Where are we now?

Do you know where you are?

Do you know where you are? Of course you do! But if you didn't, you would look at a map, right? For thousands of years, we have been making and using maps to help us find a location, and explore our planet. With smart phones and satellite navigation we now have the whole world in our pockets and in this exciting exhibition, artists are taking maps and the technology used to create them, and asking YOU to think about the places, people and all the other information found on a map and how we use it. So let's get exploring!

What is a map?

We all know a map is used to help you find where you are, but they also hold a huge amount of information that can be used in many ways. In our history, maps have helped with discovering new worlds, winning wars and building nations. Did you know that the earliest known maps are of the heavens, and not the Earth? Dots painted on cave walls dating back to around 16,500 BC in the Lascaux caves in France map out part of the night sky, showing star constellations you can still see when you look up at night time.

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From these cave paintings, to maps of Ancient Greece painted on walls, it wasn't until the 18th Century with the invention of printing that we start seeing paper maps. By engraving on large brass and copper printing plates, detailed maps of huge areas could be created and reproduced then taken on long trips to explore new lands.

Whether it's ancient markings on cave walls, huge folded paper maps, or the ones you see today on your phones, maps have allowed the human race to record and navigate their way across the world, connecting with one another, and at other times, destroying each other.

Maps give us knowledge about the area around us, and during times of war, this is extremely valuable information. During WWI, most of the fighting took place via trenches – long holes dug into the ground to hide and protect soldiers against the enemy. Some trenches could stretch for nearly 500 miles across huge areas of land, so knowing the location of the enemy trenches was extremely useful. The British Army used Trench Maps to mark enemy trenches, detailing communication posts, and finding strengths and weaknesses in their defenses. This information made the difference between winning a battle, and losing one, costing hundreds of soldiers their lives.

Maps have also played a big role in the creation of the most powerful countries on the planet. An essential stage in the development of a country is to connect it via transportation, and without a good knowledge of the land this would be impossible. Have you ever been on a long train journey? Well the first people to make this journey would have used maps to plan where to build the tracks! After all, building a train track up a mountain would make for a very scary, and expensive journey! Old railroad maps are important historical records that also show the growth of settlements across big countries and continents. Trains introduced a new and faster way of moving large loads of people, building supplies and goods across long distances, allowing small settlements to grow into the big, bustling cities we know today.

Another important use of maps was to allow governments to mark out who owned or lived on each piece of land, so they could decide how much tax the owner should pay. In order to do this, the land had to be measured and recorded with how many people living in each village, town or city by giving each area a different colour for each tax amount. Looking at these old taxation maps from modern day, they once served a very important function, but now with much easier ways of creating similar and more efficient maps, the effort and detail that went into the creation of historic maps makes them seem more like art than information...

Can a map be art?

Recently scientists discovered the oldest globe of the world – carved on ostrich eggs! When it was crafted, in the early 16th century, the huge amounts of information contained on this detailed globe could have been used to make other globes and maps, but today this strange map can be considered an incredible piece of art.

The artists throughout this exhibition are also looking at maps as something more than data and information. By using modern mapping technology instead of paint and pencils, they are asking you to look closer at how the information in a map can be translated, shared and perhaps even tell a story.

In Paolo Cirio's *Street Ghosts*, he takes images captured on Google Street View by an automatic camera atop a car, and looks for the people rather than the places these maps document. Once he finds an image of a person going about their every day business, either walking to work, or going to the shops, he then prints them life size, and pastes them on the walls of public buildings at the exact spot where they appear in Google's Street View image. Ghostly human bodies appear in cities mapped by modern technology, reminding us that our images are being captured without our knowledge on a daily basis. Who knows how many images of us exist online as information for people to use in any way they want? It's a scary thought!

Another artist in this exhibition who uses similar mapping technology is Jon Rafman, who searches Google Earth to locate the photos he uses in his art. In his project, *9-Eyes,* he explores the unique moments captured on camera by Google Street View, and the story they could be telling. Whether it's a beautifully random moment of nature, or the scene of a crime as it is taking place. His choice of images give us a record of an event in history and are asking us to look closer at what is being captured, yet they are being taken entirely by chance by an automatic camera. He is making a point about finding significance and meaning in the information presented to us by technology. Which means you need to ask yourself - is this *just* a map you are looking at?

Christopher is a freelance writer based in London and Canada, he has recently written on the Florida everglades for National Geographic Kids, and worked for the National Television awards.