

HND Typographic Design
FDA Design for Graphic Communication
Lecture Series
4.30pm Wednesday 29 January 2003

8vo: 1985-2001
Hamish Muir

Hamish Muir (b1957) co-founded the design group 8vo with Mark Holt, Simon Johnson and associate Michael Burke in 1985. Muir first trained in the UK and then at the Kunstgewerbeschule, Basle, with Armin Hofmann and Wolfgang Weingart. Between 1986 and 1992 the group published eight issues of their own journal of typography and design 'Octavo', to critical acclaim from within the design community. Their work has become celebrated for its particular emphasis on typographic detail, eschewing decoration in favour of the use of sans serif typefaces and a simplicity and directness of communication. Their exploration of the limits of digital and printing technologies won many admirers within the international graphic design community and was to be a profound influence on successive generations of designers.

'Up Against the Wall', Russell Bestley and Ian Noble, Rotovision 2002, ISBN 2-88046-561-3

Hamish Muir's work with 8vo is also assessed by Lucienne Roberts and Julia Thrift in 'The Designer and the Grid', Rotovision 2002, ISBN 2-88046-678-4

Hamish Muir reviewed the work of 8vo in a specially prepared lecture delivered under eight headings: attitude and art; real jobs for real people; flexible identities; less attitude and more art (or vice versa); design as story telling; jobs which design themselves; oh, and that journal thing...; aren't we the lucky ones.

1 Attitude and Art

Hamish cites his time at art college as particularly influential on his attitude, even to this day. He studied under Benno Zehnder at Bath and still regards him as his original mentor. It was Benno who encouraged him to apply to the post-graduate course at Kunstgewerbeschule, Basle. Whilst at Bath, Hamish saw the work of Wolfgang Weingart. He found it an eye opening experience and began to see type in the everyday environment from a completely different perspective. Hamish feels strongly that art college should not be about training for a job. He still believes in the importance of drawing as a skill that unites eye, hand and brain. He feels art colleges should be a place for rebellion and investigation. 'An art school is a place where interested, passionate and mad students do wacky things'. Developing a personal attitude is important in sustaining one's passion for the subject. The 8vo attitude embraced a stance that demonstrated an awareness of a broader international context informed by their collective experience working abroad. There was a reaction to the Britishness of British design shared by the group. Mark Holt had worked in San Francisco for four years. Simon Johnson and Hamish Muir had studied in Basle (a college known for its intake of international students as well as publicising its theories through lecture tours and publications). Michael Burke had worked with the 1972 Munich Olympics design team under Otl Aicher.

2 Real jobs for Real People

The first commissions 8vo acquired were for cultural institutions such as the Serpentine Gallery and the ICA. High profile work for Factory records and the Hacienda followed. 8vo were managing to secure the kind of work you dreamed of at art college. Working for the arts seldom leads to great wealth; 8vo realised that graphic design wasn't solely about designing posters. They were a business; they had bills to pay like anyone else. Operating a commercially successful business was all part of the challenge. Even today it is unusual for graphic design to be the subject of a television programme, less so back in the mid-eighties. 8vo were invited to outline their manifesto for design on the Late Show. They were shown throwing paint over popular designer's work and shredding the design press. Slogans such as 'reject style' were yelled out. This was all heady stuff back then and there were echoes of the art school rebellion Hamish speaks about. What they were asserting was close to being libellous. They made many enemies but incited a generation of designers to change things. 8vo weren't immune to vanity; they were up early the next day after being on the box. The phone was surely to ring with their next commission. And it did! However, they weren't expecting it to be American Express. Even so 'that'll do nicely!'. Initially they thought it was a wind up and very nearly dismissed the enquiry as a crank caller. What makes 8vo unique is their preparedness to get involved with the seemingly less glamorous end of the business. But to them it's the same thing. It's type. It's form. It's rules. The same elements as in the posters. Working on bills and forms became a new challenge. Each job allowed them to explore new worlds, to use their talents to resolve other organisation's issues. 8vo often signed their work as visual engineering. Design had become about decorating, companies paid lip service to design – getting in the designer to apply a new lick of paint rather than addressing the fundamentals of a problem. Other designers in the mean time were ensuring their work was going to look good in the design annual, probably before the client had even approved the job. This wasn't 8vo's way and they were getting known for their attitude (attitude and art). Friedland, the bell manufacturers not only asked 8vo to repackage their product, but they were trusted with the hardcore information design elements as well. Technical drawings were made, scanned in and held on a mainframe computer for calling up for in-position setting. 8vo were designing in the private and public sector: housing associations, exhibition work for the Design Museum, the London Buddhist Centre, ADT Security. Posters, annual reports, diagrams, catalogues – it wasn't about the format (as most designers mistakenly think), it was about resolving the project in the most appropriate way. Other designers were concerned only about the front cover and how it would look reproduced in the awards annual. This superficial approach to design is counter-productive in the long run; making something look good isn't solving the heart of the problem. Of course things should look good, but the holistic approach considers the sum of the parts and not just some of the parts.

3 Flexible Identities

Hamish Muir is a mild mannered individual, but mention corporate identity to him and you'd better button down the hatches. Hamish reserves a special brand of venom for what he regards as the business-driven, commercial rip-off of clients. Imagine throwing corrosive acid over the bonnet of a brand new Porsche and you're half way there. It's no secret, then, that Hamish feels the issue of identity as handled by the 'big boys' is a complete fraud. Get rich quick, short-term thinking drives much of the attitude of corporate strategising. It's actually bad economic planning which in the long

run costs. 8vo recognised that the longevity of a visual strategy lies in making it flexible. To them it wasn't about handing over a mark that would be brainlessly applied. They are anti the design manual approach, which in any case is a vanity of the designers. The idea of forging a lasting relationship based on mutual respect between designer and client appealed more and is a characteristic of much of their work. The 8vo approach is about building up a body of work that relates yet develops coherently over a period of time. 8vo uses colour, type and structure to imbue each project with a sense of identity. Identity to them is more about uniting disparate elements within a scheme. This approach is exemplified through the work for Friedland, Boymans (b-vb) and UATV. They would maintain that the essence of the problem isn't about the fascia of a company, they want to get their head under the bonnet of the problem and fix it. This means rolling up your sleeves and getting dirty. This was something that was beneath a fair section of eighties designers, it meant taking off the Rolex and the Paul Smith jacket and that wouldn't do when you had champagne to quaff at the latest design industry do.

4 Less attitude and more art (or vice versa)

There is a perceived divide between what happens in art colleges and then what happens in the 'real world'. Hamish was keen to point out that you should try to stay faithful to your principles and to remember why you started in the first place – keeping the passion alive. Its difficult at times to keep that motivation when there are pressures to subjugate your innate intuition. Hamish posed the question as to whether it is the designer's role to subvert or be subservient.

The work for Factory records proved to be an outlet for their personal aspirations in this respect. The record covers for Factory Records often came with no brief, just the expectation that it should be better than the last one. Designers often create the illusion of depth in their work. When 8vo began work on The Durrutti Column's 'The Guitar and Other Machines' it was real depth that they were exploring. Sheets of glass were erected in the studio, one behind the other. Hand-rendered type, photography and graphic elements were promoted and demoted in a three-dimensional hierarchy. The organic composition was captured on a 5x4 camera. In Holland Studio Dumbar were creating similar experiments with their stage set constructions. These compositions were an attempt to create reality as opposed to an illusion of reality. Making artwork was an event, almost a performance and not the mechanical activity that happens after the 'creative bit'. Concept and process were interwoven. The end product was the process of investigation made manifest.

At times designers have to show their ingenuity and initiative in overcoming what might seem to be insurmountable problems. Tony Wilson of Factory Records called 8vo at the 11th hour requesting a poster for a concert. The typesetters were shut for the weekend, but the poster still had to be delivered on time. So what do you do? You reassess the situation and come up with an alternative plan and react! Plan B – dust down the typewriter and press gang it into work. The resulting poster had an urgency and immediacy reflecting the 'needs must pragmatics' of the situation. Some higher profile designers might have missed the deadline but secured their all important file copies. What was more important the dissemination of crucial information advertising an event or a typeset poster? Was it more important that an audience turned up or the designer's whim was entertained?

5 Design as story telling

With design you have to get involved, you can't stay passive. It's not about being a pair of hands that carries out tasks for a domineering client. In some jobs there is no obvious story. Often it is your role to make something out of nothing. You have to find the story. Rick Poynor has called the designer a visual journalist and graphic author. What is the heart of the story? What needs investigating? What are the connections you can make? You have to make the links between the words and the visuals. Hamish asserts that you 'can't make typography without meaning, literacy, editing and getting behind the words'.

6 Jobs which design themselves

These are situations where design is not about ideas or what things look like but a reaction to a set of imposed restrictions (by yourself or the brief). These are the jobs where your role is in designing the system. The system transcends the aesthetic and removes some of the arbitrariness of subjective decision making. In a sense it is a non-interventionist policy. The Flux posters for the Edinburgh Festival are an example of this way of thinking. The typographic system of colour coded bars have been devised to give structure to information in advance of its receipt.

7 Oh, and that journal thing...

These days Hamish is reluctant to dwell for too long on this period in 8vo's history. Octavo was groundbreaking in its time. During the eighties, if your tastes strayed beyond the gaudy shores of Britain, publications such as *Novum Gebrauchsgraphik* and *Graphis* were all that was available to satiate your latent desires. The arrival of Octavo was akin to being informed that the world was indeed not flat. The journal took an international stance. Octavo had object quality; it informed and acted as a didactic model in itself. It demonstrated basic typographic principles of hierarchy and structure. A new generation of designers got excited again, anything was possible. For 8vo this was 'money where your mouth' is time, putting personal commitment on the line. This was going to cost financially and emotionally, but if you care about something you gotta do what you gotta do. Octavo could have been a financial disaster and 8vo could have sunk without trace, but it was a risk they had to take.

8 Aren't we the lucky ones?

Hamish concluded with this positive statement reaffirming his own personal passion for his work. 'It still amazes me to this day that you can actually get paid to do something you enjoy'. It's back to the theme of the lecture: drive, ambition, commitment, caring. 'It's not a job it's a way of life. I would say don't expect many rewards if you treat it as a job, as a way to make money'. Once the bug has bitten you, it's something you don't recover from – it's for life. Hamish was asked what he thought the life span of a design group was. He responded by saying he felt these days it was nothing more than a few years. Hamish blames the design paparazzi hungry for the next big thing. The mortality rate of the popstar designer is high. Hamish feels it is a pity that design is viewed in terms of passing fashions. He points out that in his opinion Wim Crouwel didn't produce his finest work until he was 45 and is still working at 75! Designers are fortunate in that they don't have to pigeonhole aspects of their life. With retirement an increasingly unlikely option we are indeed the lucky ones to be able to support ourselves through an activity we enjoy.

