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Communication Design Theory

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IBM has always been famous when it comes to graphic design. Paul Rand spearheaded

the creation of its legendary logo, and the company worked hard to teach more graphic designers

and continue to innovate in the field. Designer Ken White's work Mess with Your Mind:

Technical Vitality (1976), comes about from the ideas that the company worked to inspire. The

piece is a poster with a black background and white vertical lines across the entire canvas

mimicking letter forms. There are also bold, yellow letters across that spell out the title of the

piece. The white lines hint at the word MIND throughout and the contrast created with the

yellow words and black background is very strong and reminiscent of the International Style made famous around that time. IBM fostered these creative artists to create corporate designs for their company. And according to the article on AIG Eye on Design, the work came from a poster initiative to create "visual memoranda" that would engage employees. Many of the posters created in this program were only shown on the company campus, used exclusively as internal communication within the company.

Helen Armstrong discusses the International Style in her introduction to her Graphic Design Theory book. She discusses the "scientific objectivity of Swiss design systems" and how the designers of the '50's and 60's embraced this in order to create design that was suitable for a professional environment/clientele. They would replace the emotional aspects of avant-garde art with neutrality. Avant-garde design motifs are still present in this poster, such as breaking down word forms to an abstract version that is still legible. Yet there is an emotional connection here. It messes with the eyes and mind, drawing your eyes towards the yellow words that contrast against the other colors present, black and white. The neutrality that Armstrong says takes place is somewhat true here, yet the connection that was desired was to be memorable to the employees working at IBM still stays and creates that emotional impact. White has taken the grid, the Swiss style of design that Armstrong mentions and expertly applied them to the poster, getting the best of both worlds, professional design that creates an emotional connection to the employees.

Ken White uses the principles of Swiss style typography to create his poster. Reflective of Herbert Bayer's On Typography, "previously used largely as a medium for making language visible, typographic material was discovered to have distinctive optical properties of its own".

Ken White fully embraces the optical properties in this piece by having the white vertical lines create the outline of the word MIND very clearly in towards the center of the poster and on the outer corners it devolves into purely vertical lines. By using the optical properties of letters, White was able to engage with the viewer and have more attention drawn towards the colored words that also follow a grid across the poster. There is clarity, precision and tension within the poster, throwing another set of goals that Bayer sought to achieve with the use of type as immersive media. "Typography is not self-expression within predetermined aesthetics, but that it is conditioned by the message it visualizes" and White fully uses this idea as well. By creating the harsh contrast of character weights between the yellow text and the white lines, one of thick bold weight and another light, it creates a confusing yet on target message of messing with the viewers mind, forcing them to stop and seek out the message its giving, rendering the forms with a clear and concise purpose, once again a goal of Bayer's future for the typographic arts. White has used these goals from Bayer along with the avant-garde use of the grid and structure to deliver a concise message that grabs the attention of whoever looks at it.

In 1925, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy wrote about typography in his book Painting, Photography, Film he discussed how typography is communication composed in type, demonstrating that since the creation of Gutenbergs printing press, type has remained almost unchanged in the way it looks, in the messages it can deliver in the artistic sense. Moholy-Nagy would like this to change, and he proposes that technology will help achieve this in the future. Paul Rand states in his book Thoughts on Design, "The emotional force generated by the repetition of words or pictures and the visual possibilities (as a means of creating texture, movement, rhythm, indicating equivalences for time and space) should not be minimized". White takes both of these

philosophies into account with the repeating vertical lines creating texture that allows the emotional connection to be established with whoever looks at the poster. Moholy-Nagy also wanted type to move in the direction of a subjective use, using type to convey a message deeper than just the words it spells out. This poster is made up entirely of type, yet its message is not just literal, it engages viewers, challenges them to stop and stare. Type has been evolving since the days of the printing presses, and in 1976 Ken White was embracing the change and using it to elevate design.

The poster Mess with Your Mind: Technical Vitality by Ken White is an almost transcendental piece of design. The mixture of the abstract and the rigid structure of the grid create art that engage the curiosity of the viewer and leaves behind an impression on those who see it. Type is used expertly, creating optical tricks that further drive the memorable experience. And the use of the repetitive type and the non-literal message of his poster helps to cement the idea of a bold, memorable poster that will stay in the back of your head for a while. White had created a design that many employees saw in the halls of IBM buildings, and the posters that hung up were used only in interior communication, so not many were put away for future use or even digitized. Yet even after 45 years a design like this still feels fresh and interesting. The concepts outlined by Helen Armstrong, Herbert Bayer, and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy had been followed and it created a very strong poster.

Citations

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