

RETHINKING MODERNISM, REVISING FUNCTIONALISM

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When I think of the undercurrents that shape my graphic design, I think of ideas about language and form. Ideas about coding and reading visual form, about challenging the viewer to construct individual interpretations, about layers of form and layers of meaning. These are at the forefront of my mind, but behind that lie other deeper and older concerns that go back to my earliest years of design. Perhaps these are what could be called a philosophy or an ethic, a personal set of values and criteria, a thread that winds through the lifetime of work and sustains its rigor, the continuity in the cycles of change.

Undergraduate school in industrial design was a very idealistic time. The strong emphasis on problem-solving and a form follows functionalism struck a resonance with my personal approach toward the opportunities and problems of daily life. As a college junior, I enthusiastically embraced the rationalism of the Museum of Modern Art's Permanent Design Collection, abandoning the ambiguously intuitive territory of fine art. This somewhat vague midwestern American Modernist ethic had its roots in the Bauhaus, and our group of students gained a dim understanding of its application by the Ulm School of Germany. Added to this was a reverence for the insights of George Nelson, Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller. In hindsight I continue to appreciate the foundation built by those years of industrial design training. At that time, in the middle 1960s, even the best American education in graphic design would not have gone much further than an intuitive 'aha' method of conceptualizing design solutions and an emulation of the design masters of the moment.

This faith in rational functionalism (and not a polished portfolio) found me my first job, at Unimark International, then the American missionary for European Modernism, the graphic heir of the Bauhaus. There I had the opportunity to learn graphic design from "real" Swiss and to have my junior design work critiqued by Massimo Vignelli, the greatest missionary of them all, the master of Helvetica and the grid. Our ethic then was one of discipline, clarity and cleanliness. The highest praise for a piece of graphic design was, "This is really clean." We saw ourselves as sweeping away the clutter and confusion of American advertising design with a professional rationality and objectivity that would define a new American design. This approach was fairly foreign to American clients and in 1968 it was remarkably difficult to convince corporate clients that a grid-ordered page with only two weights of Helvetica was appropriate to their needs. Now, of course, one can hardly persuade them to let give up their hold on "Swiss", so completely has the corporate world embraced rationalist Modernism in graphic design.

But after a few years of striving to design as "purely" as possible, employing a minimalist typographic vocabulary, strongly gridded page structures and contrast in scale for visual interest, I came to view this desire for "cleanliness" as not much more than housekeeping. A number of us, mainly graphic designers in the "Swiss" method, began to search for a more expressive design, paralleling a similar movement in architecture now known as Post Modernism. Eventually what came to be called "New Wave", for lack of a better term, emerged in the 1970s as a new operating mode of graphic design. This included a new permission to employ historical and vernacular elements, something prohibited by "Swiss" Modernism. Then in the mid 1980s at Cranbrook we found a new interest in verbal language in graphic design, as well as fine art. Text can be animated with voices and images can be read, as well as seen, with an emphasis on audience interpretation and participation in the construction of meaning. But now, as the cycles of change continue, Modernism may be reemerging somewhat, a renewed minimalism that is calming down the visual outburst of activity of the past fifteen years.

Through these years of continual change and new possibilities, where does the ethic lie? Does not the idea of ethic imply some sort of unshakable bedrock impervious to the winds of change? For me, there seems to be a habit of functionalism that shapes my process at the beginning of every design project, the rational analysis of the message and the audience, the objective structuring of the text. Each cycle of change during the passing years seems to have added another visual or conceptual layer laid upon that foundation of functionalism, but inside of every project it is always there. Although this emphasis on rationalism would seem to be at odds with recent experimentation at Cranbrook, in fact it has been the provocation to question accepted norms in graphic design, stimulating the search for new communications theories and visual languages. I have never lost my faith in rational functionalism, in spite of appearances to the contrary. The only thing lost was an absolute dedication to minimalist form, which is a completely different issue from rationalist process.

Part of this ethic is a strong conviction and enthusiasm that design is important, that it matters in life, not just mine, but in the lives of our audiences and users of designed communications. Graphic design can be a contribution to our audiences. It can enrich as it informs and communicates. And there is a faith in not only the possibility, but the necessity for advancement and growth in our field, an imperative for change. That only through change can we continue to push ahead in knowledge and expertise, theory and expression, continually building our collective knowledge of the process of communication. These convictions were formed early and sustain me today.

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