# THE YALE MFA GRAPHIC DESIGN SHOW

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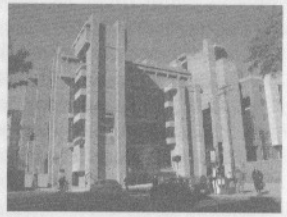
The history of the Yale University MFA Graphic Design show is interesting, and relevant to the exhibition *Wide White Space* as a case study in how different cohorts of designers have grappled with the same problem in the same institution in the same space over a number of years. I graduated from the program a couple of years ago, so I can try to explain my own experience of the problem.

But first, exactly what is the "problem" I am referring to?

The problem of exhibiting graphic design, and specifically the problem that most graphic design is small and flat. When graphic design is doing what it aspires to do—getting reproduced by the millions and distributed to every corner of the Earth—then small and flat is not a problem. In fact, it's perfect. But when graphic design is dropped into the gallery, it's screwed. It cannot command a room. And once it starts to command a room, people don't think of it as graphic design any more. The traditional gallery space is programmed to celebrate the perfect, precious singularity of something. The dollar store is the temple of the multiple.

The exhibition design experience I had at Yale in the spring of 2009 was rooted in thinking that began nearly 20 years earlier, when Sheila Levrant de Bretteville took over Yale's graduate graphic design department and began fundamentally reshaping the program. At that time, Yale's art and architecture schools were located in one of New Haven's most iconic buildings. Unfortunately, Paul Rudolph's masterpiece of Brutalist architecture, with its ribbed concrete inside and out, was an extremely challenging space for exhibiting graphic design. The first year that the students showed work in the building's gallery, everything seemed to disappear, overwhelmed by the huge space and aggressive walls. The next year, the students realized they had to design for their designs—meaning, they had to think of ways for the books to be handled, hanging mechanisms for posters, strategies for injecting life and lightness into the space.



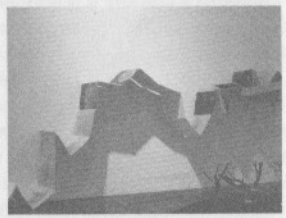
Paul Rudolph, Yale Art & Architecture building

The classes that followed continued exploring the primary questions of exhibition design—questions born of practical concerns. We have books. We want them to look good. What are we going to put them on? How are we going to light them? Are people going to want to sit down to read them? What kind of chairs, then, do we want them to sit on? These questions forced the students to think about how to position their work in space so it would be used as intended. After two years of looking inward in graduate school, the exhibition was a time for them to look outside themselves, to help someone else make sense of their work. This process challenged the students' assumptions about their purpose in art school. Was the program about becoming an artist or working in a group?

The photographic record suggests that each class often reacted against the class before it. Simple one year, complex the next. Individually experienced work, then communal. Traditional, then experimental. Despite this variety and an expanding repertoire of narrative devices, the Rudolph building was always a player in the design, muscling its way into the frame and asserting control. Throughout the 1990s, the students designed exhibitions that were



1992



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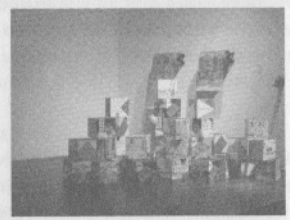
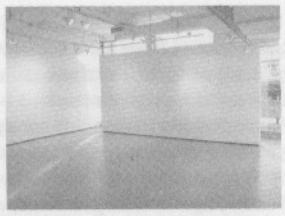


1996

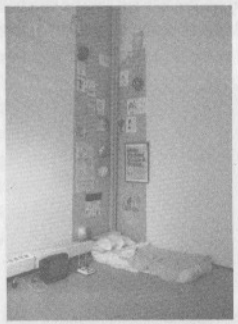
good-looking, well-organized vehicles for presenting their individual work. They hewed closely to the traditional maxim of exhibition design: I want my book to look good.

In 2000, the Yale School of Art moved to its own building, Green Hall, half a block from the Rudolph building. Once the site of New Haven's Jewish Community Center, then vacant for many years, it was completely renovated to become the art school.

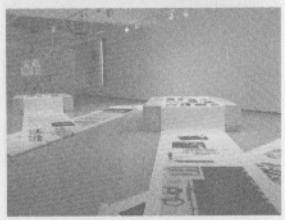


Green Hall, upper gallery, 2000

Middle gallery, 2002



Lower gallery, 2008



Upper gallery, 2008

Its three-level gallery space is a classic white cube. Around the time of the move, something about the student exhibitions fundamentally shifted. I don't know whether it was the openness of the new gallery space that encouraged the students to recalibrate their definition of a graphic design exhibition or whether, after 10 years of trying to conquer the Rudolph building, they had simply exhausted all the practical questions they cared to address. Probably some combination of the two. In any case their interest shifted to conceptual questions. From "Does my book look good?" to "Does it make sense to include my book?" From "Which table?" to "Why a table?" They

started to make curatorial decisions about what work to put in their exhibitions, to treat the show itself as form and the individual pieces of graphic design as content.

Raw graphic design will rarely challenge painting or sculpture's dominance in the gallery, but once that design is considered fodder for a larger piece, tremendous opportunity presents itself. A painting will stay a painting, but graphic design can become an exhibition. In the new space, as in the old, each class reacted against the class before it. Perhaps more than ever. White walls became gray walls. Personal expression became group expression. Visitors looked up. Visitors looked down.

In my view, three ideas animated the conceptual flowering of Yale's graphic design exhibitions.

Lower gallery, 2009

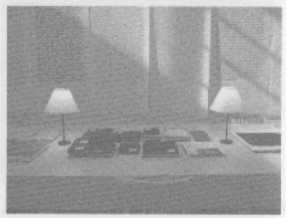
Middle gallery, 2010

First: Question all assumptions.

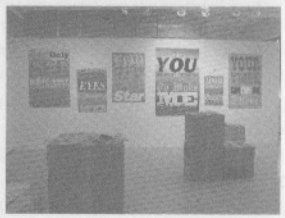
People often begin an exhibition design process with preconceptions about the appropriate language for an art or design show. Usually, it's a clean, spare look: white walls, wood-topped tables, books and posters spaced tastefully around the room. The idea that things look better when there's nothing around them is a presenting system born of modern gallery traditions. But is it really the best system? Why should it be the default? It's not the way things have always been, or the way they have to be. Other systems—the library, the street, the grocery store, the

Upper gallery, 2002

Upper gallery, 2002



Middle gallery, 2002




Middle gallery, 2002

party, the home—are just as viable and potentially better showcases for graphic design. What is the right system for what you want to do? First, you have to figure out what you want to do.

2002's class couldn't quite settle on what they wanted to do, so they divided the galleries into four highly contrasting spaces throughout which the students distributed their work. The spaces were heavily themed, immersive, cartoonish. In their extremity, they stood up to and unified the work. In a potent gesture of invitation to the outside world, the students dragged vernacular objects into the galleries and repurposed them as vehicles for showing work and organizing space. They interrogated their assumptions about what is suitable for inclusion in a gallery space and ended up throwing the doors wide open. The exhibition brimmed with individually brilliant, if not totally cohesive, ideas and images, suggesting that the show's design process was as valuable a part of the exhibition as the final product.





Second: Let a concept drive.

In many MFA graphic design programs, including Yale's, a student's graduate work is published primarily through two vehicles: a thesis book, which provides a singular, self-reflexive view of your own production, and a group exhibition. In the exhibition, you must determine how your work, reflecting your specific interests, can exist with and within other people's work and interests. You must take part in a wrenching and novel negotiation to put that work in a new context and offer it up to the public.

And then there is the inevitable fact that graduate graphic design work is often so loaded with layers of meaning that it can be difficult for those outside the program to understand. Given that, allowing the exhibition to arrange itself around a simple concept can fit inaccessible work into a coherent, beautiful display.

In 2004 at Yale, a publication became a premise for an exhibition, and also an exhibition in its own right. The students created a book organized around color. Each student was assigned a particular shade of colored paper and 16 pages upon which to respond to that color. The book, with its simple formal idea, became the soul of their exhibition, which was also organized around color.

Catalogue for *Multi-purpose*, 2004

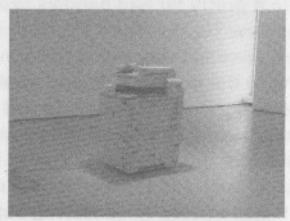
Lower gallery, 2004

Third: Impose restrictions.

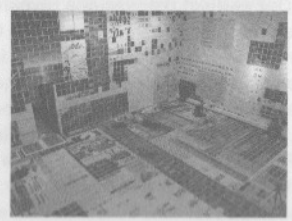
Inherent in the shift from investigating practical issues to investigating conceptual issues is a new definition of the atomic unit of an exhibition. Is an exhibition many individual gestures or one large gesture? Is it a thousand single-celled organisms or one one-thousand-celled organism? By definition, a graphic design MFA exhibition has many inputs. Exhibition design is the creation of a framing device to hold and filter those inputs. How strong is the filter? How fine is its mesh?

The 2006 show was created from more than 13,000 letter-size printouts. In the accompanying press release, Dan Michaelson, faculty advisor and member of the 2002 class, said, "Faced with the challenge of displaying work out of context and in an open white volume, students chose an 8.5x11-inch grid as a way to create a context that is at once autonomous and mutual. The 8.5x11 grid is a metaphor for the comp, the rough draft, the transmitted document, the electronic screen, and the time-based process of the installation. For us, 8.5x11 has been a set of collaborative tactics, human as well as technical in their execution,


Exterior signage, 2006



Lower gallery, 2006



Lower gallery, 2006

and a mathematical approach to budgetary limits. The students' grid has been an experiment to create a system that encompasses work as small as a letterform and as large as an exhibition hall."

In 2008, exhibition design became an accredited course in the MFA sequence. This formalized the program's commitment to exhibition as a vital component of design mastery. In 2009, 14 of the 16 members of my class, myself included, registered for exhibition design. Our instructor, Glen Cummings, was, like Dan Michaelson, a member of the 2002 class. In the first minutes of the first class meeting, we realized that we faced the emptiness of the galleries, the burden of the good work that had come before, and, most dauntingly, the absolutely freakish organizational scenario of 14 people each with an equal voice in the process. It felt like a barbaric reversal of everything we had experienced in graduate school to date.

Thinking of it today, two years later, plunges me right back into that particular feeling of slow suffocation that is the democratic process. I feel horrified by our grinding debates, furious all over again that we didn't agree on things sooner. My own complicity in the grind is mortifying. According to our class blog, on February 3, 2009, I said, "I think it's attractive to allow our contributions to be our voice in a collective structure . . . but maybe if you require one variable to be constrained, you could give freedom in another."

In the first five weeks of the semester, we came up with scores of ideas. A few that made it pretty far had handles like Giant Pizza, the Bow Tie, and Rock Paper Scissors. One of my favorites was called Balloons. According to the notes, "Balloons would suspend the work. They could deflate and the work would sink as the run of the show unfolds. I like that this displays our work in an uncontrolled way, and the work could move around. It also alludes to us leaving Yale."

Our earliest discussions revealed a common interest in using video as a tool for re-presenting our print pieces and in finding a way to reference materials that had inspired our work. These ideas would become the core of our show, but, as late as mid-February, in a pivotal vote, nine of us favored the theme Catalogue as Show. All Video received just four votes—which was one more than an idea known only as Boxes. A week later, after many hours of furious politicking, All Video edged out Catalogue as Show. Once we settled on a framing device, the exhibition took on a life of its own. It was a never-ending town council meeting crossed with a giant, mutually reinforcing game of chicken.

Besides a website committee, a publication committee, and an identity committee, we created a snack committee and a note-taking committee. We created a folding poster invitation to the exhibition, a publication, and a webpage pulling images from a webcam pointed at a video projected on a wall of the gallery of us installing the signage for the show. We created an archival website of all the pieces in the show. We created a press release, and an electronic invitation. Diagrams, spreadsheets, budgets. We called our show *Lux et Veritas,* and we felt very clever about that. "Lux et Veritas" is Yale's motto. It means "light and truth." Yale's seal has a book in it. So we took that book, reversed it out in white, threw it on a black 4:3 rectangle, added back "Lux et Veritas" but in a more enigmatic typeface, and, we felt, concocted the perfect exhibition identity.


Poster for *Lux et Veritas*, 2009

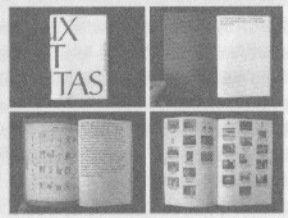
A projected book! Light! Truth! That and certain other aspects indulged in the inside jokes that pervade design work, but in other ways we genuinely did try to make the show accessible to a non-design, non-Yale audience. We obsessively imagined a mom and dad, who'd been helping to pay for years of graduate school, walking into the gallery and shaking their heads in sweet bewilderment that slowly mounted into anger as they wondered, "What the hell is this crap? *This* is what she did instead of going to law school?"

With that image in your heads, let's take a quick tour of the show. In the upper






Upper gallery, 2009




Catalogue for *Lux et Veritas*, 2009

galleries, a room of thesis books, and a room with the signage video, the webcam, and a small table piled with the exhibition's publication under a video encouraging people to take a booklet and head down the stairs into the heart of the show.

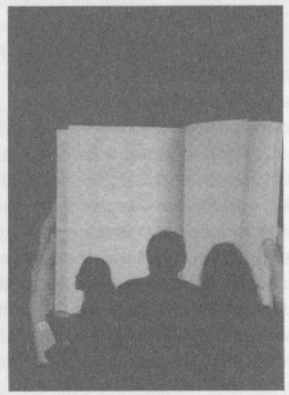
On the mezzanine, motion work that requires directed sound. Six projectors and computers, each with a set of headphones, nested in a central wooden bank.

On the bottom floor, the true spectacle.

For me, the following excerpt from our publication best explains where our thinking eventually landed: "Perhaps you are curious about the decision to go all-video when what we make is, for the most part, so material. It was reached after many prolonged meetings, protracted conversations, and near-stalemates among the 16 of us as we sought a means of collectively presenting our work. We wondered how to show our print, interactive, motion, and environmental pieces in a gallery setting. It seemed disappointing to heave an armload of objects onto a table and just leave them there, so disembodied from the world for which they were designed. Finally, we agreed to forego the objects, turn off the lights, and present our work immaterially, as a series of looping video reels."

Lower gallery, 2009

Lower gallery, 2009



Lower gallery, 2009