**Le paysage est magnifique** *(The landscape is magnificent).*

You know that wonderful, nostalgic feeling evoked by a fleeting memory? I vaguely remember a vacation somewhere in the southwest of France. A couple of friends and I had rented a rickety little house and every evening, like clockwork, a hot debate would break out about the mythical concepts 'esthetics' and 'taste'. People will often agree to disagree, but when the topic is 'esthetics' and 'taste' the gloves come off. I don't mean to imply that contemporary design is purely esthetic and tasteful, but that the discourse —to the extent that there is one— is too often reduced to a flimsy and—in my opinion—irrelevant discussion about 'beauty'. The vacation ended on a low note, and we gloomily made our way back home ...

Fortunately we've all matured somewhat, and gentle nuances have settled comfortably in our thinking. Beauty and ugliness are —fortunately— not that easy to define. What a relief! The so-called mean streets with their randomness and urban chaos can also be inspirational, for example. In the sixties, the Arte Povera movement challenged us to think about the meaning of things by using materials that were as 'poor' as possible. Applied to the same street, it might be a scribble, a tag, a weathered wall, a leftover piece of advertising or an accidental installation which, not recognized as such, is waiting for the garbage truck. These are random cries for attention which might just as well charm or inspire us. In Flanders we understand this.

**Improper hierarchy**
When I started my design studio *visionandfactory* about twenty years ago, I initially had to justify myself to a number of art collectors who had bought my artistic works. It's true, at the time I worked as a so-called 'artist'. You have probably figured out the relevance of my introduction by now. But why were these art connoisseurs so critical about my switch? Is styling or design really inferior to free or autonomous art? It's funny: although crossover has been more or less accepted as a concept, this improper hierarchy still exists. A few years later I decided to add the description *integrated design* to the name of my design studio, not as a personal statement but as a reference to the attitude which we, today's graphic designers, embrace. Without arrogance, but also without shame. Simple and to the point, a sort of new unambiguousness.

And speaking of unambiguousness: 'design' is a bizarre concept. A few years ago I put it as follows in *De Standaard*: "Design has become a knee-jerk concept, too often disconnected from its own content. More often than not it's a hip lubricant used to sell all kinds of stuff. To the extent that design evokes an image of some minimalist piece of furniture for most people, the meaning of the concept does not refer to the product. It refers to the action. If you've looked it up in an English dictionary, you know that 'design' refers to the process of conceiving something, to planning something based on detailed preliminary studies or drawings. Giving form to concepts, in other words. This play on words may seem trivial, but it's not. For example: a Dutch colleague was accosted in a so-called design shop by an overly enthusiastic salesman who claimed that a particular beautiful doorknob was designed by a real 'design designer'."
Could it possibly get any more absurd?

**Design as hype.**
Up to a few decades ago, design and the accompanying design culture were not really a topic of discussion, except in trade journals. What a contrast with today! Design has almost become a command. Woe to those who don't have designer furniture at home! The media bombard us with lofts with minimalist kitchens and post-arte povera art on the wall. Ban bad taste! Fortunately there are TV programs where a couple of 'designers' are ready to ram good taste down your throat whether you want to or not, all made palatable in an easy-to-digest format! Drenched in the lifestyle culture we constantly promote, weekend editions of papers have degenerated into glossy sales magazines for hyped-up fashion, design objects, gourmet chocolates, select wines, gastronomical tips and things of that nature. The reader is demoted, as it were, to jolly and uncritical consumer who is expected to appreciate these things. Is this a final but intense convulsion of the consumption culture? Do we realize that this is approaching a type of decadence we haven't seen since the Romans? It may sound harsh, but as far as I'm concerned this phenomenon is an indicator of a far-reaching form of intellectual impoverishment.

And yet graphic designers remain virtually invisible to the media in Flanders. Whenever a great book is reviewed, it's usually limited to a mention of the author and, if he's lucky, the photographer. Graphic designers don't seem to exist, unless it's some smart guy who has hitched his wagon to a Flemish celebrity. SOS! WTF? *You got the picture?*

**The designer as critical thinker and doer.**
In 1964, British designer Ken Garland published the groundbreaking manifesto *First Things First*. In 1999 Rick Poynor's updated reflection ('FTF revisited', in *Emigre* 51) was published. The text ends with: *"At root, it's about democracy. The escalating commercial take-over of everyday life makes democratic resistance more vital than ever."* The manifesto basically poses the following question: are designers simply supposed to serve the economy, or should they also adopt a critical attitude in order to question and improve livability and the quality of life? Now that the limits of economic growth have been clearly defined, designers are also forced to confront the question of whether they will be able to play a part in the development of a more sustainable mentality. You could call it an 'ethical revival'.

No, this is not some 'leftist' plea. It's simply a reality, as well as a concern on the part of a teacher-designer. I think academic art and design schools have a crucial role to play in this context. Renaud Huberlant, graphic designer and teacher at the Brussels *Ecole de recherche graphique*, put it this way during *Integrated2009* [freely interpreted]: "Graphic designers have achieved high levels of professional accomplishment worldwide, and they have the ability to create beautifully designed materials with the help of very professional tools. But what's next? As designers, do we have the desire, and the will, to think about our role, about communication, and more particularly about our contribution to the public arena? Do we want to collaborate with urban developers, architects, artists, marketers and politicians?" Or, as Stefan Sagmeister put it in an interview with *Addmagazine*: "*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 …*" These two reflections were formulated by two people in two different places and at two different times.

Let's take this a little further: in the future, the only economic relevance the design profession will have will be the result of a critical attitude and sufficient self-reflection. The 'marketization' of culture and design won't have any future either if they don't evolve in regard to content or if they simply obey the dictates of marketers. A design-oriented culture cannot be created on demand; its roots are deep and wide and twisted, as roots should be. This same 'twistedness' combined with a healthy dose of serendipity often leads to unique and boundary-pushing projects.

Designers, strategists, clients, marketers and others have no choice but to collaborate, because tomorrow's society and its demanding consumers will demand the utmost of them. These disciplines should not engage in value judgments about each other. Only healthy and respectful interaction will lead to joint, inventive solutions. It's the exact same thought that was expressed in the *First Things First* manifesto 45 years ago. Some things just stand the test of time.

**Voluntaristic opportunism.**
In any case, the situation is unfortunately still far from ideal. During the past two or three decades the graphic design culture in Flanders, Belgium and beyond has made enormous strides. There are many excellent schools in Flanders which, partly due to academic pressures, question and nurture the position of the designer and the design process and stimulate solid research. New generations of young graphic designers with a lot of potential are graduating every year. Some of them go abroad, others work in various collaborative contexts resulting in new office structures that are often inter-disciplinary and small-scale, but very future-oriented. It's odd that the larger firms and classic agencies are behind the curve of this evolution and often refuse to believe that society has changed around them. Because of fierce competition they are also venturing into the cultural communication market. There is nothing wrong with that in and of itself, but too often it's based on a 'voluntaristic opportunism'. What to think of firms that present detailed projects, uninvited and unpaid, to the large culture houses, thereby undercutting individual graphic designers?

Or the other way around? Clients who think nothing of briefing dozens of designers and design firms about yet another pitch, which is just a way of getting a lot of creative proposals for —that's right— free. Free design. This freeloader mentality cripples the design culture. Free is always inferior. Free is noncommittal. Free is deception. Free undermines a healthy economy.

Sure, I do freebies as a favor sometimes. But: that's my decision. No one has the right to make that decision for me. Designers who read this will no doubt heave a sigh of recognition because this practice is still only too common in Flanders, and not just with relatively small clients but even with the government. An example? You are probably familiar with bids for public contracts. Hiding behind the law, government institutions (and ministries) boldly ask for completely finished concept proposals before granting the contract. Even the agencies of the Flemish government use this practice. The parties bidding for the contract are expected to submit, in addition to a sizable portfolio (including official documents, a very detailed bid and a step-by-step plan), a detailed design proposal. This is often supposed to be done within one or two weeks. Don't believe it? It's the truth. And what is the result? Abominable design, strategically rickety and structurally unsound, technically sub-par and doomed to disappear quickly. It's inevitable: proven and professional designers and design firms usually refuse to participate.

And so we are left in Flanders —in spite of very good schools, in spite of the increasing number of talented, inventive designers— with a hodge-podge of sub-standard government designs: gratuitous logos and in-house styles that are changed every time a new manager or director is hired. Speaking of strategy … don't even get me started on the proper use of available financial means.

**On track to the future.**
What can we do about this? A professional organization such as the BNO in the Netherlands is undoubtedly effective. UDB in Belgium does the best it can, but it doesn't have enough graphic designer members yet. Design Flanders also has a long tradition of offering a broad, high-quality platform and it's doing its share to smooth out the rough terrain. But there remains much work to be done. Perhaps the next generation of designers and teachers needs to be more alert and vocal. There are no instant solutions. Maybe we should all take a page from the behavioral therapy book: action-reaction, that's how it works. Graphic designers need to think about these things and plan strategically if they want to stop seeing themselves as a mechanical, stylistic arm of the client. But they have to be willing to set the bar high for themselves and not just take the easy way out by proposing a superficial design solution.

Any world promotes the relevance of its own existence, whether it's the world of politics, finance or design. It's human nature: machinery made of passion, compassion, vanity and opportunism. Is it possible for young designers, be they driven, confused or tempered, to find a place in the midst of this system of clients, curators and price-setters? Will they survive in this jungle? I think they will, and I'm actually pretty optimistic about it. Investing in high-quality graphic design implies recognition and acknowledgement of complexity, of non-nuance as nuance, of connection in all directions. It seems to me that accepting this complexity is not only honest, but necessary. That's they way it was with Bauhaus and that's the way it is today. And for that you need both specialists and generalists.

**Integrated2009.**
In 2007, this concept of 'connections' led to a departmental research project called *Integrated* at the Sint Lucas school in Antwerp. This in turn resulted in a conference by the same name, which took place for the second time (*Integrated 2009*) at the Singel in Antwerp. 'Integrated' has absolutely no political meaning here. *Integrated* is a European platform for applying insights into the complexity of design processes —of whatever nature and in whatever discipline— in an ambitious and inquisitive manner utilizing a healthy mix of images, concepts and words. Many well-known designers made an appearance, including legendary designers such as Storm Thorgerson and Stefan Sagmeister, but also Erik Kessels, David Shrigley, Siggi Eggertsson, John L. Walters, Adbusters, Mevis & Van Deursen, Janenrandoald, Tom Hautekiet, Sara De Bondt, Renaud Huberlant, Annelys de Vet and many others.

Finally, a sobering thought. Earlier I mentioned the limited visibility of graphic designers in our media. I'd like to temper this with the following perspective: could it be that a powerful designer is present in his cleverly arranged invisibility? Or through the powerful visual impact of his pictorial language? It really doesn't matter. The possibilities are endless. The whole spectrum. From minimalism to maximalism, in all shapes, in all styles. Graphic design is a fantastic discipline. The landscape in which designers work is far from perfect, but just as inspiring for all that, even in the Flemish context. *Le paysage est magnifique!*

Hugo Puttaert, November 2009