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Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?

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Project Overview

The output consists of a curated exhibition examining the relationship between graphic design and health. The project focuses on work that demonstrates how communication strategies and visual languages have been employed to persuade, inform, prevent and protect different publics. The exhibition featured 200 projects by graphic designers from around the world, incorporating information design, illustration, branding, typeface design, environmental graphics and poster design. Examples included unbranded cigarette packaging designed to dissuade smokers, apps about the human body, minimalist pill packaging, hospital sign and information systems, public health warning posters and health awareness campaigns.

Can Graphic Design Save Your Life? was the first major exhibition worldwide to explore the relationship between graphic design and health. Curated from public and private collections around the world, the exhibition explored the role of visual communication in communicating healthcare messages and constructing notions of health and the self.

The vital but often-overlooked relationship between graphic design and health was highlighted through selected visual communications organised into 6 sections: persuasion, education, hospitalisation, medication, contagion and provocation. Examples included vital and impactful public service announcements on epidemics, such as Marie Neurath's work with Nigerian health officials to use the ISOTYPE graphic information design system to combat the spread of leprosy, as well as more insidious examples of design's role in promoting cigarettes in luxuriant advertising campaigns. The latter were juxtaposed with recent plain cigarette pack designs with stark antismoking imagery. The subliminal effects of design were further explored in the exhibition through topics such as hospital signs, innovative designs for children's wards as well as resources that help people identify and communicate different types of pain.

A provocation section concluded the exhibition by demonstrating how graphic design can promote individual responses,

as exemplified by the 2009 *Kill Jill* poster from the Scottish government, which influenced an increase in organ donation rates. The exhibition also showcased how the emergence of graphic design as a profession and discipline was supported by significant work for the pharmaceutical industry, whose approach to corporate and brand identity propelled the dissemination of 20th Century Modernist aesthetics.

Output

Curated Exhibition

[Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?](#)

Curated exhibition at Wellcome Collection,
London, 7 September 2017–14 January 2018

Production

The exhibition was jointly initiated,
curated and designed by Rebecca
Wright and Lucienne Roberts (co-
founders of GraphicDesign&).

Shamita Sharmacharja at Wellcome
Collection joined as co-curator 2 years
into the project.

The 3D exhibition design was by Satoshi
Isono, Universal Design Studio, London.

The 2D exhibition design was by Lucienne
Roberts+ with GraphicDesign&.



[Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?](#)

Curated exhibition at Wellcome
Collection, London, 7 September
2017–14 January 2018



[Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?](#)

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Context & Questions

Context

Existing research into the relationship between graphic design and public health has tended to take a case study approach placing designers in-situ in healthcare contexts, in order to assess design efficacy with patients (Paulovich, 2012). Additional multidisciplinary perspectives have examined whole systems design approaches to ‘wicked problems’ of the communication of public health issues (Cohut, 2018) alongside emerging work on the effectiveness of visual communication for multicultural contexts (Alvarez, 2014). A substantive amount of work exists in the medical humanities examining broader questions on the relationship between culture and health, including from a phenomenological perspective (Zahavi, 2005, Carel 2016) or through the lens of body politics (Salamon, 2018); but this has tended to focus on the visual arts rather than graphic design.

In respect of curated exhibitions graphic design has typically struggled to free itself of the display methods and long-standing precedent of art galleries, and as a result,

tends to decontextualise, elevate and fetishise design projects as though they were to be appreciated as art: this ‘art history of design’ concern has been discussed by Kjetil Fallan (2010), among others. In contrast, *Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?* situated a key aspect of visual communication within a specific area of public interest, health, and at an appropriate institution, Wellcome Collection, whose mission is to present opportunities for people to learn about and reflect on the connections between science, medicine, life and art.

Questions

What is the role of graphic design in the recent history of public health communications, healthcare and medical research?

How might the relationship between graphic design and health be exhibited in such a way that furthers public understanding of design's function?

What do graphic design methods bring to curatorial strategies?

How might those strategies be used to illuminate how graphic design works, rather than simply how its outcomes look?

Insights

Insights

Can Graphic Design Save Your Life? developed a distinctive approach to curation and exhibition design by exploring how graphic design works in relation to health, a specific area of human society with specialist knowledges and significant public impact. Through a process of dialogic engagement with specialist archives leading to development of a taxonomy of ways in which graphic design impacts health (persuasion, education, and provocation), and contexts in which graphic design works in health (hospitalisation, medication, contagion), the design-research-curation team recontextualised work often categorised as ‘ephemera’ in a way that revealed its effectiveness. This is made tangible and explicit in the exhibition, for example, showing how graphic design affects whether we take the correct pills, how we learn self-examination techniques, whether we donate to charity and whether we choose to give up smoking.

This was the first major exhibition to examine the relationship between graphic design and health: previously design and health have been covered as part of broad survey exhibitions, for example, at the London Design Museum, or as part of specific studies in visual communication, as in books documenting responses to the AIDS crisis. However, the dominant mode of exhibiting

graphic design is to focus on works by a celebrated designer, works from a particular style or movement, or completed works that present a survey of current practices. In demonstrating the nature of a designerly interaction with a given subject area, the exhibition sought to advance disciplinary understanding of how graphic design is presented and documented in the public sphere. As noted in a review by Sue Walker, the project raised the profile of graphic design as “visual thinking” (Walker, 2017) in addressing design problems.

In summary, the exhibition produced new insights by:

- Presenting a model of practice for the curation of graphic design in a specific context, showing how graphic design has informed understanding of public health and how public health can be communicated. This contrasts with curatorial approaches that emphasise movements (‘isms’) or the production of an aesthetic.
- Presenting the relationship between graphic design and public health in a human sciences context for the first time in this way.
- Activating a specialist archive in a designerly way, imposing a curatorial schema that drew out themes within

Wellcome’s archive and suggested new items from outside the collection to create a visitor experience that provoked curiosity.

- Making public previously unseen archival material through a curatorial process that produced different ways of understanding and evaluating graphic design – making things visible and accessible beyond a specialist audience.

Methods

Methods

This was a four year project that began with Rebecca Wright and Lucienne Roberts of GraphicDesign& approaching Wellcome to make a collaborative book using its archive of health-related ephemera. The project initially became a commission for a touring exhibition, which once planned and reviewed by Wellcome, was felt significant enough to develop into a programmed show in the main Wellcome Collection gallery. The curatorial team began identifying materials in the archives at Wellcome Collection, Blythe House (Science Museum) and Reading University, and identified collectors, designers, and design agencies who would be approached directly.

Shamita Sharmajara from Wellcome Collection joined as co-curator of the exhibition. Roberts took on responsibility for the 2D design of the exhibition. Satoshi Isono of Universal Design Studio developed and designed the 3D design of the exhibition.

Graphic design methods were used to develop content; visually mapping objects and themes, creating collaborative Trello

boards, layout drawings and 3D visualisations. The emerging maps of objects and themes helped establish criteria for inclusion and exclusion: the curatorial team sought to represent a broad geographical array as well as identifying projects that demonstrated design's impact in commercial, research, public facing and hospital-facing contexts. One particular concern was to challenge a dominant Western-centric view of graphic design by geographically diversifying these contexts, and showing that impactful graphic design is not always created by professionals and does not conform to the same aesthetic. Canonical projects such as the 1950s and 1960s branding and packaging identity of Swiss pharmaceuticals company Geigy were included alongside hand-painted Ebola-related health messages from Sierra Leone. Similarly, the curation of condom packages aimed to reflect the array of social mores and cultural values, mapped against different eras and places.

From this process emerged a list of six organising themes that designated ways

in which graphic design impacts health (persuasion, education, and provocation) and contexts in which it operates (hospitalisation, medication, contagion). The approach required weekly curation meetings at GraphicDesign&, monthly curation meetings with Sharmajara from Wellcome, interviews, visits to designers' homes and studios, and visits to archives. In addition to the artefacts on loan from the aforementioned archives, objects were identified and purchased on eBay, and others loaned by designers. The resulting collection was diverse in output, international in scope and with a range of historic and contemporary material, some of which had not been displayed in public before. Special permission was sought from the International Red Cross and Ministry of Defence to show the red cross, red crescent and red crystal symbols outside of a field of conflict.

The exhibition design process engaged Universal Design Studio in developing a tone that would be experienced as accessible and fun rather than worthy or moralistic. The team determined that the

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gallery at Wellcome should not be visually subdivided but should allow visitors to experience the connections between themes and works; sightlines were prioritised to emphasise trajectories through the show. The topic of cigarette packaging and advertising – and the World Health Organisation’s guidelines on plain tobacco packaging – were purposely foregrounded for visitors entering the exhibition, as evidence of design’s power to both encourage and change behaviour. To emphasise the playful provocation in the show’s title, *Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?* was rendered as a supergraphic that spanned one wall of the gallery. A specially fabricated green cross sign, used internationally to designate pharmacies, was commissioned for the show.

Overall, the methodological aim was to present evidence of the integral relationship between graphic design and public health through a selection of works selected to include familiar and influential examples alongside previously unseen archive material and artefacts from designers’ collections.

By visually communicating the way in which graphic design works, the curatorial team set out to demonstrate through example its power and potential as a tool for keeping populations safe, as well as its variety, mutability/adaptability and impact. The exhibition was curated and designed to illuminate relationships between form and function, medium and message, content, context and communication, with juxtapositions aimed to trigger both recognition and curiosity among visitors.

The exhibition was purposely designed to appeal to specialist and non-specialist audiences, by providing an informed perspective on an important area of graphic design history and contemporary practice, while presenting a unique angle on well-known issues of public health. Canonical design references were included, such as Florence Nightingale’s 1858 statistical ‘polar area’ graphs of the causes of death in the Crimean War and the *AIDS: don’t die of ignorance campaign*, as well as the internationally-recognised green cross pharmacy sign. To encourage a wider public

to experience the impact of graphic design first-hand, the exhibition design used the language of a real world context, incorporating blue hospital curtains, ambulance livery and vitrines to present pharmacy packaging, the aim being not to over-fetishise artefacts, but to contextualise design in its everyday use. As part of this design strategy, large dimensional icons were used to help orientate visitors around the six thematic sections: for example, a cigarette for the persuasion section, a letter ‘H’ for hospitalisation and a warning triangle for contagion. The title of the exhibition and overarching theme *Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?* was effectively addressed through case studies, notably the recent work by the design group PearsonLloyd on reducing violence in hospital accident and emergency departments through the installation of clear information panels that make visible the behind-the-scenes processes, departments, numbers of patients to be seen, and situate visitors in a timeline with real-time updates. The show attracted a total of 109,279 visitors over 110 days and received positive reviews →

in a variety of mass and specialist media, including *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *CNN*, *The Evening Standard*, *Nature*, *The Spectator*, *Medium.com*, *Eye*, and *The New Scientist*.

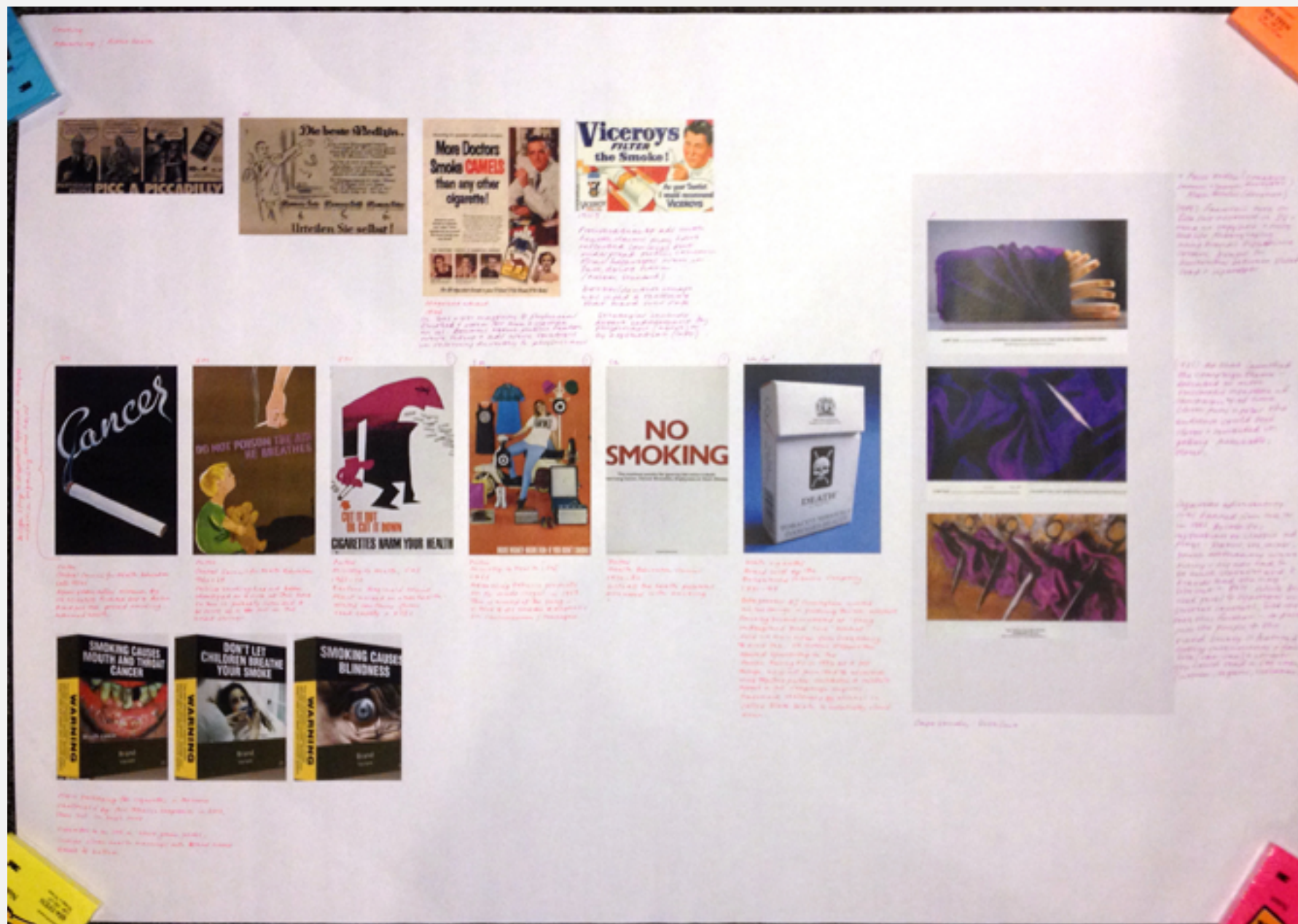
In light of the Coronavirus pandemic, the exhibition has gained renewed attention for its incorporation of visual communications linked to epidemics and pandemics in history, from the 1831 advisories on cholera in India to 20th Century warning posters on malaria, Ebola and AIDS (see, for example [Deighton 2020](#))

Exhibitors

Among the designers featured were: Fritz Kahn; Abram Games; Marie Neurath; F.H.K. Henrion; Karl Gerstner; Margaret Calvert; Dick Bruna; Ken Garland; Astrid Stavro and Nick Bell. Design studios included: Pentagram; Studio Dumbbar; PearsonLloyd; Kenya Hara's Hara Design Institute; Studio Myerscough; Poulin + Morris; A2/SW/HK; Studio Rubio Arauna; Studio Rejane Dal Bello and Stockholm Design Lab.



Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?
(installation drawing), Wellcome
Collection, London, 7 September
2017–14 January 2018, exhibition.



Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?
(initial brainstorming), Wellcome
Collection, London, 7 September
2017–14 January 2018, exhibition.



Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?
(archive visit), Wellcome Collection,
London, 7 September 2017–14
January 2018, exhibition.

Dissemination

Dissemination

Publications connected to the exhibition

Wright, R, Roberts, L., Schrauwen, S. (2017) [Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?](#) London: GraphicDesign&.

Selected reviews

Brewer, J. (2017) "Can Graphic Design Save Your Life? explores ["widespread and subliminal" impact of design on health](#)" in *It's Nice That*, 5 September.

Dawood, S. (2017) ["Can Graphic Design Save Your Life? asks Wellcome Collection's new exhibition"](#) in *Design Week*, 31 August.
 Buwert, P. (2018) "Health Redrawn" in *Eye Magazine*, Winter 2018.

Christian, B. (2017) ["From smoking to Ebola, can graphic design save your life?"](#) in *Wired*, 7 September.

Gosling, E. (2017) ["Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?"](#) in *Eye on design*, 4 May.

Wainright, O. (2018) ["Can Graphic Design Save Your Life? review – thrills, pills and big pharma"](#) in *The Guardian*, 2 February.

Martin, C. (2017) ["Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?"](#) in *CNN*, 22 September.

Durrant, N. (2017) ["Exhibition: Can Graphic Design Save Your Life? at the Wellcome Collection"](#), in *The Times*, 19 August.

De Lange, C. (2017) ["Can graphic design save your life?"](#) in *The Lancet*, 3 October.

Stahl-Timmins, W. (2017) ["Can graphic design save your life?"](#) in *British Medical Journal*, 6 October.

Journal Reviews

Hena, A (2017) ["Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?' Exhibition Wellcome Collection 7 September 2017–14 January 2018"](#), *Communication Design*, 5:1-2, pp. 273-377.

Walker, S. (2017) ["Can graphic design save your life? Wellcome Collection, London, 7 September 2017–14 January 2018"](#) *Design for Health*, 1:2, pp. 296-304.
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