



THE AESTHETICS OF INDEX

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In 1969 American conceptual artist Douglas Huebler wrote: “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.” It seems an appropriate response to a condition in graphic design today: faced with an exceptional amount of available information, the problem is not needing to create more of it; instead, we are learning to negotiate the vast quantity that exists.¹ The explosion of content in the information space exposes the statement in a new light. This is life in the data world.

Networked media has a seemingly unlimited capacity to store and disseminate any kind of material. In this context, a new set of objectives is bestowed upon a designer. Rather than making every effort to add something singular to the bottomless pit of information, the designer strives to create more value in utilizing and transforming what is already out there. Methods of information sorting and processing, traditionally considered beyond the scope of creative disciplines, allows for the recycling of commonplace digital content into a new form of creative material.

This is an aesthetic of curation, a movement of arranging. What we see is not a full image, but of a fractured plane, highly two dimensional — the design of dissemination, of sharing and reflagging, of Google Image searches and desktop folders. This is not collage. This is organization. The designer as curator, as orchestrator of information and image. The act of selecting available information becomes a way to make sense of our contemporary culture, how we sift through images.

Language can be spoken — it can be clearly understood and digested in a moment. The current state of communication is not so simple, not so concrete. There has been a turning point within post-modern thought that defied the “clarity” of earlier design/communication

models. Perhaps the notion of “design” and “communication” is not so easily defined. We are a far more complex viewership and culture, who have evolved to digest our lives in the image world much differently than the old “type + image = message” approach of past models in graphic design. Has graphic design been rendered useless? Or, more specifically, has the current moment in culture fractured forms and words in a way where the readership can see through it, disregard it, or worst of all — just not care? The reader is an active participant in the content created, and therefore is implicated in the process of interpreting those messages.

Our current digestion of information is not a linear path. When a user signs in to various social media sites (Facebook, tumblr, flickr, etc) the page that greets him or her is most commonly called the “dashboard.” This page is a frequently updated platform or stage where his or her friends or people he or she are following share links, photos, stories. Without any other way of ordering these disconnected pieces from various sources, the user goes on a journey of free association. One click leads to another set of content, which does not necessarily relate to the last page viewed. The process of free association is abstract, and many times can lead one to say, “IDK (I don’t know) how I got here, but here I am,” due to the unlimited amount of portals parsed.

Internet acronyms such as TTYL and LOL are an outgrowth of the medium of computer-based-communication; they come from writing code and evolved in relation to technological communications. They are not the opposite of “long form”; that would instead be the character cap on Twitter, for example, which is an abbreviation of communication, not compression of words. The acronym might be similar to the designer’s new language, one that relies on a knowing reader, a *user*, one

that is speaking in the same language and needs to function at the same quickened pace.

The process of internet free association leaves us with a toolbox of pieces to be put together. The question then arises: how does the role of graphic design evolve within a visual landscape of usable and reusable assets, assets free of their original association and sometimes source, yet rich in aesthetic promise? Much like a database of visual particles, these assets come to provide full, fractioned, and fragment-sized tools for the contemporary graphic designer, as well as for the average user, who, unlike any time in history, is actively participating in the act of designing on a regular basis. Therefore, as this database of valuables grows more rapidly, so does its use, forming an ever-shifting indexical aesthetic consisting of its many parts and based in the multiple strategies for how these parts might recombine.

The indexical is a critical part of our current way of communicating and thinking. It is why there is a need for curation — these two words are inextricably linked. The designer is an initiator, establishing order. The index, even if small, is compiled like inventories under the logic of sameness, even if that singularity is defined by a Google image search of “work,” “kittens,” or domesticity.” With this type of sorting, the contemporary index aesthetic is not trying to be scientific like the Dewey Decimal System but re-presentative of a current idea or concept. Here, we are not analyzing these works based on their content, but the structural strategy taken in final outcome or presentation.

This design methodology acknowledges the pieces with little regard for the whole. The importance becomes more on the individual than the group as the reader can quickly select and pick out elements as if they were stand alone

pieces. This process heralds mobility over the monolith, spread over the growth. On trendlist.org there is a subsection called “Exposed Content.” It is described as:

...one of the most popular current trends, usually seen on book and magazine covers, where images are located in different compositions and reveal the inner content. This kind of design goes very well together with visuals for the art exhibitions where

It can be problematic to look at these compositions and layouts void of context. The loose arrangements can feel arbitrary and to question its intent is necessary. If design visualizes and gives meaning to ideas, what happens when its approach is flattened and creating an anti-hierarchy? Text is placed not in opposition to an image, or integrated, but nonchalantly next to its spacial colleagues. Within the framework of the index aesthetic, designers are utilized as computers without algorithms. Output from multiple participants is consequently combined to accomplish a bigger task: the composition, the cover. Can this format force change in the concept of collecting and hoarding; or does it become an empty method that is simple to apply?

By allowing the combined elements space to breathe without a full bleed, we can understand it as a stand alone compartment from another place. We understand this through its rectangular format. With those edges, elements are not usurped by a larger idea, but remain culturally loaded by its past baggage. There’s signs, there’s signifiers and multiple meanings stacked on top of stacks. A loose grid suggests the spreading of cards on a table. It is important to note the “frame” of these works — the set, the screen, the window that these books and posters end up being viewed on and viewed through. Each image references another site, which could reference thousands of other sources. Referencing these other texts,

ideologies, symbols and so forth takes on the form of intertextuality, which is the insertion of other texts, with its meaning, into a new text. One of the fundamental aspects of intertextuality is its presumption that the viewer understands that the text is being referenced, which a user on tumblr does when reblogging off the dashboard. The graphic designer that favors the collection over the whole is the designer who acknowledges our floating world.

While designers do not have control over where their work goes once it is uploaded to a social network or their site is updated, they have control over how they digest the uploaded and shared in how it is organized for their audiences. Living under postmodernism has made designers and artists more conscious of this fact.

Designers have always had to operate conscious of structures, but the more history of images and text available (which at this point is an incredible amount), the more prudence in how it's used; but also the more material and room for semiotic play we have.[2](#)

Karolis Kosas created Anonymous Press (A-II) which functions as a self-sufficient publishing platform where the outcome is a publication created by the individual and a database, Google image search. The viewer defines a topic, and the content and form are then generated from the most relevant images found online; the publications are added to the library, available for on-demand printing. The form itself is an indexical arrangement of the user's findings. Though these publications seemingly hold the same aesthetic as the work I am analyzing, Kosa's project differs in the fact that it literally uses a system to create and visualize content.

Utilizing an unlimited capacity to store content and retrieve immediate feedback through comments, shares, reblogs and pins, the designer can be shifted to that of an

initiator defining rules and boundaries, from which the process can evolve independently based on the input of users and data. However, this is possible with a feedback loop. It becomes problematic when hijacked by print media, or non-interactive, truly data-driven content. The design output in such conditions is the development of schemes in which the author/designer remains, but is marginalized as a producer – consciously restraining the level of control.

Postmodernism produced a plethora of content appropriated from the past, so the index is the inevitable sibling. The appropriation of content makes it so much more difficult for designers to be aware of every connotation of imagery but the index allows for the image included to live as they were, perhaps in different bookends. Not to mention it's easier to create an aggregate image than to integrate disparate elements into a new form. Words and pictures very well might not only be written to be read and looked at, but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated sometimes by humans, more often by machines. While traditional notions of writing are primarily concerned with 'originality' and 'creativity,' the digital environment fosters new skills that include 'manipulation' and 'management' of the loads of already existent and ever-increasing language. Replacing "language" with a more general term "content," these ideas can be utilized to understand the shifting role of visual communication in the context of networked media.

Conceivably it is the grouping, rather than the work of an individual, that matters most. While a collaborative model of design disregards the significance of a single ultimate solution based on individual expertise, it offers in return a singular collective perspective. In this new paradigm, quality and authority are secondary to quantity and plurality, which maximize a scope of potentially feasible choices. As participants adjust to the prevailing conditions

of anonymity and to the potentially disconcerting experience of being reduced to a detached voice floating in an amorphous electronic void, they become adept at reconstituting the faceless words around them into bodies, histories, lives. The right to define the “ultimate solution” is given to the viewer, thus eliminating the dichotomy between the designer and the audience, and creating a visual infinite scroll.

Endnotes

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