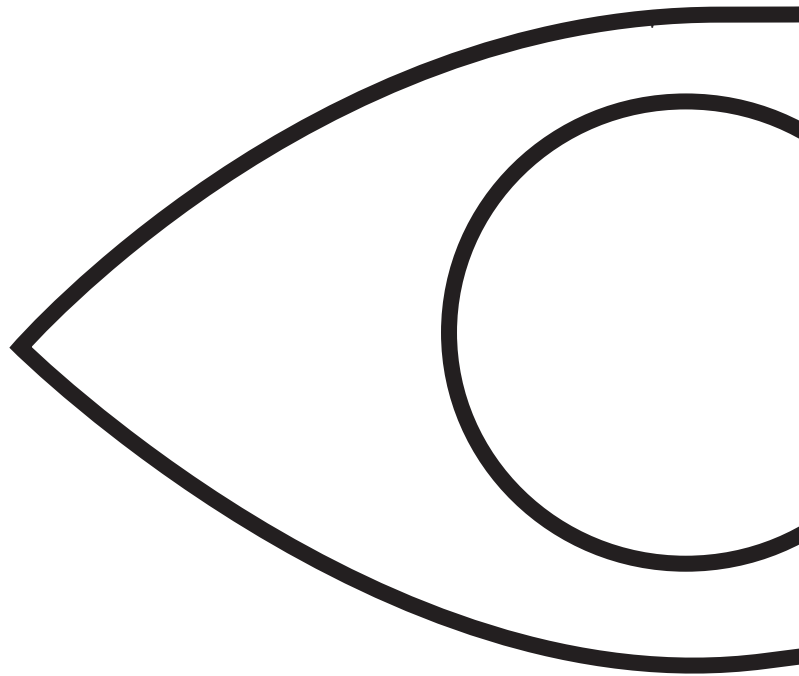# Learn
to watch

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Abstract

When we were children, we were amazed by any-
thing we can find. A little stone on the side of the road,
a birdsong, a flower in the wall of a building.There were
enough to make us see beauty and admire it. When we
grow up we start having little worries that make us loose
little by little this capacity of being amazed. And when
we become adults all the habits and the routine of the
everyday life make us loose the ability to look at our envi-
ronment. Moreover today there is too much informations,
images, signs in our environment. Publicities comes from
the street to our smartphones, brand exposed their logos
as signs of their power.

We don't take anymore the time to observe the
elements of our environment, to interpret them, to make
them become signs by giving them a meaning. When we
don't look at our environment it is finally don't belong to it
anymore, and we become stranger to our environment.
Maybe today the issues of the designer is not to
create signs anymore but question them, make the signs
appear. Designers have the responsabilities to give a mea-
ning to the actual world and to teach to individuals to look
at it. Enrich the look of individuals, allow them their rela-
tion with signs evolve.

In this approach a question appears : How can our
environment be percieved and aprehended through signs ?

Learn to watch

How can our environment be percieved and aprehended through signs ?

Introduction

I noticed that we don't take the time to look at our environment anymore because of our daily tasks, habits and because images have invaded every nook and cranny. A book guided me all along my research, The sign by Umberto Eco[1]. This book allowed me to consider the elements of the environment as signs. A question came to me : How can signs be elements of consideration of our environment ?

First of all, this question implies to understand what is the action to "sense environment", the difference between "feel / see" and "watch", and thirdly what a sign consists of.

Moreover designers can have a role to play because they may have a political influence. We define political thanks to the definition by Annick Lantenois[2] : "the power of transformation of the look that any action, any sign production or any technical device has potentially").

1 – The world of signs.

A- Feel the world.

A.1 - Perception

Perception is "the action to take through the senses". In 1611, Randle Cotgrave[3] an english lexicographer, said that it is "the act by which someone gets to know the objects that marked his senses".

Perception produce reactions that are called sensations. This sensations are in fact the result of one ore more stimuli on our senses.

Perception creates some "horizons d'attente" i.e , horizon of expectations. If perception is getting to know the environment through the senses, it is also a passive synthesis of the environment. It allows a person to distinguish shapes, events and to classify elements in categories So to put an element into a category is expecting an object

1. Umberto ECO, *The sign. History and analysis of a concept,* Le livre de poche, Biblio- essais, Paris, 1988, 283 p.

2. Annick Lantenois , art PhD, writer of *The vertigo of the tightrope walker, Graphic design between economy and design, [Le vertige du funambule. Le design graphique entre économie et morale].* Édition B42, « Cité du design », 2010, 85 p.

3. Randle COTGRAVE, *A Dictionarie of the French and English tongues,* Columbia, Université de Caroline du Sud, 1950.

to have all the behavior of its class. For example, if I classify an element as a stone, I am not expecting it to talk.

1. Georges THINÈS, « Perception », Encyclopædia Universalis.

The Belgian psychologist Georges Thinès[1] talks about a "dualism between the perceiver and the perceived ". Education and the way we learn to look at our environment makes us have different horizons of expectaions and sense stimulis differently.

Perception is subjective and it is much influenced by the society in which we live, but also by our own personality and education, experiences and physical conditions.

A. 2 – Art and perception

In art we can quote for example the impressionists[2] at the end of the XIXe century who wanted to break away artistic principles that defined the pictural representation at the time. Highlighting the shape and not the meaning, they reinvented painting. This artistic current aimed rendering an impression instead of painting a landscape in a realistic way.

2. Claude MONET (1840- 1926), « Impression, soleil levant », 1972, oil on canvas, 48 x 63cm, Paris, Musée Marmottan.

Perception is a complex thing that implies the senses and that remain at an inconscious and intuituive level of our mind. Perception makes us feel the world in a blurry way and creates sensations and emotions. It is different for each person and it is influenced by the society and education. But thanks to attention, humans don't see the world in a blurry way. They have the ability to concentrate on something and that allow them to look at signs.

B- Looking at the world.

B. 1- Paying attention to

"Looking at" is beyond perception and impliesto pay attention.

In the first century before Christ attention meant of « tend its mind towards something or someone »[1]. Attention is described by the American psychologist William James as "taking possession by the spirit of an element of the outer world or an element of thought so that it appears clearer ".

During antiquity, the philosophers noticed that the mind make it possible to see a thing more clearly or on the contrary not to notice it anymore. Later, Descartes noticed that an idea becomes clearer if we focus on it.

Eric Siéroff, a French university lecturer, studied the effects of attention [2] . It allows us to detect and identify objects faster and to see the world more precisely and more clearly.

Looking at objects with attention allows us to notice spatial information or estimate the distance with objects, to help us orientate in the space. It allows also to pass from a global appreciation of the space to a local appreciation, for example seeing the crowd and looking at a face.

B. 2 - Signs

When evolving from an animal state to an human state, man moved away from simple perception and gross experience. He started to think in a more abstract way and started to conceptualize the world and to manipulate signs.

For example they reproduced on the walls of caves the animals they wanted to eat, they took away the necklace of their enemies they killed to dominate them. In fact they controlled the elements through their signs.

1. Cicéron, *De oratore*, an 55 av. J.C.

2. Eric Siéroff, *"Attention",* Encyclo-paedia Universalis.

1. Ibid. Umberto Eco

Umberto Eco, an italian philosopher and semiologist said *: ” There is humanity when there is a society. But we should add, there is a society when signs are exchanged”.* [1]

2. National Center for Textual and Lexical Resources, cnrtl.fr

The term "sign" comes from the latin signum, which means " track, a distinctive mark"or a "proof" making probable the existence of a thing. [2]

A sign is overall what allows us to know, recognize, guess or predict something.

In the most common theories, the sign posses three elements : a signifier, a signified and a referent. The signifier is the way it is drawn, written, represented for example. The signified is the concept and the referent is the referent concepts.
For example for the word "horse", the signifier is the way the word is written, the signified is the concept of "horse", and the referent concepts are "all the horses in the world".

Signs are used in differents fields such as linguistics, mathematics, music or medicine. So signs have to be interpreted on learned standards.

3. Ibid. Umberto Eco

In several of his books Umberto Eco studied a general semiotic theory. In his book *The Sign*[3] he focused on the concept of sign.

He insisted on the distinction between artificial signs and natural signs.

Artifials signs are created consciously by someone whether human or animal, on the basis of established conventions in order to communicate something to someone. It can be a word, a gesture, a graphic symbol...

Natural signs don't have intentional emitter and come from a natural source that humans interpret like symptoms and clues, a cough for a sickness or a cloud for the rain for instance.

In religious societies, elements of the world are signs of a

divine existence. However, in our current western societies, where believes and religions have less impacts on humans, humans remain symbolic animal. Indeed our language is an articulation of signs, and our culture - for example institutions, social relations, traditional garments - are created with signs and symbols.

In our western societies many elements of our environment are signs. We can feel overwhelmed by all the images, all the signs, (luminous signs, logos, advertisements) and end up no longer paying attention to our surroundings.

Looking at elements to give them a sense enables us to see the beauty of the world and understand our environment. The role of the graphic designer could then be to give us, new ways of understanding signs, and to make hidden signs visible.

However, teaching people to focus on signs may be complicated. The job of the designer is to draw the link between the company that orders a design, the advertiser and the receiver. The designer's subjectivity is involved in the creation of the designof the sign and in messages.

II- The tightrope walker designer.

A- Design as a political object.

1. Ibid. Annick Lantenois

This question bring a second thought. Design and designers have a political influence on people we the meaning of Annick Lantenois[1].

A. 1 - The birth of the designer profession

Graphic design appeared in our societies during the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 19th century. Its purpose is to visually process information, knowledge and fictions. It also helps to organize the circulation of material and immaterial goods and of peoples.

Since the beginning of the 20th century it has been considered political. For example, the design of the avant garde (futurism, dadaism, functionalism) is a response to the chaos of war. They wanted to make the space understandable and accessible to all (for example Le Corbusier and his «standard goods» is a case in point).

A. 2 – May design not be political?

If design has an influence on individuals, one can ask the following question? Is "learning to watch" a political act? An example can help us answer this question : The Debate[1] between two Dutch graphic designers Wim Crouwell and Jan Van Toorn at the Fodor Museum in Amsterdam in 1972.

For Wim Crouwel, a graphic designer has to create what the client wants and be as objective as possible.

Jan Van Toorn says that this technician- like posture of detachment is an illusion. The designer has to use his medium to be critical and work with a client that has the same values as his.

For Wim Crouwel only the message can be political, not graphic design. For Jan Van Toorn both the message and the design are political and can influence the way people look at.

Designers must be aware of the influence they have on individuals.

B - Be interested in design

B. 1 - Definition

Pierre Kaufman, a 20th century philosopher, describes the word interest as "the capacity for a subject to pass from an "egoïstic interest" to an interest for objects or activities originally out of his sphere. Emmanuel Kant makes a distinction between "practical interest" (I am interested in something) and "pathological interest" (I had better do something).

To be interested allows a person to make criticism and have a critical mind. To watch the environment, a person needs to have a critical mind regarding signs.

1. Wim CROUWELL et Jean VAN TOORN, *The Debate, The lengendary contest of two giant of graphic design,* 1972. Retranscription in english by The Monacelli Press, 2015. Originale publication, Pays Bas, 2008 by «Practice».

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B. 2 - Economic change and declining interest

In the eighties, in the western societies, we noticed an increase of data that overwhelmed the economy. That was the birth of cognitive capitalism. People have had difficulties in adapting to this flow always faster. At the same time, the number of signs increase in the environment with this economy: visual signs (logos, advertisements), auditory signals (horns, telephone rings, mp3 ...)

All the sectors of the economy create signs,even the most surprising, like food shops that spread olfactory signs to encourage passerby to consume.

In addition, better means of transport and the ease of movement have completely transformed the way we live.

Cities that used to be medieval city with a specific culture opened up and became places were peoples circulate and where tourism develops.

Daily commuting time also increased which resultedin habits and the automation of gestures.

All these elements make us look less at our environment.

Moreover, digital culture shares some responsibility. Mass media intend to please the largest number, which they do to the detriment of the truth and quality of the information.

Furthermore, social networks also contributed to the decline in the interest of individuals on their environment. Indeed, the algorithms created by the platforms show users only what they want to see,which reduces their critical mind.

Graphic designers also have some responsibilities. Indeed, according to Jan Van Toorn, designers fall into the trap of industry pressure and create design that influences people more than they inform them. In addition, designers no longer question their responsibilities as designers and of the design questions.

Conclusion :

In such a context,people have difficulty sorting information watching and understanding the world around them. Yet it is important to continue to look at the environment, to understand it, to see its beauty. In order to feel good about it, and to appropriate it not to feel lost. Morever it allow to keep a critical mind. environment.
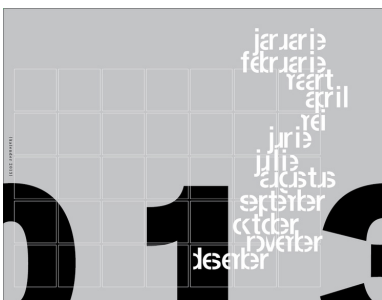
← **Impressionisme:**
Claude MONET (1840- 1926), *« Impression, soleil levant »*, 1972, oil on canvas,
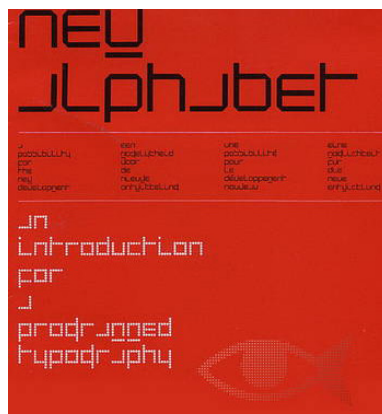48 x 63cm, Paris,
Musée Marmottan.
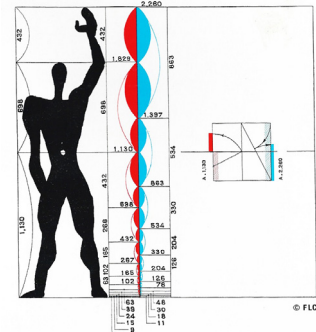
Fonctionnalisme:
↑ The *Modulor* created by Le Corbusier in 1943.
← *La Cité Radieuse*, photography by Henri Salesse, 1953.

↑ *Chagall* Etc. poster, Jan Van Toorn, for the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1971.

↑ Wim Crouwel
Calendar 1963, Amsterdam.

↑ Wim Crouwel,
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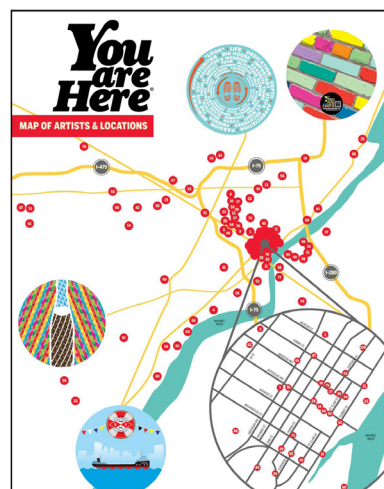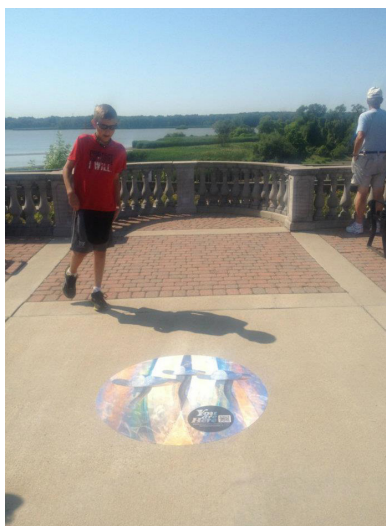
↑ *You are Here Toledo*, July 2011 -
november 2012, project by AIGA

← **Music Book**, prototype,
Editions Volumique, 2011.

Prototype of a chocolate viny,
project Taste the augmented,
Erika Marthins, 2017.

Learn to watch

How to look at Marseille

with the signs ?

Practice

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All my research started when, after several weeks living in my neighbourhood, I noticed that a Virgin was griped to a wall of a building. I told myself that I never noticed this and suddlendly, when I started to look at the walls of Marseille I saw Virgin everywhere.

This made me question me about how to look at elements, and after several research I decided to call these elements "signs".

I carry on working on the subject "learn to watch" for my practice project. As I started to look at The Virgin, and all the signs of the environnement, I worked naturally on the signs of the city of Marseilles.

Marseille is the city where I live so it is more easier to look at this environment each days. I can observe it, try to understand things , try to see new things I didn't noticed before.

Moreover, there is a lot of things in this city and a lot of elements that are really interesting and that we can consider as signs. We all have a mental image when we think of Marseilles. We think for example about the sun, the sea, the pastis... All these are signs of Marseilles.

My practice object is a design research about the signs of Marseilles.

I wanted to question these signs, try to understand what they are and what they mean.

First of all I wanted to know what are the signs of Marseilles. I collected photographies of the signs that I found in the city, in the environment where I live. I collected images from internet too, to give an idea of what are the signs of Marseille in the internet.

It is complicated to look at signs if we don't know really what to look at. We can try to look at our environment an uncertain way but several signs will escape from us.

To be as aware of all the details as possible we need a method or indications.

For example, Umberto Eco did in is book The sign, several classification of the sign. For example he distingueshed artificial sign and natural sign. So my idea was to develop a sign classification, especially created for the city of Marseille.

This classification may be used by everyone, including new arrival of the city to watch the city or resident of Marseille that wants to learn to watch at the city. This classification is a method to learn how to look at the signs.

My final classification is composed by seven groups.

- History and stories
- Rituals of Marseilles
- Be a person from Marseilles
- Know-how
- Arts
- Plants
- Animals

The History and stories gather the history of Marseilles and all the signs hystory left in the city. For example the toponymy or the architecture.

The rituals of Marseilles are the things that are perpetuate by the habitants from one generation to the next. For example the ritual of the pastis, the enthusiasm for l'OM...

Be a person from Marseilles gather the signs that prove that a person is from Marseilles like the how he talks : his accent, his expressions, what he eat and drink : the pastis, the specialities... There is also the way a person from Marseilles his dressed : the tracksuit...
The know-how are the hictorical know-how of the city, for example the floor tile, the pastis, or the boat called the pointu.

The class Art gather the contemporary art practices of marseille as the tag, the graffiti and the diversion of urban objects.

The plants are all the endemic terrestrial and marine species that comes from Marseilles like the sedum in the callanque, the pine from Alep...

And finally the animals are the terrestrial and marine animals that we can find in Marseille: rats, seagulls, fish..

To share this classification I did an application called *La Boîte à Sardine* that allows inhabitants of Marseilles, that arrived in Marseilles or that know the city.

The name *La Boîte à Sardine*, is a metaphor to say that Marseilles is a closed can that can be opened with this application to see the signs of Marseilles.

This application will allow the users to go to the hunt of the signs of Marseilles.

The first functionality will allow them to get a short explanation of the signs of Marseilles, of the things they represents or in what are they signs of the city. A map will allow them to see were they can found this signs in the city and some photographs of this sign will appear.

The second things they will be able to do is to scan a sign they found in Marseilles and the application will give them a short description of the sign.

Finally a part of the application will be a giant collection of images of the signs of Marseilles, were all users can put his photographs of the city.

Conclusion :

Marseilles is a city where a lots of signs are mixed together. Study these sign is really interesting and allowed me to understand more the city.

This classification is first of all a reflexion about what is a sign and what we consider as a sign of Marseille.

This application will allow the inhabitants of the city or a new arrival that don't know anything about the city to look at the signs Marseilles.

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