

# Mental map /Real map Journal for insiders 1.

*Send as an email message to about 20 friends by Esther Polak  
Amsterdam, 23-2 2002*

I started something new. I received a New Year's postcard from the Amsterdam Archive on which they announced a big exhibition on the history of Amsterdam city mapping. Triggered by the card got an idea: I imagined making the most recent map of Amsterdam possible; a living map, formed by the use of the city itself and using new technology.

I imagined that people in the city would constantly leave a track of their movements - as if the streets themselves were created by the passengers/by-passers. Like cow tracks in the mountains (although these are also determined by the landscape) visible only are the tracks, not the cows that made them. You see a curve, but not what caused it, what it was that the cows needed to avoid.



*Photo: Esther Polak*

I imagined something like this in the city. Make the obstacles invisible, but the tracks avoiding them visible. This might be possible by using GPS. The devices must be made so that they can send their information directly to one central computer system. This system should be able to draw all the tracks on a blank surface. The more movements, the more participants, the more visible would Amsterdam become. Different types of users could be represented using different colors, so over time it would become visible how the city of an automobilist, bicyclist and pedestrian differ.

I called the Amsterdam Archive to propose the project - if they were not interested there would be no use dreaming on. I was connected to curator Ludger Smit. After I explained my idea and overcame the initial resistance he came up with the beautiful thought of

also equipping some city ducks with the device....so the canals would also become visible. At this point I realized that he understood the concept. I then emailed him a synopsis of the project as follows:

To: Ludger Smit

Mental map/Real map

A proposal for an art project in the framework of the future exhibition "Maps of Amsterdam 1866-2000"

I suppose that all residents of Amsterdam have an invisible map in their mind and that the route decisions made - how one moves through town - are determined by this.

Would it not be interesting to visualize these mental maps via the route behaviour of the people in the city? I propose to equip a number of people with a GPS device, transmit their movements in real-time to a centralised computer system, and have them drawn on a blank surface. I imagine this could be screened somewhere in a public space, but also over the Internet.

Specific professionals and individuals might benefit directly from this map. One could think of people who have a high degree of mobility: taxi drivers, cycle couriers, homeless people, repairmen and grocery delivery services. When all those groups' routes are represented in different colours it might become visible how individually differentiated the city-use of Amsterdam is.

I imagine tracks older than a couple of days will fade out. This way an up-to-date, constantly changing and very subjective map of Amsterdam will emerge. All data will be preserved, so it will be possible to replay it at a later stage. One scenario is that this "film" will present an image in which major events like traffic jams or royal marriages are made visible cartographically.

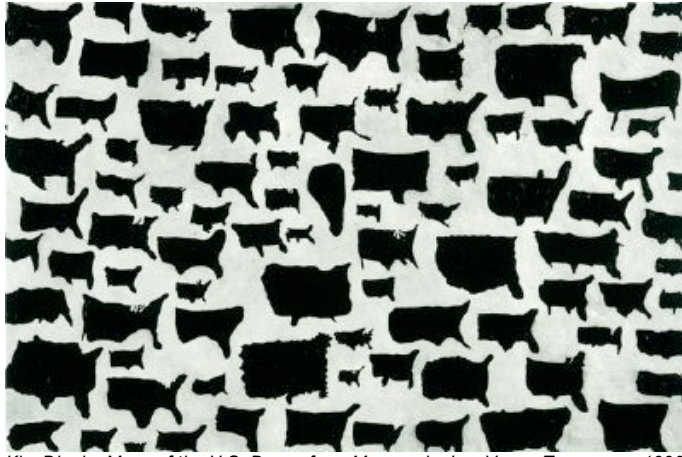
A totally different approach might be to use this project to break down the power of cartography. For example, it is also possible to invite a group of people to use this drawing machine to make their own personalised maps: somebody could use the GPS device to write the name of his/her beloved by riding through specific streets; another person could use the device to draw the exact borderline of Vondelpark (the fact the he/she would have to navigate real bushes and fences is a consequence of this endeavour); yet another person could decide to make a irrelevant path look like a important transport axis. The more people using the GPS tracking, the more objective the map will be again.

I hereby would like to ask if the Amsterdam Archive is interested in the possible realisation of this project in the framework of the exhibition "Maps of Amsterdam 1866-2000".

I would like to invite you to a meeting to discuss possibilities.

Best regards,  
Esther Polak

I sent a similar mail to the Waag to find out if they were interested in collaborating with me as the project seemed to me something I could never do on my own. Answers came: the Waag want to talk to me, as does Ludger Smit. I now have both appointments in the next week!



Kim Dingle, *Maps of the U.S. Drawn from Memory by Las Vegas Teenagers*, 1990

To ease the waiting I paid a visit to the library of the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum, to do some research on art and mapping. The first work I encountered was this piece by Kim Dingle, *Maps of the U.S. Drawn from Memory by Las Vegas Teenagers*, 1990: She had asked a group of teenagers to draw the map of the US by heart. This resulted in a series of bizarre spots that she placed rhythmically on a white surface. It looked really great even in reproduction. The teenagers remained anonymous, yet I could see straight into their minds. I could imagine a psychological testing system based on this concept: to use the maps that people have in their minds as an indication of their personality. One could invite people to draw a realistic map of the area they consider their everyday living environment. A homely person would probably just draw his or her house, while the travelling type might draw a world map. Also the variances from the 'real' map must be telling - hand reading and map reading combined!

Later that day I went to an exhibition opening at Onrust/Content, where they put on show these old anatomic gravures, totally in line with the article looking through the microscope at human tissue that I published earlier in the week in the magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*. Eli Content suggested a book by Svetlana Alpers, [The Art of Describing](#), that outlines a connection between the development of microscopy and cartography in 17th century Dutch painting. A couple of days later I picked up the book at RijksAkademie to see if I could find out more about cartography. Edith Rijnja also suggested a book by Moritz Kung, *Orbis Terrarum*. Despite not liking Moritz Kung very much ever since interviewing him (he gave me a really hard time about every sentence and word I used) this is a fantastic book! It contains an enormous amount of information. The combination of historical cartography and contemporary art on mapping is very interesting for my project development and motivated me to take a closer look at the old stuff. This is material that needs some knowledge to really appreciate it! The mistakes made me aware of the inventiveness with which the correct parts have been constructed. God knows how they managed at all back then, without satellite pictures. Did they do this all with a compass and a sextant? Hopefully Svetlana Alpers' book will answer that question.

Only yesterday I found out that cartography is considered a Dutch invention. A certain Jacob van Deventer, during the days of king Filips II, was commissioned to make [citymaps](#) of all Dutch cities. He did so by counting his steps, while having a chain between his legs to stabilize his step lengths. These maps are still remarkable accurate, as I learned yesterday at a lecture by Jhon Eberhardt, head of the publishing agency Buijten en Schipperheijn, a publishing agency on tourist maps, mainly for biking routes. The lecture was organized by the Dutch hiking association, NEMO, for their monthly meeting. When I entered, the "nature loving people's" atmosphere overwhelmed me. Of all people present I was the most trendily dressed person, which is telling.... (walking through the space I could smell at least five people's sweat, where do you find that still?)

Eberhardt's story is that he at age 19 he was stopped during a walk in the fields by an 80 year-old man who turned out to be the founding father of NIVON (a Dutch organisation for nature experience) and who, on the spot, appointed him to be his personal assistant. Although Eberhardt had expected this to be a paid assignment it was not. However, he was so fascinated by the work - the inventory of walking and cycling routes - that he accepted the offer. Eventually routes and cartography became Eberhardt's profession... so all came around. Nevertheless, he still worked with an idealist attitude: he honestly believed that making the landscape more attractive to bikes would diminish car-use. He was realistic enough to admit that this did not seem to have worked out that well, although he also joked that it was not known how the Dutch landscape would look now had he not published his maps on bike routes! This seemed to be a bit out of line to me in a cute way....

After some time listening, I realized I had 'known' Eberhardt already for a long time as for years I had been using his "Dwarsstap" maps. During my bike trips I sometimes found myself engaged in internal discussions with the (at that time anonymous) author of the routes.

At moments I felt grateful to him/her: when I passed a sublime place that I otherwise would surely have missed! But I also would feel totally irritated when he/she made me ride 3000 meter over impossibly muddy over-grown routes simply to avoid a small section of auto route. Only now I realise his maps were also drawn from his philosophical perspective. Indeed, he admitted that he had occasionally mapped totally worthless pieces of path as being perfect bicycle routes; by doing so he hoped that, over time, they would become real bicycle paths! And he had some success: the municipality would get bombarded with complaints from cyclists about the state of the (non-existent) bike path, which they would then have to fix so that it became a proper bike path!

While listening to Eberhardt, I realized that maps had for me always strongly suggested objectivity and authority. I now started to realize that they were also very much determined by the subjective choices of the cartographer, and by technical, financial and time limitations. Also something important I never realized before: cartography enjoys the freedom of the press! Eberhardt even mentioned the concept of "The Dissident Cartographer" - something which sounds good to me. I wonder whether to make an appointment with him to discuss my Amsterdam mapping project.

After the break he told us about his dreams of an "ideal map" that were remarkably similar to my project proposal. In these dreams, the world as depicted by the cartographer is one of constant change. Every layer in the map has its own rhythm of change; for example, the movements of the continent and the movement of migrating birds take place in a totally different time scale. Then there are roads, building sites, structures and vegetation. His "ideal map" would constantly change, would be constantly updated. He suggested this must be possible via the internet... I think my concept comes close!

Other interesting thoughts from this evening were: map reading seems to be more a male than a female obsession. What would cause that? Men have better spatial perception? Maps are abstract and instruments of power? Map reading is more important for the introvert part of humanity? (Women just ask directions!)

A remarkable statement by Eberhardt was: map reading is the earliest form of virtual reality. By means of constructing a model it is possible to change reality (for example the bicycle path). Another strong point: by looking closely at a map, it is possible to find features that the cartographer never even saw him or herself. (He gave the example of the archaeologist who found the megaliths in North Netherlands to be all positioned along one line; the cartographer had drawn this, but not seen it). A map, as Eberhardt states, is a reality in itself, where you can actually find something new. On the other hand, map reading is an act of Utopia construction: every map and every user brings to it his or her own Utopia. A map for fishermen, hikers, car owners, geologists, whatever,

also presents another dreamed-of world. By using a different map in the field, the landscape will present itself in a distinctively different way...

On Monday I will visit the taxi agency "taxicentrale Amsterdam" to take a look at their GPS based computer system Rasta (Rit Afhandeling Systeem Taxi Amsterdam). On Tuesday I will visit the Waag Society, to meet Marleen Stikker and the technicians. On Thursday Ludger Smit will visit the studio - I plan to showcase a heap of relevant literature on my tables and hang my best works of art on the walls....!

to be continued...

Best regards, Esther Polak