

Let's get rid of all dictates: Integrated2011!

I remember buying a poster from the Irish artist Les Levine, showing George Bush senior holding his hand up, shouting: "No new artists!" Was this supposed to portray Bush's ultimate attempt to stop artistic activism, or his final endeavour to dictate other people's minds? I never found the answer but it certainly felt that way.

Sometime in the late nineties, after having reorganized my studio, I wrote the following:

"Graphic design is entering a new era. It will assimilate visual, complex relational tasks, which requires total cross-platform thinking, make use of the most appropriate technologies & link a general to a specialist approach. As designers, we will have to look beyond the boundaries of design, starting from a sharply defined visual strategy and strong interaction with viewers' expectations. Design with social and economic relevance. Sometimes related to art, at other times to technology."

One decade on and two Integrated conferences later, this observation seems not to have lost any of its relevance. Since then, numerous discussions with designers, artists, teachers, curators, clients and –last but not least– students, have focused the minds and confirmed our earlier assessment: today's design and artistic landscape has become more complex and more complicated, but also more interesting - fascinating, even. Over the same period, human activities –including thinking processes– have become inextricably intertwined with technology. Alongside the influence of rigid conceptual thought, intuition and passion have regained their rightful place as instigators of the creation of 'form'. Anything goes, anywhere and everywhere, without any restrictions – which is a quite a reassuring thought.

Integrated2011 –third edition already!– is more determined than ever to establish connections between graphic design and other fields and disciplines. Integrated2011 is ambitious, inquisitive, eager to make use of a refreshing mix of images, ideas and words, with a view to uncovering the complexity of design and all processes of any kind which may occur in any creative discipline - such is the scope of Integrated.

Should we deduce from all this that everything is always connected with everything else? You know – 'the big picture'? Does it matter? Recognition and acknowledgement of subtle nuances have turned out to be an excellent filter, and being a teacher in this field means no more and no less than recognising and acknowledging complexity and nuances. Spotting potential synergies is the logical next step, and this is what feeds the insight that connection is everything. Contemporary art education is always evolving –it should be, anyway– and in this context, it has become clear that delimitations between disciplines are fading. This may result from the fact that design and artistic processes have become more universal and therefore less firmly tied to their original specificity and technicality. But is this the only reason? Specialisation is also on the increase, and this entails interaction, not contradiction. The fading of barriers should be considered as an opportunity to make connections between domains, not as a watering down of their unique characteristics, and this evolution is in no way conducive to shallowness – on the contrary.

'So this is all crossover stuff, really' you might conclude. Yet 'crossover' may have become too banal a term, due to overuse in glossy magazines, giving it a connotation of fashionable volatility and superficial posing. Which is why notions such as 'interconnection' are more appropriate to describe exchanges and collaborations between artists, designers, musicians, scientists, clients and entrepreneurs, that bring into existence new developments in domains no one previously knew existed. New research domains are proof of this. The academisation of art education has come a long way since the Bologna agreements. Designers and artists are appropriating fields and implementing methods that are not purely 'creative' and do not automatically result in a product or artefact. In other words: the process leading to the creative result and the analysis of a thesis aver to be as important, if not more important than this end goal.

So research is the magic word here. This 'loaded expression' shook the world of contemporary art education and introducing research into the curriculum was no picnic, neither in 'autonomous art' nor in 'applied art'. The distinction between these fields is a stale notion, as far as we are concerned – is there a fundamental difference and if so, what is it? And is this a relevant question in 2011? In this context, the statement Renaud Huberlant (Professor at the École de recherche graphique in Brussels) made at Integrated2009 remains totally relevant: *"Graphic designers worldwide have reached a high level of competence. They are able to produce some marvellously designed materials aided by state-of-the-art professional tools. But what's next? Will they go on reflecting on their role as designers, on communication, and more specifically on their contribution to public space? Are they prepared to collaborate: town planners, architects, artists, marketeers and even politicians?"*

Renaud Huberlant was talking about graphic designers at that time. But does this reasoning not apply to artists just as well? Should artists and designers keep functioning within their familiar, neatly separated worlds (and circuits) of galleries, art centres, collectives, workshops, design studios, agencies and/or hip design stores? Is the world of academic art education prepared to share its allocated space with alternative forms and are students, teachers, authorities and the public prepared to accept this? Will students have an artistic future and be economically relevant unless they have carefully considered this idea? What happens when designers and artists allow themselves to be led by the dictates of marketers and curators? Seeing as the dividing line between 'artistic' and 'commercial' commissions has become nonexistent? More questions than answers there...

Instead of declaring allegiance to either the artists' flag or the designers' flag, we might consider marching under one and the same banner, as autonomous designers and functional designers - as well as designers who are both? Would that be plausible? And above all: isn't it about time to move on from this obsolete, outdated contentious issue? (Just in case this proposal sounds like a dictate: out with it! No more dictates!)

Fortunately, our inventive souls are intangible and cannot be pigeonholed, so all configurations and variations are viable: the designer or artist as in-your-face upstart or as shrewd commercial actor, those who think and those who do, pictorialists, creators of conceptual solutions, theorists and hands-on workers, organisers and entrepreneurs, in any hue or colour, in the centre or in the margins... they occupy the whole spectrum.

In this way, today's complex pick-and-mix society will see itself reflected in our refreshing ideas, unexpected interventions and surprisingly clever solutions and products. We may reach some solutions that don't solve anything -and are in fact completely useless- or create products that are utterly absurd.... or very smart indeed, so they may serve to keep the public from turning sour and jaded, and consumers -of all kinds of objects as well as of cultural events and products- from getting greedy and lazy.

Luckily, we are living in times of crisis, a crisis that works as an irrigation system for seedlings. These seedlings are not growing into a regiment of 'creatives' content to grow in neat rows as and how clients command. These are enthusiastic people who dare to question the question that is put to them, who dig deep enough to find out whether their roots are as they should be: crooked and tortuous. This tortuousness, combined with a sound dose of serendipity, often leads to unique, groundbreaking results, whether these are reached individually or collectively, right here or anywhere else in the world.

A fleeting thought crossing my mind just now: Can it be true that it is our Western semi-religious craving for the sublime originality of individual 'art' and 'design' that has been leading us toward elitism?

The field in which we would like to regenerate creatively seems more complex and at the same time vaster than ever. Is it possible that we need to engage in some serious, clear and balanced reflection, and to test the results of this reflection in this ever faster changing real world, in order to be able to serve this world appropriately? After all, despite the political and ecological problems we're currently having, people do have to go on with their lives...and things will inevitably change - preferably for the better! Call me naïve, I don't mind. I remain convinced that designers, artists ...call us what you like, have a fundamental role to play here. Unless we are satisfied to have our egos and our bank accounts fed, and to be featured on the glossy pages of glossy magazines in glossy flagship stores or glossy galleries...

New artists: please!

Hugo Puttaert, February 2011 (with thanks to Michel Van Beirendonck & Anne Baudouin - translation)
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