

Resurfacing Graphics

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ABSTRACT

“Resurfacing Graphics” deals with the subject of unconventional design, with the purpose of engaging the viewer to experience the graphics beyond paper’s passive surface. Unconventional designs serve to reinvigorate people, whose senses are dulled by the typical, printed graphics, which bombard them each day. Today’s cutting-edge designers, illustrators and artists utilize graphics in a unique manner that allows for tactile interaction. Such works serve as valuable teaching models and encourage students to do the following: 1) investigate the trans-disciplines of art and technology; 2) appreciate that this approach can have a positive effect on the environment; 3) examine and research other approaches of design communications and 4) utilize new mediums to stretch the boundaries of artistic endeavor. This paper examines how visuals communicators are “Resurfacing Graphics” by using atypical surfaces and materials such as textile, wood, ceramics and even water. Such non-traditional transmissions of visual language serve to demonstrate student’s overreliance on paper as an outdated medium. With this exposure, students can become forward-thinking, eco-friendly, creative leaders by expanding their creative breadth and continuing the perpetual exploration for new ways to make their mark.

Key words: Resurfacing Graphics, Graphics, Design, Tactile Design, Unconventional Design, Atypical Surface for Design

As people navigate the daily routine of their lives, they are subject to nearly continuous bombardment by all sorts of visual communication. These words and designs are attempts to connect with their target audience using every method at their disposal. Their tactics include but are not limited to the use of humor and ideology, and tap into people’s innate desire to belong. These communications can even be attempts to entice viewers on a subconscious level with prospects of intangible gains and an improved self worth.

This profusion of visual communications unfortunately results in designs that blend together, becoming a collage of unrecognizable colors and shapes. The sheer magnitude of imagery that is on display means that only a select few can successfully command the viewer’s attention.

“Resurfacing Graphics” explores the subject of unconventional design, with the purpose of engaging the viewer to experience the graphics beyond the paper’s passive surface. These unconventional designs serve to reinvigorate people, whose senses are dulled by the typical, printed graphics, which beset them each day. Today’s cutting-edge designers, illustrators and artists are utilizing graphics in a unique manner that allows for tactile interaction.

Such works serve as valuable teaching models and encourage design students to do the following: 1) investigate the trans-disciplines of art and technology; 2) appreciate that this approach can have a positive effect on the environment; 3) examine and research other approaches of design communications and 4) utilize new mediums to stretch the boundaries of artistic endeavor. Students

will explore how visuals communicators are “Resurfacing Graphics”; using atypical surfaces such as textile, wood, ceramics and even water to re-engage the viewer.

Visual communication has always been the combination of art and technology to express ideas and beliefs. For a communication to achieve a desired result, the formulation of the message must be well executed. The earliest evidence of such processes can be found in the Lascaux Caves of Southern France. The images of abstract figures were the primitive illustrations of man commenting on and giving meaning to his surroundings. Technology is apparent by the various techniques implemented, which included painting with fingers, sticks, pads of fur or moss; sketching with charcoal or pigmented organic matter; and spray painting through hollow bone or by mouth. The artistry is demonstrated with foreshortening and shadowing apparent in the illustrations.

The trans-disciplines of art and technology, in its various forms, have been responsible for some of the most important artistic achievements of our lifetime. These range from pigments extracted from various bio-origins, to stone and metal manipulations and the fabrications of paper. Paper made from inner bark of mulberry trees and hemp rags emerged from China around 105 AD. Since the 13th century, the Italians improved the technology of making paper and elevated it to an art form. Italy has been known for its hand made, marbled papers. Known as the “art of clouds,” this distinctive marbling technique has been passed with veneration from master to apprentice, and survives today almost exclusively in Florence.

For the next 1000 years or so, the use of paper by graphic designers was the norm. Even today, designers use reams and reams of paper in sketching from the earliest concept through the production of the final piece. From an environmental perspective, this method has extremely negative consequences. In 2009, according to EPA fact sheet, discarded paper and paperboard made up about 28% of the entire waste stream in the United States. (“Municipal solid waste,” 2009) It has been established that decomposing paper releases methane gas, which is a potent greenhouse gas (20 times more potent than carbon dioxide). Keeping paper out of landfills will help reduce greenhouse gases, which in turn will help to slow down climate change, providing a significant global benefit. (Hanson, 2012)

As visual communicators continue to push their creativity, they have joined a growing group that takes into account the impact of one’s life choices on the environment. As a result, many individuals and organizations are trying to live ‘greener’ lives; to become part of the solution, as opposed to contributing to the problem. *Threadless* is an online apparel store that is part apparel maker and part social network. Artists submit t-shirt designs online, then a public vote of community followers help decide which designs are printed. The illustrations are hip, playful and frequently address social concerns aimed to change cultural stereotypes. A *Threadless* member, and a designer, constructed a unique way for *Threadless* customers to receive t-shirts. His unique shipping package transforms ‘origami-style’ into a hanger for it’s content.

Hangerpak, designed by Steve Haslip comments,

“I buy t-shirts online and they always come wrinkled and I always run out of coat-hangers. So I designed a sustainable, reusable way to send and keep your t-shirts. As you open the package you create a coat hanger. The packaging could be made from recycled material whether it is card or plastic and the only waste is the green tear-away tab.”



Figure 2 Joshua Goldstein, Hot Nathan (2008), 32" x 24"

Another example of "upcycling", finding new uses for objects, can be found in Brooklyn, NY. A design company, Wrecords by Monkey, uses reclaimed vinyl records as the main material of their designs. Founded by Patrick Chirico and Brian Farrell, these two young artists are bridging the world of fashion art and music. They are 'creating handmade accessories with a low carbon footprint that can be incorporated into anyone's individual style. They use water-based and green inks and paints. They also maintain and use the highest quality filtration systems that keep their facility and the environment safe. [Their] niche product, the Wrecord bracelet, comes in designs from silly to sophisticated.'



Figure 3 Wrecords by Monkey

In a growing trend, designers are ‘unplugging,’ and reconnecting with design on a more personal level. A growing number of visual communicators are applying their creative drive to items that have the ‘haptic factor.’ Haptic is non-verbal communication understood via touching; which brings out both a physical and an emotional response. ‘Unplugging’ is encouraged by the following components, the attempt to live green lives, the endeavor to liberate dynamic graphics from the passive surface of the paper and also the recent global economic situation. There is a decline in the amount of work being commissioned, as well as a lowering of hourly rate being charged, as agencies are being forced to lay off talented designers just to stay in business.

But, all is not lost, as the economy’s downward swing can present an opportunity to re-evaluate how we can best communicate personal expression and transcend commercialism. By nature, visual communicators are a group inspired by the subtle ways things play out in our lives, paying attention to its daily nuances and the happy accidents that happen around us. Visual communicators are perpetually planning, reworking and reinventing how to fabricate designs. They are constantly asking themselves; what is my next venture, and how can it embody my innate drive to create, stimulate and communicate?

One NYC based designer who was affected by the economic downturn was Emily Fischer. She took advantage of her downtime to start her own company called Soft Maps. Soft Maps was started as an academic experiment in ‘tactile wayfinding,’ which was inspired by her mother who was beginning to lose her eyesight. Fischer comments,

‘Soft-Maps are quilted maps of cities and neighborhoods that represent someone's unique place in the world. Wrap your children in them, have a picnic, pull them close during the next Nor'easter. As a keepsake, a Soft-Map serves as an intimate reminder of home: where you're from and where you belong. In a world that is increasingly digitized and remote, a quilted Soft-Map provides an expressive way to reconnect with your surroundings.’



Figure 4 Emily Fischer, Silver Lake, CA

The current generation is immersed in the electronic world, with a lifestyle saturated by technological marvels. But, all too often these innovations get in the way of effective communication, as they tend to further remove us from the real world. The task of the visual communicator is to bring us closer to a true reality, and manage the technology to cut through the clutter of mass communication. A designer's success at this task hinges upon the ability to connect to the viewer on a fundamental and personal level.

The concepts discussed above are core principles that should be taught to graphic design students early in their education. One approach to fostering a deeper appreciation of these ideas would be to give the students six weeks to research, develop, refine and produce a finish product that expresses a visual communication on a surface other than paper. The criteria for the project includes that the item be produced on the actual material of student's choice (not a digital rendering) and that it must accomplish one of the following: a self promotion, an invitation to an actual or fictitious (but convincing) event, or a promotion of an awareness of social cause. The final grade would be determined by how well the design is executed on the material, the range of difficulty with working on the material (i.e. printing on a t-shirt would be valued less than burning legible type on a wooden spoon), and most importantly, how well the design communicates the message.

"Resurfacing Graphics" also takes into consideration certain seminal design principles, such as Louis Sullivan's phrase "form follows function". This principle is typically applied to architecture and industrial design, but it is also relevant to print design. In a typical graphic design assignment, students are asked to demonstrate and explore how form refers to the look and feel of the page, as well as how the elements are composed on the page. Function is the purpose of the piece, for example; does it educate, entertain, or sell? But form without function, for example, might be just a pretty piece of paper. For a printed graphic to succeed, both form and function must achieve a strict balance.

Students are asked to re-evaluate Sullivan's principle and ask, 'How might form and function's role change in a design that is communicated on surfaces other than paper?' A shift in emphasis occurs when a piece's function is the actual object itself, such as with clothing or furniture. However, the most interesting observation may be when a piece's function is just ornamentation, seemingly without obvious purpose. Students come to understand that function is now beauty, and as such, it becomes successful in its aesthetic complexity; as illustrated by Alan Chao's bamboo coasters.



Figure 5 Alan Chao, Bamboo Coasters

One artist who utilizes this principle is Joshua Davis, a self-described digital artist and generative designer. His electronically generated compositions involve fluid and intricate graphics with potentially endless design permutations. He creates discrete shape and color palettes, and then writes algorithms that assemble the pieces into randomized, whole compositions.



Figure 6 Joshua Davis, Umbra Concept Store, Toronto, Canada

In conclusion, there is little doubt that visual communicators play an important role in an ever-changing world. All over the world, discussions are taking place about how to save the planet from the effects of 'climate change.' One hears about the tragedy of the destruction of the rain forests, the melting of the polar ice caps and the island of trash the size of Texas floating in the Pacific. Visual communicators have the ability and obligation to affect the outcome of this struggle for change.

Using their design ingenuity, visual communicators can help advance society's collective consciousness with respect to how important issues are perceived and addressed. This is evidenced with trends to re-purpose and up-cycle various pulp based and non-pulp materials. The upcoming generations of design students tend to be optimistic and seem to care about the environment as evidenced by the worldwide 'green' movements and organizations.

"Resurfacing graphics" aims to demonstrate the design students' overreliance on paper; that paper is an outdated medium. This discussion will better prepare the new generation of visual communicators by utilizing traditional skills, and providing them with a broader perspective on problem solving. Given the proper tools, coupled with creative instructions, design students can become future forward, eco-friendly, creative leaders in the ever-changing design industries.

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