

# INDISCIPLINE: A MANIFESTO FOR OPENING GRAPHIC DESIGN FUTURES

ARTICULATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

“Indiscipline” is a manifesto to pry open the everyday and imaginary of graphic designers. An invitation to free explorations and performative transformations of visual designs and acts of designing beyond the visual.

Through the happenings of four case study experiments, this paper reflects on the issues raised by a crucial manifesto in the history of graphic design. The “First Things First” manifesto published in 1964 and later revisited in 2000, serve as medium and material for an open-ended discussion on practices of communication and activism by design in the changing landscape of design research and industry relations, production and culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Published in 1964, the “First Things First” manifesto (FTF) marked a pivotal moment in the history of graphic design. Articulating an argument against advertising, the same manifesto was renewed 36 years later. In 2000 the new version of the manifesto claimed

<sup>1</sup> The “First Things First” manifesto published in 1964 and the “First Things First 2000” are both available at: <http://www.manifestoproject.it>

<sup>2</sup> The research questions from which my doctoral research set off were, briefly, what characterises social design processes, projects and what is the role and contribution of designers collaborating within non-designers

the explosive global growth of commercial and consumption culture rendered more urgent the message of the original call<sup>1</sup>.

Until recently, my experience felt as similar. Struggling with how graphic design works in the real world, I set off to change my professional practice.

In a hopeful move, I held on to acts of designing activating a personal interest: socially and politically engaged practices.

Researching into questions of how designers work in this realm<sup>2</sup>, intriguing and surprising fieldwork episodes challenged my own assumptions and expectations on what is, after all, to design (as an expert and politically engaged citizen).

Indiscipline is a forward move to slowly account four of those episodes that made visible, on one hand, that within socially engaged designings, events don’t happen as systematic sequences of steps. Rather contingency is central – as the way life happens — and as a defining principle for any design (artifact or practice) to become meaningful. On the other hand, by means of doing visual things, other things beyond the visual unfolded that were fundamentally relevant for the situations and those involved. In my attempts to do away with discipline, socially engaged, as open-ended and plural, acts were forming not in spite of but also because of (the collaboration of) graphic design.

Therefore, coming to terms with a heritage the tool-box I carried after all, opened the time and space of attention to what goes on in between social doings and visual encounters.

initiatives. See a first attempt to map a wider framework and community of socially engaged design: Veiga, I. and Almendra, R. (2014). “Social design principles and practices”, in Proceedings of: *Design’s Big Debates: Pushing the Boundaries of Design Research*. Design Research Society Conference, University of Umeå, Sweden.

Indiscipline is, thus, an exercise on learning to *see*<sup>3</sup> since becoming attentive to certain differences makes a powerful difference.

Finally, Indiscipline is manifesto for critical, open-ended, plural and more just ways of designing that are still, in essence and nature, true design acts and stories about designers, in the company of other disciplines and communities, designing their ways of being in the world.

## 1. IT'S ABOUT THE HOW

Both FTF manifestos advocate a reversal of priorities in graphic design. A mindshift away from selling and promoting artefacts considered trivial or inessential at best to other and more worthwhile communication purposes.

My first fieldwork experience was a participatory research project between April 2013 – April 2014 at Bairro da Cova da Moura (Greater Lisbon). The project aimed to act and reflect on the transformative potentials of “relational space” and Lefebvre’s “Right to the City” in relation to concrete struggles for urban rehabilitation. Cova da Moura is an informal neighborhood in Amadora self-built throughout the 1970’s by Portuguese and African migrants. With a population of around 6500 inhabitants, it is still vulnerable to threats of massive or partial demolition, poverty, unemployment and prejudiced representations.

The research group GESTUAL<sup>4</sup> from the Faculty of Architecture, for more than 10 years has been collaborating with the local associations supporting synergetic initiatives to cope with ongoing threats for massive or partial demolition.

In 2013, a shared interest between them, the residents and GESTUAL was to build tactics for the accomplishment of tangible private and public space improvements. In a collective meeting, residents argued that “we need to start making small interventions in the neighborhood, from quarter to quarter, so that it continues to evolve. This is what for us, residents, and many don’t say anything... but this is what we want to know: what are we going to do from now on? Ok, we cannot do large scale changes, but we can make those smaller ones... so we need to start gathering people.” (Lord Strike, dweller)

The strategy was, then, to autonomously attain basic conditions while preventing spatial degradation through micro yet conspicuous interventions (as a response to the state institutions’ disregard to human rights, and for how long generations of people have been living in the area, while promoting a discourse on violence and

precariousness through mainstream media to justify their actions, and inaction).

Back in 2012, two GESTUAL researchers had involved residents in an activity to rethink the uses of a small square. The place, later called “Largo de Santa Filomena”, was mainly used for parking cars and always referred to, also by the associations, as the best space for potential interventions in the absence of green, playing or resting places in Cova da Moura.

Thus in 2014 a multidisciplinary team (of one anthropologist, three architects, one artist and one designer) was gathered to explore the potentials of this same square as the locus for public space improvements and an experimental reflection.

Parring with an ongoing ethnographic engagement a series of formal participatory workshops were planned and titled “This Square could be like this”. And to set the project officially on we began with the posting of a wall-newspaper. A tool to introduce the project, communicate activities and serve as a record of the process (as well as, specifically, the main reason for inviting a graphic designer with an interest in activist practices) [Figure 1].



Figure 1: The Largo (square) and first activities of the project “Exploring Relational Space and the ‘Right to the City’. Experimental Research at Cova da Moura, Amadora, Greater Lisbon.” Research project funded by FCT-Foundation for Science and Technology with

3 In his book “Making”, Tim Ingold (2013) describes anthropology as transformational practices on “learning to learn” (2013, p. 2) as opposed to ethnography which is in essence documentary. On reading signs and spotting “differences and similarities” see Eduardo Kohn (2013, p.100).

4 Research group on social and territory studies and local action in architecture and urban planning (CIAUD/FAUL)

the reference no. EXPL/ATP-EUR/1772/2012 coordinated by anthropologist Júlia Carolino (GESTUAL/CIAUD/FAUL).

The posting was to announce the first workshop which consisted in an afternoon installation in the Largo evolving into a night projection of other squares around the world. Very few people engaged, so the following workshop proposed an open dialogue on issues, reasons and ideas to transform or not to transform the Largo.

Another installation staged the encounter and collective discussion which focused on ‘what is the Largo’ vs ‘what the Largo could be’. Which ended up causing a division between people. Those in favor of intervention imagined big playgrounds for children, proposed green spaces with table and chairs, even a stage for concerts and plays. Those who were not claimed a fundamental need for free space to park cars, although the issue unfolded to concerns that any improvement would attract more noise, trash, disturbing and unfamiliar people.

The ethnographic process continued in parallel to the workshops and both processes began to cause a division between the team members as well. The project was under constant self-scrutiny but for those directly involved with producing the workshops the process could not stop.

The following step, then, explored concrete proposals that negotiated both sides — how to maintain parking space and allow play, rest, green. An open call to the Faculty was made and 6 architecture students joined to co-design a proposal with every descriptive elements for implementation. During this time, a third workshop took place: rehearsing play and games in the Largo with children [Figure 2].



Figure 2: The 3<sup>rd</sup> workshop with children in the Largo.

The next workshop was the public presentation of the proposal [Figure 3]. Reaching the highest peak of collective conflict and discussion, intervention became a yes or no question. As all participants agreed to disagree it became the last formal participatory workshop and eventually, nothing more happened in the Largo.



Figure 3: The last workshop: “You need to know the people, the owners of the cars, there is still work to do... People who come or are just passing for a matter of minutes naturally they look and ‘that is nice, it might be this way, that is fantastic’... But the everyday, the reality is another thing.” — JH, resident

This project exemplifies a reversal of priorities. The team cares<sup>5</sup> for the struggles of Cova da Moura hence attempts to do something, to contribute. So, what happened?

Understanding participation as practices that don’t settle rather unfold and sustain conflicts<sup>6</sup>, retrospective reflections focused on the materialization of a process of dissensus, from an agonistic politics understanding (Keshavarz 2016). But emphasizing the process itself as a product of design revealed, for me, another side to the story.

Coming together with people in Cova da Moura for the temporary design workshops or the durational ethnographic engagement was to give them a voice. There was no actual “making things together” (Binder et al. 2015). They were framed as the receivers of something, framed as and taking part as informants in a project.

Omitted from the earlier description is the anecdote when the day after posting the wall-newspapers we discovered that they had been ripped up. Only two to three survived in the caffè’s where we knew the owners.

Indeed, design actions produced and were the result of frictions between “us vs them” as questions of designing “with, for or by whom” constantly emerged and prevailed. Yet, the wall-newspaper “evoked a particular effect on its own terms and not as a result of its semiotic status” (Ficher-Lichte 2008, p. 23).

From a communication design perspective, the wall-newspaper had meaningful purpose. But for people it carried so many meanings, beyond the actual content (information about the project), that its material status severed from its original (discipline-based) sense to claim a life of its own (Ficher-Lichte 2008). So as mundane and humble for some, for others it had to disappear.

5 The notion of care is here understood as “an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation” as argued by Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, p.90).

6 See: Massey, D. (1991). A global sense of place.





Listing concrete form(at)s approaches “the social” as content. As a separate reality or cause to be taken or appropriated for designers to put/apply *their* role.

Arriving in Cova da Moura to see all those human-flags, however, epitomized a fusion between the social and the aesthetic, humans and non-humans, materiality and semiosis, that contradicts this notion (Ficher-Lichte 2008).

The human-flags demonstrate that outputs and outcomes are not specialist designs but relational emergences from where, when and how design operates in interaction with and transformed by others.

To rescue a famous quote by Marshal McLuhan (2011): “any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media works as environments”. The wall-newspaper encapsulates in its nature as communication medium the entire project’s approach to people - as passive consumers of its content. Thus, in an unpredictable but also certain move, grasped in the faces of people during posting [Figure 6], the active response was to kill the environment.



Figure 6: Posting the wall-newspaper (case study accounted in the previous chapter)

If graphic or any design is a dependent practice, the time gap that separates both versions of the FTF manifestos reveals a relationship between advertising and graphic design that created a “form” (Kohn 2013). An interwoven practice or “articulation” that embedded both material practices and propagated as an independent whole throughout the years in spite of concurrent emergent movements (Keshavarz 2016, p. 43; Kohn 2013).

Graphic design was never outside but always and already happening and enveloped with Advertising. Therefore, catalogues, posters, signs for streets... are “performative utterances” as in John L. Austin theories (Ficher-Lichte 2008). Instead of bringing about change they reproduce, institute the identity and perform the everyday forms of graphic design as advertising and vice-versa. Listing them restates conditions for (reproducing) discipline as opposed to challenge it.

The discursive production of the social, the political and the ethical, as material motivations and articulations, within graphic design continues for the most part to be constituted by the very practices, things, approaches it is supposed to call into question and emancipate. For the manifesto 2000 is a manifestation of this and an underlying struggle to formulate design understandings and possibilities outside and beyond existing visual-graphic-communication disciplinary forms and frames of working and representation.

### 3. BEGGININGS NOT ENDS

Saturated with commercial and consumption messages, both FTF manifestos claim a fundamental need for more “useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication”.

“2 de Maio todos os dias” (“2nd of May everyday”) was a project in Bairro 2 de Maio, Lisbon. Occupied during the Carnation Revolution in 1974, by Portuguese northwest and gipsy migrant families, it’s known for persistent drug-dealing, poverty, unemployment and ethnic conflicts between residents.

The project won municipal funding (BIP/ZIP program) proposing to involve residents in local planning issues and make them co-responsible for the place to ease local ethnic conflicts and open social and cultural boundaries.

Activities included the refurbishment of a store-floor to become the head-quarters of the local resident’s association; a group of artists to engage residents in painting the surrounding area; a series of participatory events to co-design an urban gardening plan. And another tactic to support a sense of collective ownership was to design a visual identity and materials to communicate to a wider audience [Figure 7].



Figure 7: “2 de Maio” neighborhood and the logotype designed for the project.

When the 40th anniversary of the Revolution (April 25) and the occupation of the neighborhood (May 2) was approaching, residents began to ask for some kind of celebration. The team gathered every project stakeholder and in an open meeting, a week of activities was planned. The Municipality was the most excited partner and made itself co-responsible for any resources and logistics needed, as well as communication of the event.

During preparations, the team focused on making things happen together with residents: music activities, street art paintings, sport activities, improvised fireworks,

food and drinks, flowers to decorate the streets [Figure 8]. Insisting as well on making a 3D poster to welcome visitors.



Figure 8: Events and activities for the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Revolution, between 25/5/2014 and 2/5/2014

The idea was to cut letters from plywood in the Faculty, and then paint and hold them with children to a simple structure at the entrance of the neighborhood.

On the first day of celebrations there was still no structure. Yet we decided to move on and children were very enthusiastic with painting. The parents passed by and gave them encouragement and sometimes even engaged in serious conversations about how they needed such activities.

The Municipality took days to make the installation so for almost the entire week the letters were present on site and during celebrations. On one of the failed attempts to hang them somewhere, children and few adults grabbed all the letters and started to take pictures [Figure 9].

Figure 9: The letters anecdote

When the structure finally arrived, it was enormous, heavier and more complex than imagined hence the delay. For windy conditions and possible vandalizing acts it worked better, but once the WELCOME and the 25 OF APRIL IN 2 OF MAY were up, it was the end (of fun) [Figure 10].



Figure 10: The 3D poster

If the previous chapter argued design is context-specific this part claims acts of designing negotiate and reach beyond those same particular and situated circumstances (Keshavarz 2016).

The destination of the letters was to become a form of communication to visitors. Reaching completion, they were instrumental to signal something was happening in the neighborhood. But before *telos*, the dialogues with parents made visible the emergence of other design possibilities (Halse et al. 2010; Kohn 2013).

Painting with children was at once a procedural step in a graphic design process and a “prototype” of a meaningful potential future imagined by the parents (Charlotte Smith et al. 2015). Furthermore, the letters *lasted* long enough to mobilize people in sharing responsibility for a situation. Taking pictures with the letters was the short-lived and transient experience of a community.

So the entire episode shows “constant material articulations of the design works and contingent directions that they may take.” (Keshavarz 2016, p. 58) “Ends”, as purposes, no longer can be merely the result of disciplinary fixed actions or stable processes that progress in a linear (disciplined) way. Instead, design gestures and doings are themselves open-ended carrying potentials of change, or rearticulation, through their very execution (Keshavarz 2016; Charlotte Smith et al. 2015).

What and who, then, sets, when and where, what is useful or relevant: to respond to a communication purpose or, and, as well as to correspond with the dynamics of the everyday? (Charlotte Smith et al. 2015)

Between the actual and the possible, suspended in time with the delay of the Municipality, “ends” were constantly flourishing (Kohn 2013). Therefore, beyond mechanist approaches, the letters were beginnings. Graphic design is an “articulatory practice” for the experience of designing is a political material doing (Keshavarz 2016). It could always have been different. At any time and place the act of designing could transform and emerge anew, through its very performance.

#### 4. CATAPULTS

The last episode is a collaboration with artist Sofia Borges in her project “Vitória Gardens Collection.” Between January - June 2015 I was invited to design the ceramic plates proposed by Sofia to identify the trees and plants that were being transplanted from a demolished informal settlement, Bairro da Quinta da Vitória in the Portela Ward, Loures (Greater Lisbon).

Mainly inhabited by African migrants, for almost 40 years the area was home to a first Hindu community in Portugal. In 2006, a group of anthropologists and artists including Sofia began to collaborate with the community<sup>7</sup>.

At some point, Sofia was the only artist remaining. And as people left their homes and machines tore apart everything, trees were the only survivors standing. Having documented everyday stories (about cooking, gardening, rituals) Sofia thought of making a “garden made of gardens.” Collecting then and there those same trees and plants, she wanted to create a memory of the life that once existed in Quinta da Vitória [Figure 11].



Figure 11: “Vitória Gardens Collection” © Sofia Borges

We started to work together on the plates and a visual language to travel across different formats. For the opening of the collection, we designed an 8-page catalogue that was an offering from the local newspaper who also distributed it locally via mail. Postcards were also produced with support of the printing company who works with the local Ward.

Before this day, and shifting attention back to the artist and her doings, one day Sofia cheerfully reveals the project no longer belonged to her. Showing a contract herself had made, it stated that the collection had been officially donated to the Ward, who from that moment on was responsible for its maintenance and continuity [Figure 12].

<sup>7</sup> “A Festa Acabou” (The party is over) was a socially engaged artistic project by Sofia Borges, Vasco Coelho and Ana Gonçalves with research consultancy by Marta Carvalho; assistance setting the exhibition by Rui Palmeira and Inácio Francisco; communication design by Vítor Azevedo; collaboration of Rui Viana Pereira and António Gadanho; support texts by Alexandre, Joice, Laura, Catarina, Gina, Marta Carvalho, Sofia Borges, Rita Cachado, Geni Veloso and Portela Ward Council. The name is a reference to a

quote from a dweller expressing the transformation of the neighbourhood's life after the beginning of the demolition process. To read more about the project see: Borges, Sofia, (2012). *Quando o artista decide abrir a porta do seu ateliê e começar a olhar à sua volta*. In *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, (99), 185–202. <http://doi.org/10.4000/rccs.5157>



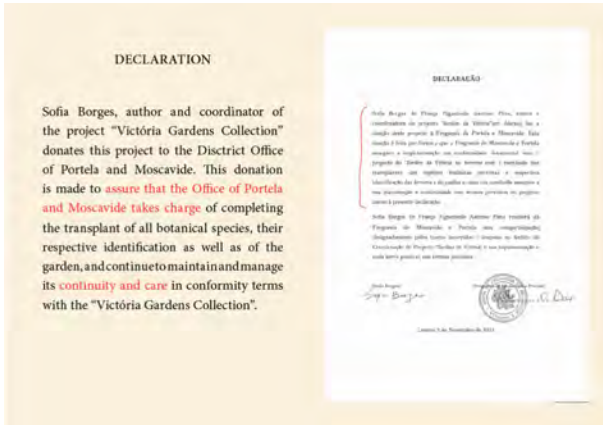


Figure 12: The contract (free translation) signed by both parties, the artist and the Ward

From a co-design perspective, crafting invitations is according to Binder et al. (2015): “an active and delicate matter of proposing alternative possibilities just clearly enough to intrigue and prompt curiosity, and, on the other hand, to leave enough ambiguity and open-endedness to prompt the participants’ desire to influence the particular articulation of the issue.”

This non-human was indeed a radical invitation to the Ward to become officially implicated in the possible futures of the garden hence artistic collection. Guaranteed proper and full-time caring for trees, especially because few are sacred to the Hindu Community, was a matter of care for the artist [Figure 13]. But beyond problem-solving the contract was the very “interface” by which the contestation and performance of power relations unfolded (Kershavarz 2016, p. 53).



Figure 13: The Hindu community and the Ward gardeners as co-subjects

As the Ward became (and felt as) co-subjects it immediately mobilised a network of trusted collaborators hence the reason we were able to make catalogues and postcards.

My argument in this chapter is that Sofia could have easily gathered the stories of people and trees and make a book, catalogue or poster out of it... However, the artistic collection shows that it’s not the (visual) appearances that guide the act of sharing, communicating or making the narratives public. It’s the “appearing” of bodies, subjects, situations, in and as their being-in-the-world: trees, stories turned into plates,

a collection made to live as a garden. Communication as the creative and relational process, that we glimpsed in the previous parts, was realized by Sofia “in a as performance” (Ficher-Lichte 2008, p. 22).

What if this is a reversal of *the artistic* priorities?

Forms of interdependency, collectivity and embodiment act as medium and material for a critical act that forms and grows as events and interactions unfold over time and in space (Jackson, 2015). While they challenge the autonomy of Art, hacking the institution from within, Sofia “articulates” an artistic practice produced and supported through those same conditions (Keshavarz 2016). Intersubjectivity and heteronomy charge new directions, understandings and possibilities for Art but it is Art that also grows and functions as medium and environment for social and cultural transformation (Jackson 2015; McLuhan 2011).

Indiscipline, in the forms of what and how Sofia performs, and as the contract showed, lies not in antagonistic gestures but in structurally embedded reconfigurations from within (Lenskjold et al 2016).

For the purpose of this paper, and for design, movements of indiscipline engender a dual state of emancipation and of attachment from and to social and cultural regimes, habits, institutions (Latour 2013; Kohn 2013). Indiscipline is the ability to use discipline for its own negation and catapult (Sloterdijk 2009; Kohn 2013).

## INDISCIPLINE

Realizing our own habits, regimes and attachments is one way to Indiscipline. Learning how to see (the paradox) the plural and emergent ways in which our design practices already form, deform and reform democratic, just and meaningful environments and actions is a fundamental leap of growth for graphic designers to take the discipline politically, on their own hands.

This manifesto is not a continuation or actualization of FTF. It’s a manifesto on decolonizing discourse. It does not offer new analysis or conceptualizations of graphic design and socially engaged practices, only few starting points for rethinking practice in performative terms.

Indiscipline is an ongoing practice-based exploration of how to change your work-life.

For it was being in the company of other disciplines and communities, humans and non-humans, in live negotiations and lively conversations that I’ve feel catapulted to follow other ways and unfold potential futures.

Indiscipline is not an end. It sustains and grows as a method and design practice not through completion but by its very nature as a not-yet future.

There is always still and will be something about design from which things can change, be different and work for



the better. This unconditional hope and disappointment, love and hate for designing is what triggered design research in the first place. And what now is forming a possible meaningful ending to my doctoral thesis and gift to all.

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