

*90 Degrees Equatorial*

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The phrase 'four corners of the globe' is an obvious antilogy, yet it's one we take for granted. It doesn't specify anywhere in particular, merely indicating an all-encompassing spatiality. If we were, however, to try and locate these magical corners, where might they be found? The word 'corner' indicates something slightly shadowy or forgotten, a dusty, neglected pocket of a place, far from the comfortable centre of things. By definition, such a place must be at the periphery of the known world, with its archaic undertones suggesting regions where the old ships were afraid to go, where strange monsters and human hybrids were rumoured to have lived, sprouting enormous horns or shading their heads from the sun with their feet.

There seems to be little in the world left unknown, yet in the usual scheme of things, informed by the news media or exotic documentaries, we tend to locate places in relation to ourselves, framing them with our experiences and attitudes and our own connections to place. The Austrian art critic Christian Kravagna recalled, on visiting an African village, that after years of absorbing images of similar villages, there seemed to be nothing strange about it; what was strange was 'the absence of a difference between the notion and the reality, between the perception and storage of images and the direct experience, which therefore could not really be

direct at all.'<sup>(1)</sup> The means of organising ourselves visually tends to follow a comfortable path, conforming to what is familiar and expected, even in the most alien environments.

It is when we are forced to consciously consider this process of perception that another form of experience is opened up to us. Art, Kravagna argues, has the potential to destabilise our connection to our surroundings and establish a new set of cognitive conditions and social relations. Through this 'suspension of certainty', there is the possibility for a shift in subjectivity. In his search for the world's four corners, James Geurts offers us a different kind of frame, another mode of looking at (and for) other places, basing his method on aesthetic rather than cultural or economic grounds. Employing cartographical co-ordinates, light conditions and topography as formal systems, Geurts presents us with the bare minimum of information about 'place', structuring his work instead around a sculptural intervention at each site. Our preconceptions about these remote sites become disrupted by this surreal interloper; they become actively involved in an event, rather than being illustrations of the 'tropical', the 'peripheral', or 'the Third World'.

East Koto Padang in Sumatra, East Kango in Gabon, West Pedernales in Ecuador and East Kiritimati Atoll in the Pacific are linked only by the artist's interest in creating a visual metaphor for our rationalising relationship to the world. Through an accident of geography, they are located at 90o angles from each other around the equator. On traveling to each site, Geurts searched for a suitable location in which to place his sculpture, an internally lit triangular form featuring bold stripes of red, yellow, white, orange and black. The sculpture's minimalist aesthetic connects it to art-historical discussions of subject-object relations, although it exists here purely as something to be photographed, a performance for the camera to be reconstituted later. Its link to land art is obvious, and the artist has referenced Robert Smithson's ideas on scale in

discussing the work.<sup>(2)</sup> Smithson's understanding of scale as determined by a conscious awareness of perception, of releasing it from the strictures of physical size into the realms of metaphor, aligns with Kravagna's 'suspension of certainty', and allows Geurts's little plastic boxes to literally frame the earth.

As a means of addressing landscape, Geurts's work highlights an awareness of it as a narrative medium, constructing places into an image. The artist's diaries relate a mythical tale of marauding bandits, stolen equipment, cancelled flights and intrusive wildlife, recalling another era of travelling before the internet and Lonely Planet had provided access to the minutest details of most of the world. A surfer, Geurts takes a deeply subjective approach to the landscape, and his works tend to be built around the rhythm of weather patterns or ocean currents, tracing the flow of the land and its interactions with people through his personal interest in how the world works. His intrepid adventures in the course of producing this work are not evident within it, but could be implied through

the photographic evidence of these isolated landscapes, which we may have pre-imagined as being intrinsically alien or threatening. Geurts's images provide evidence of the 'that has been' nature of photography; that the artist was actually there in these four sites, placing his sculpture, taking the pictures.

Ultimately, though, we aren't 'taught' anything about East Koto Padang, East Kango, West Pedernales or East Kiritimati Atoll in this work (interesting that each place is defined directionally). Our expectations that other cultures are there to be learnt about or explained to us are thwarted in these simple landscape shots. Instead, these sites coalesce around this strange, colourful object, and are unified by an artificial formalist system. Yet through this, they become oddly more present. They are now simply sites to be negotiated, where human interactions have had to be shifted out of the usual touristic or journalistic or anthropological modes and into an aesthetic one, where both sides have had to reconfigure themselves in relation to each other. It is by creating this small space for perceptual transformation that Geurts is able to provide us with a refreshed image of the great diversity and ingenuity of humanity as it occupies the remote reaches of this planet.

<sup>1</sup> Christian Kravagna, 'Political arts, aesthetic politics, and a little story about the Nachträglichkeit of experience', in *Things we don't understand*, exhibition catalogue, Generali Foundation, Vienna, 1999, p.95.

<sup>2</sup> James Geurts, interview, *Photofile* 2007