



One semester course (15 weeks)

Open to graduate students, upper level undergraduates

Prerequisite: Lorraine Wild's Historical Survey of Graphic Design (a year-long chronological survey class from the turn of the century to the present)

The philosophy of this curriculum would be to re-examine the validity and structure, as well as the contents, of the historical canon of graphic design. The class would explore these goals by using conceptual and cultural filters to examine graphic design. There is no intention to revise the canon for the beginner or the uninformed, rather it is a graduate level reconsideration of design history that requires a thorough knowledge of the existing canon in order to reconsider, re-examine and redefine design history. These strategies are intended to allow the individual to reconfigure and question design history on a personal level.

I believe this personal engagement would make design history compelling and refreshing for instructor and student alike. When the "filtered" history is handed back to the design world it gives students the opportunity to re-present design history with their own voice (rather than the standardized voice of academia), to make it subjective, to knowingly offer different lenses through which the complex web of design history can be viewed. The idea of lenses or filters is nothing new. They can easily be seen in curatorial practice, where exhibitions are created that have common themes of subject matter, time period, or stylistic motif. The curation of design history, whether at SFMOMA, London's Design Museum or the pages of graphic design history books, offers the chance for a refreshing re-presentation of content, to find illuminating paths through the mass of design, and also to expand that canon by introducing new elements from outside of the existing canon.

This is one of the most successful elements of *Eye* magazine and previous to that Herbert Spencer's *Typographica*—both magazines show the established canon but also extend the canon by showcasing new or rediscovered work of cultural importance. A less direct parallel would be the way *Colors* uses its political agenda as a lens through which to curate images from around the world, or Design Writing Research's strategy of closing the gap between visual and textual language in the initial essays in their book.

An open curatorial practice offers up a multitude of different voices with different agendas, with the distinct possibility that a trickle of such material will flow into the conventional canon of design history. The canon is already somewhat ossified, such a class could build upon it, expand it in interesting idiosyncratic ways (living history growing on dead history: like a coral reef growing organically in many different directions). It should be made clear this is not historical revisionism but historical revitalization. At the most obvious levels of design history there are the most obvious inclusions: the protagonists of the major modernist movements, of classicism, experimental form makers, the icons of different eras, in short the canon we already know. Graphic design itself, as a reflection (and a creator) of culture, is an immense and ever changing machine, spitting out an impressive variety of material—everything cannot be historicized given the limited vehicles design history has—but

at present there seems to be a void where graphic design can be re-discovered, re-articulated and re-contextualised.

One way for this re-examination to happen is through reinvestigating the mass of design history before us with new tools. Traditionally design historians have used the filters of chronology (the design of "before and after" as context e.g., Meggs History of Graphic Design) and individual design stardom (e.g., Typography by Ott, Stein and Friedl) in order to make sense of the complex web of design culture/history. Groupings by historical time period or movement and format based (design ephemera grouped by classification e.g. posters, postcards, packaging, logos, websites, motion graphics etc) have also been common as structures for viewing history (e.g. the mass of Heller edited publications from the 80s and 90s). My interest lies in furthering these structures and finding more complex threads and connections that range from the traditional to the unconventional.

Filters

Possible filters for examination might include:

- Thematic: tracing the visual representation of subjects e.g. food, drugs, color, sex, etc.
- Contextual: tracing and examining visual representation in connection to overriding contexts such as political scenarios, social agendas, technological advancements, state of education, economic criteria, etc.
- Concurrent cultural occurrences: examining themes and trends in other design disciplines and their relationship to graphic design - both how they represent graphic design and how graphic design represents them - e.g. architecture, fashion, film, art, literature, music, product design, etc.
- Concurrent historical occurrences: examining themes and trends in non-design disciplines and their relationship to graphic design e.g. scientific theory, technology, inventions, physics, etc.
- Issues of representation: considering how design (dis)affects race, gender, culture, nationality, subculture, etc.
- Design archeology: finding ways to trace the history of formal motifs e.g., examining their shifting significance and meaning through different eras/contexts.
- Connecting history: trying to understand how historical design has influenced contemporary design by tracing and documenting the influence of an historically important designer from their own time period to the present - both documented and imagined/fabricated connections.
- Idiosyncratic: a variety of personal strategies for looking at history developed by the individual e.g., what influenced me and why, personal histories, etc.

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- Curatorial connections: making your own connections and investigations by tracing themes, threads and links through existing history, either as hypotheses or as researched certainties, e.g., the relationship between drugs and design, the women behind the men, etc.
 - Chain of events: creating connections from one piece of design to another (a to b, b to c, c to d etc) with no predetermined goal but to create a chain of personal connections that flows across time periods, styles, media, etc.
 - Random: experiments in non sequiturs, random juxtapositions and chance occurrences to create different ways of viewing history, to force us to reconsider how this history is fabricated and what kind of connections we can, and do, make.

These are just sample filters, students would be responsible for determining their own lenses. Not all of these filters may produce anything "bookworthy" but I feel they will invigorate and engage design students in the field of design history by giving them a personal connection, a sense of "ownership" by making their own connections and discoveries, creating their own histories.

Curriculum

The curriculum would be centered around student generated ideas/projects. These would be developed with advice from the teaching faculty as well as outside input from specialized faculty. In the first few weeks the faculty would highlight and discuss with students examples of various filters. Students would go through the process of brainstorming, idea generation and development as group sessions/critiques. Students would keep process notebooks of the projects development. As well as an emphasis on writing and research, the class would also place emphasis on non-traditional methods of presenting history, utilizing the design student's skills and knowledge as designers, and also allowing them to enter a dialogue through, and with, form as well as with words. There could be smaller projects, focusing on single defined filters, that lead up to a more complex final project, that would demonstrate an understanding of how these filters work. The final project has no set format, it may be a paper, a fanzine, a piece of motion graphics, a poster or a web site, it must, however, be self-published in some medium and disseminated to the whole class. This offers a direct parallel to writing in the larger context of design publishing. The final project is presented and critiqued in depth by the group.

Reading/looking/research list

Rather than the class having a set reading list, each student has to produce a personalized "reading/looking/research" list. This list would comprise design history writing, fiction, theory, and criticism but also models from other media and tangential material as it relates to each project, which may involve visual presentations, performance, film, music etc. In consultation with the faculty, students would develop this personalized list relevant to their topics of interest. As an example I would show and discuss my own "reading/looking/research" list and discuss how and why this material has affected the way I think about design history:

Rock My Religion, Dan Graham
Invisible Cities, Italo Calvino
Typographica (Vol 2), Herbert Spencer
Ocean of Sound, David Toop
I Seem to be a Verb, Fuller/Fiore
Design Writing Research, Miller/Lupton
Compendium for Literates, Karl Gerstner
Right On! Levine/Naisbett/Burke
Class Questionnaire, Paul Thek
Pens and Needles, Katie Homans
Sans Soleil, Chris Marker
Subculture the Meaning of Style, Dick Hebdige
Air Guitar, Dave Hickey
Visionary Cities, Soleri/Wall
The Art of the Motor, Paul Virillio
Looking Closer 3, Beirut/Helfand/Heller/Poyner
Understanding Interactivity, Chris Crawford
Hall of Mirrors, Art and Film since 1945, Brougher
Understanding Comics, Scott McCloud
Typography, Ott/Stein/Friedl

Ownership through discovery

How do these different strategies “teach” the students? By questioning the authoritative structure of the canon they allow for an engrossing and personal experience with design history. I remember going to an art exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London at the end of a summer’s evening, just as the show was closing. There were no security guards or museum staff anywhere and I took the opportunity to ignore the “do not touch” signs and walked into the middle of a Richard Long sculpture, concentric circles of stones covering a fifty-foot area on the floor. I felt a personal connection with the work. I felt that I had “experienced” it rather than merely “looked” at it. It’s a sweet memory.

I want to let students jump over the velvet rope and touch the artwork. I know it’s not allowed, but it sure feels good, and I believe it would recall the key simple emotional pleasures found in that initial discovery of design history that many graphic designers seem to lose so quickly: the pleasure in making connections over time and space; digging deeper and feeling some sense of ownership because you discover some design work that was obscure but brilliant; making your own connections.

This approach would give the student a sense of engagement and discovery, expose them to a wider range of graphic design than typically available, and encourage the student to be investigative and questioning concerning design history. The strategies of this class offer the possibility for creative writing and thinking rather than dry historical regurgitation. They entice the student to have a close relationship with the material, to form their own viewpoints of it, to look at design history from different angles. To investigate how we are historicizing design and how we are designing history.

