

**Shaping the Invisible World
Digital Cartography as an Instrument of Knowledge**

21.01–14.03.2021

Opening Wednesday 20.01, 19:00



Jakob Kudsk Steensen, Primal Tourism, 2016, Still Image. Photo: Jakob Kudsk Steensen. Courtesy of the artist.

***Shaping the Invisible World* examines, through cartography, the representational forms of the map as a tool between knowledge and technology. The works of the artists on view negotiate the meaning of the map as a gauge of our digital, technological and global society. Exploring the technological means of our time, they show images and territories of our planet that open up new possibilities for communication and navigation.**

Cartography – the science of surveying and representing the world – developed in antiquity and provided the springboard for communication and economic exchange between people and cultures around the globe. At the same time, maps are undeniably never neutral, since their creation inherently involves interpretation and imagination. Today, it is IT companies that drive progress in the field and drastically influence our views of the world and how we communicate, navigate and consume globally. While map production has become more democratic, digital maps are nevertheless increasingly used for political and economic manipulation. Questions of privacy, authorship, economic interests and big data management are more poignant than ever before and closely intertwined with contemporary cartographic practices.

Initially, access to maps was the privilege of ruling elites; today their abundant availability enables and generates diverse subjective perspectives on the world. In a highly connected society shaped by visual culture, information technologies allow for reproduction and dissemination through a variety of media and social channels – a diversity that increasingly determines our identities, relationships and interactions with our environment. Through these new egocentric perspectives, contemporary maps tell individual stories that focus on creativity and self-expression. The medium of the map becomes the benchmark of a digital, technological and global society and provides information about its condition. Today's maps not only depict, but also document, negotiate and visualize subjective views of the world. But are these maps more democratic? Who benefits from self-determined productions and what consequences do they lead to?

Despite the development of the Web 2.0, and its higher proportion of user-generated content, has led to an increased democratization of geodata, the conflict between proprietary and freely available data remains. While Google Maps retains its dominance among online map services, alternatives in the form of voluntarily collected geographical information such as OpenStreetMap are developing. These maps are community-based and created by the users themselves.

The strategies in digital mapping and cartography employed by the artists presented in *Shaping the Invisible World* are subversive. Their spectacular panoramas and virtual scenarios reveal how the digital technologies culturally affect our understanding of the world. Navigating between subversive cartography and digital mapping, the exhibition puts the spotlight on the fascination of maps in relation to the democratization of knowledge and appropriation. By uncovering hidden realities, scarcely visible developments and possible new social relationships within a territory, the artists delineate the evolution of invisible worlds.

Artists: Studio Above&Below, Tega Brain & Julian Oliver & Bengt Sjöln, James Bridle, Persijn Broersen & Margit Lukács, Bureau d'études/ Collectif Planète Laboratoire, fabric | ch, Fei Jun, Total Refusal (Robin Klengel & Leonhard Müllner), Trevor Paglen, Esther Polak & Ivar Van Bekkum, Quadrature, Jakob Kudsk Steensen

Curated by Boris Magrini and Christine Schranz

Exhibited works:

Studio Above&Below, founded by Daria Jelonek (DE) and Perry-James Sugden (GB), has created *Digital Atmosphere* (2020), an installation using augmented reality to visualize local air pollution data. The work, inspired by early air pollution devices, uses live data inputs to generate an evolving virtual experience. *Digital Atmosphere* resulted from conversations with scientists from King's College in London, and the Atmo Sensor was developed in close collaboration with Swiss INT Studio.

The artists **Tega Brain** (AU), **Julian Oliver** (NZ) & **Bengt Sjöln** (SE) have created a simulation program based on a supercomputer and machine learning technology for the creation of different scenarios in which the possible future climatic conditions are predicted as well as the necessary security measures for the solution of climate crises. The results proposed by the

supercomputer in their work *Asunder* (2019), are often absurd and improbable. The work criticises so-called computational neutrality, as well as the belief in technological solutions to crises such as global warming.

The work *Catch and Release* (2018) by **James Bridle** (GB) explores the history of radar technology and its current developments, intersecting the history of surveillance with that of bird migration observation. The artist explores the Tour du Valat database, questioning the use of large data to understand natural phenomena. In fact, the installation deletes the data from the dataset as it displays them to the public, together with an image of the geographical location linked to the data, mirrored on itself like a Rorschach stain.

Unspoiled landscapes and their representations are often objects of analysis by the artists **Persijn Broersen & Margit Lukács** (NL). Their work *Forest on Location* (2018) consists of scanning through photogrammetry and digital reproduction of a part of the Białowieża Forest in Poland, a national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979. The artists have also made a 3D print of a forest tree trunk, the work *Shvayg Mayn Harts* (2018), which is used as a projection surface and is a pendant to the video *Forest on Location*.

Since the 2000s, the artist duo Léonore Bonaccini and Xavier Fourt, who work under the name **Bureau d'Etudes** (FR), have produced various maps of geo-political, economic and social situations with the aim of revealing hidden realities, especially those linked to a capitalist system and colonial logic. The recent *Astropolitique* (2019) chart brings up the phenomenon of asteroid mining, to detect the interests and strategies hidden behind this still speculative practice.

The studio for architecture, interaction and research **fabric | ch** (CH) takes a look at the increasing presence of satellites. The installation *Satellite Daylight, 47°33'N* (2020) showcases light perceived by a simulated meteorological satellite orbiting the earth around the latitude of Basel at a speed of 7541m/s. The installation consists of 24 neon tubes that reproduce in real time the meteorological data perceived by the satellite during its trajectory, representing sunny and cloudy locations, day and night.

Fei Jun (CN) created an interactive video game, *Interesting World* (2019) consisting of two interaction modes. The first allows the public to create a virtual world using more than 300 objects that the artist has reconstructed from ordinary objects. The second interaction mode enables audience to roam into the real-time rendered world via an iPad application on the exhibition site.

A performative approach characterises the work of **Total Refusal (Leonhard Müllner & Robin Klengel)** (AT), for example their work *Operation Jane Walk* (2018). Instead of making guided tours in real neighbourhoods of a city, the artists visited virtual spaces in the online video game *Tom Clancy's The Division* (Ubisoft, 2016), which offers an extremely realistic, albeit dystopian, reconstruction of Manhattan. Reflecting on the representation of a city in a virtual universe, the artists show how this kind of cartographic work has an impact on the perception of a city, its history and identity.

Trained as an artist and geographer, **Trevor Paglen** (US) exemplifies the fusion of counter-cartography and art. He has devoted most of his work to the analysis of the functioning and logic

of state surveillance. The video *Circles* (2015) turns its gaze to the surveillance system itself: the artist used a drone to film the GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) near Gloucester, England.

During a residency in Philadelphia **Esther Polak & Ivar Van Bekkum** (NL) developed a software that allows them to make videos in Google Street View and Google Earth using geolocation and synchronizing the GPS data with the audio recordings. In their work *The Mailman's Bag* (2015), the artists collaborated with a mailman and equipped his bag with a sound recording tool and a GPS. The most recent video *The Fortune* (2018) uses Google Earth to portray a habitual location for popular protests in The Hague in the Netherlands.

Quadrature's (DE) recent work, *Supraspectives* (2020) is a result of the collection of information from 590 spy satellites that are still in orbit, though not all of them are in operation. The work calculates the trajectory of the satellites and reconstructs what they observe of the world, particularly the satellites that pass near the installation's exhibition site. Their other installation, *Satelliten* (2015) similarly displays the number of satellites that are in orbit. A plotter draws on old maps, in a space of 10 cm² and in real time, the trajectory of a satellite in a given location.

The work *Primal Tourism* (2016) by **Jakob Kudsk Steensen** (DK) is an exact, full-scale virtual replica of the iconic tourist island of Borabora in French Polynesia. The artist recreated the island in a 3D environment for a virtual reality experience built with Unreal Engine, and using various sources such as plans, satellite images, tourist photographs, images from scientific magazines, drawings and historical reports. The narratives he creates around the island tell stories of tourism, colonialism and technology.

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Biographies of the curators:

Boris Magrini is curator at HeK (House of electronic Arts Basel). He studied art history and philosophy at the University of Geneva and completed his PhD at the University of Zurich. He edits the Italian pages of *Kunstbulletin* and he regularly publishes on contemporary and media art. Curated shows include "Entangled Realities – Living with Artificial Intelligence" (co-curated with Sabine Himmelsbach, HeK, Basel, 2019), "Future Love. Desire and Kinship in Hypernature" (HeK, Basel, 2018), "Grounded Visions: Artistic Research into Environmental Issues" (ETH, Zurich, 2015–2016), "Hydra Project" (Zurich and Lugano, 2016), "Anathema" (Fri-Art, Fribourg, 2007–2008), and "Mutamenti" (Bellinzona, 2007).

Christine Schranz is Co-Director a.i. at the Institute Integrative Design | Masterstudio Design of FHNW Academy of Art and Design in Basel and in this function responsible for research at the Institute as well as for the module Design Research at the Master Program. She studied visual communication at the Zurich's School of Art and Design (now Zurich University of the Arts) and subsequently received her doctorate in theater, film and media studies at the University of Vienna. Among other things, she was a research fellow of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) at the Winchester School of Art–University of Southampton and at the Zeppelin University in Friedrichshafen as well as a doctoral fellow at the TU Berlin.

Information:

HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel)
Freilager-Platz 9, 4142 Münchenstein/Basel

Opening hours: Wed-Sun, 12:00-18:00

Admission: 9 / 6 CHF (reduced), Wed-Fri 12:00-13:00 Happy Hour (free admission to the exhibition)

Public tours: Every Sunday at 3:00 pm in German

For more information: www.hek.ch

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About the HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel)

HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel) is Switzerland's national competence centre, that deals with contemporary art exploring and configuring new technologies and media and reflect on them. With its interdisciplinary alignment HeK allows insights into art productions of different genres in the examination of art, media and technology for a broad audience. In a varied programme of exhibitions, smaller and larger events, festival formats, performances and concerts, HeK dedicates itself to current social topics and questions as well as technological-aesthetic developments. In addition to the event and exhibition activities, HeK is engaged with the collection methodology and the preservation of digital art.