



Sydney April 1966

APPROACH TO THE ORGANISATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSAL GRAPHIC SYMBOLS
GLYPHS INC.

containing a proposal for a special exhibition of the semantography symbols within the forthcoming competition and exhibition in 1966

Dear Sirs/Madams,

Mr. Rudolf Modley, who knows of my work for a number of years, has invited me to participate in your world communication exhibit. You are aware that other organisations are conducting similar competitions and exhibitions, and if this trend is to gather momentum, more people will believe that they can find better symbols than the ones already proposed. The result will be a new Babel, such as we have already on the highways of the world where understanding in all languages is a matter of life or death. And yet, all endeavours for a world unification of road warning signs as tried by the former League of Nations, and now by the United Nations Organisation have failed miserably, defeated by the very officials in the various countries who would not admit that another guy in another country has a better symbol. In addition it would mean that many thousands of sign posts would have to be torn out and replaced by others.

When I started 24 years ago to evolve pictorial symbols I was aware of this trend, and I thought that if I could produce a simple set of a few basic symbol elements pictorial in outline, and if I could show that all meanings in all languages can be symbolized by simple combinations of these elements, I would win acceptance in the whole world. But all my approaches to the road safety committees in various countries failed - for the reasons mentioned above.

Now an explosion has occurred, the tourist explosion. Many millions of vacation travellers are on the move. Many millions of Japanese are preparing to go on world tours. Many thousands of students, scholars, and officials from the new countries in Africa and Asia are on travel. Suddenly the responsible men in the travel business, in the bus lines, railways, shipping and airlines, in the hotels and motels, in the businesses which cater for tourists, have come to realize that only pictorial symbols are the answer. The result is that many officials are already evolving pictorial symbols, not thinking that other officials in other countries have other ideas about the same meaning. The French officials picture the meaning of REFRESHMENTS by a wine glass, the British officials by a cuppa tea. A Briton looking for a tea shop in France will think that the wine glass would lead him into a wine shop. And so the muddle is multiplied.

When I looked at the meanings to be symbolized I could not understand why only 20 to 40 meanings were chosen for which symbols in pictorial outlines were proposed. Why not more? There are thousands of meanings for the thousands of anxieties for which the millions of travellers want an answer in their language. I thought then that the new symbol men will receive my work with open arms, because with my few symbol elements I can symbolize those thousands of meanings. It took me nearly 2 years to understand why they reject my symbols, and why they cannot produce more than 40 meanings. What they want is "Instant Understanding in all Languages." My symbols need be learned, they say, and hence it's not what they have in mind.

But even they could not picture all of their 40 meanings. They use an I to mean Information and an R to mean Reservation. Why? Because the meaning of Information and Reservation cannot be said in a picture. Hence, the railway officials picture a bed and the word Reservation next to it, believing that this word is international. But it isn't. Even in European languages there are other words for the same meaning. How to picture "No Responsibility for Valuables left in the Room?" They don't know, because the meanings are unpicturable. Yet, this is one of the most important meanings every hotel manager wants to show in his rooms to be understood in all languages.

Somehow in despair, I sat down and wrote the paper No. 250 with the title IS IT POSSIBLE TO DESIGN PICTORIAL SYMBOLS WHICH CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AT THE FIRST GLANCE? No, I say. I attach this paper to this approach, and beg you to read it.

For those who have not the time to read the 6 pages of the attached paper here is a short summary. I refer to a condition of Icoграда that the new symbols to be devised must be understood directly by persons of all nations, of all degrees of intelligence and of all ages. No further comment is necessary. Surely, the people to understand the new symbols must be literate at least in the mathematical numbers and their operations. It is true that $1 + 2 = 3$ can be read in all languages, provided the persons who can read it had learned it in years of schooling.

The picture of an arrow seems to be self-explanatory. But it isn't. It took us years as little children to see the arrow in many places, and always accompanied by a word TO THE EXIT or other meanings, until we realized that it indicates a directional movement. Similarly, the words MEN and WOMEN on toilet doors seem self-explanatory to us. But not to millions of people even in Europe. I recount the fact that the Australian government had to make a movie to be shown in the poorest villages of Italy to prospective migrants who have never seen the inside of a toilet, and to whom the idea of sitting down on something when moving their bowels seems utterly impossible to do. All they know is to go behind some bushes on the village green. Suddenly they find themselves travellers on ships and airplanes and in abject misery not knowing what to do. This is incredible but true. And it happens with European people, not Asians or Africans.

The outline of the handlebar type of telephone now used in thousands of signs on public telephone booths in Europe is unknown even to many people in the small villages of the United States who still use the old types of telephones. But the new symbol is outdated already, because the new Ericophon where the dial, the mouthpiece, and the earpiece is in one single light weight piece is here to stay and to conquer the world. I show now how my symbols for telephone, and even for the forthcoming televisionphone are timeless and independent of any improvement in the outline and form of later telephones to come.

I go on showing how my simple symbols for railway time tables can be used to say HAPPY NEW YEAR 1966, and even the meaning of RESPONSIBILITY in the warning mentioned before NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR VALUABLES LEFT IN THE ROOM. All I said in these few paragraphs are better said in the 6 pages, and the reader willing to be convinced to a new outlook on the use of pictorial symbols may read them.

Coming now to the conditions of your competition I find that participants should keep in mind that the symbols "are intended for universal use by people of different cultural backgrounds." This seems logical at first, but it is difficult to apply to universal symbols. As an illustration I want to refer to the many thousands of children of immigrants from Puerto Rico who now crowd many schools in New York. The teachers applied the usual I.Q. tests, and found that most children failed the test. The conclusion was that they are dunces. But the teachers found soon that they are as intelligent as native children from New York. The difference was only that their background was different, call it cultural or any other synonym. These children never saw a telephone, never lived in multi-storied houses, never saw cultural amenities with which New York children are all too familiar. Many other instances can be cited.

It is true that children and adults must learn the meaning of my symbols. But this holds true with every other symbol. It is only by constant use of certain amenities that we deceive ourselves in believing they are self-explanatory, and therefore pictorial symbols illustrating them are instantly understood. As an example I want to refer to the pictorial symbols devised by French and British railway officials to mean a day locker for luggage on railway stations. We have them here in Sydney's central station too, but not on smaller stations of Sydney, and in the country. I showed these symbols to a number of people who lived in Sydney all their lives. They didn't know what the symbols mean. Yes, they have seen those day lockers on central station. Ah yes, now they understood. But they understood AFTER I have taught them the meaning of the symbol. And yet, these are people of one of the great cities of the world.

In short, your conditions are similar to the conditions for other competitions for pictorial symbols. You too think that it is possible to devise symbols which can be understood instantly. Take for instance two meanings of your 20 meanings: DRINKING WATER and DO NOT DRINK. These meanings have been pictured perfectly by Otto Neurath exactly 30 years ago in his little book "International Picture Language" and I show these symbols on page 292 of the second edition of my book. I cannot see how these Neurath symbols can be improved. Surely, they are better than my symbols for the same meaning, but Neurath himself recognizes the extreme limitations of his symbols. They cannot be used for a "complete language" he says. But my symbols can be used for a complete language for all and any meanings.

Neurath's pictorial symbols show a "water tap," an achievement of our culture. But a water tap is unknown in many parts even of Europe, where the water is hauled from wells. In waterless stretches a motorist must be told where water can be found, and how far it is. Again a "water tap" is useless, because there is no water tap there, only a hole in the ground, or a trickle of a creek. With my symbols the motorist can be told exactly what he would find there. And my simple symbol for "water" can then be used in thousands of other combinations.

I can bring as evidence many instances where adults, and even children, once they have been told of the simple outlines and meanings of my symbols, have afterwards boldly combined my symbol elements to new meanings. This means, that a page in a travel guide, or a folder to be had free of charge in a travel bureau could enable travellers to read the meanings of compound symbols they have never seen before. Indeed, my idea for your exhibition is a photographically enlarged chart of my symbol elements and their combinations to the 20 meanings you want. In order that the logical combination of my elements be shown clearly, this chart must be hung separately on a wall, and it would occupy not more space than 20 separate square cardboard pieces: 8 x 8 inch as any other competitor has to submit. This fact too explains why I ask you for a special exhibit, not intermingled with the other entries. But there are other reasons which favours such a special exhibit not so much in my interest, but especially IN YOUR VITAL INTEREST, as I shall explain below.

Another reason why my symbols are pictorial, but drawn with the least possible lines, is that we are living in the age of the typewriter and the typesetter. The large public signs and symbols which officials are putting up would look as a blotch when reduced to the size of a typewritten alphabetical letter. Even when displayed on a large signboard, they would be seen as a blotch by people with bad vision, and 95% of all people need some corrective optical help. My symbols are composed of the barest lines, and hence seen better when in small print, or on a big sign board. Take for instance a ticket for a large stadion. A foreigner must be told the meaning of the gate he has to enter, then whether to turn right or left, then the symbol for a balcony, the symbol for a row and a seat, all these symbols accompanied by the number of the gate, the balcony, the row and the seat. All this can be printed with my symbols on every ticket, relieving the tourist to ask and ask again until he finds his seat.

I am coming now to the vital point where my presentation cannot fit your prescribed form. You want that every square board should contain on the back (that is invisible to the onlooker) the word signifying the meaning of the symbol. My copyright condition for the use of my symbols demands that the native word must be displayed underneath each symbol, so that the natives would learn the meaning in their own language, and recognize the same meaning in compound symbols, and then recognize the meanings when on travel abroad, although there the native words in other languages are printed or painted underneath my symbols. This I shall explain with the example below:

<u>element</u>	<u>element</u>	<u>derivation</u>	<u>combination for different countries</u>				
→	□	□	↗	↗	↗	↗	↗
<u>direction</u>	<u>opening</u>	<u>special opening</u>	EXIT	SORTIE	SALIDA	USCITA	AUSGANG
forward	general	a DOOR a GATE, etc.					

In other words, I can show my symbol elements and their combinations to the 20 meanings only with the words in English underneath, and not otherwise. Your demand that the meaning in words should be printed on the back for the judges and the hanging commission to read only, but not for the onlooker, is clearly derived from your belief that the symbols must be such as to be instantly understood at first glance. This is surely possible with the few meanings you have selected, but is surely impossible with many hundreds of meanings which are vitally needed in international travel, and which can only be symbolized with my symbol elements.

At this stage you may declare that my symbols cannot compete because they do not comply with your demands for each entry. This is surely true, and hence my symbols cannot be shown intermingled with all other entries which do not bear the English words underneath. However, there is the way out, the special exhibit, not on squares 8 x 8 inch, but on one single chart, say 40 inches wide and 50 inches long to be displayed separately on a wall of your exhibition room. I shall now show why IT IS IN YOUR VITAL INTEREST THAT YOU SHOULD STAGE THIS SPECIAL EXHIBITION OF MY SYMBOL ELEMENTS AND THE COMBINATION TO THE 20 MEANINGS.

If you bar me from your competition, it would not hurt me very much, but it might hurt you, ridiculous as it may seem. I have been disappointed so many times that I have resigned myself to the fate to be fully recognised long after my death.

The authoritarians in the road safety committees, in the railways, in the olympic games committees, and in other organisations, they devise their symbols and tell the public to take it or to leave it. But it is different with organisations like Icograda, the New York Committee set up by the travel business, and your organisation. You hope that your symbols will be so good that they will eventually be adopted by the authoritarians in the symbol departments. In all probability your hopes will be shattered, because, as one official told me frankly "Neither you, nor everyone else, is going to tell us how to run our business, and how to symbolize any meaning we want to express in symbols!"

But so far, all the activities of the New York Committee, the Icograda competition, and your activities are unknown generally. But your exhibition will draw attention and also comment in the papers - and CRITICISM too. Any bellhop, and any Pullman porter, and any reporter would say that there are many more meanings in international travel, not the 20 meanings only you try to symbolize. And with this statement they will condemn your endeavours, and in turn the responsible symbol people, whom you try to influence, will condemn your activities too, and would look for any symbol system which may be better suited to express any and all meanings needed.

But if you include my system in your competition in a special exhibit, you can point to my work as a possibility for further symbolization of all other meanings. In other words, all criticism of your exhibition will have to cease, and this is something which I submit to you as worthy for your serious consideration. There is even a hint to this in your conditions where you say that any symbol shown "should be designed to fit into a unified system in which specific symbols, shapes, or colours have a permanent meaning" And you even hint of "possible combinations" of such symbols. In other words, you can admit my special exhibit without deviating from your conditions as set up in your "Specifications for Participants". If I receive your go-ahead for the preparation of my chart to be printed by typeset, and then to be enlarged by photography to the desired size for your wall, I shall go ahead with it. But not before. Meanwhile I am showing you my elements and their combinations for your 20 meanings, and beg you to consider this demonstration as being a submission before the very near dead line of May 15, 1966

The semantographic symbol elements and their combinations for 20 meanings
(the words in capital letters mean the symbols for your competition)

MAN  WOMAN  any opening  DOOR  room  bowl  water  TOILET 
or TOILET  question mark ? open question INFORMATION  positivo + negative -
excl.mark ! yes + ! no - ! mouth  yes, DRINKING WATER + !  no, DO NOT DRINK - ! 
MAIL  fire  mouth  smoking  SMOKING PERMITTED + !  SMOKING PROHIBITED - ! 
child  NURSERY  or NURSERY  forward  ENTRANCE 
EXIT  international safety sign  Danger! Beware! !  !  ! DANGER RADIO ACTIVITY (see explanation below), POISON (see explanation below) DO NOT TAKE INTERNALLY
- !  stop on road sign  wheel  engine (electric or steam)  track  DO NOT
CROSS TRACKS  HOT (radat. of fire)  COLD - !  ear  listen!!  !! FIRE
ALARM   !  ! belt  < FASTEN SEAT BELT  < UNFASTEN S.B.  < earth
— food (what our mouth is fed from our earth)  animal (quadruped)  DO NOT
FEED THE ANIMALS - !   I shall show more combinations if you permit me to do it.

Here are my special explanations to a few meanings listed above. RADIOACTIVITY: The atomic scientists have already agreed on an international symbol which is already displayed in reactors, and on any shipment of isotopes, an idiotic tripronged sort of Maltese cross, as used in movie projectors. My symbol is a schematized skull with electrons circling around it. POISON I suggest the age-old symbol of the skull and crossbones.

Attached Semantography Series No.198, 250,

C. K. Bliss