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Beyond the Image and Towards Communication

An Extra-Disciplinary Critique of the Visual Communication Profession

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The profession of visual communication design needs to shift fundamentally. In times of radical uncertainty and environmental degradation visual communication, as institutionalised through the academic and business profession, has not developed its communicative potentials. It operates in ways that maintain the status quo or are even worsening the situation. In order for visual communication to change we need to thoroughly rethink our thinking, develop new theory and redirect practice.

The aim of this paper is to depict the perspectives and define approaches necessary to evolve the communicative potentials of visual communication design. It will discuss four things: (i) the inner institutional logic of the profession of visual communication design, relating it to the image and cognitive capitalism; (ii) the limitations of visual communication design and the need to go “beyond the image and towards

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co-curator of the book
*Demonstrating
Relevance:
Response-Ability, Theory,
Practice and Imagination
of Socially Responsive
Communication.***

communication”; (iii) the concept of ‘extra-disciplinary investigation’ in relation to visual communication design; (iv) the limitations of current visual communication design in the light of “design for social change” using the case of the concept of a “visual identity.”

I will begin with an example. A few months ago a small team within Queensland College of Arts’s design department started to work on a new website. This is to be the department’s primary communication tool with which the new design program under development, called ‘Design Futures’ will be presented to the world. It is a highly ambitious program seeking to implement a fundamental shift in design thinking, research, theory, practice and education. It aims to respond to the current conditions of environmental degradation¹ and radical uncertainty with a philosophy of social change through environmental and social responsibility.

While discussing the web site and collectively developing the initial concept further, we were dealing with several design concepts, which I felt could not do justice to our ambitions for the project. The concepts were too limited and limiting, they could not cover the various dimensions that were rapidly unfolding in our polemical conversations and above all, they were limiting our conversations, imagination and potentials.

The website was being approached through the design concept of visual identity – which was to be based on a participatory logic in its material-visual manifestation. Content associated with our department was to be collaged in a visual representation that could change through time. Although progressive in professional design terms, the approach of using the frame, the lens, the method, the tool, the established concept, the theory and the practice of a visual identity shows, in my opinion, the limits of what is regarded as progressive within the current design profession.

There are specific reasons for these limitations. First, the design profession has not yet established enough theoretical concepts, which would inform thinking and practice that we could call “beyond progressive”.² Second, the social nature of design, in our case, visual communication, which is always a social practice³ implies the need for tools and communication design approaches that can relate visual communication with the social in an analytic, reflexive, theoretical and practical manner. So far this is, in my opinion, not the case and in order to develop new and different progressive perspectives we will have to look outside of the established design profession.

As the editors of the “Beyond Progressive Design” issue of *Design Philosophy Papers* stated in their introduction: “Inclusive Design, Universal Design, Design for All, Human-centred Design, Co-Design, Participatory Design, Design for Social Innovation” – all considered *progressive*, are design approaches focused on creating non instrumental relations between various stakeholders involved in the particular design process... “while attempting to codify a relationship between designing and taking responsibility for a diversity

of needs, points of view and life positions.”⁴ Although many of the mentioned concepts have in various degrees of sophistication been practiced for some time and their “sociality” is to some degree intentionally relational and inclusive, they are not necessarily dialogic from the perspective of systemic and social change. In most cases, conditions for genuine dialogue don’t exist. Current design, although it might appear differently, mainly reinforces existing power relations and prevents dialogue. But this dialogue is what we need. What is considered as progressive within the design profession is not necessarily progressive in terms of social change. In the light of visual communication design, the main question has to be: how can design contribute to an open and dialogic public sphere? How can it create publics? How can it create and be an argument, “one that manifests itself more or less explicitly in the message, in relation to the conditions under which it was produced and which it is disseminated?”⁵ How can visual communication work towards distributing power more equally? These questions are at the core of the communicative dimensions of visual communication. They are related to social, ethical, political, relational, cultural, economic aspects and effects. They are related to the communicative potentials and effects of visual communication. They are related to our understanding of what is being perceived as “good visual communication”.

Neither the medium, nor the image is the message. Social relations are; and the key for today’s visual communication practice *is to shift from the appearance to the relation*. This shift implies a complete rethinking and rearticulation of the languages used, and crucially shaped within, the narrow ideology of the design profession.⁶ In order to bring these languages into ‘a relation with social relations’ we need to “untie the bonds of language” and “(open) up new social, analytical and aesthetic practices.”⁷ We need to research our abilities to respond to the social. And we need a stronger institutional critique.

In this light, the important question is: which fields have established knowledge and theories relevant to visual communication (design)? What kind of relations can contribute to insights beyond the disciplinary traps?

The Designed Profession

Design as a profession has immense and specific impact. Designers as cultural intermediaries work mainly in a depoliticised way, without an awareness of their impact on society, culture and the environment. Design as a profession, and as one of the pillars of creative industries and cognitive capitalism, is, in general, stuck in a narcissistic position of market driven self-importance unable to think about its own conditions of operation.

Cognitive capitalism is organized around the production of immaterial products like ideas, concepts, and knowledge. Due to low

production costs, the market value of such products is constructed through artificial scarcity created and maintained by branding strategies and aggressive copyright law enforcement. It is the relation between the constructed image of a product/service and copyright that ensures financial profits. Visual communication design plays an important and specific part in the logic of cognitive capitalism. Because not all parts of the productive process can be measured and not everything can be controlled under the regimes of copyright laws, designers use (and are being used through) other mechanisms of capitalization that are tightly connected to the image, the visual and the (non) visible.

In forums on progressive design, the main argument usually put is the need to connect design to a more critical perspective, especially one informed by social sciences. And design as a field has partly already shifted its direction. This however still does not seem able to inform design in a way that would empower visual communication to operate in the realm of social change; the tendency is to fall back into professional design's self-referential traps of skilful specialisation and the dictate of the image. While this partial shift towards inclusion of knowledge from other fields is relatively new and therefore all effects might not yet be possible to see, there still remains the need to undertake rigorous reflection on the conditions under which the profession operates if we want to make a really progressive step forward.

The profession of design is institutionalised in specific ways; here I will focus on several dimensions that might help us understand the problematic relations between the professional design culture of visual communication, the image and the social.

Knowledge is constituted in practice, meaning it is constructed in the social and therefore becomes real; this reality is institutionalised through objectification and legitimisation of the subjective.⁸ This objectification and legitimisation happens mainly through three institutions: education, the market, and competitions. Let's have a closer look at them.

Education

- Design as taught at universities is (almost completely) skills-based training and has not yet established mechanisms to be a serious profession.

To a very large extent, design is vocational skills-based training. As such, it was integrated into universities and has remained so. From within universities design has rarely been the subject of academic study (e.g., sociology of design). Designer-educators as well as students have been living in a small, self-referential, safe, university bubble for decades. It is important to understand that vocational skills based training is fundamentally different from an intellectual education. Design, within academia, lacks strong

institutionalised research, theory, critique and publications. Academic publications that exist deal with design mostly in an instrumental, technical manner and are generally not read by a wider audience of design educators. As a profession tightly connected with popular practice, popular public forums, for example, are essential. Serious popular publications, especially ones with a critical perspective on design, are very rare; therefore serious public debate is limited.⁹

The Market

- Design as a profession is market-based.

The skills-based training has been predominantly related to the market. This means that criteria for evaluating what is good design have been mainly constructed by the market and then brought into the classroom.

Design is understood mainly as practice. Practice is understood in a very limited way – basically it is about the “pencil and computer mouse” practice of visual communication. Strategic thinking, creative direction, conceptual development, research/investigation, thinking in general ... are not seen as practice. Those who do not use a “pencil or computer” are not considered designers.

Practice is about providing service for clients; it is not about an emancipated position. As a practice, design is image and object centred, almost without relational thinking and understanding of the broader social, cultural, communicative and political context. Because of this, it is depoliticised (except for brief, superficial rendezvous with critique in order to jump on the bandwagon of cool). This is why it has not developed the capability to think about the conditions for the construction of the profession.

The market channels the representation and institutionalisation of knowledge through the mechanisms of competitions and publications. Popular publications lack critique, while academic publications, when opening new discursive fields operate mainly at the level of inter-disciplinarity, which has certain potential, but is also problematic as we will see later.

Construction of Quality Criteria and Representation of the Profession

- Competitions in various forms – festivals, biennials, etc – are the institutions that define quality criteria in the profession. Yet they are about image control of the profession, not about the profession itself.

I will illustrate this with a particular design competition I discussed on memefest.org¹⁰:

This particular competition¹¹ gives “the biggest national award for achievements” in the field of what they call “design of visual

messages.” Here again is a good example of how ideology works: this competition started as an initiative of a handful of people mainly based at the university plus a few in the industry.

After a few years significant parts of the profession were highly critical to it. In fact the larger part of the only University design department was against it, arguing that the event does not really contribute to the profession but actually does damage to it. So where does the title, “the biggest national award for achievements for design of visual messages” come from? Who said that? Who should say that? Normally it is a matter of broad professional, academic, expert, and industry perspective and agreement. It should and can be done only if certain mechanisms are established that allow for public critique at a certain standard and if such an organisation is inclusive, not exclusive.

In this case, it was self-proclaimed through advertisements! Isn't that fantastic? It was first announced in the advertisements that were launched for the promotion of one of the biennials. (The advertisements showed a pixelated cityscape of Ljubljana, covered with the event's logotypes. Basically the complete city was branded! Interesting if we take into account that branding is a specific approach to communication).

The media and journalists are, for obvious reasons, happy to pick up this title. So are the participants, the winners, the losers, the students, etc... The nature of this process is problematic and sadly works in the longer term against itself. It does not have anything to do with any academic or serious professional culture. What I am describing here is not only about this case. The underlying principle we can read in this is part of the existing and dominating design (and advertising!) culture, because design (and advertising) competitions, festivals, biennials, etc **are not about the design profession but about the image of the design profession! And because it is about the image of the profession it is also about control / influence of the profession/scene.** This is key and very important to understand!¹²

The usual problem with design competitions is that criteria for measuring quality are vague and the process of selection is exclusive. Evaluations of submitted works are usually not articulated beyond the usual, “this is a very strong work with good idea and concept” or something like, “this is a fresh approach” or even better, “this is a strong image”, while the public and participants do not usually get any real explanation of the results. The evaluation is decontextualized, its subject is not situated and therefore can only give a partial picture of the works evaluated. This top-down process plays an important role in mystification of the knowledge and importance of design. And this populist craft orientation is profoundly anti-intellectual.

Some Notes on Cognitive Workers and Capitalists within Visual Communication

Visual communication knowledge and thought become visible in the production process, where language is used as the main means of production.¹³ The product of the productive process is also language – symbolic and aestheticised – the language that the cognitive capitalist market demands. The profession of visual communication uses a particular language whose ideological background is rooted in a culture that is channelled through institutions which are inherently connected with the operating principles of cognitive capitalism. The profession's relation to language is fundamental – visual communication design is one of the main industries of cognitive capitalism and language is the key means of its production. The end product itself is also language and the result – for example a designed visual communication campaign – is then again a means of production for the client who uses it for creating a certain image for a service, product or idea.¹⁴ The relations these languages produce are crucial in reproducing power relations between the cognitive capitalist and the creative worker. The first controls the mechanisms that make the creative, language-driven results of the second visible and associated with the symbolic capital, copyrighted or otherwise controlled. The cognitive capitalist therefore controls the regimes of image capitalisation, because it is the image that creates his wealth. As we could see in the logic of representation in connection with quality criteria and the market, it is also the image that creates a certain quality of the cognitive capitalist's or his company's expertise and as such, its relation with the actual expertise is mediated by the appearance.¹⁵

The lack or non-existence of critical knowledge within the skills-oriented education is later complemented by another structural manoeuvre: a seemingly open culture of collaboration in the professional business environment. With a commodified, co-opted and instrumentalised process of knowledge and idea generation controlled by cognitive capitalists while maintaining and encouraging an open, egalitarian culture of production, the result is that the products become an image the moment they enter the regimes of capitalisation.

Extra-Disciplinary Investigations in Visual Communication

This institutionalised and legitimised profession of design shapes the design thinking of visual communication designers: design (thinking) is situated and habituated. Design designs us. Design, in its manifold manifestations, is the result of an active interplay between a personally internalised social structure within which we can operate and the given practices and institutions that are historically situated, while “designing in the world.” This is an important and necessary theoretical perspective made by Kimbell in her article

Rethinking Design Thinking.¹⁶ We have to acknowledge this position as inherently social and political and therefore a position of power, because the fact that thinking is situated and habituated shows relations that structure but are also structuring structures that can be restructured.¹⁷

It is the institutional constraints of the profession and the nature of the professional culture that defines what visual communication design is, how it is being thought, researched and practiced. The concepts that are used in the process of production play an ideological role and help structure the habitus of designers. Design is emptied of its own emancipatory potential when it manifests itself as an image in the matrix that channels social relations nurtured by cognitive capitalism. In order to redirect the profession this must be recognised in its ideological depth.

The intellectual potentials growing on the soil of interdisciplinarity have influenced a certain shift in the profession. But the profession as it is institutionalised cannot really use interdisciplinary design thinking for social change. And interestingly it is interdisciplinarity itself that is lacking the change potential. Although it indicates a certain drift to the outside and to the other discipline, this is: “purely discursive, and uses glamorous virtuosity in the attempt to fill an empty discourse, a pastiche entirely devoid of critique, which can easily be digested by the market and is perfectly suited to the new regime’s demand for aestheticisation.”¹⁸

It is a naïve assumption that we can change things if we play the intellectual game of theoretically opening new horizons within the constraints of institutions that have generated the profession in the first place. Current efforts are failing to realise that real publics that can generate critical intellectual thought are incredibly rare and they are not to be sought after within established (inter) disciplines of current universities whose mission has predominantly become to train skilled experts of all kinds and get rid of intellectuals and serious theory. To even a lesser degree will those publics be found within the business design environment.

In his theorisation of a “new institutional critique” Brian Holmes has introduced what he calls extra-disciplinary investigations. Built on the shoulders of the artistic critique of institutions and conceptualised as a new critique of the institution of art and directed towards practices on the intersections of art/theory/activism this approach offers a critique that is in my opinion is necessary to employ for rigorous change of the visual communication practice within the design profession as well as a change of the profession itself. Holmes describes it in this way:

At work here is a new tropism and a new sort of reflexivity, involving artists as well as theorists and activists in a passage beyond the limits traditionally assigned to their practice. The word tropism conveys the desire or need to turn towards

something else, towards an exterior field or discipline; while the notion of reflexivity now indicates a critical return to the departure point, an attempt to transform the initial discipline, to end its isolation, to open up new possibilities of expression, analysis, cooperation and commitment. This back-and-forth movement, or rather, this transformative spiral, is the operative principle of what I will be calling extra-disciplinary investigations.¹⁹

This rather experimental research, or investigation as Holmes is calling it, happens within a newly created public that is able to unfold an expressive analytic and aesthetic practice and at the same time (self) organize situations of social exchange with an attempt to transform one's initial discipline.

The extra-disciplinary ambition is to carry out rigorous investigations on terrains as far away from art as finance, biotech, geography or psychiatry, to bring forth on those terrains the "free play of the faculties" and to carry out a lucid and precise critique. These are deliberate and delirious experiments, unfolding by way of material forms, conceptual protocols and situations of social exchange. Satire, hallucination and political activism go hand in hand with careful study and technological sophistication."²⁰

What is needed to achieve necessary change is an approach that generates a reflexive circulation between disciplines and "involves critical reserves of marginal or counter-cultural positions."²¹ It is exactly this specifically structured relation between disciplines which establishes a shift that has the potential to change the protocols, dynamics, flows and logics of institutionalised cultures.

In the current conditions of communicational labour and the logic of the public sphere, this approach must operate in the spheres of conflict between the dominant, commercial discourse and the challenging, critical, activist discourse. It is there where a dynamic of the biggest communicative tension is being generated.²² Such projects can't be really reduced to one institutional umbrella and they are by definition not a matter of one specialised discipline. It is this specific public sphere in which this conflict happens, where innovation, critique, theory, practice and co-optation meet. It is where the communicative tensions in all possible manifestations can become visible, but it is the moments of appropriation and capitalisation that an extra-disciplinary practice of investigation is especially aware of.

These publics are neither reduced to the street or popular media, nor only to the classroom, design studio and advertising company. For those who are engaged in public communication they are a matter of every day life, but the position is often tactical and sometimes oscillates between tactic and a strategy, because it involves moving within and around the tensions established by the "dominant

cartographies of a given social context.”²³ Such initiatives, projects and relations partly already exist, but in visual communication design, the designer’s blind spots need to be recognised. Progressive visual communication initiatives have to take a courageous step further. A change in the very logic of visual communication will play a crucial role in achieving this. The profession uses certain concepts and cognitive tools for a certain reason: they have been developed in order to institutionalise and reproduce a specific profession. In this light, the visual image is more about ideological reproduction than progressive communication.

Behind the Appearance

While the concept of extra-disciplinary investigations offers a theoretical practice of institutional critique, *it is its **socially responsive** shift towards the specific communicative tensions within the public sphere that are inherently connected to the logic of the design profession, which creates a potential for institutional redirection.*

Coming back to where we started. The lens through which we approached our web site project was that of visual identity. Within professional design, visual identity is an established concept: a visual signifier and a related system of visual elements to identify a particular product, service or organisation; distinguish it from others; and represent certain characteristics including values, institutional structures and aspirations. Within the processes of branding, the signifying power of visual identity and its related cultural impact make visual identity one of the profession’s more important and valued practices.

In our case, a concept of “participatory” design was discussed, where a collage-like grid would form the basis for this identity. This would be filled, on a regular basis, with different works – representing the real institution instead of using the usual top down approaches with a pre-prepared image that then becomes the point of identification of the institution without any influence by the members of the institution itself. In exploring this concept, we very soon faced limitations that reveal important aspects of the logic of the current design profession.

a) The Visible Is the Product, The Product Is Visual

One of the problems is in the assumption that our “work” is the actual visual outcomes of our educational process, or, for example, written texts. In general, universities are problematic because *what counts is what is visible, and the visible is what gets materialized and what is measurable.* This creates most of the alienation of students and staff alike because it commodifies knowledge and pedagogical relations. The actual outcome of education should be the pedagogic process, the relations, research, and the culture. This cannot be represented in the form of products, no matter how good they are.

One of the biggest problems in visual communication is the representation of a community, relations and process through a visual outcome. The visual outcome never really represents all the important things that generated the image in the first place. It represents something else and is also only indirectly connected with the “maker”, no matter how much the image credits the whole team or group of people and then, only with the “design”, not the concept, research, writing, photography, dialogue ... fun, etc ... ‘What really counts’ is what needs to be shown; and what this is, needs to be discussed, articulated and then a method found to represent it. This is a process that could immensely help future work with students and with colleagues.

***b) Ownership, Intention, Co-optation, Exploitation:
New and Distinct***

To discuss our example further, if we want to consider this as potentially participatory communication in the context of Design Futures, a process needs to be created that allows students and QCA staff to permanently co-create the visual identity. Otherwise it is only a curated or selected process of material outcomes, or a technological form/design that allows for visual change during time.

Here it becomes complicated, because truly “co-creating” an identity means a certain level of identification, belonging and ownership. How can this happen in a corporate context? Can we assume that all students and staff would like to be part of it? Can we assure that students will understand what this involves and be able to make a critical decision?

The creative, ideas-based, immaterial economy generates its profits mainly by colonizing all possible regimes of value creation. Advertising companies and design studios work as open platforms, inviting creative people in and giving them the possibility to do whatever they want. They build down hierarchical structures in the creative process so as to create a sense of belonging and ensure the best possible working conditions. But the ownership of the product, the copyright, and the right to manage symbolic capital either of the product or the brand of the company (in our case, the school/institute) is owned by someone else. And that’s the key to today’s exploitation.²⁴ Many people who are active in the more critically informed design and broader communication scene fail to avoid this trap, but it is crucial not to reproduce these structures.²⁵ If they cannot be overcome in legal terms because ownership is in most cases unavoidable and some of its economic and social dimensions are of course beneficial, a public reflection in the process of conceptualisation, design, implementation, representation and capitalisation needs to be established. It is these communicative publics that are crucial for things to change; they are crucial for the profession to evolve, for communication to become a more powerful and relevant part of design. So far, I don’t know of any case where this is being strategically implemented and nurtured.

There is one more issue of ownership that is important to examine. The concept of visual identity does not allow for collaborative ownership in the process of its creation. Even on the symbolic level – how can a designer ascribe the authorship of a visual identity that is not designed by him/her, but in a participatory manner by the members of the institution, which the identity should represent? The issue of authorship and its capitalisation is tightly connected with the need for interpreting a designed visual identity as unique. This is because of the logic of signifiers within the commercial, brand-driven environment and the need to create distinction²⁶; but most of all because of the logic of ascribing value to a designed product, there is an immense urge to articulate visual identity design results as “new”, “unique” and “ground breaking.” This, in my opinion, is more a result of the ideological role of the concept of visual identity than of the real design work.

c) (Non) Communication of a Visual Identity

While the profession of design celebrates form and appearance in the manifestations of designed visual identities, it misses the most important part of its communicative dimension. Of course the semiotic dimensions of such an identity define partly the communicative effects, but its meaning gets constructed and the important power relations get defined in the processes in which the visual identity gets used and is situated. Its symbolic capitals are not really intrinsic to its form, but they get defined in relation to the communication approaches that are used to position something with a certain designed identity.

One of the critiques from designers when Naomi Klein published *No Logo* was that the book, which was an anti-branding manifesto, became a brand in itself – referring to the logo-like design of the *No Logo* book cover. It is true that not everything should be aestheticised and designed. The urge to design everything is indeed one of the problems of design, but this was not the argument and this is a whole other important discussion. The key is that this argument misinterpreted a signifier for branding. The latter is a process which uses a signifier. And it's the processes – like for example the commercial colonisation of cultural events or the artificial scarcity and exclusiveness created by buying all versions of a particular internet domain name that constitute branding – not the visual signifier, the visual identity itself.

It now becomes clear that the concept of visual identity is not only a methodology, but more importantly a technology that creates and channels power relations inscribed already in the process of production and later in the process of representation and capitalisation. These dimensions are inherently connected with a specific professional institution, specific *communication approaches* and culture and *consequently with real communication effects*.

Beyond the Image and Towards Communication: The Concept of Visual Identity or a Visual Language of Facilitation?

The concept of a progressive, participatory visual identity, as discussed in the process of creating the new web site for our design department, is a rather unusual approach to communication design.²⁷ Its progressive dimensions are rooted in communication cultures that are highly critical of the dynamics reproduced by the current design profession.²⁸ Rather than being close to a professional design approach, this approach is more rooted in activist, critical, participatory communication cultures. Introducing a concept from a theoretically and practically sophisticated communication culture, bringing it into a particular institutional context and interpreting it through the lens of the design profession shows clear limitations and reveals different traps.²⁹

The relational (power) dimensions inscribed in the concept of visual identity define the limits of its communicative potential and effects. Although tightly connected to communication, because as an image a visual identity is communicative, its paradox lies in the very logic of its epistemology. In its naturalised form a visual identity is employed to enable someone to communicate better. But in fact it does the opposite. This professional design approach, where communication is symbiotically grown together with the many visual dimensions manifested in images of a naturalised professional culture and daily nurtured in a self-referential loop, is where visual communication is inhibited. The concept of visual identity situates relations within the structure of cognitive capitalism's (designed) language protocols that define its culture.

It was W.J.T. Mitchell who analysed power in terms of the relation between iconology and ideology, and then took this further by recognizing ideology in iconology and vice versa. The importance of seeing the connection between ideology and iconology is that it redirects attention from the cognitive field to the ethical, hermeneutic and political field – from the knowledge of subjects about objects to the knowledge of subjects about subjects. And from the social construction of the visual to the visual construction of the social.³⁰

How then to deal with the communicative limitations of this particular case? Instead of the visual identity concept we should introduce a “visual language of facilitation.” Facilitation mediates within a genuine participatory culture and is by principle inclusive rather than exclusive. A visual language of facilitation makes room for participation and it does not put itself at the forefront of attention. It is in the centre but never dominant, because it dissolves in the process of facilitation. This of course is also one of the reasons why professional design culture as it is now, would not be able to imagine going in such a direction. Facilitation is also inherently dialogic, which a visual identity is not, and moreover, it creates completely different dynamics of power in the process of the creation.

A visual language of facilitation, because of its inclusiveness, is also directed to the other in a dialogic manner.³¹ The other not being only actors who will participate in the permanent creation of the “visual identity”, but rather the “outside society.” Since, in the case discussed, this identity is for a department that will work towards redirecting a profession, such redirection needs to be applied to relations that constitute the profession itself. Such redirection would need to focus on the process with a different logic of “the visible” and “the visual” within the regimes of production, representation and capitalisation, and it would want to avoid falling into the aestheticised and self-promotional trap of its fetishisation.

This is possible by employing strong theoretical and practical knowledge about communication approaches. Such a position involves a socially responsive perspective³² and is necessarily strongly informed by critical public sociology.³³ What exactly a visual language of facilitation in all its possible manifestations is, needs to be yet developed. And of course for other communication cases, other socially responsive visual languages will have to be developed.

Sophisticated communication approaches can never really be developed within the constraints of a visual identity concept, but they could be developed within a concept outside of the determinations of the design profession, without remaining completely outside, but intervening in an extra-disciplinary manner.

‘The visual’ shows what is made visible by ideology and its channels, through creating different power relations, what becomes visible when the cognitive enters the regimes of capitalisation. What stays invisible is the nature of communication designed.

It is not difficult to see that the ideological characteristics of this visual culture define the very understanding of who and what is a designer. Visual communication design is related to maintaining certain relations of power – mediated through the image which becomes visible at a certain moment within the processes of production, representation and capitalisation. As in the case of a “visual identity” someone is understood as a designer only if s/he makes tangible products or creates processes channelled and controlled by strict, although implicit, specifically codified business relations of a profession institutionalised in error.

A *socially responsive* approach might help us to better understand the differences and relations between a specific treatment of the image, a specific culture of production of the image, the position of a designer within the productive process in relation to other parties involved, the fixation on certain levels of the image and its fetishisation. It can shift our understanding of the visual as communication. It can help visual communication design to develop further and become an emancipated *communication (theoretical) practice*, because this approach creates (non) institutional relations that are a condition for really progressive design to evolve. However highly critical it may be, this socially responsive approach is not about completely

dismissing or negating the current design profession, but rather realising its strengths and potentials. For many reasons, without serious change, the profession is not going to be able to see these potentials and develop its real strengths, because its current visual culture makes only certain things visible.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. In saying “environmental degradation” I don’t refer only to the physical, biological environment, but also to the mental, symbolic, intangible environment.
2. “Beyond progressive” has to be understood in the context of the current state of the design profession. There will be hopefully a time when there will be no need to go “beyond progressive”, because what will be considered as progressive by the official profession will be design as a catalyst for social change.
3. Jan van Toorn, *Design’s Delight*, Amsterdam, 010 Publishers, 2006 and Oliver Vodeb, *Družbeno odzivno komuniciranje*, Ljubljana, Fakulteta za družbene vede, 2008.
4. *Design Philosophy Papers*, ‘Beyond Progressive Design’ Issue, editorial by Sean Donahue, Rama Gheerawo, Anne-Marie Willis www.desphilosophy.com/dpp/dpp_journal/journal.html, accessed 20.1.2012.
5. Jan van Toorn, *Design’s Delight*, 43.
6. By “profession” I mean both the academic and business profession. Although they are not completely the same, they overlap in their key ideological elements.
7. G. Genosko (ed.) *The Guattari Reader*, Felix Guattari in *Postmodernism and Ethical Abdications*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.
8. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1966.
9. A good reflection on this problem from Rick Poyner can be read here, Another Design Voice Falls Silent: <http://observersroom.designobserver.com/rickpoyner/post/another-design-voice-falls-silent/31828/>, accessed 20.1.2012.
10. Openblog, comment on the post Invisible Biannual of visual communication of Slovenia www.memefest.org/en/profile/aljaz/blogs/2011/11/invisible-biannual-of-visual-communication-of-slovenia/, published 26.12.2011.

11. The Brumen Foundation organises The Biannual of Visual Communication of Slovenia, which became “the most important event” in the dense Slovenian graphic design scene.
12. The profession as well as designers and design companies constitute an important part of what I call external authority. Let’s think about the importance of competitions of various kinds in the profession. Almost all designers use awards at competitions as a reference that should prove how good they are, but practically no one is thinking about the shallow logic these events are based upon. Much more work is spent in the field of awards events than in establishing mechanisms that create knowledge from the inside, and which are crucial for a profession. Competitions are always an “outside motivation” and an “outside award”.
13. Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, New York: Semiotext[e], 2004.
14. Italian philosopher Paolo Virno defined workers whose means of production are the same as the end product as virtuoso workers.
15. Oliver Vodeb, Nikola Janović (eds), *Demonstrating relevance: Response-Ability Theory, practice and imagination of socially responsive communication*, Ljubljana: Memefest & Faculty for Social Sciences, 2010.
16. Lucy Kimbell, ‘Rethinking Design Thinking’ *Design and Culture*, Volume 3, Number 3, Oxford, Berg, 2011.
17. Piere Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, Stanford University Press, 1998 and Tony Fry, *Design Futuring: sustainability, ethics, and new practice*, Oxford, Berg and Oliver Vodeb, *Družbeno odzivno komuniciranje*, Ljubljana, Fakulteta za družbene vede, 2008.
18. Suely Rolnik, ‘The Body’s Contagious Memory, Lygia Clark’s Return to the Museum’ 2007 in <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0507/rolnik/en> (20.1.2012)
19. Brian Holmes, *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society*, Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, 2009
20. Holmes, *Escape the overcode*.
21. Holmes, *Escape the overcode*.
22. Vodeb, *Družbeno odzivno komuniciranje*.
23. Rolnik, ‘The Body’s Contagious Memory’.
24. The first counter argument might be that students and staff whose work might be shown as part of the visual identity will be promoted and therefore this might serve as a balance. But this seems similar to the logic of the dominant forms of business models in creative industries.
25. These issues are very hard to deal with within a professional environment. I can closely observe them in my own practice while co-directing and co-owning a communication studio, working on the possible intersections of business and intervention. I am

convinced that these issues are key for any really progressive institutionalisation of a business within the field of design/communication, a communication culture and communication practice. The question is what kind of relations, concepts and cultures can we create to solve this issues?

26. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2002.
27. This case, of course, can't serve as a generalisation for the limitations of all communication/design approaches, concepts, theories and practices. There are other communicative-relational dimensions that need to be emphasised and other dimensions of the design profession that need to be taken in to account in the future.
28. For more on this check the web site from *Memefest Kolektiv and International Festival of Socially Responsive Communication and Art* www.memefest.org and www.memefest.org/beyond
29. At the same time, however, it can show the potentials of a necessary shift in approaching design problems in a reflexive extra-disciplinary way.
30. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
31. This can also mean communication based on semiotic conflict, in cases where conditions for dialogue are not yet established.
32. Oliver Vodeb, *Družbeno odzivno komuniciranje*, Ljubljana, Fakulteta za družbene vede, 2008.
33. See two articles by Michael Burawoy, 'The Critical Turn to Public Sociology' in *Critical Sociology*, May 2005 31: 313–326 and 'Rejoinder: Toward a Critical Public Sociology' *Critical Sociology* May 2005 31: 379–390, London, Sage, 2005.