



# MONA HATOUM

IVAM

# THE CARTOGRAPHER OF FRAGILITY

## Estrella de Diego

### On Maps

In 1976, Michel Foucault had a legendary conversation with a group of geographers. At that time, the French philosopher was mulling over the idea of the “map as instrument of power/ knowledge”; that is, the implications of potentially re-reading the map as a supremely powerful instrument of cultural and political hegemonies. Geographers had had a crucial role in the contrivance over the centuries: they were the ones that collected the information – “intelligence-gatherers”, Foucault calls them in his text – and prepared to make maps from the data, “information which was directly exploitable by colonial powers, strategists, traders and industrialists”.<sup>1</sup>

The paradox of the map lies precisely in its presentation as a pristine reality, a fixed concept – even though there is always someone who charts the map, and it is traced from one place and for another. The map is always a biographical – or even autobiographical – document, since it arises from the cultural and personal context that determines the needs and times of all cartography. This is also true of the supposed precision and lack of concessions to systems of map symbols in the eighteenth century: ultimately, what is offered is a of mapmaking as capable of manoeuvring from a position of objective knowledge.

While in previous centuries the map had been a mirror of reality, and maps were made as a utilitarian act to reach a particular location, in 1700 reality was beginning to resemble a reflection of the map itself: once the treaty was signed between England and the Netherlands, the border was literally fixed on a map, and later initialled, moreover, on the map itself turned document.<sup>2</sup> Maps inevitably have a dimension of political control.

As of the Enlightenment, maps would become the weapon of power obstinately upheld as being endowed with an irrefutable objectivity, store of knowledge and even formula for freedoms; hence, in 1798 Agust'n Esteve decided to paint Joaquina T'llez-Gir-n, the teenage daughter of the enlightened Dukes of Osuna, with her arm resting on a terrestrial globe. This was a way of drawing attention to a contemporary fashion for geography as one of the most popular branches of learning among progressive families. The globe was a status symbol and expression of an ideology. It was also the project of a social class (the progressive aristocracy of eighteenth-century Spain) which aspired to educate its children – even its daughters – in the basic principles of knowledge.

These multiple readings associated with class and ideology transform the map into a biographical project, infusing it with a certain autobiographical charge. Neither the map nor the autobiography is an unquestionably “authentic” document. Both reflect cultural translations, including transfer into a system of representation – the Western system – that was imposed through perspective, a concept that despite being crystallized during the space of a few years in Italy at the start of the 1400s signified much more than the mere creation of a new visual system. Perspective is a means of imposing order on the world. It is no coincidence that it emerged precisely at the time when the first modern maps were being produced, maps that already looked quite a lot like today's.

In any case, maps are traced from personal histories, for while it is true that the origins of the map can be found in a very early human need to move from one place to another, to describe the road leading from one place to another and ensure a safe return home, it is also true that life stories – the journeys taken by certain groups, forced by circumstance to abandon their place of origin – have gradually reshaped the habitual readings of mapmaking.

We chart the world we see, and we see the world that we chart. The modus operandi of the mapmaker down the centuries has been to piece together a world map based on the fragments submitted by travellers who, like someone who sends postcards full of jumbled information in no particular order, described their impressions and measures of the world in snippets of coastline, stretches of river, the tips of mountains...

The work of the cartographer was, then, a supreme effort of synthesis – and, at times, imagination – based on other people's notes and second-hand news. This was a game of approximations that generated the fiction of a particular reality with a concerted effort to separate errors from successes, to distil contradictory information in a painstaking task that meant selecting pieces of other people's journeys – of other people's lives, ultimately – and fit them together to construct a collective gaze that inevitably bore the deep imprint of a subjective gaze in the infinite exchange of gazes that makes up all autobiographies.

It happens in every autobiographical endeavour: we think we are talking about our own life but we end up talking about the life of somebody else, simply because to speak about life is to speak about the people we were before, people with whom we share neither time nor space. That is why looking at a map, seeking the fragments of our existence in it, is a curious form of writing our own autobiography.

## Maps for Times of Pandemic

At its heart, the map is part of the autobiographical project because it is through maps that we represent the place we belong to, the very idea of forming a community. The map represents us (it is the illusion of us) and it forges a certain sense of belonging – or exclusion. The borders it outlines are a fine line that draws us into – or cuts us out of – this diagram, reducing the most complex issues down to simplicities. Maps give the steady sensation of an ordered world.

Of course, this capacity to yield a schematic world free from complications provides ample justification for the substantial success of the map with the general public throughout history, explaining the eternal fascination evoked by atlases and *mappa mundi*. “Around the World in a Day”, cried the slogan of the Colonial Exposition of 1931 inaugurated in Paris, the event that left the Surrealists so unimpressed: yes, the world was on hand at the Bois de Vincennes park... rendered in papier-mâché. But for many, having access to a carefully selected and miniaturized reality was enough. It was something else maps offered.

But Mona Hatoum's gaze is unlike that of the majority, and even less so when it comes to maps as the construction site of preconceptions to do with belonging, absence, territory, home, exile, displacement, flight, return... Hatoum is suspicious of the cartographer's strategy, that ability to design the world in the image and likeness of a flat reality where mountain peaks only arise from the surface in tiny, rough creases and rivers are blue lines, borders delicate strokes of the quill: sinuous, immovable, free from conflict.

Mona Hatoum looks for the faults in this well-groomed, false order of maps, and the formulas that reveal these faults. She does this in *Routes* (2003), a set of drawings from an ongoing series of works on paper that she based on route maps from inflight magazines. She wishes to expose the fragility of maps, which is, in turn, the same fragility implicit in the discourse generated by the map itself, the aforementioned semblance of control. And so she rummages around in the pocket of the seat in front of her on the plane and pulls out the inflight magazine to scrutinize the ideal world it dispenses to bored passengers. These are the moments just before take-off or landing when we pass the time in times of transition, when we find ourselves in between spaces that are also suspended, in the present continuous, in a negotiable space – coming or going. These are moments of detachment in which each map ends up being an advert for an imaginary future that is out there inhabiting some cartographic enclave. Or for a likely past, which is much the same thing, after all.

Hatoum must also feel tempted by that particular debate surrounding the notion of “autobiography” so fashionable today and shared by biographies less turbulent than her own, which is a life story that has been cited ad infinitum and is well known by all: the artist catapulted into no man's land by war and displacement and her subsequent exile, lack of a homeland, even. Nevertheless, in spite of her own story the autobiographical elements of Hatoum's work are slippery, vague, complex – “everybody's autobiography”, as Gertrude Stein – might say, since we are all displaced by the insulting exactitude of the map. Perhaps Hatoum's maps speak more of time than space, given that her disruption of the fixed nature of the map hones our gaze in on aspects of passage.

In that instant before take-off or landing in each biography, we are suspended in a kind of no man's land, between places – in *no places*, to use the term coined by Marc Augé. When we fly, when we are just about to leave or reach a destination, we dream of being someone else – at least, on the map. The map opens up the infinite possibilities for change offered by flight: time is dislocated with no three-dimensional reference point in space.

The glossy paper shares glimpses of a charming city and the strategic places that one might visit in it, playing the conventional game of consumption that holds sway over air travel and seeks to simplify matters that are far from simple using schematic representations. This also happens with the safety instructions placed in the same pocket as the magazine which render in easy-to-understand pictograms actions on which our very lives might depend in the event of an accident. The brilliant Gombrich wrote about these instructions many years ago as another space for reflecting on the act of representation, which is the crux of the map and our readings of it, the breeding ground for Hatoum's concerns regarding maps.

There are those maps, nestling synthetic in the back pages of the inflight magazine. They go from bigger to smaller, smaller to bigger depending on the company, offering a fragment of a whole: a whole country, continent, the world. On each map, in a perverse brag of representation, the coloured lines (often red) join up the destinations. The endeavour seems innocent enough: some tidy lines explain the routes, helping us order our thoughts, perhaps. They give us a false sense of security, familiarity, everything-onhand: just like the pocket globes that became popular in the mid-sixteenth century and were the object of a grand passion among the British. The world was within one's grasp in a portable format for a certain class of European intellectual.

In opposition to these miniature terrestrial globes for British gentleman of the modern era (putting the world in their pocket) in *Hot Spot* (2006) Hatoum gives us a gigantic globe, the world traced on an aluminium cage in

delicate neon lights that captivate us with their massive energy and incandescent aura. In the artist's own words, "The idea behind this work for me was that the 'Hot Spots' or spots of conflict these days are not limited to certain areas of disputed borders, but it feels like the whole world is caught up in conflict and unrest."

But to return to the maps on the glossy pages of the corporate magazine (between dream trips and duty-free products), they reinforce the rhetoric of shelter, that accursed return to childhood when the world was as expansive as the one contained in the atlas. Back to the hours poring over the *mappa mundi*, studying lakes, coastlines, mountains...

The maps that Hatoum acts on in her work are unscathed by geographical accidents – or the scars are camouflaged by the routes encouraging us to embark on more journeys. The aeroplanes come and go, criss-crossing the page, turning the flashing spots on the pilot's flight control panel into neat little lines. In the vicinity of Heathrow, JFK, Zurich, Beijing or Madrid, the dots on these screens used to accumulate in real time to the point where they cancelled each other out. In the end, there'd be great patches of light in which specific points were lost, melting into a dense glowing mass a far cry from the ordered routes in our magazine. Now, in the middle of a pandemic, the screens are almost still: now, few planes still cross the skies. These are the maps for our times of pandemic, which make the graphics on the glossy pages – and their perverse play designed to flatten the world and force it into two dimensions, with all that implies – more absurd than ever.

In fact, we tend to forget that proper map-reading requires a learning process, even though we are led to understand that it something that comes "naturally", just like reading any other expression of the Western visual system. This does not work for many cultures that cannot interpret the two-dimensional representations that we manage with ease. Perhaps due to this peculiar position in the Western visual system, Richard Wollheim decides to use the map as one of his examples when reflecting on the nature of "representation". What is a "representation"? he asks. His is a reflection on the vague nature of the term itself, the idea that all those things that appear to be a "representation" actually reside on the borders of "representation".

That is what makes Mona Hatoum's interventions on the maps and their straight, precise lines so radical: this intervention on an inflight magazine – just like her other actions involving maps – is a stark reflection of this idea that everything that seems to be a "representation" is closer to what inhabits the borders of "representation". On proposing an apparently innocent game – the artist colours in the gaps between one route and another to create a kind of op-art hallucination echoing the Argentinian artist Julio le Parc— she underscores the most drastic erosion of what the map represents in general, and in this context in particular. She converts the familiar map into a strange place, breaking the banks of the networks that would allow us to travel in a straight line – almost.

In her hands, the innocent map – and domination of the globe via the airways – shatters into a thousand pieces. Her hands occupy and dislocate the map. They saturate it; they tear it to shreds. Hatoum returns to the holes in maps in 2008 with *Baluchi (blue an orange)*: "A traditional oriental carpet looks as if in a state of disintegration as large patches of the weave appear to have been moth-eaten or somehow worn-out. On second glance one can see that the apparently random patches come together to form a recessed world map seen from above", reflects the artist. So here is the map as the meticulous work of moths that chose to represent the world on the carpet. Here, we can also see something like the representation of home, the hearth, the journey, belonging... Once again, a failed representation of the dream of the "Orient". And it is carpets that unpick the route as a real journey in *Twelve Windowa (2012-13)*, offering itineraries rendered in tapestries connected together to create a metaphorical route.

In the end, every map ends up in tatters one way or another, and in opposition to neat maps on glossy pages, in *3-D Cities (2008-10)* – an installation featuring maps of three cities (Beirut, Baghdad and Kabul) mounted on boards connected by wooden trestles - Hatoum gives us turbulence, dislocating the lines by giving them volume in an ostensibly innocent play that actually transforms every destination into a kind of target for fighter planes flying over the cities. But perhaps the turbulence that the artist sets out in *Routes* - the inflight magazine maps – was just a dress rehearsal for other dainty and lethal systems. In her art, halfway between paradox and metaphor, Hatoum responds brilliantly to control as a lack of control: maps could tell us things they keep secret.

Perhaps this is pure rhetoric. But Hatoum's incisive action not only unpicks the map and the essence of maps; it also highlights the ultimate impossibility of representation advanced by cartography, perhaps because Hatoum knows all about journeys and borders and the trickery of representation on those borders, which slip between her fingers and feet and eyes and thought as she fills in routes transformed into safe little lines.

Returning to *Routes*, from the early 2000s, if every reading of every map depends on time and place, I see that piece as a premonition in these times of pandemic: the map was already a holey surface then, with no journeys on it – and borders are much more than imaginary lines. I feel that these journeys today shared by everyone – anyone who totters across the world – come close to what Hatoum was literally telling us in those

maps in tatters, perhaps because representation is always just bordering on representation or perhaps because there are some concepts that simply cannot be represented. The lines on the maps in the corporate magazine that Hatoum questions seem to me today more rhetorical than ever.

### **Disrupted Territories: The Cartographer**

To oppose the map's rhetoric, Mona Hatoum focuses on the very precariousness of the immovable values cartography upholds. She's brilliant at it. Her strategy is to reveal mapmaking as vulnerable, breakable, generating a strange autobiographical space managed through maps. On maps, even. This is an autobiographical space that transcends the personal history of each person to speak of that history of "everyone" we mentioned already, echoing Gertrude Stein.

Sometimes Hatoum uses fragile materials in which the map is on the verge of succumbing to the flimsiness of its fabric. *Projection* (2006) has a beautiful, unstable quality that entirely wipes out the assertiveness of the *mappa mundi*, every component taken by surprise by the perishability that subverts the whole, the surfaces of continents breaking up into islands. The work, constructed in white on white, a balancing act in cotton and abaca fibre – materials and their behaviour have always been important to Hatoum – yields a vision of the world based on the Peters projection, a more equalitarian way of representing the areas of the world which have been referred to ever more frequently in recent years. It is a thrilling metaphor in which the artist returns to the theme of global warming alluded to in *Hot Spot* with its neon lights. But here, the continents seem to be sinking, becoming hollow, as if they had swapped their consistency with the water of the oceans.

This same fragility is described in the series of drawings *Mapping* (2012) – one of Hatoum's most brilliant works in my eyes, despite its diminutive size – in which the artist traces with a quill an unpicked fragment of the world on a cardboard food tray not much bigger than a sheet of paper. Hatoum traces this imaginary map on the basis of the accidental spots of fat left behind. This is a strange kind of map-making that has lost all trace of fixity – it has no edges; it is made up of interrupted islands, broken lands – to ultimately design the possibility of a new map in snippets, all muddled up like the famous Surrealist Map of the World from 1929.

Published in *Variétés*, it was a strange map with no cities where Paris ended up being France – or France, Paris, which is much the same thing, after all. Of course, this last reflection is served up on a plate for anyone who wants to follow the clues. The Surrealist Map of the World made a clear allusion to the new world design sought by the members of the group, making patent the parts of the planet that interested them, erasing some borders and drawing new ones.

Hatoum also turns her attention to borders as a device for the most crushing representation of the precariousness of the world and the brittle essence of every map as an unremittingly autobiographical exercise. This precarious world, this precarious map, are explored in another of her most powerful works, *Balançoires* (2010), in which a very obvious image of childhood is overlaid with the implications that the map has for childhood itself: the whole world contained on the *mappa mundi*.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the map becomes a printed fragment on the unstable surface of swing seats on the verge of breaking with every glide.

And it's true to say that in many of her works, taking the map and autobiographical allusions associated with cartography as a starting point, Hatoum entices us into the never-ending balancing act of the displaced: in her works, we often literally play to type, revealing a vulnerability that is as evident as borders themselves. That is why the essential aspect of a work like the installation *Map (clear)* 2021 – or one of them – is not the waverings of borders, a political reflection aided by the glass marbles that move and expand to change the metaphor of the work itself, as in the case of the food tray. The most radiant thing about this work is the uncomfortable position it imposes on the visitor: one false step and the marbles would bring about a fall. The world on this map will, at least this once, disintegrate, filling up with islands and hollows.

This is the turbulence in the life story, the turbulence each individual must ride out to a greater or lesser extent, turbulence that the map hides away, instead offering us edges and outlines of places. The marbles keep rolling in the painstaking work of the cartographer, and we roll with them – even when they distort the new order in a turbulence that erases the old borders and associations with other times, other biographies. They roll again. Perhaps the only way of opposing the map is through precariousness. That is why, in these times of pandemic, this cartographer of fragility shows us the most truthful image of the world, a world in which air travel routes are no longer anything but dotted lines in an old inflight magazine. Hatoum gives us a map of ourselves, unexpected and brave, like that of the Empire in Borges's 1960 short story "The Library of Babel." In the tale *On Exactitude in Science*, the Argentinian author recalls an Empire where "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".<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Foucault, Michel. "Questions on Geography", in Colin Gordon, Ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, Pantheon, New York, pp. 63–77.
- 2 Black, Jeremy. (1997): *Maps and History: Constructing Images of the Past*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, p. 16
- 3 The map depicted on the seats of the glass swings in *Balançoires* is not the map of the world but that of Beirut with the East side on one swing and the West side on the other.
- 4 Borges, Jorge Luis. Andrew Hurley (trans.) (1998): "On Exactitude in Science", in *Museum in Collected Fictions*, Penguin Books, New York, p. 325.



