We “climb above” and, voilà—we have just committed an ugly pleonasm. We say that evidence is “deceptive.” That is another pleonasm. “Not so sure,” would retort the purist. “Why should evidence be deceptive? Why should deceptive evidence be pleonastic?” And yet, is there evidence other than of the deceptive sort? The question makes sense if we consider, for example, the color white, which corresponds evidently to an absence of color. White is an empty space that seems to demand no more than to be filled. So be it. Let us agree on this. But let us also agree that we are caught in an illusion. So let us try a small experiment. Let us superimpose three circles—one red, another green, and yet another blue—so as to form a common intersection. What color will this intersection be? In the “subtractive colors” of paint and ink—it will be a false black. In additive colors—the colors of light—it will be a non-color, a white of sorts, which is the product of a combination of the three primary colors. All of this intersectional space is a “nothing,” strictly speaking, for white results from a perception of an excess of color. Thus the evidence voids itself as the certainty inspired by the visible fades. Elementary as this evidence may appear, it turns out to be in no way evident. Which color is Henry IV’s white panache? The famous question is less foolish than it may look.

Since 2006, Berger & Berger has been the manufacturing brand of two quasi-twin artists: Laurent P. Berger, a visual artist, and architect Cyrille Berger. The reputation of the two brothers has continued to grow in recent years.1 Cyrille exhibited in the prestigious context of the Venice Biennales of Architecture, in 2008 and 2010. From October 7 to November 24, 2011, the artists’ work was hosted by the Rosascape gallery, in the heart of Paris. This work subverts space, proposing—as the title of the exhibition suggests—“altered states.”2 Among the exhibition’s “alterations” we find, pell-mell, Parquet Vassivière—an edge of flooring made from the wood of tree stumps showing through the surface of the artificial Lake Vassivière, in
Limousin—and a world map titled *Ghost Towns*, in which vanished towns cast their shadowy presence over a planet whose twentieth century saw such ghostly vestiges multiply *worldwide*. In addition, in this exhibition Berger & Berger have attempted, through their work *Astre blanc* (*White Star*), to provide their own answer to the question of the deceptive evidence of whiteness by employing the medium of a whitish globe made of porcelain and metal, with an irregular surface, and a diameter of some several decimeters.

In a manner evoking the negative map of *Ghost Towns*, Berger & Berger’s globe points toward an uncertain cartography, a tricky representation of absent referents. It is about this cartography, remarkable even in its simplicity, that I wish to speak here.³ For, indeed, what color exactly is the white star of Berger & Berger? To be sure, there is no easy answer to this and related questions prompted by things that otherwise may seem to be all too *evident*. The globe, for example, is too full of colors to be white. It is like the blood cell (*globule*), whose color would be white if it were not red. When it is terrestrial, which is primarily what I am thinking of, the globe would sooner be blue. In fact, that is what we have learned from the astronauts and other cosmonauts upon their return from their interstellar journeys. All in all, the globe is more round and more blue than an orange. “Ah,” one might retort, “you have a surrealist penchant; have you read Eluard?”⁴ Yes, I have. And yet this is where doubt creeps in. What if the earth’s globe were at this point so saturated with color that, instead of being blue, it was actually white, dazzling us enough to prevent us from comprehending it? And, for good measure, what if it was not completely smooth and round, but quite dented? If this were so, then the work of Berger & Berger would be “realistic” and we would be among the few to “get” its realism. But—in reality—this is not the case, and so what makes the terraqueous globe a uniformly colored quasi-sphere is no more than a convention naturalized by a large number of observers held hostage by “evidence.” We learn from this art that the size of an audience has never been a guarantor of the “truth” concerning reality, whatever that reality may be. We are made aware of this every Sunday in the stadiums, where all eyes are trained on a twirling globe, sometimes white, over which fight twenty-two athletic actors.

Berger & Berger do not in fact empty the globe; they return to it its excess of color and light. Thus, they empty the evidence. Their sincere regard for the globe’s true nature, however, frustrates our expectations. For, after all, what could a white globe be? What *should* it be? This question is as slippery, as “round,” as the artists’ object. It does not give play to any hierarchy. To try to respond to it means groping in the dark endlessly, to propose a critical hypothesis, and no more than that, in the margins of all evidence. But perhaps one might offer a rejoinder, one obtaining somewhere between avoiding and acknowledging the evidence? Surely. Why not? Contributing to the emptying of the excessive plenitude of meaning by which the world is afflicted is not the worst course of action imaginable.
So here is the beginning of a critical proposition, of a non-evidential rejoinder.

The White of Deserts and Ice

At an altitude of a little less than three hundred meters, near Alamogordo, there is a gypsum desert whose whiteness sparkles under the deep blue sky of New Mexico. I briefly passed through the area in June 2005, but it could have been yesterday. The place looks almost lifeless except for the solitary yuccas holding court at the summit of dunes, like so many absurd artifacts placed there by a hand inclined to defy nature—the hand of a Frankenstein of the arid zones exhibiting a monster plant. With a little luck, you will also catch a glimpse of a lizard or two melting into the environment. Beyond that, nothing other than the empty splendor of the place. Even though the route is marked and the danger of getting lost is reduced, it is recommended to stock up on water before entering White Sands National Monument. This hazy stretch should inspire fear, but what it inspires, above all, is a feeling of liberty, of liberation, possibly the same emotion felt by the Mescalero Apaches who once wandered White Sands.

At sunset, the whiteness of the land is contrasted by the mauve shimmers of the setting sun amidst the shadows accentuating the sloping angles of the dunes. In the morning, the sun floods the gypsum crust and sparks reflections that slightly distort the contours of the meager vegetation. In the shadow of the dunes, somber rills moistened by the pink of sunrise break the white uniformity of the desert. The region is little visited by tourists, who have much to do elsewhere in New Mexico. Here, you can enjoy the beginning of solitude; you are seized by the desire to kick off your shoes and run across the miniscule gypsum crystals, more delicate than grains of sand. You actually do it.

Was it necessary to detour through the American Southwest to gambol in the gypsum dust? I am not sure. More people prefer to trample the white beaches of the seas, close or distant, in Sardinia, Malta, or under the tropical sun. There, the whiteness of the sand is highlighted by the turquoise burst of the waters or the fleeting reflection of a thousand colored fish. Sometimes, the reflected image is that of Ursula Andress’s diving knife as she emerges from the waves to set foot on a Caribbean beach or that of Halle Berry as she replays the primordial scene in Cuba (we are told) several decades later, faced with another James Bond, under the eyes of other spectators. And so, again, we forget that white is a saturation of colors that lively colors decolor. We give in, as we say, to the “evidence.” It is so easy to do so. But we realize right away that the situation is more complicated. We are too ready to forget where we actually are, that is, along the border between lands, in the grip of a misery that butts against the gold of the beach and the shiny façades of the
hotels. We want, in other words, to associate the white sand of the beach with paradise; we really insist on it.

So what would the veritable paradise be, then? It would be the ideal sum of all the White Sands and all the white sand beaches, evidently, at the exclusion of everything else, too—evidently, alas. Paradise would be a white globe whose sparkling whiteness was born when the rays of a distant star, the sun—an other—washed over different kinds of powdered minerals. But this paradise, an idealizing, touristic reflection, would be emptied of all humanity. A globe of white sand would be as dry as the surface of the skull on a pirate flag that the absence of the seas would condemn to boredom.

It is true that this infernal paradise would be conceivable. For the sake of argument, let us imagine a moment when the water of the seven seas evaporated. Further, let us imagine that they left in their absence a planetary bed of white sand—for, without water, just like the depths of the sea, the surrounding green spaces would not survive very long, and not even the yuccas would be able to hold out. What would happen then? Would we have to deal with this situation in terms of scale, of a large scale, in effect, wherein too much white sand would suffocate, dehydrate, and shock? The questions are apt because any planetary paradise fades for lack of contrast; paradiasiac is that which escapes hell or, on a more optimistic note, purgatory (a late creation, fruit of the sense of compromise and of a bottomless need for consolation). Bored to death in a space they think uniformly perfect, Adam and Eve begin to amuse themselves when the idea of a possible alternative space comes to them. And, after tasting the alternative, they become right away nostalgic for the kind of space that rejected them. So one can say that the world is badly made from the very beginning. No need to make a drawing either: a global White Sands would perhaps be the happiness of some lizards but not ours. Actually, if you think about it, and also about the aforementioned contrast, even the lizards would be depressed, for what is the point of remaining chameleonic when there is no one left to hide from?

In other words, differentiation is key; play with it, and you change the world. Let us alter the scale, then. Imagine a middle between nothing and everything (ah, Blaise Pascal . . .). Say, a little scrap of white globe, just a little scrap, nothing more—a little, or much more, than White Sands, but not the planetary desert I evoked earlier. In imagining that place, I am toying with the idea of a Mediterranean space as deprived of the sea as other regions are deprived of their deserts. This playful notion would render the contours of the shores less brutally marked, a soft a priori, and would undo the sea’s claim to a clearly demarcated space. The reliefs of the seabed would become visible. Cyprus, where Aphrodite was born, would be transformed into a mons veneris. The Mediterranean’s southern and northern shores would move closer after the maritime currents had calmed down between the Columns of Hercules. (The student of Mediterranean history might reply that the columns support a heaven whose sense of ethics sags.) At any rate,
there would be no inaccessible beaches any more. The vessels of fortune, too, would become obsolete, as would submarines. The Nautilus would no longer belong to science fiction but would be the vain offspring of a bygone past. No longer would there be capsizing, massive floods, or private dramas above the surface of crashing waves. We would move differently; we would get around better. Great! What a big deal! We would bump against new, lowered barriers. Schengen and its spirit would be always and everywhere present. And, inevitably, newly erected walls would face the vast world in the places from which the waters had evaporated.

I write these lines in Portland, Maine, where water is everywhere. The tortilla curtain the states of the American Southwest have been raising to stop Latin American immigration, an influx they otherwise need so much, stands at the antipodes of Maine. I saw this hideous fence in Nogales, Arizona, while on my way to White Sands. I even crossed it involuntarily. It is crazy how easy it is to get to Mexico from the United States, at least from Nogales. All you have to do is take what becomes suddenly a one-way drive, then, once on the other side, ask yourself how to turn around. Of course, you forgot to bring all the mountainous paperwork needed to extinguish the bureaucratic thirst of sinister-looking U.S. customs agents.

And, far off, toward the northeast, in Portland, a fragment of the Berlin Wall is erected on a pier, supplemented by a wise commentary:

The Berlin wall. Forget not the tyranny of this wall.
Horrid Place.
Nor the love of freedom that made it fall.

“Horrid, indeed,” one hastens to agree. But there are walls whose fragments we still do not display. We justify them when, politically, they seem proper. It is no good! Draining the Mediterranean would not render its space less perilous. It would not make for one of those smooth spaces so much appreciated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In fact, it would prompt a certain number of Mediterranean countries to go conquer the territory formerly covered by the high seas, which is what international right protects from the greed of nation-states. And this conquest would be done quickly, with tanks, planes, missiles, and discourse, with an arsenal of fire and incendiary words. Deterrioralizing the sea and its waters would entail an aggressive and doubtlessly bloody reterritorialization that, in turn, would “update” our maps.

In my theory of geocriticism, the stable territory reconfigures itself according to a steady dynamic, for everything is here grasped consistently according to a productive in-between (entre-deux) model. My 2007 book Geocriticism (La Géocritique) presented me with the opportunity to develop my understanding of this dynamic that more than one critic locates at the core of the postmodern approach to the world. Now, where Deleuze and Guattari reveal a line of escape that traverses all territory, others conceive of society—and
modernity—as “fluid” (Zygmunt Bauman) and its “mobilization” as “infinite” in time as well as in space (Peter Sloterdijk). Thus, common to a growing number of theories or even simple hypotheses exploring the “geophilosophic” surface of the planet (as Deleuze and Guattari would say) is a sense of a movement that delinks territory and stasis, identity and its anchorage in the singular, as well as the nation and its boundaries. Apropos of this movement, one thinks of the 2009 public debate in France, called upon to discuss the theme of its own national identity. The ensuing public debate came to a sudden end. It could not have been otherwise: in the twenty-first century, the concept of a national identity stated in the singular is a contradiction in terms. In my work, I have postulated that one of the driving principles of the geocritical approach is “transgressivity,” which does not correspond to a “transgression” in the moral sense of the term (the only sense of the word that the French language knows), but to a state of cultural and social mobility. Thus, in my account, the Latin *limes*—a kind of border considered to be absolutely impermeable—transforms itself into a *limen*, a porous border, or (when the latter is “stabilized” and unambiguously assumed) into a threshold destined to be crossed and thereby used to bring heterogeneous but in no way incompatible spaces into contact. The zones of contact are themselves particularly stimulating in that they shelter the constant emergence of the new. These zones of absolute contact are the *third spaces* that in work of the great geographer Edward Soja become “thirdspaces” and in my own work (and in French), *tiers espaces*. These spaces have been studied by several of the finest observers of today’s cultural planet—in addition to Soja, one could mention Homi Bhabha, Michel Serres, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Salman Rushdie, a novelist who has often reflected on the creative processes behind his work.

However, today’s defenders of the national border are finding new allies. In their ranks, we notice the presence of Régis Debray who, in a recent essay, *Éloge des frontières*, remarks that Terminus, the Roman god of the confines who was honored at the edges of the fields, is beginning to regain his ancient power. “It is a big gap,” Debray sighs. And he goes on: “Rarely have we seen, in the long history of Western credulity, such a hiatus between our spiritual state and the state of things.” Maybe so. And yet the question is whether it falls to the spiritual state to resign itself to a state of supposed things. Personally, I am not convinced. Culture has the right to imagine better and to propose it, even if, as the newspapers keep reminding us, in the political sphere the notion of State territory still exists. Culture does not kill. If it did, I would hope that it would cease to be called “culture.” However, a politics without conscience turns lethal.

Consider the vast surfaces whitened when material is returned to chaos—we have seen some of those in recent years and have imagined others in the margins of recent artists’ apocalyptic projections. We commemorated, in fact, the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001 a little before the opening of the Berger & Berger exhibition; while I was traveling through Maine,
preparations were well under way. Many Stars and Stripes flags, whose stars had been replaced by the inscription “9/11,” were to be found in all the drugstores. Ten years ago, we all saw the terrible images of the attacks replayed in the media over and over again. Their flashes, no longer volatile, remain graven in our memories. Many of those, at least. One memory is of dazed people, whitened by ash, running through the streets of Manhattan, and scattered papers raining down from the burning towers. Other images, from another time and place, have shown the areas hit by the white phosphorus bombs condemned by the international conventions. These were fleeting pictures, strewn with corpses contorted by a fierce agony, bodies of innocents who found themselves at the wrong place at the wrong moment. The contour lines of these victims imprint themselves on that part of the globe whitened to phosphoric translucence. In the French vocabulary of photography, that which enlarges a negative is called a “shooter” (tireur) or “marksman.” In this case, to the contrary, another shooter, who exercises a military craft, resists photography—and, for that matter, any form of publicity.

But let us come back to the world of fiction, which is sometimes supposed to maintain a looser rapport with the real world—with the world of a more material reality, a more solid one, a more evident one, and a more explosive one. Take, for instance, Cormac McCarthy, undoubtedly one of the great American novelists of the last generation. The man was born in Providence, Rhode Island. On this account, consider Chamfort too, who wrote that “someone said that Providence is the baptismal name of chance.” It is certainly true that McCarthy ceaselessly baptizes chance in his books; it is true also that this task is daunting. But he left Providence quickly and moved to New Mexico, where he has lived ever since. He knows the desert. He certainly knows White Sands: he transformed the entire United States into a great desert in his novel *The Road*. What color are the post-nuclear lands that have survived the “day after” and spread from one side of the country to the other, from the horizon to the road? The answer is, “every color and, therefore, white.” In the book, a man and his son are survivors of what seem to be a nuclear attack or catastrophe. They leave their home, now ruined, and plot an erratic course through nothing. Their destination is the ocean shore, somewhere further southeast. In the middle of chaos, they scramble to find something to eat, all the while avoiding becoming the prey of survivors looking for sustenance and, lacking other food, human flesh. Ash is everywhere. It covers the globe entirely or in part, for we do not know the extent of the catastrophe. The ash is not black; it is white-grey. It reflects the vestiges of the world that has collapsed. It testifies to that which no longer is.

For McCarthy, White Sands have somehow scorched the human environment. They do not, however, provide any warmth. It is true that White Sands is not only a nature preserve crushed by the New Mexico sun. On July 16, 1945, the U.S. Army tested the first atomic bomb in a part of the desert bordering the preserve. Several weeks later, it dropped others on two Japanese
cities. We know what happened. The code name for the desert operation was *Trinity*. Later, someone inquired of Robert Oppenheimer, director of the American atomic program, why he had chosen this religious reference. Oppenheimer did not recall the real reason. What he remembered, instead, were three lines from baroque poet John Donne:

... As west and east
In all flat maps—and I am one—are one,
So death doth touch the resurrection.\(^{13}\)

Taken from “Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness,” these lines are less enigmatic than they seem. Sick, the poet is stretched out in bed. Driven by scientific passion, his doctors have become cosmographers, examining the body laid out as if it were a map of the world. We must remember that on library globes, the east and the west touch, always relative and intermediate to one another: Donne lies at such an intersection. He hangs around the crossroads of death and resurrection. But what is the fragment’s connection to the bomb? This link slips without doubt in the unsaid, for Oppenheimer forgot to cite the following line: “Is the Pacific Sea my home?” In August 1945, this question had taken on a special meaning. Oppenheimer was obsessed by the Empire of the Rising Sun, archipelago of the Pacific.

In New Mexico, Oppenheimer saw the explosion lead to, among other effects, a deluge of colors running from purple to green. But white was dominant. In 1966, the parts of White Sands containing the bomb crater and its environs were included in the official list of historic places of the United States of America. Today, the radioactivity level there is still ten times higher than the norm. In fiction, monitoring danger is more difficult. What are the radiation levels in McCarthy’s novel, those striking the earth of the father and his son? The instruments of measurement, including thermometers, are absent. We know that in their ashen world, it is not warm. On the contrary, the cold astonishes them. The Atlantic coast is as frozen as the interior lands. The father and son’s reasoning to get to the sea for protection proves, finally, to be flawed: as it turns out, the sea does not always warm tired bones. And the gypsum of the land, which is beautiful, is replaced by a viscous and glaucous matter. *Glauche*, the French word for “glaucous” (or “whitish”), derives, via the Latin *glaucus*, from the Greek *glaūkos*, which was a kind of white with a greenish tone, roughly similar to mucus. The swath of the white and frozen globe over which the man and his son flee has this consistency, for the world has got the flu. The man, whose respiratory tracts are damaged, passes away at the edge of a talus slope. His son hangs on. Hope is not dead. The flame of hope weakens, but, as always, McCarthy avoids blowing it out. Maybe the globe, white or glaucous, will reclaim its colors or, to the contrary, it will lose them, so as to be reborn. It all depends. But on what? The last paragraph of McCarthy’s novel is quite beautiful, plunging us into a dense
and brief interval between hope and sadness, evoking the trout that wriggled in the clear mountain torrents once upon a time or upon a future: “On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.”

Too hot, then too cold. But what if the white globe received its excess of color (or its non-color) from the reflection of sun not on sand but on ice? Its whiteness then would result from the extension of the polar ice caps. This is unlikely, we are apt to retort, for the ice is melting everywhere. There are, however, those who evoke the dawn of a new glaciation: obviously, the faces of the apocalypse are shifting. But in Berger & Berger’s Astre blanc, we see another possible world, one that asks only to be mentally visualized in a different way. So let us pose then an Arctic or Antarctic version of the White Sands hypothesis. To do so, let us think of several books: White by Marie Darrieussecq or Arctic Dreams by the great Barry Lopez. We would do well also to summon Jean Echenoz’s Je m’en vais or Daniel Del Giudice’s Orizzonte mobile, among so many others, some much older.

The singularity of the Arctic or Antarctic adventure resides in how it challenges an extreme but well-demarcated environment. It starts in contrast with what the protagonist’s life is in the daily universe of home, so stable and linear. The extreme cold and the ice it generates take their particularity from their deviation from a norm indispensable to human life. Something similar happens with extreme heat. The universal desert would be banal and unlivable, and so would be an ice cap as large as the world itself; unlivable, they would quickly be uninhabitable by mankind, in any case, by man and woman. Yes, the white globe of the hot or the cold apocalypse would not make sense by itself; it also would not present any interest in self as such, for it would come after life. At best, it would be the expression of a posthuman aesthetic in the most radical sense of the term. So let us switch perspective and approach our white, dented sphere from a different angle; leave the sand and ice where they are.

The White of Maps

The time has come to avail ourselves of the services of a search engine, and to ask it what might be meant by “white globe” in another possible world, a more commercial one than Berger & Berger’s. Let us try Google; it might make us think of Globe. The response of Google’s search engine is predictable. The keyword search of the French for “white globe” (globe blanc) turns up references to lamps, bulbs, chandeliers, and other light sources, and even a “white terrestrial globe for your desk.” Mehr Licht! For the novice botanist that I am, still more surprising is the reference to “white globe” begonias,
not to mention the “white globe” turnip. A search in English for “white globe” also sparks an utterly exuberant imaginary. Here, we discover quickly enough the existence of “white globe onions”; we could well conceive, I suppose, of a globe that would peel like an onion. But I am dead set on setting the apocalypse aside for now. In fact, Anglophone and especially American searches pull up more pictures of the earth as a white globe, pictures of the white earth in its geographic varieties, than do Francophone searches. One finds an array of images of globes.

The first image is beautiful and good: it is in white chocolate. A second is the logogram of a designer. A third interests me: it is of a perfectly round, white ball that bears a pithy but programmatic commentary: *a world without any discrementation*—*Sic!* one might be tempted to add. (The multiple “i”s of “discrimination” are here “discriminated against,” in a strange, perhaps George Perec-like manner.) There is indeed something to this idea of whiting out the world. I confess that something like this crossed my mind immediately when I saw Berger & Berger’s white globe. Indeed, what would the world be, wondered the cartographer in me, if we were to re-whiten the maps?

Traditionally, maps were never white. Long ago we did not know the world at all, much less the universe. Even the principle of a globe was not evident. The more we learned about the world, the more we had to hide our ignorance or lack of awareness regarding the many things we did not know about it. And so we filled the void of the unknown with various figures drawn or painted on the borders of places known and nimbly mastered (or just stolen from others). We used and abused the recourse to goddesses and gods taken from familiar mythologies, to monsters, exotic animals, and men and women still more exotic. The more the globe demanded to be white and empty—the vaster the space of our ignorance—the more color it took on. And then our knowledge about the world reached its apex—above all, in the eyes of the West, whose appetite for conquest was insatiable. The globe then filled with place-names, and the silhouettes of the gods disappeared, useful no more for concealing a void.¹⁶ We traced new and abundant borders. We formed territories, forgetting that they crossed spaces belonging to others. We transformed the globe into a puzzle whose different pieces were reduced to little, symbolic colors. Red was for the British Empire, as a general rule. Cecil Rhodes, who gave his name to Rhodesia, which later became Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia, wanted to make the African map a red ensemble. G. K. Chesterton had summarized this vision in one of his “songs of education” consecrated to geography:

> The earth is a place on which England is found,  
> And you find it however you twirl the globe round;  
> For the spots are all red and the rest is all gray.¹⁷

Here, the globe is red and English or it is gray and void.
But the French Empire, which had meanwhile accelerated its own colonizing work, preferred a world map in a uniform blue; what was not red was no longer necessarily gray. The palette of colors served to fuel competition among the colonial powers. Other than red and blue, there was pink, orange, yellow, and green. Color-wise, there eventually remained few options to those charting the world. Of course, the actual inhabitants of the global puzzle board had not been asked for their chromatic choices. The white spots on maps did not exist prior to the second half of the eighteenth century, and they did not convey the mapmaker’s helplessness or ignorance but a political objective. White indicated the direction in which the colonial power should turn. And it did turn, very quickly. Consequently, white spots disappeared from world maps and globes within a century. Everything was appropriated, with the exception of some corner of Antarctica or recess of the retreating jungle, so many crumbs left over from the opulence of the imperial feast. Joseph Conrad and Jules Verne were the last witnesses to this frenetic gorging.

After the Second World War, the puzzle board gained in subtlety and nuance. It was unmade and remade and continues to be so. The processes of colonization had given innumerable colors to the maps and to the globe. But the idea of cartographic saturation persisted. For there are only colors imposed by some on others. There are also lines, all those parallels, meridians, borders, and abstract demarcations that caused so much drama. The streaks that furrow the world are gaping wounds, today as yesterday. The walls that I have evoked are only one type of streak among others, visible and less so. In effect, sometimes these fences and borders are immaterial. They subvert the designs of the prejudiced. But their expression is always violent. Gilles Deleuze fought these streaks and striations; he wanted to “smooth out” space. Berger & Berger, for their part, have erased the dangerous symbols that, in connoting the planet, imprison its beings. They offer an alternative within anybody’s reach, one that eshews measuring- and control-oriented lines and signposts. They give an alternative beyond discriminations and without a “message.” To be sure, they are not naive. Their globe is lumpy like a skull that has taken a heavy blow. But their artistic solution allows for a new departure, a new hypothesis. Their white globe gives carte blanche to the freest spirits to do something other than nourish the apocalypse, the advance of white sands, the glaciation of ideas.

I must say that I rather like the idea of this deliberately imperfect sphere that inspires reflection and imposes nothing. Here, whiteness suggests the effacement of any landmark. It exempts the earth from a task that the planet has sometimes assigned itself and that has proven to be the source of many conflicts: the quest for a center and thus the establishment of a hierarchy of gazes and viewpoints, referents and references—the very hierarchy of colors that the maps have reproduced. As we know, the West and its cultures have not ceased to promote this quest, which, in many respects, resembles a very Proustian “search for lost time.” We have, however, arrived at the
point where we should at last ask what cultural universality might signify for this West, indeed, for this nostalgic West. What would a planetary cultural space be today, a space that would connect the world’s grand narratives, the *mythoi*, which were already “grand narratives” for the ancient Greeks? While working on a piece about the anthropological structures described by Gilbert Durand in the wake of Mircea Eliade, Gaston Bachelard, and several other great specialists of world mythology, I came to the conclusion that we should not subsume under the same scheme or “system” myths originating from different cultures—for instance, from Dravidian India, central Europe, or Brazilian Amazonia. For what would this “system” be other than one that would replicate the West’s colorfully mapped contours? Orbiting around this self-proclaimed center would suddenly appear innumerable mythic satellites (“narrative units”) whose consistency would stem from the dynamic relations formed around the referential “node” that would be the West and, in particular, Europe. In France, François Jullien has raised the question in *De L’Universel: De l’uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures* (2008). Jullien, a philosopher and a Sinologist, was taken to task for distinguishing too neatly between the great cultures, for instance between the West and China. At the very least, however, he does pose a question quite pertinent, even a little . . . impertinent: “Is the universal not derived from a composite, not to say chaotic dynamic? And does the universal’s prestige, in Europe, not rest precisely on this universal’s contribution to holding together the heterogeneous by serving as the latter’s ideological keystone?”

Yes, it does, but in what terms would it be possible to escape ethnocentrism? The answer calls for patient reflection. One should give oneself, as I have tried here, some time to meditate on this question. It would be the kind of moment that Václav Havel—great thinker, Czechoslovakian dramaturge, and, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, first president of the Czech Republic—recommended that Europe take a break to reflect in order to better confront the challenges of tomorrow, as do the wise at sunset before going to bed. Havel was not heard. He died not long ago, and Europe is not doing well either. As for the rest of the globe, it is not much better off. Indeed, it is precisely the kind of reflexive exercise that Václav Havel submitted to our (in) attention that Berger & Berger invite through the spectacle of their sculpture. The globe is battered but, ideally, it can be rethinked, emptied of its nonsense. *Vox clamantis in deserto candido*? (The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness?) Without a doubt—and not to offend Régis Debray—the spiritual state is often a prelude to the state of things. This idea is refreshing, and, given our present circumstances, not at all negligible. Undoubtedly, a white globe—an intersection of suppressed or excessive colors—represents all but “evidence.”

*Translated from the French by Darren Jackson*
Notes

1. To learn more on Berger & Berger’s work, one can consult their website: http://www.berger-berger.com.


3. In a different version, this text, written in French, accompanied the exhibition where it was presented in the form of a pamphlet.


5. “For at last, what is man in nature? A nothing faced with infinity, an everything faced with nothing, a middle between nothing and everything.” See Blaise Pascal, Pensées (1670 [par. 72]), in Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 1106 (my translation and emphasis).

6. Schengen is a village in Luxembourg where several European accords (1985, 1990) have been signed. Thus, the agreements constituted what is called the “Schengen space,” which is to say a zone of (relatively) free circulation at the heart of the European Union, whose customs borders are now located at the exterior limits of the participating states.

7. “Sedentary space is striated, by walls, fences, and paths between fences, while nomadic space is smooth, marked only by ‘traits’ that fade and move with the trajectory.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Capitalisme et Schizophrenie 2: Mille Plateaux (Paris: Minuit, 1980), 472, my translation.


10. Geocriticism posits “spatio-temporality,” the notion that space is in time and vice versa. This is seized in a permanent movement (transgressivity) and is articulated as a link between the real and its fictional representations (referentiality). The notion also implies that these representations activate a phenomenon of global legibility (the referential space deploys itself in a fictional manner in the text or in the image that in turn informs space).

11. For other treatments of this issue and for a selective bibliography, one can consult Westphal, Geocriticism, 69–74.

16. On these questions, see chapter IV, “L’invention du lieu,” in my essay *Le monde plausible*, 156–204.