Designing Graphic Design History

Teal Triggs

Graphic design history has only recently begun to be recognized as a field of study in its own right. The vast increase in mainstream publications and academic texts has been the proof. Nonetheless, as we reflect on where graphic design history currently stands, is there an alternative and equally valid history to be discerned through designed graphic artefacts? By looking at a unique body of small press and self-published magazines and pamphlets written and designed by typographers, graphic designers and, in some cases, design students, we might suggest how these publications represent a visual and text-based alternative history that has evolved outside traditional academic and historiographic practices. Indeed, a number of these self-published works have provided some of the most interesting criticism, plus new ways of conceiving of the visual and written documentation of graphic design. While reference will be made to examples, including work produced in the 1980s/1990s such as Octavo (UK), Emigre (USA), ZED (USA) and Dot Dot Dot (the Netherlands), this article will focus primarily on The National Grid. Founded in 2006 in New Zealand, this ‘peripheral publication for graphic design’, now publishing its fifth issue (2009), is challenging perceived notions of what graphic design history should be. It is at once local and international, taking as its cue the perspectives of a new wave of young designers steeped in the culture of music, fanzines and the design of the everyday.

Keywords: design criticism—graphic design—graphic design history—national identity—popular culture—self-publishing

Introduction

The graphic artefact

The National Grid is interested in the artefacts and methodologies of the practitioner—the designers of everyday things—who seek to transform, in some small way, both their own and their audiences’ experience of the world around them.1

Any approach to the study of graphic design and its history needs to take into account the form of the graphic object just as much as the nature of the content. It is the way that this form and content come together that makes this a unique enterprise. Victor Margolin (1996) has argued for a move away from ‘a history of objects . . . toward a history of practice . . . ’ as a way of recognizing that there are multiple histories to consider—whether the product of postmodernist thinking or not.2 This was made manifest in the scholarship on self-published graphic design publications that has often been framed around the notion of ‘graphic authorship’. Graphic authorship emerged during the mid-1990s and introduced new ways of considering the designer/client role within professional practice. The designers became the originators of the message and in turn adopted their own authorial voice and ‘signature style’. Steven McCarthy writes about ‘designer-authored histories’ and the predominance of self-authorship where he suggests that publications such as Octavo, Emigre, Fuse, Zed and News of the Whirled, for example, were part of the ways in which contemporary aspects of ‘culture, new technologies, and socio-political issues informed the history of the discipline’. At the same time, McCarthy is quick to point out that the history of self-publishing can also be seen in early twentieth-century publications such as PM, Portfolio, Push Pin Graphic and Dot Zero, and even further back to the typographic books of Eric Gill (1931) and Jan Tschichold (1928).3
On the other hand, curator and author Ellen Lupton differentiates between the designer as ‘originator of content’ and as ‘producer’ who ‘is part of the system of making’ a role that she highlights. Lupton also suggests that with the emergence of new ‘desktop’ technologies, the graphic designer returned to being someone who brought ‘production activities back into the process of design’.4 There is little doubt that designers and art directors, including Tibor Kalman (Colours), Neville Brody (The Face), Cipe Pineles (Seventeen) and Alexy Brodovitch (Harper’s Bazaar) are firmly part of a history of graphic design and also within a history of visual culture more generally. The difference between these mainstream publications and those produced under the banner of graphic authorship depends, however, on who generates and maintains control over content. Lupton proposes that graphic designers might ‘actively mediate between form and content’. If this is the case, then in what way might publications in which the graphic designer is both the producer and author represent an alternative view of history?

Graphic authorship has attempted to legitimize the designer’s voice as equal to that of other privileged forms of authorship. The designer is able to exert ‘control’ over the content of what he or she is designing. Critics such as Michael Rock argue that ‘design itself (is) content enough’, making the analogy that the film director’s work is embedded ‘not in the story but the storytelling’.5 Works written and produced by graphic designers contribute to any discussion of a discipline’s ‘history’ in their essence as designed forms as well as social and cultural documents, but ‘little magazines’ are closer to the world of fan magazines than anything else. They are not client driven and they are (in general) not intended for a mainstream readership. Instead, little magazines seek to address a design-literate demographic on its own terms. The job of documenting graphic design history within such publications is done through its content and is analogous to, for example, the horror fanzine that documents the history of horror films. In both cases, the design of the object itself is carefully constructed in order to suit its intended context.

Clive Dilnot wrote in 1984, ‘. . . defining and explaining design and what a designer does are dependent not only on immersion in design practice, but also on the ability to see this practice in both historical and social perspectives’.6 I would add to this and suggest that at another level publications identified as little magazines—produced and written by graphic designers—do much more. At once they are not only designed forms but also forms that document graphic design history itself.

A brief history of graphic design history

Graphic design history has often been relegated to discussions in footnotes. It is often viewed outside more established areas of historical study such as architecture, decorative arts or industrial design. In part, this may be due to graphic design’s various beginnings in the history of art, printing, typography, photography and advertising.7 In 1983, the event ‘Coming of Age: The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design’, held at the Rochester Institute of Technology, sought to reconsider these histories, calling for ‘recognition and formal study of graphic design history’.8 The symposium’s organizers argued that establishing ‘graphic design history’ would be a step forward for the graphic design profession. A year later, Clive Dilnot’s two-part essay on the ‘The State of Design History’ (‘Part I: Mapping the Field’ and ‘Part II: Problems and Possibilities’) appeared in Design Issues, and its publication proved a further significant shift in recognizing design history, theory and criticism. To his credit, Dilnot was not oblivious to the role of the graphic design historian or design practitioner. Indeed, he engaged with a
discussion on typography and its history in order to reinforce his argument that any methodological armoury is appropriate to the task whatever the research question might be. He bemoaned the fact that some history had become celebratory and, in surveying typographic history, he briefly mentioned British printing traditions and problematized their intellectual positions.

Although the 1980s saw a plethora of books on industrial design and related areas, graphic design in general was not attracting the same attention from historians. The relationship between graphic design history and design history became disputed, and this was no more evident than in mainstream publishing. Dilnot’s reference to key books published on industrial design history included titles by Jeffrey Meikle (1982), Arthur J. Pulos (1983), Penny Sparke (1983) and John Heskett (1985). These, he claimed, had established a recognizable foundation for study out of which a series of design histories emerged with a focus on objects and design practices. These histories were also framed by art history, and social and cultural history, as well as material culture, and as a result began to take on ‘new’ significance for academics and design professionals alike.

In 1983, Nancy Green, the Editorial Director of van Nostrand Reinhold, remarked: ‘Of one hundred and twenty active titles (including about thirty titles in preparation) we have one book on the history of graphic design’. Green explained that most books published on graphic design were practical, ‘how-to’ guides. Twenty-five years later, little seems to have changed. The division between histories of the subject and instructional books remains entrenched. This point is not lost on contemporary design critics such as Rick Poynor, who laments the lack of publishing opportunities in the field. He writes:

> When this patchy output is placed beside the numerous books produced by scholars working in, for instance, the fields of art, architecture or film, as it is in any visual arts bookshop, the effect is to confirm that graphic design history as a terrain for intensive and sustained research and study barely exists at all.

Perhaps this ephemerality is the natural consequence of a lack of definition for the subject. Jeremy Aynsley, one of Britain’s first historians of graphic design, has acknowledged that the field of graphic design has an inherently broad design remit and therefore that accompanying historical writings will mirror this. Thus

At its broadest, graphic design, and consequently its history, came to cover anything from the design of a bus ticket to sign systems for motorways, the packaging of cigarettes to the typographical organization of dictionaries, the design of the lead-in to nightly television news to art-directing a magazine.

For the same reason, graphic design history has provided us with a multiplicity of voices. The late historian and educator Philip Meggs comments that ‘the ephemeral nature of graphic design combined with its life within social, economic, and cultural spheres of a society, creates a diversity beyond the range of architecture or graphic design’. As if in response to this diversity, its history books have followed the format of survey texts, organized chronologically from cave dwellings to digital design, and focusing on establishing ‘a’ (if not ‘the’) canon of graphic design. Meggs writes, ‘history becomes a reflection of the needs, sensibilities, and attitudes of the chronicler’s time as surely as it represents the accomplishments of bygone eras’. In his so-called ‘definitive history of graphic communication’, Meggs introduces his first edition with a graphic history of prehistoric times and the cave paintings of Lascaux and ends with the subjective viewpoints of postmodernist designers, illustrated by Kenneth Hiebert’s poster for an exhibition by Paul Rand and a symposium on the ‘role of art in graphic design’.
In the 1990s, an identifiable canon of graphic design history emerged. The ‘heroic’ designer monograph appeared, providing a list of ‘Who’s Who’, including David Carson, Paul Rand, Neville Brody, Fuel, and Tomato, with the contribution of women and ethnic role models notably absent. Many of these monographs may also be considered ‘object’ books—that is, books produced by design studios full of vibrant images of individual projects and studio collaborations. Object books were promotional vehicles for commercial design studios. They were not necessarily self-critical and often presented the designer’s history in a chronological fashion without any reflective or critical analysis of the work’s social, political or economic contexts. A decade later such an approach has not gone unnoticed in the design press where, for example, one commentator observes about the intent of the designer’s monograph: ‘Not one speck of self-criticism, historic or artistic contextualisation, nothing too deep, too ambitious, nothing that might inhibit new commissions’.

On the other hand, the way in which designers visualized their own work in these books often challenges conventional ways of reading history. The British design trio of Peter Miles, Damon Murray and Stephen Sorrell of Fuel employed bold image and text juxtapositions in their two published monographs, Fuel (1997) and Fuel Three Thousand (2000) as a way of exploring authorial positions. A similar, yet more politically charged thematic approach forms the basis of Jonathan Barnbrook’s monograph The Barnbrook Bible: The Graphic Design of Jonathan Barnbrook (2007). Commissioned essayists position Barnbrook’s work within a historical framework, but at the same time the designer himself has a reputation for contextualizing the historical and political positioning of his own typeface designs. These books can in some ways be seen as taking a postmodern path. The history on offer is not necessarily linear and involves a variety of entry points. Nonetheless, in terms of critical distance we must ask how much has actually changed?

The issue of copyright and control over visual material is of note here. Any author seeking to take a critical stance on a designer’s work will necessarily have to obtain access and permission. As such, any documentation of designer’s work within the context of graphic design history is edited and therefore, any narrative history is distorted.

Yet, at the same time, our understanding of graphic design history was being shaped by edited series. For example, Rick Poynor’s series of books on typography, beginning with Typography Now: The Next Wave (1991), reproduced some of the defining pieces of the 1980s’ typographic explosion. Poynor’s editorial selection (re)presented an emerging canon of works by typographers such as Phil Baines, Barry Deck and Jonathan Barnbrook. Steven Heller’s range of design anthologies for Allworth Press (e.g. the Looking Closer series) reproduced mainly previously published articles and similarly sought to refine the canon.

Other books published during the 1990s were more forward looking. Richard Hollis’ Graphic Design: A Concise History (1992), for example, took as its starting point the design profession, beginning in the middle of the twentieth century. As author and designer of the book, Hollis creates visual and text-based narratives as viewed from a modernist’s authorial position. Crowley and Jobling’s Graphic Design: Reproduction and Representation since 1800 (1996) presented a broader historical overview of graphic design, choosing to focus on the social, cultural and political contexts of the graphic artefact. This approach ‘fitted’ well with any discussion of posters, magazines and other mainstream ephemera where the readers/users of graphic design artefacts were not understood in isolation. Although the book was well researched and written, Victor Margolin pointed out in Eye magazine (1997) that the authors ‘are too ready to sacrifice design at the altar of an all consuming capitalism, unlike Twyman, Meggs and Hollis, who, as practitioners, convey in their writings a passion for graphic communication that is missing here’.
Bringing things up to date, recent textbooks such as Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish’s *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide* (2008) explore the potential of establishing other approaches to graphic design history. In their introduction, the authors readily acknowledge the influence of three of their predecessors: Meggs and his ‘historical foundation’, Richard Hollis’ cultural contexts, and the ‘methodological approach’ offered by Crowley and Jobling. They go on to suggest a different position on the history of graphic design by contextualizing the ‘social forces and conditions of their production’ of the work in order to provide insight into the way we understand practice today.20

A final mention should be made of Stephen J. Eskilson’s book *Graphic Design: A New History*, published a year earlier than Drucker and McVarish’s, which was written in order to provide a contrast to the conventional style books and design monographs. Eskilson comments: ‘It is my belief that graphic design history has too often been presented through a parade of styles and individual achievements devoid of significant social context, and that this tendency has obscured much of the richness and complexity of its development.’21 Such an assertion is questioned by Paul Jobling in a review published in the *Journal of Design History* (2008), where he reflects that ‘Eskilson’s study ends up more or less as a chronological survey, another history of graphic design rather than “a new history”’.22

The narratives of graphic design history have thus ranged from the chronological and biographical to the visual and contextual. Yet, as Steven Heller wrote in the introduction to his reader *Graphic Design History* (2001), ‘While design historians must use cultural and political histories as backdrops, ultimately the stories they tell must be rooted in issues of design. The challenge is, therefore, to find pegs on which to hang design history so that it is relevant beyond the design ghetto.’23 It is to this task that we now must turn.

**The little magazine in graphic design history**

The relationship of design practice to its history is a continuing theme in Dilnot’s writing. For graphic design, he states, ‘history seemed to be irrelevant for a discipline in the process of forming itself and attempting to escape the historic limitations of arts-and-crafts attitudes and its commercial art background’.24 Yet, it is in early publications such as *Typos: International Journal of Typography* (produced at the London College of Printing, and mentioned in Dilnot’s footnote 31) and other independent publishing ventures that a history of graphic design (and indeed printing traditions) is documented—whether consciously or not. These publications on type might be considered design objects in and of themselves. One way of reconnecting with Dilnot’s plea for a historical method ‘fit for purpose’ could be to consider this extra dimension: in other words, in what ways might the work of criticism function as a designed ‘graphic’ artefact and hence as a work of visual critique in its own right? This is a view echoed by the curator Freek Lomme in his recent essay on the tensions between industrial and visual design. He writes that visual design ‘. . . is not just about form or about content. It is about form of communication that is carved hand in hand along with the material conditions and immaterial paradigms’.25

Certainly, this does not discount the celebratory or the aesthetic (see Dilnot’s footnote 95, which recognizes a possible history of the design profession to be found in the design of the ‘glossy pages’ of magazines such as *Domus* and *Industrial Design*), but it does offer new possibilities for present-day design criticism and history. Such possibilities, however, require a platform for debate, a way of disseminating information to a broader audience. Dilnot asks ‘to what extent can history contribute to the understanding of what design is and what the designer does, and
to what extent can history make that understanding public?’ It is here where graphic
design, as a practice that considers its audience as a primary element of the com-
munication process, is able to contribute more fully.

Graphic design critics such as Rick Poynor, for example, regularly lament the defi-
ciencies of mainstream publishing practices in producing books that focus on the
dissemination of a graphic design history. On the other hand, such gaps in pub-
lishing have left the field open to a plethora of independently produced graphic
design self-published magazines—many emerging out of the 1980s wave of graphic
design activity. Emigre, for example, began as a fanzine for typographers and
gradually emerged as one of the more dynamic documents of 1980s and 1990s
graphic design. Despite its eventual absorption into mainstream design practices,
the publication’s founders, Zuzana Licko and Rudy VanderLans, regularly sought
to make it a ‘meeting place for ideas’ where graphic design stood ‘at its very cen-
ter’. The magazine was about graphic design, ‘craft, style, practice, education, the-
ory, history, ethics, as well as its impact on our society.’

British designers were also exploring ways in which little magazines could become
venues for discussions on matters of typographic design, both historical and con-
temporary. Although short lived, with a series of eight issues launching in 1986,
Octavo: An International Journal of Typography, produced by the British design
group 8V0, generated a great interest amongst the design community internation-
ally, at the same time running essays that interrogated issues related to design and
typography. For example, Bridget Wilkins’ piece ‘Type and Image’, first published
in issue 90.7, questioned conventions of reading, layout and legibility. The design
of the essay produced a highly contested space as a result of the visual tension
between the page layout and its content. Its producers conceived Octavo as a forum
for challenging the conventions and accepted practices of typography. Despite its
position a forum for visual experimentation, some critics argued that the journal’s
design continually ‘overwhelmed’ the authors’ texts. On reflection, the designers
explained:

This was partly driven by what we perceived as a growing expectation
(among the audience) of the design and print production with each issue
published. But, we were the client, and the audience were typographers
and designers—we were designing for the visually literate, which of course
is not the same as designing, for example, a bus timetable for public uses.
We understood the difference and the context.

Octavo emerged out of a growing tradition of self-published magazines in which
designers found the freedom to experiment with visual forms and production tech-
niques. A decade later, two other significant publications emerged: Zed (1995–
2000) edited by Katie Salen, then based at Virginia Commonwealth University, and
Peter Bilak and Stuart Bailey’s Dot Dot Dot (2000–) in the Netherlands [1]. These
publications reflected a shift in focus by their producers from overt typographic
experimentation to an editorial and design policy more akin to the production of a
‘fanzine-journal’. Much like the fanzines that emerged in the late 1970s, Dot Dot Dot
in particular developed out of a keen interest in the process of making. Co-founder
Bilak reflects that ‘in fact the actual process of making the magazine is the real
motivation. For ourselves, DDD cannot be defined by a single description. If it does,
it becomes stifled and we should do something about it. I suppose it is mainly
about the development.’ Despite the publication’s change in publisher (now
Stuart Bailey and David Reinfurt as Dexter Sinister), such process orientation has
become even more visible. For example, Dexter Sinister presented three evenings
of events held at Somerset House, London (2008), where the content of a forth-
coming issue of Dot Dot Dot was played out ‘live’ before an audience, thus ‘existing
in “real time” before being hardened into printed form’.
During this period, Visual Culture emerged as an area of study, introducing graphic design writers and historians to new ways of framing the visuality of graphic artefacts. Zed, for example, framed discussions of designed objects around socio-political themes including the politics of design, public and private, design and morality as well as semiotics and pedagogy. Meanwhile, Dot Dot Dot questioned the tensions existing between art and design drawing and a broader context of art practice, music, language, politics, film and literature.

It may be suggested that these publications have gone some way in documenting the history of the profession and its debates through content as well as ‘designed’ forms. Thus, they and other little magazines have an impact on the ways in which graphic design is positioned and documented within both theoretical and historical frameworks. Nonetheless, their reach to a broader ‘public’ audience is still limited. In the case of Dot Dot Dot, only 3000 copies per issue were printed in 2004 for example, and although distributed worldwide tended to be read by designers and educators. As such, we must be cautious in claiming that the little magazine has had an impact on the ways in which a broader public might consider a history of graphic design.

The remaking of graphic design history: little magazines

Graphic design history has in many ways built upon traditions found in architectural history and its understanding of theory and practice. It is worth looking for a moment at the publishing traditions fostered by architectural little magazines of the early 1960s and 1970s, which exploited potential synergies between graphic designers and architects. These were indeed ‘engagements of enquiry’ and through collaboration demonstrated the visual and critical richness found at such an intersection of these disciplines.
Such little magazine collaborations were featured in the recently held exhibition at the Architectural Association in London titled ‘Clip Stamp Fold: The Radical Architecture of Little Magazines, 196X–197X’, which explored how experimental publications such as Room East 128 Chronicle, Archigram, Op.cit and Connection affected the development of a postwar architectural culture. The show’s curator, architectural historian Beatrix Colomina, argued that these often cheaply produced publications: ‘provided an arena for critical discussion of the role of politics and new technologies in architecture and through their dissemination, a global network of exchange amongst architectural students, avant-garde architects and theorists . . .’. Through form and critical discourse, the magazine’s specific concerns, and political and/or philosophical positions, reflected a moment on the historical timeline. Disseminated to a like-minded community, the little magazine (and in some cases broadsheet) represented an immediate snapshot of contemporary discourse and sometimes provided a catalyst for action.

For example, issue 1 of NET (1975) featured a cover printed in bright yellow and red showing an image of the British-born architectural critic and historian Colin Rowe, juxtaposed with a building by Berlin architect Ludwig Leo. Rowe became best known for his book Collage City (with Fred Koetter) and for identifying a ‘conceptual relationship between modernity and tradition’ in architecture. Here, NET publishes the transcription of Rowe’s conference piece on ‘Conceptual Architecture’ (1975), emphasizing the immediacy of the discourse within architectural circles. This ‘cut-n-paste’ sense of immediacy and urgency was soon formalized. One reviewer in the New York Times observed that with the launch of Oppositions (1973), both the debates and the design had become mainstream. For instance, the bright orange covers designed by Massimo Vignelli reflected the ‘more self-conscious discussion of architectural theory’ found inside.

The concept of little magazines permeated a range of cultural discourses throughout the 1970s, in literature as well as fine art practices. In graphic design, self-published magazines were also a feature of design and printing practices (e.g. Dot Zero, Typographische Monatsblätter (TM) and Push Pin Studios) and in art schools (e.g. Ark and Typos). By the 1980s and into the 1990s critical discourse was more prominent. An interest in graphic authorship combined with the desire to reflect a critical discourse in design and typography was prevalent in, amongst others, Emigre (Rudy VanderLans, USA), Octavo (8vo, UK), Dot Dot Dot and ZED. All these were publications designed and produced by their editors—a set-up that suggested that equal consideration was being given to both form and content generation. Something was happening in the world of design publishing, but it would take another step in its evolution to connect it with the notion of the everyday.

Design history and popular cultural theory

...I guess it [issue 1] reflects a bias towards the practice of graphic design being about documenting culture rather than creating culture. Artefacts are only interesting in as much as they index the rest of the world.

In Part II of the essay ‘The State of Design History’ (1984), Dilnot observes that ‘the integration of cultural studies with design history has not taken place’. He asks ‘what could design historians bring to the study of contemporary material culture?’ and goes on to suggest that consideration should be given to accounts of ‘cultural systems’ and the artefacts within them which ‘may well be useful for constructing a theory of design history’. It is worthwhile exploring further the way in which Dilnot positions the designed artefact and its context at the centre of the discourse, and what that means for graphic design.
In the UK, the 1980s saw the predominant model of Cultural Studies still informed by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, which essentially took a Marxist position on culture and saw criticism as a form of intervention. It also pioneered work in subcultural theory, focusing on notions of political resistance. Since then, Cultural Studies has moved on and become less dominated by such critiques and has drifted more towards the study of culture, in its broadest sense. In the 1980s, a new breed of design historian emerged, including Penny Sparke and Jeffrey Miekle, who embraced material culture as an approach to studying the designed artefact, taking into account not only the socio-historical context but also the process of design and production.

In the 2000s, Henry Jenkins and others took this approach even further to argue for an ‘emergent cultural studies’. This form of an ‘emergent perspective’ meant drawing upon culture that forms part of everyday life while at the same time ‘reclaiming cultural studies’ relationship to popular traditions of criticism and debate’. Thus, in a sentence that echoes the Birmingham School: ‘... pop culture’s politics continue to be formed not only by the historical context and the individual readers who experience it, but also by the ongoing class battle over who determines culture’.

This approach takes into account popular culture ‘as a potentially powerful and progressive political force in the battle to define “culture”’. An example would be early British punk ‘fanzines’ (a contraction of ‘fan magazines’) such as Sniffin Glue, Ripped & Torn and Chainsaw, where individuals’ voices of opposition played a part in informing an understanding of subcultures. As the ‘zines were quickly absorbed into the mainstream, any position of resistance suggested by the visual was subsequently made less threatening. The visual characteristics of ‘cut-n-paste’ ransom note letterforms, collage and hand-drawn and typewritten texts became commonplace, appropriated by advertisers and large retail chains. A graphic language of ‘resistance’ once found in the realm of the subcultural emerged as a ‘cool’ understated message for consumers.

The graphic design publications under discussion in this essay are not oppositional in the sense of being political interventions, but rather express, as the fanzines did before them, the need to be linked to other like-minded individuals and to be considered as an integral part of such a group. The framework that I propose here for examining the phenomenon of designers’ publications draws from the recent work of Jenkins and his discussion of the centrality of popular culture; in particular, his work that focuses on fan cultures (the fan scholar) and the manner in which this is contextualized. The National Grid, much like the architectural publications of the 1970s, reflects a fascination for crossing disciplinary territories while at the same time documenting ‘culture’. This little magazine is challenging perceived notions of what graphic design history should be. It is at once local and international, taking as its cue the perspectives of a new wave of young designers steeped in the culture of music, fanzines and the design of the everyday. The National Grid’s editors are also the publication’s designers, with a commitment to providing a mouthpiece for those voices not normally heard. In doing so, a history of a design culture and design practice is made explicit.

A case study—passionate about music, design and culture:
The National Grid

I think it would be interesting if graphic design could look at itself in relation to music rather than architecture or industrial design. Then we wouldn’t have to talk about problem solving, and we could talk about resonance instead.
Launched in 2006, The National Grid is edited and produced by Luke Wood and Jonty Valentine with the stated intent of plugging the ‘void in New Zealand’s design discourse’ [2–5]. Its title was chosen at first because they ‘just thought it sounded good’ but later associations with music were made with the name of a New Zealand recording studio and a Bats album titled At The National Grid.44 Thus, there are obvious echoes of the ‘design grid’ and of national (New Zealand) consciousness. Yet there is also a desire to speak to an international readership: in issue 1 its editors comment, ‘Artefacts are only interesting in as much as they index the rest of the world’.45

Fig 2. The National Grid no.1 (March 2006), front and back cover. Front cover by Luke Wood and Jonty Valentine, back cover featuring a folder belonging to Dylan Herkes. Image courtesy of the editors.

Fig 3. The National Grid no.2 (December 2006), front and back cover. Front cover by Dylan Herkes, back cover featuring the back cover of the album Clyma Est Mort by The Dead C. Image courtesy of the editors.
This correlation between local and global cultural production is reflected throughout many of the essays published thus far in the five issues of the series (prevalent in the work by Kerr and Wood and others). Steve Kerr’s essay ‘Labels from the Post-Punk Periphery’ (issue 2), for example, reflects upon the significance of New Zealand’s independent record label ‘Flying Nun’ as a ‘major cultural movement’. Explicit links are made to a broader post-punk music scene but specifically in relationship to an emerging ‘do-it-yourself’ ethos. New Zealand’s geographical position—peripheral, often overlooked—resonates with the ‘edgy’ post-punk musical and design directions. Kerr remarks: ‘Thinking carefully about the connections between local culture and international movements might offer a fruitful approach to understanding New Zealand’s pop cultural preferences and its wider society’.

The National Grid is an independently produced publication with a relatively small press run, distributed through the Web, by word of mouth, and sold in selected specialist bookstores internationally. The first issue was financed by a grant from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts with subsequent funding from Creative New Zealand, the government’s arts council. The publication is modelled on ‘a cheap lo-fi graphic design fanzine’ and therefore there is no advertising and, in the first two issues, a reliance on low production qualities to enhance its sense of belonging in the margins. There is a clear nod to the visual referencing of music fanazines in the way text is sometimes crossed out and the subversion of the conventions of traditional layout (e.g. the footnotes appear before the essay). The printing is less than perfect. In fact, the editors connect this to the current conditions of the printing industry in New Zealand, where the debates between ‘trade’ and ‘craft’ are current (by issue 3, ‘Colour Plates’ are highlighted in a separate section at the front of the issue, perhaps indicating increased trust in the ability of the printers). At the same time, the design of the publication takes a ‘knowing’ approach to the look and feel of the production and layout format of early issues of Dot Dot Dot.

On another level, The National Grid shares concerns similar to those of the editors of Dot Dot Dot. Take, for example, an essay published in issue 3 by Jonty Valentine, reflecting on an exhibition he curated of ‘commonplace books’—the precursor to modern-day reference books. Valentine quotes from Stuart Bailey’s music writings published in Dot Dot Dot, as well as those texts written by British
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Thus, he makes the link with Bailey’s ideas on ‘graphic design as translation’—that is, the transformation from the conceptual to the physical object. The central theme of the exhibition (titled ‘Just hold me’) and its accompanying essay focuses on an intent to ‘. . . showcase (in this case publication) design as a dimension of object making—and in doing, to profile designers as makers’. The author critically evaluates the judging processes of contemporary New Zealand’s professional design awards by problematizing the design brief and, the resulting discourse, and making visible the design process.

An emergent Cultural Studies takes into account the shift from ‘author’ to ‘maker’ in order to acknowledge the process of generating cultural materials. The notion of the author and the emphasis on authority, which ultimately is relational, takes into account origins, process, aesthetic and ideological goals. Jenkins writes: ‘The concept of “Maker” allows us to understand that works have origins, that they are made from earlier works, and that the aesthetic and ideological goals of their makers are relevant to our understanding of their production and circulation’.

The editors of The National Grid document their early thinking about the rationale behind this direction in a double-page spread located on pages 38 and 39 in issue 1 [6]. Citations for the piece are found on the previous page 37, making evident their ‘critical map’ (based upon Salvador Dali’s ‘Paranoid-Critical Method’) prior to the reading of the rationale. The double-page spread organizes itself into categories of reflection providing a framework where consideration is given, for example, to the publication’s perspective on the ‘peripheral’. The producers argue for the idea of being at the ‘outer edge’ of the dominant design profession in New Zealand. In
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The National Grid keeps returning to manifestos [p.90]. One of our early sessions was spent getting acquainted with the fundamentalist religious overtones of New Zealand Government’s ‘Better by Design’ manifestos. We wanted to offer a counter-manifesto, inspired by the manifestos of early Modernism, like Jan Tschichold’s De Neue Typographie, and of course The Communist Manifesto by Marx, and Engels. Marx starts with: ‘A society is haunting Europe—The spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance, and we wanted to start off with an equally ominous statement. Marx’s writing was a salvation narrative, his chosen people the proletariat. We wanted to have our own design salvation narrative—to define ourselves in opposition to the ‘Better’ folk. A Manifesto does seem like a ridiculous idea in this day and age [p.153], but we were charmed by the radical fervor and aggressive zeal of these early twentieth century glimpses of utopia. We thought we should fight fire with fire, with evangelism, with evangelism.

**Manifesto**

The National Grid is a peripheral publication for graphic design. That this occurred to us while putting this issue together [p.85]. That it could be applied to most, if not all, of the articles you see here. That is summed up nicely by some of our earlier attempts to develop a ‘declaration’ for this project. That we like the connection to the optional bits you place with your company’s, but that, more generally a ‘periphery’ is an outer edge, an imprecise boundary of some domain. And therefore, as opposed to centralists. And finally that, we are aware of the asymptotic nature of such a quest [in vain we]

**Fig 6.** The National Grid adopted a graphic language found in early punk fanzines while also subverting the conventional layout of a design magazine. Issue 1, March 2006, pp. 38-39. Image courtesy of the editors.

**Fig 7.** The National Grid’s editors define the magazine’s relationship to the peripheral. They explain ‘it [The National Grid] aims to be a peripheral publication for graphic design... a periphery is an outer edge, an imprecise boundary of some domain. And therefore, as opposed to centralizers.’ This is similar to the idea that fanzines are ‘below critical radar’. The National Grid also represents resistance to the cultural norm in the way the publication fills a conspicuously empty space in New Zealand’s design discourse. Like many little magazines, there is a move away, in terms of content, from a reliance on business and client relationships.

Nonetheless, this is not to say that The National Grid does not embrace the conventions of writing about graphic design history or theory. Other essays in the publication include historical discussions such as ‘The Lay of the Case: Putting NZ Communication Design on the Map’ or more theoretical positioning of design in ‘Graphic Design Needs a Distortion Pedal’ [7]. In addition, essays appear that focus on the everyday, such as exterior signs on university buildings and New Zealand postcards, as well as a theoretical positioning of Michel de Certeau in relationship to counterfeit design [53].

The commissioned writers on The National Grid are normally also design practitioners—an approach which the editors hope will encourage writing about design that is ‘more speculative, resonant and useful... in crossing over between the world of popular music, art and conventional design history. The only criterion they have for contributors proposes that ‘The National Grid invites people to design and write
about aspects of graphic/visual culture—at home or abroad—that excite their curiosity and keep them up at night’. Jenkins observes that ‘the best cultural critics speak as ‘insiders’ as well as ‘outsiders’. Much as in the personal fanzines we see today, ‘writing about popular culture from an ‘up close and personal’ perspective has brought new issues to the foreground, such as the place of mass culture within personal and popular memory . ’. Jenkins argues for a ‘new relationship between academic and popular modes of engagement that takes the best of both worlds, recognizes and values alternative forms of knowledge production, and seeks to better map the continuities and differences between them’. Any study of documents such as these, however, raises interesting questions about the relationship between historical understanding and material documentation. Foucault comments on this problematic in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* where he cautions: ‘The document is not the fortunate tool of a history that is primarily and fundamentally memory; history is one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked’.

*The National Grid* has a circulation of 500. It does get distributed in Europe and the USA and has a Web presence (http://www.thenationalgrid.co.nz/). It has not yet garnered any publicity in the mainstream design press, so far as I am aware, but its value resides in its attitude. No longer are graphic designers treating history and their subject in a linear fashion: the incorporation of perspectives on popular culture opens up the possibility of looking at the individual, the everyday and the ‘cultural object as the primary source of meaning’.

Little magazines have been pivotal in this shift. They reflect a slice of time through their explorations of the social, political and cultural frameworks in which they
operate. *The National Grid* is not only a prime example but also takes the discussion further into the realm of design process, method and operating on the ‘margins’ of mainstream practice. At the same time, *The National Grid* provides a forum to highlight New Zealand’s graphic design history and to address the international context in which its history resides. Any written design history and criticism needs to have a critical distance between that which is produced and analysed. I would, however, argue that self-produced design publications provide valuable insights into the theoretical and visual concerns that enrich our understanding of the history of the profession, graphic artefacts and their cultural contexts.

Teal Triggs  
London College of Communication  
University of the Arts, London  
E-mail: t.triggs@lcc.arts.ac.uk

*If you have any comments to make in relation to this article, please go to the journal website on http://jdh.oxfordjournals.org and access this article. There is a facility on the site for sending e-mail responses to the editorial board and other readers.*

Notes

3 S. McCarthy, ‘What is Self-authored Graphic Design Anyway?’, 1995 <http://www.episodic-design.com/writings/agenda.html> accessed 25 May 2009. A year later, Michael Rock outlined the phenomenon of ‘The Designer as Author’ for *Eye* magazine (Eye, 20, Spring, 1996), which has been republished on the Internet (www.typotheque.com and http://www.2x4.org/) and in the *Education of a Graphic Designer* edited by Steven Heller (1998). In his essay, Rock suggests that the ‘designer as author’ may be defined as: (1) the designers who are writing and publishing material about design, (2) the designer who constructs other’s narratives or (3) the designer who is involved in the ‘creation of self-referential statements’. This is also to distinguish it from Rick Poynor’s arguments of visual journalism and the ‘designer as reporter’ in R. Poynor, ‘The Designer as Reporter’, in *Obey the Giant*, August/Birkhauser, Basel, 2001, pp.185–8.  
11 This is a point taken up again in 2005 by Rick Poynor in his keynote during ‘New Views: Repositioning Graphic Design History’ held at the London College of Communication. See also the conference review by A. Twemlow, ‘New Views: Repositioning Graphic Design History’, *Eye*, 70, Spring, 2006. Graphic Design History has always had difficulty in being seen as an established field of study. Although typography and book design, perhaps in the way it has developed out of printing traditions, is more firmly represented by a range of historical accounts (e.g. William Irwins (1953); S.H. Steinberg (1996); Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin (1976)). Dilnot acknowledges this as well (1984: 10).  
16 Publisher’s promotional blurb in the first edition (Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design*). Even today it continues to be one of the most influential written histories, appearing on class reading lists internationally.  
17 For an in-depth discussion of books published in the 1990s, see T. Triggs, ‘The Endless Library at the End of Print’, *Eye*, vol. 27, no. 7, Spring, 1998, pp. 39–47  
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book, drawing the conclusion that the book ‘makes an admi-

rable leap in the right direction of adding social context to a


Graphic Design History’, in Design Observer: Writings on Design

and Culture, M. Bierut, W. Drenttel, J. Helfund, J. Lasky (eds.).


21 S. J. Eskilson, Graphic Design: A New History, Laurence King,


Graphic Design History, Allworth Press, New York, 2001,
p. viii.


(ed.), Design Discourse: History Theory Criticism, The University


25 F. Lomme, ‘Descarting—A Study of the Tension Between


and Industrial Design Mutually Attracts and Distracts, Eindhoven:


26 R. Poynor, Reluctant Discipline: Graphic Design History’s


Symposium on the History of Graphic Design, London College of


27 Z. Licko & R. VanderLans, ‘Extract’ from Emigre Exhibition

Catalogue, Drukkerij Rosbeek bv, The Netherlands, 1998 <http :

://www.emigre.com/EB.php?id=93> accessed 8 November

2008.


29 R. VanderLans, ‘Peter Bilak Founder of Typotheque, Dot Dot Dot’

<http://www.typotheque.org/articles/peter_bilakFounder_

_of_typotheque_dot_dot_dot_arelbuilder.com> accessed 8


30 ‘Wouldn’t it be Nice: Wishful Thinking in Art and Design’ <http://

www.somersethouse.org.uk/visual_arts/721.asp> accessed 8

November 2008.

31 This also applied to numerous fine art publications as well as

literary little magazines.

32 The show opened in New York City at the Storefront for Art and


33 Introductory panel and press release Beatriz Colomina: organized

by AACP/Sheuman Baser, Clip Stamp Fold: The Radical Architecture


Association London <http://www.clipstampfold.com> accessed 5

October 2008.

34 Indeed, the importance of publications in maintaining a contem-

porary discourse is picked up in Rosalee Goldberg’s article ‘The

Word on Art, or the New Magazines’, an assessment of a new

generation of magazines, which ‘want to use the magazine

format as a catalyst for attitudes that have slowly emerged in

the past few years’, unlike those of the previous decade, which

discrims as vehicles for a ‘search for a new world’


35 N. Ouroussoff, ‘Such Cheek! Those Were the Days, Architects’,


36 The only one that continues to be published is Dot Dot Dot, which

started out as a graphic design magazine (its first issue featured

a comprehensive list of all the graphic design publications pro-

duced internationally) has now been described as ‘twice-yearly

“jocuserious” art journal’. T. Elborough, ‘Masterclasses in arts


37 L. Wood & J. Valentine (eds.), ‘Index: More Paranoid-Critical Map


38 Dilnot, op. cit., p. 9.

39 H. Jenkins, T. McPherson & J. Shattuck (eds.), Hop on Pop: The

Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture, Duke University Press,


40 Ibid., p. 40.

41 Ibid., p. 26.

42 See T. Triggs, Generation Terrorists: The Politics and Graphic

Language of Punk and Riot Grrrl Fanzines in Britain 1976–2000,


43 L. Wood & J. Valentine (eds.), ‘Index: More Paranoid-Critical Map


44 In subsequent conversations with Luke Wood, he explained the

impact of the Manchester-based Factory Records that had been

very influential on the design and music scene in New Zealand.

For Wood as an Indy producer, this would manifest itself in the

adoption of a visual language for The National Grid which drew

in part upon with the hard industrial edge of Britain’s northern

city.

45 The National Grid editors acknowledge how they have relied on

‘the design-found object’ in the first issue (for example, Max

Hailstone’s book Design and Designers (1985), sport scoreboards

and postcards) and they admit this results in being a ‘bit artefact-y’.

Wood and Valentine (eds.), op. cit., p. 39.

46 S. Kerr, ‘Labels from the Post-Punk Periphery’, The National Grid,

no. 2, December, 2006, p. 82.

47 J. Valentine, ‘Commonplace Books and Other Rhetorical Devices


48 Ibid., p. 89

49 Jenkins et al., op. cit., p. 161.

50 This form of revealing a mapping of ideas and relationships is an

inherent part of the design process. The National Grid editors

express their interest in the linking or associations of events/ideas

that are not normally connected.

51 Wood & Valentine (eds.), op. cit., p. 38.

52 R. Sabin & T. Triggs, Below Critical Radar: Fanzines and


53 This notion of tactics and resistance is explored by Luke Wood in

issue 3 in his essay ‘Counterfeit Design: A Tactical Approach’,

pp. 44–9. Here, Wood presents the recent case of Rebecca Li,

who had set up a design and advertising company near Auckland

and was allegedly also engaged in document forgeries.

54 ‘TBI Tuesday Q&A: Luke Wood of The National Grid’, The Big


55 Jenkins et al., op. cit., p. 7.

56 Ibid., p. 9.

57 Ibid.

58 M. Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, Routledge, London,


59 Jenkins et al., op. cit., p. 35.