

World View: The G-7 Suite

by Robin Metcalfe

Images of the earth from outer space are remarkable for their seeming neutrality, their indifference to geopolitical hierarchies. The famous colour photograph taken by the American Apollo 17 mission gave visual form to a dawning understanding of the planet as an ecological and cultural continuum. The view is from a point in the Indian Ocean just south of Madagascar.

It is hard to imagine a vantage point that corresponds less with geopolitical power. To afford a comparable view, a conventional classroom globe must be turned on its side. In the photograph, it is the height of summer in the southern hemisphere: the sun illuminates all of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and the cloud systems that wreath Antarctica. The wealthy countries of Europe, North America, and Japan are all hidden on the night side of the planet, in the shadow and out of sight.

Before the advent of space travel, the only images of the whole planet were produced by cartographers. In ancient maps, the known world extended more or less equally in all directions from a fixed point of reference: Rome or Jerusalem, or the Middle Kingdom. The world was a disk, an island surrounded by the River Ocean.

After Magellan established that the planet was not flat, the central problem of cartography was to represent the surface of a sphere in two dimensions. Every solution to this problem involves geometric distortions. Every culture that undertakes to map the world selects the distortions that correspond most nearly to its own pre-conceptions. A map of the world thus reveals the eye that drafted it.

To produce *World View: The G-7 Suite*, Peter Dykhuis obtained a map of the world from each of the G-7 member nations and placed each map behind Plexiglas doors that open outwards from the centre. Across the front surface of these doors, he painted in encaustic the flag of the country where the map was published. The flag splits in two as the doors open, and the reverse of the flag painting becomes visible through the transparent Plexiglas. What Dykhuis has done is deceptively simple, but it gives rise to a rich field of meanings. As one examines the individual maps, one begins to notice how surprisingly biased are these presumably neutral representations of the planet's surface. Dykhuis's point is simple but enlightening: what you see depends on where you stand what your interests are. Cartographers must choose whether, in what shades, and how vividly to colour the political divisions of the planet. They must decide where to place the centre, and which way is up. *World View: The G-7 Suite* demonstrates that the supposedly scientific and objective representations on which we rely for our information about where we are in the universe are thoroughly imbued with the self-interest of their makers. The most evident variation is the point on the globe that constitutes the geometric centre of the map. In the Rand McNally map from the U.S., the Mercator projection – familiar to North American school children, and now widely discredited for its biases – places the centre of the world at Oklahoma City. The Germans place their central meridian 10° east of Greenwich, on a line that bisects Hamburg. The British, interestingly enough, forego the traditional privilege of Greenwich, to place their centre farther to the east, at about the longitude of Suez: the hinge point of the Empire on which the sun never set.

Winnipeg falls on the central meridian of the two Canadian maps (one in French, one in English), which, not surprisingly, have the most northerly centre at 30° north of the equator. Antarctica vanishes off the edge of these maps, while the Arctic Ocean (which disappears from most of the others) is here a prominent geographic feature. The Italian map, by contrast, has a luridly striped Antarctic continent that looks like a plate of Neapolitan ice cream. France, with its enormous former colonies in Africa, places the focus of its map farthest to the south, on the equator. The metropolitan country hangs over this centre point like a ripe grape, coloured in an intense shade of burgundy that appears nowhere else on the map. To a Western observer, the most startling variation of focus is the Pacific centre of the Japanese map, which is also the most beautifully and delicately coloured. The red sun of the flag, depicted on the outer panels, splits open to be echoed in the shape of the Pacific Ocean over which it rises.

The Canadian province of British Columbia has a flag that shows the sun crowned by rays, setting into the same ocean from which the Japanese sun is rising. In the minds of every nationalist, the sun rises and sets uniquely on his or her own country. Every kingdom is the Middle Kingdom. There is some comfort in the fact that, in strongly distorted projections such as the Mercator, the territory that is placed at the centre appears the smallest. In many U. S. maps, therefore, Canada looms gargantuan. "There be monsters," old European cartographers wrote at the edges of their maps. In the Cold War geometry of Mercator, Canada is the exposed flank of a continent, a vast pink Arctic wasteland across which Soviet missiles might at an time be streaking towards American cities.

The flags that frame and cover the maps are a deliberate reference to the 1950s American flag paintings of Jasper Johns. Reproductions of Johns' work, and the modernist critical interpretation of it, tend to emphasize his reduction of the flag to an abstract compositional device. Dykhuis's choice of encaustic as a medium stems from his discovery, on encountering the Jasper Johns originals, that the translucent wax allowed one to read bits of collaged newspaper that the artist had embedded within, full of references to American politics and the misadventure of U. S. foreign policy. For Dykhuis, peering at scraps of headlines from the McCarthy era opened up a whole new reading of Johns. In a similar way, he invites us to read his world maps through the filters of nationalism, the better to recognize those filters as obstructions to clear vision.

It is interesting to compare Dykhuis's deconstruction of the nation state with that of Japanese artists Yukinori Yanagi. In *Asia-Pacific Ant Farm*, a work displayed at Toronto's Power Plant gallery in 1995, Yanagi created 42 Plexiglas boxes of coloured sand arranged to reproduce the flags of the nations of the Pacific Rim. By means of plastic tubes connecting the boxes, a colony of ants industriously tunneled through the flags, gradually breaking them down and mixing up their colours. The ants served as a metaphor for the economic forces that undermine the coherence of the nation states.

The map of the world has always been an instrument of empire, a technology of domination. While offering the viewer the power of knowledge over distant places, it also exercises its own power over the viewer, determining his or her perceptions of the world.