



In a society where graphic design permeates our visual environment, habits of viewing limit individuals to reading banal visual communication materials without ever really looking at them. Messages are absorbed, but the graphic arrangements that signify these messages are rarely questioned or even noticed. This language of automatic responses disconnects viewers from their visual environment, removing the opportunity for curiosity, discovery or critical thinking in favour of speed and efficiency. Material Arrangement brings together two Vancouver artists, Andy Chung and Christy Nyiri, and two Berlin artists, Anette K Hansen and Easton West, to explore the role of graphic treatment in the conveyance of meaning. Drawing from the utilitarian nature of the visuals being examined, the title of the exhibition describes what the artists have been asked to do—arrange a collection of materials—and asserts that the arrangement of graphical forms

is material to meaning-making in graphic design. By collecting and manipulating materials, rather than originating content, the artists put into practice Michael Rock's assertion in his essays *Designer as Author* and *Fuck Content*, that it is through treatment that a designer speaks.

Graphic designer as meaning-maker is a title that alludes to the contentious issue of authorship in design, a topic explored by Michael Rock in his article, *Designer as Author*, in which he says that authorship has been a "popular term in graphic design circles, especially those circles that revolve around the edge of the profession, the design academies, and the murky territory that exists between design and art." He acknowledges the title's seductive qualities, seeming to assign origination and agency "in a profession traditionally associated more with the communication than the origination of messages." He explores the varying ways in

which the concept of authorship could and has been applied to design, including a more recent and fairly persistent call to arms for designers to transcend their roles as facilitators to, in effect, "legitimize design as an equal of the more traditionally privileged forms of authorship":

While some claims for authorship may be as simple as a renewed sense of responsibility, at times they seem to be ploys for property rights, attempts to finally exercise some kind of agency where there has traditionally been none. Ultimately the author = authority. The longing for graphic authorship may be the longing for a kind of legitimacy, or a kind of power, that has so long eluded the obedient designer. But do we get anywhere by celebrating the designer as some central character?

Rock suggests that the role of the designer could be more closely compared to a translator, a performer or a director—as these "accept the multivalent activity of design without resorting to totalizing description"—rather than to "author," which glorifies the practice and "encourages both a historical and a cultural readings of design ... [granting] too much agency, too much control to the lone artist/genius and [discouraging] interpretation by validating a 'right' reading of the work." In the end, he suggests that the authorship not be something to seek or avoid, but rather "a device to compel designers to rethink process and expand their methods."

Rock's *Designer as Author*—for which he literally took on the role of an author—was largely misunderstood by its readers, not only highlighting the ever-present role of the reader in determining the meaning of a work, but also positioning

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him to write a follow-up article, *Fuck Content*. Despite the explicitly stated conclusion of the original article, which claims that the most apt word to “describe an activity that encompasses imaging, editing, narration, chronicling, performing, translating, organizing and directing” is “designer,” his piece was mistook as a call to arms for authorship in design:

A few years back I wrote a now widely distributed article entitled *Designer as Author*. In it I argued that designers aspire to be authors because we are insecure about the value of our work. We often feel if our work were more significant, we would garner more respect. We envy the power granted artists and authors. It is this deeply-seated anxiety that was behind a movement pushing designers toward the origination over the *manipulation of content*. The misreading of the argument is evidence that the anxiety identified therein rages unabated. I attempted to argue that *design itself was content enough, it didn't need to be supplemented*. Apparently that argument didn't take. (emphasis added)

Rock reduces the issue to one of “Content”: “The misconception is that without content, design is simply a hollow shell of dubious ‘gestures,’ wholly without value ... And so content is seen, invariably, as the source of form making, always preceding it.” He calls out those on both sides of the ideological spectrum—“those committed to clean, simple classical or modern forms...[and] those expounding more elaborate typologies”—as supporters of a “false dichotomy” that encourages designers to feel that control and development of content is “a more essential act than the shaping of it.” His true call to arms, somehow invisible to many in his previous article, was for designers to “recuperate design from its second-class status under the thumb of content” by saying “that treatment is a kind of text itself, equal to, and as complex and referential as traditional forms of content. The materiality of a designer's method is his or her content and through those material/visual moves, a designer speaks.”

While Material Arrangement positions the graphic designer as an artist and assigns the task of meaning-making—arguably making him or her an author—it does not advocate for the designer as author, but rather invites the exploration of treatment as a form of content. For the project, Chung, Nyiri, Hansen and West have selected, examined and collected forms of banal, commonly overlooked visual communication materials that epitomize design in which authorship is least visible or considered: sprites, karaoke typography, bathroom hand-type and street posters, respectively. These materials serve as what is traditionally considered the content of a designer's work, as they are readymade or found graphics that he or she

will arrange, but did not create. However, each artist will present their selection of material in an arrangement that manipulates the intended meaning or use of these visuals, separating them from their intended contexts in such a way that the chosen materials no longer prompt viewers to read, then move on (either with action or ambivalence), but rather to pause and look, causing new interpretations and observations to become available. This shift in privilege, in which the treatment is framed as the content, interrupts the way in which viewers traditionally read the materials and places value on interpretation over a “right” reading of the work. This subversion prompts viewers to transcend the role of passive receptor by questioning and interpreting what they are looking at, rather than automatically receiving a programmed message. By demonstrating treatment's ability to transform content—or, rather, function as content—Material Arrangement puts Rock's argument into practice, transcending the false dichotomy created when the origination of content is privileged over the manipulation of content.

The artists chosen to participate in *Material Arrangement* “speak through treatment,” and are as Rock describes, “intimately connected to the work he or she produces ... The choice of projects in each designer's oeuvre lays out a map of interests and proclivities ... [revealing] a philosophy, an aesthetic position, an argument and a critique.” The pieces created for the project reflect the artists' broader practices as designers and multi-disciplinary artists: Chung's design work for Mozilla and Facebook, Nyiri's weekly karaoke night hosted with her art collective Weekend Leisure, Hansen's company SemiDomesticated (a platform for creatives working in sustainable design) and West's work in music and film. Each piece can be seen as a culmination of the artist's preceding practices, supporting Rock's assertion that it is by using treatment to proclaim poignant messages—consistently and repeatedly—that a designer produces a body of work that becomes “a kind of organized content in itself,” in which “the content is, in short, the Design itself”:

If you look at the span of graphic design, you discover, not a history of content but a history of form.

Those evolutionary changes in form suggest a profession that continually revises and reshapes the world through the way it is rendered. The stellar examples of graphic design are often in service of the most mundane content possible: an ad for ink or cigarettes or machinery. But despite the banality of the content, the form has an important, even transformative meaning. The difference between designers is revealed in the unique way each individual designer approaches content, not the content they generate.

For Material Arrangement, the artists speak through their choice of banal materials and how and why they present them to the public, while simultaneously acknowledging that, like what happened when the public received *Designer as Author*, it is up to the reader to decide what they take from a text, regardless of how carefully it is constructed.

Graphic design is commonly thought of as the act of communicating others' messages; while this is often the case, a lack of awareness of the nuanced nature of treatment, and therefore its ability to convey subtle or overt meaning, creates an environment that discourages curiosity, discovery and critical thinking and encourages manipulation, ambivalence and an inability to see or appreciate much of our visual environment. For the graphic designer, the continual privileging of traditional forms of content over the content inherent to treatment, supports insecurity towards the value of one's work, demonstrated by both calls for authorship and the reaction to Rock's article, *Designer as Author*. The role reversal inherent to Material Arrangement—in which the designer acts as artist, author and originator of a message, though still without originating traditional forms of content—provides an exaggerated context in which each artist may “speak through treatment, [using] a whole range of rhetorical devices from the written to the visual to the operational,” much as they do in their graphic design practices. This subversion dismantles viewers' preconceptions and brings new perceptions into consciousness, encouraging new habits of seeing for both the viewer and the designer, by urging the viewer to look when they read and the designer to reexamine their assumptions about content.

Andy Chung is a Vancouver- and San Francisco Bay Area-based artist and designer whose work includes a range of activities that negotiate conditions and implications of the Internet. Chung holds a Bachelor of Design from Emily Carr University, developed and released the typeface Neighbourhood (2009), and recently exhibited his work as part of Typecast at Also Known As Studios (2011).

Christy Nyiri is an interdisciplinary artist and designer based in Vancouver. She co-founded the artist collective Norma, which recently received a 2011 Mayor's Art Award and has performed and exhibited work in Vancouver at Artspeak Gallery (2010), Vancouver Art Gallery (2008), Access Gallery (2005) and PuSh Performing Arts Festival (2005). Nyiri also hosts a weekly karaoke night as part of the collective Weekend Leisure, with whom she is creating the feature film *STEEL VIPER FORCE: Fiero's Redemption*. In 2009 she co-founded the interactive studio David Christy & Internet. She holds a Bachelor of Media Arts from Emily Carr University.

Easton West lives and works in Berlin as a designer and art director for publications, videos, films and music promotion. Since moving to Berlin from Vancouver, where he attended Emily Carr University and worked for Adbusters, he has founded the Son Of Catalystism record label with techno artist Stewart Walker, opened a collaborative studio with colleagues, helped launch the contemporary poetry magazine Poetry Is Dead and worked on the feature-length film Problema in collaboration with the Mindpirates.

Anette K Hansen is a Berlin-based, Oslo born and bred art director, graphic designer, curator and stylist. After graduating from the Communication Design program at Emily Carr University in Vancouver, Anette worked for Metaform Communication Design Inc. while also art directing the local street newspaper Street Corner, playing a key role in its relaunch as Megaphone. After moving to Berlin in 2008, Anette co-founded the collaborative studio space Working™@© and co-created SemiDomesticated—a platform for designers and creatives working under the umbrella of upcycled and sustainable design.

Jaz Halloran is an artist, graphic designer and independent curator based in Vancouver, BC. He has a Bachelor of Design from Emily Carr University and has been curating and designing art books since 2005. He is co-founder of Project Space and is currently the art director of OCW Magazine and Disorder.

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