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>>BOOKS

CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC DESIGN

By Charlotte and Peter Fiell
Taschen, £24.99

AGI: GRAPHIC DESIGN SINCE 1950

By Ben and Ely Bos
Thames and Hudson, £36

Reviewed by Adrian Shaughnessy

Adrian Shaughnessy is a designer, writer and editor who runs his own studio, Shaughnessy Works, specialising in design and editorial direction.

The internet has changed graphic design book publishing. Publishers say that monographs, even ones on famous designers, don't sell anymore. The days are gone when David Carson could shift 200,000 copies of one of his books. But this is hardly surprising. Most designers have a website where their work can be viewed, so why should we spend money on a book when the contents can be seen for free online?

If you are prepared to hunt for it, nearly everything in Charlotte and Peter Fiell's blockbuster Contemporary Graphic Design is available to view online. But design books aren't finished yet. Designers still love books. Print reproduction is superior to onscreen reproduction, and the web simply can't match its tactile permanence or the commentary and critique found in most printed collections of graphic design.

Contemporary Graphic Design, however, is noticeably lacking in this regard. Apart from a thin introductory essay and a few words from each of

the 117 contributors, it is 560 pages of commentary-free graphic imagery. The book is a sequel to the couple's equally gargantuan Graphic Design for the 21st Century (Taschen, 2003) and it uses the same format: each designer or studio gets four to six pages in which to show their sparsely-captioned work. Biographical details, awards and clients are listed, and each entrant supplies a short statement about themselves, most of which read the same after a while.

The editors have rounded up a formidable list of contributors. Any book that includes work by Philippe Apeloig, Irma Boom, M/M (Paris) and Jan van Toorn can't be all bad. Although it's a pleasurable enough experience trawling through what is undoubtedly some of the sharpest contemporary graphic design around, certain large questions raise their heads. Why is much of what the authors class as graphic design in fact illustration? Why is there hardly any web design? What is the criteria for inclusion? I suspect these and other questions will be considered irrelevant by many of the book's purchasers, excited by the prospect of such an abundance of visual delights.

At 720 pages, AGI (Alliance Graphique Internationale): Graphic Design Since 1950 is even bigger. But it is a bigger book in more than size; it has more commentary and a much greater range of work on display. To many designers, AGI is a mysterious, masonic-style organisation. Mention it to young designers and most of them look blank. Membership is confined to 300 or so individuals and you can't apply to join. You have to be invited, and then you have your application vetted by sharp-eyed gatekeepers.

AGI's website describes it as uniting 'the world's leading graphic designers and artists in a professional club of common interest and

REVIEW



Brasilien baut

30. April – 27. Mai 1956

Museum Morsbroich

Leverkusen

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achievement. It is an elite club. Its members have been responsible for the identity design of most of the world's top corporations and institutions as well as countless examples of globally known packaging, publications, illustrations and posters.

It's the word 'elite' that sits uncomfortably with the reality of modern graphic design, the most demotic of the visual arts. Reviewing this book, though, it's clear that AGI comes close to encompassing the best that graphic design has had to offer over the past 50 years.

The book features the work of every member, living or dead, admitted to AGI since its inception in 1951. Among the stellar names

membership is mainly American and European, AGI is admirably international in its ethos, including Brazilian, Iranian, Turkish and Venezuelan designers.

Each AGI member gets two pages in which to show their work and provide a short biography. There is also more than 200 pages of essays by, among others, Pierre Bernard, Bruno Monguzzi and Wolfgang Weingart. It's likely that the book will appeal most strongly to its members, yet it's worthy of the attention of non-members too. Even the most assiduous of design fans is likely to discover a few unfamiliar names, and the authors' deft control of the editorial rudder makes it an enjoyable, informative tome in which to get lost.

Inevitably, non-members will be drawn back to questioning what AGI is for. In the interest of impartiality, I should declare that I was once 'put up' for membership and turned down. I have no sour grapes about this. Groucho Marx's view on clubs is close to my own. But after spending a few enjoyable sessions with this book, I'm on the side of the argument

Top right: Brazil is Building exhibition poster by Karl Oskar Blase, 1956, in AGI: Graphic Design Since 1950

Right: Stefan Sagmeister's 'Trying to look good limits my life' billboards and spreads for Art Grandeur Nature / Copy Magazine in Contemporary

