

Wonders Revealed: Design and Faux Science

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0.001. Real Science

Science is revolutionizing the world. From global warming to genetic cloning to persistent threats of bioterrorism, its impact upon our very sustainability is of enormous consequence. Remarkably, however, there has been little evidence of any significant response from the design profession, other than the superficial appropriations that suddenly seem to be springing up in every design annual, in every monograph, in every design school critique. Science is the new design idiom of choice, with designers everywhere parroting its visual currencies, adopting its formal vocabularies, stealing its lingo, its acronyms, its cool, cryptic code. It is as if science offers a kind of credibility that design itself lacks, an instant validation and a seriousness of purpose that, quite possibly, design never had in the first place.

This new scientific style-seeking -- let's call it Faux Science -- is the antithesis of modernism: it's form awaiting content, or worse, serious form retrofitted with interchangeable content. So DNA is used as a paradigm for business strategy, our genetic legacies reborn as branding schemes for bran flakes. Petrie dishes are procured as objects of desire, inhabited by blurry bacteria used to metaphorically represent everything from bus schedules to bleach advertisements to the end of civilization itself. Designers document and chronicle and organize and record and list and process and craft endless diagrams with carefully plotted line weights and meticulously managed color specs, but what do they really know about enzymes or molecules or the structure of an atom? What do they really know about the world?

Filtered through design's brutally neutralizing style engine, contemporary design is anesthetized and stripped of its indigenous qualities: science, in this context, is a graphic placebo. Meanwhile, designers conceal their intellectual weightlessness and flex their stylistic muscle, producing work that strikes just the right tone of Lab Chic.

And there they stand, positioned ever so meekly at the periphery of this new century, contributing nothing of substance to these, the most critical communication needs of our time.

And designers ask why design doesn't matter.

0.002. Faux Science

"Science," wrote Heidegger, "is one of the most essential phenomena of the modern age." It's hygienic and objective, rational and finite, grounded in numerical certainty and cosmological reason. Science is all about clarity and specificity and rationalism, about charting DNA strands and analyzing chemical compounds, about physical density and gravitational pull and a reality that is anything but virtual. And in a world in which design has not only gone virtual but, in the process,

become overtaken by catastrophically invasive degrees of public interaction, "science" itself has become unusually tantalizing. Gone are the days of thick eyeglasses and plastic pocket protectors, of nerds and slide rules and chemistry sets. In today's anything-goes world of relentless self-expression, science has become the designers' safe haven. It's the new "look and feel."

And it's an easy one to imitate. We grasp its formal conceits -- its systematic language of documentation, its methodical alignments -- and parlay them into a visual language that resonates with kick-ass authority. It's a safe, if counterfeit posture for design, redolent of an aesthetic mindset that seems permanently lodged in the visual gestalt of circa-1965 Ciba Geigy pharmaceutical ephemera. Clean and lean. Formulaic. New and improved.

It's the DamienHirstization of everyday life.

0.003. False Authority

The appeal of information design is that it offers instant credibility. This is the domain of numbers and bullets and charts and graphs, ordered lists that visualize the obvious. Information design is rational and authoritative, classified and controlled to within an inch of its life: everything in its place and a place for every thing. Label it information design and it looks serious. Number it and it looks scientific.

But it's a false authority, particularly because we buy into the form so unquestioningly. Perhaps this is why so much information design looks alike, ratified by an alarmingly robust strain of Swiss modernism that obliterates the chance for a more expressive design idiom, a more content-driven form. It's also annoyingly ahistorical -- unconcerned with earlier sources and ignorant of alternative models that would, arguably, introduce a more original point-of-view.

Information design has become its own legitimizing force, regardless of its content or context. It's modernism run amok: form *masquerading* as content.

0.004. Panaceas

In biology, the term morphology refers to the basic form and structure of organisms without consideration of function. And that is precisely what the morphology (or shape) of elliptical forms seems to be. Yet if the lozenge-shapes we see everywhere bear little resemblance to the content they frame or to the function they are intended to illuminate, then what meaning do they have, and what purpose, if any, do they actually serve? Unlike the tangible and quantifiable world of biology, here in the graphical realm such "organisms" are not only function-free, they are little more than ornamental. They're graphic panaceas: a visual cure-all.

Biology, of course, isn't the only discipline in which morphology plays a central role. In the language of numbers, there is *mathematical* morphology, which concentrates on stochastic geometry, random set theory and image algebra. In the lexicon of infertility, there is *reproductive* morphology, in which sperm are analyzed for their morphology, or shape (along with mobility, or speed, and motility, or motion.) Finally, in *linguistics*, morphology is the study of the form and structure of words: here it can include deviations and inflections, random detours from the essential "shape" of things.

Nevertheless, the preponderance of lozenge-shaped *objets* in contemporary graphic matter suggests that it is this very deviation

that has perhaps superseded everything else, celebrating form -- perhaps even at the expense of content itself.

0.005. Documenting

Combine the urge to collect with the inclination to organize, and the resulting activity offers a unique assortment of scientific pretensions. In documenting, designers dutifully observe the minutiae of their efforts, recording with a detail-consciousness bordering on the absurd.

Not long ago, we attended a graduate design thesis review featuring several months' worth of lint recovered from a clothes dryer. The cumulative, color-coded evidence of this rather bizarre little odyssey in textile hygiene was presented, like a rare archaeological specimen, in an oversized glass vase located -- where else? -- on eBay. (Jesse Gordon's portrait, *The Oldest Piece of Dust*, offers a slightly more ironic, though equally detailed study of the design of detritus.)

This is navel-gazing raised to new and considerably worrisome levels: the designer is so busy organizing, it is unlikely that s/he will have time or distance or objectivity to transcend the work through insight, observation, scrutiny, or point-of-view, any of which might celebrate the power of an original idea. God forbid anyone should have an original idea. We're just too busy documenting it all.

(Footnote: Jesse Gordon and Knickerbocker, in: *Speck: A Curious Collection of Uncommon Things*. Peter Buchanan-Smith. Princeton Architectural Press, 2001)

0.006. Cataloguing

Do we strip visual information of its natural scale and emphasis, and in the process, streamline form to negate design of its meaning and message? Or do we just make it look good by looking clean, orderly, cross-referential?

The popularity of the full-bleed photographic tome is based upon an exhaustively micro-managed cataloguing of, well, pretty much anything. This inclination to make 300-page books of endless (and often word-free) photographic sequences is science gone astray: for where the scientist analyzes, the designer merely amasses. The poor reader is left to make sense of it all, to locate some hidden narrative or excavate some profound meaning as a consequence of meandering through interminable juxtapositions of intentionally non-linear thinking: so Times Square (turn the page) becomes Beijing (turn the page) becomes a little girl's hand poetically situated against a cloud (turn the page) becomes a wad of colorless chewing gum stuck to the bottom of a chair. Full-bleed image saturation abounds: it's an attempt to create an immersive context which, upon closer inspection, is little more than a theatrically staged set of aggressively cropped images meant to create an indelible impression of Real Life or Drug Trafficking or Parked Cars in The Rain. This is not science. This is not even design. This is artifice.

Hegel once posited an inevitable transition of thought, brought about through contradiction and reconciliation, formed along a trajectory of thinking that began from an initial conviction and evolved to its opposite. In the thesis/antithesis/synthesis model of Hegelian dialectic, we easily locate the scientist, who migrates from observation to analysis to discovery. Meanwhile, the designer catalogues the everyday, making thick, wordless books with pictures that jump the gutter.

0.0007. Nomenclature

Design has always built its discourse upon the languages of parallel professions. Ours is an eclectic lexicon drawn from literature and architecture, from painting and film -- disciplines which, arguably, belong in the same broadly-defined cultural orbit, and which, by conjecture, share a certain formal rhetoric. The 1990s rush to transform design vocabulary into the language of branding stems from a similar desire, albeit a commercial one.

Importing terminology from more distant worlds is inherently more problematic. To a certain extent, the success of this dynamic rests on conceptual plausibility: it is one thing to modify a form, another thing altogether to plagiarize an idea. So as objectionable as it may be to stave off the glut of derivative, scientifically-visualized publications that have nothing whatsoever to do with science, it is more egregious, still, to witness the degree to which scientific jargon has been voraciously co-opted along the way. The prevalence of the Lab Book is a case in point: from Fortune-500 annual reports to self-promotional process books lie a plethora of objects and publications with fractional numbers and gridded fields upon which messages are expressed in ScienceSpeak. Posters are pseudo-pharmaceutical and signage is seismic; DNA is all about Group Strategy and periodic tables reduce everything to a cryptic typographic acronym. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Never before has the nomenclature of science been so misused, overused and abused at the hands of creative people.

And you thought deconstruction was bad.

0.008. The New Vernacular

Designers have long been drawn to the vernacular, appropriating found artifacts and celebrating the texture of the street. Over time, the vernacular became a way to create instant nostalgia, a surface style that looked authentic but was anything *but*. From appropriation came inspiration, a postmodern culture of juxtaposition and pastiche. Because the vernacular belonged to everyone, it resonated as real, familiar and accessible. It was the art of the everyday, beautiful in its ugliness: design within reach.

Faux Science is the new vernacular, a methodology that, while highly disciplined in a formal sense, is still all about appropriation. Arguably, perhaps, the landscape has shifted: from street to laboratory. The aesthetic has shifted, too: from grit to grid. It's not so much a tension of form versus content as a favoring of style over substance.

Science represents an enormous opportunity for designers, but not if their contributions remain fundamentally restricted by what they know. At the core of this critique lie serious questions about the role of education. Why don't design students study music theory? Why aren't they required to learn a second language? And why, for that matter, don't they study science? "The difficulty lies not in the new ideas," wrote John Maynard Keynes, "but in escaping the old ones." In other words, design *beyond* reach.

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