

Dada posters in a post--colony

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Abstract

Graphic design is often seen in the commercial context and is discussed through topics linked to software and technology. When we look around us we can realise that billboards, banners, posters and most of the print that surround us in the public space are delivering messages of marketing, corporations, consumerism and other commercially inclined narratives. This, however, is not the only way to comprehend the practice of a graphic designer. Graphic design can take a socio-pedagogical and historical role and distribute alternative messages in the society which are not linked to money and consumption, unless education, reading and studying are considered consumption of sorts.

It is obvious that graphic design is a powerful tool that shapes our understanding of reality. This happens through being exposed to the work. Posters are claimed to mirror societies by many theorists and most visual communication is mediated by a graphic designer. Thus, Bonsiepe stated already in 2005 in his speech *Design and Democracy* that there is an absence of questioning activities linked to design production. It is yet a relevant theme that research needs to approach; also in a post-colony where the printed poster is ubiquitous. A simple sheet of printed paper. A very simple but extremely complex and powerful. There lies an investigation that this paper will start. The outcome of this paper to share knowledge within the researchers about creating new meaningful pathways in understanding globally important practice of graphic design. Art and design are universally important.

Keywords: graphic design, printed poster, socio-pedagogical, post-colony, history

The purpose of the paper is to show through theoretical references, case study and discussion that graphic designers have the possibility to incorporate socio-pedagogical and historical motives, as well as questioning activities, in the generally commercial and client oriented nature of graphic design. As an outcome, I want to create a reader to see that graphic design does not only prevail in Finland, the rest of the Europe, United States but is ubiquitous. It functions in the same commercial manner in the public urban spaces in the post-colonial South Africa, Namibia as in the 'West'. Researchers need to investigate further, not how things look or opinions about them, but how 'things' are practiced, in which context, and what is represented: To define what visual reality looks like. Definitions of graphic design are redefined continuously in each interaction between the printed sheet and the viewer, be it active or passive relationship.

I will start by defining the terminology. After this I will explain my research position. Thereafter I will introduce literature to define graphic design and link this to its socio-pedagogical and historical framework. I will show questioning activities. As a theoretical framework, I use writings of Bonsiepe, Potter, Müller-Brockmann, Van Toorn, Sontag, to name a few. It is necessary to introduce also writings from the South-Africa and to bring the

local understanding closer to the reader.

Terminology: Case study, artistic research, DADA, poster and post--colony

I conducted a *case study* from artistic research perspective. Borgdorff defines *artistic researcher* as a study where art practice is central to the research itself and that the creative process forms pathways to insights and understanding (Borgdorff, 2012, p.145-146). I position myself as an artistic researcher that conducted a case study in a post-colony. My researcher position is that of a permanent inhabitant in Windhoek, Namibia, for approximately a decade. I have been active in the society as artist, educator, performer, designer and as an artistic researcher.

Case study is defined by Karlsson (2016, p.3) as a single instance and a sample of one investigation of a phenomenon from a real-life context. She indicates that researchers use case study to identify what is common about the case study to explain the reader how or why something happened.

DADA refers to information retrieved from Museum of Modern Art, New York, website: http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/dada. ““For us, art is not an end in itself,” wrote Hugo Ball, “but it is an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in.” The case study is ‘dada’ in nature. It was created not for the posters themselves but towards challenging seeing and perception about the posters and design in the society. DADA is a mirror of the society through the case study, that shows the power of design.

With *poster* I refer to Müller-Brockmann (1971/2004, p. 22) who writes: “Posters are barometers of social, economic, political and cultural events, as well as mirrors of our everyday lives.” Sontag (1970,4) refers to Hutchinson’s definition of posters dictated by the demands of a service, message, or products and Sontag, herself defines poster artist as “works for money and tries to please the client”. This definition supports my view on how graphic design is linked to corporations and commercial entities directly.

The term *postcolonial* is difficult to define in a simple manner. The term has both historical and ideological significance. Postcolonialism is a critical theory focusing on colonial experience from the colonised society’s point view, semantically post colonialism means something that has a concern only with the national culture after the departure of imperial power. This case study brings DADA to people who might feel ambiguous towards it due to historical reasons. If I spoke about DADA as a white Caucasian female researcher, the words would be linked to me, not to the information, potentially. Streets are public spaces that offer individuals the choice to read, or not to read.

Literature review

Bonsiepe (2006) discusses the alarming absence of questioning activities in the design discourse. He indicates that academia still offers a space for this type of endeavour, whereas it seems otherwise slightly problematic to start a dialogue in the cultural context. Bonsiepe also

points out that designers aspire towards two minutes of fame and mentions design coffee table books that exempt readers from intellectual efforts. Design with democracy is not enjoy popularity as discussion. Whereas the word “fashion designer” is rather sexy (my word choice, not that of Bonsiepe). Bonsiepe says that design is distanced from intelligent problem solving and moving towards quick and obsolete boutiqueization of the world universally. I agree and I am starting a dialogue through the posters.

50th anniversary of the Warsaw International Poster Biennale, in June 2016, write on their website; “The Poster Remediated will explore how the conventional poster is undergoing rapid transformation in an age of ubiquitous digital screens and social media. It will show that the internet has not – as some commentators have suggested – killing off the poster. But the medium is being changed by digital technology”. With this citation, I see emphasis on what is conventionally being discussed: technology, and technical aspects. It seems secondary to discuss the art of posters and the content. Why are posters being made and with which purposes? Is graphic design only submissive to a third party? The thinking mind behind the posters as art? To answer a brief? This is a text book example discourse stuck in technology. Also, Crowley (2016) discusses – digital poster in the same context of Warsaw Biennale. The focus should be on ‘What?’ rather ‘How?’ and ‘Why?’.

Van Toorn states (Poynor, 2008,79): “The problem of design today is that it is more fascinated by the visual, as a realistic imitation or decoration, and not by the image as a subjective narrative and interpretive element.” A designer cannot adopt a position of a neutral mediator for Van Toorn (2015, 22). He (2010, 46-47) pleads “not to lose contact with social reality, to maintain an open eye and a critical mind for the conditions in which we produce, and for the effect it has on the recipients. He advises us to strive for dissident behavior and to accept more dissonance in the process. Van Toorn continues “a language use that liberates us from the forms of domination that design and its concepts still exercise today”. Van Toorn, in *Critical Practice*, (2008, 79) offers alternative ways of thinking to be embedded into the everyday commercial practice of design.

The DADA posters show the potential and new ways of becoming an active citizen. Graphic design is guerilla advertising, where anyone and everyone is manipulated. I will come to this later.

Economou (2012, 39) writes that “the visual media encourages and reproduces a culture where ambitions of glamour, sexualisation, and material wealth provide social status and recognition over “traditionally” valued concepts such as education, family values, work ethic, and civic duty”. Sounds like the ‘West’, does it not? It is. Van Toorn (2010, 46) writes about ‘reality’ and that “presentation is missing an authentic point of view and a form relating the unearthed material to our experiences in reality”. Therefore, poster mediated our new potential realities as well.

South African designer Mac Garry (2008, p. 9) claims that graphic designers can do what they want. Spiekermann (2006, 165) says on the other hand that artists express themselves, not graphic designers. Mac Garry (2008) seems contradicting himself in his writing as he publishes a text book about graphic design, yet the focus, in my opinion in personal opinions rather than theoretical. Hence, he (2008) also states that there are no rules but then shows the basic

universal rules of graphic design that are universally identified. Reader must be confused. We need to perform criticism to what we read and what we believe. If the establishment is vague, how can we? Maybe it is challenge to simply learn to question.

MacAvery Kane writes: “Graphic design serves as a filter through which much of our communication is disseminated. Graphic designers find themselves in the unique position of being gatekeepers of information as well as providing a mirror that reflects contemporary culture.” Designers are juxtaposed; how can they earn a living and offer positive alternatives all at once.

Müller-Brockmann (2004, 12) says posters mirror everyday lives in the society. Repetitive mirror becomes reality through the repetition. Müller-Brockmann (2004, 12) refers to Bense who purposes that design exists to glorify and to manipulate behaviour. Posters for Bense solve problems, but also confront us with new ones. Kepes (1995, 221) writes that: “Posters on the streets — could disseminate socially useful messages, and they could train the eye, and thus the mind, with the necessary discipline of seeing beyond the surface of visible things, to recognize values necessary for an integrated life.” (1944, 221) DADA poster aim at manipulating to change behaviour towards reading, art and design.

I have presented literature and thinking that has influenced the case study. I placed a mirror or posters to the society. Poster carry knowledge and the work has been distanced from the conventional poster designs.

Case study: DADA posters in a post-colony



Figure 1. The first reader arrived on the 6.10.2016 as I was finished posting the work. The reader was created. I do not witness people reading 'conventional' posters; I have no proof of that.

Through this case study I want to show the alternative futures of design. The purpose is to share information and offer a possibility for an individual to learn and to see alternative. I started by sending an email to approximately 150 people; artists, designers, educators etc. in Windhoek, Namibia on the October 3, 2016.

“STREETS ARE BECOMING A LIVING LIBRARY!

We have distributed D,A,D, and A (DADA) posters in Windhoek to celebrate the 100 years of DADA art movement and in celebration of art and design education and practice. This DADA 'streets are libraries' campaign celebrates the potential of graphic design through a printed poster in conveying socially beneficial narratives and messages!

What is DADA? Who knows DADA? Who cares DADA? Now people can decide for themselves, they can make the choice of learning or not learning. We don't know unless

we learn. Streets are libraries!

Graphic design can approach socio-pedagogical issues and it does not only have to be concerned about corporate and commercial affiliations. Most of graphic design is doing this. There are alternative methods the discipline can do to create a larger discourse in the society about art, design and education and society as whole. We are aiming to create awareness about design and art visions, that are not linked to corporations nor consumerism. Except if knowledge creation, reading and learning is considered consuming.

We wish that you will contribute to the awareness building of art, design and education by printing any of the attached posters and posting them anywhere in your neighbourhood. Distribute as many as you like!”

I write in an intuitive basis. I think for a long time and then act. I think that we globally share a common history of graphic design and art. We must write news histories. In South Africa, students, as a protest towards the local current unhappiness towards systems, I assume, burned art works and demanded statues to be taken down (Daily Maverick, n.d) in August 2016. I do not support violence, nor art burning. It reminds me of the history of burning books. Art history is universal heritage. Decolonising is a new buzz word, but decolonising exactly what and how?

I worked four years as a government lecturer of graphic design, where else do I start than history? I took design to where it belongs, streets. I created ephemeral libraries. I was an advertising agency, imaginary, but real. “What Would Hugo Ball or Marcel Duchamp say?”: I thought that art history is as important to an art student in Namibia as in Finland.

I designed 21 DADA posters based on text found online. I did not waste time in designing; I did it in my mind before. I copied texts, printed and made approximately 300 copies to communicate socio-pedagogical and historical meanings to be viewed by the everyday people in the City of Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. The campaign forced viewers to view the work as it looked *different* (see figures 1., 2., 3.). I posted installation to five different sites and distributed individual posters in the city everywhere. All the different posters and few reprints of reprinted authentic DADA posters were distributed in five locations. Nothing was for sale and the project was self-funded. It should have been sponsored by a company. The experimental campaign carries similar pioneering attempts as the Dadaists undertook to intervene and question long-held assumptions of what art and design should be.



Figure 2. A local taxi stopped and the passenger to said the words DADA.



Figure 3. “Drop the Shadow, just drop it!” is my advice as a lecturer of graphic design to beginners.

Why do the streets posters look like Photoshopping exercises (Figure 3.), but not good graphic design? Is it cultural design and repetition of the convention, started by anyone who started to Photoshop posters? The word on the streets is that the person is making money who designs these posters, but is not educated. Does it matter? A clever business man, self-expressionist or an extension of the client’s arm? These are questions that research needs to approach.

Discussion

The case study followed Bonsiepe’s (2006) inquiry to ask questions through actions and Van Toorn’s philosophy of design to embed alternative views. I question the surrounding posters and therefore the poster production. Potter (2002, 53) discusses client brief and its falsity which leads to my informed opinion that many street posters are ‘surface of the face of things’ (Potter, 2002, 53). Posters can be visual pollution. Sontag used (1970, 4) words ugly, banal and decadence to describe posters. Self-expression, corporate clients and briefs, or maybe socio-pedagogically and historically oriented way to develop artistic research? I chose the latter in this case study to write about. “As the extended arm of the client, it (poster) should

lead viewers to the product and appeal to them in such way that the message finds its way into their unconscious mind” (Müller- Brockmann (1972/2011, 12). The DADA posters lead to potential reading.

William & Newton (2007) researched collective memory and how it is formed by a cumulative effect of media-generated images and events. They write that media delivers visual images that create a sense of what is normal and acceptable linked to our values, lifestyles and behaviours. Media, I think, hijacks the idea of reality. Graphic designers present it visually on a repetitive basis. William & Newton discuss that we *think* we select what we see, but in fact our non-conscious memories and predispositions guide us in seeing. Our intuitive cognitive processes, according to them, receive more information than we consciously note.

Guffey (2015, 287) writes: “there has been a mistaken idea that global graphic design is nothing more than the Westernization of design forms worldwide”. I am looking forward to interesting Namibian styles, that are not repetition of the internet of things. Hand-made posters might be the solution, but now computer, I know this from four of teaching experience. Ban Photoshop! “Guffey says that posters are a stubborn and resilient form and continue to develop in new ways entirely outside the West.” I have seen interesting hand-made typography in Namibia, but not poster design.

Conclusions

“What software do you use?” Most frequently vocalised words as I say: “I am a graphic designer”. Convention. Spiekermann (2006, 164) says that the only time people discuss design is when it does not work. For the same reason, we need to expand our work beyond it. In this paper, I have shown options how this can be done. The viewer has been fed new information. By repetition it becomes a norm. Viewer does not like nor dislike, conventional posters just are there, a wallpaper, like lukewarm water, in my opinion. Outi Nyytäjä, a Finnish dramaturg and actor passed away in 2017. I never forget a radio interview in 2009 as she said: “Water needs to be cold or hot, not lukewarm. That is a death sin”. I have no reference to that except my memories. We can influence collective memory by actions. The DADA posters in post-colony is a case study conducted by artistic researcher. I showed how designer can swim against the main stream aiming at creating socio-pedagogical and historical knowledge potential. I promised an investigation into the simple yet complex sheet of paper. The poster. Further questioning needs to happen through further research.

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Autobiography

Niina Turtola

Niina Turtola is a candidate at the Culture-based service design doctoral programme at University of Lapland, Finland. She commutes between Namibia and Finland. She is a graphic designer by profession and she swims against the stream as it is what typographic artistic researcher must do, in her case. Turtola studies text and typographic language as material and as interpretation in the artistic process. She interprets, through typography, already printed texts in the society, and makes artistic design of them. In her research, the texts are always interpretation, therefore the design mirrors also the viewer through reaction.

Her thinking practice plays a more important role than actual designing, that is intuitive. The artistic process leading to an art work is fast as light, almost. She believes in thinking rather than creating pretty pictures and surfaces, that are too conventional. Turtola has created a method to create the unfamiliar following a theory of Viktor Shkolsky (1917). Her brave and self-initiated project is the subject of her doctoral research: productions of fictive Ministry of Truth and Typography. She wonders why so many graphic designers stick to corporate practices rather than explore their own artistic practices?