

Atlas Über Alles: A Conversation with Alexis Bhagat and Nato Thompson

Alexis Bhagat and Nato Thompson were kind enough to spend some time with Scapegoat for a conversation about mapping, activism, teleology, property and their current work. Their respective projects, each an exhibition and a book—*An Atlas of Radical Cartography* (with Lize Mogel) and *Experimental Geography* (with Independent Curators International)—have explored the spatial turn in contemporary art and design. Scapegoat was interested in the motivations for this work and its commitment to foregrounding concerns about property within the design disciplines and artistic practices.

SCAPEGOAT SAYS: Property is the unanalyzed foundation of architecture. While it is essential to all architectural practice, rarely do we find it addressed critically in design discourse or modelled experimentally with new modes of confrontation. One of the reasons for this is quite simple: there are few “viable” anti-capitalist models in architecture. Since so much of the profession requires existing models of property for its very existence it would seem that questioning property and its various modes is also to question the very foundation of architecture.

Before we address this point directly, I would like to turn to the theme of mapping and diagramming and its central role in both of your curatorial projects. In both *An Atlas and Experimental Geographies*, there is a distinction between maps which the Institute for Applied Autonomy calls “tactical cartographies,” which are defined by their “operational value,” and maps which are in a sense tactically useless, whether they are utopian, fantastic, or diagrammatic.

NATO THOMPSON: Take a road map, for instance. A road map is meant to be user friendly, to aid getting from A to B.

ALEXIS BHAGAT: So, in terms of its politics, a road map is in cahoots with the most basic credo of activist art—getting from A to B. Utility. What’s a map? A map shows you how to get from one place to another, when you think of social change that map is very confusing, but the ideal situation is that one actually moves from one place to another. A map is trying to read the world, trying to understand and make the world legible. But it’s not the entirety of what one can do. You can also demonstrate the coercive nature of mapping, you can actually try to resist the power that mapping has on you as a person. There are ways of getting a little dot on there, to resist the utility of maps.

SS: What do you mean by the coercive nature of maps?

NT: A map gets to set up the parameters: it sets up the rules, it’s going to tell you what’s worth seeing or not, it sets out the route to take, what are the particularities, all of it is contained within this world that it sets up. What if you’re not on that map? What if the power structures that be, that make the world turn, left you off the map, what if you’re not in there and there’s no map for you to get in there? This is how a lot of dominant maps are, but it is also a way of thinking about how radical maps reposition people’s agency in a map to some degree.

Map as zeitgeist

AB: This discussion of agency brings to mind geography’s positivist inheritances, the replacement of judgment with calculation, the faith that you can accurately represent the world, and that people can make rational use of that accurate representation. This is relatively recent development: the fantastic tradition is older in geography, the contemplation of a new world. Pedro Lasch’s *Route Guides* plays with that moment of cartography’s turning point from cosmography to geography. In the 15th and 16th centuries, there were suddenly all these fantastic reports of new worlds: if you could draw them, you could name them. The apotheosis of this situation is the naming of America.

I love how *Route Guides* underscores that that act of naming can both serve power, serve the Crown, but can also be resistant or wholly fantastic. Fantastic mapping is utopian, even when it is mercantile, utilitarian too. Fantastic maps present problems for the activists who just want to get from A to B, but offer a useful practice for activists who want to subjectively picture what is going on here and now?

NT: There’s not a lot of those. I think activist culture has got too much of that damn work ethic in it, they got that Weber thing going on, good productive people, working, working, going to bed exhausted. Pragmatism as bio-power.

SS: How has cartography affected activist and artist culture?

NT: I always joke that people got so burned out on theory that they literally wanted to ground it in space. Forget Baudrillard! Where is the place you’re talking about? Let’s go visit it. The *spatial turn* came from this urge to get out of this theoretical abstraction that seemed to not have any impact on daily life. I think it came from a theoretical exhaustion on the critical left.

AB: But it’s more than that. It has to do with the times. Lize conducts a lot of mapping workshops and I remember she was shocked at one point about how everyone thinks in plan now. Ten or fifteen years ago, if you asked a school kid to draw their house, they would probably draw a house from the front. The image of home was generally based on the image of walking into it. Now when you ask kids to draw their house, they draw it out like they’d see it in Google Maps. Lize has talked to teachers and confirmed that this is an established shift that has taken place. It’s natural for people to communicate through maps because of the dominance of plan-image in our thinking now.

Moreover, so much information comes to us in network rather than narrative form. Drawing diagrams is very normal. It’s normal for someone to not have enough time to communicate some essential information in a paragraph or a story, but to have time to produce a diagram that serves the purpose.

And, there’s a third a historical analogy that I’ve been thinking about since working on this book. The heyday of conceptual art was also a time of burgeoning corporate expansion in the First World. A lot of artists at this time had temp jobs in the offices of this corporate world: What did people do in these new corporate offices? They typed things on little Index cards and A4 pages. And they needed these big file cabinets to store all the little cards and

A4 pages. The world was full of files, and people pulled from these files to produce reports so that others might make use of these Index cards and A4 reports.

Skip ahead 30 years from 1964 to 1994, and you’re at the IPO of MapInfo Systems. A massive amount of geographic data has been assembled since the mid-90s. Thousands of people have been employed in gathering, interpreting and representing all this data. When I was in college, I always met people who had summer jobs walking, biking, or driving along highways, ground truthing maps or getting GPS data for power lines and other infrastructure. Then after college, in the late 1990s, I had several friends who were employed to walk around New York take pictures of the facade of every building. These were originally sold to Hollywood to produce perfectly accurate 3-D models of New York for Roland Emmerich to destroy, but eventually this became Google StreetView. Now, think of the massive number of labourers engaged in this Borgesian project! Some of them (a lot of them, in the case of photographic work) are going to be artists, and this labour naturally would inform their artistic practice. So, I think this is another part of the *zeitgeist* of mapping.

NT: We’re talking about the growth of mapping as a kind of zeitgeist, but one of the things that’s kind of terrifying about it is the tools that are there to do this; we’ve got these new tools, and they’re mass distributed. It reminds me of the Borges story where they draw the map that’s at one to one scale with the world. That’s kind of what’s happening with data visualization right; we’ve got data, we’ve got maps, so now we’re going to map everything under the sun. Personally, I don’t care. Where are you going with all this stuff, you feel this stuff washing over you. There’s just more and more, at some point you feel like you’ve gone to one to one scale, awash in the maps of all that is.

SS: You have to wonder what the point is?

NT: The Mark Lombardi drawings of the Iran Contra Operation are really interesting but sometimes I just don’t know what to do with that information, I’m just like, yup, that’s right, those are connected, and now what, I kind of knew shit was fucked up, you know what I mean . . .

AB: The Lombardi maps aren’t really trying to tell you what to do.

NT: No, they are beautifully neurotic and detailed.

Activist maps

AB: Exactly! They portray the paranoia of it all being connected. That’s something you can do when you’re mapping connections.

NT: It’s the feeling we all have, if we just get it *all* on paper we’d crack this thing, we’d solve it, and then it’s all on paper and we’re like fuck, I still don’t feel any better.

AB: But we’re talking about activist maps right? Activist maps are really for a leftist audience, and anyone who’s a leftist now is probably suffering from this malaise that we don’t know who the ruling class is. It was all so simple in the 19th century when there were industrialists and the industrialists owned the factories. You knew they were a class because they behaved like one: they all married each other, they had an exclusive space in which to live out their lives, and the rest of the space they owned.

Since the Second World War, it’s become increasingly difficult to identify a ruling class that behaves like one. The post-colonial elites clearly played such a role in the national economies of the South, but since GATT 1994, it would appear that ownership of the global industrial system is effectively distributed through capital markets to most everyone in the northern

countries, the southern megacities. (There are holdouts of feudalism in narco-empires and petro-states, though the War on Terror has been working to incorporate these exceptional spaces into the nets of finance.) Everyone owns a piece of something, everyone’s got a share in the ownership of industrial society: if you’ve inherited a revolutionary project from the Victorian age, who are you supposed to overthrow? You have to overthrow part of yourself. That’s where the politics of the personal came in. After you’ve gone through that, mapping networks becomes really satisfying in its own right. You can tell yourself that you’re being strategic or tactical or whatever, but mapping power is satisfying even when it is completely vain.

NT: Activism without a giant social movement is the most peculiar existential condition, you’re a pragmatist with nowhere to go, you’re like, ‘I’m so going to get there but I don’t have any legs.’ When the global protest movement was really kicking into gear those maps actually had a function because people were actually going to the places where those businesses were at, they were actually tracking and mapping power, and that’s when it’s interesting, when you’re actually going to use the map.’

SS: How has mapping helped activist projects?

AB: The war machine exists in space. Trevor Paglan’s work demonstrates this beautifully, with his projects that locate the black world of covert operations that are hidden from official existence. If actions occur, they must occupy space, they must leave traces. Groups that have mapped the war machine in their locality: and people are making use of those maps.

NT: One of the functions maps serve is to bring the war home. The fact that people are effected mostly by what’s local and showing how the local reaches the global with maps is an interesting and valuable politics because people don’t give a shit about things that don’t effect their lives. You have to draw the lines between peoples’ lives and bigger forces.

AB: Well, the war was always at home! The front may be in Iraq or Afghanistan, but the war machine is rooted at home. In the 1980s, pacifists intervened with the delivery of Trident missiles to their submarines, put their bodies on the line in opposition to the new philosophy of First Strike. The points in those interventions had to be mapped. There’s [an activist] making an excellent map now of the war machine in California, locating intelligence apparatuses and points of war, material production and delivery. But it’s not clear if activists today can make the same use of such a map. Because the State is prepared to just lock people away forever, certain tactics like filling jails don’t make sense like they once did. The consequences of property damage being what they are, it is much safer to draw pictures.

Privitization versus property

SS: What about property? Do you think there is work in either projects that seems reflective of a useful way to think about property?

NT: I’m very influenced by the Situationists. The powerful move they demonstrated which is often lost on a lot of people is that they made the connection between the production of visual culture and spatial production. Simple things like copyright and landownership are not functionally that far removed. And property isn’t just a spatial phenomenon, it’s also a capitalist phenomenon; it’s a way of relating to people, ideas, space, meaning. We’ve become so privatized that the way in which we produce meaning is often in a dynamic relation with privatization and it’s difficult to resist. Something that could demonstrate this quite simply

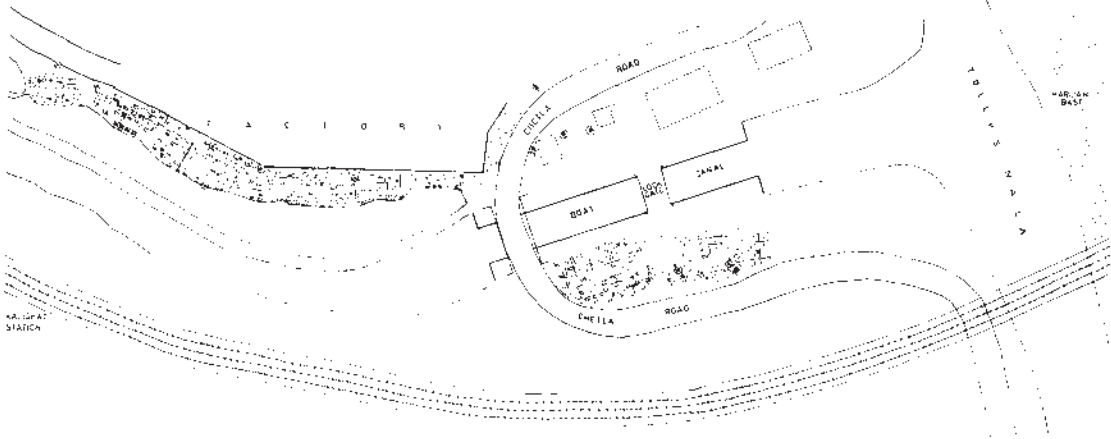
is graffiti; people think graffiti is some sort of visual culture in and of itself, but it’s really a relationship to private property and derives its meaning by existing illegally in someone else’s space. For the most part, being alive today is in some degree to illegally insist on someone else’s space, that dynamic of being a trespasser produces a lot of what goes for cultural production.

Property is this dynamic of privatization that is running roughshod through everything that we know. This is a problem because privatization is built on a system of class exploitation that produces a surplus that runs to the few. Moreover, it treats people like units of labour and sucks the living soul out of them; property is the embodiment of a kind of system that is against the majority, and that’s a problem. Architects can forget that property is built on a massive foundation of exploitation because it is the foundation of the discipline as it works right now. What would architecture or an architectural practice look like that did not assume the necessity of the property system? Shouldn’t architects be constructing a practice that undermines the property system, proposes alternatives, surpasses it? We have so few truly contemporary models to draw on, what we have are the fraught histories of socialism, communism and anarchism, leftist traditions that for the most part have sunken into stereotypes and lack the force to exist as propositions for the present.

AB: Historically, property has varied from regime to regime, has come to be in specific, various ways. In the New World things are more cut and dry. We have these founding moments of property to refer to, even if they are mythical or were voided by revolutions: first the declarations by the Monarchs of Europe, and later the creation of the independent states. One of the most profoundly foundational moments in the history of property in the US was the Allotment Act in 1887, which carved up communal or informally organized Native American nations into individual plots allotted to patriarchally-organized families.¹

SS: What is the relevance for radical cartography?

AB: The only map in *An Atlas* we have that addresses property is this map from the Unnayan, a map that potentially integrates a large number of people into a property system.² You’ll see here this is the *Harijan Basti*, that’s the settlement of “untouchable” people, and their settlement is already protected under laws established in 1947. But these people (*Lex points to the main settlement in the map*) were all refugees from the countryside, mostly from what’s now Bangladesh, and they set up what Unnayan called marginal settlements, on the marginal infrastructure land, in this case, around a canal lock, or in other cases, under power lines or along major water and sewer lines. So this is a foundational map of this settlement. They are mapping where all the houses are and where all the people live. They appealed to the city to get rights for these people but not on the grounds of individual property rights, they weren’t asking for individually subdivided lots. Unnayan’s argument was against the technocratic discourse of housing rights in the sixties that was part of International Style architecture and modernist architecture generally, which was about people having certain needs in housing—which was bullshit. People have certain needs to be in a community, if you have a larger scope that moves beyond the human body and thinks about people being part of a community and a locality, they have needs for dwelling, and dwelling rights. Unnayan’s project was all about trying to support someone’s right to dwell, so they’d make maps in the language of the planning boards in order to achieve dwelling rights for people.



SS: A dwelling right is not about the footprint of a building or a parcel of land?

Property versus dwelling rights

AB: It's not a footprint, and, in distinction to the discourse of housing rights, it's not about the *minimal* requirements for varieties of imposed housing. Dwelling is about an individual within a whole community. Unnayan would admit that they used their maps to make appeals to the Calcutta planning board, with goals like getting ration cards and mail service for people in marginal settlements. As far as the state is concerned, these are entitlements attached to property. But if you can map a community with a concern for its commons, you shift it out of the property framework a little bit.

So thinking about how some people find it hopeful, think about Europe in 1789, what did they do? They killed all these Nobles, and created smaller plots, and made property ownership widely available... so in Europe for a long time there was this dream that was embodied by America, the idea that a common person could own property, and be like a nobleman. Then when the revolutions happened, the nobleman were reduced to the scale of the common men. Soviet forced collectivization was the greatest reinforcement of the american dream, in which the idea of property's a hopeful thing, small property ownership as the greatest protection of the common. Not that I believe in small property ownership, I lived in small communes for much of my adult life, right now I don't because it's so fucking hard to live in a commune in New York, but to me that's the ideal, but I know that given the history of Soviet collectivization, there's always going to be a strong tradition, of genuine Libertarian thought, not just a leftist-anarchist thought, definitely not a communist thought, but that's going to find the protection of property rights

to be essential to liberty. Does that make sense at all?

NT: Yeah, property is like that trick, at that point it's a demarcation of space.

AB: It's more than a demarcation of space...

Coercion

NT: Alex Villar does this piece where he walks and tries to resist the function of the city. His walking pieces speak to the coercive nature of property, the way in which space is designed. It's funny when you break down what space is because it will make you claustrophobic.

AB: What do you mean?

NT: If you go on a sidewalk you're really not meant to loiter, you're meant to keep moving, you can't really go anywhere because you don't own anything, so you really either have to shop, go to work or go home and rest. These are your options in public space. Well, that is a function of property under capitalism. What is the world? It's a series of spaces, that are owned and controlled, and have functions that move you through basic ways of being in the world. So that's what his piece is demonstrating, what would it be to try to resist this machine called the city?

AB: But is the machine the city, or is it just a limited conception from Modernism? It wasn't too long ago that the city was precisely made to loiter in. Then Le Corbusier came along with his four functions--play, rest, work, and circulation. Somewhere to stop is not really part of it. You stop at home in that schema.

SS: What about ownership and property?

NT: I hate to be so basic but ownership produces power, and power produces

the ability to carve up the city. It has a huge function.

AB: Since the age of exploration, mapping has been used to incorporate areas of the world into regimes of power—the imperialist project—and consequently regimes of property. Now that these tools of mapping are available to anyone, there's the question of what do with people and areas that are off the map. There've always been the people left off the map right? Now if we're not going to be agents of the empire, how can we map people in order for them to have autonomy? In the Americas now you have nation states that are developing new relationships to their indigenous people: they're figuring out how to incorporate them into the national discourse, without gestures like the Allotment Act or the Boarding Schools. Mapping has been instrumental now in creating these new relations between English property, or Spanish property and the indigenous populations.

Commons

AB: The real issue here is assembling a new actual commons, reassembling a post-imperial commons. Geographers and activists are working on this issue from two ends - within the city and in the hinterlands. And one novel aspect of this drive is reaction to aggressive protection and enforcement of intellectual property rights. Not everyone agrees that property is theft. But, with intellectual property in the digital age, most everyone can intuit it. The filthiness of intellectual property is obvious to anyone who thinks about it, whereas real property doesn't have that same obvious filthiness.

SS: So how does the commons escape that? How does it escape the filthiness?

NT: And, what is be the spatial corollary of the commons? The park?

AB: No, certainly not a park, because you can't *use* a park. I'd say a park is almost antithetical to the commons. It's just the image of the commons. You can only occupy it and leave. If you make physical use of it, say plant a lettuce start there and expect to come back in a couple weeks and get a head of lettuce, you won't. A park is zero use: what can you do, you can play football, if that's a use, which I don't think it is, it's a pastime . . .

SS: What is the cultural significance of the commons?

AB: We don't really have a shared idea about the commons, we don't have any universals, right? When was the last time there was a culture that had a shared idea of goals? Is that why there are no commons, is that why we can't all get behind a budget for creating commons because we don't have a shared idea of the commons? Or do we even want that?

To go back to the beginning of the conversation, I think we should decide if we want to go from A to B, or if we want a picture of the world, because that's the first dichotomy we had. There are maps that are lifestyle-anarchist, and maps that are picturing the world or ones that are usefully trying to go from A to B, I mean that's a fundamental distinction, and deciding what we want to do: do we want to chill in the new world, or go from A to B? And does experimental geography help us answer some of these questions?

NT: There are certain things that art does that I like, certain things I don't like, but ambiguity, the A to B to nowhere, that's a powerful role; art can celebrate the ambiguous. I think, we're both invested in the activist communities and in my opinion activist communities are a little too didactic, it would be really nice if the they could embrace the irrational, ambiguous desires that actually brought them together, exploring them more richly would produce a more robust active community. On the flip the side, the art community could clearly benefit from a modicum of criticality, like from A to B. Maybe that's what experimental geography can do—get people excited about the possibilities of cruising a dual way of thinking about the world.

AB: Yeah I was wondering where's radical cartography in this, and thinking about the new world citizen and putting them together. I know I'm so reflexive in my wrap up. Well yeah, because I was talking about the crises of the left of not being a party, I feel like we feel that deep in our bodies, and the problem that single issues are never the solution, and locked in this golden age of whether there's a universal... problem, a universal enemy to be

overcome, and if only we could figure out what that is, and even if we know, and firmly believe there is a universal end, that's God, the search for trying to find those connections is so important to making action meaningful, because often we're stuck in this tradition of acting on an issue, but wanting to be more significant. It's depressing, really.

SS: Do you think that we need enemies?

AB: No, the helicopter depresses me, and the lack of clarity about what the world is depresses me, so on the one hand I respect everything about pragmatically trying to identify contemporary formations of power but in my heart what really makes me happy is when there's a completely alternate vision that either profoundly illuminates what is going on right now, right here for you—you know exactly what's going on, what you're supposed to do. Or, just the right escape. It's hard for me to talk about this in terms of mapping. As I'm saying this I'm thinking that so much of where I'm getting this from is so obvious, it's from science-fiction novels. What I'm really talking about is sci-fi novels. Maybe sci-fi novels are radical cartography. Lize would hate that, we can't say that, but I'm talking about it. Sci-fi novels show us new worlds, the good ones, but they are always at the same time clarifying the present.

NT: I hate to be so coy about this, but I do believe in this privileging of space inasmuch as we need to produce spaces where the imaginary of a world is possible. Don't put the cart before the horse right, we need to make a place where these visions can be made. But right now we're just running on auto pilot, like... fuck.

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Notes

1. The Dawes General Allotment Act, enacted February 8, 1887, regarding the distribution of land to First Nations in Oklahoma. The act, amended as the Burke Act would set precedent for land seizure across the United States. Over the course of the Act's 47 year life span First Nations lost roughly 90 million acres of treaty land and about 90,000 people were made landless.

2. See *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*, eds. Alexis Bhagat and Lize Mogel (Los Angeles: *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Press*, 2007); see also *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism*, eds. Nato Thompson and Independent Curators (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2008).