

## **VIS 216, Visual Form**

Princeton University

185 Nassau Room 205

Mon 1:30 – 4:20 pm, 7:30 – 9:40 pm

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www.g-e-s-t-a-l-t.org

### **Gestalt**

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts?

According to a tight group of German psychologists gathered around Max Wertheimer in the first part of the twentieth century: No, not really. They suggest that we perceive the world in organized *wholes*, not in parts at all. These wholes are our primary sense reports — they are not contingent on, nor constituted by elementary sensations. So, then, the whole isn't *greater* than the sum of its parts at all, it's simply *different* from the sum of its parts.

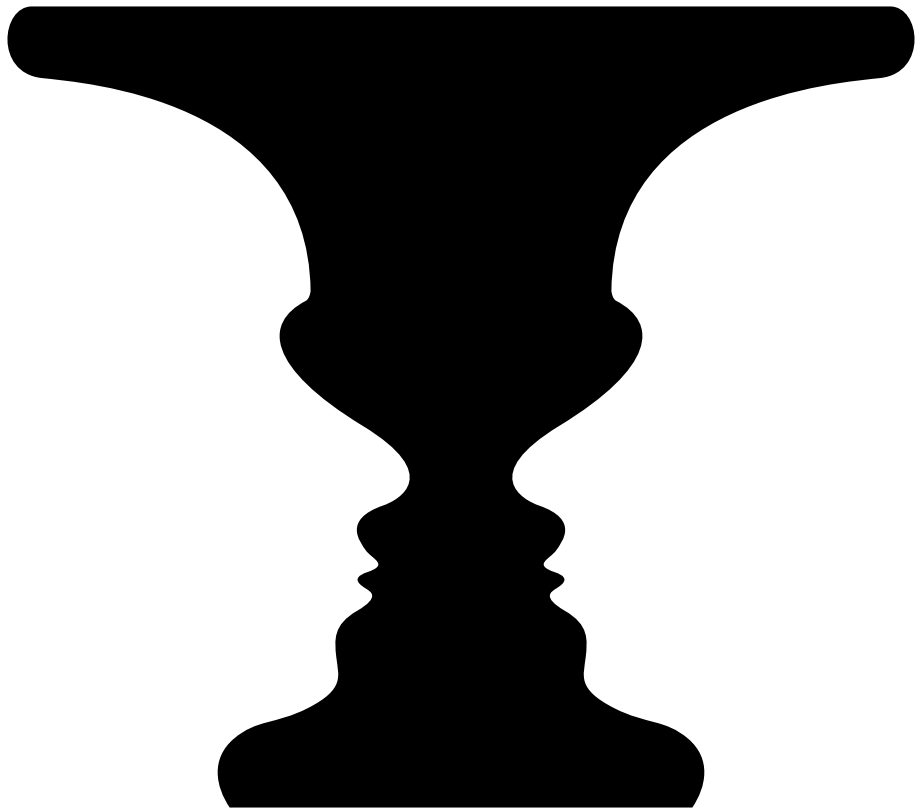
This was a break from the dominant scientific rationalism that worked to explain a given reality by analyzing the pieces that construct it: principles were discovered and stacked brick by brick, bean by bean to produce a coherent account. Instead, for Wertheimer and his associates parts are rendered secondary. What matters are wholes, their specific organization — a set of relations, a particular configuration, a form, a shape, *gestalt*.

*Gestalt* roughly translates from German as “shape,” and it is the proper name given to this account of perception. Gestalt has been a central tenet of graphic design for the last 100 years, or approximately as long as the discipline has existed. When design is employed to the careful manipulation of the relationships between distinct visual forms, a synthesis can be realized, with a corresponding multiplier effect to the power of that graphic form to contain and carry meaning.

You're probably familiar with the visual illusion (shown on the next page) of the vase that is also two faces. It was first described by Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin in 1915 while unpacking how our brain distinguishes figure and ground in the visual field. The positive form of the vase carries within its negative space the silhouettes of two human faces in profile. As you read the graphic, it appears first as a vase; but when attention is shifted to the negative spaces, another reading comes forward and the two profiles appear. The figure and ground relation becomes fuzzy and the form flips back and forth at the mercy of our own perceptual capacities. This effect is neither as tricky nor as trivial as it might seem.

The vase / face reversal is achieved through careful organization (*design*) of precise graphic form. Balance, shape, line, positive and negative spaces are all motivated to realize the essentially equal balance between these two possible readings. Similar techniques and attention to graphic form are used to encode visual messages of all varieties from corporate logos to public signage. For example, a forward-pointing arrow is produced by the negative space between the “E” and “X” in FedEx, making this logotype instantly recognizable. Or, the octagonal form of a stop sign together with its all caps, sans-serif typography, red ground and white border creates a sign whose visual form, its wholeness or *gestalt*, trumps its literal message.

This is an introductory graphic design class, aimed at students with no previous background in the subject. The course will demand a commitment to the close reading of graphic forms to foster sensitivity to their slight differences. We will be looking at graphics all around us, from the public environment, electronic media and the flotsam of commercial messaging that we navigate daily. By making your own work and critiquing the work of your classmates, you should build both a formal vocabulary for approaching design and a literal vocabulary for speaking about it.



Rubin's Vase, an ambiguous figure identified in 1915 with conflicting figure-ground perceptual cues

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### **Class Schedule**

September 19	Introduction Lecture — “Gestalt, or Wholeness & Graphic Design” Exercise — Vase / Face
September 26	Assignment 1 Project introduction and review of class tools Lecture — “A Few Forms” Reading — “Gestalt Theory” and “Laws of Organization in Perceptual Forms,” Max Wertheimer, “Art, Design and Gestalt Theory,” Roy R. Behrens
October 3	Assignment 1 continues Group review and pin-up of individual projects Lecture — “Max Bill and Bezier Curves” Reading — “Continuity and Change,” “Function and Gestalt,” Max Bill
October 10	Assignment 1 (adjusted) Individual meetings Lecture — “The Language of Visual Thinking” Reading — “The Language of Vision,” from <i>Language of Vision</i> , Gyorgy Kepes, “Visual Thinking,” Rudolf Arnheim
October 17	Assignment 2 Review, in-class critique (Assignment 1) Lecture — “Currently in process . . .” Demonstration — animated gifs Reading — <i>A Primer of Visual Literacy</i> (excerpt), Donis A. Dondis, <i>Interaction of Color</i> (excerpt), Josef Albers
October 24	No class, makeup November 15
October 31	Fall break
November 7	Assignment 2 ends Lecture — “After Effects (on Bruno Munari)” Reading — “A Language of Signs and Symbols,” <i>The Triangle</i> (excerpt), Bruno Munari
November 14	Assignment 3 Project review, in-class critique Lecture — “Auto-Vision” Reading — “Structure and Movement,” Karl Gerstener
November 15	Assignment 3 continues Individual meetings / critique
November 21	Assignment 3 continues Class review and discussion ** Visiting designers: Julie Peeters and Scott Ponik **

- November 28      Assignment 3 continues  
Individual meetings and class discussion  
Lecture — “Desktops, trashcans, and other assorted metaphors  
or Why computers look like this: On Muriel Cooper and Susan Kare”  
Reading — “Swedish Campground,” on Susan Kare, “Muriel  
Cooper’s Visible Wisdom,” Janet Abrams, “Spatial Data  
Management (Books without pages),” Richard Bolt
- December 5      Assignment 3 continues  
Individual meetings and class discussion  
Lecture — “The NeXT Intuition”  
Video — “The whole is more incredible than the sum of its parts.”  
Reading — “The Next Logo” and “Intuition and Ideas,” Paul Rand
- December 12     Assignment 3 ends  
Final review  
Reading — “Language of Vision,” from *Design, Writing, Research*,  
Ellen Lupton and Abbott Miller, “G-e-s-t-a-l-t,” from  
The Serving Library
- January 9        Final portfolio due by 1:30 pm