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Growing up Post-Modern, Post-New Discourse, Post-Ugly

I am zapped by zero-consciousness, a depthless memory brought on by relentless channel surfing. I have the sneaking feeling that its all been said before. This is a remix.

The following are the themes, opinions, questions, notes and personal asides that portray me, a neophyte graphic design educator, attempting to define *my* practice and teaching philosophy in the context of *my* education and academia today. I suggest that it is somehow fitting for a paper with the title *Growing up Post-Modern, Post-New Discourse, Post-Ugly* to be piecemealed from fragments written during this past year; after all I am the product of learning the ins-and-outs of design during a period marked by ambiguity, idiosyncrasy, illegibility, fractured narratives, and skepticism about established practices.

No More Rules

The title of Rick Poynor's book makes a bold statement claiming that there is no longer a foundation for conducting the activity of design. How and what does one teach when "it is no longer possible to believe in absolutes, in 'totalizing' systems, in universally applicable values or solutions"?[1] I too share the belief that we have deviated from fixed ideas. We operate within a world characterized by depthlessness, destabilization, plurality, hybridity, and intertextuality.

The designers who I admired subverted communication and exposed its flaws.

We must debunk the belief that Visual Communication and Graphic Design are synonymous. These two terms are too often used interchangeably, in my opinion, when they should not be. *Visual communication* implies modernist ideals, after all this is how it was labeled within the HFG Ulm curriculum. *Visual communication* "aims at relating visual statements as clearly as possible to their subject".[2] *Visual communication* is objective; it relies on universal strategies for the production of form. In the modernist canon *visual communication* is neither content nor context dependent.

Our slippery usage of the word "communication" in design rhetoric only adds confusion to the term *visual communication*. We use it when we should say, "to inform." We use it instead of "to express." Or we use it in place of the word "meaning," when in fact all things carry meaning. I suggest that communication is the *exchange* of ideas. It is an active process.

Graphic design is much harder to define. In my opinion, the design process requires active "making" that probes widely held norms, ideas and values. Designers seek to understand and change the status quo. According to Norman Potter:

> a designer interprets reality through the modalities of action; in the end, his work stands or falls by the intractable objective qualities of an outcome. Only in such good sense is he a philosopher: in making an actual experience of design, and thus constantly re-defining what the word (and the work) stand *for*.[3]

De-centering, super-imposition, cross-programming, are conditions of postmodernity—let's give 'em a hug.

Peter Eisenman proposed that:

> the architectural discourse is a discourse that cannot *be* except in the critical sense of distance from its own boundaries; it *must* always be in the process of *becoming*, of changing….dislocation for architecture is not

> dislocation in the sense that it necessarily creates a destructive or alien condition. A critical practice is not a destructive practice…Critical according to Heidegger, defines the boundaries by drifting out, by distancing.[4]

Eisenman considers architecture's ability to critique—moral, political, and philosophical issues—and to be critiqued to be a necessary *attitude* for the practice of architecture. Architecture must embrace a critical methodology, Eisenman suggests, because of its service to institutions of power that have no real ideological responsibility. It is Eisenman's paradox of architectural practice that suggests in establishing a critical position one must constantly be on the edge pushing the boundaries of the discipline. In order to practice the architect must also attempt to also dislocate from within. This means that an architect must distance architecture's physical form from architecture's metaphysical presence—its aesthetics, meaning, and utility.[5] Eisenman's paradox is limited because he believes that architecture, due to its physical presence and to the human need for shelter, is the only discipline in which this disassociation can exist.[6] I disagree with Eisenman's limited application of his ideas. In my opinion, all designers face a never-ending struggle between the object that is made, the ideas that embody making, the institutions the design artifact serves, and the greater discourse of the particular design profession.

What if…?
What if graphic design, as Lebbeus Woods insists of architecture, "was *only* and *always* concerned with experimental beginnings"?[7] Adopting such a position would radically alter what we consider design because what we consider design is repeatedly based on ideas and techniques that have become established practices.

My definition of design exists only at the edge of the discipline, tugging on it, pushing it outward. It is its critical nature that it seeks to question norms, which places it there. The rest is status quo; it is just the process of making/crafting, void of critique, masquerading as design.

If the goal of design is to understand and change the way we live, the goal of "graphic" design is to change by altering language—textual, visual, verbal, temporal and spatial. To be a graphic designer, I believe, one must push the edge by redefining the systems—dynamic or static—that *facilitate* the exchange of ideas. Graphic design produces objects and systems—letterforms, alphabets, images, symbols, signs, typography—which themselves hold meaning and can be used to communicate ideas and information. To be a graphic design educator one must find a way to nurture and foster student inquiry into the function of language and the expression of meaning.

Can strategies exist for education to be pushed to the periphery or are there rules to govern where there are no rules? I believe there are at least guidelines.

Educators must stop recycling course material (including what you were taught in school):
Reuse of teaching materials, particularly those dealing with formal strategies and methods, perpetuates dated pedagogy and turns such methods into canons. Without being placed under constant scrutiny, critique, and revision, reuse of materials fails to address technological and cultural changes. The use of dated pedagogy only serves to re-center learning within the stagnant boundaries of the discipline. It must be recognized that course materials, like objects, belong to a specific moment in time and should be contextualized by the pedagogical goals of the instructors and discourse of that era. Course work must be flexible and dynamic—it must remain malleable to encourage continuous change. The periphery is constantly in motion.

Education should marginalize commercial projects.
I propose that all design education should become, as Steven Heller comments of Cranbrook in "Cult of the Ugly," "a place to test out ideas that 'transgressed' as far as possible from accepted standards".[8] Educators are so quick to assign commercially

driven, real world, applied projects when the great thing about education is its ability to alleviate the pressure of standards and precedent found in commercial practice. If we are to maintain a periphery practice, we must push away from accepted norms and question every design consideration, including commercial considerations. I believe projects that push the boundaries of commercial practice only become successful when the relationship between design and commerce is called into question.

Educators should avoid the terms assignment and project brief.
They connote a commercial model of graphic design. I am in favor of inquiry, investigation, examination, query, probe[9] or "just search for a way to make meaningful form." I believe that changing the language we use changes how we teach. This shift in language requires educators to create a line of questioning which defines an investigation's parameters for students.

It's time we start asking students to answer tough questions:
   What is the role of graphic design, and the systems it creates, in an age of
      increasing violence?
   Can a typeface act as an agent to empower the underprivileged and
      underrepresented?
   Can graphic design ease or repurpose the increasing invasiveness of
      advertising in the home?
   Can the structures graphic design generates mend the effects of war?
   Can graphic design help us cope in a society of fear and anxiety?
   How does language change in an age of mobile communications, the 9-button
      keypad and the 1.5-inch screen?[10]
   What do *letters* and *words* look like when language becomes solely spatial
      and experiential?

Educators should be cautious when stipulating restrictions.

Establishing format constraints too often relies on industry conventions: brochures, catalogs, books, web sites and posters. I suggest faculty apply Rick Poynor's observation that "the erosion of the old boundaries allows new hybrid forms to blossom"[11] to design explorations. We allow hybrid methods and media to emerge when we erode the format restriction barrier. In my mind, design is created in the pursuit of ideas not in the pursuit of format. Designed objects become "vehicles" that embody ideas generated by designers who work in the context of the culture they are immersed in.

In the inverse, if and when educators must stipulate the restrictions of given medium or format, we must ask: what does it mean to design for a specific medium? How does that medium affect or dictate formal decisions? How does that medium affect language?

Educators are responsible for defining practice.

As educators we shape the future generation of practitioners. We (often) fail to acknowledge how one creates work at the edge of the boundaries. Graphic design education is too often concerned with providing and meeting industry expectations, the demands of professional practice, and student skill sets. I suggest that we must free ourselves of these expectations. Anthony Dunne, in an interview in *Icon*, comments, "Students need to be turned out in a way that equips them to make things happen, to set up new kinds of design companies, new roles for design."[12]

I liken this shift in both graphic design and its education to Lebbeus Woods' justification of abandoning the design of objects:

> The shift of focus I have made… has not been made simply as a rejection
> of typological thinking, which dominates the design of buildings; nor
> simply as a rejection of the politics of identity that buildings inevitably
> work to sustain; nor as a rejection of the illusions of authority conjured by
> buildings—especially innovative buildings, designed and built in the

service of private or institutional power. It is a shift I have made in order to liberate, in the first case myself. If I cannot free myself from the reassurance of the habitual, how can I speak of the experimental, which is nothing without real risk, even loss? If I cannot free myself from the obsession with the end-product, how can I advocate the revelations latent in the processes of making things? Without freedom from the tyranny of the object, how can I attain the measure of independence necessary to join with others, who, in making things, conquer their existence in the first place by their own efforts? If I cannot free myself, how can I advocate the freedom of others, in whichever terms they may choose?[13]

I pause, withdraw from my thinking momentarily, and stumble into the deep pitfall of questioning the purpose of establishing a ground on which to stand when in fact there may not even be a surface, only an edge.

No More Rules redux

I am told that I am just an empty shell. I am told there is nothing real in the world today; it is simulated. I am told that there is no depth. These are just a few of the tenants I have gleaned from postmodernism. There are "no more rules." Everything is up for grabs. There may be no norms, just the illusion of them. I am only left with the skepticism about what we teach and how, and I have to generate a syllabus for what I am teaching next fall. It is both intimidating and simultaneously liberating to think that we can only move forward while teetering on the edge. Try working under those conditions.

Addendum 06.03.05

No one is to derive an entire curriculum from this; these guidelines are not strict tenants. What is missing is the making/crafting of form, the stuff of stone carvers, bricklayers, pressmen, typographers, or as Ellen Lupton mentioned earlier today "expert cookie makers."[14] The ability to make form is an essential skill. However unless it is critical in nature, I believe, we must be cautious and not call it "design."

[1] Rick Poynor, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism*, (Yale University Press, 2002), 11.

[2] Curriculum Guide for Hoshscule für Gestaltung Ulm 1959.

[3] Norman Potter, *What is a Designer: Education and Practice a Guide for Students and Teachers* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1969), 49.

[4] Peter Eisenman, "A Critical Practice: American Architecture in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century", *Education of an Architect: The Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture of The Cooper Union*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 192.

[5] Eisenman, 191.

[6] Eisenman, 192.

[7] Eric Owen Moss, foreword to *The Storm and The Fall* by Lebbeus Woods (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 12.

[8] Steven Heller, "Cult of the Ugly", http://www.typotheque.com/site/article.php?id=68, originally published in *Eye* No. 9, Vol. 3, 1993.

[9] Elizabeth Diller frames student investigations using the word probe.

[10] Question based on project by Jae-Hyouk Sung completed for his MFA thesis at California Institute of the Arts.

[11] Poynor, 11.

[12] Marcus Fairs, "Design Education is Rubbish", http://www.icon-magazine.co.uk/issues/012/nesta.htm, 2004.

[13] Lebbeus Woods *The Storm and The Fall* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 12.

[14] Ellen Lupton in her talk at AIGA: Revolution refers to Martha Stewart as an expert cookie maker.