We Interrupt the Programme

We Interrupt the Programme is a collaborative project spanning the last eight years. To date this has been undertaken in a variety of forms and in a number of different locations, defined in large part by the process of collaboration.

The project in all its forms aims to explore our collective understanding of the processes and responsibilities within the workings of graphic design, it's relationship to communication and language, and the intention of the maker or designer. It is the investigation not only of the production of messages but the way in which it is possible to see graphic design as a form of social commentary. In this sense it could be argued that design is a mirror of culture, that it reflects the culture it stems from. The writer and designer Michael Worthington has stated that graphic design refracts culture and that design itself is altered by this process of refraction.[1] What is certain is that design is an activity involved in the business of opinion making, whether this be through persuasion or the dissemination of information. As Ann C.Tyler has said *"The goal of visual communication is to persuade an audience to adopt a new belief."*[2]

Graphic design is a subject that remains in its infancy and as such it needs to develop an arena away from commercial considerations in which to fully explore its wider potential. As part of the process of maturation the adoption of the formality of language used in the discussion of other allied disciplines can, when applied to visual communication, create new paradigms in which to consider the continuing project of what could be described as the intellectualisation or professionalisation of the activity.[3] It is important therefore for us to establish the context in which we believe this project exists.

Recent debates within graphic design suggest a growing separation between commercial practice or applied design thinking and the discussion of a wider role for graphic design or visual communication. Our interest as educators and designers stems from a commitment to the further development of the activity of graphic design as an academic discipline. That is to say we would not seek to locate the work within a framework of commercial production but would position it as part of a discourse

within the academy. Over the last decade, the 'hot-house' environment of the academy has been the catalyst for much of the experimental and exploratory thinking in design and is now the basis of most of the new grammars and approaches within the field in general. This development of the subject suggests an affirmation and consolidation of its position and the confidence to genuinely explore relations with other disciplines with a longer history of self-analysis and critical development so useful in the definition of graphic design.

It is of equal significance that at this point we take time to define what we would mean as graphic design:- It is possible to describe graphic design as a subject without a centre; that it defines itself purely in terms of its relationships, and that its activity is determined by the context other related activities provide. That it is a field without a specific subject matter of its own, and as Gunnar Swanson describes existing *"in practice only in relation to the requirements of given projects."*[4] The history and the development of graphic design and to some degree its self-image is based upon its reactive nature and in large part its responses to technical innovations such as movable type, lithography, the Macintosh and Internet etc. This description would confirm the definition of design's self image and identity by its relationship to others, but would also suggest the difficulty for graphic design in transcending the restricted definitions of craft, trade or profession.

Earlier incarnations of graphic design were as technically specific as today, but were also committed to the notion of design as an empowerment and as a cultural agency and it would be wrong to move from any discussion of history without reminding ourselves of the roots of this subject as avant-garde, democratic, socially engaged and interventionist. The designer and writer Jorge Frascara describes graphic design as a series of responsibilities in his book User-centred graphic design:-

"The act of form giving involves at least four distinct responsibilities:
Professional responsibility *– the ability to create a message that is detectable, discriminable, attractive, understandable and convincing;*
Ethical responsibility *– the creation of communicational engagement that recognises the humanity of the addressees;*

Social responsibility – the visual presentation of messages that make a positive contribution to society and;
Cultural responsibility – the creation of an object that enriches the cultural existence of the public; beyond the operational objectives of the design."[5]

To this list we would wish to add political responsibility – the engagement of strategies to empower, inform and to challenge existing orthodoxies and hierarchical power relations within a culture or society. We believe it is incumbent on designers to see their role as mediators as opposed to the more traditional description of facilitator.

To return to the discussion of the academy we should like to make some general observations surrounding the notion of what Schôn has described as the *'reflective practitioner.'* Much of the work within institutions of art and design is concerned not only with training and technical competence or, perhaps, more cynically, feeding another generation of designers into an already saturated market place, but in choosing to place our objectives within a bigger framework of personal development and informed engagement. The legitimising of a theory/practice, or research-led approach is essential in the continued growth and development of the reflective practitioner within graphic design studies. A definition of this in relation to design or visual communication would accommodate approaches in all modes of engagement based on the understanding of context and meaning as central to design thinking.

We Interrupt the Programme attempts to explore the nature of graphic design as a direct component of the larger communication process. If we consider the medium of graphic design in a more democratic, open fashion, where the audience has a genuine investment in the experience of a message, then the implicit hierarchy embodied in the determinist model of communication (that of transmitter – receiver) must be broken. Graphic design traditionally relies on the fixity of meaning contained within a message; or as Gérard Mermoz has said *"the semantic specificity of the text"*[6] which allows the intentions of the writer or author to be transferred to and understood by the reader. The skilled graphic designer would then be seen as someone who manipulates and streamlines information through a channel of common understanding or shared experience. Design can therefore be seen as a facilitating process, a speeding up and

focusing of the intended message so that it may be transmitted more efficiently and effectively to its intended audience. This model of communication implies and reinforces the notion of a hierarchical structure: the graphic designer imparts 'meaning' or 'knowledge' to his or her audience through visual language. This structure is obviously problematic – critics, writers and theorists in media and communication studies, for example, have explored the difficulties inherent in this assumption for some time.

Any investigation into the audience which a graphic designer intends to reach needs to include a study of the perspective of that audience, and of that designer's position relative to it. This approach has been accepted and embraced as common practice by other closely allied disciplines, such as advertising, (of which graphic design is a part) in their use of audience and market analysis. The problem of conceptualising an audience also suggests an 'historic apartness', which to some extent is reinforced by design education. The problem of meeting the needs of industry whilst retaining a distance from 'vulgar' commercialism has seen many educational institutions forced into making a choice between some form of vocational training and a retreat to 'higher' academic interests. The mistrust or misunderstanding that lingers between the traditional art and design schools and the commercial sector has helped to augment this feeling of separation. This is re-enforced from within the largely mainstream and non-oppositional professional design community and by the perception of design as willingly preoccupied with commercial facilitation.

Another difficulty lies within the definition of the graphic design practice itself. Stemming from commercial art and with a strong foundation in the market economy and the consumption of goods and services, graphic design has long been associated with the transmission of information used to persuade or manipulate - as Frascara has said *"the modification of people's attitudes or abilities."*[7] But our conception of the practice should not be confused with a limited consideration of the profession or business of graphic design – debate about the subject has widened its scope considerably. A reflexive critical approach (an essential element of the design process itself) is necessary for the grounding and positioning of a debate which surrounds the practice and carries it forward.

Where graphic design has engaged with critical theory, particularly in the application of semiotic approaches to the construction and reading of a text, it has been concerned with the notion of common aims and understandings on the part of maker and reader. This has left the problem of the concrete message itself intact. As a model of communication, this implies a transparency of the message and a level of autonomy on the part of designer and audience. The designer is seen to simply draw on existing cultural codes and metaphors, encoding a message which can eventually be decoded by the reader. This process implies the use of the same code, of course; in circumstances where the message is formulated using one dominant code, which is transmitted to a group who receive and interpret it using a different code, the meaning of the message may differ completely. The meaning contained within a text, and we would include product or cultural artefact as text, is partially constructed by the audience in their reading of it. This reading should be seen as an active part of the construction of that object, not a passive interpretation of a fixed message. Stemming from work in both cultural studies and literary theory, this model of communication suggests exchange based on dialogue rather than the monologue intrinsic to a transmitter-receiver formula. Drawing a parallel with French literary theory, we can describe a text as readerly, in that the language used in the text aspires to a transparent relation of content, or as writerly, where the 'medium of representation' is openly recognised and addressed.

Communication is inherently distorted; it is based on unequal relations and hierarchies. Its meaning is constructed by producer and audience, and within a set of boundaries imposed by ideological codes and power structures within society. Of course, graphic design plays a major part in the construction of a culture; it both reflects on and informs the development of social interaction and community, utilising visual transactions which act in parallel with oral and literary traditions. One of graphic design's greatest assets arises from the wide range of applications where the medium is employed. Its ubiquitous but largely invisible presence allows communication to take place on a multitude of levels beyond the realm of many other media. However, the communication process is also inherently reflexive - it is constantly being challenged and updated from within as the debates about meaning and the notion of authorship inform and develop new ideas. Graphic design should not

restrict itself to the debate from within and the obviousness of 'related' media theory, but should widen its scope to include a diverse range of broader disciplines. This wider, more eclectic approach to thinking about communication and design exposes the nature of the building blocks which make up our reasoning and practice. The social nature of graphic design practice can be re-emphasised once more, and the makeshift boundaries which make up the distinctions between disciplines can be placed open to question.

We interrupt the programme has, to date, taken the form of a written article and visual essay, a series of workshops, exhibitions and lectures. The intention on our part is that each element or activity should inform the construction and development of the other, and an equal weight be given to all. Central to this process is the notion of collaboration with others. This has involved working with professional designers and design students at the Jan van Eyck Akademie in Holland, the University of Texas at Austin, Manchester Metropolitan University and Concordia University, Montreal. On each occasion the collaboration has taken different forms. Leading on from an introductory lecture and seminar discussions surrounding the nature of graphic design, the project is developed within a series of workshops which seek to explore the notion of 'open' communication, and those strategies which might be employed by graphic designers seeking a more democratic approach to the construction of meaning. At each exposition this has involved the production of single and multiple word image combinations, the discussion of how these may work together in single and multiple narrative and how it may be possible to extend these ideas to reveal the processes and intentions at work in visual communication.

This process of locking and unlocking readings and the construction of systems that permit and encourage negotiated understandings has been concerned in the main with methodological approaches based on personal reference. The open structures explored within the workshops has meant that the final results have differed greatly, though always operating between prescribed limits as defined in the introduction to the project. Each collaboration has resulted in a display of the visual experiments; it is important throughout the process that these practical methods are explored alongside theoretical considerations.

In Holland we worked remotely with the designer Jan van Toorn – sending faxes from England of work we had produced which were then subsequently reorganised and edited by members of the Akademie. This work was then exhibited at the Design Beyond Design Symposium. This resulting display of work was made in isolation from us and outside of our immediate control. In Austin we worked directly with undergraduate design students across a period of days to explore how the project could be extended to encompass a sense of place or location. Workshops involved a discussion of how to propagate the ideas and work we produced so that the notion of the control of meaning or curatorship could be thrown open. In England students from Manchester Metropolitan University worked with us to extend these ideas; to negotiate not only the act of commentary or sense of place but also to consider the proxemics or communication of a three dimensional experience, in particular how narrative structures can be designed to allow multiple readings dependant on location and navigation.

Any act of communication will always assume an intrinsic hierarchy between sender and receiver, and the position of the graphic designer can never be a neutral one – the cultural artifact will always carry ideological codes within its formal structure. The experiences and position of the authors remain inherent in the production of the work; however from this point of departure the user is able to configure the visual material in a matrix, conditioned by their own perceptions of, and approach to, the project. The work which makes up the project is designed to produce readings based on internal word/image relationships and on their external relationships within the set. Roland Barthes defined the term anchorage to describe a deliberate act, usually in news or advertising captions, where photographs as potentially 'open texts' are juxtaposed with words in order to direct the reader toward a preferred reading. This 'closing down' of the image by the use of a verbal text denotes an ideological function, a guide that displays the desired connotation of the author. The imposition of what Barthes termed an ideological closure on a text is a deliberate attempt at coercion by the author/producer – an attempt to reduce its polysemic potential.

The words incorporated in the project are deliberately chosen either for their loose semantic referent, or for their function as deictic words whose precise meaning is

always dependent on the their particular 'context of situation.' As such, the word/image pairings can be combined by the reader in a number of different ways to indicate a variety of (external) preferred readings, though the internal relationships of the individual pieces will stay the same. Multiple readings occur at both levels; in the individual pieces where word/image relationships allow a number of readings, and in the combination of pieces, where a shift in the apparent context of the message occurs with each grouping. Though the message can never truly be an open, democratic construct between sender and receiver, we can attempt to expose the nature of the process at work by allowing the reader a free hand in the act of construction itself. The problem for graphic design remains clear and to a large extent unresolved. Inherent within the communication process must be a consideration of the negotiated interpretation that occurs in the understanding of messages. Then, the index of possibilities is determined not by a visual monologue but in the acceptance that interventions made can act as a mediating force in the creation of a dialogic culture for design.

This development of new spaces in which to consider the activity of visual communication suggests the growing maturity of a relatively young discipline. Rather than the advocacy of an oppositional or discrete debate away from the commercial application of design, this approach begins to suggest new relationships or partnerships between experimental and speculative thinking and the applied environment design exists in. Roman Jakobson states that *"the message does not and cannot supply all the meaning of the transaction, and that a good deal of what is communicated derives from the context, the code, and the means of contact. Meaning, in short, resides in the total act of communication."*[8]

The absence of a pronounced determining role for design within the process of communication does not suggest a reduction in influence for visual communicators but in doing so we may be able to revisit many of the earlier values so important in the definition of graphic design. More importantly, the understanding of the so-called 'postmodern condition' demands that we adopt a position that acknowledges that to move forward our role resides in determining structures which encourage meaningful correspondence and articulation with others. Design in public space is not a recent

phenomenon. Rather more, our consideration of this location has become relegated in importance. Other disciplines such as the fine arts have for many years been able to articulate this discussion of public or social space in a formal problematisation of its activities away from the traditions of gallery or museum. Design has no existence beyond its very public life and needs to commit to similar paradigms that allow debate to grow in a legitimate and relevant manner.

We Interrupt the Programme attempts to place the recipient/user in a position of equal power, whereby they can re/construct the message as an open series of connecting links. The reorganisation and organisation of the work becomes a map of both maker and users' experiences – a mapping rather than a pre~determined mapped, documenting a process usually invisible to all parties. The notion of 'form giver' traditionally associated with the role of the graphic designer is shared at this point. The act of construction is the form of the message.

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