

## the spirit of mapping through writing

**KATARINA WESLIEN** *Titling the book **Mapping the Intelligence of Artistic Work** requires a little explanation. How do the acts of making, mapping, and writing come together?*

**ANNE WEST** I call this work “mapping” because the metaphor best serves the intention of this practice, which is to make more apparent the hidden texture of artistic seeing and knowing. Mapping through writing is the catalyst for plumbing the hidden correspondences in our image language. It is the means we use to probe the dynamic space of the imaginative mind and to plot the intricacies of this composite world. The metaphor of the map links writing to the creative imagination and brings to consciousness a more authentic understanding of an artist’s work.

**KW** *How did the connection between the two arise in your mind?*

**AW** Over a decade ago, an artist friend introduced me to Charles Hampden-Turner’s *Maps of the Mind*. The spirit of mapping in his book set me on a path of thinking and teaching. Hampden-Turner’s maps are windows into the complex minds of leading thinkers in philosophy, psychology, and sociology. His maps portray diagrammatically, with visuo-spatial imagery, the thought worlds of great thinkers. We see the intelligence of each mind’s unique approach to configuring reality. In fact, his maps read as landscapes of essential ideas which, when rendered as image, frame mental paradigms. With his emphasis on “connectedness, coherence, relationship, organicism, and wholeness,” we are able to see a convergence of their thought patterns and worldview.<sup>1</sup> In one instance we see a map of Martin Luther King’s mind: the ecology of his values and how he broke from dualism.<sup>2</sup> Immediately I felt his work was a powerful interpretive tool for seeing, thinking, and writing about visual work. Over time, I have witnessed the power of using mapping as a vehicle for revealing and celebrating the visual mind.

**KW** *You teach a course by a similar title at the Rhode Island School of Design. Is this book an outgrowth of that course?*

**AW** Since 1996 I have taught an image-based form of critical writing to graduate students who are preparing their written theses. Employing the technique of “mapping through writing,” students discover the underlying intelligence of their work and through this discovery their voices as artists and designers. Mapping enables them to forge vital links to the meaningful messages of their work, making them more effective and confident communicators. Inspired by these classes, I decided to capture the essence of these group processes into book form for an expanded audience. This process was built in successive stages within group settings. Utilizing carefully planned exercises (vignettes), the students examine the connections, both concrete and abstract, that inform their creative processes. The idea was to get to the pith of the experience via connections, gaps, and bridges, and to express it in words.

**KW** *Can we backtrack a little? If you were initially intrigued by Hampden-Turner’s ways of mapping the mind, how has this translated into mapping the artistic mind? How is the mind of the artist different?*

**AW** Mapping the artistic mind involves a kind of spatial poetics where image-based thinking is brought into dialogue with the written word. Imagination—the way we make sense of reality—is not a clear cut rationalist process. It is an immersive, non-linear process directed by images. In the hands of artists and designers, mapping through writing is a way to inquire, document, and constellate meaning within an open, interpretive space. In this flexible space multiple centers of awareness exist simultaneously and in dynamic relationship—real experiences, fundamental transformations that occur through media, charged aesthetic considerations, intuitive insights, and much more.



**KW** *How do you envision the process of tracking the way that the imaginative mind operates?*

**AW** For me, the idea of the god Hermes presents a way to envision this process. Hermes, the messenger god of Greek mythology, is the interpreter. According to Homeric legend it was Hermes who invented writing. He has wings on his heels that make him adept in forging links across different zones of experience. He is cunning in his *modus operandi*. How artists trace out what they know requires a similar cunning approach. The artist-writer obeys a different kind of logic as s/he, like Hermes, wanders along non-linear paths. It’s a form of chaos theory at work. Painter Christine Hwang expresses this process so clearly when she writes,

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“Mapping through writing is landing in one spot, exploring the area around it, discovering the boundaries, and then moving on.”<sup>3</sup>

**KW** *Chaos theory at work. Can you tell me more?*

**AW** We know from chaos theory that what makes a system chaotic is that it is dynamic. Nothing that is alive lives by being enclosed and separated from the environment. If a system remains enclosed, it is subject to entropy. Structures will dissipate within this entropy. They need an initial variant—a strange attractor—from outside the system to give them life.<sup>4</sup> The initial variant and its behavior cannot be predicted. Weather is a good example. Our imagination is a dynamic system. Images nudge our consciousness and behave as unpredictable variants—strange attractors that come from outside the system and affect the system, giving it life. The initial unpredictable behavior in turn results in creating a vital new pattern of thought. Artistic awareness is built upon the power to respond to these strange attractors which come in the form of idea, intuition, sense impression, recognition, memory. I believe they connect to the body’s deep level of knowing—Eros. They alter the field of attention and break the chain of familiar response. For me mapping is the best way to work with images and dynamic systems. It allows us to see the way we combine, recombine, organize, and reorganize meaning.

**KW** *This is the main point of mapping.*

**AW** Yes. The non-linear dynamics of the imagination cannot be interpreted from a single fixed angle or with an anticipation of a set behavior. Mapping asks us to follow the paths that the “strange attractors” activate and to bring these insights to consciousness. When artistic consciousness is viewed through mapping, artmaking no longer functions as a subset of life but rather as a human process operating within a dynamic field of potential and as a system of relationships. Maps give us eyes to this larger analogue. We zoom in on the intimate. And then through the wide aperture of the mapping lens, we link with the generative matrix. It’s all one vision.

**KW** *You seem genuinely intrigued by what animates the artist’s mind, what you call vision. How does vision work?*

**AW** As you well know, artists do not see from a single vantage point but holistically from many angles. Vision, which includes a space for the body, not just the eyes, comes from multiple centers of awareness: visual, visceral, emotional, experiential, abstract, and inquisitory.

**KW** *Can you speak to how we build a clear map based on our field of vision?*

**AW** The imaginative mind is disciplined and inextricably connected through persistent vision and developed visual language. From this persistent vision, a cohesive body of work emerges. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *On Imagination* speaks of images as “conscious events.”<sup>5</sup> When images are strung together forming a group of interrelated elements, they acquire cohesion—a field of vision.

**KW** *What informs this persistent vision upon which the mind is structured?*

**AW** Images are ideas and thus a way of seeing and knowing. It is imagery that carries the life spirit and energy of the work. These “mental events” form a vision of reality. For example, author James Hillman opens our understanding to the link between ideas and insight. He writes,

“The word idea itself points to its intimacy with the visual metaphor of knowing, for it is related both to the Latin *videre* (“to see”) and the German *wissen* (“to know”). Ideas are ways of seeing and knowing, or knowing by ways of insightful. Ideas allow us to envision, and by means of vision we can know.”<sup>6</sup>

**KW** *So, we create a map of these mental events and build from there. Perhaps it is noticing what we do? I am thinking about how important the first person point of view is, and that our experience of life is being mapped.*

**AW** Yes. By naming the images that fire the imaginative mind, we understand the structures through which we perceive. Italo Calvino discusses at length how images are potentialities and how we get caught in their web. He writes,

“As soon as the image has become sufficiently clear in my mind, I set about developing it into a story; or better yet, it is the images themselves that develop their own implicit potentialities, the story they carry with them. Around each image others come into being, forming a field of analogies, symmetries, confrontations.”<sup>7</sup>

I like this idea that images develop their own implicit potentialities.

**KW** *But how does we actually “do” it? How do we work with these images in the process of writing?*

**AW** Through a “poetic logic,” meshing image and language.

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**KW** *What do you mean by the term, poetic logic?*

**AW** I first encountered this term in the writings of Marcel Danesi about the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico.<sup>8</sup> In the 18th century, Vico was writing about artistic knowing as “poetic logic.” He was perhaps the first to speak for a knowledge that stemmed not from reason but from imagination. According to Vico, imagination and metaphor are the essence of the mind.

The Greek word *poiesis* means, “to make, create, invent.” The word poet means “maker with words.” *Logos* is the Greek word for “speech, articulate discourse, rational word, and idea.” According to Vico, iconic, perceptual thought inaugurates the first act of knowing and images are our first-order thought forms. These images become the foundation stones where we first “make,” “create” sense. The images wallow deep in the imagination and form an interference pattern in the mind that incites creativity. Through a metaphoric capacity in the mind, these impressions are translated into conceptual thought. So, in a Vichian sense, when one translates into language the roots of one’s visual knowing, a poetic logic gives validity to the experience.

**KW** *In other words, one starts with perceptions and sensations to get to the underlying images and thus language.*

**AW** Yes. Visual work teaches us to reside differently at the threshold of language. Initially the work is unaffected by words (unless language is the basis of the work). If images are the means of thinking, then one must consider the weight of sensation and perception as the means to connect with language.

**KW** *In the encounter between art and writing, how does this poetic logic work?*

POIESIS — LOGOS  
making — writing  
sensation — language  
intuition — rationality  
sensing — knowing

**AW** To write on behalf of visual work, we function in the space between *poiesis* (the making) and *logos* (the speaking). *Poiesis* and *logos* are inseparable; one cannot be without the other. They work like opposing magnets and through a union arrive at communication. *Poiesis* needs the glimpse of inspiration revealed through the imagination to inaugurate a form. *Poiesis* represents the expressive potential and syntax of the visual field. *Logos* requires imaginative capacity to generate linguistic form. The verbal is accessed through the visual. The map is a complementary cross-fertilization emanating from the overlapping of *poiesis* and *logos* (image and language).<sup>9</sup>

**KW** *How is the spirit of mapping relevant to this encounter?*

**AW** Mapping allows us to locate the place of identity in the work and to know both in form and in language our most accurate truth, authentic voice. It tracks the persistence of the imagination and generates a narrative structure that communicates the intelligence of the visual work. The non-linear dynamics of artistic vision cannot be interpreted from a single fixed angle. Writing encourages shifts of stance in accessing the matrix of the work. Mapping is the lens, the generous optic revealing the intimate facets as well as the larger field of artistic vision. One of my students, sculptor Laura Kaufman, who has worked with this process, remarks,

“Mapping...grants me reprieve from eliminating what may have been true before, but is not what is before me now. In other words, there is no need to amputate ideas – they are all mine – some farther from the center but the center will shift and the once far away idea glows in the spotlight of focus. Mapping grants me a state of mind/being that shifts and includes, not one that prunes errant branches before they bloom. It allows my small, fearful mind to accommodate the big world.”<sup>10</sup>

This awareness and ability to adapt is essential to generating a meaningful map.

**KW** *I have heard you refer to this writing practice as a practice in holism. What do you mean by this expression?*

**AW** To write about imaginative understanding, we must enter the “picture” as an experiment in holism. To appreciate and understand the work is to experience it whole. It is viewed like a hologram, where a number of complex relationships are packed into a concise image or form. When writing, we unpack the hologram to see what has fired the imagination. Mapping through writing is a way to see the work holistically. Seeking wholeness allows us to find validity in the ambiguity of an open, non-linear process. It fosters a graceful balance between knowing and non-knowing and sidesteps the perfection that can easily become a tyranny on the imagination. Writing into this wholeness is a gesturing toward something that is in a constant state of evolution.

**KW** *What does it mean to be a keen or comprehensive mapmaker?*

**AW** When I was writing this book, I was also learning to sail. I learned, while out at sea, what it means to be a keen mappist of a world in a constant state of flux. Like the creative process, sailing requires minute-to-minute perceptual attentiveness to

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information coming simultaneously from multiple sources. Extending this metaphor to the practice of writing in the mapping mode, artists work like sailors charting their course. At various points along the way, they become privy to what informs consciousness. As they move to another place of thought, they reframe their position and perform the same exercise again. With each shifting angle, perspective becomes more intelligible. Each nuance of awareness develops a more generous optic with which to see the larger picture. Vision comes into sharp relief, moving one from tunnel vision to the largesse of a more prismatic way of seeing and knowing. The writings of architect Christopher Alexander helped me to understand this process of attending to the multiple centers that carry the vitality of work. According to Alexander, the centers are the building blocks that give a work a sense of the whole. Using the metaphor of the early Turkish carpet, he shows that the degree of wholeness that a carpet has is directly correlated to its number of centers. The more centers the more powerful and deep its degree of wholeness. Likewise the deeper the ideas that inform our visual work the more powerful its degree of wholeness."

**KW** *As you speak about the enterprise of mapping and map-making, I wonder if there is a danger of thinking too rigidly about this mapping process, that is, of attributing closure to a process that is in fact an open one?*

**AW** I recall one student asking,

*"Can I really know these impulses and describe them or are my notions just signposts, agreements with a spirit I can only obey but not fully describe, map, or understand?"<sup>12</sup>*

The richness of visual language is speculative and indeterminate. The moment we compartmentalize, find a formula, pigeonhole, establish a niche, the act of interpretation becomes finite. If we set out to explain it, we may draw the life out of it. Artistic knowing does not exist in the domain of direct correlation between fact and meaning. Art permits us to be carried away from this type of determination. Art serves notice that the world of meaning is an open one that is constantly being created and recreated.

Mapping artistic work is about becoming more perceptually aware, about making connections for the sake of consciousness. By becoming more aware of the processes, the sources, the actions, and materials, we stimulate artistic consciousness. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari write,

*"Art is never an end in itself; it is only an instrument for tracing the lines of lives."<sup>13</sup>*



LEE JOHNSON, COMPOSITE MAP, 2010 / PHOTO — ADAM LUCAS

1 Charles Hampden-Turner, *Maps of the Mind* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1982), 8.

2 *Ibid.*, 204–207.

3 In conversation with painter Christine Hwang, January 2007.

4 This passage builds upon an interpretation of chaos theory offered by Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in his *Wisdom of the Elders* recording (Fetzer Institute, 2004).

5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Imagination: a psychological critique*, trans. by Forrest Williams (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press 1972). Sartre offers a critical investigation of the history of the imagination, in which the character

of images and of the nature of the imagination are revealed as a type of consciousness.

6 James Hillman, *A Blue Fire: Selected Writings*, ed. by Thomas Moore (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989), 53.

7 Calvino, 88–89.

8 Marcel Danesi, *Vico, Metaphor, and the Origin of Language* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993). “The first language of humanity was an iconic one that crystallized in the deep level of the mind when the imagination transformed the images produced by the brain into iconic signs.” (Danesi, 117)

9 The writings of Denis Wood also informed my thinking about the exchange between image and language. See: Wood, 95–142.

10 In conversation with sculptor, Laura Kaufman, at the Art & Writing Institute, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Connecticut, 2007.

11 Christopher Alexander, *A Foreshadowing of 21st Century Art: The Color and Geometry of Very Early Turkish Carpets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 31–51.

12 In conversation with photographer Noah David Smith, January 2004.

13 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in Deleuze’s *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1.2004.