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Graphic Design Search
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Statement of philosophy

Teaching

Throughout my teaching experience at Rhode Island School of Design, Virginia Commonwealth University, and most recently at San Jose State University, my teaching philosophy has combined my work ethic and my visual theories. The philosophy of teaching that has resulted results from this amalgam lends a special flavor to my courses, which consistently stress the overlap of mind-work and hand-work, and the interdependence of the two.

The work of the mind

Graphic design, even when the end result is purely visual, is almost always based on some concept or verbal content. I believe that the best solutions to design problems are often rooted in language and the verbal content that were conceptualized in the problems themselves. I call this "the linguistic approach to design."

The work of the hand

Just as writers create verbal sentences for others to read, we designers create visual sentences for others to see and read. Drawing is at the heart of how design manifests itself. Work on a computer should always be integrated with the physical activities of drawing, sketching, cutting, assembling. I call this "the craftsman's approach to design."

Content

The integration of mind, eye (sometimes ear as well), and hand, is at the heart of my views about the "how" of design. Still, the "what" of design, often defined as "content", is possibly more important. Although the designer is seldom the author of the content, the designer can and often should elevate design above the mere activity of arranging text and images in an effective way. His contribution, done well, can actually place the designer subtly in the position of being a "co-author" of the content. Seldom is legitimacy officially granted to this activity, and of course the effort must serve the author's primary purpose, but I have always aspired in my projects to make a meaningful contribution beyond mere technical expertise and towards broader ethical and social values.

Interpretation

Designers carry social responsibilities because they often occupy the privileged position of being early readers of an author's text. As they attempt to give visual form to that text, they need to first understand it in order to properly interpret it for subsequent readers. Our interpretation must be honest and our design must preserve the integrity of the text, not distort it for the purpose of making it fit into predetermined visual "styles" or formal "containers". The integrity of the text cannot be preserved unless the text is first read, understood, and then properly interpreted. Yet, today, "reading" and along with it, "legibility" have become almost old-fashioned concepts in design. "Attitude," "style," "statement," are code terms behind the usurping approach of much current design.

Technology

During the last two decades the way we work has changed from a workflow that had many clearly defined roles and interrelated professions to "a workflow of one". Today, anyone with a computer can be a graphic designer. Design education has adapted to this new model all too readily to the neglect of underlying craft. Since students are expected to be technically proficient on day one of their first new job, a lot of emphasis has been put on technical expertise at the expense of a good general design culture. But their expert technical knowledge of the tools (computer) is not always accompanied by a solid design preparation in the cultural aspects of design. It is often said, especially in studio settings, that the computer is simply "just another tool" — a fairly neutral object, a sort of "digital pencil" that has simply replaced the traditional tools. But this supposed "neutrality" is rather misleading and a cause of much frustration for the student who can't comprehend why "the colors are wrong, the printout is too big or too small, and the type is all messed up". And herein lies the difficulty. Especially within the CMYK color space of print: the computer is a seemingly unlimited tool, but we use it to produce objects whose characteristics are still quite traditional: physical paper, a pre-defined page size whose scale does not change in the real world, often a fixed reading distance. The most common "mistakes" made by design students have to do with the "scale of the object" being designed. On screen the object's size can change continuously and our reference point is never fixed; in real life, that same object will have a fixed, definite, unchanging size. Students tend to forget this.

RGB & CMYK

There is CMYK and print, and then there is RGB and the web (and screen-based media), and the two are not the same. Designing for the web is different than designing for print. Attentional focus is critical. On the screen too much interaction (unsolicited events and movement of the elements) can be confusing and frustrating. Web design is an art but it's not magic. HTML is very logical and can be done by hand with a text editor. And there is apparent magic in seeing the visual results of a few simple lines of HTML code. But there is no magic, only mystique, in most WYSIWYG web design tools.

Identity and diversity

The blog is the latest salvo in the ongoing dismantling of the traditional order which defined the so-called creative profession. It is but one example of how technology is

empowering anyone, for better of for worse, to simultaneously be the author, designer, producer and distributor of content, whether it be text, still or moving images, or sound. I believe that in this fluid landscape the role of the designer is to keep a sharp focus on the unique but inclusive characteristics of the discipline: its ability to span across other disciplines, focus in on specific details but always keep the whole in full active view. Yes, different media are integrating, but they are not all equivalent. On the contrary, each media has its own valence that allows it to hybridize with other media. The valence is often quite specific, and while we cannot avoid the fact that new "elements" are constantly added to our "periodic table", we must remember to teach those principles which govern the behavior of the elements that are already on the table. These principles (of typography, of color, of light, of time, of sequence, etc.) still make the difference between good graphic design and bad graphic design.

P. T.