

GRAPHIC DESIGN THEORY: READINGS FROM THE FIELD

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Maryland Institute College of Art, GDMFA Thesis

The texts in my thesis project, a book entitled *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*, reveal ideas key to the evolution of graphic design. Together, they tell the story of a discipline that continually moves between extremes— anonymity and authorship, the personal and the universal, social detachment and social engagement. Through such oppositions, designers position and reposition themselves in relation to the discourse of design and the broader society. Tracing such positioning clarifies the radically changing paradigm in which we now find ourselves. Technology is fundamentally altering our culture. But technology wrought radical change in the early 1900s as well. Key debates of the past are reemerging as crucial debates of the present. Authorship, universality, social responsibility—within these issues the future of graphic design lies.

COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP

Some graphic designers have recently invigorated their field by producing their own content, signing their work, and branding themselves as makers. Digital technology puts creation, production, and distribution into the hands of the designer, enabling such bold assertions of artistic presence. These acts of graphic authorship fit within a broader evolving model of collective authorship that is fundamentally changing the producer/consumer relationship.

In contrast to the predominate modern concept of the designer as neutral transmitter of information, many designers are now producing their own content, typically for both critical and entrepreneurial purposes. The controversial idea of graphic authorship, although still not a dominant professional or economic paradigm for designers permeates discussions of the future of design. And, as an empowering model for practice, it leads the curriculum of many design graduate programs.

Out of this recent push toward authorship, new collective voices hearkening back to the avant-garde are emerging. As a result of technology, content generation by individuals has never been easier. A new kind of collective voice, more anonymous than individual, is beginning to emerge. This collective creative voice reflects a culture that has as its central paradigm the decentered power structure of the network, and that promotes a more open sharing of ideas, tools, and intellectual property.

Whether or not this leveling of voices is a positive or negative phenomenon for graphic designers is under debate. Dmitri Siegel's recent blog entry on Design Observer, included in this collection, raises serious questions about where designers fall within this new paradigm of what he terms "prosumerism—simultaneous production and consumption." Siegel asks "What services and expertise do designers have to offer in a prosumer market?" The answer is, of course, still up for grabs, but the rapid increase in authorial voices and the leveling of this multiplicity of voices into a collective drive suggest the future of our working environment. Already designers increasingly create tools, templates, and resources for their clients and other users to implement. Graphic designers must take note and consciously position themselves within the prosumer culture or run the risk of being creatively sidelined by it.

UNIVERSAL SYSTEMS OF CONNECTION

At the same time that technology is empowering a new collectivity, it is also redefining universality. To understand how this crucial design concept is currently evolving, we need to take a look at how it initially emerged.

The technology through which designers today create and communicate has quietly thrust universality back into the foundation of our work. Software applications mold individual creative quirks into standardized tools and palettes. The resulting aesthetic transformation, as Lev Manovich explores in his essay "Import/Export," is monumental. Specific techniques, artistic languages, and vocabularies previously isolated within individual professions are being "imported" and "exported" across software applications and professions to create shared "metamedia." Powered by technology, universality has moved far from the restrictive models of the past toward this new common language of, in Manovich's words, "hybridity" and "remixability" unlike anything that has come before.

This revamped hybrid universal language crosses boundaries between disciplines and individuals, between countries and cultures. In their essay "Univers Strikes Back," Ellen and Julia Lupton note it is "a visual language enmeshed in a technologically evolving communications environment stretched and tested by an unprecedented range of people." The universal systems of connection emerging today are different from the totalizing universality of the avant-garde, which sought to create a single, utopian visual language that could unite human culture. Today, countless designers and producers, named and unnamed, at work both inside and outside the profession,

are contributing to a vast new visual commons, often using shared tools and technologies. Through this new “commonality” the paradigm of design is shifting.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The same digital technology that empowers a collective authorship and enables a new kind of universal language is also inspiring a sharpened critical voice within the design community. Designers are actively engaging their societies politically and culturally, increasingly thinking globally inside a tightly networked world. As more and more designers, enabled by technology, produce both form and content, issues like sustainability and social justice are moving to the forefront. Designers are looking beyond successful business/aesthetic practices to the broader effects of the culture they help create.

As the new millennium moves into full swing, graphic designers create within a vast pulsating network in which broad audiences are empowered to produce and critique. Within this highly connected world, designers like Kenya Hara, creative director of MUJI and managing director of the Nippon Design Center, develop innovative models for socially responsible design. For Hara, as for the avant-garde, the answer lies in the rational mind rather than individual desire. This new rational approach, however, incorporates a strong environmental ethos within a quest for business/design models that produce “global harmony and mutual benefit.” Issues of social responsibility, like graphic authorship, have also entered graphic design educational curriculum, encouraging students to look beyond formal concerns to the global impact of their work. No longer primarily led by restrictive modern ideals of neutral, objective communication, the design field has expanded to include more direct critical engagement with the surrounding world.

THE AVANT-GARDE OF THE RISING MILLENNIUM

My thesis is divided into three main sections: Creating the Field, Building on Success, and Mapping the Future. Creating the Field traces the evolution of graphic design over the course of the early 1900s, including influential avant-garde ideas of Futurism, Constructivism and the Bauhaus. Building on Success covers the mid to latter part of the 20th century, looking at International Style, Pop and Postmodernism. Mapping the Future opens at the end of the 20th century. It explores current theoretical ideas in graphic design which are still unfolding.

Looking back across the history of design through the minds of these influential designers, one can identify pervasive themes like those discussed here. Issues like authorship, universality and social responsibility, so key to avant-garde ideology, remain crucial to contemporary critical/theoretical discussions of the field.

Jessica Helfand, in her essay “Dematerialization of Screen Space,” charges the present design community to become the new avant-garde. My thesis was put together with that charge in mind. Helfand asks that we think beyond technical practicalities and begin really “shaping a new and unprecedented universe.” Just as designers in the early twentieth century rose to the challenges of their societies, so can we take on the complexities of the rising millennium. Delving into theoretical discussions that engage both our past and our present are a good start.