

Epilogue

Mapping Uncertainties

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The drawing table in front of me is nothing more than a large wooden panel installed with a vertical angle of about 15 degrees. A little extra wooden strip at the bottom holds the pens and pencils. My arms are just long enough to be able to touch both sides at the same time. All around the edges, foldback clips hold paper in place. I take my pencil, put it on the paper to start the next line but immediately take it off the paper again. I take a little step back. I pause and hesitate over where to let the tip of the pencil touch the paper again. I make maps, and I look at them. Generally, these are the two things one can do with maps. I alternate between both, from behind my drawing table. I am the first person to look at the map I am making.

This epilogue takes another perspective as I expose my role as a mapmaker. I invite you to come and have a look from behind my drawing table. The form and tone of this epilogue is therefore, in this context, somewhat unusual, but no less relevant. Maps have the ability to produce knowledge not only while looking at them but also while making them. For every map there is at least one maker and an entire mapping process.

This drawing table is not situated in an office or in an artist's studio, but at the place to map. I find myself at that place. When I look through the window, I see the place I am mapping. I am thus not only looking at the map, I am also looking outside at the place to be mapped. I see the place to map on a one-to-one scale outside, and at the same time I look at a scaled-down version on my drawing table that I can overlook. The scale, orientation, and proportions on the map may vary, but my distance to the place on the map is

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BREPOLS



Figure 1. My empty drawing table, winter 2023. Photo by author.

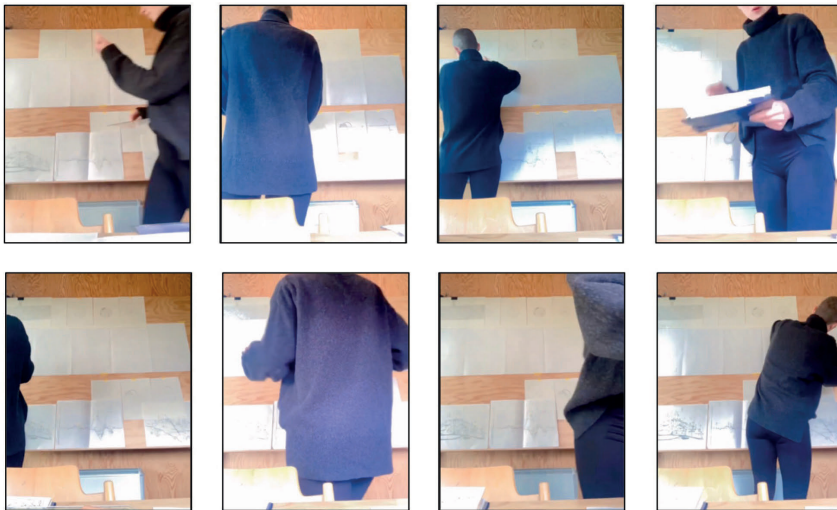


Figure 2. Series, cartopological dance, summer 2022. Photo by author.

as small as possible. From nearby, I hesitate over what scale, proportion, and orientation to use on the map.

I call myself a cartopologist.¹ Cartopology stretches up and merges cartographic documentation techniques with anthropological fieldwork methods. So, as a cartopologist, I make maps by using my presence at a place to collect and map knowledge hidden in the everyday life of that place. I put myself in a vulnerable position throughout the mapping process at the place that I do not know. The place changes my habits and routine. I must expose myself to the place and be admissible. This fragile position allows me to come as close as possible to the place I want to map.

In front of the drawing table, I am still uncertain. Should I not just start drawing? What else can I do? I am holding a pencil. The doubt about whether to put another line on the map or not will just disappear the moment I draw that line. I can always use my eraser, if it is not satisfactory. I try to shape and locate my experiences of the place on the sheet of paper. What took place where, and how does that experience relate to other previous experiences already drawn on the map? The more I can add to the map, the more I get to know (about) the place. I make to come closer to what I do not know.

I draw. I erase a bit. I redraw a part, but bigger. I erase a bit. I redraw again, adding other details. I erase a bit. I redraw a last time, but I quickly realize I will have to make a more drastic decision. I will have to cut this part of the paper out of the map and replace it with blank drawing paper. I'll have to start over on this part. I cut the exact same shape out of a blank sheet of paper and tape it to the existing map on the drawing table.

Instead of immediately making another attempt, I let the map be, and decide to go outside. To look, participate in, and experience on a scale of one-to-one the exact place that I just failed to draw on the map. I don't have a sketchbook with me, but I do have my smartphone. I take lots of pictures. To better remember and have another look back at the drawing table what a certain place looks like, but also because my smartphone is set to keep the exact location of each picture. This way, should I need to, I can link place to experience.

Failing repeatedly and being uncertain about the drawing result, the map guided, almost forced, me to go outside and participate in the reality of daily life of the place. The map on my large drawing table not only acts as a place where experiences of daily life are located and documented, it also takes me by the hand and steers me in a different direction. It makes me go outside rather than keeping on attempting to draw that specific part of the map. So the map

¹ Cartopology is a field I have been setting up to question my artistic map making practice. By setting up a new field I am inviting others interested in (making) maps to relate to the discipline as well. As the field grows, its location between art and science, making and thinking, practice and theory is more and more founded as well. More information about cartopology on its Wikipedia page and on www.cartopology.institute.

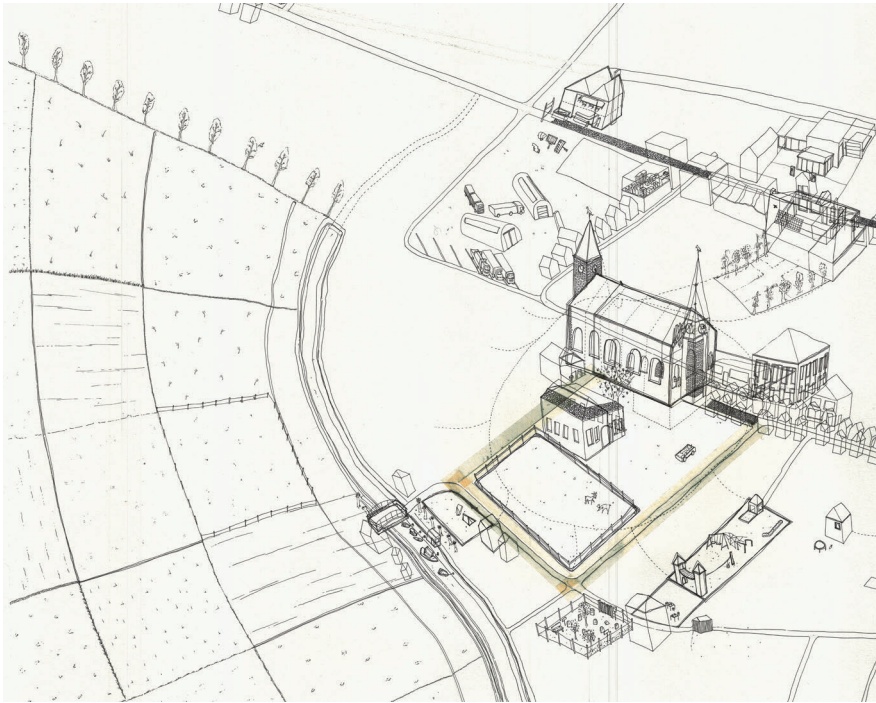


Figure 3. Map with tape, 2015. By Marlies Vermeulen.

not only collects knowledge, it seems to support me in producing it, too. It tells me where to go, even before it is finished.

About an hour and a half later, I am back behind the drawing table with new insights, experiences, and hopefully also new possibilities. I change the scale, adapt the proportions between elements on the map, and choose different orientations based on the daily life that impacted me during my participatory observations at the place I just came back from. I tailor the map to the place. The map and the place are therefore inseparable. I make another attempt. Gently I move closer to the drawing table again and place my pencil on the paper. I see the edges of the renewed blank paper that remind me of previous attempts. I look at the pictures I took earlier, think about the experience I had in the place, and start drawing.

The map guided me well. I had to go outside and take part in the daily reality of the place. Now, I am more certain about what the map depicts—at least, about the part that I could not draw on the map before.

I notice that the participatory observations have altered the way. I use different proportions, leave some things out, and allow more space and focus for other elements. I am drawing with more certainty, more in relation to the place to map. A language begins to form that allows me to have a dialogue between the place and the map. I make new types of hatching that fit the place. I make new combinations of line types and thicknesses, and I seem to

have grasped the scale that is exactly necessary to capture the daily life of the place. Not too large so that I keep an overview, not too small so that I can add sufficient detail.

Relieved, I take another step back. I take some distance from the drawing table and realize that only now the actual work begins. If I want to map the reality of daily life of the place, I must apply the way of drawing I seem to have found on the small piece of new blank paper to the rest of the map.

Where at first I became uncertain about the drawing, the map, my observations, and my presence at the place, I now have managed to find a way to make the two correspond, by moving back and forth between map and place, between one-to-one scale and overview, between researcher and artist, and between anthropologist and cartographer.

As a cartopologist, only one thing remains for me to do. I am evidently the first person to look at and use this map while I am making it. However, I am most definitely not the last. The map will leave this drawing table and this place soon to meet and engage with a wide range of public: people living at the place I am mapping, policymakers taking decisions for the place, other mapmakers, artists, and researchers, for example. They will all engage with the map from a different point of view.

Will my map survive their gaze? Will the map be able to guide their eyes, just as it also directed my gaze outward and brought me new ideas and insights? In the same way as perceiving a place, you also experience a map by *having a look around*. Maps invite you to look in all directions. From bottom left to top right. From the middle to a small corner. Sometimes one skips a piece, while another detail makes you stop your hovering and grabs your attention.

I tried to draw the map as accurate as possible. However, the map will never be complete. On the contrary, it is a collection of perceptions of daily life that I experienced at the place I have mapped. At a certain time and in a certain context. The mapmaking process may be over, and my drawing table may be ready again for the next map, but cartopological maps always live on. They are never complete, nor completed. Like the place itself, maps should keep the ability to change, adapt, and modify, also according to who looks at the map or is at the place. This way, the mapmaking process I encountered might be over, but it is just about to start for my map readers.

It is better for the map to live on as a dynamic document that encourages a curiosity and an interest in places rather than to evoke an incomplete truth. Let the (cartopological) map be a document to better understand a place rather than a document that fixates the place, that stops interpretation and change, I keep saying to myself. With every map that leaves my drawing table I impart a bit of vulnerability. I hope my uncertainty will only encourage my map readers to be uncertain, too. And understand the map as an invitation to be open to multiple perspectives and multiple maps of the same place. Even though they may tell a different story. Let this cartopological practice be a plea to embrace

uncertainty. Not only when it concerns historical maps, but perhaps even more so when it comes to maps made today. Let them be full of uncertainties and incompleteness so that we continue to look at the beautiful places around us with wonder, precision, and focus.

About the Author

Marlies Vermeulen is deeply involved in cartology. She co-founded the Institute of Cartology, is artistic director of Dear Hunter, and teaches at universities in The Netherlands and Germany. Currently pursuing a cartology PhD at Maastricht University and Zuyd Hogeschool, she expects to finish in 2024.