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Between the Map and the Territory: Taking the World Apart in the Age of Un-Discovery

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Between the Map and the Territory:
Taking the World Apart in the Age of Un-Discovery

By

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A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

The map is demonstrative of a basic human impulse, the desire to understand our surroundings and our position within the world. Through the activity of mapmaking, we aspire to comprehend comprehensively, but the very nature of the map allows for only partial understanding. Despite this objective for total knowledge, the blank space of a map is a necessity; in order for a map to be useful it must leave some aspects out. This blank space, along with other blanks in visual representation, is an active silence, and holds meaning in its absence.

While the map attempts to represent a territory, the two become conflated as the map shapes our perception of the space it depicts. As mapping conventions become normalized, the map appears to be an authoritative depiction of a physical space. However, it presents not only what is sensed in the world, but an accumulation of knowledge constructed by society. The map can never reproduce the terrain, but rather combines the real with the representational scheme, the natural with the ideological. We do not simply traverse the physical world but an architecture constructed by the lines of the map.

Interactive mapping technologies further complicate the relationship between the map and the territory; these digitalized maps have become authoritative representations of the world that we can carry in our pockets. As we navigate according to satellite maps, we look to the land to reflect the information of the map. Despite the ostensible accuracy of these charts, when a discrepancy is discovered between the map and the territory, the satellite “picture” of the map can be immediately “redrawn”, instantly erasing any false data. This is the act of un-discovery, once commonplace during the Age of Discovery but now an absurd occurrence amid the ubiquity of satellite maps. This condition points not only to a blurring between the map and the territory, but is indicative of a structural shift. If exploration is the act of forming a world, then un-
discovery is the act of taking it apart, akin to the fracturing of post-modernism. However, in the dissemblance of uncertain times, there is an opportunity to visualize new, alternate spaces, to reconstruct through imagination.

In my thesis work, *We Do Not Profess to Construct Planets*, large-scale drawings investigate the nature of the mapping impulse, the relationship between the map and the territory, and un-discovery as a post-modern condition. Through deconstructive and reconstructive strategies, these drawings explore the conflation of the real and the imagined, the search for meaning through partial perception of the world, and the potential for reconstruction through the formation of alternate spaces. Collectively, the works point towards a shift in perspective, restructuring the space of the map as a strategy to see anew. As works of art, the drawings begin to explore the potential of the artist to work outside of established systems of knowledge, and negotiate visual representations free from the conventions of any one practice.
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The Blank Space of the Map

…In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

—Suarez Miranda, Viajes devarones prudentes, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658

- Jorge Luis Borges, On Exactitude in Science

Of the many visual strategies used to represent our surroundings, the map is ubiquitous; a strategy so pervasive that the mapped record often becomes conflated with that which is represented. The activity of mapmaking not only functions to abstract the referenced space as a functional representation, but builds the architecture by which we navigate the world. The impulse to map is one rooted in a basic human desire, the aspiration to perceive the world in its entirety. Yet, despite the aim of complete visualization, a map can never fully encompass a whole, and must employ blankness, a kind of silent presence, which articulates our inability to fully comprehend the complexity of the world. The desire to reveal a whole, and the necessity of a blank space are simultaneously implicit in the idea of the map, which characterizes its relationship to the territory.

Early mapmakers would fill in the edges of the known world with drawings of fictional beasts and warnings of supernatural perils, evident of the archetypal image’s power to anticipate the unknown. These images, like the sea monsters posed to threaten intrepid explorers in the Carta Marina of 1539 (Figure 1), were both fantastic and conventional, and served to inhabit the edges of the map with palpable articulations of the unknown. The anthropomorphic depiction of
the wind in a Ptolemaic map of 1504 (Figure 2) serves a meaningful but less fantastic end; not only does it provide necessary sailing information, but gives form to a material experience, filling in the edges of the maps with a fanciful visualization of a natural occurrence. With the advent of more accurate cartography, these fantastic embellishments were struck from our picture of the world, and now the spaces they inhabit lie empty. These archetypal images attempted to fill that blank unknown with a comprehensible idea, giving the explorer power to contend with these unknown territories despite their potential horrors. Now blank, these spaces are still locations of imagination.

The blank space is a vital component of the syntax of the map. White space on a map obscures the parts of the territory deemed irrelevant or outside of its scheme, and yet, continues to hold meaning in its apparent lack of information. As a device of the map, absence is always present, a necessary device that enables and reveals the subtexts of the document. Although the map is usually characterized by what has been rendered, that which is left out holds equal meaning. While the negative space of a map can simply be a syntactic necessity in order to reveal the theme or function of the chart, the map’s blank space is representative of our impulse to map, our desire to contain the unknown. The bare regions of the map can be sites of possibility and imagination, open spaces yet to be conquered or explored. The urge to fill in the blank space is the imperial challenge, the invitation to uncover new territory, be it land or knowledge.

The blank can also be read as indicative of our relationship to physical spaces we think of as empty, or natural. While it is often necessary to remove natural spaces from political maps in order to elucidate the relevant information, the representation of oceans and terrestrial wilderness as flat blue and green voids is reflective of how we construct the idea of nature. Preserved spaces
become blanks; areas legislated against being “filled-in”. These spaces are literally “off-the-grid”, withheld from the linear map of relevant territories to become empty surfaces, blank territories of earth. While no place on earth is truly empty, this convention of mapping highlights how natural wilderness has become regarded as a kind of void.

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He had bought a large map
Representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased
When they found it to be
A map they could all understand
- Lewis Carroll, The Hunting of the Snark
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While blank, these negative spaces are not always absences; their lack of information is essential to convey meaning. In the epic nonsense poem, The Hunting of the Snark (An Agony in 8 Fits), Lewis Carroll exaggerates this necessity, describing a map of the sea that is completely blank, and thus very easy to use. The blank map illustrated by Henry Holiday depicts the map with all conventional standards of mapping, but lacking any feature of the mapped territory (Figure 3). The blank space exists as a necessary syntactic device, enabling that which is mapped to be examined hermetically. Despite any holistic endeavor, no map can truly represent everything. Once it does, it becomes as useless as Borges’ to-scale map of the empire. In fact, the real work of a map is in leaving almost everything out. For the map to be a useful representation, the mapmaker must exclude nearly everything. The blank space is not a void, but rather, a withheld unknown. It is a simplification by way of omission, an empty space that infers everything excluded by the map’s scheme.

Part of the language of the mapping, these blanks serve to frame the intent of the map. Cartographer and critical theorist, J.B. Harley notes, in his essay “Silences and Secrecy”, that blank spaces are not necessarily indicative of a lack of information, rather, they are ‘silences,’ or
a lack of utterance. These silences are just as meaningful as the drawn spaces of the map; the
“…silences should be regarded as positive statements and not as merely passive gaps in the flow
of language”.

These ‘silences’ are presences, not absences. Harley elaborates:

Silence can reveal as much as it conceals and from acting as independent and intentional
statements, silences on maps may sometimes become the determinate part of the
cartographic message….Silence and utterance are not alternatives but constituent parts of
map language, each necessary for the understanding of the other”.

The blank space is not a passive lack of text, but the meaning-laden act of remaining silent. A
map cannot be read without some use of silence; it is as consequential to its meaning as the
diagrammatic image.

The blank space can function as a silence in less didactic forms of visual communication,
able to hold meaning in emptiness. Toba Khedoori’s large-scale drawings utilize the power of
the blank space, weighing it with as much meaning as her renderings. Her images often depict
fragments of constructed environments and objects, such as hallways or chairs. They are
delicately rendered in graphite and oil paint and isolated on enormous sheets of paper that have
been coated in wax, accumulating studio detritus such as dust or hair. These spaces are
uninhabited, as in the vignette rendered in Untitled (Doors), wherein a corner of an interior space
with two doorways, doors ajar, are depicted sparingly, while the rest of the room or building is
replaced with blank waxy space (Figure 4). The lack of information forces the viewer to search
the nearly empty paper for additional meaning, using his or her imagination to presume what is
missing. Khedoori’s drawings imply enormous restraint and “metaphysical refinement,” paring
down a subject matter to its bare essentials, drenched in light and a vast emptiness. Here, the
white space has become what Harley calls a ‘silence,’ not an absence but an intentional
statement, a critical component to Khedoori’s visual language. The expanse is rich with
meaning; a purposeful omission intended to be read. The space becomes weighted with both an
active emptiness and a world of possibility. Her minimalism demands you to consider what is missing, whether it is missing or simply unattainable. It is a potential space, for the viewer to invent or imagine.

Ptolemy, in his *Geographike Syntaxis*, defines geography, which he equates with cartography, as “a representation in pictures of the whole known world together with the phenomena which are contained within.” As Peter Turchi notes in the essay “Theater of the World,” this definition was “…precedent-setting in its use of ‘whole’: he set geographers the goal of representing everything”. The aim of mapping is not simply the representation of the physical world, but the struggle to form a total picture, so one may contend with the whole through an abstraction of its parts. While maps often only represent pieces of the world, the original thrust of the practice is to perceive the referent’s entirety.

This endeavor is not restricted to the representation of space, but an impulse that is mirrored in any attempt to accumulate comprehensive knowledge. From the historical Great Library of Alexandria, “an institution created to gather, under one roof, a copy of every book (scroll) every written,” to Jorge Luis Borges’ fictional Library of Babel, depicting a fantastic reality in the form of an expansive library containing every possible combination of the alphabet, we have tried both in practice and imagination to contend with the immensity of our cultural production.

Perhaps this impulse is reflected most recently in the information space of the Internet. Reflective of the desire to contain knowledge comprehensively, online spaces collect data at a massive scale, continually growing and being revised at a speed unprecedented. Not only does the Internet enable instant entry to archives of accumulated information, but also fosters unprecedented connectivity between individuals. This desire for comprehensive access to
knowledge and others is utopic in nature, as Turchi notes, the mounting ubiquity of the Internet has “…resulted in the secular devotion to the belief that a glorious future is assured if only every child has access to a computer that is ‘wired’.”\textsuperscript{9} The desire for universal access is related to the drive behind mapmaking, the desire to rise above our limitations, to know the whole world. The anxiety of being stuck on the ground, unable to perceive one’s city, continent, or world as a whole, is relieved through the map’s abstraction.

Similar grand efforts occur in the history of the map, with the aim to represent the earth wholly. In the late 16\textsuperscript{th} century, the \textit{Theatrum Orbis Terrarum}, or \textit{Theater of the World}, soon followed by Mercator’s \textit{Atlas}, endeavored to represent the physical world in its entirety as ancient maps had strived to do for cosmological and mythological systems. Interactive satellite mapping such as Google Earth has magnified this endeavor, attempting a navigable map of the entire planet. This map attempts an unparalleled holistic view of the world, allowing the map to visualize both the grandness of the entire planet from space, the intimacy of the street view and everything in between.

Borges succinctly parodies the quest for absolute accuracy once more, in the single paragraph short story, \textit{On Exactitude in Science}, wherein the cartographic discipline of a fictional empire has become so precise that a map is made to the size of the territory, covering every inch of the land. Inevitably, the map is recognized as pointless, and falls to ruin, revealing the land beneath. Through absurdity, this story reveals how in the evolution of the map, and by extension, our desire for comprehensive comprehension, true precision is a futile goal. Mapping works on the assumption that there is a whole to be represented; without some abstraction, the map is useless. While any attempt to render an entirety will prove as untenable as the Empire’s tattered map, these efforts serve to illuminate what can’t be encompassed. Actual attempts at
amassing total knowledge, the constant revising of digital maps of the Internet, reflect our desire
to capture a whole, but, “…inevitably, these grand ambitions serve to make us newly aware of
what is missing, what we can’t contain”. Any collection of knowledge is best characterized by
what has been excluded, as well as included. Stephen S. Hall contemplates, in his essay on
personal geographies, “I, Mercator,” “… the most important thing a map shows, if we pause to
look at it long enough, if we travel it widely enough, if we think about it hard enough, is all the
things we still do not know.” While the attempt to represent the whole world is unattainable, it
does illuminate that which is unrepresentable; revealing just how much we can’t include in a
cohesive picture.

The map serves to define chaos with some sense of order. The logic of the order need
not be scientific, but any operational principle by which to orient yourself. For Hall, whether it
is scientific, fictional or personal, the map serves to define a space, a sense of home. He states:

…We need some secure oasis of order, even if only a memory (or a fiction), as a home
port for our various explorations, our attempts to make sense of the unknown. This is the
place we call “home,” which appears on page one of every private atlas….Home is where
the lines are straight, the order clear, where even disorder seems predictable and the
displacements tolerably temporary. And perhaps that is why when disorder invades the
home – when illness, death, divorce, or any of the dozen domestic estrangements upsets
the order – our metaphors for the ensuing emotional distress are so often geographical:
we are lost, disoriented, have lost our bearings, we are at sea.”

To map is to quell disorder, to orient oneself. It is a quest for more a location, but a bearing
within a landscape. For Hall, this need for knowing one’s bearing is:

“…a kind of transcendent orientation that asks not just where am I, but where do I fit in this
landscape? Where have I been? …And what pattern, what grid of wisdom, can I impose on my
accumulated idiosyncratic geographies?” Hall terms this act ‘orientating’, a kind of
“…crashing through larger landscapes of memory and experience and knowledge, trying to get a
fix on where we are in a multitude of landscapes that together compose the grander scheme of
things”. Mapping is a process by which we sort through our own systems of knowledge and experience, and fix ourselves in relationship to them. Thus, to look at a map is to see the conflation of the maker’s experience with that which is mapped; to make a map is to map oneself. Perhaps in Khedoori’s drawings, the drawn spaces tenderly rendered at the interior of a vast emptiness are the “home” to which Hall refers. The detailed and articulated architectural spaces are the fragment of the void that is familiar and knowable to the artist; they are the sites of the drawings where the order is clear and things make sense. Turchi elaborates, “…To chart the external world is to reveal ourselves – our priorities, our interests, our desires, our fears, our biases. We believe we’re mapping our knowledge, but in fact we’re mapping what we want – and what we want others – to believe”. The map does more than strictly abstract a physical space; it reveals the ideology of the mapmaker. Entering the space of the map is entering the maker’s belief system, taking on the order or logic of the person or culture it emerges from. The activity of mapmaking is the construction of a world, building an architecture that frames our experience. This speaks not just to our fascination with the making of maps, but the looking and enjoyment of maps. When we look at a map, no matter its irrelevance to our sphere, we can enter another’s beliefs, another place, and escape our own perspective.
The Map-Territory Relationship

The very act of mapping is the building of an imagined space - a space that relates the physical world but is a fiction. To look at a map is to see the ideological architecture that we inhabit. The map is not the territory, but rather a representation of that which exceeds perception of the physical world. It is an architecture that reflects not simply the territory, but accumulated knowledge and ideologies. The map cannot be divided into either the real or the imagined; rather, it is a conflation of the two.

The ubiquity of the structure and organization of the map contributes to this conflation. In order for a map to be useful, the mapmaker must adhere to established mapping conventions. A useful map is one that can be easily “read,” and interpreted with very little thought. Variations persist, and with time, certain conventions go in and out of style. Portraying information clearly and legibly, no matter how complex, is in the mapmaker’s interest and intent. However, conventions that enable maps to be read are part of what lulls us into accepting them as reproductions of reality, rather than abstractions. We have become so used to reading a map a certain way that the conventions become invisible, and we begin to read the map as a direct translation of reality, rather than an artistic or scientific representation. Denis Wood writes, in *The Power of Maps*:

> The naturalization of the map takes place at the level of the sign system in which the map is inscribed. …No sooner is a sign created than it is put to the service of a myth (this is that the world displayed in the map is… *natural*). It is thus not merely that the native Americans were left off maps made by Europeans in the 16th and 17th centuries, but that the resulting surface – of trees, rivers, hills – took on the appearance of a window through which the world was seen --- *as it really was*.

As these conventions become naturalized, we become less aware of the map as an artistic construct. The map shows us the world in a way we have never seen it; colors change, irregularities simplify, a seemingly impossible viewpoint unfolds, all affects which serve to
selectively present the world from a singular point of view. However, despite these obvious abstractions, the map becomes an authoritative representation of the world, empowered by the utility of established conventions.

The map does not reflect the world, as Wood argues, but “a reality that exceeds our vision, our reach, the span of our days, a reality that we achieve no other way. We are always mapping the invisible or the unattainable…the future or the past”. For Wood, the map serves to concretize the intangible information we cannot perceive.

The world we take for granted – the real world – is made like this, out of the accumulated thought and labor of the past. It is presented to us on the platter of the map, presented, that is, made present, so that whatever invisible, unattainable, erasable past or future can become part of our living…now…here.

Despite its task to represent the land, or whatever referent, the real work of the map is “…to grapple with what is known instead of what is merely seen, what is understood rather than what is no more than sensed”. The map does not simply reflect the physical world, but rather the societal construct from which we, the mapmakers, inhabit. Whatever knowledge the map presents is not discovered, but projected from the culture of the mapmaker, “as a casting from its mold, as a shoe from its last – isomorphic counter-image to everything in society that conspires to produce it.” The map cannot be understood simply as an “accurate” window into the world; it does not merely reproduce or elucidate any reality. Rather it is a reflection of the societal constructs that produced it.

The confusion of the map-territory relationship is located in how the map, which points not at a referent but a societal construct, influences the territory. Not only does the map attempt to represent its referent, it constructs the space it represents. Broadly, we can presume that the very act of representation constructs what we perceive. Essayist Pablo Martin Pascual describes, “…the representations are not actually constructed from reality; rather it is reality which is
constructed from the representation. Representational activity is what constitutes the world”.

Not only must we acknowledge the map as a constructed abstraction, but also the activity of mapping as a system of representation that constructs the world we navigate.

The most obvious example of this conflation is the mapping of politics and property. These are lines of ideology: boundaries created not only through the physical attributes of a space, but also through a confluence of political and historical decisions. Wood notes, “Once it is acknowledged that the map creates these boundaries, it can no longer be accepted as representing these ‘realities.’” When these documents become the space we inhabit, we not only navigate the space of the map, but a sociopolitical space. We begin to inhabit this ideological architecture, a space that may be analogous but in no way reflective of the terrain. When conflated with the real, it is very difficult to see outside this architecture. The map becomes a document not of the physical world, but the world we inhabit - a combination of the real and the imagined, the tangible as arranged by the societally constructed. The map becomes a kind of augmented vision into our environment, a lens into the space between the real and the imagined, making us present to the architecture built by the map.

This condition is expressed at its extreme in the cultural theory of philosopher Jean Baudrillard. He sees the activity of mapmaking as indicative of a condition beyond representation. In the essay “Simulation and Simulacra,” Baudrillard describes how “the map engenders the territory” as a metaphor for his theory of the precession of simulacra. For Baudrillard, the real is irrelevant, as culture has replaced it with simulations. We no longer live in or interact with reality, but in a world filled with signs and symbols of reality. Media and culture constructs these simulations to form our perceived reality. The map is representative of this condition; no longer does the physical space determine the map, as it might seem, but quite
the opposite. The space of the map is the world we live in; we refer to the abstraction instead of the territory. For Baudrillard, we have lost the “representational imaginary,” the former relationship between the “magic of the concept and the charm of the real”, from where the impulse for mapmaking derives.

While this theory of simulation might be best used to discuss the acceleration of our technological media culture, it also speaks to the growing tension between the real and representational. Whether the map is actually preceding the territory, or the two have just become inseparably intertwined, any clear distinctions between the real and the imaginary have become blurred and for the activity of mapmaking, inappropriate. As we critically examine the map outside of the conventions of the practice, it becomes apparent that there never was a formal one-to-one relationship of the map to the land. Despite its intent to represent the physical world, its true function has always been to represent the ideological lines and organization that lie upon the land itself, like Borges’ perfectly accurate map. The map represents a mash-up between historical, political and natural features, making up the world through which we actually navigate.
The Age of Un-Discovery

With the advent of digital satellite technologies, the distinction between the map and the territory has become even more complicated. The map is now the same size as the territory, and inhabits the same space, albeit a virtual one overlaid upon the physical world. For the contemporary mobile map user, the map is the space we navigate. We glance up from smartphones to verify that the physical space in fact does match the satellite imagery we are walking through. No matter how technically sophisticated these interactive maps are or how closely they resemble the real world, they are still abstractions, constructed virtual spaces that we inhabit instead of the real thing. We are tied to these abstractions and have become more entrenched in this virtual space than ever before.

In 2012, a group of Australian scientists aboard the *Southern Surveyor* noticed discrepancies between several maps, among them the digital satellite imagery of Google Maps, and decided to sail to the site of the discrepancy to investigate. Upon arriving at 19°15' S 159°55' E, in between Australia and New Caledonia, they discovered only ocean, with no evidence of any landform having ever been present. The mass they had been looking for, Sandy Island, had been present in maps for centuries, which at forty-five square miles would have been roughly the size of Manhattan - not a landmass that would easily go without notice (Figure 5).

This is not the first island to have been proved to be nonexistent, but the first one in at least a hundred years and in the digital age. Although Sandy Island had been noticed before to be a phantom, this survey was the first time the news reached the greater cartographical community. This illustrates quite literally Baudillard’s metaphor, wherein the referent is subsumed by its simulation. In fact, no original ever existed. Sandy Island illustrates how the real becomes irrelevant, as we prefer to only contend with its fiction, depicted by the map. A
landform has been simulated through a technological system of representation that so closely imitates the physical world that it replaces it. Google Earth, the premier satellite digital map, covers the earth as in Borges’ short story *On Exactitude in Science*, wherein the map of the empire is made to the size of its territory and has become the very thing we navigate, not the territory itself. It is not unusual, with the ubiquity and prevalence of GPS mobile mapping, for the user to expect the land to be in accordance to the map, not the other way around.

Soon after the discovery of Sandy Island’s non-existence, the National Geographic Society and Google maps struck the landmass from the record. The island was expunged from most digital maps, through not completely eradicated. Artifacts remained within the digital code; initially a black punched-out hole ripped through the fabric of Google maps at the location of the imaginary island (Figure 6). At the time of this writing, mobile maps still show unnamed territorial outlines where Sandy Island once was labeled (Figure 7), and bulges in the blue ocean of the satellite imagery, in the exact shape of the phantom island (Figure 8). Within the maps that purport to have charted the entire globe in the most accurate sense - through satellite imagery - ghosts of the island still exist. Sandy Island did not just disappear as if it never existed; it was *un-discovered* – as in a time when the full erasure of information is difficult, a digital memory remains.

If exploration is the act of putting our world together, then the case of Sandy Island represents the act of taking it apart. The island was *un-discovered*, leaving an archeological remain within the map where it once existed. Throughout the Age of Discovery, the act of *un-discovery* was necessary to sort through the flood of accurate and imagined accounts gathered from the fringes of territories. Now, in the information age, it is a rupture in the map of the world, the map that is possibly more real than the land itself. It is a glitch not in the code, but in
our culture. Generally, we consider exploration to be the act of discovering or entering an unknown territory for the first time, the broadening of the edges of our empire. It is the act of putting together our world, forming the map that dictates how we conceive of our territory. Sandy Island is representative of a shift from discovery to un-discovery, from the world being formed to unformed.

This un-forming seems at home within the fragmentation that characterizes our post-modern age. The splintering and deconstruction of grand narratives into multiplicities, from one to many, is analogous to the act of un-discovery. It is the breakdown of any one true meaning. However, within the ruins of fragmentation is the potential for rebuilding. By creating alternate spaces, we can construct from within a fractured world. The impulse to world-build is born of this desire to pick up the pieces, and in this case, imagine prismatic worlds instead of any one grand narrative.

Artist Robyn O’Neil does just that; her large-scale graphite drawings depict vast desolate landscapes, inhabited only by a group of unremarkable middle-aged men. These characters are subject to their hazardous environment, in danger of some impending apocalypse. In her 2003 work, *Everything that stands will be at odds with its neighbor, and everything that falls will perish without grace* (Figure 9), sweat suit clad middle-aged men perform mundane tasks amid an environment that threatens to destroy them. Curator and critic Shamim M. Momin places O’Neil’s work in the trajectory of artists who “…construct alternative worlds to embrace the absurd chaos of our existence, and in so doing provide a prismatic view of a reality become increasingly dangerous and alien”\(^\text{25}\). For Momin, this is a reaction to the effect of post-modernism, as “…simplified versions of reality have begun to collapse under the weight of the fractal complexity that defines our ‘post-everything’ world”\(^\text{26}\). However, for this trajectory of
artists, there is potential in this new condition, the possibility to construct anew from the
fragmentation of post-modernism, to pick up the pieces from the ruins. O’Neil’s world is filled
with chaos and uncertainty but is not wholly without hope. Despite the implied anxiety about
this world, Momin sees “…a renewed desire for passionate engagement and re-enchantment”27.
For O’Neil, an alternate world is a space for re-building, for sifting through the fragments
shattered by post-modernism, and remaking in a way befitting to this new environment.
Critical Analysis of Work

My work investigates the relationship of the real and the imagined, exploring the conflation of the two as a state of limbo. My drawings use the map as an expression of that liminal state. The resulting images are representative of the architecture that we navigate instead of the map itself, suspended between fact and fiction. They employ blank space as an active silence, a negative space that inquires to an unknown whole. The images attempt a similar end to the strategy of un-discovery - a kind of deconstruction that, in effect, rebuilds.

The series We Do Not Profess To Construct Planets is comprised of drawings on large white paper, similar to Toba Khedoori’s work, with rendered elements surrounded by the emptiness of the blank page. The elements of the drawing float, seemingly unhindered by a ground or gravity. A combination of photocopy transfer, pencil drawing and watercolor is used to render the drawn components. The images start with an appropriated reference, removed from its context, and manipulated in scale, form and color, through digital means, the process of photocopying, and by hand. The photocopy serves as a provisional matrix, reworked in multiple iterations and further altered once transferred onto the drawing itself. The resulting aesthetic is referential to early print ephemera, often employing a palette and visual language reminiscent of early architectural drawing, naturalist lithographs, and traditional scientific illustration.

The blank spaces of We Do Not Profess To Construct Planets are charged with meaning. By leaving much of the composition ostensibly empty, the emptiness becomes an active character of the pictorial space. Each drawing proposes its own lacking; by leaving so much of the composition out, the viewer must search for the reason behind its emptiness. As Turchi notes:

Just as a visitor to Rome can’t help but stop and imagine what the Forum looked like at various earlier times, and a viewer of the Elgin marbles is led to an appreciation of the
Parthenon as it once was, the reader of fragmented work is encouraged, and in some cases required, to fill in the blanks – to take part in that act [of]… “imaginal adventure”

The blank space forces the viewer to impose upon the drawing, to finish the image mentally onto the empty parts of the page. The abundance of negative space further forces the viewer to acknowledge the complicity of blank space in spatial representation.

The blank space speaks broadly to the medium of drawing. As Emma Dexter notes in “To Draw is to Be Human,” the white background “…acts as a reserve, a blank space from which the image emerges…The reserve therefore functions as a device to keep at bay the desire for obvious structure, composition, and totality…” The act of drawing implies a certain incompleteness; it forsakes stability in exchange for fractured inquiry. Catherine De Zegher writes in “Drawn to You,” an essay accompanying the 2004 Whitney Biennial, “As drawing is largely not geared toward closure or completion, it can deal with an idea of lack as well as the phenomena of increasingly greater amounts of information”. In its ability to deal with losses of structure and stability, drawing has emerged as specially equipped to deal with the anxiety and uncertainty of a world in pieces. De Zegher notes that “…drawing meets the present-day requirements of embodying a destabilized sense of existence in a fragmented world”. The intrinsic qualities of the medium resonate with a shift in perspective, reflective of the growing need to locate oneself within an unstable environment.

In this series, the rendered elements of the composition are diagrammatic “pieces” of the natural world. Rectangular slabs of land and water, with photorealistic renderings of their surface and smooth grey sides, appear to be “cut” out of a greater whole. Their isolation in white space implies they are the only pieces visible from a grand “whitewashing” or erasure of the rest of the represented world. Either way, the world exists in pieces; it’s indeterminate whether the
world this space evokes is in the beginning of time or the end of days. It is both pre-civilization and post-apocalyptic at once.

In Survey I, cross-sections of water are organized upon a perspectival receding grid, as if these pieces have been sliced out, and the remainder of the earth has receded into the white space of the paper (Figure 10). The diagrams are repeated as multiple identical moments, and vary in scale, suggesting depth. The cross-sections depict contained areas; each “piece” is a discrete space for examination. Each block of water is a scrap of wilderness, a portion of nature that has been confined into a rational slice. The slabs are quantifiable bits of water, denying their fluid nature. They are enveloped in the hermetic space of the white page, a spatial silence of what has been left out and deemed irrelevant to the object of inquiry.

Three male figures appear in this work, holding long poles and costumed for an earlier century (Figure 11). They are of three distinct sizes, and due to their placement, appear to recede in the distance along with the water blocks. These figures are appropriated from an early convention of architectural drawing; these particular figures are culled from the drawings of British landscape architect Humphry Repton (Figure 12). Repton, along with other architects of his time, would sketch a potential building site while men holding 10-foot poles would stand at various distances. The resulting drawing would contain its own measure of scale, giving rise to the modern practice of using an assumed six-foot tall human figure in architectural plans to provide the scale of the building. In this work, the men stand stoically in a barren scene as in Robyn O’Neil’s work, functioning dually as a pictorial device, setting the scale of the water blocks, and as the sole inhabitants of this nebulous white space. Not only do they measure their world, they act as the guards of these divvied slabs of territory, protecting their own system of measure.
In the series *We Do Not Profess to Construct Planets*, the use of the white space as an allusion to an unknown whole remains constant, while compositional strategies of these ‘pieces’ of nature shift, playing with and reframing these investigations. The drawing, *A Gray Unbroken Line*, investigates the conflation of the map and the territory through the elimination of almost all information, except the invented lines of the map (Figure 13). Pieces of water are used to visualize the boundaries of the five oceans. These are limitations that cannot be perceived in the physical world and divide what is essentially a singular body of water. On the white page, all that remains of this world is the seemingly random pieces of water that only exist in the space of the map. These pieces exist in limbo - fictional boundaries concretized in the material substance they influence. These divisions are representative of the delineations that form the architecture of the map, the structures that shape our perception of the physical world. They become the three-dimensional mapped space that we navigate instead of the place itself. It is a structure that reflects something known rather than sensed, made invisible through the naturalization of the mapped convention. This piece reveals a world comprised only of ideological lines, with the entire “real” or physical world removed. *Without the Least Vestige of Land* takes this removal to its extreme, excising most of the represented space until only a trace of the terrain is left: a boundary wall of the rocky land (Figure 14). These two pieces focus on the act of removal; disassembling the earth’s surface down to the small overlaps between the map and the territory. These boundaries are literal sites of Borges’ “accurate” map; the architecture of the map is overlaid upon an actual space, and through the intentional removal of everything else, their nature is revealed. These fragments evoke archeological ruins, the remains of ideology.
In *The Smallest World You Would Care to Inhabit*, the rectangular cross-sections of water of *Survey I* are used to rebuild the white space; multiple blocks are stacked to form structures of the same flow of water (Figure 15). The resulting structures are absurd; stacks turn into walls, corners, postmodern turrets, and blocky archways. These pieces have been excised from their original environment, and reorganized into a new, seemingly useless architecture. Here, the pieces of water that have been severed from their environment and ripped from a larger whole are used in an attempt to rebuild. *The Smallest World You Would Care to Inhabit* proposes picking up the pieces and constructing anew.

In $19^\circ15'S\ 159^\circ55'E$, Sandy Island, a quite literal example of the conflation of the map and the territory, is depicted in its state immediately after being ripped from the fabric of satellite mapping (Figure 16). It now exists floating as in a séance, caught in a limbo between the real and the fantastic. This element of the series most directly references the act of un-discovery, displaying its fictive aftermath. This reference provides one of the frames for this work, alluding to disassembling of a whole, the deconstruction described by post-modernism. However, with the removal of these elements into a blank space - be it the falsely mapped Sandy Island or the absurdly arranged stacks of water – there is revealed a reconstruction inherent to the act of deconstruction. As these pieces become unformed, they begin to build an alternate space. They propose a new structure, one not completely based in reality or fiction, but in varying degrees of both. It is in this rebuilding that we can contend with the uncertainty and anxiety of our fragmented world. Although we may not be able to conceive of the entirety of accumulated knowledge, or the vast unexplored unknowns, we may begin to rebuild with the pieces we do understand, the places on the map where order is clear. We may reform them to shift our perspective, to see through the map, to see outside it. In the building of an alternative world
through artistic invention, a fiction “invites us to inhabit its world but also to see around it and beyond it – to see our own world through it. It draws the imagination outward”\textsuperscript{32}. Through this we may gain an extended vision of the world. Through the critical deconstruction of the map, we may become aware of our perspective, and through imagination and reformation, we may propose to exceed it.
Conclusion

In the Victorian satirical novella, *Flatland*, schoolteacher and mathematician Edwin A. Abbott writes of a two-dimensional world called “Flatland”, inhabited only by geometric figures. The narrator, a square, cannot comprehend his interaction with a sphere until he travels to the sphere’s home, the three-dimensional “Spaceland”. For the square, the addition of the third dimension is completely world-altering. He describes:

> There was a darkness; then a dizzy, sickening sensation of sight that was not like seeing; I saw a Line that was no Line; Space that was not Space: I was myself and not myself. When I could find voice, I shrieked aloud in agony, “Either this is madness or it is Hell.” “It is neither,” calmly replied the voice of the Sphere, “it is Knowledge; it is Three Dimensions: open your eye again and try to look steadily.”

Although Abbott’s intent is to describe how we might experience the fourth dimension, he also succeeds in relating the sheer power of perception. Through a shift of perspective in the work of fiction, the very shape of the physical world is changed.

As we reckon with the complexity of the spaces we have constructed for ourselves, a more indeterminate picture of the world emerges. The world we inhabit is a conflation of the real with the representational; any territory we experience is inextricably entangled with the map that delineated it. Through awareness of this conflation, the map is revealed as representative of its maker, a reflection of the accumulated knowledge and ideological demarcations that influence its form.

Our age is one characterized by a predilection for deconstruction. The post-everything world not only demands dissolution of any one “big picture” of the world, but also a reckoning with the instability that arises in the aftermath of fragmentation. Now, we must negotiate inherited schemes of knowledge, and re-examine how mapmaking has formed our perception of the world.
In this respect, the artist is uniquely positioned to investigate these shifts. Being trained in matters of perception, the artist is likely to be observant of changes in how we construct meaning. Not bound to a single body of knowledge, the artist may negotiate established schemas and perceive in some new way. Through the deconstruction of established representations of our environment, the artist may form new visual representations that are not beholden to the conventions of any one discipline.

Our search for meaning in the unknown is a search for our own bearing within an unstable, indefinite environment. As the drawings of *We Do Not Profess to Construct Planets* depict, we are isolated amid the aftermath of a fragmented world. Stuck floating in an indeterminate place, we are driven to forge connections to that which surrounds us. If the desire to map is to determine where home is, wherever the order is clear, and venture into the blank space and attempt to fill it in, then the event of *un-discovery* is characterized by the seepage of blank space back into the known parts of the map. We may contend with the shift towards an indefinite picture of the world by disassembling the visual representations that structure our physical reality. Devolving a map can have the power to shift perceptions: the map forms our world, and by altering it, we alter our perspective of the world - in effect, changing the landscape. By imagining and constructing alternative spaces, we may attempt to reengage with an uncertain world.
Notes

2 Lewis Carroll, The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in 8 Fits (London: Methuen, 2000), 8
4 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Turchi, Maps of the Imagination, 131
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Hall, “I, Mercator,” 15
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
17 Wood, The Power of Maps, 4-5
18 Wood, The Power of Maps, 7
19 Ibid.
20 Wood, The Power of Maps, 18
21 Pablo Martin Pascual, “Science is Everything That Artists Call Science.” in Experimental Station: Research and Artistic Phenomena, CA2M 2011 181
22 Wood, The Power of Maps, 19
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
28 Turchi, Maps of the Imagination, 63-64
29 Emma Dexter, “To Draw is to be Human,” in Vitamin D (New York: Phaidon, 2005), 6
31 Ibid.
32 Turchi, Maps of the Imaginations, 67
Illustrations

Figure 1
Figure 2
Gregor Reisch, [Untitled Ptolemaic Map of World]. Map. 1504.
Figure 3
Henry Holiday, “The Bell-man’s Map.” Illustration from Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark (An Agony in 8 Fits)*. 1876.
Figure 4
Toba Khedoori, *Untitled (Doors)*. Oil paint and wax on paper. 1999. 138 x 191 1/2 in.
Figure 5
British Map of Sandy Island. Map. 1922.
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Current TomTom Map of Sandy Island (Standard View).
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Current TomTom Map of Sandy Island (Satellite View).
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Figure 16
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Figure 1.

Figure 2.

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Figure 6.

Figure 7.
[Current TomTom Map of Sandy Island (Standard View)]. Image from Apple Maps application powered by TomTom Maps. Personal photograph of author. April 6, 2013.

Figure 8.
[Current TomTom Map of Sandy Island (Satellite View)]. Image from Apple Maps application powered by TomTom Maps. Personal photograph of author. April 6, 2013.
Figure 9.

Figure 10
Carla Fisher Schwartz, “Survey I”. Pencil, photocopy transfer, and watercolor on paper. 2012. 47”x59”.

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13.

Figure 14.
Carla Fisher Schwartz. “Without the Least Vestige of Land” from the series, We Do Not Profess To Construct Planets. Pencil, photocopy transfer, and watercolor on paper. 2013. 48”x36”.

Figure 15.
Carla Fisher Schwartz. “The Smallest World You Would Care to Inhabit” from the series, We Do Not Profess To Construct Planets. Pencil, photocopy transfer, and watercolor on paper. 2013. 48”x36”.

Figure 16.
Carla Fisher Schwartz. “19°15’S 159°55’E” from the series, We Do Not Profess To Construct Planets. Pencil, photocopy transfer, and watercolor on paper. 2013. 48”x36”.
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