

# Counter-Cartographies

## Politics, Art and the Insurrection of Maps

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Tracing out complex systems. Comprehending conflicts, networks, territories, borders and situations which were previously invisible. Sharing techniques and new technologies. Producing autonomous knowledge. These are some of the strategies that characterize the practices of critical cartography. Up to which point do these maps succeed in going beyond conventional maps, opposing impartial representations and objectives followed by corporative, military and governmental interests? In which way can arts and activism employed by cartographers and insurgent artists contest these dominant powers? What are the possibilities for participating in these movements?

We might be used to thinking that maps are exact representations of reality. But neither does neutrality exist in the production of maps nor does it exist in their use. In the hands of capitalism and its institutions, mappings have been instrumentalized in many ways: for installing order and executing domination of colonizers over the colonized, for consolidating economic blocks, for justifying private control over public spaces, for legitimizing borders, for exploiting natural resources and common goods. Yet the proposition I want to discuss here is the following: parting from their history as instruments of domination, maps can also be transformed and thus used by the hands of those who resist state control and capitalist domination. This transformation becomes possible due to the fact that cartography – as the discipline of the creation of maps as well as the study and reflection of their political and social role – suffered from a substantial change in the twentieth century, in that it was and still continues to be widely subverted by artists and activists. This contribution elaborates on some examples of artists and collectives that promoted this change. I will explore their struggles to position themselves in the capitalist art world and point out the renewed relevance of counter-cartographies.

The resistance against capital's cooptation of culture calls for the production of new radical imaginaries, spaces of political autonomy and shared invention. This is also the case for the regulation of the forces of cooperation which tend to be captured, absorbed, and neutralized by corporative, military and commercial mechanisms. It also calls for the elaboration of conceptual and analytical tools that enable the visualization of the ever more sophisticated structures of capitalism which provoke new situations of opposition and political engagement. Mappings realized by collectives of art activism – such as the Bureau d'Études (France)<sup>1</sup>, the Counter-Cartographies Collective (United States)<sup>2</sup> (see article page 212), Iconoclastas (Argentina)<sup>3</sup> (see articles pages 86 & 183) and many others presented in *Not-an-Atlas* – are examples of open and process-oriented tools proposing to map regional and global

flows of power systems, monopolies and administrative networks. The maps of these collectives give us an idea about which forms of counter-power we need to create and what social struggles are, as they are much more than mere representations. In order to create counter-cartographies, their practices invert sovereignty of a cartography of control. And, in fact, these maps can also be seen as starting points for subversive actions.

### Making Domination Visible

In this contribution counter-cartographies are understood as maps that break with the scientific tradition and specialization of cartography as well as with its mere technical or essentially positivist view of the world. This type of transgression goes against official geopolitical maps while exposing relations of domination over and exploitation of a territory as well as revealing concealed networks of power. With an anti-capitalist orientation, one of the aims of counter-maps is to make obscure and established powers more perceptible in order to confront them. Counter-cartographies can be used in a tactical manner over the duration of an action and in a strategical manner for analyzing networks and spaces in order to generate social change from below. Another task is to deconstruct the political and economic logics of mechanisms, organizations and social hierarchies so as to reveal its contradictions. This type of experiment also makes arts political, not only due to the approach of a "political issue", but because its sensitive and intuitive expression is capable of enunciating the violence going on behind the scenes.

Articulations between artistic practices, pedagogic alternatives and militant investigations make it possible to formulate questions concerning the experiences of counter-cartographies in relation to protocols and dilemmas of collaborative work. While mapping with communities and social movements, the artists/collectives mediate a continuous process in which the act of listening, the systematization of data as well as decisions regarding the means to make the maps are constructed, negotiated and decided upon collectively. Through collective mapping, the language, tools and techniques of cartography formerly restricted to "specialists", are socialized and reinvented. They are shared freely and thus expanded to non-conventional uses.

The transformation of cartography by practices of art activism over the past decades has made it possible to explore alternative models outside of the academic context and beyond purely scientific activities. This includes historical references going back to artistic vanguards at the beginning of the twentieth century (such as

Dadaism and Surrealism) as well as maps created by Situationists<sup>4</sup>, feminist artists and groups such as Fluxus.<sup>5</sup> One of these artists to anticipate some of the nuances of the political practices of counter-cartographies was the Swedish-Brazilian Öyvind Fahlström (1928-1976). He brought forward the critical necessity and revolutionary urgency for prefiguring another world as possible. This was done by challenging the rigidity of maps which portrayed a planet dominated by the instability of imperial power disputed between the United States and the Soviet Union.

With his World Map (1972), Fahlström confronted established limits and dominant powers individually in order to construct a counter-cartography as a tool for political sensitization and public indignation. The synoptic view of the World Map in a collection of events and in the narration of short chronicles shows the progression of political and economic power of North American imperialism during the Cold War, from the end of World War II to the beginning of the 1970's. Fahlström collected and organized data referring to different scales of analysis on the global economic situation, on exploitation, repression and struggles in the so-called "Third World". Statistics, thoughts, extracted texts and periodicals of the left as well as historical facts were compiled, registered on color-coded sheets and inserted into the continents of the World Map.

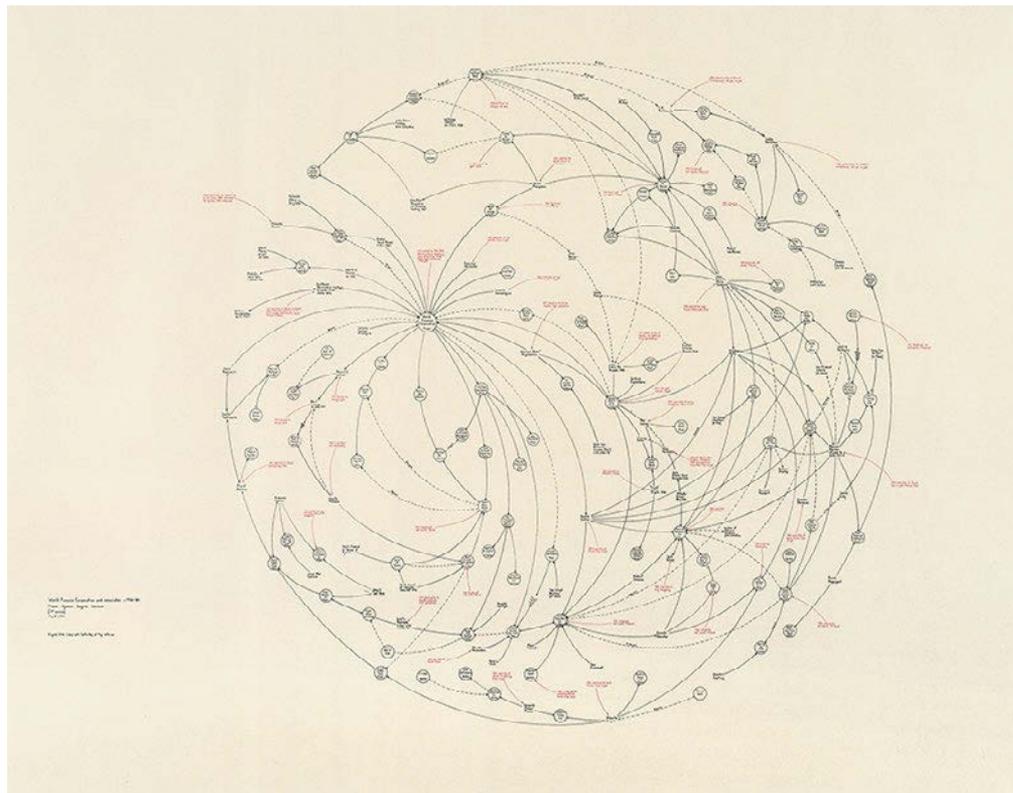
The world that pulsates, expands and contracts itself in the World Map does not register an exact mapping of the physical geography of the planet. Rather it is the quantity of information that shapes the forms of the continents in accordance with the

intensity of their crises. Its topographic malleability suppresses, transforms and recreates institutionalized borders in order to make space for fragments of stories. Oceans were practically abolished and are more narrow now. Like cracks they are swallowed by the collision of territories. The de-naturalized forms of the continents portrayed in the World Map try to support the weight of the facts describing a planet taken by greed and violence.

Another example of how counter-cartographies of artists can illuminate common territories between past and present which are generally hidden by official cartography, are the "narrative structures" built by Mark Lombardi (1951-2000) (see map this page).<sup>6</sup> In 1994, Lombardi decided to give a new direction to his art work by systematizing the practice of an archivist obsessed with documenting a continuous flow of information on political, economic and corporative powers.

Lombardi shows us data and connections in a network of trajectories, designed in the form of circles and arcs that take up great spaces on paper. We find appointed identities in the names of institutions, presidents, bankers, mafia bosses, terrorists and soldiers cited within small circles

that make us remember their polemical stories once shown in the media. We are taken by a disconcerting reality seeing individuals connected to wars, drug trafficking and crimes. An interlaced swarming of the financial and corporative world emerges with multiple causalities. Exorbitant numbers link individuals and companies through dashed lines.



Fahlström's maps were elaborated in the troubled moments of the 1970s, while Lombardi configured narrative structures during the exponential development of global and financial networks two decades later. Both are important historical and conceptual precedents for a posterior generation of artist-activists. Fahlström and Lombardi worked with particular methods to manually compile and archive precise and verifiable data on political, social and economic processes, organizing it in maps or diagrams to analyze situations of the present. Evidently, the work of these two artists has gradually been incorporated into the permanent archives of museums, banks, galleries and collectors. As museums, collectors and companies have turned into the contemporary guardians of these artistic cartographies that reveal the access to power, the access to these works is even more restricted.

### Use Value and Artistic Autonomy

It is necessary to point out some escape strategies that mark the history of artistic cartography. In the essay "Resymbolizing Machines: art after Öyvind Fahlström" the Bureau d'Études (2004) examines how Fahlström tried to gradually leave art institutions and gained relative autonomy through a system of alternative distributions of his maps and games. A version of the World Map [Sketch for World Map Part I (Americas, Pacific)] was printed, and distributed through a new left journal of the seventies [Liberated Guardian] to disseminate the political content of this work and reach a wider public (Bureau d'Études, 2004).

The Bureau d'Études uses Fahlström as a reference to examine failures and advances of artists when their projects depend on the authority and the discourses of the art world. For example, this may include the endorsement of curators, critics, collectors, etc. to be legitimized or even suppressed when trying to leave this system. Investigations by the Counter-Cartographies Collective also show that, at present, when companies, institutions and clusters of so-called "creative industries" capture the power of inventions of students and cultural workers, a trend to exclude these groups from the networks of production must be observed. At the same time there is an enormous distrust concerning the forms of expression that circulate via official channels – may those channels be museums, governments, universities, marketing agencies or media conglomerates.

By conducting interviews and workshops with students, the Counter-Cartographies Collective produced a DisOrientation Guide (2006, 2009) (see map on opposite page) on the campus of its University of North Carolina, localized in the "Research Triangle" formed by the cities of Durham, Raleigh and Chapel Hill. The guide shows diverse maps and diagrams connecting student struggles in their institutions with demonstrations that have occurred in other countries. The Counter-Cartographies Collective considers that universities are not a "privileged bubble", an "isolated space" or an "ivory tower" separated from the world but rather a fabric that concentrates flexible work markets, knowledge economies, corporative research, financial capitalism and gentrification. In these initiatives of counter-mapping lies a necessity to seek not a romanticized redemption of an autonomy from society or a repetition of gestures or formulas, that, in the best case, will be considered as acts of institutional critique. Rather they call for

the reformulation of this criticism to other disciplines regulated by neoliberalism in the face of the production of spaces of artistic autonomy.

In its most basic sense, autonomy signifies "self-legislation". It is the capacity of a group, of an occupation or community to establish its proper institutions and to self-organize according to its agreements. The term artistic autonomy, fundamental for the Bureau d'Études, indicates the decision of aesthetic producers to restructure themselves in order to seek new ways of acting, prioritizing alternative experiences of publication, reception and distribution. In this sense, the maps of the Bureau d'Études (see map at the end of the article) problematize in detail and exhaustively the almost inaccessible links between institutions as well as known and unknown individuals. In order to do so, they start with mapping the power concentration of corporate media, the system of food production, global vigilance, military technologies, prisons, financial networks and economic crises among other topics. For this collective autonomy is a fundamental point of their existence. They thus seek to visualize the lines of production and the resulting meanings of official systems through their maps. It is necessary to decode the capitalist machinery in order to intervene in it, and to thereby situate insurgent strategies and actions.

In the beginning of the 2000s, the maps of the Bureau d'Études began to serve the group as a means to orient themselves in reference to networks of control which needed to be surpassed as well as political autonomy which needed to be created. The protests of the Global Days of Action and the use of technological networks by artists and social movements delineated a new topology of the planet that needed to be understood and situated. Even more so, since after September 11, 2001, the disproportional increase of intelligence services and private companies exploring programs of vigilance and monitoring channels of communication needed to be verified. The internet opened up countless possibilities to conduct critical mapping investigations of contemporary capitalism. For these investigations the map productions and the new cognitive tools have become essential to close a gap regarding the means of analysis. This approximates them to demonstrations and other forms of direct action.

Artistic autonomy crosses habitual dichotomies of inside/outside of art institutions. The question to be answered by collectives of art activism continues to be the following: how can the subordination under official institutional models be escaped and a way of non-mediated autonomy be found? In other words, how do counter-cartographies find a political space in which to formulate their compositions of this "outside"?

While a diagram such as Lombardi's is a unique work of art, the works of collectives of counter-cartographies are produced and shared like common goods in order to deepen knowledge, to inform, to inspire and to be engaged with. An example of these dynamics can be found in the works of the Iconoclastas. Formed in Buenos Aires in 2006, the Iconoclastas have since then combined theoretical research and graphic arts in mapping workshops with students and social movements (see second map at the end of the previous article).

For Maribel Casas-Cortés and Sebastian Cobarrubias, members of the Counter-Cartographies Collective, maps become more heterogeneous when they are produced in a collective way.

# FORECAST: NEW WAVES OF AUTONOMY



**AMERICA LATINA:** Autonomous universities, independent from the state and corporate powers, include Universidad de la Tierra in Oaxaca and Chiapas, Mexico (two separate institutions), Universidad Experimental in Rosario, Argentina, and Universidad Libre in Chile. Recent struggles include protests against tuition at the national university in Mexico City, the occupation of university land to construct a new student center at the UBA in Buenos Aires, and (pictured) a 30-day student and faculty strike in solidarity with striking workers at Brazil's largest university, the Universidade de Sao Paulo.

As 3Cs we participate in a growing network of students, faculty, and staff fighting for autonomy on university campuses around the world. Other members of this network helped create this work in progress by submitting current struggles (⚡) and autonomous universities (☀️), as well as participants in the series of 'Edu-Factory' discussions (☁️). This map is not complete. Visit [countercartographies.org](http://countercartographies.org) to help add to the map and find out more details!



**AFRICA:** Students in Liberia (pictured), Sierra Leone, Egypt and Morocco, along with South Africa, participated in the 2008-2009 Global Weeks of Action against commercialization of education through teach-ins, seminars, and rallies. Students also protest for better facilities and more autonomy from repressive and/or neoliberal governments. South African scholars in Durban and Johannesburg participate in the Edu-Factory discussions.



**AUSTRALIA:** The Australian higher education system is in crisis due to the recent sharp upswing in the number of international students. Indian students and graduates are driven to service work, often taxi driving, and face growing discrimination and violence. Indian cab drivers go on strike multiple times in large cities, including Sydney and Melbourne, to protest their situation. Students and faculty at other universities protest against the commercialization of education and participated in the Global Week of Action and the Edu-Factory project.



**NORTH AMERICA:** Increasingly precarious TA and adjunct faculty work is a major site of struggle, with contingent faculty unionization efforts and strikes in Toronto, Minnesota, Michigan, Oregon, and elsewhere. As the economic crisis is used to justify increasing corporatization of the university, students answer by occupying buildings at the New School (pictured) and NYU. After a for-profit governing board shuts down Antioch College, students and teachers open their own autonomous Nonstop Institute for the Liberal Arts, building their infrastructure from the ground up. International conferences on Rethinking and Reworking the University 2008 and 2009 galvanize critical thought on the university.



**EUROPE:** School occupations in Spain and the UK, massive student strikes in Italy, university riots in Greece. New university policies, known throughout the EU as the Bologna process, are met with the Anomalous Wave – a massive response on the part of students, professors and staff. This Wave is more than street confrontations with police; it strengthens 'autonomous universities', where student and faculty-run higher education and research includes their own decision making processes and curricula. The regular university system collaborates with autonomous universities across the EU and as far east as the Street University in St. Petersburg.



**ASIA:** University students across Asia link their struggles for better and more affordable education to campaigns for more democratic governments. Students in Singapore protest university censorship. Students in Taiwan protest the Parade and Assembly law. In the Philippines, students strip down and protest naked against tuition hikes. Autonomous universities and edu-factory participants in the region include: the Vidya Ashram in India, and student groups in Shanghai, Taiwan, and Delhi.



Through collective processes they create instances for popular participation, its information and icons can be added more easily, and other people can suggest different relevant data for the map. This data may include information about a specific corporation or a set of work relations, and it often enables the development of new aesthetics of cognitive mapping as well as the discussion of new issues to be mapped (see Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias, 2007, p. 120). Collaboration and cooperation increase the complexity of the power and critical grasp of a map based upon different perceptions. Counter-cartographies are an essential element of the repertory of the forms of artistic activism. They are one tool within a variety of tactical actions and artistic interventions carried out in public space, each corresponding to specific situations. Regarding the circulation and multiplication of their maps, the Iconoclastas, the Bureau d'Études and the Counter-Cartographies Collective count on electronic distribution of their projects

on web pages, blogs and digital communities. Printed versions can be paid for with the budget of an exhibition or with money from one's own pocket. This enables the map's circulation in autonomous spaces, schools, workshops, open classes and activist meetings while being distributed for free and from hand to hand. All this permits immediate, open and unlimited public access to these works, ascribing them a use value that cannot be achieved through a circulation which is restricted to the spaces of galleries and museums.

Through these maps a new sense is conferred to cartography. Cartography is not only a particularized activity or a restricted knowledge but can also be seen as a possible project that disseminates as much as possible – a type of information which was usually related to a specific public and specific sources. These maps result from an effort of collective intelligence offering free knowledge to any person interested in researching them in order

to initiate their own investigations. They represent practices that point to the fact that the moment has come to rethink the means of production and the emergence of a political counter-history of arts and culture (Sholette, 2011, p. 3). The work with counter-cartographies does not only reveal systems of power as it gives a new sense to the notion of "maps producing territory". Moreover, this territory produced by the map is multiple, not only spatial, but also temporal and social: it extends from the place where the maps are produced – with its stories, reports and vestiges – to the countless situations in which they are distributed, accessed and used.

### Mapping or Being Mapped

The politicized appropriation of the mapping practices by artist-activists in the last decades has helped to transform cartography into a tool of criticism and counter-power. Nevertheless, we live in a totally mapped era in which our expectations, gestures and itineraries are registered all the time, be it while circulating in the streets, exchanging messages and documents via the internet, or crossing physical or symbolic borders. Why then produce more maps in a mapped world? My response is that we need to make and remake maps not only in order to confront the forms of control but also so we can expose the underlying mechanisms. Most of all we need to produce counter-maps in order to create actions that might affect our perceptions of social space and its different vectors, to change our modes of looking at the world and create new dialogues and discoveries. Counter-cartography is less a visual object that accumulates information than the opportunity to go beyond the "proper" representation of traditional maps. Mapping in a different way means redefining maps critically. This redefinition of cartography is an expression of dissent against the power executed by privileged groups who seek to dominate others. At the same time, it is an opportunity to democratize the techniques and the practices of the creation of maps beyond the figure of the artist, activist or specialist. A statement cited from an interview I did with the members of the Counter-Cartography Collective seems to summarize the spirit of this proposal in other words: "To map systems of oppression, not oppressed people!"

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*Translation by Timo Bartholl*

### Endnotes

1. [bureaudetudes.org](http://bureaudetudes.org)
2. [countercartographies.org](http://countercartographies.org)
3. [iconoclasistas.net](http://iconoclasistas.net)
4. The Situationist International (1957-1972) was an organization of artists and theorists searching for ways to criticize and transform the conditions in capitalist cities while superating the concept of art through subversive everyday practices and artistic interventions.
5. Fluxus was an international, multidisciplinary group of artists, poets and composers initiated in the early 1960s. The group realized works, performances and artistic projects with an emphasis on processes and actions that encouraged the active participation of its spectators.
6. Mark Lombardi describes his "narrative structures" as follows: "In 1994 I began a series of drawings I refer to as 'narrative structures.' Most were executed in graphite or pen and ink on paper. Some are quite large, measuring up to 5x12 feet. I call them 'narrative structures' because each consists of a network of lines and notations that are meant to convey a story, typically a recent event of interest to me, like the collapse of a large international bank, trading company, or investment house. One of my goals is to explore the interaction of political, social, and economic forces in contemporary affairs." (Lombardi, 2001).

### References

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- Sholette, G. 2011. *Dark matter: art and politics in the age of enterprise culture, Marxism and culture*. New York: PlutoPress.

### Illustrations

- page 27 Mark Lombardi, World Finance Corporation and Associates, c. 1970-84, Miami, Ajman, Bogota-Caracas (Brigada 2506 : Cuban Anti-Castro Bay of Pigs Veteran) (7th version), 1999, Colored pencil and graphite on paper, 69 1/8 x 84 inches, Private collection, Courtesy Donald Lombardi and Pierogi Gallery
- page 29 Counter Cartographies Collective, *disOrientation Guide 2.0*, 2009
- page 35-39 Bureau d'Études, *World Government*, 2013, Courtesy Bureau d'Études

# Pictographic Grammar



## Organizations

### Public organizations and services

### Social organizations

## Companies

## Bank, trade and market companies

## Technical & symbolic systems and devices









