

Opinion Column

Denis Wood's article "Map Art"

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Dear Editor:

There is much of interest in issue 53 of CP, and some problematic bits as well, as befits a broad and engaging subject. My particular interest in writing concerns certain issues raised by Denis Wood's article, "Map Art". Wood seems at first to be mounting a real and badly needed challenge to the way cartography is generally conceived, but his pitch is queered by some unresolved problems. The problems lie in part with the issues themselves and in part with his manner of approaching them.

We are all quite used to problems of this nature being characterized, in the cartographic literature, dichotomously: art and science being the most typical division. Dichotomies seem to be a clear, neat, and distinct means of definition: one or the other, good or bad, with us or with the terrorists, but we know that a dichotomy can be posited without its being appropriate. Dichotomies sit at the heart of most belief systems, and their operation has been well studied. We know that in establishing oppositional binaries, one term is privileged and the other subordinated: living – dead, us – them. The decide-ability of differentiation is what makes a dichotomous system work, which is to say that one must be able to evaluate a novelty and decide its classification unambiguously.

In the course of "Map Art", Denis Wood sets up an pair of opposed categories: The art-map and the normative map. He constructs his opposition on what he would like to convince us is a clear differentiation between physical works categorizable as one or the other, and he bases his differentiation on the normative. Clearly, Mr. Wood would like us to accept this unexamined normative map as an unproblematic yardstick. The normative seems to be defined by Mr. Wood using some combination of map issuer, drawing and lettering style, and map furniture; at least that is how he goes about identifying the 1929 Surrealist map [p.9] as not-normative (and therefore, as art-map).

(As an aside, dear Editor, I finally noticed that there are two descriptions of that map: Walbergs's and Wood's. The quotation and comment are run together in manner that suggests their conflation. Something of a decide-ability problem in the text itself, eh?)

Just what exactly it is about map furniture, or which particular bit of it, Wood thinks rescues the art from the normative is less than clear. For instance, on the Surrealist map, he finds no "grid" but apparently the equator (which he does see) is a privileged part of the graticule. In the end, I cannot begin to guess exactly what, for Wood, normative practice might be. Decide-ability is already breaking down.

When we examine Wood's discussion of the art-map, however, we come up with a more concrete element for differentiation: the issue of the mask. Even with this element, however, the test is still negative: only Wood's normative map wears a mask..

What is this mask? This, at least, is uncontroversial: the mask refers to the signs employed by a map to connote trustworthiness. I have called this mask the ethos, or ethical appeal of the map [Denil 2003], and he and I seem to agree that all maps must necessarily make this appeal. Curiously, Wood then equates trustworthiness (the foundational legitimizing need of the map) with "objectivity" (one possible manifestation of legitimacy for some particular user or users); an identification which might or might not

ever be true.

The main point, however, is that all maps must necessarily wear what Wood terms a mask. Fair enough, but we learn, however, that Wood identifies some *privileged* maps that can set aside or never don a mask. These are the art-maps. Clearly, this is an extraordinary and extremely problematic assertion, and leads us to a choice. Either art-maps are not maps (because they do not wear the mask) or they are specially privileged maps (since they get to parade around without masks). Neither is an acceptable alternative.

We know that the mask a map wears is not only *always* present (and always *attempts* to remain invisible); but that it is a foundational part of the article's very existence as a map. Wood very clearly sees the masks that many other observers accept as the map's face, (indeed, he has performed yeomen service over the years exposing the masks all maps wear) yet he now wants us to believe that somehow the mask can be laid aside in some special, privileged case.

It seems obvious that what is happening is that these (art-)map makers are rendering their masks transparent *in Denis Wood's sight* so that Denis *thinks the mask has gone away*. Here we see where the problematic definition of the normative contaminates the dichotomy. It would appear that in the absence of the 'normative' indicators (map furniture, a powerful map issuer, professional penmanship, whatever) Wood can no longer identify the mask. He doesn't seem to even suspect that the mask may be *embodied by the absence of the very indicators he identifies!*

Indeed, it is the very mask itself, and the power that the mask confers by its persuasiveness of legitimacy, that makes the map such an attractive and engaging vehicle for art practice. The map, by virtue of its cache of believability, can appeal in a naturalized manner to massively disparate audiences. Map-art neither employs nor needs special dispensations or powers to do this.

There is a clear identity and unity between cartographic and art practice; on a conceptual level they are identical even when they vary superficially on the level of craft, use, or audience. One must recognize that Debord, the Harrisons, Duchamp, and the Surrealists make (or made) maps, and they make them the *same way* that I as a professional cartographer make maps. *They* mold, stretch, adapt, and subvert the boundaries, contents, and the contexts of what maps are and how they function, all for reasons of their own, and *so do I*. We all of us make maps that are judged each and every time they are considered for use. What is seen on or read into a map is up to the user, and *interpretation* (what the user wants/expects/can recognize) constrains the *facts discovered*: not the other way around.

We can see that the dichotomy Wood sets up is inappropriate for an understanding of this issue. The dichotomy of normative and not-normative (art-map) is in fact a relatively fragile and deeply flawed working model and does not reflect anything essential. He is not challenging the underlying foundational mythology, but simply proposing an inversion of an ill-defined, questionably valid, conventional hierarchy. While this may or may not make a valid political program, it is not, at least as presented, sound theory.

There is no normative - art-map dichotomy: only unity. Only use defines the map. As the great Pogo once said: "We have met the Enemy, and He is Us".