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Visualogue: Nagoya, Japan

From 6,000 miles away, for 20 months, I had watched Visualogue's ambitions uncoil like a hydra. As part of the English text team, I'd sensed the great desire to make this inaugural event—the first joint ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations) General Assembly and International Congress held in Asia—unlike any other design or ICOGRADA Congress. It meant to accurately respond to graphic design's position in the real world—where the developing regions are torn between imitating and rejecting the Western model, and the developed ones are sinking into postmodern, advanced consumer burn-

out. The goal was to do this from the unique position of Japan, an industrious and design-centric nation that since World War II has moved from the first group to the second.

The emperor's new format?

First, would Visualogue realize its claims as a “new congress format”—claims that were grand, but at the same time—thanks to eternal internal discussions among the 280 people involved in the organizing committees—ambiguous? Would it

Be, “a unique format for a unique conference...an index to a new method of dialogue dependent upon visual elements?”

Physically, Visualogue (October 8–10, 2003) did innovate with the number and placement of microphones and screens. Each of the nine rooms on four floors of the Congress center let us see the speakers from different vantages. Some, like C4, where a central stage—bisected by a screen—in turn bisected the audience, created a sense of oneness, and helped us commune with facts presented there: “6.5 million Cokes are sold daily, but 1.1 billion people lack access to potable water.” (Amrik Kalsi, UN-HABITAT, Sustainability in the Age of

Branding). In Century Hall, where the ceremonial and big-audience events took place, four round translucent screens suspended above the stage let projected images pass through, making eight: Eight huge eyeballs; eight big, brilliant Richard Saul Wurmans talking with their hands; eight Japanese flare drums, and so on.

Big balloons, riceball girls and the überbinder

But Leimei Julia Chiu, Director of the International Design Center Nagoya (IdcN), liaison and consultant to the ICOGRADA Secretariat and the only woman on the 104-member Japanese Steering Committee, lamented, “In trying to achieve a new dialogue, we failed. The most essential part [of the plan] was trying to find a different way to interact with the audience. That's not something you can do using physical means.”

As a focus for the gathering of 3,700 people, however, Visualogue was a success. ICOGRADA past president and conference veteran Robert L. Peters said, “I've always viewed design conferences as Trojan horses. Any real change starts with conversation.” Despite the fact that the Congress was scheduled as tightly as a Japanese group tour, often with 5 events running simultaneously, at every available moment the lobbies were full of a real exchange among delegates and speakers from 49 countries.

Japanese hospitality ranges from an elegant hostess' silent retreat behind sliding paper doors to hordes of attendants and overwrought visual presentation designed to elicit cries of, “Too much!” This Congress offered the gamut. Donald Norman, author of *The Design of Everyday Things*, has said, “You don't do good software design by committee. You do it best by having a dictator...you must have a coherent design philosophy.” Indeed. Peters admitted that with the unwieldy organizing committees (extreme inclusion being a typically Japanese method of managing mixed opinions), Visualogue was bound to be a huge compromise. But whether the official communication tools modeled or challenged the Japanese compulsion to overdo, they at least were the brainchildren of individuals—signage, Masaaki Hiromura (see CA January/February 2004 for a feature article); binder to end all binders, Ken Miki; Visualunch, Taku Satoh; gummed tape, Kenya

To achieve sustainability, we need to recover our own control over consumption, not invent new institutions to handle consequences.

—Karen Blincoe

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Hara—and spoke with the authority of dictatorial decree.

Delegate Sonja Rocco, a Croatian designer and first-time visitor to Japan, anticipated a certain level of order. “You have high expectations because [Japan] is a well-organized nation, very professional and serious.” The three-ring, plastic hard-cover, 180-page binder, with its coated pages, die-cuts, file tabs, detachable lunch tickets, pre-folded daily schedule with lined memo pages, embossed world map (so people could point out their home countries) and detachable 96-page program, required a plenary session to explain, but gave Rocco what she wanted. “The conference really was well organized, from lectures to lunches.”

Become a world
citizen. Envision
a sustainable
future; then share
your vision.

—Robert L. Peters

In contrast to Miki's binders, 4,500 of which were produced at a base cost of about \$14 apiece, Masaaki Hiromura's buoyant balloon signage left what Peters praised as a fairly light footprint. Designed to come and go in four days and complement the battalion of 826 bustling volunteers, the balloons swayed effortlessly in our wake,

“Dispelling,” said Hiromura, “the image of signs as solid or fixed objects.” The balloons even entertained, when staff members changed the signs attached to their guy wires or replenished their helium. “From a psychological standpoint,” Peters said, “it gave some attributes to the event itself.”

Although the floor plan was terribly complex, Hiromura regularly advocates non-signage, and was happy to follow the Congress charge to investigate the relationship between information technology and design, by producing some humanism+signage, as he called it: “Not verbal, but visual hospitality.” And so participants encountered the riceball girls, volunteers wearing lunch menu pictograms and arrows on their T-shirts to conduct delegates to meal stations. Said Hiromura, “This too is a form of Visualogue, I think.”

Who's Who: The speakers

After WW II, Japan stopped following social movements in Europe and turned towards America. Officially, its graphic design world has been facing the U.S. ever since. Visualogue 2003 reflected a schism between the old guard, which grew up in thrall to the red, white and blue, and the new, striving to represent today's global configurations and confront the new responsibilities and truths. The former chose big-name, mainly U.S.-based designers, and the latter inserted an Asian perspective, including sessions on Asian scripts, Chinese design and The Design Alliance, an encouraging movement to main-

tain Asian culture in design even as commercialism expands.

As Ms. Chiu remarked, “Japan is just one country in Asia. [It] has a strong identity, but when we think of Chinese, nothing comes to mind. Ten years down the road, I think it will be different, just like in Europe; you have Swiss, Dutch, French design, distinctive, and equal, parts of the world's stage. Chinese script, shared by a fifth of the world's population, and Indian script, full of complex shapes made of multiple components and allowing for 12,000 combinations, both present intense challenges to graphic design and information technology, as well as content; what are the appropriate qualities and aesthetics of information that originates in Asian circumstances?”

The younger members also fought to include several pointed sessions addressing the profession's heavier problems: sustainability, AIDS, water shortages and global inequality, issues that European and North American designers consider vital, but which Japanese society and designers have been unsure of how to approach. Iterating this ironically Western message were, among others, Jonathan Barnbrook, Karen Blincoe and, for the final session, Robert L. Peters, presenting Design for the World. How brave of Japan to host a conference where the audience could see not only the great and now-famous design that got us where we are today, but also discover that we needn't always be “here.”

To delegates who might have attended the session “Charging China and its Identity” and seen there some Chinese designers' cigarette ads, for example, Karen Blincoe pointed out that, “Where the battle for growth is largely over, the primary question for manufacturers is how to sell more: How can Coca-Cola sell more Cokes, how can Marlboro sell more cigarettes?” She answered with a chilling truth: “American and British tobacco giants are poised to target 300 million+ smokers in China when China opens to the outside world by joining the WTO.”

Who's Gonna Be Who: The audience

Visualogue, six years in the planning, was over in a week.

Who benefited from all this international exertion? From the e-mails and Web sites, circulars and newsletters, peripheral events throughout Nagoya, homestays, hours donated by the kindly volunteers and sold by the simultaneous interpreters, the balloons and T-shirts and intricate Congress kits, the speakers and their PowerPoints, the computers, mixing boards and screens? Of 3,700 delegates, 2,227 were students. Of these, 90% were Japanese. Although the Congress was designed to attract established designers, first 9/11, then SARS, then the war in Iraq frightened the committee into inviting more students, and at a substantial discount.

Chiu had hoped to attract a cross-section of society, including professionals, CEOs and policy-makers, because, "It's only when individuals from different sectors converge that one can initiate an impact on the whole system, and more meaningful projects—going beyond 'design'—can be created in each world." But the final attendance suited her just fine. "I think Buddha's watching over the students," she told me. Along with Peters, Chiu believes Japan's design community and society are crying out for changes, and the next generation must make them.

Consider the spiritual, moral aspects of your work if you want to achieve sustainability and wholeness in your lives.

—Amrik Kalsi

much higher level of transparency. When you segment, and contain, you maintain the status quo. When people get together, things happen."

Right now, only 2% of Japan's working graphic design community of 100,000 are involved in official organizations. Peters hopes that thanks in part to Visualogue, this will rise to a figure appropriate to this very design-oriented country of 157 million people. "Looking back a few years from now, I think this will be seen as a huge catalyst to change."

30,000 feet

In the end, too much was spent on ceremonies and the very practical 'question cards' the audience was supposed to wave stayed in the beautifully-designed binders because there was no time for Q & A.

"But," said Peters, "taking the view from 30,000 feet, I know that although there were sins of omission, it was very, very successful." **CA**

Anime and computer games may be what comes out of Japan and enralls the rest of the world, but staid poster exhibitions are still the norm among official organizations. Peters said these, "Don't provide a pathway for younger designers, especially those using computers." The attending students, he argued, "Will have made links... and formed impressions that will help shape their own practices. One thing ICOGRADA has tried to bring to Japan is a



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