
Can we be more Graphic about Graphic Design?

Véronique Vienne



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1121>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.1121

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2005

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Véronique Vienne, « Can we be more Graphic about Graphic Design? », *Critique d'art* [Online],
26 | Automne 2005, Online since 03 February 2012, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1121> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.1121

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Can we be more Graphic about Graphic Design?

Véronique Vienne

REFERENCES

Heller, Steven. *De Merz à Emigre et au-delà : graphisme et magazines d'avant-garde au XXe siècle*, Paris : Phaidon, 2005
Graphic design for the 21st Century = Le Design graphique au 21e siècle, Cologne : Taschen, 2005, (Icons)

- 1 Can you objectify a subjective notion? This is the question graphic designers must face when they talk about their work. Even though graphic design artifacts are omnipresent in our culture, graphic design is still an exceptionally ill-defined profession.
- 2 This is one of the reasons design criticism is still a rudimentary discipline. No one knows for sure what is this thing we sometimes call “graphic communication” for lack of a better word—a technique my Webster’s dictionary describes as “the art or profession of using design elements (as typography and images) to convey information or create an effect.”
- 3 It is a lot more difficult to talk about graphic design than to talk about design, a *métier* that produces objects one can see and touch. Even though a layout or a website can also be seen, and even handled, their subject matter is less tangible. More often than not, the graphic information presented on a flat surface is absorbed by the brain before it has time to be perceived as an object.
- 4 In order for their work to become more visible, graphic designers often eschew legibility in favor of innovation. They pull all the stops to slow down the reading process long enough to insure that their creations receive the same amount of attention than that of colleagues who design three dimensional objects. Pity the graphic design critics who must not only evaluate the quality of the design of a book cover, a brochure, a poster, a

magazine, or a website, but must also evaluate its ability to distract us from the business of deciphering its messages quickly.

- 5 Three books on graphic design recently published in French illustrate this problem. Too busy with the logistics of presenting complex visual material, all three books fail to inform their readers as to their ultimate intention.
- 6 The first book is a special issue on graphic design of the *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*¹ which offers a dozen serendipitous articles and interviews that are informative and well-written; in particular an examination of the genesis of the Centre Pompidou's own logo, designed by Jean Widmer; an article on the work of two famous poster designers, Cassandre and Jan Tschichold; and a comparative study of the way two plays are laid out in book form, Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* by Robert Massin versus Pichette's *Les Ephiphanies* by Pierre Faucheux.
- 7 There is only one problem: Why this particular selection of articles and interviews? In his introduction, editor-in-chief Jean-Pierre Criqui does not elaborate on his reasons for picking these particular topics. Why doesn't he share with readers his secret agenda? Grateful for this special issue—the first ever on graphic design in this series—are we supposed to accept as gospel everything in it?
- 8 In a different genre, more commercial but just as disappointing, is Taschen's paperback edition of *Graphic design for the 21st Century = Le Design graphique au 21e siècle*. Written by Charlotte et Peter Fiell, two British design specialists who have authored a number of books for Taschen, this 190-page volume presents the work of 45 “avant-garde” graphic designers, twenty of them living in England against only four in the United States and five in France.
- 9 The brief commentaries that serve as captions for the portfolios seem as arbitrary as the decision to include or exclude this or that designer. Hasty and/or elliptical, they are obviously the product of phone interviews or emails between authors and subjects. Each designer is allowed one quote in English, printed in bold type. “Language is a virus, money is a nasty disease,” claims Jonathan Barnbrook. “Style=Fart”, announces Stefan Sagmeister. Platitudes all, these pronouncements are an insult to the intelligence of readers, and detrimental to the professional reputation of the designers involved whose wit and aptitudes are grossly misrepresented.
- 10 In contrast, the third book of this selection, published by Phaidon can only be described as important. *De Merz à Emigre et au-delà : graphisme et magazines d'avant-garde au XXe siècle*, the book features a selection of international publications that have influenced or have been influenced by revolutionary and underground movements of the twentieth century. The quantity of illustrations and the quality of the historical research makes it a major contribution by its author, Steven Heller, one of the most prolific and dedicated graphic design critic in the USA.
- 11 And yet, *De Merz à Emigre* leaves readers perplexed. Why this staggering display of so-called “avant-garde” publications in a wide range of styles and formats? For the sheer pleasure of having it all together in a single volume? Indeed, graphic arts collectors and design professionals are sure to appreciate the visual feast this book offers by featuring the work of every great names in graphic design, from Kurt Schwitters (Merz) to Rudy VanderLans (Emigre). Here, at least, no one is left out. And yet... Reading the text does not elucidate the main question: What is the specific role of graphic expression in the propagation of avant-garde ideas?

- 12 Graphic design will not find its rightful place in art history until one acknowledges that it is a unique mean of *expression* and not, as it is often characterized, a unique mean of *communication*. Indeed, the act of combining together words and images—the trademark of graphic design—is an extraordinary feat. And looking at the two together demands a very special sort of effort from the viewer. The back-and-forth movement necessary to decipher at the same time abstract typographical signs and tangible images puts a specific pressure on the right and left sides of the brain that must sort out simultaneously two totally different forms of language.
- 13 The singular appeal of graphic design in our culture today can be explained by the physiology of the viewing process, an exhilarating event that stimulates our firing neurons. What we need from graphic design critiques is an analysis of how we look at graphic compositions, and how two subjective impressions—words and images—can become objectified in our mind as a single radiant insight.
-

NOTES

1. *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, #89, Fall 2004 (Special issue: Graphic Design)