

Way to Go

Signs are a common and ubiquitous aspect of contemporary life. Signs surround us at almost every turn either as advertisements or virtually via the Internet. A remarkable and often neglected aspect of the way signs function in society is the way they distinctly direct our movements and consequently spatialise our experiences. Signs choreograph movement and action in public space especially. With this in mind, signage is also an integral aspect of the experience of exhibitions in public museums and galleries. Actually, recourse to signage in these contexts is so pervasive these days that it is rarely reflected upon, even though such signage orients our thoughts very particularly guiding us to think certain things about the art we are viewing. Indeed, the very pervasiveness of signage, on multiple levels and in manifold contexts, preempts a broader consideration of its contemporary ramifications.

When did signage insert itself so forcefully into our visual and spatial environments? Whilst it may be impossible to ascribe an exact date to such an occurrence, the ubiquity of signage is without doubt a product of Twentieth Century modernity. One only has to think of a key example such as Hungarian-born French photographer Brassai's, famous nocturnal images of Paris, the 'City of Light' in which modern advertising was suddenly illuminated as a subject. Even earlier, Eugene Atget's archivalist renditions of Paris' rapid transformation into *the* city of modernity, the streets newly resplendent with amassed hand-painted signs for every novel commodity under the sun, or for every old product 'reinvented' by modern capitalism. For a Twentieth Century theorist of modernity like Walter Benjamin, this world of advertising, aligned with the burgeoning growth of increasingly elaborate window displays, fundamentally changed the urban texture of cities¹. Now signs promised the world from every street corner in more and more bizarre and outlandish ways. While commodities began to assume their own lives, as Marx said they would, the advertising that spoke of them equally took on a quasi-autonomous identity. It was this that obviously appealed to the Surrealists, with whom Benjamin shared a number of important theoretical commonalities. For them, commodities were just the future junk of the flea markets they loved to scour, where the uses of objects evaporated in favour

¹ See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1999

of unperceived poetic possibilities. Likewise, when Surrealist leader Andre Breton chose to illustrate part of his novel *Nadja* (1928), his paean to *amour fou*, with a photo of the Mazda sign depicting an overwhelmingly oversized, manually-rendered electric light bulb, he was cognizant of the underlying 'surreality' of advertising signage, its ultimate divorce from reality.

In a more contemporary way, the sheer commonness of signage today infiltrates the virtual, yet undeniably expansive spaces of the Internet where anyone using a web browser is faced at any minute with an array of pop-up windows that appear as if out of nowhere and which, like more 'historical' forms of advertising, make promises that can never be realised. In fact, it is the conditions of virtuality that decree that we constantly move from one thing to the next in the hope that what is virtually promised, will reveal itself in full as we move from one web link to another, if we are gullible or simply curious enough. Even more than this though, it is not just Internet advertising but the very way computer software is configured that leads us through these various operations. Tabs instruct us how to open new web pages, the cursor tells us where we 'are' at any instant, every icon for every program on a computer is a sign of sorts that utilises much older forms of graphic recognition to engage in the most sophisticated and unfathomable internal operations that we simply take for granted. Allover, the language of signs born of contemporary technology, ipods, ipads, mobile phones - all with touch screens and with a mind-boggling array of 'apps' - navigate us in any number of ways, including physically through space, and in more profound ways that make it seem as though such technology was made only for us as a natural extension of our biological and psychical selves.

Of course, the scope of modern day signage extends especially to the way we experience art, and other institutional exhibitions. The museum emerged from Renaissance traditions of the natural history Wunderkammer or 'Cabinet of Curiosities' where disparate objects, whose categorical boundaries were yet to be defined, were brought together and displayed seemingly without any particular recourse to logical themes despite a cursorily encyclopedic outlook. Over time, the museum became increasingly directed and overtly pedagogically orientated. Indeed, the French Revolution saw the birth of the museum proper and with it rationalised collections of art, old and new. The Enlightenment programme set in motion by the

Revolution, sought to educate the sensibilities of the masses and to instruct them as to what art was 'for' and how it should be experienced. This at least outwardly, ultra-rationalist attitude was of course challenged much later by the various avant-gardes, perhaps most notably by Dada whose disparate adherents self-consciously sought to derail standard museum practices by staging their own exhibitions where attendant signage took the form of pure, often aggressive,² nonsense.

Today, gallery signage has progressed from the inclusion of more or less discreet information concerning particular works on show, to encompass a huge, some might say, overweeningly vocational swathe of related (and semi-related) information. The increasing amounts of accompanying information included in exhibitions, arguably blinds viewers to the experience of art, whether as an experience of recognition or refusal. Once more traditions that wish to assert the finite pedagogical value of what is exhibited hold sway. Actually, the mere linking of informational signage to artworks serves also as a legitimising factor implicitly asserting their rightful inclusion in 'important' collections and exhibitions. This is especially ironic with regards contemporary art, as signage also carries with it an automatic historicising function. The extent to which this is true might lead us to wonder how an exhibition consisting solely of gallery signage, in the absence of artworks, might 'read'. Furthermore, in an age like ours that prioritises information, it could also be pondered whether the works themselves were really 'necessary' in the first place. Here then is another paradox of gallery signage where the informational 'truth' of a work may be seen to symbolically exceed its material existence. It is not surprising either, that many artists of the first wave of Conceptualism immediately sought to confront such conditions. Paradoxically enough though, many of these same artists ended producing art of an auspiciously informational nature, no-matter how critically incisive. This was because art could always potentially be reduced to a discussion of the semantics governing its descriptions. However, while it may be impossible to avoid description, art is notable

² Consider for example Max Ernst's and Johannes Baargeld's 1919 Cologne Dada performance where the attendant gallery signage included a note affixed near a hatchet, encouraging visitors to destroy any works they didn't like. The contemporary ramifications of such an invitation are humorous to imagine.

for the fact that, as French philosopher Michel Foucault pointed out,³ it cannot be wholly explained by language; language and art are co-extensive but the latter is not simply reducible to the former.

Elsewhere signage may also take much more abstract forms. Consider for example, the sheer preponderance of road and construction signage via which specific shapes and colours are encoded to denote ‘danger’ or ‘no access’ for instance. This type of codified design is particularly interesting in the way it connects with traditions of Modernist formalist abstraction. In fact, the superficial look of much industrial signage could easily be mistaken for abstract art when taken out of context. Revealing too about such non-verbal signage is the significant degree to which its language is similarly taken for granted. This means we can automatically interpret mere shapes and colours as signifying something very specific; a curiously utilitarian inversion of the utopian and quasi-mystic pretenses often associated with abstract formalism. The aesthetic logic of such signage may be exemplified by a formative example like the London Underground map. The map of the ‘Tube’ engages a complex simplification that weaves together a diversity of real locations under a multi-coloured linear code that is aesthetically streamlined and graphic while being simultaneously eminently concrete and abstract.

The manner in which road signage extends into a topographical understanding of urban space further testifies to changes in contemporary perceptions of space in general. Such perception also pertains to mapping where it is habitually assumed that a map merely accurately describes the reality of a geographical situation, nation or continent. Nonetheless, space is never really apprehended topographically even when flying; the contours of a land mass reduced to an object will always testify to the uncanny fissure between a priori perceptions and first-hand experience. Thus, a topographical map with its inscribed details and divisions, speaks primarily as an abstraction, a sign for the idea of a nation, continent, community or racial group.

In the end, signs abound in our post-industrial culture. They inhabit practically every space imaginable in both blatant and subliminal ways. They are also conspicuously

³ See Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1982

noticeable in instances of their absence. For example, while museum and gallery exhibitions incorporate more and more signage, the interiors of many contemporary public buildings dedicated to maintaining the seamlessness of their architectural vision, increasingly bar signs entirely from the spaces they configure. In a somewhat deconstructionist way, the architects of such spaces appear to view instructional language purely as an unnecessary intrusion. This attitude might seem idealist in a Modernist sense, although it could also be viewed as spatially adhering to contemporary managerial methods where obvious signs of the operations of power are slyly disguised or withdrawn. In a concomitant though opposite way, the rise of contemporary cultures of urban intervention mean that the signs that structure and direct our daily actions and experiences are everywhere *détourned*⁴ making both signs and their intentions nakedly, even embarrassingly, apparent. Thus, the contemporary landscape of signs has multiple dimensions; signs function transparently as advertising (or they function invisibly in public via their notable absence), they exist virtually in the dematerialising ether of new technology, they dramatically shape the perception and navigation of urban and other landscapes and they are inverted, often humorously, via external intervention. The interaction of this variable ecology of signification is opaque and in a sense, ultimately unreadable. Consciously taking this paradox into account is a generative means of seeing signs as something other than what they say they are.

Alex Gawronski 2013

⁴ *Détournement* is a term normally associated with Guy Debord's (1931-1994) Situationist International where it refers to the 'Situationist's' politicised and subversive intervention into the spaces of street and pop-culture. Contemporary practices of urban intervention, including the rewording of public signage and advertising, bear a particular relationship to such practices. Ironically however, certain forms of urban intervention have sought and attained the very type of pop currency the Situationists, especially Debord, despised.