

graphic design worlds/words: stories and atoms

By Benedetta Crippa
Published in *Graphic
Design Worlds/Words*,
Curated By G. Camuffo
And M. Dalla Mura,
Electa, Milano,
January 2011

"Stories and Atoms" is born following my work as production assistant to the exhibition Graphic Design Worlds, which took place at the Triennale of Milan Design Museum in January 2011, Italy. At the time, I was working at Studio Camuffo in Venice, and I assisted the curator Giorgio Camuffo through the preparation of the exhibition, which took almost two years. The exhibition showed a diverse landscape in the graphic design scene, involving over 30 graphic designers from Italy, Europe and the United States. My text, part of the exhibition's catalogue, highlights common patterns in the Italian part of the show, while stressing the importance of storytelling in the design practice. The illustration accompanying the essay, realized by me and graphic designer Matteo Zago, is meant as a metaphor or a mental map of the design process, made of the relationship between a well defined project structure (atoms) and free-drawn signs (stories).

Over the past few months I had the chance to take part in putting together *Graphic Design Worlds*, following the event as it gradually took form. By the exploration of a variety of different "worlds", this exhibition casts a light on a number of relevant aspects of the Italian design landscape represented in the show.

Telling, revealing, interpreting stories

When the youth protest movement was at its height in 1968, poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote: "The world is made of stories, not atoms."¹ For me, this phrase expresses perfectly one of the peculiarities of graphic design, a discipline which has always been closely bound up with the world and its stories, giving them visible form as they take shape. It is no coincidence that in the last few years the practice of

graphic design has often been associated with a terminology that belongs specifically to the world of storytelling. Today, designers often see their role as the one of mediators and interpreters, who act as connectors between different systems and contexts.

If every design project tells someone's story – being it the one of a company, of an organization, or one's own – it is also developed through a variety of stories and paths, which mould it and determine the direction in which it unfolds: the design process.

It is interesting to note how—possibly encouraged by the idea of “worlds” that is at the core of *Graphic Design Worlds*—many designers in the show have chosen to focus upon the stories related to their design process, each in their own way: experiences and encounters, behind the scenes, working methods and courses of development, as well as personal vocations, cultural backgrounds and individual knowledge.

So it happens that Joseph Miceli chooses to bring in the exhibition his passion for hip-hop culture and music; FF3300 take the visitor behind the scenes describing their own processes and methods, while Tommaso Garner unveils an archive of images put together over years of research. These examples show how personal stories are meaningful to designers in order to allow a more complex understanding of their practice, while giving them new value by bringing them into the exhibit space.

Networks and Movements

As emerged from the meeting at the Triennale Design Museum, what professionals see in design is a means of creating worlds through relations: Invernemuto, for instance, explicitly defines graphic design as an opportunity to establish connections.

The interest in the relationships behind design solutions is possibly encouraged by the tools available in what has been defined as “the network society”², as the web has made it possible to establish connections in a way which would have been unthinkable just twenty

years ago—especially in Italy. In the exhibition is made very clear that designers see the relations established during its development as a fundamental part of the design process, and the installations focus primarily upon the relations that design projects generate and consolidate. A significant example is Studio Temp's decision to tell about the tiny universe of several years of collaboration with a single printing supplier.

(Letting ourselves get) "Contaminated"

The web also changes our very relationship with space.

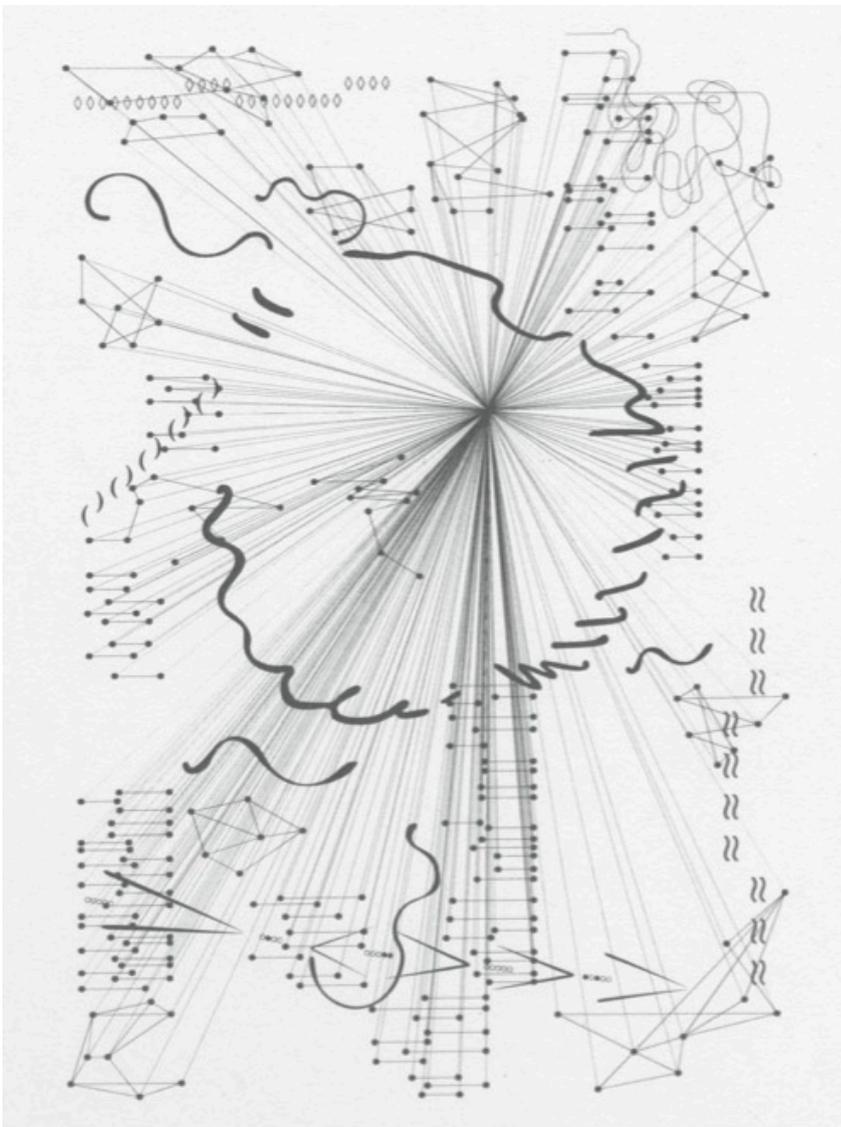
As it facilitates connections with others, it also makes virtual ubiquity possible, as well as the ability to peek at any moment into contexts that can be far from our own, in both geographical and cultural terms. In this scenario one no longer has to choose as base what are usually identified as the obvious centers of design and creativity in order to exist in a network of stimulating relationships. Amongst the Italian designers in the exhibition, several of them have not only made the conscious choice to live and work in the places where they grew up, but also to make use of and operate on such surroundings through their design practice. This translates into design projects that are focused on and intimately connected with the territories the designers belong to.

Angelika Burtscher and Daniele Lupo have chosen to open an art gallery—which is in fact a cultural center—in Bolzano, a relatively minor city in the North of Italy, in a brave attempt to invert the osmosis of talent and energy.

Similarly, the designers at Tankboys grew up and studied in Venice and have chosen to live and work in this city, motivated to do so by a firm desire to play an active role within their own environment.

As for Bianca Elzenbaumer and Fabio Franz—whose very choice of the name "Brave New Alps" explicitly their belonging to a specific geographical setting—, their practice is focused on intervening on each and every context they find themselves working in, and have brought to the exhibition a reflection upon the social and historical context to which they belong.

All the different angles described here are still narrated through quite typical objects belonging to the graphic design tradition. We will still leaf through books, unfold posters, go through different printed materials and dimensional spaces. However, above all, what we will look at is design narrated through personal stories and the processes it entails, a narration that highlights a plurality of otherwise invisible worlds.



notes

1 Muriel Rukeyser,
The Speed of Darkness, Random
House, New York 1968

2 Manuel Castells,
The Network Society, Blackwell
2000