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STIFTUNGSKUNSTFONDS

KARTENLESESAAL

EVAN

IN

NINTH

SEPTEMBER

HAUS UNTER DEN LINDEN
UNTER DEN LINDEN 8
10117 BERLIN

ROTH

2022

TO

NINTH

FIGURES

DECEMBER

MO. WED. AND FR.
9:00AM TO 5:00PM

2022

TU. AND TH.
9:00AM TO 7:00PM

Staatsbibliothek
zu Berlin
Preußischer Kulturbesitz

“Out of love for you, every strand of my hair turned into lines of poetry.”
– Rumi¹

Long awaited, and long in the making, Evan Roth’s first painting series *Strands* is a homecoming. Muraled above and hung between a million maps, tens of thousands of atlases, and hundreds of globes, it is reunited with the cartographic holdings that Roth researched while developing this body of work. With a faithfulness to format in line with Agnes Martin’s, each work was made using custom software worldsinfigures.com: a gift from the artist which opens to the net in sync with the exhibition. Designs created using the software were rendered and exported as vector files, cut into vinyl masks and painted. Like Martin, with no additions other than the wobble of the artist’s hand against the contours of the canvas.

Programmatic paintings, unplaceable yet somehow known. Etel Adnan brights, Matisse cut-outs at max saturation, Bridget Riley blended with Kusama. Although a practice of art as gifting aligns both artists philosophically, it is a visual parallel with Samson Kambalu’s *Bubblegum Flags* that unearths the source of this familiarity. *Strands’* ground is made up of false flags, the geometry pirated from the flags of nations to which the art holds no allegiance. Their palette – blue, orange, green, brown, slate, white, red, black, yellow,

violet, rose and aqua – is spliced from the colour-coding chart engineers use to identify fibre optic strands. Strands of plastic each part of a larger cable and that cable part of a much larger system of telecommunications, girdling the globe, the unseen subject of much of Roth’s career-long inquiry. A strand can also be the shore between tides; to, figuratively, leave helpless; of a story. Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* gave its name to the filmic device of following various narrative strands as they diverge and rejoin like streams. Contemporary uses often dam the narrative flow with a final truth revealed – the murderer, insanity, the actual intended loot of a heist – but the original only spoke of alternative realities. Truth is multiple and bias inescapable, even in the totems of our understanding. Roth’s paintings critique the imperialism of technological monoliths no less rigorously than his works that need plugging in or powering up to experience. This artist digs where he stands.

Unfolding the perceived impartiality of maps is one way to open up a conversation about power. The game that north is up is up. We know that rendering a sphere in two dimensions spins it out of whack, that pole positions are swung by politics not magnets, that Alaska isn’t bigger than Africa. But, it is not until we are confronted with the alternative projections to the dominant Mercator that we in turn confront our own discomfort with them. We want to believe maps are real; Roth urges us to expand our faith.

1 Rumi: *Unseen Poems*, trans. by Maryam Mortaaz, Brad Gooch (London: Everyman’s Library, 2019)

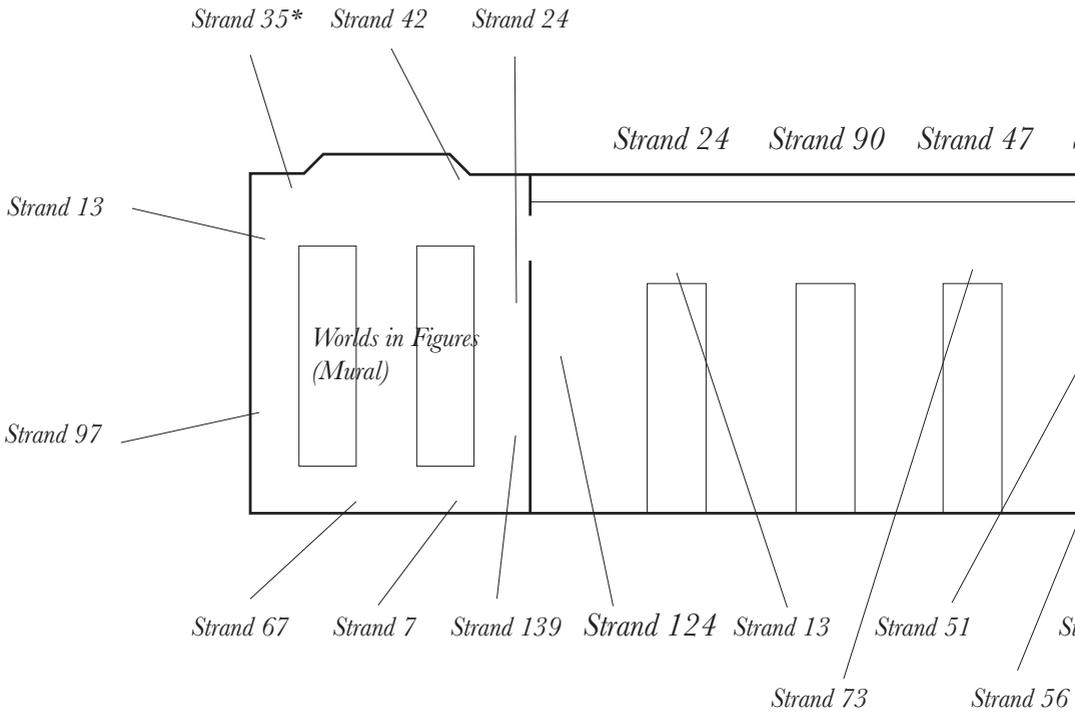
Garbled geography graces each *Strand*, maps subject to one of 121 different established projections. These shots at the impossible, flattening the globe, each uniquely alters space during the transformation process, keeping areas equal and distorting the angles between them and vice versa, ditching the rectangle, rotating the poles. There is no limit to the haggling over which properties to preserve and to what degree. The mathematics can be applied in the software to any uploaded image with the projection extending beyond the bounds of the map itself. In *Strands 1–12*, for example Roth has added a map projection to one of his forged flags but toggled off the world. In others, the shorelines of continents are prominent, borders melted in monochrome. No hemispheric hierarchy here however, signed on all four edges, just like our planet, these paintings were made to turn.

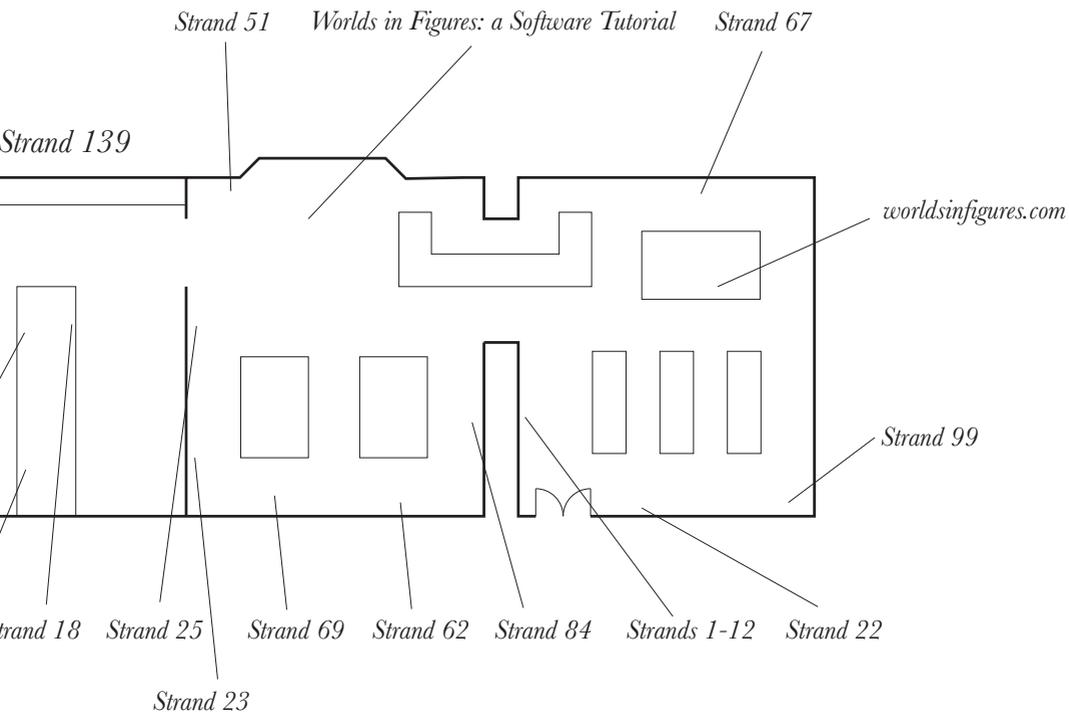
To balance bias, many methods have been used over time to demonstrate distortion in map projections. One which has stuck is the use of the human face. Face perception is hyper evolved – instantaneous recognition a means to survival – so we see quickly when things aren’t bang on. The Gedymin face still used today bears the name of the Soviet cartographer who invented it, and of course his gender and his ethnicity. As it moves over various map projections its cranium expands like a classic movie alien at the poles or its nose grows along a meridian. The map, like Pinocchio, has told a lie. Roth subverts this tool in *Worlds in Figures* and uses a face so

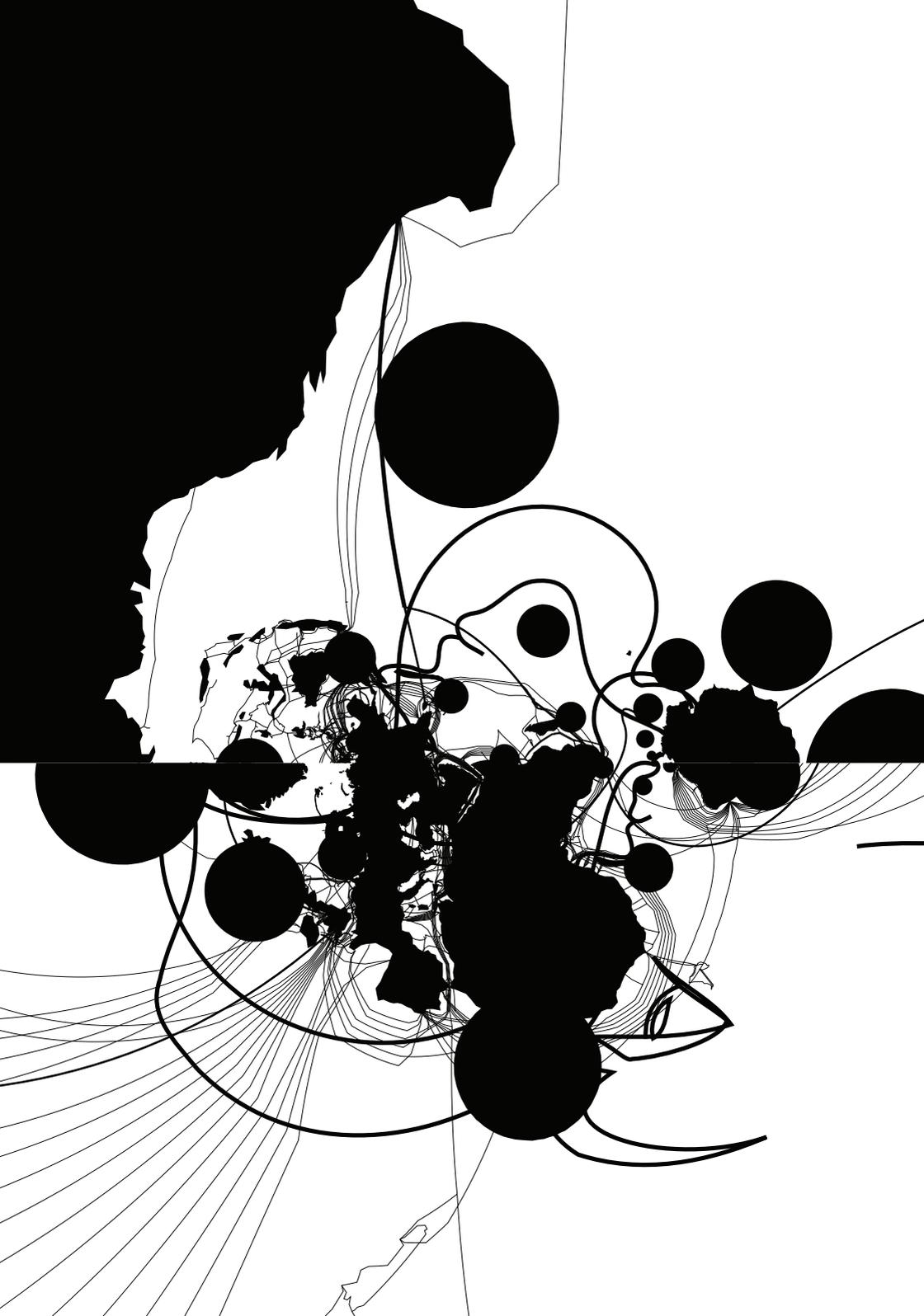
familiar he would recognise a bend in any of its curves. The artist wrote his wife Michele’s profile in GeoJson and in ode to a quarter century together, to the woman who turned his world upside down, uploaded it as a vector layer. There are other layers to the paintings too, all similarly available to transform and modify in the software. Tissot Indicatrices, the *All Red Line*, and the submarine cables network can be faded in and out in one of the 12 fibre-optic cable colours. Painted, these systems drop-line down *Strand 13* like gossamer or float across *Strand 73* like soap bubbles with a seeming spontaneity that masks the complexities of their origin. “Painting is not a shape” Etel Adnan once said in an interview with Negar Azimi², “but it is a feeling.” One which these artists share. Although *Strands* hold within them a deep criticality of the powers that shape our vision of the world, they are painted with joy. They are painted with love.

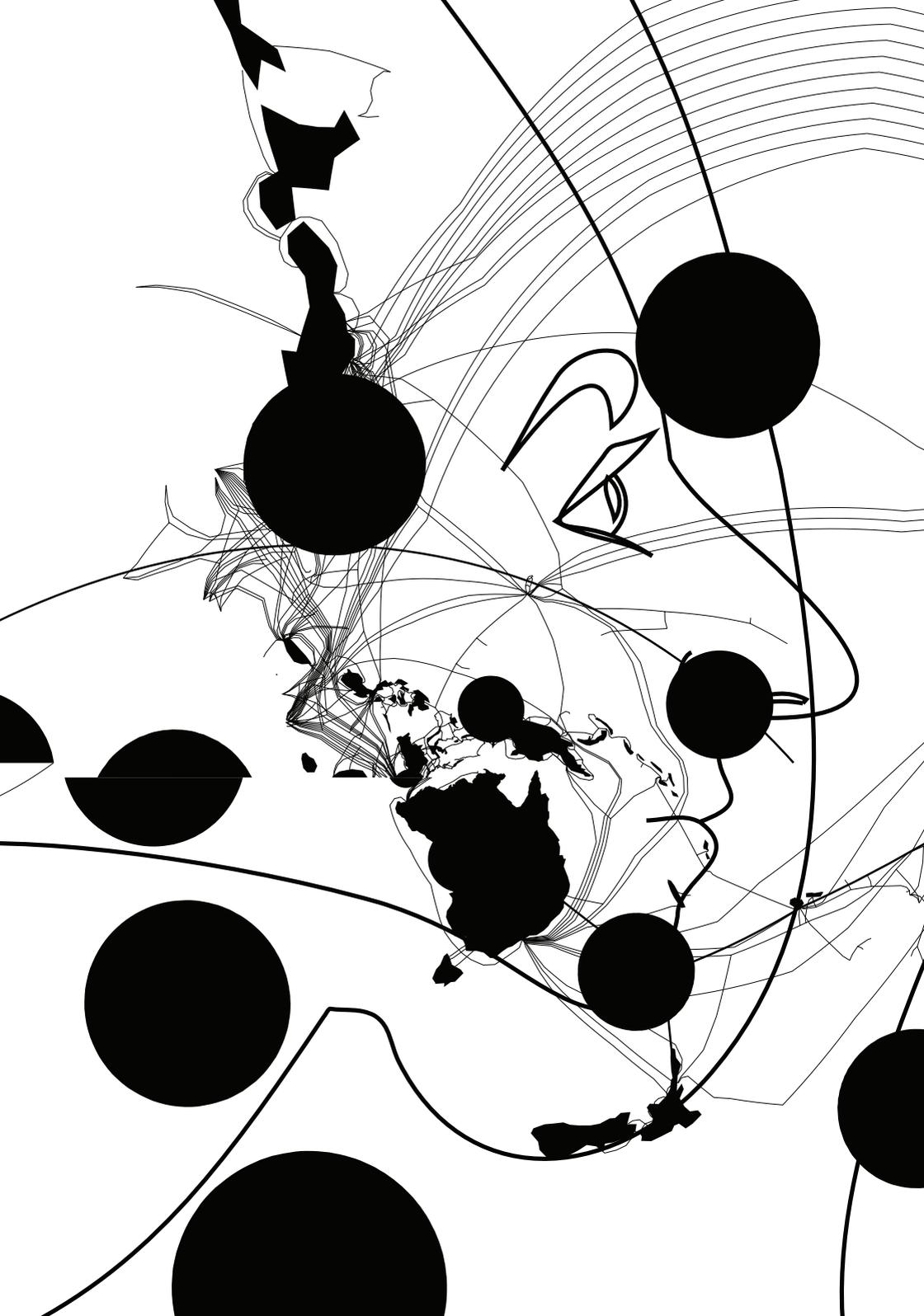
– Charmian Griffin

2 Negar Azimi, ‘*The Many Loves of Etel Adnan*’, *Frieze*, no. 212 (July/August 2020) <<https://www.frieze.com/article/many-loves-etel-adnan>>









All of the work in the exhibition was produced over the course of the last three years using custom software designed by the artist for the manipulation of images using historical mapping projections that date from AD 150 to 2018. As part of the exhibition, this software (as well as the corresponding video tutorial) is available for free online at: <https://worldsinfigures.com>

Software development: Cezar Mocan

Exhibition text: Charmian Griffin

Poster design: Paul Bille

Project funding support: Stiftung Kunstfonds and Neustart Kultur



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