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A Working Ideology for Graphic Design

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A Working Ideology for Graphic Design

**Master of Fine Arts
Thesis Exhibition**
Jeremy Nixon

Merrill–Cazier Library
December 2 — 13
Fall Semester 2019

Graduate Committee
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**A Working Ideology
for Graphic Design**

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This exhibition represents an experimental body of work completed for the Caine College of the Arts. It explores the interplay of explicit and implicit functions within semiotics, while simultaneously communicating the college's messages and honestly representing my own aesthetic ideals. Through the treatment of these explorations I hope to create an aesthetic experience for the viewer. That stems from my own ideology – which consists of a myriad of conscious and subconscious beliefs – that make up who I am as a designer.

My conception of form arises from an essentialist approach to space and shape. This conception developed out of stripping ornament and detail, leaving visible only structural and proportional elements. The treatment is sparse at times and rigorous, but strives for a type of honesty. Much of the layout is determined by mathematical forms and systematic intervals. This aesthetic is more rough and concrete than lyrical and abstract. The forms I reference are indebted to older industrial forms, including among others the ubiquitous factory folk-art of North America. They strive for functional unpretentiousness. Like the realist painters I seek inspiration from ordinary people doing their ordinary tasks.

Emphasizing the form and the aesthetic experience can create an interesting dynamic in the work. It creates visual interest but runs the risk of overthrowing its original intended function by delaying or frustrating quick comprehension. As a result, an emphasis on the implicit function, can oftentimes lead to failure because of its inherent ambiguity and decentered messaging. This work represents explorations of the limits within semiotic systems and communication and explores the aesthetic dimension and meaning within form itself.

THESIS STATEMENT

GRAPHIC DESIGN IS THE DISCIPLINE OF MAKING VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS – MARKS, SYMBOLS, IMAGES, AND LETTERFORMS, FORMS THAT BEAR MEANING. THIS ROOT IS WHAT DRIVES GRAPHIC DESIGN FORWARD AND MAKES IT A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE AND DELIGHT. GRAPHIC DESIGN IS NOT ONLY CONCERNED WITH WHAT THE SIGNIFIERS MEAN BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY *HOW* THEY BRING ABOUT MEANING.

Semiotic systems are fluid mechanisms used to enable interaction within society and the environment. The use of visual communication is governed by socially established symbolic codes. Designers understand the complex meanings inherent in visual signs and how these signs are interpreted. It is challenging to grasp the full array of nuances within visual cues and their unconscious inferences. Research has shown how limited our conscious attention can be, while the bulk of information is communicated and processed by our unconscious mind. When we encounter signs within our environment our minds are occupied with deciphering its most surface conceptual meaning. All other inherent meanings are interpreted and understood through our unconsciousness.

This depth of meaning inherent in signs is made clear by Umberto Eco, he explains, “what is commonly called a ‘message’ is in fact a text whose content is a multilevel discourse” (Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1979). Meaning can be defined by its content and by its material. Any material can be arbitrarily endowed with meaning. There are levels of meaning within the signified and levels of meaning within the signifier. Combined, they encompass a sign, that sign becomes a multilevel discourse.

Semiology is a science of forms, because it studies the significations apart from their content. We can consider signs as half-form and half-substance or termed as implicit and explicit function. This thesis breaks down these two inherent functions in order to understand their interplay. This is attempted by taking everyday design assignments – communicating their messages (explicit function) whilst emphasizing the form as a consequential actor in communicating aesthetic meaning (implicit function).

EXPLICIT & IMPLICIT FUNCTION

Graphic design is different than art in that design generally seeks value from an extraneous purpose, whereas art attempts to derive value in itself. Graphic design therefore has features that set itself apart from the other arts in that it *must* be useful. This means representing the information in an understandable way, by utilizing comprehension, spatial relationships, hierarchical structure, legibility, readability, and Gestalt psychology. A designer's activity is essentially functional. A designed object that fails at the purpose for which it is intended is a failure, regardless of whatever aesthetic merits it may have. Graphic design must satisfy a user, and the purpose of the user is always something other than aesthetic.

Form separate from the content and explicit message, encompasses the implicit function. The best works of graphic design are judged both by their utilitarian functionality and their aesthetic merit. Aesthetics are a quality that give the form living energy. It goes by various names but is often described as serenity, liveliness, humor, grace and joy. Graphic design can embody these two functions in varying degrees, but the best design exemplifies and unifies both.

Typically the visual form directly reflects, reinforces, and solidifies the messaging of the content and reflects its intended function. Decentered messages can be problematic because the client is employing the skills of the designer to communicate a singular message. The way we manipulate the form has an essential, transformative, and potentially subversive effect. The form communicates something alongside the content of the message. Sometimes these messages are unified and sometimes they communicate a multitude of meanings simultaneously. Remember Eco's statement of the message being a "multilevel discourse." Abstract forms in a general sense, have conventions within themselves and these forms can be interpreted through their codes. Abstract representations can be deciphered through the conventions of graphic codes by being unconsciously familiar with them.

AUTHORSHIP & HONESTY

As mentioned before, the form separate from the content and explicit message encompass the implicit function. The designer's domain resides in this realm of the implicit function. Abstract, non-representational form embodies meaning. The forms signifiers take have an inherent meaning and therefore are communication all its own – the form is in fact a form of text in itself. Graphic designers operate in this space within the signifier. The devices we use to create signifiers – typography, line, form, color, contrast, scale and weight become our medium. Designers are concerned with the 'internal affairs of formalism' (Michael Rock, *The Designer as Author*, 1996). Our voice surfaces within the treatment of the form, in this way the designer has a small claim of ownership of the message. This means of meaning making via the form is as relevant as the meaning from the content.

“The trick is to find ways to speak through treatment, via a range of rhetorical devices – from the written to the visual to the operational – to make those proclamations as poignant as possible, and to return consistently to central ideas, to re-examine and re-express. In this way we build a body of work, and from that body of work emerges a singular message...The ways those projects are parsed out, disassembled, reorganized and rendered reveals a philosophy, an aesthetic opinion, and argument and a critique.”

(Michael Rock, *Form Content*, 2009)

The meaning I wish to communicate in my work stems from an essentialist approach to space and shape. Developed out of stripping ornament and detail, leaving visible only structural and proportional elements. This treatment is sparse at times and rigorous, but striving for a type of honesty. The layout is determined by mathematical forms and systematic intervals. This aesthetic is more rough and concrete than lyrical and abstract.

Older industrial forms inspire me, including the ubiquitous factory folk-art of North America. They strive for a functional unpretentiousness. Like the realist painters, I look for inspiration from ordinary people doing ordinary tasks. and design that isn't self conscious. The working class comprise a large portion of the population and these individuals live their lives in general anonymity. Their contributions go without any clear authorship yet they often have tremendous influence on the built and shared environment. I've tried to honor their aesthetic by giving it a voice in that space of the implied function within my work.

There is no limit to what can be the source of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic quality is not solely judged by beauty alone. An aesthetic experience arises from the design meeting a higher standard than just being beautiful. Honesty is required from the designer. Graphic design can improve our everyday environment by making it

more aesthetic. Objects of daily use, interactions with others, eating, walking and working can all be more enjoyable with continuous interaction with quality design. Aesthetic experiences are not reserved for the upper classes and aren't exclusive to fine art institutions. We have a responsibility to make the world a better place.

CONCLUSION

When we analyze graphic design in its rawest form we discover that the framework of semiotics helps us deconstruct and uncover the root of graphic design. Graphic design is the discipline of making visual representations that bear meaning. We learn that these systems of signs are fluid mechanisms governed by socially established symbolic codes. These forms of communication are a multilevel discourse that are interpreted by our conscious and subconscious mind. Each sign consists of half-form and half-substance or an implicit and explicit function. Graphic design is unique in the arts because it *must* be useful and satisfy a user. The form is the implicit function – aside from the content and explicit function. The designer's domain resides in this realm. The designer's voice surfaces within the treatment of the form, in this way the designer has a small claim of ownership of the message. My own aesthetic convictions and world view arise within this space of the work. Graphic design is a discipline of form.

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