

Absurdist Cartography: The Dada Millennium Map of the United States

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What might be the outcome of bending the traditional rules of cartography in favor of chance? Our answer is "something Dada." What does chance have to do with cartography and Dada? Taking the last first, Dada is a recent expression of the ancient absurdist spirit of relativism which, as an antidote to rationalism, is as old as Alley Oop and Protagoras. As a protest movement against the excesses of a rational society, Dada mushroomed briefly in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. It arose among French and German intellectuals out of their sheer moral exhaustion and nausea over that War.

By 1916 the absurdity of the systematic slaughter of men and mules and its ties to the Age of Reason were becoming appallingly apparent: masses of patriotic soldiers were being mechanically marched off by the War Administrators to die meaningless deaths in miserable battlefield trenches. The story of the birth of Dada in the chaos of wartime tells us that one day in 1916 some of these soldiers, fully knowing they would all be gassed, maimed and slaughtered, suddenly and spontaneously burst out into a cacophonous bleating-like sheep—instead of singing their patriotic marching songs. This absurd spontaneous gesture by the walking dead in protest of the dehumanizing Death Machine was the birth of the Dada movement, which was always more about protest than about art. Thus, when viewed against the logic of the trenches, the insanity of Dada—the sweeping antilogic of its protest—spectacularly demonstrated some subversive potential in dysrational critique.

Among the countless contradictions that characterized Dada protests are its exuberations over life through embracing nihilism. From within the organizing engine of insanity that was Dadaist cosmology in 1916, life intuitively appeared to be a series of irrational collisions ruled by chance: if the Cruel War just happened, then life was considered all the more precious and precarious because of its meaningless extinction on the battlefields. Dadaists in the aftermath of the Big War shared a revolutionary state of mind that used, for effect, warlike violent shock tactics in its war against War—in art, in dance and in literature—macabre and absurd humor, for example—to suggest that life, absurd as it might be, was the only thing that ever matters. Thus, the Dadaists expressed through their excesses their contempt for a "world gone mad."

Dada was more generally a protest against the hypocritical values of an arrogant self-satisfied world that preached aesthetics and progressive thoughts while squandering life. Dada especially questioned the pretentiousness of Establishment art by creating its own absurd juxtapositions of anti-art. Dada's usual method—its *modus operandi*—was to wage a guerrilla warfare against Establishment materialism by employing the and language of that materialism as its own weapons of attack.

Which brings us finally to the topic of cartography, and to the introduction of our Dada Millennium Map of the United States. We were surprised to discover that peacetime and wartime cartography was never—either in its art, or in its science—a target for Dada anti-War protesters. This is strange considering the extent to which rational cartography served the War machine and subsequent destructive developments during the interwar period. Cartography also contributed to the carnage of the Second World War, and since then has increasingly served myriad exploitive corporate machinations against humanity and nature that have raised profits while squandering plant, animal and human life around the world, right on down to the present.

“Down to the present” is the appropriate phrase here. It conjures our abyssmal future, given present trends. We appreciate that Dada nihilism, as expressed in its art forms, was against both the world “as it is” and the future. What W. B. Yeats, Leonard Cohen, Joseph Heller, the Dadaist poets and ourselves all protest in common is that the world “as it is” stinks, and that the future is murder.

This sentiment is often called Nietzschean nihilism, after the philosopher-gone-mad Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's dysrational anti-philosophy valorized the insidious power of the absurd to destabilize any progressive thought or rational-utilitarian order. In geography, the underground *Globehead!* journal of extreme geography, launched by graduate student cartographers at Penn State in 1994, anticipated our Dada map by exploring the destabilizing potential of critical, absurdist and transformative cartographies.

Our own absurdist Dada cartography as presented in this map of the United States is inspired by Nietzsche's philosophical aphorisms. On the reverse of our map we juxtapose some of his aphorisms to a running contemporary chronicle of local events: Dadaists once read the daily newspapers aloud and called it poetry. Likewise, we find, salvage and recycle old news text to empower the insignificants of the past—and then call it “philosophy.”

The map side protests the logic of points, lines and polygons by instead

evoking image fragments in stamp art that correspond ambiguously to vaguely familiar places. While not all stamp art is protest art, some of our stamp images, in the eyes of each beholder, may be perceived as vivid metaphors that employ the most abstruse absurdities to reveal the overall irrelevance of an absurd empirical world dancing on its own deathbed. If the beholders of our map want to add their own images to express their own protest, space is available. One of the absurdities of the Dada Map is that it is never complete; always a work in progress.

Together, the text and images constitute a critique of socio-economic and environmental conditions across the United States on the threshold of the second millennium. The deliberate irrationality of our Dada map negates the laws of beauty and organization in traditional mapping. Designed to be mailed instead of filed, framed or referenced, our absurdist cartography partakes in an interdisciplinary, international, and largely underground correspondence art movement whose members most likely would be amused instead of outraged by the emergence of an anti- or parallel cartography. And, as a mailed item, our Dada map "corresponds" to the world in an ambiguous sense of the word, by refusing to correspond to the Establishment's traditional perceptions of what constitutes an acceptable representation of the real, or a cartographic truth. In its typography, layout and philosophy, the Dada Millennium Map of the United States defiantly violates all the conventions of good taste in cartographic publishing.

In conclusion, we began by asking "What might be the outcome of bending the traditional rules of cartography in favor of chance?" One outcome is our Dada Map, a product of an alternative cartography that is appropriate to serving—not another War Machine—but serving as everyone's own doormap to the end of the millenium. Look to your mailbox soon for the Dada Millennium Map. Unfold it. Behold it. Wipe your feet on it.

The next two pages show reduced sized illustrations of the full Dada Millennium Map of the United States, which will be mailed separately to all members of the California Geographical Society.

