

# Preface

My work is located in a post-structuralist discourse, but where post-structuralism works on the basis of deconstruction of existing texts and forms, I ask how we might, from a similar theoretical premise, create new work.

Post-structuralism arises out of Derrida’s critique of logocentric thought systems, in which ‘things’ (including figurative things) are thought to have inherent properties; rather, Derrida argues, properties are dynamically allotted to things by the relationships they exist within. Deconstruction, one of the primary methodologies of post-structuralism, aims to level and reset dualities such as speech/writing, man/woman, inside/outside, self/other, which it sees as always producing implicit hierarchical power relations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For an excellent review of post-structuralism an graphic design, see Ellen Lupton’s article, <http://elupton.com/2009/10/deconstruction-and-graphic-design>

Without previously knowing anything about Derrida or post-structuralism, I came intuitively to a similar position: first through my work as a designer, as I attempted to find ways to describe a certain quality I perceived to be unsatisfactory in my work, then through a series of trans-disciplinary readings that all seemed to be addressing a similar question, from the fields of anthropology, philosophy, cognitive science, quantum mechanics, semiotics, literature, art history, music theory, studies of creativity and improvisation, and various wisdom traditions such as Buddhism. Thus, in line with the constructivist approach to education, it was perhaps best that I experienced and ‘constructed’ for myself first what I have only recently come to recognize as an existing field, with an established nomenclature for the kinds of issues I have intuitively been tackling, and a set of discourses within which I have now already found my own position. I do not for instance believe in the ‘death of the author’, but I do believe that voice is an incredibly complex phenomenon. Similarly I cannot accept post-structuralism’s slide into post-modernism; I think they just ran out of steam.

My ignorance until recently of this wider context is perhaps fortuitous because post-structuralism has already ‘had its day’ in graphic design, notably in the Cranbrook program led by Katherine McCoy; and, had I encountered this earlier in my graphic design journey, I might have fallen into imitative passivity and similar pitfalls—if the term ‘post-structuralism’ had even held any meaning for me, lacking my personal intuitive encounter, grappling and discoveries.

The introduction that follows therefore makes no reference to post-structuralism; I have preserved it as a record of how I conceived my thesis inquiry. But it is now fascinating to note the points of divergence that have evolved through my previous ignorance: starting from the same set of assumptions regarding the nature of ‘things’, but lacking the methodology of deconstruction, I have discovered instead a means of making, a set of practices and considerations, and my own original nomenclature that together, I believe, represent a new, nuanced extension of post-structuralism that begins to point in an extremely exciting direction for graphic design.

Specifically, in considering the ‘genesis of ‘things’’, I have located the ‘performative’ as a key insight. This is a trajectory already very well established in the arts outside of graphic design, as it underscores jazz music, Noh theatre, most forms of ritual (from religion to sports); and it finds rigorous theoretical and experimental expression in the work of J. L. Austin on ‘speech acts’ and the poet Charles Olson’s sense of ‘projective verse’, respectively. The key aspect of performativity is that it differs from performance: the performative is the bringing of something new into the world which has not been seen before, does not represent, is not, as Dr. Michael Hrebeniak puts it in our conversation included here, a ‘metonymic substitution’; whereas the performance is a rendition and representation of something already existing in the world, a copy, and a preservation of existing power hierarchies. For this reason, the formulation in my subtitle emphasizes the word ‘form’ inside of ‘perFORMative’, as my contention in this thesis is that this is where form comes from. Form can also come from tradition, of course, a ‘performance’ of existing forms which are operated within, remixed, satirized, and critiqued. This sense of form has recently received great attention in graphic design, to the extent that it is perhaps now thought of as the sole area of inquiry. Yet as Robert Giampietro points out in