

Political/Hydrological: A Watershed Remapping of the Continental United States

This paper will discuss my most recent artwork, *Political/Hydrological: A Watershed Remapping of the Continental United States*, a river-centered atlas created using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) software. As an artist, I capitalize on the visual language and historical significance of maps to express my ideas about the world. My background as an environmentalist shapes my worldview, and it is from this place that my maps emerge. By re-imagining spatial data for State and watershed boundaries within the U.S., *Political/Hydrological* imagines and illustrates a world where water is the basis for America's socio-political structure. In this alternate reality rivers are given priority, not as resources to be exploited, but as an integral part of the health of a social/biological system. By presenting this model of the world as I believe it ought to be, I question dominant ideologies and lead the way toward new, more ecologically integrated visions of the world in which we live.

Traditionally, the production of maps has been funded and directed by people with power in order that they might maintain their elevated positions. Their maps are not necessarily based on what is, but rather on what they would like us to see and believe about the world. In this way, maps are inherently skewed to reflect particular values. In his book, *A History of Spaces*, John Pickles states that, "maps provide the very conditions of possibility for the worlds we inhabit and the subjects we become."¹ By this he means that maps do not represent the world, but in fact create it by shaping the way in which we imagine/visualize ourselves, both socially and physically, in geographical contexts. GIS technology puts creative power into the hands of a much wider community of potential map-producers, all capable of making visionary contributions in the ongoing creation of our social and physical worlds. The use of GIS in popular computer applications, such as *Google Earth*, is an example of how this technology is already affecting our collective geographical imagination. *Political/Hydrological* is another. I use GIS technology to create my particular counter-mappings of possibility and critique because in addition to being a powerful tool for organizing and analyzing spatial data, GIS uses a graphic interface to visualize this data. This space where information is translated into image gives way to the natural intersection between GIS technology and art, and with it the capacity to change the way we see the world.

¹Pickles, John, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic reason, mapping, and the geo-coded world*, (London: Routledge) 5.