

1998 The Designer as Producer Ellen Lupton



Silkscreening the print *Oil & Water Do Not Mix*, 2010, designed by Anthony Burrill, conceived and produced in collaboration with Happiness, Brussels. Courtesy Anthony Burrill



Will Holder and Stuart Bailey (as Will Stuart) explain the concept of vertical integration using a replica of Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Structure for Talking While Standing* (1965–1966), Chelsea Space, London, 2010. Courtesy Will Holder



Jürg Lehni and Uli Franke, creators of *Hektor*, executing a wall drawing for Cornelia Windlin's contribution to the exhibition *Public Affairs*, Kunsthalle Zürich, 2002. Courtesy Jürg Lehni



Walter Benjamin, Paris, 1937. Courtesy Archive: DHM Berlin

The Death of Walter Benjamin

Walter Bendix Schönflies Benjamin (15 July 1892–26 September 1940) was a German-Jewish intellectual, who functioned variously as a literary critic, philosopher, sociologist, translator, radio broadcaster and essayist. ¶ Benjamin committed suicide in Portbou at the French-Spanish border while attempting to escape from the Nazis. The people he was with were told by the Spanish police that they would be deported back to France, which would have hampered Benjamin's plans to get to the United States. While staying in the Hotel de Francia, he apparently took some morphine pills and died on the night of 25/26 September 1940. ¶ The fact that he was buried in the consecrated section of a Roman Catholic cemetery would indicate that his death was not announced as a suicide. The other persons in his party were allowed passage the next day, and safely reached Lisbon on 30 September. ¶ A manuscript of Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" was passed to Theodor Adorno by Hannah Arendt, who Research (temporarily relocated to New York) in 1942. A completed manuscript, which Benjamin had carried in his suitcase, this is very unlikely as the author's plans for the work had changed in the wake of Adorno's criticisms in 1938, and it seems clear that the work was flowing over its containing limits in his last years. As the last finished piece of work from Benjamin, the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* is often cited; Adorno claimed this had been written in the spring of 1940, weeks before the Germans invaded France. While this is not completely certain, it is clearly one of his last works, and the final paragraph, about the Jewish quest for the Messiah provides a harrowing final point to Benjamin's work, with its themes of culture, destruction, Jewish heritage and the fight between humanity and nihilism. —Wikipedia

Anthony Velonis

Artist/producer Anthony Velonis helped transform screenprinting into a viable fine arts medium. In the 1930s, the WPA's Federal Art Project was created to employ artists during America's Great Depression and to bring art into the lives of ordinary citizens. Velonis saw screenprinting as an affordable medium with great aesthetic potential. His pamphlet *Technical Problems of the Artist: Technique of the Silkscreen Process* helped to popularize screenprinting in the postwar period. After leaving the WPA, he founded the Creative Printmakers Group, which produced fine arts prints as well as commercial posters. —EL



Anthony Velonis working on a poster matrix in the photography and reproduction department, Lowry Field, Denver, circa 1943. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division



Muriel Cooper at work in the Visible Language Workshop at MIT. Photo: L. Barry Hetherington

Muriel Cooper

A pioneer of design for digital media, Muriel Cooper founded the Visible Language Workshop (VLW) at MIT in 1975. In 1985, the VLW moved to the MIT Media Lab as one of its founding research groups. Cooper worked with her students to create an electronic language for building "typographic landscapes"—complex, malleable documents that function in real time and three-dimensional space. Cooper brought typography to life, imparting dynamic interactivity to such principles as layered information, simultaneous texts, and typographic texture. She aimed to restructure the language of design in four dimensions. In an interview with the author shortly before her unexpected death in 1994, Cooper said, "In the traditional model, the designer tries to interpret what given elements are 'supposed to do' together. So what happens with computers (beyond the primitive desktop publishing model)? On the 'information highway,' all sorts of things are up for grabs—authorship, how people read, how people gather and generate material for their own purposes." —EL

The slogan "designer as author" has enlivened debates about the future of graphic design since the early 1990s. Behind this phrase is the will to help designers to initiate content, to work in an entrepreneurial way rather than simply reacting to problems and tasks placed before them by clients. The word *author* suggests agency, intention, and creation, as opposed to the more passive functions of consulting, styling, and formatting. Authorship is a provocative model for rethinking the role of the graphic designer at the start of the millennium; it hinges, however, on a nostalgic ideal of the writer or artist as a singular point of origin.

The avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 1920s critiqued the ideal of authorship as a process of dredging unique forms from the depths of the interior self. Artists and intellectuals challenged romantic definitions of art by plunging into the worlds of mass media and mass production.

As an alternative to "designer as author," I propose "designer as producer." Production is a concept embedded in the history of modernism. Avant-garde artists and designers treated the techniques of manufacture not as neutral, transparent means to an end but as devices equipped with cultural meaning and aesthetic character. In 1934, the German critic Walter Benjamin wrote "The Author as Producer," a text that attacked the conventional view of authorship as a purely literary enterprise. He exclaimed that new forms of communication—film, radio, advertising, newspapers, the illustrated press—were melting down traditional artistic genres and corroding the borders between writing and reading, authoring and editing.

Benjamin was a Marxist, committed to the notion that the technologies of manufacture should be owned by the workers who operate them. In Marxist terminology, the "means of production" are the heart of human culture and should be collectively owned. Benjamin claimed that writing (and other arts) are grounded in the material structures of society, from the educational institutions that foster literacy to the publishing networks that manufacture and distribute texts. In detailing an agenda for a politically engaged literary practice, Benjamin demanded that artists must not merely adopt political "content," but must revolutionize the means through which their work is produced and distributed.

Benjamin attacked the model of the writer as an "expert" in the field of literary form, equipped only to craft words into texts and not to question the physical life of the work. The producer must ask,

Where will the work be read? Who will read it? How will it be manufactured? What other texts and pictures will surround it? Benjamin argued that artists and photographers must not view their task as solely visual, lest they become mere suppliers of form to the existing apparatus of bourgeois publishing: "What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture the caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary useful value. But we shall make this demand most emphatically when we—the writers—take up photography. Here, too, therefore, technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of political progress."

Benjamin claimed that to bridge the divide between author and publisher, author and reader, poet and popularizer is a revolutionary act, because it challenges the professional and economic categories upon which the institutions of "literature" and "art" are erected.

Benjamin's Marxist emphasis has a tragic edge when viewed from the vantage point of today. By the time he wrote "The Author as Producer," abstract art was already at variance with Stalin's state-enforced endorsement of social realism. Benjamin applauded Dada and Surrealism for challenging the institutions of art, and yet such experimental forms were forbidden in the Soviet state he so admired. Benjamin's theory of the author as producer remains relevant today, however, even if one proposes more modest challenges to the existing structures of media and publishing, opening new paths of access to the means of manufacture and dissemination.

In the 1920s, Benjamin met Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, the Hungarian Constructivist whose work as a photographer, typographer, artist, and writer made him a prominent figure at the Bauhaus. Benjamin's 1928 collection of essays, *One-Way Street*, reflects on experimental typography and the proliferation of such commercial media as the pamphlet, poster, and advertisement, which were upending the classical book as literature's sacred vessel. Benjamin wrote: "Printing, having found in the book a refuge in which to lead an autonomous existence, is pitilessly dragged out onto the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos. This is the hard schooling of its new form." Describing the relation of authorship to technology, Benjamin predicted that the writer will begin to compose his work with a typewriter instead of a pen when "the precision of typographic forms has entered directly into the conception of his books. One might suppose

that new systems with more variable typefaces might then be needed."

Such "new systems" are, of course, ubiquitous today in the form of software for word processing and desktop publishing. These tools have altered the tasks of graphic designers, enlarging their powers as well as burdening them with more kinds of work to do. Such is the rub of de-specialization. Benjamin celebrated the proletarian ring of the word "production," and the word carries those connotations forward into the current period. Within the professional context of graphic design, "production" is linked to the preparation of "artwork" for mechanical reproduction, rather than to the intellectual realm of "design." Production belongs to the physical activity of the base, the factory floor: it is the traditional domain of the paste-up artist, the stripper, the letterer, the typesetter. The "desktop" revolution that began in the mid-1980s brought these roles back into the process of design. The proletarianization of design offers designers a new crack at materialism, a chance to reengage the physical aspects of our work. Whereas the term "author," like "designer," suggests the cerebral workings of the mind, production privileges the activity of the body. Production is rooted in the material world. It values things over ideas, making over imagining, practice over theory.

When Benjamin called for authors to become producers, he did not mean for them to become factory workers alienated from the form and purpose of the manufactured thing. The challenge for designers today is to help become the masters, not the slaves, of technology. There exist opportunities to seize control—intellectually and economically—of the means of production, and to share that control with the reading public, empowering them to become producers as well as consumers of meaning. As Benjamin phrased it in 1934, the goal is to turn "readers or spectators into collaborators." His words resonate in current models of practice that view the reader as a participant in the construction of meaning. ☒

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Rob Giampietro, James Goggin, Peter Hall, Steven Heller,
Jeremy Leslie, Ellen Lupton, Ben Radatz, Michael Rock,
Dmitri Siegel, Daniel van der Velden, Armin Vit and Bryony
Gomez-Palacio, and Lorraine Wild

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