

UNSAFE

*An installation by Ruth Watson
at Two Rooms, Auckland, New Zealand
21 September – 20 October 2007*

Unsafe is Ruth Watson's first solo exhibition in a dealer gallery in Auckland since 1992. She returned to New Zealand in 2006 after a 12-year absence, spent first in Berlin (1993–95) then Sydney and Canberra. She holds dual New Zealand and Australian citizenship.

For over 20 years, Watson has worked with cartographic ideas and imagery as a major basis for her work. From emerging artists' project *Planetarium* at Artspace, 1989 to work made for *Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific*, 2003 her work has consistently engaged with these concerns, particularly the image of the world. Trained as a painter, Watson has also worked with photography and more recently, installation. This is her sixth large-scale, floor based site-specific installation and the first time she has made one for a New Zealand site. Her last in Australia was a 12 metre diameter map of the universe made for the Yale-Columbia Observatory at Mt. Stromlo, Canberra, in 2005.

Watson's work has been included in many prestigious international exhibitions including two Australian *Perspecta* (national survey) exhibitions, in 1997 and 1999; the Tom Sokolowski-curated *Lest We Forget* in New York City; the major New Zealand exhibition *Cultural Safety: Contemporary Art from New Zealand*, 1996; the Sydney Biennale, 1992; the Cheju Korean Biennale, 1995; the inaugural Auckland Triennale, 2001; *Telecom Prospect: Recent New Zealand Art*, 2004; as well as over 25 solo exhibitions in New Zealand, Australia and Germany.

Watson has been the recipient of several awards, including the Olivia Spencer-Bower Foundation Award, 1992; a Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council (now Creative NZ) Fellowship, 1993 and the international Walter W. Ristow Prize for a cartographic essay, 2005. Her artworks are held in nearly all the major New Zealand public collections, including The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, as well as the National Gallery of Australia.

Watson has a BFA in Painting from the University of Canterbury (1984), a MVA from Sydney College of the Arts (1999) and a PhD. in Fine Arts from the Australian National University, Canberra (2005). In 2006 she accepted a position as a Lecturer at the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland.

Unsafe, the installation (shown opposite), was accompanied by two series of works on paper, exhibited in the upstairs gallery at Two Rooms. One series of drawings is titled *Natural Boundaries* and is based on the work of oceanographer Athelstan Spilhaus. From the 1940s until the 1990s Spilhaus created maps of the world to privilege the ocean. To do this he had to, in his words, "slice up the land". This is the reverse of what is usually done; including in Watson's installation. Some of Spilhaus' interruptions were chosen to show tectonic plates, others to focus on ocean-land relationships; the title *Natural Boundaries* is taken from Spilhaus' writings. A second series of drawings, titled *Unsafe*, use the glass spheres from the installation to recreate versions of Spilhaus' maps and one more that relates to the installation, titled *Unsafe (Map Without Projection)*.

For further images, including of the two series of works on paper, see www.tworooms.org.nz

Ruth Watson would particularly like to thank Jenny Todd for her generosity and vision in hosting a large-scale installation in her main gallery.

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PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY Jennifer French
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Two Rooms

Ruth Watson UNSAFE



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UNSAFE

IT IS A TRUTH, not yet universally acknowledged, that artists do not always make the best writers about their own work. The pitfalls are many: the artist may be overly confident (or the reverse), too focused on some new technique mastered or caught up in the personal epiphanies of making art to see any bigger picture. Worse, they might be confused for an oracle with the final word on how the work might function for others, or simply make a hash of it. There are exceptions of course; McCahon informed others of what he was doing using simple yet effective words. As I am surrounded with colleagues better than I in the art of interpretation, the question must be asked, why do I? Alongside a bizarre deadline was an opportunity or challenge, not to interpret my own work, but to offer some of my thinking around it, perhaps helping bridge a few gaps relating to my long absence from New Zealand. So in lieu of interpretation, here are some of my takes on mapping, artistic models and methods, all mixed together.

LEGENDS OF THE MAP
Is anything not being mapped today? Mapping has superseded other metaphors, some related to it, and some from other visual fields; for example, today we rarely 'chart our position',

'give an outline of...', 'offer a perspective on...', and so on; mapping has taken their place. Why is the map such a current place to be? This currency may have multiple origins. Our idea of what mapping is supposed to do has had to radically expand in the last 30 years. Things, events and processes well beyond the geological or social are now being mapped. Our imagination has been captured by the Human Genome Project or mapping the universe. Another factor in the metaphor's prevalence may be the exact opposite: the seeming obsolescence of the traditional map in this new era of global positioning systems and other 'new cartographies'. The map may therefore have become even more available for other, metaphorical tasks. But I doubt this would explain the ubiquity of the metaphor. Perhaps all this expanded usage—metaphoric and literal—reflects our increasing reliance on maps (although this may be a western-specific cultural phenomenon).¹



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ship between sign and signifier, in which 'accuracy' is the next keyword (in the mathematical definition of mapping, it is 'correspondence'). Yet history constantly shows us that maps are uncertain, changeable, and its means of representation is not separable from the desires, minds and methods that produce them. A map is, by its very nature, a projection; as a product of the mind, prone to migrations over time, place and meaning. The history of the term itself gives us some hints of a richer past: one version of the map, as a verb, is *to bewilder...* this version is now, unsurprisingly, obsolete. Here it is, from the Oxford English Dictionary:
map, *v*² Obs. Rare-1. ... 1445, "Festivals", 175 in Leg. Rood (1871) 216: "Ours lady. ... Lay still doted and dased, As a soomman mapped and mased."
Is this what today's users of the metaphor mean? I doubt it; the usual appeal is to certainty, with authority also invoked. Mappings, mappekyns, and mapkins also appeared in the fifteenth century, meaning: nibblers; and therefore, often applied to bunnies or rabbits. All that sweetness has now been lost, although the sense of reproduction or replication may remain. Today's 'mathematical' map and the *mappa*, or tablecloth (one historical meaning often referenced), have become tiresome. Run, mapkin, run.

REORIENTATIONS
Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have offered a definition of the map that underlines its mutability:
The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It

can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation.²
In this era of so-called globalisation, when the world maps or globes are used as representative images, it is worth investigating alternatives to our well-worn imaging habits. The type of projection chosen—the map's own mathematical structure—is one way of starting. Many wonderful examples of world describing have already sprung from the minds of cartographers, from the ocean privileging maps of Athelstan Spilhaus to the hibiscus-like Quincuncial projection by Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce, famous still as a semiotician, implied that the mathematics that underlined all his work (including cartography) was "an arachnoid film, spun from the stuff dreams are made of". Art, as much as mathematics, can play a part in world describing. Some of the tasks contemporary art now has—to challenge, reawaken, reconnect with emotion, encourage lateral interpretation, and more—seem perfectly fitted to envisioning new worlds.

Sometimes it's not even art that inspires, but a twinkle on the road, a pool of water in a hollow dip, or an article on pattern recognition. Recalling Peter Peryer's 1991 photograph of a school playground version of the outlines of New Zealand, it seemed like the view from a satellite at night, with lights twinkling below. Part of that work's

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appeal is the viewpoint; Peryer simply stands above the concrete ground to shoot his picture but his position becomes akin to floating in space, as if looking down on the land-forms from afar. The black-and-white abstraction of the work contributes to its sense of distance, of some historical document. Another's photograph can be part of generating an installation.

One of the most famous artists working with maps, Robert Smithson, in some ways left the map unquestioned. Smithson's use of this imagery was integral to his concerns about geologic structures and even the social construction of space. While he did cut and arrange the maps in his *Non-sites*, it always surprises me that he did not investigate the non-spaces of the map itself. He mostly leaves the map alone, its visual languages and descriptions—capable of obliterating as much

as displaying—are left unchallenged. A floor-based installation made from jagged pieces of plate glass titled *Map of Broken Glass (Atlantis)* was a homage to a place that no longer exists. Smithson's broken glass was overtly dangerous, necessitating gallery guards in the vicinity. No one in his or her right mind would walk on or through it and the appearance is clearly alarming. Similarly, Mona Hatoum's glass marble floor *Map* of 1998 would not invite walking upon. I wished for something a bit more slippery than either of these—more overtly beautiful and deceptive; attractive, yet with some potential for danger. Still, I did put up warning signs, perhaps giving some of the game away.

Another famous artist of the 60s and 70s, Alighiero e Boetti, like several prominent artists today (including Hatoum and more recently, Chinese megastar Ai Weiwei), simply employ the Mercator projection without question or qualification. Without going into its politics, I instead question the artistic strategy of taking the Mercator projection as 'a given'. Emendations or alterations to that highly conventional image are then limited to being a reaction to a dominant paradigm. Why not challenge the paradigm by questioning its very structure? One artist that has generated her own alternative worlds was Agnes Denes, whose works *Isomorphic systems in isometric space: Map projections* spanned the 70s to the late

80s. In these works, the world was formed as a doughnut, egg, snail shell or cube. These fanciful projections were often made as three-colour lithographs, dusted with five metallic colours on hand coloured Japanese Moriki paper. As Denes is largely known as an environmental artist, perhaps this preciousness was intended to impart a concern or care for her new worlds. What interests me most about these works is that they were made before information on map projections was widely available to the non-cartographer.

Yet I'm working after Smithson, Boetti's or Denes' era, in a world awash with images of map and globes, of GIS and Google Earth™. Why delve into history when everyone else is obsessed with the increasingly digitised present? As our neophilia directs our energies elsewhere, we forget things that don't fit the new regimes and that things have not always been the way they are now. Our emphasis on land over sea is one such issue; products like Google Earth™ reinforce this (cultural-specific?) hierarchy. *Unsafe* is loosely based upon a dymaxion projection, designed by 20th century polymath Buckminster Fuller. This particular variant of his map reinforces relationships between landforms that I have made repeat and almost replicate in a meandering line through the gallery. Although the installation is clearly focussed on the landforms,

it could also be said that the sea is everywhere (and sports its own dark continents in the form of stains in the gallery's lovely concrete floor, stains I didn't wish to cover or hide). The edges of the landforms are blurry and



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soft, with these thinner layers of beads gleaming often more brightly in the overhead lights. These are the most slippery parts, the most impermanent.

The tiny glass road safety spheres are being used contrary to the purpose they were made for. When paint holds them in place on the road, they help us see where we are going. Here, we find ourselves looking from afar at a potentially beautiful, yet bewildering world.

—Ruth Watson

IMAGES

- 01 UNSAFE, 2007
Miniature glass spheres directly on floor.
Installed at Two Rooms, Auckland
- 02 UNSAFE, 2007
as above
- 03 Miniature glass spheres, used in UNSAFE, 2007
- 04 UNSAFE (detail), 2007
Installed at Two Rooms

¹ Wood, D., *The Power of Maps*, New York: Guilford Press, 1993.
² Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F., *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizoanalysis*, Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 15.
³ Newman, J. R., *The World of Mathematics*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1960.