



Please Come to the Show, Edited by David Senior, 2010. Flyers and posters from the 1960s to the present – and presents them here as an historically overlooked but integral aspect of exhibitions, and often the first point of contact between the audience and artist.

I talk to Sara De Bondt

Sara is a clever graphic designer, originally from Belgium. She works primarily with cultural clients and extends her practice into pedagogy, conference organizing, and design history research. She also cofounded <u>Occasional Papers</u>, a nonprofit publishing house, which features books about overlooked artists and artifacts. Soo Hyun Shin joined parts of the conversation.

Christina: thank you for making time to meet! Soo: Yes, thank you. You've gone through a lot of change in how you think about graphic design, and I am wondering if you are a completely different person now from when you started?

Sara: I think what's deep inside you doesn't change, but you evolve depending on the people that you meet or where you live or your past experiences; your teacher or your clients or your loved ones. I think definitely relationships have a big influence. I dated an artist for five years and that was a big influence. Now I am married to an art historian and that is an influence. I feel a bit weird talking like this because maybe a guy wouldn't talk like this. But the basic fact of wanting to communicate with ideas and not style stays the same. It's important not to push your self and not have a fixed style or way of working. To keep it interesting. Then you follow an interest and that changes your work. Like typography or art history.

> I really appreciate your honesty and candor and the way that you talk about yourself and your perspectives. You just said that you don't think a guy would say this, can you elaborate?

i don't know, maybe women more easily relate themselves to others. I don't know if the partners I've been with would talk so openly about my influence on them even though I know it's there. There is a history of architect couples working together and one of them not being recognized. I feel like it's never the other way, it's always the man who is known.

> This happens. I didn't realize that Massimo Vignelli and architect Robert Venturi and others were working with a wife the whole time and I realized, wow that's a book in itself. For me, it was exciting to know about the partners, but also kind of maddening that there is this embedded cultural issue of patriarchy. Soo: that's so interesting

Definitely! I would I would like to more about

Yes, that is something that is very important for Occasional Papers. It's a way of making the book come alive or having it extend beyond the book. With the Dom Sylvester Houédard book and performance—that was a really important event because there had never been a book about him. It became very important and the event became a completion of the book, rather than the book existing as an entirely written monograph—and also to do something quickly and have it be a reason to have a launch where people meet and share stories and maybe that will become another book. In that sense it is continued. So, it is a way of extending the dialogue. It is very activated.

how you consider your formal response to a project, and from a larger scope how you consider atypical methods or modes of distribution to respond to content. For example, you talked in your lecture about installations, events, performance, such as the reading of a book that is a script. That seems really smart and interesting.

Yes, it is making it public not only through print but also discussion, performances, whatever.

Going back to what you said about "maybe a guy wouldn't talk like this", you were quoted in <u>Eye</u> magazine as saying Karel Martens said, long ago, that your work is too girly?

That was written in that? I can't believe it!

I kind of like that it's out there. Again I like the honesty that you bring as a person talking about your work. I think that there's so much posturing that can happen in graphic design. Maybe there's a shift and now designers are putting on less of a front.

That would be nice

Wouldn't it be great? I think there are insecurities where people want to prove that you know what you are doing. You have worked side by side with a few famous male designers who are part of the Western European male-dominant graphic design canon. Can you tell me more about that experience. What was it like then and how you think about it now?

I think it's a real problem with <u>Occasional Papers</u>. We are doing too many books about older white men and we are really worried about it, but it's kind of a trap that you keep falling into.

How are you encountering your subjects? I am curious how the trap happens.

The books are primarily about loner artists or designers that at one point were well known and then forgotten. You bump into people who used to know them and start getting a story. Whereas women of the same time are hidden even further and you have to actively dig for them. A few of our books have been edited by women.¹ We are very conscious of it. And that is definitely Antony's [Antony Hudek, co-founder of <u>Occasional</u> <u>Papers</u>] concern as well . I really want to do a Beatrice Ward book.

> Can you talk about what you said in the lecture about focusing on feminism in your publishing and representing those who fall out of the design industry's central focus? There are a couple of books I know of that feature women designers. It is important that these are made but it is problematic that they exist as a capsule that says "oh don't forget the women, here they are over here", vs. being a part of the bigger picture all of the time.

Yes, definitely, I agree because then you are primarily classified as "the woman". I was once on the cover of a magazine in England that did a graphic series of around ten profiles and I was at a related event and someone said, "I hear Sara is going to be on the next cover" and another said "oh yes, I heard they are looking for a woman". Immediately I think, oh it is because I am a woman and then you start thinking that, like "I got a teaching job it must be because I am a woman"

Which happens. It is tokenizing but perhaps necessary.

And I say that too, when I am organizing a conference I am thinking, we have to have more women. Do you know the Hall of Femme series? It is a really nice book series started by two women in Sweden^{2.}

> Yes, I know of them. I continue to be surprised by the prevalence of issues around gender. Beyond the topic, I have been looking at how I might be able to make it more about my own

actions—bring it into my practice as a designer—in a holistic way— Doing more with education, maybe conferences and other work outside of client based projects. I don't want to become pigeonholed to a topic. I struggle with that.

I know what you mean, there are women who get labeled like that and maybe don't get called for jobs. What is your thesis about?

I have been experimenting with ways of making that mess with hierarchy or expectations. I work with public space a lot. Not just as a physical experience, but also online. I investigate methods of disrupting an encounter (how we take in content) and how through form activate a topic. For example, I noticed that feminism was trending online this past summer and fall. There were artists whom I follow, such as Antony Hegarty³, who are interested in maintaining the necessity of feminism and keeping it from being negatively relegated to the past. She was doing performance art with a group of fellow feminist artists such as CocoRosie in New York. They were getting a lot of press. At the same time, you have rape culture, ongoing politics, controversial university projects³, pop icons claiming feminism and a band of U.K. women talking about a "fourth wave". So I wanted to make a project that responded to this, and to create some sort of book or publication, as a crossover of online voices into printed format. Perhaps this publication could exploit the nature of the internet and how we experience it. Over a period of a few months, it became a weekly reader that literally collected and re-aggregated whatever came through via google alerts email filter based on the term "feminism". The content was broken down and hierarchy between page content and related links flipped, to see what new patterns could be seen in the periphery. The printed version uses both sides of the accordion folded paper to parse content and then folds/flips in a way that activates it further. This is a good example of what I have been experimenting with conceptually and formally in my thesis work.

Sounds good.

So you are a designer, educator, conference creator and more. How do you shape the context of your teaching in relationship to your interest or concerns.

It depends on the structure of the course. Right now I am teaching at Camberwell School of Art in London and we have 60 undergraduate students. It needs to be more concrete than the workshops I do, but in both I have students doing writing.

Do you have a preference?

I don't feel that I have enough time in a charette workshop. You just get going and then you have to stop. It is more about a process but can be frustrating. As a student I did a workshop with Paul Elliman where we had to go out into the city and I slept on a boat! I wasn't able to document it because of the boat, and it isn't something I could ever show anyone, but it did change my thinking about the boundaries of my work, finding inspiration and getting out there and doing things you learn things in a different way so I guess both have their value. When I taught at the Royal College of Art we had group work in the morning and then individual tutorials in the afternoon which I really enjoyed because it is a one hour discussion about someone's work. That ongoing long relationship is very rewarding.

> I taught a class here at RISD during our five-week Wintersession. Fellow classmate Minkyoung Kim and I designed the course, and workshops became creative models as structures with which to make connections in a short period of time. I learned a lot about interpersonal dynamics, it took us that entire time to establish the comfort to talk more freely through dialog as a group. There are all of these wonderful things that start to happen when you have that foundation built. It has been really great to be able to talk with you and get to know you better.



Tree of Codes, Jonathan Safran Foer, 2010

Each page of this book is a unique die-cut to create a hands-on experience of time, layers, space and meaning.

1. Adrian Henri: Total Artist was edited by his widow Catherine Marcangeli, Graphic Design: History in the Writing was edited by Catherine de Smet and myself. Notes from the Cosmic Typewriter: The Life and Work of Dom Sylvester Houédard was Edited by Nicola Simpson

2. http://halloffemmes.com

3. Future Feminism, The Hole NYC, 2014. Created by Antony, Kembra Pfahler, Johanna Constantine, Bianca Casady, Sierra Casady

4. Carry That Weight, Emma Sulkowicz, Columbia University