Annotative Design: A Study of Everyday Signs, Anonymous Notes, and Annotative Practices

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This thesis titled
Annotative Design: A Study of Everyday Signs,
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ABSTRACT

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Annotative Design: A Study of Everyday Signs, Anonymous Notes, and Annotative Practices

Director of Thesis: Don E. Adleta

Looking at everyday anonymous signs found in break rooms, in hallways, on doors, etc., I argue that, collectively, they define a form of design I call “annotative design.” These practices, defined by their visual language, their materiality, their posting and placement strategies, point to a logic of design, reminiscent of book marginalia, that differs from standard professional graphic design practices. Using Michel de Certeau’s studies on the interplay of strategies and tactics in everyday life, I also argue that graphic design relates to visualist strategies connected to a tradition of spatialization of knowledge while annotative design uses tactical ways of operating.

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I wish to thank for their support of and contribution to this research project my thesis committee members: Don Adleta, Sherry Blankenship, John Sabraw, and Marina Peterson. I am grateful for their continuous encouragement and guidance.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There are no obvious reasons to compare notes written on the margins of books and everyday, anonymous signs taped on refrigerators or hung on door handles. They look different: the former are handwritten and squeezed between the edges of a page and paragraphs of text; the latter are often printed and taped, hung on, or pinned to their support. They are made with different objectives in mind: the first are personal records of ideas or feelings; the second are messages intended for a group of people sharing objects or spaces.

Yet it is by looking at the first and by trying to understand how they relate to reading and designing books that I became interested in the second and began to see telling parallels between the two. From formal and theoretical explorations of these parallels come one of the central themes of this thesis: notes on the margin of books and everyday, anonymous signs are both examples of how users change and build on the work of graphic designers, industrial designers, and architects. Marginalia are traces left in books of a dialog between text and comments, between authors and readers, and between book designers and book “users.” As for anonymous notes, they have a similar relationship to their authors, their environments, and their designers. They too are traces of a dialog between spaces, objects, and everyday practices related to them. The language I chose to define and discuss this relationship between design and use is itself derived from that initial insight. If marginal annotations can have a productive relationship with books and book layout and thus become a form of user-generated design, it is appropriate to call this type of practice, in all its forms, “annotative design.”
Although this study will focus on one example of annotative design—everyday, anonymous signs—this concept, as I envision it, describes a variety of practices, some of which have already been studied. Vernacular architecture, vernacular typography, popular culture, fandom, *bricolage*, *jua kali*, *gambiarra*, etc. are all cultural categories which capture some of the essence of annotative design: the productive use by non-designers of readily available material to create personal or communal objects of value outside of the mainstream commercial channels of design, production, and sale.

The origin and context of some of these terms are revealing. They provide clues about preexisting notions that affect our understanding of annotative design practices. *Jua kali* and *gambiarra*, Swahili and Portuguese terms for the DIY, make-do cultures of East Africa and Brazil, both capture the idea that annotative design is seen, in the West at least, as the product of foreign, informal, and economically volatile cultures. Fandom evokes related notions: informal subcultures lacking the social and economic credentials of “proper” culture. Finally, when designers themselves have documented examples of annotative design and acknowledged its value, they have called it “non-intentional design” (Brandes, Stich, & Wender, 2009), “thoughtless acts,” or “intuitive design” (Fulton Suri, 2005) implying that annotative practices belong to a subconscious or less rational form of thinking.

My own collection and documentation of everyday, anonymous signs, indicate otherwise. Annotative design is much less foreign and much more rational than it may seem initially. Over the course of nine months, from August 2011 to April 2012, I collected nearly 200 photographic samples of everyday signs. To understand them
better, I documented not only the signs themselves but their surroundings as well, believing that, as marginal annotations, they existed and functioned in relation with a specific formal context.

I included in my sample, signs that met the following two main criteria:

1. Signs that had been added to an object or a place and that were not, therefore, part of its original design. Original design elements of an object included branding features and instruction or safety information. In a building, original graphic material normally included branded wayfinding signage, and safety and accessibility notices.

2. Signs that had no commercial or promotional purpose. Thus, I excluded “Help Wanted” signs or signs advertising products, services, or events, even when they used the visual language and placement strategies of everyday, anonymous signs.

However, I intend to do more with this study than present examples of annotative signs in context. I propose to contrast annotative design practices with what I refer to as standard, professional graphic design practices. Unfortunately, the notion of standard design practices is not easy to define. The term “graphic design” covers a variety of professional and non-professional practices. These practices include historical and geographical variations which a single phrase cannot capture in full. For this analysis, I chose, therefore, to restrict my understanding of standard, professional graphic design to the contemporary practice of graphic design as reflected by the visual and written production of professional associations like AIGA, design magazines and publications such as *Print*, *Eye*, *I.D.*, *Communication Arts*, etc., and well-known design studios whose work is documented and used as models for designers in training.
(Pentagram, IDEO, Chermayeff and Geismar, Interbrand, etc.). My definition of the term is also informed by my own experience teaching graphic design to undergraduate graphic design students and by what I have seen and heard discussed as the essential skills these students needed to learn.

As an analytical concept and tool, the notion of standard professional graphic design practices does not stand, therefore, for graphic design as a whole. I do not claim to paint an exhaustive picture of the field with it. It is an approximation, but one which I believe is grounded in valid empirical experience of how many practicing designers understand the current state of their profession. Naturally, this understanding is also grounded in the time and place in which it developed. Thus, this study might have been written differently were we not experiencing currently a resurgence of interest in the functional ideology and aesthetics of Modernism. For reasons I do not claim to be able to explain, the present visual culture of design seems to be inspired strongly by Modernist ideas of functional minimalism and by a nostalgia for the visual culture of High Modernism. Gary Hustwit’s celebration of Helvetica, a typographic icon of Modernist design, in his eponymous documentary; the success of the television series Mad Men and its glamorous depiction of 1960s aesthetics; museum retrospectives of the work Dieter Rams\(^1\), an icon of Modernist industrial design, with publications of two

\(^1\) “Less and More” is an exhibition of Rams’s industrial design work organized and produced by the Suntory Museum (Osaka) and the Fuchu Art Museum (Tokyo) in 2008. It has since travelled to the Design Museum in London, the Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
comprehensive books about him in the last year\textsuperscript{2}; Modernist grid systems developed for and applied to new media such as the web and tablets; recent documentaries on celebrated Modernist figures like Julius Shulman or Charles and Ray Eames\textsuperscript{3}; commercial and critical success of graphic design studios reviving Modernist visual culture (Experimental Jetset); all are anecdotal but significant signs that after a period of criticism of its methods and aesthetics begun in the late 1960s, Modernism has made a significant come-back. Thus, my own understanding of annotative design practices, and particularly its relationship with professional graphic design practices, is informed by this “neo-Modernist” current and its effect on our visual culture. It creates a strong contrast where a more moderate one might have emerged at a time when post-Modernist ideals emphasized a more fluid and inclusive approach to graphic design.

Nevertheless, in spite of those historical variations, I believe that this recent resurgence is a sign that Modernist aesthetics continues to be a driving force behind much of the discourse on and practice of graphic design, whether it is critical or appreciative of it. Its longevity and scope justify its inclusion in a discussion of the modes of operation of design in all its forms.

This study is organized in five chapters. The first describes its objects: the anonymous, everyday signs I documented and analyzed. I detail in it what defines them, visually and formally. The second chapter contrasts annotative signs with

\begin{itemize}
\item Dieter Rams: as little design as possible (Lovell, 2011) and Less and more: the design ethos of Dieter Rams (Klemp & Ueki-Polet, 2011).
\item Visual acoustics: the modernism of Julius Shulman (Bricker, 2010) and Eames: the architect and the painter (Cohn & Jersey, 2011).
\end{itemize}
graphic design standards and explains how they differ from one another. Following this formal analysis, I examine the reasoning behind formal critiques of anonymous signs and shed light on the visual and spatial logic of both design systems. I focus on how standard design practices align with spatialized forms of expression of order while annotative design practices work against or around them. The third chapter relates these opposing systems of design, particularly the emphasis on spatial order in graphic design, to the visual spatialization of knowledge observed in other fields in arts and sciences. In this discussion, I focus on Johannes Fabian’s concept of “visualism” and use Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* to offer an alternative model of spatial metaphorization of knowledge, one based on everyday ways of operating. The fourth chapter expounds on Certeau’s analysis of the oppositional forces of everyday tactics and visualist strategies, to see how much annotative design can be said to function as a tactical element of everyday life and how graphic design becomes a recognized field of production through its own strategic discourse on what constitutes design. Finally, a concluding chapter looks back at anonymous notes and annotative design and examines how annotative practices relate to creative practices.
CHAPTER 2: ANONYMOUS SIGNS

Invisibility

The objects of this study are almost invisible not because they are difficult to see, small or transparent, but because we have learned not to see them. They belong to a part of our visual culture which we choose to ignore or dismiss as unworthy of our attention. Nevertheless, they are everywhere and we read what they say sometimes. But we quickly forget about them, what they are, what they look like, and how they come to be a part of our environment and visual culture.

These objects—semi-anonymous, everyday notes, signs, and notices—are found nearly everywhere people coexist. They are visual evidence of the presence of individuals living and working together in environments they use, sometimes for long periods of time, but which are not theirs. They are there to remind us to lock doors, flush gently, use other entrances, or keep sinks clean. Unnecessary in a household where rules can be established and reestablished face-to-face, they become essential, it seems, where colleagues, classmates, roommates, and strangers share common spaces but do not meet or have conversations. Hence they are found everywhere we come in contact with others, directly or indirectly, in hallways, elevators, lounges, waiting rooms, staff kitchens, conference rooms, storage rooms, etc. They aggregate around other objects we share: refrigerators, microwave ovens, projectors, sinks, light switches, doors and windows, etc.

One of the objectives of this study is to understand what graphic designers make of these signs, how they interpret and account for them. This discussion will not center
on formal characteristics, however. It will not pit the visual language of anonymous signs against that of standard graphic design to see how far the former strays from the latter. Doing so would imply that graphic design can be reduced to a visual, mechanical process where a set of formal rules can be followed to achieve predictable results. It would also legitimize the view that aesthetic decisions, like those graphic designers make, are connected to an autonomous realm of forms one sees, identifies with, and belongs to—or not. It would sidestep any discussion of the origin of those visual languages and of the practices and systems of values that create and support them. However, because the visual and formal vocabulary that defines everyday, anonymous signs determines how designers see them, I will begin by describing these signs to establish their material makeup, their shared formal characteristics, the visual and functional vocabulary they create and use, and their modes of production and operation.

**Formal Analysis**

*Taping and Laminating*

The vast majority of anonymous collective notes are printed or handwritten on standard quality paper and affixed to their support using common forms of non-permanent posting methods: adhesive tape, push pins, and binder clips. Other methods range from the more temporary—leaning against a wall—to the more permanent—black marker directly on the support. Signs are often laminated, either with standard lamination vinyl film or with transparent tape laid in overlapping layers (see Figure 1). This practice shows that sign-makers are aware that the use and placement of these
signs make them susceptible to damage either by the environment itself—rain, wind, snow on exterior doors—or by use—spills near microwaves or repeated hanging and removal around doorways.

Figure 1. Sign taped to a microwave oven.

The double use of tape for binding and lamination often marks a sign of particular importance, one which must last and must neither be (re)moved nor modified. Even when it is not used over the entire surface of a sign, tape often serves as
a supplemental marker of importance: first, when tape frames a sign instead of merely holding it in place, and second, when layers of old tapes have accumulated around an area and act as markers for repeated attempts at communicating something about this area. In the first scenario, tape is a design element which the sign-maker controls whether or not they are fully aware of its effect. In the second, tape is already present. The focus that it brings to the sign is perhaps less the result of a decision by the sign-maker to create such focus than an effect of repetition and accumulation.

**Graphic Design Idioms**

Handwritten signs show few variations in their layout. Most are simply written with black marker with little concern for spacing or alignment within the page (see Figure 2). Printed signs are more varied but their vocabulary remains limited. These design idioms fall under four categories: alignment, type, color, and iconography.

![Figure 2. Handwritten sign on PostIt note.](image)
The vast majority of printed signs are either set ragged-right or centered. In spite of the fact that the former is the default alignment setting for new documents on all word processing and desktop publishing software, centering appears to be the more popular solution. Interestingly, this indicates, first, that sign-makers are aware that alignment is an element of composition they may change, and, second, that most considered centering more appropriate or preferred it. For the purpose of our analysis, the former conclusion is more important that the latter. It indicates that individuals responsible for these signs made decisions regarding their design and composition, and that they operated with a system of aesthetic or functional values in mind which they were able to express visually.

Other elements of design support this conclusion. With typography, a similar tension exists between default settings, the multiplicity of options available, and individual or collective preferences. The most commonly used faces are those pre-installed on commercial computer systems and set as default in word processing applications. Times New Roman, Calibri, and Arial consistently top the list (see Figure 3). Other faces appear as well, notably display faces (Comic Sans, Charlemagne, Cooper Black, etc.) with a particular emphasis on brush script faces and type families which include swash characters. Upper or lower casing and font size are two additional typographic elements sign makers use to affect the design of their signs. While most

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4 Microsoft has been distributing Times New Roman and Arial with all its versions of Windows since 1992 and Apple with Mac OS X since 2001. Calibri replaced Times New Roman as the default face on most Microsoft Office products in 2007.
follow standard upper and lower casing practices, many are set in capital letters only. Nearly all use large font sizes at 20 points or above.

![Figure 3](image)

*Figure 3. Sign set in Calibri centered on page.*

The color palette is somewhat limited. Most signs are printed or written in black on white paper. Color usually comes in the form of color paper where yellows dominate, either in the pale yellow of PostIt notes and related products or in bright, almost fluorescent yellows of letter size office paper. In nearly all cases, all substrates are office stationery products. Ink colors, beside black, vary but with a predominance of reds which serve to focus readers attention on specific parts of the signs sometimes in conjunction with a bold face or uppercase characters.
Many signs use, in addition to type, visual elements to add to their designs. Two appear consistently: arrows and clip art. Most arrows direct the reader’s attention to the object referenced by the sign. An arrow in combination with “Use other door” points to the correct door to use; on a “Ring bell” sign, to the bell to ring. Those signs are typically located next to those objects they reference. In some cases, the referred object is farther away and the arrow indicates the direction where the object is located. Finally, arrows may point back at the sign itself to draw attention to a particular aspect of it.

Clip art, generic images used as illustration and often made available for free on the Internet or with word processing software, are one of the distinctive features of printed signs. Unlike arrows, however, it is not found on handwritten signs. Most of it illustrates the main object of the sign: a paint can and a brush for a “wet paint” sign, a mailbox for a directional sign to mailboxes, etc. In some cases, clip art serves to extend the meaning of a sign. A fireman on a sign asking users of a microwave to not leave their food unattended points to the chain of events linking the written warning and the potential outcome resulting from ignoring this warning: burning food setting off fire alarms involving, in turn, the fire department (see Figure 4).
As the previous section has shown, anonymous notes are not constructed independently from their physical and spatial context. Arrows, which are frequently found on them, hint at a set of spatial and directional cues which are built into the
design and the semantic logic of the signs. They materialize a connection to the environment which plays an important role in most, if not all, signs. Other elements reveal this connection as well.

First is the language of the notes. It is filled with demonstratives—“this cabinet,” “this refrigerator,” “this surface”—definite articles—“the Xerox,” “the stairwell,” “the space”—and geographic cues—“located across,” “downstairs”, “next door.” These linguistic shortcuts extend into other, more complex, forms of positional cues such as pairs—“the other door” one a sign taped to one of two adjacent doors—or time—“teaching...until 2 pm.” In all of these cases, the message of a sign is conveyed in part through language and in part through its location in space or time (see Figure 5). While no sign is ever free of context, these anonymous notes rely heavily on their surroundings to function properly. They are built to take advantage of the proximity of the objects their address.
The second clue of the importance of the connection between these signs and their environment is in the posting strategies reviewed above. If most signs rely on their surroundings to be understood, what binds them to those surroundings is itself important in understanding their formal language. Taping, for instance, only works
well on flat and clean surfaces. Hence it is found often on the flat metallic body of kitchen appliances and on laminated office doors. Pinning requires a softer surface and is prevalent on corkboards, fabric covered partitions, and drywalls. Hanging, with strings or binder clips, used when signs need to be reused, is found with door handles, and wall-mounted mail holders. Finally, for small spaces, particularly around switches and buttons, adhesive tape is commonly used, either handwritten or printed on a label maker.

In all of these cases, the location and binding of a sign affect its design. On small adhesive tape signs space is an issue and, therefore, there is never any non-verbal, non-typographic, elements. Signs designed to be placed on larger surfaces—doors and walls—tend to be larger than signs that must fit on more particular spaces—appliances or library carts for instance—and hence tend to use the full space of a letter size sheet of paper. In turn, because standard paper formats are easy to process on an office printer, those signs are more likely to be printed than handwritten and therefore more likely to be designed with a particular set of tools and bear the marks of these tools. Hence proximity, a major spatial characteristics of these signs, defines the distinct but connected operations of writing, posting, and designing—choosing a typeface, a paper format, an alignment on the surface of that paper. Form follows placement.

Location in general, not only proximity, plays a role in determining the visual and formal grammar of these signs. Because most of them are found in areas where people walk and stand—doorways, hallways, staircases, kitchens, bathrooms, etc.—they are designed to be read at eye-level from a short distance. Hence, while
type is often larger than text sizes, i.e. commonly 20 points or more, it is also smaller than commercial signs designed for areas of high pedestrian and automotive traffic for example, and therefore rarely exceeds 72 points. In addition, I found that signs sometimes mirrored the orientation of their support, itself a function of the posture of their users: notes on doors, refrigerators, and cabinets were often vertical. Finally, location and position sometimes related to the meaning of a sign (see Figure 6). Notes prohibiting certain behaviors—entrance, plugging, opening—normally covered the area in question and preferred horizontal layouts, as if to draw a proscriptive line through space.

![Figure 6. Mirroring: vertical signs on vertical directory panel.](image)
Like the graphic idioms of their design, the formal language of everyday, anonymous signs—positional and locational characteristics reflecting their physical environment—shows that their makers are aware of context for which they are designing. They know where, how, and often by whom those notes will be read, and they know to adjust some of the design attributes they control such as size, orientation, or language. Moreover, they know how to exploit the terrain at their disposal to find ways to communicate and do so using physical metaphors and opportunistic placement and posting strategies that reveal a thought process similar to that of experienced graphic designers.

**Semantic Analysis**

Although not directly related to the design of anonymous notes, language plays a significant role in their functional logic. The abundance of demonstratives and other deictic turns of phrase showed how closely they relate to their immediate surroundings. Language, and particularly the semantic field these notes define, also serves to describe the cultural environment in which they exist. It mirrors the technological and administrative contexts that produced these signs.

One of their most essential characteristics is their politeness. “Please,” “Thank you,” and “Thanks” are by far the most frequently used words and expressions on anonymous notes (see Figure 7). Their presence relates to the nature of the messages conveyed which, very often, ask something of someone. Whether it is to do or refrain from doing something, these signs stand for a demand made which must be mitigated through common forms of civility. In this respect they differ from other kinds of public
signs which do not show the same concerns for civilities. Public signage of the kind found in urban and commercial environments, for instance, share formal characteristics with anonymous notes: they use similar formats designed for close reading, they favor language-based communication over a purely visual kind, and they often mitigate the effects of collective living (traffic, circulation, wayfinding, etc.). They are, however, rarely worded to acknowledge and mitigate the demands made of its readers. They embody a form of authority that is accustomed and entitled to making demands. Anonymous signs do not.

Figure 7. Polite language (“PLEASE DO NOT...”).
Paradoxically, when some signs use “The Management” as a signature element, as I have observed on a few occasions, they seem to claim a measure of authority which their design, location, and function undermine otherwise. A fading handwritten note taped on a door, for instance, lacks the visual authority of a bolted store-bought vinyl sign as one implies cheap improvisation and the other organizational intent. Mention by the former of “the management” is a reference to an external form of authority which the sign seems to recognize and distance itself from at the same time. While the presence of a managing authority is acknowledged, verbally, the mode of operation of the sign itself—its placement, design, etc.—places it outside of the register of authority and its own modes of operation. The resulting incongruity and the veiled parody of the commanding tone of authority—“the management” implying a self-referential and totalizing logic of power—act as linguistic modifiers reminiscent of Pleases and Thank yous. They soften the demand made on the reader by presenting it as a humorous and non-threatening request.

It is worth noting that these parodic signatures are virtually the only ones found on such signs. Far from defying the anonymous nature of these notes, however, “the management” itself acts as a form of anonymity. It connotes the existence of an entity only known through and named after its role. A functional mask, it provides anonymity to individuals who remain unnamed.

Generally speaking, anonymous notes are good indicators of the administrative and legal environment in which they are found. Aside from mimicking managerial practices and language, they can also function as pseudo-legal documents establishing
an order of rules and consequences for breaking those rules. Many use the future tense to describe the logical progression from failing to heed warnings to a corrective course of action of which the sign itself is a guarantee. These predictive future—“Anything left...will be disposed,” “microwave will be taken”—formalize, in grammatical terms, the physics of a social universe in which anonymous notes act as natural law theories. Once again, anonymity becomes an issue. No single individual is ever made responsible for rules (see Figure 8).

![Figure 8](image)

*Figure 8. Predictive future clause: “THIS MICROWAVE WILL BE TAKEN AWAY”.*

Those signs I have just described, these anonymous annotations placed in common areas—staff kitchens, utility cabinets, doors, doorways, staircases, etc.—share graphic, spatial, and semantic characteristics. Formally they are normally no larger than common office letter-size paper, printed or handwritten on white or sometimes yellow
paper. They are often put together using word processing software and, therefore, bear the marks of its default settings (typeface and color options) and its basic capacities (embedded clip art, easy centering, etc.). Their small size but also their placement limit and define the size of the fonts, their orientation, and the method of posting, often temporary, used to attach them to their support. Finally, they reflect a social environment where demands are made politely and consequences spelled out without any real acknowledgment of a sanctioning authority.

Anonymous signs something else, something obvious but which must be restated: someone designed them. How well they were designed matters much less to this study than the fact that a person made a series of decisions regarding their format, layout, method of production, placement, etc. The connections between the processes that resulted in the creation of those signs and the processes that lead to professional design work are more relevant to the objectives of this study. It is our contention that they are similar in nature although they are presented and discussed quite differently. The next chapter will begin to examine these connections by looking at how anonymous signs are excluded from the field of graphic design.
CHAPTER 3: DEFICIENT SIGNS

Anonymous notes are not normally considered graphic design. Books about graphic design, whether they survey its history or focus on a particular moment of that history, do not include them. They are no exhibitions dedicated to them, no prizes awarded for the best ones, no website featuring them as examples of graphic design. No brandbook ever includes a section on anonymous signs. When they are presented for discussion, it is often to be derided or serve as counter-examples to professional design practice. The following two chapters will examine this disconnect to understand why and how a distinction between annotative signs and graphic design work is made. In this chapter, I will focus on how anonymous notes fail to conform to common expectations of what good graphic design is.

Simplicity and Complexity

The first line of defense establishing a difference between what is deemed graphic design and anonymous notes is formal. The argument, at this stage, is that common signs are not well made. Individual arguments supporting this assertion mirror the description of formal characteristics of annotative signs I gave in the previous chapter.

Their methods of production, whether posting (taping, pinning, laminating) or printing (common paper and office laser printers), are crude. They provide little opportunity for delicate work. Colors are limited and neither vibrant nor subtle enough. Laser printer ink on common paper leaves little room for play with textures or depth and color options for color papers are usually garish. Taping will invariably lead to signs
detaching or being torn. Yet when they do stick they sometimes create a glare which leads to legibility problems. Push pins often come in bright colors that create distracting spots on neutral backgrounds and clash with color backgrounds. Finally, when signs are handwritten, the variety and irregularities of handwriting seem out of place in environments where so much material—signs, documents, digital displays, etc.—is designed on computers using commercial typefaces.

The formal language of annotative signs is critiqued in the same way. For instance, graphic designers point at the use of display faces as a misguided practice which reduces the legibility of a sign. Many operate on the assumption that simplicity, and its corollary, the reduction of formal elements on a page, leads to more effective communication. Any formal element that show signs of the reverse process, addition when subtraction is deemed preferable, is rejected for producing ineffective or distracting solutions. Display faces, which often bring in such additional formal elements—strongly contrasting shapes, elaborate serifs, swash capitals, etc.—act as de facto markers of visual complexity and confusion. On anonymous signs they are giveaways of both an absence of training on the part of the designer, for ignoring principles of simplicity, and a disregard for legibility.

Paradoxically though, those same signs may be dismissed because of their structural simplicity. So while graphic designers may decry them for being confusing and for using overly elaborate typefaces ill-suited for their environments, their inability to find formal schemes to organize the page can be seen as a kind of graphic naïveté. Indeed nearly all anonymous signs are either laid out around a single vertical axis or
ignore rules of composition altogether. When they do make use of a structural axis, they are either set ragged right to a small left margin or centered on the page. Either way, they are using two very simple schemes in a literal way: a left vertical axis supporting left-aligned text and a central vertical axis supporting centered text. Where graphic designers look for organizing principles—a grid or a set of axes—and ways of laying out text and images dynamically over those structural elements, designers of everyday notes make little or no use of structural forms.

The combination of structural simplicity on the one hand and ornamental complexity on the other makes it easy for professional designers to find flaws in the design of anonymous signs. With it, opposite notions join to form a total and complete indictment of their functional and aesthetic values. Surprisingly, however, given the limited amount of iconographic and textual material found on everyday notes, and in spite of the occasional typographic embellishment, the lack of a grid or principal axis is rarely problematic. They remain readable.

Clip art, listed above as a defining trait of anonymous signs, plays an equally ambivalent role in constructing their formal deficiencies in terms of simultaneous simplicity and complexity. As an element of illustration, it is too simple. It shows no attempt, in concept or in form, to convey anything but what it is being said with words. It is redundant, first because it shows what is written, and second, because it shows it in a manner which does not add anything to the message. A sign about a mailbox shows a mailbox. Another sign about keeping a door closed to keep animals out shows a cat and a squirrel. But if indeed the semantic simplicity of clip art prevents it from serving
any real purpose then clip art must be also superfluous, or worse, a sign of complexity, of adding where subtracting, reducing, and essentializing should be the rule. By the standards of professional graphic design practices, therefore, clip art is both a marker of unfortunate simplicity and distracting complexity.

Visual Speech

The informal style of the language of anonymous signs can also become a reason to disregard them as unprofessional or inferior. While none of the signs I documented showed signs of egregious grammatical or spelling errors, a few strayed from what is considered proper written English. They took liberties with rules of punctuation and capitalization for instance: “If you make a mess, clean it up, please cover food...” or “Keep Eye Wash Stations Clean, Test monthly.” Others seemed not to have been checked for simple word omissions: “if you’ve keeping food in it...”

Pointing out mistakes on anonymous signs is one of the rare ways in which they register as objects of discourse. Web sites have appeared that collect photographs of those errors normally to poke fun at their poor grammar: illiteratebusinesses.ca, funnytypos.com, flickr.com/groups/spelling/, etc. Some of these sites have become so specific as to specialize in subcategories of grammatical errors. Sites such as apostrophecatastrophes.com and apostropheabuse.com, for instance, both focus on the wrong use of the apostrophe in public signs, whether anonymous or commercial.

Standard-free

The handmade or “office printed” look of everyday signs, their location, their mode of posting, i.e. the fact that they can be removed easily, all point to a mode of
production which does not see these signs as fully valid. They are not, in form, the same as sanctioned signs which are professionally printed on vinyl or aluminum substrate and glued, cemented, or screwed in on their support surfaces. They remain what and where they are only insofar as their design signals their removability and temporary nature. They are tolerated.

Part of the problem is that they do not fit in the legal culture of sign production and display. They do not correspond to building code or safety code requirements. They are not mandated by law and carry little legal weight. Legal tort cases and debates over liability may hang on the presence or absence of warning signs, on their legibility, on the specificity of their language making the manufacturing and designing of some signs a matter of legal and financial importance. By contrast, anonymous signs follow no legal guidelines and are not held to any kind of standard. Their design reflects, therefore, neither the standards of professional graphic design practice emphasizing legibility, originality, or commercial credibility, nor other “non-creative” standards guiding sign-making. Everyday signs fail to uphold many of the safety, accessibility, or equal-opportunity laws of the societies that create them. As warning signs, they provide limited legal protection. In most cases they are designed and positioned with the assumption that they can be seen by standing individuals with a certain level of fluency in the dominant language of their environment, assumptions which legal frameworks of accessibility for instance try to change.

On formal, linguistic, and legal grounds, anonymous signs appear defective. They are poorly produced using cheap materials. Not only do their means of
production—common paper, laserjet ink, office pens, markers, etc.—afford limited opportunities for quality graphic design work, they also guarantee that they will fade or tear quickly. What is more, their layouts show an inversion of the rules of visual composition, of balance, and contrast. Where simplicity is expected, they show signs of complexity and confusion with conspicuous display faces and overly illustrative clip art where professional designers would prefer proven classical typefaces and, in some cases, smart visuals. Where sophistication is desirable, they are banal or simplistic: their layouts are either exceedingly straightforward or chaotic showing no ability to find harmonious or dynamic relations with the format and proportions of the paper they are printed on.

Their language is sometimes subject to ridicule. Whether words are misspelled or misused, sentences poorly punctuated, or just clumsily phrased, anonymous signs, most of which were, in fact, properly written, are expected to be informal when not semi-literate. More importantly, while their linguistic failures are debatable, their shortcomings in another system of rules, that of law, are easier to recognize. In a culture where adherence to safety and labor law is not optional, they stand as peculiar exceptions in work environments designed to implement and enforce these standards.
CHAPTER 4: SIGNAGE AND SOCIAL ORDER

The value of anonymous signs can easily be dismissed on technical grounds. They can be said to be formally, linguistically, and legally inadequate. Based on a set of objective parameters, parameters I tried to derive from what could be called standard practices—professional norms of good design, accepted conventions of proper written English, legal standards—everyday notes appear unprofessional, unsophisticated, and careless.

This chapter will expand on this analysis by deconstructing the logic at work behind this form of technical or objective rejection of anonymous signs. I will question some of the assumptions these objective parameters make about what is desirable in signage and graphic design. I will establish that these criteria serve, in fact, to justify disregard for the cultural space and practices these signs make visible more than for the signs themselves.

Materiality

*Old and Unchanged*

The modes of production of anonymous notes make them particularly vulnerable to aging. They are fixed to their support using temporary or easily removable means. They are often found in areas of high activity—appliances in shared kitchens, doorways, etc.—and are thus exposed to constant wear and tear. The paper they are printed on is usually light office-grade paper which absorbs moisture and curls or ripples easily. The overabundance of taping and laminating observed does reduce the amount of tearing or staining but laminated signs come loose, bend, are amended much like non-laminated
signs. Thus signs of aging—stains, torn edges, curling, handwritten comments and annotations—become as much a part of the look of these notes as any other aspect of their design (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Typical wear and tear on a sign in a kitchen.

Everyday signs, therefore, are visual reminders of the fragility of designed objects. They spoil the illusion that the fate of the places where we live, the objects that we own, and perhaps also the physical beings that we are, may be spared from aging or relieved from it through association with the new. Where design self-servingly touts
the merits of a glossy, fresh, rejuvenating aesthetics, anonymous notes speak plainly of a material world where degradation is the norm. Worse, and paradoxically, they also show signs of endurance which guarantee that they will remain looking old for long periods of time. They fade and are torn but often perdure where they were originally placed offering to anyone who notices the vision not just of aging but of its permanence. What has aged remains looking old and what we may wish would have disappeared long ago is still with us. This phenomenon undermines not only the cult(ure) of the new in design but also one of its fundamental modes of operation. Graphic design relies on the idea that it can provide creative solutions where they are needed. Anonymous signs however show that transient solutions, quick fixes, can last and that designers’ ability to find new solutions is not always necessary. Not only, then, is the aesthetics of the old and the worn-out exposed for all to see, old everyday notes also defy the promise of functionality of the new.

*Soft Labor and Evident Materiality*

In spite of their quasi-invisibility as object of (graphic) design, anonymous signs manage to make themselves visible in their materiality. In bearing marks of their aging, for instance, they show themselves to be fragile but persistent. But that is not all that they show. The making process of the sign is also visible in the materials used and in the use that is made of them. Nothing about letter-size paper, tape, pushpins, or markers is complex or rare. Nothing about the way they are used is unusual or impressive: flat adhesive tape is used to bind one flat object to another flat surface; paper is used as two-dimensional support for two-dimensional graphic objects, etc. Not only, therefore, are
the materials common but there is little to no attempt to hide what they are or subvert
the functions for which they were conceived.

It is easy to assume, therefore, that nothing about either their production
method or the signs themselves is impressive or complex. This absence of material
complexity becomes an absence of any complexity: a series of material and physical
steps is all that goes into making them. In other words, anonymous signs are the
product of a kind of soft labor which they do not or cannot hide. The labor is in the plain
mechanical nature of the making. The softness in the absence of physical strain put on
the maker.

By contrast, designers prefer to erase or transcend the material aspects of
their work. For professional designers this can mean that the production side of their
work is done by a separate set of individuals who take care of mechanical and material
“details” (printers, programmers, assistants, interns, etc.). It can also mean that any
physical sign of this production process that remains visible in the work is considered
a flaw. Anything from specks of dust on a photograph to poorly trimmed edges or
slight color shifts in ink can become ground to halt production. While it is difficult,
having internalized the rules that determine what constitutes professional quality
work, not to see these flaws as significant, it is worth considering that these rules make
materiality and particularly the elimination of some physical aspects of production what
determines the in-group or out-group status of individuals engaged in similar activities,
i.e. using visual and graphic means to communicate usable information to others.
This last statement should not be construed, however, to mean that designers are disengaged from all concerns with materiality. The opposite is true in fact. First, because, as I just explained, it is what allows them to define themselves as professional designers, and second, because it also allows them to qualify their relationship to materials, to production, and to labor. Designers can and do choose specific materials and processes to work with: expensive inks, quality papers, diecutting, embossing, sandblasting, unusual binding methods, etc. These methods differ from the means available in environments in which anonymous signs are made. There, mass-produced and cheap supplies are the norm and constitute the base on which everyday notes are constructed. Caring about the material aspect of their work is a way for designers to free themselves from the physical plane of design, a space where production methods and labor are visible and evident, only to return to it as masters of these means of production.

Thus materiality affects the way we perceive everyday signs and interpret their anonymity. It acts as a metonymic marker for the social environments which produced them. Products of soft labor, the simple mechanical production of objects requiring no physical strength, and evident materiality, the transparent use of cheap materials, these notes come to be associated with absence of power. Where power directs labor, lack of power labors. Where power deploys transformative force, lack of power produces weak objects. Where power can afford elaborate materials and processes, lack of power uses whatever material is immediately available. Where power chooses to be visible
or invisible, lack of power can only leave evidence of its presence and yet remain anonymous.

Placement and Marginality

The pattern I observed in the materiality of anonymous signs repeats itself in other aspects of their identity. If materiality influences the way we understand them and their relationship to their social context, their location and placement play a similar role. I have already noted that everyday signs are found predominantly in certain kinds of environments, namely in communal areas, near appliances, and around “nodes” of the infrastructural grid of a building: doors and doorways, light switches and outlets. All these places have set characteristics that they share which colors our perception of anonymous signs.

Doorways and communal areas tend to be “in-between” spaces. In the case of doorways, their “in-betweenness” is inherent to their primary function. They act as transitional areas between two spaces, out of one space and into another. Doorways are potent symbols for that very reason. They mediate between two spaces but also, metaphorically, between two states, two ways of being. They are literal and metaphorical portals. For that reason, doorways are not normally associated with long-term functions for which individuals might need to remain. When they do, they are generally associated with abnormal or marginal behaviors: blockades, as a sign of protest or tension; shelter, either from excessive forces of nature (rain storms, earthquakes, etc.) or from everyday exposure for the homeless; etc.
Communal areas (staff kitchens, public restrooms, break rooms, hallways etc.) are less transitory in nature but can still be considered “in-between” spaces. Their liminality resides in their intended function which, for all of them, is to act as secondary spaces to a primary function. In other words, office buildings where the primary designated function is conducting business may contain such secondary spaces but only as a form of accommodation to the people engaged in their primary tasks. In a university environment, teaching facilities (classrooms, labs, studios, etc.) and offices might be the primary focus of a given building but that building will also have spaces fulfilling intermediary functions (kitchens, bathrooms, locker rooms, etc.). Moreover, these secondary functions tend to be associated with domesticity: cooking, dressing, washing, etc. “In-betweenness” is reinforced, then, by the intrusion of personal/familial/private functions with public/communal spaces.

Irrespective of their “in-between” or transitional status, both doorways and communal areas serve important social functions. Both are spaces where people interact in ways not fully regimented by the primary function(s) of a building. In a staff kitchen for instance, people from different areas and with different occupations and backgrounds will meet to fetch or prepare food, work on the same tasks together, regardless of their position in an organization. In hallways and stairways where motion is the primary mode of physical interaction, the static hierarchical order embedded in the architecture and interior decoration of a building—corner offices, expensive-looking furniture, privacy or lack of privacy, centrality vs marginality, etc.—is temporarily revoked. Not only then do people meet and interact in these in-between
environments, they do so according to social rules that become much more fluid than in other “primary” spaces.

“In-between” spaces, therefore, disrupt the visual, linear, hierarchical logic of order and management commonly embodied in architecture. Not coincidentally, architects have devised ways to reestablish hierarchies. Hence, for instance, the difference between service entrances, service elevators, etc. Hence, beyond architecture, uniforms and special terms of address which serve as a movable systems of order and hierarchy. Nevertheless, “in-betweenness” finds way to insinuate itself where it may not belong. Anonymous notes are closely associated with that process. They, like the spaces in which they are found, blur the lines between signage as a surface where structured, visual language speaks with authority and signage as means of informal, “less-structured,” domestic, sometimes humorous, transgressive language speaks. The voice of everyday signs is not the authoritative voice of management sanctioned by architecture. It is the voice of a secondary order of use patterns, collective ownership and actions, and intimate or domestic gestures stripped of their power.

In many ways, “in-between” spaces where, as I have mentioned in the case of doorways, marginal functions can take place, are marginal spaces themselves. Like the margins of a book, staff kitchens, bathrooms, and break rooms are often located around and outside of the main focus of a building. Façades, impressive lobbies, theatrical staircases, and other such devices which architects use to direct our gaze rarely link up directly with marginal spaces. Those are normally relegated to the back side of a building, lower floors, and secondary levels of circulation. Those architectural margins,
like the margins of a book, are spaces where primary and secondary purposes meet and where the order inherent in primary spaces—three-dimensional for architecture, two-dimensional for books—breaks down. There, the phrase “annotative design” introduced in the introduction takes on its full meaning. The process of annotation which happens in a book, this process of collaboration between writer and reader, of co-elaboration of meaning resulting from the overlaying and overlapping of ideas, can be said to happen in space and to be conditioned by the space in which it happens. Like notes in the margins of books, anonymous signs can act as markers of this process and as identifiers of the spaces in which it happens.

**Situatedness**

What the preceding discussion shows is that space is an essential component of how we interpret signs. This should not be understood simply to mean that space provides a context and that context is an additional piece of information one needs to understand a sign. What I mean instead is that the function of a sign as well as its use-cycle—its lifespan from the moment of its creation to the moment it falls off the wall and all the possible moments in between when it is covered, reattached, written over, annotated, etc.—are a product of the space in which and for which it was created. Space/place, function, use over time, and form are deeply connected to one another. The deictic language, binding strategies, and placement of anonymous signs are some of the clues that I have used to uncover the mechanics of this connection.

Like materiality and marginality, situatedness, the bond between everyday signs and their environment poses a problem to some of the principles of design and
graphic design. When graphic designers talk about the rules of design, those rules usually exclude context. They are meant to apply in most environments, under most circumstances. Rules of proportion, order, legibility, contrast, or grouping are thus presented as true and universal. Geometric proportions for instance, like the golden ratio and others, are touted as unshakable foundations on which to design. Arguments for such ideas are often based on a certain set of assumptions about where universal truths come from and what embodies them.

Nature and natural sciences, studies on vision and perception are called upon to create the intellectual scaffold sustaining ideas of universal design. Nature is presented as a creator of patterns and the human eye and brain as privileged organs receptive to these patterns. The growth pattern of a nautilus shell for instance, the canonical example of the presence of the golden ratio in nature, is used to show that mathematical pattern which we can recognize and demonstrate visually are everywhere present in nature. They are the tautological proof that abstraction, the creation of forms derived from mathematical or geometric modelling of physical, natural models, is itself an independent, observable phenomenon which designers must imitate or learn from.

The problem with this line of reasoning is that abstraction is not an independent phenomenon or ability but the result of an intellectual process of structuring of our understanding of our environment. Abstraction and the rules of design dependent on it cannot be considered inherent attributes of nature unless we already agree on a definition of what nature inherently is and on the means to determine which facts support this definition. In other words, the growth patterns of the nautilus shell, while
perhaps real in the sense that they can be observed, gain their significance only if one subscribes to the belief that they are the nature we ought to turn to to find order, and that there is meaning to derive from accounting mathematically for this particular geometric and visual phenomenon. What rules of design would we derive from studying the electrical signals emitted by fish muscle contractions, or the color palette perceived by bees, or the imperceptible sound butterfly make when they clap their wings? What if the nature we abstracted forms from were constructed using rules radically different from the ones we use now and which presuppose visual order?

Paradoxically, nothing speaks more directly of the bond between graphic design and ideas of universal visual order than design’s focus on white space. First, the spaces of design are conceived as blank. Most design work begins in fact by establishing a canvas which must always be free of any preexisting elements: a new sheet of paper, a new digital document, a white wall, etc. As the work progresses, much attention is given to the proper management and architecture of this blank space. Margins, exclusion zones for logo, gutters in grids, and frames act as its guardians separating what goes in from what must be kept out. What goes in, however, are not simply the visual elements of the design process, i.e. type, photography, illustration, color, etc.. It is also the rules that guide the organization of these elements. White space is the conceptual plane in which those rules apply. Metaphorically speaking, therefore, the reason so much attention is given to white space in design is that preserving it is synonymous with preserving the logic of abstraction that produces design. The space of the universal is
the absolute white space of the new design, a space in which no other kind of competing logic can exist.

White space and universal rules of design are one and the same. They are two facets of a single process: decontextualization. They produce a visual and logical space in which design exists and functions according to its own rules. By contrast, anonymous signs exist primarily in context and in a visual and logical space which is not their own, which they borrow or squat. Once again, the concepts of margins and marginality become relevant. Margins belong to the order of white space and the visual logic of design. Marginal notes, annotative design, occupy that space and corrupt the order of design. It is an intrusion not only on the visual order designers are told they bring to the world but also on the abstract space of order.

In the universal space of design, everyday signs reintroduce contingency, proximity, and embodiment, notions which are difficult to reconcile sometimes with graphic design. They appear in one kind of space, employ visual strategies of that space but end up creating another one opposed to it. In visual, hierarchical, abstract space they introduce deictic, embodied relations belonging to a logical realm—private, domestic, changing—that clashes with that of the primary order of architecture, design, and the type of functional projections they make.

Time-bound

Situatedness is not confined to space, however. As I have already shown, materiality, the material makeup of everyday signs, betrays a relationship to time different from that of more standard practices of graphic design. First, because it
fails to hide marks of its own aging, and second, because it shows that temporary solution, even as they age, maintain a certain level of functionality. Anonymous signs defy common expectations about aging and the ability of aging objects to serve their purpose. Graphic designers too have to account for the passage of time on their work and its effects on form but again do so through abstraction. Similar to the space-based abstraction I have just discussed, they use another system of abstraction which is time-based.

Timelessness, the idea that some of the formal attributes designers impart their objects can withstand the changes of taste over time and remain, thus, outside of time, is often considered one of the highest levels of achievement of good design. Timeless classics are celebrated, collected, exhibited, written about, and copied. Museums are busy managing their timelessness by both preserving their physical appearance and reiterating their importance to the canon by which timelessness comes to be defined.

Like the visual abstraction of pure form, or the decontextualization of designed objects in space, this process of detachment from time is absent from everyday signs. They are not designed to be timeless. They bear the marks—tears, annotations, overlapping, overlaying, etc.—of time passing. When they are no longer usable, they are replaced by other signs which may or may not perpetuate the forms used in the original signs and make no attempt to function outside of their time context.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) theorized that taste—aesthetic preferences and modes of cultural consumptions—is structured by the socioeconomic conditions from which we experience and make sense of culture. For him there is a close connection, therefore,
between our relation to material constraints, time one of them, and our aesthetic judgements. He writes:

The principle of the most important differences in the order of lifestyle and, even more, of the ‘stylization of life’ lies in the variations in objective and subjective distance from the world, with its material constraints and temporal urgencies. Like the aesthetic disposition which is one dimension of it, the distant, detached or casual disposition towards the world or other people, a disposition which can scarcely be called subjective since it is objectively internalized, can only be constituted in conditions of existence that are relatively freed from urgency. (p. 376)

When timelessness, used to signal detachment from time, is evoked in matters of taste—to distinguish one type of object from another for instance—what is at work is a metaphorization of needs and power where power is equated with the ability to distance oneself from material necessities. The taste of those who can afford to be in control of their time and their material needs reflect a similar detachment from time and matter. In this respect, anonymous signs and their “timeliness” are bound to time passing and, by analogy, to time managed, time objectified in the service of others.
CHAPTER 5: VISUALISM AND EVERYDAY LIFE

In this chapter, I propose to examine again the contrasting systems I have discussed, the abstracted system of graphic design and the time- and space-bound systems of everyday signs. This time, however, I wish to look at how each one relates to other frameworks presenting similarities in their relation to space, vision, process, and abstraction. I will focus on two in particular: Johannes Fabian’s visualism and the concept of everyday life articulated by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau.

Visualism and Spatialization

In *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian (1984) introduces the term “visualism” to “connote a cultural, ideological bias toward vision as the “noblest sense” and toward geometry qua graphic-spatial conceptualization as the most “exact” way of communicating knowledge” (p. 106). Fabian is particularly interested in how visualism relates to anthropology and the assumptions embedded in the visual tools and procedures (charts, tables, grids, etc.) anthropologists have developed to work in the field and report their findings. Though focused on anthropology, what Fabian describes transcends in fact anthropological research. It is part of a process he calls the “spatialization of consciousness” (p. 111) which pervades Western thought. For him, this process is tied to deep historical connections between rhetoric and science and the use in rhetoric of visual and spatial metaphors to organize arguments and present them in an intelligible, memorable, and persuasive manner. Hence, Fabian explains, the “rhetor’s art consisted in his capacity to present to himself the temporal flux of live speech as a spatial topography of points and arguments” (p. 111).
What Fabian describes amounts to a form of visual architecture onto which arguments and concepts are projected. This process, he claims, became ingrained in the minds of Western scholars as they evolved the methods that would later support the development of the scientific method and as they devised means of educating new generations of scholars. From the art of convincing in oral debates, to the art of teaching using the new instruments which became available during the Early Modern period—not the least of which, the printing press—the spatial partition and visual representation of knowledge became the paradigm through which Western society made sense of the world. Citing Walter Ong, Fabian illustrates how printing, the visual arts, and science united around visualism (p. 115):

Spatial constructs and models were becoming increasingly critical in intellectual development. The changing attitude manifested itself in the development of printing, in the new Copernican way of thinking about space which would lead to Newtonian physics, in the evolution of the painter’s vision climaxed by Jan van Eyck’s use of the picture frame as a diaphragm....

Fabian's point is not simply that knowledge made visible became a substitute for all knowledge in the West but that this process of “spatialization” also involved the creation of systems of spatial order and, with them, of visual devices embodying that order. Diagrams, charts, tables, trees, maps, grids, indexes, etc. became the instruments of this new intellectual culture looking for means of presenting knowledge in an abstract form. Multiplied and amplified by the ever-evolving ability to mass produce textual and graphic material after the “invention” of the printing press in Europe in the
mid-15th century, their hold over Western thought grew stronger still with the ensuing rise of literacy and, later, with national education policies. Structured, visual, spatialized knowledge became the standard by which all other forms of knowledge were to be interpreted, reformulated, and judged. Structured, graphic, spatialized devices used to present this knowledge in print became the standard by which authority and credibility came to be established.

Although Fabian attempts to trace the history of visualism back to rhetoric and oral culture, Walter Ong (2002), on whose work Fabian’s argument partially relies, directly correlates the spatialization of knowledge with the development of print. In *Orality and Literacy* he uses the difference between lists and charts as an example of the progressive entanglement of visualism, its graphic devices and print culture. Alphabetical lists, he argues, work by spatializing sequences (of letters and words) and are found in the early days of literacy where they are used as mnemonic devices in poetry. By contrast, “charts, which range elements of thought not simply in one line of rank but simultaneously in horizontal and various cross-cross [sic] orders, represent a frame of thought even farther removed than lists are from … oral noetic processes....” (p. 98). They are “a result not simply of writing, but of the deep interiorization of print” (p. 98). What Ong points out with this example is that as the logic of this system of spatialization developed, it evolved into a self-referential abstract system. Its original connections to the sequences and the imagined architectural structures through which and in which it arose faded and was replaced progressively by its own systems of visual
abstractions such as the multidimensional spaces of charts or the infinite spaces of Cartesian grids.

As I have previously noted, visualism is a pervasive phenomenon. Although Fabian is interested in its consequences in anthropology, others have made similar points in other domains. In visual arts, Rosalind Krauss (1979) noted the prevalence of grids in Modern art for instance. She traced its ancestry back to Early Modern German and Italian studies on perspectives and to 19th century treatises on optics. In the latter context in particular, Krauss asserts that by “its very abstraction, the grid conveyed one of the basic laws of knowledge—the separation of the perceptual screen from that of the ‘real’ world” (p. 57). Like Ong, Krauss reintroduces the idea of an abstracted visual plane removed from the physical experience of “the real world.” Her interest in the “conditions [that] combined to precipitate the grid into a position of aesthetic preeminence” (p. 64) are particularly relevant to our study as it mirrors our own interest in the aestheticization of spatial graphic devices by graphic designers and their marginalization of annotative design practices.

In yet another area, biology, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1979) provided further proofs of the importance of abstracted graphic devices to the visualist scaffolds of Western thought. In Laboratory Life, an ethnographic study of the life of a biological research laboratory, they established the fundamental importance in scientific practices of the process of abstracting empirical knowledge into written and visual forms. They
focused in particular on what they named “inscription devices” (p. 51) which they defined as “any item of apparatus or particular configuration of such items which can transform a material substance into a figure or diagram which is directly usable” (p. 51) by members of the laboratory. Thus any machine or recording equipment which outputs data, as lists, tables, charts, or diagrams, belongs to that category. Latour and Woolgar’s insight with respect to inscription devices was that they turn matter into abstract, symbolic, graphic systems. Moreover, they argued, much of the work of scientists is to take these visual representations and work with them as if they were working from matter. They explained that an “important consequence of this notion of inscription device is that inscriptions are regarded as having a direct relationship to the ‘original substance’” and that the “process of writing articles about the substance thus takes the end diagram as a starting point” (p. 51). Hence the work of scientists and the establishment of scientific facts rests, in large part, and as theorized by Fabian, on a system of graphic devices derived from a long process of spatialization and visualization of knowledge.

Finally, let us consider Henri Lefebvre’s (1991b) analysis of the concept of space and its own entanglement with abstracted spatialized knowledge. Lefebvre’s The Production of Space examines in great details the evolution of the concept of “space” and theorizes that social space is defined by three types of operations: perceiving and experiencing space, conceptualizing space, and creating and living in a semantic,
encoded space. One aspect of this triadic relationship that Lefebvre examines is the connection between physical space, the “practico-sensory realm” (p. 200) of the body, and representations of space or in space. His interpretation echoes Fabian’s analysis of visualism. Lefebvre finds that visual projections of space undermine the physical experience of it (p. 200):

[The geometrical and visual space of modern architecture] has an analogical affinity with the space of the philosophical, and more specifically the Cartesian tradition. Unfortunately, it is also the space of blank sheets of paper, drawing-boards, plans, sections, elevations, scale models, geometrical projections, and the like. ... A narrow and desiccated rationality of this kind overlooks the core and foundation of space, the total body, the brain, gestures, and so forth. It forgets that space does not consist in the projection of an intellectual representation, does not arise from the visible-readable realm....

Here Lefebvre is preoccupied with the same tension between abstracted, visual representations and physical, social experiences that elicited Krauss’s reflections on the grid in Modern Art, Ong’s and Fabian’s interest in lists and charts in social sciences, and Latour and Woolgar’s analysis of the construction of scientific facts via inscription devices. His criticism of visualism is particular in that, by virtue of its intention to provide a general theory of social spaces, it extends to nearly all domains of social life including sciences and arts. Only Latour and Woolgar in their scrutiny of the social life

5 Lefebvre himself calls these three operations "spatial practice," "representations of space," and "representational spaces" respectively and the spaces they define "the perceived, the conceived, and the lived." (Lefebvre, 1991b, p. 33 and p. 39)
of a laboratory come close to the kind of analysis Lefebvre provides. They too express an explicit interest in the consequences of the spatialization and visualization of knowledge on society as a whole. In Latour and Woolgar’s case, that concern is directed at a fundamental component of our intellectual environment: the establishment of facts and the processes that enable society to determine what it holds true about itself, its members, and its environment. For Lefebvre, Latour, and Woolgar, as well as for Ong, Fabian, and Krauss, what we know and what we see expressed in graphic form are inextricably connected. The order of the world is the order of the two-dimensional space of the graphic devices we use to create this order.

Everyday Life

Parallels between Latour, Woolgar, and Lefebvre are not limited to the range and implications of their work. All three are equally interested in social practices and how they affect systems of knowledge. For Latour and Woolgar, it is the everyday life of a scientific institution and the ordinary tasks of scientists and technicians that provide a telling contrast to the principles of scientific research. They note and comment on the comings and goings of individuals in the various sections of the lab, their face-to-face conversations and their phone exchanges, their different levels of access to equipment, reference material, and facilities. These mundane acts, unspoken rules of behavior, and ad-hoc adaptations to these rules contrast with formal explanations given by scientists and others of how scientific work supposedly happens. As Latour and Woolgar (1999) summarize, “our discussion is informed by the conviction that a body of practices widely regarded by outsiders as well organized, logical, and coherent, in fact consists
of a disordered array of observations with which scientists struggle to produce order” (p. 36). That struggle Latour and Woolgar refer to is reflected in the social practices observable in and out of the laboratory where the fluid world of human interactions shape scientists’s abilities to construct facts and create order.

Lefebvre is equally invested in understanding that struggle between abstracted, spatialized order and social practices. In *The Production of Space*, he speaks of the necessity to include bodies, their physicality, their range of motion, in any discussion of the nature of social space. “Though definable in ‘purely’ mathematical terms – as applications, operations, transformations or functions – [symmetries] are not imposed upon material bodies … by prior thought. Bodies … produce space and produce themselves” (Lefebvre, 1991b, p. 171). Social practices, therefore, are not abstract practices but are determined by gestures and marks made in space. The gestural and mark-making abilities of humans are, for Lefebvre, some of the most basic ways in which bodies qualify space. He evokes, for instance, marks “made by living beings with the means readily available to them, notably excreta such as urine, saliva, and so on” (p. 174). Gestures and marks, primal and more socially elaborate ones, are for Lefebvre what defines humanized—as opposed to abstracted or symbolized—Man. The “space” in which that essence “is made real through action and in practice” (Lefebvre, 1991a, p. 159) is everyday life.

For Lefebvre and, later, for Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, everyday life becomes a key concept in their effort to articulate the relationship between ideology, social order, and social practices. Lefebvre’s approach is broad as he seeks
to define everyday life as an instrument of political sociology against the alienating effects of both capitalist and communist ideologies. Thus he claims that “the substance of everyday life – ‘human raw material’ in its simplicity and richness – pierces through all alienation and established ‘disalienation’” (p. 97) Certeau, who shares Lefebvre’s aversion of dogmatic thinking, develops Lefebvre’s theory into a study of the disruptive power of everyday practices. Walking, talking, cooking, and reading in particular are some of the examples he uses to demonstrate the subversive nature of everyday life.

Certeau sees everyday life as a space of behavioral, social and cultural “systems of operational combination,” “ways of operating” (Certeau, 1984, p. xi) which combine to create an oppositional force to the systems of control imposed on society by various forms of power. Following and expanding on Lefebvre’s terminology, Certeau names these “ways of operating” “tactics” and the systems they interact with “strategies.” Thus, in two of the most famous examples from The Practice of Everyday Life, he opposes, first, architecture and urban planning, the strategic use of space in which the hierarchical order of society is reflected, to walking and wandering the city, the tactical (mis)use of that space by pedestrians, flâneurs, and revolutionaries, and second, writing and sanctioned textual interpretation to reading and the free and personal interpretation of texts.

Certeau develops many of the same themes already mentioned in previous examples of critiques of abstracted, spatialized forms of visual communication but presents them in a dialectic relationship. To architecture and its plans, maps, and grid—“the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye” (p. 93)—he opposes walking,
meandering—“a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language)” (p. 98).

Thus spatialized knowledge is confronted with a form of response which brings its own spatialization, one driven by use, physical motion, and individual acts.

Parallels begin to emerge between the object of this study on the one hand, anonymous signs and their relationship to graphic design, and the opposition between everyday ways of operating and a visualist system of order on the other. What Fabian, Ong, and others describe is a system of visual representation of knowledge and information relying on the metaphorical use of architectural and geometric spaces followed by an intellectual internalization of this metaphor. This “spatialization of consciousness” evolves into a belief system in which those metaphorical spaces become productive, coherent, self-referential spaces which compete, ideologically, with the physical space of everyday experiences. These abstract spaces, the “out-there” in which scientific facts, according to Latour and Woolgar, are made real by the internal logic of scientific standards, are no longer, therefore, simply spaces on which to project ideas. They also serve as normative models by which ideas but also behavior and practices are framed and judged. “Out-there” is no longer secondary to here-and-now but comes to define it.

The tools used in these normative operations, the graphic devices of visualism, reflect this historical ideological development. With their emphasis on linear order, compartmentalization, and positional hierarchies, they embody the spatial, geometric, and architectural metaphors of visualism. Graphic design is one of these tools and
much of the professional standards I have already discussed relate directly to these metaphors: hierarchization of content, visual architecture of a page according to linear and geometric principles, use of mathematical ratios derived from natural proportions presented as facts, “white space” becoming synonymous with abstract space, etc.

Graphic design thus maintains and perpetuates, at its own level, the order of visualism. It creates its own abstract space, its own “out-there,” which is a fragment of a greater abstract space, that of modern science, arts, politics, religion, etc. to which it is related not only in a historical sense but in an ideological sense as well.
CHAPTER 6: THE SPECTER OF ANNOTATIVE DESIGN

With Latour and Woolgar’s, Lefebvre’s, and Certeau’s related assertions that everyday practices define a particular cultural “space,” one that is not built on abstraction but created by accumulation of recurring experiences and by the marks that they leave, I propose that anonymous, everyday signs, and annotative design in general, are expression of that “space” of everyday life. This chapter will focus, therefore, on defining that relationship and examining how anonymous signs relate to everyday life as defined by Certeau in The Practice of Everyday Life. Four aspects of his analysis are particularly relevant to my analysis: visibility, discursivity, activity, and legality. All of them reflect the tensions that exist between visualist strategies and annotative tactics, tensions that arise from the former’s attempts at policing the latter and the latter’s challenges to those attempts.

Visible/Invisible

The first term of this series, visibility, is of particular interest as it addresses directly the notion of visualism. Where visualism describes a system centering on the visual and spatial ordering of knowledge and its modes of graphic representation, vision and visibility naturally play an important role. The kind of visibility Certeau describes, however, is qualified by its relationship to space and the spatialization of the gaze. For him, strategies produce visibility, their own and that of objects they seek to control. They create the conditions in which they can see and be seen, and through which they can be interpreted. Referencing Foucault, Certeau calls it a “panoptic practice” which “proceeds from a place whence the eye can transform foreign forces into objects that
can be observed and measured, and thus control and ‘include’ them within its scope of vision” (Certeau, 1984, p. 36). Strategies do this by aligning with the hierarchical geometry of abstract spaces and with its projections onto physical spaces created by architecture and design for instance. This visibility describes, therefore, an ability to be seen by the sight which dominates the world ruled by spatialized knowledge. By contrast, for Certeau, invisibility is the inability to mobilize this same sight. Drawing on his central military metaphor, he explains that, unlike a strategy, a tactic is “a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision,’” “a form of legerdemain” (p.37). If it is visible, it is only as trace—echoing Lefebvre’s ideas of traces, gestures, and tracks—camouflaged form, “multiform and occult postulate of productive activity” (p. 35). Its ability to be seen is in fact so tenuous that it may “become invisible in the universe of codification and generalized transparency” (p. 35).

The notion of transparency, which Certeau introduces in his analysis of visibility and invisibility, calls up a recurring theme of discussions of graphic design. At least since Beatrice Warde’s 1932 essay, *The Crystal Goblet*, transparency is seen as an essential sign of quality in design work. For Warde and her followers, design serves its content best when it becomes an invisible vessel which shapes what we see without changing its meaning. In her argument, she implies that content and form are separate entities and that good design occurs when that separation is no longer meaningful because form becomes imperceptible and only content appears to remain. Thus, good design hinges on the ability of designers to make the elements of form, i.e. the material components of design (paper, ink, binding methods, the labor that goes into
production, etc.) and its structuring devices (proportions, grids, etc.), disappear. What Warde and others call transparency, therefore, is a quality obtained through a process of structuring of meaning, in form, resulting in so complete an alignment with other complementary, dominant structuring practices as to erase any traces of that process. What remains perceivable is formal compliance with those visualist practices presented as normal, natural, and clear. Transparency is not, therefore, the same as complete invisibility since it is dependent on our ability to identify its naturalized effects. But it is different from visibility in that it does not show itself but merely hints at its own presence. All the graphic devices of visualism (grids, tables, maps, charts, etc.) can act as structuring visual agents whose material presence transparency conceals. Grids, for instance, produce spatial order on a page without making themselves visible. They structure meaning without revealing their presence.

I begun this study by stating that everyday, anonymous signs were invisible because we often ignore or dismiss them. Paradoxically, their materiality, the signs of their production which they cannot hide, and their linguistic and physical connection to their environment make them intrude upon our field of vision and, therefore, also makes them plainly visible. Following Certeau, I can say now that what defines their relationship to visual perception is not simply visibility and invisibility but opacity and transparency. Everyday signs do not produce their own visibility or invisibility because it is produced for them by the dominant visual culture of design that determines the criteria of what is visible and invisible. These criteria, in turn, are tied to the notion of transparency and the use of the transparent devices of visualist thinking. For appearing
in marginal spaces, removed from central positions; for rarely making use of abstracted, spatialized graphic devices—grids and the absolute frame of white space in particular; and for detracting from those signs that do follow the spatialized rules of design, everyday signs can be both visible and invisible but never transparent. They are opaque.

Discursive/Silent

Discursivity, taken here to mean the ability to produce or become discourse, is another feature of spatialized knowledge and graphic design which defines annotative design. First, I must note that in spite of the visual, graphic, and iconographic foundation on which graphic design rests, there is no significant difference between the visual culture of design and the language-based culture sometimes associated with discourse. Following postmodernist ideas of discourse, I do not wish to limit it to language but to keep it open to the structuring and exchange of ideas in many forms, including visual. Certeau's theory allows us to consider this connection further. As the previous section already showed, his analysis of the differences between strategies and tactics transcends the difference between their modes of expression. The close relationship between strategies and discursivity is not bound to the type of strategy one observes but to the operational modalities of strategies in general. Hence, again, Certeau finds equations between architecture, medicine, writing, sciences, and warfare. All of them define similar domains which they regulate and from which they constitute alternative ways of operating as marginal “non-domains” to annex or control.

In relation to discourse specifically, Certeau notes that when Enlightenment philosophers imagined a new society where learned individuals combined knowledge of
arts and sciences, they also defined the realm of everyday practices “as a folkloric region or rather as an overly silent land, still without verbal discourse and henceforth deprived of its manouvrier [(day) laborer] language as well” (p. 69). Later, he contrasts Foucault’s idea of “panoptic apparatuses” of control to “many other series [of practices] which, pursuing their silent itineraries, have not given rise to a discursive configuration” (p. 47). These, and other examples from Certeau’s text—consumers as “silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality” (p. xviii); reading as “silent production” (p. xxi); etc.—reflect his idea that tactics are “silent” or non-discursive. They do no produce discourse in the sense that they do not appear to try to determine the meaning of their own gestures or turn these gestures or themselves into subjects of discourse related to other existing subjects.

I have already noted in chapter 3 that anonymous notes are not part of the discourse of graphic design. They are not normally included in discussions of design or included in the professional practices of graphic design as material created, entered in competitions, or taught for instance. When they are, it is usually to act as counter-examples or as “outsider-examples” of non-design. By doing so, graphic design, as a field of professional knowledge and practice, affirms its own legitimacy by granting and denying entry into graphic design discourse and by setting the parameters by which suitable candidates for inclusion into this discourse are judged. Consistent with the internal logic of strategic control, what is deemed suitable is the ability to reproduce those rules of inclusion and exclusion including visibility/transparency, discursivity, etc. For being “outside” the visualist framework of transparency, annotative design
is not recognized as graphic design. This exclusion, then, is manifested as absence of production of discourse on annotative design as graphic design, a silence which is read as another reason for further exclusion. In the case of everyday signs, this manufactured non-discursivity is exacerbated by the fact that most of them are anonymous or without traceable author(s)—first because few, if any, are signed, and second, because there is no established form of documentation of their history, no contract for their design, no budget drawn for their printing, no trace of their disposal, etc. Without recognizable authors in an environment where standards of literary and print culture make individual or institutional authorship a condition of discourse, anonymous signs seem all the more silent and deserving of their supposed silence.

Active/Passive

Within the dialectic framework of strategies and tactics, the production of discourse and the production of visibility, i.e. the use of spatialized strategies of discourse and presence, should be regarded as active and productive. The kinds of activities they denote are those activities that are aware of their own productive powers and aware of the strategic use they can make of them. Hence, for instance, we see architecture as that which drives the production of buildings, cities, interiors, etc. We recognize it as a productive field of knowledge. Linguistics, to use another example, produces our knowledge of language by establishing rules by which we understand language and procedures driving the handling of those rules. By contrast, walking
through a building or a city is not generally accepted as producing anything and neither is everyday speech with its varied inflections, accents, turns of phrase, etc.

Certeau’s point, however, is that, for not being recognized as productive or active, these ways of operating are not passive either. He describes their particular and varied forms of production in many ways, as “clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning,’ maneuvers, polymorphic situations, joyful discoveries” (p. xix), “manipulating and enjoying” (p. xxiv), “an ‘ordinary’ art” (p. 28), “‘popularization’ or ‘degradation’” (p. 32), “taking advantage of ‘opportunities’” (p. 94), etc. The two most significant labels Certeau uses to describe the active/productive aspects of tactics are “making-do” (p. 29) and “poaching” (p. 165). The former term is particularly appropriate to describe annotative design practices, their materiality, and their connectedness to their environment. Annotative design is characterized both by its use of common materials, particularly office supplies and equipment, and by how it “binds” to its surroundings using a limited but specific range of tactics. Anonymous notes are made and attached to their support with whatever is immediately available—marker, letter-size paper, desktop computer; tape, clips, pins.

The result of this ad-hoc assemblage is not nothing, however. The act of putting together a sign, hanging it, making it available for others to see constitutes a
positive act of production—of visual content, of behavioral cues, of social standards, of alternative order etc.—albeit one which does not present itself as an autonomous, productive field of knowledge or practice. Before *The Practice of Everyday Life*, architects⁶, anthropologists⁷, and folklorists had noted that everyday life and its modes of operations were capable of producing a “popular culture.” That culture, however, had tended to be associated with an Other remote in time (folklore) or in space (colonial or rural anthropology)⁸. Certeau himself remarks on the historical weight of these types of approach when he notes for instance that tactics are confined to a “folkloric region” (p. 69). With and after *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a new generation of authors developed more dynamic and inclusive theories of popular culture in which common, everyday forms of cultural expressions were presented not as remote, inferior, or derivative but as pervasive and productive. Stuart Hall (1977), John Fiske (2010), and Henry Jenkins (1992), for instance, turned to youth culture, television, and fan fiction respectively for examples of active readings and repurposings of mass-produced cultural products (clothing, pop music, television series, etc.). These later interpretations are not devoid of their own analytical biases, particularly when they overemphasize the role of everyday life and popular culture as a counter-weight to capitalist consumer culture.

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6 For studies of popular culture and vernacular architecture, see for instance Rudofsky (1964), Boudon (1979), or Venturi, Scott Brown, & Izenour (1977).

7 “Making-do” is the English translation of Certeau’s “bricoler.” The French term is also famously associated with anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s notion of “bricolage” or cobbling together of myths from other readily-available notions and beliefs.

8 There is a third element to this equation of cultural remoteness: gender. The cultural production of women has historically been associated with folklore or confined to an anthropology of domestic spaces where women, it was assumed, naturally belong.
Nevertheless, they provide detailed examples of the constant interplay of consumer and popular cultures, mainstream and counter-cultures, and mass and niche cultures. They also challenge the myth of an amorphous folk, national, or ethnic culture—ever a substrate for a higher culture to come—and propose to look at culture as a dynamic and integrated system, one in which consumption can be an open-ended productive act.

In spite of their “invisibility” and their lack of inclusion in graphic design discourse, anonymous notes, like other forms of annotative design and other practices identified as “folkloric” or as elements of “popular culture,” have tangible effects on our environment and our culture. Two are easily identified: their ability to correct design problems cheaply and their capacity to transform anonymous objects into discursive ones.

_Palliative Objects_

The environments in which we live and work are imperfect, not because they fail to achieve perfection, but because they are dynamic and entropic. Buildings age and we remodel them⁹; software becomes obsolete and we update it; appliances break down and we replace them; visual identities look dated and we redesign them. The world is in a constant state of change and design is one of the processes we use to try to bring order to it and mitigate the effects of change. But design too, as a discipline and as a creative force, is subject to entropic forces. Even at its best, design can only produce something

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⁹ Steward Brand’s *How Buildings Learn* (1995) is a fascinating essay on the evolution of buildings after they are built. Though focused on architecture, its central argument about the normality of change and the necessity to build with and for it apply to (graphic) design as well. It informed much of the following discussion of the corrective ability of annotative design.
valuable—functional, new, delightful, challenging, etc.—some of the time. Most of the time, the design process can no more guarantee the quality of its output than it can the durability of its best products. Even the best design fade and fail eventually.

In this context, where the failure of design over time is normal, annotative design plays an important role. It mitigates the effects of failure. Many of the signs I documented directly address this aspect of the dysfunctional life of design, usually by pointing out corrective measures users can take to carry on with their asks or by showing what can be done in anticipation of impending and recurrent failure. “Please use other door” allows circulation in and out of a building to continue when doors and locks break. “If [flush does not shut off], please contact facilities management 593-2929” simultaneously warns of a possible problem and provides a solution. Signs with arrows directing visitors to mailboxes or bathrooms in office buildings compensate for faulty architectural logic and failing wayfinding systems which place frequently used services out of view and leaves a certain class of users—receptionists, administrative assistants, janitorial staff often—with the responsibility of designing their own solutions to these problems.

Not only is annotative design a form of palliative design, but it fulfills that function cheaply. As I have shown, it is defined in part by its use of local and common resources (making-do with office supplies in the case of anonymous notes). Yet it can correct the behavior or address the malfunction of pieces of equipment, or indeed entire buildings, orders of magnitude more expensive than its own cost of production. The low-cost, corrective power of annotative design makes it more than a curious
phenomenon occurring on the margins of design. It is an essential aspect of the full cycle of design and use. Without it, the cost of design increases and without user-designers, professional designers would find themselves under much greater pressure to succeed. A less charitable reading of the same situation would argue that, while decrying annotative design, designers actually offset part of the costs of design by relying on its palliative capacity, effectively turning annotative design into a negative externality for consumers.

**Discursive Objects**

Not all annotative design is corrective or palliative, however. It can also act as a means to capture other elements of experience and use we want to communicate. It can act as a repository of procedural and social knowledge attached to an object or a place. This aspect of its functional profile is transformative since it gives a voice and a memory to our environment and turns mass-produced, monotone objects or spaces into individual, discursive objects. A microwave which expresses in its engineering and design the values of the company that produced it and that of the institution that bought it can become, with an anonymous warning note taped to its side, a singular microwave recording past experiences — of burnt food, of conflicts over it, etc. — and the particular modes of interaction of its users.

The discursive nature of annotative design is not limited to its ability to capture fragments of personal and communal experiences, however. It can also hints at entire systems of scheduling (“After normal business hours...” near a door), of safety procedures (“Test monthly” near an eye wash stations), of taxonomy (cat and
squirrel clip art on a sign about animals getting in), of purchasing policies (“If you need paper for your office or lab, please go to your department office”) and budgeting (“Use sparingly” on expensive equipment switch), of task structuring (“Not for general use” near a computer), of call routing (“dial 9 before your seven-digit local number” near a phone), etc. In those cases, the discursive power of annotative design stems for its ability to signal areas of contact or conflict between everyday ways of operating and the spaces in which they function. Thus, anonymous notes provide verbal and visual cues of the presence of such areas by leaving marks of practices and behaviors that take place in them and which account for their particular nature. In doing so, they draw diagrams of the relationship between organized systems and communal ways of operating. They create maps of social practices expressed not in Cartesian coordinates but in a discursive, situated, visual language of deictic symbols and formulaic language. This partial plotting of the social landscape, of its structures and modes of operation, is reminiscent of Lefebvre’s idea of mark-making: bodies moving through space leave marks which, taken as a whole, define territories. Marks left by discursive objects—everyday, anonymous signs or others—delineate the space of everyday life (the space of tactics) and the porous border of legitimate discourse, of established fields of knowledge, and of norms (the space of strategies). They plot the marginal spaces where competing yet complementary systems of values meet.

**Legitimate/Illegitimate**

Aside from “making-do,” “poaching” is another major theme and recurring word in Certeau’s inquiry into the peculiar agency of everyday practices. With it, he
captures three essential features of everyday ways of operating. The first one, which I just mentioned, is its productive aspect: in the act of poaching, someone benefits from getting something out of a guarded area: the poacher gets wild game; the office worker doing personal work on company time does something he or she could not have done otherwise. The second one, is the close connection between, or interdependence of, strategies and tactics: poaching requires guards and guarded areas to exist as poaching; personal work on company time relies on the compartmentalization of time and the objectification of time and people as manageable resources. The resultant and third feature is the creation of legal discourse to regulate the productive potential of everyday practices and their relation to the strategies they circumvent. Thus, taking wild game from a guarded area can be defined as poaching, a term which we understand to imply transgression and an order of right and wrong in which the guilt of one party and the legitimacy of the other are made evident.

Whether he uses the word “poaching” or writes about “camouflaged transgression” (p. 54) or “economic diversion” (p. 27), Certeau is committed to the idea that everyday ways of operating have a transgressive potential which counters the
order of established fields of knowledge and practice. Although this idea has often been construed to mean that everyday tactics are antagonistic, a pervasive form of sabotage, Certeau himself, in spite of his frequent use of military similes, does not focus on this particular aspect of the relationship between strategies and tactics. For him, tactics are not simply a matter of counter-culture or illegality in relation to a legal system. Mundane, legal acts—chatting, cooking, reading, etc.—are included in the subtle dynamics of transgressions he defines. What matters, then, is not whether a particular action is legal or not, but what comes to be defined as the norm, who has the power to make that judgement, and how it comes to be made. Thus in this study of annotative design, it is the relationship of anonymous notes to normative practices of design and communication that interest me, not their legal status.

Everyday signs are, in fact, of dubious legal status. First, because they exist in an environment of signs regulated by laws—safety warnings, accessibility notices, etc.—which they often ignore and break. Second, because their language sometimes reflects an awareness of a legal structure of management which they mimic, parody, or perhaps impersonate. Finally, because of their anonymity and the undocumented

10 Normative behavior is not only expressed in terms of legality. Moral, religious, or medical language can take the place of legal discourse. Jenkins (1992) explains for instance that the use of "fanatic" to designate sports fans developed at the end of the 19th century when sport was starting to become a regulated spectator event and the behavior of some team supporters was regarded as excessive. It is still used today to denote the behavior of those whose consumption of various forms of entertainment (theater, music, sports, etc.) exceeds what is expected of them, often crossing into free-form, productive territories like fan-fiction, etc.

11 Taking notes in a library book is often regarded as breaking another set of rules and conventions. By extension, annotating any book can be regarded as transgressive although this has not always been the case. On the history of marginalia see Jackson (2001).
context in which they are created, everyday signs are non-entities and excluded from legal practices. But as I have just noted, legality matters most as a marker of a larger struggle over norms and order. Looking at annotative design practices, I showed that form, materiality, placement, and the use of spatialized graphic devices are elements of this struggle and that graphic design is one of its instruments. Marginality is one of the essential concepts of this dialectical relationship. If poaching is a form of transgression into a guarded area, a crossing of a border into a forbidden territory, then the area that defines this border is also the area that defines this transgressive act. Thus, the margins on a sheet of paper or the margins of society, are border areas where what is acceptable and what is not come to be debated and defined. Writing on the margin of a book, posting a sign on the “margin” of a building, in secondary spaces away from primary central spaces, or sticking a note on the side of an appliance is a transgressive act irrespective of its actual legal status because it crosses a visible or invisible line in an environment created—designed—to follow and affirm a spatialized logic of order and norms. It is always an invasive act.

Everyday, anonymous signs register as a spectral presence in our environment. Like spirits in ghost stories, they inhabit a space which is not theirs, which they do not control and, yet, to which they are connected. Liminal creatures, they haunt our hallways, doorways, and break rooms but lack any ability to expand beyond those spaces to become signage systems or evolve into an autonomous visual language. We may see

12 The word margin derives from the Latin word margo/-inis meaning “edge” or “boundary.” The word mark derives from the same root. Making a mark—writing, printing, taping—implies setting a boundary and creating a margin.
them and read what they say but they are barely visible, only opaque, and seem to have nothing to say other than what is written on them. Finally, by attaching themselves to objects and spaces to which they do not originally belong, they trespass on a material world which acknowledges their presence only as a form of absence or lack of body, voice, or will.

However, unlike the fictional world of ghosts, everyday, anonymous notes are products of a social and cultural environments where visibility, discursivity, passivity, and legality are not naturalized qualities but expressions of ideologically determined values. Annotative design, which, in this study, stands for the form- and mark-making process belonging to the spectral world of everyday ways of operating, Certeau’s tactical space, is not ghost-like. It is made ghost-like by a competing system, that of abstraction and spatialized knowledge of which graphic design is a product and a producer. The preceding chapter had already noted the opposition between those two systems, the “out-there” of visualist thought and the here-and-now of every day life. This chapter showed, however, that the relationship between abstract and dematerialized out-there on the one hand and here-and-now on the other is presented in reverse. Out-there becomes real and here-and-how becomes ghost-like. Visualist space becomes the norm, the space of a dominant ideology controlling discourse in its varied form, including discourse on what constitutes reality or factuality. This same normative, dominant discourse confines the space of everyday life to marginal spaces and disputes the ability of everyday ways of operating to produce anything, a functional category whose
importance it determines by making commodification a central element of its system of values.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Much of this essay on anonymous notes and annotative design has been devoted to analyzing a type of object which is not ordinarily considered worthy of attention. I have tried to show that the peculiar state of invisibility—opacity—and silence in which everyday signs find themselves was the result of discourse on design which favors certain visual and graphic practices over others, notably practices derived from a dominant current in Western thought to present knowledge in abstract, spatialized, visual forms. I focused in particular on the opposition between what I called standard graphic design and annotative design, and I explained how the former constructed the formal and functional deficiencies of the latter. This opposition, however, is not absolute and total. It is, in fact, a by-product of the coexistence of these systems. The visualist system of graphic design is a part and an agent of everyday life. Annotative design uses and changes the work of designers and relies, therefore, on the existence of that system and its products. One system needs the other and functions in relation with it. Moreover, these competing systems only exist as systems in the plane of analytical discourse. Outside of that plane, everyday life is not a system. It is the sum of individual experiences and practices, the marks they make on the environment over time, and the long-term shaping of that environment which happens as a result. Visualist thinking is not a established system either. It is the result of a cultural evolution which favored a series of technological means of communication—writing, charting, indexing, mapping, printing, tabulating, etc.—over others and built on that evolution. While systems of thought were built upon visualist thinking (the Enlightenment, the
scientific method, Modernity, capitalism, etc.), systems which are essential parts of the intellectual makeup of contemporary Western society, visualism itself has never existed as an independent field of knowledge.

The original assumption of this thesis was that there is a connection between marginalia, notes in books, and everyday, anonymous notes left on a certain class of communal objects and spaces. I have shown that this connection exists metaphorically, in how both forms of annotations relate to two- and three-dimensional abstract spaces. I emphasized in particular the important of the concept of marginality to understand how placement in relation to primary, central spaces determined the modes of operations of annotative design. I have also shown that a connection exists functionally, in the ability of either forms of annotation to capture the exchange of ideas and values which occurs on paper, in writing, and in space, in ways of operating. Marginalia bind to paper and write a new text with the text of the book. Anonymous notes bind to objects and spaces to write meaning into their environment, acting as palliative and discursive semantic markers.

The text that these notes write, however, is not solely the product of a literary culture. It is also tied to a form of performative writing based on physical presence, movement, habits, comings-and-goings, etc. It is written in how we get lost in a corridor, wander when our food is being heated in a microwave, forget to knock on doors, or jiggle a handle that gets stuck. It also written in our responses to these situations and the means we find to communicate them to others. Unlike commercial signs which sometimes address similar issues—common practices such as entering and
exiting, washing hands, wearing protective gears, etc.—everyday signs relate to a given place in ways that commercial signs cannot. They are designed to address and make use of their immediate environment and, therefore, are formally and logically connected to it. The performative language of annotative design, unlike that of commercial design, is directly rooted in and shaped by its physical and social environment.

This hybrid status between visual signs and context-bound, performative-semantic markers makes everyday, anonymous signs products of a kind of design pidgin, an intermediary form of visual expression between social spatial practices (speaking, walking, opening, etc.) and the visual culture of graphic design (typography, illustrative iconography, signage, etc.). As a rule, pidgins arise where speakers of different languages meet and form a new common language from two or more existing languages. Like other hybrid languages (dialects, linguae francae, creoles), pidgins are “contact languages” which, historically, have appeared in areas of sustained multicultural trade and in colonized territories. Annotative design also owes its existence to the fact that two different semantic modes of operation, graphic design and everyday practices, come in contact in environments where conditions are ripe for this encounter to be productive. In spaces where everyday ways of operating challenge visualist strategies—where personal, domestic, or communal values carry more weight than public, collective values; where opportunities arise for annotation and appropriation—forms of expression evolved from and for spatialized abstractions—linearity, centrality, immateriality, timelessness, etc.—lose their semantic hold on the environment and its users. They break down, their totalizing
logic diminished by tactical ways of operating that undermine their discursive power. They remain present but only in partial form: as written language, as formulas, as tools and production methods, as incomplete strategies, as parts ready to be scavenged or, following Certeau’s terminology, “poached.”

This process of hybridization and its outcome, the pidgin of annotative design, pose a threat to established fields of knowledge like graphic design. They show that their wholeness and coherence are tenuous and that their borders are porous. They are tangible expressions of the fact that the values, aesthetics, practices, methods of a discipline can be broken down and changed, and that they are a collection of parts from which other objects can, and are, constructed. Consistent with the importance of spatial metaphors in visualist ideology, this perceived threat of destruction and hybridization also becomes spatialized. It is seen as a threat to territorial integrity, as an invasive crossing of borders. Hence, for instance, the space surrounding text and keeping its meaning whole is referred to as a border, a margin. Hence, also, the designation of pidgins as “marginal language[s]” (Romaine, 1988, p.24): languages of border areas where speakers of different languages meet, but also products of linguistic *bricolage* with grammar and vocabulary poached from multiple sources in disregard of their supposed integrity. This partition of metaphorical spaces, a process of naturalization of cultural landscapes, is reinforced by another act of delineation: the partition of people. Territories, even metaphorical ones, need natives, and margins barbarians. Thus, design creates and opposes two groups of people whose existence it conjures up to affirm its coherence. First, “creatives,” the natural designers who belong in the space of design.
Second, design’s outsiders, the speakers of “vernaculars”—localized languages and dialects—and the people of “popular cultures.” With this pseudo-linguistic order, some are granted fluency in the in-language and, as rightful speakers, a legitimate voice. Others are not and are confined to a separate language-space of which they become the natural population.

The geography of the visualist world, the world of graphic design, is built, therefore, on the rejection of a system of parts and hybridization. It has, at its margins, incoherent poachers and scavengers ready to tear everything apart. At its center, meanwhile, are those who try to keep the world whole and ordered, as it is meant to be, in their view. It is a cosmography of coherence and purity which posits a bounded universe revolving around the idea of creation, the notion that a single event can make something out of nothing, fully formed. Creation, therefore, is the defining act, the standard by which all other types of form-making activities are judged. It is a singular, perfect moment: one maker making one object at once. Any variation on this concept is a move away from the center of the universe it defines, a dangerous move towards chaos.

After having examined the modes of operation of everyday, anonymous notes and how they relate to other annotative practices, I suggest that we ought consider a different model, one in which singularity is no longer the mythologized norm of form-making, one in which the coherent center which anonymous signs supposedly threatened no longer exists, and one in which the narrative of creation and the natural, coherent order of matter that it brings no longer eclipses the observable effects of
long-term, performative, grounded, collective, anonymous processes. This new model emphasizes the connectedness of creative acts, the chain of people and events linking one form or one idea to another. It makes every creative act an annotative act.
REFERENCES


