Reviews

Arden Stern


Throughout the process of reading The Graphic Design Reader, an expansive and carefully assembled anthology from Teal Triggs and Leslie Atzmon, I wondered whether my linear approach was appropriate for the task of reviewing it. Anthologies are, after all, typically consulted piecemeal, so a sustained journey through 1,000 pages of material left a different impression of the field. In any case, I expect many essays in this collection eventually could be consulted individually online through the Bloomsbury Design Library—the publisher’s expanding online collection of design-related images, exhibition materials, e-books, articles, and soon lesson plans and bibliographic guides, available through institutional subscription. For better or worse, this represents a growing business model for academic publishing in general and design writing in particular.

Triggs and Atzmon are accomplished graphic design scholars, practitioners, and educators; as such they are eminently qualified to assemble a graphic design anthology of this breadth. They have considered the landscape of existing Anglophone anthologies and distinguish their own by emphasizing its inclusion of newly commissioned work alongside previously published essays. The introduction lays out a series of intentions, premises, perspectives, and lenses through which to view the volume and graphic design as a field. The primary lens applied in this anthology is that of practice, which includes “methods for understanding audiences and addressing client problems through critical assessment, and particularly thinking through making” and “history, theory, and criticism” (1). The editors state at various points that the Reader does not offer up a canon or seek to define the field so much as provide material for critical reflection, discussion, debate, and inquiry.

Although it is impossible to adequately summarize the ninety essays in this collection, I offer a cursory overview. They were initially written between 1898 and 2019, though overwhelmingly in the past three decades, and they address several centuries of graphic design practice but mainly focus on the past 100 years. The book is organized into seven parts, each with titled subsections. The essays in Part 1 (“History of Graphic Design and Graphic Design History”) consider how graphic design history should and should not be constructed and engaged, although by way of a limited demographic of authors. I was surprised that for the number of times postmodernism is invoked in this part, only Dick Hebdige addresses Fredric Jameson’s application of the term and therefore the dynamic relationship between graphic design and capitalism. Nevertheless, Part 1 captures how a significant portion of graphic design history has consisted of debates around the historical role and value of aesthetic evaluation.

Part 2 (“Education and the Profession”) explores practical and thematic connections between graphic design education and its professional practice from a variety of perspectives, featuring autobiographical narratives alongside methodological analyses and reflections on curricula and pedagogy. Several authors in this Part, including Katherine McCoy and Elliott Earls, describe discrepancies between how graphic design is taught and how it is practiced professionally. Others, such as Damian and Laura Santamaria, see continuities.

Part 3 (“Type and Typography”) offers a glimpse into the ideological underpinnings of typographic practice since the last century. Type is called “invisible” (Beatrice Warde) “experimental” (Peter Bil’ak), “dimensional” (J. Abbott Miller, Atzmon), and “electronic” (Jessica Helfand) among other descriptors, demonstrating how typographic forms and practices are not simply defined by particular technologies but work alongside and through them to construct cultural discourses and theories of communication. In this respect, there is a great deal of excellent work in this section, although it largely omits typographic histories, systems, and experiments outside of North American and European contexts.

The essays in Part 4 (“Graphic Design, Critical Writing, and Practice”) address and model the integral role of writing in design, engaging frameworks drawn from multiple disciplines to theorize graphic design and reflect on the role and value of graphic...
design criticism. This Part demonstrates that how graphic design is interpreted, theorized, and critiqued can reposition it in the cultural field.

The first section of Part 5 (“Politics and Social Change”) builds on these frameworks and articulates others, featuring feminist perspectives on graphic design alongside polemics critiquing graphic design’s capitulation to capitalism. Michael Dooley’s essay on Shepard Fairey points to how so-called radical practices have been historically tied to the development of new markets. The second section of this Part is where the anthology offers a more sustained engagement with graphic design professionals, works, and contexts outside of North America and Europe to explore questions of identity in relation to race, nationality, and ethnicity.

Themes of community, identity, and place are picked up in Part 6 (“Changing Visual Landscapes”) with respect to how the work of graphic designers shapes visual culture. This Part looks beyond commercial applications of branding to analyze the expansion of market logic into civic and community spheres, with examples ranging from the redesign of the city of Melbourne’s visual identity in 2009 (Jessica Glickfield) to Johnson Witehira’s creation of the Whakarere typeface in accordance with Maori design principles (Margaret Andersen). Meanwhile, other essays analyze information visualization not as a neutral process of communicating data but as a practice that can reveal, conceal, and construct worldviews and thus is ripe for critique and activist engagement.

The first section of Part 7 (“Graphic Design Futures”) consists of four rigorous essays on the future of print that contextualize digital design within the history of image and text production. According to these authors, digital design has not supplanted print but is part of a continuous revisiting and reshaping of interpretation strategies, cultural practices, technical processes, and aesthetic programs. The Part closes with a series of case studies spanning socially engaged practice in Lebanon and the inner workings of Google Creative Lab in England, and the epilogue briefly discusses speculative design, interdisciplinary practice, design thinking, and object-oriented ontologies among other graphic design “futures.”

Triggs and Atzmon have indeed marshaled a powerful collection of voices that accomplish even more than promised in terms of representing many of the critical entanglements, ideological conflicts, and methodological nuances that shape contemporary graphic design practice. This anthology is valuable for its sheer quantity of high-quality reflections on graphic design. That said, although I recognize the staggering challenge of assembling such a project and that any strategy has its flaws, the editors might have more sharply articulated the logic behind the book’s structure and their criteria for inclusion and exclusion. This anthology is not unique in that it (self-consciously) includes relatively few references to vernacular graphics and other practices not associated with elite academic and professional institutions, and it features relatively few contributions by authors of color; authors not from or based in North America, Europe, and Australia; indigenous designers; tradespeople; and other, less often celebrated graphic design laborers. What do these omissions say about how the anthology “shed[s] light on the ways graphic designers have integrated … core practices with new comprehensive approaches in contemporary graphic design” (1)—its stated intent?

The editors’ curatorial approach, carefully hedged in the introduction, nonetheless implicates a broader social and political landscape that is left mostly unaddressed in the anthology’s framing. For example, although Triggs and Atzmon do reference ongoing discussions around decolonizing design in their introduction, they elide the concept with calls for greater diversity in the field—an important but markedly different goal than dismantling the colonial power relations inherent in design.² Decolonization discourses have prompted many scholars and critics, myself included, to scrutinize how our definitions and interpretations of graphic design practice are shaped by our encounters with the field. We make and study design in a world where local print shops still offer graphic design services alongside industry heavy hitters like Pentagram, where a globalized economy shot through with income inequality and restrictive immigration laws governs who can and cannot enroll in academic graphic design programs, where hand-painted graphics coexist with augmented reality projects and speculative design initiatives, and where neoliberal markets dictate the daily labor practices associated with graphic design and its viability as a
source of income. Because many of the essays in the Reader refer directly and indirectly to these circumstances, it would have been helpful for the editors to more clearly delineate this broader landscape of contemporary graphic design practice and the position they see the anthology occupying within it.

If these seem like indictments, I should clarify that they are intended as observations—not just for the editors of the Reader but for all of us who write about graphic design and, indeed, those of us with decision-making power in publishing houses. In any case, Triggs and Atzmon have accomplished a great deal with this anthology, which I expect will be consulted extensively by designers, educators, and researchers alike.


Alice Twemlow

Writing for the Design Mind by Natalia Ilyin

Being a visual person or a verbal person is usually presented as a choice. Not so, for writer and instructor Natalia Ilyin: She believes that design and writing are part of the self-same scheme of systemized mark-making and are driven by the same human urge to communicate and preserve. As design students the world over can attest, we should not assume that these skills have always been taught in parallel. Design students get admitted into college on the strength of a visual body of work; they then are asked to write a lucid, rigorously argued, historically informed, deeply researched and footnoted 10,000-word dissertation that makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge. Space and time are rarely allotted in design curricula to teach the mechanics, let alone the art, of writing; the discipline implicitly assumes that students learned how to write somewhere else, at some other time. Many students get overwhelmed and despondent when facing writing assignments. Many tutors get overwhelmed and despondent when teaching them. Ilyin’s book provides both groups with much-needed reassurance and hope.

Ilyin offers a method by which designers can approach writing in the same ways that they approach designing. By presenting writing in terms of its systems and structures, and by outlining a set of practical mapping and diagramming tools, Ilyin wants to help designers to ease into, or refine, their writing practices and, in effect, to understand and engage more fully in the design of writing.

Based on the logic that designers use diagrams as part of their working process, to “explain their imagined future to the producers of that future,” she argues that the diagram is “the designer’s edge” when it comes to writing. (50) “Using diagram is natural to designers,” Ilyin says. “It allows you to [….] sketch imagined connections and relationships in all directions. It’s the tool for the mind that doesn’t run on a linear track.” (51)

Her recommended multi-step process begins with mind-mapping—a means of dumping onto the page all one’s initial thoughts about the topic at hand and then of indicating the associative connections between them. Next, she advises identifying the most important or powerful ideas within this network, which become “hubs,” and then clustering related ideas around them to create what she terms a “rich club.” This cluster becomes the tight constellation of core ideas at the heart of a piece of writing. Ilyin goes on to offer a choice of three diagrammatic systems, each suited to a different kind of essay writing. The first and simplest is the rooted tree diagram—the best choice for a classic, five-paragraph, hierarchical, three-pronged-argument type of essay, in which ideas are firmly penned into their appropriate paragraphs. The next option allows for a more open and discursive approach to essay writing, where “smaller ideas can rub up against larger scale ideas and then again against tiny thoughts.” For this essay, Ilyin suggests picturing the floor plan of a house, where each room is a small yet interdependent argument, and the writer then takes the reader on a