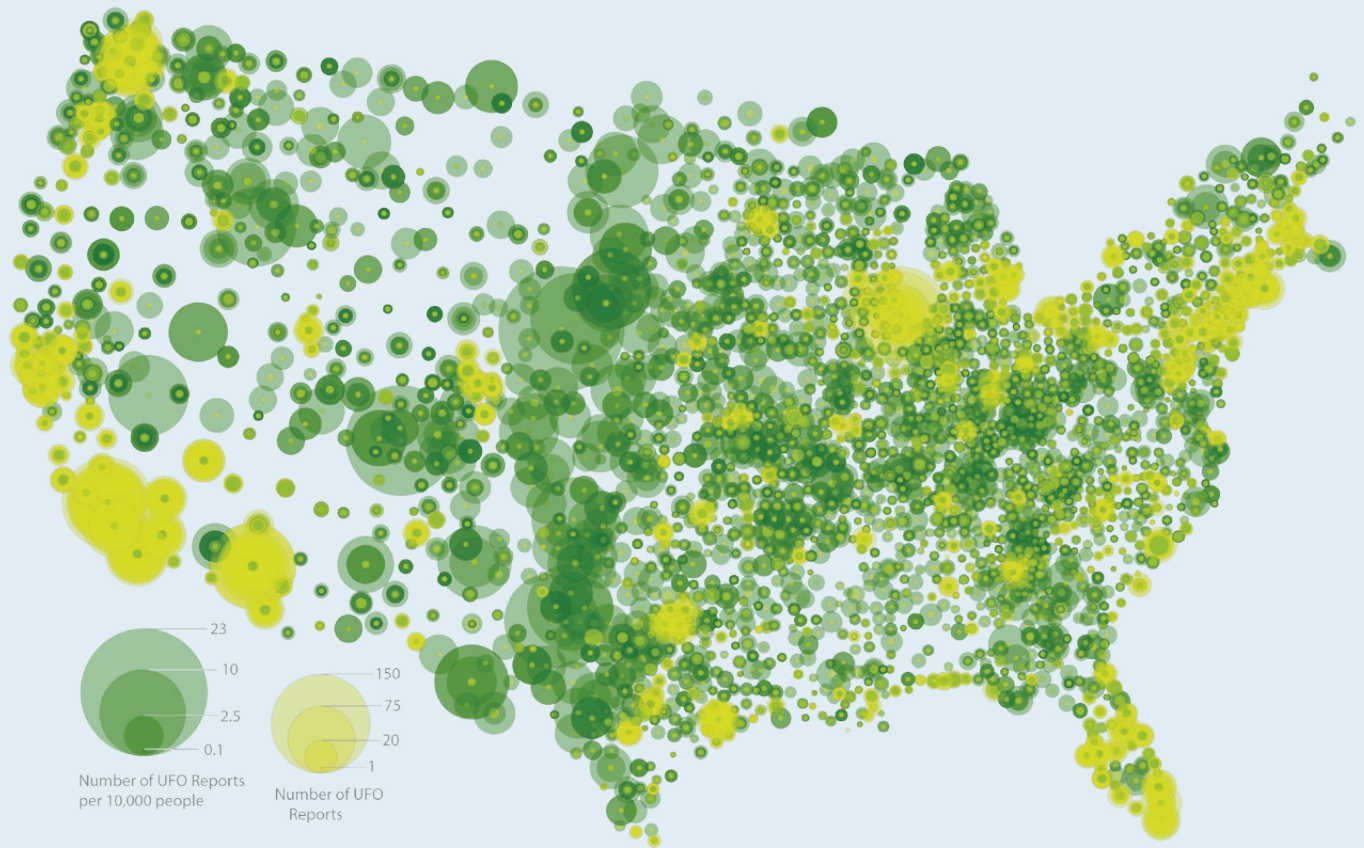


Mapping the Unidentifiable

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In *Mapping the Unidentifiable* Mathew Dooley uses form, color, and value to translate over 35,000 data points into rhythmic groupings of circles. In contemporary mapping, cartographers frequently employ circles to indicate positions in space, but in Dooley's map the rich past of this cosmic symbol comes into play. In traditions of Western art, the circle embodies some of humankind's richest worldviews and philosophies, which range from signifying notions of divinity, perfection, and cosmic order to symbolizing unity.

Dooley's map also taps into a tradition of seeking to document, communicate, and order unexplained phenomena. His map records UFO sightings reported to the National UFO Reporting Center, an organization that provides anonymous, online channels for reporting unidentified objects in the sky. The resulting map reflects data collected between 2000 and 2009, and relies on various shades of green and yellow hues to convey the number of UFO sightings. Without visual devices to indicate state, county, or city, clusters of dots flesh out the coastlines and national borders of the United States. The act of filing a report, therefore, becomes the mode of identification as all other information falls away, leaving viewers with green and yellow in a sea of white, negative space.

The reporters' efforts to empirically document something they have witnessed, although subjective, result in a record of shared experiences. "Unidentifiable" is part, by definition, of what constitutes a UFO. The recording of an inability to identify a phenomenon becomes the defining means for inclusion. The map, therefore, tracks the unknown rather than the known. More revealing than cartographic technique, the map begins to engage the community of people behind the reports. What does the resulting image record, and what does it say about the communities themselves? Do these reports provide evidence of intelligent life from other planets, or could they be a measure of the reporters' desire to probe some of humanity's most elusive questions with the support of a community?

Combinations of the map's warm and cool circles push and pull, creating a rhythmic dynamism that reverberates across the composition. Lured by its energy, *Mapping the Unidentifiable* encourages viewers to ask questions. It motivates audiences to consider how one experience, one circle, or one disc-shaped object in the sky can implicate or resonate across the paths of others. Conspiracies, national threats, and covert government operations undoubtedly enter into subsequent conversations, as do explanations that look to mental illnesses or hoaxes. Regardless of explanatory models, the kinds of connections that some UFO reporters were seeking out are continued and recapitulated in the conversations that the image inspires.

Visual Fields focuses on the appreciation of cartographic aesthetics and design, featuring examples of inspirational, beautiful, and intriguing work. Suggestions of works that will help enhance the appreciation and understanding of the cartographic arts are welcomed, and should be directed to the section editor, Daniel Huffman: daniel.p.huffman@gmail.com.