# INTERVIEW WITH
# *Lize Mogel*

*by* **Jeremy Hight**, online via email correspondence, May 2011

Re-Drawing Boundaries, Leonardo Electronic Almanac New Media Exhibition
Curator: Jeremy Hight
Senior Curators: Lanfranco Aceti and Christiane Paul

**What are you working on right now?**
I'm working on "Global Cities, Model Worlds," which is a project with Ryan Griffis and Sarah Ross about mega-events –Olympics and World's Fairs– and their effects on cities. This will be a traveling exhibition that will debut at the Pittsburgh Biennial in September and travel to cities (so far: New York, Chicago, Knoxville) that have had either an Olympics and/or a World's Fair or are/were involved in the bidding process. This is a long term project for us –we'll be doing a site-specific audio or video piece, or tour, for each city that the exhibition travels to. Last year we produced an audio tour about Vancouver's False Creek, an urban waterway that was reshaped by the 1986 World's Fair and the 2010 Olympics. You can download it here: (http://temporarytraveloffice.net/stories/sitingExpos.html)

**What is possible within maps and cartography for dissent, commentary, and raising awareness?**
Among other things, maps are good for the analysis of complex systems, for diagramming power

structures, and for understanding the potential functions and limits of space. There's a long history of maps used in the service of activism. Some recent examples: Eyal Weizman's mapping of the occupied territories, Columbia University's Spatial Information Design Lab's and the Justice Mapping Center's Million Dollar Blocks project, Bill Bunge's maps and spatial analyses of Detroit, the Center for Urban Pedagogy's "Cargo Chain", etcetera. Some of these are effective because they are collaborations between artist/designers and grassroots groups or other institutions that are able to connect with organizing campaigns.

### What brought you to work with maps as an artist?

I've always been interested in representation and place, and have always been fascinated by maps. In grad school I did work that critically unpacked the urban landscape and politicized a "nice view". After graduation I worked with the Center for Land Use Interpretation for a year and a half, which was extremely influential not just in shaping my thinking about *the land* and how it is used; but also in developing a more journalistic approach to art making. While at CLUI I met Chris Kahle, who at the time was doing doctorate work in geography at USC, and in our conversations realized there was a significant overlap in what we were both reading and thinking about, albeit from different fields. We co-curated an exhibition "Genius Loci" which featured artists' subjective mappings of Los Angeles as well as archival, mostly pictorial maps of the city from various institutional collections. Through this project I was lucky to meet and work with Denis Cosgrove, who was one of the very few academic geographers who were genuinely interested in thinking about art and cartography/geography. (Because of Denis, several artists joined the geography PhD program at UCLA while he was there).

Also at this time I produced my first public art/cartographic project, "Public Green" which was a mapping of public parks and social capital in Los Angeles that was distributed as a poster in transit

shelters throughout the city in 2001 and 2002. Since then, my main focus has been maps and mapping–I've produced my own projects, disseminated other artist/designer/cartographers' mapping projects through a couple of exhibitions and the publication "An Atlas of Radical Cartography," and been involved in the discourse around mapping in the cultural realm. After more than 10 years of working with maps I'm starting to move on to other ways of having a "critical spatial practice" and describing geopolitical relationships.

### Are there many forms of mapping?  Is this misunderstood by most people?

I'm going to take this question in a different direction…the map (or mapping) itself is *made* to be misunderstood so that it gives a partial or impartial truth...or a singular editorial *perspective*. I think this is illustrated well in looking at recent data visualization projects in art and activism. (and yes, I'm conflating maps and diagrams here). Eyebeam's recent Data Viz Challenge asked designers and artists to visualize how Americans' tax dollars are spent. Their base data was provided by WhatWePayFor.com, which uses budget numbers released to the public by the Federal government. The War Resisters League have another interpretation of the Federal budget (http://www.warresisters.org/pages/piechart.htm ) that highlights how much military spending is hidden in other budget categories. The Data Viz Challenge used data that shows only about 20% defense spending. The War Resister's League estimates military spending at 54%, which includes, for example, public benefits for veterans and interest on the national debt created by military spending. Trevor Paglen's work on military "black budgets" also comes to mind here. I think it's important to offer multiple interpretations of data, place, etc. so that the 'truthiness' of the map (or the data underlying it) is further destabilized.

### Are we in a cartographic moment right now with GPS and GIS so ubiquitous on phones and in cars?  What may come from this?

We definitely are! Geographic information is being embedded in so much that we do ("we" meaning wired citizens). Everything can be geo-coded from our vacation photos to our trash. Space is further and further mediated by technology. However what we are losing is a more innate geographic knowledge or curiousity. I am thinking about Mark Shepard's Serendipitor app for a smartphone, in which you input your start and end points on a google basemap, and the app plots out an indirect, meandering path for you. This nicely captures the idea of the Situationist drift and undermines a main selling point of a smartphone as a wayfinding device. However I wonder, do we really need technology to get us *lost*, to explore or experience a space?

However, as mapping technology becomes more ubiquitous, it also becomes more accessible. Community cartography, participatory GIS, where ordinary citizens are trained in GIS and other mapmaking and map interpretation tools formerly only available to city planners, policymakers, and other experts. This helps to level the playing field especially when making decisions about space and how it is used. The use of cartographic tools in indigenous mapping is particularly important.

### What fields of art is your work classified in? Can labels be limiting?

I don't really worry/think much about classifications, especially since the 'labels' for what I do are constantly in flux (i.e. institutional critique, relational aesthetics, map art, socially-engaged design, etc. ). My work encompasses geography and urban planning, as well as graphic design and journalism. The commercial art world and I are mutually uninterested in each other. What I *am* interested in is working in a hybrid way, in public, and anti-monumentally.

Mappa Mundi, 2008/2010, Lize Mogel. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

## Mappa Mundi

The title refers to medieval world maps that conflated real and imaginary geography. This "map-mash up" is a world map that is reorganized according to the processes of globalization. China, South Asia, Panama, and other places are linked geographically and through common narrative threads of shipping, displacement, and struggles over territory. Installation view at University of Buffalo Art Gallery.

*Mappa mundi* is part of an ongoing project that explores two kinds of popular representations of the World –the iconic world map and the international spectacle of World's Fairs. As technology and commerce blur more and more geographic boundaries, the ubiquitous world map cannot adequately to describe the intricacies of global economies. *Mappa mundi* is an attempt to remake the world map, relying on *associative* geographies rather than physical ones.

This experiment within the confines of the specific form of the world map reconfigures it to create new geographies which represent contemporary global situations. Familiar borders are denied, and new connections between places are brought to the surface, sharing narratives of displacement, commerce, and sovereignty. This map mash-up reorders the world based on connections between places, their histories, and the processes of globalization.

*Mappa mundi* refers to medieval world maps that sometimes conflated real and imaginary geography, made at a time when the complete picture of the physical world was still being formed. This project is also related to the late medieval *portolan charts*, which were functional navigational maps used by seafarers. These maps focus on the coastline –the interior is often blank– and show how to navigate from *here* to *there*, to make physical connections between landmasses.

Area of Detail, 2008/2010, Lize Mogel. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

## Area of Detail

Area of Detail zooms into the geographic center of the UN emblem —the Arctic Circle. The project contrasts the international debate over future 'new' territory in the Arctic made accessible by melting ice with the symbolism of the map-logo. Viewers rotate a map of the Arctic to read a circular text printed on it. Installation view, HMVK Dortmund.

The translation of the spherical world onto the flat plane of a map is a mathematical problem; the translation of the political world into a map is an ideological problem. How does one represent the world in a way that does not show dominance? Something or someone is always on the top or at the center. The United Nations emblem is a world map centered on the North Pole. The continents are not divided by national boundaries, thus geopolitical relationships are not pictured. This map is purely symbolic, representing nations united under common interests, all parts considered equal. What is at the center of the UN emblem? A blank spot that belies the geopolitical realities of the area. This area of detail, the ice-bound ocean of the Arctic Circle, is regulated by the UN through the Law of the Sea which sets how nations define and exploit their territorial boundaries. As the climate warms and ice recedes, new possibilities for commerce and capital become possible. This center of the World is becoming a focal point in other ways, as surrounding nations look to claim territory in order to develop new energy resources and commercial routes.

Shajah infoCart/Sharaj CityMap, 2011, Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

## Shajah infoCart/Sharaj CityMap

The Sharjah InfoCart/CityMap is a mapping of Sharjah City in the United Arab Emirates. The InfoCart is a mobile information kiosk which was deployed in shopping malls and outdoor public spaces in Sharjah during January and February 2011. The cart operators passed out a questionnaire and had conversations with more than 500 people who live and work in the emirate. They provided information about the city and about places that are important to their daily lives and to their community. Much of the information in the CityMap was determined by their experiences.

80% or more of the residents of the UAE are from other places, mainly South Asia and the Gulf region; and almost none have citizenship rights. Official maps (and road signs) are printed in Arabic and English only. The CityMap was printed in six of the main languages used in Sharjah: Arabic, English, Urdu, Malayali, Bangla, and Tagalog. It is a functional map and that contains local knowledge as well as subtle commentary on life in Sharjah. The project was produced in collaboration with architecture and design students at the American University of Sharjah, who designed the InfoCart; and Natasha Jen/njenworks who designed the CityMap. It was commissioned by the 10th Sharjah Biennial.

The Sludge Economy, 2010, Lize Mogel. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

### The Sludge Economy

If we think about the city as an extension of the human body, then infrastructure like wastewater treatment is part of a natural cycle of "input and output". However the geography and economy of waste are much removed from out actual bodies. *The Sludge Economy* makes more visible the infrastructure of human waste –specifically sewage treatment plants; and the social, environmental, and racial justice issues that are sometimes equally as invisible as the physical infrastructure.

A newsprint pamphlet outlines a sewage chronology and related social justice issues in two neighborhoods burdened by sewage treatment plants. I also held a public event titled "This Picnic Stinks!" in the Riverbank State Park which sits atop the North River wastewater treatment plant in Harlem, New York City. This potluck picnic included a talk by me and Jaime Stein (formerly the environmental policy analyst at Sustainable South Bronx) about New York City's sludge economy. A cake printed with locations of sewage plants was a visual aid and dessert.

### Artist's Statement

My work moves between the fields of art and cultural geography. I create and disseminate counter-cartography —maps and mappings that produce new understandings of social and political issues. This work connects the real history and collective imaginary about specific places to larger narratives of global economies. I use the map as a readymade, appropriating it to analyze and understand the power relations contained in it; and as raw material —to be reconfigured into new geographies. I am interested in producing alternative histories of place that politicize everyday spaces and experiences. I do this by subverting the inherent 'truthiness' of maps and information graphics. I insert counter-cartographies into public space and distribute them via publications, as well as create wall installations. It is important that my work be accessible to different audiences and both inside and outside of an art context. To this end my projects are often temporary, anti-monumental, and easily/inexpensively reproduced and distributed.

### Bio

Lize Mogel is an interdisciplinary artist who works with the interstices between art and cultural geography. She has mapped public parks in Los Angeles; cultural migration patterns in Idaho; and future territorial disputes in the Arctic. Her recent projects rethink popular representations of the world as it is shaped by global economies. Exhibitions include the Sharjah Biennial, Gwangju Biennal, and the Pittsburgh Biennial, PS1's *Greater New York*, Casco (Utrecht), HMKV (Dortmund), and *Experimental Geography* (touring). She is co-editor of the book/map collection *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* and co-curator of the related exhibition *An Atlas*. She frequently collaborates, and has worked with Alexis Bhagat, the Temporary Travel Office and Sarah Ross, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, and the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest. She has presented her work internationally including at the Whitney Museum, the New Museum, the Carnegie-Mellon University, and the Royal Danish Art Academy (Copenhagen). She has received grants from the Jerome Foundation, the LEF Foundation, the Graham Foundation, the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Danish Arts Council for her work. ∎