

SIGN

A VISUAL ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC SIGNAGE
IN NEW ZEALAND

Greet Gielen/Recoulès
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dedication

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attestation of authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.



Greet Gielen-Recoulès
February 2012

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abstract +
introduction

Through an investigation of the regulatory and informative signs which constitute public signage in rural New Zealand, this creative research project poses the question: When is a public sign not a public sign? The research explores the function of the graphic elements that are commonly presented in a public signage, and questions how messages are communicated through these related signifiers.

The intention of this research is to explore how meaning is constructed in public signage and how new meanings can be created by means of subtraction, isolation and juxtaposition. Through these investigations I intend to locate the point where the meaning of the public sign changes. To locate the point where the function of the sign changes. To locate the point when the public sign is not a public sign.

The aim of this research is to develop a deeper understanding of how the meaning making process operates in the graphic design of public signage and it is intended that my findings will make a contribution to the body of Knowledge in this field.

abstract

introduction

This thesis critically examines regulatory and informative public signs, through consideration of four perspectives: the rural (through everyday life), the urban (through reflection on my past), the official (through the call for attention) and the visual (through pictorial representation).

In pursuing this avenue of research I aim to enhance my creative practice as a graphic designer by deepening my understanding of how communication is effected by visual signifiers.

The inquiry is influenced by my reminiscences of urban life in the city of Brugge, Belgium and my current life as a new immigrant living in a small rural community in New Zealand.

The body of work is an heuristic exploration that relates specifically to the unique way the meaning-making process operates in relation to a set of commonly used graphic signifiers employed in public signage, such as frequently used border shapes, colour systems, and typefaces. The exegesis is structured in seven sections.

The first section, *Situating the Researcher*, looks at the background and views in relation to the investigation.

The second section, the *Critical Framework*, discusses how this practice relates to ideas and conceptual issues such as the design environment, current practitioners, and relevant theory.

The third section *Context*, discusses the urban and rural context and the cultural differences that can be reflected in public signage.

The fourth section, *Methodology*, discusses the nature of a creative practice, and the system of heuristic inquiry that is used to investigate the topic and to reflect on experimentation.

The fifth section, *Practice*, critically analyses the practical outcomes of the research as a way of gathering data.

The sixth section is the discussion of the *Final Work*, which is constituted as a book.

The final and seventh section, the *Conclusion*, reflects on the outcome of the research.

This thesis is constituted as 80% practice-led graphic design and 20% exegesis.

Figure 1.1
Girls' toilet, New Zealand



Figure 1.5
WC sign, Belgium



Figure 1.4
Dames Flemish toilet sign, Belgium

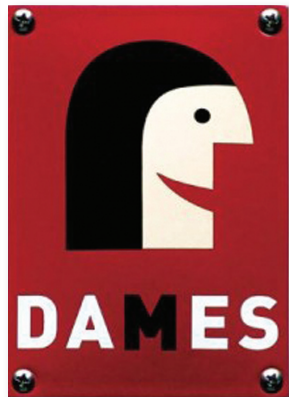


Figure 1.2
Ladies' toilet sign, New Zealand



Figure 1.3
Toiletten Flemish
toilet sign, Belgium



positioning

This project has developed from changes my family encountered upon immigration to New Zealand from Belgium in 2006, as we confronted a second language and a new culture. From the moment my children started school, my aim was to help them assimilate as quickly as possible. This was not an easy task as they had nothing to identify with; no familiar points of reference. My first thought was to find some visual items such as public signs within the school environment that resembled their Belgian counterparts and could be introduced to make their early experiences easier (Fig. 1.1, 1.2). Some of these objects included public signs, such as those located on toilet doors, and exit signs in the classrooms. At that time my children were not able to read text on these signs because of the language barrier. I began to wonder how they could interpret the visual meaning of these school signs that were both culturally and linguistically different to what they knew in Belgium (Fig. 1.3, 1.4, 1.5). Additionally, if form or colour becomes a dominant communicator over language, how might meaning be effected? This questioning led me to a visual analysis of public signs.

/1.0 situating the researcher

Figure 1.6
Hand-made construction sign,
regulatory sign



Figure 1.7
Hand-made strawberries sign,
information sign



Figure 1.8
Hand-made Lions market sign,
information sign



By investigating the meaning-making process used in relation to public signage, I attempted to develop a more profound consideration of interpretative processes and how they could operate in relation to a set of commonly used graphic signifiers used to communicate both a rural voice and an urban voice within a visual vernacular. As a basis for the research I used public signage which can be divided into two main categories: informative signs, which display information and services to a specific viewer (Fig. 1.7, 1.8); and regulatory signs, specifically, official traffic signs and warning signs which instruct the user on rules pertaining to a particular situation, which can be obeyed or disobeyed, (Fig. 1.6, 1.9, 1.10, 1.11).



Figure 1.9
Give Way Roundabout
sign, regulatory sign



Figure 1.10
School Pool sign
regulatory sign



Figure 1.10
School Pool sign
regulatory sign

introduction

This section of the thesis offers a critical framework within which to position the practice, and should be considered a discussion of the ideas the work engages with.

The project considers manipulating visual elements of public signage as a way of trying to locate the turning point where what is signified changes and in doing so address the question: When is a public sign not a public sign?.

/2.0

**critical
framework**

signs

The word sign has many implications within a critical studies framework, but in this thesis I use the term for its overt meaning in the context of public signage:

Sign, n. a notice on public display that gives information or instructions in a written or symbolic form (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Public is further defined as:

Public, adj. open to or shared by all the people of an area or country (Oxford University Press, 2011).

In *Manual of Traffic Signs*, Moeur (2010) defines public signage, as reflecting the story of trading, services, and business, and also serving to warn, connect, and communicate. Signs justify a need, they call for attention, deliver a strong simple message, and command respect from travellers (Moeur, 2010).

Public signs use a combination of written language and visual language. The written words used are typically short, making economic use of space and allowing use of larger, more legible fonts. Short words also offer fast communication, and deliver an uncomplicated and direct message with no room for misinterpretation.

In *Signs: Lettering in the Environment*, Baines & Dixon (2003) suggest two sorts of signage.

Firstly, the regulatory sign (Fig. 2.1), which instructs the viewer on rules to obey. These signs are all presented in a consistent manner, which is reflected in the shape and typography. This needs to be big enough to attract the road user and legible enough to read while driving at high speed. The colours used on these are different from their natural environments, so they can be easily recognised and also serve to create categories within the systems of regulatory signs (de la Escalera, Moreno, Salichs, & Armingol, 1997; Crow, 2006).



Figure 2.1
Example of a regulatory sign



Figure 2.2
Example of a informative sign

Secondly is the group of signage that can be classed as (Fig. 2.2) informative signs (Baines & Dixon, 2003). Signs from this group display information and services to a specific viewer, and can consist of unique single-message signs. In contrast with the regulatory signs they are not consistent in their use of shape, colour and letterform, they can be hand painted and are situated within public view. The unique and inconsistent qualities of these “roadside images” can promote “evocations of rural values” (Bell & Lyall, 2002, p. 282). In addition to their functional informational aspect, public signs can reflect the value and message of the area and create a direct form of identification (Bell & Lyall, 2002). For example a “toilet” public sign can be an introduction to the public toilets of an area; the state of the sign can determine if the viewer will or will not feel comfortable to use these public toilets (Baines & Dixon, 2003).

semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs, or of what Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) called “the role of signs as part of social life” (p. 15). This involves the theoretical and visual analysis of signs, codes, and signifying practices. We constantly use signs in our daily life; they can take the form of images, sounds, gestures, words and objects (Chandler 2007).

To follow Saussure’s view of how meaning arises, we need to have an understanding of how signifiers work in relation to each other in order to form meaning. According to Saussure (1983) signifiers are “purely relational entities” (p. 118). “No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs” (p. 118).

As Chandler (2007) argues, in Saussure’s tradition signification depends on the relationship of the two parts of a sign: the signified and signifier. Thus, Saussure claims that signification, what is signified, refers to the relationship between the signifier and signified. The signifier is what can be seen as the material or physical form. It can be felt, tasted, and smelled. The signified is the mental concept of a sign, and can be used to define the function

of a sign. An example is the public sign that informs people. Therefore, by manipulating information on a public sign, and placing emphasis on the other signifiers such as borders, colours, and typography, we may question how the sign communicates and whether the public sign can still hold some of its signification.

The following example (Fig. 2.3) shows an exploration into signifiers derived from a public sign. This investigation uses only colour and shape to signify the regulatory sign (traffic sign), in a rural context (to represent every day life). Questioning how much information can be manipulated before the instructions disappear and how and when does the meaning change? Specific meaning is created in relation to context. Exploring this by taking aspects such as colour from a road sign and applying it to a different context; trying to explore if the border, colour, and shape still retain their meaning when used in an unfamiliar setting and how far can we go in manipulating a public sign before there is no notion of the original communicated message left.



Figure 2.3
Cross sign

interpretation of the meaning

In this research the designs are analysed using the ideas that Barthes (1978) presents us with in the *Image-Music-Text* seminal text *Rhetoric of the Image* which gives us an insight into his critical method of interpreting word-and-image associations.

By creating an analytical system Barthes (1978) argues that the viewer interprets images by decoding information according to his or her own cultural and social background.

Barthes (1978) discusses that an image can be constituted out of three messages: firstly “the linguistic message” (Barthes, 1978, p. 272) which refers to the words in the image, secondly “the coded-iconic or symbolic message” (Barthes, 1978, p. 272) refers to the feeling or idea the images raises as it appears in the context of the scene, and thirdly “the non-coded iconic message” (Barthes, 1978, p. 272), also referred to as the literal message or primary meaning (Barthes, 1978).

“The distinction between the two iconic messages is not made spontaneously in ordinary reading: the viewer of the image receives at one and the same time the perceptual message and the cultural message. The distinction however has an operational validity, analogous to that which allows the distinction in the linguistic signs of a signifier and a signified, even though that no one is able to separate the ‘word’ from its meaning”. (Barthes, 1978, pp. 272, 273)

The differences between the three messages gives us the tools to structure images so that we can explain them clearly and in a logical manner. In that way the image creates a more solid foundation for understanding.

These separations can be identified through the use of a structural description of the messages as this is converted to “three messages: a linguistic message, a coded iconic message, and a non-coded iconic message” (Barthes, 1978, p. 272).

synecdoche and metonymy

Within the paradigm of semiotics we can find synecdoche and metonymy which are employed to explore the meaning-making process in public signage. Metonymy and synecdoche are very closely related; some include synecdoche within the trope of metonymy while other theorists understand it as a separate trope and still others see it as part of a different system.

Synecdoche

Corbett and Connors (1998) argue, “Synecdoche involves using a part of a thing to stand for a whole” (p. 397).

For example, a kiwi stands for New Zealand; The Empire State Building stands for New York city. Synecdoche is the representation of a slice-of-life.

Experimenting with synecdoche to create and analyse meaning in my practice was developed through the subtraction of signifiers.

The design (Fig. 2.4) could be seen as the representation of a close up of an empty field, a slice-of-life, as we don't know what happens outside the picture. There is an indication of a part of a sign; we can presume it is a sign by its shape and colour. It does not have any message, other than the viewer can tell the frame is not transparent (as we can see the shadow). Does it want to warn us that we cannot enter the field? Or that we cannot litter? Or that there is danger ahead? There are many scenarios that can be read, but what is consistent in the reading is there is a warning of some kind: it can imply a warning by regulatory sign in a rural setting.

In my test here, synecdoche is used in the way that the image is framed to represent only a fragment of a larger scene. The viewers make their own assumption as to what the bigger picture is.

Figure 2.4
Image demonstrating the use of synecdoche.



Metonymy

“Metonymy is an association of terms; one sign is associated with another of which it signifies one of its functions or attributes, or a related concept” (Thwaites, Davis, & Mules, 1994, p. 47). For example an ear can stand for the act of listening; the Hollywood sign stands for the American entertainment industry.

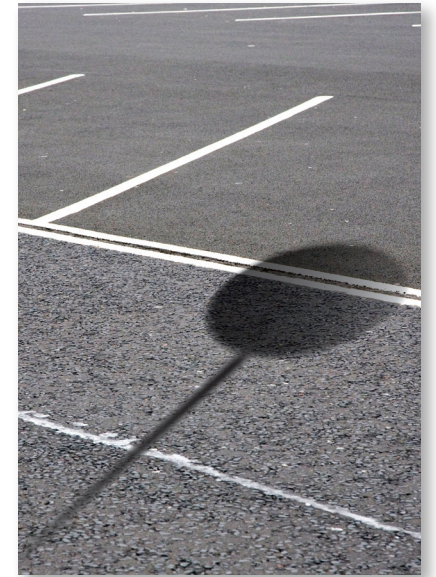
This project explores metonymy by creating associations between visual elements and the objects or events. For example, the viewers interpretation can be guided by using codes that represent contiguity, that, according to Jakobson & Halle (2002), refers to something that is in some sense part of something else. The association of the codes will help create more meaning than what is literally represented in the image. Therefore, the designer uses metonymy as a strategy to manipulate the meaning of the viewing.

In this particular example I experimented (Fig. 2.5) with car parking, as the white lines on the road

suggest: the shadow of the road sign hints to the existence of a message. As the car park is empty the viewer might by association allocate several different meanings to the message. Perhaps that there is no parking after a certain hour. Perhaps based on prior knowledge of car parks, that you need to pay before leaving. It is apparent there is a warning of some kind, which indicates a regulatory sign, and metonymy is used here to imply this.

Synecdoche is very closely related to metonymy and is sometimes positioned below metonymy, as it is more vaguely related to other figures of speech such as irony and metaphor. However to make a distinction between the two it can be said that synecdoche relates to a specific connotation with the visual message, where as metonymy relates to an association implied by the visual message. Therefore within the context of this project, a visual signifier can operate under both synecdoche and metonymy at the same time: the visual signifier has a specific connotation due to its form but also implies an association with other signifiers.

Figure 2.5
Image demonstrating exploring
the use of metonymy.



Barbara Kruger

The photomontage artworks of American graphic artist Barbara Kruger draw attention to the power of signs in a postmodern society. Her use of commercial images forces the viewer to reflect upon the cultural signifiers we are bombarded with every day. She is particularly concerned with notions of consumerism and feminism, and often uses images torn out of popular magazines in order to address these issues by subverting their own signifiers (Rider, S., 2011).

The most well known of Kruger's works are created from found black and white photographs overlaid with text. Her use of colour, shape, and borders creates a strong connection with the call for attention as the idea of authority is communicated through the use of red type, which is constituted out of Futura Bold on a white background shape (Fig. 2.6).

The captions frequently appellate the reader, by using words such as I, you, we, and us, which direct the text to the viewer on a personal level. The red signifies warning, and, in combination with the personal appellation, Kruger creates a sense of being hailed, to attract the viewer to the advertisement.

In contrast, research within this project tends to remove recognisable written text in order to focus on the non-linguistic signifiers. However, akin to Kruger's work, the researcher creates a sense of visual authority by attempts to create colours and shapes which are visually familiar to the viewer from their experience of public signage, but which are no longer directly readable in their usual sense. By subtracting literal information, such as text, the meaning is derived only from the learned cultural associations of colour and form within the context of signs.

Figure 2.6
Barbara Kruger, *I Shop Therefore I Am* (1987).
Photocollage.

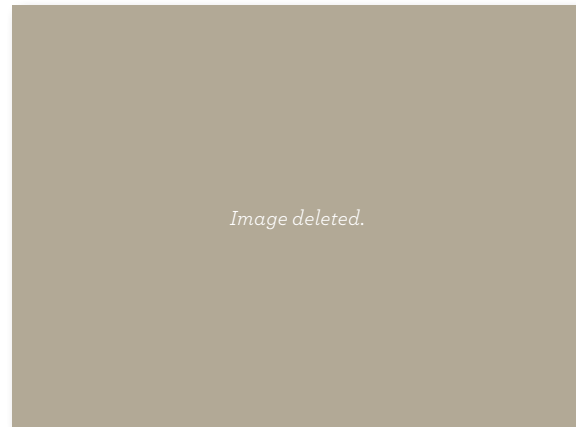
Image deleted.

Figure 2.7
Ed Ruscha, *Brother, Sister* (1987)
acrylic on canvas, 72 H x 96 W (inches)

Ed Ruscha

Ed Ruscha is an American artist with a background in commercial art. His graphic-oriented images are inspired by different aspects of popular culture and he includes photography, painting and drawing in his work. He is well known for communicating the city landscape combined with a vernacular language to express the “banality of urban life” (Ruscha, 2011, p. 2).

In his series of silhouetted paintings and more specifically the work “*Brother, Sister*” (Ruscha, 1987),



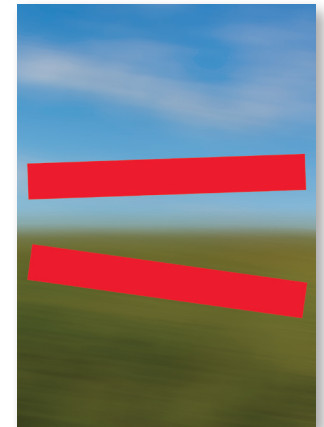
silhouettes of boats and the horizon are depicted (Fig. 2.7). Upon this background the placement of white rectangular boxes create the impression of censorstrips, or deleted text. The blurry images create a sense of vagueness. The censorstrips add the idea that there is a message communicated but this message is not accessible. This creates tension which is something that I appropriated in my own work.

The use of censorstrips in my practice (Fig. 2.8) creates a sense of disruption; the viewer is not allowed to see what the shape hides. It becomes a symbolic sign for denying viewing of the linguistic message.

This creates tension between the participant and the implied message as there is no real understanding only the vague feeling of uncertainty. The non-coded iconic message is represented in the background image, with on top disruptive shapes (censorstrips) that hide the linguistic message.

Appropriating Ruscha’s blurry images create a sense of distance, which can be seen in time and in space.

Figure 2.8
horizonline sign



urban and rural environment

In respect to urban life, residents of large Western cities typically take for granted what it feels like to walk around in public; to wander one's way through a landscape full of familiar urban signs and landmarks. As Henkin (1998) describes, "we are both embraced and alienated; the city acknowledges and addresses us, but keeps us moving and at an impersonal distance" (p. ix).

The city is a landscape that is constantly shifting. An urban resident is used to the ever-busy crowds and constantly changing visual landscapes. This is expressed through a multicultural exchange of people, scenery, and visual messages such as public signage. Colour, movement and traffic overload the senses and the physical city forms a structure for exciting possibilities in visual language, such as public signs that are pleading for attention.

Everyday life in the city can become a repetitive routine to and from the office, however the landscape of public signage changes constantly in the urban environment; yet because of daily routine the urban resident may hardly notice these changes.

While a rural environment does not have the overt process of constant change, continual change is present as in the rural area, through the natural change of seasons.

Even though Wilson (1992) suggests that the aspect of continual change within the city can create a sense of uneasiness it could be argued that over time change becomes the norm and the city dweller becomes unaffected by it. This is in contrast with a rural dweller, where nature rules the environment and effects deep changes in residents on a day-to-day basis.

urban and rural signage

A distinctive feature of public signs in the urban environment is the means of production. The professional production of signage through mechanical processes can impart an impersonal quality. As the importance of information graphics lies in the understanding of the message, typefaces such as Helvetica have a strong solid structure and can be easily seen from a distance. Müller (2005) argues that Helvetica is widely renowned for transferring the message through its sober and practical typography. Helvetica is committed to transferring the message with its function being the understanding of that particular message: “Anything written in this typeface wants to be read” (Müller, 2005, p. 118). Even though Helvetica has been described as “an all-time favourite among multitude of codes and signals and commands that enliven urban life. Helvetica is the perfume of the city” (Helvetica forever, n.d.), we could argue that the Helvetica typeface has become such a part of the

environment that the viewers can become ignorant of the messages due to its presence everywhere.

On the other hand we can argue that some public signs in a rural environment have a much bigger individuality due to the specific skill of the maker, which translates itself into hand-made signs. The hand-painted or hand-drawn signs create a unique view on a particular message (Baines & Dixon, 2003).

The mechanical printing process such as large-laser printed designs and vinyl banners results in an outcome that has a consistent quality to it and perhaps is therefore perceived as more valuable. We are not used to hand-drawn advertising in the cities anymore. The use of professionally, mechanically created signage produced by professional designers results in well-drawn vector images, expert photography and carefully selected typography. We can argue that some rural signage, that lacks all professionalism, can also appear to be successful due to the visual simplicity of the message that communicates two things: the vision of the creator (which is reflected in the piece of design), and the message (which is reflected in the sign) (Bellon & Bellon, 2010).

scale in urban and rural signage

In the crowded environment of the city the public signs and advertising also have to compete with each other for attention and therefore scale becomes an important factor (Henkin, 1998). The size of the buildings provides a large canvas for the purposes of advertising. Because of the movement through the city this scale enables the inhabitant to see the message within a fast-paced and crowded environment (Henkin, 1998).

Scale can also be a factor in a rural environment, as large public signage competes for attention of the urban traveller who, in the vast amount of rural space, needs to be able to differentiate a village from the others (Bell & Lyall, 1995). “Without the object, passers-by might not know about the significance of the place” (Bell, 2007, p. 129) and so, when the sign becomes place-specific, it becomes part of a rural

identity of the village. In more general terms, “space becomes place through any mechanism of recognition” (p. 280) and thus we can argue that the public sign in a rural place becomes important for the identity of the village, as it is a unique representation of the particular rural area, whereas the public sign in the urban environment can act more as a guide in a place where we do and do not belong. In the urban context the public sign becomes more an impersonal written authority (Henkin, 1998).

It was perfectly possible for a small community to visually state its unique identity by erecting a novel sign. Whether the sign proclaims Bacon Country or JenniferAnn.com, its very uniqueness will outperform the generic signs in the competition to grab attention (Bell & Lyall, 2002, p. 284).

rural vernacular

An important aspect of rural communities is that they are distanced from large urban areas. This can create cultural isolation and can hinder development and modernisation, which can result in limited opportunities for residents and businesses. When rural businesses are disconnected from large urban areas, a particular vernacular is created that is reflected in public signage e.g. handwritten and hand-crafted signs (Kalman & Jacobs, 1990). A rural environment could be seen as a vernacular setting for public signage, as the ordinary people who did not study design or typography create hundreds of messages that need to be communicated (Bellon & Bellon, 2010), when they want to sell or tell something. “Vernacular is slang, a language invented rather than taught. Vernacular design is visual slang” (Kalman & Jacobs, 1990, para. 57) and it has become part of the environment where we live; rural residents often do not notice its idiosyncracies any more, as it is so familiar. It does, however, attract the attention of the urban visitor who is not acquainted with this visual slang.

Kalman & Jacobs (1990) argue, in *Print* magazine, regarding the creation of these vernacular signs:

A straightforward process that creates work which has an unfiltered, emotional quality. These designs are some person's, some regular human being's, idea of how to communicate, how to say ‘This is a company that sells shipping supplies’, or ‘This is a store that sells sausages’. (para. 59)

The urban immigrant coming to a rural environment from the fast-paced and visually overloaded setting of the large city is confronted with a setting where “uniqueness can be claimed by one or two inexpensive, appealing, odd idiosyncratic signs” (Bell & Lyall, 2002, p. 282). The proximity of amenities in the big city offers a wealth of cultural and technological opportunities to the inhabitant. Everything necessary is usually at hand in the city and the inhabitant has no need to venture outside it.

Coming from an urban environment the city dweller may feel isolated in a rural setting due to the large amount of open space (Bell & Lyall, 2002). Signage in the open space of a rural environment disrupts the landscape and therefore is more noticeable. The isolation inflates the level of attention given to the sign and subsequently to its subject. This is in contrast to the urban environment where signs compete for attention (Bell & Lyall, 2002). We can however argue that the vernacular messages also competes for our attention as they are so much part of the rural environment.

introduction

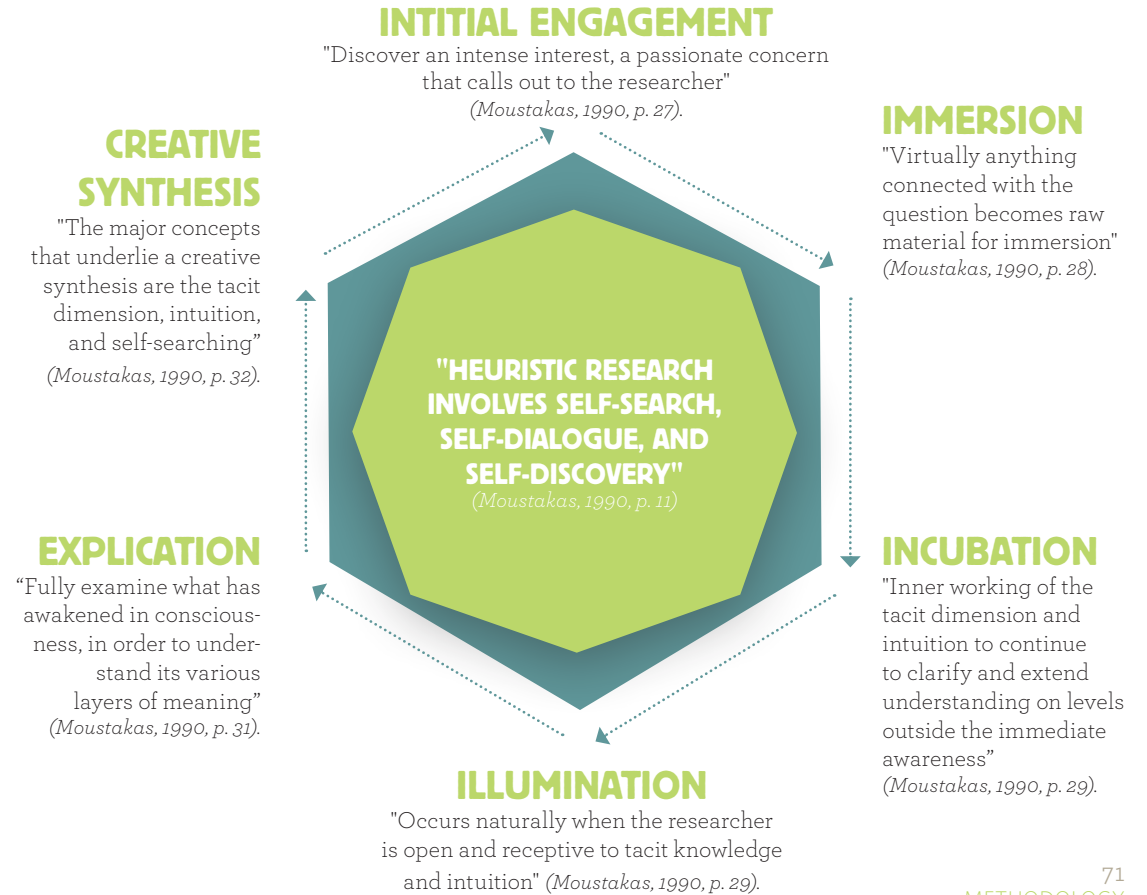
This chapter focuses on a range of creative research methods used to allow the greatest possible experimentation this under the paradigm of heuristics: digital inspiration, tacit knowledge, research diary, reflection in and on action, and flow charts. All the methods had a significant role in my practice as they provide me with inspiration and created clarity within the practice.

Heuristics helped me investigate the research question and assisted me to improve my understanding of my own practice.

heuristics

Moustakas (1990) acknowledges six phases in the heuristic methodology (Fig. 4.1): initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis.

Figure 4.1
a visual representation of
the six phases of the heuristic process used
in the developments of the designs



step one

INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

This first phase (Fig. 4.1) can be defined as initial engagement, which refers to “discover[ing] an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27).

In the initial stages of the project I drew on my experience as an immigrant to New Zealand. As mentioned in my positioning statement, this project is developed from some of the changes my family encountered upon immigration to New Zealand from Belgium, in 2006. My new everyday experience in a New Zealand rural environment is an important source for the investigation; journeys taken through

**PROPRIÉTÉ
PRIVÉE**

Figure 4.2
Propriete privee sign, Belgium,
regulatory sign

Figure 4.3
No Entry sign, New Zealand,
regulatory sign



the local rural location as part of day-to-day life provide visual material in the form of a variety of public signs.

This led to the question: “How would my Flemish-speaking children interpret the public signage in their new environment? This question led me to begin to analyse public signage in a process of initial engagement. In doing so I discovered that examples of Belgian (Fig. 4.2, 4.4) and New Zealand (Fig. 4.3, 4.5) public signage demonstrated visual and linguistic differences between the two countries, for example the Belgium smoke free sign (Fig. 4.4) is showing the colours red, black and white with a rectangle border in red and a pictorial image of a prohibition smoke sign whereas in New Zealand the smoke free sign (Fig. 4.5) employs green and white, with a white round cornered border and no pictorial image, which appears less as a warning sign than the Belgium one.

Figure 4.4
Smokefree sign, Belgium,
regulatory sign



Figure 4.5
Smokefree sign, New Zealand,
regulatory sign



step two

Figure 4.6
Example of a Evernote page

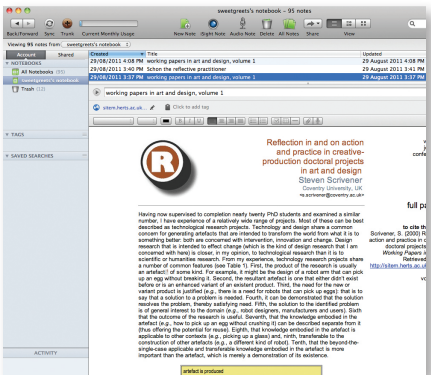
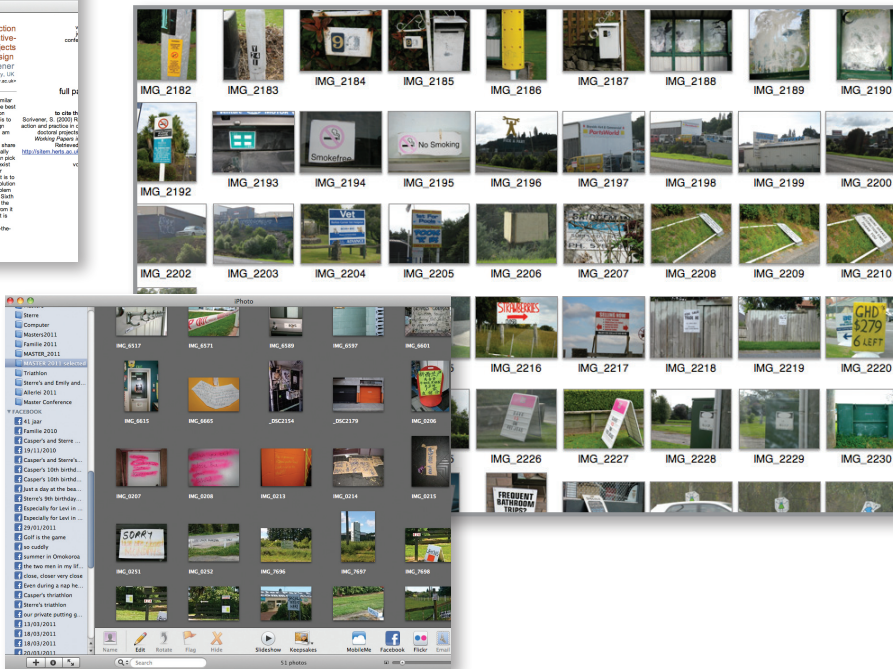


Figure 4.7
Example images
of the image bank which are
always collected in iPhoto

Examples of photographic images I took are graffiti, rural views, images of school signs, road signs, panoramic views, urban road signs, urban posters, etc. They provide knowledge about shape, colour, typography, and position in the environment.

IMMERSION

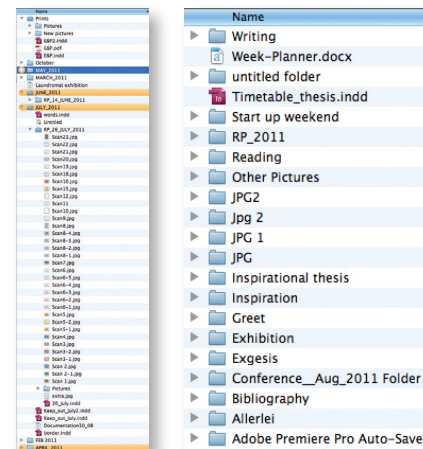
The second step (Fig. 4.1) in the development of the project is Immersion: as Moustakas states, "Virtually anything connected with the question becomes raw material for immersion" (p. 28). Immersion provides a way to collect visual material and written information that has some relation to the project.



Data collection

The database is organised into different groups that are revisited frequently and are constantly rearranged to fill in the gaps that have emerged during the developments. Subject and keywords order this digital database in different folders (Fig. 4.8). For easy access and retrieval, I used the software packages Evernote (Fig. 4.6), Zootool, and iPhoto (Fig. 4.7). I used my own photographs to create a database for inspiration, and to provide raw material I could select and refine in later phases. Although the thesis was specifically considered public signage, I collected all sorts of other impressions found in both rural and urban environments. These different tools are used to create order in the research project. It provided a way to retrieve information quickly in the emerging project.

Figure 4.8
Two examples of the structure of digital files and folders



step two

Refining the database

Some images are selected by browsing through the database (Fig. 4.7) to create a more specific collection (Fig. 4.9). These images were used as inspirations for the initial visual experimentations, relating to the research project. The process of immersion is not confined to specific types of signage; walking and observing the environment and its behaviour, or viewing exhibitions in galleries, also offered fresh perspectives.

Figure 4.9
more specific collection of the image bank



INCUBATION

Moustakas (1990) argues that meaning springs from our own thinking, which is influenced by our opinions, principles, and judgments. The incubation stage (Fig. 4.1), which gave me a new insight into my practice, may be defined as the point at which the “Inner working of the tacit dimension and intuition to continue to clarify and extend understanding on levels outside the immediate awareness” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 29). It often seems to be a subconscious element to the thinking that accompanies this incubation stage. Acknowledging this period of incubation raises awareness that, even while not specifically focused on the research question, my understanding of the nature of the problem was deepening.

step three

step four

ILLUMINATION

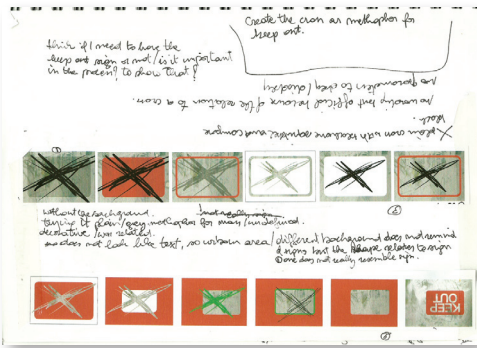
The fourth step (Fig. 4.1) “Occurs naturally when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition” (Moustakas C., 1990, p. 29). In this thesis this is the first attempt to create designs where the only guidance is the visual inspiration originating from the databank (Fig. 4.7). Each visual experiment in a series is a refinement of the experimentation before it (Fig. 4.10).

In this particular experiment I subtract elements and take the development a step further with each design in order to question: “How much visual information can be subtracted before there is no message left?” This adds to the overall question of the thesis: When is a public sign not a public sign? The thesis is an open exploration into attempts to locate the points where meaning changes and alters the function of the sign.

Figure 4.10
Feijoas Series investigating subtracting



step five



EXPLICATION

The fifth step (Fig. 4.1) “Fully examine what has awakened unconsciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). By describing and reflecting critically on what we created can mean we discover new knowledge, which is necessary to move forward (Fig. 4.11). After the reflection, the researcher selects the design, which provides the most relevant knowledge in relation to the research question: When is a public sign not a public sign? (Fig. 4.12).

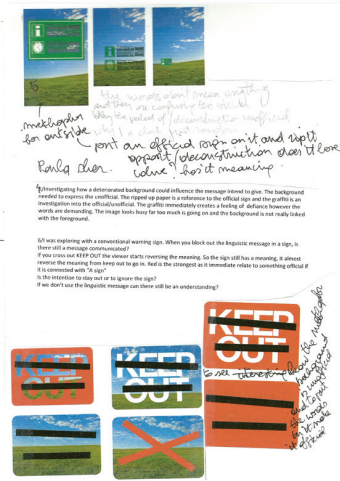


Figure 4.11
Critical reflection.



Figure 4.12
Critically reflect and select the design out of the exploration series which provided the most new knowledge in relation to the research question: When is a public sign not a public sign?

step six

CREATIVE SYNTHESIS

The sixth step (Fig. 4.1) is the creative synthesis, “The major concepts that underlie a creative synthesis are the tacit dimension, intuition, and self-searching.” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32). This example (Fig. 4.13) becomes the final design for this particular investigation. This example is achieved via the investigation of the different heuristic steps and has resulted in a design that combines the knowledge gained throughout the different stages as the researcher gains knowledge in every step which brings the researcher closer to a response in the research question, this answer will always be ambiguous and not definite due to the subjective nature of the investigations.

Figure 4.13
Example of a creative synthesis



tacit knowledge

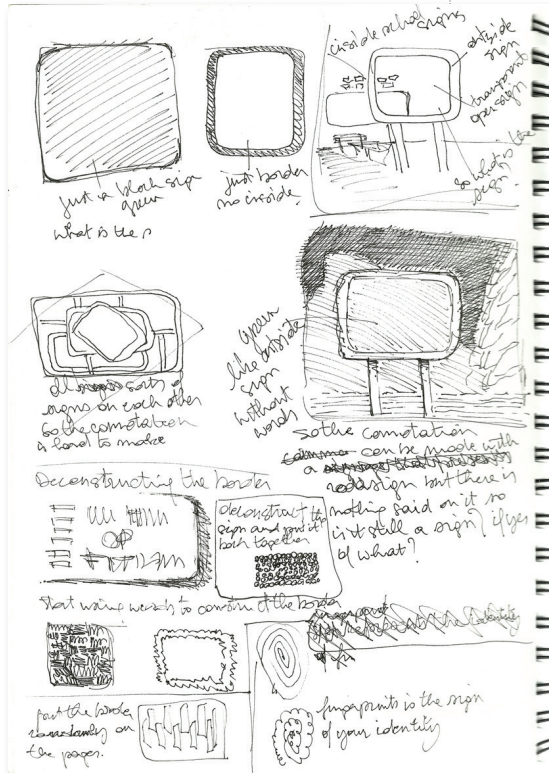
We can define tacit knowledge as our intuitive *knowing*. This knowledge is not easy to share or recognise, as we are not aware of it. It exists within ourselves; it is part of our being. Polanyi (1966) argues “tacit knowledge lies below the surface of conscious thought and is accumulated through a lifetime of experience, experimentation, perception, and learning by doing” (p. 182). Schön (1983) similarly suggests that tacit knowledge is “actions, recognitions, and judgments which we know how to carry out spontaneously; we do not have to think about them prior to, or during the performance” (p. 2).

The heuristic approach offers the designer the opportunity to identify and articulate the elements of the design practice that are tacit. During my more than twenty years of experience as a graphic designer I had internalised, without realising it, a significant body of knowledge that I could not now

easily explain. These graphic design elements and principles had become second nature. I used them without conscious thought.

The philosopher Gilbert Ryle’s definitions of *wissen* (knowing what) and *können* (knowing how) cover both the practical and theoretical knowledge (Polanyi, 1966, p. 7), understanding that in the “knowing”, one form of knowing never exists without the other. Therefore, we are mostly incapable of describing the *knowing* which the designs reveal and, in order to reflect on these designs, there is the need for external knowledge to articulate the vision of the designer. In all my years of designing I created a databank with inspirations, images, scenes, and emotions that are internalized knowledge, and this allows me to draw on visual references and recollections as opposed to relying purely on graphic inspirations as sources.

research diary



Schön (1991) suggests that in order to effectively “reflect in practice” and “reflect on practice” (p. 63) one needs to create specific methods for reflection. Newbury (2001) argues that “the reason for keeping a research diary is to facilitate the research process through recording observations, thoughts and questions as they happen, for later use by the researcher, and to stimulate reflective thinking about the research” (para. 8). Therefore, to fashion order out of the chaos that collecting extensive visual and academic information engenders, I created a research diary as Newbury (2001) suggests. Within this A4 sketchbook I recorded observations, ideas, readings, and also thoughts and reflections, unresolved problems, issues or questions, and plans for action (Fig. 4.14, 4.15, 4.16). This research diary became “the vehicle for ordered creativity” (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973, p. 105).

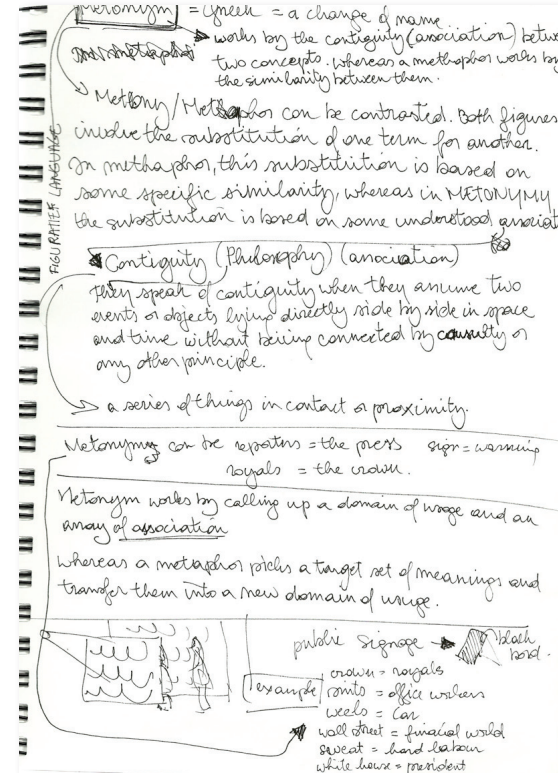
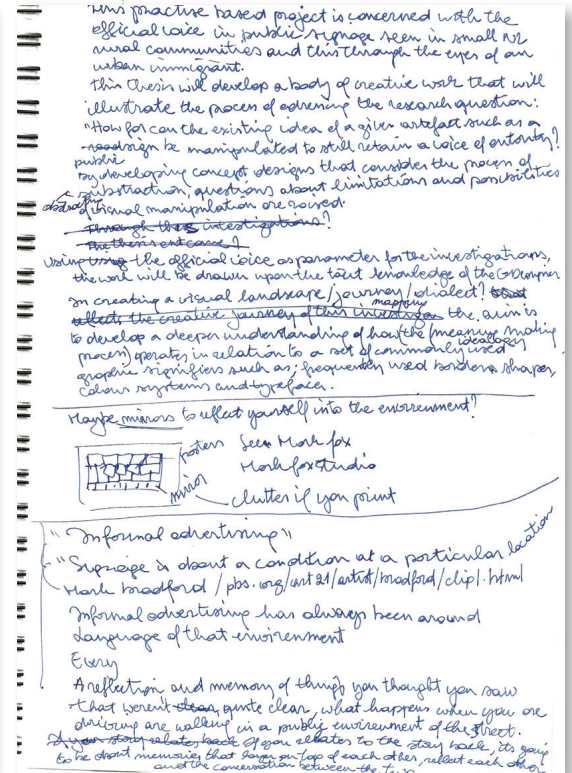


Figure 4.14/4.15/4.16
Observations, thoughts, issues etc.
in the research diary.



reflection in- and on- action

Figure 4.17

Reflection on action in research diary



An important process in creating work is “reflection-in-practice” and “reflecting-on-practice” (Schön, 1991, p. 63). The reflections involve an evaluation of current results and assessing how this fits within the dimensions of the aim, and subsequently modifying the position of the project if necessary. The researcher does this by analysing and responding to the explorations created in the research diary (Fig. 4.17). Reflection-on-action also took place prior to and during online sessions, during which the development of the project to date is discussed with supervisors, to see how further developments could take place (Fig. 4.17, 4.18, 4.19).

Figure 4.18

Reflection on action for online sessions

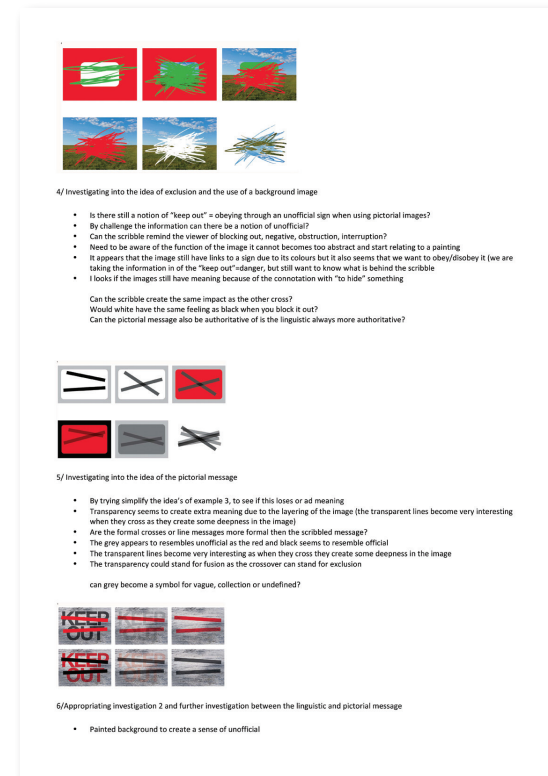


Figure 4.19

Analysing and reflecting on the online discussions

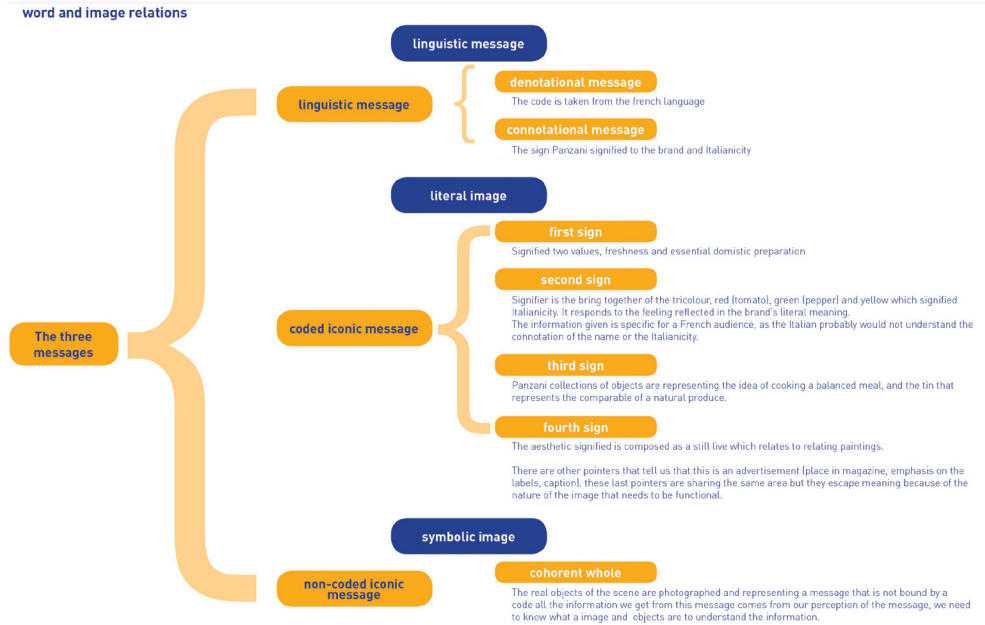


flow chart

Figure 4.20
Flowchart that visually maps
the word and images theory of Barthes
Barthes, R. (1978). *Rhetoric of the image*.
In R. Barthes, *Image/
music/text*. New York NY: Hill and Wang.

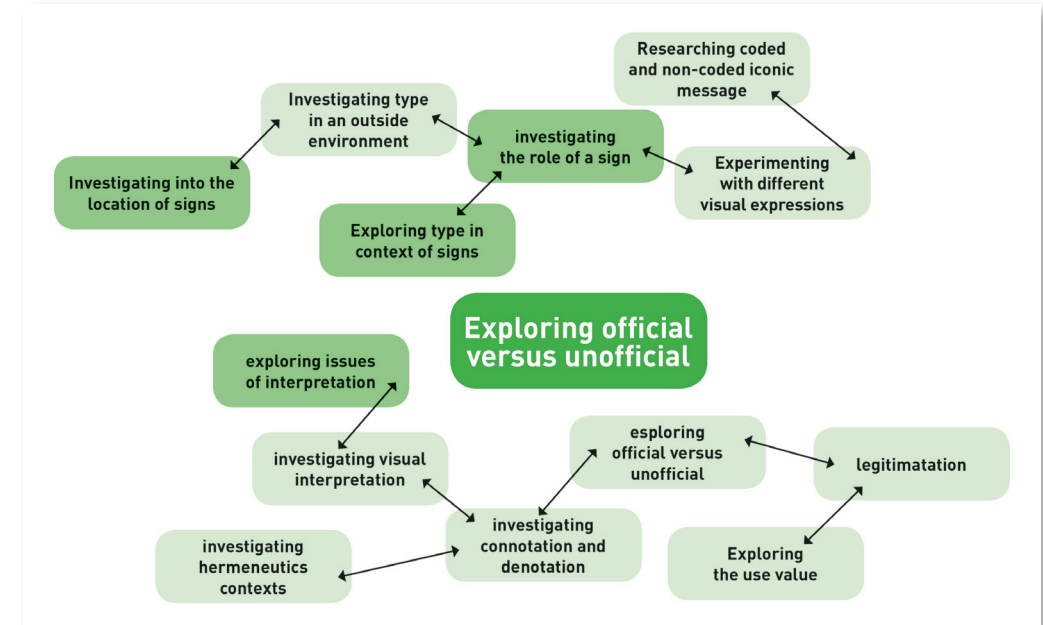
As the project develops the topic begins to cluster into themes, and flow chart are used to create structure from the chaos.

Flow charts were a useful tool to create connections between ideas within the work (for example visual representation of word and image relations (Fig.



4.20) or another example was brainstorming public signage and its possible connotations (Fig. 4.21), and also to aid reflection at a later date by visually mapping out ideas to create an overview of how the different parts could connect. In this process I preferred to use a digital form that is easy to create, store and access.

Figure 4.21
Flowchart that visually
maps out ideas.



introduction

Colour and shape are important factors for practical investigations, as they have strong symbolic connotations for public signage. Therefore the practice starts with introducing them, before the series of six different explorations, each focussing on specific issues around a manipulation of the signifiers of public signage, and exploring visual communication language elements such as metonymy and synecdoche.

The emphasis of the practice is on the meaning-making process of the design, and how the manipulation of different parts (e.g. border, shapes, colour systems, and typefaces) relates to informative signs and regulatory signs in public signage: their different characteristics form a basis for the investigation.

/6.0
practice

colour

The viewers' perception is both visual and physical toward colour, so the designer needs to try to control what the viewer will perceive in order to translate the message effectively (Gage, 1999).

Feisner (2006) argues:

There are many factors affecting our perception of a colour, such as the surroundings of the object, its surface texture, and the lighting conditions under which it is seen. How much of a colour is used, whether it is bright, dull, light or dark, and where it is placed in relation to another colour are also crucial factors in our perception. (p. 4)

Our cultural background will affect our colour associations. As Feisner (2006) puts it, "colour associations are often culture specific" (p. 127). For example, green can be linked to New Zealand as "a country that constantly reminds itself and visitors that the 'clean, green, and beautiful' landscape is the major national asset" (Bell & Llyall, 1995, p. 283). The colour black is associated with power and authority. In New Zealand this is linked to the successful All Blacks

rugby team, who project the idea of dominance on the field. The colour can be described as totally ambiguous or unclear, and yet something is there (Gage, 2007). The association with black type in my practice is intended to convey a sense of power.

Red is intended to convey a sense of power and can suggest danger (Feisner, 2006). It can be used in a negative manner, where it is connected with a hazard (for example the danger sign), but can also be seen in a more positive manner, where it tries to attract people's attention to tell something (Feisner, 2006). In my research practice the use of red colour can imply informative and regulatory signs but also to draw attention to the colour and its associations.

Grey can suggest a sense of vagueness, as Richter (2007) explains, "Grey makes no statement whatever, it evokes neither feeling nor associations; it is really neither visible nor invisible" (p. 205-207).

Colour can have significant emotional connotations. For instance white can imply serenity and innocence, while yellow implies happiness and optimism, vitality and hope (Feisner, 2006). However in the context of road signs the significance is less an emotional one than it is a way of creating a consistent and recognisable system of sign categories, e.g. red and blue are compulsory signs, green are information signs and yellow are warning signs etc.

shapes

In my investigations, identifying and isolating particular shapes commonly used in public signage are used to explore within the investigations. The shapes that are used in public signage are selected particularly for their strong visual capacity (Crow, 2006). The most common shapes used in these investigations are the circle, triangle, and rectangle. Frutiger (2006) argues:

Circular panels, which bear some resemblance to the raised open hand, are the most clearly visible against their background whereas square or oblong shapes tend to be submerged into the general townscape and the circles and the oblique line provides a much stronger contrast to the urban environment. (p. 146)

Combinations can be created with colour and/or typography and/or a graphic symbol (e.g. an arrow). The arrow is an example of a symbol that can be recognized across cultural barriers. For example if the viewer is not familiar with the linguistic message on the sign there will only be an urge to gain understanding via other signifiers such as a symbol like an arrow, which can also be seen as powerful due to the cultural specific understanding.

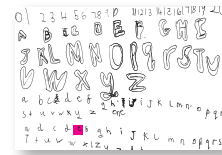
series 1

These initial developments show explorations into the combination of different information and regulatory signs sourced from within and outside the school environment. How is the linguistic message affected when manipulating different elements and subsequently how meaning is perceived?

Figure 5.1
Selection of public signs and images form the visual inspiration for the investigations.
The images are derived from daily travel from and to school.



Fig. 5.1.1
exit sign1 investigation

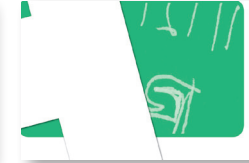


visual inspiration from two
informative signs forms the basis of
experimentation into manipulating
the linguistic message, handwritten
font and form to contradict the initial
directness of the Exit sign

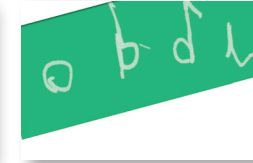
appropriation of the
different signifiers is used
to create a visual tension



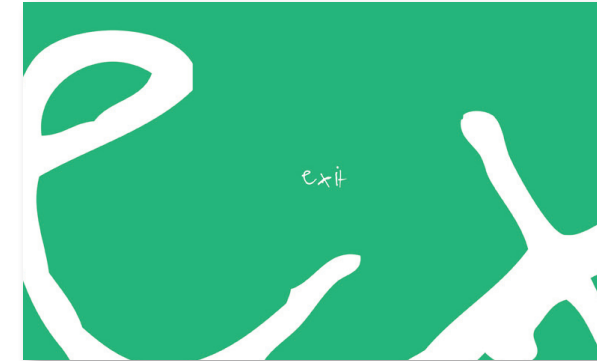
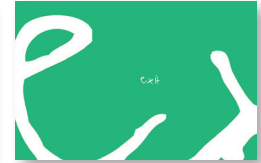
asymmetric angle used to
create tension between the
different forms



emphasising the linguistic
signifiers to create a
hierarchy



creating a visual hierarchy
between the foreground
and background linguistic
message creates a dynamic
tension between the
different signifiers



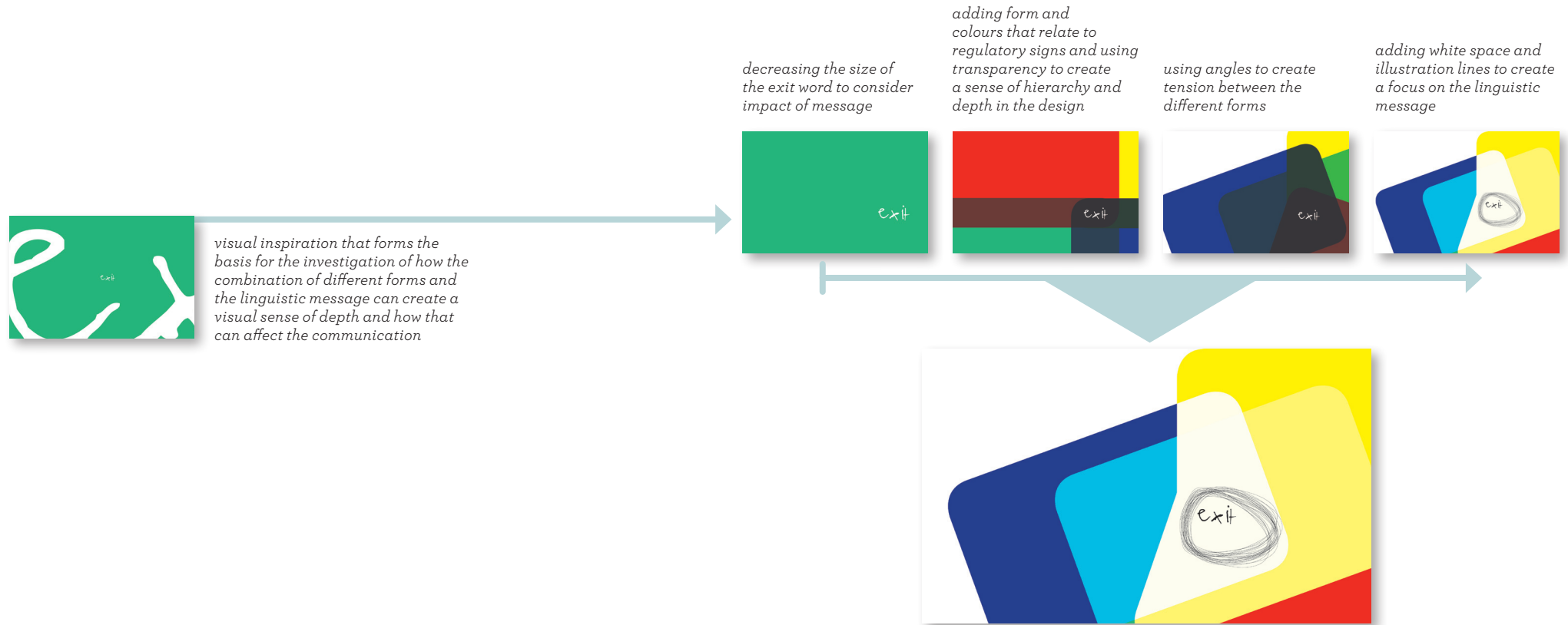
Reflection on selected design

- > increasing the graphic impact by creating a visual hierarchy between the foreground and background linguistic message creates a dynamic tension and affects the communication of the message in which the colour green and the linguistic signifiers imply the symbolic exit sign

Knowledge gained

- > colour is important in the understanding even if the linguistic message is limited
- > the typography style does not really change the understanding of the design if there are still signifiers that refer to the original exit sign
- > this sign does not create a direct message that is common for exit signs however it retains a reference to the exit sign through colour and text

Figure 5.1.2
exit sign2 investigation



Reflection on selected design

- > the different angles, colour transparency and position of the forms all help to create visual hierarchy between the linguistic message and the background, the white space deflects attention towards the linguistic message
- > the message of the initial Exit sign is not clear due to the variety of colour used which is not consistent with public signage

Knowledge gained

- > the idea of a visual hierarchy, colour tension and scale creates too many different graphic signifiers and undermines the understanding of the linguistic message
- > there is no direct connotation with public signage

Figure 5.1.3
pool sign1 investigation

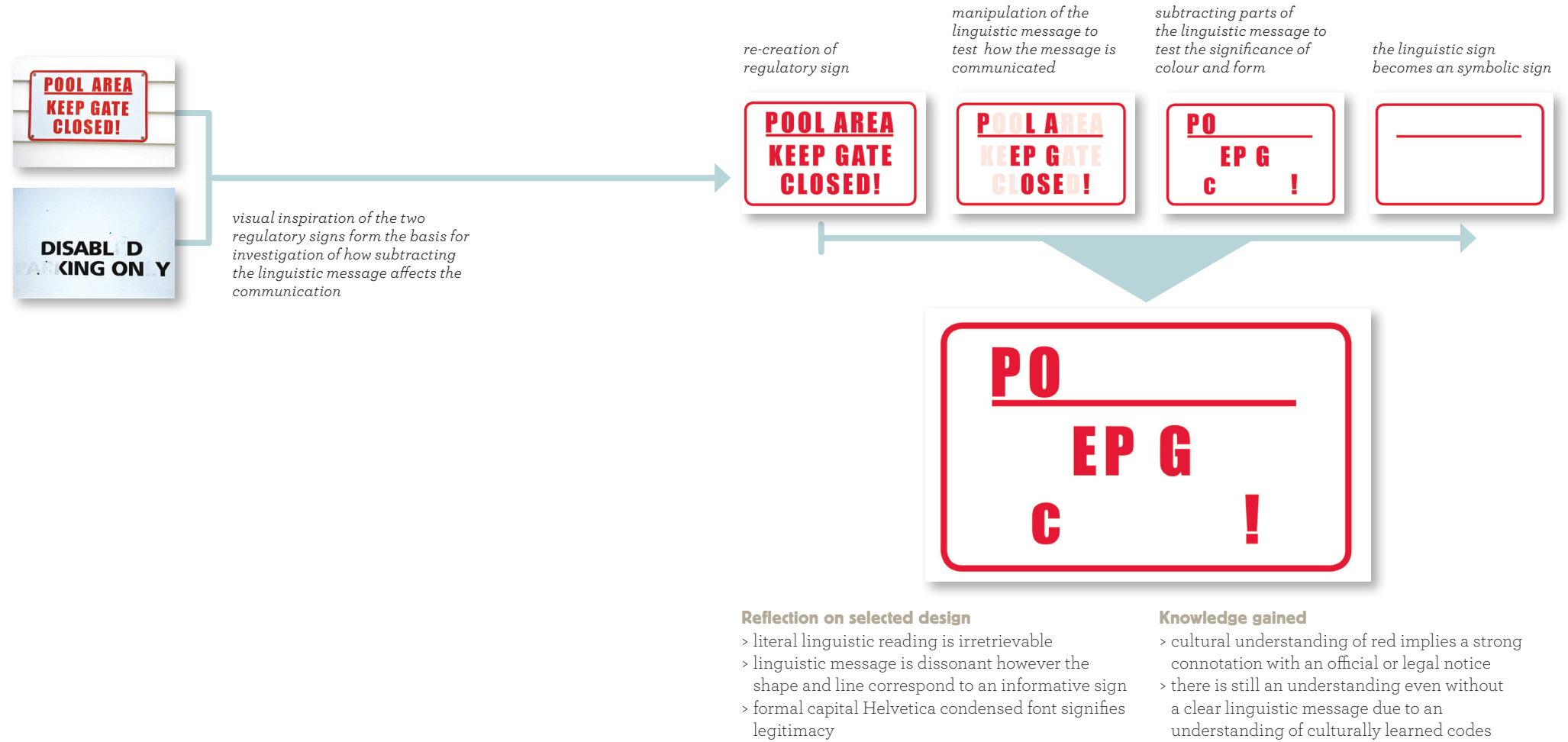


Figure 5.1.4
pool2 investigation

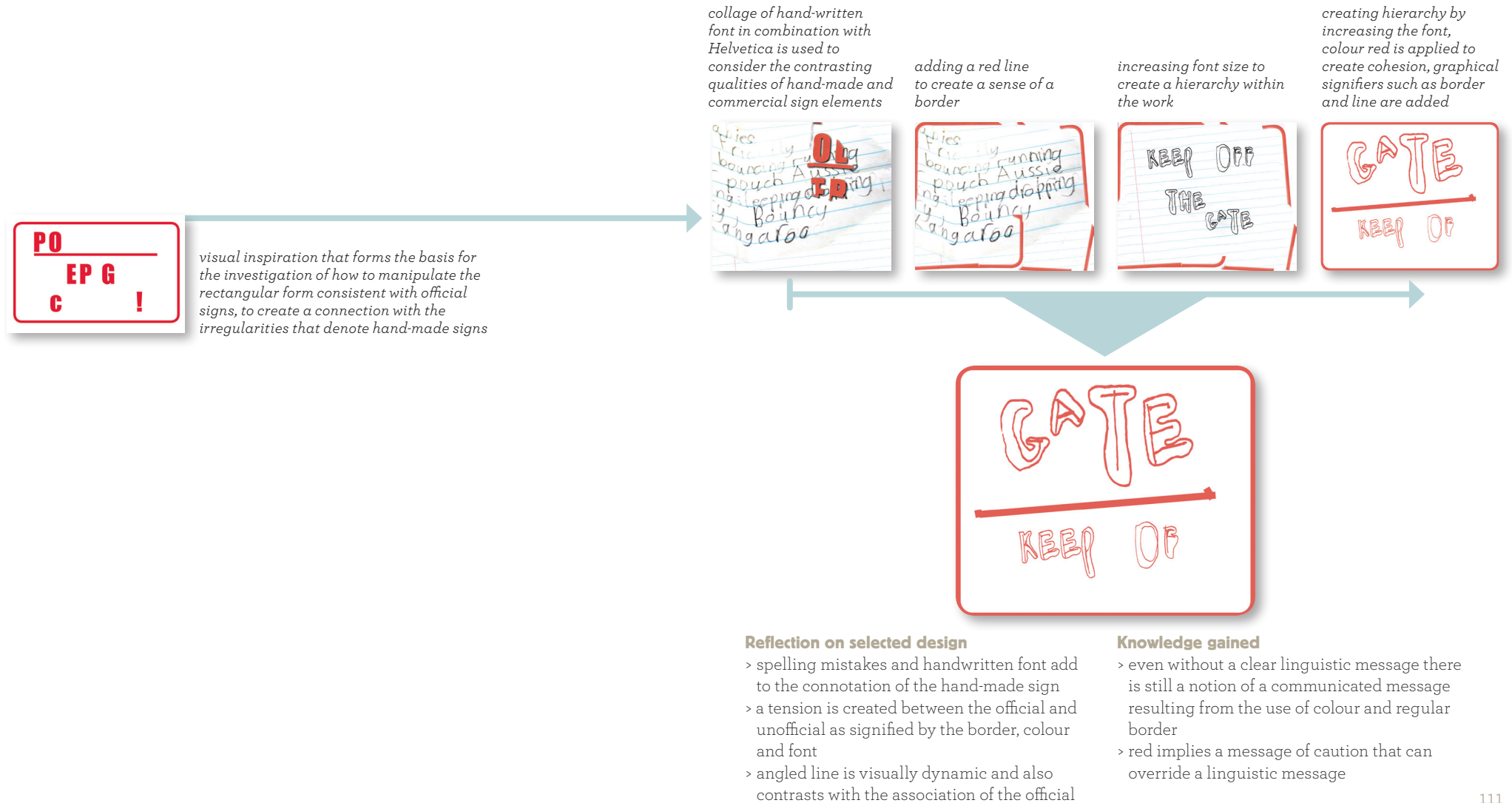
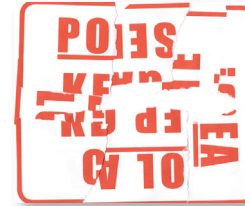


Figure 5.1.5
pool3 investigation



visual inspiration that forms the basis for the investigation of manipulation of linguistic and visual communicators to create irregularities that are consistent with hand-made signs

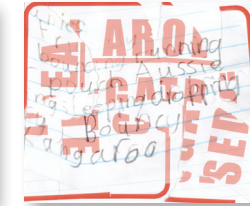
reassembling pieces of a sign to see how the meaning changes when content is rearranged and how this effect differs from methods of subtracting



Rearranging the pieces to disrupt the border



adding black handwritten text and creating transparency to separate identities between the handwritten and commercial typography



adjusting tone to create an aged impression and test ideas of value and the effect on meaning



Reflection on selected design

- > the Helvetica type is dominant in the design even when partially obscured or when the linguistic message is irretrievable
- > colour and tone adjustments used to imply a sense of deterioration raise questions about value of the linguistic message
- > the handwritten text loses importance and takes on the appearance of graffiti contributing to a sense of neglect

Knowledge gained

- > the design still has a strong connotation with public signage, even when colour is removed
- > the border retains its official nature even when it is disrupted

Figure 5.1.6
series 1 summary

- > by using a variation of graphic associations the significance of the linguistic message can be analysed
- > the linguistic message is not always the most important element in communicating meaning
- > red contributes a powerful coded iconic message which conveys a sense of warning, and metonymy is used to imply this
- > font use creates a distinction of value and impact of the message between information and regulation signs



series 2

These initial developments show explorations into the combination of different information and regulatory signs derived within and outside the school environment and how the linguistic message is affected by different graphic elements and subsequently how meaning is perceived.

Figure 5.2
Selection of public signs and images form the visual inspiration for the investigations.
The images are derived from daily travel in the local area.



Figure 5.2.1
shadow1 investigation



visual inspiration that forms
the basis for an investigation of
manipulation of the visual context of
the sign and its interpretation

juxtaposing an indexical
shadow sign with a
symbolic and linguistic
message using an image
of the beach to signify the
outdoor environment



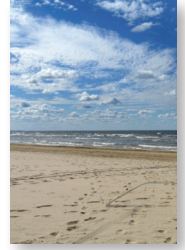
removing
linguistic message



removing symbolic
colour signifier



trace of the
symbolic sign is
integrated with
the indexical sign



Reflection on selected design

- > the shadow of the sign is still powerful due to the connotation of its shape
- > the different angles create a continuation to the right side of the page which results in a strong composition



Knowledge gained

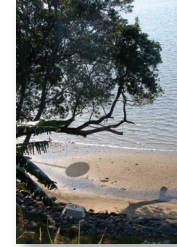
- > even without any linguistic message the indexical sign still has power and signifies a message of authority
- > the background image affects the interpretation and meaning of the indexical sign

Figure 5.2.2
shadow2 investigation



visual inspiration that forms the basis for an investigation into the manipulation of the indexical sign in relation to the physical context and its interpretation

placing the indexical signs on different locations within the rural landscape



investigating variations of form of the indexical sign

Reflection on selected design

- > the shadow form is immediately recognisable as a regulatory sign
- > the background image provides a context for the implied sign
- > the diagonal angle of the indexical sign activates the location and raises questions as to the nature the sign



Knowledge gained

- > the indexical trace connotes public signage and implies a message despite the lack of a linguistic element
- > the indexical sign retains its signification regardless of the context, however the message may change according to the location
- > the form of the sign carries with it a sense of warning when combined with the rural context and unknown subject
- > the scale affects the importance of the sign within the design

Figure 5.2.3
shadow3 investigation

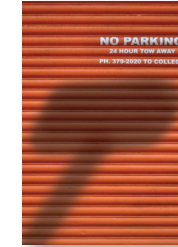


visual inspiration that forms the basis for an investigation of the indexical sign in relation to angle and hierarchy

indexical sign is used to imply a public sign, the use of shadow creates a hierarchy in the design



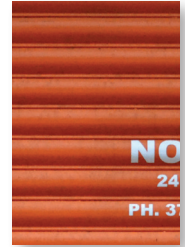
angle visually emphasises the linguistic message



emphasising the linguistic message to create hierarchy

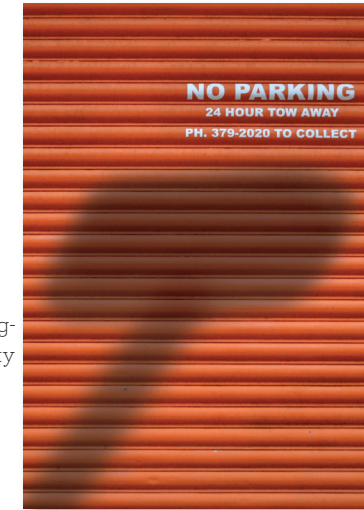


cropping the image and linguistic message to manipulate the amount of information provided



Reflection on selected design

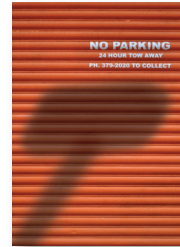
- > shadow suggests an indexical reading of a public sign
- > the shadow is imposing and signifies a strong sense of authority
- > the angle of the indexical sign combined with the horizontal lines in relation the linguistic message creates a visual unity between the different elements



Knowledge gained

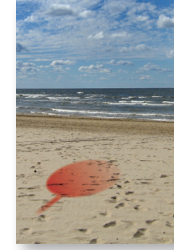
- > a smaller linguistic message overrides an indexical sign as it is immediately understood
- > the use of the shadow is less threatening in an urban context because signs of this form are commonly found in this environment and can be regulatory or informative

Figure 5.2.4
shadow4 investigation



visual inspiration that forms the basis for an investigation of colour use in the indexical and symbolic sign

red indexical trace which can connote a message of warning



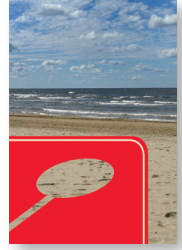
the indexical sign is visually manipulated and appears more symbolic in meaning



border is added to separate sign from the background image



using full colour creates emphasis and creates a distinction between foreground and background



Reflection on selected design

- > the cropping creates tension which emphasises the symbolic message of a public sign
- > horizontal lines combined with the angle create strong compositional balance



Knowledge gained

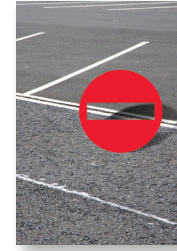
- > the red combined with the form of a regulatory sign creates a sense of warning in this context
- > the border with rounded corners connotes an official sign

Figure 5.2.5
shadow5 investigation

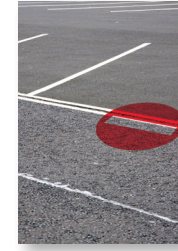


visual inspiration that forms the basis
for further investigation of colour use in
the indexical and symbolic sign

use of a symbolic sign,
transparency creates
a sense of depth and
consequently hierarchy



symbolic sign is
reduced to trace



the symbolic sign moves
into an indexical sign as
it becomes reminiscent
of a shadow



faded indexical
trace



Reflection on selected design

- > the indexical trace suggests the form of a symbolic sign
- > the background image communicates the context therefore a linguistic message is not necessary to communicate a message
- > the angled lines imply movement and create a dynamic composition and emphasise the indexical sign



Knowledge gained

- > symbol and form can imply a strong message even when there is no indication of an linguistic message
- > shadow and transparency affect the impact of the message however it is still present

Figure 5.2.6
series2 summary

- > the trace or shadow of an indexical sign retains the power of the original shape.
- > the shape of the sign can be indexical or symbolic depending on the way it is visually manipulated
- > the shadow communicates a different message when juxtaposed with a rural or urban context
- > the forms used in regulation signage communicate a strong message even in the absence of a linguistic message
- > background image adds to the interpretation of the coded iconic message even without a typographic explanation as the design indicates a regulatory sign through metonymy



series 3

Experimentation with regulatory and information graphic signifiers to investigate symbolic signs of colour and shape to see how a message is communicated in relation to public signage.

Figure 5.3
Selection of public signs and images,
create the visual inspiration for
the investigations.
The images are derived from daily travel.



Figure 5.3.1
out1 investigation



visual inspiration that forms the basis
for investigation of the manipulation of
foreground colour to see how this affects the
reading when combined with the symbol

manipulating the
symbolic form and
colour derived from a
regulatory sign



minimizing
the amount of
background
information available



removing background
context and testing
scale



reversing
foreground and
background
colour



Reflection on selected design

- > the form is in black but still implies the message of a regulatory sign due to the background colour association of a road sign



Knowledge gained

- > black indexical sign retains power even when the scale is altered
- > coloured background creates a strong symbolic message
- > a linguistic message is not necessary to gain some understanding of the message due to learnt codes

Figure 5.3.2
out2 investigation



visual inspiration that forms the basis for further investigation of how symbols and colour communicate to see how manipulation of these can affect the reading

juxtaposing
colour, symbol
and rural
background



altering the
hierarchy of how
the information is
communicated



emphasising on
the symbolic sign
by experimenting
with scale



reversing colour
and blurring
background to
emulate a barrier
in the foreground



Reflection on selected design

- > the background image adds to the power of the symbol as it provides some context
- > asymmetry of the cropped sign creates tension between the foreground and background
- > the large symbol dominates the image



Knowledge gained

- > emphasising the cropped symbolic sign creates a strong communication of the message even without a linguistic message
- > scale adds authority to the symbol sign

Figure 5.3.3
out3 investigation



visual inspiration that forms the basis
for an investigation of the manipulation of
regulatory sign symbol and colour to test
how colour and form operate together

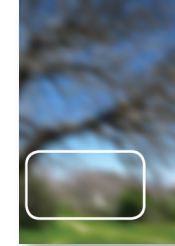
using border only



blurring the surrounding
background to change
the emphasis



eliminating colour
and changing the
background



changing scale
and composition
to test what kind
of hierarchy is
created



Reflection on selected design

- > the background creates a sense of open space
- > a spatial organisation is created through alignment of the horizontal lines of the symbol in combination with the horizon line

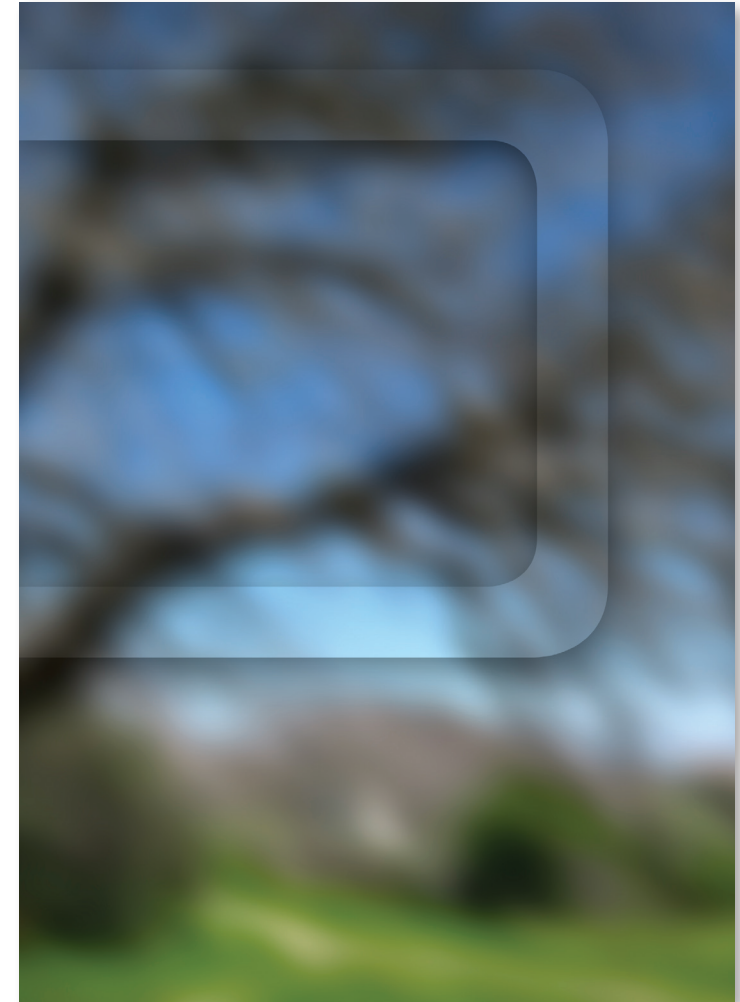


Knowledge gained

- > colour alters the meaning of the form
- > red alerts the viewer to the importance of the message

*Figure 5.3.4
series2 summary*

- > emphasising on the cropping of the symbolic sign creates a powerful communication
- > the indexical sign remains powerful even when it is visually manipulated
- > the shadow creates a real sense of depth implying a foreground (important) and background (less important)
- > coloured background adds to the interpretation of the coded iconic message even without a linguistic message as the design indicates a regulatory sign through synecdoche in a way that the background is framed to represent only a fragment of a larger scene. The viewers make their own assumption as to what the bigger picture is.



series 4

These developments are investigations into the importance of the linguistic message by testing how much can be manipulated before it loses its meaning and if shape only can be used to represent the message symbolically.

Figure 5.4.0
Selection of public signs and images, creates the visual inspiration for the investigations.
The images are derived from daily travel.



Figure 5.4.1
keep out1 investigation

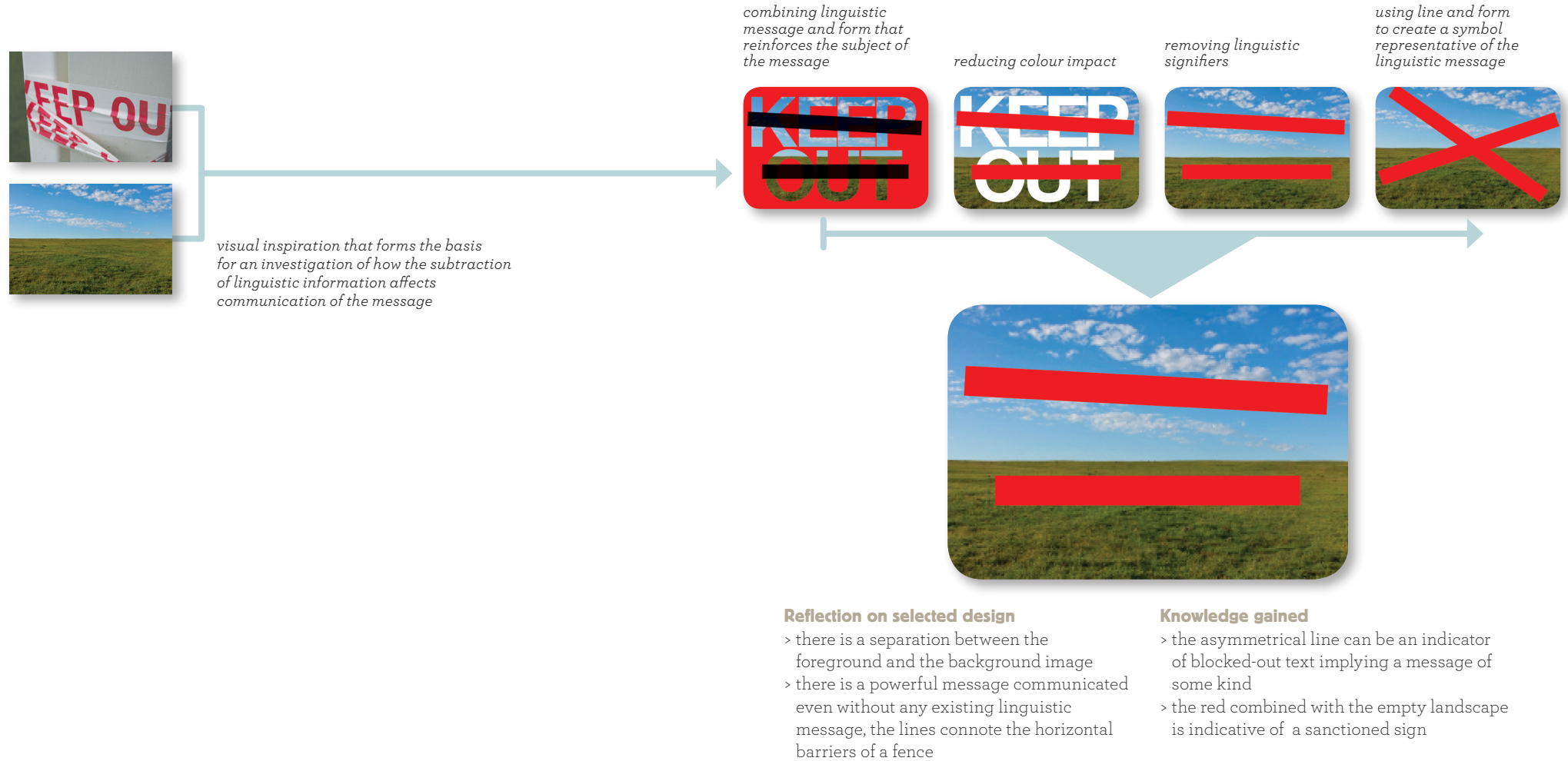
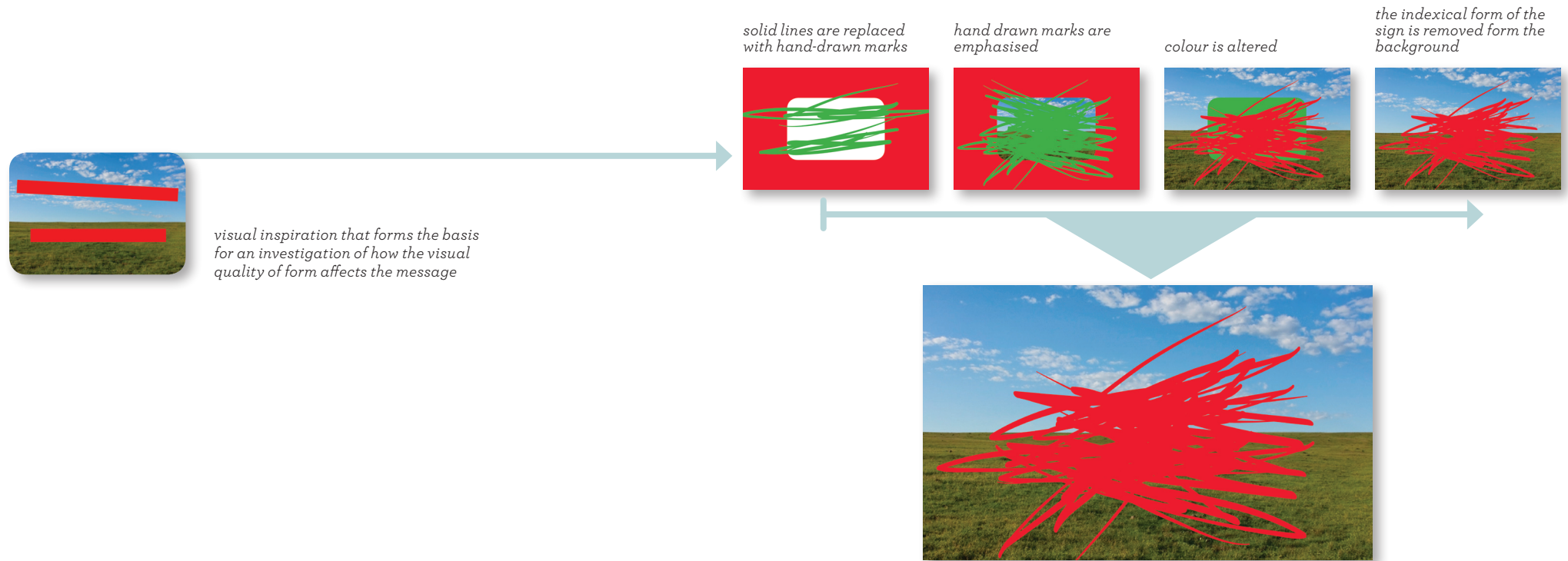


Figure 5.4.2
keep out2 investigation



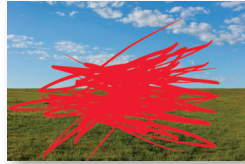
Reflection on selected design

- > the type of line used has an emotive quality
- > the hand drawn area obscures the central part of the background image
- > there is the effect of information being obscured or removed

Knowledge gained

- > the representation of a regulatory or informative sign is dependent on the quality of line and shape used
- > the scratched line contributes a sense of destruction rather than the obscuration of a message to be communicated
- > quality of line affects the value the information presented

Figure 5.4.3
keep out3 investigation



visual inspiration that forms the basis for an investigation of how different combinations of only shape and colour might communicate a message

background imagery is eliminated, quality of line is once more refined with reference to regulatory signs



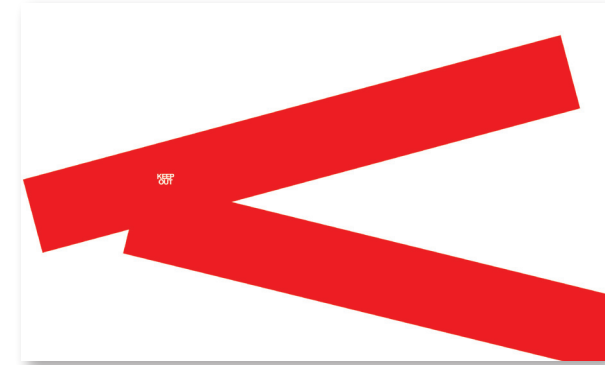
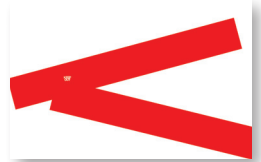
simplify the line to make the content clearer



subtracting the middle layer



subtracting the background colour layer



Reflection on selected design

- > the lines are dominant
- > without a background context there is no direct message
- > there is limited reference to regulatory signs remaining

Knowledge gained

- > colour can lose meaning when it is isolated from the context that a symbol provides
- > layers suggest a message through the connection and relationship between different colour and form elements

Figure 5.4.4
keep out4 investigation

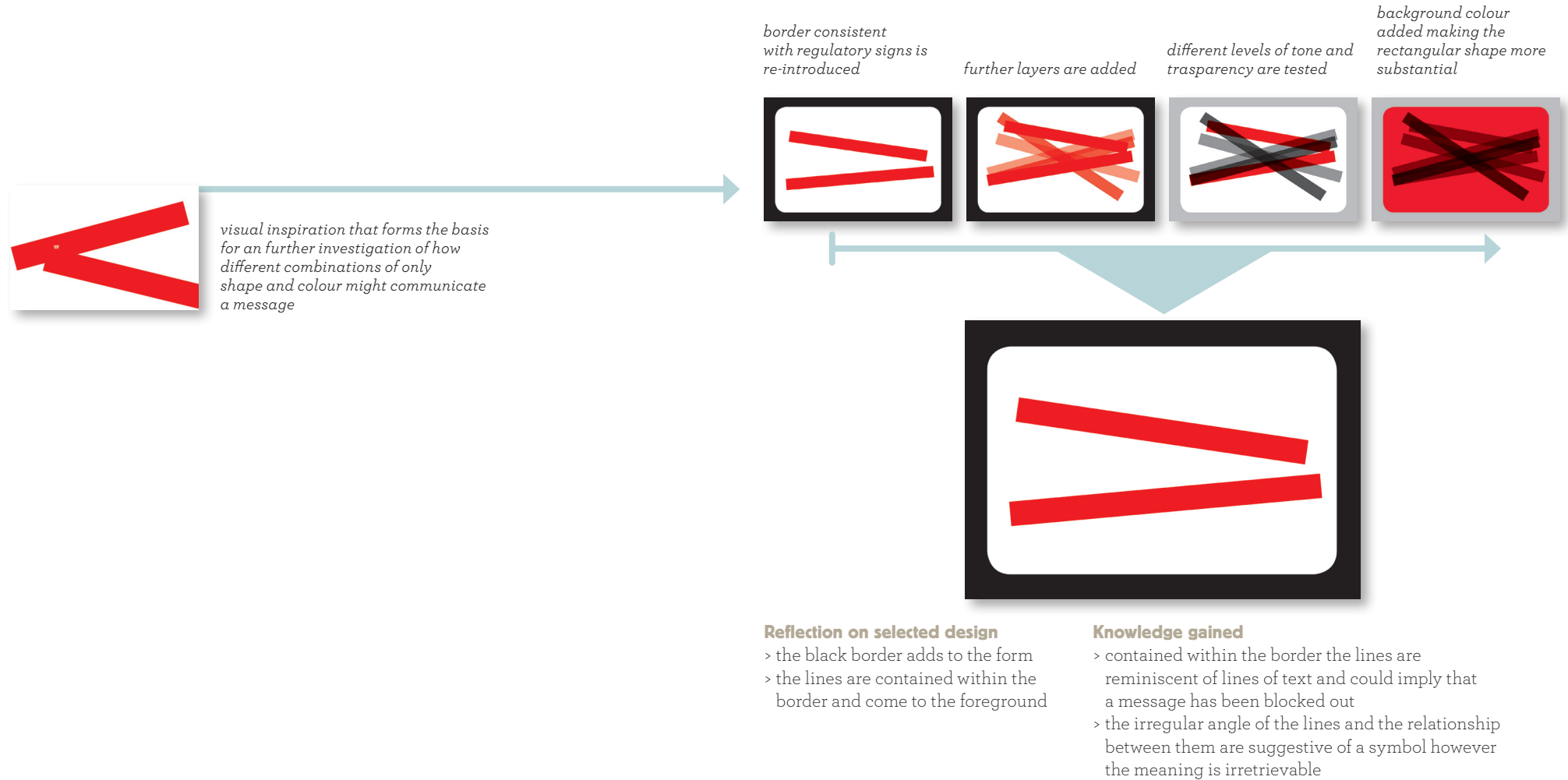
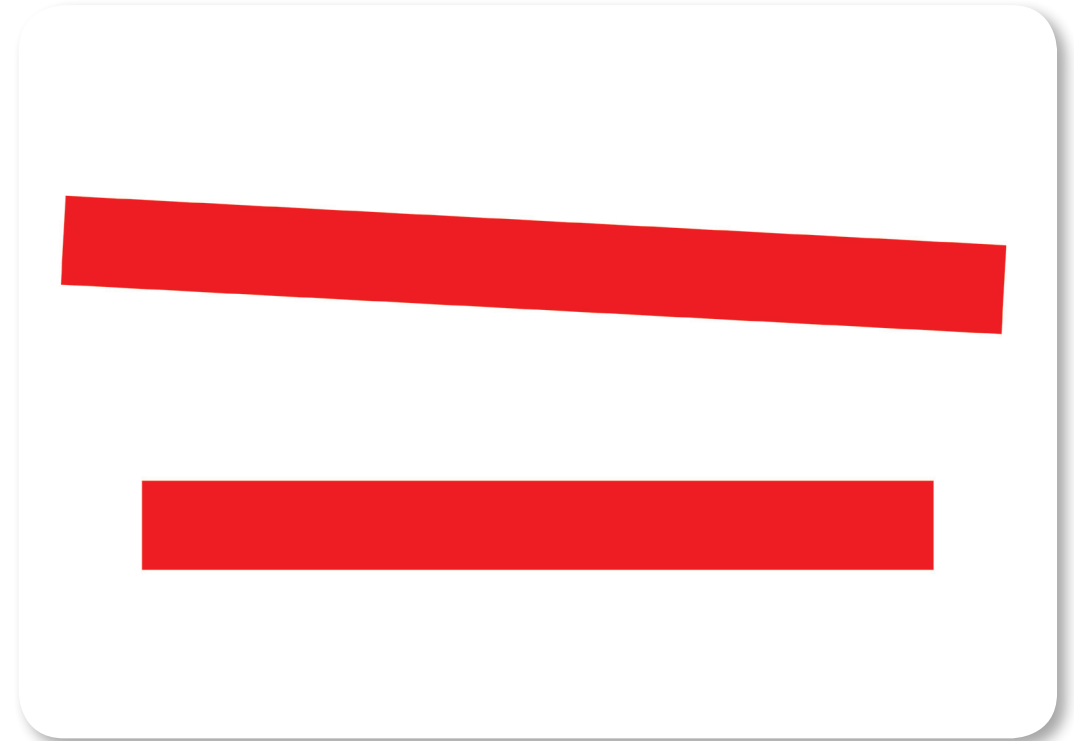


Figure 5.4.5
series 4 summary

- > signifiers used in public signs such as line, colour and the shape add meaning to the linguistic message
- > although shape and colour may not be able to be used to replace and successfully communicate a specific message, they can be used to communicate authority in the absence of linguistic signifiers
- > the red lines imply a message through means of metonymy
- > the border with rounded corners used in public signage is a particularly strong signifier of regulatory signs and the perceived authority that produces them
- > the red lines add to the interpretation of the coded iconic message as the design indicates an indexical sign which can indicate a warning of some sort, synecdoche is used to indicate a linguistic message through the red lines which only represent a fragment of a larger scene.



series 5

These developments investigate how graphic signifiers such as line and shape can be used symbolically and refined to a point where a design is created which no longer has an association with a sign.

Figure 5.5
Selection of public signs and images,
creates the visual inspiration
for the investigations.
The images are derived from daily travel.





these images form the basis for the investigation of how shape and colour can be used symbolically in conjunction with an image to provide context

emphasis on the shape to imitate a physical barrier



scaling the symbolic sign to investigate tension on the page



experimenting with scale to manipulate foreground and background



deconstructing the symbol to investigate if lines can connote a physical barrier

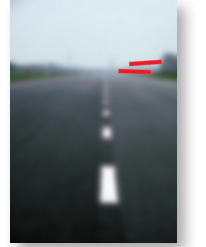


Figure 5.5.1
crossout1 investigation

Reflection on selected design

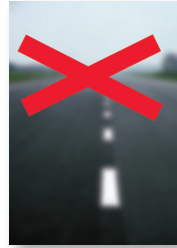
- > the symbol is dominant
- > the shape has symbolic meaning but also forms a physical barrier
- > the background image as-signs a road sign connotation



Knowledge gained

- > the cross, even one that is irregular, is a strong symbol of denied access
- > the red is a strong signifier for a communicated message
- > the small lines do not have a strong sense of a sign

Figure 5.5.2
crossout2 investigation

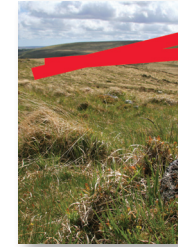


The image forms the basis for further investigation of how shape and colour can be used symbolically in conjunction with an image to provide context

the symbol sign is placed in a rural context to create a barrier which creates tension



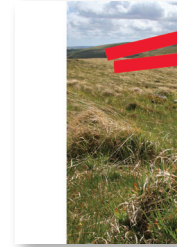
testing how the symbol of the cross moves into a shape by altering the angle



deconstructing the forms to see how that affects the reading



the overall composition is altered to create tension in the work



Reflection on selected design

- > the symbol is dominant
- > the form has symbolic meaning but also forms a physical barrier
- > the background image assigns a road sign connotation

Knowledge gained

- > framing of the image can be used to activate synecdoche and control how the information is communicated
- > the context determines whether the form and colour take on meaning
- > the angled form of the lines are not suggesting a clear meaning therefore the message is hard to define

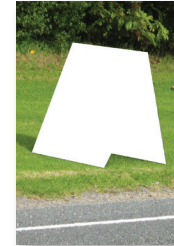


Figure 5.5.3
crossout3 investigation



The image forms the basis for investigation of how shape can be used to indicate the absence of a linguistic message

eliminating the background image to change the imagery into a symbolic sign



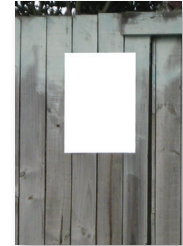
obscuring text from an information sign to create a sense of disruption



allowing some text alludes to missing text



a blank rectangle becomes indicative of an informative sign when placed in context



Reflection on selected design

- > a linguistic message is present but obscured
- > the blackboard references an informative sign
- > the lines are dominant and create a sense of obscurity



Knowledge gained

- > white can imply a symbolic message
- > the rectangular shape becomes representative of an informative sign when it is juxtaposed with a physical context
- > white shape can lose meaning when it is isolated from the context

Figure 5.5.4
crossout4 investigation



the image forms the basis for further investigation of how shape can be used to indicate the absence of a linguistic message and at what point the reference to text ends

creating difference in scale to emphasise on the importance of the shape in order to signify a message



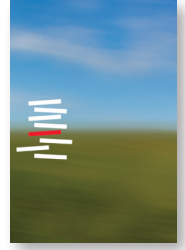
limiting and rearranging the lines to see how this affects the reading



using similar colour to create equality between the different forms however unified forms create a stronger message



lines are used to represent text, red signifies highlighted importance



Reflection on selected design

- > the blurred background suggests movement as if looking at the rural landscape from a moving vehicle
- > the composition creates a relationship between the colour, shape and background
- > there is no clear symbolic sign



Knowledge gained

- > the repeated linear placement of the line shape can refer to lines of written text
- > colour appears to come forward whereas white appears as an area that has been removed which suggests that colour is more important than white
- > unity of forms create a strong indication of a message
- > using the blurry background creates a depth of field

Figure 5.5.5
series5 summary

- > colour and shape can be used successfully to convey a regulatory message and an authoritative voice however this is strengthened or weakened by the contextual information provided
- > metonymy is used to suggest a message through the red lines however the meaning is not direct as the symbolism is not conventional or part of a learnt code
- > the white empty background and the cropped image represents only a portion of a whole; synecdoche is used to imply this. The viewer makes their own assumption as to what the bigger picture is.
- > where a plain coloured background appears solid or filled, a white background implies absence and can appear empty



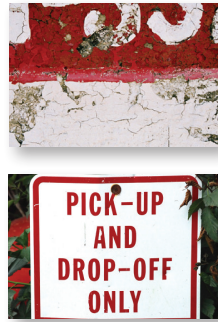
series 6

These developments show experimentation with physical materials and the use of layering to reference the field of the handmade to reflect a unique rural vernacular. The function of shape, colour and typography is questioned by removing and rearranging parts of the message to see how meaning and value of the message is affected.

Figure 5.6
Selection of public signs and images,
creates the visual inspiration
for the investigations.
The images are derived
from daily travel.



Figure 5.6.1
tapemark1 investigation



The images form the basis for the investigation of how shape, layering and surface treatment affect the sense of value of the message

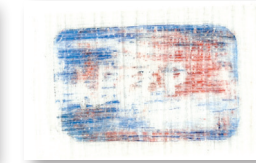
experimenting with layering and painting techniques on reflective tape to signify the reflective nature of some regulatory signs



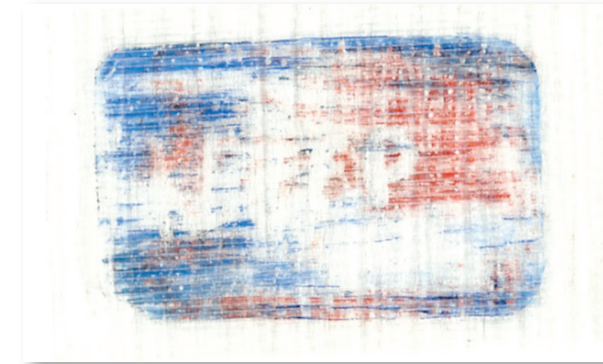
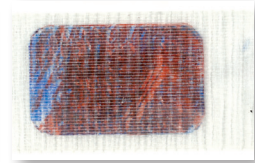
introducing text to create layers of importance



adding colour and obscuring text to imply destruction



layering colour to reduce the value of the message



Reflection on selected design

- > the colours appear as different layers that have eroded
- > the different layers create a sense of aging as they appear to be painted in several different stages
- > the combination of blue, red and white are reminiscent of product advertising

Knowledge gained

- > there is a sense of age created by the weathered look
- > the rounded shape combined with linguistic signifiers indicates a sign irrespective of the surface treatment



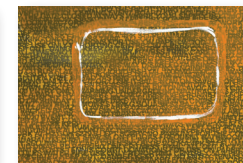
TO STOPPING CAR FROM GRAZING
AVAILABLE SMILE YOU ARE IN THE
TUNE NO PARKING 24 HOURS TOL
MAY COLLECT AT 379-2020 EVENT
TONIGHT TENNIS COURT DO THE
HT THING DO NOT LITTER PLEASE
OVER THE POOL LEAVING PLEASE
HARD KEY HOLDERS ONLY PLEASE
KEEP THE GATE CLOSED ALWAYS
HERE YOUR SAFETY BELT MOUNT

The images form the basis for the further investigation of how shape, layering and surface treatment affect the sense of value of the message

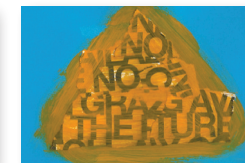
text is used as textural element as words from signs are combined and overlapped to form a background



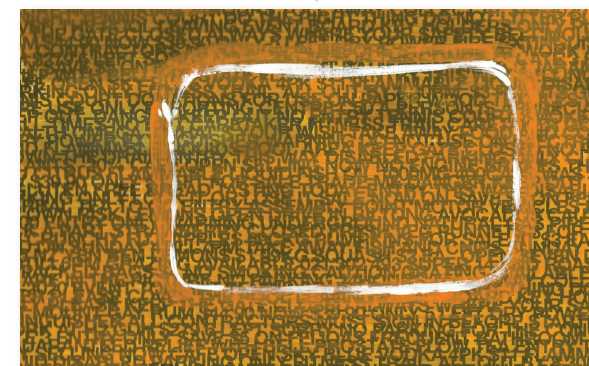
obvious linguistic message is removed from foreground and white border is added to emphasis on the shape



different shape and background colour is tested to see if the value changes



experimenting with layering techniques and access of linguistic message to create more emphasis on the typography



Reflection on selected design

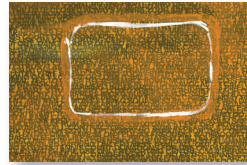
- > the text follows the convention of being read from left to right although the letters overlap
- > the text is recognisable as linguistic symbols
- > the colours reference regulatory road signs
- > the viewer is drawn to the area inside the sign shape

Knowledge gained

- > at first the text appears unreadable however when a word is recognised it prompts the viewer to look for more meaning in the linguistic signifiers
- > the hand-painted shape still refers to public signage when juxtaposed with colour and text
- > when viewed from a distance the typography becomes an image

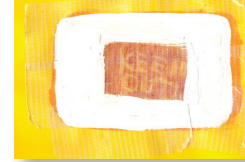
Figure 5.6.2
tapemark2 investigation

Figure 5.6.3
tapemark3 investigation



The image forms the basis for the investigation of how shape, layering, colour and surface treatment affect how a linguistic message is communicated

thick white border is painted to emphasis on the shape transparency



manipulation of the linguistic message behind the border to test how the message is communicated



linguistic message is partially obscured to test if there is still a message



border and sign shape are removed to test the composition considerations of the linguistic message



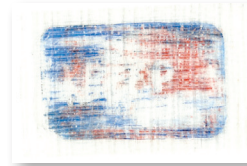
Reflection on selected design

- > the colours used are reminiscent of public signage; there is however no strong reference to regulatory signs
- > the yellow draws attention but is not a strong communicator in terms of a specific message
- > a direct linguistic or symbolic message is not clear
- > the composition differs from the basic central alignment of public signs

Knowledge gained

- > the white paint over text has the feel of the layering of aged posters
- > the rounded-corner border is a direct reference to public signage
- > the presence of text, even if it is illegible, implies a message to be communicated

Figure 5.6.4
tapemark4 investigation



The images form the basis for the further investigation of how linguistic signifiers juxtaposed with shape, layering and colour affect how a message is communicated

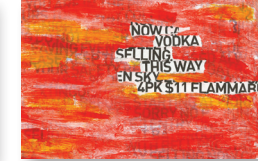
a juxtaposition of a dominant border and a white shape is used to emphasise on the message



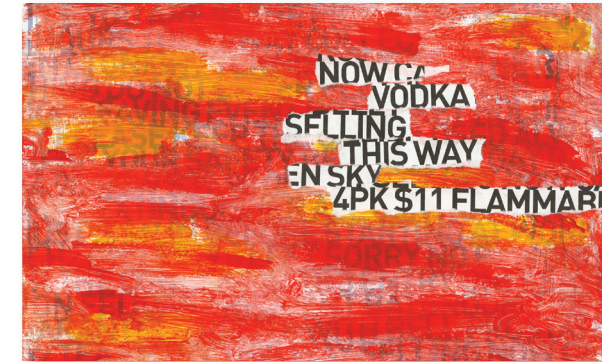
altering the shape to create dominance between the linguistic message and the colour



removing the border to open up experiments with layering to create emphasis on the type elements



linguistic signifiers used in both the background and the foreground combined with a white paint to create layers of understanding within the work



Reflection on selected design

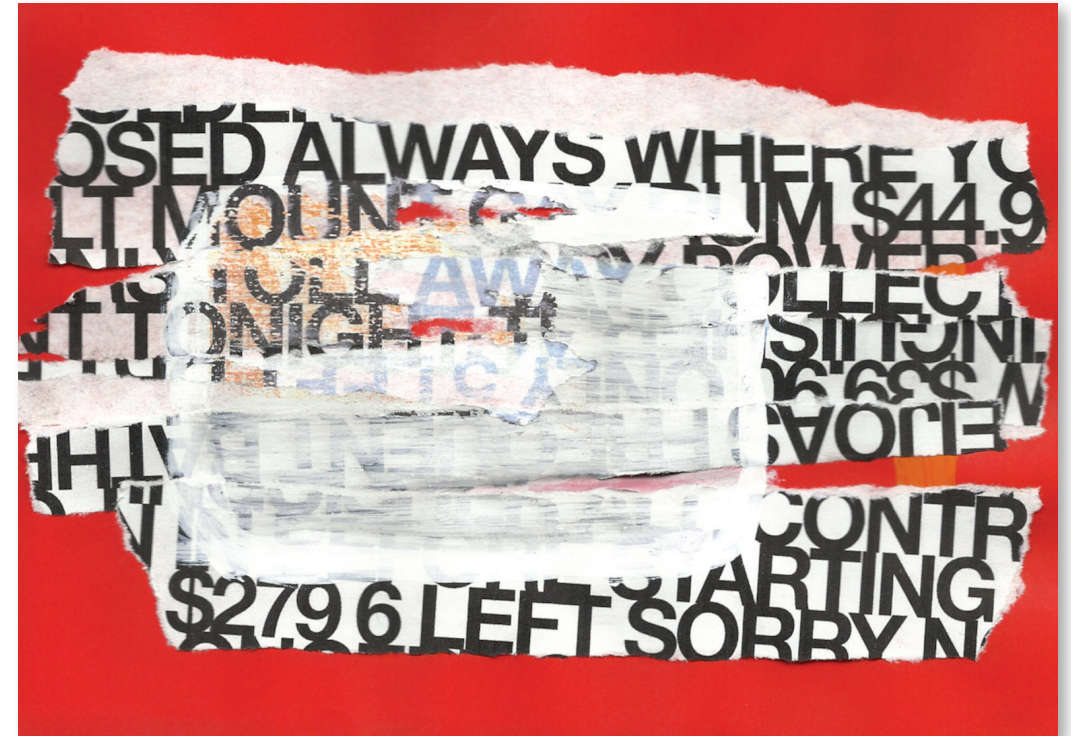
- > if shape is altered to an undefinable form typography becomes dominant even when we cannot understand the linguistic message
- > there is a sense of urban context due to the colours used and the overlapping layers that have a connotation with posters pasted to walls

Knowledge gained

- > the separation between foreground and background is strongly defined by the use of plain colour
- > a plain background contains the text in the same way as the frame of a regulatory sign
- > legible words creating meaning within the work therefore they signify importance

Figure 5.6.5
series6 summary

- > the image is successful in demonstrating that layering and surface treatment can be used to communicate a sense of age and tend to indicate an urban context rather than a rural context - this is also a result of the use of a commercial font
- > when used in this way (layering) the colour red is less a signifier of warning but instead is a way of drawing attention and in this way can reference the way colour is used in advertising as well as public signage.
- > the Helvetica font has a strong association with commercial signage and advertising when used with layering
- > the use of layering removes the connotation of regulatory signs that would otherwise be strongly communicated by the same use of the border, font and colour
- > metonymy is used to imply an official quality due to the hailing of the red colour"



/6.0 final work

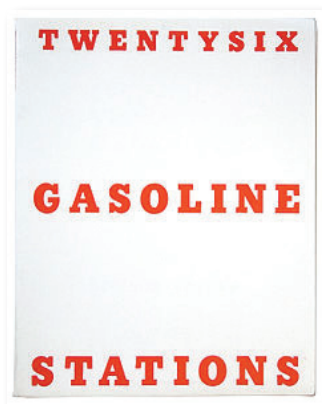


Figure 6.1
Ed Ruscha,
Twentysix Gasoline Stations, (1963)

no sign driving through my rural backyard

Ed Ruscha's (1963) inspired me with this *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* artist's book in which he recounts a voyage from his home in Los Angeles, to his hometown Oklahoma City, and back. On the trip he photographed 26 gasoline stations, and then collected the images in a black and white photographic book. The way you progress through his pages creates a sense of recounting the journey.

This influenced me to present the outcome of the practical research in a book *No Sign: Driving Through My Rural Backyard*, which contains designs inspired by short trips in my rural environment, where public signage pops up here and there. Sequencing the designs page by page create a sense of recounting the drive along the road. The book aims to become a sequential journey of discovery of a drive along the road in the rural environment.

Ruscha created a documentary series of different gasoline stations whereas I have created different series of investigations, with all the same underlying question. The simplicity in which the designs are presented is inspired by Ruscha's book.

Ruscha uses captions with every image; this inspired me to create a narrative where the participant senses a narrative in time.

The idea of putting the designs in a book does generate a sense of focus, as it becomes a private reading, which therefore becomes more profound without distractions of its surroundings, which is inevitable when presenting the work in the outside setting. Most of the designs are digitally created and reproducing the designs will be established without losing quality. As the work investigates the question of when a public sign is not a public sign, there is not a clear message communicated in the design, which contradicts the true purpose of a sign. However when the designs are presented as a collective in a book it presents a strong and tangible message, in contrast with outdoor viewing, where fragmentations of different messages interrupted the whole significance of the sign.

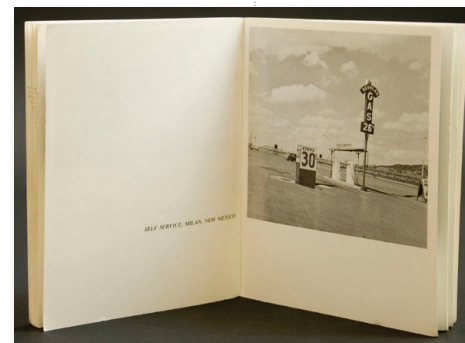


Figure 6.2
Ed Ruscha,
Twentysix Gasoline Stations, (1963)

book

The final work is a large square book (30cmx 30cm) that is presented within a wooden frame and mounted on a green Astroturf material to reflect the rural context.



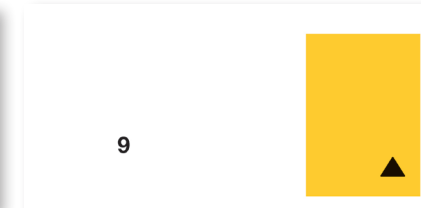
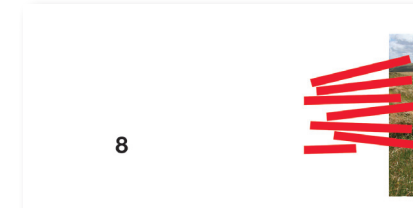
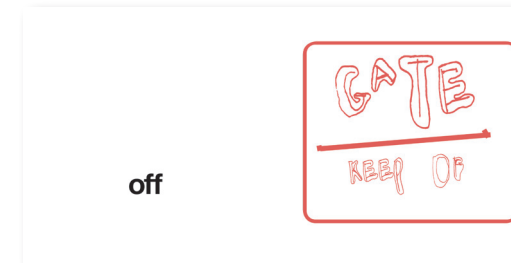
The book is created out of 80 pages, which reflect the 40 roads that constitute my rural village. The 80 pages replicating both sides of the road, therefore the double spread presents the full road.

Figure 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6
Examples of the printed book



As text is a main element of signage there is investigation into the use of words and numbers to support the image but they were found not successful. The use of sections called series in the publication created a sense of discovery. The viewer interprets the images without being given an instant explanation. This can lead to a successful uncovering of the surreal images and their conveyed messages.

Figure 6.7
Examples of experiments with different usage of words and numbers in diverse spreads



conclusion

The aim of this research was to enhance a deeper understanding of how communication operates through the visual signifiers of public signage with specific reference to public signage in rural New Zealand. This exploration resulted in the creation of the book 'No Sign: Driving Through My Rural Backyard'.

This book is developed around a series of short road trips which are part of my daily life. For example trips which involve taking my children to school, trips to the beach, trips to the shops and going to work, etc.

As a graphic designer I am very aware of the public signage that I see in the routine of my daily life and I have tried to gain a deeper understanding of these artefacts and this experience through the unfolding of the pages in this book, No Sign: Driving Through My Rural Backyard and through the supporting practice led research.

This interest in public signage in rural New Zealand also connected with my concerns related to the way my children were interpreting public signage a

their school, when we first arrived in New Zealand from Belgium. For example I noticed that my children were sometimes not aware of the particular function of some New Zealand signage and this led me to develop the research question: when is a public sign not a public sign? The word sign in the research question refers specifically to public signage and not to the semiotic term of a sign, as developed by Charles Sanders Pierce and Ferdinand de Saussure.

Public signage is woven into the fabric of our daily lives and we often go through our daily routines without really considering how these signs speak to us and how they operate. In this research I employed a heuristic methodology to gain a deeper insight into the visual language of public signage. Heuristic inquiry informed the different stages of discovery, and made me realise the importance of intuition and tacit knowledge in developing my practice. I see this particular discovery invaluable in the development of further practice-based research.

Semiotics states that there is always a meaning communicated by a sign. The purpose of this investigation is to see how far meaning can be manipulated before losing the core value of a public sign. The research has involved many complex investigations and has resulted in many new discoveries related to the way the meaning making process operates in public signage. For example by eliminating the linguistic signifier I have discovered that it is still possible to retain the original mes-

sage of a sign. My investigation revealed that the linguistic message is sometimes not needed to communicate a message, and signifiers such as colour, border and shape can sometimes communicate the same meaning. For example when I removed the words KEEP OUT from a particular sign (Fig. 5.4.1) I discovered that the border shape of that particular sign performed the same regulatory function in a rural context.

I discovered that while shape and colour may sometimes not be able to be used to replace and successfully communicate a specific message they can still be used to communicate the voice of authority in the absence of linguistic signifiers.

The process of subtraction led to other discoveries. For example when I completely removed the physical sign and left only the index shadow of the sign I discovered that the shadow still retained a very strong connection with the connotations of the original shape of the regulatory and informative signs. It could be argued that the moment a symbolic sign changes to an indexical sign, for example when we see a the shadow of a stop sign, the shape and form in that shadow could still retain the same meanings as the original sign. My experiments also revealed that the indexical trace, the shadow of the sign, will however communicate a different meaning when placed in a different setting. It could be argued, for example, that the same indexical sign appears less threatening in an urban context, because signs of this form are commonly found in this environment and can be regulatory or

informative, whereas in a rural context the indexical trace, the shadow, can create a strong sense of regulatory warning.

Through my investigations related to the surface of the signs I discovered that meaning could be altered through aging and through the application of one sign on top of another. This alteration of meaning can be commonly observed in urban settings when stickers and posters are frequently layered on top of existing signs. For example if stickers are placed over the linguistic message on a red no smoking sign the meaning of the red changes from a warning to something else.

The examples outlined above re - present a sample of the type of questions undertaken throughout this research and are included here to provide examples of the type of conclusions drawn throughout this investigation.

Being a picture person, the stories of my journey in this investigation are told via the images in this exegesis and subsequently the book No Sign: Driving Through My Rural Backyard. This journey does not end here, however: it is just the beginning. The investigations have opened many interesting paths for further research, and I am particularly interested in conducting deeper investigations into hand made signs and their vernacular typography.

This journey changed me as a person; it gave me the desire to be a life-long scholar, and also the confidence to articulate my thoughts and findings, in a second language.

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