

DREI

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Olga Pedan

‘Schemes’

Nov 11 – Dec 17, 2016

Opening Nov 10, 6-9pm

For Olga Pedan, *Schemes*, October 2016.

In 1981, the Human Interference Task Force established the field of nuclear semiotics. This is the story of how a group of scientists, anthropologists, philosophers, linguists, etc. attempted to develop a method to communicate the danger of radioactive waste storage sites to biological agents (humans?) in the far future—on the order of the half-life of plutonium-239, 34,000 years away. Their suggestions—myth, ‘hostile architecture’, signs written in every existing language and every new one, schematic diagrams—exhibit an almost charming Cold War naivety.¹

Where does a schematic sit in the field of communication containing a monolith, natural language, an ant’s pheromones, a bee’s dance? If it’s a representational exercise in the stripping away of redundant features, inconsequential detail, then how is it decided what is redundant and inconsequential? What remains is a means of constructing *a form of* objectivity. It communicates through simplified resemblance (IKEA instructions), affect (arrows, gradients), correspondence, plausible topologies (x is connected to y , z is not connected). There is this appeal to accreted expectations, a sedimentation—our experience of continuity of motion, a sense of up and down or the high and the low, what the intersection of two lines might be, your trajectory and mine. This amounts to an *iconology* of diagrams,² one in which we are embedded: non-specialists today are likely to find Athanasius Kircher’s alchemical diagrams unintelligible.

But if a diagram claims to be a representation of a state of affairs, that is not to discount the possibility it has its purpose equally in generating that state of affairs. When picturing the economy, as in François Quesnay’s 1758 *Tableau Économique*, we are also doing the work of bringing the object economy into being, saying by what is pictured what is consequential within it—wealth creation through farming—and what is not—women, for instance.³ All this with the seductive power of the image thrown in for good measure.

The notion of a simple, essential, and linear structure rendered apprehensible (by diagram, mathematics, whatever) is the Enlightenment idea *par excellence*, and it remains ready-to-hand, for better or worse. Nevertheless, such schemes are increasingly undermined by the fact of the massively parallel and probabilistic processes that underlie contemporary information processing, and that resist easy visual representation. These processes are themselves in a sense diagrammatic: computationally finite and well-defined, to a degree. It is conceivable that one could draw a picture of such a process, but it would be impossible to understand.

Jack Brennan

1. Human Interference Task Force, *Reducing the Likelihood of Future Human Activities That Could Affect Geologic High-level Waste Repositories*. Office of Nuclear Waste Isolation, Columbus, Ohio. BMI/ONWI-537, May 1984.
2. Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. Oxford, 1939.
3. Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Envisioning Capital’. *Critical Inquiry* 21:2, pp.434-467, 1995.