

M/M (Michael Amzalag, Mathias Augustyniak)
Royal College of Art discussion with
David Blamey//2006

Tom Mowyer Despite your recent collaborations with artists and your current exhibition in an art gallery, at the end of the day you're still graphic designers, right?

Michael Amzalag No, at the beginning of the day we are graphic designers. It's just that we have been making all these shapes and objects and at this moment in time our work interests people in the art world. Initially it was institutions that approached us to design for them. Gradually, it shifted to artists who asked us to help them design their art pieces. Now we are in the situation where galleries are asking us to present our own work in an art context.

David Blamey On the surface it looks as though you have been through a process of transition then from design to art. Has there been a strategic benefit to you in crossing the species barrier?

Mathias Augustyniak To start with, I tend to feel that it is always best to be a specialist, whichever field it is in. If you have too much of a broad approach – if you are a non-specialist – you never arrive at the kind of pressing questions that are interesting. Our belief is that the more you are a specialist in your field the closer you get to the essence of things. Only then can you start to have a possible relationship with another field – and this is where things start to become interesting. Being specialists gives us a point of entry – a keyhole through which we can look onto the world. It is in this spirit of specialism that we meet and work with artists.

We always thought we could follow our intuition more freely as graphic designers. As designers we were liberated from the weight of art history and were therefore able to approach the notion of art with a degree of nonchalance.

An ongoing problem for artists today is the question of how their work can be effective beyond the art world. It seems that since the 1960s artists have become the producers of elite forms of entertainment and luxury goods that have little to do with reality any more. Art has simply become more and more detached from the economy of everyday life; artists seem to insist on positioning themselves outside of the real world in this exclusive space called art.

Blamey So to come back to the nub of that point again: behind my question was

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READ ME

a widely held perception about what the roles of the artist and the designer entail. You have just suggested that artists have become detached from the economy of everyday life, but perhaps you meant society in general. Graphic design is, by contrast, very much engaged with society: it delivers information, it helps us find our way home on the road, it signals the street that we live on, etc. Design is omnipresent and fundamental in a way that art just is not. Art isn't supposed to be practical or even sensible. From this I can see that claiming to be designers first and foremost is elemental and I can see how you have allowed your practice to evolve, but isn't there an element of timely *cachet* about it too? Claiming to be a designer first reverses the prevailing hierarchy wherein art and artists continue to be perceived as existing on a higher realm than design and designers. The placement of your work in the gallery represents one of the most recent examples of where the art world is taking seriously work that for many commentators should stay in the lower domain of the design world.

In other words, you are riding a wave in a positive way. If we look at some of the artists you have been working with – Pierre Huyghe, Phillippe Parreno and Liam Gillick – the time is now right to be aligning yourselves with a method of working associated with them. I am, of course, thinking of relational aesthetics ...

Augustyniak We first met Nicolas Bourriaud just before he wrote his infamous text. Though I really love the poetry of those two words being brought together – relational and aesthetics – what is really interesting about the term is that it could be a definition of graphic design. Basically, it says that art production should be about the collaborative process – between producers and audience – and not just about the final object. The same has always been true for design. While theories of the 'relational' are exclusively applied to art, instead of becoming part of a wider active process, its effect will only be to produce a poor artistic visual style. Maybe what Nicolas should have insisted on is that instead of faking reality art should aim to produce a new reality out of the old one.

Basically, we wanted to make the statement that one could deal with the notion of art from a creative platform other than the one defined as the art world. As graphic design is situated at the crossroads between many different activities it seemed the perfect place from which to establish this kind of fulfilling exchange with practitioners from other disciplines.

And anyway, we always thought our position was equivalent to that of the artists – there was never any doubt about this. Establishing a one-to-one dialogue with the artist on a level field was always crucial. We don't like the artist who comes to the graphic designer and says, this is my picture, this is my art, do something cool with it – treating us like the butler. From one field to another there should be respect.

Amzalag Something that happened to us right at the beginning relates to this well. There was a show curated by Eric Troncy for which we were asked to design the invitation. Eric thought that we were cool designers – it was like the art world was peeping at us for the first time. While designing the invite we looked at the artists on the list and we said, we're as good as all those people, and so we added our name to the list. The person who was producing the invite was a friend of ours and she let it go through. Of course it led to a big drama. We had messages at the time on the answering machine saying things like, what have you done? And when the invitation was released, and there was the list of names, right in the middle there was a hole. They had erased our names from the list of artists!

Blamey But recently the art world has treated you with more respect; can you reveal something of the collaborative arrangement between yourselves and the artists that you've joined forces with?

Augustyniak One of our earliest collaborations was triggered by a commission by Harald Szeemann for the 1999 Venice Biennale in which we worked with Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. The first decision that Pierre, Philippe and Dominique made about the presentation of their project was that they wanted to work in partnership and show a single film in one of the rooms – effectively leaving two of the rooms allocated to them empty. The Biennale people were furious. In response, the artists developed the concept of using the first and last space as lead-in and lead-out areas from the film by sub-contracting to us the job of making its title-sequences in the form of paintings on the walls. Instead of being spatially locked into the work itself, the titles allowed the film to begin in the viewers' heads as they entered the first space and then to taper off, instead of stopping dead, when leaving. In this case, we were able to create a gigantic painting that covered the walls of two big rooms while the film was situated in only the middle room.

A more recent collaboration was with Pierre Huyghe in his exhibition *Celebration Park* at Tate Modern (2006). This show was a direct comment on the relationship between art and reality. *Celebration Park* was designed as a three-dimensional image of the propaganda that promotes the non-existent place called art. To achieve this we enlarged a neon signage system of ours to meet the scale of the building – making a sign system for a place that does not exist yet. Our contribution is therefore wrapped up in the process of arriving at the work – its visual strength ensuring that the idea doesn't just collapse into artistic utopia. This is what we find beautiful.

Blamey So the overriding message here – one that I think is really positive – is

that you refuse to acknowledge the boundaries between these areas. Your principal interest, your terms of engagement, in fact, are those of dialogue, quality and equality.

Augustyniak Yes. We are interested in dialogue between specialists.

Blamey So if I were to ask you if you designed your exhibition that opened at the Haunch of Venison here in London last night, is this a question that you would refuse to recognize because it uses the design label?

Augustyniak No, the exhibition exists on many levels – one being design. We considered the gallery as a place in which we could display an archive of our ideas. In reassessing our work produced in the commercial world for the exhibition we are giving the viewer the chance to read some of our propositions again. The objects for sale in this context should be seen as commemorations of this process. When a museum purchases our work they are buying an entry point to our overall creative process.

But being able to show in an art gallery with this premise makes some artists and critics suspicious of our practice; for them, the connotation of the word 'collaborator' hasn't changed since the Second World War. Basically, they think we are frustrated to be in our field and so are spying on theirs!

Blamey What you are saying is that historically designers haven't been given the liberal space to allow them to have a more exploratory approach in the way that artists have. What you are insisting on is being granted that space – and one way you do that is to collaborate with artists. For even if you are invited initially to be a facilitator, eventually through dialogue your production becomes equivalent to the art produced. As a result, it becomes so enmeshed in it that you can't distinguish one from the other.

In relation to this, I'm wondering whether Graphic Thought Facility, who I believe are currently designing a book on your work, are granted carte blanche to do whatever they want, or do they serve you, as the artist's butler, precisely in the way that you yourselves so detest?

Augustyniak No. I expect them to do what they think is right. At the end I expect to be able to say at least it was a good thing to have worked with them because the collaborative process was a creative one – even if I hate the book!

Maki Suzuki How are you different to GTF?

Augustyniak That's a good question. From what we know of them GTF would never say they are artists. Also, they are London based while we are in Paris, with all that the cultural difference entails. But since this is an intimate question maybe it would be good to ask the same question to Andy Stevens and Paul Neale. My sense is that they are more than happy to be graphic designers. They have a romantic idea of what it is to be graphic designers and they have an obsession with the design of things.

Once they were doing a conference and they were presenting a design for a caption display system. They were showing these strange aluminium shapes and I said to myself, I couldn't do that, they are mad, mad scientists! Even if this piece of design eventually ends up in a museum, they will never say it is a sculpture. Maybe this is the difference between them and us.

Blamey That's a good answer, but having just worked with them as their client, my experience was that it felt just like working with fellow artists and not designers. Of course this has nothing to do with what the work looks like, but everything to do with the quality of the discussion that you have when working with them. Maybe your experience of GTF is different, but for me it was a very collaborative process. Certainly the book that we ended up with at the end was nothing like anything I could have imagined at the beginning. I'm sure they would say the same thing too. The nature of the process – the dialogue between us, the openness to learning something new on their behalf as well as mine – enabled the journey to inform the destination. This echoes your earlier point Mathias about specialists communicating across fields of expertise.

Augustyniak Yes, it's strange because we are very similar to GTF and yet not at all. I would say we are complimentary.

When GTF were designing posters for Habitat to promote British artists, I remember I had a discussion with Paul and I asked him why aren't you doing a poster yourselves, your own thing, instead of just servicing these artists? From what I remember of the artists' work, if GTF had done their own poster it would have been as good if not better than all the others, but they had no interest in forcing themselves onto that stage as equals in the way we did.

Blamey Maybe their approach is a subtle one. Think of their signage for the *Stealing Beauty* exhibition at the ICA (1999) or the mirror posters that they did for the Peter Saville exhibition at the Design Museum (2004). Both are good examples of where they did what you are asking for but they did it covertly. Their creative fingerprint was all over those exhibitions because their contribution was so strong despite ostensibly being at the service of others.

Whether because of their modesty, or because they prefer to sneak up on you instead of shout on your face, they get noticed in the end and the results are always memorable.

Amzalag Maybe it's a matter of the same tool being used differently. Or maybe it's simply that they operated out of a different context and so were not asked the same questions as us. What we do is more like couture.

Alex Coles What interests me here is that although M/M's processes may be similar to that of certain artists, the notion of context plays a crucial role. The historical conditions of the white cube are different to those of a fashion magazine such as *Vogue Paris*, which you redesigned some years ago. Of course, you can use the same conceptual strategy when working in either context, but will it be equally effective in both? I'd say probably not. So I would like to know how M/M perceive context and how it affects their approach.

Amzalag The problem for us at the moment is that museums are so motivated by popularity that they have become places of consumerism, like supermarkets. But recognition of this fact takes us back to our first intuition to become graphic designers when we knew we had to face this hard selling world. We accepted the Haunch of Venison show because the gallery clearly announced their intentions as a commercial operation from the very start. For us this was great because it makes the context clear. And yes, the relation to the context as a graphic designer is something that is very, very important.

Callum Sutton I'm from Haunch of Venison so I'm coming at this debate from the point of view of art rather than design. So far, things have very much focused on M/M's identity as designers. I want to ask Alex what the effect of them choosing to show in an art gallery is and what contribution is that making to the debate about the boundaries of art and the way art and design are marketed?

Coles The boundaries of art seem to be infinitely flexible, but only to the extent that it is useful to the art world for them to be so. Think of the current trend of commercial galleries exhibiting design: whether it is historical design, with Gagosian LA's Charlotte Perriand and Jean Prouvé exhibition, or contemporary design, with Established & Sons' Zaha Hadid table or, of course, your present exhibition. The auction houses also play a big role in this process with chairs and tables now fetching prices previously only associated with paintings and sculptures. Were M/M's exhibition to be reductively perceived to be just an extension of this process, whereby the commercial art world colonizes design in

the name of making a buck, it would be a real shame, a failure of sorts.

Amzalag This division between art and design is very recent, whether it is in their production or their marketing and distribution. Otherwise how would you consider Michelangelo being asked to do Saint Peter's Cathedral? If you take a piece from the cathedral and put it in a museum then is it a design piece or an art piece? Today it would be an art piece, but at the time he was not tagged as an artist in the way that we now think of him – he was more of an artisan.

Blamey Yes, in the fourteenth century artists would expect to work commercially in a number of ways. Both of them were problem solvers, in the most everyday sense, as well as merchants in truth and beauty in accordance with the classical way artists are assumed to be. Michelangelo mixed science, art and design together in response to an unbelievable range of commissions. But he seemed to pursue his own imagination and curiosity from within the restrictions of the client's instructions. Maybe there is a good model for us here.

The contention that traditional boundaries between art and design are eroding nowadays may well be true – I hope so – but it's worth noting that the claim is nothing new. Following what Mathias was saying before about art becoming detached from the rest of the world since the 1960s, it is also true that in the late 1960s and early 1970s people were beginning to talk about interdisciplinarity as a development – as a new direction for both art and design. There has been recognition among artists and designers in the UK for some time that the qualities that had differentiated one discipline from another were beginning to become common to both. But the revolution of the way in which we think about and evaluate the image world turned out to be more in theory than in practice ... the old divisions are still there.

Perhaps all we can say with conviction is that some art is as bad as design, and some design is as good as art.

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