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# book review

A Book to Think With:

After the Bauhaus,
Before the Internet:

A History of
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### A Book to Think with: A Beview

#### Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl

This ambitious book, edited by Geoff Kaplan, is well worth your time as it is a collection of essays from many perspectives. The collection will jog your thinking about graphic design past, present, and future. I propose that readers should think along with this book; sometimes I will digress as I ponder the essays in the collections. You will want to agree or disagree with some authors or even expand on the ideas presented. Several authors slip the frame established by the Yale conference, that is the title of the book. *After the Bauhaus and Before the Internet* is more than a history; many articles are provocations. I selectively sampled some articles that I found particularly compelling, although I read the entire book and scanned the extensive footnotes, which by themselves provide a rich resource given various academic and scholarly pursuits. The authors are serious academics dealing with thorny issues of substance that concern how to frame graphic design education now and in the future. The book is in four sections, which are used here as section headings.

#### From Practices to Disciplines

A thread running through the book relates to use of the terms practice, profession, discipline, and theory. These words are used almost casually by some, but Deborah Littlejohn parsed them carefully. Graphic design is caught in the realm of practice and seems unable to escape. Designers tend to move quickly from project to project, focusing on the work at hand. They are specialists rather than generalists who might see a bigger picture leading to research. In the context of universities, a profession and its school are second class, known as preparation for a job rather than preparation to engage in science and scholarship. By contrast, a discipline has the goal of creating new knowledge — with knowledge based on "true belief," according to Littlejohn. I would argue that true belief is relative to a certain time span and that evidence justifying a belief is the primary concern. As Littlejohn observed, knowledge development also has methods and critical analysis, but these are dynamic rather than stagnant. Looking at other established disciplines. I think we regard them as more fixed and stable than those who work within them. New insights and methods emerge; the context changes.

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Littlejohn argued that graphic design is not a discipline because it has no theories or foundational texts; it has little research, little distribution of research findings, and little development of a programmatic approach to scholarship. While this is true, two counter exemplars can serve us well, from different points of view: John Dewey as a pragmatic philosopher and Josef Albers as an artist/designer/researcher/theoretician. The nature of design, with its complex interrelationships and trade-offs, is a practice involving problems, clients, users, technology, communication strategies, and more. We are necessarily practical and pragmatic even though pragmatism, like theory, has a bad reputation. Dewey's pragmatism is reflective and cannot be likened to a kind of vulgar expediency. Design is a clinical activity rather than a theoretical one. It could be likened to a profession in search of a discipline. It is an inquiry into the production of new artifacts and habits. "Pragmatism is an honest foundation for knowledge, and avoids the specious claim that only abstract, self-validating theory gives us genuine certainty." 1 Dewey put theory on the same level as practical work and activity. And regarding a search for certainty, he claimed the desire for certainty is based on anxiety whether individual or societal: "Theory (so to speak) is not a foundation on which we can safely construct practice; rather, it is a way of bringing our external commitments into line with our experience as practitioners."2 Theory, when laid bare, does not precede action, but is hidden within action and can be later revealed and guestioned. 3 Theory and practical action anchor each other. Dewey gave a practical (pragmatic) account of inquiry that "arises from felt needs, employs both abstract and concrete tools, tests proposals in the laboratory of experience and terminates in the resolution of difficulties which occasioned that particular sequence of inquiry."4

At the end of her essay, Littlejohn described disciplinary words in terms of the character of the designer and the character of disciplinary action. We have as a prefix to disciplinary: multi-, cross-, inter-, trans-, pluri-, meta-, alter-, and uni-. Perhaps you will find the labeled intersection of your own characteristic of reaching out to other disciplines, as you address your own shortcomings or identify and seek special expertise and consultation given the complexity of problems to be examined.

While Dewey is concerned with the act of experiencing, the other exemplar, Josef Albers, is best known for his extensive, beautiful, controlled body of work, *Homage to the Square*. Like Dewey, Albers put practice before theory, as opposed to the other way around. Albers operated from a phenomenological base that led to theory (that much maligned word mentioned earlier). His color experiments led to understanding perceptual shifts in reading or experiencing adjacent colors. Albers was interested in Gestalt psychology during his time at the Bauhaus; he later kept abreast of vision science as it continued to develop. He provided a more grounded, scientific approach to research that takes into consideration the generation of experimental materials, perceptual

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observation, analysis of collected data, and trial hypotheses, ultimately resulting in his *Interaction of Color*. He provided a model for a science-based understanding of perceptual fundamentals that characterize design. For a careful analysis of Albers contribution to research via an understanding of science and the construction of empirical experiments that reveal theory, see Mike Zender's essay "Design Research Pioneer Josef Albers: a case for design research." 5 "...there are at least four qualities from Albers research that stand out as instructive and worthy of emulation in Communication Design research today: Key Topic, Sustained, Systematic, Empirical Study, Generalizable Principles, and Practice before Theory." 6

Dewey's pragmatism or Alber's phenomenology could be starting points for thinking about research. Philosophy can help focus one's position, i.e., where you stand in the world of ideas; it helps with clarity. That is not to say there will be no confusion or argument. Dewey, however, has a first-rate comment about this "test of the value of any philosophy which is offered us: Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealing with them more fruitful. Or does it terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque than they were before?"7

For me, Dewey deserves the last word in this section: "An empirical philosophy is in any case a kind of intellectual disrobing. We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear when we assimilate the culture of our time and place. But intelligent furthering of culture demands that we take some of them off, that we inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us."8 It pleases me to contrast Dewey and Albers for their potential contribution to design thinking. The space between practice and discipline will not close automatically or swiftly. It will take curiosity, borrowing from other disciplines, clear methodologies, publication of results, and riding on the backs of practitioners and researchers who go before us.

#### The Act of Reading

The book contains considerable discussion about what we hope our students read, as this extends their thinking beyond lectures and studios. The questions that result are: What do they read? How are those readings interpreted, whether there is focused discussion in the classroom or among their peers? In essence, how do the readings integrate into their design activities and lives? Several bibliographies appear in textual or footnote form and they are primarily reading lists first mentioned relative to Paul Rand's list from 1974. Katherine McCoy created a bibliography in mid-1980

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and another in 1988 that was developed on Communication: Structuralism, literary theory and postmodernism. This could be likened to books in search of a design discourse. Andrew Blauveldt did a Critical Theory and Cultural Studies Bibliography in 1993, followed by a Cultural Studies Bibliography in 1997. Liz Sanders created The Bibliography on Cognition and Emotion (nd), while Meredith Davis did A Critical and Cultural Studies Bibliography in 1997. Ewan Duncan created Design Planning about this time (nd). Audrey Bennett inserted her own bibliography on pages 255–258 in this book, separating books between categories: culturally situated, canon, and periphery. In fact, all these bibliographic lists are attempts to locate institutional context and networks of influence; they are often personal constructions sometimes based on program orientation. We have records of what students read, but not how the reading is integrated or influential in their work.

Visible Language had its own flirtation with bibliography in 2002 when it published An Annotated Design Research Bibliography: By and For the Design Community. 9 In contrast to the lists mentioned, these books were recommended and importantly annotated by readers. Five Ph.D. students in the Institute of Design's Ph.D. program served as guest editors, and organized the issue into three sections: Philosophy of Design, Principles & Methods, and Theory & Practice. All the sections contained thirty books. I would liken the Ph.D. students to professional readers; they were the ideal smart and dedicated individuals to create this special issue of the journal. Quoting myself from this issue: "It is a truism that the literature of a field defines its discourse. Design has been a field of practice with few substantial formal resources, much less agreement on what the important resources might be. With no common sense of importance, design practitioners, teachers, and researchers set out to inform themselves about design in an unmarked territory. The project that unfolds...is an attempt to remedy this situation."10

Philosophy of Design, Principles & Methods, and Theory & Practice gave it focus in which to engage a community of scholars. There were thirteen Ph.D. students, seven faculty, and three MDes students with seven Americans and the remaining seventeen from other countries. Contributors were asked about the relevance of a book. Books were ranked by a larger online community and the distribution of fields was determined by doing keyword analysis. There was a clear methodology regarding selection. This special issue of *Visible Language* was one of few that sold out.

Readers continuously work on their knowledge of the world and design. Habits among designers tend more to looking than reading. Reading is slower than giving a glance to something. Do students read? Can they read deeply given the distractions of contemporary life with so much information and competition for their attention? Can they separate the ephemeral from what is more lasting? Do they grasp the use value of various kinds of information, can they integrate it?

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#### **Problems are Solutions**

Gui Bonsiepe began his essay, "On the Heteronomy of Design in a Post-Utopian Age," by taking us all to task with our consumption-saturated lifestyle and lack of concern with environmental issues. He identified twelve commonly agreed-upon varieties of design, to which he added at least seventeen more recent permutations of design. Among them are emotional, radical, post-utopian, calm, and dirty, among others both known and obscure. Are these labels marketing ploys, attention getters, or real differentiators based on changed processes? Are their processes and products uniquely different? I detect a desire on Bonsiepe's part for clarity and wholeness, which contrasts with the fragmentation of this list. He went on to question the explosion of interest in design and suggested two reasons for it: 1) the intrinsic attachment of design to the future, and 2) the unresolved contradictions of design practice and education. He can't help but look for a common unifying thread and suggested: "Structuring the interaction between users and artifacts (both material and semiotic), by contrast, constitutes the professional identity of designers."11

Following a discussion contrasting the goals of science with the goals of design, he used Ulm, and to a lesser extent the Bauhaus, as touchstone examples. Science is marked by its iterative nature and the importance of experimental feedback. At the Bauhaus under Meyer's brief tenure, he unsuccessfully tried to integrate science with design education. Later, Moldonado replaced form as the guiding principle for design. Bonsiepe concluded that putting scientific disciplines together with design disciplines results in conflict and dysfunction. Based on Meyer's experience or Moldanado's at Ulm, this is true. However, the contemporary growth in Ph.D. programs—particularly at some universities, such as the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology—joins science with design selectively. Yes, there is sometimes difficult discussion centering on why the research isn't done in another department, like in a psychology or engineering department. The answer is that designers pose different questions for research than those typically engendered in those departments. Design needs students who are broadly educated and unafraid of science and its methods. Littlejohn's description of science brings with it disciplinary aspects of use to design, and the example of Josef Albers represents a concrete example of what can be achieved.

Academic tradition is based on language use, insight, and peer-reviewed publication. Only architecture has escaped this lockstep tradition and proposed, and been accepted for, project-based work. By contrast, graphic design tends toward complex or emerging problems requiring research and analysis, and yes, a design solution that hopefully breaks new territory. Papers are seldom written based on the work. Bonsiepe tied this to theory and practice orientations. Practice is well understood and

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often judged by its profit calculation in business terms: "Theory reveals differences between instrumental reason and critical reason." 12 This is thinking to advance work versus critically thinking to perhaps sabotage work by thinking from another context or perspective or redefining the project at hand.

Bonsiepe stepped aside from form and beauty as the defining feature of design and instead proposed the use value of an artifact; in other words, how the interface mediates between a tool and user in the broadest sense. The main feature of the design profession is its mediation. I believe he was speaking in an ecological sense, connecting environmental concerns; the use of technology with its often-hidden dimensions; concerns of distribution, social, and economic concerns; and many more. How a project is framed is an important dimension for its outcome. He desired for us to practice design that is relevant.

In the same section as Bonsiepe, we find Hugh Dubberly, who pondered what was wrong with "problems" as a frame for the nature of design. The investigation takes us on a historical journey and identifies the usual suspects in a loose chronology, including Louis Sullivan, Deutscher Werkbund, Bauhaus, Albers, HfG Ulm, George Nelson, Emil Ruder, and others. All used statements regarding "problem" as an important word.

Continuing with design methods, we find Christopher Alexander, Horst Rittel, and Herbert Simon, among others—all with a focus on problems. This continues, according to Dubberly, with design methods morphing into design thinking. Here we find Bryan Lawson and Peter Rowe, while IDEO and the Stanford d-school substantiate the connection between problem solving and design thinking. This alone is a gift—to design research in its historical and analytical search that zeros in on "problems," a word we take for granted, because it is ubiquitous or extendable to design thinking in its current use.

After establishing the pervasive way we use the word *problem*, Dubberly dug into what's misleading with the conception: there is no one solution, situations are dynamic and changeable, and solutions are satisfied rather than optimized as the best possible result. And this is just the beginning of problem-solving shortcomings.

Dubberly continued on and discussed what he believed is wrong with problem solving. His belief was that it implies that problems are simply floating in the ether waiting to be solved, when in fact the problem is co-created by those involved in the project. Projects or problems do not proceed with logic or in linear fashion with guaranteed results. Innovation, which is highly desired, has an unknown process and is inherently unstable and unmanageable. With these factors undermining the use of problem as a focus, he suggested that we think again about the characterization of design as dealing with a problem to solve.

Turning from a direct look at design and its practice, Fred Turner and Annika Butler Wall offered insight into the

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contemporary time in which we live. The economics of neoliberalism accounts for the commercialization of everyday life so abhorrent to Bonsiepe. This is characterized by a market-based economy, more governmental control, and the justification of widespread inequality. A top-down economic system requires people to desire what planners or designers provide as revealed through propaganda, advertising, persuasion, and effective person-to-person comment via social media. If this is unsuccessful, other forms of more direct coercion are used. By contrast, there is a bottom-up entrepreneurial spirit that technology supports to develop unique or short-run artifacts.

These authors played off the thinking of Friedrich Hayek, who received the Nobel Prize for Economic Science. "The engine of such a system would be the free market, a system of buying and selling that Hayek reimagined as an information system. According to Hayek, the price mechanism within the free market served as the most effective single way to identify and build order from a universe of individual preferences." 13 Hayek's market-centered democracy, according to these authors, is a society by design. Design and planning—design thinking in particular—fit smoothly into this economic system. Stanford's d-school exemplifies this approach with a focus on the total person in terms of creativity and innovation. Even physical space is calculated and valorized as an apparent freedom—one that enhances collaboration, transparency, and commodification of life itself; all to benefit business.

A digression is in order here; I want to draw attention to a non-design novel, Dave Edgar's The Circle. 14 The Circle is a dystopian tale about technology, surveillance, privacy, and coercion in a neoliberal setting. The novel is a believable rendering of the buy-in character of high tech, with its belief structure, pressures, and reward system. The Circle is the name of the all-encompassing tech business, which is cult-like. masking social pressures and external measures of belonging that lead one to hope that the heroine can find enough moxie to escape. The velvet gloves and perks make this difficult. Coolness is everything. Formal hierarchical structure is erased, but the advantages of class and economic structure cannot be suppressed. Equality is found in the empowerment given by a belief system and the tool kit that accompanies it. "Design thinking aims to make each of us a designer of our own lives, yet it offers us no tools with which to collaborate in more temporary and largely for-profit ways. On the contrary, it teaches that the proper place to express our individuality and negotiate our differences is not the public sphere but the factory floor."15

Designers need to uncover the hidden consequences of their actions and understand the future they are supporting. These forces are at work in our own time. Bonsiepe, Dubberly, and Turner and Butler-Wall all contribute to a cautionary design tale. There is a need for designers to question project and process foundations, the values the

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project promotes, and who is served, and who is excluded. What values are we underwriting with design?

#### **Designing Pedagogies**

The section on pedagogical reflection contains many diverse ideas and approaches. Lorraine Wild set the stage with questions like, "Would we have developed a more rigorous, critical bodies of work that might have encouraged a wider set of engaged practices beyond commerce? Would we have gone more deeply into graphic designs as a kind of visual knowledge? Would we have spent a little more time on history, criticism, publication? Most importantly, would we have continued to develop a pedagogy less dependent on art school models obsessed with individuality, and spent more energy on the collaborative, research-based, synthetic, and outward-facing practices that ideally constituted graphic design?" 16

Developing a new, probably more focused, approach to graphic design is risky and runs counter to the repetitive standard pedagogies currently in play. A few brave individuals in this book call for a new pedagogy. Alternative pedagogies might question the economic context of graphic design; as Lauren Williams asserted, "The state of design pedagogy is largely a function it of the way design is practiced. Serving capital like a dutiful neoliberal cog, the design profession calls for design institutions to produce students who can frictionlessly fit into that framework."17 It is impossible to deny the connection between design and capitalism. An apolitical posture toward capitalism is a removal from reality. Hidden or obvious social exploitation and critical analysis of the values that underpin design or other ideas suggested within the book open more critical postures toward culture. One author tied capitalism to attitudes supporting racism, gender inequality, and lack of regard for marginalized populations.

Danielle Aubert offered an interesting labor-based history of graphic design. She questioned whether the university is a factory for the preparation of design labor. There is no doubt that technology and, more broadly, digital applications in the world have changed not only graphic design, but writing, translation, research, photography, medical records, security, communication in general, and much more. These skills signal professional competence for white collar labor; they are now in common use in the digital world, sometimes under software control, undercutting design expertise and leaving the question of what unique skills remain in design's repertory. Has graphic design become a kind of readymade? Will artificial intelligence make it obsolete?

What models from other fields of study might suggest an array of possibilities? Architecture, also a design profession, is

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not too far afield for consideration. Some authors suggest other approaches to graphic design history, such as considering a more local history. The Midwest, a so-called flyover territory, is a misnomer. Nestled in small-town Indiana is an architectural gem that continues to evolve from its inception in 1954. Cummins Engine is headquartered in Columbus, Indiana (population 50,000). Cummins CEO J. Irwin Miller started a foundation to support modern, community-based architecture. Harry Weese, Venturi & Rauch, and Richard Meier, among many others, have been beneficiaries and supporters of Miller's vision. The Foundation pays the architect's fee and a percentage of the construction cost. The architectural focus has expanded to parks, streetscapes, and planning. Recognition of the role architecture can play in establishing a community's quality of life is a key idea. It starts with a visionary idea: a living and used architecture can support quality of life and serve as a museum of architectures' changing history. What visions do we have for the future of graphic design?

#### **Conclusion**

Faculties need some common agreement regarding the context in which they are teaching; is the goal to create skilled practitioners, or is the goal to develop a discipline? The space between these two goals is significant. Practice appears to be obvious, but it is changing into specializations—and those specializations are not trivially driven by technology. How do you essentially define what designers do? What are their skills: form making and aesthetics, problem solving, mediating between people and tools in the largest sense, information design, or something else? Given the speed of technological change, the intense competition for attention, the excessive amount of information available, and the increasingly ephemeral nature of design, how is a pedagogical framework sensibly created?

A disciplinary goal is an ambitious project requiring a slice into research possibilities like Albers' perceptual studies, usercentered studies of mediation, or any number of clearly defined studies. The studies need to have a future trajectory, lead to further study, and uncover some fundamental insight. They may require finding partners from other disciplines, searching for funding, writing prospectus and research reports, acquiring Ph.D. students, and building a network of like-minded colleagues. This runs counter to short-term project work; interest must be sustained for a much longer time.

An opportunity to redefine what we are about is before us, and what is past is not necessarily prologue. Technology has thrown us into the future. We need to stake out a territory for development. What might it be? *After the Bauhaus*, *Before the Internet* It challenges the status quo in many ways—in other words, it is a book to think with.

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#### Resources

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Geoff Kaplan, editor

After the Bauhaus, Before the Internet: A History of Graphic Design

Pedagogy

New York: no place press, 2022

Stephen Toulmin

Return to Reason

Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press, 2001

Larry A. Hickman

Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism, Lessons from John Dewey

New York; Fordham University Press, 2007

John Dewey

Experience and Nature

New York: Dover Publications, ???

Josef Albers
Interaction of Color
Cambridge, MA: Yale University Press, 1963

Dave Eggers

The Circle

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013

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**Footnotes:** A Book to Think with: A Review

1 Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 174.

2 Ibid, 133.

3 Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl, Design Theory to Go, Connecting 24 brief theories to practice, (Estes Park, CO, 2018).

4 Larry A. Hickman, Pragmatism of Post-Postmodernism, Lessons from John Dewey, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 37.

5 Mike Zender, "Design Research Pioneer Josef Albers: a case for design research," *Visible Language*, 50.1 (2000), 48-77.

6 Ibid, 72.

7 John Dewey. Experience and Nature, (New York: Dover, 2000), 7.

8 Ibid, 37.

9 Praima Chayutsahakij, Chujit Jeamsinkul, Napawan Sawasdichai, Sakol Teeravarunyou, Carlos Teixeira, guest editors, "An Annotated Design Research Bibliography: by and for the design community" *Visible Language*, 36.2 (2002), 100-240.

10 Ibid, 101.

11 Gui Bonsiepe, "On the Heteronomy of Design in a Post-Utopian Age," After the Bauhaus, Before the Internet: A History of Graphic Design Pedagogy (New York, NY: no place press, 2022), 265-266.

12 Ibid, 266.

13 Fred Turner and Annika Butler Wall, "Designing for Neoliberalism," After the Bauhaus, Before the Internet: A History of Graphic Design Pedagogy (New York, NY: no place press, 2022), 303.

14 Dave Eggers, The Circle, (New York: Alfred A.

Knopf, 2013).

15 Neoliberalism, Turner and Butler Wall, 315.

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16 Lorraine Wild, "Notes on Practice: Expended, Compacted, Exploded," After the Bauhaus, Before the Internet: A History of Graphic Design Pedagogy (New York, NY: no place press, 2022), 328.

17 Lauren Williams, "Troubling Design Pedagogy," After the Bauhaus, Before the Internet: A History of Graphic Design Pedagogy (New York, NY: no place press, 2022), 424-425.