Fuck All

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The solution most commonly offered for improving or expanding writing about graphic design is to recruit more practitioners to the task. Or, to lure formerly active ones back. Unsurprisingly, it's almost exclusively other designers that propose these remedies. Discussion quickly turns to methods to inject more money into writing, to offset the robust pay (at least in comparison) that comes from doing design. As a writer myself, I can't argue against that prospect. But as a reader, offering higher fees for the same unreliable product isn't an advance.

To varying degrees, the writings of practitioners—or those who rose up through the profession—are always compromised. Directly or indirectly, these writers bolster their professional status and prospects in their texts. Why shouldn't they? Arguing a strongly held opinion is the hallmark of all good critical writers. That opinion should align with a designer's business interests. However, a simple disclaimer must accompany practitioners' writing: Warning: may contain ulterior or mixed motives. This is a significant issue in design writing, where practice-related and practice-centric writers predominate.

Catalog essays for the currently touring Graphic Design: Now in Production (GDNiP) exhibition highlight the problems with practice-related writers. Immediately, there is their prevalence in the complement of essayists. Then there is the uncritical acceptance of propositions that speak more about the writers' professional aspirations than the ostensible subject.

For profession-based writers, professional practice and "graphic design," are synonymous. Client-based commercial work is asserted as the graphic designer's sole legitimate expression. "We speak through our assignment," writes designer/educator Michael Rock in "Fuck Content," a 2005 article revised for the GDNiP catalog (and included in the design studio 2x4's recent book Multiple Signatures). This short essay is intended to be the definitive statement on the essential nature of graphic design. To that end, Rock pronounced a resolution of the "content" vs. "form" dichotomy. Form-making—graphic

treatment—is declared as design's true content. "Just as every film is about filmmaking," Rock says, "Our content is, perpetually, Design itself."

Rock's stated purpose for the article is to counter a widespread misreading of "The Designer as Author," his oft-cited 1996 Eye essay surveying the phenomenon of "graphic authorship." To his dismay, designers considered the article an affirmation of the idea Rock set out to debunk. "Fuck Content" is the rebuke. According to the GDNiP's co-curator Ellen Lupton, Rock "admonished designers to focus on how things look and how they communicate, not what the message is." All that matters is how you do design—formally.

Though cleverly argued, Rock merely restates design's traditional, Modernist rationale. As he asks in his essay, so what else is new? In an ironic twist reinforcing its throwback nature, Rock invokes Paul Rand ("There is no such thing as bad content, only bad form") to strengthen his case. Where Rand famously quit Yale University due to the influx of mind-clutterers, the renown designer's choice was clearly impulsive with the coterie of profession-centric tutors long ensconced (but untenured) at the school.

Rock further channels Rand by remaking design history in his own image: "If you look at the span of graphic design, you discover, not a history of content but a history of form." Here, Rock's reading is accurate, in that the design profession and its chroniclers have emphasized and prized formal achievement. It also ranks as a truism: is there a formless design? A contentless one? Rock's perspective churns all design artifacts into conceptual slurry, roiling all distinguishing intentions into a blurry mass of form.

Rock's reductive view is absurd, particularly considering Modern design's genesis. Of the few practitioners he cites—Rand, Zwart, Cassandra (sic), Matter, Crouwel—none count amongst design's polemical progenitors of form. Rock proposes that the German designer Jan Tschichold's impassioned, polit-

ical text in Die Neue Typographie (1928) had no more significance than current copy for the Nike Sportswear Fall Retail Campaign. For many other designers of Tschichold's time and others before and since him, design is a medium to ideals beyond itself—and especially beyond consumer culture.

The covert agenda in "Fuck Content" is to reinforce the status quo of design as service industry—and the established hierarchy of practitioners. At the apex are moneyed culture and its servants. Overall, the Graphic Design: Now in Production catalog gives no love for graphic authorship, with the design writers Steven Heller and Ellen Lupton heaping scorn upon the poor concept—Lupton slapping it down in her two essays ("The Designer as Producer, "Reading and Writing"). Why is graphic authorship so reviled and marked for elimination?

While problematic as a concept, graphic authorship implicitly (and dangerously) questions the purposes that design talent is put to, and the terms under which we appraise it. Eradicate content as an evaluative factor, whether self-generated or for non-commercial purposes, and we default to abstract graphic treatments possible only under the patronage of affluent clients.

Works of graphic authorship are also alarmingly compelling. In "Design Entrepreneur 3.0," (2011) Steven Heller back-handedly acknowledges the power of graphic authorship, attempting to siphon off its appeal to fuel his own synthetic movement. The number and variety of productions featured in "The Designer as Author" undermined Rock's contentions, speaking more persuasively than his recondite scolds.

The "insecurity" derided as motivating force behind graphic authors appears to afflict the most daring and accomplished designers of historic and contemporary times, and compels singularly inspiring and imaginative works. The standards of traditional, form-centric, client-based design are challenged and swept away. Might designers see this not as a bug but a feature?

Retrograde commentators regard graphic authorship as just another excess of the 1990s to be rolled back. To practice-centric

critics, the nineties are what the sixties represent to conservative politicians. Both eras are regarded as times of indulgence, ugliness and chaos, where upstarts challenged their betters, and establishment verities were rejected. Reading critics rail against graphic authorship echoes right-wingers mocking the "permissive culture" fostered under liberalism.

Self-determined works are by definition more egalitarian than client-based design. Of course, commercial design work is possibly as open since it's available to anyone for purchase—if you can afford it. However, Michael Rock isn't professionally invested in such work. And "Fuck Content" points toward a restricted design practice, not a populist one.

Rock discloses his thinking in an e-mail exchange reprinted in the design critic Frida Jeppsson's In Case of Design—Inject Critical Thinking (2010), which published an earlier version of "Fuck Content." In it, Rock dismisses "99.99%" of design as simply "an index of the culture that produced it," while the remaining 0.01% "is the part that really bears up to close looking." A reasonable assumption is that Rock considers his work amongst that select one-hundredth of a percent. Once again, he harkens to design's past: an ability to stand apart from culture was another Modern conceit.

What is ultimately telling is that detractors of graphic authorship never claim that its works are incapable of Rock's design paradigm: "...to speak through treatment, via a whole range of rhetorical devices—from the written to the visual to the operational—in order to make those proclamations as poignant as possible...." Arguably, a graphically authored work has more potential to attain the ideals Rock proposes for design. Except it was not produced to a client's order, making it of de facto lesser status. The objection is about propriety, not quality.

One of Rock's statements is inarguable: "The choice of projects in each designer's oeuvre lays out a map of interests and proclivities. And the way those projects are parsed out, disassembled and organized, and rendered may reveal a philosophy,

an aesthetic position, an argument and a critique." A survey of the Michael Rock/2x4 oeuvre maps an obsession with elite consumption, buttressed by abstruse theory. Graphic design is fetishized, in keeping with the fetishized goods it frames. As Rock sets no boundaries as to the methods or ends to which design may utilize its potential to make its "proclamations as poignant as possible," we must assume that there are none.

With articles like "Fuck Content," the author provides valuable intellectual cover for the elite class of designers and their clientele. His sincerity is evident as he proselytizes for an expansive and empowering role for graphic design. That it can only be realized by substantial capital is, for him, happenstance—and irrelevant. It's about form—not personal ambition.

While he goes further than any other designer in rationalizing an exclusive construction of design, Rock still refrains from declaring any personal ambitions beyond exemplary formal achievement and communicative efficacy.

Historically, renowned designers are always presented, and present themselves, as acting out of abstract principles. Their creative idealism transcends mundane careering to operate on a rarified plane of practice. In the foreword to Steven Heller's 1999 Paul Rand monograph, Swiss designer Armin Hoffman states "Paul Rand worked tirelessly with his students on the renovation and invigoration of our sign-world." For famed designer George Lois, he was the "heroic Paul Rand," whose "major concern was to strive for cause and effect in the creation of his work, and with tireless and selfless effort, teach write and inspire younger generations to march to his beat."

To biographer Kerry William Purcell, International Style icon Josef Müller-Brockmann had "...a near-religious longing to give one's self over to a greater truth." And never one to assume a low hyperbolic orbit, in the revised edition of The End of Print, commentator Tom Wyatt declared of David Carson, "The commitment was to original expression, ceaseless exploration, an unending quest to originate and assimilate, and to change what

you were doing if you recognized it was looking rule-bound."

Amongst these aspirants, Stefan Sagmeister is decidedly self-effacing in his famed "Things to Do Before I Die," list. It starts straightforwardly enough —"Open and run a design studio in New York,"—but still manages to end on an ardent note, "Touch someone's heart with graphic design."

That designers might want to enjoy an exclusive lifestyle—to be like or rub elbows with their celebrity/thought leader/industry titan clients—isn't acknowledged. Or, of course, that it might influence their value system.

Having attributed graphic authorship to striving and envy, might we also credit Michael Rock with the same causation? Yes, designers aspire to power, social position, and cachet. But they also hope, by declaring themselves a kind of "graphic auteur" to garner respect—and stout fees. Rock isn't alone in having parlayed a reputation as a deep design thinker into an enviable career crafting (for instance) Kanye West-branded immersive theater experiences in Qatar. These are opportunities for power, position, and cachet that is risible to expect from graphic authorship.

For prominent designers, the reality of their relationship with elite consumption can be an uncomfortable state of affairs. Most espouse classless, left wing political attitudes. The conflict between championing an egalitarian access to exceptional design and the substantial capital required for realizing it has bedeviled idealistic designers going back to the British designer William Morris. The economics seem inflexible, pushing practitioners unremittingly into the arms of moneyed culture.

Resignedly, designers will sometimes tender explanations that they must "rob Peter to pay Paul." But the said theft isn't an imperative, it's a choice. As attractive as Paul's wares may be, the necessity to rob Peter to acquire them should give pause. It's not inherently wrong to desire fine objects, live and work in New York, travel and lecture widely, hang with

Kimye's people. The problem is transmuting the desire for a lifestyle into a design theory.

That designers have an appetite for graphic treatment is obvious. What the response to "The Designer as Author" revealed was a hunger for meaning—and self-determination. A choice of how to perform graphic design and have it judged on its merits.

"Fuck Content" is nihilism posing as revelation. Commercial work isn't at risk of being supplanted as graphic design's primary manifestation. If you find that practice, or its alternative, embarrassing and unfulfilling, then don't do it. But also refrain from tearing down everything in fear of being supplanted. Like it or not, our design, and our perception of it, says something about us. Design isn't a glossy and empty abstraction of itself. It's by and for people. Our content is, perpetually, ourselves.