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You Are Here

Introduction by David Coggins

Photographs by Alec Soth



Alec Soth. *Cape Girardeau, Missouri, 2002*, Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

The history of mapmaking is marked by natural curiosity and imperial ambition. It's an uneasy convergence, an innately optimistic search but one directly tied to acquisitive intent. The map represents territory to conquer, treasure to discover, markets to capitalize. Once considered royal property, maps were kept secret, even burned to avoid discovery by enemies. Yet they were conceived by humanists like Erasmus who wanted to understand the world as it was, not through the blinders of church decree.

Owning a map could be considered a political act. Those who studied stars and topography asked questions that could rightly be called revolutionary. Mapmaking did more than create a reference—it often questioned religious authority itself. In describing the shape of the world, cartographers implicitly acknowledged the importance of science. That science, however, was often imperfect, and for centuries, maps often inflated the size of the maker's country. That's not strange—today, when people are asked to draw their own country, they considerably overstate its geography in relation to the rest of the world. In that sense, maps betray a sense of patriotism, even a desired national destiny.

Maps once began at home and had to reckon with the unknown. No longer. On Google Maps our movements are ceaselessly tracked by the pulsing blue light; we become the masters of our own virtual realm. This inversion locates us at the ongoing center of the world. Google Maps tells us exactly how far everything is from us, and that's become the currency of the day. We use Google Maps less as a map than as a service, a series of directions catered to wherever we are—they dictate our path, while everything else recedes away.

Recently, a friend asked to borrow a map of New England. He may well have asked to start a fire with two sticks. I realized how long it had been since I used an actual map, one that had to be read, that had to be folded. The map I gave him, in fact, had notes along the margin: the call numbers of a sympathetic radio station, the address of a bar-b-q stand in Putney, an arrow pointing to a place to fly fish off Route 4. All that can now be



Alec Soth. *Dallas City, Illinois*, 2002. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

discovered on a computer, local knowledge, acquired over years, has been instantly reduced to a search term.

And yet our interest in maps persists. There's a strain of authority in a map that artists like to undermine. Jasper Johns drained the map of its inherent cultural distinctions; without any references Wyoming becomes a rectangle, a formal concern. How could something as seemingly impersonal as a map serve an artist's signature style?

But that implies that a map is neutral. It's no more neutral than history is. Win a war and you redraw the map. Victorious nations think they're lucky, but the truth will come out as decades of migration rewrite reality on the ground. Installed regimes buckle under their illegitimacy. That's not to say that borders have no meaning—ask a Canadian. Borders mean different things to people standing on either side of them, or there would be no traffic waiting to get into California from Mexico.

Modern technology facilitates the spread of everything from empowering information to financial volatility. It also allows us to order the world around our needs, and in uncertain times there are movements to retrench. We customize our online news to filter out stories that don't interest us, then we have our views reinforced by like-minded cable opinioners. Focus groups tell TV producers they don't want to be depressed and out go reports on wars. We're left with 'news you can use' and the weather forecast. We redefine reality down to our own convenience. This encourages industries that traffic in parallel information, whether questioning where the president was born or research that claims to refute the existence of global warming. It's a conscientious decision to undermine what is science and what is fact.

We now make our way through a world of narrowing interests. We define our niche, retreat into it, and resist enlightened global engagement. When surveyed, Americans regularly overesti-



Alec Soth. *Luxont, Arkansas*, 2002, Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

mate the amount of money the government spends on foreign aid. Those who'd build a fence across the Mexican border question why it's in our national interest to encourage the textile industry in Pakistan or viable farming practices in Afghanistan. We turn our focus abroad only when violence brings the world's dissatisfaction into sharp relief. Only then do we consider how we're connected and why.

We engage with the world because we're part of it, whether for political reasons or personal ones. Artists travel to broaden their scope, from Richard Long to Alec Soth, Hiroshi Sugimoto to Stanley Brouwn. Drive across West Texas and you'll see why the light attracted Donald Judd to Marfa. Knowing that Richard Diebenkorn was a cartographer before he was a painter changes the way we look at his paintings. When Gertrude Stein rode in an airplane for the first time and looked down at the landscape she said she finally understood Cubism. Distance gives us perspective, a *real-time* assessment, that pixels can't re-create.

For centuries, maps were cultural documents made by cartographers who worked closely with astronomers, geographers, bookmakers, and voyagers. They were heroic collaborations, an ongoing pursuit to improve collective knowledge. Technology has changed all that, collapsing our sense of space and re-orienting how we engage with our surroundings. But the innate desire to understand our place in the world remains. It is as fundamental as wanting to take our first step.