

Design under attack: Politics, values and responsibility principles

Over the past few decades, design – visual communication design in particular – has been recognized as a cultural and social agent capable of promoting values such as inclusiveness, sustainability, justice, participation, and democracy (Anceschi, 1984; Kotler, 2020; Manzini, 2015; Papanek, 1971). Thoughts and approaches on design activism have emphasized the need to respond to people's real needs, promoting actions oriented toward the common good and social responsibility. More recently, scholars and designers have outlined a genealogy and phenomenology of design activism, identifying strategies, tools, and limits of design as a form of political intervention in a scenario troubled by authoritarian tendencies, ecological crises, ideological polarization, populism, and misinformation (Julier, 2013; Bieling, 2019; Fuad-Luke, 2009).

However, while the current landscape clearly demonstrates the potential of visual communication design to generate awareness, influence public opinion, and activate forms of participation (Baule, 2015; Bichler & Beier, 2016), these values are increasingly being challenged by political, economic, and media forces that pursue collective de-responsibilization and the regression of civil, environmental and social rights.

In this scenario of "permanent emergency" (Piscitelli, 2019) – environmental, social, informational, and democratic – questioning design as a critical tool and agent of transformation becomes more urgent than ever. Today we are witnessing actions that destabilize the potential of communication design and open the door to a "design under attack" perspective, troubling its role as a tool grounded in transformative actions, as a bearer of ideologies, and a catalyst for empowering awareness. Hence it is necessary to reconfigure and strengthen the epistemic, ethical, and operational status of communication design, attempting to ask how design can respond today to a context that is subverting its ethical and political premises, and, specifically, whether communication design can avoid taking a stand regard to a global landscape affected by growing inequality, migration crises, decline in civil rights, climate catastrophes, and information conflict.

Issue 42 of *Progetto Grafico* invites designers, theorists, researchers, and activists to enquiry visual communication design as a form of militancy, an act of resistance, a tool for critical information capable of constructing alternative imaginaries. The issue asks to analyze and hypothesize new or enhanced forms of expression that amplify the discipline's ability to operate as a true agent of breaking down dominant codes, and a vehicle for new visions for the future, and it also asks to broaden our perspective on the possibilities and the systemic contexts in which a design project takes shape. The aim, therefore, is not only to analyze tools, languages, and messages, but also to interrogate the organizational forms, the institutional platforms, the structures of design work, and the participatory opportunities that either limit or enhance the designer's role as a social agent. This involves asking which systems currently interfere and often deny the access to spaces for design action, dogmatically defining who is entitled to participate and who is excluded.

At the heart of the debate is the urgent need to (re)define a plural, systemic, and participatory design ethical responsibility, capable of adapting to specific contexts, abandoning

universalistic claims, and addressing the real implications of design practices in their various forms. Design actions, by their very nature, have the potential to overcome self-referential tendencies and respond critically and pragmatically to the complexity of the contemporary world. From this perspective, design ethical principles become operational tools, instruments of interpretation and intervention, activated through collaboration between different fields, including – but not limited to – visual communication.

Thematic Areas

Issue 41 of the journal welcomes contributions that explore some key questions, including:

- Endorse the role of design as a responsible and critical practice, and therefore question how visual communication design can respond to a reality that subverts its founding values.
- Design forms of responding towards dominant communication, questioning the communication, projectual, and speculative strategies that can stand against the rhetoric of populism, anti-science, and post-truth.
- Hybridize visual languages as an act of speaking out and of civic action and ask what languages, devices, and formats are emerging in visual design as a form of political action.
- Design communication tools that facilitate the visibility of marginalized subjects, categories and communities and their access to design tools. Therefore, the question is: To what extent can communication design build spaces of resistance and solidarity, as well as spaces of visibility, coalition, and representation for marginalized subjects?
- Demonstrate that every design act involves choices ethically and politically positioned worldviews: Is there such a thing as “value-free” design, or is every project inevitably political?
- Enhance the intrinsically social, cultural, and political nature of communication design and question whether design can be limited to being merely functional and instrumental, or whether its connection to society makes it inevitably political and ethical.
- Investigate contemporary work systems and design platforms, asking what organizational, institutional, and technological conditions enable or limit communication projects as forms of social and political intervention.

Bibliographic References

Authors are encouraged to consider the following references as starting points for their proposals:

Anceschi, G. (Ed.) (1984). *Prima Biennale della Grafica. Propaganda e cultura: indagine sul manifesto di pubblica utilità dagli anni Settanta ad oggi*. Arnoldo Mondadori Editore.

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Types of Contributions

Contributions published in Progetto Grafico are divided into four sections:

- *Research* – Scientific essays on the theme of the call (25.000-30.000 characters, including spaces), to be placed in one of the following categories:
 - Experiment*: applied research and design innovations.
 - Mapping*: case studies and critical analyses of design experiences.
 - Narrate*: historical research on relevant phenomena, figures, or artifacts.
- *Visualize* – Scientific communication artifacts (infographics, maps, experimental visualizations, videos, interactive representations).
- *Discover* – Critical book reviews (max. 7.000 characters).
- *Wander* – Scientific essays off-topic but of particular academic interest (25.000-30.000 characters, including spaces).

Each section has a specific editorial purpose and follows defined formatting guidelines. For full details on the types of contributions, please refer to the document “INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS”.

Deadlines and Submission

Opening of the call: September 1, 2025

Deadline for submitting titles of books to be reviewed: September 15, 2025

Deadline for submitting contributions: October 28, 2025

Notification of acceptance / revision requests: November 20, 2025

Deadline for final version: December 15, 2025

Publication of the issue: January 2026

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