

2021

december

**SPECIAL ISSUE:**

in collaboration with  
the academic journal  
*Visual Anthropology Review*

## Advisory Board

- Naomi Baron – *The American University, Washington, D.C.*  
Michael Bierut – *Pentagram, New York, NY*  
Ann Bessemans – *Hasselt University & PXL-MAD (Media, Arts, Design)*  
*School of Arts, Hasselt, Belgium*  
Charles Bigelow – *Type designer*  
Matthew Carter – *Carter & Cone Type, Cambridge, MA*  
Keith Crutcher – *Cincinnati, OH*  
Mary Dyson – *University of Reading, UK*  
Jorge Frascara – *University of Alberta, Canada*  
Ken Friedman – *Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia*  
Michael Golec – *School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL*  
Judith Gregory – *University of California-Irvine, Irvine, CA*  
Kevin Larson – *Microsoft Advanced Reading Technologies*  
Aaron Marcus – *Aaron Marcus & Associates, Berkeley, CA*  
Tom Ockerse – *Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI*  
Sharon Poggenpohl – *Estes Park, CO*  
Michael Renner – *The Basel School of Design – Visual Communication Institute,*  
*Academy of Art and Design, HGK FHNW*  
Stan Ruecker – *IIT, Chicago, IL*  
Katie Salen – *DePaul University, Chicago, IL*  
Peter Storkerson – *Champaign, IL*  
Karl van der Waarde – *Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne*  
Mike Zender – *University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH*

- N. Phil Bevan - *Teikoku University, Japan*
- N. M. D. C. F. - *Teikoku University, Japan*
- Ann Messeroffs - *University of York, MA (Media Arts Design)*  
*School of Architecture, England*
- O. M. B. B. - *Teikoku University*
- Matthew Carter - *Letter & Corp Type, Cambridge, MA*
- Kirk Culbert - *London, UK*
- Shoji Ogino - *Japan's National TV*
- Ingrid Francini - *University Alberta, Canada*
- R. H. B. C. - *University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland*
- S. C. C. - *University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland*
- Ingrid Francini - *University of Alberta, Canada*
- V. H. C. - *University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland*
- A. J. M. C. - *University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland*
- Tom O'Keefe - *Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI*
- Simon B. G. P. - *Edinburgh, UK*
- Michael Peacock - *The School of Design, Visual Communication Institute*  
*Academy of Art and Design, HCS/HNM*
- S. J. K. - *University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland*
- K. S. J. K. - *University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland*
- Peter Spinkerson - *Champaign, IL*

Karl van der Warden - *Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne*

# Contents

# december

Naomi S. Baron

**Beyond Judging Books by Their Covers: 12 — 21**  
**Reflections on “Interrogating**  
**Cultural Anthropology Text Covers”**

Ann Bessemans  
María Pérez Mena

**Exploring the Boundaries Between 22 — 27**  
**Visual Anthropology and**  
**Visual Communication Design Research**

Mary C. Dyson

**A commentary on: 28 — 35**  
**Reappropriation of Gendered Irish**  
**Sign Language in One Family**

Michael J. Golec

**Empathic Projections: 36 — 49**  
**Visual Anthropology, Design, and**  
**Acknowledgement**



Dori Griffin

**Re-reading the Borderland Imaginary  
from 2021** 50 — 59



Michael Renner

**Echoing the Call for  
Multimodal Representation** 60 — 65



Michael Renner

**Drawing to Tell Versus  
Drawing to Intrigue?** 66 — 77



Karel van der Waarde

**Developing Accurate  
Visual Conventions?** 78 — 87





# Introduction: The makers and the made

Mike Zender, Editor

Academic disciplines are a help and a hindrance. While they advance knowledge by focusing disciplinarians on a coherent set of related issues, those same boundaries that define and focus, also delimit and inhibit expansion of universal knowledge for the broad benefit of humanity. Such are Communication Design and Visual Anthropology.

Visual communicators (the discipline) focus on cultivating knowledge and methods to help designers make more effective communication objects. Professional communication designers, engaged often by clients to help them craft their communications to stakeholders, focus on making the clients' messages clear. While the visual communication design process increasingly includes evaluation of the effectiveness of communication for people, at least in the past, professional designers were often professionally indifferent about the actual content of the message or its cultural impact.

Visual Anthropology studies the visual aspect of cultural lives while also using visual techniques in anthropological research and representation. Designers are makers of visual objects that enter culture. Visual anthropologists study the visual cultural lives and experience. This seems like a recipe for cross-disciplinary collaboration.

*Visible Language (VL)* and *Visual Anthropology Review (VAR)* collaborated to produce this issue of *Visible Language* as an experiment to advance knowledge. *VL* invited two dozen visual communication scholars to read a selection of articles from *VAR* and respond. The seven authors and eight articles in this special issue are their response.

A couple of things stand out. Naomi Baron's article calls out the presupposition in Hammond, et al "Interrogating cultural anthropology text covers: Intended messages, received meanings" that textbook covers can shape students understanding of a discipline and that publishers intend messages about book contents in their covers. While Baron gives anecdotal examples that legitimately question how seriously students take cover designs, it is the *VAR* authors themselves that uncover the many factors that go into a cover design, very few of which concern students understanding of a book's contents let alone a whole discipline. Budgets often dictate outcomes. Part of that is the dictum that that covers use inexpensive (relatively) stock photography. Stock photography, while an interesting cultural study in itself, necessarily limits the potential that a specific cover will symbolize a specific book's contents. Rather, stock photos use off-the-shelf

generic photos created to fit a broad range of possible uses. The authors also point out that cover design is often guided by branding requirements for the publisher, or a line of books, or even the catchy title of a series of textbooks like “Mirror for Humanity” whose cover logically shows a reflected image, or “Seeing Anthropology” whose cover crops an image of eyes. Other factors the VAR authors did not explore also impact cover design, such as a designers’ style, or the perceived expectations of certain adoption committees. All of these factors go against the likelihood that covers are intended to communicate a book’s specific content, let alone the essential nature of a discipline. Baron suggested that Hammond and colleagues interesting study overplayed the theory that students are impacted by book covers. Most people just do not take book covers seriously. A recent article by Sabina Sieghart “The Influence of Macrotypography on the Comprehensibility of Texts in Easy-to-Read Language” in this journal pointed out that the genre of a communication can by itself communicate much to a reader. Low literacy readers could infer much of the content of an instruction manual or a menu or a poster just because the reader recognized that they were an instruction manual or a menu or a poster. This suggests that people know a book cover is not likely to do more than attract attention, as the students in Hammond’s paper suggested.

For visual anthropologists, this means that’s semiotic analysis should begin with understanding of a communication object’s genre and of people’s expectations of that genre. People know posters and book covers are trying to sell them something and interpret them accordingly. Menus and instruction manuals are read more seriously and interpreted more critically. A poetic instruction manual that leaves a lot of room for interpretation would be a failed instruction manual, whereas a book cover that is colorful and engaging but vague in meaning is probably fulfilling its role. To be more specific, in their semiotic analysis visual anthropologists should not infer that “the wall which runs horizontally across the image, dividing the water from the temple, connotes the separation of the terrestrial of humanity from the ethereal” when the user of the book cover with that image is just looking uncritically at an attractive, colorful cover whose photo reinforces the title, not searching for the meaning of the universe in it

In short, designers can learn from visual anthropologists to consider the possible impact of their work on people, and visual anthropologists can learn from designers to infer meanings in relation to people’s awareness of design genres.

Another thing that stands out is from Mary Dyson’s consideration of the things considered, and not considered, in LeMaste’s “Reappropriation of gendered Irish Sign Language in one family” in VAR. Mary observed that the authors did not consider adequately the forms of the signs in sign language. Designers know intuitively, if not explicitly, the principle of representational correspondence: that visual representations

should correspond with our mental representations. Up is best represented by something high on the page for example. Applied to icons and symbols, representational correspondence means that symbols that are closed in appearance (closer in semantic distance) to what they represent are easier to understand and recall. Dyson observed that this basic principle did not seem to factor into the analysis of which sign language symbols were selected to become Irish Sign Language. Because designers are invested in creating the most appropriate signs and sign systems, they would likely have evaluated the form of the signs selected with an eye to how well the signs fit the meaning. This factor jumps out to those who design symbols but was not considered by the visual anthropologists. Related to this would be how easy or difficult the sign is to make or how easy one symbol is to distinguish from all the others in the system. While designers would likely have glossed-over how many men's versus women's signs were chosen, the visual anthropologists focused on sex to the exclusion of form.

I could go on, but to conclude this introduction, I can say conclusively that our experiment in speaking into each other's disciplines has been fruitful to me. One of the first *VL* articles that I published as editor, Beier & Dyson's "Influence of Serifs on "h" and "i" Useful knowledge from Design and Scientific Research," called for more collaboration of communication designers with scientists, a call that echoed the call of *VL*'s founder Meradl Worlsted over 50 years ago. While the general idea that we should learn something from reading papers from another discipline is neither novel nor surprising, the features of what is exposed when we cross boundaries of visual communication and visual anthropology are unexpected and enlightening.

All the *VAR* articles cited in this issue are available on-line at the Visible Language website.



Beyond Judging Books by Their Covers:  
Reflections on “Interrogating  
Cultural Anthropology Text Covers”

Naomi S. Baron

Why place covers on books? The most obvious reason is to protect the pages. But what do you put on the covers themselves? Answers to the “what” question have evolved over the nearly two millennia since the birth of the codex. To situate the use—and user interpretation—of contemporary covers, particularly for textbooks, let’s start with some history.<sup>1</sup>

## From Book Covers to Book Jackets—and Back to Covers

We begin in medieval Europe, where manuscript production was labor-intensive and book ownership was relatively rare. Bound pages typically had embossed leather bindings, sometimes bedecked with precious stones, ivory, or threads of gold or silver; these adornments befit the book’s valued status. With the coming of print in the West in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the extra trappings were largely dispensed with, leaving coverings of just embossed leather.

Those embossings were essentially decorative, not linguistic. Only in the 16<sup>th</sup> century did title pages begin appearing (inside)—with the work’s title, author, and publisher—and did titles start showing up on the outside, commonly on the spine. Next followed several centuries when books were generally sold without external coverings, enabling purchasers to select the kind of leather and embossing they wished (and could afford). Accordingly, there was no uniform cover content.

But in the early 1800s, publishing practices changed. Binding became part of the manufacturing process. Leather bindings gave way to fabric, with embossed illustrations and, importantly, the book’s title displayed on the front and spine. Another 19<sup>th</sup>-century development was the addition of book jackets, designed to protect books while in transit from the press to the purchaser. The jackets themselves typically contained the same (or similar) textual and illustrative material to what appeared on the fabric cover.

By the early 1930s, publishers moved to economize by only having one place for illustrations. Since printing on fabric covers was expensive, artwork was now displayed only on the paper jackets, leaving most books with blank front and back covers, and only title, author, and maybe publisher embossed on the fabric spine. These practices typify hardcover books today.

What about paperbacks? A precursor of modern paperbacks were the “yellowbacks” or “penny dreadfuls” that appeared in England in the 1830s. Short, inexpensive, and commonly with lurid covers, they provided entertainment for the growing ranks of often newly literate.

However, the real paperback breakthrough came in 1935 when Allen Lane co-founded Penguin Books, bringing high-quality literature to paperback format. Since there was only one (paper) cover, it bore all the linguistic and illustrative information.

"Quality paperbacks" soon competed with traditional hardbacks, in both the trade and education markets. We turn now to the latter—textbooks, both hardback and paper.

## Textbooks

Back in the day when I was in secondary school, our task as students on the first day of the academic year was to make paper covers for the school-owned, hardback textbooks we were issued. Generally, we fashioned covers out of paper grocery bags, though sometimes from a roll of brown kraft paper. The goal was to protect the books, which were passed on annually to other students. But as a result, whatever information—linguistic or graphic—was on the books' covers was hidden from view.

Since college students (at least in the US) procure their own course materials, the approach has been different in higher education. Students are free to put covers on their own books, or not. In my student days, for books that received considerable wear (such as my calculus text and, later, my *Old English Grammar*), the usual covering of choice was pre-made, partially-opaque, plastic covers. We could make out images that lay underneath, but rarely did we bother looking, except to ensure we grabbed the right book.

In college, the notion of what counts as a textbook is more complex than in secondary education. Some "textbooks" are actually what some of us have come to call "book books," meaning books that the larger public might purchase, such as Homer's *Iliad* or Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*. When these books are included on reading lists in higher education courses, overwhelmingly, students buy the paperback version. Depending upon the year of publication, publisher, or discipline, the cover might bear an illustration relevant to the book's subject matter (for the *Iliad*, maybe a Greek soldier as depicted on a red figure vase) or simply text (also used on some editions of the *Iliad*). A single course, particularly in the humanities or social sciences, might require students to purchase a number of "book books."

Other "textbooks," like that calculus book, constitute the sole (or at least main) material for the entire term. They might come in hardback or, these days, often in paper. Again, year of publication, publisher, and discipline influence what appears on the cover. The cover of my calculus text bore only very boring lettering, though these days, even for

mathematics texts, there is more effort to add eye-catching graphics. Gone are dust jackets, so on hardback and paper alike, the cover is the only place for messaging.

## Messaging on Textbook Covers

Understandably, textbook publishers are focused on selling books. While students are the ultimate consumers, it is faculty members who select the textbooks students are asked to acquire. Faculty choices might be driven by a host of factors, including the book's content and the stature of its author(s).

Take Paul A. Samuelson's classic textbook, *Economics*, currently in its 20<sup>th</sup> edition (and now co-authored by William D. Nordhaus). For decades, it was the go-to introductory economics text. (A longtime professor at MIT, Samuelson was also the first American to win the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. Nordhaus, a professor at Yale, received a Nobel award in 2018.) Over the years, the editions have sported a variety of cover designs, from simple text to wind turbines to a map of the Western Hemisphere to a crowd scene to Mondrian-style art. But besides updates and new co-authors, the material remains largely the same. If covers keep changing for subsequent editions of highly similar textbook content, what can we say about semantic relationships between covers (especially those with pictorial artwork) and the subject matter of the books themselves?

When it comes to cover art selection, decision-making ultimately rests with publishers—a reality not just in the textbook market, but for academic and trade titles as well. As the author of nine books (including both academic and trade), only twice have I been consulted on cover issues. Factors over which authors have no control include publishers' budgets (e.g., for commissioning new artwork or buying rights to reproduce existing illustrations) and editors' judgments as to what design will help drive sales.

Assume, for the moment, that a textbook publisher is planning a large print run on an introductory text and therefore willing to commit ample resources for artwork. To what extent does the publisher create a cover for the purpose of conveying information about the book's (and, derivatively, the subject area's) content? Of equal importance is the question, how do student readers perceive this messaging? These are the kinds of questions that Joyce Hammond and her co-authors addressed in studying the covers of college textbooks for introductory courses on cultural anthropology.

# Interrogating Cultural Anthropology Text Covers

Hammond's discipline of cultural anthropology occupies a visually fertile domain for textbook covers. By contrast, an informal survey of my own bookshelves, plus cover photos on Amazon, confirmed that covers of introductory-level textbooks in fields like linguistics, philosophy, or mathematics are frequently "illustrated" with only abstract geometric or type-based designs.

Hammond's study of textbook covers begins with the assumption that "a text's cover is likely to shape students' initial impressions about cultural anthropology." She goes on to explain that the purpose of her research is to "foster a greater awareness of the messages that text covers may convey to students new to anthropology" (Hammond et al., 2009, p. 150).

The article reports on a content analysis of 47 covers of introductory cultural anthropology texts, along with results from focus groups in which students were shown a subset of those covers and asked to discuss such issues as what the covers conveyed to students about cultural anthropology and how effective the covers were at transmitting that information. Another group of participants provided individual responses to questions. Nearly all the covers in the set of 47 included colorful pictorial illustrations.

Of interest to us here are not the details of the content analysis or student responses,<sup>2</sup> but two presuppositions that underlie the study. The first is that the books' covers were intended (here, by the publishers) to convey information regarding what the field of cultural anthropology is about. The second presupposition is that students seek meaning from textbook covers in the first place.

## Presupposition 1: Publishers' Intended Meaning

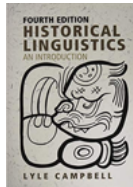
There is an Indian parable about the blind men and the elephant. None of the men had encountered such a beast before. They all laid their hands on different parts of the body. Depending upon the part touched, each man derived a different interpretation of what kind of creature it was. The person who felt the trunk said an elephant must be like a snake. The one feeling the ear likened the elephant to a fan, and so on. Each substituted his findings about one aspect of the animal for the whole.

In much the same way, pictorial textbook covers that attempt to represent the conceptual material in a book can only hope to reference part of the contents. Take, for example, the cover of Lyle Campbell's *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction*. The cover is bedecked with a majestic Mesoamerican glyph, but gives no indication that the subject

of historical linguistics was largely defined by evolution of Indo-European languages on the other side of the globe.

Figure 1.

Cover of Campbell, *Historical Linguistics*, fourth edition



Similarly, the cover of Janet Holmes and Nick Wilson's *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* displays what appear to be traditional Ethiopian figures. However, the images could equally be referencing cultural anthropology, African history, or social diversity. Moreover, they give no indication that the book involves language use by those pictured or anyone else.

Figure 2.

Cover of Holmes and Wilson, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*



In Hammond's analysis of cultural anthropology textbook covers, some study participants indicated they didn't understand what messages particular covers were intended to express. Equally telling, when asked what kind of cover best conveyed what the field of cultural anthropology was about, half of the focus group members judged the "ideal" cover to contain four or more images, in some sort of collage (Hammond et al., 2009, p. 163). This approach presumably would help overcome the "part for the whole" problem.

## Presupposition 2: Do Students Seek Meaning from Textbook Covers?

Hammond's second presupposition about textbook cover design is that students look to derive meaning from these covers. When I was in middle and high school, we likely didn't, since the books went under wraps the day they were issued to us.

What about college students?

Consider printed texts of the sort Hammond discusses, all bearing cover art. Hammond's research directed study participants to seek meaning in the covers they were shown. But what happens with students in the normal course of a semester? They may glance at the covers, but do they "see" them? My strong hunch is that most students using print textbooks largely ignore the covers. To test this hypothesis, a simple experiment could ask students towards the end of a semester what was on the cover of their textbooks. I suspect the responses would reveal sketchy memories at best.

Hammond's study was published in 2009. We might well wonder how her research questions and findings would differ if she undertook her study today. Between then and now, college textbooks underwent a sea change, heavily shifting from print to digital (Baron, 2021). Yes, digital books have cover designs, but in practical terms, they remain more hidden than my high school, kraft paper-covered, American history text.

## Digital Book Covers:

### Pragmatically an Oxymoron?

Think for a moment about digital books in general. One advantage they have over print is the privacy they afford from potentially prying eyes. Unlike the cover of a print book you're reading on a bus, plane, or park bench, the cover of the same digital text isn't visible to others. It was no accident that when E. L. James' bestselling erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* first appeared, it was only available digitally.

Even if you're not concerned about onlookers judging your literary taste, you can still be affected by the tangible properties of print: its size, heft, paper quality. And cover. A *New Yorker* cartoon reminds us how powerful the physical presence of a book can be. In the cartoon, two men are sitting at the beach. One turns to the other and says, "I got tired of 'Moby-Dick' taunting me from my bookshelf, so I put it on my Kindle and haven't thought of it since" (William Haefeli, September 3, 2012, p. 51).

What about digital textbooks and their covers? Consider this observation posted on a Colorado State University blog:

— Yes, electronic versions still can have "cover" images at the beginning, but they don't have nearly the same effect as the bold, weird, and random covers of printed textbooks, peeking out from bookshelves and staring us in the face every time we sit down to study. (Colorado State University Online, n.d.)

A primary reason that digital textbook covers have more limited effect than paper is that digital ones are barely seen.

Even pre-pandemic, textbook publishers were aggressively developing new digital publishing models (Baron, 2019). In summer 2019, the textbook giant Pearson announced a "digital first" policy, whereby digital materials would have publishing priority, fewer new editions of print textbooks would appear, and prices for print would be relatively high. Meanwhile, "inclusive access" policies of publishers such as Cengage and McGraw-Hill give students digital access to course textbooks—for a

bundled reduced price, which students pay to their schools as a course fee, and then schools pass on to the publisher.

Come the pandemic, classes moved not just to virtual learning but overwhelmingly to digital reading. Some of these texts were available as open educational resources (OERs) or materials simply appearing online, but others were digital versions of commercial print textbooks. Regardless of how students accessed their texts, I doubt these readers spent much—if any—time contemplating the digital covers. As with the experiment I suggested for print textbooks, it would be interesting to ask students towards the end of the course what was on their digital textbook's cover. My hunch is that recall would be even lower than for the print scenario. And if you can't remember, you can't interpret the designer's intended meaning.

## The Future of Textbook Covers

As the author of nine “book books” whose readership includes college students, I have always cared what my covers look like, even when I have little or no say in their design. While the publishers' goal is sales, my own desire for covers is both to intrigue potential readers and to offer clues as to the volumes' contents.

Yet as a longtime university teacher, I have no illusions that even the most inviting book covers are normally taken by students to have semantic importance regarding course content. Now that text materials are increasingly digital, I wonder how many students recall ever having seen the cover. Could they pick it out from a line-up?

For the foreseeable future, both print and digital textbooks will continue to have cover art. However, those of us who teach need to be realistic about the impact of such designs. Publishers will still control the artwork. Authors will continue wanting input. Faculty members doing book selection will remain the primary audience for what's on those covers.

The end users—students—will likely be the least invested in the covers' content. Particularly given the digital turn, perhaps one saving grace is less reason to worry students will be judging books by their covers.

## Notes

1. This historical sketch draws heavily upon the series of blog posts from Graphéine Graphic Design (2017), *A short history of book covers*.
2. See Hammond et al. (2009) for discussion of findings.

## References

- Baron, N. S. (2019, September 19). *Textbook merger could create more problems than just higher prices*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/textbook-merger-could-create-more-problems-than-just-higher-prices-123120>
- Baron, N. S. (2021). *How we read now: Strategic choices for print, screen, and audio*. Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, L. (2021). *Historical linguistics: An introduction* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). MIT Press.
- Colorado State University Online. (n.d.). *10 reasons why we'll miss textbook covers*. <https://blog.online.colostate.edu/blog/uncategorized/10-reasons-why-we-well-miss-textbook-covers/>
- Graphéine Graphic Design. (2017). *A short history of book covers*. <https://www.grapheine.com/en/history-of-graphic-design/history-of-book-covers-1>
- Hammond, J. D., Brummel, J., Buckingham, C., Dolan, D., Irish, L., Menzel, E., and Noard, C. (2009). Interrogating cultural anthropology text covers: Intended messages, received meanings. *Visual Anthropology Review* 25(2), 150–171.
- Holmes, J. and Wilson, N. (2017). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Routledge.

## Author

Naomi S. Baron is Professor Emerita of Linguistics at American University in Washington, DC. She is a former Guggenheim Fellow, Fulbright Fellow, and Visiting Scholar at the Stanford Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. For more than thirty years she has been studying the effects of technology on language, including the ways we speak, listen, read, write, and think. Her earlier books include *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World* (2008) and *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World* (2015). Her newest book is *How We Read Now: Strategic Choices for Print, Screen, and Audio* (2021). Presently she is exploring how artificial intelligence is reshaping what it means to write.

# Exploring the Boundaries Between Visual Anthropology and Visual Communication Design Research

Ann Bessemans  
María Pérez Mena

Researchers and/or designers in visual anthropology and visual communication share the visual aspect or visual study as a common interest. However, their views are different. Visual anthropologists consider the social impact and/or meaning of the visual communication within a culture. They are also interested in ways to present anthropological data by means of visual techniques. Visual communication design researchers create visual communication, and are interested in how participants respond to visual matter in order to enhance the human experience. In a way, they are (partly) producing the visual culture visual anthropologists are reflecting upon.

In order to find out how and whether such disciplinary exploration might be fruitful, we were assigned three articles from *Visual Anthropology Review* within the category "Deaf Visual Culture." As typographic legibility researchers within READSEARCH this felt familiar, since we have conducted several design studies (published and in preparation)—more specifically, practical legibility research—for the deaf and hard of hearing community.

As design researchers in legibility studies, we do see possibilities to build bridges among the disciplines of visual anthropology and visual communication. A remarkable resemblance between the different fields of study within a deaf culture, in our eyes, is the approach of trying to capture legibility/illegibility within language (spoken, signed, and/or written) by means of visual properties. Therefore, we would like to highlight differences and similarities between anthropology versus visual communication, drawing conclusions about why both disciplines should keep a close eye on each other. Implementing insights into their research practices and/or visual communication design artifacts may open horizons within innovative or even collaborative research projects. Both fields, visual anthropology and visual communication, are trying to contribute to a specific common concern in deaf education—namely, the educational context of language practice.

## Deaf Visual Culture in

## visual anthropology studies

Deaf Visual Culture is understood as a broad understanding of the social impact and/or meaning of a diversity of ways among the Deaf to communicate visually within specific contexts. Sign language (as their native language) seems to form a core element in their visual culture in order to explore dynamic interactions concerning a wide range of topics in language practices in social and educational contexts. Studies done by visual anthropologists contribute to this knowledge of the visual language by studying

the communicative issues of the visual matter that shape, in an important way, the Deaf Visual Culture and values of Deaf visual tradition.

According to Laksmi (1999–2000, p. 6), in a visual anthropology milieu, it is important to “record what people actually do, rather than what they think they do and say they do.” Methods for visualizing social practices for analysis are diverse: collecting quantitative images/videos/art, practicing (long-term) observations, and/or a form of elicitation sessions. Some of these methods trigger a participatory action research method. Every form of analysis of social practices that is made visible to reflect upon a deaf-centered perspective can serve as a platform to start dialogue on matter that before, seemed to be difficult to discuss with non-peers and even with peers (with the latter, we are referring to the article, “Reappropriation of gendered Irish Sign Language in one family,” by Barbara LeMaster, 1999–2000).

The attention of visual anthropological results, which are extracted from research into Deaf Visual Culture, focuses on what happens when visual connectivity is not understood—illegible—or even worse, avoided or shunned. In order to start up the dialogue evaluating a deaf experience, language confusion is, among other things, portrayed by visual anthropologists. This happens through documenting language produced during interactions within Deaf Visual Culture (e.g., deaf art, sex-segregated sign language, deaf pedagogy) and within an overarching community of multiple language usages (e.g., deaf vs. hearing, signs vs. oral, gendered sign language). Moreover, this documentation provides visuals and visual analyses that may serve as communication tools toward a variety of audiences, holding the potential of serving social change.

Out of the received articles that we had to critically assess, we noticed that the main areas of interest and contributions in these studies lie in stressing the above-mentioned awareness of language confusion and/or the feeling of being misunderstood by a deaf individual or deaf community in a hearing society. Additionally, they contribute to the understanding of existing language barriers and the restrictions deaf people experience. Expressed differently: the importance of native sign language, not necessarily interlinked with written text and spoken language, is a communicative tool that stands for an ideal component of independence.

# Differences between visual communication design research and visual anthropology in the context of Deaf Visual Culture: Opportunities for collaboration

Visual communication design research aims to understand how any community, determined by a given context, behaves toward a communicative artifact of visual matter and creates innovative solutions within the scope of visual communication that lead to improvements in the well-being of that community. In essence, visual communication design research provides an evidence-driven academic foundation that establishes the direction of the design decisions. Considering this, we postulate visual communication design research in the scope of action. Therefore, this kind of research is deeply embedded within action research. Through action research, design researchers achieve understanding in an iterative process that encompasses “a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting” (Yeo, 2014, p. 5). This dialogue between an action and critical reflection turns participants into active counterparts. This results in a design process *with* rather than a design process *for*. In this collaborative or participatory methodological approach to research, visual communication design researchers get involved in investigated matter, trying to come up with the most suitable solutions. Other than providing a platform for the self-expression of the Deaf, visual communication design research creates a space for innovation where Deaf communities may find new ways to interact with hearing and non-hearing peers that have never been imagined and applied before.

Visual anthropology in Deaf Visual Culture has proven to be an invaluable source that reveals many different realities that Deaf communities experience in their communication with peers and/or non-peers. Within the scope of visual communication, design research has focused its attention mostly on finding visual strategies that bring elements of non-written communication, such as sign language and prosody in oral speech, into written communication with the aim of helping Deaf readers gain a deeper understanding of the content by improving their communicative skills when interpreting and processing visual information.

One example within the context of visual communication design (action) research in Deaf communities is the ongoing typographic research carried out by READSEARCH (Hasselt University/PXL-MAD School of Arts, Belgium) where researchers are creating new tools (e.g., prosodic typefaces, typographic layouts) that bridge the gap between the monotone of the written text and prosodic variations from oral speech to provide a deeper understanding of the content when reading.

## Conclusion

Establishing visual communication design research within the framework for action requires visual communication design researchers to be advocates for social—and environmental—responsibility. Visual communication shapes our visual world, bringing ideas into tangible realities that can be connected and articulated into new ones. Hence, within the context of Deaf Visual Culture, design researchers, having an interdisciplinary expertise and working method, contribute to the creation of alternatives that may enrich the communicative process and interaction among people with different hearing qualities.

The collaboration in Deaf Visual Culture between visual anthropologists and visual communication design researchers could open interesting and innovative paths for future research. It should also be mentioned that both disciplines should have designers as one of their audiences they are aiming to reach. Empirical information is needed to improve, in a designedly way, visual matters in any “reading” environment. The multiple communicative realities that Deaf communities represent within their visual culture, and which are displayed through the observation and analysis of participants in visual anthropology studies, can provide visual communication design researchers with insights/inspirational sources that would not have been considered otherwise. A deeper understanding of these multiple communicative realities enables designers to introduce more and different perspectives in their hypotheses and considerations during the decision-making process. Consequently, this collaboration could potentially contribute to the creation of innovative practices that lead to designing more inclusive models of interaction among people. Additionally, the interdisciplinary framework from visual communication design research could broaden the approach of visual anthropology to the possibilities for areas of visual communication in Deaf Visual Culture that may potentially be explored and examined.

## References

- Lakshmi, F. (1999-2000). The third eye: Reflections on deaf visual culture. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 15(2), 3–7.
- LeMaster, B. (1999-2000). Reappropriation of Gendered Irish Sign Language in One Family. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 15(2), 69-83.
- Yeo, J. P. H. (2014). An overview of research methods in visual communication design education. *International Journal of Design Creativity and Innovation*, 2(1), 51–62.

## Authors

Prof. Dr. Ann Bessemans is a legibility expert and award-winning graphic and type designer. She founded the READSEARCH legibility research group at the PXL-MAD School of Arts and Hasselt University where she teaches typography and type design. Ann is the program director of the International Masters program in Reading Type & Typography. Ann received her PhD from Leiden University and Hasselt University under the supervision of Dr. Gerard Unger. She is a member of the Data Science Institute UHasselt, the Young Academy of Belgium, and is a lecturer at the Plantin Institute of Typography.

Dr. María Pérez Mena is an award-winning graphic and type designer. She is a postdoctoral researcher at the legibility research group READSEARCH at the PXL-MAD School of Arts and Hasselt University. María teaches typography and type design in the BA in Graphic Design program at PXL-MAD, and is a lecturer in the International Masters program Reading Type & Typography, as well as the Masters program in Graphic Design at the same institution. She received her PhD “with the highest distinction” from the University of Basque Country, and is a member of the Data Science Institute UHasselt.

A commentary on:

**REAPPROPRIATION OF GENDERED  
IRISH SIGN LANGUAGE IN ONE FAMILY<sup>1</sup>**  
BARBARA LEMASTER

Mary C. Dyson

## Introduction

Barbara LeMaster's article "Reappropriation of Gendered Irish Sign Language in One Family" in *Visual Anthropology Review* piqued my interest with its initial sentence:

*The native vocabularies of one segment of the Dublin deaf community (i.e., primarily women over 70 and men over 55) contain different signs for the majority of common lexical items examined (LeMaster 1990).*

From this I learned that there existed different female and male signs in Irish Sign Language. This intrigued me and led me to explore further, despite recognizing that I was probably out of my comfort zone. I would be addressing a topic of social history, through my lens of theoretical and empirical aspects of communication design. Curiously, I rejected a more comfortable choice of an article that uses an approach far more familiar to me: research analyzing the covers of introductory texts on cultural anthropology (Hammond et al., 2009). I am therefore acutely aware that the questions I ask about Irish Sign Language not only stem from another discipline, but also introduce different research methods. I also suspect that some of the issues I raise are covered elsewhere, either by LeMaster or by other researchers. This I regard as a positive sign of considerable overlap between our disciplines.

In the following commentary on LeMaster's article, I start with a brief account of what I consider to be main themes within the article. This is not a comprehensive summary, but sets the scene for discussion points. I then propose some general differences in approach and emphasis between the disciplines of visual anthropology, as represented in this article, and communication design. Although I have situated myself within a particular sector of communication design (in the introduction), I have nonetheless tried to cover a wider field encompassing design practitioners and historians. From more general topics, I narrow down to specific areas that might inform, or be informed by, graphic communication research: the process of language standardization and dictionary design. The final section on signs moves us some distance from LeMaster's study. However, personally, one of the most exciting aspects of research is forging links between apparently disparate areas of research, which might require a leap in the dark.

## Summary of LeMaster's article

After an introduction where LeMaster explains how gendered Irish Sign Language came about, she explores the change from an environment of sign language alone in Dublin deaf schools to the introduction of oralism (lip-reading and speaking). This change has consequences for communication across generations and genders. A case study of one family of seven deaf people, with different experiences of signing and oralism, uncovers interesting inconsistencies in the use of gendered signs. These are discussed in relation to the concept of "survivals" of gendered Irish Sign Language and how their transmission by something other than gender may be tracked. The research aims to uncover how different signs co-exist and are reshaped or reappropriated over time, identifying linguistic social networks.

## Overview of differences in approach between disciplines

The main thrust of the article is the identification of sociocultural factors that explain the development of the language. Examples of the visual-gestural language, signing and dictionaries, are used as a means of discussing the socialization experiences. The anthropological study of the forms of signs, i.e., the sign variations, consists of identifying their gender and meaning. The visual and gestural details are relevant only in observing similarities or differences in form.

Researchers who study the history of graphic communication may be comfortable with this visual anthropological approach. Some of their questions concern the context and meaning of design decisions. If they were to restrict their investigations to the visual representations of the language, they may miss sociocultural factors that might better inform their study of artifacts. In this case, graphic communication researchers who do not have access to the linguistic history might misinterpret reasons for changes in Irish Sign Language over time.

But visual details (of dictionaries and signs) are of primary interest to graphic communication researchers and practitioners. The context of use is also important to practicing designers, as it will influence design decisions, but context tends to be interpreted more narrowly. Rather than considering societal issues, such as socialization experiences, communication designers are more concerned with how individuals use visual language, closer to a psychological approach than sociological.

## Language standardization

A section of McMaster's article introduces Irish Sign Language dictionaries and describes the process of writing a dictionary through a committee in 1979, whose members voted on whether to include the male or female form. The goals, procedure, and outcomes are briefly summarized, and prompt many more questions. What were the criteria used to choose the signs, other than a bias toward male signs? Were some signs considered easier to interpret than others? Were similarities among different signs a reason to reject signs from inclusion in the dictionary? When signs were invented, were there any guiding principles? Of course, to address these questions a record of the dictionary committee's decisions would be needed, either through minutes from the meetings or by conducting oral history interviews.

An interesting example of the interplay between social and visual is in this standardization and legitimization of language through dictionaries. LeMaster explains that it was not socially acceptable for older men to use female forms of signs, but younger male signers used female signs from the dictionary. The importance of the origins of signs in determining their acceptability, rather than what they look like, suggests that the criteria for selecting or inventing signs may have had little to do with their visual and gestural characteristics. Although this might be disappointing from a design perspective, such knowledge nonetheless informs graphic communication researchers. More than thirty years on from the original research, we might establish whether the origins of the signs retain their importance or whether they have evolved to accentuate visual differences and aid intelligibility.

## Dictionary design

The 1979 dictionary, and the revision and reprint in 1996, provide LeMaster with a means of tracing the source of some uses of gendered signs. But these publications also present an opportunity to examine the design of the dictionaries. Documents such as these are important primary sources for typographic researchers, and comparisons with other sign language dictionaries would determine whether the publications used typographic conventions found in other dictionaries of the time.

Some examples of dictionary entries are provided within the paper and further research might analyze the typographic and graphic treatment of different elements of the entries. Dictionaries are complex texts that require typographic coding to differentiate individual structural elements. As a practicing designer of dictionaries, Luna (2004) asked how far typographic treatment maps the underlying structure in a

logical, consistent, and transparent manner. The design of sign language dictionaries must also deal with the inclusion of images. How might static traditional printed dictionaries compare with current dynamic resources of online videos?<sup>1</sup>

The 1979 dictionary is described as being used in sections of the Dublin residential deaf schools and in sign language classes. No mention is made of dictionaries in homes, or how the 1996 version was accessed. Such details inform designers of the narrower context of use, which may have had implications for how accessible these were in terms of their availability and ease of use. How many individuals owned a copy? LeMaster asks whether knowledge of the origins of the signs included in the 1996 edition has any effect on usage of the signs. This might depend on the salience of this element within the entry, determined by the typographic treatment.

## The signs

My initial, somewhat naïve, enthusiasm for this topic imagined that a logical area of research for communication researchers would be the signs themselves, not just how they are depicted in dictionaries. The article includes somewhat vague references to signs looking “virtually identical in form,” “similar in form,” and “just different.” What constitutes similarity in form? What is the range of variation?

The difficulty of answering these questions became apparent after doing a little research, which clarified that the signs are distinguished along three main parameters. LeMaster uses the terms “handshape,” “movement,” and “point of origin.” A systematic analysis of these complex signs to describe how their visual and gestural characteristics differ from each other would pose a significant challenge.

My background in studying perception steers me toward exploring how the distinctions between signs are perceived and how this maps onto the visual or physical differences in the signs. This brings in other disciplines, such as linguistics and psychology. Studies of American Sign Language (ASL) have shown that sign language experience affects the perception of handshape distinctions. Deaf signers perceive distinctions in a different way to hearing non-signers (Emmorey et al., 2003). The age of acquisition of ASL also affects perceptual processing of handshapes (Morford et al., 2008). If similar studies were undertaken on Irish Sign Language with deaf signers of different generations and genders, might we find that their language differences affect how the same signs are perceived?

1 For example, <https://www.britishtsignlanguage.com/>.

## Conclusion

LeMaster's article presents a fascinating insight into cultural aspects of Ireland's deaf history. Although the gendered language differences are at the center of the research, the nature of the sign differences are illustrated, but not analyzed. But given the importance of the sociocultural factors in the development of the language, this knowledge is a necessary part of interpreting any visual analysis. This example of visual anthropological research has the potential to complement and enhance theoretical and empirical approaches to communication design and appears to overlap with historical research.

## Postscript

I feel I must comment on the typesetting of the title. A very awkward line break has been inserted. Are we meant to read "Reappropriation of gendered" as a meaningful phrase?

## References

- Emmorey, K., McCullough, S., and Brentari, D. (2003). Categorical perception in American Sign Language. *Language and Cognitive Processes*, 18(1), 21–45.
- Hammond, J. D., Brummel, J., Buckingham, C., Dolan, D., Irish, L., Menzel, E., & Noard, C. (2009). Interrogating cultural anthropology text covers: Intended messages, received meanings. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 25(2), 150–171.
- LeMaster, B. (2000). Reappropriation of gendered Irish Sign Language in one family. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 15(2), 69–83.
- Luna, P. (2004). Not just a pretty face: The contribution of typography to lexicography. In G. Williams & S. Vessier (Eds.), *11th Euralex International Congress*, 6–10 July 2004 (pp. 847–858). Université de Bretagne-Sud, Faculté des lettres et des sciences humaines.
- Morford, J. P., Grieve-Smith, A. B., MacFarlane, J., Staley, J., & Waters, G. (2008). Effects of language experience on the perception of American Sign Language. *Cognition*, 109(1), 41–53.

## Author

Mary Dyson started by studying experimental psychology with a PhD in perception. She then moved into the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading, UK, to a position that was linked to the field of Electronic Publishing, as it was called in the 1980s. Her teaching and research involved theoretical and empirical approaches to typography and graphic communication. Mary's early research therefore looked at reading from screen and the effects of typographic variables on reading speed, reading strategies, and comprehension, closely related to legibility. This developed into looking at how we read which required a focus on individual letters and typeface characteristics. She also explored what happens to people's perceptions after they receive design training. After retiring from her post in Typography & Graphic Communication, she wrote a textbook on legibility and is currently enjoying developing scholarly collaborations with former students, colleagues, and friends.

Empathic Projections:

Visual Anthropology, Design, and  
Acknowledgement

Michael J. Golec

*Averting or embracing our capacity for acknowledgement results from what we are willing to take-in what there is to see. In this sense, the photo essay in general confronts us with the limits of our capacities. This essay attempts to examine how it is that the photo essay and its design contend with imagination and acknowledgment. Considering recent editorial initiatives and a redesign of Visual Anthropology Review, and, in greater depth, Feldman and Pérez's photo essay "Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19," this essay asks: How does the photo essay—and relatedly, the photograph—in its looks face the possibility of a resistance to acknowledge the reality it depicts?*

In preparing my essay for this issue of *Visible Language*, I came across an introduction to the Fall 2020 issue of *Visual Anthropology Review (VAR)*, written by co-editors Fiona McDonald and Stephanie Sadre-Orafai, entitled "Empathy, care, and dialogue: Transforming visual anthropology's publics." Reading their brief introductory remarks on Lindsey Raisa Feldman and Michael Vicente Pérez's "Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19," I learned two things, both of which are crucial to what appears below. First, Feldman and Pérez's contribution constitutes a return of "The Page," an editorial initiative introduced in 2016 by then co-editors Jenny Chio and Rupert Cox. According to the previous co-editors of *VAR*, "The Page" extends anthropological scholarship by attending to "the relational analytics of image and text selection, placement, and layout in the two-dimensional space of the journal page..." (Chio & Cox, 2016, p. 101). The Fall 2020 issue of *VAR* marks the return of "The Page" after a year-long absence. Second, according to McDonald and Sadre-Orafai, "In its ideal form ethnographic fieldwork centers on both empathy and care for those with whom we [anthropologists] live, work, and come to know through embedded field engagements" (McDonald & Sadre-Orafai, 2020, p. 206). I find this observation both heartening and enlightening.

It is instructive, too, because I'm interested in how the photo essay and its design respond to our attitudes toward acknowledgement, or what the philosopher Cora Diamond (2003) called "the difficulty of reality." Acknowledgement is, according to the philosopher Stanley Cavell (1969), an attitude that is practically expressed in how we engage with the world and its inhabitants. This mode of engagement can go either way in terms of positive or negative receptivity. As he pointed out, "[T]he concept of acknowledgement is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success" (Cavell, 1969, pp. 263–264). Averting or embracing our capacity for acknowledgement results from what we are willing to take-in—to absorb—what there is to see. In this sense, the photo essay confronts us with the limits of our capacities: it might overwhelm the imaginative range of some beholders, while simultaneously, for others, it might fail to capture attention, or perhaps succeed only in just doing so, before attention passes on to

another interest. In the former case, the photo essay turns us toward reality by triggering our imagination, as an instance of what the philosopher Iris Murdoch (1971) identified as “an apprehension of the real” or with a change of standpoint to come to take the world as it exists (p. 88). The nature of the technology itself *acknowledges* our outlook on acknowledgement. Because things—events, persons, objects, scenes, etc.—are there to see in photographs, there are always things to be thought differently about the things to see in photographs, hence a new view is always available to a beholder. The logic of averting or embracing acknowledgement, then, entails that we are willing and able to see what the photo essay shows, *or not*. Therefore, it isn’t only the case that the photographs therein have to overcome an aversion to what the photo essayist means to communicate. In its design, the photo essay anticipates a beholder who is recalcitrant and/or unable to acknowledge, even though there is no guarantee that such a design will be met with success in overcoming these obstacles. In my attempt to know how it is that the photo essay and its design contend with imagination and acknowledgment, I ask: how does the photo essay—and relatedly, the photograph—in its *looks* face the possibility of a resistance to acknowledge the reality it depicts? (Where I use the terms “look” or “looks” to indicate a visual display, I am referring to the intentional organization of marks or inscriptional forms on surfaces—be they graphic, typographic, and/or photographic—for the purposes of being perceived.)

One possible answer: the photographer and photo essayist, in the act of photographing (in the broadest sense), confronts the difficulty of reality, and in doing so brings about a change of thought and a new mode of seeing in the beholder. And there is more. This shift of perspective is the crux of Feldman and Pérez’s (2020) photo essay “Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19,” in which, through a “co-constitutive process of image making in the field,” the anthropologists bring about an imaginative turn in their ethnographic research (p. 383). They achieved this by inviting their research participants to choose the circumstances under which they were photographed, and by providing opportunities for input into the images that were produced as part of the interview process. By an imaginative turn in confronting the technical standards of the apparatus, Feldman and Pérez show what empathy and care look like when photographed and designed as a photo essay.

Before I continue, there is a very brief history to recount. Let me start from the beginning. As I mentioned above, in 2016, *VAR* inaugurated “The Page.” Chio and Cox (2016) invited the photographer-scholar Patrick Sutherland (2016) to contribute an article, “The photo essay,” to the journal. In their editorial introduction to the issue in which his article appears, the co-editors explained that they asked Sutherland to reflect on key elements in the history of the photo essay and requested that he extrapolate the relationship between visual anthropology, documentary

photography, and photojournalism. The photo essay is exemplary of a rich history of primarily image-based, but also text-related, research that intersects with visual anthropology's already "reflexive awareness of the social relations at stake in the process of making images and an engagement with the politics of representation" (Chio & Cox, 2016, p. 101). Sutherland (2016) confirmed the reciprocity of these intersections when he observed that exemplary works of photographically led research benefit from "the depth of anthropological understanding and analysis" (p. 120).

In his article, Sutherland (2016) compared four examples of photo essays, each of which touched on a variety of combinations of photographic, textual, and paratextual approaches. Beginning with Bourgois and Schonberg's (2009) *Righteous Dopefiend* and moving on to consider Eppridge's (1965) *LIFE* magazine feature on drug addiction, Clark's (1971) *Tulsa*, and Richards' (1994) *Cocaine True Cocaine Blue*, he argued that the history of the photo essay provides useful exemplars for visual anthropology by combining "depth, commitment, detail, and subtlety of . . . ethnographic field research and anthropological analysis with photography" (Sutherland, 2016, p. 120). As both a technology and as a technique of visual investigation, Sutherland offered, photography can and often does exceed the merely procedural recording of "the world as everybody sees it" (Sutherland, 2016, p. 120). This entails the photographer undertaking a search to find a strategy that will, as a matter of visual representation, exceed the everyday or ordinary workings of tools like cameras and the kinds of pictorial conventions they reinforce. Sutherland (2016) observed that a photographer can take distinctive views—or *stands*—and that photographic images capture these unique perspectives. Everything—the entire world—is given to the photographer. It's all there for the (picture) taking. Yet, the challenge is for her to focus on an element that often escapes views taken by everybody else. As Sutherland implied with his examples and comparisons, the photo essayist photographs *something* and not everything, and that *something* photographed is a result of having to contend with, and overcome, commonplace, and therefore, unconsciously applied conventions.

Elaborating on the visible elements that exceed ordinary views taken of the world, Sutherland provided a thought-provoking observation. He asked the visual anthropologist to attend to the perceived "gap between what the world looks like through the camera viewfinder and what the resulting photograph looks like," in the pursuit of a critical and creative practice. He then quoted the American street photographer Garry Winogrand: "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed" (as cited in Sutherland, 2016, p. 121, n. 13). The "gap" that Sutherland spoke of registers the *constructedness* of what *something* looks like from both the camera's and the photographer's perspectives. By mentioning a "gap" and referencing Winogrand, Sutherland introduced a procedural means-to-an-end logic that suggested how *something* may

come to appear in a photograph, and therefore can be seen in it. When something appears in an image or picture, according to the philosopher Richard Wollheim (1987), a beholder experiences the phenomena of seeing-in, or representational seeing. Implicit in this logic is an intention to get *you-name-it* to look like *something* photographed. These steps can include, but are not limited to, what Sutherland (2016) described as a range of approaches—or attitudes—in his comparison of the documentary character of Clark's ethical ambivalence in *Tulsa* or Richards' humanistic empathy in *Cocaine True Cocaine Blue*, to name two examples. In both instances, neither Clark nor Richards merely reduced the world to two dimensions and then added equivocation, in the former, or pathos, in the latter. Theirs are acts of photographic reduction—from everything possible to what can be seen and thought in particular—which necessitates and follows all steps in the process of crafting the image—from picking up a camera, to scouting locations, to framing in the viewfinder, to developing, to reviewing contact sheets, to print, and to every micro-step in between. Clark and Richards shared the conviction—or the meaningfulness of a commitment to what the photo essayists decide to depict in photographs—that *something* rather than *everything* counts towards the production of a visual effect.

Committing to *something* rather than *everything* relates to design research in general and bears asking the question of acts of acknowledgement. For example, in a project that integrates image-driven design research and documentary photography, Helga Aichmaier (2018) asked, "What kind of strategies in the design process cause an image to emerge that is 'perceived' as documentation" (p. 75)? In her article, Aichmaier (2018) proceeded to interrogate various image configurations, as she deployed various optical and design techniques commensurate with what she referred to as "the design process of photographs" (p. 90). Aichmaier's (2018) examination of the design of visual effects necessary for a beholder to see photographs as documentary pictures focused on four public squares in Switzerland and Austria. In her research, the representation of the specificity of place became a search for an optical standpoint external to the virtual image frame. Each of the many iterations of optical standpoint marks a transition from one perspectival order to another. And each step potentially affirms or negates *something*, thereby edging away from or edging toward significance.

In this example, what counts as an act of picking out the just-right instance of "documentation" can only be evaluated retrospectively. If, however, an image-led research strategy allows consequence of placement to be granted relevance retrospectively, then it does so through a process of redesign or re-inscription in order to "foster an image of an 'objective' documentation" (Aichmaier, 2018, p. 90). What counts as "just right" (by whatever criteria) has to do with evaluating how something—here, Haustellate Linz—will look designed as a photograph, such that its

*documentality* can be distinguished from its mere photographically recording a scene. Techniques of image-led investigation, as Sutherland (2016) observed of the photo essayist, surpass instances of “the world as everybody sees it,” yet still rely on a set of acknowledged practices of visual communication. In the case of Aichmaier’s (2018) project, the designer who constructs or designs documentation (she also said “objectivity” and “factitious”) *ex post facto* attends to her process (as inheritance, legacy, convention, style of reasoning, etc.). The fascinating thing about Aichmaier’s (2018) designed photographs is that the photographic artifact must rigorously organize the relation between what can be seen in them—how documentation appears, for example—and what interpretive capacities or skills the designer presumes that the beholder possesses so as to perceive “documentation” in a photograph. As is the case with acknowledgment (in the sense that I use the term here), even when designed, the photograph risks communicative misfire in not bringing about a specific effect for a beholder. Following a research protocol does not ensure a felicitous result. The research protocol is tacitly built on conventions that the visual communications designer has mastered, which in consciously or unconsciously deploying these conventions takes a step towards an affirmative response. But, there is no guarantee that the desired result will transpire, even when adhering to the most obvious conventions of visual communications design.

In the spring 2020 issue of *ViAR*, newly installed co-editors Sadre-Orafai and McDonald inaugurated a redesign of the entire journal. Referring to their predecessors Chio and Cox’s “The Page” as an influence, the revised design of the journal, Sadre-Orafai and McDonald explained, prioritized flexible layout and dynamic organization to “activate the page—or better, spread—in more engaging, theory-driven ways” (Sadre-Orafai & McDonald, 2020, p. 5). The redesign of the journal also registers changes in the field (Sadre-Orafai & McDonald, 2020, p. 6). The material presentation of the *ViAR* reflects the journal’s adoption of editorial best practices to “ensure ethical and accurate representation of Indigenous voices and knowledge in the journal” (Sadre-Orafai & McDonald, 2020, p. 4). In both the 2016 and 2020 initiatives, all four editors tacitly acknowledge that the history of the anthropological journal, originally established as an organ of the “anthropological society,” is a history of the contested space of the page. Western conventions of academic journal design as an activity of discursive and material framing produces the anthropological subject *on* the page, and *in* the world (in other words, they represent that subject from an occidental, colonialist perspective). The editors of *ViAR* understand that design can be a means to contest the epistemological restraints of historical editorial conventions in anthropology journals and monographs. Such an understanding of visual communications design can be traced to Robin Kinross (1985), who points out that so-called “neutral” design approaches are permeated with conceptual biases. In this sense, “neutral” design does

not necessarily invite a multiplicity of voices and points of view; rather, it imposes a European modernist moral understanding of the world. Past approaches to the design of anthropological journals—VAR included—imposed a vastly too-reductive model of representing the manifold of concepts that can be deployed in thinking about the world and about our lives.

Reframing, redesigning, and realigning, as Sadre-Orafai and McDonald (2020) proposed, are three combined strategies that create new options for the visual anthropologist and the photo essay, and for anthropology more generally understood. I might suggest, however, a slight adjustment to the order: redesign, reframe, and realign. I place “redesign” first, because *redesigning* the research protocols of ethnographic study directly impacts the redesign of the photo essay, and the subsequent *reframing* of that body of work in the pages of the journal. (Recall what I take Sutherland to indicate in his account of Clark and Richards. Neither photo essayist merely reduces the world to two dimensions only to insert—or add—ambivalence or empathy.) The redesign of the journal reframes visual anthropology as a research practice by not imposing a single model of rational unity on all cases, and thus promotes suppleness that results in realignments with the academic field of anthropology.

Realignment follows from a redesign of the research project. As an integral component of their visual research for “Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19,” Feldman and Pérez invited their research participants to guide them in constructing the circumstances under which they could photograph the scenes included in their study. Additionally, research participants provided input into the images that were produced as part of the interview process. Therefore, the ethnographers and the research participants negotiated compositional choices regarding standpoint, distance, and visual angle (to name a few possible topics of conversation). The distinctive views made available to beholders exceed the ordinary or conventional. The goal was to evoke what the ethnographers referred to as “improvisational waiting.” As Feldman and Pérez explain, the joining of the two concepts into a single theme “emphasized the creative energies that can emerge under constraining circumstances” (Feldman & Pérez, 2020, p. 384). The concept of “improvisational waiting,” as I understand it, describes a way of regaining personhood within a bureaucratic system, and to exist creatively within the temporal experience of just getting through to the other side of mind-numbing boredom.

Of the ten photographs that appear in the essay, one is particularly instructive [see Figure 1 below]. It’s the opening photograph, depicting a near vacant Main Street in downtown Memphis.

Figure 1.

Page layout with introductory photograph of a near vacant Main Street, Memphis. Raisa Feldman, L. & Vicente Pérez, M. (2020). Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19. *Visual Anthropology Review* 36(2), 379.



A light-rail line runs through the center of the photograph. Because human presence is evacuated from the foreground of scene, the photograph compels the beholder to look with great care for signs of life, following the lines inscribed by the rails to the vanishing point of the picture. This makes it possible to glimpse three pedestrians walking in different directions in the background. The caption below the image explains that prior to the shelter-in-place order, this had been a bustling thoroughfare, populated by crowds of tourists and locals, which include members of Memphis' homeless community. In a process of reframing the beholder's gaze, the design of this photograph defeats conventions of perspectival order, where in viewing the scene, the beholder is located at a distance from the picture plane, which approximates the distance of the picture plane to the vanishing point. This compositional strategy situates the beholder just at (or up against) the picture plane. In turn, the organization of the picture virtualizes the beholder's proximity to a public transit stop on right-hand side, which prominently features a sign that reads, "The station is temporarily closed." Just above and to the right there is a smaller sticker, with a graphic representation of a trolley and the instruction, "No loitering."

In short, the image projects a standpoint from which the beholder is solicited to see *something* she otherwise wouldn't ordinarily attend. The beholder finds herself the implicit addressee of both signs in the photograph. No train will stop for passengers here. *The beholder waits*. Yet, there is a prohibition on waiting in this space, one that is enforced both by the city transit authority *and optically framed by pictorial composition*. Officially, *the beholder loiters*. The beholder's conversion of a state of waiting to a state of loitering (and *vice versa*) is the picture's literal and figurative standpoint—imaginatively, waiting is a reality that the beholder acknowledges in their attentive viewing. Here on this spot and in this line

of vision, she is virtually situated. Standing here, she is offered a choice to move on, not necessarily to move off the track (although the choice is there) since the station is closed, but a choice to take a next step and turn the page. This is an instance of the photo essay confronting the beholder with the issue of intention vis-à-vis “improvisational waiting.” By establishing “improvisational waiting” as an intentional act at the opening of the photo-essay, Feldman and Pérez (2020) signaled a theme that is recognizable throughout the entire research project—a theme that can be acknowledged or dismissed. Furthermore, as if to anticipate the beolder’s recalcitrance or inability to be moved to acknowledge what the photo essay shows, the structure of the introductory photography extends throughout the photo essay by way of the layout [see Figure 2].

Figure 2.

Two-page layout. Raisa Feldman, L. & Vicente Pérez, M. (2020). Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19. *Visual Anthropology Review* 36(2), 386–387.



The single column of text approximates the near verticality of rails running along Main Street seen in the introductory photograph, and the placement of the nine remaining photographs approximates the signs posted at the transit station. Importantly, the sequence of photographs that reveal research participants’ daily acts of “improvisational waiting” supplant the prohibitory orders of the signs. Waiting here can be construed as a tentative or a provisional act, however. The nine photographs that depict Feldman and Pérez’s (2020) research participants place the women in the photographs between signs of administrative authority and whatever (unseen) official enforcements remain after the shelter-in-place order is rescinded. Improvisation is fraught with risk; thus, improvisational acts are always provisional.

The combined efforts of the ethnographers and the research participants, by designing the *look* of intention photographed, achieve a great deal more than exemplifying the former's conceptual frame in the photo essay. Their research approach in using photography as an ethnographic research tool, as I see it, is *not* to bring about the look of "improvisational waiting," since that might result in making the image conform to the theory, or, what Pierre Bourdieu called, an "anthropological fallacy." Rather, as I claim above, their achievement is showing how waiting can be understood as being an intentional act. In doing so, Feldman and Pérez (2020) urged beholders of the photo essay to see this as awesome and astonishing in its possibility (an insight shared between ethnographers and their research participants), rather than as always constituting an instance of bureaucratic control. From what I can see, this collaboration establishes a criterion to judge what counts as the just right photographic *look* such that the intentional nature of "improvisational waiting" can be distinguished from a merely photographic record of waiting in a non-improvisational or non-intentional sense.

Part of the process of highlighting what there is to see in the photographs is for the photo essayist to adopt a strategy in the design of the photo essay that prohibits, to whatever extent possible, a concept from obscuring a shared conviction that *something* should show up other than, or in addition to, an image that is perceived as merely a documentation of a preconceived ethnographic theory. By "shared conviction," I mean to emphasize not only collaborative fieldwork, but also supporting acts that organize the research materials—photographs and text—onto the pages of *VAR*. In other words, design counts in a shared conviction that exists in the field (where the photo essayist conducts research) and out of the field (where the photo essayist organizes research for publication). Co-editor Stephanie Sadre-Orafai worked closely with Feldman and Pérez to achieve an installment of "The Page" that was both in keeping with the authors' ambition and with the remit of *VAR*'s editorial policy. Working within a flexible layout, Feldman and Pérez, with the assistance of Sadre-Orafai, structured the appearance of *something* in their photo essay that may very well be "theory driven," but is not theory laden such that the conceptual framing of the project obscures those who participated in their field research. The collaborative process of refinement—that is, how design can make *something* appear—reckons with significance or meaningfulness in the specificity of something photographed (or depicted, in general). Design can further the location of meaning as something in particular, which can show up and engage a beholder's capacity for acknowledgement in her response to the *look* of *something* designed.

At the beginning of this essay, I asked: How does the photo essay—and relatedly, the photograph—in its *looks* contend with the possibility of a resistance to acknowledging the reality it depicts? I

briefly discussed Sutherland's (2016) article "The photo essay," exploring his suggestion that the photo essayist endeavors to work toward the production of a visual effect that results in the look of *something* photographed. I then touched on Aichmaier's (2018) interrogation of various strategies in the design of photographs that, as she put it, can be perceived as "documentation." In my final example, I took up the case of Feldman and Pérez's (2020) "Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19." Here I proposed that the ethnographers and the editors of *VAR* showed how waiting can be seen as being intentional. And they achieved this, as McDonald and Sadre-Orafai (2020) wrote, by taking up the challenge set by an ethnographic ideal of focusing on "both empathy and care for those with whom we [anthropologists] live, work, and come to know through embedded field engagements" (p. 206). This is, I claim, what the intentionality of "improvisational waiting" *looks* like photographed. In all three examples, I posit that there is, in the design of the photo essay, an implicit logic of averting or embracing acknowledgement, or the recognition of something otherwise unthought or not deemed worthy of attention. Confronting this entails that the photo essayist, the visual communications designer, and the visual anthropologist are embroiled in negotiations with whether they and their audiences are willing and able to see what the photo essay shows, *or not*. This can't be known *a priori*, as if there is a prescribed method to follow that will ensure acknowledgement. Overcoming an aversion to what the photo essay shows—its reality—is a problem that must be faced in each specific instance. As I propose above, while the design of a photo essay may predict disinclination, recalcitrance, or disinterest, there is no assurance that its design will successfully overcome these obstacles.

## Figures.

Fig. 1. Raisa Feldman, L. & Vicente Pérez, M. (2020). Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19. *Visual Anthropology Review* 36(2), 379.

Fig 2. Raisa Feldman, L. & Vicente Pérez, M. (2020). Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19. *Visual Anthropology Review* 36(2), 386–387.

## References

- Aichmaier, H. (December 2017–April 2018). Identifying design processes in photography by analyzing photographic strategies in the documentation of public places. *Visible Language* 51(3)–52(1), 74–95.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). The scholastic point of view. *Cultural Anthropology* 5(4), 381–382.
- Cavell, S. (1969). *Must we mean what we say*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cavell, S. (1979). *The claim of reason: Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality, and tragedy*. Clarendon Press.
- Cavell S. (1979). *The world viewed: Reflections on the ontology of film*. Harvard University Press.
- Chio, J., & Cox, R. (2016). Editor's introduction. *Visual Anthropology Review* 32(2), 101–102.
- Diamond, C. (2003). The difficulty of reality and the difficulty of philosophy. *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1(2), 1–26.
- Kinross, R. (1985). The rhetoric of neutrality. *Design Issues* 2(2), 18–30.
- Mareis, C. (2012) The epistemology of the unspoken: On the concept of tacit knowledge in contemporary design research. *Design Issues* 28(1), 61–71.
- Maynard, P. (2000). *The engine of visualization: Thinking through photography*. Cornell University Press.
- McDonald, F.P., & Sadre-Orafai, S. (2020). Empathy, care, and dialogue: Transforming visual anthropology's publics. *Visual Anthropology Review* 63(2), 203–206.
- Mingolo, W. (2003). *The darker side of the Renaissance: Literacy, territoriality, and colonization*. University of Michigan Press.
- Murdoch, I. (1971). *The sovereignty of good*. Routledge.
- Raisa Feldman, L., & Vicente Pérez, M. (2020). Living at the LUX: Homelessness and improvisational waiting under COVID-19. *Visual Anthropology Review* 36(2), 379–400.
- Sadre-Orafai, S., & McDonald, F.P. (2020). Reframe, redesign, realign. *Visual Anthropology Review* 36(1), 3–17.

Sutherland, P. (2016). The photo essay. *Visual Anthropology Review* 32(2),  
115–121.

Wollheim, R. (1987). *Painting as an art*. Princeton University Press.

## Author

Michael J. Golec is Associate Professor of Art and Design History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Golec's scholarship focuses on histories and theories of typography, visual communications design, technical images, and data visualization. In addition to contributing numerous chapters and essays to edited books, he is the author of *Brillo Box Archive: Aesthetics, Design, and Art* (2008) and co-editor of and contributor to *Relearning from Las Vegas* (2009). Golec has published articles and reviews in *Design and Culture*, the *Journal of Design History*, *Design Issues*, *Senses and Society*, *Cultural Critique*, *American Quarterly*, *Home Cultures*, *Visible Language*, and *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*. He has lectured and given talks at numerous cultural and academic institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art, Hagley Museum and Library, Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), Chicago History Museum, Princeton University, Tulane University, University of Texas (Austin), University of Illinois (Chicago), Illinois Institute of Technology, Cooper Union, School of Visual Arts, Parsons School of Design, and Institut für Architekturwissenschaften, Technische Universität, Vienna.

# Re-reading the Borderland Imaginary from 2021

Dori Griffin

*This essay re-reads Margaret E. Dorsey and Miguel Diaz-Barriga's "Beyond surveillance and moonscapes: An alternative imaginary of the U.S.-Mexico border wall" (2010) from the position of a design educator engaged with horizontal co-design methods for social and disciplinary change. The essay brings Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga's ideas into conversation with a selection of relevant visual communication design outcomes and scholarship produced around the same time. It then rereads the value of that transdisciplinary conversation from within the present moment—one complicated, morally charged, and visually saturated by domestic immigration policy.*

## Introduction

I'm a design educator concerned with horizontal co-design for social and disciplinary change. In my research and teaching praxis, I operationalize historical enquiry and visual communication to empower design for equity within current scholarly, educational, and social frameworks. It's from this position that I read Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga's "Beyond surveillance and moonscapes: An alternative imaginary of the U.S.-Mexico border wall" (2010). In the essay that follows, I bring their ideas into conversation with visual communication design outcomes and scholarship produced around the same time. I then reread that conversation from within the complicated and morally charged landscape of domestic immigration policy in 2021. I write in the wake of the Trump presidency, at a moment (August 2021) when US President Joe Biden has been ordered by the US Supreme Court to reinstate his predecessor's "remain in Mexico" immigration policy. As a middle-class, invisibly disabled, cisgendered white woman born in the US, my own immigrant roots occupy a hazy and distant position within family memory, or perhaps more accurately, family imagination. Conversely, I experienced firsthand the automatic and unearned privilege of whiteness when I spent four years living in Phoenix, Arizona—a city and state with clear interests in anti-immigrant legislation. My clearest personal memory of this is the differential between my experience at a Border Patrol stop near the US/Mexico border in Ajo (Figure 1) and the physically nonviolent, yet markedly more intrusive experience I witnessed between officers and the Latino man in the car ahead of mine. His Arizona plates and state-issued ID didn't protect him from the figurative and ideological violence of institutionalized racism at the border. Thus, I read Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010)—and transliterate their insights into my/our context of visual communication design practice, research, and education—seeking to see, synthesize, and apply.

Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) "examine border residents' perceptions of the [US/Mexico border] wall in relation to national policy and popular renderings." They're concerned with the "politics

of representation” in visual landscapes, which typically “portray the border region as lifeless and desolate”—and dangerous (p. 128). They identify common visual tropes “circulating in the popular press” in 2010: the “nameless ‘illegal,’ desolate border town, brave Border Patrol genre, or a combination of the three” (p. 129). These tropes work together to “fetishize the US–Mexico border as an uninviting locale” (p. 129). The authors probe the “central role that visual culture plays in the imaginary of the border — and [the] implicit justification of the wall” (p. 129). They critique popular visual representations that perpetuate monolithic narratives. These center surveillance, poverty, militarization, and moonscape-like landscapes of desolation and emptiness (pp. 129–131). While such images capture verifiable physical circumstances in certain geographic and temporal locations, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) critiqued their omnipresence within the visual landscape. Limited and limiting, these tropes occlude alternative narratives of rich ecosystems, resilience in difficult circumstances, and cross-border collaboration demonstrated by local residents (pp. 132–135). Furthermore, these tropes persist in 2021 (Figure 2).

After contextualizing the visual landscape of mass media border narratives, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) turned their attention to the possibility of “an anthropological photo essay” (p. 133). Their essay deploys photographs not only as a methodological tool for documenting the fieldwork process, but also as a visual communication technology for producing and sharing knowledge (p. 133). This approach affords new (to outside viewers) ways of understanding the US/Mexico border, its landscapes, and its inhabitants. It also affords new (to many visual anthropologists) technologies of public-facing visual communication and new (to many designers) methods of contextualizing visual communication as research methodology and output. It’s these possibilities that excite me as I consider how “Beyond surveillance and moonscapes” might inform design research today.

## Interstitial, Interdisciplinary, Visual Conversations

Borders populate the American imagination, informing our concepts of national identity and the sovereignty of our nation-state. Even more emphatically than in 2010, the US/Mexico border looms large as a landscape of urgent social and political concern. The Trump presidency and its concomitant “big, beautiful wall”—itself largely an imaginary construct—focused the national consciousness of the US on this particular boundary (Business Insider, 2020). Immigration permeates contemporary discussions of border

politics. Negative stereotypes abound in popular news media and social media memes: abandoned children, gang violence, criminal trafficking, stolen jobs, abuse of the social safety net. Conservative political pundits interpreted (and continue to interpret) movement across the Mexican border into the US as a threat to national security and the national economy. Meanwhile, in 2019 the United Nations drew attention to the persistent and, in the words of the UN rights chief, “appalling” human rights violations inflicted on immigrants at the border (Tan, 2019). Though popular news sources still offer pejorative and limited visual narratives of the border within certain media bubbles, other mass media outlets complicated these visual and narrative stereotypes during Donald Trump’s presidency (*USA Today*, 2017).

Visualizations of immigration, and of the lived experiences of immigrants, play a significant role in understanding the importance of the US/Mexico border in the popular imagination. Portraiture and oral history—and, especially, the two in combination—have historically played an important role in deepening the understandings that US citizens hold around these issues. At the Mexican border, Works Progress Administration (WPA) photographer Dorothea Lange’s documentary series in El Paso, Texas, is perhaps the most famous canonical example (Sontag, 1977; Ulibarri, 2019). The black and white photos utilize the stark contrast and geometric composition common in much of Lange’s work, along with her focus on human figures within the landscape (Figure 3). Popular media accounts of her border series emphasize how Lange “not only established a visual standard for documentary work, but ethical considerations, as well—that photographers owe it to their subjects to not just look, but listen” (Palumbo, 2018). Lange demonstrated this in her commitment to captioning, asking that her captions be included whenever her photographs were published, though often they were not. By acknowledging participants’ narratives through a written text, Lange intended the caption to extend the attached visual narrative and contextualize it meaningfully for viewers.

Lange, and her fellow WPA photographers, continue to exercise strong visual and conceptual influence on the photographic vocabulary. Among many other examples, this can be seen in German photographer Max Böhme’s black and white image of the US/Mexico border along Tijuana/San Diego’s Pacific coast, taken in 2019 (Figure 4). The image entered the public sphere through the photo sharing site Unsplash without any context but its location. As Susan Sontag (1977) wrote in *On Photography*, Lange filtered both her visual and written vocabulary heavily and nonreflexively through her own experience and aesthetic priorities (p. 175). Clearly, twenty-first century images and image-makers aren’t exempt from the same pitfalls. As contemporary visual ethnographers, though, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) brought to the practice of photographic analysis a self-reflexive, critically engaged, multivocal language of thick description. The running text accompanying their briefly yet effectively

captioned photographs acknowledges positionality and complexity. In addition, the text acknowledges the spaces of exchange between photographer and photographed, between photograph and viewer, between caption and running text. The three elements (image, caption, running text) exist in dialogue with one another, and with authors and readers. In this sense, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) fulfilled goals Lange left unmet through a lack of critical tools to recognize her own positionality and/or through the mechanistic, sexist operations of the photojournalistic publishing systems of her time.

Though they fully embrace thick description in discussing their images within the text and captions of the essay, Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) left unexplored other powerful options for visual communication. Their photo essay included nine landscape-oriented photographs and one portrait-oriented photograph. Five of the landscape images included people, as did the portrait image. The images' one- or two-sentence captions followed the design conventions of the journal in which the essay appears, *Visual Anthropology Review*. Two notable examples within visual communication design scholarship offer relevant counterpoints to this approach: *Crossing the BLVD* (Lehrer & Sloan, 2003) and "South of the border down Mexico way" (Rogal, 2000). Transdisciplinary patterns and questions emerge when reading "Beyond surveillance" in conversations with these two visual narratives of and about immigration and borderlands in the US. Neither specifically visits the US/Mexico border as such. Yet both offer insight on the limitations of the ethnographic photo essay as a visual-textual form and suggest meaningful opportunities for cross-disciplinary conversation. In particular, they exploit visual communication design strategies that would prove valuable for future investigations of US/Mexico borders that seek to complicate and de-homogenize our stereotypical visual narratives.

Scholars across the disciplines of design, photojournalism, anthropology, ethnography, and oral history reviewed *Crossing the BLVD*, a fully designed oral history in book form, eagerly received as "visionary in [its] approach" (Martin, 2004, p. 106). In it, designer Warren Lehrer and oral historian Judith Sloan told the stories of individual immigrant residents of Queens, New York. They used images taken on-site and transcribed words spoken by participants during interviews. Mexico notably appeared in two stories. "The other side of the road" (Lehrer & Sloan, 2003, pp. 196–213) told Miguel and Mariana's "story of forbidden love, migration, and survival as undocumented 'aliens'" (p. 199), and "No bull" incorporated six voices to tell the story of a locally famous bull who escaped from a Queens rodeo in 1999 (pp. 270–281). For reviewers, the authors demonstrated a "humanistic approach" by scholars "unafraid to create a beautiful work of art [via] arrangement and editing choices" (Martin, 106). The book is "for people who have so often been otherized, stereotyped, and misrepresented, [...] an exercise in authenticity." In it, "the true goal of oral history—to

make voices heard and preserved—is met with integrity” (Martin, 106). For designers, Lehrer and Sloan were early exemplars of how to visualize social sciences research via design.

In comparison to Lehrer and Sloan, who document individual and lived stories, Maria Rogal uses design to communicate the imaginary of the US/Mexico border. Her visual essay (2000) investigates the kitschy interstate rest stop at the North/South Carolina border. The stop is named “South of the Border” and is typified by its unapologetic deployment of Mexican cultural stereotypes. Rogal investigated it “as a uniquely American landmark, as a purveyor of ‘Mexican-ness,’ and as a creator of values which are evident in the words and images in space and have a relationship to what is occurring in the larger culture” (p. 145). Her focus on “words and images in space” resonates when juxtaposed with Dorsey and Dias-Barriga’s (2010) essay. Rogal’s (2000) deliberate use of space to suggest cross-border relationality informs how we read the text: “An analysis of South of the Border does not depend on the sequential ordering of codes. Rather, it is dependent on the relationship of parts to each other and to the whole”—as filtered through the lens of the individual viewer (p. 156). Putting the pieces together for oneself becomes part of what the text means, and this meaning changes relative to the viewer’s own position. Rogal (2000) positioned herself clearly and self-reflexively as one viewer, describing how and where, and through which cultural and experiential lenses, her documentation of South of the Border came to be. Visual relationships, and the reader-viewer’s translation of these, significantly impact the meaning of the work.

Like the decade it followed (2000–2009), the decade that Dorsey and Dias-Barriga’s essay opened (2010–2–19) proved a fertile space for visual and theoretical exploration of so-called marginal, peripheral, and/or interstitial landscapes. Fatimah Tuggar’s (2013) visual essay “Montage as a tool of political visual realignment” provided a final counterpoint to “Beyond surveillance.” Tuggar (2013) suggested that the very act of visual juxtaposition carries with it an imperative to question the act of looking and its politicized meanings for makers and readers of images. Tuggar (2013) specified that “Meaning for these works [of montage] primarily exists in between the elements brought together” (p. 375). She emphasized how the medium, and the strategies deployed by the image-maker(s), necessitate active translation and meaning-making by the viewer. The montage directs viewers’ attention, causing it to “strategically focus on deconstructing aspects of the image *as a method for challenging conventional perceptions and attachments to static ways of looking*” (p. 375, emphasis added). Tuggar (2013) described her strategy as one that dialogically creates meaning “through layering and compositing of multiple images, multiple viewpoints” (p. 375). To achieve this, she deployed a variety of formal compositional strategies. Images might be composed as panoramas, portrait- or

landscape-oriented images, or images in series. Tuggar (2013) manipulated scale, used cropping and silhouetting, and operationalized sequence. These formal strategies become part of the matrix of meaning-making. Tuggar's (2013) montages are polyphonic not only because text and image enter into conversation with each other, but because the viewer's reading of the montage is part of the work itself.

Visualizing polyphonic voice emerges as a primary consideration in the three works considered here. All three can be read as intentional, formally-designed visual ethnographies of people-in-place. The designers-writers accomplish this not through textual writing or "straight" photography, though both are components in their larger image-text strategies. Rather, they create meaning through visual juxtaposition and control of size, scale, placement, and typographic composition. In other words, though they utilize photography and text as elements, they rely on visual communication strategies beyond those of the documentary photograph and descriptive caption to achieve their visual-narrative goals. Notice how synthesizing these three counterparts to "Beyond surveillance" relies on the hyphen as a signal of hybridity: designers-writers, visual-narrative goals, image-text strategies. As with so many borders, the ones defining these research outcomes are porous and composite—hybrid. Contemporary right-wing dogma in the US frames such borders as dangerous, undesirable, and antithetical to American identity. Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) challenged this mindset in their content, though their visual strategy remains quite segregated in its approach to narrative. Images and text inhabit separate, singular spaces. They aren't hybridized. Visual communication design offers tools for moving a hybrid *conceptual* approach into a congruently hybrid *visible* landscape.

## Re-reading Disciplinary Significance in the Present

How might a close reading of "Beyond surveillance" inform design praxis and design research today? As the introduction mentioned, I'm an educator exploring co-design research methodologies for social change. This pedagogical orientation embraces hybridity, the co-creation of meaning, and deliberate de-homogenization. In Arturo Escobar's (2018) popular turn of phrase, it seeks pluriversal ways of seeing and understanding design. In its most basic sense, a pluriversal philosophy is one that embraces multiple ways of seeing, knowing, making, and being (multiple "realities") and in its construction of "reality" does not eliminate the possibility of such multiplicities. I'd argue that these values sit at the core of "Beyond surveillance" and

the three design-writing counterpoints against which I've read it here. In this context, "Beyond surveillance" becomes a case study in pluriversal visual communication, though its authors didn't originally frame it as such.

Case studies are valuable design research tools, particularly when we read them in conversation with one another. Co-created, de-homogenized, pluriversal, hybrid design spaces require consistent engagement. They demand a willingness to evolve—not just once, but continually. In seeking "alternative representations" in the plural (p. 128) and "producing visual knowledge[s]" through their ethnographic fieldwork (p. 132), Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) contributed to a hybrid, pluralistic, potentially *pluriversal* visual conversation located along the US/Mexico border. Seen this way, I'd argue their work becomes particularly valuable for designers because it models text (traditionally defined) in conversation with images to support deeply contextualized meanings. Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga (2010) exploited the content-oriented possibilities of captions and running text in ways that remain underutilized by some designers, though not those mentioned in this essay. Images, including those that embrace type-as-image, don't always say everything that must be said. In what ways, then, could or should images enter into dialogue with written texts? Readable (again, as traditionally defined) texts can help to frame polyphonic dialogues in useful ways, as "Beyond surveillance" demonstrates. Pluriversal design emerges "through dialogue across plural cultures and cosmovisions" and builds "a world in which other worlds are possible," as decolonial ethicist Robin Dunford (2017) puts it (p. 380). This rarely happens via images alone.

What else is possible? Design has been asking this question for quite some time. Our visual modes of methodological tools for answering it stand to benefit from an embrace of context particularized through thick description, polyphonic dialogues, and the co-production of pluralistic linguistic-visual knowledges. Dorsey and Diaz-Barriga's (2010) work doesn't provide comprehensive answers, if indeed there are any. But "Beyond surveillance" frames and models useful ways of asking the question.

## References:

- Dorsey, M. E., & Diaz-Barriga, M. (2010). Beyond surveillance and moonscapes: An alternative imaginary of the U.S.–Mexico border wall." *Visual Anthropology Review*, 26(2), 128–135. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7458.2010.01073.x>.
- Dunford, R. (2017). Toward a decolonial global ethics. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 13(3), 380–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2017.1373140>.
- Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.
- Lehrer, W., & Sloan, J. (2003). *Crossing the BLVD: Strangers, neighbors, aliens in a new America*. Norton.
- Martin, C. E. (2004). Review of *Crossing the BLVD: Strangers, neighbors, aliens in a new America*, by Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan. *The Oral History Review*, 31(2), 104–106. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3675385>.
- Palumbo, J. (2018, October 1). *Seeing the U.S.–Mexico border through the eyes of 10 photographers*. Artsy. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-10-photographers-told-story-us-mexico-border>
- Rogal, M. (2000). South of the border down Mexico way. *Visible Language*, 32(2), 142–61. <https://visiblelanguage.herokuapp.com/issue/120/article/442>.
- Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Tan, V. (2019, July 8). *UN rights chief "appalled" by US border detention conditions, says holding migrant children may violate international law*. United Nations News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/07/1041991>.
- Tuggar, F. (2013). "Montage as tool of political visual realignment. *Visual Communication*, 12(3), 375–392. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357213482607>.
- Ulibarri, K. L. (2019). Documenting the US–Mexico border: Photography, movement, and paradox. *Art Journal*, 78(2), 48–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2019.1626157>.
- USA Today. (2017). *The wall*. <https://www.usatoday.com/border-wall/usa-today-network-border-project-about-vr-podcasts-map/>

## Figures:

Figure 1. "Recalling the Imagined Border." Digital collage. Dori Griffin, 2021. A decade after visiting Ajo, Arizona, I remember my own border imaginary.

Figure 2. Photograph by Barbara Zandoval, February 2021. "Frontera Tijuana." <https://unsplash.com/photos/fhEkwsRgMNO>. The desolate, dangerous border remains a visual trope in 2021.

Figure 3. Photograph by Dorothea Lange, June 1938. "Mexicans entering the United States. United States immigration station, El Paso, Texas." LOC item 2017770683. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017770683/>. Lange's style and her documentary impulse continue to inform photography along the US/Mexico border.

Figure 4. Photograph by Max Böhme, June 2019. "Tijuana, Mexico." <https://unsplash.com/photos/0NWnW2jgY6k>. The formal vocabulary of photographic "truth" and compositional Modernism lingers in this contemporary photo, titled simply with its location.

## Author

Dori Griffin is an assistant professor in the School of Art + Art History at University of Florida where she teaches graphic design and design history. Much of her research centers around the visual rhetoric of popular print media during the early twentieth century, exploring the ways in which visual communication design participated in the construction of social identity relative to place and culture. She is currently at work on a visual history of the type specimen, a project which emerges from research conducted during her 2015 Cary Fellowship at the Rochester Institute of Technology's Cary Graphic Arts Collection. Intended for students, educators, and practitioners of graphic design, the forthcoming book (spring 2022) will contextualize the specimen as a visual form and a professional practice.

# Echoing the Call for Multimodal Representation

Michael Renner

The editor's introduction to the *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 32, Issue 2, from fall 2016 emphasizes the necessity of anthropology to engage in multimodal methodologies of research and research communication. Jenny Chio and Rupert Cox specifically named images and wrote in the introduction:

— An expanded view of visual anthropology, and its methodological and analytical contributions to current debates, recognizes and builds on the field's commitment to a reflexive awareness of the social relationships at stake in the process of making images and an engagement with the politics of representation. It also encompasses an active approach toward learning to see how others see, how technologies of imaging picture the world, and a serious consideration of the technical capacities necessary for communicating ethnographic knowledge through visual composition, editing, and design. (Chio & Cox, 2016, pp. 101–102)

The claim that the reflection on images has been neglected compared to the reflection on language, echoing in the introduction of Chio and Cox (216), has been made in the context of the *iconic turn* in the mid-1990s. In reference to the *linguistic turn* in philosophy coined by Richard Rorty (1967) in philosophy, art historian Gottfried Boehm (1994, pp. 11–38) described the *iconic turn*, and Thomas W. Mitchell (1995, pp. 11–34) used the term *pictorial turn*, observing a significant shift toward communication by images. Both recognized the increasing power of images in society through the digital means of communication, which enables everyone to easily create and disseminate images. Both were aware of the lack of reflection on the meaning of images in Western thought.

Since Plato's proclamation of a hierarchical relationship between a sensuous experience and an abstract idea of an experience (Heidegger, 2010, pp. 121–128; Nietzsche, 2010, pp. 60–73; Plato, *Politeia*: VII 514–541), images were preconceived as secondary and deceiving simulacra of an original. The deeply rooted preconception of the sensuous as seductive and the conceptual as a means to attain the essence of an experience has prevailed until today in Western societies. Scientific projects are leading to a result that can be described by a system of abstract symbols—either by language or math. The call for a multimodal approach in the introduction of Chio and Cox as an epistemological methodology to broaden the window of perception can be seen as the necessary consequence of a long-lasting preconception of the superiority of language over sensuous perception.

The call for the “alphabetization” of images, following the *iconic turn* in many interdisciplinary research clusters, has also

resonated within the context of visual communication. Who would be more affected by the increasing image flood than a practice that is involved in creating images for everyday communication in a society? Who should be more aware than the visual-communication designer that images are a powerful agency in a society equipped with digital tools? Who would be more aware than the visual communication designer that the way images create meaning is the result of a process that is always connected to a sociocultural context? Who would know better that the effect images can create cannot be fully explained by semiotics, a theory derived from the analysis of language? Who would be more suited to reflect upon the effect of the digital medium being witness of the transformation digital tools have caused in communication since the mid-1980s?

Accepting the call to participate in the quest of unveiling how images generate meaning, the academic field of visual communication was challenged to define its own approach within an interdisciplinary research field. While cultural studies—such as art history, media studies, linguistic studies, or psychology—are reflecting on a given image, visual communication designers are creating images in the field of practice for the purpose of conveying a message. In the context of image research (*Bildwissenschaft*, or *iconic research*, as the research field is called in the European academic context), visual communication can employ its competence of creating image variations in order to differentiate their meaning or to describe the processes of their creation. Through a practice-led inquiry, we may differentiate what ornamental, documentary, diagrammatic, typographic, scientific, participatory, etc. images are. Or we can use the practice-led approach to extend our knowledge about the various influences on the processes of image creation with analog or digital tools. We called this approach, which we have been developing since 2005, practice-led iconic research (Renner 2010, pp. 76–82; Renner 2017/18, pp. 8–33) and defined it with this phrase: “creating images in order to add to their understanding.” In contrast to artistic research, which accepts the creation of a work of art as an epistemological methodology, practice-led iconic research uses the creation of images as a methodology in combination with verbal reflection (Renner 2017/18, pp. 8–33). In this context, language is not replacing the image, and images do not replace language. Language is used as a means to interpret the effect of an image variation in comparison to other ones, in view of the image variations discussed. This hermeneutic approach is based on the fact that a beholder/reader may question the interpretation of the image variations presented to follow the interpretation or to contradict it in a response to the research community. This approach is widespread in literature studies, art history, or media studies, but visual communication is reluctant to accept it. Very often, methods of the social sciences or psychology are employed in practice-led visual communication research in order to verify or falsify an interpretation. It is not surprising that a major protagonist of hermeneutics,

Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, 1992, pp. 71 – 85), has described the arts as the third approach, next to the humanities and the sciences, to understand our being in the world.

In this respect, anthropology might be further advanced than the field of visual communication. The call of Chio and Cox for a multimodal approach includes photography, film, drawing, etc. as a means to describe and understand cultural phenomena. The interest of the *Visual Anthropology Review* in the additional perspectives a practice-led approach can provide to a discipline goes along with the understanding that a theoretical approach can describe a practice from the outside to a certain degree, but the involvement in a practice leads to a different understanding of it (Barad, 2007, pp. 132–185; Heidegger, 2010, pp. 117–118; Ingold, 2013, pp. 2–4, Renner, 2011, pp. 92–116).

From an anthropological point of view, the politics of representation might not be addressed enough in the described methodology of practice-led iconic research. The socio-cultural fabric that influences our activities, including the creation of images, might be overseen at first glance, even though an aesthetic effect always depends on a specific sociocultural situation. This friction between the point of view of social sciences and the point of view of creative production is, as mentioned in the introduction by Chio and Cox, the interesting field in which complementing activities of anthropology and practice-led image research can initiate a productive dialogue.

An example of a successful collaboration between anthropologists and image researchers at the FHNW Academy of Art and Design, Institute Digital Communication Environments (IDCE), in Basel, Switzerland, is a project that is inquiring into the ability of images to foster dialogue and mutual understanding in processes of urban planning. In this context, practice-led iconic research means creating images that allow a multitude of interpretations for diverse groups of citizens, who are invited to participate in the architectural process of transforming a district.

From the point of view of anthropology, processes of participatory image-making have been developed in order to include diverse groups of citizens into the process of planning an urban transformation. In short, we can say that this research project and its outcome are exemplifications of Bruno Latour's observation that design, in this case visual communication design, like many other disciplines, has changed from providing matters of fact in the modern era to addressing matters of concern (Latour, 2008, pp. 2–10).

## References

- Barad, K. (2007). Agential realism: How material-discursive practices matter. In K. Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Boehm, G. (1994). Die Wiederkehr der Bilder [The return of images]. In G. Boehm (Ed.), *Was ist ein Bild? [What is an image]*. Wilhelm Fink Verlag.
- Chio, J., & Cox, R. (2016). Editor's introduction. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 32(2), pp. 101–102.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1992). Wort und Bild – 'so wahr, so seiend' [Word and image – 'so true, so being']. In Grodin, J. (ed.) (1997). *Gadamer Lesebuch [Gadamer Reader]*, UTB für Wissenschaft.
- Heidegger, M. (2006). *Sein und Zeit [Being and time]*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Heidegger, M. (2010). Nietzsche's overcoming of Platonism. In C. Kul-Want (Ed.), *Philosophers on art from Kant to the postmodernists, A critical reader*. Columbia University Press.
- Ingold, M. (2013). *Making: Anthropology, archeology, art and architecture*. Routledge.
- Latour, B. (2008a). A cautious Prometheus? A few steps toward a philosophy of design (with special attention to Peter Sloterdijk). In F. Hackney, J. Glynne, & V. Minton (Eds.), *Networks of design: Proceedings of the 2008 Annual International Conference of the Design History Society (UK)*. BrownWalker Press.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (1995). The pictorial turn. In W. J. T. Mitchell, W. J. T. (Ed.), *Picture theory*. University of Chicago Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (2010). How the "true world" finally became a fable: The history of an error (W. Kaufman & R. J. Hollingdale, Trans.). In C. Kul-Want (Ed.), *Philosophers on art from Kant to the postmodernists, A critical reader*. Columbia University Press.
- Plato, (2007). *Republic*: book VII 514–541. Penguin Books.
- Renner, M. (2010). Practice-led iconic research. *Diid, disegno industrial* 41, pp. 76–82.

Renner, M. (2011). Die Stumme Bildkritik des Entwurfs [The mute iconic criticism of design]. *Rheinsprung 11. Zeitschrift für Bildkritik* [Rheinsprung 11. journal for iconic criticism], 1.

Renner, M. (2017/2018). Practice-led iconic research: Towards a research methodology for visual communication. In M. Renner, C. Reymond, & A Schubbach (Eds.), *Visible Language, the journal of visual communication research* 51(3)/52(1). University of Cincinnati Press.

Rorty, R. (1967). *The linguistic turn: Recent essays in philosophical method*. University Press of Chicago.

## Author

Michael Renner is head of the Institute for Digital Communication Environments at the FHNW Academy of Art and Design in Basel, Switzerland. He experienced the digital revolution first-hand working for Apple Computer and The Understanding Business in California, just after completing his education at the Basel School of Design. Renner's practical, pedagogical, theoretical and research-oriented design activities explore the meaning of images in the context of today's digital communication channels. By gaining knowledge through the creation of images, he positions the design process itself as both central research theme and methodology. Renner was member of the board of "eikones," the Swiss National Center of Competence in Iconic Research (2005 – 2013) and member of the European Research Network "What Images Do" (2013 – 2017). He is responsible for several design research projects supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation. He is visiting professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and member of AGI.

# Drawing to Tell Versus Drawing to Intrigue?

Michael Renner

The article "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review* (Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 97–113) focused on the use of images in early anthropology. The drawings by Arthur Bernard Deacon (1903–1927), which he made during his field studies in Vanuatu, New Hebrides from 1926 until his sudden death caused by blackwater fever in 1927, are the starting point of Geismar's inquiry.

The author discusses Deacon's drawings and infers the potential of drawing as a methodology for anthropology. Deacon was a young PhD candidate who was sent to Vanuatu from the University of Cambridge. It was his intention to continue the studies of the indigenous culture of the New Hebrides at the time, which had been started by the Department of Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. In contrast to his expectations, Deacon found a culture in the process of decay. The subject of his study, the indigenous culture, had been threatened by diseases and cultural influences that settlers, missionaries, and traders imported with them since they landed in the middle of the nineteenth century. Deacon described the impossibility of protecting the indigenous culture and critically reflected on his role as an anthropologist (Geismar 2014, p. 102).

## Drawing and Visual Communication

We can compare the fields of anthropology and visual communication through their aspiration to capture the very essence of a culture, or the essence of a message as an utterance within a specific cultural context. Both disciplines pursue their goals through the representations of our world in different media, ranging from the most abstract forms of language and the most direct gestural imitation to a mere trace of a gesture in a drawing.

In visual communication, the methodology of sketching plays a central role. But it has a different purpose than sketching in anthropological field work. Visual communication pursues the goal of transferring information. But beyond "pure information," a visual message has to deviate from what has been seen before and is stored in our collective memory in order to be intriguing and convincing (Lyotard, 1997, p. 36). The continuous search for this slight deviation, situated between an understandable message based on convention and a deviation from the expected, is a core quality a visual communication designer is looking for. In the process of searching for the unknown and a surprising image, drawing becomes an important methodology. Jacques Derrida (1993) compared drawing to the groping of a blind person (p. 2). If we drag a drawing tool over the paper, we do not know if the line is successful or not. A relentless critical evaluation

in the process of drawing lines will not lead to a successful drawing. In the moment of the gesture, during which we cannot control the outcome, the unexpected can emerge. Since, in the action of the gesture of drawing, the control of our conscious thinking is limited, the outcome is often considered to be accidental. But an individual's gesture, as well as an individual's voice, is the most significant utterance expressing a unique identity (Arendt, 2010, pp. 219–220). As a theoretical model of cognitive science describes, the dispositional space in our memory is the unconscious repository, where individual traits are formed through heritage, early childhood experiences, and the ongoing experiences we collect (Damasio, 1999, pp. 331–332).<sup>1</sup> These traits, not accidents, are responsible for the unconscious, intuitive decisions made in the gesture of drawing (Renner, 2018). These preferences, guided by our dispositions, make it possible that—in the processes of experimental sketching—we can overcome what we would achieve by a fully conscious act of creating a drawing. But the process of drawing does not only consist of intuitive gestures leaving a trace. In order to frame the intuitive gestures in both fields—visual communication and anthropology—a goal of the act of drawing, which can be verbalized and, therefore, is part of our conscious process of thinking, has to be defined (Renner, 2011). This goal and the inferred criteria make it possible to evaluate the outcome of the intuitive process of creating lines through gestures. In these iterative phases, between conscious evaluation and intuitive gesture, the mediation between an individual interpretation and the preconceptions formed by the sociocultural context occurs. In contrast to the goal of creating an unseen image through drawing processes in visual communication, the goal of an anthropological drawing is to create a record of an object, a cultural practice, or an experience in the field of study.

## Deacon's Drawings—Looking at Drawings

If we turn now to the concrete examples of the drawings by Arthur Bernard Deacon, presented in "Drawing It Out," we find three distinct categories of drawings: drawing by observation, rubbings, and schematic drawings of the practice of sand drawings.

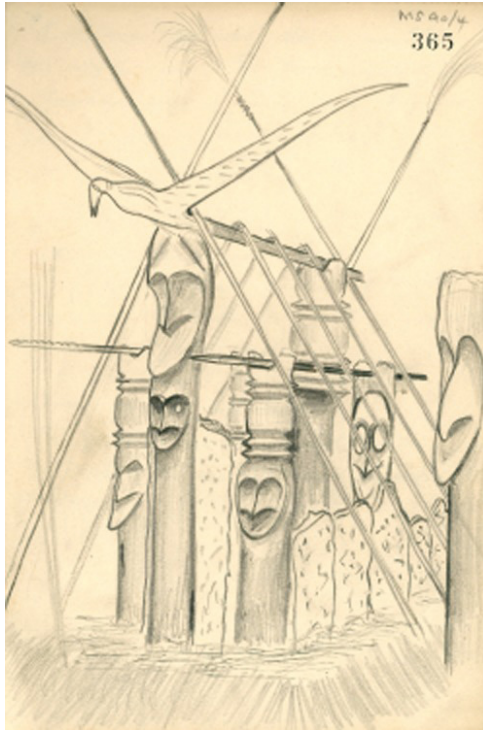
If we first focus on the drawings by observation, Figure 1, presented in the paper, is a drawing of a Nimangki shrine.

---

1 "The image space is that in which images of all sensory types occur explicitly. [...] The dispositional space is that in which dispositions contain the knowledge base and the mechanisms with which images can be constructed from recall, with which movements can be generated, and with which the processing of images can be facilitated" (Damasio, 1999, p. 331).

Figure 1:

Drawing of Nimangki shrine, S W Bay, Malakula, by A. B. Deacon, in small fieldwork notebook. MS 90/4/D365. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review* (Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113)).

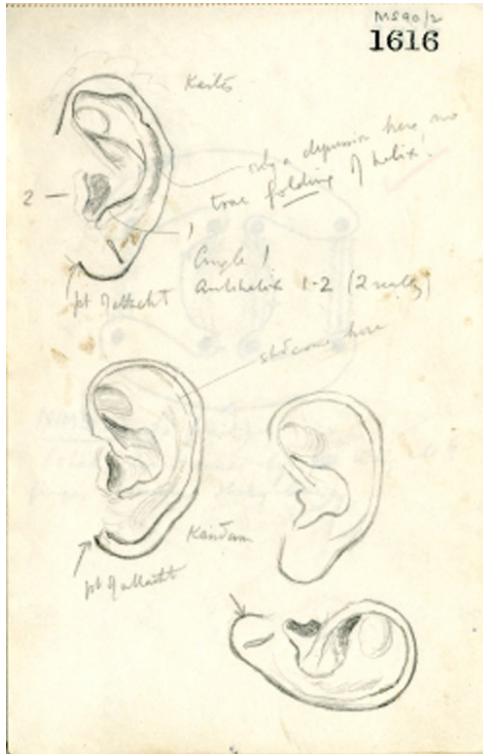


The author describes the drawing of standing stones and carved faces as a “typical ethnographic drawing” (Geismar, 2014, p. 98). The sculptures are placed within a tent construction, which is usually covered. In order to present the arrangement of stones and sculptures in an analytical way, only the beams of the tent construction are shown, while the cover is left out. The drawing explains the three-dimensional space—floor, sculptures, and tent—in the tradition established by the Western culture of representation ever since the Renaissance. For the horizontal lines, two vanishing points outside of the paper format are used to create an analytical explanation of the space. Following this convention, the vertical lines are parallel and do not vanish toward the top of the format. In order to achieve a more naturalistic representation, textural qualities of materials and the light situation are represented through a variety of grey values and textures created with a pencil. The drawing is not intended to be an individual interpretation of the situation, nor does it reflect in any way a ritual connected to the use of the shrine or other aspects of the context. The drawing is not a tentative sketch, but rather, the attempt to create a record of the material situation by a distant, objectified approach, informative for a beholder trained in the interpretation of representations of three-dimensional space in a Western culture. Tim Ingold (2013) classified the drawings that describe

a spatial detail or situation as drawings which do not tell, but rather intend to specify and articulate (p. 125). Following this line of thought, the drawing of the Nimangki shrine is a typical drawing of an ethnographer studying a culture with a distant attitude of observation.

Figure 2:

Annotated drawings of ears, indicating both the names of the individuals, with notes about the physical characteristics of their ears. Annotations: rainbow+mbat imeet; (top ear) slight widening; Masenrean; antihelix = in level to helix; pl of attachment; (middle ear) distinct overfold; no overfold; slight depression; pt att. Antihelix depressed below level of helix. Angle 1; (bottom ear) MILMILIAG Albino at Venian, man and his mother albinos. LOKON MS 90/2/1632. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review* (Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113)).



An opposite approach becomes evident in Figure 2, a study of the ears of individuals Deacon observed during his field work. Ears were of special interest at the time, as they contributed to the discussion about Darwin's hypothesis of the evolutionary development of monkeys and humans. In contrast to a comparable representation of ears of indigenous people and monkeys, Deacon has named, among other annotations, the individuals whose ears he has drawn (Geismar, 2014, p. 103). In contrast to Figure 1, the drawings of the ears were made with the attempt to record the observed. Through a careful and faithful observation, they provide a representation, which can be interpreted by their beholder. The ear studies are less schematic in comparison to the Nimangki shrine. Deacon did not make the attempt to classify what he observed one way or the other through a visual interpretation. The attempt to represent what he observed carefully turns the ear drawings into a record of a witness, compared to

the explanatory drawing of the Nimangki shrine. The ear studies are true representations of a living individual whom Deacon has met. They are not schematic records of space. We may even call them portraits, in a sense, as we are able to interpret the strokes as qualities of the individual character of the sitter. Also, the repetition of the four studies on a single sheet of paper supports the interpretation that the witness has worked hard and attempted several times to capture what he saw and experienced. Coming back to Ingold's (2013) classification of drawings, Deacon's ear studies are drawings that tell (p. 125). The lines and annotations have a synesthetic effect. In combination, they represent more than the visible object and trigger a broader narration in the beholder. From these drawings, Geismar (2014) infers a turning point of anthropology from the natural sciences to the social sciences (pp. 104–105). Deacon is more interested in the individual being in its social context than providing proof of evolutionary processes. In Ingold's (2013) sense, we could also see the difference between the drawing of the Nimangki shrine and the ear studies in his proposal for a distinction between ethnography and anthropology, the objectified explanation of the shrine by the ethnographer versus the study with emotionally involved and emphatic records of the individual ears by the anthropologist (pp. 2–4).

Figure 3:

Sketches of the Malakulan coastline, "[upper level]: distant hills; [middle level]: distant range; bay; d.n.; [lower level]: bay" interspersed in a notebook with notes on kinship terms, naming, and genealogies MS 90/7/H33A. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113).



With the landscape sketches of the Malakulan coastline (Figure 3), a third kind of observational drawing can be discussed. The three drawings, made from a canoe on a small format, are the most sketch-like. They have the most tentative character of all the drawings presented in Geismar's paper. It may be that the drawing from the canoe has influenced the sketch-like character of the drawings. But through their very elusiveness, these drawings of the coastline convey what Deacon describes as his struggle to preserve a culture that has already vanished (Geismar, 2014, p. 102). The drawings convey the attempt to capture something that is elusive even though the coastline, with its hills and mountain ranges,

would have been a still object to observe. Through the line quality and their sketch-like character, the coastlines appear to be more of a representation of Deacon's state of mind than a real landscape. In Ingold's (2013) sense, we can argue that the coastline drawings are drawings that tell of an anthropologist who is transformed by his work.

Figure 4:

Full-length rubbing of Nimangki figure. MS 95/9/. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113).



If we now turn to Deacon's rubbings, we have got a fundamentally different process of image generation to discuss. A rubbing is not a notation of visual perception transferred with traces of gestures. It is a direct transfer from the relief of an object to a piece of paper. The gestures of the image-maker are still blind, but it is not the dispositional space that is first and foremost determining every line. The edges of the relief define where the application of the grey value stops and the blank paper becomes visible. This is a technical process that is comparable to other technical

image-creation processes such as tracing, photography, or x-ray imaging. With all the technical processes of image creation, the preconception implies that they are less subjective, since the decisions are delegated to a procedure or an apparatus (Flusser, 1984, pp. 10–14; Galison, 1998, pp. 327–359). With a closer look at Deacon's rubbing of the Nimangki figure, we see that the image is not the result of an unreflecting, repetitive movement of the tool over the relief. The legs of the figure show, for example, a clear modulation of the grey values. The edges of the legs are drawn in a darker hue in order to achieve a three-dimensional representation of them. Also, the light grey values, which describe the torso of the figure, are not the result of a mechanical process, but rather, the consequence of a decision in the process of image-making in consideration of the overall appearance of the image. Typically, for the preconceived objectivity of technical imaging processes, many aspects of the outcome still depend on the decisions of the image maker.

Figure 5:

Schematized sand drawing showing an Ambrym geometrical figure named "The Turtle," MS 94/7/20. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113).

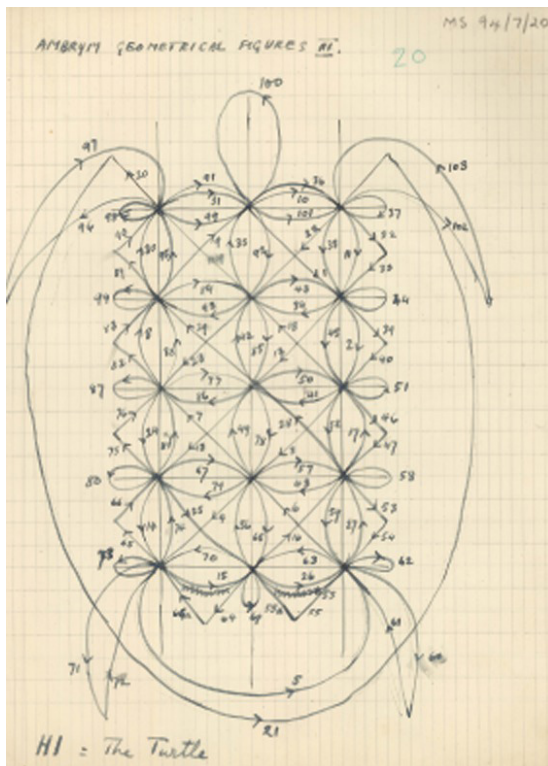


Figure 6:

John Teungkon creating a sand drawing; Craig Cove, Ambrym, 1999. Photograph by Stephen Zagala. (Image and caption as presented in "Drawing It Out" by Haidy Geismar (2014) in *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113).



If we now turn to the third category of drawings, the schematized sand drawings, a completely different purpose for these records can be described. While the observational drawings and the rubbings had the purpose of providing a record of the indigenous culture and their protagonists that Deacon studied, the sand drawings are an image-creation technique of the culture he studied. The schematized figure of the turtle (Figure 5 and 6) reenacted by Deacon was annotated with numbers in order to record the sequence of movements in the standardized creation of the sand drawing. Deacon's drawing can be interpreted as proof of his attempt to learn how the drawings were made. The drawings are dissected and the sections are numbered in order to learn the complex sequence of gestures. But the practice of drawing them is also an intuitive process in which the trained hand, comparable to a writing gesture, makes decisions below the threshold of conscious thought. To be able to execute and use the sand drawings in their cultural context, the same as the indigenous people of Vanuatu did, made Deacon into an anthropologist in Ingold's (2013) sense. Deacon was involved and transformed by the study of a specific cultural practice (pp. 2–49). Whether he actually repeated the sequence of the turtle drawing 10,000 times as Richard Sennet described (2008), as a prerequisite of the mastery of a craft, is not transmitted (p. 172).

## Conclusion

Geismar stated that Deacon had neither a methodological framework for drawing provided by anthropology, nor did he have any specialized training in drawing. Considering these circumstances, it is even more surprising how decisively Deacon described the limits of language in the context of his field work and, therefore, strongly relied on drawing as an epistemological methodology:

— “Writing is so unreal, so terribly unreal, lending the illusion of movement to quiet and stillness, and holding back desire and vision and the cool, clear welling up of things.”<sup>2</sup>

The limits of language are a crucial point, which can be also used to find a common ground between anthropology and visual communication. The awareness that the experience of being in the world is multisensory and cannot be represented exclusively by language fosters a common interest in images.

Another connecting line between anthropology and visual communication can be drawn regarding their relationship to a sociocultural context. What the participatory engagement in the field work of anthropology means is mirrored by the necessity of knowing the current culture in visual communication. In order to recognize the surprising deviation of the known from the involvement in the known—the established aesthetic of a culture—is necessary.

As mentioned above, drawing is an important competence in the field of visual communication and includes trained in any curriculum. In today’s context of visual communication, it is not the virtuosity of drawing that is the ultimate goal anymore, but rather, the recognition of how important it is to find a balance between intuitive processes and conscious processes of thought (Renner, 2021). This awareness is crucial in order to create intriguing images in communication, but also to create image series in practice-led iconic research (Renner, 2014; Renner, 2017/2018). Even though I cannot answer this question for the field of anthropology, I would assume that drawings that are drawings that tell, as well as their epistemological outcomes, are also based on the mentioned balance between intuitive processes and conscious processes of thought. Seen from this point of view, Deacon’s drawings can be read as examples of the varying combinations of these two components in the process of drawing.

---

2 Deacon writing to Gardiner, on board the SS Ormonde sailing to Malakula, August 25, 1925 (Gardiner, 1984, p. 15), quoted in Geismar (2014), “Drawing It Out,” in *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 97–113.

## References

- Arendt, H. (2010). *Vita activa oder vom tätigen Leben [The human condition]*. Piper.
- Damasio, A. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.
- Derrida, J. (1993). *Memoirs of the blind: The self-portrait and other ruins* (P.A. Brault & M. Naas, Trans.). Chicago University Press.
- Flusser, V. (1984). The technical image. In Flusser, V. (1984) *towards a philosophy of photography*. Reaktion Books, pp. 14–20.
- Galison, P. (1998). Judgment against objectivity. In P. Galison & Jones, C. A. (Eds.), *Picturing Science, Producing Art*. Routledge.
- Geismar, H. (2014). "Drawing It Out." *Visual Anthropology Review*, 30(2), 97–113.
- Ingold, T. (2013). *Making: Anthropology, archeology, art and architecture*. Routledge.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1997). The paradox on the graphic artist. In Lyotard, J.-F., *Postmodern fables* (pp. 33–48.) Minnesota University Press.
- Renner M. (2011). Die stumme Bildkritik des Entwurfs [The mute iconic criticism of design]. In *Rheinsprung* 11. Zeitschrift für Bildkritik, No. 1, 92–116.
- Renner M. (2014). Die zeichnerische Geste. Soziale Bedingung und individuelle Ausprägung in der Praxis des Zeichnens [Social condition and individual characteristic in the practice of drawing]. In U. Richtmeyer, F. Goppelsröder, & T. Hildebrandt T. (Eds.), *Bild und Geste. Figurationen des Denkens in Philosophie und Kunst [Image and gesture. Figurations of thinking in philosophy and art]*. Transcript Verlag.
- Renner, M. (2017/2018). Practice-led iconic research: Towards a research methodology for visual communication. In M. Renner, C. Reymond, & A. Schubbach (Eds.): *Visible language: The journal of visual communication research*, 51(3)/52(1), 8–33. University of Cincinnati Press.

Renner, M. (2018). The search of the unpredictable—the process of drawing. In P. Lloyd & E. Bohemia, (Eds.), *Proceedings of DRS 2018 International Conference: Catalyst*, 4, pp. 1458–473.

<https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2018.609>

Renner, M (2021). Drawing labs—from the copy of the master to the inquiry into the design process. *Proceedings Image and Learning Conference 2021*. Springer (in press).

Sennet, R. (2008). *The craftsman*. Yale University Press.

## Author

Michael Renner is head of the Institute for Digital Communication Environments at the FHNW Academy of Art and Design in Basel, Switzerland. He experienced the digital revolution first-hand working for Apple Computer and The Understanding Business in California, just after completing his education at the Basel School of Design. Renner's practical, pedagogical, theoretical and research-oriented design activities explore the meaning of images in the context of today's digital communication channels. By gaining knowledge through the creation of images, he positions the design process itself as both central research theme and methodology. Renner was member of the board of "eikones," the Swiss National Center of Competence in Iconic Research (2005 – 2013) and member of the European Research Network "What Images Do" (2013 – 2017). He is responsible for several design research projects supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation. He is visiting professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and member of AGI.

# Developing Accurate Visual Conventions?

Karel van der Waarde

*Five articles about pictorial materials that were published in Visual Anthropology Review were read with an aim to compare the research approaches of anthropology and visual communication design. This text focuses on three themes in the five articles that relate to pictorial materials: processes, terminology, and the objectivity of visual evidence. Several questions and uncertainties are very similar in both disciplines. It might be beneficial for investigations into visual communication design practices to consider the level of detail, a critical theory base, and reflexive positions that form the basis for the five anthropology articles. Both disciplines need to look at terminology and investigate the motivations and impact of pictorial materials.*

## Introduction:

# A summary of the articles and a selection of themes

The initial challenge for this text was set by the editor of *Visible Language*, who asked authors to: “Write a short article exploring how 5 articles in the Visual Anthropology Review relate to communication design and communication design research.” The aim was described as follows: “The article can be critical—what visual anthropologists are misunderstanding about the visual culture designers produce, or supportive—how visual anthropologists’ understanding adds something important to our discipline.”

I’ve approached this challenge in three steps. First, I’ve summarized the five articles. Condensing these thoughtful articles into a few sentences can never do justice, but it might help readers to get the gist of these texts. Then, I selected a number of possible themes. As a last step, I discussed these themes and their consequences. The summaries of the five articles, in alphabetical order by original author, are as follows:

Zoe Bray (2015) described the links between “naturalist-realist portrait painting” and anthropology. Both approaches use a process to “apprehend the social world.” The result is an interpretation—a “thick description”—based on shared and accepted conventions and methods.

Haidy Geismar (2014) investigated the sketches of Arthur Bernard Deacon, who worked as an anthropologist on the island of Vanuatu in 1926–7. This essay provided a review of the role of sketching in anthropology and looked at cultural conventions and historical representational practices.

S. Lochlann Jain (2020) described the use of fine arts as an ethnographic method of analysis and communication. This essay introduces several projects as the author searches for alternative ways of presenting observations. It questions the dominance of texts as a highly standardized structure to communicate about anthropology.

Stephanie Sadre-Orafai (2016) provided a detailed description of how numbers were used in the fashion industry in New York between 2003 and 2007. These numbers relate to data about many categories of information: waistlines, ages, career length, and diversity of fashion models, just to name a few. Sadre-Orafai showed that these “objective indicators” are used by fashion agencies in rather unexpected ways, and mainly aim to “market and select models.” The article provides a background of the portrayal of “the extreme whiteness and thinness of models” by the fashion industry.

Jonathan Westin (2014) described the process of making illustrations about archeological research findings. Westin’s article describes the negotiations between archeologists and illustrators about shows the negotiations about uncertainty, interpretation of different materials, and visual conventions in visual representations.

These five articles in *Visual Anthropology Review* were used as a basis to find if designers and anthropologists shared assumptions about the benefits, aims, and risks of making and interpreting pictorial materials.

Of course, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is a wide range of different activities in both disciplines that do not necessarily relate to a single common standard. To try to provide concise definitions about these disciplines is probably futile, but it is possible to give some general indications.<sup>1</sup> Bray (2015, p. 124) described the goal of an ethnographer as “to understand social behaviour in context holistically” and “to accurately interpret how people give meaning to their lives.” The author stated that “a successful ethnography is one that provides a fair description of social phenomena in a clear and comprehensible form” (Bray, 2015, p. 127). Ethnographers and anthropologists are very careful not to influence or change the people or contexts they study. There is an active awareness of potential bias by personal characteristics and individual worldviews.

And that is probably one of the fundamental differences with visual communication design. Design always aims to be disruptive and affect knowledge, opinions, and behavior of people. Changing existing situations is seen as fundamental. The influence of individual characteristics on projects—“superstar designers”—is perceived by many to be a beneficial asset, although this is contested too.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example: <https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/ethnography>.

In order to provoke changes, it is essential for designers to know how people give meaning and behave. So, for both disciplines, it is essential to observe, interview, record, analyze, and communicate findings about groups of people. Both disciplines need to contemplate the balance between “objectivity” and “subjectivity,” and purposefully select what to focus on, what to include, and what to ignore.

Pictorial materials are produced and used by both disciplines to record and communicate about knowledge, opinions, and behaviors. Three themes came to the forefront after reading the five articles. These themes are unlikely to be representative and are certainly biased towards my own interests. They are:

- 1 Processes: how are pictorial materials made?
- 2 Terminology: what exactly are we talking about?
- 3 How reliable is pictorial material?

Several other themes might have been interesting to discuss as well. For example, the use of visual conventions, relations between texts and these materials, the impact on people who look at these, and different academic traditions could just as well have been selected.

## Theme 1: Processes

All five authors seemed to agree that the making of pictorial materials is a step-by-step process. For example, Bray (2015, p. 126) suggested that spending a long time with a model creates a close relationship that leads to a more intimate, truthful, and “thick” and “deep” description than had it been done in just a few hours. Westin (2014, p. 145) described the development from “idea to form” in a visualization studio, and Jain describes the progress of a search to reduce the dominance of text-based essays.

The articles provided several reasons why pictorial materials are important for ethnographers and anthropologists. Visual research findings might reach a wider nonacademic audience (Jain, 2020, p. 216), painting is a process of producing a thick description (Bray, 2015, p. 129), and drawings might link the practical experience of being in Malakula with conversations about theory in Cambridge in the early 1920s (Geismar, 2014, p. 110).

However, there certainly is not a single accepted standardized process within ethnography. For Sadre-Orafai (2016), making images is “a creative and aesthetic process where designers need freedom”

(p. 124). This is in contrast to Westin's (2014) description of the development of archeological drawings, where processes are described as teamwork. The influence of individuals on the result is small, and the freedom of designers is restricted to avoid unsupported speculations. Jain (2020) selected appropriate visualizations based on a personal interpretation, while Bray (2015) aimed to paint "as objectively as possible" (p. 123). It is very interesting to read that each of the articles provided careful considerations of the relationships between "creative or correct," "individual or teamwork," and "objective or interpretative." These considerations can lead to a wide variation of outcomes, although all will be limited by an adherence to agreed conventions.

This brief overview of processes of making pictorial materials shows the meticulous attention paid to detailed descriptions of subjects and careful characterization of the contexts. All five articles link to a theoretical basis and provide relevant references.

## Theme 2: Terminology

All five articles provide different descriptors of "anything that is not text" or "images." The authors use words such as "sketch," "drawing," "visual image," "mark-making," "snapshot," "quasi-photographic image," "artistic production," "stylized representational form," and "faithful pictorial record" without much definition or description. These terms might refer to a visible result, a technique for making images, an intention for making images, the process, or any combination of these. This variation of descriptors does not make it easy to compare and relate the articles.

Take, for example, the words "sketch" and "drawing." In Westin's (2014, p. 144) article, sketches are the basis for discussions between archeologists and studio-staff. For Geismar (2014, p. 97), sketches are private, and are not necessarily intended to be seen by a broad audience. Geismar (2014) used "sketches," "images," "illustrations," and "drawings" to refer to a picture of the coastline of Malakulan (p. 107) and suggested that "sketches are also mediations and reflections of prevailing anthropological ideas" (p. 111). Bray (2015, p. 121) differentiated between "sketching," "drawing," and "painting" without providing reasons why these three terms are used and how they differ.

In sharp contrast to the carefully considered methodological approach is the articles' irregular use of terminology. The articles show a fairly arbitrary use of vocabulary when it comes to the description of non-textual materials.

## Theme 3: Objectivity of pictorial material

Each of the five articles looks at a different discipline. The disciplines of realistic portrait painting, historical research, fine arts, fashion, and archeology are not directly related to ethnography. And each of the five authors chose to present their encounters in a way that is unconventional in ethnography or anthropology. Bray (2015) chose portraits and not film or photography; Geismar (2014) looked at the role of sketches, not at “physical anthropology”; Jain (2020) looked at fine arts objects, not at essay-texts; Sadre-Orafai (2016) discussed different applications of the same numerical data; and Westin (2014) looked at reducing visual uncertainty in drawings. All five authors therefore left their comfort zones and avoided standard anthropological ways of describing their visual findings.

The five authors also agreed that it is essential to have a critical look at the data that are provided, and the ways this evidence is approached and represented. Evidence is put into a specific perspective through observations, additions, combinations, and interpretations. Each of these approaches is presented in such a way that a reader can find out how the pictorial materials are related to the data. There are direct observations of people (portraits) and islands (sketches). When archeologically correct illustrations of Roman life needed to be made, missing data were considered and added. It is also possible to combine different kinds of data to discuss, for example, car crashes, as was done by Jain (2020). And finally, it is possible to look at very different ways of interpreting the same numbers in the fashion industry. The authors clarified these different approaches and showed that the selection and interpretation of the data are always in danger of bias and subjectivity. The detailed examination of the collected evidence in these articles, and the way these data are combined with other resources, is laudable.

All five authors worried about the impact of their use of pictorial material. Westin (2014) worried about the archetypal visual conventions depicting the past. The colorful, bright and sunny visualizations of Roman life, for example, seem to indicate a “stable society,” while the gloomier and darker Middle Ages are indicated by a very different choice of colors. Sadre-Orafai (2016) described the impact on consumers and models of skewed images of beauty in the fashion industry. Geismar (2014) worried about the lack of critical discussions related to the role of drawing as a fieldwork tool for anthropologists. And Bray (2015) discussed the subjectivity in naturalist-realist paintings. Although these worries are mentioned, none of the articles suggests that this assumed impact could or should be further investigated.

The common approaches in these five articles indicate that it is very possible to look at the pictorial materials of other disciplines from an ethnographical perspective. The data can be observed, added to, combined, and interpreted in different ways. This leads to variations in the ways pictorial materials are made, and in the longer term, could challenge the visual conventions.

## Some considerations

A sample of five articles is, of course, not representative, but this selection of articles does give a compelling glimpse into another way of writing about visual communication design. I found this selection fascinating and thought-provoking. One comment I have is that there are many more “pictorial materials” that are likely to be used by anthropologists, but that are not mentioned in this selection of five articles. Visual representations such as maps, tables, and diagrams would need to be included in a wider review. This short review certainly does not do justice to all “non-textual representations.”

The different descriptions in the five articles offer an opportunity to clarify some aims of pictorial materials. The articles mentioned at least four different aims:

- Observation: to make a faithful pictorial record of objects. The maker observes as a witness and aims to record what can be seen. Bray (2015, p. 121) described this as: “Translate through painting the sensory experience and personal human exchange as sincerely and justly as possible.” From Geismar (2014, p. 111): “There is a need to expand our approaches to drawing in fieldwork and become more critically engaged with the actual nature (rather than the simple existence) of drawing as a tool during fieldwork.” A viewer who looks at such an observation would recognize the direct relation between the object and the pictorial material.

- Visualization: to make a stylized representation of subjects. The maker aims to show what cannot be seen by making abstract ideas visible. Westin describes this as: “Filling in the lacuna with educated guesses can therefore be argued to bring the image closer to what it is representing” (page 148). A reader can expect that something has been added and needs to find out what this is.

- Provocation: to make pictorial materials that instigate, support, and provoke discussions. The reader is invited to react as part of a collaborative development.

- Illustration: to use an existing image to clarify part of a textual argument. This is probably “the academic use” of pictorial materials. Readers are expected to review the combination of text and pictorial material to follow the narrative of the author.

These four types – observations, visualizations, provocations, and illustrations – are governed by the individual maker(s) of pictorial materials. And it is therefore essential that these makers consider the balance between “objective representations” and “subjective representations.” Furthermore, all four can be “thick and deep,” or “thin and shallow.” And a third criterion is the application of existing visual conventions. Providing motivated decisions about these three choices will answer questions, “Why did you make it like this?,” “What was your source material?,” and “What do you think will be the consequences of these decisions?”

## Visual communication design

It is clear that there is an overlap between anthropology and communication design/communication design when pictorial materials are involved. Both aim to represent information, based on specific perspectives and aims. Both use visual conventions to show realities, and both discuss the development of these conventions. The difference seems to be that “visualizations” and “provocations” are used more in communication design, and “observations” and “illustrations” are probably used more in ethnography and anthropology.

The role of these four types of pictorial materials is rarely critically discussed in visual communication design processes. The conventions of different kinds of pictorials, their roles in recording and developing ideas, and their roles in communication within teams and with clients might need more attention in visual communication design education, practice, and research.

Visual communication designers might therefore look at the articles in *Visual Anthropology Review* to find out about the care taken in critically describing practice, relating fieldwork and projects to theories, and considering the impact of pictorial materials within design processes and as a part of communication about a project.

The interpretation of pictorial information by different people and their impact on knowledge, opinions, and behavior in different contexts seem to require an ethnographical approach. The interpretation of visual conventions by people from different disciplines remains a fascinating research area.

## References:

- Bray, Z. (2015). Anthropology with a paintbrush: Naturalist–realist painting as “thick description.” *Visual Anthropology Review*, 31(2), 119–133.
- Geismar, H. (2014). Drawing it out. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 30(2), 97–113.
- Jain, S. L. (2020). Commodity violence: The punctum of data. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 36(2), 212–233.
- Sadre-Orafai, S. (2016). Models, measurement, and the problem of mediation in the New York fashion industry. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 32(2), 122–132.
- Westin, J. (2014). Inking a past: Visualization as a shedding of uncertainty. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 30(2), 139–150.

## Author

Karel van der Waarde studied graphic design in the Netherlands (The Design Academy, Eindhoven), and the UK (De Montfort University, Leicester and Reading University).

He started in 1995 a design - research consultancy in Belgium specializing in the testing of pharmaceutical information design. The company develops and tests patient information leaflets, instructions, forms, and protocols in both digital and analogue formats. ([www.graphicdesign-research.com](http://www.graphicdesign-research.com))

Karel van der Waarde publishes and lectures about visual information. Currently, he teaches (part time) in Switzerland at the Basel School of Design (FHNW) and the Hochschule Lucerne (HSLU).

He is a life-fellow of the Communications Research Institute (CRI, Melbourne, Australia), a board member of International Institute for Information Design (IIID, Vienna, Austria) and editorial board member of *Information Design Journal*, *Hyphen*, *She Ji*, and *Visible Language*.

