

The Global Style

Modernist Typography after Postmodernism

Mr. Keedy

Mr. Keedy is an educator, designer, type designer and writer, who has been teaching in the Graphic Design Program at the California Institute of the Arts since 1985. His design work has received recognition for both institutional and commercial clients in branding, packaging and publication design. His design work and essays have been published in numerous publications.

For *Slanted magazine*, he wrote a critical essay about the typographic style in arts and cultural communication.

As a reaction to the postmodernism of the 80s, and 90s, modernism reasserted itself (did it ever really go?) with a new-ish style of typography that has become ubiquitous in cultural institution around the world. The good old International Style has been upgraded to a bigger and better (or at least easier) Global Style.

Over the course of about thirty years the various radical and experimental modernist styles coalesced into the Swiss Style of typography. Which grew and spread across Europe and to the Americans and was renamed the International Style. It was *the* style for typography for three more decades until the late 80s when postmodernism deconstructed its hegemony. But postmodernism set too many designers adrift, up a creek without a paddle (not enough rules), and their nostalgia brought them back to the safer and familiar shores of modernism.

The International Style designers turned their backs on local and regional traditions and created a new universal visual language that became the default style of corporate capitalism. It gave impersonal companies an identity so they could be easily recognized but not really known (that would come later with branding). To this day the International Style is still in full force at most airports, and government offices of western superpower nations.

History does not repeat itself but it rhymes.

What the International Style was to commercial corporations, the Global Style is to cultural institutions. It is the new typographic style of institutional art and cultural production. You can see it at your local museums and art galleries, or at just about any arts institution of any kind, anywhere in the world. Thanks to the internet it is more wide spread than the International Style ever was, and it is becoming a universal visual language on a global scale.

For most graphic designers Modernism is not an unfinished project, it's an unending one. Where postmodern typography was a fragmented, de-centered, self-regulating (some might say self-defeating) system, for making meaning. The Global Style, like the International Style before it, is a prescriptive, language of specific formal compositional rules that when followed will successfully convey a message while expressing a specific mood or emotional response. These rules that elicit the desired emotional response are what constitutes the style.

The emotional response that one has to the old International Style is that it is contemporary, sophisticated, cool, calm, and rigorously logical. And that is exactly how it's supposed to feel. Designers wore lab coats at Unimark, to show that they were not artists, they were calculating professionals. But now after half a century the International Style is pretty familiar. It's lost some of its snootiness

by being so pervasive in the corporate and commercial world. Helvetica starred in a bio-pic and you can get PMS color chips on a coffee mug or t-shirt. Today the International Style is more like a post-uncle (from some exotic European metropolis). He's distinguished and cool, but he's old!

By contrast the Global Style looks new, but still familiar. In fact it radiates newness and very little else. Like the International Style before it, the Global Style is easy to assimilate and is obedient to the point of near transparency. On an emotional level it sublimates quotidian boredom into a contemporary expression of cool, ironic, ennui. It is as if the lab-coat wearing designer / scientist of Unimark has been replaced by an App.

Most of the formal and aesthetic attributes of the new Global Style are lifted directly from the International Style. White space backgrounds, sans serif typefaces, minimalist asymmetrically balanced compositions with limited color palate. No extraneous decoration, ornament or complex patterns. A love of simple geometric shapes. The one notable exception is the grid.

It's not that the grid is no longer there it's that the grid is no longer visible or even detectable. It is embedded in the 0's and 1's and x and y coordinates of digital space. Just like the movie *Tron* the digital environment is built on a grid (it just doesn't glow like neon). So it is understandable why designers would stop fussing with grids when it is the ground beneath us, the water we swim in and the air we breathe in our virtual / digital world.

But back in the old days, the International Style designers ground their blue lead pencils to a razor-sharp point that they used to inscribe a bespoke grid structure into the picture plane. This was the scaffolding or framing on which the typography would hang. The grid was the starting point that determined more than anything what the relationship between the typography and the space it existed in would be. So the designer took great care to make sure that the grid they devised would accommodate the space they were creating to the concept they wanted to communicate.

Grids were something you learned about in school. Competent use of a grid is one of the things that showed you were a pro. Creative transgression or "breaking" of the grid, showed that you wanted to be more than just good. The analog world of the International Style was grounded in the laws of physics. Paper was cut and scored to a quantifiable and very determinate size. Type came in at limited sizes of lead or photo-film strips. Within these finite restrictions the designer asymmetrically composed carefully scaled text into architectural compositions that conveyed a concept that embodied the message. Transforming the simple 2D space of the printed graphic

into an abstract deep space that seemed to extend from the poster to the wall and worlds beyond.

By contrast the Global Style's typographic composition does not explicitly refer to the rectangle or object in which it exists, nor to anything in the real world. It may be on a poster or book or website, but it is not an integral part of an object occupying a specific space or size. It could be a large poster that someone is holding in their studio or just a thumbnail JPEG of someone holding a poster. It makes no difference to the design. Because the design is not size, site, nor media specific. When you gaze upon a Global Style composition you don't imagine what is happening outside of the picture plane, because you know the answer is nothing. The typography doesn't delineate space, it just fills it.

Space in the Global Style is flat to the point of non-existence. Although there is almost always some layering of a tedious geometric shape on top of an insipid block of text, the effect is still one of simultaneity and flatness as the overlap is usually transparent. The picture plane is not composed, it is just temporarily occupied. The hierarchy of forms is designed so that everything within the composition is of more or less equal unimportance. Some words go this way some go that way, here it is, easy to read, easy to look at, everything in place filling the page up nicely. Since the page is so evenly filled we read it instantly as "complete" or "done," it requires very little of the audience in terms of interpretation or participation (who has the time). Like a child's drawing, there is a charming dumbness to it. It feeds on our nostalgia for a long lost simplicity and purity that never existed. It functions like cultural "wallpaper" it is easy to ignore.

The International Style used typographic trickery to animate the flat picture frame with the illusion of depth and space. Borrowing from music and video, the Global Style uses the 4th dimension of time, or rather a reference to time, to animate the 2D space. It accomplishes this by looking like it was a single frame taken out of an animated sequence. One can easily imagine many different iterations before and after the one we are currently seeing. The overlap of disparate imagery looks like "screen burn" or "ghost images" that would make more sense seen individually and sequentially. In this way the Global Style extends beyond itself forward and backward in time but not in space. It is very emblematic of our transient culture, it's a move that hits the zeitgeist right on the head. Making it more relevant than the old International Style with its analog abstraction of 2D space.

What the Global Style took from Postmodernism is a taste for the vernacular, the quotidian, the punk inspired anti-aesthetic and an interest in language. That is where the "ugly" font and color choices come from as well as the squashed type and the frames around the

outside and the frames within frames, the overt use of language and diagrammatic symbols, the slash, the underline, etc. Center axis typography was used as a historical referent in postmodern typography, but in the Global style it is simply an easy (auto) default setting, randomly deployed.

It also appropriated the aura of theory, or at least it insinuates theoretical motivations, even though there is to date little tangible evidence of any theory. That so many designers would utilize a single prescribed style almost exclusively in service to cultural practices and yet be so uncritical or self-reflecting of that style is curious indeed.

Designers of the postmodern era were accused of aesthetic self-indulgence with all the computer stunts, historical quotation, formal contortions and time consuming complexity. No one can accuse the designers of the Global Style of aesthetic self-indulgence since pretty much anyone can design like that, and do it quickly. Obviously their self-indulgence is not an aesthetic one, but a social one. Forget about print, digital, motion, environmental, or interactive media, because it's social media that has the biggest impact on design today.

Does it really take a studio of three or four designers to design a Risograph art catalog or silk-screened poster consisting of an ALL CAPS HEADLINE (with underline) and coarse half-tone photos for a friend's "art" show? Should design studios really put the bulk of their efforts into "projects" of their own devising that are of no use or interest to anyone but themselves and a few underemployed friends? Feeding your blog, Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter account is self-promotion, but is it design? The fact that you are busy doing design doesn't mean you are a designer, anymore than the fact that you are busy cooking makes you a chef.

Design is for somebody besides you!

I say this as someone who argued back in the day, for designers to be recognized as making culturally significant contributions and not just be seen as problem solving commercial tools. Today it is taken for granted that graphic designers have a cultural role to play. We won that battle, we have our autonomy. But is this how we want to use it? Replicating art world practices, and recycling old styles for each other? Is being an institutional servant somehow better than being a commercial one? Better for who?

The Global Style, like the International Style before it, will be with us for some time to come. It is the new normal, or base from which a multitude of stylistic iterations, and reactions will evolve. Every era and culture gets the style it deserves. What did we do to deserve this?

Or maybe it's something we didn't do?

