

Visible Language: An Experimental Course

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An experimental course, *Visible Language*, at the Institute of Design in Chicago is discussed. The course consists of five problems which are presented in terms of the problem statement and intention, together with examples of solutions from first-year students. The problems range from spontaneous visual language response to perceptual experience, through content-form explorations, ending with a co-operative venture in communication.

The following problem descriptions and example solutions comprise a new, experimental course for first-year design students at the Institute of Design, Chicago. The purpose of the course is to encourage sensibility and creativity with regard to language and its visible presentation. The intention is not to provide a course in typographic history or style, but to provide experiences based on language as communication of a perceptual/cognitive idea or event, language as presented visually—enhancing perceptual meaning, and language as invention or systematic structure.

All the illustrative material is the product of first-year students during the first semester that the course was offered.¹ The course consisted of five problems. The first one focused on perceptual/cognitive experience as represented by a visible language response. The next three problems dealt with an exploration of the relation between form and content, while the last problem was a co-operative effort in communication.

Problem 1: Visible Language Responses

The first series of experiments was geared to honing a finer perception of the world through the use of a specific sensory sequence which directed and focused experience on one perceptual/cognitive attitude at a time. This was represented by appropriate visible language

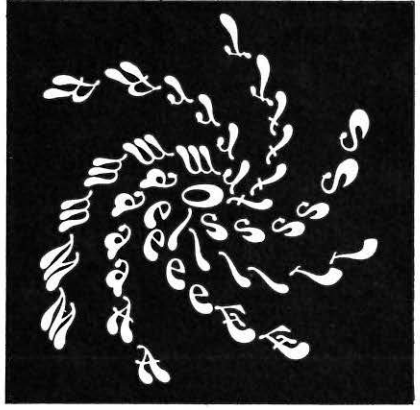
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response. The purpose was to allow students to develop a more flexible and creative attitude toward language, and encourage a dynamic sensibility regarding perceptual experience. The emphasis was on direct experience (unself-conscious, if possible) with no special skills being necessary. The experimental writing sequence presented in this journal, "Vertical Group Exercises in Graphic Design,"² was adopted for this purpose. The first experimental sequence dealt with an object of the student's choice. Then each student did his "self" as object. This was followed by a series of four environmental objects such as the lanyard, penholder, knife, and glass ornament in the example (Fig. 1). Later, the basic idea was adapted to enlarge experience through a structure which encouraged less dependence on the tangible world and more on associations and invention (relate objects: 1. as symbols of larger ideas, 2. in terms of spatial and form relationships, 3. in terms of their relative or potential power, 4. examine each object in terms of the "personality" of one of the other objects, 5. describe each in terms of a diagram, and 6. synthesize the four objects into an invention).

Problem 2: Figurative Words

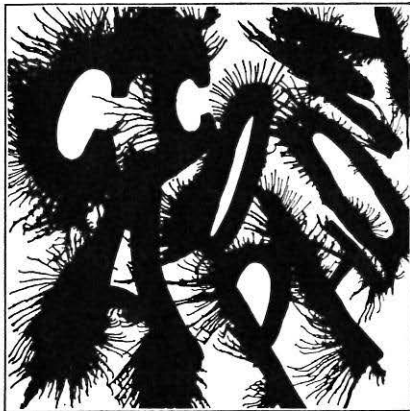
The first formal exploration of content-form relations was in terms of figurative words (Fig. 2). Words were selected on the basis of having a strong perceptual base, as well as for their infrequent use in common language. Every attempt was made to avoid words which would easily lend themselves to preconceived solutions. Words such as fragment or erase were avoided, as well as words commonly manipulated in a trite manner, such as thin, hairy, or old-fashioned. Unusual words provided a richer experience. Basic visual and/or typographic manipulations such as repetition, change of scale, fragmentation, distortion, spacing, and type style were reviewed as possible solution directions. The goal was to unite content and form through an appropriate or revealing word presentation. The word-image reinforced meaning. Technically, ideas were typographically executed with "found" type or transfer type.

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ABERRATION

OSMOSIS



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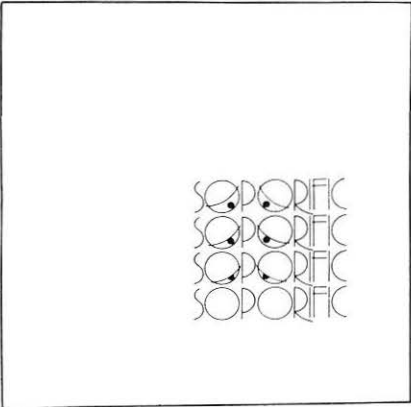
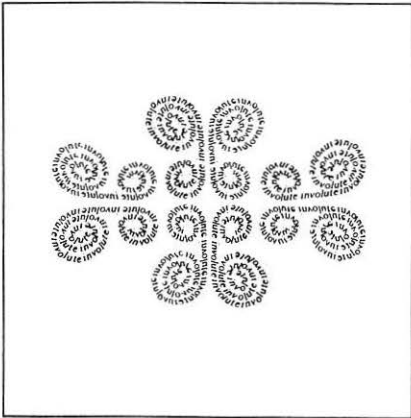


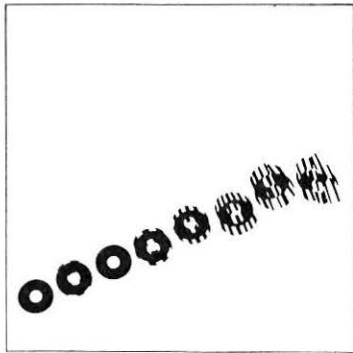
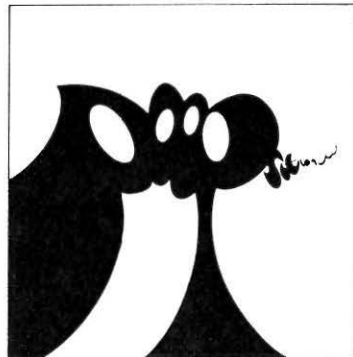
Figure 2. Figurative Words.

Problem 3: Invent-a-word

Invent-a-word was a highly abstract exercise. Each student drew at random a specific situation such as "It is a solemn occasion, but you can't stop laughing." The task was to invent a phonetic (based on the English language) and visible language presentation for the feeling response evoked by the situation. Alphabetic characters were designed and typographic style developed appropriate for the expressive dimension of the evoked feeling. The process of dealing with the problem was as rewarding as the solutions. Thinking and solution development varied, ranging from introspective-philosophical to psychological-physiological analysis. Some students worked from phonetic to visual while others worked from visual to phonetic. This problem was designed to increase sensitivity to formal alphabetic conventions as well as provide the opportunity for sound-form=meaning exploration (Fig. 3). Invent-a-word further established the foundation for the next problem, concrete poetry.

Figure 3. Invent-a-word. Left to right, row by row:

| <i>Phonetic form</i> | <i>Meaning</i> |
|----------------------|---|
| GRAaaunnn | It has been a great day and you are drifting off to sleep. |
| [none] | You have just taught yourself to walk on water. |
| poopsation | It has been a great day and you are drifting off to sleep. |
| Kdum-el-te | You have just been canonized as the first living saint. |
| wulthum | This is the most boring class I've ever had. |
| foffle | Dazed, you answer the telephone at 3:00 am and no one is there. |
| [none] | After spending 16 hours making (designing, building) a large, handsome kite, the string snaps and the wind carries it away. |
| [none] | It is a solemn occasion, but you can't stop laughing. |
| [none] | You dream you are Superwoman. |
| op nil | Try to imagine you are dead. |
| TEPHPHABLEXEC | The computer made a slight mistake, you won't graduate until 1978. |



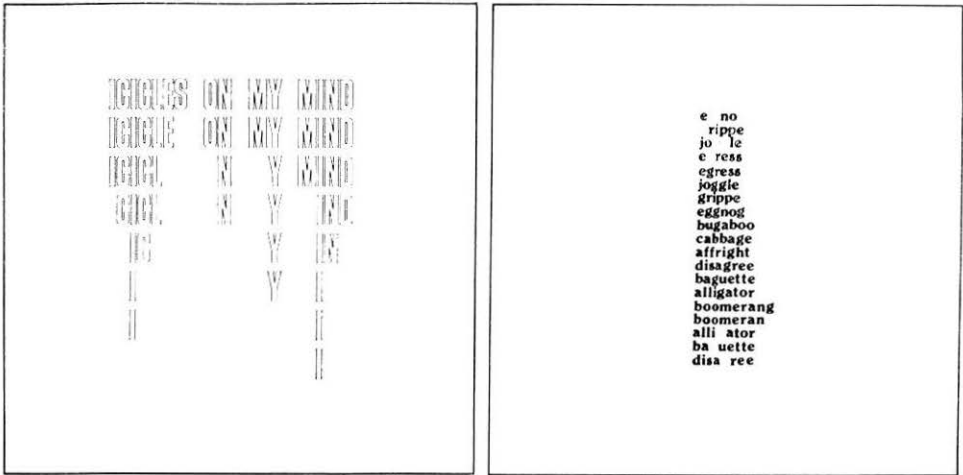


Figure 4. Concrete Poetry.

Problem 4: Concrete Poetry

The concrete poetry assignment provided the framework for synthesis of content-form relations at whatever level of sophistication the student was capable. Each was asked to explore the three basic orientations: optic, kinetic, and phonetic.³ Typographic presentation was an important consideration as it enhanced or impeded the content-form idea. As the conclusion to the problem, the best idea was formally presented (Fig. 4). It was not expected that they would invent new concrete structure or form, but that they would be exposed to the sensory and structural qualities of language and would creatively use the existing vocabulary of concrete ideas. Innovation not invention was implicitly called for.

Problem 5: Poster Design Via Telephone

Verbal intercommunication as well as the issue of personal interpretation and influence were crucial to the last problem. The student addressed himself to the issue of communicating about the act of creating a communication. Each student wrote "unique and memorable" copy. Each randomly drew another student's telephone number. He called this number to receive the copy for the poster he was to design and was in turn called for his copy. Each student wrote copy and designed a poster (limited to typographic presentation) for the copy of another (Fig. 5). Copy critique and comments on presentation ideas could be shared and debated only via telephone. Each was actively engaged in working out the best solution for the communication: if the copy was poorly written, it was the province of the designer to suggest, rewrite, and influence the author concerning the verbal material; if, on the other hand, the presentation sounded off the mark, it was the province of the author to influence the designer by reiterating his position or by clarifying his intended meaning. At the conclusion, each student rated his partner's work in terms of power of statement (copy) or design and interpretation of content (design).

1. Ed Bedno, another teacher at the Institute of Design, taught a section of the course; we worked co-operatively on teaching techniques. Work shown is representative of both class sections.
2. Edward Wright and Jean Collins, "Vertical Group Exercises in Graphic Design," *Journal of Typographic Research* [now *Visible Language*], I (October 1967), 387-408.
3. Mike Weaver, "Concrete Poetry," *Journal of Typographic Research* [now *Visible Language*], I (July 1967), 293-326.

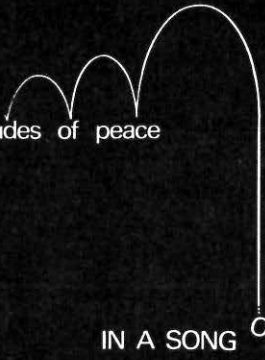
I would like to acknowledge financial assistance from the ID Press, covering the cost of reproducing the student's original work. The following student's work is presented to complement and clarify the experimental course discussed in this article: Ashmann, Champlin, DeLee, Dougherty, Eckert, Garland, Hornak, Humphreys, Kelly, Kitz, Lavicka, Maggio, Marchand, Martin, McDonald, Moy, Orahem, Peika, Sarao, Smith, Steinle, Strode, Stroud, Thys, Tinen, Wachter, Weber, Wilson, and Zabler.

nothing
comes out
nothing

YOU
ARE
DEFINED
BY YOUR

deviations

in the ludes of peace



IN A SONG OF WAR

BAD POLITICS MAKE GOOD RE
BAD POLITICS MAKE GO
GOOD REVOLUTIONS BAD
GOOD MAKE
BAD POLITICS MAKE GOOD RE

Figure 5. Poster Design Via Telephone.

“Reading, in its original essence . . .”

“You may tell me,” adds Ruskin, “that if you like better to talk with living people, it is because you see their faces, etc.,” and refuting this first objection, then a second one, he shows that reading is, to be exact, a conversation with men much wiser and more interesting than those around us we may have the opportunity to know. I have tried to show . . . that reading could not be thus made comparable to a conversation, were it with the wisest of men; that the essential difference between a book and a friend is not their degree of greatness of wisdom, but the manner in which we communicate with them—reading, contrary to conversation, consisting for each of us in receiving the communication of another thought, while we remain alone, that is to say, while continuing to enjoy the intellectual power we have in solitude, which conversation dissipates immediately; while continuing to be inspired, to maintain the mind’s full, fruitful work on itself. Had Ruskin drawn the consequences of other truths he enunciated a few pages further, it is probable that he would have come to a conclusion analogous to mine. But evidently he did not seek to go to the very heart of the idea of *reading*. To teach us the value of reading he simply wished to tell us a beautiful Platonic myth, with that simplicity of the Greeks who have shown us almost all the true ideas and have left our modern misgivings the task of fathoming them. But I believe that reading, in its original essence, in that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude, is something more. . . .

From Marcel Proust, *On Reading* (translated and edited by Jean Autret and William Burford). New York: Macmillan, 1971; p. 31.