Visible Language in Transition
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ABSTRACT

Visible Language evolves into its third generation with a new editor (Mike Zender) and a new institutional support (University of Cincinnati). Transitions across the two completed generations and plans and expectations for the third are explored. Forty-six years of continuous publication are celebrated.
It is singularly appropriate for a design journal to experience transition. Donald Schön (1983) defined design as a profession that stimulates transition: from existing to preferred states. How could a journal supporting design transformation not itself change as it seeks to facilitate the growth of knowledge in a change-oriented profession?

Visible Language has been published continuously for forty-six years—this is a small miracle in scholarly publishing, particularly when the scholarship deals with design of communications. The first editor and founder, Merald Wrolstad, provided twenty years of guidance, bringing the journal through a name change, from Journal of Typographic Research to Visible Language, with a focus on reading and writing, the processing of visible language (reading) and its construction (written language, calligraphy, type design, typography, diagrams, etc.).

The second editor provided twenty-six years of guidance and brought the journal into the digital age; broadening its mission to include digital communications with their more fluid, relational presentations, structural concerns regarding interface and interaction, an interest in communication in terms of contemporary issues like bilingualism, cultural difference, globalization, teaching and learning design, and research in all its formal and informal modes.

During this time, the Rhode Island School of Design provided a physical home for the journal, while the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology provided early and continuous web access for the journal and its participants on their servers. The support of both these institutions was deeply valued. The Advisory Board, who reviewed articles, offered advice and occasionally guest edited issues, were the substantial backbone of the journal. Many people as authors, designers, consultants, reviewers and critics supported the idea that design could and should support dissemination of information that went beyond what a trade magazine supplied. In terms of the second editor, this was about building a discipline through research and various forms of scholarship; it sought to bridge the gap between science and art. It was inclusive regarding international participants, recognizing that research in design is a vital part of many cultures. A cursory count over the past ten years of authors’ national identities demonstrated that American and foreign authors were almost evenly divided.
Some of the special issues that show the range of journal interest and gave the second editor special pleasure were:

**36.2 AN ANNOTATED DESIGN RESEARCH BIBLIOGRAPHY: BY AND FOR THE DESIGN COMMUNITY**
This was a resource in which many designers and educators contributed books with a brief commentary on their importance. That the issue sold out is a testament to its contribution and the design community’s interest. Five PhD students were the guest editors.

**36.3 & 37.1 RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION DESIGN**
Doctoral investigations often languish without reaching either education or practitioner cultures. In these two issues, research accomplishments were featured.

**37.3 INSTRUCTION AND PROVOCATION, OR RELEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS.**
Guest edited by Michael Golec and Aron Vinegar, the famous Venturi book *Learning from Las Vegas* received another look demonstrating that it still resonates within the design community.

**38.1 CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNICATION DESIGN**
This issue paired the most dissimilar articles, the Mixtec screenfolds from the distant past and from the present a visual analysis of user interface using Gert Hofstede’s cultural model on international web advertising for major international corporations.

**41.3 VISUAL METAPHORS IN USER SUPPORT**
Guest edited by Karel van der Waarde and Piet Westendorp, the role of metaphors in communication, particularly as they guide user performance through abstraction or similarity was the focus. Some of the topics were, for example, the passage of time, a healthful diet or textual movement.

**43.2/3 & 44.1 COMMUNICATION DESIGN FAILURES**
Guest edited by Sharon Poggenpohl and Dietmar R. Winkler, various kinds of failure were featured in the belief that a critical examination of design performance and aesthetics is necessary to the advancement of the profession and should be part of critical learning. The failures under examination were diverse: the control room at Three Mile Island, temporary signage and prescription medicine information.
One design scholar called Visible Language “quirky.” The journal has broadly drawn its mission, and the individuals who participate lend their academic and cultural flavor. “Visible language” permeates our lives, yet is so pervasive and taken for granted that we miss its significance until it fails to serve us. Imagine a day without visible language—no street signs, no computer screen information, no printed packaging or instructions, no books (whether physical or digital), no temperature gauge, no maps...

Western thought is full of polarities that disengage and fragment the continuum of thinking; we classify and set categories against each other. John Dewey (1958), the preeminent pragmatist philosopher, in his theory of inquiry, recommends abandoning dualisms of mind and matter, objective and subjective or general and specific as they exist on a continuum and depend on the context of inquiry. In this regard, designers sometimes think of themselves as generalists or specialists. The generalist works from theories and principles, applying them to a broad array of communication need or opportunity. In contrast, the specialist immerses him or herself in the history, tradition and constructive possibilities of making, for example, a typeface. Both are valuable approaches, and probably few designers exist at the ends of this continuum.

At a time when crossover between disciplines is increasingly desired and significant projects addressing human needs can be tackled only through collaboration, we need to reach across boundaries and entertain new information from other sources.

Visible Language has sought to bridge such gaps by presenting scholarship of narrow and broad focus, addressing the special, historical focus of typography and addressing analytical examination of various kinds of practice. Articles have presented empirical research, scholarly investigation in a more humanistic tradition, ideas in early development and those that are accomplished. While some of the articles have dealt with a specialist interest, others or the context of the journal’s entire corpus have been general. Knowledge flows in both directions and given the changing nature of expectations and practice; this is appropriate. Visible Language continues to be curious about how processes including people’s habits and desires are changing regarding communication.

Visible Language is entering a new phase in its life, with a new editor, Paul Michael Zender, and a new institutional support, the University of Cincinnati. Mike, as he prefers to be called, along with many years
of teaching and practicing design, brings a strong interest in advancing design through research. He has written papers on his collaborative research that focuses on making medical information more accessible for medical researchers and practitioners. Two of these papers were presented in this journal (Zender, 2006, 2007). The first article came at the start of what has become a years-long research program in symbol design. Describing a research study funded by Procter and Gamble to communicate product attributes without words, it quickly became apparent that the study of icons, pictograms and symbols had importance well beyond any commercial function and was strategic for understanding visible language. Mike’s subsequent articles have explored various aspects of symbol design and issues of design research. A new paper is included in this volume.

The University of Cincinnati, with its long history of cooperative education that joins academic learning to professional exposure and experience in the world, provides a platform in which research may transfer into practice and application; weaving together what have typically remained separate endeavors. Experiential learning in general, and co-op in particular, harnesses the idea that we form important kinds of disciplinary knowledge through the dynamic interaction of research, theory and practice. In medicine this has been called from bench to bed, referring to the flow of ideas from the laboratory bench to the hospital room and indeed into the patient’s bedroom, then back into the lab. In design education a co-op system follows a similar path: from research and theoretical exploration in the academy, students go out to put theory into practice in design firms and organizations, then return to school with knowledge from the field. This cooperative educational model parallels the design process itself where concepts (theories for how to solve a problem) are prototyped (put into practice), tested (evaluative research) and deployed (put into practice). Coexistent with the co-op system, the University of Cincinnati is a large research one institution with over $400 million in annual research funding and is also a complete academic enterprise with an academic medical center. This thriving home of research and practice now houses Visible Language.

As the journal changes editor and location it transitions to sharper focus on research in visual communication. True to it’s name, Visible Language will continue to explore all things typographic and literate, while also true to its name
it will seek to stimulate and report research in all forms of visual communication: perception, symbols, 3-D objects, user experiences, contexts and interactive systems.

The original Visible Language was about writing and reading. The evolved Visible Language will be about seeing, experiencing and gaining meaning from it.

Specifically, Visible Language will be about publishing research and stimulating discourse to create knowledge of how designers make what people see, which informs what people know and do.

We trust Visible Language will continue to be quirky and broadly inclusive. It will welcome research from all design disciplines and points of view. But it will also seek to advance the quality and quantity of design research, from defining how design research is and is not like research in other fields, to identifying best research methods and apt standards of rigor.

This journal has been around for nearly 50 years. A transition is a good time to ask ‘why.’ Why is Visible Language around? Because it is self-evident that we are all surrounded by, immersed in visible language. Because the majority of our cerebral cortex processes visual information. Because designers who use visible language every day have so little explicit knowledge to guide their work. Because it is tremendously fun to learn and grow in community with colleagues who stimulate and challenge us through respectful discourse. With the explosion of technology putting visual language in the palm of our hands, Visible Language is more important today than 47 years ago when Merald Wrolstad founded it. Welcome to the next 46 years of Visible Language!

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REFERENCES


Zender, Mike. 2006. *Advancing Icon Design for Global Nonverbal Communication: or What does the word ‘bow’ mean?* Visible Language 40.2, 177-206.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl has taught in notable design programs: The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, and the Rhode Island School of Design. Her focus over a long career has been post-graduate design education, both master and Ph.D., as well as design research. Taking a human-centered position with regard to design, she teaches to help students humanize technology, to learn to work creatively and collaboratively with each other, and to prepare them to contribute to building a body of design knowledge. For twenty-six years, she edited and published the international scholarly journal Visible Language. She co-edited with Keiichi Sato Design Integrations, Research and Collaboration (Intellect Books, 2009). Currently, she is working on a book tentatively titled Design Theory-to-go, while teaching occasionally in Hong Kong.