Essay

Information Design = Complexity + Interdisciplinarity + Experiment

Gerlinde Schuller
published by AIGA, New York, March 2007

Information design is explained in only three languages in Wikipedia. The term is not even listed in Encyclopaedia Britannica. This shows that the discipline is still far from having established itself, although its approach is as old as the cultural history of mankind. Information design focuses on the efficient graphic design of complex sets of information employing an interdisciplinary approach. The rapidly increasing complexity of data from our everyday lives has in the past decades led to information design distinguishing itself in the broad field of visual communication as a specific discipline with its own courses of study, practitioners and theoreticians.

Complexity

Information design is the transfer of complex data to, for the most part, two-dimensional visual representations that aim at communicating, documenting and preserving knowledge. It deals with making entire sets of facts and their interrelations comprehensible, with the objective of creating transparency and eliminating uncertainty. At best, representations of information achieve a transfer, by deriving additional knowledge and creating interaction via the organization, combination and density of facts. They are not representations of what one sees but what one knows.

To design the 'meaning of complex information' is a task that demands from information designers systematic thinking and a combination of analytical, editorial and graphic abilities. The top priority lies in addressing the content of the information. Moreover, methods of navigation, order and abstraction belong to the basic knowledge required. The efficiency demanded from information design necessitates the examination of human perception and cultural circumstances; the demand of sustainability requires that visualization practitioners constantly think ahead.

To practice information design implies viewing the world through a special filter, disassembling it with analytical curiosity, to then assemble it again in a simplified way and with a feeling for precision and detail.

Interdisciplinarity

Information design evolved from an interdisciplinary attitude. The persons who have had a lasting influence on the field come from different disciplines. They have repeatedly cooperated with other disciplines in a content-related way and used these other approaches and methods of thought as inspiration. In addition to innovative, graphic representations, they have above all invented new methods of order, navigation and interaction. Hence, they have established essential standards for the interpretation of complex sets of facts and provided new orientation aids for our everyday lives.

Information design demands an interdisciplinary approach to communication, e.g., by combining with each other the skills of graphic design, 3-D design, digital media, cognitive science, information theory, and cultural sciences. Information design is not practiced in a media-bound way. It intends to elaborate common solution strategies together with other disciplines. It thus differs from classical graphic design, which is to a large extent geared to 'multidisciplinarity' and additively utilizes methods of other disciplines without establishing a unified conceptual framework structure linking these disciplines.

Information design understands interdisciplinarity as the synthesis of different partial aspects; the mere juxtaposition of these aspects does not suffice. The discipline has its roots, among others, in information theory and the psychology of perception, and is therefore a combination of research and design. However, the research aspect of information design goes beyond the usual research on the acquisition of information. It has more in common with the systematic gathering of information as it is performed in academic or journalistic research.

Experiment

Technical and graphic standards are an important part of information design's repertory. In addition to claiming absolute objectivity, they are often indispensable for applied information design solutions. However, it is frequently the case that a subjective bias of information design representations cannot be avoided and that standard models at times do not achieve their purpose. There is no formula for good Information design. Many tasks ask for new concepts and graphic solutions, because the amount of information in our daily lives is constantly increasing and incessantly changing its structure.

How can the information design repertory be expanded in the future? Until now, only applied research has become established in Information design, a functional research that in view of a business application attempts to solve specific, often technical, problems.

A free examination of complex systems, which is in line with the approach of Information design, is usually not attributed to it. Experimental research is neglected or even frowned upon.

However, it is desirable for information design to turn to the 'experiment.' It is important to create experimental platforms–interdisciplinary forums in which theoretical and visual research merge and new content-related and visual concepts are tested in a playful manner. An autonomous research approach could help reflect upon and expand the methods of information design. This would also give new impetus to commercially oriented solutions. Artistic disciplines could provide a source of inspiration and thought-provoking impulses to this end.

The awareness that information design can be at once inspiring, enlightening, entertaining and functional is yet to be achieved by consumers and many of its practitioners. It is now in keeping with the times, in information design as well, to offer a multi-faceted interpretation of the world.

Gerlinde Schuller is head of The World as Flatland, an information design studio, based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She is specialized in information design and visual journalism. Besides working on commissions for international clients, she teaches information design and writes about the discipline. She is co-author of the book 'Making the Impossible Possible' (2006) on economic superlatives and author of 'Designing universal knowledge' (2009) on complex knowledge collections.
http://www.theworldasflatland.net