Authorship, Entrepreneurialism and Experimental design

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Abstract

This paper responds to recent calls in design literature for a return to design authorship, and the appropriation from fine art of theories of relational aesthetics (Poyner 2005, Mermoz 2006). I suggest that before looking to art as a model, it is useful to retrace various divergent moments in the authorship and entrepreneurialism debates in graphic design. This paper describes how these debates polarise the designer-as-author as antithetical to the designer-as-service-provider, and as such omit a third term, experimental design. I discuss an example of experimental design, *Re-magazine* by Jop van Bennekom, in terms of how such design challenges the promises of "total control" or autonomy that is identified by many as a key motivation in practices of graphic authorship and entrepreneurialism (Heller 1998, 2006, Lupton 2003, Margolin 2003, Tremlow 2006). I interpret issue 9 of *Re-magazine* as an allegory that questions design's pursuit of autonomy. Rather than confuse the distinct specificities of fine art and design practices in an unexamined adoption of relational aesthetics, as Poyner and Mermoz suggest, I propose that design must first reflect on its own products and practices.

Keywords: experimental design, critical design, authorship, graphic design, relational aesthetics, Re- magazine, Jop van Bennekom

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The return of design authorship

Responding to recent calls for a return to design authorship, this paper recounts the various metaphorical constructs ascribed to the graphic designer, for instance author, producer, entrepreneur, and social entrepreneur. Debates that polarise the designer-as-author as antithetical to the designer-as-service-provider, omit a third option, experimental design. Examples of experimental design, such as *Re-magazine* challenge the promises of "total control" identified by many as a key motivation in graphic authorship and entrepreneurialism. Issue 9 of *Re-magazine* is discussed as an allegory that questions graphic design's pursuit of autonomy, and illustrates that the distinct specificities of graphic design practice offer more for design criticism than the adoption of theories from fine art.

Design educator Gerard Mermoz recently proposed that the project "The City of Signs," where graphic designers and architects collaborated in interpreting the city of Istanbul, revives increased critical agency for the designer. He suggests that recasting the role of the designer as author, not seen since the heated debates of the 1990s, under the auspices of relational aesthetics, has merit for design (2006). Mermoz claimed that "The City of Signs" exemplified aspects of art theorist, Nicolas Bourriaud's proposals in *Relational Aesthetics* because it aimed to "extend our role both as readers and as authors" and work "in collaboration with other disciplines" (78). According to Mermoz collaboration was necessary because graphic designers are ill-equipped to "achieve the status of 'author' within the broader fields of research and aesthetics" (78). On this basis, Mermoz suggests that design look to the development of relational aesthetics in the field of fine art because it models a speculative approach to production where "each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations" (Bourriaud quoted in Mermoz 2006: 78). According to Mermoz relational aesthetics is significant for design because

> it redefines the status of work from that of autonomous object and authorial statement expressing and embodying the artist's truth, to that of an open platform onto which artist and public negotiate possibilities of meaning and being. (Mermoz: 79).

Mermoz argues that adopting relational aesthetics increases the "critical capacity" of design and produces a more complex understanding of authorship by redefining the

designer's role as one of negotiating a series of relations (79). While this model resonates with how designers can operate critically in cultural production, it seems to follow Bourriaud perhaps too closely in minimizing the differences in the histories of art and design and their respective cultural functions and social standings/contexts.

In appropriating relational aesthetics as a theoretical framework for current design practice, Mermoz does not address the experimental approaches to typography that prompted the authorship debates in graphic design in the 1990s. One could ask what else were designers who were published in the authorship debates doing if not treating design as a form of visual research and "extending their roles as readers and authors"? (78) Mermoz's strategy is further problematised given that Bourriaud's characterisation of design as a service industry that "involves a reprocessing of cultural production" (Bourriaud 2003: 81) of course privileges art over design.

Like Mermoz, design critic, Rick Poyner suggests that the field of design-art provides an alternative model for contemporary design. Poyner draws from commentary by art critic Alex Coles regarding the design process appropriated by artists in that "what artists bring to design is an interface with art that goes beyond the literal production of design and instead looks at design scenarios" (Coles quoted in Poyner 2005a: 32). Poyner elaborates Coles' assertion with the provocation that when designers reflect on authorship they invariably claim "some kind of right to their own measure of self expression" in the manner claimed by artists, yet "few have much to say about the role of design in society, or about anything else" (2005a: 32). Although Poyner has more recently promoted the work of designers such as Ron Arad, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, and Hella Jongerius as examples of designers that "exceed their functional role" claiming that they challenge "expectations of form's conventional possibilities" (2005b), his commentary indicates again design's amnesia about the critical debates in experimental typography of the 1990s. This is particularly surprising given that Poyner himself was then one of the most vocal advocates of the critical capacity of design (1991).

Designer as author.

Much of the authorship debate in the nineties was prompted by design educator Katherine McCoy's assertion that "We are not here at Cranbrook to prepare

indentured servants for corporate America." (McCoy 1991 quoted in Vanderlans 2005: 37). Designer Anne Burdick adopted McCoy's perspective and claimed that "designers must consider themselves authors, not facilitators" (Burdick 1992). Burdick incited practitioners to take design seriously, invest more personally in design, and act more responsibly through attention to context. Because Burdick's argument was a response to a demand by designer Howard Riley that designers engage in design as socially responsible service providers, the fault lines of the service versus authorship debate were drawn by 1992. As editor of graphic design journal *Émigré* (1985-2005), where much of the debate was published, Rudy Vanderlans was instrumental in re-enforcing the polarisation of designer-as-author vs. designer as service provider. According to Vanderlans his motivation in publishing *Emigre* was based on his view that "graphic design had simply become too narrowly defined as a service-oriented profession that organises and gives form to the ideas of commercial clients." (Vanderlans 2005: 55).

Much of the rhetoric and enthusiasm about experimental typefaces and graphics of the 1980s and 1990s by critics such as Poyner proclaimed that experimental designs generated independently of client commissions but they also expressed "socio-cultural commentary" (1991: 10). Poyner proposed that some examples of experimental typography could be considered as a post-structuralist revaluing of the co-production of meaning by both author and reader. This is evident in his discrimination between, amongst others, "polemical" typeface designs that "demonstrate their designers' reluctance to accept that the conventions of typography are inscribed inviolably on tablets of stone" (1991: 7), and "type as entertainment" that Poyner claimed functioned only as decoration (1991: 15). Poyner elaborated this view in 1996 and commented that experiments in typography "reflect a deep scepticism about received wisdom and a questioning of established authorities, traditional practices and fixed cultural identities" (1996: 15). Poyner contrasts his characterisation of experimental typography as the practical critique of design orthodoxies with the popular perception of designers as: "little more than service-providers whose job is to convey a given message to an audience as efficiently as possible" (1999: 28).

Designer as translator, performer, director.

In contrast, criticism of experimental typographic design by curator Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller claimed that graphic authorship was based on a misreading of theories of authorship in literature and film (1996: 8). Lupton & Miller argued that graphic design had misunderstood post-structuralism as "a romantic theory of self-expression" (9). In a discussion of the social responsibility of the designer, critic and designer, Michael Rock extended Lupton's and Miller's analysis and posited that graphic authorship as it emerged in much typographic experimentation produced only "socially irresponsible …typographic stunts that serve no real function, speak only to other designers and the cultural elite" (Rock 1992/1994a: 193). Rock later justified his claims by laying out the contradictions of designers foregrounding personal expression at the expense of legibility when for some time literary theory had questioned the value of heroicizing the author as the source of meaning (Rock 1996: 46). He identified the pitfalls of adopting a theoretical model for design that conflicts with client expectation, the reality that most design production occurs collaboratively, and the fact that design is not popularly legitimate as a source of authority anyway. From this perspective Rock definitively prescribes the finite number of graphic forms that can legitimately claim to be authored by designers: artists books, activist design, concrete poetry, and outcomes by the designer who "writes and publishes material about design" (Rock 1996: 50). According to Rock it may only be when "function has been fully exorcised" (Rock 1996: 49) that it is legitimate to define a designer as an author. Rock's polarisation of the categories designer-as-author and designer-as-service-provider frames his protest against the implication that "authored design holds some higher, purer purpose" (Rock 1996: 53). Instead Rock proposes that designers select from one of three alternative models of the designer: as translator, as performer and as director (1998: 155). Rock defines the role of translation as "essentially the clarification of material or the remodelling of content from one form to another." (156). While Rock clarifies that translation is not a science that is independent of its historical context and that it reflects "the individuality of the translator" (156), he emphasizes that the designer-as-translator is an intermediary. Rock defines the metaphor of performer as an actor that realizes the work, and claims that it is the expression of the designer that contextualises the content "into the frame of the present" (156). Rock's third category is that of director. He states that this model can only work in the orchestration of large scale projects. According to Rock, this metaphor for design poses the designer as a choreographer of meaning from "masses

of material" (157). While these models provide different emphasis and nuance how designers function there is no explicit identification in Rock's formulation for reflexivity. In contrast to experimentation the roles Rock provides limit design activity within the coordinates of design as service.

Designer as producer

In place of design authorship, that according to Lupton was engaged as much with developing a "signature style" (2003: 23) as it was with agency, Lupton recommends the model of the "author as producer" proposed by theorist Walter Benjamin. Lupton argues that the designer-as-producer concept emphasizes designers controlling manufacture, rather than operating at the behest of client instructions. Although Lupton invokes Benjamin's exhortation for authors-as-producers to engage in practice that "challenges the social institutions of literature and art" (Lupton 2003: 24), the examples she provides do not seem to change the social institutions of design, as Benjamin recommended. The examples provided instead appear to replicate the prevailing modes of marketing and distribution, for example online sales, branding, and niche products. While Lupton's argument on behalf of the designer-as-producer was compelling, because it seemed to democratize design, it seems that when designers assumed the role of client, design's institutions remained intact. A consequence of the shift towards definitions of the designer-as-producer is that questions raised regarding the function and effects of design, and the questioning of design orthodoxies of utility and efficiency derived from design's genesis in industrial production, were set aside in favour of greater control of production.

Designer as entrepreneur.

Polarising the debate, design historian Steven Heller presented a proposal that "authorpreneurship" replace authorship as it better described the expansion of design's agency. Heller justified his proposal for interpreting authorship as entrepreneurship by stripping authorship of any critical function it had performed in graphic design of the 1990s:

> Authorship is not a theoretical construct. As defined here, it is a form of entrepreneurship that is about originating concepts, bringing them to fruition, and marketing them (1998: 35).

Here Heller simply conflates design with marketing, where the "freedom" or autonomy that he associates with entrepreneurialism allows designers to achieve "total control" over their production (1998: 36). According to Heller, in their efforts to "transcend the typical problem-solving routine" (2006: 12), "authorpreneurialism" encourages designers to generate products independently of clients. Heller's proposal for design-entrepreneurship, and his negation of post-structural challenges to the autonomy of the author, again reinforces designers support of the commercial status quo of the design industry.

Designer as social entrepreneur.

In contrast to Heller's approach to design as marketing, for design historian Victor Margolin entrepreneurship is a useful concept by which designers can reconceptualise their relationship to social issues. He claims that entrepreneurship is valid if it is motivated by concerns for social change. Margolin contextualises this perspective by historically locating social entrepreneurialism in the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th century, and the experimental typography of the 1990s. Margolin selects these two models because he believes they respectively "sought to challenge the dominant production paradigm" of the industrial era (2003: 163), and indicate how such challenges can still be mounted. Although Margolin endorses a critical approach that includes taking sustainability seriously to "innovate in socially responsible ways" (161), he also valourises the increased control that entrepreneurial activities provide for designers: "They are able to control the entire production process." (161).

Designers as dissatisfied

Design critic Alice Tremlow attributes the recent surge of graphic designers launching their own products to "a widely felt dissatisfaction with the models and forums currently available for the production and presentation of graphic designer's work" (Tremlow 2006b: 34). Because Tremlow acknowledges that authorship and entrepreneurialism form the historical background for current practices, and because she is critical of the emphasis in design discourse on "the production of design rather than its consumption" (77), she presents a more nuanced interpretation of the shift from authorship to entrepreneurialism. But like Lupton, Heller, and Margolin, she also advocates entrepreneurialism as an extension of authorship's usefulness in "the expansion of design's agency" (34), and its effectiveness in self promotion (36). She

further argues that since designers are now "in control of the conditions of making, not only can they create new products and ideas, they can devise new economies for creative practice" (41). This view seems based on an assumption that it is enough to change who is in control of design, rather than questioning the effects of entrepreneurial activity.

In contrast, one example of design that implicitly challenges the autonomous claims underpinning entrepreneurship in design is *Re-magazine*. The design project involved in *Re-magazine* revives a third term derived from the service vs. authorship debates of the 1990s. While developed without a client, *Re-magazine* does not focus on the agency of the designer (although much commentary regarding it has). Instead *Re-magazine* questions orthodoxies specifically related to magazine design and follows a trajectory initiated by experimental typography of the 1990s. Just as the random typeface *Beowolf* (1990), by Erik van Blokland and Just van Rossum, criticised expectations that digital technology produced more control, van Bennekom's *Re-magazine* critiques design instrumentalization that services only dominant market structures and behaviours. Like *Beowolf*, *Re-magazine* functions as a practical critique of design conventions.

Re-Magazine

Re-magazine is a quarterly publication begun by Jop van Bennekom as a student project at Arnhem Academy of Art and Design, the Netherlands, in 1997. The first eight issues each focussed on an aspect of life that is often neglected in mainstream magazines. The subject matter of these issues explored idle thoughts, providing for example a guide to connecting with one's past, and a reflection on the nature of boredom. In 2002 van Bennekom reconfigured *Re-magazine* to present the perspective of a single contributor per issue. Since this shift each issue of the magazine presents a text and image portrait of an ordinary individual in layouts that appear almost undesigned. Undesigned in the sense that the magazine comprises informal photo essays modelled on snapshots and typographic layouts comprising only headings, body copy, rules, and folios; the layouts are devoid of decorative devices. In contrast to commentary that valorizes van Bennekom's increased agency and control in combining the roles of writing, photography, editing, and art directing,

one can argue that the undersigned quality of *Re-magazine* challenges the design convention that 'better' design results from more designer control.

Issue 9: of *Re-magazine* entitled "John" published in 2002 is the first issue of the second iteration of Re-magazine. It presents a narrative of a man who asks questions about the effects of a designed life and claims that John "In search of unconditional freedom, … radically distances himself from the world, with the ultimate purpose of getting closer to its core" (van Bennekom 2002: 1). John's strategy for achieving independence or retreat from external influences is to disappear and abandon his possessions, home, partner, and job. John removes himself from his assigned social roles and presents his story as one that is "about borders, against controls, against a life where everything is registered and directed." (21). John his decision to disappear arose because

> I found myself in a world that I had not determined. I decided to build something next to this world, or actually in this world. A parallel universe where I would be constantly confronted with my own decision, the one made by John (20).

John describes wandering the city with the aim of losing himself. He recommends the "receptiveness" in attitude that wandering the streets without a map or a plan provides (34), and viscerally describes how he survives by eating leftovers from the supermarket (37) and intermittently sleeping in an abandoned house (25). The narrative concludes when John asks himself "Is this what I wanted?" and realizes that rather than disappearing he is "still in the centre" of himself (57) and cannot escape his context or social roles. It is only at the conclusion of John's story that van Bennekom reveals that John's story is a fiction (68).

For design director and curator at the Walker Museum, Andrew Blauvelt, *Re-magazine* is an example of design that "[rejects] stereotypical, commercial images and media driven stories" (Blauvelt 2003: 315). Blauvelt claims that *Re-magazine* inverts the conventions of magazine publishing by representing "ordinary people" instead of celebrities (285). Aaron Betsky, design curator at the National Architecture Institute in the Netherlands claims that this inversion and the magazine's "unfinished"

presentation "challenges the very notion of presentation and utility that constitutes [design] as a discipline." (Betsky 2003: 53). Betsky sees *Re-magazine* as a challenge to the effects of de-sensatization produced by media overload and cites Van Bennekom's statement that his aim is to "break down the way we are conditioned" (van Benekom in Betsky 2004: 251).

For Tremlow, *Re-magazine* represents what she perceives as the search for authenticity in reaction to the effects of globalization where "the more we are aware of everything that's happening everywhere, the more we want to connect with something, somewhere" (Tremlow 2006b: 17). Design critic Shaun Cole emphasizes what he describes as the autonomous attitude expressed by *Re- magazine*: "As publisher as well as editor and designer …van Bennekom has the freedom to develop [the magazines] as he chooses and is not dictated to by a publishing corporation" (Cole 2005: 79).

Experimental design.
In my opinion *Re-magazine* engages in the polemics of the authorship versus service debate. Van Bennekom also neatly challenges the assumptions that increased agency and control is a positive for design by presenting John's search for absolute self sufficiency or autonomy. The lengths to which John goes to in achieving unconditional freedom are extreme, and reading John's narrative can be emotionally demanding. Since van Bennekom has claimed that *Re-magazine* is a reflexive interrogation of design conventions it can be read as an allegory for design, and John's story could be seen to articulate the consequences for designers when they search for autonomy. It points to the contradictions in desiring freedom and the futility if not impossibility of achieving independence from context, demonstrating that like John, design is context dependent.

Van Bennekom claims that "There's no such thing as a standard procedure" (Tremlow 2006a: 40) and refutes rationalist definitions of design as a routine procedure or service. As such, *Re-magazine* raises questions about the purposefulness that is implicated in the notion of design as service, by not solving a problem but by asking a question peculiar to design. Unauthorised polemical publications and critical

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pamphlets have existed since the invention of the printing press, yet *Re-magazine* is essentially engaged in questions of its own production and reception. In its relation to the market's demand for new products it questions the designer's unlimited control over the means of production. In dealing with the specificities of design, and questioning magazine design conventions this issue of *Re-magazine* reveals how receptiveness to context offers insights for design and provides an incisive critique of the operative assumptions on which design's institutions rely. As such this issue of Re-magazine presents an allegory of contextual limitation and makes evident that design is neither a practice solely concerned with autonomy and self expression, or a managed process of service provision. *Re-magazine* is an experimental design that negotiates the implications of societal management as the crucial normative value in design (whether in terms of social reformation, purity of function, meaning and desire).

Conclusion

If the history of experimental typefaces and the authorship debates of the 1990s are reconceived not as entrepreneurialism but as a critique of design's prevailing standards, design practice and criticism can re-negotiate the contested terms of service, authorship, entrepreneurialism, and experimentation.

Setting up design debates in the binary terms of authorship vs service excludes experimental design. While the term "critical design" describes approaches similar to "experimental design", the term "critical" is too easily interpreted as extending the legacy of rationalist design discourse that modelled design on control and efficiency. From this perspective the term "critical" foregrounds intellectual engagement, and minimises the emotional, sensual, and contradictory aspects of design. Given the precise definitions of design authorship by Rock (1996 / 1998) and Poyner (2003) a third terms is required. The term 'experimental design' describes how design provides implicit critical commentary on orthodoxies, assumptions and institutional practices in design. In this way experimental design provides a service to the design community.

While Mermoz aims to revive the heat in design debates about authorship, graphic design might consider relational aesthetics with care. If graphic design

unquestioningly adopts a theoretical model from another field, as it did with authorship, design may well continue the emphasis of the 1990s on expanding design's agency. This is not to say that a critical consideration of the implications of Bourriaud's argument is not a potentially fertile area for graphic design, but to remind the graphics field that relational aesthetics and design-art often omit the respective specificities of art and design that include the analysis of authorial prerogative, function, contexts, history and use. In contrast, graphic design's own history of experimental practice questions the role of designers and provides a counterbalance to the ubiquitous production of design by so-called authorpreneurs. As the allegory of John attests, although design has increased its agency to engage in the production of meaning, design is not autonomous. What is interesting about experimental design is not that the designer controls the whole process, but that works, such as *Re-magazine,* make implicit critique of design. As a self-initiated collaboration the designer of *Re-magazine* has a double ambition: to gain a certain amount of control over the means of production without idealizing that control; and at the same time to test and critique the conditions and conventions of magazine design and demonstrate the enabling limits of graphic design practice.

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