

**THE SOIL, LIVING SUPPORT:
A GRAPHIC DESIGN FOR A FORGOTTEN (AGRI) CULTURE**



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A FORGOTTEN (AGRI)CULTURE

LUCIE COLIN

RESEARCH WORK IN DESIGN UNDER THE DIRECTION
OF ÉLISABETH CHARVET, LAURENCE PACHE AND
CATHERINE PRADEAU

DSAA, SPECIALIZED IN ECODESIGN, GRAPHIC DESIGN

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FOREWORD

My family often asked me what was the work of the graphic designer: «are you doing art?», «Are you making advertising then?». Graphic design is associated with an artistic or advertising profession by many people, and is badly perceived: he creates «good» images or is pushing for consumption.

However, the fundamental part of design is forgotten: its social vocation. According to Alain Findeli, «The end or purpose of design is to improve or at least maintain the habitability of the world in all its dimensions.» (Epilogue of *Manifeste pour le renouveau social et critique du design*, 2015)

Therefore, it was important for me to take an interest to a current issue that concerns us all: the degradation of the living soil. What was my surprise in discovering what it implied in the practice of graphic design ...

INTRODUCTION

Monsanto (2008) in which she denounced the toxicity of their products.

company. Marie-Monique Robin, investigative journalist, carried out a three-year investigation, transcribed in an unused film *The world according to*

1 According to the official website of Générations Futures, accessed on 20.12.2017
2 Monsanto is an American agricultural biotechnology

Agriculture in the United States of America implies a strong management of soils. As the major industry of the United States, agriculture is practiced in all states, especially in the Great Plains, a flat land in the center of the US.

American agriculture is known for leading seed improvement, mechanization of farming and intensive agriculture, for example with the harvesters combine invented by the american Cyrus McCormick in 1834. To conquer the global market, the United States' agricultural policy promotes an intensive and efficient agriculture, nevertheless against the natural rhythm. How can we explain this soil and landscape management ?

According to David Pimentel, a professor at Cornell University in the United States and a soil scientist, 0.5% of cultivable land is lost each year. The soil, a vital living resource, is a victim of disinterest and ignorance. This ignorance manifests itself through the search for homogeneous spaces and the standardization of the living beings. The specificity of the soil is now neglected. The plots are managed equally and uniformly on a large scale. The landscape reflects this standardization of soil and plots, and agricultural plots prevail in this landscape. How does the landscape influence our vision of the support ?

As a response to the exhaustion of living world, an ethical design has appeared. It is consistent for a designer to be interested in these environmental issues. After having done some critical work born from the dissatisfaction about the world which



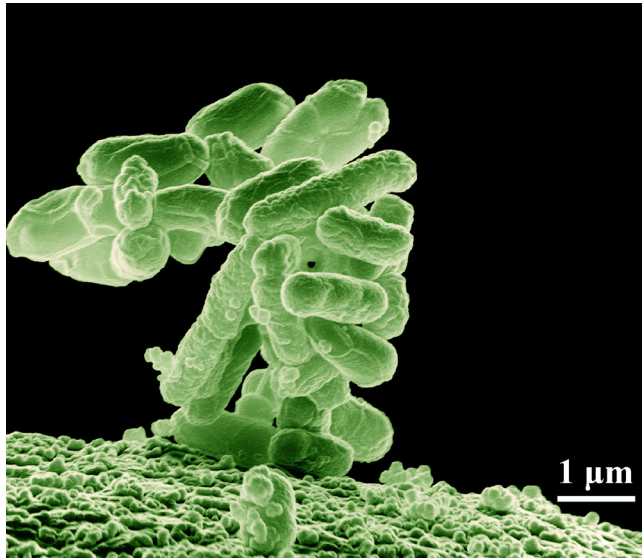
(fig.1) Documentary photograph © Paul Grebliunas

surrounds him or her, a designer's role is primarily to question the improvement of the life of the community. According to Stéphane Vial, a French philosopher specialized in design research, a fair practice in design is necessarily critical and social: authentic design thinking focuses on the relationships between humans and their diverse environments, the ways in which they live together, the expression of contemporary cultures, and the conceptions of the common good.^A How does this new conception of design make it possible to root the graphic productions in the environment? How can the graphic designer participate in making people aware of the soil issues in order to improve agricultural production conditions to restore the living character of the soil? The role of a graphic designer is to build and propagate ideas and images through the signs it puts in circulation, is it possible to break the ideas and images around micro-organisms that have been rooted in people's minds since the war? How does our relationship with the soil,

A- Vial S., Gauthier P., Proulx S., (2015) Épilogue: Manifeste pour le renouveau social et critique du design, In: Le design, Presses Universitaires de France. [Traduction of the idea]

a living support, influence our way of understanding supports in graphic design? The aim of this research work is to approve the value of the interest to study a domain outside the design in order to raise current questions in graphic design and to open new exploratory ways. To do so, it's first of all necessary to study the territorial management of the United States and its colonial history in order to understand agricultural techniques. Since the landscape is the initial revealer of land standardization, how does the relation to agricultural land act as a model of collective imaginations?

Then, it will be interesting to look at the emergence of ethical design, an ingrained vision of design that allows to question the actions of the designers. Finally, a design practice that aims to rely on the living support will be examined to propose assumptions about possible actions for a graphic designer in an agricultural context, which is an unusual context as far as design is concerned.



(fig.2) Micro-organism, *Escherichia coli* bacteria © Fr Academic

1. A NORMALIZED AMERICAN TERRITORY

FROM CITIES TO STATES, THROUGH AGRICULTURE: A CHECKERED TERRITORY

According to Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin^B a territory is the projection of a human group on a specific space. This refers to defined, measured, divided and arranged spaces. The American territory is known for being based on a grid system, called *Public Land Survey System**. What does this reveal about the people's relationship with nature, and more particularly with the soil? How does this grid system affect our vision of nature and landscape standardization?

The PLSS* was created by the Land Ordinance of 1785 after the American Revolutionary war, and was originally suggested by Thomas Jefferson (3rd President) to distribute American lands. The aim of the system was to create a baseline for the organisation of states, cities and plots. This grid system is called the Township and was established in the 18th century. However, people think that the *Public Land Survey System* makes the cities impersonal and creates a monotony of the territory. So why did American policies decide to divide the territory this way?

B- Ghorra-Gobin, C « Territoires et représentations : l'imagination géographique de la société américaine », *Revue française d'études américaines* 2006/2 (no 108), p. 84-97.



(fig.3) USA map © DR

(fig.4) Central Park, New York, USA © DR



Indeed, the establishment of a distribution system was necessary since the United States of America represents 9.6 million square kilometers. The USA is called a continent-country. The PLSS* is a tool applied to new countries that didn't have any historical past and had colonial cities born *ex nihilo*, to help the territory distribution. Hence, the United States is today a hierarchized and controlled territory, that «embodies its dynamism», according to Anne Dalsuet^C. This management of nature embodies the building of the American identity. Thus, geometry is omnipresent in the territorial management.

The Manifest Destiny is an american ideology. According to it, the American nation had the divine mission to spread democracy and civilization to Westward: «It is by right of our manifest destiny that to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us.»^D American people have been pushing this frontier through the manifest destiny as a civilizing mission: the frontier has forged the myth of a frontier nation and the American society is seen as an exceptional society in a position to constantly assign itself mobilizing objectives.^E The myth of the Frontier-nation shaped the American geographic unconscious and all its political and economic approaches. This idea of a fundamental progression in the American identity manifests itself in exporting American products and the American Way of Life through the world.

C- Dalsuet, A « Philosophie et écologie », 2010

D- John L. O'Sullivan on Manifest Destiny, 1839

E- Ghorra-Gobin, C « Territoires et représentations : l'imagination géographique de la société américaine », Revue française d'études américaines 2006/2 (no 108),p. 84-97. [Traduction of the idea]



(fig.5) Killeen, Texas, USA © DR

Therefore, we can ask ourselves if this territorial organization has influenced the relationship of American people with nature? The notion of wilderness appeared in the USA to qualify wild nature. Wilderness is outside social life. It evokes the purity of nature almost linked with virginity. This wild nature, which is widespread in the United States, is still raising fears. Indeed, wild nature evokes anarchy. Undomesticated nature appears hostile, it needs to be explored, conquered, dominated by humans.

¹ According to the official website of Générations Futures, accessed on 20.12.2017

² Monsanto is an American agricultural biotechnology company. Marie-Monique Robin, investigative journalist, carried out a three-year investigation,

transcribed in an unused film The world according to Monsanto (2008) in which she denounced the toxicity of their products.

F- Schwartz, M. (2008) I Hate Nature

« We must come to grips with the fact that our environment is largely shaped by us. This is a double-edged word, because it means that we can determine its physical form, density, and function... or not. So far, our infatuation with the American wilderness myth has resulted in very ambivalent feelings about the appropriateness of imposing form on our landscape.»^F This need of sculpting the landscape manifests itself in particular through agricultural practices.

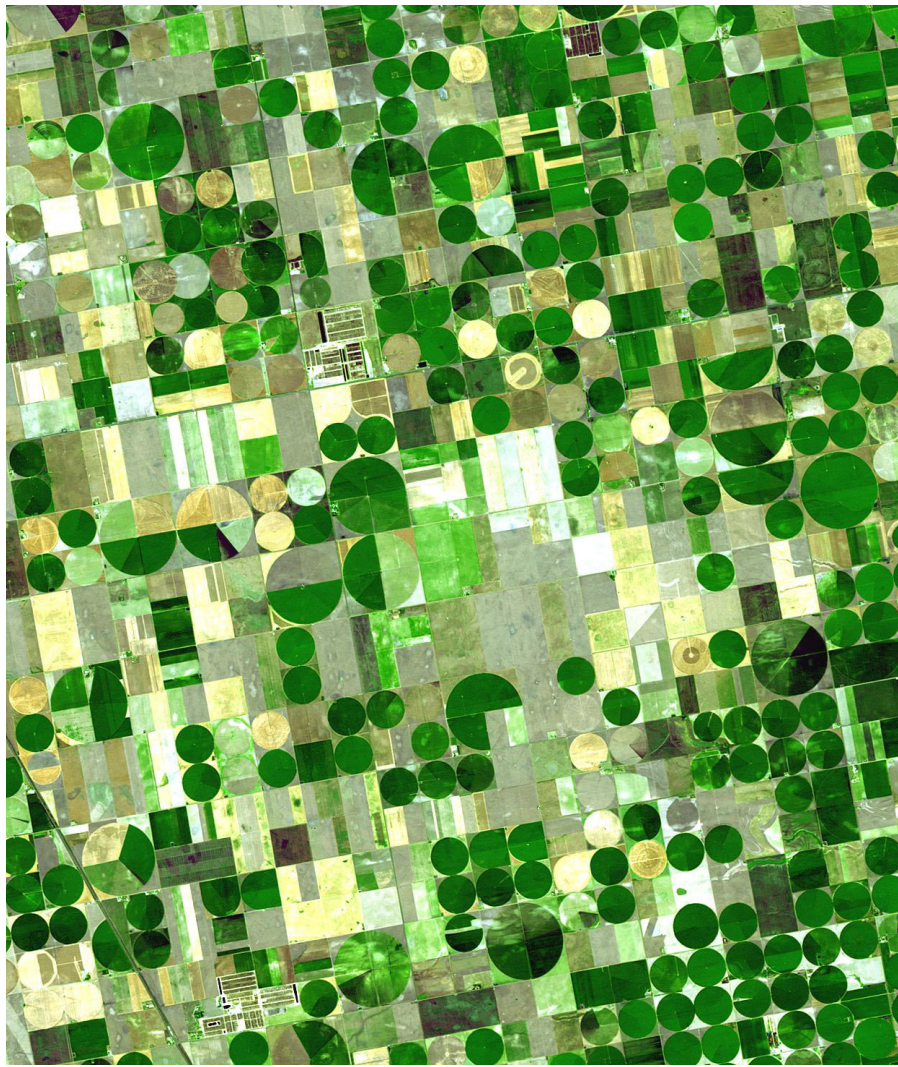
A CONTROVERSIAL AGRICULTURE

The United States has a usable agricultural surface area of 370 million hectares. This positions the USA as the world's leading agricultural power. Agricultural production is just the center of the immense American agro-industrial complex that includes fertilizer production, agricultural equipment, services such as banks, storage, and transports. San Joaquin Valley is one of the most agricultural regions of the United States. It produces the majority of the United States' agricultural yield.

Huge firms like Monsanto have a significant impact on the agricultural production and soil health. Today at the heart of many scandals, Monsanto² is at the origin of the development of glyphosate, also known as RoundUp, which is ubiquitous in soils, water, plants, animals and humans. In 2015, a French association named Générations Futures conducted a urine test¹ of 30 people: 100% of samples are positive for the carcinogenic herbicide (classified potentially carcinogenic by the International Agency for Research on Cancer).



(fig.6) Crops in Kansas © DR





(fig.7) © DR

(fig.8) Dust Bowl © DR



Developed by the American firm Monsanto that is currently accused of ecocide and « silent genocide », RoundUp is today the most widely used herbicide worldwide, marketed through the world since the expiry of the US patent in 2000. The intensive use and overuse of chemicals such as glyphosate in crops or even for private use has already created ecological disasters. For example, the Dust Bowl ravaged the Great Plains of the United States of America in the 1930's. The open topsoil, which was over-ploughed and intensively cultivated, completely disappeared due to erosion during the Great Depression's drought in that region. But how did this such intensive agriculture appear?

Standardization and productivity have developed throughout centuries, and this until the once intimate link between humans and the soil was broken.^G Indeed, in order to face famines that hit the people during wars, high productivity quickly prevailed, leaving aside human's concern for soil.

Military research during World War 1 also initiated research on chemical weapons. They were first intended to kill humans, and have been transposed into agriculture like other tools originally developed for fighting. Thus, wars helped to promote the development of pesticides and herbicides in 1930's. Moreover, this has led to a change in farming : the peasant, who was once concerned with the quality of his land, quickly became a farm operator. Through these two terms we observe a change in farmer's concerns. Farmers who used to be rooted in their land and dedicated to the transmission of their know-how, became farm operators with the agro-industry, and now exploit their land for productive purposes, where everything is calculated and

G- Entretien avec Nicole Pignier, In : Pignier, N. (2017) « Le Design et le Vivant : Cultures, agricultures et milieux paysagers ». Connaissances & Savoirs

controlled : the operator's mission is the economic management of the land. But how does this relationship with the soil influence our way to deal with graphic supports ? What links can be indentified between agriculture and graphic design ?

GRAPHIC DESIGN ENCOURAGED BY STANDARDIZATION

For Augustin Berque, the peasants creates the landscapes.^H Agricultural landscapes, which are strongly present in our environment, influence our way to consider any type of support through the meanings that it conveys : standardization, geometry, sharpness, etc. It is important to remember that once, the earth had an almost sacred metaphysical dimension and was meant to convey messages about society through petroglyphs and geoglyphs. Then it is interesting to question the messages conveyed today by soil management. There is a reciprocal relationship between graphic design and agriculture, through collective imaginations. Indeed, our way of modeling the soil, influences the collective unconscious. But how is this expressed in graphic design ?

Graphic design is both influenced by this perception of the ground deep in the collective psyche, and accentuates this idea through its own standardized media. We especially notice this in graphic productions such as the *Rural Electrification Campaign*, 1937 by Lester Beall in which we find a geometrization of forms or a pure functionalism. This is even more obvious today with

H- Entretien avec Nicole Pignier, In : Pignier, N. (2017) « Le Design et le Vivant : Cultures, agricultures et milieux paysagers ». Connaissances & Savoirs



(fig.9) Lester Beall, Rural Electrification Campaign, 1937 © DR

the recognition of a dematerialization of graphic supports. We are now trying to communicate in a virtual and non-tactile way. Could these behaviors come from our relationship to the soil?

Indeed, digital technologies lead to a loss of gestures, just as agricultural machinery leads to a distance between the farmer and his land. Thus, we notice a denial of materiality. Sensory experiences are limited, both in the agricultural context and in the transmission of messages. Is it possible to denounce standardization by producing less normative graphic supports, since graphic supports have to respect standards that make them look like each other? Standardization in graphic design is criticized for example in the diploma work of Victor Rouve, who denounces the movement of counter-ornamentation. His work questions a system of neutral packaging, which contrasts with the overconsumption of images. He therefore criticizes the standard that leads to a dispossession of identity and diversity. Thus, it is interesting to imagine graphic supports that would defend the living character of the soil, that is today neglected and exploited until it is exhausted.



(fig.10) Geoglyphs, Sloan Canyon © DR





(fig.11) Normer la production graphique, Victor Rouve, 2016 © Victor Rouve

2. AN ETHICAL DESIGN IN REACTION TO MASS PRODUCTION

UNDERSTAND THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE DESIGNER'S ACTIONS

Victor Papanek is an Austro-American designer and defender of sustainable design in the 1970's (1927-1999). He is one of the pioneers of ecological design. In front of unsustainable practices, it has become urgent to reinvent new design practices, linked to the issues and crises of the society. Indeed, through *Design for a real world*, he criticizes industrial designers, who participate in leading to a destructive society. According to him, it is urgent to consider the environmental issues of design. Thus, an ecodesign practice is emerging, that takes into account the recycling of materials and the life cycle of objects designed.

«Design must be an innovative, highly creative, cross-disciplinary tool responsive to the true needs of men. It must be more research-oriented, and we must stop defiling the earth itself with poorly-designed objects and structures.»

Design for a real world, Victor Papanek

The practice of design according to Victor Papanek makes the distinction between the surroundings and the environment. The environment is distinguished from the surroundings by taking into account the relationships between humans and other living beings within a specific territory². The design in the environment aims to defend a living environment threatened by a commercial appropriation, to rebuild a technical environment dispossessed of its culture, its know-how, its manners¹. This ethical vision of design is also addressed by Nicole Pignier in *Le Design et le Vivant*: The ethical aims of epistemologies that drive Research are not neutral, they carry societal issues, they affect the 'real', living beings, life in society and life in short.¹

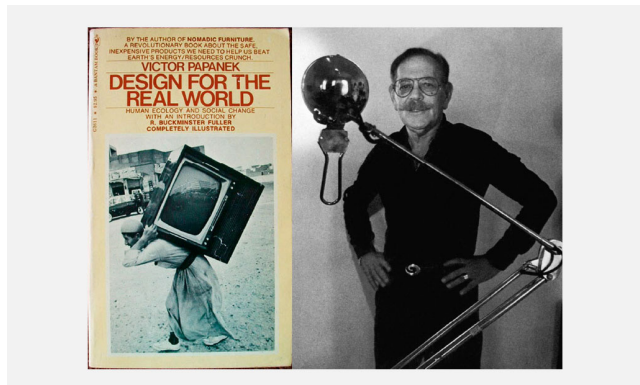
Thus, the practice of design, whether responsible or not, impacts society. But what are the links between agriculture and graphic design? According to Victor Papanek, we are all designers: «All men are designers. All that we do, almost all the time, is design, for design is basic to all human activity».^K

So, we can say that the roles of the farmer and the graphic designer are the same and both are responsible for a perception of the world. One of them models the landscape, the other models messages, but both make signs. The message of the landscape is contained in forms, colors, textures. Thus, our relationship with the soil induces a specific behavior throughout circulation of messages: the support is forgotten, and the communication tends to be less and less tactile. Then, is it possible to consider a graphic design that stands out against standards?

I- Gorz, A. (2008) «Écologica» [Traduction of the idea]

J- Pignier, N. (2017) « Le Design et le Vivant: Cultures, agricultures et milieux paysagers ». Connaissances & Savoirs [Traduction of the idea]

K- Papanek, V. (1971) «Design for a real world».



(fig. 12) Victor Papanek © DR

A ROOTED DESIGN

In the 1960's Victor Papanek devised a 9 cents low-tech radio receiver for underdeveloped countries, by the observation of Indonesian culture. The radio is composed of a recycled juice can, a transistor, a carplug, a wire, paraffin wax and wick.¹ Local cow dung could be used as a sustainable power source. This object is completely rooted in the environment in which it is operated. How can we, as graphic designers, root the media we create in the environment?

The environment is similar to a biotope³: It is an «environment (...) sheltering a community of living beings which constitutes, with the biocenosis, an ecosystem.» So the different environments offer infinite diversification. In addition, the rural environment is itself already very diverse.

L- Kreis, D. (2017) Victor Papanek, un design pour le commun (annexe)



(fig. 13) Tin Can Radio, Victor Papanek and George Seeger, North Carolina State College © DR

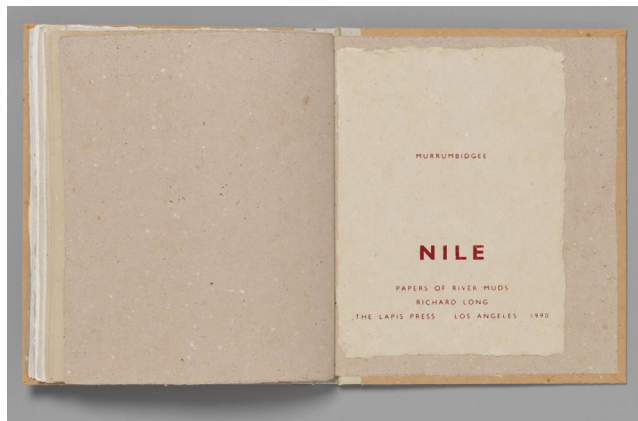


Indeed, the rural environment is characterized by a strong social mix. As Annick Lantenois reminds us in her book *Le vertige du Funambule*, it is necessary for a graphic designer to accept to leave his or her status and its certainties behind and venture into the unknown. Graphic design research requires forgetting boundaries and accepting to be interested in multidisciplinary. The interest in a field completely out of design, which also raises worrying questions today, raises an issue which arises in design thanks to this attention that we focus on the status of the soil.

Indeed, according to Ruedi Baur, it's interesting, even necessary, for the graphic designer to open to other areas than his own, or design in general. The notion of In Situ is essential for him: he defends a contextual approach that consists to cultivating diversity where it is, that is, in situ. In other words, Ruedi Baur argues that the graphic designer must leave the hermetic space of the laboratory^M. From this statement, how to draw on the reality of the environment to create messages in a fair way? Is it possible to use living supports, such as landscapes, to convey messages?

M- Baur, R. (2013) « 101 mots du design graphique : à l'usage de tous ». Archibooks [Traduction of the idea]

(fig.14) Paper of River Muds, Richard Long, 1990 © Richard Long

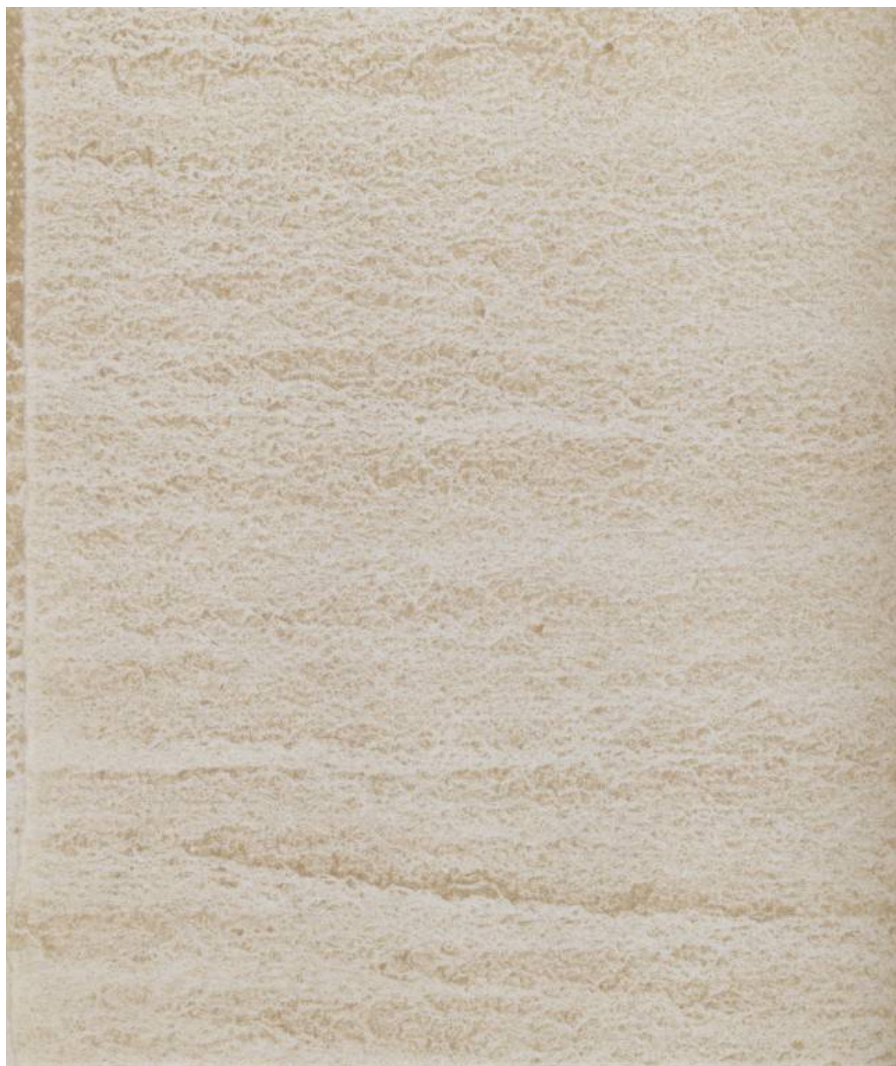


That's what Richard Long wanted to experiment in his series of Papers of River Muds (fig.14). This project, from 1990, is a limited edition made of different books: Nile, Mississippi, Rhine, Chitravathi, Avon, Umpqua, etc. Each of them put forward a river: the paper that composes it is made of the mud from each river. So the pages have different shades of brown. The use of sedimentary material from rivers directly connects the book to the medium in question. The diversity of the different rivers is made visible and palpable; this work underlines the particularity of each river. So, Richard Long manages to reveal the uniqueness of each place. Therefore, our goal is to start designing on living supports while imagining a graphic language that addresses farmers, peasants and farm operators, as a specific community.

A DIVERSIFIED AND SINGULAR GRAPHIC PRODUCTION IN AGREEMENT WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

Despite the issues raised previously, many researchers and farmers are trying to reintegrate the living elements in their work. Alternative techniques to conventional agriculture are trying to make their way. Agroecology or peasant agriculture is an agriculture rooted in a specific environment. It was invented by Masanobu Fukuoka, a Japanese farmer and microbiologist: the soil is not ploughed and machines that compact the soil are scarcely used.

Indeed, practitioners of agroecology argue that the farmer lies at the heart of the food system, and that such a change of practice must come from one's experiments and exchanges.



(fig.14) Paper of River Muds, Richard Long, 1990 © Richard Long



It's a kind of agriculture that demands a specific relationship to nature: we must accept the unknown and the diversity, because each parcel of land is different and requires a different job. Attempting to make nature uniform goes against the principles of agroecology. Then, it is important to experiment for learning, to study the soil and living organisms fully *in situ*, and learn peer to peer. These new agricultural practices call into question the uniqueness of points of view and the standardization of sensitivities. In the same way, permacultural design aims to unlearn, and to leave industrial utopias behind: it means intervening as little as possible in a chemical and mechanical way. Diversification is needed in both agriculture and design: each field is different. The soil and the graphic support are victims of standardization and uniformisation.

This research aims to use the agricultural world to regenerate graphic design thinking. By developing tools adapted to the target, the graphic designer can address them appropriately. How to value the work of agricultural land? And how to create signs that echo the peasant culture? How, through research in graphic design, to denounce the way the soil, which is a living support, is neglected? Then, it would be necessary for graphic design to draw from the agricultural context the codes of the relationship to the soil in order to denounce the disregard for the support through a criticism of the standard, both graphic and agricultural. That is, to consider that the graphic designer intervenes in an existential way in the environment where societies evolve with the territory. This implies that the graphic designer should radically act upon existing environments defined by the evolution of territories and their inhabitant. It means ultimately using design to challenge society or communities, because there is currently a break between creative design and cultural specificities.

CONCLUSION

The Township, the American grid system, reflects a vision of a managed and submissive nature that underlines the Human domination above nature. This grid system creates a distancing with natural spaces, and acts as an agricultural model which leads to natural disasters like the Dust Bowl.

Human beings are, according to themselves, hierarchically superior to nature, and they seek to dominate it. The soil provides our food and regulates the atmosphere and water ; it also radically impacts the landscape by the way we manage it. If we consider, like Victor Papanek, that we are all designers, the farmer makes as many signs as the graphic designer.

This landscape produces a message, acts ubiquitously and unconsciously on the management of nature. More importantly, agricultural tillage and landscape manage to unconsciously influence the way we think about any type of support and how we communicate, through a standardized and uniform view of the support. Thus, the distancing with the support is also felt in the field of graphic design. This convergence established between the abandonment of the living soil and the virtualization of the exchanged messages draws the outline of an unconscious less and less tactile and concrete. Thus, the culture and the agricultural culture participate in the construction of the man's imagination by the way the soil is considered.

The aim of this research work is to question what are the means, for a graphic designer, to trigger a perception of different living supports from the agricultural community. Thus, to value the living character of the soil to farmers, it is important to take an interest in the agricultural culture, which as we have seen, is specific because it is located in a marginal and special environment: the rural environment. This environment has a limited access to graphic culture, and is a forgotten environment of graphic design. The role of the graphic designer is to translate messages through media in agreement with the target. Research in graphic design is here to question communication in an environment where the graphic culture is reduced and develop signs and messages drawn from this specific culture.

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RESUME

American agriculture is known for leading seed improvement, mecanization of farming and intensive agriculture. But why American people developed this specific relationship with nature ? To conquer the global market, the United States' agricultural policy promotes an intensive and efficient agriculture, nevertheless against the natural rhythm. How can we explain this soil and landscape management ? The living support, consisting of pests, weeds, decaying organic waste, is today neglected. Yet, it is a fundamental element of atmospheric and hydraulic regulation and access to food. The soil is today threatened, so it is consistent for the designer to be interested in this environmental problem. Its role is primarily to question the improvement of the life of the community, after having done a critical work born of a dissatisfaction on the world which surrounds it. According to Stéphane Vial, a fair practice of design must be critical and social. So, how can the graphic designer participate in a soil awareness as a living support to improve agricultural production conditions ? The role of the graphic designer is to build and propagate imaginary through the signs it puts in circulation, is it possible to break the imaginary rooted since the war around microorganisms ? How does the relationship with the ground, living support, influence our way of understanding the supports in graphic design ?

This thesis focuses on the relationship between living support and graphic support. What is the interest for the designer to

study a domain external to the design? How the living support influences the support in graphic design? How can the designer address a marginal environment devoid of graphic culture?

Agricultural soil is present on 53% of the country's surface, so agricultural plots are ubiquitous in the landscape, standardizing and acting as a visual model of garden management. Moreover, they acclimatize an orderly vision of nature and this extends into other areas than agricultural culture. As the landscape is the initial revealer of land standardization, how does the agricultural land relation act as a model of collective imaginations? What behavior does our relation to the living support then have with respect to the circulation of messages?

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