

Map ≠ Territory

Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck, Rossella Biscotti, Bady Dalloul,
Cian Dayrit, Shadi Habib Allah and Christine Rebet

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In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

—Suarez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658

The map has long been a contested site. Jorge Luis Borges' 1946 story *On Exactitude in Science*, composed masterfully of a sole paragraph written as a literary forgery, sounds cautionary: despite its alleged precision, the map is doomed to finish as a tattered, haunted plane. It is fundamentally an abstraction. Trusting either cartographic imagery or the language of 'representational' mapping is illusory, as the relationship of the tool to its subject is one of flux, instability, and layered subjectivity. Any canny observer of images, dutifully informed by postmodern tendencies to distrust simulation and manipulation, clearly lost faith in representational veracity long ago. Yet the map sneaks past these filters, doggedly presenting itself as *a terra firma* kind of reality, sealing the deal on the promise of certainty and reliability that Borges so deftly critiqued.

Map ≠ Territory, subtly complicating linguist Alfred Korybski's incisive phrase with a mathematical sign, unites the work of six artists who plumb the complex question of mapping today—a time of ongoing post-colonial fallout, elusive resources, invasive tech, and intensifying surveillance. Rather than literally mapping, these artists reflect on the various (and sometimes urgent) strands of inquiry the fraught map/territory relation continues to encompass.

The simple act of reading a map is problematized in Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck's *Ian Gulf* (2018), which, like many of the artist's works, is sharp witted yet deeply layered. By obliterating the first four letters of the words 'Persian' and 'Arabian' on side-by-side Gulf maps by means of a cardamom pod and pink peppercorns, the artist conjures, in one swift gesture, ancient trade routes, the march of empire, ongoing geographic name squabbles, and a host of political entanglements that smolder below the surface of the gently pastel-colored documents—from 1950s Soviet military ambitions to Western oil extraction strategies. The plaything of shifting geopolitical scheming, the territory, like the signs used to demarcate it, can never be truly 'read.'

Trusted documentary methods, in the hands of Rossella Biscotti, convey alternative truths. Conflating two documentary 'models'—the blueprint and the oceanographic map—Biscotti's *The Journey* (2016) confounds scientific exactitude by alluding to the politics of invisibility at work in any attempt to render the visible. The artist dropped a 20-ton marble block awarded to her by the iconic Michelangelo quarry in Carrara, Italy into the charged waters between Italy, Malta, Libya, and Tunisia. Pinpointing the marble chunk's location, Biscotti fathoms military relics, commercial and migrant routes from the seabed up, interrogating how exploration and exploitation overlap.

Invisibility, the environment, and the scramble for resources coalesce in Balteo-Yazbeck's *Constellation A*, from the *Fossil Carbon Cycle* series (2006-2020). Five wooden lumps splayed across the wall are made from ancient roots seeped in the fossil-fuel-generated carbon they have imbibed throughout their long lifecycle. The wall-bound configuration reproduces exploration maps indicating underground fuel deposits, the tar-painted roots' convex curves mimicking the representational system of topographic maps.

Cian Dayrit engages in a practice of counter-mapping: he subverts the language of the map while signposting potentially emancipatory means of reinterpreting space. His choice of medium—embroidery and feathers on textile—destabilizes the cartographic canon, implying narratives that easily ravel and unravel. Cartographic might is undermined by flourishes of indigenous symbols, while the titles' resolute questioning (*Which Border Do You Subscribe To* or *Both Poles Serve You?*) claim some agency over the hegemonic powers whose slicing up of the world have led to the dispossession and displacement at the heart of Dayrit's concerns.

Consequences of imperial power (re)surface in Bady Dalloul's floor-mounted video *Discussion Between Gentlemen* (2016). Referencing the territorial scoring of the Levant by the French and British, Dalloul's comic/ironic work amplifies the precarious nature of map-making, foregrounding the palimpsest-like layers of erasure and re-writing. Echoing Borges, the work concludes that the map is futile, incapable of seizing the shifting will of its masters, ultimately becoming a relic. Resembling an operation room information panel (or a crime investigation suspect board), *On the Happy Occasion* (2015) takes a 1920s vintage map as a springboard to plot seemingly ordinary moments in the nascent history of a handful of imaginary countries that mushroom into markedly significant events. In much the same way *Discussion Between Gentlemen* exhausts the re-writing of history to the point of futility, *On the Happy Occasion* reframes the endeavor under the sign of randomness.

The surveillance state is power at its most insidious, its mapping technologies largely invisible, its panoptic might forever creating docile bodies. In his video *Did You See Me This Time With Your Own Eyes?* (2018) Shadi Habib Allah springboards off an experiment with a DIY 2G phone network—devices favored by nomadic Bedouins in the Sinai infamous for smuggling to escape Egyptian government tracking—to interrogate mapping that atomizes the conventions of the cartographic. Intercepted sound, encrypted messages, pervasive networks, decoding devices: the map enmeshes and strangles out its 'subjects.'

Compelled by questions of illusion and deception, Christine Rebet freely maps a monk's metamorphic journey from his mountain top home to the sea in the hand-drawn animated film *Breathe In Breathe Out* (2019) and accompanying ink-on-paper drawings. The path meanders through a succession of physical metamorphoses, but also marks a journey of the mind, peppered by glimpses of elusive corners of a fragile living world. Everything, the works suggest, is transitive.

Map ≠ Territory revels in a sense of unmappability, in this amplified collapse of trust in the map, so deeply wound up in structure of domination and control. Nothing is ever as it seems, these artists attest. And while the map may be futile as a representation of perpetually shifting territories, the deeper concern is that reality itself is unknowable. In the end, each map leads to other maps in a recursive regression. Are we fated only to ever have untrustworthy representations?

Text by Kevin Jones

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck

Born in 1972, Balteo-Yazbeck graduated in Fine Arts in his native city – Caracas, Venezuela, where he extensively exhibited his work, and later moved his practice to New York from 2000 to 2010.

Institutional solo exhibitions include *Diplomatic Entanglements*, Rochester Art Center, USA (2015); *A little bit of heaven (1998-2008)*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, USA (2008); and *Analysis*, Jersey City Museum, USA (2006).

Recent group exhibitions include: *Oil. Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age*, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany (2021); *Stories of Abstraction: Contemporary Latin American Art in the Global Context*, Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona, USA (2020); *Nuestra América*, Galeria Luisa Strina, São Paulo Brazil (2020); *Making New Time*, curated by Omar Kholeif, Sharjah Biennial 14, Sharjah, UAE (2019); *Crude*, Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai, UAE (2018); *Everything Is Connected: Art and Conspiracy*, The Met Breuer, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, USA (2018); *Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany (2017); *4.543 billion. The matter of matter.*, CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, France (2017).

He is now based in Berlin.

Rossella Biscotti

Born in 1978 in Molfetta, Italy, Rossella Biscotti graduated from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Naples in 2002 and later attended the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam in 2010-2011. She took part at major international exhibitions, including the 55th Venice Biennale and 13th Istanbul Biennale (2013), dOCUMENTA 13 (2012), and Manifesta 9 (2012).

Her work has been presented in solo exhibitions at Witte de With, Rotterdam; Fondazione Ratti, Como; daadgalerie, Berlin (2019), Kunsthaus Baselland; Protocinema Istanbul (2018), V-A-C foundation at GULAG History State Museum in Moscow (2016-2017), Museion Bolzano (2015), Haus Lange Haus Esters, Krefeld; Wiels, Brussels; Sculpture Center, New York (2014), Secession, Vienna e-flu, New York (2013), CAC Vilnius (2012).

She has also exhibited in a number of group exhibitions including Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka (2020), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2019-2018), Kunstmuseum StGallen, Tate St Ives (2018), Contour Biennale, Mechelen (2017), MAXXI, Rome (2010-2017), Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Swiss Institute New York (2016), Sonsbeek, curated by ruangrupa, Arnhem (2016), the IMMA Dublin (2015), ICA London, Pinchuk Art Center, Kiev (2014), Castello di Rivoli (2012), Museu Serralves, Porto (2010).

She lives and works in Brussels.

Bady Dalloul

Bady Dalloul was born to Syrian parents in Paris in 1986. He graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris in 2015. In 2017, he was nominated for the Prix découverte des Amis du Palais de Tokyo, and in 2018 he was awarded the Prix des Amis de l'IMA.

Recent exhibitions include: *Diaspora at Home*, Kadist, Paris (forthcoming); *Notre monde brûle*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2020); *Orientalism*, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern- IVAM, Valence (2020); *Persona Grata?*, MACVAL museum (2019); *L'épopée du canal de Suez*, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris (2018); *Talismans*, Gulbenkian Foundation, Paris (2018) and *Tous des sangs-mêlés*, MACVAL museum (2017).

Bady Dalloul is the only laureate of Villa Kujoyama, Japan in 2021.

Cian Dayrit

Born in 1989 in Manila, Philippines, Dayrit earned his BFA Major in Painting from the University of the Philippines (2011) and won the Ateneo Art Award in 2017. He was an Artist-in-residence at Emerging Islands, La Union, PH (2021) and Gasworks, London, UK (2019).

Recent exhibitions include: *Minds Rising Spirits Tuning*, Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju (2021); *Active Threads*, Kai10, Arthema Foundation, Dusseldorf (2021); *The Crack Begins Within*, Berlin Biennale Of Contemporary Art, Berlin (2020); *Far Away But Strangely Familiar*, Danubiana Museum, Danubiana (2019); *Motions of this Kind*, Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, UK (2019); *Songs For Sabotage*, New Museum, New York (2018); *A Beast, A God, And A Line*, Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka (2018); *A Beast, A God, And A Line*, ParaSite, Hong Kong Ts1, Yangon (2018); and *Stories Of Almost Everyone*, Hammer Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles (2018).

His work will be included in the forthcoming edition of the Biennale of Sydney in 2022.

Shadi Habib Allah

Born in Jerusalem, Palestine in 1977, Shadi Habib Allah received a BFA from Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in 2003 and an MFA from Columbia University in 2010.

Solo exhibitions include: *Free Rein*, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, Scotland (2019); *Hammer Projects: Shadi Habib Allah*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA (2018); and *Put to Rights*, The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, Chicago, USA (2018).

Recent group exhibitions include: *Post-Capital: Art and the Economics of the Digital Age*, Mudam, The Contemporary Art Museum of Luxembourg, Luxembourg (forthcoming); *BACA Projects: In Light of the Land and its Shadows*, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht (2019); *74 million million million tons*, Sculpture Center, New York, USA (2018); *Tamawuj*, Sharjah Biennial, Sharjah, UAE (2017); *I can call this progress to halt*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles, CA (2017); New Museum Triennial, New York, USA (2015); *Empire State*, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, Italy (2013); *Frozen Lakes*, Artists Space, New York, USA (2013).

He lives and works in New York.

Christine Rebet

Born 1971 in Lyon (France), Christine Rebet took a bachelor's degree at St. Martin's School of Art and Design, London and a master's degree at Columbia University, New York after studying at the Accademia di Belle Arti, Venice.

Selected exhibitions include *Escapologie [Escapology]*, MAC Lyon, France, (2021) (solo); *Tropical Lab*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore (2021); *The Drawer*, Librairie Yvon Lambert, Paris, France (2021); *Time Levitation*, Parasol Unit foundation for contemporary art, London, UK (2020)(solo); *Draw: Concept & Craft*, SECCA – Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, USA (2020); *Animated Perspectives*, Alliance Française, New York, USA (2019); *DISSENT: what they fear is the light*, LACE, Los Angeles, USA (2016); and *Move On...! 100 Years of Animation Art*, Kunsthal KAdE, Amersfoort, Netherlands (2015);

She lives and works in Paris and New York.