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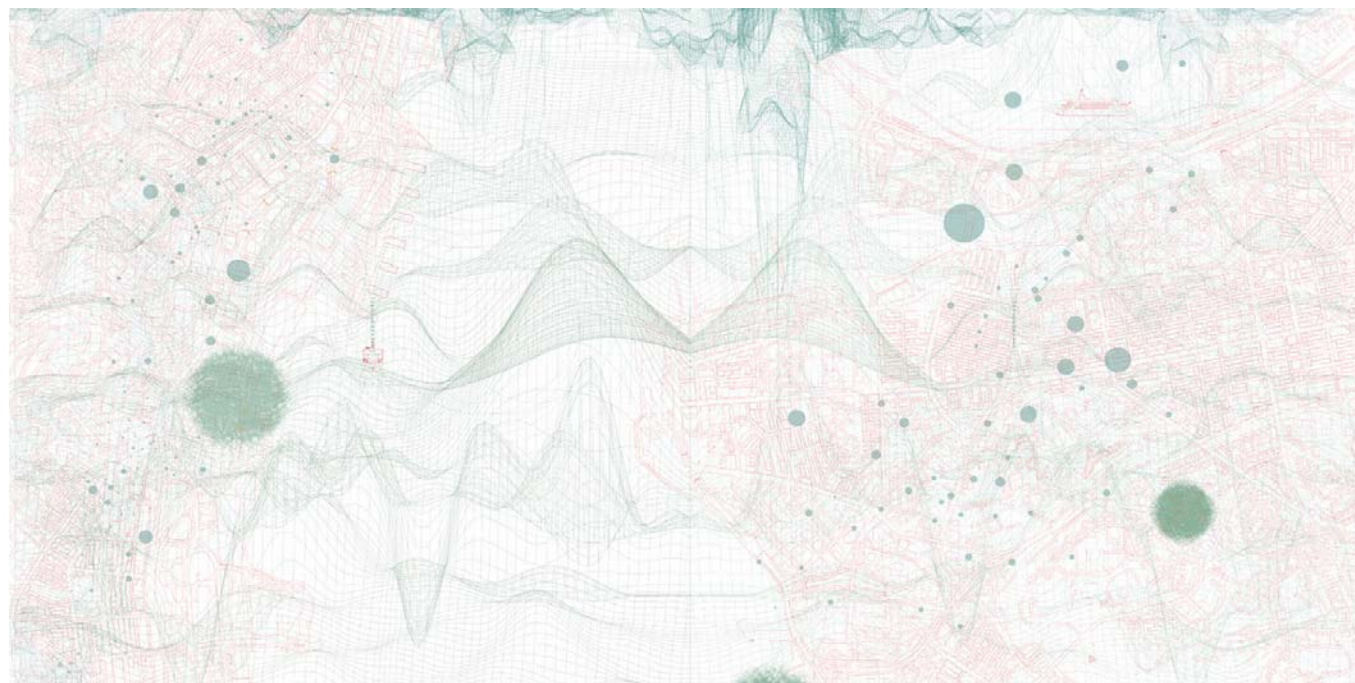
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Speculative Cartography

written by **Artomity Magazine**


By Gerhard Bruyns and Peter Hasdell

On Exactitude in Science: In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. Succeeding Generations… came to judge a map of such Magnitude cumbersome… In the western Deserts, tattered Fragments of the Map are still to be found, sheltering an occasional Beast or beggar; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of

Geography.

Purportedly from *Travels of Prudent Men* by Suárez Miranda, Book Four, Chapter XLV, Lérida, 1658; from A Universal History of Infamy by Jorge Luis Borges, 1935

Jorge Luis Borges' *On Exactitude in Science* examines as speculative instruments the applications, skills and techniques of cartography, and can be understood as a critique both of science and of the folly of geography. Borges invites us to regard a cartography that attempts to map the world to such an extent that it ends up effacing or supplanting its object, namely the real, terra firma. A cautionary parable that questions ideas of representation and reality – the text is also an elaborate fiction acutely aware of its artifice – it both describes the construction of the grounds for cartography's authority and offers a critique of its veracity.

From Borges we learn that in the horizon between the fragments of the map that remain and the territory it covers, an imaginary world exists. The map is no longer based on an ontological, comprehensible reality but exists between reality and representation, between the known and the unknown, and between that which can be represented and that which will always be outside representation. The blurring of this horizon questions the discourse of power that provides a map with its authority, and the authority vested in the lines that demarcate a projected territory. The lines, or rather the lineages that construct them, be they cartographic, legal, cultural or architectural, abound in peculiarities that hide their fictions, errors, distortions, erasures, acts of censorship, duplicities and areas of dispute. The legitimacy of cartographic fictions is evidence of a power and dominion that is often founded on the projected and speculative basis of a territory being *terra incognita* or *terra nullius*, unknown or unoccupied land.
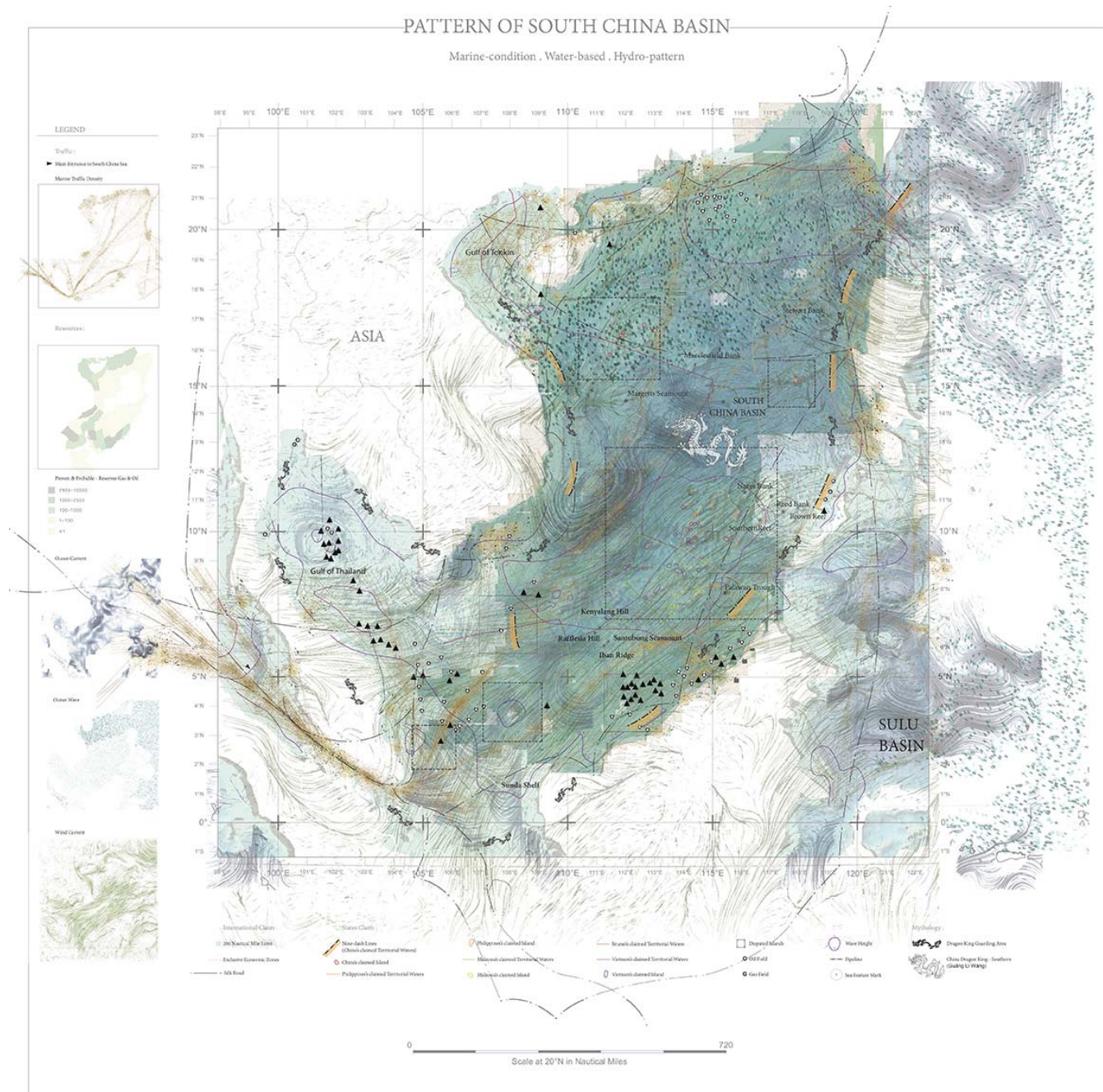
Jacky Chan

Architecture, planning and cartography are premised on the economy and apparatus of the inscribed line, be it on paper or defining physical territory. As orthogonality, as rectilinearity and as correctness, the line itself, as the primal essence of drawing, is not perceived as a line but as the coastline on a map, by the spaces either side of the line, or as a grid, a scale, a name, a mesh of conventions, speculations, laws and codifications carrying the notions of authority and power.

Here, between the representational and the real, determined by the intersection of the material world with the imaginary territory of the mind, an ephemeral condition exists. In other words, the specular and speculative world of appearance found in the projective practices of the draughtsperson or cartographer and of their imaginings

prevents the map or drawing from being mere pictorial representation. These processes construct a complex territory that defies simple spatial articulation of inside and outside.

Questions of power are at stake: lines that restrict the professions of architecture, planning or cartography, and underscore the practices of the architect, planner and cartographer and their tools of speculation, and their subsequent manifestation in the material world with the authority to demarcate walls, streets, boundaries and lands. In Alberti's terms, the lineaments, the cartographers' lines, the surveyors' lines, the lines of the law, those of the architect and others seek to enclose and articulate a form or body. Written, charted, drawn and inscribed on a surface, these lines carry intentions, emotions and desires. Therefore the cartographer who draws with these many and varied lines could begin to conceptually, conventionally, metaphorically and in practice inhabit the lines they inscribe.

Cartography has a range of codified practices. The grid lines indicating position, reference and location, the dimensions and scales, the boundaries and borders, the manifestations on maps of height and depth, and of walls and buildings, not to mention the numbers, names, notes and abstractions all provide identity to each mapped reality. All cartography is codified in particular ways that are decoded by reading it. Each drawing symbol is assigned a specific meaning meant to lead the reader through sets of information. A misreading of a map or chart that in the architectural world, for instance, might lead to dimension lines being constructed as a wall, or lead a map reader to look for the grid lines on a map in a real place, similar to using a conventional road map in places omitted from maps such as Area 51 in Nevada, its erasure from all charts an act of deliberate obfuscation.

Historically the origins of cartography find their source in the ancient Greek in χάρτης or *khartēs*, meaning the act of writing on a sheet of papyrus or paper, or a map. Present-day definitions outline the diagrammatic and informational representation of a variety of elements in a two-dimensional format. Also known as cartographic projections, the quest for making, reading and reinterpreting cartography remains vibrant within the current digital paradigm. John Noble Wilford's *The Mapmakers* (1981) is a representational account of cartographic processes, tracing the trials and obstacles cartographers have faced in the production of maps. Each type of cartography remains a product of a period of thought, for example the mapping strategies of Marcus Agrippa (65-12 BC), son-in-law of Augustus Caesar, who wanted to map most of Britain and segments of Europe as part of the Mappa Mundi, or Map of the World. Although rudimentary by today's standards, the map was a way of configuring the perceived

world and its spatial dimensions. Later the Portuguese, under the leadership of Prince Henry of Portugal (1393-1460), known as Henry the Navigator, undertook four personally funded expeditions to map the unknown world. By the time of Henry's death the Portuguese had managed to map Africa's west coast as far as Sierra Leone, facilitating Vasco da Gama's expeditions to India from 1498.
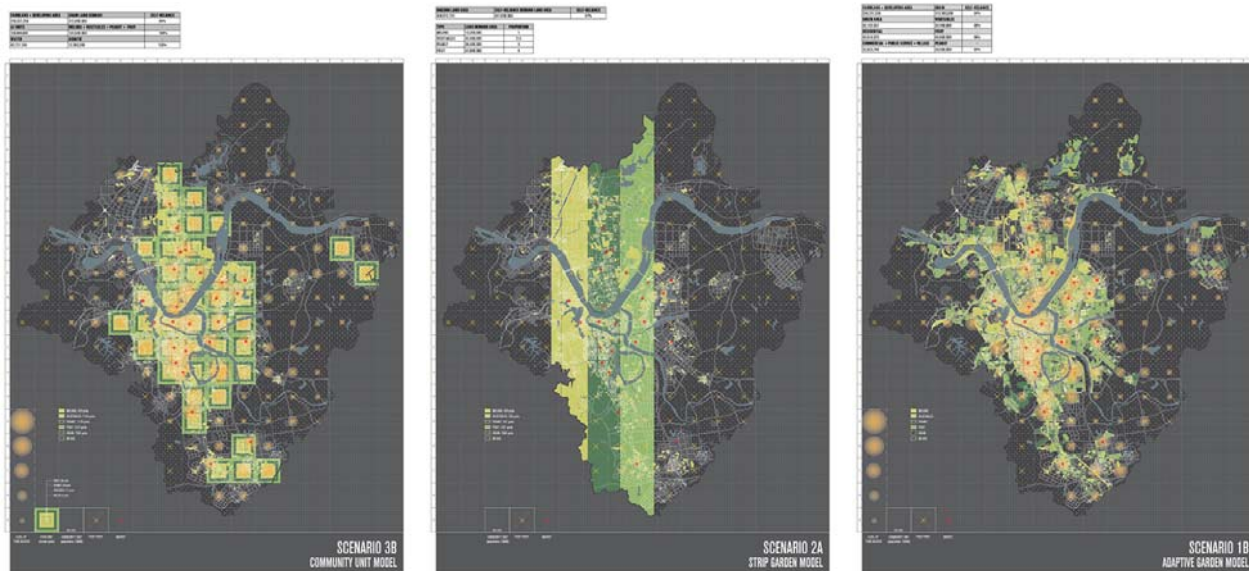

Moving forward a few centuries, the variety of maps remains as diverse as ever, despite the increasing prevalence of Cartesian systems. Some cartography independently addresses thematic aspects, social conditions and a range of worldly phenomena. The more conventional, drawn on parchment, paper or canvas, stand in contrast to the plethora of digital maps now available. Other, more artistically inspired maps interpret a world of emotions and mapped experiences through their use of symbols, aesthetics and compositions. There are also the familiar historical, aerial, satellite, cadastral, topographical, planning and geographical maps, as well as themed maps covering fauna and flora, density, population distribution, use of space, internet connectivity, political preferences and tourist activities, all using their own colour codes and symbolic systems.

From a philosophical perspective, cartography has always been an artistic endeavour, since before it turned into a scientific instrument meant to document and place a rationalist form of taxonomy over the world. As creative act, cartography has continuously challenged how real objects can be combined with imaginary ideas or concepts. Ernst Haeckel's Tree of Life, published in 1866, is as much a classification of morphologies within the biological world as it is a mapping of taxonomic life orders. More recent conceptual mapping includes Rem Koolhaas' 2003 proposal for tracing out 30 new spatial types for the 21st century, in what he terms the New World. Commissioned by *Wired* magazine, Koolhaas used his AMO think tank to represent actual environments as well as computer-generated landscapes of data, processes and

activities as a way of confronting the commonly accepted aspects of the urban landscape. Through the activity of mapping, that is to say the realignment of topological characteristics in a visual format, Koolhaas defines new spatial geographies, which might appear to be virtual but have a bearing on the physical landscapes. The results remain astounding. Koolhaas' cartography is confrontational, producing, for example, maps of warning spaces, contested spaces and new spaces. Warning spaces are places once celebrated that have become unstable, based on European powers' relations to the third world; contested spaces reflect on terrain continuously redefined by battles to control it; and new space cartography, including art spaces, atlas spaces, voice spaces, home spaces, office spaces, protest spaces, border spaces, colour spaces, crowd spaces, dump spaces, euro spaces and blog spaces.

With design fulfilling the roles of both synthetic process and analytic skill, cartography can fill a fertile gap as both a methodological means of exploring the territorial and a profoundly speculative vehicle that opens up a series of critical ways of questioning. Grounding notions, descriptions and visual lexicons have been land-centred: territory, territoriality and terrain are all derivative of 'terra', or 'earth'. Jacky Chan's cartographic work *Aquatic Territoriality Exploring the Future and Potentials of Alternative Urbanization Within the 9 Dash Line* (2017) features a different, aquatic understanding of territory, proposing the abandonment of all land-derived concepts, usually referenced as landscape features, topographical aspects and traces of humanity such as roads, railways, airports, public spaces and settlement patterns, from both the conceptual and visual domains, replaced by a reformulated, water-driven spatial terminology. As a replacement of the terra framework, Chan's cartographic proposal postulates four projections based on, among other things, cultural superstitions, water policy and law, historical and oceanic events, sea currents, wave cycles, sub-surface depths and oceanic ravines. As result, the methods of reconfiguring this specific portion of Southern China question the understanding of China's political intent and spatial ideologies in contentious geopolitical debate around the Nine-Dash Line policy towards islands in the South China Sea.
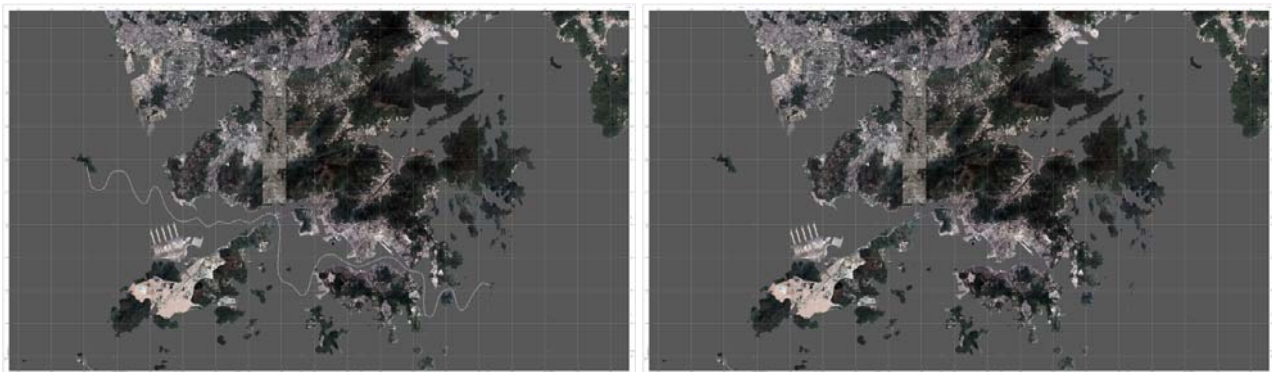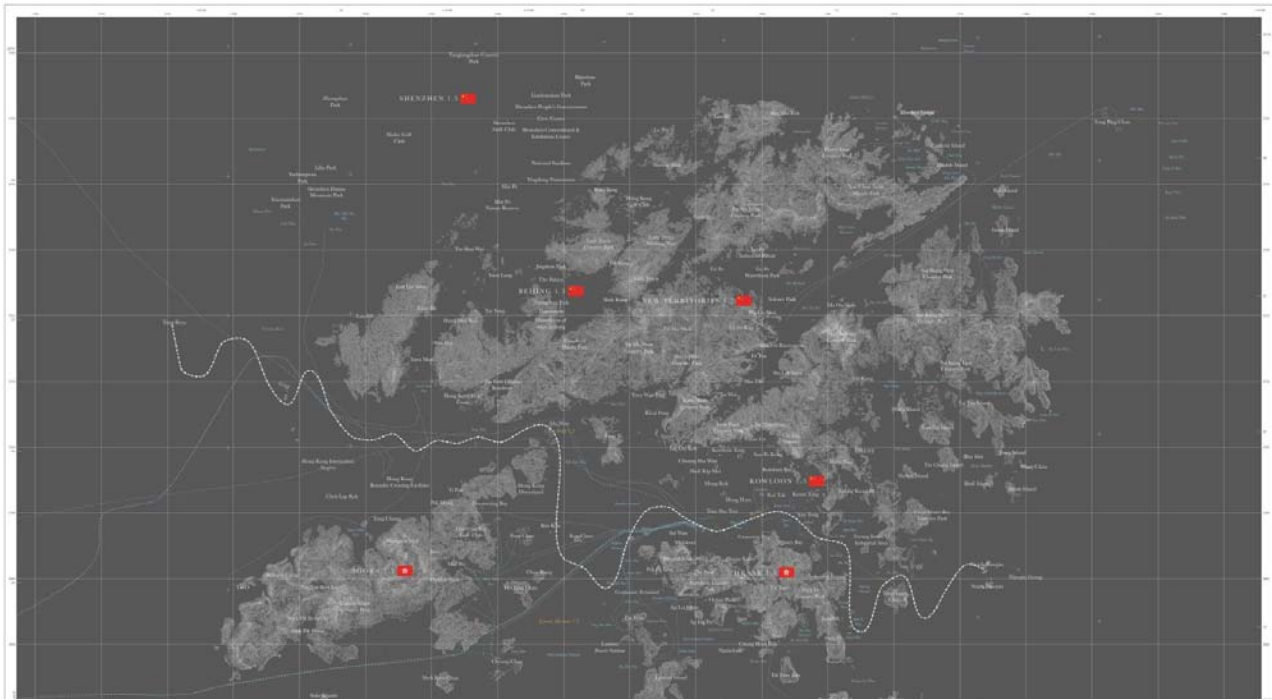
Jacky Au's confrontational cartographic proposal Polis | *1.5 – A Story of the Socio-political change in Hong Kong 2047* harnesses both the projective and the analytic features of cartography. As cartographic activity, each solid line, dash line and Photoshopped segment is meant to destabilise the conventional associations of an existing political territory and its two countries-one-system approach. With the Hong Kong SAR as context, Au reformulates regions and their speculative power structures, proposing a complete division between Hong Kong island and the Chinese mainland, including Kowloon and the New Territories. Amplifying the idea of one country, two systems, what the author calls the Hong Kong 1.5 effect, the speculative landscape is expressed with Hong Kong island becoming the main political entity, referred to as Hong Kong SAR 1.5 Polis, or political refugee centre and urban enclave, and Lantau island transforming into the urban agora, or place of commerce, entertainment and religious practice, and home to a vastly expanded international airport. Victoria Harbour acts as the new division, scaling the distances between Hong Kong and China at a 1.5 scale distance.

Cartography as means of speculative representation is also found in Shanzhi Lui's *Data Atlas* (2017), which questions the contemporary city and the digital paradigm. Challenging the data cartography that is part of the information society, the project mirrors the complexities of digital overload in one of the densest urban landscapes on the planet. To represent the data clouds over roughly five square kilometres of Victoria Harbour, Lui condensed all available digital information, drawn layer on layer, onto one surface. Totalling 50 layers, including wireless networks, camera systems, public transportation systems and block-out zones, the informational cartography deliberately becomes illegible, requiring alternative means to observe and interpret the vast

information sets. Optical filters can be used to eliminate some layers from view, revealing specific information sets and creating a cartography of choice, constructed by allowing access to information at will.
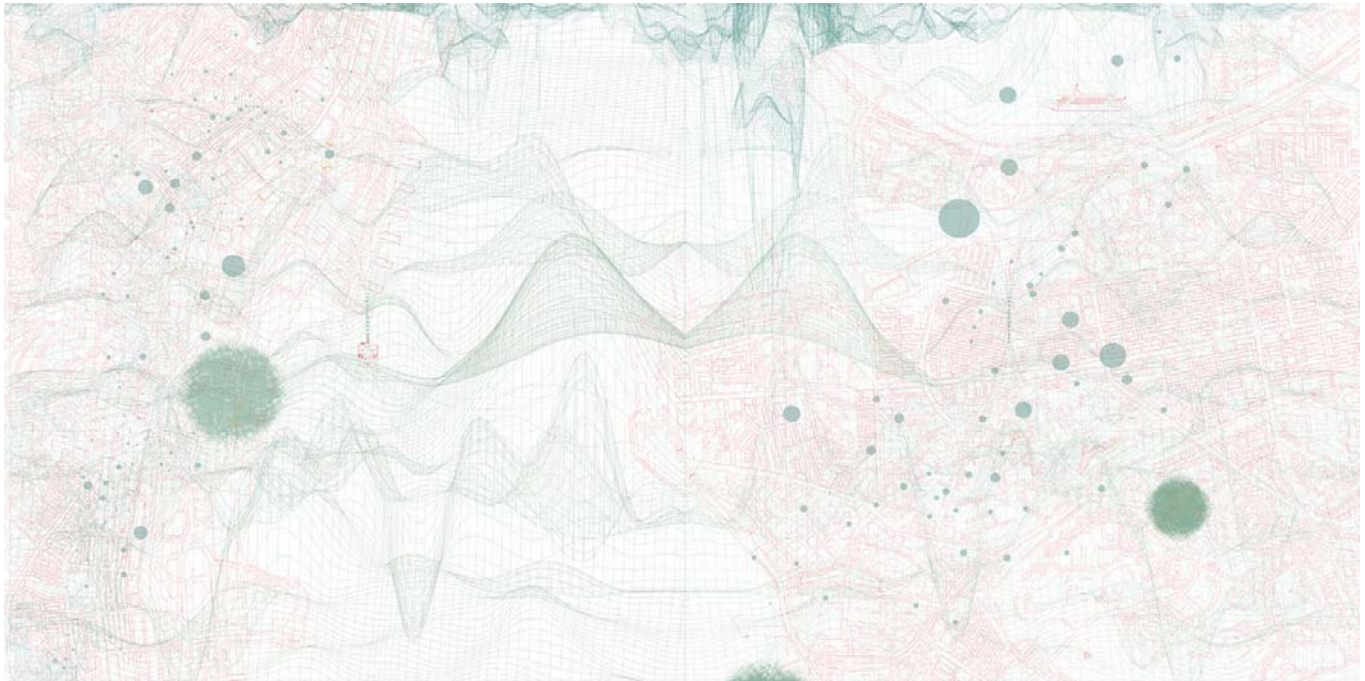
Shanzhi Lui

This approach stands in stark contrast to *Intergreening Huizhou* (2017), a proposal by Shu Ye that examines cartographies of nutrition, food security and exchange. Ye's approach is a process cartography based on how human necessity becomes spatialised and used as a medium for spatial intervention and urban reconfiguration. Ye's repetitive colour sets represent the food centres or centres for nutrition in Huizhou, China, affecting hinterlands and a historic centre in terms of food security at a mega city scale.

Irrespective of scientific intent, cartography offers both the artistic means and speculative potential to provide a fertile ground for critically questioning the authority of cartography, its means of representation and our cartographic conventions. It remains part of the nature of the human condition and the territories we hold in our dominion: speculative, open-ended and ever-present.

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