

Hay Festival 2013: 'we can't compete with Google maps', says Prof Jerry Brotton

Professor Jerry Brotton admitted that it's impossible for state organisations to compete with Google and Apple's mapping data, as he and Adam Lowe unveiled their 3D reproduction of the Hereford Mappa Mundi at Hay Festival 2013.



Jerry Brotton and Adam Lowe's 3D reproduction of the 700-year-old Mappa Mundi is unveiled at Telegraph Hay Festival 2013 Photo: Clara Molden

By Harry Wallop

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Firms such as Google and Apple have amassed so much mapping data that it is impossible for state-sponsored organisations to compete, claims a leading British academic.

Professor Jerry Brotton of Queen Mary, University of London was speaking at a Telegraph Hay Festival event at which he and artist Adam Lowe, founder of Factum Arte, unveiled their new 3D scan of the Hereford Mappa Mundi (*see above*), **one of the world's great cartographical treasures**, which dates from circa 1300.

"State-sponsored mapping, both national and international, has gone, because we can't compete with companies like Google and Apple in terms of the amount of data they have," said Prof Brotton. Rather awkwardly, the speech was sponsored by Ordnance Survey.

It could have been worse. Prof Brotton and Mr Lowe's event was originally scheduled for Google's Big Tent, where the technology firm would have heard Prof Brotton complain about how Google Earth and other mapping applications had reduced the field to "geometry and shopping", and represented globalisation "in a horribly smoothed-out form that completely anaesthetises the strange, pointy nature of the world".

Their attempt to redress this takes the form of an ambitious project for the 2015 Venice Biennale – to build a map of the world the size of a football pitch on the banks of the Venetian lagoon, in an effort to promote ecological awareness. The project – which has an estimated cost of £3-4 million – will see a model of the world's contours, from ocean trenches to Himalayan mountains, constructed from eight million "pixels" made of alabaster offcuts.

The aim is to use a projection centred on Antarctica, to render the world especially unfamiliar. After the installation assembled on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, water will be allowed to flow in. "We're planning to gradually pump in the lagoon, so the map goes from being completely unfamiliar to suddenly starts to resemble what we know," explained Lowe. They will then continue pumping in water, to simulate rising sea levels, until the tip of Mt Everest is submerged, before the cycle begins again.

There is one snag, however. So far, it has taken four people from Lowe's team a full month to assemble a single square metre of the map, as a sample – and its size of 40 metres by 20 metres means the final map will be 800 times as large. The pair are hoping to persuade people to sponsor individual pixels, and use other forms of online crowd-funding, in the hope that offers of help will flood in as surely as the waters of the lagoon.

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