# Position through iterating

Crow, D. (2010) *Visible signs: an introduction to semiotics in the visual arts.* Second edition. Lausanne: AVA.

Crow (2010) talks about the official and unofficial languages in visual arts, which are also applicable to bin signages. The symbol of three chasing arrows lining in a circular direction is often seen on official signs for recycling. At the same time, the icon of a person throwing litter into a bin is on signs for general waste. Some common official messages on bin signages include 'recycling only,' 'rubbish only' and 'no food waste'. Residents, the contributors of the unofficial language, often labelled their bins with their house numbers, phone numbers and sometimes a personal message for the waste collectors. One can learn much about the waste management system by dissecting and studying the communication and the relationships between these two languages.

I have extended this perspective to one of the most common packaging materials: cardboard. Because of its sustainability, cardboard has also become a symbol for recycling. In this case, I'd argue the official use of this material is packaging, and it carries the official languages of shipping carriers and recycling systems. Meanwhile, the unofficial use of cardboard includes placards and shelters for people who experience homelessness where the material becomes the medium for the unofficial signs and languages.
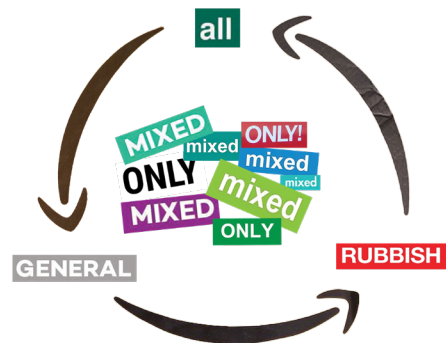
Pater, R. (2016) *The politics of design: a (not so) global manual for visual communication.* Amsterdam: BIS Publishers.

Though symbols are an essential visual aid in graphic design, they do not necessarily make information or the system in which they are embedded more accessible (Pater, 2016). Fugelsang (1982, cited in Pater, 2016) validates that, like reading text, image reading is a skill that needs to be learned. However, even for a generation that grew up with the internet, reading and understanding all recycling symbols can be a challenge. While recycling policies are localised, the products we consume and the packages that come with the products are internationalised, many of which are shipped by the multinational company, Amazon. Delgado (2023) points out that the resin identification codes, wrapped in the three chasing arrows symbols, have misled consumers into thinking all the plastics with this symbol will be recycled while only two of the resin types are recyclable. This misinformation works because we, as consumers, have been taught to read these arrows as a symbol of recycling, but can we unlearn what we knew and be re-introduced to the actual meanings and underlying system behind this symbol? By dissecting the recycling signs into colours, sentences, and eventually keywords, these iterations present how little information is given by these signs when the actual sorting and recycling process is complicated and arduous.

Kozole, E. (2021) *A book documenting all Slovenian logos that feature the national symbol of the country.* **Available at:** https://www.ljudje.si/change-2/arhiv-triglav **(Accessed: 18 April 2024).**

Through collecting over 400 logos of the most famous mountain, Triglav, in Slovenia, Kozole (2021) documented more than just variations of the national symbol, but also stories of the communities and the people of Slovenia as each logo carries a unique story of its own, but, collectively, they contextualised each other and pieced together the history and the contemporary image of this country. The power of a distinct and abstract symbol, such as the Triglav symbol and the recycling symbol, is that they are very memorable and recognisable (Pater, 2016). In the second set of my iteration, by gathering images of recycling symbols, recycling signs and the mediums of these graphics, such as delivery packages and bins, a basic structure of the waste management and recycling systems has been visualised.

Xu, B. (2015) *The Seven-Character Poetry Collection of Small Enterprises* **[Clothing labels and programming writing]. Beijing. Available at:** https://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/692?year=2015&type=year **(Accessed: 18 Apr 2024).**

Xu (2015) created visual poems with unique textual and cultural qualities by appropriating words and sentences from a collection of clothing labels. Though recycling labels are supposed to be more informational than visual, they have become a tool in building a brand identity associated with sustainability, accompanied by customised, illustrative icons. Meanwhile, the portion of text on all labels has been reduced as the icons take up more real estate, competing for attention in a graphic-saturated world. I started decoding the labels and sorting the design devices by colour, shape, icon, and text, and then I rearranged the text blocks to visualise the recycling process. The same method has been applied to the images of placards. To iterate these design elements further, I combined the text, icons, and symbols from both recycling labels and the protest placards to generate new signs that speak in an unofficial language.

DiSalvo, C. (2014) *Adversarial Design.* Cambridge: MIT Press. Available at: http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ual/detail.action?docID=3339433 **(Accessed: 21 April 2024).**

DiSalvo (2014) considered inquiry a process of producing a shape, or a material form for situations that are otherwise vague and confusing.

Through recreating symbols with actual packaging materials of Amazon, these iterations re-contextualised these three chasing arrows by visualising what is produced, used, disposed or recycled through our everyday purchases. What are the assumptions that are associated with these symbols, these materials, and the recycling infrastructure? Has the symbol been reappropriated into a piece of decorative design on a package from a visual aid to the recycling instructions?
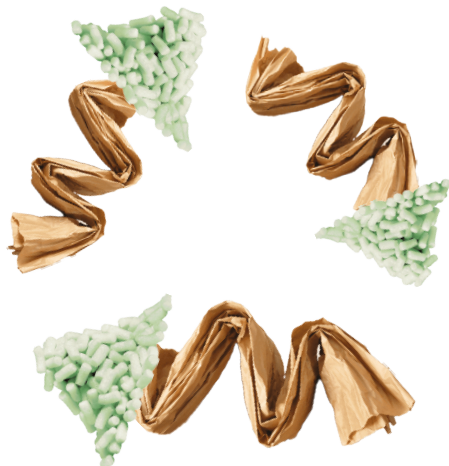
Blauvelt, A., Maurer, L., Paulus, E., Puckey, J., Wouters, R. (2013) Conditional Design Workbook. Available at: https://www.conditionaldesign.org/manifesto/ **(Accessed: 16 November 2023).**

Blauvelt et al. (2023) consider logic the tool for conditional design. When given a clear, logical framework, one can see and determine materials that should be used as input and ones that are to be discarded. If we look at the current recycling system in our city, using the approach of conditional design, what are the logic and the rules for things to be recycled? Consumers, waste management companies and policymakers may adopt different logic to what is recyclable and what is waste. And what role does a sign designer play in this process?

Cardboard is considered one of the most sustainable and recyclable materials; therefore, many cardboard boxes have been collected by bin workers and accepted into the recycling process. However, the recycling rate of cardboard is still not 100% because players in this system apply different rules when dealing with these materials. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (2022), some consumers dispose of cardboard as solid waste due to a lack of infrastructure or awareness. Some recycling workers discard recycled paperboard due to contamination. This set of iterations has not fully explored these rules, but I'd like to keep developing them in my next brief.

Additional reference

Delgado, C. (2023) *Why the recycling symbol is part of a 'misinformation campaign'.* Available at: https://www.popsci.com/environment/recycling-symbol-misinformation-greenwashing/ (Accessed: 18 April 2024).

Environmental Protection Agency. (2022). *Municipal solid waste (MSW) generation in the United States from 1960 to 2018, by material (in 1,000 tons).* Statista. Statista Inc. Available at: https://www-statista-com.arts.idm.oclc.org/statistics/185710/us-materials-generation-in-the-municipal-waste-stream-since-1960/ (Accessed: April 24 2024)

Line of enquiry

Is symbol a tool for simplification?
What is the context for this symbol?
What is the underlying structure of this symbol?
What are the assumptions that are associated with these symbols, these materials, and the recycling infrastructure?
What are the rules of recycling for consumers, waste management and policymakers?
Has the symbol been reappropriated into a piece of decorative design on a package from a visual aid to the recycling instructions?
What has been excluded in this process?
Can we unlearn what we knew and be re-introduced to the actual meanings and underlying system behind this symbol? How to re-imagine a 'universal' symbol and use it as a form of resistance or to reflect?
How could symbols communicate in an unofficial language? how could design generate new meanings with discarded items in an alternative way?