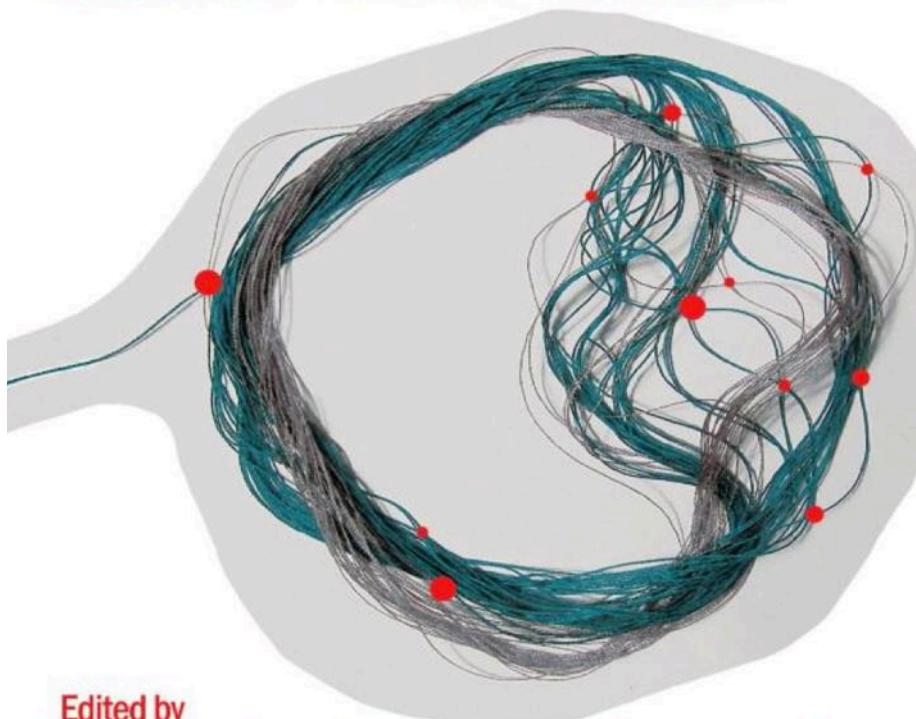


CRITICAL CARTOGRAPHY OF ART AND VISUALITY IN THE GLOBAL AGE



Edited by
Anna Maria Guasch Ferrer and Nasheli Jiménez del Val

Critical Cartography of Art and Visuality in the Global Age,
Edited by Anna Maria Guasch Ferrer and Nasheli Jiménez del Val

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CHAPTER SEVEN

WELTKARTEN. PANORAMA¹

LAURA F. GIBELLINI

This paper is the “translation” of an oral presentation that explored the relationship between theory based research and art practice. It contemplates how theory can be incorporated into artistic practice and thus rendered visible.² *WeltKarten. Panorama* explores the *visualization* of the bond between concepts and actions, between theoretical and factual practices, between ideas and the gestures that give concepts a specific (art) form.³

It seems important to start by pointing out the three fundamental thinking processes that converge in this paper—and in its public presentation as a “talk” in Barcelona. Firstly, my inquiries take the form of artworks that consider how maps *represent* existing places—but also reflect on how these same maps affect, create, and reconfigure the places to which they refer. Cartographical representations are forms of conceptual and instrumental knowledge about the world. Since they imply the convergence of theoretical and technical artistry, maps seem a natural matter for me to devote my investigations to. Secondly, such artworks should be considered as the constitutive elements of a broader thought process—that is, my practice as a whole. This concept is fundamental since it considers artistic practice itself as an ongoing phenomenon, one that involves the tracing of ideas and the development of lines of thinking. Along with marking, depicting, or conforming to a territory, my approach to mapping examines the relationship between thought processes and the gestures involved in creating images—the hand performing a perhaps indelible trace. The third element to consider is the format: the talk *per se*.

The “Talk”

Recently, I have grown more interested in exploring forms of expression that are not necessarily “artistic” or purely exhibition-related,

but that are conversational and based in dialogues and ongoing private or public discussions.⁴

Discursive presentations and personal interactions require an immediacy normally missing in conventional exhibition practices. Conversations allow forms of understanding that can only occur in a dialogue, in the context of spoken words. I am interested in the potential of the space created by the back-and-forth of the conversation. This is why, in Barcelona, I considered my presentation as an exercise in process that explored the “talk” as an artistic form in itself. The lecture seemed an ideal avenue in which to reconcile intellectual and artistic practices, and it proved fruitful in the convergence of disciplines and set of ideas.

The Consideration of a Single Artist’s Artistic Practice as a Whole

For some time now, I have found it fundamental to consider artistic practice (including my own) as a process in which specific artworks appear and manifest themselves as emergent nodes along an ongoing intellectual and transversal means of comprehension.⁵ This notion of process implies a negotiation between the idea and the gesture that gives this idea its particular form. Moreover, the consideration of a particular work of art as arising from a specific context, and the subsequent understanding of it in relation to its relative position within the other artworks that precede or follow it suggest a cognitive process that goes beyond the piece itself. Artworks are not self-sufficient or self-contained entities. They gain their full meaning when placed against the backdrop of the world(s) in which they exist.

The question thus arises: how can the ongoing bond between theory and practice be rendered visible? From my perspective there are two fundamental thought processes involved in art praxis. One of them happens abstractly: it involves intellect and theory, sensitivity and even emotion. But there is another equally important kind of thought that happens in *the being there* of the “art making,” and in the very process of performing a gesture that takes on a particular aesthetic form—a form that never quite overlaps with the idea that prompted it.

From this perspective, artistic practice implies a sort of *applied thought* that is as invisible as it is performative (I use the term performative as it relates to “performance” as an act, a (re)presentation, the rendering of a particular gesture), a thinking-while-doing that connects processes and favors unconventional ways of understanding. And creates worlds.

The Place of Cartographical Representations

The series of works to which I would like to refer investigate the rhetoric and the grammar of maps. (And please, keep in mind the framework previously explored when considering the artworks).

Recently, I have been contemplating the idea of “place” as *becoming*, as something that *happens*, and *takes place*, rather than existing independently from the use that we, human beings, make of it.⁶ This implies that a place is a practiced, inhabited, performed, used, and unstable entity configured or constructed by the *habits* or gestures of those seeking to inhabit or make use of it in one way or another. “Places” emerge in the interstices between ideal and factual gestures, between the conceptualization of a place and the literal gestures that affect and modify the territory. It is in these interstitial relationships where a particular place (and not any other) materializes.

Places thus appear in the *being there*, performing a gesture that never quite overlaps with the concept that prompted it. At the same time, the performative aspect of the gesture forces the *real* place to happen elsewhere, further away—as it is fundamentally unattainable—, in an ongoing process that reveals the gap between the mind and the hand (or the gesture performed by it), between the theory and the practice.⁷

This reflection on the complex nature of place seeks to comprehend the world around us, and points to an overwhelming impossibility, to the fundamental flaw that, as the philosopher Jose Luis Pardo would say, constitutes and defines every single place:

any place can be defined by an absence (the hole in the clothes) or a surplus (the patch that artificially and temporarily covers the hole): in every place one is missing—the best, the authentic, the true—, and another is exceeding—the spy, the traitor, the sham—[...], it means that every place has a hole through which it threatens to fall, where it is at risk of losing its identity, a crack through which its nature and spirit escape and penetrates the putrid air of something that is *not nature*, *which is not spirit nor is culture*, something that is not the proper place and, probably, any other. This refutes the old belief, above mentioned, that *there was a time when everyone was in place and there was a place for everyone*. It is the contrary. The place was defined in its origin because one was missing and another was a superfluous, because not everything was in place.⁸

The approach to place as an “ongoing search”, and its fundamental lack

of “completeness”, has led me to consider the map as an object of study—an object that is in itself also a means of inquiry. Maps are visual renderings that gather “objective” data on a particular territory then used to “describe” that place. Simultaneously, maps ask us to confront their image with our personal experience, asking questions whose answers are to be found in the place itself. Maps imply the visual representation of the concept of a place, but they also engender territories in themselves and project particular visions of the places they represent.

It is well accepted that maps represent specific forms of power and government. In fact the rules of mapping are influenced by the rules of those governing the cultural production of the map. A fundamental one is the rule of ethnocentricity, which led many societies (from pre-Columbian North American Indians to Christian Europe) to place their own territories in the center of the world maps.⁹ However, in opposition to the conventional maps that seek to establish a *status quo*, other types of maps exist. These emerge far from the canonical political maps that name territories and impose the images enforced by their makers. These types of cartographies include those forged by the Situationists in their *drifts* (acts of *dérive*), or in Francis Alÿs’s strolls and wanderings; it is the map depicted by the Surrealists that subverts the shapes, dispositions, and proportions of conventional world maps; or the maps of Alighiero Boetti or Marcel Broodthaers, that re-conceptualize the political use and creation of maps, to name just a few. These maps serve as sites with the power to reconsider and revitalize conventional approaches to the world. They take the power of cartographical representations seriously while subverting the mechanisms used by maps to generate “reality”. Similarly, I intend to explore the conventions of cartography and challenge their dispositions by situating myself in a site, asserting resistance, with a resultant refusal to comply with their established forms of representation.

The (Art)Works 1. An Aerial Perspective

Maps present and represent trans-atmospheric discussions. Drawn from an elevated point of view, they are essentially aerial recollections.¹⁰

Maps seek the translation or transposition of a territory, of a *body* of land, onto the paper. According to the Oxford Dictionary “translation” means both “the process of translating words or texts from one language into another” and “the conversion of something from one form or medium

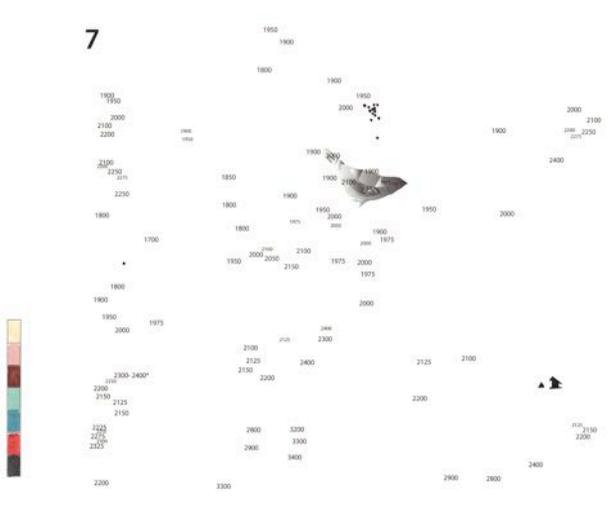


Figure 7.1. Laura F. Gibellini, *New York City Panorama 11*. Digital print and gouache on paper, 21.5 x 28 cm. 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

into another”. The translation used in maps involves the use of different means of projection and techniques, and implies the transference of an actual corporeal dimension into a flat abstraction.¹¹ As abstractions, as plain depictions with no depth, maps are meant to be observed, not inhabited. They demand a user devoid of body, a mere eye.

Study for (a) Landscape (fig. 7.2) aims to subvert and challenge the flatness of maps by situating the spectator *inside* a specific cartography. The video is a literal immersion in a map that offers a three-dimensional approach to a commonly flat depiction of a territory. But the video also contemplates the fundamental elements of cartographical representations—the point, the line, and the color scheme.¹²

Points suggest specific locations; lines which represent the movement of a point in a particular plane, determine altitude while repeatable colors describe the specific characteristics of a territory—a wetland, a rocky mountain, a meadow... In the video, a succession of points leads to lines, which accumulate into a tri-dimensional entity determined by specific colors. Only when the camera zooms out do we gain sufficient distance and perspective on what we are seeing. Only from the air does the *north* make sense.



Figure 7.2. Laura F. Gibellini, *Study for (a) Landscape*. (clip) Digital video on DVD, 3 min 58 sec. 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

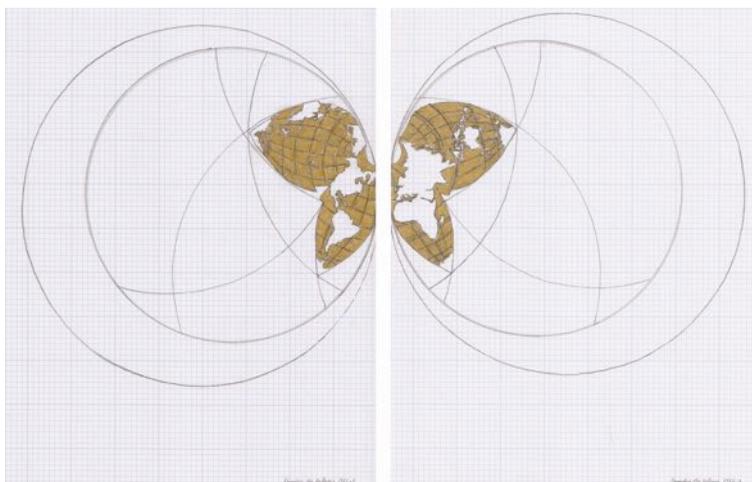


Figure 7.3. Laura F. Gibellini, *Expanding the Contours*. 1962. Drawing on gridded paper, 21.59 x 39.4 cm each (diptych), 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

In its most extreme version, a map is the flat representation of a sphere, which implies an acutely imperfect overlap or rather a clash between reality and representation. The transposition of reality into representation requires the adoption of the various conventions that seem to circumvent this mismatch and lack of accuracy. Maps require mediation—they bear no direct relationship to reality.

Expanding the Contours. 1962 (fig. 7.3) is the re-appropriation of an atlas of the world that depicts a very particular interpretation of the globe. As contemplated in this diagram, the unfeasibility of reconstructing the orb points to the inherent impossibility of matching cartographical representation to reality. This failure is disguised by technical and scientific modes of representation.

The (Art)Works 2. Projection(s)

In 1569, Gerardus Mercator devised a system of projection fundamental and revolutionary to the period, as it facilitated navigation at sea. In his projection, the lines marking the latitude and longitude of the globe were kept parallel, so that lines of constant compass-bearing were straight. Mercator's world map maintained the shapes of the continents as they appear on the globe, which created a striking image of the world that became popular as a decorative illustration.

Mercator's map grew to be a referential depiction of the world and engraved a particular image of the planet upon the minds of Westerners. But the technical manipulations used in order to create such maps nonetheless face a fundamental dilemma, since both shape and size cannot be conveyed accurately at the same time. Thus Mercator's projection incurs a fundamental distortion, which is emphasized in the poles: the size of the landmasses is disproportionate and as a result Europe, Asia and North America look bigger than they really are, while the continents in the South appear smaller—apart from also being placed in the bottom half of the world cartographies. Mercator's image of the world, while seemingly objective and scientific, does not quite overlap with geographical reality. Rather, it exemplifies our distorted understanding of the world. Of course, this distortion of size is political as well as geographical; it unveils the power relationships that dominate the world.¹³

Maps presuppose the appropriation of territories and the power to bestow names and to place images where they did not exist before—and it is a well-understood coincidence that those imposing the names are also the ones governing. The blank spaces on maps correspond to unknown places that are yet-to-be *discovered* and thus lack images. Once *discovered*, regulated, and standardized on a map, such spaces will be colored the same shades as the lands of their conquerors—a process that duplicates their patrons' identities. Such duplication is also nominative; hence, the proliferation of diminutives or neologisms such as La Española, New Cadiz, New Guinea, New Caledonia, New Amsterdam (later New

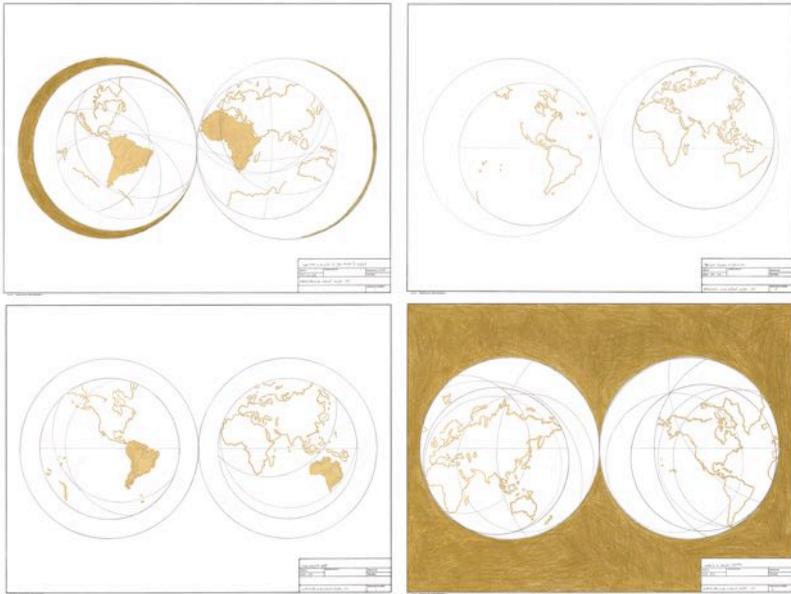


Figure 7.4. Laura F. Gibellini, *WeltKarte. On How Continents Overflow 1-4*. Drawing and gold leaf on paper, 45.5 x 60.5 cm. 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

York) and many others.

The series *WeltKarte. On How Continents Overflow* (fig. 7.4) is based on world maps of 1694, 1752, 1799 and 1844 respectively, all of which follow Mercator's projection. The unfinished lines represent unknown, unexplored, and *undiscovered* places—hence the incomplete contour, the lack of closure. The absence of images reinforces the blankness of the paper in which land and sea blend and become part of the *same*.

The last map of the series situates the American continent at the right hand-side, and, as we read left to right, emphasizes the dominance of Europe. All of the maps include an interesting detail: the continuity of the *two* sides of the globe is insinuated by the repetition of masses of land in their borders (see fig. 7.4). This suggests a fundamental intention to overcome the (conceptual) flatness of the picture and shows the possibility of encircling the globe.

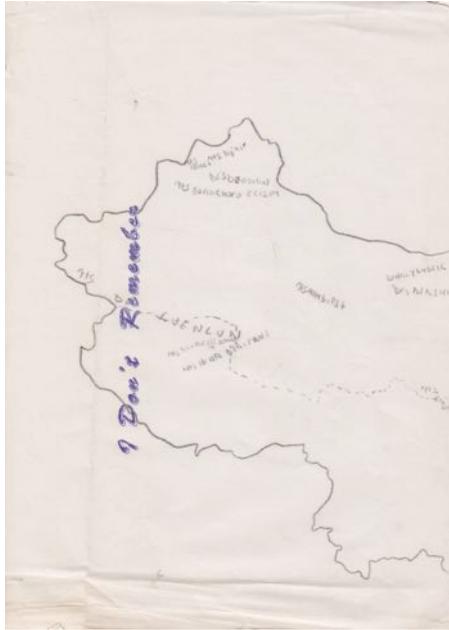


Figure 7.5. *The Shapes I Don't Remember.* Drawing and collage on found map, 21.7 x 31.5 cm. 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

The (Art)Works 3. “Truth” and Translation

Maps are seen as mirrors of nature and are based in the idea of progress. They function under the belief that the application of evolved scientific methods can lead to an ever more precise representation of reality. The knowledge produced by maps is hence cumulative, probable, and verifiable.

Maps seek a correct, precise, and objective translation of a territory. Expressed in mathematical terms, the flat transposition of a body of land onto a piece of paper appears as a fundamental *truth* that can be verified.

The primary effect of a scientific principle is the creation of a standard and a normalization of the discourse. Maps generate recognizable forms and reproduce those that are already known. *The Shapes I Don't Remember* (fig. 7.5) derives from a found map previously unknown to me, and whose shape I cannot recognize.

Such a map—an unremembered, previously unknown map—cannot

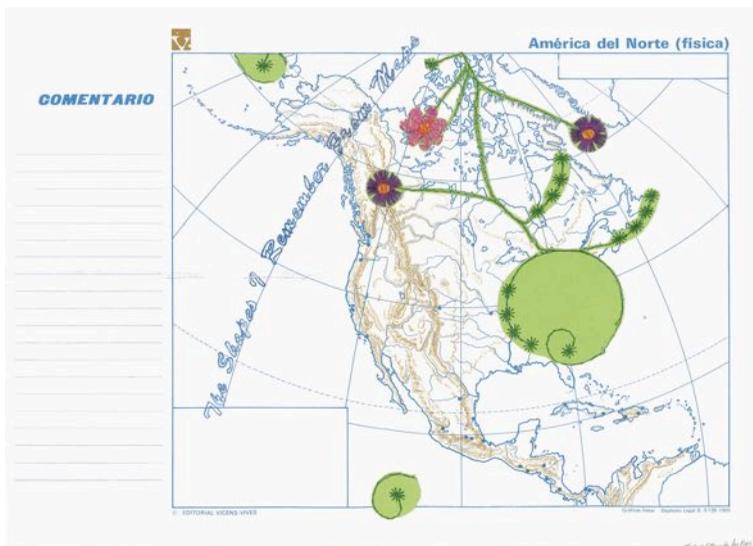


Figure 7.6. *The Shapes I Remember From Maps*. Drawing and collage on an atlas of North America of 1965, 32,5 x 23,7 cm. 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

evoke an existing territory in the mind of the viewer. This phenomenon suggests that images must belong to a formal recollection, and must be part of an already existing mental paradigm in order to be comprehensible.

Maps shape mental structures and suggest the production of a transportable form of knowledge. Maps imply an occupation. Space is produced and reproduced through representation—a representation that itself entails the projection of a specific comprehension of something abstract, in this case of the world order. *The Shapes I Remember From Maps* (fig. 7.6) and *The Shapes I Remember* (fig. 7.7) depict two maps of North America whose shape is recognizable, known and repeatable. However, both have also been *occupied* by decorative elements, in an attempt to appropriate an already familiar form.¹⁴

Maps seek to transform the terrain into a civilized system that is both uniform and reproducible. The diptych *Say It With Flowers* (fig. 7.8) consists of two drawings based on Bartholomew's equiareal projection.¹⁵ In the diptych, the landmasses have been drawn by following a continuous

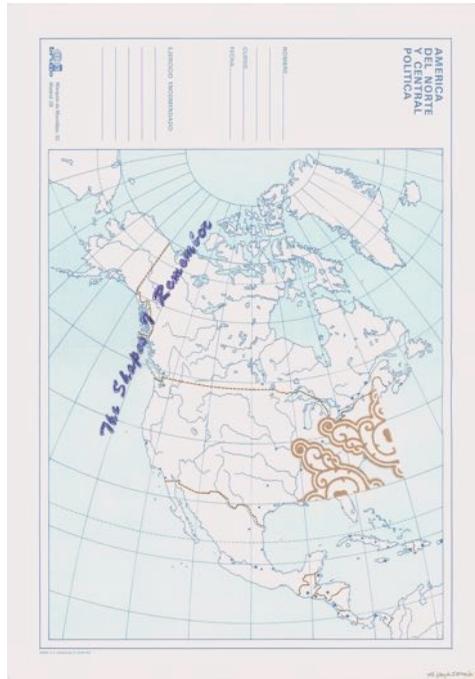


Figure 7.7. Laura F. Gibellini, *The Shapes I Remember*. Drawing and collage on an atlas of North America of 1976, 32.5 x 23.7 cm. 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

line along the meridians. As a result, the shapes in the diptych comprise all the land contained in the globe. A new world order, a unique continent, appears here—one consuming the entire planet.

The (Art)Works 4. (A) Sense of the World

Maps generate a sense of the places of the World. They produce a formal index and create a hierarchy of space. Maps exercise their power mainly over the knowledge of the world—a knowledge that is mobile and mobilized and that requires a translation, a flow, a *becoming* (something else). Maps create a spatial Panoptic.¹⁶

Much of the power of cartography lies in its seeming neutrality. Yet, in fact, it is the business of a ruling State, following its own nationalist and

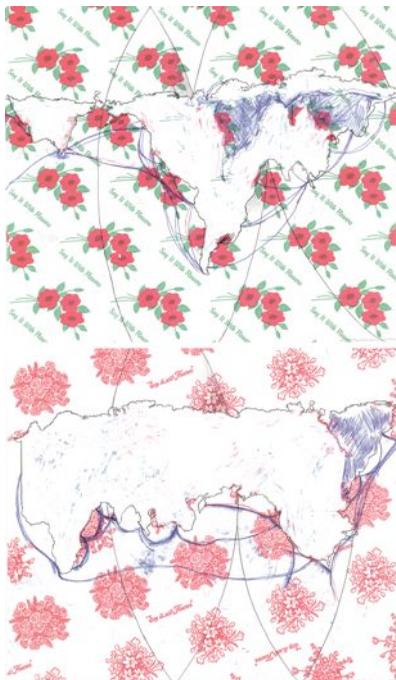


Figure 7.8. Laura F. Gibellini, *Say It With Flowers* (Bartholomew's Equiareal Projection). Drawing on paper, 50 x 60 cm each. 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

ethnocentric dictates and imposing its own social order.

The Extended Contours of the Horizon (fig. 7.9) comprises 195 drawings that redraw all the contours of each of the countries whose sovereignty is recognized by the US Department of State.¹⁷ In the series, the contours of each nation have been stretched and extended horizontally.

The line in each drawing represents the extension of a country, as if we were to walk its borders and trace our steps. The coordinates on the upper part of the drawing indicate the nation's relative horizontal position on the planet. The names of the countries appear in English, confirming the legitimacy bestowed by the US.

The Extended Contours is a topographical index of the planet that is as objective as it is poetic. It exposes the inaccuracies inherent in cartographical representation (and the problems of representation in

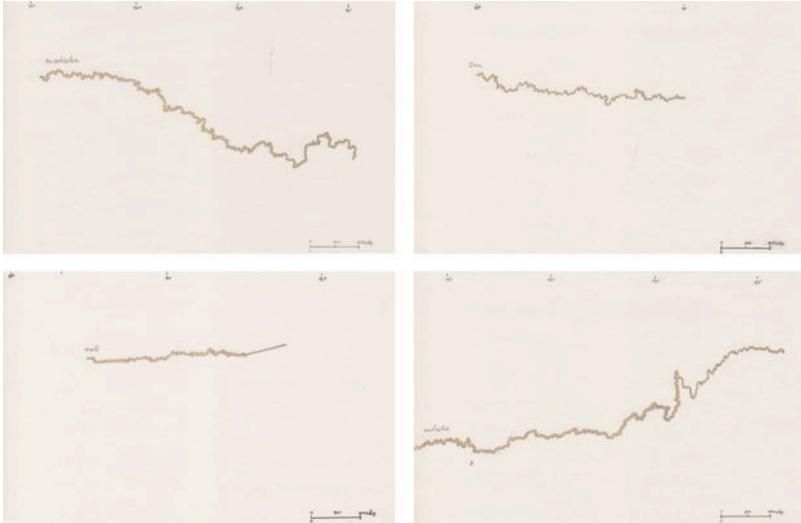


Figure 7.9. Laura F. Gibellini, *The Extended Contours of the Horizon*. Gold leaf and drawing on paper. 14 x 21,6 cm. 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

general). But, and perhaps more importantly, the series challenges our deep-rooted beliefs about the perceived world order. Within it unfolds the possibility of carrying us far beyond territorial misconceptions, attachments, and encirclements, towards unexpected possibilities.

All these considerations manifest the relationship between theory and praxis. Or, as stated above, between the idea and the gesture that turns a concept into a specific (art)form. It engenders an image where one did not exist before. As it happens in maps—and also in the making of art.

Notes

¹ The title of this presentation alludes to the *panorama* (or *atlas*) as a way to organize knowledge. Unlike the archive, which tends to imply a rather obscure succession or stack of data, information, images and realities, the *panorama* appears as a model of horizontal order. It spreads out in a plane that favors a direct visualization and access to its content as a whole.

² On the occasion of this paper I have adapted (or *translated*) the oral presentation to fit in the specifics of a written format. Certain gestures, pauses, the flow and

cadence as well as the general “tone” and the structure of the lecture had to be reworked in its written version. The same is true for the Spanish-English translation. Even if the text was reworked in English, rather than translated from the original Spanish, specific issues regarding language have arisen, and a great deal of editing was needed. In the process of writing I have found myself confronted to the inherent problems of *translation*, both between languages and between theory and practice. I am in debt with Mary Di Lucia for her invaluable help in the editing process, as well as for her capacity for asking fundamental questions.

³ I am contemplating the relationship between theory and praxis beyond the use of *theory based* material and diverse modes of documentation which, in processual art practices, tend to integrate diverse forms of research in a final *product* or art piece.

⁴ E.g. the panel “Constructing a Place” hosted by Independent Curators International, NYC, in January 2013. I invited fundamental representatives of a diversity of disciplines (ecology, poetry, sociology, urban planning, geography, choreography, etc.) to reflect on the overlap between their theoretical work and the implementation of these ideas in the territory, in the paper, in the artwork. For more information see curatorsintl.org/events/panel_discussion_construyendo_un_lugar_constructing_a_place

⁵ When I use the term *intellective* I am not only referring to the rational processes of the mind but also to the overall abstract thinking (including irrationality and emotion) that takes place *in* the body but lacks of a physical and definitive form.

⁶ For an extended discussion in these ideas see F. Gibellini, Laura et al., *Construyendo un Lugar / Constructing a Place*. (Madrid: Universidad Complutense, 2012). Colección Palabras de Imágenes, Sección Departamental de Historia del Arte III (Contemporáneo) at <http://www.laurafgibellini.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/constructingaplace.pdf>; and my doctoral dissertation *Lo local en lo Gobar. Paradojas Posmodernas del Lugar*, (Madrid: Complutense University, 2010), at <http://eprints.ucm.es/12343>.

⁷ These ideas have been developed before in the publication above mentioned *Construyendo un Lugar / Constructing a Place*. The manuscript reflects on the construction and representation of the idea of “place” by focusing on the basic elements implicit in representations: the dot and the line.

⁸ José Luis Pardo, “A cualquier cosa llaman arte (ensayo sobre la falta de lugares)”, in *Informes sobre el estado del lugar*, ed. Ignacio Castro. (Gijón: Caja de Asturias, Obra Social y Cultural de Oviedo, 1998), 179. Translation by this author (emphasis in the original text).

⁹ J. B. Harley, “Deconstructing the Map”, *Cartographica* 26 (1989): 5-6.

¹⁰ Jennifer L. Roberts, “Actual Size: The Refusal of Cartographic Abstraction in Audubon’s *Birds of America*” paper presented at the conference *Mapping: Geography, Power and the Imagination of the Art in the Americas*, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, March 7-8, 2013. Maps cannot be drawn from the ground, they entail an aerial viewpoint.

¹¹ And in my work entails the use of transfer and tracing techniques and overlaps (superposition).

¹² See a preview of the video at <https://vimeo.com/28833623>.

¹³ Take Africa, for example. It measures thirty million square meters, which makes it is roughly three times larger than Europe (including the Russian west side of the Ural mountains). In order to make up for such distortion in size, several projections have been devised since then. Among them is the controverted Gall-Peters projection, which represents the size of the continents more accurately even if incurring in other misrepresentations: it lacks distance fidelity and keeps an extreme distortion in the polar regions.

¹⁴ The use of decorative patterns links to an ongoing reflection on decoration as a symbolic means of appropriation in my work. See the text *Construyendo un Lugar / Constructing a Place* for more information.

¹⁵ That is, where the meridians remain equidistant while the lines of latitude increase their distance from each other in accordance to their distance from the equator; the farther they are from the equator, the farther apart the lines of latitude are.

¹⁶ The Panopticon was specific type of institutional building designed by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century to allow a single man to observe the inmates of such institution (without them being able to tell whether they were being watched or not). Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), used the Panopticon as a metaphor to refer to modern "disciplinary" societies and their inclination to observe (and seek normalization).

¹⁷ The drawings are based on Gall's stenographic projection—which implies less distortion of the landmasses than Mercator's map.