Content

Jonatan Eriksson
Opinnäytetyö

Contents

1
Preface

1.1.1

The Purpose of this paper is to explore if writing can work as a design tool. Can the practice of word editing benefit the design? Should I as a designer be engaged with the written word. how much should I experiment behind a typewriter? Or is the quest for authorship (through words) only distracting me from what I already do (through form)?

1.1.2

These questions were not the ones that I would ask myself often as a student. I started my studies eight years ago in the Graphic Design Department of what is now called Aalto University. The studies were very much about visual research. For me and lot of my peers at Aalto at the time, visual expression was what kept us working hard. What we looked up to was beautiful use of visual experiments and the history of graphic design encouraged us. "The span of graphic design is not a history of concepts but of forms." as Michael Rock, designer and principal of 2x4 states in his essay.[01]

1.1.3

The forms were what we responded to. And to be able to leave a mark to graphic design history, forms were what we wanted to excel in. To make a difference was to do work that would stand out in the crowd visually. We believed that visual details had something very powerful in themselves an we were determined to find how to use them to their fullest effect. "Think

01   Michael Rock
        "Fuck Content" (2005)
        Accessed in February and April, 2012
        http://2x4.org/ideas/2/Fuck+Content/

of Piet Zwart's industrial work. Think of the posters by Cassandra or Matter or Crouwel," Michael Rock writes. "In these, form has an essential, even transformative, meaning."

1.1.4

However the question of understanding content became very real when moving on from studies to commissioned work. It took time to transform the form driven practice learnt in school to a service driven process where politics of content played a big role in the outcome. The new goal was not only to answer to a communication need, but to a need to manipulate and understand the communication structure of content. Collaborating with experienced designers, editors and copywriters brought light to a fact that the designer-author-communication was a two way street. With a talented writer it was a shared interest that the design and content worked seamlessly. Personally teaming up the two worlds seemed like a totally new creative ground, yet to be explored.

1.2.1

Text is mastered by many designers in all parts of the field. But where does it fit in for the everyday use of the common designer? What happens to the designer when the editor or an author is not there to give form to the language of the text? Finally, where do graphic design and content[02] meet, and how can the two benefit each other?[03]

02 Writing about content can sometimes be tricky since the word has kind of a double meaning of being both meaning, or significance itself, but also the basic material that is contained. The hardest part of this research is that usually when designers talk about content, the same word is used interchangeably for the both purposes: in content the material and the message are the same thing, and they rarely need to be separated.

03 Published writings on graphic design are often observatory in nature. This paper bases its views not upon academic research on the field, but on timely writings by published designers. The point of view to the subject also relate to personal firsthand experiences, and to published interviews of working designers.

2
Background

2.1.1

Graphic design is flexible in its nature. Designers' roles and tools have developed through the existing of the profession. Designers are quick to adopt to the available possibilities. The fields that have served before as backbones of graphic design, like publishing and advertising, are changing an merging to form new fields with new challenges. It is hard to predict what the future design practice is like, but what seems to be clear is that designer will have to continue learning new tricks. As Ellen Lupton observes: "Tools have altered the tasks of graphic designers, enlarging their powers as well as burdening them with more kinds of work to do." [04]

2.1.2

Meanwhile perpetual authorship and quality content are celebrating a new found glory as communication tools. In an environment as dynamic as the Internet, to be visible means to publish. Internet presence requires written communication: on Twitter, blogs, Facebook, or any other such platform run on constant output. In the sea of static information, only the current and new is visible. The content is cherished throughout the fields of communication — even marketing: "The consumer is much more likely to engage with independent editorial content than with conventional, purely product-focused advertising," says Max Vallot marketing director of BLK DNM interviewed by The New York Times.

2.1.2

The timeliness of content plays an important part. Mature publishing methods have made sure that the written content is ready to be released to the world, instantly, after it has been written down — without the need for active hands-on designer formatting. WordPress Templates, Tumblr Themes, even magazines and websites with their content management systems, make it possible to publish content in a steady flow, without

the need of day to day designer activity. These systems have a tendency to render designer as someone who defines beforehand the frames where writing is going to be presented. In the 1994 the workflow was very different. This we can see in an article from designer and writer Will Novosedlik published in the Eye magazine[05]: "In most cases, the content is created first and the form comes second, as a response to that content." These days the most design responds to need to communicate and the content fills the designed frames eventually.

2.1.3

For graphic designers this kind of change in perspective is an opportunity to redefine our responsibility for the process and seek what form and content mean in our work. The de-specialization of print production brought new opportunities and responsibilities to go deeper into the production, should the uprising of content make us go deeper into the message?

3
Form follows content

3.1.1

Content has a very special role in graphic design. It's a basic material that keeps our practice moving, rooted so deeply in the life-cycle of graphic design, that we can often merely draw a flimsy outline around the handling of content. How to use the content and how not to use the content? In his essay "Fuck Content," Michael Rock lends an old truism to describe the usual relationship between form and content: "In graphic design circles, form-follows-function is reconfigured as form-follows-content." This used to be not only a hierarchy but also a chronological order, as Will Novosedlik states in his article about Bruce Mau in Eye magazine: "At the end of

05   Will Novosedlik
      The producer as author
      Eye Magazine
      Eye 15, Winter 1994
      Bruce Mau

the day, one must remember the sequence of events. In most cases, the content is created first and the form comes second, as a response to that content."

3.1.2

However, form-follows-content is more often used to talk about ideals and ultimates, most often along the lines of: "Designers need to follow content." Content is king: designers who don't follow the content are not good designers. Content regulates what should be communicated. In Nick Bell's article, "The Steamroller of Branding," we find footnotes about designer archetypes divided into two schools: One who is into process and one whose focus is on the product. Michael Bierut notices not the differences but the similarities from the text[06]: "Both designer types are willfully apolitical and tellingly uninterested in the content of the work they undertake."

3.2.1

The most romantic form-following is the one you get to know in graphic design studies: the inspiration. A classic design assignment entails finding a piece of content that speaks to you, then translating its meaning or feeling into the design. This lesson is a way to study the relationship between the meaning of the content and how designers can use their tools to translate the content into what Michael Rock sees as "a vibrant, evocative language."

3.2.2

The essay is Rock's manifesto for a more uplifting mode of visual translation. Just as movie directors give themselves to bringing scripts to life, graphic designers should focus on transforming the content to a new level of communication: "What makes a Hitchcock film a Hitchcock film is not the story but a consistency of style which winds intact through different technologies, plots, actors, and time periods like a substance of its own.

06   Michael Bierut
        The Two Footnotes p. 146-147
        Seventy-nine Short Essays on Design
        Princeton Architectural Press
        7/1/2007

Every film is about filmmaking." The same tagline rhetoric doesn't work as well for design as it does for filmmaking. Stating that "Every piece of graphic design is about graphic design" has to be paired with a footnote acknowledging that "It's all about the content".

3.3.1

One of the most celebrated manifestoes regarding design's relation to content comes from Beatrice Warde[07], whose piece, "The Crystal Goblet" argues that design should merely contain and display the precious content, and that any interference should be judged as suspicious. Her views are based on the model of form-follows-content in a very straightforward sense. The content dictates the design, to the point where a good design is something you can't seemingly have without first having a well-crafted manuscript. Her advice to a designer with lousy content is to give up: "Get attention as you will by your headline, and make any pretty type pictures you like if you are sure that the copy is useless as a means of selling goods…"

3.3.2

Paul Rand states the very opposite in one of his many oft-quoted aphorisms: "There is no such thing as bad content, only bad form." This is a dense truism that should be handled with caution, howeverThere are two ways to interpret Rand's way of seeing content. Paul Rand might just consider that a bright designer is able to fix any material attached to the commission, solving the design problem with his infinite imagination. Every content has at least one perfect form it can be presented in.

3.3.3

Alternatively, he may mean to suggest that content is not a script that requires following, but rather a meaning waiting to be given form, by both writers and designers. Quality of meaning is impossible to evaluate. As if Rand was saying, "There is no such thing as bad meaning, only badly

07   Beatrice Warde
        "The Crystal Goblet or Printing
        Should Be Invisible," in The Crystal Goblet, Sixteen
        Essays on Typography
        Cleveland: World Publishing Company
        1956

formed content". Even though graphic designers are not paid to critique content, the quality of a given writing is one of the the first things people will evaluate. The critique, however, remains foreign to the design process as Will Holder[08] notes in Dutch resource: "One problem with design today [...] is that it is easier to change your typeface after 2 years than to admit you have a bad name."

3.4.1

Even if Paul Rand doesn't count the form of language to be included as possible bad form in his principle, it is impossible to deny that words have forms of their own. Written words have lot of visual and stylistic "DNA" built in themselves. This is surprisingly rarely acknowledged in design. That's why Will Holders story about Karel Martens obvious notion remains interesting: "I remember comissioner telling me how Karel Martens wisdom dictated that ANY word generates its own form. All you do is set it in Grotesk, and if your name is Jan you have a different 'logo' than when you call yourself Iwan."*

3.4.2

It's an unspoken rule in the graphic design process that to a great extent, the graphic designer should regard words as being set in Greek type — a modular set of elements forming gray boxes in the layout. In a typographic system, any word may be interchanged with another, without the designer's discretion. The author may change the words as much as is needed, and the language may even be translated to another. For a graphic designer, it is important to keep the system working without interfering with the content inside the system, even if it may benefit the form.

3.5.1

The form that Martens describes is mainly visual. It is more commonly acknowledged that written content also has a form of language - a style. Raymond Queneau's Exercises In Style is famous for its study of 99 different ways to write the same plot line. These forms of language give a point

08   Will Holder
      # Dutch resource
      Valiz/Werkplaats Typografie; Bilingual edition
      March 1, 2006

of view to the topic itself and work as a user-interface for the reader. The given style guides the reader through a sensory world of images and helps user to understand what is the meaning of the writing.

3.5.2

The form-giving of writing is rarely called design. Even though we can see from Queneau's exercises that writing acts as a big part of what can be called a user experience, we easily discard the use of words as part of the design. Bronwyn Jones writes about the relationship between content and form on alistapart.com[09], a celebrated blog about web design: "You wouldn't try to force an incongruous visual element into a carefully considered design. Same goes for written content. Even if you've wisely designed a site around the content it delivers, written copy may fit neatly physically but still ring false to the intended audience."

3.5.3

Surprisingly, it is on the Web (and in texts written about the Web) where the notion of writing as a form of design is popularized. Jones' tone differs greatly from Paul Rand's when talking about content. Here it's important to note that Bronwyn Jones is a copywriter. As tools of the digital environment outmode the creation of hand crafted layouts and designs, it is writing that will come to display the perpetual creativity. Is this a part of creative process that graphic designers don't want to take part in?

4
 Form follows lorem ipsum

4.1.1

In online publishing writing and designing take place in shifts -- contradictory to the process that print publishing operates by. Most of the writing and designing must be planned to fit together before a word is written.

09   Bronwyn Jones
        Better Writing Through Design
        A list A part
        July 31, 2007
        Accessed in February and April, 2012
        http://www.alistapart.com/articles/betterwritingthroughdesign/

The content will follow long after the design process has started (sometimes even finished). The separation of content and its presentation is built into the internet presentation as we know it.

4.1.2

Digital content is managed by systems that don't require a designer's immediate presence. The visual structure is crafted in advance by designing with placeholder text. In the content-to-be-added-later model, promise of what is to be communicated takes the place of written content. The actual writings can go on to live a life of their own in these pre-designed frames. Meanwhile designers are accustomed to using dummy text like Lorem Ipsum as a proxy to final texts.

4.2.1

Though essential in web design, using placeholders is not a new practice in graphic design. Using Latin to fill the void is briefly mentioned even in Wardes' 1932 paper: "He did not have the actual text to work with in drawing up his specimen pages, so he had set the lines in Latin. […] Setting it in Italian or Latin is only an easy way of saying 'This is not the text as it will appear'."

4.2.2

Drawing with Latin is an accurate analogy showing how designers utilize typography and compositions to create designs without content even to this day. If the content isn't there, it's better to use a piece of writing that can not be mistaken as actual content. Designers trust writers to produce similar blocks of writings to replace the Latin. Publishing has given us a tradition that a written content assumedly shares the same kind of structure and qualities with texts written before them: a sequence of para-

graphs and headings. If the content will be similarly structured it is easy to adjust the form by drawing just the container for this ever repeating stream and then guiding it with stylistic rules.

4.3.1

A great example of this is Jan Tschichold's Composition Rules for Penguin Books[10], in which he gives concise guidelines on how texts are to be handled formally throughout the book series. Tschichold uses the structure of continuous paragraphs and headings as the core of his design and controls exceptions with simple and efficient rules: "If a chapter is divided into several parts without headings, these parts should be divided not only by an additional space, but always by one or more asterisks of the fount body."

4.3.2

The written material that was eventually published in the Penguin Book series followed the structure predicted by Tschichold. The Composition Rules went on to be a classic example of a design strategy. However, Tschichold is not only remembered for broad strategies and simple solutions. On the contrary: his earlier work focused on the benefits of complexity. In his New Typography he manifested asymmetric composition and tailored page layouts: "The harmonious relation of the parts, being always different, will give every job an individual, yet pleasing appearance, and one which is integrated with its meaning and purpose; instead of the beautifying if work by the fortuitous addition of ornament and other alien elements."

4.3.3

Tschichold's formula here is to draw an interesting composition with writing, breaking the content to separate parts - a totally different model to 'Composition Rules', in terms of handling the content.The two types of composing with content or a placeholder are a good example of what works and what doesn't in place holding. A continuous stream is easy

10   Ruari McLean
      Jan Tschichold: A Life in Typography
      Publisher: Princeton Architectural Press
      December 1, 1997

to replace with Latin, but in an asymmetric layout, Latin will render as ambiguous decorative text blocks. 'Lorem ipsum' on the left corner and 'lorem ipsum' on the right corner don't really justify why the two are positioned there. The meaning of different parts of content declares how they should position in the asymmetric layout.

4.4.1

The integration of a design and its purposeful content is one reason why designers are tempted to apply meaning to these placeholder parts. It is part of the designer's practice to form not only a formally balanced, but meaningless story by composition: a text block on the right signifies a date, a text block under it,on the left, a heading; and the block beneath it is a description. In this way, a composition of purposeful parts creates a text in itself, even if the parts are ostensibly only there to hold a place.

4.4.2

This kind of structuring can be very extreme, however: a designer can decide to fill the page with only one word, reasoning that this word will "shout" with its form. The shouting itself is then integrated into the drawing, whether or not the writer intends to convey the same measure of strength through the written words. This type of overt contradiction between content and form rarely happens, as writers and designers work together to achieve a stylistic consensus to support overall meaning. It is part of the designer's job to propose a visual language to work with text, and it is a part of writers or content makers responsibility to direct the presentation.

4.4.3

Copywriter Julian Koening's work is a great example of visuals and content working together to reinforce meaning. His work for Volkswagen is considered to be one of the highlights of advertising industry, through both its writing and design. In the iconic ad, an image of a round, dot-like car is shown cruising from over the horizon on a blank page, surrounded by a great white void At the bottom of the page, a simple tagline punctuated by an enlarged period reads: "Think small." The visual style of the design couldn't be any closer to the style of writing: brief and to the point.

Both are reduced to the bare essentials integrating the meaning, the presentation and the content with monumental results. For this advertising, Koenig is credited for both design and the writing of the advertisement.

4.4.3

The type of unity between visual and verbal communication, as seen in Koenig's work, is not a virtue exclusive to the advertising world, nor is it a skill strictly held by copywriter-cum-designers. New York Magazine is one of the great landmarks of editorial design. A magazine former design director Chris Dixon praises the holistic style of the editor-in-chief, Adam Moss: "He is very attuned to design, and can go back and forth in a conversation about the editorial direction of the article, then quickly move to a discussion of photography, and then move on to how the typography is working for the story as well. He sees them all as one unit."

4.5.1

The oneness is challenged by new platforms. When new ways of reading require infinite flexibility, it's often the tailored design -- rather than the content -- that has to back down, as Ellen Lupton describes: "In today's world, the medium is often just the medium, as content seeks to migrate freely across platforms rather than embody the qualities of a specific medium. 'Device independence' has become a goal more urgent than the task of crafting unique page layouts."

4.5.2

With its unique layout, Tschichold's New Typography is traded for a set of rules to control the content flow, the lorem ipsum. The optimum layout is one that feels the same in every device. Bold statements are stripped away when the same layout will need to handle several different kinds of content in several different kinds of medias. The holy grail of endless flex-

ibility can turn design to compromises. The creativity in graphic design is endangered, if only left for pieces of illustration and lettering secluded from each other.

5
Forms and words as one

5.1.1

Identity systems are one of the instances in which visuals and language are introduced at the same time. Designing an identity begins with a purely abstract combination of meanings and intentions, and ends with an identity concept that can hold within it directions for both visual and written language. When the goal is to communicate values in a distinctive way, language can be as effective as any visual tool.

5.1.2

Intertwining visuals and words was the base of the music festival Flow's identity created by Tsto, a design studio I co-founded. Since a music festival is filled with sounds, rhythm and voices, we wanted to create a language that would sing, hum, and resonate just as loudly: a visual mantra for the urban tribes congregating at Flow. The language becomes an element of imagery, with vibrant typography applied at a series of scales and positions to evoke the look of what a mantra would sound like. A brand identity is not only a visual identity. Is there room for words to be used for their visual qualities? Dave Eggers snarky comment in the magazine McSweeney's encourages us to do so: "If words are to be used as design elements then let designers write them."

5.2.1

Even though our studio ended up writing the mantra for the Flow Festival identity, we never saw ourselves as authors. But a designer writing content is easily faced with a question of authorship. Dutch designer Jop van Bennekom describes his search for new ways of communicating through

publishing and editing[11]: "As a graphic designer […] instead of translating information into a form I was more interested in how I could redefine communication – the whole spectrum of communication itself. So I started doing everything myself. My questions in the beginning were pretty basic: Can I write? And if so, how can I write? And, can I do photography? And if so, how can I do photography? I tried to push the boundaries all together in order to redefine design, and with that, to redefine my own position. It was very much a question of authorship; it was – and still is – an experiment of the designer as author."

5.2.2

From there, Bennekom went to create Fantastic Man, a magazine where in his own words "the design, and the photography — the whole conception of the whole thing — all adds up to one language."[12] A language where content works effortlessly as design and form turns to content. Content can for example be presented on a letterhead tucked in between the pages of the magazine, as if to tell the reader about the joys of letters themselves. The insight found in the content is limited, yet the tactility of the differing paper stocks adds a narrative and story-like quality to the words. The content of Fantastic Man may have read pretentious and meaningless, had it been delivered without it's designed details.

5.3.1

For self-publishing designer Bruce Mau, the same vision of designer as an author is about taking more responsibility: "Content is no longer necessarily outside the realm of design practice," he says. "What I am trying to do is to roll […] on to the field upon which content is developed." This is mentioned in an article of Eye Magazine, where Mau's thoughts are

11   Axel J. Wieder
      Editing Attitude: Jop van Bennekom
      032c Magazine
      Issue #6 (winter 2003/2004)

12   Glenn O'Brien
      Fantastic Man
      Interview Magazine
      Accessed in February and April, 2012
      http://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/fantastic-man/

elaborated by Will Novosedlik[13]: "In the normal course of project development, the 'author' is the one who enjoys the luxury of penetrating the depths of the subject, of pursuing ideas down any and all paths of speculation, no matter how long or labyrinthine." This is where Mau aims to be. He doesn't want to submit to the rules given by the sequenced workflow where a writer writes and a designer draws: "The designer's involvement is expected to be brief and to occur within a very shallow range of exploration. After all, the important work has been done: the designer's job is simply to provide a package."

5.3.2

His biggest proof of concept is an iconic book on Rem Koolhaas, called S,M,L,XL, in which the architect's works are organized in order of scale and size, creating a narrative of monumentality. As opposed to Fantastic Man, the designer's approach as a content maker here is not as much recorded in the details, as it is expressed through a concept and a presence. The way the book works is unique, carrying a progression that can't be written into a manuscript. The publication starts to resemble a cinematic piece, because it has been directed like a film.

5.3.2

In spite of Mau's passion to the editing and authoring process, an article about his work in Eye magazine reveals the problems of fitting the passion into the practice. When asked why he didn't hold onto his former post as creative director at I.D. magazine, he replies. "I guess in the end the problem was that I wasn't the editor."

13   Will Novosedlik
        The producer as author
        Eye Magazine
        Eye 15, Winter 1994
        Bruce Mau

6
Conclusion

6.1.1

James Goggin sees the Graphic Designer as an editor, among many other things: "An important part of reading 'graphic design' as an inherently multidisciplinary practice is the recognition of 'designing' as including ostensibly banal, supposedly 'non-design' activities in its definition: dialogue, research, organization, management, and the reading, writing, editing mentioned above are all facets open to analysis, exploration, and even subversion."[14] These might not be the activities a young designer want's to excel in, but are a great part of what a designer will have to learn to do in the daily practice. As Goggin observes: "The experienced graphic designer–whether working only by commission, or with a mix of commissioned and self-initiated projects--becomes naturally skilled in all of these areas, so it is only logical to apply this knowledge [...]" Goggin builds upon an old wisdom of learning by doing. The list of activities, shouldn't be foreign to any graphic designer. A graphic designer handles written content on a daily basis, and communicates to the people in charge of it throughout the design process. If there's a will to engage with the content, learning to do so shouldn't be a stretch.

6.2.1

Mental structures are what keep content and design away from each other. Adam Michaels attributes this problematic divide to formal education: "Most educational superstructures ensure that the art student and the liberal arts student shall never meet. The alienation between text and image production is learned early on and reinforced by increased professionalization over the course of life."[15] The separation of content and it's presentation works as taxonomy, but the education I received never excluded

14   James Goggin
      Practice from Everyday Life
      Graphic Design: Now In Production
      Walker Art Center
      November 30, 2011

15   Adam Michaels
      The Electric Information Age Book: Mcluhan/Agel/Fiore and the Experimental Paperback
      Princeton Architectural Press
      January 25, 2012

writing as a option. As young designers we were most of the time so interested in the forms that words were presented in that we never stopped to question if the words themselves could have a different language.

6.3.1

The interest is something every designer has to decide themselves. But what is to be recognized is that there is no glass wall between the content and the design itself. The two affect each other and benefit from each other. As Michael Rock states in his "Fuck Content" essay: "The trick is to find new ways 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, and to consistently revisit, re-examine, and re-express, central themes."

Michael Bierut
The Two Footnotes p. 146-147
Seventy-nine Short Essays on
Design
Princeton Architectural Press
7/1/2007

Ellen Lupton
Introduction p. 9
Graphic Design: Now In
Production
Walker Art Center
November 30, 2011

James Goggin
Practice from Everyday Life
Graphic Design: Now In
Production
Walker Art Center
November 30, 2011

Will Holder
Dutch resource
Valiz/Werkplaats Typografie;
Bilingual edition
March 1, 2006

Adam Michaels
The Electric Information Age
Book: Mcluhan/Agel/Fiore and
the Experimental Paperback
Princeton Architectural Press
January 25, 2012

Beatrice Warde
"The Crystal Goblet or Printing

Should Be Invisible," in The
Crystal Goblet, Sixteen
Essays on Typography
Cleveland: World Publishing
Company
1956

Michael Rock
"Fuck Content" (2005)
Accessed in February and April,
2012
http://2x4.org/ideas/2/
Fuck+Content/

Ruari McLean
Jan Tschichold: A Life in
Typography
Publisher: Princeton
Architectural Press
December 1, 1997

Bronwyn Jones
Better Writing Through Design
A list A part
July 31, 2007
Accessed in February and April,
2012
http://www.alistapart.
com/articles/
betterwritingthroughdesign/

Will Novosedlik
The producer as author
Eye Magazine
Eye 15, Winter 1994
Bruce Mau

Glenn O'Brien
Fantastic Man
Interview Magazine
Accessed in February and April,
2012
http://www.interviewmagazine.
com/culture/fantastic-man/

Axel J. Wieder
Editing Attitude: Jop van
Bennekom
032c Magazine
Issue #6 (winter 2003/2004)