

Collision. Everyday Graphic Design

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Abstract

In this brief Collision, we explore a tension between the contemporary graphic designer David Carson and the 1960s artist Jacques Villeglé, an artist Carson has never heard of.¹ We claim that Villeglé’s work celebrates the irregularities of what could be considered mundane ad hoc street performances. In contrast, Carson more or less detaches his work from that seamy reality of the banal by reducing the inherent complexity of the everyday into ideal assemblages of image-and-text. By highlighting this awkward difference between an ideal designerly intention and a grubbier everyday reality, we stimulate appetites for more realist-inspired discourses of graphic design.

Keywords

Graphic design, the everyday, collage, dirty realism

Graphic designs are the almost unremarkable clutter of the everyday. When given sincere and sustained consideration, however, the ordinary ubiquity of image-and-text reveals itself to be an overwhelming decor. In an introductory essay to *Art of Revolution: Ninety-Six Posters from Cuba* (1970), Susan Sontag writes that “specialized connoisseurs—of the aesthetic of infestation, of the libertine aura of litter, and of the libertarian implications of randomness—can find pleasure in this decor”; it is a commonplace furnishing Sontag had earlier described as an “instant visual theater in the street.”² In *nu collage.001* (2019), graphic designer David Carson’s latest

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FIGURE 1. David Carson, “Great find . . .” *Instagram*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwAGcYMHvk7/>. Reproduced with the kind permission of the author.

book, the “theater in the street” is a prominent motif. Carson’s unique designs in the 1990s were bold graphic experiments laid out in fractured compositions. Despite these earlier works also evoking the analog lyric of the street—often erroneous, and resembling something primitive—they were digital creations. As such, Carson’s earlier collages, which seem to be made up of incidental scavenged fragments of other graphic images, are actually more procedural and deliberate than they appear. Carson’s new collage works, however, feature actual bits of stuff found in pedestrian spaces, which he assembles manually on paper. Turning away from his desktop computer, Carson now faces the contingent materiality of the everyday. Leafing through *nu collage.001*, there are similarities between Carson’s work and the work of the 1960s French *nouveau réalisme* art movement. For the sake of this brief Collision, we will focus on the work of Jacques Villeglé, a prominent figure of the movement.

This is not the first time Carson and Villeglé have been compared: design writer Rick Poynor has already drawn astute observations in this vein.³ However, it strikes us that the aesthetically similar works of Carson

and Villeglé, which show them to be specialized connoisseurs of surface wreckage, have generally been given more attention than their ideologically divergent treatments of the everyday. For instance, on the one hand, Villeglé's more artistic sensibility is occupied by the pluralities of *des réalités collectives* (collective realities).⁴ On the other hand, Carson's enduring enterprise of poststructural graphic design appears to privately limit the multiplicity of the collective public. Curiously, when considering their context in the "instant visual theater" of the street, Villeglé celebrates the irregularities of what could be considered mundane impromptu street performances. Carson, instead, is more or less detaching his work from that seamy reality of difference by reducing the inherent complexity of the everyday.

For example, in a photograph on his Instagram account, Carson is somewhere in Barcelona standing on a car roof (figure 1). With his arm outstretched, he photographs a dilapidated billboard. He captions the photograph: "most of these old #billboards arnt [sic] great, but occasionally . . . this one really works well."⁵ Just like Sontag's connoisseur, Carson is finding "visual gratification in the unplanned collage of posters (and neon signs) that decorate the cities."⁶ Carson comments further on his photograph: "I looked into cutting out the right half, but heavy, awkward, might look suspicious etc. . . . not sure how I'd get it back." Consequently, in a pantomime of the original billboard, Carson recreates the aesthetic of infestation, litter, and randomness in a poster for Barcelona's design festival, *OFFF* (figure 2).

Carson's ideological treatment of the everyday is made apparent in this encounter with the unwieldy billboard. He eliminates unwanted excesses and picks out specific sections to emphasize more general aesthetic qualities. As such, that particular billboard, along that particular street, on that particular day, is designed into a poster of folds, tears, and overlaps that lacks a particular situation. As a designer, Carson must exclude and abstract. This is a fundamental tenet of de-signing: he must reduce to sign. Carson's treatment of the everyday in his graphic designs is a kind of "extensive abstraction" away from the complex and ruinous real, and towards the more meaningful designerly ideal.⁷ Consider *Ray Gun* magazine, for example, where Carson was art director. In producing intentionally illegible, seemingly misprinted, and supposedly haphazard magazines, Carson defined a now renowned grunge aesthetic for *Ray Gun*. But this appearance of a publication post-catastrophe arises from deliberate, adroit design sensibilities. In her introduction to *Ray Gun: The Bible of Music and Style*, singer-songwriter Liz Phair brings *Ray Gun*'s aesthetic appetites down to a sullied everyday realism. About the streets of Chicago, Phair writes:



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FIGURE 2. David Carson, “nucollage poster.” *Instagram*, April 27, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwwLhXJntqh/>. Reproduced with the kind permission of the author.

We paid attention to the graffiti and wheat-paste posters in our neighbourhood . . . We walked around a pre-gentrified metropolis, trying to tune out the ugly buildings, the endless concrete, and the lurid business signs missing essential lettering. We learned to see beauty in the way the rain would wash away ink or how weathering would expose layers of previous posters.⁸

It seems to us that this more designerly connoisseurship of the everyday is tinted with a kind of idealism that optimistically evades the present; it is as if the visionary designer wills the world into something other. Phair, walking along the streets of Chicago with the connoisseur's point of view, is looking for a particular kind of urban decay that has a more significant quality—what a designer or “connoisseur” might find to be an ideal aesthetic—than what is ineluctably just there, such as “the ugly buildings, the endless concrete, and the lurid business signs missing essential lettering.”⁹ Designers navigate the everyday through their vision of an ideal, which is separate from their sight of what is imminently present. Surely, when design is framed in these more discursive terms, the awkwardly banal characteristics of the everyday should inspire the discourse, rather than distract the connoisseur—after all, this is where all designs ultimately reside: in the ugly, monotonous, and absurd planes of everyday life.

In contrast to Carson's treatment of the everyday, Villeglé's 1959 solo exhibition *Les lacérés anonyme* (Anonymous Lacerators) featured posters torn and unstuck from the streets of Paris, which were then mounted on canvas and exhibited in art galleries. The *affiches lacérées* (lacerated posters) claim passersby as their authors because these passersby have, by ripping and tearing—lacerating—the posters they walk past, collectively intervened in the way these commercial images manifest in the everyday. In the works of *Les lacérés anonyme*, we are goaded to admire the unschooled hand of anonymous pedestrians as artistic works of *décollage*. Villeglé's open works insist on the excesses of image-and-text because they always remain, in some sense, public and unmanaged. In this way, Villeglé's works do not lose the qualities that have been abstracted, namely, that situated condition of the everyday. Instead, the work is only ever loosened, slightly, from its referent. Like an anti-object, the *affiches lacérées* are made without intention or plan—in other words, without design. Nonetheless, they are still made by hand: by ripping, tearing, pulling, crumpling. Alternatively, rather than being drawn into the exchanging play of “collective realities,” like Villeglé is, Carson appears to be more interested in the way the “aura of litter” arises without the hand, like an *acheiropoieton* in wreckage.¹⁰ Villeglé's passion for the violent immediacy of designs that have been lacerated is not the same, either ideologically or aesthetically, as Carson's appreciation for designs that have been weathered and washed away.

It appears to us that when graphic designs are framed in discursive terms, which they rarely are, it would be unusual for their less than ideal everyday existence to be given sincere attention. Instead, what we find is more of an archivist's adoration of the past—typically making monuments

of the Swiss, Dutch, and German design schools—or catalogs of twee design self-help guides.¹¹ It appears that in critical reflections on graphic designs we are yet to see those sullied posters and spoiled fliers in a way that does not either transpose them out of their situated context or sensationalize them above the real.

Once designs are in position idealism slips into realism. But where is that realism when graphic design is framed in more discursive terms? Why is the idiosyncratic experience of an almost unremarkable reality, with its grubby patina, not intriguing enough to designers without needing to be strained into unusual shapes or otherwise passed over as something irrelevant? In admiration for the mundane, is it possible to consider the largely unacknowledged realism of the day-to-day in graphic design without resorting to marvelous spectacles? Is it possible to be a designer (away from the desk) situated in the world with imminent experiences of design that contradict the aesthetic or utilitarian intentions of their designers? Or is that blasphemous? What if, as designers, we don't play along? Wandering with curiosity among the obviousness of the everyday, what if we treat it as it is, as a confusing, ambiguous, ongoing moment, and embrace the inevitable relapse of the designerly ideal back into the mundanely real?

Notes

- 1 Shane de Lange, “Design Culture: Reviving Graphic-Design Craft—Interview with David Carson,” 11 March 2019, <https://www.marklives.com/2019/03/media-design-reviving-graphic-design-craft-david-carson-interview/>.
- 2 Susan Sontag, “Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity,” in *Art of Revolution: Ninety-Six Posters from Cuba*, ed. Douglas Stermer (London: Pall Mall Press, 1970), i–xxiii.
- 3 Rick Poynor, “Surface Wreckage”, *Eye Magazine* (1999).
- 4 Anne-Lise Quesnel, “Jacques Villeglé—François Dufrêne—Pierre Restany: ‘Collective Realities,’” *Critique d’Art* no. 40 (2012): 130–45.
- 5 David Carson, “Great find,” Instagram, April 8, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwAGcYMHvk7/>.
- 6 Sontag, *Posters*, xiii.
- 7 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 74–98.
- 8 Liz Phair, “Ray Gun and the politics of mystery,” in *Ray Gun: The Bible of Music and Style*, ed. Marvin Scott Jarret (New York: Rizzoli, 2019), 68–79.
- 9 Phair, *Ray Gun*, 17.
- 10 Sontag, *Posters*, xiii.
- 11 “On the Rise of the Creative Self-Help Book,” *Creative Review*, accessed August 15, 2019, <https://www.creativereview.co.uk/on-the-rise-of-the-creative-self-help-book/>.

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