

# CONTENT AND FORM

**Margus Tamm**

Exhibitions of graphic design are not that frequent. The most popular formats are overviews based on open competitions, personal displays or retrospective curated exhibitions. Curatorial exhibitions, which aim to describe graphic design here and now, is still quite a rare format. That novelty is what makes latter so interesting and meaningful: opportunities offered by format, the expected curatorial self-articulation, the authoritarian mechanics of dichotomy and differentiation.

The exhibition *Content and Form I. Contemporary Estonian graphic design 2001–2010*, at the Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, displays applied design by lecturers and their students of the Design Department at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Most works were commissioned by various cultural institutions, although there are also exercise books, skateboards, CD designs, T-shirts and logos. It is also nice that everything can be touched, flicked through.

Strangely enough, there is no additional information about the design items to be found at the exhibition, not even the names of the designers. In an interview with Rene Mägi, the curator Indrek Sirkel explains his decision: “by leaving out the designers’ names, the viewer focuses on the object”. This approach does not seem to be too convincing: a basic concept of the culture-theoretical debate about the author’s function is that it is precisely the author’s name that enables an object to be more visible, revealing its perception as a symbol and as a whole. We could also ask whether, in this case, the curator should have stayed anonymous as well, in order for the “exhibition itself” to emerge. The curator’s doubts about displaying “live” graphic design in a white cube are natural (in his interview, he compares a poster in the exhibition room with a stuffed bird), although the chosen solution seems to increase the “stuffed effect”.

The nameless design objects with no origin, taken out of their original context, are organised according to their formal, rather than contextual continuity: posters placed together on the walls, and publications on a table. The display is united by the curator’s name, museum walls and stylish exhibition furniture. This kind of display could be characterised by the term *wunderkammer*. The art historian Francesca Fiorani describes *wunderkammer* as “memory theatre which conveyed symbolically the patron's control of the world through its indoor, *microscopic* reproduction”.

Regarding the exhibition *Content and Form* as a *wunderkammer*, it becomes clear why most works come from the curator himself and the rest from his immediate surroundings. This is a case of a personal memory theatre.

Luckily, the book-catalogue accompanying the exhibition, *Content and Form II*, has abandoned the exhibiting concept. Each picture has the designer's name and a brief introduction of the project, and thus several works open up which did not attract attention at the exhibition.

The catalogue records several hundred design projects and this in itself is a remarkable event.

Equally important are the three thematic essays. If we look at graphic design from a wider perspective, it is an emancipating discipline, which is rapidly growing a textual layer around it.

Quite a few serious treatments of the history of the speciality have been published, and there is an increasing need for analytical self-description and criticism beyond the discipline.

Rene Mäe's essay *Graphic Design as Cultural Work* offers an excellent analysis of the peculiarities of cultural work in the contemporary risk society. As the article is theoretical rather than empirical, it can be expanded to other fields of creative work, so the essay is a must read for all students of applied art.

Essential writings about graphic design have been produced by Indrek Sirkel, the curator of the exhibition *Content and Form I*, and an associate professor in the Graphic Design Department at the Academy of Arts, and by Professor Ivar Sakk, at the same department.

With the addition of the extremely pretentious subtitle to the exhibition (*Contemporary Estonian graphic design*), we can say that all the preconditions for writing history are there.

However, when reading both texts, they seem too fragmented to map the set of problems aspiring to be a whole. The texts contain individual interesting bits and pieces, but a more compact analysis gets lost in the confusion of wandering thoughts, autobiography and depictions of single cases.

The confusion, in fact, begins with terminology marking the (self) determining object; it is unclear what exactly is being described: contemporary graphic design, a generation, a school or a "school" (Sirkel), the graphic design of the new millennium or youngsters (Sakk). These terms, open to very different interpretations, are constantly interchanged within the same essay, and thus make it impossible to arrive at any kind of serious discussion.

On the basis of texts by Sirkel and Sakk, it appears that the presented graphic designers are honest, methodical, thinking and skilful people. There is no reason to doubt this, although these are hardly qualities that can determine one school or another, a particular generation, a circle of friends or a university chair.

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The central argument, emphasised in the exhibition press release, in the interviews and in Sirkel's and Sakk's essays, is that the work of the designers at the exhibition opposes the domination of the

market logic. This is not immediately obvious in the works themselves: practically all the exhibits are, after all, commissioned works. Opposing market logic, according to the curator Sirkel, seems to mean that the designer works freelance and that his work is project-based (to this kind of work culture, he opposes advertising agencies). However, precarization generally characterises today's market economy, and one certainly cannot say that a freelance designer opposes the dominance of the market logic; we are, instead, dealing with an adaptation tactic (or, as Rene Mäe says in his essay, an organisational alternative to advertising agencies).

One can therefore conclude that, although the curator's views clearly express a sharp opposition ("thinking designers" vs "nine-to-five mouse-rubbers who produce visual rubbish" at advertising agencies), this is not really an essential opposition.

Looking at the biographies at the end of the catalogue, something common strikes the eye: this is the Schengen-visa generation; after enrolling at the Estonian Academy of Arts, practically all of the designers furthered their studies abroad. Most of them did so at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Netherlands. Considering the many thousands of universities offering design studies in the world, this kind of special relationship is obviously significant. It would certainly be interesting to find out why such close relations have developed with this particular Dutch design school, and how the rather one-sided cultural exchange has influenced graphic design at our Academy. How does the Dutch design school relate to local design heritage, e.g. the photographic poster of the 1980s? *Content and Form* does not provide answers to these questions, and that is a great pity. A more open analysis of the relations between the Graphic Design Chairs at the Estonian Academy of Arts and the Rietveld Academy would have given *Content and Form* a considerably clearer definition, instead of the supposed opposition to the market logic and the rather pointless rhetoric of being honest and decent.

It should be emphasised, however, that the mere fact of an exhibition of graphic design and the publication of a bulky catalogue are remarkable events in Estonian context. The presentation is occasionally not very well thought through, but this could be regarded as Mina kirjutaks:

..a feature characteristic to a developing discipline which is still seeking its own place and image.

In any case, *Content and Form* offers a comprehensive overview of the work of the Graphic Design

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