

MALTE MARTIN

Out of The Corner of The Eye

Translated from a French article "Vu du coin de l'oeil" by
Véronique Vienne for *Etapas* magazine 179 / May 2010

There is, on the fringes of our field of vision, a zone of perception that has so far eluded our scrutiny. Less sensitive to colors than the centre of the retina, it is far better at detecting motion and identifying objects in low visibility. Thanks to specialized "rod cells" that are practically color-blind but highly motion-sensitive, we receive critical information that could be essential to our survival. Even though we might not see exactly what's going on out of the corner of our eye, we can register suspicious or unexpected movements and react to them accordingly. Jugglers, soccer players, hunters, and of course burglars depend on their peripheral vision to practice their craft, but rare are the artists or graphic designers who know how to take advantage of this "sixth" sense without which the world would look like a constricted scene at the end of a telescope.

One Parisian graphic designer, Malte Martin, who prefers to work in what he calls "low tension", has found a niche for himself in the chiaroscuro of this achromatic peripheral vision. Emphasizing the contrast between pristine blank space and densely inked surfaces, he creates graphic images so arresting they act on the retina as powerful stimulants. Pasted on walls, displayed along subway corridors, painted on store windows, or screened onto the front of buildings, his typographic exercises attract the attention of the most hurried pedestrians. You don't even have to read what's written on his posters to decipher their message: they speak directly to your reptilian brain.

Malte Martin developed this visual approach quite by chance, while looking for a graphic strategy that would be an antidote to garish commercial images. He thought that he had found the magic bullet:

aggressive black and white letterforms, severely cropped, combined with brash abstract motifs. These startling compositions were so minimalist that they stood out even in the most hectic urban landscape. And indeed, between 2002 and 2006, for public-art commissions in the streets of Chaumont, Fontenay-sous-Bois, and Belleville, he was able to arouse the curiosity of a slightly bemused local audience with a series bold typographic pronouncements featuring provocative aphorisms and questions. But the real breakthrough came when he got a chance to install a large octagonal kiosk on one of Paris's most busy and populous venues, Boulevard Magenta, and used this structure to road-test his newly-minted "low tension" theory.

The three-month experiment was part of a city-sponsored contemporary art festival celebrating the Mayor's progressive urban development agenda. At first, to prove his point, Martin displayed vibrantly colored posters featuring a series of upbeat quotations by famous French writers, from Victor Hugo to Patrick Chamoiseau. Then, from the terrace of a nearby café, he observed people's reactions to his installation. Most folks only glanced at the fluorescent posters, even though they brightened the somewhat depressing patch of sidewalk. Having documented this phase, Martin decided that it was time to progressively replace the psychedelic-looking texts with simple black and white ones. The results were immediate and unarguable: passer-bys would systematically slow down, some even stop to have a closer look at the kiosk and decipher what came across as a series of striking messages.

Malte Martin's diagnostic was straight forward: in public spaces, colorful posters are perceived as being commercial, whereas black and white ones are interpreted as more "serious" and worthy of attention. The conclusive outcome of the Boulevard Magenta's installation became the basis of the new visual identity Martin devised for the Athénée theatre, one of his long-standing clients. Using the DIN typeface in black and white, and playing up the contrast between its bold and light fonts, he defined for the

cultural institution a unique visual vocabulary. To offset the austere impression of the stark typography, he punctuated his compositions with a single playful pink dot. This campaign, a feature of Parisian metro corridors since 2006, has had a double effect: it not only gave The Athénée a strong identity, it also became a signature for Martin's work. However, it would be an oversimplification to describe his masterful handling of the monochromatic language as an expression of his typographical talent or as evidence of his rigorous aesthetic. What makes his work unique is the context in which it is seen. Without question, Martin's favorite environment is the agora. He visualizes his work as part of the urban experience. To evaluate his contribution to graphic design, one must get out in the streets and mingle with the crowds.

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Motion occupies a central place in Malte Martin's discourse. His "lab" is called "Agrafmobile". There, he develops personal projects unlike those he produces in his studio. "Agrafmobile", he says, is "an itinerant theater that investigates urban spaces and the territories of everyday life". What he doesn't say (did he even notice it?) is that this constant movement is a characteristic of his audience even more so than that of his projects. Indeed, his "Agrafmobile" work is seen, first and foremost, by pedestrians, by people who are in a hurry to get somewhere and get things done. As they rush by, they only give his messages a cursory glance. They read his posters "out of the corner of their eye", while using their peripheral vision to negotiate street traffic and sidewalk encounters. One could argue that, while moving up and down boulevards and avenues, people transform static images (posters, billboards, store windows, street signs, etc.) into motion graphics. And even though they are not aware of absorbing the information they see, they are nonetheless taking it in. The fact that images are displayed

sideways makes them all the more compelling: the brain can't help interpret passing visuals as potentially ominous.

At Fontenay-sous-bois, one of Martin's installations illustrates this principle. There, he commissioned a poet, Christine Rodès, to write a text that was to be placed on an angle formed by two walls, the first one facing a busy street while the second one was running along a quiet alley bordered with trees. Called "90 degrees", the poem could be read from both directions, its meaning and rhythm depending on how one approached the walls. An invitation to slow down, it required one be willing to move sideways as well as forward in order figure out the entire poem. Combining slowness and swiftness, this mural engaged the viewers' sense of timing as well as their perception of scale and space.

Malte Martin likes to team up with specialists from different fields : a dancer who juggles with sheets of tissue paper ; a composer who has translated the letters of the alphabet into specific musical notes in order to "read" texts as partitions; a sculptor who makes wrought iron sundials. With these collaborators, Martin creates what he called "fragile spaces": ephemeral performances pieces that explore the fluid, cursory and transitory nature of experience. « I love this idea of evanescence", he says. "My work tend to create situations in which something can be grasped in one breath and lost in the next."

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Malte Martin considers himself to be as much of an artist as a graphic designer. Even though he is attentive to his clients' demands and to the explicit and implicit requirements of their briefs, he isn't trying to come across as a "communicator". Born in Berlin in 1958 and raised in Germany, he is pragmatic and disciplined, yet, like so many designers of his generation, he owes a lot to Polish poster artists and to the politically-motivated Grapus collective (where he worked briefly in the late

80s). At the beginning of his career he embraced conceptual images, often turning to photography to create arresting visual metaphors. His studio quickly became known for its theatre, contemporary dance, and musical performance posters. Even in this early stage, the notions of ephemerality and movement were omnipresent in the vocabulary of this young cosmopolitan expat.

In the late 1990s, his work for the Théâtre de la Commune, for the Malakoff's theatre, for the Royaumont's Abbey, and for the Comédie de Reims, made extensive use of abstracted photographic images. References to art history were numerous: Martin studied fine arts at the Stuttgart and Paris beaux-arts schools – and it shows. *Asile poétique* (1998), an accordion folder for a dance association, echoed the work of photographer Aaron Siskind. The graphic identity of another dance organization, *Isadora* (1999), was reminiscent of the constructivist photograms of László Moholy-Nagy. His first posters for the Malakoff theatre (2000–2002) had the playfulness of Mirò paintings. The posters for *la mousson d'été* Festival (2000–2002) were as rich as compositions by Antoni Tàpies. Back then, the work of Malte Martin elicited reactions rather than emotions. Looking at his portfolio, one would be more likely to say Ah! than Oh! He was still in the “frontal” mode, relying on logic to develop an intelligent graphic communication language. « Today, I try to temper my protestant sensibility with more Mediterranean accents, ” he explains. “ I no longer try to put a distance between my work and my feelings.”

At Chaumont in 2002, for *Festival de l’Affiche*, Malte Martin collaborated with poet and composer Jacques Rebotier and with local denizens on a Dadaist performance piece, “Le théâtre des questions”. It was, in hindsight, a liberating experience for Martin who realized that his work didn't have to be limited to image making. It gave him permission to think of himself as a wordsmith as well as a designer, as someone who indulges his passion for the construction of artistic experiences using whatever medium he deems appropriate.

From then on, the written word - in French - became his primary means of expression. With German as his mother tongue, French idiomatic expressions had always had a strange beauty and texture for him. But terms and phrases that had looked in the past like odd objects were now extraordinary artifacts he manipulated as he pleased. More interested in the shape of words than in their semantic order, he began to play with their weight, their geometry, and their intricacy, weaving them and knitting them with abandon. Whereas a French graphic designer might have been worried about grammatical coherence, he had no such concern. He took pleasure in blurring the lines between legibility and illegibility. From his point of view, the main advantage of black and white typography was not its clarity but its poetic dimension. Today, his posters are as bright as snow and as crisp as night, steeped in light and in mystery, eliciting at the same time trust and apprehension.

After 2002, under the "Agrafmobile" label, Malte Martin kept working on pilot projects. « I am drawn to the idea that my work can capture the attention of people who never go to museum,» he says. "I believe that everyone can appreciate art, for its emotional, plastic or literary qualities.» As much as possible, he tries to work for public art projects and for institutions for whom cultural programs are more than "prettification" initiatives. Recently, he has observed that a growing number of French elected officials at the local level are viewing poetic installations in urban environments as politically-charged statements. For these politicians, encouraging site-specific art projects is a way to advertise more progressive agendas. « Likewise, I would like my work to serve as a catalyst to convince citizens that sharing with others their personal points of view, their aesthetic preferences, and their poetic insights is what democracy is all about", says Martin.

His public art commissions took many forms. A couple of years ago at Fontenay-sous-Bois, he transformed an old storefront into the setting of a typographic shadows play with "Snow White" as the theme. The following season, in Belleville, during « Lire en fête » festival, he was able to celebrate the event with free posters, banderoles and wrapping paper inscribed with literary quotations. In summer 2004, while participating in a nationwide "in situ" billboard art event, he used his minimalist verve to demonstrate how a highway underpass can be as great a location for artistic expression as an art gallery. Between 2007 and 2009, in underprivileged neighborhoods in Paris, he honed his street animation skills, installing huge screens, organizing night art performances involving artificial fog, hot air balloons, light shows, and a deluge of tissue paper confetti, the size of candy-wrappers, blowing over rooftops like swarms of white butterflies.

An inexperienced viewer might have trouble evaluating the work of such a prolific graphic designer. Perceived as excessive activity on the fringe of our field of vision, the artistic production of Malte Martin has sometimes been misunderstood. His latest book *Interroger les limites et fabriquer des bords* ("Questioning limits and pushing boundaries") is yet another expression of his inexhaustible inventiveness. Presenting twelve years of creativity, from his first publication, the magazine *Agraph*, to his most recent projects for the city of Villetaneuse, it is simply overwhelming. Malte Martin's unlimited peripheral vision is like the horizon; the closer one gets to him, the further ahead he seems to be.