GRAPHIC DESIGN THEORY

READINGS FROM THE FIELD

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FOREWORD
WHY THEORY?

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This book is an introduction to graphic design theory. Each selection, written in its own time and place across a century of design evolution, explores the aesthetic and social purposes of design practice. All of these writers were—or are—visual producers active in the field, engaged with the realities of creating graphic communication. Why did they pause from making their work and building their careers to write about what they do? Why should a young designer today stop and read what they wrote?

Theory is all about the question "why?" The process of becoming a designer is focused largely on "how": how to use software, how to solve problems, how to organize information, how to get clients, how to work with printers, and so on. With so much to do, stopping to think about why we pursue these endeavors requires a momentary halt in the frenetic flight plan of professional development. Design programs around the world have recognized the need for such critical reflection, and countless designers and students are hungry for it. This book, carefully curated by emerging scholar and designer Helen Armstrong, is designed as a reader for history and theory courses as well as an approachable volume for general reading. Armstrong developed the book as graduate research in the Graphic Design MFA program at Maryland Institute College of Art, which has produced a series of collaboratively authored books. Hers is the first book from our program edited independently by a graduate student. Presented within its pages are passionate, intelligent texts created by people who helped build their field. These writers used their practical understanding of living processes and problems to raise philosophical, aesthetic, and political questions about design, and they used those questions, in turn, to inspire their own visual work as well as the work of people around them.

Design is a social activity. Rarely working alone or in private, designers respond to clients, audiences, publishers, institutions, and collaborators. While our work is exposed and highly visible, as individuals we often remain anonymous, our contribution to the texture of daily life existing below the threshold of public recognition. In addition to adding to the common beat of social experience, designers have produced their own subculture, a global discourse that connects us across time and space as part of a shared

endeavor, with our own heroes and our own narratives of discovery and revolution. Few members of the general public are aware, for example, of the intense waves of feeling triggered among designers by the typeface Helvetica, generation after generation, yet nearly anyone living in a literate, urbanized part of the world has seen this typeface or characters inspired by it. Design is visible everywhere, yet it is also invisible—unnoticed and unacknowledged.

Creating design theory is about building one's own community, constructing a social network that questions and illuminates everyday practice—making it visible. Many of the writers in this book are best known for their visual work; others are known primarily as critics or educators. But in each case, a living, active connection to practice informs these writers' ideas. Each text assembled here was created in order to inspire practice, moving designers to act and experiment with incisive principles in mind. El Lissitzky, whose posters, books, and exhibitions are among the most influential works of twentieth-century design, had a huge impact on his peers through his work as a publisher, writer, lecturer, and curator. In the mid-twentieth century, Josef Müller-Brockmann and Paul Rand connected design methodologies to the world of business, drawing on their own professional experiences. Wolfgang Weingart, Lorraine Wild, and Katherine McCoy have inspired generations of designers through their teaching as well as through their visual work. Kenya Hara has helped build a global consumer brand (MUJI) while stimulating invention and inquiry through his work as a writer and curator.

A different kind of design theory reader would have drawn ideas from outside the field—from cognitive psychology, for example, or from literary criticism, structural linguistics, or political philosophy. Designers have much to learn from those discourses as well, but this book is about learning from ourselves. Why theory? Designers read about design in order to stimulate growth and change in their own work. Critical writing also inspires new lines of questioning and opens up new theoretical directions. Such ideas draw people together around common questions. Designers entering the field today must master an astonishing range of technologies and prepare themselves for a career whose terms and demands will constantly change. There is more for a designer to "do" now than ever before. There is also more to read, more to think about, and many more opportunities to actively engage the discourse. This book lays the groundwork for plunging into that discourse and getting ready to take part.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this book sprang from conversations I had with Ellen Lupton as I prepared to teach a course in graphic design theory at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Fall 2006. In her roles as director of MICA's Center for Design Thinking and MICA's Graphic Design MFA program, Ellen provided invaluable guidance throughout the project. The Center for Design Thinking works with MICA students and faculty to initiate publications and other research projects focused on design issues and practices.

As both a student and a teacher at MICA, I have profited from the sheer dynamism of its Graphic Design MFA program. Special thanks go to my classmates, as well as the program's associate director, Jennifer Cole Phillips. I also recognize my own students, who provided a strong sounding board, allowing me to vet each stage of this book within the classroom. Gratitude is due, as well, to readers of my introduction, particularly art historian T'ai Smith. Her contemporary art seminar helped contextualize issues of anonymity and collectivism so important to graphic design. And, finally, thanks to the research staff of MICA's Decker Library, particularly senior reference librarian Katherine Cowan.

Essential to this project, of course, are the many eminent designers who graciously contributed their work. Special recognition goes to Shelley Gruendler for sharing her expertise and photo archive of Beatrice Warde. At Princeton Architectural Press, thanks goes to my editor, Clare Jacobson, for her thoughtful comments and ongoing support of the project. I hope this collection will inspire graphic designers to continue creating such vital theoretical texts.

Finally, to my family. To my daughters, Tess and Vivian, who will create by my side for a lifetime to come. My mother, Sarah Armstrong, who made annual essay contests a high point of my childhood. My father, John Armstrong, whose deep resounding voice I still hear when I read a verse of poetry. And to my husband, Sean Krause, a talented writer and the love of my life, without whom none of this would have been possible.

INTRODUCTION
REVISITING THE AVANT-GARDE

The texts in this collection 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.

Early models of graphic design were built on ideals of anonymity, not authorship. In the early 1900s avant-garde artists like El Lissitzky, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Herbert Bayer, and László Moholy-Nagy viewed the authored work of the old art world as shamefully elitist and ego driven. In their minds, such bourgeois, subjective visions corrupted society. They looked instead to a future of form inspired by the machine—functional, minimal, ordered, rational. As graphic design took shape as a profession, the ideal of objectivity replaced that of subjectivity. Neutrality replaced emotion. The avant-garde effaced the artist/designer through the quest for impartial communication.

After WWII Swiss graphic designers further extracted ideals of objectivity and neutrality from the revolutionary roots of the avant-garde. Designers like Max Bill, Emil Ruder, Josef Müller-Brockmann, and Karl Gerstner converted these ideals into rational, systematic approaches that centered on the grid. Thus proponents of the International Style subjugated personal perspective

to "clarity" of communication, submitting the graphic designer to their programmatic design system. Müller-Brockmann asserted, "The withdrawal of the personality of the designer behind the idea, the themes, the enterprise, or the product is what the best minds are all striving to achieve."[1] Swiss-style design solidified the anonymous working space of the designer inside a frame of objectivity, the structure of which had been erected by the avant-garde.

Today some graphic designers continue to champion ideals of neutrality and objectivity that were essential to the early formation of their field. Such designers see the client's message as the central component of their work. They strive to communicate this message clearly, although now their post-postmodern eyes are open to the impossibility of neutrality and objectivity.

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. This assertion of artistic presence is an alluring area of practice. Such work includes theoretical texts, self-published books and magazines, and other consumer products. In 1996 Michael Rock's essay "The Designer as Author" critiqued the graphic authorship model and became a touchstone for continuing debates.[2] The controversial idea of graphic authorship, although still not a dominant professional or economic paradigm for designers, has seized our imagination and permeates discussions of the future of design. And, as an empowering model for practice, it leads the curriculum of many graphic 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. (Consider the popularity of the DIY and the "Free Culture" movements.)[3] As more and more designers, along with the rest of the general population, become initiators and producers of content, a leveling is occurring. 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.[4]

Whether 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."[5] Siegel asks, "What

1 Josef Müller-Brockmann, *The Graphic Artist and His Design Problems* (Zurich: Niggli, 1968), 7.

2 Michael Rock, "The Designer as Author," *Eye* 5, no. 20 (Spring 1996): 44-53.

3 The DIY (Do It Yourself) movement encourages people to produce things themselves rather than depend on mass-produced goods and the corporations that make them. New technologies have empowered such individuals to become producers rather than just consumers. For an explanation of the Free Culture movement, see http://freeculture.org. This movement seeks to develop a culture in which "all members are free to participate in its transmission and evolution, without artificial limits on who can participate or in what way."

4 For a discussion of the network structure and our society, see Pierre Lévy, *Cyberculture,* trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

5 Dmitri Siegel, "Designing Our Own Graves," Design Observer blog, http://www.designobserver.com/archives/015582.html (accessed April 28, 2008).

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 evolving, we need to take a look at how it initially emerged.

Members of the influential Bauhaus school, founded in Weimar in 1919, sought a purifying objective vision. Here, under the influence of constructivism, futurism, and De Stijl, a depersonalized machine aesthetic clashed with the subjective bent of expressionism, ultimately becoming the predominant model for the school. Artists like Moholy-Nagy equated objectivity with truth and clarity. To express this truth artists had to detach emotionally from their work in favor of a more rational and universal approach.[6]

Objective detachment spurred on other Bauhaus teachers, including Herbert Bayer and Josef Albers, who sought to uncover ideal forms for communicating clearly and precisely, cleansing visual language of subjectivity and ambiguity.[7] As Moholy-Nagy optimistically claims in his essay "Typophoto," in this new universal visual world, "the hygiene of the optical, the health of the visible is slowly filtering through."[8] In the 1970s and 1980s, postmodernism challenged the notion of universality by asserting the endless diversity of individuals and communities and the constantly changing meaning of visual forms.

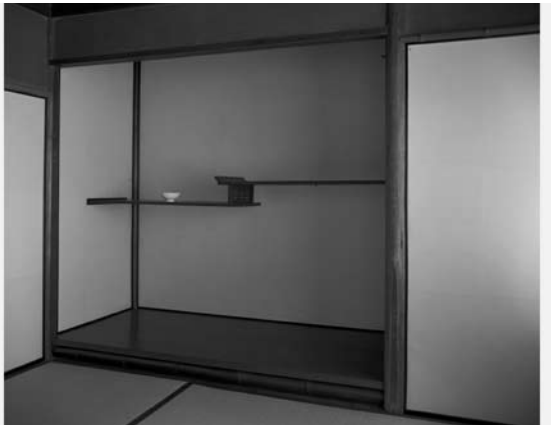
The technology through which designers today create and communicate has quietly thrust universality back into the foundation of our work. Designers currently create through a series of restrictive protocols. Software applications mold individual creative quirks into standardized tools and palettes. The resulting aesthetic transformation, as Lev Manovich explores in his essay "Import/Export," is monumental.[9] 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

6 For a more complete discussion of Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus, see Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

7 For a more complete discussion of the Bauhaus quest for visual language, see Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, eds., *The ABC's of Triangle Square Circle: The Bauhaus and Design Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), 22.

8 László Moholy-Nagy, "Typophoto," in *Painting, Photography, Film,* trans. Janet Seligman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), 38–40.

9 Lev Manovich, "Import/Export, or Design Workflow and Contemporary Aesthetics," http://www.manovich.net (accessed April 28, 2008).



KENYA HARA MUJI advertisement, 2005 tea house posters. Hara's advertising philosophy for MUJI reinterprets old concepts of anonymity and universality. As he explains, "Communication becomes effective only when an advertisement is offered as an empty vessel and viewers freely deposit into it their ideas and wishes."[1]

1 Kenya Hara, *Designing Design*, trans. Maggie Kinser Hohle and Yukiko Naito (Baden: Lars Müller, 2007), 243.

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."[10] Both global and local, the mass of work emerging from this universality and the resulting blurring of singular vision would boggle the minds of even the avant-garde. 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.

10 Lupton, Ellen and Julia, "Univers Strikes Back," 2007. An edited form of this essay was published as "All Together Now," *Print* 61, no. 1 (January–February 2007): 28–30.

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 and aesthetic practices to the broader effects of the culture they help create.

Although currently recontextualized within the digital world, design-driven cultural critique, like issues of authorship and universality, is rooted in the avant-garde. Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, and Bayer attempted to actively reshape their societies through design, pruning the chaos of life into orderly, rational forms. Both their language and their designs, included in this collection, portray the power of their societal visions. Beginning in the 1920s, Russian constructivists like Rodchenko and Lissitzky, in particular, helped enact a revolutionary avant-garde agenda. In the new Soviet Union, they transformed individual artistic intent into a collective utopian vision, hoping to achieve a better, more just, more egalitarian society. The fine artist became the unnamed worker, the "constructor."

The detached neutrality of the International Style, particularly as practiced in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, distanced designers from revolutionary social ideals. American designers like Paul Rand, Lester Beall, and Bauhaus immigrant Herbert Bayer used the almost scientific objectivity of Swiss design systems to position graphic design as a professional practice of value to corporate America. Rather than immerse their own identities within a critical avant-garde paradigm of social change, these designers sought to efface their identities in service to the total corporate image, bolstering the existing power structures of their day.[11]

In the late 1960s, the tide began to turn, leading to a renewed sense of social responsibility in the design community. A postmodern backlash against modernist neutrality broke out. Wolfgang Weingart, trained as a typesetter by typographic luminaries Emil Ruder and Max Bill and later a teacher at Basel Künstgewerbeschule, led a movement termed New Wave design in Switzerland.[12] He pushed intuition to the forefront, stretching and manipulating modernist forms and systems toward a more self-expressive, romantic approach.

In the United States Katherine McCoy, head of Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, led her students from the 1970s to the early 1990s to engage more subjectively with their own work. While exploring poststructuralist theories of openness and instability of meaning, McCoy destabilized the concrete, rational design of the International Style. She emphasized the emotion, self-expression, and multiplicity of meaning that cannot be controlled within the client's message. And, in so doing, she shifted the user's gaze back to the individual designer, instating a sense of both voice and agency.

In the 1990s such rebellious forays into emotion and self-expression joined an increasing global awareness and a new concentration of production methods in designers' hands. Together, these forces motivated more and more graphic designers to critically reengage society. As the field shifted toward a more subjective design approach, a social responsibility movement emerged in the 1990s and 2000s.[13] Graphic designers joined media activists to revolt against the dangers of consumer culture. Kalle Lasn launched *Adbusters*, a Canadian magazine that co-opted the language and strategy of advertising. Naomi Klein wrote No Logo, an influential antiglobalization, antibranding treatise.[14] Thirty-three prominent graphic designers signed the "First Things First Manifesto 2000" protesting the dominance of the advertising industry over the design profession. Designers began generating content both inside and outside the designer-client relationship in the critique of society.[15]

11 For a discussion of avant-garde artists and corporate America, see Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

12 New Wave design is also called New Typography, postmodernism, or late modernism.

13 For an overview of this social responsibility movement, see Steven Heller and Veronique Vienne, eds., *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility* (New York: Allsworth Press, 2003).

14 Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2002).

15 Rick Poynor, "First Things First Manifesto 2000," *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* 17, no. 2 (1999): 6–7. Note: This manifesto references the "First Things First" 1964 manifesto authored by Ken Garland.

As the new millennium unfolds, 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 and design models that produce "global harmony and mutual benefit."[16] 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.

16 Kenya Hara, *Designing Design*, trans. Maggie Kinser Hohle and Yukiko Naito (Baden: Lars Müller, 2007), 429–431.

THE AVANT-GARDE OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

This book 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 during 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 twentieth century, looking at International Style, Pop, and postmodernism. Mapping the Future opens at the end of the twentieth century and explores current theoretical ideas in graphic design that 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 in this introduction. Issues like authorship, universality, and social responsibility, so key to avant-garde ideology, remain crucial to contemporary critical and 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. This collection 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 is a good start.