



**THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT!**

<http://entertain.ianlynam.com>

Graphic design culture at large has the potential to be intellectual and critical in nature, yet the individuals and groups that operate within the sphere of cultural production and assorted economies attached to graphic design consistently ignore intellectualism as operational methodology. This exhibition is the opposite—within, I attempt to suggest some of the difficulties that both the public and design practitioners are facing with the development of design in the Neoliberal Era.

## FORMAT FOLLOWS FUNCTION

This exhibition utilizes a more-or-less dead format: political posters, though almost unrecognizable as such, as the posters within do not have the aesthetic attributes of retro activist posters. Instead, the posters adopt a contemporary aesthetic—one free from the constraints of “the grid” and akin to “the cloud”, a whole other form of tyranny. The aesthetic is that described as “The Global Style” in Jeffery Keedy’s eponymous 2013 essay:

*The Global Style looks new, but still familiar... it radiates newness and very little else... it is obedient to the point of near transparency. On an emotional level it sublimates quotidian boredom into a contemporary expression of cool, ironic, quotidian boredom into a contemporary expression of cool, ironic ennui.”*

*Most of the formal and aesthetic attributes of the new Global Style are lifted directly from the International Style. White space backgrounds, sans serif typefaces, minimalist asymmetrically balanced compositions with limited color palette. No extraneous decoration, ornament or complex patterns, A love of simple geometric shapes. The one notable exception is the grid.*

*It’s not that the grid is no longer there—it’s that the grid is no longer visible or even detectable. It is embedded in the 0’s and 1’s and x and y coordinates of digital space... just like the movie Tron, the digital environment is built on a grid (it just doesn’t glow like neon). So it is understandable why designers would stop fussing with grids when it is the ground beneath us, the water we swim in and the air we breathe in our virtual/digital world.*

Keedy’s thoughts on the Global Style far transcend mere aesthetics—they function as stand-in for the designer as laborer in the Neoliberal economy, unmoored from economic structures and

standards of the late Fordist policies of developed nations (e.g.: freelance/contract-to-contract-based designer and/or adjunct design faculty sans steady employment, health benefits, et al).

The political poster and general visual activism first devolved first to Adbusters-esque 'culture jamming' in the 1990s, and then even further in the 2000s to just mere product—designers/artists/marketeters and their army of interns have drained political imagery from even being pastiche.

The political poster today is the semantic equivalent of a bloated corpse floating in an aquatic environment with face, genitals, and limbs nibbled off. There is a body, but there is little to distinguish it as unique, much less rebellious in nature. Beret-wearing 'visual revolutionaries' have drained the impact of historical reference in service of the Fall/Spring fashion season cycle.

When the lessons, inherent meaning and visual impact of history are drained in vampiric service of the market, even at least on the surface level. What do we have left beyond visual freefall?

Beyond aesthetics, designers are currently besieged by a brave new world. The multi-member independent design studio model is currently in it's death throes, and the individual designer (versus the world) is quickly becoming the new standard. Graphic design itself is increasingly fractured and graphic designers must be adept at more skills and specializations than ever before.

Simultaneously, graphic designer as 'hired gun' must operate as his/her own public relations representative/hype man, promoting post-studio output in the digital sphere as rapidly as it is made. If one's work does receive popular attention, it is most likely through non-remunerative channels (medium.com views/reads, Facebook likes, reTweets, Pins, Behānce dingleberries) that serve to bolster one's self-worth in a way that is purely 'social'/network-based.

This is reified in Keedy's *The Global Style*, as well:

*Feeding your blog, Instagram, Tumblr and Twitter account is self-promotion, but is it design? The fact that you are busy doing design doesn't mean you are a designer any more than the fact that you are busy cooking makes you a chef.*

Social media-based promotion puts neither the non-proverbial ‘food’ on the table, nor pays the rent on one’s co-working space as one has to now pay a premium for one’s monthly/annual software-licensing/ software-based storage-licensing. Fealty to an employer has been supplanted by ‘independence’, but at the cost of the snowball effect of exponentially increased and diversified labor for lesser returns and a simultaneous reliance on much-misunderstood PostFordist interdependence.

Design is potentially at the edge of a precipice—one that is symbolic of culture at large. If design is one of the major vehicles for cultural expression and communication, then it may be bigger than we all think. Designers are more ‘free’ than ever, but simultaneously more tethered to their workstations than ever before.

The posters in this exhibition—printed in 2 spot colors on A3-size paper using Risograph printing explore these ideas as much as many of the other constituent parts of the contemporary culture of graphic design.

## CLOUD AS SITE

Encircled by the polyphonic ‘mist’ of the posters is an on-demand replica of the Free Speech Monument erected at the University of California, Berkeley—a physical celebration and memorial to the Free Speech movement there. It reads,

***“THIS SOIL AND THE AIR SPACE EXTENDING ABOVE  
IT SHALL NOT BE A PART OF ANY NATION AND SHALL  
NOT BE SUBJECT TO ANY ENTITY’S JURISDICTION.”***

The original monument, Mark Brest van Kempen’s “Column of Earth and Air”, has no legal bearing—it is merely a monument to the notion of free speech and is not a true autonomous zone. The monument is recast here (in another educational environment) in order to suggest the freedoms that global citizens do not truly have—by intimating that the cheaply-reproduced four-foot by four foot space is a space for freedom of speech and action, and that most individuals who reside in developed nations cannot physically live for long within the designated space, the possibility of actual freedom from control is nearly nonexistent in the contemporary moment.

One of the outcomes of the First World’s economic shift to Neoliberalism is that the Information Economy destroyed boredom

by occupying citizens' time while simultaneously deskilling them. (Shorthand: That's entertainment!) This has continued unabated—a relatively few American technology companies (Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft) have created economic/commercial monopolies surrounding surveillance, e-commerce, hardware, software, telephony, data aggregation, social interaction, et al.

On a smaller scale, say that of technology surrounding graphic design, there are two corporations that supply today's creative tools: namely, Adobe and Monotype. Each has a virtual monopoly on specific software—Adobe's Creative Cloud suite for digital imagery and typographic form-giving and Monotype's near-monopoly on digital typefaces (what the general public uses for the transmission of visual language). The stock value of both corporations for the past three years forms the outermost layer of this localized 'cloud'—the real-time commercial worth of the digital mechanics of graphic design.

Hauntology (a portmanteau of haunt and ontology), a term coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*, is a state of temporal, historical, and ontological disjunction in which the ostensible immediacy of presence is replaced by “the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive.”

By utilizing the dead format of the political poster, one could invoke this type of intellectual idea as a *raison d'être*, though this is confounded by the content being generated by a graphic design critic, another practice which is becoming nearly nonexistent in the contemporary cultural context. (Shorthand: Outmoded forms of graphic design being produced by an individual working in a seemingly obsolescent form of practice.)

Economist Tyler Cowen wrote in his 2009 book *Creative Destruction: How Globalization Is Changing the World's Cultures* that:

*Critics and experts tend to be most effective when the evaluated item is large in value, relative to the effort required to assess it. Experts are hired to assess the quality of diamonds, but not the quality of brass. We buy Consumer Reports to evaluate new cars or stereos on the market, but not new brands of thumbtacks or paper clips.*

The role of the critic in contemporary society, especially in terms of graphic design, is shifting in that the perceived value of design seems to be increasing socially, whereas the economic value of design is increasingly atomized, fragmented, compartmentalized and destabilized. In the recent past, operating as a critic implied a certain sense (and obligation) toward objectivity in assessing the subject at hand, often through critics being employed in academia in lieu of being reliant upon the service sector for income. The role of the critic at the contemporary moment is simultaneously destabilized in that the role of the 'pure' critic is placed in limbo due to the possibility of an academic being able to operate outside of the service sector being rarified to the point of near-non-existence.

## COMPLICATIONS

This is further complicated by the emotional and economic involvement that I have with the subject matter at hand:

- I am adjunct faculty at a university.
- I champion design, yet see how institutions utilize the problem-solving ethos of design to obliterate or absorb inquiry-based theory and art programs.
- Google and Adobe have been my clients.
- I receive monthly royalty payments from Monotype for the licensing of my fonts.
- I own stock in both Adobe and Monotype.
- My last book was crowdfunded via Kickstarter.
- I utilize social media for the promotion of my career.

The method in use is more akin to “fog computing”<sup>1</sup> which operates both outside of and within the constructs of cloud computing<sup>2</sup> as the structure is more complex. I am not afforded the traditional role of the critic, as I am just as much a participant in the subject matter at hand—I would not be able to write this without the fluency and immersion within Neoliberal graphic design. This may cast me as an unreliable narrator, but I am a narrator nonetheless.

It is through truly understanding the methods and mechanics of design at a deep level wherein we can facilitate a more fluid, candid, and honest expression of design to non-experts as well s within our practice, while simultaneously making work with a greater sense of engagement and mastery. By exposing ourselves, however uncomfortably, to the pressures faced by contemporary graphic

designers, we can peel back the facade of ‘cool’ cast by ‘creative’ economic forces and get to the data behind the spectacle of ‘innovation’, as well as create empathy and deeper understanding of the market forces that prop up graphic design.

From an as-yet unpublished essay by Randy Nakamura and Ian Lynam:

*The ubiquity of the overused catchwords “creativity” and “innovation” are perhaps the surest indicators that a culture is in decline. The fact that the noun “creative” has been synonymous with the denizens of ad agencies since the 60s is more evidence of a broad co-optation of the term that has insinuated itself unopposed into the popular lexicon. If we now assume that any notion of a “creative” must be linked to the marketing orifices lining the dank underbelly of corporate capital, then how is it even possible to talk about creativity in a way that is neither insipid nor irrelevant?*

*Innovation, creativity’s idiot cousin, is in barely better condition. Although dubious associations as a word do not blight it, the word has the problem of being never precisely defined, yet implicitly packed with all kinds of moral and virtuous goods. But innovation is shorn of its moral virtue when one considers the fact that almost anything can be considered the product of innovation. Unregulated credit derivative markets? Unmanned drone assassinations? These must be considered products of innovation, but they lack any inherent “good” moral value. It is likely that most people would find both either despicable or vaguely frightening.*

The exhibition is provided to the public in a non-numbered series so that it can be taken away by exhibition attendees or downloaded from the Internet in PDF format so that it can be freely distributed—a strategy deployed as “disruption” by many major technology companies (e.g. Google’s free Android smartphone/tablet platform, Facebook access, etc).

The exhibition website also contains a list of suggested further reading wherein participants can interact with many of the source materials that have helped inform the concepts, themes and visuals content of the exhibition.

This model allows the exhibition to function in the realm of elucidation and communication rather than just in the realm of mere creative production and interpretation—the work within is not commodified, but instead focuses on the commodification of culture

and our role in it in relation to the act of cultural production we call “graphic design”.

## FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Data architecture that uses one or a collaborative multitude of end-user clients or near-user edge devices to carry out a substantial amount of storage, communication, and control, configuration, measurement and management.

<sup>2</sup> Ubiquitous, on-demand internet-based digital information access.

## FURTHER READING

- **Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design & Politics by Metahaven**
- **The Epic Struggle of the Internet of Things by Bruce Sterling**
- **The Wretched of the Screen by Hito Steyerl**
- **Solution 168–185: America by Tirdad Zolghadr**
- **Enlightenment 2.0 by Joseph Heath**
- **The Efficient Society by Joseph Heath**
- **The Global Style by Jeffery Keedy**
- **The Global Style, Revisited by Anther Kiley**
- **Huh? #10: An interview with Randy Nakamura by Ian Lynam**

## A NOTE ON THE TYPE

The typeface used for the exhibition is Stamen, developed for the release of the LP “I Thought the Future Would Be Cooler” by the band YACHT. It is a typeface that is ‘lost in time’, referring to neither strict historical models nor purely futuristic forms. This exhibition was partially inspired by the song “The Entertainment” on ITTFWBC and which serves as the theme song for this exhibition.

## DOWNLOADS

Exhibition participants can view an enhanced digital version of the essay at <http://entertain.ianlynam.com>, as well as download digital versions of the exhibition posters, this pamphlet, and the poster announcing this exhibition.