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graphic design is my pa??ion

Investigating alternative design tools as
counterpraxis opposed to traditional graphic design,
towards a process-oriented, anti-capitalist approach.

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Introduction

The journey of becoming a graphic designer meant for me far more than just acquiring skills and exercising a mere profession along with working in a job to earn money. The idea of moving from simply pursuing a hobby to a field of self-fulfilment was rather mind-blowing for me as a teenager. The motivation for this thesis arose from a growing crisis in my work as a graphic designer. During the years, I got increasingly disappointed with this once supposedly passion of mine. My experience in the field of design has been shaped by traditional, capitalist, and individualistic influences, which are generally widespread. I am questioning, if the use of open and alternative design tools can be counteract opposed traditional design processes towards a process-oriented anti-capitalist approach and autonomy of designers means of production¹ in the example of the radical design movement. In the upcoming three chapters I want to investigate possibilities of so called counter-tools to be *anti-design* opposed to traditional graphic design practices and its limits.

1. "Means of production" or "production means" refers to the resources and tools used by the worker to produce products and services in an economy.

These chapters include "Design and rejection", where I give an introduction to my experiences in the graphic design field. I examine the historical role of graphic design and its status quo within capitalism by analysing it through different perspectives. I give examples, how the software company *Adobe*² is dominating the creative industry. The second chapter "Anti-design as counterpraxis" gives an introduction to the radical design movement and their ideas about anti-design as reaction against "good design" and the industry norm within its later misuses. I attempt to compare it with process-based strategies and possible implications to counterpraxis.³ The last chapter "Tools while caring" reflects on my selected counter-tools which give alternative approaches to proprietary software⁴ in their utilisation, appropriation, ethos and limits.

2. Computer software company, that offers various applications and services used for graphic design, illustration, photography and video editing.

3. I refer to the term "praxis" instead "practice" to emphasize the combination between theory and practice as process. In doing so, I also distinguish myself from the term practices, which is used to refer to "the repetition and improvement of skills or procedures."

4. Owned by a company or individual.

Design and rejection

In the upcoming chapter I present the status quo through perspectives of ideology, exclusion, capitalism, education and tools within a traditional graphic design field and its practice. I'll address the friction between the

self attributed attitude of designers in a capitalist industry. Furthermore, I examine Adobe, the most common software utilised by designers, in relation to the associated constant conflicts and exclusionary mechanisms.

“Good design”

Already as a kid I started to build my own little office inside my dad’s office behind a shelf. I designed and printed my own forms, logos and file systems. Later in 2012 after middle school I applied for a vocational graphic design school, mainly focused on the industry. I felt that this was the only possible thing I could find interest in and unfold my wholly creativeness. Besides enhancing our skills in the handmade realm, we were required to learn to use Adobe software. I almost exclusively learned from just a few classmates. These classmates were seen as some sort hackers to us, because they were impressively fluent with it. One of the first things I learned right from the start was how to insert a grid into my documents, since grids seemed to be the most crucial starting point. The study by designer Nolwenn Maudet based on interviews of professional graphic designers, “Beyond Grids: Interactive Graphical Substrates to Structure Digital Layout” shows how graphic designers structure their layout and, using grids, found out that all their participants always start their design process with certain systems, principles, structures, rules, or constraints. They are guiding the layout and disappearing eventually from the designs’ end result. (Maudet et al., 2017, p.3) This study demonstrates, that design processes often underlining strictly defined mechanisms. These grids are often following rules based on calculations like the golden ratio.⁵ Such instruments for initiating and guiding design processes are already thought and learned in education and being later executed by designers.

5. Golden ratio is a mathematical tool to structure elements by an “ideal” visual appeal in a grid.

For decades, these and other processes have been standards for so-called “good design”. They are endlessly theorised and indoctrinated by designers and design theorists. Traditional layout rule sets of the 20th Century are often based on principles, inflated into style sets and ideas about “universal” and “objective” design as “timeless” and “neutral” and therefore equally applicable and perceived by everybody. “Universal graphic design” follows specific ideas and rules on essentials in graphic design to assure “good design” originated for instance by *Bauhaus*⁶ and *Swiss Style*.⁷ However, there is no such thing as “neutral design”, given that art and design is influenced with biases and individual or cultural perceptions and contradicting egalitarian ideals. Origins lie in Western

6. German art movement from 1919 to 1933; combined crafts, fine arts and design.

7. Also “Swiss school” or “Swiss design” is a graphic design movement formed in the 1950s with influences of Bauhaus.

8. Art movement emerged from the late 19th to mid-20th century. It characterises a break with the past and new form of expression and experimentation.

imperialism, and it continues to be predominantly Western-centric. (Te Velde, 2016) According to designer Darin Buzon already *Modernists*⁸ claimed design as neutral, with the ability to communicate to anyone. Stating a false notion, that design can be perceived uniformly across all cultural boundaries. Furthermore, he argues, in white supremacy, whiteness and universalism is default. (Buzon, 2020) The historical assumption of neutrality in graphic design is also supported by numerous typographers like Beatrice Warde in 1956 in “The Crystal Goblet”, that design and typography should be invisible for its content. (Warde, 1956) This concept basically creates the adaption, that design can be unnoticed, the communication erased and therefor neutral. Described by designers and researcher Javier Syquia, graphic design lies in a practiced standardisation of “good” Euro-American design and trained in Western education institutions. He goes further and claims that the canon of “good design” was established by the men of the Bauhaus. Additionally, men still hold the power and thus determine what is considered “good” graphic design, which generally follows the "clean" Swiss principles. (Syquia, 2021)

Universal design is also often equated with minimalist design. Minimalist design fosters reduced, essential, and economised elements with clear communication, that ensures information is perceived as quickly as possible by target audiences for successful marketing strategies. These guidelines, manuals and standards are disseminated by so-called “creative geniuses” and “design gurus” constantly reproduced into the masses and adapted by designers. One of many examples are from the famous designer Dieter Rams and his *ten principles for good design* from 1970.⁹ His instructions are subjective and support minimalist design as universal. Likewise, already from the 18th century philosophers like Kant and Hume both gave extensive thinking to the ideas of aesthetic pleasure in (“good”) taste, beauty, and ugliness in the philosophy of art. It is worth mentioning that, during this time period, the visual arts were primarily accessible to those who could afford to create and produce art (predominantly the white and privileged). In that way, their universal truths about how art is to be enjoyed became established.

9. <https://tenprinciples.design/>

After graduating graphic design vocational school I started an internship in an award-winning packaging agency, producing designs for the largest FMCGs (Fast-moving consumer goods). I had to photoshop and retouch water splashes, design packaging labels and adjust shadows and lightings of ingredients on packagings. The first couple months I spend browsing through tutorials, forums and filling several notebooks full of

notes on how to achieve specific results in Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. Additionally, I learned that the common perception of creativeness (literally the ability to create) was not perceived as a gift, nor a talent in the agencies I worked at. It was something you learned through reading project manuals, exercising and browsing endlessly through *Pinterest* and *Shutterstock* to find the perfect inspiration (or template). A practice of mocking, imitating and copy-pasting aesthetics while losing yourself into endless hours of repetition. Nevertheless, still having the hope of fulfilling my dream of being a creative and “trying to think outside the box constantly” while mixing three different typefaces is an absolute no-go.

Exclusion

I want to mention as well that the general design profession has ever since excluded marginalised groups (Mabuye, 2024) and stabilised a white, euro-centric, cis-male-dominated, capitalist profession, especially in the digital sector. The accessibility of processes, software and tools in general are a matter of race, gender, class and privilege. The design professor Rebecca Stephany and designer Anja Kaiser argue in the book *Glossary for Undisciplined Design* that the prevailing dominance of a Western, male-centered worldview, as well as principles such as efficiency, neutrality, and objectivity, define a “good” design practice while remaining unquestioned. (Kaiser and Stephany, 2021, p. 5) Graphic design trends are defined and empowered mainly euro-centric, while simultaneously stealing and appropriating aesthetics from the rest of the world. Designers choose which visualities they include and exclude, therefore determining what becomes popular and what is published. Anja Groten from Hackers and Designers claims that design is inherently a discriminating practice and a process of prioritising, classifying, and selecting. (Groten, 2022, p. 113)

Capitalism

The profession of graphic design is fundamentally and systemically tied to capitalism, claimed by scholars like Dori Tunstall (Tunstall, 2021), Arturo Escobar (Escobar, 2018), Wolfgang Fritz Haug (Haug, 2009), Silvio Lorusso (Lorusso, 2024) and Ruben Pater (Pater, 2021). Designers in advertising create inducements to consume. They are charging an inflated illusion of use-value on commodities to create a deception, as German philosopher Fritz Haug claimed (Haug, 2009). Traditional graphic design is still strongly tied to consumerism, stabilised by creating attractive appearances for selling products and services. Designers are

engaged in paths of invention, production, consumption and destruction. (Mareis, Greiner-Petter and Renner, 2022, p. 9) The quote by designer Victor Papanek strengthens the historical ties of graphic design with consumption: “Here are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. And possibly only one profession is phonier. Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don’t need, with money they don’t have, in order to impress others who don’t care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today.” (Papanek, 1973) Overall, the conventional graphic designer designs things and systems for and foremost for the capital to generate profit.

With this realisation, designers sought to distance themselves from this capitalistic logic. Moreover, they convinced themselves that they were capable of changing the world for the better. This associated sense of obligation is an old phenomenon and has been reproducing for decades.

Already in the 1960s designers¹⁰ and scholars saw potential in their profession to change making and emphasising social responsibility. Designer Afonso Matos argues current design approaches shifting however from “problem-solving” to “problem finding and framing”. (Matos, 2022, p. 5) Therefore, designers found alternative—and more realistic—ways to distance themselves from consumerism by pointing out social grievances through their work.

10. E.g. “first things first manifesto” by designer Ken Garland and many others proposes a design profession from exclusively advertising design to more supposedly “ethical” design like street signs, books, catalogues, instructional manuals, television, industrial manuals etc.

Education

My values and praxis changed fundamentally with studying at an art academy following working in design agencies. A transition from a mere service provider to an “intellectual” and “critical”. Hence, the study of the theory of critical thinking: directed against the world, the system, the structure, and ultimately the institution (where one studies), as well as against oneself. At design schools, critical engagement with projects is often a prerequisite. Furthermore, designers and students strive to find meaning in their work, their profession, and themselves—to become one with it. Design students do not want to end up solely as service provider or let alone a *craft maker*¹¹ with a specific skill set. Consequently, the designer is already perceived more as a technician than an intellectual. (Lorusso, 2024, p. 274). Instead, they strive for autonomy, creative freedom, and prestige. I have noticed a tension at art academies regarding the practical orientation of the design profession. There are opposing forces of inclusion and exclusion of these two aspects: the practice of traditional “object” design as a capitalist service versus the appreciation of free and autonomous artistic expression. Designer and

11. Historically, there has been a distinction between “real” fine arts and everyday aesthetics as crafts.

writer Silvio Lorusso argues that art academies are mainly laboratories of self-design, secondarily spaces where things are designed. (Lorusso, 2024, p. 257) There appears to be a contradiction between the focus on speculative topics intended to foster self-development and self-realisation, and the simultaneous need to adapt the outside market logic into the institution. This logic is designed to turn yourself into a product, rather than only your work. Although, the design institution is a balancing act between branding and position yourself while target and expose social and political problems. Therefore, finding constantly purpose in your work—meaning yourself. Yet the fact is that once students graduate, it limits their ability to act critically within their profession in (paid) jobs, because of the creative fields' precarity and roots in consumption logics. As a result, designers and—students in particular—often bound to disappointment when they realise the different realities in education versus job. If these critics cannot be pursued further afterward, the critical design education seems like a mere imitation and is just functional in its own system itself.

Nevertheless, I still believe it is important to learn and develop critical perspectives within these institutions during education. It may still be possible to apply these praxes later on, develop an awareness and—in doing so—critically examine the (design) industry. Conversely, capitalist practices are otherwise simply followed from the outset and carried out blindly. I therefore urge us to continue reflecting on the mechanisms of design and the system—especially outside institutional settings—and to question which systems it promotes and sustains.

Tools

Karl Marx already predicted a feeling of disconnection from the industrial workers work and creation, and their own creative potential due to the capitalist system. He described an alienation and exploitation from their creation, of which workers don't benefit from. Their work is commodified, and they have no power over their “means of production”, which is privately owned, made and operated for profit. (Katzenstein and Marx, 1987) Supported by this argument I'm convinced that the production means of graphic designers is primarily controlled by the company Adobe, which dominates the creative industry. For context, Adobes Creative Cloud paid memberships have risen over 41 million in 2025 (ProDesignTools, 2025) and were holding 70% of current creative software market shares in 2025. (Dey, 2025) The only real competitor is *Canva*,¹² owning around 10% of the market share. (Dey, 2025)

¹². Layout tool, in operation since 2013 with a “freemium” pricing model with several plans.

13. \$291 Adobe
Cancellation Fee in 2021.

Therefore, Adobe can nonetheless be seen as a market leader and is still widely established by creative professionals and universities. This is maintained by them with models like “Adobe Creative Campus”, claiming 25% of students in the UK are already using their software. (Naeve, 2024) Designers relying solely on industry standards like commercial software they do not own, which is actively limiting their usage by restricting them from modifying it. In the past, it was at least possible to “own” Adobe software through a one-time purchase. However, it is now available exclusively via a subscription model with constantly rising prices, including occasionally substantial cancellation fees.¹³ (Sulleyman, 2021) Other examples include warnings from Adobe, stating that customers are no longer permitted to use older versions they once officially purchased and can get sued. (Bode, 2019) Throughout history, Adobe acquired entire companies and competitors in the digital graphics tools sector to establish itself as a software leader. In 1994, even the *Federal Trade Commission* stepped in and prohibited Adobe from acquiring similar products and competitors for the next decade in order to prevent the creation of a monopoly. (Carter 2021) Graphic designer, Loraine Furter researches economical and ecological surroundings of standardised tools. She argues that designers, who are lacking a stable socioeconomic position, face challenges due the fact that the Adobe Creative Cloud is only accessible online and ownership of the software is not possible any more. (Furter, 2022, p. 168) In addition, there is currently the increasing use of AI implementations by Adobe, which is being trained without users’ consent. Also, the re-invented *Adobe Fonts*, which can only be used within the Adobe domain itself and require an active subscription.

In *Graphic Design in the post-digital age* designer Michael Kryenbühl argues that the Adobe software are very influential in terms of final outcome due to limitations in working areas and their workarounds. (Kryenbühl, 2022, p. 228) The designer was supplied with particular instruments by Adobe through the introduction and implementation of specific tool sets that are replicated by their users. Some design applications like the Photoshop toolbar once introduced in the 1990s is still being used by graphic designers almost 30 years later (Maudet, 2019, p. 3) and until this day. Furthermore, Adobe’s software promotes visual conformity and limits the creative freedom by seemingly making users dependent on their software—as the market leader and due to its widespread use in the creative industry. (Forbes, 2022) Graphic designer Eric Carter argues that the pre-digital profession once focused on eliminating roughness, setting type perfectly and drawing everything by

hand, has evolved by Adobe into a “precise, perfect, and adjustable” practice. (Carter, 2021) Through invented digital tools it was suddenly possible, to change vectorised designs any time accurate even by pixels. The profession shifted with Adobe from handmade to digital applications. Conversely, several online tutorials today imitating these handmade and photocopied effects again.

Internet artist and theorist Olia Lialina points out a misconception about the profession of designers that is reflected in a 2007 advertisement for *Adobe Dream Weaver*. The less you think about the software you’re using, the more creative you can be. (Lialina, 2012) The advertisement is neglecting any connection between designers and their tools. Another example is a commercial for Adobe Illustrator in 1988 that says the best kind of design requires designers to forget about their tools. (Lialina, 2012, cited in Maudet, 2019, p. 7) Femke Snelting, working in the intersection of publishing and trans*feminism, states that almost all graphic design—such as posters, websites, and publications—are made mainly digital nowadays, yet only one company worldwide provides tools for this. (Snelting, 2008, p. 2) Adobe is therefore still the status quo in production means in the creative field, yet remains largely unquestioned.

To conclude this chapter, the profession of graphic designers has been challenged by (self-)positioning, justification, and transformation, starting already in education. Originating from an invention to contribute to and stabilise capitalism and consumption, designers have sought since decades to subvert their roots and maintain a distance by adopting a political stance as an inherent attitude. The profession has experienced growing disillusionment, especially fostered in design schools. The disconnection between designers’ dominating software Adobe as a standardised market leader has made the prioritising of efficiency over autonomy increasingly evident.

Anti-design as counterpraxis

In this upcoming chapter I am laying out an example of the radical design movement and their ideas about anti-design, an existing culture and movement against the predominant status quo of design and consumerism. To this day, the ideology is co-opted by branding and marketing ecosystems that appropriate the original concept

contradictorily. I will investigate strategies of process-based approaches regarding alternative and open perspectives in the praxis of graphic design in the ethos of anti-design.

Radical design movement

As a recurring definition and terminology, I am (re-)using the terms *anti* and *counter*. *Anti* described as opposed or against a particular thing or person and *counter* as something with an opposing reaction, opinion or action (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022) or towards a different direction, result or effect (Merriam-Webster). I discovered through these collected terms the radical design movement and their ideas about anti-design, which started in the 1960s in post-war Italy also known as *controdesign* or *counter-design*. The movement originated among architects, (urban) designers, and students rising to studios and groups like *Archizoom*, *Superstudio*, *Studio 65*, *Gruppo 9999* and *UFO*. (Colbachini, 2023) “Radical” in the movements’ definition was translated to the term *radix* (root) in Latin, that stands for “returning to fundamentals, questioning assumptions, and rethinking the role of design in society.” (Vanier, 2025) It was seen as a direct response to the cold, impersonal and “universal” principles of Modernism in fine arts. (The Inverness Design Studio, 2025) It tried to break with the past of the industrialisation and the years following the two World Wars and searched for new forms of expression. (Kuiper, 2025) Namely, the movement responded against traditional design principles of conventional “good design”, that questioned general consumer culture, bourgeois values and opposed the traditional norm. Their philosophy was a rejection against the idea that design should merely serve the industry and commodity culture, cultural production and the capital. Their art and design questioned established norms and values in the industry and challenged the status quo in design, its ethos and prevailing economic systems. Moreover, they promoted autonomy and independence. The design professors Mazé and Redström argue that the movements’ critique didn’t target design or planning in general, but rather the role of design in promoting and enforcing an ideology. Further, the “products” of the movement were not meant to be seen as completed or closed forms. Although object-oriented, the form was utilised provisionally, allowing ideas, debate and appropriation—creating alternative forms of ideological consumption and not just of products. (Mazé and Redström, 2009, p.4) Even when they marketed their objects, these were produced in small batches, entirely by hand, and were far from being commercially successful. (Strauss, 2020) Therefore, creations were often anti-functional, uncomfortable and provocative. Depending

conventions of alleged beauty, the movements creations were often seen as ugly, while it embraced kitsch and irony.



Figure 1: "Design textile Farfalle" by Archizoom, 1968

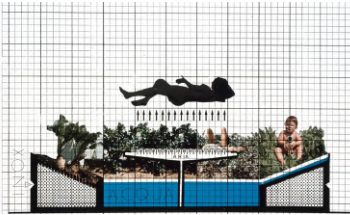


Figure 2: "Bedroom for the Vegetable Garden House" by Gruppo 9999 for MoMA, 1972



Figure 3: "Supersurface, The Happy Island, project", by Superstudio, 1971

The movement took use of *maximalism* opposed to minimalism, charged with kitsch, excess decorative, noisiness and bold elements. I addressed minimalism in the previous chapter as a means of Western imperialism by spreading and promoting a false belief, that design can be culturally neutral. They took their distance from normative minimalism and formalised, rational and pragmatic aesthetics in design towards commercial goals and thus, practical purpose. Therefore, the idea of anti-design or radical design can be seen as a counter-culture in graphic design informed by the rejection of perpetuated rules, norms and principles. According to design historian Alison Clarke, design had a real potential to evolve into something different during the radical design movement of the 1970s. The radicals' dream had been already lost by the 1980s—design had come to revolve solely around individualism, brands and labels. (Clarke, 2016) The movement stagnated and later anti-design movements such as *The Memphis Group* drew inspiration from Art Deco and described themselves as anti-ideological. (Kwun, 2020) But they, too, were not spared from capitalistic mechanisms and their recognisable aesthetics got quickly absorbed and appropriated by global brands and popular culture. (Julier, 2016) In general, I see a strong emphasis on form and a focus on aesthetics and object orientation in this movement, which, in my opinion, has become particularly prominent with The Memphis Group.



Figure 4: The Memphis Group, collection of their objects

However, the radical design movement also faced critique and limits. They were described as being elitist, since their productions were just understandable by insiders in their self-made echo chamber. (Vanier, 2025) The question arises, regarding whether they solely represented themselves, rather than those of the broader society, since they consisted exclusively of intellectuals. This contradicted their criticism of the bourgeois class. There is also criticism that the movement was mostly male-dominated (Strauss, 2022) and sexist. (Vanier, 2025) The studios were overwhelmingly male, as evidenced by member lists and group photos. As a result, their ideas about transforming domestic life developed almost exclusively from a male perspective. At that time, numerous sexist standards were prevalent not just in the urban planning and design industry. The radical design movement never directly confronted these issues, even though it dealt with various other problems in its field and beyond. They positioned themselves as political radical, but reproduced systematic exclusion and gender inequality within their own structures. It also remains open which contributions and transformation the movement in society acknowledged, and to what extent they reached transformations outside their echo chambers. How far they created merely aesthetics and were ultimately focused on forms and objects is a question.

The new ugly aesthetic

Nowadays anti-design gets picked up again in contradictory forms by rising online popularity. Reused as a “new ugly aesthetic” against uniformity and perfection in the search for more rawness and authenticity. It could be seen as a general reaction against the perceived

uniformity and perfection in mainstream branding. According to anti-designs original intention, it also still rejects supposed design rules and norms while embracing chaos, asymmetry and noise. (Foley, 2025) Supposedly the attributions and ethos behind the once evolved counter-design movement are largely unchanged. Controversially, the terminology is solely used for optics and lost its rejection of consumerism. Online guidelines revolve around how to implement the new rough and unique trend, for which brands its suitable, including successful examples and practical applications. (Foley, 2025; Moore, 2024; Hallaaltaie.com; 2025; Miranda, 2024) Companies using the trend for younger and rebellious audiences to convey authenticity and non-conformity (Hallaaltaie.com, 2025) while it stands out in a crowded marketplace and grasps audience's attention and stimulating interests (Miranda, 2024) by supposedly targeting a unique crowd. The appropriation of aesthetics can be seen in many areas for the sake of grasping younger generations interest while selling alternative worlds and narratives. Already claimed in 2009, that the deeper ideological engagement and aspects of anti-design and related countercultures was rapidly robbed by including it into mainstream as a superficial aesthetic or marketing tactic. (Mazé and Redström, 2009, p. 4) With this new trend designers—particularly *professionals*—criticised, that anti-design glorifies mediocrity and promotes a lack of skills. (Hallaaltaie.com, 2025) Hence, ignoring the critical intentions and labelling it simply as effortless and clumsy. Likewise, designers try to defend their competence and rulesets by accusing the use of anti-design techniques as cheat.¹⁴ While its messy, anti and experimental aesthetics getting more and more commodified and monetised for big fashion brands (The Inverness Design Studio, 2025) and pop stars by becoming a cliché. (Foley, 2025). Especially since the rise of AI generated images and graphics, hand-crafted, authentic and opposed hyper-polished aesthetics are getting more desired (Celf.in., 2025) and trustworthy, especially in marketing ecosystems.

14. YouTube comment on: Will 'ANTI DESIGN' Takeover The Graphic Design World!? by Satori Graphics in 2021.



Will 'ANTI DESIGN' Takeover The Graphic Design World!?



Satori Graphics ✓
1.52M subscribers

Subscribe

6.4K



Share

Save



4 years ago (edited)

I'm not worried about this. I'm more worried about all of the people who learned how to use five photoshop tools and are out there promoting themselves as graphic designers and using Photoshop for everything, even vector work. If I have to explain to one more "graphic designer" why logos need to be vector...

Society already doesn't respect graphic design as much as other skilled professions. Now every Joe with Canva thinks he's a graphic designer.

The sudden surge of channels teaching people how to "cheat" at art using public domain images isn't helping our industry, either.

Show less

2 Reply

1 reply



3 years ago

It's relieving that another graphic designer here has real standards.

1 Reply

Figure 5: Anti-Design as "cheat", YouTube comment

However, despite the problems and subsequent appropriation, I nevertheless see possibilities in the origin of the radical design movement as a counterpraxis for graphic making opposed to the traditional graphic design field towards anti-capitalist praxes and openness. To use this design approach as a revitalised tool for systematic critique, rather than as superficial problem-solving. The movement transformed their approaches continuously, explored alternative utopias while questioned their capitalist roots, which presently loses sight in the relation between designers and their production means. It questions established order—in general, in design and own praxis—which is significant for a genuine change in the industry. It rather is a tool for global critique instead production. Despite the limitations and the criticism of the movement's intentions regarding system critique in its further implementation, I see opportunities in reclaiming and approaching these transformative values in relation to processes for today's design praxis, I will present later. Moreover, what I do not argue for is a simple copy and paste of the

movements' moralities and methods. The movement has rightly faced criticism about sexism and classism, which I also referred to the design profession in general. Therefore, I see it more as an inspiration of a starting point with taking action in habits and values. The movement became trapped in its own echo chamber, particularly when it comes to purely provocative designing things itself and focused materiality, like forms and objects. In addressing alternative praxes, I am interested in a broader perspective, that goes beyond a narrow focus on simply design as a designer. Notwithstanding, I want to embrace the idea of debate, experimentation, non-functionality and rejection around perpetuated rule sets. The principles and ideas of these movements were compelling and can be, to some extent, applied to the present day. Additionally, the anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist as well as self-criticism stance is more important than ever. I still consider the movement's approach to be significant, as it deliberately employed tactics such as provocation and kitsch as a form of resistance.

Process-based strategies

I see a connection between strategies of the movements' intention and my own approach: moving away from the endless production of results towards a praxis that embraces the process itself. The outcome could be a possibility for an anti-capitalist approach in conventional graphic design. Furthermore, the aim is to evolve strategies toward process-oriented methodologies in order to appreciate the unknown without focusing on a specific outcome, a clear purpose, or measurable results—factors that typically characterise conventional design and capitalist practices. Thus far, an approach of moving away from the exclusive interest in the result itself. Processes in graphic design are still focusing merely on how to reach the end-product, without its—often erroneous and *unproductive* detours. I view these approaches as counterpraxis opposed to productivity and the completion of design tasks with the least possible effort, often unintentionally chosen by designers, particularly in their use of interfaces and software. That is also why I see potential in designers' means of production to get actively more in the way instead of becoming increasingly obscure, as is frequently observed with proprietary software. As I described in the previous chapter how Adobe often misunderstood designers' interface to their software and implied they want to overlook their tools and forget about them.

When it comes to the relation between designers and their tools, Nolwenn Maudet describes the fundamentals of the Bauhaus design school as follows: One of the first goals for designers was to

reappropriate their lost production means and fusion design and production together. Further, design software is still an ongoing concern, because an essential part of designers' work and ethos is to select and question their tools. (Maudet, 2019, p.3) That implies an important position of designers' reclaiming their tools in order to question their possibilities and limits. Personally, I feel that designers are getting increasingly alienated with their production means and perform above all repetitive, monotonous and rational tasks—not just with their tools. To apply a further process of anti-design, I advocate hereby entering uncomfortable terrain, which “pinches” and at first, feels unfamiliar. Embracing a nescience of tools and processes in order to experiment intentionally with them and not being afraid of imperfection, failure, or completeness. Getting lost in these unintentional detours to discover intriguing and unusual paths. This process could be a way to oppose just submitting to the software, but rather become more familiar, autonomous and open.

I clearly see opportunities and new openings towards a more sustainable making process, despite the result. Process-based strategies could break the endless circles of self-transformation and self-improvement against perpetuated capitalist systems. It questions and re-considers current praxes and in what extent they help us and one another. According to the essay *Sick Woman Theory* on the importance of radical kinship by Johanna Hedva: “The most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to take care of yourself.” (Hedva, 2022) In other words, being aware of literal interfaces between people and processes, while revisiting, reflecting and changing them accordingly. Toward a praxis that seeks to move away from elitism and reach beyond echo chambers, in which the radical design movement was trapped. Establishing genuine criticality is the basis for not just individual issues in design, but also for a critique of other, more urgent issues in our society. (Mazé, 2009, p. 395) Meaning, developing awareness of grievances in order to eventually transfer them into broader perspectives beyond the individual.

To summarise this chapter, the radical design movement of the 1960s was marked by rejecting supposed design rules and support and uphold of consumer and commodity culture by designers. The movement embraced maximalism over minimalism, kitsch and irony against prevalent structures and capitalist systems. Nowadays, the movements' ethos and aesthetics is getting constantly appropriated and misused for marketing and also criticised by professional designers. I attempted to link their moralities with possible counterpraxis for graphic designers

today and advocated an importance in constantly questioning norms, tools and established practices. Process-based counterpraxis could be a sort of dismantling perpetuated systems in graphic design, which are frequently getting lost in the relation between designers and their production means.

Tools while caring

In this last chapter I want to focus on my observations and reflections of alternative means of production and the appropriation of alternative tools as a possible strategy for anti-system praxes. During my research I discovered and utilised several generative/algorithmic tools, software and engines for generating graphics, design, layouts and paged publications as counter-tools in graphic design.

Experiments

It was important for me to not simply finding equally alternatives to Adobe software like *Inkscape*¹⁵ or *GIMP*¹⁶ as *GUI*¹⁷ or *WYSIWYG*¹⁸ software. My first intention of counter-tools had to be *radical* but at the same time approachable and in the sphere of my realistic possibilities. Radical in the sense that they represent a contrarily fundamental break with usual or traditional approaches, such as GUI software and consequently programming based. I refer to them as counter-tools, given that they stand in contradictory to usual graphic design production means, which today are generally limited to proprietary software like Adobe, as I outlined in the first chapter. During my discovery I stumbled repeatedly over open-source and *Free/libre open source software (F/LOSS)*¹⁹ tools. I knew that the counter-tools I am looking for have to be non-proprietary and relatively accessible due my very little experience in programming.

These tools were *NumPy*²⁰ (package for numerical computing in Python), *ImageMagick*²¹ (software for converting, editing and manipulating images, invoked through the terminal), *p5.js*²² (a library for creative coding), *p5.genzine*²³ (a library for generating p5.js into a printable zine), *paged.js*²⁴ (library to transform HTML document into print-ready PDF), *WeasyPrint*²⁵ (library to transform HTML/CSS into print-ready PDF), *runal*²⁶ (creative coding environment, that runs in the terminal), *rune.js*²⁷ (library for programming graphic design systems in the browser) and

15. Free and open-source vector graphics and design tool, equivalent to Adobe Illustrator.

16. Free and open-source image manipulation software, equivalent to Adobe Photoshop.

17. Graphical User Interface; a visual form of the interface instead of text based.

18. What You See Is What You Get; allows the users a real time view while lay outing.

19. or FOSS means Free(/libre) open-source software: can be used, shared, modified and distributed freely. Rather a matter of liberty, not price, the concept is meant in 'free' equivalent to "free speech", not to "free beer". (Mansoux, A. and De Valk M., 2008, p. 23).

20. <https://numpy.org/>

21. <https://imagemagick.org>

22. <https://p5js.org/>

23. <https://github.com/munusshih/p5.genzine>

24. <https://pagedjs.org/>

25. <https://weasyprint.org/>

26. <https://empr.cl/runal/>

27. <https://runemadsen.github.io/rune.js/>

Python scripts for generating patterns with *Unicode* in the terminal. In general, I had an interest in the application of randomness and unpredictability, since these functions are not applicable in Adobe. This randomness is reappearing in my experimentations because I can counteract against conventions in graphic design and defy the principles of “good design”. Embracing a generated arbitrariness to some extent for further development. Another interesting aspect for me was working in the terminal—for example, using ImageMagick—or displaying and running visualisations there, such as with runal. Therefore, the environment exists in the terminal as output or input only. This approach eliminates the need for external software or text editors. Apart from generating graphics I was also interested in generating layouts or paged publications like paged.js or WeasyPrint as layout containers and alternative to Adobe InDesign. At the start of my research, I documented all the tools I tried on the course’s wiki page, including instructions for installation, getting started, my observations, helpful links and the code. This approach led me to document my investigations and experiments in an online logbook.

28. Unicode is a character encoding standard, which includes 128 box-drawing characters, widely used for text user interfaces to display frames and boxes.

One of my starting points was inspired by a Python script for automated poetry based on “House of Dust” by Alison Knowles from 1967. The script is fed with an array of *Unicode box-drawing characters*,²⁸ which prints randomised patterns in the terminal. Later on I used NumPy for colour manipulating of images. I found different Python scripts for randomising RGBA (Red, Green, Blue, Alpha) channels of images and changing colour ranges accordingly. I’ve been following this approach for several months, and it is a good example of how I’ve embraced my processes as an unproductive detour. Instead of using a colour range slider for instance in Adobe Photoshop, I delved into background processes of colour information of images and their manipulation. ImageMagick is another example for exploring functionalities of image manipulation. In my previous practice I worked a lot with bitmapping and dithering of images in Adobe Photoshop. With ImageMagick I discovered several and alternative ways for manipulating images and especially dithering them in alternative ways. Since the manipulation works coding or rather text-based in the terminal, I had the ability to better understand the application of image editing, which is usually hidden in the background of GUI software. With p5.js I tried an approach of learning JavaScript from the ground up within the p5.js library and several tutorials. This approach helped me the most by learning a new programming language. Although, p5.js exists just in its own framework and can seem closed up. In my observations it also shows a certain limitedness in its interactivity. Paged.js and WeasyPrint I used for

just boxdraw unicode



boxdraw & others



How to be a
graphic designer/artist
plumber/serve-prov
artist/barista/cashier/b
without losing yourself

This is where I design team HQ

21/32



Figure 12: paged.js zine about graphic design memes, 107 pages



Figure 13: Meme edited with WeasyPrint

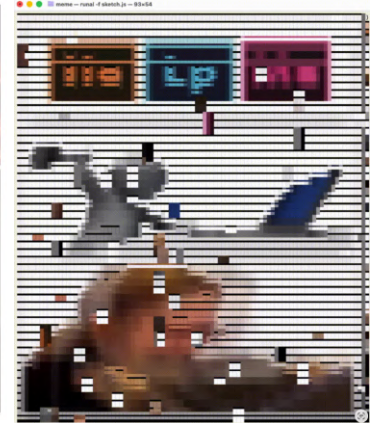


Figure 14: runal animation in the terminal

Stop normalising the grind

Throughout the process, I supplemented the tools with a collection of memes on the topic of graphic design, that I had collected during my research. My logbook therefore contains both my observations on the counter-tools including the graphic design discourse through memes. With this approach I found a way to connect my praxis with my research in a low-threshold manner by including several voices. With this mode of production I re-generate and overlay these memes and incorporate my counter-tools. Additionally, the logbook also serves as a project that lets users simply get lost in it, escape the daily grind for a few moments and feel understood. These selected memes depict struggles of designers' profession, which are collectively affirmed, witnessed and shared in social media through hashtags like *#graphicdesigncore* or *#designcommunity*. They're reflecting the designers' canon of a despair by monetising your hobby, passion, and pleasure for profit and survival. Like the quote by Sister Corita Kent "RULE SEVEN: The only rule is work."²⁹ Feel guilty while not being productive, do not rest, be underpaid and work overtime, find design in every means around you and live in a never ending love-hate relationship with your passion. As Lorusso puts it, the everyday designers will not write papers to express their disenchantment, they do not have time or capacity for that (Lorusso, 2024, p. 54). They make a meme instead and share it while doomscrolling for distraction. Artist, educator and writer Hiba Ali proposes the usage of humour and sarcasm as critical practice to shift the focus to wrongly normalised exploitative systems of control and domination. (Ali, 2023) Further, pointing out precarity and exploitation through the act of sharing struggles and finding community. It is also no coincidence, that many recently published graphic design theory literature like Silvio Lorusso's "What Design Can't Do" or Afonso Mato's "Who can afford to be critical?" are using memes about heartbroken graphic design

²⁹ Sister Corita Kent's 10 Rules for Students, Teachers, and Life, seen in art academy contexts in Germany.

practices to describe and underline common feelings and realities. Their distribution expresses collective emotions, thoughts and emphasises these. Through memes designers feel seen among each other, experiences getting shared and expressed while digitally bonding together. They create a sense of community and belonging by providing cultural information that is easily accessible across various cultures and beyond academic circles. This leads to a kind of unionisation and connection beyond several echo chambers.



Figure 15: Meme: Graphic Design Is My Passion. Part of a series on Tumblr; continuation. (Know Your Meme 2015)

Encountered challenges

I am still in the beginning of this process, and due to the limitation of time I faced challenges in the applicability. I encountered frustration due to my capability of learning and therefore utilising my selected tools. Implementing programming languages I had to learn from the ground like JavaScript and Python was more time-consuming as I expected. My first approach was not to learn these counter-tools deeply, but rather to examine as many as possible to get an overall understanding of possibilities and approachability and being able to make comparisons. Intentionally, I planned more on reusing and scraping founded scripts for further implementation. However, in order to give credit to my process-oriented approach—instead of rapid results—I wanted to delve deeper into the functionality and applicability. Although I noticed, that for realising my aspirations I need more knowledge and experience for the usage of them. Given the fairly wide range of different applications, At first, I spent most of my time installing, getting a basic understanding of them, and figuring out how to use them going forward. I noticed that the tools' documentation pages often assume an advanced knowledge in

programming. Deeper explaining, troubleshooting, step-by-step installations, possible extensions or simple introductions are rarely to be found. Nevertheless, tools like p5.js, WeasyPrint, and runal offer test programs and templates that simplify starting with your own projects. These templates help to navigate in an already established framework and make it easier to operate from the ground up. For instance in p5.js, I found the most low-threshold resources and tutorials in particular. I appreciated the more authentic community aspect, as sketches are publicly saved through accounts via the built-in web editor. It automatically creates an open archive that facilitates exchange and invites openness.

On the contrary, the other tools often felt challenging to integrate at times. Surveys show, that the sphere of open source is still not diverse enough. Despite the availability of numerous beginner-friendly guides across various platforms, a GitHub survey and Lu Wilson's (Wilson, 2024) talk on open practices indicate that open source is still failing to fulfil its endeavours of being an inclusive community. GitHub's "Open Source Survey 2024" even reveals a decline of interest in open source being welcoming from 2017 to 2024. (Opensourcesurvey.org, 2024) Additionally, studies show that there are still deep-seated gender issues in open-source software. The literature review "Women's Participation in Open Source Software: A Survey of the Literature" has revealed significant gender disparities in the field of open-source software with women's representation being at about just 10%. (Trinkenreich, 2022, p. 8) It is wrong to assume, that only efforts focused on general ethos and politics in theory can ensure structural change from within their own system.

Implementation

With my background in graphic design, I found myself involuntary adopting and employing practices that I slowly started to reject. All this while becoming more professionalised with proprietary and GUI design software over a decade, and being an Adobe Illustrator tutor at my previous academy. I was advocating to learn Adobe's software fluently as a graphic designer, to be able to unfold full creativeness without having a "barrier" or seamless interface between user and machine. Furthermore, I realised that this so-called barrier however can inform alternative graphic-making praxes in new and *awkward* ways, used as term by Femke Snelting in *Awkward Gestures: Designing with free software*. The argument in *Tools shape practice shapes tools...* let me rethink my intentions of counter-tools: Adobe's limited and predetermined work

environment transforms into space of infinite possibilities and open ends, in contrast F/LOSS is an invitation to reevaluate standardised workflows and reflecting between aesthetics, technology, and production. (Berends and Snelting, 2024, p. 8) Even if Adobe serves infinite possibilities, my experience shows that by utilising, it produces flatness and is becoming too perfect and predictable. With these non-proprietary counter-tools I see a more autonomous control in the production means by designers. Tools that do not, for example, make users dependent on subscription models and do not limit their potential uses, as I described in the first chapter. A shift from just being a mere observer to engager to evolve new meaning in my praxis. Moving the use of tools more centralised than incidental and peripheral. *Hackers and Designers* questioned in their workshop “Counter Interfaces”, if designers actually control GUI-tools—for instance if switches, toolbars, drop downs, menu lists and sliders in program interfaces may influence the dependency in creation? (Hackersanddesigners.nl, 2022)

Proprietary software tries to get invisible and processes are hidden behind interfaces. The environment and application is predictable, limited and enclosed. The user is becoming increasingly obsolete, especially with the rise of AI and software getting “smart”. On the opposite, the use of counter-tools can be unpredictable, while opening up unintended processes, methods and outcomes. As Snelting describes, that this process of mishandling and misusing of software may unclothe questions about underlying processes. She goes further, that it brings out unusual gestures, which break with the appeasing elegance of the usual designer who is in all means sorted. (Snelting, 2008, p. 8) Designers, which are associated with self-imposed norms and conformity to rigid systems. Accordingly, I see possibilities in emphasising the glitch, messiness, error and bugs in process-oriented processes and breaking with trained (and often unquestioned) flows. Furthermore, by unlearning anchored guidelines and accept incompetence in the use of software and seeing habits while learning to handle them. Flows in the form of processes with open ends are highlighting *repraxis* and the exploration itself. Pointing out the creation instead of the created, practice graphic design as a verb instead of a noun. (Atkinson, 2021) I argue that the utilisation of counter-tools can be an embracing and reactivating act of anti-design in new terms of resistance of conventional practice and visualities, which are instruments to support consumption and the capitalist system. Additionally, F/LOSS, which exchange does not solely supply information and products, but rather behaviours, approaches and methods in working. (Van Belle, 2008, p. 19) Consequently,

counterpraxis and their users getting politically and collectively involved as workers and citizens, rather than as individuals in a competitive field.

In conclusion, I noticed that despite the unproductive and unfamiliar processes, I became more invented in experimenting with the possibilities. During my research, I saw that further appropriation, experimentation and exploration of these counter-tools could be a valuable shift and important role in graphic making praxes. In a decentralisation of the usage of production means and centralisation of the process and tool application itself I see promising possibilities. I observed that these counter-tools are inherently foster experimentation, empowerment and openness. I believe it is important to critically examine one's own praxes and their consequences.

Conclusion

It is still challenging for me to imagine graphic design being detached from capitalist complicity, because many attempts have been nothing more than a facade for decades. They have been exploited to evade capitalist ties while still justifying traditional graphic design as ethical. I was searching for a way out of these very capitalist practices in graphic design to gain hope for this once passion of mine. During my research I found hopeful alternative possibilities as production means in the utilisation of counter-tools in the sphere of open source, even if they first seem uncomfortable. I see vast opportunities for graphic designers and makers in the transformation towards free, open and non-proprietary software, especially in their general values.

Nevertheless, after my research of six months I have arrived to the conclusion, that the counter-tools I experimented with, cannot be in short time a replacement in everyday graphic design work. Especially taking in consideration the difficulties involved in radically changing practices within capitalist systems and working conditions. Although, during this time I learned that the use of counter-tools can be far more than mere production means for designers. Discovering and experimenting with these, gave me an optimistic reclaim for graphic design praxes and a community, which is reversed to serve industry and commodity culture. Therefore, I perceive the idea of anti-design as an inspiring starting point for counterpraxis on constantly questioning norms, tools and established practices. I found a contrast to the

exclusive interested in finished outcomes and productivity, which are typically characterising in conventional design and capitalist systems. Hence, I shifted my focus more towards actively engaging in the making process, rather than the product and embracing the unknown and unproductive detours for unusual gestures.

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Figure 6: Screenshot by author.

Figure 7: Screenshot by author.

Figure 8: Screenshot by author.

Figure 9: Screenshot by author.

Figure 10: Screenshot by author.

Figure 11: Screenshot by author.

Figure 12: Screenshot by author.

Figure 13: Screenshot by author.

Figure 14: Screenshot by author.

Figure 15: *source unknown*. [online] Available at: <https://x.com/reactjpg/status/1358325173120716802> [Accessed 17 Apr. 2026].