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Designing counter-knowledge, shaping counter-powers.

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I’m honored and thrilled to be here to present this paper. The work I’m sharing with you today somehow tries to solve this design equation, often considered as unsolvable: how avant-garde design can possibly be an actual tool for social change?

I’m french. In France, « graphic design » is not the way we usually call graphic design. We call it « Graphisme » -graphism if you may, with this isme -ism- suffix, that marks ideological concepts in a slightly derogatory way. Unfortunately, I must admit that it quite reflects the complex history of France and design, if not french design. And above all, graphic design.

The history of design in France is historically bound to decorative arts, then to arts applied to industry. This is what « applied arts » stands for in France: « arts applied to industry ».

The designer that I’m talking of today, as well as me, was educated in applied arts departments, she graduated a « DSAA », which literally translate as « superior degree in applied arts ». No design here. But rather the idea of some artistic skills folded over industrial production.

One can picture this as limited to an « ornamenting practice », but one could also imagine that what is applied to the industry is in fact an artist’s practice: a critical, reflexive, uneasy, thought-provoking position that adresses industrial preoccupations, such as innovation, competition, growth, efficiency, economical and technical rationalisation, etc.

A position embodied in shapes. A position of authorship rather than a position of agent or operator.

It appears to me that a fraction of french graphic design, that we sometimes refer to, in a slightly mocking way as « graphisme d’auteur » (« a design of author ») stands on this paradox: on the one hand, a position detached if not ignorant of industrial design paradigms, preferring a
demanding reflexive work of the forms. On the other hand, a way of designing forms with a political agenda.

The question of the political agenda and political agency of design is of course not a French specificity. Let’s think here of Viktor Papanek, or the Italian Radicals such as Ricardo Dalisi. And, obviously, in the very field of graphic design, we could name British designers, such as Ken Garland or Jonathan Barnbrook.

In a way, the work of the graphic designer Hélène Mourrier doesn’t escape her profession’s historiography.

It’s important to understand that the work I’m studying here isn’t a work over visual identity, even if the question of identity lays everywhere in it. It’s first and foremost a health information tool, concerning one minority widely ignored by French public authorities: the transgender community.

It’s actually a work of “design for the real world”, to quote Papanek, a work rooted in the urge of helping an isolated fringe of society to get over physical and psychological suffering.

This is one of the fundamental issues adressed in this work: the stance of the designer towards activism. Through its young history, design has constantly tried to prove its commitment to social and moral changes. From the Arts and Crafts pioneers to the most recent Makers movement, the question remains: does the designer have to be an activist? Can the designer be an activist? However, I propose to consider a reformulation of this issue through the case study of the work of graphic designer Hélène Mourrier, conducted with a non-profit transgender support organisation: What if the activist embraced design as a profession?

By engaging with and for an activist group committed to specific issues, the graphic designer demonstrates the agency of her practice, as the skills to (I quote design historian Annick Lantenois): “visually process the information, knowledge and fiction, [...] graphically design their organization and hierarchy, [...] design a graphic visual syntax which guide looks and readings.”

Hence the designer joins a vivid and reflective dialogue within the activist community, not from a perspective of co-design but rather looking for a hybridisation of knowledge and know-how, establishing what I call a corpus of ‘knowledge in resistance’.

Through this presentation, I might tend to question the following points:
- observing how graphic design acts as an agent of production of paramedical ‘counter-
knowledge’ equally constituted of formal knowledge and non-formal specialised knowledge;

- observing how the design of scientific illustrations, in this very case, satisfies not only its specific
aim of visually processing informations and knowledge, but also a generic aim of graphic design
to give a coherent shape to a heterogenous discursive ensemble;

- observing how the printed matter establishes a critical and operative corpus that can circulate,
debate and be debated.

First, let me introduce the context in which the project was run.

As she was completing her postgraduate degree in Scientific Illustration at École Estienne in 2011,
Hélène Mourrier chose to work with and for OUTrans, (I quote) “feminist self-directed support
organisation from the FtM community, for trans, FtM, MtF, Ft*, Mt*, cisgendered people”.
As a young transfeminist activist, she started to confront the design practice she was being trained
to, to her most individual political belief and commitment.
Her “taste in the drawing practice” led her to enter the selective postgraduate degree in Scientific
Illustration, nevertheless with a clearly defined agenda: working on transidentity.
At the core of the training programme, there are classes in anatomy, morphology, ergonomics and
biology, supervised by practitioners. As the degree is entitled by the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital, a
medical team guarantees the acquisition of specific and valid scientific knowledge. Students also
have to complete an internship during the first year while their graduation project must be
achieved in an actual professional context.
In line with her personal commitment, Mourrier attempted to approach the OUTrans non-profit
organisation, without success.
She has finally completed her first-year internship in another transgender non-profit organisation.
At the contact with trans activism, she has become familiar with specific trans health issues but
also with the political and theoretical grid of trans statements (I quote Mourrier):

This is where I truly deepened my understanding of trans issues, especially the medical and surgical
aspects. It made me realise that all the discourses, all the scientific and medical knowledge about
transidentity were voiced by the medical profession. I did not have to look any further: my degree
project was to focus on the trans genital surgical procedures.

At the end of her internship, Mourrier officially declared the subject chosen for her postgraduate
project, and approached again the OUTrans organisation. Hélène Mourrier joined OUTrans in
2010, even if her arrival raised the suspicion amongst the members, as there’s always a certain distrust of cisgendered people interested in trans issues.

Mourier chose OUTrans because it suited both her personal and political affinities. An organisation with younger people, mostly from the Female To Male community, dealing with a different agenda than older organisations. Another specificity of OUTrans at the time was the important contribution of ex-Act Up members, trained to some forms of queer activism focusing on bold visual representations, and loud means of action such as zapping and pressing the authorities.

Mourier’s design skills were involved in an important HIV prevention campaign, that got quite unexpectedly funded by a national public health institution. At the end of the HIV campaign, OUTrans finally had time for the conception of the Trans/Formations booklets.

Textual material, such as depictions, captions and commentaries, plays a significant role in the existence of these singular booklets. From the design of booklets to the defense of her postgraduate project, these texts were technical descriptions and comments, retrieved from professional documentation which the designer was able to access thanks to her teacher, the neuroanatomist Dr. Dominique Hasboun. Then, Mourrier added political content she had to cobble together herself, as OUTrans forces were then fully engaged in running the HIV campaign at the time she defended the project.

As her “lexicographical makeshifts” were insufficient and too vague for the final edition, a group was formed afterwards within OUTrans in order to rewrite and proofread.

However, the technical-scientific contents have not been ruled out. They have been lightened when the degree of technical detail was not deemed necessary for the basic understanding of surgical procedures.

Nevertheless, they have been used as a foundation to build a polymorphous discourse. This assemblage materialises in the very substance of the text a tension between several regimes of truth.

The trans political discourse doesn’t seek to invalidate the legal and biomedical discourses, but rather to transport them within its own discursive space. Their internalisation is being deconstructed by this no less performative discourse built from non-formal specialised expertise, and from the queer theoretical background of the activists. Through the articulation of a heterogeneous set of signs, discourses, objects and interventions, it is arguable that OUTrans and Mourrier produce (I quote Foucault) “strategies of relations of forces
supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge” that is to say: a queer apparatus [dispositif] engaged in a relation of forces with a normative apparatus [dispositif]. Besides a collectively established lexicon that provides definitions for terms such as “dicklit”, “hormones” or “cisgender”, the nomenclature of procedures itself, and its commentaries, contribute to question deeply their normative, legal and medical status: for example, laser hair removal in the booklet MT *.

If, for the legal and biomedical fields, this procedure doesn’t belong to the “gender reassignment process”, it is nevertheless a part of the set of procedures often implemented for the feminisation of a body: thus, through a non-formal specialised understanding of this process, it becomes legible and interpretable with a queer grid of analysis, and is, in fact, an interesting example of a semantic move that can be performed by a queer statement.

Knowledge from the biomedical sciences is then popularised a minimum - so one can quickly associate the technical name of a procedure to a type of transformation - and directly confronted to political, legal, linguistic, visual contents.

These booklets are somehow "trans" in their own way; a hybrid discourse, without hierarchy, without separation between disciplines and knowledge, to quote Foucault, “a true monster”.

Or to quote Butler a “parodic proliferation” of statements “[depriving] hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities”.

It is in her progressive understanding of transidentity issues as framed by OUTrans, that Mourrier has developed a graphic system capable of meeting her defined political, moral, ethical agenda:
- producing a document popularising science as well as trans political representations
- establishing limits no to be trespassed when representing the trans body: do not normalise, essentialise, reify trans bodies
- avoiding coarse or harsh imagery, the one mainly visible in the few records pertaining to these procedures
- “integrate an erotic dimension, something related to seduction; trans bodies are also bodies for sex: lovable bodies to love”

Her graphic system is based on a geometric modular grid where the core module is an inverted isosceles right triangle, a shape chosen referring to the markings of homosexuals in concentration camps. This reversal is a literal interpretation of the queer use of inversion and re-appropriation of the stigma, as OUTrans’member Ali Aguado points it:

Indeed, the choice of using triangles only, symbolically charged of “femininity” and “masculinity” depending on their orientation, and above all bearing the scars of history, is a way to take advantage of our discrimination, to return the system against itself, and to forclose the influence of the medical profession and its discourses.
The color palette using nearly a dozen shades of pink brings back the presence of the flesh. Shades and contrasts are not used to mimic volume, as in conventional painting techniques, but rather suggest the body parts’ non-homogenous pigmentation, especially genitalia’s. This extensive palette of pink is a graphic attempt to re-sexualise contents that are usually not supposed to be, also returning to the readers/users a relatively hidden dimension within the formal informational discourses over their own trans bodies: trans bodies as sexual bodies. As Mourrier states: “the choice of pastel colors is a transcription of the sensitive and erogenous value of the sexual areas in question”.

The graphic language of Hélène Mourrier echoes trans activist mindset as influenced by concepts coined by Butler or Haraway, legible in an artificial system of representations, detached from mimesis. It produces mutating shapes following (I quote Haraway) a “lovely replicative baroque”, the anatomical parts composing and recomposing themselves at will, parodying - diagram after diagram - the standardised codes of visual information, denaturalising the biomedical sciences representations, and playing down surgical procedures themselves.

To transitioning bodies, on their way to denaturalisation, to anti-essentialisation, to bodies evading the figures of the ideal gendered body, Mourrier offers visual tools for permanent construction, a sort of graphic tangram “without genesis, but [...] without end” to paraphrase Haraway again.

It is notable that the graphic system designed by Hélène Mourrier does not consist of highjacking, or reappropriation, but rather of an attempt to push the limits of a set of representations, that has artificially made traditional craft coincide with an imperative of truth. Here, the designer does not get rid of this imperative of truth but of the traditional craft, to make room for another regime of truth, set in both design and discourses. In a way, Mourrier chooses to refute what is refutable in the specific context of these ‘counter-biopolitical’ booklets: namely the artistic canon of her discipline, which hereby says nothing about the truth of surgery, but installs a body representation system which is now challenged by the queer bodies in progress. In the space and time of this work on words and things, Mourrier opens a breach for what Foucault called a “teratology” of legal and biomedical knowledge.

Finally, note that the booklet format tries to offer a creative response to the necessary use of A4 DIN, as the booklets are freely available for download and home printing. By choosing to bend and bind the long edge, Mourrier provides more visibility to the booklets: a format that hits and stands out, embodying the ideological stance of OUTrans: «the visual identities of our activist struggles matter [...] To be heard by the public authorities, to stand out in the activist space.»
Reclaiming the exemplarity of trans health informations booklets may seem trivial at first sight. Although remarked in the french queer activist landscape, the printed MT*/FT* booklets failed - for economic matters - to be as massively disseminated as OUTrans and Mourrier wanted them to be. Nevertheless, it remains a success precisely where images and words take on: as tools for producing knowledge-power in resistance. This work embodies and realizes (I quote Foucault)

an opposition to the effects of power which are linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification: struggles against the privilege of knowledge. But [it is] also an opposition against secrecy, deformation and mystifying representations imposed on people. There is nothing ‘scientist’ in this (that is, a dogmatic belief in the value of scientific knowledge), but neither is it a skeptical or relativistic refusal of all verified truth. What is questioned is the way in which knowledge circulates and functions, its relations to power. In short, the régime du savoir.

In other words, it is a matter of offering a community the power to name itself, or rather, to leave it the capacity not to do so, to produce its own representations, beyond legal, medical, psychological and symbolic norms which have so far imposed hegemonic views over individual identity issues. It is indeed a question of undermining the performativity of discursive orthopedics, of undoing their hold on human existence, of denouncing the hierarchy of lives they impose on us. And of doing it literally by design.

References


