ELLEN LUPTON GAVE GRAPHIC DESIGN A NEW VOCABULARY. THROUGH HER SEMINAL BOOKS AND EXHIBITIONS, SHE TOOK KEY THEORETICAL IDEAS ENCOMPASSING ART, LITERATURE, AND CULTURE AND APPLIED THEM TO OUR PROFESSION. When people want to understand design, they turn to Lupton. Beginning in 1992, she served as contemporary design curator for the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. In 2003 she launched a graphic design MFA program in Baltimore at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Through her work at these institutions and through her prolific writing, she has opened up the discourse of design to the general public. As the tools of publishing become increasingly available, Lupton explains, design thinking becomes increasingly essential. Through a broader understanding of design, citizens can become communicators; consumers can become producers. She believes, as she asserts in the essay below, that graphic design "is a mode of thinking and doing that belongs to everyone on earth." This essay was written with Lupton's twin sister Julia, a renowned Shakespeare scholar who has become a DIY designer on the side. The Lupton twins have embarked on a series of books and projects focused on bringing design skills and design thinking to new audiences; "Univers Strikes Back" was their first coauthored published piece.

UNIVERS STRIKES BACK

ELLEN AND JULIA LUPTON | 2007

In *Print* magazine in 2002, Katherine McCoy challenged designers to support local cultures by practicing audience-centered design. McCoy was voicing the postmodern disillusion with universal design. "As a Modernist Swiss-school graphic designer in the late sixties," McCoy wrote, "I knew we were going to remake the world in Helvetica." Modernism sought a common language built on systems and modularity; in contrast, the postmodernists valorized the special idioms and dialects of cultures and subcultures.

Today, culture seems as much a problem as a solution. Differences in ideology, religion, and national identity are tearing apart communities, countries, and the world itself. Tribal hatreds and civil warfare as well as corporate greed and imperial arrogance are doing the damage. No longer satisfied by the cult of cultures, philosophers, theologians, journalists, and artists around the world are recovering the universal ideas embedded in their particular religious, national, or communal orientations, whether it's love of neighbor, the equality of citizens, human rights, or responsibility for a shared planet.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, the Princeton philosopher and ethicist born and raised in Ghana, has questioned the values of multiculturalism in the name of a new "cosmopolitanism," literally, "world citizenship." Kumasi, the thriving, multilingual capital of Ghana's Asante region, is populated by people of Asante,

1 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 102.

Hausa, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and British descent. In a small village just twenty miles away, the population is more ethnically homogeneous, but the culture is nonetheless connected to the world. "The villagers," Appiah writes, "will have radios; you will probably be able to get a discussion going about the World Cup in soccer, Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, and hip hop." They'll be drinking Guinness and Coca-Cola as well as Star lager, Ghana's own beer. But, he notes, you'll hear the local language, not English, playing on the radio, and their favorite soccer teams will be Ghanaian. These villages may be connected globally, but their homogeneity "is still the local kind"—the same level and style of homogeneity, he writes provocatively, that you would find in a New Jersey suburb.[1]

Appiah eloquently opposes the attempt to create artificial museums out of local cultures. The world, he argues, is made up of individuals, not of cultures. Individuals belong to a shared humanity and a global civilization as well as to a local community. A cosmopolitan place such as New York or Paris or Kumasi draws its energy from a mix of persons, inextricably connected with a larger world, who have the right to participate in a world discourse.

Postmodernists exposed the ideal of universal communication as naively utopian at best and oppressively colonial at worst. After World War II, ideas pioneered by the modernist avant-garde came to serve globalization, whose international branding campaigns allow international brands, from Coca-Cola and McDonald's to IKEA and Starbucks, to compete with indigenous goods and services. Witness, in New York City, the gradual disappearance of the classic Greek diner coffee cup, designed by Leslie Buck in 1963 for a Connecticut paper goods manufacturer; once a ubiquitous throwaway, the rise of Starbucks has rendered it a nostalgic museum-shop souvenir.

But can global design sometimes affirm cultural identity while enhancing millions of lives? Consider IKEA, a company that has integrated furniture design, manufacturing, and branding with the social trends of nomadic living, customization, and disposability. Objects such as the humble Klippan couch, designed by Lars Engman in 1980, make good on the democratic ideals of the early modernist designers. Whereas few Bauhaus products ever reached mass markets, the Klippan, selling for under $200, has found a place in over a million homes in dozens of regions around the world.

One could fault IKEA for spreading the monotony of globalization. Although IKEA is a global company, it maintains a distinct regional identity (think meatballs, lingonberries, and cured salmon). Founded in 1943, IKEA built its product line around a Scandinavian variant of modernism—comfortable, casual, and adaptable to individual tastes. IKEA soon established stores in other Scandinavian countries and then across Western Europe and beyond.

When IKEA built its first United States store in 1985, the company already had outlets in Hong Kong, Australia, Saudi Arabia, and Dubai. Wherever IKEA opens its doors, people line up outside. In contrast with Coca-Cola and McDonald's, companies that tune their marketing and their recipes to local tastes, IKEA's merchandise and store design are more or less uniform across the world. At the same time, their products reflect and acknowledge global influences. A current store display tucks a tiny Japanese tea room at the end of a galley kitchen, marrying Nordic and Asian modes of minimalism.

Take the case of clothing sizes. In 1958, the U.S. government standardized sizes so that consumers could shop more reliably. In 1983, in the face of the changing shape of American bodies, these standards were abandoned and companies set their own. When you choose a brand, you're choosing a whole bundle of identifiers—not just gender, but age, class, and lifestyle. Hanes are oversized for the underclass, while American Apparel is slimmed down for the youth market. Tim Kaeding, creative director for 7 for All Mankind, a California jeans company, confessed in a recent interview, "In the jeans world especially, size is not a precise science. It's almost an irrelevant, made-up number system." Whose fault is that, anyway? Consumers practice the art of denial in response to a diet of fast food carbonated by images of the rich and thin. Marketers are there to make us feel better and buy more. A return to universal sizing would lead to greater transparency for consumers and producers everywhere.

How does this argument bear on graphic design? Consider the template, which offers generic solutions to common problems in a lame bid to automate design. Designer Dmitri Siegel has criticized what he calls the "templated mind," which searches for blanks to fill out, wallpapers to customize, and products to rank and rate. The dismal templates of PowerPoint serve more to control production than to empower its users with tools for agile thinking, yielding wordy, gimmick-ridden documents.

Yet PowerPoint has become an indispensable tool because it crosses platforms, giving everyone from schoolchildren to mid-level executives access to multimedia authoring. The challenge for designers—a group that increasingly includes thoughtful users as well as professional typographers—is to disable the stylistic limitations of templates without forgoing the expanded access to the tools of communication. For what makes design "universal" today is not the clean lines of Helvetica, but rather the spread of software such as Photoshop, Flash, and After Effects to vast new user groups, not just around the world but down the hall and across the street.

Transparency, layering, and hybridity have been features of artistic practice, including typography and design, since at least the rise of commercial printing.

ELLEN LUPTON
Interview by Nicole
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What makes these principles new again in today's context is their ubiquitous accessibility through commonly available software. They have become, in a different way from Helvetica, universal. The new universality pursues not a fixed, closed totality but an open infinity. It emanates from particular situations, from individual users solving specific problems. Their quirks and their quandaries force design to change and expand.

Consider the attempt to define "universal design." Does "universal design" refer to a single language or a global, panlinguistic typeface? Does it promote common access to education, tools, and software? Does it enumerate shared standards and protocols that allow information to be easily exchanged? Does it demand designing for users with diverse physical and cognitive abilities? Does it delineate a basic form language capable of describing an infinite array of visual relationships? "Universal design" encompasses all of these reference points, many of which were not concerns during modern design theory's first wave.

Multiculturalism celebrates the ethnic, racial, or gender identities of designers and their audiences. But designers are also drawn together by design itself as a common language. Each reader of this magazine produces work informed by his or her cultural background. But we are also engaged in a common exploration of the language of design, itself shaped by a variety of discourses, from typography to music to religion. We are developing our particular voices as people—as men and women, as members of a generation, as participants in local communities and institutions, but also as practitioners of a global design discourse. Moreover, more and more, whether we like it or not, we must approach our audiences not only as consumers of our designs, but as contributors to the designed world. The baseline that draws us all together is design.

Universal design as it is emerging now, after postmodernism, is not a generic, neutral mode of communication. Rather, it is a visual language enmeshed in a technologically evolving communications environment stretched and tested by an unprecedented range of people. Individuals can engage this language on their own terms, infusing it with their own energy and sensibilities in order to create communications that are appropriate to particular publics and purposes. Just as the Asante people of Ghana enjoy both Coca-Cola and Star lager, people around the world have access to pencils, pens, and paint as well as Photoshop, HTML, and Processing. People around the world sit on IKEA's Klippan couch. They talk on cell phones (in many languages) and surf the Internet (using common protocols). Design is a visual language whose endless permutations result from the particularities of individuals, institutions, and locales that are increasingly connected to one another by acts of communication and exchange.

ELLEN LUPTON Spread from *Design Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design*, 1996. Written and designed by Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, this influential book presents an early example of the contemporary move toward graphic designers as authors.

ELLEN LUPTON Spread from *Graphic Design: The New Basics*, 2008, written and designed by Ellen Lupton and Jennifer Cole Phillips. Through this book Lupton explores emerging universals within the practice of graphic design, including newly relevant concepts like transparency and layering.