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MoMA



Second Sight: Returning to W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits Today

More than a century on, Du Bois's visual breakthrough speaks directly to our contemporary moment and still inspires artists.

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Printing Black America: Du Bois's Data Portraits in the 21st Century (2026), an ambitious new work in MoMA's collection, is currently on view in the exhibition [Full Disclosure: The Edge of Information Design](#). Cocreated by artist [William Villalongo](#) and urbanist/architect [Shraddha Ramani](#), the portfolio returns to W. E. B. Du Bois's (1868-1963) groundbreaking 1900 Paris Exposition diagrams. This contemporary project treats Du Bois's data portraits not as historical relics but as living instruments, primed for reactivation in the present day.

To better understand Villalongo and Ramani's work, we need to travel back to the spring of 1900, when the Universal Exposition transformed Paris into a glittering monument to 19th-century achievement. Towering Beaux-Arts palaces celebrated the conquests of modern industry and imperial power. Inside the Palace of Social Economy and Congresses, visitors were invited to survey the *Bilan d'un siècle*, a self-congratulatory inventory of a century's civilizational progress.

But tucked away in a modest 20-square-foot alcove within this grand theater of Western triumph came a different account—one that quietly subverted the event’s imperial gaze.

The Exhibit of American Negroes was conceived as a direct challenge to racial prejudice. Thomas Junius Calloway, a Black lawyer, activist, and editor of *The Colored American*, solicited support from more than 100 Black leaders, including Booker T. Washington, for an exhibit at the Exposition. He argued that “thousands upon thousands will go, and a well selected and prepared exhibit, representing the Negro’s development in his churches, his schools, his homes, his farms, his stores, his professions and pursuits in general will attract attention...and do a great and lasting good in convincing thinking people of the possibilities of the Negro.”¹

After Washington appealed to President William McKinley, Congress allocated modest funding for the project. Calloway enlisted his former Fisk University classmate W. E. B. Du Bois, then a young professor of sociology at Atlanta University, and Daniel Murray, bibliographer and Librarian of Congress, to assemble the exhibition.

Less than 40 years after the abolition of slavery in the US, the post-Reconstruction era had witnessed the consolidation of Jim Crow segregation, systemic disfranchisement, and rampant—often state-sanctioned—racial violence. Emancipation did not abolish the racial fantasies that had sustained slavery. In subsequent decades, statistics were increasingly recruited to give those fantasies the appearance of fact. Quack “race science” turned statistics into an alibi for white supremacy, marshaling cherry-picked data on poverty, disease, crime, and mortality and arranging them into false narratives of racial deficiency.²

In a powerful rebuttal, Du Bois, Calloway, and Murray reclaimed the instruments through which modernity purported to know the world. The same statistical machinery that had been used to classify and pathologize Black life could be redirected toward another end: to make Black achievement, complexity, and agency visible on their own terms.

What good is data if the society collecting it refuses to acknowledge what it means?

The Prompt

The urgency of this visual intervention became painfully clear in 1899, when Sam Hose, a Black farmhand who had killed his boss in self-defense, was summarily lynched in Palmetto, Georgia. The complexity, brutality, and denial of due process in Hose’s case had a profound effect on Du Bois. “Two considerations thereafter broke in upon my work and eventually disrupted it,” he explained. “First, one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved; and secondly, there was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort that I was doing, as I had confidently assumed would be easily forthcoming.”³

The event shattered his belief that detached, objective sociology alone could persuade a society to abandon its prejudices.

Hose's murder precipitated a more profound question: What good is data if the society collecting it refuses to acknowledge what it means? The answer was not to abandon data, but to make it impossible to look away. The Paris diagrams were never simply an accumulation of figures; they were a bold attempt to give visual form to a larger truth about Black survival, resistance, and progress under structural oppression. Information design could no longer be a passive academic record; here, it held the possibility—and, therefore, the responsibility—to become an active, uncompromising weapon for liberation and justice. As Du Bois would later famously declare, "All art is propaganda and ever must be."⁴

The Power of Design

Working within a frantic three-month period and on a tight \$2,500 budget, a sum that today would be close to \$100,000, Du Bois mobilized a dedicated cohort of students and alumni at Atlanta University. Together, they collated census records, conducted original municipal surveys, and hand-drafted 63 extraordinary infographics.

Their visual vocabulary was startling. Familiar forms—pie charts, maps, pyramids—were humming with energy and bursting with color. They sported saturated gouache and ink, spirals ebbing into waves, concentric circles, serpentine bars, intersecting fields of color, and elegant block lettering.⁵

Compared with the traditionally muted, bureaucratic graphics of the era, exemplified by works like Francis A. Walker's landmark 1870 *Statistical Atlas of the United States*, Du Bois's diagrams are bold, almost unruly. Where statisticians like Walker offered neutral administrative inventories, Du Bois conjured an argument.

Population growth, education enrollment, land ownership, property values, and professional achievement are given forms that seem to strain against the confines of the page. Du Bois's formal innovation and his political rationale are inseparable: the freedom he imagines for Black Americans is mirrored by the freedom he claims for the graphic form itself. Information design becomes a visual representation of lived reality, assembling diverse historical data into a powerful, unified counter-stereotype of collective Black vitality and growth.

Du Bois's portfolio anticipates a central problem of contemporary information design: Who is represented, who does the representing, and who stands to benefit from this representation?

Counter-Mapping

Du Bois's vision of sociology relied on empirical, localized research on actual human deeds, living conditions, and experiences, and his charts possess the evidentiary force coming from proximity to the lives being measured. Cartography, long utilized as a tool of colonial exploitation and control, was reclaimed by Du Bois as a medium for Black self-determination and spatial awareness.

The 63 data portraits were part of a display that also included three leather-bound albums containing 500 photographic portraits titled *Types of American Negroes*—depicting Black Americans at home, school, work, and in community life—captured by Black photographers like Thomas E. Askew. At the entrance stood a statuette of Frederick Douglass, establishing a genealogy between the 19th-century abolitionist and the emerging Black intelligentsia of the 20th.⁶

While the photographs challenged racist caricatures through dignified portraiture, the infographics translated those individual lives into systemic proof of historical progress, even in the midst of ongoing oppression.

This pairing also offered a response to what Du Bois understood as the danger of “double consciousness”—the condition of seeing oneself through the eyes of a dominant society. The exhibition reversed that direction of vision.⁷

Rather than allowing a predominantly white society to define Black Americans from the outside, Du Bois constructed a visual world through which Black Americans could represent themselves. The data and portraits become a means of reconciling “second sight,” he explained: a way of transforming the burden of racialized observation into an instrument of knowledge, critique, and accountability. Du Bois’s portfolio therefore anticipates a central problem of contemporary information design: Who is entitled to produce evidence? Who is represented, who does the representing, and who stands to benefit from this particular representation of reality?

A Century Later

A century and a quarter later, Du Bois’s visual breakthrough speaks directly to our contemporary moment, an era dominated by algorithmic opacity, big data extraction, automated surveillance, and machine-learning systems that frequently re-encode centuries-old racial biases under the guise of neutrality.⁸

We are inundated with information, yet increasingly uncertain about who gathered it, who classified it, what was omitted, and whose interests it serves. In an age where information is weaponized and obfuscated, Du Bois’s 1900 project offers a foundational model for critical data literacy and computational justice.

It also inspires [*Full Disclosure: The Edge of Information Design*](#), the first MoMA exhibition devoted entirely to this practice. *Full Disclosure* brings together contemporary projects that similarly reject the myth of information design as neutral, dispassionate recordkeeping and instead frame it as at once speculative, investigative, political, and, at times, deeply personal. It demonstrates how contemporary designers, building upon historical predecessors like Du Bois, still try to expose systemic injustice, map invisible infrastructures, and find new ways to restore human agency and access to information that can otherwise feel remote, complex, and impenetrable.

Reassembling the Archive

Across the 30 prints of *Printing Black America: Du Bois's Data Portraits in the 21st Century*, arranged in six thematic portfolios, Villalongo and Ramani translate contemporary demographic, economic, and geographic data through Du Bois's graphic vocabulary, working with six small-batch printmaking studios situated in the locales where the data was collected.

Villalongo and Ramani's methodology combines historical printmaking techniques—woodcut, etching, silkscreen, and hand-applied gouache—with advanced geospatial mapping and computational analysis. Du Bois's 19th-century racial categories give way to layered representations of multiracial census identities, Afro-Latinidad, and diasporic complexity. Shifting occupational patterns reveal both the expansion of Black professional life and the persistence of wage inequality. A reimagined property spiral tracks the enduring racial wealth gap and the devastating impact of the 2008 financial crisis on Black homeownership. Some diagrams confront the rollback of affirmative action, while others use counter-mapping to reveal histories of displacement, incarceration, and labor. The data has evolved, but the questions at the core of these portfolios have not.

Du Bois's Data Portraits remain a testament to the power of design in the service of human dignity. With bold aesthetic courage and unflagging investigative rigor, his work gave shape to the nuances of human experiences that had yet to be accurately described. In so doing, he empowered a generation of formerly enslaved Americans with a faithful representation of their lived realities. In Du Bois's hands, data morphed into evidence of selfhood, proof of progress, manifestations of dignity. Over a century later, his work prompts us to consider what remains overlooked in our own data-driven world, which experiences still want for expression. For Du Bois and the lineage of designers who have followed in his footsteps, the tools used to render information do more than simply reflect reality; they crack open new possibilities for how to transform it.

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4. See W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32, no. 6 (October 1926): 290–97.
5. See Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Rusert, eds., *W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2018).
6. See Rebecka Rutledge Fisher, "Cultural Artifacts and the Narrative of History: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Exhibiting of Culture at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 4 (2005): 741–74.
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