the abc's of ▲■● the bauhaus and design theory

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Visual Dictionary

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1 The Bauhaus was a place where diverse strands of the avant-garde came together and addressed the production of typography, advertising, products, painting, and architecture. The school's activities were widely publicized in the U.S. in the late 30s, after many of its members had emigrated to this country. The Bauhaus became equated with advanced thinking in design. Part of the Bauhaus legacy is the attempt to identify a *language of vision*, a code of abstract forms addressed to immediate, biological perception rather than to the culturally conditioned intellect. Bauhaus theorists described this language as a system analogous to—but fundamentally isolated from—verbal language. Visual form was seen as a universal and transhistorical script, speaking directly to the mechanics of the eye and brain.

3 Paul Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (1925) and Wassily Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), both published by the Bauhaus, are primers for the grammar of visual writing. Gyorgy Kepes's *Language of Vision* (1944) and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion* (1947) use Gestalt psychology to lend the "language of vision" a scientific rationale; both books were written at the School of Design in Chicago, founded as the "New Bauhaus" in 1937.[1] Gestalt psychology has since become a dominant theoretical source for basic design teaching. Numerous textbooks have appeared since World War II which describe the "language" of design as a "vocabulary" of elements (point, line, plane, color, texture) arranged according to a "grammar" of formal contrasts (dark/light, static/dynamic, positive/negative).

In 1923 Kandinsky claimed that there is a universal correspondence between the three basic shapes and the three primary colo

2 The word "graphic" refers to both *writing* and *drawing*, two different media which employ similar tools. The word "graphic" also refers to a convention employed by the sciences—the *graph*, which represents a list of numbers as a continuous line drawn in a gridded space: the pattern formed by a graph is perceived as a *Gestalt*, a single shape or image. In the textbooks of Kandinsky, Klee, Moholy-Nagy and others, information graphics function as models for a new aesthetic, an art that is at once didactic and poetic. Scientific grids, graphs, and diagrams constituted a privileged branch of the sign; they were seen as the basis of a visual script that is anti-illusionistic yet universally comprehensible, a graphic language that avoids the conventions of perspectival realism yet is linked objectively to material fact.

4 These texts reflect the concept of a "Basic" or Foundation course, now a common feature of art and design training in America and Europe. A Foundation program teaches students fundamental principles of design, a general language of form and materials which underlies the particular speech of the specialized professions. The first teacher of the Basic Course at the Bauhaus was Johannes Itten, whose mysticism and conspicuous eccentricity were at odds with Walter Gropius's practical plans for the school. After Itten's resignation in 1923, Kandinksy taught classes on color and the "Basic Elements of Form"; Klee taught sections of the basic form class after 1924. Beginning in 1923 Josef Albers led the materials component, while Moholy-Nagy took command of the course as a whole.[3]

This project began as a paper for a course taught by Rosemarie Bletter at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. My thinking about visual form as a systematically structured "language" is indebted to the work of Rosalind Krauss.

1 Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953, 1981); Wassily Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane* (New York: Dover, 1979); Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision* (Chicago: Paul Theobold, 1944, 1967) and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobold, 1947, 1969).

2 On the Basic Course at the Bauhaus, see Marcel Franciscono, *Walter Gropius and the Creation of the Bauhaus in Weimar* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

5 A key difference between verbal language and the modernist ideal of a visual "language" is the *arbitrariness* of the verbal sign, which has no natural, inherent relationship to the concept it represents. The *sound* of the word "horse," for example, does not innately resemble the *concept* of a horse. Ferdinand de Saussure called this arbitrariness the fundamental feature of the verbal sign. The meaning of a sign is generated by its relationship to other signs in the language: the sign's legibility lies in its *difference* from other signs. Saussure proposed the study of a new branch of linguistics: *semiology*, a general theory of signs, encompassing non-verbal as well as verbal systems. Saussure predicted that many customs with an apparently natural, inherent significance—for example, "polite" gestures or "tasteful" cuisine—are, at bottom, arbitrary.[1]

7 In *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky describes a "dictionary" that would translate numerous modes of expression into a single graphic script:

"The progress won through systematic work will create a dictionary which, in its further development, will lead to a 'grammar' and, finally, to a theory of composition that will pass beyond the boundaries of the individual art expressions and become applicable to 'Art' as a whole" (83).

My essay is a response to Kandinsky's call for a visual "dictionary." The terms compiled in this dictionary are techniques or strategies for organizing textual and pictorial material: *graph, grid, translation,* and *figure.* Such strategies were set forth as the basis of a visual script whose signs would be abstract in their form and universal in their content, a graphic code appealing directly to perception.

Moving from hot to cold, light to dark, and active to passive, the series is an elementary sentence in the "language" of vision.

6 In contrast to semiology's project to uncover the cultural function of signs, the theorists of modern design have searched for a system of signs which is *natural* and universal, insured by biologically stable faculties of perception.

For example, in his 1966 text *Graphic Design Manual*, Armin Hofmann writes:

"The picture... contains an inherent message. Although it costs us an effort... to 'read' its outward forms... it nevertheless speaks to us directly. Unlike lettering, the picture radiates movements, tone values and forms as forces which evoke an immediate response".[2]

For Hofmann, pictures have a universal significance, because their underlying abstract "forces" appeal to the "immediate" and natural faculty of perception rather than to cultural convention; the response they evoke is sensual and emotional rather than intellectual.

8 My lexicon aims to reveal the interconnectedness of visual and verbal "writing"—not their separateness. Modern art education often discourages graphic designers from actively engaging in the writing process: instead, students commonly are taught to serve as "solvers" of pre-ordained "problems," whose function has been established in advance. Instead, the graphic designer could be conceived of as a language-worker equipped to actively initiate projects—either by literally authoring texts or by elaborating, directing, or disrupting their meaning. The graphic designer "writes" verbal/visual documents by arranging, sizing, framing, and editing images and texts. The visual strategies of design are not universal absolutes; they generate, exploit, and reflect cultural conventions.[3]

1 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1956).

2 Armin Hofmann, *Graphic Design Manual: Principles and Practice* (New York: Reinhold, 1966). Similar texts include Donis Dondis, *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973).

3 Jacques Derrida presents an expanded definition of writing in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).