

Integrated?2007

Integrating design... What the f*ck!

Integrated?2007 would sound better, but since question marks in URLs are still an absolute no-no...

Let's take a small step back in time: Citytype 1997 and 1999. In both of these conferences, Sint Lucas Antwerp primarily presented a pictorial ode to the typographic and graphic design scene of a mythical decade. In the Belgium of those days such conferences were more the exception than the rule. In the meantime, a great deal has fortunately changed. The appeal of studies such as graphic design shows that appreciation of that discipline has greatly increased - perhaps because the socio-economic context has also evolved considerably. What's more, 'design' has become the buzz word on everyone's tongue! Design? As amalgam, for what?

"...As a concept design has become forced, all too often far removed from the actual meaning of the word. Generally it is nothing more than a trendy lubricant to facilitate the marketing of anything and everything. For many people design conjures up the image of some or other item of no-nonsense, modern 'design' furniture, but actually design does not designate the product, it designates the act. Anyone who looks it up in a good English dictionary will find that 'design' refers to the process of designing, making use of detailed preliminary studies or sketches to plan and prepare something. So design is all about designing ..."
(from De Standaard of 18/10/2004)

So what then does graphic design entail in 2007? Is 'graphic' still the appropriate adjective? Wouldn't 'integrated' now be more appropriate? After all, the role of the graphic designer has thoroughly changed in recent decades, because of the increasing complexity of the media and the wealth of available software, technology and advanced production systems, for example. It is almost enough to put the designer in a spin. One would think that with such an enormous selection to choose from, it would be relatively easy to make the appropriate choice. Nothing could be further from the truth. Choice always entails decision, and decision-making is the most complex part of the design process. There are a host of influences and motivations. And often a choice will only be made for something that is already on offer. Designers all over the world are working with the same software and, without them realising it, their thinking is being steered and constricted by the functionalities of these programmes, no matter technically sophisticated these functionalities may be.

Is 'designing' therefore simply a matter of choosing? One question = one answer?

Or is designing also an attitude that allows the designer to follow a constructive trajectory and arrive at a personal and well-founded result whatever the circumstances, in other words, designing as a process? Education in art and design still often seems to be based on the 'romantic notion', in which the designer translates the task into an aesthetically generally acceptable result or product on the basis of his or her own, personal imagination, like a sort of applied artist. This autonomous aspect is utterly valuable and highly important. But the design issues confronting present and future designers will not be of a purely aesthetic nature. The crazy thing is that although designers now have more autonomy, they are also more steered and constrained by strategy, marketing and technology. This phenomenon has a multiple effect. On the one hand it allows more room for new development, but on the other hand it can push the designer into a purely executive role. Bizarre though this may be, it is nevertheless a fact, because design and the execution of design are not at all the same thing. The English word 'design' covers both aspects, and that is perhaps where the confusion arises. Design research is what distinguishes the two. Design research places the designer at the heart of the thinking and development process and, consequently, also makes him or her a researcher. But is this what young designers really want? Perhaps they would prefer to be guided by the briefing? Perhaps they would prefer to take the easier path and earn their money quickly and without too much mental exertion? Or would they rather dare to question the briefing, as 'researchers'? And thus arrive at solutions that may be more inventive, more relevant and therefore more interesting. But all of that requires a better synergy between 'generalists' and 'specialists', a synergy above and beyond the limitation of the task. Because our economy is currently governed and almost paralysed by short-term thinking. Should 'academic' training reflect this? In other words, should training serve the market by churning out made-to-measure specialists? Perhaps, and perhaps not. After all, there is also a need for people with a wider or different perspective on things. You could call them generalists. Perhaps part of the task of academic training is to unite the two (generalism and specialism) to a certain degree, so that the future 'graphic designer' will be capable of coming up with solutions, both as a creative thinker and as an organiser.

But what do we understand by creativity? It seems logical that 'creativity' should be an important aspect of any education in art or design. But the nonchalance with which that word is bandied about in contemporary society, is just as characteristic of it as its banalisation. Isn't it characteristic of people (and animals!) that they come up with solutions through a mixture of chance, ingenuity, technique and entrepreneurial spirit, whatever the circumstances? A fantastic painter is not necessarily creative, but an 'incompetent idiot' may very well be so, if he or she can come up with interesting links, in every direction, from abstraction to realisation, from concept to material and the other way around. Integration is no magic word here. In this context, it is rather an 'attitude', an attitude in which designers take up post at the heart of things. In this sense, the job of the 'graphic designer' in both education and society is a priori investigative and not exclusively 'creative' in the narrow sense of the word. Although a generous dose of 'dis-integration' is naturally also always intriguing.

'Integrating design...' is therefore also a research project: a project that can foster the academisation of design, by inspiring the critical thought of doers and thinkers - and combinations of the two - from various disciplines at the crossroads of graphic design, illustration, typography, advertising, visual culture, new media and autonomous art. Its goal: the attainment of a better insight into design processes, of whatever nature and in whatever discipline. **The inspiring gully between thinking and doing. Integrated2007.**

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