2005
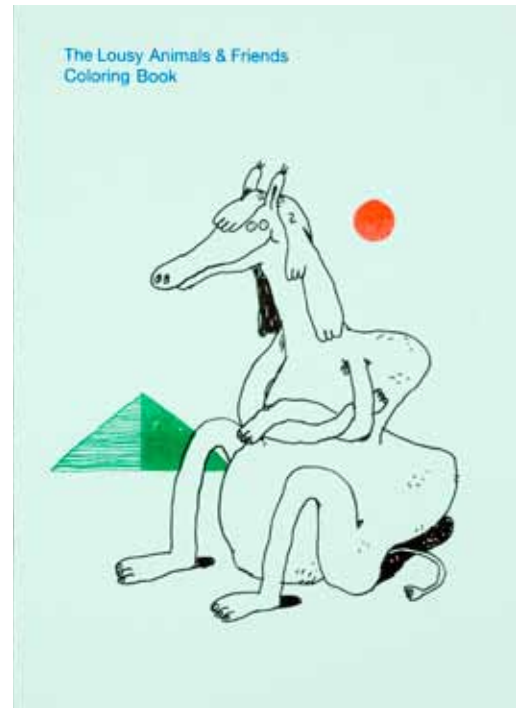# Fuck Content
Michael Rock

Bruno Munari among his children's books, circa 1951   Courtesy Corraini Edizioni

The Lousy Animals & Friends Coloring Book

Stefan Marx, *The Lousy Animals & Friends Coloring Book*, 2010, designed by Urs Lehni
Courtesy Rollo Press

Bruno Munari's ABC

Bruno Munari, *Bruno Munari's ABC*, ©1960 by Bruno Munari. All rights reserved Maurizio Corraini Srl-Italy Courtesy Corraini Edizioni
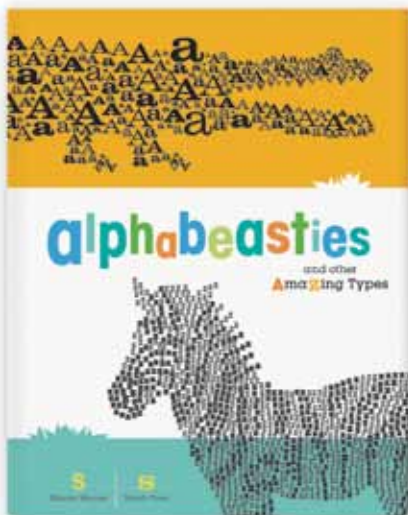

Sharon Werner and Sarah Forss, *Bugs by the Numbers*, 2011, Werner Design Werks, Inc.
Courtesy the artists

"A good children's book with decent story and appropriate illustrations, modestly printed and produced, would not be such a success with parents, but children would like it a lot." —Bruno Munari, "Children's Books," *Design as Art*, 1966

Stefan G. Bucher, *12 Bigger Monsters*, 2011   Courtesy the artist

alphabeasties
and other Amazing Types

Sharon Werner and Sarah Forss, *Alphabeasties and Other Amazing Types*, 2009, Werner Design Werks, Inc.   Courtesy the artists

Sparkle and Spin

Ann and Paul Rand, *Sparkle and Spin: A Book About Words*, designed by Paul Rand, 1957/2006   Courtesy Chronicle Books

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In "Designer as Author" I argued that we are insecure about the value of our work. We envy artists and authors for their power, social position, and cachet, and we hope, by declaring ourselves "designer/authors," to garner similar respect. That deep-seated anxiety has motivated a movement in design, pushing us to value the origination over the manipulation of content.

"Designer as Author" was an attempt to recuperate the act of design itself as essentially linguistic—a vibrant, evocative language. I have found, however, that it has often been read as a call for designers to generate content; in effect, to become designers *and* authors, not designers *as* authors. While I am all for more authors, that was not quite the point I wanted to make.

The problem is one of content. I think the misconception is that without deep content, design is reduced to pure style, a bag of dubious tricks. In graphic circles, form-follows-function is reconfigured as form-follows-content. If content is the source of form, always preceding it and imbuing it with meaning, form without content (as if that is even possible) is some kind of empty shell.

The apotheosis of this notion, repeated *ad nauseam* (still!) is Beatrice Warde's famous Crystal Goblet metaphor, which asserted that design (the glass) should be a transparent vessel for content (the wine). Anyone who favored the ornate or the bejeweled was a knuckle-dragging oaf. Agitators on both sides of the ideological spectrum took up the debate: minimalists embraced it as a manifesto; maximalists decried it as aesthetic fascism. But both camps accepted the basic, implicit premise: it's all about the wine.

This false dichotomy has circulated for so long that we have started to believe it ourselves. It has become a central tenet of design education and the benchmark against which all design is judged. We seem to accept the fact that developing content is more essential than shaping it, that good content is the measure of good design.

Back when Paul Rand wrote, "There is no such thing as bad content, only bad form," I remember being intensely annoyed. I took it as an abdication of a designer's responsibility to meaning. Over time, I have come to read it differently: he was not defending hate speech or schlock or banality; he meant that the designer's purview is to shape, not to write. But that shaping itself was a profoundly affecting form. (Perhaps this is the reason that modern designers—Rand, Munari, Leoni, etc.—always seem to end their careers designing children's books. The children's

book is the purest venue of the designer/author because the content is negligible and the evocative potential is unlimited.)

So what else is new? This seems to be a rather mundane point, but for some reason we don't *really* believe it. We don't believe shaping is enough. So, to bring design out from under the thumb of content we must go one step further and observe that treatment is, in fact, a kind of text itself, as complex and referential as any traditional form of content.

A director can be the esteemed auteur of a film he didn't write, score, edit, or shoot. What makes a Hitchcock film a Hitchcock film is not the story but a consistency of style that winds intact through different technologies, plots, actors, and time periods like a substance of its own. Every film is about filmmaking. His great genius is that he is able to mold the form into his style in a genuinely unique and entertaining way. The meaning of his work is not in the story but in the storytelling.

Designers also trade in storytelling. The elements we must master are not the content narratives but the devices of the telling: typography, line, form, color, contrast, scale, weight, etc. We speak through our assignment, literally between the lines.

The span of graphic design is not a history of concepts but of forms. Form has evolved dramatically from one year to the next, and suggests a profession that continually revises and reshapes the world through the way it is rendered. Stellar examples of graphic design, design that changed the way we look at the world, are often found in the service of the most mundane content: an ad for ink, cigarettes, spark plugs, or machinery. Think of Piet Zwart's industrial work. Think of the posters by Cassandra or Matter or Crouwel. In these, form has an essential, even transformative, meaning.

Because of the limited nature of the designed object, individual objects are rarely substantial enough to contain fully rendered ideas. Therefore ideas develop over many projects spanning years. Form itself is indexical. We are intimately, physically connected to the work we produce, and so it is inevitable that our work bears our stamp. The choice of projects in each designer's oeuvre lays out a map of interests and proclivities. And the way those projects are parsed out, disassembled, reorganized, and rendered reveals a philosophy, an aesthetic position, an argument, and a critique.

This deep connection to making also positions the designer in a modulating role between a user and their world. By manipulating form, the designer reshapes that

essential relationship. In this way, form is replaced by exchange. The things we make negotiate a relationship over which we have a profound control.

The trick is to find ways to speak through *treatment*, via a whole range of rhetorical devices—from the written to the visual to the operational—in order to make those proclamations as poignant as possible, and to consistently revisit, reexamine, and re-express central themes. In this way we build a body of work, and from that body of work emerges a singular message. As a popular film critic once wrote, "A movie is not what it is about, it's how it is about it." Likewise, for us: our What is a How. Our content is, perpetually, Design itself. ◉

©Michael Rock, 2005, www.2x4.org

2006
Research and Destroy: Graphic Design as Investigation
Daniel van der Velden

Sea Shepherd *M/Y Robert Hunter* trails Japanese whaling fleet's factory ship, the *Nisshin Maru*, in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary off the coast of Antarctica, February 9, 2007   Photo: Sea Shepherd Conservation Society

Members of the Unimark International studio, Milan, 1966   Courtesy Rochester Institute of Technology Vignelli Center for Design Archives

Introductory Remarks to Research on Research III Symposium

The unpleasant picture shown here is important for a number of reasons. Ecological, environmental and ethical ones—yet just one of those reasons concerns us today. What are we looking at? In fact, the picture's taken from aboard one of the ships of an organization called Sea Shepherd. Sea Shepherd is a radical conservation society, founded by Paul Watson, a co-founder of Greenpeace. Sea Shepherd, contrary to Greenpeace, when it encounters a ship hunting for whales, it will warn once, and upon ignorance of that warning, will attempt to disable it. And that's what is about to happen here. This picture was taken while Sea Shepherd was pursuing a Japanese whaling fleet in the Southern Ocean. The targeted ship was the *Nisshin Maru*. It was the last remaining one of the so-called factory ships. These ships are used to process whales into canned meat while at sea. Now since commercial whaling is forbidden, the Japanese had tried to do something to prevent their mothership, the *Nisshin Maru*, from being targeted by the international treaties. They had painted a text on the ship's side. The text read: Research. Now I would wholeheartedly agree if you would claim that this is far from the ideal way to start today's symposium about graphic design. However, what I want to isolate from the case just outlined is the particular usage that the term "Research" is getting here. It is of course used as a sign or logo that lets the ship, its crew, and its fleet, be *exempt* from rules and laws that define commercial

HMS *Argus*, with "razzle dazzle" warship camouflage, 1918

HMS *Mauretania*, with "razzle dazzle" warship camouflage, 1918

whaling as a punishable crime. It is a way to dissociate the ship and its crew from their true intentions. This is, I think, comparable and analogous to what is at risk of happening in art and design practices today. That risk is that we start naming them research practices while what's going on below the surface is business as usual. Not every practice is a research. On the other hand: not every research is a practice. If we want to describe how design practice at present *tends towards research*, or defines conditions for it, one way to start is by looking at what it is designers are doing, and how they bring their interests and their obsessions into the work they do, and how their working methods are changing, and how, in fact, all-embracing definitions of design practice are increasingly hard to draw. It is still quite normal to assume that actually, designers are pragmatists and all they want to do is solve problems. ¶ But under the

Total Design studio portrait featuring Wim Crouwel (front left), 1982 ©Total Design
Photo: Paul Huf/MAI   Courtesy Unit Editions

influence of the information revolution, graphic design is set adrift and has begun finding new mandates and possibilities: simply because the computer has brought typesetting into the designer's studio, and that computer has email in it and is connected to the internet, many different faculties of and in designers are potentially being activated and developed. ¶ For example, many graphic designers nowadays are writers and work extensively with forms of discourse and written exchange as part of shaping practice. The works they produce visually, as designers in the classical sense, cannot be seen independently from these writings. In that, they are not unlike some of their avant-garde predecessors from the modernist movements. ¶ Some designers have changed what used to be the common design practice of stealing from each other's work: they have started *referencing* their visual sources instead, which is indeed a meaningful departure from the implicit notion of competition and appropriation that underpin design as a fashion and trade. ¶ The agency of designers in other fields than their own craft, results in many designers being invited into their context with a clean sheet, no agenda, a *carte blanche*. ¶ Here, in a way, they can design their own role from scratch. Rather than being asked to serve a pre-defined objective, designers often become wildcards, chameleons, adaptively changing color by the minute. Solving a traditional design problem is just one out of many roles that the designer is performing simultaneously. ¶ One of the other consequences of our changing tools is that we can set up a studio now anywhere we want. There is no need to be contained within the four walls of an expensive metropolitan office space stuffed with Vitra chairs. ¶ Many examples of cutting edge design are now being produced by collectives and entities who are not studios in the classical sense, and who operate from the unlikeliest of places, often mobile, sometimes unglamorous, and even at times from remote natural resorts where life is still good and affordable. ¶ Other designers have started expanding their skills to formulate models and speculative scenarios. As such, they are bringing design thinking into areas off-limits to the strictly *productive* reach of what it is designers do, into a more *strategic* understanding of what design might become. They actively seek for an involvement in issues which are none of their business, in which they are introducing an outside perspective. ¶ We can say that a lot of conditions to speak of graphic design as research are in place. Writing, agency, authorship, mobility, post-studio field work, new collaborations, strategic and theoretical activities, are all transforming design into a knowledge-intensive multi-disciplinary discipline. ¶ But just like the commercial whaling Research shown here entails a risk, so does what I just briefly spoke about. The manifold positions which designers find themselves capable of occupying, eventually bring the risk that there's no time left to actually make work. We may become so incredibly smart that we will be left in between all our knowledge-intensive networking activities with nothing to show. ¶ Let this never happen. Do research. Make work. And let's talk about it. —Daniel van der Velden, Jan van Eyck Academie, 2007

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"Since the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the labor involved in this production immaterial labor—that is, labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication."
—Toni Negri & Michael Hardt, *Empire*, 2000

Does your desire for Dior shoes, Comme des Garçons clothes, an Apple iPod, and a Nespresso machine come from need? Is design necessary? Is it credible when a designer starts talking about need, the moment he arrives home from a weekend of shopping in Paris? Can you survive without lifestyle magazines? Can you live without a fax machine that sends an SMS to the supplier whenever the toner needs replacing? Is it necessary to drive a car in which, for safety, nearly all the driver's bodily functions have been taken over by the computer— while the driver, at a cruising speed of 170 kilometres per hour, is lulled to sleep by the artificial atmosphere in his control cabin with tilting keyboard, gesture-driven navigation, television, and Internet service?

We no longer have any desire for design that is driven by need. Something less prestigious than a "designed" object can do the same thing for less money. The Porsche Cayenne brings you home, but any car will do the same thing, certainly less expensively and probably just as quickly. But who remembers the first book, the first table, the first house, the first airplane? All these inventions went through a prototype phase, to a more or less fully developed model, which subsequently became design. Invention and a design represent different stages of a technological development, but unfortunately, these concepts are being confused with one another. If the design is in fact the aesthetic refinement of an invention, then there is room for debate about what the "design problem" is. Many designers still use the term "problem-solving" as a non-defined description of their task. But what is the problem? Is it scientific? Is it social? Is it aesthetic? Is the problem the list of prerequisites? Or is the problem the fact that there is no problem?

Design is added value. En masse, designers throw themselves into desires instead of needs. There is nothing wrong with admitting as much. Konstantin Grcic, Rodolfo Dordoni, and Philippe Starck are found in *Wallpaper* boutiques, not in Aldi supermarkets. Unvaryingly, the poorest families—for they are always around—are still living with secondhand settees in grey, postwar neighborhoods, in a total absence of design. Orchestration of "third-world" design assembled for the cameras cannot

escape the image of the world in poverty having to make do without the luxury gadgets that are so typical of contemporary design. The hope that some designers still cherish, of being commissioned to work from the perspective of objective need, is in vain. Design only generates longing. The problem is the problem of luxury.

Graphic design
There is one discipline in which, less than ever before, the definition of the problem and the solution are bound to a scientific, technical, or even just a factual state of affairs. That discipline is graphic design— or visual communications. Even Paul Mijksenaar cannot deny the fact that passengers still manage to find their flights in airports where he did not design the airport signposting. Meanwhile, the letter type that he developed for Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport is also the airport's logo. In graphic design, every "problem" is coloured by the desire for identity on the part of the client. They are the problems and the solutions of the game of rhetoric, expectations, and opinions. The graphic designer, therefore, has to be good at political maneuvering.

The effect of this depends, among other things, on his position in regard to his client. What has historically come to be referred to as "important graphic design" was often produced by designers whose clients considered them as equals. See, for example, Piet Zwart, Herbert Bayer, Paul Rand, Wim Crouwel, and Massimo Vignelli, all designers who worked for cultural organisations as well as for commercial enterprises.

Today, an "important graphic design" is one generated by the designer himself, a commentary in the margins of visual culture. Sometimes the design represents a generous client. More often, it is a completely isolated, individual act, for which the designer mobilized the facilities at his disposal, as Wim Crouwel once did with his studio. It always concerns designs that have removed themselves from the usual commission structure and its fixed role definitions. The designer does not solve the other person's problems, but becomes his own author. [1]

As a parallel to this, innovating designers pull away from the world of companies and corporations, logos and house styles. Their place is taken over by communications managers, marketing experts and, for some ten years now, design managers, engaged on behalf of the client to direct the design process. The design manager does what the designers also want to do—determine the overall line. In contrast to the "total design" of the past, there is now the dispirited mandate of the "look and feel"—

a term that catches designers in the web of endless manipulating of the dimensions of form, colour, and feeling.

It is not so strange that a branch of graphic design has evolved that no longer hangs around waiting for an assignment, but instead takes action on its own accord. It has polarized into the "willing to work," who often have little or no control over their own positions, and the "out of work," who, with little economic support beyond re-channelled subsidies or grants, work on innovation for the sake of innovation.

Designing as factory work
In the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper, Annette Nijs, cultural spokesperson for the VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), wrote, "We are making a turn, away from the assembly line to the laboratory and the design studios, from the working class to the creative class (estimates vary from 30% to 45% of the professional population)." [2]

According to a study by the TNO, the Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research, the major portion of economic worth derived from design (about € 2.6 billion in 2001) is from visual communications. [3] Can a designer, if he is in fact seen by the VVD politician as the successor to the factory worker, still encompass the strategic distinction that Alvin Lustig, Milton Glaser, Gert Dumbar, Peter Saville, and Paula Scher made in the meeting rooms of their respective clients? Is a designer someone who thinks up ideas, designs, produces, and sells, or someone who holds a mouse and drags objects across a computer screen?

If designers are labourers, then their labour can be purchased at the lowest possible price. The real designer then becomes his own client. Emancipation works two ways. Why should designers have the arrogance to call themselves author, editor in chief, client, and initiator, if the client is not allowed to do the same? Only the price remains to be settled, and that happens wherever it is at its lowest. Parallel developments here find their logical end: the retreat of the innovative designer away from corporate culture and the client's increasing control over the design.

Designing and negativity
In recent years, the graphic designer has shown himself as—what has he not shown himself to be? Artist, editor, author, initiator, skillful rhetorician, architect.... [4] The designer is his own client, who, like Narcissus, admires himself in the mirror of the design books and magazines, but he

is also the designer who does things besides designing, and consequently further advances his profession.

The ambition of the designer always leads beyond his discipline and his official mandate, without this above-and-beyond having a diploma or even a name of its own. Still, it is remarkable that design, as an intrinsic activity, as an objective in itself, enjoys far less respect than the combination of design and one or more other specialisms. A pioneering designer does more than just design—and it is precisely this that gives design meaning. Willem Sandberg was a graphic designer, but he was also the director of the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum (for which he did his most famous work, in the combined role of designer and his own client). Wim Crouwel was a graphic designer, but also a model, a politician, stylist, and later, also a museum director.

Is the title of "designer" so specific that every escape from it becomes world headlines? No, it is not that. The title is not even regulated: anyone can call himself a designer. It is something else. The title of "designer" is not specifically defined, but negatively defined. The title of designer exists by way of what it excludes.

Designers have an enormous vocabulary at their disposal, all to describe what they are not, what they do not do, and what they cannot do. Beatrice Warde, who worked in-house for the Monotype Corporation when she wrote her famous epistle, "The Crystal Goblet," impressed on designers the fact that their work is not art, even though today it is exhibited in almost every museum. [5] Many a designer's tale for a client or the public begins with a description of what has not been made. In the Dutch design magazine *Items*, critic Ewan Lentjes wrote that designers are not thinkers, even though their primary task is thorough reflection on the work they do. [6] Making art without making art, doing by not doing, contemplating without thinking: *less is more in die Beschränkung zeigt sich der Meister; kill your darlings*. Add to this, the long-term obsession with invisibility and absence. Sometimes it is self-censorship, sometimes disinterest, but it is always negative. The cause is undoubtedly deference or modesty. Designers often consider themselves very noble in their through-thick-and-thin work ethic, their noblesse oblige.

Graphic design is still not developing a vocabulary, and hence has not begun developing an itinerary to deepen a profession that has indeed now been around for a while. This became very clear in October of 2005, when the book presentation for *Dutch Resource* took place in Paris, at an evening devoted to Dutch design, organized by the Werkplaats Typografie in Arnhem, who published the book. The French designers who attended praised "typography at this level," as though it were an exhibition of flower arrangements, whereas the entire textual content of the book had been compiled by the designers at Werkplaats Typografie, and there was more to speak about than just the beautiful letter type. At the presentation, it was this search for depth and substance for which there was no interest and most of all, no vocabulary. One attending master among the Parisian designers, who rose to fame in the 1970s and 1980s, did not have a good word to say about the design climate and the ever-increasing commercialization. He dismissed out of hand a suggestion that this could be referred to as a "European" situation. Although commercialization is a worldwide phenomenon, for him, the fight against it was specifically French.

Design as knowledge

Despite the interesting depth in graphic design, its vocabulary is made up of negative terms. This frequently turns meetings of more than three practitioners of this noble profession into soporific testimonies of professional frustration. The dialectic between client and designer, the tension between giving and taking and negotiating is threatened with extinction, because both designer and client avoid the confrontation. The former becomes an autonomous genius and the latter an autocratic "initiator" for freelancers offering their services. We have already talked about need. Instead of giving the wrong answers, design should instead begin asking interesting questions.

In the future, design might have to assume the role of "developer" if it wants to be taken seriously. The Netherlands still enjoys a grants system. Internationally, things are not so rosy. Denying this fact would be the same as saying, "I have enough money, so poverty does not exist." The market conditions that are beginning to seep into the Netherlands, France, and the rest of Europe are already the norm for the rest of the world.

Consequently, the knowledge economy—the competitive advantage, according to Annette Nijs, the VVD politician—will quickly become a thing of the past, if holding a mouse proves cheaper in Beijing than in the west of Holland. The true investment is the investment in design itself, as a discipline that conducts research and generates knowledge—knowledge that makes it possible to seriously participate in discussions that are not about design. Let this be knowledge that no one has asked for, in which the designer is without the handhold of an assignment, a framework of conditions, his deference, without anyone to pat him on the shoulder or upbraid him. Let the designer take on the debate with the institutions, the brand names or the political parties, without it all being about getting the job or having the job fail. Let designers do some serious reading and writing of their own. Let designers offer the surplus value, the uselessness and the authorship of their profession to the world, to politics, to society.

But do not let designers just become walking encyclopaedias, adorned with such titles as "master," "doctor," or "professor," their qualifications dependent on a framed certificate hanging on the wall. Let there be a design practice in which the hypothesis—the proposal—has higher esteem than need and justification.

In 1972, for the catalogue for the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Emilio Ambasz wrote about two contradictory directions in architecture: "The first attitude involves a commitment to design as a problem-solving activity, capable of formulating, in physical terms, solutions to problems encountered in the natural and socio-cultural milieu. The opposite attitude, which we may call one of counter-design, chooses instead to emphasize the need for a renewal of philosophical discourse and for social and political involvement as a way of bringing about structural changes in our society." [7]

With the removal of need and the commissioned assignment as an inseparable duo, the door is open to new paths. The designer must use this freedom, for once, not to design something else, but to redesign himself. ◉

Originally published in *Metropolis M* 2, April/May 2006.

Notes
1. See also Camiel van Winkel, *Het primaat van de zichtbaarheid* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005), 177.
2. *NRC Handelsblad*, 9 February 2006.
3. The TNO report, *Vormgeving in de Creatieve Economie*, January 2005, can be found at www.premsela.org.
4. From the jury report for the 2003 Rotterdam Design Award: "More or less all the positions that designers have taken in recent years have passed revue: the designer as artist, the designer as technocrat, the designer as editor, as director, as a servant for the public cause, as comedian, as critic and as theorist."
5. Beatrice Warde, "The Crystal Goblet or Printing Should Be Invisible," in *The Crystal Goblet, Sixteen Essays on Typography* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1956).
6. Ewan Lentjes, "Ontwerpers zijn geen denkers," in *Items* 6, 2003.
7. Peter Lang, "Superstudio's Last Stand, 1972–1978," in *Superstudio: The Middelburg Lectures*, ed. Valentijn Byvanck (Middelburg, the Netherlands: Zeeuws Museum, 2005), 46.

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2009
Practice from Everyday Life: Defining Graphic Design's Expansive Scope by Its Quotidian Activities
James Goggin

The RISOGraph MZ970, launched 2008, designed by RISO Kagaku Corporation
Courtesy RISO, Inc.

RISOGraph

This low-cost, high-speed printing method is similar to the mimeograph stencils of yore though unique in that it is a two-color, single-pass technology. The machine forces ink through tiny perforations in a digitally generated master created via a thermal process (heat spots burn through the master to create a stencil). RISO printing is appropriate for runs between 50 and 10,000, making it a cost-effective bridge between photocopying and offset printing. Whereas most large-scale book publishers outsource offset printing to manufacturers in distant locations, many independent presses use digital duplicating technology to bring manufacturing directly on site. Publishers using digital duplicators include Rollo Press (Zürich) and Bedford Press (London). —EL

Messages and Means class, taught by Muriel Cooper and Ronald L. MacNeil at MIT, 1974

Cornel Windlin, *Project Vitra*, 2007   Courtesy the artist

Manuel Raeder, *BLESS Nº 39 Heart Ringers*, insert for *Girls Like Us*, vol. 2, issue no. 1, 2011
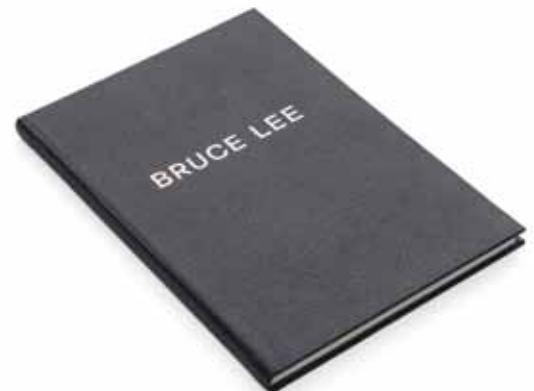Courtesy the artist

BLESS Nº 39 Heart Ringers

Design and concept of the lookbooks for the fashion designers BLESS. Since this close collaboration with BLESS started, all the lookbooks have been published inside existing magazines, allowing us to spread ideas and projects by BLESS in a field broader than only the regular press offices or inside the fashion industry. Joined together in new ways, making friends or unusual encounters happen. The BLESS lookbook *Nº 39 Heart Ringers* has been published inside the magazine *Girls Like Us* (vol. 2, issue 1) and is always folded differently for each issue. Photography by Heinz Peter Knes. —Manuel Raeder

Relational Design

I have used the word relational design, but it could go by several others including contextual, collaborative, situational, or conditional design. I chose the word I did because it embraces the broadest spectrum: it could include collaborative practices but it also leaves room for more singular approaches. It points outward from design's mute artifacts to other possible connections, affiliations, and associations. The opposite of relational is autonomous, independent, isolated, and closed. The relational is synonymous with interdependence, connectedness, and openness. The relational evokes today's networked culture, literally and metaphorically, where a web of associations, uses, constraints, and contexts determines design. Relational design is preoccupied with design's effects, extending beyond the form of the design object and its attendant meanings and cultural symbolism. This trajectory takes us through three distinct phases of modern design in this past century, moving from form to content to context, or in semiotic terms, from syntax to semantics to pragmatics. —AB, "'Was it lunch, or was it relational design?'" *Items*, May 2009

Laurenz Brunner, *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books: The Future Issue*, 2010, Carl Burgess and Thomas Traum (3-D rendering and design)   Courtesy the artist

NORM | Dimitri Bruni and Manuel Krebs, *Bruce Lee: The King of Kung Fu, His life, his art, his films and his death*, 2005, based on a book of the same title from the New Sport Series (Beirut: Modern Library, 1975)   Courtesy NORM

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"In the broadest aspects of communication, much work has recently been done to clarify theories and make them workable."
—Ray and Charles Eames, *A Communications Primer*, IBM, 1953

"Production is a concept embedded in the history of modernism. Avant-garde artists and designers treated the techniques of manufacture not as neutral, transparent means to an end but as devices equipped with cultural meaning and aesthetic character." —Ellen Lupton, "The Designer as Producer," 1998

"Graphic design" has been defined by a plethora of titles, terms, subcategories, movements, and zeitgeist-capturing phrases: communication design, visual communication, communication art & design, "designer as author," "designer as producer," and recently, "relational design" and "critical design." Additionally, certain extra-disciplinary concepts from art, cinema, architecture, and literary spheres are frequently applied to and compared with graphic design: auteur theory, deconstructivism, postmodernism, relational aesthetics, etc. This discourse is essential for graphic design, and can ideally provide critical viewpoints from which to consider the discipline and its position(s) in wider cultural and social contexts. From the practising designer's position, however, the particular phrasing of new movements or tendencies can at times result in a restrictive form of pigeonholing. Graphic design becomes accountable not to its own activities and contexts, but to preconceived ideas and categorisations. Attempts at new names and definitions often betray an assumption that "graphic design" itself is too limited, merely the term means the simple service-oriented industry that many still see it as. Instead, I would argue that graphic design has always occupied a unique position between reading, writing, editing, and distribution and is a discipline nuanced and expansive enough in its everyday activities and processes to make renaming unnecessary. Rather than seeing "graphic design" as too narrow for the multidisciplinarity of contemporary practice, designers, design critics, and historians might instead widen their own perceptions of what exactly the term can logically encompass.

Everywhere and Nowhere
An important part of reading "graphic design" as an inherently multidisciplinary practice is the recognition of "designing" as including ostensibly banal, supposedly "non-design" activities in its definition: dia-

logue, research, organisation, management, and the reading, writing, editing mentioned above are all facets open to analysis, exploration, and even subversion. In accepting this definition, the idea of a graphic designer doing things like editing a book, publishing a zine, performing a public reading or curating an exhibition should not be unexpected, let alone seen as exotic. The experienced graphic designer—whether working only by commission, or with a mix of commissioned and self-initiated projects—becomes naturally skilled in all of these areas, so it is only logical to apply this knowledge both in the service of a client and as a means of self-production, analysing all channels of interpretation, production and distribution for potential creative and critical scope.

London-based Swiss designer Laurent Benner and Switzerland-based Brit Jonathan Hares' in-situ printing and sampler-assembly system for *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books* catalogues (2005–2007)[1] perhaps embodies this approach taken to its logical conclusion, where the designers were explicitly coordinators of, and participants with, the editor, paper merchant, printer, and binder: the approach itself determining the form of the book. As the designer of the following *MBSB* triptych (2008–2010), designer Laurenz Brunner took on the related (and conceptually crucial) roles of picture researcher and coeditor with Swiss writer-editor Tan Wälchli, emphasising the idea of the *MBSB* catalogue being a kind of meta-book: a book about books. In a past *MBSB*-awarded project, Cornel Windlin's design and editing roles for *Project Vitra*, taking in content-specific art-directed photography, extended to comprehensive content and picture research (also evident in his art direction for *Tate Etc.* magazine). Where in 2005, Swiss designers Norm operated as publisher, editor, and producer for pseudo-reissue *Bruce Lee*,[2] in 2008 Urs Lehni featured not only in the designer, printer, and publisher categories (with his Rollo Press imprint) for Linus Bill's *Tu m'as volé le velo*, but also simply as "Printer" for Simplex Grafik's *Transfer*, using his eBay-sourced Risograph GR 3770 stencil duplicator. This is nothing new, of course, as countless other polymathic precedents show, historically from William Morris' Kelmscott Press through Kurt Schwitters' *Merz*, Herbert Spencer's *Typographica* to Muriel Cooper's MIT Visible Language Workshop, and more recently the designer-editor-publisher output of Will Holder, Jop van Bennekom, and Dexter Sinister (David Reinfurt and Stuart Bailey), to name just a few.

Graphic design operating beyond its usual assumed boundaries often provokes

an art vs. design debate, but one should instead judge the idea of an inherently expansive design practice less as a renegotiation of design and art boundaries and more as an acceptance of graphic design as emphatically "graphic design," with all the aforementioned scope, activities, and contexts the term encompasses. Indeed, we should embrace the idea that graphic design might happily operate as a paradoxically ubiquitous yet overlooked system. Rather than aspiring to a perceived higher level of "authorship" in the cultural hierarchy (be it art, literature, architecture), we can instead take advantage of the discipline's invisibility, its spectral qualities. To quote Stuart Bailey: "[Graphic design] isn't an a priori discipline, but a ghost; both a grey area and a meeting point."[3] This slightly ambiguous position, a distinctly in-between discipline that is both everywhere and nowhere, is to our benefit, allowing graphic design to talk without boundaries to a wider audience, while also enabling us to infiltrate and use the systems of other disciplines when desired and where relevant. As M/M (Paris) point out: "[Graphic design] has neither a target group, nor fixed points of distribution, as do art or cinema. We have […] the opportunity of utilising the various communication networks simultaneously, the very specialised ones, as well as those of the general public."[4]

When invited to contribute work for standard design magazine showcases, London designers Åbäke instead often propose to "publish" their own parasitic magazine *I Am Still Alive*, which "only exists in other people's publications." Issues have appeared variously, and irregularly, in such periodicals as *IDEA*, *A Magazine*, and *Lodown* [see *I Am Still Alive #21* on pages 145–160 in this catalogue]. Berlin-based designer Manuel Raeder similarly appropriates existing distribution networks with his work on seasonal lookbooks for fashion collective BLESS: publishing them as features in fashion magazines, thereby making their work visible to a wider and seasonally varied audience than the usual exclusive fashion world mailing list of editors and buyers. Dutch designer/researchers Metahaven achieve a kind of ominous legitimacy for their self-published speculative geopolitical polemics with the simple deployment of such readymade formats as postage stamps, currency, passports—even fruit labels.

Art and Design
Designers initiating a more expanded involvement in given projects are today less likely to be doing so for motives of personal expression, a common misunderstand-

ing of 1990s "designer as author" notions. Rather than simple signature statement or addition of subjective opinion, the designer now more frequently aims to add more intangible, almost invisible elements to a given project: particular functional and conceptual inputs that all work to support (and, admittedly, sometimes subvert) the given content. Sensitivity becomes a signature, as opposed to an overtly stylised aesthetic. In this sense, the designer recognises the aforementioned invisibility of the graphic designer and uses it to their (and the project's) advantage. This kind of authorship perhaps conforms to László Maholy-Nagy's definition: an "anti-signature" based on process rather than craftsmanship. We could also take German typographer and book designer Hans Peter Willberg's definition of an "image author" (working in tandem with the "text author"), where any book project ideally involves direct collaboration right from its conception between author, designer, printer, and publisher.

This is why the false dichotomy of "constrained commissioned work" vs. "experimental self-initiated work" does not really represent the reality of current graphic design practice. While constraints are happily adopted and essential to creative outcomes for most designers, they do not exclusively belong to commissioned projects. Designers also regularly impose constraints and rules on self-initiated work, and conversely find and explore open critical frameworks within commissioned projects. My use of the word "constraint" here is chosen very carefully against the more familiar "compromise," a frequent caveat used by designers to blame a client for a project's unsuccessful outcome. Charles Eames made this important difference of attitude clear when describing his work ethic: "I don't remember ever being forced to accept compromises, but I have willingly accepted constraints." [5]

A common criticism of contemporary progressive graphic design is its ostensibly narrow field of projects and clients: invariably within the cultural sector, a kind of ghetto in which, it is argued, little effect or positive influence on society at large can take place. To a certain degree the criticism can be valid, and the point is particularly interesting to note in relation to the above *Most Beautiful Swiss Books* examples, both in light of Jan Tschichold's original motivation for the award to encourage standards and values for the broader industry, and with the acknowledgment that a growing proportion of the books awarded are art catalogues. However, such criticisms often ignore the realities of graphic design prac-

tice and modes of commissioning. Rather than designers exclusively approaching cultural organisations as an aesthetic choice or ethical stance (the art world: ethical?), for many, arts clients seemingly remain the only ones willing to entrust projects to independent designers and small studios. While most of these studios would happily take on the challenges of mass-market publishing—trade paperbacks, technical books, corporate annual reports, etc.—given the chance, the opportunity seems largely absent. The days of Paul Rand, Bruno Munari, Derek Birdsall, Karl Gerstner, et al. combining writing, self-publishing, research, even painting, with publication, identity, or advertising work (in their case for the likes of IBM, Campari, Mobil, or Geigy, respectively) seem well and truly over.

There is therefore a particular irony to be found in the renewed value contemporary book design places on the very production models no longer employed by the mass market: materials and design quality that have now seemingly become the sole domain of cultural sector publishing. References to dictionaries and technical manuals (screenprinted PVC covers), travel guides (pattern-embossed covers, colour section inserts), newspapers (mixes of newsprint and lightweight gloss stock), and trade paperbacks (pocket formats and cheap book wove stock) can be found re-contextualised in many contemporary design projects. A potential danger with the use of now-rarified methods originally found in "inexpensive books for people" is that we conversely end up with the very "luxury books for snobs" Jan Tschichold warned against in his demands for the ideal "new book." [6]

Everyone as Author

The recent prominence of notional "critical" and "relational" design movements in graphic design discourse is partly due to the wider availability of systems facilitating such expanded activities, particularly small presses, office printer/duplicators, and online print-on-demand services (Lulu.com, Blurb, et al.). But in encouraging designers' scope for self-production, we must acknowledge the simultaneous democratisation of such processes for a much wider general audience in the past ten years or so. Having customised Myspace and Facebook pages, published comments on newspaper stories, uploaded content to Flickr and YouTube, and become 24/7 broadcasters on Twitter, it is no longer a stretch for web users to submit PDFs to print-on-demand services, transforming themselves instantly—if unwittingly—into authors, editors, pro-

ducers, printers, and distributors. Whether designer or reader, will this phenomenon begin to affect graphic design as a professional discipline? Perhaps it already has: looking at *MBSB*-awarded publications, digitally printed books in the past few years include Cynthia Tuan's *Intersection: 4 Cities/360 People* (in an edition of only 15) and *Silex No. 20*. Print-on-demand productions also feature groenland.berlin.basel's *Buchstaben, Bilder, Bytes,* published with German POD service Books on Demand (bod.de) in 2004; and Rafael Koch and Urs Hofer's *Encyclopaedizer 2006–04*, with Lulu.com in 2006.

In this democratised public realm, graphic design remains what it has always been: an open-ended discipline where analysis of its everyday activities and tools reveals an inherent scope for a systematic approach to commissioned work and a logical capacity for self-production. Rather than debating art vs. design or authorship vs. subservience, we are free to focus on meaning, relevance, and context. The dichotomies are simplified: good or bad, beautiful (i.e., appropriate, functional, or even just, well, "beautiful") or ugly, useful or useless. Urs Lehni's William Morris riff on Rollo-press.com's "About" page sums it up well: "To own the means of production is the only way to gain back pleasure in work, and this, in return, is considered as a prerequisite for the production of (applied) art and beauty." [7] ◉

Notes
1. From 2005 to 2007, Laurent Benner and Jonathan Hares designed the annual award catalogues *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books,* in which eight pages of each of the winning books were reprinted on their respective original papers at various printers in Switzerland and abroad.
2. Norm's Manuel Krebs and Dimitri Bruni's *Bruce Lee* is a self-published reprint and adaptation of a small book originally published in Lebanon about thirty years ago.
3. Peter Biľak, "Graphic Design in the White Cube," 22nd International Biennale of Graphic Design, Brno, 2006, http://www.typotheque.com/articles/graphic_design_in_the_white_cube.
4. M/M (Paris), interview by Lionel Bovier, "Design in an Expanded Field," in *Berlin/Berlin*, ed. Miriam Wiesel, Klaus Biesenbach, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, and Nancy Spector (Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag, 1998).
5. Charles & Ray Eames, *Design Q&A* (Herman Miller Inc., 1972).
6. Jan Tschichold, *Die Neue Typographie* (1928), from Robin Kinross, "Old Ideas of the New Book: The Phantom of 'Beauty,'" in *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books 2007*, ed. Tan Wälchli and Laurenz Brunner (Bern: Swiss Federal Office of Culture, 2008).
7. Rollo Press, "About Rollo Press™,'' http://rollo-press.com/about/.