THE FREEDOM

TO CREATE:

AN ESSAY ON

open design

BY VALERY MARIER * 29 NOVEMBER 2019

Valery Marier
valery@marier.design

YSDN 3106: Image & Influence
York University & Sheridan College
29 November 2019

The Freedom to Create: An Essay on Open Design

At it's core, the field of graphic design exists to serve society by enabling the communication of ideas. In the 20th century, modernist graphic designers valued a universal idea of how design should be made. To them design was supposed to be a way to improve society through a universal visual language that made it easier to dissemenate, consume, and respond to ideas. Yet what they failed to realize was only an elite few — of whom were generally cis white men — had access to the physical and financial tools and resources needed to create graphic design. As a result, the social good that they were trying to achive through their universal visual language, as well as the visual language itself, was one for the cis white man. However, in the 21st century the focus has shifted from a universal idea about *how* to make design to a universal idea about *who* can make design. In today's world everyone has equal access to the tools needed to create works of graphic design. No longer do you need to have your own design studio, printing press, bachelors degree, or even money to create graphic design. With open design everyone, regardless of their gender or the colour of their skin, has equal access to the tools to create and communicate.

Before we can delve into the shift towards open design — and why I believe it is for the better — we should first define what open design is. To put it in the most concise terms possible, open design is any works of graphic design, design creation tool, or design education resource that complies with the Open Knowledge Foundation's (OKFN for short) *Open Definition*:

> "Open means anyone can freely access, use, modify, and share for any purpose (subject , at most, to requirements that preserve provenance and openness)." (n.d.)

Basically what this covers is any resource that is free to use and modify for commercial and non-commercial uses. The only exception to this rule is typefaces licensed under the Open Font License (OFL), which can be used for commercial purposes but the font itself cannot be sold individually.

1 Horst Erich Wolter/*Germany*
2 Olle Eksell/*Sweden*
3 Hans Neuburg/*Switzerland*
4 Anton Stankowski/*Germany*
5 Louis Dorfsman/*U.S.A.*
6 Carl Dair/*Canada*
7 Piet Zwart/*Netherlands*
8 Roger Excoffon/*France*
9 Hiromu Hara/*Japan*
10 Max Caflisch/*Switzerland*
11 Oldrich Hlavsa/*Czechoslovakia*
12 Hermann Zapf/*Germany*

Figure 1. The jury of Typomondus 20 circa 1966. It was made up of designers from all over the world, and while they are certainly goofy (I'm looking at you Carl Dair), they are a great example of how the industry was lacking diversity and as a result diverse perspectives.

During the twentieth century the modernist avant-garde designers sought to find the proper way to lead society through communication (Harvey, pp. ,1990). Their solution was largely based off of the values from the Enlightenment; the triumph of reason and objectivity, individualism, and universality. This class of graphic designers was–in general–exclusive to cis white men as the purpose fo the Enlightenment values that modernism was based around was largely to give power to the people who were deemed to have '*reason*'; i.e. no women, people of colour, members of the LGBTQ+ community, etc, (Allyn 2019).[1]

While not all of the graphic designers of the era might have intentionally barred these groups of people from participating in the industry, there is no doubt in my mind that the systems in place definitely did. This is largely because the graphic designers in the modernist period were more concerned with a universal way to make pieces of graphic design than a universal access to making graphic design. Jan Tschichold's *Elemental typography* was not concerned with who got to create the design, but instead that the designs being created were universalized through the use of inner and outer organization and standard (DIN) paper sizes (Kinross, pp 87-90). The Swiss designers that would follow ignored other perspecives even more than Tschichold did. To the Swiss, the window of what was good graphic design was extremely narrow; it uses the grid, a simple sans serif type, no illustration, and no ornament.#
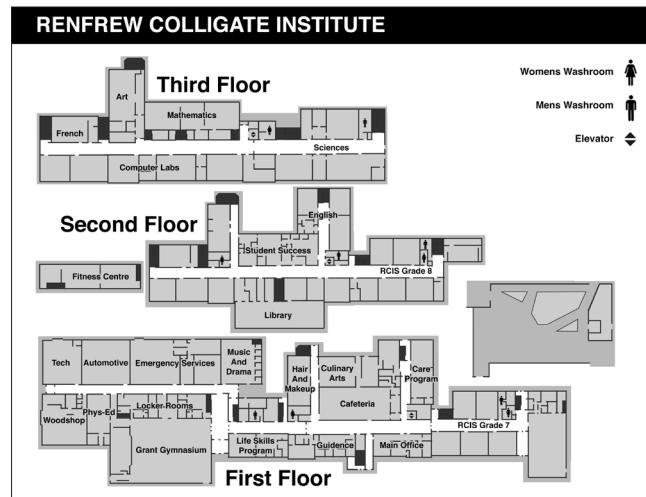
1. See Figure 1.

Figure 2. One of my portfolio pieces from 2016 that got me into the York University / Sheridan College joint program in design. It was made in Inkscape, a piece of open design software, with no formal training.

But opinions alone don't prevent people from doing design work, so lets look at how expensive design really was. A majority of work in graphic design requires written copy to go through some form of typesetting, and typesetting requires having access to type that you can use. According to the American Type Foundry's *Handy Type Index and Price List* if you wanted to buy the font Franklin Gothic in the year 1960 you could buy a completed font with caps, lowercase, uppercase, and figures for $10.15; approximately $89.15 when you adjust for inflation (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2019). However this would only get you a single size and weight of type with a limited amount of characters. Then add on the additional cost of a printing press, good paper, and ink, and producing works of design starts to look pretty expensive. And while in the latter half of the twentieth century graphic designers started to become more separate from printers, leaving the printers to bear most of the cost for fonts, the field of graphic design in the twentieth century really only substituted one type of expensive equiptment for another (Buchan, pp. 12-38, 1986).[2] Add on top of this the education that was required to learn how to use these tools, and it becomes very clear that participation in the field of graphic design was placed behind a paywall; reserving participation in the creation of mass communication only to those of means.

At the start of the twentieth century Walter Benjamin noted that mechanical reproductions have the power to democratize art; substituting a unique singular existence for a mass existence (Benjamin, p. 14, 2010). His thoughts were that, while mass

2. In the latter half of the twentieth century graphic designers started to use new expensive tools like air brushes, photocopiers, PMT Macines, and Camera Lucidas' to name a few (Buchan, pp. 12-38, 1986).

3. With the advent of variable fonts this will soon change from a few weights to hundreds of weights.
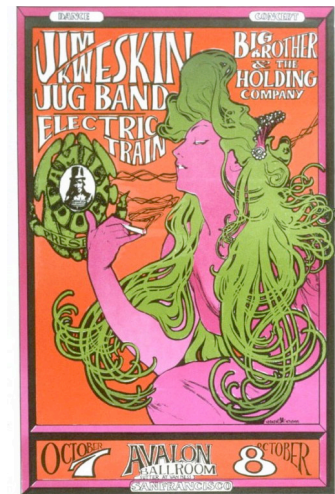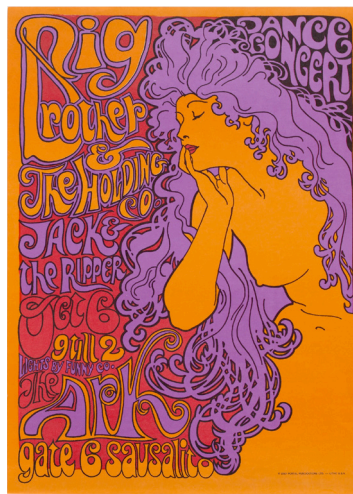
4. See Figure 2.

Figure 3: (TOP LEFT) Mucha, A. (1896). *Salon des Cent. XXme exposition du Salon des Cent*. Figure 4: (TOP RIGHT) Mucha, A. (1896). *Job*. Figure 5: (BOTTOM LEFT) *Big Brother and the Holding Company, Jack and the Ripper* (1967). Figure 6: (BOTTOM RIGHT) Kelley, A., & Mouse, S. (1966). "'*The Woman with Green Hair*,'" *Jim Kweskin Jug Band, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Electric Train, October 7 & 8, Avalon Ballroom*".

producing art made it lose it's aura, in its place was a newfound accessibility to art for the everyday person. Today, digital reproductions have the power to democratize mass communication in much of the same way. Lets go back to the font Franklin Gothic once more. Today, thanks to open design, you can get the entire font for free under the Open Font License through the free repository Google Fonts (2019). Moreover, the font that you download is able to be adjusted to any point size, set to 9 different weights, and comes with italics.[3] Furthermore, with open design software like Inkscape, Scribus, and Kirita—tools that I got my start in graphic design using[4]—everyone has the ability to create graphic design. But it's not just the technical tools that have become freely available. With large

databases like the Internet Archives, Unsplash, and the Wikimedia Commons, it is easier than ever to access the hundreds of thousands of images and illustrations in the public domain. If history is a raw resource, than these databases are mines of information just waiting to be tapped into and reappropriated. These images are availible to anyone who wants to copy, remix, and modify them into new creative works.

You do not even need to own a computer anymore to become a graphic designer and contribute your unique perspective. Most public libraries offer free access to their computers with a full suite of software to their patrons. The only cost now is the cost of printing. Yet, with the advent of the internet I would argue that printing your design work isn't even a requirement to share it anymore. With free social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram your design work can be reproduced at a mass scale for absolutely no cost to the user.

With this newfound universal access to graphic design tools and resources, a new question is raised. If anyone can create graphic design now, without training or a formal design education, does this not cheapen the profession of graphic design as a whole? Moreover, since these untrained graphic designers can copy and paste historical design work so easily, won't this flood our industry with a ton of copycat design work? The short answer is no, it won't. This ability to copy public domain work is, at least from my perspective, a form of design education to those who do not have access to a formal design education. Because while open design has enabled anyone to do graphic design, unfortunately our education system has yet to catch up; hiding behind a paywall of $10,000 a year. Actually, copying is one of the essential ways that we as humans are able to learn new things. As Sir Isacc Newton is famously quoted saying, "*If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.*" (Oxford Reference, 2016). Which, I might add, is a quote he copied from Bernard of Chartres (Oxford Reference, 2016). At the end of the day all creativity is, is the application of different types of tools and knowledge to to existing materials; taking an idea and transforming it through modification and iteration. The real question that we, as graphic designers, should be asking ourselves is how we can contribute to the improvement of open design resources and design

10. See *Figure 9* on page 15.

11. I am basing this off of the publication date of Foucault's work from 1972, who Harvey uses as one of the first important postmodernist thinkers.

12. See *Figure 12* on page 18.

13. While the sixth pamphlet *etcetera* (1968) wraps the series up nicely, I cannot help but wonder if Dair saw this work in the same way that he saw Jan Tschichold's *Die neue Typographie, as* "an unfinished work [that he] will not finish" (Dair, 2015, p. 23).

education. We no longer live in the twentieth century, where only a privalidged few had access to mass communication and controlled the narrative. With open design everyone, has equal access to the tools to create and communicate.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Harvey, D. (1990). *The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change*. (pp. 10-38; 39-65). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Kinross, R. (1992). *Modern typography: An essay in critical history*. (pp. 85-112; 123-133). London: Hyphen Press.

Andra [@basilsbliss]. (2019, March 16). *Neat graphic designer find: the jury of Typomondus 20 goofing around* 😂. [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BvFI4YAFeJr/

Mucha, A. (1896). *Job* [Poster; Colour Lithography; 64 x 46 cm]. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Retrieved from: https://catalogue.bnf.fr/

Mucha, A. (1896). *Salon des Cent. XXme exposition du Salon des Cent* [Poster; Colour Lithography; 64 x 44 cm]. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Retrieved from: https://catalogue.bnf.fr/

Kelley, A., & Mouse, S. (1966). *"'The Woman with Green Hair,' Jim Kweskin Jug Band, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Electric Train, October 7 & 8, Avalon Ballroom"* [Poster; Colour Offset Lithography; 50.6 x 36.2 cm]. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco. Retrieved from: https://art.famsf.org/

Big Brother and the Holding Company, Jack and the Ripper [Poster; Colour Lithography; 55.9 x 41 cm]. (1967). The Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Retrieved from: https://www.moma.org/collection/

baseline. (2013, October 10). *No-one Starts From Scratch: Type Design and the Logic of the Fork*. Retrieved November 15, 2019 from: https://i.liketightpants.net/and/no-one-starts-from-scratch-type-design-and-the-logic-of-the-fork

USA Bureau of Labour Statistics. *CPI Inflation Calculator.* Retrieved November 15, 2019 from: https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

Buchan, J. (1986). *Studio Secrets for the Graphic Artist*. (pp. 12-38). Rexdale, ON: B. Mitchell.

Alleyn, R. (2019, September 13). *Image & Influence: Lecture Two* [Discussion] Retrieved from Sheridan College J222.

American Type Founders. (1960). *Handy Type Index and Price List*. Retrieved November 20, 2019 from: https://archive.org/details/ATFHandyTypeIndexTY138

Open Knowledge Foundation. (n.d.). *The Open Definition*. Retrieved November 15, 2019 from: http://opendefinition.org/

Libre Objet. (n.d.). *Design (as a) Process*. Retrieved November 15, 2019 from: https://books.libreobjet.org/open-guide/en/design_process.html

Design Research. (n.d.). *FREE/OPEN SOURCE*. Retrieved November 15, 2019 from: https://www.design-research.be/open-source/

Benjamin, W. (2010). The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducability [First version] (M. W. Jennings, Trans.). *Grey Room*, 39, 11-37.