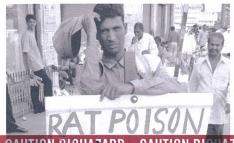# GRAPHIC DESIGN THEORY

READINGS FROM THE FIELD

HERBERT BAYER   KARL GERSTNER   KENYA HARA   JESSICA HELFAND   STEVEN HELLER   KALLE LASN
EL LISSITZKY   ELLEN AND JULIA LUPTON   KATHERINE McCOY WITH DAVID FREJ   LEV MANOVICH
F. T. MARINETTI   LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY   JOSEF MÜLLER-BROCKMANN   PAUL RAND   MICHAEL ROCK
ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO, VARVARA STEPANOVA, AND ALEKSEI GAN   PAULA SCHER   DMITRI SIEGEL
JAN TSCHICHOLD   JAN VAN TOORN   ROBERT VENTURI, DENISE SCOTT BROWN, AND STEVEN IZENOUR
BEATRICE WARDE   WOLFGANG WEINGART   LORRAINE WILD

Edited by
Helen Armstrong

With a foreword by
Ellen Lupton

A DESIGN THEORY GUIDE

GLOSSARY

AVANT-GARDE Driven by utopian visions, avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century, particularly those discussed in the context of graphic design, sought new visual forms capable of objective, universal communication. These artists attempted to radically alter their own societies by merging art with everyday life, shifting the arts away from the individual, subjective, and, in their minds, corrupt visions of the past. Often the avant-garde used mass communication—books, magazines, exhibitions—to spread their ideals internationally.

BAUHAUS Under the leadership of Walter Gropius, this influential school opened in Weimar in 1919. Initially its express purpose was to merge art and craft, thereby elevating German industrial design. Although the experimental work there varied greatly, graphic designers usually focused on efforts by prominent Bauhaus members, including László Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Bayer, to uncover a universally comprehensible visual language. This quest greatly influenced New Typography. Also of note is the Bauhaus *Vorkurs,* or basic course, which became a curriculum model for art and design schools internationally, particularly in the United States. More generally, the Bauhaus has become synonymous with high modern design.

CONSTRUCTIVISM In 1921 a group of twenty-one Russian artists, inspired by Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square,* founded the Working Group of Constructivists. These artists put aside their easels, declaring that artists should produce only utilitarian art. The artist became the worker, the constructor. Founding members included Aleksandr Rodchenko, his partner Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksei Gan, and El Lissitzky. The movement's popularity faded in the USSR in the early 1930s after spreading across much of Europe.

CRAFT As digital technology increasingly dominates the creation and production of graphic design, a growing number of designers are looking instead to the physical act of making. They are incorporating a sense of the handmade into new technology or putting such technology aside altogether to explore older production methods like letterpress printing. In "The Macramé of Resistance," Lorraine Wild positions craft as central to a "designer's voice." For Wild, craft suggests a crucial knowledge acquired through making. She argues that this kind of knowledge, in addition to more verbal, conceptual approaches, must "form the foundation of a designer's education and work." Craft is often associated with the resurgence of ornament in the design community, as well as the broader DIY movement.

CRYSTAL GOBLET This well-known metaphor of typography is taken from Beatrice Warde's famous 1930 lecture, later published as an essay. According to Warde, typography should be beautifully transparent, communicating the message as clearly as possible while not calling attention to its own form.

CULTURE JAMMERS These activists use techniques of disruption to rebel against Corporate America's dominance of the media. They attack mainstream advertising through various techniques, including billboard liberation, media hoaxing, audio agitprop, subvertisements, and anti-ads. *Adbusters* magazine, founded by Kalle Lasn in 1989, has become a catalyst for culture jamming activities. See www.adbusters.org. A 1993 book entitled *Culture Jamming,* written by cultural critic Mark Dery, is the central text of the movement.

DEATH OF THE AUTHOR In 1967 French theorist Roland Barthes deconstructed the literary author's position as the originator of meaning through his concept of the death of the author. According to Barthes, instead of turning to the author to discern the meaning of a text, we should focus on the "open web of referents" in which the text functions. The author as the key producer of meaning was and is, in effect, dead. In the words of Barthes, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."

DECONSTRUCTION Jacques Derrida introduced the concept of deconstruction in his book *Of Grammatology* in France in 1967. In simplest terms deconstruction is a mode of questioning that breaks down the hierarchical oppositions of language, revealing its inherent instability. Within the design community this term is most widely applied to a complex, layered design style popular in the 1980s and 1990s that literally translated poststructuralist theories, including Derrida's key concept of deconstruction, into visual layouts. Involved work took place most notably at Cranbrook Academy of Art, where designers actively engaged the intricacies of poststructuralist thought within a broad body of work.

DIY (DO-IT-YOURSELF) MOVEMENT Supporters of this movement actively resist dependence on mass-produced goods and the multinational corporations that generally produce and distribute such goods. Instead participants encourage individuals to produce goods themselves, thereby protesting corporate exploitative labor and environmental practices while empowering individuals to become producers rather than just consumers.

FREE CULTURE MOVEMENT This social movement advocates a participatory rather than proprietary structure to society. To achieve this kind of open culture, participants put the power of communication, creation, and distribution into the hands of individuals by resisting and critiquing concepts of copyright and intellectual property. A crucial text for the movement is *Free Culture,* a book by Stanford University law professor Lawrence Lessig. The roots of the movement lie in the free software movement. See http://freeculture.org.

FUNCTIONALISM In the early 1900s, avant-garde artists stripped their work of anything useless and/or ornamental in favor of utilitarian, highly functional design. This approach evolved into the core modern tenet of "form follows function," still much quoted as the key component of effective design. Postmodernists rebelled against these standards at the end of the twentieth century. Functionalism resurged in popularity at the onset of the twenty-first century as the vast amount of information archived and communicated through digital technology foregrounded issues of interface and usability.

FUTURISM Led by poet F. T. Marinetti, futurists shook off nine-teenth century conventions, using the arts instead to express their unique vision of the twentieth century, a vision dominated by speed, aggression, and war. Marinetti's radical typographic experimenta-tion freed other avant-garde artists, including prominent members of the Bauhaus, to explore dynamic new typographic forms that engaged the machine aesthetic of the industrialized world.

GRAPHIC AUTHORSHIP This term was first used by Cranbrook Academy of Art director Katherine McCoy in 1990. During that period, the concept was used to explore a postmodern shift toward personal, expressive work. During the 2000s, however, the term took on new meaning as designers began to author texts of design history and theory, as well as initiate other entrepreneurial endeav-ors. Within this authorship model of graphic design the presence of a client is no longer key to the design process.

GRID Grids divide and order content. They are most notoriously associated with International Style or Swiss-style design. For practitioners of this influential design approach, complex, modular grids play a crucial role in establishing a tightly controlled design methodology. Although the popularity of grids peaked with Swiss style in the 1950s and 1960s, they have recently incited new inter-est, since the broad expanse of the web demands complex universal ordering mechanisms.

INTERNATIONAL STYLE This design ideology stems from a modernist, rational, systematic approach. Designers often use a limited typographic and color palette, carefully constructed modular grids, and objective imagery. Such designers put aside personal vision and become, instead, translators who clearly, objectively communicate the client message. This "valueless" approach helped professionalize the design field in the 1950s and 1960s, moving it away from the arts and into the semiscientific realm. Such systems were particularly useful for large-scale corporate identities that began to appear during that time.

LEGIBILITY WARS During the 1980s and 1990s a conflict broke out between modern and postmodern designers. Modernists advocated legibility as a key component of graphic design; postmodernists questioned this, sacrificing legibility when necessary to achieve visual impact. Steven Heller's essay "The Cult of the Ugly" was a touchstone for this debate.

METAMEDIA According to Lev Manovich all forms of new media are merging into a giant all-encompassing metamedia in which working methods and techniques of different media are remixed within a single project. This evolving metamedia is radically transforming contemporary aesthetics.

MODERNISM The Modern movement falls roughly between the 1860s and the 1970s. It is typically defined as artists' attempts to cope with a newly industrialized society. Modernism is progressive and often utopian, empowering humans to improve or remake their environments. Within modernism falls various other movements crucial to the development of graphic design. These include futur-ism, constructivism, and New Typography. The design community continues to debate the value of modernism, as basic modernist tenets still define conventional standards for effective design.

NEW MEDIA This term typically refers to the distribution of information by digital means. However, as Lev Manovich notes in *The Language of New Media,* the term can be more accurately broadened to include the transformation of all media, old and new, through using digital technology.

NEW TYPOGRAPHY Avant-garde approaches to typography—sans serif type, asymmetrical balance, conscious utilization of the optical nature of type, and so forth—were developed by artists all over Europe, but primarily at the Bauhaus. These approaches are often re-ferred to as New Typography. László Moholy-Nagy used this term in his essay of the same name written in 1923. Jan Tschichold codified these ideas in his seminal work *The New Typography* in 1928.

NEW WAVE Often used interchangeably with postmodernism or late modernism. Designers typically associate New Wave design with Wolfgang Weingart, a leader of the second wave of Swiss typographic style. Through this New Wave Weingart rebelled against Swiss design luminaries of the 1950s and 1960s, pushing intuition and personal expression to the forefront of his work. Notable students are April Greiman and Dan Friedman.

POSTMODERNISM Postmodernists recognize that meaning is inherently unstable; there is no essence or center that one should strive to reach. The broad term *postmodernism* is closely associ-ated with the critical field of poststructuralism. Within the design community it can be used to refer to a layered, complex style or a poststructuralist critical approach to design. The postmodern movement begins roughly in the 1960s. There is no definite end point, although most suggest we have already moved into a post-postmodern world. Critics describe postmodernism as either a reaction against or the ultimate continuation of modernism. Either way, postmodernism moves away from the quest for absolutes and universally applicable values that characterize modernism.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY MOVEMENT Participants in this move-ment urge the graphic design community to confront the negative societal and environmental consequences of our rampant consumer culture. The "First Things First Manifesto 2000," initially signed by thirty-three influential designers, brought such issues to the fore-front of design discourse. The manifesto was published in numerous magazines and journals internationally and is still a controversial topic. Note that it was an updated version of the "First Things First" manifesto published by Ken Garland in 1964.

TYPOPHOTO László Moholy-Nagy uses this term in his book *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (*Painting, Photography, Film*) published in 1925. Typophoto refers to the combination of photography and typography in layout form, specifically in book and advertising formats. Typophoto, for Moholy-Nagy, allowed the designer to communicate clearly and objectively.

UNIVERSAL Herbert Bayer designed this geometric alphabet of lowercase letterforms at the Bauhaus in 1925. This alphabet evokes Bayer's quest to fundamentally rethink letterforms by efficiently stripping them of past values and conventions. Although not mass produced during the first half of the century, it has recently been made into a digital font.