Sharla Sava / GRIDLOCK: ANTONIA HIRSCH'S *World Map Project*

But what has propelled the recent surge in mapping – in gathering and arraying data in visual form – which can be observed in such a wide array of disciplines?[1]

A while ago I received an email from my friend Antonia Hirsch, sending me a link to a series of snapshots on *Flickr*, a popular web application and resource for social networking via photography (www.flickr.com), that show her installing an artwork for *Altered States*, a group exhibition that took place in Taipei during the summer of 2006. When I clicked the link, there she was, roller in hand, filling in a patch of land just west of Hudson Bay (p. 73). It gave me a bit of a thrill to see this informal, behind-the-scenes, view of an exhibition. Strange, too, to see the machinery of an exhibition taking place at such a distance (I was in Vancouver at the time), and simultaneously part of a larger viewing public dispersed all around the world. The flickr snapshots made Antonia's trip to Taiwan appear more knowable and immediate – as though we could share an experience despite being physically separated by thousands of kilometres. While it is true that the history of photography is deeply entwined with documenting and sharing our experiences of the world, be they tourist travels or work-related projects, it seems that current advances in online social networking technologies are transforming the pace, volume and accessibility of such encounters and, perhaps, in doing so, are also transforming the social relations that govern the ways we have come to know images.

The piece that Hirsch is working on in the Taipei snapshots is called *Forecast*, and it belongs to a larger series, *World Map Project*, begun about six years earlier. *Forecast* is a world map which adjusts the relative scale of each country according to annual rainfall (p. 77). Installed directly on the gallery wall with clear, shiny, varnish, the land masses appear insubstantial, creating a formal parallel with the transparent and reflective surface of water.

Another work from the *World Map Project* included in the Taipei exhibition, *Rivers and Borders*, juxtaposes the means by which masses of land have been divided by the natural flow of rivers with the manufactured divisions created by the construction of political borders (p. 74-5). When installed in Taipei, Hirsch worked directly on the wall, using fluorescent orange marker for inscription:

rivers on one wall, and borders on the adjacent wall. When reworking the project as a print edition for *Fillip* magazine, Hirsch traded in the orange marker for texture, creating an artwork in which the rivers and borders become visible through a process of directly embossing and debossing the paper.

Rivers and Borders, similar to the five other major works which, to date, constitute Hirsch's *World Map Project*, draws cartography into the realm of contemporary art. In doing so, it stresses the visual basis of world maps, and the many other occasions in which mapping has been positioned as a facet of the visual arts. While the scope of the conjunction between cartography and art is vast and amorphous, what is pertinent to Hirsch's concerns is the place of this conjunction with respect to the historical breakdown of modernism. In order to make sense of what we are seeing here, I think it is necessary to understand how Hirsch's current work both calls upon and resonates with art in the era of what Rosalind Krauss calls "the post-medium condition."[2]

While disparate in terms of media, scale and content, a common aesthetic aim can be said to unite the artworks in Hirsch's *World Map Project*. Hirsch's artworks take the rational, objective, and highly conventionalised language of cartography as their starting point. Thus we can see that all the works in the *World Map Project* are governed by the same abstraction, distance and systematisation which informs the modern history of European map-making. As with typical world maps, Hirsch's maps-as-art remain defiantly impersonal. In *Average Country* (p. 76 and cover), for instance, as with *Forecast* (p. 77), and *Blot* (p. 80), the artist's hand remains invisible, and the recognizable contours of nation or continent provide the basis for recognition. That is to say, Hirsch, in starting with a map of the world, has embraced the commonly held assumption that the world *is* – or is knowable as – a map.

Although evidently interested in such documents, Hirsch's process of working with them, as we can see with *Rivers and Borders*, does not remain exclusively tied to the ideological conceits of conventional geographical knowledge. Hirsch introduces the materiality of representation, interrupting the transparency of communication, in order to displace the familiar "world as map." Each of the works in the *World Maps* series applies a particular specialised knowledge as a means by which to modify or distort the conventional world map. In some instances Hirsch has taken statistical data as the basis for rationalising an adjustment in scale. For example, in *Forecast*, as Hirsch notes, the "size of each country is represented as proportional to the percentage of that nation's annual rainfall"[3], and with *Blot* the dimensions depend on GDP (Gross

Domestic Product). An adjustment of scale is also present in *Average Country*, where the size of every country in the world has been adjusted to conform to a single standard. Other works in the series rely on the process of erasure, and sometimes reversal, as the technique of estrangement. In *ARTnews Top 200* (p. 79), Hirsch shows only those countries that, according to *Artnews* magazine, are home to influential art collectors, and in *Le Monde Métrique* (p. 78) the artist chose metric graph paper, tearing away – and thus erasing from view – those countries (United States, Liberia, Myanmar) that remain officially non-metric.

What I mean to emphasize here is that both the form and content of Hirsch's *World Map Project* attest to social transformations brought about by the advent of a post-industrial, globalised world system. Rather than stressing the sovereignty of the individual nation-state, Hirsch's art mobilizes data technologies that rely on abstract and standardizing language in order to establish relations and means of comparison. Aside from the political points to be drawn from such re-mappings, Hirsch demonstrates an important affinity with the minimal and post-minimal generation, adopting the language of a highly industrialised, information society that is more deeply reliant on networks and systems for social structure than on political mandates based upon the collective will of a given population.

Hirsch's interest in maps shares something with Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers, and with post-minimal Italian artists Alighierro Boetti and Claudio Parmiggiani, all of whom demonstrate a longstanding interest in cartography. Produced primarily during the 1970s and 80s, Boetti's *Mappa del Mondo* introduces geopolitics into aesthetics (or vice versa) with its series of embroideries depicting a world map where countries are inscribed with their national flag. In another well-known project, *The Thousand Longest Rivers of the World* (1971–77), Boetti demonstrates how much of our knowledge of nature relies on a process of international data accumulation. Based on several years of amassing geographical facts, Boetti established the names and details of the world's longest rivers, eventually publishing them in a thousand-page artist book. Hirsch's *Average Country* is also reminiscent of Broodthaer's *The Conquest of Space: Atlas for the Use of Artists and the Military* (1975), in which the artist created a miniature book depicting the silhouette of eight countries, each scaled to identical size.

Hirsch's work in information and aesthetics is not confined exclusively to mapping. In other series, notably *Anthropometrics* (2004) and *Photographie Métrique* (2004), she approaches conventional systems of classification from

another angle. These photo-based series are concerned with exploring subjective and non-standard responses to standardized forms of measurement, bringing to mind such work as American conceptualist Mel Bochner's *Measurement Room* (1969). Where Bochner relied on measuring and documenting the dimensions of the art gallery, Hirsch has expanded the critique of standard measuring systems into the world of everyday life.

Online technologies have turned us all into potential cartographers. The digital collection and searchable database, *NationMaster* (www.NationMaster. com), for instance, provides an array of world maps based on statistical data. In a matter of seconds (and without paying a fee!) I can create a map of nations based on comparative statistics including "most murderous," "most generous" or "most trigger happy." Works such as Hirsch's *Average Country*, then, make some headway in coming to terms with how the ubiquity and flow of digital data has undermined the stability and autonomy of the modernist image. But it is crucial to understand that *Average Country*, a world map in which all the nations of the world are not only regulated by size but also literally stacked on top of one another, short-circuits the certainties implied by *NationMaster* and other such statistical data. Hirsch's project functions, not as an agent of globalisation, but rather as a witty and cautionary tale of globalisation's problems. What is visible to the spectator of Hirsch's work is the sobriety and utter lack of differentiation offered by this terrain. This world map is a vast, geographical space condensed into a dense and narrow black hole, as if by the ideology of neoliberal globalisation. From a distance Hirsch's *Average Country* looks like the gaping wound caused by a bullet, or the delicate surface of a painting touched by the aesthetics of minimalism.

NOTES

[1] Janet Abrams and Peter Hall, "Where/Abouts," in *Else/where: Mapping New Cartographies of Networks and Territories*, Abrams and Hall, eds. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Design Institute, 2006), 12.

[2] Rosalind Krauss. *'A Voyage on the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-medium Condition*, (NY: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

[3] http://antoniahirsch.com.