

BOOK AND EXHIBITION REVIEW

Royal College of Art's 'GraphicsRCA: Fifty'

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GraphicsRCA: Fifty Years and Beyond, 5 November–22 December 2014, Royal College of Art Gulbenkian Gallery, Accompanying book 'GraphicsRCA: Fifty Years and Beyond' (ISBN 978-1-91064-200-9)

The winter of 1962–63 in London brought the coldest weather in 200 years. So spring 1963's 'Graphics RCA: Fifteen years' of work of the School of Graphic Design' at the Royal College of Art Gallery was a warming boost, with its luminous 'prints, illustrations, books, publicity, television and films'. Forward half a century: the RCA provided respite from the weather again with the 5 November 2014 launch of 'GraphicsRCA: Fifty'. It too featured graphic paraphernalia from the intervening years of graphic design at the institution, enriched by the stories of its more illustrious students and educators. And, with an accompanying publication and series of seminars brightening the days up to Christmas, it provided much more than an escape from the UK weather.

Of those students and educators: The Royal College of Art (RCA) has a staff and alumni widely regarded to have significantly contributed to UK design from the latter half of the twentieth century onwards. The College is unique in its solely postgraduate offering in art and design, and was ranked top of the QS World University Rankings 2015 in the subject area. This institution has a reputation to live up to, and it assertively flexed its credentials with 'GraphicsRCA: Fifty'.

The original call for alumni work for the exhibition read:

As a student at the RCA some of your college work is already housed in the RCA's 'Special Collections and Graphic Design Archives'. Yet, after initial conversations with graduates, we know there is more to consider than what these archives currently hold.

That quieter ambition of 'more to consider' and the implicit cross-references to RCA's archives and its current graduates was particularly well explored through the series of accompanying events, and most emphatically within the accompanying publication.

The 'GraphicsRCA: Fifty' publication has a chapter by Senior Tutor Adrian Shaughnessy titled 'A cloud-nine academic monastery'. This is apt since the RCA's Gulbenkian Gallery did indeed feel like a place of worship for the exhibition opening. That was because it was easy to feel reverence for the cultural icons like the bright red lips and tongue of the Rolling Stones logo by John Pasche; or alumni including Margaret Calvert and Jock Kinneir, whose 1957–1967 designs for typography and signage adorn every significant carriageway in the UK; and contemporary contributors to graphic design and its education including the likes of Neville Brody, Teal Triggs, and Adrian Shaughnessy. The sense of pilgrimage was heightened even further by the quietly intimidating presence of many of those on the roll call.

These big-hitting names and images are the media-magnets that attracted the focus of most previews and reviews. But it was the other half of the exhibition in the gallery entrance that helped to transition the exposition from mere retrospective visual epithet to deeper meaning and resonance. The exhibition was most colourful for me in this more monotone space. Here, it quietly focused on reflections of the RCA by some of the people behind the productions. It is where the purpose of the exhibition resounded – dodging accusations of navel-gazing by its implicit posing of more satiating open-ended questions. For instance, how does the cultural reputation of an iconic school affect the individual within it? To what extent do students and staff even experience an ‘RCA-ness’ within these walls? How does an individual experience and resolve the tension between commercial and artistic aspects of their work in a world of employability-focus and commoditization of learning? Being the smaller area of the whole, there was really only space to infer more questions than answers, but there were some whispers of riposte. For instance, the most touching piece on display for me was a freshly-researched and produced simple scroll of the names of all the people who have passed through RCA Graphics over its lifetime. It touched by its allusion to the memorial roll call of honour, containing the names of the well-known and well-regarded ‘generals’ of British graphic design, but it also contained the names of those who have quietly and assiduously contributed to the profession and its education. It hinted at the symbiosis between the art and design institution and its alumni – each party iteratively nurturing individual but aligned reputations through their joint-achievements over years and decades. In this metaphor to the roll call of battle, is the ‘unknown soldier’, then, represented by the majority alumni (even at the RCA) whose skilful graphic work may cast significant cultural, social or educational influence but whose names remain relatively anonymous or subsumed amongst commercial studios, practices and institutions?

The accompanying book takes up this theme too in its cleverly-folded cover that wraps its contents in the names of past and present RCA students and staff chronologically and alphabetically. It details this more fully in a beautifully delicate four-page spread: ‘1963/2013 Graphic Design at the RCA – RCA Staff and Students’, which is even more redolent of a remembrance roll call with its ghostly monotone of silver on black. Again, rather touching – simultaneously a demonstration by its numbers but also a retort in its simple humanity to the accusation that higher education institutions (even at postgraduate level) have become academic ‘sausage factories’. The book is also where the questions implied by the exhibition are explored much more fully. The research has been painstaking, with extensive interviews with alumni and staff. Richard Guyatt (previous Chair of Graphic Design at RCA) features with his 1950 ‘Head, Heart and Hand’ essay, which themes are threaded throughout the book by a series of visual essays. These scaffold the thorough interviews and other short essays. Each interview probes the interviewees about their practice and experiences, with the strong commonality being their notions of the Royal College of Art. This all sounds as though it could be a mutual love-in, but the insights are genuine and thoughtful. The late actor Alan Rickman (student 1968–69) concludes his interview with a hardly gushing (but nevertheless significant): ‘In retrospect, being at the RCA was like walking across a necessary bridge to the rest of my working life.’ Alex Maranzano says of his time (1965–68): ‘For me it was excellent, so different to everything I had previously experienced.’ That exciting appraisal appears to contrast with the experience of Richard Doust (1962–65): ‘We were basically left to ourselves. So actual teaching was very limited.’ But Doust goes



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on: 'What was created, however, was a dynamic working environment where a core of the students all fed off each other.' But more recent graduates Emma Thomas and Kirsty Carter (2003–5) are pragmatic in pointing out that: 'The RCA has high fees, and London is an expensive place to study, so it can have a major impact on the demographic of students, at postgraduate level in particular.' In other words, one needs to be able to afford to study in London at the RCA.

Current Dean of the School, Professor Neville Brody, has said that the RCA 'has produced many of the leading and most innovative practitioners of the modern era'. The contribution to British culture and way-of-life of some of the work and people within the exhibition lends weight to his assertion. And yet, Thomas and Carter indicate more of a coming together of talent than the production of it in the conclusion to their interview: 'The College brought together some amazing students from all over the world – we met some very talented and interesting people. And we met each other!' So is that the crux of what the RCA provides – bringing together excellent students and showcasing interesting talent and practices? Is RCA-ness that simple? Then why, apart from my own innate insecurities, have I a slight sense of intimidation amongst the prolific outputs of the RCA and its creators at the exhibition opening? Despite the invite, a nagging feeling of having accidentally stumbled in from the rain to a close-knit party? It is perhaps explained by another privilege that Thomas and Carter earned during their time at the College a decade ago: 'If you look at both of our lives now the RCA is still very present, most of our closest friends and collaborators went there – the opportunities we still get are often linked to the College.' *I am an outsider.*

That enduring presence of the RCA in one's being as an alumnus, the self-assuredness and foresight to hold its own special collections and archives, to so emphatically mark the significant anniversaries of one of its schools, and in doing so to yet again challenge notions of graphic design and graphic design education: is this the College's uniqueness? Perhaps: the extensive exhibition, seminar series and book are not just about RCA-ness, but are RCA-ness.

Notes

'GraphicsRCA: Fifty' was held from 5 November–22 December 2014 at the Royal College of Art Gulbenkian Gallery. The curators were: Teal Triggs, Jeff Willis, Richard Doust, and Adrian Shaughnessy. Curatorial associates were Abbie Vickress and Natasha Trotman. The external alumni adviser was Michele Jannuzzi. The book 'GraphicsRCA: Fifty Years and Beyond' is a revealing and engaging addition to the bookshelf of those with an interest in graphic design education. It stands as a comprehensive volume of a single influential institution in its own right, rather than merely a catalogue of the exhibition. It is published by the Royal College of Art, ISBN 978-1-91064-200-9.

GraphicsRCA: Fifty Years is travelling and recently showed at the Museu Nacional de República in Brasília, Brazil (4 September – 27 September 2015).

Notes on contributor

Ian Sharman is part-time tutor for final-year undergraduate and master students in graphic design at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, and Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He is sole-tutor for the courses 'Introduction to Graphic Design' and 'Developing Graphic Design' within the University's Office of Lifelong Learning. His PhD research at University of Edinburgh investigates student visualisations of their graphics education and future professions through graphic methods of inquiry and exposition. He is Research Officer for the Graphic Design Educators' Network.

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