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Reflecting on the August 2025 Issue — Considerations Nowadays and Implications For

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1. Considerations Nowadays: Identity, Expertise

What are we? As Maria dos Santos Lonsdale (2025) revealed in the April issue's introductory editorial, this issue takes as its consideration *the present,* following that issue's consideration of *the past.* The articles reveal various perspectives on our present. Well, "our" depends upon who is doing the reflecting. Ramanathan (2025), Zhang et al. (2025), and Medley and Haddad (2025), all in rather different ways, discuss cultural or personal identities that must be addressed in the things we design and the ways we go about designing them. An outsider might think that these external factors are what our field would struggle with — as we do — but that we would have internal clarity about our field's identity. Speaking for myself — as an editor of a journal in the field, and as a senior faculty member who instructs graduate students on the nature of the field and its scholarship — I have no such clarity.

Three practicing designers published in this issue make a point of acknowledging the presently dynamic nature of our field's identity: Hall (2025) outlines four new definitions for designers in their *evolving roles*: as advocates, curators, orchestrators, and emotion mediators. Shell (2025) focuses on *evolving responsibilities,* calling on designers to be the "human in the loop" in a world where it is no longer safe to assume that creative production is human production. Gupta (2025) also invokes *evolving responsibilities,* including not just the detail of expertise in collaboration but the defining

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title of "AI designer." All three of these designers have written in response to the rapid proliferation of commercial artificial intelligence technology, especially large language models and diffusion models.

But our field — again, "our" is not straightforward — was destabilized long before AI. When I began my studies of graphic design in the mid-1990s, the popular internet was just emerging, and the image element in HTML ("img") was recently invented (Andreessen, 1993) but not yet adopted in the web standards (Berners-Lee & Connolly, 1995). As the web standards were developed, some of us in graphic design began designing and coding websites. These included text and imagery, just like books and posters did, but they were displayed on monitors, in browser windows that varied in size and in their interpretation of code, and were responsive to scrolling inputs, mouse clicks, and hover states. Of course, even earlier graphic designers became involved in the design of personal computer interfaces, and before that other important changes occurred (see Bigelow & Holmes, 2025, in the April issue, for significant detail on such changes specifically in regard to font design). Mobile devices presented another set of screens and elevated the need for designers to create responsive typographic systems, with a wider range of display sizes and processing limitations.

The point is that *what we design* has been changing for decades. I think this is a more dramatic case of flux than other fields in design have faced. For instance, while architects have had to adjust to continuously changing tools and dependent building technologies, they are still designing buildings. Of course, some graphic designers are still designing books. So we have not coolly shifted along with technology. We are doing something else. It is just not clear to what degree it is expanding "our" expertise, or if "we" are fracturing.

I have used the term *graphic design,* but my colleagues at *Visible Language* at the Universities of Leeds and Cincinnati use *communication design.* I prefer the former, because I think it better incorporates user interface design, which relies on graphic devices but empowers people to do things instead of communicating to them. (That is, I think *communication* can be a limiting construct for conceptualizing user interfaces.) But that is not a robust argument, and *communication design* conversely has a level of abstraction that is probably more adaptable. The American Institute of Graphic Arts — *Arts* — now goes only by its once abbreviation, AIGA, which is paired with the more contemporary and noncommittal "professional association for design" (AIGA, n.d.). *Visible Language* was originally called *The Journal of Typographic Research,* but Merald E. Wrolstad (1971) decried "having to add a footnote every time the name [was] mentioned in order to explain its actual range of interests" (p. 5). Advances in reproduction technology likely had an influence on this decision, as one designer became capable of producing more kinds of things — typography *and* imagery — with existing technology and at an accept-

able level of competence. Returning to *graphic design,* my academic department recently changed our degree-granting programs from that to *graphic and experience design,* and in truth a presently more accurate title for the degrees would probably be *visual, interface, and experience design* (*visual design* is often used in software development contexts, especially when the term *graphic design* is still applied to other employees who focus on branding). And I will end this parade of titles by noting that as of 2024 *Visible Language* was described as covering *visual communication design,* but we now list it as *interface, experience, and communication design.*

What do we know? It gets worse if we consider what our *discipline* is, or what research and scholarship is and is not for us. I will not digress fully into those questions. But our research and our practice both rely on some base of knowledge, ability, or specialty — even if we often learn and enact our kind of design through more tacit pattern knowledge (Kolko, n.d.) and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1984). In my own consideration of these issues, I continually return to the *things* we can purport to be expert in that others cannot. I do not think generative AI is going to replace this expertise. I think generative AI crystallizes it. If everybody can make the same kind of bland derivative thing, then expertise in evaluating outputs — decision-making surrounding words, pictures, and their configurations in space and time — becomes all the more valuable.

Perhaps a pressing need for us is thus to make our tacit knowledge more explicit, and to not just assume, but to better understand how our immersive studio-based education and our highly flexible making practices can be leveraged. For instance, a design educator in our field may decide that in the past we learned about sets of relationships we can roughly call *semiotics* in large part — not exclusively — through long hours of making, seeing, questioning, and critiquing. And they may say that with production technology becoming more accessible and dramatically faster, to retain an expert "we," we must now be increasingly formal in how we learn such things. (I suppose I am that "educator" in this "instance.")

Academic journals are access points for knowledge generation, and this issue of *Visible Language* provides guidance for advancing our field through expertise retention and crystallization. Zhang et al. (2025) address the kind of nuanced understanding of typography that we must have if we are to be the experts, while Medley and Haddad (2025) consider the kinds of subtleties in imagery we need our students to invest in, if they are to have a say in the pictorial world we all inhabit. Armstrong et al. (2025) outline something they do not quite call a process, as a way to retain what we know about how we make — through visual exploration — while contributing to technology development.

It feels like an oversimplification. But we do make, select, and arrange typography and imagery, wherever and however they are instantiated, and expertly.

2. In this Issue

As reflected in the table of contents, this issue is divided into two parts:

1. Looking closely at type, text, and image (pages 109–175), and
2. Artificial intelligence and interface design (pages 176–251).

But there is another sequential organization related to our new publishing model. *Visible Language* is now diamond open access. The *diamond* distinction means that not only is it available free to readers, but authors do not incur any charges when their manuscripts are accepted, typeset, and published. This is in part enabled by the immediacy and lower cost of online publishing. (The other part is that the editorial board works to ensure financial support for the production costs that commitment of our own time cannot reduce, in service of the discipline.) Emphasizing online publication allows us to present some articles as "early views" in advance of indexing in one of the three issues per year. But *Visible Language* also has a history — beginning in 1967 — of printed volumes that are held in complete collections in some libraries (and by subscribing individuals as well). So at least for the time being, we are collecting issues in volume yearbooks that can be purchased as physical books at the end of the year. This means that the main articles of the April issue will be united with this August issue's articles (and the December issue's articles) in a continuous format. Knowing this, let me reveal the other structure:

▶ Invited article from the *past*-themed set in issue 59.1:

▷ Rathna Ramanathan: "Research-Led Pluralist Typographic Practices: Case Studies from South Asia." Publication of this article was delayed, but by placing it first we will reunite it with the other invited articles in the yearbook.

▶ Author-submitted peer-reviewed articles — the lifeblood of academic journals:

▷ Yuchan Zhang, Jeanne-Louise Moys, and Matthew Lickiss: "The Role of Text Alignment on Response Speed and Accuracy When Reading Chinese-English Bilingual Traffic Signs."

▷ Stuart Medley and Hanadi Haddad: "Breaking Images: A Method for Improving Design Students' Visual Literacy."

▷ Helen Armstrong, Ashley L. Anderson, Rebecca Planchart, Kweku Baidoo, and Matthew Peterson: "Addressing Uncertainty in LLM Outputs for Trust Calibration Through Visualization and User Interface Design."

▶ Curated articles from industry professionals as *Dispatches from Industry*:

▷ Syashi Gupta: "A Seat at the Table: Designing for AI with Strategy, Vision, and Collaboration."

> ▷ Will Hall: "The Changing Definition of Designers in the Age of Generative AI."
> ▷ Sierra Shell: "The Human Touch(point): Recommendations for Thoughtful AI Feature Design."

In the volume yearbook, these articles will be followed by others authored by design students (see the call for papers in the April issue). The volume sequencing will thus be:

1. Invited articles from luminaries in the field,
2. Submitted articles from academic researchers subjecting their ongoing work to peer review,
3. Curated articles from industry professionals who would not otherwise have had publication in an academic journal in mind (but may now), and
4. Submitted and expert-reviewed articles from students who will soon be academic researchers or industry professionals.

In this way, the 2025 volume of *Visible Language* tells a story of scholarly engagement in reverse order.

3. Implications for: Research, Practice

In our last issue, Nigel Cross (2025) outlined the strides in design research and design understanding that have been made in the broad discipline. We are building on decades of progress. This is followed by Meredith Davis's (2025) description of a stagnating educational paradigm in design that is faced with an ongoing paradigm shift in practice, largely under addressed for decades. Elsewhere Deborah Littlejohn (2023) notes a disconnect between the design profession and design education that holds design back (well, *graphic design* as she calls it there) from becoming a fully healthy *discipline*. To echo my own professed reflection and indecision earlier in this editorial, she notes that part of the "core problem" is that graphic design "lacks agreement from the field's experts about what it is and what it is about" (Littlejohn, 2023, p. 55).

The editorial board of *Visible Language* is highly invested in the maturation of our field — whatever we call it, or whatever we call *them* if there is fracturing — into a proper discipline. There are two initiatives evident in this issue through which we hope to help develop our discipline.

First, we have established a column called *Dispatches from Industry* (pages 218–251), for which we have contacted industry professionals, engaged them in conversation, and when that conversation led to what we considered appropriate content for the journal, invited them to contribute. The initial *Dispatches* — Gupta (2025), Hall (2025), and Shell (2025) — all address AI, but that is a factor of curation in the moment (a moment for which AI has currency for both design and academic publishing).

We think *Dispatches from Industry* is highly valuable, as evidenced by the quality of these three entries. But beyond those individual pieces, the initiative itself has great potential because it surgically targets a weakness in our discipline (or field): an unhealthy relationship — really, too little of a relationship — between industry and academia. Industry works on short time scales, often measured in two week sprints and inflamed in reorgs and corresponding layoffs as companies constantly flow with changing conditions. Meanwhile in academia, concepts of contributions turn into manuscripts, which turn into articles, over one or two years. Funded projects last even longer, and dissemination of their results trails them further. Neither is a problematic model. There is a difference in user research and basic research reflected in their parent organizational structures. But user research and the practices tied to it are greatly enhanced if they are informed by basic knowledge. Furthermore, academic researchers cannot make all of the best decisions about what knowledge to pursue if they have only a cursory understanding of industry trends. We desperately need to bridge the gap that exists. We hope that *Dispatches from Industry* helps to do so.

Second, astute readers may have noticed in our last issue an additional prefatory element between the abstract and keywords in Van der Waarde and Thiessen (2025): an *implications for practice*. This prefatory element is not a straight summary, which would be redundant with the abstract. It is a guide for reading or *accessing* (as in a database) the article from a practice perspective. It seeks to proactively answer the practitioner's question: How is this academic article useful for me? I think it is helpful here to compare an abstract and *implications for practice.* So, for the same article:

> **Abstract:** The number of experiments that investigate the "readability" or "legibility" of texts is very substantial. Literature reviews of these studies appear regularly, and many publications refer to these experiments to suggest evidence for claims. Some of these claims have led to usable recommendations. However, most of these recommendations are often hard to apply and unhelpful. When we are teaching typography, we struggled to explain why the recommendations are difficult to use, why many reviews are uncritical, and why experiments rarely provide reliable evidence to support design decisions. A literature review, guided by experience in both commercial practice and university level education, lead to a list of themes and issues. There are at least 19 reasons why the results of many typographic experiments need to be questioned. This article provides 19 guidelines that could be used to evaluate experimental research into the ways in which texts are read. This list of reasons can be used as a checklist to assess and guide new typographic experiments. We hope to make sure experiments are worthwhile, future reviews are based on reliable sources, and recommendations are effective. (Van der Waarde & Thiessen, 2025, p. 77)

As with all proper abstracts, this embodies a form of problem statement and justification, it previews what the article will be like, and it outlines contributions. And while it does end with some guidance on how the article might be *used,* the following is far more specific and written with the practitioner's perspective in mind:

> **Implications for practice:** There are three practical applications of the findings of this review. Firstly, the 19 guidelines might help to critically review experimental findings and assess if they are relevant for practice — Table 1 is a handy checklist for this assessment. Secondly, the review shows that a typographic practice must be reader-focused. It is essential to involve readers throughout design processes, especially when the intention of information is to enable people to act. Performance criteria, evaluation methods and performance levels need to be relevant for readers. The result of this involvement is qualitative: a single remark from a single person can change the frame of a design project. And thirdly, the review shows that it is beneficial to look more intentionally at differences across readers and across reading activities. Involving people with different backgrounds and experiences will provide new insights into the ways visual information can be interpreted and applied. Listening and observing are fundamental design skills that need to be trained and honed. Even after decades of practice, it remains a humbling experience to find out how people really look at visual design. (pp. 77–78)

The *implications for practice* does not attempt to cover all of the content. For instance, this one directs the reader to Table 1 for quick access. In a proper reversal, and still in the interest of bridging academia and industry, the *Dispatches from Industry* columns in this issue include a counterpart *implications for research.* Here is an example from Shell (2025):

> **Implications for research:** This article raises issues that suggest fruitful research areas. The recommendation to compare a potential AI-driven design solution to a non-AI solution (Section 2) suggests the development of a conceptual framework for systematically assessing and justifying aspects of AI specification. Such a framework should be compact enough to integrate into R&D processes for ground-level impacts. The principle of thoughtful friction in AI product design (Section 3) is introduced in relation to frictive AI elements of granular typographic detail such as point size and positioning. Empirical research could determine which typographic and interface characteristics provide friction for contemporary users, to what degree different options do so, and what thresholds exist for users' emotional and cognitive responses. Further research could examine whether such frictive elements effectively facilitate trust calibration for potentially erroneous AI-generated content. Finally, the

recommendation to integrate feedback mechanisms into AI-driven products (Section 4) suggests research aimed at understanding the current state of AI feature feedback collection in popular products, both in terms of mechanism and frequency. (pp. 241–242)

If you are a design researcher, above you can find clear direction for work that you know would be valued in industry. In this example, sections are explicitly referenced to guide the reader to areas of interest. But as an open access journal, *Visible Language* articles like these are available online and will be read not only by people, but also by machines. It is hard to predict how search engines will behave or continue to evolve (or how LLM summarization will do the same), but the *implications* elements are expected to aid in connecting potential readers to *Visible Language* content, even if they are unaware of the journal's existence. This could be impactful in bridging the industry–academia divide.

This issue's articles have many implications for research and practice, only some of which are collected under those prefatory headings. We hope our readers are able to find some that are particularly relevant to their own research, practice, or instruction, in whatever it is they call their areas of design.

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