
TOWARDS CRITICAL AUTONOMY, OR CAN GRAPHIC DESIGN SAVE ITSELF?

Andrew Blauvelt

“Art exists today in a state of pluralism: no style or even mode of art is dominant and no critical position is orthodox. Yet this state is also a position, and this position is an alibi. As a general condition pluralism tends to absorb argument—which is not to say that it does not promote antagonism of all sorts. One can only begin out of a discontent with this status quo: for in a pluralist state art and criticism tend to be dispersed and so rendered impotent. Minor deviation is allowed only in order to resist radical change.” —Hal Foster, “The Problem with Pluralism,” 1982

It would be an understatement to suggest that the 1990s were an important decade for graphic design. Not only were the technological transformations of the desktop publishing and personal computing revolution of the 1980s fully absorbed, but so too were the lessons of formal experimentation that had developed in the academies and the marketplace.

Today, we can reflect fondly on those impassioned debates in the nineties about the merits of computer-aided design and the limits of readability and legibility, or the naïveté of whether we needed only ten typefaces and the unbridled enthusiasm of the Internet. These issues and many others formed the basis for much design discourse in the first half of the nineties producing a new generation of voices debating the merits of these changes—many of them in the pages of *Émigré*, myself included.

Slowly the debates subsided. Any tension that may have existed among the factions eased and the marketplace and academy embraced the eclecticism of difference. The globally interconnected and highly disseminated design scene, which really came into the fore in the nineties, could easily transplant even the most provincial tendencies in a matter of months. Graduate programs, whether celebrated or scorned, were once seen as the source of “the problem.”

Hal Foster’s commentary (cited in the epigraph) about the pluralism of the eighties art scene could be easily applied to contemporary graphic design. Significant aesthetic debates have been superseded by consensus: not a fight over which style but agreement on all styles. The bedrock principle of pluralism asks not in what style we should design, but rather says that we design stylishly. A plethora of these benign styles exists to mix and match according to the logic of the marketplace. Once style was a defining gesture, unapologetically ideological, and a signal that differentiated and codified its subject. Today style has been reduced to a choice, not a matter of conviction but one of convenience. Professional organizations, publications, schools, and even competitions used to be distinct. If they are not now defunct, they are pretty much interchangeable.

This situation of academic and marketplace pluralism as well as a dearth of critical discourse are actually related phenomena, each reflecting the condition of the other. Slowly, but surely, any critical edge—either real or imagined—to design has largely disappeared, dulled by neglect in the go-go nineties or deemed expendable in the subsequent downturn. However, the reason seems not a factor of cyclical economies, but rather the transfiguration of a critical avant-garde into a postcritical *arrière-garde*.

It is no wonder that graphic design today feels like a vast formless body able to absorb any blows delivered to it—lacking coherency and totally dispersed. This absence of a critical mass or resistant body is at the heart of the current malaise. One might argue that graphic design today no longer exists in the form (or body) we once knew it. So scattered and destabilized are its constituent elements that any attempt at definitions becomes meaningless. The expansion of graphic design beyond its roots in print is simply one symptom of this crisis. Even a broad moniker such as “visual communications” loses cohesion in the face of a multitude of providers producing all sorts of “visuals” for divergent media, be it print, television, video, film, or the Internet. Lacking the specificity of a medium, graphic design tends to be identified more through its varied products than any sense of social practice. Thus graphic design is reduced to its commodity form—simply a choice of vehicles for delivering a message: ad, billboard,

book, brochure, typeface, Web site, and so on. Implicit in this reductive understanding is the denial of graphic design as a social practice and with it the possibility of disciplinary autonomy.

The late eighties and early nineties produced an assault on the conventions of graphic design through an intense period of formal experimentation. Those inquiries were a desire to rethink prevailing assumptions, principally the legacy of modernism, and succeeded in breaking the link between modernism and the avant-garde. Up to that point, from the late nineteenth century on, an avant-garde in design existed primarily within the rubric of modernism. Indeed those experiments demonstrated that it was possible to produce a design avant-garde independent of modernism. But just like other modernist avant-gardes, these experiments were premised on the notion of inventing new formal languages without historical precedent. Paradoxically, much of the theoretical discourse that formed the basis of these experiments espoused a philosophy that dispensed with such notions as originality altogether. Nevertheless these experiments soon conflated the avant-garde with individual expression (the ultimate "origin" of the designer), as if guarding against the looming anonymity of the designer in the desktop publishing universe. We have become so conditioned to the importance of personal style in design that the subsequent pluralism that it has wrought goes essentially unchallenged.

The results of these experiments moved quickly from polemic to profitability. Both within the marketplace and the academy the consequence was not to invent wholly new languages but rather develop variations of styles. The critical reflexivity that had been the genesis of such experimental work was pushed aside as the promotion of individual expression became paramount. It is no coincidence that the proliferation of design styles corresponded to the increase of the number of brands and the demand for product segmentation in the marketplace. The academy reacted with similar misrecognition by seeing formal experimentation as end in itself; whereby the exercise of individual expression (more commonly called "personal style") is considered experimental. The situation created successive generations of work that had all the look and feel of the experimental without actually being experimental. This should be contrasted with the possibility of experimentation that is itself contextual—tied to the continuity of a historical language of design, for example, or one that is essentially aformal and questions not so much the form of design but the possibilities of its practice. Such an alternative would require both a sense of history and a more contextual understanding of developments within the discipline.

An important way out of the current predicament is for graphic design to reclaim a position of critical autonomy. By autonomy, I do not mean a wholesale withdrawal from the social or the kind of freedoms the fine arts claim. Graphic design, precisely because it is an instrumental form of communication, cannot divorce itself from the world. Rather graphic design must be seen as a discipline capable of generating meaning out of its own intrinsic resources without reliance on commissions, functions, or specific materials or means. Such actions should demonstrate self-awareness and reflexivity; a capacity to manipulate the system of

graphic design. A newly engaged form of critical practice is necessary, one that is no longer concerned with originality as defined by personal expression, but rather one dedicated to an inventive contextuality. We also need to imagine a historical language of design that transcends styles and is embedded in the continuity of discourse. The point is not to invent a neomodernist avant-garde and inherit all of its problems. Rather the purpose is to stake a claim for autonomy, which, like an avant-garde, is already a separation from the social demands that limit graphic design to its most marketable features. Autonomy also gives coherency to graphic design in order to resist the dispersal it currently suffers by defining the conditions and terms in which it seeks to operate. Most importantly, a space of autonomy for graphic design affords an opportunity to engage in a more critical examination of its practice, assuming that it does not lapse into a convenient formalism or cannot escape the ideology of expressionism.

METHOD DESIGNING: THE PARADOX OF MODERN DESIGN EDUCATION

Jessica Helfand

Over a century ago, Konstantin Stanislavsky revolutionized the modern theater by introducing a new system of training, in which the actor would draw on his or her own emotions to achieve a true understanding of a character. "We protested against the old manner of acting and against theatricality, against artificial pathos and declamation," Stanislavsky wrote, and, indeed, in an era framed by considerable social and civil unrest, the very notion that characters could be shown to have an interior life was itself remarkably revolutionary. Through the practice of what we have come to know, today, as "method" acting, an actor could explore, identify, and ultimately reveal the degree to which a character could be a hugely complex human being with feelings, emotions, and often conflicting desires.

To this day, method acting remains a highly regarded pedagogical model for training actors. But when did it become an appropriate system for educating designers?

Schools of thought are always hotbeds of ideological controversy: there are always exceptions to the rule, deviations from the principal learning curve. In creative education this a particularly thorny issue: how to teach discipline *and*