

# ITERATIONS

Design Research & Practice Review

Issue 4 | December 2016

ISSN 2009-8243



12 >



9 772009 824000

**INSTITUTE  
DESIGNERS  
IRELAND**

Aideen McCole

# POST: Delivering Denmark's newest design festival

This article is a brief reflection on the delivery and impact of POST, a new design festival which ran from 17-20 August 2016 in Copenhagen, Denmark. POST was delivered by an international team – including Irish curator Aideen McCole – and focused on the disciplines of graphic design, illustration and visual communication. In addition to a disciplinary focus, POST had a thematic focus too: that of the politics of image making, the working life of the visual communicator and the ethics of design.

**POST was the first of its kind in Copenhagen, as a design event focused on visual communication that placed politics and ethics at its heart, and proved to be a much-needed addition to design discourse in the Danish capital.**

On 17 August this year, I, along with my co-directors Jody Barton and Peter Folkmar, opened POST, Denmark's newest design festival. POST consisted of four days of workshops, talks, discussions and parties with 26 Danish and international speakers and workshop leaders and over 150 participants. While organising a design event in Copenhagen might sound like selling tea to China, it actually proved to be a vital addition to the Danish design calendar.

I arrived in Copenhagen in September 2015 with the hopes of working in one of Denmark's design organisations, but soon connected with a small team of independent practitioners planning a design conference instead. It was a conference that had not happened before, in Copenhagen or anywhere else, and it would focus on graphic design, illustration and images. It would place at its heart an interrogation of the sometimes contentious relationships between design, commerce and politics. Over the course of ten months from first meetings to opening night, the conference team grew and altered, the name changed repeatedly and the budget which started aspirationally high only to contract with each negative funding application outcome. An initial programme of predominantly UK-based speakers developed into one reflective of practice in Denmark and in other pockets of Europe. A collaboration with Malmö's M&E and Form/Design Center was hatched, a relationship with IKEA's future living lab, Space10, was cemented, and – finally – some

funding was secured from the Danish Arts Foundation. All the while though, the core of the event remained the same: to critique the working life of the visual communicator, to explore the ethics of design, and to discuss the politics of image making.

## Hands on and doors open

The first event of the festival was a two-day practical workshop, led by Kate Gibb, Rob 'Supermundane' Lowe and Abdul Dube. The designers, educators and students present were led through two days of creative randomisation: means of breaking out of normal creative patterns by using dice, booklets with imagery and instructions (*'do it with your eyes closed'*) and quickfire creative exercises. Participants worked together and individually at different points and created a range of zines along with sketches, collages and a collaborative hand drawn typeface. The process and outputs were displayed throughout the festival in the Drawing Room, an evolving exhibition curated by M&E, while zines were swapped and distributed among workshop participants and the wider festival audience.

The talks programme then opened with a presentation by HORT's Eike König and Fjord business designer Anne Meekers, exploring how their very different approaches to the design process might influence one another. That was followed by designer and researcher Tzortzis Rallis, who showed a wide range of his work for social and activist movements, including the Occupied Times

and Propagate. While that first evening of talks was aimed first of all at those who bought workshop or talks programme tickets, we also released 90 free tickets to the event to invite a wider audience to POST. While tickets to the talks and workshop programmes, at the equivalent of €55, were relatively inexpensive when compared to similar events, we thought it was of utmost importance that we limit financial barriers to an event exploring, among other things, non-commercial design practice and the labour rights of designers.

### Design serving society

Two days of talks from practitioners from Denmark and further afield explored contemporary design and illustration practice through the lens of ethics, politics and social impact. With all speakers briefed to give more than a standard *'show and tell'* presentation, and a small audience of 65 ticket holders present to ask questions and give commentary, it meant that POST could offer a more intimate, discursive and critical look at design and illustration than many other design conferences. Our first speaker was German photo editor, Andreas Wellnitz who presented a range of work from his 20 year career, a highlight being *Make Love*, a sex education book for teenagers that documented real teenage sex rather than the sterilised illustrations of traditional sex education, or the warped world of pornography, now so ubiquitous. From a society flooded with imagery (sexual and otherwise) to a society with none, day two of talks opened with a presentation by Bob Linney of Health Images. Much of Bob's career has been spent working in rural communities in developing countries to use images to communicate health, community and environmental messages. Often working in communities with very little experience reading images, he would work in close consultation with end users to ensure his messages about health, hygiene and so on were as clear as could be.

### Design as work

We had presentations from a number of practitioners who shared insights from their working life as visual communicators. Copenhagen studio Atlant create typographic-led work for a range of cultural clients in Denmark, including Roskilde's Museum for Contemporary Art and the most recent Danish pavilion at the Venice

Architecture Biennale, and they discussed the challenges of being a young studio. They spoke openly about choosing clients, agreeing on payment and insisting on who they collaborate with: to them, to be able to commission work from emerging type designers is their *'political power'*. Designer and independent publisher, Hugh Frost spoke about his UK-based publishing house Landfill Editions, focusing, in particular, on his Mould Map publications as a means to question and critique the political status quo. He also advocates for designers to use the same transparency we often ask of government, and so after embarking on a Kickstarter for an edition of Mould Map, he released a financial report breaking down all income and expenditure.

### The politics of image making

Another key theme at POST was the political power – or implications – of visual communication. London-based illustrator David Foldvari opened with, *'I don't like illustration'*, and continued to explain how he is concerned the culture that illustration should express is being undermined, and that too few illustrators are using their medium to tackle difficult but important social and political issues. He was followed by German illustrator and artist Maren Karlson, whose own work certainly contradicted Foldvari's premise. She presented recent work exploring female autonomy, asking the question, *'Where is the pop culture narrative that sheds a positive light on female autonomy? The male loner is seen as a hero, while the female loner is a character for pity.'*

### Something rotten?

Other events included a panel discussion with representatives from some of Denmark's key creative unions – the Union of Architects and Designers, Visuelt Forum (the branch of the Danish Journalists' Union for designers, illustrators and cartoonists working in the media) and Young Artists and Curators – and a panel discussion on design education with input from the Danish Design School, Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design and Nottingham Trent and Ravensbourne in the UK. The unions focused on the rights of self-employed workers in Denmark, which is a key issue for the design community, many of whom work by themselves or start their own businesses. Denmark has amazing labour rights and welfare benefits, but few of them currently



Above: Atlant

extend to freelancers, in fact, two of the three unions present have teamed up to lobby government about this. Meanwhile, in the education sector, the academic restructuring of the Danish Design School is affecting teaching staff, few of whom have gone through an academic education themselves. At the same time, significant government cuts seem to disproportionately affect resources for the academic and practical aspects of the school, while administrative teams are growing in size and influence. Both discussions were lively and interesting, but perhaps most importantly, shed light on the reality that while design is so key to Denmark's perception of itself (and its profile internationally), both design education and design labour rights are in a state of flux. Though it has not reached *'something rotten'* status just yet, it is a warning that blind admiration of the Danes can obscure the full story...

**Something new**

Copenhagen boasts bi-annual furniture trade fairs, an experimental biennial furniture exhibition, an architecture festival and an

interaction design conference. The Danish Architecture Centre hosts a programme of architecture exhibitions that changes regularly. Designmuseum Danmark will show three temporary exhibitions at any given time, often focused on furniture or fashion, and the Danish Design Centre hosts regular events focused on design strategy and design thinking. As for graphic design though, only a one-day annual conference exists, called We Love Graphic Design, placing the emphasis firmly on celebration, not critique. In the past, Copenhagen has seen spin-offs of Dublin's popular Sweettalks design events, but little else appears to have been offered to the city's graphic design and illustration community. In the wider Nordic context, little focus on graphic design or illustration exists. In fact, the only recent conference that has focused on Nordic graphic design was Pure North, held in April 2016 in Kiel, Germany.

So, while it was obvious over the course of developing POST that it would offer something that Copenhagen did not already have, when meeting with the audience at the event itself, the city's need for it became



clearer than ever. The rhetoric surrounding design promotion in Denmark and most other places, so often celebrates how broad the sector is, how varied its processes, how its outputs come in all shapes, sizes and guises, yet the actual promotion itself – the exhibitions, publications and events – do not always represent that multifariousness. This is certainly the case in Denmark, where a graphic design and illustration community is acutely aware that it gets underrepresented, and where those who attended POST spoke often and openly about their frustrations at this.

#### Conclusion

We hope our audience learned something by attending POST, that they enjoyed it, felt inspired, or felt that they saw and heard things they had not before. The organising team certainly learned a lot from delivering the event, far beyond the practical aspects of delivering a major design event. We have learned about the importance of creating a design culture with an emphasis on criticality over consumption. We have also learned that, contrary to what you might

think, Copenhagen really needed an event that put criticality at its heart, that shone the blinding light of 'Danish design' on disciplines other than furniture design and that moved the conversation about image making in Denmark away from offensive cartoons. We have learned that as badly as we needed our audience to buy tickets and turn up, they needed us just as much: to offer a chance for the graphic design and illustration communities to come together, to offer the city a critical creative outlet and to provide a platform for non-commercial and socially-engaged work. I had not anticipated that I could offer much to a design culture I have always admired so much, but it turns out that even the mighty Danes have gaps to fill. And so, POST will return next year to do just that.

Above: Bob Linney