
SURROUNDING US EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY...

Surrounding us every minute of every day – from packaging, print and signage to television identities and web pages – graphic design is an omnipresent aspect of modern life. Complex and ever changing in form, it synthesizes and transmits information to the public while, at the same time, reflecting society's cultural aspirations and moral values.

The four years since we published *Graphic Design for the 21st Century* (TASCHEN, 2003) have witnessed many developments in the practice of graphic design, and significant shifts of emphasis in both style and content. For example, the ever-growing interactivity of computers has transformed graphic design from an essentially static medium to one that increasingly involves movement. The greater sophistication of software solutions has also refined image manipulation, and graphic designers worldwide have creatively exploited the blurring of fiction and reality that this facilitates. Even that most respected of newsgathering agencies, Reuters, has been hoodwinked by images doctored to maximize their impact.



Stefan Sagmeister
Project: Annual report
for DDD Gallery in Osaka
and GGG Gallery in Tokyo.

2005 (photo: Matthias
Ernstberger)
Client: Dai Nippon
Printing Company

Many designers – and, of course, film makers – have exploited these potentialities to the full, generating hyper-real artificial environments in which even the laws of physics can be broken at will. This has given media of all kinds a rather surreal air, promoting greater skepticism among audiences who are no longer prepared to trust the evidence of their eyes. Indeed, the more polished the message and its delivery have become, the more distrust they seem to breed. Unsurprisingly, this trend has inspired many graphic designers to reconnect their work with the ‘authentic’ and hand-drawn – employing scratched, shaky or blotched visuals to suggest a trustworthy simplicity. Taken to extremes, this approach has spawned a variety of campaigns clearly constructed on the principle that, “if the ad is crap, the product must be good.” The almost cult success of the *Cillit Bang* campaign featuring the over-enthusiastic “Barry” and his cleaning products, revisited in endless spoofs and remixes on the web, succeeds precisely because of its garish ‘naffness’. Similarly, the huge impact of *Dove’s Real Women* campaign owes much to its parodying of ‘glamour’ advertisements and the rigidly idealized portrayal of female beauty that they display.

To the same extent popular web sites such as *YouTube*, a video-sharing portal which allows easy-to-access self-broadcasting, have fundamentally changed the nature of user participation by offering media exposure on the audience’s own terms. In some ways this digital ascendancy has eroded the professional graphic designer’s status – now everyone with access to a personal computer thinks he or she is a design maestro, regardless of talent. This do-it-yourself ability has also eroded the line between homage and plagiarism, with the result that designers in professional practice really have to be on the creative ball to stay ahead of the digital game. At the same time, however, this digital revolution has also led to a greater freedom within graphic design – the sophisticated software at designers’ fingertips allows them to play freely with ideas that would otherwise have taken hours if not days to work up. John L. Walters, the editor of *Eye* magazine, recently summarized the current situation as follows, “Today, any engagement with process usually touches on the digital.”

After all, many of the younger generation of graphic designers working today grew up with computers and have a detailed understanding of programming. Fundamentally, they are technophiles rather than technophobes. Rather than being intimidated by technology, they are prepared to experiment with

and subvert it. Indeed, designers have frequently cracked commercial software codes so as to adapt it to their own requirements. For example, the *Scriptographer* plugin (designed in 2001 by Jürg Lehni) is a wayward child of the ubiquitous *Adobe Illustrator™*, and uses *JavaScript* to extend the original software’s functionality allowing, according to its web site, “the creation of mouse controlled drawing-tools, effects that modify existing graphics and scripts that create new ones”. Many of *Scriptographer’s* tools are designed to generate visual complexity – *Tree* script sprouts seemingly random branches; *Fiddlehead* script grows fern-like tendrils; *Tile Tool* script has an engaging block-like quality; *Faust* script has a topographical 3D quality; and (our personal favourite) *Stroke-Raster* script translates the pixel value of an image into diagonal lines of varying thickness.

This type of advanced software has led to a strong re-emergence of ornamental complexity within graphic design, and a post-modern delight in ‘more’ rather than ‘less’. In the past, hard-line Modernists believed ornament itself was linked to immorality. In his 1928 design manifesto *Ornament and Crime*, Adolf Loos famously asserted that, “the evolution of culture marches with the elimination of ornament.” This current renaissance of the decorative rejects such strictures for an exuberant and playful naivety. In part, this can be seen as an attempt to humanize communications, and to re-connect the audience with the message in an increasingly atomized and coldly corporate world.

The digital revolution has also led to the dissolving of many creative boundaries, allowing an ever-greater melding of graphic design with fine art, illustration, music and fashion – in fact many of the graphic designers featured in the coming pages are also artists, fashion designers, musicians, animators and film-makers. Today it is not unusual for graphic designers to go on to have ‘post-graphic-design’ careers as art directors and production designers. The leap from 2D to 3D design has been facilitated by the introduction of software such as *Maya*, *Previs* and *Studio Tools*, and their honed skills of composition can, therefore, be readily adapted to other media.

Understanding the technology used by designers does not, however, explain their motives for designing. For many, if not most, of the designers included in this publication, graphic design is not simply a job but a way of life and a source of identity. A significant number weave intellectual ambitions and agendas into



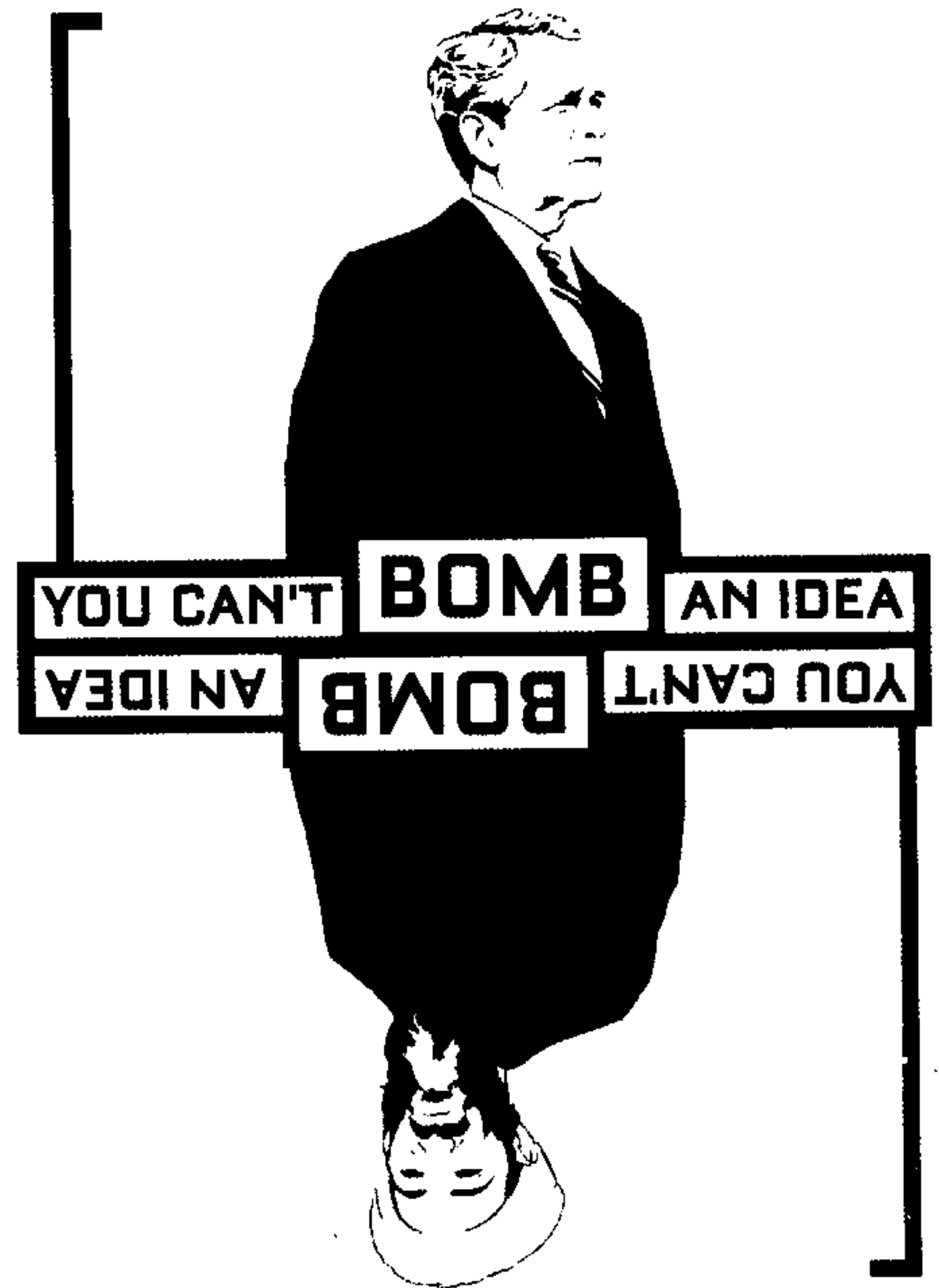
Bruce Willen Post Typography Client: Herb Magazine
Project: "The Chosen"
illustration for Jewish
cultural magazine, 2007

Jonathan Barnbrook
Project: "You Can't Bomb an
Idea" political message, 2003
Client: Self

their work, most commonly reflected in a left-leaning political outlook and a desire to highlight ethical and environmental concerns. In this regard, graphic designers are alert to the powerful tools of persuasion at their disposal. The same skills that can market fizzy drinks and soap powder can also be employed to change public attitudes on a whole raft of issues, be it sweatshop labour, environmental destruction, unfair trade practices, gender-discrimination or the war-fueling greed for oil. One of the most high profile graphic-designers-with-principles, Jonathan Barnbrook, declares his motivation to be, "an inner anger which is a response to all the unfairness that is in this world". His highly politicized work has conscientiously sought to challenge capitalist structures, and is as thought provoking as it is visually stimulating.

Similarly, in the last few years, the AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) has begun to see its mission as promoting socially responsible design, rather than the reputations of individual designers. In a recent statement the Institute acknowledged that, "In today's world, complex problems are usually those defined by a complex context. And increasingly, as noted in the Kyoto protocols, the Johannesburg conference on sustainable development, the global tensions surrounding cultural terrorism or revulsion, and a stumbling of economic growth, the context involves economic, environmental and cultural dimensions." Consistent with these sentiments, the AIGA has begun sponsoring a number of ethically-driven initiatives, such as *The Urban Forest Project* in New York's Times Square (October 2007). Importantly, the web now allows for a greater dissemination of this type of work among communities of like-minded people, and graphic designers increasingly understand their role as providing a vital interface between high politics and public consciousness.

There can, however, be a sharp division between those who see themselves as socially-aware, anti-capitalist protesters, and the creative 'marketeers' who are proud of their commercial clout and their ability to raise brand awareness for their paying clientele. Of course, the economic realities of running a studio dictate that designers often have a foot in both camps, and face the seemingly intractable dichotomy of having ties to both the anti-globalization movement and big business. This balancing act often leads designers to intersperse straightforwardly commercial work with more culturally, if less financially rewarding projects for art galleries, museums and educational institutions.





Craig Holden Feinberg
Project: "Eating cigarettes"
graphic artwork – award-
winning entry for "Nagoya

"Design Do!" competition, 2004
photo: Namiko Kitaura
Client: International Design
Center of Nagoya



Sweden Graphics
Project: "Territory" still from
animated short film, 2002
Clients: onedotzero; Channel 4

The lingering perception of graphic designers as the hired hands of big business – as well as the new mass availability of computerized design tools – perhaps also explains their eagerness to present themselves as members of a highly trained, professional design community. More than any other sub-group of the design profession, graphic designers use prizes, awards and membership of chartered organizations to establish and police the boundaries of their professional territory. A large percentage of graphic designers also combine lecturing responsibilities with their other activities. The resulting cross-fertilization between practice and academia does much to underpin the internal coherence and professional status of graphic design.

Political and commercial developments, and the extraordinary power of the web, have also recast the geographical and cultural configuration of graphic design. The integration of former Eastern Bloc countries and China into global cultural and business networks has been highly influential. This survey features designers from Russia, Slovenia, Hong Kong and Turkey, alongside work from countries more traditionally associated with avant-garde graphic design practice, namely Britain, Germany, Switzerland, Holland and France. Many of the designers included emphasize their national cultural roots and draw on them in their work; others are more interested in universal solutions that transcend national and cultural boundaries, and that reflect globalism rather than globalization. Either way, they are all trying to connect people to the ideas and opinions transmitted by their work in the most engaging way possible.

One of the most startling characteristics of the designers featured here is their youth – with the vast majority belonging to Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), with its post-baby-boom cynicism and love of irony. It is not surprising that this generation – weaned on MTV, grunge and skateboarding – has a very different approach to media production than its predecessors. Much of their work references youth culture and is used by companies to inject their products with the essential hip credibility. Interestingly, their thoughts, as revealed here, are noticeably self-reflective, referring back to their adolescent experiences – it is as though the teen in them has never really grown up. A recent phenomenon has also been the appearance of 'viral marketing' as a way of tapping into the idealistic, optimistic, and flexible mindset of the still younger Generation Y (born between 1980 and 2000), or as it is sometimes known GenY. Even more resilient

to traditional marketing techniques than its older brother, this grouping shows how the Internet has created a swing away from television and print advertising towards web-based community platforms (which are already being infiltrated using viral marketing techniques). To get their message across, today's graphic designers have to be evermore aware of the fast-moving currents of youth culture, which like its demographic, are characterized by short attention spans and a natural empathy for technology.

In an attempt to engage the ever-shortening attention span of today's media-savvy-yet-weary audience, many media producers are increasingly using sexual imagery to sell all kinds of products. The problem is that like the games junkie who becomes anaesthetized to violence, the audience of potential consumers becomes so jaded with titillation that images have to become more and more raunchy in order to create an impact. What would have been seen as explicit even ten years ago is now deemed mainstream in many western cultures – it is no wonder that a scary backlash of religious fundamentalism (both Islamic and Christian) has emerged. Rejecting this type of overt porno-graphic-design, our selection prioritizes those designers, like Francesca Granato, who use sexualized imagery from a very different feminized and subversive standpoint. Regrettably while many of the graphic designers featured here have conscientiously laboured to critique the iniquities of contemporary industrial society, much of today's media appears to be working just as energetically to extend its moral bankruptcy, sensationalism and celebrity worship.

If graphic design is to remain a vital force within the contemporary cultural landscape, its practitioners must take on board not only the plethora of new media platforms, but also the fact that it is indeed possible to be a successful graphic designer without selling your soul – and many of the designers selected for this survey are shining examples of this belief. They are prepared to respond to their new global responsibilities with work that is aesthetically and conceptually fresh. The contributors to this publication have also very kindly written in their own words about their approaches to the design process, and the underlying motivations behind their work. We hope, therefore, that *Contemporary Graphic Design* will not only offer a visually engaging snapshot of contemporary graphic design, but will also generate ideas and values that will provide an ethical compass for its professional practice today.