ESSAY

The Dead Body in Graphic Limbo

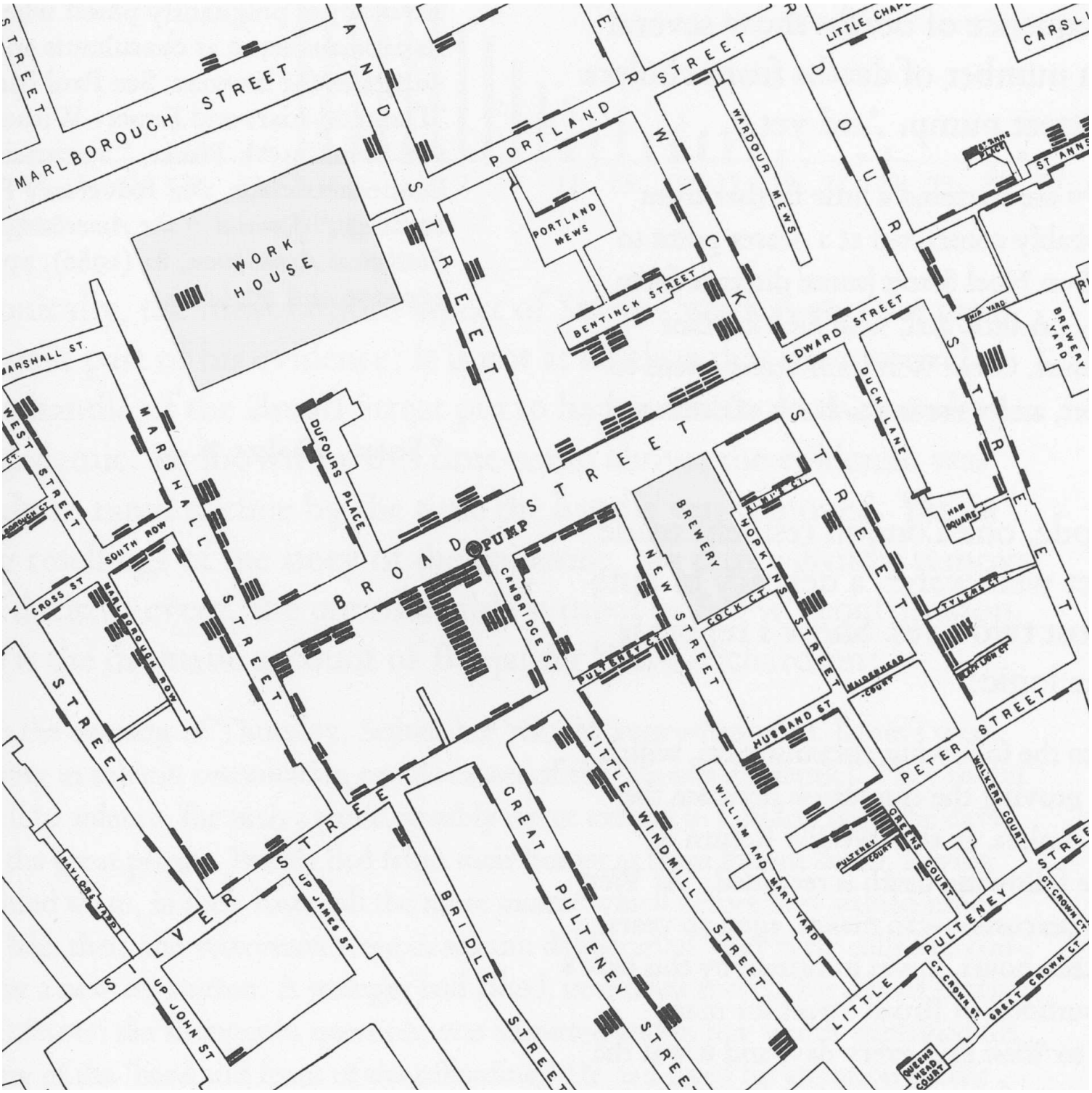
James Langdon



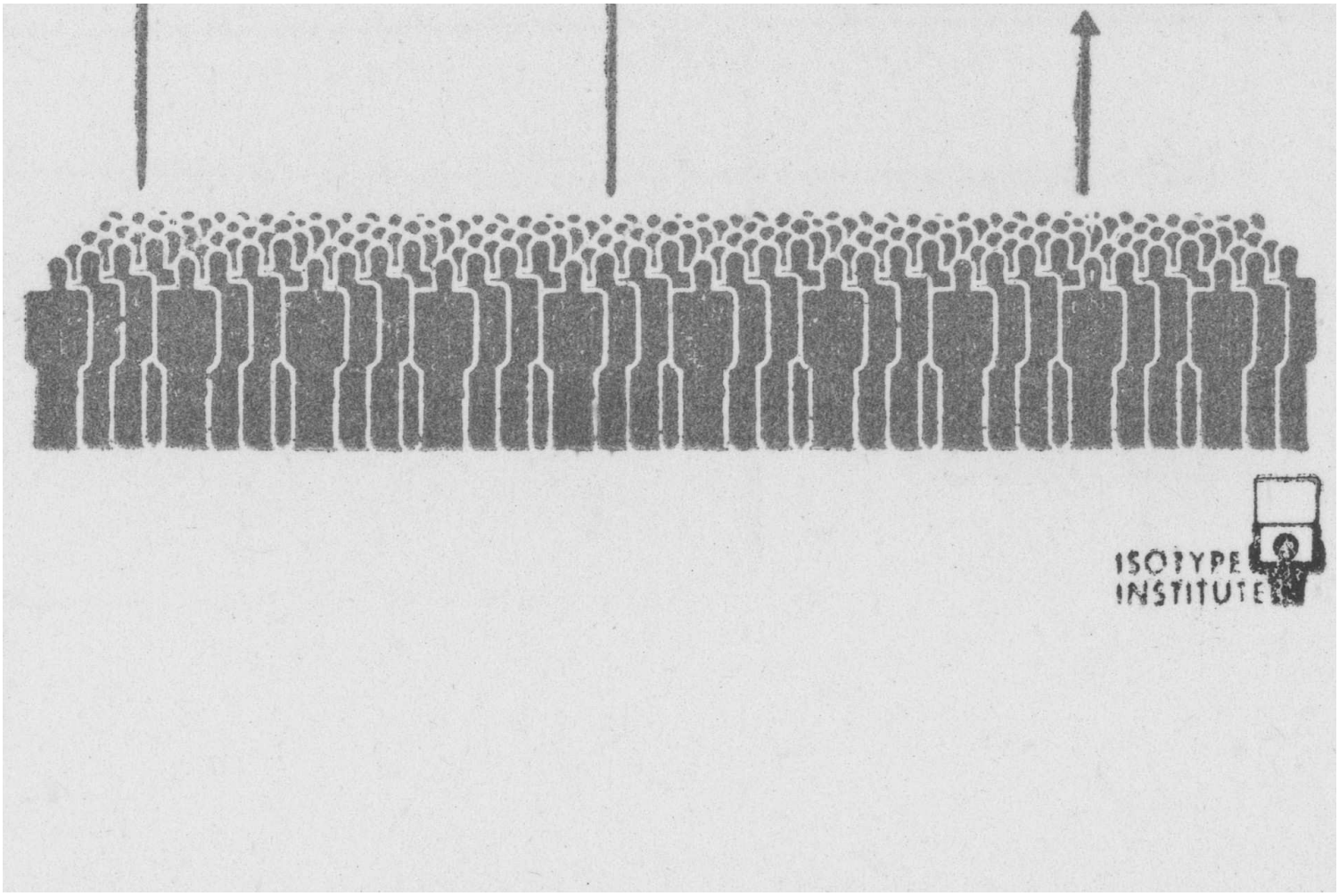
1.

Graphic limbo is an ambiguous presentational space, normally somewhere in-between the diagrammatic and the pictorial, where a contradictory suspension of disbelief occurs. Take this image, an example of a typical, mid-twentieth century promotional postcard produced by an American airline. Passengers appear to be enjoying their flight in spacious luxury. Nobody looks at such an image in horror.

The familiar diagrammatic device of the “cutaway” illustration effectively placates any unconscious, pictorial interpretation of the scene. *No*, this device reassures the viewer, *of course that’s not a passenger aircraft in flight with a gaping hole in its side! And behind it, beneath it, that’s absolutely not the blackness of night over some remote wilderness!* In graphic limbo, the pretence of information moderates affect.



Graphic limbo might be a byproduct of historically divergent attitudes toward abstraction in the statistical depiction of the human body. During the cholera outbreak that ravaged London's Soho in 1854, the disease was mistakenly believed to be spread through airborne transmission. An anesthetist, John Snow, suspected otherwise. By taking the official list of the dead, organised *chronologically*, and plotting each death *spatially* onto a map of the area, Snow was able to first identify that the epicenter of the outbreak was the water pump on Broad Street, and subsequently to establish that bacteria were passed not through the air but from the drinking water. On Snow's map, dead bodies are represented as uniform black rectangles. These marks *are* deathly, and subtly anthropomorphic, particularly as they stack up in the vicinity of the pump, but their visual rhetoric is typically explained quite differently. Snow's map is a canonical example of the production of knowledge through visual practices. In the history of data journalism, its black marks are resolutely *statistical*, not *human* bodies. It was the dispassionate abstraction of these forms, and the emphasis on their spatial plotting that—rhetorically—enabled Snow's discovery.



3.

In 1936, the Austrian political economist Otto Neurath formulated a set of basic principles for the visual communication of information, an “international picture language,” that later became known as the ISOTYPE (International System of Typographic Picture Education) method. According to Neurath’s method, where quantitative measurements are concerned, the repetition of representative forms is preferable to the enlargement of singular, abstract and totalising forms: “a sign is representative of a certain amount of things; a greater number of signs is representative of a greater number of things.” [1]

The human body has a number of basic forms in Isotype, differing according to the granularity of the information presented. In one example, unemployed workers are given a forlorn demeanor, hands in pockets and shoulders slumped. In charts representing more complex demographics, or even entire societies, minimally detailed figures are used, according to the logic that “the sign ‘man’ is not to give the idea of a special person with the name XY, but to be representative of the animal ‘man’.” [2]

Isotype’s systematic approach sometimes veers into a graphic limbo in which a large group of bodies lose their statistical character, unintentionally becoming another kind of political object altogether: a crowd. This particularly depersonalised horde, originally used to represent a government constituency, huddles together like a military troop, a wall of bodies whose uniformity suggests a hint of menace.



"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

New York 4,786 deaths

National Edition
Mild in the north with late-day showers or thunderstorms. Some sunshine and warm in the south. Afternoon highs in 70s north and 80s south. Weather map, Page B8.

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How Outbreak Kept New York A Step Behind

Infighting, Delays and Unheeded Warnings

By J. DAVID GOODMAN

A 39-year-old woman took Flight 701 from Doha, Qatar, to John F. Kennedy International Airport in late February, the final leg of her trip home to New York City from Iran.

A week later, on March 1, she tested positive for the coronavirus, the first confirmed case in New York City of an outbreak that had already devastated China and parts of Europe. The next day, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, appearing with Mayor Bill de Blasio at a news conference, promised that health investigators would track down every person on the woman's flight. But no one did.

A day later, a lawyer from New Rochelle, a New York City suburb, tested positive for the virus — an alarming sign because he had not traveled to any affected country, suggesting community spread was already taking place.

Although city investigators had traced the lawyer's whereabouts and connections to the most crowded corridors of Manhattan, the state's efforts focused on the suburb, not the city, and Mr. de Blasio urged the public not to worry. "We'll tell you the second we think you should change your behavior," the mayor said on March 5.

For many days after the first positive test, as the coronavirus silently spread throughout the New York region, Mr. Cuomo, Mr. de Blasio and their top aides projected an unswerving confidence that the outbreak would be readily contained.

There would be cases, they repeatedly said, but New York's hospitals were some of the best in the world. Plans were in place. Responses had been rehearsed during "tabletop" exercises. After all, the city had been here before — Ebola, Zika, the H1N1 virus, even

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As Limits Ease, Wuhan Limps Into New Life

By RAYMOND ZHONG and VIVIAN WANG

China on Wednesday ended its lockdown of Wuhan, the city where the coronavirus first emerged and a potent symbol in a pandemic that has killed tens of thousands of people, shaken the global economy and thrown daily life into upheaval across the planet.

But the city that has reopened after more than 10 weeks is a profoundly damaged one, a place whose recovery will be watched worldwide for lessons on how populations move past pain and calamity of such staggering magnitude.

In Wuhan, sickness and death have touched hundreds of thousands of lives, imprinting them with trauma that could linger for decades. Businesses, even those that have reopened, face a wrenching road ahead, with sluggishness likely to persist. Neighborhood authorities continue to regulate people's comings and goings, with no return to normalcy in sight.

The Chinese authorities sealed off Wuhan, an industrial hub of 11 million people, in late January, in a frantic attempt to limit the outbreak's spread. At the time, many outsiders saw it as an extreme step, one that could be tried only in an authoritarian system like

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How the Coronavirus Toll Grew
The first 5,000 deaths came in just over a month. In less than five days, the second 5,000 followed. Article and more graphics, Page A14.

Sources: New York Times database of cases and deaths, based on data from state and local health agencies and hospitals; U.S. Census Bureau. Data as of April 6, 2020 at 10 p.m., Eastern. Data for Puerto Rico is displayed at the territory level.

LAZARO GAMIO, KAREN YOURISH AND BILL MARSH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

BLACK AMERICANS BEAR THE BRUNT AS DEATHS CLIMB

Statistics From Certain Cities and States Highlight Entrenched Inequality

This article is by ***John Eligon, Audra D. S. Burch, Dionne Searcey*** *and* ***Richard A. Oppel Jr.***

The coronavirus is infecting and killing black people in the United States at disproportionately high rates, according to data released by several states and big cities, highlighting what public health researchers say are entrenched inequalities in resources, health and access to care.

The statistics are preliminary and much remains unknown because most cities and states are not reporting race as they provide numbers of confirmed cases and fatalities. Initial indications from a number of places, though, are alarming enough that policymakers say they must act immediately to stem potential devastation in black communities.

The worrying trend is playing out across the country, among people born in different decades and working far different jobs.

There is Donnie Hoover, a judge from Charlotte, N.C., who could not shake a dry cough that arrived in March. On the South Side of Chicago, LaShawn Levi, a medical assistant who rides the bus to work each day, turned to tea and cough syrup — "everything your grandma taught you" — to treat a headache and a cough. And in Detroit, Glenn Tolbert, a union leader for city bus drivers, was coughing so much that he got tested.

"This is a call-to-action moment for all of us," said Lori Lightfoot, the mayor of Chicago, who announced statistics of the outbreak in her city this week. African-Americans account for more than half of those who have tested positive and 72 percent of virus-related fatalities in Chicago, even though they make up a little less

ADELE KUZIN GARCIA/CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

Mayor Lori Lightfoot of Chicago cited "shocking" figures.

than a third of the population.

"Those numbers take your breath away, they really do," said Ms. Lightfoot, who is the city's first black woman elected as mayor. She added in an interview that the statistics were "among the most shocking things I think I've seen as mayor."

In Illinois, 43 percent of people who have died from the disease

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President Ousts Official Policing Relief Spending

By CHARLIE SAVAGE and PETER BAKER

WASHINGTON — President Trump moved on Tuesday to oust the leader of a new watchdog panel charged with overseeing how his administration spends trillions of taxpayer dollars in coronavirus pandemic relief, the latest step in an abruptly unfolding White House power play against semi-independent inspectors general across the government.

The official, Glenn A. Fine, has been the acting inspector general for the Defense Department since before Mr. Trump took office and was set to become the chairman of a new Pandemic Response Accountability Committee to police how the government carries out the $2.2 trillion coronavirus relief bill. But Mr. Trump replaced Mr. Fine in his Pentagon job, disqualifying him from serving on the new oversight panel.

The move came at a time when the president has been reasserting authority over the executive branch and signaling impatience with independent voices within the government that he considers disloyal. In recent days, he fired an inspector general who reviewed the whistle-blower complaint that led to his impeachment, nominated a White House aide to another key inspector general post, declared that he would ignore certain oversight provisions in the new relief law and attacked another inspector general who criticized virus testing shortages.

Mr. Trump even cheered the firing of the captain of an aircraft carrier for sending a letter to fellow Navy officers pleading for help for his virus-stricken crew,

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In Wisconsin, Sense of Strain Shadows Vote

By ASTEAD W. HERNDON and ALEXANDER BURNS

MILWAUKEE — Even before voting began, there were lines outside polling locations that stretched for several blocks. Some poll workers wore hazmat suits. Nearly every voter wore a face mask, removing it only to make small talk that reflected a combination of determination and grim

LAUREN JUSTICE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Voters lined up on Tuesday outside a school in Milwaukee.

humor about the extraordinary experience of voting amid a deadly pandemic.

For thousands of people across Wisconsin on Tuesday, fears of the coronavirus outbreak did not stop them from participating in the state's elections, where critical races such as the Democratic presidential primary and a key state Supreme Court seat were being decided.

"It feels bad to have to choose between your personal safety and your right to vote," said Dan Bullock, 40, as he waited to vote at Washington High School on Milwaukee's North Side. "But you

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Holidays bring a hankering for a dish that the North Carolina chef Bill Smith aims to make popular again. PAGE D1
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Susan E. Rice PAGE A25

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4.

In contemporary media, graphic limbo is occasionally used to communicative effect. It is customary in newspaper publishing, at least since the mainstream transition to colour printing, to reserve the use of full-page photographic images on the front page for a rare category of truly momentous global events. On September 12, 2001, for example, *The Times* in London—at the time printed on a broadsheet format—gave over its entire front and back pages to a single

photograph of lower Manhattan engulfed in dust and debris, shortly after the second World Trade Center tower had collapsed.

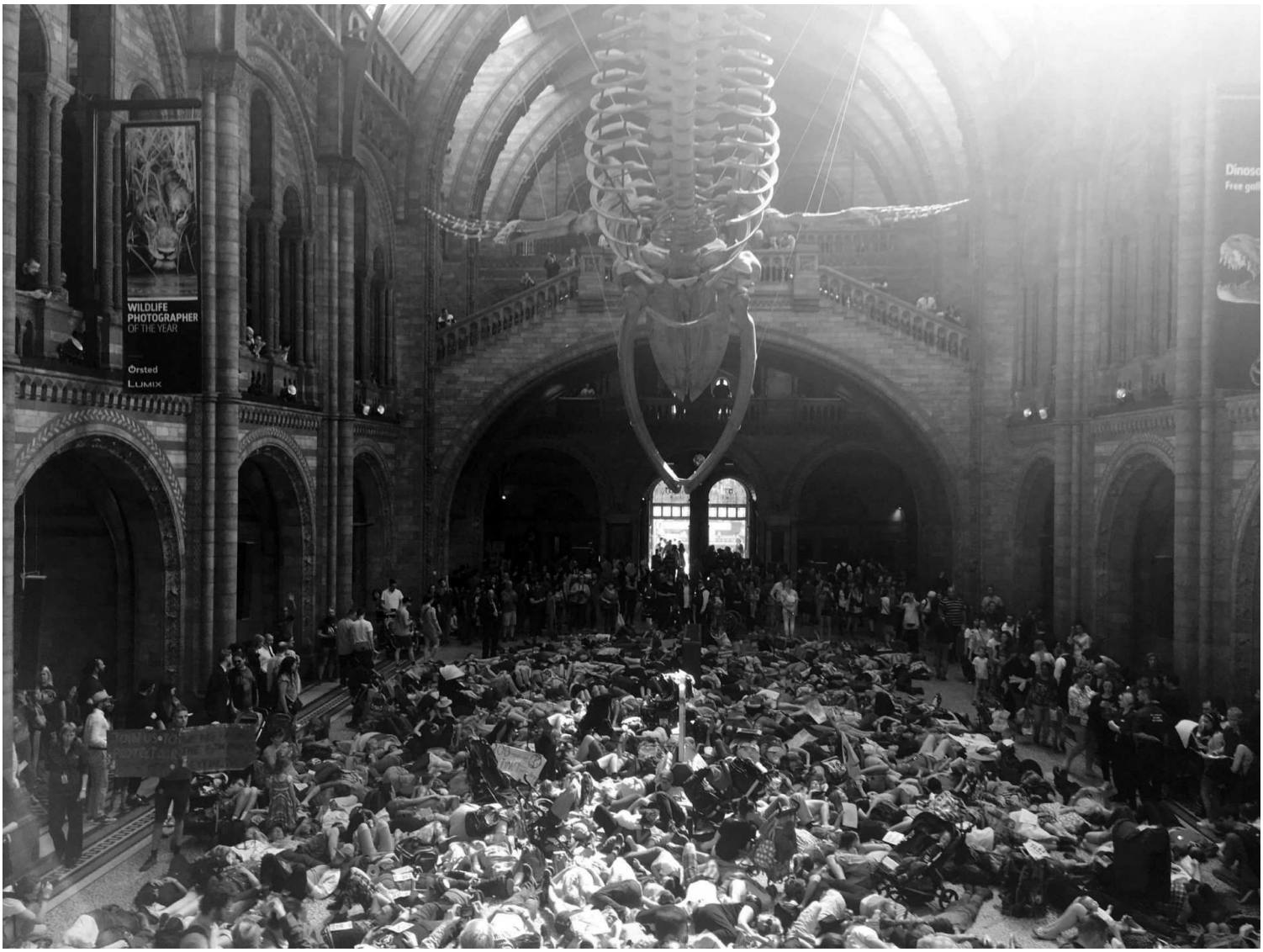
What to do then, in the art department of *The New York Times*, when the terrifying early spread of the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to warrant such treatment, yet also defied the metonymic potential of any single photograph? On April 8, 2020, the front page of the *NYT* was given over to a set of four maps of the USA, on which an array of red vertical spikes was used to chart the deaths in major cities between March 17 and April 6. On the final, uppermost map, to show that deaths in New York had risen from 20 to 4,786 in these three weeks alone, one red spike extended completely beyond the edges of the chart, transgressing the *NYT*'s iconic nameplate (apparently for the first time in its history), and entering a graphic limbo that threatens to exceed the page itself. In a moment whose global significance confounded the photographic, what could be more alarming than the message that death is *off the charts*?



5.

Abstraction can produce a form of graphic limbo that operates even in the photographic image. Barbara Kopple's 1976 film *Harlan County, USA* documents a violent coal miner's strike over pay and working conditions at the Brookside Mine

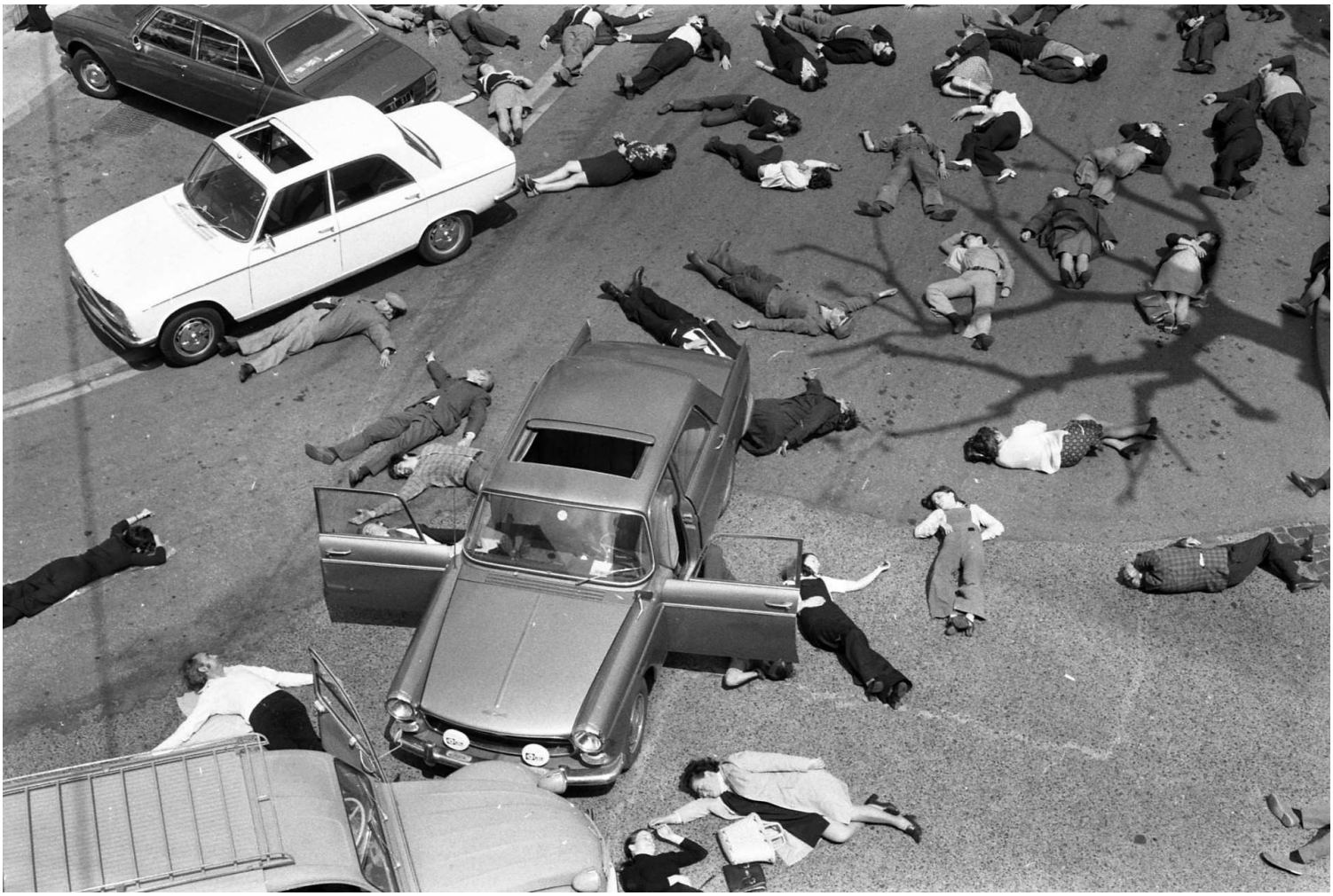
in Kentucky. The film follows several miners who are afflicted with black lung disease, a debilitating deterioration of the lungs resulting from prolonged exposure to coal dust. In one scene, at a public meeting organised by the miners, a doctor performatively handles a fragment of the damaged lung from a deceased victim. As its brittle tissue crumbles from his hand, the blackened lung establishes itself *as an object*, a visceral prop in a graphic limbo which circumvents the contravention of any journalistic ethics around the reproduction of images of dead bodies.



6.

The “die-in” is a form of protest closely related to the “sit-in,” the strategy of occupying institutional spaces frequently used in the counter-cultural movements of the late 1950s and 1960s. During a die-in, a group of protesters play dead, typically in public space. In June 2019, the international climate activism

organisation Extinction Rebellion (XR) staged a site-specific die-in, occupying the vast Hintze Hall of London's Natural History Museum. This action was taken in protest against the museum's hosting an awards dinner for the Petroleum Group of the Geological Society. Claiming this event was inconsistent with the museum's stated aim "to inspire better care of our planet," several hundred XR protesters lay down dead beneath the museum's center-piece blue whale skeleton—symbolically entering into the presence of its collection of extinct species, in a graphic limbo photo opportunity conceived to *foreshadow* death.



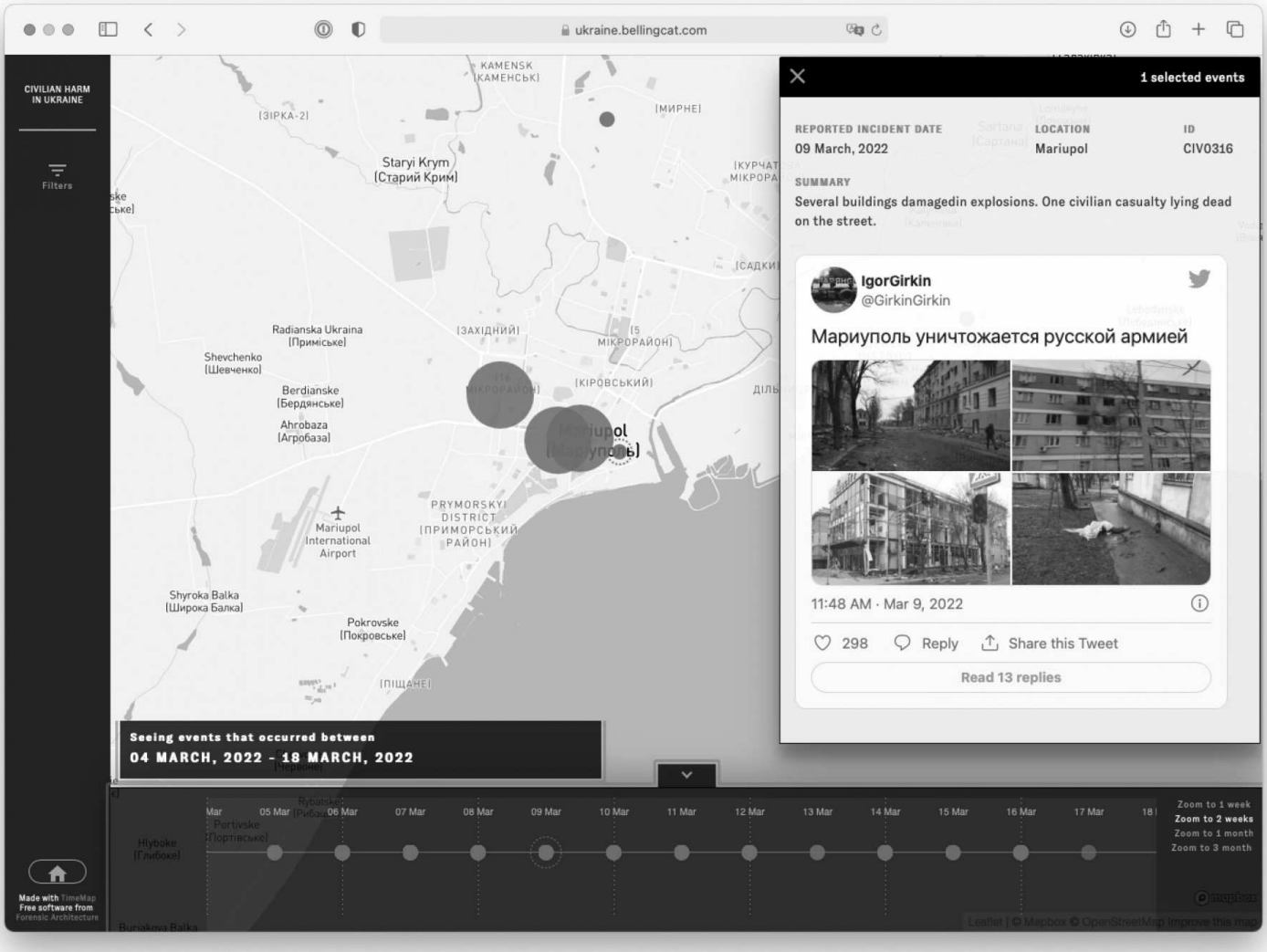
7.

In 1973, French journalist Michel Tauriac staged an extraordinary piece of televised political activism, a die-in on another scale entirely. During the previous year, an unprecedented 16,500 people had been killed in road traffic accidents in France. While preparing to report on this grave statistic for national television news, Tauriac realised that the number could believably be the population of an entire small town. Research led him to just such a town, Mazamet, in the southern region of Tarn, and following long negotiations with the mayor, local

businesses and newspapers, at 2:30 p.m. on May 17, a siren sounded and the people of Mazamet lay on the ground pretending to be dead. Television cameras recorded the eerie scene from moving cars and a helicopter above.

Tauriac's media event conforms to art historian Claire Bishop's notion of a "delegated performance," whereby professional performers are replaced by ordinary people who "perform their own socio-economic category,"[3] in this case quite literally, by corresponding to the demographic of a single—and therefore unquestionably relatable—French town. Even knowledge of the artifice of the resulting images cannot completely extinguish their visceral affect. They conjure a graphic limbo in which a deeply unsettling form of power, as described in Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power* can be vicariously experienced:

the sight of large numbers of prostrate and lifeless bodies has a terrible effect on anyone who experiences it: he comes to feel as though he himself had struck them all down and his sense of power increases rapidly and uncontrollably.[4]



8.

In a media landscape where facts and misinformation openly compete for attention, graphic limbo is no longer a curiosity, and it could even describe a default condition. In such a fraught context, a new genre of data journalism, informed by digital OSINT (open-source intelligence), actively works to disambiguate and disaggregate its information content. Reporting on civilian harm in the currently ongoing Russian military invasion of Ukraine, Bellingcat (using the Forensic Architecture collective's TimeMap software) explicitly separates the diagrammatic from the pictorial. The reader accesses this material primarily via an online, open-source map, on which incidents are marked with purple circles (neither gratuitous red, nor anodyne grey). Any interaction with one of these incident markers immediately brings into view a feed of primary documentary material, scraped from social media, whose relevance and credibility are determined both automatically, using metrics such as geotags and

timestamps, and by content moderators. In this mode, the viewer encounters uncensored photographs of dead bodies (selectively edited only to establish that the identity of any individual is not visible). Short captions describe the incident and signal Bellingcat's editorial oversight of this material: "9 March, 2022. Mariupol. Several buildings damaged in explosions. One civilian casualty lying dead on the street." [5]

Only by such explicit disaggregation—the simultaneous presentation of maximum abstraction in the map view, and maximum disclosure in the incident view—can a mediated representation of a dead body establish any solemn credibility in 2022.

Aspects of this article are elaborated in a forthcoming issue of the HfG print magazine MAS (Materialien zu Ausstellungsdesign und Szenografie).

Footnotes

1. Otto Neurath, *International Picture Language*, London: Kegan, Paul, Trubner & Co, 1936.
2. Ibid.
3. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso Books, 2012.
4. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, New York: Seabury Press, 1975 (1960).
5. See: https://ukraine.bellingcat.com/.

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