the immaterial, which Larisa Dryansky's book brilliantly shows it to be. But I would still like to be able to actually see for myself (more than ever) whether it is submerged or not, and empirically acknowledge its activated potential of immateriality. One of the huge merits of *Cartophotographies* is to reinforce both terms of the site, the abstract and the real, which it holds in masterful balance, suggesting their mutual attraction and complementary force.

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Subjects: Recensions

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