

# CULTURE & MEDIA

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## New Visual Languages: Symbols and Icons

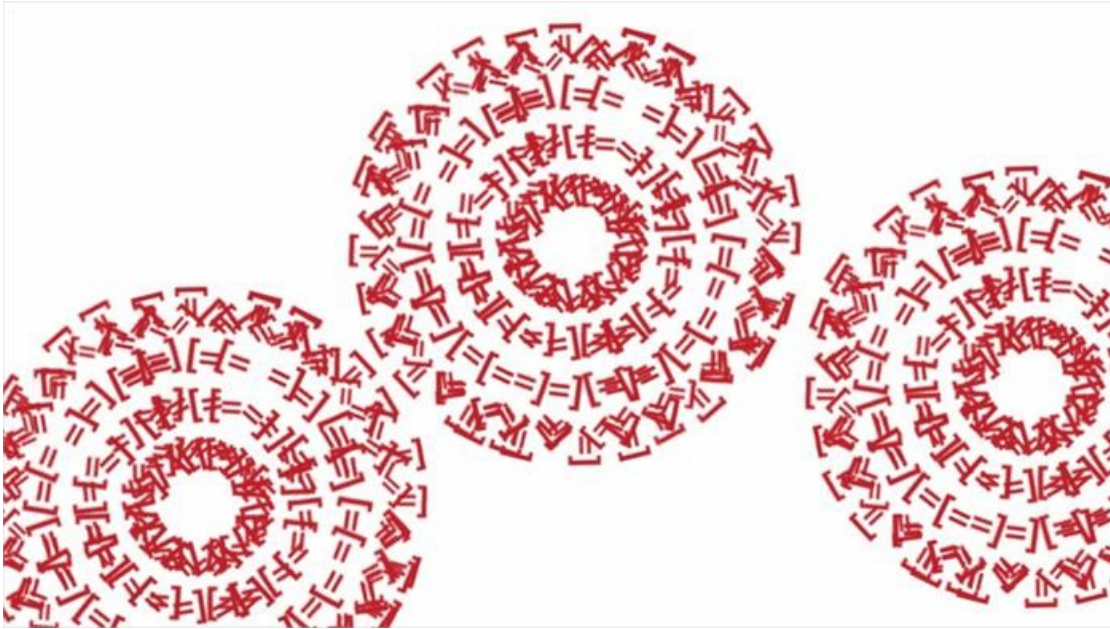
The default setting for information is freedom. Visual language, indeed all language, is based around the notion of sharing information. In a digital world, how are new symbols and icons shaping the future of communicating both information and emotions? Stylus explores the graphic possibilities.

# VISUAL ARTS

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## New Visual Languages: Symbols and Icons

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“There are hundreds of languages in use in the world today, so any brand that relies on its name meaning something in English has problems. Also, a big part of the world’s population has problems with reading. All of which suggests that to succeed in the world today, a true global brand needs to be primarily visual in nature.” So says Simon Silvester, EVP head of planning at Young & Rubicam, in a recent [interview](#) with Stylus.

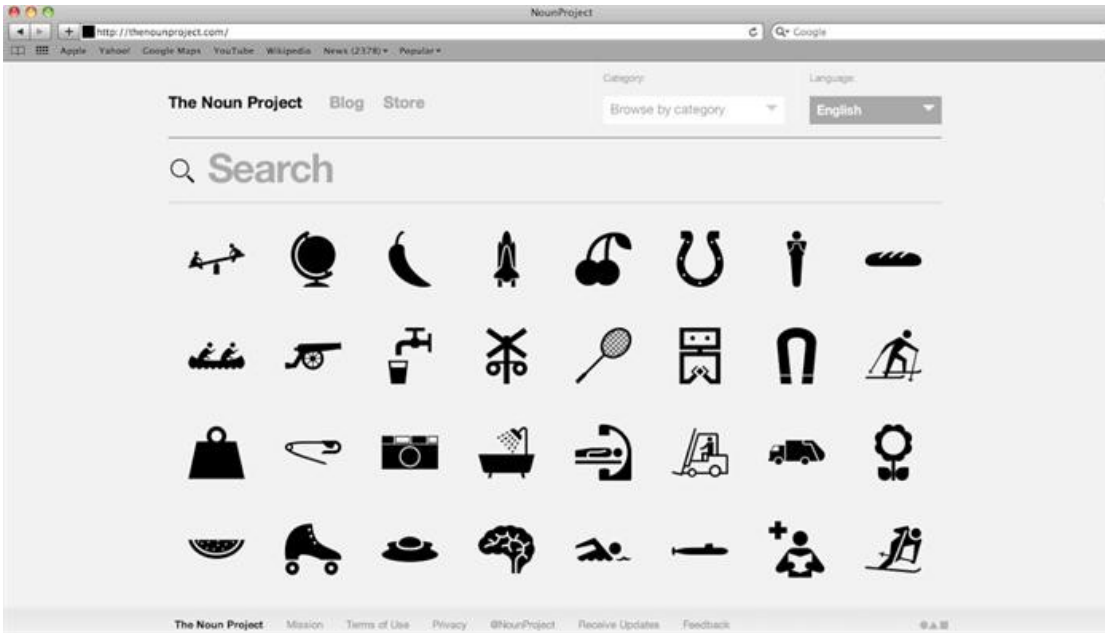
His comment reveals the importance of understanding the new visual languages of digital culture, whether icons used for apps or symbols for sharing, in order to offer new graphic and design solutions. Although the language may be familiar, the scope for the personalisation and deconstruction of language is growing as methods for digital creation and delivery increase. As this digital communication evolves, the importance of conveying emotion and meaning succinctly is a new measure in digital creative endeavour.



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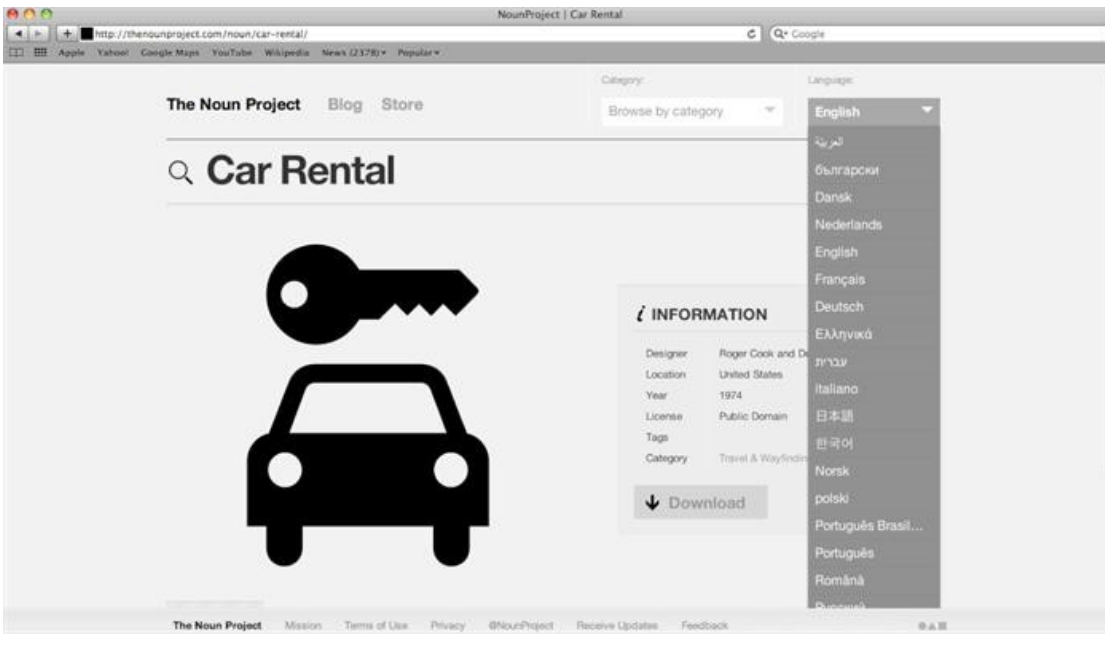
## The Noun Project - Symbolic Language

Based in Los Angeles, one recent project funded by the pledge community [Kickstarter](#) called **The Noun Project** collects, organises and adds to the highly recognisable symbols that form the world’s visual language. Users are able to download and use the symbols free of charge.



Edward Boatman, creative director of the project, cites some of the most exciting symbol developments as occurring in the realm of online sharing. “I see new symbols representing the idea of sharing on almost every website that features video,” he says. “We want to know which one of these symbols best communicates the concept of sharing. This is something our site is going to do in the future.”

The Noun Project is planning to allow user submissions from designers that will substantially increase the number of recognised symbols available in the coming months, making it a valuable online reference.



## Getting Emotional - CopyPasteCharacter

Swedish programmer and designer **Martin Strom**, who often works alongside the design team **Konst & Teknik**, has created a website and latterly an iPhone app that allows instant, free downloads of commonly used symbols called **CopyPasteCharacter**.

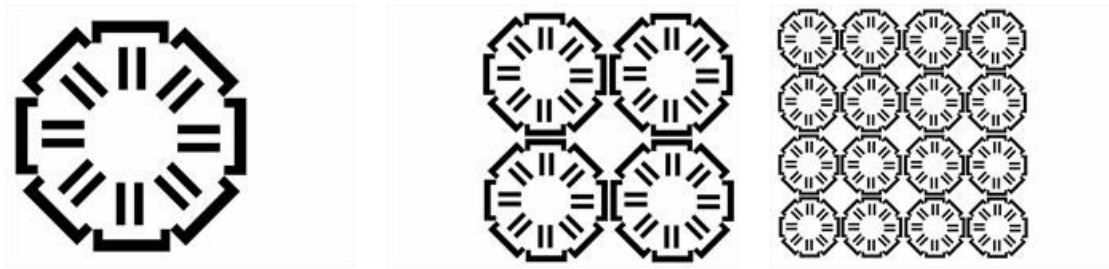
The use of the keyboard in mobile phones and e-mail conversation was a starting point for the project, and Strom notes that although ‘smileys’ – or emotional icons – have been around for a while, it’s only “now with all Unicode characters available in all modern computers, there seems to be a new era of smileys that use characters or symbols which haven’t been available (or easily accessible) before”.

The site also contains many symbols that are not readily available elsewhere. When asked to specify the most popular download, Strom says: "Since the beginning, the most popular symbol has always been the heart: ♥." It's a symbol with universal understanding.



## Communicating with Symbols

Derrick Welsh is a British digital artist and former Nokia Champion (the ambassadorial arm of the online creative community for mobile devices called Mosh – precursor of the present **Nokia Ovi** community) who works on the fringes of digital culture. A drawing fellow at the Wimbledon School of Art in London and guest educator in the primary school sector in the UK, Welsh is passionate about the possibilities of developing new visual languages and communicating with symbols and digital language. He uses the Nokia Ovi site to showcase his work, and has issued more than 500,000 free downloads of his designs for use as mobile phone screensavers and text attachments since he started the project, with the majority of requests coming from Asia and the Middle East.



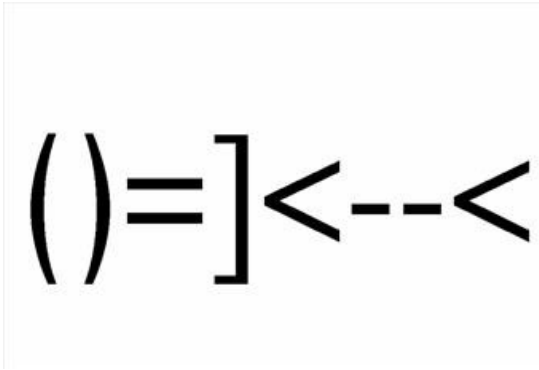
Interestingly, Welsh often uses an iPad to draw with and uses the 'gesture' function on the device as an expressive tool in his work. He works with young people and teachers to show that new technologies are not just a passive gaming experience, but can also be used to communicate emotion using emoticon language and physical interaction with technology.

Welsh sees the future of communication between cultures as a visually led experience of shared 'visual bytes' that can be transferred easily on handheld devices. He is also witnessing a surge of interest from a new generation of youth that immediately understands both the technology and the power of quick, easily shared, icon-based communication.





"Adults write :) kids write =]. Within the confinement of the qwerty keyboard they have found a way of visually communicating in a different way to their parents," says Welsh of his experiences teaching in UK primary schools. "I noticed that in several sessions in different locations across the country they would automatically bring their =] icon and LOL text speak into their drawings on mobile devices. In some instances I observed teenagers talking using text speak in school and youth settings, knowing that the adults didn't understand what they meant. This means that a new secret language is on the rise that isn't just visual – it's oral too!"



## Sharing Language

UK-based programmer, artist and musician Alex McLean has created a programme that creates sounds when the user draws symbols. The project, titled **Acid Sketching**, is an exciting development. Looking at how symbols could be morphed by code, McLean creates and manipulates visual language that in turn creates sound. This has huge implications for creating a richer visual language experience.

In addition, Acid Sketching was produced using open-source software and is intended to be used as an open experiment. As an advocate of sharing visual language, McLean has some thought-provoking opinions on the subject. When asked about freedom of information in creating language, he states: "I prefer the original term 'free software' to 'open source'. Open source is a misnomer, a new term created... to appeal to those who choose to dislike the word 'freedom'. Industrial giants bicker about whom is the most open, but freedom is not a badge of honour, but a collective responsibility."

## Visualising Communication

New digital and re-mastered analogue languages may be combating the increased speed and decreased space of online engagement, but there are also moves to bring the ephemeral nature of digital communication into our physical environment. How do we visually communicate the communication itself? At a time when logos are fast becoming buttons to portals, what about the representation of the entire digital landscape as a whole?

Timo Arnall, creative director of **Berg**, a London-based design consultancy that works with technology and 'finds opportunities in networks and physical things', is a well-known proponent of the possibilities of representing the digital landscape. Two recent projects in this field include working with creative media agency Dentsu London on one of its first projects in 2010 based on its ethos of 'making future magic'. Arnall worked alongside Dentsu's executive strategy director Beeker Northam to first draw using an iPad, then, using stop frame animation, create a much-lauded film of the process.

More recently, Arnall has been involved in a project entitled **YOUrban** at The Oslo School of Architecture and Design, based on an earlier research project called **Touch**. The resulting work, called *Immaterials: Light Painting Wifi*, aims to reveal the 'invisible landscape of networks that is becoming an interwoven part of daily life'.

Recognition and visual display of 'invisible' digital communication is becoming an oft-used symbol of the power of digital. A recent television advert for telecommunications company BT in the UK by AMV ABBDO plays on a similar refrain; that digital communication is a physical and demonstrative process.

## Stylus Summary

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Re-mastered analogue and new digital symbols and characters reinforce the sharing, community spirit of the digital environment. The creative community is beginning to disseminate and share solutions to visual communication.

Although the language may be familiar, the scope for the personalisation and deconstruction of language is increasing as the methods for digital creation and delivery grow.

Artists and educators see the possibilities in a new language derived from digital and mobile devices that speak to a younger generation, and allow for the portrayal of emotion and self-expression in a readily available digital format.

The work that many programmers are doing will enable the mass market to utilise otherwise out-of-reach design solutions. Look to the growth in websites created by designers, allowing free-to-share symbols, characters and icons.

As digital communication evolves, the importance of conveying emotion and meaning succinctly is a new measure in digital creative endeavour.

Otherwise invisible communication structures are being illustrated to bridge the gap between the physical dimension and the digital. A new aesthetic to illustrate the human emotional response to the mathematics and physics of the digital creative process is under way.

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### ARTICLE REFERENCES

[Kickstarter](#)  
[The Noun Project](#)  
[Martin Strom](#)  
[Konst & Teknik](#)  
[CopyPasteCharacter](#)  
[Acid Sketching](#)  
[YOUrban](#)  
[Touch](#)

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### NEW VISUAL LANGUAGES GALLERY / 14 IMAGES

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