

# THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

CHRONICLES OF AN ELUSIVE CONNECTION: WHY GRAPHIC DESIGNERS AND SEMIOTICIANS HAVE STRUGGLED TO FORM A LASTING AND PROFITABLE ALLIANCE, A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.

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## ABSTRACT

*The following paper's objective is to understand how a difference in agendas has prevented semiotic theory and graphic design practice from forming a lasting and mutually profitable alliance. The technological advances that began in the last decades of the twentieth century have particularly affected graphic design as a profession. Academic interest in design as a whole, and graphic design in particular, has grown exponentially since the 1950s. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the design community became acutely conscious that in order to survive as an intellectual – and not solely a technical – practice, it needed to advocate for continued theoretical development. However, where scholarly focus has been on graphic design as a culturally, socially, politically and economically significant meaning making practice, professional writing has tended to concentrate on the value of the designer and that of authorship. One side turns outwards towards society, and users, whereas the other seems to turn inwards towards the practitioner and his artefacts. Semiotic theory focuses on meaning making from the angle of reception; graphic designers and its own critical writing is attached to meaning making from the production side, at least partially in an effort to demonstrate the value of the maker.*

## 1 IN PRACTICE AND IN THEORY

When W.A. Dwiggins renamed commercial art “graphic design” in 1922, he hoped the new moniker would “confer a loftier professional standing” (as described by Steven Heller in his Foreword to Audrey Bennett’s 2006 *Design Studies. Theory and Research in Graphic Design* reader). It would therefore seem that the recognition that so many designers still strive to achieve, which Michael Bierut speaks of in his *Design Observer* piece (also in 2006) “The Road to Hell, Part two: That Elusive Silver Bullet” has been a subject of concern, and so often fodder for disappointment from the field’s twentieth century genesis, or semantic rebirth.

In the piece mentioned above, Bierut, a renowned designer himself, analyses graphic designers quest for recognition and concludes by saying that that practitioners themselves hold the key to what they so desperately seek, and that it is up to the profession as a whole to demonstrate their own value:

“(…) the game doesn’t bring the player; the player brings the game. Every great designer I know has gotten respect the old fashioned way, by earning it. The means to that end are glorious in their variety. There is no one true path to victory, no silver bullet. (...) Each successful designer has to prove him or herself with every new project and every new client.” (Bierut, 2006)

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Bierut's wise words notwithstanding, a portion of graphic design's legitimacy as a field has relied upon, or at the very least placed some of its hope in theory. Since the dawn of Design Studies, in the 1980s, both scholars and designers have underscored the importance of developing a solid theoretical foundation in order to better define and understand the practice, and one might assume by proxy, this would lead to a better defence of the profession.

In a previous paper (Belkhamisa, 2011), Sarah Belkhamisa, Bernard Darras, and I attempted to compile a quantitative meta-analysis of all bibliographic references relating to semiotics and product design on one hand, and semiotics and graphic design on the other. There was, unsurprisingly, a certain degree of overlap between the two fields, and we found the bodies of literature to be comparable in volume. We were nonetheless left with the sentiment that graphic designers, as practitioners, and semioticians, or, we might even go so far as to say graphic designers and scholars in general have never quite managed to bridge their divide.

Storkerson is quite pertinent when he says "Theories are, foremost, technologies for thinking: tools for accomplishing particular goals" (Storkerson, 2003). It seems the divide that has persisted is indeed due to a divergence in goals. Where scholarly focus has been on graphic design as a culturally, socially, politically and economically significant meaning making practice, professional writing has tended to concentrate on the value of the designer and that of authorship. One side turns outwards towards society, and the users, whereas the other seems to turn inwards towards the practitioner and his artefacts. Semiotic theory focuses on meaning making from the angle of reception; graphic designers and its own critical writing is attached to meaning making from the production side, at least partially in an effort to demonstrate the value of the maker.

## **2 GRAPHIC DESIGN PRACTICE: SEMANTIC REBIRTH, LEGITIMACY, AND VALUE**

Let us begin by addressing what appears to be an age-old, or profession-old question of recognition. As previously mentioned, even the name graphic design, and, in the case of its practitioner, graphic designer, are born of one practitioner's desire to find a term that allowed him to differentiate his own approach from that of his peers. At the time, the nomenclature revolved around the notion of commercial art, and tended to refer to the specific skill set one possessed. Although it may seem unnecessary to indulge in a reminder of the terms design and designer's etymologies and their mutations, it does appear pertinent to glimpse at the context in which *commercial art* became *graphic design*. When WA Dwiggin's coined the term "graphic designer", it was in order to apply it to himself and his own work, which included typography, book design and layout<sup>1</sup>. "Graphic design" brought together under the same title what had previously been separate specialties, and although it was born of a desire to translate his personal "pluri disciplinarity" it was adopted into the field's lexicon as the fitting reflection of the profession's growing generalization, echoing the teachings of the Bauhaus school and its modernist disciples. A century later, few

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<sup>1</sup> Information regarding WA Dwiggin's was obtained from a number of different sources, including the Design is History, the Art Directors Club, Wikipedia websites (i.e. [www.designishistory.com/1850/wa-dwiggin's](http://www.designishistory.com/1850/wa-dwiggin's)) and in Steven Heller's article's « WA Dwiggin's : Master of the Book » in Step by Step magazine's January/February 1991 issue.

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graphic designers focus solely on typography, or editorial layout, or visual identities and although most have a specialty, they have been trained for the multiple facets of the profession and tend to make use of the spectrum of skills acquired during their graphic design education.

Creating a cohesive multidisciplinary field out of a patchwork of distinct – though often dovetailing – activities is not without its perils. The definitions of design, and designers, have themselves been the topic of much debate for the past century, and although graphic design is the smaller branch of a much vaster system it seems to suffer from the same nebulousness as its “governing” body. Graphic design today refers to an ever-increasing number of potential practices, with differing levels of expertise, which lead to the production of both material and immaterial artefacts. They do however share one central objective: meaning making through visual language.

A fairly complete academic literature review did not reveal any truly significant publications that had undertaken the task of quantifying or qualifying the worth or recognition that graphic designers feel they have for/in society. However, the sentiment that graphic design, and by proxy, its practitioners, do not receive adequate recognition for their contribution to so many of the elements that exist and proliferate in our visual environment is one that is quite present in critical writing and never fails to appear in conversations with designers themselves.

Design writers, often designers themselves, such as Michael Bierut (but also Steven Heller, Veronique Vienne, Randy Nakamura, Rudy Vanderlans, Katherine McKoy, to name a few), have tackled the subject in a number of pieces. One of the most glaring paradoxes to surface is that designers are growing ever more conscious of their potential impact on human behaviour, and on society as a whole and yet, they continue to feel as though their contribution, or the weight of the specificity of their skills is not taken into account. Throughout the interviews undertaken for the sake of my PhD on the meaning of responsibility as a value in contemporary practice almost every single designer mentioned feeling “unrecognized”, too often they felt that what it is that they do is not granted sufficient significance. More recently, in October 2014, at a conference organized by the CNAP (*Centre National des Arts Plastiques*)<sup>2</sup>, which focused on graphic design and the urban environment, a series of round table discussions took place and the designers present again voiced an individual and collective sense that their skills are poorly considered. I have personally, time and time again heard graphic designers regret the misapprehension that somehow makes them simultaneously responsible meaning makers for some – occasionally to blame for some of society’s worst ills (cf. Victor Papanek) and glorified decorators or technicians to others.

The notion of design theory in itself has its detractors, such as Randy Nakamura, whose essay in *Emigre 67* “The grand unified theory of nothing” – the title speaks for itself – fails to understand “contemporary design (...) [practitioners’ attempt] to raise design above its middlebrow pedigree to a ‘higher realm,’ away from the pejorative connotations of merely being ‘designer’ or ‘stylish’”. When the graphic designer was alone in his mastery of a number of technical skills, such an aversion to theory – which simply held that the designers practice was one guided by intuition and made possible by his own specific knowledge – was

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2 Design Graphique, ville et architecture which took place on October 15, 2014 at Arc en rêve, centre d’architecture in Bordeaux, organised by Centre National des Arts Plastiques. [www.graphismeenfrance.fr](http://www.graphismeenfrance.fr)

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tenable. When a number of tools were made accessible by the advent of the personal computer and digital imagery, graphic designers began to sense that theory would be the key to the profession's self preservation. As meaning makers in possession of a skill set that allowed them to communicate using a visual language, graphic designers were of interest to academics from the 1930s onwards, but that interest grew exponentially once the designers themselves, and design educators especially (in a profession long dominated by practitioners educators) truly seized the importance of theory.

### **3 CONFLICTING HABITS: INTUITION, REASON, AND SEMIOTIC THEORY**

Semiotics were first applied to visual culture in Charles Morris' 1938 *Foundations of the theory of signs*, but graphic design itself went relatively unnoticed as the debate remained focused on signs drawn from the "high arts". Nonetheless, writings dedicated to communication and applied arts began to appear in the 1950s and 1960s. Research associations devoted to design, and even graphic design began to form in the 1960s and 1970s, *ICOGRADA* was one of the first, founded in 1963.

The term graphic design, though relatively widespread among practitioners was adopted by scholars later on, the latter seemed to favour *graphic communication, visual communication or communication design* (see Krampen (1965), Muller-Brockmann (1971), Ehses (1977)) until the 1970s (Belkhamza, 2011). *Visible Language*, was the first publication to feature a issue, its eighth, devoted to graphic design and semiotics. The 1980s marked a significant rise in academic interest, and the end of the same decade saw the birth of the notion of "user-centred" design, with Frascara (1988, 1996) as its first true advocate.

During the 1990s, two directions in design writing emerged, and they remain fairly stable even today. On one hand, there is academic theory, which seeks to apply existing theoretical framework to analyse design production – semiotic theory tends to belong to this category; and on the other hand there are critical essays, more often authored by designers themselves, these tend to be more concise, more personal and more often geared towards a professional readership.

The significant difference between these two types of writing, and if we can call both "theory" is that one is anchored in the rationalization of graphic design practice and most often reception based, whereas the other maintains the modernist, Bauhaus School roots of intuitive craftsmanship. Their founding habits, in the Deweyan sense of the word, are opposed. In *Design Form and Chaos*, Paul Rand describes the intuition that governs design practice as "a flash of insight conditioned by experience, culture, and imagination" (1993, p.47). Rand, among other founding and defining figures of graphic design such as Dwiggins and Thompson, promoted the discipline as intuitive, following the precedent set by art and architecture (Bennett, 2006). Their vision is still very much present in graphic design education – despite pleas such as Swanson's for a curriculum closer to that of a liberal arts education than a vocational one (Swanson, 1994, 2000), or manifestos such as the *ICOGRADA Design education manifesto 2011*. Much of the faculty that teaches in graphic design programs are practitioners themselves, educated in a traditional fashion and the rational approach of academic theory, particularly semiotics, is viewed as abstract. (Storkerson, 2010)

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It seems worthwhile to note that, particularly with regard to Peircian semiotics, that although "semiotics is the explicit heart of graphic design theory, just as it is the implicit (subconscious) engine in graphic design practice. The central role of semiotics is therefore clear, as, from this perspective, every graphic designer is a semiotician" (Skaggs, 1997), the vocabulary is difficult to engage with and makes the theory all the more impermeable to a number of practitioners.

Nevertheless, semiotics is probably less hindered by its unorthodox nomenclature than by its focus on reception. Storkerson refers to a "lack of broad visibility" (2010) within graphic design and graphic design education, and refutes the existence of a single "underlying problem", preferring to refer instead to "a series of antinomies and contradictions". Although we agree with a number of the arguments Storkerson puts forward, we nonetheless persist in thinking that there is one dominant problem does remain, one that is intrinsically linked to a historical struggle with value and recognition within graphic design as a profession.

In their own critical writing, graphic designers have consistently pled for focus and attention to their own specific expertise. Critical writing consistently shows itself to be the heir of graphic design's modernist ancestors and their universal, assimilatory tendencies. Post modernism led to the recognition of individual choice, and cultural preference. The audience is no longer left behind, a mass to be taught. The academic world fuelled the newfound understanding of society, and it has long left the posits of modernism behind, and the elitism that it unwittingly spread. Research helped us gain a better understanding of the world design exists in.

### **4 CONCLUSION**

The central subject of this eleventh European Academy of Design is the *Value of Design Research*, a call to demonstrate and underscore the roles Design research plays both in academia and in practice. Graphic design as a practice struggles with its own value, and by proxy its practitioners – via critical, professional, writing, among other vectors – often express doubts as to the recognition of their value. However, as academic research and its literature places the emphasis on reception, and for the past decades on the audience's or users more or less active role, the designer feels growing uncertainty as to the contours of his or her own role. Audrey Bennett suggested in 2006 that the age of user-centred, audience-aware, co-design may be graphic design's version of the Enlightenment. In 2013, in his piece *Graphic design criticism, a spectator sport* (Design observer), Michael Bierut regrets that user inclusion has led to the progressive erosion of the consideration of the designers' specific expertise. Bennett speaks for academia and Bierut for practice, each defends their own habits, and therefore their own agenda. It is the apparent difficulty in reconciling the two that has seems to hinder and separate the academic from the professional, semiotic theory from implicitly semiotic action, in the case of Graphic Design.

### **5 REFERENCES**

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