



Designers and the Advertising World

by Mariam Hamdy

DRUM

SHERIF SAMY, image courtesy of the artist



The term “graphic design” can refer to a number of artistic and professional disciplines which focus on visual communication and presentation. Various methods are used to create and combine symbols, images and/or words to create a visual representation of ideas and messages. Depending on the industry served, the responsibilities may have different titles yet “Graphic Designer” or “Graphic Artist” is most common (1).

Despite the clarity with which the occupation can be described, it seems to be the case that the profession itself is yet to be defined in Egypt. Graphic Designers are almost always grouped within the realm of advertising, which, despite the latter being a respectable industry, limits the Graphic designer both professionally and creatively.

Egypt has witnessed, and perhaps facilitated, the notion that graphic design is a process that will always come under an umbrella of some other discipline. A misconception which further aids this notion is that the Graphic Designer is not considered an end in his/her own right, but rather the means to an end, be that an art director at an advertising agency or a creative director of sorts. This leads to the fact that the graphic designer is immediately equivalent with the bottom of the food chain: a stepping stone in an evolution towards a better “title”, rather than being an entity of his or her own as is the case abroad.

This is not the designers’ fault, primarily because Cairo doesn’t have an entirely self-sufficient graphic design house, but rather, all the Graphic Design houses in Egypt have to do advertising to get by, otherwise they just would not survive in the industry. This overlap between graphic designing and advertising brings to light an observation that is becoming more and more apparent: The Egyptian market and general public do not understand the nature of the Graphic Designer’s job.

A local example would be best to illustrate this rampant lack of awareness of the discipline in question. Egypt Air, the national airline of Egypt, had decided to evolve its brand & corporate identity, and that includes the signage and designs on its airplanes. The entire project would’ve been

the dream of any of the graphic designers in the country, most of

(1) Wikipedia definition.



Work by designer MAHMOUD HAMDY. Image courtesy of the artist

whom have the necessary skills & knowledge to have accomplished an impressive outcome, and gladly for free. The project is also a perfect example of a graphic design job: A problem whose solution can only be found within the realms and expertise of this specific discipline. The project instead was given to an advertising agency, who dealt with it as an advertising brief rather than a visual endeavor, resulting in what can only be called mediocre work. The problem here was not entirely in the agency that executed the project, but in the fact that Egypt air had nowhere to turn to for this type of job to be done properly. It pitched the project to ad agencies, where ideally all the Graphic Designer's work. Herein lies the problem.

It seems pressing that a syndicate of sorts is in need, one that would both identify the graphic designer as well as provide arenas for their work. This not only includes the regular dose of workshops, artist talks and discussions, all of which are events that are imperative for the growth and maturity of the industry, but also a forum where the standards are set.

A perfect example of this is the International Council of Graphic Design Association (Icograda) based in Montreal, Canada. Icograda is the world's non-partisan and non-governmental representative and advisory international body for communication design, and it aids to define and increase awareness of professional standards and best practices governing communication design practice as well as facilitate cooperation amongst organisations of designers, and allied institutions (2). The most intriguing aspect of Icograda's website, and one that directly pertains to the creation of similar association as such in Egypt, was the fact that it has dedicat-

(3) Founder and owner of The Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, Egypt. (www.thetownhousegallery.com)

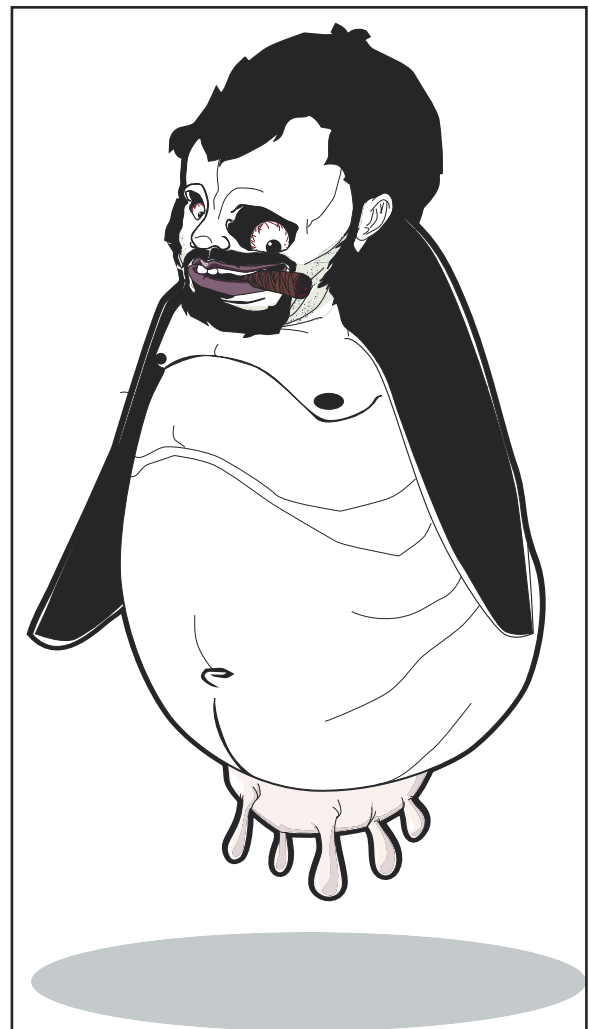
(4) *Breaking Boredom* is group exhibition held at the Townhouse Gallery July 2008. The show hosted the collaborative works of 6 graphic designers and illustrators: Ibrahim Eslam, Engy Aly, George Azmy, Mofa, Mahmoud Hamdy and Hani Mahfouz. The show was curated by Independent Graphic Designer Ahmed Foula. (www.breakingboredomproject.com) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breaking_Boredom_Project)

ed an entire page to several definitions of the profession in question. It was only during the 2005-2007 term, that the Icograda Executive Board and Secretariat updated their 'job descriptions', if you will. The significance of this fact is to illustrate that Egypt is not alone in it's misunderstanding in regards to Graphic design, but also to highlight the importance of a Collective agreement as to what it actually is.

In an attempt to reach a more concise understanding of the

situation of graphic designers, both as independent artists as well as in the advertising world, an exchange between four of the most prominent designers in Cairo has been conducted. The following text is a conversation between Mahmoud Hamdy, Graphic Designer and founder of File Club Studios, a Design house in Cairo; Ali Ali, Founder and Manager of Elephant, an advertising and Graphic design house in Cairo; Sherif Samy, an independent Graphic Designer and Creator of Spaghettimag.com and finally, George Azmy, independent illustrator/image maker.

Ali: Egypt has yet to understand Graphic Design as a process and an end result in its own right rather than a tool. It is unfortunate to see how anyone who is capable of using software such as Photoshop or Illustrator is immediately labeled a Graphic Designer- by himself or herself as well as by potential clients. That gravely undermines the elements of design in the actual process.



GEORGE AZMY, Personal work, 2007. Courtesy of the artist

DESIGN

Azmy: Designers in the Advertising world are oppressed. The machine that is the advertising industry limits the creative drive of the designers. The predictable brief, the controlling client and the fast pace with which the work is expected to be made, makes for depressing working conditions. This becomes worse if this is where the designer is first hired, which is usually the case for the lack of an alternative.

Mahmoud: On that note, the authority of the client is significantly more so than the authority of the designer. Usually when you have a problem, you go to a specialist and they fix it for you. You trust this specialist, be it a doctor, a technician or a mechanic, and you understand that he or she know better than you do at fixing this problem, hence your appeal to them. If you however, persist on telling this specialist (who in turn relies on you for their income) how to do their job, a series of compromises will occur which lead to the ultimate death of the product or solution you're both looking for. This is the case in advertising here and due to this, the designers and their work suffers.

Samy: If the artist's na-

(5) Ganzeer is a Graphic Design firm founded by Mohamed Fahmy. (www.Ganzeer.com)

(6) h|m|d is a Graphic Design firm founded by Hani Mahfouz. (www.hmd.com.eg)

(7) Conversation printed with the permission of all the artist's involved.



SHERIF SAMY, image courtesy of the artist

ture is scarified for that of the advertiser, that would mean that his work will be only serving function, which will transform him into an engineer. What I think is better to be done is that a designer should develop his artistic side and to try to use it in his work as an advertiser. Having said that, I think that

the artist and the designer come from two different worlds, where each has its own rules and aims. The artist's quest is beauty, while the designer's is function in an artistic form.

Mahmoud: That is also a fact that needs to be clarified as it is the basis for a lot of confusion. Graphic design is ultimately design; it may be inspired by the Fine Arts but it's always for a purpose or to serve a function of sorts.

Samy: The design world started to experience the need of salvation from its own rules. As a result, artists from within

the world of design appeared and started a new movement, doing art/design for designers. Those designers/artists actually broke the rules of the design world in a quest for experimenting and searching for independent means of expressions, using the same medium of the design world. What usually the art dealers are looking for is the art that lives for decades, because its value increases with time. The design artist's creations are by nature not subject to live for long, as they are, as we explained, a product of the world

of consumerism. Like any product, it has an expiration date. And this is the reason why the dealers and the auction houses do not consider such art forms/designs as fine art works.

Ali: Yet Graphic designers are gaining respect as Artists rapidly all over the world, but here we're a little slow to catch up. Someone like William Wells (3) is very willing to exhibit Graphic design work in his gallery, so long as you go to him with a coherent, solid body of work, which was the case with

Breaking Boredom (4). These graphic designers did just that, and if you look back on the history of modern art in Egypt, I believe that that show was in fact a breakthrough both in the art world as well as for graphic designers and how they're perceived. It was the first fine art show that was entirely computer generated by graphic artists. There is room in the Art world, moving forward, for manipulated art as such.

Azmy: On the note of *Breaking Boredom*, I think that Graphic design needs also to be defined as a medium. You can create advertising with it or you can create Art. Either way, the designer has to have a command of his craft and his tools.

Samy: From that point of view, the designers can use any other material than that of the fine art's as a medium to express: like cars, streets, walls (ie. graffiti), clothes. In that sense, the medium/the world is opened to be a wide space of expression for the design artists.

Mahmoud: All visual creators take part in that. Directors do it. Michel Gondry is an award-winning director and he has directed an ad for Levi's. Does that make him a sell out? Not really. It's just that in both fields, Hollywood and the Ad-

vertising world, people appreciated his work and they used them accordingly.

Ali: But it's difficult to define who graphic designers are here because there is no graphic design entity, which goes back to

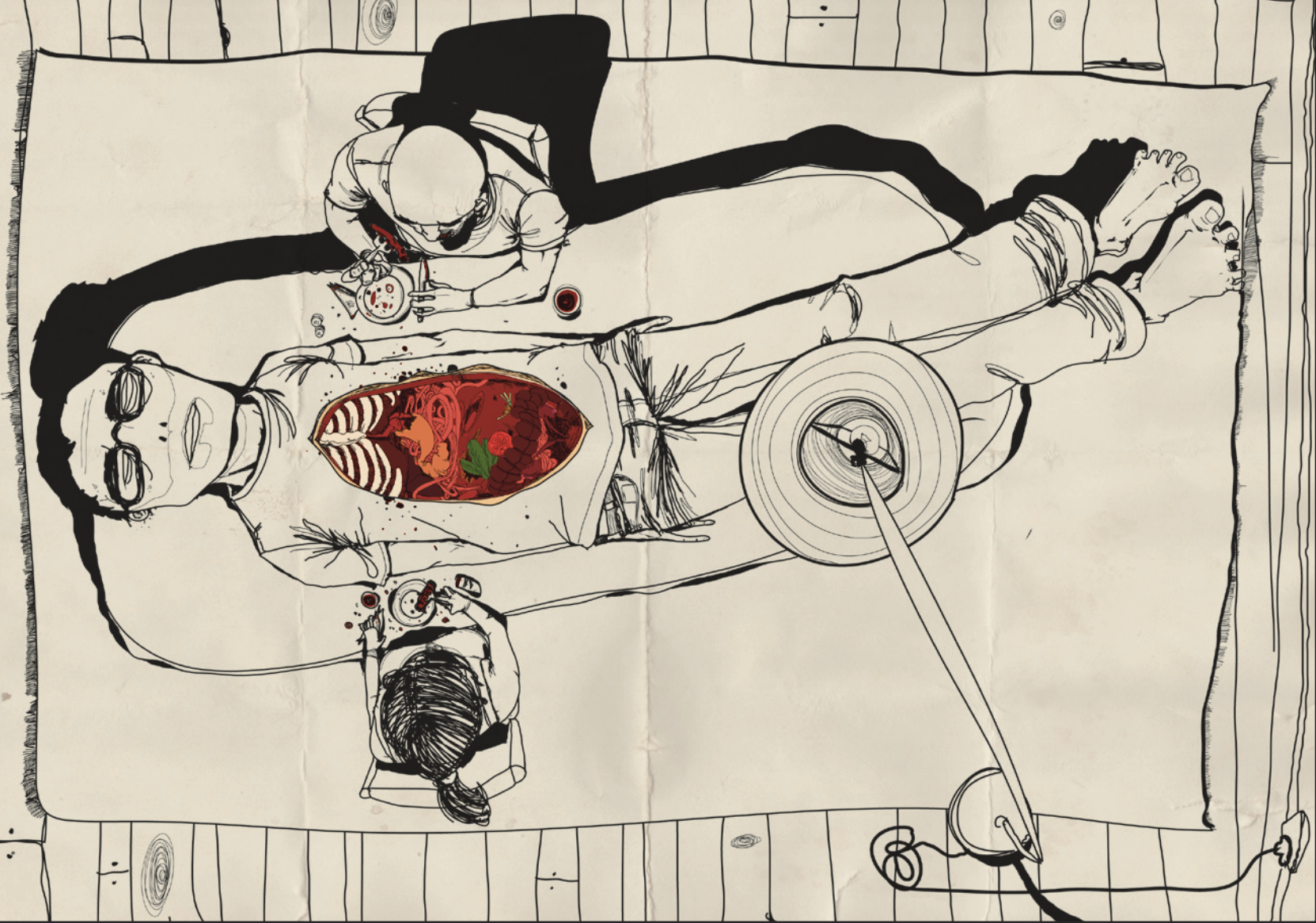
the original problem. Most of the Creative Directors have a background of advertising; most of them were account executives who despite their interest in art, do not have a design background. This further feeds into the problem now that it has become painfully clear that the advertising industry is a monstrous and seductive field currently swallowing the smaller entities that are graphic designers.

At Elephant, we hope to move towards becoming a more graphic design firm, yet the money is in the advertising at this point so it's a struggle. One of the steps we've taken towards a more design based format rather than an ad agency is that we've eliminated the ac-

count handling section. Despite it being a blessing on occasion, the presence of an account handling team tips the balance of creativity towards a more "production line" format. Elephant wants to eliminate the account handler's control



GEORGE AZMY, Book cover: Poetry by Nabil Khalaf, 2008. Courtesy of the artist



GEORGE AZMY, Personal work, 2007. Courtesy of the artist

over the creative produce, whereby they allow the latter more freedom in creation as well as a more thorough understanding of the client's wants and more importantly, how they can alter these wants to create more original work.

Mahmoud: File Club has taken a step further towards a graphic design firm. We're not only our own account holders, but we're also more selective with our clients. We try, as best we can under the current circumstances, to establish our personality as a firm. The client would then have the option of working with us or not. I believe that Egypt requires a lot more of these firms and to have them in turn deal with one another as a larger entity.

Azmy: There are a few design firms in Cairo, such as Ganzeer (5) and h|m|d (6), yet they're all independent efforts.

Spaghettimag.com is helping in grouping these efforts somehow.

Samy: Through Spaghettimag.com I wanted to create a connection between the designers from all over the world to widen their angles of view and also to help them develop their talents and especially in the Arab world. And that's because I found out that the design movement in our region is rarely documented, and hence I felt the importance of creating such a space of connection between the Arab and the World's designers. I also started doing interviews with the most talented Arab designers as a way to document their works and to let them be connected with their colleagues from all around the world. In the future, I'm planning to expand the website with new parts where the design artists would be able to express themselves in a direct way by posting their own works and opinions and favorites.

Ali: What Spaghettimag.com is doing is to be admired and a great start, but I still think we need to come together for a more united front. When you have ten graphic designers in the same place you get a spark, and then they feed off each other. But currently, it's all solitary efforts, which despite their sincerity prove to be futile as they can't possibly break through the industry single handedly. It's too dispersed, which makes Graphic Design & Art a hugely underappreciated art form whereas it shouldn't be.

Samy: I think that such under appreciation is not only happening in the Arab world, but it also happens everywhere else in the world. The only difference is that the western media is more aware of the presence of the designers and of the influence of their works in the society.

Mahmoud: Because they have a collective of some kind. We need a syndicate, a forum or an association that will group our work and our separate entities into a more visible and tangible existence.

Azmy: We also need to create graphic design work that is independent of a brief. As an illustrator I create work that I define as artwork, and I also create work that serves a client's brief. The same has to happen with Graphic designers, so that the discipline itself more tangible for the public and the market to see and be aware of. This ideally should happen in a more collective front, not with each designer separately, so that the result would have a more overpowering effect.

Ali: We're in it together so we might as well fight the same battle together. We need to create a front that is from graphic designers, to graphic designers, for the love of graphic design.

Conversations are printed with permission of the artist's involved.

To read more of Mariam Hamdy's writings, please refer to "Gazbia Sirry" pp.



Experimental type, work by designer Mahmoud Hamdy
Image courtesy of the artist