Christopher Burke, Eric Kindel and Sue Walker (eds.),
Isotype: Design and Contexts 1925–1971,
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Reviewed by Jesse O'Neill

After returning to Vienna in the early 1920s, the social scientist Otto Neurath established the Museum for Settlement and Town Planning, a small organization intent on guiding the citizen-led building campaign then taking place on the outskirts of the city. In 1925 the institute became the Museum for Society and Economy, reflecting Neurath's growing ambitions. He began by organizing exhibits on urban life in Vienna, its physical and human infrastructures, social insurance, and hygiene. By the end of his life, Neurath had compiled educational material on merchant navies, unemployment, life in India, women's underwear, shoe production in the USSR, war-time recycling, and many other topics loosely classified under the catch-all terms, *society* and *economy*. Driving this production was Neurath's consolidation of a new approach to visual display, first known as the *Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics*, and now remembered for its later title *Isotype*, the International System of Typographic Picture Education.

A product of 1920s central European thought, Isotype is imprinted with three major influences: post-war utopianism, logical positivism, and the internationalist drive of the political Left. Through their work, Neurath and his collaborators – chiefly the mathematician Marie Reidemeister (later Marie Neurath) and illustrator Gerd Arntz – were constructing a system of *universal* graphic principles. They defined methods for composition, colour treatment, map projection and quantitative display, all of which were grounded in the principle of standardized pictograms, which became the shadow figures for which Isotype is so well known. By 1930, Isotype had reached a degree of maturity, becoming a striking visual language of mechanical clarity.

Neurath imagined that these visual principles would produce an international picture language. He had no intention, though, of constructing a visual Esperanto like that later devised by fellow Austrian Charles Bliss, whose *International Semantography* outlined a new graphological system that could (so he thought) span all languages. While Bliss's system visualized linguistic concepts, Neurath's picture language scientifically examined the existing grammars of data

visualization and defined rules for their efficiency. Isotype was always intended to operate alongside printed text, but it aimed to respond to the "eye-consciousness"[1] of the modern world by foregrounding imagery that would better capture the mind and give greater access to knowledge. For this ambitious project, Neurath was accused of a misdirected utopianism, yet his thinking always appears metered by practicality; the work was directed towards formidable yet ultimately conceivable projects like his atlas, *Gessellschaft und Wirtschaft,* of 1930, and *Modern Man in the Making* of 1939.

The influence of logical positivism and the Vienna Circle, of which Neurath was a prominent member, can be found at the very heart of Isotype's visual method, which was built around the discretely observable. It began with quantitative facts measured out through pictograms, each of which represented a defined physical phenomenon, such as a certain class of people or objects. The graphic chart was composed through a series of these visual noun-phrases, measuring and comparing quantities and cutting away the description of actions or processes. Action, or cause and effect, was less present in the chart itself than it was in the viewer's interpretation of the chart's meaning. They generally only showed physical things, therefore relying on viewers to reach logical conclusions about their relationships and meaning. Thus Neurath's international picture language shares some qualities with the Basic English proposed by Charles Kay Ogden in 1930. Ogden's system streamlined the number of nouns used (just as Arntz's universalist pictograms aspired to synthesize their many possible regional variants), and minimized the complication of verbs by largely eliminating them. Basic English appealed to the German-speaking Neurath, and he often followed its rules in his later writing. Focusing on measurable, physical data, Isotype presented a means to demonstrate relations between observable phenomena in a way that could elicit a narrative understanding of change and effect, democratizing the data by involving the viewer in its interpretation.

The involvement of the viewer in Isotype charts came from Neurath's concentrated interest in a person he called the 'man in the street'. This imagined figure drove the museum's exhibition strategy, encouraging Neurath to show at the Volkeshalle of the Vienna City Hall and a little shopfront that he called the *Zeitschau*. Both visual display and exhibition format were conceived as devices for improving public access, positioning work in ways that could be comfortably seen and understood by anyone. Throughout this time, Neurath was playing the part of the proletarian combatant (his return to Vienna came after he was tried for assisting high treason in Germany for his role in the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic), and the initial direction of his work shows the particular influence of the political climate of 1920s *Red Vienna*. Neurath utilized the expectation that the museum was apolitical, transforming it into a vehicle for empowered and educated citizenship. Isotype was conceived as a civic instrument built on knowledge, involving citizens in understanding the people and wealth of their world.

Pursuing the internationalist outlook of his picture language, Neurath began expanding his institute beyond Austria. He first attached his visual work to the international Mundaneum network devised by the likeminded Belgian Paul Otlet, which was intended as a museum repository for all human history. This move eventually saved the Neuraths from the Nazi annexation of Austria, allowing them to move to The Hague, and then to England. Over the course of about 50 yeas, the Isotype method continued to develop, being applied to exhibition

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[1] Otto Neurath, *From Hieroglyphics to Isotype: A Visual Autobiography,* London: Hyphen, 2010, 5.

charts, statistics, cartography, children's books, film, state propaganda, medical information and voter registry in Europe, the Soviet Union, North America and Africa.

Isotype: Design and Contexts 1925–1971 is Hyphen's third book on the visual work of Otto Neurath and his associates. Their first, *The Transformer*, contains an essay from Marie Neurath that sketches out Isotype's mature graphic techniques. Their second, *From Hieroglyphics to Isotype*, is Otto Neurath's 1945 autobiography, a delightful ramble through the author's memories of old printed visuals. Both have an intimate voice, containing the notes of Isotype's two leading figures. The current work steps back to view Isotype from the outside. It presents a compilation of new essays from several authors, which have been carefully tied together to form a single narrative that traces a line from Viennese reconstruction after the First World War to decolonizing West Africa in the 1960s. As has become expected from Hyphen's design publications, *Isotype* is well researched, pleasantly readable and beautifully made as a book; it is also copiously illustrated, with many additional image descriptions that sit outside the main texts.

Hyphen's publications emphasize the visual structures of Isotype, which the editors of the current volume define as "a method of graphic design".[2] While this is to some extent a commonsense definition, we shouldn't allow it to gloss over the fact that direct connections between Isotype and graphic design practice continue to be problematic. For some time now, Isotype has been held as an important part of the history of twentieth-century graphics, adopted as a precursor to contemporary areas of cultural production such as symbol design, information design and data visualization; but it holds a troubled place in the canon. In *The Transformer*, Robin Kinross pointed to the way that Neurath himself positioned Isotype within a larger tradition of visual information, then going on to suggest relationships to works by Harry Beck, Jan Tschichold, Max Bill and others.[3] Such links always seem tenuous. There are certainly similarities in their desire for objective representation, clarity, or reduced and often mechanical form, but these are limited to outward formal relationships and not tangible connections. The clearest link is often assumed to be in the legacy of reduced shadow figures that populate world signage systems, but as Christopher Burke now demonstrates in the conclusion to *Isotype*, there is also no direct lineage to be found here. In his autobiography, Neurath showed us that he gave great thought to traditions of visual representation, but this does not mean he positioned himself within a lineage of professional design. Indeed, it is often easier (as I've indicated above) to link Neurath to figures like Ogden, Bliss and Otlet than it is to connect his work to graphic designers, something that is clear from any of the cursory textbooks on the history of graphics that struggle to competently insert Isotype into the narrative. When looking at Neurath, we are never only seeing one isolated discipline of practice. His work (even his visual work) has wider influences than just design. Judging from the scope of Neurath's output in information, exhibition, statistics, philosophy and politics, Isotype appears to rest nowhere completely, except possibly with the now somewhat ridiculous projects of a loose band of individuals in the early twentieth century who sought ways to transform communication and knowledge for the modern world.

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[2] Christopher Burke, 'Introduction', in *Isotype: Design and Contexts 1925–1971*, edited by Christopher Burke, Eric Kindel and Sue Walker, London: Hyphen, 2013, 9.

[3] Marie Neurath and Robin Kinross, *The Transformer: Principles of Making Isotype Charts*, London: Hyphen, 2009, 107–115.

Hyphen's *Isotype*, in that it makes significant expansion on the story told in *The Transformer*, provides hints at the possibilities for developing knowledge of Neurath's visual method beyond the limitations of graphic design. Emma Minns's chapter is devoted to Neurath's effort to establish himself in the USSR, founding Izostat, an office that eventually crumbled under the pressures of Stalinist propaganda and socialist realism. Hisayasu Ihara dedicates a chapter to the attempts at entering the American market, Rudolf Modley's effort to commercialize Isotype through pictogram pattern books, and the Americans' attack on a European-centred image of internationalism. There are chapters by Christopher Burke on British home front war films, by Sue Walker on children's books, by Benjamin Benus on the artistic career of Gerd Arntz, and by Eric Kindel on Marie Neurath's pro-democratic propaganda in West Africa. The book is the first detailed historical account of Isotype's graphic strategies, its visual and material output, and its institutional development, contextualizing the graphic work with its wider political and cultural influences.

However, if we are to look at Neurath's graphic work more fully and in its wider context, we should perhaps look past the visual artifacts and begin to pay more serious attention to the professional role he devised to produce this work. Neurath called the person who crafted raw data into meaningful visual display the *Transformer*, a term that is often bypassed as an anachronistic attempt to define what we would now understand as the 'designer'. Such a simple equation is misleading. More than design, the Transformer held a dual task of comprehension and composition: making sense of complex information and finding the means to visualize it in ways that could be understood by the broad masses. Thus it was a unique task of thinking about the social world through a precise visual methodology. Neurath's visual principles – his picture language – was always more than an attempt at refining style; he was shaping the analytic thinking processes of the person who made these charts, more than the charts themselves. Isotype is therefore not strictly a method of visualization, which implies translation. Instead, what Neurath created was a visual approach to sociological thinking, both for the highly-trained transformer and the interpreting viewer. The Transformer held the role of the philosopher or the sociologist, who worked through the tools of the designer rather than the written word.

Neurath's resistance to integration within the canon of graphic design stems from the fact that his work arrives to us from outside of design, from philosophy, channeled through the world of educationalists and scientists. In most respects he is closer to his fellow philosophers of the Vienna Circle, or cartographers such as Karl Peuker, than to modernist graphic designers, and his work cannot be reduced to stylistics but must be fully conceived through the framework of his logical positivism. And thus if Isotype does not fit well with the established narrative of design history, then maybe Neurath can assume canonical position in another kind of history, one that would mediate modernist philosophy and modernist design. This is the greater importance of Neurath's Transformer and his Isotype method, which is a bridging of these separate fields.