

(Learning Through the Soles of Our Feet)

Vermeir & Heiremans

7 Walks is an artistic research trajectory in collaboration with guest walkers and participants. Using walking as a public research method and developing a direct relation with the natural or urban environment, the project aims to connect the ecology of the arts with a natural common good – water.

Vermeir & Heiremans develop three new walks in Brussels for *nadine*, initiating a dialogue on concepts such as ownership, public goods and governance, and exploring forms of value redistribution and mutualism. At the same time, they examine cartography from an alternative pedagogical perspective.

The walks activate the archival documents that the artists present in *nadine*'s exhibition space. These documents are a generous loan from the *Service des Archives, patrimoine et réserve précieuse* of the Université libre de Bruxelles. They highlight the role of anarchist and geographer Élisée Reclus (1830–1905) within the Université Nouvelle and the Institut des Hautes Études. These institutions were founded in Brussels in 1894 by progressive thinkers and dissident ULB professors after Reclus' invitation to teach geography at the Université libre was cancelled for fear of reputational damage in connection with Reclus' anarchist views and sympathies.

The self-organized Université Nouvelle became an international meeting point where Élisée Reclus, as well as neo-impressionist artists, writers, lawyers, activists and progressive politicians taught. The Institut des Hautes Études offered free adult education with the emancipation of workers and students in mind. In this context Reclus set up the Institut Géographique.

Geography takes up a central role in alternative learning, with walking as a didactic method. The great tradition of anarchist education swears by the axiom that the best learning happens... *through the soles of our feet*. Anarchist geography saw 2D maps as a means of creating dependent subjects rather than empowered citizens. Reclus did not like 2D maps either, instead his teaching started from the observation of the nearest stream. Based on his book *Histoire d'un ruisseau* (1869) he practiced an *intuitive geography*, one that was in direct contact with its environment.

Vermeir & Heiremans gladly take up this advice in their walks to observe the Brussels' waters: the sources, drinking fountains, lakes and the invisibilized vaulted rivers.

Next to historical documents the artists have installed a giant globe hanging from the ceiling of the exhibition space, with a printed image of the earth derived from powerful NASA satellite data. We see the earth and its fragile envelop, the atmosphere, showing us weather patterns from space.

Creating a giant globe was one of the dreams Reclus wanted to realize: a realistic representation of the world, devoid of boundaries, meridians and abstract cartographic symbols. According to Reclus, "the globe outdoes the map by nature of its truthfulness: it represents the planet in its true structure, it varies exactly according to the real contours, whereas maps, increasingly false as they are applied to greater parts of the planetary surface, can only deceive the viewer regarding the relative dimensions of different regions while on the curvature of an artificial globe it is impossible to err with regard to the relative area of the various terrestrial entities". Flat 2D maps deform countries and continents due to their chosen projections. Those maps reflect the power of the person or state who commissioned the map. Therefore, Reclus' Institut Géographique created small globes and 3D maps for schools promoting alternative education.

Today we can assemble the wealth of photographic information on a variety of *reality* maps and globes. One can retrace these maps and globes to one picture that revolutionized our view of the world. In 1972 NASA distributed *AS-17-148-22727*, a picture that showed the complete earth, emancipating itself from earlier cartographic conventions, or so it seemed. In fact, the picture has been re-oriented by NASA. The original picture shows the south side up, and the continents "upside-down". NASA also cut out the globe from the black cosmos and re-entered it in close-up in the middle of the image.

Why did NASA re-orient the globe with north on top? Even Élisée Reclus represented the earth in that way. It is a cartographic reasoning. In order to find oneself on the earth, north is placed upwards, and so the map, as a powerful concept, is re-surfacing again. Despite itself, *AS-17-148-22727* became a map. Cartography seems so ingrained in our brains.

How can the world be made visible, as it is and not as we think it is? How can the cartographer disappear? How can the vast empty space of the cosmos be visible, and the fragile tiny earth in it?

To make the cartographer disappear was Reclus' motivation to create a Great Globe at the scale of 1/100.000, resulting in a monumental object of 127.5 meters of diameter to be presented at the 1900 Paris World Fair. Reclus envisaged to appoint neo-impressionist artists to draw the color decoration for the enormous surface of the globe. "The great symbolic power of that object, which was never realized, was an attempt to minimize as much as possible the dichotomy between the world and its representations, that is to make the world an artwork."

Reclus' vision clearly merged art, geography and activism. A form of *social geography* in which one can act upon the world and be embedded in it, to (socially) reform it for all living beings. "The earth is infinitely beautiful, but for us to associate ourselves to its beauty, to glorify it by a respectful art, there is no other means but that of becoming free of instituting the decisive revolution against money and of ennobling the class-struggle by abolishing the classes themselves". Reclus warns us that ugliness is created by speculation and accumulation. The reason for that he saw in "the fact that everything can become private property."

Today the powerful NASA image has become a new type of map. Inside the virtual world of *Earth 2*, we rediscover the image as a geo-located Metaverse, in which a direct relation with where you are in the real world is created. *Earth 2* is building "a pristine 1:1 scale digital replication of our planet Earth. *Earth 2* is one of the most successful start-ups in history and has grown into the biggest Virtual Land Registry in the world with over 100 million tile land parcels sold."

In his short story "*On Exactitude in Science*" (1946) Jorge Luis Borges describes the Cartographers Guilds who had struck a "Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it". Later generations had allowed the map to fall in ruins. When in these 1:1 Metaverse Earths, the real earth and virtual earth are linked in the form of real estate parcels, and when intellectual, material and immaterial property converge, public space, the commons, movement and free speech might become severely restricted, opening up the possibility of the *propertization* of everything.

The walks through Brussels question the dark side of all these forms of cartography as an infrastructure of power and surveillance, what occasionally becomes visible in the urban fabric. In these walks Vermeir & Heiremans address the possibility to co-create an emancipatory cartography, starting from artistic practices embedded in the landscape, a cartography that can generate new narratives, collaborations, mutualism and agency.

- 1 Reclus É., *Projet de construction d'un globe terrestre à l'échelle du cent-millième*, Paris, 1895, 3-4. in Federico Ferretti, *Pioneers of the History of Cartography: the Geneva map collection of Élisée Reclus and Charles Perron*. *Journal of Historical Geography*, Elsevier, 2014, 43 (1), pp. 85-95.
- 2 Gillet, A. AS17-148-22727 – *Face à la Terre*, *Geogr. Helv.*, 70, 27–32, <https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-70-27-2015>, 2015.
- 3 Ferretti F., "Anarchism, geography and social art", in C. Kosuch (ed.) *Anarchist Avant-Garde*, Amsterdam, Brill, 2019, 235-259, <https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789004410428/BP000013.xml>, p. 15.
- 4 Ferretti F., "Anarchism, geography and social art", in C. Kosuch (ed.) *Anarchist Avant-Garde*, Amsterdam, Brill, 2019, 235-259, <https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789004410428/BP000013.xml>, p. 15.
- 5 Reclus É., *L'Art et le peuple* (1904), in F. Ferretti, "Anarchism, geography and social art", in C. Kosuch (ed.) *Anarchist Avant-Garde*, Amsterdam, Brill, 2019, 235-259, <https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789004410428/BP000013.xml>, p. 13.
- 6 Reclus É., *Du Sentiment de la nature dans les sociétés modernes* (1866), in F. Ferretti, "Anarchism, geography and social art", in C. Kosuch (ed.) *Anarchist Avant-Garde*, Amsterdam, Brill, 2019, 235-259, <https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789004410428/BP000013.xml>, p. 13.
- 7 <https://earth2.io/>
- 8 Borges J. L., *On Exactitude in Science*, *Collected Fictions*, Penguin Books. Translated by Andrew Hurley.
- 9 Vermeir & Heiremans, *Volatile properties: A Modest Proposal revisited*, *Finance and Society* 2023, 9(3): pp. 75-90.

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