# NEW TYPOLOGIES IN THE STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC-DESIGN PRACTICES

## Dionisio Sánchez

Graphic designer, researcher and teacher

Emerging practices within graphic design are defined as a set of projects which are starting up within the field of graphic design and which, given their characteristics, cannot be classified into any of its specialist fields. This professional framework offers a different perspective in the way of understanding the profession, as designers themselves are actively faced with these changes. As a result, design as a practice has changed in meaning and the limits of the discipline have been displaced.

**Key words: DesignArt, Critical Graphic Design, Speculative Design, Editorial Design.**

The field of graphic design is exploring new territories that go beyond the boundaries of the discipline. Graphic designers are becoming aware that the world needs a new attitude on their part. Consequently, the significant and the meaning of the professional practice have changed and the functions of the designer and the limits of the discipline are enlarged when design becomes an attitude.

The most immediate consequence of this displacement is the hybridisation with other disciplines. Today the graphic designer works together with architects, artists, urbanists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc. Besides, the graphic designer is assuming the role of editor, producer, writer, activist or researcher and their concerns are centered on geopolitics, environment, sustainability, economy, culture or social inequality.

We are before a change of model evident from multiple projects that are initiated from this stance, and that open a new future in which graphic designers can create their own initiatives in an autonomous manner, far from the conventional relationship between designer and client. This article means to make this practice typology visible through different examples that will serve as starting points to enable closer examination and allow us to theorise on their scope and future applications.

## Beyond DesignArt

The interferences between art and design have always occurred along history. From Bauhaus and De Stijl to-date, there have been common areas in which art and design have shared knowledge resulting in objects of difficult classification. It must be pointed out that the phenomenon has produced a profound debate rooted in the eternal polemics: "art is desgn" or "design is art". Theoreticians, historians and critics have written much on this phenomenon that centres in the hybridisation as a transdisciplinary method that blurs the borders between the disciplines. In this common zone between disciplines what has been called *DesignArt*[1], which appeared at the end of the decade of 1990's as a label meant to describe the work of professionals as different as Studiio Van Lieshouf, Superflex and Andrea Zittel[2]; linked mainly to the production of textiles, furniture and spaces[3]. Alex Coles is one of the theoreticians that more texts have published on the phenomenon of *DesignArt* through the work of artists such as Henri Matisse, Sonia Delaunay or Jorge Pardo.

However, the phenomenon of *DesignArt* has not been studied in depth since it has been considered more as a style trend than an area of research. This is because *DesignArt* has had greater repercussion in fairs, galleries and exhibits devoted exclusively to this type of objects. But as Alex Coles indicates, simplifying the interface between design and art to a commercial trend is reductive, what is really interesting about the phenomenon consists in in-

**1**

See: COLES, ALEX. DesignArt, London, Tate Publishing, 2005. COLES, ALEX. Design and Art (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art). London, The MIT Press, 2007.

**2**

POYNOR, RICK. Art's Little Brother, 2005. <http://www.iconeye.com/404/item/2628-arts-little-brother-%7C-icon-023-%7C-may-2005>. [Latest consultation: 06/10/15].

**3**

COLES, Alex. DesignArt. London, Tate Publishing, 2005.

vestigating on their tensions, displacements and transmission of knowledge. In the same way, it is not possible to define the resulting hybrid objects, the experience of the process and the result perceived by the spectator from a single discipline. One of the main problems in the *DesignArt* studio is that in general terms, it has no established limits nor an ideology of its own.

It must be pointed out that art responds to another type of interests from its own autonomy, differently from design that is based on the conventional client-designer relationship. Today designers are changing this relationship, developing projects in a committed and autonomous way, investigating social subjects and exercising a critical and activist attitude. Today there are many designers who question themselves on matters of gender, class, property, politics or welfare, among others.

In this territory between design and art there is the work of Lawrence Abu Hamdan, an artist who researches through graphic design, sculpture and photography different political conflicts in relation to frontiers and human rights. *Conflicted Phonemes* (2012) is a Project in which a group of persons of different disciplines (linguists, researchers, activists and graphic designers) joined to work together with a group of immigrants from Somalia that asked for political asylum in Holland and whose request was denied after being subjected to a language-dialect analysis to determine if they came from the north or the south of the country. The project is an exhibition of maps and infographs that were presented to the Dutch immigration authorities denouncing these tests and their doubtful effectiveness[4]. The maps exhibited have the intention of demonstrating how the history of Somalia and its forty years of continuous migration have had great impact on the life of these peoples as well as on their speech.

In this type of projects in which different disciplines converge, we can identify that art and design share the same concerned and thus is logical that the frontiers that limit them become blurred. From different perspectives, they are concerned with similar problems, opening a new disciplinary dialogue that goes much beyond the concept of *DesignArt* or other possible labels.

### Design as a Method

An ever increasing number of contemporary practices find opportunities for ideological commitment and social change through the mechanisms, logic and activities of design. The criticism this type of practices proposes aims to break with the historical convention and ideological predominance on design. The thought behind design and its methods, not only allow solving the problems of certain clients, but also, contributes to researching social problems, opening a debate that allows becoming aware of them. It may be that these practices do not solve great social, political or economic problems, but through search and articulation of ideas and their subjacent implications, the critical practices make comprehension and discussion of these problems more accessible.

*Hipervincles* is a clear example in which design is used to introduce social improvements. It is Bet Puigbó and Paula Pladevall's final degree project (Elisava 2011). Oriol Nicolás (design), Rober Pallas (design), Raquel Pelta (research) and Indensitat (from Barcelona, Spain) have also collaborated in the project.

*Hyperlink* is a term used to define connections between different documents that are lodged in the internet and that allow us to connect ourselves to an extensive data network. The word *hyperlink* is formed by the prefix *hyper* – used to form words endowing them with a superior or greater meaning – and the word *link*, which means union between a person or thing with another person or thing. Outside the internet context, hyperlinks might define those more intense connections that occur between determined persons or social groups. These links between people are produced less frequently in contemporary society and are replaced by unstable and fluid relationships that are more common in the social networks and the internet. One of the purposes of *Hipervincles* is to invert this trend, considering how relationships between people weaken and why. As Bet Puigbó indicates, our society is regulated by the progressive loss of identity, precariousness in the labour market and dissolution of communities. Trust, planning, stability and security, all values related traditionally with modernity have been replaced by suspicion, uncertainty and what is provisional. Our social fabric is debilitating and the links between individuals are ever weaker – *liquid*, Bauman would say – in a way that social relationships are more difficult, causing great frustration in people.

Confronted with this situation, the *Hipervincles* project tackled the objective of improving the bonds between people to generate a feeling of belonging to a community through a collaborative practice that consisted in the creation of a modular typography.

The project's target public was young people between 13-17 belonging to a social sector in which personal relationships were uncommitted. The project sought to conform awareness on the debilitation of the community fabric through social cohesion and integration of these groups.

The project was divided into four phases, in the first one the youths, through different activities that promoted consideration and debate, became aware of the changes that have occurred in our society and the consequent loss of values. In the second phase community cooperation was encouraged by

4

More information on the project: http://lawrenceabuhamdan.com/#/conflicted-phonemes/

seeking objects that would conform the modular typography in collaboration with the neighbours. The third phase of the project was the most creative one. The teenagers created a typography by means of stencils using the different modules collected. They wrote, stamped, on pieces of cloth the values the community had lost.

Finally, the project had a stage of expressing gratitude, dissemination and reflection that allowed making the feelings of the entire community visible. To do this the printed cloths were given to the neighbours to be hung from their clothes lines. In this manner, the values the community had lost were made visible through words. The clothesline functioned as a link (interlocutor) between the individual and the social realms making a collective communication possible.

## Critical Design

The term critical design has been used lately to define a set of practices in the field of design that mean to open a discussion on determined matters that concern the discipline itself. Critical design questions the work of the designer and his relationship with contemporary society. It also researches through methods and processes of design on subjects related with politics, environment, sustainability, innovation or technology. Its main characteristics reside in the hybridisation between critical writing and visual fiction. Projects usually are initiated through research on a determined problem that is formalised in the essay format. At the same time, designers create objects or communications that evidence this criticism visually.

Critical design differs from affirmative design (a term Anthony Dunne and Fiona Ray use to describe the practices on which conventional design is based) in that it tries to find a single solution for a determined design problem. While affirmative design tries to give answers, critical design tries to formulate questions on how things could be. Critical design rejects the hegemonic vision of affirmative design and proposes other possible alternatives which include certain social and cultural values.

In the field of graphic design, the greatest influence critical thought has had is the Radical Architecture of groups such as *Archizoom* or *Superstudio* and of authors such as Manfredo Tafuri with his critical considerations on modern architecture and its role in capitalism. Architects such as *Archizoom* or *Superstudio* indicated that architecture was responsible of social and environmental problems of the world, and question in their projects "economy, consumerism and cultural status quo" creating fictional scenarios of anti-design inspired in the pop culture and kitsch, using techniques such as collage, drawing, calligraphy and inclusion of signs.

This critical approach gave rise to the project *Forms of Enquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design*[5] (École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland 2009) commissioned by Zak Kyes which shows the influence of critical vision of Radical Architecture on graphic design. The purpose of the project was to use critical design as an instrument capable of reconsidering graphic design and research on the limits of the discipline, and also explore new relationships with architecture. The project not only analysed conventional forms of collaboration between both disciplines – typography as an architectonic element with the work of Paul Elliman or Michael Worthington, and the extension of the graphic elements to the shapes built by Karel Martens or Radim Pesko – but also explored the influence that the architectural experiments are having on graphic design.

The project results materialised in different exhibitions and had the contribution of several graphic design studios. The studio Norm (Zurich) researched the advertising billboards as large scale graphic design buildings, examining the different existing types through the work of authors such as Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brow and Steven Izenur. According to the Norm studio, these three dimensional structures are used by the establishment with propagandistic aims, invading buildings that – for political or economical matters are converted into large scale posters. Lehni-Trub (Zurich) investigated about Marcel Breuer's Armstrong Rubber Company building and how it has become a mere advertising billboard. Mevis en Van Deursen (Amsterdam) carried out an investigation on the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, and Metahaven (Amsterdam) speculated on the conspiracy theory concerning September 11th and the strange conditions in which the Building 7 of the World Trade Center was demolished.

The exhibition also gathered the research work carried out by Abäke, Manuel Raeder, Laurenz Brunner, Dexter Sinister and Experimental Jetset, among others, by means of different texts, essays and posters whose aim was to extend our notion of design as a critical activity.

## Speculative Design

Speculative practices and critical design converge in time and fashion. From a critical approach, fictional utopian or dystopian scenarios are created. Speculative design and critical design share two basic principles: initiative of the project and politicization begin with the designer, breaking with the traditional client-designer binomial.

This is the line of work of the Dunne & Raby design studio. They use design methods as a tool to stimulate debate and discussion on cultural and

**5**

ethical implications of the use of new technologies in society. The studio comprises Anthony Dunne (Director of Interactive Design Program in the Royal College of Art of London) and Fiona Raby (professor of Industrial Design in the University of Applied Arts in Vienna). Their research projects are a combination of design trials and answers that explore in a critical fashion the relationship between production of objects, new technologies and the impact they have on the lives of people. They are also interested in fictional and speculative design using the design methods and processes to pose questions on what our contemporary society needs – or does not need.

The project *Evidence Dolls*[6] (2005) is a clear example of how research and critique can generate a debate that allows understanding better certain problems and their contexts. The project was presented in the exhibition *D-Day* in the Pompidou Centre in Paris and its aim was to open a debate about genetic research and its relationship with reproductive technologies, to see how women perceive these biotechnological advances and speculate on the possible ethical, social and cultural consequences these could have on their lives.

Another collective that works in speculative terms is Conditional Design (Amsterdam). In this group work Luna Maurer (expert in algorithm systems), Edo Paulus (sound artist), and Jonathan Puckey (graphic designer and professor of Interactive Graphic Design in Gerrit Rietveld Academy).

Their work is characterised by the influence of the new technologies and how they are used in an experimental and transdisciplinary manner. The processes focus on learning models and use methodologies that come from the world of science (like logic). Their manifesto stresses the importance that the process has in their form of work. Instead of operating under the terms of graphic design or interactive design, they prefer to refer to their approach instead of defining themselves by the chosen communication media. Finally the logic and processes used are transferable to other fields of study and can be applied in other projects[7].

Metahaven is one of the studios that have most researched in the field of graphic design through speculative projects such as *Sealand* (2003-2004), *Wikileads* (2010-2011) o *Facestate* (2011). These speculative design projects have the purpose of creating a debate on political and social matters, the projects are fully developed but often are not used and remain in a stage previous to their materialisation, that Van Der Velden calls proto-functional.

One of the most influential exhibitions on speculative practices in graphic design has been *All possible Futures*[8]. During January and February 2014, the SOMArts Cultural Center of San Francisco lodged the work of Radim Pesko, Metahaven, Peter Bil'ark or Dexter Sinister, among others. The curator, Jon Sueda, describes the exhibition as an ensemble of projects that include design propositions that were rejected and that were never implemented, as research projects and a number of interviews in which the graphic designers give their opinion on what the term *speculation* can mean in the field of graphic design.

## From Edition To Publication

Editorial design through the publication and edition of magazines or books is one of he special fields within graphic design that have granted greater autonomy to the designer. This type of publications – generally self-initiated – have contributed a new approach to the field of graphic design since it is the designer who assumes the role of writer and editor – occasionally even that of distributor – allowing many enterprising designers to develop their profession. This is the way Dexter Sinister works. It is a collective formed by Stuart Baily and David Reinfurt that, for more than a decade, has created different projects focused mainly in the edition and publication of magazines, centering on graphic design as a practice of criticism. Their best known publication is Dot Dot Dot. It was published for the first time in the year 2000 and was active during nine years. According to Stuart Baily, Dot Dot Dot functioned as a catalyser for a reader conscious of the new possibilities that were emerg-



Metahaven, *Facestate*, 2011. Images from the exhibition "Graphic Design: Now in Production", Walker Art Center, 2011. Images courtesy of Walker Art Center.

ing in the field of graphic design. The project was initially created in Holland and later moved to New York. The contents of the magazine were created based on the experiences lived in places where they lecture and teach, gathering contributions of other designers, artists investigating on graphic design, art, cinema, philosophy and architecture. The contents that conform the magazine come from this nomadic practice[9].

Currently the Dexter Sinister project is developed in New York in a space that functions as a library and meeting place for workshops and lectures. At the same time, through *The Serving Library*, essays are published under the name of *Bulletins of The Serving Library* that are distributed gratuituosly in pdf format from their web site.

As we pointed out previously, the editing world has allowed many designers to work in an independent manner, due greatly to the emergence of numerous book fairs devoted exclusively to Fanzines, artists books and independent publications which have had de support of institutions such as New York MoMa and the organisation of meetings such as *Fahrenheit 39* in Ravenna, *It's a book* in Leipzig o *Pa/per view* in Brussels.

## In Conclusion

This approximation to the new practices of graphic design has allowed us to observe how the field of graphic design is changing. Little by little, the limits of the discipline are blurring and although there is a professional faction that rejects these practices because they consider that they are not limited to utilitarian and pragmatic questions, the analysis of different case studies proposed show their transforming potential, endowing the designer with an autonomy that allow them to exercise the profession from their own initiative, extending the field of the profession and breaking the traditional binomial client-designer.

The capacity of criticism is the true potential of the projects and practices examined, indicating the designer as an agent capable of fostering a social and cultural change.

Although these initiatives are still in the minority, they show that to be able to reach a greater autonomy as graphic designers we must pass from a passive role – conditioned by the projects commissioned by the client – to an active role which will allow us to detect unattended problems or criticise social models that can be improved through design.

This change will only be possible if the academic institutions are capable of transforming an education system based on training non-critical designers – indoctrinated under the marketing culture – to a model that encourages autonomy and promotes critical capacities in the students.

**BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOURCES:**

BENNET, AUDREY; HELLER, STEVEN: *Design Studies / Anglais: Theory and Research in Graphic Design*. Princeton Archi, 2006.
CALVERA, ANNA: *Arte ¿? Diseño, Nuevos capítulos de una polémica que viene de lejos*. Barcelona, Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2003.
COLES, ALEX: *Design and Art (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)*. London, The MIT Press, 2007.
COLES, ALEX: *DesignArt*. London, Tate Publishing, 2005.
COLES, ALEX (ED), ROSSI, CATHARINE. *EP VOL 1: The Italian Avant-Garde 1968-1976*. Germany, Sternberg Press, 2013.
COLES, ALEX. *The Transdisciplinary Studio*. Germany, Sternberg Press, 2012.
DUNNE, ANTHONY: *Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience, and Critical Design*. London, The MIT Press, 2005.
DUNNE, ANTHONY; RABY, FIONA: *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. London, The MIT Press, 2013.
MCCARTHY, STEVEN: *The Designer as…: Author, Producer, Activist, Entrepreneur, Curator, and Collaborator: New Models for Communicating*. Amsterdam: Bis Publishers, 2013.
METAHAVEN: *Uncorporate Identity*. Zürich, Lars Müller Publishers, 2010.
SUEDA, JON: *All Possibles Futures*. London, Bedford Press, 2014.
VV.AA. *DESIGN ACT: Socially and Politically Engaged Design Today––Critical Roles and Emerging Tactics*. Germany, Sternberg Press, 2011.
VV.AA.: *Iaspis Forum on Design and Critical Practice: The Reader*. Germany, Sternberg Press, 2009.

**PRINTED PUBLICATIONS:**

POYNOR, Rick: "Borderline. Metahaven Understakes its Own Research and Makes Visual Proposal that Suggest a New Role for Graphic Design in Public Life". Eye magazine, London, 2009, issue 71, p. 22-29.
GRAPHIC: "When Design becomes Attitude". *Graphic*, Korea, issue 17, 2011.
GRAPHIC: "The Subjective Tour Guide to Amsterdam". Graphic, Korea, issue 24, 2012.
METAHAVEN: "Rebrand…or else!". Print magazine, Palm Coast ,2011, issue 65.5, p. 81-83.

**FINAL DEGREE PROJECT:**

PUIGBÒ, BET; PLADEVALL PAULA: *Hipervincles*. Elisava Escuela Superior de Diseño e Ingeniería, 2010-2011.

**ELECTRONIC DOCUMENTS:**

COLES, ALEX: *The DesignArt Phenomenon*, 2008. <http://www.konstfack2008.se/essays/the-designart-phenomenon.html>, [Date of last search: 01/10/15].
HASEGAWA, YUKO: *The Potential of Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, 2008. <http://www.konstfack2008.se/essays/the-potential-of-cross-disciplinary-approaches.html>. [Date of last search: 01/10/15].
LUPTON, ELLEN: *The Designer as Producer*, 2004. <https://www.typotheque.com/articles/ the_designer_as_producer>. [Date of last search: 01/10/15].
POYNOR, RICK: *Art´s Little Brother*, 2005. <http://www.icon-eye.com/404/item/2628-arts-little-brother-%7C-icon-023-%7C-may-2005>. [Date of last search: 06/10/15].
POYNOR, RICK: Borderline, 2009. <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/borderline>. [Date of last search: 01/10/15].
RAFF, JAN-HENNING: *Theoretical Frameworks for the Conceptualization of Graphic Design in Use*, 2013. <http://iridescent.icograda.org/journal/journal68.php>. [Date of last search: 03/10/15].
ROCK, MICHAEL: *The Designer as Author*, 1996. <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/ article/the-designer-as-author>. [Date of last search: 03/10/1

**Dionisio Sánchez**. Graphic designer, researcher and teacher. Since 2013 he lectures as a guest professor in the *Escola d'Art i Superior de Disseny de València* (Higher School of Art & Design of Valencia) and in the *Universitat Politècnica de València* (Polytechnic University of Valencia). His academic training includes a Master Degree in Artistic Production and presently he is doing a Master Course in Visual Arts and Multimedia in the *Universitat Politècnica de València* (Polytechnic University of Valencia). His work as a researcher is being carried out as a PhD student in "Art Production and Research" in the San Carlos Faculty of Fine Arts.

**9**
GRAPHIC. The Subjective Tour Guide to Amsterdam, Graphic, nr. 24, Korea, 2012, p.139- 152. The project's web can be consulted in: http://www.servinglibrary.org/