

Controlled Production of Virtual Geo-political Reality through Failure

Jan Svenungsson

There is an important difference between an image that is a work of art and one that is an illustration. The latter's content will have been defined before the picture: its role is to serve, make clear, to visualise. It should not add complexity or provoke new questions. A work of art, on the other hand, may serve a purpose or have an agenda, but it will contain some question that cannot be fully answered, some kind of intangible value that cannot be extricated without being redefined and changed in the process. This value makes the work unstable and it encourages the viewer (a term which will include the artist) to shift his/her position.

No categorisation being absolute, it will always be possible to find examples of images that have been made in order to illustrate one thing or another, and where the maker has had further ambitions, or where s/he just got lucky and managed to add something that does not let itself be extracted and simplified. The more of this, the less efficient the image will be in its primary role to illustrate whatever idea it was meant to communicate. On the other hand, the artist who has no assignment but his/her own must be aware of the danger of continuing to produce work when all questions have been answered and there is no space left in the work for it to create new meaning. At this point the work will have become stationary instead of mobile, stable instead of dynamic. The artist will then be *illustrating herself/himself*.

The meaning of an image that is a work of art cannot be precisely described in words, neither by the viewer nor by the artist. This is not to say that such attempts are futile. The power to inspire repeated attempts by viewers – as well as by the artist – at trying to describe the meaning of

a work of art is a partially constitutional factor of what makes it art. The (temporary) position of the meaning/content of the work of art will be influenced by the process of observing it and the attempts to define it. It is analogue, not digital: it will always escape final definition by the viewer (including the critic or the art historian) and it will provoke opposing views regarding its nature. Many, if not all, of the participants in this reception game, will argue for excluding some perceptions of the content that will stand in contrast to their own. This discussion will never be finally settled. Its dynamics will become part of the work. Thus, a work of art can gain content over time.

At first glance, a map is an illustration; the information it is meant to convey would be possible to communicate using words – but it would take an infinite number of them. A map denotes certain facts about an area and every line and colour is linked to occurrences in reality. If it is a political map, this reality will not be visible, which does not lessen the importance of the exact positioning of the line. The opposite is true: when a line in a political map changes shape – there *will be* change on the ground. A political map can be active whereas a geographical map is reactive. A political map can be a tool and a weapon, it may cause wars and be the currency of peace. It is not neutral.

As a consequence, maps – and in particular political maps – are wonderful raw material for artistic work. Their extracurricular properties mean that the result of the content process within the work (of art) will have the power to transcend borders (in more than one sense) and that it can be indefinitely magnified. A political process can be set in motion. Reality can be impacted.

I sometimes use maps as raw material and I produce new maps as a result, in a group of works with the title “Psycho-Mappings”. I will describe one of these works here: “Psycho-Mapping Europe” from 1998.¹



Figure 1. "Psycho-Mapping Europe" installed in Galerie Grita Insam, Vienna 2003.

At first, I intended to make my case here entirely without pictures, but was then asked to provide small reproductions of the work in question. It remains to be said that there will always be an important difference between a work of art and its reproduction, also when it is made using modern media or when the original is a multiple. The making of visual art is a unique activity in society, in that no hierarchy of meaning is established that cannot at any moment be subverted. To use another metaphor: the centre of interest of a painting may lie at its edge, or outside of the canvas or right in its middle; this can never be known beforehand. Gold and dirt may form the material of a sculpture with all expression concentrated in the handling of the dirt. It is not until you have *seen* the original (in whatever form it *was made* to appear) that you will really know it. If the work is discussed in a text it will in some way be (re)created in the imagination of the reader, but the text's final aim

may well lie elsewhere. In my field, the actual locus of content may be far away from what at first seemed to be the centre of the argument.



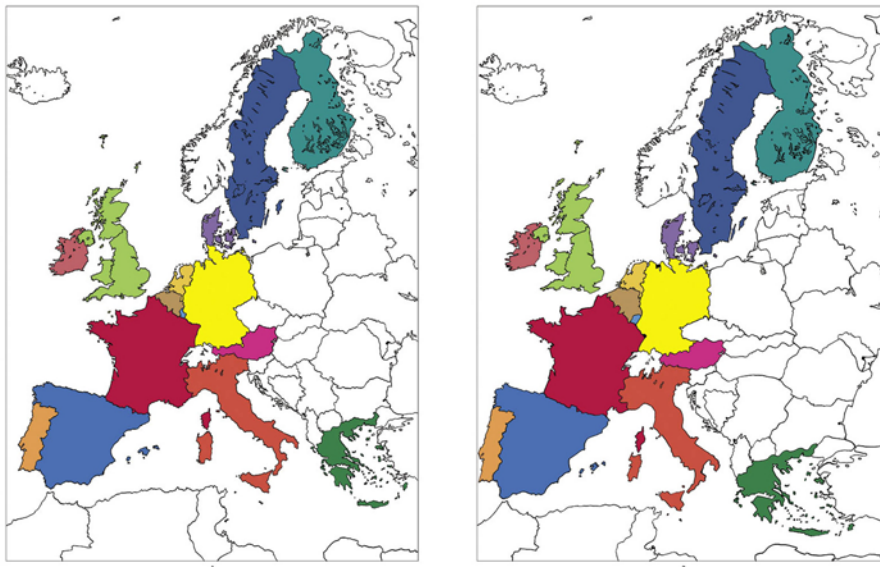
Figure 2. “Psycho-Mapping Europe” permanently installed in the consulate department of the Nordic Embassies, Berlin.

“Psycho-Mapping Europe” from 1998 consists of a series of twenty map images printed on 76 x 56 cm large Aquarelle Arches Satine paper. At the outset, all twenty images were drawn by hand onto sheets of the same paper. Then these “originals” were scanned and coloured in the computer – what now constitutes the original work is a series of Iris-prints.² The work exists in an edition of three.

In order to talk (or rather: *write*) about this work in a meaningful way, I will concentrate on describing the process by which it was made. Writing about your own work without reducing and/or destroying it

accidentally is an art in itself, the secret of which lies in identifying where art stops and illustration begins; in seeing the work as a means, not an end.

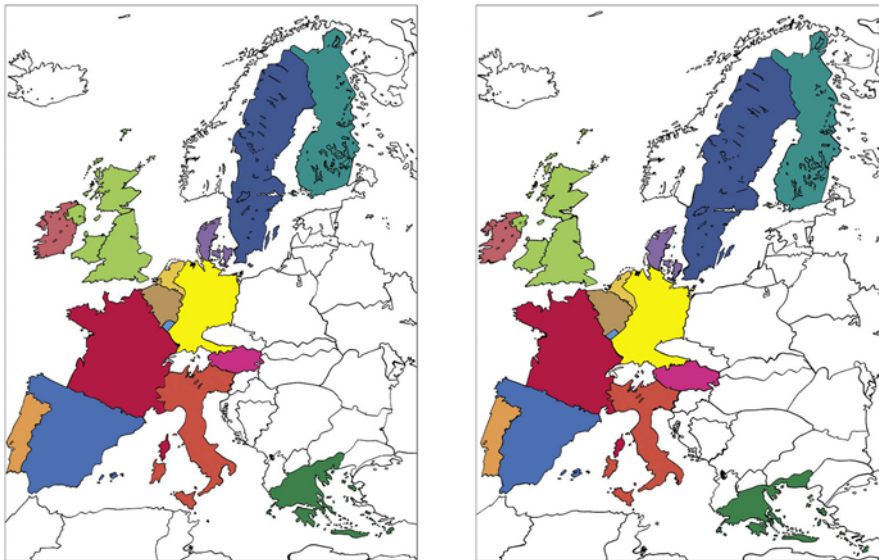
In all my work the process of production is regulated by sets of rules – that may sometimes be deliberately broken. Art is not science; in art there simply are no rules until each individual artist has defined some: by making them up him-/herself, or deciding to accept a set handed down from a colleague or from tradition. In order to experience and communicate some sense of freedom, the artist needs first to establish some rules – in order to be able to break them later. Obviously, this cannot happen all the time.



Figures 3-4. "Psycho-Mapping Europe" 1998.

The first image in "Psycho-Mapping Europe" is a political map of Europe and beyond. Iceland is in the upper left corner; to the right the map extends into Russia and the western parts of Turkey; to the south the map image almost reaches the southern tip of Tunisia. My first task as a cartographer was to make decisions regarding how to best fit Europe

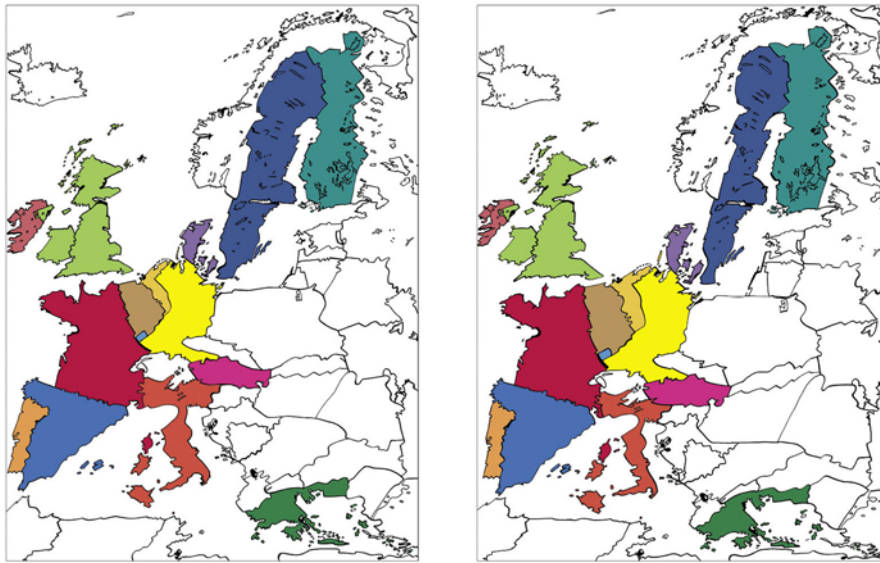
into my chosen format (which I chose simply because I find this particular type of paper attractive to work on). I collected lots of different maps (both political and geographical), studied them and compared them (even on a limited landmass like Europe the effects of different projections are surprising) and selected one with an aesthetically pleasing projection. I then enlarged it and transferred it to my first sheet of paper with the help of a light table. I drew the map image with a thin black ink line (using an accident-prone steel dip pen) depicting coastlines and major lakes as well as political borders. No cities, mountains or rivers. The map image is framed by a thin black border about one centimetre inside the paper's edge. This border was drawn first. Below the map, the margin is slightly wider: the number "1." was later printed in the middle of it.



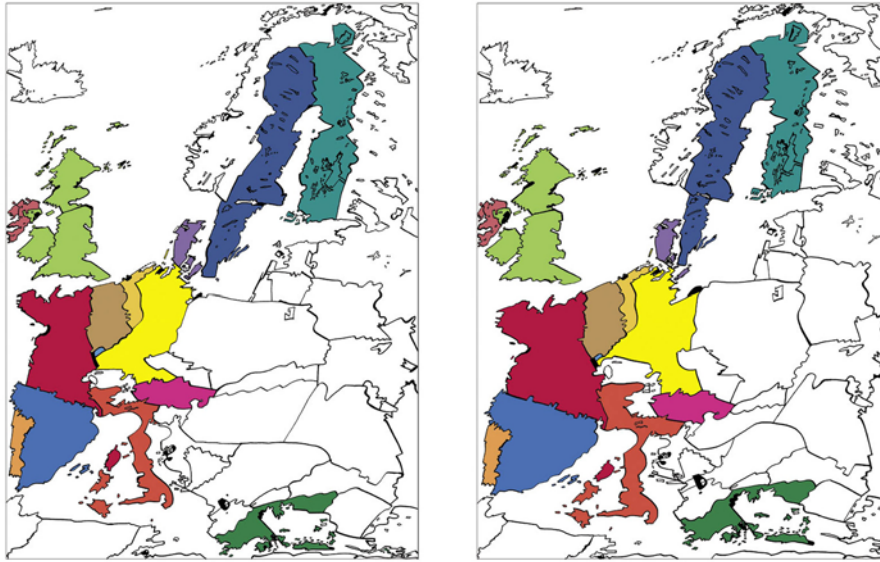
Figures 5-6. "Psycho-Mapping Europe" 1998.

After I had finished drawing (= tracing) the first map image in the series, I took a new sheet of paper, added the thin frame and started to *copy* the first map drawing line by line, dot by dot, using the same pen,

trying to be as exact as was humanly possible without recourse (this time!) to the light table or any other tool (and limited by the extent of my patience). I imagined being a machine, a kind of human scanner, with no knowledge of anything except the precise task (“programme”) at hand: which was copying bit by bit a system of lines from one sheet of paper to another (starting at the upper left corner and moving from left to right, from top to bottom) using my eyes and hand only. As I was drawing with ink, erasing was not an option and I could not sketch. Every mark would stay on the paper. Every line in the original had to be included, nothing could be deliberately left out. I was patient and careful, and my copy came out well: it looked very much like its model. Examined close-up, however, there were little mistakes and deviations to be found everywhere. These I now had to accept, they could not be changed.



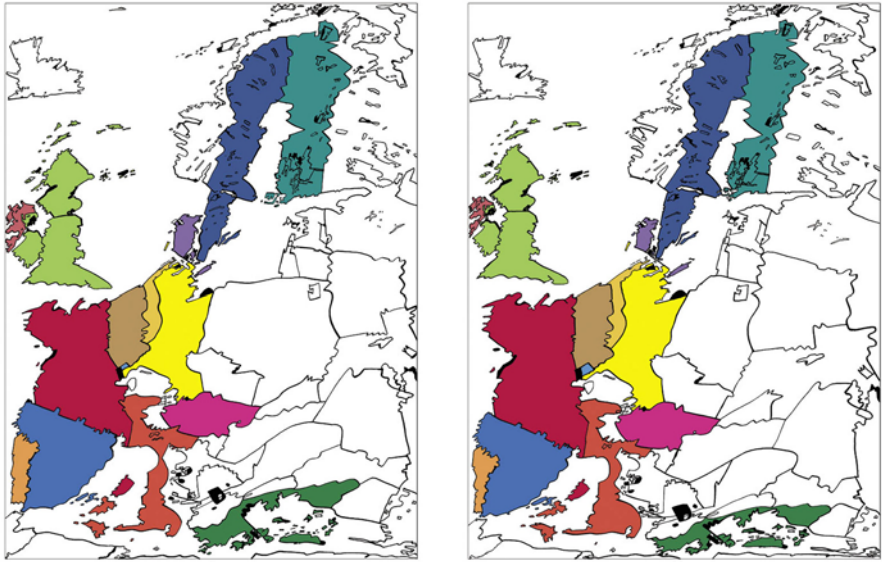
Figures 7-8. “Psycho-Mapping Europe” 1998.



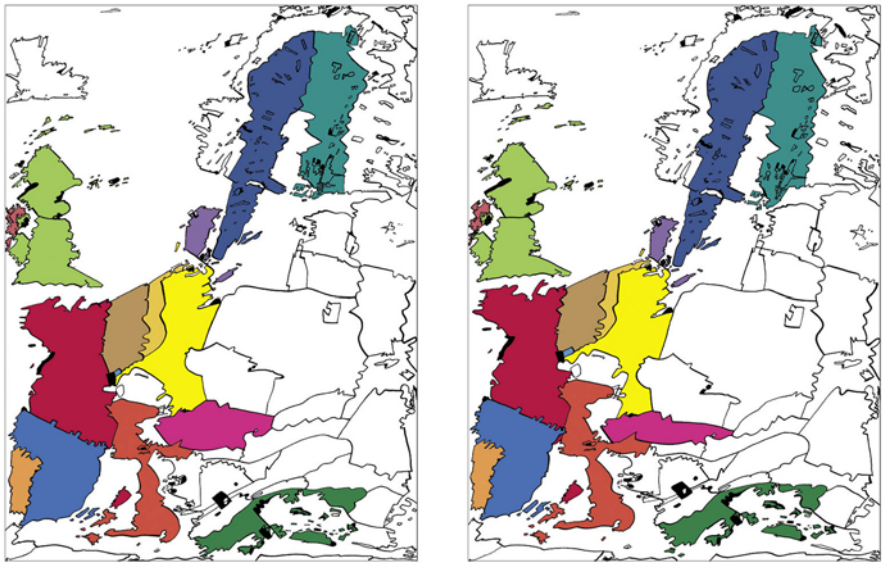
Figures 9-10. "Psycho-Mapping Europe" 1998.

Once my copy was finished, it underwent an important change in status: what moments ago had been mistakes and deviations ceased to be that and instead became part of a new reality. The first (traced) map was hidden away; my third image was to be another very careful copy; a copy of my second image.

The procedure of careful copying was repeated nineteen times. Each time I made every effort to avoid "correcting" (in relation to any lingering memory of the first map or any other extraneous knowledge) any "mistakes" which had become incorporated into my model. My assignment – unusual in an artistic process – was to focus solely on the mechanical process of copying. Not to add, not to subtract: not to "translate". Stay calm, stay focused, just get it "right" like it already is. Avoid any input.

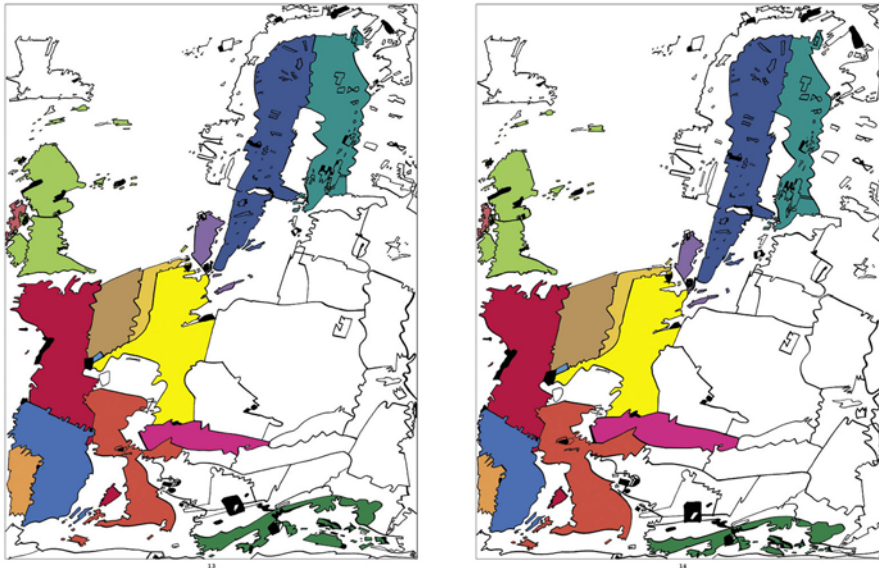


Figures 11-12. "Psycho-Mapping Europe" 1998.



Figures 13-14. "Psycho-Mapping Europe" 1998.

However much I tried, new imperfections and mistakes could not be avoided, and thus a process of accumulating failure had begun. This was, of course, my hidden goal for the whole exercise. I can say that now. But it was of utmost importance that no deviation from the model be added deliberately; *all failure must be real*. Any inclusion of deliberate failure would lead to something very different: design. My interest was in finding out something I did not know, not projecting ideas already conceived. I suspected that in some way the work would carry a visual trace characteristic of me, its maker, but I did not know then how this trace would be constituted and I was intent on doing everything I could to avoid it in the first place. The more I could eliminate my subjectivity from the process (i.e. slavishly following the technical rules, set up by myself, that regulated the copying process), the more value I would achieve in the work's conceptual aims.

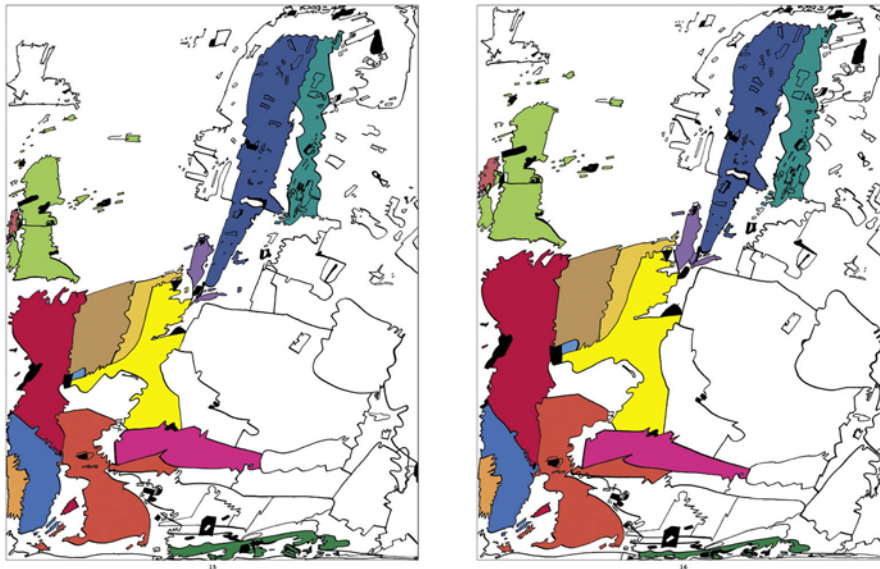


Figures 15-16. "Psycho-Mapping Europe" 1998.

When all twenty map drawings in ink had been finished, they were scanned and partly coloured in the computer: the (then) fifteen member

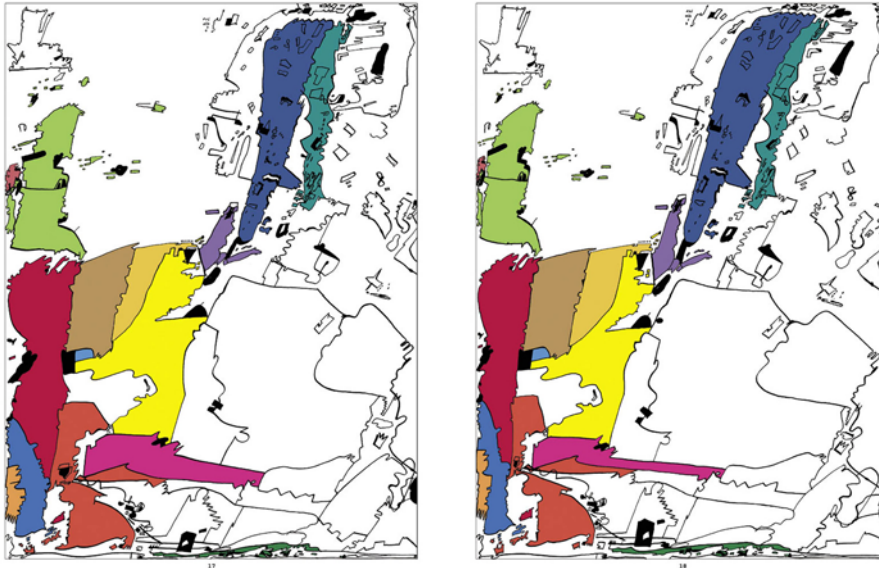
states of the European union each received a colour: Sweden dark blue, Italy orange red, Denmark violet, Germany yellow, Greece moss green, Austria pink, etc. The palette had been developed to maximise differences between the colours – the distribution among the countries was made later using a random method. The colouring was made in the computer in order to reach a flat and “pedagogical” result, after which a specialised company took care of the printing.

This work has been exhibited a number of times, always with the twenty numbered images in a long line, like a careful step-by-step prognosis for the dynamic development of European geo-politics. Each time that I have been present at such an exhibition, there have been viewers eager to prove their know-how who have come up to me to discuss computer animation. Something in the way these maps look make them think – take for granted! – that these images have been generated using a computer programme. It is truly a fascinating misconception!



Figures 17-18. “Psycho-Mapping Europe” 1998.

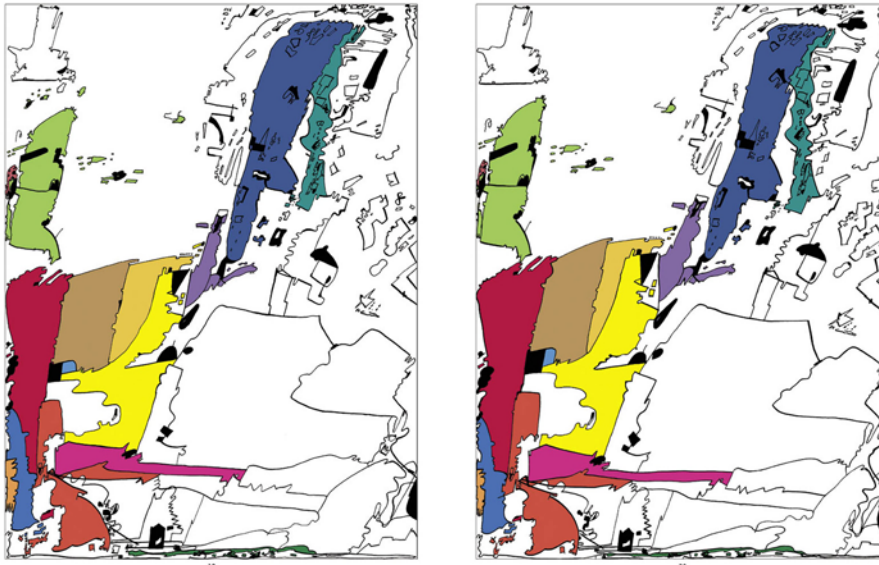
This (vision of a) geo-political reality has developed itself, in conflict with all my practical efforts if not with my underlying intention. The work's success is relative to my capacity to focus on the task at hand while ignoring any other perspective; to separate conceptual agenda from physical effort; to achieve maximum robotic behaviour while remaining aware that all information or value is created in the glitches that mar and betray the robot. In this, the visual work produced is as far from an *illustration* as can be as neither artist nor anyone else knew beforehand what this Europe was going to look like at the end of the line and all through the process the artist made every effort to avoid any change at all.



Figures 19-20. "Psycho-Mapping Europe" 1998.

With the work finished, I changed my perspective from production unit to art consumer. I looked at what had been produced and marvelled at what could be gathered from what there was to see. I saw Europe transforming itself into something new – still recognisably Europe – but different, surprising. Most of the EU states seemed intent on moving

west, even though Austria seemed to show a lingering for the opposite direction. Colourless Poland had grown to be the central power while Italy was contorting itself, seemingly on the verge of breaking into three parts. At the bottom, Greece seemed to be carrying the weight of the whole continent on its shoulders and being crushed in the process.



Figures 21-22. "Psycho-Mapping Europe" 1998.

This narrative – and others I could invent – has, of course, no value except as a personal interpretation of what had developed "objectively" during the process. When analysing the whole series of twenty images, I could establish that among the many complexities of failure in these images there was also a trace of my physical constitution. One of my rules had been to transfer *all* lines and dots from original to copy, not leaving any out. Combined with an unconscious tendency in myself to always make the copy slightly larger than the original, as well as my right-handedness, which led me to start the process with the upper left corner, it meant that when I reached the lower part of each image/copy, and especially the lower right corner, space was always in short supply

and the remaining lines had to amass just inside the thin frame.³ Bad luck for Greece! Another aspect I could now see was that a country like Sweden had kept more of its characteristic shape than others; this may have something to do with being in the upper half of the map and perhaps also a certain inability of mine to completely disregard my knowledge of Sweden's correct shape?

Thus, both technical and mental factors could be seen to have influenced the result, even though the programme aimed at excluding all such factors.



Figure 23. "Psycho-Mapping Europe Painting 1-3", oil on canvas 1998.

Creating a work like this requires a highly controlled process in order to achieve an unpredictable outcome at odds with its prerequisites. I am not a programmer, but I think I can say with impunity that there are no AI algorithms available that would come anywhere near the dynamics of my psycho-mapping. But there is another aspect here that is just as important: *I* am responsible. There is *somebody* behind it all. Every quirk of line here is the result of a particular human being's failure and every

millimetre of ink line and dot here can be infinitely enlarged and referenced to the myriad aspects of reality – life – on the ground. Paradoxically, it is this aspect that makes it possible to see the work also as an “illustration”. An illustration of how new value – content – information – culture – is born out of constant human failure to do right. While never giving up trying.

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Notes

1. I choose to discuss this particular work here because of its relative simplicity. Had I wanted to focus on the political dimensions of my “Psycho-Mappings” I could have chosen the very complex project I made for Moderna Museet, Stockholm, two years ago: “Psycho-Mapping the Current Crisis”. My exhibition was built around a developing series of maps of the Middle East, with Baghdad in the centre of the first painting. The exhibition opened on February 14, 2003 – about one month before the war started.
2. “Iris-print”, or sometimes “Giclée”, is a high-grade inkjet printing process, which meets archival standards.
3. In other words: certain physical characteristics of my body had influenced the result. This aspect became very clear a little later, when I decided to make five paintings using the same method and taking off from image # 20 of the Iris-prints. These canvases were much larger (187 x 135 cm each) than the sheets of paper used, and had to be stood against the studio wall while being worked upon. Instead of controlling the brush with my wrist I was now using my arm and the whole of my body as well. As a result, the European map started to develop in another direction from before. Poland began to lose its dominant position, while France grew....