

# Invisible Signs

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*Sign n: something that indicates or expresses the existence of something else not immediately apparent.*<sup>1</sup>

This paper represents the first theoretical reflection of 'INVISIBLE SIGNS', a practically based body of research currently being undertaken by Lawrence George Giles in the cities of Liverpool & Manchester, England.

There exists an almost ubiquitous prevalence of signs, signage and information graphics throughout our society, whether this be information signage, such as a notice that instructs, advises, informs and warns or commercial signage which is designed to inspire recognition, familiarity and affiliation with the viewer. Indeed the unconscious way in which we receive, digest and understand these has become almost second nature, resulting in these signs of symbolic meaning becoming almost 'invisible' to us within our daily landscape and everyday experience.

A key premise of this research therefore surrounds the apparent natural acceptance of these everyday emblems, whilst endeavouring to challenge and question the apparent custom of daily receipt of these insignia via the subtle visual distortion of these cultural symbols.

Import here is placed upon the field and use of photography in order to visually reflect upon and illustrate the ubiquitous nature of the physical sign within society, whilst particular interest and focus relates to the way in which we receive, digest and understand these transmitters of meaning within a public arena in relation to the receiver's response, relationship and ultimate reading and understanding of the same.

## Research context

Inspirationally the proposed body of work draws upon a series of existing influences and bodies of works which relate to these stated themes and which can be evidenced within the likes of the practice of John Baldessari, Gregory Crewdson, Tom Hunter and Felice Varini.

In particular, credence is placed upon the artwork of Christopher Steinbrener and Rainier Demf's entitled 'Delete!' and the significant role in which this work questions of the use of the sign within a public setting by placing question marks over the subjective denotation and connotation of these everyday emblems.<sup>2</sup>

In this project artists Steinbrener and Demf covered every single piece of advertising on the Neubaugasse, a busy commercial street in Vienna with a yellow covering, resulting in a two week period in which all advertising signs, slogans, pictograms, company names and logos disappeared.

This 'restructuring' of the environment effectively resulted in a shift in the space between reception and perception of these urban transmitters of meaning and via this process raised questions as to the dominance and significance of these purveyors of meaning within a public domain. In an analogous yet distinct manner Invisible Signs attempts to reflect the interests, reasoning and rationale which resonate within the likes of works such as Delete, whilst additionally attempting to raise questions as to their use, function, interpretation and meaning as part of our everyday experience.

Focus here relates to the physical and metaphysical 'support' for such mechanisms or devices and the impact that these have visually when this is removed, therefore resulting in these geometric bodies becoming more evident carriers of the written and pictorial signals, which, in many ways might normally evade our conscious perception.

## Interpretation & meaning

There are three main areas via which we construe meaning in relation to these physical signs; the signs themselves, the way in which they are organised into systems and the context in which they appear. Emphasis is therefore placed upon the paradigmatic fields of two distinct yet thematically linked systems or signifiers, namely way-finding and promotional signage systems,



themselves part of the greater paradigm of public information graphics.

The two dominant models of what constitutes a sign by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce act as the basis for the locating of this project. Invisible Signs however draws upon a more materialistic interpretation of the 'dyadic' or 'triadic' models proposed by Saussure and Peirce for its foundations whilst reflecting and comparing these towards Barthes positioning or relationship of the reader in the exchange of meaning and content.<sup>3</sup> Additional significance is also drawn from the principles of advertising in relation to the promotional attributes of successful message delivery systems in relation to promotional signage systems.

As such Invisible Signs is sited across two divides of theoretical and practical interests namely;

1. Theories of advertising; those mechanisms used to employ, promote, display, instill and sell
2. The field of visual semantics in relation to public way-finding signage; their relevance, import, significance and meaning in relation to expected norms.

With regard to this stance/posture there exists two individual yet interconnected structures via which these two signage systems could be said to function, themselves sharing a particular series of commonalities or 'agents' within their specific structures. (Figures 1 and 2)

<b>Figure 1: Agents of communication: Advertising</b>	<b>Figure 2: Agents of communication: Semiotics<sup>4</sup></b>
1. The sender (who)	1. The sender (who)
2. The message (meaning)	2. Intention (aim)
3. The medium (by which means)	3. Message (meaning)
4. The receiver (to whom)	4. Transmission (by which means)
5. The response of the receiver (with what result)	5. Noise (with what interference)
6. The feedback or interaction	6. Receiver (to whom)
	7. Destination (with what result)



Particular focus, however, is given to the significance of the 'intention' of the message and how this reverberates and effects transmission and reception once a visual disruption or 'noise' has taken place. Emphasis here relates to the reaction, interaction and feedback of the receiver once this 'interference' has taken place.

In *Invisible Signs*, it is the 'poles' or 'physical' support structures themselves that act as metaphysical support systems. Without these the conventional rendition or paradigm of the signs themselves, along with their intended meanings begin to shift, blur and change.

*If there is a specifically symbolic side to language, it is on the side of the signifier whereby each element takes on its value owing to its difference from other elements within the chain like structure.*<sup>5</sup>

The introduction of 'noise' or 'change' offers up an opportunity to re-reflect upon the nature of these signs in relation to their position, prominence, impact and analysis and by doing so affords the reader a greater sense of 'choice' as to their relevance, importance, significance and interpretation. It is this extended 'choice' which is central to the overriding remit of this body of work, both in relation to our acceptance and understanding of these signage systems and in relation to the shift in meaning via this introduction of 'choice'.

The important thing to remember is that where there is choice there is meaning.<sup>6</sup>

The premise therefore is that the general arbitrary nature of these emblems and their connotation (via the introduction of this visual 'noise') begin to 'open up' whilst at the same time raise and re-focus questions as to the meaning/interpretation, brought to the image at this stage in the process. By doing so this increases the denotative aspects or reading of the resultant sign/signifier for the reader/recipient.

Meaning is therefore re-generated from the combinations, relationships and transformations of different elements within the symbolic context and via the subtle shift in visual perception introduced by the author/creator of these works.

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- 1 Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary. 2005.
  - 2 Steinbrener, Christopher & Demf, Rainier. <http://www.steinbrener-dempf.com/delete/index.html>
  - 3 Barthes, Roland. 1968. *Elements of Semiology*. Cape.
  - 4 Hall, Sean. 2007. *This Means This, This Means That*. Laurence King Publishing.
  - 5 Leader, Darian. 1999. *Modern Thought*. Harper Collins.
  - 6 Crow, David. 2003. AVA Publishing SA.