DESIGN AND VALUE(S) IN THE INTERCONNECTED STATE

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Resume

Projects in Global Design, conducted jointly with MS and MFA students from the Graduate Communications / Package Design department at Pratt Institute in New York and the Graphic Design Master's program at the Academy of Art and Design St. Joost (Akademie voor Kunst en Vormgeving St. Joost, AKV Sint Joost, Avans Hogeschool) in Breda, Holland for the past two years, has been a vehicle for students to investigate their own values as a designer as well as the role of communication design in creating value.

Students on both sides work via network tools (a shared group workspace and weekly one-on-one Skype calls) to uncover new perspectives on value and design, as well as to experiment with new ways to learn and work together while testing the boundaries of transnationalism (transcending borders).

According to Simon Davies and Reynoud Homan, docents (professors) at the Academy of Art and Design St. Joost, "The joint results of the exercise are to be both practical and theoretical and concentrate on definitions and strategies researched and devised by the students themselves, augmented by guidance

from the professors at Pratt and Sint Joost."

The starting point of the collaboration was an essay by Nigel Whiteley, entitled "The Valorised Designer," as well as books by Jan van Toorn (Design's Delight) and Roger Martin (The Design of Business). Students created essays and prototypes to uncover a social "mystery," develop a heuristic (a working "hunch") and finally, proposed an algorithm (an intervention) that creates value.
The challenge of keeping abreast of hundreds of blog posts and dozens of Skype calls meant that many important exchanges went unnoticed by the professors and students alike.

Project results became secondary to the excitement and the phenomena of the exchange itself. The quantity and intensity of the posts suggested a group far larger and far more expressive than what was encountered in our respective classrooms as well as when we met face to face during the Pratt students visit to Breda.

Introduction, Networks

As early as the late 1970s, I began testing the notion of transnationalism—transcending borders—using early computer networks. Years before these devices became common place, I assembled networks of email and satellite connections for mixing images derived from personal memories with those inspired by popular culture to explore what was private and what was public in the emerging era of networks, as documented in the art and technology journal, Leonardo (107-112).

I mention these early experiments because there is a direct line between them and the creation of Projects in Global Design, a course conducted jointly with Master of Science and Master of Fine Arts students from the Graduate Communications / Package Design department at Pratt Institute in New York and the Graphic Design Master's program at the Academy of Art and Design Sint Joost (Akademie voor Kunst en Vormgeving Sint Joost, Avans Hogeschool)

in Breda, Holland, in the spring semesters of 2011 and 2012.

Introduction, Dutch Context

I was attracted to Holland as a young designer in the mid-1970s, perceiving it to be the incarnation of a design utopianism I saw in fictional creations like Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.

After sending hundreds of inquires and C.V.'s to Western European agencies and institutions, I secured a position working for the Rotterdamse Kunststichting (Rotterdam Art Foundation), then the Total Design studio in Amsterdam and eventually as a docent (professor) at the Academy of Art and Design Sint Joost. I went on to live in Holland for nearly a decade.

One of Total Design's principals, Wim Crouwel, exemplified the belief that graphic design could steer the fabric of an entire society. Total Design's 1972 telephone book for the Dutch PTT (post and telecommunications agency) was completely set in sleek but difficult to read lower case Univers, a high point for sans-serif minimalism.

When I arrived in the mid-1970s, every private and public entity seemed to have its own rigorously designed graphic system, from the small corner shop to the currency designed by Ootje Oxenaar, (Figure 1).

Younger designers of the time, such as Anthon Beeke, added a "bad boy" tinge to Dutch design. His poster for Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida featured a woman bending over wearing horse straps.

Beeke's and others' work in the 1980s exemplified the tension between the inheritance of a Calvinistic rectitude and the politics of the European summer of '68.

By the turn of the millennium, the borders that had made Dutch design unique, were dissolving. The treaty that established the Euro was signed in Holland in 1992. In the early 2000s, Dutch design schools began to rollout a policy to admit

students from across the European Union on an equal criteria basis. All graduate-level courses were to be conducted in English–a language often spoken as a first language by no one in a class.

The social engineering leanings of sans-serif modernism, the juvenile delinquent overtones of Beeke's work and the relative chaos of recent years all turned out to be present in the process, the dialog and the design outcomes of Projects in Global Design.

Figure 1.
25 Guilder bank note, designed by Ootje Oxenaar, 1971.

Setting Up Projects in Global Design

In 2010, Jeff Bellantoni, the new Chair of Graduate Communications Design at Pratt asked me to help create a transnational component to the program.

By coincidence, the Vice Dean of the Academy of Art and Design Sint Joost, Jeroen Chabot, was touring the USA in search of partners. After a meeting in New York with Jeroen, it was agreed in principle to establish a collaboration.

Between that handshake agreement in early 2010 and the actual start of the course in the spring of 2011, there were hundreds of emails on my part to

finalize details. These went mostly unanswered by the Dutch side. As a last resort in the fall, amid Pratt's deadline to definitively schedule the class, I engaged in my own version of "shuttle diplomacy" and made a half-day trip to Schiphol airport in Holland for a two-hour meeting with Sint Joost's Acting Dean to confirm the course would take place.

Contributing to the uncertainty was a large flux in the administrative and teaching staff at Sint Joost and the need to deal with new personalities every few months. There were also different semester schedules to synchronize. We eventually found seven weeks that overlapped within which to conduct the course.

Goals

Conducted over seven weeks of the spring semesters in 2011 and 2012, dialog and project collaborations were created as a vehicle for students to think about their values as a designer and how value is created with the help of graphic design.

It was also an opportunity to understand the advantages and limitations of network tools within the context of graduate education as well as (for the professors and administrators) the degree of planning necessary to successfully carry out such collaboration.

The final goal was to comprehend to what extent students studying within two different systems, each of which with students from many other countries, would gain a sufficient shared understanding in order to produce a meaningful collaboration.

Format

The primary interactions in the course were a shared blog space (Figure 2), one-on-one Skype calls, group Skype conferences and large print designs. The groups also met once a week in their usual studio settings.

At the end of the seven weeks of collaboration, there was a trip to Holland for the Pratt students for a group critique and workshop in Breda with both the Sint
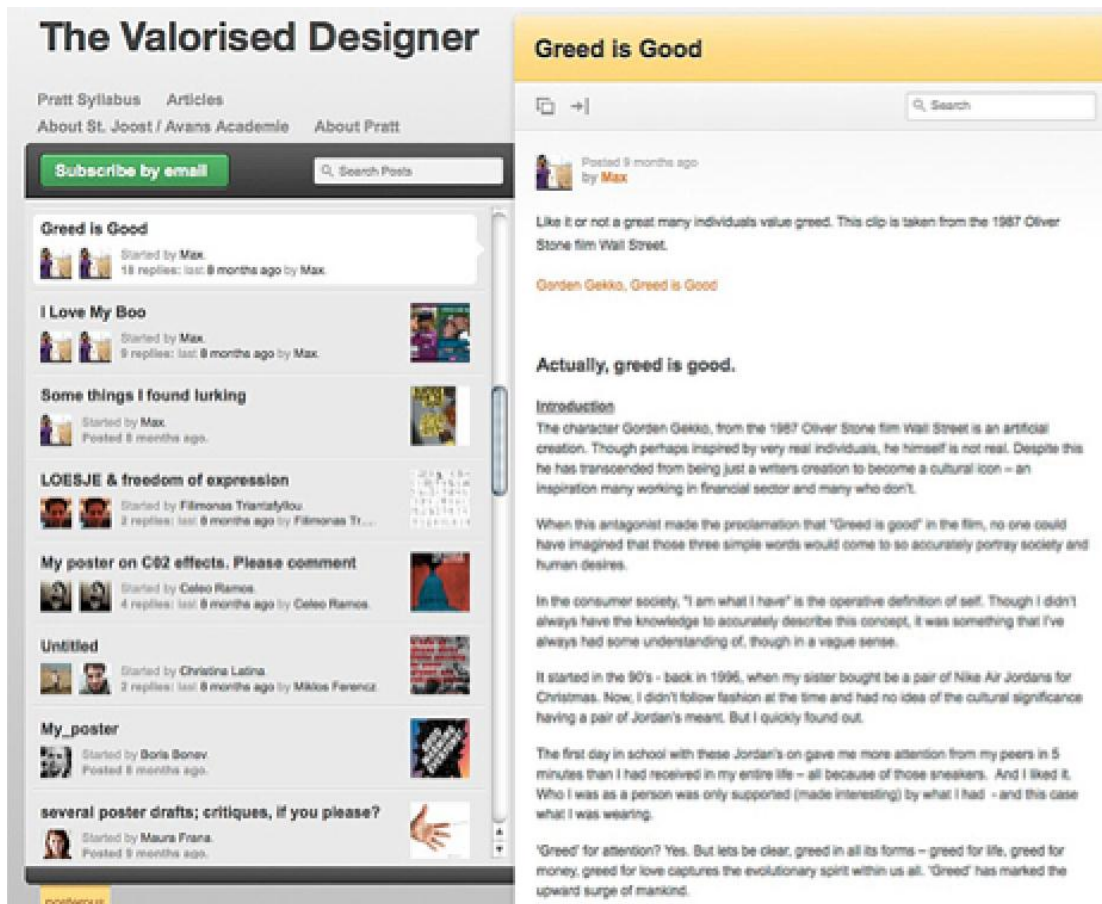
Joost and Pratt students present.

Figure 2.

Group blog for Projects in Global Design, spring 2011.

Collaboration 2011

The starting point for 2011's collaboration was an essay entitled "The Valorised Designer" by Nigel Whiteley from his book, Design for Society. Whiteley suggests that graphic designers move beyond the current models of the formalized designer, centered on utilitarian functionality; the theorized designer, dependent on ideas from post-modern writers at the expense of pragmatic application; the politicized designer, marked by a focus on work with a particular political bias; the consumerized designer driven by market forces; and, the technologized designer who, in a need to appear cutting edge, does not question the value of what gets produced (110-113).

Whiteley's proposal is for a "valorised designer," one who is courageous by

being aware of the values their work promotes and their need to pledge to a creed equivalent to that of the physician's Hippocratic oath: to practice ethically and honestly (112).

According to Simon Davies and Reynoud Homan, professors at the Sint Joost Academy in an email correspondence to me in December of 2010, "The joint results of the exercise should be both practical and theoretical and should concentrate on definitions and strategies researched and devised by the students themselves, augmented by guidance from the professors at Pratt and Sint Joost. We wish, in the course of this exercise, to discover the understanding, appreciation and belief of this proposed new type of designer within the discipline of graphic design and in the context of an exchange project between our two institutes and our two international groups of students."

Students began by choosing an historical poster that overlapped with their own values. They articulated these values set in a short essay, posts to the shared blog space plus and Skype conversations. Maura Frana, a Pratt student, wrote: "In 1980 Pierre Bernard, while at Grapus, designed this poster for le Secours populaire français (SPF)...it reads, 'There for you, Always here, le Secours populaire français, Solidarity in France and across the world.'...I will focus on some of the values he shared with SPF: loyalty, decentralization, altruism, and action. Of those four core values, I consider loyalty a foundation for the other three...." Maura's poster results alluded to loyalty with the unseen hungry (Figure 3).

During the critique of the posters at the Sint Joost Academy with Pratt students present, Hugues Boekraad, author of a book about Pierre Bernard called My Work is Not My Work: Design for the Public Domain, was adamant in critiquing Maura's work, saying that "solidarite" was a much more politically loaded word than "loyalty".

Henk Cornelissen, former Sint Joost professor and associate of the well-known American designer Saul Bass, also attended the critique. Henk remarked that the students' posters were not really posters because they lacked a central

element of primary visual impact. This led to a discussion about whether posters, regardless of their formal qualities, remained of concern to graphic designers.

Other lively exchanges took place on the blog, including this one between students Max Gaines at Pratt and Max Senden from Sint Joost:

Max Gaines (Pratt): Actually, greed is good...greed is simple...the world runs on greed. And greed's' natural child is consumerism.

Max Senden (Sint Joost): Consumerism is not good...I'm not driven to the tasks that pay the more, I'm driven to the tasks that both are able to sustain me and enable me to grow....

Max Gaines (Pratt): [My] whole piece uses inflammatory language and satire to grab your attention...Buy a pair of Jordans!

For his poster project, Max Senden went on to reference Anthon Beeke's Troilus and Cressida poster and transform it into an ironic website promotion.

In the weeks after the critique at Sint Joost, Pratt students drew on the results of the first half of the semester's exercise to propose (in the form of a slide presentation) a social entrepreneurship organization inspired by the values expressed in the earlier essays and posters (Figure 4). The Sint Joost group was less interested in seeing the results of the collaboration brought forth as proposals for implementation and was content to see the project as an experiment in a collision of values and design traditions.
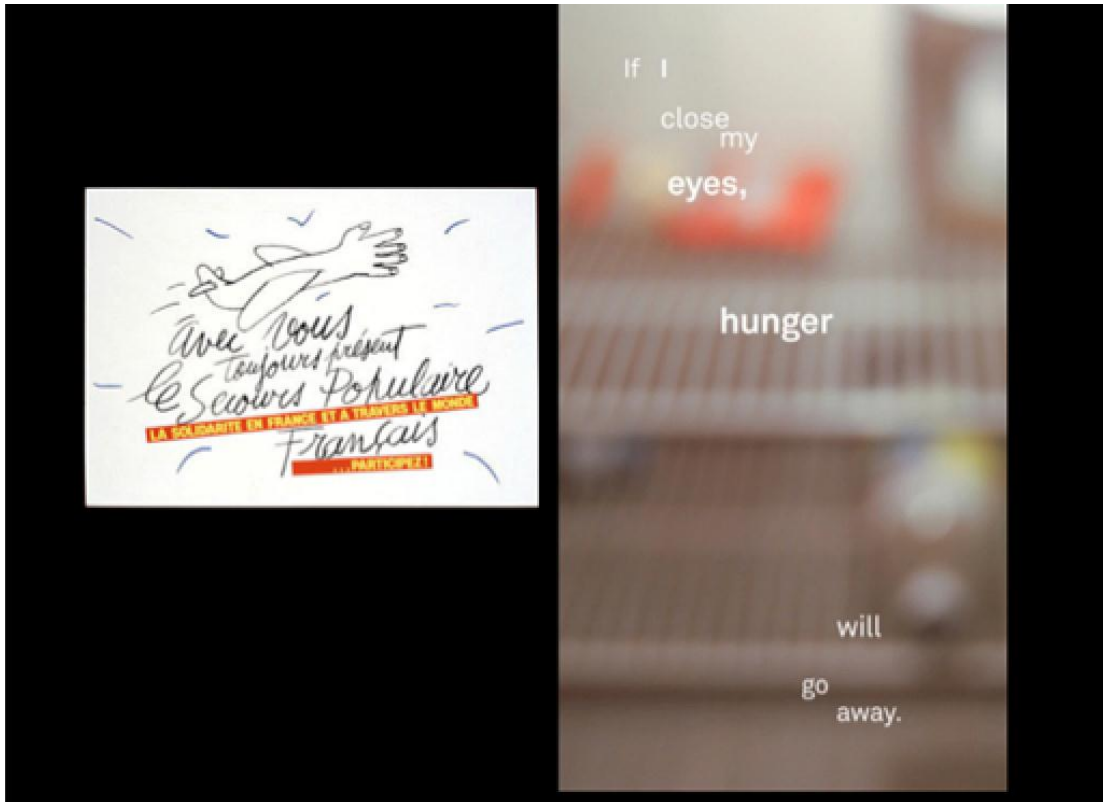
Figure 3.

Maura Frana reference poster (left), le Secours populaire français, Pierre Bernard, 1980. Maura's own poster (right).

Figure 4.

Value-based organization proposals, Maura Frana (left) and Celeo Ramos (right).

Collaboration 2012

The following spring's collaboration began with readings from The Design of Business: Why Design Thinking is the Next Big Competitive Advantage by Roger Martin and Design's Delight by Jan van Toorn. Students exchanged posts with their respective Dutch or U.S. partners to uncover synergies between the texts.

Martin advocates abductive reasoning which he defines as "…between intuition and analytics", especially within an entrepreneurial context (62). Van Toorn asks designers to, "…to formulate a concept and strategies which once more make action for the public concern possible." (27).

Pratt student Charlene Sequeira and myself, along with Sint Joost students Marriette Wilt and Luisa Vieira Silva, and St. Joost professor Max Bruinsma, exchanged these posts:

Marriette Wilt (Sint Joost): "...reading van Toorn's book...How many of us in our daily practice really (and should) put our morals into action?"

Charlene Sequeira (Pratt): "I was more inclined to the practical implications of 'design thinking' from Martins book than the preaching of van Toorn...."

Luisa Vieira Silva (Sint Joost): "...are we, as designers enough well-educated to make any valid /relevant comments on society?"

Tom Klinkowstein (Pratt): "...We may need much more university-like education (for designers)...less visual communication courses."

Max Bruinsma (Sint Joost): "Although I agree with Tom that designers need more university-like education, I strongly disagree with less visual communication...Jan van Toorn's book Design's Delight should be required reading for advanced students of graphic design, in that it is in my view one of the most sophisticated examples of visual editing around...to answer Luisa's question, read a newspaper (at least one, preferably more) every day, and never stop practicing your visual argumentation skills. And realize that visual argumentation is not the same as visualizing."

For the project portion of the collaboration, students developed their own early stages of a proposal for a business or other entity that created value using Martin's "Mystery, Heuristic and Algorithm" process, to be tempered by

sympathetic or contradictory concepts from van Toorn's book.

A Mystery could lie anywhere on the spectrum from the deeply theoretical to the overtly pragmatic. As used in this context, a Heuristic is an "informed hunch".

Following discussion in class and online, as well as field research, students created A1-sized process prints that summarized their findings. These were used during the critique at the Sint Joost Academy with both Sint Joost and Pratt students present.

We were careful not to call the A1 process prints "posters", recalling the contentious discussion from the previous year's group critique. Nonetheless, Sint Joost students generally produced more formalistic results while Pratt students veered towards process presentations with information graphics or visually reinforced texts.

The final step was a visually-augmented spoken presentation of a proposal for funding a more complete proof of concept of the Algorithm—the repeatable framework for a service, entity or intervention from which value would be created.

Figure 5.

Process print, Mimi Rojanasakul (Pratt), March 2012.

Conclusion

We started the collaboration with two different cultures, two educational systems and the legacies of two different professional practices of design.

English was our shared language, but only spoken as a first language by half of the Pratt students, by none of St. Joost students and only one of the four professors on the St. Joost side.

Commencing in the middle of a deep recession in both countries, we choose to tackle high-resolution themes of value and values using the low-resolution channels of blogging and Skyping, ultimately achieving more candor and satisfaction online than in the face-to-face group studio critiques during the three day visit to the St. Joost Academy by the Pratt students.

There were two sets of administrative processes to work within. Pratt had specific deadlines for course registration and Pratt students could weigh taking the Global Design course against the merits of many other electives they had to choose from. At. St. Joost, the collaboration was handled as an add-on to a fixed curriculum where all students took the same courses throughout the two years of the Master's program.

While I was the both the coordinator and professor on the Pratt side throughout the two years, responsibility at St. Joost was passed from one instructor to another–sometimes in the middle of a course–making the necessary programmatic and pedagogical interaction before and during the collaboration difficult.

The challenge of keeping abreast of hundreds of blog posts and dozens of Skype calls meant that many important exchanges went unnoticed by the professors and students alike, suggesting the need in the future for moderators to call out especially engaging comments and exchanges.

Project results became secondary to the excitement and the phenomena of the exchange itself. The quantity and intensity of the posts suggested a group far

larger and far more expressive than what was encountered in our respective classrooms as well as when we met face to face during the Pratt students visit to Breda.

Entangled online exchanges produced fleeting but intense relationships, momentarily escaping national and institutional affiliations, producing a new transnational form of what the Dutch call "gezelligheid"–a special sense of camaraderie and conversation within a self-selected ethnographic group.

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