

**“Though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a different world.”**

Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

In recent decades, the field of graphic design has undergone changes that are nothing short of revolutionary. Design has emerged from its roots as a simple service industry and become acutely self-aware, examining its role within culture at large. The power of design as a cultural force has been widely acknowledged, and practitioners now grapple with difficult questions regarding their role in consumerism and their professional and social responsibilities. The designer’s individual perspective is now considered an important part of the design process. The role of the designer as an author and cultural producer has been a radical shift that continues to change design practice.

How did this massive change take place, and how has it played out in design practice? To understand the impact that this has had on the world of graphic design, the history and underlying structure of design must be understood.

Design stayed in the background of commercial activity for many years, as a silent servant to the products or ideas that it represented. The Modernist ideal was for the designer to be a neutral conduit communicating a client’s message to their audience. Design theorists had long hoped to discover a universal mode of communication through design principles that would transcend human error or subjectivity. Michael Rock, examining the emergence and acceptance of authorship in design, writes about the roots of Modernist thinking. “[Joseph] Müller-Brockmann and a slew of fellow researchers such as Kepes, Dondis and Arnheim worked to uncover a pre-existing order and form in the way a scientist reveals a natural ‘truth.’” It was believed that a mode of expression could be discovered and quantified, to be applied as pure, uninterrupted communication. This theory manifested itself in the International Style, originating in Switzerland, which was characterized by the strict use of a grid, sans serif typefaces and a rejection of ornament and decoration.

Kuhn, Thomas S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second Edition, University of Chicago Press, 1970.



An example of the International Style

Cover for *New Graphic Design 2*, Carlo L. Vivarelli, designer, 1959.

Rock, Michael, “The designer as author,” *Eye 20*, 1996, pp. 46.

Beginning roughly in the 1970s, the yet-unnamed concept of authorship was the catalyst that most significantly expanded design's understanding of itself and its own role within society. Beginning with Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault's theories questioning the role of the author, proceeding through a succession of more personal projects, from advocacy and pro bono work to self-published efforts, designers more and more began to do what was previously unacceptable and use their personal voice as a means of communication and expression. The realization that designers were always authors in some capacity – no matter how hard they tried to suppress their own perspective and biases – dispelled the myth of the silent communicator. This also encouraged design to further assert itself as a presence independent of a client or commission.

Design has often been characterized as a combination of science and art, but this combination is tenuous and uneasy. On one side, it relies on the formal elements of artistic expression and aesthetic beauty. At the same time, it attempts to achieve an understanding of human nature and social patterns based on methodical research and testing. Design seems to struggle in locating itself between art and science. It is commonly understood as a decorative art, but the design profession is actively seeking an opposite understanding by the general public as a powerful communication tool and a quantifiably beneficial service for business.

Mainstream, client-based work has traditionally been more closely aligned with science, due to its need to be an effective tool of business strategy with an end goal that achieves measurable results. Usually, a designed object must communicate an idea or convince an audience of something. Design strategies often rely on psychology to explain why they will be successful. One simple example of this is the use of color psychology to explain how a certain palette will affect the attitude of the viewer. Research, focus groups and other systematic testing are tools used to determine what will succeed in the marketplace.

The Corporate Design Foundation (CDF) is an organization that educates business leaders and students about the impact of design in

**“Does it really help to imagine that there is some one full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to the ultimate goal?”**

Kuhn, 171

business. This organization publishes *@issue*, a magazine that features case studies of product design, architecture and communications design that “improve the quality of life and effectiveness of organizations through design. *@issue* tries to quantify the value of design through “success stories” with specific results. In an article about the redesign of the Federal Express identity, cost savings and market research are cited as specific factors of the project’s effectiveness.

Design proponents have hoped to validate its role in business through such result-oriented documentation. Paul Rand, who many credit with building a strong case for design in business, made such an impression on IBM chairman Thomas J. Watson that he coined the phrase, “Good design is good business.” This statement would be echoed by designers countless times, seeking more legitimacy for their practice. But Watson had a very rigid view of which type of design was “good business.” In a 1976 lecture, he said, “Experimental design carried beyond disciplined control often becomes nonfunctional, wasteful, and expensive. Good design has to meet functional requirements.”

Design work expressing personal concerns or exploring formal experiments were considered “avant garde” and were not viewed as practical for commercial application. Beyond being impractical, they were viewed as an improper use of graphic design. These experiments were categorized closer to the activities of artists. (It should be noted that the line between art and design is very blurry, and a definition that divides art and design has proven to be quite elusive.) However, avant garde explorations, which seemed outrageous at first, expanded design, giving it more freedom within which to practice.

“Once a service art, graphic design has, during the last decade, rapidly emerged as a strong, often independent force on the printed page,” Joseph Giovanni wrote in 1990. Not only was design emerging on the page, but the designer was also shaking off old restrictions and practicing a new freedom. The role of design education in this process was crucial. Beginning in the more progressive schools, educators like Wolfgang Weingart, Dan Friedman and Katherine McCoy began

from the Corporate Design Foundation’s mission, <http://www.cdf.org/frameset.html>



“How Federal Express Became FedEx,” *@issue*, Volume 1 No. 1,

Heller, Steven, *Paul Rand*, pg. 152, Phaidon Press, London, 1999.

Giovanni, Joseph, “A Zero Degree of Graphics,” in *Graphic Design USA*, Walker Art Center, 1990.

pushing students to explore personal expression in assignments. They were carving out a place for design, and especially the designer, in the wake of a complete shift in perspective.

Designers have often been expected to be “creative” and contribute the authorship of some humor, or a new way of looking at the idea being presented. This visual sophistication and wit was highly developed in the 1960s with the “Big Idea” movement in advertising; however to some, these techniques fall far short of contributing meaningful content. Jeffrey Keedy chides, “...As if graphic designers cornered the intellectual market with their visual puns and ‘big ideas’ that operate on the conceptual level of a knock-knock joke.” Can’t design communicate on a higher plane than jokes and puns? The extremely limited expectation of what a designer could contribute to a project was challenged.

Keedy, Jeffrey, “*Design Modernism 8.0*,” in *Rant (Emigre 64)*, pg. 65, Sacramento, 2003.

At the same time, the disconnect between the personal voice of a designer and the expectation that they simply communicate any message that they are presented with led to a variety of work that began to assume heightened authorship. In the turbulent political atmosphere of the Vietnam War, designers created protest posters. Pro-bono work for non-profit organizations became a way for a designer to work on projects that aligned with her beliefs. In the ‘80s and ‘90s, the public attitude toward corporations had changed from trust to suspicion and then to hostility. This gave rise to further alignment of personal values and beliefs with the types of commissions a designer would take on. Each of these changes made authorship a key component of the design process.

The rejection of Modernism’s certainty, optimism and universality left the postmodern designer with many questions and few answers. The personal, individual experience was one of the few things that could be confidently stated as fact. Theories of a universal communication aesthetic became problematic, if not judgemental and stereotypical; this meant that design’s methods and assumptions had to be completely reconsidered.

The link between design and art led to the changes that have taken place in the design field over the past 30 years. More and more, designers became willing to work in the ambiguous territory between art and design. We will see that the designers who have rejected a scientific basis for their methods have changed the way design is practiced in general.

Design is linked with art for many reasons. Most obviously, it is a visual medium that requires an understanding and mastery of accepted aesthetic principles including color, scale, balance, movement, and so on. Design is usually taught within the context of an art department, where artists and designers undergo the same foundational training. Design activities are often characterized by some sort of “creative” contribution from the designer. Art evokes human experience, and in many ways design tries to do the same thing by trying to connect with a specific audience.

Design – being a natural landing place for creative-types seeking a profession that promises a steady paycheck – is heavily populated with artists. It makes sense that the artist-turned-designer will return to artistic expression in their work. But what happens when artists masquerade as designers, or when the distinctions are not so clear? Suddenly these artist/designers (“designists” is the term proposed by Denise Gonzalez Crisp) demand the right to express themselves, to explore personal interests, and demand the validity of the personal voice in design. They are criticized by “proper” designers for being indulgent and inappropriate, but in the end they expand the realm of graphic design through their transgressions.

In the postmodern world, blanket statements of fact were no longer convincing or effective. Designers began to tap into the realm of human experience to express ideas and communicate with their audience. Logic, facts and arguments were no longer convincing; designers turned instead to the “more potent realm of feeling – the realm of graphic design, with its ability to pair image and word.” Design hoped to evoke ideas, rather than dictate them. The hope was that the design would

**“...to desert the paradigm is to cease practicing the science it defines. We shall shortly discover that such desertions do occur. They are the pivots about which scientific revolutions turn.”**

Kuhn, 34

Giovanni, Joseph, “A Zero Degree of Graphics,” in *Graphic Design USA*, pg. 203, Walker Art Center, 1990.

“carry imaginations to other worlds.” No longer was the content, the writing, illustrations and photography, enough to express the full idea. It was believed that design, via the designers authored contribution, could communicate on a higher, intangible, subconscious level.

“If writing is receding on the page, the best contemporary graphic designers are themselves emerging as a new type of writer. [April] Greiman, for example, layers verbal and visual images in what she calls “information texture” so that words and pictures are complementary... The elements depend on each other for their meaning.” This “information texture” is a very subjective technique, but one that became incredibly common as designers tried to put a post-modern face on design. Barthes’ “tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture” could be one inspiration of this layered, fragmented, collaged technique that hoped to transcend traditional communication. Readers were expected to synthesize the words and images, becoming authors themselves, and interpreting the work in their own personal way.

Even today, artistic expression in design is often criticized for working in areas inappropriate to the discipline. Jessica Helfand, in a recent talk entitled “*Culture is not Always Popular*,” criticized design education for allowing designers to work under the guise of art. Helfand (a student of Rand, it should be noted) criticized student design projects that were “without practical context or intellectual foundation,” though she conceded they were valid personal explorations. This criticism displays a continued resistance to the use of graphic design in the expression of the personal voice. Why does the fact that designers could produce work that functions on very similar conceptual and formal ground as contemporary art draw such sharp criticism?

At the root of the art/science divide in design is this problem of intangibility vs. concreteness. As soon as a designer begins expressing a personal point of view, the only claim to legitimacy can be made on an intangible level. It is argued that the design connects with the audience on a subconscious, undetectable level. David Carson describes his process as a spiritual, intuitive design sensibility.

Giovanni, Joseph, “A Zero Degree of Graphics,” in *Graphic Design USA*, pg. 207, Walker Art Center, 1990.

“...we see voice expressed less as an act of subversive will, and more as a staging of false identity: this work says a lot about designers wanting to be artists, using “design” as a weak metaphor for “art” and expressing their personal experience without practical context or intellectual foundation.”

from “*Culture is not always Popular*,” <http://www.designobserver.com/archives/000048.html>

This intuitive design technique is exemplified by many designers including David Carson and Charles Wilkin. They create work that is often highly stylized, and try to connect with audiences on a subconscious, emotional level. Wilkin explains the philosophy of his work, saying, "...[D]esign becomes the conduit which connects clients with their audience both visually and emotionally. Our unique approach to design utilizes not only dialog and strategy but intuition and the human experience as a means to develop visual solutions that are both engaging and memorable... This conceptual approach to design allows [us] to blend elements of art and design together – resulting in work that engages its audience on multiple levels."

<http://www.automatic-iam.com>

This authored, intuitive design can't be proven (or disproven), which may be its greatest strength. Whereas many of Modernism's ideologies have been determined to be ineffective and even culturally inappropriate, personal, authored design stays on safe, if subjective ground. "Remove specifics and convert to ambiguities" is the way Jeffrey Keedy's philosophy captures this attitude.

What began as personal work has led to heavily authored work in the mainstream. The advances of the avant garde, which are criticized at first, in the end serve the mainstream by creating more options for design practice at large. Certain designers have contributed so significantly to projects that they are listed as one of the authors of the work (most notably Bruce Mau's work on Zone Books or *S, M, L, XL* with Rem Koolhaas). When authorship is recognized as part of the designer's role, there is the opportunity to be more significantly involved in projects, intellectually and strategically (or at least to participate in more than just the visual aspects of a project.)

The '90s brought highly conceptual work that tried to do more than just get a laugh or draw out a thin metaphor. Studios such as Cahan and Associates produced work that translated highly technical fields into understandable yet unexpected explanations. On these projects, the designer was interpreting the given information, while also contributing a high level of authorship to the project. In one project for a company

**"Is it really any wonder that the price of significant scientific advance is really a commitment that runs the risk of being wrong?"**

(Kuhn, 101)



*S, M, L, XL*, a collaboration between designer Bruce Mau and architect Rem Koolhaas

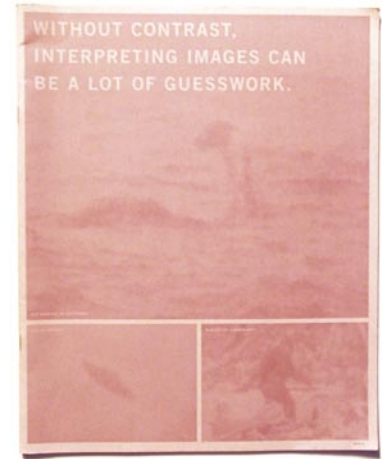
developing ultrasound technology that produced clearer images, blurry photographs were used to show the difficulty in telling the difference between a UFO and a frisbee, for example.

When authorship has clearly opened up new opportunities for designers, why is there still such clear resistance to allowing design to simply express the personal voice? Realizing the notion of authorship opened design up to vast formal, professional, personal and entrepreneurial possibilities. It is not the end-point of the development of design practice, but a crucial stage in its life. It was a revolution that was in some ways fueled by technological advances, but in the long run will prove to be far more important than the introduction of any tool or technique.

The concept of authorship is critical in understanding the role of a designer within contemporary culture. A designer is not simply an interface of communication; inherent in the process of design is the addition of conscious and unconscious layers of information and meaning. Authorship is most simply defined as the contribution of a designer to the work he creates. Where Modernist ideals sought to suppress the personal voice, we now accept it as a given and examine where it can emerge forcefully and where it remains more subtle. As authorship has become a recognized part of a designer's contribution to any given project, more opportunities have been made available, with greater creative freedom and heightened responsibility.

In the end, design is not required to exist in the service of anything, be it commerce, intellectual ideas or personal experience. It does not rely on any one of these types of expression to gain its identity; it is free to comment on and contribute to any of them. Design is flexible enough to embrace either art or science (it doesn't even have to choose one over the other), and it should be free to fully explore either extreme.

Design can be used to sell a product to a specific audience. It can also be used to work out a personal curiosity or obsession. It is free to fluctuate between the poles of science and art.



*Molecular Biosystems, Inc. 1998  
Annual Report, Cahan and  
Associates, designers*

Design is powerful because it has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to such differing spheres of contemporary life, from pop culture to postmodern philosophy, from business marketing strategy to completely gratuitous expressions of personal artistic voice. It is free to take whatever form the designer deems necessary in a certain situation and, like many things these days, doesn't seem to have any hard and fast rules, just a bunch of questions.

**“We may have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth.”**

Kuhn, 170