

ARTIFICE, THE SEMIOSPHERE, AND COUNTER-CONSCIOUSNESS (OR) A MODEL FOR A COUNTER-DESIGN AND DESIGN RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

If we are to find a future in the practice of design (this paper limits itself to graphic design and design research) which aims to assist in the evolution of culture (as opposed to perpetuating the “closed” stabilizing system of culture and language, the persistent heterogeneity, conventions and givens), design might pivot (a designerly thing, as simple as to turn as a slight of hand or as a playful manipulation as in *Détournement*) to a critical and discursive practice of counter-design. Abandoning the territory of commercial practice for an experimental counter-practice, design becomes an active agent in the “open” system of culture and facilitates the adaptation and evolution of culture to new forms.

While the call for new critical practices of design is nothing new, (Margolin 2003) there is a scarcity of models. This exploratory paper postulates a model, one of counter-graphic design constructed by theories of semiotic space, graphic design as a language of artifice, and transformative counter-consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

The very compact synthesis of theories just articulated could also be listed as an integrated set of models:

- A. Within the semiosphere (Yuri Lotman’s model of the complex of semantic space by which language structures and thereby creates culture), the language of graphic design (one of many languages), by way of its syntax and its artifacts (or as semiotics would term, its “texts”), structures cultural forms. Graphic design is a diecasting mechanism (Lotman 1978) either supporting culture’s homeostatic functions and preserving stasis and unity (a “closed” system) or creating difference and structuring new forms that facilitate cultural adaptation and evolution (an “open” system.)
- B. Vilém Flusser proposes that design is a craft of cunning and artifice (Flusser 1995). For example, within Lotman’s semiosphere, graphic design is a semantic craft articulating and shaping the “real” to text/image and making it artificial – an act of artifice. Without conjuring negative connotations, it is deceit.
- C. Graphic design and its products (its texts), by means of its common functions within cultural production¹ and its utilization of conventions to ensure cultural connections with its audience, perpetuates culture’s stabilizing functions. A pivot of graphic design’s practice away from this function to a destabilizing (or critical) one, creates what Marcuse terms a counter-consciousness (Marcuse 1978) challenging presumptions, and shaping difference and new realities.
- D. A conscious articulation of a counter-practice is a counter-design, reflective and discursive. To quote

¹ Mainly capital, see marketing, branding, advertising, even the innocuous construction of identity in the forms of typographic styles, styles of way-finding graphics, etc.

Superstudio, the radical Architecture firm that coined the term, it is “the activity of designing understood as philosophical speculation, as a means to knowledge, as critical ¹existence” (Ambasz, 1972).

A) GRAPHIC LANGUAGE WITHIN THE SEMIOSPHERE / THE LINGUISTIC STRUCTURING OF CULTURE

Yuri Lotman’s theory of the semiotic continuum, the semiosphere (modeling itself on the biosphere) is a contained, self-regulating ecological system structured by language. Like the biosphere, it can be seen both as a whole and as an interconnected, interdependent, systemic complex; a semiotic organism of nested semiotic organisms.

In Lotman’s theory, the primary task of culture “is in structurally organizing the world around man ...” (Lotman 1978) with language functioning as a “diecasting mechanism” creating an “intuitive sense of structuredness that with its transformation of the “open” world of realia into a “closed” world of names, forces people to treat as structures those phenomena whose structuredness, at best, is not apparent” (Lotman 1978).

I would argue that in the highly mediated landscape of contemporary culture, graphic/visual language (a subset, or semiome, within the larger and more general semiosphere) plays a significant role as a “diecasting mechanism. It structures the “open” world of reality into a “closed” world of visual “names”. It structures and forms reality.² We design reality. Or as Tony Fry (2003) states “Humans design, but are, in turn, designed by what results from this designing — be it as things, symbolic forms or traditions.”

B) GRAPHIC DESIGN AS ARTICULATION AND ARTIFICE

Vilém Flusser in his essay “About the Word *Design*” (1999) explores the semantic and etymological development of “design” and its function between art and technology. He points out that the Greek word for art, “*techne*”, means to give form and so the “technology” of design is to shape things, to give form to the formless or visibility to the invisible. The Latin equivalent of *techne* is “*ars*” and its diminutive is “*articulum*”, “something twisting around something else; a wristjoint, for instance” (Flusser, 1999). Design is not simply to give form but to turn and twist so we can “see properly” (Flusser 1999).

Lotman’s structural diecasting mechanism of culture functions similarly. The cultural and semiotic mechanism of graphic/visual design “casts” forms. It also “articulates” but not by the common meaning of

² Clearly other forms of aesthetic production are at work here. Film, television, literature, art, the multi-variant forms of the Internet all have significant roles. All of these forms, and others, constitute subsets of the semiosphere. For the sake of this work, I am limiting my argument to graphic design. This would include all graphic forms and would cross over various media.

putting to words a specific idea, but rather to Flusser’s more complex meaning of turning, maneuverability, and artifice. It articulates the “real” into text/image and makes it artificial. It is by artifice then that graphic/visual language structures the world of reality into a world of visual/textual “names”.

C) COUNTER-CONSCIOUSNESS AND CULTURAL RENEWAL

“The reform of consciousness consists solely in... the awakening of the world from its dream about itself” (Marx 1932).

It is not hard to argue, or simply imagine, that contemporary consciousness is in a dream state, absorbed by the apparitions constructed by culture.

Herbert Marcuse, contends that art does not produce illusion (an argument against a Marxist social realism) but rather postulates alternatives to an accepted reality creating a counter-consciousness, a “negation of the realistic-conformist mind.” (Marcuse 1979)³ He states that “Art’s separation from the process of material production has enabled it to demystify the reality produced in this process. Art challenges the monopoly of the established reality to determine what is ‘real,’ and it does so by creating a fictitious world which is nevertheless ‘more real than reality itself’” (Marcuse 1979). Distinguished from “the given” reality, it functions as a remedy to the prevailing dream state.

Lotman posits that the “long-term memory of the community” of society functions as a “closed” system stabilizing culture. (Lotman 1978). Placed within Marcuse’s model, this functions as a mechanism for the continuation of the prevailing realistic-conformist mind or “the given”. Within the semiosphere, culture generates and sends coded semantic signals constructed by cultural memory. These coded signals structure cultural activity and generate behavior (the future). Behavior, though, is an “open” system and, by way of additional inputs, generates adaptability and change and a “self renewal” of culture. (Lotman, 1978)

Within the semiosphere exists a tension between the “closed” and “open” systems balancing the static “given” with “self renewal”. (Lotman 1978) Graphic design typically works with these tensions balancing the “givens” in order to find connections and relevance, and difference/change to create engagement and uniqueness. Its job is to understand, navigate, and express these domains and their boundaries. In this way, graphic design as a structuring agent – a diecasting mechanism within the semiosphere – is well suited to change behavior, to add information into the “open” system of culture.

D) ABANDONING THE TERRITORY AND SELF RENEWAL: COUNTER DESIGN AND CRITICAL PRACTICE

“The first attitude involves a commitment to design as a problem-solving activity, capable of formulating, in

physical terms, solutions to problems encountered in the natural and socio-cultural milieu. The opposite attitude, which we may call one of counter-design, chooses instead to emphasize the need for a renewal of philosophical discourse and for social and political involvement as a way of bringing about structural changes in our society” (Lang, 2005).

As design has a significant role in our unsustainable predicament, and is simultaneously seen as a method out (although we could also argue that NOT designing is a way³), design might explore alternative and even radical roles. If, for example, redirective practices are to be taken seriously, we might want to seriously rethink and challenge the cultural “given”.

A practice of counter design, as framed by Superstudio (as well as others such as Archigram, and in tangent practices, The Situationistes International), offers possibilities. Abandoning the territory of commercial practice (artifice in the service of consumption and cultural stasis) to counter “the given”, design might pivot and align itself to such radical paradigms as *Détournement* (a turn), *Surrealism* (a negation of the realist mind), and *Pataphysics* (a twist), to name a few. By countering the stabilizing tendencies and the persistent heterogeneity of culture, design becomes a catalyst in the “open” system of culture and assists in its self-renewal.

COUNTER-GRAPHIC & EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN RESEARCH PRACTICE: THE AD HOC ATLAS

The author’s ongoing project, titled the Ad-Hoc Atlas, conducts design research resulting in creative works and is a demonstration (mostly) of the model outlined here. Avoiding conventional outcomes of discrete projects and artifacts, it produces instead a continuous series of open and experimental investigations and prototypes. While there may be findings of sorts, there is no intention to do so. The objective is to use the tools of design research and the discipline of designing to develop a continuous and evolving critical discourse by and about design.

Specifically, the project explores the operations of graphic language in the construction of urban space (space as the social and dialectic) viewing semiotic space as an ecology nested within the ecology of the urban landscape.⁴ It proposes that if place construction is as much a matter of the representational and the symbolic as the material activities of the city (Corner 2006), then we might explore and analyze the city through graphic/visual language. The project prompts us

to think differently about urban space and to challenge perceptions about how language influences us.



FIG 1: from the Ad Hoc Atlas of Montréal.

It uses methodological-instrumental research in conjunction with creative exploratory inquiries through design making. It is both experimental-hypothetical research through design and theoretical-conceptual research about design. It is interdisciplinary in its integration of graphic design research and inquiries in the construction of the urban landscape.

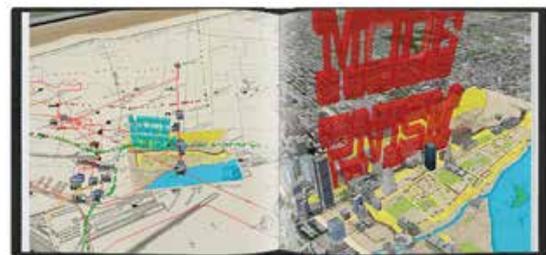
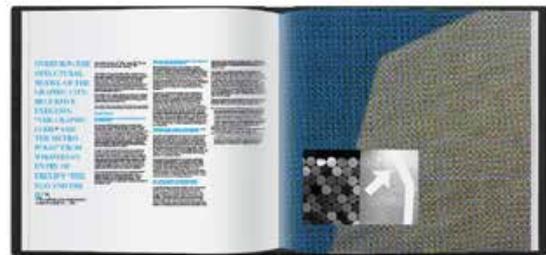


FIG 2-3: from the Ad Hoc Atlas of Montréal.

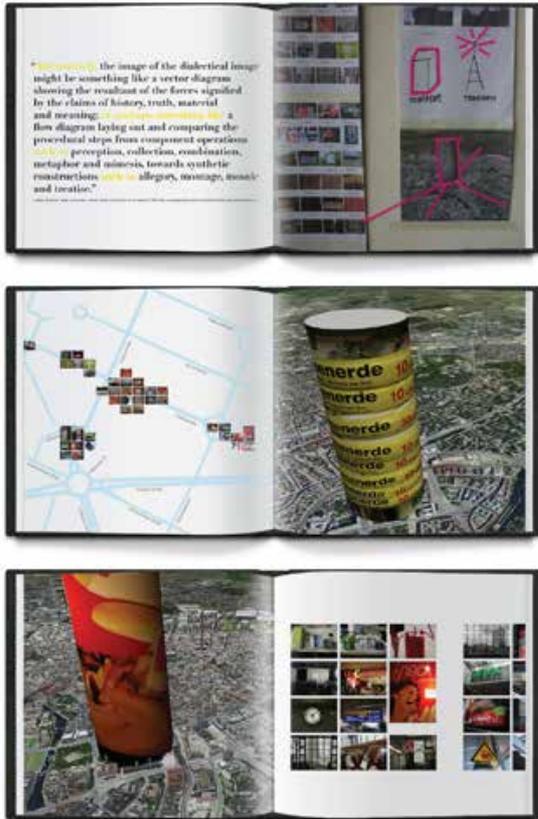
Field research is conducted using GIS (geographic information systems) to map, track, and geolocate graphic language in the urban environment. Additionally, historical and contemporary records and images are audited and collected. Findings are incorporated into experimental explorations in the studio using design research as making. Hard data is commingled with fictions and fantasies as a means to construct new narratives, and dialogue. For example, theoretical writings are hijacked and repurposed, historical and current maps are annotated visualizing theoretical landscapes and propositional geographies, information graphics render invisible conceptual spheres, and design artifacts of the urban landscape and historical images are constructed into visual narratives,

³ See Calvelli, John. “Design Philosophy Politics » (new) Design Is/Is Not the Problem.” *Design Philosophy Politics* (August 2011). <http://designphilosophypolitics.informatics.indiana.edu/?p=143>.

⁴ Here we might use James Corner’s themes of the Urban Landscape as an ecology and tie it more closely to Lotman; the urban landscape is both an ecology of systems and forms, which include semiosphere(s).

a poetic and often cryptic tableau vivant of the dialectic semantic space of the city.

These ambiguous narratives operate as design by using its forms and methods of persuasion as well as its aura of authority to poetically and purposefully confound, challenge, and critique. It is design as a critical stance processed through a conventional discipline resulting in uncanny forms. The artifice of language is embraced for its ability to leave us untethered and disoriented and open to new vistas.



FIGS 4-6: from the Ad Hoc Atlas of Berlin.

CONCLUSION

Within culture's self-regulating semantic ecology, design articulates "turns", artifice that enables us to see "properly" (Flusser, 1995.) It functions within this ecology as a diecasting mechanism structuring cultural consciousness and the real, either preserving culture's homeostatic tendencies or countering them. If we assume this, then design and design research can be used as a critical tool to stage narratives and provocations as a parray, a contrarian response or action, to challenge these tendencies. As an experimental practice in the creation of new forms that counter "the

given", it shifts our view so we can see differently. The boundaries of research and creation, process and form, and fact and fiction fuse into a discursive counter-design, and an "activity of designing understood as philosophical speculation the, as a means to knowledge, as critical existence." (Ambasz, 1972, p. 2) Design and design research become active agents in the open system of culture and by tipping the balance in the tension of cultural forces it facilitates cultural self-renewal and an awakening of the world from its dream about itself.

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