

Developing Accurate Visual Conventions?

Karel van der Waarde

Five articles about pictorial materials that were published in Visual Anthropology Review were read with an aim to compare the research approaches of anthropology and visual communication design. This text focuses on three themes in the five articles that relate to pictorial materials: processes, terminology, and the objectivity of visual evidence. Several questions and uncertainties are very similar in both disciplines. It might be beneficial for investigations into visual communication design practices to consider the level of detail, a critical theory base, and reflexive positions that form the basis for the five anthropology articles. Both disciplines need to look at terminology and investigate the motivations and impact of pictorial materials.

Introduction:

A summary of the articles and a selection of themes

The initial challenge for this text was set by the editor of *Visible Language*, who asked authors to: “Write a short article exploring how 5 articles in the Visual Anthropology Review relate to communication design and communication design research.” The aim was described as follows: “The article can be critical—what visual anthropologists are misunderstanding about the visual culture designers produce, or supportive—how visual anthropologists’ understanding adds something important to our discipline.”

I’ve approached this challenge in three steps. First, I’ve summarized the five articles. Condensing these thoughtful articles into a few sentences can never do justice, but it might help readers to get the gist of these texts. Then, I selected a number of possible themes. As a last step, I discussed these themes and their consequences. The summaries of the five articles, in alphabetical order by original author, are as follows:

Zoe Bray (2015) described the links between “naturalist-realist portrait painting” and anthropology. Both approaches use a process to “apprehend the social world.” The result is an interpretation—a “thick description”—based on shared and accepted conventions and methods.

Haidy Geismar (2014) investigated the sketches of Arthur Bernard Deacon, who worked as an anthropologist on the island of Vanuatu in 1926–7. This essay provided a review of the role of sketching in anthropology and looked at cultural conventions and historical representational practices.

S. Lochlann Jain (2020) described the use of fine arts as an ethnographic method of analysis and communication. This essay introduces several projects as the author searches for alternative ways of presenting observations. It questions the dominance of texts as a highly standardized structure to communicate about anthropology.

Stephanie Sadre-Orafai (2016) provided a detailed description of how numbers were used in the fashion industry in New York between 2003 and 2007. These numbers relate to data about many categories of information: waistlines, ages, career length, and diversity of fashion models, just to name a few. Sadre-Orafai showed that these “objective indicators” are used by fashion agencies in rather unexpected ways, and mainly aim to “market and select models.” The article provides a background of the portrayal of “the extreme whiteness and thinness of models” by the fashion industry.

Jonathan Westin (2014) described the process of making illustrations about archeological research findings. Westin’s article describes the negotiations between archeologists and illustrators about shows the negotiations about uncertainty, interpretation of different materials, and visual conventions in visual representations.

These five articles in *Visual Anthropology Review* were used as a basis to find if designers and anthropologists shared assumptions about the benefits, aims, and risks of making and interpreting pictorial materials.

Of course, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is a wide range of different activities in both disciplines that do not necessarily relate to a single common standard. To try to provide concise definitions about these disciplines is probably futile, but it is possible to give some general indications.¹ Bray (2015, p. 124) described the goal of an ethnographer as “to understand social behaviour in context holistically” and “to accurately interpret how people give meaning to their lives.” The author stated that “a successful ethnography is one that provides a fair description of social phenomena in a clear and comprehensible form” (Bray, 2015, p. 127). Ethnographers and anthropologists are very careful not to influence or change the people or contexts they study. There is an active awareness of potential bias by personal characteristics and individual worldviews.

And that is probably one of the fundamental differences with visual communication design. Design always aims to be disruptive and affect knowledge, opinions, and behavior of people. Changing existing situations is seen as fundamental. The influence of individual characteristics on projects—“superstar designers”—is perceived by many to be a beneficial asset, although this is contested too.

¹ See, for example: <https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/ethnography>.

In order to provoke changes, it is essential for designers to know how people give meaning and behave. So, for both disciplines, it is essential to observe, interview, record, analyze, and communicate findings about groups of people. Both disciplines need to contemplate the balance between “objectivity” and “subjectivity,” and purposefully select what to focus on, what to include, and what to ignore.

Pictorial materials are produced and used by both disciplines to record and communicate about knowledge, opinions, and behaviors. Three themes came to the forefront after reading the five articles. These themes are unlikely to be representative and are certainly biased towards my own interests. They are:

- 1 Processes: how are pictorial materials made?
- 2 Terminology: what exactly are we talking about?
- 3 How reliable is pictorial material?

Several other themes might have been interesting to discuss as well. For example, the use of visual conventions, relations between texts and these materials, the impact on people who look at these, and different academic traditions could just as well have been selected.

Theme 1: Processes

All five authors seemed to agree that the making of pictorial materials is a step-by-step process. For example, Bray (2015, p. 126) suggested that spending a long time with a model creates a close relationship that leads to a more intimate, truthful, and “thick” and “deep” description than had it been done in just a few hours. Westin (2014, p. 145) described the development from “idea to form” in a visualization studio, and Jain describes the progress of a search to reduce the dominance of text-based essays.

The articles provided several reasons why pictorial materials are important for ethnographers and anthropologists. Visual research findings might reach a wider nonacademic audience (Jain, 2020, p. 216), painting is a process of producing a thick description (Bray, 2015, p. 129), and drawings might link the practical experience of being in Malakula with conversations about theory in Cambridge in the early 1920s (Geismar, 2014, p. 110).

However, there certainly is not a single accepted standardized process within ethnography. For Sadre-Orafai (2016), making images is “a creative and aesthetic process where designers need freedom”

(p. 124). This is in contrast to Westin's (2014) description of the development of archeological drawings, where processes are described as teamwork. The influence of individuals on the result is small, and the freedom of designers is restricted to avoid unsupported speculations. Jain (2020) selected appropriate visualizations based on a personal interpretation, while Bray (2015) aimed to paint "as objectively as possible" (p. 123). It is very interesting to read that each of the articles provided careful considerations of the relationships between "creative or correct," "individual or teamwork," and "objective or interpretative." These considerations can lead to a wide variation of outcomes, although all will be limited by an adherence to agreed conventions.

This brief overview of processes of making pictorial materials shows the meticulous attention paid to detailed descriptions of subjects and careful characterization of the contexts. All five articles link to a theoretical basis and provide relevant references.

Theme 2: Terminology

All five articles provide different descriptors of "anything that is not text" or "images." The authors use words such as "sketch," "drawing," "visual image," "mark-making," "snapshot," "quasi-photographic image," "artistic production," "stylized representational form," and "faithful pictorial record" without much definition or description. These terms might refer to a visible result, a technique for making images, an intention for making images, the process, or any combination of these. This variation of descriptors does not make it easy to compare and relate the articles.

Take, for example, the words "sketch" and "drawing." In Westin's (2014, p. 144) article, sketches are the basis for discussions between archeologists and studio-staff. For Geismar (2014, p. 97), sketches are private, and are not necessarily intended to be seen by a broad audience. Geismar (2014) used "sketches," "images," "illustrations," and "drawings" to refer to a picture of the coastline of Malakulan (p. 107) and suggested that "sketches are also mediations and reflections of prevailing anthropological ideas" (p. 111). Bray (2015, p. 121) differentiated between "sketching," "drawing," and "painting" without providing reasons why these three terms are used and how they differ.

In sharp contrast to the carefully considered methodological approach is the articles' irregular use of terminology. The articles show a fairly arbitrary use of vocabulary when it comes to the description of non-textual materials.

Theme 3: Objectivity of pictorial material

Each of the five articles looks at a different discipline. The disciplines of realistic portrait painting, historical research, fine arts, fashion, and archeology are not directly related to ethnography. And each of the five authors chose to present their encounters in a way that is unconventional in ethnography or anthropology. Bray (2015) chose portraits and not film or photography; Geismar (2014) looked at the role of sketches, not at “physical anthropology”; Jain (2020) looked at fine arts objects, not at essay-texts; Sadre-Orafai (2016) discussed different applications of the same numerical data; and Westin (2014) looked at reducing visual uncertainty in drawings. All five authors therefore left their comfort zones and avoided standard anthropological ways of describing their visual findings.

The five authors also agreed that it is essential to have a critical look at the data that are provided, and the ways this evidence is approached and represented. Evidence is put into a specific perspective through observations, additions, combinations, and interpretations. Each of these approaches is presented in such a way that a reader can find out how the pictorial materials are related to the data. There are direct observations of people (portraits) and islands (sketches). When archeologically correct illustrations of Roman life needed to be made, missing data were considered and added. It is also possible to combine different kinds of data to discuss, for example, car crashes, as was done by Jain (2020). And finally, it is possible to look at very different ways of interpreting the same numbers in the fashion industry. The authors clarified these different approaches and showed that the selection and interpretation of the data are always in danger of bias and subjectivity. The detailed examination of the collected evidence in these articles, and the way these data are combined with other resources, is laudable.

All five authors worried about the impact of their use of pictorial material. Westin (2014) worried about the archetypal visual conventions depicting the past. The colorful, bright and sunny visualizations of Roman life, for example, seem to indicate a “stable society,” while the gloomier and darker Middle Ages are indicated by a very different choice of colors. Sadre-Orafai (2016) described the impact on consumers and models of skewed images of beauty in the fashion industry. Geismar (2014) worried about the lack of critical discussions related to the role of drawing as a fieldwork tool for anthropologists. And Bray (2015) discussed the subjectivity in naturalist-realist paintings. Although these worries are mentioned, none of the articles suggests that this assumed impact could or should be further investigated.

The common approaches in these five articles indicate that it is very possible to look at the pictorial materials of other disciplines from an ethnographical perspective. The data can be observed, added to, combined, and interpreted in different ways. This leads to variations in the ways pictorial materials are made, and in the longer term, could challenge the visual conventions.

Some considerations

A sample of five articles is, of course, not representative, but this selection of articles does give a compelling glimpse into another way of writing about visual communication design. I found this selection fascinating and thought-provoking. One comment I have is that there are many more “pictorial materials” that are likely to be used by anthropologists, but that are not mentioned in this selection of five articles. Visual representations such as maps, tables, and diagrams would need to be included in a wider review. This short review certainly does not do justice to all “non-textual representations.”

The different descriptions in the five articles offer an opportunity to clarify some aims of pictorial materials. The articles mentioned at least four different aims:

- Observation: to make a faithful pictorial record of objects. The maker observes as a witness and aims to record what can be seen. Bray (2015, p. 121) described this as: “Translate through painting the sensory experience and personal human exchange as sincerely and justly as possible.” From Geismar (2014, p. 111): “There is a need to expand our approaches to drawing in fieldwork and become more critically engaged with the actual nature (rather than the simple existence) of drawing as a tool during fieldwork.” A viewer who looks at such an observation would recognize the direct relation between the object and the pictorial material.

- Visualization: to make a stylized representation of subjects. The maker aims to show what cannot be seen by making abstract ideas visible. Westin describes this as: “Filling in the lacuna with educated guesses can therefore be argued to bring the image closer to what it is representing” (page 148). A reader can expect that something has been added and needs to find out what this is.

- Provocation: to make pictorial materials that instigate, support, and provoke discussions. The reader is invited to react as part of a collaborative development.

- Illustration: to use an existing image to clarify part of a textual argument. This is probably “the academic use” of pictorial materials. Readers are expected to review the combination of text and pictorial material to follow the narrative of the author.

These four types – observations, visualizations, provocations, and illustrations – are governed by the individual maker(s) of pictorial materials. And it is therefore essential that these makers consider the balance between “objective representations” and “subjective representations.” Furthermore, all four can be “thick and deep,” or “thin and shallow.” And a third criterion is the application of existing visual conventions. Providing motivated decisions about these three choices will answer questions, “Why did you make it like this?,” “What was your source material?,” and “What do you think will be the consequences of these decisions?”

Visual communication design

It is clear that there is an overlap between anthropology and communication design/communication design when pictorial materials are involved. Both aim to represent information, based on specific perspectives and aims. Both use visual conventions to show realities, and both discuss the development of these conventions. The difference seems to be that “visualizations” and “provocations” are used more in communication design, and “observations” and “illustrations” are probably used more in ethnography and anthropology.

The role of these four types of pictorial materials is rarely critically discussed in visual communication design processes. The conventions of different kinds of pictorials, their roles in recording and developing ideas, and their roles in communication within teams and with clients might need more attention in visual communication design education, practice, and research.

Visual communication designers might therefore look at the articles in *Visual Anthropology Review* to find out about the care taken in critically describing practice, relating fieldwork and projects to theories, and considering the impact of pictorial materials within design processes and as a part of communication about a project.

The interpretation of pictorial information by different people and their impact on knowledge, opinions, and behavior in different contexts seem to require an ethnographical approach. The interpretation of visual conventions by people from different disciplines remains a fascinating research area.

References:

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Author

Karel van der Waarde studied graphic design in the Netherlands (The Design Academy, Eindhoven), and the UK (De Montfort University, Leicester and Reading University).

He started in 1995 a design - research consultancy in Belgium specializing in the testing of pharmaceutical information design. The company develops and tests patient information leaflets, instructions, forms, and protocols in both digital and analogue formats. (www.graphicdesign-research.com)

Karel van der Waarde publishes and lectures about visual information. Currently, he teaches (part time) in Switzerland at the Basel School of Design (FHNW) and the Hochschule Lucerne (HSLU).

He is a life-fellow of the Communications Research Institute (CRI, Melbourne, Australia), a board member of International Institute for Information Design (IIID, Vienna, Austria) and editorial board member of *Information Design Journal*, *Hyphen*, *She Ji*, and *Visible Language*.