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# Mining Maps, Making Meaning: An Interview with Kasia Ozga

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## Abstract

In the following interview with Kasia Ozga, the Polish-French-American contemporary artist focuses on her *Mapping Aluminum* series from 2013-2014, metal relief sculptures that throw light on environmental issues arising from bauxite mining and aluminum processing and smelting. Ozga illuminates how she came to focus on the material aluminum, the context in which she developed the project and selected the mapped sites (the Saint Lawrence River in Massena, NY, the Simandou Mountain Range in Guinea, and Ajka Vezprém County, Hungary), and how borders, cartography and maps figure in her larger body of work.

## Résumé

Dans un entretien, l'artiste contemporaine franco-américaine d'origine polonaise Kasia Ozga se penche sur sa série Mapping Aluminium. Réalisées entre 2013 et 2014, ces sculptures en bas-relief en métal mettent en scène les problèmes environnementaux liés à l'extraction de la bauxite ainsi qu'à la transformation et la fonte de l'aluminium. Kasia Ozga explique comment elle a commencé à s'intéresser à l'aluminium, le contexte dans lequel elle a développé le projet et sélectionné les sites représentés (le fleuve Saint-Laurent à Massena dans l'État de New York, les montagnes de Simandou en Guinée et Ajka Vezprém en Hongrie), puis comment les frontières, la cartographie et les cartes figurent dans son œuvre.

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Figure 1. Installation view of Kasia Ozga's *Simandou Mountain Range, Guinea and Ajka, Veszprém County, Hungary* in her solo exhibition *Land Grab* in THE SUB-MISSION, Chicago, 2014.

Kasia Ozga is a Polish-French-American artist based in Saint-Etienne, France, though originally from Chicago. She holds a PhD from the University of Paris 8, an MFA from the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, and a BFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA), Boston/Tufts University. Her public artworks, sculptures, installations, and urban interventions challenge viewers to think more deeply about their environments and how their daily actions impact the world around them. This interview focuses on her *Mapping Aluminum* series from 2013-2014, metal relief sculptures that throw light on environmental issues arising from bauxite mining and aluminum processing and smelting. Ozga illuminates how she came to focus on the material aluminum, the context in which she developed the project and selected the mapped sites (the Saint Lawrence River in Massena, NY, the Simandou Mountain Range in Guinea, and Ajka Veszprém

County, Hungary), and how borders, cartography and maps figure in her larger body of work (Fig. 1-3). By way of introduction, this conversation begins with a brief overview of bauxite and aluminum and the environment, the *Mapping Aluminum* series, and my connection to the artist and what drew me to this particular series.

Aluminum is a familiar material; aluminum foil and aluminum cans likely come to mind. However, its uses are wide-ranging, from antacids to airplanes. Aluminum is a major industry that includes extracting, refining, processing, producing, and recycling. To give an indication of the scale of the industry, the Aluminum Association reports that in the United States alone, “when all suppliers and business functions are taken into account, the industry drives \$174B in economic impact—almost



**Figure 2.** Kasia Ozga, *Ajka*, Veszprém County, Hungary, 2013-4, cast aluminum sculpture, 91cm x 71 cm x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

1 percent of GDP.”<sup>1</sup> Some market analysts suggest aluminum industry annual growth figures are good indicators of the overall economic/consumer health, because the material is pervasive and regularly consumed by individuals and industry (cooking, cars, medicines). Ozga signals the familiar functions of aluminum in our everyday lives by retaining the visible vestiges of soda can shapes. She invites the viewer to recognize this aluminum she is sculpting as reused, melted down, and transformed, still bearing marks of its previous lunchtime function. In the interview she states that although aluminum is “the 2nd most-used metal on the planet (after Iron) and among the most recycled, and we rarely think about where the aluminum can that we order with lunch comes from, and where it will go once the meal is over. I

wanted to draw attention to the relationship between cans and other consumer products and the materials that they are made from by linking sites of consumption to sites of production.”

It is with the sites she maps that she gestures toward the industrial life of the material and environmental consequences for various communities. She depicts each site in cast aluminum in the standard dimensions of a Rand McNally map. The places she maps represent, in Ozga’s words, “where bauxite mining, aluminum processing, and aluminum smelting has caused environmental problems. Damage to local ecosystems, harm to local constituency groups, and evidence of illegal mining operations are represented using molds of crushed aluminum cans.

<sup>1</sup> “Industries,” *The Aluminum Association*, accessed August 2019, <https://www.aluminum.org/industries>.



Figure 3. Installation view of Kasia Ozga's *Raw Materials Exhibition* at the Saint-Etienne International Design Biennial, 2019.

The title of each work refers to a specific site where these negative externalities are manifest.” In 2010, international headlines of “toxic sludge” appeared alongside photographs of vast expanses of red mud in the area around alumina plant near Kolontar, Hungary, one of the sites selected by Ozga for *Mapping Aluminum*.<sup>2</sup> Two years prior, in 2008, was when I became aware of bauxite and the striking redness it produces in soil while visiting Conakry, Guinea. Guinea’s Simandou mountain range is another site in Ozga’s series, located 550 kilometers southeast of Conakry. Simandou is an important forest ecosystem, home to a number of endangered species. Guinea is also home to the world’s largest bauxite reserves.<sup>3</sup> International firms vie for power

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Rosenthal, “Hungary’s Red Sludge Spill: The Media and the Eco-Disaster,” October 21, 2010, [https://e360.yale.edu/features/hungarys\\_red\\_sludge\\_spill\\_the\\_media\\_and\\_the\\_eco-disaster](https://e360.yale.edu/features/hungarys_red_sludge_spill_the_media_and_the_eco-disaster).

<sup>3</sup> A 2014 KPMG mining study identifies Guinea as home to over 25% of the world’s bauxite reserves. “Guinea: Country mining guide,” published by the KPMG Global Mining Institute, 2014, <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2014/07/guinea-mining-guide.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Fiona Harvey, “New technology could slash carbon emissions from aluminum production,” May 10, 2018,

and influence to capitalize on Guinea’s resources; Emirates Global Aluminium (EGA) and the Republic of Guinea announced a \$1.4 billion deal earlier this year. The Massena, New York site included in *Mapping Aluminum* made news this year as well, with New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announcing a deal to extend the work of the Alcoa East (formerly the Reynolds Metal Facility) plant there for another seven years. The Reynolds facility had closed in 2014 following a cleanup of toxic industrial waste released into the St. Lawrence River. These sites represent different stages in the extraction, processing, and production of aluminum and span three continents. *The Guardian* reports that aluminum production accounts for approximately 0.8% of global greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>4</sup> And yet, bauxite/aluminum is not widely recognized or understood on the level of plastic, water or oil. *Mapping Aluminum* draws attention to the scale, reach, and geographic diversity of the communities impacted by aluminum.

Environmental issues have long intersected with the art world, but artists, curators and museum directors appear to be amplifying their voices regarding environmental concerns. For example, this summer the Tate galleries are taking new measures to “pledge[e] solidarity with communities facing ‘climate extinction.’”<sup>5</sup> The Tate directors jointly issued a statement and sustainability plan reading: “We have reached a defining moment in the history of our planet and the cultural sector has a unique part to play in effecting change.”<sup>6</sup> Declaring a “climate emergency,” the Tate directors put in place a plan to reduce their carbon emissions by 10% by 2023, rethinking policies and institutional decisions from staff travel to the shop and restaurant.<sup>7</sup> This coincided with Tate Modern’s Olafur Eliasson retrospective. The Tate leadership communicated that “as an organization that works

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/10/new-technology-slash-aluminium-production-carbon-emissions>.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor Dafoe, “Pledging Solidarity With Communities Facing ‘Climate Extinction,’ the Tate Unveils an Ambitious New Sustainability Plan,” *Artnet News*, July 17, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/tate-climate-emergency-1603438>.

<sup>6</sup> “Tate Directors declare climate emergency,” press release on [tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk), July 17, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/tate-directors-declare-climate-emergency>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

with living artists, we should respond to and amplify their concerns. And, as our audiences and communities across the world confront climate extinction, so we must shine a spotlight on this critical issue through art.”<sup>8</sup> Also this summer, *The New York Times* featured an article entitled “Can Art Help Save the Planet?” in which Karl Kusserow, Princeton Art Museum curator of *Nature’s Nation: American Art and the Environment* said: “There’s a crescendo of interest in both art that is itself about the environment and art that is self-consciously environmental, and I think that’s entirely understandable and good, because it draws attention to these dire situations we’re facing.”<sup>9</sup> Ozga, likewise, draws attention to the consequences we face in our communities with work that in its self-referential way makes beautiful the familiar material aluminum while also challenging viewers to understand more complicated and difficult realities about the impact of mining, processing, smelting, etc.

Kasia Ozga and I first met while she was a student at SMFA/Tufts and we were both in the inaugural cohort of Omidyar Scholars, a program devoted to catalyzing change and promoting active citizenship, public service, and social justice.<sup>10</sup> The development of her practice makes evident why she was a natural fit for such a program early in her career. As one might assume, many in that program channeled their interest in active citizenship and public service into careers in politics, diplomacy, and the law, but it is striking how Ozga, as evidenced by her answers here and in her practice as a whole, probes difficult questions our societies face and invites viewers to join in that process of questioning, deep thinking, and, in some cases, community participation, through her artwork, which, in her words “depicts relationships between human bodies and physical, social, and political systems.” Mapping Aluminum reveals a human connection--consumption of a canned drink, the

crumpling of the map as it’s being held over the course of a long car journey, the environmental consequences felt by the people in the communities represented in the landscapes depicted. In introducing her practice overall, Ozga writes:

My work begins and ends in the human body. Our remnants (what we cast off and leave behind in the form of waste, trash, memory etc.) ground and connect us to the earth. “Where do the things in our lives come from and where they go once we’ve used them?” By representing and re-animating remains, I explore the potential of materials to ask questions and to evoke larger environmental relationships.

I treat the products of our culture as physical remains of our bodies and explore how we generate objects as concrete extensions of ourselves. With man-made forms, materials, and processes, I extend, inhibit, and modify elements of the human body. I reuse, up-cycle, and revalue regular, standardized, and mass-produced materials into something one-of-a-kind and special to invert the associations we make with different kinds of detritus. My raw materials are manufactured products with a particular use history and product life cycle. Whether I distort industrially produced goods in the white cube or manufacture surreal interventions in public spaces, my work explores the limits of functionality and worth.<sup>11</sup>

In this interview, Ozga shares thoughts on hand-held maps, technology, her desire to work with leftover materials as a starting point in the development of this series, the relationship between her academic work and art practice, and social justice and the environment, among other themes.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Alina Tugend, “Can Art Help Save the Planet?,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/arts/art-climate-change.html>.

<sup>10</sup> On a personal note, I found myself particularly drawn to this series, because the way in which she works with cast aluminum connects with my current work at Fisk University, a historically black college and university, or HBCU, in Nashville,

Tennessee. Fisk has a strong tradition of training artists in repoussé, or low metal relief sculpture. Aaron Douglas’ student Gregory Ridley taught Jamaal Sheats, who now teaches repoussé to current students.

<sup>11</sup> Kasia Ozga, artist statement, accessed August 2019, <https://kasiaoza.com/artist-statement/>.

**NP:** Tell me about Mapping Aluminum.

**KO:** Mapping Aluminum began with the idea of leftovers. Specifically, I was sick of constantly purchasing new materials with which to fabricate my artwork and I had several old aluminum sculptures taking up space in my parents' basement, that I wanted to get rid of by melting them down and re-using the material.

As I was brainstorming what to make, I was lucky enough to be selected for a residency with ACRE (Artists' Cooperative Residency & Exhibitions) in rural SW Wisconsin. I decided to take the materials with me that I would need to sculpt wax positives and to decide what to make, once there (the sculptures were later cast at a foundry in Chicago).

In Steuben, artists and cultural practitioners gathered regularly for lectures and discussions. One of the talks I attended led to a discussion about local materials; specifically, we talked about local sand mined only in that region that was then shipped all over the country to various fracking operations. Even though fracking companies were not directly drilling into the ground in that part of Wisconsin, the local area remained "complicit" in such operations taking place elsewhere.

This led me to research the process of making aluminum from Bauxite and the negative environmental externalities that accompany that process, around the world. Aluminum is the 2nd most-used metal on the planet (after Iron) and among the most recycled, and we rarely think about where the aluminum can that we order with lunch comes from, and where it will go once lunch is over. I wanted to draw attention to the relationship between cans and other consumer products and the materials that they are made from by linking sites of consumption to sites of production.

I decided to make a series of relief maps of "flashpoints" for social and environmental problems related to Bauxite mining, Aluminum smelting, and processing. The maps are sculpted "with creases" in the standard dimensions of a Rand McNally map (like a Michelin map in France), however this reference only makes sense for those

of us that aren't digital natives and didn't grow up with google maps constantly accompanying us from point A to point B. Identifying geographic markers on the maps (road intersections, towns, rivers, etc.) are overlaid with the sculpted forms of crushed aluminum cans.

In the future, I would like to continue the series with more maps that take on some more varied forms (crinkled, folded etc.).

**NP:** In researching aluminum production and related environmental issues, what most surprised you and what most influenced your work?

**KO:** It was instructive to learn about the interplay between environmental and social issues; between extreme inequality, labor exploitation, and unsafe working conditions in some of the countries in which Bauxite is mined and processed. I was surprised by how rarely the problems in mines are addressed in mainstream media in the West. It was as though such issues were no longer present in developing countries around the world, but rather confined to the coal mines of yesteryear that used to be ubiquitous in everyday landscapes (incidentally, I currently live in Saint-Étienne in the Loire coal mining basin, a region transformed by coal extraction from the 13th to the 20th centuries).

**NP:** I'm fascinated by your choice of the Rand McNally map format and your being clear about the brand and its Americanness, especially given your own background and experiences as a Polish-American, growing up in Chicago near the Rand McNally headquarters, now living in France and the global nature of the project (depicting sites in Guinea, Hungary, and the US). Also, the foldable Rand McNally paper map is an iconic travel tool that, as you say, has been supplanted by digital maps that don't have prescribed ways of framing the landscape and instead are driven by user questions like how do I get from point A to point B. Could you tell me about the moment in which you chose to reference the Rand McNally map?

**KO:** For me and, I assume, for many who took family road trips in the pre-smartphone era, Rand McNally is a really iconic brand that is also a source of

authority. I remember pouring over the maps and road atlases produced by the company as a child, getting my first sense that the vast geography of the Midwest, where I grew up, could be subdivided into sharp rectangles and regular grids.

In the artwork, I wanted to evoke the folds and "crumpled" aspect of a map that was used by someone's body/senses (hands/touch, sight/eyes). I foreground the physicality of the experience of traversing space and meandering through and around a site as opposed to point-A-to-point-B GPS trajectories centered around highways and nonplaces (Marc Augé's *Non-lieux*). I confess that I have a certain nostalgia for paper maps, even as I appreciate the convenience and efficiency of contemporary mobile phone apps.

Had I made the artwork in France, where I now live, I would probably have chosen to reference the dimensions of a Michelin map, as the company holds a similar position in the popular imagination, here. By applying a specific type of map from my youth to locations near and far, I evoke the Cassini ideal of triangulating physical space that emphasizes that every point in space can potentially be measured and situated in relation to any other point. At the same time, the relief sculptures refuse to "flatten" physical space à la Google by linking specific sites to a specific physical material, and the social and environmental externalities associated with its use and production.

**NP:** Your current show at the Saint-Etienne International Design Biennial is entitled *Raw Materials*, and for that show you're working with very different materials such as lace (Fig. 4). Could you talk about your process of achieving that hand-held, crumpled feeling in metal?

**KO:** The aluminum sculptures are created through a hot wax casting process, whereas my current body of work involves direct casting in reinforced plaster, rather than mold-making.



**Figure 4.** Kasia Ozga, *Cartographie Personnelle*, 2012, sculpture in the form of an interactive puzzle, drawing in black pencil, wood, plywood, varnish, 3 layers, 120 cm x 83 cm x 2 cm when packed, dimensions variable when on display. Courtesy of the artist.

For the maps, I first made silicone rubber molds of a series of found crushed aluminum cans. These were then individually filled with brown foundry wax and cut-out for use in various sections of the larger sculptures.

Next, I cast and recast the larger map forms in the scale that I wanted by pouring hot melted foundry wax on aluminum foil that had been cut, taped, and folded to the scale that I wanted for the finished pieces.

The process involved a lot of trial and error to get the correct thickness for the casting process while retaining physical details that I wanted to evoke the landmasses I was representing. Once this "base layer" was in place, I could use various tools (often dental instruments!) to draw on the wax, to cut into the wax, and to "weld" the aluminum can forms into place.

Unfortunately, I can't locate the original maps that I relied on for the sculptures, in my records, however I do remember that I specifically avoided using google maps and instead found maps of the sites online, from various other sources.

When each artwork was completed in wax, I took it to a foundry that was able to cast it, using a ceramic shell process, in aluminum that I had leftover from other projects. Once cast, the sculptures were sandblasted in preparation for patination, patinated with a blackening agent, wire wheeled back to increase contrast with areas of high detail being somewhat darker, and plains with less relief brought to a brighter luster. All three pieces were sealed and buffed. The "crumpled" feeling of the texture comes from a combination of the inherent properties of the metal, the specific forms I sculpted in wax, and the surface treatment of the cast artworks.

**NP:** So far, the Mapping Aluminum series includes three sites: the Saint Lawrence River in Massena, NY, the Simandou Mountain Range in Guinea, and Ajka Vezprém County, Hungary. When I first learned about the project, I was struck by the differences between the three places, and intrigued by the way your work throws light on how they are linked: through, as you point out, "bauxite mining, aluminum processing, and aluminum smelting ... damage to local ecosystems, harm to local constituency groups, and evidence of illegal mining operations." Issues around bauxite/aluminum aren't as widely discussed as, say, oil, plastic, and water. Do you think global consciousness around bauxite will increase in the coming years and do you see your project as playing a role in elevating the conversation/making the issue more visible?

**KO:** In my own practice-based research, I look at how specific material choices can raise awareness of environmental externalities in the process of production. I got interested in mining after reflecting on the larger production cycle of the aluminum in my studio that I wanted to re-use/ use up. Over the past few years, I've really begun to think about how artists integrate waste into their art production processes more generally, from a

personal combination of eco anxiety and environmental guilt, a desire to pare down my own belongings (a paradoxical standpoint for a sculptor with truckloads of materials and tools!), and an interest in responding to material constraints in my own work. I first began thinking about the concept of environmental externalities during an economics course as an undergraduate and I'm interested in how artists can represent these factors and whether such art can actually inspire change by getting policy-makers and waste producers to internalize such externalities.

Whereas the green party is on the rise in Europe, the political winds seem to be blowing in the other direction across the Atlantic with "America First" and Trump's rollback of Obama-era climate rules. As for environmental awareness regarding metals vs plastics, I think that people tend to think about problems as they arise. I remember the impact of Mike Daisey's story about Apple in China (on the radio show *This American Life* in 2012) in getting people to think about the provenance of the precious metals in their smartphones, various studies on how acidic foods cause more aluminum to leach from cookware have prompted waves of concern about those products over the years, news articles about children toiling in E-Waste Dumps in Africa and Bangladesh abound, and recently Forbidden Stories released a series of articles in collaboration with the Guardian, Le Monde, and other major news outlets about horrific conditions and environmental scandals at the North Mara gold mine in Tanzania. While these issues do not concern bauxite directly, they do bring up questions about where the metals we use come from and where they end up.

Whereas most consumers make purchase decisions based on price, I think that a slow, creeping awareness of the environmental and social costs of what we buy has been on the rise. The difficulty comes in translating that knowledge into lifestyle choices. Less than half of the 100 billion aluminum cans sold in the United States each year are recycled. So even if aluminum is better than plastics, in the sense that it is 100% recyclable,

users are not doing their part to make that cycle of use a reality. Raising global consciousness about environmental issues has historically been a task embraced by journalists and scientists, but more and more artists are rising to the occasion.<sup>12</sup> By highlighting the issues with aluminum, I aim to get viewers to reflect on the environmental consequences of their broader consumption patterns rather than dwelling on the *comparative* harms of mining vs ocean plastics vs illegal logging vs nuclear waste...

**NP:** Public art is an area you've focused on in your research and an important part of your artistic practice that was activated during your time at the SFMA at Tufts that has continued through your PhD and beyond in your scholarship, activism, and site-specific public art practice. How do you see your academic work informing your artistic practice and vice versa?

**KO:** Actually, I only really began making intentionally public work during grad school at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, Poland. When I began my Ph.D. at Paris 8, I was still mainly focusing on the temporal composition of sculpture, however I completely switched gears as I realized that I wanted to write an applied, rather than theoretical text, that had more social relevance. Since my son was born, I have partially redirected my public practice for logistical reasons (I made a lot of site-specific work that required my long-term physical presence on location, and I live far from family that would be able to provide childcare for extended periods). I remain drawn to calls for art in physical sites that have a potential for social change and for group shows with political themes.

Making the connection between my art and my academic work is something that I struggle with and different artists in the *recherche-création* (practice-based research) space define their respective practices in different ways. So far, I've tended to spend intense work periods making art alternating with similar blocks of time devoted to writing. When I teach, I tend to bring the themes

that I am working on in my research into the classroom, as a means to exchange references and to generate new ideas. My scholarship and art-making inform each other but the relationship is rarely causal or linear. The process varies from one text to the next and from one series of artworks to the next. My art-making may spark an interest in a particular theme, say photography-based installations, which can lead to a critical analysis, which can then inform later proposals and finished public art projects. Writing articles also leads me to discover new work by new artists, who then influence the techniques I use and the forms that I create in my work. For now, the two processes are complementary, rather than intertwined. In the future, I want to explore ways to integrate the two modes of inquiry/production more closely.



**Figure 5.** Kasia Ozga, *Cartographie Personnelle*, detail, 2012, sculpture in the form of an interactive puzzle, drawing in black pencil, wood, plywood, varnish, 120 cm x 83 cm x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

<sup>12</sup> See Paul Ardenne, *Un art écologique. Création plastique et anthropocène* (Brussels: La Mulette, Editions Le Bord de l'eau, 2018).

**NP:** I'd like to ask you about *Cartographie Personnelle*. What inspired you to use the puzzle format? In this photograph I see a child playing with the puzzle (Fig. 5). What motivated you to make it an interactive piece, something visitors can play with?

**KO:** The idea for the piece came about after a series of failed attempts at drawings linking the macro scale of topographic (elevation maps) and the micro scale of fingerprints. I was playing around with the outlines/contours of various countries on Photoshop and I decided to distort the scale and modify relative location of places that I had physically lived in. I wanted to critique the idea of geography as something cold, objective, and steadfast as opposed to personable and malleable...

and I was also interested in whether art could illustrate or even subvert Doreen Massey's reflections on the spatial dimension of cultural diversity ("The whole variegated and unequal geography of the world is being reorganised into a historical queue. Geography is being turned into history, space is being turned into time. What's more, there is only one historical queue - one model of development.")<sup>13</sup>

A puzzle is a kind of game, but also an educational tool... I liked the idea of enabling visitors/viewers to re-imagine and re-interpret my own geographic trajectory, to create new patterns that I wasn't aware of, and to suggest alternative connections between the places that I'd lived in and experienced. I currently have an interactive project in the works, *Personal Cartography Redux*, that involves an interactive online drawing tool enabling anyone, artist and non-artist alike, to make their own "personal cartography" drawings...

**NP:** I'm intrigued by the multiple ways in which maps operate in your work. Would you talk about the appeal of mapping, cartography, borders, etc. for you as an artist?

**KO:** As an artist, I am interested in the creative potential of maps to promote social change.

Whereas most of us interact with maps as tools that help us get from point A to point B, maps not only convey information but also visualize authority.

While map-making is frequently used as a qualitative research method in ethnography and urban studies, I am interested in the aesthetic and critical potential of engaging with maps as visual markers of space. The maps we use and the ways we use them inform how we understand our environments. Whereas (national) borders are generally identified on existing augmented reality maps online, the technology privileges an expansive view of space that transcends these markers with roads extending on either direction and consistent background and color content throughout. This choice may reflect an idealized attitude towards space, implying that it is accessible everywhere for anyone. As we know, especially in light of ongoing conflicts along borders in the US and elsewhere, the reality of access on the ground depends on who you are and where you come from.

By using art to start dialogues about mapping, I hope to raise awareness about how representations of space affect identity, mobility, and personal liberty for all people.

**NP:** I want to pick up on your mention of augmented reality maps online and how "technology privileges an expansive view of space." How does this inform your work?

**KO:** Personally, I have an ambiguous relationship to borders; as an immigrant who had the privilege of being able to move from one country to another due to luck (and my parents' tenacity!), I feel a lot of compassion for those who do not have access to the geographic mobility that I have been accustomed to. In my work, I frequently take a critical stance toward the injustice inherent in barriers that enable the free mobility of goods (i.e. the recently passed CETA agreement) but limit the mobility of humans that suffer as a result of free trade policies

<sup>13</sup> See Doreen Massey, "Is the world really shrinking?," Open University radio lecture given on 2:15pm on November 5, 2006, at FACT in Liverpool,

[http://www.open2.net/freethinking/oulecture\\_2006.html](http://www.open2.net/freethinking/oulecture_2006.html), and Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).



**Figure 6.** *Cache-cache (Hide-and-seek)*, a participatory sculpture that made with students in Beaufort, during 2016 CLEA Residency in Maubeuge-Val de Sambre. Courtesy of the artist.

that turn a blind eye to the ecological and social externalities of economic decisions.

When I mention augmented reality and the aesthetic of online maps, I'm referring to a representation of limitless possibilities, a video-game-like sense of being able to "walk" anywhere from point-A to point-B and to "see" additional layers of information. This vision is both enticingly utopian and ignores the very real limits of legal authorization and financial means that prohibit physical travel and exploration for much of the world's population. My work seeks to foreground these and other social/spatial justice issues.

**NP:** In January you sent a New Year's newsletter that began with a photo and a description from you: "This year's photo comes from Cache-cache (Hide-and-seek), a participatory sculpture that I made with students in Beaufort, during my 2016 CLEA

Residency in Maubeuge-Val de Sambre (Fig. 6). The project emerged after I heard a story about elderly local residents that recalled hiding in the shed in the school's courtyard to avoid coming back to class after recess. I asked children at the school today to pretend that they too were hiding in the 'pré haut.' We used a classroom projector to cast their shadows and then retraced the shapes on old wooden pallets. Volunteers at the Ferrière-la-Grande Ressourcerie helped me reinforce and cut out the silhouettes and then students repainted the forms. The work was installed on top of a brick wall in the school courtyard." How does a project like this influence your practice generally?

**KO:** This was a participatory artwork produced in the context of a CLEA (Contrat Locale d'Éducation Artistique) commission in the Northern region of France. I was interested in exploring different ways

to produce public art with the participation of youth and the grant I received entailed 4 months of on-site production of different works with schools, preschools, high schools and youth centers in and around Maubeuge, France. The artwork I produced in Beaufort was site-specific; the idea was tied to the physical location and the history of that site that I learned about while there. While I try to make most of my public art site-specific to one degree or another, I rarely do this with works destined for indoor exhibitions (due to different creative objectives as well as funding/logistical issues). By producing work for shows that is more related to the conceptual context of materials and markets rather than a particular geographic site, I make it more natural for that work to circulate from one venue to another. The underlying issue in *Mapping Aluminum* is not confined to the geographic sites depicted but rather to the ways in which the products of those locations circulate in our existing economies.

**NP:** Have you encountered other artists who've worked with maps or mapping themes that have particularly moved you, and why?

**KO:** In 2007, I curated a group show at the Fondation des États-Unis in Paris entitled *Espaces Cartographiques* that included Makoto Morimura, Valentina Loi, Maja Bialon, Hyona Kim, Claudia Gochicoa Gutiérrez, Yi-hua Wu, Magdalena Gatialova, and Charwei Tsai. The works in the exhibition by Makoto Morimura and Valentina Loi explicitly used maps.

Aside from my personal experience, I adore anything Cathryn Boch and Maya Lin have ever touched. Mona Hatoum also has great map-based works.

One of my criteria for work that "moves me" is that it makes me want to make art. It's also an objective for me in art-making: I want to make people want to make (art, community, sustainable environments, etc.)!

**NP:** Do you recall the moment when you were first excited about an artist working with metal or a particular artwork produced in metal?

**KO:** As a child of architects, I was lucky to be exposed early and often to outstanding works of art in metals and other materials. Personally, I became particularly interested in working in metals after taking foundry classes with George Greenamyre (an amazing kind and encouraging professor!) at MassArt while I was enrolled at SMFA/Tufts. Seeing molten metal transform into solid sculptures through the coordinated ballet of a team of artist-workers clad in industrial protective gear was the closest thing to a religious experience I experienced as an undergrad. Outside of class, I participated in the 'Iron Guild,' a prelude to Massart's iron casting program in the form of a re-occurring collective performance/music/metal casting event in which recycled old radiators were transformed into new pieces of art.

**NP:** Can you think of artists whose work brings together diverse geographies in inspirational ways?

**KO:** Off the top of my head: the artists Slavs and Tatars, Ghada Amer, Fred Wilson, Yinka Shonibare, El Anatsui, Nick Cave, Nespoon (street-art), and the designer Serge Mouangue.

**NP:** Do you think there's something particularly contemporary about *Mapping Aluminum*?

**KO:** I like Nathalie Heinich's definition of contemporary art as challenging the very notion of an artwork and I think the pieces are self-referential in this way. The materials and themes that the artwork engages with are relevant to contemporary life: the work elevates a form of waste and sheds light on processes of production that are generally hidden from view. The works refer to sites far from where they are physically displayed while tying those locations to the here and now. In a contemporary cultural context dominated by digital media, my embodied artworks challenge assumptions about our interactions with real and virtual environments and argue for a renewed attention to the physical dimension of our existence on this planet.