Dan Mills and His "US Future States Atlas"

It is no longer radical. It's a moral. *
— Arundhati Roy

Dan Mills has been invested in the idiom of collage ever since his maturity as an artist began in the mid-1980s and his chosen medium has given him the freedom to accumulate visual data from the external world. The gradual development of Mills's artistic vision has always been closely related to his interest in specific global political subjects—he is able to internalize those subjects and twist them with his keen insight to ensure a highly personal sequence of constructed imagery excavated in a form that shifts back and forth between representation and abstraction, and there is a direct, detectable continuity that allows for a pictorial interplay between the two tendencies. In (2003) and (2004-05), a complex system of superimposed images yields to a greater control of graphic signs and notations. The painterly impulses are executed site-specifically in Superimposing Culture (Priddy, 2002), which demonstrates the evolution of color modulation within the deducible shape of a map; the work also includes a color chart hovering over the black-and-white gradiation of other mapping and illegible texts.

Some were to consider Mills's work in the context of avant garde art history, it belongs in the rare company of no more than four or five contemporaries who have been galvanized by similar political themes—most notably, Oyvind Fahlström and Mark Lombardi. Fahlström, with his highly personalized construction of both topical and historical materials, never intended to make his images legible to the viewer, nor did he wish for his works to adhere to the logic of popular trends. Given the artist's enthusiasm for happenings and opera—two art forms whose spatial and temporal aspects are conducive to his notions of art's autonomy—it stands to reason that he understood that the "abstract" aspect of art is not a necessary means to a political end. In addition, Fahlström's grouping of painted images derived from mass media and popular culture—particularly images in the conventional language of cartoons—endows his composition with a sense of inevitability. Through his unusual appeal for information overload Fahlström ultimately was able to pose his own question about reality—and this question, in turn, became his political axis. For example, World Map (1972), an epic work presenting a graphic of current history of "facts" separated from each other by borders, is unashambly driven by pictorial necessity: the image is shaped by the contained data from each region rather than by its physical geography. The result, a symbiosis of formal complexity, is a visionary union of comic-book images and political cartography.

Unlike the open ends and resistance seen in Fahlström's work, Mark Lombardi's eschews drawings as embody a kind of pared-down construction that could be perceived as the most likely data exposed by his investigations of financial capital. The work results from an almost algebratic constellation of overlapping and intersecting patterns. In Fahlström's art, one immediately recognizes a parameters underlying that is dictated by a maximalist sensibility—everything is accounted for in his vision of utopia, whereas Lombardi's narrative structure is an exhaustively detailed representation, comparable to the ways in which certain vocabularies are manifest through illostracric charts and diagrams. Using invented signs and symbols, Lombardi demonstrates how money is routed through a maze of secret arrangements, such as the George Bush—Pulitzer National Bank, the savings and loan scandals of the eighties and nineties, for example, in which inherent relationships are drawn on the white background. Every statement of fact and every connection is called by the artist directly from the public record.

Similarly, looking at Dan Mills's "US Future States Atlas Project" (2003-
2009, comprised of thirty-works on paper, variously measured in nearly uniform formats (from 11” x 151/8” to 179/8” x 221/8”), one notices how the artist has taken full liberty to reconfigure the content, which is transposed with selected texts. Mills then superimposes and superimposes selected maps and countries in an equal-hemisphere, politically motivated equivalent of what he refers to as a jerographic vision. In Future State No. 1, Near Albany (2009), a map of the U.S. appears at top left, above a close-up of “Near Albany” (the country of Albania expected to scale over the state of Virginia on a drawing of the Eastern U.S.). On the right Mills has painted rectangular patches of green, dark green, pink, and some red areas closing in on what is left of central Albania. Text surrounds this image, covering topics such as Albania’s forty-four years under communism, the motives/visionary (i.e., U.S. attempts to dominate along with Albania’s natural resources and economy, all of which is in consonant with what actually benefits the U.S. In Future State No. 20, Near Cuba (2010) the artist depicts the legitimate map of Cuba, slightly off axis of the picture. This map is overlapped by its larger version, a honeycomb grid painted in blue (the actual island is colored by a strange acid green), its darker tone accentuated with horizontal strokes. These horizontal strokes repeat in what appears to be a map of the state of Oregon located on the upper right—it is embedded in modulated variations of white and pink horizontal strokes. As in Future State No. 1, Near Albany, the surrounding texts play an equal role in the picture as a whole.

These works reveal Mills’s improvisational impulse, which corresponds with his critical observation of U.S. imperial ambitions. Again, we’re reminded that the text in his work provides the viewer with the whole chain of actions, corresponding to the concept of the memory image associated with its intended meanings.

US Future State Atlas was conceived in 1992 during the quincentennial of the so-called first encounter (Christopher Columbus landing in the “New World”). After completing his first handful of “Future State” works, Mills felt that, as he put it, “the only way for visual clarity to co-exist with narrative is to conceive of the whole process with consistent strategies.” After presiding the staggering array of information available in the “Global Fact Book,” Mills began to think of himself as a global imperialist who is able not only to utilize the text, but also to colonize the shape of each selected state or country accordingly. The artist then re-contextualizes these geographies using curious strategies: physically distributing them as in the case of Ukrania (2013) and Umaculatia (2010); fomenting them in hysterical color charts, an USI inannis (2013); or reducing them to patterns, as in Forms/Faces (2010).

Mills considers imperialism to be a mediating term that draws between fact and fiction. In this moral maelstrom, one thing is certain: his object of desire inevitably will become our object of desire. Lisa Fehlhaber and Lombardi, whose works resist any kind of easy unrolling of the artist’s political vision of the world, Mills has found his refuge in conceptual density and maximal lightness. Ultimately, what holds our interest in Mills’s work is the tension between what is read and what is seen. It’s no longer imagined. Phong Bui 2018