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AGRICOLE

Editorial

This edition of MAS presents materials related to graphic representations of the human body, visually multiplied to function as a statistical measure of death. From nineteenth century epidemiology to the media strategy of contemporary activist groups such as Extinction Rebellion, the image of bodies en masse has been used variously, to produce knowledge, to make political commentary, and to shock.

We are specifically concerned with the 'die-in', a form of protest that may have origins in the 'sit-in', the occupation of an institutional space frequently used in the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s. During a die-in a group plays dead in public space. Such embodied actions require considerable organisation and active participation, but the media spectacle of the mass of bodies is now complicated by its contact with digital image manipulation and subversive political practices such as 'astroturfing' — the production of fake crowd images.

We focus on several points in a speculative history of the statistical body. In London in 1854, the English epidemiologist Dr John Snow famously discovered the source of a deadly cholera outbreak by plotting deaths on a map as black spots.[1] Snow's simple statistical graphic revealed what nobody had been able to see: the black spots centred around the water pump on Broad Street. The use of the pictorial chart as a communicative device, in which the black spots come to represent a particular group of people, requires an ethical code.

In 1930s Germany, Otto Neurath's Isotype group (international system of typographic picture education) devised such a code: For Isotype, the representation of groups, demographics, and societies, were not matters for reductive abstractions. In an Isotype chart, groups of people are always shown as multiples of a simplified human form.[2]

In 1973, French journalist Michel Tauriac staged an extraordinary piece of televised activism, a prototypical media event. In 1972, 16,500 people had been killed in road traffic accidents in France.



1 Dr John Snow's map of the cholera outbreak in London 1854.

Typical Isotype figures

While preparing to report on this alarming statistic for national television news, Tauriac realized 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 2:30pm on May 17, 1973, 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.

Mazamet set a template for the die-in as large scale media event. In June 2019, the climate activists Extinction Rebellion staged a site-specific die-in, occupying the vast Hintze Hall of London's Natural History Museum. This action was in protest at the museum's hosting the annual 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", a large group of protesters lay down dead in the hall beneath the museum's center-piece skeleton of a blue whale. In contrast with Tauriac's elaborate organisational virtuosity, XR could effortlessly depend on the presence of hundreds of internet-connected cameras to broadcast their images.

Typeface: MAS bodies

For the cover of each issue we invite designers, artists or theoreticians. Cover 001: Lotte Meret Effinger. Cover 002: Bas Princen & Office KGDVS. Cover 003: Moritz Küng. Cover 004: Anja Kirschner. Cover 005: Heike Schuppelius. Cover 006: Na Kim.

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