

Valiz

(Ed.)

Ingo Offermanns

Graphic Design

Is (...)

(...)

(...)

(...)

(...)

(...)

(...)

(...)

(...)

(...)

(...)

Innocent

Valiz, Amsterdam www.valiz.nl

Graphic Design Is (...) Not Innocent questions ingrained approaches, values and assumptions of graphic design in globalized societies. This publication aims to initiate a dialogue between designers, scholars, critics and commissioners, who investigate responsibilities, potentials, politics, limits and risks of designing visual communication. How innocent is graphic design? Whom is it addressing, whom is it in/excluding? What does it bring about? When defining the role and impact of visual communication, what future questions lie ahead?

Graphic Design Is (...) Not Innocent combines case studies and academic reflections, trying to sketch a common ground for basic research into the parameters and value systems of graphic design. It is a road trip between various possible conceptual challenges and praxis. It is a temporal inventory, without the claim of completeness. It is a question mark, as well as an exclamation mark. And it wants to stimulate critical thinking in graphic design.

Edited by Ingo Offermanns

With Contributions by

Karo Akpokiere, Christian Bauer, David Bennewith, Friedrich von Borries, Clémentine Deliss, Sandra Doeller, Daniel Martin Feige, Feminist Internet, Annette Geiger, Matthias Görlich, Anna Lena von Helldorff, Martin Ludwig Hofmann, Jianping He, Kay Jun, Anoushka Khandwala, Francisco Laranjo, Degeng Li, Eva Linhart, Madoka Nishi, Ingo Offermanns, Offshore, Sophia Prinz, Konrad Renner (Knoth & Renner), Conor Rigby (Feminist Internet), Isabel Seiffert (Offshore), In-ah Shin (Feminist Designer Social Club), Pierre Smolarski, Markus Weisbeck

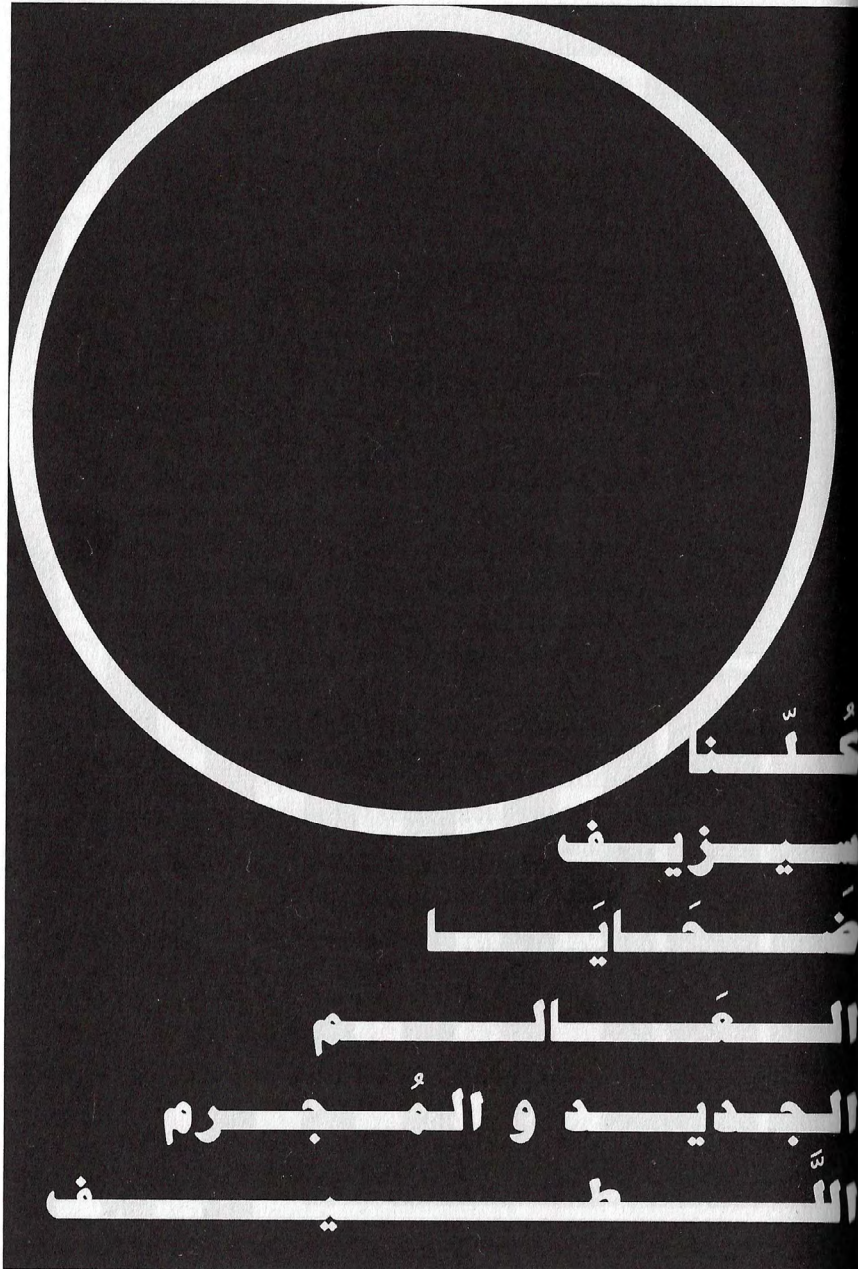
Printed and bound in the EU
ISBN 978-94-92095-90-9



9 789492 095909 >

HFBK
Hamburg





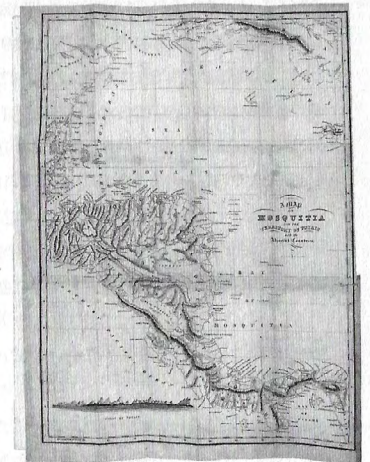
Graphic interlude by Yaman Albaker. *We are all Sisiphos*, 2022

Graphic Design as a Narrative Tool

In the early 1820s, investments in South American countries were booming. Especially the London stock market merchants were trading bonds of Peru, Colombia, and Chile like hot cake. Among those who smelled blood and profit, was also Gregor MacGregor, a Scottish soldier and adventurer, who bought land in an area of what is today known as Honduras. His only problem: the land was mainly swamp, bombastically unattractive to invest in.

So, what was not there, had to be faked. MacGregor created the imaginary country of Poyais, which he promoted through leaflets, ads, and a 355-page book in which he praised the fertility and beauty of the land. As a central component of his fake he distributed a map of Poyais, which made investors and emigrants trust him. Tricked by MacGregor, hundreds of settlers bought land and sailed towards their new home country, full of hope, only to find a mosquito-infested moor. Most of them died, only a few were saved by a British rescue mission.

Thankfully, maps haven't always had such deadly consequences. But nevertheless, they have been used throughout history to disguise, manipulate, and lie. Maps are an effective narrative tool for



A Gregor MacGregor, *The Imaginary Country of Poyais*, c. 1820.

storytellers of all sorts, because people hardly question what they depict. Their aura of objectivity, science, and neutrality make them particular trustworthy. This powerful aura emerges first and foremost from the way maps are looking at the world—the bird's-eye view. A physical place, seen from above, is associated with a god-like, all-seeing, all-knowing perspective. It is a perspective of control and power, of wholeness and truth. What's on the map is alive and what's not, is dead. And exactly this is why maps have the power to give a physicality to places that do not exist, like Poyais.

This creation of physicality through maps is essential for the modern nation state and its political imagination. For example, China unveiled a new official map of the country in 2014, making the disputed waters of the South China Sea more clearly seem like Chinese territory by drawing a heavy dashed line around it. Obviously, this map represents hunger for territory and resources. It is a dream about a new geopolitical physicality, dreamed from the bird's-eye view. But at the same time, this map is much more. It is the graphic evidence of an agenda that wants to, as the Indian essayist Apoorva Tadepalli puts it, “root people to entities to which they would have to be loyal, but could not see.” This way maps manufacture a sense of collective identity by telling stories about the spaces we live in, by narrativizing us and our physical environment.

Different maps of the South China Sea, created by its surrounding countries, tell different stories about its territory because the narrativization of space is always subjective and ideological. Not least because maps are at heart a collage of distorted information. The process of

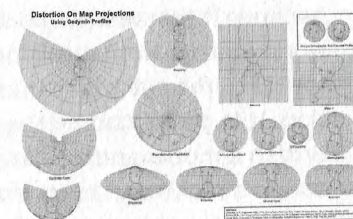


collecting, selecting, editing, visualizing, and producing this information is determined by various preconditions, biases, and technologies, all of which can be affected, or manipulated in one way or another, consciously or not. In the end, all maps are inherently distorted views of the world. But where do these distortions exactly happen and who is in control of this process?

Let's look at this example. Maps are made of raw basic data, called primary data, gathered through different methods. Firstly, it can be collected by people working in the field, measuring roads and buildings. Their results will depend on endless variables, such as their tools, experience, skill, the agenda of their bosses, and maybe even also on the fact whether they are hungry or not. Secondly, the data is produced by photogrammetry, a method used to analyze aerial images. These images are taken from planes or satellites with cameras that will always distort what they see. Resolution, lenses, weather, altitude, manipulation, and so on can all affect this process. And at the end, the quantity and quality of this primary data will influence the map, its possible scale and amount of detail entirely.

But now it becomes even more tricky: in order to create a map as we know it, mapmakers have to translate this primary data from the real world onto a flat surface, a process called ‘projection.’ Projecting in a neutral way is truly impossible, since each projection distorts the global sphere in one way or another. Mapmakers are doomed to fail.

Today the most common and popular projection is the Mercator projection. It was drawn in 1569 and optimized for navigation at sea, using compass directions as straight lines. This has dramatic consequences: the northern and southern poles are stretched upwards, making some areas of the world



B China map, 2014.
C Distortion On Map Projections, Using Gedymin Profiles, PB Anderson, 2009.

appear too small. For example, although Greenland and Africa look the same size on the Mercator map, Africa is actually fourteen times bigger. Also, South America appears the same size as Europe, when in fact it is almost twice as large. These inherent distortions of the Mercator projection are not merely a cartographer's problem, they are a political one, because they correspond to a sixteenth-century world view, when colonial powers were dominating the world. Europe is at the center, Western empires are bigger and situated on top of the map, whereas the suppressed others are smaller and at the bottom. But you will be surprised, despite its difficult socio-political connotations, that the Mercator projection is used almost everywhere today. Google maps, Apple maps and Bing maps are all using it, and probably you have used it at school too.

Although there is no neutral and correct way of projecting the world, we have to be aware of the fact that each projection tells a different story about the world we live in. For instance, the Gall-Peters projection tells us mostly a story of political correctness, because it represents the areas and surfaces of the world equally. Not surprisingly, this makes it look distorted to the eye that's used to the Mercator projection. It is promoted by the United Nations, used in British schools and was introduced in some Boston schools recently. There, most children seeing it for the first time, were astonished, asking emphatically, as if they were betrayed for years: "What, Africa is this big, really?!"

But if you think that primary data, scale, and different projections cover all of the inherent biases that can be found in maps, I have to disappoint you. It's really just the beginning. Because on top of this, maps show their actual content through graphic symbolism. Roads, bridges, buildings, harbors or process-



D Distortion on map projection, Greenland in real comparison to Africa.

es of trade and politics are represented through colors, shapes, thickness, contrast, sizes, patterns, and a million more things, which tell you what is important, dense, long, or short; they are graphic codes that create stories about the world.

Like the map of the oil and fuel company Esso from the early 1970s. Conveniently, it showed a visual difference between fast and slow roads. Fast was bright yellow, slow was less saturated. But this turned out to be wrong if you looked closely—because the bright yellow lines actually highlighted not the expressways, but the ones that contained Esso gas stations.

As we see maps are, as map theorist Denis Wood describes it, not *naturalized windows* on the world at all, but *arguments about* the world. Maps are not neutral, they are narrativized space, stories written in the language of graphic design. And if we consider—pointed out by journalists, sociologists, and writers again and again—that we will eventually become the stories that we *tell* ourselves, we start to understand the delicate terrain we are in when we draw a map or look at one.

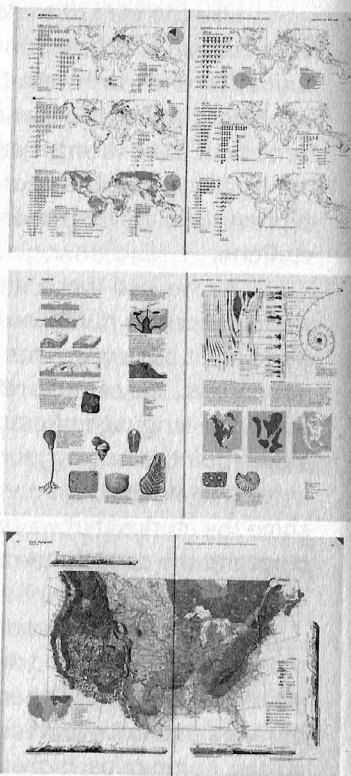
But now the question is, how do we deal with these issues of bias and manipulation as authors and graphic designers? Especially in a world that is full of maps and infographics, generated by the media, states, companies, individuals, and algorithms alike. How do we design maps in an age of democratized and automated map making tools, where maps are travelling fast as light, creating evermore what Walter Lippmann has described as "pseudo-realities" of our information bubbles? The bad news: we don't have final answers to these questions. The good news: here are some ideas.

For sure, you could do it like Google maps and pretend that everything is fine. For instance, during the height of the Russia-Ukraine conflict Google decided to show the Russian version of the border line

if you accessed Google from Russia, and the Ukraine version if you accessed it from the Ukraine. So, if you want to run away from political problems of our time and please everybody in the name of slick usability and its related profits, you should go for this option.

Or you could do the opposite and face the contradictions our world has to offer. Like Herbert Bayer, a Bauhaus-trained, Austro-American graphic designer, artist, and architect. When approached by the Container Corporation of America to design an update of their *Atlas of the World* in 1953, he decided to create a publication that shows a “new graphical narrative of humans and geography.” In order to achieve this, he collected most of the data himself, travelling and researching for five years throughout Europe, because “a scientist would not think in terms in which I worked.” Bayer called it “a good adult education”—and indeed, his approach represents the idea that a graphic designer could also become a much more active and educated actor, an author and editor of content who doesn’t accept the prefabricated data and shapes of his time and looks for new ways of collecting and visualizing information.

The American conceptual artist Mark Lombardi pushed this research-driven, investigative approach even further. He spent months in libraries, browsing public sources for new entries into his extensive archival system of more than 12,000 index cards about politics and economics. This research was so elaborate that journalists and supposedly even the FBI used it. In a following step he tried to carve out otherwise invisible connections by extracting interlinked peo-

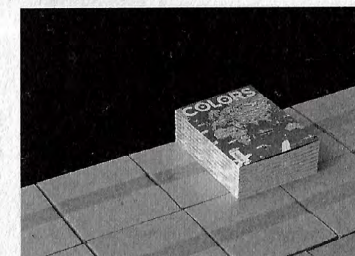
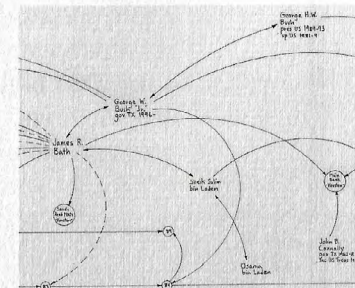


E Herbert Bayer, *World Geo-Graphic Atlas: A Composite of Man's Environment, The Container Corporation of America, 1953.*

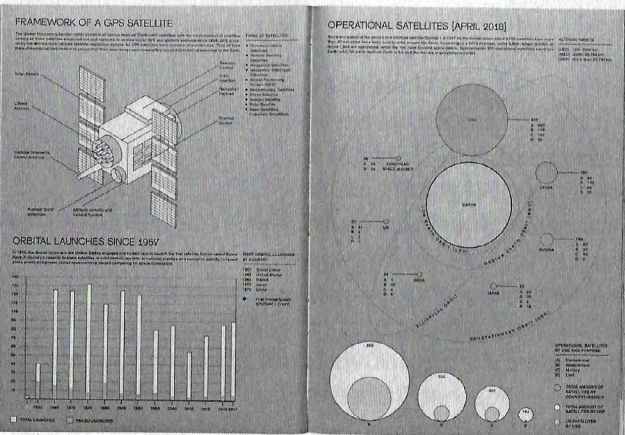
ple and processes from these cards, creating huge paintings, which he called *narrative structures*. Although he didn’t make use of cartographic elements, Lombardi’s structures are mapping information almost like maps do, showing us that there are no easy answers in a world full of complex interdependencies.

Another way of making people aware of map-inherent distortions is to confront different kind of maps, projections, and views with each other. For example, in our practice with *Migrant Journal*—a publication about the movement of people, goods, information, capital, flora, and fauna—we try to use different projections of the world depending on the context of the story. This relates to the approach of the journal, where we try to disrupt and challenge existing notions and stereotypes about migration, and challenge our readers. If design, as Tony Fry argues “either serves or subverts the status quo,” we definitely try to be on the more subversive side with the way we draw our maps and infographics in *Migrant Journal*.

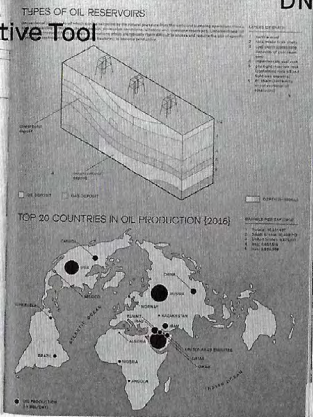
Last but not least, both in *Migrant Journal* and also in our involvement with *Colors Magazine*, we’ve tried to escape the inherent traps of maps by balancing them with other narrative elements, like journalism, photo-journalism, illustrations, or infographics, a practice that you could call ‘visual storytelling.’ For example, *Colors Magazine* takes a global outlook on issues of our time by telling stories in an engaging, multi-layered, and narrative fashion. Very different visual and textual components come together for a rich reader experience—the single elements provide different entry points, create rhythm, intertwine with each other, and unfold eclectic narratives that are more than



F Mark Lombardi, *Narrative Structures and Other Mapping of Power Relations, 1990s.*
G *Colors Magazine.*



Magazine design Migrant Journal #2 - Wired Capital by Offshore, 2017.



the sum of their parts. This allows us to use maps where it's appropriate, but also to compensate for their weaknesses with other visual and conceptual approaches. Quite often, this creates more balanced and nuanced, but also stronger, more engaging narratives.

Interestingly enough, *Colors Magazine* and *Migrant Journal* were encouraging designers to realize this potential by questioning what a graphic designer should and can do. Both magazines pushed designers to investigate, research and dig really deep into the content; they could even suggest and create stories by collaborating with journalists, researchers, photographers, and illustrators. This way graphic designers and everybody else involved becomes an active part in reading, negotiating, redefining, and telling more critical and nuanced stories about the world we live in.

But in order to use graphic design as a narrative tool that doesn't make simplistic and biased judgments about the world, we need to realize first that no graphic shape is innocent, nothing is neutral, nothing is objective. Every visual expression comes with its politics and it's up to us whether we want to use these inherent politics blindly or want to accept our responsibility in questioning and challenging them. Because, as Jerry Brotton puts it: "We always get the map that our age deserves"—and probably we want to make sure that the map of our age is not a seaman's map from 1569.

