Atlas of Knowledge: Anyone Can Map

by Katy Börner
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Everything is documented; everything is recorded and known. But we almost never look at it. The process of its updating is always in progress; it flows and never stops. You can’t readily take a slice through it any more than you see a vertical slice of the Thames as it flows past the headquarters of the Secret Intelligence Service at 85 Albert Embankment in London. You can’t film it or take a useful, single snapshot. We rely, then, on maps: data painstakingly analysed, collated and displayed, even if almost never in real time, showing for example how life expectancy varies with income, where cancers lie, where taxes go or how happy people are. What is normally sequentially represented or communicated (and thereby hardly communicated at all) is piled up in one place, we hope intelligibly and usefully. We can see how things change over space, time, social space, mental time, and so on.

Does this knowledge empower us? Not a lot, I should think. Real information is a difference that makes a difference, and outside of specialisms and maps of transport it’s hard to see how infographics affects us very much in the everyday world where we both fear and celebrate the map becoming the territory as we reduce the cartography of our lives and loves to that which social media allow or encourage and then complain that the map is all there is.

And yet… we know that we wouldn’t have known how horses gallop unless their movements had been sequentially recorded by Edward Muybridge, nor have understood a rocket’s trajectory had we not performed the injurious approximations of differentiation and integration. Often we do need to split continuities into bits in order usefully to see or understand them even though by so doing we risk blinding ourselves to aspects of them, getting granularities in our eyes. Maps select; then, being human, we tend to fill in the terrae incognitae with what we think we know. How we need to be discontinuous in order to perceive! How we adhere to the continuity we then invent based on our prejudices, and we all love books of things to colour in these days.

If we ask a mapmaker or analyst “Why are you showing me this?”, we might recognise that we are almost asking an art-theoretical question with certain aspects of aesthetics (but not all) removed. In fact, to ask of an image whether it shows us something in some sense worthy of scrutiny and somehow vivid for us, to ask that whilst ourselves making such an image too, is clearly not a million miles from art.

Visual thinking about complex data can enable us to evaluate it—and questioning the data in images can be enticing—but I am not in any way suggesting some old fashioned quantitative or statistical analysis of art, espoused by a few people (even today!) with whom one wouldn’t really want to have a drink. Rather the reverse, and to start in a particularly obtuse and childish way: the illustrations in this book, many of them, look a bit like art. Beautifully asymmetric stuff in glowing colours ranged around the rims of discs, diagrams of interconnectivity on backgrounds the colour of parchment, looking like a cross between Leonardo (the artist, not the journal; well…) Art & Language and Cy Twombly and with the spreading out and coming together of Terry Riley’s ‘In C’ or the Portsmouth Sinfonia.

So what, of course. This is, though it doesn’t want to be and is much else, also a coffee table book. In appreciating, however, against one’s better nature, that which is not really art, as art, we have to theorise a bit. And theorising like that in front of the representations of data (OK, maps) in this book starts one going backwards, reverse engineering: what would it be like to make art, actual art, like this? Are there things I can take from infographics, apart from but not necessarily ignoring the pretty-picturesness that might map (sorry) onto my own practice? More generally, do we have techniques, plans, methods or even habits, for taking stuff from realms outside art, and using it to make art?

Well, hello? What a daft question! Unless our art is only, exclusively, about art, all we make as artists is done, systematically or not, by, with or in spite of objects, ideas and processes from outside art. Such as, I don’t know, life. And we’re always chopping up bits of it, layering them, juxtaposing, translating or transducing them into forms that are still life but now are art too.

I suggest very strongly that reading this rather beautiful and thought-provoking book of unconventional map-making case studies will make many want to run quickly to their studios and do some art work.

Whether it contributes to the discipline of infographics I am not qualified to judge, though other reviewers certainly assert that it does. But as I have argued elsewhere, I am convinced that sometimes books (or research, models, apps and so on) from non-art domains (metallurgy, psychometrics, exobiology, paleo-linguistics…) can contribute in a rich way not merely to appearances or subject matter for art, but for ways of seeing, of thinking about, and methodologies for connecting to aspects of the world that we might otherwise ignore, and this book is a fine example.