



# DESIGN OBJECTS MUSEALIZATION, DOCUMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

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CULTURA, ESPAÇO E MEMÓRIA

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# GRAPHIC DESIGN IN MUSEUMS: THE EXPANDED FIELD

MADDALENA DALLA MURA\*

**Abstract:** *The story of graphic design as a cultural and museum object is a complex one. While there have been few dedicated institutional efforts towards graphic design itself, its numerous outputs have been acquired by a variety of private and public entities as either works of art, collectible objects of fetishism, sources of information or archival and documentary materials on a variety of topics. The varied and dispersed presence of graphic design within institutes in charge of cultural heritage has been further complicated in the digital age. The spread of digital technologies has not only challenged graphic design as a specialised practice, but also led to an expansion of the design field that makes it more difficult to identify, and thus acquire and preserve, its products as distinct artefacts. Examining the status of the design object in museums through the lens of graphic design invites us to question the very ideas of design and museum, as this contribution aims to briefly illustrate through the discussion of several cases between the past and the present.*

**Keywords:** *graphic design; poster; GLAM; born digital design.*

**Resumo:** *A história do design gráfico como objeto cultural e museológico é complexa. Embora tenham existido alguns esforços institucionais relativamente ao design gráfico, os seus múltiplos resultados têm vindo a ser adquiridos por diferentes entidades privadas e públicas, como obras de arte, objetos colecionáveis de fetichismo, fontes de informação ou materiais de arquivo e documentais, sobre uma variedade de temas. A presença variada e dispersa de design gráfico em instituições dedicadas ao património cultural tornou-se mais complexa na era digital. A disseminação das tecnologias digitais não apenas desafiou o design gráfico como uma prática especializada, mas também conduziu a uma expansão no campo do design, tornando mais difícil identificar, adquirir e preservar os seus produtos como artefactos diferenciados. Observando o estatuto do objeto de design em museus através da lente do design gráfico convida-nos a questionar as próprias ideias de design e de museu, como esta contribuição procura ilustrar, de modo sucinto, por meio da discussão de diferentes casos entre o passado e o presente.*

**Palavras-chave:** *design gráfico; cartaz; GLAM; design digital nato.*

## THE SHORT STORY OF THE GRAPHIC DESIGN MUSEUM IN BREDA

The year 2017 marked the final stage in the story of the Graphic Design Museum in Breda. Opened in 2008, this institution was the result of a long, and controversial, process initiated in the early 1990s, when the Municipality of this small city, located in the southern part of The Netherlands, decided to relaunch its cultural and touristic image. Willing to avoid competition with the most prominent art institutions of other cities and drawing on the work of a local cultural centre (De Beyerd) that

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had organised visual arts, photography and graphic design exhibitions for decades, the Municipality decided to raise the flag of graphic design<sup>1</sup>. Since its opening, the Graphic Design Museum sought to balance past and present. Along with the main, permanent, historical section — that recounted 100 years of Dutch graphic design, i.e., the development of the profession in the framework of the modernisation process of the country — the institution was also quick to involve contemporary designers in the production of events and *ad hoc* projects, including exhibits for children, and multimedia and interactive installations<sup>2</sup> (such as the *Posterwall for the 21st Century* by studio Lust, which will come up again in this paper). Breda could certainly boast that it had a *unique* institution, and as such it was praised within the graphic design community<sup>3</sup>. Despite this enthusiasm, however, graphic design alone was apparently not enough to sustain the museum. After only three years the institution was re-named Museum of the Image (MOTI) and its mission changed from «graphic design» to «image» and «visual» culture. Likely reflecting broader cultural trends, particularly the emergence of visual and cultural studies, this transition occurred after the appointment, in January 2009, of a new director, Mieke Gerritzen<sup>4</sup>.

One of the first designers in the Netherlands to be involved in digital media in the early 1990s, Gerritzen had gained attention at the start of the new millennium with two publications she co-edited titled *Everyone is a Designer* (2001 and 2003), which, through a series of slogans and maxims, and with a bold design, extolled and questioned the present and future of graphic design as an increasingly pervasive and democratic practice<sup>5</sup>. Looking at design from the perspective of post-1980s visual culture, when anyone can produce and disseminate images, Gerritzen highlighted in her books the progressive demise of graphic design as a specialised profession and an individualised field. Marking the end of graphic design as it had developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its focus on posters, books, and printed materials, the advent of the Internet and social media had definitely turned design into a field of expansive and collaborative practices and strategies, pushing designers towards new metapositions as software developers or artists. This was also the vision that Gerritzen brought to the Graphic Design Museum once she became its director.

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the founding of the Museum in Breda is available at <<http://www.architravel.com/architravel/building/graphic-design-museum/>> and <<https://www.bndestem.nl/breda/uniek-museum-met-roerig-verleden~a65d35c4/>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>2</sup> A self-reflective look into the making of the permanent installation of the Graphic Design Museum in Breda is offered by CLEVEN, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the report about the Museum by WALTERS, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See <<https://www.motimuseum.nl/en/over-moti/nieuws/mieke-gerritzen-new-director-graphic-design-museum>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>5</sup> GERRITZEN, LOVINK, 2001, 2003. Regarding Gerritzen's ideas about the transition from the era of graphic design to that of visual communication and of the image, see also GERRITSEN, 2010, 2013.

While during its transformation phase the Museum still kept an eye on graphic design and attempted to bridge the field's past and present — namely with the exhibition *Connecting The Past and The Future* in 2011, which drew from the collections —, in subsequent years its concentration clearly shifted from graphic designers and graphic design production to the use and circulation of images, examined through the lens of different media, disciplines and phenomena including photography, journalism, fashion, digital art, gaming, and consumption.

However, only five years later MOTI closed its doors. As of January 2017, its collection, organisation and premises were merged with those of the Breda Museum, basically a local history museum, to form the Stedelijk Museum Breda, a new institution devoted to cultural heritage and visual culture<sup>6</sup>. Within this context, the *museality* of the graphic design objects, i.e., their museum value<sup>7</sup>, underwent another shift: originally selected as exemplary works of graphic design under the Graphic Design Museum, and later repurposed as image culture under MOTI, they now shared space with religious artefacts, archeological finds and a variety of applied arts items, serving as evidence of material and visual culture, and being *picked* as artistic commentaries for exhibitions on several topics. A setback in terms of recognising graphic design as a distinct field, or rather, an acknowledgement of graphic design as one of the many significant manifestations of the ongoing civilisation process? However one interprets it, this further repositioning of graphic design as a museum object serves as a reminder that museum artefacts are always dynamic entities.

The musealisation of graphic design is a story characterised by uncertain and unstable encounters, situated between resistance and attraction, invisibility and visibility, presence, and oblivion. To question the status of the design object in museums through the lens of graphic design is intriguing not because it provides us a neat portrait, but because it complicates things. The history of graphic design's museality eventually brings into question the very ideas of museum and object, as I intend to briefly illustrate in this paper, by discussing several cases and perspectives, between the past and the present.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN AS MUSEUM OBJECTS

The relationship with museums is inscribed into the history of modern design. However, when it comes to graphic design, this relationship has been anything but straightforward.

The emergence of modern graphic design openly challenged the values, boundaries, and spaces of museums as institutions representative of a world that emphasised the past, tradition, rarity, and high culture. This is particularly the case with the illustrated poster, the quintessential graphic object, wherein lie the

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<sup>6</sup> See <<https://www.stedelijkmuseumbreda.nl>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>7</sup> For such concepts as *museality* and *musealisation*, as used in this paper, see DESVALLÉES, MAIRESSE, eds., 2010.

foundations of modern graphic design as the practice of «conveying ideas through the juxtaposition or integration of word and image into a holistic entity»<sup>8</sup>. Functional, mass produced, ephemeral, even cheap and messy in their first public appearances, the illustrated posters were conceived to perform their function — that is to promote and inform about new products and entertainments — *out there*, in the public space. Significantly, one idea that circulated early on about posters in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in France, where the poster art phenomenon first bloomed, was that they themselves constituted a new kind of public institution. Their presence in the streets was described by some critics as an open, democratic and always up-to-date kind of museum, archive, gallery or library<sup>9</sup>. Artistic and aesthetic considerations were indeed central to this discourse given the kinship between poster design and the greater art of painting. Yet, posters were also praised for their wider cultural and educational significance, as information carriers and visual documents covering various aspects of modern life, from politics to travel, from medicine to technology. Other authors, however, soon advocated for the official recognition of posters *in museums*. The new commercial art, nonetheless, could not sit well in the old master's museums. While some claimed that *afficheistes* like Jules Chéret deserved to share space with great living artists in contemporary art museums<sup>10</sup>, other critics called instead for the establishment of a dedicated institution, one which would celebrate posters as a peculiar form of modern art, an applied and industrial art.

Engaged in erasing the hierarchy between the arts, advocates of decorative arts considered the works created through reproductive processes to be of equal value to fine arts. And yet, in order to sustain the recognition of posters as worthy of becoming *musealia*, they first had to «auratize» them, to build their cultural status, as thoroughly illustrated by Ruth Iskin in her compelling study *The Poster*<sup>11</sup>. This process intersected with the burgeoning phenomenon of collecting posters.

In 1900, for instance, Roger Marx, a critic and member of the advisory committee of the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, proposed that the French state should set up a poster museum that would be part of a future museum of decorative arts. Marx's vision acknowledged all the multiple values of posters, both as artistic expressions and documental artefacts. He envisioned a «documentary collection» that would preserve and transmit to posterity «*the entire poster production*», serving as a testimony to the «art and life» of modernity. Interestingly, though, Marx's proposal appeared in the final issues of «*Maîtres de l'affiche*», a series of monthly publications released in the

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<sup>8</sup> JOBLING, CROWLEY, 1996: 3.

<sup>9</sup> See texts by critics such as Victor Champier, Frantz Jourdain, Jean Finot in the anthology of texts edited by DE IULIO, ed., 1996. See also the thorough study by ISKIN, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> See Frantz Jourdain in DE IULIO, ed., 1996: 69-74.

<sup>11</sup> Regarding this process and the case of *Maîtres de l'affiche*, see ISKIN, 2014: 145 ff.



late 1890s that featured small-format reproductions of selected world-famous posters. Printed on high-quality paper and with high-quality ink, this sort of curated gallery in print was just one among several similar initiatives that at the same time responded to and fuelled the collecting craze, and that helped to re-purpose the poster. As Iskin highlights, «Maîtres de l’affiche», by taking posters out of their original context — the streets — and rescuing them from ephemerality, provided a critical framework that allowed collectors to examine and appreciate them closely with a focused aesthetic gaze. This approach eventually transformed these pieces into objects of private contemplation, creating an experience akin to that of the private art galleries of the past. It was only following the translocation of posters into this space of reception and signification that it became possible to consider these artefacts worthy of musealisation.

Even so, the dedicated museum envisioned by Marx did not come into being as such, at least not immediately. While the recognition of posters and other prints as worthy of preservation beyond their ephemeral nature contributed to the survival of many of them, it did not automatically lead to their immediate or permanent musealisation. (Marx’s own collection, for instance, was sold and dispersed after his death<sup>12</sup>). Only in the 1970s, almost eighty years after Marx’s proposal, Paris finally witnessed the foundation of a poster museum. Formerly known as the Musée de l’Affiche, and later renamed Musée de la Publicité, its collections of posters and advertising objects were finally incorporated into the Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN IN MUSEUMS, BETWEEN PRESENCE AND INVISIBILITY

As a specific graphic genre, the poster has generally had a quite fortunate history of patrimonialisation thanks to art-historical considerations and to the mediation of collecting practices. However, when we move beyond art posters and beyond criteria such as authorship, rarity, and exemplarity, which easily fit the context of arts institutions, we find that the musealisation of graphic design has generally followed nonlinear and scattered paths; pathways along which the multiple nature of the graphic artefacts, as both documents, media, works of art and of design, has been put into play alternatively and intermittently<sup>13</sup>. Another institution in Paris offers a significant case in point: the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF)<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> ISKIN, 2014: 341, note 89.

<sup>13</sup> An examination and discussion of the life of graphic design objects, of graphic design’s temporality and of the unstable status of graphic design artefacts is offered by the sociologists Jérôme Denis and David Pontille. See DENIS, PONTILLE, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> See <[http://www.bnf.fr/fr/collections\\_et\\_services/estamp/s.affiche\\_graphisme.html?first\\_Art=non](http://www.bnf.fr/fr/collections_et_services/estamp/s.affiche_graphisme.html?first_Art=non)>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017]. For a discussion of the activities of the Département des Estampes et de la Photographie de la Bibliothèque nationale de France with regards to graphic design, see the presentation given by Anne-Marie Sauvage at the *Journée d’étude sur l’histoire du design graphique* organised by the Centre national des arts plastiques (CNAP), 18 September 2014, available at <<https://www.cnap.fr/anne-marie-sauvage>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

Given its mission to document and preserve any published material and medium, and thanks to the legal deposit requirement, the BNF today holds nearly a million posters printed in France, collected independently of any criteria of quality or authorship. In this regard it can be argued that the BNF has come closer to embodying Marx's vision of a comprehensive poster museum. However, the importance of the BNF for the musealisation of graphic design goes beyond that. As revealed by the study and exhibition work carried out by the library's Département des Estampes et de la Photographie (Department of Prints and Photographs), the broader holdings of the BNF can, in fact, be considered an extensive «graphic design» (*graphisme*) collection encompassing a wide range of media and artefacts, including books, magazines, advertisements, CD sleeves, visual identity systems, websites, and, of course, posters.

Over time, as the BNF progressively appraised its holdings in terms of graphic design, it also began assuming the role and functions of a graphic design museum or curatorial department, actively engaging in all activities related to musealisation as a process that entails not only physically or conceptually extracting objects from their original environment and relocating them within a museum setting, but also studying, interpreting and displaying them<sup>15</sup>. An emblematic example of this commitment was the 2001 international exhibition *Graphisme(s), 200 créateurs 1997-2000*, which was also made available online through a dedicated micro-site<sup>16</sup>. More recently, furthermore, the BNF has begun promoting contemporary graphic design<sup>17</sup>.

Apart from highlighting that the museum function is certainly not exclusive of institutions bearing the title of «museum», the case of the BNF also sheds light — as an exception to the rule — on a distinctive aspect of the fate of graphic design objects as cultural heritage: their dispersed and overlooked existence. «Visible/invisible» is how the French graphic design historian Catherine de Smet described this issue a few years ago with regard to the sources of graphic design history<sup>18</sup>. As she observed, artefacts related to graphic design have often times been acquired and preserved — when not incidentally — primarily as items of documentary value, as *evidence*. These acquisitions have been made by institutions with diverse missions, which often do not prioritise design; institutions such as libraries and media archives, private and public collections and archives, as well as specialised museums of various types, including history museums and company archives. This condition can be regarded as a reflection and effect of the paradoxical nature of graphic design: the more graphic artefacts

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<sup>15</sup> DESVALLÉES, MAIRESSE, eds., 2010.

<sup>16</sup> See <<http://expositions.bnf.fr/graphis/affiche01/index.htm>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>17</sup> See for example the exhibition *Graphisme contemporaine et engagement(s)*, organised in 2015. A discussion of this event is offered in the conversation between Anne-Marie Sauvage and Véronique Marrière, *Focus sur... Graphisme contemporaine et engagement(s)*, available at <<https://www.cnap.fr/actualites/graphisme-en-france/entretiens/focus-sur-graphisme-contemporain-et-engagements>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>18</sup> DE SMET, 2012 [2007].

contribute to shaping our environment and to mediating our relationship with the world, the less visible graphic design is *in* and *of* itself<sup>19</sup>. Within GLAM institutions, graphic design may be present but may not receive the recognition it deserves as such. In order to keep track of and to fully comprehend the status of graphic design as *musealia*, it is therefore necessary to keep looking in multiple directions.

## GRAPHIC DESIGN AND DESIGN MUSEUMS, BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

If we turn our attention to those museums that, from their very inception, have been devoted to design, we find that within this context too the status of graphic design objects as *musealia* has been subject to diverse interpretations, and has not remained immune to shifts, discontinuities, and even disruptions between past and present.

Museums are time machines, capsules that at the same time house our past and showcase our present. This condition is particularly challenging for museums of modern and contemporary art and design, which were established to be *of their time*, serve the present and potentially guide the future. While documenting the advancements of their respective fields — employing retrospective, comprehensive, or prescriptive approaches to varying degrees — these museums have eventually come to embody multiple visions and temporalities: those of their mission, focused on the present, and those of the objects they preserve. Playing a dual role, design museums bear the responsibility of bridging and reconciling these different visions, a process that can lead to a range of outcomes, encompassing both continuity and disruption. This is particularly evident in the case of fields such as graphic design that have been closely associated with specific types of artefacts or media, the value and centrality of which have changed over time. Two cases from Europe and the USA, the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich and MoMA in New York, can illustrate this point.

Rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of the applied and industrial arts movement, the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich was founded in 1875, pairing a museum and a school for sustaining the education of artists and designers<sup>20</sup>. A typical encyclopaedic endeavour, the Museum has acquired over time a broad typological and chronological sampling of free and applied arts, from the 15<sup>th</sup>-century to the contemporary era, inclusive of 20<sup>th</sup>-century modern and modernist design — to which Swiss designers have notably contributed. As for graphic design, such an open collecting strategy means that the Museum has come to preserve a great variety of items and typologies that include design works and preparatory materials by name designers, as well as

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<sup>19</sup> See also LYOTARD, 1990 for a discussion of the paradoxical nature of graphic design.

<sup>20</sup> With regard to the history of the Museum für Gestaltung's collections, see the publication edited by Christian Brändle and Verena Formanek (BRÄNDLE, FORMANEK, 2009); for a discussion of their multiple values, see in particular the essays by BRÄNDLE, 2009, ADAMSON, 2009 and FORMANEK, 2009.

everyday graphics and anonymous ephemera, ranging from typography to popular magazines, packaging and even party flyers. Posters are also preserved, yet they form a dedicated collection<sup>21</sup>. The richness of the Museum's collections was well represented in 2009 in the publication *Every Thing Design*, cleverly designed by the Dutch designer Irma Boom as a sequence of unexpected visual, material, or conceptual combinations of selected items of rarity and mass production, high and popular culture, authorship and anonymity as well as functionality. In this book, released at a time when the Museum engaged in a process of re-organisation, the director Christian Brändle wrote that «establishing a conclusive definition of [design would be] tempting when developing a consistent collection strategy». However, he also noted how the responsibility of dealing with a collection that contains a plurality of media and values can offer unexpected insights and serves as a stimulus for maintaining a broad understanding of design<sup>22</sup>.

In the case of the Museum für Gestaltung, the presence of the past informs the vision for the future. Today, this vision is certainly also supported by the partnership with the art and design university in Zurich. Although the collections of historical items may have become less central to the training of designers, today they nonetheless attract the interest of scholars and students invested in researching design from the perspectives of visual and material culture, design history and cultural studies<sup>23</sup>. It should be noted, however, that the Museum in Zurich primarily focuses on graphics in print<sup>24</sup>. If and when the Museum in Zurich begins venturing into the field of digital design, to what extent will it be possible to emphasise continuity in preservation, acquisition, and exhibition practices?

One possible answer to this question comes from MoMA in New York, an institution where the musealization of graphic design in its various print and digital manifestations seems to be oriented more towards divergence than continuity.

The quintessential champion of high modernism's principled and prescriptive approach, MoMA has been a central player in the canonisation of modern art and design. In this institution, graphic design has been a province of the department of Architecture and Design<sup>25</sup>. Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, as this department progressively emphasised the autonomy of industrial and product design from the realm of fine arts, focusing on their functional and innovation values, graphic design

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<sup>21</sup> As for the Museum für Gestaltung's collections of posters and graphic design, see in particular MAUDERLI, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> BRÄNDLE, 2009: 200.

<sup>23</sup> MAUDERLI, 2002: 48.

<sup>24</sup> As confirmed in an email addressed to me by the Head of Collections Operations, 5 September 2017.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the history and collecting strategy of the Architecture and Design department at MoMA, see ANTONELLI, 2009, and, with specific regards to graphic design, ANTONELLI, 2004. Most recently, the French researcher IMBERT, 2015 investigated exhibitions of graphic design in modern art museums, and MoMA is one of her case studies.

within the Museum remained largely perceived as an extension of modern art. This approach was expressed in an acquisition strategy that focused on posters, a medium more easily associated with the developments of the major artistic movements, notably painting. (Exceptions to this concentration can be found in the Museum's history, yet these consist mostly of donations and gifts or instead of temporary exhibits that did not contribute to the collections<sup>26</sup>). At the dawn of this century, the relevance of the existing graphic design collection and its capacity to properly and fully represent the Architecture and Design department's understanding of design was questioned internally. In 2004, Senior Curator Paola Antonelli, who had for years been committed to exploring and promoting the expansion of all forms of design, expressed that frustration in an article titled *Is Graphic Design, Not Simply Posters, Museum Worthy?*<sup>27</sup>. In her text she envisioned a collection of graphic design which, rather than posters and prints, would take in different artefacts and media, including time-based and digital designs.

At MoMA, however, the attempt to bridge the past and future under the label of *graphic design* ultimately failed. By the onset of the 2010s, a split had apparently occurred at the Architecture and Design department. While pieces from the *graphic design* collection have typically been displayed in exhibitions devoted to 20<sup>th</sup>-century posters and graphics in print — of which several have been curated by Juliet Kinchin, a specialist in modern design and decorative arts<sup>28</sup> —, the exhibitions and programmes devoted to the more contemporary, experimental and innovative strands of design — such as *Talk to Me*, curated by Antonelli in 2011 and devoted to communication between people and objects — have dropped *graphic design* in favour of *visual communication*, or just *design*<sup>29</sup>.

## DIGITAL (GRAPHIC) DESIGN, EXPANDING THE MUSEUM

In the new millennium, the uncertainties regarding the status of graphic design within museums seem to intensify. Graphic design has exploded into an ever-expanding territory, which is difficult to track using conventional criteria and categories such as medium type or authorship, and where tangible outputs and actual objects may no longer be the primary focus. To borrow the words of the curators of the exhibition

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<sup>26</sup> As a closer look into the history of exhibitions held at MoMA and its collections can reveal; see <<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/history>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>27</sup> ANTONELLI, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the shows curated between 2009 and 2011 by Kinchin and devoted to Polish posters (<<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/955>>), Hungarian revolutionary posters (<<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1120>>) and to posters of the London Underground from the 1920s-1940s (<<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1083>>). [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>29</sup> Interviewed the same year by Véronique Vienne (2011) for the French graphic design magazine «Étapes», Antonelli clearly stated that her interest lies in functional design and visual communication, a kind of design that she juxtaposed with, or opposed to, «graphic design». See VIENNE, 2011.

*Graphic Design: Now in Production*, organised in 2011 to celebrate this expansion, graphic design «has broadened its reach» becoming a «widely deployed tool»: a tool that anyone can use to «create and publish visual media», and a tool that designers also still use, albeit now as «authors, publishers, instigators, and entrepreneurs»<sup>30</sup>.

Co-produced by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum in New York, and curated by Andrew Blauvelt and Ellen Lupton, *Graphic Design: Now in Production* certainly offered an extensive examination and representation of this landscape. However, this exhibition also evidenced the challenges that any institution wishing to deal with the graphic design field today would have to confront, especially with regard to the possibility of establishing clear boundaries around graphic design and of representing the full spectrum of its manifestations. Indeed, several genres and formats were put on display, from posters to motion graphics and dynamic visual identities. Nonetheless, not only some common areas such as environmental graphics and websites were noticeably absent<sup>31</sup>, but, as the curators themselves admitted in the publication accompanying the exhibition<sup>32</sup>, they were compelled to exclude numerous more intangible and process-based forms of design (some of which, it should be noted, were instead documented in the catalogue itself, which had been conceived not merely as a mirror of the displays but as an independent investigation of the field). Beyond the difficulty of showcasing in the exhibition space some of the most advanced forms of graphic design, the question that remains open is whether it is still feasible today to preserve and manage them for future interpretation and communication — that is, to transform them into proper *musealia*. This is a particularly pressing question with regard to digital design, where the *graphic* quality of the design is deeply intertwined with, and difficult to separate from, other aspects such as programming, editing and interactivity.

I would now invite the reader of this paper to make a quick online search of two photos that document the *Graphic Design: Now in Production* show at the Walker Art Center and to compare them<sup>33</sup>. One image shows two people admiring a cascading installation of screen-printed posters made by the Minneapolis firm Aesthetic Apparatus<sup>34</sup>. The other image shows a visitor looking at his mobile phone while standing in front of the installation by the Dutch studio Lust, *Posterwall for*

<sup>30</sup> See the press release at <<https://walkerart.org/calendar/2011/graphic-design-now-in-production>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>31</sup> See MCCARTHY, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> BLAUVELT, LUPTON, eds., 2011.

<sup>33</sup> The images can be found here: <<http://calitreview.com/31479/art-review-graphic-design-now-in-production-the-hammer-museum-los-angeles/>> and here: <<https://walkerart.org/magazine/gdnip-9-lusts-posterwall-for-the-21st-century>>.

<sup>34</sup> This image illustrates the review of the exhibition by Michelle Lopes, 19 October 2012, available at <<http://calitreview.com/31479/art-review-graphic-design-now-in-production-the-hammer-museum-los-angeles/>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

*the 21st Century*<sup>35</sup>. This installation is a projection of ever-changing digital posters that are automatically generated via a script, drawing content from various Internet sources and reacting to input from the viewers: their movements or their messages sent to a computer. The visitor we see in the image is, therefore, not distracted or indifferent to the installation, but rather, he is actively engaging with it. And this is how we are likely to encounter graphic design today: by interacting with it. So *you look* (first picture) versus *you interact* or, if you like, *you participate* in the design (second picture).

Departing from the most traditional graphic design object, the printed poster, the installation by Lust provocatively questions the status of design as well as that of the graphic designer in the digital age. In their installation the design is an algorithm and a tool, open to any form or content. *Posterwall*, however, is also an exemplary case of a contemporary graphic design «object» that defies musealisation. The original version of this installation was made for the Graphic Design Museum in Breda in 2008. In subsequent years, Lust developed new implemented versions that were put on display at various venues worldwide. Therefore, one might initially ask how these versions should be regarded in relation to one another. Are they part of the same project or separate projects?

A closer look into the story and status of the original version of *Posterwall* at the Stedelijk Museum in Breda illuminates other issues. Having been conceived as an installation *for* the museum, *Posterwall* was not acquired in the usual sense and did not properly enter the Museum's collection. The installation was on display on an on-loan basis, so the source code and concept remained property of Lust which, by the way, closed in summer 2017<sup>36</sup>. Consequently, the preservation of the project was not taken over by curators or keepers at the Museum. However, Twan Bastiaansen, from the Multimedia department at the Museum took it on himself to deal with that issue, as part of his job, which implied, as he explained it to me in an email, making «things work for exhibitions»<sup>37</sup>. In order to preserve the exhibit, Bastiaansen resolved to act along two lines, adopting solutions that, however, only serve to demonstrate the difficulty of circumscribing the object to be preserved. On the one hand, he followed the best practices of media art conservation, where documentation is considered a viable solution when dealing with time-based works<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, he recorded a short

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<sup>35</sup> This image illustrates a post in the Walker Art Center's blog that features Andrew Blauvelt's description of the installation, and which was posted on 8 December, 2011, available at <<https://walkerart.org/magazine/gdnip-9-lusts-posterwall-for-the-21st-century>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>36</sup> Twan Bastiaansen, Stedelijk Museum Breda, email, 23 August, and 31 October 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Twan Bastiaansen, Stedelijk Museum Breda, email, 23 August 2017.

<sup>38</sup> With regard to the preservation of immaterial forms of design and the key role of documentation, see, recently, SCHOLZE, 2016.

video while the installation was on display at the Museum<sup>39</sup>. He also made a backup of all the files (posters) generated at the Museum. Lust, however, had also designed an online version of the *Posterwall* on a website that no longer exists. This raises the question of whether this website, as well as the posters generated on it, should also be considered as part of the project. On the other hand, when the installation was dismantled Bastiaansen preserved the hardware and the software *as they were*. And yet, as he explained to me, in order for the installation to actually work again, the code would require updating since the software and the API that generated the posters have become obsolete. Although Bastiaansen himself could update the code, would this change mean an alteration of the original work? In any case, the change would require licensing by the designer.

However peculiar the status of the *Posterwall* may be, the challenges it poses in terms of musealisation and preservation are not unique. Bastiaansen shared with me his concern about other digital designs belonging to the collection of the Graphic Design Museum, now the Stedelijk Museum in Breda, such as John Maeda's renowned *Reactive Books*. Made in the 1990s, these «books» only work on OS9. The Museum therefore saved an old Mac to run them. Yet, as Bastiaansen wrote to me, «Will that withstand the test of time?» His answer: «I would not know»<sup>40</sup>.

The digital has not only changed design, but it is also changing museums, requiring them to rethink their approaches and practices. Clearly, this is a demanding process, and not all museums have the necessary resources to undertake it. Moreover, it is a process that necessitates embracing a cross-cutting perspective beyond the disciplinary and typological divisions that traditionally permeate museum departments. Two major design museums, both in New York, have recently begun to lead the way in this direction.

Making a notable impact in the field of design, in 2010 Paola Antonelli announced that the department of Architecture and Design at MoMA had acquired the «@» sign. This symbol, which has a long history dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century, was eventually «appropriated», so to speak, by the American electrical engineer Ray Tomlinson when, in 1971, he turned it into a key element of the e-mail system of communication. A «powerful act of design» as Antonelli called it, justifying its inclusion in MoMA's collection<sup>41</sup>. Obviously, this acquisition was more of a consecration, an acknowledgement or a «tagging» given that this sign is in the public domain, on everybody's keyboards, that it is free, and it is immaterial. MoMA does not own it

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<sup>39</sup> Lust itself produced a video about this project, see <<https://vimeo.com/31793671>>. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017].

<sup>40</sup> Twan Bastiaansen, Stedelijk Museum Breda, email, 23 August 2017.

<sup>41</sup> ANTONELLI, 2010a, 22 March. See also ANTONELLI, 2010b, 24 March. The acquisition of the «@» sign received great attention within the museum world and the graphic design community. See, among other articles and texts discussing it, VIENNE, 2011.



in a conventional sense. Still, the department of Architecture and Design produced a number of interpretive, mediation and communication acts *around* and *about* it which are not much different from those usually carried out in regard to more traditional, physical museum objects. Articles were featured on MoMA's blog («Inside/Out») and press announcements were released to explain the acquisition and to present the story of the «object». The «@» was also put on display, for example in the exhibition *This Is for Everyone*, in 2016, along with another new entry in MoMA's collection, the Creative Commons License Symbol (acquired in 2015). Through all these acts we might say that MoMA actually *built* its object.

Before the novelty of these virtual acquisitions wore off — the Museum's team itself began joking about them when on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015, it announced that the museum had acquired the «.» baseline dot<sup>42</sup> — the Museum of Modern Art had already started delving more deeply into the question of what and how to acquire and conserve digital design artifacts. In 2012, the inclusion of 14 video games into the Architecture and Design collections marked the start of a comprehensive strategy for the preservation and display of interactive designs. Taking into account all aspects of design, including visual quality, aesthetic experience, elegance of the code, and player's behaviour, the Museum developed a protocol that encompasses not only the acquisition of the games' software and hardware and technical documentation, but also the devising of ways to display them and to enable the audience to experience them by playing full or demo versions.

While all of this was happening, the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, welcomed its first piece of code — an act that was part of a larger process of renovation and transformation of this institution into a museum of the future where the digital is recognised as central, from exhibition design to collecting strategies<sup>43</sup>. In 2013, the Museum's Digital & Emerging Media department acquired the iPad app Planetary. Intended by the Cooper Hewitt as a case study to explore all of the conceptual, technical and legal issues that arise with regard to the musealisation of design as not so much an «object» but a process or a living object or system, this acquisition included the app's source code as well as documentation of the design and development of its software<sup>44</sup>. As Seb Chan, then Director of Digital & Emerging Media stated on a page of the museum's website dedicated to documenting and explaining the new direction taken by the museum's collections: «We cannot pretend to have all the answers [...] but we think it's important to start making the effort to find some

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<sup>42</sup> PERSSE, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> See MEYER, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> CHAN, 2013. See also CHAN, Seb; COPE, Aaron (2014). *Collecting the present: digital code and collections*. Paper presented at the Museum and the Web conference, Baltimore, MD, 2014. [Consult. 1 Oct. 2017]. Available at <<https://mw2014.museumsandtheweb.com/>>.

of them»<sup>45</sup>. This commitment was recently reaffirmed at the Cooper Hewitt with the launch of the Digital Collection Materials Project, which seeks to «set standards, practices, and strategies related to digital materials» within its permanent collection<sup>46</sup>.

In the digital age, as design continues to expand, it also becomes increasingly ephemeral. While the musealisation of digital design is an area open to experimentation, experiences like the ones mentioned above reveal a prominent aspect: the operational shift of focus from the object itself to documentation, with documentation design and production becoming central activities in preservation.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The *excursus* I have made in this paper brought us from the wall of posters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the *Posterwall for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*; from the open museum in the public space to the open museum on the screens of our personal devices; from an age when graphic design *as such* did not exist to an age when graphic design as we used to know it appears to be expanding to a point — according to some — of disappearing; from an age when the physical graphic object, finite and ephemeral, defied, and at the same time aspired to, the museum's impermanence to an age when precariousness and immateriality have become valuable qualities of design and, apparently, of museums, too.

In 2010-2011, when the Graphic Design Museum in Breda was being transformed into the Museum of the Image, this institution published a book and organised a symposium under the title *I Don't Know Where I Am Going, But I Want To Be There*<sup>47</sup>. This claim — which was used on that occasion to signify the broadening of the field of graphic design and the uncertain position of the graphic designer — also aptly fits the description of graphic design's relationship with museums, which today appears to be stretched to extremes. Although we cannot be certain where this relationship will lead, continued investigation of its evolution can offer us a unique lens for examining issues of cultural heritage on the brink of presence and oblivion.

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<sup>45</sup> CHAN, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> See <<https://labs.cooperhewitt.org/tag/digital-preservation>>.

<sup>47</sup> KRIER, RUYG, KAMPMAN, eds., 2010.

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