

FILLIP EDITIONS

Antonia Hirsch *Rivers & Borders*

Edition of 14

Strains of thought in Antonia Hirsch's *World Map Project*

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In 1648, Claes Jansz. Visscher, the most famous of the renowned Dutch cartographic publishers of the seventeenth century, produced a map that attests to a fascinating development in the history of state iconography. This map, the *Leo Hollandicus*, represents Holland at a moment when the sovereign state was a novel idea in search of representation.¹ Curiously, rather than make use of the increasingly accurate science of cartography to assert hard-won national borders, Visscher chose to represent Holland in the form of a heraldic lion. (An altered state indeed!) Visscher's map not only capitalized on the symbolic resonance of the lion, but actually repurposed this shape from the *Leo Belgicus*—an earlier map produced in several versions to represent the seventeen provinces of the Low Countries during the time when these vied for independence from the Spanish Empire. By 1648, when seven of the seventeen provinces gained independence from Spain, the new map was neither reduced nor altered, but simply retained the lion's evocative form. It may be said that at this stage in the development of national representation, the shifting and all too abstract shapes derived from the geographic boundaries of Europe's newly sovereign territories lacked the familiarity of national symbols. In a contemporary context, this situation is reversed. The lion-maps have gone the way of the dodo and the irregular shapes that demarcate national boundaries have become some of the most easily recognizable icons of national sovereignty.

In confronting Antonia Hirsch's *World Map Project* (2000–2006), the contemporary sense of maps as the stuff of icons—images so recognizable that they render their referents *more* real—becomes palpable because it is delayed if not outright denied. None of her maps present the world as we know it. *Le Monde Métrique* (2005), for instance, plays on the ubiquitous phrase used to describe countries that signed on to the Metric Convention of 1875 and figures only those countries that abstained (the United States, Liberia, Myanmar). The shapes of the three countries are torn out from metric graph paper and situated relative to each other, as on a world map, at once subjected to and resisting the grid. The resulting world is strange, askew, abstract, and seemingly irrational, though paradoxically appealing as form. It is telling that Hirsch's first work in the series was entitled *Blot* (*Gross Domestic Product by country*) (2000). Presenting a world as an assembly of state maps statisti-

cally resized in terms of relative gross domestic product, *Blot* tested the limits of recognition in a kind of reversal of Hermann Rorschach's inkblot test. In other words, unlike the Rorschach blots, which are used to test patients' patterns of (re)cognition, Hirsch's manipulated maps have tended to encourage viewers to see a blot *before* they see a world.

Pursuing this strain (or stain) of thought, it may be useful to consider a more recent installation at 69pender—a space in Vancouver's Chinatown, now slated for renovation by a local developer, which was temporarily occupied by artists who lovingly restored its walls to a pristine white. Yet in converting a one-time musty mahjong parlour into a space for the presentation of contemporary art, nothing could be done about a large brown water stain that covered most of the ceiling. Invited to present a project at 69pender, Hirsch used clear varnish to produce a wall-size map altered to show relative rainfall per country. A raking light revealed *Forecast (annual rainfall by country) (2005)* on the pristine white wall. At the same time, the lighting also accentuated the sense that Hirsch's carefully measured political map qua meteorological diagram, which effectively stretched and bloated the familiar shapes of continents, held an undeniable formal (and perhaps a humorously structural) resonance with the large brown blot above.

Hirsch's (con)fusion of statistics and stains, which defers (re)cognition and causes an estrangement of the world, recalls the strategy of *ostranenie* (i.e. estrangement or 'making strange'), which was articulated by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky. A passage from Shklovsky's *Art as Technique* makes his attitude apparent:

*The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*²

For Shklovsky, who was writing in the era of the Russian Revolution—a time of intense formal experimentation, especially in Constructivist and Suprematist circles—unfamiliar forms were sought not as expressions of new content/information but as catalysts for total cognitive estrangement. Estrangement was one of the main objectives of the abstraction of form and was meant to produce a wholly novel worldview, a catalyst for revolution. In Hirsch's *World Map Project*, the forms have tended to be familiar—contemporary political maps gained popularity in the late seventeenth century with the rise of the nation state and the exploratory need for a total and scientifically-determined worldview that turns a blot into a swiftly surmised form. But in employing scientific means of computation, Hirsch returns the maps' incongruous forms to their *blotness*.³

Although Hirsch's methods cannot be squarely aligned with Formalist concerns, it is useful to consider them in this context. Such a comparison allows her works to demarcate the limit of the knowable and (reversing Enlightenment drives) to yearn, not for recognizable states, but for abstract forms. As Hirsch's maps remain hovering on the verge of the undecipherable, but retain a recourse to scientific data and representational form, they mark a boundary that is difficult to cross in contemporary art. Some time in the second half of the last century, artists experienced a certain exhaustion of/with abstract forms, rendering many contemporary artists incapable or unwilling to entertain the realm of abstraction in its most radical implications—as an image that tests the boundaries of knowledge because it confronts the body, eye and mind with all the incoherence of a scrawl or a blot. In part due to the failed revolutionary promise of many variants of heroic or avant-garde abstraction, the very notion of the abstract is currently not so simple to engage and needs to be re-imagined. Antonia Hirsch's project may be situated in this imaginative arena.

To pose the question of abstraction and move away from the reading of Hirsch's visceral work as elegant diagrams of geo-political data is to sever her map-forms from their iconic function (or the production of knowledge and belief at first sight). As her project unfolds, the forms continue to avoid easy recognition. The most recent variant of the World Map Project, the Phillip edition of *Rivers & Borders* (2006) departs somewhat from the form of the world map and thereby disrupts the expectations of those 'in the know' about Hirsch's project to date. What Hirsch offers is an abstraction (understood as estrangement or extraction) of two similar but different systems of representation that the world map provides. With the rivers indented and the borders extruded, the two similar line patterns may at first sight seem to be the product of the same embossed negative, splayed open to mirror each other. And indeed, parts of the maps do mirror each other perfectly since rivers make for 'natural borders' throughout the world. In part then, Hirsch's latest installment of her *World Map Project* affords a study of the extent to which existing geologically-inscribed lines have been followed to create national borders and to what extent they derive from more arbitrary arrangements usually betrayed by the perfect geometry of straight lines. Such straight lines are of course easier to inscribe from afar, from a colonial office where a map rather than the land served as the primary site for forging physical and mental boundaries. All this begs the question of the extent to which geo-political forces have contributed to the very notion of (geometric) abstraction. While exploring its phenomena of estrangement anew, Hirsch consistently manages to implicate strategies of abstraction in politically motivated systems of thought. But the strange forms that her project has yielded also imply that existing politics need not limit the use (or usefulness) of abstract forms in expanding our worldview.

NOTES

1. 1648 was the year when the Thirty Years War ended with the signing of the Peace of Westphalia. This series of treaties effectively inaugurated the modern notion of sovereign states, which slowly superseded the kingdoms and empires of Medieval Europe. One of the earliest sovereign states was present-day Holland, which integrated seven of the seventeen provinces of the Low Countries, all of which had previously existed under imperial Spanish rule.

2. Viktor Shklovsky, from “Art as Technique” in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992): 277. Shklovsky’s text was originally published as “Iskusstvo kak priyom” in *Sborniki, II* (Petrograd, 1917).

3. Hirsch’s other projects, such as *Photographie Métrique* (2004) or *A Science of Language and Humidity* (2003) make subjective, arbitrary, and strange the seemingly universal rationalisms of the Enlightenment.