

Do You Want  
Typography  
Or Do You  
Want The  
Truth?

By Erik Carter



Oakland-based graphic designer Erik Carter (formerly of MTV, the New York Times, the Office of Paul Sahre) approached The Gradient with the idea to contribute a critical op-ed that addresses what's not being said or valued by graphic designers practicing in an ever tumultuous and high-stakes world—a world that can benefit from voices of opposition or reason in the face of inequality and injustice. On the flip side of that coin is what is being said (explicitly or not) or valued by graphic designers today, which begs the question: how do our individual and collective actions, decisions, and allegiances have the potential to have greater implications on realms ranging from consumerism to the future of the graphic design profession? Carter's op-ed delves into these pressing topics—underwritten by a sentiment that serves as a reminder for us all to periodically take a step back with a (self-)critical lens, ask questions, and change course. Check out other recent designer op-eds published here on The Gradient including Brooklyn-based graphic design studio Other Means on branding and Eric Hu and Harry Gassel on the politics of style.

# Do You Want **Typography** Or Do You Want The **Truth?**

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*Image by Michael Oswell*

What has become of the profession that we call graphic design? What was once an anonymous intersection between art and industry that pushed for higher ideologies outside of the occupation has become a passive tool for targeted advertising fueled by venture capital, obsessed with the creators and less so the work. This current climate is due to a number of systematic and societal issues that exist inside and outside of design. And in order to improve this, we need to examine some core problems: graphic design's failure to examine its societal implications, the profession's obsession with personality and itself, and the lack of inclusion in design's history and in the current discipline. By examining and outlining these issues, we can start to try and map a better future for our field.

## ETHICAL DESIGN UNDER CAPITALISM

*(THERE IS NO SUCH THING)*

One of the biggest faults of the professional discourse is the failure to thoughtfully examine the real-world ramifications of graphic design. One of the explicit effects of branding is that it can elevate products without outlining their true implications. A change of font in a logo can increase worth of the product it's selling, but it can also deny access from people who may need it or trick people into thinking it's something it's not. Graphic design can do more to intensify income inequality, even if it's in a passive way, than it can to reduce it. Blogs such as Brand New celebrate logo redesigns and tend to talk more about the font and color choices than what the companies actually represent. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are raised on Kickstarter for reissues of corporate design manuals when perhaps graphic designers could support more timely projects instead of throwing money at these fetishized monuments of capitalist nostalgia. Often times, if graphic designers feel a sense of civic duty (or want people to think that they do), they virtue signal and try to fundraise with enamel pins and tote bags. Civic engagement in a local community could go miles farther without perpetuating consumerism and contributing to designer-as-celebrity.

*Image by Michael Oswell*



## DESIGNER AS CELEB

However, as we all know, existing under capitalism is an inescapable restraint, and every individual has different financial and personal needs. Working in an industry such as advertising (with all its damaging influence) can be a means to an end. Not everyone has the allowance to examine and counteract the systems that they are forced into. Outside forces such as the invoice system structure in the United States make it extremely difficult for individuals to be completely independent of corporations. The options for a young designer burdened with student debt are bleak, and most jobs in the field don't give designers much agency. To try and fight this, graphic designers need to inform themselves about more than just aesthetics, but about politics and who and what they are designing for. When nuclear warheads start flying over our heads, are we going to sit back and comment on the logos on the missiles? We need to do better.



*Image by Jennifer Daniel*

In western graphic design, current practitioners can be divided into two eras: the pre-internet guard of professionals and the new crop raised on social media. In the popular 2007 documentary Helvetica, modernist designers such as Massimo Vignelli and Wim Crouwel were pitted against designers who became canonized in the '90s such as Stefan Sagmeister and Paula Scher. With Modernism increasingly becoming an aesthetic or nostalgic design choice instead of a philosophical one, these personalities who rallied against modernist "objectivity" and proposed a more personal route of design began to loom high over the profession's discourse. Their argument of making design more personal morphed into a narcissistic view of our profession where the personality comes first and the work comes second. Practitioners traded in their Wacom pens for wraparound mic headsets, posters were replaced with TED Talks, typographic education with social media training. What was once positioned as a championing of expression over Modernism morphed into celebrity worship.

Design blogs, conferences, and competitions all have catalyzed this climate of design celebrity. Placements on design blogs are often seen as a signifier for success rather than less tangible professional and personal gains. While blogs have made it much easier for designers to get better clients and be seen by art directors—practically making award-show books obsolete—their rapid publishing pace feels disposable, and a splashy write-up can be treated as the final step in the ladder of a career. Not all blogs merely prop up designers without any deeper thought, but the ones that do tend to be the most widely referenced and celebrated. It is much harder to get clicks with a long-form article than it is with a handful of images of sexy typography, and many sites create and contribute to this negative feedback loop.



*Image by neuroticarsehole*

Design conferences can help educate designers and connect them to the community, but increasingly they promote designers' personalities instead of their work. They tend to be expensive and hard to attend unless a corporation is footing the bill, and presentations often take more cues from motivational speaking than from educational institutions. Many designers often see the measure of success in their career trajectory shift from making good work into becoming a full-time speaker; but it can actually be damaging to their career when their energy is spent on conferences rather than designing or maintaining a design business. Conferences must try to serve the designers who would benefit from a better network and education and present voices who are underrepresented instead of presenting empty attempts at inspiration.

Competitions like Young Guns help promote the idea of designer-as-celebrity—propping up well-lit headshots and charging \$150 entrance fees—while further diminishing the designer-as-designer. These awards prey on the dream of youthful success, often promote the same handful of designers and studios, and set up an environment that discourages those without the financial means to enter. Some competitions do have a historic function, showing how the tastes in design have shifted over the years, and some still can be a stepping stone to acquiring better jobs or clients. But as more competitions pop up, it is important for designers to examine how competitions benefit them before spending their resources. Seemingly, professional design organizations use competitions and conferences to fund their institutions, and they need to examine the negative effects they have on the industry and find new ways to support the community.



## THE DESIGN BUBBLE

There is no shortage of graphic designers who are pushing forward aesthetics and design philosophy. It can be disheartening to see some of these skilled practitioners lost in the deluge of social media personalities and outdated design ideals. The most important step that we must take to improve this is to make the current and future generations more critical and inclusive. The systemic and structural bias that exists in our society also affects our profession. In 2014 designer Silas Munro wrote, "Yes, there are many great black and brown designers in practice, but they had to work harder than their peers to get there. There were fewer possibility models, at least that has been my experience. My teachers, as talented as they were, didn't reflect that aspect of my identity. My design history courses didn't either. The monographs of design greats didn't either. There are still so many gaps."<sup>1</sup>

There have been some strides forward with directories made by a handful of individuals attempting to promote underrepresented communities: for "creatives," there's People of Craft. Tech has Good for POC. For illustration, there's Women Who Draw. Alphabettes is a showcase for women in type design, and graphic design has Women of Graphic Design. These are all made by small groups of individuals, so they often overlook designers who aren't connected to the creators of these sites, but they are a huge step in the right direction. At every level of the workplace—in design schools and publications—if you have the means, you should absolutely support diverse voices. If designers have financial stability, they should try and lend their services to public works, government agencies, local communities, civic groups, and other systems that are less aligned with capitalism; taking on work that is less financially rewarding but ultimately more beneficial to the designer and to society in the long run. And if you have a voice in the field, it is your responsibility to speak up and attempt to map a better future.

## END QUOTE

Now is the time to destroy the old guard, and make way for a new generation of design. Graphic design has the ability to define our visual landscape, influence culture, and improve products for people but we need to address the issues of politics and prejudice in our profession and start combating them. Design should no longer be defined as a battle between personal style, concept-based design, and objectivity. Those arguments are already being made in the work and in the discourse and if graphic design stays this way, we will all end up in the bin.



*Image by  
GRMMXI*

