

The Poster As a Curatorial Challenge

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Abstract: This paper investigates the poster media from a curatorial perspective, focusing on the shift that occurs when posters are torn loose of their original living context and exhibited in museums. The shift is of a general museological relevance, however, is reinforced by posters' distinct communicative and "visual aggressive" kind (Sontag 1970) and strong dependence on its environments. Applying an ecological view to design, mainly the semiotic notion of 'counterability' (Krampen, 2002) and the reciprocal relationship of humans and their built and product-designed environments, I suggest counterability to be a viable option for curatorial work. The concept is unfolded in a case study of a recent exhibition on British posters of the interwar years, held in 2015/16 at the Danish Poster Museum in the open air museum Den Gamle By in Aarhus, which I curated in collaboration with graphic designer Michael Jensen.

Keywords: posters, mediation, environments, exhibition, curating, museum

MEDIATING THE POSTER: AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Two main sources have motivated my contribution to the conference theme on design and mediation: one is an academic, archive-based research project on British modernist posters of the interwar years, identifying a poster movement which gave the poster the highest priority in aesthetic, commercial, social and cultural matters (Hjorth Christensen 2013).

The study investigates the social and commercial conditions causing the rise of the movement, the circles of artists and designers who renewed the media in new directions, and the interpretations of a European modernism gained from their efforts; a central part deals with the mediation of posters in urban and museological contexts and how posters enact meaning at the edge of

The subject dates back to my Ph.D. project; in 2013 a monography was based on the project and in 2015, again remediated, turned into an exhibition at the Danish Poster Museum in 'Den Gamle By' in Aarhus; additionally, several educational projects were developed, among others one directed at the BA-programme in Cultural Mediation at the University of Copenhagen that I coordinate and teach. In itself this process demonstrates how different contexts cause the same subject to be mediated in different ways and how boundaries between different types of disciplines, media and between theory and practice are blurred. In this paper I will focus on the curatorial process in regard to the exhibition *Spot On! British Posters from the Interwar Years*, approaching the subject from museological and phenomenological perspectives.

The process raised fundamental questions in regard to mediating graphic design; above all the general "museum problem" (a term borrowed from Adorno's classic essay "Valery Proust Museum" (1967)

referring to Paul Valéry's "Les Problèmes des Musées"): that of objects losing meaning when torn loose of their living, original environments and are turned into museum objects. What implications in particular does this shift have in regard to graphic design objects and posters? And: How can the specific potential of two-dimensional objects be unfolded as they are displayed in the limbo of the museum gallery? What options of meaning making when posters, by Susan Sontag (1970) defined as a media of a particular "visually aggressive" kind, are staged in a second mediating frame, that of the museum? If other areas of art and design, have been explored from curatorial perspectives and in some cases, for example fashion and architecture, have developed extensive critical discourses, graphic design still needs this kind of extensive reflections. If contemporary art, self-consciously since the 1950's and 1960s, has been in a continuous discourse about its context or representation, graphic design has never done that (Krishnamurty 2016).

Defining the poster

Defining the poster as a two dimensional printed media, it can, in brief, be characterized by its ability to pass on a message, most often restricted by a short timespan and pointing to a particular event, product, place or institution: at the core of the image is a constraint to cause effect or reaction, a task to "seduce, to exhort, to sell, to educate, to convince, to appeal" (Sontag 1970); however, these criteria are all bound up with an over-all environmental premise: That it must compete with other visual signs in the traffic and flow of public space. This premise, that a poster's functional undertaking and visual semantics cannot be separated from the environments, runs through poster literature: Senior researcher and former V&A curator Margaret Timmers (1998) has underscored posters' rootedness in their environments and the accessibility of their physical deployment as a defining characteristic of the medium, crucial to its continued power and appeal; American art historian Ernest Gombrich (2002) describes how posters, by minimal references to a reality outside the limits of the poster sheet, challenges our way of seeing and catches our attention among buildings, street interior, lights and traffic; Danish architect Poul Henningsen (1918) claimed how posters work only on the basic condition of contrast to the architecture behind and around it; Gunnar Biilmann Pedersen (1938), called attention to the "awkwardness" which occurs when posters are put on display in museum galleries, removed from the outdoor to the indoor, and from a distant and hasty gaze to a close-up, contemplative "viewing situation"¹.

Nevertheless, when posters are put on display the environmental premise is rarely explicitly problematized or integrated in the exhibition narrative, nor considered a progressive factor in the physical exhibition design. A white cube aesthetic often prevails (Smith 2014), framing commercial, ephemeral designs as fine art, repeating traditional art historical display principles according to artist/designer, style, period or artistic school; maintaining a view to the poster as a fine art form, and leaving out environmental aspects are rarely taking into account; leaving them out means overseeing

¹ For an account of viewing positions with regard to French fin-de-siècle posters, see K. Carter (2012) 'The Spectatorship of the "Affiche Illustrée" and the Modern City of Paris, 1880–1900', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2012, pp. 11–31.

'the paradigm of embodiment' (Hale 2012), the notion that in relation to architecture, museums and exhibitions it is "...important to consider what the medium of three-dimensional space can offer to the storytelling process that text alone cannot provide". (ibid.: p.199) Further it has caused a frequent critique, more often raised by designers who work with design driven by purpose, function and client orientation. While many art forms have museums, or other exhibition platforms as primary points of destination, designers see graphic design as a media directed towards 'living' purposes, time defined events or organizations, "Most graphic design is created to live in some sort of real world context. To then take it and put it into a gallery...it's not without interest, but this act turns graphic design into anthropological objects taken out of their original context of usage". (Krishnamurthy cited in Smith 2014).

The act that causes a loss of 'real world context' is essential for any object entering a museum collection, however, in the case of posters, it stands out. When mediated in a museum context, the poster message has, often long ago, lost its current interest and can be hard to read outside of their historical, linguistic or site specific context: poster texts of like "Footballers prefer Shell", "Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?", "Soaring to Success! – Daily Herald" all prove Krishnamurthy's point of graphic design turned into an "anthropological" object: British viewers might get the message; to others, the message is alienated, encoded, mysterious rather than easy comprehensible. If most everyday objects offer us a notion of their fundamental idea, this is not necessarily so in the case of the ephemeral poster message which, distanced in time and place, loses the direct, easy-to-catch-in-a-glimpse effect. As a message, combining word and image, one can, like graphic designer Peter Bi'lak (2002) claim, that for posters in a museum "the entire raison d'être of the work is lost as a side effect of losing the context of the work, and the result is frozen appearance stripped of meaning, liveliness and dynamism of use."

Before introducing the exhibition, I will briefly describe the analytical concept 'counterability' which I have found useful in understanding how posters work as an integrated part of the environments beyond strict commercial purposes, and how they create urban situations of display and make an impact on the surroundings. Further, for curatorial purposes and 'practice based' work, the concept helps to sharpen the focus on how environmental, physical and sensorial aspects can be transferred to or interpreted in a museum context when objects lose their original function.

Counterability – "the meaning of the object for our existence"

According to Krampen, the specific reciprocal relationship between the viewer and the built or artefactual environments holds 'counterability'. The word refers to 'the meaning of the object for our existence', the essential idea of an object, what the object 'invites us to do' (Krampen 2002). Counterability stands for the central function of designed objects; it quotes a perspective derived from the science of biology and states that surrounding us "has only its sense and meaning by its relationships to humans". (Krampen 2002, p. 92)

The physical relation between man and his built or product designed environments is based on a biologically acknowledging that everything which we get to see is adapted to our human needs and means something in regard to humans and the human body. We cannot perceive the environment without perceiving our self within it; parts of our body will always 'be in the picture' when we look at

buildings, the urban or rural surroundings. Counterability is explained further by the term ‘affordance’, lent from ecological psychologist James Gibson: the ‘invitation character’ of the object, what the object asks us to do, what the object ‘offers’, explained as,

“... the meaning of the object for our existence. This counterability is what the constructor of house, book, the planting the flowers prepares them for counterability. Everything surrounding us here in town has only its sense and meaning by its relationships to humans.” (Krampen 2002:95)

In the case of posters’ counterability stresses how they, as ubiquitous images in public space, are closely connected to the body and movement. Secondly it stresses the poster’s urge to create a reaction, the reciprocal relationship of the media and the viewer and their built environments; it helps us to transcend a more one-sided, strictly functional way of looking at posters, demonstrating how they, as graphic design objects, are of a much more physical kind than often acknowledged. In extension of this, how this quality, advantageously, can work as a creative, motivating factor in a curatorial mediating process.

So, in brief, it moves our attention from the internal structures of the poster image to the viewer’s experience of the media. When collected and turned into objects of a contemplative museum gaze, meaning is to some extent or completely, lost. The poster message, made up in word and image, remains a signifier of a core message and reflection of a historical era or style; however, the mutual interconnectedness with the environments, are lost.

STAGING THE POSTER: SPOT ON! BRITISH POSTERS FROM THE INTERWAR YEARS

The subject and main aim of Spot On! was to show how British posters during the first part of the 20.th century became a primary form of advertising and the place where British art found some its most innovative and modern expressions; the displays introduced to leading designers of the time, to a small but influential minority of commercial artists and designers who conveyed to the field of poster and graphic design during that period. These designers set higher standards for themselves and their profession compared to the relatively mediocre routine-based work performed by the majority of commercial artists. Further, they did not limit their professional engagement to the poster design but critically engaged in social, political, commercial and aesthetic debates and projects; they reached out for a public beyond the exclusive circles of art connoisseurs and professional practitioners and were also involved in exhibition activities. The exhibition also introduced to visionary organizations and corporations supporting the poster as a primary media and art form in the development of early corporate design strategies, mainly London Transport/London Underground and Shell Oil Company.

Dansk Plakatmuseum/the Danish Poster Museum is located in Den Gamle By/Old Town in Aarhus, more precisely, in an area representing historical buildings of the 20th century. The museum is situated in a new building opened in 2009, however, hidden behind a 1920s façade; it was designed by Danish architects C.F. Møller in a classical strict modernistic style and holds two storeys with a total area of 360 m². The first floor houses a permanent exhibition of Danish poster ‘classics’, and on the ground

floor show contemporary exhibitions of Danish and international posters. The contrast of the poster museum and the historic open air museum is striking in regard to time, space and museum types: Dressed up figures of earlier eras greet museums visitors of the present day, and 19th and 20th century buildings and urban areas frame that of the 2009 late modernism poster museum building; the clash of types also plainly marks different curatorial approaches to the concept of reconstruction: that of Gamle By's omnipresent illusionism encountering C.F. Møller's white cube modernism. As a visitor one is likely to experience a 'de-naturalization' or unmasking of the naturalized historical cityscape revealing the open air museum as 'true fiction'. From a curatorial viewpoint, the two museum types represent different approaches to reconstruction, the sacred limbo of white cube modernism and the all-enveloping illusionism of a 'living' museum.



Taking counterability into account they also offer curatorial strategies either aiming at a gallery like affordance, inviting viewers to a contemplative viewing position - or a more insistent invitation to participate in a lively narrative scene. Again, these strategies would either push the meaning of the British posters in an art for art's sake direction or, if integrated in a reconstructed city scene, turn them into ephemeral, nostalgic poster designs (and classics) belonging to the street and the everyday life.



The exhibition was formed as a grid, built in black painted wooden battens, centered around three ‘poster towers’ of different heights. The structure invited visitors to take a stroll, to explore, challenging his view from a variety of angles and levels, of the posters, objects, films and photos on display. The black grid was of an installationary kind, underscoring the visitors embodied and subjective experience of the displays as well as the time progressing experience². Our aim was to create a space which enabled a walk among the towers, glass cases, monitors, posters and the oversized captions, framed in like the posters, to appear like large signs. The entire grid could, panoramically, be overlooked from the upper floor; the towers reached up to 6-7 meters, abstracting the concept of the traditional poster stand, kiosks, bus stop or other types of urban interior, which in the past and present work to restrict and control commercial design in public space. Towers are also a recurrent and central symbol of the great national and international exhibitions held continuously during the 20th century. Further, the poster towers emerged as colourful monuments celebrating the London Underground/ London Transport and Shell Oil Company as modern companies and ‘patrons of art’. During the first half of the 20th century these companies prioritized posters as a primary way of communication and initiated, as part of foresighted and professional commercial strategies, corporative works with artists and modern graphic designers. The reciprocal relation between posters and viewers was also reflected

² Anne R. Petersen (2009) defines installation art according to three parameters; rather than seeing the art work as autonomous, embodying specific formal characteristics, she focuses on the relations between ”the art work” (”værket”) and the ”outer-works” (”udenværkerne”). By this installations are characterized by: 1. activating space and context; 2. progressing the installation in time, like a situation or a process; 3. Having a phenomenological approach to the embodied and subjective experience of the viewer and the progressing in time.

in the selection of objects on display: A great part of the posters were new reprints of inter-war lithographic and off set printed posters in a 1:1 format. In addition to a high solution print quality, the reprints enabled an unshielded, direct form of display, highlighting the colours, close to the original prints, and the tactile sense of the large paper sheets, resembling poster viewing in the urban. A selection of original British posters of the Poster Museum's collection linked the British subject to the museum, stressing the matter of private collectors and the provenance of museum objects. Special attention was given to Abram Games' (1916- 1996), one of the most important and influential figures of 20th century graphic design.³ In addition to Games' original poster designs, his working tools, brushes, paints, sketches and art works were put on display to create a sense of the creative process; further, iconic markers such as a watch, an ashtray, a pipe, a family photo, worked to visualize a grand designer's personal life as inseparably from world history. They were all everyday objects, which invited viewers to engage in the subject from a combined artistic, biographical and personal perspective.

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³ All original posters, art works and objects were kindly lent to The Danish Poster Museum by the Estate of Abram Games and Naomi Games, daughter of Abram Games.

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