

visual fields

Some Things Lilla LoCurto and William Outcault Have to Say About Maps

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Lilla LoCurto and William Outcault, the artists whose *timeline_33seconds* graces the cover of this issue of *Cartographic Perspectives*, have a history with mapmaking, indeed with NACIS members, that goes back ten years. Until then LoCurto and Outcault had thought about themselves as sculptors, if sculptors of a distinctly modern cast. After all they had both graduated with MFAs in sculpture in 1978, and had taught and made sculpture during the following years. LoCurto tended to make room-sized installation pieces out of found objects. For example her *Crossings* (1991) used rows of white stretchers and sandbags in a piece about the first war in Iraq. Outcault, on the other hand, made organic abstractions out of wood, plaster, fiberglass, and lead. His *Untitled* (1991), for example, mounted six white, swelling organic forms on a cedar trellis.

LoCurto and Outcault began collaborating with *Self Portrait* (1992), a piece about the universal nature of the threat posed by AIDS. A room-sized, interactive, video installation piece and a convincing sculptural presence, *Self Portrait* incorporated characteristics of the work each had been doing. Four stacked video monitors in a chain-link cage hung inside a transparent globe nine feet in diameter. A network of tubes on the globe's exterior pulsed with a blood-like fluid synchronized to the pulse – the amplified sound of which filled the room – of the viewer who sat in a chair facing the monitors, on the top one of which appeared his or her head and shoulders. The lower screens displayed the constantly changing trunks, thighs, and legs and feet of others, so that the viewer's head sat on top of a protean, universal body, trapped in a cage hanging inside a transparent globe coursing with blood. The powerful piece traveled widely and was followed by others, *Sharp Appetites* (1994), *Vrouwke Pis* (1994), and *Bean Boys* (1995) that continued to pose questions about the human body, its fragility, its vulnerability, its fragmentation.

In 1996 LoCurto and Outcault attended a show about Buckminster Fuller's work where his icosahedral projection of the world hit them as something of an epiphany, revealing for them the sculptural implications of a map. "It was probably," LoCurto and Outcault have written:

... the simplicity of his projection that made us un-

derstand what mechanics were involved but, like most people, we'd never really thought too much about how a map originated from a three dimensional surface. We saw connections between this and the artistic problem of rendering a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface as well as with the Cubist and Futurist idea of simultaneity, experiencing that three-dimensionality at once in its entirety. We'd been working with the figure, particularly our own, prior to this and the idea of projecting the human figure like a map using digital technologies struck us as a way to add to these traditions in a contemporary way. We also imagined the process itself would contribute aesthetically to the final images by tearing the body as it flattened it, emphasizing the frailty and vulnerability we saw as inherent in our condition.

That is, mapping their bodies struck them as a powerful way to approach the themes that had been consuming them since *Self Portrait*.

But how to project the body? They began by attempting to use their flatbed scanner as a camera, hanging it upside down from a gantry and assembling the resultant scans into approximations of projections as one might do with air photos. They soon realized, however, that they needed a three-dimensional whole-body scanner to achieve the simultaneity they were looking for, which is the hallmark of any map. They found one at the Natick Soldier Systems Command in Massachusetts where they were invited in and scanned. They now had to find or develop software that could transpose the scanner output into maps. This search led them to John Krygier, then a geographer at SUNY in Buffalo, and Krygier introduced them to Daan Strebe, whose obsession with map projections had five years earlier led to the release of the map projection program Geocart. Strebe was willing to augment Geocart for LoCurto and Outcault but an interstitial program was required to translate the scanner outputs into cylindrical and spherical coordinates, so Strebe introduced LoCurto and Outcault to the mathematician and sculptor, Helaman Ferguson. Ferguson introduced them to his mathematician son, Samuel Ferguson, and it was Samuel Ferguson who created The Body Mangler software that made it possible for Geocart to read the scanner output and produce the images that, realized as chromogenic prints mounted on aluminum, made up LoCurto and Outcault's *self-portrait.map* (LoCurto/Outcault, University of Washington Press, 1999).

Of this suite of eighteen body maps we've reproduced five in our portfolio: *Bipolar Oblique BS1sph(8/6)7_98* (figure 1), *Gall Stereographic L8sph(8/8)7_98* (Figure 2), *Kharchenko-Shabanova BS1sph(8/6)7_98* (Figure 3), *Gall Stereographic BC-1sph(8/6)7_98* (Figure 4), and *Urmayev III L3sph(8/6)7_98* (Figure 5). This work is usually discussed in terms of the body, especially in terms of LoCurto and

Outcault's concern for the fragmented, the fragile, and the vulnerable; but it is also seen as a revisioning of the self-portraiture tradition, and considered from the perspective of art history. For example, Helaine Posner has written of *Kharchenko-Shabanova BS1sph(8/6)7_98* (figure 3) that here "a photograph of William Outcault is symmetrically unfolded and splayed out across the picture's surface, the body seemingly suspended in



Figure 1. *Bipolar Oblique BS1sph(8/6)7_98*
1999
24" x 24"
Chromogenic Print.

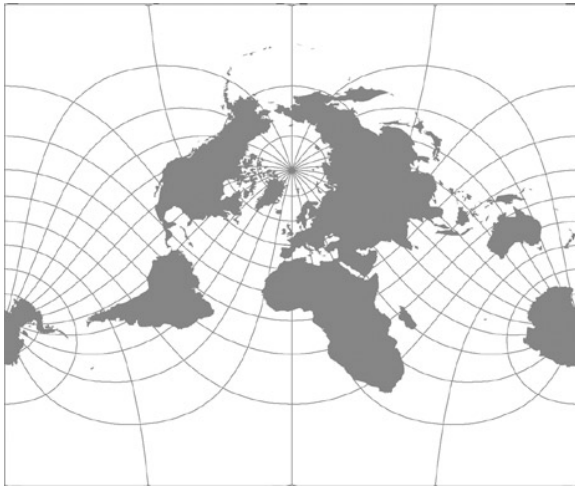


Figure 2. Gall Stereographic L8sph(8/8)7_98
1999
48" x 62.5"
Chromogenic Print

space. The central focus on his clasped hands and the tension between a body that appears to be drawn together and pulled apart brings to mind Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* from the Sistine Chapel." Another critic has observed that, "LoCurto and Outcault's efforts result in a series of phantasmagorically rendered and printed images that are at once elegant and grotesque. They playfully blend a Botticellian sense of Renaissance/mythic grandeur with a post-modern fetishistic morbidity suggestive of Francis Bacon."

The images can, however, be read from other perspectives as well, for example, from that of the earth or that of map projections. After all, the earth and the body have long been seen as metaphors of each other and here, where the graticule is expressed, the comparison is almost unavoidable. To turn again to *Kharchenko-Shabanova BS1sph(8/6)7_98* (figure 3), Outcault's body is, as Posner noted, symmetrically unfolded and

splayed out, but *exactly as the earth is symmetrically unfolded and splayed out* in this projection. The distortions which so fascinate and disturb critics looking at *Kharchenko-Shabanova BS1sph(8/6)7_98* are every bit as characteristic of the earth on such a projection, although the distortions of the earth have long since been confused with its actual appearance. Everything that can be said about the images of LoCurto and Outcault's bodies can be said as easily about the earth, including the reflections on fragility, vulnerability, and fragmentation, though again these have been conventionalized into acceptability. Who any longer sees, as on our map of the world here in the *Kharchenko-Shabanova* projection Antarctica *splayed*, the Pacific *severed*? The violence done to the globe by the map has been smothered by familiarity, but the images of LoCurto and Outcault recall us to a renewed awareness of how cruelly the earth is *squashed* into a map.



Comparison of Kharchenko-Shabanova BS1sph(8/6)7_98 with Bipolar Oblique BS1sph(8/6)7_98 (figure 1), of Gall Stereographic L8sph(8/8)7_98 (figure 2) with Gall Stereographic BC1sph(8/6)7_98 (figure 1) should recall to mapmakers the genuine strangeness of the earth they so easily drop onto the page, should help them recover something of the marvelousness that projections embed in every map. Habit inures us to the wonder of the world. By defamiliarizing the thing we know best, our body, LoCurto and Outcault's work brings with it the possibility of reenchanting something we only *think* we know well, the earth.

Having taken this first step, LoCurto and Outcault found the next quite easy. On a subsequent visit to be scanned at Natick they noticed in the software a utility



Figure 3. Kharchenko-Shabanova BS1sph(8/6)7_98
1999
48" x 57.5"
Chromogenic Print



Figure 4. Gall Stereographic BC1sph(8/6)7_98
1999
48" x 62.5"
Chromogenic Print

that aligned the scanner's four laser views: "As the application traced the contiguous layers of our volumes," they write, "we were captivated by its description of the body as an almost liquid drawing. In one format the scanned data is expressed as parallel horizontal lines that describe the outer contours of the human figure. Points are located along each line with instructions on joining the adjacent points to create triangles, or polygons, which, when all connected, form a wire frame volume." Excited by the potential they saw here, they were able to enlist the aid of Neil Katz, an architect friend familiar with a proprietary architectural drawing program that could eliminate the points and vertices to produce line drawings. Sam Ferguson was then able to modify The Body Mangler so that LoCurto and Outcault could "topologize" this new body from any angle and into any number of layers. Of the resultant "topologies" we have reproduced *topo_bs1* (2004,

figure 6). This is another version of the scan of Outcault mapped in *Kharchenko-Shabanova BS1sph(8/6)7_98* (figure 3) and, paradoxically, it's even more destabilizing. The contour-like lines seem to offer far more purchase on the image than was vouchsafed by the projected scan, yet any attempt to "follow" the lines leads to a realization that the figure is rendered inside out, an intuition that plays havoc with one's perception of the image.

Because of this, *topo_bs1* is capable of recalling to viewers their earliest encounters with contour lines, when their efforts to "understand" contours cognitively all of a sudden gave way as the lines "snapped" into a perceptual gestalt and sent them tumbling over the edge of the ravine or down the slopes of the mountain they were looking at. That sense of vertigo, especially acute when stereo pairs first come together, is a permanent attribute of *topo_bs1* whose paradoxes,



Figure 5. Urmayev III L3sph(8/6)7_98
1999
48" x 52"
Chromogenic Print

however, no amount of looking seem likely to resolve. Nor have LoCurto and Outcault any interest in doing so. To the contrary, each step they've taken seems determined to further discomfit our sense of self. Further programming efforts on the part of Sam Ferguson and others, and later by Ferguson's younger brother, Michael Ferguson, provided LoCurto and Outcault with the ability to manipulate the horizontal layers individually and ultimately to animate them. This led to an animation, *Essay of a Thousand Layers* (2003), and to the series *thinskin* (2004) of which we have reproduced *thinskin*[b7] (figure 7). Here the

layers have turned into ribbons of flesh, and the body been dissolved into a handful of confetti. The software tool developed with Michael Ferguson, CuisinArt, has given LoCurto and Outcault even greater flexibility – they are no longer confined to ribbons but can slice and dice and recombine almost at will – resulting in the three-channel animation *scribble in the air* (2006) and the series *timeline* (2006) from which we selected our cover image as well as *timeline_20seconds* (figure 8) reproduced here.

While with these images we may seem to have left any contact with the world of the map, this is not

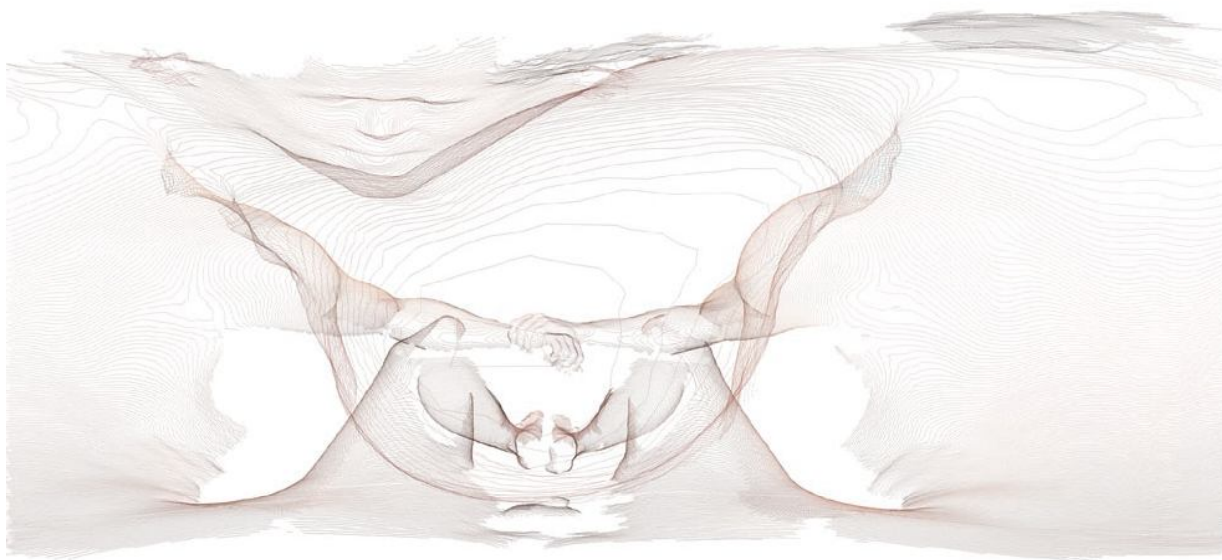


Figure 6. topo_bs1
2004
33.5" x 16.5"
pigment print

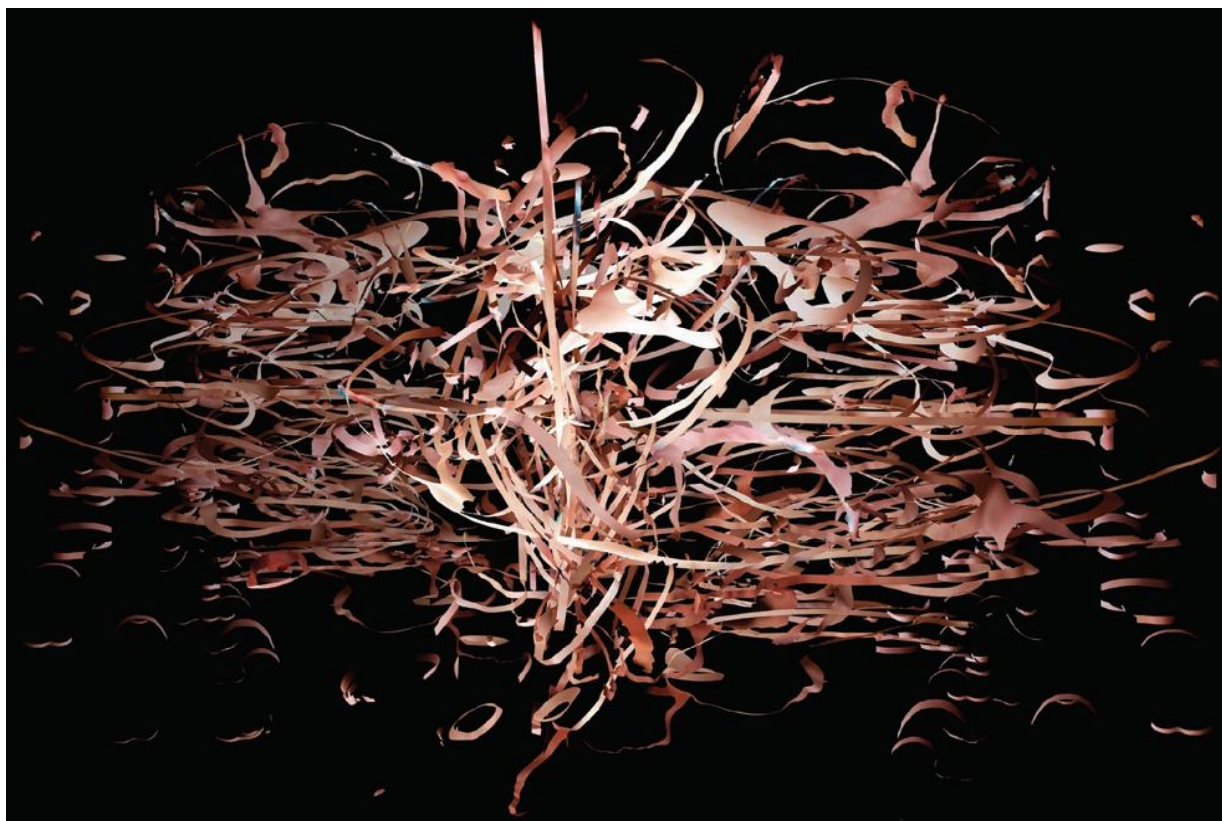


Figure 7. thinskin[ned][b7]
2004
24" x 36"
pigment print

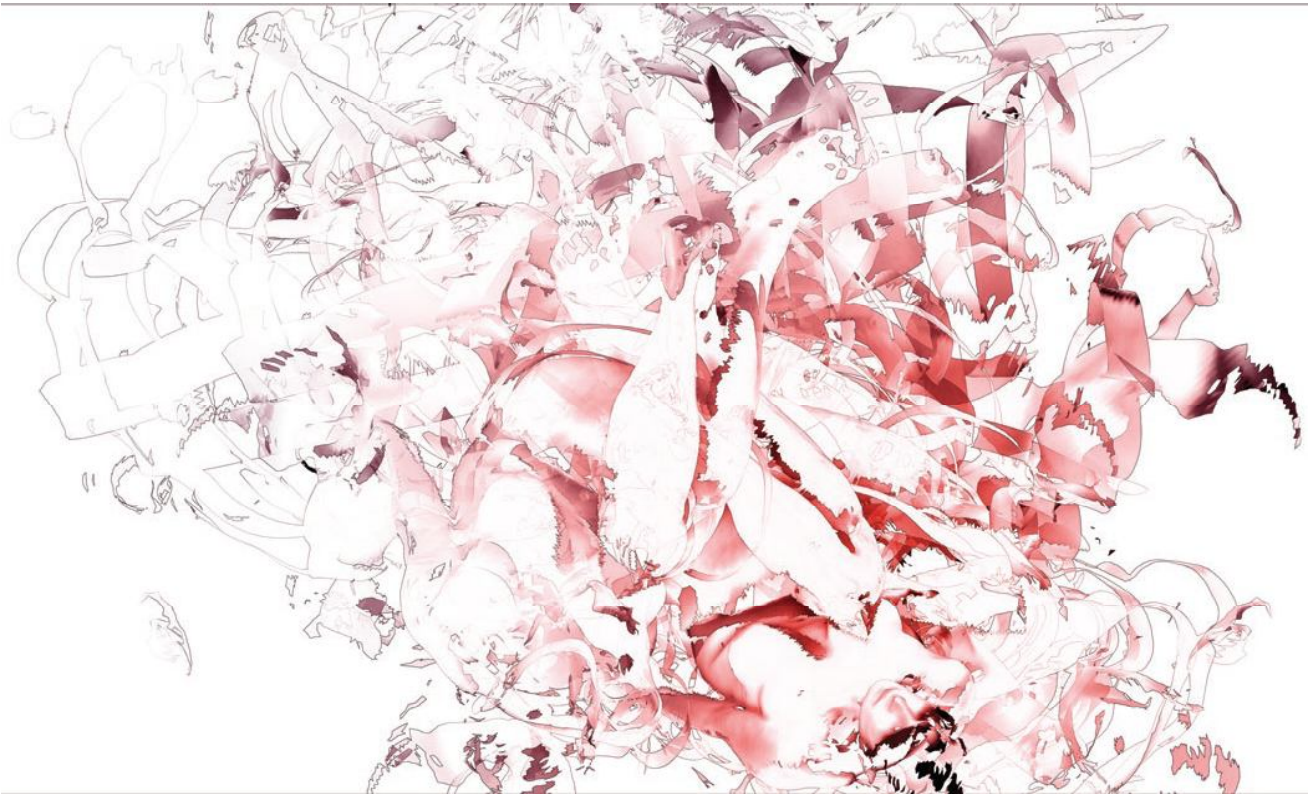


Figure 8. timeline_20seconds
2006
24" x 48"
pigment print

necessarily the case. "Since beginning with the map project," LoCurto and Outcault have written,

... we've continued working with the three-dimensional scanner as a camera, having developed different software programs that allow us to deconstruct the 3d body and to produce animations by manipulating the figures and their relationship to the cameras. Points of continuing fascination for us are the ability, within the computer, to not only work with the three-dimensional figure sculpturally but also to manipulate the viewpoint of the camera. Images captured with a traditional camera are limited to a single viewpoint, fixing the photographic eye in time, whereas with three-dimensional imagery the camera essentially surrounds the subject, allowing a unique simultaneity. We continue to explore this omni directional quality of the three-dimensional photographic images, using the unlimited number of viewpoints derived from a single scan to place the viewer outside the frame of traditional lens-based perspectival vision. In *thinskin*, instants from animations are revisited and compiled from numerous viewpoints, capturing a single moment from multiple angles.

While it is doubtless a commonplace to speak of maps, even maps of the world, as though they were

views taken from a single vantage point overhead, it is in fact the case that the map's "eye" surrounds the three-dimensional earth exactly as the whole-body scanner surrounds LoCurto and Outcault. Far from being limited to a single vantage point, maps are seen literally from an infinity of vantage points, each precisely overhead every point on the map.

This astonishing characteristic of the topographic "view" is, like so many characteristics of the map, hidden from us by our familiarity, as invisible to us as the miracle of language, or air. Confrontation with the work of LoCurto and Outcault, at once so close to that of mapmakers and at the same time so completely alien, forces us to confront afresh the bizarre, distorted, multiperspectival fact of the map, and so refresh our own self-image.

What more can we ask of art?

For more images, please see the LoCurto/Outcault website: <http://members.bellatlantic.net/~vze3s5q6/>