'**Nothing Will Come of Nothing**'
Territorial Investigations by Bureau d'Études

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For a considerable time now, the Parisian conceptual group Bureau d'Études has been engaged in literally mapping contemporary capitalism. Since the erosion of the Iron Curtain, capitalism as an organizational form has undeniably become a global affair. This article is a conversation on the practice of contra-cartography, which, by making information that is available but often invisible visible, aims to 'potentialize' society and at the same time to actualize a potential society.

The Cartography of Information and Place

In 1992, at a time that the world was no longer being held captive by the oppressive divide between East and West, when it was being confronted with the information revolution caused by the World Wide Web, three artists, then still students, founded the collective 'Das Kapital' ('Capital'). Their origin was tied to a place in Strasbourg; an independent exhibition space in which they showed, for a week, a work with the same title. It consisted of 1600 identical wooden logs, a sort of meccano set, with which the collective composed a different installation each day. This 'daily construction' ('construction quotidienne') necessitated the design of a system, a procedure that would allow them to continuously make use of the 1600 set parts. The work functioned as a 'common language' ('Capital'), an organizational form with which to generate the various spaces (installations). After various other attempts to cooperate two artists of the 'Capital-group', Xavier Fourt and Léonore Bonaccini, founded another group: Bureau d'Études.[1]

The name, a reference to the research department of an architectural practice, may express something cautious and modest, the work Fourt and Bonaccini produce most certainly does not – it is threatening and aspiring. It uncovers the fact that an abundance of available information, for instance on the internet, is basically not utilized to its full potential. One of the many troubling and bizarre features of contemporary politics is the paradox that although the informationalization of society implies an enormous increase in the traceability of the doings and dealings of the powerful, the disruptive power of the exposure of these activities is still remarkably small.

Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu, Bureau d'Études started out by mapping the art world, in order to understand how as artists they are a product of the system, and to get a grip on the various meaning-producing economies (market, state, cooperative, etcetera) that are active in it. Since then they have become part of a vast international network of critical information workers. At the moment they are in the course of developing new models and approaches with which to redefine the relations between information and place in their visualizations. They do this mainly by making maps that lend visibility to what they call 'the organization of capitalism'.

Languages and Territories

What are your inspirations in mapmaking?

We are still in the phase of fabricating our tools, our cognitive schemas and our modes of symbolization. Our maps are preparatory studies, work in progress. We can not yet claim to entirely master the practice or the knowhow that would be needed for their realization.

We began with a great many studies on the organization of capitalism that had been done by Marxist structuralists in the 1970s, and with critical sociology (Bourdieu, the Frankfurt School) and critical history (Foucault). The studies on finance capitalism more or less ceased with the downturn of criticism around 1978-1979, and books on the question become rare in the early 1980s. We went and rediscovered those older studies on the used book shelves, while collecting flowcharts that we found in the press and consulting corporate financial reports at the library, along with official financial bulletins and the general or specialized business press. On that basis we began to do maps on the organization of ownership in French and then European capitalism. The first examples were exclusively maps of ownership links, which we drew like architectural plans featuring rooms and corridors. It gave you planar views of immense cities vaguely resembling electronic circuitry. But those maps remained quite abstract for anybody not already familiar with the corporations or the individuals we were representing. What's more, they were based solely on financial links. In time we came to see their limits (the absence of companies that aren't quoted on the stock market, and of companies specializing in mergers and acquisitions, which have a key role to play in the structure of capitalism). To increase the comprehensibility of the information, we used pictograms differentiating the fields of activity of the companies being represented (banks, arms manufacturing, consumer-product distribution, etcetera). Since the objective was to create a map of power in the contemporary world, we also began to put in non-financial data, such as lobbies, influence groups, think tanks, governments and so on. At the same time we read tons of studies to understand the formation of capitalism and the evolution and strategies of its major components (the history of merchant banks, the links between finance and diplomacy, industrial policy…) and the influence of non-financial organizations. We also carried out a series of exploratory maps of state administrative structures and international organizations. Right now we are working on a quite complex map of the French state where we wanted to go beyond simple representation by identities and relations, and show in detail how the machine operates physically and socially, its technical, legal and organizational components, its functional articulations.

Gregory Bateson [2] often used the notion he borrowed from Alfred Korzybski: 'The map is not the territory.' and he would then add: 'And the name is not the thing named.' With regard to your maps, what then is the relationship they have with the territory they represent?

The physicist Ernst Mach said something that can help to understand what cartography means: 'In reality, human beings and animals who have lost their sense of direction move without exception more or less in a circle, whose diameter varies according to the species, while the center of the circle, depending on the individual and the species, is located either to the right or to the left of the individual following the circular path.' A map is what keeps you from going round in circles, it is knowledge to supplement the loss of a sense of direction.

Among the cartographic tools, there is a difference between geographical maps that allow you to orient yourself in space and organizational maps that allow you to orient yourself in social or symbolic complexity. We have done maps in each of these two areas.

It can't be said that the geographic map is not the territory. It resembles the territory, and that's what makes it into a perceptual crutch that keeps us from going in circles, that

allows us to orient ourselves in space, despite all the simplifications and evaluations it contains. It allows you to act, to move around or to transform the territory. But just as there exist different ways of resembling the real on the basis of a geographical matrix (just think of the difference between an Aboriginal map and a map by the National Geographic Institute of France), so there exist different ways of putting reality into words on the basis of a linguistic matrix. With the maps of social organization, there are no latitudes or longitudes or techniques like those of topography. There is no North Pole, no social magnetic field, and therefore no compass. A 'compass-image' of a social organization is based on symbolic or quasi-symbolic elements such as information, conventions, rules or laws that govern social relations. It constitutes the invisible objects of social relations and powers, by means of legal, institutional, financial, sociological, anthropological, psychological and historical knowledge. It constitutes identities or units of information (state, firm, individual…). It works in advance via selection, classification, data refinement, and then finally symbolization, positioning, assemblage, interlinkage. Thus it produces a feeling of totality through the construction of landmarks, the construction of a system of dynamic coordinates that allow you to put some order into social reality. For all these reasons, the map of social organization seeks to be a tool allowing us to perceive, to orient ourselves, to act on social space, like a general or a rat who activates affects, representations, perceptions, beliefs and rules.

But what possible relation is there between a geographic map and the map of a social organization?

We could illustrate this relation on an initial level with a map we did in 1995 in Dresden in the former GDR. We took our departure points from geographic maps of infrastructure grids (electricity, telephone lines, water pipes) and from aerial photographs. We cut out a district which we took as being emblematic of the city centre. The very concept of city centre, as a bourgeois concept, had been refused by the Soviet-era urbanists. We then observed the reinvention of the city-centre by the irruption of Western capitalism. After the fall of the Wall, the first geographical maps of real-estate prices appeared (the price of real-estate in the Soviet era was indexed on the value of a square meter of arable land). We took three maps (1991, 1993, 1995) which made apparent the gradual appearance of a centre (the most expensive place in the city). This re-creation of the city centre was carried out gradually through real-estate speculation by the major West German banks (Deutsche Bank, Dresdner Bank) which bought up the buildings. It was also carried out by various signs (large advertising billboards, etcetera) which had not existed before. We did several proposals for the organization of the city centre, with four utopian projects. There you see a precise junction between geography and capital, through the reformulation of a city centre by the big West German banks.

Is that junction also apparent in your map World Government?

In the latest version of the map of 'World Government', this junction takes another form. The globalized networks of transportation, telecommunications and information have entirely reformulated spatial and therefore strategic constraints, the possible alliances and relations across the planet. Each day in the media we see that the informational geography of the Europeans does not match the physical geography of the planet. And this obviously has psychic consequences, it elicits social hierarchies and behaviors, even within our own societies.

For the moment we have basically sought to map the dominant sociotechnical organizations, and some of the antagonistic formations. The big difficulty is to try to displace the criteria of evaluation, so as not to reduce the global social struggles that are trying to radically modify the course of history into mere critical feedback loops in an integrated world-system. This is why we find it necessary today to have an ontology different from the rationalistic materialism that is still dominant in the critical movements (despite the epistemological upsets of the twentieth century) and also from the socio-

technical approach to the world where the map would claim to be or to create the territory and language (whether cybernetic, informational, genetic…): to be or create the real. This would allow us to represent something other than machines, or to do something other than fabricating tools of modeling, simulation, delegation, manipulation…

The Cartography of Hypercritical Madness

What is your basic concept of mapmaking? Do you use classic map-making knowledge, or is it an applied bric-a-brac of info-graphic traditions?

We try to create a language corresponding to what we want to show. We're still only at the beginning. The graphic language that we use is still far short of the complexity and diversity of the information that we have to deal with. Our maps are works in progress at several levels and, in particular, where the creation of graphic knowledge is concerned.

We refuse to just recycle the types of simplification normally employed in flowcharts. Hierarchy by the scale of size or value gives information (the power of a given company compared to another) but it masks the difference in the meaning of power, depending on the geographical origin. We don't lend any particular credit – even if we do pay attention – to the official modes of evaluation, classifying the 100 leading world businesses according to turnover or number of employees. We have observed that these official evaluations are relative to the people who carry them out: the world's leading companies aren't necessarily the same when seen from the United States, Europe, Japan or China. What is more, it's well known that among the world's leading financial funds some are not evaluated, because they are not traded on the stock market or because their organization is not attached to a state, but instead is networked, based on financial operations by companies located in tax-free zones, etcetera.

For the moment we have basically used three parameters of graphic representation, which are *identities* (pictograms representing, for instance, a state, a business or an agency), *links* and *spatial positions*. Each of these parameters has its own economy.

What are the conceptual problems that you face in the making of your maps?

The major problem in our analytical maps remains the representation of identities. If we differentiate them too much (out of an analytical preoccupation), the vocabulary can become too complex. In this way you can lose the visual divides between the identities. What is more, even as they are differentiated, the reality of the identities remains quite relative. We are incapable of concretely imagining the one hundred thousand people who make up IBM. A pictogram marked 'IBM' can't show this firm with its hundreds of affiliates, its thousands of subcontractors and its multiple partnerships with other businesses and states. An identity such as IBM isn't univocal and its coherency comes from its strategy rather than its internal organizational chart. Its reality is not immediately perceptible.

In the same way, we don't know what we're communicating or even what we have in our heads when we talk about the state. A state like France has thousands of businesses at its disposal and constructs international strategies with other states and businesses. It is not just closed in on itself or inside its territory, with ties attaching its outer edges to exterior identities. The French state is crisscrossed with multiple identities that are not 'French'. Graphic representation merges realities together, more than it distinguishes them. The United States and France each appear in a 'state' pictogram and this relationship visually supplants the historical, geographic, demographic, religious and military differences that characterize each of them.

For this reason we proceed somewhat as geocartographers do, adjusting the graphic generality by means of additional data or symbols that qualify the identities. A given state will be qualified as democratic, or the number of inhabitants will be indicated, the dependency on oil resources, the religions that are practiced, etcetera. But in fact, we

continually oscillate between different obstacles: the selective forgetting and manipulation of information, the variability of the viewpoints (official, non-official, and so on), the lack of strict analysis, a hypercritical attitude that leads you to flip out, to exaggerate.[3]

On the Quality of Relations

Bateson defines information as 'a difference that makes a difference'. What is information for you as contra-cartographers?

Information can never produce a feeling of the world. Information is a-cosmic, diverse and accidental. A newspaper is a collage of heterogeneous bits of information, clues that can't be composed into a coherent picture. What we are trying to do is to recompose the coherency of this seeming chaos, at the very moment when human beings can be modified just like the information in any data-processing system.

It is not always possible for a reader, a listener or a TV viewer to discern true information from false, or to simply identify the degree of manipulation in the information received. What they get is a second-hand reality, which they have never experienced, a reality constituted by the sedimentation of representations and critiques of those representations: 'I've never been to Iraq but I saw this account, I read this and that article, I heard this or that testimony or analysis, and I formed an opinion.' How can I judge whether or not my opinion is true or false? Isn't it just an argumentative judgment on a reality that I have not experienced? But first of all, why is Iraq constructed as a media object? Who creates the information, who sets the focus and the establishes the hierarchy of world events, lending importance to one and passing over another in silence, as they do every day at Agence France Presse? And above all, why do we inform ourselves? Why has information become so important today?

The complement of democratic regimes is propaganda, or in other words, the possibility of a public debate leads to the political will to orient or manipulate that debate, to escape the abstraction of the free exercise of each one's faculties by educating those faculties and shaping the objects of judgment. The whole problem with information is that in militarized democracies like ours, information is rigged for war. There are systems to help manage the 'media battle', systems to help create media deceptions, systems of argumentation for special operational communication, etcetera. Here you have to pay some attention to the way that propaganda has been working for over a century, how one creates friends and enemies in wars where the public enemies are also the friends of the established powers. You have to know how a statistic is twisted or how an insignificant piece of information is amplified (murders in the suburbs, rioters in the demonstrations or journalists in battle) in order to create a certain psychic disposition among the population. The press agencies as well as governments and transnational corporations define the orders of priority and importance of world events. You have to see reality like a chess player or a Go player, without believing that it's natural, spontaneous, without history, hierarchy or *habitus*. Debate in public space (and riots in particular) are struggles against the monopoly on the representation of reality. It's a matter of raising insurrections against the psychic frameworks imposed by the information systems.

Does your cartography exclusively show an analytical attitude vis-à-vis the information that you collect, or does it serve a purpose?

It must be said that we don't only do analytic maps. The ways of doing (and therefore, the hermeneutics) vary with the kinds of cartography. In a given context, for example the defense of autonomous publishing / production / distribution, we make maps that can constitute a target or an enemy serving as a foil (such as the map *Chroniques de guerre* on the Lagardère group, or the map *GNR NBC TIC*). Such a map has an instrumental aim, which is to identify, locate and qualify the components of a given target (a business,

service, person, machine…). Businesses and web crawlers continually carry out such targeting operations, in order to conquer, contaminate or influence a population. In the target map, the idea is to turn these capitalist guerrilla techniques around and identify the power of a firm, a technology, a person or a state. The target map may also be accompanied by further instructions describing different ways to act on the target. But identification in itself opens up means of action. For example, in the map like the one we did of an armsmedia group such as Lagardère (publishing, distribution, news stands, radio, TV), there is a list of components (stores, publishers) which can be boycotted. When the target map is geographic and not only organizational, the action induced by the map is first of all that of becoming physically aware of the very existence of an agent.

Other maps potentialize information in such a way as to reveal where we are going, what we can do or what we are (see the maps of *Communisms*, of *Gratuité*, of *Inklings of Autonomy* on contemporary social movements, etcetera). [4] For example, we have done several maps on autonomous movements which could possibly be grouped under the name of the multitudes. The problem with the use that is made of the term 'multitudes' is the low degree of multiplicity and sometimes even the ideological univocality of the term. Basically, the term 'multitudes' has been annexed by a social movement, or more precisely, a range of social movements, which do not have or desire contacts with the multiplicities of other social movements which are assembled differently and construct war machines of different 'models' than theirs. In these maps of the multitudes we timidly sought to represent the amplitude and diversity of the fronts of struggle. We are quite careful about not having a unitary approach but on the contrary letting war machines coexist, since they are all struggling in their own ways against the system even if they are sometimes in conflict with each other as well. For example, we did a map where we put movements against imperialism next to movements interested in extraterrestrials and struggling against the government policies that deliberately hide or manipulate information about those subjects. But that's not very easy to do in our psychically sealed-off countries, so different from what we encountered on a trip to Cameroun, where the discussion would easily shift from class or group struggle in the country, to UFOs or voodoo.

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Footnotes

1. Willem van Weelden (translations from the French by Brian Holmes, Paris).

2. Gregory Bateson (1904 to 1980), anthropologist, social scientist and cybernetician, was one of the 20th century's leading social scientists. Strongly opposed to those scientists bent on reducing reality to mere matter, he was determined to reintroduce the human mind into the scientific equation. He did so in two famous books: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind and Mind and Nature* (op.cit.). The mind was in his view an integral part of material reality, making nonsense of efforts to divide mind from matter. Idolized by the counter-culture of the Sixties, notably by the incipient ecological movement, he was also a founder of the discipline of cybernetics together with other 'second wave' cyberneticians such as Warren McCulloch, Gordon Pask, Ross Ashby, Heinz von Foerster and Norbert Wiener. Cybernetics, a fundamental multidisciplinary study concerned with analysing information and feedback in information systems, established early on that the 'science of observed systems' was indistinguishable from the 'science of observing systems', because we are the ones who observe. The cybernetic approach focuses on the inexorable limit of what we can know: our own subjectivity. Cybernetics can thus be conceived from an epistemological viewpoint as a critique of materialist (i.e. Marxist) linguistic information theory and semantics.

3. Websites of and in cooperation with Bureau d'Études, or on them: bureaudetudes.free.fr, utangente.free.fr, syndicatpotentiel.free.fr and www.twenteenthcentury.com; Brian Holmes Maps for the Outside: www.oeh.ac.at; Publication Artistic Autonomy (Autonomie Artistiques) (text by Bureau d'Études): utangente.free.fr; Cartography of excess (Cartographie de l'excès) (text by Brian Holmes): utangente.free.fr.

4. Irit Rogoff, Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture, Routledge, New York 2000. An article of her in Andere Sinema, media tijdschrift, no 171 herfst 2004, Rotondomania / Bush als special effect / Cartografie & Dérive: 'Un- / Re-mapping, buiten beeld/in kaart gebracht'.