Curating as meta design-authorship

Steven McCarthy

Design-authorship is often considered at the micro-level as graphic designers produce discrete works with an enlarged sense of agency. Whether publications, posters or interactive media, these artifacts position the designer as having a greater role in the communications paradigm, thereby enlarging the cultural, economic and political spaces for design activity.

Designer-authored works are occasionally brought together into themed exhibitions, as curators cast this work into new contexts. Additionally, acting as meta-authors, some curators produce design-authorship at the level of the conceptual exhibition. This paper examines examples of both approaches: the exhibit *of*, and the exhibit *as,* design authorship.

The dual nature of the curator as meta-author is explored through seven exhibition case studies. These studies show the variety of ways in which traditional distinctions of subject (*by* designer) and object (*about* designer) are becoming blurred and dynamic.

Keywords*:* design-authorship, exhibitions, curator, meta-authorship

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Exhibition curators establish themes for shows, and gather the necessary artifacts to achieve conceptual cohesion. Often, works are selected from existing collections, borrowed from others archives, invited from afield ('call for entries'), or even commissioned. The aim, usually, is to have the works contribute to a certain curatorial idea. This is generally supported with the exhibit's design and installation, supplemented with didactic or explanatory texts and furthered with promotional materials and a documentary catalog.

In art and design exhibitions the curatorial act can be quite authorial in the sense of desiring intellectual ownership and establishing the relationship of the work to the viewer. In this meaning the term 'authorial' is subjective and intentional, even polemical.

The American Center for Design's 100 Show competition from 1992 is an early precedent of curatorial meta-authorship that deserves acknowledgement. Although primarily known as a publication rather than an exhibition, the show's selection process bears relevance to this paper. Show chairperson Katherine McCoy invited Lorraine Wild, Bruce Mau and Rick

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Vermeulen as jurors, but empowered them to make their own selections as curators. Rather than voting or arriving at bland consensus, with opposing views potentially canceling each other out, McCoy defended their results as being biased and "…intentionally opinionated, uncovering new and significant work that the field of graphic design might not otherwise see." (McCoy 1992) As one might expect, many of the individual works chosen had an increased sense of agency with evidence of the designer's expanded voice.

Exhibits of design-authorship – while relatively new, and few – offer additional challenges and opportunities. Prior to discussing some of the past decade's innovative approaches to exhibiting individually designer-authored works and of the exhibit itself serving as a work of design-authorship, further background is required.

Theories about authorship in graphic design emerged in the mid-1990's with several influential projects. Emigre magazine 35 and 36, the Mouthpiece: Clamor Over Writing and Design issues, guest edited by Anne Burdick (Burdick 1995, 1995), featured essays on the topic as well as specifically designed creative works in response to a national call for proposals. The juried exhibit Designer as Author: Voices and Visions, co-curated in 1995, displayed the works of leading designer-authors, and established some of the movement's tenets in the accompanying poster/catalog (McCarthy & de Almeida 1996). Soon after, Michael Rock's oft-cited article The Designer as Author was published in Eye magazine. (Rock 1996)

Eventually, the movement's intellectual maturation was reached as a flurry of articles and editorials supported or opposed the notion of design-authorship. Even the term *author* was held to scrutiny, as various scholars advanced their own terminology: "designer as producer" (Lupton, 1998), "designist" (Gonzales Crisp, 1997), "designer authorpreneur" (Heller, 1998), and so on. In 2001, the paper Designer as Author: Diffusion or Differentiation? (de Almeida & McCarthy 2002) was presented at the Declarations conference in Montréal, which advocated for design-authorship's qualities to be spread throughout the discipline, rather than granting designer-authors rarified status. Seizing the differentiation stance, the graduate experience at the School of Visual Arts in New York was named the MFA Designer as Author program.

The ideas within design-authorship include an expanded and more meaningful role for graphic designers through:

- creating self-initiated projects
- engaging in innovative collaborations
- integrating writing, editing, designing and publishing
- acknowledging subjective methodologies
- recognition of sub-cultural audiences
- developing entrepreneurial ventures

These are often manifest in individual projects, such as David Carson's work on Raygun magazine, Bureau's politically activist posters about HIV/AIDS, M&Co.'s line of whimsical products, Jonathan Barnbrook's type designs and naming strategies, and Shepard Fairey's viral Obey Giant campaign.

While individual projects represent the act of creation at the micro level, and series or bodies of work at the macro, this paper is concerned with the next scale of design-authorship: the curated exhibition as an act of meta-authorship. Although Designer as Author: Voices and Visions (DA:VV) was the first exhibit to directly address the concept, a number

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of exhibits have since been mounted that show works of design-authorship, or to position themselves as works of design-authorship.

The call for entries for DA:VV (McCarthy & de Almeida 1995), asked for the works of designers who:

- are as involved as thoroughly with literal content as they are with visual form
- pose problems and questions as readily as they seek solutions, and use graphic design as a tool of investigation
- are adept at using words, both typographically and for literal or poetic expression

Also inviting works from writers and editors, the call continued, seeking work from those who:

- use type in ways that amplify meaning or adds a commentary on their writing
- work graphically across disciplines, perhaps borrowing from art, language, technology, psychology, politics or literature

Because the organizing concept of DA:VV was neither design style nor design medium, the works juried into the exhibit had a range of visual and literal approaches. The artist's book *The History of the/my World* by Johanna Drucker, Daniel Jasper's anti-consumerist posters, Michael Beruit's *Rethinking Design* books for Mohawk Paper, Maria Rogal's visual critiques of women in advertising, and Martin Venezky's art direction of culture magazine Speak sat side-by-side. More prominent figures in the emerging field of design-authorship, such as Ellen Lupton, Abbott Miller, Rudy Vanderlans and Katie Salen were displayed in DA:VV with lesser known, but still forward-thinking practicing graphic designers, faculty and students.

Mouthpiece editor Anne Burdick, then a visiting faculty member at North Carolina State University, gave the keynote address at the DA:VV exhibit opening. Even her lecture was a critical commentary on authorship, as her entire talk was woven together from the texts of others (this was disclosed at the end).

While there have been numerous exhibits of artists' books (wherein text, image and reproduction technologies converge in expressive book-forms) and a plethora of exhibits and publications featuring commercial graphic design, the examples of important American design-authorship exhibits over the past decade can be counted in single digits. While this paper does not purport to be an exhaustive chronicle, some of those exhibits are discussed below.

The two primary approaches to curating such exhibits are defined as: shows that feature works of design-authorship (such as DA:VV), and shows in which the concept and organizing principle of the exhibit itself is a work of design-authorship through the meta act of curating.

In 1996, designer educator Kali Nikitas invited two friends to each invite two others, and so on, as this particular "exhibit curated itself." (Nikitas, 1996) And She Told Two Friends featured the work of women designers from the United States, The Netherlands, Great Britain and Malaysia, and was initially exhibited at the Women Made Gallery in Chicago. The participants read like a *who's who* of influential design practitioners and educators: Katherine McCoy, Lorraine Wild, Sheila Lavrant de Bretteville, Ellen Lupton, Lucille Tenazas, Marlene McCarty, Women's Design + Research Unit and others. Although most of works exhibited were not created with the notion of design-authorship *per se* (many

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were client commissions), many of the projects are infused with a high degree of agency.

Nikitas' unique curatorial angle made And She Told Two Friends an original and innovative project. Tied to modes of communication and relationships in feminist networks, the exhibit was cohesive in spirit while being diverse in the work included. Postage stamps for the Dutch Post Office, a children's book, a typeface made from dog feces, and cultural posters all occupied the same conceptual territory. The exhibit was accompanied by a catalog that illustrated the work and included brief written passages explaining each friend's selection, and short descriptions of the work itself. As an exhibit, And She Told Two Friends embodied the idea of the designer as author as curator. It was greater than the sum of its parts.

The Next Word: Text and/as Design and/as Meaning was curated by Johanna Drucker and displayed at the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase (State University, New York), in the Fall of 1998. It included "visual art, artists' books, visual and concrete poetry, graphic design and new media by artists, poets and Web-based designers." (News Pulse, 1998) The media in the exhibit ranged widely, and reproduction technologies were emphasized as having a direct relationship to the act of creating visual/verbal narratives: handwriting, digital typography, collage, painting, letterpress and offset printing, and designing for the computer screen.

Many of the of the works in The Next Word were artists' books (perhaps reflecting Drucker's own *oeuvre*), and other works that seemed to value self-expression. A couple of exceptions included the work of the Yale University graduate student collective Class Act, whose work tackled social and political themes, and the digital type designs of Emigre's Zuzana Licko and Font Bureau, which were entrepreneurial projects.

In her catalog essay, Drucker wrote:

> "Books, visual poetry, fine art, and design are rarely exhibited within the same environment. This is often the result of logistical considerations since each activity has different audiences and poses different challenges to a curator." (Drucker, 1998)

The Next Word fits the model of an exhibit that brought disparate works of design-authorship together, using the concept of designers and artists using words literally and of writers and poets using words visually. As an accomplished designer/artist who writes and an accomplisher writer who designs, Drucker's exhibit was an extension of her own creative persona.

Soul Design, another curatorial project by Kali Nikitas, was produced in 1999. Eighteen graphic designers were invited to create tabloid-sized designs in response to the theme of honoring someone important to them personally. Bound only by the theme (which provided room for interpretation), the paper size, and a single color of ink, the designers created deeply personal, eclectic designs that reached across the human condition. In this regard, the designed response to the curatorial brief was one of intention: the visual/verbal result addressed the theme in the way that a commercial project aims to satisfy a client's wishes.

The designs were printed on individual sheets in a press run of one thousand, and displayed in tidy stacks on knee-high pedestals around the gallery's perimeter. Viewers (initially in Minneapolis, USA and subsequently in Oslo, Norway) were encouraged to take copies of each print, dispersing the show's contents into the public realm. A catalog featured the designs along with explanatory texts, and an essay titled On Balancing Individualism and Commitment to Community by Arthur Redman. A brief conclusion by

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the catalog's editor stated, "Given the limited forums for discourse within the professional culture of graphic design, more and more designers are taking it upon themselves to initiate projects such as this exhibition to address critical issues." (Dewey, 1999)

As framed by Nikitas, and through exhibition in an art gallery setting, Soul Design was a forum for its designers' self-expressions. And yet, the de-commodification of the prints as art objects (by printing a sizeable edition and then giving them away free) made the transmission of message akin to mass media, albeit in an unorthodox manner. In this regard, Soul Design succeeded as an idea beyond the individually designer-authored works.

Adversary: A Traveling Exhibition (of) Contesting Graphic Design was *collated*—a term he prefers to curated—by Kenneth FitzGerald in 2001. About the exhibition, FitzGerald wrote:

> "Adversary presents graphic design that challenges and/or expands common
> conceptions of design's purpose, content and process. A primary challenge
> is to the construction of design as solely a commercial activity – and which
> promotes the politics of a consumer culture. Print and interactive works
> directly confront this representation and/or offer alternate forms/contents."
> (FitzGerald, 2001)

The show traveled to seven venues throughout the United States, including an art museum, a private gallery, several university galleries and made an appearance at the AIGA (America's professional organization for design) national conference in Washington, the nation's capital.

A review of Adversary titled The Path of Most Resistance: Para-Graphic Design at Zero Station by Chris Thompson stated:

> "[FitzGerald] explains that while he asked certain designers to participate,
> in many cases he just gave them the general theme of the show and asked
> them to put together whatever they wanted. This makes 'Adversary' less of
> an exhibition and more of an intervention." (Thompson 2001)

Appropriate to this assessment, many of Adversary's participants were designers with known provocative tendencies: Ed Fella, Elliot Earls, Rick Valicenti, Gunnar Swanson and Women's Design + Research Unit, among others. Much of the exhibit's work was created specifically for the adversary theme, but some contributions were already completed works that loosely fit the topic. FitzGerald collated it into a show that served the idea of the graphic design field critically examining its own existence in today's hyper-media culture.

Form/Inform, shown at the University of Minnesota's Goldstein Museum of Design in Fall 2003, was an exhibit that was both curated (with invitational works) and juried. Form/Inform's catalog described the show as:

> "an exhibition that examines the trajectory from graphic design education to
> professional practice. Each designer's submission consists of a single student
> project, a current piece of professional work, and a brief statement that puts
> the two in context." (McCarthy 2003)

The Goldstein Museum's curator of graphic design conceived of Form\Inform's concept, while a jury consisting of educator Kali Nikitas, and designers Steve Sikora and Tim Larsen reviewed submissions. Because of the nature of the exhibit (the relationship between designers' student projects and their mature works, as expressed in a written essay) complex choices had to be made about what was included. The curator's statement put

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it thus: "Form\Inform is ultimately about the stories told by the artifacts, their creators, and the conditions for their existence." (McCarthy 2003)

Design-authorship in Form\Inform can be literally interpreted, as the designers authored their own accompanying texts and made micro-level curatorial decisions about what to submit. It can be viewed at the meta-level as an overall theme determined that the exhibit's contents. This context made art foundation projects and studio experiments from years, even decades, earlier relate to contemporary packaging, book designs, promotional materials, cultural posters and digital typeface designs. Further merging roles, the curator edited and designed the exhibit catalog and designed the gallery installation – a typical designer as author *Gesamtwerk*.

I Profess: the Graphic Design Manifesto exhibit was jointly curated and juried by professors Maya Drozdz and Chris Corneal. The call challenged graphic design faculty to create posters that would visualize their teaching philosophies. The show's web site states:

> "The resulting exhibit showcases a wide range of viewpoints and pedagogical
> and ideological priorities that will serve as inspiration and as starting points
> for dialogue among students and faculty. With this exhibit, the curators aim
> to encourage debate and to provoke the next generation of graphic designers
> to actively shape the future of our profession." (Drozdz & Corneal 2004)

I Profess has been exhibited in six venues over three years, with at least one additional show scheduled for 2007. Most of the participants are American graphic design educators (including some with highly visible commercial consulting practices, like Jennifer Morla, Bob Aufuldish and Amy Franceschini) with additional representation from Great Britain, Croatia and Turkey.

Although the poster as a format is not necessarily the best medium to carry the message – rather it's the discipline's favorite canvas for virtuosity – the show's visual and conceptual variety is impressive. Posters are ideally suited for gallery presentation, as design-authorship in this context is presented not unlike visual art. A point of contention with the I Profess process, however, was the jurors' self-selection into the exhibit. While a curatorial role would be forgiving of including oneself, the ethical implications of a juror doing so are murkier. It is possible to wonder if any of the excluded entries (roughly seventy percent of the submissions, an indicator of competitive rigor) may have been more appropriate in Drozdz and Corneal's places. Such a position might have arguably allowed them to act out their design-authorship purely on the meta-level.

This brings the complexities of the design-authorship exhibit curator as meta-author to the fore. As the various roles assert themselves, what is the border – or the relationship – between subject (*by* designer) and object (*about* designer)? Between immersion and self-promotion, between display and critique, between communication and expression, and between process and product? On one hand, the idea of curatorial meta-authorship is a shift in scale, a different hierarchical arrangement. On the other, it's a broadening and blending of roles: curator, editor, art director, writer, exhibit designer, social networker, political activist, budget manager, and so on.

Cultural parallels to the idea of meta-authorship are worthy of comparison. In twentieth century visual art, curated exhibitions were often the way that a movement or style was codified. Often times the exhibit emerged as like-minded artists organized their own themed show, *about* the art and *by* the artists. Furthermore, derivative works abound as

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collage, montage and assemblage strategies enabled artists to remix the works of others into new creations. Digital media has since facilitated the *sample*, an appropriated portion of an original work that gets incorporated (with varying degrees of alteration) into a new song, image, literary work, film, video or performance. Curated and designed scenarios are now fluid, ever changing in scale and context.

The compilation record album or CD, a collection of thematically related songs ("top power hits of the seventies!"), has long been a staple of music publishers repackaging songs for continued appeal. Now the compilation exists on the individual level as friends swap MP3 music files as customized playlists. Today's technology-savvy youth create original content (digital art, music and video) and mix it with mass media works in new, ever-evolving forms of interactive meta-authorship. Artists and designers, actors, musicians and authors' individual roles have permanently shifted as curators, directors, producers and editors have blurred traditional boundaries, and vice versa.

The idea of curating as meta design-authorship means redefining roles and erasing distinctions. New combinations of activity give rise to diverse contexts, which in turn spawn new activities. Exhibition curating spills from the cultural realm into politics and commerce, as designers as authors as curators as designers continuously transform.

Nikitas approached her curatorial projects with a strong vision of the overall exhibition, establishing themes with personal conviction. The individual designs mattered less than the governing concept. Drucker's The Next Word was a survey of works that occupied the overlap between art, design and literature. The theme of '*next* word' seemed more like the definition 'adjacent' (next to) rather than 'subsequent' (following next), emphasizing lateral relationships over sequential ones. Form\Inform depended on the sequential relationships between designers' student works and their professional output, whereas I Profess presented a series of posters as design professors' visualized manifestos.

These studies reveal curatorial approaches encompassing serial, sequential and conceptual methods, and might be best explicated in a future paper involving the analytical tools of group theory. "The power of group theory lies in its ability to identify organization, and to express organization in terms of generative actions that structure a space." (Leyton 2007) Perhaps Kenneth FitzGerald has a point with his term collator – an arrangement is made from within a grouping of design works and this arrangement is dynamic.

To conclude, meta design-authorship through exhibition curating signals both a maturation of design connoisseurship and its concurrent democratization. Two examples that signal these distinctions follow. The first is about commerce and the popularization of curatorial activity and the second is about design curating as a specialized intellectual endeavor.

A surprising example is found in a series of trendy toys. The Dunny character, a plastic doll loosely modeled on a rabbit, is collected and traded for its innovative surface graphic designs and has achieved wide-spread subculture cachet. Occupying both cultural and commercial territory, Dunny is coveted, collected and displayed – not unlike a museum object. Azteca, a new line of fifteen figures, credits individual designers and a *curator*.

> "Curated by Headquarter in Mexico City, the Azteca Dunny series showcases some of the hottest names in Mexican art, fashion, graphic design, music, and industrial design. The brightly colored series captures the creative passion of Mexico's artistic community. The objective of the series was to bring to the

surface the very essence of Mexican street arts, underground culture, and diverse history." (Kidrobot 2007)

On the opposite end of the spectrum is an event upcoming at the University of Minnesota. Design and Its Publics: Curators, Critics, and Historians, an:

> "international symposium co-hosted by the Design Institute and Department of Art History exploring the state of architecture and design discourse as expressed in contemporary criticism and curatorial practice." (College of Design 2007)

Participants include curators of design from some of the world's leading institutions: Museum of Modern Art (New York), Design Museum (London), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago among others.

While they 'talk the talk' of future directions of design curating, Dunny's curator Headquarter will 'walk the walk.'

Note: *the author of this paper had work invited into the Soul Design and Adversary exhibits, and juried into I Profess.*

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