

Pictorial Planes Inventing Photocollagraphy

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Photo- of or produced by light

carte- chart

-graphy a process or method of writing, recording, or representing (in a specific way)

colle paste

tekhne art, craft, skill; to weave

*“Mapping entails uncovering realities of the landscape previously unseen, unimagined, or unpredictable. Mapping differs from cartography in that it is a more speculative, revelatory activity allowing the mapper and reader to discover new relationships in the landscape. Maps of this kind are more diagrammatic than dogmatic and made to reveal hidden ideologies, unseen phenomena, processes, consequences, actions, possible futures and histories of the landscape.”*¹

The term “mapping” has been widely used, almost overused, in academic discussions of representational techniques. A derivation of cartographic processes, it is not enough to define it in traditional map terms of symbols, borders, geography, and human habitation. Instead, mapping as an architectural strategy utilizes photography, collage, and cartographic techniques to communicate in ways none of those fields can completely accomplish on their own. The useful attributes of this mapping might include the tangible (territory, land forms, settlement, geography, terrain, area, and physical boundaries), the organizational (patterns, grids, degrees and scale), and the intangibles (agendas, propaganda, memory, illusions, alternative realities, identity, time and analysis). The hand-made combined with the virtual, or the low-tech and high-tech merger, transcends even early forms of architectural mapping to become a new form of representation, a *photocollagraphy*.²

From the earliest coming together of all the disparate technologies involved, photography was initially viewed as a process that

occurred outside the hand of man. This ‘writing with light’ was perceived as ‘nature painted by herself’, nearly a spiritual act helped along by man’s relentless experiments with optics and chemistry and his insatiable desire to replicate the world around him in precise form. The earliest photographs – particularly the daguerreotypes in their secretive velvet boxes – were not considered representations as much as they were considered additional versions of reality. The possession of the soul in the image, the precise likeness of every wrinkle and every fold, was a snatching from the world itself – a power over nature, the start of an ownership psychosis. But ultimately this hands-off reputation laid the groundwork for photography’s first uphill battle – its rights to a lifetime in the world of art rather than that of science. Not until 1940 – over 100 years past its founding – did the Museum of Modern Art become the first museum in the world to establish a Department of Photography, hence claiming a spot in the representation lineage with painting and sculpture.

Yet, unlike painting and sculpture, the photographic artist works directly with the reality palette, re-presenting through a subtractive rather than additive set of variables. At the core are the three basics – the aperture, the light-tight box, and the light-sensitive surface – pointed at the whole of the world, carving out a single set of relationships (with a single set of light particles) in time and space unlike all the trillions that came before and those that will come after. It is a process of juxtaposition and position, cropping, framing, zooming – above all *looking*. It is a mastery of vision through the USE OF technology (high or low tech) that controls and captures the relationships between depth and speed through a ratio of light and non-light.

In collage, however, photography found an ally. Both wholly modern in their vision of a complex and layered world, they joined forces early on in Constructivism and Dadaism and in

places like the Bauhaus and later the Chicago Institute of Design to represent an era infinitely juggling both chaos and progress. Collage, too, is literally made from reality, though nearly in the opposite way as photography – one turning the world into scraps, the other turning scraps into the world. Where photography is a flattening, collage is a thickening.

The revolutionary quality of a collage, the inclusion of prefabricated elements into works of art, raised the question about the very nature of reality in what was then a rapidly advancing world. “Collage may be seen as a quintessential twentieth-century art form with multiple layers and signposts pointing to a variety of forms and realities, and to the possibility or suggestion of countless new realities”³ The same could be said, ultimately, of the new photographic art form. In both, various levels of meaning coexist on a single pictorial plane, fusing a highly differentiated collection of details into a unified perception of infinite new realities.

Where photography is a flattening and collage is a thickening, cartography is a collecting. A combination of information and speculation, the earliest maps of the New World combined rugged reconnaissance and early measurement technologies with vision. As a history of place, these documents recorded both the land itself and the invasion of that land through human settlement. Artworks in their own right, they combined this technical information with both decorative attributes and fantasy speculation, often used as propaganda to entice new settlers and their potential investment in the growth of a region. Previously guided by astronomical patterns, technological advancements of direction (the compass) and measurement (longitude and latitude, surveying) changed the core structure of map making. The evolution of a symbolic language, both textual and visual, expanded the cartographic vocabulary.

But the ability to become airborne prioritized the planometric over the experiential.⁴ Once a literal hacking of underbrush and swatting of mosquitoes, the technologically advanced information gathering removed the cartographer from the earth’s surface and the map from the drawing board. From simple flight-based aerial photography to satellite communications and global positioning systems, the explorer is no longer lost in the woods but infinitesimally identified by digital coordinates and pixilated heat sensory images. Maps based on the information gathering from these new technologies are multi-scaled, intensely colored, and universally and instantaneously available.

At the turn of the digital millennium, photography, collage, and cartography are themselves being re-presented. The sensory enticements of the cold, dark room amongst familiar chemical smells is transformed from silver crystals to dots per inch; the scissors, paper, and paste that gave collage its name are supplemented by digital tools with similar though intangible

on-screen functions: the poetic lines of geography and habitation are cross-hairs, pixels, and coordinates. These re-presentations, though they may ultimately appear similar to their visual forefathers, have new sets of variables, and new agendas about their representation of this current era. These additive, subtractive and collective processes, shaped by hand-made methods and enhanced by technology, lead to a multi-dimensional, conceptually-thickened representation of time and space – *photocollagraphy*

So, how do you begin to take and represent meaningful measure in the twenty-first century? The low tech processes and products – drawing, pinhole photography, traditional film, paper, and tangible objects – are thrown into the kit of parts with the digital world of video, animation, pixels, laser processes, and virtual environments. The attributes of the tangible are enhanced by the attributes of the quick and infinitely reproducible. These processes and their material form join the qualities of traditional mapping – the tangible, the organizational, and the intangible – to form an intellectual idea which is given priority over the actual (projective rather than descriptive). Their truths lie not merely in what they portray but also in what they leave out.

*“The Square is now surrounded by skyscrapers, and cars and buses compete with pedestrians for the street, yet it remains the center of Charlotte’s identity – the place where the past and the future vie for our attention.”*⁵

Charlotte, North Carolina is a city obsessed with erasure and newness. Generated from a crossing of a main Native American trading trail and a north-south migration route, this once agrarian settlement grew with the introduction of the textile industry and the discovery of gold in the 1830’s. The intersection of these two paths, now Tryon and Trade streets respectively, define what is today the center of the downtown district, known as “the square”. The streets define the four wards, the first sense of order in the city. Now one of the top three financial centers in the United States, the introduction of banking transformed this agrarian mill town into a white-collar, service-based financial center.

The shape of the city, its physical and mental order, is always in transition. Though Tryon Street has remained the main linear artery, and the four wards are still visually evident, there were no official landplanning organizations until the 1940s, allowing a somewhat haphazard growth to occur.⁶ The order of the city today is governed by the automobile. Downtown is contained by the ring road of 277 and links Charlotte to its real main arteries, I-85 and I-77. The city sprawls out in semi-concentric ovals connected by winding (though “picturesque”) wheel-spoke roads. Yet its physical presence – really a lack of order – is directed more by the invisible commerce, the ebb and flow of values and commodities.

This commercial identity has driven a new form of development in downtown. Renamed “uptown” to remove the negative implications of the urban core, this and the constant action of the wrecking ball, have erased the remnants of its complex history and created a monochromatic scape. In the Charlotte metro area, up to 40 acres of forest and farmland are lost to development every day. A combination of consumerism, growth, and greed have fueled this development steamroller and have resulted in not only a fragile and scarred landscape, but one whose memory is repeatedly eradicated.

Even the maps of Charlotte have hints of these shifts and disorders. The 1882 Kerr-Cain map of North Carolina shows Charlotte adjacent to the most disputed and confused areas of the territory. Defined by the Lords Proprietors in London, the Carolina territory division was to happen due northwest to the 35th parallel, then due west to the ocean. The establishment of the 35th parallel, which took nearly twenty years from the initial expedition, was located incorrectly, creating an 11 mile wide stretch of land just south of the city that was essentially claimed by both states. To the east of Charlotte, the Catawba Indians chose to be located in South Carolina, distorting the state line in a perfect square heading towards Charlotte. Being within ten miles of this state border, the city is inevitably affected by this identity confusion.

The city maps indicate an ambivalent sense of order as well. Though there is an original grid within the highway loop, it leaks outside of those lines only randomly. The lack of any ordering device or any guiding geographic condition allows the roads to erratically change names as well as roads of the same name to cross each other. Beyond the core, the builtscape is neutral with a general lack of hierarchy, nodes, and common landmarks.

There is the potential for photocollagraphy to reveal the ordered and complex narratives currently buried beneath the city’s fragments. The development of content is a four part, cyclical process: reconnaissance, portrayal, analysis, and revealing. Each phase is envisioned through the mind, eye, and hand of the collective map-makers – the photographer’s editing, the collagist’s layering, and the cartographer’s measuring.

The reconnaissance is one of tangible and literal materials, but more importantly one of narrative and history – how do we unearth the lost layers before their final disappearance, in essence see what is no longer there. Reconnaissance is a process of exploration.

Portrayal is visual, though not neutral. Every pointing of the camera, line on the page, and cutting of paper is based on an agenda. Media contributes to the thesis, providing a layer of conceptual information in addition to the content. Portrayal is a process of depiction.

Analysis involves dissection, the separating of the whole to discover the potency of the parts. Through diagramming in the

broadest sense, the parts are juxtaposed, edited, and collapsed. Analysis is a process of examination.

Revealing utilizes the reconnaissance, portrayal, and analysis to invent a past, present, and future simultaneously. The revealing is both site and person specific, relying on the location of study and the agenda of the individual. Revealing is a process of exposure. The activity of the map-maker is conceived not simply as a form of contemplation, but also a process of inquiry undertaken in a spirit of skepticism. Since the conventions of any representational system, are social – not ‘objective’ – in character, there is an important sense in which the map becomes the territory.

“...one escapes to a place situated only in the imagination, where all things are real. This imagined place is constructed of connections not of separations; of readings, not categorisations.. How do we filter the nature of these forces into a pedagogy so that our design studios become active theaters in which new narratives are invented?”

Our upcoming class utilizing the photocollagraphy process descends from a history of other pedagogical experiments and shared personal interests. Central to this investigation are issues of memory and mobility, both key to unearthing a Charlotte history and inventing a Charlotte future that is valuable and meaningful. Again, considering the topics in both their hi-tech and low-tech components, memory spans from the Settler’s cemetery – a physical repository of early inhabitation – to the massive virtual measures being taken to protect the financial records of the fourth largest bank in America. Mobility issues range from the very founding basis of the city – the migration and trading route – to the placelessness of such a neutral suburban environment. We propose that a successful twenty-first century representation is somewhere in the midst of the old and the new, a process based in the additive, the subtractive, and the collective, both the digital and the analogue, both the modern and whatever we might ultimately call today.

NOTES

¹ Alan Berger, *Reclaiming the American West*, (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2002) p.118.

² Linda Samuels and Pamela Unwin-Barkley.

³ Katherine Hoffman ed., *Collage: Critical Views*, (Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1989) p. 1.

⁴ Anne Boddington, “Editorial”, *Architecture of the Borderlands*, Anne Boddington, ed. (John Wiley & Sons, 1999) pp. 4-5.

⁵ John and Amy Rogers, *Charlotte: Its Historic Neighborhoods*, (Charleston, Arcadia Publishing, 1996) p. 9

⁶ Thomas Hanchett, *Sorting out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill), 1998) p. 4.

⁷ Teddy Cruz, “The Tijuana Workshop: The Border Chronicles of a Vertical Studio at SCI-Arc”, *Architecture of the Borderlands*, Anne Boddington, ed. (John Wiley & Sons, 1999) pp. 43-17.