


GRAPHIC DESIGN THEORY

READINGS FROM THE FIELD



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III A DESIGN THEORY GUIDE

DMITRI SIEGEL EPITOMIZES THE NEW GENERATION OF DESIGN THINKERS. He is a pragmatic intellectual who approaches crucial graphic design issues from the working field. While contributing essays regularly to the influential blog Design Observer, as well as myriad other publications, Siegel is the creative director for interactive and video for Urban Outfitters, a partner in the publicity venture Ante Projects, and creative director for the magazine *Anathema*. He is also on the faculty of the Art Center College of Design and has taught at University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Siegel stands solidly on the "sliver of land suspended between culture and commerce," a situation he once described as "the defining characteristic of graphic design." In the Design Observer entry printed below, he takes on the emerging cultural and economic model of consumer as producer. Siegel describes this new DIY style of consumerism as "prosumerism—simultaneous production and consumption." Where, he asks, does the graphic designer fit within the new model? Who do we work for, if everyone is "designing-it-themselves"?

¹ Dmitri Siegel, "Context in Critique (review of *Émigré* No. 64, *Rant*)," *Adbusters* (September-October 2003): 79-81.

DESIGNING OUR OWN GRAVES

DMITRI SIEGEL | 2006

A recent coincidence caught my eye while at the bookstore. A new book by Karim Rashid called *Design Your Self* was sitting on the shelf next to a new magazine from Martha Stewart called *Blueprint*, which bore a similarly cheerful entreaty on its cover: "Design your life!" These two publications join Ellen Lupton's recent *DIY: Design It Yourself* to form a sort of mini-explosion of literature aimed at democratizing the practice of design (never mind that, as Lupton has noted, Rashid's book is actually more about designing his self than yours).

With the popularity of home improvement shows and self-help books, our society is positively awash in do-it-yourself spirit. People don't just eat food anymore, they present it; they don't look at pictures, they take them; they don't buy T-shirts, they sell them. People are doing-it-themselves to no end. But to what end? The artist Joe Scanlan touches on the more troubling implications of the *DIY* explosion in his brilliantly deadpan piece *DIY*, which is essentially instructions for making a perfectly functional coffin out of an *IKEA* bookcase.

Scanlan's piece accepts the basic assumption of "Design your life" and *Design Your Self*: that design is something that anyone can (and should) participate in. But what is behind all this doing-it-ourselves? Does that coffin have your career's name on it?

THE SURPRISING BY-PRODUCT OF THIS DEMOCRATIZATION OF
DISTRIBUTION IS THAT THE PRODUCTION/CONSUMPTION
CYCLE HAS SPLINTERED INTO MILLIONS OF TINY EXCHANGES.

DMITRI SIEGEL
Comment from
"Designing Our
Own Graves"
2006

The design-your-life mind-set is part of a wider cultural and economic phenomenon that I call prosumerism—simultaneous production and consumption. The confluence of work and leisure is common to a lot of hobbies, from scrap-booking to hot-rodding. But what was once a niche market has exploded in the last decade. Prosumerism is distinctly different from purchasing the tools for a do-it-yourself project. The difference can be seen most clearly in online products like Flickr and Wikipedia. These products embody an emerging form of inverted consumerism where the consumer provides the parts and the labor. In *The Wealth of Networks*, Yale Law School professor Yochai Benkler calls this inversion “social production” and says it is the first potent manifestation of the much-hyped information economy. Call it what you will, this “non-market activity” is changing not just the way people share information but their definition of what a product is.

This evolving consumer mentality might be called “the templated mind.” The templated mind searches for text fields, metatags, and rankings like the handles on a suitcase. Data entry and customization options are the way prosumers grip this new generation of products. The templated mind hungers for customization and the opportunity to add their input—in essence to do-it-themselves. The templated mind trusts the result of social production more than the crafted messages of designers and copywriters. And this mentality is changing the design of products. Consider Movable Type, the software behind the blog revolution in general and this site in particular. This prosumer product has allowed hundreds of thousands of people to publish themselves on the web. For millions of people, their unconscious image of a website has been shaped by the constrained formats allowable by Movable Type templates. They unconsciously orient themselves to link and comments—they recognize the handiwork of a fellow prosumer. Any designer working on a webpage has to address that unconscious image. And it does not just impact designers in terms of form and style. As the template mentality spreads, consumers approach all products with the expectation of work. They are looking for the blanks, scanning for fields, checking for customization options, choosing their phone wallpaper, rating movies on Netflix, and uploading pictures of album art to Amazon. The template mentality emphasizes work over style or even clarity.

This shift in emphasis has the potential to marginalize designers. Take book covers. The rich tradition of cover design has developed because publishers have believed that a cover could help sell more books. But now more and more people are buying books based on peer reviews, user

recommendations, and rankings. Word of mouth has always been a powerful marketing force, but now those mouths have access to sophisticated networks on which their words can spread faster than ever before. Covers are seen at 72 dpi at best. The future of the medium depends on how it is integrated into the process of social production. The budget that once went to design fees is already being redirected to manipulating search criteria and influencing Google rankings. A good book cover can still help sell books, but it is up against a lot more competition for the marketing dollar.

Prosumerism is also changing the role of graphic design in the music industry. When the music industry made the shift to compact discs in the late 1980s, many designers complained that the smaller format would be the death of album art. Fifteen years later those predictions seem almost quaint. The MP3 format makes compact disc packaging seem like the broad side of a barn. The “it” bands of the last few years—Arctic Monkeys, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, and Gnarls Barkley to name just a few—have all broken into the popular consciousness via file sharing. Arctic Monkeys and *CXNSY* generated huge buzz on MySpace before releasing records, and Gnarls Barkley’s irresistible hit “Crazy” made it to the top of the UK pop charts before it was even released, based entirely on MP3 downloads. The cover art for the new album from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs was the result of a do-it-yourself flag project the band ran online. The public image of a musician or band is no longer defined by an artfully staged photo or eye-popping album art. A file name that fits nicely into the “listening to” field in the MySpace template might be more important. The MP3 format and the ubiquity of downloading has shrunk the album art canvas to a 200 x 200-pixel JPEG. Music videos, once the ultimate designer dream gig, have shrunk as well. Imagine trying to watch M&Co.’s “Nothing But Flowers” video for the Talking Heads on a video iPod. As playlists and favorites become the currency of the music industry, the album as an organizing principle may disappear entirely. Soon graphic designers may only be employed to create 6 x 6-pixel favicons.

In *Revolutionary Wealth*, veteran futurists Alvin and Heidi Toffler (*Future Shock*, *The Third Wave*) paint a very optimistic picture of prosumerism. They rightly make the connection between the do-it-yourself ethos and the staggering increases in wealth that have occurred around the world in the last century. They describe a future where people use their extraordinary accumulated wealth to achieve greater and greater autonomy from industrial and corporate production. Benkler also spends a great deal of time celebrating the increased freedom and autonomy that social production provides.

But is the unimpeded spread of this kind of autonomy really possible? Benkler raises serious concerns about efforts to control networks through private ownership and legislation. Wikipedia is not a kit that you buy; you do not own your Flickr account and you never will. When you update a MySpace account you are building up someone else's asset. The prosumer model extracts the value of your work in real time, so that you are actually consuming your own labor.

And what would be the role of the designer in a truly do-it-yourself economy? Looking at Flickr or YouTube or MySpace, it seems that when people do it themselves, they need a great deal less graphic design to get it done. The more that our economy runs on people doing it themselves, the more people will demand opportunities to do so, and the more graphic designers will have to adapt their methods. What services and expertise do designers have to offer in the prosumer market? Rashid and Lupton have provided one answer (the designer as expert do-it-yourselfer), but unless designers come up with more answers, they may end up designing-it-themselves . . . and little else.