Graphic Design is Immaterial: Contexts, Criticism, and Continuities

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Introduction

> Graphic design is absolutely ripe for symptomatic analysis….
> what is the internal discourse of design, and what are the narratives
> that it tells itself about what it's doing? (Drucker 1998, p. 143)

> "Graphic design will save the world right after rock and roll does."
> David Carson, graphic designer (quoted in Poynor 2001, p.53)

If we were to take a snapshot of writing and thinking about graphic design in North

America *right now* – and here I mean the kind of graphic design 'criticism', 'journalism',

or 'history' that we find in a wealth of books, journals, magazines, edited collections,

conference papers, discussions, and even weblogs, I think we would find that there are

several recurrent themes that can, in some senses, be considered as characteristic (if not

quite definitive) of this outpouring; this 'discourse'[1].

When designers and invested observers pause to reflect on the state of this profession - or

'practice', as some would have it – the kind of hand-wringing that ensues has much to do

with an abiding sense that (a) graphic design is important, god-damn it; (b) as hard as

'they' try, 'they' don't understand who we are and what we do; and (c) if only our

importance was recognized by the wider world – for the right reasons, of course – then

we'd all be better off. Alas, this insularity is not so much *imposed* as self-inflicted. Take

Lorraine Wild's sage observation, delivered in the context of debates over social

responsibility:

> Criticism of the commercial abuse of design is always problematic: if it comes
> from Stuart Ewen, it's rejected because he's an academic; if it comes from Neville
> Brody, it doesn't count because he's English; if it comes from Tibor Kalman, it's
> invalid because he is somehow tainted by his own commercial practice; if it
> comes from Dan Friedman, well "doesn't he design furniture now?"; if it comes
> from someone like me, it is written off because my practice is not commercial
> enough. (Wild 1994, pp. 58-59)

Indeed, it was only 15 short years ago that Joe Duffy declared, in the wake of his very

public spat with Tibor Kalman at the AIGA's Dangerous Ideas conference in 1989, "I

don't care what Stuart Ewen says; he's not a designer." (*Tibor Kalman vs. Joe Duffy* 1990,

p. 71) Even Philip Meggs sneered at this particular messenger, sidestepping whatever his

message might have been: Ewen's was "a passionate talk with Marxist overtones.

Personally, he cut quite a capitalist image with four fancy rings and a lush Italian-

designer jacket." (Meggs 1990, p. 115)

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[1] I say this with a modicum of insight since I have recently completed a PhD thesis (Soar 2002b; see also
Soar 2002a) that required me to plow through a substantial sampling of this material.

As another example, take the topic of famous designers and the writing of graphic design history. In 1991, and in concert with many design writers who were intent on questioning largely unspoken cultural and professional biases associated with gender, Martha Scotford (see Scotford 1997) tentatively ventured that there *might be* a canon, and that this seemed to consist entirely of dead, white male designers. Further, she suggested that this *might be* a problem for the teaching of graphic design. Flash forward to a copy of *Print* from May/June 2004, and we find an uncharacteristically testy Rick Poynor misrepresenting a perfectly sound line of thinking with gems such as this: "Barthes, Foucault…and a platoon of feminist art historians are usually brought in… to demonstrate how deeply oppressive it is to know the names of the people who designed the artifacts we use." (Poynor 2004, p. 34) (I challenge anyone, Rick included, to find a single art historian who has ever suggested as much.)

Let's assume for a moment that this was written on an off-day or was conjured up merely for rhetorical effect. Further, that it's somehow symptomatic of something akin to cabin fever: we've spent too long thinking about our own familiar little world at uncomfortably close quarters, so much so that we've all got a bit *unhappy*. On that note, and with one eye on brevity, I'd like to offer up three ways of thinking about graphic design that rarely, if ever, appear in this discourse. They're theories – abstractions – rather than famous people or important places or things designed. Hence my suggestion that graphic design is *immaterial*: not that it doesn't matter; far from it. Rather, the most important way we might think about it right now is as a set of ideas and relations; a way of being in the world; as part of a bigger picture.

1. Graphic design is immaterial, or, It's not just <u>what</u> you know but <u>who</u> you know - and <u>where you come from</u>.

Garry Stevens is an architectural engineer in Australia, and the author of a recent book called *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction* (Stevens 1998). What he did in this book is very interesting indeed. He took the vastly useful ideas of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984) and then applied them to the profession of architecture. Bourdieu had set out in the 1950s and 1960s, with a whole team of fieldworkers, to discover how class inequities were reproducing themselves in postwar France. He found that a key mechanism was the exercise of *taste*, rather than mere wealth.

Let me digress for a moment: I used to know a young Englishman who positively oozed privilege; he once told me with mischievous glee that his mother would occasionally take him to one side in public and say under her breath "N-Q-O-S, dear", which meant that the person or people he had chosen to talk to at that moment were *Not Quite Our Sort* – and should therefore be avoided. How many of you remember your parents casually asking, in direct reference to your brand new best friend, "And what do his/her parents do?" (The 'jobs' they had, or didn't have, would of course be a fairly reliable index of your new acquaintance's suitability as a desirable friend). Of course class works in many, many more subtle ways. Each of us, at every moment, betrays our 'class belongingness' as we gravitate almost instinctively towards similarly identified individuals through learned body language; how one holds one's knife and fork (the way one says "one" instead of "you"); clothes; attitude; accent; musical choices; knowledge about dead languages and dead poets, etc. Stevens calls this "a set of internalized dispositions that incline people to

act and react in certain ways…. the filter through which we interpret the social world…and the mechanism we use to regulate our actions in that world"[2] (Stevens 1998, pp. 57-58)

As an architectural engineer, it became startlingly obvious to Stevens that there was a kind of class hierarchy at play within the profession – one that held architects in far greater esteem than engineers, for example. So, one of his key arguments in *The Favored Circle* is that a select few architects become successful (and famous) not out of sheer genius, or even dumb luck, but because of who they studied with; by extension, those "lucky breaks" – college acceptance, contacts, internships, first jobs, career advancement – depend to a significant degree on class and taste. (Telling, too, that Stevens's book was met with a torrent of vitriol; after all, what he'd done was nothing short of *tasteless*.) In this sense, talent can never be the only index of potential success.

How might this apply to the profession of graphic design? Well, for a start, Milton Glaser has gone so far as to offer a notional "Art Hierarchy" of "roles"; "the exact order varies a bit, but those at the top are closest to God and inspire more respect." (Glaser 2000, p. 263) Here it is in full:

PAINTER
ARCHITECT
SCULPTOR
ARTIST-CRAFTSMAN
CITY PLANNER
INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER
GRAPHIC DESIGNER
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT
INTERIOR DESIGNER
BOOK DESIGNER
EDITORIAL DESIGNER
ADVERTISING DESIGNER (ART DIRECTOR)

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[2] The technical term Bourdieu, and hence Stevens, uses to capture this phenomenon is "habitus" (See Bourdieu 1984.)

Of the last entry, Glaser notes: "It's true that many of the roles can be subsumed by the phrase commercial artist, but if you describe yourself that way, you go right to the bottom of the list." (Glaser 2000, p. 263)

It is of course an enormously *tasteless* game to play, but one could begin to build a map of who, among today's cadre of famous designers, trained with or began their careers working for yesteryear's famous designers or famous design studios (quite aside from famous design schools and their famous tutors). Suffice to say that Paula Scher did a good job of dramatizing this very point with her wonderful satirical cover for *Print* a few years back (see *Print* Nov/Dec 1985).

In a sense, then – and I choose my words very carefully here – the graphic design profession that each cohort of graphic design students eyes with varying degrees of ambition, glee, and dread, is not a meritocratic free-for-all. Whatever happens after school, be it fabulous success or abject failure or, most likely, rather modest advancement, has a great deal to do with their portfolios, but also where they come from, who they are now, how well they fit in, and how quickly they learn the unspoken rules of their chosen profession (hence class).

2. Graphic design is immaterial: It's not this or that but somewhere in the middle.

Around fifty years ago, during the salad days of the International Design Conference in Aspen, a motorcycle-riding, Marxist academic from Columbia delivered a speech called

'The Designer: Man in the Middle' (Mills 1963). I don't want to dwell on the content of the piece so much as to suggest that, whether designers have been paying attention or not, this middle ground is a recurrent theme in social and cultural theory. Bourdieu, for example, used the term "cultural intermediaries" to analyze a group of workers – including graphic designers - that "comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services." (Bourdieu 1984, p.359)

Designers, then, operate in the spaces between production and consumption; between the spheres of work and leisure; they mediate between the communication needs of their clients on the one hand and the expectations of consuming audiences on the other. (I have argued in the past that this audience is actually secondary: strictly speaking, the *first* audience for designers is themselves and their peers, whether through casual interactions at work or out of the workplace; through the ongoing assembly of a fresh portfolio; or, through endless awards shows and annuals. More on this in a minute.) This, I think, is a key issue when figuring out how we as designers fit into the bigger picture. Better still, it helps to explain why graphic design goes through periodic convulsions regarding its goals, its purpose, its *raison d'etre*.

It wasn't lost on Mills or Bourdieu that being in the middle creates its own peculiar problems. (As any middle child can attest, you're neither the eldest nor the youngest; you're neither one thing nor the other.) Now, Bourdieu calls this an "essential ambiguity" – a paradox, a contradiction, that comes with the territory. For graphic designers (indeed, for all the cultural intermediaries) it is "the discrepancy between the (symbolically)

subversive dispositions linked to their position in the division of labour and the manipulative or conservative functions attached to the position, between the subjective image of the occupational project and the objective function of the occupation." (Bourdieu 1984, p. 366) In other words, while being a designer often strikes many people as a fun, cool, hip way to earn a living (something like rock-and-roll but with a steady paycheck), in which one can comfortably design a website for a business one minute and a protest t-shirt the next (apparently without betraying the interests of either client), it is also, in the cold light of day, a process of economic exchange: you design an annual report for corporation X to our complete satisfaction, and we'll pay you the going rate (or less). Every now and then visible resistance to this rather harsh reality does surface; the two incarnations of First Things First, thirty-five years apart, being only the most obvious examples. Alas, they are perhaps the exceptions that prove the rule.

3. Graphic design is immaterial - because graphic designers are consumers.

This past June I spent a week in the amiable company of forty or so other designers at Maine College of Art's DesignInquiry[3]: seven days spent chatting and debating and designing with folks from all over the place who had come together under the theme of 'truth and message'. One thing I took away with me, apart from a nifty bookwork I spent too many hours contributing to, was a conviction that graphic design just might matter after all; I've certainly had my doubts in the past. One experience in particular inspired me to write this very presentation: Peter Hall, the design journalist, had assembled us all with the intention of facilitating a discussion about our role as designers. He had us begin

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[3] http://designinquiry.meca.edu/designinquiry.html

with a set of readings that included Michael Rock's piece from *Eye* called 'The Designer as Author' (Rock 2002), Rick Poynor's 'The Designer as Reporter' (Poynor 2001, pp. 185-188), and Ellen Lupton's 'The Producers' (Lupton 2003).

Without wanting to undermine Peter's initiative, I do want to pause for a moment to reflect on the way in which every piece is, naturally enough, concerned with imagining an empowered (ie authoritative, even *autonomous*) role for the graphic designer – whether it be as a journalist, an author, a producer, or a translator. Call it contrarian or perverse (or flatter me entirely and call it dialectical), but I actually started thinking about concrete ways in which designers are decidedly *unempowered*, such that they might never be masters or mistresses of their own destinies – surely our biggest collective fantasy. Aside from issues of class and taste and being piggy-in-the-middle - as I've already suggested - designers can reasonably be understood not as producers at all, but as consumers.

In occupying the precarious middle ground along with every other cultural intermediary, graphic designers are obliged to cultivate an acute attunement to everything that is new in the world. As designers we depend, in a very real sense, on exposing ourselves to the very latest styles, movies, books, gadgets (say hello to iPod), music – the very freshest morsels that the cultural zeitgeist can deliver. Only then can we produce design work that isn't stale. The problem, though, is that once everyone else gets their hands on it, it ain't fresh no more; so off we move again. As one invested observer has put it, designers "have the apparent contradictory interests of sustaining the prestige and cultural capital of these enclaves [of consumption], while at the same time popularizing and making them more accessible to wider audiences." (Featherstone, 1991, p. 19) Herein lies the rub: the

last thing we want is to be associated with the Joneses, for all their embarrassingly outré suburbanism. So, we have to keep ahead; the further ahead the better. Where once we read *Wired* or *RayGun*, we now read *Res* or *ThisIsAMagazine* - at least until the hoards catch up and clue in; we bought Radiohead's (or HoneyBarbara's) first album when it came out and played it all day long in the studio, but now they're just *too popular*. I'm sure some of you have rather more hip examples to offer - which is precisely my point.

In Conclusion

I have tried to sketch out in the most rudimentary fashion some notions that I hope will help to challenge some of our most cherished assumptions and aspirations about graphic design's role in the world. My aim has not been to trample them in the dirt, but to suggest that the process of making them achievable must involve a more thorough-going interrogation of the kinds of values and ideals that can sometimes blind us to our own fallibility. The three objections I have raised are derived from a very particular source; a rich vein of cultural and social theory that may provide answers but is certainly not the only port of call. Whatever we do, we – students of graphic design, educators, design writers (I count myself as all three) - must become acculturated to looking beyond our own backyard to develop an enriched understanding of graphic design in its least material forms; beyond its existence as a set of artifacts and distinguished individuals.

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