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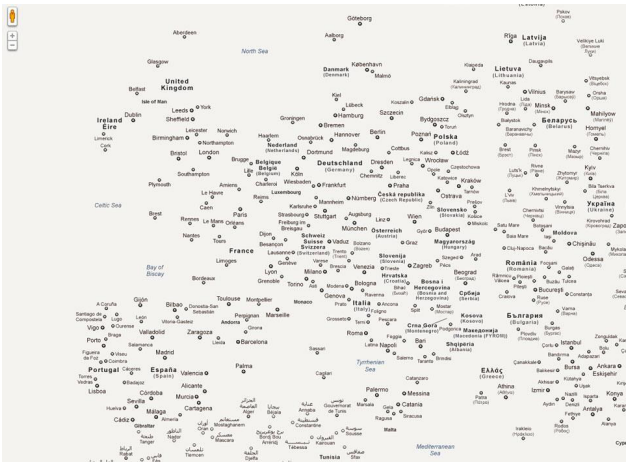
Search and You Shall Find

by Roberto Marone, June 1, 2012



The experiments conducted today by artists using Google Maps are impetuous and have the same high margin of error — and, perhaps, even the same lack of inhibition — typical of the avant-gardes of the past. An art report from Milan by Roberto Marone

Out of Google’s seemingly infinite galaxy of products, Google Maps is, perhaps, the most outstanding, a defining matrix for all of the company’s output. At the bottom of every single one of their products — from Google’s main search engine to its videos, books, news, reader and translator — you will see one, main utopian impulse for mapping the world, which indexes, arranges, vivisects and scans it before returning it to you ready for use, like a takeaway meal of human-knowledge. In the end, everything else Google does will pour back into the map and we shall sit, with some strange form of eyeglass, looking for and at the world from our own small room. Search and you shall find.

This may be why, when surfing the Web, you keep encountering all sorts of artists, graphic designers and creators who are trying to create enterprising visual experiments using the Google virtual planisphere. An enormous, never-ending photograph of the globe, turned inside out like a sock, creating a unique universal language. While it could be impossible to trace all of this frenetic activity in the Web, searching and extracting some examples can generate an outline of these kinds of experimentations.

A first example is the painstaking search process conducted by young US artist Jenny Odell. In All the People on Google Earth, she had already amassed information without context, assembling large crowds of people floating in mid-air. Odell’s Satellite collections series, on the other hand, shows masses of ships, swimming pools and golf courses, again taken out of context and neatly arranged as in a catalogue of life-altering discoveries. Her subsequent Signs of Life series focuses on graphic design, via an overflowing reproduction of road signs.

Dead Pixel is one fine, physical manifestation by Helmut Smits — an ironical Duchamp-style Dutchman —, the records of which show a piece of turf missing from a lawn; a dark rectangle in the compact green expanse that is little more than a dead pixel in the great geoJPG taken by a satellite.

New Yorker Clement Valla plays, instead, with distorted reality, identifying and reproducing an error in the automated algorithm used by Google to print photographs of the globe. A satellite photograph reconstructed on the map inevitably squashes the bridges down onto rivers and straightens out the tangle of roads. By denying jumps, it annuls heights. It is a dreamlike abstraction that at times seems like a lesson, telling us that the single, polyphemic point of view is short-sighted by definition.

There are some, like Canadian Jon Rafman, who have travelled several times around the world via Google Street View's photographs and, just like an early 20th-century photographer or reporter, unearthed frames captured here and there in the street by the indiscreet eye of the automatic camera. None of those photographs technically belong to him, but it is as if they all did.

Similarly, French digital-art wonder-kid Julien Levesque sieved through the archives of the digitalised world in search of similar views to cut out and create new, false ones for his Street Views Patchwork.

Finally, one of the younger and perhaps most interesting artists, New York-based Damon Zucconi, hacked into the world map and cancelled its design, leaving only the location names suspended in midair, as if in a planetarium of the Earth. It looks like a constellation but seen from up here

We could go on, rooting about in the undergrowth of the Web and coming up with Richard Sympson, Sanja Pupovac and Alberto Biagetti, Christoph Niemann and more. All fuel the inventory of works featuring rehashed "big G" pictures and maps. The examples above are extracted from a myriad of others, but they tell us that the map is the seed of a widespread, contemporary exercise that takes it as a pretext to rethink the digital world as a new grammar of the visual arts. These kinds of maps reissue meaning and give strength to the format. The same experiments conducted in the past by the Dadaists with photography and the Bauhaus with tubular steel can be seen again today in the digital world: just as rash and with the same high margin of error — and, perhaps, even the same lack of inhibition — typical of the avant-gardes of the past.

Perhaps this widespread use of the gentle giant's map has become so prevalent because the map, which is a graphic version of a context, conveys the very meaning of network: routes on a landscape. Or, maybe, because the word geography contains the etymology of "describing the earth's surface", which is after all the utopia that art always reaches out to, trying in vain to reconcile two clashing instincts: its understanding and its potential design.