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Notes on silence in the graphic design archive

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Disquieting Histories: Notes on Silence in the Graphic Design Archive

Inaugural Lecture

delivered to mark the special appointment in the Wim Crowel Chair in the History,
Theory and Sociology of Graphic Design and Visual Culture at the University of
Amsterdam on December 1, 2022.

by

Alice Twemlow

Introduction

Mister Rector Magnificus

Madam Dean

Members of the Board of Trustees of the Wim Crouwel Chair in the History, Theory and Sociology of Graphic Design and Visual Culture

Board Members of Stichting Wim Crouwel Instituut

And members of the audience

For the trust placed in me, I thank:

The Executive Board of the University of Amsterdam and the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities;

My curatorium, namely:

Lisa Kuitert, chair of the Book Studies program, for welcoming me in among the books.

Mia Lerm Hayes, professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History, for her energy and support.

And Rob Huisman, chair of the Wim Crouwel Institute, who has done so much for graphic design and its heritage.

My thanks go to everyone involved in envisioning, championing and funding the Wim Crouwel Chair:

The Institute's partners, especially Pictoright.

Its kind and patient coordinator, Harriet van der Veen.

Its board members, namely:

Alex Duijnisveld

Carolien Glazenburg

Nikki Gonnissen

Astrid Vorstermans

Roosje Klap

I am especially grateful to Roosje Klap for designing the beautiful invitation for this lecture, for supporting me through my moments of panic and being my co-moderator for the symposium happening right afterwards.

I would also like to thank Frederike Huygen, Wim Crouwel Institute fellow, who has forged a path for graphic design history at UvA.

I would like to acknowledge all the colleagues and students I have met so far and those I plan to meet soon.

And thanks to everyone for coming in person and online. I truly appreciate your interest and attention.

Some final, more personal, thanks:

My parents, Cayla Twemlow and Graham Twemlow, who have travelled over from the UK for this occasion. Graham studied Graphic Design at Central Saint Martins in London and, until his retirement, was a graphic design lecturer. He continues to be a graphic design scholar, with particular expertise in the work of poster artist E. McKnight Kauffer.

Next to them is my husband David Womack, my chosen companion in all life's adventures, who I met when I lived in New York and we both worked at the American Institute of Graphic Arts.

Next to him is our son Otto. When we first moved to Amsterdam and Otto was six, he was lucky enough to be able to submit his personal logo design for review by one of the most famous and best-respected graphic designers in the world. This graphic designer took on the challenge with the same level of care and seriousness as he did in reviewing iterations of a new identity for a major art museum. The idiom that came to mind was: using a sledge hammer to crack a nut.

Dankjewel, Judith Cahan Crouwel, for inviting us for tea that day, and for your continuing support, and indeed all the Crouwel family for your trust.

And of course, my thanks are due to the nut-cracking sledgehammer himself: Wim Crouwel. Although he is much missed both personally and for what he represented; his accomplishments, convictions and generosity live on, and are especially palpable on an occasion like this.

And *why* I think he is here with us tonight, looking on with interest, is because what is actually being inaugurated, given a special appointment and inducted into the university, apart from me—merely its human conduit—is *graphic design*.

The overarching term of *visual culture* can refer to formats as diverse as books, flags, directional signage, medication labels, but also encoded protest messages, Midjourney nightmares, and typefaces meant to be unreadable by text scanning surveillance software. The term *graphic design* can also be used to describe these formats, but it has a more specific signification, as a mode of visual expression whereby images, patterns and/or words are purposefully arranged spatially or temporally to package or convey a product, message, experience or idea, and usually intended for multiple

production and dissemination. More specifically still, the term also refers to its *categorisation* as a profession, an industry, a discipline. It was labelled as such (in the English language anyway) in the early twentieth century as a way to differentiate its outputs from non-professional variants of visual culture, and its processes and sensibilities from those of neighbouring disciplines or professions such as art, industrial design, and advertising.

Part One: Putting the History, Theory and Sociology of Visual Culture and Graphic Design in the University

I would like to start by saying a few words on what I think it means to locate graphic design in the university. In the Netherlands this situation is rare. The Dutch education system divides into two routes: the so-called scientific or academic variant which takes place in universities and the so-called practical training which takes place in colleges of vocational education, including academies of art and design.

Around the age of twelve, a child already has to make a decision or be ‘advised’ about which route to follow. This means that a young person who has the chance to get on the academic highway, but also has an interest in the visual arts, and has heard about something called ‘graphic design’, will have a difficult choice to make.

So starting with this simple, concrete outcome: putting Graphic Design History, Theory & Sociology in the university means that now this student can go to university to study French literature, for example, but *also* graphic design. *And*, more importantly, the resonances that emerge between them.

As academia remembers it has a body as well as a brain and finds it needs more sensory and embodied methods in its toolkit, and as design becomes more investigative and forensic and finds it needs to know about citations, peer review and data ethics, there are more opportunities for exchange between these disciplines and practices.

Desire lines are already being tracked back and forth between practice and scholarship, between the workshop and the seminar room, between insights that develop from the perspective of making and analysis that derives from the perspective of viewing and using.

There is still a way to go before those desire lines become actual thoroughfares, and before the two tracks of Dutch education merge. There is still a way to go before that *other* young student, the one who is advised to go to vocational training school

because they are good at art, gets the chance to study French literature as well as graphic design, and the resonances that emerge between them. But this chair *is* a signpost pointing in the right direction.

And what does it look like when graphic design and visual culture is invited into the university?

As a subject of study and research it fits right in alongside and amongst other humanities subjects. Subjects such as art history, architectural history, media studies, cultural studies, literary studies, book studies, linguistics, museum studies, artistic research, to name only a few.

But the thing about Graphic Design and Visual Culture Studies and why perhaps it should not be merely an appendage at the end of that list, is that it intersects almost all of those subjects. From its position at the nexus of form and meaning, communication and cognition, materiality and distributed digitality, content and context, it has the potential to illuminate those subjects in new ways.

You might say graphic design is already in the university. The university just needs the skills—the critical visual literacy—to analyse and understand it. Think of the myriad documents, sources, and artefacts consulted by humanities scholars as part of their core business.

To be able to know how and why our visual culture looks the way it does and with what effects, scholars need to be able to discern which techniques, tactics, and constraints graphic design has at its disposal in different regions and political regimes of the world and the ones it may have had in different time periods. They need to know the significance of a designer's choice of colour, typeface, inclusion of white space, the cropping and positioning of image, the inclusion of historical or associative references, and the choice of open source or proprietary software, for example. In each of these graphic design has been deployed, like a finely tuned rhetorical instrument, to shape, frame or distort information and ideas and to attempt to influence how they will be understood intellectually and emotionally.

In a 1994 article in *Design Issues*, titled 'Graphic Design Education as a Liberal Art: Design and Knowledge in the University and the "Real World"', the designer, educator and scholar Gunnar Swanson looked back at the history of liberal arts education and speculated what graphic design, if reconceived as a branch of the humanities, might entail.¹

¹ Gunnar Swanson, "Graphic Design Education as a Liberal Art: Design and Knowledge in the University and the 'Real World'," *Design Issues* 10, No. 1 (Spring 1994): 53-63.

Liberal arts education was considered by the Ancient Greeks to be essential preparation for effective participation in public life and the building of a democratic society. It prioritised the acquisition of intrinsic and non-specialised knowledge, distinct from putatively technical knowledge or know-*how*.

Swanson characterised graphic design as ‘syncretic’—as not having a subject matter of its own, and existing only in relation to the requirements of commissioned projects or assignments.² Even if graphic design *is* ‘syncretic’ in the sense that it interfaces with a lot of different fields and market sectors, it is not as if its discourse resets to zero before every new encounter. In fact, you could say that graphic design’s mobility is an asset; what allows it to *accumulate* intrinsic and non-specialised knowledge as preparation for participation in civic society.

I would like to pick up Swanson’s thought experiment where he left off: What if graphic design, in an education and research context, develops a new relationship with the liberal arts on a more equal footing? What if the kind of knowledge to which we are referring goes beyond graphic design’s own history, goes beyond visual culture as a *subject*, and includes the kind of knowledge that can be surfaced *through* graphic design?

Indeed, I think that the methods used by graphic design to critically analyse, interpret and synthesise data, images, text, and interactions in space and time, are not just desirable, but essential, to the transdisciplinary effort required of any university to tackle the complex political and social urgencies of our time.

Now the reality of it is, as with all special chairs at UvA, that I am paid the equivalent of one day a week (with no additional funding for developing or disseminating research) and there is no designated chair to sit on, let alone a ‘special’ chair from which to do all this Graphic-Design-as-a-Liberal-Art- or Visual-Cultures-Studies-world building.

But what I *do* have is the enormous privilege to teach masters students, to supervise and promote doctoral candidates, and to collaborate with colleagues, and to benefit from all of that combined expertise. Indeed, the university is exactly as advertised, etymologically—a *community* of teachers and scholars. And within that community, with these materials and means, I am marking out a conceptual agora where students, PhD candidates and post-docs, colleagues, and international researchers, for whom graphic design and visual culture is a focus and a departure point, can assemble. The research trajectories are specific and deep, but also intersecting and coalescing. I will mention a few of them to give you a sense of what is taking shape.

² Swanson, “Graphic Design Education as a Liberal Art,” 53-63.

I participate in two research schools: Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis and Amsterdam School for Heritage, Memory and Material Culture. I attend seminars and conferences and meetings of Research and Reading Groups, including Artistic Research Research Group (ARRG), Artistic Knowing, and Word & Image. With Tânia Esteves Fernandes Cardoso, I am the co-founder of the Walking as a Research Practice group (WARP), which recently held its first international conference of walking researchers from multiple disciplines.

In the area of PhD supervision, I work with, among others: Basma Hamdy, a graphic designer, curator and educator, based in Doha, Qatar, and who is conducting research into Egyptian design archives and the curator Stephanie Smith who is looking at situated contemporary artist and designer-led initiatives in Chicago, US.

I am externally supervising doctoral candidates in other institutions, who are working with UvA archives, including: Alex Todd, from the University of Brighton, UK, whose PhD research looks at the work of Wild Plakken in the context of Dutch political identity, 1977–1990 and Paul Bailey, from the KASK School of Arts/University of Gent, Belgium, who is studying the visual essay as a critical instrument in graphic design.

Among the masters students I am supervising: Amélie Martelle is considering the contribution of Slothouber & Graatsma to the Dutch Pavilion at the 1970 Venice Biennale in relation to issues of Dutch national identity and understandings of the role and purpose of art and Angelina Senchi who is looking at how graphic design is used to represent queer identity in Young Adult novels.

The Book Studies MA has created a new study path which allows students to specialise in graphic design. Meanwhile, for master students in any discipline as well as those auditing from other institutions, there is my course: ‘Re-Reading the Graphic Design Archive: Re-Framing the Graphic Design Collection’.

Part Two: Disquieting Histories of the Graphic Design Archive

And as a kind of a throughline, or reference point in this conceptual agora, is my own research project. The wide-angle view of the project is this: from the perspective of a design historian, and through the study of archival artefacts, documents, and testimonies, I investigate the relationship between graphic design as heritage and graphic design as a contemporary phenomenon.

Specifically, I engage with a set of twenty-six archives. They are distributed among four institutions: the Graphic Design and Typography collection at The Allard Pierson Museum/University of Amsterdam Special Collections, the Graphic Design collection

at the Stedelijk Museum, the Amsterdam Municipal Archives, and the International Institute of Social History.

These archives were acquired between 1992 and 2014 by the Dutch Graphic Designers Archive foundation (NAGO) whose founders included the designer Ben Bos and policymaker Rob Huisman. NAGO's objective was to preserve a representative picture of the development of graphic design and typography in the Netherlands after the Second World War.³ To do this they set out to obtain the records of Dutch graphic designers and agencies, to organise, describe, and pack them, to find them homes in suitably equipped institutions where they might be accessed and, thereby, to promulgate Dutch graphic design heritage.

An online finding aid, introduced in 2004, was developed by Fabrique Communicatie & Design in collaboration with NAGO and Ivo Zandhuis. It used the Total Design archive as its test case and was supported by a mix of cultural and corporate funding from the Mondrian Foundation, Colt Telecom, as well as Total Design itself.

NAGO was disbanded in 2014 and the responsibility for the archives was passed to the Wim Crouwel Institute, which had been founded in 2013. Since then, the Institute, supported by funding from Pictoright (an organisation initially spearheaded by legal advisor Vincent van den Eijnde, to protect the collective authorship rights of its member designers and illustrators) has organised events, exhibitions, and initiatives to help illuminate their contents.

Out of the twenty-six archives assembled, one is devoted to the Holland Festival, five are the records of design agencies, and seventeen are those of individual cis-male, white, Dutch graphic designers. Which means that the number of archives directly concerning women graphic designers is precisely two.

I am sure you can imagine what my first question was.

But I have others, that contain less expletives and are more genuinely questions. For example: What does it mean, as a British born, female design historian, to hold a professorship in the name of a Dutch-born male design practitioner? What does it mean to inhabit an academic position funded by a visual copyright protection organisation and, by extension, the membership fees of practicing graphic designers? What does this professorship allow for and what does it preclude?

These are big questions, and I do not know the answers yet. But, as I tell my students, a necessary step in any research project is to problematise one's positionality—to

³“Rob Huisman,” Dutch Graphic Roots, accessed May 12, 2023: <https://www.dutchgraphicroots.nl/en/rob-huisman>

locate oneself as a researcher and a human, conceptually and physically, but also morally—in relation to a field of research.

And before that, as I also tell my students, we need to clarify some key terms. For a definition of *the archive*, let's start with the one provided by the International Council on Archives, which advises that archives are the 'documentary by-product of human activity retained for their long term value'.⁴

In its broadest and most physically, digitally, and institutionally distributed, sense, the 'graphic design archive' is the apparatus by which the residue, or 'documentary by-product of this profession', practice, and mode of cultural expression, becomes its heritage.

There is another layer of complexity to factor in with graphic design, however, because what, for other archival categories might be considered a supporting document, is, in the case of graphic design, its actual product—the main event. For example, the flyer for an International Women's Day protest, designed by Wild Plakken, is simultaneously artifact and document. It can be archived as a work of design in itself and, if we are lucky enough, as in this case, it can also document the process of its own making—and open a window on how graphic design was produced in 1980s Netherlands. It can be a souvenir in the papers of an individual. It can be logged in the International Women's Day organisational history, or in a graphic design critic's archive as an example of graphic design that use torn edges to convey a heightened sense of urgency.

Many involved in the archiving of graphic design believe there to be a heightened sense of urgency since, in its very purpose and materiality, the graphic design artefact is so ephemeral. It is vulnerable to disintegration and, perhaps worse, disregard.

This is why the box is so key to the archival project. And I do not just mean the one made of acid-free cardboard—the mainstay and organisational unit of physical archives. Nor just the one made of code that shapes digital collections such as those created on Instagram accounts.

Beyond its more prosaic role as a container, the archival box is also a political construct. What is used to prevent the physical document from getting out and moisture and bugs from getting in, also acts on its meanings and interpretations—as an epistemic enclosure.

In his mid-1990s discourse on the concept of the archive, Jacques Derrida began with how the archive's ancient Greek etymological roots—the *arkheion*—puts its birth at

⁴ "What Are Archives?," International Council on Archives, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.ica.org/en/what-archive>.

the same address as the *archons* themselves, those citizens of the Greek city-state who held and signified political power and were considered to possess the right to make or represent the law.

‘On account of their publicly recognized authority’, wrote Derrida, ‘it is at [the archons’] home, in that place which is their house [. . .] that official documents are filed [. . .] It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place’.⁵

This tripartite conceptual link—between the archive, the political power of those that govern it, and its state of incarceration in their houses—still lingers in archive house rules.

Beyond documents and boxes, therefore, the graphic design archive is an ideological apparatus. ‘Not an innocent site of storage’, as art historian Griselda Pollock points out. But, rather, a canon ‘shaped according to the interests and needs of certain groups’ and, as such, a force that “actively shapes the present for us”.⁶

Which brings me to my next question: How have the interests and needs of certain groups of graphic designers shaped its archive and to what extent does this archive exert an influence on how graphic design as a practice and mode of cultural expression is performed and understood in the present?

In April 1983 the Rochester Institute of Technology in upstate New York hosted the ‘First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design’. Here the designer Massimo Vignelli gave a passionate keynote address in which he shared his punch list of what was needed to elevate the profession—to give it gravitas or what he called ‘cultural structure’.⁷ According to Vignelli, graphic design—at least in the US in the early 1980s—needed its own philosophy, criticism, and its own historical, and more specifically, archival turn.

‘We need to document everything we do’, urged Vignelli. ‘We need to perceive ourselves as steps in a historical process’. He concluded by saying: ‘If we don’t make this step forward, we are all culturally dead and if that is the case, Amen’.⁸

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* 25, No. 2 (1995): 9.

⁶ Griselda Pollock, “Trouble in the Archives,” *Women’s Art Magazine* 54 (1993): 10–13.

⁷ Massimo Vignelli, “Keynote Address,” in *First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design*, B. Hodik and R. Remington (eds.) (Rochester: Rochester Institute of Technology, 1984), 9.

⁸ Vignelli, “Keynote Address,” 10.

In 2010, four years before his death, Vignelli's own archives were lodged at the Rochester Institute of Technology in a purpose-built Design Studies Centre named for him and his wife and design partner Lella.

A Derridean reading of Vignelli's 1983 keynote might detect traces of a 'fevered' desire to exchange the physical body for a place in the historical record—what Freud termed a 'death drive'.⁹

For the *artefacts* of graphic design, the archive is a something of a gilded coffin. It takes them out of their true context where they might be seen only for a moment, in motion, in multiple, and puts them in static house arrest. But for the creators of those artefacts, their archiving can offer the possibility of 'resisting annihilation', of being remembered beyond death—a Faustian transaction which might seem even more alluring in the case of graphic design because of its extreme ephemerality.¹⁰

The Netherlands' own graphic design archive fever peaked in the early 2000s. Seminars on the topic were held and an active 'catch-up project' was initiated by government-funded cultural organisations including Nederlands Architectuurinstituut NAI (now Het Nieuwe Instituut), Premisela and the Dutch Institute for Art History. At a 2009 symposium on the topic, Gert Dumbar of the Dutch agency Studio Dumbar, remarked, in another instance of the conflation of a denial or postponement of the fragility and transience of the graphic design object, with a denial or postponement of the fragility and transience of the graphic designer's status, that he liked the idea that his archive 'will not decay into dust, moisture and bugs. It is especially important for exhibitions and books [...] so that the work you have done is passed on to new generations'.¹¹

Design firms and individuals were encouraged to archive their work; a Dutch journalist reporting on a symposium, in an article titled 'The Private Archive of the Graphic Designer as Cultural Heritage', observed how creating an archive is 'common practice for the graphic designer because they use this archive as a *portfolio for future clients*'.¹² (my emphasis).

When the hosts of 'The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design' reflected back on the cultural contribution of the conference they had organised and the initiatives it had inspired (a second conference, the launch of a journal of design history theory and criticism, a listing of existing design archives, among others) they underlined their achievement by stating: 'Many of us feel that the recognition and

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1987), 316.

¹⁰ Derrida, "Archive Fever," 41.

¹¹ Dumbar, G. quoted in Van der Horst, I., "Het privéarchief van de grafisch ontwerper als cultureel erfgoed," *Simulacrum* (October 2009).

¹² Van der Horst, "Het privéarchief van de grafisch ontwerper als cultureel erfgoed."

formal study of graphic design history is essential to the recognition of the graphic design profession'.¹³

Their repeated use of the term 'recognition' suggests a belief in a causal relationship between graphic design's historical value as heritage and its market value as a professional service. That the cachet of the archive was not only a gift to the future, but could be capitalised on in the present.

*

The enmeshing of commerce and culture, and of past and future, evident at the macro level of the graphic design heritage-profession continuum, is also apparent at the micro-scale of a design firm, where the archiving of past projects is often built into the architectural structures of a studio as well as its procedural and economic ones.

The way a design firm or individual decides to archive their work can be prompted in certain directions. The *Concise Manual on Archiving for Designers* published by NAGO in 2006 advised designers to preserve 'anything that gives insight into why something looks the way it does'.¹⁴ But it is possible that a designer is also prompted by the monographic exhibition catalogues and books about their teachers, bosses and peers, shelved in their studio right next to the archive/client portfolio. And partly because these books and catalogues proceed in chronological order, beginning with a designer's early life and training, followed by the high points of their career, with those high points usually defined and organised by client, then so will the archive, as if in anticipation of being turned into a book. Mathieu Lommen, curator of Graphic Design & Typography at the Allard Pierson in Amsterdam, explains that he advises designers to assemble their archives based on the question 'What would a biographer need?'¹⁵

Because of the way institutional archives are arranged and catalogued—in adherence to the principles of integrity of accumulation and provenance or *respect du fonds*—means that the ways that a design firm or individual decides to archive their work will track through to how it is absorbed into a museum or library. Such arrangements can seep out even further, influencing how a historian or curator will structure a monographic exhibition or book.

¹³ Barbara J. Hodik and R. Roger Remington, *The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design: Coming of Age: 20-21 April, 1983* (Rochester: Rochester Institute of Technology, 1983), 5.

¹⁴ Karin van der Heiden, *Concise Manual on Archiving for Designers* (Utrecht: NAGO), 5.

¹⁵ Mathieu Lommen, in conversation with Alice Twemlow, April 20, 2022.

Professional success and posterity; industry and academia; non-disclosure agreements and intellectual property rights; the living and the dead; archive department and billing department; designer and historian. It can start to feel as if we are all caught in a looping mutually congratulatory back-pat.

*

Today, the graphic design archive suffers from a double challenge. On the one hand, it is overloaded. Institutions have run out of physical storage space and the resources to catalogue and administer it. And, as the ecological impacts of data storage become more pronounced, so that the Earth itself is an archive of Anthropocenic values, it becomes increasingly evident that digital archiving is not the panacea that it was one hoped it would be.

On the other hand, it is punctured with absences and silences resulting from what the canons and norms of Eurocentrism, whiteness, Anthropocentrism, and the frameworks of modernity have, as decolonial theorist Rolando Vázquez puts it, ‘rendered invisible, irrelevant, disposable’.¹⁶ The graphic design archive is dominated by printed publications and posters attributed to white, male, solo artist-designers and defined an operative conception of the practice as a product of late-capitalist Global North industrial democracies. Frustratingly, when a female graphic designer’s role is mentioned, for example, in the case of Jolijn van de Wouw, largely irrelevant details such as the fact her ‘marriage was childless’, are logged, at the expense of information about her political views, business practices or other aspects of her contribution to the field.¹⁷

Even though women, non-binary people, people of colour, as well as numerous interns, and students may have contributed to the making of the works collected, and the profits of businesses documented, in initiatives such as the NAGO archives, for only one example, for the most part their names—let alone their experiences—remain invisible and their perspectives unheard.

In order to unlearn such tendencies, theoretical perspectives and dispositions derived from decoloniality and intersectional feminism will surely be necessary travel companions. And it is a journey, I believe since, just as the archive is never complete

¹⁶ Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity: decolonial aesthetics and the end of the contemporary*, (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020), 165.

¹⁷ Wouw, Johanna Helene Adriana Maria van de (1942-2001), Huygens Institute, accessed 12 May 2023: <https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon/lemmata/data/WouwJolijn>

and always in the process of becoming; so its decolonising and depatriarchalising, is a temporal project as much as a spatial one.

Decoloniality allows us to see how the dynamics of power differences, social exclusion and discrimination (along the axes of race, gender and geographical and economic inequality) are connected to the ongoing repercussions of the legacy of colonialism. Intersectionality highlights how various forms of discrimination that shape society, institutions and ourselves cannot be seen as separate, but need to be understood in relation to each other.

These theoretical perspectives can also manifest as actions — the repatriation of displaced archives, the sifting and rereading of the archive for previously marginalised stories, and the collection of material that will allow richer historical understanding in the future.

While there *are* parts of the graphic design archive that are in need of emergency remediation, repatriation, or even deletion; there is also much work to be done with what exists, in situ. As the historian Achille Mbembe reminds us, ‘the Western archive is singularly complex. It contains within itself the resources of its own refutation’.¹⁸

There is no doubt that designers and design historians are complicit in cementing hegemonic narratives around the graphic design archive; but, equally, designers and design historians may also be the ones with the skills, the opportunities, and the incentive to chip away at them.

Especially us design historians. Since, in effect, we are the intended consumer of a design archive. So how might we critically intervene in its mechanisms of collection and description, and thereby participate in the collective effort to unsettle its normative assumptions?

Part Three: Tools and Tactics

In the final part of this lecture, I would like to discuss some of the kinds of interventions, tools and tactics for unfixing not just the contents, but also the categories and, perhaps even, the attitudes, of the archive. And in so doing, I will introduce the speakers we will be hearing from in the panel discussion at Pakhuis de Zwijger, in the second part of this exploration of graphic design and the archive.

¹⁸ Achille Mbembe, “Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive,” in *Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography*, accessed 3 October 2022, <https://worldpece.org/content/mbembe-achille-2015-“decolonizing-knowledge-and-question-archive”-africa-country>.

Counter-archiving

One of the most impactful responses to perceived omissions in the archive is to establish a counter, or ‘community’ archive, where, as Archival Studies reader Andrew Flinn puts it, the active participation of a community is required ‘in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality on their own terms’.¹⁹

Archival scholar Sarah Lubelski’s work on the World Center for Women’s Archives established in 1935, shows us one of the progenitors of the women’s archiving movement, and how it took a particularly pre-emptive stance by reaching out to women with questionnaires, to request that if they had an archive they donate it, and if they did not, that they should start assembling one immediately.²⁰

The Lesbian Herstory Archives has collected the experiences of the lesbian community in the United States since 1974 and remains an independent and volunteer-run collective focused on serving the community from within which it is based.²¹

Right here in Amsterdam we have The Black Archives that gathers, catalogues, and exhibits histories of Black experience and resistance in the Netherlands and beyond. Its organisers have to proactively hunt for the material needed to fill the gaps and to claim a place in the archive for those that were forced to be ‘hidden’ or stereotyped in the dominant historical narrative.²²

The People’s Graphic Design Archive, initiated by a group of designers and educators in Los Angeles, is self-described as a ‘crowd-sourced virtual archive of inclusive graphic design history’.²³ Using the mantra, ‘Everyone should decide what is a part of graphic design’s history’, they invite people to submit digital images of finished projects, as well as of the processes, photos, letters, oral histories, anecdotes, published

¹⁹ Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens & Elizabeth Shepherd, “Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9, No. 1 (2009): 73.

²⁰ Sarah Lubelski, “Kicking Off the Women’s ‘Archives Party’: The World Center for Women’s Archives and the Foundations of Feminist Historiography and Women’s Archives,” *Archivaria* 78 (November), 96-7.

²¹ “Our Herstory,” Lesbian Herstory Archives, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org/about/a-brief-history/>.

²² “About The Black Archives,” About Us, The Black Archives, accessed June 1, 2022. <https://www.theblackarchives.nl/about-us.html>.

²³ “About,” The People’s Graphic Design Archive, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://peoplesgdarchive.org/about>.

and unpublished articles, essays, and other historical material that they consider to be relevant to the work.²⁴

Later this evening The Grafis Nusantara collective (based in Jakarta) will explain how and why they collect Indonesian ephemera and make it available online. And two of the three members of the Syrian Design Archive (based in Damascus and Belgium) will discuss the rewards but also the risks of collecting and cataloguing exemplars of Syria's hitherto-overlooked design heritage.

Re-filtering the metadata

The attributes by which archives are catalogued and the vocabulary with which contents are labelled and described can determine how they are accessed and experienced, and even how they written into history. As data and digital humanities scholars Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein have pointed out, the data science power balance skews overwhelmingly white, male, and techno-heroic.²⁵ A second way in which the archive can be critically intervened in and to challenge this power differential, therefore, is to reveal the insufficiencies and oppressions of the metadata.

The Feminist Search Tool was developed by art and research collective Read-in and Hackers & Designers as an interface to invite different ways of engaging with the records of a university library. With its question 'Why are the authors of the books I read so white, so male, so Eurocentric?', the project helps us to reflect on our search inquiries, and how they are influenced by the biases and blind spots of publishers, librarians, algorithms, and databases—as well as our own.²⁶

The Homosaurus is an international linked data vocabulary of LGBTQ+ terms, intended to be a companion to broad subject term vocabularies, such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings. Libraries, archives, museums, and other institutions are encouraged to use the Homosaurus to expand their own vocabularies used for cataloguing entries and thereby to enhance the discoverability of their LGBTQ+ resources.

These are just two examples but there are many other initiatives that explore what alterative measures and filters can we insert in, or append to, the archive in a collective

²⁴ The People's Graphic Design Archive, "About."

²⁵ Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein, *Data Feminism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2020).

²⁶ "Unlearning My Library: The colonial project of education," Doing and Undoing Relationships, Feminist Search Tools, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://feministsearchtools.nl>.

effort to help dismantle what Audre Lorde called ‘the tools of a racist patriarchy’ and to expand the categories and reimagine labels by which archiving is conducted.²⁷

Mapping

For the final assignment in my class ‘Re-reading the Graphic Design Archive’, I ask students to propose an intervention into an existing archive or archival device, to redress a particular omission or insufficiency. One student, Liona Micajkov (studying a double Masters in Comparative Cultural Analysis and Philosophy of Humanities), took on the archive of Fré Cohen who made her living as a professional graphic designer in 1930s Amsterdam.

Cohen was both an active member of, and the designer for, the Sociaal Democratische Arbeiderspartij (SDAP), the largest socialist movement in the Netherlands. She designed the journal *De Proletarische Vrouw*. She also read it. She began to explore her Jewish heritage and identity while doing graphic design for multiple Jewish organisations, including the publisher Querido and De Wereldbibliotheek.

Archival science conventions separate out details of an individual’s career from their life events. But since Cohen’s politics and her practice were so entangled, such an effort seems self-defeating. Her archive contains evidence of a complex life filled with contradiction and unconventionality, which its category headings can only grasp the edges of. For example, even though at the time, socialists and feminists tended to confine themselves to their discrete social arenas, Cohen identified with both and had clients in both camps. As for her practice, since graphic design was a middle-class and male-dominated occupation, her own working-class background and gender set her against the grain from the get go. Her name was actually Frederika Sophia, and she signed her work ‘Fre’, or ‘FC’, presumably to create confusion around her gender, which may have played a part in her professional success. But even though the risks of being exposed as Jewish in the lead up to Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, were much higher, than being known as a woman, she continued to use her last name Cohen, and made no effort to disguise her Jewish identity.

During the war years, Cohen went into hiding successively in Amsterdam, Diemen, Rotterdam, Winterswijk and Borne. Even in these conditions she continued to work

²⁷ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House” in *This Bridge Called My Back Writings By Radical Women Of Color*, New York, Moraga, C. and Anzald.a, G. (eds) (KITCHEN TABLE: Women of Color Press, 1981), 98.

illegally, as best she could. She was arrested by the Nazis in 1943 and to avoid interrogation she ingested poison, and died soon after.²⁸

Even the fact that her archive exists at all, is against the odds. It was assembled by the only survivor of another Jewish family whose father had also been a graphic designer and who wanted to make a catalogue raisonné of Cohen's work. But it can also be read as an archive of the failures of that period and place, of the guilt of her fellow designer-citizens who failed to protect her and ultimately betrayed her.

How might Fré Cohen's archive be re-read to reintroduce some of this complex interweaving of identity, social life and professional practice, and to acknowledge the positionality and agency of the contemporary researcher in the construction of whatever narrative unfolds from its boxes? As feminist critical legal scholar Trina Grillo put it, 'the anti-essentialism and intersectionality critiques ask only this: that we define complex experiences as closely as possible to their full complexity as possible and that we not ignore voices at the margin'.²⁹

Liona sourced a map from the period and inscribed two routes upon it. The first route in red focuses on the everyday life of Cohen. It marks the different places that were important to her such as: the Institution for Arts and Crafts Education (now known as the Gerrit Rietveld Academy) where Cohen studied to become a graphic designer; her atelier; the locations of the SDAP, the AJC, and the publisher Cohen worked for; and her family home.

The second route is marked in black and shows where Cohen's archives can be found in Amsterdam today and as such represents Liona's own work as a researcher, making a connection across time toward the object of her research.

Through creating temporary, and reflexively subjective, overlays, such a map reinserts a designer's practice and life back into the fabric of her urban context, while also highlighting the existence, and maybe even the positionality, of the researcher herself. There is also the potential to indicate connections between one document and another or between an archive in one kind of institution and those in other types of information repositories and material culture collections, or to link to different sources of contextual information and critical interpretations.

Annotation

²⁸ Marjan Groot, *Vrouwen in de Vormgeving in Nederland 1880-1940* (Rotterdam: nai010 uitgeverij), 315, 469.

²⁹ Trina Grillo, "Anti-Essentialism and Intersectionality: Tools to Dismantle the Master's House," *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 10, no. 1 (1995): 22.

In their exhibition ‘Facing Blackness’ at The Black Archives in 2022 curators Jessica de Abreu, Raul Balai and Mitchell Esajas addressed racist representations of Black people in Dutch commercial products and Christmas traditions. Within the display, the most degrading images and slurs were obscured with slips of paper, which a viewer could choose to look beneath—or not—reflecting an intention to give people agency in how they encounter the material and to acknowledge the existence of these representations without reinscribing their violence.

Some aspects of feminist philosophy deploy the bracket as a sanctioned space, a pause and a way to circumvent the automatic prescription of oppressive or exclusive behaviour. The gap, interval, or passage between what is no longer and what has not yet occurred is a kind of bracketed space in which imagining can take place. Feminist scholar Ewa Ziarek, for example, advocates for the insertion of an agonistic interval ‘whenever thinking or action seem to exhaust themselves or to repeat comfortable conclusions’.³⁰

Rolando Vázquez has urged us to shift from the abstraction of enunciation to what he calls ‘positioned reception’, from the will of domination, of the sovereign ‘I’, to the ‘capacity of receiving difference, of becoming capacious’.³¹

African-American Studies scholar, Saidiya V. Hartman, who has drawn attention to the violence of the colonial archive and the way power is registered through its silences, attempts to write the history of a captured enslaved person from the records of Atlantic slave traders while being cognisant of the impossibility of such writing. She has forged a style of creative and interpretative practice as a way to ‘exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive’, and thereby ‘strain against’ the boundaries of the archive, a practice which she terms ‘critical fabulation’.³²

In solidarity with these efforts, I offer the following modest proposal for critical typographic annotation in the archive: [sic]

Square brackets are used editorially in quoted texts to indicate that whatever is captured between them has been inserted retrospectively, subjectively, and provisionally.

The Latin adverb *sic*, is an abbreviation of *sic erat scriptum*, meaning ‘thus it was written’. The term is inserted following a word or passage to indicate that the quoted matter has been transcribed or translated exactly as found in the source text, complete

³⁰ Ewa Ziarek, “Shall We Gender: Where? Who? When?,” University of Colorado Boulder, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.colorado.edu/genders/2016/05/19/shall-we-gender-where-who-when>.

³¹ Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity*, 157.

³² Saidiya V. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts.,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 11.

with any erroneous, archaic, or nonstandard articulation. It is also added to any surprising assertion, faulty reasoning, or other matter that the author wants to draw the reader's attention to.

The inclusion of square bracketed content or the addition of a *sic* is ostensibly for clarification, but their use can also aim a spotlight at the content in question, and thereby convey an implicit critique of its anachronism, error or omission.

Adding a [sic] to moments of omission or occlusion in the archive is a small gesture, to be sure but, perhaps with the inclusion of a date stamp and the signature of its author, we design historians can give the archive permission to doubt itself, to invite others in to complete a category, or offer an alternative reading. And for design history more generally we can signal the need for an interval of mourning, and encouragement to move from its familiar mode of enunciating towards one of capacious listening and imagining.

Rolando Vázquez and Walter D. Mignolo urge us to engage in a 'praxis of reconstitution, of re-existence and the re-encounter with the communal. Learning to unlearn', they say, 'is a step towards disobedient delinking and the beginning of a walk towards re-making and re-learning ourselves in communal and decolonial paths of re-existence'.³³

I hope that by illuminating some of its colonial and patriarchal tendencies—by focusing in on the 'resources of its own refutation' and identifying opportunities for 'disobedient delinking'—or what I refer to as 'disquieting' that historians and designers can reconstitute the graphic design archive as a site of debate, as the field, grounds, and the means for a communal 'relearning' and a 'remaking'.³⁴

Working with students, PhD candidates and colleagues at UvA and beyond, and informed by some of the examples and theories I have discussed here, I aim to experiment with some of these tactics and to be able to walk more just and inclusive pathways between the past, present, and future of graphic design practice and its cultural historical interpretations.

³³ Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, "Learning to Unlearn Decolonially—Disobeying, Delinking and Relinking," Summer School at University College Utrecht and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven in 2022.

³⁴ Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive.," Mignolo and Vázquez, "Learning to Unlearn Decolonially—Disobeying, Delinking and Relinking."