1

Thinking Broadly

Concepts

Sources
Activities
Origins
Influences
Issues

Roles
Form
Function
Experiences
Voice

This chapter discusses how we as designers, viewers, and users are participants in the creation and evaluation of visual messages. It examines how design both influences and is influenced by culture.

Thinking Broadly

1.1
Planet Earth

We are a place of 6.6 billion inhabitants, 250 languages, and 245 sovereign states.

"Every human being is a designer."[1]

Norman Potter

Every day, we process information, organize objects, filter opinions, act on opportunities, and physically create things. We design our space, our interactions, and our future.

Design is a form of expression and communication. It also provides a way to organize our environment, understand relationships, shape routines, and derive meaning.

The word *design* is both a noun and a verb: it is a product of thinking and an extension of thinking. The word has its roots in the Italian verb *disegnare*, which means to create. Whether understood as a noun, a verb, or both, design is all around us: in human-made and natural forms and in the ways we communicate with and understand one another and our environment.
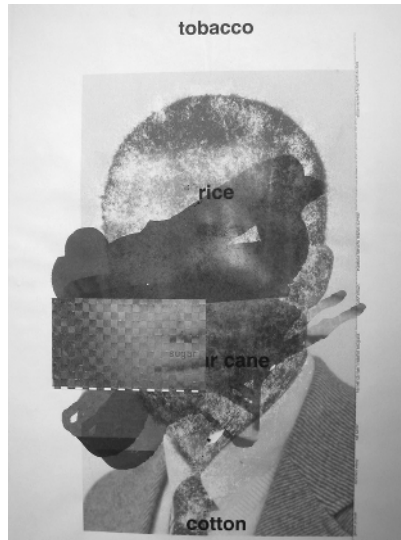
1.2
Chattel #1, 1995
Frank DeBose

DeBose's ancestral experience of slavery is explored in self-portraits that layer related imagery to heighten awareness of the issue.

Design is a form's visual appearance, message, and purpose. In a broad sense, this includes its context, targeted audience, and media, which collectively describe its form and function. Design can be applied (such as graphic design) or non-applied (such as fine art).

Design encompasses many types of activities. Design that communicates specific ideas for targeted audiences, design generated out of personal experience, and design of broad social value are among the many areas this book explores.

Design crosses many disciplines, including the social sciences, business, and literature. In the broadest sense, design encompasses not only visual explorations, but also those cultural, social, and philosophical in nature.
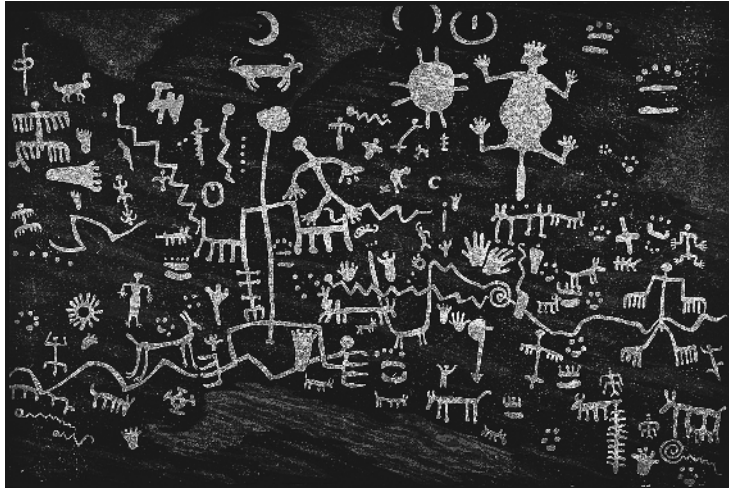
1.3
Markings, AD 900–1200
Newspaper Rock, Arizona

Early drawings aided in the search for meaning. Anthropologists have found that early cultures rarely created art for pleasure alone due to their focus on survival.

Purpose refers to a design's goal or guiding principles and can be determined by an agenda, objective, or strategy.

Context refers to the physical location or cultural environment in which a work exists and influences the viewer's or user's interpretation of the work's message or function. For example, the letter X on a sidewalk may designate an excavation site for a public utility; on a greeting card it may represent a kiss and an expression of affection (e.g., XOXO); and on a shopping list it may indicate that an item was found.

As humans, we have basic, practical needs that must be met to sustain life. At a minimum, we require food, water, and shelter. We also have varying degrees of emotional and personal needs, including the desire to pursue and find meaning, self-fulfillment, and a sense of security.

Design often originates from basic human needs and desires. Since early recorded history, humans have sought to co-exist with and, at times, control others and the human-made and natural environment. Visual form and message-making is a primary way that we express our view of ourselves, others, and the world.

Sources Influences
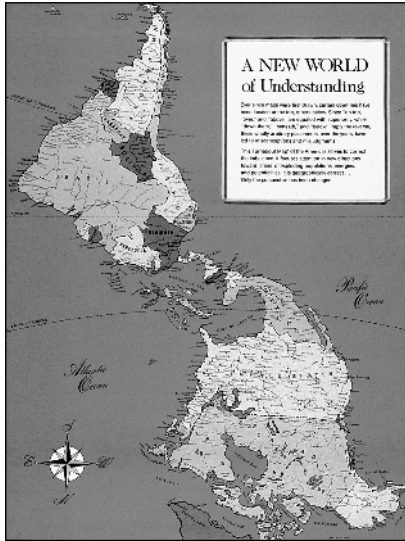
1.4
Upside-Down Map, 1982
Jessie Levine

This work comments on the mapping convention in which north is aligned at the top and east to the right. Early maps drawn by northerners positioned better-known regions in the upper-right corner for more convenient study.

Idea is an image or thought formed in the mind. Ideation is the process of forming and relating ideas.

Concept is an idea that serves as the basis of a work. All work has an underlying concept that is open to interpretation, whether ambiguous, obscure, or self-evident.

Design is influenced by a range of forces. A design initiated by an individual can be further influenced by others on a development team and by external forces. Marketing strategies, community regulatory codes, project deadlines and budgets, the methodology and technology employed to create the work, social or cultural conventions, and even accepted styles of the moment contribute to a work's visual appearance, delivery, and audience interpretation.

1.5
Advertisements for
United Colors of Benetton, 1992
O. Toscani,
United Colors of Benetton

Part of a series of advertisements
that used powerful imagery of
human tragedy as a means to sell
clothing while raising consciousness
about social issues.

Aesthetics is a branch of
philosophy that examines
the nature of sensory
perception and the experience
and definition of beauty.

Design is largely driven by the need or desire to address
a specific or broad set of issues. These issues can range
from private to public concerns such as developing a sense
of place, individual and collective responsibilities such
as those surrounding sustainability, and official and
unofficial actions such as those related to activism. These
issues can further range from the cultural or social to the
philosophical or ethical.

In this light, design is much more than the creation of
objects for beauty alone. Instead, design is used to inform
others, question conventions, create change, and promote
justice. As designers, we not only serve as transmitters
of messages, but also as interpreters and mediators.
More than makers, observers, or controllers of information
and ideas, designers are participants in the creation,
criticism, and dissemination of culture.
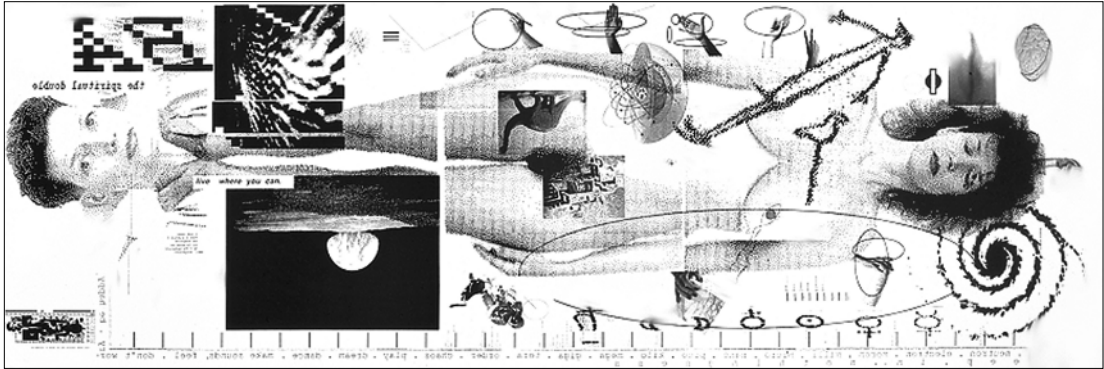
1.6
Does It Make Sense?
1985
April Greiman

One of the first digitally created graphic works, Greiman's full-size self-portrait uses her body to structure dream imagery, poetic text, and a time line of significant personal and world events.

Form has numerous meanings, many derived from the Latin word *forma*, which is based on the Greek words for shape, structure, and idea.

Concepts become tangible through form. Form is composed of visual components including lines, shapes, images, and colors. These components can be organized through principles such as visual hierarchy and emphasis, and developed through methodologies that help direct working processes, such as problem solving.
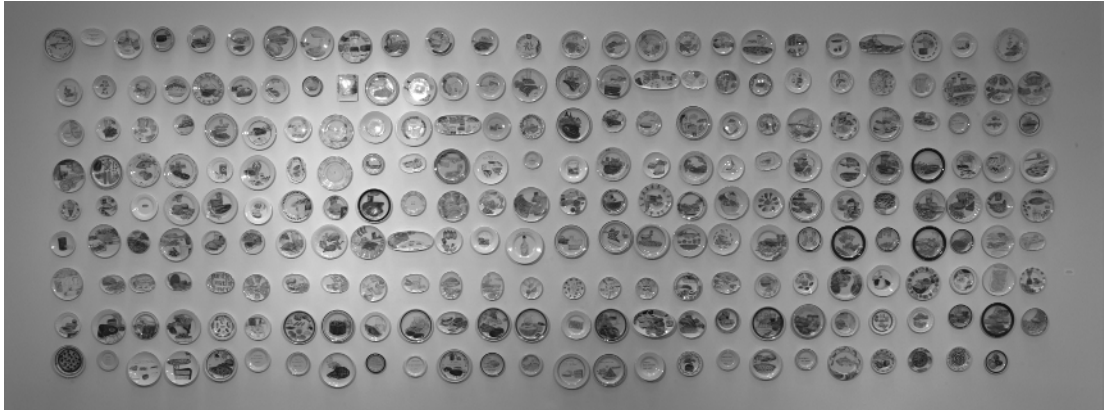
1.7
The Flooded Grave,
1998–2000
Jeff Wall

Wall's large-scale, back-lit photographs
reveal the irony and contradiction of seemingly
mundane scenes.

Function is a form's practical, spiritual, cultural, or personal use. In two-dimensional design, function is synonymous with purpose, with a form's intent. This includes an evaluation of why the form was created, its audience, how it will be used, and what it will do.

Every form has primary and secondary functions. Function is obvious in some forms. A saw, for example, has the mechanical function of dividing pieces of wood.

In two-dimensional form, function can be more abstract and difficult to define. A painting has no mechanical function, yet it can inspire, inform, or move us to action.

1.8
*The Last Supper:
Final Meal Requests of
U.S. Death Row Inmates*, 2006
Julie Green

Green explores last rites and requests in the design of plates that show the last meals of convicts before execution.

"As designers, we are
late in recognizing the fact
that representations
of differences in terms of
class, race, gender and
sexuality are constructed
through design." [2]

Garland Kirkpatrick

"To be successful, designers
must appreciate and reconcile
multiple viewpoints about
the same topic." [3]

Meredith Davis and Robin Moore

Designers are the creators of experiences. These experiences can involve interactions or environments that shape a moment or series of encounters, which in turn can create a lasting impression or desired response. Building a sense of participation, ownership, or loyalty to an idea is often a design goal.

Experiences are often emotional in some way and attempt to personalize the subject matter. From coffee retailers that promote coffee as a lifestyle to political debates in which candidates discuss social issues by relating stories of their upbringing through emotional storytelling, experience building is part of a larger cultural phenomenon.

10

"I was born in Oxford on April 1, 1910. My father
said I was the most beautiful baby in the most beautiful
state, so he named me Iowa."[4]
Iowa Honn

For a closer look, see Chapter 7

1.9
Iowa Honn, 1984 and 2004
Peter Feldstein, photographer
Steven Bloom, writer

Feldstein explores the lives of residents in
small-town Iowa, where he has photographed
over the past 20 years. His work brings
to light the hope and the losses of a tight-
knit community.

Interpretation is the translation
of a form's message through
the filter of one's perspective.
Interpretation derives meaning
and understanding.

Meaning is derived intent,
purpose, or information of
a message, and is influenced
by the viewer's or user's
experiences and abilities.

Voice is the combination of
unique perspective and
individual expression. It refers
to the choice and use of visual
principles and media, and to the
methods employed in presenting
ideas, desires, and opinions.

As designers, we have a unique role in society in that we
shape both the physical and cultural landscape. Through the
forms and messages we create and respond to, we define
who we are individually and collectively.

Design can illuminate difficult and complex issues, share the
plight of the marginalized, and allow reflection through the
creation of elegance and beauty. Every design function
has its time and place. Work that is memorable, has a degree
of originality, and that merges form and function creates
value on many levels.