

Mapping the Earth in Works of Art

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My non-sites are like large, abstract maps made into three dimensions. You are thrown back onto the site. . . . The site is a place you can visit.
—Robert Smithson, "Earth" (1969)

1.

"Mapping the Earth in Works of Art": I start from this rather pretentious title to signal a more generous sense of what art can be in relation to the earth and to be this when considered as a mode of mapping. This is an odd venture, to be sure. How can mapping, which supposedly measures the earth in the greatest possible exactitude, join up with art, which takes up the earth (when it takes it up at all) in its inexact amplitude?

As a preliminary step, let me distinguish four basic kinds of mapping:

(a) *Cartography* is the effort to represent a given region of the earth (or its seas) in accordance with the highest precision known at any given historical moment, whether this be by means of grids (as already in ancient Chinese mapping), rhumb lines in the late Middle Ages, meridians and parallels and Mercator projections in the early modern period, or infrared photography as at present. Styles and techniques change in the history of cartography, but the attempt is always to provide representations that are at once perspicuous in image and consistent in symbolism, while being at the same time reliable and useful for anyone undertaking exploration or travel. For us today an ordinary Rand McNally atlas is the most widely available exemplar of cartography.

(b) *Chorography*. Where cartography reflects its Latin root in *c(h)artus*, papyrus, sheet, page—thus a surface of representation on which more or less accurate images or signs can be inscribed—"chorography" embodies its origin in Greek *chóra*, 'matrix', 'countryside', and above all 'region'. A thriving discipline until the middle of the nineteenth century, chorography is the mapping of *regions* of the earth, whether as defined by national or state borders or by natural configurations such as mountains or rivers. If it has undergone demise as a special industry, the rise of ecological awareness has encouraged the return of chorography in the form of maps that depict bioregions.

(c) *Topography* is the mapping of particular *places*: cities, counties, and other determinate localities. This, too, was once a distinct discipline, most strikingly in early modern Dutch and German etchings of the streets and even the individual buildings of a *Stadt* or *Ortschaft* itself, often viewed from outside the city walls or from above the city itself. Topography survives in those bland and bare representations that show only the major arteries and public areas of a certain city: downtown Indianapolis, greater St. Louis.

(d) *Body-mapping*. With this a fourth kind of mapping we leave behind altogether what is traditionally regarded as a map in the first three senses. This first emerges in abstract expressionist paintings wherein the artist's body is not merely an immediate instrument for mixing paint and holding a brush, etc., but becomes itself a means for mapping the very place which is its ostensible subject matter. The artist's body, as a whole moving mass, displays its sense of the place it paints, first in its gesticulations and then in the ensuing painted image. The gesticulations already incorporate into the body a sense of the circumambient landscape. Just as this landscape is retraced in bodily motions, so these same motions leave traces on the canvas that, rather than *representing* the landscape's precise contours, *reimplace* them on the pictorial surface. The artist who does this most effectively and dramatically is Willem de Kooning, especially in his abstract landscapes of the late 1950s and 1960s such as "Woman in the Landscape" and "Door to the River."

In paintings like these, the artist's phantom body seems to be spread out over the landscape, reinstating it by its very motions, and thereby giving us a sense of what the land (or water) feels like from close up, as the body caresses the surface of the earth. Such a body, in such paintings, *maps out* the landscape (or seascape) by extending itself into its distinctive configurations—in contrast with other more conventional forms of mapping, which in a reverse directionality map the land (or sea) back *into* the representational surface, containing it there. Instead, the body of the painter-mapper bursts the bonds of representation and projects itself ecstatically onto the landscape that is its subject matter, the materiality of the body rejoining the matter of the earth.

A sign of the divergence between this last kind of mapping and the first three I have identified is found in the fact that the latter easily combine forces, whereas bodily mapping is *sui generis*. The celebrated map by Nicholas Visser that hangs on the wall of Vermeer's "The Art of Painting" is at once

cartographic in its precision and chorographic in its representational reach: it shows the Low Countries as a coherent group of places. It is also topographic, since it depicts cityscapes along its right and left margin. A master mapmaker such as Visscher is able to put cartography, chorography, and topography together in one seamless representation. It is difficult to imagine body-mapping as an active partner of these three forms of mapping. Nevertheless, approximations exist, as we see in certain works by Jasper Johns, Mondrian, and Diebenkorn. Johns allows his bodily active painterly gestures to complicate a standard cartographic map of America. Diebenkorn, in his "Ocean Park" series, gives us quasi maps of rural land and sea as if seen from far above, his body suspended over the earth; Mondrian, in contrast, gives an abstracted yet vibrant map of New York City in his "Broadway Boogie Woogie." Johns and Mondrian and Diebenkorn—and De Kooning in a much more radical way—continue the ancient tradition of decorated maps but with the difference that the ornamental element, the fancifully figurative, is allowed to overpower the representation, with the result that the map becomes itself a work of art and the work of art a map. In more traditional maps, the decorative element remains decorous, being a factor of design deployed for the purpose of embellishment rather than the expression of a lived body in intimate contact with the surrounding landscape. When this expression becomes the primary factor, when land and body become close companions and co-creative forces, mapping of a different order is accomplished: body-mapping.

2.

Let me back up and start again. I take *earth* to be what subtends human experience; in Husserl's phrase, it is the "basis-body" for all more particular bodies that reside in or on it, whether animate or inanimate. Earth stands under the movements of our bodies, the upsurge of organic matter, and the settling down of stone. For all its vulcanism and metamorphic shifts, earth is the guarantor of all that we do on it; its felt immobility puts paltry human motions in their place; it is an ultimate place of places against which we measure the comparative instability and waywardness of whatever we humans and other animals do. Even earthquakes eventually equilibrate.

Land is something else again. Not merely is it the crust of the earth, its surface—whether as soil (for agriculture), as countryside (for viewing and painting), or as property (for possession: as "real estate"). It is also a mediatrix between earth and *world*, which I take to be the communal and historical and linguistic domain of human speech and action. Heidegger, who first underlined the earth/world contrast (albeit in somewhat different terms than I here espouse), significantly failed to single out land in his emphasis on the polemical relationship between earth and world, their unremitting struggle. I have long felt that we cannot leave matters just there—that there is an unacknowledged

edged *Zwischenraum* ("between-space") between the two epicenters of earth and world that cannot be reduced to a *Streitraum* ("space of strife"). *This is land*: the very land that is the basis of landscape painting, earthworks, the photography of nature—and of most mapping. Land is a liminal concept. It is both literally liminal—a *limen* or threshold between earth and sky in our direct experience—and liminal in the more expanded sense that it is the arena in which earth turns toward world and thereby gains a face, a *facies* or 'surface'. Land is not a surface in the sense of a mere covering, for instance, as sheer "topsoil," but, rather, in the richer sense of that which bears out its own depths. As Wittgenstein wrote in *Zettel*, here "the depths are on the surface." And just as land brings earth *out*—out into visibility in that "layout of surfaces" (Gibson) that is the experiential basis of the natural environment—so it allows earth to become imageable in paintings or photographs and intelligible in the historical deeds and language of a given lifeworld.

Land turns earth inside out, as it were, putting its material contents on display, setting them out in particular places, so as to become subject to articulation in language and to play a role in the history of those who live on it. The configuration of the local land of Afghanistan not merely expresses the character of the geological forces beneath as well as furnishing soil for wheat and poppies, but it provides redoubts for various militant forces. Land acts not just to close in (as happens when regarded as a place-of-hiding or as sheer propertyed possession) but to open out into a world of public action. That Heidegger misses this middle term—or dissolves it in one or both of his poles—is not accidental. This critical omission reflects his anti-Hegelian effort to eliminate third terms of all kinds and to conceive of human culture in terms of a Heraclitean *polemos*; it also reflects his *own* world-time, the mid-1930s: a time of mounting armed conflict and forced choices, with no compromise allowed—no middle ground, no land that is not *ours* or *theirs*. This is to adopt a dis-landed logic of closed-off options in which the specialness of a given land, as it rises from the earth and is imbued with its own history, is not recognized, much less respected.

Understandable—perhaps—as a response to the terrors of his time, Heidegger's bipolar model is nevertheless ill-equipped to deal with the multiplexity of art works in their creative alliances with maps: a multiplexity that calls for a triadic paradigm of earth/land/world if it is to begin to do justice to the specificity of place in the midst of the work—place in the form of land, the common subject of landscape paintings and of maps.

3.

Land regarded as a link between earth and world acts as the generative axis of two other closely related triads: three kinds of -scape and three kinds of work:

A. *-Scapes*. A *-scape* is a bounded view of a scene of some sort. It is place or region seen from somewhere by a looking body, a somebody who is acting on his or her epistemophilic interest, a curiosity about and a wish to know better the surrounding world. There are as many *-scapes* as there are such situations: not just landscapes and seascapes but skyscapes and cityscapes, even people-scapes and buildingscapes (the sudden destruction of which latter in lower Manhattan was central to the horror of September 11). There are three traits of *any -scape*: scope, scrape, sheath.

(i) “Scope” signifies the exhibited breadth and depth of any given perceptual scene, its extensivity or outspread, its range. This is a resolutely visual parameter, and it includes a factor of active looking: “scoping out,” as we say. To scope out is to seek out the limits of a perceptual scene, whether these limits be the walls of the building in which we are located or the horizon of the landscape in which we are placed.

(ii) By “scrape” I refer to the action of digging into a surface, scooping out this surface literally or figuratively, and leaving traces there: marking it down. If scoping out is the preliminary action of sensing what the boundaries of a given situation are, marking down what we find allows us to fix the features we discover. It is an essentially linear action that can occur by setting stones into the earth to establish property lines—or else by the drawing of literal lines in engravings of the landscape. It is also integral to maps, which consist in congeries of lines etched on the surface of a cartographic, chorographic, or topographic representation, or (in the case of body-maps) gesticular lines of movement traced upon a canvas that stands in for (without attempting to represent) the circumambient landscape.

(iii) “Sheath” names a group of qualities or things that act as an enclosing surface. We perceive a *-scape* of any kind in terms of fascicles of particular items, each with its own distinctive set of traits: trees and hills, buildings and streets, even the waves of the sea. Not unlike *chóra* in Plato’s *Timaeus*, these clusters present themselves as more or less coherent *Gestalten* which, taken together, constitute the surface of what we perceive at any given moment. The world is rarely if ever entirely helter-skelter in its appearance; it comes sheathed, as it were, in bundles of like entities, or at least of entities gathered together in turn in the same region.

As a matter of scope, as sheathed in its surface effects, and as calling for the scraping motions that will specify or represent it, every *-scape*, every place-scape, singles out a portion of the known world, the *oikuméné* (as Greek cartographers called the mapped world). Each such *-scape* presents part of this world, where “part” signifies integral feature and not detachable piece: *Teil* rather than *Stück*. More exactly, each landscape (or seascape or cityscape: all varieties of place-scape) is what Merleau-Ponty calls a “total part”: a part that adumbrates and finally includes the whole as if by massive condensation or

concentration. This accounts for the sense that by looking into a given *-scape*, however delimited, we somehow grasp the earth or the world as a whole: that we are not just seeing *this* particular part, rich or dense as it may be, but a larger totality—here detotalized in a regional fragment. The result is precisely what I would call “earth-scape” and “world-scape,” the two primary modalities of all place-scapes:

Earth-scape is the earth construed under a certain aspect, its detotalized totality as viewed from somewhere in particular, or else in a representation that depicts it in terms of a region or set of places. Characterizing every earth-scape is its sheer stability, the sense that it will remain after any experience or representation of it; the bearing up of the earth under our living and looking bodies, its always being under foot; the earth-arc: not the horizon but the receding of earth as it recedes *toward* the horizon from the place where we are viewing it; a factor of closure, whereby it always reaches a more or less determinate end, whether effected by the horizon or by the limits of a region; and its sheer materiality, as this presents itself in the form of mega-things such as mountains or miniscule items such as bushes.

World-scape, in contrast, is a non-enclosed, ever-expanding totality. What matters in a world-scape is the opening up and opening out of a scene, a panoramic sense of unending space (and sometimes also time). Instead of the stability and subtendance operative in an earth-scape, its very gravity, here there is an alleviated and even ethereal aspect: as if the perceiver’s look could go on and on and on. In an earth-scape I am always situated just *here*, where my lived body is located, and acutely aware of how much what is over *there* opposes me as a *Gegen-stand* or would be arduous to reach in the form of literal “countryside,” a word in which we can hear “contra.” On the other hand, in a world-scape I feel that I am already over there, out there, at the horizon or beyond: the limited has become the undelimited, the heavy the light, the supportive the unsupported. It is the difference between Constable or Rousseau on the one hand, and, say, Cézanne or Pieter Breughel on the other: the former two painters securely locate us and even confine us, the latter open our gaze onto a veritable world of possibilities beyond those actually represented.

Despite the manifest differences between such painters—and despite the conceptual differences between earth-scape and world-scape to which I have just pointed—we would still say that each of them offers to us a *landscape* in some significant sense. This is surely a striking fact. It is as if “landscape” continues to exhibit the same power of intermediacy which I have ascribed to land in relation to earth and world. Whatever the undeniable differences of *-scapic* genre to which earth- and worldscapes give rise, any particular landscape painting will to some significant degree combine traits of both: the stability as well as the ethereality, the bearing up from below as well as the opening out beyond the ostensible boundaries. The same is true of the perceived landscape: it exhibits both tellurian and cosmic dimensions, parts that

close in on themselves and factors that move ever outward such as the sky or the horizon—not surprisingly, for it is precisely land that links the two dimensions, being the mediatrix of their very difference. The partialism of every -scape—of earthscape as self-enclosed and bogging down, of worldscape as ungrounded in its very outgoingness—is redressed in the embrace of landscape, perceived as well as painted. Being itself a view, landscape has its own partiality—its own scope and mode of sheathing, its own schematic signature—but it is itself a total partiality that encompasses that from which it is nevertheless distinguished.

B. *Works*. “Earthworks” and “worldworks” also meet in the middle term of “landworks.” By “earthworks” I refer mainly to such prehistoric constructions as burial mounds or ziggurats—all that Hegel would call “symbolic” in their outsize (and now empty) power. But the Nazca lines and the pyramids are also literal earthworks, fashioned as they are from the earth itself. “Worldworks,” in contrast, are of cosmic scope and find their paradigmatic instances in star charts and maps of the whole world as we know it at any given historical moment. If the prototypical period of earthworks is that of the pre-modern, that of worldworks is the modern era—when knowledge of the non-European world became the obsession of many European nations.

Post-modern in contrast are “landworks,” which I construe as those imaginative artworks which have been created by artists such as Robert Smithson or Michael Heizer or Andy Goldsworthy, each of whom creates artworks set in extraordinary locations and often made from equally unusual materials (leaves, branches, ice: anything to hand in Goldsworthy’s case). Such landworks are not only of contemporary art-historical interest but manage to combine, in innovative manners, features of earth- and worldworks, and are often works of art and maps at the same time (as Smithson, for one, has affirmed). They truly map the earth in works of art by virtue of modifying the surrounding landscape in ways that challenge our accustomed modes of visual experience.

4.

After so much distinguishing and ranging as broadly as I have done in this chapter, I would like to draw some at least provisional conclusions. I shall do so in six points.

1. My primary distinctions—after a preliminary survey of four modes of mapping—concerned the two parameters of -scape and work. In each case I contrasted an earthly and a worldly species, and then argued that landscapes and landworks manage to negotiate otherwise diremptive differences. Moreover, the very ideas of “-scape” and “work” are themselves importantly complementary in character. A work intensifies what is already happening in a -scape of any kind. It does so by re-materialization, as it were. The working of the work is

hand-work and tool-work—arduous body-work—but it is also and above all vision (design and plan but also inspiration) on the part of artists or mapmakers alike. These various creative manners of working shape and reshape what is already delivered spontaneously to the artist’s or mapmaker’s perceiving body in any given -scaped experience: and every human experience is so -scaped. It is as if the insertion of the lived body into the perceived world, its fragile position on earth, calls for the work of painting or mapping to consolidate and configurate what would be at once too confined and too confused to count as an artwork or mapwork at this most primitive level of human experience. This model is not polemical: -scapified experience and the work that ensues or intervenes are not engaged in a battle with each other but, instead, solicit each other and reach their own optimal state only in conjunction with the other pole. Between the poles there is tension and difference but not strife. *Methexis*, not *polemos*, rules.

2. An alliance of another kind occurs between work and world. This is an Arendtian theme, but now transferred from the publicity of the *polis* to the shared intimacy of aesthetic experience. Both work and world infuse cultural/historical/political dimensions into art. The -scapic—the bodily, especially in its visuality—carries the earth into the work: that is its distinctive contribution. But the work would not be altogether a *work* were it just the reworking of what perceiving (and especially viewing) offer, whether first- or second-hand. The contribution of world is to take the transmission of what has been sensed -scapically and reshape it in terms of a local or (in our time increasingly) a global culture: which means to make its expressivity sufficiently articulate to render it transmissible to others and not just to one’s sensing body. *This is to make it (into) a world*: fashioning both its own world of more or less coherent meaning and linking it to other worlds as well (i.e., the worlds of others as well as other kinds of worlds such as literary or cinematic or art-historical worlds, not to mention culturally diverse worlds).

3. Let me make it clear that I am not rejecting Heidegger’s framework of earth and world as the ultimate epicenters of art but am letting it stay in place to show how, at every turn, it must be supplemented—and, finally, how it is undermined from within. It is supplemented by pointing to the way in which the earth pole is not a single place or force but itself gathers several factors in its midst: most notably, the -scapic modalities as realized by the active agency of the lived body. The world pole in turn is constructively complicated by recognizing its affinity with work and vision. In this way we start to fill out what remains abstract and formulaic in “The Origin of the Work of Art”: for example, world as “the openness of the Open” or earth as the “self-seclusive.” What is called for is a much more resolute commitment to the concreteness of art—and of mapping as its long-lost cousin.

To honor this commitment, I introduced the admittedly awkward nomenclature of the “-scapic,” which signifies the very particular ways in which such

downright specific actions as scoping out, marking down, and sheathing are accomplished. "Work," by the same token, points to quite specific means of grappling with materials and views, media and intentionalities. Heidegger himself has shown this brilliantly in his analysis of the work-world in *Being and Time*—a world set up by the stringencies of the ready-to-hand and its complex entourage of references and regions.

It is not accidental, then, that I singled out the régimes of the -scapic and the work (indicating their various avatars) in the middle part of this essay. This was a way of showing that any theory of art necessitates these régimes, both singly and finally together. They hang together by virtue of the fact that each is a modality of the lived body, one pointing to its dynamism of vision and the other to its powers of making. Seeing is accomplished by the seeing *eye*, however culturally informed this eye may be; and working is effected by the skillful *body*, however much a creature of *habitus* this body always is. Each serves to *singularize* the body in its central role of putting the work of art together, witnessing it once it has been created, and (in most cases) offering it to some real or potential public.

4. I have argued that, beyond earth and world (and now admitting their complications and concretions), there is a factor neglected by Heidegger—and most other Continentalists who have written on art. This is *land*, which in effect deconstructs the dyad of earth and world from within. Land is a middle term, a mediatrix as odd and upsetting, as metaphysically untenable, as Platonic *chóra*. (Indeed, they are related through the linguistic fact that *chóra* can mean 'country' or 'countryside'.) Land undeniably relates closely both to earth and to world: earth subtends it from below, world extends it above. But it has its own unique form of being as depth-in-surface. It is the basis of the places and regions that fill out earthscapes; and it makes possible the worlds that are established in its midst—in cities and cultures, languages and traditions, thereby creating worldscapes. It is the primal scene in which condescend tellurian forces downward and cosmic directions outward. It is itself always singular: it is always just *this* land, located in this particular place and region and nowhere else. We are lucky to have it: no wonder we crave it so much and miss it so much when we have lost it—not just in its sheer materiality (i.e., as soil or property), but in the phenomenological fact that it is the inner frame for all outgoing and ongoing perception, a basis for personal as well as public identities: just where we are, after all, has much to do with just who we are.

5. One virtue of the model I am here proposing is that it includes not only traditional forms of art—painting, photography, sculpture, architecture—but also newer avatars such as installations and (what is called conventionally) earthworks. These latter are landed entities, either directly (as in Heizer's or Smithson's works in Utah and Arizona) or by displacement (as when the floor of a gallery or museum becomes the surrogate of the land without). At the same time, this model allows us to understand why mapping is so closely

affiliated with so many such art forms, traditional or contemporary—why the artist is always mapping out some landscape, perceived or imagined, and why conversely so many maps can be considered artworks. The inner link is effected, once again, by the doublet of -scape and work as enacted by the human body. An apogee is reached, once again, in the extraordinary case of body-mapping as practiced by de Kooning or Diebenkorn, Johns or Mondrian.

The case of mapping, less pondered by philosophers, calls for extra emphasis. Every map, however ambitious its aim (e.g., in the case of what was once called *cosmographia*, "world maps"), still takes up its own point of view and thus has its own -scapic determinacy; and every map is a work, whether realized by hand or by the most advanced technological means. The mere fact that most maps are representational—indeed, are explicitly cartographic in intent—and are meant for practical use should not mislead us: every map is a delimited take on the region it represents by means of the work it sets forth. And every map finally reflects some particular bodily engagement, if not that of active exploration, then that of drawing and reproducing. Just as there is no painting or earthwork without bodily performance, so there is no map without some analogue of this same kind of enactment. This becomes overt in body-mapping, but it is tacitly present in chorography and topography—and even, by displacement and sublimation, in the most advanced cartography.

6. I would like to point, finally, to two outcomes of contemporary interest. For one thing, the centrality of land allows us to recognize that every art work—and every map—has significance for environmental issues. If land is indeed the pivot of earth and world, then the manner in which it figures into art and maps will always be revealing: it will present our experience of the natural or built environment to us in novel and suggestive ways that bear instructively on how we are to manage our life on earth. In this sense all art, and all maps, are environmental. For another thing, the conjunction of work and -scape in the landed heart of art and maps means that the factor of place—always at stake in matters of land—regains renewed importance in our appreciation of these two distinctive but not disjunctive modes of human creation. Heidegger's earth is nowhere; it is as unlocated as is the earth of the Gaia hypothesis when this latter becomes metaphysical in scope; his world is equally unplaced: just where is the openness of the Open it offers? The key is place as the "local absolute" in Deleuze and Guattari's language, or as "global locality" in McLuhan's earlier term. This has political and social consequences which we cannot afford to overlook in an age of global capitalism, rampant internationalism, and equally rampant terrorism. In this age we need to find, and to valorize, a delimited middle region where place and space, the singular and the universal, earth and world meet and conjoin not only in the specificity of artworks and mapworks for which I have been pleading here but in public actions and social works that are equally sensitive to the specificity of land.