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Introduction: Do Maps Lie?

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Do Maps Lie?

ARTL@S BULLETIN

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The journal promises to never separate methodology and history, and to support innovative research and new methodologies. Its ambition is twofold: An insistence on the “transnational” as constituted by exchange between local and international or transnational, and an openness to innovation in research methods, particularly the quantitative possibilities offered by digital mapping and data visualization.

By encouraging scholars to continuously shift the scope of their analysis from the national to the transnational, *ARTL@S BULLETIN* intends to contribute to the collective project of a global history of the arts and literature.

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Do Maps Lie?

To spatialize and globalize art history is the main objective of the ARTL@S Project and, hence, its *Bulletin*. We want to contribute to the horizontalization of art historical narratives and especially that of modernism, a project that Piotr Piotrowski identifies in the work of many scholars coming from or writing on supposedly “peripheral” places and movements.¹ Make maps: you will see and think differently, more broadly, and maybe more fairly.

This “new seeing” through maps, however, implies a very scrupulous methodology, and a mistrustful attitude towards the images our data seem to produce with the help of our computers, hands, and prejudices. Maps lie. Spatial art historians should always be aware of this. Their readers, even more. Maps lie as they have always lied. Throughout history, maps have provided “scientific” justifications to imperialist visions.² Even in art history: “Kunstgeographie” in the context of 19th and 20th century German speaking countries offers exemplifies of how cartography justified pangermanist ambitions in Central Europe.³ As the French specialist of geopolitics Yves Lacoste put it: “Geography is first used for making war.”⁴

Maps can be handled as a kind of objective evidence that is in fact in no way objective: who selected the data? What was forgotten, what was erased? Why those colours, and not these, and what do they underline, or hide? Why this basemap? Everything is significant, hence potentially manipulated, or biased. It is good, and fair, that some art historians revolt against the symbolic violence of maps, as they have against the symbolic violence of numbers in our symposia and conferences.⁵ A map, much like a number, is not a proof just because it is supposedly scientific. In France, cigarette brands must indicate the risks of smoking with horrible photographs of cancerous lungs, or with the very clear announcement: “fumer tue” (smoking kills):



¹ Piotr Piotrowski, *In the shadow of Yalta : art and the avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (London: Reaktion, 2009).

² See Christian Jacob, *The Sovereign Map: Theoretical Approaches in Cartography through History*, trans. Tom Conley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Some examples: Jean-Paul Bord, « Cartographie, géographie et propagande. De quelques cas dans l'Europe de l'après-guerre », *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, No. 80, Numéro spécial: Propagande et communication politique dans les démocraties européennes (1945-2003) (Oct. - Dec., 2003), 15-24

³ See Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, “Adam Miłobędzki: Mapping and the Geography of Art,” *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* xxx (2006): 23-29.

⁴ Yves Lacoste, *La géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012). First edition 1976. In the *ARTL@S Bulletin*, see also Elizabeth Sutton, “Mapping Dutch Identity Across the Atlantic,” *ARTL@S Bulletin*, II, 1 (Spring 2013): 6-13.

⁵ On the question of quantitative method in art history, see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, éd., *L'art et la mesure histoire de l'art et méthodes quantitatives* (Paris: Ed. rue d'Ulm, 2010). On the question of maps, the conference *Spaces of Arts* at Purdue University in September 2012 saw fascinating controversies, especially on the last day, during a round table animated by David Lubin.

In turn, why not oblige art historians to add an official warning to their maps: “Maps LIE”? Art historians, who have not been critically trained in manipulating maps, charts, or graphs, would thus have their own version of a “mind the gap” warning:

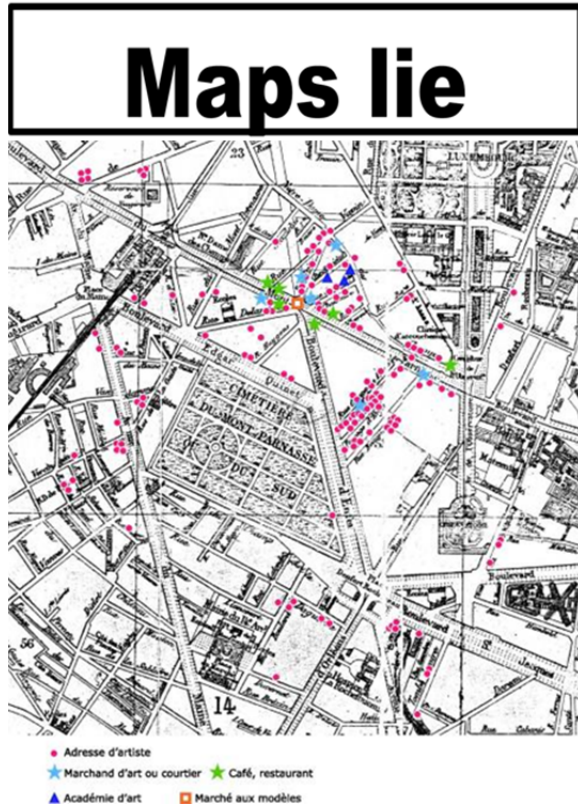


Figure 1

Foreign artists at the 1913 Parisian Salon d'Automne 1913, and their addresses in Montparnasse. Source: Mapping or the addresses of non-French artists of the catalogue on the base map of Paris published by E. Andriveau-Goujon, 1885.⁶

Of course, this proposition is ironical. But at the very least, a standard methodological caveat should be a reflex to signal to our readers our own awareness that “maps lie,” and to spare many unnecessary controversies. We know that maps lie, but we also know that they expose things that a chronological, or descriptive, or even critical narrative (capable of being every bit as deceptive as any map), cannot show.

⁶ Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, “L’art de la mesure. Le Salon d’Automne (1903-1914), l’avant-garde, ses étrangers et la nation française,” *Histoire & mesure* XXII, n° 1 (1 juin 2010): 145-182, doi:10.4000/historemesure.2333.

Still, none of this should prevent a sincere reflexion on the potential and limits, of the cartographic approach to art history. This new issue of the *ARTL@S Bulletin* presents two positions: one which questions the longstanding mendacity of the map in the modern era, and another that makes a case for the map’s bird’s eye view of art history—what Franco Moretti calls “distant reading”—as essential for transnational histories of modernism. The authors in this issue demonstrate a clear understanding of the constructed character of the data and the questionable dimension of their results. In the first approach, maps lie; in the second, it is the canon that lies. Ultimately maps reveal how other narratives may be possible, without necessarily insisting on the “truth” of this new narrative over and above dominant canonical accounts.

As spatial art historians, we see value in a kind of “flattening” of the discipline, especially when encouraging quantitative and serial approaches to historicizing the arts. Count, compare, map, question! The French phrase “mise à plat” I am translating here by “flattening” has a double meaning:

1. A general evaluation of things, putting every artist, every work, and every question on the same level. This, again, is Moretti’s “distant reading,” in which there is no canon, just objects—and millions of them.⁷ No hierarchy – just a large horizontal landscape to study.
2. The “mise à plat” leads to a flat reading, without taste. Making maps for art history, and for global art history, pushes out (or at least seems to) questions of reception, taste and creation. Is it still art history? Where is the interest in artworks? How do we stop on one special work, if one is obliged to browse around all possible works? The work of the art historian, traditionally passionate and

⁷ Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (February 2000).

spiritually engaged, one could say, is now dispassionate. No more fascination. Flatness.

What is the added value of spatialization for art history, beyond the deconstruction of the canon, or the construction of some new digital humanities gimmicks? Perhaps we yield a more critical approach. At the very least, we are reminded of our obligation to be prudent in our conclusions—in addition to writing a serial, transnational art history that goes further than merely adding new pieces to the impossible puzzle of the “Global” art historical project.⁸

To open this special issue entitled “Do Maps Lie?” we asked a colleague, David Lubin, to help us better reflect on the implications of art historical mapping. David has a subtle approach to visual objects and the politically misleading, or downright deceptive, potential of images.⁹ We greatly appreciated the friendly but severe comments he first provided during an international conference we organized at Purdue University in September 2012 and then through lively conversations and email exchanges. We thank him warmly for accepting to rework his remarks for publication, and for the new directions he is charting for how we will continue to map... lies.

⁸ On the impossibility of Global Art History, see James Elkins, *Is Art History Global?* (New York; London: Routledge, 2007).

⁹ See for instance David M Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).