

The Integral Map / Telling the Way: Decoding Shiau-Peng Chen's Map of Taipei

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Coming of age on the Pescadores Islands, Shiau-Peng Chen studied in Taipei and pursued further education in New York and Melbourne. She was an artist-in-residence in several cities in the U.S. and the U.K., and held solo and group exhibitions in many places around the world. Now she is a Taipei-based artist and art professor. Throughout her career as an artist over the past decade, travel has become part of her quotidian existence, and the change of her residence has become a common occurrence. Nonetheless, the routes of her travel and migration invariably revolve around Taipei, a city which is foreign yet meaningful to her. Her *Taipei Series* consists of a concatenation of works on the theme of Taipei. This series contains a total of 23 works created between 2012 and 2016. As a matter of fact, the artist prefers to treat the places she resides in as the point of departure for creation, which is abundantly evident in the riotous profusion of her art series such as *Glenfiddich*, *Anderson Ranch*, *Brooklyn* and *Scotland*. Why has Chen, as an artist, unweariedly represented the cities, areas or places in which she resides, lives, studies or works? Besides, how did she summarize and meanwhile anatomize the modern cities that are every bit as complex and protean as a house of mirrors with the compositions framed in limited spaces?

The Dutch in the 17th century felt proud of their own cities and documented the cities' scenes and features as a result. The British gentry in the 18th century construed "grand tour" as integral to their training and ergo had to bring the images of the cities they visited back with them as tangible evidence. "Vedute," detailed images of cityscapes by definition, effloresced on the crest of these customs. Treating cityscapes as the sole focus rather than neutral backgrounds, vedute have been excluded from the genre of landscape painting due to their photorealistic style. Under the urban renewal program carried out by Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-1891), Paris managed to cement its status as a modern city of the bourgeoisie in the 19th century. Haussmann's program was not fully materialized until 1872, and two years later the Impressionists elaborately organized their group exhibition for the first time in history. These painters were consumed by passion for Europe Bridge, Saint-Lazare Station, Boulevard Montmartre and Avenue of the Opéra, almost turning themselves into the artistic endorsers of Haussmann's Paris. Applying iridescent colors in their paintings that radiate a convivial aura, these painters depicted Paris as the bustling and flourishing "Capital of Europe" to their heart's content. However, they deliberately ignored the scars a cosmopolitan city might bear. It was not until the emergence of painters like Jules Adler (1865-1952) that the grotesque factories belching smoke over the city and the fuming workers on strikes were faithfully mirrored. Throughout the 20th century, cities had not only enjoyed unprecedented popularity among architects, urban planners and photographers,¹ but also, of course, become an extensively and vigorously debated and portrayed subject among modern and contemporary artists. Cities have evolved and expanded dramatically, and artists as dwellers or visitors may need either to address the ensuing consequences such as decentralization, structural disintegration, de-urbanization, malfunction, spatial disorientation, and the concomitant nostalgia for the old way of humanity, or to alter, restore, and even imagine the semblance of the frustratingly elusive cities from the depth of their sentiments and memories.

¹ For example, the French government commissioned a number of photographers to carry out the largest and the most systematic project on cities (1983-1989), with the aim of representing the French landscapes in the 1980s.

Chen studied in Taipei between 1994 and 1999, and resided there again between 2002 and 2006. After a short period of leave, she has lived and worked in Taipei since 2010. This span of years bore testimony to the vitality and rhythm of the artist's life as well as the growth and changes of Taipei as the most civilized city in Taiwan. The artist has mapped Taipei in different circumstances on her outward and homeward voyages. What does the "Taipei" mapped in this manner look like? In addition, *The Integral Map*, the title of this exhibition, is a homonym of "telling the way" in Chinese. In this sense, what kind of route to Taipei did this title exactly map out?

Cartography

The best way to know a city is probably using the city map. Although Chen chose to represent Taipei with paintings since she is a professional painter, she based the representation not so much on the edifice of cityscape paintings as ingeniously on a set of cartography-oriented contemplation. Charles Baudelaire's (1821-1867) idea of "flâneur" (*flânerie*) and Guy-Ernest Debord's (1931-1994) concept of "drift" (*dérive*) collectively marked the dawn of map utilization in the 20th-century art world. The former led to the Dadaist practice of extensive urban roaming in the 1920s, and the latter resulted in the specific meaning that the Situationists assigned to the presentation of maps after the end of the Second World War. Debord further pinpointed some "ambient units" (*unités d'ambiance*) on the map of Paris, and defined "drift" as follows:

The concept of drift is indissolubly tied to the recognition of the effects of psycho-geographic nature and the affirmation of a playful-constructive behavior which is against all classical notions of voyage and promenade.²

In the foregoing attempts, that is, to transcend the rigid confines of urban planning and to find or even create some "ambient units" in these breakthroughs, Fluxus and G.R.A.V., a research group of visual arts, respectively planned their lines of "playful-constructive behavior" in the cities and marked them on the city maps. Similarly, the marks left on city maps threw the result of social survey delivered by conceptual artist Hans Haake (1936-) into sharp relief. Nevertheless, it was land artists that optimized cartography, particularly the system of "sites" and "non-sites" elaborately built by Robert Smithson (1938-1973): "sites" refer to specific places in the world characterized as panoramic, borderless, decentralized and incomprehensible territories in which all historical and cultural concepts are nullified, while "non-sites" refer to the museum-based displays of the materials, photographs, maps and survey diagrams of these specific places, which collectively summarized these geographic sites in an abstract manner, making them comprehensible without indicating their exact whereabouts. Even though cartography was developed not so much in visual arts as in geography, it has since become the technique of choice for many artists. The exhibitions *Mapping* (1994) and *GNS* (2003) curated respectively by Robert Storr (1949-) at MoMA and Nicolas Bourriaud (1965-) at Palais de Tokyo counted as two stellar examples. Such a choice is usually rooted in artists' interest in and discussion over the idea of "territory" as a matter of course.

² "Le concept de dérive est indissolublement lié à la reconnaissance d'effets de nature psychogéographique, et à l'affirmation d'un comportement ludique-constructif, ce qui l'oppose en tous points aux notions classiques de voyage et de promenade." See Guy-Ernest Debord, "Théorie de la dérive," in *Les Revues Nues*, no. 9 (Nov. 1956), reprinted in full by the French publishing house Allia in 1995, p. 3.

When Chen worked as an artist-in-residence at the Glenfiddich Distillery in 2010, she began to apply the satellite images, road maps, ground plans and coordinate graphics of the city to her works for the purpose of representing the real-life experiences she gained there. Unlike the aforementioned artists, Chen used maps neither for pinpointing the city's "ambient units" that fall into line with psychological geography, nor for abstractly summarizing the geographical or social milieus of specific sites. Rather, she transformed maps into the vehicle of paintings. Art and architecture critic Marie-Ange Brayer (1964-) argued that, "as late as in the 19th century, people still employed the metaphor of map to represent paintings, or construed maps as painting-like microcosms that encapsulate the world in a single plane."³ This argument prompted Chen to develop her own painting approach from the blurred boundary between maps and paintings. Her cartography is not so much about drawing territories on maps as about turning ready-made maps into paintings. On a more specific basis, she does not simply clip and paste, collage and mark on the maps, but further imbricates pigments, manifests colors and shapes, and underscores the layout of lines and spaces. This approach embodied the "representation of representations," namely a non-physical representation, an idea highlighted by Michel Foucault (1926-1984) when he was analyzing the painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez (1599-1660).⁴ In this way, the products of geographical surveys supposed to be highly scientific and objective are inevitably rife with glaring contradictions between realities and figments of imagination as well as between objective and subjective observations due to the skillful manipulation the artist used in her paintings.

Semiotics

In fact, Chen has never intended to transform her map-based paintings into accurate city maps, although they are as flat, abstract, geometrized and symbolized as real ones. What the artist treats as the base for her paintings are actually "base maps" such as metro route maps, floor plans and signs that are frequently seen in our daily lives and used for relaying practical pieces of information. They are exactly "pre-maps" rather than real ones for practical use. In her *Taipei Series*, the work *My Universities II - The Wheel of Life (Survival Techniques?)* depicted and simplified the logos of universities the artist had taught in, and then turned them into an original work. *My Universities III - Me & Us (Location & Gender)* combined the floor plan of her own office with those of the faculty offices in the college building. *My Universities IV - My Space (Field & Territory)* included the campus map, the site plan of the college of fine arts, and the floor plans of the special classroom and her office. *My Universities V - My Time (Calendar & Year)* was, by definition, inspired by her calendar and course schedule. The base maps in Chen's maps/paintings may even be derived from another painting produced by herself. For example, *My Universities I - Four Seasons in Kuandu (An Eternal Spring?)* was derived from one of her previous paintings. The painting was cropped into four sections and covered with white pigment after re-arrangement. Taking a comprehensive overview of the whole *Taipei Series*, we may notice that the artist adopted identical methods and steps to represent the sites where she taught in (i.e. *My Universities I-V*) and held exhibitions (i.e. *My Galleries I-IX*), as well as her motion paths (i.e. *My Ways I-V*) and observations on the political situation of the capital (i.e. *My Parties I-II*). This series contains a riotous profusion of base maps ranging from signs in exhibition venues, site plans, floor plans and metro route maps, all the way through to Google Map, Easy Card, lanes in swimming pools, racetracks and green marks, *inter alia*.

³ M.-A. Brayer, *Exposé*, no. 2 (Orléans: HXX), p. 7.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1966), collected by the Human and Social Sciences Library Paris Descartes-CNRS.

Nonetheless, these “base maps” served simply as the point of departure for the creations of the artist. Her ultimate goal was to transform them into paintings through reshaping, coloration and spatial arrangement. Firstly, maps and “geometric abstraction” hold geometrization as characteristic in common. Through geometrization, the intrinsic geometric elements of these base maps were further refined and simplified, as much as Kazimir Malevitch’s (1878-1935) concept of “Suprematism” that embodied the spirit of anti-painting for it features basic geographic forms painted in a limited range of colors. Besides, “geometry” is an optimal term to describe modern cities. It was coined in the 1920s when the international style of architecture emerged. Breaking away from architectural traditions, the international style espoused the belief of “pure forms and colors” as the sole ornamental motif, which was vividly reflected in the “Purism” preached by Le Corbusier (1887-1965). In addition to pure forms, Chen tends to adopt in her oeuvre the colors able to provide sensory stimulation on the one hand and perform the functions of analogue, suggestion, instruction and metaphor on the other. For instance, buildings may appear black, white or grey in color, yet these colors may suggest ignoring, fuzzy or uncomfortable feelings. Besides, red is an apposite color for indicating directions and locations due to its visual attractiveness, and it meanwhile signifies tremendous momentum or warning. Spaces naturally unfold in Chen’s works with the brilliant arrangement of shapes and colors, appearing in two-, three- and multi-dimensions, and even sublimating into the mysterious spiritual realm.

Applying such a creative approach, Chen has produced her paintings with no other means than to extract geometric elements from other graphics. It is also an embodiment of the “representation of representations,” through which the original graphics or signs were altered or revised in the second-order representation. This is certainly an attempt to be reckoned with, as Nam June Paik (1932-2006) believed that reinterpreting information is far more Herculean than storing it.⁵ The altered and revised graphics were detached from their original contexts, gaining fresh meanings from the separation of the signifier and the signified, or becoming new signifiers that are ostensibly similar to but essentially different from the original ones. This approach on the one hand effectively tackled some sets of sophisticated differentiations (e.g. map/painting, presence/absence, openness/closure, certainty/uncertainty, figuration/abstraction, universality/specificity, etc.), and on the other hand created a paradoxical context for interpretation by turning paintings into maps or vice versa. To be more specifically, the viewers may have a strong feeling of déjà vu about the graphics in Chen’s oeuvre that remind them of Taipei and the lives people lead in this city, yet they have no way of recognizing what they are and what they refer to. The artist expects to encourage the viewers in questioning the identities of her creations, as these works successfully challenge the viewers’ stereotypical view about maps and paintings: they should refer to specific sites or fragments of daily life if they are maps, while there is no such a need if they are abstract paintings.

Last, but certainly not least, these works oscillating between maps and paintings are connected as a “series,” a colossal “index” system that its content is autopoietic in nature, which is a dead ringer for an encyclopedia capable of including new entries *ad infinitum* while all the entries refer to the same thing under the principle of tautology. Chen often interlaces words with graphics in her works without the slightest hesitation, which was evident in her *Taipei Series* in which written words were employed to enhance the legibility of this index. The base maps in *My Galleries I-IX*, for example, were derived not only from

⁵ Ruhrberg, Schneckenburger, Frocke, Honnef, *Art of the 20th Century* (Köln: Taschen, 2000), p. 593.

the signs and the architectural features of the exhibition venues but also from the names of the galleries. Even more, *Taipei 543 I* and *Taipei 543 II*, the last two pieces of the *Taipei Series*, listed the titles of all the pieces of this series respectively in Chinese and English as a way to mirror each other in a tautological manner. The two pieces not only perfectly wrapped up the entire series, but also suggested that the content of this series is likely to change due to the increase or decrease of the number of its pieces of works. In this sense, the *Taipei Series* is virtually a series in progress.

The Integral Map

Within this context, what kind of route did the *Taipei Series* in the exhibition titled *The Integral Map*, a homonym of “telling the way,” map out for the viewers on earth?

In fact, after transforming Taipei into flattened, geometrized and abstract symbols with cartographical methods, the artist further presented a *sui generis* perspective on this city, a perspective of deliberate misrepresentation, an “amphibological”⁶ perspective which gives the viewers a bird’s eye view and an eye-level view at the same time. The bird’s eye view is a centuries-old perspective of its own kind on this world. Widely recognized as the earliest landscape paintings in the world, the depictions of the countryside around Siena by the Lorenzetti brothers (1280, 1290-1348) in the 13th century also gave a bird’s eye view rhapsodized as the “landscapes of the world” (*paysages du monde*), which contrasted vividly with the eye-level view in the “landscapes of human beings” (*paysages de l’homme*) generally admired in the 17th century. Based on people’s quotidian experiences and their genuine and unique feelings for the mundane world, the beautiful, approachable, real and finite “landscapes of human beings” became a cult favorite of the painters who seek to visualize the harmonious, symbiotic relationship between human beings and the world. These painters faithfully represented the ordinary scenes coming into view, allowing the viewers to relive past memories and experiences when admiring their paintings. In contrast, the sublime, majestic, Olympian, exuberant, boundless, and difficult-to-master “landscapes of the world” are not something observed intuitively by the painters. Rather, by blending various geographical elements into the compositions according to their perceptions, the painters reconciled the discrepancies between reality and imagination, thereby conveying their *weltanschauungs* and the feeling of being dominated as a drop in the ocean. Actually, modern artists have had a predilection for this perspective widely taken for making maps. The second-generation bellwethers of Italian Futurism such as Alfredo Ambrosi (1901-1945), Gerardo Dottori (1884-1977) and Tullio Crali (1910-2000) even established the style of “Aeropainting” (*Aeropittura*) in the 1930s, visualizing the disturbing cityscapes from constantly changing aero-perspectives with the aim of situating the viewers in a cockpit-like position and giving them a dizzying sensation as if bombing the city.

Chen has expressed her interest in perspective switch more than once in her works. First of all, her paintings may be hung vertically on walls or laid flatwise on horizontal planes. *Quovis modo*, the exquisite design she developed consistently renders her oeuvre nothing if not reasonable. Secondly, in her works such as *My Universities IV - My Space (Field & Territory)*, the perspective switched from the distant to the near, macro-scope to micro-scope, the campus map to her office’s door, as well as from the landscapes of the world to those of human beings, constantly zooming like the pictures in a film. Moreover, the viewers are

⁶ The word “amphibological” was derived from “amphibians,” carrying the undertones of ambiguity or doubtful expression.

allowed to switch between perspectives at any phase without hindrance in this way of viewing: in the bird's eye view, the artist's immediate environment is seen at once; and in the eye-level view, her private space is turned public.

Nevertheless, such an amphibological perspective not only presents what the artist has seen, but also indicates the route she mapped out for the viewers. This route not only takes the viewers to the site with the artist's presence, but also leads them to the mysterious realm of painting and even the artist's inner world. Such a perspective bears more than a passing resemblance to Robert Smithson's explication of his attempt at the study on sites/non-sites. He claimed that galleries tend to exhibit "refined materials," which prompts him to invite the viewers to undertake a retrospective "voyage" of "tracing the origins of these materials."⁷ Similarly, Chen encourages the viewers to set out on a journey which is temporally retrospective and spatially shifting. The "Taipei" she represented is as environmental as historical, as public as private, as geographical as psychological, and as perceptible as sentimental. No matter how the "Taipei" she represented looks like, what stories about Taipei she narrated, and what meanings she assigned to this city, her map-like paintings always entail the viewers choosing their own perspectives to trace the "origins of the materials," so as to encounter the wandering mind of the artist somewhere in the city.

Furthermore, when we peregrinate the Taipei represented by Chen, the homonyms, paronomasias, and graphical insinuations in her works may easily put a knowing smile on our faces. To sum up, the artist has managed to address frustratingly difficult issues with her own peculiar brand of wits and humor, thereby soothing our anxiety about the unbearable hardship to the life in a metropolitan city like Taipei.

⁷ Robert Smithson, "Fragments of an Interview with P.A. Norvell, April 1969," in Lucy R., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, (London: Studio Vista, 1973), p. 87.