

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

# Do we need an alternative history of graphic design, or would an alternative future be more useful?

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Graphic design has always been hard to place into an historical context. Is it a craft, a trade, a practice or an industry? Are we, as graphic designers, imagineers of new visions for the world or simply facilitators for industry and commerce? Or is this now a moot point given that outsiders, cultural mavens without formal training, are increasingly part of the field of visual communication?

Adrian Shaughnessy proposed in his 2006 essay *The Cult of Graphic Design*<sup>1</sup> a distinct split in our practice. He stated 'Graphic design used to be homogeneous: everyone agreed about the fundamental principles, even if they disagreed about what was good design and what was bad design'. He continued to divide the practice of graphic design into two discrete camps: one led by industry; graphic designers responding to consumer needs and wants. The second, and arguably more interesting section of design practice, pursuing a more culturally enriching experience, being the engineers of their own destiny.

But arguably there is a third, and equally valid group that will in time come to form part of an overall history of graphic design: the non-graphic designers, the outsiders and DIY creatives, people interested in culture who 'use' graphic design purely as a mechanic, a means to communicate without seeing themselves within an industry, practice or trade. This third alternative, rather than being driven by design is driven by culture. In this third definition graphic design is less important than the act of trying to explain, question and understand the world. The mechanics of graphic design become insignificant; it is no longer a practice of secrecy and professionalism where a rich technical language separates those on the inside from the masses, as it moves to a more embracing condition where amateurs and professionals alike communicate to the world through the visual medium, albeit some better than others.

Fraser Muggeridge's 2015 exhibition 'Towards an Alternative History of Graphic Design: Schmuck, POP, bRIAN, Assembling' (De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill, UK from August to October 2015) sought to explore the work of some of these outsiders and cultural commentators. Muggeridge is right to be cautious about proposing such a rethink in how we contextualize graphic design, and his caveat 'towards' is telling, stating that we are not there yet. William Addison Dwiggins, the American type designer and calligrapher, coined the phrase 'graphic design' in 1922, not as a positive statement of activity, but more as a means of collecting a

wide range of often unrelated tasks that he performed as a newspaper designer, from cutting out to laying up, and from drawing to specifying type.

So arguably our 'history' of graphic design is one born of trying to compartmentalize and summarize a set of activities that have always been fractious. The ebb and flow of time at one point coagulated this disparate set of activities under the helmsmanship of the graphic designer and now is again dispersing them through generalists and specialists, professional designers and cultural enthusiasts. Increasingly, it is non-design professionals leading the way. The collection of works in Mugeridge's exhibition exemplify four manifestations of this outsider approach, each of whom used the form of a publication.

In this exhibition, we see four published works laid out around a gallery wall providing an overview of sequence, colour range and density, presenting the publications in a way that we usually don't see them. We see *Beau Geste* – beautiful Gestetner<sup>2</sup> – *Press' Schmuck* (1972–1978) by Mexican artists Martha Hellion and Felipe Ehrenberg together with David Mayor who produced eight issues focusing on Fluxus and Mail art, with a wanton abandon of conventions and boundaries of disciplines. Heinz Ohff's 'Pop-Art und die Folgen!!!' (*Pop Art and the Consequences*, 1968), with visuals by Wolf Vostell. Hansjorg Mayer's *bRIAN*, a student-led publication that was the result of experimental teaching by Mayer at the Watford School of Art in the UK that actively sought to embrace chance and the happy-accident. Finally, we see Richard Kostelanetz and Henry Korn's *Assembling* that produced 13 anthologies of supposedly 'unpublishable material' from 1970 to 1982, each invited contributor submitting 1000 copies of a single page of their work that was then 'assembled' into a single publication.

Within the exhibition original pages from the four publications are pasted directly onto the wall, with little contextualization referencing a Fluxus stream of consciousness. As one publication is placed directly next to another juxtapositions of type and image are formed, a series of relationships created that were never intended by the various authors, but that are in keeping with the spirit of the disparate artefacts. Retrospectively, looking at this body of work collated into a gallery setting it was never intended for (these were low-fi outputs, often by non-professionals), they seem uncannily appropriate at this current junction of graphic design lineage and history.

Technology is a liberator and an enabler. Mugeridge recalls that the development of the golf ball typewriter in the 1960s and 1970s made it possible for people to change typefaces, liberating typefaces from the monopoly of the print shop. Technological changes continue to come and the rate of change seems to increase. We are entering an unprecedented era of democratization of both technology and skills, and these works seem a profoundly pertinent reflection on the nature of outsider publications. With this liberation of technology and content perhaps there is less of a barrier between the professional and the amateur, those on the inside and those considered outsiders.

To return to Mugeridge's statement of intent, 'Towards an alternative history of graphic design', perhaps this was never possible and never intended to be. What the exhibition does very successfully however is propose an alternative future for graphic design. A non-exclusive, democratized future, one where the protagonists of these seminal 1960s and 1970s publications would feel welcome. A future where wishing to express opinions or thoughts isn't hindered by professional barriers to entry or technological restrictions.

ENDS



Images credit: Images courtesy of De La Warr Pavilion. Photography by Nigel Green, 2015.

## Notes

1. Adrian Shaughnessy's 'The Cult of Graphic Design' published in *Looking Closer Five, Critical Writings on Graphic Design* (2006).
2. The Gestetner machine, stencil duplicator or mimeograph, was embraced by artists and fanzine producers as this technology allowed for the cheap reproduction and publication of documents.

## Notes on contributor

**Gavin Ambrose** is a Senior Lecturer on the Graphic Design BA at the University of Brighton. Since 2004 he has published with Bloomsbury Press, and his latest book, *Design Genius* was nominated for best Scholarly, Academic and Reference book at the 2015 British Book Design and Production Awards. His current practice-based work focuses on book publishing and design, including work for the late seminal photographer Raghbir Singh. Ambrose is currently the Design Director of the 2016 Design Research Society conference, to be held in Brighton next summer and is researching and compiling a book on the late Malcolm McLaren's sketchbooks.