2022

Revisionist history

AIGA Shift(Ed)

Revisionist History

A pandemic. Racial reckoning. Civil unrest. Political uprising. For many of us, the year 2020 motivated self-examination across every spectrum of our consciousness — social, cultural, economic and intellectual.

Academia provided space for impact. None of us had ever developed pedagogy overnight — we were building the plane while flying. My impulse to instruct remotely was at first off-base. The students clearly needed time to adjust to the improbability of it all. And so we traded leads; we flattened the pedagogical hierarchy. An egalitarian architecture materialized where students led and I followed.

Students felt fragile, we all did, as individuals seeking to normalize mammoth instability. This vulnerability underscored the value of inclusivity, all voices deserved a platform. Was my pedagogy inclusive enough? Was it empathic enough? How did it speak to our social and political context that was under intense scrutiny? Instead of a pedagogy informed by my own lived experiences, a bias especially visible in my Graphic Design History curriculum, I wondered what would inspire students to independently ask the same important questions we are reflecting on in this publication.

Academia faces an opportunity and graphic design history, in particular, is under fire. But how was its white-washed history bathed in exclusivity established in the first place? One hundred years ago, graphic design history emerged as an off-shoot to the practice

and was codified by the industry with European trade books such as Jan Tschichold's *Die Neue Typographie*, Alfred Tolmer's *Mise en Page*, and periodicals including *Neue Grafik, Arts et Metier Graphique, Gebrauchsgraphik*, *Typographiche Mitteilungen* and more. The economics fueling the discipline relegated graphic design to either commercial audiences defined by and for privileged classes or as a beacon for mobilization, whether political, existential or otherwise. 'During the 1950s graphic design history gradually emerged as pedagogy and art museum curators began to collect graphic design ephemera and acquired papers and artifacts. Graphic design history books became accessible to wider audiences through a rise in classes, symposia and conferences.' (Heller, 2020) The 1980s saw a groundswell of historical and theoretical inquiry driven by the emergence and proliferation of MFA Graphic Design programs in the United States and a tradition of graphic design scholarship firmly situated itself within the academy. American Philip Meggs released *A History of Graphic Design* in 1983, documenting the presence of visual communication dating back to ancient Egypt. Trade magazines including London's *Eye* and California's *Emigre* were decisive counterpoints complementing Meggs's preeminent narrative. Fast forward to the digital revolution when tools for creating, consuming and distributing content were ubiquitous, the discourse took a hard right. 2001 Wikipedia, followed by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and later, self-publishing ventures, completely democratized authorship and accessibility. When social media and self-publishing ventures enabled greater access to tools for content consumption and production, visual culture itself ballooned, shattering any notion of absolutism. Which brings us to today, a discourse ripe for interrogation, reinvention and expansion.

But, how does this culture of critique shape a historical survey? Developing a Graphic Design History curriculum affirms a perspective with every google slide. My initial set of images and accompanying narrative represented just one vision — mine. The story I've chronicled hinges on the presence of design cycles throughout the past two centuries. Within each subject, I endeavor to pinpoint a narrow design consciousness that galvanized broader, cross-disciplinary outcomes, whether it's when, during the industrial revolution, design was articulated as a discreet thought process OR seventy-five years later when Buckminster Fuller's dymaxion car regarded objectivity and purpose over all else. While the discourse meanders from architecture, to industrial design to branding to typography, the lectures follow a template identifying the initial design seed, with graphic design riding the caboose as design concepts mutate from the academy to the commercial and consumer mainstream. Although the story is sound, it is never complete and, I believe, should be rewritten collectively; participation, integration and expansion yields the requisite inclusivity. Design history is fluid and mutable; it could, and should, be in a constant state of revision. Reimagining this history requires regular dialogue, attention, dissent, and revision.

Recognizing the universal need to decolonize the design history narrative recently triggered multiple efforts resulting in varying forms of expansion as our student audiences grow increasingly more diverse and represent cultures that deserve acknowledgement. Projects such as The People's Graphic Design Archive (Sandhaus & Levit, 2020), Polymode's Bipoc Design History (Polymode, 2021) and Bahia Shehab's A

History of Arab Graphic Design (Shehab & Nawar, 2020) provide important alternatives. Questioning assumptions is vital to our work as educators, artists and designers and decolonizing graphic design history requires more than challenging the Eurocentric narratives of art and design. We need a model to continue advancing design history — a democratic versus absolutist style of inquiry where individual perspectives comprise our design history fabric. The discourse adapts to its audience, and fosters inclusivity, through a redistributed dialogue. Levelling the pedagogical hierarchy democratizes the conversation to stimulate deep understanding, helping to uncover our student's individualized points of view. The importance of showing, discussing, and including artists, designers, and writers who represent people, cultures, and aesthetics historically excluded from history textbooks reveals visual culture underdogs who created influential, context specific work. The egalitarian nature of these conversations translates to the content itself: everything matters.

How are we expected to find relevance in this visual free-for-all? It's our duty, as educators, to illuminate context, by indicating the cycle of design from conceptual origin to pragmatic artifact, cultural reception and commercial mainstream. Highlighting these thought patterns equips students with the criticality needed to curate, to identify 'good design'. To stimulate these student perspectives shaped by individualized cultural backgrounds and lived experiences, my lectures provoked analysis, where students simultaneously learned mine and developed their own unique points of view. Our weekly discussions comprised groups of eight to ten students led by a subset of two or three students. These facilitators fostered conversations to identify blind spots or cultural

equivalents absent from that week's lectures and readings. At a fundamental level, students were encouraged to consider, interrogate and generate alternative content derived from their own set of preferences, experiences and inclinations. After just one semester, these gaps yielded rich new alternatives, disrupted the canonical hierarchy and exposed 'low vernacular' visual styles that are realizing renewed seriousness.

Like what? Conversations about industrialization and the separation of design as an isolated planning activity spawned a multitude of aftershocks to our 19th century visual landscape. Victorian eclecticism permeated furniture, consumer products, fashion and even typography. Style emerged as a symbolic idea, denoting class and worth with every extraneous flourish. Form signified status. The Victorian broadside offered another application for extravagant ornamentation, expressed through motley compositions of Egyptian, serif and sans serif typography. Fast forward one hundred years, and the trend persisted throughout Los Angeles (until 2012) with the Colby Poster tradition. Adding fluorescent ink colors to the familiar typographic bric-a-brac seen in 19th street art, Colby Posters displayed a 'lowbrow approach result[ing] in a minimal, bold, and no-nonsense aesthetic that was always eye-catching and surprising.' (Dunne, 2014) A student based in Lima, Peru contextualized this work with posters she encounters daily. Peruvian Chicha street graphics snub elite aesthetic credo, acting as vehicles for anti-establishment, anti-colonial expression. The anti-purist posters incorporate Andean-influenced fluorescent colors, performative typography and idiosyncratic iconography, evoking a positive expression of diversity, medley and democracy. (Neira, 2016) The more is more mentality transcends generations, classes

and technology, and is indiscriminate towards its audience, amplifying its inclusive appeal. These relics of lowly street culture dovetail their noble origins, blurring the lines between elite and vernacular design. Lorraine Wild's Great Wheel of Style (Sandhaus, 2000) progresses at whiplash speed. Low is high; high is low.

There's more. While the now familiar Communist propaganda headlines every 20th century design history text, an important side-story transpired. We know that Russian Constructivism branded the Communist regime. Like the Peruvian Chicha artists, the Soviet Union similarly addressed a universal audience, codifying a Communist aesthetic expressed with bold red and black geometric abstractions designed to cross classes, dialects and geographies. Every black square, red wedge and pictorial typography stimulated institutional loyalty: messages were meant to be seen, heard and revered. Dynamically composed forms conjure a vision of the new world, "constructed" through a new visual architecture. (Coogan, 2020) Our many students from China highlighted the lesser known, Big Character Posters (Dazibao), which carried a similar aesthetic and political gravity. Like Communist Propaganda, the posters fervently entrenched a new political ideal, fortifying China's 1960s Cultural Revolution led by Mao Zedong. Featuring bold black and red palettes and agitated typography hearkening to Constructivist visual language, the Big Character Posters established a forum for discussion and dissemination, (Ho, 2017) but were ultimately weaponized against their own grass-roots audience (Figure 2). 'Big-character posters were..ubiquitous, used for everything from sophisticated debate to satirical entertainment to rabid denunciation; being attacked in a big-character poster was enough to end one's career.' (*Dazibao*,

n.d.) The generations surviving the Cultural Revolution reacted to political pressure and suppressed their own appalling first hand experiences, inadvertently obscuring the Dazibao culture in its entirety. A 2017 Harvard University exhibition featuring Dazibao posters presented over fifty works donated anonymously. Chinese historians involved in the curation noted their own abbreviated awareness stemming from a lack of information—a culture of secrecy prolonged by relatives and educators who were likely pawns pressured by the regime to incriminate or abuse their own community. (Bergeron, 2017) Expanding our design history discourse simultaneously unearths, activates and repairs, allowing us to collectively process a past etched in trauma.

It's critical we adopt a more inclusive, egalitarian method for studying and styling graphic design history as we acknowledge the populations who have been or still are marginalized by current modules. The examples outlined here legitimize that approach, as they uniformly oppose absolutist traditions that routinely glorified idols. Student generated content opens new possibilities 'that are increasingly inclusive, representative and varied'. (Rittner, 2020) Democratizing methods for establishing design history narratives validates visual cultures that were historically excluded and provides space for our audience to incorporate their own important cultural legacies—like the Peruvian Chicha and Chinese Big Character Posters. As design educators and students, we owe a debt to visual culture, to reflect on and contextualize more homespun visual chapters. Our student audiences are only growing more global and diverse—let's reorient the historical landscape and embrace a messier, more inclusive terrain. Liberate idiosyncrasies and embrace authenticity. We run the risk of

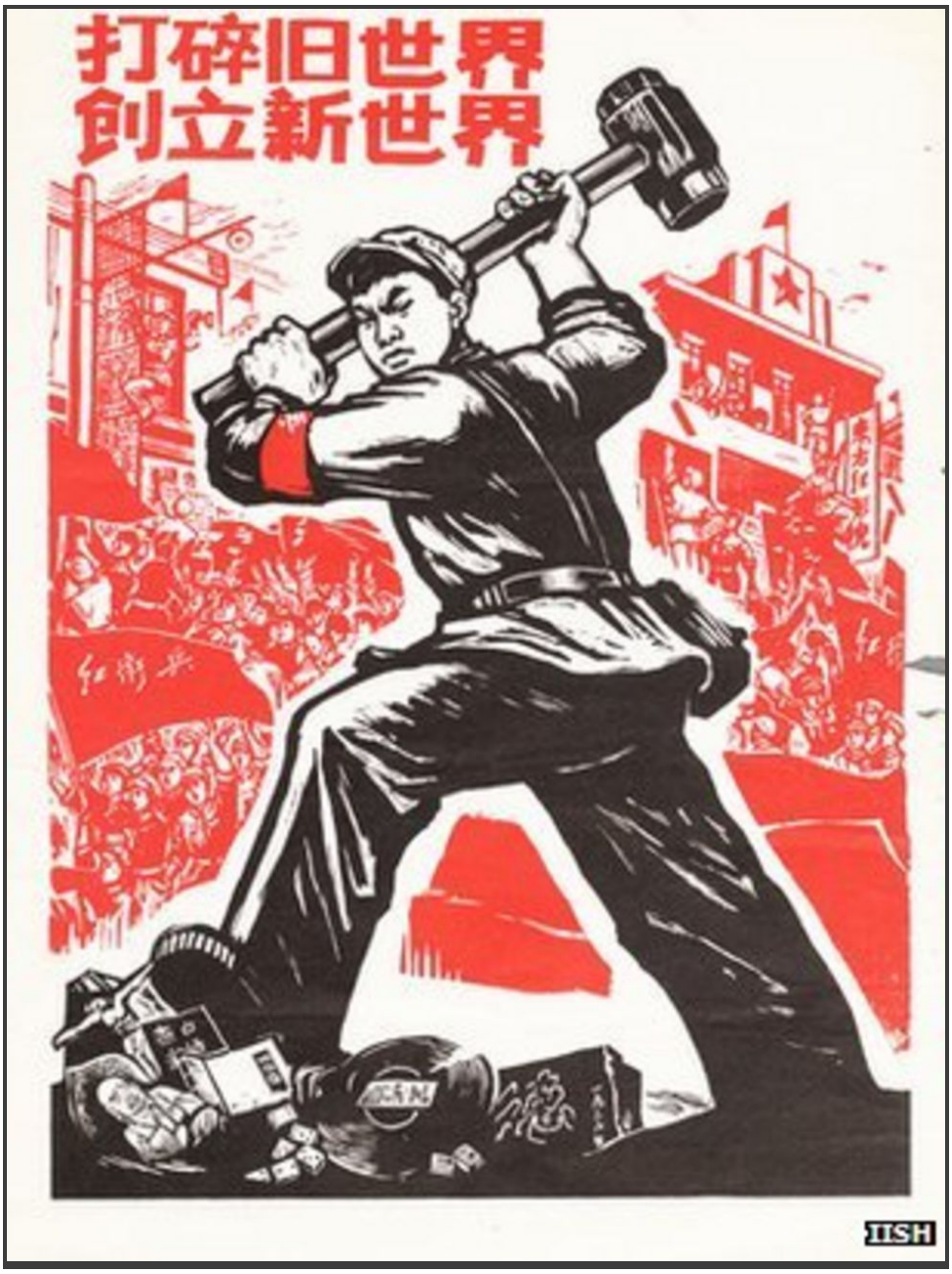
complicating design history, but we endow our future discourse with an inclusivity that our students and our discipline deserves.

Figures

Figure 1

“Wall Drawings, icônes urbaines”. 2016. (MAC Lyon Francia Gallery).
Illustration from https://www.elliottupac.com/sarigrafias_1/ [accessed June 21, 2021])

Figure 2
Scatter the old world, build the new, from late 1960s (IISH/Stefan R Landsberger Collections). Illustration from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-24923993 (accessed June 21, 2021)



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