

# PERMANENT SIGNS OF TRANSIENCE

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Research on posters cannot ignore the place where they are seen: the street. Posters belong to the large family of public signs that guide our route through urban space. Not just their text and image are important for an understanding of what they mean, but also the nature of their presence. They occupy a position somewhere in between the permanent signs of power, which it takes brute force to remove, and the illegal traces of subculture that keep on coming back.

Officially the poster has had its day, as Jouke Kleerebezem shows in this publication. The omnipotence of the digital world seems to have overshadowed it. How can the poster still maintain visibility in an environment that is filled by big illuminated signs and at a time when the digital connection occupies a large part of the passer-by's attention? The poster is outdated, but remarkably enough still manages to keep going. Apparently it still meets a demand. Of course it is inexpensive, but economic motives are not enough to explain its continued presence in the street. Something in how it addresses us, what it announces and whom it represents appears to be essential to our public domain.

Posters belong definitively to the terrain of transience. They announce actions, performances, concerts, meetings, special offers – all things that are connected with specific dates that determine the duration of the life of the poster. Their shelf-life is so short that in fact they are already half-torn down before they have been pasted to the wall. That sets this form of advertising apart from other commercial expressions in the public domain. Logos, the names of shops and firms, neon signs are firmly anchored to buildings. Like street signs and other routing, they are the stable orientation points of the public domain. Of course businesses often disappear as quickly as they pop up somewhere, but every time they will announce their presence with a conspicuous sign or a large neon display. However, these clear identifying markers also mark boundaries. Like traffic signs, they indicate whether something is allowed or not. Every shop is open to every customer, it is true, but at the same time it must be clear that not everything is permitted there. The customer is there for the shop too and has to behave in

accordance with the rules that apply to this private property.

Posters, however, do not signal a domain, they announce an event. And precisely the fact that that event, be it a demonstration, a performance by a DJ or a special offer of bikinis, is given a place in the urban space makes it clear that it is a public event. What is more, if we add these signs up, they reveal everything that is going on in our public space. While the big neon advertisements and the logos provide the city with a map, the posters chart the cultural life that takes place there. They are apart of the changing, unpredictable flow that is the essential characteristic of the urban space.

In the 1950s and 1960s the French artists Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé seized on precisely this transient, cultural character of the poster as the basis for their work. They took down posters that had been pasted on top of one another and half torn off from the wall and put them in exhibitions with the title *Décollage*. As a part of Nouveau Réalisme, these works mark a break with abstract art, but do not mean a return to a coherent and recognisable representation. What they show, rather, is that no coherent picture is possible and that our world of signs is constructed of layers of images and meanings that in overlapping and encroaching on one another defy decipherment. But the work also shows which forces are at work in the public domain. Posters are more than neutral announcements. They are expressions of power or resistance, voices of highly diverse groups that at times of unrest – like the 1950s and 1960s, when France was involved with a revolt in Algeria and a war in Indochina – are a part of a struggle that takes place at the level of these signs. When it is the rich and powerful who can disseminate the images to advertise their commercial or ideological wares, the poor and impotent still have the power to deface them, rip them or paste over them to express their dissatisfaction.

Today posters still speak to and on behalf of certain groups. More than anything else, they show that the city is shared by theatre lovers, free fight fanatics, rave partygoers and visitors to ideal home exhibitions. They represent all the dominant and less dominant groups that coexist in the city and above all live side by side there; these public, temporary signs reflect their own preferences and thus provide a confirmation of their right to exist. However, there no longer seems to be any question of a power struggle. Clashes of opinions have moved to the internet by now, where anonymous tearing has been replaced by anonymous cursing and insulting. So the question is: What is at stake in the poster, exactly what do posters do with us?

The voice of the absent spectator echoes in the *décollage*. But which voice is speaking now, just what is it saying, how do you make that intelligible? In their research on the poster, René Put and Rianne Petter first made an attempt to chart intersubjective standards. On the basis of a matrix of possible reactions, they wanted to find out which elements in the design produced particular effects. This attempt to reduce the pluriformity of posters to regularities by means of a semi-scientific approach was, however, bound to fail. No matter how interesting the results were, they remained arbitrary. Only a large-scale questionnaire would be able to provide the

solution, but the question still remained of whether this was the right way for designers to tackle this problem. It was not until Put and Petter decided to throw the weapons of the designer into the battle and to analyse not innumerable viewers but a clearly delimited number of posters that spectacular results were achieved. Unlike the *décollage*, this research does not show the anonymous mass that uses these signs as weapons in the struggle, but by taking the process of destruction into their own hands the designers expose in detail the methods of the often anonymous poster makers. Suddenly the regularities of the genre become visible and the uniformity that is hidden in that pluriformity emerges undisguised.

The analysis indicates that the poster today speaks with a single voice and actually has a single message. It no longer expresses an opinion or passes comment. It just brings something to our attention as effectively as possible, and that something is primarily something that is for sale. Posters address and stimulate us first and foremost as consumers. That is hardly a surprising conclusion, but the research of Petter and Put does show the possibilities that the poster ignores and the potential that still lies latent in this medium. For unlike the clamorous demand for attention of neon lights and LED screens, the poster – in spite of the transience that is its characteristic – can convince us without shouting. The fact that in principle it does not address everyone, but just a limited group, makes it extremely suitable as a graphic marker of the multiformity of our society. Still, that calls for a visual idiom that is made more eloquent again by a design that dares to differ from the commercial laws which, by probing every layer, this research has brought to light.

This text is out of the book:

Rianne Petter & René Put, *Poster N° 524*, [Valiz](#), ISBN 978-90-78088-59-2

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