

A Response to Denis Wood

Mark Denil

Director of Conservation
Mapping/Chief Cartographer
Conservation International
m.denil@conservation.org

Dear Editor

I was quite pleased to see that Denis Wood took the time to respond so fulsomely to my letter [Denis Wood's article *Map Art* CP 55], and I read his remarks with great interest. I think that his explanations certainly clear up a lot of ambiguity in the earlier article [*Map Art* CP54], and allow us to pinpoint quite precisely where Dr Wood's argument runs off the rails.

Clearly, the bone of this contention is what Wood has referred to as the mask worn by a map. He and I, as he points out, have no argument that the mask is the means employed by the map to connote trustworthiness. However, we discover from *A Map Is an Image Proclaiming Its Objective Neutrality: A Response to Mark Denil* [CP56] that Wood attempts to turn this circumstance, common to all maps, into a stigmata indicative of only certain maps; maps Wood identifies with a certain conceit. To accomplish this identification, he chooses to employ very narrow and carefully circumscribed definitions of the terms trust, trustworthiness, and map in order to plead for the recognition of specially privileged categories of maps. Unfortunately, his definition of these specially privileged categories is so imprecise as to make decidability extremely problematic, and to obscure the consequences of accepting his shaky thesis. Wood clearly has some pertinent things to say about the categories of map he chooses to highlight, but his tactic of subverting general theory to the make his point is a questionable one at best.

I would like to explore some of the statements Dr Wood makes in his *Response*, and evaluate some of the problematic ramifications they entail.

Early on, Wood singles out what he terms 'sketch maps' as maps which come into the world "naked"; that is, without a mask. In fact, he goes so far as to declare that "neither experimentally generated sketch maps nor sketch maps in general are maps." (CP 56 p.10) His confidence in this exclusionary declaration is based in part upon his assertion that:

People save maps. They take care of them, they horde them, they catalog them, they pile them in libraries. People throw sketch maps away. Of the huge number we might imagine has [sic] been made – that so many authors are so fond of describing being sketched in sand and snow and on scraps of paper – almost none remains. Those that haven't blown away by the wind have been tossed in the waste basket. (p.10)

Now, it very much simplifies the construction of any theory if one can begin by setting up boundaries and definitions to carefully exclude anything inconvenient; but it is difficult to believe that this criteria for defining a so-called sketch map could be workable. Does an anonymous sketch of a walk to the drugstore [figure 1] only become a map only because Gudrun saved it? Did it become a map when she included it in a catalog? Does it cease to be a map when I lose the catalog? Can I be certain that, since there are other copies which are better cared for and stored, I can toss a dirty and torn National Geographic map of the world in the waste basket without compromising its status as a map?

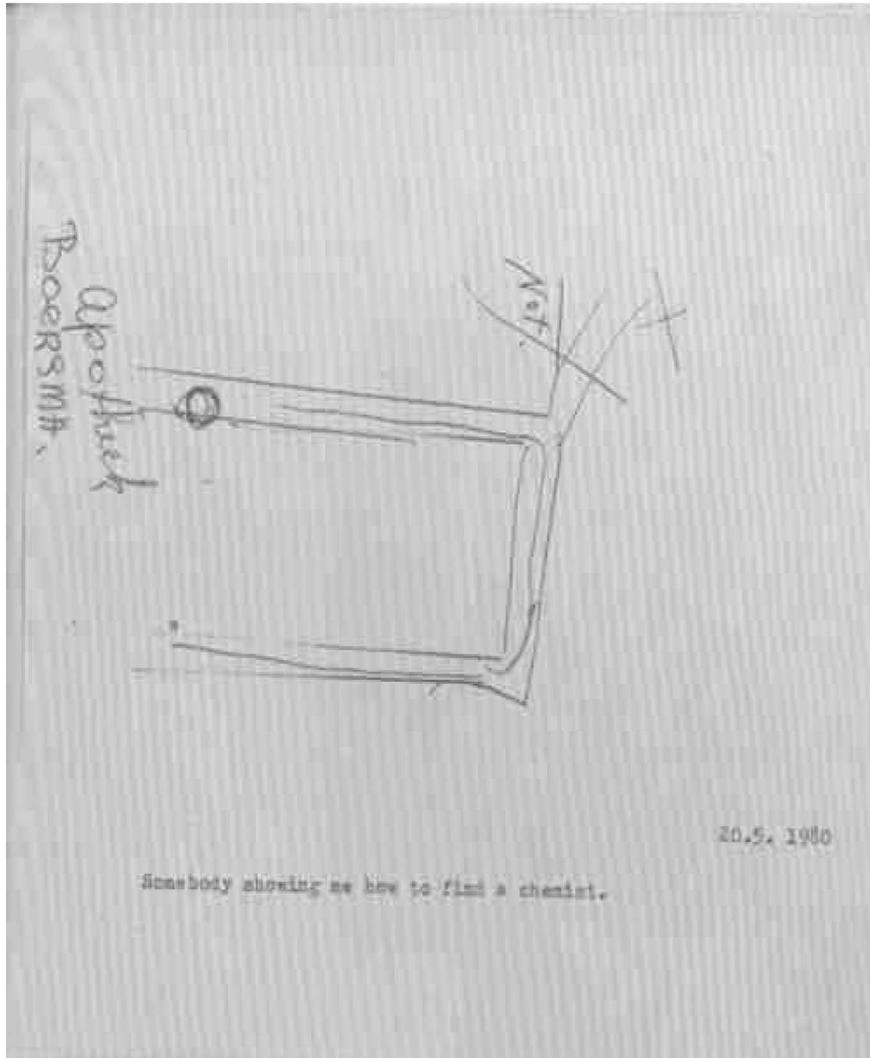


Figure 1

Granted, Wood does provide other (equally problematic) criteria for establishing a unique category of things called sketch maps, but why is all this hoarding and tossing brought in at all? It can only be to obfuscate an already murky position. And what is that position? At this juncture it seems to be that Wood would like us to accept that a sketch map is a special sort of thing that can simultaneously function fully as a map (at least to Wood) while not being a map at all (at least to Wood). Still, Wood is reluctant to throw sketch maps away completely; he will next claim that they are specially privileged maps.

For Wood, so-called sketch maps are naive or innocent products; a kind of noble savage among maps, or a sort of Mapping Degree Zero somewhat akin to Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*. For our purposes, this is useful because it may allow us to see exactly where Wood would like to place his map / not-map boundary. In discussing the map of *Neal's Yard* (figure 5 p.11), Wood writes about how the drawing of the map was accompanied by a variety winks, nods, and grunts: things Wood says "sealed" the map. By contrast, he denigrates the addition of a title and border as a "grotesque" attempt to affix a mask to the map; as an attempt to embed something in the graphic that had earlier been conveyed by grimaces and hand flapping.

Somewhere between these points, then, is the line Wood would draw between the map and the not-map (sketch map, in this case). Clearly, Wood had no problem with the main features of the sketch of *Neal's Yard*: graphic figures that apparently represent features of the yard either significant for the game or for the context of the yard, or, perhaps, features purely random and anecdotal. Clearly, as well, he accepted the narrative explanation that accompanied the sketch (the looks and gestures). Thus we see what Wood found to be natural, acceptable, honest, trustworthy, and real: certain words and gestures, and certain marks on paper *up to a certain point and no further*. Why no further? What is it about the further marks on the paper that violated the pure and noble wholesomeness of the sketch so that afterwards everything new became simply grotesque?

It is to a certain *class* of markings on paper that Wood objects. There is nothing materially different between Kelly (the author of *Neal's Yard*) telling Wood that 'this is Neal's yard' and Kelly writing *Neal's Yard* on the paper before mailing it to, say, a grandparent with a description of the game. Yet Wood is outraged by the very simple devices Kelly added in an effort to embody something of the previously verbal and gestural narrative into the graphic (Wood declares the devices *grotesque*). The reason is that Wood *recognizes* that text centered at the top of the altered sketch, and that framing box: he recognizes it as confidently as Jerry Falwell recognized the triangle on Tinky Winky's head; this is *map furniture*, and (according to Wood) it violates sketch map virginity.

This gives us an idea of where Wood would draw his line, but it really doesn't help all that much. Would a label ("Home Plate") have violated the purity? How about an arrow (whether or not drawn while saying: "run this direction")? What if the house in the sketch had square corners? Do we have to assume that in this sketch map that the relative proportions of the yard are wrong (or at least not quite right)? Good grief; must I tear this page out of CP and throw it away (People throw sketch maps away)?

Obviously, Wood is placing valuations upon the legitimacy of means. Kelly's original drawn map was praised as spontaneous and naive, honestly "sealed" and delivered. Kelly's attempt to add an affordance to interpretation that might outlast or go beyond the magical moment of interpersonal bonding experienced with Wood is decried. Why is there this sharp divide? Wood tells us that it hinges on a pretense of neutrality. Somehow, according to Wood, Kelly's original work escaped pretending to be neutral. This is clearly nonsensical.

There is no question about the fact that Kelly was presenting the map from inside a argumentative position ('this is a context that shows the game'); but was Kelly insisting or admitting that the sketch was *not* an objective characterization of the game or the yard in question? Of course not. Every speaker (or map) claims objectivity, even when declaring otherwise ('... in my totally biased opinion...'): the pretense remain that the speaker's or map's prejudices are arrived at and delivered honestly and objectively. The map in question indeed forwarded a pretense of neutrality; the pretense that the world is this way, and that the map simply *reported* that reality. This is indistinguishable from the pretense of any topographic map. Only a political difference remains: Wood finds Kelly's original claim legitimate and dismisses other claims; including Kelly's later work. Apparently, Wood feels that the sketch map is an honest product that arises from a partisan position, but that an 'ordinary' map is a deceptive, pretensive product that also arises from a partisan position. We can see that the only difference between the early and late markings on Kelly's paper are the valuation of the legitimacy status which is assigned by Wood: a personal political difference, not a fundamental one.

Obviously, Wood's proposed boundary for the sketch map (and map / not-map division) is very unstable and quite undecidable in any dispassionate way. This is real problem for his case. On the one hand, one would think that decidability of the map / not-map boundary would be critical, but on the other hand any question so radically undecidable is moot. Clearly, Woods' identification of any boundary between maps and sketch maps (experimental or otherwise) is mistaken.

Sketch maps are, in fact, just like any maps, and they make similar appeals of trustworthiness as do all maps. Certainly, a sketch map is generally aimed at a restricted user community; one about which the map maker can confidently make many assumptions, and which may occasionally even be present to receive verbal or gestural explanations to supplement the lines on the paper (or in the sand, snow, etcetera). The map must always convince its audience of its veracity; if the sketch (map) had not convinced Wood that it was an attempt at a reasonable representation of Neal's yard and a game played therein, Wood would not have recognized it as a map (a sketch map or otherwise). He might perhaps have assumed it was a doodle undertaken to occupy an active hand while the child described the game, but he would not have seen it as a map. If Kelly had been unconvinced that it was a reasonable map it would have been scribbled out or otherwise abandoned. But both Kelly and Wood *did* recognize Neal's yard, and both recognized a *map*.

This is what it means to recognize a map, and to recognize a map as trustworthy. It does not mean that one would be able to measure on it for purchasing fencing; it doesn't mean that a zoning board would accept it as a valid plan, it doesn't mean it is good for anything *except* describing the game in Neal's yard to someone one could also provide with supplemental information. Its user community is sharply restricted, in part because it is so graphically terse.

In fact, it that very graphic terseness which is for Wood the telling appeal because it makes it appear unsupported and naked (to Wood), and so seems (again to Wood) honest, ingenuous, and amateur.

Different maps certainly use different means to forward their appeal, and sometimes an argument of nonprofessional-ity is adventitious to employ (I may not be an expert, but...), but such a pretense is simply a rhetorical device. All maps are, after all, rhetorical vehicles: they all forward a position. One of the appeals they make to their audiences is one of its own competence. Wood, clearly, has been hoodwinked by the sketch map's profession of honest amateurism. It is a mistake, however, to confuse an argument with its means of delivery, or to so privilege a particular means of delivery as to obfuscate its argumentative nature. Wood's attempt to claim special privilege for sketch maps must be disallowed.

Later, Wood claims that there is another special category of privileged maps on the other side (so to speak) of the general run of maps: the Art-Map. It is, Wood tells us, a map specially endowed with the power to throw off its mask and prance about naked.

In discussing this claim, Wood offers an interesting and illustrative comparison between Paul Eluard's *Surrealist Map* and my own *Villcabamba-Ambaro Conservation Corridor* maps. While I will refrain from repeating most of the very flattering things he says about the *Villcabamba* maps, I would point out that he identifies them as (at least pretending to be) trustworthy. Eluard, on the other hand, Wood identifies as someone who (by virtue of his identification as a Surrealist) rejects trustworthiness as a virtue. It is quite clear, however, that each map is aimed straight at its audience and each appeals for an appropriate trust directly to its own audience by every means at its disposal. Each map uses every means that

each map's maker knew would be recognized as a legitimate hallmark of trustworthiness for each intended audience.

The *Villcabama* map set was aimed straight at a major funding foundation. To be quite blunt, it went into the woods loaded for bear, and in the end proved to be dead on target. There is a good deal of testimony on all sides acknowledging that it was these maps, as a significant component of a large, detailed, and persuasive request, that secured what was at that time the largest funding grant yet given for Andes Biodiversity conservation. Yes, indeed, the *Villcabama* maps wear a mask that their audience recognizes as connoting trustworthiness.

The audience for the *Villcabama* maps had a predictable, and, one might say, a conventional set of criteria that for them connoted a trustworthy map. Surrealists, as one might expect, held a different conception of legitimacy. Surrealism was a movement which looked for value in (among other things) the act of turning established order on its head. An apparent rejection of trustworthiness (or at least of the outward, accepted trappings and signs of trustworthiness) was how one made a trustworthy Surrealist work. In fact, Surrealism is an excellent example in this regard because it was one of the most organized of art movements: one could be expelled from Surrealism if one were not sufficiently, or acceptably, Surrealist. One cannot imagine Paul Eluard daring to show André Breton any map that departed less from the "colonialist maps" (p.12) than did this. One need only recall the career of Jean Cocteau to know the danger in seeming insufficiently Surreal to Breton. Obviously, Eluard knew his audience, and knew his context, and knew how to persuade his audience that his was a reasonable characterization of the Surreal world. Eluard knew how to make a trustworthy Surrealist object, and that is what he did.

Is Eluard's map really all that innovative? Does it really present a wholly new vision ungrounded in previous usage? Of course not; without pedestrian bourgeois conventionality Surrealism could not have come about. Eluard's map is a distortion, engaged for particular reasons, of a familiar map form. The surrealists were engaged in leveraging transformation: "Transform the world, said Marx; change life, said Rimbaud; for us, these two watchwords are one" [Breton, quoted in: Brotchie p.82]. How this distortion is materially different from the 4th century *Peutinger Table* (which was distorted to fit on its scroll) or a standard Mercator map (which is distorted to make rumb lines straight) or any other map is an issue not really addressed by Wood. It would seem likely that to address it he would be forced to abandon his untenable position that there is any difference between Eluard's map and mine. Eluard's map is identifiable as a map even by someone who would reject all Surrealist practice as illegitimate. That particular someone may not accept Eluard's map as a reasonable characterization of the world; that is, he would not think it was a *good* map, but that particular someone would need be quite unreasonably doctrinaire to reject it out of hand as a *map*. That is because it *is* a map, like any other: like, in fact, the *Vilcabamaba* maps.

This is what I meant when I opined that Eluard and I made maps in the same way. We each identified a use for our map, and we each incorporated features into the map that afforded access to the information we wished to present, and finally (although not necessarily in that or any order) we framed our argument about the situation (a surrealist world, or the situation in the Andes and how best to engage it) in a manner that spoke to, and was acceptable to, our audience. We each constructed useful, usable, and trustworthy map graphics that each wear masks appropriate to themselves. Our practices are identical.

Setting aside for the moment the fact that Eluard and I are engaged in

identical practices, What can we say to Woods' contention that the so-called art map removes its mask, where my map must perforce remain masked? To answer this, I think we need first to consider the nature of the mask itself.

In the course of his *Response*, Wood gets much rolled up in Barthes' terms myth and mythology, but it seems that his attention to Barthes' (sometimes questionable) vocabulary and detail rather obscures some important points. Both Barthes and Wood seem to miss the point that *all* myth is artificial: only *belief* makes it seem real. The critical issue about myth and mythology is not that one can be invoked to "break" the other, nor are issues of the "alienation" engendered by myth at all pertinent. What *is* pertinent and central is that myth, and mythic structures, are *naturalized* and are *believed* by interpretive communities of readers (map users). Myth is the cultural context within which a semiotic makes sense; within which it has any value whatsoever. *No one* can possibly understand *anything at all* outside of myth. Most people simply accept that framework and get on with things, while others can and do recognize the structure as a construct, but *no one* can escape it because outside myth there is no meaning.

It is clear that none of this is up to anyone alone. "The configuration of maps depends not only on the current state of geographical knowledge, but also on graphic codes and the visual and aesthetic universe shared by the author of the document and his or her readers." (Jacobs p.184) Furthermore, "the map results from a double construction, that of its author and that of its readers – a symmetrical process, a twofold construction as though reflected in a mirror, of encoding and decoding." (Jacobs p.185). It happens that human cultural and mythic structures overlap, and one can, metaphorically, step from one to another across the world and across the ages. We *can* learn to recognize a Marshall Islands stick and shell panel as a map, even when we can't use one, in very much the same way we learn to understand that a highway map is a map, or that a T-O map is a map. We learn what constitutes a legitimate map through our cultural / interpretive experience, and only things so constituted can, for us, be maps. The features that constitute the legitimate map are the map's mask. *Until* it is recognized, it is not a map. It is recognition of the mask that constitutes recognition of the map.

What, then, about the so-called Art Map? This is the map which Wood maintains removes its mask, to expose..... well, something (exactly what is never quite made clear). Let us set aside for the moment the fact that there is no map where there is no mask, and consider Wood's contention of special privilege.

How does one decide if a given example is an Art Map (that has ripped its mask away), or a regular old map (that cannot). Once again we find that decidability is an issue. Is it because the map was made by an artist instead of a cartographer? How is *that* status decided? How about me? Am *I* an artist or a cartographer? I am employed as a cartographer (a Chief Cartographer, no less); so, are my maps, by definition, not art? It happens, however, that I also have a Master of Fine Art degree, a terminal degree for an artist: I am qualified to teach in art school. My MFA thesis dissertation was about maps and map-making: it was titled *Cartographic Design: Rhetoric and Persuasion*, and was published in *Cartographic Perspectives* [CP45]. I clearly have credentials as an artist; does that make my maps Art Maps? Maybe I need exhibitions, or maybe gallery sales, to qualify? (As Andy Warhol said; it's art when the check clears). Setting aside the artificiality of these criteria (commercial gallery success has not been the benchmark of artistic value for some time now, at least since the time of



Figure 2



Figure 3

Corbet), I certainly have had both exhibitions and sales. I have not shown the *Vilcabamba* maps, it is true; but I have shown and sold other maps: for instance, *The Seven Arms of the Ota* (figure 2) and *The Great Grey-Green Limpopo River, All Set About With Fever Trees* (figure 3). These works are maps, every bit as much maps as the *Vilcabamba* maps. They are made in the same way; I make no differentiation in my practice. I challenge anyone to figure out if, under Wood's rules, they are Art Maps or plain old maps.

We could perhaps invoke issues of canon; maybe some maps are Art Maps because they have become recognized as such by a general (if elite) public. This is, after all, how one tells the difference between, say, William Carlos Williams' *Kora in Hell* and a prescription he wrote in 1918. Late in life Williams identified medical case histories as having the greatest influence on his writing; yet while one presumes medical histories had almost as much influence on the prescriptions as on the prose, of the two examples only *Kora* is in the canon.

Still, we know that both literature and the map lie in the eye of the beholder (the eye provided by the beholder's interpretive community), so a canon is itself an unstable and shifting authority wholly dependent upon that same beholder's interpretive community, which is itself mutable in its opinions. While a canon can help us judge the value or fashionability of art, it is not a reliable guide to something as fundamental as a special privileging of the art map.

Maybe the only way to tell if a map is an Art Map is to get a certificate, in much the same way that only documented Dogma films are Dogma. Still, one can get the Dogma rules from the Dogma Films web site and thus make a dogma-type film without a letter from Lars von Trier. Where are the rules for Art Maps? Does one need a letter from Denis Wood?

The point I am making here is not that maps cannot be art; the point, in fact, is that map making is a legitimate art practice. Although I used myself and my own work as examples, since Wood had already introduced the *Vilcabamba* maps as an example, the arguments could be applied to any map maker. I am not claiming (at least here) that my maps are *good* art, or even that they are *good* maps, but I am instead drawing attention to the identity of the practices. Anyone identifying a need or use for a map, who makes a map that is usable, and has that map accepted by an audience (even if that audience is limited to him or her self, in some cases) is engaging in an art practice called map making. Any special powers granted an Art Map is perforce granted to any map.

We have examined a few of the central points made by Wood in his "messy argument" (p.10), and found them uniformly wanting. In each case, Wood forwarded a special pleading as justifying privileged existences for particular categories of map, and in each case we have seen both that the categories are based on undecidable criteria and that the special privileges claimed for the particular map taxa are unwarranted. The whole construct breaks down on the issue of the mask all maps wear connoting trustworthiness, in order to solicit belief from an audience. It is clear that the mask is the map, and that no map is born (or even conceived) without one and that no map can remove its mask (although it may switch to another mask for a different audience) without ceasing to be a map.

Mark Denil

Director of Conservation Mapping / Chief Cartographer
Center for Applied Biodiversity Science
at Conservation International

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