An analysis of 'typographic self-portrait projects' by the 2nd grade students of Baskent University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Design and Architecture, Department of Visual Arts and Design

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Abstract

The self-portrait solutions were designed to be transferred into typographical design elements by the 2nd grade students of Baskent University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Design and Architecture, Department of Visual Arts and Design, during fall semester 2017–2018, within the scope of the course 'Typography Design' under the leadership of Halime Turkkan. The concept of 'self' was converted into typographic self-portraits. The main objective of the project was to express the concept only by words through different perspectives of students. This study is focused on analysing the different points of view on creating conceptual typographic designs and the effects of visual culture on students during the design process for exhibitions and other design activities. The graphic solutions which were exhibited in Gallery Baskent and Artankara 4th International Modern Arts Fair will be examined in terms of visual and cultural backgrounds of Turkish graphic design students.

Keywords: Typographic design, self, visual culture, Turkey.

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1. Introduction

The aim of one of the projects of 2nd grade students of Baskent University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Design and Architecture, Department of Visual Arts and Design was to create self-portraits by using only typographic elements. The brief, which was given to the students, asked them to analyse and criticise themselves, and then produce new-born portraits with the words and/or sentences they have chosen to express themselves. The most striking point of this project was that each student had to analyse and create their own distinctive expressions of self-portraits.

The aim of this study is to analyse the projects which were designed to transfer the self-concept into typography by the 2nd grade graphic design students during fall semester 2017–2018, within the scope of the course 'Typography Design' under the leadership of Halime Turkkan.

2. Typographic self-portrait projects

The main object of this project was to express self-theme by typographic elements through different perspectives of students. Each student has created his/her own portrait with different visual ways. The brief was to be more minimal and less story-telling like systemising effective typography. They were made to finalise their portraits with their own points of view by using only words. They were asked to express themselves by their own words without any symbolism but only using typography. Debatably, typography is regarded as the most important component of graphic design which requires a distinct ability to make readable messages while expressing, emoting and projecting concepts to large or small audiences (Heller & Anderson, 2016, p. 6). The aim of this project is to help students express themselves individually by using only the most important tool of the graphic design: typography.

This opportunity given to design students by sharing their projects in a course show allowed them to express themselves. They had the opportunity to be followed by other students and professors. On the other hand, an interaction took place between different students from different design disciplines. Different perspectives to life, art, design and also to self were encountered in these final typographic solutions.

Primarily, six design solutions of my typography students will be analysed one by one in terms of the composition elements they used. I will try to remark their individual ideas on themselves. Then, the income of projects will be discussed. Besides the course exhibition in Gallery Baskent, the selected six works were also exhibited in Artankara 4th International Modern Arts Fair.

The students were asked to use the same format for their design works, which was designated as '35 cm × 50 cm white paper' vertically. The reason for giving them the same format was to make them focus only on the typographic design. Each student made the typographic compositions with the words which describe themselves. Here are the selected design works for this course:

Figure 1. Self-portrait by Berru Guney

The first project belongs to Berru Guney, whose main theme is 'Take me anywhere there is a light and it never goes out'. On the other hand, she uses black and magenta colours in her hair in order to express her real physical appearance as a pink haired girl. Berru's gaze and her posture in this project really reflect herself. This self-portrait work of Berru, who always use deep meanings in her projects, speaks strongly to the way she looks at the world. In this project, the words 'There Is A Light That Never Goes Out' by The Smiths, released in 1986 on The Queen is Dead album, are used. This project, designed with the words of an album released before she was born, gives important clues about Berru's point of view on life. Using the lyrics of an old song for such a project shows her cultural background and sensitive personality.

Figure 2. Self-portrait by Beyit Cem Karadeniz

The designer of the second project is Beyit Cem Karadeniz. In this study, Beyit Cem defined himself by using his own adjectives as opposed to Berru. In addition, a design similar to a bionic face is also a reflection of its own personality. The prominent words in his design are 'child, sad, alone, brave, nobody, problem and mortal'. It can be considered as an effective design example which explains the combination of concepts that can be considered as the opposite, such as a child, brave and even mortal, and the psychological situations in which he is living, as a childish but a powerful adult.

Figure 3. Self-portrait by Oguzhan Uslan

The third project belongs to Oguzhan Uslan, who wants to emphasise his own dalliance; thus, he composes his design mostly using the word lazy (*usengec*). His aim was to display the lazy behaviour of himself with repeating the same word in his typographic composition. His portraits' gaze somehow symbolises the laziness of the self. He tried to make humour in his design by using the words patient (*sabirli*) and hardworking (*caliskan*) a few times. His approach to the self-concept is quite ironical.

Figure 4. Self-portrait by Ahmet Tellioglu

In the work of Ahmet Tellioglu above, he preferred to use his personal attributes and pleasures, his own superficial features such as hobbies and favourite activities, just like squeamish (*alingan*), friendly (*sicakkanli*), perfectionist (*mukemmeliyetci*), designer (*tasarimci*), fat (*kilolu*), etc., rather than psychological attitudes.

Figure 5. Self-portrait by Emre Bildirici

The fifth chosen work from these self-portrait projects belongs to Emre Bildirici, who preferred to design his own portrait with a realistic point of view by using his personal features. In his composition, he not only tells the values he has but also writes the words which tell his personality; like romantic (*romantik*), aggressive (*agresif*), loyal (*sadik*), confused (*saskin*), self-confident(*ozguvenli*) and so on.

> It has often been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. More recently, in a lecture at the Rhode Island School of Design, multimedia designer Mikon van Gastel offered, "One perfectly chosen word is worth 30 minutes of footage...Letterforms themselves have no intrinsic third dimension. Jan Tschichold, the renowned typographer and designer, wrote a wonderful metaphorical essay about working with a type called 'Clay in the Potter's Hand'. But type is less like clay and more like Legos. It is a prefabricated kit of parts, a closed system, with typefaces whose inner harmonies make them complete in and of themselves (Skolos & Wedell, 2006, pp. 9, 10).

As Skolos and Wedell mention, the typographic design is a systematic harmonical system, which provides viewers different levels of cognition. With this project, the students (designers) have the chance of expressing their personal feelings by using only typography and make viewers experience their inner thoughts.

Figure 6. Self-portrait by Melisa Gur

Lastly, this work of Melisa Gur gives the idea of herself in terms of the attitude of her portrait, her eyes, hair and the position of the face. The words which create her design maintain her stance. The sentences she chooses like 'She couldn't finish the school yet' (*okulu bi bitmedi*) is an important hint for her ambitious and hardworking personality. Yet, the words like passionate (*tutkulu),* addicted (*bagimli),* authoritative (*otoriter*) or worried (*dusunceli*) are really telling about her assiduous personality.

The selected typographic self-portrait projects had been described above. In each composition, a short description of the student appears. My students were asked to analyse their points of view on. All typographic self-portraits in the course exhibition were reduced to a certain extent, just to draw attention to the self-concept. These solutions are minimal social presentations which summarise my students' perspectives on themselves and their lives. It may be considered as a striking visual presentation that describes the youth's point of view.

> Making portraits from typefaces is not even remotely essential as part of the toolkit of a truly great typographer, and yet, it is a nice extra skill to have mastered. When the typographic visage is cleverly composed it is, at the very least, satisfying to see how the juxtaposition of different letters stimulates cognitive joyfulness (Heller & Anderson, 2016, p. 111).

Although it is not a new thing to make typographic portraits, creating surprising designs is thought to be the aim of this project. The design solutions which are being analysed at the moment not only provides to discuss artistic approaches of students but also offers to be witness to the collective thoughts of the new generation in Turkey.

Bringhurst says that legibility is one of the principles of durable typography, another is something more than legibility: some earned or unearned interest that gives its living energy to the page, as serenity, liveliness, laughter, grace or joy (2001, p. 17). Just like he mentions, the typographic works of these students give different feelings to the audience according to the words used in the compositions. Each work has a different message. Lupton states that combining typefaces is like making a salad, each element has a role to play (2010, p. 54). The examples given in this paper are also containing a mixed combination of different types and different words, which explain the features of students'. Each project is a self-expression with different typographic solutions.

3. Results

Design works are uploaded with lots of meanings and thoughts. This is considered as a lasting relationship between architecture and the legacy of aesthetics, the emotions and thoughts which the design student trying to convey, the way of exhibiting the design work, the practices of the viewer's sense and interactions arising from being collectively in one place (Yardimci, 2005, p. 30). 'The designer who strives for typographic excellence—the foundation of a classic graphic design education—can elevate otherwise mundane signing into an iconic statement, something instantly recognisable and closely associated with a specific place. Careful letterform design and expressive typography can make all the difference between delivering a mediocre solution or an outstanding one'. (Gibson, 2009, p. 75).

With the typographic design projects discussed above, different perspectives and ways of presenting ideas were combined in one place. Many different projects and ideas came together collectively in one corridor in both Gallery Baskent and Artankara 4th International Modern Arts Fair. Design is an interactive issue and such exhibitions/projects provide young designers to share their social perspectives. Besides, their ideas are being visualised as representing themselves together, which helps to analyse their visual and cultural background.

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