signature gesture and suppress wild innovation or individual expression.

But control, like originality, is notoriously hard to achieve or enforce: the origami eagle that yet hovers between the twin “A”s of the American Airlines logo was added by another design firm (that of Henry Dreyfuss) at the client’s request; the black bar that is such a distinctive unifying element across the top of the New York subway signage system was apparently added by the in-house sign manufacturers, who misread the specification drawings and took the mounting system at the top for part of the graphic design. One can only imagine the resigned sighs, barely ruffling the lab coats and the designer suits, at a world that refuses to be entirely disciplined and directed by reason and design. Perhaps we still sigh with that longing.

Design retains its uneasy relationship with the vernacular, with the demands of consumer taste and global marketing. Today, the growth of the most heavily design-driven firms outpaces that of more traditional business models, such as manufacturing. Still, design resists growing over into a size and scale necessary to match the biggest international businesses. It remains largely a highly labor-intensive service, difficult to mechanize entirely and unresponsive to massive gains in speed and efficiency. Like Unimark in its day, many design firms today stay afloat more on the returns from long hours, grinding working conditions and low wages, rather than the value added from brilliant formal thinking. And like many design firms today, Unimark was somewhere in the middle, striving for a purity of form and communication but buffeted by the realities of economics and popular desires. This book is itself an obvious labor of love and passion, driven by a powerful idealism, but in the end it suggests that the poetry of the future will arrive in its own time or not at all.

Jesse O’Neill


Probably the most enduring legacy of Otto Neurath’s Isotype Institute is the “shadow-world” it created of silhouette people and objects, whose descendants we commonly cross paths with in hospitals and international airports. In graphic design history, Isotype is most readily adopted as a precursor to symbol design for information and wayfinding; appearing, for example, in Eskilson’s Graphic Design: A New History only as the inspiration for Otl Aicher’s 1972 Munich Olympics symbols, classics of the genre. And while it is probably true that iconic symbols are the most recognisable and tangible products of the Isotype Institute, this method of visual communication was so much more. Hyphen Press has now published two books on Neurath’s work, which will ensure that a wider view of what the Isotype Institute produced can replace any narrow focus on shadowy symbols. These are the autobiographical works of Isotype’s leading figures, Otto and Marie Neurath. Containing texts that were originally written in the 1940s and the 1980s, these two volumes now emerge thanks to Reading University’s “Isotype Revisited” project. These long-overdue accounts lay out the ambitions, processes, and thinking behind the Isotype method of pictorial education.

The first of these books is Marie Neurath’s and Robin Kinross’ The Transformer: Principles of Making Isotype Charts. The main part of the text is Marie Neurath’s 1986 memoir, in which she relates her memories of working on Isotopes from 1925 until she concluded the office in 1971. What we now know as the Isotype project began in the 1920s when Otto Neurath formed the Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum in Vienna, his process of shaping visual charts for popular education was then known as the “Vienna Method” (Wiener Methode). Later moving to The Hague and then to Oxford, the museum was renamed the Isotype Institute, standing for the International System of Typographic Picture Education. Marie Neurath (then Reidemeister) became a principle “transformer” (Transformator), this being the professional title Neurath gave to someone who translated textual and statistical data into visual information. In the Vienna Method, the transformer’s role was to interpret data, and to select from this an engaging focus or story (which could typically be expressed through comparative numerical data, for example, measuring the number of inhabitants in regional cities versus major cities, and comparing these across time and geographical location). From this data the transformer was then charged with the composition of a visual chart. The process of the Vienna Method cannot then be summarised as a universal procedure that would be identical for all information, instead it is about the intelligent and sympathetic translation of selected facts, through what Otto Neurath calls an eye-consciousness, a sophisticated awareness of the visual. The entire process was underpinned by Neurath’s positivist outlook, favoring tangible and measurable subject matter.

Marie Neurath’s memoir is combined in The Transformer with separate articles on the categories of Isotype work (written by Neurath and Kinross), and the lessons to be learned from Isotype composition, which are examined within the context of other designers’ practices (written by Kinross). This does lead
to something of fragmented narrative, which becomes tiring as the authors return the reader to the beginning of the story to readdress now familiar topics. But within this disorder, the book reaches for something truly important, a definition of what Isotype work was that expands well beyond the commonly recognised “shadow-world” of silhouette men, and perhaps even an understanding of what Isotype is, if we choose to see it as an attitude towards information that can still be applied, and not as an attempt to emulate what is otherwise a period style. Yes, Isotypes applied standardised picture elements, but they are less about the design of these symbols and more about the development of a pictorial grammar. The qualities of this grammar could be learned, and can be recognised in features such as quantified arrangement, the removal of perspective, axial organisation, and the compounding of symbols. Isotype ultimately aimed at picture education, the categories of the Neuraths’ works and the lessons of their grammar all demonstrate this.

The Transformer describes the processes and work of this professional figure, but is the transformer equivalent to a designer? Apparently Marie Neurath wasn’t convinced of this, seeing design as too superficial to explain the work that she did. Where Neurath may not have been convinced, it is clear that Kinross is. The lessons learned from Isotype that he follows through the practice of designers from Harry Beck to Max Bill and Anthony Froshaug don’t really show any direct influence, but identify general attitudes to information that have led to comparable display techniques, showing that while the Neuraths’ work was so original, they weren’t necessarily working in isolation. The comparison with other designers has a clear historiographic motive. Drawing from the analysis of the Isotype Institute’s formal techniques in this book, it places the Neuraths firmly within design discourse by creating similarities in product, whether they may have wanted it that way or not.

Hyphen’s second book on the practices of Isotype is Otto Neurath’s From Hieroglyphics to Isotype: A Visual Autobiography. From a manuscript originally written shortly before his death in 1945, and subsequently never seeing publication, this account of the formation of Otto Neurath’s ideas on visual communication has finally been brought to life.

Unlike The Transformer, From Hieroglyphics to Isotype is not a description of the Isotype Institute, nor does it thoroughly elaborate on the preparation of Isotype charts. It is instead Otto Neurath’s recollections of an inquisitive childhood. Over four chapters, Neurath relates his first experiences with pictures; he vividly and enthusiastically describes his early scrapbooks of pasted pictures, his exploration of his parents’ library and Vienna’s Museum of Art History, and the illustrations he came across in books and periodicals. Written at the end of his life, Neurath recounts his first interactions with visual information. A fifth chapter closes the story by describing the formation of the Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum. This final piece offers some closure to the account, but is really just an addition to the central story of Neurath’s youth.

What is perhaps the most engaging feature of Neurath’s visual autobiography is the inquisitive excitement with which it reads. Neurath, who could be a forceful and formidable intellect, carries himself with a childlike sense of wonder in telling his early discovery of a world of pictures, filling his scrapbooks, imagining the lives of the ancients, and encountering frustration when pictures aren’t clear enough to explain exactly how something was done. Neurath tells us about the things he liked, including his admiration for map-makers, as well as the things that frustrated him about pictures he found (even as a child, apparently), such as the imposition of the artist’s ego interrupting what should be the clarity and correctness of educational drawings.

The work aimed to be nothing comprehensive. Christopher Burke calls it “refreshingly unconfessional;” it is simply a story of Neurath’s involvement with pictures and the lessons he learned from them. Burke’s introduction provides some extra biographical information, introducing the influence of Neurath’s father, a Viennese Jewish scholar, and describing the process of writing the visual autobiography. But this is not a full picture of the young Neurath, just a story of the young Neurath’s love of pictures. An appendix includes reproductions of the visual material Neurath collected, and the text is richly illustrated with picture examples of what he describes. In one instance the present editors demonstrate a direct connection from a picture Neurath first saw as a child and one of the later Isotype charts; readers familiar with the work of the Isotype Institute will undoubtedly recognise many more without these having to be pointed out.

Otto Neurath may not use his ruminations to establish the foundations of his Vienna Method, but those familiar with his work will recognise its origins in what he writes. Each of his anecdotes, while not overtly linked to the features of his later work, has repercussions on how we understand the grammars of Isotype. Whether these are the aim for essential information, modular symbolic components, or flat colour, all have their origins traced back to childhood play. We are not told that the Isotype method is “correct;” the book does not provide any comprehensive analysis on the qualities of communication through pictures, nor does it explicitly outline Neurath’s formation of the principles of Isotype, remaining quite distinct from any discussion of his life work. It is in this separation from the specifics of Isotype that this book is at its most delightful. Leaving the reader to interpret the innocent excitement conveyed through his descriptions, in full knowledge of where the ideas would go.

Other authors have contributed to broadening the historical representation of the Isotype Institute
beyond its work in visual communication. For example, in Otto Neurath: The Language of the Global Polis, Nader Vossoughian, explored Neurath’s philosophical outlook relating to his work in the context of city planning. At its broadest, the Isotype method was an intellectual approach to representing the world, favoring a positivist outlook, though it should be emphasised as a relativist one, considering the way his process required the transformer to limit information. But the two recent releases from Hyphen do not concern themselves with Neurath’s wider philosophical position, focusing as they do on his attitudes towards visual education and the formation of Isotype charts.

Read in combination, From Hieroglyphics to Isotype and The Transformer outline the intellectual origins of Isotype in Neurath’s childhood, following through the visual autobiography his interests and beliefs in communication as he begins to develop his method of pictorial information. Then, through Marie Neurath’s memoir, we arrive at a description of the development of the Isotype Institute and the methods of working. We are given both the inception of Isotype in turn-of-the-century Vienna, and the closure of the project in Britain in 1971.

The scope of these accounts clearly removes the practice of Isotype from any limited view on the generation of silhouette symbols, which would leave Isotype simply in the tradition of ideograms for public space signing. The result though is that Isotype cannot be simply defined, it had no fixed formal process, no required arrangements; it was an intelligent process of interpretation, storytelling, and re-transmission. This resulted in many preferred forms of composition—the grammars of Isotype—which were found to improve clarity. But these were never about trying to enforce a unique style.

3 Which can be seen in Neurath, From Hieroglyphics to Isotype (London: Hyphen, 2009): 111.

Laura Forlano


In recent years, design thinking has captured the imagination of the business world as a strategy for creating innovative products and services. As designers have moved from designing logos and laptops to services and systems, many in the design world are calling for the elevated role of designers in shaping the future of business. Hartmut Esslinger’s A Fine Line is one of several recent books—along with Tim Brown’s Change by Design and Roger Martin’s The Design of Business—that argues in favor of the potential of design thinking to transform innovation, organizations and, even, social change and sustainability.

Esslinger’s book is part personal memoir and part guide for business leaders. Specifically, it targets business leaders that are interested in collaborating with designers and embedding design thinking into their company strategy. A Fine Line traces Esslinger’s career from that of a young entrepreneur in a garage in Germany’s Black Forest to the leader of one of the most successful strategic design firms in the world, Frog Design Incorporated (frog). Over the past forty-years, Esslinger has collaborated with companies including Apple, Sony, Disney and Louis Vuitton to name just a few, making key contributions to their aesthetics, offerings and technologies.

Following early projects in the areas of electronics and dental equipment in Germany, frog (the acronym for Federal Republic of Germany as well as a reference to the species inhabiting the Black Forest) eventually moved to Silicon Valley in order to work closely with Apple on the “Snow White” design language and the Apple II computer series. Later, they developed Louis Vuitton’s “non-matching” strategy, which created the neutral patterns that can be paired with any clothing and are still exceedingly popular among women today. For Disney, frog created a line of cruise ships known for their “retro-futuristic” design, which combined a classic French ocean liner with the fictional Star Trek Enterprise but animated in bold Disney colors.

As a career memoir, one thing that becomes immediately apparent is Esslinger’s persistent and aggressive drive to be the best. Among Esslinger’s early musings while still a student in 1969 were his six steps for success as a business leader, which included doing great work for clients, getting famous as a visionary, using fame to build the company, building the best company and looking for the best people. When his partner inquired about the company’s future plans, Esslinger responded that he wanted to have designed
I'm Jess O'Neill, a creature artist specializing in animals and animal anatomy, working remotely from Melbourne, Australia. I'm currently available and always looking for freelance contracts as a modeler, texture artist, and digital. Jesse O'Neill, Actor: Godzilla: King of the Monsters. Jesse O'Neill was born on November 9, 1986 in Pompton Plains, New Jersey, USA. He is known for his work on Godzilla II: King of the Monsters (2019), Watchmen (2019) and Actor for Hire (2015). Jesse O'Neill, New York, New York. Armed with just six strings and songs to sing, Jesse O'Neill is a guitar slinging singer-songwriter. Armed with just six strings and songs to sing, Jesse O'Neill is a guitar slinging singer-songwriter. His latest effort 'Short Songs' finds him exploring new sounds while enlisting old partners to bring to life a musical journal during the musicless coronavirus pandemic in the New York islands.