

Infospheres



According to Edward Tufte (the man who wrote the basic text on the visual display of quantitative information), “the use of non-representational pictures to show numbers is a surprisingly recent invention.” The Yale professor explains that “it was not until 1750-1800 that statistical graphics—length and area to show quantity, time-series, scatterplots, and multivariate displays—were invented.” He claims that “often the most effective way to describe, explore, and summarize a set of numbers—even a very large set—is to look at pictures of those numbers.”

Recently, the artist Ingo Gunther created his World Processor project, which projects a wide variety of statistical data onto the conventional sphere of the globe. In his installation, Gunther translated complicated sets of numbers “as clearly as possible [so they could] become obvious without too much explanation.”

The 300-globe project is available online at www.worldprocessor.com. On the opening page you are given three options for browsing. You can also

scroll down the page and load up the entire catalog from 1988-2005—this has the best images but takes time to load.

The range is surprising. One white planet (#59, Rainforest Leftovers) shows green and red areas where rainforests still survive or have disappeared. The Landlocked Nations globe (#7) looks normal for those countries with no coastline, but those on the oceans are blacked out to highlight the others. Globe #53 shows the Chernobyl Cloud in red like a large four-legged creature reaching out following the flow of airstreams. Among the more abstract, there’s the Earth in 80 Languages (#66)—a pink sphere with the word “earth” spelled out in various languages, in the locales of those languages. The size of the word relates to the predominance of the language.

If you think visualizing data is pretty much pie charts and bar graphs, check out Ingo Gunther’s site and then borrow a copy of Edward Tufte’s *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* from the library. ■