

Visitations

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Following are excerpts from a series of online chats that took place in September 2002 between Louise Sandhaus in California, Kali Nikitas in Minnesota and Denise Gonzales Crisp in North Carolina. Together, these three designers/educators had taken a two-week trip in June to Holland and London to visit designers and design programs, museums and fashion houses. These chats reflect on the state of graphic design as they encountered it, and were also meant to help inform the three as they returned to teaching and developing curriculum at California Institute of the Arts, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and NCSU's College of Design, respectively.

Denise: Okay getting started. What motivated you two to organize this trip?

Kali: As the chair of a graphic design program, it was important to reacquaint myself with the European design community, both for my own growth and to set up potential relationships with studios and schools for study abroad, internships, visiting artists, etc.

Louise: I work with an astounding faculty, but I still felt I needed to expand my scope of influence and be exposed to the ideas and issues that designers in other countries are dealing with.

Kali: I was reminded how a different political and social climate affects designers and their work philosophy and formal expression. I noticed a lot of simple, clean work and the need to make design be more than just pretty. Particularly in the exhibition we saw at the Design Museum in London, curated by Emily King and Christian Küsters.

Louise: I wrote a review of that show for Eye. It was based on the book Restart, which was about the response by designers to an exhausted postmodern chaos through creative use of systems or sets of rules to define the process...

Denise: ...that can also control the outcome of the form. My sense is that design studios, and education programs - or maybe the more progressive design programs - are starting to ask how designers might contribute more deeply to the process of design. How they can find themselves both at the core of developing systems that continue to generate form, as well as making the end product, and understanding how these forms work in the culture.

Louise: Yes, but in some of these programs it seems that the more designers get involved in the "product," the more the development of the visual form as a significant contribution to the function of the work gets diminished or overwhelmed.

Kali: Which is a big mistake.

Denise: Right. Can you say Jacob Nielsen?

Kali: When you believe that form is not important, you are being naïve or lazy.

Denise: What about the form we encountered in Holland and England? Are the designers we talked to developing systems at the expense of the form?

Kali: Depends on the designer. Take Foundation 33. They stick to systems so much that the form does not vary much from project to project. The form suffers. Experimental Jet Set, Graphic Thought Facility (and the list goes on, also in the U.S.), have made some interesting systems that have generated some interesting forms, but by now it's a bit trendy and predictable.

Denise: Would you say Experimental Jet Set was among the originators of this trend though? I ask, because I do think some of their work is attempting to find intelligent counters to style mongering. Unfortunately, the forms their systems generate are borrowed from the "unemotive" universally minded sixties.

Louise: Some of their work reminds me of 60s conceptualism, of Sol Lewitt's manifesto. Lewitt said that "Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful form."

Kali: I'm thinking about the "Conceptual Art" show we saw at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The work in that exhibition was beautiful and rooted in new ways of thinking. The form that those artists created was not boring, maybe because the form was a natural expression of the times.

Denise: It's no accident that this show was curated now. Clearly there's a trend toward, or back to, a type of conceptualism filled with thick and juicy ideas. Graphic designers seem to have adopted the look too, though. Which is why I think the trend toward sixties and seventies modernism is as much about mining the past (pomo) as it is an attempt to redirect our values.

Louise: I wonder if 60s-style conceptualism really ever went away in Europe. I'd also like to point out that there's two kinds of conceptualism. There's the conceptualism that tries to get the material object out of the equation. For instance, Shoot, the 1971 performance by artist Chris Burden, where he had someone shoot him in the arm, was about an experience as a work of art rather than an object. And then there's the conceptualism in which the system is the idea, which finds its expression in a particular visual form.

Denise: I'm thinking of Karl Gerstner and his modular systems which generated and regenerated form like a machine, and new form at that. This isn't what we saw in Europe, though.

Kali: No, it's not. We saw designers who were either ignoring history, or were unaware of history.

Denise: Right. Remember, Experimental Jet Set even said that in Europe Helvetica is just a typeface, and doesn't mean what it might in the U.S. I guess that does indicate they're aware though.

Louise: From what I could tell, very little history, design or otherwise, is taught in the schools we visited. "Now" seems to be a blank slate that arrived from nowhere.

Kali: And look at how few of the designers we visited were interested in what we are doing or what is happening in the U.S.

Denise: Did anyone ever ask about our work, our programs?

Kali: That's my question. Maybe my expectations of the profession are too high. Since school, I have been interested in what is happening on both coasts as well as across the ocean. I think everyone should look beyond their backyard. It seems natural to have a dialogue with designers in other countries. But maybe our education was unique. And maybe the Europeans we met are content, and aren't looking elsewhere for any answers.

Louise: I also want to bring up Hal Foster's new book Design and Crime, which is this melancholic reflection on design. He talks about Rem Koolhaas - a designer who generates unique, well-researched descriptions of contemporary cultural conditions into which his designs are supposed to function. For instance, the project on China and the one on shopping that he did with the Harvard students where they create these over-the-top comprehensive doorstopper compendiums of the history and circumstances of an existing cultural situation. Rather than imagine utopic or idealized conditions instead of the realities of shopping and development, he and the students are more interested in describing a condition that actually exists. I'm guessing that it's to get a better grasp on what to design before considering what the designed thing looks like. But there doesn't seem to be a consideration of the social or political agendas that these situations he's describing represent. And so there's no response in the "design solution" to that part of "reality," including the possibility of saying, "This isn't the future I want to live in," and perhaps offering some viable, alternative proposal. Some of the graphic design work we saw had a similarly partially-blind agenda. And unlike Rem's project, there seems to be little knowledge of the past; no vision of the future, no reason for why anything is being made.

Denise: This lack of a greater context is the true issue for me. And as you suggest, it is what seemed to have gone missing in what we saw in Europe. So many designers were attempting to find something meaningful. And I applaud that. Yet the result seemed to still end up being capital "D" design. For me, much of what we saw still comes back to a wholesale acceptance of what graphic design is supposed to look like. No one we visited, except maybe Goodwill and Graphic Thought Facility, was attempting to challenge D-design.

Louise: Design vs. design?

Denise: Big D design is where the only goal is to create appropriate solutions to any so-called problem provided by a client, where the drive toward resolution overwhelms exploration of other formal possibilities. This kind of work must always look like design, rather than, by contrast, looking like, well, design informed by things other than graphic design!

Louise: Let's follow through on the Goodwill example. He struck a chord.

Denise: Yes, I think he touched a major nerve.

Kali: My first reaction to his work was, "how familiar!" The thinking and form - it looked like CalArts work from the late 80s.

Louise: I think the work was incredibly nihilistic. It depressed me. The idea that even common sense or thoughtfulness could be abandoned and the work still be considered design.

Denise: For me Goodwill was one of the few designers attempting to break away from the dictates of Euro-determined design. Anti-style (and I agree, been-there-done-that), but also anti-modern. And that's another step in the right direction as far as I'm concerned.

Louise: But his work gives up hope that design - not as a mere exercise in aesthetics, but as shaping of thought and thoughtful shaping - has significance. I can appreciate what you're saying Denise. And yes, over-aesthetized work is tiresome. But works intended as public communications done without intention to further that function! Sorry, but it's really a sign of "why bother, it's all crap and doesn't matter anyway" to me. Excuse me while I get a handkerchief, sniff, sniff.

Denise: Shaping significance is most closely tied today to shaping systems. And this is among the things Goodwill was attempting, whether he knew it or not. He is shaping systems that don't manifest as groovy computer form, that aren't modular and "high level" views, but systems that might move us past taste as a guiding principle, or personal expression, and into forms that reflect and interact with users, clients, designers, everybody.

Louise: So Denise, your answer is don't shape at all?!

Denise: No. But think of the way an imprinted address on a piece of direct mail interferes with tidy aesthetics. He's just corralling some of that. At least he wasn't quoting high-modern design as if it were so much vernacular.

Louise: But he was using vernacular; the vernacular of default!

Kali: Lousie, you mean that "default" equals not originating or designing the form? And that he seems to be assuming, because he is being conceptual, that the form he creates will automatically be meaningful?

Louise: Yes. Actually, it's something I'd say was pervasive in much of the work we saw elsewhere. I call it the "style of the everyday." And it reflects what I believe is the continuing crisis of representation, that is, the problem that designers like Goodwill have with representing a world that is so full of complexity, information and contradictions that no one feels up to the challenge of representing it. Instead we get non-representation. Defaults. They leave everything "as is."

Kali: I have a different take on him. I perceive Goodwill as trying to distinguish himself by exploring issues such as designer as author, or designer as director of audience experience. The look and function of his work is decided in part by the user. But he should have been in contact with American designers, because these issues that he is struggling with were explored in the late 80s and 90s at schools like Cranbrook, CalArts, and Yale. He could have saved himself a lot of time if he had been exposed to these explorations.

Denise: Still, his method is at least one way to get design practice to reflect more depth, to represent actual living beings instead of martha-matons. This is the concern I continue to see surface over and over, in Europe, and the U.S. Goodwill seems to be trying to make things meaningful by disregarding or kicking at design Euro-standards. And I agree with this push. Though as Kali said, maybe it's what we saw going on in the U.S. a while ago.

Denise: Let's talk about what we might be carrying around as a sort of souvenir from this trip, something we refer to in our thoughts, a teeny muse.

Louise: I saw this textile design at Central St. Martins and RCA. The stuff was so compelling. It was conceptually based and so full of energy and visceral. By comparison, the graphic design work we saw looked limp.

Kali: I remember the dinner with Rick Vermeulen, and the chef who promised us a great meal and delivered! And Rick's work, which still resonates with me.

Denise: His is the one poster I put up upon returning. Very vital stuff, still, for me too.

Louise: There were those Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka glass sea creatures at the Design Museum in London. Their radiance outshined the "Graphics Now" show in the next room.

Louise: And Karel Marten's grandbaby announcement.

Denise: And the layers of history and decoration of the Amsterdam streets. The work you mention bore out passionate responses to making. Maybe as designers, we all just want to move beyond the replicable one-off, or that oh-so-clever graphic aloofness. These things we are reacting to have what in common?

Louise: Passion, yes. Caring. The sign that something matters!

Denise: I'm afraid I found so much joy in non-design things that it seems immaterial to our conversation. In Antwerp, the view out my window of the wrought iron pensione sign set against the massive carved stone tower of the cathedral. Or not understanding a politically charged argument over architecture, in Dutch, during a lecture at the back of a restaurant in Amsterdam with Henk Elenga occasionally translating in my ear. Or the intense red and green where that working-class strip mall was converted into a living lesson in art.

Louise: We're bad. No wonder so many cringe at calling themselves graphic designers. Even us champions of graphic design found so much more outside design to move us.

Kali: There's always room to grow. And what we're doing here in the states ain't so bad after all.

Denise: Don't you think we're in a unique position as Americans to play many sides at once?

Louise: we ARE in a unique position to ask what do we want to invent for this culture?

Denise: Right, we need to create rather than react.

Kali: This trip reminded me that when one is a full-time designer, there is little room for questioning, challenging, and shifting the profession. As teachers, we're in a privileged position to affect change with our students, and also maybe take risks in our own practice.

Louise: We've have GOT to get over the Adbusters mentality in academia. Instead of critiquing everything and complaining, we have the opportunity to really address our society and culture. But we must have some sort of picture about our hopes and dreams for the culture and the society in which we live and then build something that will further that vision. But I want to emphasize the need to accept this culture as it is and insert ideas from and into that culture.

Denise: While I agree that the Adbusters approach isn't as productive as social service, for instance, it does inform about issues otherwise left unaddressed.

Kali: But it tends to ignore complexity. They are SO black and white. What about the person who has to feed their family and is in no position to protest? We can challenge and should challenge, yes, but please! Let's look at the bigger picture.