*Conference Review*

Icograda 2003 Congress Visualogue: A Visual Dialogue Between Designers

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Eighty percent of Japan is covered by mountains. Steep mountains. In traditional painting, they often are depicted rising from a mist, with no visible paths leading up from the base. Representing divine worlds, serving as destinations for pilgrimages, and symbolic of the spiritual journey towards enlightenment, mountains have been important for Shintoism and Buddhism since the beginning of Japanese civilization. The practice of meditation, often described in the West as a departure from the physical for a spiritual world, in a sense often is grounded in the physicality of a mountain. Mandalas in India and Japanese "kakejiku" scrolls are used as meditation tools, representing a graphic mapping of the paths up a mountain to enlightenment, and allowing meditators to ascend a mountain without leaving their tatami mat.

For the identity of the Icograda (International Council of Graphic Design Associations) 2003 conference, called "Visualogue" and held October 7–12 in Japan's fourth largest city, Nagoya, a mountain was used as a graphic identity to represent the journey to

Registration, Icograda 2003.
Photo by Gitte Waldman
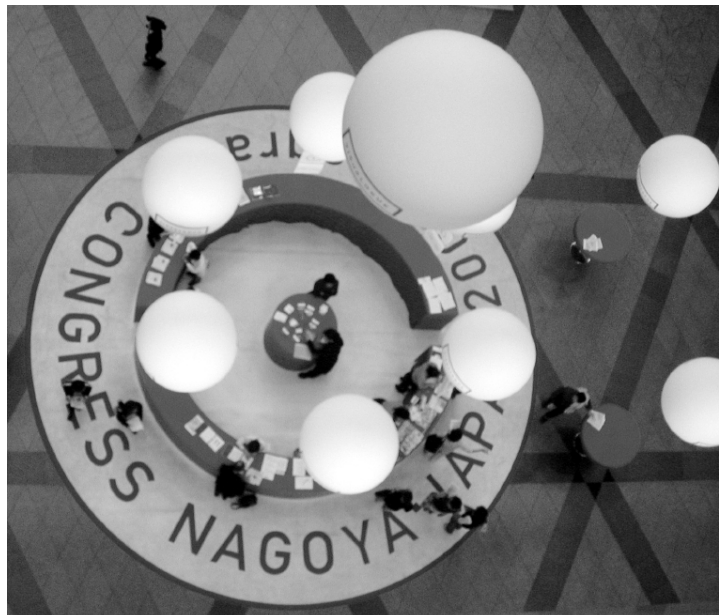
the goal of "quality of information," which was this year's theme. An evocative, visual mnemonic steeped in cultural specificity, the graphic identity expressed, and in some ways stood in contrast to, the conference title, rooted as it is in Western languages (the Latin *visus,* or sight, plus the Greek *dialogos,* or "through words"). Organizers defined "Visualogue" as "an index for a new method of dialogue"—a visual dialogue "most appropriate to graphic designers."

By "quality of information," the ideal at the summit of the mountain, the organizers meant not only legibility, but also quality in the sense of tactile, textural, and allusive aspects of design that can subtly color and transform information design into an experience that is at once surprising and deeply affecting. Three paths were inscribed onto the mountain graphic to lead designers on a pilgrimage towards the goal: creating work infused with clarity, creativity, and joy. These three qualities define "quality of information," and formed the subthemes and organizational channels of the presentations. In this age of colocation, lossless duplication, and avatars; it seems fitting that not only are there multiple paths, but that a contemporary designer can conceive of traveling on all three at once and, in fact, may need to do this in order to create compelling, quality work.

In his opening keynote presentation, Richard Saul Wurman championed following the path of clarity. Increasing legibility and understandability of complex information, he stressed, is the ethical responsibility of graphic designers. Wurman grounds his projects in personal needs, identifying information areas that he personally finds confusing and then proceeding to make sense of them for himself and others. For him, helping people bushwhack their way through the thicket of statistics and numbers that without design remain useless, misleading data is a designer's moral necessity. Presenting several spreads of his upcoming book on healthcare in the U.S., he offered a sobering reminder that a lack of clarity about some topics can have deadly consequences. While undeniably advanced along the path of clarity, the absence of the other two paths of quality in his work, most notably creativity, was not lost on the audience.

A few European and American presenters gave soul-searching presentations questioning what lay at the top of the summit; what exactly "quality of information" entails, and whether it is worth striving for, or even if it's the right mountain. In an argument for increasing powerful visual communication that makes use of the visual language artists have developed and taps into personal motives of expression and connection, Stefan Sagmeister reached beyond the notion of client and message to urge graphic designers to find their sense of purpose, and touch their audience by creating an experience beyond the commercial confines of the design world. He talked about his goal of "touching people's hearts" through a presentation that melded graphic design with art practice: one piece in the

spirit of Van Gogh involved using razor blades to slice the message into his flesh. A similarly searching Neville Brody rushed through a slide show of his firm's luscious visual design to spend the greater part of his presentation lamenting the clichéd, trite look of much contemporary graphic design, and the lack of a political effect or moral imperative in his own past work and generally in the field of graphic design at the moment. He predicted that, in the near future, work that is based on following the "rules" of good design, without a point of view from the designer, will be automatically generated by software, and not considered "design" at all. Designers, as interpreters and thinkers, have more to offer: "We could have been artists," he said. "We chose to go into design because there is a greater audience we can reach in this medium."

To the Western designer's explicit questions: "Why are we on this journey?" and "What is at the summit?" the Japanese seemed to answer "It's about the journey." Featured Japanese talks focused on the paths of creativity, and humor/joy, with audiences packing the halls for feasts of color and form from Eiko Ishioka, Naoto Fukasawa, Masaki Fujihata, and other celebrated Japanese graphic and media designers. Through their choice of presenters, it was apparent that, for the Japanese organizers, information design is not segmented by application or material into the traditional divisions based on choice of medium: presentations reflected the crosscurrents of three-dimensional design, space design, print design, motion, and sound. Part of creating quality information is finding the right medium, and the right collaborators to convey the message: understanding Marshall McLuhan's maxim that "the medium is the message" implies a responsibility to not let the medium take over, but to work out of the communication needs of the message in carefully and thoughtfully choosing the best and most effective medium with which to deliver it. Eiko Ishioka, a featured designer, moves easily from graphic to set to costume design, describing her role as an "actress" who is calling forth emotion with her stage costumes, sets, videos, films, and stage sets. In contrast to Ishioka's work, informed by the context of stage and film, Naoto Fukasawa, another featured presenter who comes from industrial design, spoke of his medium: products that communicate as quiet companions in our everyday lives. Fukasawa gave a presentation about gaining inspiration by quietly looking around him to appreciate and find the often overlooked quality and texture that can inspire product design, or "staring blankly" as he travels through Tokyo. He described good design as one that "dissolves" into behavior. For Fukasawa, great design—graphic, spatial, or product—is about supporting, celebrating people's behavior, and invisibly becoming part of their environment.

The "visual dialogue" brought together design from such disparate fields to examine how the paths to the elusive quality of information are defined, what paths might be more natural for different design fields and cultures, and some different values and

attitudes towards what lies at the summit—what "quality of information" really means. As mentioned earlier, the conference title "Visualogue" is a combination of the words "visual" and "dialogue." In addition to being about the intercultural and inter-media exchange of ideas between designers, some presentations pointed to the give and take between designer and audience as a dialogue, expanding the notion of communication to include the active participation of the viewer in their cultural, social, and gender-specific contexts. Katherine McCoy, speaking at the second day's panel discussion, presented examples of communication messages that were tailored for specific audiences by using culturally understood codes and graphic conventions local to that group. One example was a condom advertisement meant for a relatively small audience in inner cities: in a message that would be lost on most of the mainstream population, the package had the police radio three-letter code for "death" printed on the packaging as a reminder of the consequences of not using one.

Humorous presentations were an area where the questions of audience dialogue and the role that cultural differences play in communication were highlighted most. As audiences sat with headsets on, listening to simultaneous translation of presentations with jokes, it became clear that great humor, rooted as it is in the play with audience expectations and norms, often requires a familiarity with those customs and traditions in order to be effective. Seymour Chwast showcased thirty years of his work in illustration to the delight of the Americans in the audience, exhibiting work that played with oppositions of content and graphic conventions. In one particularly poignant series, he used a decorative, pre-civil rights era illustration style to depict scenes charged with racism and sexism. For full effect on the viewer, his biting commentary on American culture and politics required a deep understanding of American social history and the associations of historical graphic conventions. Likewise, the impact of Japanese humor probably was lost on many of the Western audience members. In what seemed at first a quaint cultural marker, Shigeo Fukuda placed a small bonsai on a table near him during his presentation. In a surprising move at the end of his presentation, he ripped off a branch, put it in his mouth, and tore it in two with his teeth. Anyone who has pruned and cared for bonsai over the years, or who knows the culture of respect and care the long-lived plants are given in Japanese homes, was shocked at this gesture. In a second surprise, he offered branches to the audience, telling us it was a candy plant.

With extensive local and national government funding and involvement, the conference marked Japan's and host city Nagoya's place in the international design community, and showcased design sensibilities that are local to Japan. The conference environment and materials left no question about which culture lay at the base camp. Upon arrival, each conference attendee received a beautifully

designed, bilingual, three-ring-bound conference guide tabbed with information on the conference and concurrent education symposium and public forums. Marked on the front with the graphic elements of the Japanese Hinomaru flag, the simple two-color motif red circle on white was carried through all the environment, print, and interactive design of the event. Infused with a particularly Japanese attention towards detail and texture (the inside matte paper contrasted sensually with the high-gloss section dividers and cover), the conference designers brought a sense of delight to the practical aspects of getting one's bearings, meeting people, finding talks, and even eating meals. From luscious die-cut maps (included in the conference package to specially printed, playfully worded chopstick packages provided with the lunches of Japanese onigiri, no detail was ignored. Even the planning of staff interactions had a particularly Japanese sensibility: during busy times, conference workers were posted at escalators as human signs to direct attendees.

With all of the expression of cultural specificity and boundary crossing of design cultures through graphic, media, and environment design, one line that was firmly preserved was that between traditional and upstart design; the "high" and "low." Although widely featured in America bookstores and museum stores, new art and design inspired by Japanese pop culture including cartoon characters, manga, and anime wasn't represented in any of the conference presentations. Much of the Japanese audience consisted of students, who had traveled from around the country and been given a considerable entrance fee discount to attend. The contrast of young people both at the conference and in Nagoya, with their buttons, t-shirts, and bags, highlighted the absence of this vernacular, youthful design.

Nowhere was the contrast more apparent than in the official conference posters. The exquisite set of posters, designed by Japanese members of JAGDA (the Japan Graphic Designers Association, Inc.), depicted Japanese symbols of peace, unity, and longevity. The look and feel was in keeping with the sensibility of the traditional Japanese scrolls and screens in terms of craftsmanship and beauty. Although featured on the Website in advance of the congress, we found only one set of posters hanging at the conference: they were in one of the lecture halls, next to the exit, in a corner. They were easy to miss, which I had, until one of our group pointed to where they hung and expressed an interest in purchasing a set. Trysh and Gitte asked the organizers, searched the booths of books for sale, and the "poster" exhibition downstairs (which consisted mostly of paper and printer vendors hawking wares); but no one had any idea of how we might get our hands on a set. Somehow, despite being specifically commissioned for the event, they were unavailable, and no one outside of our group seemed to notice or care. Commenting on the masses of Japanese students, with their printed bags and T-shirts, someone in our group said, "The T-shirt is the new Poster."

Just as ex-pats living abroad often decorate their homes with a nationalistic fervor they would never allow themselves in the context of their home country, culture can become about historic clichés, defined as only that which has been validated by tradition: qualities that can be at odds with creating information design that is surprising and touching, expressive of personal creative interpretations and responses to the flow of contemporary events, and speculations about what could be. Cultural influences are broadening to include design from around the world, making the notion of work that is simultaneously culturally specific, full of allusions, humor, texture, and reference, and yet also contemporary and increasingly problematic. The fact that the conference posters had gone unnoticed by the Japanese students attending in favor of forms that spoke more directly to their experience in the world left us thinking that the challenge and contradiction of information design is that it be intercultural, yet still possessing a "quality-rich" dialogue infused with humor and capable of touching people's hearts.