VISIBLE SIGNS

Required Reading Range
Course Reader

2nd edition

An Introduction to Semiotics in the Visual Arts

DAVID CROW

Ethical: awareness/reflection/debate

ava academia

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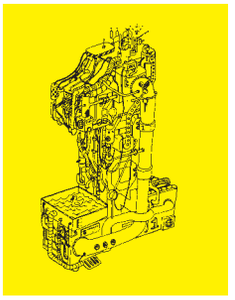

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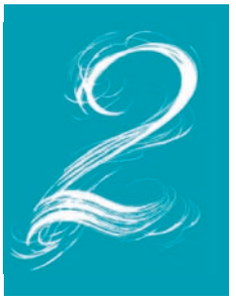

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INTRODUCTION

This second edition of 'Visible Signs' aims to explore the mechanics of visual language in an attempt to explain how visual communication works. The terms and theories used to explain visual communication are borrowed from linguistics (the study of language) and semiotics (the study of signs). The presentation of semiotic theory is often clouded by difficult language, which, in practice, makes the discussion of work unnecessarily challenging. This book is intended to help students unpick the signs in their own work; to understand how communication works and, if necessary, to deconstruct their own work to determine why it is not working as they intended.

Each chapter provides an overview of a particular facet of semiotic theory. The core text remains unchanged as it deals with well-established ideas and theories that are still relevant today. This edition updates the visual reference material in the portfolio pages with carefully selected examples of 'real' design presented alongside extended captions. These function as mini case studies that refer explicitly to theories introduced in preceding chapters; illustrating the timeless nature of the underlying theories. Each portfolio section refers the reader on to creative self-directed exercises.

The motivation behind this publication is to help students of art and design to find credibility in their practice through a deeper understanding of many of the intuitive decisions they make.

‘Except for the immediate satisfaction of biological needs, man lives in a world not of things but of symbols.’[1]

1. Von Bertalanffy L. *General System Theory* (1968), Braziller in Bolinger D. *Language the Loaded Weapon* (1980)

---

1. COMPONENTS

We begin our journey through semiotics by looking at the fundamental building blocks of language. Structuralists developed ideas and theories that demonstrated the arbitrary nature of language and determined the necessary formal conditions for languages to exist and develop. The study of art and design has borrowed heavily from these ideas and here we begin to relate these to a visual language that uses both text and image.

2. HOW MEANING IS FORMED

Having looked at the underlying structure of language and the sign, chapter two examines how we extract meaning from a sign. We define the different categories of signs and discuss the structural relationships between them. We look at why some signs appear to be quite abstract and why these are still easily read and understood. We discuss how signs are organised into systems and how these underlying structures and patterns help to form meaning.

3. READING THE SIGN

The transfer of meaning from author to reader is not a one-way process, but a process of creative exchange between author and reader. We introduce Roland Barthes’ idea that semiotics takes in any system of signs, and the idea of a visual language. This chapter moves through a number of theoretical terms, helping us to appreciate the several layers of meaning to a sign and to understand how the reader interprets the way a sign is expressed.

INTRODUCTION

4. TEXT AND IMAGE

This chapter continues with Roland Barthes' ideas about the relationship between text and image. He uses popular culture as a reference point to explain that these different types of signs have distinct structural relationships that can be employed by artists and designers to help control the way that their compositions are read.

5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Language is a social and political instrument as well as a functional one. As languages are developed, a sense of hierarchy is also developed around those languages. This chapter looks at cultural hierarchy and examines the ways that societies ensure the acceptance and legitimisation of language within their territorial boundaries.

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Outside of the recognised and approved use of visual language, there is a way of generating meaning that is independent of such political control. Here we explore the unofficial and informal codes that are used in daily life by many groups in our societies. This includes the rituals of sports fans and the use of graffiti and vandalism as methods of communication. The underlying motivation behind these visual dialects is examined along with the way that these messages are loaded with second-order signifiers related to dissent and resistance.

7. SYMBOLIC CREATIVITY

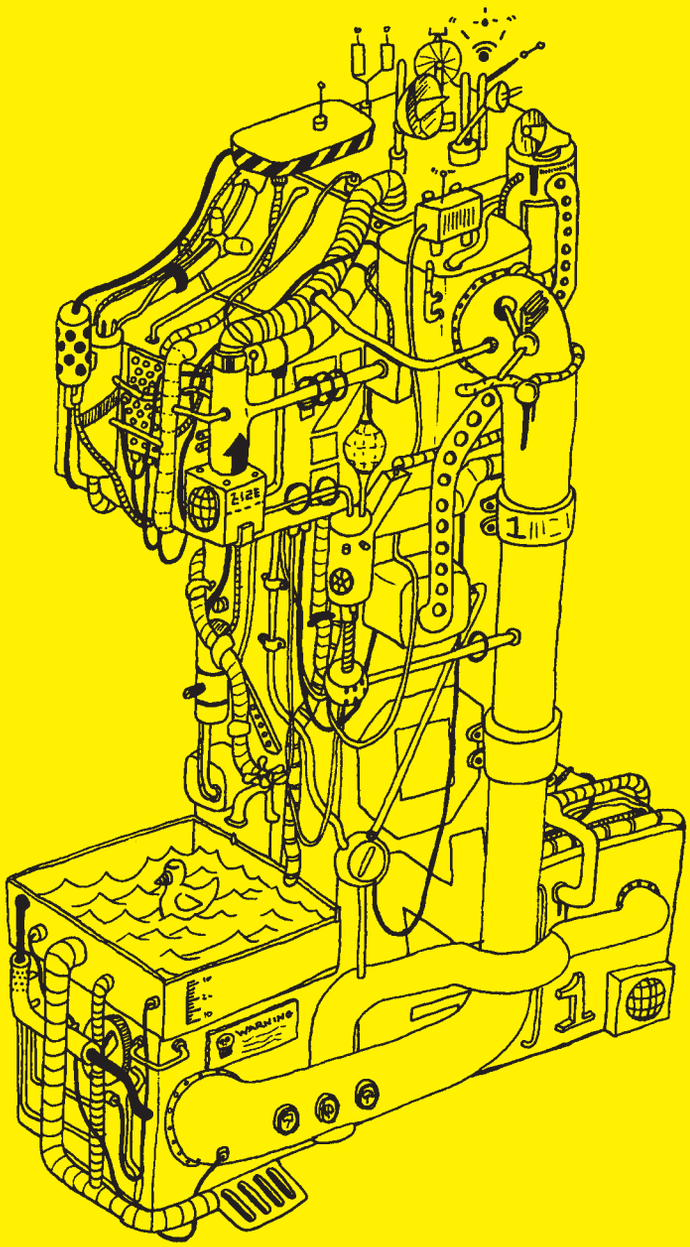
‘Visible Signs’ looks for the possibility of a visual language that already exists, growing from its own resources and used by a large group of people who could be said to be outside of the arts and media. This might be considered an informal visual language that does not use the economic field as its source of rationale. We will discuss the notion of symbolic creativity and its use by individuals to find ways of visually representing their identities.

8. JUNK AND CULTURE

We can identify a system by looking at what has been discarded from the system and classified as dirt or rubbish. We investigate the classification of cultural objects and look at the possibility of changing their value by placing them in an entirely different context. Here, we also look at the use of rubbish as a resource for the visual arts. It allows artists and designers to bring new meaning to discarded items and explore alternative ways of creating meaning.

9. OPEN WORK

The work of Umberto Eco is a key resource for an exploration into the creative relationship between the author and their audience. Here, we explain the connection between communication and information, and explore how a richness of communication is possible by carefully creating the freedom for the reader to make their own creative associations.

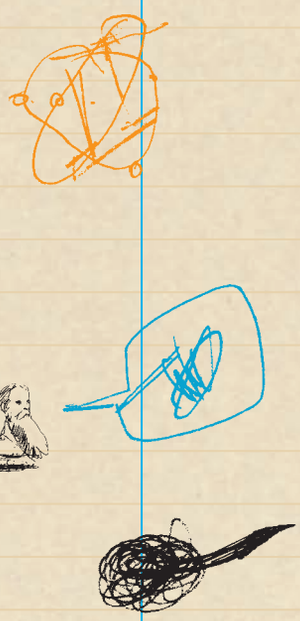

WARNING

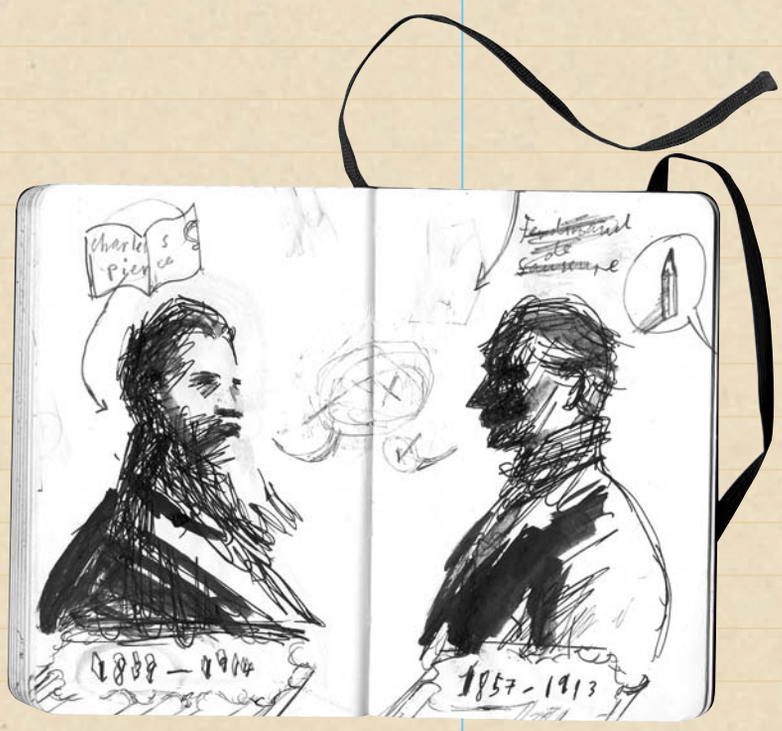
COMPO-
NENTS

1. **COMPONENTS**

What is theory?

The word ‘theory’ comes from the Greek word ‘theoria’, meaning to view, to observe or to reflect. The dictionary defines theory as an explanation or system of anything: an exposition of the abstract principles of either a science or an art. Theory is a speculation on something rather than a practice.





The theories that we apply to graphic design and visual communication are taken from a study of the general science of signs known in Europe as semiology and in the USA as semiotics.

Saussure and Peirce

This new science was proposed in the early 1900s by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), a Swiss professor of linguistics. At around the same time an American philosopher called Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) was developing a parallel study of signs that he called semiotics. To avoid confusion we will use the term semiotics as it has become more widely known. Although they were working independently, there were a number of fundamental similarities in both of their studies. Both Saussure and Peirce saw the sign as central to their studies. Both were primarily concerned with structural models of the sign, which concentrated on the relationship between the components of

1. COMPONENTS
What is theory?

Saussure's Model for a Sign
The two fundamental elements that make up a sign are the 'signifier' and the 'signified'. A sign is produced when these two elements are brought together.

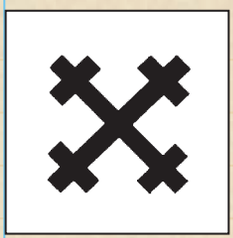
the sign. For both Saussure and Peirce, it is this relationship between the components of the sign that enables us to turn signals, in whatever form they appear, into a message which we can understand. Although they used different terminology, there are clear parallels between the two descriptions of these models (see the diagram on p. 22). However, there are also key differences between the studies. The most significant difference is that Saussure's study was exclusively a linguistic study and as a result he showed little interest in the part that the reader plays in the process. This was a major part of Peirce's model, as we shall see when we look at how meaning is formed in chapter two. There are three main areas that form what we understand as semiotics: the signs themselves; the way they are organised into systems and the context in which they appear. The underlying principles, which have become the cornerstone of modern semiotics, were first heard by students of Saussure in a course in linguistics at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911. Saussure died in 1913 without publishing his theories and it was not until 1915 that the work was published by his students as the 'Cours de Linguistique Générale' (Course in General Linguistics). Prior to this, the study of language (linguistics) largely concerned itself with historical usage of languages. In the search for the source of meaning, linguists looked to the origins of language. Linguists supposed that if meaning could be found in language then the nature of thought itself

There are three main areas that form what we understand as semiotics: the signs themselves; the way they are organised into systems and the context in which they appear.

could be found by looking at the origins of language. In its early stages, linguistics was an attempt to explain signs by imagining them as descriptions of a series of gestures, actions and sensations.

This developed into a comparative study of the forms of words in different languages and their evolution. At this stage, linguists were concerned with the structure of language in its own right, with no distinct relation to the mind. Prior to his post at Geneva, Saussure himself was concerned with the study of historical languages and had a particular interest in the comparative grammar of Indo-European languages, particularly Sanskrit.

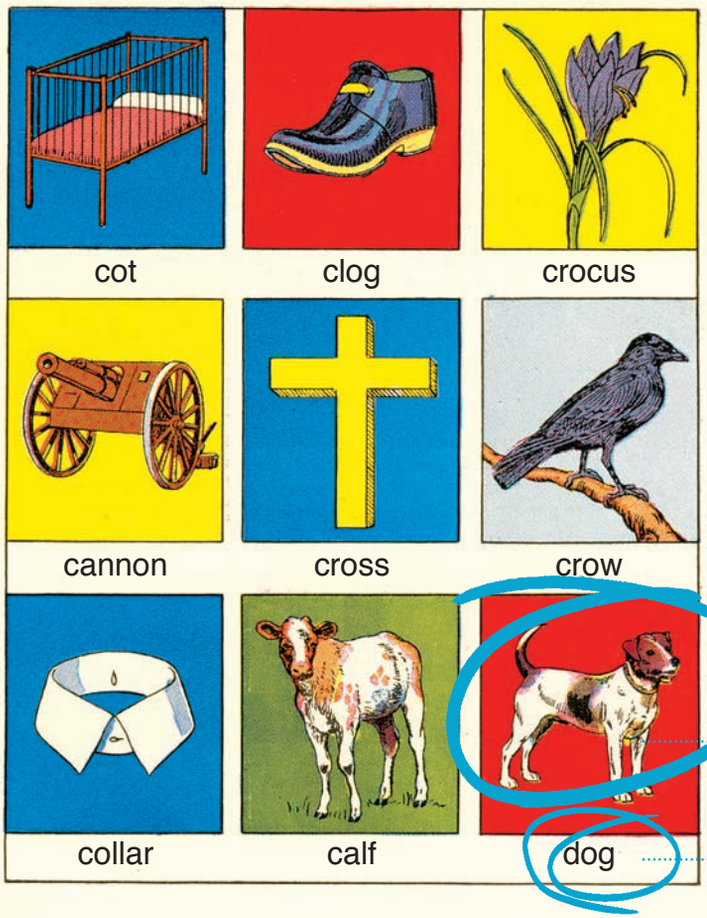
Saussure was unhappy with the way linguists were approaching language, as he felt they had not determined the nature of what they were studying. As a result, Saussure proposed an entirely different way of looking at language, by returning to the essentials and looking at language as a system of signs. If we could understand how the system of language works then this might lead us to how meaning is formed. One crucial difference in this approach was that Saussure and the structuralists were concerned with the underlying principles of language, which all speakers or bearers of a language have in common. These underlying principles are fixed and do not evolve over time with social or technological change. Saussure was a linguist. As a result, his theory focused on language and his model is centred on words as signs.



Crosses
A variety of different crosses. The meaning of each cross is dependent on its context for its meaning.

1. The cross of St Julian
2. The cross of St George
3. The Red Cross
4. No stopping sign (UK)
5. Positive terminal
6. Hazardous chemical
7. Do not wring
8. No smoking

1. COMPONENTS
What is theory?



From an early age we are taught the relationship between the signifier and the signified. This is not something we are conscious of, but it remains one of the most fundamental building blocks in the structure of language.

this is a dog

this is a copy

this is a drawing

this is arbitrary

Linguistic signs

According to Saussure, language is constructed from a small set of units called phonemes. These are the sounds that we use in a variety of combinations to construct words. These noises can only be judged as language when they attempt to communicate an idea. To do this they must be part of a system of signs. The meaning of the individual units (the phonemes), which make up language, has been sacrificed in order to give a limitless number of meanings on a higher level as they are reassembled to form words. The word 'dog', for example, has three phonemes: d, o and g. In written form, the letters 'd', 'o' and 'g' represent the sounds. In turn, these words then represent objects or, more accurately, a mental picture of objects. What Saussure outlined is a system of representation. In this system a letter, for example the letter 'd', can represent a sound. A collection of letters (a word) is used to represent an object. Each of these examples contain the two fundamental elements which make up a sign: the signifier and the signified. A word became known as a signifier and the object it represented became the signified. A sign is produced when these two elements are brought together.

In different languages, the collection of phonemes that make up the signifier are different. In English-speaking countries, our four-legged friend is called a dog, whereas in France it is 'chien', in Spain 'perro', in Italy

In English-speaking countries, our four-legged friend is called a dog, whereas in France it is ‘chien’, in Spain ‘perro’, in Italy ‘cane’ and in Germany it is ‘Hund’. What this shows us is that the relationship between the signifier ‘dog’ and the thing signified is a completely arbitrary one.

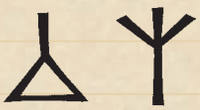
---

1. **Chafe W.** *Meaning and the Structure of Language* **(1970)**

‘Duality freed concept and symbol from each other to the extent that change could now modify one without affecting the other.’ [1]

‘cane’ and in Germany it is ‘Hund’. What this shows us is that the relationship between the signifier ‘dog’ and the thing signified is a completely arbitrary one. Neither the sounds nor their written form bears any relation to the thing itself. With few exceptions, any similarity is accidental. Just as the letter ‘d’ bears no relation to the sound we associate with it, the word used to describe a dog bears no relation to the thing it represents. Just as there is nothing book-like in the word ‘book’, the word ‘dog’ does not bite, the word ‘gun’ cannot kill you and the word ‘pipe’ does not resemble the object used to smoke tobacco. This divorce between meaning and form is called duality.

1. COMPONENTS
Agreement



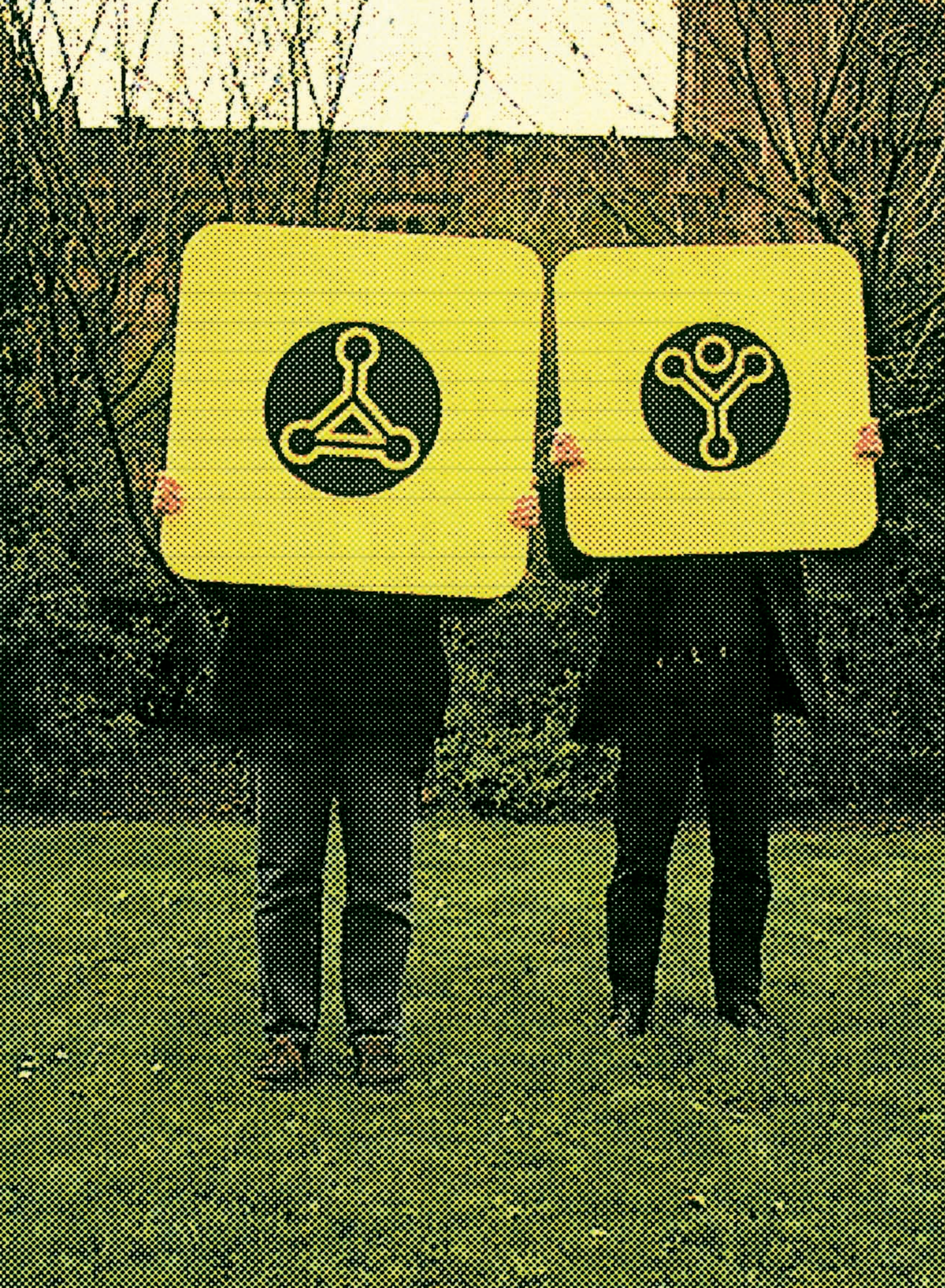
Three Versions of Signs for Man and Woman
Left – Runes.
Below – Symbols used by the US Department of Transport.
Right – Signs from the font Creation 6 based on the runes. Designed by David Crow for the religion issue of 'Fuse' magazine, issue number eight.

All that is necessary for any language to exist is an agreement amongst a group of people that one thing will stand for another.

There are two exceptions to this rule, but the fact that we can readily identify them as exceptions only reinforces the overriding rule that ordinary signs are constructed from arbitrary relationships. There are onomatopoeic words that in some way imitate the things they represent through the sounds they make. A dog, for example, could be described as a bow-wow. A gun as a bang-bang.

The second exception is where the sequence of sounds that make up the word or signifier is constructed from two separate signs, which might describe an action or the construction of the object it represents. A keyboard, for example, describes the object used for typing words. It is quite literally a board that holds the keys. However, this type of second-order signifier is only of use in English and does not transfer to other languages. A keyboard in English is 'teclado' in Spanish. So we can see that the relationship between the sound and the thing it represents is learnt. It is its use in social practice that helps us to understand its meaning. Saussure also pointed out that language is not just a set of names chosen at random and attached to objects or ideas. We cannot simply replace the arbitrary name for one object in one language with the name in another language. Where English uses the word 'key' to represent something that we press to type or open a door or play on a piano or a significant idea or moment, all from the same signifier, the translation into French would throw up a range of different words. Similarly, there are signifiers in one language that have no direct translation into other forms of language. Each language has a series of arbitrary signifiers that exist independently of any other language or dialect. Languages do not just find names for objects and ideas that are already categorised, languages define their own categories.

All that is necessary for any language to exist is an agreement amongst a group of people that one thing will stand for another. Furthermore, these agreements can be made quite independently of agreements in other communities. Saussure proposed that this was true of any language or dialect.



1. COMPONENTS
Agreement

René Magritte
The Betrayal of Images
1929 © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2010

The text beneath the painting is neither true nor false. It is not the physical reality of a pipe; it is a representation of a pipe, a painting of a pipe, a signifier for 'pipe' but not a pipe itself.

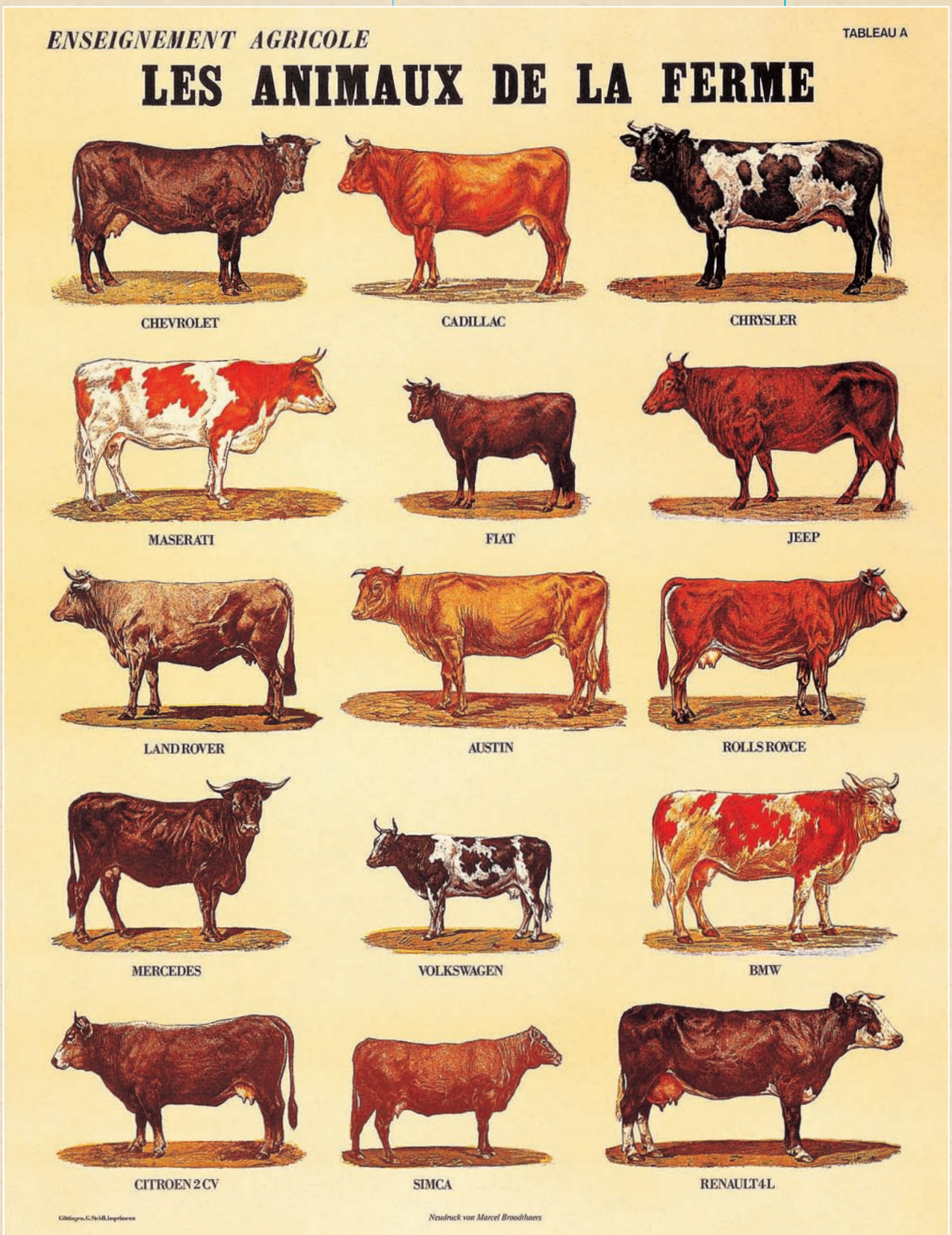
Linguistic community

The group of people making the agreement became known as a linguistic community. As long as a community remains intact, changes in language are likely to be small and everyone can easily adopt or be aware of the changes in meaning. If the community splits then the changes will take different directions with different agreements and eventually the members of one community will have difficulty in understanding the other.

This idea of arbitrary representation based on agreement freed art from a tyranny of words and was explored with much invention by the visual artists. The paintings by the surrealist artist René Magritte in his series entitled 'The Key of Dreams' (1930), show a collection of objects arranged in a grid. Each one is labelled as in a child's picture book. However, in this case, three of the images are incorrectly labelled whilst the fourth image is labelled correctly. In 'The Betrayal of Images' (1929), Magritte labels an image of a pipe with the phrase 'This is not a pipe'. Both these paintings highlight the arbitrary nature of language and invite the viewer to rediscover the ordinary. This presented the opportunity for artists to make poetic associations between signifiers and the signified. Wittgenstein, a philosopher and contemporary of Magritte's, wrote that:

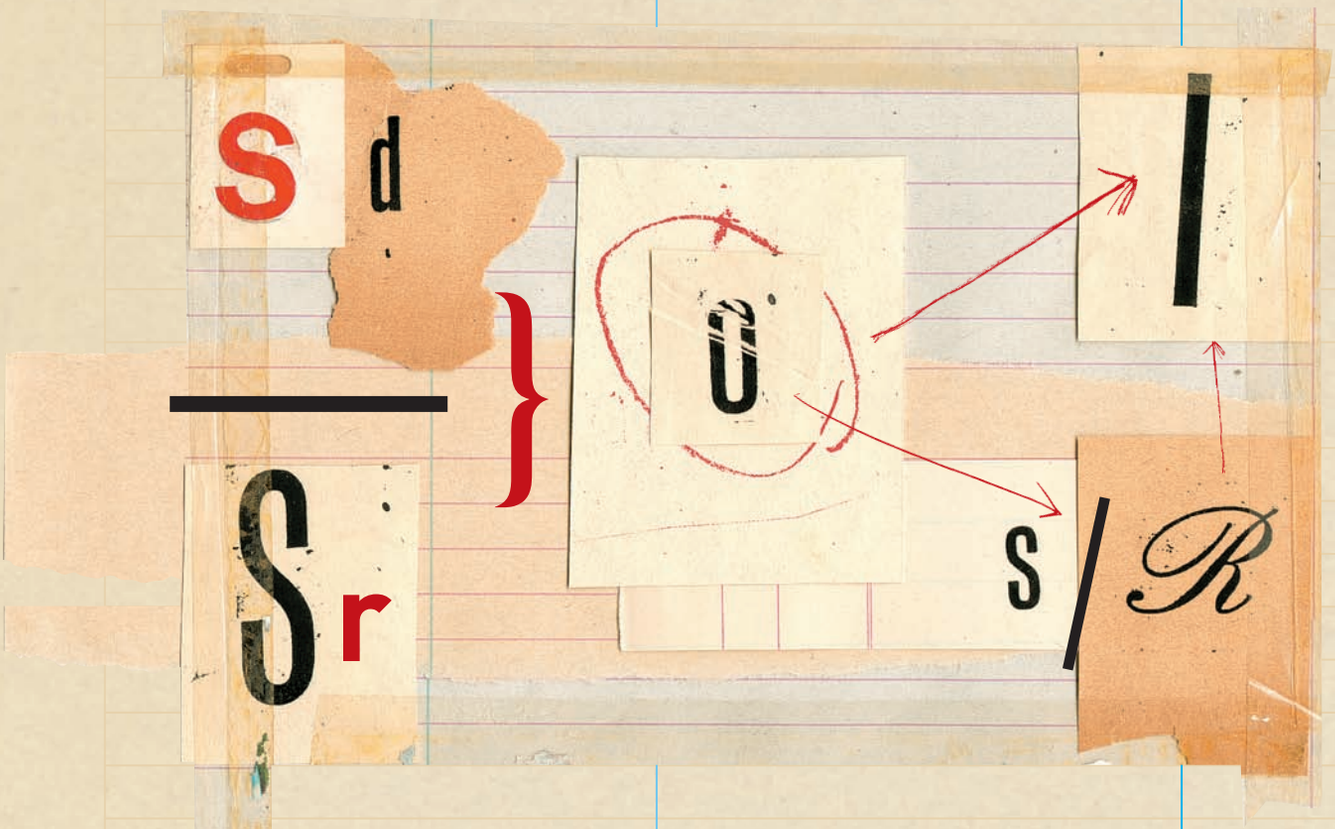
> *'the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity.'* [2]

2. Wittgenstein L. *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) in Gablik S. *Magritte* (1970)



Marcel Broodthaers
The Farm Animals
1974 © DACS 2010
The viewer attempts to make new signs by searching for associations between the cows and the car manufacturers.

1. COMPONENTS
Agreement



Combined Model for a Sign
On the left Saussure's model for a sign and on the right the version proposed by Peirce. As we can see, the two models are remarkably similar despite the difference in terminology.

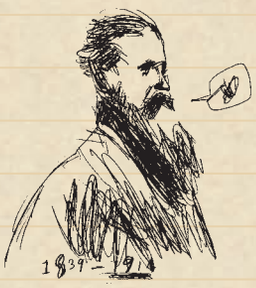
In a later example, the pop artist Marcel Broodthaers uses the same principle to label a series of cows with the names of automobile manufacturers in 'The Farm Animals' (1974). In this case, the viewer makes new signs in their mind's eye by searching for an association between the images taken from nature and the names from international manufacturing.

Charles Sanders Peirce is the philosopher who is recognised as the founder of the American tradition of semiotics. Whereas Saussure was primarily interested in language, Peirce was more interested in how we make sense of the world around us. Peirce's model for the sign is triangular and deals with the sign itself, the user of the sign and the external reality – the object (O) – referred to by the sign.

In this model, the sign (sometimes referred to as the representamen S/R) is very similar to Saussure's signifier (Sr). This is the physical evidence of the sign. This can be, for example, a word, a photograph, a painting or a sound. Saussure's signified (Sd) becomes the interpretant (I) in Peirce's model. This is not merely the user of the sign but a mental concept of the sign, which is based on the

3. **Zeman J.** *Peirce's Theory of Signs* **(1977)** in **Sebeok T.** *A Perfusion of Signs* **(1977)**

‘A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object.’ [3]



user’s cultural experience of the sign. The interpretant is not fixed. It does not have a single definable meaning, but its meaning can vary depending on the reader of the sign. The emotional response to the word ‘book’ will vary depending on the reader’s experience of books. For some it may be a comforting and affectionate response based on a lifetime of reading and escape through literature, where for others it may be a suspicious and defensive response based on the book as an instrument of official institutions.

1. COMPONENTS
Portfolio

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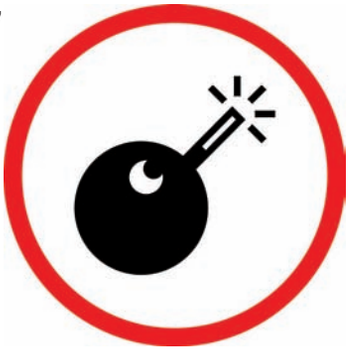


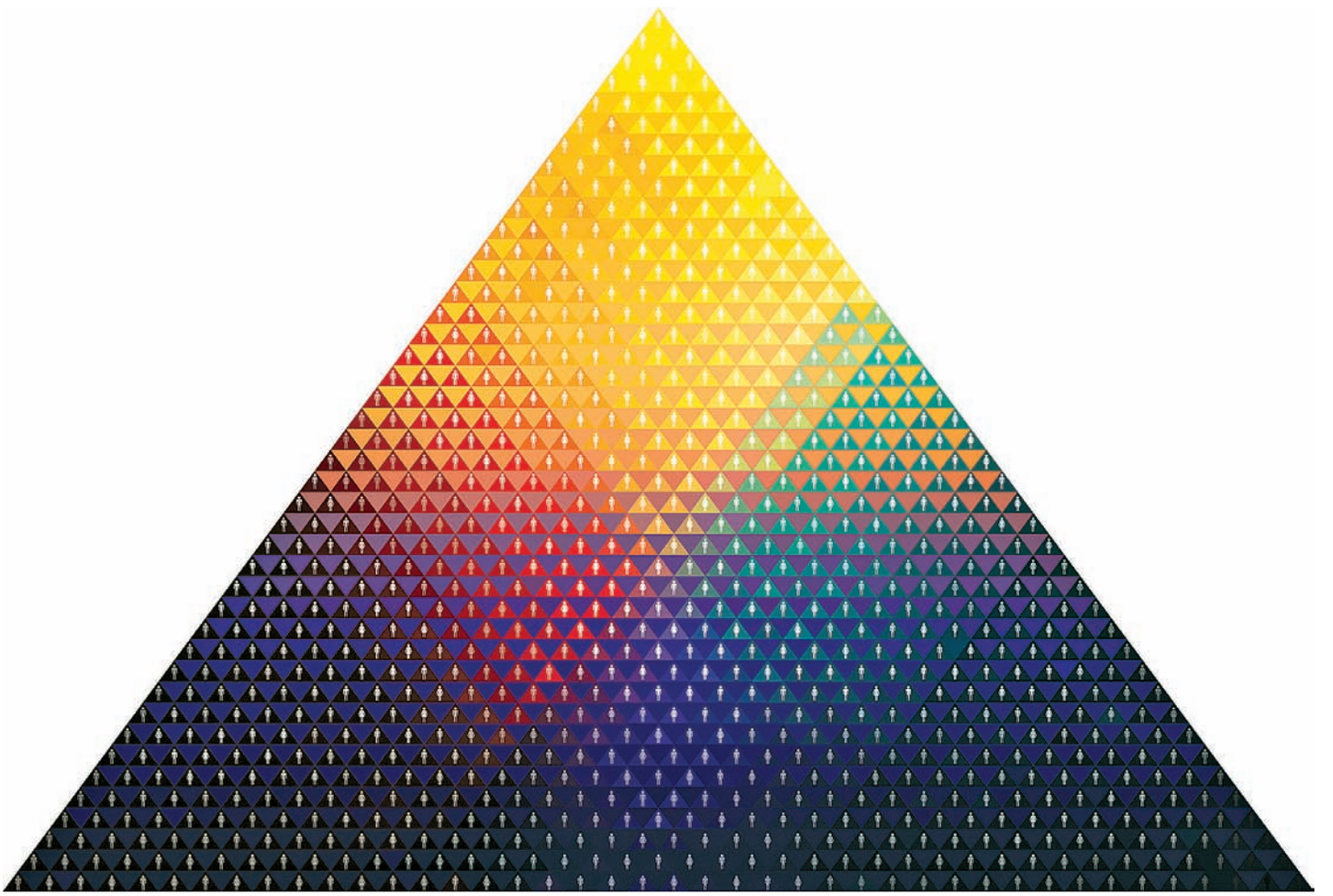
8

9

Creator: **Daniel Eatock**
Title: ***No Smoking***
Exemplifies: **Agreement/Linguistic community**

1. Christian Eager
2. Eric Robinson
3. Noah Hilsenrad
4. Phil Ward
5. Julien Bouvet
6. Jack Farrelly
7. Monster Kid
8. Linus Kraemer
9. John Paul Dowling

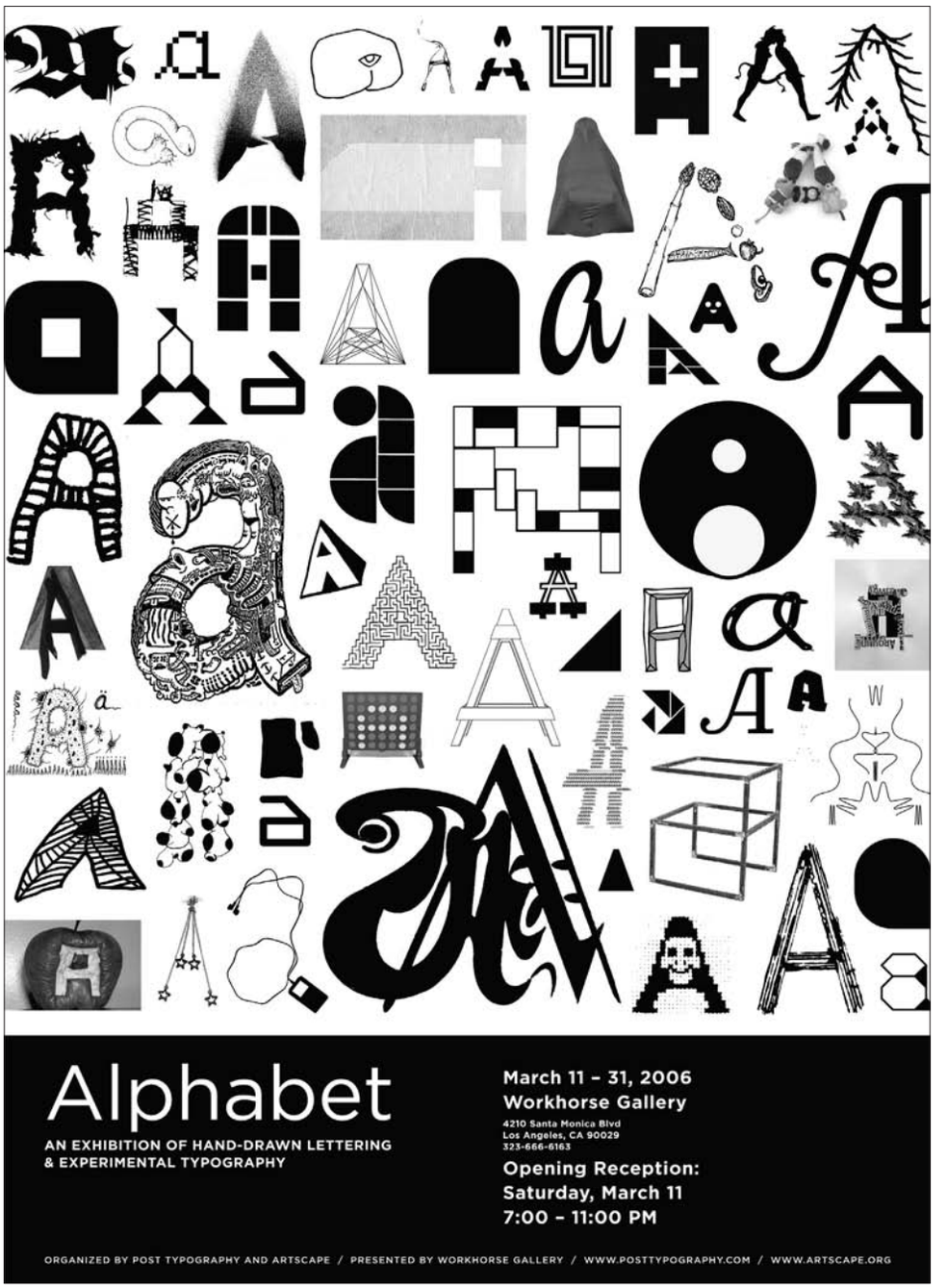
A mixture of linguistic signs and symbols collected by Daniel Eatock. Any of these signs could be used to signify no smoking, but we have a particular sign in each of our cultures (linguistic communities) that has been agreed as the legitimate sign. For some cultures, the linguistic signs (such as examples four or nine) will have no meaning because the relationship between the act of smoking and the words used to describe it are arbitrary and culturally specific. Similarly, example six will communicate on a deeper level beyond the linguistic message; it has a smaller and more distinct linguistic community as it relies on the particular cultural knowledge of a twentieth-century painting. Example one has no graphic mark to cancel or strike through the cigarette and therefore will only have meaning for a linguistic community that recognises a red circle with a horizontal white bar as a road sign barring entry. Example three relies on a knowledge of industrial pictograms for parts of the human body, and the message in example seven is carried through humour for those who have prior knowledge of western comic art.



Creator: Andy Gilmore
Title: ***Illustration for 'Wired' magazine***
Exemplifies: Agreement

The pyramid structure may have a universal meaning through its natural geometry but the second set of signifiers, the signs representing man and woman, have been learnt as part of a distinct system and form part of an international agreement. Their placement or context also affects their meaning. In this context, they simply represent gender, whereas on a door they would signify the function of the room in addition to the gender. Used individually, these signs can be read as a global signifier: not just man or woman but all men or all women. In multiples, as in this illustration, the reader tends to read the scale and see them as a population. (See also metaphor and metonym in chapter two.)

1. COMPONENTS
Portfolio



Creator: Post Typography
Title: ***Alphabet – Poster***
Exemplifies: Agreement/Duality

This poster shows a variety of different representations of a phoneme or sound. The repeated shape we know as the letter 'A' is well understood and deeply embedded in our visual language, so the author can improvise around this basic shape to the point of abstraction without losing the basic meaning. At the foot of the poster the sign is combined with other signs to make words, which in turn are signifiers for places, names and so on. Clearly, these signs are arbitrary, as their meaning varies from one part of the world to another. This arbitrary nature of signs is known as duality.

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Creator: Sagmeister Inc.
Title: ***Happiness is a Warm Gun***
Exemplifies: Agreement

This poster is part of a series celebrating punctuation marks. The title comes from the idea that the apostrophe has the job of eliminating a letter. Punctuation marks are part of a set of signifiers that carry a grammatical concept rather than a sound. These signifiers exist beyond spoken or written language because the idea they represent can be applied across many languages. The signifier for the apostrophe is subject to agreement amongst linguistic communities in the same way as an alphabetic signifier. In this case, the agreement is found on a much wider scale across a range of spoken and written languages, and consequently the linguistic community is much larger.

HOW MEAN-ING IS FORMED

2. HOW MEANING IS FORMED
Categories of signs

‘In a language state everything is based on relations.’ [1]

This chapter looks at the various ways in which meaning is formed in a sign. Both Saussure and Peirce agreed that in order to understand how we extract meaning from a sign we need to understand the structure of signs. To help us do this they categorised signs in terms of the relationships within the structures.

1. de Saussure F. *Course in General Linguistics* (1974) (1st edition 1915)

Peirce defined three categories of signs:

Icon – This resembles the sign.
A photograph of someone could be described as an iconic sign in that it physically resembles the thing it represents. It is also possible to have iconic words, where the sound resembles the thing it represents. Onomatopoeic words like 'bang' or 'woof' could be described as iconic language.

Index – There is a direct link between the sign and the object. In this category, smoke is an index of fire and a tail is an index of a dog. Traffic signs in the street are index signs: they have a direct link to the physical reality of where they are placed, such as at a junction or at the brow of a hill.

Symbol – These signs have no logical connection between the sign and what it means. They rely exclusively on the reader having learnt the connection between the sign and its meaning. The red cross is a symbol that we recognise to mean aid. Flags are symbols that represent territories or organisations. The letters of the alphabet are symbolic signs whose meanings we have learnt.

As a linguist, Saussure was not interested in index signs, he was primarily concerned with words. Words are symbolic signs.
In the case of onomatopoeic words, they can also be iconic signs. Saussure categorised signs in two ways, which are very similar to the categories used by Peirce:

Iconic – These are the same as Peirce's icons. They resemble the thing they represent.

Arbitrary – These are the same as Peirce's symbols. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. It functions through agreed rules.

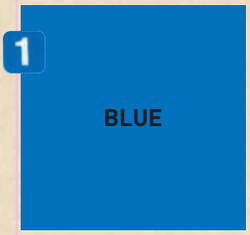
1

2

3

Signs
1. This sign for a shopping centre in Manchester is signposted using an iconic sign, which depends on local knowledge.
2. An index/symbol. The danger of fire is linked to the forest through its physical position (the sign is on the edge of the forest) and by the use of an ideogram of a tree.
3. The red cross and the subsequent words are all symbols. The reader will have had to learn the correct codings of all these signs in order to understand their meanings.

2. HOW MEANING IS FORMED
Categories of signs



It is important to recognise that whichever terms you use, the categories are not separate and can function together in sets. For example, let's look at the traffic sign, which warns us that we are approaching traffic lights. The mark on the sign that resembles the lights is both an icon and a symbol. As it physically looks like the thing it represents, it can be said to be iconic. However, it is also a symbol. That is to say, it is part of a set of signs for which we have an international agreement about their meanings. We have learnt what the signs mean. We may even have been tested on their meaning as part of a driving test. The red triangular frame around the sign is a symbol, which we understand as a warning sign. Furthermore, when this traffic sign is placed in the street next to the road junction it also becomes an index sign. In reality, its meaning is in part formed by where the sign is placed. It is an icon/symbol/index sign.

Peirce also identified three levels or properties for signs, which can be mapped on to his triangular model. He labelled these properties firstness, secondness and thirdness.

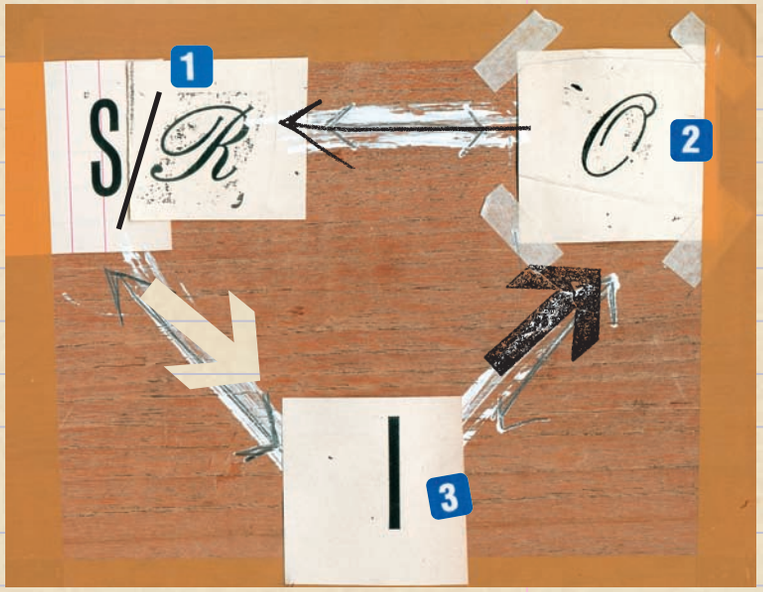
Firstness – this is a sense of something. It could be described as a feeling or a mood. To say that you are feeling 'blue' could be said to function on this first level.

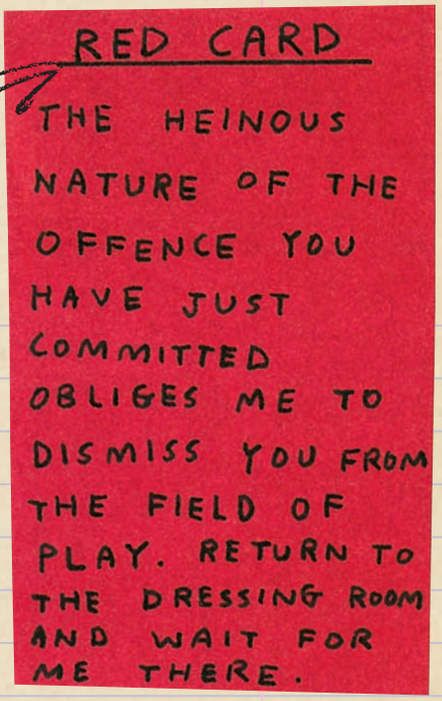
Secondness – this is the level of fact. It is the physical relation of one thing to another. The traffic sign we discussed earlier functions on this physical level of fact.

Thirdness – you could think of this level as the mental level. It is the level of general rules, which bring the other two together in a relationship. It relates the sign to the object as a convention. The association we have in our minds between the Stars and Stripes and the United States is a mental relationship that relies on a convention.

Right – In the table, the rows are the categories (firstness, secondness and thirdness) and the columns are aspects of being. The diagram underneath shows how these are mapped onto Peirce's elements of a sign: the representamen (or sign), the object and the interpretant.

	Quality	Brute Facts	Law
1st	Qualisign	Sinsign	Legisign
2nd	Icon	Index	Symbol
3rd	Rheme	Dicent	Argument





David Shrigley
Red Card

Above – The representamen of a red card can be seen as a legisign, as its signifying element is primarily due to a law or convention. As an object it is a symbol in that it utilises a convention that is learnt and as an interpretant it is an argument because it enables us to understand the sign as part of a general system of knowledge.

Peirce's work on the classification of signs became increasingly complex as he refined his original propositions. In 1903, he divided the properties into three broad areas and classified them accordingly: qualities (firstness), brute facts (secondness) and law (thirdness). Each of Peirce's original three elements of signification (representamen, object and interpretant) can be mapped against these qualities and, in turn, each of these qualities can be found within each of the elements. This generated a complex grid of sub-classification as shown above. Every sign has a representamen (sometimes known as a sign vehicle) and so can be classified as a qualisign, a sinsign or a legisign. Every sign also has an object and can be classified as an icon, an index or a symbol and, similarly, as every sign has an interpretant it can be classified as a rheme, a dicent or an argument. All signs then become classifiable as combinations of each of their three elements. In other words, it can be one of the three types of representamen, one of the three types of object and one of the three types of interpretant.

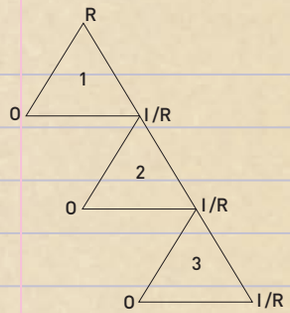
2. HOW MEANING IS FORMED
Categories of signs

Semiosis

Peirce uses the term semiosis to describe the transfer of meaning; the act of signifying. What is distinct about his view of semiosis is that it is not a one-way process with a fixed meaning. It is part of an active process between the sign and the reader of the sign. It is an exchange between the two that involves some negotiation. The meaning of the sign will be affected by the background of the reader; their background, education, culture and their experiences will all have a bearing on how the sign is read. One of the most visible examples of this is the symbolic use of colour in different cultures. In Western Europe, we are familiar with the colour black as a symbol of death and mourning. Funeral directors wear black jackets and it is usual for those who attend to wear black. Sportsmen wear black armbands to show respect for those who have been lost. This is a symbolic sign that we have all learned and it is also, to a degree, iconic. However, in other cultures across the world this relationship between colour and loss is quite different. In China, for example, white is used for funerals, which is a complete reversal of these values, and could create the impression of a wedding to a Western European who has quite a different understanding of the symbolic use of white.

Unlimited semiosis

In the previous chapter, we looked at the terms used by Peirce in his triangular model of a sign. The representamen signifies an object, which in turn conjures up a mental concept, the interpretant, in the mind of the reader. However, when we consider meaning we must recognise that this triangular process may happen more than once from one starting point. To use Peirce's terms, the interpretant resulting in our mind from the first representamen can then become a further sign and trigger an infinite chain of associations, where the interpretant in one sequence becomes the representamen of the next sequence. This is best understood as a diagram (see opposite). This phenomenon, called unlimited semiosis, is commonplace in our reading of signs and we will rush through these chains of meanings at such speed that we hardly notice the chain at all. This is similar to Barthes' structure of myths, which is based on Saussure's model of the sign.



Unlimited Semiosis
The triangular process described by Peirce.

2. HOW MEANING IS FORMED
Value

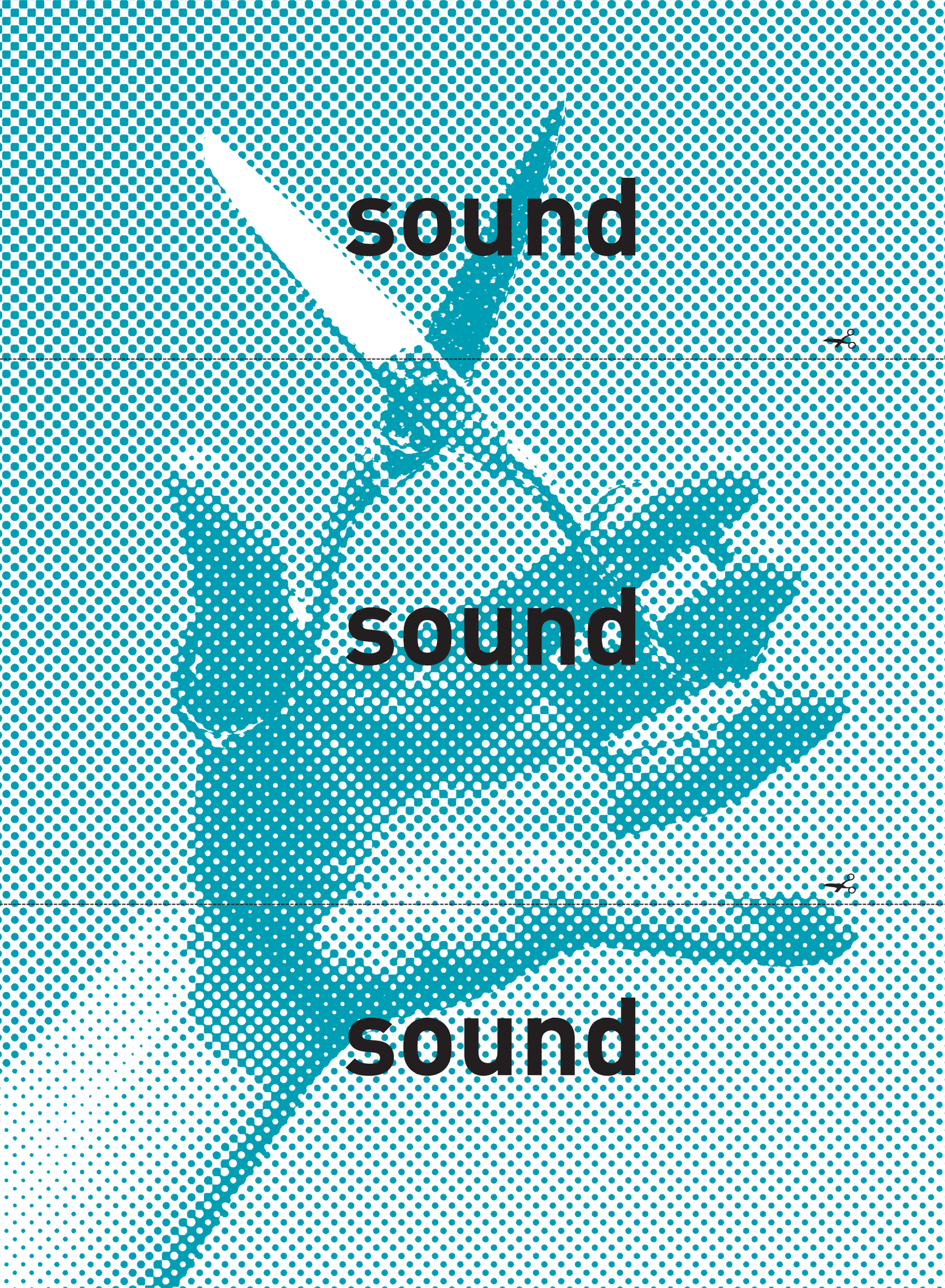
For Saussure it was what he called 'value' that determined the meaning of a sign. Saussure focused on the relationship between the sign and the other signs in the same system. He looked at what we mean by something in relation to what we do not mean by something. In his system, book means not magazine, not poster, not film. Saussure has a different term for the transfer of meaning. He calls this signification. For Saussure, signification is achieved by using the mental concepts, the signifieds, to categorise reality so that we can understand it. The signifieds are artificial things that are made by us and our society and culture. They are a part of our communication system, which is unique to our particular culture. The meaning comes not from the relationship of this sign to reality, which can be arbitrary, as he has pointed out, but from the relationship between the sign and the other signs around it. To illustrate this, Saussure describes language as a sheet of paper with thought on one side and sound on the other. We cannot cut the front of the sheet without cutting the back at the same time. Sound and thought cannot be divided.

> *'Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others.'* [2]

This is essentially a theory of combination and substitution, which Saussure explains using the terms syntagm and paradigm.

If we cut the sheet of paper into three pieces, the meaning of each piece does not come from the relationship between the front and back of the paper but from the relationship of one piece to another.

2. de Saussure F. *Course in General Linguistics* **(1974) (1st edition 1915)**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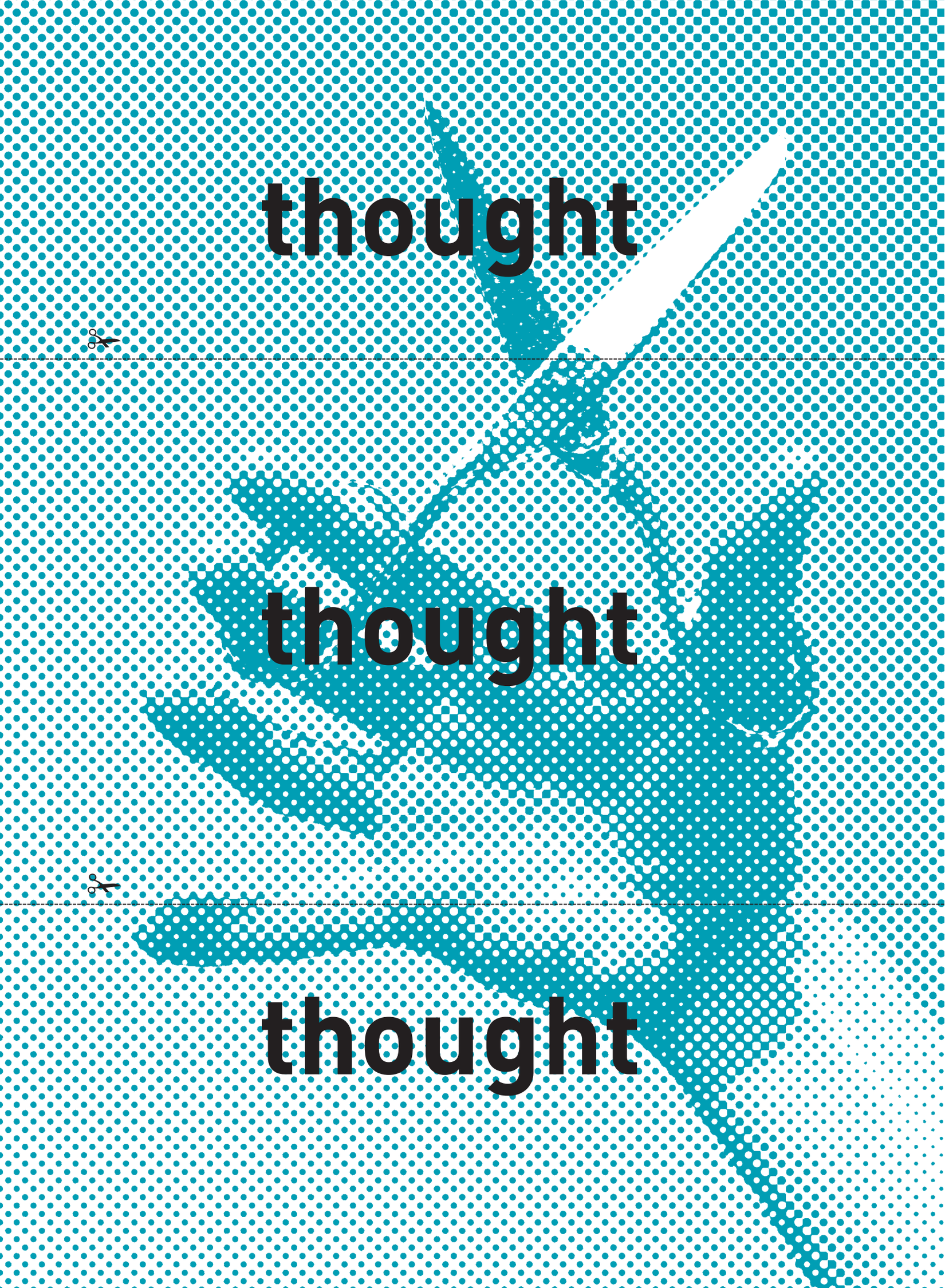

thought
thought
thought

The value is always composed of two things:
1. a dissimilar thing that can be exchanged.
2. a similar thing that can be compared.

‘The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it.

Proof of this is that the value of a term may be modified without either its meaning or its sound being affected, solely because a neighbouring term has been modified.’ [3]

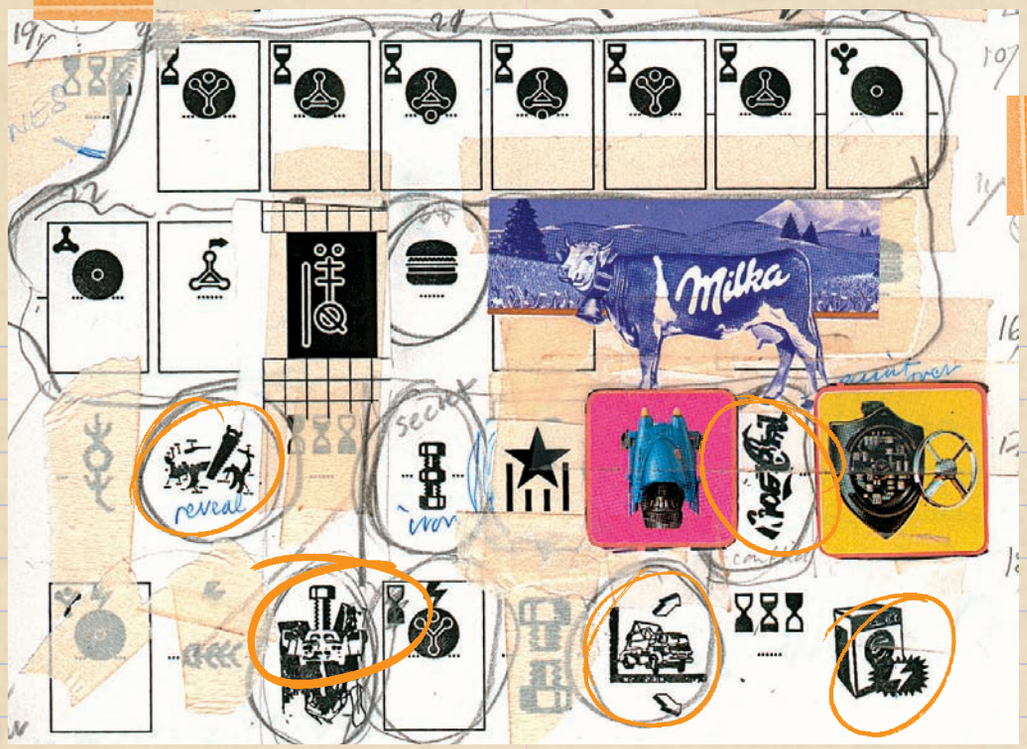
Syntagm

This is a collection of signs that are organised in a linear sequence. The word ‘book’ is a syntagm using a set of units – b/o/o/k. A sentence is also a syntagm. Take the sentence, ‘The girl reads the book.’ The words are the signs, which are arranged into a syntagmic sequence, where each sign has a syntagmic relation to the signs that go before it and after it. The value of the sign ‘book’ is affected by the other signs around it.

In visual terms, the clothes we wear are a syntagm made up of units, which are the individual garments. The garments themselves are also syntagms, where each garment is made of units such as sleeves, collars and cuffs. As with the previous examples, the value of these units (signs) can be affected by their combination with the other signs. We all create syntagms every day, where the combinations are governed by conventions. These conventions or rules are a feature of the syntagm. When we are writing we call this convention grammar; when we are dressing ourselves for the day we might call it taste.

3. de Saussure F. *Course in General Linguistics* (1974) (1st edition 1915)

2. HOW MEANING IS FORMED
Value



David Crow
Creation 6

Sketches from the development work for the Creation 6 font. Each subset within the font is a paradigm in itself. The symbols circled are all part of a paradigm of found images, which in this instance represent various events.

The two basic characteristics of a paradigm are that:
1. the units in the set have something in common.
2. each unit is obviously different from the others in the set.

Paradigm

The meaning we get from a collection of signs (signification) does not come from these linear combinations alone. When we are making combinations of signs, whether they are words, sentences or outfits, we are faced with a series of individual choices where we can substitute one sign for another in the same set.

We can take the letters of the alphabet as a simple example. These are all part of a paradigm that we recognise as part of the same set. 'A' is part of the paradigm that is the alphabet, where '5' is not and '+' is not. When we make choices from this paradigm, we create words that are part of another set of paradigms, such as nouns or verbs. If we substitute an 'n' for an 'o' from the alphabet paradigm in the syntagm 'b-o-o-k', to form 'b-o-n-k', we change the meaning entirely. The way that we use language creates another set of paradigms, such as legal jargon, technobabble and bad language. When writing poetry we could describe the rhyming words as paradigms based on sound.

In typography, we could say that FF Din Regular is part of a paradigm that includes the entire set of weights that make up the FF Din family and in turn this family of typefaces is part of the paradigm of sans-serifs. The way we fix one part of a garment to another is a choice made from a set of possibilities that form a tailoring paradigm. The way we choose to apply colour to a painting is part of another

FF Din light
FF Din regular
FF Din medium
FF Din bold
FF Din black

paradigm. In video, the way we edit from one sequence to another is a choice made from a paradigmical set of conventions where the 'fade', the 'dissolve' and the 'cut' all have meanings of their own. In music, it may be the way we arrange sounds together to form melody. Our choice of car and the choices we make to decorate our homes with objects are made from a set of paradigms.

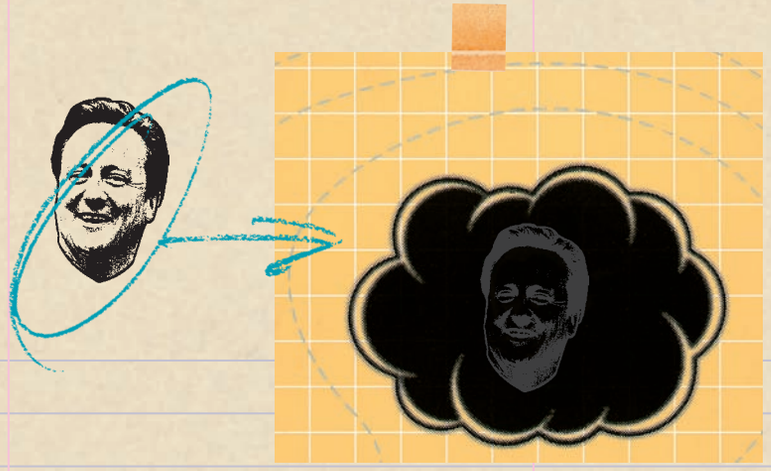
Codes

As we can see from these examples, some of the paradigms have a fixed number of units to choose from, such as the alphabet or the number of weights in a typeface family.

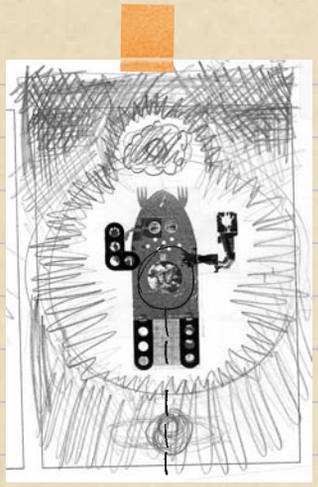
These types of paradigms are made of codes, which are called digital codes. These types of codes are easy to recognise and understand as the units are clearly defined.

There are also paradigms that do not have a fixed number of choices; the range of choice is unlimited and the divisions between the choices are unclear. The marks produced by a paintbrush or the sounds used in music could be described as paradigms, which use codes with no clear distinction between the choices. This type of code is called an analogue code. In practice, it is common for us to attempt to impose digital notation on to analogue codes to help us categorise and understand the codes. Musical notation, for example, is an attempt to do just this.

2. HOW MEANING IS FORMED
Value



Above – The dark cloud is used as a metaphor for bad news. By placing an image of a political figure inside the cloud the bad news is associated with that figure. The value of the sign has been formed by its relationship with the other signs around it.



David Crow
Nervous Robot

Above – The characteristics of a butterfly in flight are used as a metaphor for feeling nervous by simply placing the image in the stomach of the robot.

Metaphor and metonym

In terms of the practical application of paradigmical choice, it may be easier to understand using the terms metaphor and metonym[4]. Where we substitute one word or image in a sequence for another, we can transfer the characteristics of one object to another. This use of metaphor is very common in advertisements, where a product is imbued with particular properties it is not readily associated with. We can also apply this type of metaphoric substitution to other forms of media. The paradigmical choice to remove the sleeves from a Savile Row pinstripe suit and refasten them using safety pins, would entirely change the way the suit is read. We would naturally make assumptions about the individual wearing the suit based on this change. The pins are part of a paradigm of fasteners. That they are not normally used as the conventional way of fastening a well-tailored suit can be used to change the meaning of the suit. The irreverence and immediacy of the pins is transferred to the suit and would become part of our overall reading of the garment and the statement that it makes.

A metonym works in a similar way except that it is used to represent a totality. Where we want to signify reality in some way, we are forced to choose one piece of that reality to represent it. For example, if we want to represent all children we might use an image of a child. In this case, the image of

4. Jakobson R. and Halle M. *Fundamentals of Language* (1956)

The important thing to remember is that where there is choice, there is meaning.

one child is being used as a metonym to represent the whole, all children.

With all these paradigmical choices, meaning comes largely from the things we did not choose. There is not necessarily any fixed number of options in a paradigm and each individual is likely to generate a different range of choices. It is also possible for the collection of signs in any given paradigm to change over time, where meanings of words, images and gestures change through the natural evolution of social change. The important thing to remember is that where there is choice, there is meaning.

2. HOW MEANING IS FORMED
Portfolio

Creator: Dorothy
Title: ***A Dead Thoughtful Product***
Exemplifies: Icon/Value

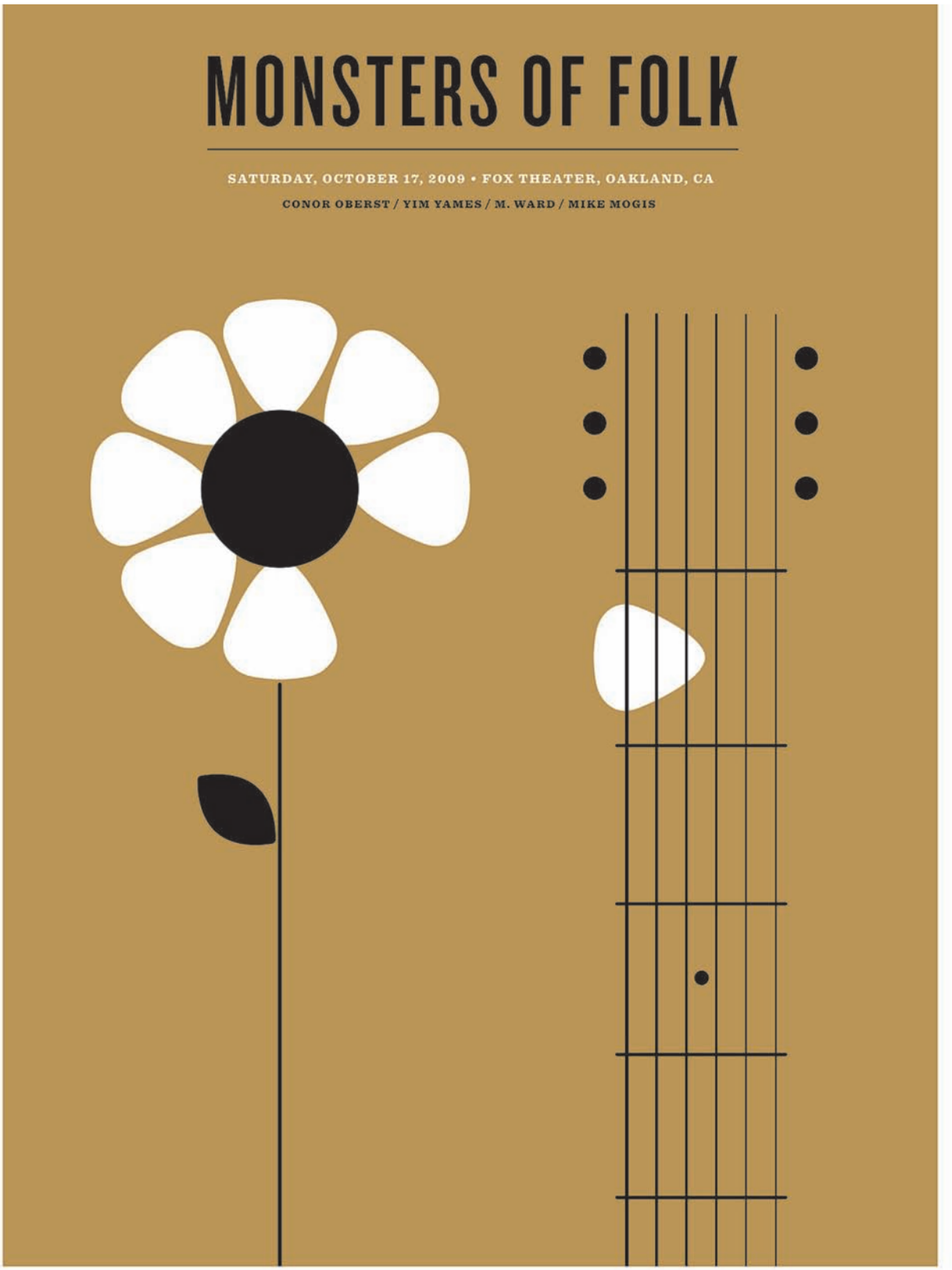
Dorothy designed a set of alternative Christmas decorations to encourage people to stop for a second and think about what's happening elsewhere in the world at Christmas. The aim of the decorations was to highlight the effect global conflict has on communities. The limited-edition 'Xmas Declarations' were packaged in sets of six. For each pack sold, a donation was made to the youth initiative Ctrl.Alt.Shift to support its campaign against global conflict.

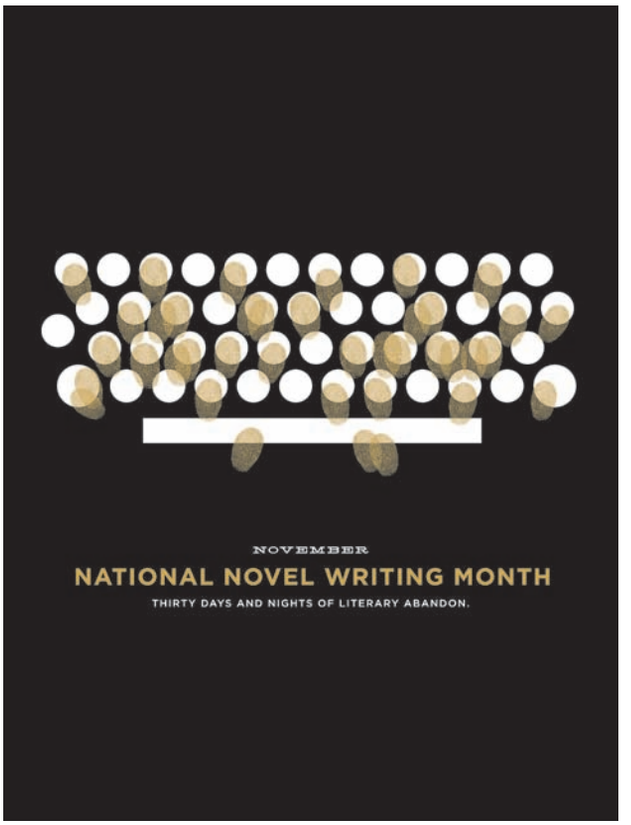
The silver decoration is unmistakable as an iconic signifier for a hand grenade. It is made more realistic by its metallic finish and by its reproduction at a size not dissimilar from the weapon it represents. The potency of the signifier makes the relationship between the Christmas tree and the signified all the more powerful. The message the designers intended is communicated through this transfer of value from one sign to the other. As Saussure stated, the value of a sign comes from the other signs around it.

Creator: Timorous Beasties
Title: ***Glasgow Toile*** *(Left)****; London Toile*** *(Below)*
Exemplifies: Value

Timorous Beasties are renowned for producing hand-printed fabrics and wallpapers. Their work is a wayward take on the often twee world of textiles. They are known for their take on the 'Toile de Jouy' fabrics of Napoleonic France and have designed a number of toiles based on different cities around the world. The toile designs include a balance of decorative, architectural and human contexts. The stylistic mannerisms of classic French textiles give a sense of heritage and tradition, and this is what you see at first glance. However, on a closer inspection the reader finds images of a contemporary cityscape. The signs that were most obvious are now undermined as they are juxtaposed with a set of signs from the underbelly of urban social realism, a distinctly different paradigm. The value of the most obvious sign is now affected by the other signs around it and the reader is invited to compare and contrast the idealised vision of our society with a contemporary social reality.

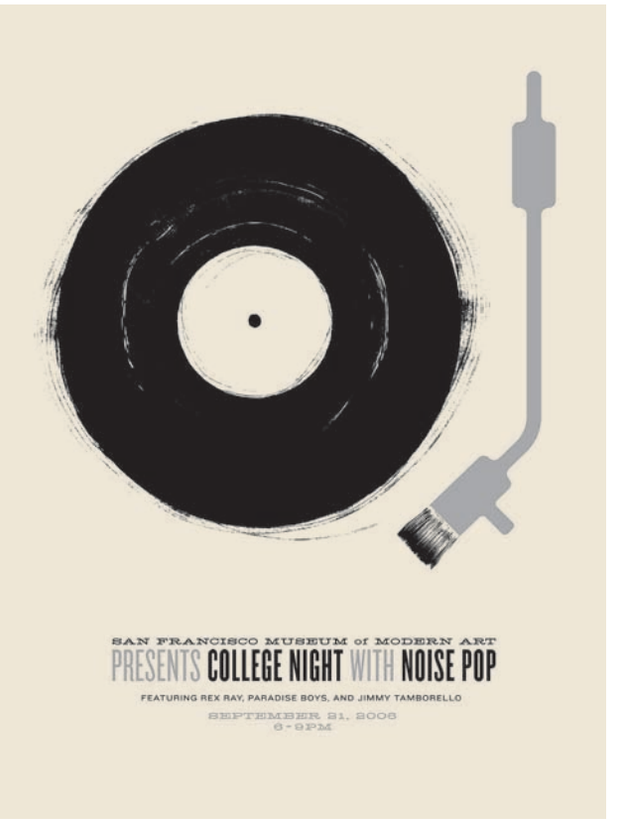
2. HOW MEANING IS FORMED
Portfolio





Creator: Jason Munn/The Small Stakes
Title: ***Monsters of Folk – Poster***
Exemplifies: Value/Metaphor

Opposite – The idea or appearance of a sign is less important than the other signs around it. We can see in this example that the value of a sign (a flower petal) can be modified without changing its appearance but simply by modifying the neighbouring sign. In this case, changing it from a flower to a fretboard (see p. 39). The less a sign is motivated the more the reader has to rely on having learnt the associations (see p. 56). The drawing of a flower petal/plectrum in this example is a very simple geometric silhouette and could be described as unmotivated. The designer has relied on the reader finding the meaning of this shape by being able to instantly connect it with a flower or with a guitar fretboard. The flower petal also carries with it a set of qualities and associations that act as a metaphor when they are transferred to music.



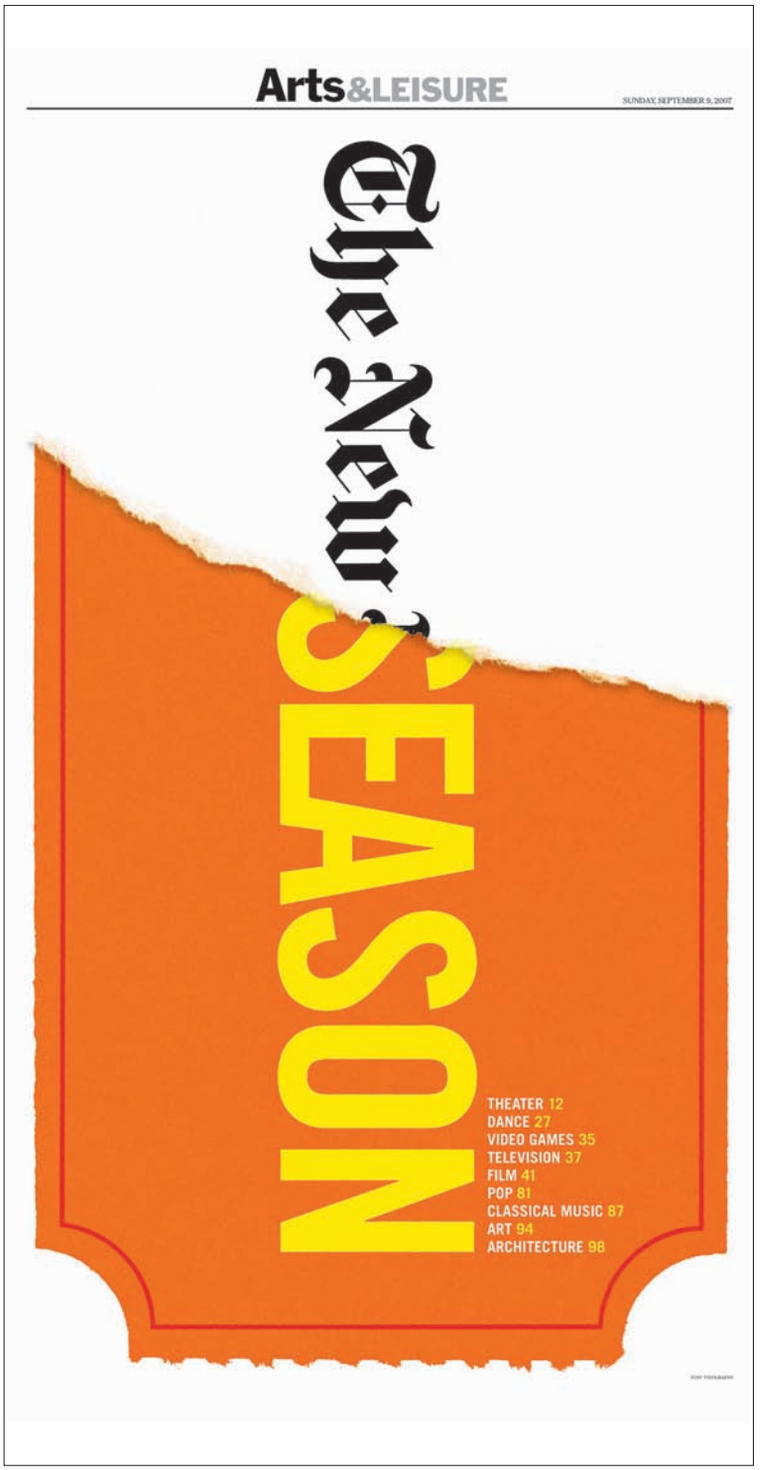
Creator: Jason Munn/The Small Stakes
Title: ***National Novel Writing Month – Poster***
Exemplifies: Icon/Index

Above left – An arrangement of circles signifies a keyboard in this image, despite the fact that keyboard keys are rarely circular. We recognise this configuration of shapes easily because the layout visually resembles the keyboard many of us use on a daily basis. The sign is iconic in that it looks like the thing it represents. The fingerprints are a signifier, which can have a number of meanings, but in this instance the fingerprints clearly relate to typing because of their relationship to the keys. This could be described as an index sign because its meaning comes from the direct link between the sign and its physical placement – the fingerprint and its position on the keyboard.

Creator: Jason Munn/The Small Stakes
Title: ***San Francisco Museum of Modern Art – Poster***
Exemplifies: Icon/Metaphor

Above right – The turntable and stylus arm could be described as iconic symbols because they resemble the things they represent. The designer has overlaid this sign with qualities of a traditional artist by adding a brush and the brushmarks of a painter. This transfer of the characteristics of one idea to another is a good example of how metaphor is used in visual compositions.

2. HOW MEANING IS FORMED
Portfolio



Creator: **Post Typography**
Title: ***'The New York Times' – The New Season***
Exemplifies: **Icon**

Left – On the full-page cover of the Arts & Leisure section on the new season in the arts, the designers borrow 'The New' from the well-known 'Times' logo. The additional graphic shape, created by adding a perforated edge and distinctive cutaway corners, clearly resembles the object we recognise as a ticket – despite its change in scale. The collage is then emblazoned with the word 'SEASON' to imitate a season ticket.

Creator: **Post Typography**
Title: ***Greenbuild – US Green Building Council***
Exemplifies: **Metaphor**

Below – Greenbuild is the largest US annual conference and expo devoted to environmentally responsible building. Reflecting the conference theme of big ideas, the advertisement shows the voices of the conference attendees gathering together to create a larger and stronger idea in the form of a single voice. The numerous voices are gathered together in one speech bubble to act as a metaphor for a crowd.

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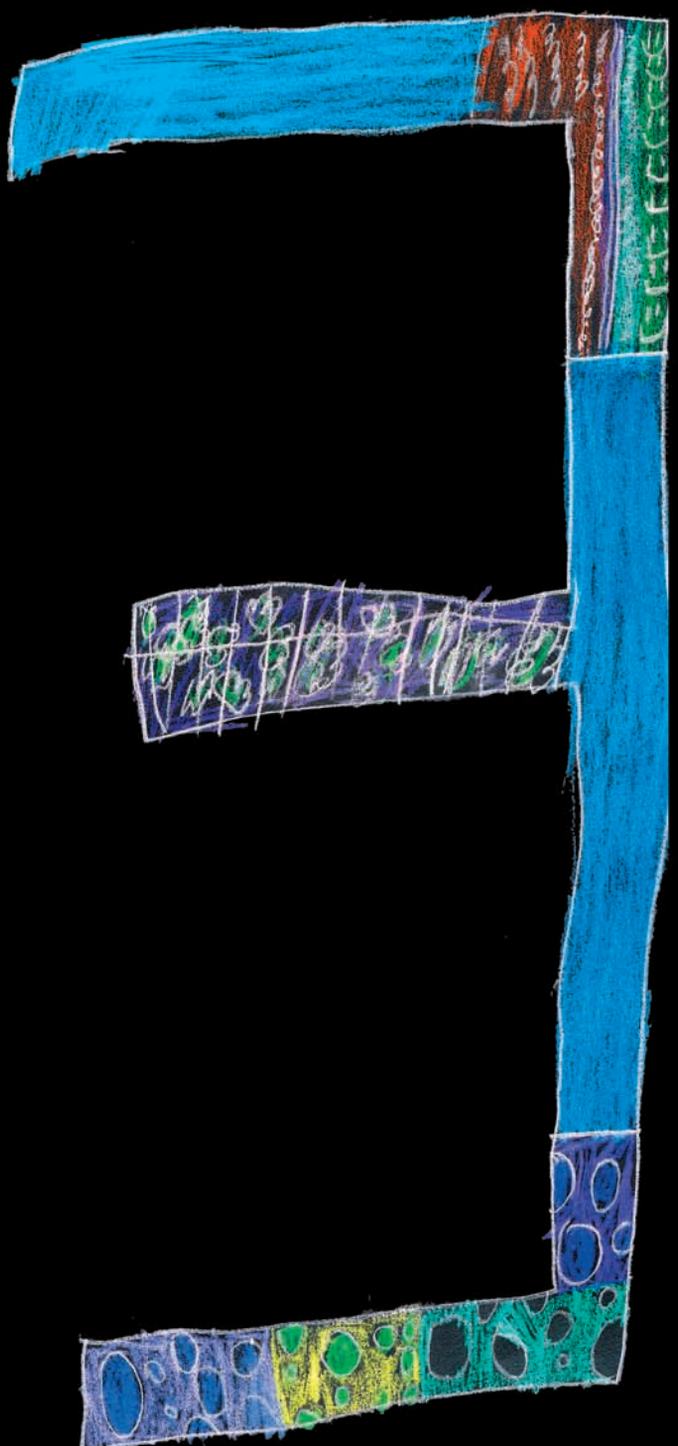
pages 183–84

Creator: **Post Typography**
Title: ***Racism Erases Face***
Exemplifies: **Metaphor**

In this public service poster for race relations, empty space is used as a metaphor for pointless anonymity. The human face is a well-understood sign for individual identity. By simply erasing the faces, the designers have transferred this act to the people pictured and it becomes a metaphor for erasing their individuality.



READ-
ING
THE
SIGN

3. READING THE SIGN
The reader

The meaning of any sign is affected by who is reading that sign. Peirce recognised a creative process of exchange between the sign and the reader.

Although we can see many similarities between Peirce's interpretant and Saussure's signified, it is clear that Saussure wasn't concerned with the relationship between the signified and the reality to which it refers. The reality that Peirce calls the object does not feature at all in Saussure's model. Saussure was concerned only with language and he does not discuss the part played by the reader. His theories concentrated instead on the complex structures of language that we use to construct words and sentences:

> *'A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from the Greek 'semeion' sign). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts.'* [1]

However, the meaning of words can change depending on who reads them. In the USA, Peirce had created a theory that saw the reading of signs as part of a creative process.

1. de Saussure F. *Course in General Linguistics* (1974) (1st edition 1915)

Observa
y Aprende
EDICIONES S. M.
MADRID (19)
65

3. READING THE SIGN
The reader

Whereas Saussure saw linguistics as forming one part of semiotics, Barthes turned this idea upside down and suggested that semiotics, the science of signs, was in fact one part of linguistics.

Barthes

In Europe, it was Roland Barthes, a follower of Saussure, who took the theoretical debate forward. In the 1960s, Barthes developed Saussure's ideas so that we could consider the part played by the reader in the exchange between themselves and the content. For Barthes the science of signs takes in much more than the construction of words and their representations. Semiotics takes in any system of signs, whatever the content or limits of the system. Images, sounds, gestures and objects are all part of systems that have semiotic meanings. In the 1960s, Barthes described complex associations of signs that form entertainment, ritual and social conventions. These may not normally be described as language systems but they are certainly systems of signification. Whereas Saussure saw linguistics as forming one part of semiotics, Barthes turned this idea upside down and suggested that semiotics, the science of signs, was in fact one part of linguistics. He saw semiotics as:

> *'... the part covering the great signifying unities of discourse'.* [2]

Barthes pointed out that there was a significant role to be played by the reader in the process of reading meaning. To do this he applied linguistic concepts to other visual media that carry meaning. Like Saussure and Peirce before him, Barthes identified structural relationships in the components of a sign. His ideas centre on two different levels of signification: denotation and connotation.

2. Barthes R. *Elements of Semiology* (1967)

Above – A black-and-white photograph can be read as nostalgic. A negative could be a reference to the process of photography or to forensics and crime. This idea is encouraged by the mysterious crop of the man in the background. A close-up draws our attention to the emotional aspect of the subject; the coarse dot reproduction suggests low-quality printing and can in turn suggest either newspaper journalism or political campaigns.

Denotation and connotation

This first order of signification is straightforward. It refers to the physical reality of the object that is signified. In other words, a photograph of a child represents a child. No matter who photographs the child and how they are photographed, in this first order of signification, they still just represent 'child'. Even with a range of very different photographs the meanings are identical at the denotative level.

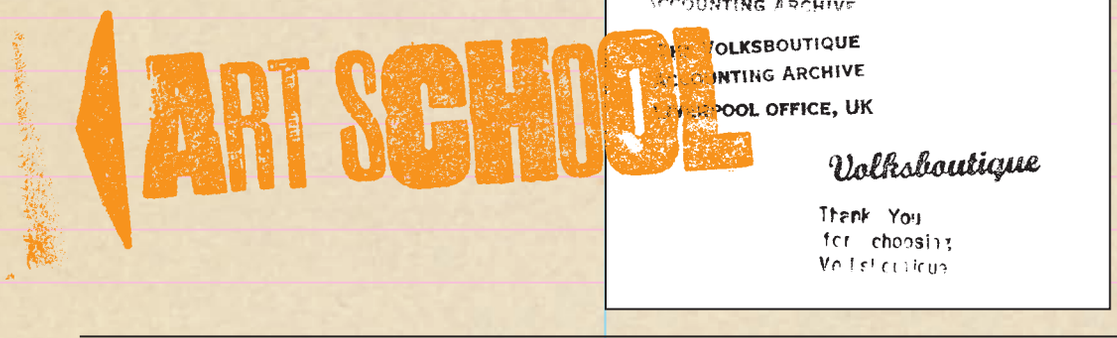
In reality, we know that the use of different film, lighting or framing changes the way in which we read the image of the child. A grainy black-and-white or sepia-toned image of a child could well bring with it ideas of nostalgia; a soft focus might add sentiment to the reading of the image and a close-up crop of the face could encourage us to concentrate on the emotions experienced by the child.

All these differences are happening on the second level of signification, which Barthes called connotation.

The reader is playing a part in this process by applying their knowledge of the systematic coding of the image. In doing this, the meaning is affected by the background of the viewer. Like Peirce's model, this humanises the entire process.

Connotation is arbitrary in that the meanings brought to the image are based on rules or conventions that the reader has learnt. The consistent use of soft focus, for example, in film and advertising has found its way into our consciousness to the degree that it is universally read as sentimental. As conventions vary from one culture to another, then it follows that the connotative effect of the conventions, the rules on how to read these images, will also vary between communities.

3. READING THE SIGN
Convention and motivation



Airside
Screen Icons

Opposite and overleaf – A series of contemporary bitmap cartoons, by design group Airside, demonstrate how an author can take liberties within representation. Here the illustrators distort the relative sizes and shapes of physical anatomy in highly unmotivated signs. The audience, however, has no problem decoding these because the images draw from a well-understood cartoon convention.

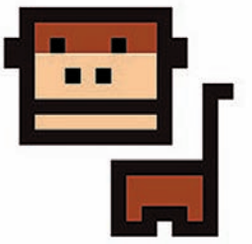
Convention is an agreement about how we should respond to a sign. We have already mentioned conventions such as the close-up and the black-and-white image. Conventions such as these pepper the images we read today. We instinctively know that slow-motion footage does not mean that the action is happening slowly. We understand that we are supposed to use this as a signal to study the skill of the action or admire its beauty. The roughly rendered typography of the rubber stamp indicates a gestural immediacy. It suggests the informal. We can almost hear the sound that the stamp would make when the above image was made. So much of meaning comes from convention that signs with little convention need to be very iconic in order to communicate to a wide audience. Another way of describing this is to say that a sign with little convention needs to be highly motivated.

Motivation is used to denote how much the signifier describes the signified. For example, a photograph is a highly motivated sign because it describes in detail the subject in the image. It looks like the thing or the person it represents. Using the term provided by Saussure and Peirce, it is iconic. A highly motivated sign is a very iconic one. Using the complementary terms, an arbitrary sign (Saussure), or a symbolic sign (Peirce), could be described as unmotivated. Using the earlier example, a photograph of a child is highly motivated, whilst a cartoon image of a child is less motivated. In the photographic example, the arbitrary element is confined to the framing, focus and so on, whereas with a cartoon the illustrator has more freedom to take liberties with the reality of how the child actually looks. However, the less a sign is motivated the more important it is that the reader has learnt the conventions that help to decode the image.

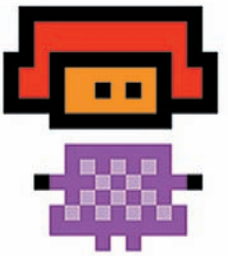
boy

boy in a bear suit

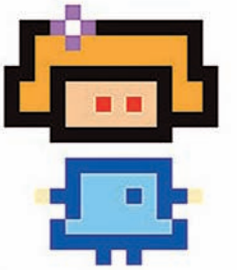
boy with big hair



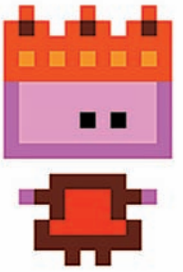
monkey



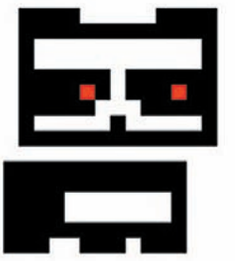
girl



girl with flower in hair



princess



panda

Language and speech

We could think of the differences between the first and second order of signification as the differences between what we say and the way we say it. (Saussure distinguished between the two, which he called 'langue' and 'parole'. However, as we have seen, Saussure's primary concern was the system: the language; 'la langue'.) Language, says Barthes, is language minus speech; yet at the same time it is a social institution and a system of values. Speech, according to Barthes, is an individual act of selection and actualisation. By way of distinguishing language from speech, Barthes provides examples by introducing the idea of systems of language and speech[3]. In what he calls the garment system, Barthes describes language as the parts of a garment and the rules of language govern the association of the parts. Speech in the garment system would then be the individual way of wearing, the personal quirks, the degree of cleanliness, size, the free association of the pieces and so on. With the car system, the variations in the way we drive would then make up the plane of speech. This correlates closely with Willis' ideas of symbolic creativity[4], which relate exactly to these types of everyday expression. So we can then say that when people adopt different hairstyles, for example, although they are using the same language (the hairstyle

3. **Barthes R.** *Elements of Semiology* **(1967)**

4. **Willis P.** *Common Culture* **(1990)**

3. READING THE SIGN
Convention and motivation

Seel Garside
Ladies Night

Angelina, Buffy, Catherine, Demi, Elizabeth, Fiona, Gwyneth, Helena, Isabella, Julia, Katie, Laura, Mia, Nicole, Olivia, Patricia, Queenie, Rachel, Sandra, Theresa, Uma, Victoria, Winona, Xena, Yoko, Zoe.

system perhaps), they are using different forms of speech, speaking differently or, to use the terminology of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, they are using different dialects[5]. Using the example of the rubber stamp, the words are the language and the qualities of the stamp are the speech. The idea of using a tone of voice is useful to those who use typography as a communication tool.

Myth

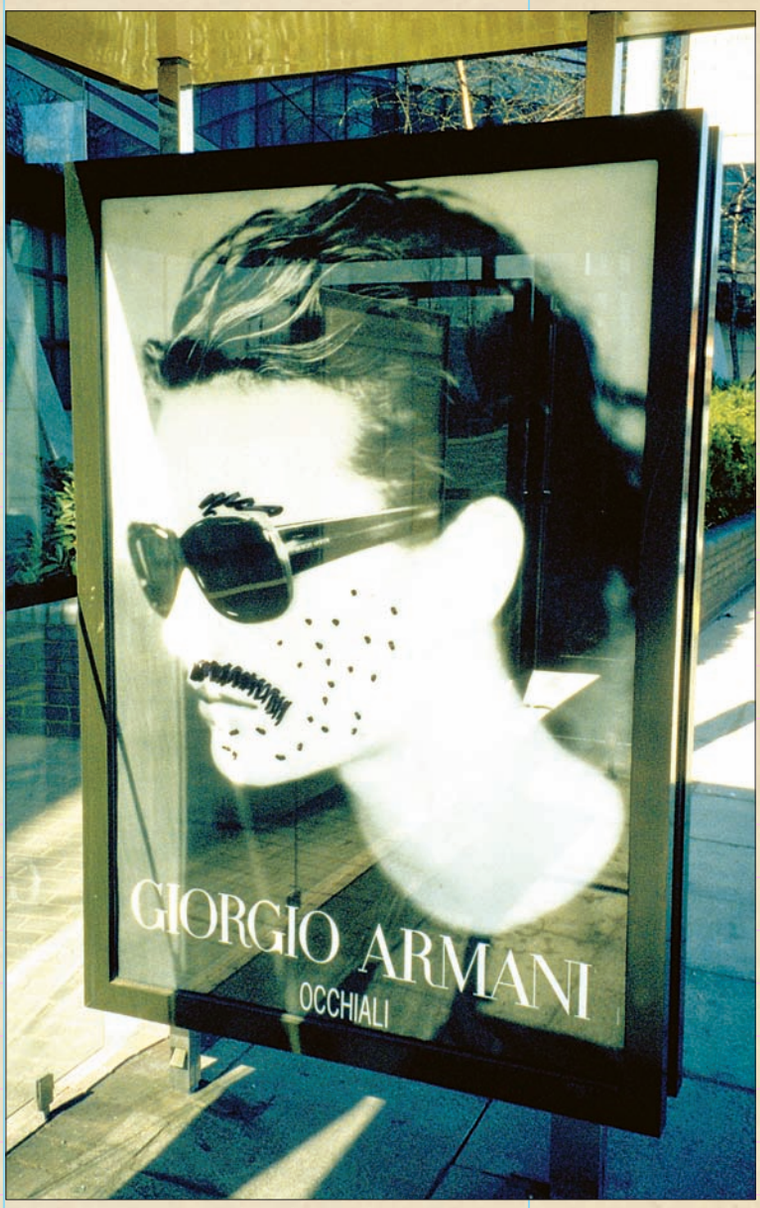
Barthes saw a new approach to semiotics that would force us to look more closely at what we take for granted in our visual culture. In his essays on myths in contemporary culture[6], Barthes draws attention to a range of misconceptions in French society about the properties and meanings we attach to images of the things around us. The purity of washing powder, the sport of wrestling, the Frenchness of wine. Barthes was angered by the way contemporary society confused history with nature.

For him, myths were the result of meaning generated by the groups in society who have control of the language and the media. These meanings are seen as part of the natural order of things. Where these meanings came from, and the process that transformed the meaning of the signs, are either forgotten or hidden. The process of generating myths filters the political content out of signification. In today's society, modern myths are built around things like notions of masculinity and femininity; the signs of success and failure; what signifies good health and what does not.

5. **Bourdieu P.** *Language and Symbolic Power* **(1991)**

6. **Barthes R.** *Mythologies* **(1972)**

In today's society, modern myths are built around things like notions of masculinity and femininity; the signs of success and failure; what signifies good health and what does not.



Portfolio

Ctrl.Alt.Shift presents
war school
a short film about war + peace
DIRECTOR: Ben Newman PRODUCER: Andy Noble
MENTOR: Aoife McArdle (MiniVegas)
SOUNDTRACK: Shy Child and Chipmunk
STARRING: Kate Ashfield and Phil Campbell
Winner of the Ctrl.Alt.Shift short film project
It's your world - take control. www.ctrlaltshift.co.uk
Ctrl+
Alt+
Shift.

Creator: Dorothy (Phil Skegg)
Title: ***War School***
Exemplifies: Language and speech

Opposite – The War School film poster was one of a set of five, designed to promote the winners of a national short-film competition launched by Ctrl.Alt.Shift. Each film raised awareness of a pressing global issue. 'War School', by Ben Newman, recreated a military training camp for child soldiers in a British school to bring the real horrors of war closer to home. The central motif is a well-known mathematical symbol simply constructed of two dots and a line (the language). What gives the poster its potency, however, is the speech employed by the designer. Turning one of the elements into a bleeding wound shows just how much the meaning is affected. The result is a powerful combination of the technical language of mathematical division spoken by the bloodstain of the war.

Creator: G-Man
Title: ***Beauty and the Beast***
Exemplifies: Language and speech

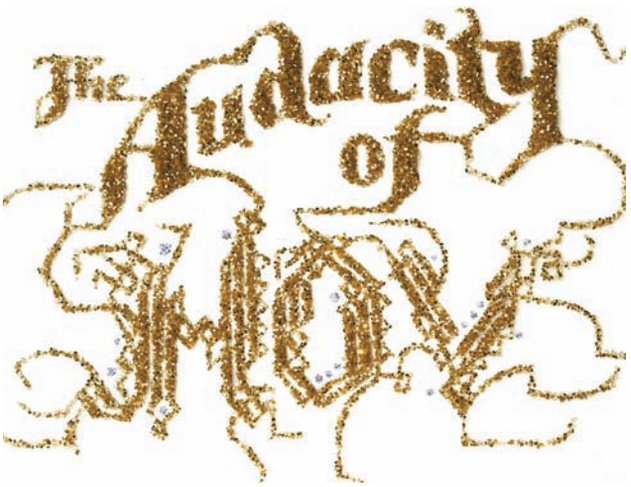
Right – In this set of stationery items, the linguistic conventions (the language) of business cards are closely followed. However, what changes these from being merely conventional is the way that the designer delivers the language (the speech). Just as with changing one's tone of voice, the tone and feel of these cards are changed by the careful use of materials – showing how tools and processes are signifiers too. The use of heavy matt card and metallic foil blocking results in a robust, genuine quality, without the business cards losing their functionality.

3. READING THE SIGN
Portfolio

Creator: **Burn**
Title: ***Fifth Floor Space, Tate Gallery***
Exemplifies: **Connotation/Index/Metonym**

The tape chosen as an identity for this gallery is used as an index sign in a direct relationship with a series of exterior spaces. Tape in itself is not considered a symbol for space, but used alongside a physical location the link can be made as the two elements work together. Presented in a paradigm of exterior spaces, the individual locations become a metonym for space and the viewer is clear that they should read the spaces as generic 'space' as opposed to specific ones. The tape features a repeated typographic statement and is presented in exterior environments, which suggests familiar yet uncomfortable situations – a traffic accident or a dangerous area. These constructions imply that the art on view on the fifth floor is unlikely to be decorative or highly conventional; it is likely to be challenging and unpredictable.

3. READING THE SIGN
Portfolio



Creator: Marian Bantjes
Title: ***If I Want to Explore a New Direction Professionally, it is Helpful to Try it Out for Myself First***
Exemplifies: Language and speech

Above and opposite – Stefan Sagmeister asked Marian Bantjes to contribute to his series 'Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far'. Marian used sugar to form the phrase 'If I want to explore a new direction professionally, it is helpful to try it out for myself first'. The piece uses sugar to render the arrangement of words (the language) in an unconventional form. This unconventional 'speech' also conveys a sense of serenity and elegance from the use of two different white textures between the foreground and the background.

Creator: Marian Bantjes
Title: ***The Audacity of Hov***
Exemplifies: Language and speech

Left – 'The Audacity of Hov' appeared in the fifthteenth anniversary issue of 'VIBE' magazine for an article on JayZ. The traditional arrangement of letterforms, which make up the phrase, is given a very distinct and unexpected tone of voice, or speech, by rendering the calligraphy in sparkling gold glitter.

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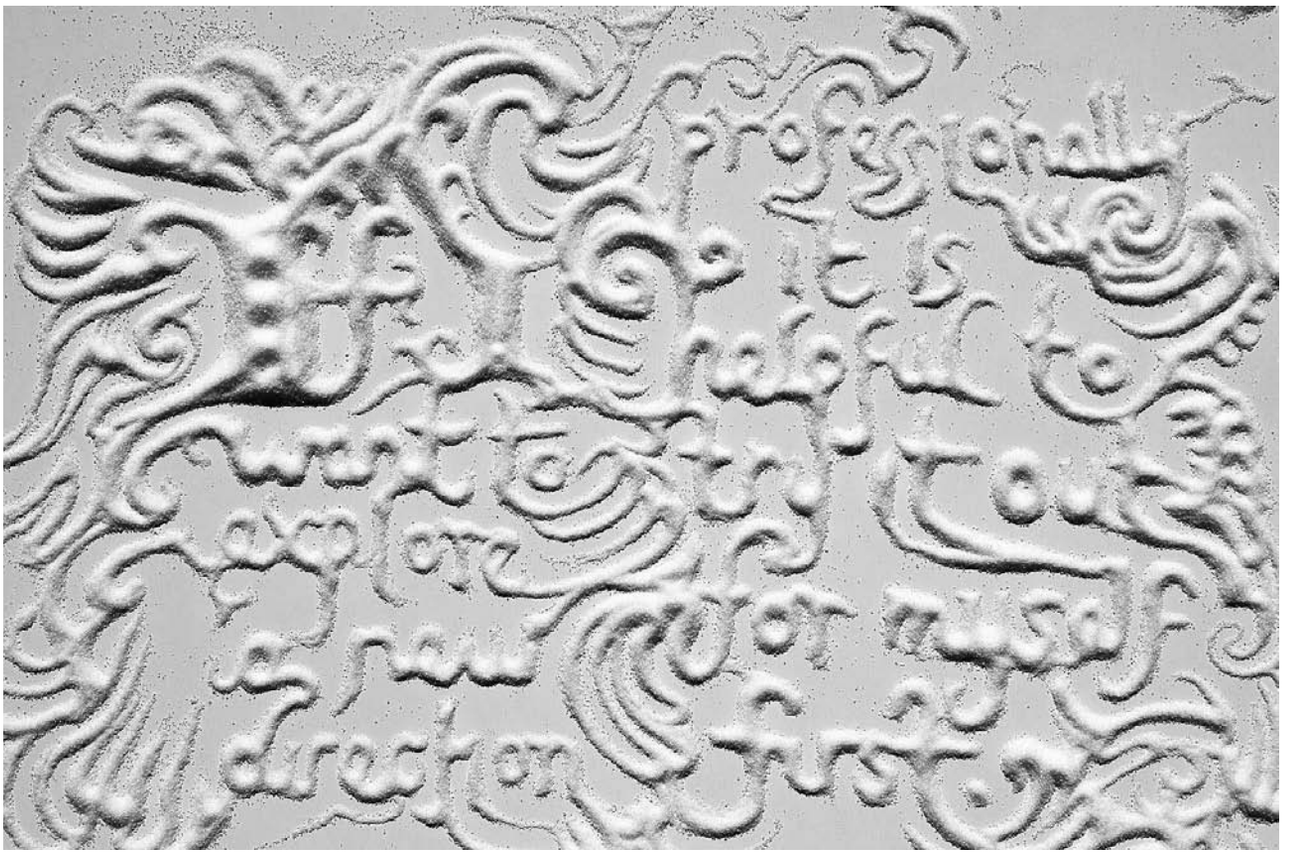
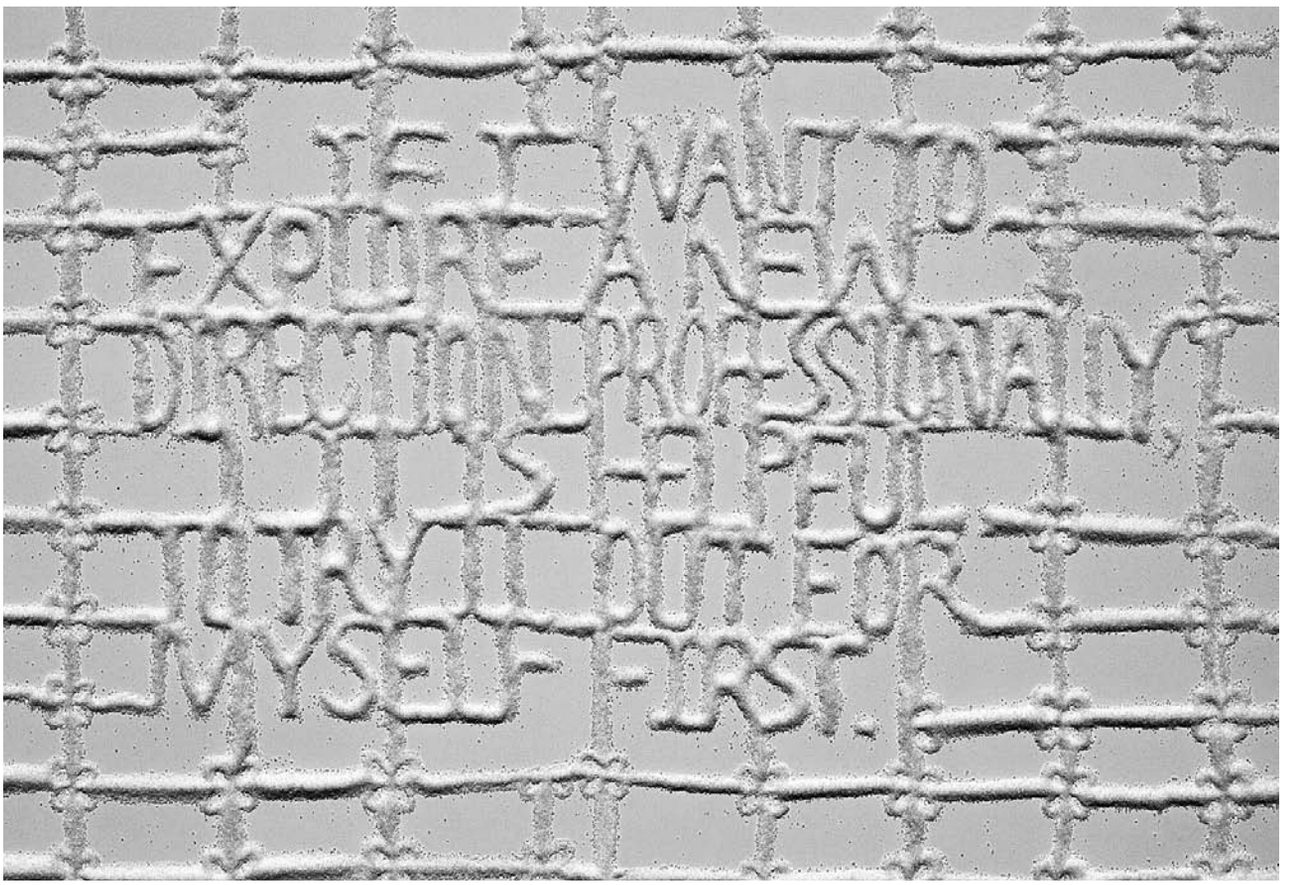




TEXT AND IMAGE

4. TEXT AND IMAGE
Digital and analogue codes

For linguists, codes must be digital, which is to say that they are composed of a fixed number of digits or units. In ‘Image, Music, Text’[1], Roland Barthes asks whether it is possible to have codes which are analogical.

1. Barthes R. *Image, Music, Text* (1977)

ABCD
EFGH
IJKL
MNOP
QRST

Digital codes are paradigms where each of the units in the set are clearly different from each other. (As we saw in chapter two, the two basic characteristics of a paradigm are that the units in the set have something in common but each unit is obviously different from the others in the set.) The alphabet is arguably the most common example of a digital code.

Analogue codes are paradigms where the distinctions between each unit are not clear; they operate on something more like a continuous scale. Music or dance, for example, could be described as analogue codes. However, many analogue codes are reduced to digital codes as a means of reproducing them in another form. Musical notation, for example, reduces the analogue qualities of sound to distinct notes with individual marks.

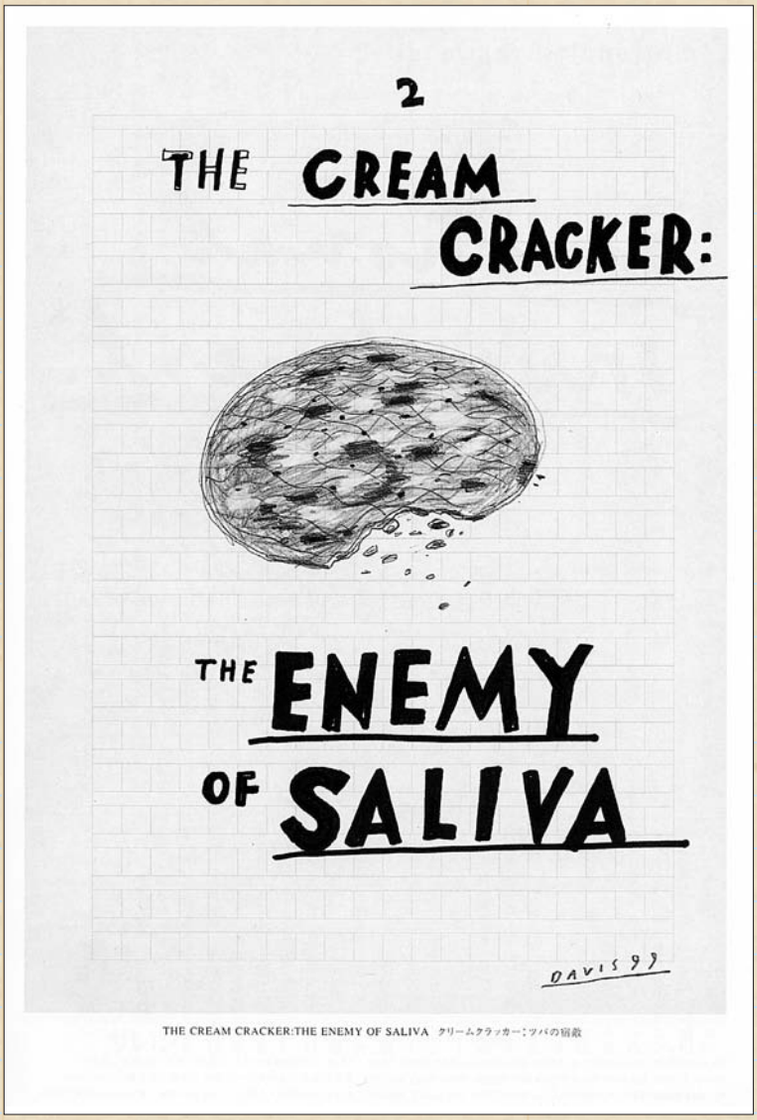
Jas Bhachu
Rubik's Cube Font Generator

Each individual part of the drawings we recognise as letterforms is separated out in an ingenious 'Rubik's Cube' of geometry that can be combined to make any letter of the Roman alphabet. The geometric shapes form a digital code.

4. TEXT AND IMAGE
Advertising writing

To examine the relationship between text and image, Barthes chooses to focus on compositions from advertising. In advertising, the reader can be sure that signification is always intentional. Nothing is left to chance. It is the purpose of the advertisement to communicate the positive qualities of the product as clearly as possible to the chosen audience. This is demonstrated by Frank Jefkins' three basic principles of effective advertisement writing:

> *1. The advertisement should be of interest and value to the reader. The writer should ask himself, 'How can I interest my prospects in my proposition? How can my offer be of service to prospects?'*
>
> *2. The advertisement should be precise, that is, get to the point as quickly as possible; hence the success of the most hard-worked word in advertising, FREE!*
>
> *3. The advertisement should be concise, saying what it has to say in the fewest necessary words, remembering that an encyclopaedia of many volumes can be concise compared with a verbose novel.* [2]



THE CREAM CRACKER:THE ENEMY OF SALIVA クリームクラッカー：ツバの宿敵

UVWXYZ

2. Jefkins F.
Advertisement Writing
(1976)

The three messages

Barthes sets out a system for reading text/image combinations, which comprises three separate messages. The first message is described as the linguistic message. This is the text itself, usually in the form of a slogan or a caption to the image. Reading the linguistic message requires a previous knowledge of the particular language employed. The linguistic message can also carry a second-order signifier by implication. For example, an advertisement featuring the word 'Volkswagen' tells us the name of the manufacturer but also signifies certain national characteristics. Notions of high design standards and precision engineering are read at the same time as the name.

The second message is the coded iconic message. This is a symbolic message and works on the level of connotation. The reader is playing a part in the reading by applying their knowledge of the systematic coding of the image. An image of a bowl of fruit, for example, might imply still life, freshness or market stalls.

Paul Davis
Wasteland

Opposite – The text answers the question 'What is it?'. Our attitude to the humble cracker is fixed by the addition of a copy line in a parody of advertising (see p. 74).

Alan Murphy
Feline Hell

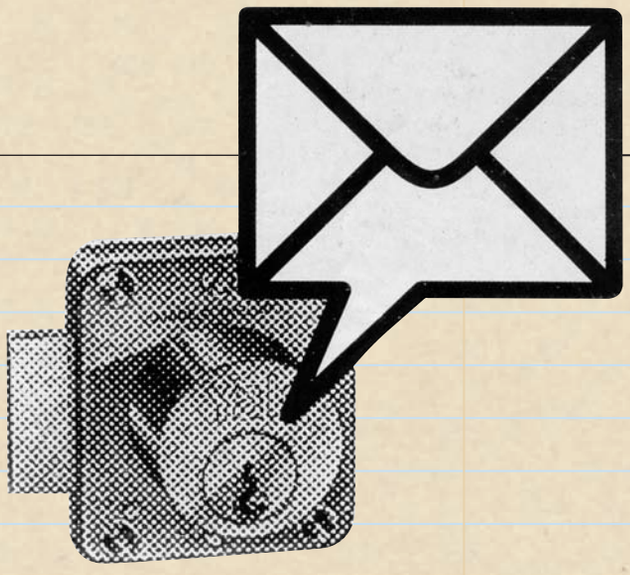
Right – The innocuous drawing of the cat and the flames are changed by the addition of the text calling for an end to the breed. Without the text the cat could almost be keeping itself warm. The advertising parody is reinforced by the addition of the stylised 'HEL', which has the character of a brand name.

4. TEXT AND IMAGE
Advertising writing

The third message is described as the non-coded iconic message. A photograph, for instance, could be described as a message without a code, one simply reads the medium as itself: it is a photograph. This works on the level of denotation.

Although the linguistic message can be easily separated from the other two messages, Barthes maintains that the other two cannot be separated because the viewer reads them at the same time. In other words, the medium cannot be separated from the message; a phenomenon Marshall McLuhan pointed to in his book 'The Medium is the Message'[3].

Text on an image, according to Barthes, constitutes what he calls a parasitic message, designed to quicken the reading with additional signifieds. The addition of text can be a powerful method of altering or fixing the meaning of an image. This is something that is present in a great number of the images we read: in captions, subtitles, film dialogue and comic strips. However, it seems that neither the length of the linguistic message (the text) nor its position are particularly important, but merely the presence of the linguistic message itself. Indeed, it is possible that a long text may only comprise one message, a single global signified. When coupled with an image, text has two possible functions: anchorage and relay.



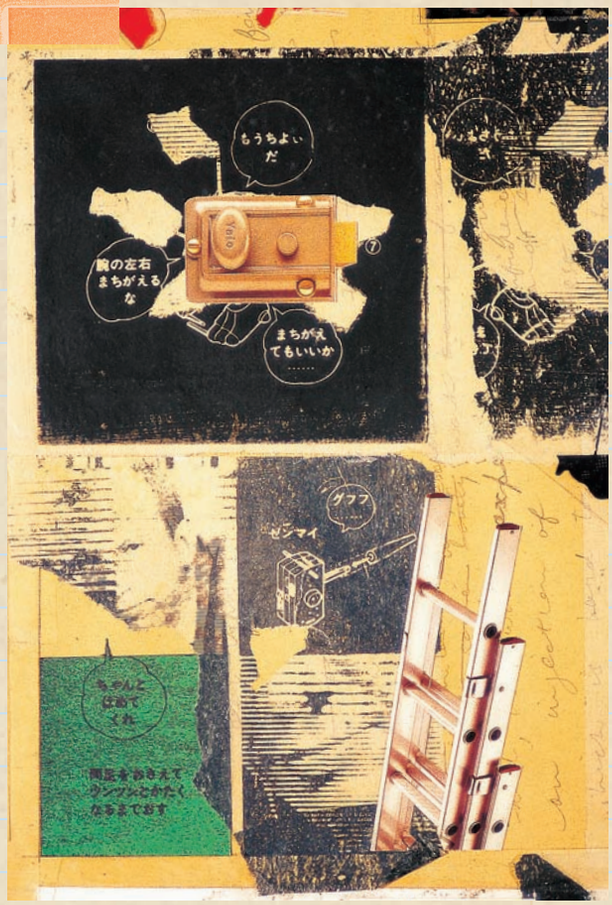
Anchorage and relay

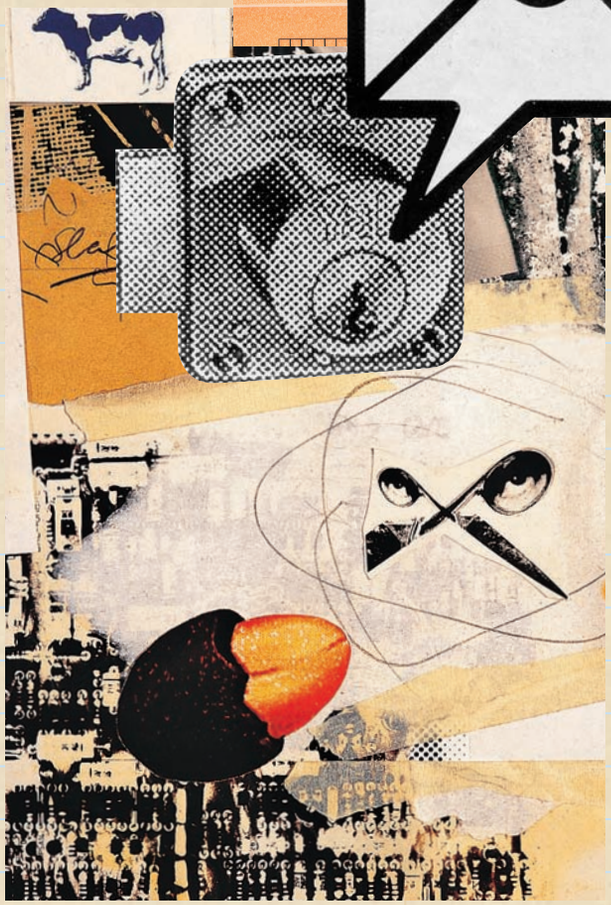
Anchorage, says Barthes, directs the beholder through a number of possible readings of an image, through what he calls a floating chain of signifiers, which causes the reader to ignore some of the signifiers and read others. The text answers the question 'What is it?'.

Text on a connoted image (the coded iconic message) helps the reader to interpret the signifiers they are presented with. Text on a denoted image (the non-coded iconic message) aids recognition. Barthes describes the way in which the reader is remote-controlled to a meaning that has been chosen in advance. He points out that this often has an ideological purpose. Anchorage text can then have a repressive value when applied to an image.

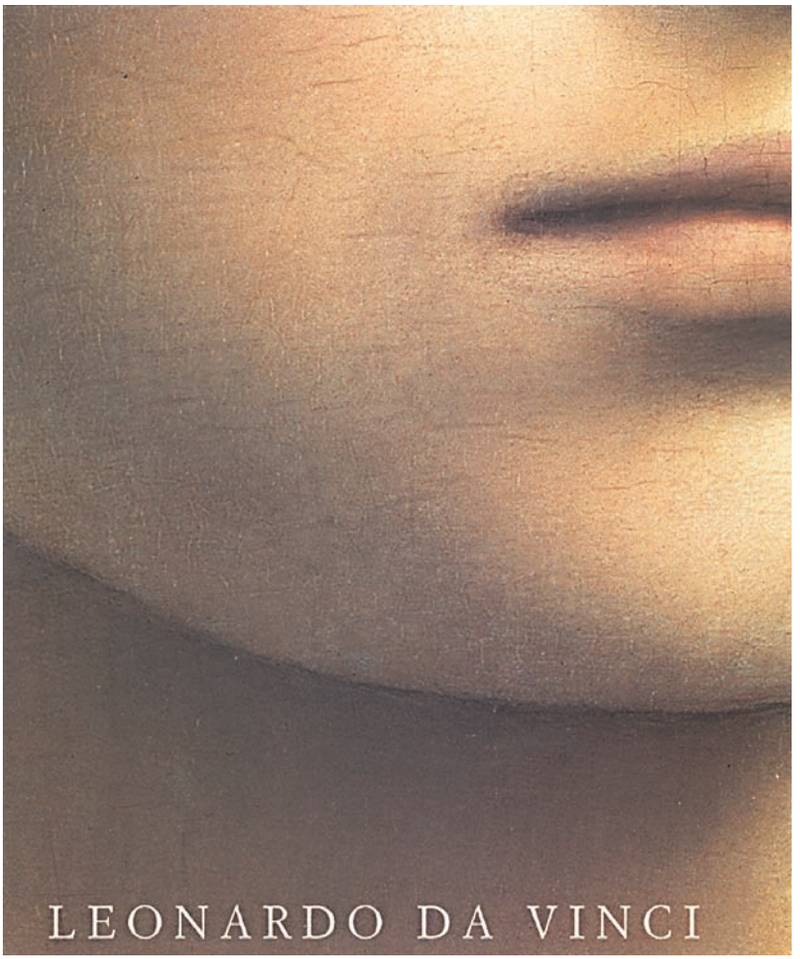
The second possible function, relay, is much less common. The text is usually a snippet of dialogue and works in a complementary way to the image. It can be found in comic strips, for instance, and is particularly important in film. Relay text advances the reading of the images by supplying meanings that are not to be found in the images themselves, as in film dialogue.

3. McLuhan M. and Fiore Q. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967)


もうちょいだ
腕の左右まちがえるな
まちがえてもいいか……
ゲフ
ゼンマイ
ちゃんとはめてくれ
両足をおさえてクシツシとかたくなるまでおす

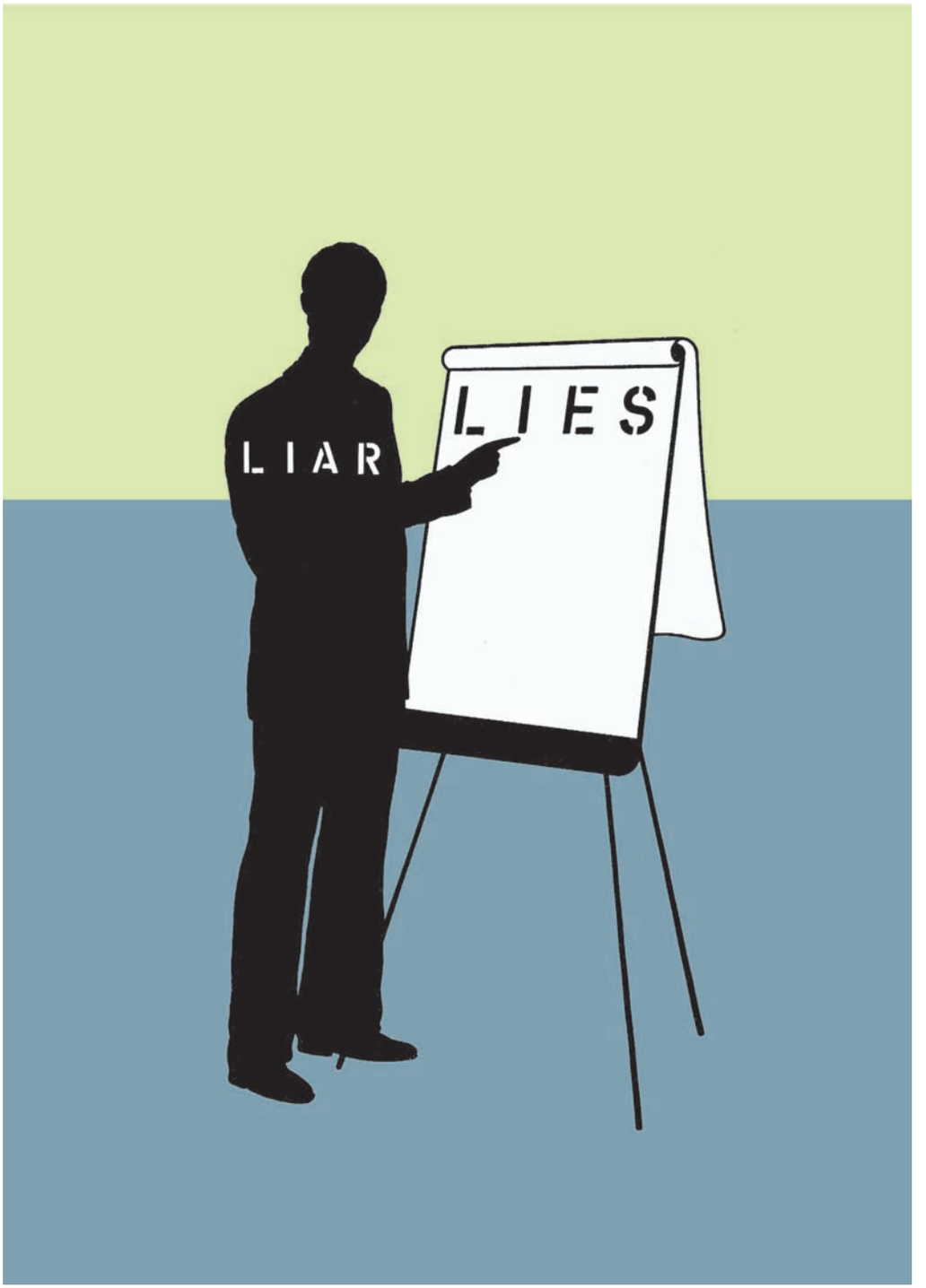


4. TEXT AND IMAGE
Portfolio



Creator: Michael Walsh – New York School of Visual Arts
Title: ***Leonardo da Vinci***
Exemplifies: Anchorage/Value

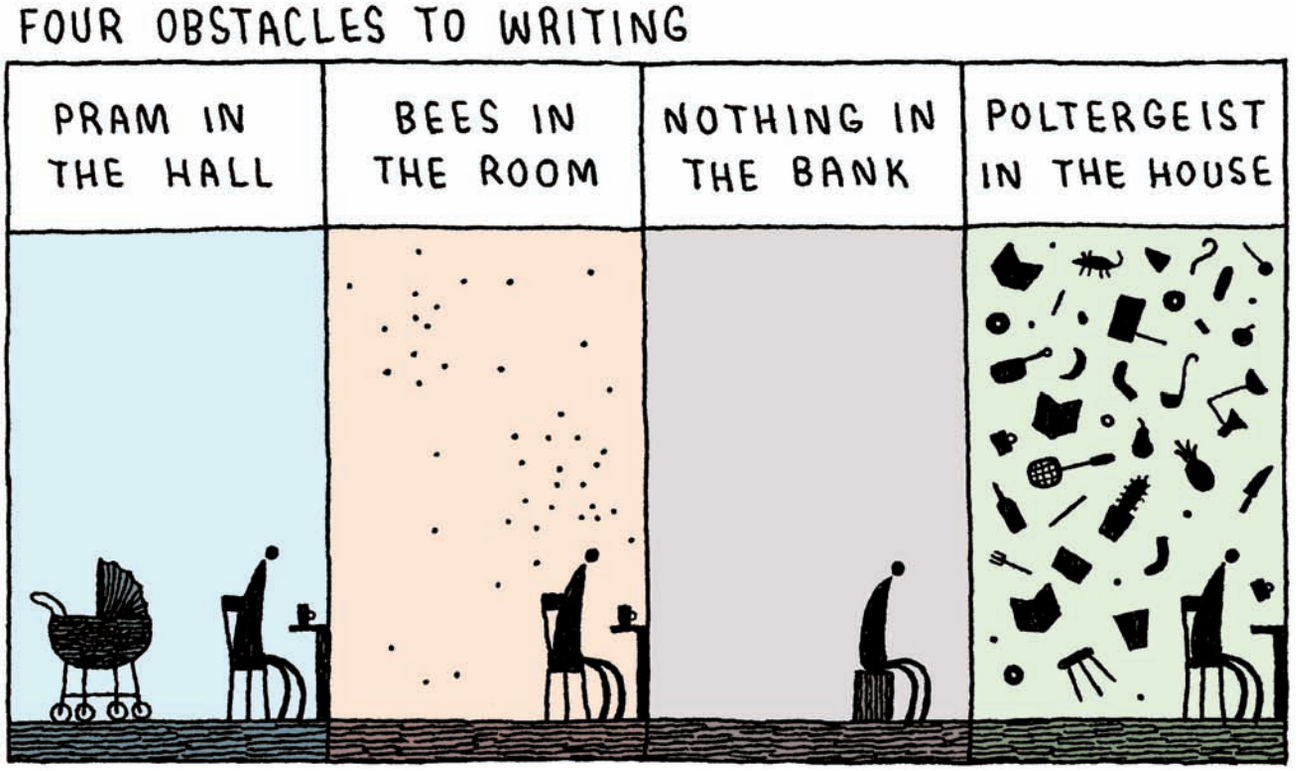
A close-up of the smile in da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' is enlarged to fill the entire cover of this book jacket. This draws the reader's attention to the surface detail of the painting: the brush marks; the cracked canvas; the quality of the light and the colour palette. This is done by deliberately excluding other signs that exist in the painting but fall beyond the boundary of the book jacket. In this instance, the value of the sign is controlled by removing other signs. The addition of the text anchors the reader's uncertainty about the artist; although a reader with a highly defined cultural awareness might not need this additional sign.



Creator: Lawrence Zeegen
Title: ***Liar***
Exemplifies: Anchorage/Value

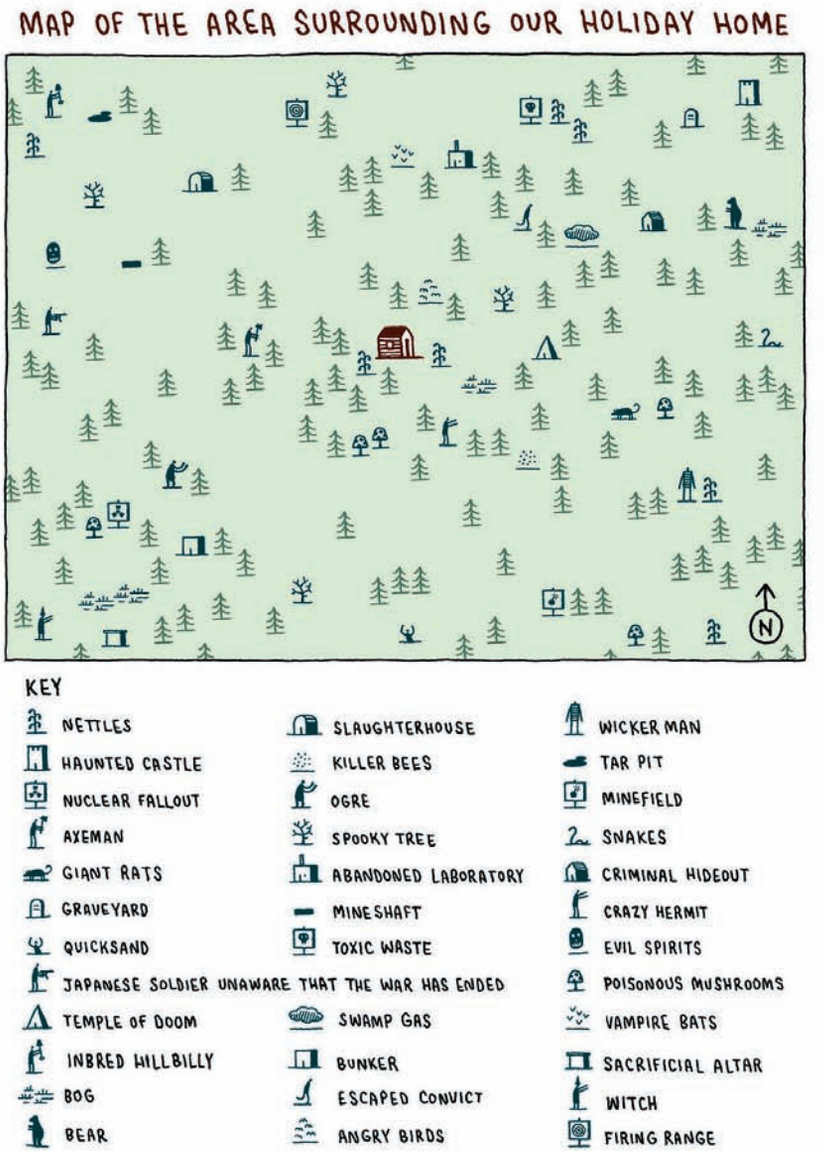
The authority of the managerial figure is undermined by the word 'liar'. The silhouetted figure with his flip chart becomes a sinister character with an unpleasant ulterior motive. As Saussure points out, the value of a sign is dependent on the other signs around it. A similar relationship develops when text is added to the image, adding a second sign. In this instance, any ambiguity on the reader's part is fixed or anchored by the addition of the text. Barthes' floating chain of signifiers is removed and the reader is remote-controlled to a more fixed reading of the composition.

3-D FRIENDS
HELLO! I'M A SPHERE
...AND I'M A CUBE!
WE CAN NEVER TRULY KNOW ANY-ONE. WE ARE ALONE IN A COLD, UNCARING UNIVERSE.


FOUR OBSTACLES TO WRITING
PRAM IN THE HALL
BEES IN THE ROOM
NOTHING IN THE BANK
POLTERGEIST IN THE HOUSE

Creator: Tom Gauld
Title: ***Map of the Area Surrounding our Holiday Home***
Exemplifies: Relay Text

Right – In this example, the icons on the map still have a degree of ambiguity to their meaning, which is fixed by the addition of relay text. A running figure, for example, which could carry a variety of different meanings, is confirmed by the addition of the text. What could be an athlete or a jogger or someone who is late for a meeting is explained by the text as 'escaped convict'.



Creator: Tom Gauld
Title: ***3-D Friends***
Exemplifies: Relay text

Opposite top – In both of these examples, the illustrator uses anchorage and relay text. In '3-D Friends' there is very little signification to be found from the three frames of the comic strip. The three shapes simply float in space as time passes. In the first frame, the text anchors the image by answering the question, 'What is it?' The shapes speak directly to the viewer and explain, 'I'm a sphere' and 'I'm a cube.' The second frame, however, shows a different relationship between the text and the image. Here the text functions as relay text because it supplies the meaning. It is typical of relay text that it should be a piece of dialogue: 'We can never truly know anyone, we are alone in a cold, uncaring universe.' Arguably, the absence of text in the final frame also functions as relay text. Having established dialogue in the other two, we then read the silence in the final frame as a text. The absence of dialogue is as potent as the dialogue in the previous two frames.

Creator: Tom Gauld
Title: ***Four Obstacles to Writing***
Exemplifies: Relay text

Opposite bottom – In 'Four Obstacles to Writing', the text in the first two frames functions as anchorage text. In the first frame 'Pram in the Hall', the text reaffirms what the non-coded image shows. In the second frame, the text 'Bees in the Room' answers the 'What is it?' question posed by the coded image because here the reader cannot be certain what the tiny dots signify. The final two frames, 'Nothing in the Bank' and 'Poltergeist in the House', fix the ambiguity of the meaning in the images. The third image simply shows an empty background and the text explains the reason for this emptiness. In the final frame, the reader can identify the various objects pictured in the space around the central character, but it is the text that helps the reader make sense of why they are there and what they mean in this context.

4. TEXT AND IMAGE Portfolio

Go to SELF-DIRECTED STUDY: EXERCISES

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Creator: Francesca Williams aka Bunny Bissoux
Title: ***Pixie Shoes***
Exemplifies: Anchorage

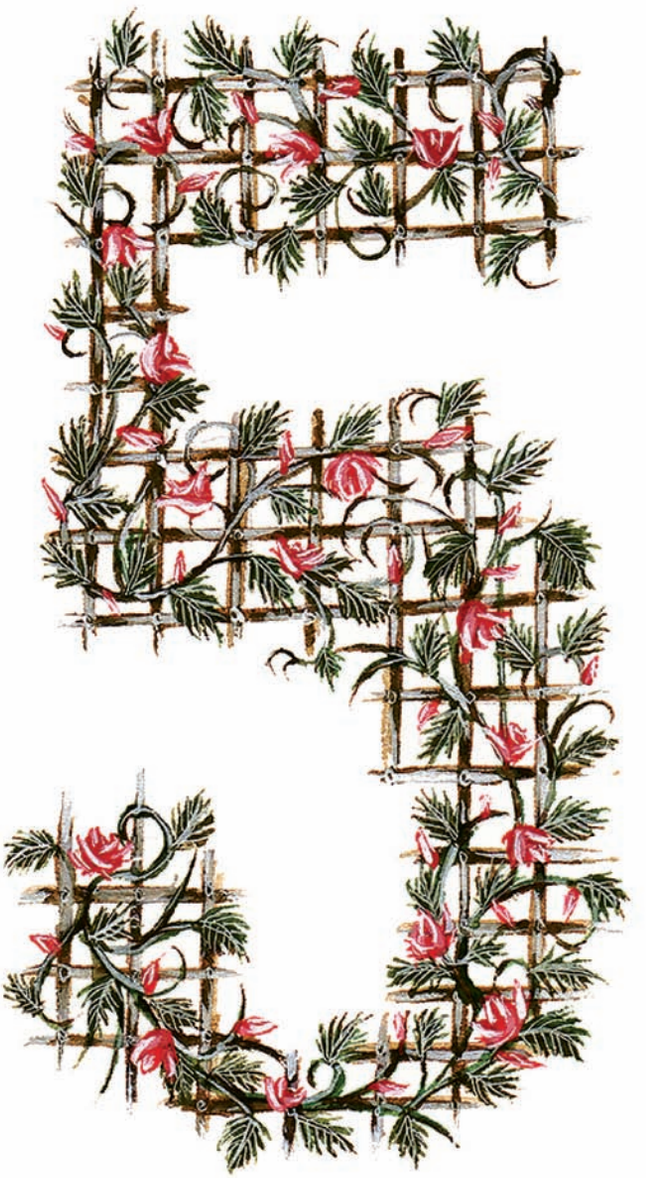
Above – A simple self-initiated sketch as part of a series in a small book of recent shopping purchases. The drawing itself gives a limited amount of information about the shoes – their colour, for example. However, the ambiguities and the gaps are taken care of by the addition of text, which effectively anchors the drawing. The image of the shoes shows a coded message where specific physical characteristics of the shoes are suggested rather than described. The material the shoes are made from, their precise shape and their colour are all lost to the reader until the text, 'These are my magical new green pixie shoes', explains some of the missing signs in the drawing.

Creator: William John Hewitt
Title: ***7th July London Bombings***
Exemplifies: Anchorage

Opposite – Part of a series of documentary drawings about the London Bombings. Pictured here are two of the 59 drawings of the day. They are visual notes and impressions of the event and as such there is very little real information that can be gleaned from the drawings. In the top frame, the text, 'Two motorcyclists – police or paramedics come round the van', explains exactly what we are looking at and anchors the image. In the bottom frame, the text anchors part of the image and provides relay meaning. To the question in our minds regarding what the building is, the author answers 'Embankment station'. The nature of black line drawings cannot convey the man 'with grey hair', so it is stated in the text.

Two motorcyclists – police or paramedics come round the van

walking towards Embankment station. I notice, for the ever, some rather plush public toilets to the East of the sta a smartly dressed man in a grey pinstripe suit man hair, ci



OFFI-
CIAL
LAN-
GUAGE

5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Habitus

Pierre Bourdieu classified human endeavour and knowledge in terms of fields. Some fields are clearly defined by making entry into that field difficult to attain and, in general, the more difficult the entry the more defined the field. The field of law might be considered a clearly defined field. Those in the field could be said to be sharing or struggling with a common pursuit and share in its own particular discourse. The visual arts would be described as an activity that takes place within the field of cultural production. Like all other fields, this field is constantly changing, as is its membership and its discourse.

1. **Bourdieu P.** *Intellectual Field and Creative Project* (1966) in **Young M.F.D.** *Knowledge and Control* (1971)

The notion of creative and intellectual fields was extended to establish the idea that each field pre-exists its membership; in the case of the field of cultural production, the field pre-exists the artist. Within the field there are a number of official positions, such as graphic designer, for example, which offer a range of possibilities. These possibilities are limited by a number of factors, such as education, social background, gender and age. This influences choices whilst also reinforcing the validity of the field. It is generally agreed that individuals carry with them some idea, perhaps subconsciously, of which position to take up on their arrival within the field. You could call this a sense of vocation. It is this sense of vocation that became described as habitus. Bourdieu states that the choice between the territories where we will take up position as individuals (the choice of habitus within the language) is accomplished without consciousness in every situation[1]. Apparently insignificant aspects of everyday life, such as ways of doing things or body language, for example, and the constructed images we witness every day, all contribute to the formation of habitus.

5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
The production of legitimate language

Bourdieu begins his assertions about legitimate language with Saussure's observation that neither languages nor dialects have natural limits[2]. All that is necessary is a set of speaking subjects who are willing to make themselves the bearers of the language or dialect using an intrinsic and autonomous logic. Bloomfield describes this as a 'linguistic community – a group of people who use the same system of linguistic signs.' [3]

Bourdieu, however, goes on to point out that external as well as internal factors affect the limits of a language, and that externally there is a political process that unifies the speaking subjects and leads them to accept, in practice, the use of the official language. In order to successfully impose this language as the official language, it is necessary to have a general codification that is sustained by creating institutional conditions that enable it to be recognised throughout the whole jurisdiction of a certain political authority. It follows that this official language has territorial limits. An unofficial language, a dialect for example, has not undergone this institutional process of control; it is internally driven by its own independent logic. We will look at this in more detail in chapter six.

The official language imposes itself as the only legitimate language within a territorial limit. In the context of this book, the territory could be described as the field of cultural production and would include various positions within it, such as a graphic designer or artist. This is particularly true of situations that characterise themselves as official. This will be discussed later on in this chapter.

Grammarians and teachers working from institutions become jurists who examine the usage of language to the point of the legal sanction of academic qualifications. These qualifications identify the legitimate language within a territory and enable individuals to take up positions within a field. If we look at the vocational art and design disciplines of graphic or fashion design, in most cases entry into the field is acquired through the successful completion of an academic qualification, such as a degree or a diploma. The process of completing the course generates a portfolio, which is used in selection at interview, but in most cases the interview is only possible once the award has been attained. The use of language, both written and visual, has been judged and sanctioned by an institution:

> *'The educational system, whose scale of operations grew in extent and intensity throughout the nineteenth century, no doubt directly helped to devalue popular modes of expression, dismissing them as 'slang' and 'gibberish' (as can be seen from teachers' marginal comments on essays) and to impose recognition of the legitimate language.'* [4]

Recent shifts in bilingual education in the USA illustrate this well. In an essay entitled 'Language Wars'[5], René Galindo points out a number of propositions passed in the late 1990s. A California English Only initiative (proposition 63) was followed by a provision for citizens and anyone doing business in the

2. Bourdieu P. *Language and Symbolic Power* **(1991)**

3. Bloomfield L. *Language* **(1958)**

4. Bourdieu P. *ibid.*

5. Galindo R. *Language Wars: The Ideological Dimensions of the Debates on Bilingual Education* **(1997)**

the page itself is a sign

The book of Genesis tells the story of the Tower of Babel. At that time all the citizens spoke the same language and everyone could understand each other. To celebrate this they decided to build a tower that reached towards the heavens. God in his wisdom decided that this must be stopped. To do this, the most effective method was to fragment their language so that hierarchies would develop.
Of course, linguists do not take the story to be an accurate historical text but it serves as a useful metaphor of how language can be used as an instrument of control.

state to sue local governments for actions that diminish or ignore the role of English as the common language of California. Proposition 227, called English for the Children, was passed in 1998 and decreed that all children should be taught English and anyone who wants their children to be taught a second language would have to make a special written request. Galindo summarises the debate:

> *'... competition for value between different constituencies that takes place through the manipulation of symbolic assets such as language(s)... '* [6]

This competition for value can also be seen in the way slang is included in dictionaries as recognised omissions from legitimate language. Slang phrases often appear in italics, a typographic signal of difference or separation, as popular or common uses. Indeed, any value or capital (cultural or monetary) awarded to individuals always arises from a deviation from the most common usage. Commonplace usage is seen as trivial or vulgar. Capital, such as qualifications, is awarded to well-chosen words/signs/images that are seen as dignified or lofty. As the educational system is funded by and answerable to the state, then it could be said that the production of a legitimate language is bound up with the field of economic production.

> *'Obligatory on official occasions and in official places (schools, public administrations, political institutions etc.), this state language becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured.'* [7]

It is worth noting that the highest proportion of graffiti attacks (an extreme form of unofficial visual language) take place in schools, the institutions responsible for the maintenance of the official language and on local authority (state) property.

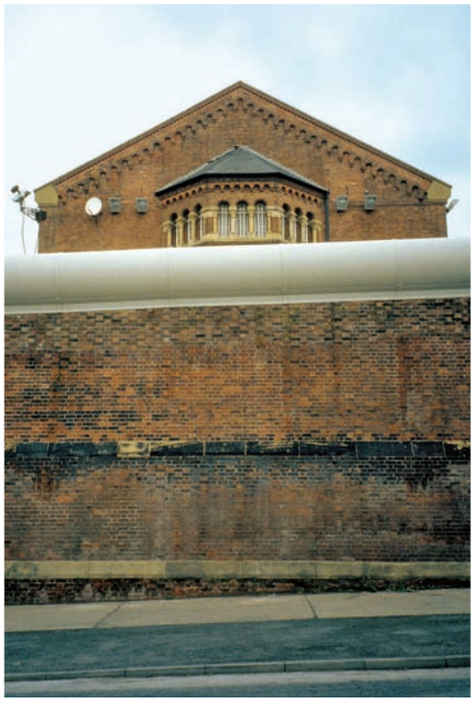
Bourdieu points out that for a particular language, or a particular use of language, to impose itself as legitimate, the different dialects, whether class, regional or ethnic group, have to be practically measured against the legitimate language. Without support from external agencies, these dialects or unofficial languages (which are internally driven) cannot be imposed as the norm for another territory, despite the possibility of using these differences as a pretext for declaring one superior to another. The theory follows that these differences can be developed into a system for determining hierarchical position.

If we look, for example, at the appearance of the visual language of the pop artists in the 1960s, and the criticism that now accompanies this work, we can see the way in which the discourse surrounding it has developed to authorise the work and enable its acceptance as part of the official visual culture.

6. Galindo R. *Language Wars: The Ideological Dimensions of the Debates on Bilingual Education* **(1997)**

7. Bourdieu P. *Language and Symbolic Power* **(1991)**

5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
The production of legitimate language



Society awards capital to individuals for their use of language. This can be monetary or cultural capital. In the case of good use of the official language, an educational award such as an honours degree or a PhD could be the cultural capital leading to monetary rewards. The reverse is also true for the use of an unofficial language, such as graffiti or vandalism, where a spell in detention could be the reward.

Capital

In its open celebration of popular culture, pop art caused a great deal of consternation amongst those at the centre of the field of cultural production.

> *'There was a widely held view in some circles in the 1950s that serious painting had to be abstract, that it was retrograde for artists to make reference to the outside world by engaging in representation or illusion.'* [8]

The British artist Peter Phillips was studying at the Royal College of Art in London, the most prestigious art school in the UK, marked by its Royal Charter. When he first produced what has become known as some of the finest examples of British pop art, he was castigated by his tutors. Their disapproval was so strong that Phillips was forced to transfer from the Painting School to the less noble, but popular, Television School for his final year. The celebrated David Hockney was threatened with expulsion at around the same time for his refusal to complete (official) written work. Allen Jones fared less well and was expelled from his college. Compare this attitude towards the work with these excerpts from a recent critique on the same work:

> *'Phillips painted a large canvas, Purple Flag, in which he synthesised his practical skills and his intuitive response to Italian pre-Renaissance painting with an open expression of his enjoyment of funfairs and the game of pinball... . The smaller motifs incorporated in the lower half of the painting... establish an alternative timescale as in early Italian altar pieces, in which predella panels establish a narrative compliment to the starkly formal central image.'* [9]

This method of referencing the past is commonplace in artistic criticism and appears to lend authority to the work by aligning its formal features with those that are already accepted as part of the official discourse.

> *'Some of the recurring characteristics of pop... were anticipated in a variety of developments in European and American Modernism. The basing of images on existing popular sources, for example, had precedents in the work of nineteenth-century painters such as Gustav Courbet and Edouard Manet.'* [10]

Rules

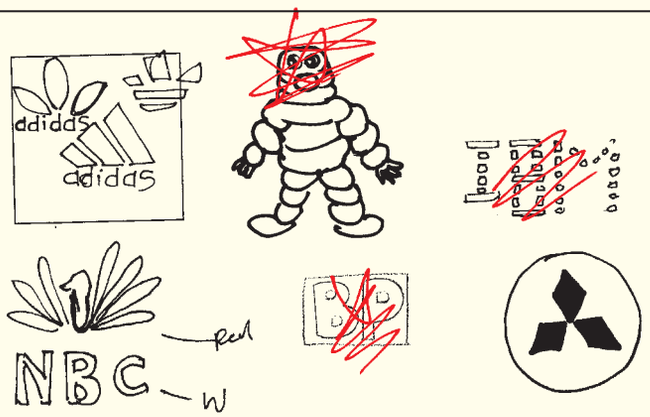
Visual arts publications, which deal with the craft of making visual work, invariably carry sets of rules on how to successfully employ the official visual language within their various disciplines. Of course, many of these accepted conventions are grounded in experience and are valid observations. The important thing to recognise in the context of this chapter is that there are rules that have become accepted as legitimate practice and are used in education and elsewhere as the norm against which deviation is measured. Here are some examples from graphic design texts:

'... the efficiently designed trademark must be a thing of the barest essentials.' [11]

'... useless elaboration that has been traditionally a feature of bad trademark design.' [12]

'... typefaces can unquestionably be assessed on the basis of artistic quality irrespective of their fashion status; and, conversely, no amount of fashionable success can change this assessment for better or worse.' [13]

'Visual analogies which most clearly illustrate meaning or the spirit of a word should be sought; for example, the letter O could be the visual equivalent of the sun, a wheel, an eye.' [14]



Any value or capital (cultural or monetary) awarded to individuals always arises from a deviation from the most common usage. Commonplace usage is seen as trivial or vulgar.

8. Livingstone M. *Pop Art* (1990)

9. Livingstone M. *ibid.*

10. Livingstone M. *ibid.*

11. Horn F.A. *Lettering at Work* (1955)

12. Horn F.A. *ibid.*

13. Hutchings R.S. *The Western Heritage of Type Design* (1963)

14. Rand P. *A Designer's Art* (1985)

5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
The competition for cultural legitimacy

It was generally agreed that the social uses of language owe their social value to their being organised into systems of differences. To speak is to adopt a style that already exists and is marked by its position in a hierarchy of styles, which corresponds to a hierarchy of social groups. In a sense then, these different styles/dialects are both classified and classifying by marking those who use them.

Foucault points out that the biological distinction of gender has been overlaid with a systematic set of discourses that have become an organising principle in recruiting labour and consuming and producing goods – all of which lead to gender-dominated practices[15].

'Knowledge and Control' shows Bourdieu outline a competition where the public is seen as both the prize and the arbitrator; one in which competitors cannot be identified with the competition for commercial success[16]. This is certainly true of the experiences of designers within the field of cultural production, where work that can be identified as commercial is subject to varying degrees of derision. This is perhaps even more intense in the fine arts, where there is reluctance to acknowledge that art is a commercial activity. This declared refusal to meet popular demand could encourage art for art's sake and increase the intensity of emotions between members of an artistic community. Mutual admiration societies appear, which are inevitably accompanied by formal award ceremonies as a result of artists addressing an ideal reader.

15. **Foucault M.** *The History of Sexuality* **(1978)**

16. **Bourdieu P.** *Intellectual Field and Creative Project* **(1966)** in **Young M.F.D.** *Knowledge and Control* **(1971)**

Flux and hierarchy

Another condition that Bourdieu offers as essential to maintaining the permanence of an official language, is the need for a process of continuous creation and review through an ongoing struggle between the different authorities within a field of specialised production. A field must be in constant flux to be able to survive. So although one cannot be seen to be identified with wholly commercial issues, there is however a practical commitment to the economic field (advertising, constructed realities, work ethic) by the constant drive to maintain the status quo at the centre of a specialised field. The example of the reception given to Peter Phillips' work is part of an endless process of assimilation, which is necessary for the field to maintain its authority. Carl Andre's pile of bricks was finally accepted when the Tate Gallery bought the second version of the piece in 1972 despite the ridicule that heralded the first version in 1966. By 1976, the bricks were exhibited alongside paintings by John Constable in the gallery in London. The history of the field of cultural production is littered with similar examples.

The relationships between different agents within a specialised field (publisher/author, painter/curator) leads us to question the traditional perception of authorship. Bourdieu describes this as collective, with each agent or partner employing the socially established idea of the other partner. This judgement is a representation of their place within the particular specialised field. He provides us with examples of activities that fall between noble, cultural activities and vulgar, commonplace activities in the forms of photography and cinema. The divided opinion and controversy between the cultivated classes is used to place photography halfway between the poles of high and low culture. The position of photography would then determine the relationship between the photographer and the painter. Although it could be argued that photography has become more acceptable to those at the centre of the field of cultural production (since 1991, when Bourdieu wrote 'Language and Symbolic Power'), there remains evidence of a reluctance to fully accept the media into the fine arts. This can be seen through the varying degree to which it is resourced in art colleges throughout the UK, with some colleges providing distinct pathways for photographers and film/video makers, while others make no practical provision at all.

5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
The competition for cultural legitimacy

Lucy McLauchlan
Jackdaw

It is generally accepted that a designer works in a 'commercial' area and artists make work that is 'issue based'. Jackdaw is an example of how a designer/illustrator develops their own visual language through exploring issues such as new media, subject matter or scale. This work is based on Aesop's fable 'The Vain Jackdaw' and is 2x0.8m in size, black marker pens on plywood.

The acclaimed designer Paul Rand points out that there remains a discernable hierarchy within the practices that make up the visual arts:

> *'That graphic design is generally considered a minor art has more to do with posturing than it does with reality. The paucity of great art is no more prevalent among designers than it is among painters. To be sure there is a basic difference between graphic design and painting. But that difference is one of need and does not preclude consideration of form or quality. It merely adds more stress to the normal difficulties entailed in producing original work.'* [17]

This perception is built on historical ideologies that show an outright contempt for artistic works with any functional value.

> *'Nothing is truly beautiful except that which can serve for nothing.'* [18]

Although institutions such as the Arts Council in the UK were set up with the aim of making the arts more accessible to all classes, Paul Willis points out that:

> *'The Arts Council withdrew very promptly from the site of popular consumption.'* [19]

However, Willis also points out that this high culture cannot ignore low culture.

> *' "Elite and official" culture can no longer hope to colonise, dominate or contain everyday life because there is already something there which grows from its own resources – a meaning-making and ordinary cultural production now full of implications for the rest of society.'* [20]

17. **Rand P.** *A Designer's Art* **(1985)**

18. **Gautier T.** in **Rand P.** *A Designer's Art* **(1985)**

19. **Willis P.** *Common Culture* **(1990)**

20. **Willis P.** *ibid.*

21. **Austin J.L.** *How to Do Things with Words* **(1955)**

Being able to recognise and employ Legitimate Language does not necessarily empower the speaker or artist without another set of conditions. The words themselves have no power unless the user is 'authorised' to use them.

Authorised language

It is obvious that social conditions and social ritual have a bearing on the use of language. It is a principle of drama that the nature of acts must be consistent with the nature of the surroundings. This phenomenon can certainly be observed within the institutions, mentioned earlier, whose role it is to impose, defend and sanction legitimate language. The lecture theatre provides an excellent example of Burke's observations on drama. The theatre, the lectern, the books are all instruments of an official discourse deemed worthy of publication. The lecture is granted as legitimate, not by being understood, but by being delivered by an authorised and licensed (qualified) person in a legitimate situation. One notion that is particularly good at highlighting this is what Bourdieu calls 'the magical act'. This is described as the attempt, within the sphere of social action, to act through words beyond the limits of delegated authority. The visual arts is full of examples of the magical act, where the semiotics of the official and the corporate have been skilfully employed to communicate the ideas and feelings of the individual.

> *'Suppose, for example, I see a vessel on the stocks, walk up and smash the bottle hung at the stem, proclaim "I name this ship the Mr Stalin" and for good measure kick away the chocks: but the trouble is, I was not the person chosen to name it.'* [21]

5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Portfolio

Creator: **Stefan Sagmeister**
Title: ***Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far***
Exemplifies: **Official language**

Left – Four of 15 covers of the book 'Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far' by Stefan Sagmeister, which accompanied an exhibition of the same name in Deitch Projects' Grand Street gallery in New York. Sagmeister draws on the discourse of high art by creating 15 limited-edition book covers. The reader's perception is shifted away from mass-produced items towards collectible, high-art items more readily associated with official visual culture.

Right – Sample spreads from the book featuring the maxim: 'Trying to Look Good Limits My Life'. The work produced from the maxim appears in wildly varying forms and has been published all over the world in spaces normally reserved for advertising or promotions, on billboards, magazine spreads; on the cover of an annual report. Sagmeister projects a series of unofficial informal texts on to an official cultural space. The designer anticipates that the audience will read the page as a sign and the billboard as a sign. This reading of official context at the same time as the unofficial text lends authority to the message and results in what is effectively a magical act.

This deliberately playful approach to context and his ability to manipulate the commercial world to his own ends, leads to Sagmeister's work being described as sitting between graphic design and art.

TRYING TO LOOK GOOD LIMITS MY LIFE.

I REALIZE I POSSESS the need to always seem like a nice person. I also recognize this need is restrictive.

CLOSELY RELATED TO MY DESIRE to look good is my fear of confrontation—I love to avoid conflict—as well as my fear of rejection. Many doors simply close because I don't want to find myself in a situation where somebody has a chance to say no to me.

WHILE QUEUING in a long check-in line at Tokyo's Narita Airport, author and information architect Richard Saul Wurman told me his life's motto: You don't ask—you don't get, a maxim made all the more memorable by the fact that, while explaining it to me, he asked and got me upgraded to business class.

YEARS AGO I READ Frank Lloyd Wright's letters to his clients. He seemed to have no problem appearing to be (and sometimes being) a complete asshole. Similarly, Steve Jobs apparently has no qualms about killing a project countless people worked hard on for months if it turns out not to fit within the company's overall product strategy. While I recognize this attitude as advantageous when it comes to getting things done, I have no desire to treat people shabbily.

AFTER THE SURPRISING AMOUNT of positive feedback we received for *Everything I do always comes back to me*, I was thrilled to receive Morten Salling's call from France, especially since he promised similar amounts of freedom. His brief: "We have billboards; do something."

DESIGNER MATTHIAS ERNSTBERGER and I rented a large-format camera and flew down to Arizona. We brought neither sketches nor preconceived ideas, the strategy being that the desert landscape and materials of Tucson would generate the typographic form. It speaks highly of Morten and his trust in us that he green-lighted the project without ever having been presented with any firm plans.

WE WERE INFLUENCED by the time-based work of artist Allan Wexler (with whom I had given a lecture at Yale years earlier). A diary entry from around this time

The billboards, as they appeared in Saint-Denis, a northern suburb of Paris, were installed in groups so a viewer could see them all from a single vantage point. No product to promote, no service to sell—an advertisement made solely for the enjoyment of the audience.

5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Portfolio

Creator: **Stefan Sagmeister**
Title: ***Keeping a Diary Supports Personal Development***
Exemplifies: **Official language**

The Sagmeister studio was invited to Singapore to produce another instalment of the series 'Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far'. This one-minute clip about the importance of keeping a diary was shot in one day in an abandoned park. These stills show how a personal piece of information, which exists as an unofficial and unsanctioned statement, can be transformed into something that appears to have an authoritative voice. The audience will read the high production values in the photography, the strong symmetrical composition, the epic scale of the settings and the text itself to form a picture of a highly sanctioned piece of work. The work could sit in a visual paradigm alongside epic movies, historic drama or location-based documentary. All of these suggest a high level of production, a level of expense and a sense of broadcasting and publishing that does not apply to unsanctioned communication.

5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Portfolio

Creator: **Pete Richardson**
Title: ***Crowns*** *(Opposite)*
Exemplifies: **Official language**

In the UK, glasses with crown marks have been checked to ensure they are of the specified capacity (pint, half pint etc) to comply with national legislation. The number varies depending on which agency has done the checking. This enables the glass to also be the measuring device and avoids the need to measure the liquid separately and then pour it into a glass.

Each system of language has an independent system of codes that exist independently of any other language system. For each system, all that is needed for it to exist is an agreement from a distinct group of people, a linguistic community. In this case, the combination of crown mark and numeric value is an official sign that has a significance to a distinct audience who have agreed on the code and have learnt the relationships involved. This set of marks is recognised as the only legitimate sign for the measure within a specified political territory. This example also illustrates the three main areas of signs and how the meaning is affected by them: the signs themselves (numbers, crown); the way they are organised into systems (the relationship between the crown and the number); and the context in which they appear (the glass).

1 Not Issued 2 City of London 3 Edinburgh 4 Southwark 5 Stockport 6 Birmingham 7 Nottinghamshire 8 Bedfordshire 9 Cornwall 10 Cornwall 11 Cornwall 12 Cornwall 13 Westminster 14 West Yorkshire 15 Aberdeen City 16 West Yorkshire 17 Strathclyde 18 Derbyshire 19 Derbyshire 20 Kent 21 Camden 22 Dundee 23 East Renfrewshire 24 South Lanarkshire 25 West Yorkshire 26 Staffordshire 27 Kent 28 Tower Hamlets 29 Haringey 30 Southwark 31 Hounslow 32 Staffordshire 33 Staffordshire 34 Glasgow City 35 Renfrewshire 37 Sheffield 38 Bristol 39 Luton 40 Torbay 41 Hull 42 Kent 43 Cumbria 44 Cumbria 45 Cumbria 46 Cumbria 47 Cumbria 48 Cumbria 49 Cumbria 50 Cumbria 51 West Yorkshire 52 North Ayrshire 53 Strathclyde 54 Cheshire 55 Cheshire 56 Halton 57 Cheshire 58 Strathclyde 59 Glasgow City 60 Glasgow City 61 Glasgow City 62 South Lanarkshire 63 South Ayrshire 64 Newcastle upon Tyne 65 Walsall 66 Camden 67 Southwark 68 Plymouth 69 Perth and Kinross 70 Oldham 71 Newcastle upon Tyne 72 Argyll and Bute 73 Angus 74 Poole 75 Devon 76 Manchester 77 West Sussex 78 Luton 79 Plymouth 80 North Yorkshire 81 Staffordshire 82 Staffordshire 83 Salford 84 South Ayrshire 85 Norfolk 86 Wirral 87 Glasgow City 88 Lancashire 89 Merseyside 90 Merseyside 91 Merseyside 92 Lancashire 93 Blackpool 94 Lancashire 95 City of London 96 City of London 97 Lancashire 98 Cheshire 99 Wigan 100 Lancashire 101 Oldham 102 Stockport 103 Milton Keynes 104 Lancashire 105 West Yorkshire 106 West Yorkshire 107 West Yorkshire 108 Wigan 109 Greater Manchester 110 Leicestershire 111 Angus 112 Norfolk 113 Norfolk 114 Buckinghamshire 115 Buckinghamshire 116 Milton Keynes 117 Buckinghamshire 118 Milton Keynes 119 Milton Keynes 120 Oxfordshire 121 Cheshire 122 Dumfries & Galloway 123 Angus 124 Dorset 125 Cambridgeshire 126 Cheshire 127 Liverpool 128 Wirral 129 Lincolnshire 130 Lincolnshire 131 Sandwell 132 Birmingham 133 Wolverhampton 134 Sandwell 135 Wiltshire 136 Wiltshire 137 Yorkshire 138 Yorkshire 139 Cleveland 140 North Yorkshire 141 Derbyshire 142 Derbyshire 143 Derbyshire 144 Derbyshire 145 Derbyshire 146 Aberdeen City 147 Liverpool 148 Durham 149 Devon 150 North Yorkshire 151 Cleveland 152 North Yorkshire 153 Devon 154 Durham 155 Durham 156 Northamptonshire 157 Durham 158 Northamptonshire 159 Durham 160 Durham 161 Poole 162 Bournemouth 163 Dorset 164 Durham 165 Darlington 166 Darlington 167 Durham 168 Durham 169 Darlington 170 Durham 171 West Sussex 172 West Sussex 173 West Sussex 174 West Yorkshire 175 Suffolk 176 Wolverhampton 177 Coventry 178 Birmingham 179 Redbridge 180 Derbyshire 181 Derbyshire 182 Essex 183 Essex 184 Essex 185 Essex 186 Waltham Forest 187 Essex 188 Essex 189 Redbridge 190 Highlands 191 Borders 192 Greater Manchester 193 Wigan 194 Suffolk 195 Suffolk 196 Lincolnshire 197 Brighton & Hove 198 Lincolnshire 199 Manchester 200 Blackburn with Darwen 201 Strathclyde 202 Newport 204 Strathclyde 205 East Sussex 206 Essex 207 Essex 208 Coventry 209 Fife 210 Hereford and Worcester 211 Brighton & Hove 212 Brighton & Hove 213 Glasgow City 214 Hereford 215 East Sussex 216 East Sussex 217 East Sussex 218 East Sussex 219 Newham 220 Buckinghamshire 221 Newham 222 Newham 223 Suffolk 224 Hereford and Worcester 225 Suffolk 226 Strathclyde 227 West Dunbartonshire 228 Newham 229 Dumfries and Galloway 230 Hereford 231 Hereford 232 North Lincolnshire 233 Lancashire 234 Lancashire 235 Nottinghamshire 236 Monmouthshire 237 Hereford and Worcester 238 Hereford and Worcester 239 Southwark 240 Grampian 241 Wolverhampton 242 South Tyneside 243 Walsall 244 South Tyneside 245 Wolverhampton 246 Norfolk 247 West Lothian 248 Reading 249 Reading 250 Brighton & Hove 252 Cardiff 253 Warwickshire 254 Slough 255 North Yorkshire 256 North Lincolnshire 257 East Riding of Yorkshire 258 Highlands 259 Powys 260 Sefton 261 Warrington 262 Wirral 263 Warrington 264 Hereford and Worcester 265 Hampshire 266 Cambridgeshire 267 Suffolk 269 Suffolk 270 Coventry 271 Suffolk 272 Suffolk 273 North Yorkshire 274 Not Issued 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5. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE Portfolio

Go to SELF-DIRECTED STUDY: EXERCISES

pages 184–185

Creator: **Katy Dawkins**
Title: ***Interference (Plaque)***
Exemplifies: **Authorised language**

Left and above – Part of a series of graphic interventions in public spaces. The original text is taken from the unofficial communication of graffiti, found in various parts of the city; it is then redrawn using a legitimate and authorised visual language before being returned to its original environment. By using characteristics and materials from an authorised visual code, the designer is able to transfer the message from unofficial to official language. This transfer, acting beyond the realm of delegated authority, is described as a magical act.

Creator: **Daniel Eatock**
Title: ***Price-Tag Gift Wrap offset on paper, edition of 300***
Exemplifies: **Authorised language**

Opposite – Individuals were invited to participate in a public gift exchange that would generate an American version of Eatock's 'Price-Tag Gift Wrap'. Participants were asked to buy items (bearing removable price tags) that could be offered as gifts. Each participant brought his or her gift item to the gallery, its price tag was carefully removed (in keeping with the convention of removing the price) and reapplied in a random pattern on a single sheet of paper. Once the price-tag sheets were printed, they were used to wrap all the gift items brought to the gallery and these were then displayed on shelves as a work in the exhibition. Every gift brought to the gallery is represented on the paper by its corresponding price tag. At the end of the show each person who gave an item returned to the gallery to select a gift. Would participants open the gift to discover the item inside or keep the artwork intact and conceal the gift?

Eatock highlights the gap in cultural hierarchy between the gallery as a high-art activity and the low art of consumption and shopping by deliberately transferring the visual language of one culture on to another.

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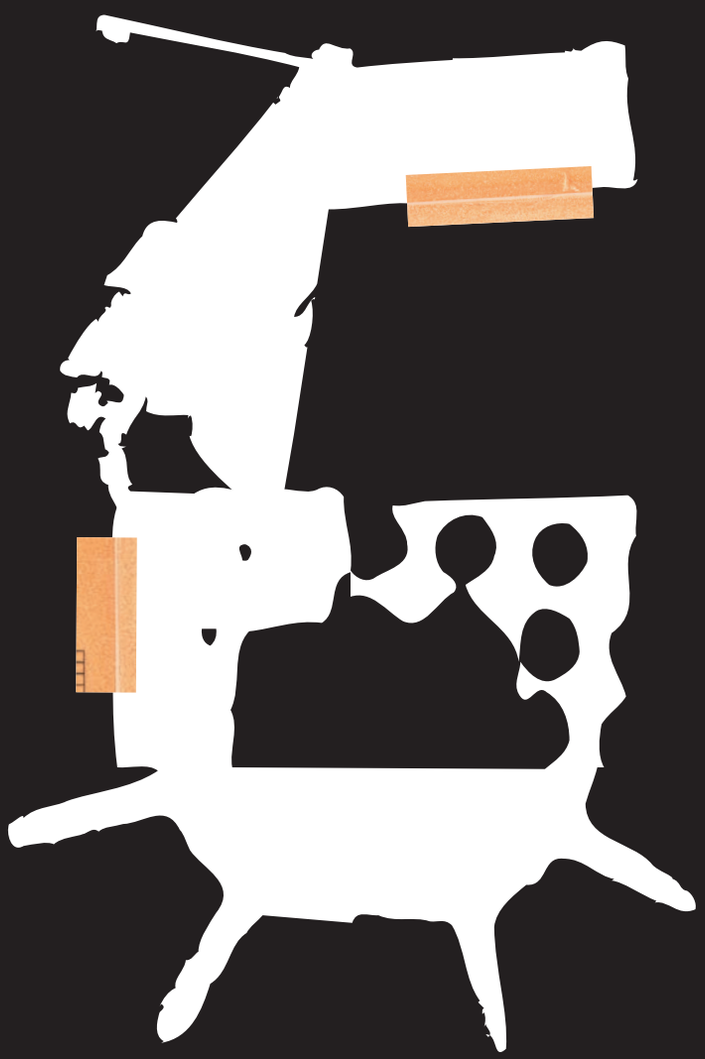

UNOF-
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6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Unofficial codes

All of us face the problem of a differential fit between how we see ourselves and how others see us. Where we try to solve this problem individually it can lead to isolation, but solving the problem collectively offers us a new perspective on the situation.

Mike Brake points out that the differential fit problem is redefined according to the rules and conventions of the subcultural group and offers us a new identity outside of the usual categories of age, class or occupation[1]. Young people in particular feel marginalised by official cultural values. They often place no importance on work, even as a means of earning money, and turn instead to leisure-based rather than work-based activities. Increasingly their aspirations are focused on what they do outside of the workplace. Their energies are directed towards activities associated with music, fashion and sport. Often two or more of these are fused together in a semiotic package.

The football terraces, for example, are lively and colourful places, densely packed with fans adorned in team colours. On one level this merely signifies the team they support. However, studies involving the behaviour of football fans show that there are a number of subtle messages being communicated. The way the colours are worn, how the scarf is tied, the gestures made by the fan and the way they dress are all part of a semiotic code. Studies have shown that it is possible to predict which fans would stand

1. **Brake M.** *Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures* **(1980)**

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Unofficial codes

and fight, which fans regularly attend away matches and which fans see themselves as tough but probably aren't; all by looking at semiotic subtleties.

> *'Although the fans dress in a similar manner which accords with certain conventions and styles they are still able to convey a wide range of messages in their choice of clothing which fall within the wider conventions. In other words the 'gear' that the fans wear has a highly symbolic function.'* [2]

The gestures between rival football fans work as metonyms. The clenched fist and the frosty stare are all recognisable as metonyms for real violence and can replace real violence in ritualised aggression.

As we have previously seen, Saussure observed that neither languages nor dialects have natural limits. All that is needed is a set of speaking subjects who are willing to make themselves the bearers of the language or dialect. The symbolic gestures discussed in this chapter can be seen as dialects. A whole range of semiotic symbols mark the distinct linguistic communities. What they wear, how they talk, their gestures and their haircuts are all part of their particular dialect. The language, whether spoken or visual, is determined by the community who use it and, unlike the official language, it has no control imposed from the outside. It is easy to see why it is an attractive option for anyone who feels, in some way, marginalised by official culture: the opportunity to communicate with like-minded people in a way that cannot be understood by those they mistrust. By its very use, the language also marks the user as part of an alternative community.

Graffiti

Let's look, for example, at graffiti as an unofficial visual language that also carries its own linguistic terms. Graffiti is a useful model as, first of all, it is distinctly visual. It also has the benefit of being an extreme type of unofficial language. It stands well outside of any educational system. This makes it easy to recognise and produces equally clear reactions from those who read it.

> *'Writing graffiti is about the most honest way you can be an artist. It takes no money to do it, you don't need an education to understand it and there's no admission fee.'* [3]

The demonstration of individual identity is perhaps the most popular and prevalent theme of graffiti writing. The time-honoured practice of writing your name (or nickname) is still very much part of our environment today. It also has a long history: symbols and pictures were found scratched alongside the names of gladiators on the walls of the excavated buildings of Pompeii.

2. Marsh P., Rosser E. and Harré R. *The Rules of Disorder* **(1977)**

3. Manco T. *Stencil Graffiti* **(2002)**

4. Castleman C. *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York* **(1982)**

Castleman's study of New York graffiti identifies a number of forms of contemporary graffiti[4], such as the tag or the throw-up. Used by graffiti writers, this terminology extends to highlight a hierarchy and a code of practice peculiar to its own field:

Backgrounding – an agreed code not to cover or deface other people's work.

Bomb – a group attack.

Fame – fame.

Getting Up – writing.

Hit – an early name for a tag.

King of the Line – the writer with the most number of throw-ups.

Nasty, the Death, Vicious, Bad, Dirty, the Joint, Juicy, Down, Burner, On – terms of approval.

Racking Up – shoplifting (it is considered proper that the materials used should be stolen).

Tag/Throw-up – the graffiti writers' version of a signature or logo.

Toy – a term that can be added to a piece as a form of criticism, meaning insignificant.

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
The graffiti writer

The official view of the graffiti writer is that he or she is a vandal. It seems to follow a stereotypical description of a working-class inner-city adolescent whose destructive activities are the forerunner of criminality in later years.

'... it is easy to see how today's young vandal can become tomorrow's football hooligan and next week's mugger.' [5]

The British Home Office Research Unit literature confirms this view:

'The motivation underlying vandalism by adolescent youths may also fuel other forms of delinquent behaviour, especially theft...' [6]

However, this stereotype is discredited by independent studies, which claim that the vandals have a much broader social background:

'Vandals come from urban and suburban as well as rural areas, from working-class and middle-class as well as upper-class families, and are of different ethnic origins. A recognition of the growing involvement of girls in vandalism would also help to correct the stereotype.' [7]

This view is certainly backed up by the high proportion of involvement shown in Gladstone's self-report study in 1978 and also confirmed by Craig Castleman's study of New York graffiti. Officers from the transport police talked about the vandals and described what kind of backgrounds they came from:

'... their fathers were professors at Columbia, NYU, some were CPAs, some were doctors, architects. They live in thousand-dollar houses, apartments, some are living in $1.98-a-month ghettos. There's no generalisation.' [8]

According to Castleman, the Nation of Graffiti Artists (NOGA) has members representing numerous ethnic groups:

'including Chinese, Americans, West Indians, Ukrainians, Filipinos, Dominicans and Nigerians.' [9]

The police records also showed that the majority of writers were between 11 and 16. The writers themselves confirmed this in interviews with Castleman. They tended to start around ten years old and retire by their 16th birthday, this being the age at which, as adults, they would be photographed and fingerprinted; effectively criminalised.

5. Hurd D. *Conference on Vandalism, London* **(1988)**

6. Home Office Research Unit in **Coffield F.** *Vandalism and Graffiti* **(1991)**

7. Coffield F. *Vandalism and Graffiti* **(1991)**

8. Castleman C. *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York* **(1982)**

9. Castleman C. *ibid.*

10. Scottish Criminal Justice Act of 1980 (Section 78)

Motivation

Perhaps the most striking feature of this area is that there is no general view about the causes and motivation behind graffiti and vandalism. There is no single theory that is generally accepted as having unlocked the secrets of these illicit activities. Rather, there are a number of approaches that attempt to explain either part of the problem or a particular type of vandalism. There is also no general agreement of a definition of vandalism. For example, criminal statistics for England and Wales show that no one has ever been charged or found guilty of vandalism, whereas in Scotland, vandalism has been a criminal offence since 1980. In England and Wales, graffiti and vandalism have been defined in terms of criminal damage yet the Scottish Criminal Justice Act of 1980 (Section 78) clearly states that:

> *'Any person who, without reasonable excuse, wilfully or recklessly destroys or damages any property belonging to another shall be guilty of the offence of "vandalism".'* [10]

Despite this difference in legal terminology, news reports and press cuttings show that it is typically described as 'senseless', 'mindless' or 'obscene', both by journalists and the police. These terms are rarely used, however, when reporting the efforts of city planners or developers who have damaged cities and landscapes more permanently.

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
The graffiti writer

This vandalism with power was highlighted by David Downes, extending traditional concepts of vandalism to include what he called pinstripe vandalism. In general, there is a tendency for official institutions and authorities to view vandalism and graffiti as a problem and to address the issues using a discourse that reflects this view. Stan Cohen and Frank Coffield, however, suggest that vandalism and graffiti are solutions rather than problems, which provides a different perspective from the usual approach of prevention and punishment.

Prestige and excitement

Home Office Research in the UK cites prestige and excitement as motives for graffiti and vandalism:

> *'... most of the vandalism seems to be committed either by young children in unsupervised play, or by older adolescents seeking prestige and excitement; relatively little seems to be committed by older youths or adults.'* [11]

A study of workers on the Liverpool docks showed that a system of rules and conventions, generated by financial hardship, led to a tradition of risk-taking as proof of strength, courage or skill. This tradition was focused on defiance towards authority. A code of practice was established where it was quite acceptable to steal something from the workplace but entirely unacceptable to steal from the family.

One other point was made by the UK Home Office Research Unit, which is particularly interesting as a clue to possible motives:

> *'... a comparatively small proportion of vandalism appears to be committed against people's personal or private property... most vandalism is directed at local authority property.'* [12]

We begin to get a broad picture of graffiti as a series of gestures directed against the visible symbols of the establishment. These are motivated, at least in part, by the need for excitement or prestige amongst the graffiti artist's own particular linguistic community.

Categories

There have been a number of attempts to define the motives behind vandalism, first by categorising the variety of actions that come under this heading and then dealing with why these take place. Perhaps the most accepted formulation of categories are the types outlined by Cohen, which were later adapted by Baker and Waddon[13] (whose alterations I have added beneath each category):

1. Ideological Vandalism
Property that is destroyed to gain publicity for a particular cause, which is justified by a political belief or a long-standing grievance.

2. Acquisitive Vandalism
To acquire money or property. For example, looting vending machines or stealing signs.

3. Tactical Vandalism
Baker and Waddon replaced this category with a new category: graffiti. A means of achieving some other end, such as bringing a production line to a halt in order to break the boredom of the work and to increase standing within peer groups.

4. Vindictive Vandalism
Baker and Waddon changed the title of this category to Problem Expression. Vandalism for some form of revenge or to settle a grudge, often directed at schools.

5. Play Vandalism
Vandalism for fun or through high spirits, which is motivated by curiosity or competition. For example, who can break the most windows.

6. Malicious Vandalism
For Cohen, this is the category that includes the behaviour of young people who are 'breaking out, breaking away or breaking clear' and would include attacks on local authority property. He recognises this to be the category that

11. Home Office Research Unit in **Coffield F.** *Vandalism and Graffiti* **(1991)**

12. Clarke R. (1978) in **Coffield F.** *Vandalism and Graffiti* **(1991)**

13. Baker C. and Waddon A. *Vandalism: Understanding and Prevention in Helping Troubled Pupils in Schools* **(1989)**

14. Hurd D. *Conference on Vandalism, London* **(1988)**

is most difficult to understand as it appears to be 'meaningless' but provides an opportunity for them to express their boredom, frustration or despair with little chance of being caught and convicted.

As already stated, there seems to be no general view about the causes and motives underlying vandalism; however, from the above list we can identify a number of possible motives – financial gain, peer group pressure, aesthetic pleasure and manufactured malice. Douglas Hurd's view in 1988 was that the causes were:

'boredom, stupid drinking and young people's appetite for excitement'. [14]

However, the motives that generate most debate are the notions of pleasure and manufactured malice. The argument is that vandalism as a solution to this group's problems is appropriate, in symbolic, expressive and emotional terms. That is, in its very senselessness, it makes sense. It offers excitement, trouble, toughness, action, control and risk.

We have a picture of what society should be and we recognise certain motives as legitimate. Where these motives cannot be found then the behaviour cannot be tolerated. Vandalism, which does not involve financial gain (this would include graffiti), is then seen as motiveless. The only way then of making sense of some actions is to assume that they do not make sense under conventional logic.

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
The graffiti writer

Visual dialect

One formal feature that is common to most graffiti is the materials used to make the work. The nature of the act dictates that the marks have to be made quickly with materials that can be easily carried and concealed, and that are readily available. In addition to scratching, the most popular materials are spray paint and more recently the marker pen, which can be customised to give a desired effect (chiselled or taped together). It is worth noting that flyposting is never mentioned as a form of graffiti and, as Castleman observed, the transport police did not target sticker campaigns. Whether this is due to the permanent nature of graffiti tools or the fact that many commercial or political campaigns use print-based (official) media, remains unclear. What is clear is that flyposting also has many of the features of graffiti:

> *'Flyposters have provided a cultural form which those on the fringes of, or totally outside dominant cultures, have been able to use with great effect. The uses have varied from person to person and from situation to situation. The common characteristic is that flyposters are a medium for groups or individuals with little money or access to the established media. They are exciting, dangerous and subversive.'* [14]

Stencil graffiti carries a similar set of semiotic values. As Tristan Manco points out in his book on stencilling, the medium is readily associated with the stencil lettering to be found on functional packaging and urban street furniture. This gives the stencil an authority and an authenticity with the added benefit of consistency. Like the flyposter, our awareness of their history makes them exciting and subversive:

> *'All graffiti is low-level dissent but stencils have an extra history. They've been used to start revolutions and to stop wars. They look political just through the style.'* [15]

The possibilities in loading messages with these second-order signifiers (danger, subversion, dissent, authenticity, politics) has certainly not been lost on manufacturers and advertisers. The unofficial visual language of graffiti and its associated forms has been used to promote fashion labels, music, cars, clubs, sportswear, foodstuffs, drinks and events. Whenever a brand wants to communicate directly with a young audience it can adopt a dialect that suits its particular needs. As well as speaking with the right tone of voice, unofficial visual language is usually inexpensive to produce, adding to its authenticity. In truth, many of these fail to deliver true authenticity as the context plays such a large part in reading the message. A graphic mark on a cereal box is unlikely to be dangerous and exciting simply because it is on a cereal box. In art and design, the use of the vernacular is a popular way of adding a layer of perceived authenticity and honesty to a whole range of work. It is often seen as a signal that the marketing department has not been involved in the promotion of a product or service. The vernacular is broadly seen as work that is deliberately undesigned. This draws from a range of visual communication made by amateurs giving it an informal and unofficial flavour. The work is often made by hand or by using instant design systems, such as plastic peg letters, for example.

14. **Fuller M.** *Flyposter Frenzy* **(1992)**

15. **Manco T.** *Stencil Graffiti* **(2002)**

VENDO PISO
EN ESTE ZONA
TEL. 36
VOTA
PARTIDO

PAGE

we are you
BOXFRESH
Röyksopp Röyksopp
Eple
BOXFRESH
BRITISH YOUT

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Unofficial language and the visual arts

A number of the formal values of the vernacular of graffiti can be found in examples of what might be termed fine art (identity, spontaneity, repetition). However, few artists have emerged from a background of graffiti with any significant commercial or critical success. The most notable exceptions to this are, arguably, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. (It should be noted here that both these artists received formal art training, unlike the majority of graffiti artists whose work never reaches a gallery.) What is interesting is the extent to which the work revealed its background in graffiti when it was transferred from an unofficial context to the official arena of the gallery. Basquiat, who began working as one half of the graffiti team Samo, certainly displays the speed and gesture of graffiti in his work:

'... Basquiat was in a terrible and terrifying hurry... drawing for him was something you did rather than something done, an activity rather than a medium... . His earliest images on paper show the same authoritative handwriting of his pseudonymous street tags.' [16]

Haring, too, seemed to recognise the element of performance in making graffiti. For him, it was an activity rather than a medium:

'Haring's commitment to public performance was backed by his absolute embrace of chance and spontaneity. He was inspired in equal parts by the automatism inherent in Jackson Pollock's and Mark Tobey's painting process, the assuredness of Oriental calligraphers, and the sheer abandon of graffiti writers "bombing" trains'. [17]

'He did nearly all the subway drawings during the day, often at peak times, and was as intent on sharing the act of art making with his audience as he was on leaving behind lasting artworks in the material sense.' [18]

So already we can see formal similarities between this art and graffiti (speed of execution, spontaneity, materials, no real distinction between figure and ground, even

16. Storr R. *Two Hundred Beats Per Min* **(1990)** in **Gallery R.M.** *Basquiat Drawings* **(1990)**

17. Blinderman B. *And We All Shine On* **(1992)** in **Celant G.** *Keith Haring* **(1992)**

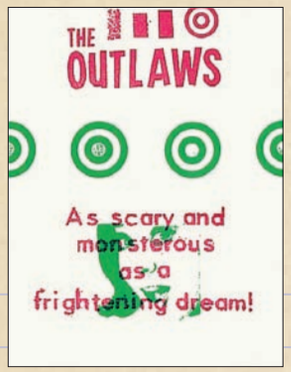
18. Blinderman B. *ibid.*

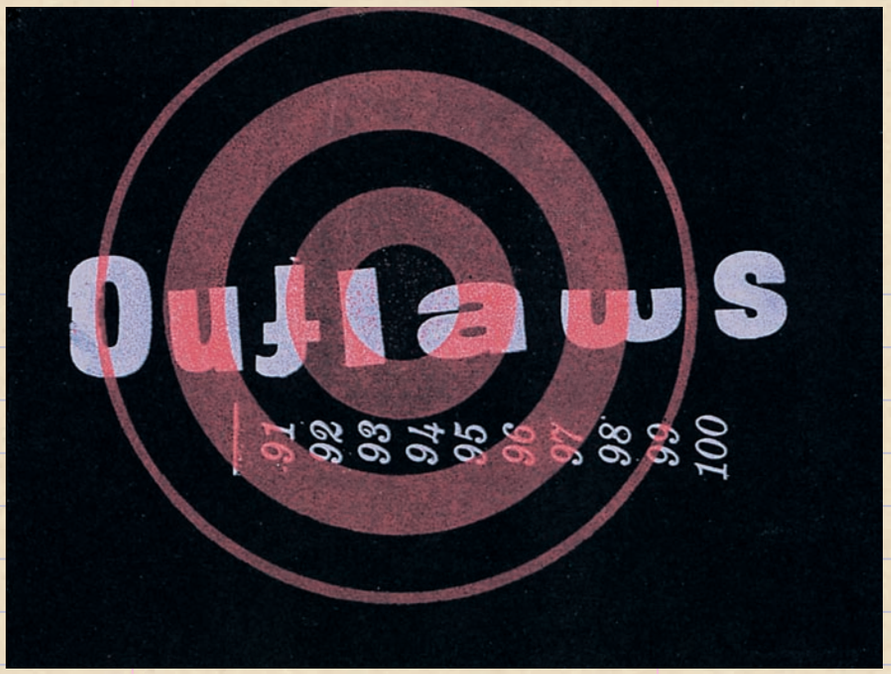
context) but also some important distinctions. The artists' work has been sanctioned in some way: Basquiat's graffiti becomes 'drawing' and takes place in a studio on paper and canvas; Haring works in public spaces on walls at rush hour without arrest and often by invitation. Arguably, both artists demonstrate a greater control over the traditional values of composition, spatial arrangements of images on a surface and colour than most graffiti writers, but what of the subject matter and the issues in the work? Neither artist was content, as many writers are, to simply repeat their name. However, a recurrence of visual symbols seemed to signal a signature of sorts.

Jean-Michel Basquiat
A Panel of Experts
1982 © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat/ADAGP, Paris and DACS London, 2010

Lists of personal heroes (including boxers and musicians) repeated over the canvas in his trademark handwriting draws on his background in graffiti. In this case, the canvas itself is constructed in a casual manner like a found object from an urban backstreet.

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Unofficial language and the visual arts





Outlaws

Flyers from a boxed collection of objects. The box functions as a catalogue for an exhibition that was staged in a homemade shed situated outside the Tate Gallery in Liverpool, UK.

With Basquiat it was lists of personal heroes, boxers, bluesmen and heads, often skulls, whereas Haring used a featureless, almost baby-like outline figure, which he coupled with a variety of architectural or technological objects: the television screen, steps, flying saucers:

> *'Haring's legacy is a model universe, a lexicon of signs and symbols reflective of anxiety, euphoria, desire, oppression, and hope in an age of digital magic and communications breakdown.'* [19]

There is little to conclude from these notes other than that perhaps the artists' background in graffiti is evident in the formal qualities of the work, even if the motives are less certain. Whether the public considered the work to be art or tactical vandalism before it reached the gallery is unknown. The only thing that seems certain is that once it appeared in New York galleries it became art. The value of the work was determined by the other signs that surrounded it. The work was art because it was placed in an accepted art gallery.

The UK-based stencil graffiti artist Banksy has clear views about the essential difference in placing his work in different contexts:

> *'... I've done gallery shows and, if you've been hitting on people with all sorts of images in all sorts of places, they're a real step backwards. Painting the streets means becoming an actual part of the city. It's not a spectator sport.'* [20]

Perhaps, as with Carl Andre's 'Bricks', it is only a matter of one discourse being accepted into the official discourse over a period of time. This explanation by an 18-year-old art student from Blackpool (who was banned from every railway bridge in Britain in January 1991 after pleading guilty to seven charges of criminal damage with spray cans) seems to sum up the feelings of graffiti writers, and for that reason is worth quoting in full:

19. Blinderman B. *And We All Shine On* **(1992)** in **Celant G.** *Keith Haring* **(1992)**

20. Banksy in **Manco T.** *Stencil Graffiti* **(2002)**

21. *The Guardian* **21st January 1991 4.1.3 interview**

‘It’s a good feeling – like being an outlaw. Out there in the night with a couple of friends on your own. You’re creating something wonderful and beautiful for others to enjoy. I understand that British Rail don’t want to see murals on their walls, but I don’t look upon it as vandalism. It’s popular art. Unfortunately a majority of people are ill-informed and don’t understand what the culture is about. It’s about self-expression. We are adding something colourful to a blank, bland surface which others will see and admire. It may not be fully appreciated at the moment, but in due course I believe it will be recognised as an art form.’ [21]

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Portfolio

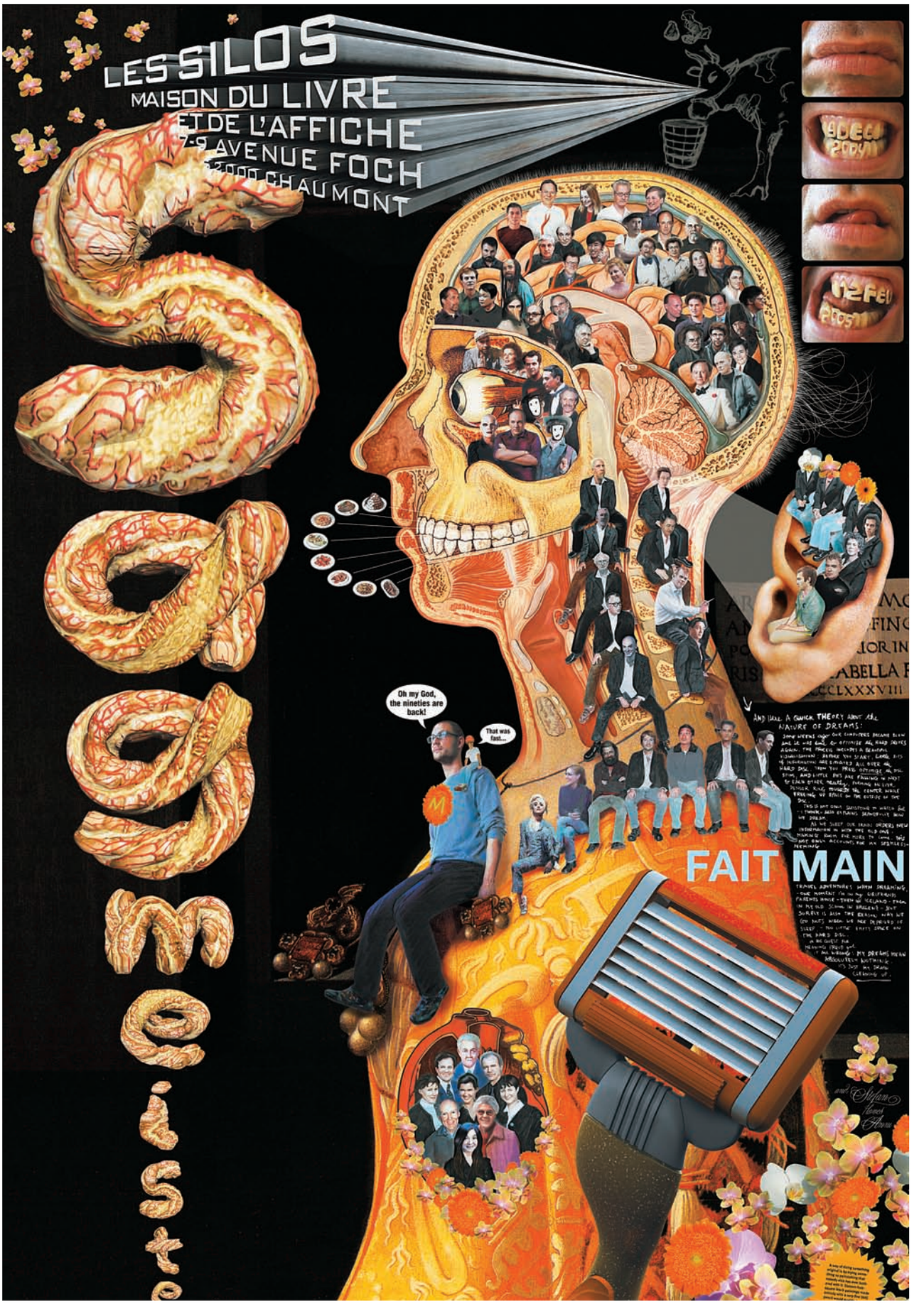
Creator: Sagmeister Inc.
Title: ***Design Austria Poster***
Exemplifies: Unofficial language

Above – On this poster celebrating the anniversary of Design Austria, the designers literally cut through the boredom of a pair of brown socks with an intricate diecut design featuring a wide variety of sausages. The banal presentation and ordinary nature of the socks themselves draws on a vernacular approach to photography, which deliberately avoids any attempt to engage with the conventions of official visual culture. The diecut sausages have a visual connection to cheap paper doilies that also inhabit a visual culture of banality and anti-design.

Creator: Sagmeister Inc.
Title: ***Chaumont Poster***
Exemplifies: Unofficial language

Opposite – This poster for Sagmeister Inc.'s exhibit in Chaumont, France, features all the people who had a significant influence on their work. By inviting tourist illustrators to New York's Central Park to create the images, the studio deliberately celebrates the supposedly low-art culture that is situated outside the legitimate discourse of official visual arts practice. This work, like much of the work in the unofficial category, takes place in highly public urban spaces that have no defensible territory. The work is low cost and tends to deal directly with representations of popular role models. This sense of the popular, the everyday concerns and the unsanctioned and unprotected space, all position the work in a very different discourse to high art, where formal values are often the guarantee of credibility.

The portraits in this poster include role models and influences such as actors, designers, artists, writers, favourite food, architects, engineers, musicians, friends and family.


LES SILOS
MAISON DU LIVRE
ET DE L'AFFICHE
29 AVENUE FOCH
CHAUMONT
Oh my God, the nineties are back!
That was fast...
FAIT MAIN

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Portfolio

Creators: Francesca Bunny Williams/
Hannah Waldron
Title: ***University of Brighton – Open Days Poster***
Exemplifies: Unofficial language

Above – This open days poster is a collaborative piece where each designer made two costumes. The photographs show a three-dimensional visual expression of a culture of home-made fancy dress that is normally reserved for amateur craft and school plays – a visual vernacular that is firmly sited at the bottom of our cultural hierarchy. It is made using materials that are readily available and produced with domestic tools – characteristic of unofficial work. In this case, the charming handmade outfits are clearly not from a professional theatrical wardrobe. This is supported by the addition of paper leaves that frame the image. In doing this, the central figures on this poster are loaded with second-order signifiers that celebrate the homespun and individualism. The use of these signs on the poster stresses the individualism of the students and shifts attention away from the corporate reading of 'University' where the event is sited.

Creator: Riitta Ikonen
Title: ***Snowflake/Commuter Thrival***
Exemplifies: Unofficial language

Opposite – Riitta Ikonen embraces the vernacular in her carefully constructed images through a combination of bespoke handmade costumes and photography. In 'Snowflake' *(top)*, the work is a personal response to the worries of global warming in her homeland of Finland. The 'Commuter Thrival' project *(middle/bottom)*, is a 'communication campaign that aims to raise awareness of the issues surrounding public transport through a series of posters visualising people's emotions with custom-made costumes'. The middle-left and bottom-left images were accompanied by the text, 'You should see the sweat under here, it's like a river' and the middle-right and bottom-right images were captioned, 'Hey, underneath all this I'm smiling'. Ikonen adopts a way of making meaning that sits somewhere between fashion and theatre. However, her costumes are clearly not high fashion or theatrical wardrobe. The production values of the costumes and their naïve, simple, graphic use of colour and form sit them amongst a homemade tradition that could be described as theatrical vernacular. Although the images are beautifully conceived and photographed, the costumes have a naïvety that draws on folk traditions, like fancy dress and Hallowe'en. These signifiers feel quite out of place when they are brought into a public arena such as a London Underground station; displayed where the audience might expect to find corporate advertising. In time, this type of communication will no doubt become an accepted part of the discourse of public service graphic design, but at present it is both a brave and unconventional way to engage commuters during the rush hour and is not part of the authorised visual language for this community.

OXFORD CIRCUS

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Portfolio

Creator: Elzo Durt
Title: ***Veterant Skateboard Poster***
Exemplifies: Unofficial language

Above – The unofficial context of urban space is a backdrop to this street poster for a skateboard manufacturer. The combination of low-budget surreal imagery and an edgy location produces a visual dialect that speaks directly to a distinct audience who will sense a credibility in the message because of the appropriate dialect.

Creator: Elzo Durt
Title: ***Space Invaders 1@tour du lotto Bruxelles***
Exemplifies: Unofficial language

Right – The cult imagery of the space invader, from the retro computer game, is given an epic presentation in a domestic urban setting. Durt provides a way of presenting a symbol that sits outside a legitimate or authorised context for visual production. This type of communication is reminiscent of political protests or personal messages, which are made by placing handwritten texts on the windows of urban housing estates.

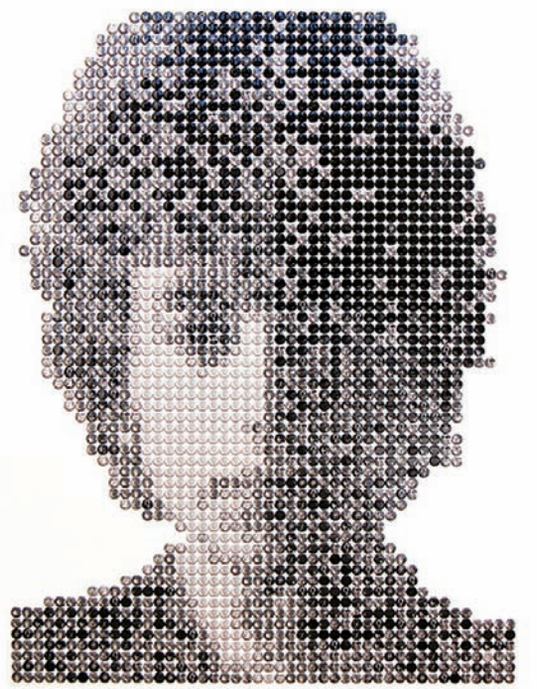
Creator: **Burn**
Title: ***Wastebin***
Exemplifies: **Unofficial language**

Design group Burn uses the visual dialect of graffiti and vandalism as part of its self-promotional work. In our experience, graffiti carries signification associated with danger or excitement. Its authors are understood to be outside of the official fields of cultural production and we already know graffiti is an illicit act. By employing these visual clues, a group – in this case a design group – is able to suggest that there is something intrinsic in its work that places it outside our conventional understanding of graphic design practice. The reader might expect this group to be young, to be highly individual and to be politically aware or motivated.

6. UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
Portfolio

Go to SELF-DIRECTED STUDY: EXERCISES

pages 184–185



Creator: Ian Wright
Title: Bob Dylan
Exemplifies: Unofficial language

Left – A portrait of Bob Dylan composed entirely of monochrome button badges. The button badge is associated with the unsanctioned cultural arena; in particular with the underground culture that brings together politics and music. The medium is especially appropriate for Bob Dylan whose protest songs and unconventional style characterise his work.

Creator: Ian Wright
Title: ***Record Prints***
Exemplifies: Unofficial language

Above – The personal marks of the DJ are celebrated in this limited-edition print. A series of highlighted fingerprints on the vinyl illustrate how the DJ interacts with the record. These accidental signs are supplemented by stickers and handwritten tape marks, which are in-points on each of the tracks. In this case, the marks are deliberate but entirely functional, and exist as personal notes, drawn quickly with cheap materials.

Creator: Ian Wright
Title: ***TI/Paper Trail***
Exemplifies: Unofficial language

Opposite – Portrait created to promote the studio album by hip hop artist TI. The songs for the album were written by the artist as he awaited trial for federal weapons possession charges. Given the unusual circumstances, TI broke his normal practice and wrote the lyrics down on whatever was to hand. The concept of writing on scraps of paper as a record of ideas was translated by illustrator and artist Ian Wright into a dense collage of torn paper. The life-size collage was created on a West London street and an image of it was used on promotional materials.

The use of public urban space as a backdrop is often a feature of unofficial work. This suggests that the authors have no access to official media channels. Unofficial communication often uses very low-cost tools and readily available materials, and this sets the work apart from sanctioned or authorised work. This work is placed directly alongside flyposters and graffiti, and draws on this context as part of the message. It suggests an audience for the work and lends an authenticity to the content and its visual interpretation.

Folk
KEEP CALM
Scally
WEDDING PRESENT
I AM SOUND
rock chick
MATTHEW BARNES IS ALRIGHT
JOHN
CARMEN
EN FRANCE
Val d'Orbieu
VIEJO
CASTILLO

SYM-
BOLIC
CREA-
TIVITY

7. SYMBOLIC CREATIVITY
Hyperinstitutionalisation

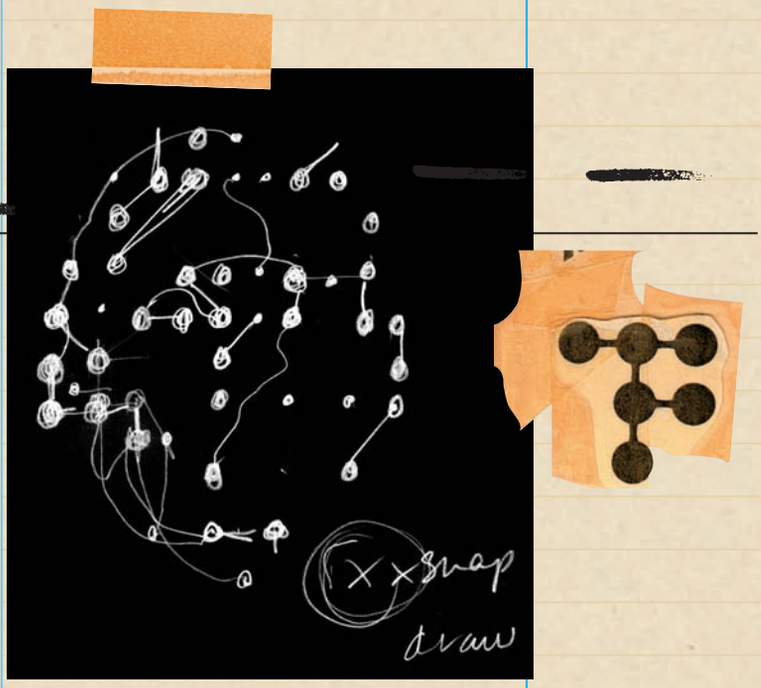
Paul Willis claims there is a vibrant symbolic life and an active symbolic creativity in everyday life, everyday activities and expressions. He points us to the way in which young people's lives are actually full of expressions, signs and symbols.

James Jarvis
Ozzy *(Above)***; *In My Room*** *(Opposite)*

Illustrations originally produced for 'The Face' magazine.

JOHN COLTRANE
MC5
UNION BALLROOM
ROCK CONCERT
MC5
STOOGES
UP
1 DOLLAR
ZERO
SONY
Skittles
SMILE THE BEACH BOYS

7. SYMBOLIC CREATIVITY
Hyperinstitutionalisation



Paul Willis introduces us to the idea of symbolic creativity[1] by quoting statistics from the UK General Household Survey[2] and it is useful to repeat some of these figures here: 4 per cent of the population attend museums or art galleries, 90 per cent watch television for over 25 hours per week, 2 per cent of young people (aged 20–24) attend the theatre (the most popular British arts venue), 92 per cent of young people listen to radio and 87 per cent buy music.

These figures support Willis' assertion that the various genres that constitute high art are currently institutions of exclusion, which have no real relationship to young people and their lives. He continues by arguing that the arts establishment has done little to discourage the commonly held belief that gallery-based art is special, heightened and certainly not everyday. He goes further to say that in fact these institutions of high art promote a fear of cultural decay in order to strengthen claims for subsidy and privilege. Against this, Willis claims there is a vibrant symbolic life and an active symbolic creativity in everyday life, everyday activities and expressions. He points us to the way in which young people's lives are actually full of expressions, signs and symbols, despite their not being involved with the arts. Willis states:

> *'... the multitude of ways in which young people use, humanise, decorate and invest with meaning their common and immediate life spaces and social practices – personal styles and choice of clothes: selective and active use of music, TV, magazines; decoration of bedrooms; the rituals of romance and subcultural styles; the style, the banter and drama of friendship groups; music-making and dance.'*[3]

It is this tendency of high art to distance itself from these things; insisting on a prior educational knowledge that leads to a complete dislocation of art from living contexts, which often results in what Willis calls hyperinstitutionalisation. This is explained as a situation where formal features become the guarantee of an aesthetic rather than a relevance to real-life concerns. The people who don't understand, the uncultured, simply lack the code and are seen (or may even see themselves) as ignorant or insensitive.

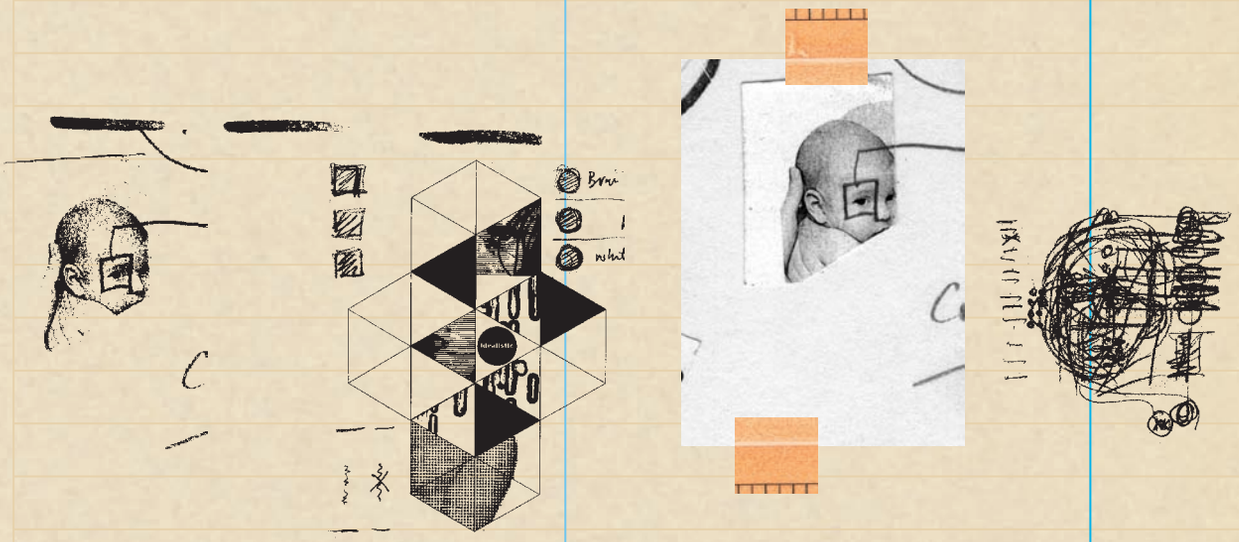
[Hyperinstitutionalisation]... a situation where formal features become the guarantee of an aesthetic rather than a relevance to real-life concerns. The people who don't understand, the uncultured, simply lack the code and are seen (or may even see themselves) as ignorant or insensitive.

1. Willis P. *Common Culture* (1990)

2. *The General Household Survey* (1983–6) (Cultural Trends p. 51)

3. Willis P. *ibid.*

4. Willis P. *ibid.*



David Crow
Megafamily

Sketches and development work from the Megafamily font.

seen (or may even see themselves) as ignorant or insensitive.

He also returns to Bourdieu's notion of fields by placing the subsidised artist on the periphery of the field of symbolic creativity rather than at the centre, reversing the traditional view by placing the public at the centre. Willis maintains that this symbolic activity is not only vibrant but necessary because human beings are communicating as well as producing beings; furthermore, whilst all are not productive, all are communicative. He stresses that the necessity of symbolic work has been forgotten and offers us a definition:

> *'The application of human capacities to and through, on and with symbolic resources and raw materials (collections of signs and symbols – for instance the language as we inherit it, texts, images, films, songs, artifacts to produce meaning).'* [4]

Play and identity

Willis' definition is somewhat at odds with the English radical tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, which followed the ideas of people like William Morris, who stressed the dignity of labour in his equation: art = work/pleasure. Necessary work was, at this point, seen as human capacity applied through the action of tools on raw materials to produce goods or services (usually through wage labour). However, Willis points out that the mechanisation of modern industry has made it impossible to find art in paid work and points to an extreme example where a study of British factory workers found more opportunity for symbolic production in driving to work than there was to be found at work. This lack of opportunity for necessary symbolic work in the workplace highlights the importance of

7. SYMBOLIC CREATIVITY
Hyperinstitutionalisation

This is how we produce and how we reproduce our own individual identities, who we are now and who we could become. It also places these identities in time and place and defines membership of groups such as race, gender, age and religion.

play in our individual expression. It is then the informal rather than the formal situation that offers us freedom and choice in symbolic activity, and increasingly this is where our necessary symbolic work takes place. According to Willis, the increased importance of play has been reflected in the huge growth of commercialised leisure, with opinion divided about whether or not commercial status devalues cultural currency.

Willis separates symbolic creativity from material production and suggests it be seen as symbolic production. He outlines four elements needed for necessary symbolic work:

1. The primary communication tool of language which enables interaction and allows us to assess our impact on others and their impact on us.

2. The active body (according to Willis this is the site of signs and symbols).

3. The drama of roles and rituals which we perform with others.

4. The practice of symbolic production (where language is both the raw materials and the tools) bringing about new ways of producing meaning.

Willis maintains that symbolic creativity is intrinsically attached to energy, feelings, excitement and psychic movement. He believes this to be the basis of confidence.

Having outlined what symbolic creativity is and what we need in order for it to take place, Willis then offers a number of examples of what is produced by symbolic creativity. He suggests that this is how we produce and reproduce our own individual identities: who we are now and who we could become. It also places these identities in time and place, and defines membership of groups, such as race, gender, age and religion. It also empowers us with the expectation of being able to change the world we live in and to make our mark on it. It is worth noting here that Willis sees these activities as transitive, in that we are constantly experimenting with

‘In many ways this is a question of cultural survival for many young people.’ [5]

5. Willis P. *Common Culture* (1990)

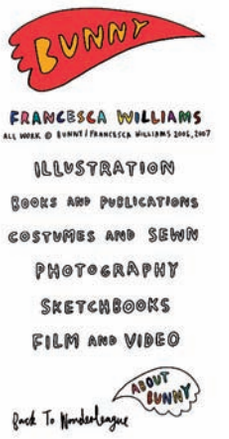
6. Marsh P., Rosser E. and Harré R. *The Rules of Disorder* (1978)

these expressions of identity and have a cultural sense of which haircut, language or music (for example) works most economically for ourselves. Willis stresses the importance of this aspect of symbolic production. He points out how young people in particular feel marginalised by the constructed visions of youth supplied by our society through institutions, advertising, magazines and television. This is brought about by the perception of difference between how they are told they should be and how they actually are. Studies of football hooligans in the UK also point to the necessity for disenfranchised young people to define their identity in opposition to existing constructs.

‘The struggle begins when they see many of the things that seem routine to the rest of us as ways of devaluing them... . If they are to have any significance, their lives must be self-constructed and made significant with the use of home-made materials.’ [6]

7. SYMBOLIC CREATIVITY
Portfolio

2



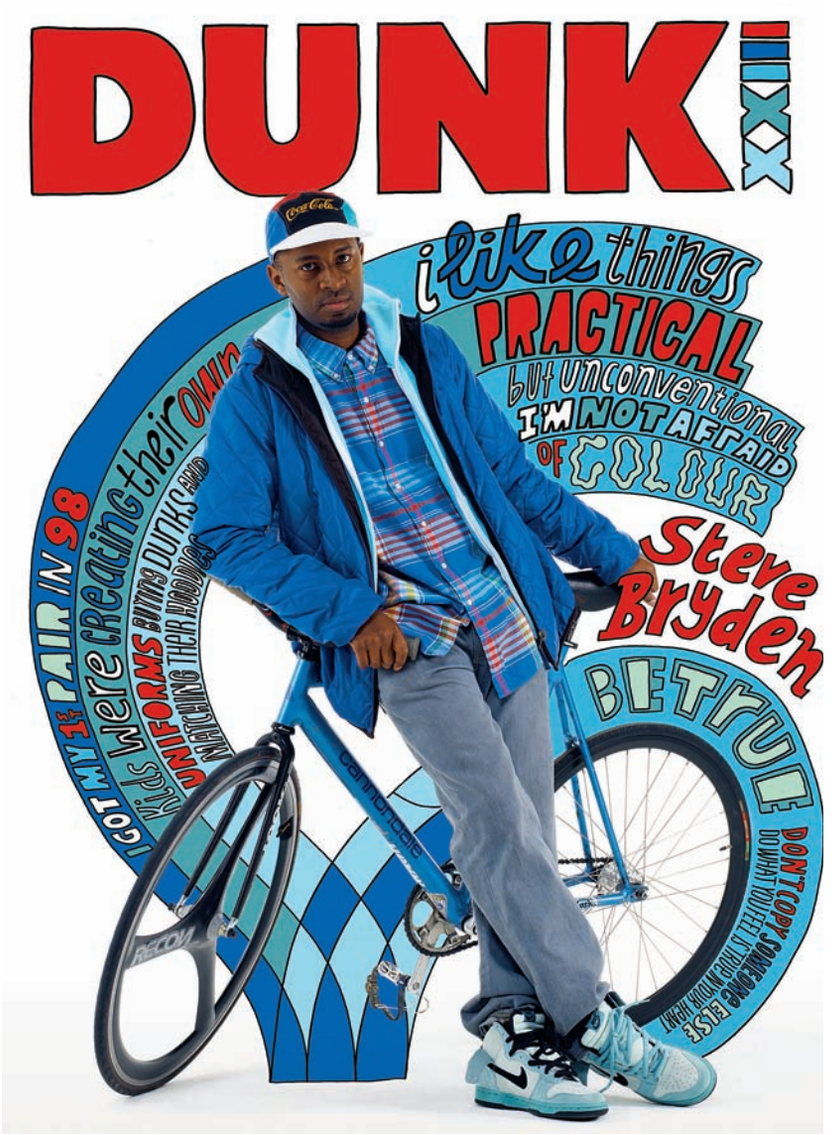
Creator: Francesca Bunny Williams
Title: ***www.wonderleague.co.uk***
Exemplifies: Symbolic creativity

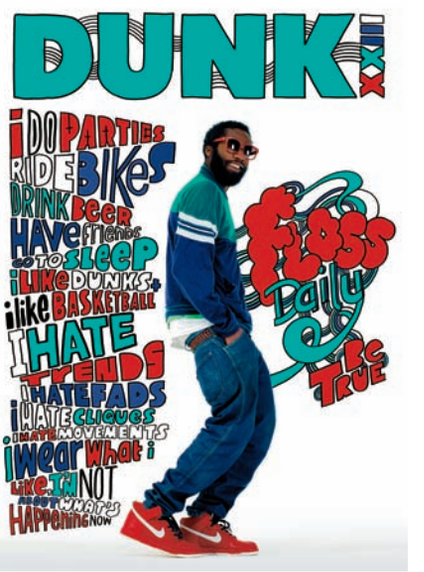
Personal lifestyle, choice of clothes, eccentric visual imagery and subcultural styles are all part of the way that Bunny Williams (aka Bunny Bissoux) describes her identity on her website. The web has provided individuals with the opportunity to create a holistic identity that extends far beyond the limits of conventional promotional marketing. In addition to an illustration portfolio, www.wonderleague.co.uk includes personal photographs, a shop selling vintage clothes, shoes, accessories, retro toys and homewares. Potential clients are invited to immerse themselves in the symbolic creativity that is Bunny Bissoux as they get a contemporary portrait of the artist.

Creator: Kate Moross
Title: ***'T-Post' (T-shirt) Magazine/Badge Sets/Bag***
Exemplifies: Symbolic creativity

The importance of clothing in the expression of identity is harnessed by a Swedish magazine, where the magazine and the T-shirt are one and the same. The front of the T-shirt functions as the cover of the magazine and the content is printed inside. This brings together two important cultural reference points for young people in exercising their symbolic creativity. Kate Moross also offers her audience the opportunity to share her expression of individualism with a range of ephemeral items available through her online shop. These items form part of a personal obsession with geometric shapes and how they symbolise human qualities. This work is playful, low cost and accessible. These qualities are ideal for experimentation with personal symbolism and enable us to place our identity in specific groups and periods.

7. SYMBOLIC CREATIVITY Portfolio



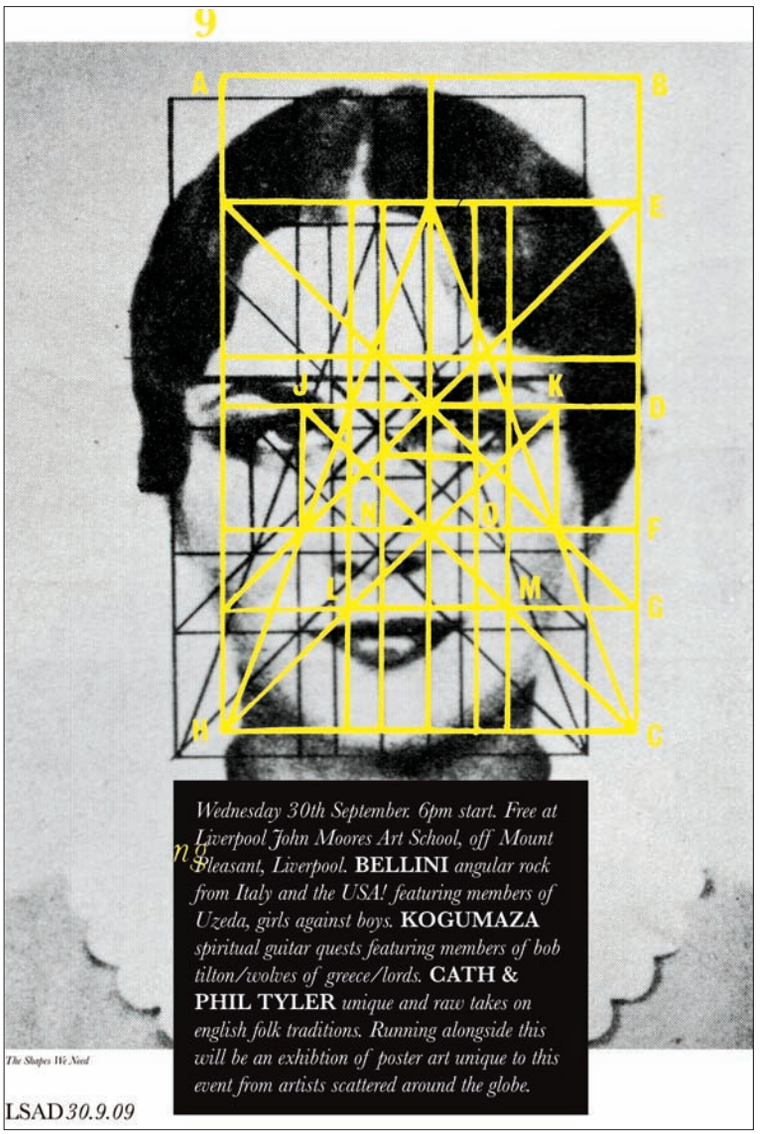


Creator: Kate Moross
Title: ***Nike Dunk/Be True***
Exemplifies: Symbolic creativity

For the celebration of the Dunk 23rd Anniversary, Kate Moross collaborated with Neil Bedford and Carrie Mundane to produce a range of life-size illustrated photographic portraits for an exhibition sited in London's hip Brick Lane. The context of the project is as important as the visual language used. An event in a carefully chosen venue is a very important sign. The brief was to visualise the connection between basketball culture and London street style. The designer referenced a series of interviews where people talked about their aesthetic and the importance they place on the way they represent themselves in their clothing, the way they communicate and the music they listen to. Clearly, it is important for brands to reflect the personal symbolism of their audience in the objects they manufacture. This creates a sense of ownership of the brand by the people who use it to express themselves through lifestyle choices.

DUNK
I Get FRESH
WITH COLOUR
I DON'T JUST KEEP THEM IN A
OX
I think trainers are nice to look at
BUT I DRESS FOR MYSELF
NEXT
THESE HAVANA ARE BEAUTIFUL AS SOUGHT AFTER

7. SYMBOLIC CREATIVITY
Portfolio



Creators: Ian Mitchell *(Left)*/Michael O'Shaughnessy *(Right)*/Seel Garside *(Opposite)*
Titles: ***Event Poster – Bellini/Kogumaza/ Cath and Phil Tyler***
Exemplifies: Symbolic creativity

A series of posters advertising a single music event. A group of designers and educators express their individualism through their interpretation of an event at their local art school. Unlike most of the population, designers are occasionally given the opportunity to express their identity using the tools and media of mass production. In these examples, the content of the event is overridden by the desire to produce a playful set of personal gestures. Just as most people employ a set of personal signs and symbols to identify themselves with subcultural groups, designers can also use personal and cultural reference points to signify who they are and what excites them visually.

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JUNK AND CUL-TURE

8. JUNK AND CULTURE
Dirt and taboo

Mary Douglas points out that dirt is the by-product of a system of order. Dirt has been rejected in a process of classification as the elements that are out of place. Douglas argues that if we look at what counts as dirt then we can begin to understand and identify the system that rejects it.

1. Douglas M. *Purity and Danger* (1966)

2. Douglas M. *ibid.*

Our ideas about what constitutes dirt are part of a symbolic system of signs, which has clear categories used to organise the signs into a hierarchy of importance or use:

> *'Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; outdoor things indoors; upstairs things downstairs; underclothing appearing where overclothing should be and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.'* [1]

'Where there is dirt there is a system.' [2]

8. JUNK AND CULTURE
Dirt and taboo

Douglas shows us that the threat of danger is often used as a justification of social convention. We might well be endangering our health or that of our family by not throwing out an item of chipped crockery. Dangerous germs may lurk in the chip, ready to make us ill. She points out that what's really under threat is the semiotics of ordered social conventions, which are the agreed practice in our society.

To understand why something has been rejected, we need to rebuild a picture of the systems of signification that lie beneath the decision to reject it from the system. In this sense then, we can see that the study of dirt or rubbish is a semiotic study.

For example, to understand what is currently fashionable in typography, you would need to look at what has been discarded as unfashionable. This helps to define the category and describe what is at the margins of fashionably acceptable.

In chapters five and six we looked at the idea of official and unofficial language. We have also discussed the interplay between the two and how one cannot exist without the other. In order to comprehend what constitutes legitimate language, we need to know what has been rejected as inappropriate in any given situation. Unofficial language is the dirt in a system that has rejected it in favour of an accepted and legitimate language choice:

3. **Douglas M.** *Purity and Danger* **(1966)**

'As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder.' [3]

Since order and pattern are made from a limited selection of elements, there is then an implication that pattern is restricted in some way. Disorder, the enemy of pattern, could then be considered unlimited. Disorder has no pattern in itself but its potential for making pattern is infinite. Douglas argues that in the first instance we recognise that disorder destroys existing patterns but also that it has huge potential. This leads us to view disorder as a symbol of both danger and power.

8. JUNK AND CULTURE
Rubbish theory

In his essay 'Rubbish Theory'[4], Jonathan Culler invites us to consider the rubbish that is not particularly dirty or taboo. This is the rubbish that we all have stored away in spare rooms, garages and lofts: old football programmes, comics, postcards, tickets and coins. Some of this is rubbish we have inherited: my father's pen and a watch that doesn't work; my grandfather's penknife and ration book from the 1940s. These objects were all edited from a wider set of rubbish where some things were kept and others rejected. If dirt is evidence of a system of classification, then how, asks Culler, do we read these cupboards full of everyday rubbish?

Much of this material functions as souvenirs. Perhaps it signifies for us an experience we have had or something we have seen, which in time will become a significant part of our life. Visual constructions often use these sorts of items to signify memory in some way. You may find it disrespectful to consider mementos, especially those handed down by your parents, as rubbish. However, in most cases, the collected material has no economic value nor any practical use. For these reasons we can consider it rubbish.

Semiotic categories of objects

This relationship between rubbish and value is clarified by Michael Thompson in his essay 'Rubbish Theory'[5]. Thompson identifies three semiotic categories of objects that have a direct relation to economic value.

Transient cultural objects have a finite life span and their economic value decreases over time. Foodstuffs are an obvious example of transient objects, but the term could also refer to objects that are susceptible to the whims of fashion. This illustrates that it is not only the physical properties of an object that categorise it, but there is also a social dimension that attributes value based on the values in our society.

The value of durable cultural objects are maintained or even increased over time. They have no finite lifespan; they may even be considered as having an infinite lifespan. Antiques are a good example of durable objects. This category also includes items that may have started life as fairly inexpensive and common but have become durable because there is a collector's marketplace for them. Certain recordings, for example, have more

The Mercedes Benz motor car is an example of what could be described as a durable object, whose value is maintained or, in some cases, increased over a period of time.

4. **Culler J.** *Rubbish Theory* **(1988)** in **Culler J.** *Framing the Sign* **(1988)**

5. **Thompson M.** *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* **(1979)** in **Culler J.** *Framing the Sign* **(1988)**

BENZ

8. JUNK AND CULTURE
Rubbish theory

value now than they did when new, as do commemorative items from historical events, such as a keyring from the Queen's coronation. In brand advertising, many objects are presented in a way that reinforces their durable qualities. Mercedes Benz, Timberland and Rolex are all brands whose products are deliberately bound up in the notion of durability.

Thompson points out that those who have wealth or power will strive to keep their objects in the durable category and ensure that the transient objects of others remain so. This is a necessary step, as we know it is possible for objects to shift from one category to another, and the transfer of economic value follows this shift.

To explain how this change is possible, Thompson identifies a third, less obvious category. This category contains objects that have an unchanging value of zero. Thompson outlines a scenario where the transient object gradually loses value until it is worthless. It remains in this valueless state until someone rediscovers it and transforms it into a durable object. We have all experienced revivalist fashion coming from an utterly unfashionable period. Styles that have only recently waned in popularity rarely make a successful comeback, whereas a style that has been discarded always has the potential for being very fashionable again. Thompson's 'Rubbish Theory'[6] describes how transient cultural objects can only move to the durable category once they have been considered rubbish. Buying a classic car or a piece of antique furniture is about buying into the semiotic idea of durable objects. The way we treat our objects is also a sign of which category we believe they belong in. We might cherish and maintain our classic car, carefully restoring the most banal detail to its original state. However, if we have a new model that declines in value, we are at some point likely

... those who have wealth or power will strive to keep their objects in the durable category and ensure that the transient objects of others remain so.

6. **Thompson M.** *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* **(1979)** in **Culler J.** *Framing the Sign* **(1988)**

8. JUNK AND CULTURE
Rubbish theory

David Crow
Masterlux The Baptist

Signs from Christianity are mixed with consumerist signs as part of a series of screen prints, which present shopping as a new religion.

to let things go wrong if we plan to replace it. It is simply not worth any further investment. We may eventually pay a scrap metal dealer to tow away our worthless vehicle. It will sit untouched for years, only to be rediscovered two or three decades later as a classic and be bought by a collector for restoration.

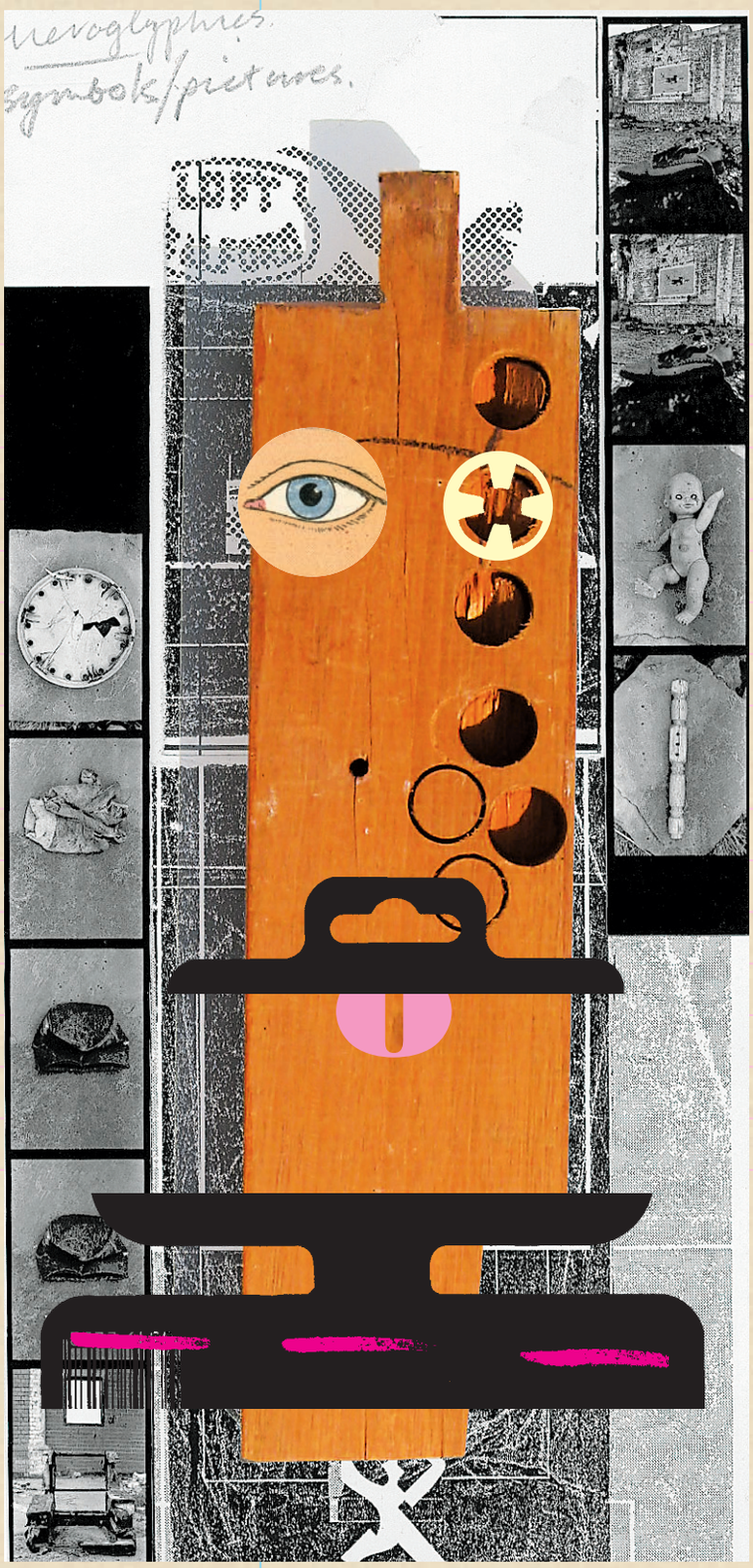
This theory appears to draw inspiration from 'Purity and Danger'[7], where Mary Douglas poses the question of whether dirt, which is normally destructive, can ever be considered creative. In her exploration of this question, she describes two stages that dirt must go through to achieve creative symbolism. First, in the process of imposing order, dirt must be differentiated as being out of place. Dirt is seen to be unwanted, but it still has some identity in that it can be recognised as the unwanted item. Over time, however, this identity gradually disappears until the unwanted item becomes part of the general mass of rubbish.

> *'Earth should be a cloud of dust, a soil of bones,*
> *With no room even for our skeletons.*
> *It is wasted time to think of it, to count its grains,*
> *When all are alike and there is no difference in them.'* [8]

Douglas states that as long as there is no identity then dirt is not dangerous. At this stage it is not differentiated in any way, just as it was before it became classified as dirt. This completes a cycle where dirt moves from a non-differentiated state to a differentiated state (recognised and classified as dirt) and then finally back to its original state of non-differentiation as part of the general mass of discarded dirt. She argues that it is in this formless state that dirt can function as a sign of growth as much as a sign of decay. The argument concludes that everything that applies to the purifying role of water in religious symbolism could also be applied to dirt.

7. Douglas M. *Purity and Danger* **(1966)**

8. Sitwell S. *Agamemnon's Tomb* **(1972)** in **Douglas M.** *Purity and Danger* **(1966)**


hieroglyphics.
Egyptsk/pictures.

A debate often ensues where those who wish to establish an object as a durable, draw on the discourse of legitimate language to justify the transition.

priceless worthless

As we have already seen in chapter five, there are clear hierarchies at play in cultural production. The fine arts are generally considered a more significant practice than design disciplines. The work produced by each of these areas is also considered differently in terms of their importance as cultural objects.

In his essay 'Rubbish Theory'[9], Jonathan Culler describes two types of cultural artefact. First, there are artefacts that are part of the practical world: utilitarian objects, such as newspapers, magazines and television. These are considered transient cultural objects. Then there are artefacts that have no obvious purpose and are presented as being separate from commercial or practical concerns.

These are part of our world of leisure and are broadly categorised as part of our cultural heritage. These we see as durables. Culler points out that cultural rubbish has become a valuable resource in the visual arts. He cites the example of Carl Andre's 'Bricks' bought by the Tate Gallery in 1972. This pile of common household bricks would have been considered rubbish by many who saw it at the time. They may well have had a similar pile of unwanted bricks in their own backyard. However, the museum who bought the work saw it as part of the category of durables. The work had been 'authorised' by the museum, and arrangements of common rubbish made by recognised artists became collectable again. A marketplace for similar

9. Culler J. ***'Rubbish Theory'*** in Culler J. *Framing the Sign* **(1988)**

The transient object gradually loses value until it is worthless. It remains in this valueless state until someone rediscovers it and transforms it into a durable object.

Marcel Duchamp
Hat Rack and Urinal
1917 © Succession Marcel DuChamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2010

artefacts had been established and 'Bricks' increased in value. More recently, the same gallery came under fire from the popular press over the display of Tracey Emin's 'Bed', which was surrounded by an assortment of household rubbish. Although there is little concern shown when transient objects become rubbish, the transformation from rubbish to durable always provokes a strong reaction. Those who wish to establish an object as a durable often draw on the discourse of legitimate language to justify the transition.

There are a number of earlier examples of this transition, where an equally vociferous outcry heralded their appearance. If we look at the self-proclaimed anti-art Dada movement, there are numerous examples that use rubbish as a resource to change the way we approach the notion of what constitutes art. Marcel Duchamp's sculptures from the early part of the twentieth century (such as 'Bicycle Wheel', 'Hat Rack' and 'Urinal') were all discarded functional objects that became durables. These are now cited as classic pieces of art; serving as inspiration for generations of visual artists.

8. JUNK AND CULTURE
Portfolio

Creator: Hazel Jones
Title: ***Chocolate Button Safe***
Exemplifies: Rubbish to durable

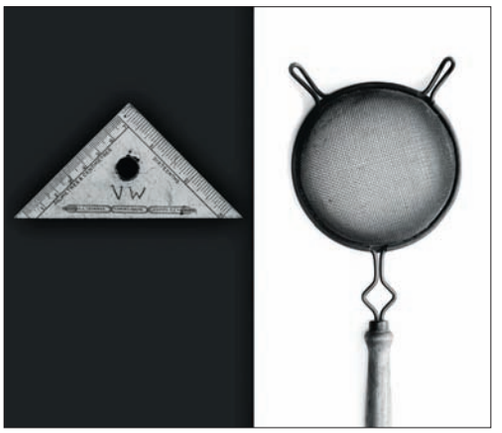
Above – Jones' work is based around an exploration of forgotten everyday objects. Once rediscovered, these objects can be reinvented to evoke memories and histories with new and unexpected uses. The semiotic value of the original material is very low and it is this value that is transformed as the artist uses a set of technical skills and, more importantly, a dialogue about the work to increase its cultural and monetary value. In this example, various pieces of discarded scrap metal are reconfigured as a highly robust safety deposit for chocolate buttons, an iconic confectionery from the artist's childhood.

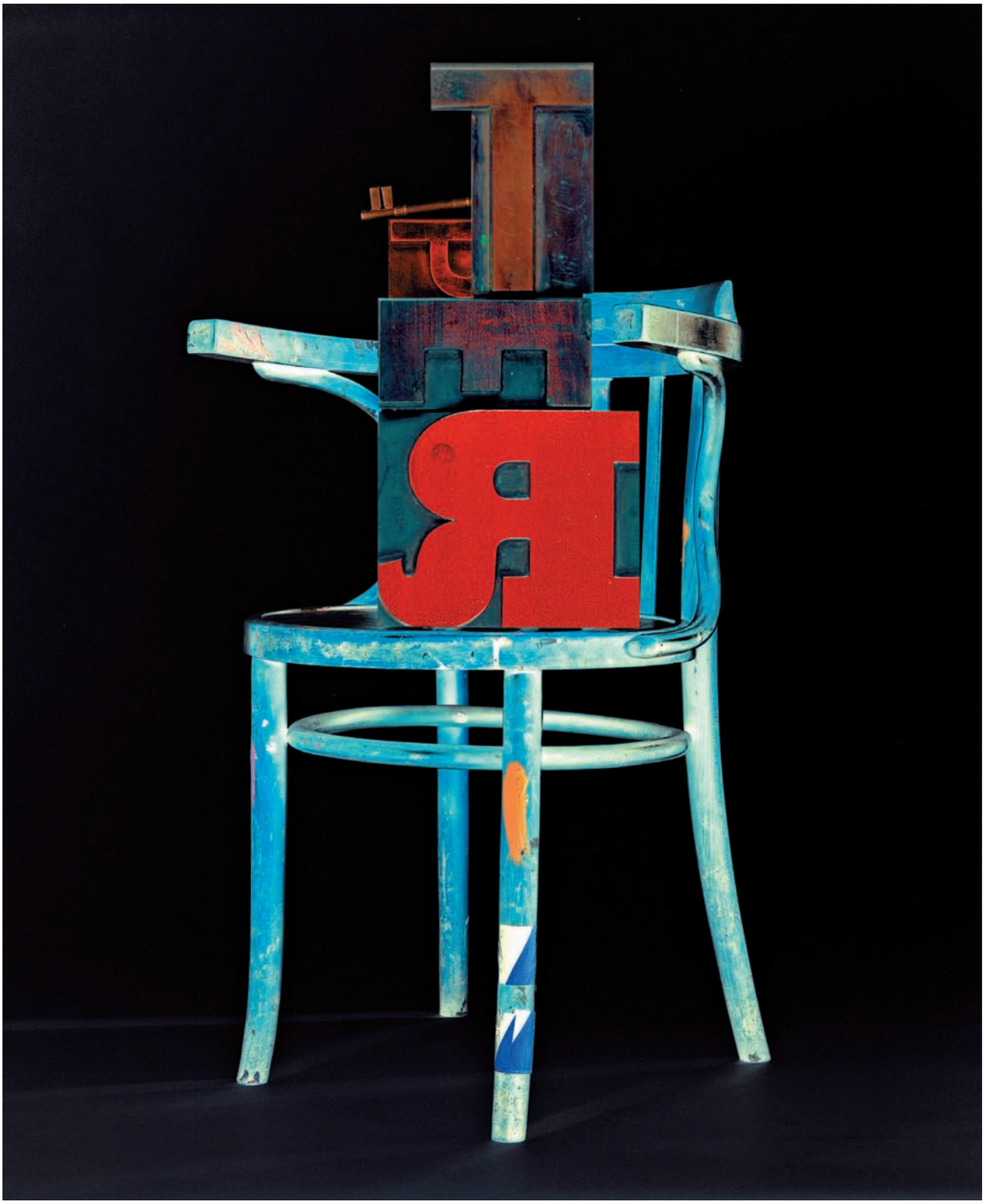
Creator: Hazel Jones
Title: ***String Too Small for Use***
Exemplifies: Rubbish to durable

Opposite – These objects form part of an extensive collection of discarded items. With entire websites devoted to individual categories such as 'Rusty Nails' or 'Scrapmetal', Jones demonstrates the ability of the visual arts to transform the economic and cultural value of worthless objects by placing them in a different context and in a different dialogue.

String too small
for use

8. JUNK AND CULTURE
Portfolio





Creator: **David Crow**
Title: ***'Emblem' – Rubbish Issue***
Exemplifies: **Rubbish to durable**

Opposite – Spreads from an in-house magazine at the School of Art, Manchester, England. This issue features objects from the collection of two artists/designers – Sharon Blakey and Hazel Jones. The cover of this edition is double-printed in fluorescent orange and foil-blocked in gold. This is a deliberate graphic juxtaposition of the cheap display signs found in low-cost marketplaces selling transient items, such as fruit and vegetables, alongside the high-cost packaging on durable items, such as expensive perfumes. The inside front cover features handmade additions that draw the reader's attention to the object's limited-edition status; making direct reference to the language of the art world. Both the hand of the maker and the editioning of work become signs that increase the economic and cultural value of the object. The interior spreads display a series of photographs of discarded objects that are isolated from their functional context and placed against a flat black or white background, which renders them as artefacts in the visual language of a museum or gallery catalogue.

Creator: **David Crow**
Title: ***St Peter***
Exemplifies: **Rubbish to durable**

Above – An old chair rescued from a skip becomes the centrepiece of an art print. The chair's valueless status is changed as it becomes part of a limited-edition cultural object.

8. JUNK AND CULTURE
Portfolio

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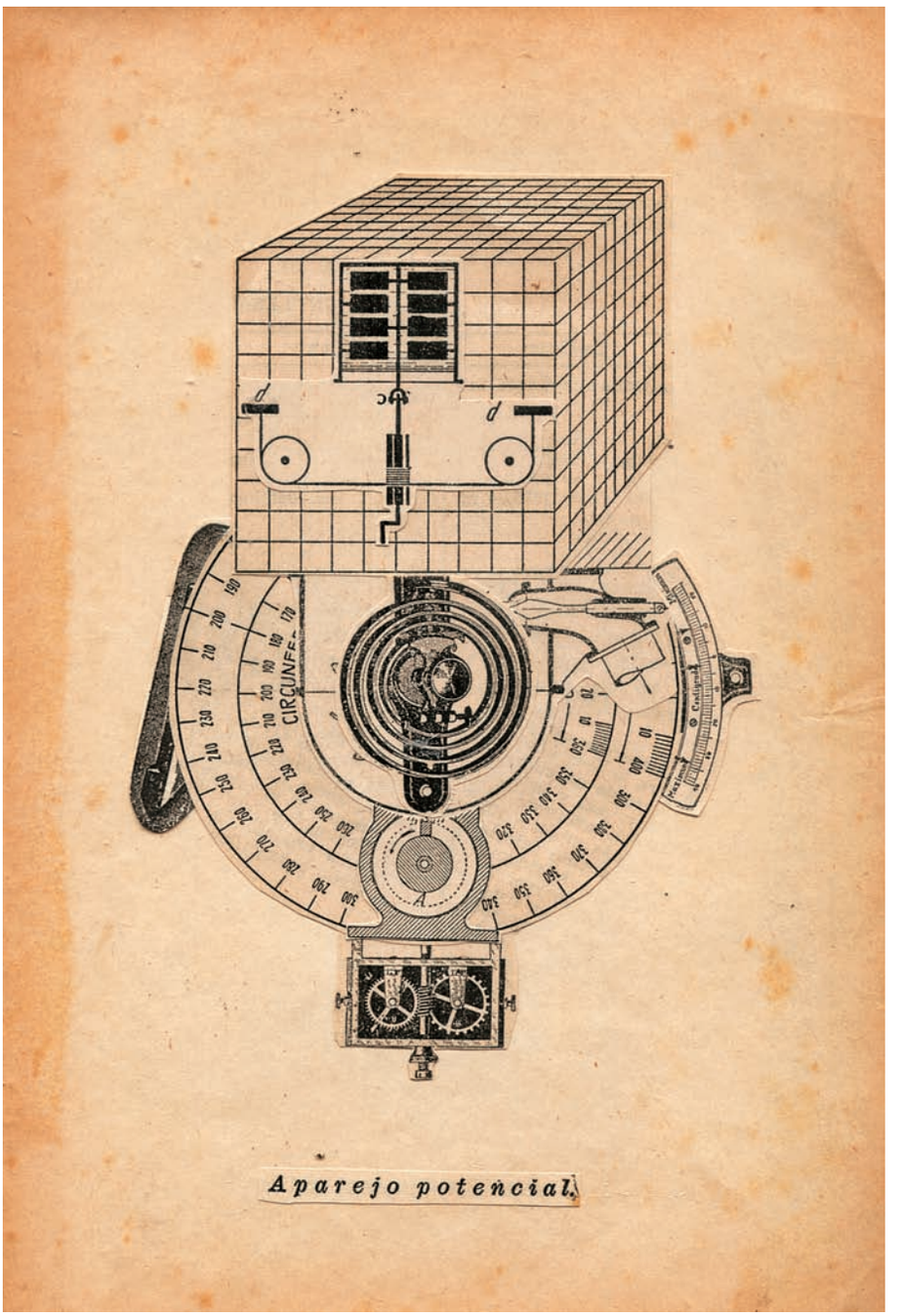
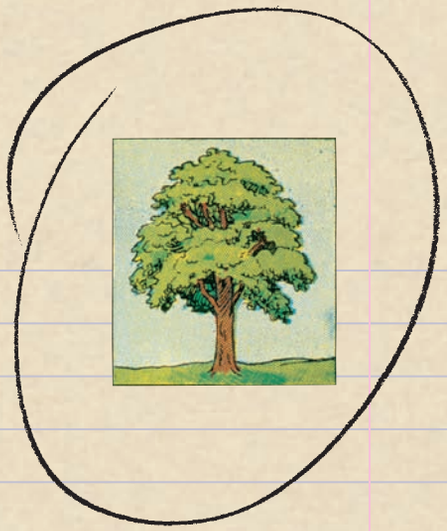


Creator: **Rodrigo de Filippis**
Titles: ***Guarda el Polvo*** *(Opposite)*; ***Aparejo Potencial*** *(Above)*
Exemplifies: **Rubbish to durable**

A variety of found images and discarded ephemera are recombined by Filippis to create these prints. The worthless scraps of imagery are given value by the artist placing them in a new context. In bringing together a set of disparate, worthless objects in an arrangement made by an artist, the work becomes authorised and valuable again. In 'Guarda el Polvo', the transfer of value from the artist to the object is underlined by the presence of hand-drawn elements that personalise the work and function as the artist's signature. The future value of works like these will then depend on the discourse that happens around them. Reviews, exhibitions and publications featuring the work all contribute to a value system that collectively determines their worth.

OPEN WORK

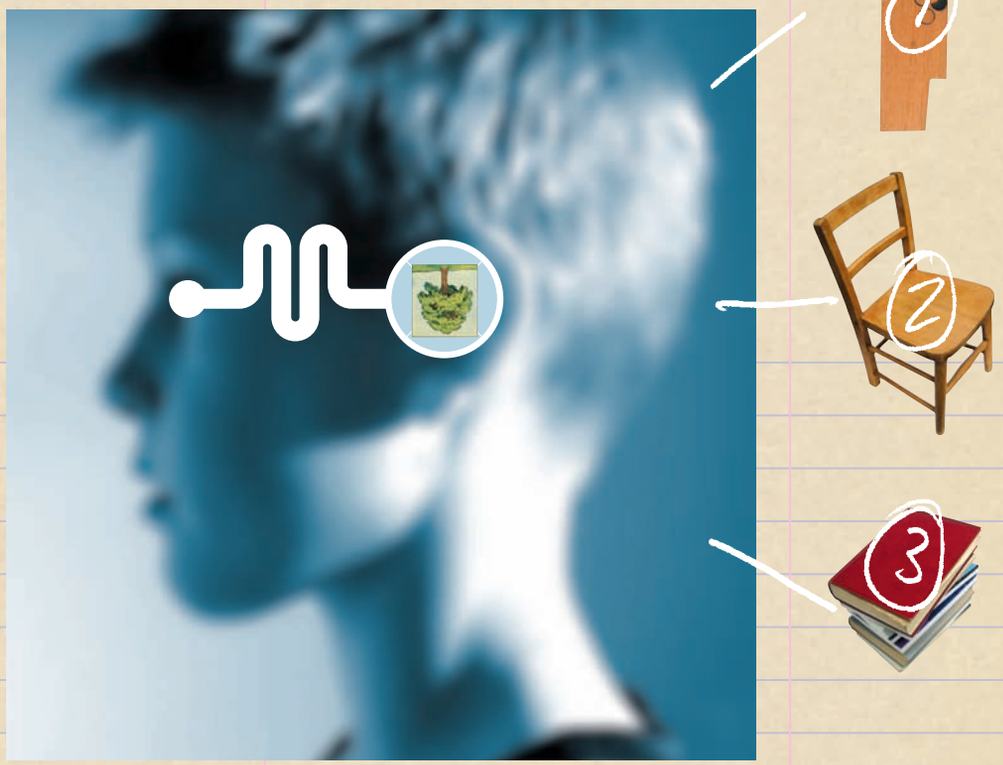
9. OPEN WORK
The open work



The term 'The Open Work'[1] comes from the book of the same name written by Umberto Eco, a philosopher and semiotician born in Piedmont, Italy, in 1932. The work was first published in 1962 and remains a significant piece of writing today as it anticipated important developments in contemporary art. In particular, Eco is interested in the relationship between the author of a work of art and the reader.

1. **Eco U.** *The Open Work* **(1989) (first published 1962)**

2. **Zeman J.** *Peirce's Theory of Signs* **(1977)** in **Sebeok T.** *A Perfusion of Signs* **(1977)**



Like Peirce[2] before him, Eco places particular emphasis on the role of the reader as an important part of the creative process. As readers, we receive a work of art as the end product of an intended message. This message has been assembled and organised by the author in a way that makes it possible for the reader to reassemble it for themselves as the author intended. However, we know that the reader's background affects the way that the message is reassembled.

The overall meaning of the message may be constant, but each of us brings an individual perspective to the reading based on our culture, background and experiences. Eco prefers the term 'encyclopedia' to describe the transfer of meaning through the use of signs, rather than the more common term 'code'.

For Eco, a code implies a one-to-one transfer of meaning like a dictionary definition, whereas encyclopedia suggests that there are a number of interrelated interpretations and the reader must negotiate their own path through the network of possibilities. Although Eco sees an openness in the reading of signs, he does not, however, suggest that there are an infinite number of readings. Rather, he describes a situation where the work of art is addressed to an ideal reader who will select from the suggested readings of the work. The ideal reader is not so much a perfect reader who interprets the work exactly as the author intended, but as a reader who is awake to the possibilities that the work contains.

9. OPEN WORK
The open work

$$\text{information} = \log \frac{\text{odds that the addressee will know content of message } \textit{after} \text{ receiving it}}{\text{odds that the addressee will know content of message } \textit{before} \text{ receiving it}}$$

If a newsflash tells me that tomorrow the sun will rise, I have been given very little information as I could have worked this out for myself. If, however, the newsflash tells me that the sun will not rise, then I have a lot of information as this is a highly improbable event.

3. Eco U. *The Role of the Reader* (1979)

Eco sees art as a performance[3] because each reader finds a new interpretation and much of his writing focuses on musical performances as examples of the open work. Composers such as Stockhausen are cited because the work is open in a more obvious way than in the visual arts. The composer supplies the musician with a kit of parts; with the invitation to interpret the material for themselves.

In this way, the work is obviously incomplete until the reader is involved. The freedom on the part of the reader, in this case the musician, is conscious and explicit. Indeed, by asking the musician to interpret the work in their own way, the artist invites them to ask why they would want to work in this way. What is the conceptual framework for the piece?

In the visual arts there has been a shift towards a greater personal involvement on the part of the reader. Along with a greater degree of formal innovation has come a greater degree of ambiguity. When Eco published 'The Open Work', the art world was dominated by developments such as abstract expressionism and action painting; movements that questioned our traditional views on representation and meaning. It called for the reader to work harder to find meaning.

Information and meaning

In an attempt to help define what he means by openness, Eco uses the mathematical science of information theory to measure the relationship between the amount of information that the reader receives and the openness of a work. It is important to note that he sees information to be a different thing to meaning or message. He suggests that the amount of information contained in a message is dependent on the probability of the reader already knowing the content of the message before it is received. If a newsflash tells me that tomorrow the sun will rise, I have been given very little information as I could have worked this out for myself. If, however, the newsflash tells me that the sun will not rise, then I have a lot of information as this is a highly improbable event. Eco presents a mathematical formula, reproduced here for reference, which essentially proposes that the amount of information contained in a message is inversely proportional to the probability or predictability of the message. For Eco, contemporary art is highly unpredictable because it often dismisses the established semiotic conventions and rules

DON'T BELIEVE A WORD

The amount of information contained in a message depends on where it originates and on its probability.

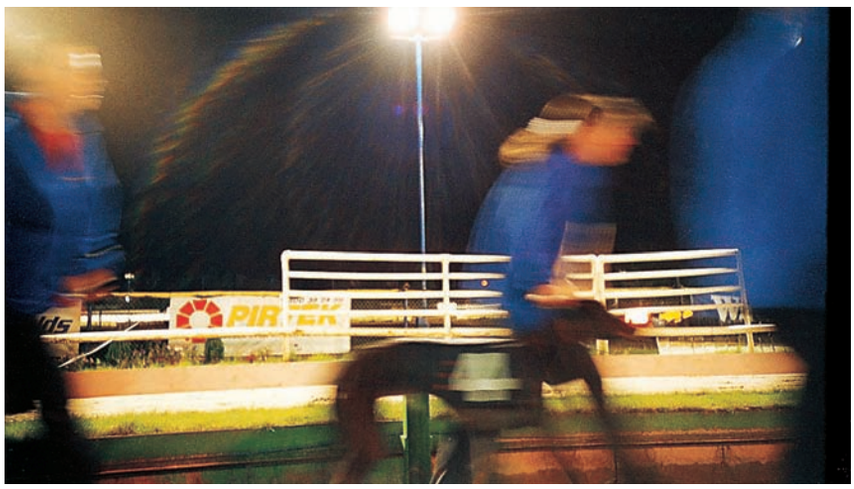
9. OPEN WORK
The open work

that preceded it. Eco argues that contemporary art contains much higher amounts of information, though not necessarily more meaning, by virtue of its radical nature. More conventional forms of communication, such as the road sign, for example, or figurative painting, may carry more distinct meaning but much less information.

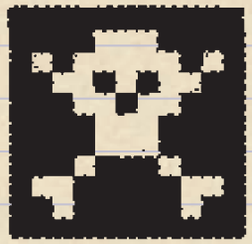
He also points out that the amount of information contained in a message is affected by another factor: our confidence in the source of the message. The example he uses is the traditional Western Christmas card: a seasonal greeting sent each year between families and friends. To receive a Christmas card from the secret police would be very different from receiving a card from a favourite aunt. Although the message is essentially the same (Merry Christmas), the amount of information varies hugely because of the improbability of the source. Similarly, if a landlord were to tell me an apartment had damp problems before I rented it, I would be more inclined to believe him as he has nothing to gain by fabricating this message. It is tempting to assume that information and meaning are the same thing. However, we can see from these examples that the amount of information is greater where the source is improbable. Compare this to the statement: Christmas is an annual festival. This has a very clear and direct meaning with no ambiguity, yet it doesn't add to our existing knowledge. In other words, the amount of information is low despite the communicative value being high.

Openness and the visual arts

Eco focuses on the painting styles of abstract expressionism and action painting, which were current when 'The Open Work' was written. He describes how these can be seen on one level as the latest in a series of experiments to introduce movement into painting. However, there are a number of ways in which movement is signified in the visual arts. The use of repetition or the addition of trace lines around an image have long been established as signifiers of movement. These are signs that work on fixed structures and have been around for as long as we have used images to communicate. In these cases, the nature of the sign itself is not affected, merely the position of the signs relative to each other. For example, if we repeat a figure a number of times across the same work but in different settings, we begin to describe a timeline and we see the figure in a changing narrative. Compare this with the ambiguous forms of the Impressionist painters; the blurred images that became possible with the introduction of the camera or the gestural marks of abstract expressionism. In these examples, the nature of the sign itself has become ambiguous, if not the forms they signify. We still read the forms in the paintings as people or buildings or bridges, but according to Eco they have acquired an inner vibrancy. The reader is now conscious of the movement of light around the subjects.



9. OPEN WORK
The open work



Similarly, with the gestural marks of abstract expressionism, we are reading the way the mark is made; the action that has left this mark as evidence. The open work offers the reader a field of open possibilities. They can choose their own viewpoint, decide for themselves what is foreground and background, and make their own connections between different parts of what they see.

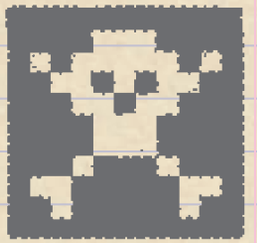
An obvious example of this is the sculptural mobiles of artists like Alexander Calder. Theoretically, the work offers the possibility that no two experiences of it will be the same.

The question one invariably asks of work like this is whether or not it communicates. Is the work legible and how do we stop it descending into a chaotic visual noise or a complete communicative silence?

Openness and information

Eco is interested in the tension between the information offered to the reader and the level of comprehension needed for the work to be interpreted. Can the reader detect the intentions of the author of the work? Is an agreement between the two discernible?

Some types of visual communication clearly need structure and order; signs that, because of their practical application, need to be read and understood quickly. In situations where speed of communication is important, pictograms bridge the gap between the technical world and language. In other cases, where the practical application is less important, there are signs that merely seek to give information as opposed to meaning.



Ian Wright
Heads

The skull and crossbones is a symbol that, because of its practical application (poisonous chemicals, electric pylons), needs to be read and understood quickly. In situations where speed of communication is important, these pictograms bridge the gap between the technical world and language.

The heads by Ian Wright work on quite a different level; in this instance the reader is invited to bring their own meaning and character to the drawings.

Another way of looking at these signs is to see them as seeking to deliver not a single meaning but an abundance of possible meanings. In contemporary art and design, there are many examples of work that deliberately seek to avoid what Eco calls 'the laws of probability that govern common language'[4]. In fact, he points out that contemporary art draws its value from this deviation from common structures.

If we spill ink on a blank sheet of paper we are presented with a random image that has no order. No particular direction is given to the reader in terms of how to interpret the image. If we then fold the paper in two and transfer the image on to both sides of the paper, we now have an image with some order.

4. Eco U. *The Open Work* (1989) (first published 1962)

9. OPEN WORK
The open work

...a piece of discarded material can become an artefact once it has been framed.

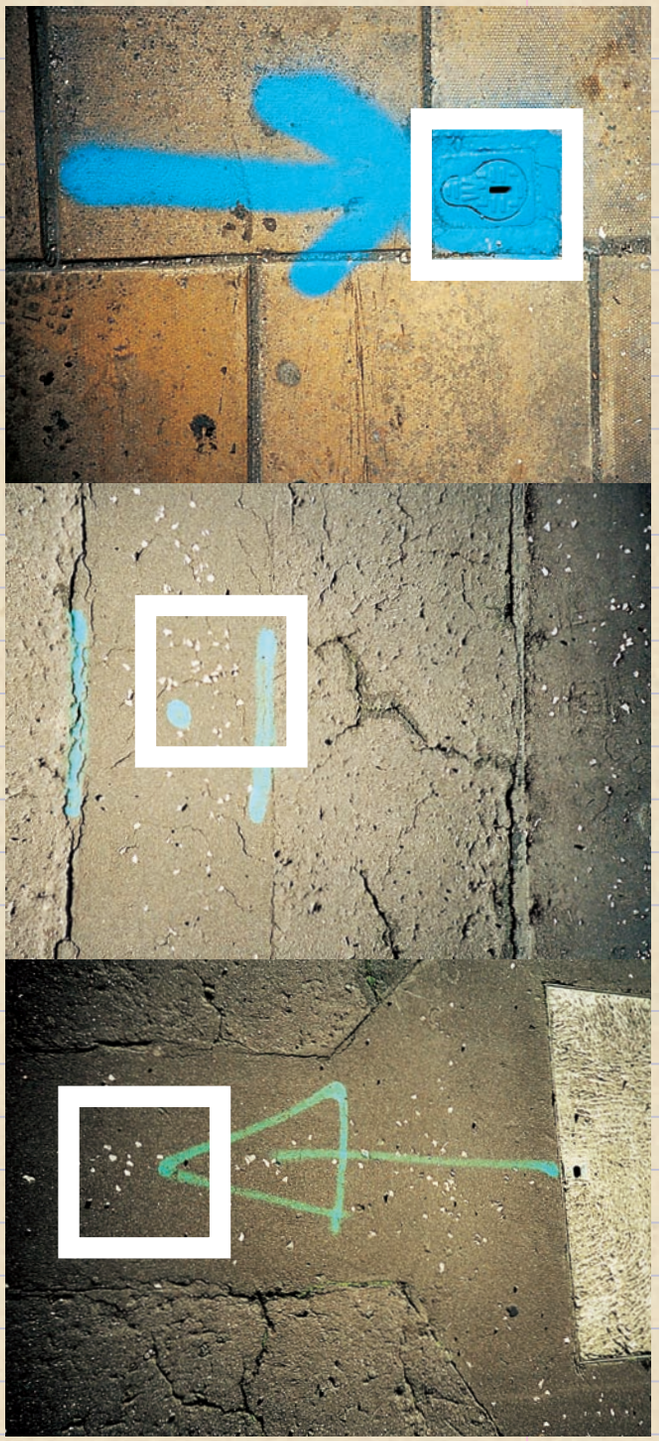
In this case, the order is symmetry – a simple form of probability. The reader now has some visual reference points that can be connected together to suggest a way of reading the image. Although the image still offers a good deal of freedom to the reader in terms of interpretation, they now have some direction. If we were to shred the paper, make paper pulp and roll it out to dry as a sheet again, there would be a huge number of dots and marks across the surface of the paper. The reader could begin to connect these marks in an infinite number of ways, but there would be no discernable direction for the reader. The image is now extremely open, contains a maximum amount of information but is utterly meaningless. We are not likely to make one reading of the information above another. What we have is the visual equivalent of white noise.

This excess of possibilities does not increase the information, but denies it altogether. It doesn't communicate. Eco uses this as evidence that:

> *'...the richest form of communication – richest because most open – requires a delicate balance permitting the merest order within the maximum disorder.'* [5]

He maintains that this is a characteristic of any visual communication that wants to be understood but also wants to allow a degree of freedom to the reader. He points out how the intention of the author may be enough to give the work a value. As we saw in chapter eight, a piece of discarded material can become an artefact once it has been framed. Our pavements and roadways are peppered with cracks and holes. Some of these are framed with brightly coloured squares painted by the highways agency to mark their priority for repair. This visual signal shows us that these cracks have been chosen over other cracks; they have called attention to them. Merely by isolating them they have become artefacts.

5. Eco U. *The Open Work* (1989) (first published 1962)



Highlighted Cracks and Holes
Much of what an artist does is to make choices. By choosing to isolate a particular part of a pattern we immediately make it an artefact.

9. OPEN WORK
The open work

The mark does not merely stand for the action – it is the action. The gesture and the sign are fused together.

Form and openness

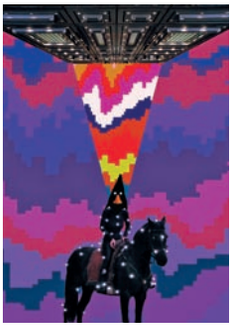
Eco reassures us that the informal sign does not mark the death of form in the visual arts, but proposes instead a new flexible form – a field of possibilities. The gestural marks and spatters of abstract painting stimulate the viewer to make their own connections in the work. Reading the original gesture that leaves this mark, is fixed by this mark, is in this mark, will lead us eventually to the intention of the person who made the mark. According to Eco, it is this underlying intention that distinguishes a work of art from the patterns of the cracked pavement. The marks are the signifier of the gesture but not a symbolic sign for the gesture. The mark does not merely stand for the action – it is the action. The gesture and the sign are fused together.

Unlike symbolic signs, which belong to a defined set of signs and whose meaning we have learnt (like road signs or letters of the alphabet), these abstract marks need interpretation. There is no predetermined collection of these signs. They could be considered analogue codes rather than digital codes, like music or the gestural movements of dance. Eco argues that in allowing the reader to freely associate the signs, they can enjoy the experience of doing this whilst simultaneously enjoying the aesthetics of the signs. The reader searches for as many possible associations as they can in a game of pleasure and surprise; trying to interpret the intentions of the author as they do so.

Open work in the visual arts is, according to Eco, a guarantee of communication with added pleasure. The two things are connected together in a way not to be found in the reading of more conventional signs. When we read the road sign, whose meaning has been learnt, we read the message but rarely do we marvel at the aesthetics of the sign. Only those of us with a particularly strong industrial aesthetic would enjoy the effectiveness of the way the sign is made. Openness is pleasure. Our visual culture invites us to view the world as a world of possibilities.

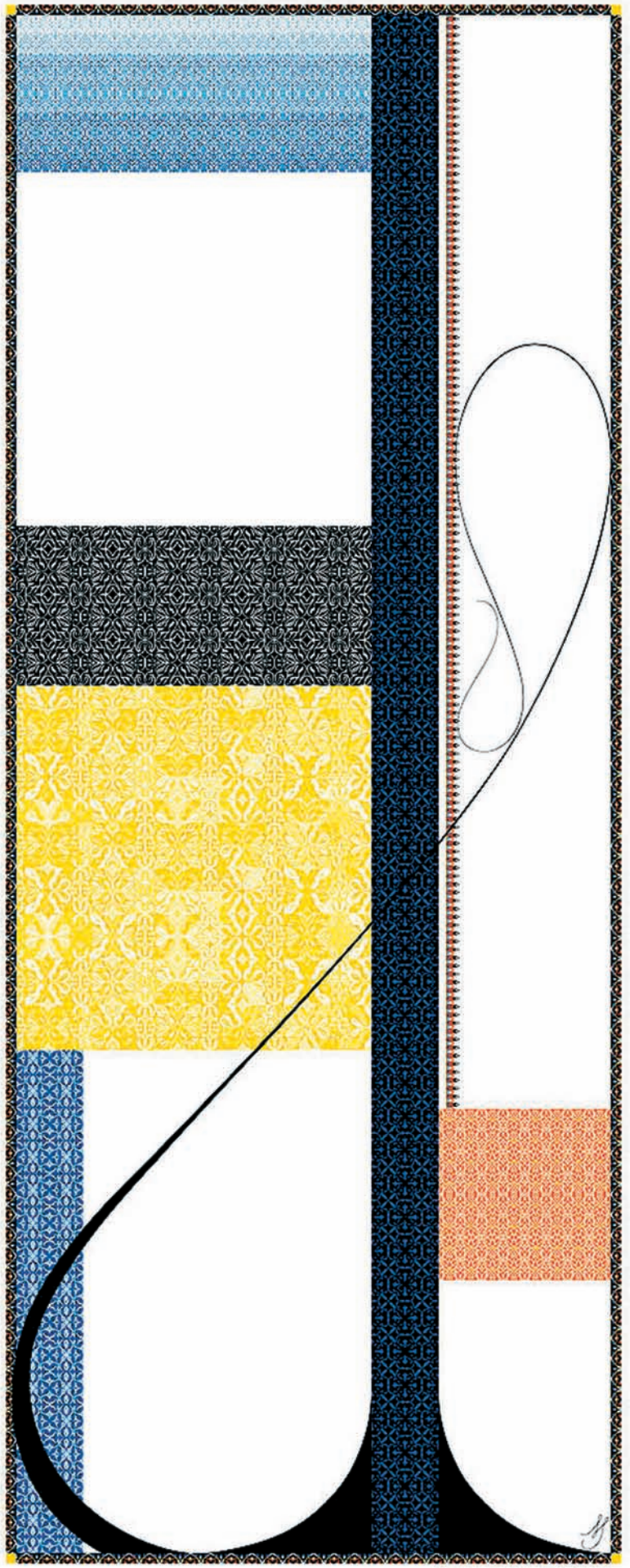
Openness is
pleasure.

9. OPEN WORK
Portfolio



Creator: Andreas Banderas
Title: ***Untitled Collages***
Exemplifies: Open work

The psychedelic photomontages by Norwegian designer/illustrator Andreas Banderas invite the reader to find their own clues in an unpredictable set of signs that avoid conventional readings. The juxtaposition of signs from differing paradigms result in rich mixes of pattern, photography and drawing; which come from such disparate sources that the viewer has to invent their own logic to find poetic links between all the elements. Each of the components are signs we have experienced before and alongside a more conventional set of signs we could easily construct a narrative around them. However, in this form the unexpected combinations slow down our reading and force us to work on the relationships between each component. It is this balance between order and disorder that Eco argues is what makes open work so compelling.



Creator: Marian Bantjes
Title: ***Pop!Tech Conference – Poster***
Exemplifies: Open work

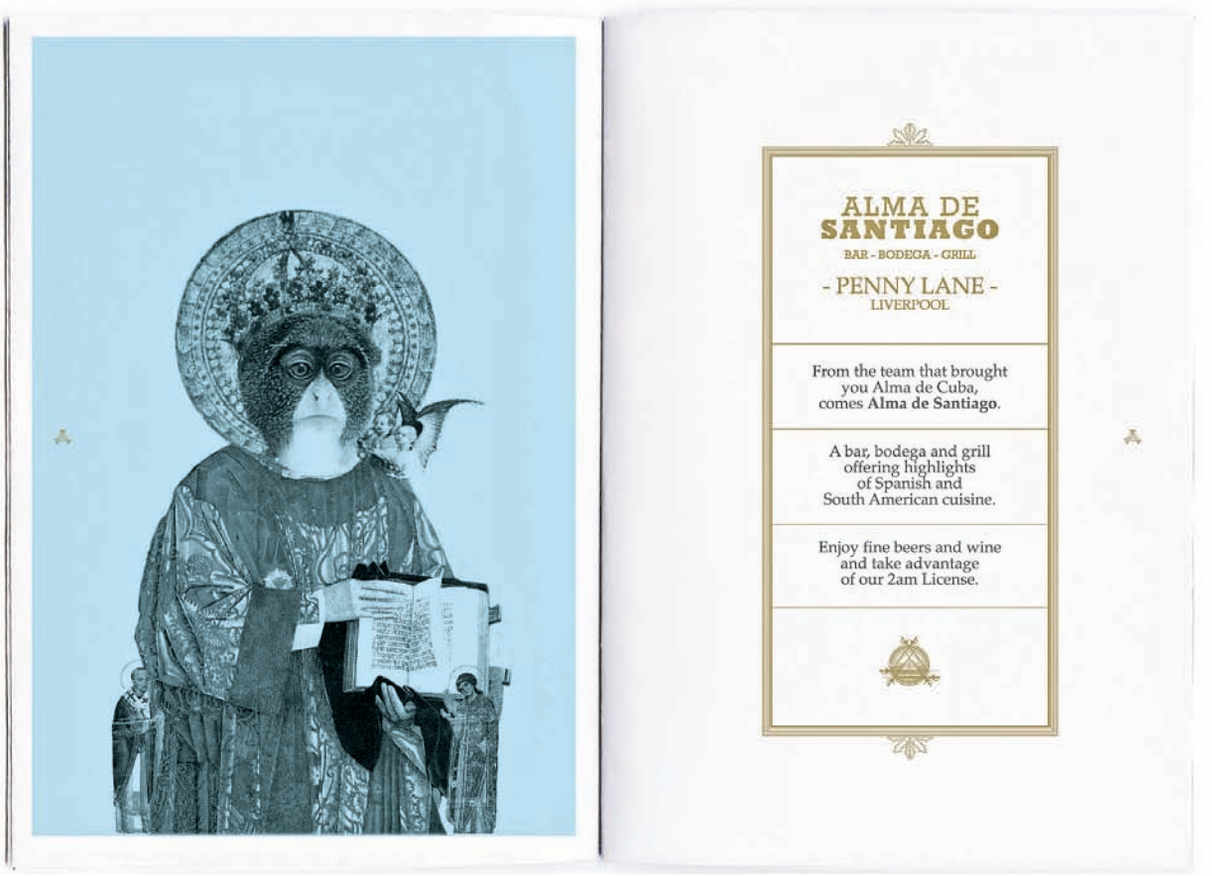
The designer was asked to create a poster for the 2008 Pop!Tech conference. Bantjes' intention was to make a poster that would appeal to everyone but allow for varying interpretations by a diverse and eclectic audience. Bantjes has deliberately set out to create an open work that encourages individual readings and interpretations on an abstract level.

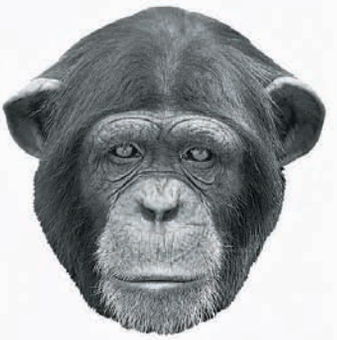
Using the themes of scarcity and abundance, the resulting poster is a curious mixture of asymmetrical geometry, detailed pattern and elegant calligraphic marks.
The geometry appears to come from a Modernist paradigm, the pattern is perhaps from the decorative arts of the Middle East and the calligraphy seems to have its roots in the elegant calligraphic treatments of Middle Eastern publishing. The overlaying of these three ideas defies a simple and quick reading of the work and invites the reader to bring their personal experiences and references to the semiosis. The designer describes her own reading of the poster as 'Mondrian goes to Tehran'.

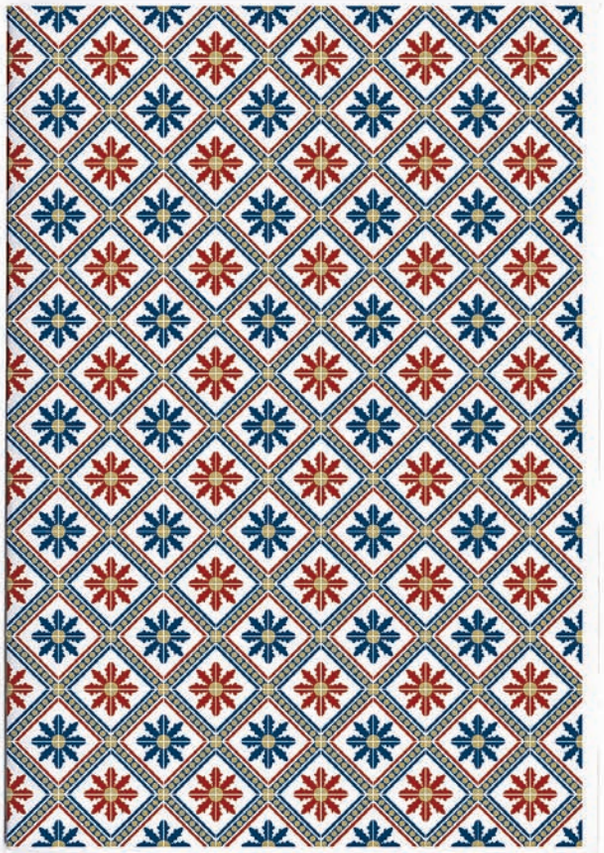
9. OPEN WORK
Portfolio

Creator: **Burn**
Title: ***Alma De Santiago***
Exemplifies: **Open work**

The imagery created for this South American bar and restaurant gives the reader a chance to find meaning from an unusual set of signifiers. They appear to represent ideas and objects without surrounding adjectives. The monkey seems to just signify 'monkey'. Similarly, the tiles signify 'tiles', fruit signifies 'fruit' and the medals, 'medals'. The bold graphic notations form an overall composition that functions like a set of freestanding nouns. They invite a form of surreal visual poetry that asks the reader to fill in the missing words for themselves. This openness brings a sense of atmosphere and mood rather than distinct meaning. The absence of text allows the imagery to float free of any fixed meaning and we are left with an intriguing impression of the venue rather than a description of it.







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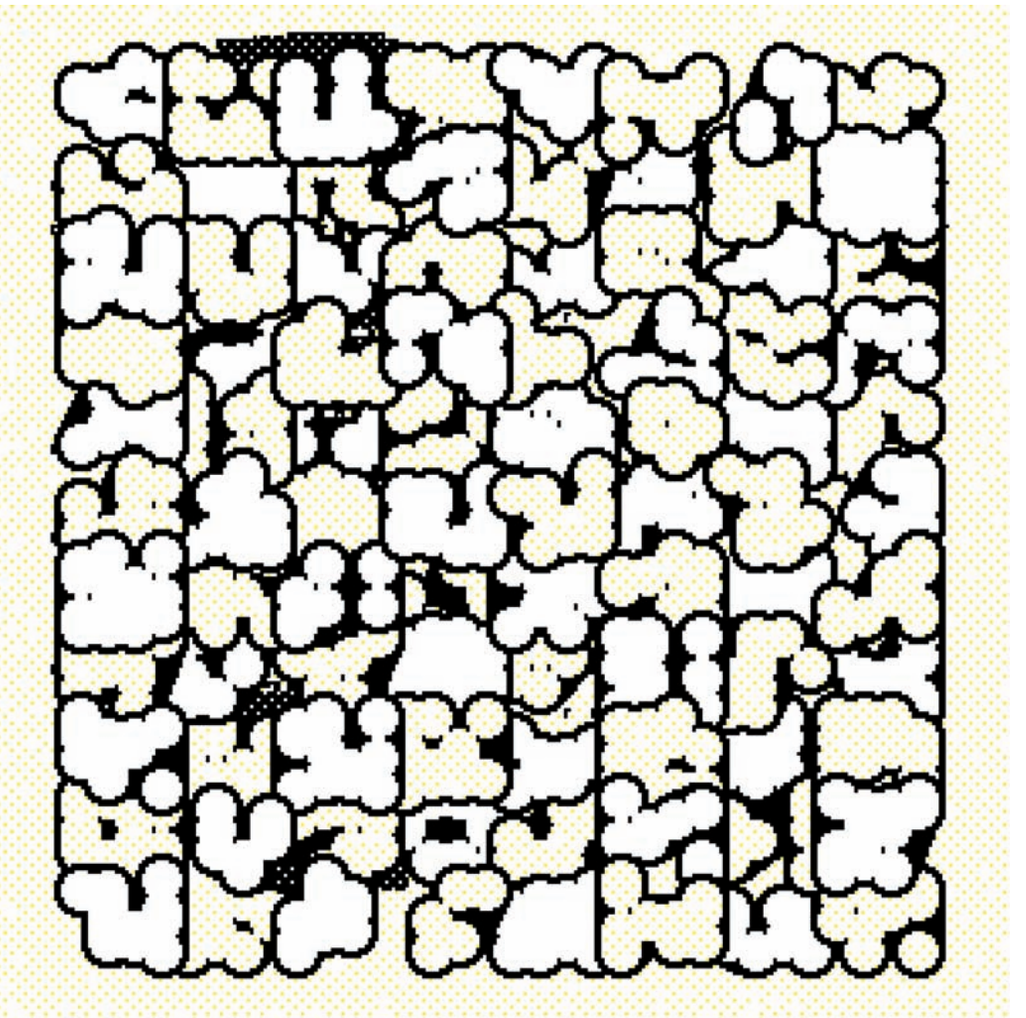
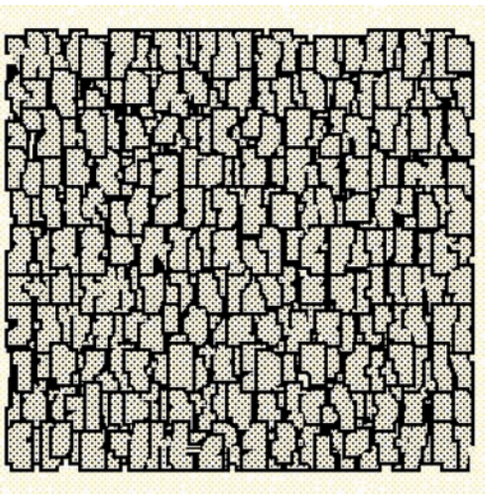
9. OPEN WORK
Portfolio

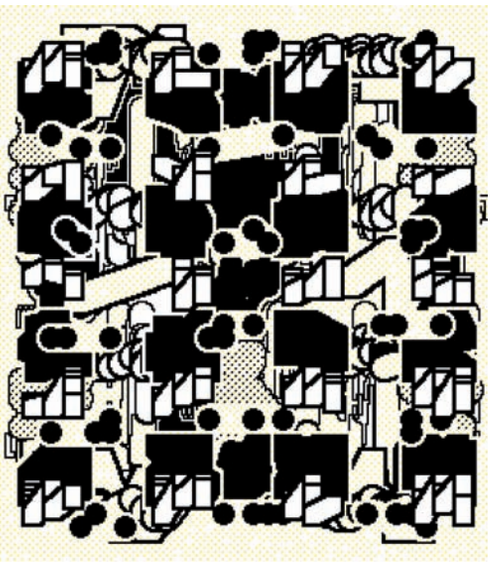
Go to SELF-DIRECTED STUDY: EXERCISES
page 185

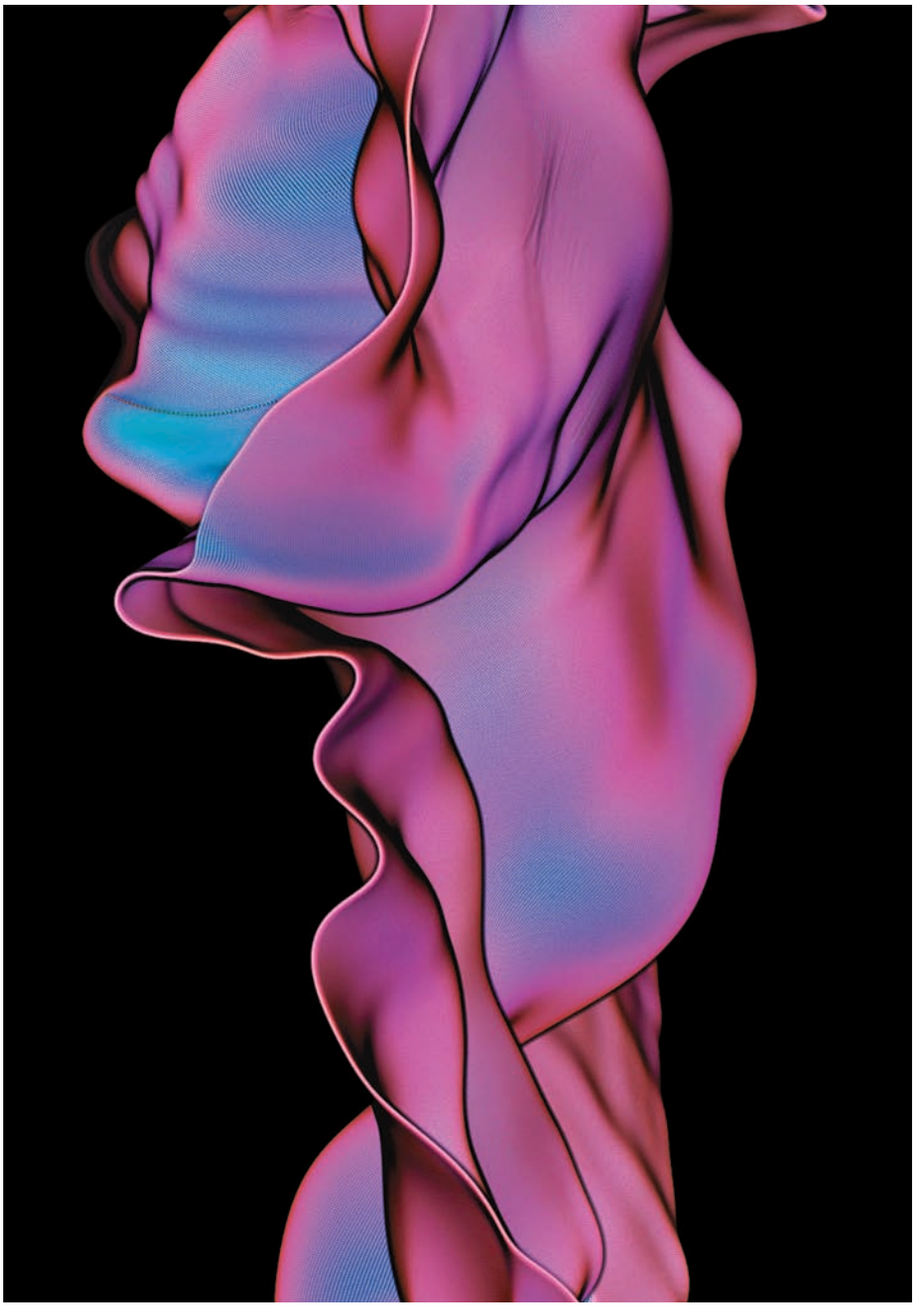
Creator: Jonathan Hitchen
Title: ***Automatic Drawings***
Exemplifies: Open work

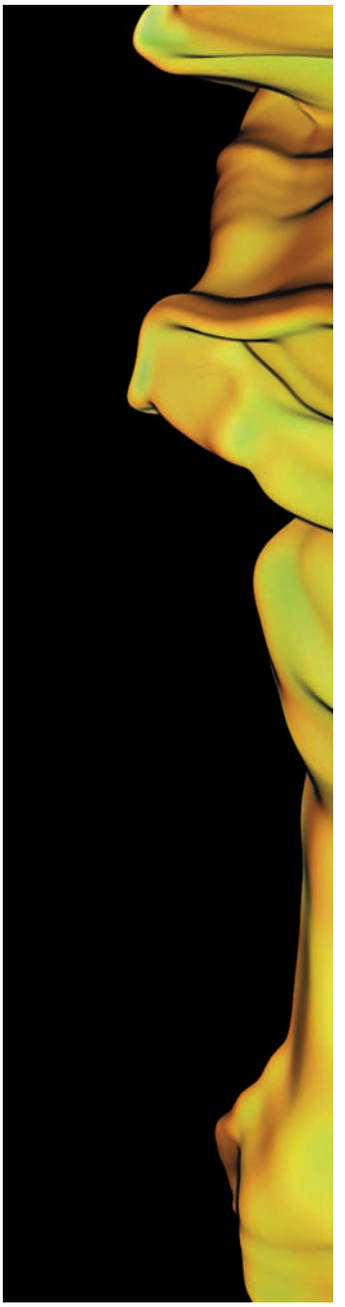
A small sample from a potentially infinite number of drawings made by the computer using a set of predetermined marks, shapes and tones. Created in the retro software Hypercard, the author imposes their signature in a choice of marks and a distinct bitmap aesthetic. This celebrates the mechanical element of the work and the computer as a delivery platform. Within these restrictions, the author suggests the possibility of a limitless range of unfixed signs for the reader to explore and create for themselves.





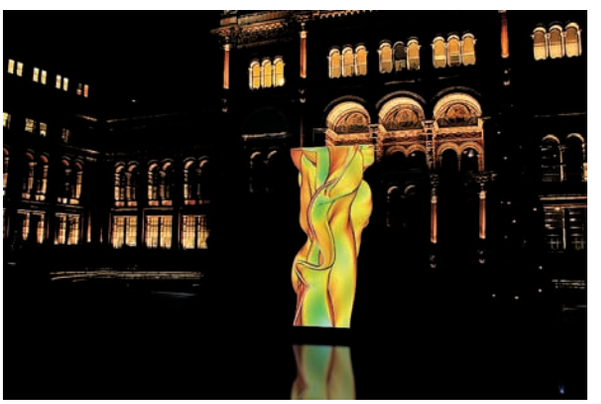






Creator: Universal Everything
Title: ***Forever***
Exemplifies: Open work

A generative video-wall installation displayed on a large screen at London's V&A Museum, in the John Madejski Garden in 2008. 'Forever' was created by Matt Pyke and Karsten Schmidt for Universal Everything using sound files created by Simon Pyke. In this work, custom-made generative coding creates sound and visuals around a set of pre-determined parameters. The images, based on the concept of manipulating a length of string, weave a series of patterns that are entirely self-generating and never repeat. The work is made by writing abstract algorithms, where the key is to give just enough control to the possible chaos by limiting the parameters of what can and can't happen. The open nature of the piece's construction allows for a skilfully made set of possibilities to animate effectively, but with enough control for the forms to remain coherent. It also allows viewers the opportunity to read the motion, sound and visuals in a highly personalised way.



SELF-DIRECTED STUDY: EXERCISES

Many artists and designers find it difficult to explore theoretical material in academic writing. Below are a series of short exercises that will help to exemplify the ideas in 'Visible Signs' through practical application. It is often easier to translate our thoughts and ideas into words by reflecting on experiences we have had or things we have made.

1. de Saussure F. *Course in General Linguistics* (1974) (1st edition 1915)

2. de Saussure F. *ibid.*

1: COMPONENTS

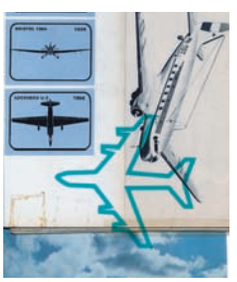
There are three main areas that form what we understand as semiotics: the signs themselves; the way they are organised into systems and the context in which they appear.

Exercise 1
Context

Collect a number of simple set graphic marks that all have the same origin (for example, a set of crosses as featured on p. 15). If you are not sure where to start, you could reference international road or safety symbols. Here you will find marks and images that have a number of meanings depending on their context and the ways that they are combined.

Generate or collect a series of contexts or locations. These could be images cut from old magazines or photographs you have taken yourself. Ensure variety in the examples you use (for example, a variety of periods, locations and compositions).

Using a pinboard or sketchbook, position the marks on the different contexts. Think about how the meaning of the mark shifts



depending on the context, its colour, its scale or the period it is placed in. Write some brief notes to accompany each example as you reflect on the compositions. Try to figure out why you read each one in a particular way and where you learnt to do so. Keep these in your notebook for future reference.

Exercise 2
Duality

Using well-known symbols that function as a set, create a short narrative without using words. The symbols could be from a child's reading book (see p. 16) or from the US Department of Transport (see p. 18). Think about how you can change the meaning of a symbol by changing its relationship to other symbols. Try changing the scale, placing one symbol inside another, making a symbol from multiples of another symbol or cutting them up and joining them to other sections of other symbols. Choose a familiar narrative so that you can concentrate on how to translate rather than writing a story. You could use a familiar short journey, a regular routine or a classic fairytale as your narrative.

Once your narrative is complete, ask a partner to read you the story from the pictures. Compare this story to the one you had in your mind and use any differences as the starting point for a discussion about why the stories vary.

2: HOW MEANING IS FORMED

'In a language state everything is based on relations.' [1]

Exercise 3
Icon/Index/Symbol

Collect a set of graphic signs from the environment. Categorise these signs as either 'icon' or 'index' or 'symbol', or a combination. Using these signs as a starting point, redesign them so that they fall into a different category. For example, redesign the sign for the shopping centre on p. 31 as a symbol rather than an iconic sign. This would mean that the sign was clearly about 'shopping' rather than relying on recognition of the centre's architecture. Similarly, you could try redesigning signage from your local area based on the architecture rather than on the function or service. This way you will generate an iconic signage system. You could test the results on a sample group of residents, paying attention to whether or not the system gradually breaks down the further you go from the area.

'The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs around it. Proof of this is that the value of a term may be modified without either its meaning or its sound being affected, solely because a neighbouring term has been modified.' [2]

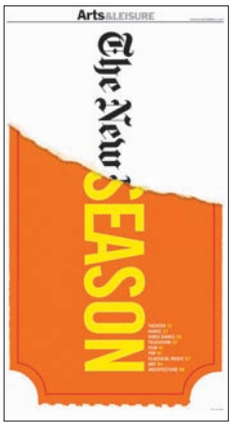
Exercise 4
Value

Take a series of photographs that aim to tell a story about a particular issue. You could take 'big' issues like environmental waste or site your work closer to home with an issue that is important to your local community. Make multiple prints of one or two of the images that you feel are most successful at telling the story. Using these images, make a series of cropped versions of each photograph. You are effectively changing the value relationship between a sign and the signs that surround it.

Exercise 5
Relationships and meaning

Collect a series of photographs of recognisable objects and/or people. Choose images that are unambiguous and iconic. Using these images make a series of visual sentences in your sketchbook, where the central or key image is unchanged but the images on either side vary from sentence to sentence. Write down a sentence in words as your eyes read the images and then reflect on whether the key image changed in meaning, despite not being modified in any way. When you feel confident at generating and reading these sentences, then work the other way round. Find three sentences with a common key figure or word and generate the imagery to describe each sentence.

SELF-DIRECTED STUDY: EXERCISES



Exercise 6
Metaphor

Using the same series of images from exercise 3, look for ways where two or more of the images can be combined to transfer the properties associated with one image to something else. For example, on p. 42 the idea of being nervous, often described as 'butterflies', is transferred by simply placing a butterfly inside the stomach of a robot. Make something feel natural or clean or dangerous, for example, by finding images that can be used to generate a metaphor when combined with something else.

3: READING THE SIGN

Exercise 7
Language and speech

Look through historic examples of signs and symbols, and try to find instances where the meanings have changed entirely. For example, a coat of arms used as a football club's crest or university logo. Try drawing these signs in a variety of different ways, using different line qualities. Can you update these original signs by drawing them in a particular way? In other words, can you add contemporary speech to an ancient language or sign?

Exercise 8
Connotation/Index/Metonym

Choose a number of adjectives at random (dirty, beautiful, eccentric, special). Create a roll of tape that features one of these words as a repeat. (In practice, this can simply be a roll of paper made by joining laser printouts together.) Choose a number of exterior or interior spaces that you feel represent your adjectival choices. Mark the space by using the tape you have created. Think about the way the words are displayed (the speech) and the colours you use, and try to find unusual locations where you can use the tape to draw attention to a quality that is not immediately obvious. Take photographs of the taped spaces. You are playing with various connotations by the way you photograph the locations, but you are also anchoring the meaning of the space by using the words on the tape. The resulting image could be described as an index sign because of the relationship between the word and the location.

4: IMAGE AND TEXT

Exercise 9
Duets

Find a photographic image from a magazine or newspaper that you find particularly compelling. Using this image as the starting point, generate an image yourself to accompany your 'found' image. Write down all the possible meanings that could be read from having these two images side by side. Overlay a word on one of the images to fix or anchor the meaning of the composition. Try a number of different words to see how this third sign controls the way we read the semiotic relationships.

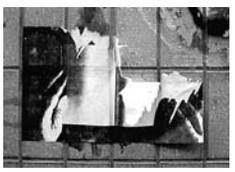
5 + 6: OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE

Exercise 10
The magical act

This exercise is about recognising the features that characterise a piece of communication as either official or unofficial, and attempting to take a piece of communication from one area to another.

Record a number of signs that you feel are characteristically unofficial marks. These may be photographs of graffiti tags or marks made by individuals very quickly or in an informal way.

Collect several pages of advertisements from magazines. Deconstruct one or two of these so you are clear about who the audience is and how the manufacturer or supplier wants to position themselves. Think about the age group of the audience and their demographic. Is the product appealing to professional people? Is it expensive or affordable and accessible? Try to be clear about what the clues are. This could be the way the image or illustration is presented, the use of words, the way the logo is drawn, the choice of typeface and so on.



Your task is now to transfer the unofficial signs into official visual culture by using the information from the decoded advertisements. This might entail redrawing the unofficial marks as if they were logos for a particular demographic, reinterpreting the message as a studio photograph or typesetting an original scrawled text as a magazine layout.

If you want to test the transfer you can make a brief multiple-choice sheet to be used in short interviews. The interviewer might ask the reader to look at the images and tick a box that attributes the imagery to a particular type of company or to a particular audience.

7: SYMBOLIC CREATIVITY

There is a vibrant symbolic life and an active symbolic creativity in everyday life, everyday activities and expressions. Our lives are actually full of expressions, signs and symbols.

Exercise 11
Identity

Choose an individual you know well enough to be able to spend some time in their workplace and/or their home. Preferably, this should be someone who does not work in the creative industries and is not the same age as you. Make a body of visual research based around how this individual expresses their identity. Look for instances where they are not actively trying to express themselves but, nevertheless, tell you a lot about their attitude and outlook on life. Use your camera, make sound recordings, make drawings and try not to determine the outcome during the research stage. The task is to bring the documentary research together in a digestible format that functions as a celebration of your chosen subject. The format may relate directly to your subject or could be an established documentary format, such as a small booklet, a video or a blog. Please be sensitive towards your subject in how you publish the work and remember to get permission from them beforehand.

8: JUNK AND CULTURE

Exercise 12
Rubbish/Cultural objects

Make an exhibition catalogue to accompany your own 'Museum of the Ordinary'. To do this, you will need to document a collection of objects that are overlooked by almost everyone who sees or experiences them. These could be objects that are very personal and signify a particular memory, despite being worthless in monetary terms. Alternatively, you might consider the museum to be your immediate urban or rural environment. In this instance, you will also need to help the reader find the 'exhibits'. Your role is to explore how you can present these objects in a way that gives them a cultural value that belies their ordinariness and elevates them to exhibits, either for their historic interest or as found-art objects.

9: OPEN WORK

Exercise 13
Interpretation

There are many different ways to play Chinese whispers – a traditional parlour game. Please use this version as a suggestion only; feel free to adapt it to your own style. You will need a group of people and a way of directing the activity back to the originator. This could be an internet-based game or something much simpler. The objective of this version is to give each participant the opportunity to make an interpretation of what they perceive before passing the 'message' on to the next person in the chain.

Make an image on a postcard and post it to a friend. Ask them to translate it into one word and send this word on a postcard to another friend. This recipient should then make an image based on the word and send the image on to be converted into a word, which is then sent on to be made into an image, and so on. The last person in the chain sends the work back to you, completing the circle and signalling the chain is complete. The postcards should then be brought or sent to a central point for a small exhibition where they are presented in the order they were made.

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Portfolios

1: COMPONENTS
p. 24 – No Smoking
Direction: Daniel Eatock
www.eatock.com
p. 25 – Illustration for 'Wired' Magazine
Design: Andy Gilmore
www.birdbrid.com
p. 26 – Alphabet Exhibition Poster, 2005
Client: Artscape
Design: Bruce Willen
www.posttypography.com
p. 27 – Apostrophe Poster, 2005
Client: Neenah Paper
Design: Matthias Ernstberger, Sagmeister Inc

2: HOW MEANING IS FORMED
p. 44 – Xmas Declarations
Design: Dorothy
Image: Tim Sinclair
www.wearedorothy.com
p. 45 – Glasgow and London Toiles
Design: Timorous Beasties
www.timorousbeasties.com
pp. 46–47 – Posters
Design: Jason Munn/The Small Stakes
p. 48 – The New Season
Client: 'The New York Times'
Art Direction: Paul Jean, Post Typography
p. 48 – Greenbuild, 2007
Client: US Green Building Council
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p. 49 – Racism Erases Face Poster, 2002
Client: AIGA, Baltimore
Design: Bruce Willen, Post Typography

3: READING THE SIGN
p. 62 – War School Poster
Client: Ctrl.Alt.Shift
Design: Dorothy (Phil Skegg)
Photography: Shaw and Shaw
p. 63 – Beauty and the Beast
Design: G-Man
pp. 64–65 –The Fifth Floor, Ideas Taking Shape
Client: Tate Liverpool
Design: Burn
www.burneverything.co.uk
pp. 66–67 – If I Want to Explore a New Direction Professionally, it is Helpful to Try it Out for Myself First and The Audacity of Hov
'VIBE' Magazine title page
Client: Mark Shaw, VIBE, 2008
Artwork: Marian Bantjes, 2007
Client: Stefan Sagmeister
Artwork and photography: Marian Bantjes

4: TEXT AND IMAGE
p. 76 – Leonardo Book Cover
Client: New York School of Visual Arts
Design: Michael Walsh
p. 77 – Liar (self promo)
Design: Lawrence Zeegen
pp. 78–79 – 'Guardian' letters: 3D Friends, Four Obstacles to Writing, Map of the Area Surrounding Our Holiday Home
Client: 'Guardian' newspaper
Illustration: Tom Gauld
www.tomgauld.com
p. 80 – Pixie Shoes
Illustration: Francesca Bunny Williams
www.wonderleague.co.uk
p. 81 – Drawings for 'Emblem' Magazine, 2008 Documentary
Illustration: William John Hewitt, Manchester School of Art

5: OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
pp. 96–97 – Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far, 2008
Client: Abrams Inc
Concept: Stefan Sagmeister
Design: Stefan Sagmeister and Matthias Ernstberger
Photography: Henry Leutwyler
Illustration: Yuki Muramatsu and Stephan Walter
Editor: Deborah Aaronson
Production: Anet Sirna-Bruder
pp. 98–99 – Keeping a Diary Supports Personal Development
Art direction and concept: Stefan Sagmeister
Design: Matthias Ernstberger and Stephan Walter
Producer: Joanna Lee and Bert Tan
Creative director: Richard Johnson
Editor: Elena Ho
Sponsor: MDA Singapore
Design: Sagmeister Inc.
pp. 100–101 – Pint Glass
Design: Peter Richardson
Photography: Nick Bentley
peter@villagegreenstudio.com
p. 102 – Interference (Plaque)
Design: Katy Dawkins
p. 103 – Price-Tag Gift Wrap
Design: Daniel Eatock

6: UNOFFICIAL LANGUAGE
p. 120 – Design Austria Poster, 2008
Art direction: Stefan Sagmeister
Design: Matthias Ernstberger and Sarah Noellenheidt
Client: Design Austria
p. 121 – Chaumont Poster, 2004
Client: Chaumont, France
Design: Sagmeister Inc, New York
Art direction: Stefan Sagmeister
Design: Matthias Ernstberger
3D illustration: Aaron Hockett
Illustration: Gao Ming, Mao,
p. 122 – Open Day Poster, 2009
Client: University of Brighton
Costumes and design: Francesca Bunny Williams and Hannah Waldron
www.wonderleague.co.uk
www.hannahwaldron.co.uk
p. 123 – Snowflake
Concept and design: Riitta Ikonen
Photography: Anni Koponen
p. 123 – Commuter Thrival
Concept and design: Riitta Ikonen
Photography: Anja Schaffner
Typography: Valerio Dilucente
p. 124 – Veterant Skateboard/ Space Invaders
Design: Elzo Durt
www.elzo.be
p. 125 – Wastebin self-promotional work
Design: Burn
p. 126 – TI/Paper Trail
Design and illustration: Ian Wright
www.mrianwright.com
p. 127 – Record Prints, Bob Dylan
Concept and design: Ian Wright

7: SYMBOLIC CREATIVITY
p. 136 – Wonderleague website screen shots
Design: Francesca Bunny Williams
www.wonderleague.co.uk
p. 137 – T-Post T-shirt subscription magazine (Image courtesy of T-Post)
Design: Kate Moross
pp. 138–139 – Nike Dunk Posters
Art direction and design: Kate Moross
Photography: Neil Bedford
Styling: Carrie Mundane
www.katemoross.com
pp. 140–141 Bellini Posters
Design: Ian Mitchell, Michael O'Shaughnessy, Seel Garside, Liverpool Design Academy

8: JUNK AND CULTURE
pp. 156–157 – Chocolate Button Safe, String Too Small for Use
Design: Hazel Jones
www.a1scrapmetal.blogspot.com
pp. 158–159 – Emblem/St Peter
Design: David Crow
Manchester School of Art
pp. 160–161 – Guarda el Polvo and Aparejo Potencial collages
Design: Rodrigo de Filippis
www.flickr.com/rodrigboy

9: OPEN WORK
p. 176 – Self-commissioned work
Design: Andreas Banderas
http://andreasbanderas.com
p. 177 – Pop!Tech Poster, 2008
Client: Pop!Tech
Artwork: Marian Bantjes
pp. 178–179 – Alma De Santiago
Design: Burn
p. 180 – Automatic Drawings
Design: Jonathan Hitchen
p. 181 – Forever, 2008
Client: Victoria & Albert Museum
Design and art direction: Universal Everything

www.avabooks.com
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Required Reading Range
Course Reader

AVA Academia's Required Reading Range: Course Reader titles are designed to support visual arts students throughout the lifetime of an undergraduate degree. Packed with examples from students and professionals and fully illustrated with clear diagrams and inspiring imagery, they offer an essential exploration of the subject.

This second edition of Visible Signs is an update to the popular first edition of the same name, in which David Crow introduces design students to the fundamentals of semiotics. Basic semiotic theories are taught in most art schools as part of a contextual studies programme, but many students find it difficult to understand how these ideas might impact on their own practice. *Visible Signs* tackles this problem by explaining semiotic terms and theories in relation to visual communication, with illustrative examples taken from contemporary art and design. Concepts such as signs and signifiers, and language and speech are all explored within the framework of graphic design and the visual arts.

The second edition features new content and includes case studies, student exercises and 200 visuals that have been specifically sourced to best illustrate the ideas discussed within the book.

- Features substantial new and revised content.
- Addresses the lack of an accessible and visually interesting publication on the topic of semiotics.
- Showcases 200 colour visuals specifically created to illustrate the ideas discussed in the text.

David Crow studied Communication Design at Manchester Metropolitan University. He subsequently worked as a designer in London for Assorted iMaGes and as Art Director for Island Records before running his own consultancy. As a freelance designer he worked for a range of clients in the cultural sector including Rolling Stones Records, Virgin Records, Phonogram and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Crow then moved into academia as Head of the Department of Graphic Arts at Liverpool John Moores University. He is currently Dean of the Faculty of Art and Design and Pro-Vice Chancellor at Manchester Metropolitan University.

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