DS1-Unit 2 / Word AS Image

Fall 2016, Graphic Design Department, RISD

Thomas Ockerse

Unit Title: Word AS Image

Unit Question: How can the graphic medium enhance and enrich the verbal message?

In this unit's assignment I want to make a point about the need for graphic designers to become more conscious of the integral nature and powerful potential of the idea of Word AS Image. It seems so obvious to me, because I've practiced this idea for so long...but I have noted increasingly that not all that many designers do not tend to pay attention to this principle, and especially today when there is an increasing tendency to operate quickly and let the technology dictate how we do things. But, hope remains that too will change!
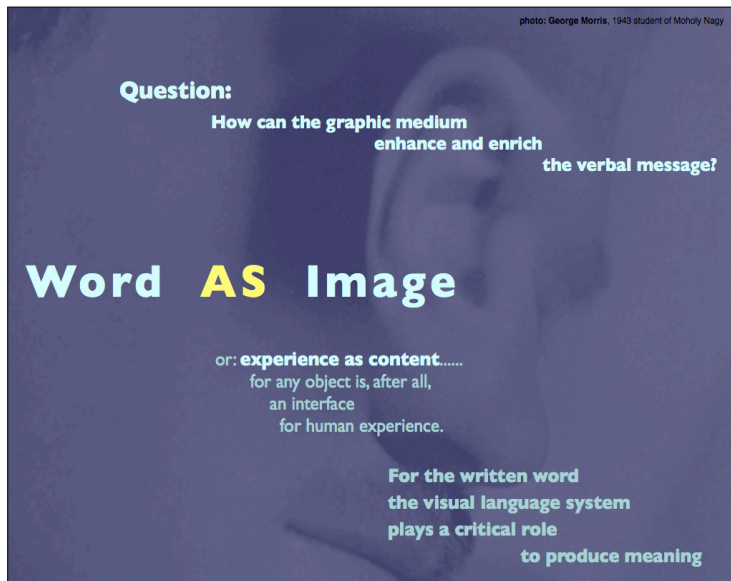
For this unit please note the highlighted word in yellow: **AS** .... not "*and*". It's much easier for us, as designers and as interpreters, to separate the word as it's own world of representation—but whenever words are presented, be it spoken or visually presented, we can never really escape the fact that the presentation of the word first make an impact via that medium. For the presentation of the word in print or screen the first impact is on our eyes, and that visual aspects immediately determines how we take the word inside us and process its significance.
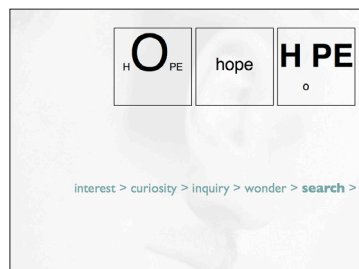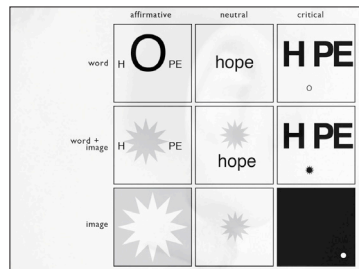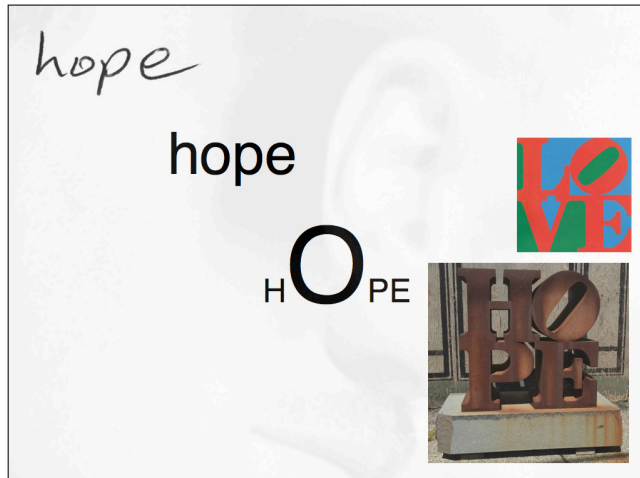
In this unit, I hope to stir up lots of things, which I believe essential to design and attitude—and mostly to stir up YOUR interest, which-interest moves to curiosity, inquiry and wonder, and a principle for search that should continue in all your studies and beyond.

Word **AS** Image concentrates on the presentation of the word—be that in print, on the screen, in space, or whatever medium we choose for its visual experience with it. This meeting of the verbal and visual creates an engagement wherein the word becomes an experience wherein the visual responds to, and presents, and enhances the word's content. That is, after all, what we become engaged with in any object of design, which is then necessarily an interface for human experience.

Actually, the assignment is very simple.
First of all, soon after you return to the class room (after this intro) you will **end up with a single word**. That is your word to work with for the next two weeks.

photo: George Morris, 1943 student of Moholy Nagy

Question:
How can the graphic medium enhance and enrich the verbal message?

Word AS Image

or: **experience as content**......
for any object is, after all,
an interface
for human experience.

**For the written word
the visual language system
plays a critical role
to produce meaning**

Now, what is a word?

Of course, we all know the answer to that—it seems so obvious and dumb....but let's make sure we all understand this is not as simplistic as it may appear after all. For example—and importantly—Alfred Korzybski (Polish mathematician/philosopher) said so famously in his General Semantics theory: *"The word is not the thing"* .....and similarly *"The map is not the territory"*. That is to say: the word "pencil" is not "the pencil"; the word "hope" is not "hope"—and so on. The word is a conceptual vehicle to direct the mind toward a certain idea—and in that very process of conceptualism the "word" has its own existential reality...and is NOT limited to what it points to!

Of course, we will present the word as an idea to communicate that idea—like the word "hope". I use speech right now, as I say "hope"--but I can also write that word. Then, we can also write it as graphic designers would, and use typography. Already you can see that each version has its own "existential" visual reality. Plus, it's inescapable that we realize a difference, and that difference we instantly attach some meaning to what we read—or see/read...

Furthermore, as graphic designers, we could consider typographic options that might offer some "voice", or "expression", ideally to the idea itself or some other aspect we might want to bring into that picture.

This unit assignment is just this simple!

But in that process of inquiry you're bound to become more and more aware of value such treatment and its implications will have! Like this example the artist Robert Indiana paid homage to his iconic LOVE painting from 1966 with the word "hope". The world of options are endless and fun to experiment with, BUT ask yourself also what value the visual form has as in our experience of reading/seeing and experiencing the object itself and the ideas this interaction generates.

So, yes, basically this unit's assignment is to take a word and to give it visual form. BUT, your question for inquiry is: ***How can the graphic medium enhance and enrich the verbal message?*** ..and I will add: ***to what depth and breadth for the ideas a word can hold?***

That's our unit's inquiry...albeit not as simple as we think.... partly because we tend to take too much for granted. This deeper knowing is why the topic of word and image equations (as I have called it) has occupied my interest and curiosity throughout my professional career. Teaching especially helped me dive deeper into this, and brought about various ways to look at this. Here, for example, is a synopsis of ideas I developed for my grad students years ago—and continue to offer in some undergrad courses.

This theoretical diagram represents the meaning equations for words and the visual language we speak as designers, to represent an idea. Note that the idea or concept within each square holds is the same idea for each square—yet each appears different and unique. In this diagram note that the word at the top hint at the designer's role and purpose these variations might serve, not just as mere experiment. I'll get back to this later.

Now, I'm very mindful of this unit's limited time frame, as only a two-week assignment. Therefore, we will not go into this larger territory for our purposes, and will limit it to Word AS Image (and we will also go without the words noted around the original diagram).

However, in this lecture I will share with you some of these theoretical underpinnings— which will also illuminate the few constraints the unit has. However, I quickly add, that, in spite of these "constraints" the motto remains: **give yourself the freedom to fully explore and experiment and to follow your own curiosities**—then this inquiry will become quite exhilarating and revealing—but only IF you commit yourself to **YOUR** interest, curiosity, and wonder!

Here is an overview of the topics I'll cover.
Topic 1: the visual language
Topic 2: the visual language and the verbal text
Topic 3: the designer's voice
Topic 4: the uses of language
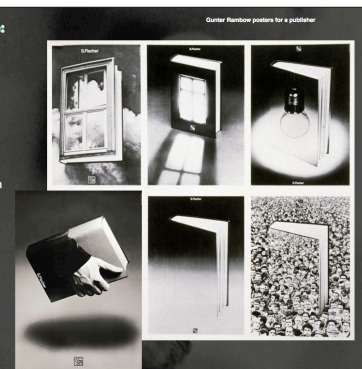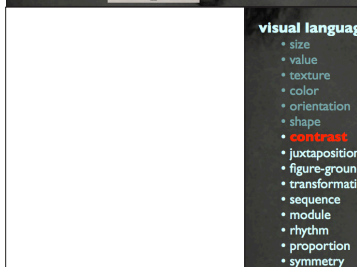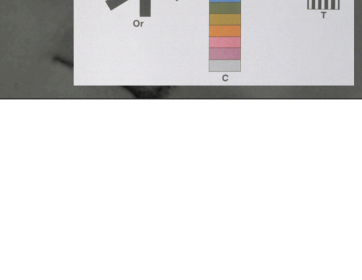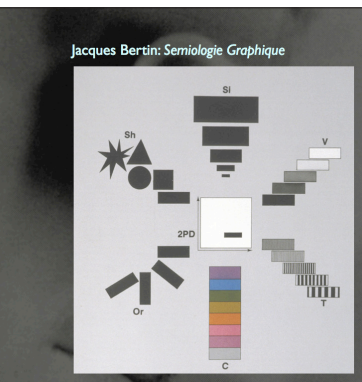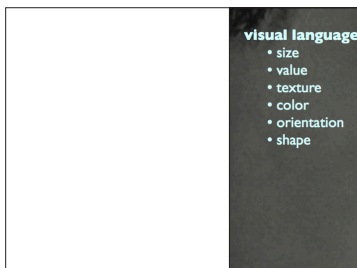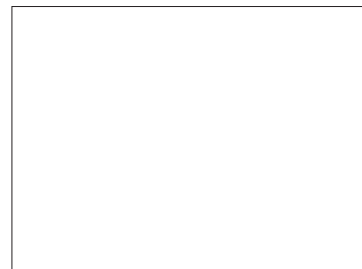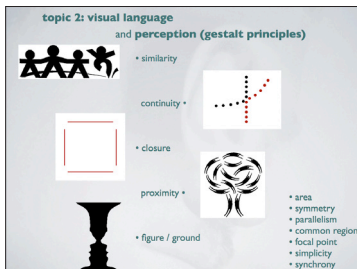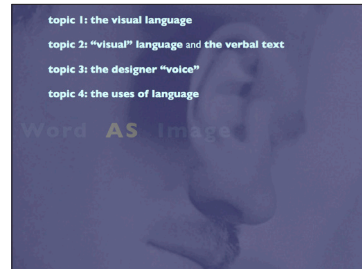
Topic 1: the visual language.
But only briefly since Keetra covered this so well last week. The visual language plays such a critical role in what we create as graphic designers—and, as the "gestalt" view clearly states, it's critical we design our interfaces for communication with the users in mind. As graphic designers we "speak" this visual language! However, remember that the "gestalt" principles are abstractions, being principles of an "underlying" or "hidden" nature; but, since in their applications play a dynamic role of complexity, this often makes it a slippery challenge to use them consciously.

Also, and especially since perception represents what we construct in our minds, as the mind seeks to organize and discriminate for the purpose of unraveling the relative complexities.

Here is another view of these principles by Jacques Bertin. Jacques was a French cartographer and theorist, especially known for his inquiries into the meaning (= "semiotics") of the visual as used in information design. He explained this thoroughly in his book ***Semiologie Graphique***, wherein this basic diagram plays an underlying role of principles. However, in his book he also delves deeply into the so-called "meaning" of things—and it's that dimension of the language we will open up to in this unit, albeit limited and intuitive.

While this all appears as wonderfully simple, to apply this consciously can become quickly convoluted, evasive, and even mysterious. NOT just because these few words also lead to other (albeit related) ideas, but that when "meaning" is brought into view this web of relations gets that much more complex and convoluted—as Jacques Bertin spend his life doing. But these posters for a German Publisher, by the German designer Gunter Rambow, quickly illustrate this puzzling complexity—and the challenge we would have to identify these basics words in analyzing the posters.

Well, then again, it maybe not be so complicated after all.
Paul Rand for example was once asked "what is graphic design" .... and he responded with: "CONTRAST".... period.

Topic 2: the "visual" language and the "verbal" text.
The next topic is what the visual means, as a system or language, relative to the verbal language. Actually, much of that happens in subtle ways, as I'll show in the next slides.

In typography we learn the very basic principles of how the visual language operates to present a text—that is we learn to use aspects of the visual language (form, space, structure etc.) to help others engage with and experience the text—which means to read the text.

In this example the text is merely placed inside a space, mechanically produced in its linear fashion....but totally illegible. But when we add even the small visual element of line-spacing the parts become more clear to some extend....which then continues to build when we add other visual aspects such as: word breaks, punctuation, paragraph breaks, and capital letters, and headlines, and Pandora's typographic box that opens up our choices to type size differences and styles, etc.---to give us numerous options.
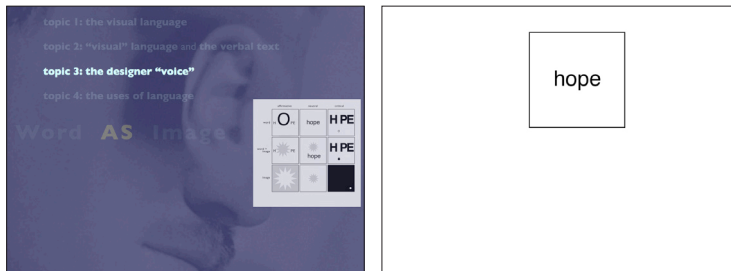
Perceptually typography offers the reader (user) a basic accessibility, as it should—and especially as it serves that function of need, to include legibility, distinction, and even expression and voice with a purposeful relationship to the eyes and perception. The more we see these aspects in their service for the text, the visual language is integrated to serve the value of parts and wholes toward their purpose.

That said, to control these options is easier said than done—and mainly because we get ourselves (that is our personal preferences and limited perceptions) in the way of that service. The question will be then: **what can we offer that is worth experiencing in its service for others**—not merely our personal preferences.

But our options are enormous and can become as I said, bewildering in terms of relating parts and wholes. For example, the design of type itself can become an integral part of what is experienced and how. Here Brian Coe experimented with how much of the lower case letters could be deleted without obstructing legibility. An alphabet by Reginald Plot eliminated the "Q" which he deemed superfluous in the english language. The Dutch designer Wim Crouwel designed a font for the very early stages of computers, by avoiding curves. Or the use of other media like neon....or whatever materials and purposes... However, while the latter experiments with typography appear fun and energizing, my main criticism is that their content for form is trivialized—and for that matter.... even absent of content.

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affirmative	neutral	critical
word H O PE	hope	H PE o
AFFIRMATIVE: favorably, with approval, with preference	**NEUTRAL:** objectively, impartially, nonalignment	**CRITICAL:** judgmentally, fault-finding, with disfavor

The **three USES of language systems**:
1) the **practical**
2) the **dialectical**
3) the **poetical**

Topic 3: the designer's voice

So, that brings me to my third topic, the designer's attitude or "voice" —which is an inescapable phenomenon in design, no matter how "objective" one intends to be in the design of texts.

Now a brief return to that diagram of "word and image equations" which I shared earlier. The word being what we start with, in your process process of inquiry **to present the word** you will become aware of the typographic implications for that. There are many, many ways that you can play with the visual elements for the word via letters, sizes, spaces, structures, etc. And as I said before, this is just one exemplification of that.

However, in your process to present the word you might also **become aware of your personal role in determining that presentation**—mich might become possibly affected by your mood of feelings, or interest, or preconceptions. So, i'd like to share that a little, with this theoretical model that studies the implications of the designer's "voice" or attitude— but NOT to follow literally!!

This diagram (in its original form) was intended to add that perspective of "voice" and the designer's "attitude." That's what the words at the top refer to.—and to have the student become mindful of that potential (if not inescapable) effect on the work.

The middle square has a "neutral" attitude behind the design process. Neutral means to view content objectively, impartially, and without any alignment toward feelings about it.
The left square has an "affirmative" attitude behind it—affirmative meaning to view content favorably, with approval, with preference.
The right square has a "critical" attitude behind it—and critical means to view content judgmentally, with fault-finding and disfavor. Then the assignment asked to **push each attitude toward its extreme** to discover how it might influence design.

With that in mind the students worked with only one specific text (not merely one word)—and each student used that same text, which enable us to see comparatively. Also, as indicated in the diagram, each square uses the same text—but each attitude results in a different visual representation of that text. Again, it's always the same text—but its visual presentation is obviously implicated by the designer for an experience to read it! Okay, I leave it at that—and again, NOT meant to illustrate your unit assignment as a "how to."

Topic 4: the uses of language

The fourth topic concerns **how we use the language** overall as a holistic system. I do so in the hope you do not succumb to a kind of trivializing of the visual language—as a decorative means or surface treatment, or as mere playground for typography. Please, carefully consider how we can use and work with the visual language toward a purposeful communication of content.
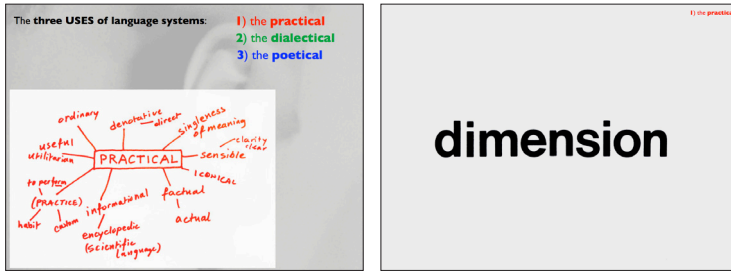
There are three basic "uses" for any language, which we can apply to the visual language. These three distinctions enable us consider visual form, structures and space to give voice to ideas either they
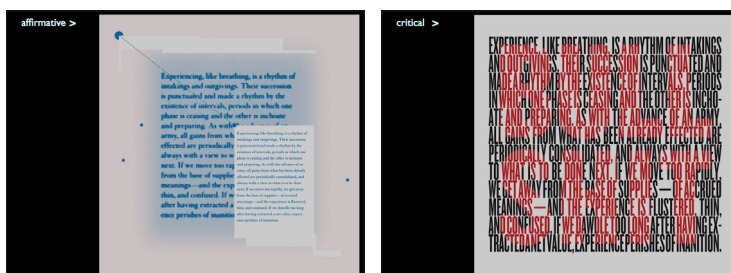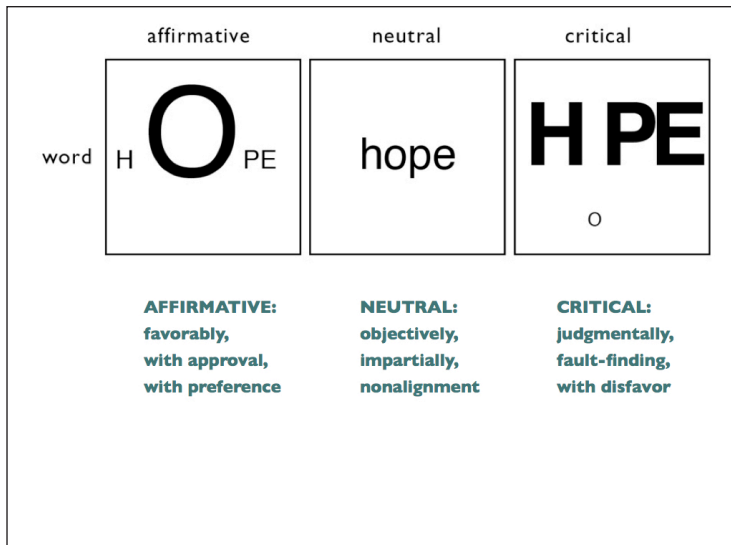
carry themselves, or in support of parts they interact with. I named these: the practical, the dialectical, and the poetical.

By practical is meant the use of language to communicate information with a singleness of meaning, which is characteristic of immediate information that is denotative, useful, sensible, factual (for example a dictionary text has to serve that purpose typographically).

Here is an example of that the word "dimension" and how the visual attends typographically to serve the practical needs of immediacy, directness, and legibility. That practical mode is also employed in the work of on one of favorite artists, Jenny Holzer. The presentation of her text is of a very practical nature—but then is contextualized by the objects and environment these integrate with. This would be an example of "word AND image ... not word AS image!
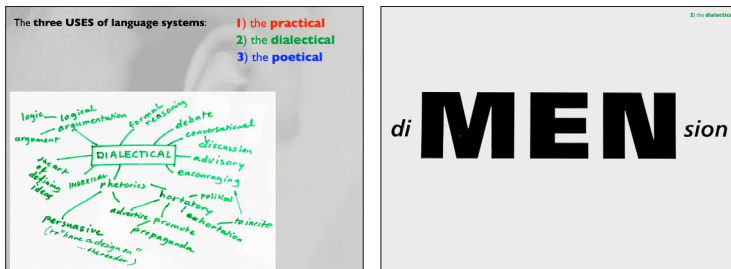
The next use for language I call dialectical—and the word itself already implies already there are two (=dia) aspects or parts brought into a mediating relationship. Dialectical means to communicate with reason and discourse. That is, we see things from ways that appear to add an opinion to the content we're engaged with via the visual language; or, if you prefer, adds an expressive voice to work with. In that sense dialectical means to encourage, or council, or to persuade someone — and from a certain point of view, possibly an ulterior motive. For example this dialectical language system is typically used in advertising, and propaganda, and political speeches. This use of language becomes challenging because of its entanglement of personal views, as these mix content and meaning.
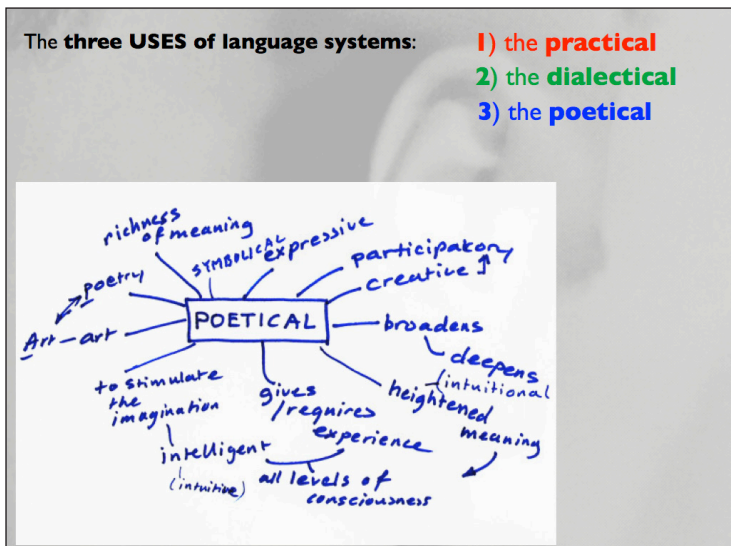
Here is a kind of (admittedly) simplistic example of that, using the same word "dimension" in comparison: it adds an oblique point of view, with some ulterior motive by putting the focus on the word "MEN" that exists within this word "dimension".....
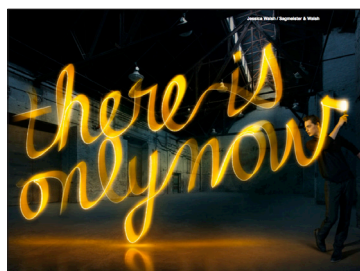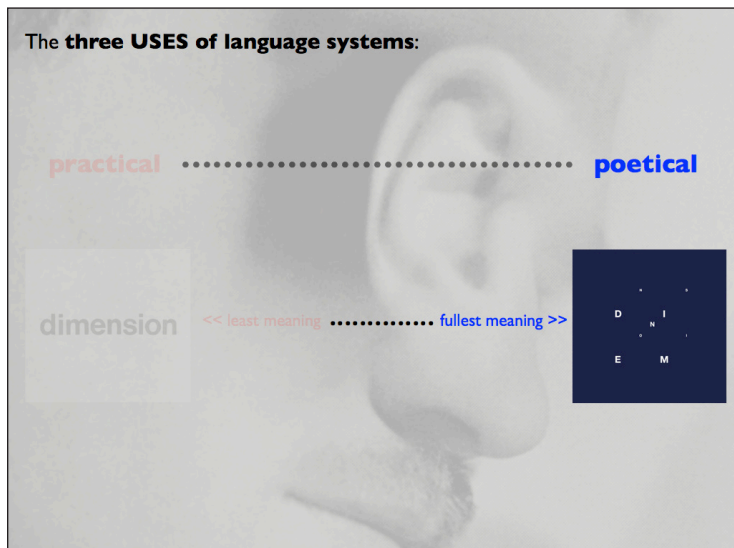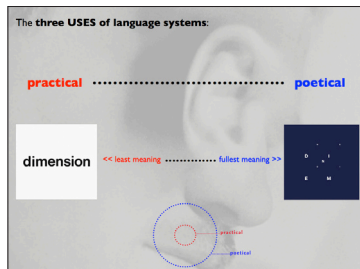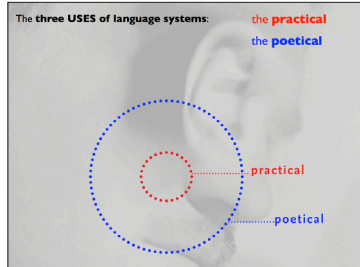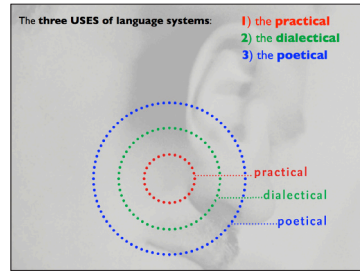
Next is poetics. By poetic language is meant the use of language to stimulate imagination and a depth of perception, that is, it does not merely mediate points of view—rather, it evokes potential qualities and values that moves us toward a broader and especially deeper sense of awareness regarding the object presented to us.

In linguistics the poetic language is characterized by metaphor, symbol, and emotional expression with the purpose to stimulate a richness of meaning— and even deeper into a sense of essence or spirit of things. The experience we have with that language is likely to leave us with a sense of awe. A certain sunset can serve as example—it quiets us, changes us.

However, the poetical aspects truly requires us to pay attention to unveil the meaning for its content. Why? Because poetry requires a subtlty so that meaning is not limited or trivialized to risk falling back into the limitations of the practical. Depth is about subtlety and the hidden. Content is, therefore, not likely to be recognized in any obvious manner! Rather, in the poetic realm content should allow for the user to become totally engaged with the experience of unveiling content—which active participation for interpretation in turn makes that user a truly active co-creator of meaning!

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So here we have the word "dimension" again, but its poetic language of presentation pushes the integrated qualities and values into that poetic depth, the more we have contemplate the object and its complexities. Also, this contemplative engagement with the poetic language for an object that does not simply tell us what's there, creates an experience that we become integrally part of, and in that sense we are the creators of its content and significance. In that sense we can say that a poetic object becomes something truly worth experiencing.

To take this model a little further, these three means are not totally separate, and not even sharply divided!

Rather, they have a dynamic interdependent relationship, of a sort of sliding range. Ideally there is always enough of the "practical" even with the "poetical" to allow us to enter into its depth; and in the practical there can be the gesture of quality and value, even if that is, for example, merely in its aesthetics. And the commercial world of advertising can often move into the other directions—albeit to serve other intentions.

To recap briefly: the practical first relates to immediate needs to distinguish parts from wholes. Then the mind begins to mediate these facts with other aspects, via our perception and seeing or adding relationships. And then, if we sense further attraction and interest we can gain even more value from getting even deeper into the object which can lead us to a deeper, inspired level of consciousness and understanding.

So, these three modes help us identify three points of view on how we might apply the "visual design language" to the products we create.

That' is the overall picture of this model—BUT for our purposes we will simplify this even more, and generalize the sliding scale between the two extremes of the practical and the poetical. Like this way, with the range of meaning (especially in its beginning) limited the practical; but then pushed more and more toward the poetical end.

This will allow you to see the truly powerful potentials of operating parts and whole to work toward enrichment, depth of meaning and inspiration.

In other words, your means of the visual language will come to serve more and more the fullest potential for the content of your word.

Now to share some works—not as "how to's" or to follow literally—rather, as examples to help you see more options, and in the hope these spark your interests and you can resonate within.

However, please, be careful that **visual form does not merely become it's own obsession**, for its own sake, which is easy to do when it comes to your choices for typographic means, font styles, scales etc., along with all the digital techniques....especially today....
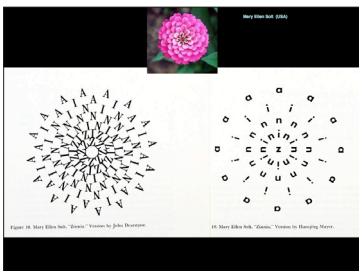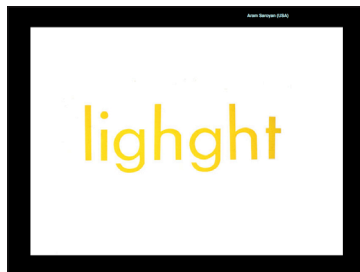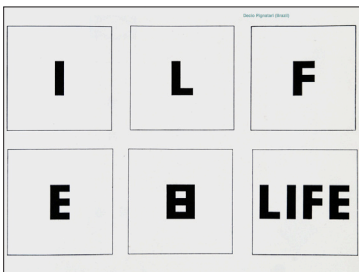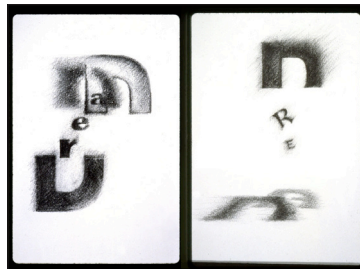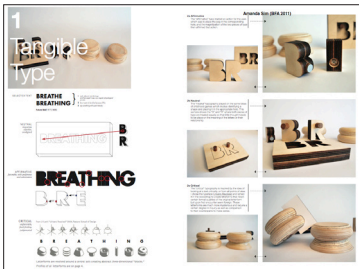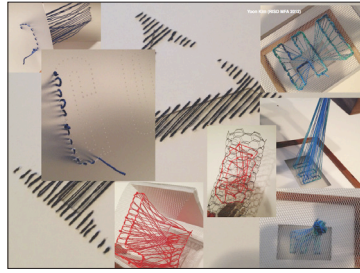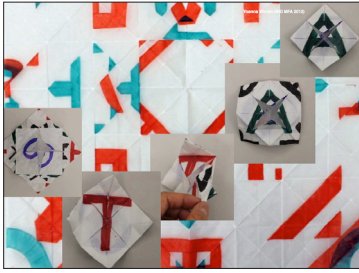
And in closing this lecture I want to share some examples from, what I feel, are the most powerful examples I can share for this "word AS image" unit. The artists/poets worked in an area called "Concrete Poetry"—an art movement I also became part of this. Concrete poetry stemmed partly from an interest to combine minimalism in art with literary forms of experimental poetry. It evolved into a world-wide movement from the 1960s through the early 1980s—and caught my interest around 1965 after I had met and worked with the artist Dieter Roth. I loved the strange mix that erased the edges between the literary, the visual, and the performing arts—all based on the primary interest to experiment with new ways to make poetry.

Now the unit's brief: Word AS Image
(see uploaded text)

The mind map (or concept map) is merely a simple method to reveal the relational values of parts to other parts and groups as wholes. This represents a fundamental principle: meaning exists only from relationship. By placing a word in the center helps you maintain awareness of the central idea along with the interactive nature of parts and wholes (vs. a "list" as linear path, wherein we tend to loose sight of source and value).

The term "mind-map" was popularized by British psychologist Tony Buzan, in the late 1970s, and inspired by Alfred Korzybski's General Semantics theory. However, the term "mind-map" is somewhat misleading since the system does not truly "map the mind", but merely documents aspects of "thought" and insight. Actually, long before Buzan others used the same mapping system for similar purposes (e.g., 3rd cent. Greek philosopher, Porphyry, used it to map out Aristotle's categories; Ernest Wood, 1930s, used this as a means to train concentration skills). / Thomas Ockerse

Phase 1a: How to find your word
Each participant is given an **object** (same for all). In your studios first work individually to *mind map** your identity with the object *(what it means to you and can mean).*

After about 15 minutes of mind mapping **select a single word from your map** *(subjectively, to connect to the object).*

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