Graphic Design: Now in Production

Edited by Andrew Blauvelt and Ellen Lupton

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Practice from Everyday Life: Defining Graphic Design’s Expansive Scope by Its Quotidian Activities
James Goggin

"in the broadest aspects of many of our contemporary lifestyles and practices, much work has recently been presented as the intersection of design, technology, and culture. I have used the word 'interdisciplinary,' but I could go by several others including contextualization, collaboration, situational, or conditional design. I chose the word 'contextual' because it introduces the localized spectrum: it could include collaborative practices but it also leaves room for non-transparent approaches to design, new tools and techniques to other possible connections, affiliations, and associations. The opposite of material is a combination of material, independent, loosed, and closed. The relational is synonymous with interdependence, interconnectedness, and openness. The relational activates today’s inherited culture, identity and tempora have a web of associations, uses, significants, and contexts that determine design. Relational design is in precipitate with design’s efficacy, extending beyond the design of the design object and its attendant meanings and cultural symbols. The concept is an intervention through three-phased process of modern design in this postmodern culture. They couple can be context to context, or in semantic terms, from syntax to semiotics to meaning to meaning. If the concept is not more clearly defined, then the term might be more useful.

Bruce Lee

Art Director: The Artful Dodgers Design Studio

Everywhere and Nowhere
An important part of everyday design as an inherently more complex practice is the recognition of the need to include the "non-design" activities in its
"In the broadest aspects of communication, much work has recently been done to clarify theories and make them workable."

—Ray and Charles Eames, A Communications Primer, IBM, 1953

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"Graphic design" has been defined by a plethora of titles, terms, subcategories, movements, and zeitgeist-capturing phrases: communicationdesign, visualcommunication, communication design, and design. "Designer as author," "designer as producer," and, recently, "relational design" and "critical design." Additionally, certain extra-disciplinary concepts from art, cinema, architecture, and literary spheres are frequently applied to and compared with graphic design: auteur theory, deconstructivism, postmodernism, relational aesthetics, etc. This discourse is essential for graphic design, and can ideally provide critical viewpoints from which to consider the discipline and its position(s) in larger cultural and social contexts. From the conceptualization of the designer’s position, however, the particular phrasing of new movements or tendencies can at times result in a restrictive form of pigeonholing. Graphic design becomes accountable not to its own activities and contexts, but to preconceived ideas and categorizations. Attempts at new names and definitions often betray an assumption that "graphic design" itself is too limited, merely the terms mean the simple service-oriented industry that many still see it as. Instead, we would argue that graphic design has always occupied a unique position between reading, writing, editing, and distribution and is a discipline nuanced and expansive enough in its everyday activities and processes to make renaming unnecessary. Rather than seeing "graphic design" as too narrow for the multidisciplinarity of contemporary practice, designers, design critics, and historians might instead widen their own perceptions of what exactly the term can logically encompass.

Everywhere and Nowhere

An important part of reading "graphic design" as an inherently multidisciplinary practice is the recognition of "designing" as including ostensibly banal, supposedly "non-design" activities in its definition: dialogue, research, organization, management, and the reading, writing, editing mentioned above are all facets open to analysis, exploration, and even subversion. In accepting this definition, the idea of a graphic designer doing things like editing a book, publishing a zine, performing a public reading or curating an exhibition should not be unexpected, let alone seen as exotic. The experienced graphic designer—whether working only by commission, or with a mix of commissioned and self-initiated projects—becomes naturally skilled in all of these areas, so it is only logical to apply this knowledge both in the service of a client and as a means of self-production, analysing all channels of interpretation, production and distribution for potential creative and critical scope.

London-based Swiss designer Laurent Bannier and Switzerland-based Brit Jonathan Haras' in situ printing and sampler-assembly system for The Most Beautiful Swiss Books catalogues (2005–2007) perhaps embodies this approach, taken to its logical conclusion, where the designers were explicitly coordinators of, and participants with, the editor, paper merchant, printer, and binder: the approach itself determining the form of the book. As the designer of the following MBBS triptych (2008–2011), designer Laurens Brunner took on the related (and conceptually crucial) roles of printer and publisher with an interactive online catalogue of artists' books.

In a past MBBS-awarded project, Conran Winstill’s design and editing roles for Project Ultra, taking in content-specific art-directed photography, extended to comprehensive content and picture research (also evident in his art direction for Tate Etc. magazine). Wherein 2005, Swiss designer Norm operated as publisher and editor, and producer for pseudo-naiusea Bruce Lai, 4 in 2008 Urs Lehni featured not only the designer, printer, and publisher catego-

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Designers initiating a more expanded involvement in given projects are today less likely to be doing so for motives of personal expression, a common misunderstand-
ling of 1980s "designer as author" notions. Rather than simple signature statement or addition of subjective opinion, the designer now more frequently aims to add more intangible, almost invisible elements to a given project: particular functional and conceptual inputs that all work to support (and, admittedly, sometimes subvert) the given content. Sensitivity becomes a signature, as opposed to an overtly stylised aesthetic. In this sense, the designer recognises that aforementioned invisibility of the graphic designer and uses it to their (and the project's) advantage. This kind of authorship, or perhaps conforms to László Moholy-Nagy's definition: an "anti-signature" based on process rather than craftsmanship. He could also take German typographer and book designer Hans Peter Willberg's definition of an "image author" (working in tandem with the "text author"), where any book project ideally involves direct collaboration right from its conception between author, designer, printer, and publisher, is precisely why the false dichotomy of "constrained commissioned work" vs. "experimental self-initiated work" does not really represent the reality of current graphic design practice. While constraints are happily adopted and essential to creative outcomes for most designers, they do not exclusively belong to commissioned projects. Designers also regularly impose constraints on self-initiated work, and conversely find and explore open critical frameworks to commissioned projects. My use of the word "constraint" here is chosen very carefully against the more familiar "compromise," a frequent catch-veat used by designers to avoid the client for a project's unsuccessful outcome. Charles Eames made this important difference of attitude clear when describing his work ethic: "I don't remember ever being forced to accept compromises, but I have willingly accepted constraints." A classic criticism of contemporary graphic design is its ostensible narrow field of projects and clients: invariably within the cultural sector, a kind of ghetto in which it is, argued, little effect or positive influence on society at large can take place. To a certain degree the criticism can be valid, and the point is particularly interesting to note in relation to the above Most Beautiful Swiss Books examples, both in light of Jan Tschichold's original motivation for the award to encourage standards and values for the broader industry, and with the acknowledgment that a growing proportion of the books awarded are art catalogues. However, such criticisms often ignore the realities of graphic design prac-
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