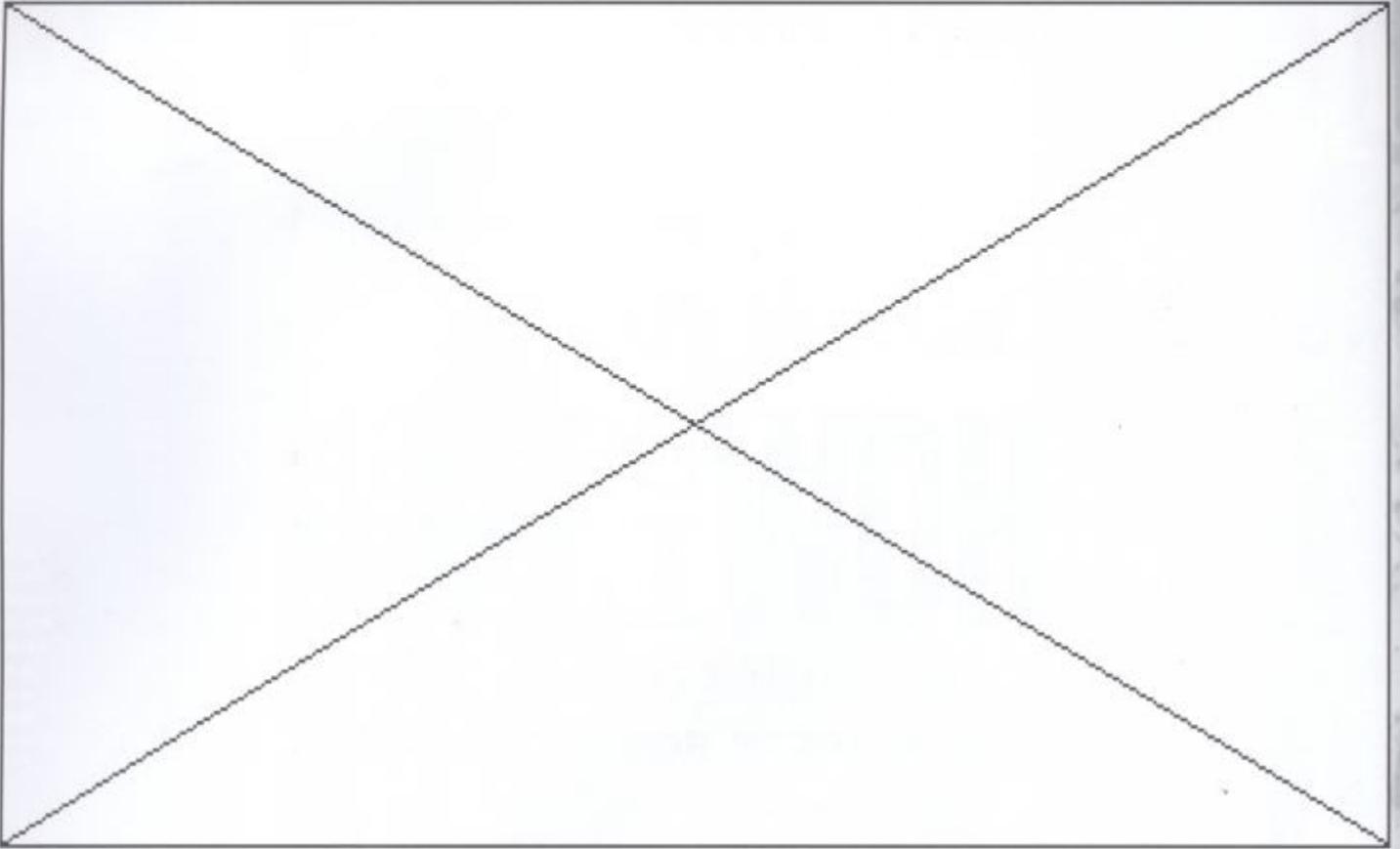


# THE DEATH OF FORM



Have designers lost interest in graphic invention?

**I have witnessed** in recent years a curious thing happen to graphic design. While I can sympathize with the development up to a point, it still perplexes me. It flies in the face of everything we valued about graphic design since the beginning of its life as a professional practice in the early 20th century, and turns its back on a key motivation that led so many people to become designers in the first place.

I'm talking about what has become of the love of visual form, the desire to seize its possibilities and mold it into original, surprising, and spectacularly expressive new shapes. Of course, graphic designers still carry out this task—sometimes, though less often now, with great panache—but they don't much discuss visual concerns nor do they appear to value them greatly. At times it almost

seems as though form is becoming taboo, a dirty secret from the past that we are all too embarrassed to mention, and which we are working hard to recover from and leave behind.

The response I received to an essay I wrote last year about Dutch graphic design for the Dutch Design Yearbook drove this point home. The Dutch used to be extraordinary inventors of graphic form, from 1920s modernists such as Piet Zwart to the extravagant creations of Studio Dumbar in the 1980s. Work like Dumbar's exerted great influence on postmodern American graphic design and my argument in the essay, a polemic aimed primarily at Dutch readers, was that a decade later (and ever since) Dutch designers seem to have lost interest in graphic invention. As Dutch

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designer Jop van Bennekom put it, "Form is so worn out in the '90s."

My criticism of contemporary Dutch design caused some local annoyance and I was invited to Amsterdam to take part in a panel discussion—fairly good-natured, as it turned out. What interested me, though, both there and when the piece was republished on Design Observer, is that, once again, no one responded to the specific issues I had raised about form by speaking up for its importance and value. Among these designers there was clearly little sense of concern about the diminished value assigned to form in contemporary graphic design. The general feeling was that designers had different concerns now. They had many more platforms to think about, more complex demands from clients to satisfy, and a supposedly greater sense of responsibility about fulfilling client needs than earlier generations of form-loving designers.

There isn't space to explore these assumptions except to say that none of them are reasons to neglect form. And form is the subject I want to concentrate on here. I find myself in the strange position of being a non-designer who seems to value form more—apparently a lot more—than many professional form-makers, and this has obliged me to think again about the underlying reasons for this attraction.

As a child, I had been impressed by comic-book art, packaging, product logos and lettering, and I liked to draw. In my teens, I started to look consciously at art—first in books, and then in art galleries because I had to see the real thing. My principal concern at that stage was with painting. I had never been told how to analyze a picture, not even by art teachers, so I set out to learn how to do it myself. This required patient and sustained looking, as it does for each and every viewer.

I already understood the aesthetic pleasures of reading. It was a tremendous revelation to discover just how much pleasure there could also be in

looking. The closer you looked at a picture, the deeper into the visual field you ventured, the more you considered the relationships between each element and how they combined to convey meaning, then the more satisfying the viewing experience became. Having made this discovery as a teenage art fan, it surprised me how few of the people I knew seemed aware that this sphere of aesthetic sensation existed as something to seek out and enjoy. What I did receive from one favorite art teacher was the complementary insight that the artist should look as attentively as possible at the world and notice details that many tended to overlook out of habit. The two activities, paying attention to the texture of reality and looking at art, were, in a vital sense, linked. It was all about learning how to see.

Painting rapidly led me to photography, and photography, in turn, to the artistic potential of film. While each medium has different capabilities, the visual aspects they have in common—composition, color, use of light—were always central to my pleasure as a viewer, and I took it for granted, because experience repeatedly demonstrated it to be so, that in good work, form was inseparable from meaning.

Graphic design attracted my attention a few years later because it, too, was highly visual. I had always loved record sleeves, book covers, and flamboyantly visual magazines. Now, with an eye trained by other media, I began to explore the wider possibilities and achievements of graphic communication—writing about it all came a few years later.

The great designers, I found, had been shaped by many of the same visual influences that determined my own reactions to graphic design. It made complete sense to me that the discipline's history was closely intertwined at key moments with that of art. During the period when my interest developed and became a passion, from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, graphic design was going through

one of the most visually inventive phases in its history.

In deciding what has been valuable about graphic design, I cannot avoid starting with my own experience, which tells me that an aesthetically abundant environment has deep value to the individual and to society. Graphic design has been central to the visual culture of modernity. We see it everywhere we turn. It expresses in the most immediate and compelling form—note, *form*—our hopes, desires, convictions, values, and dreams. A densely imaginative, formally inventive visual culture tells us something about who we are as a people and how we aspire to live.

Conversely, a lackluster visual culture would be a sign that we no longer feel the same sense of hope, freedom, and possibility, and that's how I read the failure of aesthetic nerve and retreat from the manifold pleasures of form in some areas of graphic design: as evidence of something crucial gone missing.

Some designers and design educators seem convinced that earlier designers committed to the visual were unacceptably self-indulgent. I understand the need to purge that many felt in the late 1990s after the beanfeast—I have written about it before in this column. But abstinence has become a self-defeating habit and it's time to move on. For sure, there was plenty of self-indulgence during that decade of technological experimentation; at any given moment there is always bad work. This doesn't invalidate the continuing mission to use an inherently visual medium as expressively as we can. No one complains that the enormous aesthetic pleasure provided by every kind of music is exhausted, old-fashioned, indulgent, excessive, simple-minded, or compromised by being merely aural, as in Duchamp's famous but inaccurate complaint that pre-conceptual art was "merely retinal." The eye craves to be treated with tender regard just as much as the ear. If graphic designers neglect the challenge of form, others will step in and do the job. •