

25 DESIGNISMS

Jenny Holzer, the preeminent artist who created her soul-searching “truisms,” made us conscious of the human condition by revealing our frailties:

“Action causes more trouble than thought.”

“All things are delicately interconnected.”

“Ideals are replaced by conventional goals at a certain age.”

“A single event can have infinitely many interpretations.”

“Any surplus is immoral.”

“Words tend to be inadequate.”

These six truisms make us consider our collective moral conscious. As designers, we often underestimate the impact we have on the world at large, and how our visual vocabulary is influenced by political, social and cultural events.

So here are my versions of Holzer’s truisms, 25 Designisms, a listing of my observations and reflections on design and designing.

01. DESIGN DOES NOT LIVE IN AN AESTHETIC VACUUM.

Design is influenced by, and influences, contemporary society.

02. DESIGN BRINGS CONTENT INTO FOCUS.

Design makes function visible.

03. DESIGN IS NOT SOLELY A MARKETING DEVICE THAT SUPPORTS CONSUMERISM.

It can be a communicator of dissent. It can market ideology. It can effect change.

04. DESIGN MUST SURPRISE AND INFORM.

And it should do so in this order: surprise your audience with the unexpected, then allow their curiosity to lead them to the message.

05. DESIGN CAN BE SEDUCTIVE PROPAGANDA.

It is your responsibility to be knowledgeable about what you are asked to communicate. Make your decisions educated decisions.

06. DESIGN HAS A RATHER SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP WITH STYLE, AND STYLE IS SOMEWHAT PRECARIOUS.

What looks great today may look dated in 15 years, and maybe, if you’re lucky and very talented, it will look good again in 20 years.

07. GREAT DESIGN IS, QUITE SIMPLY, INNOVATION THAT REFLECTS THE SPIRIT OF AN ERA and becomes a classic because of its timeless appeal.

08. REPETITION WORKS.

Multiples of most anything look good. Sol Lewitt knew it when he lined up hundreds of white boxes on a floor. Bruce Mao knew it when he put hundreds of big, grainy pictures back to back for Rem Koolhaas, and the Gap knew it when they filled their windows with a multitude of kids’ sneakers.

09. EXTREMES WORK.

Really large, or really thick, or really small, or really colorful, or really simple, or really dense. Really.

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10. "SERIOUSLY FUNNY" WORKS.

Seriously. Reference the work of Tibor Kalman. Seriously funny was in his DNA.

11. DICHOTOMY WORKS.

Try juxtaposing opposites: The historical with the vernacular, the rough with the refined, the brash with the sublime.

12. DESIGN THAT MOVES OTHERS COMES FROM ISSUES THAT MOVE YOU.

13. NO DESIGN IS COMPLETELY ORIGINAL.

We are all influenced by the bombardment of visual information we are exposed to on a daily basis. But please recognize that influence and plagiarism are distinctly different.

14. A GOOD DESIGNER IS A GREAT LISTENER.

If you listen carefully, the client nearly always tells you the solution.

15. A GOOD DESIGNER IS A GREAT STORYTELLER.

Every company, service, or institution has a story to tell. Explore the narrative and banish the corporate speak you've read so many times before.

16. WORDS ARE AS IMPORTANT AS IMAGES,

and images can be more powerful than words.

17. ACCIDENTS OFTEN PRODUCE THE BEST SOLUTIONS.

Accidents are a hands-on experience. Only you can recognize the difference between an accident and your original intent.

18. PROCESS CAN MANIFEST THE SOLUTION.

There are no shortcuts to smart solutions. Take the time to do the following:

1. RESEARCH

Immerse yourself in the finding and gathering of information, and take the time to substantiate the material.

2. ANALYZE

How does this research inform the problem, and what is the relevance of the data?

3. IDEATE

Conceive design concepts based on your analysis. Allow yourself the luxury of conceiving a multitude of solutions.

4. STRATEGIZE

How many ways can each of these ideas solve the problem, and which medium is the best form for the solution: Video? Book? Installation? Advertising? Interactive?

5. CREATE

Engage in the process of making the form.

6. EVALUATE

19. PASSION ENABLES YOU TO REMAIN TRUE TO YOUR CREATIVE VISION.

Analyze, synthesize, visualize, but don't compromise.

20. RECONSIDER ABSOLUTES, QUESTION THE STATUS QUO.

Question the subscribed design vocabulary for a given audience. Consider how David Carson manipulated type for the surfing magazine BEACH CULTURE, or how John

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Plunkett and Barbara Kuhr defined the look of the dot-com era with WIRED magazine. As radical as these solutions appeared to be at the time, they were all appropriate to the gestalt of the client and spoke to their audience in a meaningful way.

21. "THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE."

Valerie Steel, Chief Curator at FIT, wrote an excellent essay on object-based art criticism that is a critical analysis of artifacts involving questions about how one interacts with the piece, what the experience is, and how the piece compares to other similar or related pieces. I have used these to measure and critique my own work.

"What are its cultural, technological and stylistic forbearers?"

"What relationship does this have to the culture in which it was produced?"

"What does it reveal about the culture?"

"What function does this object perform within its culture?"

By posing these questions, we are not only evaluating the stylistic structure and content of any given piece, but questioning the medium of the message.

22. ASKING QUESTIONS GENERATES MORE IDEAS.

23. PRACTICE ARTICULATING DESIGN CONCEPTS WITHOUT REVEALING THE STYLISTIC APPROACH.

24. DESIGNERS ARE LIKE ARCHITECTS; we structure space to facilitate the experience.

25. "DESIGN MUST ALWAYS BE IN SERVICE TO SOLVING A PROBLEM, OR IT'S NOT DESIGN, IT'S ART."