

DIALOGUE & DISSONANCE

EXPLORING DIALOGUE IN DISSIDENT SELF-PUBLISHING

MA TYPO/GRAPHIC STUDIES
LONDON COLLEGE OF PRINTING
2004

MAJOR PROJECT PROPOSAL
KEVIN YUEN KIT LO

FIELD OF STUDY

DISSIDENT SELF-PUBLISHING

Coming from my background in activist graphic design, my field of study could be broadly described as the samizdat tradition of 20th century avant-garde cultural movements. The term samizdat originates from the Russian, referring to a system in Soviet-bloc countries wherein people clandestinely printed and distributed government-suppressed literature. Key to this technique was a small print-run, simple and cheap production methods, and ‘underground’ channels of free distribution where people were encouraged to reproduce works and pass them on. The term has since been used as an umbrella term by Stewart Home to describe a tradition of utopian cultural movements (or “currents”) of the 20th century that are concerned with self-organisation, collective action, and oppositional politics. Therefore it can be understood as both the act of dissident self-publishing as well as the manifest ideology behind the practice.

SAMIZDAT

As this is obviously too vast an area of research, I will narrow the scope by focusing on the published works of the Dada and early Situationist movements, due to my personal interests as well as the relative “success” of these movements and the resulting wealth of writing on them. This investigation will necessitate an understanding of the political and cultural mandates of these movements, and specifically the role that publishing played in the development and dissemination of their ideas. The form of the manifesto will therefore be central to my research.

AVANT-GARDE

There will also be a necessity to investigate the contemporary articulations of samizdat, which could be identified as DIY and zine culture, which originally emerged out of the marginalised communities of science fiction and punk-rock fans. Though this expansive subculture is by no means an extension of the aforementioned movements (though the “relationship” between situationism and punk is well-documented), and cannot even be collectivised as a movement per se, the shared principles of self-publishing make it a valuable and relevant area of research.

ZINES

FOCUS

DIALOGUE AS COMMUNICATIONS MODEL

From initial research into samizdat and zines, it is clear that one of the main roles of these publications is the fostering of a community, which is often ‘virtual’ or ‘underground’ in nature, separated by geography, marginalisation, or outright oppression. Though one of the key themes separating the samizdat tradition from zine culture is the latter’s frequent emphasis on individualistic authorship and expression, it nonetheless relies heavily on an active community for reception, distribution, and exchange, in short, for its survival.

COMMUNITY

As I’ve addressed in my field of study, another central characteristic of these publications is their rhetorical political nature. And though many zines are not explicitly political in the same way as the avant-garde publications, within a consumer society whose cultural sphere is largely dominated by hegemonic media, the very act of self-publishing can be seen as a political act, as a fundamental rejection of the role of passive consumer. In Stephen Ducombe’s study of zine publishing, “Notes from Underground”, he defines the binding thread between the diversity of material studied as “a radically democratic and participatory ideal of what culture and society might be... ought to be.”

OPPOSITION

It is in this spirit that I hope to produce my thesis work.

My central focus will be the application of dialogue within the context of alternative/ oppositional self-publishing. This stems from an understanding of dialogue as an a priori element of a community, be it real or virtual, and my desire to foreground the role of dialogue within contemporary social activism.

Dialogue, as a communications model, can be understood (in simplified terms) as the generation of “shared meaning” between a group of people through conversation. In contrast to debate, which consists of a contestation of ideas, or to discussion which aims to analyse, evaluate and judge, dialogue is an open-ended model that attempts to incorporate multiple perspectives and strengthen commonalities, to make implicit collective meaning.

As espoused by philosophers such as David Bohm and Jurgen Habermas, dialogue becomes an important tool for social change. Bohm believes that understanding generated collectively from even a small dialogue group can percolate quickly up from the grassroots into the common consciousness. Habermas describes the interaction between people in response to the crisis of modern society as a form of Communicative Action. This interaction, which through reason and rationality in language can bring about understanding and agreement between people, allows them to make plans for common action. He sees this coming together and agreeing as replacing revolution as a mode of change.

Thus far I have outlined the theoretical rationale for my thesis work but have only touched briefly on the discipline of graphic design. Graphic design as a mediating form of communication is heavily invested in the concept of dialogue, though this investment is rarely made explicit. Within the historical ‘cannon’ of graphic design, one such point arose during the 80s at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, where Katherine and Michael McCoy sat as co-chairs of the Design Department. Heavily influenced by poststructuralist and semiotic theory, which broke down the traditional sender > receiver communications model, the deconstructionist experiments performed at and around Cranbrook “emphasized the construction of meaning between the audience and a graphic design piece, a visual transaction that parallels verbal communication.”

Looking further back, one can trace a tendency within the chaotic typographic collages of Dada periodicals, the concrete poetry which emerged in various parts of Europe after World War II, the cut-up literature of beat writers such as William Burroughs, and within graphic design, the New Wave Typography of Wolfgang Weingart and April Greiman. Though these were not all specifically dialogic approaches, they were all deeply engaged in finding forms to make verbal language visual.

Jan van Toorn’s seminal work as a designer and cultural intellectual, and his understanding of symbolic production in relation to society also engages strongly in notions of dialogue and argument. Similarly, the body of work produced by designer Tony Credland and the Cactus Network, which is rooted in ideas of collaboration, debate, exchange and political engagement, has strongly influenced my approach to this project and will provide a practical basis from which I hope to build.

METHODOLOGY

RADICAL PRAXIS

This project is fundamentally driven by an ideological commitment to furthering social change. Informed by the literature of avant-garde movements of the past, it aims to materialise discussion around contemporary oppositional culture. A key reading of this culture can be found in the compilation of essays and articles “we are

everywhere: the irresistible rise of global anticapitalism". It describes an incredibly diverse "movement of movements" which has emerged over the last ten years to contest corporate globalisation and capitalist imperialism. I share many of the political views and personal values expressed by this movement, and though it is not my intention to locate my project within it, it will inevitably inform the ideological thread that will run through my work.

More relevantly, I will look at the discursive intersections of oppositional culture and graphic design as evidenced by events such as the "design beyond Design" conference, the heated debates around the re-issuing of the "First things First Manifesto", the "declarations" symposium, and the AIGA Voice and Hell No! conferences. The growing discourse on social responsibility, within journals such as *Emigre* and *Eye*, and in compilations such as the *Looking Closer* series, has helped shape my perspective of the discipline and with this project I hope to contribute to it.

The question here is how graphic design can be politically engaged, not in the sense of issue-oriented advocacy, but through a critical disciplinary autonomy. This questioning builds upon my previous thesis work, "Critical Engagement: Graphic Design Culpability and Responsibility", and it is my hope that with this project I will be able to move beyond a theoretical overview and into a series of practical (if experimental) resolutions.

GENERATIVE CONTENT

One of the central explorations of this project will be the collective generation of content through dialogue. By making use of internet based communications tools (email, instant messaging, weblogs) the technical aspects of this endeavour will be quite simple. However, the motivation and facilitation necessary for an engaging dialogue is far more complex, especially given the limited time frame, and will require further research into the dialogic communications model. The largest challenge of this project is that it will be dependent on the participation and commitment of others.

I have already assembled a small group of interested individuals, and it is my intention to conduct the dialogue through a "signal > response > signal" approach where the responses generated from an initial stimulus will be used to form the basis of the next stimulus and so on. The subject matter for the dialogue will be based on the radical praxis described above. As many of the group are also graphic designers, I am expecting visual responses as well textual ones.

I have started the process by sending out a request for quotations in the form of "rebel calls". The rationale behind this is two-fold; firstly, it requires only limited commitment from the group as I am not asking them to author their own text, and secondly it will help to contextualise the inherently rhetorical subject matter and broadly define the areas of interest. It is my hope that collectively, the initial small contributions of the participants will create a body of material that, when fed back into the group, will generate further dialogue at a deeper level.

DESIGNING DIALOGUE

The formal representation of dialogue will be the complementary exploration to the generation of content. Drawing from the historical tendencies mentioned in my Field of Study, I will experiment with various typo/graphic approaches to foreground the dialogic nature of the content. Furthermore, I will undertake an investigation into the ways in which the design could not only represent the dialogue, but could also encourage dialogue with the reader, allowing for the possibility of "shared meaning".

The relative success of zines to create tightly knit, geographically distant, communities can in part be ascribed to the accessibility of their design. The unpretentious, personally expressive, and amateurish aesthetic of the DIY approach speaks convincingly to the values of zine culture which privileges authenticity above all else. By factoring in issues of “selling-out” and commercial appropriation, an analysis of this aesthetic becomes even more interesting. Though I will undertake a formal analysis of this aesthetic, it is not my intention to employ it. As a trained graphic designer, any attempt to make my work look amateurish would in fact be an inauthentic expression. This paradox in itself will be a rich area of formal exploration. Is there a visual language of authenticity for a professional graphic designer?

Obviously the results of these investigations will be difficult to measure. Yet as part of the “signal > response > signal” approach, the quantity and quality of feedback I receive will give some indication as to their success or failure. At each stage I will build the feedback into my next design, and I believe that by the final stage of the project, the resulting work will provide useful insights into the possibility of both a designed dialogue and a dialogic design.

RESOLUTION

The intended resolution for this project will be a series of small books containing the dialogic content described above. I will design and produce these books periodically (ideally, two per month for the period of the project) and as the project progresses, they will grow in complexity and size. Material considerations will be key as they need to be made affordably, be easy to reproduce and distribute. The project will also require a simple website to house .pdfs of the books and act as a public face for the project.

COLLABORATION

Tony Credland

Tony is a graphic designer and educator whose work is in large part the basis of my proposed thesis. He has done considerable work in the sphere of social activism and his autonomous projects as the founder of the cactus network focus on debate and exchange around issues of graphic design and politics.

John W. Stuart

John is a graphic designer and writer. He is a personal friend who has made a firm commitment to participating in this dialogue and beyond his actual contribution, his input and criticism into the written work will be of considerable help.

Oliver Vodeb

Oliver is the founder and president of Memeworks: the international festival of radical communication. He is a postgraduate student of Sociology in Ljubljana with a strong background in communications studies. His insight into the theoretical basis of my project will help to shape the direction this project will take.

SUMMER SCHEDULE

July week 1 - 2

Setting up of a blog site at lokidesign.net/2356. This is already partially complete, yet I still need to write several key posts to describe the project and the plan of action. I will then send out an open call to participate as well as encourage the participation of my core group.

Editing, design and production of first zine based on received “rebel calls.”

Reading and Research

July week 3 - 4

Continuing dialogue with recipients and over the course of two weeks receiving their replies.

Working with previously generated material - experimenting with form to prepare for second issue. Generating my own response.

Consultation with Tony Credland.

Reading and Research.

August week 1

Editing, design and production of second issue.

August week 2-3

Continuing dialogue with participants, with an emphasis on their response to the second issue.

Receiving and editing responses.

August week 4

“Vacation” Solevenia and Prague. Consultation with Oliver in Ljubljana.

September week 1

Design and production of third issue. Preparation for presentation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blauvelt, Andrew (ed.), *New Perspectives: Critical Histories of Graphic Design*, in *Visible Language* 28.4 - 29.1. Providence: Rhode Island School of Design, 1994.

Bohm, David, *On Dialogue*, London: Routledge, 1996

Bouman, Ole (ed.), *And Justice for All...* Maastricht: Jan Van Eyck Academie Editions, 1994.

Crow, David, *Visible Signs*. Switzerland: AVA Publishing, 2003.

Drucker, Johanna, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Ducombe, Stephen, *Notes from Underground: Zines and The Politics of Alternative Culture*. London: Verso, 1997

Foster, Hal (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 1985

Home, Stewart, *The Assault On Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War*. Edinburgh: AK Press, 1991

McDonough, Tom (ed.), *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002

McCoy Katherine, P. Scott Makela and Mary Lou Kroh, *Cranbrook Design: The New Discourse*. New York: Rizzoli International, 1990

Notes from Nowhere (eds.), *We Are Everywhere: the Irresistible rise of Global Anticapitalism*. London: Verso, 2003

Plant, Sadie, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. London: Routledge, 1992

Poynor, Rick, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2003

Richter, Hanz, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*. London: Thames and Hadson, 1965

Van Toorn, Jan, *design beyond Design*. Maastricht: Jan Van Eyck Academie Editions, 1996

Vanderlans, Rudy (ed.) *Rant, Emigre 64*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003