

VISAP '18

October, 23rd – 26th 2018
Berlin, Germany

The Phaistos Project. Forty-five symbols

Pascal Glissmann, Olivier Arcioli, Andreas Henrich

THE PHAISTOS PROJECT

— FORTY-FIVE SYMBOLS.

Abstract

The increasing complexity of Big Data Practices reveals unseen societal patterns through computational processes. In an alternative approach, The Phaistos Project – Forty-five Symbols is visualizing the tracks of our lives from a different – rather qualitative and individual – perspective: participants observe, experiment with, and speculate about data of their everyday to capture a meaningful fraction of their lives. They design ethnographic visualizations that stimulate a sociopolitical discourse and reflect a critical position.

Authors Keywords

Visualizing the Everyday;
Qualitative Data;
Experimental Media Archeology;
International Collaboration;
Data & Ethnography

Introduction

The Phaistos Disc, which was discovered in 1908 and is thought to date to around 1700 BC, is a circular piece of fired clay stamped with forty-five distinct symbols. This code is still unresolved. It inspires the participants of The Phaistos Project – Forty-five Symbols to translate current

concerns – political, economic, ecological, cultural, or social challenges – into collections of forty-five unique symbols. Design methodologies are used as a mode of inquiry to develop ethnographic visual narratives that are subjective, stimulating, and reflect a critical position.

In this time of global transformations our design practices are shifting. While we are transferring skills to automated intelligent agents, we are defining our voice in the socio-political discourse that responds to human actions of the past and present. To successfully navigate these new interconnected systems and position ourselves as critical practitioners, we have to explore new ways of understanding design as a mode of inquiry. In that sense, the reflection of our methodologies, our abilities to research, and an open discussion of how we generate, document, and circulate new knowledge are crucial at this very moment.

The visual narratives are shaped through the domains of visualization: data, information, knowledge, and wisdom. Following a general examination of the everyday and its identities, participants dissect a specific culture and gather all its discrete elements

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Figure 1: The Phaistos Disc

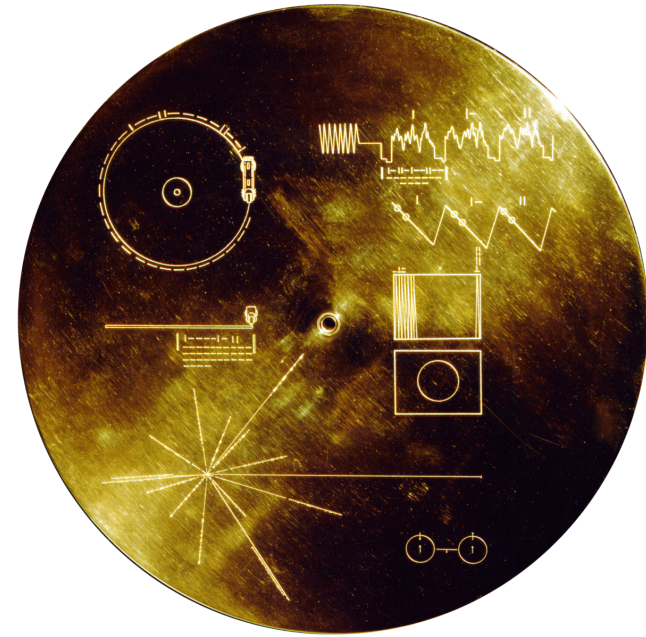


Figure 2: The Golden Records

and descriptive facts. The data is this: All things that we can perceive with our senses and, subsequently, process with our brain.

We believe that studying a time capsule from the past has the power to spark new ways of thinking. Of course, materials and devices have evolved. Today, clay is code, interfaces are fluid (and not discs) and the access to knowledge is ubiquitous through mobile devices. However: Who's knowledge is it? Who really has access? What are the questions that emerging designers have for humankind today and which narratives are worth being preserved for future generations?

Revealing Unseen Data of the Everyday: Forensic Analyses of the Overseen and its Traces:

Two discs – both are devices of media technology; both have inscribed spiral information; and both capture our fascination beyond their materiality. One of them was found one hundred years ago underneath layers of soil below the surface of our planet.

The other one was sent away from this earth fifty years ago. “It is currently traveling into interstellar space, the region between stars where the galactic plasma is

present, and is the farthest human made object from Earth”. (NASA, 2013)

The Phaistos Disc was found by the Italian archaeologist Luigi Pernier in the Minoan palace-site of Phaistos. Even though its purpose and authenticity are still discussed it is considered to potentially be an early, if not the earliest, document of movable type printing. The clay-impressed notation is assumed to be a textual representation and comprises 45 unique and recurrent symbols. As Herbert Brekle points out in the article “The typographic principle” in the Gutenberg-Jahrbuch:

An early clear incidence for the realization of the typographic principle is the notorious Phaistos Disc (ca. 1800–1600 B.C.). If the disc is, as assumed, a textual representation, we are really dealing with a “printed” text, which fulfills all definitional criteria of the typographic principle. (Brekle, 1998)

Early 2018, linguist and archaeologist Gareth Owens announced that he and his research group have deciphered “more than 50% of the Phaistos Disc”.

The article on the website Archaeologist & Art continues: “in collaboration with Oxford phonetics professor John Coleman, he has progressed in the “reading” of 99% of the disk.” (Athens and Macedonian News Agency, 2018). They believe this textual representation is a religious text, a prayer to a goddess.

Still, there are many unresolved questions about the disc and it remains a mysterious artifact of archaeology and writing systems. What we know for sure is that the clay-impressed notation has 241 tokens, comprising 45 distinct signs.

The Golden Records are phonograph records made of vinyl. They store analog signals of coded images and sounds to portray the

diversity of life on Earth. They are intended for any intelligent extraterrestrial life form, or for future humans, who may find them. They have been included aboard the Voyager spacecraft launched in 1977.

Their physical distance is increasing by the second, yet they share – on purpose or randomly – information about how we, as humans, observe and document our everyday. While the writing system of the Phaistos Disc utilizes icons of mundane everyday-life-objects, the Golden Records characterize humanity, for example, with images showing the “acts of licking, drinking, and eating”.

As scientists, we could apply forensic analysis and use carbon dating techniques to break the silence of the Phaistos Disc. Equally, we could use modern specialized instruments and software to track the Golden Records. However, we are also allowed to simply look at them through the lens of our personal history and cultural context.

Various workshops were held in the participating classes and courses. In the first phase of the project, they focused on the Phaistos Disc, its functionality, and its manufacturing technology. Later, students explored theories of semiotics and visualizing techniques with an emphasis on designing systems. This led into studio-based classes



Figure 3 & 4: Workshop on experimental reconstruction of the Phaistos Disc: Circular clay plates are imprinted with 3-D stamps. Spiral arrangement as a principle of area economy and linear readability.

that combined critical making with research methodologies and topic-finding strategies.

The Phaistos Project is applying Experimental Archeology as a mode of inquiry. We question material, form, content, meaning, use, benefit – nothing is off limits. As Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley point out in their seminal book “Are we human?” artifacts change as soon as they enter the world:

“Artifacts are therefore never simply the representatives of human intentions and abilities. They are also openings, possibilities of something new in the human, even a new human. There is always a gap between

intentions and what is produced. The artifact offers something unexpected, some additional quality or resistance. This excess opens up new ways of thinking, new modes of design.”
 (Colomina & Wigley, 2016)

Which ways of thinking could a clay disc open for young designers who grew up in the digital age and perceive the world through screens (which are squares)?

One interesting fact is that the number of tokens on the disc – 241 – is very close to how we communicate today: tweets and short messages have almost the same number of characters.

212 PROJECTS
 43 COUNTRIES
 9540 VISUALS



Through a yearly Open Call for Entries, The Phaistos Project – Forty-five Symbols received more than 212 projects from more than 43 countries so far. Submissions are research-driven and self-directed observations, experiments or speculations to visualize how individual data tracks the identities of our everyday.

Submissions are evaluated by an international Jury applying the following criteria: Ability

to translate topics into visuals, the level of exploration of the symbolic elements to transmit the message/story, systematic approach and uniqueness of the visual language.

This annotated portfolio introduces only five selected projects. The growing archive of Jury-selected projects is available at:

www.45symbols.com



#3 – Water, 330ml, 22g



#26 – Toilet Cleaner, 1l, 80g



#34 – Curry Sauce, 220ml, 26g

The PET Proof of Identity **Madelene Imhof & Franziska Krenmayr**

Academy of Art and Design Basel
Basel, Switzerland

Course: Information Design
Teacher: Prof. Marion Fink

Drinking from plastic bottles (PET) has become an everyday thing in modern life. It is practical and of course easy. But that's not the full story. We also know that there are issues with endless amounts of plastic ending up in the oceans, and the

production of these plastic water bottles adds to this problem. Madelene Imhof's and Franziska Krenmayr's "The PET Proof of Identity" is a forensic analysis of many common everyday objects to act as a subtle wake-up call about modern life and its effect on the environment. Imhof and Krenmayer use specialized instruments and methods to provide new perspectives on our daily habits. Through the


























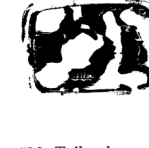


















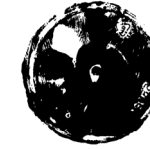
titles of the symbols, they also document the consumer needs of our daily lives, from toilet cleaner to curry sauce. In that sense, the study has an ethnographic character that could possibly puzzle future generations in the same way we are mystified by the Disc of Phaistos. (The Phaitos Project – Forty-five Symbols Jury, 2018)

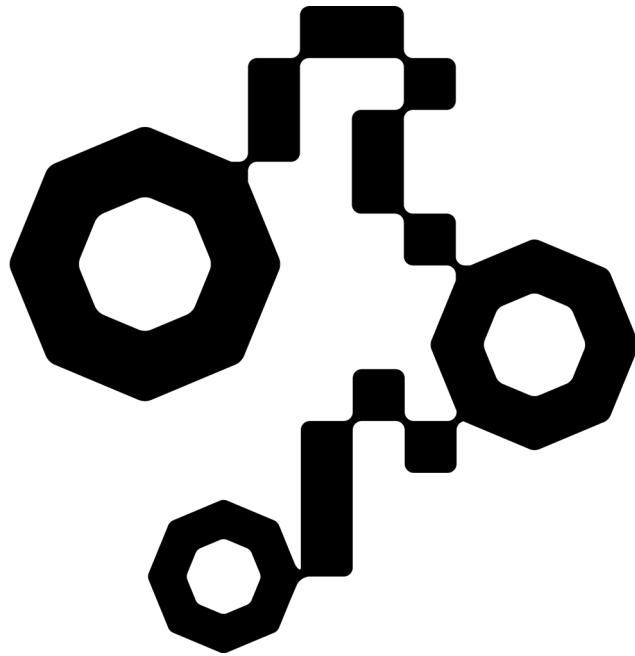
Methodology

Imhof and Krenmayr traced the individual surface-data of PET containers through coloring and relief printing / impressing the bottom sides. Using this analog and manual printing technique captures irregularities and represents the everyday usage visually.

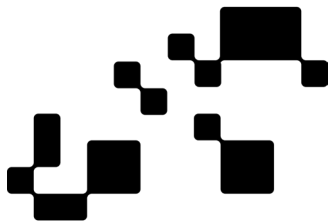
The PET Proof of Identity

Madelene Imhof & Franziska Krenmayr

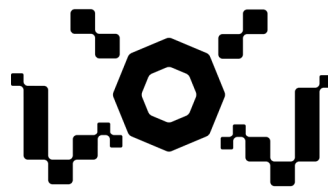
								
#1 Mouthrinse 500 ml, 48 g	#2 Water 330 ml, 22 g	#3 Hand sanitizer 25 ml, 12 g	#4 Orange juice 330 ml, 27 g	#5 Hand sanitizer 80 ml, 28 g	#6 Ice tea 500 ml, 28 g	#7 Kitchen cleaner 750 ml, 71 g	#8 Reusable travel bottle 100 ml, 20 g	#9 Aloe vera drink 500 ml, 38 g
								
#10 Water 11, 28 g	#11 Hair oil 125 ml, 40 g	#12 Bathroom cleaner 500 ml, 38 g	#13 Ice tea 11, 40 g	#14 Cleaning vinegar 11, 46 g	#15 Reusable travel bottle 50 ml, 8 g	#16 Water 75 cl, 31 g	#17 Olive oil 27, 78 g	#18 Sun flower oil 11, 41 g
								
#19 Eye make-up remover 200 ml, 30 g	#20 Sun flower oil 11, 45 g	#21 Dish soap 750 ml, 57 g	#22 Shampoo tester 35 ml, 10 g	#23 Yogurt 500 ml, 33 g	#24 Glass cleaner 750 ml, 81 g	#25 Kitchen cleaner 500 ml, 55 g	#26 Toilet cleanser 11, 80 g	#27 Water 50 cl, 20 g
								
#28 Smoothie 750 ml, 38 g	#29 Milk 11, 42 g	#30 Sirup 0,5 l, 54 g	#31 Coca cola 0,2 l, 17 g	#32 Green tea 600 ml, 27 g	#33 Body lotion 250 ml, 53 g	#34 Curry sauce 220 ml, 26 g	#35 Shower oil 50 ml, 16 g	#36 Shampoo 30 ml, 11 g
								
#37 Olive oil 11, 45 g	#38 Shampoo tester 30 ml, 11 g	#39 Juice 500 ml, 30 g	#40 Salad dressing 500 ml, 34 g	#41 Aloe vera drink 500 ml, 34 g	#42 Sirup 25 cl, 32 g	#43 Descaler 1000 ml, 48 g	#44 Ice tea 75 cl, 33 g	#45 Liquid soap 300 ml, 48 g



#10 – Neural Networks



#18 – Swarm Behavior



#37 – Hostile AI

AI Generated Language Isaac Sanchez

University of Houston
Houston, USA

Program: Graphic Design

Teacher: Prof. Sibylle Hagmann

Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning have become ubiquitous in our everyday lives. But we know we are only seeing the beginning of how powerful algorithms will change the way we work, live, and potentially think. As the current debates rages on the ethics of AI and how to teach machines with un-biased training sets, the designer Isaac Sanchez looks two steps ahead and speculates how machines will communicate with each other once they have surpassed the intelligence of humankind. In his proposal, their language is still accessible to humans. Obviously, machines communicate through the exchange of electronic signals, and in a dystopian world, there will be no need for them to use visual language that could be understood by any human being. Sanchez takes us on a journey

into the future, where machines can travel through the earth's orbit to find energy, and his work makes us wonder: What role will humankind play? Can we learn from a future vision to make the right decisions today? Sanchez succeeds in developing a visual system based on digital primitives, geometric shapes, and pixel-like structures to address simple concepts to complex issues. (The Phaitos Project – Forty-five Symbols Jury, 2018)

Methodology

As a visual experiment of speculative communication between systems of artificial intelligence, this set of visuals follows the architecture of Eastern Languages: the elements have their standalone definition, but when used together complex thought can be conveyed. Following a rigorous grid, the system is designed as a visual hybrid combining aesthetics of scripts alphabets with elements of digital machine language.

AI Generated Language

Isaac Sanchez





#33 – Sadist



#5 – Oral Person



#1 – Brooder

Chews a character Patricia Grabowicz

**Academy of Art and Design Basel
Basel, Switzerland**

Course: Information Design

Teacher: Prof. Marion Fink

Chewing, in its proper definition, is a mechanical activity to grind food to prepare it for chemical processing. But looking at it from a cultural context and in history, we find a multitude of interesting connections and phrases connected to chewing.

At night, we “chew our teeth” and we spend hours “chewing over a problem.” Even the way we chew—from vigorously biting to carefully nibbling—says a lot about our character. This inspired Patricia Grabowicz to develop her ironic set of forty-five symbols “Chews a Character.” Applying a humorous lens, she analyzes the shape of chewing gums that anonymous “users” have contributed to her project.

Whether inflexible, optimistic, or minimalistic: each shape that has been chewed paints a precise picture of human emotions and characteristics. As a collector of everyday leftovers, Grabowicz creates a bizarre anthropological archive that points out the emphasis on the individual in our Western philosophy and translates it into a visual system. (The Phaitos Project – Forty-five Symbols Jury, 2018)

Methodology
Grabowicz used anonymous pinboards to collect chewed gums and photographically reproduced a selection of forty-five objects. She assigned a human character trait to each artifact using her subjective interpretations of the sculptural form.

Chews a character
Patricia Grabowicz

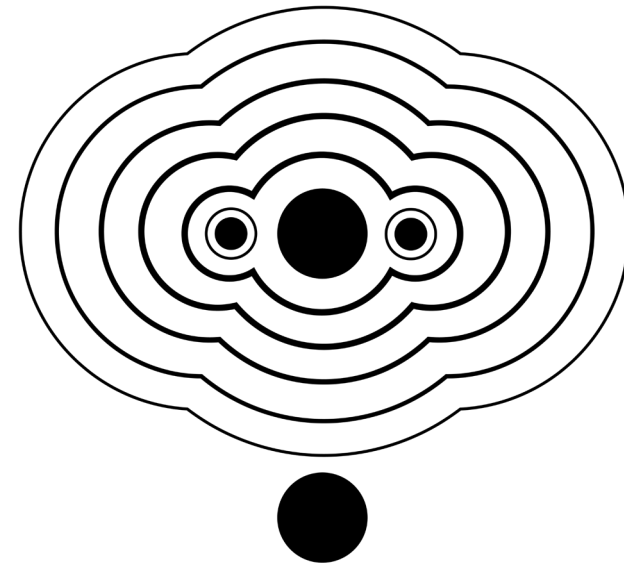


The Code of Gumboot
Bryton Scott, Muhammed Modhien, and Deirdre Okumu

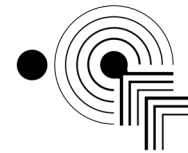
Greenside Design Center,
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Program: Multimedia & Graphic
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Teacher: Prof. Melanie Cameron

The South African Gumboot Dance – which can be traced to Apartheid – is the polyrhythm and total body articulation way of mine workers to communicate in dark and flooded gold mines. Deprived of conversation, they used the sounds of their bodies, their Wellington boots, bells and chains to exchange signals. The language they created became a popular dance in the 1970s with the end of Apartheid. Gumboot dance steps are still performed today. This project is a visual score of the dance move to preserve the practice and its identity.

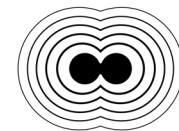
Methodology
To document the Gumboot Dance, distinct moves of the body have been coded into visual elements that can be read as a choreography. In that sense, it has the characteristics of a musical score or dance notation. The basic elements – coded different actions – are systematically combined according to their sequential and spatial appearance.



#26 – Turn Right + Left Stomp With Bells



#15 – Right Stomp + Clap



#3 – Stomp both feet together

#1 Stomp (Right Foot)	#2 Stomp (Left Foot)	#3 Stomp (Both Feet Together)	#4 Stomp (Both Feet Apart)	#5 Clap	#6 Salute On Head	#7 Left Stomp & Clap On Back Outer Foot	#8 Left Stomp & Clap On Front Outer Foot	#9 Right Stomp & Clap On Front Outer Foot
#10 Right Stomp & Clap On Back Outer Foot	#11 Clap Above The Head	#12 Left Stomp & Clap Twice On Back Outer Foot	#13 Left Stomp & Clap Twice On Front Outer Foot	#14 Right Stomp & Clap Twice On Front Outer Foot	#15 Right Stomp & Clap Twice On Back Outer Foot	#16 Turn Left & Right Stomp With Bells	#17 Left Stomp & Clap Thrice On Back Outer Foot	#18 Left Stomp & Clap Thrice On Front Outer Foot
#19 Right Stomp & Clap Thrice On Front Outer Foot	#20 Right Stomp & Clap Thrice On Back Outer Foot	#21 Turn Right & Right Stomp With Bells	#22 Left Stomp & Clap On Both Inner And Outer Foot	#23 Left Stomp & Clap On Both Inner And Outer Foot	#24 Right Stomp & Clap On Both Inner And Outer Foot	#25 Clap On Both Inner and Outer Foot	#26 Turn Right & Left Stomp With Bells	#27 Left Stomp & Clap On Back Outer Foot
#28 Turn Left, Left Stomp Clap On Back Outer Foot	#29 Right Stomp & Clap On Front Outer Foot	#30 Turn Right, Right Stomp & Clap On Front Outer Foot	#31 Stomp Both Feet Together With Bells	#32 Left Stomp & Clap On Front Inner Foot	#33 Left Stomp & Clap On Back Inner Foot	#34 Right Stomp & Clap On Front Inner Foot	#35 Right Stomp & Clap On Back Inner Foot	#36 Left Stomp & Clap On Front Inner Foot
#37 Right Stomp & Clap On Back Inner Foot	#38 Clap Of Front Of Feet Together	#39 Clap Of Back Of Feet Together	#40 First: Clap Of Front Of Feet Together Second: Clap	#41 First: Clap Of Back Of Feet Together Second: Clap	#42 Clap The Left Back Of Shin	#43 Clap The Right Back Of Shin	#44 Clap The Left Front Of Shin	#45 Clap The Right Front Of Shin



#33 – Distressed

Zen
Li Chung Chang

Parsons School of Design
New York, USA

Class: Collaboration

Teacher: Prof. Pascal Glissmann

Zen is a state of focus that incorporates a total togetherness of body and mind in the present. It is essential to Asian culture. As a young designer of Asian heritage living in New York City, Li Chung Chang set up an experiment to track how his emotions impact his Zen calligraphy practices.



#15 – Depressed



#38 – Outraged

The result is a set of visuals that seems like a hybrid of brush strokes and finger prints.

Methodology

On forty-five sequential days, Li Chung Chang entered a distinct state of mind for a full hour before making a single brush stroke on paper.

Zen
Li Chung Chang



Selected projects

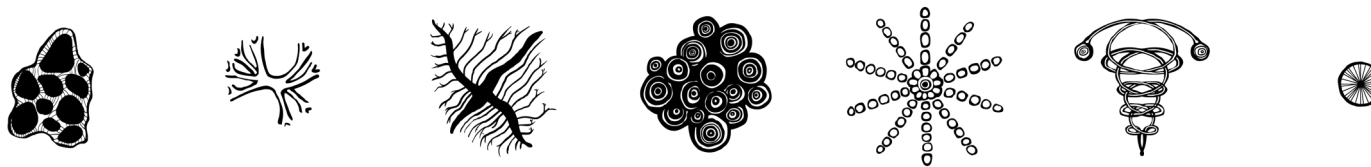
Full sets of visuals , information about
concept and author on www.45symbols.com.



Monoculture
Salomé Anna Neuhaus



Trace The Tracks
Johanna Buehler



The Sixth Day
Mirjam Leppers



Deltas in Danger
Lena Meier



Hydropower
Livia Graf



Baile Folklórico
E. Andrade-Guerrero

Acknowledgements

The Phaistos Project – Forty-five Symbols has been supported by Parsons School of Design New York and the Academy of Media Arts Cologne.

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Jury 15/16, 16/17, 17/18

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