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Isotypes and Elephants: Picture Language as Visual Writing in the Work and Correspondence of Otto Neurath

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In 1920s Vienna, as part of the larger socialist experiment that earned the city the nickname 'Red Vienna', the picture language of Isotype was born. It was the invention of the Vienna Circle philosopher and sociologist Otto Neurath, working with a team of artists and researchers at his Gesellschafts-undWirtschaftsmuseum (museum of society and economy, hereafter GWM). Isotype began as the Vienna method of pictorial statistics, a means of making statistical information and comparison legible to non-expert and even semi-literate audiences through the use of pictures. Later, it became Isotype, an acronym for International System of Typographic Picture Education. Individual symbols or pictograms were made as ink drawings, then lino-cuts (later metal letter-press blocks). These were printed, cut out and pasted onto charts for display in exhibitions or for publication. A key innovation of Isotype was in the way it represented quantities as repeated pictograms of identical size, not as differences in size or volume. In this way Isotype made visual statistics measurable, because the number of pictograms could be counted and compared to the given numerical figures, but it was also far less dependent on written labels and contextual information than previous methods. Isotype was among the first standardized systems for representing social facts in pictures, and the elegance of its visual solutions arguably remains unsurpassed.[1] *[fig1]*

[1] On the importance of Isotype see Robin Kinross, 'On the influence of Isotype', *Information Design Journal*, 2, 11 (1981), 122-30; Michael Twyman, 'The Significance of Isotype' in

Though it had this specialized use, Isotype is sometimes described as the precursor of contemporary visual icon systems (used on toilet doors, and as road and airport signage). This claim is not entirely accurate insofar as Isotype symbols were always part of larger charts, maps and illustrations. Nevertheless, in his 1936 book, *International Picture Language: The First Rules of Isotype*, Neurath did connect Isotype with the emergent sign systems that were appearing in instruction manuals, on the street, and on the road.[2] Here Neurath explicitly presented Isotype as a language, comparing it to other artificial (and 'semi-artificial') languages such as Esperanto and Basic English. He was keen to emphasize its limitations, such as its inability to deal with emotional content, and suggested Isotype be considered as a supplement to, rather than replacement for, 'natural' languages. Until his death in 1945 he continued to stress that Isotype was not intended to be a 'quasi-language in full-dress'.[3]

In 1920s and 1930s Vienna, the primary use of Isotype charts was in specially designed exhibitions, alongside architectural models, maps and photographs. In The Hague, in the late 1930s, Isotype work for exhibition and public information continued, but commissions were rarer. In Britain, the Isotype Institute, established in 1942, gained much of its work through the company Adprint, a 'book-packaging' firm which designed illustrated books on behalf of publishers such as Penguin and Collins. The Institute produced charts for

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Graphic Communication through ISOTYPE (Reading: Reading University 1975), 7-17. For a history of the Vienna period, see Nancy Cartwright, Jordi Cat, Lola Fleck and Thomas E. Uebel *et al*., *Otto Neurath: Philosophy between Science and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[2] Otto Neurath, *International Picture Language: The First Rules of Isotype*, Psyche Miniatures (London: Kegan Paul, 1936).

[3] Otto Neurath letter to R.W. Moore, 23 May 1944. Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading, Isotype 1/10-11.

these books, but also made public-information leaflets and animated sequences for wartime propaganda films, as well as exhibition charts. If in Vienna Isotype had been primarily part of exhibitionary and statistical techniques, now through its use in a wide variety of books, and through Neurath's explicit promotion of it as a 'picture language', it began to be more connected with linguistics and literature.

Isotype's increased involvement in publishing and literature must have suited Neurath, who was a prolific writer and a keen reader. He wrote philosophical and sociological books and journal articles, and an extraordinary number of letters, as well as a popular book *Modern Man in the Making,* published in 1939 and illustrated by Isotype. Though never entirely fluent in English, he wrote in English and Basic English as well as his native German. He had no artistic training and his role in the production of Isotype was as the director of the various institutes and organizations. He negotiated commissions, instigated new projects, and gave public talks promoting and explaining Isotype. He also had a strong influence on the execution of projects and on establishing the basic principles and conventions they deployed. Several artists were responsible for the visual appearance of Isotype, but the one who had the greatest impact on its development was Gerd Arntz, who worked closely with Neurath from 1928 in Vienna and then in The Hague. Arntz's ability to condense the details of everyday objects into simple recognizable shapes and to convey social types through silhouette and line was evident in his own political prints of the 1920s. He gave to Isotype clarity and a modern style, but it was up to 'transformers' such as Marie Neurath (née Reidemeister) to mediate

between researchers and artists, planning the layout of charts in order to ensure they communicated information clearly and consistently.[4] *[Fig. 2]*

Although he did not consider himself an artist, Neurath commonly signed his letters with a cartoon of an elephant. These signatures were so distinctive that one obituary for Neurath, by Waldemar Kaempffert, was titled 'Appreciation of an Elephant' and began, 'Otto Neurath signed his letters to friends with the drawing of an elephant, usually cheerful, sometimes subdued. Now those brilliant letters have ceased'.[5] These signature drawings might be seen to constitute another picture language, insofar as Neurath uses them to communicate with his correspondents. Stylistically they differ very much from Isotype, not least in being rapidly hand-drawn. Recent studies have made much of the distinction between the flowing, expressive, hand-drawn line and the straight, unmodulated, mechanical line, associating the latter with Enlightenment notions of rationalization and progress.[6] This opposition may be complicated by comparing Isotype and Neurath's elephant, and by considering what, exactly, a picture language might entail.

Neurath set out some of his thoughts on picture languages in a book written in the last two years of his life. It was finally published in 2010 as *From Hieroglyphics to Isotypes: A*

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[4] For more on Gerd Arntz's work see Ed Annink and Max Bruinsma (eds) *Gerd Arntz: Graphic Designer* (Rotterdam: 010 publishers, 2010). For Marie Neurath's role as a 'transformer' see Marie Neurath and Robin Kinross, *The Transformer: Principles of Making Isotype Charts*, Hyphen Press, London, 2009,

[5] Waldemar Kaempffert, 'Appreciation of an Elephant', Survey Graphic, February 1946.

[6] See for example, Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007). In a conference paper on technical drawing, Frances Robertson argued that this view of the straight line originated in mid-twentieth century modernist theory. Frances Robertson, 'Marking the line: discourses of mechanical drawing in British culture around 1790-1830', paper given at *Orientations, Inaugural Conference of the International Society for Cultural History*, Ghent University, Belgium, August 27-31, 2008.

Visual Autobiography.[7] Here, Neurath describes Isotype as a system of modern hieroglyphics inspired by eighteenth-century military illustrations, pictorial atlases and encyclopaedia such as the Orbus Pictus and ancient Egyptian wall paintings. He was fascinated by the potential of pictures to communicate with clarity and affect, and interested in language and writing systems. This is evident in Neurath's philosophical work, especially in his logical empiricist opposition to metaphysical claims and his early practice of prohibiting himself from using certain words that he saw as obscurantist or quasi-theological. Like many of his contemporaries, Neurath was also interested in attempts to produce new artificial languages. He wrote *International Picture Language* in C.K. Ogden's Basic English: not an entirely artificial language but a radically simplified English. Neurath's interest in pictographic writing extended to Chinese writing, and this was part of his broader interest in contemporary Chinese culture, including philosophy and cuisine, and involvement in the China Campaign committee.[8]

Though Isotype's first context had been the social projects of Vienna's socialist city government, it is evident that Neurath saw Isotype as having a role in the context of the growing internationalist planning movements of the 1930s. On its migration to Britain in the early 1940s, Isotype was adopted by various groups that were adapting the pre-war vision of a planned society for the purposes of British social reconstruction, but also for a post-war,

[7] Otto Neurath, *From Hieroglyphics to Isotypes: A Visual Autobiography*, ed. by Matthew Eve and Christopher Burke (London: Hyphen Press, 2010).

[8] Neurath's involvement and interest in things Chinese is evident in much of his correspondence, especially in 1942-43. See the Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection at the University of Reading, Isotype 1/1-5.

post-Empire Commonwealth of nations.[9] *The Loom of Language* (1943) gives some clues as to the stakes for thinking about language in this period in Britain. This bestselling book was written by an acquaintance of Neurath's, the Swiss/South-African linguist Frederick Bodmer, and edited by Lancelot Hogben, who worked with Neurath on other publications. Commissioned for Hogden's series, *Primers for the Age of Plenty*, it was aimed at the 'home-student' and members of the Adult Education movement. It sets out to demystify language learning by showing the common roots of different languages and by explaining how traditional approaches to learning languages derive from an elite, academic approach rooted in 'the Latin scholarship of the humanists, and in the teaching of Greek in schools of the Reformation'.[10] The book demonstrates how the residues of past linguistic habits exist in contemporary writing and speech and can provide clues to the commonalities between languages, but Bodmer and Hogben make it clear that their sympathies lie with a standardization of spelling, and the pursuit of an artificial language for international communication. Their sympathies are clearly socialist; their vision is for a self-educating working class to play a central role in the construction of a democratic, rational and international post-war 'age of plenty'.

Neurath's political sympathies and ideas about language had much in common with this. So it is worth looking at what Bodmer tells us about picture languages. Bodmer writes of ideographic and logographic languages (such as Chinese writing and Egyptian hieroglyphics)

[9] Robin Kinross writes, 'The Isotype Institute fitted well into the project of social and political reconstruction in Britain, which got underway from about the time of its foundation'. Kinross points out that one of their early commissions was for a 1943 pamphlet publicizing the Beveridge report. See Robin Kinross, 'Emigré Graphic Designers in Britain: Around the Second World War and Afterwards', *Journal of Design History*, 1, 3 (1990), 35-57 (p. 44).

[10] Frederick Bodmer, *The Loom of Language: A Guide to Foreign Languages for the Home Student*, ed. by Lancelot Hogben (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1943), p. 36.

in which symbols that began as pictures had then 'lost their explicit pictorial meaning' and become logograms and ideograms that require a key to be interpreted. In Bodmer's view, the ancient picture languages probably became obscure and difficult to interpret because 'picture-writing was necessarily the secret lore of a priestly caste'.[11] Neither Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics nor Chinese writing initially had any connection with the sounds of speech, although Egyptian hieroglyphics eventually incorporated phonograms and the Japanese adapted Chinese logograms and transformed them into a syllabic script. One of Bodmer's claims is that Chinese people who speak different languages may read exactly the same scripts. This understanding of Chinese writing is one of the reasons it was of particular interest for internationalists in the period. Another reason can be found in Bodmer's claim that English is coming increasingly to resemble Chinese because there is a 'large and growing group of words which can be verbs, nouns or adjectives'.[12] This linguistic simplification was seen as significant in the search for new means of international communication and a tool in the democratization of knowledge.[13]

If Bodmer's text points to how hieroglyphic and logographic scripts might lend themselves to this political effort, it also suggests their inappropriateness by arguing that this was a secret code, intended to keep knowledge, and therefore power, within the circle of priests. The difficulty of deciphering ancient hieroglyphics in the modern period is perhaps testimony to the success of this strategy. Yet Neurath was not the only person to connect hieroglyphs with a modern, popular visual education. His acquaintances, Theodor Adorno

[11] Bodmer, *The Loom of Language*, pp. 57-58.

[12] Bodmer, *The Loom of Language*, p.125.

[13] For a discussion of European uses of, and assumptions about, Chinese characters and script in relation to Orientalism, see Nina Parish, *Henri Michaux: Experimentation with Signs* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), chapter 3.

and Max Horkheimer, made the same connection, but with very different conclusions. In the early 1940s, at the same time as Neurath was writing about Isotype as hieroglyphics in Britain, Adorno and Horkheimer were in the US, completing *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Hieroglyphics are discussed in the first chapter, which is in part an indirect critique of Neurath and the Vienna Circle, and in another chapter, not included in the published version, entitled 'The Schema of Mass Culture'.[14]

In Adorno and Horkheimer's argument, mass culture takes the form of images that parade themselves as natural, immediate and obvious, but that are an encoded means of domination: 'in the rulers' dream of the mummification of the world, mass culture serves as the priestly hieroglyphic script which addresses its images to those subjugated, not to be relished, but to be read'.[15] In the picture language of mass culture, images appear as 'neutral counters' to be read unreflectively, as mere signs: yet what they conceal is reification (described here as 'mummification') and domination. In other words, for Adorno and Horkheimer, mass culture communicates with images: these are hieroglyphics both because they make language pictorial, and because they operate as hieroglyphics did, not to disseminate knowledge and power, but to consolidate and preserve the social position of a few 'priests'.

In Bodmer's account, picture language becomes logographic as the priests increasingly attempt to maintain secrecy. Pictograms are accessible, because they resemble the things and

[14] This chapter was eventually published in 1981. It appears in English translation in Theodor W.Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.53-84.

[15] Miriam Hansen, 'Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer', *New German Critique,* 56, Special Issue on Theodor W. Adorno (Spring-Summer, 1992), 43-73 (pp. 48-49).

ideas they represent, but logograms and ideograms are cryptic, maintaining only traces of visual resemblance. Neurath recognized that the Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs worked in combination with wall paintings to form a complex picture-writing system. Some of the little hieroglyphic symbols derived directly from the wall paintings, and these were the ones that particularly interested Neurath. He was influenced less by the mysterious hieroglyphic script than by the communicative clarity and vividness of these images derived from everyday experience. Adorno and Horkheimer, on the other hand, relate the very clarity of the picture language of mass culture to the rule of a modern, capitalist 'priestly caste'. Adorno and Horkheimer generalize mass culture, discerning little difference between advertising, comic strips, and pictograms like Isotype. In a brief essay of 1944, entitled 'Picture Book without Pictures', Adorno referred to 'little silhouettes of men and houses that pervade statistics like hieroglyphics', and which, like the newspaper 'funnies' in his view, replaced aesthetic contemplation with by training people in a mode of visual reading that is instant and unreflective.[16]

Neurath emphasized the distinctive qualities and value of different media which 'ought not to be lumped together in one category'.[17] He too saw a connection between newspaper comic strips and Isotype, and on several occasions expressed interest in producing Isotype strips for newspapers. Yet it was in his correspondence, not in Isotype, that Neurath constructed a form of pictorial communication that shared the hand-drawn, fluid cartoon style of the popular comic strips. The signatures are informal, playful, and closely associated with

[16] Theodor Adorno, 'Picture Book without Pictures', in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974), pp.140-41. Originally published in 1951.

[17] Neurath, *From Hieroglyphics to Isotypes*, p. 99.

handwriting, and contrast vividly with the rigid elegance of Isotype. The elephant is an expressive character that changes according to the content of the letter, for instance, growing thin and surrounded by cactuses if the writer is in a tight spot, or using its trunk to offer flowers in love or gratitude, usually smiling with a raised trunk, but very occasionally with drooping ears and trunk, and a tear in its eye. By the 1940s, the drawings are quickly and confidently executed. The elephant always faces to the left, usually with an open smiling mouth, large cartoon eyes, two simple curves for the ears, and three toenails on each foot. Though the position of his trunk varies, and he becomes fatter or thinner in different drawings, the elephant's pose and the way it is drawn remain consistent. The drawing works successfully as a handwritten signature: repeatable, quickly executed and instantly recognizable. *[Fig. 3]*

This character was arrived at over the course of Neurath's correspondence.[18] It is used frequently in letters dating from after his arrival in Britain in 1940. Photographs and drawings of elephants appear in a collection of love letters written by Otto to Marie, during their internment on the Isle of Man in 1940-41 (they married on their release). The camp authorities appear to have imposed a word limit on these letters, which would have passed through the British censors, and it seems Neurath used the pictures to compensate for the restrictions on written expression. Though Neurath did have a 'proper' written signature which appears on some letters, much of his correspondence after 1940 is signed with the elephant and carries no written name at all. After leaving Onchan camp, he returned to the

[18] Marie Neurath possessed one drawing, a souvenir of the 1928 Press Exhibition in Cologne which may be by Neurath. This rather distorted elephant is seen from the rear, a pile of books upon his back, his trunk raised as if he is trumpeting. The drawing shows some attempt at realism that is not present in the signatures: there is laboured shading and modelling, and the air snorted from the trunk is drawn using nineteenth-century conventions. The Otto Neurath Nachlass, Vienna Circle Archive, Haarlem.

long-established habit of typing all his letters. In this context, the signature drawings add a personal touch. However, there was no mechanical means of making images as cheaply and swiftly as a typewriter prints text, and hand-drawn images also illustrate the typed newsletters that were mimeographed and circulated by internees at Onchan camp. Printed images appeared on business letters in the form of elaborate letter-headings, but these are fixed and unresponsive. Cartoon autographs are not rare, as many autograph books will testify, but the responses of Neurath's correspondents indicate that they were not usual or conventional. The elephant often attracted commentary. When one correspondent enquired why he depicted himself as an elephant, Neurath replied that he had gained that reputation 'because I am so capacious' – perhaps not referring to the fact that he was physically big, but to his reputation as a polymath.[19]

Neurath's German-speaking peers also used informal and affectionate animal symbolism. In his private written correspondence, Theodor Adorno referred to himself and his mother as hippopotamuses, and to Horkheimer as a 'mammoth'.[20] The common use of animal symbolism and personification in modern culture has been understood in various ways: as symptomatic of the modern marginalization of actual animals, as evidence of the enormous importance of animals to the ways in which we imagine ourselves, and as a means

[19] Neurath to Coppen, Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, Isotype 1/1-5.

[20] See Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno. Ein letztes Genie* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2003) and Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno. Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2003). Adorno's use of animal metaphors is discussed in a review of both books: Robert Savage, 'Adorno's Family and Other Animals', *Thesis Eleven*, 78 (August 2004), 102–12.

of negotiating the 'otherness' of animals and other human beings.[21] Animal drawings are also, of course, associated with children's literature and with 'light' culture and frivolity: in Neurath's correspondence the hand-drawn elephant lends a playful informality, and he used it to set a friendly tone in business correspondence as well as in correspondence with close friends. It is evident just how effective this is as a form of visual communication, as other writers, sometimes hesitantly, begin to draw in response.

For example, a letter written to a printing company, Hall the Printer, in February 1944, requests 3000 sheets of notepaper to be printed with Neurath's Oxford address as the heading. In the same brief letter he asks for tissue paper sheets to be used to cover the Isotype charts in transportation, saying 'We want to paste it on the upper edge of the card boards we got from you'. He ends the letter 'yours sincerely' and below that is a drawing of an elephant lifting a sheet of tissue to reveal an Isotype board beside it. Next to the board is a cat, his symbol for Marie Neurath. Here the signature works as a joint signature, indicating that the request is written by Otto on behalf of himself and Marie. It also illustrates and explains the tissue paper request. In another letter to Hall the Printer written two weeks later, Neurath reminds the company of his other request for 'the paper with my name and address on' and ends 'what can I do, without a "head"? Yours sincerely' and here is the elephant again, smiling as usual, and holding out a flower in his trunk. The sun is shining, but the elephant's head floats free of its body, which stands below it, in its usual pose, but with flesh and bones revealed in the cross-section of its severed neck. The sun, the proffered flower and the

[21] See for example, John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals' in *About Looking* (London: Writers and Readers, 1980), pp.1-26, and Margaret Blount, *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction* (London: Hutchinson, 1974).

elephant's smile, all indicate Neurath's good will and good humour, even in this decapitated state.

The printing company wrote back to say they were working on the notepaper. Nothing in this letter is particularly unusual or informal except the signature. In place of a signature is a drawing of a man, in hat, raincoat and pinstripe trousers, replacing the head on an elephant. The correspondence continued for some time: on 16 March, Neurath, still without his headed notepaper, asks 'How may I appear in society, without my letter head?' and an entirely headless elephant stands on its hind legs, with its front legs raised as if beseeching the printer.[22]

This example is not entirely unusual. Repeatedly, correspondents felt the need to comment on, or engage in, Neurath's practice of signing his letters with a drawing. Dorothy Woodman, author and secretary of the China campaign and the Union for Democratic Control, writes 'I can't draw elephants so I only send by substitute what I think is a very delightful card to you both'.[23] Here the elephant is seen as a picture-gift, which must be reciprocated. On 12 March 1941, the photographer Lucia Moholy writes to Neurath thanking him for a letter and expressing delight that he has survived the war in Europe: 'I hoped you may have been able to escape but not having heard from you all this time I had almost given you up'. She ends with a postscript, 'I do not know which animal would be the one to replace my signature – can you tell?! I enjoyed your two'. A month later she decides, and signs a letter to Neurath with her own animal picture, a long-eared cat seen from the back. Adapting his convention for the expression of good will, Moholy gives her cat a red flower, which it

[22] Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, Isotype 1/6-9.

[23] Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, Isotype 1/1-5.

holds with its tail.[24] Helen Coppen, a South African student at the Institute of Education, signs one of her earliest letters: 'Being a Westerner I must leave picture writing to the Chinese and sign myself very sincerely yours, Helen Coppen'. In their subsequent correspondence, she signs herself first 'Table Mountain', in writing, with an outline of the mountain over the words, and then eventually with a drawing of the mountain and no words. Neurath responds by omitting her name from his letters and addressing her with his own drawing of Table Mountain, elaborating her simple line by adding trees on one side and waves beneath.[25]

What is the relationship of this with the practice of Isotype? The signature appears on letters to do with the business of the Oxford-based Isotype Institute, which Otto and Marie ran together, as well as on Neurath's correspondence with friends and students such as Coppen. Since the content of these letters has often to do with Isotype, it is not surprising that many of the drawings incorporate Isotype-like figures. One example is a brief letter to Peggy Volkov, the editor of *The New Era in Home and School*, the London-based journal of the New Education Fellowship. Writing on 15 April 1944, Neurath expresses regret that Volkov had not advised him of the difficulties she had reproducing an Isotype chart in colour. He sets out some of the colour rules of Isotype: 'Blue is always used as a "speaking" colour and never used as a "text" colour in our charts… Black is text colour and symbol colour'. He ends the letter, 'Of course, I know there is a war on and everything goes on in a hurry, where periodicals are concerned. I hope all this strain is not endangering your recovery. With kind regards, yours sincerely,' and beneath, the elephant on the right, and on the left, a family of

[24] Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, Isotype 1/1-5.

[25] Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, Isotype 1/1-5.

Isotype figures: a woman with her arm stretched out to the left, a girl, and two young children.[26]

The New Education Fellowship was concerned with child-centred education, so it is possible that the cartoon Isotype figures represent Volkov's or the fellowship's protective role in relation to children. But perhaps most interesting about this example is the contrast between the emphasis on the rules governing colour in Isotype charts, and the improvisational signature. In another letter to Volkov Neurath speaks of her recent appendix operation and his own childhood appendicitis, and then depicts the elephant, smiling at a floating appendix in a jar, and below, Isotype-style infants sit on grass, with flowers growing between them.[27] Some of the most elaborate signatures appear in letters to the author and biologist Lancelot Hogben, the editor of the series of *Primers for the Age of Plenty* who later authored an Isotype-illustrated history of visual communication entitled *From Cave Painting to Comic Strip* (1949*)*. In the letters to Hogben, Isotype figures appear as circus tumblers, balancing on one another's shoulders, helped by the friendly elephant; Isotype diagrams of the workings of the ear are discussed, and then an anthropomorphized inner ear is drawn, as if singing to the elephant; political or social commentaries are thus made. One letter includes Isotype-style figures at desks, with the slogan 'the higher the seat, the lower the salary'. Often, the elephant is an instructor or guide, using his trunk to point. *[Fig. 4]*

In the signatures, then, Isotype symbols are allowed to do things which they were not allowed to in the context of the charts: to illustrate personal opinions, to tumble around playfully, and to symbolize in ways that were outside the possibilities of the charts. An

[26] Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, Isotype 1/6-9.

[27] Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, Isotype 1/6-9.

Isotype symbol of a child always represents a given number of children; figures are always equal size and arranged in rows; they do not hold hands like paper-chain people; and they stand for verifiable 'facts' not personal observations (however insightful) about things like the relationship of furniture to social position. The signatures have qualities in common with speech and writing that the picture-language of Isotype does not have: the improvisational and inventive quality, the ability to deviate from and within a given formula, as discursive, dialogic and intimate. This picture language is *scriptible* or writerly in Roland Barthes's sense, in that it invites and elicits responses in kind; it is participatory.[28] Anyone can do this, Neurath's signature seems to suggest, and perhaps the fact that his drawing is not particularly accomplished helps to encourage his correspondents to draw too. Isotype, by contrast, is an expert practice. As Marie Neurath wrote after Neurath's death, 'the writing of it was a very responsible and difficult job which can only be carried out by a group of experienced persons'.[29] The two approaches to a visual language could be seen to embody two opposing perspectives on language: one which holds that language is primarily creative and generative, produced 'from the grass roots up' and another which emphasises its rule-bound, systematic nature.[30]

Retrospectively, it may be tempting to read the signifying differences between the picture language of Isotype and the picture language Neurath uses in his correspondence in

[28] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970)

[29] Marie Neurath to Philip Dingle, Town Clerk of Manchester, 27 March 1947, Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, Isotype 1/1-5.

[30] This was politicised in V.N. Vološinov's 1927 critique of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics for placing too much emphasis on the system of language over living speech. Volosinov instead emphasised the competing meanings produced by different classes in class struggle. See V.N. Vološinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1973)

terms of fundamental differences in meaning between the mechanically produced and uniform, and the hand-made, uneven and expressive. After the war, several modernist designers and artists, including Neurath's close friend Josef Frank and the typographer Jan Tschichold, repudiated the modernist insistence on a uniform style, associating this with totalitarianism.[31] Isotype's standardized appearance has been linked with the popularization of Henry Ford's assembly line and F.W. Taylor's scientific management.[32] While Neurath himself had emphasized diversity and pluralism in early critiques of modernist design and Taylorist planning, Isotype was necessarily uniform. [33] As Neurath argued, a picture language sets out to be understood by everyone and therefore needs to be standardized, systematic, coherent and unified. Isotype grew from a particular cultural context in which to side with mass reproduction over individual expression was to commit to democratization, social renewal, and to socialism.

The GWM in particular, grew out of social activism and avant-garde experimentation. It employed successful artist-printmakers working as part of the modernist avant-garde. The GWM had connections with the Constructivist and Dada movements, and had exhorted the artist to be more like an engineer or factory worker, closing the gap between artistic production and mass reproduction. It had connections with the Bauhaus and with the Soviet

[31] See Christopher Burke's epilogue to his book on the typographer Jan Tschichold for a discussion of Tschichold's repudiation of his earlier work in *Active Literature: Jan Tschichold and New Typography* (London: Hyphen Press, 2007). See also Christopher Long's discussion of Frank's post-war anti-style of 'accidentalism' in Christopher Long, *Josef Frank: Life and Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[32] See Peter Wollen, 'Modern Times: Cinema, Americanism, the Robot' in *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (London: Verso, 1993)

[33] See for instance Otto Neurath 'The Converse Taylor System: Reflections on the Selection of the Fittest', in *Otto Neurath: Empiricism and Sociology*, ed. by Marie Neurath and Robert S. Cohen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973), p.133. Originally published as 'Das umgekehrte Taylorsystem,' in *Kunstwart und Kulturwart* (Dresden, 1917).

avant-garde, who were putting this aim into practice by placing art in the service of mass design. 1920s photographs of Arntz and his colleagues working at the GWM, in their white laboratory coats, bear strong resemblance to photographs of Constructivists at work in the same period.

Yet the institutes and museums that produced Isotype were small concerns, never factories mass-reproducing images. While individual symbols were hand-drawn then reproduced in multiples through lino-cut and letter-press, the exhibition charts made by the various institutes were assembled and pasted by hand. In these production contexts it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between manual and mechanical forms of production: the history of picture-making is a history of the use of technical aids, including pen and ink, rulers and scissors.

That Isotype charts can be read more easily than they can be produced has to do with the range of techniques deployed and the expertise required for signifying clearly and coherently in Isotype. This is underscored by a 1942 correspondence between Neurath and George Stevenson, medical director of the U.S. National Committee for Mental Hygiene. Stevenson had suggested communicating mental disorders such as 'gross distortion of ideas' by using wavy and dotted lines around a central figure, a symbolism that is completely incoherent within the context of the 'picture language'.[34]

Yet Isotype and the signature cartoon drawings are not as far apart as they might seem. Neurath maintained that while the making of Isotype charts may have been a difficult expert business, learning to read picture statistics meant getting involved in practices of

[34] George Stevenson to Otto Neurath, Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection, University of Reading, Isotype 1/6-9

communicating through pictures: to read we must also learn to write. His archive includes photographs of charts hand-drawn by Viennese school children, and in Britain he carried out similar experiments at Dartington Hall. His approach to this was informed by an understanding of child-centred education practices of Montessori and others. These had shaped the education delivered at the civic kindergartens of Red Vienna, and also possibly informed the practice of Isotype. Maria Montessori's approach to kindergarten education emphasized the early acquisition of literacy. Reading is learnt through writing and in visual and tactile ways: using cut-out sandpaper letters, children gradually form their own words, and through this begin to identify the words they see elsewhere.

Moreover, cartoons are not unrepeatable forms of individual expression, free from social convention. Like Isotype, Neurath's drawings follow a standardized format, with the same conventionalized symbolism used to communicate certain things (such as cactuses for 'prickly' situations, and flowers for love and affection), even if they are more improvised than Isotype charts. The GWM itself experimented with using cartoon-like drawings, as shown by a chart prepared in the early months of the museum, 'Police Action in Vienna in February 1925'. The chart resembles later Isotype charts in its linear layout, but instead of neatly separated and countable figures, the hand-drawn figures are brawling. Neurath's archive includes prints by George Grosz, which suggests he had an interest in Grosz's caricatures. However, Arntz reportedly criticized Grosz's use of caricature for conflating social types with physical types, by imposing a certain physiognomy on figures like bankers,

army officers and workers.[35] Neurath's own drawings never caricature people, but either render them as Isotype-style silhouettes and figures, or represent them as animals.

In *International Picture Language*, Neurath contrasted Isotype with advertising, trademarks and corporate logos. In advertising and corporate identity, pictures do not form a language, but mark distinction, competing with and outdoing one another: each picture 'has the tendency to put all such other pictures out of the memory of the onlooker'.[36] The picture language of the free market is chaotic and incoherent, yet it all functions in the same way, to impress itself on the viewer. If it repeatedly uses the same devices and techniques, it attempts to conceal this through novelty (as Adorno and Horkheimer noted).[37] Trademarks are recognizable and repeatable because they are acting as authentication, as a guarantee of the authorship of the product, and (increasingly) as an assertion of property rights.[38]

Signatures also authenticate, and monograms, which usually originate as names or initials given pictorial form, have close association with the trademark and logos of corporations, which are also often based on the initial letters of the company's name. In his obituary, Kaempffert compared Neurath's signature to James McNeill Whistler's butterfly monogram.[39] As Kaempffert pointed out, the monogram does not have the expressive variety of Neurath's elephant. Though the butterfly changed over time, and may have had some

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[35] Gerd Arntz quoted in Martyn Everett, 'Art as a Weapon: Frans Seiwert and the Cologne Progressives', online at *http://martyn.everett.googlepages.com/artasaweapon*. Originally published in *The Raven*, 12 (October/December 1990).

[36] Neurath, *International Picture Language,* p. 28.

[37] Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 123

[38] See Jane Gaines, *Contested Culture: The Image, the Voice and the Law* (Durham, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

[39] Kaempffert, 'Appreciation of an Elephant'.

expressive features (developing a sting, for instance), it remained a means to authenticate Whistler's work. Neurath's elephant does more by communicating his feelings, mood and character. Graphology might claim that a signature can also communicate character, a contentious claim, but even if it does, it does so in an unconscious and coded way, which only the expert graphologist can decode. Even this code, though supposedly directly expressive of character, can be learnt, as initiates adapt their handwriting to the character they want to project. Neurath's own interest in symbolism had to do with the explicit, convention-bound and conscious ways in which societies communicate. If a picture language was to communicate feelings (something he acknowledged Isotype could not do), it could not do so in a direct way, but through analogy (the elephant is sad, the elephant is Otto, therefore Otto is sad) or conventional symbols (such as the flower and the cactus). If the elephant signature communicates something of Otto's character, if for instance it suggests to us that he was an optimist, original, irrepressible, and playful, this assumptions also has to do with our interpretations of the cultural conventions surrounding letter-writing, signatures and the practice of drawing.

While his work brought him into close contact with both avant-garde experimentation and artificial language movements, Neurath's own drawings are very different from attempts to explore the potential of language and mark-making for expressing inner psychic states, and far removed from the idea of producing an entirely new, entirely rational international language. Nevertheless, and despite evident differences, the picture language which Neurath develops in his correspondence and the picture language of Isotype do share some common features. Both reject the reduction of pictures and writing to stamps of authentication or property, and instead, emphasize their communicative function. Both avoid encouraging a

physiognomic reading that might reduce people to visual types. Both aim to be easily legible by using recognizable and established symbols where possible.

When Neurath died suddenly in December 1945, Isotype continued. Out of financial necessity Marie Neurath was back at work in January, and over the next thirty years she ran the Isotype Institute, successfully adapting the method to the production of non-fiction children's books. But when Neurath died, 'those brilliant letters […] ceased' and the elephant died too. Far more dependent on one man than Isotype was, this picture communication ended, because Neurath's friends also gave up drawing on their letters. Affection was expressed in different ways, in writing. But a trace of the picture language remains in the nickname Helen Coppen continued to use for Marie Neurath: 'Dear brr brr', she wrote, a reference to the cat that Neurath had so often drawn to accompany his elephant.