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An Opening: Graphic Design's Discursive Spaces

A review of the particular problems which have been identified with the history of graphic design as a field of study and the emerging discipline of graphic design history is undertaken as an introduction to the special issues of *Visible Language* entitled, "New Perspectives: Critical Histories of Graphic Design." Operative definitions are provided to delimit the project and explicate the notion of critical histories. A case is put forward for the examination of graphic design through its relationships with larger discourses. A proposal is made for the exploration of graphic design's discursive spaces as an alternative form of historical inquiry.

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Solutions are not to be found in history. But one can always diagnose that the only possible way is the exasperation of the antitheses, the frontal clash of positions, and the accentuation of contradictions.

Manfredo Tafuri[1]

The Particular Problem of Graphic Design (History)

It is helpful at the outset to distinguish the disciplinary aspirations from the field of inquiry, or paraphrasing historian John Walker; graphic design history from the history of graphic design.[2] Many events could be cited to demonstrate the existence of what could be best labelled a proto-discipline of graphic design history: books and journals published, conferences organized, papers written, archives established, exhibitions presented, courses of study formed and persons claiming the status of "historian."[3] I use the term "proto-discipline" to describe graphic design history because, despite these numerous activities, a coherent body of autonomous knowledge has not formed which would be a prerequisite for any disciplinary status. The reasons for this seem quite numerous, but probably lie in the activity and social status of graphic design itself.

Most discussions of graphic design history are subsumed under the rubric of design history, a field that potentially comprises *all* design activities but that eschews certain design practices, namely architecture (which it sees as somehow distinct) and, more specifically, graphic design, in favor of the study of industrially-produced consumer products and certain (mostly pre-industrial) decorative art forms. While all forms of design activity must, by definition, conform to some shared traits, their historical specificity would reveal differences and demand certain approaches. It is these conditions or situations which, for better or worse, established the bracketing of art history, then design history from the larger field of historical studies. An umbrella approach of design history under which would fall the history of graphic design (among others) strives for a

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Tafuri, Manfredo. 1980. *Theories and History of Architecture.* New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 237.

2
See Walker, John A. 1989. *Design History and the History of Design.* London: Pluto Press.

3
See Margolin, Victor. 1988. "A Decade of Design History in the United States 1977–87," *Journal of Design History*, 1:1. 51–72.

problematical unifying philosophy of design which undermines the significance of graphic design as a distinct field of inquiry, with specific historical contexts which demand particular attention.

If graphic design history has as its field of study the thing we have come to call "graphic design," then it is this term and its changing definitions that constitute a fundamental problem for sketching the limits of the discipline. While Philip Meggs ascribes the origins of graphic design to the cave paintings of Lascaux, others trace its development from the invention of movable type (Western with Gutenberg, rather than Eastern with Pi-Shêng). The current definitions of graphic design, however, come from the middle of this century and have as their objective the consolidation of certain activities and the exclusion of others for the benefit of professional autonomy (i.e., specialization of the designer and the segregation of production). Even the most general definitions regarding its status as printed matter have been rendered problematic by advances in electronic technologies and the often predicted demise of printed materials. As Victor Margolin noted in an essay about a decade of design history in the United States, the impetus for graphic design history as a field of study comes largely from those persons affiliated with educational institutions — teachers of the professional practice of graphic design.[4] This scenario has helped to shape the constitution of this proto-discipline. The ambiguity of definitions is reflected in the shifting terminology of the academy as educational programs have changed titles from "commercial and applied art" to "visual communication" and eventually "graphic design." To compensate for this, graphic design history has absorbed discrete histories of relevant areas such as those of technologies like printing and photography as well as the aesthetic models and approaches of art history. The ad-hoc nature of graphic design history creates its share of disadvantages since its incorporation of other disciplines' histories and methods has been undertaken with a characteristically unproblematic critical assessment. Ironically, many graphic design historians have treated the importation of "theory"

(as somehow distinct from history) from other disciplines with prejudicial scorn, particularly if it emanates through graphic designers or, if it emanates from those individuals outside of graphic design, with resistance to academic "carpetbagging."[5]

The shortcomings associated with the developments of a graphic design history have been reflected more recently in a series of articles written by both design historians and practitioners. I will attempt to reprise some of the major problems associated with the history of graphic design as a field of study and graphic design history as an emerging discipline.

The distinguishing characteristic of graphic design from both architecture and product design lies in its inherent ephemeral state. The ephemeral nature of most graphic design simply means that many of the objects of study no longer exist and are not normally collected nor archived. The transitory nature of graphic design creates a condition of "presentness" which, in turn, creates an ahistorical sensibility about the objects and the conditions of their formation and reception. Design historian Bridget Wilkins has commented that "[m]ost graphic design...is not an 'object of desire,'..." and, therefore, does not afford the attention and the significance attributed to certain product designs.[6] Paradoxically, this lack of objects has nevertheless contributed to the object-oriented nature of most, if not all, histories of graphic design. This orientation developed as an inheritance of art history, which itself developed out of the connoisseurship, historical attribution and classification of objects. For graphic design this has meant the selection of objects which testify to the value of design, or more appropriately the cultural capital of "good design." This selection process with its nebulous criteria and its accompanying rejection of certain objects of graphic design as somehow unworthy have been recently challenged.[7] Similarly, the focus accorded designers in the various accounts of graphic design history can be linked to the need for an emerging profession's legitimization including the desires of teachers to offer historical "role models" for students studying the contemporary practice of graphic design. The combined effects of both of these orientations (understood as the subjects and objects of heroicism) has

5
Margolin, Victor, editor. 1989. *Design Discourse.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 158. The term and concept are borrowed from an essay by Frances Butler, "Eating the Image: The Graphic Designer and the Starving Audience." Clive Dilnot addresses the "resistance to theory" encountered in design history in his essay "The State of Design History, Part II: Problems and Possibilities," in the same collection.

6
Wilkins, Bridget. 1992. "No more heroes," *Eye,* 2:6, 6.

7
For one account see: Frascara, Jorge. 1993. "Graphic Design History: Its Purpose and Relevance," *Design Statements*, Winter, 13–16. The types of graphic design shown in history classes and reproduced in books tends to cater to an art historical tendency in which the things closest to paintings, like posters, get shown and where entire areas of graphic design produced for society are ignored, like the products of "information design," product packaging and even print advertising.

been to underplay the significance of the complex processes which allow for the production of both designers and design artifacts. What is also lost is the complexity surrounding the circumstances in which such artifacts are distributed, received and/or consumed in and through various segments of society, and increasingly, societies.[8] As it is currently most often taught, at least in the United States, the history of graphic design has been organized around the notion of contemporary professional practice wherein all previous subjects and objects ("history") are traced back and unfold in a linear, chronological fashion segmented through a series of stylistic successions — a procession that takes its cue from the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. The unfolding story is a *progression*, both technological and professional, from its past to its teleological present. The professional benefits of this type of history are, as Victor Burgin has related, "to legitimate careers and commodities — history-writing as underwriting."[9] Clive Dilnot has noted the consequences of this myth-making process:

> *How is myth manifested in design history? Most obviously by the* reduction *of its subject matter to an unproblematic, self-evident entity (Design) in a form that also reduces its historical specificity and variety to as near zero as possible. This reduction also restructures the history of design to a repetition of designers' careers and to the past as simply anticipating and* legitimating *the present.*[10]

As Dilnot has noted, the legitimizing function of a history in service to its profession denies the historical specificity, and thus understanding, of the professionalization of graphic design as a condition of its *current* state as well as its relative position to the vast amount of graphic design produced as a vernacular activity with anonymous contributors.[11] More importantly, the social significance of the activity of graphic design (i.e., the process of designing) is rendered absent as it is taken for granted, this at a time when the profession of graphic design tries to demonstrate its efficacy to both clients and society at large by relating its abilities against those of untrained profes-sionals. Thus, the mythologizing of graphic design as a story related through its history and told to its future practitioners

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I am attempting to describe two effects. One is the circulation of design in and through socially defined audiences (as opposed to a "mass" audience) and the other is the circulation of design across national boundaries mostly in the form of multinational corporate capitalism.

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Burgin, Victor. 1988. "Something About Photography Theory," reprinted in *The New Art History*. A.L. Rees and F. Borzello, editors. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 45.

10
Dilnot, Clive. 1989. "The State of Design History, Part II: Problems and Possibilities," reprinted in *Design Discourse*. Victor Margolin, editor. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 237.

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Here I would distinquish the role of vernacular design, which Dilnot suggests has passed in relationship to disciplines such as architecture and industrial design, with the increase of non-profes-sional graphic design prac-tice which has surfaced with the advent of the personal computer. See Dilnot, Clive. "The State of Design History, Part II," 245.

confronts the technological de-mystification of its production through the advent of personal computers, software programs and desk-top publishing.

The overall effect is a lack of critical positioning and contextual understanding surrounding the practices of graphic design and its historical antecedents. The lack of critical dimension and theoretical application was noted as early as 1983,[12] again in 1988 by Victor Margolin[13] and who, in 1992, commented on the continuing failure to provide an adequate set of limits with which to organize a coherent body of knowledge that could be considered "Design History."[14] In response, Margolin's proposal called for a reappraisal of the notion of design history for a more inclusive concept of *design studies* which he described as:

> *…that field of inquiry which addresses questions of how we make and use products in our daily lives and how we have done so in the past. These products comprise the domain of the artificial. Design studies encompasses issues of product conception and planning, production, form, distribution, and use. It considers these topics in the present as well as in the past. Along with products, it also embraces the web of discourse in which production and use are embedded.[15]*

In a similar gesture, the British historian John Walker offered an alternative model for understanding the social context of design which describes its production, distribution and consumption.[16] Again disciplinary coherence, or rather the lack of it, precipitates his proposal:

> *The bulk of the literature on design consists of "partial" studies in the sense that there are books on designers, products, styles, design education, etc., but what is lacking is a general account of how all of these specific studies interrelate and, taken together, constitute a coherent totality.[17]*

Both Margolin's and Walker's models share a common concern for the social context of design and could be compared with similar events occurring in art history which fostered the development of the social history of art out of the same kind

12
See Vignelli, Massimo. 1983. "Keynote Address," in *The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design: Coming of Age*. Rochester, New York: Rochester Institute of Technology, 8–11.

13
Margolin. "A Decade of Design History in the United States 1977–87," 58.

14
Margolin, Victor. 1992. "Design History or Design Studies: Subject Matter and Methods." *Design Studies*, 13:2, 105-6.

15
Margolin, "Design History or Design Studies…," 115.

16
See Walker, John A. "Production-consumption Model," in *Design History and the History of Design*, 68–73.

17
Walker, "Production-consumption Model," 68.

of criticisms that have been levelled at the history of graphic design. The social history approach seeks an understanding of art and design outside of the objects and their creators — the transcendence of aesthetics and the artist/designer genius.[18] It provides a context for the objects insofar as they could be understood to manifest class struggle, and thus is indebted to a Marxist approach to interpretation. While Margolin's and Walker's models develop out of a Marxist understanding of production and consumption as reciprocal moments in an economic cycle, the type of context offered in both proposi-tions goes beyond a traditional Marxist approach and has yet to be applied in most analyses of graphic design. What graphic design history has applied is not an understanding of class struggle or even the economic forces which serve to constrain design practices, but rather context as a background of world events or the filler of biographic anecdotes.[19] As with the social history of art, the effect has been to simply reproduce the canon (with more "details" or "context"), albeit without the economic determinism of a Marxist analysis. Graphic design history has yet to undertake the task of understanding its social context, understood as a range of effects: from the reproduc-tion of cultural values through the work of graphic design to the shifting nature of consumption and reception, both conspicuous and symbolic, by audiences.[19]

Instead it is the canon of graphic design history which has served as the site for most contestation. The first inroads made were from feminist theories which challenged the operation of patriarchy in design (mainly architecture, product design and advertising). Not surprisingly, feminist theories have provided design history with its most developed critique for understand-ing design's social effects.[20] The specific response of graphic design history to the critiques provided by feminism has been the recuperation of the roles of certain women graphic design-ers who are "lost" to history.[21] Similarly, the canon is being challenged as individuals endeavor to understand the role race has played not only in terms of the existence and achievements of designers of color but also in the understanding of how racism is socially reproduced in the practices of design. Again,

18
For the incorporation of a post-structuralist account of authorship and inten-tionality in the social history of art see: Wolff, Janet. 1993. *The Social Production of Art*. Second Edition. New York: New York University Press. For an account of the develop-ment of the social history of art, particularly in Great Britain, see: Rees, A.L. and F. Borzello, editors. 1988. *The New Art History*.

19
For an argument of the conventional call for context understood as a set of social influences on graphic design see: Scott, Douglass. 1991. "Graphic Design History—In Context," in *Spirals*. Providence, Rhode Island: Rhode Island School of Design, Department of Graphic Design, Book Six, 217–225.

20
See Buckley, Cheryl. "Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design," in *Design Discourse*. Victor Margolin, editor, 251–262 and Judy Attfield, "FORM/female FOLLOWS FUNCTION / male: Feminist Critiques of Design," in Walker, John A. *Design History and the History of Design*, 199–225.

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graphic design history has responded by seeking the recupera-
tion of individual practitioners and by an examination of the
representations of "others" in the work of graphic design.[22]
Additionally, the impetus provided by the heightened aware-
ness of cultural relativity (i.e., multiculturalism) has served
to challenge the centrality of the canon with its focus on
graphic design from the United States and Western Europe.[23]
The response has been a call for the expansion of the canon
to accommodate work from outside these boundaries, but
little attention has been paid to a critical assessment of what
the canon actually allows as examples of graphic design or of
the seemingly operative definition of graphic design as an
exclusive product of industrialized, late-capitalist democracies.

New Perspectives: Critical Histories of Graphic Design

*Historical perspective therefore authorizes the
operation which, from the same place and within
the same text, substitutes conjunction for disjunction,
holds contrary statements together, and, more
broadly, overcomes the difference between an order
and what it leaves aside.*

Michel de Certeau[24]

What all of the aforementioned arguments suggest is an under-
standing of the cultural activity of graphic design as one rooted
in particular social practices. The activity of graphic design
would be understood as historically relative and therefore
changing, contributing to the notion of multiple *histories* of
graphic design. The subjects and objects of graphic design
history would move beyond the artifacts and designers to
encompass the complexity of the forces which allow for their
very existence. This *critical* positioning would include an
awareness of the limits of any historical project as revealed
through the historian's particular *perspective*. Incumbent in such
a heightened awareness would be the acknowledgement of the
disciplinary forces at work which serve to constrain the roles

21
The direct reference is to
a lecture by design critic
Karrie Jacobs entitled "Lost
Women in Design,"
presented at the 1992
Modernism and Eclecticism
Conference (School of
Visual Arts, New York).

22
Although sparse, the recu-
peration of graphic design-
ers of color has been
carried forward by several
individuals through various
forums such as lectures and
articles. In particular see:
Miller, Cheryl D. 1987.
"Black Designers Missing in
Action." *Print*, 41:5, 58–65,
138. Fath Davis Ruffins of
the Smithsonian Institution
in Washington, D.C.
provided an historical
account of ethnic represen-
tations in her lecture at the

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of not only graphic design and graphic designers but also of historians and history-writing, including the constitution and uses of knowledge. This concept of historically specific constraints was theorized by Michel Foucault,[25] whose work, as outlined by Mark Poster, suggests that:

> [t]he emancipatory interests promoted by historical materialism are sustained only with a detotalized theoretical stance such as that proposed by Foucault, a theoretical asceticism that severely restricts the truth claims of texts. There are two constraints of particular importance: 1) that the historian acknowledge his or her political orientation and 2) that the historian's text not claim to exhaust the meaning of the field to be investigated.[26]

Bearing these constraints in mind, the collection of essays contained in three consecutive issues of this journal have been positioned by the editor in order to facilitate certain ideas presupposed by the project itself and those suggested by common themes among the essays. The first collection of essays, contained in this issue, has been arranged with an emphasis on a critical appraisal of current approaches undertaken in the name of graphic design history. These essays address both general problems of historiography and history-writing as well as specific problems arising from current narrative accounts of graphic design history and the particular problem of typographic histories. The second collection of essays, found in volume 28, issue 4, has been grouped under the rubric of practice. They speak to a conception of graphic design as a variety of theoretically informed and socially engaged practices. Eschewing many current operative definitions of (mainly professional) practice, they address the role that graphic design does and could play when understood in its greater social context and the plurality of its activities. The diverse range of concerns shown in these essays moves us to an understanding of the cultural context of the practice of graphic design; from issues of social activism and the making of history to the methodological problems of examining the historically specific roles that women practitioners have played in patriarchy. The third collection of essays, found in volume 29, issue 1, offers specific case-studies of graphic design. They

1994 Modernism and Eclecticism Conference (School of Visual Arts, New York) entitled, "Race and Representation: Ethnic Imagery in American Advertising 1800–1960."

23
Works of graphic design have been allowed into the canon from outside the U.S. and Western Europe when they conform to the expectations of what constitutes graphic design in "first world" terms, such as posters which show the influence of European modernism.

24
de Certeau, Michel. 1988. *The Writing of History.* New York: Columbia University Press, 89.

25
See Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language.* New York: Pantheon Books.

26
Poster, Mark. 1989. "Foucault, the Present, and History," in *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 73.

represent a critical position in relationship to their object of
study, focusing on the roles of historical interpretation, from
the assignment of meaning(s) to the understanding of perfor-
mative effect(s). The subject matter of these case-studies ranges
from a reassessment of historical icons from graphic design
history's canon to the inclusion of previously ignored products
of the vernacular practice of graphic design. These essays strive
for an understanding of their subject matter as a product of
greater cultural forces while acknowledging the active role
designers and society play in their construction.

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Acknowledging the homogenizing tendency of the editorial
process of ordering wherein differences are effaced, the texts
represented in these volumes are in service to the project at
hand. They have been arranged in three issues, each issue with
a particular focus (critiques, practices and interpretations) and
each essay serves this ordering purpose and simultaneously defies
it. The act of ordering texts only serves to undermine the editor-
ial purpose as each focus overflows the boundaries of its imposed
limits. The artificial nature of these foci is exposed in the over-
lapping themes of the essays across all three issues. In this way,
we can detect, for example, critical assessments of graphic
design history either explicitly or implicitly in all essays. While
the ordering of texts has been determined and the foci fixed,
the connections between essays are indeterminate and unfixed.
History is thus understood as a production, one which is com-
pleted fully only when it has been engaged — and its meanings
negotiated — as it passes from an (un)fixed writing to an
(un)fixed reading. The accentuation of the boundaries and the
play between the three foci determine the limits of this project.
As such, this historical project is simply another work on the
margins as it defines itself against some contiguous "other." In
turn, the marginal limits of historical projects form the field of
investigations. The historian Michel de Certeau relates:

> *Whatever the author's own position, his work both describes*
> *and engenders the movement which leads history to become a*
> work on the margins: *to situate itself through its relation to*
> *other discourses, to place discursivity in its relation to an elimi-*
> *nated other, to measure results in relation to the objects that*
> *escape its grasp; but also to establish continuities by isolating*
> *series, to analyze methods closely by distinguishing distinct*
> *objects which they grasp at once in a single fact, to revise and*
> *to compare the different periodizations that various types of*
> *analysis bring forth, and so forth. Hereafter the "problem is no*
> *longer of tradition and trace, but of delimitation and margins."*[27]

27
de Certeau, Michel.
The Writing of History, 40.

28
The history of graphic
design as a history of
positions is put forward by
Jorge Frascara in his essay,
"Graphic Design History:
Its Purpose and Relevance,"
16.

Consequently, the boundaries of each study and the project as
a whole begin to create a set of limits to the field of inquiry,
both through their presence — their positive formations
with discernible edges — and through their absence — their
negative ground by which they are rendered visible. This
project creates a group of present or visible points (the essays)
as well as a field of absences, what de Certeau refers to as the
"eliminated other." Thus, I would contend that this project
defines as much by what it leaves aside as by what it includes.
This opening in the field of graphic design history creates a
discursive space for investigation insofar as we are able to
conceive of the absences that are generated by history itself.
These absences could be understood as those elements which
are effaced in conventional historical accounts which favor
the transparency of objects, the assignment of meanings, the
attribution and classification of objects, the centrality of the
designer and (usually) his intentions, the evolution and refine-
ment (development) from past to present, the logical succession
of events and styles, etc. In contrast, discursive accounts would
emphasize the opacity and complexity of relationships which
allow for the production of graphic design and graphic designers,
the understanding of the performative effects of such produc-
tion, a critical understanding of the role of the subject (designer
and audience) neither solely as a free, autonomous agent nor
as an individual completely dominated or determined by the
prevailing hegemony, the examination of the exclusions of
graphic design history's canon and a move away from history as
a chain of events to history as a space of critical positions.[28]

Perhaps we should be pleased with the proto-disciplinary nature of graphic design history, in the sense that it has not achieved full disciplinary status. After all, it is the instrumental uses of knowledge and its segregation into discrete units which has been rendered so problematical in the last few decades by the blurring of boundaries between disciplines. The complex nature of the design process necessitates an understanding of it which intergrates knowledge from many different disciplines and in the process develops its own particular account. For the discursive spaces of graphic design to be opened for investigation requires that the defensive posturing and the shoring-up of the walls of graphic design history be exchanged for the active examination of the "limits" of graphic design.[29] □

29
I use the term "limits" here instead of Michel Foucault's "discontinuities," because, as Michel de Certeau observes, it is too suggestive of a rupture in reality. I do not intend to set definable or defendable limits for the field of graphic design.