

“The days of manifestos are over. In politics, no one much<sup>3</sup> believes in any sharp polarity of left and right. The difficulties of action are immense. Keeping the boat afloat and away from the rocks seems all we can do. Any manifesto-talk has merely tried to turn this sense of difficulty and confusion into a principle<sup>»</sup>.”<sup>1</sup> “We cannot be bound beyond what we are able to perform, by reason that effect and performance are not at all in our power, and that, indeed, we are masters of nothing but the will, in which, by necessity<sup>»</sup>, all the rules and whole duty of mankind are founded and established.”<sup>2</sup> “Can a design manifesto still be written from the ideological void<sup>o</sup>? Now that the principal tools of design—the computer and its software—have been homogenized among practitioners and democratized among people, professional distinction is an unlikely perspective for a future design manifesto to gain support. User-generated content accounts not for an amateurish supplement to a stable, professional core, but for a fundamental transformation of the workforce and the value it creates.”<sup>3</sup>

“The true investment is in the investment in design itself, as a discipline that conducts research and generates knowledge<sup>»</sup>—knowledge that makes it possible to seriously participate in discussions that are not about design. Let this be knowledge that no one has asked for, in which the designer is without the handhold of an assignment, a framework of conditions, his deference, without anyone to pat him on the shoulder or upbraid him. Let the designer take on the debate with the institutions, the brand names or the political parties, without it all being about getting the job or having the job fail. Let designers do some serious reading and writing of their own. Let designers offer the surplus value<sup>»</sup>, the uselessness and the authorship of their profession to the world, to politics, to society.”<sup>4</sup> “Research may be graphic design’s way of shaping new discourse and a community that accepts its standing as a discipline that manoeuvres within other disciplines, but has the capacity to exist alone. That gains from inward investigation and outreaching collaborations.”<sup>5</sup> “This requires both theoretical and project based research as well as active sourcing of knowledge and experiences from abroad. And it requires relevant structures and models<sup>»</sup>, which can cater for the necessary flow of knowledge from the source of the research to design students and practitioners and to others, for whom this knowledge is of vital importance and value.”<sup>6</sup> “We need our roots<sup>»</sup>.”<sup>7</sup>

“It should be no surprise that, along with the lack of history and theory, criticism is totally missing. The main function of criticism is not that of providing flattering or denigrating reviews but that of providing creative interpretations of the work<sup>»</sup>, period<sup>‡</sup> or theory<sup>»</sup> being analyzed<sup>»</sup>. Out of those creative interpretations a new light is cast on the objects, and new nuances<sup>‡</sup> and reflections are brought to our notice.”<sup>8</sup> “Because, as I have always understood the term, to be critical involves not taking things for granted, being skeptical<sup>»</sup>, questioning what’s there, exposing limitations, taking issue, advancing a contrary view, puncturing myths.”<sup>9</sup> “Towards an observable level of critical sophistication, where “critical”<sup>»</sup> refers to engaged discussion as part of a historical and theoretical continuum<sup>»</sup> rather than the regular ego-feeding value-judgments of the group or individual crit.”<sup>10</sup> “There is a body of knowledge about design, its principles, history and theories. There is a parallel body of knowledge about research. For both of them, however, the knowledge of greatest significance is the knowledge of how to do it<sup>△</sup>. To some extent this can be taught, but fundamentally it is learnt—individuals gain experience in how to design or research through designing and researching. Their learning is ongoing and their knowing is embodied in their doing<sup>»</sup>. Through this doing they advance and extend their knowing of their field and perhaps the total knowledge of the field itself.”<sup>11</sup>

“Real innovation in design, or any other field, happens in context<sup>‡</sup>.”<sup>12</sup> “It is clear that design is not just political, but primarily geopolitical; the new shapes and forms may arise haphazardly and by chance<sup>o→</sup>, but they register (in a quite formidable way) the geopolitical forces of the globalizing world.”<sup>13</sup> “Experiences are the process and destination of originality. And designers’ practices or experiences can prove the validity of originality.”<sup>14</sup>

“If I cry out:

Ideal, ideal, ideal

Knowledge, knowledge, knowledge

Boomboom, boomboom, boomboom

I have given a pretty faithful version of progress, law, morality and all other fine qualities that various highly intelligent men<sup>△</sup> have discussed in so many books, only to conclude that everyone dance to his own boomboom, and that the writer is entitled to his boomboom.”<sup>15</sup> “No longer are graphic designers treating history and their subject in a linear fashion: the incorporation of perspectives on popular culture opens up the possibility of looking at the individual, the everyday and the ‘cultural object<sup>‡</sup>’ as the primary source of meaning’.”<sup>16</sup>

“Trees fall, the grass goes yellow with autumn.

I climb the towers and towers

to watch out the barbarous land:

Desolate castle, the sky, the wide desert.

There is no wall left to this village<sup>o</sup>.”<sup>17</sup>

“The value of design experiments<sup>»</sup> should not of course be measured only by what succeeds, since failures are often steps towards new discoveries. Experimentations is the engine of progress, its fuel a mixture of instinct, intelligence or discipline is in the mix<sup>o→</sup>.”<sup>18</sup> “If the depths of our minds harbour strange forces capable of increasing those on the surface, or of successfully contending with them, then it is all in our interest to canalize them, to canalize them first in order to submit them later, if necessary, to the control of the reason.”<sup>19</sup> “Form itself is indexical<sup>→</sup>.”<sup>20</sup> “Traditional? Modern? Post-modern? Forget those worries, and go back a step. Think what it is that you want to do. Think for yourself! Disregard preconceptions, models, influences. Consider what you know and what you have

<sup>1</sup> Robin Kinross, ‘More Light! For a typography that knows what it’s doing’, 1993

<sup>2</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne, Complete*, Chapter VII, 1877

<sup>3</sup> Metahaven, *White Night Before a Manifesto*, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Daniel van der Velden, ‘Research and Destroy: Graphic Design as Investigation’, 2006

<sup>5</sup> Cameron Ralston, *Essay*, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Pernille Grønbech & Steinar Valade (Ed.), *The Role of Design in the 21st Century, Danish Designers’ Manifesto: A Vision for the Future of Danish Design, 3rd Edition*, 2010, p.9

<sup>7</sup> Massimo Vignelli, ‘Call for Criticism’, 1983

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Rick Poynor, ‘The Time for Being against’, 2004

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Bailey, ‘Towards a Critical Faculty’, 2006–7

<sup>11</sup> Peter Downton, *Design Research*, 2003, p.9

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Mau, ‘Incomplete Manifesto for Growth’, 1998

<sup>13</sup> Metahaven, *White Night Before a Manifesto*, 2008

<sup>14</sup> Cai Shi Wei Eric, ‘Idea Innocent Originality Reasonable’, 2008

<sup>15</sup> Tristan Tzara, ‘Dada Manifesto 1918’, 1918

<sup>16</sup> Teal Triggs, ‘Designing Graphic Design History’, 2009

<sup>17</sup> Ezra Pound, *Lament of the Frontier Guard*, 1915

<sup>18</sup> Steven Heller, ‘Cult of the Ugly’, 1993

<sup>19</sup> André Breton, ‘First Surrealist Manifesto’, 1924

<sup>20</sup> Michael Rock, ‘Fuck Content’, 2005

to hand. Then you can plot a course that makes sense for you and for everyone else involved in the enterprise, not least the user or reader. The scandal of this proposition is that it emphasizes thought, intellect, and rationality. Personal intuition, as well as cultural tradition, can certainly play important parts: but in dialogue with the awkward questions put by reason. Design is so often taken as being about ‘expression’—of the designer and the designer’s personality. Forget that, and think. Think with extreme attention and passion. Reason that is split off from feeling is a distortion of reason. And reason is an active thing. It connects with the world: reason is critical<sup>∞</sup>.”<sup>21</sup>

“Graphic design only exists when other subjects exist first. It isn’t an a priori discipline, but a ghost; both a grey area and a meeting point<sup>○</sup>—a contradiction in terms—or a node made visible only by plotting it through the lines of connections.”<sup>22</sup> “This slightly ambiguous position, a distinctly in-between<sup>○</sup> discipline that is both everywhere and nowhere, is to our benefit, allowing graphic design to talk without boundaries to a wider audience, while also enabling us to infiltrate and use the systems of other disciplines when desired and relevant.”<sup>23</sup> “It eludes definition just as it eludes itself; a prey to unfathomable anamorphosis, it rubs itself out and rewrites itself<sup>∞</sup>; it allows itself to be read, only to slip away.”<sup>24</sup> “Rather than the negative connotation of ambiguity as a form of vagueness, I have a positive interpretation of ambiguity, intended as a plurality of meanings<sup>∞</sup>, or the ability of conferring to an object or a design, the possibility of being read in different ways—each one complementary to the other to enrich the subject and give more depth.”<sup>25</sup>

“You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images<sup>→</sup>, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”<sup>26</sup>

“The mystique<sup>△</sup> has finally gone out of ordinary design and print.”<sup>27</sup> “And maybe graphic design today seems as though it’s lost all cohesion—a nebulous endeavour in a sea of influence, complicity, corporate agendas, and personal cries<sup>∞</sup> for creative expression above a din of branded communications.”<sup>28</sup> “Consumerism is running uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design.”<sup>29</sup> “I offer a modest solution: Find the cracks in the wall. There are a very few lunatic entrepreneurs who will understand that culture and design are not about fatter wallets, but about creating a future<sup>→</sup>.”<sup>30</sup> “The only way out of this representative illusion is through presentative culture. The immorality of advertising and the morality of anti-advertising are two sides of the same coin. What we need is a form of graphic design that is neither immoral nor moral, but amoral; that is productive, not reproductive; that is constructive, not parasitic.”<sup>31</sup> “That is to say, a more autonomous existence<sup>△</sup> based on self-management, mutual aid, solidarity and direct participation and control over one’s affairs. As the potential producer, educator, and visual face of social change, graphic design could weld its creative future with more pressing concerns than market shares and profit margins.”<sup>32</sup>

“Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows  
Like harmony in music; there is a dark  
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles  
Discordant elements<sup>∞</sup>, makes them cling together  
In one society.”<sup>33</sup>

1. “Study<sup>∞</sup>. A studio is a place of study. Use the necessity of production as an excuse to study. Everyone will benefit.”<sup>34</sup>
2. “Forget about good. Good is a known quantity. Good is what we all agree on. Growth is not necessarily good. Growth is an exploration of unlit recesses<sup>○</sup> that may or may not yield to our research. As long as you stick to good you’ll never have real growth.”<sup>35</sup>
3. “We tolerate failure. Failure is part of the process.”<sup>36</sup>
4. “Believe complex ideas can produce simple things.”<sup>37</sup>
5. “In the course of joint discussion there is a free exchange of suggestions and in this way the individual’s point of view<sup>∞</sup> is broadened.”<sup>38</sup>
6. “A joint search for the best answer to a problem will throw up more potential solutions and there is more likelihood of generally valid standpoints being discovered than when the individual must tackle the job unaided.”<sup>39</sup>
7. “We collaborate. Collaboration does not mean consensus.”<sup>40</sup>
8. “Doubt is better than certainty<sup>∞</sup>.”<sup>41</sup>
9. “It is intelligence electrified by the flood of Naivety<sup>○→</sup>.”<sup>42</sup>
10. “Yet one cannot give that which has not been created. Creation comes before distribution—or there will be nothing to distribute. The need of the creator<sup>∞</sup> comes before the need of any possible beneficiary.”<sup>43</sup>

“If you detect a common attitude running through these proposals<sup>∞</sup>, and feel sympathetic towards it, you will no doubt add your own items to the list. What I must say in conclusion, though, is this. These tasks operate in the short and middle-term. They might play some part in preventing the disintegration of our society which will surely take place if it hardens into its present unhappy mold. In the long term there must be vast, probably painful changes.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Robin Kinross, ‘More Light! For a typography that knows what it’s doing’, 1993

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Bailey, ‘Dear X’, 2004

<sup>23</sup> James Goggin, ‘Practice from Everyday Life: Defining Graphic Design’s Expansive Scope by Its Quotidian Activities’, 2009

<sup>24</sup> William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind*, New York, The Viking Press, 1978, p.23

<sup>25</sup> Massimo Vignelli, *Vignelli Canon*, p.20

<sup>26</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, 1922

<sup>27</sup> Bob Gill, ‘Otherwise Forget It’, 2012

<sup>28</sup> Michael Schmidt, *Emigre*, no.67, 2004, p.11

<sup>29</sup> Adbusters, ‘First Things First Manifesto 2000’, 1999

<sup>30</sup> Tibor Kalman, ‘Fuck Committees’, 1998

<sup>31</sup> Experimental Jetset, ‘Disrepresentation Now!’, 2010

<sup>32</sup> Jared Davidson, ‘This is not a Manifesto: Towards an anarcho-design practice’, 2009

<sup>33</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1805

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Mau, ‘Incomplete Manifesto for Growth’, 1998

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Edenspiekermann, ‘The Edenspiekermann Manifesto’, 2010

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Eatock, ‘Mini-Manifesto’, 2012

<sup>38</sup> Josef Müller Brockmann, *The Graphic Artist and his Design Problems*, Switzerland, Arthur Nigilli Ltd., 1961, p.135

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Edenspiekermann, ‘The Edenspiekermann Manifesto’, 2010

<sup>41</sup> Milton Glaser, ‘Ten Things I Have Learned’, 2001

<sup>42</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Blast 1*, London, 1914, p.38

<sup>43</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*, Philadelphia, Blackiston, 1943, p.739

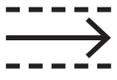
<sup>44</sup> Ken Garland, ‘Here Are Some Things We Must Do’, 1967



**Critical Ambiguity**—When I put this down as the title I didn't actually understand what it could mean. It was simply intended at the beginning to fulfil the need for a title as critique loomed upon me. However this title has provided an interesting reading to my practice and current thinking about graphic design. I now come to understand this in terms of the expanded field of graphic design and a valuing of the ambiguous readings that come from diversity in practices and processes. Is it dissatisfaction with the current state of graphic design and perhaps an envy of freedoms of expression in other disciplines that has led to a mixing of our disciplinary boundaries with those of associated fields? Perhaps it is the lack of shared discussion across our discipline (or lack of ambition beyond the requirements of income) that prevents such simple ideas from surfacing. Anyhow 'towards a critical ambiguity in graphic design' (an ambiguous phrase in itself) for me reads as the need or desire for a greater critiquing of context, information, principles and processes in graphic design practice and research in order to achieve better outcomes. Within this provided definition a directing also towards an engaged discussion of study and experimentation beyond profit and completion of briefs. The value of ambiguity coming from the variation created in practices that allows new criticality—for designers to work out and debate their own subject through an unrestricted range of sources, where criticality isn't a pretentious attempt to raise work above rudimentary design work but an inherent necessity to the existence of a broad ambiguous discourse.



**Adding to knowledge/surplus value**—Ambiguous disciplinary boundaries allow us, as graphic designers to dip into the melting pot of arts and sciences. I find when graphic designers research beyond the field of form and engages with societal confines it naturally exists within, projects emerge that add to the growing knowledge of our young discipline. In this way maybe graphic design can add to bodies of knowledge outside its discourse just as it is added to by them. Maybe the language we have borrowed isn't adequate to express what new knowledge we have, although conversely this borrowing of language could be useful through allowing us to communicate to a multitude of disciplines. Where interesting designers emerge are those who have lines of inquiry that permeates into other fields of knowledge—the act of designing in these new ambiguous practices is a method to new knowledge.



**Necessity/doing**—I think that graphic design, at its core, needs to be for or about something in order to exist. This for or about could be graphic design itself or an experimentation of formal properties. But as a discipline that's primary output and use is in composition, the necessity is placed on the doing, and through this a generation of individual and studio practices; studio practices in the way of collective practice via study and discussion which feed into a common/greater understanding of the discipline. Continuing to discuss via an about, for and through definition of practice I might ask my readers to question the creation of content by graphic designers. Graphic design about graphic design—a self-reflexivity that is aware of the reasoning behind itself and adds to itself through the basic necessity of design as a service. Not requiring a higher purpose or lofty ideal, but rather an understanding of our shared purpose—to communicate through visual language.



**Void/middle ground/grey**—What happens when graphic design exists alone? Is this possible? If, as many would have us believe, graphic design should be classified as a way of thinking and if we disregard graphic design as the producing of aesthetic objects and compositions then perhaps we are closer to seeing it as a methodology. A spectre that moves between other disciplines borrowing from, and applying its, methods where necessary. I view graphic design as an incomplete discipline—requiring outside motives to complete it, the core resources easily understood but the ambiguous lines of inquiry that crossover to create defined outcomes add the curious value to designing. So then I see graphic design as being quite simple but infinitely varied (as is the nature of visual mediums) in potential outcomes. It is when graphic design reaches outside its borders that the potential of our discipline is realised and work of significance and depth is created.



**Research/methodology**—I struggle, as do many in my field, to justify the processes that I use as 'research'. This being that the way in which I work—the restrictions I place upon myself and the contextual reading I do—is an essaying of the definitions and limitations associated with current of design knowledge. My work is not necessarily useful as altering visual societies and communications but rather as a critiquing of what already exists. Perhaps through writing graphic designers can impose their methodologies upon their readers. Writing too existing as a resource of debate and knowledge (criticality) and guide to the defining of how graphic design can exist beyond its regular activities. As a method of study writing allows for an expression of ideals or processes otherwise invisible in much of design ephemera. Reading then is a model that encourages an active participation and understanding of contemporary context of value to the development our individual investigations.



**Continuum/canon/future**— If I were asked to define graphic design I would respond that, for me, I understand it as a process and practice of reading and reading composition. Graphic designing (awkward verb) under this is understood, by me, as the creation and application of visual language—aware of its viewership being the readers of these communications. This being how we read letterforms, images, diagrams, texts, et cetera et cetera... Looking retrospectively at previous design practices reading is evident again—be this in formal qualities, reading the designer's concerns into the forms (a reading between the lines, or shapes perhaps) or reading composition in relation to contemporaneous conventions. This leads me to believe that the future canon of graphic design will be read as a product of previous forms, for nothing is invented in our void. The void is rather a large cloud from which it occasionally congeals to a reason for compositional decisions. We'll probably just do what looks good to us at the time.



**Context**—Context is perhaps one the most important ambiguities that graphic designers can be critical of. The background that the work comes from and where it will exist are constant reference points to new work. Invention and propagation seems to be a myth in graphic design. That someone conceives of forms that are then spread to other designers seems an odd theory to me. Surely the context from which the original 'creation' of style or visual language itself is one loaded with imagery, even at the most naive, assimilated through a visual memory. Hence being able to locate where my work comes from and be critical of those origins is important to making better decisions and generating relevant discussion via distinguishing the similarities and differences in principles and practices. For example, I am aware of my youth in the discipline so much of my thoughts are built on vague presumptions and educated guesses, yet what I do know stems from academia and I thus seek variations to methods of learning and experimentation that aids in the defining of graphic design and establishment of my individual practice.



**Scepticism/criticality**—As definitions of graphic design are vague at best and common rules are constantly drawn and erased it is a necessity that we be sceptical of developments and theories. We should be especially careful of the contextual backgrounds to theories, be they individual or corporate, to constrict our discipline should be criticised. But again I think graphic design has attached itself to too many other disciplines to be retractable without an immediate criticism. Yet I also think that this sparse understanding of what exactly we are doing is to our benefit and by being critical of the unclear relationships within design we generate better, more relevant discussions and work.



**Ambiguities/nuances/individuality**—Individuality, although an obvious subject, is often overlooked as a source for investigation. Of course individual inquiries lead to interesting nuances away from restrictive client based design, but through examples like this I can identify that it is the ambiguities of information, context, principles and processes that should be the source of new material and direction inward of graphic design. If I define an individual's practice as reflexive of their taste and inquiries then being aware of the ambiguities that surround graphic design becomes a tool for contextualisation, and hence more grounded or complete work that may in some way enrich our discourse.



**Skill/mystique**—The worth of skill based education in practical output is waning as the ability for those outside the discipline of graphic design to utilise the tools of production are expanded. Now I feel a perception of a designer's mysticism comes from compositional knowledge or 'genius'—a knowledge that is obtained through design experience. However this thought of mystique as designer's 'bag of tricks' seems an undercooked view. Must the graphic designer now be somewhat skilled in all facilities of process and production? Professional design (from the outside listening in) desires workers similar to a production line of profit. So designers are becoming just that, 'workers'. I recognise that graphic design and art have uneasy borders but I find that if we redefine designers as having practices similar to artists (where one might argue the mystique still exists) then instead of the commercial anonymous worker we might have more invested, rewarding and interesting work produced. Has graphic design come to resemble too much of a factory to be encouraging this perspective?



**Chance/naivety**—It often occurs to me when looking through a graphic design history significant changes to the visual discourse and knowledge often comes as the result of chance opportunities or naivety (lack of knowledge). This is a worrying observation to the value of education in graphic design, teaching a method of producing formal work runs the risk of creating a banal stylistic sameness. Should I propose a praising of naivety over academic investigations... perhaps a freedom of experimentation with visual language and interdisciplinary borders as a furthering of visual practice is more worth our attention? How can we engage with this irrational force as academics so often drawn towards the rational? I think it makes a case for contextual study where the sprawling network can be critiqued through an understanding of where—audience, location (time/place) and method—the experimentation can be applied and evaluated. Perhaps these complexities are old postmodern concerns coming back into fashion. Or maybe it's just that the amorphous complex of graphic design, subject only to popular conventions desired by commercial clients, is so varied and incomplete that attempting to predict the direction of our medium is futile at best. But that sounds too cynical, and indeed there is interest in the examining of histories to evaluate past principles and contexts in contemporary design.