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Graphic design :  
Between encryption and decryption

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DSAA Design graphique  
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## Abstract

- 4 / Introduction : Why the tension between encryption and decryption in graphic design is particularly relevant nowadays
- 6 / Case study : Helvetica, designed as the most neutral and the most universal font, why is it sometimes seen today as a symptom of an insipid and ultra-liberal way of communicating ?
- 7 / Art history : the tension between modernism and postmodernism, how digital graphic design navigates through these artistic periods
- 12 / Conclusion
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## Should graphic designers puzzle or reveal, encode or decode ?

Facing media hype and intrusive marketing, how can graphic designers find their place ? Should they puzzle, put riddles ? With this research work in design I am trying to propose playful processes in which communication is a treasure hunt asking the public to get involved actively in the process of reading graphic design, as opposed to advertising which is imposed on us.

Graphic design is a subject which consists in creating, choosing and using graphic elements such as drawing, typographic characters, photographs, colors, etc, to develop an object of communication and/or culture. It is a way of representing in which each element is symbolic and meaningful in the design of a project, to promote, inform or educate.

According to Annick Lantenois, the author of *Le vertige du funambule*<sup>1</sup> «Graphic design can be defined as the formal treatment of information and knowledge. Graphic designers are then mediators who act on how the information and knowledge they deal with are received and appropriated.» Whatever their speciality, illustration, poster design, corporate communication, press, edition, packaging, advertising, web design, signalling system, visual identity, they are part of the graphic chain, connected to printing offices and other professionals.

Graphic designers are often asked to decipher, to make things legible and readable, to explain a set of information to a public. They deal with everyday life narration.

The receiver is also an actor in the process of deciphering which allows interactions and sharing through graphic design. The role of mediator of graphic designers is relevant in the transmission of digital tools today to share and discover. The technological access is a democratic step in sharing knowledge.

Objects of design such as tactile posters, augmented reality and tracking can bridge gaps between different fields, overcome prejudices.

With the democratic illusion considered as graphic transparency, graphic designers are tempted experiment if riddles increase interest and sharing.

For many years, between the 50's and the 80's advertisers and graphic designers told everyone that a clear and legible design meant a transparent and democratic speech. This was the creed of Modernism but it was strongly criticized during the 80's by young designers who thought that designers were accepting to be enslaved by an ultra liberal system.

Helvetica, designed by Max Miedinger in 1957 is a case in point. Indeed it disguises a split in contemporary graphic design, conceived during full modernist movement. It offered real modern typographic shapes in a universal and unifying creative drive. Helvetica is Modernism in itself.

Celebrated as one of the ultimate fonts for its sobriety and its clarity, it is considered as essential for both inexperienced and experienced designers. However through the years it was openly criticized for its role as banner of the international style and its responsibility in the development of liberalism for the seductive image it gave to big corporations.

The documentary, Helvetica by Gary Hustwit<sup>1</sup> about this font helps us to better understand the points of views of numerous contemporary graphic designers about this controversial typography and what it may symbolize.

(1) Helvetica, a documentary film, Gary Hustwit 2007, PlexiFilms <http://www.hustwit.com/category/helvetica/>

The «Helvetica issue» is symbolic to graphic design itself during the second part of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, at the end of the Second World War, having reached a climax of horror and destruction, designers considered graphic nationalisms partially responsible for the wars, the totalitarianisms of the XX<sup>th</sup> century have in common the fact they annihilated the work of the Avant-garde such as Bauhaus or Constructivism considered too subversive to promote their propaganda. They relied on a vernacular and violent visual identity which called people to the worst for the glory of their nation. Moreover, there was a strong desire to design a universal and peaceful graphic system.

The former members of The Bauhaus exiled in Switzerland or in the United States such as Herbert Bayer, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy or Jan Tschichold influenced a new idea of graphic design, in connection with the architectural Modernism of Mies Van Der Rohe and of Le Corbusier. Clear and geometrical layouts, railings of construction, neat typographies, these were their rules for a universal way of communication. Josef Müller-Brockmann, Adrian Frutiger, Max Miedinger, Paul Rand and Massimo Vignelli, among others, adapted these principles to the graphic design of the 1950's and gave birth to essential fonts such as Helvetica and Univers and to visual identities still used today.

A documentary film  
by Gary Hustwit

Plexifilm

# Helvetica

Helvetica  
Helve

Helvetica, a documentary film by Gary Hustwit  
2007 Plexifilms studios

## Helvetica

Aa Ee Rr

**Aa Ee Rr**

a

## Kunsthalle

abcdefghijklmnop  
nopqrstuvwxyz  
0123456789

Helvetica, Max Miedinger  
1957, Linotype .CO



But that period was also the time for post-war economic, services became the most important sector in the western world, the standards of living improved significantly, households became better equipped, consumption was glorified, corporations became almighty and the international style was and still continues to be the visual identity of the consumer society.

Paul Rand designed the graphic standards of IBM, ABC and Ford and they are still used more than fifty years later. It is the same for Massimo Vignelli with American Airlines' visual identity.

Despite the economic boom, the situation was not ideal, inequalities grew between the West and the Third World, Cold War went on, the Viet-Nam War dragged on and people who didn't want to send young people to death thousands miles away from home demonstrated and rebelled. Protest movements occurred all around the United States and questioned «The American Way of Life». There was a wind of rejection of western values at the turn of the 1970's which reached its peak during the oil crisis. It was the end of the dream of everlasting growth and unlimited resources.

Visually such a state of mind took the shape of a denial of modernist standards. Designers returned to experiments, abandoned railings of construction considered too restrictive. Poster designers turned to cultural and political fields to get rid of consumerism and marketing, which were left to big advertising agencies. Typographers such as Ed Fella or David Carson who wanted singularities, played with the limit between legibility and illegibility.

The split of the practices seems linked with the decline of ideologies, a widespread disillusionment. Modernism which was meant to be universal and unifying was then perceived as an instrument of an ultraliberal and imperialistic ideology.

According to Annick Lantenois in *Le Vertige du Funambule*. «The transformation of graphic design in visual asset vector of profits dates back to the implementation of a capitalism which relies on communication to get the approval of the masses and appeal to graphic designers to match the visual shape with the underlying speech.

With the end of the happy duet of the 1960s between companies and graphic designers, came a Neoliberalism which broke the relationship of trust between content and form. Graphic designers refused to be the skillful hands of a propaganda leading to devastating social effects. They invented the notion of author in graphic design and avoided their former employer, the business world.»

A gap in graphic design then occurred. The big advertising agencies such as RSCG, Publicis or Saatchi and Saatchi have the monopoly on advertising graphic design and became examples for smaller graphic design agencies.

Graphic designers-authors dedicated work to cultural and public areas.

With the boom of home computers, inkjet printers and software of graphic creation such as the Adobe Creative Suite, there was a real democratization of the technical means to create graphic design.

The largest part of the graphic designers in activity was formed this way to design from the end of 1990s. There has never been so many graphic designers in France as today. Many are called, but few are chosen for cultural projects. There is a paradox between what junior graphic designers learn and experiment in design schools and the reality of the job.

Can we seek in digital technology, Fab-Lab working logics and contributive creations some ideas to conceive graphic design in an other way ? This way will we be able to create interactive devices to gather graphic designers and the public in experiments which involve paper and screen ?

## Conclusion

It is obvious that the skepticism and the lack of trust towards graphic communication at the service of corporations and capitalism is symptomatic of the collective disappointment towards our social values. It shows the insecurity and the disillusion for a system in crisis. Graphic designers-authors fled marketing and «basic» clients to cultural area but the offer is turning scarce.

As a junior graphic designer, I want to try to create devices which lead to sharing, implication and subjectivity while designing and sharing then with people. Creation in collaboration, cultural mediation and working with organizations are what I wish to explore to propose a social, open and democratic graphic design. Doing this, people can experience graphic communication their own way instead of being passive in the reception brought by advertising. But I did not want to make superficially enigmatic graphic design for a niche public either.

Video games, interactivity and the relationship paper / screen are many assets I plan to implement to propose playful projects in which even the fact of receiving graphic design makes sense and is fun.

# Project

## Project n°1 : tactile poster

The purpose is to associate a voluntary illegible interactive poster with a screen so that the receiver can test multiple combinations of layout and then have his own by printing.

The graphic designer is there to set up the rules, decide on a visual background but here I want to create an open device which allows an active and necessary implication from the receiver to be relevant.

How can this be done ?

The tactile poster is designed with a Makey-Makey, a micro-card which transforms objects of everyday life into tactile elements wired to a computer.

Every element is connected to a Makey-Makey and the poster becomes a keyboard and thus can be set up to make the poster conductive. There are two solutions, either conductive paint screen-printed or copper tape circuit behind the poster.

I used copper tape which allows more possibilities to design the poster.

## Project n°2 : Kinect

The idea was to create graphic design through gestures. Microsoft Kinect device allows a recognition of movement through space and is programmable with Processing. The user can influence the result while gesturing.

## Project n°3 : Video game

The aim is to cut the discovery of graphic document by steps using a video game. In a playful way, the user gets involved by getting a layout of a picture every time he manages to finish a level of the game so the graphic designer can create narratives in connection with the process of reception of the graphic design itself.

How can this be done ?

Adobe Flash software allows to import pictures in .png, to animate them and to set up them to be elements of a video game.

Gdevelop software and the game engine Unity also allow to create prototypes of video games.

# Noailles tous ici

Noailles Tous Ici is the project of 3 students in graphic design and four organisations

- Art'Up I3, Les Petits Débrouillards, Destination Familles and Urban Prod.

The purpose of the project was to value the district of Noailles through three strolls centered around the know-how, around the nature and around the collective initiatives of the district. It was the opportunity for three students in master degree in graphic design, Morgane Guillaume, Marine Laurent and myself to apply their research projects.

We met the people working for organizations in February and we discussed what was relevant to do. It was complicated for everybody to understand one another because all had different preconceived ideas and intentions for the project. We finally came to a compromise after numerous meetings and mails finally.

We created a font for the district, a signalling system made of wooden signs to mark out the spots of the strolls.

I was asked to design an interactive map to present videos shot by some children from the district, working with Olivia Moukouri from Art'Up I3. With the press of a button the map becomes interactive as users can choose the video they want to watch.

We wanted to give tools such as typography and stencils to the inhabitants to be free to use if they wish to continue the project.

The research and the first prototypes were presented on 11th and 12th of March 2016 to the inhabitants of Noailles as well as at the Transistor de La Friche La Belle De Mai.

On Saturday, April 30th, 2016 a shared meal within Noailles helped us to define the final spots of the strolls together with the residents.

We were then asked to design the communication of the event, with posters, flyers and social media posts. We lost a lot of time doing this because we had to get the right information from the different organizations, which was hard as something was always missing.

From 23rd of May to June 3rd Marine Laurent and us organized workshops at Destination Familles to teach the residents how to make their own tools like wooden signs or stencils to communicate, we also designed the facade of Destination Famille to promote the event.



The strolls took place on June 4th, 2016.

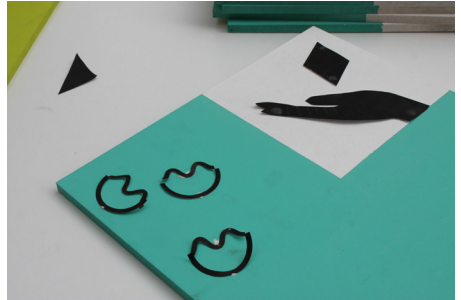
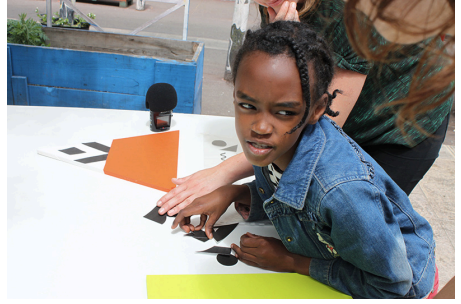
There was a lot of activities to promote the event. We presented the wooden signs placed in the district, we placed the interactive poster so that the visitors could try it, there were soup workshop, concerts, dj sets, we recorded a radio show with Radio Grenouille. At 3pm and 5pm there were two strolls with the inhabitants, visitors and members of the project to talk about the district, its assets and problems...

The project Noailles Tous Ici was an enriching experience. It was an important event with a lot of partners and a chance to show our work to a large audience. However the misunderstandings between the different members of the project and the lot of extra work they gave us were hard to cope with.

















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