

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*

promote invention? Arguably, designers who were trained to understand two-dimensional composition by crafting eight-by-eight inch plaka boards were more conscious of the former than the latter, while today's design students firmly occupy the opposite camp. And while each approach might be said to be imperfect, it is the contemporary condition within which today's design students are expected to "make work" that gives me cause for concern.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should reveal that I was an actress before I became a graphic designer. I struggled with just how difficult it was to understand a role, to be another person—and while the skeptic in me had my doubts about method acting as a kind of religion, I recognized then (and still do) that at its core, it was all about stripped-down emotional honesty. If you could achieve this honesty, your performance would resonate with a kind of pitch-perfect humanity and you had a far better chance of truly engaging your audience as a result.

Engaging the audience, of course, might be said to characterize the designer's goal as well. Perhaps this is why, having spent the better part of the last two weeks participating in year-end reviews at several design schools, I am at once hopeful and discouraged by what I am seeing—in particular, by a kind of self-aware, idiosyncratic abstraction that seems to lie at the core of the theoretical process. And while a good deal of the work I've seen is original, imaginative, and, in more than a few cases, magnificently daring, I find it oddly vexing that somewhere along the line we have allowed our students to appropriate some part of method acting—the part that glorifies feeling and celebrates vanity; the part that amplifies personal memory and replays it as objective truth. It's extremely subjective and it's extremely seductive; and more often than not, it's extremely misplaced as graphic design.

The *good* news is that, in an effort to produce designers who can think for themselves, we ask our students to identify a method which becomes evident through the work that they produce. Such an emphasis on authorship is, by and large, a way to train young designers as thinkers—and not merely as service providers. (So far, so good.) At the same time, we encourage them to seek references beyond the obvious: the richness of their sources testifies to an ability to engage a larger universe, and their work benefits from locating itself along a trajectory they've chosen and defined for themselves.

The *bad* news is that as a consequence of seeking validation elsewhere, there is an unusual bias toward false identity: so the design student, after looking at so much art, believes that s/he is *making* art. The design student, after considering so deeply the intangible forces framing the interpretation of visual form, comes to believe that the very act of interpretation is *itself* the form. This is where the method backfires so paradoxically: in being true to ourselves, we distance ourselves from a more universal truth, the kind that designers, in making messages clear, are so naturally predisposed to understand.

In an age of staged, declarative theater, Stanislavsky's came as a radical response to what was then a stilted performative norm. Yet the reason it has survived since its inception more than a century ago may have more to do with the

rigors of form than the emotions of the performer: at the end of the day, there's still a tangible barometer of authenticity—and that's the *script*. (Hamlet can be many things, but in the end, he's still got to deliver his lines.) Perhaps this lies at the core of the problem: where's *our script*? When did we begin to allow, let alone forgive, let alone *encourage* work that is so rhetorical, so impervious to public engagement? The persistent evidence of impenetrable personal work in design schools across America is a serious epidemic, resulting in a kind of method designing that erroneously treats sentiment as substance, and why? It was, after all, Stanislavsky himself who cautioned: "Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art." Where did we go wrong?

The problem with method designing is not our students' problem. It is *our* problem. Let's teach our students to keep asking difficult questions, to keep solving harder problems, to keep inventing better worlds, and, yes, to be true to themselves. As emissaries of visual communication, our audiences deserve nothing less. To better understand ourselves as authors requires a certain amount of self-reflection, but when did the mirror of autobiography become our canvas, our public lens to the world? If such self-love leads to more honest communication, to more novel form-making, to more meaningful solutions, then so much the better. But for designers, such self-knowledge cannot be a method. It is simply a motive.

PAINTING THE WORLD PINK

William Owen and Fenella Collingridge

By teaching the simple facts of the shape, size, and position of a country relative to all the others, the political map of the world has become intrinsic to our sense of national identity. When we were growing up, in Britain in the mid-1960s, our school maps portrayed the British Isles (we just called it "England") sitting comfortably and naturally at the exact longitudinal center of a flat world, north at the top and south at the bottom, the country subtly and significantly exaggerated in size by the Mercator projection and colored prettily in pink. We learned from the beginning that this was the natural way of things.

A lot of the rest of the world was pink, too: these were the twilight years of the British Empire. The map was probably twenty years old by then and its