

SYLLABUS: GRAPHIC DESIGN THEORY

Helen Armstrong, Maryland Institute College of Art

I designed this syllabus for a 16 week 3 hour lecture course. Each class includes main texts for the opening lecture/discussion and then seminar readings for the small group discussion/exercise portion of the class. Texts entitled "Optional Readings" provide useful background material which may not be necessary for all the students.

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MAIN TEXT

Armstrong, Helen. *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009.

SUGGESTED READING

Thackara, John. *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*. Cambridge: MIT, 2006.

Jubert, Roxane. *Typography and Graphic Design*. Singapore: Flammarion, 2006.

(For those who have not taken a graphic design history course, this provides necessary historical background.)

UNIT ONE: CREATING THE FIELD

Unit One provides a strong foundation of theoretical ideas in graphic design spanning the early decades of the 20th century. It opens with influential figures of the avant-garde—Marinetti, Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy—designers who grappled with issues of form and function, striving to overcome past conventions and create new world orders. These designers put crucial tensions into play which form the modernist foundation of the field. Design tenets developed during this period are particularly relevant to designers today (functionalism, white space, hierarchy, the Vorkurs, etc.).

WEEK 1: SEPT 2

WHY DESIGN THEORY?

Lupton, Ellen. “Foreword: Why Theory?” *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 6-8.

Armstrong, Helen. “Introduction: Revisiting the Avant-Garde.” *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 9-15.

WEEK 2: SEPT 9

OVERVIEW OF THE AVANT-GARDE, CONCEPT OF MATERIALITY

This lecture examines designers who grappled with issues of form and function, striving to overcome past conventions and create new world orders. Special emphasis is placed on the concept of materiality and the work of these designers within the overall context of modernism.

Marinetti, F. T. “Manifesto of Futurism.” *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 20-21.

Warde, Beatrice. “The Crystal Goblet or Printing Should be Invisible.” *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 39-43.

Seminar Reading: Helfand, Jessica and John Maeda. “Dematerialization of Screen Space.” *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 119-123.

Optional Reading: Jubert, Roxane. “The Avant-Garde Floodtide.” *Typography and Graphic Design*. Singapore: Flammarion, 2006. 154-162.

WEEK 3: SEPT 16

OVERVIEW OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivists recast the role of the designer in modern society. This lecture considers the influence of constructivist thought upon modern design, including the emerging role of photography and social responsibility within design practice.

Rodchenko, Aleksandr. "Who We Are: Manifesto of the Constructivist Group." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 22-23.

Lissitzky, El. "Our Book." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 25-31

Seminar Reading: Sagmeister, Stefan. "How Good is Good?" <http://www.graphicdesigntheory.net>

Optional Reading: Jubert, Roxane. "Continuation and Reconstruction in the Avant-Garde." *Typography and Graphic Design*. Singapore: Flammarion, 2006. 180-184.

WEEK 4: SEPT 23

THE BAUHAUS

Design tenets developed during this period are particularly relevant to designers today (grid, white space, hierarchy, the Vorkurs, etc.) Issues to be discussed: importance of Bauhaus to contemporary design education and practice, concept of visual language, evolution of formal design methodologies.

Moholy-Nagy, Laszlo. "Typophoto." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 32-34.

Bayer, Herbert. "On Typography." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 44-49

Seminar Reading: Helfand, Jessica. "De Stijl, New Media, and the Lessons of Geometry."
<http://www.graphicdesigntheory.net>

Optional Reading: Jubert, Roxane. "Continuation and Reconstruction in the Avant-Garde." *Typography and Graphic Design*. Singapore: Flammarion, 2006. 195-205.

UNIT TWO: BUILDING ON SUCCESS

Unit Two covers the latter decades of the 20th century. It begins with designers, like Josef Müller-Brockmann and Karl Gerstner, who developed avant-garde ideas into more formal methodologies through International Style, a method later assimilated by corporate America. Unit Two goes on to explore the strongly conceptual, distinctly American, design approaches of iconic figures like Paul Rand. At this point, the readings take a turn. Modern begins to turn to Postmodern as the Pop movement appears in Robert Venturi's Learning from Las Vegas. David Carson takes on mainstream typography, while Katherine McCoy explores the experimental work done at Cranbrook. Building on Success ends at the height of the modern/postmodern clash.

WEEK 5: SEPT 30

INTERNATIONAL STYLE

This lecture traces the evolution of International Style and examines the concept of the grid.

Müller-Brockmann, Josef. "Grid and Design Philosophy." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 62-63.

Tschichold, Jan. "The Principles of the New Typography." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 35-38.

Seminar Reading: No seminar reading. Grid exercise.

WEEK 6: OCT 7

CORPORATE CULTURE: THE ASSIMILATION OF INTERNATIONAL STYLE.

This lecture explores the relationship between corporate culture and the graphic designer, including issues of branding.

Rand, Paul. "Good Design is Goodwill." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 64-69.

Lasn, Kalle "1600-1886: The Birth of the Corporate 'I.'" <http://www.graphicdesigntheory.net>

Seminar Reading: Heller, Steven. "The Underground Mainstream." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 98-101.

WEEK 7: OCT 14

DESIGN SYSTEMS

This lectures considers systematic approaches to design. Such methodologies, popular in the 60s, are useful for addressing currently issues of ecology and society.

Gerstner, Karl. "Designing Programmes." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 59-61.

Alexander, Christopher. "Introduction: The Need for Rationality." *Notes on a Synthesis of Form*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964. 1-11

Review for Exam; No Seminar Reading

Optional Reading: Thackara, John. *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*. Cambridge: MIT, 2006.

WEEK 8: OCT 21

MIDTERM EXAM

WEEK 9: OCT 28

FALL BREAK

WEEK 10: NOV 4

OVERVIEW OF POSTMODERNISM; TYPOGRAPHY AS DISCOURSE

This lecture provides an overview of postmodernism specifically as it relates to graphic design with special emphasis on the concept of Typography as Discourse and the role of deconstruction.

McCoy, Katherine with David Frej. "Typography as Discourse." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 81-83.

Lupton, Ellen. "Deconstruction and Graphic Design: History Meets Theory." <http://www.graphicdesigntheory.net>.

Seminar Reading: Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. "Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 70-76.

WEEK 11: NOV 11

POSTMODERN AESTHETIC; THE LEGIBILITY WARS

This lecture considers the resulting postmodern aesthetic through its various forms and reactions within the design community.

Weingart, Wolfgang. "My Way to Typography" *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 77-80.

McCoy, Katherine. "American Graphic Design Expression: The Evolution of American Typography." <http://www.graphicdesigntheory.net>.

Seminar Reading: Heller, Steven. "The Cult of the Ugly." <http://www.graphicdesigntheory.net>

UNIT THREE: MAPPING THE FUTURE

Mapping the Future explores fresh topics vital to a basic understanding of the current field. This unit begins with an emerging sense of social responsibility, as expressed by Kalle Lasn, Jonathon Barnbrook and Jan van Toorn. Unit Three then considers issues of authorship as the texts debate new roles for designers an increasingly networked, participatory culture. Technology takes a front and center position as Unit Three continues with discussions of the effects of software upon current aesthetics. The unit ends with an examination of the universal within today's culture.

WEEK 12: NOV 18

REVOLUTION

This lecture explores revolts between the graphic designer and Corporate America at the end of the 20th century, including the Social Responsibility Movement of the 1990's.

Barnbrook, Jonathon, et al. "First Things First Manifesto 2000." <http://www.graphicdesigntheory.net>

van Toorn, Jan. "Design and Reflexivity." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 102-106.

Seminar Reading: Lasn, Kalle. "Design Anarchy." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 107.

WEEK 13: NOV 25

DESIGNER AS PRODUCER

This lecture recognizes contemporary possibilities for the designer as author/producer, rather than a more traditional problem-solver.

Rock, Michael. "The Designer as Author." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 108-114.

Lupton, Ellen. "Designer as Producer." <http://www.graphicdesigntheory.net>

Seminar Reading: Wild, Lorraine. "The Macramé of Resistance." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 84-86.

WEEK 14: DEC 9**DESIGNER AS ENABLER**

As technology propels more and more citizens into the production of content and form, designers and artists have an opportunity to become creative leaders, producing work that invites participation from users. This lecture considers contemporary models of making which fulfill such leadership roles.

Blauvelt, Andrew. "Towards Relational Design." <http://www.graphicdesigntheory.net>.

Siegel, Dmitri. "Designing Our Own Graves." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 115-118. (visit <http://www.designobserver.com> to read responses to Siegel's essay).

Seminar Reading: van der Velden, Daniel. "Research & Destroy: A Plea for Design as Research." <http://www.graphicdesigntheory.net>

Reader Response Project due

WEEK 15: DEC 2**MOVING FORWARD**

This lecture considers the monumental impact of technology upon contemporary aesthetics, as well as a reexamination of the concept of the universal.

Manovich, Lev. "Import/Export, or Design Workflow and Contemporary Aesthetics." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 127-132.

Ellen and Julia Lupton. "Univers Strikes Back." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 133-137.

Seminar Reading: Hara, Kenya. "Designing Design." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 124-126.

Critical Essay/Visual Research Project due.

WEEK 16: DEC 16**WRAP-UP**

Scher, Paula. "The Dark in the Middle of the Stairs." *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 87-89.

Armstrong, Helen. "Introduction: Revisiting the Avant-Garde" *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*. New York: Princeton Arch, 2009. 9-15. (re-read for final discussion)