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Identity Crisis

by Karen Mahony

Brno, Czech Republic. A rather homely Buddhist proverb of amphibian prudence set the tone for much of the Icograda conference this year:

"The frog should not drink up the pool in which it lives"

Has the design profession used up its pool of public goodwill by promoting the unbridled consumerism of the big brands? Or is the design profession an innocent, simply focused on producing great images and not to be held responsible for the ultimate purpose to which these are put?

It was certainly timely for Icograda, the International Council of Graphic Design Associations, to put integrity on the agenda. 2002 was, of course, turning out to be a year in which scepticism about corporate ethics was reaching a new intensity. The questions raised at the conference weren't new, but the current situation did give them a particular urgency. Should an identity consultancy create a flattering representation of a company known to have dubious practices? Is it okay to use powerful images to blatantly mislead consumers? Should designers' efforts be spent on selling expensive, useless or even dangerous products to disadvantaged communities? Should design agencies go even further than this and urge nations with unfortunate reputations to remake their public faces, rather than using the money and time to address more fundamental internal issues about behavior towards their own and others' citizens?

Despite the seriousness of these issues for the profession, and the mostly eloquent, personable and experienced roster of speakers chosen to elaborate the theme in Brno, one nagging doubt kept arising throughout this two-day conference: Why was there a prevailing feeling of listlessness and lack of response from the audience?
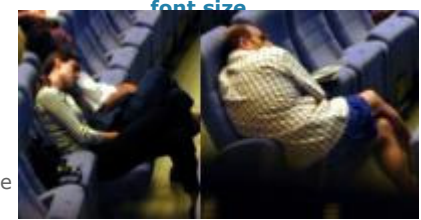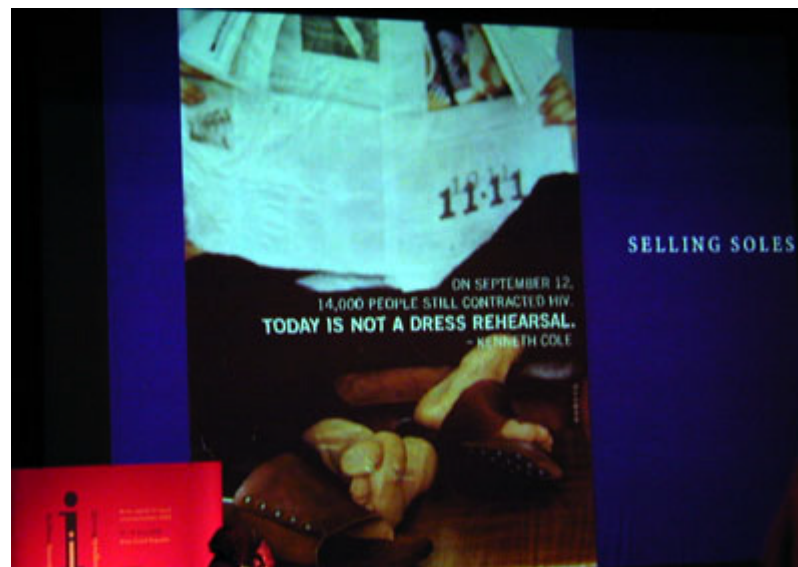

An audience grabbed by the issues?

Perhaps the sheer heat didn't help: All time records were hit as some parts of the Czech Republic saw temperatures in the mid-30s and the audience, at times, was in danger of melt-down. There were also some particularly difficult language barriers: over 40 nationalities were represented (an achievement in itself by Icograda) and inevitably not all delegates felt confident enough to express themselves well in English, Russian or German, the three languages supported.

In the end, it felt as though the persistent disengagement and lack of serious discussion were largely due to the geographical and professional constituency that the conference drew on. For designers working in societies in which efficient capitalism and effective business are still in the process of being built, questons of corporate ethics feel less familiar and less relevant than they do in the more brand and corporation-dominated parts of the world. If you have never designed a large corporation's identity, and feel that you may never get a chance to do so, then how can you really be engaged by a discussion of the ethical decisions involved? For many of the delegates, much of the talk about integrity, consumerism and the behavior of the global brands seemed to provoke perplexity rather than passion.

The organizers were clearly aware that this difference in local experience might be a problem and tried to address it. The first presentation by Mervyn Kurlansky, for example, tried to establish a context by explaining basic principles of corporate identity. This was well intentioned, but in practice, simply too basic. The talk had its moments of historical interest (as a founder of Pentagram, Kurlansky has tremendous experience to draw on), and it was charmingly presented and well illustrated, but at times, it tended to patronise the audience. The problem isn't that designers from South America, Africa or the former Soviet Union need to have the theory of identity and branding explained to them—it is rather that they rarely get a chance to put it into practice; the theory they know remains undeveloped and untested.

In contrast to Kurlansky, David Berman put his case forcefully and without simplification. He argued that the West exports the idea that life can be better if you consume more, and that designers must bear some responsibility for supporting this myth. "How Logo Can We Go?" he asked, and some of his examples implied that the answer is pretty low. Photographs of Coca-cola branded signs on impoverished African towns, schools and even churches seemed shockingly cynical.

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The Knowledge Circuit

How logo can you go? David Berman

The Events of September 10, 2001

1,970,000,000 Marlboro cigarette butts shipped outside U.S.

900,000,000 doses of Coca-Cola ingested

41,000,000 McDonalds hamburgers served

8,200,000 pounds of plastic molded to bottle drinking water

28,000 hectares of ancient forest destroyed

15,800 humans became infected with HIV virus

2,750 Africans killed by untreated malaria

1,600 ads consumed by each person in the U.S.

72 species made extinct

Some of Berman's sobering statistics

But in a world in which a typical American can identify 100 brands but only 10 plants (another of the unnerving statistics quoted) Berman argued that the design profession needs to apply intelligent ethical judgement rather than an indiscriminate anti-brand or anti-corporate stance. So how do you apply such ethics in a shrinking market where a competitor may accept any work you turn down? Berman and his colleagues at the Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario suggest that through a system of registration, designers can agree professional standards collectively rather than individually. The expectation is that "good" corporates will then take pride in hiring only registered designers. Is this all a bit optimistic? Well, you get the impression that Berman fundamentally is an optimist. As he emphasized, his belief is that designers hold a lot of power and can "enhance social conditions around the world, as opposed to applying their skills to help organizations mislead their audiences."

The briskest response to Berman actually came from Wally Olins, another of the speakers, who used the rather hackneyed "do you think people are too stupid to judge for themselves?" to defend the use of any means of persuasion at the designer's (and corporation's) disposal. Berman replied that in an equal world people could indeed make their own good judgements — but until then unethical selling techniques should not target the disadvantaged.

One might have expected this exchange to produce a strong reaction; after all, it touches on the very core of global design ethics. However, once more there was next to nothing from the floor in response. I suspect that many of the delegates were focused simply on wanting to work with a large brand or corporation and hadn't yet had a reason to think about its possible ethical implications. As a German colleague of mine recalled recently, when "the wall" went down in 1989, the liberal left in West Germany enthusiastically started telling East Germany to reject conspicuous consumption, ubiquitous branding, store cards and all the other paraphernalia of capitalism. But East Germans did no such thing. They preferred to experience these things for themselves before making a judgement. Perhaps something of the same attitude applies to designers and design agencies in emerging economies.

the nation **and** the brand

and

the nation **as** a brand

Olins sets out to rebrand nations

Interestingly, the very next talk was by Wally Olins. In "the nation and the brand, and the nation as a brand" Olins argued that countries should copy corporations and work with design agencies to rebrand themselves — quite a contrast to Berman's stance.

In some ways the argument was compelling: we are regularly told that nations and corporations are becoming more and more alike. Many countries undoubtedly have an identity problem; indeed, this is the year in which the US called a high-profile meeting to discuss its identity. According to one Olins' survey, most people know only the most basic, cliched and often out-of-date information about countries. The Ukraine, for example, is recognized only for Soviet wheatplains and Chernobyl — quite a drawback if you are trying to attract tourism back to the Crimea. According to Olins, some thorough rebranding backed up by a good promotional campaign should mostly do the trick. But he also acknowledged that governments have proved frustratingly unenthusiastic about hiring design consultants to do this job, so clearly there is some skepticism.

What is Olins really selling? Sure, an improved image can help tourism — but there's nothing new in design agencies working to improve the communications and images of national tourist boards. Can re-imaging the entire country identity really help inward investment or societal progress, as Olins claimed, and if so, has anyone ever demonstrated this?

More controversially, where would Olins draw the ethical line when it comes to rebranding countries? Would his argument that consumers can judge for themselves be enough to make him take on the job of — for example — rebranding Mugabe's Zimbabwe? In the back of my mind I kept remembering that story (apocryphal?) about the day that novelist Frederick Forsyth remarked in the British Royal College of Art senior

the day that novelist Frederick Forsyth remarked in the British Royal College of Art senior common room "Ah, Adolf Hitler, now there was a great graphic designer." At what point do you refuse to use the power of re-imaging to strengthen an immoral regime? It would have been good to debate these issues, especially in front of so many representatives of countries that have had to change their image and their reality radically and rapidly.

In the event though, the only questions put were pretty basic and uncritical, and indeed showed a rather touching faith in Olins' premise. "What is your image of El Salvador and how can we improve it?" asked one, while another wanted to know about how Russia was now perceived. The answers from Olins were friendly but necessarily noncommittal. One wondered how the questioners, even if they had been given the magic answers to a new image for their country, would then have gone about selling this to their governments? This is obviously a problem that Olins himself has still to crack, and his talk was backed up by very little in the way of examples of proven (or even completed) work.

Later talks by Ahn Sang-Soo, Bo Linnemann, Ashley Booth and Roland Schweighofer went down well with the audience, but perhaps because they were essentially straightforward portfolio presentations, and less provocative. The most striking was by Sang-Soo, who showed the painstaking work he has done on developing and applying typefaces for the Korean "Hangul " script, which he sees as a powerful element in the visual vocabulary of the Korean nation. It was enlightening to see Sang-Soo offer this much less broad-brush answer to enhancing national identity than that advocated by Olins. To Sang-Soo, identity starts from within and is subtle. Nothing to do with focus groups or branding campaigns, but is instead a steady, painstaking and respectful re-establishment of some major symbolic elements — in his case, the Korean script. The resulting work shown was beautiful; elegant but also full of impact and modernity.
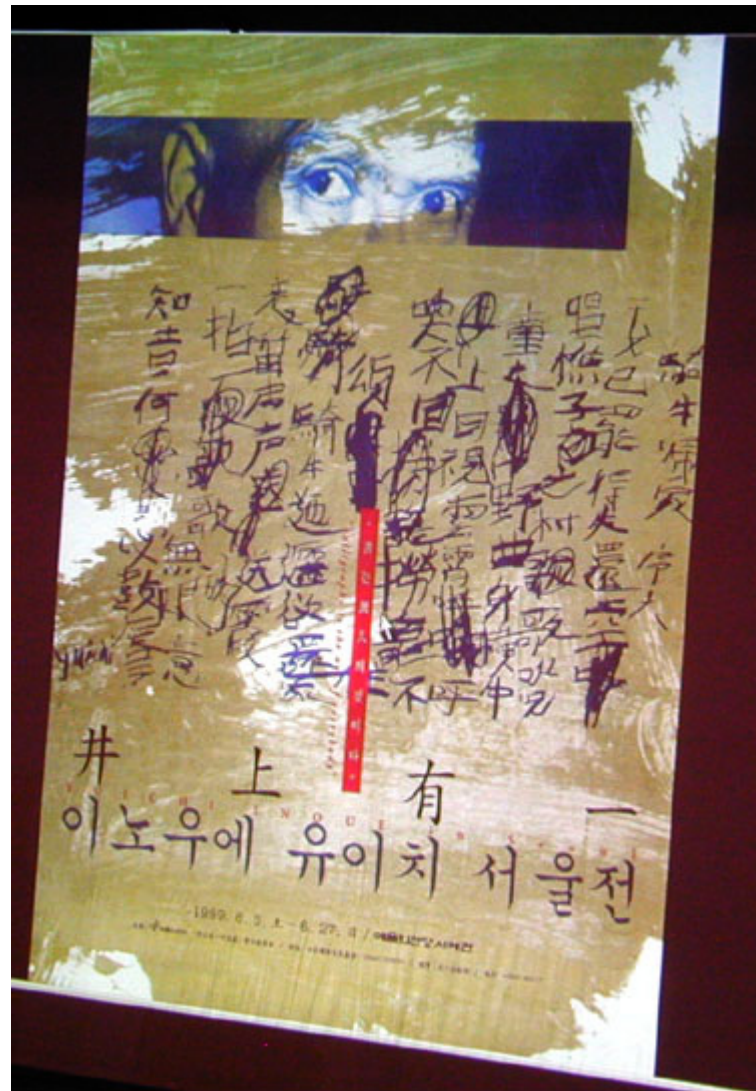
A Sang-Soo poster in Hangul script

Bo Linnemann, a founding partner of Kontrapunkt, picked up on something of the same theme of national character in design and presented a concept of "Danishness" that showed the kind of clean, straightforward and slightly serious work (no post-modern frippery here) that we expect of the established Scandinavian agencies.

Clean, clear and uncontroversial, logotypes from Kontrapunkt

"Danishness" in design is well understood. But how about "Czechness" ? Ales Najbrt's talk on the second day, promised something beyond a portfolio presentation. The Czech Republic has fought hard for its independence and identity and when Najbrt promised to tell us more about "how capitalism [has] affected eastern European designers and design during the last 13 years," I hoped for a discussion of the emergence of some distinct national character and attitude and perhaps even of a distinct professional integrity. This is after all, a nation that has a poet for its president, that once employed Frank Zappa as a cultural advisor, and that had the (very sexy, powder blue) uniforms of its national guard produced by a theatrical costume designer.

Instead, we were given a thorough but uninspiring survey. By this account Czech design has mainly spent the last 13 years playing "catch-up" rather than establishing anything distinct. Typical was the (unimplemented) identity developed by Studio Najbrt for Czech Telecom. This was done only five or six years ago but it looked worryingly like the 1980s British Telecom. Not much experimental "Czechness" there then — and frankly, not even much modernity.
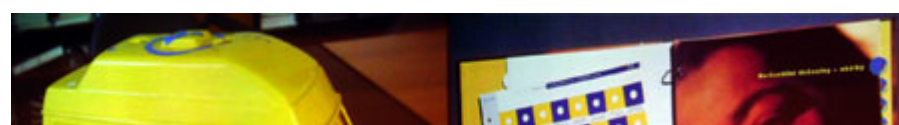
Studio Najbrt identity for Czech Telecom: Efficient, well-organised and thoughtful enough to be racially inclusive (the woman is Roma) — but distinctively Czech?

The other corporate logotypes shown mostly looked like the product of reliable but slightly pedestrian Western agencies of the early-nineties. On this showing, we certainly can't yet expect to see a velvet revolution in corporate identity practice coming from Prague agencies.

Finally, and in total contrast, the conference concluded with Andrew Lam-Po-Tang of the Boston Consulting Group. An ex-graphic designer and current strategy consultant, Lam-Po-Tang focused on the "puzzles" of corporate identity, in particular whether brand and identity redesign provides measurable business advantage. Lam-Po-Tang began by taking brand valuations calculated by Interbrand, and from these figures, doing a further calculation to see whether an enhanced brand value translates into enhanced company and shareholder value. The results are dispiriting for the branding profession. Basically, except in the case of the very small percentage (around 5%) of companies in which brand is an exceptionally high proportion (around 70%) of their overall value, the money spent on branding does not appear to increase shareholder value. In other words:

In terms of business impact, there is still no clear, quantitative correlation between business performance and branding/identity - if you try to correlate changes in published brand valuations with changes in total shareholder returns, you will find a very weak, or no, relationship.
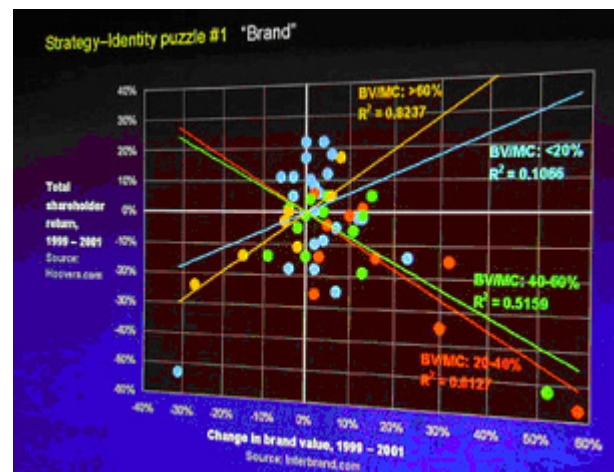
Statistical proof that money spent on brandingis usually money wasted? Lam-Po-Tang stirs it up.

Lam-Po-Tang was apologetic about this, and emphasised that he still feels that design is necessary and worthwhile. However, he needn't have been too concerned about depressing his audience. His rather revelatory findings were received with a degree of puzzlement rather than concern. Again, it seemed that worrying about company valuations was not really within the working scope of most of the delegates, who in the end would probably rather have seen less charts and more beautiful typography. Yet current economic difficulties will only make it more imperative for designers to be able to argue for the value they can add. It will be interesting to see if Lam-Po-Tang's figures do prove to be an effective wake-up call once the profession has had time to properly digest them.

In summary then, Icograda 2002 did both voice opinions and show work of some real passion and integrity. But it also raised many questions about the creation of many slick brand identities that are at best mundane and at worst irresponsible. If, in the end, the conference has simply put some doubt in the minds of emerging design agencies about unquestioningly admiring what has been done before in established markets, then it will have achieved something worthwhile. If it results in the profession as a whole now looking even a little more seriously at ethics and integrity then it will have achieved something that could bring about a real growth in the stature of our business. Here's hoping.

On June 18-19, 2002, over 500 delegates from more than 40 countries participated in the Icograda 'Identity/Integrity' Conference in Brno, Czech Republic.

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