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Sustainable Graphic Design: Modification of Production, Distribution and Consumption Processes

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Abstract: Monthly, with every bank statement customers receive promotional packages related to credit, telemarketing, and special promotions. In every department store, in every season and on every special date, millions of catalogues and newspapers are being printed, which use everything from the most expensive digital printing processes to the traditional newspapers in order to broadcast their offers. Some of these objects cost more than all of the books that a child uses to study an entire elementary school year. Direct mail is being used to send sales magazines, brochures and fliers. Along with each product that we purchase comes a manual, at times several of them in different languages, warranties, and special promotions. Non-negotiable drug samples are presented in large cardboard boxes containing a single pill that tends to be inside a metal packaging. These are some examples of what our current culture of consumption has brought about. This work presents a critical analysis of the commitment of graphic designers and their responsibility so that, based on profound ethical considerations, they would change the chain of the designed.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Graphic Design, Non-Recyclable Waste
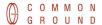
Introduction

PRACTICES THAT RESULT from marketing have saturated the world of graphic communication with printed messages that have no other destination than being thrown away. If we could at least be able to say that these wastes are biodegradable, we would have the pseudo-vision that no environmental remain was left, however, that would be a fallacy.

Daily, all over the world, millions of objects designed under the terms of advertising and propagandistic discourses circulate among the masses that persuasion efforts and consumption mottos have turned recipients of visual messages into.

Direct mail during the recent decade has becomes an environmental nightmare for people who, without asking for it, what is more, without understanding how their address was obtained, receive promotions of all kinds: supermarket periodicals, department store flyers, telemarketing catalogues, religious magazines, political propaganda, surveys, etc.

Likewise, in any field, if analyzed, one can find an enormous waste of resources in the process of promoting brands, based on the defence of free market and free competition. A worrying example is that of medical laboratories, which daily distribute drug samples in which a single pill uses the same amount of material and the same container as a complete pack of pills that is sold in the drugstore.

In each department store, every season and for every special occasion, millions of catalogues and magazines are printed which use everything form the most expensive digital

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printing processes to the traditional newspapers in order to broadcast their offer. Some of these objects cost more than all the books used by a child during an entire year of elementary school.

This work presents a critical analysis of the commitment of graphic designers and their responsibility so that, based on profound ethic considerations, they would modify the chain of design.

The Purposes of Graphic Design

The objective of graphic design is the configuration of messages in two-dimensional supports that are conceived for their multiple reproduction and massive broadcasting, therefore, it creates objects such as books, magazines, newspapers, posters, flyers, billboards, booklets, brochures, catalogues, labels, packing, etc., which are recognized and organized according to a specialized taxonomy. This implicates a direct relationship with man, and the task is conditioned based on its usefulness; the *what for* defines the designed.

The graphic designer's *praxis* consists of endowing the designed objects with a visual organization that optimizes their communicative functions, projecting coherently the disposition of elements that would be submitted to the users' perception; thus, a designer is considered an organizer of structures.

The designed object is a carrier of forms that are joined according to certain orders, recognized individually, combined based on general demands: topology, continuity, materiality, etc. which is why sometimes the object is a communication of its own self, because it is possible for its form to be a message that is placed before its materiality.

A designed object's final structure follows its function; at times it reaches it and at times the form evolves following a slow process of adaptation to the environment, through which the object remains in the environment or is eliminated. The morphology of the designed is subject to adaptation.

> Through the generations, a species will alter its form to better suit the countless circumstances that constitute its environment and its living within that environment – its functioning […] the form of an object should be obedient to the necessities of its function.[1]

It is clear then that one of the determinants of graphic design is its communicative, functional value which results of the relationship between communication needs, their establishment as a problem, and their solution.

Jean Baudrillard, in *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* affirms that the form-function synthesis corresponds to the fundamental theory of design and to what is called the aesthetic logic of objects.[2]

One of the problems of design is that professional of this discipline, when elaborating partial theses on the innovative advance of form in search of its ideal state, attack the surroundings masking and protecting functions that involve irreversible damage to the environment and create shopping addiction in consumers.

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[1] Christopher Williams. *Los orígenes de la forma*, pg. 76

[2] Cf. Jean Baudrillard. *Crítica de la economía política del signo*

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The Risks of the Designed

The structural and functional complexity of a designed object comprises different values such as:

- The practical aspect that defined a practical-functional configuration, like the case of Félix Beltrán's '*Click'* poster.
- The symbolic aspect that circumscribes a symbolic-functional configuration, like the *1982 Soccer World Cup set of posters*.
- The aesthetic aspect that determines an aesthetic-functional configuration which is considered more an art object than a communication object, similar to Chris Kluge's *Music Insects of the World* poster from 1979.

None of these functions escapes the human superficiality that is manifested in different ways. Currently, there are several examples of superfluous, useless, extravagant, snobbish designs, destined to be signs of prestige, of admiration, of scandal, of social status…

Consequently, one of the challenges faced by graphic designers is to avoid these deformations that promote addiction to shopping and cause the waste of resources, and search for the right answer to real communication needs.

This addiction, as Ban Ki-moon says, is a terrible thing because "it consumes and controls us, makes us deny important truths and blinds us to the consequences of our actions."[3]

This attitude of giving way to the subjective possibilities of designed objects, opens the door to *styling*, to the decoration or make up of messages, in which the designer's objective is to achieve an almost conditioned response between a product and its possible consumer, putting in doubt "who the true receiver of the messages is, or in other words, who is the audience for whom massive communication business works."[4]

The designer is responsible of defining the configuration and its effects, according to a careful methodological process that must include for this purpose:

- The objective requirements of the action that is being sought
- The social demands that its use will impose
- The limitations of the technology used
- The meaning that the form will acquire as a sign in its cultural context
- The object's useful life
- The impact of production, distribution, consumption and destruction or recycling processes and their effect on the environment

The Design Process

Graphic design is defined based on a series of methodological constants, the first and most important one being formed by the series:

NEED – PROBLEM – PROJECT – SOLUTION
The second is formed by the diad: FORM – FUNCTION

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[3] Ban Ki-moon. *Mensaje en el Día Mundial del Medio Ambiente 2008*
[4] Alfredo Yantorno. Hacerse Cargo, pg. 1

And last, the triad: PRODUCTION - DISTRIBUTION – CONSUMPTION

Even though these are networks that intertwine during the design process, the graphic designer's task is an activity dominated by economic factors among which one mustn't lose sight of the importance of competition, demand, consumption and social stratification.

The designer is constantly pressured by the marketing goals of producers and clients. Apparent realities present themselves constantly, giving rise to false needs and the demand for new designs in an endless chain of consumption that has lead, as proposed by Yves Zimmermann, to the "overdose of design that started in the eighties"[5] and continues today, stripping design of its essence.

The previous occurs because the designers, adds the author, "project but do not produce what they configure"; they are subdued by a dynamic that is external to the message's sense and its moments of interpretation.

New Methodological Horizons

One must not deny the possibilities of graphic design to contribute to sustainable development by seizing new phases of creation, "a state of conscience to which the professional is obliged"[6] setting aside self-compliance which seems to allow him not to break methodological schemes.

First, the objective of design should be culture; this would imply that both the advertising discourse as well as the propagandistic one would do without all the communications that go beyond the informative and the formative.

This utopia involves the *rupture of the paradigm of the media's need to communicate all types of messages*. It is fundamental for design to move in its own course and be recognized as a discipline that the society can count on to progress, not to devastate itself.

Graphic design projects must be directed toward the development of basic communication objects, of which needs correspond to cultural day-by-day, as are publications, especially books and all genres that contribute to improving the life quality of the community.

In 1972, Victor Papanek[7], in his text *Design for the Real World* insisted on the thorough analysis of the materials and production resources of design, so that it would be responsible towards the environment, responsible towards society, so that it would achieve the maximum obtaining the minimum, consume the necessary, use things for longer time periods, in other words, so that it would be revolutionary and radical.

> Designers must recognize the social situations in which they work and to which they contribute, and take a conscious stance to define the future of this profession. For this to occur, they must change their role to a certain degree, develop new tools, join interdisciplinary groups, initiate projects and activities, generate new information and disseminate it. This process would extend society's knowledge base of this profession.[8]

In regard to this social responsibility, understood as the reflection on the wide sectors of the population that are discriminated by graphic design, one must reflect on the faith of designed

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[5] Yves Zimmermann. *El diseño como enfermedad de los objetos*.
[6] A. Yantorno, *op. cit*.
[7] Cf. Victor Papanek. *Diseñar para un mundo real*
[8] Jorge Frascara. *Diseño gráfico para la gente*, pg. 51

objects and the limits of their audience, marking new frontiers that would modify the concept of consuming what is useless by that of rational use of satisfiers.[9]

The sustainability of graphic design demands drastic decisions regarding the use and application of human resources and materials, and the decisive exploration of production, distribution and consumption patters, and this would not be possible as long as competitiveness is the market model for visual communication.

Conclusions

Design, affirms André Ricard[10], must *change its frivolous and ludic image by that of a discipline that it useful for development and progress*, it is a challenge to bring individualization face to face with massification, culture face to face with consumption, saving face to face with wasting.

The most important determinant of graphic design objects is sense, what is being said, who it is being said to, and how it is being said. Graphic design has the power to immerse into the receiver's conscience; therefore, it can and must contribute to caring for the environment in different ways:

- Coining the concept *sustainable development*[11] as one of its paradigms, with the objective of satisfying the visual communication needs of the current generation, without compromising the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own graphic design needs.
- Avoiding over-consumption practices that lead to the waste of the natural capital that society has today.
- Conserving resources, eliminating superficial communications that do not benefit society.
- Detecting current niches of lacks of visual communication.
- Finding the best alternatives for adapting its satisfiers to the possibilities of the present.
- Conceiving an ethical attitude towards addictions that are generated by the designed, particularly consumerism.

Associating graphic design with the idea of sustainable development will always be possible by binding the thought of individual and collective wellbeing that today marks the ecological frontiers. Graphic designers have the obligation to plan under models that achieve equilibrium with no strictly economistic purposes, returning to their origins in which the value of the symbol was above the value of use and further above the value of change.

Design production, distribution and consumption processes must search for greater efficacy in the educational field, the use of environment-friendly technologies, and the longing for sustainability.

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[9] Papanek used the example of industrial design, of the consumer who wishes to acquire a chair and finds 21,336 different models among which probably only 500 are good and only some, perhaps three, fulfill the requirements of low price, functionality, maintenance, storage, transportation, unconcern for social conditioning, etc. *Ibid*

[10] Cf. André Ricard. *El diseño en la sociedad del espectáculo*

[11] Ramón López Rodríguez. *El desarrollo sostenible ¿una utopía o una necesidad urgente?*, pg. 258

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Professor in Posgraduate Program of National School of Visual Arts in National Autonomous University of Mexico. Pioneer in Mexico using digital resources in arts and design. First woman director of National School of Visual Arts at UNAM (2002-2006), has published four books about Graphic Design Theory, Graphic Design Metodology, Non-linear languages semiotics and Graphic Design Hermeneutics, 32 research papers and 18 didactic manuals. Manager from two diferent firms: a technologic center and a graphic design place. Teacher during 30 years, is oficial tutor from postgraduate program in the lines of researching projects, semiotic and hermeneutic studies; participating in academic events in Mexico, Dominican Republic, USA, Canada, Greece, Spain, Cuba, Peru, Holland, Uruguay, Argentina, Germany and Portugal and presenting conferences in Mexico, Panama, Cuba, Spain, USA, Lisbon and other countries; also, being advisor thesis from more than 120 researching student thesis works in different universities. Professional graphic designer, working in Mexico, USA and Canada in firms like BMG Entertainment, Environmental Law Institute or UNESCO in traditional and digital way. Visual artist, has exposed digital art, collage and visual poetry in more than 30 exhibitions in Mexico, Panama, USA, Rusia, Spain, France, Greece, Palestine and Frankfurt.

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