

About 'Ethics in Design'.

Andréa Poshar

The 105th College Art Association CAA Annual Conference, with its more than 250 Sessions, is considered to be one of the largest international gatherings of professionals and research in the visual arts environment. Andréa Poshar went to New York City in mid-February, to participate in the 'Ethics in Design' panel.

Organized by Andrew deRosa (Designer and Assistant Professor at the Queens College) and Laura Scherling (Design lead at the New School), the panel aimed at bringing into discussion the role of the communication designer, design practitioners and design educators towards their position to influence culture and persuade audiences.

According to deRosa and Scherling, “the purpose of the panel was to bring together diverse points from designers, researchers, and educators who are working at the intersection of design and ethics and to create a discourse around the issues”.

The panel exceeded expectations and covered a wide range of topics. Paul Nini (Ohio State University) examined a model for threading ethical content throughout design education curricula. By analyzing the curricula offered by design schools, Nini realized the importance of such discussion within graduate and undergraduate-level seminar and professional practices courses. Nini has been writing about ethics in design since the early 2000s, and he points out that among his first investigations, he found the speech delivered by [Milton Glaser at](#)

the AIGA 2002 Voice Conference, where Glasser stated that in “AIGA’s code of ethics there is a significant amount of useful information about the appropriate behavior towards clients and other designers, but not a word about a designer’s relationship to the public.” To Nini, it is necessary to keep the discussion on designer’s profession’s responsibilities towards its audience;

Meredith James (Portland State University) discussed social media designers as ethical interventionists. With few examples from Facebook, Instagram, Google, and mobile applications, the researcher presented her concerns about “the overall attitude, privilege and racial dynamic that permeates online culture”. What concerns James is the passivity with which the industry is handling ethical questions. Siri’s design for instance, cannot distinguish - neither filtrate - questions related to suicide and suicidal help. According to James, designers should question their role as social agents to what regards the development and coding of those social platforms.



In turn, Mariana Amatullo (ArtCenter College of Design, Pasadena) explored ethical questions regarding design education for social innovation and presented the rules of engagement in Design Education for Social Innovation. Amatullo, co-founder of the Designmatters at the ArtCenter, introduced some of the projects developed by the group. One of them was “Where’s Daryl?”, a middle school violence and gun prevention campaign developed in the fall of 2011 in Los Angeles (US). The second project presented was “Safe the Niños”, developed in Santiago, Chile. In partnership with COANIQUEM, a nonprofit Chilean pediatric burn treatment facility, Amatullo’s students were challenged to reinvigorate the 6-acre campus of the institution with innovative environments able to afford optimal healing for the children who stay in the center for their recovery/healing process. To Amatullo, design is uniquely positioned to catalyze our capabilities as human beings to be “free in action, responsible in society and wise in the pursuit of knowledge” (McKeon, 1964).

Taking into account the assumption that historically many were the designers to engage within politics and activist movements (Meggs and Purvis, 2009; Hollis 2001), I discussed about the ethical complexity resulting from this relationship. Designers can create immense social and cultural changes by interacting with marginalized groups of the society. Within the tools of the hegemonic culture and their cultural mainstream background, designers are not only able to create alternative means of communication (Eco, 1986; de Certeau, 2010), but they are also able to share, teach or per pass their own knowledge. Considered to be a good action of design or a commodification process itself (Poshar, 2014), it is necessary to observe and analyze the extension that designer's influence can cause; it is necessary to understand how they can re-shape activism movement's mindset while presenting mainstream's systems/processes. What I intended to point out, was the exchanges and/or interactions between designers and social movements and their ethical nature with what regards these relations. Following this line of thought, the ambiguity of the designer within activism should be more discussed in nearer future, as well as the role of the designer as an agent of fruition (Latour, 2005; Calabrese, 1987) between hegemonic and activism culture.

The chairs deRosa and Scherling summarized the multitude of themes that have emerged "touching on everything from ethical issues in design and technology and design pedagogy, to broaching issues that are often difficult to address in our field such as race and representation, the role of design in low-income communities, sustainability, politics, social justice, and philosophy. Ethics and design as a subject matter is topical, and ripe for further investigation".

Given the rapid advancement in media technologies and its influence on the field, it seems especially timely to re-investigate the concept of ethics in design. As global communication (design) changes, the ways in which we practice design have also changed. New ethical considerations have arisen and it seems mandatory to all of us in the field to re-think it.

Andréa Poshar*, April 2017

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