CHICAGO SCHOOLS: GYÖRGY KEPES AND FUNCTION IN DESIGN

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Abstract

Professor Golec (SAIC) gave the second of our four Chicago Lectures. Evaluating the work of György Kepes, Golec exposed a more intricate exchange than previously assumed between the Chicago school of design and the Chicago school of psychology. In this context, multiple senses of the term “form,” together with Kepes’ reinterpretation, were closely scrutinized. Here, we feature Professor Golec’s full lecture notes. The section titles were chosen by the editor.

What follows reflects Michael Golec’s ongoing engagement, since 2003, with Kepes’s theory of “dynamic iconography.” Golec’s most recent installment of this project is “The Dematerialization of Complexity, Dynamic Iconography, and Iconic (Past) Futures,” forthcoming in Bauhaus Futures (MIT Press).

1. György Kepes at the Fogg

In January 1949, the Hungarian emigre artist and former instructor at Chicago's New Bauhaus, György Kepes, spoke as part of a series of four public meetings held at the Fogg Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The series was entitled *Graphic Forms: The Arts as Related to the Book*, and it was co-sponsored by Harvard University Press and The Bookbuilders of Boston. Amongst the other invited speakers, including W.A. Dwiggins and Walter Dorwin Teague, Kepes delivered a paper on "Function in Modern Design." His talk attended to the role of book design in the "development of a new, richer, multi-dimensional literary art that affects human sensibility on every level of sensuous experience."[1] As Kepes posits in his introductory remarks, the book fits into an ecology of design: building, chair, book, each of which is intended to serve a purpose or is meant to function in a particular manner. Yet, he is not certain of this, asking, is the purpose of building to provide shelter, the chair to support the human body, and the book to permit reading (or support the distribution of human knowledge)? Within this ecology, Kepes places a book in the hands of a reader, who sits in a chair, and both are enclosed within the sheltering space of a building. All are designed, even the human who is affected by the book's delivery of a "new, richer, multi-dimensional literary art." The building and the chair are frames for "every level of sensuous experience." In order to arrive at the local reality of the affective nature of the book, Kepes takes up the task of redirecting his audiences' understanding of function in design, because he believes that they have lost sight of its human intended purpose.

Remarking on the fetish status of "function" in design discourse, Kepes takes an admonishing tone, stating: "We tend to mistake the slogan for truth, the formula for the living form, repetition of habit for cultural continuity. Inertia leads us to carry this dead body of lifeless thoughts around with us. To halt the depletion of the life of the words we use, of the ideas and purposes that guide us, we must constantly overhaul our mental equipment."[2]

2. "Function" Refers to Everything and Nothing

The slogan he refers to is the old bromide "form follows function," attributed to Chicago architect Louis Sullivan. (Nowhere does Kepes directly quote the aphorism, nor does he reference the full passage from which it is all too often taken from.) Worrying aloud, Kepes claims that there is very good reason to believe that "the underlying thought [behind the aphorism] has lost its living strength."[3] With his list of misunderstandings—our taking slogan for truth, formula for living form, repetition for continuity—Kepes mournfully asserts that the meaning of the term "function" has migrated too far from its life source; the term refers to everything and nothing in design. When we use the term, Kepes suggests, we are at a loss (hence by reference to the logic of the fetish, both in terms of Marx and Freud). Such a loss leaves design unmoored, or disconnected from its calling (whatever that might be). The perceived role of function (its being taken for granted), or the functional in modern design, to quote Kepes' title for his talk, is design's undoing. And, every pronouncement of the word "function" reveals a perverse attachment to an illusion. This is, as Kepes unambiguously proposes, design's self-delusion at mid-century.

Kepes isn't really concerned with reviving the call to "form follows function." (At least I can't take revival as a serious concern for him, since he is adamantly set against resuscitating dead forms.) He senses that something is still alive, however. Thus, he wonders aloud: How can we get back meaning in the words designers use to explain their actions? In wishing to define the purpose of design, he wants to "subject our professional catchwords to strict scrutiny."[4] Thus, he asks, "What is function *in* design?" There is no other way to answer this question, according to Kepes, than to first recognize the "root purpose" of design. It is, he says, for "man," who is the "root" of design thinking, and "human function" gives direction to the designer's thought.[5] Here, Sullivan returns, but not as the source of the all too often quoted "form follows function" slogan, but as the originator of the observation: "Man perhaps and probably was the only real background that gave distinction to the works appearing in the foreground as separated things." Thus, with Sullivan's observation in mind, Kepes asks: Is the purpose or function of a book its being read? The answer: Through design, the function of a book is for its human reader to "function better, that is, [to] live fuller and freer."[6] Therefore, function is not a source for design, but rather function *in* design is an attentiveness to human social life. It is here that I detect an echo of Charles Eames, who as early as 1941 advises designers to develop a "habit of approach" and an "attitude of feeling" for human scale. Kepes doesn't take up "function" as a mere neglected problem for design; rather, he seeks to recover the field's authority on the topic of the human function *in* design. Whether or not he is successful is another story for another time. For now, let me say this: Kepes' goal is to bring function back home, back to the neighborhood (or scale) of ordinary human interaction, as if in answer to design having somehow departed from the everyday and the

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Notes

[1] Kepes, "Function in Modern Design," 14.

[2] Kepes, "Function in Modern Design," 3.

[3] Kepes, "Function in Modern Design," 3.

[4] Kepes, "Function in Modern Design," 4.

[5] Kepes, "Function in Modern Design," 4.

[6] Kepes, "Function in Modern Design," 5.

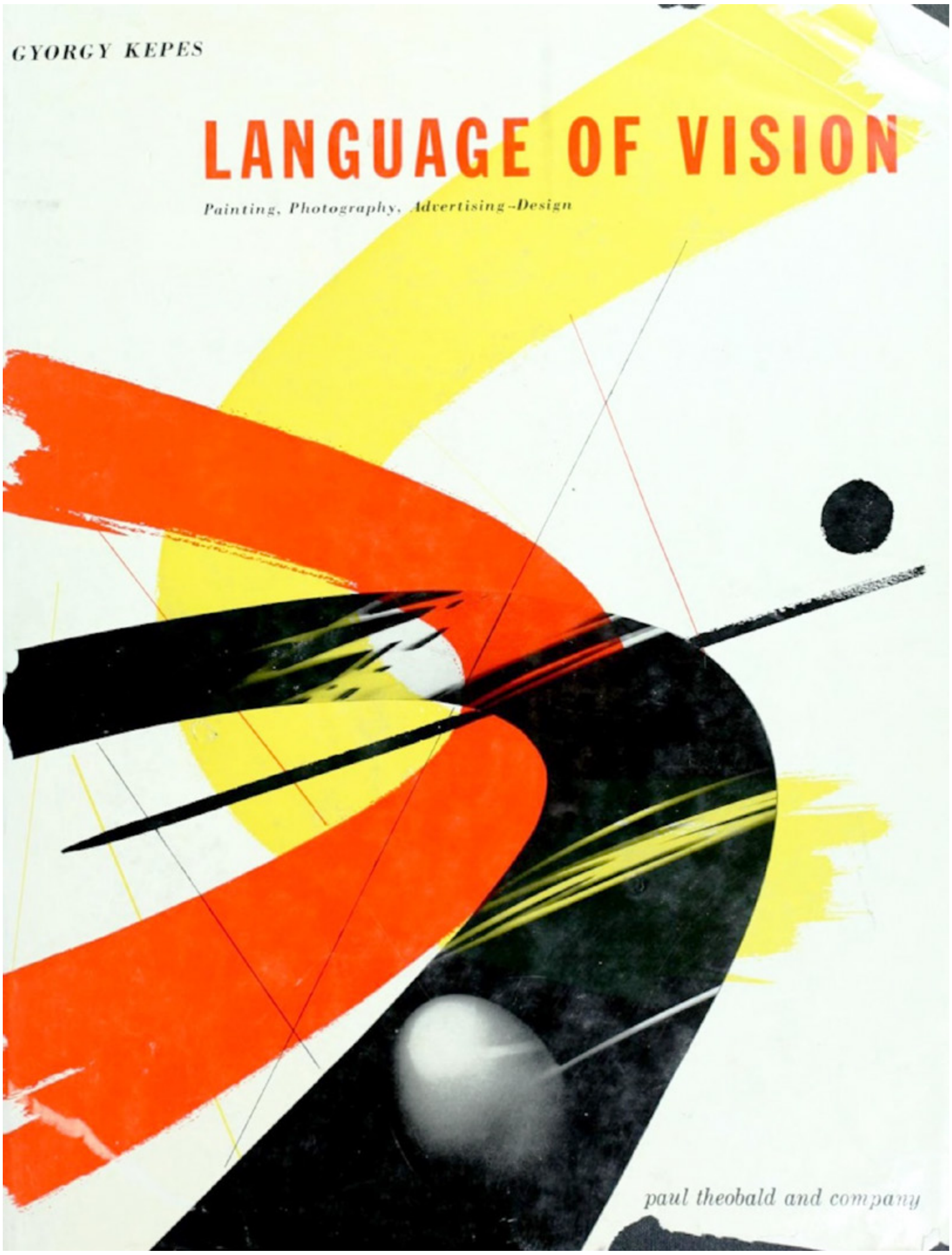
GYORGY KEPES
LANGUAGE OF VISION
Painting, Photography, Advertising-Design
paul theobald and company

Figure 1: Book cover of *Language of Vision* by György Kepes. (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1944.)

human. Kepes' claims are, as I will argue, in keeping with his ambitions for design in the post-World War II era that takes as its objective the mobilization of "the creative imagination for positive social action."[7]

Kepes' claims for function, or, at least a consideration of its early formation, are in keeping with his concept of "dynamic iconography," first articulated in his book *Language of Vision*, published in 1944 (figure 1). By "dynamic iconography," Kepes means visual communication's ability to integrate (to make material so as to make perceivable) the dynamism of the modern world. "Thinking and seeing, in terms of static, isolated things identical only with themselves," Kepes writes in *Language of Vision*, "have an initial inertia which cannot keep pace with the stride of life, thus cannot suggest values—plastic order—intrinsic in this dynamic field of social existence."[8] If design ceases to be dynamic (to turn sclerotic) it will not inspire "positive social action," according to Kepes. As early as 1944, he notes the "failure in the organization of that new equipment with which we must function if we are to maintain our equilibrium in a dynamic world."[9]

3. Kepes, Walter Benjamin, László Moholy-Nagy, and Jan Tschichold

As I've previously observed, Kepes' "dynamic iconography" resonates with the German critic Walter Benjamin, and his assertions that mechanical reproducibility fine-tuned visuality, as in Benjamin's comments on the "optical unconscious" and the deepening of both the perceptual and "apperceptual."[10] Like Benjamin, Kepes argues for the capacity of communications technologies to both prescribe and inscribe new patterns of human behavior. Both Kepes and Benjamin claim that human subjectivity is an effect of technologies of mechanical reproduction. This is how humans come to read, or take readings of the world in their efforts to measure their mimetic capacity and to internalize new habits. A clear source for Kepes on these points is the fellow-Hungarian and former Bauhaus master, László Moholy-Nagy. It was Moholy-Nagy's efforts as head of the School of Design—formally the New Bauhaus and now the Institute of Design at IIT—that brought Kepes to Chicago and that established him as head of the Light and Color Department. There are aspects of Kepes' "dynamic iconography" that draw on Moholy-Nagy's 1923 essay "The New Typography, and his Dynamic of the Metropolis" from his 1925 Bauhaus book, *Painting, Photography, Film*. (Frederick Schwartz notes the influence this book had on Benjamin. And my colleague Annie Bourneuf points out that Moholy-Nagy claims typography is transformed by developments in new optical and lighting technologies.) Also, Kepes' "dynamic iconography" shows clear affinities with Jan Tschichold's *The New Typography* from 1928. This is especially the case where Tschichold argues that typography must acknowledge its situatedness, that its dynamism is predicated on its attunement to its moment. That is to say, that the "new" in *The New Typography* is its being-of-the-moment.

4. Kepes and the Chicago School of Psychology

It's tempting to place Kepes' concept of "dynamic iconography" solely within the context of *The New Typography* and Benjamin's media aesthetic theory. Closer to home (that is Chicago, at the time of writing and editing *Language of Vision*) and closer to concepts of human social interaction, however, Kepes found an important resource in the University of Chicago philosopher Charles Morris. Working with Moholy-Nagy, Morris had contributed "The Intellectual Program of the New Bauhaus," and had taught philosophy at the school. Importantly, as I first reported elsewhere, Morris played a significant role in the development of the book's symbolic theory of vision. While *Language of Vision* is a study of "optical communication," a culmination of experiments that Kepes carried out while teaching in Chicago, it was Morris who had informed the author's formulation of, in Kepes' words, a "sign system based upon a correspondence between sensory stimulations and the visible structure of the physical world."[11]

Morris had first arrived at the University of Chicago to study with the Chicago School pragmatist George Herbert Mead. (Named by William James, the Chicago School of Pragmatists included John Dewey, James R. Angell, Edward Scribner Ames, Addison Moore, and James H. Tufts.) Collectively, the Chicago School is known for their theorization of the organism in its environment, and behavioral interactions they refer to as "experience." As Bruce Kuklick explains, "The quality of this interaction in human experience displayed mind."[12] Thus, a quality of a mind, its ability to attain high levels of cognition, is predicated on the recognition of complex signals that shape behavior. Communication and behavior are key aspects of Mead's behavioral theory of signs. And, Mead's case for "pragmatics" as an aspect of semiosis, is of critical importance to Morris's understanding of the function of communication. Morris explains, pragmatics "deals with the biotic aspects of semiosis, that is, with all the psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs."[13] Whereas, semantics is the study of the relation between signs and objects, pragmatics is the study of the relationship between signs and interpreters and the "function" of signs in social relations. The kinds of relationships that pragmatics attends to is best expressed in Mead's reference to a snarling dog, which calls out appropriate responses in interpreters. Such a gesture, from a pragmatic point of view, "affects human sensibility on every level of sensuous experience" (here I quote Kepes from his lecture on "Function in Modern Design"), which in turn results in a response. Beginning in 1939, Morris develops Mead's pragmatics into a theory based on the vital role that signs play in the formation of human behavior and human culture. In "Science, Art and Technology," Morris proposes that a theory of signs assists in gaining "insight into the essentials of human culture." Significantly, Morris defines human culture as a "web of sign-sustained and sign-sustaining activities."

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[7] Kepes, *Language of Vision*, 14.

[8] Kepes, *Language of Vision*, 202.

[9] Kepes, *Language of Vision*, 12

[10] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 235.

[11] Kepes, *Language of Vision*, 67.

[12] Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America: 1720-2000*, 182.

[13] Morris, *Writings on the General Theory of Signs*, 43.

Morris provides Kepes with a link to Mead's pragmatic functionalism, whose influence is crucial to the elaborations on "dynamic iconography" in *Language of Vision*. Wherever Kepes mentions the need for "readjustment" as a response to his sense of an all-pervasive sense of disorder, chaos, and what he identifies as a "tragic formlessness," he echoes Mead's observations on human conduct (or habit) where it, in Mead's words, "is the sum of the reactions of living beings to their environments … ."[14] The self, according to Mead, is formed from responses to environmental stimulus, and responses become meaningful, "when it is indicated by a generalized attitude both to the self and to others."[15] As Morris comments on Mead's pragmatics, "At these complex levels of semiosis, the sign reveals itself as the main agency in the development of individual freedom and social integration."[16] In this sense, Kepes' "language of vision" can be considered as a system of behavior from the point of view of pragmatics and a theory of significant symbols. Change the symbol and you change, or readjust, human conduct. Therefore, when Kepes expresses a desire for "educating man to a contemporary standard," he is stating the function of the symbol as a means to form a more coherent social world.[17] Let me state this in terms of the meeting in Cambridge, where I began this talk: The efficient symbol functions as a tool for, in Kepes' words, "the design of man as an individual and as a member of society."

Certainly, this is the function of the book, especially when considered within the context of neo-humanist educational reforms at the University of Chicago, and its focus on the Great Books program initiated by Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler. As my colleague Lara Alison has observed in her unpublished paper on Container Corporation of America's "The Great Ideas of Western Man" campaign, the School of Design, under Moholy-Nagy's direction, had adopted similar reforms to its curriculum in the mid 1940s (just at the moment when Kepes left Chicago for Texas, and, soon after, for Cambridge). In Kepes' case, he gestures toward this turn where, in his address to the *Graphic Forms* audience, he asserts that over-specialization in education, and life in general, drains, dulls, and deforms human "emotional unity."[18]

In that same lecture at the Fogg Museum in 1949, Kepes states, "It is time now for redirection. Let us discipline our thinking by tracing all that we are doing or are intending to do to the original purpose, the human purpose."[19] It seems to me that at this particular stage in Kepes' thought, he becomes dissatisfied with the potentially post-humanist direction of "dynamic iconography" and pragmatics (how both, for example, too easily align with mechanical theories of behavior and human responsiveness to environment, as in cybernetics). At least he makes the case for reintroducing the human element in the pragmatic enterprise. It is my sense that his dissatisfaction is not only directed at this audience, but also at himself. This is especially the case where he asks his audience to consider what it is that the design of forms of visual communications, specifically the book, can do to illuminate the pathways of a new direction, a direction that takes seriously the better functioning of human kind. Dynamic iconography as influenced by Morris and Mead, perhaps, allows the human to withdraw too far into the background, and thus lending little to no "distinction to the works appearing in the foreground as separated things," to refer back to Kepes' Sullivan quote. When Kepes invokes Sullivan, he consciously or otherwise reveals the humanist origins of Mead's pragmatics, and thus acknowledges one Chicago school's influence (that of architecture) on another Chicago school (that of philosophy). Indeed, Hugh Duncan has observed Sullivan's influence beyond architecture, which included Chicago School pragmatists like Mead (and Dewey), especially Sullivan's idea that the development of human social identity is linked to designed environments in which social interactions occur. In seeking origins, Kepes reasserts the fundamentals of dynamic iconography (as influenced by Morris and Mead). But, in reasserting the fundamentals of dynamic iconography, he is careful not to align its motivation with mere functionality, which he worries is too far afield from the local reality of human purpose. Kepes ends his lecture with this thought: "If graphic forms are made to function for man's welfare in their fullest range, we may hope that we will one day fulfill our obligation and make truth […] truth again and not a slogan."[20]

14. Mead, "A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol," 159.

15. Mead, "A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol," 163.

16. Morris, *Writings on the General Theory of Signs*, 50.

17. Kepes, *Language of Vision*, 13.

18. Kepes, "Function in Modern Design," 12.

19. Kepes, "Function in Modern Design," 7.

20. Kepes, "Function in Modern Design," 14.

5. Misunderstandings and Loss of Meaning

To Kepes' ear, the dictum "form follows function," through overuse, has become meaningless. It is lifeless, a dead body, a hollow phrase that, in an age fixated on speed and quantity, is more often used as an excuse, rather than as a statement of truth. It is as if he is saying to his audience: Your principles are misunderstandings. We no longer have a "clear view" of the use (or function) of "function," and by extension, nor do we have a clear view of "form."

A loss of meaning as a theme is important within the context of a meeting on "graphic forms." Forms are meaningless, because their functions have lost their meaning in the post-war age of affluence. And thus, forms created with function in mind are clouded, blurred even. According to Kepes, we have no clear view of the human, either.

In his talk, Kepes demonstrates that, in order to project authority, a school of thought and/or practice must embody an awareness of how its proposals are situated in relation to a past from which the original issued, and could exhibit sensitivity to its return into a contemporary moment. (Hence, Sullivan's place within Kepes' *The New Landscape of Art and Science*.) This is what he means by wanting to "subject our professional catchwords to strict scrutiny."

In no way do I mean to indicate that Kepes wants to replicate a past school or tradition on the topic of function. What Kepes seems to want to take hold of is something of the accomplishments of earlier practitioners, their acknowledgement of the local realities of human purpose, by addressing what designers took to be the relevant standards of their practices. He achieves this through recognition of "our professional catchwords" as established in and through the work of Sullivan, but also through a new interpretation of "form follows function." In his talk, Kepes exhibits a self-critical awareness of such standards, which entails his wrestling with a delusion that arises when slogans are disconnected from tradition, or cultural continuity. In this sense, and without such awareness, schooling in functional design will be for naught.

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