The Visual Language of Perception and Place

Aj Cooke
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To be within a system is to be a part of a whole. The network is defined by all of the properties any part gives to the function of the system. Therefore, if a part is removed or changed, the network is no longer the same structure or perhaps becomes inoperable all together. The concept of systems theory is likened to the web-of-knowledge model where there is no absolute truth, rather many ways to navigate meaning and various paths to take, which in turn echoes the notion of individual realities that concludes we can never have complete objective knowledge because it is provisional upon our own experiences in life. That being said, it is important to note that knowledge is a constant quest without end, due to various viewpoints that are always shifting. These assertions of the system in flux question how humans structure the world in order to find meaning within the chaos. I am interested in how we organize our world with constructs that have a shared network of humanity while still remaining bound to and in our individual realities.

Though post-structuralism proposes a concentration of individual perception which allows humans to break away from a universal concrete standard of meaning, the theoretical framework does not necessarily address how our species communicates together in standard conventions, which denies a connection among various people. "Think-ing is what we already know we have not yet begun…"[1] Realizing that we are capable of structuring the world in order to make sense of it, to be the logical animal, is not an epistemological answer onto itself regarding this systematic arena of language in which we reside. The process is also important. Heidegger referred to this status with the German word "Dasein," translated as "Being-in-the-world."[2]

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Of Gramatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1967).

[2] Martin Heidegger, "Being and Time" in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, translated by Joan Sambaugh and J. Glenn Gray (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1927), 53-54.

> Dasein is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its Being this being is concerned *about* its very Being. Thus it is constitutive of the Being of Dasein to have, in its very Being, a relation of Being to this Being. And this in turn means that Dasein understands itself in its Being in some way and with some explicitness. It is proper to this being that it be disclosed to itself with and through its Being. *Understanding of Being is itself a determination of the Being of Dasein.* The ontic distinction of Dasein lies in the fact that it is ontological.[3]

In stating this, Heidegger points out that we cannot be separated from the world but are also independently aware of our being a part of it. Likewise, Derrida questions the ultimate question of Being by stating that our presence needs to be present. Through the theory of deconstruction, which denies the presence of one meaning, and instead claims an ever-changing structure, Derrida proposes that our presence–or place in the multi-layered world, governs how we process information to create structure. Derrida uses the term "bricolage" to explain the various pathways of a system one may take in search for meaning.

> [Bricolage] uses 'the means at hand', that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appear necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous–and so forth.[4]

The "instruments" used to create meaning are inherent to an individual's place in the world; characteristics such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc., all contribute to a single identity and personal experience. When individuals create meaning for themselves within the overarching structure of humanity by use of a unique filter, the difference displayed does not allow for a single meaning, no one truth. Instead we are

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[3] Ibid, 33.

[4] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1966), 278-94.

faced with the opportunity to traverse meaning in various ways. This multiple pathway

format does not have an ultimate end, yet offers a diverse community inhabiting the same

structure of the human condition.

Yet within all of this difference there are ways–both obvious and complex, in how

people relate to one another. The human species has many differences when reflecting on

single parts of the whole, but if the micro view was replaced by a macro lens, the new

outlook would acknowledge that the collection of humanity shares the basis of our

functionality–our biological make-up. Considering that "all experience arises from

electrical discharges in the type of brain cells known as neurons… Patterns of activity arise

that are complex and integrated enough to create thoughts, feelings and perceptions," [5] this

defining biological connection explains how the majority of humans can function within

similar sensory frameworks but is also conflicting to the notion of difference in meaning,

or perception. Vision for instance, is the biological sense of sight that is part of the body's

central nervous system, allowing an animal to process the world through optical

representation based on light. However, the way an organism individually interprets the

environment perceived is not only unique to that organism from these sensory physical

aspects such as visual impairments or actual perspective based on positioning in a space,

but also because of the countless number of daily decisions and experiences created and

stored in memory which spins each person's web of knowledge and therefore influences

how and what humans see. Still, the basic principle of human cognition is also the basis of

our connection; though the species is made of many unique parts in the form of

individuals, all are included in the network and therefore create shared meaning. Likewise,

every human being creates what German biologist Jakob von Uexkull refers to as an

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[5] Rita Carter, *Mapping the Mind (*Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 13.

"Umwelt" or an environment that not only exists for an individual identity, but also contributes to a greater connection within the species.

> Since the sensory spheres of individual humans are similar in all essentials, the objects in the different Umwelten are also similar… The conventional universe, where all our relationships to our fellow human beings are enacted, has brought all personal Umwelt spaces under a common denominator, and this has become indispensable for civilized human beings.[6]

Furthermore, art historian, Barbara Stafford refers to linking both individual and shared meaning by using analogy through a "mediated image" without which "there is only the negative dialectics of difference, ending in the unbreachable impasse of pretending assimilation or the self-enclosed insistence on absolute identity with no possibility for meaningful communication."[7] According to Stafford, the importance thrust upon personal filters via Post-Structuralism has created alienation among people due to our focus on difference, producing divide instead of unity.[8] To combat this division made possible by finding a hierarchical value in difference, the use of a visual analogy could bring a "likeness in diversity"[9] among humanity by acknowledging and comparing individuality within a network that includes all in the biological species instead of separating communities of people.

Yet in a world where perception dictates meaning, and "every object becomes something completely different on entering a different Umwelt,"[10] the question remains: How does the human species function as a whole with individual realities? Perhaps new

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[6] Jakob Von Uexkull, "An Introduction to Umwelt" in *Semiotica* (2001).
[7] Barbara Maria Stafford, *Visual Analogy* (Massechusetts: Massechusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), 51.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Helena Cronin. *The Ant and the Peacock: Altruism and Sexual Selection from Darwin to Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p8, quoted in Barbara Maria Stafford, *Visual Analogy* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), 48.
[10] Uexkull, *Umwelt.*

meaning can be learned through immersion in a greater context of humanity and therefore

not only expand a person's web of knowledge but also connect experience and meaning to

others.

> The capacity to generalize to new objects from those already encountered is based
> on perceiving common traits and matching them according to a shared category.
> Information theory is particularly interested in the role played by inferencing in
> problem solving and how analogy not only compares mental representation but
> inductively regroups them into new coordinations.[11]

Through the use of conventions—a code that can be recognized and interpreted by multiple

communities, shared meaning can be created by a common sign system, like visual

language.

> Unbound, various and complex, visual language seems to range freely across a vast
> informational landscape, its disparate elements lacking any discernible structure.
> However, to function as a language that users can reliably make meaning with,
> visual language must embody codes that normalize its practices among both the
> designers who deploy it and the readers who interpret it.[12]

The elements of art and principles of design are both systems of constructing an image that

are widely known and used in the world irrelevant of many societal restrictions imposed

upon individuals. The elements of art, for example—line, value, color, shape, form,

texture, and space, are all conventional codes used to create and view a visual, even if the

viewer cannot necessarily define the elements on a technical level. Furthermore, the

conventional codes of visual language link both viewer and artist due to the participation

embodied by the image itself; an artist creates the visual using conventions, and the viewer

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[11] Stafford, *Visual Analogy*, 61.
[12] Charles Kostelnick and Michael Hassett, *Shaping Information: The Rhetoric of Visual Convention* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 1.

interprets the code as an image to look at and responds accordingly.[13] This act of looking is both objective and subjective due to biological cognition that intuitively processes and categorizes visual information on a physical level, as well as the personal meaning drawn from memory and experience that is created through individual filters. The concept of perception as either a neuron-based process or an individually constructed reality are actually one in the same when considering that the meaning collected through the physical senses are created by an organism responding to its own environment.[14]

> Every brain constructs the world in a slightly different way from any other because every brain is different. The sight of an external object will vary from person to person because no two people have precisely the same number of motion cells, magenta-sensitive cells, or straight line cells.[15]

Yet our need to compulsively find pattern and organize information—even in our own ways, is a connection that can be exploited and epistemologically portrayed by an image. A visual can be seen as the analogy that puts "the visible into relationship with the invisible"[16] by recognizing the individual meaning constructed by the shared function of biology.

By acknowledging that "the notion of representation is tied to the idea that experiences have contents, where contents are a kind of condition under which experiences are accurate, similar in many ways to the truth—conditions of beliefs,"[17] and through the reorganization of basic pictorial information—a *visual language*, I aim to engage the viewer in an experience where personal meaning of an image becomes accessible to a

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Karl Edlinger, "Biological Models of Organisms and Their Evolutionary Change: Their Importance for Epistemology and Different Cultural Traditions" in *Cognition & Motivation: Forging an Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Shulamith Kreitler (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 184.

[15] Carter, *Mapping the Mind*, 108.

[16] Stafford, *Visual Analogy*, 23.

[17] Susanna Siegel, *The Contents of Visual Experience* (Oxford University Press, Inc., 2010), 4.

broader group of people. My intent is to convey the post-structural idea of individuality, but also extend the theory to include shared meaning found in the human species with a conventional design language. In the large scale painting, *VL2* (fig. 1), the viewer is confronted with a hundred objects—organically shaped forms that are individual both in contour and color, yet uniform in approximate size and placement. Though all the forms are different, they are included in a single matrix: transfixed to the wall in a grid that promotes pattern-searching by the viewer, and also displays a formal design technique used throughout history for its conventionality, as demonstrated by Minimalism and the Bauhaus school of artists. The act of looking, searching, and relating the forms to one another demonstrates the visual cognition of the human species; we want to make connections, to process information and solve a puzzle that we ourselves created to begin with. We want to construct order from perceived chaos.

Though most viewers share the process of perception on a physical level, the meaning or perceived representation of each form changes per individual. The abstracted figures are non-representational and therefore uphold shifting interpretation, conceding no right or wrong answer but allow for an acceptance of all modes of speculation. This use of minimalist design allows for a broader audience by not portraying specific imagery and therefore endorsing individuals to find and express their own meaning. Josef Albers conveys the importance of self-discovered meaning by framing the search within the boundaries of design by stating:

> Sometimes the results of these experiments represent innovations in the application or treatment of material. But even when we evolve methods which are already in use, we have arrived at them independently, through direct experience and they are on our own because they have been re-discovered rather than taught.[18]

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[18] Josef Albers, *Werklicher Formunterricht* quoted in Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius and Ise Gropius, *Bauhaus, 1919-1928* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 114.

While the singular perception of deriving meaning from each object is subjective, the viewer is actively involved in reading the work by the conventional code of design shared by most people as a common visual language, creating a community among difference.

The process of constructing *VL2* also embodies the notion of connecting many parts to create a network; I am gathering visual information from my own perceived world, breaking it down into individual shapes and colors that make sense in my own framework, which I then organize into a taxonomy of data that reflects my own cognitive functioning (fig. 2). The origin of the contours and colors used to create the forms are pulled from macro photographs of human biology such as cells, skin, and hair. This pronouncement symbolizes the contradiction of our species' epistemology by identifying the visual abstraction taken from macro imagery of the human body which is a functioning system and standardized object. After the pieces have been identified, they are then rejoined in a new system based on both my knowledge of conventional design, as well as personal aesthetic, to create a pleasing visual. It is important that the art object be compositionally balanced and visually appealing for the viewer to encourage time with the arrangement and consideration of patterns and relationships within the network. High saturation of the colors is purposefully chosen for the majority of the forms to contrast the organic imagery with this goal in mind, attracting the viewer to the matrix in an otherwise stark white gallery environment.

While derived from the photographic documentation of human biology, the palette used to paint the wood forms in *VL2* is subjective to my perspective of identifying and mixing the colors I see on a physical and functional level as well as through a personal filter developed through my own experience in life—the artist's hand. Oil paint is used

decisively for the depth and richness of the medium, allowing for subtle shifts in value of a hue which links color families within the grid while also permitting independence as one of a whole. The inclusion of the personally derived paint formulas used to mix each individual color accompanies the gridded forms and acts as a taxonomy, displaying the process through a referential legend (fig. 3). The viewer may then engage with the information and relate their perspective of each color on a communal level that promotes interaction and identification of personal place within the world.

Though still engaging the viewer in a puzzle of looking, *CH030715-3* (fig. 4) pushes the concept of perception by creating a site-specific immersive environment for the spectator to experience as a participant. The white box convention of the traditional gallery space is deconstructed and recoded through a single visual perspective derived from a specific time and date within a specific location. *CH0307015-3* is entitled as data, labelling the art work for what it is—Craft House gallery on March 7th, 2015, at 3:00 in the afternoon. Photographs were taken of the white walls within the gallery at that time and day and digitally dissected to extract the pixelated color found on the perceived blank white walls via sunlight, shadows, etc. From there, a selection of various hues were chosen and translated into a color palette which was recreated in oil paint. These base colors were then painted on hand folded paper forms resembling three-sided pyramids, designed and created due to the flat sides that depict three separate values of light which further distort the perception of a single defined color (fig. 5). Each form therefore, just like in *VL2*, is its own individual object yet functions within a matrix of shared meaning and convention. By reintroducing this visual information for the viewer to see more directly with planes of oil paint, the awareness of the conventionally labelled "white box" has been shown to be a matter of perspective. Furthermore the participants may experience the visual language of

place by recognizing the shift in time and value not only from wall to wall, but also identifiable in each painted paper form by means of light and shadow; seeing is then all a matter of perception since the color values change based on positioning in the room and reflective color.

By dismantling the mental image of a white wall as a blank slate, I am metaphorically engaging the participant to consider other conventions that are shared in our world despite the reality of personal meaning; the blank wall is not really devoid of information (color and value). As people walk through the transformed space, tints of high key hues are distinguishable from each other while also bouncing off one another to create value shifts from overlapping color and shadow that alters the perception of each color based on physical and subjective perspective of the participant.

By creating an installation that requires the viewer to transcend spectatorship and activate the space as a participant, *CH030715-3* is an environment in which the viewer may participate in a shared language of visual-art principles, as well as the subjective quality of personal meaning through interpretation of the design conventions. Likewise, "…the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually in itself because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity."[19] The use of a controlled and site-specific space is therefore purposeful to the experience I aim to create for the participants, which focuses on visually perceiving for both individual and shared meaning, while bringing attention to the site as it is in a specific time and place.

As a collective species, we are aware that our lives are lived separately and independently, and are defined by the experiences we have and the choices we make in the

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[19] Maurice Merlean-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: 1945), 320, quoted in Claire Bishop, Installation Art: A Critical History (New York: Routledge, 2005), 50.

communities in which we choose to belong. We are constantly comparing ourselves to others and trying to understand (or perhaps not willing to understand) another's meaning and way of thinking. Our own realities define our unique spheres, yet we function as a structured population regardless of all of this difference. By concentrating on the basic connection of biology, and more specifically, the cognitive and bodily function of perception, we are able to construct both a post-modern sense of variance, as well as the notion of unity. Through the conventions of art and design language, data collection and pattern recognition, *VL2* as well as *CH030715-3* are demonstrative examples of visual analogy—the mediated image that allows individual and shared meaning by comparing one thing to another.

Figures

Fig. 1. Aj Cooke, *VL2*, 2015, oil and ink on wood.

Fig. 2. Aj Cooke, installation detail, 2014, oil on paper.

Fig. 3. Aj Cooke, *VL2* detail, 2015, ink on wood.

Fig. 4. Aj Cooke, *CH030715-3*, 2015, oil on paper.
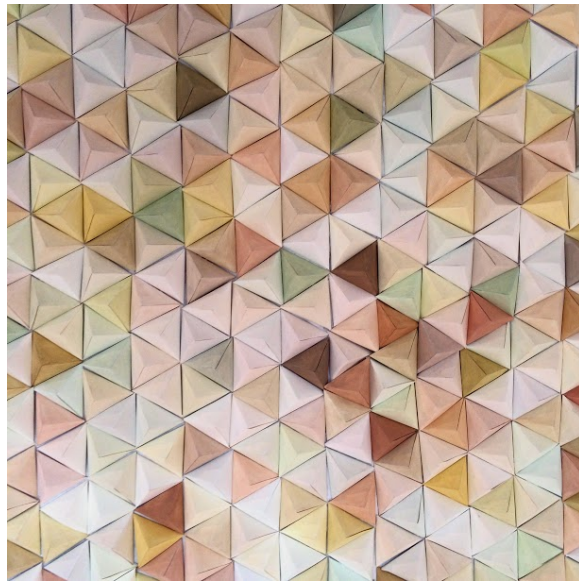
Fig. 5. Aj Cooke, *CH030715-3* detail, 2015, oil on paper.

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29. Cobalt Blue (1) + Yellow Ochre Yellow (1)
30. Permanent Rose (1) + Alizarin Crimson (1) + Titanium White (2)
31. Cobalt Turquoise Light (1) + Cadmium Red (1) + Titanium White (2)
32. Sap Green (2) + Titanium White (1) + Cerulean Blue (1) + Titanium White (3)
33. Raw Umber (1) + Titanium White (2)
34. Permanent Rose (2) + Yellow Ochre Pale (6)
35. Permanent Rose (2) + Alizarin Crimson (1) + Titanium White (3)
36. Cadmium Red (1) + Alizarin Crimson (1) + Titanium White (5)
37. Sap Green (1) + Yellow Ochre (1) + Titanium White (1)
38. Sap Green (1) + Naples Yellow Light (1)
39. Sap Green (2) + Yellow Ochre Pale (2)
40. Yellow Ochre Pale (3) + Permanent Rose (1)
41. Raw Umber (1) + Yellow Ochre Pale (1)
42. Cadmium Red Deep (2) + Cadmium Yellow Deep (1)
43. Sap Green (1) + Cadmium Yellow (5)
44. Sap Green (1) + Yellow Ochre (1) + Titanium White (2)
45. Cobalt Turquoise Light (1) + Cerulean Blue (1) + Titanium white (5)
46. Cadmium Red Deep (2) + Cadmium Lemon (4)
47. Cadmium Red (2) + Cadmium Red Deep (1)
47. Cadmium Red Deep (2) + Cadmium Lemon (3)
48. Sap Green (1) + Cadmium Yellow (1)
49. Yellow Ochre Pale (2) + Alizarin Crimson (1)
50. Yellow Ochre (3) + Permanent Rose (1)
51. Cadmium Red Deep (1) + Permanent Rose (1)
52. Cerulean Blue (1) + Raw Umber (1) + Titanium White (2)
53. Permanent Rose (2) + Alizarin Crimson (1) + Titanium White (4)
53. Permanent Rose (2) + Yellow Ochre Pale (1)
54. Sap Green (2) + Yellow Ochre Pale (1)
55. Cadmium Red Deep (1) + Permanent Rose (2)
55. Cadmium Red Deep (1) + Yellow Ochre Pale (4)
56. Raw Umber (1) + Cadmium Yellow Deep (3)
57. Cadmium Red (2) + Cadmium Yellow (3)
58. Sap Green (1) + Cadmium Yellow (3)
58. Cadmium Red Deep (2) + Cadmium Yellow Deep (3)
59. Cobalt Turquoise Light (1) + Cerulean Blue (1) + Titanium White (2)
60. Alizarin Crimson (1) + Permanent Rose (1) + Titanium White (3)
61. Cadmium Red Deep (2) + Cadmium Yellow Deep (2)
62. Brown Madder (1) + Yellow Ochre Pale (1) + Titanium white (1)
63. Brown Madder (1) + Yellow Ochre Pale (1) + Cadmium Yellow (1) + Titanium White (1)
63. Yellow Ochre (2) + Cadmium Red Deep (1) + Titanium White (1)
64. Permanent Rose (2) + Alizarin Crimson (1)
65. Cadmium Red (1) + Cadmium Yellow (4)
65. Cadmium Red Deep (2) + Alizarin Crimson (1) + Titanium white (6)
66. Cadmium Rose (2) + Alizarin Crimson (1) + Titanium White (2)
67. Permanent Rose (1) + Cadmium Red Deep (1) + Titanium White (1)
68. Permanent Rose (2) + Permanent Rose (1)
69. Permanent Rose (2) + Cadmium Yellow (1) + Titanium white (1)
70. Yellow Ochre (2) + Yellow Ochre + Rose (1) + Permanent Rose (1) + ... Deep (5)