The Political Potential of Humour in Graphic Design

or

**A designer, a comedian,
and a politician walk into a bar.**

Akbar Khatir

MA THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis is an exploration around the topics of graphic design, humour, and the political. More specifically, the use of humour as a political tool in a graphic design practice. This thesis provides an overview of the most significant theories of humour. By way of examining the three encompassing theories of humour and conducting qualitative interviews, this thesis tries to understand as to why humour might be of value to graphic designers.

This thesis use the theories of humour as a framework for investigating the political dimension of graphic design. Humour is universal phenomenon that is highly contextual, therefore it is one of the most important aspects when trying to understand any particular culture. As for graphics design, it is commonly defined as a profession and practice of cultural intermediaries, who are situated in between production and consumption. This close-up view, of how images and ideas circulate within a given culture, is inherently political but yet graphic design lacks political power. By the way of humour, we can open up unexpected opportunities in the discourse of graphic design, that can allow us to expand our conception of what it means to be a graphic designer, beyond its visual artefacts.

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A designer, a comedian, and a politician walk into a bar.

Akbar Khatir

Allahu Akbar

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Preface

WAS CHARLIE CHAPLIN THE GREATEST
GRAPHIC DESIGNER IN THE WORLD?

In trying to answer this hypothetical question, one will have to come up with the criteria of what is the *ideal* graphic designer, if there is one.

Let me try to clarify and answer the question based on my own criteria, which will form the basis of my thesis. To be short and straightforward. Yes, Chaplin was the greatest graphic designer in the world, and the figure of the Tramp the greatest design object/ project. The answer implies an existing criteria but reality is too complex and confounding than simple declarations. Chaplin, or more precisely his creation the Tramp, is the catalyst for the formation of a criteria. It informs the criteria rather than be chosen by it.

For the sake of clarity the criteria is as follows:
Graphic designers are foremost citizens and as such part of the politic. Therefore, they are responsible for engaging directly or indirectly with political structures, whether they be institutional or conceptual. This engagement manifests itself in the visual form when the profession/discipline/work is graphic design. The effectiveness of the engagement is dependent on the power of the visual to carry and/or communicate to others in the body politic. The Tramp is a symbol and starting point for this thesis. Or to put it ironically, a sort of avatar, brand mascot, and logo wrapped into one.

Although the initial question is a provocation of sorts, it is one which seriously needs to be pondered and dealt with by graphics designers and others alike. By defining the ideal, we define our roles as graphic designers and we envision our encompassing roles in the society we live in.

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1. Introduction

Lets start with graphic design. People seem to underestimate the inherent power of graphic design. This is the case both inside and outside the profession. From a generalized outsider view, graphic design is about making things look "pretty" or "presentable", depending on your angle. It is a varnish that attracts. For its practitioners, graphic design is about organizing, communicating, and solving problems. This view seems to be the general consensus within the field. But yet it underestimates the potential of graphic design by narrowly defining the field of discussion to formal qualities and needs of the client or commissioner.

The potential power of graphic designer, and graphic design by extension, lies in its understanding of how symbols and signs might operate in society at a given time and affect it. It is the understanding of how symbols and signs might be transmitted and received. It is the power of visuals to influence behaviour and communicate complex conceptual ideas through instinctive reading of images. It is the understanding of the historical context of symbols/signs.

It is within this understanding of graphic design that this thesis is formulated. The subject matters we will be tackling are Graphic Design, Humour, Politics, and their intersections. Although the subject areas might seem disconnected, this thesis will show some crucial connections between them to highlight their relationship with each other. This thesis is going to be based around the following research questions:

Why has humour been used and continues to be used as a form of political resistance in/through a graphic design practice?

What can graphic design learn from theories of humour and their political implications?

How can graphic design actively engage with the society it operates in?

In *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, Philip B. Meggs (2011) writes that the "immediacy and ephemeral nature of graphic design, combined with its link with the social, political and economic life of its culture, enables it to more closely express the Zeitgeist of an epoch than many other forms of human expression" (viii). It is within this framework that we might see the insights of graphic design and its practitioners, but also how graphic design might move beyond just the capability of expressing the *Zeitgeist*.

The impetus for this thesis is not graphic design or design in general. In this thesis we will be looking at the practice of graphic design, as seen through the lens of the political and humour. We will consider the role of humour as a political tool, and hows its insights might be applied to graphic design. Another motivation for writing this thesis is the lack of research and in-depth analysis that examines the intersection of the three subject areas. The existing literature in graphic design is either insufficient in its analysis or highly focused on the artefacts of graphic design.

Broadly speaking, the primary interest of this thesis is to better understand the practice of graphic design by way of humour theory and considering the practice politically.

SCOPE

Before moving forward it is important to establish the scope of this thesis. Within the context of this thesis a *graphic designer* will be defined as someone that arranges "type, form, and image" by combining "illustrations, photographs, and type in order to communicate an idea" (Cezzar 2017).

Since this thesis concerns itself with the political, it will be of value to briefly explain what we mean by *the political*. For this we will turn to the definitions provided by political theorist Chantal Mouffe

and design theorist Tony Fry. Mouffe (2005a), in her book *On the Political*, considers the political as "the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflict-uality provided by the political" (9). Fry (2011), in *Design as Politics*, echoes Mouffe's (2005a) statement when he states his differentia-tion between politics and the political:

> Politics is an institutionalized practice exercised by individuals, organi-zations and states, while the political exists as a wider sphere of activity embedded in the directive structures of a society and in the conduct of human as 'political animals'. Politics effectively takes place in the sphere of the political wherein the agency of things – material and immaterial – is determined and exercised as they are perceived, and become directly or indirectly influenced, by a political ideology. (5-6)

Contending with the political dimension of creative practices is crucial to this thesis. As such, the practice of graphic design can be seen as political, since one cannot distinguish between political and non-political design. Because "every form of artistic practice either contributes to the reproduction of the given [hegemonic] common sense…or contributes to the deconstruction or critique of it" (Mouffe et al. 2001, 100).

CONTENT OUTLINE

A significant part of this thesis will consist of introducing, review-ing, and juxtaposing theories from the fields of graphic design and humour, and their political implications. Chapter 2 will introduce the most significant ideas and theories in the study of humour. This chapter is crucial to the rest of the thesis, since it is the base for the subsequent chapters. Along with introducing humour stud-ies, we will explore the three most prominent theories of humour,

Superiority Theory, Relief Theory, and Incongruity Theory. We will also briefly look at the concept of humour as play, parody, and satire.

Chapter 3 further explores the thesis' main subject areas, graphic design, humour, and the political, as we discuss the intersections between each of these topics. The discussions are divided into three sections.

Chapter 4 is based upon interviews, so that the reader can grasp the ideas of the previous chapters in the context of their translation into a practice. It presents interviews with three contemporary Finnish designers and artists; Otto Karvonen, Kasper Strömman, and the GRMXXI collective. The interviews follow a qualitative research methodology and approach, in which the discussion is semi-structured and helped by an interview guide.

THEORIES OF HUMOUR

2

2. Theories of Humour

The use of humour is an integral part of how we communicate in human societies. It can be verbal, written, visual, or auditory. The importance of humour goes well beyond our need to feel moments of elation. It is an indicator of how a particular society works, so much so, that for anthropologist the operation of humour is one of the crucial keys to the understanding of a particular society. The study of humour has come to be an interdisciplinary endeavour, including disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, literary studies, and many more.

The following pages are going to be an overview of the crucial concepts of humour. This chapter will serve as a base for the rest of this thesis, as it is necessary to understand and analyze humour in all its. This also provides us with a background so we understand the political role of humour and its use in graphic design.

This section is by no means an exhaustive account, but rather a cumulation of the major theories on how humour operates. We will look at the three encompassing theories of humour: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, and Relief Theory. It should be noted that, as it is understood today, these theories are not competing theories but rather complimentary to each other. These theories are general frameworks which encompass diverse sub-theories. Humour as a topic is too far reaching and complex to be understood from a singular perspective, which is why the boundaries of the aforementioned theories are fluid, and a single theory can be situated within multiple frameworks.

Aside from these three encompassing theories, we are also going to cover the concept of humour as play, and differentiate between parody and satire. The reason being that these elements of humour are essential for understanding the role of humour in visual communication, and especially graphic design.

2.1. Superiority Theory

The Superiority Theory of humour is perhaps amongst the oldest theories concerning humour. According to Adrian Bardon (2005), "[it] is the theory that the humor we find in comedy and in life is based on ridicule, wherein we regard the object of amusement as inferior and/or ourselves as superior" (463). For instance, the laughter followed after witnessing someone slip on a banana peel or *Your mama is so fat* jokes, blonde jokes, *Wipeout* tv show, home videos, *Jackass* tv show, etc.

Some of the most well known thinkers that have come to be associated with the Superiority Theory are Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Charles Baudelaire, A.M. Ludovici, and Roger Scruton. Although one should thread carefully when grouping them under one label. John Morreall (2009), the noted philosopher of humour, supports this view when saying that Superiority Theory is "a term of art meant to capture one feature shared by accounts of laughter that differ in other respects" (6).

Ancient Greek thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Epictetus, and the Stoics consider humour in a negative light. An important caveat to their assessment of humour should be that the word *humour* did not have the same meaning as we use it today. This becomes clear when we look at the etymology of the word *humour*, which means liquid as well as bodily fluids (Carroll 2014, 5). Humour originated from and was tied to the physical body. So when we talk about humour in the context of the ancient Greek thinkers, we are really talking about their views on comedy and laughter. Plato can be considered to be among the chief critics of laughter. In the *Philebus*, Plato contends that laughter contains malice towards the others who are not self-aware and deceive themselves as a result (6). Plato advises for the suppression of comedy and laughter for the citizens of his republic:

...indeed one should learn about the ridiculous things just for this reason — so that he may never do or say, through ignorance, anything that is ridiculous, if he doesn't have to. The imitation of such things should be assigned to slaves and to strangers who work for hire. There should never be any seriousness whatsoever about these things, nor should any free person, woman or man, be observed learning these things; (*The Laws of Plato* 7.816e)

A poet of comedy, or of some iambic lampoon, or a melody of the Muses, may not in any way make a comedy about any citizen, through speech or image, whether with spirited anger or without spirited anger. (11.935e)

Although Aristotle believed humour to be "a form of abuse" (Carroll 2014, 6), he still maintained that it had a positive affect when enjoyed in moderation as form of relaxation and a "counterweight to activity" (7). His cautious approval of humour also extends to "jokes that abuse what is itself improper" (Bardon 2005, 464).

Through the ancients Greeks, ideas and perceptions towards humour passed down to early Christian thinkers. In his book, *Comic Relief*, Morreall (2009) adopts the view that "early Christian thinkers brought together these negative assessments of laughter from both Greek and biblical sources. Like Plato and the Stoics, they were bothered by the loss of self-control in laughter" (5). To this one can add the view of laughter in the Bible. Morreall (2016) describes the views of Christian thinkers as being "reinforced by negative representations of laughter and humor in the Bible, the vast majority of which are linked to hostility".

The popularization of the Superiority Theory, can also be explained through its promotion by Thomas Hobbes, the influential English philosopher. As one might expect from the author of *Leviathan* (1651 [1982]), Hobbes views laughter in terms of selfishness and egotism.

He states,

> the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. (38)

The above quote brings to forth another dimension of the Superiority Theory; that laughter can also be directed at oneself when it is at one's *former* state of being. For instance, the laughter invoked in us by not remembering something very obvious.

The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1914, 87), in his book *Laughter*, presents his version of Superiority Theory by arguing that humiliation that comes from being laughed at is a form of social corrective. That is to say, it forces the object of laughter to mend their behaviour in a more socially acceptable manner.

One of the contemporary proponents of Superiority Theory is the philosopher Roger Scruton. In Scruton's view, Superiority Theory is supported by the fact that most people dislike being laughed at. For him this surely indicates that by being the object of laughter we feel devalued in the eyes of others (Morreall 2016, 4).

However, despite its popularity in the past, there are various objections to the Superiority Theory. One objection is put forth by Noël Carroll in his book, *Humour: A Very Short History*. He finds Superiority Theory to be inadequate when trying to "explain puns, laughter from amiable teasing, self-deprecatory humour, laughter at funny faces (by babies), laughter at prowess of Buster Keaton" (Carroll 2014, 12-13). Superiority Theory is highly dependent on laughter, since it can be considered an outward sign of superiority and/or a signal of scorn on the subject. But laughter is not a

requirement for many instances of humour. And there are also many instances where laughter is a "response to tickling, nutritious oxide, cannabis, alcohol, laughter itself…" (16). Francis Hutcheson supports this line of argument when he says that "superiority theorists have missed the main issue in amused laughter, and are focusing instead on an incidental characteristic of some humorous situations" (Bardon 2005, 466) rather than the cause of it .

It should be mentioned that the context of the pronouncements in regards to humour and/or laughter by Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes is important, since most of the claims about humour in their works could claim to be in passing when discussing other topics.

We should note though that most of the claims about humour in the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes were in passing when they were discussing other topics. They do not elaborate their thoughts on humour in any comprehensive manner. So, we should keep in mind the context of these pronouncements. Sheila Lintott (2016) advices as much when she suggest that "neither Plato nor Aristotle, and I will add Hobbes, espoused superiority theory as an essentialist comprehensive theory of humorous laughter" (349).

2.2 Incongruity Theory

Incongruity Theory is "based on the fact that human experience works with learned patterns" (Morreall 2009, 10), where past experience effects our response to future experiences. When our expectations are not meet and the pattern is not followed it creates a discord or disruption. In respect to comic amusement the disruption is between how the world is and how it should be (Carroll 2014, 17). This disruption is referred to as the incongruity.

Incongruity Theory is considered to be the most dominant theory in humour studies. The dominance of this theory could be attributed to the fact that it can account for a considerable amount of instances that correspond to humorous instances. These instances can vary considerably – such as jokes, puns, slapstick, found humour, absurdities, etc. – but still be subject to being analyzed through Incongruity Theory.

The origins of the Incongruity Theory can also be traced back to the ancient greek philosophers. Although the term *incongruity* wasn't used at the time, Aristotle wrote "that one way for a speaker to get a laugh is to create an expectation in the audience and then violate it" (Morreall 2016). This is a strategy familiar to anyone who has seen a stand-up comedian perform. Umberto Eco (1979) concurs with Aristotle when explaining the workings of a MAD Magazine comic strip based on the genre of the Western. He states that "one must be aware of the background *genre role* (namely, western movie) whose violation produces the comic pleasure. But the rule must be presupposed and taken for granted" (5).

Regarding the theoretical frame of this theory, when it is compared to Superiority Theory, there is a shift in the analyzed object in Incongruity Theory. The shift occurs from "the emotional angle of derision, envy and malice to a cognitive view of humor and its

analysis" (Larkin-Galiñanes 2017, 5). Although a generalization it would still be apt to say that Superiority Theory deals with the "how we use humour", whereas Incongruity Theory asks "why we find something humorous".

In the psychological humour theories of Thomas Schultz and Jerry Suls, incongruity is not considered sufficient on its own. In their view, it is the resolution of the incongruity that gives rise to comic amusement (Morreall 2016). Salvatore Attardo (1994) refers to theorists such as Schultz and Suls, as Incongruity-Resolution theorist (143), but notes that the resolution of "the incongruity is not supposed to get rid of the incongruity, but to coexist and accompany it" (144).

It should also be noted that not everything we find incongruous is amusing, such as puzzles, feelings of anger, and fear. To put it another way, everything funny might be incongruous but not everything incongruous is funny. James Beattie seems to have perceived this difference when advising that the "perception of incongruity will not excite the 'risible emotion,' [of laughter in this case…] when that perception is 'attended with some other emotion of greater authority' such as fear, pity, moral disapprobation, indignation, or disgust" (quoted in Morreall 2016). Noël Carroll (2014) tries to resolve this conflict by proposing that for "comic amusement to take off, it must occur in a context from which fear for ourselves and those we care about—including fictional characters—has been banished […] or, at least, what is potentially threatening, frightening, anxiety producing aspects should be deflected and/or marginalized" (29-30).

Apart from Aristotle, many other historical thinkers have contributed to the advancement of Incongruity Theory in all its variations. Some of them include Henri Bergson, Immanuel Kant, James Beattie, Søren Kierkegaard, Francis Hutcheson, and Arthur Schopenhauer. While it is valuable to state some of their views it

has to be acknowledged that only Beattie and Bergson wrote anything substantial on the topic of humour (Morreall 2009, 12).

Kierkegaard connects the disruption of our exceptions to the tragic, as well as the comic. He states,

> The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction.... The comic apprehension evokes the contradiction or makes it manifest by having in mind the way out, which is why the contradiction is painless. The tragic apprehension sees the contradiction and despairs of a way out. (quoted in Morreall 2016)

Bergson says a situation is comic "when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" (Larkin-Galiñanes 2017, 13). Bergson's view of humour as a corrective, which we have previously discussed, positions *the social* at the core of his theory. He maintain that laughter is an act of the intellect rather than a response to emotion (Bergson 1914, 186).

For Schopenhauer "the cause of amusement is a discrepancy between our abstract concepts and our perceptions of things that are instantiations of those concepts" (Morreall 2009, 12). And it is in this contradiction where the pleasure of amusement, such as laughter, lies for us. Schopenhauer further elaborates by claiming that "on some subconscious level, we are resentful of our higher intellectual faculties, so we are pleased when they are frustrated: laughter is the expression of a kind of pleasure that derives from seeing thought frustrated by perception when expectation is contradicted by reality" (Bardon 2005, 470).

Kant refutes Schopenhauer by arguing that contradiction between our expectation and reality can only lead to frustration rather than enjoyment. According to Kant,

A joke amuses us by evoking, shifting, and dissipating our thoughts, but we do not learn anything through these mental gymnastics. In humor generally, according to Kant, our reason finds nothing of worth. The jostling of ideas, however, produces a physical jostling of our internal organs and we enjoy that physical stimulation. (quoted in Morreall 2016)

Although in general agreement with the notion of the incongruous in humour, Kant adds a curious physiological element. As we will see, Kant's physiological explanation for laughter leads us to the Relief Theory of humour.

Before we move forward, the following summary of Incongruity Theory by Carroll (2014) gives us a good working definition. He summarizes:

Someone is comically amused if and only if (i) the object of their mental state is a perceived incongruity, which (ii) they regard as neither threatening or anxiety producing nor (iii) annoying and which (iv) they do not approach with a genuine, puzzle-solving attitude, but which, rather, (v) they enjoy precisely for their perception of its incongruity. Humour is the response-dependent property that affords comic amusement. Found humour differs from invented humour in that the latter is proffered with the intention, supported by external and internal features of the presentation, to afford comic amusement, whereas in the case of found humour the percipient themselves not only discovers the incongruities but brackets wariness, annoyance, and the disposition towards puzzle solving on their own, thereby opening themselves to the possibility of enjoying the stimulus. (37)

2.3 Relief Theory

The physiological aspect of Kant's theory leads to the third encompassing theory of humour, the Relief Theory. Some of the individuals that are connected with advancing a form of Relief Theory include Immanuel Kant, Lord Shaftesbury, Herbert Spencer, Sigmund Freud, and Aristotle (in his lost second book of *Poetics*). Relief Theory views humour as a pressure valve for the release of nervous energy. It refutes Incongruity and Superiority Theory by claiming that the cause of amusement is the release of tension, whereas incongruity and humiliation might be an occasion for it but not the cause (Bardon 2005, 471).

The first Earl of Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper) is considered to be the first notable writer to have used the term *humour* in its contemporary understanding. He is also considered to be the first to have fully formulated a Relief Theory of humour. In his 1907 essay, *Sensus communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, he writes, "the natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged upon their constrainers" (in Morreall 2016).

Most forms of Relief Theory maintain that humour is connected to an emotional response. Herbert Spencer, the biological theorists, developed his Relief Theory of humour following this line of reasoning. In his essay, *On the Physiology of Laughter*, he claims that emotions manifest themselves as nervous energy in our bodies (Morreall 2009, 16). Once excessive energy gets built up by the way of excessive emotion, we try to release it in a physical form through movements of our body. For instance, excessive amounts of grief may lead to crying, or feelings of anger may lead to a fight. Laughter is another form that nervous energy can take. But unlike emotions,

laughter does not take an actionable form, it "functions *only* as a release of excess nervous energy" (16). For Spencer, laughter occurs when we are confronted with some grave or serious matter, which unexpectedly leads to or is transformed into something trivial (Carroll 2014, 38).

Freud is perhaps the most well known figure associated with Relief Theory. In his version of the theory, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, he differentiates between *joking*, *the comic*, and *humour*. In all the three formulations, "laughter releases nervous energy that was summoned for a psychological task, but then became superfluous as that task was abandoned" (Morreall 2016). In other words, the summoned energy is released as laughter when it is deemed to be no longer needed. According to Freud, the source of the nervous energy in *joking* comes from the energy required to suppress feelings, in *the comic* it is the energy of thinking, and in *humour* it is the energy of feeling emotions (Morreall 2009, 18). This might explain why a humorous disposition is common amongst vastly different populations and time periods. Humour serves as a deflection or an armour against harsh circumstances. It explains perhaps, to some extent, the use of humour as a survival mechanism. Bardon(2005) connects this to Freud's *pleasure principle*, which maintains that our "primitive psychic mechanism [...] directs us to avoid or repress negative feelings and pursue pleasure" (473). Arthur Koestler's *Safety-Valve Theory* follows a similar line of thinking. He proposes that laughter is an outlet of excessive emotions, which might negatively impact us if we were to act upon them. Laughter, therefore, is a deflection of these passions, "which incapacitates a person for action and at the same time leaves him/her pleasurably relieved" (Larkin-Galiñanes 2017, 11).

The Relief Theory as an explanation of humour is not considered to be sufficient on its own among contemporary humour theorists. It is too limiting when trying to take into account the various forms and processes of humour. One of the contentions with Relief Theory

is that it provides scant explanations as to how it understands the processes of humour. For Morreall (2009), the transformation of psychic energy "being rendered superfluous, seem unverifiable, and so of no use in building a theory of humor" (21). Relief Theory presents an hydraulic view of the mind, especially in Freud's and Spencer's version of it. It explains mental energies as one would the flow of water.

2.4 Humour as Play

One dimension of humour, which we haven't touched upon yet, is the notion of play. In the writings of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas we find the conceptualization of humour as a form of play. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae* states,

> As bodily tiredness is eased by resting the body, so psychological tiredness is eased by resting the soul. As we have explained in discussing the feelings, pleasure is rest for the soul. And therefore the remedy for weariness of soul lies in slackening the tension of mental study and taking some pleasure.... Those words and deeds in which nothing is sought beyond the soul's pleasure are called playful or humorous, and it is necessary to make use of them at times for solace of soul. (quoted in Morreall 2016).

Although not all forms of play are humour, an obvious example is playing sports, it has nonetheless a strong connection with humour. To repurpose something previously mentioned, *All play might not be humorous, but all humour can be playful*. Therefore, humour might be conceptualized as a form of play. The notion of play in humour becomes clearer once we realize that someone or something is doing the amusing, to make us laugh or to engage us in amusement. "Another way of saying that in amusing people we are out for pleasure [...] is that amusing people is a way of playing with them (Morreall 2009, 34).

The act of play provides us with opportunities to exercise our capabilities, whether they be mental or physical, in absurd or extreme ways. This is done in a safe environment that allows us the freedom/courage to engage in the exercise. By pushing our abilities to their limits we learn new skills, regardless of success or failure. Bardon (2005) concurs when she states that the "pursuit of humor represents a kind of play that contributes to conceptual flexibility. The feeling of enjoyment associated with this kind of play is amusement" (16).

The safe setting in play is established through, what ethologists call, a play signal, such as laughter or a smile. This is especially crucial in environments where the humorous might be hard to distinguish, for instance in conversation with others, or mock aggression.

A criticism of this view comes from Carroll (2014, 43), who brings to attention the case of satire, which deals with serious matters in society but is still a form of humour. Perhaps a counter argument could be that the signal is one of *indicating and/or requesting* of a safe setting to exercise the absurd/unusual interpretation, while it is still infused in the *usual* language and discussion.

The hypothesis by ethologists that laughter evolved as a play signal, provides a more ready explanation for the appearance and sound of laughter; "as an easily recognized cue to the group that they could relax. It also explains why laughter, considered separately from humor, is overwhelmingly a social experience, as [Superiority, Incongruity and Relief theories] do not" (Morreall 2009, 39).

This form of humorous play also provides a sort of freedom from constraints of convention and acceptability, while still being situated in it. Ted Cohen's understanding of humour as *anomalous* experiences supports this view when he asserts that "anomaly is pleasant when it provides a sense of power and freedom. It also can be pleasant when it inspires a mood of willing acceptance of one's own powerlessness" (Bardon 2005, 18).

To sum it up, Victor Raskin notes, Superiority, Incongruity, and Relief Theory "characterize the complex phenomenon of humor from very different angles and do not at all contradict each other – rather they seem to supplement each other quite nicely" (quoted in Morreall 2009, 7).

2.5 Parody ≠ Satire

Giovanni Sinicropi, as quoted in *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, states that;

> The lack of a rigorous, or at least reliable, definition of humor and of its categories causes (...) another difficulty that hinders research; it is represented by the fact that denominations of processes usually considered sources of humor (...) are often used as if they were synonyms or if they shared a semantic space. This denotes that the semantic field to which they belong does not have precise boundaries. (quoted in Attardo 1994, 4)

Sinicropi's concern is the lack of dependable definitions in the field of humour research, upon which researchers can build strong theories. As there is no constant, in terms of what is meant by satire, parody, irony, farce, wit, etc., we have to constantly spend extensive amounts of energy in defining them before we can proceed. So before we proceed further, the following sections should be viewed in light of Sinicropi's assessment, in all the complexities of relationships between the terms.

Although this thesis is not going to delve deeply into various categories and genres of humour, there are two concepts related to the concept of 'comedy' that need to be discussed and clarified further. These two concepts are satire and parody. We need to examine these two concepts because they are often confused with one another and at times used synonymously. They are also often associated with political forms of humour, satire more so than parody. In regards to graphic design, both concepts are featured heavily whenever an artifact of graphic design is referred to as having a political dimension.

Parody and satire are considered to have originated from literature and theatre. Therefore many of our ideas about these two concepts

derive from thinkers who considered them mainly within those confines. Nowadays, however, these concepts have become malleable enough that it can easily be extended to films, television, and various other fields of art and design.

The etymological source of the words satire and parody lead us to Latin and Ancient Greek. Satire comes from the Latin word *satura*, meaning "medley" or "assortment", while also describing a roman dish (Stott 2005, 104). It should be noted that western notions of, what we understand as, satire go back to ancient Greece. The word parody is derived from the ancient Greek term *parôidia*, which is a combination of *para* and *ode*. Para translates to "near", "imitation" and also "counter", while ode refers to song (Milne 2013, 196). In essence the term *parôidia* can be said to stand for an imitation in the form of a song.

SATIRE

Let us look at the concept of satire first. Andrew Stott (2005) defines satire as "a literary form that aims to criticize or censure people and ideas through the use of humour. Satire can take many forms, but is generally understood according to its degree of viciousness" (147). Leonard Feinberg (1963), while analyzing literary satire in The Satirist, postulates that "the technique of the satirist consists of a playfully critical distortion of the familiar" (7). One thing that is consistent between these two definitions is the aspect of a critical stance towards an object, whether that be a person, institution, convention, or concept. For a work to be considered satirical, there needs to be a critical oppositional stance taken within the work. According to Dannagal G. Young (2017), what sets satire apart from other forms of political humour is the quality of casting judgement on its object. She states that, "Jokes and texts that treat political topics in a lighthearted manner but offer no criticism of institutions, policies, or societal norms do not

constitute satire" (Young 2017). The judgement in a satire can be delivered in subtle or obvious ways. It can be delivered in a biting or jovial way, but needs to view its object in a critical light. The mode of address in western satire is often categorized into two techniques or approaches, the Horatian and Juvenalian, respectively named after the ancient Roman writers Horace (65-8 BC) and Juvenal (AD c.60-c.136) (Stott 2005, 105; Combe and Kumar 2015, 213). Horatian satire is considered to be a critique from an "honest man", delivered with playfulness and lightheartedness. Juvenalian satire on the other hand has darker tones, with its pessimistic irony and sarcasm delivered with indignation at the ills of society (Young 2017).

Satire can often include parody and other forms of humour. The categories of humour tend not to be exclusive, they often meld, incorporate, and echo one another, therefore the difficulty and complexity of defining them individually.

PARODY

While satire is concerned with using humour as a form of critical judgement towards the underlying norms of a society, parody is more about exaggerating the aesthetics of an existing concept or text as form of comment. In *Design Humor: The Art of Graphic Wit*, Steven Heller (2002) views parody as "the 'art' of imitating a serious subject in a nonsensical or ridiculous manner (but generally with underlying intent)" (86). For instance, caricatures are a form of parody, as they exaggerate distinctive characteristics of a person. Parody doesn't necessarily have to view the original work in a critical manner. Quite to the contrary, it could even present the original in a positive light, or pay homage to it, by "remain[ing] affectionate to their source" (Bousfield and Simpson 2017, 162).

For a parody to be effective, it requires the knowledge of the original reference. It could be argued that a parody can be enjoyed without

prior awareness of the original, just by enjoying its absurdity or silliness, but what makes it more effective, humorous, and memorable is the recognition of the original. Esther Milne (2013) puts forth the poststructuralist argument that parody is depended upon the audience's recognition of the dynamics between the referenced background text and the foregrounded parody, for it is "possible to miss the parodic intent of a work if one is unfamiliar with the cultural references" (197).

While we can acknowledge the value and purpose of parody (i.e. it binds the audience closer by making them complicit in its meaning-making), it is not beyond criticism, especially in respect to its political character. Dunne and Raby (2014) contend in *Speculative Everything*, when addressing the use of humour in design, that the power and effectiveness of design is reduced when "borrowing from existing formats" because "they signal too clearly that it is ironic and so relieve some burden from the viewer..." (40). James Anderson and Amie D. Kincaid warn that by "simply choosing a figure, idea, concept, or claim to parody, reaffirms the legitimacy of the object's power" (2013, 178). This line of critique could be taken one step further to include satirical works that are superficial and don't "challenge unjust [or the perceived unjust] social arrangements" and power structures (177-178).

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When discussing the effectiveness of political humour, specifically satire and parody, it is crucial to recognize that they are not prescriptive, they are concerned with exposition more than providing a solution for their criticism. Dannagal G. Young et al.(2014) argue for a similar perspective when stating that:

> ...the meta-communication inherent in comedy in general and parody
> in particular distances the audience from the object of critique, most
> comedy is compatible with rendering a judgment on the foibles and

follies of the human condition and human institutions but incompatible with a direct call to reform them in a specific way. (1123)

In discussing the disposition of the satirist, Feinberg (1963) echoes the above statement from a different perspective, he contends that the satirist is more of an artist than a moralist, "using for his material the moral values accepted by his society because satire deals with deviations from a norm" (41), adding that the satirist "is more interested in inadequacy than achievement, injustice than justice, illusion than truth" (185).

Due to its potential for destabilizing the hegemony of the status quo, satire is considered to be the most political form of humour. As such it is also most prone to censure by governmental and institutional forces. It is within this framework that we can consider a counter-argument to Dunne and Raby's aforementioned argument that parody states its intention too glaringly for it to be effective. Satire, when using the parodic form, may escape political censure. Because it clearly signals its intention as a humourous piece, so it is not supposed to be taken "seriously".

Chapter Summary

In this chapter we have discussed some crucial aspects of humour by looking at three encompassing and complementary theories of humour: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, and Relief Theory. We have also examined other particular concepts related to humour, such as the role of play, satire, and parody. As we proceed onwards, we should keep in mind humour's ability to expand our perceptions of taken-for-granted concepts. Not to mention, the complex social role it can play as a bonding and demarcating technique amongst individuals and groups. Upon the conclusion of this chapter it should be evident that humour is an integral part of how we understand ourselves and relate to each other in our society. Humor also allows us to imagine beyond the concepts we live by, through constantly shining a light on things we take for granted, whether they be related to aspects of cognition or social matters. It should be noted that viewing humour as a purely positive or negative attribute should be avoided, rather it is a tool through which we explore our context of being.

Now we are on a more stable ground in terms of the theoretical understanding of how humour might operate in our society, in all its richness and complexity. Moving forward, this knowledge will help us in analyzing the various dimensions of humour as they are applied in graphic design, and their use as a political tool.

INTERSECTIONS

3

3. Intersections

Graphic design, humour, and the political, like many societal phenomena, are not self-contained. Humour and the political are concepts that transcend any particular time and space, while the artefacts and techniques of graphic design are hard to escape in our visually saturated environment. Therefore it is no coincidence that these three fields are often amalgamating at various levels of our society. It is with this overarching perspective that this chapter has been developed, to analyze particular aspects of these intersections between the main subject matters of this thesis; graphic design, humour, and the political. By examining their areas of encounter, we can assess both opportunities created when they blend with each other, as well as the limitations that arise from these fusions.

For the sake of clarity, this chapter has been divided into three sub-sections: *Amused by Pictures* deals with graphic design's connection with humour, *All Graphic Design is Political* is concerned with understanding the political as it relates to the field of graphic design, and *More than Laughing at Pictures* examines the three subject matters together, in hopes of highlighting how graphic design might build upon the theories of political humour in order to expand its own discourse.

3.1. Amused by Pictures: Graphic Design & Humour

Humour is an integral part of human existence, as such it plays a major role in our communication. If we are in agreement that there is such a thing as visual language, or visual communication, than surely humour is a significant part of it. Graphic design is no different. Humour has been part of graphic design since its inception, whether one traces back its history back to early human civilizations or to its institutionalization as a profession.

Categories of humour easily lend themselves to be depicted in visual terms. Categories such as the pun, parody, pastiche, satire, and nonsense, to name just a few, have always had their visual counterparts. However, Some of these categories have been more rigorously analyzed than others when it comes to their visual manifestations. In regards to graphic design specifically, the lack of research and critical discussion is quite evident. Not much has been written about the incorporation of humour in graphic design, at least not in any in-depth manner. The lack of analysis is curious, considering humour is a commonly used strategy among graphic designers. The few books that take up the challenge of understanding this connection, like Steven Heller's *Design Humor: The Art of Graphic Wit* and Eli Kince's *Visual Puns in Design*, are venerable efforts and provide a reasonably good historical perspective and some insights, but have serious shortcomings,in regard to their theoretical treatment of the topic. They devote considerable amount of space to the concepts of wit, visual puns, and parody since they are some of the most often discussed concepts of humour in graphic design literature. Due to this fact, we will contemplate these concepts and analyze their use with a critical eye.

It is a commonly held belief that humour in graphic design is a strategy to "hook the viewer's interest" (Lupton and Phillips 2015, 73). As a mnemonic tool it helps in retention of a message or

concept, whatever that might be. Or in the words of Steven Heller (2002), the goal is to "to subvert the subconscious and thereby earn a market share of memory" (*xxix*). Perhaps memorability was the goal when Christian monks were writing and designing the illuminated manuscripts, even though we may not be able to fully understand their message. Christopher Niemann sees this mnemonic relationship as having "an interactive quality", where "the reader cannot only consume the design, but has to think to make it work" (quoted in Heller 2002, 149). Graphic designers, being mediators of symbols and signs, are aware of the bonding properties of humour (as discussed in chapter 2), when they try to incorporate it into their work. At different times in the history of the profession/discipline, graphic designers have used various forms of humour to get their and/or their client's message across. This humour often takes the form of focused play. When we perceive humour through the lens of play, then the wit of *caligramme*, the "nonsense" of Dada, the moderne design of the 1920s and 30s, the visual play of Paul Rand, Bradbury Thompson, Herb Lublin and their cohorts, become more evident as design humour. It could be argued that the postmodernist mood of the 1980s and 90s was the peak of humour graphic design, where cynicism was coated with a "profound sense of play and humor" (Heller 2002, 22) and a thick layer of irony .

GRAPHIC DESIGN AND THEORIES OF HUMOUR

Humour in graphic design is often understood in terms of the incongruities it presents through juxtapositions, scale differences, repetition and other forms of manipulations, which "also apply to 'straight' design" (Heller 2002, *xxxi*). Humour is seen as a cognitive strategy in order to elicit a sense of surprise. This directly relates to the concept of Incongruity Resolution Theory, whereby humour is achieved when the viewer has understood the frame of reference and has resolved the incongruous relationship that the artefact has presented. Graphic design relies on humour's mnemonic capacity to

not only engage the viewer at the moment of interaction but also to continue the dialogue beyond the initial interaction. This concept is referred to as *communicative dynamism* (Attardo 1994, 289; Delaney 2011). The use of visual puns is another aspect where Incongruity Theory is present in graphic design humour. The definition of visual pun as "an image with two or more concurrent meanings that when combined yield a single message" (Heller 2002, 57) directly exposes this fact.

Design humour also touches upon the bonding aspect of humour. By understanding the signs and their relationships in a work, the viewer becomes part of a group. The notion of humour as a bonding mechanism for a community is echoed by Russell Bestley (2013) when he writes that "the underlying sense of satisfaction felt by the viewer – either in 'getting the joke', sharing a common vision and empathizing with the subject, or simply solving the puzzle, ties many punk graphic design approaches together" (266). We will further discuss other social aspects of humour in graphic design in later sections.

Play is crucial in making new and surprising connections, so it is no wonder that the idea of play is ever-present in graphic design. Heller (2002) differentiates between child's play and adult play; "From child's play come randomness; from adult play comes concept. Random imagery is an end in itself, while concept is the basis for a solution, which translates into visual communication" (35).

It is in the translation from play to visual concept where the field of graphic design thrives in; to an extent that it is often taken for granted. Play becomes almost a prerequisite for intriguing and thought-provoking graphic design that provides insightful visual and conceptual connections. It is no different when using humour in graphic design. Perhaps humour is play's most natural companion in this respect.

Although the Relief Theory of humour may not be something obvious when examining graphic design, it could still – as a metaphorical concept – provide us with some insights. It could be said that certain tendencies/movements in graphic design, such as Dada, Punk and Post-Modernism, by their desire to shock and break taboos were releasing pent-up frustrations and energy by the way of their works (Bestley 2013, 257). But it has to be said that this line of reasoning needs more analysis and appears superficial for the moment.

WIT OR WIT-OUT

The majority of writing on the relationship between graphic design and humour has been from the perspective of its commercial practitioners, whether designers or writers. It is quite evident from the onset, that when discussing humour, the concept of *wit* is constantly used. At times as a separate concept from humour, on other occasions as a synonym for it.

The terms are almost never explicitly defined and differentiated, and whenever wit is defined, the definition seems to be unsatisfactory. For instance, Alissa Walker (2006) defines it as "the process of bringing together images and concepts and words in a way that surprises, or shocks, or delights" (81). Bestley (2013) writes, "graphic wit can be narrowed down to the recognition and understanding of a sense of surprise, an encounter with the unexpected that makes sense on reflection but was usually unseen or unnoticed at the outset – like the punchline of a joke" (236).

Heller (2002) states that "Wit and humor in design occur when play and logic are seamlessly interwined" (xxxi). So it becomes a confusing matter to decipher what is meant by the terms *humour* and *wit*, at any given time.

One interpretation for this confusion is the most straightforward. It is merely a convention that has been adopted from common usage. A matter of historical precedence. Such is the case when books are filed under "Wit and Humour" in a library system. Or that the definition of the term *wit* is not stable or agreed upon, and it "has been distinguished from [humour] for instance, while many people count wit as a kind of humor" (Morreall 2009, 64). According to multiple dictionaries, the term *Wit* is mainly connected to the broader categories of humour and intelligence. Wit is also a character type, as in someone who possess "quick inventiveness in language, and [takes] pleasurable liberties with meanings" (Stott 2005, 53). We can perhaps deduce from the above definitions that the term is meant to be a form of intelligent or cerebral humour, as opposed to crude or physical humour. But how does this quick wittedness show itself in static visual artefacts, which are less spontaneous than verbal conversations? Perhaps it has something to do with the perceived lightness and effortlessness of a particular work, where it must appear to be "free from the self-conscious and tired conceits of all belabored humor" (Heller 2002, xxvii).

When we examine what is considered to be "belaboured humour", some clues emerge as to the privileging of wit. Heller includes punk graphic design and digital graphics of the late 1990s and early 2000s in this category. Describing punk graphics as "acerbic but not necessarily strident, raucous but not really intelligent" (Heller 2002, 22), while claiming humour for "Digital Age-ist" being "often the problem, the solution, and the be-all-end-all" (25). This demarcation points to the author's preferred use of humour rather than anything related to intelligence of use. The use of wit, as a descriptor, when discussing graphic design humour is often charged with hidden prejudices and particular sets of ideas about "good design" and appropriate use of humour rather than any thorough analysis. It is to police the boundaries of acceptable use of humour by writers of the status quo. In regards to punk design, "Heller's narrow focus misses an understanding of the complexity of punk humour, as well

as its particularity to those within the subculture" (Bestley 2013, 234). The separation of wit from humour seems arbitrary at times and elitist in utilization, therefore we will use the term *humour* moving forward.

VISUAL PUNS

Pun is the variable that informs that particular type of jokes we have come to know as "dad jokes". Often referred to as the lowest form of humour, puns can also be considered the most egalitarian form, since it is based on a shared language, whether that be verbal or visual. The pun is ever-present in language, but can be hard to translate from one language to another due to its specificity. By this premise the assertion could be made that the *visual* pun is better at breaching the boundaries of language and culture, due to the proliferation of images, symbols, and icons (albeit mainly the western-anglo variety) that float as freely as capital in our globalized world.

Punning is a form of play that uses language as its clay, specifically the ambiguities inherit in it. The pun uses the particularities of language(s) "to cause a word, a sentence or a discourse to involve two or more different meanings" (Giorgadze 2015). According to Eli Kince (1982), it is a form of "sound, letter, or word manipulation" (11), which is often humorous but can also be serious or both. Visual puns operate similarly to verbal puns, but symbolic images are used instead of words. Or as Meri Giorgadze (2015) puts it in her paper, *Categories of Visual Puns*, "Visual puns are a type of visual expression in which the concept of word play is applied to an image" (Hempelmann and Samson 2007). From an anthropological/sociological perspective it could be argued, as Kince does, that one definition should suffice for both verbal and visual puns, since words are symbolic representations (1982, 11).

As Steven Heller (2002) puts it, "In visual language, it often is necessary to substitute one image for another, or one symbol for another — not just for purposes of jest but to enhance meaning" (xxviii). This form of play describes a key element to categories of metaphor, symbolism, and puns, but in their visual incarnation. Catherine A. Moore (2017) refers to these concepts and links them together by the way of "our inherent ability for pattern seeking", as exemplified by the Kuleshov effect. Puns, like metaphor and symbolism, seek for desperate visual elements which they can connect into a pattern, the results are new connections that push "beyond conventional patterns of thought to produce surprise or delight, or both" (Kince 1982, 11).

A pun is recognized by us when there is a cognitive fluctuation between two or more meanings generated by one or more symbols, which nonetheless belong and inform each other in one context. The recognition may result in a laugh, smile, or even a knowing nod. If our response is one of surprise at the cleverness, as though we have been caught off-guard and thereby sparks a smile or laugh, then that is the Humorous Pun Effect (46). It is a sort of instinctual release of tension. Even though Kince uses the word *humorous*, it is more akin to a *Comedic Pun Effect* or just plain funny. Whereas the *Analytical Pun Effect* is meant to be more of a "witty and apt" brain puzzle that produces a knowing smile (46). Rather like the untangling of a riddle.

Not all puns are created equal. Or at least they are not all the same. But the classification of puns into distinct categories has proven to be frustrating and confusing for scholars. In Ana Koren's (2012) words, it has proven to be "elusive, unstable and slippery" (24). Christian F. Hempelmann and Andrea C. Samson (2007) categorize the visual pun into six categories, from perfect visual puns to no visual pun, with most of their 72 test samples falling into two categories, the perfect visual pun and imperfect visual pun. Kince (1982) provides the following three categories;

The Literal Pun. When the effect that creates the pun literally upholds the primary meaning of the message, a literal pun is the result. (43)

The Suggestive Pun. When symbols create that almost magical feeling that you are seeing one thing with two meanings at the same time, you have witnessed a suggestive pun. (43)

The Comparative Pun. Different from the first two types, comparative puns rely on at least two key symbols to create the pun effect. In them, symbols that are visually similar are placed in similar situations for comparison. (45)

In terms of graphic design, the visual pun is not merely images. It often includes a text as an integral part. Russell Bestley (2013) connects the idea of interplay between image and text with the semiotic theories of Roland Barthes. Barthes' (244) concept of *anchorage* and *relay*, in his essay *Rhetoric of the Image*, is crucial here. Anchorage is the notion of placing a text with an image in order to *choose the correct level of perception*. In other words to ground or narrow down its meaning (Barthes 1977, 39). Relay refers to the idea of placing a text alongside an image in order to extend its "reading beyond the immediate and obvious" (Barthes 1977, 41; Bestley 2013, 244). The notions of Anchorage and Relay, as theoretical frameworks, provides us further tools to investigate the artefacts and techniques of graphic design, which includes the use of visual puns.

PARODY

Graphic design as a practice relies heavily on referencing visuals and ideas from the broader culture, whether it be the one it exists in or whether it is outside of it. As Rick Poynor (2003) puts it, "visual references of all kinds are an essential feature of the way that it communicates" (72). Parody is a form of humour that is inherently based on the idea of borrowing, referencing and manipulating. But

one must be aware that the "interpretation and understanding [of parody] can only take place when the viewer or reader is familiar with the context, history and (sub)cultural origins of the message" (Bestley 2013, 236). Or else the parody is lost on the audience.

The use of parody in the graphic design profession became immanently visible during the rise of postmodernist ideas during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Today, however, it is not attached to any particular school of thought. Parody is abound in contemporary culture. From the "jabs" at Donald Trump's hair and orange skin to brand knock-offs. It is as much used in ads by corporate brands, as it is by activists subverting these corporate brands. Since parody is mainly an aesthetically driven concept, it lends itself effortlessly to graphic designers. Ian Noble and Russell Bestley (2011) define parody as "a work created in order to mock, pass comment on, or make fun of an original work, its subject, author, style, or some other target, by means of humorous, satirical, or ironic imitation" (138). Parody shares some characteristics with other categories such as pastiche, burlesque, homage, and mimicry. The differentiation between parody, and these other concepts lies in its use of humour and mocking nature towards the original artefact, which either might be the primary target or as an aside. Therefore attention to both visual and conceptual detail is essential when trying to execute a parody. The designer has to have a deep understand of the material to be able to successfully manipulate it for parodic effect. Heller (2002) warns that, "if the parodist takes too many liberties, then the parody will suffer; conversely, if the material is not twisted enough, the result could read as mimicry, or, worse, plagiarism" (89).

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The use of humour in graphic design stretches back to its foundational blocks, i.e. illuminated manuscripts, caricatures, typography, etc. The visual pun has come to exemplify the use of humour in

graphic design, whether it be as a logo, editorial, parodic ad, or protest poster. By appealing to our inherent susceptibility to humour, designers have used and continue to use it as a strategy to attract our attention and as mnemonic tool in-order to extend the discourse of their message beyond the initial experience.

The analysis of humour in graphic design appears to be scant. It is often the case that writing about humour in graphic design is tackled by designers themselves or design journalists and critics. This type of approach seems to emphasize examples and visual presentation rather the theoretical analysis of humour integration. This shallow approach leads to pieces that are often devoid of rigorous analysis but depend short statements and truisms from designers, which themselves tend to be on the vague side. Instead of analysis and reflection, which could provide unique perspectives, we tend to have collection of images and superficial taken-for-granted assertions. It is understandable that images play a crucial role in carrying the burden of proof, nonetheless they can only try to support the assumptions of the author, whether convincingly or not. Perhaps it might be helpful to approach the matter from a more collaborative conversation between scholars of visual culture, researchers, and designers, whether that be in the form of in-depth interviews, discussions, or critiques.

It might be a generalization and vague pronouncement to say that both humour and graphic design are highly contextual based fields of inquiry. But we can't ignore the fact that their executions are often based on specific contextual symbols, and it is true for both that the conceptual leap of understanding may not happen if those symbols or their relationships can't be deciphered. In this regard, both humour and graphic design are about (re)presentation of concepts and categories within their situated cultures.

3.2. All Graphic Design is Political: Graphic Design and the Political

It seems to be another renaissance for political graphic design. Not sure by what criteria we can make that assessment. At least it is getting more attention by the design press and by the mainstream news press. As evident by these exhibitions from the past few years; *Hope to Nope* (2018) by the Design Museum in London, *The Art of a Political Revolution* (2016) a touring exhibition (across major cities in USA) by HVW8 Gallery, *It's Not Very Nice That* (2014) by the Lighthouse in Glasgow.

Perhaps one has to be thankful for the Donald Trump presidency for shinning some light at the political nature of graphic design and also making graphic designer think more political about their work. But is the anger, resolve, and dissent going to last when a more friendlier face of liberalism is presiding at the oval office. We saw a similar up surge of creative dissent when George W. Bush was in office, although one should not forget the highly successful, much talked about, and highly praised corporate branding exercise which was the 2008 candidate Barack Obama. From this observer's point of view, it seems like the design press only highlights the political nature of graphic design in contemporary society when there isn't a liberal centrist or centre-left politician in the highest office. This might be a bias of how the profession views itself, or at the associative bodies that regulate its boundaries. The phenomenon of selective coverage might be anglo-centric, it might not be true of greater Europe (whether that be the well to do european nations or the other ones who are there for the imposition of austerity measures), or even the rest of this multifaceted and complex world. But its applicability is still relevant, given the transmission of images from the north-western hemisphere to other parts of the world.

A note before moving forward. The following section only deals with a particular aspect of graphic design itself. It analysis how the profession sees and conducts itself. It does not deal with the political artefacts that emanate from professional and amateur graphic designers alike. The reason for this exclusion is due to the fact that this thesis is concerned with the motivation of graphic designers, the *why*. That being said, the exclusion should not be taken as a sign for the lack of importance and attention that the political artefacts of design deserve. Stuart Hall's (2014 [1973]) theories of encoding and decoding could serve as a valuable and interesting framework through which to look at these artefacts, if one choses to do so. But, alas, this section would not be analyzing the aforementioned artefacts.

A POLITICAL PROFESSION:
THE GROUNDING OF GRAPHIC DESIGN

> Designers – either by marketing or by fiction – perpetually innovate the seductive regime of surface, which stimulates other designers to do the same thing, disconnected from the non-negotiability of the brutal material ground, historical structure and political struggles on which, originally, surface itself was premised. (Metahaven 2008)

Now that we have arrived here, let us talk about the politics of and the political in graphic design. It is often the case that for graphic design practitioners, who see themselves as service providers, the political of their profession lies within the work that they do for political causes. Whether that be designing a brochure for the local non-profit, making a pro-bono poster for a demonstration, subverting a corporate advertising, or creating the identity design for a politician. From this view, the political is an externality, beyond the parameters of a profession. To put it more succinctly, it is usually the graphic artefacts of politics which are called Political Graphic Design. This is a generalization that is being challenged more

often, or at the very least, we can hear some of the voices amongst the noise. The political does not exists only in artefacts. We must not forget that all design is political. Both from the inside and the outside. All structures that govern how we conduct ourselves in a society are, by essence, political. Certain ways of "doing" things are chosen, while other possibilities are discarded. Design picks, chooses, and selects, both the discourse and the materials for its artefacts. As much as it may seem to be the natural order of things, we shape our society and are in turn shaped by it. The design theorist Tony Fry (2011) contends as much, when he says, "what design brings into being not only influences the nature of the world we human beings inhabit but equally affects what we become as actors within the world as its makers and un-makers" (38).

Confusion and Concealment

The origins of graphic design as a profession is soaked in ideology, from its movements and institutions (i.e. Arts & Craft, Art Nouveau, Modernism, the Bauhaus, Constructivism, De Stijl, Post-Modernism, New Aesthetic, etc.), its precursors (movable type, type design, the printing house, the poster, heraldry, mapping, etc.), to its function, and its promotion. Graphic design does not exist in a vacuum of pure form. The historical connection of graphic design with the political becomes discernible in *Socialism: A Life Cycle* by Régis Debray (2007), has he expounds in his theory of the *mediasphere*, even clearly see that the profession of graphic design in mired in the political life force of society, even though nowhere is it mentioned by name. As cultural intermediaries, designers are a bridge between production/commerce and consumption/culture, they mediate the relationship between goods/ideas and the public (Bourdieu 2010). They are situated in the political, but, in general, seem to lack an awareness of their role, and thereby fail to exercise any political power.

So why is it that graphic design seems to be denied its inherit political role as an actor in society? Its role in creating artefacts for

political movements is recognized, but the practising of graphic design is often divorced from its clients/commissioners, who might be political in nature. Perhaps one clue lies in the mechanism of modern industrial production with its origin in the late 18th century, where "'making' gradually became divorced from distribution and retail" (Roberts 2005, 18). This has resulted in graphic design becoming alienated from the dissemination, use, and results of its artefacts. To such an extent, that the primary audience for these artefacts is primarily the graphic design industry itself (Soar 2002). So it is no wonder that the whole mechanism of the graphic design industry revolves around the concept of the portfolio; educational institution teach around it, internships and jobs are dependent on it, and awards are a materialization of the "best" of them. Another clue to graphic design's depoliticization might be the "failure to distinguish between the political and politics" where "the latter acts to conceal the nature of the former" (Claude Lefort quoted in Fry 2011, 6). This act of concealment has also rendered graphic design to conceive itself as a "neutral" ground, whereby it only "communicates (for good or bad) the political intentions of the person or organization that commissions it" (Baldwin and Roberts 2006, 41). By internalizing this act of concealment for so long, the profession/discipline has rendered itself powerless.

In some cases the ethos of graphic design, as a field of study and practice, has expanded beyond preaching the modernist ideal detached from its (often patriarchal and misguided) political dimension, which was a crucial aspect of early modernism (Soar 2002; Lavin 2001, 33). This expansion beyond the consideration of the formal, has lead to genre of Political Graphic Design becoming "legitimate" and often being considered a "noble" cause. But Political Graphic Design is still considered and processed in very similar terms as one might when designing a poster or identity for a commercial product. Hugues C. Boekraad (1997) warns of a conformist attitude in "critical" outlooks that are promoted amongst students and young designers, he views the content of these critical

discourses to be "taken from official ideologies, such as antiracism, feminism, or environmental awareness. These are all — at least in our part of the world — state ideologies accompanied by penalties for breaking the laws derived from them" (228). By letting the institutions of the status quo – whether they be cultural or governmental – dictate the definition of struggles, we are in danger of blunting the power that these struggles might posses for integral and systematic change. This is often what happens when designers engage in commercial work as part of their day job, while making political graphic design on the side. In spite of that, this split between trying to make a commitment to a political action, and the necessity of "making a living", is often encouraged by the capitalist realist world we find ourselves in, where precariousness or the constant threat of precariousness is not too far away. It is within this contemporary context that we can understand the genre of Political Graphic Design, as it is practiced today. As much as designers protest through Political Graphic Design, they are still doing it within the parameters of the status quo. It is ideologically far easier and convenient to voice one's disapproval or resistance through visuals, than to collectively devise tactical disruptions, such as strikes, that have actual potential for the realization of political power. What's more, the design studio Metahaven (2013) even doubts that graphic design has ever been a socially concerned discipline, as one might surmise from Political Graphic Design. They insist that the discipline is "based simply on the predictability of getting reasonable financial returns from running a graphic design practice", where "everything else is an exception" (65).

The Celebrity, The Professional, and The Amateur
We can see this exception, as represented by the image of the celebrity designer, who has accrued cultural capital in the industry. The notion of the celebrity designer is not tied to an individual, but rather it serves as an operating mechanism around which the majority of the industry functions. It is the celebrity that also obfuscates the non-celebrity or the labourer that aspires to be a

celebrity. It conceals the existence of the anonymous, which it is not. It declares its presence by masking "the vast mass of unattributed designed structures and things" (Fry 2011, 6). This condition, although not unique to graphic design, is nonetheless present in its reflection. It might be irony or tragedy that a profession that professes to understand visual culture has proven to be helpless, partially through its own self inflicted wounds.

The distinction can be extended another step between the *professional* and the *amateur*. As has been witnessed over the last two decades, the professionalization of graphic design has come to be excepted by practitioners as well as clients/commissioners. In essence, professionalization is demarcation and policing of the boundaries, that is carried out through associative bodies such as AIGA, ATypl, Design Council, ico-D, etc. It is setting up and proclaiming the distinction between design vs. non-design, professional vs. amateur, worthy vs. worthless. In other words, it is about the "conspicuous exercise of taste" (Soar 2002) – who has it and who is allowed to judge it. During the technological proliferation of design tools in the mid 1990s, the amateur was relegated to the "Desktop Publishing" corner and chastised for its "offences" against the professional design practice. In this light it seem duplicitous to hail the omnipresence of design (by claiming that everything is designed and everyone is a designer, in order to promote the relevance of the profession in the eyes of the public, corporate clients, and governmental bodies), and to demarcate, the boundaries of legitimate practice at the same time. It is the promotion of entrenchment as a strategy against the popularization of the profession. The amateur is treated as an opponent, while at the same time their output is "co-opted" and turned into a "witty and informed emulation" of the vernacular (Soar 2002).

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Graphic design has come to accept its position as client/commissioner oriented, while forgetting that it continues to be public-facing and engulfed in the processes of communication. As Maud Lavin (2001) points out, "this self-definition [as client oriented] discourages explicitly political expression" (88). Aside from client-orientedness, "creativity" is another promoted conceit that hides the political grounding of graphic design. It situates the profession as one concerned with individual creativity and form, divorcing it from the "economic and ideological forces that shape other forms of human social activity" (Howard 1997). Regardless of this prevailing view of graphic design as a profession concerned with client-orientedness and "problem-solving", it is heartening to witness some graphic designers that are negotiating and broadening the definition by not taking previous assumptions for granted. Although at times the contemporary discourse of critical graphic design is still too homogenized in terms of it being a middle to upper-middle class profession that is still concerned with notions of *taste*. For the most part, the political graphic, in the developed "democratic" world, still maintains the status-quo of a *consumer democracy*, where ideas and personality need to be *sold* to the sovereign consumer. It has not developed a language or an independent formulation of its own discourse (besides academia and niche practices) that is capable of scrutinizing and actively affect its role in broader society.

Regardless of whether the profession of graphic design comes to take the view that it is entrenched in ideology, it continues and will continue to have a political dimension whether one opportunistically defines it as such or not.

3.3. More than Laughing at Pictures:
Graphic Design, Humour, & the Political

Since graphic design is a public-facing profession/practice/discipline that deals with the reconfiguration of ideas through signs, symbols, and icons, it has a unique potential for using humour as a means to bring established relations into question. In other words, it has the potential to expose the political dimension that is concealed by politics.

It has been the case that the political use of humour in graphic design is often discussed in terms of irony, parody, and satire. At times, as mentioned in previous chapters, some of these terms have been used interchangeably by design critics and writers, which follows the tendencies of humour studies itself. However, in design discourse, terms related to humour are used as though their meanings are a given and agreed upon, without clarifying explanations from the authors. In order to try and untangle a complex phenomena such as humour classification, we can proceed with basic definitions, where irony is mainly concerned with stance, parody relates to form, and satire is interested in intent or desired effect. Although a simplification, this allows us to easily comprehend their co-existence, regardless of how complex their relationship to each and their surrounding might be. The lack of in-depth analysis of humour in graphic design is also compounded by an over reliance on assessing the artefacts of such practices. The same is true for the assessment of the political in graphic design. In this section the inter-connection of graphic design, humour, and the political is going to be examined through their roles, conceptions, and definitions in society, not through their artefacts. In order to understand their link with each other, we will look at 1) the political potential and limitations of humour, and 2) the understanding of political humour in graphic design.

To take humour seriously might sound like a contradiction, but in order to appreciate it as a political vessel, its relation to power needs to be analyzed in a serious way, so as to "increase our understanding of structures of inequalities and how they are produced, reproduced and maintained" (Särmä 2014, 71-72). We can examine humour's political powers through concepts from humour theory itself. Humour, when used as a political tool, engages the concepts of humour theory in two main respects. First, in the incongruous understanding, which has the potential for disrupting taken-for-granted relations between concepts by exposing them in a different light. Incongruities can reveal "the everyday structures of power and renders the familiar unfamiliar, thereby producing opportunities for critique" (Holm 2011). In this respect Incongruity is viewed as a process of cognition. The second aspect of humour as political is the social facet of humour appreciation, which enables bonding among groups, as well as providing boundaries of distinction from others. We can ascribe this perspective to have an emotional dimension, as it relates to other individuals and groups, and their relationship within a society. Here humour functions politically as a "medium to assert identities, unite activists, and encourage them to continue their struggle" (Teune 2007, 116).

Potentiality
The two aforementioned aspects (incongruity and demarcation) are broad generalizations and are not so clear cut entities that could be distinguished as distinct categories. Like many other aspects of humour they can co-exist. They also raise some interesting questions, especially in regards to the social dimension of humour, and its role in bonding and solidarity. For instance, what is the dynamic at play when humour is used not for outreach, or solidarity within a group, but rather when the composition of a group is yet to determined. The concept of *humorous indeterminacy*, as described by Serhat Karakayali and Özge Yaka (2016) is important here. It states

that "the public discourse and inscribing into it an identity, targets, and a political program" is left open, so as to keep "the political space fluid", thereby "allowing the process of recomposition of the multitude to take place" (213). Here humour is used to form previously unrealized and unarticulated solidarity amongst individuals. It is about the opening of a space, rather that trying to consolidate the distinction between us vs. them. In the formulation of humorous indeterminacy, the content of the humorous act is not overtly political, perhaps even apolitical, but the strategy is still political in nature. It is within this frame of reference that we can also discuss the use of absurdist humour, as a means to break free from the confines of reason, logic, and common sense. Absurdist or nonsensical humour, not only defies sense-making but also the characterization of what can be considered nonsense in order to laugh at it. As Nicholas Holm (2011) asserts, "humour can thus constitute a form of politics when it disrupts existing relations of nonsense in ways that also challenge the ordering logic of the distribution of the sensible, and thereby create the possibility whereby the inaudible and invisible may be rendered sensible." For when one is uncertain about the categorization of sense and nonsense, it becomes hard to laugh-off something as a mere joke, thereby opening up the possibility for different (re)readings of commonly held concepts. An example of this would be the comedic personas of Andy Kaufman, the American comedic entertainer from the 1970s and 80s, who pushed the boundaries of the sensible to a point that it appeared to become absurd.

Another interesting facet of humour in the political context comes from Majken Jul Sorensen's (2008) understanding of humour as "turning oppression upside down" (175). In this particular conception, humour is used as a way to force the oppressor's hand in reacting to a situation. Humour is confrontation, risky to the participants, and a tactic that "reduces the oppressor's options for reacting in a way he can later justify" (Sorensen 2008, 180). It should be noted that to use humour in this respect requires

coordination within an established group. The actions of the Campaign Against Conscription (KMV) in Norway during the 1980s (Johansen 1991) and the Serbian Otpor Movement again the Milosevic government (Dodds and Kirby 2013, 56) can be viewed as the implementation of this tactic. In regards to Otpor, the use of visual imagery and graphic humour also was an intrinsic part of the movement.

Limitation

Humour as a political tool can provide unique perspectives and opportunities, but it is not a magic bullet. It is merely a tool like any other and its use is depended upon the context and the entity welding it. Humour does not have a bent towards any direction of the political spectrum, even though some might suggest it has a progressive sensibility. It is as much used by the politically power-ful and in the service of the status quo as it is used by the powerless against the status quo. Holm (2011) maintains as much when he writes, "Literature, film, music and fine arts seem just as capable of reinforcing our prior assumptions regarding the world as they do of disrupting them". His claim can easily be extended to the use of humour, whether in graphic design or any other discourse. Humour, as an entity, has a reputation for being "non-serious" and ambigu-ous, which allows it to evade or deny the intention of an utterance. As such, one might pass off any offensive statement as "only a joke", and even accuse the offended party as not having a sense of humour. We can now ascertain the double-edged sword that humour can be.

Humour can be also used as a tool of oppression while seeming to support the oppressed. When humour is viewed in the geopolitical sphere, we can see this play out. Saara Särmä's (2014) analysis of parodic imagery directed towards Iran and North Korea is instruc-tive in this matter. She claims that when memes are directed at non-western countries, they "recirculate mainly western pop cul-ture references, they invite the viewer to join in the hegemonic laughter and attempt to create a sense of belonging in the western

international that easily masks itself as the human polity" (73). Thereby preventing "us from taking these countries seriously and seeing the real suffering that is going on" (154). Generally, the use of humour as a political sentiment against the politically powerful is nothing new, even though the sentiments might be encouraged by the politically powerful entities themselves. Instances of this phenomena are quite visible both in contemporary society, as well as in historical civilizations. In medieval western societies for example, carnivals served as occasions during which peasants and commoners were given free reign to not only exhibit immoral behaviour but also to ridicule the political powers, such as the church, the nobility, and the royal court. Other examples include the role of court jesters (Otto 2001), the tradition of satirical magazines in France, and the White House Correspondents' Dinner, to just name a few.

Since humour is highly contextual, it is very hard to uproot and transplant it in a different context. Due to this fact, the effects of nonsensical disruptive humour can be very unstable. Instead of having a disruptive quality, it can easily affirm the status quo. "Humour must therefore be grasped as a site of constant tension between, on the one hand, its utopic promise to prise open gaps within the sensible and, on the other, its ability to reconfirm the existing consensus of sense and nonsense under the guise of free play" (Holm 2011).

UNDERSTANDING & EXPLORING POLITICAL HUMOUR IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

Graphic design views humour through its potential for reframing existing relations and uses it at such especially when the content is political in nature. The use of political humour in graphic design is prevalent enough that one can consider it as a genre or sub-genre of the field. When humour is used as means of attacking power, this takes "the form of brash lampooning of misbehaving politicians

and electoral systems" (McQuiston 2004, 10), as well as other "individuals, groups, or institutions such as marriage or motherhood" (Heller 2002, 85). This can be seen as a natural extension of the "normal" practice of graphic design, which is the use of symbols and signs to represent concepts and ideas. Graphic design, through humour, has a long history of tackling socially complex matters. For instance the use of humour by Gran Fury to raise awareness of the aids epidemic, by Guerrilla Girls to fight misogyny in the Art world, or efforts in confronting racism. It is what John Carty and Yasmine Musharbash (2008) refer to as humour's ability to "[pave] the way for an uncomfortable conversation" (215). Within this arena, the use of parody and satire looms large, so it would be of value to provide some further insights and reflections on the matter, beside the larger discussion contained in chapter 2.

An Aspect of Satire in Graphic Design

By and large, when we encounter satire in graphic design histories or in public, it is through the lens of Horatian satire, which is a gentler form of satire. The follies of society are addressed through cleverness and the optimistic hope of reform. This form of satire stands in contrast to Juvenalian satire, which is characterized by its abrasiveness and hostility towards the ills of society. It can often be cruel, and filled with a sense of indignation, to a point where many might not see the humour in it. In today's western societies, which are concerned with civilized discourse more than ever, Juvenalian satire is cordoned off to the fringes and margins of society, and only becomes more visible at times of acute political crisis. In this respect, the use of satirical humour in graphic design is no different. The discussion of Juvenalian satire seems to take place in retrospect, while Horatian satire is often promoted in the present. One prominent example which might be considered in terms of Juvenalian satire, is the meme. Although it has a quality of emancipatory insurrection, it is a concept and practice too broad to be tied down to one category of humour. Nonetheless, the potential of the meme as understood through the lens of graphic design discourse is limited,

the most prominent exception being Metahaven's (2013) book *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?*, which ruminates on the political potential of the meme in respect to network culture.

Openings and Opportunities

Humour in graphic design is generally used as a tool for externalizing criticism. It is situated in what Ramie Mazé (2009) refers to as the third node of criticality, which is about addressing the public and facing out. Although the use of humour to address the discourse of graphic design is becoming more prevalent, it is by no means a broad occurrence, and even rarer is critical assessment of humour directed internally toward the practice of graphic design. Perhaps this is where an opportunity lies, both in terms of practice, as well as analysis through writing. By using humour at a discursive level, graphic design itself can provide opportunities to reveal its own modes of operation from within by ways of opening up a cognitive space that might have been previously enclosed. Through humour, graphic design can create, what Simon Critchley (2002) refers to as *dissensus communis*, a moment outside the confines of how we understand the world to be and make sense of it, which is "distinct from the dominant common sense" (90). In this regard, James H. Auger (2012) provides an insight on how this might be achieved. He says that the use of mundane and familiar details can serve as a diving platform for proposing "spectacular, even preposterous" suggestions (167).

Thinking beyond the primacy of the artefacts, the transitioning of strategies used in graphic design can be an opportunity to communicate with rather than to the public. A more sensitive appreciation of humour and the complex social role it plays in communities can help to make the switch to this new understanding of graphic design. We graphic designers, with our well-honed intuitions, are often more attune to culture minutiae and changes, but it would be an exaggeration and wishful thinking to believe that we constantly engage with these cultural insights through our work, which

is usually highly subservient to the client/commissioner. Humour can serve as a tool to situate graphic design within and amongst the visual culture of a particular society, rather than perceiving itself to be near the top of a "visual cultural hierarchy". By understanding its role in society apart from the perspective of the profession itself, graphic design could attain political powers that are beyond merely creating artefacts. Towards this goal the value of humour lies in "facilitating understanding, creating meaning or creating the very contexts through which shared meaning becomes possible" (Carty and Musharbash 2008, 215).

Chapter Summary

We have seen in this chapter that graphic design, humour, and their political aspects are not insular phenomena, but rather they can inform each other. We have come to explore some areas where the main topics of thesis can perceive to be interacting with each other. In the first section, *Amused by Pictures*, we examined the intersections of graphic design and humour, as it relates to the already established theories of humour, its preoccupation with term *wit*, its use of visual puns, and a further expansion into the notion of parody. The second section, *All Graphic Design is Political*, looked at how the political reveals itself within the field of graphic design rather than its artefacts. The third and last section, *More than Laughing at Pictures*, examined the political opportunities and limitations of humour, and how understanding of them can be applied in order to comprehend and expand the role of graphic design.

By exploring some of the intersections, we can understand how these particular areas of thought and practices can influence each other, in addition to reveal their distinctiveness in certain contexts. By grasping how humour get incorporated in movements of political resistance, we can the apply the same insights into the practice of graphic design, so that we can envision openings and opportunities, which might not have been apparent or concealed beforehand. The cognitive openness to humour plays a critical role in this regard. It would be prudent to keep in mind the arguments of this chapter, as we examine the significance of humour as it might be applied in practices that strongly identify with the methods and techniques of graphic design.

IN PRACTICE

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4. In Practice

Up to this point, the discussions in this thesis have been theoretical in nature. However, this chapter looks into the application of humour as a political instrument through the use of graphic design methods and techniques.

By examining practices that incorporate humour we can get a more comprehensive picture of how humour operates in the complexities of a society. This also provides us with an opportunity to scrutinize why humour is utilized as part of creative practices. To explore these matters, three interviews were conducted with Finnish artists and designers Otto Karvonen, Kasper Strömman, and the GRMMXI collective, which all took place between February and April 2018.

4.1. Reflections & Observations

This chapter includes three interviews that were conducted as part of this thesis. The subjects of these interviews were all Finnish artists and designers, but at different stages in their developments. Throughout the process of conducting the interviews, certain tendencies in their approaches and views towards humour became apparent. Some particular insights are briefly outlined below. The full transcripts of the interviews can be found in the subsequent sections of this chapter. First, we will go through the selection criteria for the interview methodology and interviewees.

SELECTION CRITERIA

From the start of the thesis process, a qualitative interview approach was chosen as the best option for this type of thesis. Originally the plan was to interview five subjects from various countries, but during the process it was decided that better insights might be gained if the "home-base" of the subjects was contained to some extent. As the process developed further, the semi-structured interview method (Given 2008, 810) of the Interview Guide Approach (Turner 2010) was chosen. Due to the informal and time-consuming character of the interview method, it was decided that three interviews, instead of five, would suffice for the purpose of this thesis.

The selection criteria for the interviewees was developed during the early stages of the writing process. It was important that the subjects had a political approach to their work and also consistently used humour in some way. Upon preliminary research (i.e. talking to professors, colleagues, and online searching), it became evident that, in Finland, only a few practitioners met those criteria. The interviewees were then chosen according to the variability of their approaches to their practices, which will be further touched upon below.

Following are some reflections and observations in regards to the conducted interviews.

Otto Karvonen
Otto Karvonen As an artist, Otto's base of understanding is slightly different to the two other interviewees'. He is fully situated in the art world, but throughout his body of work there is an intriguing use of methods and techniques that would be quite familiar to any graphic designer. This comes as no surprise, since Otto's mother is a graphic designer and his father an architect. So, perhaps it is natural that his work is informed by the discourse of these two practices. Otto uses techniques of graphic design, the platform of public spaces, and the strategy of humour in the majority of his works. His approach to the public can be grasped by Chantal Mouffe's (2005b) view that "public art is not… art in the public space, but an art that institutes a public space, a space of common action among people" (152).

Throughout the interview it became clear that Otto views his work as having a political dimension, not only because he often addresses controversial topics, or stages most of his works in public spaces, but also because he deliberately attempts to engage the public in "serious" topics through the use of humour. Through skillful and subtle manipulation of signs, symbols, and concepts, he is trying to introduce incongruities or "distributions" into everyday experiences. The use of humour by Otto serves multiple purposes. It provides an easy entrance in to the works, both at a cognitive level, when something intrigues the mind, and at a social level, when the public wants to further engage after the initial encounter. By having a humorous stance towards the public, his works can avoid the pressure of expectations upon them. This might be because the engagement is firstly based on the commonality of humour rather than the content of the humorous act. The idea of humour as an

outreach mechanism is also touched upon by Otto. He states that this might allow individuals or groups to engage on a similar level of consciousness, who otherwise would not communicate in normal circumstances.

Another interesting topic that arose during the conversation was the political potential of absurd humour, which lies in a grey where the public is not sure whether an act is humorous or not. His view is that this sort of absurd humour provides an opportunity to bypass the automatic pattern of thinking that we naturally fall into. Here we can see parallels with the concept of nonsensical humour, as it relates to the distribution of the sensible and the nonsensical in a particular society. He recognizes that the use of humour in his works might be misread, however he does not see this as a failure but rather as an opportunity to examine aspects he might have not thought about.

Kasper Strömman
Kasper Strömman Kasper is a well known blogger, podcaster, and personality in Finland. His educational background is in illustration and graphic design, although he seems to be doing less of both these days. It is interesting how he is using humour as a technique to disarm and "sneak-past" established boundaries of professions. I suspect that this has to do with his open approach to graphic design as a field. Kasper uses humour as a particular kind of methodology. This is not to suggest that it is unnatural or artificial, but rather that he hones his skills like a stand-up comedian would.

Humour for Kasper is a technique that makes people relax and open to accepting new perspectives. In addition, it is useful for breaking taboos, traditions, and saying controversial stuff in public, as it allows to "get away" with it due to the fact the societies have a higher tolerance towards acts of humour. This is essentially how he started gaining popularity as a blogger – by poking fun at classic icons of Finnish design. His perception for incongruities and absurdities in

everyday life seems to have been heighten by his professional train-
ing as a graphic designer, and his comedic instincts. He maintains
that tackling serious matters requires a *lightness* of form in order to
be effective. He understands the specifics of humour and language,
as is evident by him being focused locally and writing in mostly in
Finnish. Although a self-proclaim nerd of graphic design minu-
tiae, he aims to reach an audience broader than just other graphic
designers. This brings us to his tagline, "graphic designer of the
year 2013", which he got from Grafia (Finnish Association of Visual
Communication Designers) and still often uses as a humorous jibe
at the pretentiousness of the graphic design industry in Finland. For
him, the use of the title *graphic designer* seems to serve as a camou-
flage in order to divert and subvert expectations from his comedic
persona. By being involved in various projects outside of what is
normally considered graphic design, he is either transitioning out
of the field, or he is expanding its boundaries and frame of analysis
through a comedic stance

GRMMXI

As a collective, GRMMXI, was formed in 2011 by 13 friends, most of
whom are graphic designers. At times they work together on special
projects under the moniker of GRMMXI, besides practicing graphic
design as individuals. For this interview five of the members were
available. Being a collective, their views are, at times, diverse and
contradictory, but for them this is an opportunity of engaging with
each other, rather than a cause for concern. Their work often cri-
tiques the profession of graphic design from within, a criticism
which is also directed towards themselves. Their critique often
takes the form of irony and satiric comments, usually in a visual
form. As a group of young designers they are keenly engaged in the
contemporary discourse of graphic design and what it means to be
a graphic designer at this particular moment in time. Unlike the
other two interviews, this interview was conducted through Google
docs over a period of several weeks.

Their preoccupations, as a group, are highly based on the context of Finnish graphic design culture. Therefore their output at times seems perplexing if one is not aware of the utilized symbols and how they are manipulated. Although they borrow some of their anarchic visual tendencies from art and design "movements" such as New Aesthetics, or Post-Digital, or "Amateur" aesthetics, they localize it to their particular interests and *habitus*. They use humour in a very self-conscious, but not in a strategic way. It is more a natural mode of response. As much as they are optimistic about the direction of graphic design in Finland, they also comprehend its extents, such as the limits of its political potential and its scope of influence.

Moving forward it would be interesting to see the direction that the collective takes, since many of their members are currently pursuing MA degrees at different parts of the world.

4.2. Otto Karvonen

Otto Karvonen is a Finnish artist working and living in Helsinki. A major part of his practice is situated in public spaces. He often uses humour as a catalyst in order to generate encounters, surprises, and engagements in those spaces.

This interview took place at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art's café on February 13th, 2018.

AKBAR: Lets start by you telling me about your background.

OTTO: My mother is a graphic designer, my father is an architect, so I have been influenced by this kind of imagery and visual language since I was a kid. Also I already had an interest in typography and calligraphy as a kid. So there was some kind of an inbuilt interest in typography and visual language.

And in the late 80's we, me and my friends, started doing graffiti, that was kind of fun to paint graffiti in the city. It was not dealing with text. I wouldn't consider it as art, but it has element of graphic design, and these elements go back and forth of course. And then graphic painting is another way to occupy public space. You seem to take over the city. During those years I developed a certain relationship to the city. Because you kind of have to go out at nights and you know exactly where you can go and what you can do in those places.

AK: Was that here, in Helsinki?

OT: Yes. I think that was kind of an important thing in my childhood that somehow resonates still.

AK: How long did that last?

OT: 10 years or something, but I was not painting that actively. Started doing it on taxies and trams and walls, and then some paintings under some bridges or train yards. Not too much, because I didn't like to deal with the police.

AK: I guess for people who really like it, that's kind of the rush of it.

OT: Well, that's one part of it. It was something illegal. You get this kind of excitement.

AK: I suppose that created the foundation for you being interested in the kind of work that deals with those kinds of spaces and ideas.

OT: I got this idea that cities are a kind of playground and you can do what you want. You just find a place and the time and you can do basically anything. And also at that time Helsinki was full of all kinds of empty plots and undefined places. It was totally a waste-land. Even in the centre of the city. There were many places where you would just go and do whatever and nobody cared. It is a bit different now. But that was a normal situation when I was a kid. And also whenever there was construction work, like for a build-ing, a house or renovating, these construction sites were open, there were no gates or anything, you could just go and climb up. Everything was kind of wild.

AK: Did you also study here in the city?

OT: Yes. First I went to a visual arts high school. Lots of friends went there and then I went studying at Aalto (formerly TaiK) at the Department of Art Education. I did my BA there and then went to Amsterdam to study MA, which was just Visual Art.

AK: Judging from the work on your website, there's a lot of what you call "action-oriented pieces" and installations.

But first, let's talk about your background, with your mom being a graphic designer and you being interested in letters, visual culture, and visual language. How did this filter through into your current

work, since you're doing a lot of lettering and using text in different ways?

OT: Well, the thing is that these kind of texts are basically all over the place, all the time. You go into the city and you're surrounded by text, graphic design, and so on. I've always been reading the stuff around me, not actively, but taking everything in. And the way it is written and designed affects how you take it in. I want to try making as little change as possible in order to distract somebody's mind. So, you think you see just a normal thing, because it looks and behaves like that. But there is some little change happening that disturbs the everyday experience. So it became obvious to me that if I want to change the message of a specific thing, like a street/public sign – like this text there *Mannerheim* – then I have to learn why and how it was made, and why is it like that. To somehow find the meaning of it. Then I can try to make it into something else, with a different meaning, but it looks or feels exactly like that.

In a way I had to learn these fundamentals of graphic design in order to know how I can do the same thing but make my little changes. It's very much in the details. If you do something that is almost there, it doesn't work at all. It's surprising how important small details can be.

AK: So you had to self educate yourself, at least in terms of using this language that looks "professional".

OT: Well, sometimes I have to learn a really crappy visual language as well. Which can be kind of difficult with my educational background in visual arts. Because you imitate something that was made without any formal education or professional skills. That's even more difficult. To make a pizza advertisement is challenging because if it looks too "cool and professional" then it doesn't work.

AK: Then it becomes a way of reading and applying the visual queues rather than making something look "professional", the way one might have been taught at school.

OT: I just try to be realistic. I try to change as little as possible, so it looks real. If you manage to get that kind of appearance, then it is incredible the kind of silly things you can do, and still convince/fool people.

AK: When did it occur to you to use this strategy of imitating existing visual material? Was it something that clicked one time or did you work towards it gradually?

OT: It might be when I was moving around the city and reading all the advertisements. I sometimes created these little word games. Without really thinking about it too much, I would make these little jokes in my mind. Maybe it comes from there.

AK: Looking at your works, many of them seem to deal with the authority of signage. By that, I mean they serve as an authoritative voice in the space. If you could talk more about that.

OT: If you think about what is the most effective and convincing kind of language in the public space, that's of course the official language. For example, traffic signage. There are many laws that regulate traffic signage. You cannot simply mess with them. And in a place like Finland we can trust the authority, we can trust that nobody is messing with the traffic signs. It's a very good thing that we can trust. So to mess with them seems a little bit dodgy, since you play with people's trust. Same goes for uniforms. In the projects, *Security Flip Shifty* and *Radio*, I play with the notion of uniforms. I don't use any real uniforms, but security guard uniforms, which are not real, in the sense that they are not "official", like police uniforms.

AK: It seems security companies are trying to mimic this kind of official uniform, without it being at that same level.

OT: They are not official because they are missing certain words that make them official. But they give off that certain kind of feeling, and it comes from the small details. In the case of the security guards, there are all these bells and things hanging from their belts and they make certain sounds when they hit the fabric of

the clothes. These things are extremely important. It doesn't really matter if one thing is wrong, but rather if most of the things are right. Some people get angry because I am messing with this "official" language, since uniforms also have power and authority embedded. It's a matter of who has access to this power.

AK: That's an interesting point. When people realize that these are not official authorities, when they doubt who has the authority in these spaces.

OT: When I did this skateboarder security guard work (*Security Flip Shifty*), it was after a public discussion about security guard uniforms, as there had been some kind of fashion amongst the security guard companies to wear these more militaristic uniforms. There was a lot of opposition to this militaristic appearance, because it created a feeling of insecurity. This was not taken very happily by citizens.

AK: So it had the opposite effect…

OT: It was the opposite of what it claimed to do. Eventually there were some regulations of those uniforms. But at that time there was no change in the actual security situation in Helsinki but private security companies were taking over and patrolling the streets. It was kind of difficult to imagine the reason behind it. The uniforms I used in the work were from a security guard company, so they looked very real.

AK: So most people thought they were real guards?

OT: I think so. I can't tell, but…

AK: In regards to that, I want to ask you about the role of humour in your work.

OT: Well, I've always been interested in humour and also in language and words. I think humour is a very good tool for confronting somebody in the public space. It's an easy entrance into a situation. If I am making a fool out of myself, then it's safe for

someone else to just come there and laugh. It's about the permission to laugh about it in the first place. Then, when you are in a good mood, laughing, maybe it's much easier to ask the second question: What's happening there? It's an invitation to get involved.

I think when I am making a fool out of myself, it is kind of safe environment. It seems to work. Everybody knows what I am doing is a joke or a game. But even if it is a joke or game, many people still want to play along, because it seems funny or absurd. People realize that there are no expectations. Of course, this happens to those people that actually get involved somehow. But if you work in the public space there are always a lot of people who just walk past, maybe look very shortly and then continue. I think that's maybe an even more important audience. When you just walk past and look at something you might realize that there is something out of the ordinary, but there is no time to get really deep into it. In that situation, maybe it stays a little bit in your mind. Then afterwards you try to connect things in your head and come up with a theory about what you saw. "Was it good or bad, or where does it fall?".

AK: So rather than talking to you, which would clear up the situation for them, they have to resolve the situation themselves.

OT: Yeah. They have to get creative and occupy their mind for that task. I mean everything you see, your mind has to put it in some category. It has to come up with a meaning or reason, like "oh, what's happening". Even if this process is not happening actively, it's still happening somewhere.

AK: You've done pieces in other European countries and in North America as well. Did this change your approach to humour and graphic language? Since the locality not only effects the use of humour but also the use of graphic language.

OT: I think they say that, let's say in developed countries or the *western* world, the visual language is quite universal. It's easy to learn. Maybe there are some local variations, but they are not that important when it comes to communication in public spaces. But humour is very local. So if something is funny in Finland, in France

it's totally not funny. Things work in a very different way. It's always very unpredictable.

For instance, I was studying and living in the Netherlands for two years. I learned, whereas in Finland it's very common to make jokes about yourself, like when you go to the office in the morning: "haha, yeah I fell in the stairs when I left home this morning and then I forgot my keys and blah blah blah". You make jokes about all these kind of obstacles, like bad things that happen to you and you laugh about it. But in the Netherlands, you never ever do that. When I would make this kind of a casual joke, about something funny that happened to me, there was silence. "Like please don't". It's very difficult to understand why it is not funny. Why you can't tell such a joke.

Sometimes humour also works in an unexpected way, like you make a joke and it is funny, but in a way that you didn't intend or don't necessarily understand yourself.

AK: Has this come up with some of you work? When you have meant something but it was interpreted in another way? It's seems hard to go back and figure out what people thought about it. But still, was there an instance when somebody came up to you and they found something funny but they found something else in it than you expected?

OT: Well, for example in New Zealand, in Christchurch. For a project, *Here will open/Christchurch*, I was making a joke about Christianity and homosexuality. Christianity is very much present in that city, but all the gay scene was in Auckland. This is what I learned while there. I just thought, okay, let's make a joke about this. That was such a strange combination that even the locals, like the exhibition organizers and producers and so on, they had to spend a few empty moments when looking at my sketches. It took some time for them to somehow squeeze it in their mind and then it was really funny. But afterwards they were saying that no one here, living in New Zealand, could come up with such a joke. Eventhough it's obvious…

AK: … that nobody would make that joke.

OT: That nobody would make it. They, the organizers, thought that some people will understand it as humour and they will definitely appreciate it, but most may not. Most people may think that it was a hostile thing. And I think many people did take it seriously.

AK: Then it raises the question of whether it's even more effective when it's taken seriously, effective in that they have to seriously think about it.

OT: In this case, it was a fake shop window, and I know that these things are taking seriously because of the medium. So it was meant to be taken seriously. But if you think about it enough you might realize that it cannot be. Although it has been surprising how people still have the need to believe it. I think it is only because of the medium. The making of that kind of announcement has to be carefully designed because it has such a convincing power and people take it seriously. It has to be convincing but impossible at the same time and that's kind of interesting.

AK: You have to figure out where that line is.

OT: I realize that it is kind of unfair because it's also has to do with people's trust. You trust that the news will tell the truth, and you trust the announcement that "here will open a café". It's a bit questionable but I am not hurting anyone.

AK: That"s why I find it interesting, because there is this grey area where you don't know what it is. If it was obviously/overtly a joke, if it was understood immediately then the whole tension evaporates. You may want to get rid of this tension, whether by thinking about it seriously or as a joke, but when it's lying somewhere in the middle, where you don't know if it is a joke or not, you can't dissolve the tension as easily.

OT: The thing is, if it's totally absurd and impossible, but if it's in a believable format, like a display window of a shop, then you start to come up with all kinds of theories, like "okay, sounds impossible,

but maybe there's something behind this?". You think of all the ways how it could be possible, because of this need to believe since there is no inbuilt system in us that would automatically make us critically examine everything.

AK: There was another thing that you brought up, the idea of using humour but in a unfair way. For most of us humour can have either a positive or negative connotation, the grey areas are not explored as much, but the view of humour as positive or negative depends very much on the context, the specific audience you are saying it to…

OT: I like to make jokes about topics that are very serious, like religion for example. Making jokes about religion without any deeper understanding of any religion. Sometimes people ask me, "How can you talk about Islam if you don't know anything about it?". But I am not making jokes about Islam, I am making jokes about me and other people like me who don't know anything about a certain topic but they still talk about it and have opinions and so on. So the joke is that I'm not trying to talk about any of these difficult issues, it is more about us, about the kind of preconceptions we have and how they are constructed, so they are also jokes about difficult or embarrassing things.

These jokes are also coming from my experience, from my own thinking. They are sometimes negative jokes. I'm not supposed to make someone happy or laugh out of happiness, but make you laugh about your own silliness. It is uncomfortable of course. But I think good humour is about making you uncomfortable and happy at the same time, it has to. Humour needs controversy. You can't make a joke where everything is positive.

AK: This leads us in the area of *the public* and *the public space*. As you said before, humour is a way for you to bring them in and engage them in your work. How do you think about it in general, the idea of the public in the works themselves? What does it mean to you?

OT: There is always many *publics*. If you make an action in the street, there are the people who run into you and make contact with you. Somebody might stop and ask something or get involved in some other way, they get more insight into what is happening or even participate somehow and then there's people who just like to know what is happening but they don't dare to come to you but kind of walk past and stare at you. And there are people who walk a bit further away and have a look and see, notice something, register it but then continue on. This experience can also be extended or it might pop up some years later. Somebody might talk about something they saw on the street, "I don't know what was there, but there was this thing happening". And by then the memory has changed a bit, has got disconnected to something else. In that way it gives it another life.

Once I had this experience, five years after one intervention I did in Helsinki. I heard a conversation where somebody was talking about my intervention. And they had just created a perfect theory about it, with a context and explanation for the intervention but it was totally different from mine. But listening to it was really interesting, everything was perfectly explained.

AK: The idea of the public brings forth the notion of the political in these interventions, especially with humour and the controversy in the humour that your trying to access. So, how do you see it in that context? Can you talk more about the political in your work?

OT: Well, I have always been interested in talking about political issues, in ways that don't make people allergic to it.

There is a problem with activist strategies in terms of engaging people who are not already engaged. Activists do very important work, like gathering information and watching what is happening. But when it comes to sharing this information with the public, there is this kind of an interface problem.

AK: You can say it is a design problem.

OT: I don't know, but there's many problems. So, an easy solution is to just talk to people that are like minded already. But, I mean what's the point.

Direct interaction with politicians is very important part of what they do. At the same time they are doing public campaigns, that actually have the opposite affect, I think. When I talk to somebody, who doesn't have any special interest in any political issues or anything. They don't want to engage with these public campaigns. It is too much. Nobody wants somebody telling them "how everything is wrong, that you should do this and this and that."

But people do become interested if the message is communicated in an interesting way. Or in a way that is easy to enter. So I have been thinking about how to talk about things that are important and difficult, but in a very "light" way. Just to introduce the idea that there is this issue. The approach is much more important than the explanation of an issue. You can't take that much information in one fleeting moment. Because most people are not very interested in what is happening, not interested in doing anything actively to change anything. I think they first need to be made aware that there are these issues actually existing. So it can be frustrating to first introduce an atmosphere where somebody might get interested in something or maybe not.

I try to communicate in a way that anyone can just grasp, not only like-minded people because there is no use if there is some educated person who is already interested in what is happening, that person will find out on there own.

AK: The idea of being able to cross boundaries. For instance, you may have groups that are speaking amongst each other but if they don't speak to a bigger public then the issues don't matter. They don't get the same power in the space if they are not speaking/communicating with a public that is much bigger. As much as you can be passionate, you still need the numbers to back you up in that passion, in order to be able to push through an issue.

OT: I try to avoid preconceptions when it comes to people, or groups of people. It is very difficult for everyone. There are many people who claim that it's not difficult. I don't believe them. Like these kind of "tolerant" people. It is a difficult thing, but this is what I'm trying to do myself at least. When I'm thinking about audiences and people who I want to talk to or talk with, I am trying to think about the neo-nazi.

I once had this experience in Berlin, when I was doing a performance, there was this guy who was really fond of it and came to talk to me afterwards. We had a long talk about art and everything, and then when he was departing he waved, "chuss comrade". This is a neo-nazi greeting in Germany. And I was like "whaaaattt!". I was doing my MA thesis work at the time. So it was an early experience working in public spaces. First I was "Oh my god. This was a total failure". I didn't talk about this incident for many years. But afterwards, I realized that this is the whole point of working in a public space or working anywhere actually. If you want to do something that has any meaningful content, then there's always going to be many people who totally misinterpreted it or interpret it in totally different ways than you meant it. You know it is intriguing how you can twist things to look like how you want them to look like. For instance, if I concentrate I would see a monkey instead of a horse, the power of the mind is very strong in that way. You have to admit that it's out of your control. The more you try to control it the worst it goes. Everything will go the other way around anyways for somebody, because the audience is so huge, you get all kinds of interpretations.

It is no use thinking about it too much, instead it can be useful to think about how can I actually approach the neo-nazi. How can we talk about something that first brings us at the same level because 99.9 percent of the neo-nazis are the same as me. It's not a very big difference in the end. If you get to the same level with somebody, who you think is totally opposite in values than you, you realize that you can talk about something even if you don't talk about how you oppose each other. It is already an achievement that I can talk with some neo-nazi about something and that person can talk with me, while knowing that we have very opposing views.

It might sound to be a very small thing. What does it mean? Does this person change his attitudes? Maybe not, but maybe there is at least the possibility. When there is extreme thinking it results in formation of smaller and smaller groups that are closed from the outside. So I think any interaction with different types of people creates some sort of movement.

AK: You mentioned the idea of groupings. I want to talk about it a bit more. It is a very common strategy of graphic design, this act of labeling and organizing. It seems inherent to even the act and process of graphic design, or what at least I was taught to be "graphic design". In order to think through an assignment one has to label, organize, and position, in order to create a hierarchy, so that it is readable and approachable. You do this yourself, you play with the whole notion of organizing and labeling, for instance you play a lot with this notion of categorizing religions in absurd ways to provoke an idea.

OT: Of course. I use all these things, I could use them to create an advertisement campaign. I am playing with similar things, I'm thinking about "who will read it?", about "what I am trying to say?", "How I should design it, so it just goes from here to there". That is how I interpret it.

AK: In that sense, I want to ask you; Is the act of organizing, the labor of organizing in itself an inherently political act?

OT: Yes, in a way. Well, it can be. It has to do with what you are organizing or reorganizing. Political acts can be very very small, it can be changing one letter in a street name, which can be a very hot topic. If you deal with something that is considered as public property, cultural heritage or whatever belongs to people as a collective thing, like street names, public monuments, things that cannot be sold or considered meaningful. It is always a political act to mess with these things. I think it has to do a lot with the design. You can work with exactly the same content and have different outcomes. It doesn't have to be a big difference in the way you put it out. Put in a certain way it can be funny and harmless, and put a little bit differently the same content can be like super provocative.

AK: What would you say, is it just the intention of the maker that makes something charged versus something light?

OT: I don't know, intention could be the same but if you don't know the language that you are using very well or you don't know the context, then there can be mistakes. You try to make something more serious but it becomes funny, or the other way around. It has to do with visual language but also the cultural environment; things that you can't read about anywhere but is embedded in the cultural context. There is also one interesting thing, that even though the visual language might look very universal, it doesn't mean the same thing everywhere necessarily. We have places like shopping centres, where everything is exactly the same but they don't mean anything except what they are. But otherwise, things may look the same but they might have different meanings or different importance.

AK: It kind of reminds me of the American fast food restaurant chains that are opening up stores in Finland, recently there was Taco Bell. Their meaning, when they first open here is different than what they might be in the U.S. The same thing transposed in a different culture gives it a different meaning.

OT: Also a nice thing is that you can misinterpret things in that way, make mistake in that way. I think that is also the strength of an artwork or it can be.

If I go somewhere for two weeks and make a work in some totally weird place. I have this one or two weeks time to look around and come up with an understanding of what's happening there. I have to make very quick interpretations of what I see, most of them are probably just wrong. But then I base everything on them and take something out of them and then I bring it back there. At once, it is familiar because it's born out of the environment but everything is a little bit weirdly seen and understood.

For the locals it might be very funny because as a local you can't have the same view, you can't misinterpret it in that way since you know everything by heart. So it can be really funny to have

somebody coming there and tell you, "this is what's happening here, this what it's like".

AK: In our daily lives we are on automatic. I guess humour can be used to make you stop your automatic thinking as well.

OT: If you create obstacles somewhere, people have this automatic system to navigate around them. If you're making something absurd, you don't have an automatic system to deal with absurdities in public space. Then you have to kind of spontaneously do something. Its like cars nowadays that have radar for obstacles but if something doesn't make sense to them then…. Tesla didn't see a truck but you know…

AK: Recently I looked at the news, it might have been in Netherlands, Switzerland, or New Zealand, I don't recall. It was some country, oh Iceland. Well, they had painted the traffic crossings to give them the illusion of 3D, so that people in cars would slow down or stop, since they see it as something physical.

Are you still working within the same realms of interest? Has there been any shifts in terms of your thinking at the start of work as an artist and now? Or are you doing something different with those initial thoughts and ideas?

OT: Somethings have been following me. When I go to a different place and there is different time; the context changes so you can actually do the same thing all over again because it is happening somewhere, so it is based on that place, context, time, and specific moment. Everything around is changing anyway. It would be an interesting idea to just do the same thing all the time in different places and time. Because it is always going to be different.

AK: Sort of the differences in repetition, every iteration turns out different even though you try to do the same…

OT: It is not possible to the same thing, it always means something different because of what is happening around.   AK: How do you see your works over time? Most of your works are very ephemeral,

they exist for certain periods of time and they're not there after-wards. How does it progress into the future, when they don't exist anymore?

OT: Sometimes I have done videos of these performative works, that's what stays and some photographs and explanations. But I don't know, I don't need to have any permanent trace of them. It's impossible.

AK: Like jokes they're very situated in their place and outside it they might not, they don't exist and their existing beyond that might not matter.

OT: Yeah, right. Some things are just meant to be short-lived. I have done some objects also, big and small. I don't think about every-thing at the same level, they are different practices.

Also when I am making a work or showing a work for museum or a gallery space I don't think about it as public space. It is more a place for like minded people. Everybody who goes to a gallery is somehow in the system already. So there is no use of talking about the same things as I would talk out in the public. A work with polit-ical content I wouldn't do it in a gallery. Most of the people who go to galleries vote for the same party as me anyway, it would be a bit useless.

AK: Isn't there an impulse to play a joke on them? To subvert their idea of your work, especially in the gallery setting.

OT: I am going to have a solo exhibition in Heino Gallery in April. I have been thinking about the expectations. People must have all kinds of expectations, like what I will do there. And I think I will disappoint so many people because I am doing something totally different.

I will show some videos of some performances in public spaces but the show is going to be in two different sections. The videos are more like documentation, they are there to raise curiosity or trigger the imagination about the real situation or how it would have been

there. It is not the work itself, like a very good documentation it's more like a hint, like "this was happening". Explanation with some images. The rest would be something totally different since it was made for the gallery space and it's not the same thing.

AK: You are thinking about them separately, the way they're existing in one space versus the other space. You also have these fun and interesting pieces at the Alkovi Gallery. It is a small and narrow gallery space that is facing the street, like a shop display window, there isn't a "proper" gallery space to enter into.

OT: Yeah, I rented it. First I asked to have it for a couple of weeks because it was empty. But the owner wanted me to have a gallery there, so he said, "you can have it for long term", and I said "ok". It still works as a gallery but I don't run it anymore. I don't consider that a traditional gallery space, it is more like an extension of the public square.

AK: I mean those spaces at least can be interesting and it reminds me of the space where you are selling fish in the market hall. You can consider it as a private space behind the counter, as a person working there, which includes dealing with the public on the other side. As far as I can tell, you were playing a "straight" man, you're trying to sell these fish and answer as much as you can about why they're labelled in such a manner.

OT: Yeah, I was disguised as the assistant to the fish monger, so the customers didn't really ask me that much. They would just ask me about the difference between the fishes. I was telling them, "No difference, they are exactly all the same. Coming from the same lake, same price."

AK: Is there anything else you would like to add before we wrap up.

OT: I think one other reason I use humour is that I was never capable of being very serious. I leave it to other people, like scientists. I'm not an academic person, my brain doesn't work that way.

AK: The same thing can be said of some comedians, they can make insightful stabs and precise observation about something without knowing or understanding much about the topic.

OT: I think you can, you don't have to know much. Also jokes don't always work, ideas are not all good, you have to make lots of bad ideas to come to a good one.

AK: I guess we will end it there then.

4.3. Kasper Strömman

Kasper Strömman is a Finnish graphic design, illustrator, presenter, and an *observational graphic-design lecturer* working and living in Helsinki. The use of humour is integral to Kasper's work, regardless of the medium.

The following interview was conducted at Cafe Piritta on February 26th, 2018.

AKBAR: Let's start with your background.

KASPER: I studied graphic design at Camberwell College of Arts in London. I have a BA from there. Then I was working as a graphic designer and an illustrator for several years but then other things took over, I started blogging and doing other stuff. Now I still call myself a graphic designer but that's maybe ten percent of what I do these days, maybe 20. I still do stuff like comics, which I have always loved and have worked on for a long time, but I only draw one comic strip at the moment for one magazine which nobody reads. So that's the invisible side of what I do.

The big visible thing is last week we became out with a new TV program called *Design 3000*, which is about Scandinavian future design. We have been working on it pretty much all of last year. So that's one of the bigger projects that I have worked on. Also, two years ago with the same people, I did a series about summer cottages called *Stugar*. We were looking at quirky and unusual architecture in a rural, *mökki*, setting. That was really good.

Nowadays, people ask me to write all kinds of stuff because I have a pretty popular blog and I'm not super enthusiastic about writing. I can write stuff, it's not that difficult for me so I do it but reluctantly. I know what my focus is at the moment, but it's a good thing to combine things as well, so you don't get too bored with one thing.

AK: When was it that you did your BA?

KS: That was back in 2001. That was a long time ago.

AK: Did you have any inclination of going into graphic design before starting your BA? Was it something you wanted to do or something that you came across.

KS: I did a foundation course, in the UK you would call it a BTech or something. Basically, I did a two-year graphic design course in Finland, in a city called Kouvola before that. Actually, I never mention that because it sounds cooler to say, "I went overseas to study". I've always liked drawing, obviously kids like drawing but I liked it more than other kids. Then I did that "army thing" which obviously you have to do in Finland. After that you had to apply for something to study, I didn't really know what but someone gave me a brochure, where you can just choose a profession.

AK: Like a catalog or something.

KS: Yeah, like a catalog. I was like, "What's graphic design? Sounds vaguely like something where you get to draw." So I applied for this, it was called something *Arppisanni* or…I don't know if it still exists. That was back in 1994 to 1996. Then actually, I worked for a year and a half at an advertising agency in Turku in 1997, also a long time ago. That wasn't super interesting and since I was the youngest they gave me all this crappy work nobody else wanted to do, like ads in the daily papers for Intersport. "Could you just put these skis next to this price tag", that kind of stuff. Then I did the BA and came back to Finland. Worked for a year at this place where they made maps or something, never mind. I've been a freelancing since because I like the freedom of it. I get to choose who to work with. I also had some kind of artistic ambitions at some point, had some exhibitions going and tried my hands on a little bit of music like all graphic designers do. I mean everyone is a DJ, right.

There hasn't been any major life event where things have turned around, everything has just been organic. Everything seamlessly blending into everything else. So, not a clear career

path but I guess everyone creates them in hindsight, like "this is what I wanted to do", or "everything's been pointing to this moment in time".

AK: You mentioned that you still do a comic. Were you always more interested in illustrative and drawing part of graphic design? In Finland I have noticed graphic designers have a strong element of illustrative and drawings skills, at least in the BA studies. Whereas in Canada or North America having drawing skills is not particularly necessary in order to get into BA studies. Illustration tends to be a separate field than design. You would never describe yourself as a graphic designer if you mainly did illustration, while here they seem to have a much closer relationship.

KS: I never thought of it as a weird thing because where I did BA people were very open to do whatever you want. For instance, one of the guys turned out to be a stuntman. And my mate Michael, he now makes surfboards down at the Isle of Wight. A lot of people got into photography and a Korean girl I know, she's just a conceptual artist now. She travels the world, then she just collects rubbish and builts these sheds in galleries. We were really encouraged to just go in any direction possible but then find your strength or interest. So I never thought about it that way.

One thing though, if you're a comic artist or a graphic novelist or whatever it's called these days, your storytelling skills and the illustration skill ideally should be complementing each other. I mean obviously deep down I probably know how to draw but I like having a pretty simple graphic style, very minimalistic. When I draw I tend to peel off everything that's not the core value or idea of the illustration. While the storytelling bit is something that wasn't my strong suit. I think I'm only getting there now after so and so many years.

I actually published a graphic novel two years ago in 2016 called *Tallipiällikkö*, which is my first longer story. I was working on that for years. I have three kids and when everyone went to sleep I would just be sitting at night, at the rate of one page maybe a week. So it just took forever but very pleased when it was out. No one

cares obviously because nobody reads graphic novels but that was a personal victory.

I come from a background where it's encouraged to do whatever the hell you want.

AK: I find it to be very open, which is nice. The idea that different kind of people can come within the same realm and learn. Whereas in Canada or North America it is very regimented. I'm not sure if UK is like that too.

KS: I guess it depends very much on the college as well. Some places or universities are very strict and you probably do some kind of number crunching, while other places are like Camberwell, which has a reputation for being "artsy".

AK: It could very well be. At least from what I understand, in North America it is pretty much an industry machine, churning out people that are able to work.

KS: I find people here have that attitude a lot. You're encouraged from the start to think about apply for a job and work in an advertising agency, whereas where I studied they were like, "don't go there you know people are douchebags in advertisement agencies, you should do your own thing, start up your own whatever". So that's different but I don't know which one is the right path to take.

AK: In MAs, they teach you a bit more openly but the BAs tend to be more constricting, it is changing a bit thought. Anyways, so from there you went into blogging?

KS: That was a thing I did as a joke. We have a little studio which I share with some people up here in Kallio, it's called *Super 8*, stupid name but that's what it's called and I just started a blog called *super 8 intranet*, which was supposed to be our internal thing, although it was open for anyone to see. It was mostly me doing it, there was a lot of office humour kind of jokey things but it went off in all directions and not many people were reading it at the time but I just had fun doing it.

Then, when Helsinki was the design capital in 2012, the way they presented it was very conservative, i.e. this is a design classic from the 50s, so we should know how to appreciate this post-war mid-century modernist thing. So I just starting my blog (*Kasper Stromman Design Blog*) as a reaction to that, like lets take this more lightly. I was doing my own version of these design classics, for instance I bought a four legged stool and sawed off one leg making it into a "design stool" because it's tipping over easily, so that kind of stuff. People seemed to like it and I did that for 2012, maybe 2013. I was writing it in English, I don't know why, maybe because I thought this is going to be an international success. I don't think it ever was, it was more a Finnish thing, for people who grew up with Moomin mugs, that kind of stuff. It felt too restricted to design though because it was called *Kasper Stromman Design Blog*, that's why I started, in 2013 or '14, writing the blog I do now, *Kasper Diem*, also a silly name but this time in Finnish because why not. I'm not actively writing that blog anymore because I feel there's a focus away from that medium, people are funny on Instagram and other places now. It is a bit lame being a blogger that's why I'm actually thinking of just getting rid of it and doing other stuff.

But because of the design blog, which was pretty popular, I was asked to host a TV series about architecture and also the program I am doing now, *Design 3000*. Both of these programs are stemming from the design blog in 2012 because it's basically just the same idea. We actually did a trailer for the current TV program where we have a Moomin mug and we just let it drop onto a concrete floor and it explodes in slow motion. That's the most forbidden thing you can do in this country but we couldn't show this on TV because it was too harsh, too much for everyone. It all boils down to the idea that everyone's bored of this old stuff and lets focus on the new stuff now.

Obviously people mean well but they frequently ask "So, what do you call yourself these days?" Because I was the graphic designer of the year in 2013, I just use that jokingly now, it just became a thing I say. So that's what I call myself but who knows what the future holds.

AK: I find it interesting that you still use that moniker, as a tagline. Not just graphic designer but graphic designer of the year 2013.

KS: That's a proper thing though there's this organization called *Grafia* that actually nominates or just chooses one person. Obviously it means nothing but it's always funny. Sometimes when you walk around you see these plaques on the wall that say things like "Roof of the year 2016". There is so many of these awards as well and I always take pictures next to them. It has just become like a meme for me or whatever. Nobody ever hears about who's the graphic designer this year. I know who it is, it's Inka Bell, she's into screen printing and does artsy stuff. You need to call yourself something, so it just becomes a thing. It's funny that sometimes when I am out, I don't go out that much by the way, but people when they are bit drunk they come up to say, "hey, you are graphic designer of the year 2013". So it has really caught on.

AK: Picking up from your use of "graphic design of the year 2013" as a tagline. Were you always into doing "silly" things or did it emerge at some point in time?

KS: I have this, what would be the word for it, like an unreleased comic inside of me. I actually used to do it even as a kid, I would be watching whatever that was on TV and I would be writing down jokes I would hear on a piece of paper and I still do that. I have a file in my computer where I collect other people's jokes in a document. I mean why? I don't know maybe it comes from my dad or something but everyone likes a joke right. I guess there is no deeper explanation to that.

In general I find people tend to be a little bit too serious at times, especially people who consider themselves to be important graphic designers or visual artists or whatever and they sign these NDA's and have little secrets. When all they're doing is a campaign for Pepsi or whatever. I don't take myself very seriously and I don't expect anyone else to either. I'm averse to all this pompous behaviour that still exists in some industries, when people have titles and they call themselves "creatives" or "senior geniuses", when all they do is just not very important things.

AK: I've seen some of your videos where you are giving talks, those remind me of a very typical combination of a lecture and a stand up act, it has that of kind of vibe to it. Is that a conscious approach from you?

KS: Obviously that's the thing I do. It is because I've seen so many boring lectures that's why as well. When somebody just shows some text on a screen and then he reads the text, going on and on about some boring stuff. I'm not a big fan of TED Talks, but at least they have a little bit of engagement with the audience. You would think it would not difficult to just do a show that's not super boring. I get invited to talk at these places and often I don't want to go because they sound so boring but then when you have to sit around and watch everyone else's presentations…, I'm surprised that they are not putting more "oomph" into it or some feeling.

I've definitely borrowed some of the techniques from standup, just to make it more interesting for people watching it but I still always want to keep the core of the talk to be meaningful, that there is actually a point to what I'm saying. It is not standup for the sake of standup, it's *observational graphic-design lecturing* done in a more lighthearted manner.

A friend of mine, she's really into Buddhism, no it is Harikrishna I think. She just goes on about some master, who says that "matters of great importance should be taken lightly", that's her take on it. She is Kaisa Leka, she draws comics as well. I think there s a point to that. The message gets through easier if you're not sitting there fiddling around or doing something else on your phone and not paying attention. It's a bit more engaging and that is pretty basic stuff, this shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone but still even interesting people can give boring lectures.

AK: It becomes a form of graphic design then, which is about pre-sentation of content. A similar thing came to mind when I was reading about humour, it can also be seen as a presentation of content that is interesting for your mind to observe, it engages it.

KS: If it's good.

AK: If it's good, exactly. Did you work on the aspect of your humour or is it just off the top of your head? For instance speaking in front of people does not come naturally for some people. Stand-ups that perform routines constantly practice. Was that ever you?

KS: I have read a book on presentation, couple of books even, but that's what you do right. I mean you watch a YouTube tutorial or whatever. I've been actively trying to hone this skill by just seeing what other people do right and try to emulate that in what I do. So I definitely try to read about these things but at the end of the day it takes practice. I did one talk up in Lapland a couple of weeks ago and I feel only now after several years I get the timing right and it's a lot about the deliverance of what you want to say. I guess that's something, for instance, people at university could benefit greatly from. Maybe there are courses in presentation. What do I know.

AK: I bet there are, especially in business schools they focus on that.

KS: But they do it in a bit more douchey way, which is not great.

AK: Which brings me to another point. The use of humour as a way…

KS: …to disarm. I use it in that way.

AK: yes, to disarm someone but also for what purpose are you dis-arming them and bringing them in. It can, of course, be seen as a positive thing, when your content and your message is perceived in a positive way. I mean to say that there is no inherent value to humour in itself. There is no positive or negative value. It is just a tool you are using.

KS: But when I am out for a month interviewing people for the TV series, it just makes people more relaxed because some people still in this day and age get a bit wary of the camera and don't perform as well as they would but if you make it a bit more relaxed then everyone is at ease.

AK: I would say that it is even more so than in the past. From what I've seen of old interviews and archival footage, in them people seem much more relaxed and they would actually engage if somebody came to them.

KS: You mean like man-on-the-street type of thing.

AK: But now, it is seen like a sort of performance, people wondering, "what am I supposed to say, what am I not supposed to say", that kind of a thing. Humour, as you said, is a thing that throws you off of that mentality, where it brings you in expecting something else. You are expecting to be entertained and play long. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but as you said before, humour disengages them from that cautious or rigid mentality.

KS: Ideally, you would think everybody would be a bit more jokey. Some people obviously like to keep up a professional appearance, I think it comes down to these walls or not walls even but things we build, like images we build. The worst thing to do is believe in a myth of you created by other people, if that makes sense. There are definitely still people who want to uphold this perfect image. There's a lot of talk about this in articles about how people create these perfect words/descriptions on the Instagram. An image of, "look my life is super exciting and I'm on a holiday now. I'm having a kombucha and some avocado at the cafe" and all that. When you realize they might be unemployed and all that. My point here is that it would be more interesting for everyone to go more real and behind the scenes. Be more life like somehow. I don't know if that made any sense.

AK: It does make sense in some ways.

KS: But I still love logos, I'm working on one now and I love those little things like in the Toblerone logo, you've got a little bear hidden in the mountain. When you get these hidden gems or even visual surprises, I'll look at the FedEx logo and there's like an arrow. That's a form of low-key humour, which I find to be more 1970s graphic design. I feel these days a logo is more like a square and it says Microsoft. They need to be as vague and bland as possible so

nobody will get offended or you can just read any connotations into it, whereas I like those old tongue-in-cheek versions. I'm definitely trying to get that little funny bone going when I design stuff like that. At the same time this is not the perfect time for me to work in this way because people will choose the blue square that says something in Latin.

AK: It definitely makes sense that the use of humour in graphic design seems to have been much more prominent in previous eras.

KS: Yeah, I would say that. Sometime I flick through this UK magazine, *Computer Arts*, that they have at the local library. I'm just flicking through it and I feel like people are really taking themselves seriously when you have a little design studio. Maybe two guys up in Norfolk or somewhere and they try to come together with a super impressive portfolio. That's creating an image for companies, to perhaps hire you, you build this fantasy castle of what it should be or what they would like it to be but in reality it is just two guys "dicking" around. I found out that I don't need all that but then again maybe I'm poor and would be more successful if I was just creating an image of a super senior genius designer.

I actually made some cards for myself at some point that just said "design genius", I was handing them out to people. I don't know if people got that. I also have one now which just has gold embossing and it says *menestyä* and nothing else, which means "successful".

AK: Reminds me of American Psycho, where they go on about business cards…

KS: Yeah, the thickness…

AK: …thickness of the paper and embossing.

KS: That was great and they look super lame.

AK: It revealed the hidden aspect of things when you're designing stuff, the things you don't think about necessarily, but maybe it is in your head subconsciously. To what purpose is this information

being used or how other people see these decisions about paper, colour, and embossing, etc. In that joke it becomes obvious, the tragically hilarious part of this profession. Why do you need to put a gold foil on this? Then you realize why you are doing it, because some one is paying you to it.

KS: It is mad. I definitely have friends who went on to work at Facebook, or some really big corporations. I see what they're doing but I don't really see what they're doing. Why do you get paid the big bucks for this. There's definitely this "emperor's clothes" type of thinking in the industry and that's why probably I'm not part of it.

I just saw that the Foreign Ministry of Finland has a new logo and they're advertising it in my Facebook feed for some reason, it just says sponsored feed, and it looks like a Death Star and they have the Finnish Lion where the cannon goes into the Death Star. Why are you doing this? It's not rocket science exactly all of the time, but it is fascinating as well that people can make a career out of it.

AK: In some of your work, I see something similar. This way of looking at things from the outside and thinking about what I can read into this thing, apart from the obvious stuff that people and you as a graphic designers have been trained to read into it, like what is the meaning of this colour or that shape. What I am trying to say is that you are obviously going out of your way to read something completely different into things.

KS: You are probably right, but that's one of the tricks of comedy. To just turn things around and finding the opposite.

Recently I read an article in The Onion or something. You know how you have artists who are dead but we have performing holographic images of them, like Michael Jackson. In the same vein, the article was about an obscure nineties band who have a holographic audience when they perform. This kind of humour works out pretty well, by taking an existing thing and turning it around 180 degrees and then it becomes funny automatically. That's one of the things I really try to use within my work. Again "work", no, it is just my "dicking" around.

AK: In a way, this "dicking" around or using the title of "graphic designer of the year 2013" gives you the license to go about making these "silly" tangents but they seem to have some inherently serious purpose to it with the approach or format being silly.

KS: I've noticed that we, Mikko and I, were a bit worried when we were doing the podcast. We were worried at first that people were going to take things too seriously and take it out of context. But when you have this tone of talking, sarcasm is not the right term, but with this certain tone of talking you can basically say things you wouldn't normally be able to say publicly because everyone knows it's within the boundaries of a performance or a comedy podcast. It also gives you the license to say things you wouldn't be allowed to say otherwise which I find useful. I guess that is why there's a lot of political satire around now, with the Trump administration and all that. It is a "golden age" but also sad.

AK: The comedy is sad and there's nothing funny about it because *it is happening*. It might be grotesque or carnivalesque, which are other forms of humour, but not really funny. Things like Saturday Night Live, which is making fun of Trump a lot. They use the symbol of Trump to make fun of Trump, not the prevailing system that made Trump. It would be more funny and satirical, I think, if they pointed to the systematic causes but their goal seems to be to reveal that the "emperor has no clothes", but they end up reaffirming the whole system.

KS: I follow a lot of stand-up comedians on Twitter and everyone's going really political now and it's not even jokes anymore it's just like reporting. What he has done, it just gets more bleak. So I see what you are saying.

AK: It brings to an aspect of graphic design, which we don't often think about. Lets take the Trump brand. All that gold. Whether one likes it or not, graphic design plays a major role in it.

KS: Like all the Trump Tower type, which is very blocky…

AK: When you talk about branding he's the perfect case for branding himself, whether graphically or as a personality.

KS: Although, I read some headline that business-wise it's not good anymore to be affiliated with Trump. People are trying to push back a bit now.

AK: Exactly, but one can argue that is what helped him to get elected, he already had a brand established. People knew that he wasn't making money. He hasn't built anything for years. He just puts his logo and name on things. Sorry, going off on a tangent here. But that gets me to my main concern with these interviews, which is the use of humour in a more political way, whether it is directed towards politics, like in Trumps case, or politically toned.

KS: I definitely have a bit of that in my blog. To me it's pretty obvious because when things happen, like the refugees in Europe being sent back, you read this news and read that people are really worried about it. If you can put this situation in another light, in a more comedic context, if you can put the spotlight in a slightly different place and make a joke out of, it makes it become more obvious as well that this is not going the way it should be.

It goes back to the saying "that matters of great importance should be taken lightly" because it helps people to digest it more easily if it's presented in a light-hearted way. I used to read The Onion online and at some point I think I actually got my news from it. They're making jokes but based on real events. Sometimes you hadn't even heard about these things but would know about them when they made a joke about it. Nowadays there is a lot going on and a lot of news about whats going on. You keep getting bombarded with messages. So if you just wrap it up in another way I think it helps the message in getting through. Without trying to sound too pretentious, that's what I'm trying to achieve. It's difficult actually sitting here to talk about my fantastic brand of humour, as the saying goes "talking about humour is like dissecting a frog, the frog dies of it."

AK: You mentioned that humour lets people digest things better.

KS: Yeah, like with the lectures we were talking about, it gives it a bit of an "up" note, helping people stay awake basically.

AK: In regards to that, with the project you did where you redrew the municipal crests for the different municipalities…

KS: That was fun actually. I guess there is something political to it since some areas of town are more upmarket, so to say, so you want to put an SUV in the crest. That's the thing I saw in Berlin, where every part of the city has a crest. I felt it needed to be done here in Helsinki. People at least around these parts, or everywhere, have this proudness about their area of town. In Helsinki, most people have moved from somewhere else, I'm from Turku, so they choose an area and make it their own. They develop this pride over it, like saying "I'm Kallio person". It's almost like people are happy to get a symbol for where they are from, so this sense of community still exists although it's may be chopped down to smaller areas. In these days of raging nationalism, it's not very kosher to go around waving around a Finnish flag and saying "I love Finland", but it is totally ok to say "I love Kallio". Some kind of micro nationalism becomes more the norm than rooting for a country in the Olympics, which I don't do. If someone skis very well, how does that have anything to do with me. If anything it's super boring to ski for 50km. They probably had to do it everyday of their life up till now to become good. I can't relate to that but I find it more relatable if someone lives in Vallila. People still have the need to belong somewhere, that is not going away, which is a good thing.

AK: Some of these crests you made have a comedic effect but you also realize that the symbols are kind of true. Whereas in normal crest the symbols tend to be value based, the symbols you use have been morphed into reality based symbols…

KS: It is also stereotypes…

AK: In these kind of projects, whether it be logos or crests, one is basically using stereotypes, it is sort of a natural response. When it is put in an "appropriate" form, like a crest, then nobody questions the stereotype. But when there is something wrong with what

the symbol represents, some representation that you particularly don't relate to but it still might be the representation of what other people might see from the outside. I recall the crest for Matinkyla, where you basically have symbol for Iso Omena. Whenever someone things of Matinkyla, they might think of Iso Omena, the shopping centre.

KS: There is nothing there. My sister just moved next to Iso Omena. Apparently there are a lot of these new tower blocks. But her kid goes to school in Espoo so she doesn't want to move to Helsinki. The place grew out of nothing, which it did 15, 20 years ago. Obviously all cities started like that, you just decide you need be there, you need to build. But it feels very ruthless and not very aesthetically pleasing place to live but there's all these values people attach to it.

Funny thing is that I take an interest in heraldry. I have actually read some books about it before I started doing this project. It is a very interesting, fascinating world. There is all these rules about how you're only allowed to use five colors. Do you have an familiarity with it by any chance?

AK: I once attended a lecture by this lady that came in from the Royal Heraldry Society of Canada. The talk was very straight and dry, she was very knowledgeable telling us how each symbol represents very specific things. For instance the meaning behind the number of legs a lion has in a crest.

KS: I like super nerdy people who choose a thing and they go way down a rabbit hole.

AK: These crests, they seem to represent a form of identity. In the past, these were bestowed upon a certain region whether it be by kings or church authorities and now they have developed into being our national symbols. They represent similar ideas but we have given up the kings but the format of what the kingdom represents is still with us.

KS: I am bending the rules a lot because I'm doing it for, as you say, comedic effect and not to be a skilled heraldic expert. Still, I like having those basic rules there, so it's not completely ridiculous, so I could still say with some confidence as to the placement, scale, and composition of these symbols. For instance, I could say an animal is facing to the left because that's how it would have been on a knight's shield. I actually saw an interview with an old heraldic gentlemen who were analyzing them but I was really glad they took it pretty lightly as well. Also for them it's was good thing that somebody is still interested because that's a dying breed. All municipalities and cities around Finland they used to use their crest or coat of arms and now they all have these weird logos and slogans instead. For me it is a nice old-school thing we have that I would like to bring back.

AK: They are the original form of brand or logo design.

KS: All these symbols, like the the French Lily which is used in Turku's crest of arms, symbols like that are so deeply rooted in everyone's heritage that they creep into logos as well. I know some of these people who made a lot of these coat of arms in Finland in the 1950s, they also did logos at the time. One famous bank in the 1980s, which doesn't exist anymore, had a squirrel which was very stylized and it was looking to the left, like in heraldry. I never got that as a child, it appeared weird since you read from left to right. I always thought the tail of the squirrel was its head and didn't make sense at all. It was a mirror image of how I would probably draw a squirrel. When you draw comics that how you are taught as well see. If you read manga it goes the other way round, because you start the right. Regardless, your character should be facing to the right in order to take the story forward.

I have a daughter, she has known how to read for a couple of years and she reads manga, it seems really effortless. When they translated in the Finnish they still keep the Japanese way, so you just read it from right to left and it seems to work. Doesn't seem weird to her at all.

AK: Perhaps if they're introduced early on with the conventions and they realize that these are two different systems, then they learn in easily. And when you're older you might be set in your ways too much that it's harder.

KS: I have a Japanese friend who studied with me in England. The old way for them is to go from up to down but they also have right to left and sometimes from left to right. I asked, how do you work around it. His reply was that you just go with it, you just used to it. They also have these different forms of writing, like Katakana, Hiragana and the latin lettering. They are just super smart people to wrap their heads around all these different ways.

AK: Lets talk about misinterpretation of humour.

KS: That happens. In terms of the blog some older people don't seem to get the satire, they just read it for what it is and get upset. When someone share your stuff on Facebook you can see it. I can see when a senior person has shared it, but someone always corrects any misinterpretation since the blog has been going for a few of years and more people know about it. Things like that get sorted out pretty quickly, it's not a huge problem.

I'm just happy that a bit more of freedom is given and we're given these platforms. It used to be that you could have one little mildly funny thing in the paper at April Fool's. But when everyone can have a platform and you can write whatever, it makes it a richer media landscape.

AK: In one way, it is an opening up but it can also be interpreted in another way, in a more political way. To understand it with the idea of hegemony, where a power that's controlling things will incorporate the dissent into it, as to defuse the power of the dissent.

KS: Are you taking about April Fool's or….

AK: Just in general, perhaps April Fool's is an example of it, which reminds me of old carnival festivals in the Middle Ages where you had this opportunity for one day or one week to let out your

frustrations. Any humour making fun of kings and authority figures was permitted. Dissent taking the various forms of humour and being legitimatized by the power structures. The king might say, "this week do whatever you want and I'm not gonna kill you guys. You can make fun of me". April Fool's is kind of like that.

But specifically I am talking about the April Fool's mentality without it being specified to a particular day. So in order to diffuse the power of this daily dissent, it can be sanctioned in some way, not by a king perhaps but with signalling that it is meant to be taken humorously, so let's not take seriously. This concept of it being double-edged comes into play, specifically if you're referring to something political or controversial. Maybe the power of it gets diminished. What do you think about this?

KS: One thing I've been thinking about is that we really take it for granted that this is something you can do without there being any repercussions. I have never got into any trouble for writing anything. This probably wouldn't be the case in Russia or someplace like that. People also have really right wing or even alt-right blogs where it gets a bit nasty, then you do get in trouble for writing. These are just loose thoughts. I'm just really happy to live in this time when this suddenly got to be a thing. This hasn't existed for that long. When did blogs come around, like early 2000s? Around 2005 it got really big in Finland. Maybe even later.

AK: In 2000s, the first weblog platforms sort of started emerging.

KS: It was more like diary type.

AK: Then web 2.0 came in around late 2000s. Where platforms like Myspace and Facebook came into common understanding. It was taking the philosophy of the weblogs to a different level of sharing.

KS: At least for me that's been very helpful because people would never read anything I write if it wasn't for social media. As you say it's only been around for ten years or so, but it feels like eons of time now, like it's been around forever. People complain a lot about social media and there's always people announcing that they are

getting off Facebook but nobody is going to notice if you go away, there is so many other people talking here. But I can see how this has helped Donald Trump become president. I feel that I'm using it for good though. I'm using it to spread good vibes.

Obviously this is tricky for newspapers, which I don't read anymore. I can get my news online and from different sources. I guess people don't see the magnitude of what is happening, in the sense that a message can be multiplied and beamed out everywhere. You can reach a lot of people just by being funny on a blog.

I have about hundred thousand readers every month, which is still I guess a decent number when compared to smaller newspapers which obviously is a different thing but they might have a print run of 20,000 copies. I'm not sure what we were talking about but that's probably alright.

AK: What I was referring to before is the opportunity in the con-fusion. I wasn't referring to it exactly but part of it. You have this opportunity when somebody gets confused because they don't know if you're making fun or not. Where it becomes uncomfortable for both your followers and/or people who know you well and your political opinions because something crosses a threshold where people don't know what to make of it. When it is borderline.

KS: That's when it becomes interesting.

AK: Have these types of situations arisen where you've said or done something ambiguous without realizing it?

KS: I definitely play around with this way of writing, which is a very time-honored tradition. So, you write a newspaper article, you have a certain kind of headline, and a very sober newsman like style of writing. But then if the content is clashing with the traditional reporting style that's where the fun lies. You take some expres-sion and twist it around a little bit. So, I'm definitely influenced by The Onion and newspapers like that, which have been doing it for ages and doing it really well. I do it in a more local setting where it hasn't been fully established and then it feels fresh. I don't actually

know about that many humour blogs in Finland. There is this one person doing jokes on post-it notes and posting them on some kind of Facebook group. That's maybe the closest to a humorous blog which I've seen in Finland.

AK: Perhaps you can talk more about this aspect of locality.

KS: I choose not to go into this whole American politics. It feel like there's enough coverage. I need to do something that involves people living here and go by domestic headlines. Maybe because there's not much competition but also since I'm writing in Finnish it's still going to be limited within the borders. I actually follow a bit of Swedish news as well because I speak Swedish and it would be fun to write about those as well but I need to keep it Finland centric. That's just due to the niche that I fill, since nobody else is doing it.

AK: What does this focusing of your view allow you to do? Does it allow you something that you think wouldn't get expressed?

KS: It's more a matter of knowing what's going on and living in an environment where you can pick up on stuff that you wouldn't necessarily otherwise. If I was writing about stuff happening in Germany, which I don't know anything about, so I'm not going to completely rely on news then. I see things, I talk to people. Just being in this reality. So it's a matter of convenience at the end of the day.

AK: I see it as a particular strategy…

KS: You could call it that.

AK: …since humour is very hard to translate across boundaries. Some forms of humour like slapstick or physical humour tend to translate better with different audiences.

KS: Which I'm not a big fan of.

AK: Perhaps because your doing very specific language, form, and contextual based humour.

KS: Actually not so much language based, because I don't even feel my Finnish writing is solid actually, since I went to a Swedish school. It's part of why I'm doing it. I'm just learning Finnish at the same time.

AK: You're probably following a tradition of humour where you joke about the things you know. Then you can at least back yourself with why you are making these jokes. Why are you using humour in the way you are. If you can make some kind of inside observation with it.

KS: Well, that happens.

AK: Do you still consider yourself to be a graphic designer? Previously you said you don't.

KS: I do though, in the sense that… I know you don't consider illustration to be part of graphic design.

AK: I didn't before but now having come to Finland and where I am studying, I understand to be a broader field than what I was I used to.

KS: I use to illustrate a lot. My sister has written about five children's book, which I illustrated. They are not very popular books, so nobody had seen them. But I haven't probably touched a pen in years. Although I'm not doing it actively anymore it's still somewhere in me. I don't see why I couldn't start drawing a lot again in a couple of years time. I still feel like it serves as a base for a lot of things I do. If i were to quickly make a little meme, I'll use that graphic design knowledge which is buried somewhere deep inside of me. It's definitely a base. At the moment I'm exploring slightly different areas now but I will probably always come back to it. As I said, I was drawing a comic strip last night and I'm going to work on a logo today. It's a more invisible part what I do.

When I do a talk I don't want to bore people with logos. Although that might be good for me and it might be interesting for you as a graphic designer or a visual communicator. That's actually one

things they warned us in college. The worst thing is graphic designers doing stuff for graphic designers, so it becomes this little clique of people circle jerking, if you will. You don't want that. You want to do stuff that reaches out and involves people who don't have terms for what is a font. You got to be more broad. So that's what I'm trying to do instead of boring people with a layout I did for a magazine. I want to be more broad, I want to reach out. That's why I'm deliberately hiding away some of the graphic design nerdiness, which I still love.

AK: I came to the same conclusion for myself as well, that I was very nerdy about typography. I never drew type, like in type design, but would really get into spacing, kerning and the history of a particular typeface.

KS: Love that shit.

AK: But then you realize for what purpose is this.

KS: There is going be about ten people who's going to appreciate it.

AK: Then it turns into a broader thing. As you just mentioned, you were initially approaching humour and design as a way to reach a broader public .

KS: This also might sound pretentious but I think of it as doing a favour for the graphic design community. By moving out of this little boundary or circle of graphic designers and going out into the wilderness, talking to people. I don't want to bad-mouth *Grafia* too much, after all they gave me this fantastic title but I feel like they're more constricted in their view of graphic design, which is very agency focused. I've been trying to talk to people about this. I was in this group because when you're "graphic designer of the year" you get to be in this little clique of people who chooses the graphic designer of the year for the next year. These people didn't see things the same way I saw them. Like it doesn't have to be strictly type, doesn't have to be computer based. It can be someone who works in painting if they feel like they're a graphic designer. I see

it as a broader subject and I really hope that in your education the walls are moving out a bit.

AK: Initially when I saw some of your work, I looked at it from emerging field of design criticism, which seem to have its on cliques, but nonetheless the practitioners of it that I have read seem to have a broader outlook. The tools might be design tools but the outlook is broad. Using that insight through design tools in order to get into something else. So I see your work and other people's work whom I'm interviewing, from this perspective.

Design awards tend to be focused on what other designers find interesting and that's the "best" design. You have to be in the know-how of the nerdiness to be able to considered as the top in that hierarchy.

KS: Since it is industry people giving awards to each other it also gets political. For instance, "I might want to work in this agency next year, so I could give this award to this personal and maybe I will get a job next year". Political might be the wrong word, clique-y might be more appropriate.

AK: Clique-y perhaps, but also these things are called "office politics". It has its political dimension as well. It might be a different kind of organization, but the things you do are similar to politics, it's just in a different setting you're doing it in.

I find interesting that the political doesn't need to be overburdened. It doesn't have to be over the top descriptor, like calling yourself a "political designer". I see it more as nudging people.

KS: I wouldn't call myself that but I guess in a way I am.

AK: The more you define yourself in that way the more you pigeon-hole yourself. It might be the opposite of what that definition is describing.

KS: I think if you call yourself a comedian people tend have this reaction, like "so you are a comedian. Entertain me. Show me what

you got." So they have this defensive reaction, whereas if you call yourself "graphic designer of the year" people just go "what is that".Then it comes a surprise that you have some funny schtick you are doing. That's definitely a strategy I'm using. I am not claiming to be too funny from the start.

AK: You are using a title but you are doing something else.

KS: A couple of times I've gone to see stand-up comedians who are just starting up. Having an open mic at the bar. It's not super good all the time, just sitting there and wanting to leave. I don't want to be rude, I want to you know be polite and go along but it's not all.

AK: I guess it depends on the type of humour. Some people are really funny but when you are with them they don't make jokes, there doesn't seemed to a laughing bone on their body. Some people could be very funny with graphic design without being funny in person.

AK: We can end it here, unless you would like to add something.

KS: No, I'm pretty good.

4.4. GRMMXI

GRMMXI is a graphic design collective of 13 friends, based in Helsinki. The collective serves as a space of experimentation and support community for its members, with views as diverse as the individuals within. The following interview was conducted with five of the members.

Unlike the previous two interviews, this one took place over the course of several weeks, through back and forth chats inside a Google word-processing document. These symbols represent the different individuals: ● ♣ ♥ ■ ♦

AKBAR: Do you have a mission or vision statement as a collective?

GRMMXI: ● We do not have an explicit mission or vision as a collective, but there are a few guidelines that we try to follow:

● We do not want to turn into a studio with mission statements and company visions.

♣ We don't necessarily want GRMMXI to turn into something we are dependant for to pay rent.

● We don't take on super commercial jobs, or work that contradicts some ethical values of any of us.

● The work we do should be somewhat enjoyable for everyone involved.

♥ By organizing our practice as liquid as possible and deciding on the working methods case by case keep us experimenting with the ways that COULD become actual ways of working instead of the current status quo (of a working design studio). Sometimes it's easy and fun to work this way, sometimes it's challenging and stressful, for example in terms of circulating responsibilities and managing

projects etc. Anonymity within the GRMMXI (we have shared our names, but the projects are done as GRMMXI and not as individuals) has also been a kind of a strategy from the beginning that has been liberating in some ways. Running away from getting too established or labeled or "branded" from outside is sometimes difficult but we are trying.

■ Also naturally as a group of a dozen people, there are probably as many views of what GRMMXI is, was, or should be.

AK: Are you taking the piss?

GR: ● I think here is important to make a distinction between detached irony and humour. Surely humour has a big role in what we do, but we take our humour seriously. :D

● We might be taking a piss at some of the outdated practices or rigid categories in the Finnish design scene (mostly advertising industry), but we do this with a sincere intention of trying to open up discursive space in our disciplinary field.

AK: What is the state of contemporary Finnish graphic/ visual design?

GR: ● This is one of our favourite topics to complain about. :-D

♣ Finnish graphic design field is pretty detached from the international design discourse (especially of what is often called "critical design"). ● Finnish graphic design field is still quite advertisement based and commercial, and studios that do visual identities often do this sleek, user centric, minimalistic, ♥ hyper-functional ● style. The design schools want students to become highly branded star designers or illustrators, to succeed in international competitions and work for international companies. BUT, it feels like there has been some development in recent years. Critical design discourse is slowly coming to Finland, and with that I feel like there's a lot of untapped potential in Finland to make something different, and the support starts to be there (also in terms of funding).

♥ Also there is a completely different approach to how visuals are concerned in any industry nowadays, which means there is a lot of potentially interesting opportunities to co-operate and work in non-commercial design opening up in the future.

♦ Well expressed above. I would also add that in Finland it seems like graphic design is not understood (nor respected) as an autonomous discipline/practise, but as a sort of wrapper to other things. Not that I would necessarily want to see more "auteur" graphic design in Finland…

(As said above this might be slowly changing though) Most of this has to do with the fact that historically graphic design in Finland has been made inside advertising agencies (even many of the cultural sector design stuff is done by ad agencies). Even actual "independent" design agencies (even if they worked as subcontractors for marketing agencies) are fairly few in Finland, am I right? How many can you name? TSTO, Kokoro, Double Happiness…

Also the instrumentalized nature of design education is responsible for this. (That also is changing with a new generation of great teachers such as Arja Karhumaa!) Many of the assignments at design schools are about designing products for imaginary (or sometimes actual) clients. Something like "personal practice" or "artistic research" was unthinkable at least when we did our BA.

AK: What was the impetus for the GRMMXI's formation?

GR: ♥ GRMMXI was formed quite organically, since we were already a random selection of people that started to study graphic design in Aalto together in the class of 2011. We named our fb-group GRMMXI and started the tumblr to shit-post stuff in to. We spent a lot of time together and shared anxieties and issues we faced throughout our studies, so we had this experience of shared history over the 4-5 years of bachelor studies we did together which I find really important to have as a basis of a working collective.

● GRMMXI is a *henkireikä* for many of us. The direct english translation would be "spirit ♦ / breath / life ● hole": an outlet / coping

mechanism / place to let off steam from the woes of traditional work-life. With GRMMXI we are able to do things that we wouldn't necessarily normally be able to do in any other environment.

AK: As an experiment, how has GRMMXI evolved then from its initiation till now? How do you see it evolving in the future regardless of whether it actually happens or not?

GR: ♥ It probably evolves along with the interest of the people who work on the GRMMXI projects and how their situations are finding their way regarding income and this thing called work/life. As GRMMXI, we have kind of agreed to keep things as they have has started, not to rely on it as the thing that pays our rent but rather as a thing that keeps us connected and gets us together and let's us channel our anxieties and impulses and have a party or whatever. There has also been talk about starting a co-op and sharing a work space among those of us who freelance, so maybe that would be relevant in near future.

♦ Most of us who are currently studying abroad are planning on coming back to Finland after and at least I have lots of things in mind that would be nice to work on with GRMMXI when I get back :) (not necessarily in the name of GRMMXI but w/ the people of GRMMXI).

● Same! Honestly I'm quite excited about coming back to Finland after a few years of studying abroad, to engage again with gd stuff in Finland, with GRMMXI people.

AK: You have mentioned that you don't want to be dependent on GRMMXI in order to pay the rent. How would you respond to the notion of developing a "working-method" or trying out different working methods, which might become a viable means of supporting yourselves? Perhaps to put it another way. Why try out these different working methods, when it might not be able to support itself?

GR: ♥ As probably mentioned before, we have individual urges and hopes and resources regarding how much we are willing or able

to "design a worklife" for ourselves. On a personal level I'm highly motivated to do so and setting up a design/research collective or studio on an alternative focus (comparing to local scene that is) is something that I see as an realistic option, but it will include taking chances and the urgency to actually push it will probably come after MA graduation.

♦ If it wasn't tried how would we know if it works or not ;) I don't think we have come up (or even experimented) with sustainable business models or ways of organizing our work, but I think we've managed to try different methods of designing collectively.

♥ Yes, and there is a lot of value in experimenting with no initiated outcome. It's like a way of thinking one's practice by also failing. We find out how some things work surprisingly well even though the whole process would not come out ideal. GRMMXI has helped me to understand a lot about collective work by looking back at things we've done together and analyzing why some things have/ haven't worked with GRMMXI that haven't/ have worked in another collective or group project.

♥ Also the process and means of production influence the outcome. So it would be ideal to practice how you preach but so far there are no ready-made-all-inclusive models to do successfully supporting yourself while opposing and criticizing basically everything capitalism stands for. :D It's this constant conflict of eating and saving the cake at the same time, but if you don't act and try things out there will be no change in the situation, just frustration and obeying.

AK: How would you describe GRMMXI's aesthetic and how does it relate to the ethos of the collective?

GR: ♣ Messy and heterogenous.

♦ Weak. Difficult.

♥ Trendy & cool, awkward, unclear. Sometimes carefree. We get influenced by each other and each of us gets influenced by other things and that forms a weird exchange within the group where a

certain "aesthetic" has formed. As long as it is not "designed" or defined in any way it's ok though.

■ I really enjoy the idea of 'weakness' in our aesthetics, too: of not having to show off, to be a macho designer superstar, to sell, to be consistent or stable.

♦ When you zoom out and look at all the things we've done, I quite like how messy and discontinuous the "body of work" is (you can literally "zoom out" by going to the "archive" view of our blog). It looks really unprofessional. :D There something cool about it.

AK: The idea of "weakness" is interesting. Would you describe and elaborate on it a bit further?

GR: ♥ I agree. I think weakness and faultiness are capabilities that are not celebrated enough in our capitalist society. I think there is a lot of potential of solidarity and alliance in admitting how failed we are as individuals, and how shared the notions of self-criticism, inadequacy, amateurism and failure actually are. It feels very liberating not having to prove or sell yourself, but simply gain trust and support and back-up from the group. There's space to "make mistakes" and fail and still be able with make something out of those experiences or even precisely out of the "mistakes" or someone will pick up on your mistakes and take things on from there. It's like "a method of friendship". :)

♦ That was beautifully put :) I also like how Wei Huang once called our work "unreliable". There's something sweet about this absence in contrast to our current economic condition where you might not have a job but you at least need to be constantly available and reliable :D

● Agreed! I think also working in such a big group has forced us to trust each other and accept any aesthetic choice as good, and to go with it. Very very rarely, if we work together, we say to each other that "this is not good, change it". I like the idea of "a method of friendship".

AK: Would you speak to your adoption of what is traditionally considered as non-designer or amateur designer aesthetics, such as powerpoint, word processing, text-art aesthetics?

GR: ♥ I think it's highly elitist to consider that amateurs shouldn't design. I get pretty excited over "crappy" design, and not even in ironical sense, so yes I'd consider amateur design choices a big influence. At least aesthetically the "goodness" of design is an illusion and such a time-, site- and culture specific thing. Also embracing some aesthetics that doesn't fit in the norm of "good design" by taking it to a professional level and being serious about it can shift the norm even just a bit. Confusion is healthy! The world would be so ugly and boring and conservative if it was only designed by professional designers. Anyway the tools should be there for anyone to use. And why are there all these standard settings and amazing ready-made templates in the programs if not for to using?

♦ I really like design that undermines (by underperforming) it's role as the guardian of good taste. I also believe in the old situationist claim that ideally all aesthetic practice should be accessible to everyone and dissolve into everyday practices to such an extent that aesthetic professionality would be rendered unthinkable :D I'm not saying that we are contributing to this (actual participatory design strategies might be), but i guess we are participating in lowering the standard of what passes for design :D

AK: Is the work of the collective different from the individual works of its members?

GR: ♦ Yeah, a lot different. When I work alone I always default to more conventional/basic aesthetic choices.

♥ Depends on what I'm working on though. Lately I've been letting myself loose on some individual work as well, but GRMMXI is not a glove that suits any purpose or any hand. We work individually each on our own terms and our individual works also look different.

● Sometimes working on my own it's easy to resort back to this kind of "automatic design". Just follow a certain pattern and don't put too much thought into it. GRMMXI stuff is often a bit different: don't follow a pattern, just follow your intuition and accept any "mistakes" you make. It's always like a fun little adventure.

AK: What does a collective allow you to do that working under your own name does not or may not?

GR: ♦ Try things. ♥ Work together with friends. Share, hang out. ● Have fun. The outcome and the process is always unexpected.

AK: I presume you are interested and invested in humour since you have explicitly included "Funny Links" on your official website. What is it about humour that resonates with you as a group and individually?

GR: ♦ Humour is funny. There's too much seriousness in design to a point of embarrassing pathos (designer as saviour). I guess there is cynical humour in some advertising work that is sometimes funny, but in the so-called "social design" (the hegemonic paradigm at Aalto IMO) there is almost none. I think humour is a part of healthy disciplinary self-reflection. ♥ It is also an important tool to deal with really sad and serious issues.

■ It is a cliche but humour often ties us together. I guess it's easier for us to sometimes agree on what's funny than on some serious and big issues.

AK: By "us", do you mean it ties the members of GRMMXI together or individuals in a society?

GR: ♥ Us as individuals within GRMMXI as part of society? ♦ :D

♦ "Humour that ties the society together" that's food for thought.

AK: Humour as bonding mechanism seems to be one of the critical function that it has. It is widespread amongst vastly different societies, both in terms of place and time. To an extent that it is

considered to be an important topic in anthropology; in order to fully understand structure of a society one has to understand how jokes and humour operate in it. Which brings me to the use of humour in your work. It appears to me that beside functioning as a "glue", it is also a way to setup the boundaries of "us vs. them". Would you say that does this apply to the way humour by GRMMXI?

GR: ♥ Hmm. To some extend this inner-outer circle thing is probably there, but I personally do not like the idea of opposing such as us vs. them, since the issues are about all of us. I do not always feel like an outcast or an underdog in society in general, but these positions vary. In some situations I can be privileged and powerful and part of the majority and in some spaces I am quite the opposite. In our practise I feel that it's more important to be able to laugh at yourself or humans in general since we too are part of the problem(s) and part of the society.

AK: On the use of humour. You have said that you take your humour seriously. I am interested to get your thoughts in regards to its deliberate formulation in your work. I am referring to things like the natural outgrowth of humour, the focusing of it by editing (strategic use), the conscious practising of it, using types of humour that may not be natural to the individual but provide a utilitarian use for a project. Do you get my meandering thoughts?

GR: ♥ Again, humour (for me at least) is not a strategy that we consciously put into the work to make it work better for "our agenda". It's just having a laugh on the stupidity of things. Like "look at this, so stupid!" LOL

AK: What do you mean by "social design"? And how do you feel it is devoid of humour?

GR: ♦ I think here I used "social design" as like a slur :D I can explain later, but it's kind of besides the point.

AK: I also see a strong element of critical self-reflection towards yourselves and the role of the graphic designer, which is mostly

expressed through humour. Would you comment on this element of self-ridicule and self-parody?

GR: ♦ In a more cosmic scale most of the usual design work is pretty meaningless, so why be so serious about it. ♥ It also maybe has to do with unraveling the myths of design work and modernist designer heroes. Anyone can do design if they put their time/ energy to it and we are all just pathetic humans struggling here anyway. It's cool if we can make use of our skills for not making things worse than they already are, but being a designer or doing design work is nothing in itself but only exists in relation to or in exchange with other things and bigger picture. There are other things to concern as serious.

AK: For me this raises an interesting point that might is separate from humour. The idea of graphic design is or should be a way of communication that everyone does and it should be "de-professionalized". I think I read it in a Michael Rock article, (https://2x4.org/ideas/5/on-unprofessionalism). Where the concept of professionalism, and/or forming a "discipline" is trying to not allow for this fact to be recognized.

GR: ♥ I feel it's not that design should be deadly serious even if the issues you are designing/ communicating for are. I think the "seriousness" comes with the struggle and urge to make the (sometimes invisible) work of designers seen and heard and appreciated and generally acknowledged to for example get paid properly. But maybe design as a profession is finally at a state where it is recognized as a profession so we could move on from highlighting the practice of the profession and focus more on the things we use and could use it for, like who are the one's profiting from our design work and who are not.

AK: In your works there seems to be a conscious effort to "break the fourth wall", especially with the use of humour. To what purpose are you using this strategy, if there is one?

GR: ♥ There's no strategy, but I can see this happening in some level. Just because there is an understanding that we live in a

construction, that somebody (or many bodies) have designed and built our world and society to what it is now and there are structures that benefit some individual characteristics over others (eg. sex, ethnicity, age, physical abilities etc.) and those structures are consciously maintained by politics. And maybe because we are both the actors on the stage as well as members of the audience so a lot of times we are also communicating with ourselves or stating the obvious.

AK: What is your relationship to critical design, more specifically critical graphic design?

GR: ♦ I think the criticality (if there is some to be found) in GRMMXIs work has more to do with HOW design work is done and organized and not so much with "content" or representation of "critical" themes etc. (So maybe Ramia Maze's LEVEL 2 criticality :D)

♥ Working on projects (whether the content is critical or not) I often find us wanting to do something we haven't seen being done (at the time at least) to keep things interesting and exciting for ourselves, so maybe our practice has a criticality towards the current state of design itself. Avoiding settling, "safe" choices & norms in practices, ways of working as well as aesthetics. Maybe it's a kind of queer approach on design, to not try to conform.

AK: What happens then when it is conformed by the hegemony of the status quo, when the radical or political nature of the work or action is depoliticized? Historically, we have seen this with famous figures, such as Mandela, or MLK or Gandhi. We have also seen this with past graphic designers, either written by themselves or the official histories we have access to.

GR: ♥ Unfortunately that's the way culture industry (according to Adorno) and capitalism functions, chewing stuff up for consumption and cycling things around as passing trends. I see that being maybe more widely recognized and called out lately though. For example the way feminist slogans are recently capitalized by fashion industry has raised pretty open criticism. Hopefully things will

turn more generally against the brands or industries that act like assholes by exploiting or appropriating e.g. political movements for their own interest without any positive contribution to the issue. But again, it's not so much about the design (apart from occasional copyright offences) rather than the issues behind the cool graphs.

♦ It really seems that capitalism is able to co-opt and appropriate almost everything in it's operations. Not only aesthetics but also other forms of criticism; If you look at the whole industry of cri-ti-cool theory lingering around the art scene and academia. No thought is too "radical" not to be co-opted and recuperated. I don't expect much to change in the domain of representation; things need to change in how our lives are materially organized (actual situated lives of actual bodies). Since graphic design mostly deals with the some-what flat reality of images I would look to other disciplines for projects that are addressing this stuff. Sometimes I'm almost embarrassed to discuss politics as a graphic designer. I think the "scale" of graphic design is quite small and that's ok :)

AK: Thanks for taking the time and responding to these question, even though you are many and dispersed geographically for the moment. It has provided some compelling insights for me, both for this thesis and outside it.

5

5. Conclusion

It has been the intention of this thesis to explore the ideas surrounding the questions that were asked at the begining of this paper. As a reminder, here they are:

Why has humour been used and continues to be used as a form of political resistance in/through a graphic design practice?

What can graphic design learn from theories of humour and their political implications?

How can graphic design actively engage with the society it operates in?

During this exploration the parameters around the topics of graphic design, humour, and the political were put forth in order to give us a base to work with. Graphics design was defined as a profession and practice of cultural intermediaries in between production and consumption. By being situated at the intersection of public communication it provides us with a close-up view of how images and ideas circulate within a given culture. We have also scrutinized this idea by the means of understanding graphic design as a political practice. So, that we can perceive opportunities that will allow us to expand our conception of what it means to be a graphic designer, which then might be analyzed beyond its visual artefacts. In this investigation we have used concepts and theories of humour as a framework.

So, how can we respond to questions that have served as guides for us throughout this process? We can conclude that through the research path taken in this thesis, certain commonalities have emerged in the political use of humour by graphic design. Humour has the ability to provide natural entry points into serious and often contentious subject matters, since people are willing more

open and lenient towards things that they perceive to be humorous. This leads us to the capacity of humour as a bonding mechanism between unknown entities or amongst established groups. In terms of this thesis, the most crucial and interesting aspect of humour lies in its use as a catalyst to pries open previously unrealizes openings in a discourse. The use of satire, and absurdist humour seems to have the most potentiality here, since it flirts between the notions of sense-making and the nonsensical. Graphic design can utilize insights and take note of humour's limitation, which emerges when we view humour through a political lens, by applying it to its own internal discourse as a research or investigative methodology. Graphic design can also alter its communicative potential and stance by using humour as a way to converse *with* and *in* the public.

The views and ideas that have been drawn from the research have not been fully is dissected due to limitations of it being a MA thesis, but also due to the author being a novice in the matters of humour and political theory. The contents of this thesis should be read while keep in mind that the perspective is northern and western hemisphere focused, although I can envision the insights be applied to other parts of the world, if they haven't been applied already. At times, the interviews also suffer from not being conducted by an experienced interviewer and researcher, as evident by the GRMMXI interview being conducted through an online platform, while the other two interviews were conducted in person.

This thesis can serve as a springboard for broader research into the use of humour for investigating the political nature of creative practices, either directed internally or externally. It would be of value to combine this form of research with a complementary study into the form of artefacts that result from politically self-defined graphic design practices. The recommendation would be to narrow the frame of reference to a particular theory of humour, which might result in more in-depth and unique insights.

And one doesn't have to be a "funny" person to find this area of research interesting. For this author can't even tell a joke, so he will borrow one.

> According to Freud, what comes between fear and sex?
> Fünf.

> (Cohen 1999, 17)

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