

reviews

World Views: Maps & Art

By Robert Silberman, in collaboration with Patricia McDonnell.

Essay by Yi-Fu Tuan.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

80 pages, numerous maps and photographs of art works.

Soft cover, 8.5 by 11 inch format.

ISBN 0-8166-3686-9

Reviewed by Jim Ketchum,
Department of Geography,
Syracuse University

This thin volume serves as the catalogue for an art exhibition organized by University of Minnesota art history professor Robert Silberman in collaboration with the curator of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, Patricia McDonnell. The exhibition, *World Views: Maps & Art* appeared at the Weisman, in the city of Minneapolis, between September 11, 1999 and January 2, 2000. The book includes two essays, one by Silberman and the other by Yi-Fu Tuan, emeritus professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Beyond these two essays, the book appeals mainly for the number of high quality images it contains. These include photographs of the art works from the exhibition, and the many excellent reproductions of maps important to the historical lineage of cartography (especially those in the Western tradition), most of which appeared in the exhibition. The exhibition included works by 18 artists or artist groups, including Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, and Joseph Cornell. Three of the 18 artists (Mel Chin, Laura Kurgan, and Ilya Kabakov) were commissioned to produce installation works specifically for *World Views: Maps & Art*.

Maps impressively reproduced within the catalogue include Albino de Canepa's *Portolan Chart* of 1489, Martin Waldseemüller's *Map of the World on Twelve Gores for a Globe* of 1507, and Gerhard Mercator's *Description of the Northern Lands* of 1595, all of which appeared in the exhibition. Beautiful photographs of art works that appeared in the *World Views: Maps & Art* include *Mappa del Mundo* (1978) by Alighiero e Boetti, *Magallanes en la confusion encontró un océano* (1994) by Miguel Angel Ríos, and *United Shapes of America III* (1994) by Kim Dingle. Other full-color images in the catalogue provide context for the exhibition by recalling other works of art that have taken cartography as their subject, such as *Sphere of Influence* (1990-92) by Mike and Doug Starn, and *The New Ring Shout* (1995) by Houston Conwill, Joseph DePace, and Estella Conwill Majozo. All those images listed above appear in color; about half of all images in the book appear in black and white.

The book also includes statements written by the three artists asked to produce works specifically for this exhibition: Mel Chin (of the "Knowmad Confederacy"), Laura Kurgan, and Ilya Kabakov. These three artists were commissioned to produce art works "that would relate to maps and mapping and that would be appropriate for the millennial moment" writes the exhibition's curator, Robert Silberman. Of course, all three artists were previously known for working within the subject of mapping. It is never made clear, however, why these three artists (as opposed to any of the many other artists who work with mapping) were asked to create works for this show, or how these works relate to the other art works and maps presented in the exhibition.

Chin's work is actually a group work, which he initiates, directing

his concept as then carried-out by a number of computer experts who Chin assembled for the task. The group calls themselves the "Knowmad Confederacy," and includes Rocco Basile, Emil Busse, Tom Hambleton, Brett Hawkins, Andrew Lunstad, Chris Parrish-Taylor, Jane Powers, and Osla Thomason-Kuster. The work produced for the exhibition is titled *Knowmad*, the focus of which was, apparently, a video game about place that museum-goers could play. Unfortunately, neither the photographs of the installation, the description of the work by Robert Silberman, nor the artists' statement make very clear what the work of art actually consisted of as an object. Silberman refers to Chin's interest in the process of weaving rugs in Middle Eastern civilizations, then says Chin finally decided on a video game as the "focus" of *Knowmad*. What *Knowmad* consisted of beyond the video game is unclear. Silberman discusses these woven rugs in the Middle East as being important cultural objects full of significant meanings, and the video game appears to incorporate these designs. Yet, if the work is truly about place, as Chin and Silberman both suggest it is, it would make sense to be more specific in this book about exactly where these designs came from rather than simply attribute them to a civilization roughly defined as "Middle Eastern." Silberman states that, in this work "art and popular culture are deployed to raise consciousness through a lively experience," but it is quite unclear as to what important issue the audience is supposedly being made conscious, or what they are supposed to do once they have become enlightened. The artists' statement discusses the disappearing world of these tribal weavers, vanishing rapidly "due to a complex series of political and cultural changes." Still, how is the audience sup-

posed to understand those complex changes, or are they supposed to understand them at all? The stated desire of the artists is to “catalyze the desire to know more about cultural artifacts and human expression and accelerate beyond preconceived methods of mapping and artistic expression.” That of course sounds good, but what is it exactly the audience is supposed to know, and what is supposed to happen once the audience knows it? There may be answers to these questions, but one couldn’t tell what they are by reading this catalogue.

Ilya Kabakov produced a work for *World Views: Maps & Art* called *The Globe in a Different Topographical System*. This installation piece consisted of three (apparently) plaster models, one each of Europe, the United States, and Russia, each placed on one tier of a three-tiered platform looking like a staircase formed of straw. Unfortunately, the catalogue pictures the art works without providing any information regarding the materials out of which they are fashioned, a basic and very common piece of information which it seems strange to leave out, especially for installation pieces which use non-traditional materials. One would think that part of the effect of this work would involve an audience member’s experience of the sensuous materiality of the objects themselves, yet Silberman continually refers to the form and structure of this work as viewed from a detached position, and completely ignores what one might easily suppose to be the main advantage of an “installation” piece—the opportunity to experience it through a variety of senses rather than merely observe it with cool detachment. Silberman so focuses on looking at Kabakov’s piece, as well as the other commissioned installation pieces, one wonders why he had installation pieces commissioned

for the exhibition at all. Kabakov positioned his straw-like structure at one corner of the gallery, next to a short, wooden staircase. From atop the stair, Silberman tells us, the viewer can look down upon the models of Europe, the United States, and Russia. A table with drawings of the installation stands nearby. At least with this art work, the book presents a good idea of what one might have encountered in the gallery. Still, it might be useful to know, for example, a few basics. Did the artist make the table and staircase himself, or did he simply acquire them for placement in the installation?

The two installation photographs of Laura Kurgan’s piece, *Spot 083-264: Kosovo, June 3, 1999*, present the series of images hung upon two gallery walls as the visitor would have seen them upon entering the gallery. Her artist’s statement is the most focused and informative of the three. Unfortunately, some of the images on the pages that follow the installation shots somewhat confuse the issue. Are these images from this piece, or another of Kurgan’s work? After some reflection, it becomes apparent that these are closer views of some of the images from this exhibition, but the confusing design layout of these images and of works from the show on previous pages have by this time left the viewer skeptical and dazed enough to doubt the position of any image they encounter by the time they reach Kurgan’s work on page 68. Kurgan’s works consist of data images taken by commercial satellites. These are of the Kosovo conflict. The purpose of her works also seems to be the most understandable of any of the three commissioned pieces: the more we are able to apprehend the world at some distance, receiving details about world conflicts, the less we actually know about what causes those events. In fact, this superfluity of data may

actually be used to obscure the relationships involved in producing those events, making them in effect more distant from our understanding.

The book includes two essays. The first is by Yi-Fu Tuan, the second by Silberman. Tuan’s essay seems peculiar on several counts. First of all, Tuan never makes reference to any of the works in the exhibition. Of course, he would have written the essay long before the exhibition would have actually come together. Still, it would not have taken so much effort to view slides of the art works or read about them. Even if it was Tuan’s intention to merely provide an essay about mapping to present some context for the exhibition visitor, it still seems somewhat odd that he never refers to the exhibition, even in the abstract. After beginning with some curious claims (such as that the “artistic urge” for design only comes into play when the materials involved are relatively permanent), Tuan latches onto what he sees as the key tension between maps and art: that maps are essentially tools of practical use that represent the arrangement of objects in the real world, while art is basically the expression of natural urges toward balanced design that are only inhibited by reference to the real world. He reports that in China, map-making never succeeded the way Western map-making did because too much artistic freedom was licensed in practice by Chinese cartographers (who were really more artist than scientist). Later on, Tuan tells us that “Cartography is Art,” leaving this reader completely confused as to his definition of art.

Part of the problem with Tuan’s essay is the struggle he engages in involving a dual purpose he sets up but never seems to resolve: to tell his museum-going, catalogue-reading audience something basic and informative about mapping,

while at the same time attempting to say something meaningful to scholars and other cartography-minded intellectuals. He is obviously aware that his audience will include both those who know almost nothing about maps and those who know a great deal already, perhaps because they are cartographers themselves. After praising Western cartography, Tuan launches into a confusing discussion of the map as a kind of portrait of place, comparing maps to self-portraits and then landscape paintings. He eventually lands on the claim that maps embody more of what we *want* to believe than they actually represent a scientific reality—a claim that seems strained by his earlier discussion of maps as outstanding Western scientific achievements that manage to effectively suppress the artistic impulse while incorporating it just enough to strike the perfect balance of natural urges toward objective reference and subjective artistic design. As Tuan's essay goes on, it seems to drift further than ever from the exhibition itself. In the end, although an interesting amalgam of entertaining claims and counter-claims, I am not sure what real context this essay provides for viewing the exhibition.

Offering a second opportunity to bewilder the reader is the essay by the *World Views* curator, Robert Silberman. Silberman refers to most of the 18 art works in the exhibition, even if many are attested to only sweepingly. However, it again seems somewhat odd that no internal referencing takes place, as Silberman neither refers to the substance of nor even acknowledges the existence of the essay by Yi-Fu Tuan. Presumably, the exhibition's curator wanted a respected geographer to fashion an essay for the catalogue that would somehow contribute intellectually to the curatorial effort. It seems odd then that Silberman's

essay makes no such connection. In fact, there are few connections to be made at all in this book: between Tuan's essay and the exhibition; between Silberman's essay and Tuan's; between the many maps in the exhibition and the works of contemporary art present in it; between the three commissioned art works; between those three commissioned works and the themes in the two essays. Silberman moves easily and lightly from theme to familiar theme: from the various pleasures involved in looking at maps, to the map as reflective of the culture that produces it, to a listing of the many twentieth century artists who have approached the cartographic subject, to the claim that maps are the perfect vehicle for contemporary artists who wish to tackle problems of the contemporary social world.

In the end, it is my job to critique not the exhibition, but the catalogue of the exhibition. The exhibition itself may have been quite interesting. If it was, I'm sure it may have been for reasons that extended beyond the intentions of the curator. This is because I cannot tell, after having read and re-read the exhibition catalogue, what the curatorial intentions in fact really were. An exhibition should involve a core intellectual argument, like any good work of scholarship. Neither the images nor the essays provided in the book demonstrate any clues that an intellectual argument was being made in *World Views: Maps & Art*. Professor Silberman admits that he is new to the subject of mapping, and this project allowed him to follow-up his curiosity. I think part of the problem lies in that he does not follow it up more thoroughly. Although Silberman refers to other art exhibitions that have, over the last decade, taken as their subject the exploration of maps and mapping by contemporary artists, he never refers to

the intellectual content of those exhibitions.

This catalogue reflects a serious lack of curatorial critical reflection. Although Lyndel King writes in the catalogue's "Director's Forward" that *World Views: Maps & Art* "explores the rich relationship between art and maps that has persisted from the first century A.D. to the present moment," I cannot say that I can recognize any real *exploration* of such a relationship at all, especially any critical exploration. This despite King's claims that this exhibition will offer "insights" into the topic to "art-sophisticated audiences and students as well as to visitors who may have less experience with art." If such insights were present in the exhibition, the catalogue of the exhibition has failed to demonstrate those insights.

Still, the catalogue remains essential for anyone interested in the connection between contemporary art and maps, or between contemporary art and geography more generally—if merely as background information regarding exhibition efforts that have been made to connect the two. Anyone who works with visual materials will appreciate the quality of the many reproductions of maps and art works on a fine paper of heavy stock. It is too bad that the binding cracked so easily, leaving the pages to come free, the book falling to pieces on my desk. This did not however cause any damage to the images I so prize in owning the book, and even less to the organization of ideas present in its pages.