

Shape Languages

A presentation by Lindsey Whittle

also know by art identities: Sparklezilla and Future-Lindsey

Part of **CTRL + ALT+ RESIST**

Hello! I'm Lindsey Whittle, I also go by the art identities Sparklezilla and Future Lindsey. I'll be talking about Shape Languages, specifically how collaboration can function as a medium and as a form of resistance.

What Are Shape Languages?

The best way to explain shape languages in my work is through a Hindu parable my dad told me as a child. Three blind men approach an elephant. One touches the trunk and thinks it's a snake. One touches the leg and thinks it's a tree. One touches the ear and thinks it's a bird. Individually, none understand the elephant, but together they begin to see the bigger picture.



Conceptual Prompts from the Shape Language Concepts

*These prompts help blur the line
between art and life*

"Ask engaging questions about things I am doing and see what ideas take shape." - *Bowty Enterprises Venture Capital*

"Use research prompts as a way to elevate and think through the work." - *Molly Donnermeyer-Reinhart*

"Treat an unfamiliar material as a collaborator and let it guide the work." - *Joe Lemancyck*

"Explore movement composition rules and B.E.S.T. Explorations in action work." - *Kim Popa*

"Celebrate small moments and share joy when possible." - *Terry Palmer*

These next 3 slides demonstrate what combining all twenty-two Shape Languages can look like in my work. I'll share the full list of all 22 at the end of the presentation.

Each Shape Language has a specific conceptual focus. It guides the collaboration and also serves as a decision-making prompt. These slides feature some of the action prompts that grew out of each language.

I'm going to read a few from each page, focusing on ones that aren't already featured in this presentation. I wish I had time to share all twenty-two languages, and all the ones I am still dreaming of making in the future.

"Experiment with consistency." - *Chris Grau*

"Look for moments to be extreme." - *Future Lindsey*

"Look for opportunities for mirroring and teamwork." - *Clint Basinger*

"Look for opportunities to provide support." - *Brittany Gottschall*

"Look for opportunities to be brave."
- *Jada*

"Show up for people when I can." - *My Family*

"Look for opportunities to engage chance." - *Vesper James*

"Look for opportunities to be generous and connect with people." - *Roger*



Sampling of current mixed Visual Shape Languages

(16 languages present)



This slide features a sampling of sixteen Shape Languages combined.

Shape Languages have their own visual vocabularies, similar to hieroglyphics, that serve as their primary form of communication. Each Language communicates the space between me and another person. It grows from our authentic relationship and develops its own structure, vocabulary, and conceptual focus. As the relationship evolves, the language evolves—I love getting to know a shape over time, redrawing it again and again until it takes on a life of its own.

When combined into a visual sampling or set of action prompts, these individual languages form a larger system that collectively represents all of us.

This system reminds me of how people in a country share a common language, but within it develop specialized vocabularies specific to their professional field. They are still all speaking the same language, only more specific to their fields. In my work, each individual Shape Language is a specialized vocabulary rooted in one relationship. On its own, it carries meaning within that relationship. Together, they form the full, shared language of my work.

The number of Shape Languages I use simultaneously varies by project. Sometimes I combine as many as possible, while other times I focus on one or two and build the work around them. This is especially in a focused project with one of the collaborators. Even when one Shape Language guides a project, I intentionally draw from the others through their prompts and shapes to strengthen and add complexity.

The First Shape Language

Steve Kemple

Shape Language of Kernel/origin/seed → hinged-spiral, I.e., Spiraling Convergence/Reconvergence (tessellated cyclone); strata/rings; branching paths (fractal prism)→Self-Symmetry (fractal being) (ever changing concept)

Steve Kemple is a human/person/individual/writer/educator who lives in New Jersey.

Now I'm going to focus on a few specific Shape Languages so you can see some of these ideas in practice. I've chosen some of the more developed Languages because they're easier to talk through.

I'd like to start with Steve Kemple, who was the first Shape Language I ever made.

While Steve's visual shapes, shown on this slide, have remained unchanged since 2020, you can see his Shape Language concept is quite complicated and has evolved and completely changed more than any other so far. Steve's language is - - This is Steve's 3rd concept shift so far and it seems to grow increasingly more complex each time, and I mean that in the best way possible. These evolutions continually ask me to learn, rethink, and adapt to his increasingly expansive ideas. Steve's language disrupts control because it cannot be locked into one meaning or stabilized into something fixed. Without a single definition to anchor it, no one gets to contain what it can become.

1 min 25 seconds



I'm going to use Steve's language to convey an example of how we developed the visual symbolism for his language.

In 2019, we created a performance that deeply impacted me: I designed a giant choir robe that required 8 Singers to move and sing together, forming shifting sculptures across the stage.

See if you can follow this layered collaboration: The choir robe concept grew out of a 2013 conversation with Shape Language collaborator Annie Brown. Next, Steve wrote a hauntingly beautiful eight-part choir piece using lyrics he generated by hypnotizing my students who were looking at a photograph Grace DuVal and I created earlier that year. Collectively this became one singular performance. So—Very dense.

I couldn't get this piece out of my head, and I didn't want to. I took Steve's sheet music, cut away the negative space, and scanned the remaining forms. Those shapes became the foundation of his visual language, representing layers of action, time, thought, and people.

Now I want to share a few more examples of how different Shape Languages, through the medium of collaboration, bring out different forms of resistance in my work.



The Language of Layers

Grace DuVal

Grace DuVal is a Wearable Artist, Maker, and Photographer based in Boston, MA. DuVal's work moves freely between garment, photography, performance, and collaboration — combining a lifelong career as a photographer with her degrees in sculpture and fashion to create otherworldly garments and visual experiences.

Built out of nontraditional materials, her work transforms mundane objects into extraordinary garments that are large and sculptural, transforming the body into something unrecognizable and otherworldly.

***Note Perform Garment while speaking**

Now we have Grace DuVal who has the Shape Language of Layers

My Shape Language with Grace, pictured here, has developed over years of friendship and living art collaboration, rooted in layering, complete trust, and dissolving ownership through letting go. We literally talk to each other through what we make.

We are connected by two shared goals: creating otherworldly work that invites dreaming, and asking, as Grace put it, “How do you trick people into revealing the artist they already are?” That question guides how I work, especially with collaborators who don’t identify as artists and with patrons who engage our projects.

Our process is an ongoing “yes, and”, layered on top of on top of on top of. We don’t micromanage each other because we trust each other’s genius to carry the work. Grace compares our language to a geological cross section, a vertical slice where layers of time, action, trust, people, and intention reveal themselves gradually.

I make layered textile prints, and because Grace is the language of layers, she is present in each one. I also create prints directly about her work. The layering is so dense that people often need multiple looks to really see her work within them. When Grace wears them in public, they spark conversation and carry our collaboration into her world, becoming a living exchange rather than a finished object.

The abstract, alive, and sculptural garment I’m wearing is an interpretation of this presentation made by Grace, combining one shape from each language into a collective whole. This design is her, it also me is me, and it is every Shape Language collaborator featured on this presentation at once - - a collective of minds and ideas layered together.

Ultimately, this Shape Language is a shared space where ownership dissolves, collaboration replaces control, and we practice ways of being together that sit outside capitalist models of ownership and enforced authority.

The Language of Joy

Terry Palmer

Terry Palmer is a master designer and WELLA hair color specialist, trained with Kérastase and Sebastian, whose decades of craft are grounded in precision, care, and transformation.

Terry Palmer is an Army veteran and fierce defender of human rights. She brings the same integrity to her life as an artist, mentor, mother, wife, grandmother, and radiant spreader of joy.



***Note - Create a hair reveal**

Next we have Terry Palmer and the Language of Joy, pictured on this slide. One could argue that my Shape Language with Terry began when she first cut my hair at 12. I'm 41 now. I always knew she was a sculptor, but I didn't realize she was a painter until she dyed my hair for my wedding in 2014. Hair is her canvas, dye is her paint.

Terry has complete freedom to design my hair—she could shave it all off and I would be excited to experiment with that. Her work is woven into my identity, my hair serving as the medium through which the outside world experiences me. I make art in response to her designs, and she designs my hair in response to my art, creating an ongoing collaboration circle, also a shape.

What began as documenting her complex hair paintings, which grow out and fade, has become a decade-long portrait project between us, with joy as the dominant concept guiding those photographs.

Terry gifts me joy by helping me feel most like my vibrant self, and that joy becomes contagious as I carry it into the world. It invites connection. It opens conversations. It shifts how people approach me.

Joy is not decoration. It changes how we move through the world. Systems of control rely on exhaustion, fear, and isolation. Joy interrupts that pattern by restoring energy and reconnecting us. In dark days, even a glimpse can spark hope. Choosing to decorate ourselves, move freely, rest deeply, laugh loudly, and feel fully is reclamation. Shared joy builds connection beyond institutions and hierarchies. Making art, showing up, and celebrating together creates communities that are harder to fragment

That is what Terry is doing when she paints my hair. That is what we are documenting. That is the shape of joy. And when joy persists, especially among people expected to be quiet, broken, or invisible, it insists on something simple and stubborn: we're still here, and we're more than what hurts us. 2 Min 10 seconds

The Language of Questions

Bow Ty Enterprises Venture Capital



This is Bow's 1-2 Bow Ty Enterprises Venture Capital (i.e. BTEVC, a.k.a. Bow Ty) is an action artist and multidimensional human business conglomerate who works in the mediums of time, fear, identity, career, ambition and dream.

Bow Ty produces rules, images, events, situations, and enterprise solutions which playfully deconstruct institutional foundations, attempt impossible feats, flip hierarchies, trial the limitations of popular wisdom, and open up discourses on conformity and difference.

Now we have BowTy Enterprises Venture Capital, yes that is their legal name, who holds the Language of Questions.

Bow's Shape Language has no visual shapes. It lives as ideas that take shape in my mind through disruptive, transformative questions. This was a shocking turning point for me and the project. Bow pushes me to think differently, but in a caring and deeply supportive way.

Their language shows up through long conversations and rigorous challenges. Through that process, I began to see that conversation itself could be the art.

Here, questions become the primary material. They function like a prism: a single question can refract reality in many directions, revealing new ways of seeing, thinking, and making. The more tightly we cling to one dominant truth, the less freedom we have. Staying in a state of questioning keeps you open. Asking different questions doesn't just change the answers. It reshapes reality.

The best questions are starting points with many answers or none at all. They often lead to more questions that can take your breath away.

I'd like everyone to close their eyes. I'm going to share a few of my favorite Bow questions. Don't rush to answer them. Let the ideas take shape. Ready?

- What other forms can shapes become beyond the literal, when time itself takes shape and when questions and answers shift depending on the language they are asked in?
- If we remove labels like art, job, or product, how does that change how we think about purpose and value?
- How are you doing?
- How do the questions we ask shape the way we understand the world, and what happens when we start questioning why we're asking them?
- How do we move within systems built on hierarchy while still making space for ways of working outside of it?

The Language of Flags & Design

Benjamin Cook

Benjamin Cook is an artist and educator at the University of Louisville, researching the relationships between painting as a physical object and as digitally disseminated image documentation.

Benjamin Cook's paintings and online-based projects have been exhibited nationally and internationally at galleries including Hashimoto Contemporary (LA), Zg Gallery (Chicago), Gallery COA (Montreal), The Rochester Museum of Fine Arts (New Hampshire), Sidney Ruckers Gallery (New York), as well as in publications including the Art Newspaper, Artnet, Forbes, New American Paintings, and LA Weekly.



Ben requested that as a part of this presentation, I share this QR code that links to the North American Vexillological Association (which is an academic organization which studies the histories, preservation, and design of flags) and tell you that membership is only \$40 and that all the coolest people are members.

Next we have Benjamin Cook and the Language of Flags and Design, pictured on this slide. The QR code links to the Vexillological Association, which was important for him to share.

My Shape Language with Ben grew out of our shared love of flags. I was teaching flag-based textile projects, and Ben, a painter who redesigned the City of Covington flag in Northern Kentucky, visited my classes to talk about what makes a good flag. Those conversations evolved into collaboration, and eventually we began creating flag-based experiences and installations together.

Flags are deceptively simple, but they carry enormous power. They define belonging. They tell people where they stand and what they stand for. They can hold communities, movements, histories, alliances, beliefs, and shared aspirations. But the same power that unites can also demand allegiance and reinforce control.

Take a second and picture a flag that matters to you.

My Shape Language with Ben is rooted in hope. We make bright, non-objective flags that do not point to a single nation, cause, or fixed ideology. They do not tell people what to believe or where to stand. They invite dreaming and leave space for viewers to project their own ideals, futures, communities, and reasons to gather. Hope refuses despair. It keeps imagination alive and gives people something to move toward rather than submit to. By keeping the meaning open, the flag shifts from instruction to possibility. The resistance lives in that openness, in trusting people to imagine and define the future for themselves.

The Language of Transformation

Kim Popa & Pones

Kim Popa is the Executive Director and Co-Founder of Pones, with over 38 years of dance training. She is an internationally experienced performer, award-winning choreographer, and dedicated educator who teaches across regional institutions.

4. TIME: Move as fast as possible and as slow as possible. Observe again how you feel. What emotions come up with each tempo?

Kim Popa is certified as a trauma-informed teaching artist, and is deeply committed to movement, arts in health, and volunteerism.



My visual language with Kim Popa, who directs the contemporary dance troupe Pones, is still developing. I've been collaborating with Pones under Kim's guidance since 2014, and the shapes here come from a 2023 collaboration. Because they are dancers, movement and action are embedded in the language itself. It carries a different kind of aliveness.

Through ongoing conversations, Kim and I have been developing a shape transformation exercise to build the Pones Language. We're shaping it together, and I'd like to try a version with you now. It draws from participatory theatre practices developed by Augusto Boal.

OK now try to think of something you're struggling with right now. Picture it as a shape. Are its edges smooth or jagged? Is it organic or geometric? Flat or dimensional? What texture does it have? What energy does it carry, electric and intense or calm and soft? If you can, sketch it on your phone or a piece of paper. If not, hold it clearly in your mind.

Now imagine a possible solution to that struggle. How does your shape change when you hold that solution in mind? Does it look different? Does it communicate a different energy? Allow the shape to transform into its new form and, if you are able, sketch the changes.

Where could it move if it kept going?

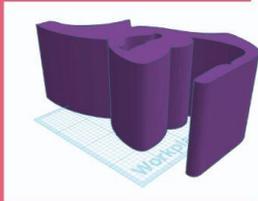
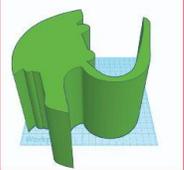
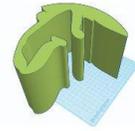
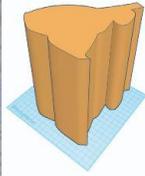
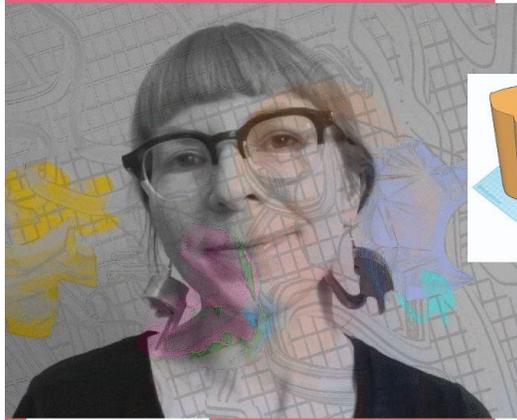
Dreaming is a form of resistance because it insists that change is possible. Systems that rely on control convince you that nothing can shift. But even the smallest transformation alters the structure. Even the smallest movement reshapes the form. 1 min 50 seconds

The Language of 3D & Architecture

Lorraine Wilde

Pataphysics enthusiast and digital artist Lorraine Wible collages diverse digital imagery to explore the paradoxes and failures of our value systems.

Through surreal narratives and anti-scientific experiments, her work reveals the biases, contradictions, and often hilarious absurdities embedded in Western aspirations.



***Note start building columns that fall down while talking.**

Next we have Lorraine Wible and the Language of 3D and Architecture. When I first approached Lorraine about starting a Shape Language together, pictured on this slide, she immediately said it had to be three dimensional. I did not realize until she prompted me that even though I am a garment maker, I mostly think in two dimensional shapes. Flat pattern pieces. Textile prints. Vector shapes. Teaching my brain to build and understand 3d form in space has been very exciting, confusing, and stressful.

Learning to think in 3D with Lorraine is not just a formal shift; it disrupts my authority over the work. I am no longer the expert moving comfortably inside my own system. I have to respond. I have to adapt. I have to let someone else's way of thinking reorganize mine.

That matters. When left alone, we get stuck. Echo chambers are not just political problems, they are creative problems. When we only engage what confirms us, our work gets predictable and our thinking narrows.

Algorithms do this socially. Habits do this personally. Collaboration interrupts it.

Lorraine's three-dimensional prompt reshaped how I make and think. It expanded what I could create because it expanded what I could see. That expansion is not comfortable, but it is necessary. When someone who thinks differently stretches you, your world does not shrink around your habits. It widens. You start seeing from more than one vantage point. You carry that into how you act. That is where resistance lives.

PETER FRANK

the Fluxus Performance Workbook
edited by Ken Friedman, Owen Smith and Lauren Sawchyn



Thank You Piece

Thank you
Thank you

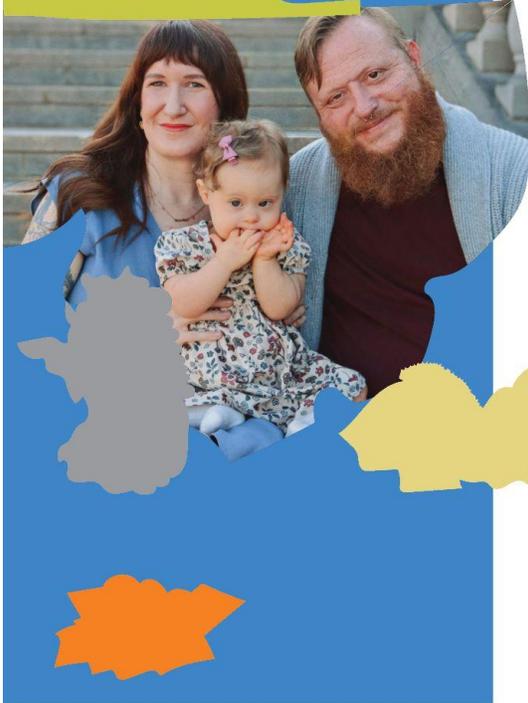
politeness is NO crime

DATE UNKNOWN

As a Fluxus artist at heart, I'd like to pause and do a brief Fluxus performance together. I want to thank everyone here today, Thank this panel for the opportunity to bring these ideas together, and thank all of my collaborators who generously shared their minds with this presentation. Using Peter Frank's "thank you" prompt, I invite you to say thank you with me fifteen times. You can whisper it, yell it, move it, sign it, or say it in another language. - Ready -

Molly-DonnerMeyer Rinehart

Cincinnati, OH



The research for this presentation was evaluated and guided by Molly Donnermeyer-Rinehart, who holds the Shape Language of Research. In addition, all of the Shape Language collaborators involved in this presentation consulted on the research, leading to many impactful breakthroughs I would not have made on my own.

Molly Donnermeyer-Rinehart is a librarian, artist, and advocate for Down syndrome awareness. She lives in Cincinnati, Ohio with her husband, daughter, and multiple pets.

***Note Perform Shape**

So - I want to acknowledge other people that were heavily involved in the preparation of this presentation (read slides)

Librarians are radical because they protect free access to knowledge. Having one as a Shape Language collaborator protects the conditions that let my ideas grow.



Emily Doyle and Kassia Borycki

Portland, OR

The structure and storytelling of this presentation were visually advised and arranged by Emily Doyle and Kassia Borycki, who share the Shape Language of visual structure. I love seeing these ideas through their eyes. They also reorganized the slide hierarchy to improve communication and thoughtfully challenge how I approached the presentation.

Emily Doyle is an Oregon-based, Florida-born, Illustrator and Graphic Designer. When not creating, spends her time enjoying other arts and the company of her dog. She is still searching for Bigfoot.

Kassia Borycki is a Canadian-born, Oregon-based, designer, illustrator, and artist with a passion for the written word. She likes to take small adventures with her small dog. She may be a cryptid.

***Note Perform Shape**

Changing the order of the slides completely shifted my approach to this presentation and opened up a whole new way to deliver my own art ideas. And in a time when institutions benefit from confusion and distortion, clarity itself becomes a form of resistance.

Current Active & In-Progress Shape Languages

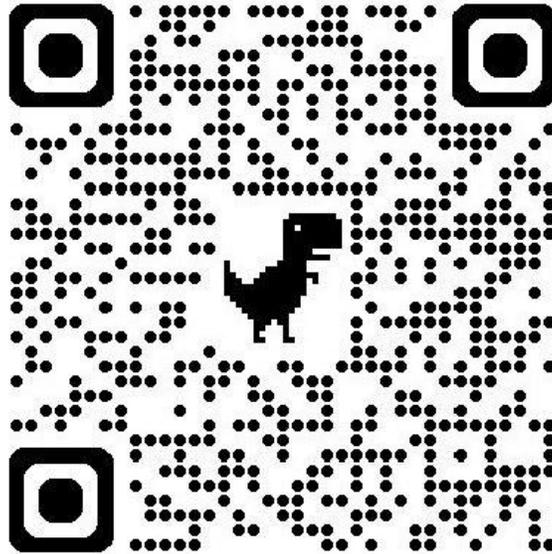
Clint Basinger (Husband)—Language of Mirroring and Teamwork
Future Clint and Future Lindsey—The Language of Being Extreme
Steve Kemple—The Language of Kernel/origin/seed → hinged-spiral, i.e., Spiraling Convergence/Reconvergence (tessellated cyclone); strata/rings; branching paths (fractal prism)→Self-Symmetry (fractal being) (ever changing concept)
Grace DuVal—The Language of Layers
Sky Cubacub—The Language of 4D, Chainmail and Chronic Illness Support
Bow-ty Enterprises Venture Capital—The Language of Questions
Jake Vogds—The Language of Sound(Waves)
Joe Leamanczyk—Language of Material Explorations and Hats
Terry Palmer—The Language of Joy
Pones/Kim Popa—The Language of Transformation
Emily Doyle and Kassia Borycki—The Language of Structure

Molly Donnermeyer—The Language of Research
Noel Maghathe— *being developed*
Rhee Lightner—*being developed*
The Brown Family—The Language of Adventure
Jamie Shiverdecker—The Language of Circus/Spectacle and Organization
Brittany Gottschall—The Language of Support
Loraine Wible—The Language of Architecture and 3D - Physical and Digital
Benjamin Cook—The Language of Flags and Flag Design
Vesper James—The Language of Chance and Collages
My Family—The Language of Showing Up
Chris Grau—The Language of the Day-to-Day and Consistency
Roger Basinger—The Language of Generosity, Humor and Nature (posthumous)
Jada Kirk —The Language of Bravery (posthumous)

This is a list of all my current, active, and in-progress Shape Languages, with collaborations happening across 13 different cities. This includes two posthumous Shape Languages I created after those collaborators passed.

My fantasy is to develop Shape Languages with everyone, living or passed, who has shaped how I think, how I move through the world, and how I make art.

I will likely spend my entire lifetime trying to make visible all the minds and relationships that make up my work. And maybe, at the very end, I will finally understand what an elephant is.



Scan this QR Code for more information on the collaborators featured in this presentation.
Or visit: <https://www.sparklezilla.com/team-1-1>

My email is on this linked page if you would like to send any shapes you made during this presentation!