



Why do
I hate
Graphic
Design?

Guillermo
Vázquez
Bustelo

Guillermo
Vázquez
Bustelo

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It feels good. When you're really angry, everything takes on a simplicity and a clarity which might be absent if you're not angry. There's just you, and whatever you've identified as the cause of your anger. You feel as if you have the right, and the responsibility, to hurt the cause

of your anger, and what would normally seem like a poor excuse for cruelty seems such sublime reasoning that even the greatest of history's philosophers would acknowledge the justice of your actions. Then you get over it, realize that you weren't thinking

straight, and begin to suspect you've been acting like an asshole.

The idea of writing about my love/hate relationship with graphic design was born out of necessity. In October 2012 I started feeling I was useless, stu-

dying and working for useless principles. So I decided to self-diagnose myself an “academic and professional crisis”, locked myself for a couple of days in my room sulking and muttering. Then I decided that I wanted my observations — made over the years studying de-

sign — to lead me to action. Take my thoughts in my own! Take the reins!



I thought it would be appropriate that my essay lead me to stop and reflect about what has been for me this past four years studying design, dedi-

cated to the subject I love the most, and yet makes me nuts. What is what a learnt, so I can make my own conclusions in what makes me angry about graphic design? Wasn't I supposed to enjoy 100%? Or on the contrary, as in all good love stories, there's always a

hint of hatred? And, does anger help me to work better, to try to change things I don't like about my work? What I hate about this matter, is the subject itself or how I have been taught, or how I understand this profession? All these questions I will try to answer through-

hout this brief essay, which is presented as an introspective journey to what is what makes me angry about graphic design.

I want to take this essay as a chance to verbalize my thoughts and standpoints on the field

I'm studying, and create a structure as a support to my crisis. To start this, it was important to ask myself several uncomfortable questions — that I was too afraid to ask before — and that directed me to breakdown what is exactly what is making me angry:

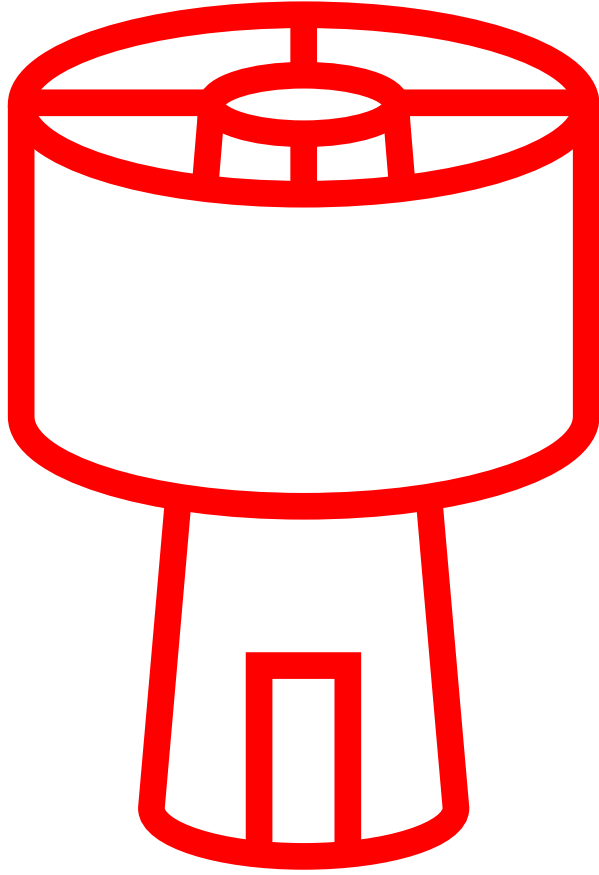
W h a t
w i l l
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lifespan
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b e ?

H o w
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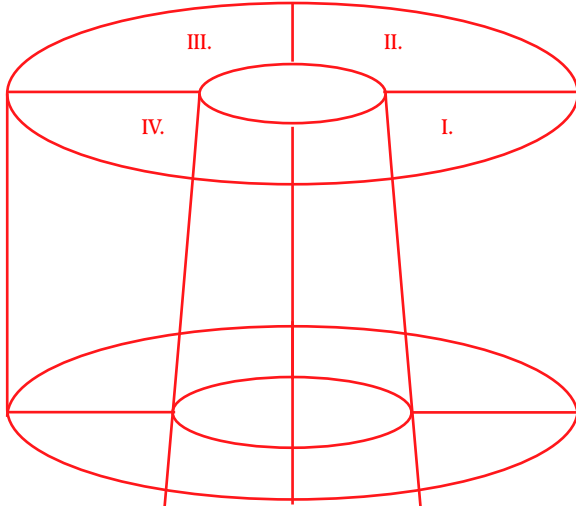
Am I
living
the
classic
megalo-
maniac
dream?

Why
am I
studying
this
and
why
here?



To better structure the essay, I started building a “house” in which architecture I base the strokes that boost my text up. This lighthouse’s entrance is on the bottom part, having to climb the stairs to find the four main rooms where my work is divided — I., II., III., IV.

III. Lack Of In-Depth Study On Other Fields Of Knowledge II. Blurred Boundary Between Design And Artists Work

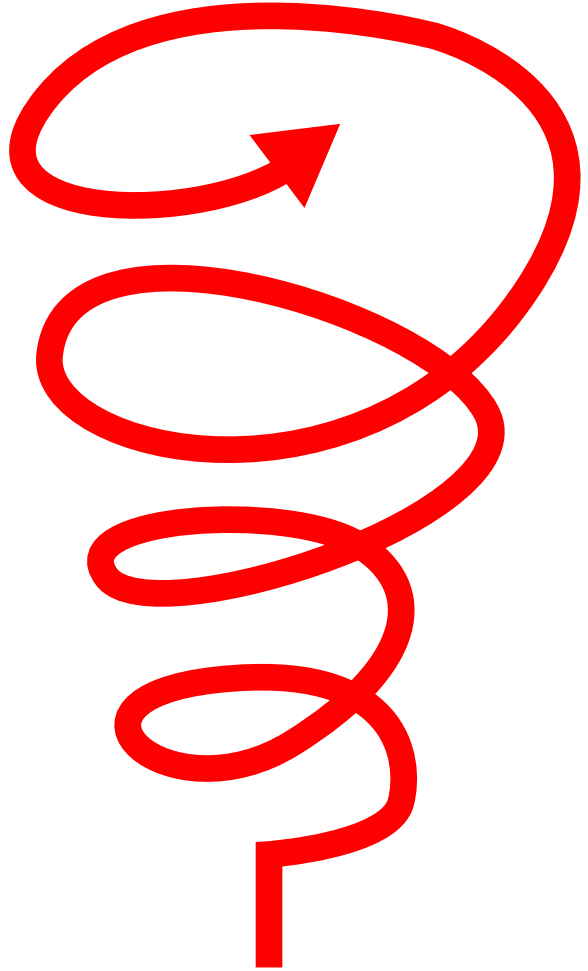


IV. The Super-Designer or its role in society

I. Disociation Between Content And Container

Uncomfortable Questions

Crisis



**I.
Dissocia-
tion
between
content
and
container.**



**1: What the hell,
form or content?**

Thus, well structured navigation and content organization goes hand in hand with having a good conversation.

— Chikezie Ejiasi

The graphic designer's role in the communication process is to be the message encoder or interpreter. A designer must work on the

interpretation, organization and presentation of visual messages. The sensitivity to the form must be parallel to the sensitivity to the content. This work deals with the planning and structuring of communications, with its production and evaluation. Design work is always based on customer demand, demand which eventually established linguistically. This means that graphic design transforms a linguistic message in a graphic demonstration.

**2: · So, must be
content the driver
on graphic design?**

Content is the holy grail of beleaguered designer. The misconception is that without content, design is simply a hollow shell of dubious "gestures", wholly without value. In addition, a century of modernist mantras have hammered home, in one variation or another, the notion form follows function. Its only a slight variation to say: form follows content. And so content is seen, invariably, as the source of form making, always preceding it. Form without content then is some kind of bastard child, unloved and unloving, cloying, sallow and craven.

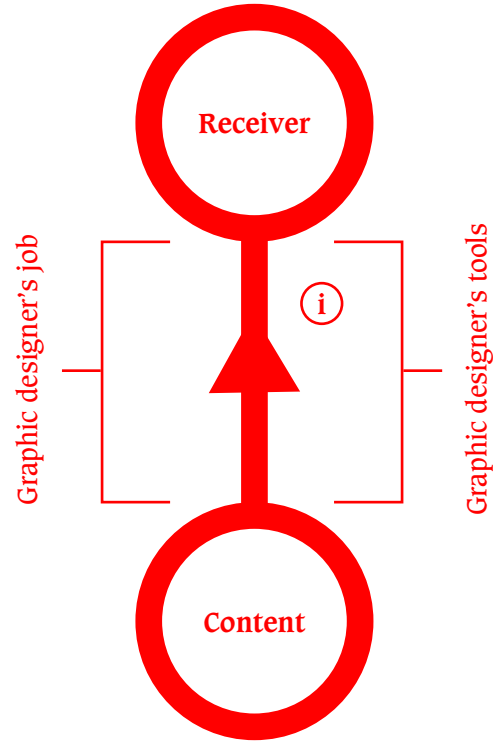
— Michael Rock

“Fun” is a tricky word. People think that if you’re having “fun”, you’re ignoring content, or you’re ignoring the importance of the piece. But that’s not true.

— Carin Goldberg

I was told once by a professor “Fuck content! Work with your eyes, forget about your brain!”. It made me think, and here it’s a part of my essay dedicated to this point. Then I read an interesting article, written by Michael Rock called “Fuck content” — it made me smile —, where he explains completely the opposite of what I was told before: Content is king. The design and interactivity is what you frame around your content. Design without content is like car without an engine. Sure you can sit in it, and enjoy the feeling of it, but you aren’t going anywhere.

Also, a little chat I had with Mirko Borsche while he was making an inspiring workshop at Écal, opened my mind and made me believe I was not alone thinking what I was thinking. For him — and so we did in the 5 days workshop — the content must be analyzed, it is the first and most important part of the project; a graphic designer should always be subordinated by the information he’s trying to communicate, researching about it and developing and breaking it down.



Assuming working by your self since the beginning of the whole creative process of the project is being unrealistic. To do a Graphic Design project means to be connected with other fields of knowledge, which means be connected in the working matters with people, experts on their own fields.

3: But then, design as an author or not?

Authorship has become a popular term in graphic design circles, especially in those at the edges of the profession: the design academies and the murky territory between design and art. The word has an important ring to it, with seductive connotations of origination and agency. But the question of how designers become authors is a difficult one. and exactly who qualifies and what authored design might look like depends on how you define the term and determine admission into the pantheon.

– Michael Rock

Graphic designers are insecure about themselves. That is because anybody, with a little knowledge of the digital tools we use (such as Photoshop, InDesign or Illustrator) can do our job and be called graphic designer. As Michael Rock affirms in his essay “Designer as Author”, we are envious of the power, social position and cachet that artists and authors seem to command. That’s why designer authorship has become a hip term nowadays. There’s then a movement of designers who rather create content instead of manipulating it.

4: Do I believe designers can create their own content?

Creating your own content is not part of the graphic design process, it’s fine if a designer creates its own, but it’s right after it when its work starts. It’s when you finish compiling, creating or collecting this content when you start doing graphic design; applying the designer-tool to create a way of communication between the content and the receiver.

I presume we can, but I think it’s a another matter. You can create your own content, but it’s not your work as a communicator. In my opinion, it is extremely important for a designer to be cultivated – in terms of other fields of knowledge is concerned –; the more you know, you are better able to understand how to convey this information.

Ultimately, I believe in designer and author, and not in designer as author. This does not mean that a designer should not be qualified to generate interesting content. As I answered in the previous question, our job should be a team work, tightly collaborating with experts in other fields.

I also believe that one of challenges on graphic design is to know how to deal with content someone else offers you to be communicated to a particular target. By creating your own content, you can fall in the personal inter-

pretation of it, and thereby losing the communicative function of our job.

5: So, is it graphic design just “decoration”?

Content precedes design. Design in the absence of content is not design, it's decoration.

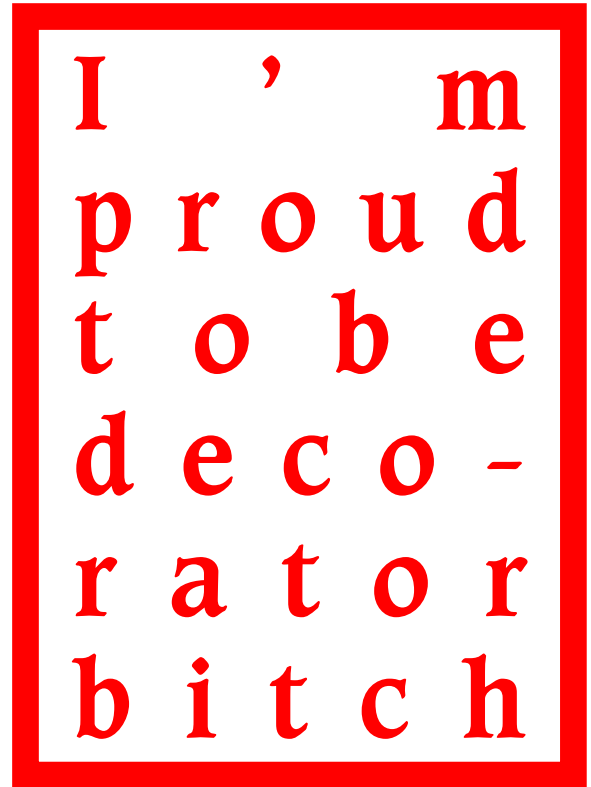
— Jeffrey Zeldman

Many people will tell you that your job as a designer is just to create forms for the content to shine. Other people will tell you that you must defend your work as a graphic designer, indicate that people who postulates graphic design is a decorator work – placing furniture-content in that room-container — is very wrong.

But, what if those same people accusing us of decorators is right? Would it be so wrong? Why should we believe the creation of content is more important than creation of form?. Citing a film realization, we could say that the plot is as important as the filmmaking.

Many designers are blinded by trying to prove their task is metaphysical in nature (is this why we act as rude bastards?). But from my point of view I think it is important to accept the premise that form (always driven by content) is equally important as content, and is

handled exempt. Defending our work as decorators — positioner technical tool for this furniture called content in this room named container — is a courage act and good defense of our work.



**II.
Blurred
Boundary
between
Graphic
Design and
Art**

1: Let's see, where to start?

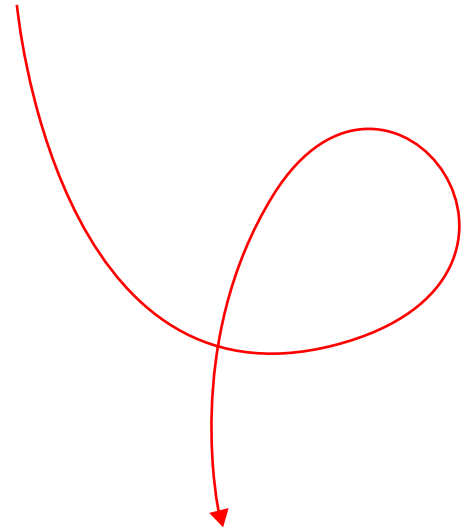
[...] The relationship between art and design is fundamentally different from the relationship between science and technology in at least one important respect: science may contribute to new developments in technology, and technology may contribute to new development in science. There is, however, no spiral connection or mutuality, certainly not today, in the relationship between art and design. But as I have already remarked, some spiral connection must have existed in the distant past between the evolution of tool making and the evolution of visual thinking. It is almost certain that this connection was a central factor in the invention of art.

— TSION AVITAL

A lot of times I asked to my self, what is the difference between art and design? I clearly knew what it was in practice, but I had several and truly vague own harvest theories about this topic that I wanted to put on paper. One of the first things I read after deciding that this topic would come into my essay as one single chapter, was “The Complementary of Art and Design” by TSION AVITAL, from the Holon Acade-

mic Institute of Technology. Here he expresses from a techie point of view, how he could relate the relationship between science-technology to the relationship art-design, and he arrives to the conclusion I attached above.

From this very article I took a list that appears differencing art and design in 20 comparable sentences-statements, that although they are presented as polar contrast, further analysis shows that all the contrasting pairs of attributes are actually complementary pairs. The relationship between the two domains is therefore more like a yin-yang one rather than a dichotomy.



Art

Artist as notator

Cognitive

Extensions of brain

Organization of symbol systems

Abstraction of the concrete

Effects changes in states of mind

Intended for communication, expression and metaphorization

Moves from plurality to unity

Acts directly on mind, and indirectly on reality

Inductive, classificatory

World of symbols: or-

Design

Designer as tool maker

Instrumental

Extensions of hand, feet, etc.

Organization of materials

Concretization of the abstract

Effects changes in states of affairs

Intended for use

Moves from unity to plurality

Acts directly on reality, and indirectly on mind

Deductive

World of objects:

ganismic, atemporal, systemic connections

Symbols get their meaning from other symbols (systematic meaning)

World of universals, holons.

Has reference and self-reference

Metaphorical, implicative

Idealization, generalization and differentiation

World of paradigms: totalistic and exclusive. Irreversible paradigms shift

Incompleteness principle of representation or description

Holistic, analogue and digital

Open-ended, infinite extensiveness

mechanistic, spatio-temporal connections.

Objects get their meaning and existence from symbol systems.

World of particulars, parts.

Has no reference nor self-reference

Factual, applicative

Increasing specialization, specification

World of styles: co-existence of different styles. Reversible shifts

Completeness, perfect finish

Fragmentalistic, digital systems

Closed-ended and finite

2: Is there a defined limit between Art and Design?

Art is like masturbation. It is selfish and introverted and done for you and you alone. Design is like sex. There is someone else involved, their needs are just as important as your own, and if everything goes right, both parties are happy in the end.

— Colin Wright

As a graphic designer, I like to collaborate. I don't want to be in a cold garret somewhere smoking unfiltered Camels all by myself with paint all over my body.

— Carin Goldberg

Based on the sentence that Colin Wright formulates, I could state one of the key differences between design and art: graphic design and art differ mainly in that the second seeks to arrive at a product that is accepted by the final consumer, while the second is based on total freedom of expression, whether it is accepted or not.

From my point of view, anything can be defined as art, and by anyone. That is how art comes to be (Duchamp art work). The relation-

ship between the definition of the piece and the art is the premise for any judgement of the quality of the artwork. If the definition changes, so must the judgement of quality.

Design has a predefined purpose: To deliver information, or fulfill a specific outer need. Any method is acceptable as long as it is true to the nature of the information, or the nature of the need, and the purpose of the design.



3: Is there a defined limit between Art and Design?

*It's art if it can't be explained. It's fashion if no one asks for an explanation.
It's design if it doesn't need explanation.*

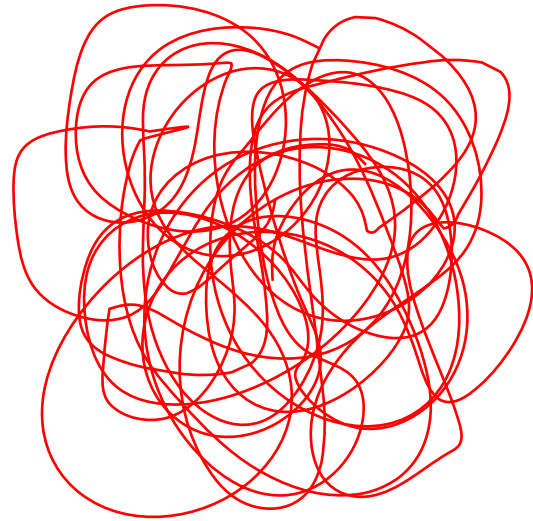
— Wouter Stokkel

Yes, but it's not heritage of the graphic designer's tasks. A designer usually has the technical and creative skills enough to do this, however this art/design will be created without being commissioned by a third party, with no intention. That is only for your own enjoyment. That is art.

As I explained before, it answers the same question "Can designers create their own concept?": yes, but having the tools to create it or not doesn't mean it's part of your working process as graphic designer.

D e s i g n
Form + Function
A r t
Form + Meaning

Design solves problems



Art creates problems

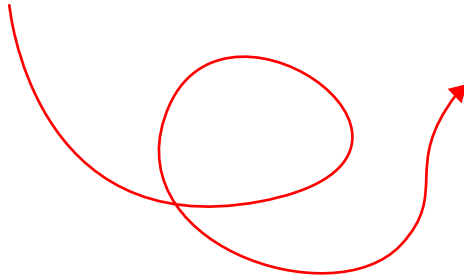
**III.
Lack of
in-depth
study on
other
fields of
knowledge**

1: Let's jump into the pool: What is the goal of graphic design?

At this point in experience design's evolution, satisfaction out to be the norm, and delight out to be the goal.

— Stephen Anderson

Being a good graphic designer isn't about craft, knowing creative suite, knowing how to code, whether you can make pretty things or whether your portfolio impresses people. In my opinion, it's about whether the things you've designed do what they are supposed to. Did the message reach the target? Was the goal met?, etc. Everything else — those noted above and more — are a distant second to these goals. Of course, having good foundational knowledge, craft, education and experience in any given area will contribute to this but not what defines good design.



2: So, what is the inherent knowledge of Graphic Design? What are the skills a graphic designer must have to correctly achieve its goal?

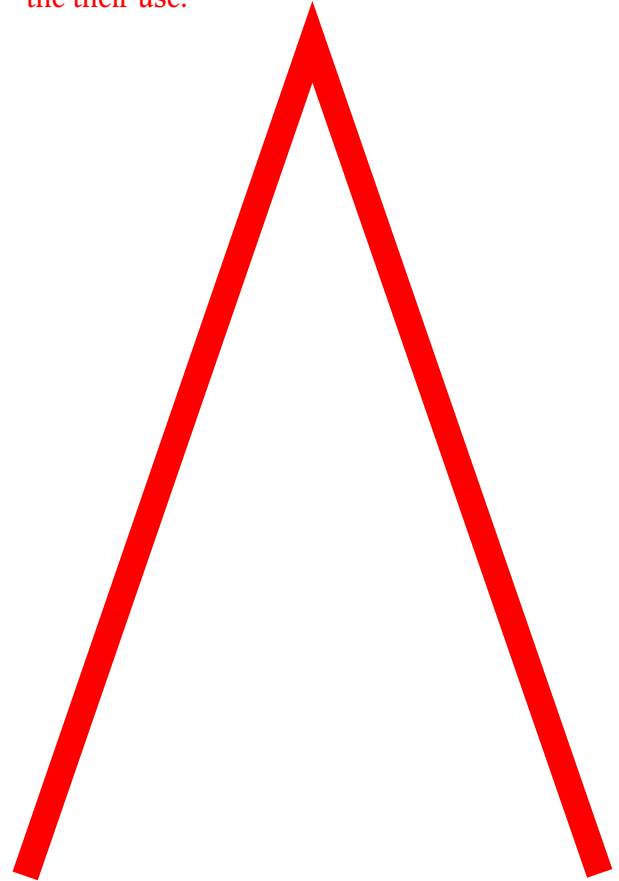
Reading several articles on the net where the steps to be a “good graphic designer” seemed just a matter of a proper mix of technical skills, I could bring up to light a list of the “essential skills a graphic designer must have”:

1. Perception, visual organization, aesthetics
 - Form and structure
 - Form analysis
 - Structure and system
 - Visual phenomena
 - Composition and visual framing
 - Visual abstraction
 - Unity of form
2. Visualizing techniques
 - Photography
 - Visual translation
 - Model making
 - Sketching and drawing
3. Materials, tools and technology
 - IT knowledge
4. Blending ideas and production techniques
5. Media Design basic skills
6. Message and content
 - Semantics

- Visual metaphor
 - Persuasion and information
 - Image, symbol and sign
7. Networking
 8. Methods, planning and management
 - Design methodology
 - Design evaluation
 - Design management
 9. Design theory
 10. Graphic design subjects
 - Letterform investigations
 - Typography
 - Type and image
 - Design systems
 - Symbol and identity systems
 - Information design
 - Diagrams, graphs and maps
 - Publication and print design
 - Book design
 - Poster design
 - Film and video graphics
 - Computer graphics
 - Package design
 - Environmental signage
 - Exhibition and display design
 - Advertising design

I believe also, that all those technical skills teach a graphic designer how to structure information, breaking it down into hierarchical orders. How the information must be treated,

and how this one must be adequately transmitted to the consumer, it's acquired by the technical skills before mentioned experience through their use.



3: But, is it just a combination of technical skills what a graphic designer must have to do a good job?

Ability proceeds from a fusion of skills, knowledge, understanding and imagination, consolidated by experience.

— Jonathan Rez

I personally believe Graphic Design must be fed with several other knowledges such as history, sociology, psychology, marketing, business, etc. Reading books, newspapers, jump-linking on Wikipedia or listening to new brand or old music can extend your range of possibilities when creating a solution to a given problem. As long as we are creating always to people, we must understand societies and people's behavior. I believe in Design as a solving problems and understanding matter = The more information we can get or know the better we understand how to solve a problem.

Studying graphic design in these past years, I have witnessed how schools, eager to teach specific graphic design techniques and tutor students with top professionals in this field, have forgotten this so important second part that is to have enough knowledge to know how society works. Graphic designers are in-

creasingly encircled, building larger walls between us and the society we want our projects to fit in. We design for us, conceive our own concepts and content and walk away from the needs of the community for which we seek to design.

Following this premise, it's necessary for any worker who performs a job solving problems for society (in this specific case, being the oracle communicator between information and target), to have basic knowledge in the humanities, social sciences and economics, to understand better the working context.

This third part, leads to the fourth one (The Super-Designer or its role in society), as it is closely linked to the designer's social value.

**IV.
The Super-
Designer or
its role in
society**

1: What is then, the graphic designer's role in society?

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, photographers and students who have been brought up in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable means of using our talents. We have been bombarded with publications devoted to this belief, applauding the work of those who have flogged their skill and imagination to sell such things as: cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste, aftershave lotion, before-shave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorants, fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons.

By far the greatest effort of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity.

In common with an increasing number of the general public, we have reached a saturation point at which the high

pitched scream of consumer selling is no more than sheer noise. We think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on. There are signs for streets and buildings, books and periodicals, catalogues, instructional manuals, industrial photography, educational aids, films, television features, scientific and industrial publications and all the other media through which we promote our trade, our education, our culture and our greater awareness of the world.

We do not advocate the abolition of high pressure consumer advertising: this is not feasible. Nor do we want to take any of the fun out of life. But we are proposing a reversal of priorities in favour of the more useful and more lasting forms of communication. We hope that our society will tire of gimmick merchants, status salesmen and hidden persuaders, and that the prior call on our skills will be for worthwhile purposes. With this in mind we propose to share our experience and opinions, and to make them available to colleagues, students and others who may be interested.

— *First Things First Manifesto*

Worried and angry, thinking about the corruption of the concept of design, the role of designers in society and how educators are promoting design's perversion, I found an incredibly useful article, written thirty years ago by Victor Papanek called "Edugraphology — The Myths of Design and the Design of Myths".

In Edugraphology, this designer, philosopher and educator writes a detailed examination of a series of myths, created or fostered by education and the establishment of the design, which, by the perpetuation of these myths, tears design apart from people. Papanek provides some solutions that are half given, half wishful, to demystify design.

In this paper, Papanek describes designers to be reaching a point of redundancy. That we have segregated ourselves so far from the public to which we are trying to communicate that they no longer feel they need us or respond to our work or even respect what we do. He blames the education systems of making us into a "high-art" community where everything we know about the qualities of Graphic Design is a self pumping myth, and that we are promoting this waste, consumerist culture we live in.

The myths Papanek is speaking of are:

1. The myth that design is a profession.
2. The myth that designers have

good taste.

3. The myth that design is a commodity.
4. The myth that design is meant to be industrially produced.
5. The myth that design is for people.
6. The myth that design solves problems.
7. The myth that designers have specialized skills that are developed during six years of specialized education.
8. The myth that design is creative.
9. The myth that design meets requirements.
10. The myth the design is temporary.

The vehemence and urgency with which Papanek summarizes the basic lines of his theory — "the only healthy thing men do is to design" — dismisses any confusion and clearly defines itself, despite some contradictions and lukewarmness, as a furious declaration of principles about designers social role and how to carry out their activities.

It's interesting to highlight the quote with which Papanek starts his text, that initiates an intent statement about how he wants to vindicate design as a social work:

"The production of too many useful things results in too many useless people."

— Karl Marx

Edugraphology, written in 1975, continues the critique to the design profession as in his most famous book: *Design for the Real World*, published in 1971, which holds that all men are designers and that design is common to all human activities, as even baking an apple pie is design. In *Edugraphology*, Papanek maintains this view and argues that design is a “basic human attribute.”

In the *First Things First Manifesto*, published by Ken Garland and others in 1964 (and renewed in 2000 by another group of theorists and designers), we can see a more moderate sketch of Papanek’s article content. Garland expresses the hope that society gets tired of “tricks traders, status salesmen and hidden persuaders.” Papanek uses similar concepts to speak of a design team consisting of “technocrats, specialists in selling and fashionable persuaders”. In Garland’s pamphlet we can see the same critique Papanek does to the designer’s lack of involvement and social responsibility, to trivial purposes’s waste and dedication.



D i e
techno-
crates,
& fas-
hionable
persua-
d e r s !

2: So, which conclusion I take from what I think about what is the place of graphic designers in society?

I'm tired to see how designers are dedicated to work for minorities — real or invented minorities — which I think is an act of snobbery. I don't believe in this designer-subject that is introduced into the crowd just to observe and stand aside, a passive observer.

I, admittedly, like this Papanek thought process! And kind of agree to a certain degree, though I know how important it is to “learn the rules before you can break the rules”. The way in which design is closed on itself, building euphemisms, manipulating signs, working innocuous concepts and plotting towards a “hedonistic ethnocentricity”, it is clear that three decades after the text was written nothing has change, moreover, it has been dramatically exaggerated. The designer is more and more — but it has been throughout the twentieth century — above results, often even out.

As I also mentioned in the part III. I really like the term “cultural design”, for me that's the focal point of the Manifesto discourse analyzed before. Papanek is probably not under-appreciating graphic design but, as I believe, standing against the hip, cool, snob attitu-

de of the most designers who are not culturally aware of the social issues and live in their little worlds of self-appreciation. “Design is further and further removed from people and the real world and it seems that ‘they up there’ are out of touch with ‘us down there’” he says.

The idea that through the designer's work “individuals increasingly design their own experiences, services, tools and artifacts”, positively tears design apart to its relationship with art and definitely gives it a social character.

There's no room for the individual egomaniac creator: all men are designers.



It feels good. When after being lost finally you can find a path to continue working with dedication. These four detailed analyzes helped me find the way to tear apart the corrosive emotions, such as fear, humiliation or shame that came together with rage or anger. I'm

still angry, but it's an anger that push me forward to try to create more and better. Those doubts or raw ideas I had before, now became my own standpoints. Even thzough I couldn't answer all my vital questions, I know which I want to be my role as a graphic designer.

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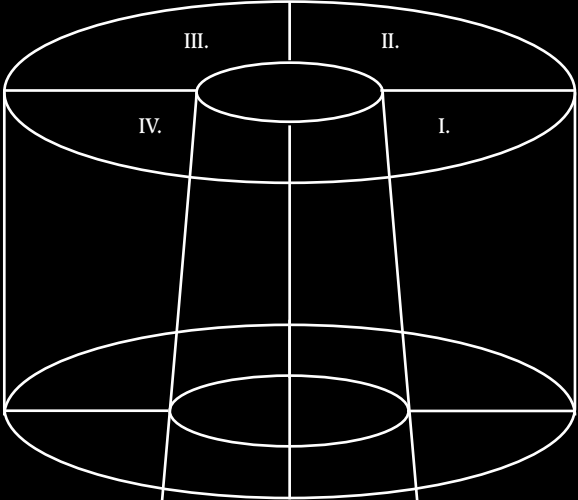
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III. Lack Of In-Depth Study
On Other Fields Of Knowledge

II. Blurred Boundary Between
Design And Artists Work



IV. The Super-Designer
or its role in society

I. Disociation Between
Content And Container

Uncomfortable
Questions

Crisis

