

At the end of Integrated2007, the participants were sent away with the message that this conference was only the first step in a whole series. Ambitious? Perhaps. Apart from that, 'Integrated' serves not just to be seen as a sort of 'ultimatum' to unremittingly unite things. By so-naming the conference, we refer to the versatility, the complexity, and the unbridled nature of design and artistic practices. The extreme verticality of disciplines and sub-disciplines that have characterised the last decades –in contrast to their existence in the beginning and middle of the 20th century– also ensured a need for 'connection', and possibly – if not compulsively – for integration. On conclusion of the conference, more than just symbolically, one red tee shirt was raffled-off to the participants by means of an improvised quiz. With the text: 'F*ck integration'! As a plea to absolute diversity...

The essence of the 2007 concept memo, a synopsis:

"Design! It seems like a command. Design is. Design must!... As a notion, design has become relentless, too often separated from its own content. Usually it isn't more than a hip lubricant to sustain everything and then some..." © Hugo Puttaert, De Standaard, 2004

And what then can graphic design in the year 2009 mean? Is the adjective 'graphic' still correct? After all, the role of the graphic designer has thoroughly changed over the past few decades. Along with the increasing complexity and influence of the media, marketing, technology, advanced reproduction techniques, etc... It seems that with such a large supply, the choice is obvious. However, nothing is less true. Anyway, choosing comes after deciding, whatever the motivation hiding behind it. Often the choice is for something that is already on offer. Worldwide, designers work with the same software and tools and, without realising it, their thinking is driven by the functionality of these programs, however far –technologically– these may reach.

In 1964 the British designer Ken Garland published the commotion-causing manifest 'First Things First'. In 1999 Rick Poyner's updated reflection 'FTF revisited' (Emigre magazine no. 51) appeared. It ended with: "...At root-level, it's about democracy. The escalating commercial take-over of everyday life makes democratic resistance more vital than ever." It seemed naïve, but in the current context that's no longer the case. Now that the borders of economic growth have been clearly laid out, designers are also confronted willy-nilly with the question as to whether they can play a meaningful role in the development of a mentality more focused on durability, and by which, averse to trends and commercial aspirations, they can think responsibly about the relevance and carrying capacity of their intervention. Thus 'designing' in this context seems to have become 'more relevant'. But alas, the opposite is also true. Design has also become 'more gratuitous', squeezed into one or other 'format', with, figuratively speaking, a grey and emotionless mainstream as a consequence.

In an interview, Stefan Sagmeister postulated: "There surely is a lot of beautifully photographed, well illustrated work out there, complete with careful, letter-spaced typography, that leaves me, and I suspect many other viewers, completely cold..."

© Stefan Sagmeister, addmagazine # 2, 2006

Design as attitude

Design is complex; can we agree on that? Design isn't about linear choices. One question = one answer. Can we not also consider design as an 'attitude'? By which the designer works in a 'process-orientated' way. Still, it seems that art education often supports the 'romantic notion', by which the designer translates the brief from his/her personal imagination into a generally aesthetically acceptable result, like a sort of 'applied artist'. But the design question with which current and future designers are confronted, is not merely grounded in aesthetics. Designers find themselves within the spectrum of a complex society. The silly thing is that while the designer is better and more autonomously educated, strategy, short-term commercial thinking and the impact of technology, also, to a considerable degree, drive him or her. Formats govern the contemporary media society and the power of marketing is (too) great. This phenomenon has a twofold effect. On the one hand it offers space for new developments, but on the other hand it forces the designer into a purely executive role. As such, the designer becomes degraded to a proverbial 'common image-maker'. In this context academic art and design courses are fundamental. They stimulate design research and this is undoubtedly a differentiating factor. Design research places the designer in the centre of the thinking and development processes.

Nevertheless, this demands strong engagement from the docents as well as from the students. Do young designers still want this anyway? Maybe they only want to let themselves be led by the brief and to choose for the easiest route: to quickly earn money without all that much mental exertion? Or maybe they simply become specialised? Because it certainly seems as though the market calls only for specialists. But is this right? After all, there are also people needed to take a broad and transgressive look at things. You could call them 'generalists'. An academic education, to a certain degree, perhaps has the task of uniting generality and speciality such that, with hope, the graphic designer proves able, as a creative thinker and inventive organizer, to offer solutions. Design in this context is thus really an 'attitude' with which designers implant themselves in the middle of the social field. In this sense the a priori task of the graphic designer is investigative and not exclusively 'creative' in the narrow sense of the word. Moreover, this investigative attitude obliges designers to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration.

Another intriguing phenomenon is that of 'separate worlds'. Despite the mingling that goes on in daily life, there are undoubtedly more-or-less separate worlds, each possessing its own jargon, customs and principles. Despite large overlaps and utterances of crossover, these worlds continue to function separately, to a greater or lesser degree. This is extremely peculiar but also highly fascinating.

When we look at 'graphic design' in its broad and realistic context, it is crystal clear that in professional terms, the 'graphic designer' comes into contact with all these 'worlds'. This is a unique position, extremely complex but at the same time hugely challenging. For this reason Integrated2009 wants to be a conference for doers and thinkers and combinations thereof. We not only wish to depart from the domain of 'graphic design', but to make contact with people who, in a very unusual and individual manner, are active in other areas or at the fringes of graphic design, typography, image culture and autonomous art.

Integrated2009 wants to be a European platform in which ambitious, investigative insights displaying a healthy mix of image, thought and word, are brought into the complexity of the design process, of whichever sort and in whichever discipline.