

Networks and Transactions 2 (Art 752a)

Fall 2011, Tuesdays 1:30-5:30

Dan Michaelson

<http://art.yale.edu/Art752a>

Prerequisite: None

“I was a real amateur at it but I learned what his feeling for chess was.... He said it wasn't a war game, it's an aesthetic game, and you feel the shape of the board as it begins to shift its pattern and you make it become beautiful, even if you lose.”

–The gallerist Julien Levy remembering being taught to play chess by Marcel Duchamp

“A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue”

– Arthur Rimbaud

“If the balanced line is considered to be the only correct one, then the typewriter must, of necessity, write incorrectly.”

– Josef Albers, “Regarding the Economy of Typeface”

“This is an A train running local, local, local, local, local, local, local, local, local to Lefferts Boulevard.”

– Conductor unknown

“I was wondering about a radio [broadcaster] in the Netherlands ... he was stu-stu-stu-stuttering. And I was thinking, how is it possible that someone who can do everything, he can be a postman, he can be a scientific thinker, he can be an architect, but not someone who's working with language... But when he was speaking it was so intense and so believable...”

– Karel Martens

Some of the most interesting and lovely possibilities in design arise when design's job is to connect multiple networks of information and of people, all of which are in motion. You will complete three assignments in this class, each of which involves the qualitative design of systems for transient, multi-directional communication among sets of people. We focus particularly on *typographic form*, *network form*, and *movement form*, and the synesthetic possibilities for conversion between these.

No technology is required for any of the assignments; there are many ways to create algorithms and networks (for example, a chess board). Nevertheless the course is inspired by technology, and the use of technology (such as programming, digital screens) is supported and encouraged.

Assignment 1: Chess

Step 1. If you don't know how to play chess, please learn how to.

Step 2. Combining your knowledge of chess – its rules and other aspects of the game's strategies and poetics which you identify through research and personal practice – together with your own thesis, design a set of chess pieces.

Your chess pieces should be two-dimensional. If Calder's or Ernst's chess sets are about the nature of sculpture (through the lens their own artistic practices) in equal measure as they are about the game of chess (its rules, strategies, and poetics), then this is a project about the nature of graphic design/typography (through the lens of your own thesis) in equal measure as it is about the game of chess (its rules, strategies, and poetics).

You can take some liberties in that your pieces don't have to comprise a usable game, a familiar vernacular, or a marketable product etc. – but they do have to obey the rules of chess (e.g. 16 pieces per side in 6 genres [king, queen, rook, bishop, knight, pawn], the bishop moves diagonally, etc. etc.).

Consider the relationship between the game's visible aspects (game pieces) and invisible aspects (rules, stratagems, opposition). How does each uniquely reveal, influence, or engage the other?

You may wish to consider this brief from Duchamp:

The standard chess sets now in use, the FRENCH set and the STAUNTON, are both somewhat confusing in the similarity and intricacy of their forms. In the *French Set* for example, the Bishop is a little Queen and the pawn a little Bishop. Cannot a new set be designed, that is, without a too radical departure from the traditional figures, at once more harmonious and more agreeable to the touch and to the sight, and above all, *more adequate to the role the figure has to play in the struggle?* Thus, at any moment of the drama its optical aspect would represent (by the shape of the actors) a clear incisive image of its inner conflicts. In the complicated modern game the figures should inspire the player instead of confusing him. They should whisper to him at the right moment: "Move now to QB4. ... Break through the center. ... Pin the Knight. ... Let me win a piece. ... We can exchange Queens, the pawn will be metamorphosed into a new Queen. ... to mate the King."

and

they should never make a
MISTAKE.

It's your choice whether you want to in any way consider existing vernaculars of chess sets. You could ignore the "Staunton" standard style of chess pieces altogether and focus only on the nature of the game (for example, what Duchamp calls the potential to reveal an "incisive image of its inner conflicts"), and your thesis, as design factors.

Assignment 2: Alphabet

Create an alphabet. This may be at least 26 letters (capitals, lowers, or both), or all 10 numerals, or both, without or with punctuation and/or accented characters. You may choose a non-roman script (e.g. Hangul, Japanese, simplified Chinese, Cyrillic, Arabic) if you wish and you're familiar with the script. If designing numerals, you may choose an alternate counting system such as base 2 or 16 (design all the digits of that system).

Your alphabet is intended for (one or more of) a digital sign, marquee, large-scale film/video titles, or other changeable messaging. If you wish, "changeable messaging" could mean an analog technique such as Bob Dylan's in "Subterranean Homesick Blues," back-lit marquee letters, etc; or a digital technique such as programming, or a set of (e.g.) 26 After Effects animations. Individual letterforms (or words or messages) may animate through algorithmic or other means, but these movements should be intrinsic to the "font" you are creating. That is, movement (if any) should be built into the kit of parts itself (however complex that kit may be), not designed by a skilled motion graphics designer at the time of typesetting.

Your alphabet may be vector-based, photographic, sonic (not too plausible for a useful roman alphabet, more plausible for numerals or a phonetic alphabet such as Hangul or potentially Serbo-Croatian), or any other form.

I am particularly interested in the following factors:

- Rhythm, syncopation, negative space: in both space and time
- The modular, including the module of the message, the line, the word, the glyph, potentially the components of the glyph (Dürer)
- Surprise

These several aspects, when considered across the range of the alphabet and all its possible messages, comprise a network of equal subtlety and force as your chess set, and much greater scope. As with the chess set, you may or may not wish to respect (or even to study) existing typographic vernaculars, or even the emergence of legible word forms (though you should consider what makes your alphabet an alphabet, if not language). But you must consider your thesis as the rule set within which these letterforms operate. Like the residents of *Flatland*, your letterforms are creatures of the world of your thesis. Consequently the messages they form must be, too. As a mere type designer, you don't know precisely what those messages will be, though – yet you influence their emergent qualities, and "inspire the player" (the writer, the reader) of a "complicated modern game" (Duchamp), in *the ways you want* or the ways your thesis dictates.

Finally, take note that this assignment may range from rather simple (a 1 and a 0) to extremely complex (e.g. a fully algorithmic and animated font with programming code behind it), with numerous possibilities and more or less metaphorical solutions in between. Decide for yourself as a tactical question at the outset, how much time you wish to devote to this project and how you want to approach it.

Assignment 3: Festival

This assignment introduces a final concept for the Networks & Transactions curriculum: program. As a class we will organize an end-of-semester festival: a film festival, a chess festival, none or all of the above, or it may include multiple different components appropriate to your various theses. The festival may have several different venues or programs; there is no need to agree on one or even to collaborate, or some of you can to some extent if you want.

Our festival will need one or more marquees to advertise its program(s) in public or semi-public space.

This assignment is to organize the festival and design and implement the marquee(s) in the ways dictated by your theses. As with your alphabet, please consider especially rhythm, syncopation, negative space, the module, and surprise. You can now also consider sequence more particularly. You may also consider fostering a heightened relationship between text and image, if there are images (and text). You may use your alphabet from assignment 2, or not.

Like any marquee, these should engage a public. But in other ways you can rethink what a marquee is, for our time and within the universe of your thesis. A particularly interesting problem may be the non-linear and unpredictable factors inherent in programming a festival, or in representing a festival's actual program. You may wish to consider the unplanned, the emergent, and even the emergency.

You may implement your marquee as a digital content management system (as one possible solution, PHP software driving a full-screen web browser), or it may be analog. It may occupy a single surface or many surfaces, and exist in any medium.