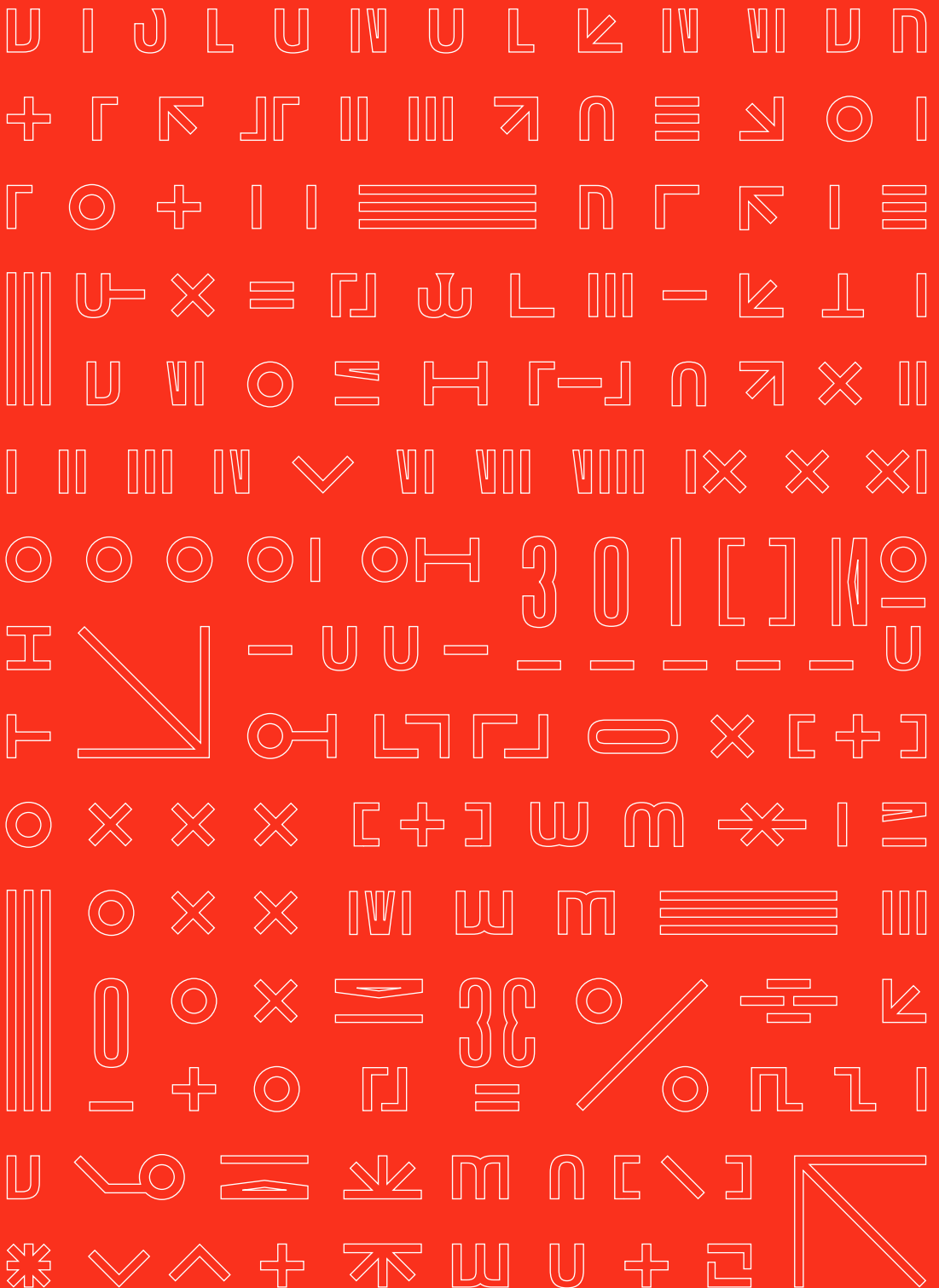
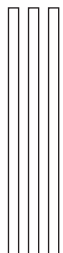
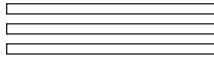


D I C E C N O

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Disegno

JOURNAL OF DESIGN CULTURE

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Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design, and visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavour welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academia by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

All research papers published in Disegno undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process.
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The full content of Disegno can be accessed online: disegno.mome.hu

Published by: József Fülöp
Publisher: Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, 1121 Budapest, Zugligeti út 9–25.

ISSN: 2064-7778 (print) **ISSN:** 2416-156X (online)

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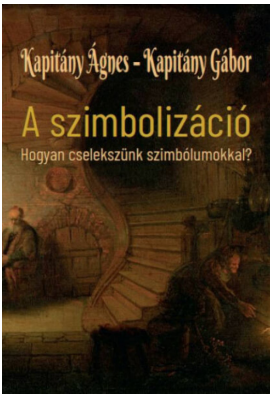
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Ágnes Kapitány and Gábor Kapitány: A szimbolizáció. Hogyan cselekszünk szimbólumokkal?

Julianna Bodó and Zoltán Biró A.

https://doi.org/10.21096/disegno_2022_2jzbza



Ágnes Kapitány and Gábor Kapitány: A szimbolizáció. Hogyan cselekszünk szimbólumokkal?
Budapest: Ventus Commerce,
2021, 508 pages. ISBN-13:
978-6-155-82823-2

According to Edmund Leach, the essential characteristic of human culture is its endless diversity. By this he does not mean chaotic diversity nor predetermined versatility. Leach's statement could be one of the mottos of Ágnes Kapitány and Gábor Kapitány's most recently published book, *A szimbolizáció. Hogyan cselekszünk szimbólumokkal?* (Symbolisation: How Do We Act with Symbols?), which deals with the rich and diverse world of symbolism. The authors, who have been analysing symbolic phenomena for nearly fifty years, have published a summary monograph that was preceded by four foundational publications reviewing literature on a particular area of symbolisation mechanisms. This large-scale summary was also preceded by a series of research projects carried out by the authors over several decades, which were broad in their methodology and choice of topics. The description provided here outlines the main content of this monograph, which exceeds five hundred pages. The authors have been active and widely known in Hungarian academic life for decades. Their thematic research programmes covering the wide range of symbol use, their professional and scientific presentations, their individual and joint publications have been and still are a unique model for social research. The synthesis of their research into the diverse and rich world of symbolism represented in this publication can be seen both as a professional product and as a kind of institutional history of a two-member research lab that has been operating for several decades.

People use symbols, create symbols, and interpret symbols. Symbols are integrated into all levels of individual and community life. From everyday life events to significant community celebrations, from clothing to relationships, from the use of physical space to the construction of virtual spaces, they appear in many forms and ways. They

not only provide a framework for our actions and interpretations, but also *constructively* advance a way of acting, a possible process of symbolisation. “How do we act with symbols?”—the authors ask in the title of the publication, and the volume offers a comprehensive and thematically rich answer to this question.

The first chapter of the volume, divided into five major sections, presents approaches to the concept of symbol and the characteristics of symbolic thinking. This presentation also offers a history of professional interpretations of symbols. The second chapter, which deals with the components of the symbolisation process, approaches the process of symbolisation from the perspective of cultural anthropology, psychology, and aesthetics. The historical overviews of the concept, nature, function, and mode of operation of the symbol, on the one hand, and the review of contemporary approaches in cultural anthropology, linguistic theory, semiotics, and aesthetics, on the other, provide a useful source of orientation for those who wish to explore this very complex subject.

Based on the authors’ rich and varied analytical practice over several decades, the third and largest chapter in the volume offers a range of skillful examples of symbol analysis. Each of the seven thematic analyses (objects and spaces, power, world of values, social modernisation, community identity, historical periods, and motivations) is also a content-structural unit in the sense that it is linked to a specific topic by a literature context, a social or socio-historical framework, a specific research methodology, analysis material, and presentation. The authors modestly identify these seven themes, presented in more than 250 pages, as “a few” areas of analysis, but at the same time offer the reader a comprehensive synthesis of the diverse and complex practices of symbolism.

In chapter four, which deals with the interpretation of the symbolisation process, the authors formulate approaches and at the same time analytical aspects from the point of view of the formation of symbols, their polysemic nature, their interrelation, and the attenuation of symbolic meanings. An important part of this chapter is a complex and detailed discussion of the role of context.

The final chapter dealing with the role of symbols in society draws attention to the variety of actions that can be carried out through symbolism and its important social constructive role. Symbolism, the authors emphasise, is a highly significant phenomenon in society, which largely determines the present and whose role and importance will grow. The concluding section, which lists the most important statements in thesis-like form, can be seen as a summary of the volume’s findings. The thematic variety of the extensive bibliography illustrates the complexity of the symbolisation process and the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of the approach.

It is not an easy professional task to review a scientific work summarising a researcher’s career, and in this case it is not the work of one

author but of a pair of authors whose research has been focused on a single topic—the use of symbols—for several decades. Furthermore, the reviewer is not in an easy position if, in addition to highlighting the professional value of the publication, which is obvious at first sight, he or she also wishes to address content-related issues. Although the authors call this a monograph, it could well be argued that this is an encyclopaedic work. The authors themselves indicate this when saying they see this book as a summary—and therefore also as a review—of their research, and the monographic character is reinforced by the fact that the achievements of several decades are being reinterpreted at a more recent, updated, and abstract level. We would like to draw attention to this encyclopaedic nature and the experience of the reader.

The language, the use of words and the way the book is written are indicative of an attempt to address a wider audience. This is also indicated by the numerous everyday examples of use of symbols. However, there are, despite the authors' best intentions, several features of this book that may reduce the readership considerably. Three factors should be briefly mentioned.

In this book, the authors present a long trajectory of research on symbolism by presenting the key concepts, theses, and interpretations of individual researchers or professional trends. The encyclopaedic nature of the book does not allow room for a more detailed presentation, for the discussion of individual ideas or professional findings in the context of their own scientific paradigms. In many cases, therefore, the reader will need a considerable knowledge of the social sciences to follow the summaries and descriptions. The key concepts presented by each author, school, theory, or research result provide the links to the symbolic themes. To make sense of this connection, however, the reader needs to know more about the paradigm, thesis or theory being presented. At least in part, the reader needs to know the epistemological framework that underlies each paradigm, theory, thesis, or concept. Similarly, the reader is presented with parallel theories, methodologies and professional results from several disciplines, sometimes very different from each other, which have dealt with the topic of symbolism in their own course, but which have approached the topic of the use of symbols with very different aims, perspectives, and methodological starting points. And finally, there are many passages in the book where it is necessary to consult the authors' earlier works to follow the discussion. In some cases, the authors at least signal this.

It is important to emphasise that the encyclopaedic features make the publication colourful and rich in content, and this is certainly an important virtue. They also enable the reader to enjoy the chapters, case studies, reflections, and examples in the book, or even to gain useful methodological and analytical ideas and solutions. However, if the reader wishes to engage in a dialogue, debate, or further reflection on the publication as a whole or on individual chapters, a profound knowledge of social science in a variety of disciplines is required.

This work is well edited, clearly structured, and despite its strict professionalism, it is still a readable publication. The latter characteristic is certainly due to the richness of the examples and the authors' extensive knowledge of the field. A special feature of the volume is that it can be read and interpreted at the level of individual chapters. At the same time, it is a publication offering a broad professional overview, which can be used in education, as a basis for research programmes, and for the dissemination of scientific knowledge. The rich and varied social practices of symbol use illustrate that there are social phenomena present in every age and situation that play a key role in the organisation of society, and that social researchers continuously challenged by the continuity and change of use of symbols. The authors' choice of topic, their decades-long research, and the wealth of results related to these, are evidence of a sustained research commitment and research practice on a single topic, and furthermore that, although relatively few undertake such a project, it is useful and productive.