

## These Glitches From Google Maps Are Worthy of an Art Gallery

BY KYLE VANHEMERT 12.27.13 | 6:30 AM | PERMALINK

Next >>

View all



Image: Emilio Vavarella

As sophisticated as it is, Google Maps is fundamentally the same type of thing cartographers have been making for centuries. It's a flat, scaled representation of our planet. That means decisions have been made about what to show and what to leave out. At any given level of zoom, you can see only a certain subset of streets, of cities, of tributaries or topography. Even today, some streets are missing or mislaid. It feels omniscient, but its omniscience is made by humans, for humans.

### THE PLACES WHERE THAT SYSTEM BREAKS DOWN HAVE A MYSTERY ALL THEIR OWN.

Google Street View is something entirely different: a photographic document of world. It's more objective and indelible than even the most accurate satellite-aided map. And that's a bit unsettling. When every acre on Earth is catalogued for us to see, where will all the mysteries hide?

Thankfully, Google's nine-eyed robot cameras and their attendant code aren't quite omniscient either. And as Emilio Vavarella shows us in his screenshots, the places where that system breaks down have a mystery all their own.



For "Report a Problem," Italian artist Emilio Vavarella collected a hundred warped scenes from Google Street View. Image: Emilio Vavarella

Vavarella spent a year cruising Street View, looking for the places where Google's document of the world departed from reality. He approached it like a photographer, waiting patiently for vistas that caught his eye. The hundred he liked most are collected in "Report a Problem," one part of a trilogy of Street View-related products the young Italian artist finished last year (another assembles all the places Google's robot cameras inadvertently caught a glimpse of their human handler).

The best thing about them is the variety of the digital hiccups. Pixelated columns spring out of sidewalks; phantom sinkholes materialize in streets. Landscapes get swathed in psychedelic haze and buildings fold onto themselves impossibly, like the robot viewing them suddenly went cross-eyed.

For Vavarella, much of whose work is steeped in theoretical thinking about today's sophisticated systems, the project was partly about drawing attention to the fact that Street View and its algorithmic ilk are fallible, just like people. "It doesn't matter how much they try to perfect these systems, they only offer the illusion of total control," he says. "Every technology has its own errors, and every map—every recreation of the world—is just an approximation based on conventions, and therefore imperfect and subject to adjustments, glitches, surprises and changes."

The great thing about being human, though, is that we have the capacity for finding beauty in these glitches. "These technological errors help us to remember that even machines slip up," Vavarella says. "But they can't have fun with these errors the way we can."