

Design as a social and political force
or
Why design education must counter the tradition of the apolitical designer

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Design Renaissance International Conference, Glasgow, Scotland 9.4.93

American Institute of Graphic Arts National Conference, Seattle, Washington 9.29.95

This decade finds us in a crisis of values in the United States. Our increasingly multicultural society is experiencing a breakdown in shared values – national values, tribal values, personal values, even family values – consensual motivating values that create a common sense of purpose in a community.

The question is how can a heterogeneous society develop shared values and yet encourage cultural diversity and personal freedom? Designers and design education are part of the problem, and can be part of the answer. We cannot afford to be passive anymore. Designers must be good citizens and participate in the shaping of our government and society. As designers we could use our particular talents and skills to encourage others to wake up and participate as well.

Before the U.S. congratulates itself too much on the demise of Communism, we must remember that our American capitalist democracy is not what it used to be either. Much of our stagnation comes from this breakdown of values. Entrepreneurial energy and an optimistic work ethic have deteriorated into individual self interest, complacency, corporate greed, and resentment between ethnic groups and economic classes. Our traditional common American purpose is fading – that sense of building something new where individuals could progress through participating in a system that provided opportunity. Consumerism and materialism now seem to be the only ties that bind. The one group that seems to be bound by more than this is the Far Right; but their bond is regressive, a desire to force fundamentalist prescriptive values on the rest of us.

In the Reagan-Bush era we were told it was all ok, that we could spend and consume with no price tag attached. During this period, graphic designers enjoyed the spoils of artificial prosperity with the same passive hedonism as the rest of the country. Now we are beginning to realize it was not all ok. The earth is being poisoned, its resources depleted, and the US has gone from a creditor to a debtor nation. Our self-absorption and lack of activism has left a void filled by minority single-issue groups aggressively pushing their concerns.

There are serious threats to our civil liberties in the United States from both fundamentalist censorship of the Right and political correctness from the Left. We have seen the dismemberment of artistic freedom at the National Endowment for the Arts in recent years, and aggressive attempts to censor public schools' teaching from Darwin to Hemingway to safe sex continue. A conservative Congress continues to push for content restrictions on internet discourse. And as graphic designers specializing in visual communications, the content of our communications could be seriously curtailed if we do not defend our freedom of expression.

But even more troubling is our field's own self-censorship. How many graphic designers today would feel a loss if their freedom of expression was handcuffed? Most of our colleagues never exercise their right to communicate on public issues or potentially controversial content. Remove our freedom of speech and graphic designers might never notice. We have trained a profession that feels political or social concerns are either extraneous to our work, or inappropriate.

Thinking back to 1968, the atmosphere at Unimark International during my first year of work typified this problem. Unimark (an idealistic international design office with Massimo Vignelli and Jay Doblin as vice presidents and Herbert Bayer on the Board) was dedicated to the ideal of the rationally objective professional. The graphic designer was to be the neutral transmitter of the client's messages. Clarity and objectivity were the goal. During that year, the designers I worked with, save one notable exception, were all remarkably disinterested in the social and political upheavals taking place around us. Vietnam was escalating with body counts touted on every evening newscast, the New Left rioted before the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, and Detroit was still smoking from its riots just down the street from our office. Yet hardly a word was spoken on these subjects. We were encouraged to wear white lab coats, perhaps so the messy external environment would not contaminate our surgically clean detachment.

These white lab coats make an excellent metaphor for the apolitical designer, cherishing the myth of universal value-free design – that design is a clinical process akin to chemistry, scientifically pure and neutral, conducted in a sterile laboratory environment with precisely predictable results. Yet Lawrence and Oppenheimer and a thousand other examples teach us that even chemists and physicists must have a contextual view of their work in the social/political world around them.

During that time, I became increasingly interested in the social idealism of the times: the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam peace movement, the anti-materialism and social experimentation of the New Left, and radical feminism. Yet it was very difficult to relate these new ideas to the design that I was practicing and the communication process that I loved so much. Or perhaps the difficulty was not the values of design so much as the values of design community. About all I could connect with was designing and sending (to appalled family members) an anti-Vietnam feminist Christmas card and silk-screening t-shirts with a geometricized 'Swiss' version of the feminist symbol. Meanwhile, we continued to serve the corporate and advertising worlds with highly 'professional' design solutions.

The implication of the word 'professional' as we use it is indicative of the problem here. How often do we hear, 'Act like a professional' or 'I'm a professional, I can handle it.' Being a professional means to put aside one's personal reactions regardless of the situation and to carry on. Prostitutes, practitioners of the so-called oldest profession, must maintain an extreme of cool objectivity about this most intimate of human activities, highly disciplining their personal responses to deliver an impartial and consistent product to their clients.

This ideal of the dispassionate professional distances us from ethical and political values. Think of the words used to describe the disciplined objective professional, whether it be scientist, doctor or lawyer: impartial, dispassionate, disinterested. These become pejorative terms in a difficult world crying for compassion, interest, concern, commitment and involvement. Disinterest is appropriate for a neutral arbitrator but not for an advocate. In fact, most often design education trains students to think of themselves as passive arbitrators of the message between the client/sender and audience/receiver, rather than as advocates for the message content or the audience. Here is the challenge – how to achieve the objectivity and consistency of professionalism without stripping oneself of personal convictions.

Our concept of graphic design professionalism has been largely shaped, and generally for the better, by the legacy of 20th century Modernism as it has come to us through the Bauhaus and Swiss lineages. However, there are several dominant aspects of this Modernist ethic that have done much to distance designers from their cultural milieu. The ideals, forms, methods and mythology of Modernism are a large part of this problem of detachment, including the paradigms of universal form, abstraction, self-referentialism, value free design, rationality and objectivity.