An Exploration on Humanitarian Relief Project Using Graphic Design

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by

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1. Introduction

My work is unabashedly Humanitarian. This is an everlasting topic in the public media. Global poverty, natural disasters, environmental and social crises, refugees, epidemic diseases are all in our daily newspapers, TVs and networks. I decided to explore this topic as my thesis project because I was stimulated by the reports on a series of intense earthquakes which stroke the entire world from 2008 to 2011.

We can make a long list of places where great earthquakes happened during this time: Japan, New Zealand, Chile, Haiti, China, etc. So many devastating disasters, such as collapse, fire, explosion, tsunami, nuclear accidents, accompanied these. No wonder that some people wonder whether the earth is taking its revenge on humanity's lavishness and vandalism. It was a report on the earthquake which occurred in May 2008 in the Sichuan province of China that caught my heart. When the deadly earthquake hit the Nanba Primary School in Wenchuan County, many students were still in classrooms which collapsed in the course of the quake, that only lasted for a few minutes. The earthquake caused chaos in all rooms across the campus, and the students were terrified and rushed out of the building. Many students and teachers were dead or missing after the building collapsed. Du Zhengxiang, two days after the most devastating earthquake, was found dead bending over the rubble and facing the door. She held one child in each of her hands and shielded three others under her bosom. What touched me most was the spirit of love, courage and perseverance demonstrated by ordinary people when facing the deadly blow. It inspired me to design for the humanitarian, non-profit, philanthropic topics like disaster relief or environmental protection using graphic design methods. I felt I could do something to help people experiencing such crises.
While designing on my project, I was able to work with the Red Cross Society of China, Zhejiang Branch, the biggest charity organization in my birthplace. As one of the affiliations of the world is largest volunteer-led, humanitarian organization, International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement it was founded to protect human life and health, to ensure respect for all human beings, and to prevent and alleviate human suffering, without any discrimination based on nationality, race, sex, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. However, recently they have been experiencing a public relation crises due to the “Guo Meimei” blogging scandal. The whole Red Cross Society of China is facing censure on the corruption and misuse of donations from the public. In order to rebuild credibility, they are eager to redesign their information bulletin board in cyber space. The main purposes are to be transparent in their accountability, recall public awareness to charity; and convey their regards to the people who are devoted to humanitarianism, including the board members and local residents.

I was able to confine my design project to disaster aftermath humanitarian relief. The whole exhibition included designs in all kinds of media: video, website, posters, brochures, and textiles. I wanted the viewer to experience my feeling through almost all their senses, especially the visual, auditory and even the tactile. In this way the audience is invited to participate sensually with my work.

2. Methodology

From an historical point of view, positive moral qualities such as love, sacrifice, unselfishness, bravery and courage are forever topics in the arts. They were important themes for humanistic art which is an approach in study, philosophy, or practice on the topic of the human
self. Since the Renaissance, humanism in art has its special connotations, such as the recurrence of classical art or relief from the religious world, and most importantly the focus on human values and concerns. Like the comments from Thomas Munro, the former president of the American Society of Aesthetics, “The traditional humanistic values can be, to some extent, conveyed or symbolized in art, but they are not to be taken as absolute rules, and they are open to many interpretations”. Placed in an environment of national disaster, these spirits and emotions can be easily magnified and attract people’s attention.

Multimedia has been a catalyst for all of my current art. Although my current work is considered as two-dimensional graphics, computer assisted design is one of the most important processes used to create these pieces. As a designer in advertising, marketing, and publishing for some years before entering graduate school, I have acquired the ability to apply design and drawing concepts to the creation of digital designs. Design software has allowed me to experiment, giving me the freedom to explore different design options. Furthermore, I was able to superimpose audio materials onto a stream of images and to devise explanatory montages to build up the dialogue between my world of ideas and the viewer’s perception.

Many artists and mentors have been inspirations to me while working on this project. A particular one came from the Haiti Poster Project, a collaborative effort by the global design community to help effect change through graphic design works, benefiting victims of the earthquake in Haiti. Patrick Kenney’s poster, “Rebuild Haiti”, uses different letters to compose the map of Haiti. Although simple, it is quite impressive to attract people’s attention. I was especially touched by the photos taken by Riccardo Venturi, an Italian photographer, following humanitarian crises all around the world. The photo of a child in front of a burning building in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, won him the “Best News Pictures of 2010” from the World Press.
Similar resources are coming from the Japanese design community, Social Art and Design for Earthquake Relief. The design related projects have emerged out of the destruction of the earthquake and tsunami that hit the northeast coast of Japan in year 2011. Their designs were not only focused on the aftermath relief but also on environmental protection and resource recovery as well.

On the other hand, since my project is tied with the red-cross organization, I needed to have an analysis of the scope of the audiences. The scenario in which my contents are displayed, if adopted by my client, needs to be considered also. My design process is to produce images reflecting the real world, focusing on the structure and content of these images, and their influence on readers.

My client, the Red Cross Association, is a classical humanitarian organization which is required to look at issues solely from the perspective of impartiality and neutrality. Relief agencies are expected to deliver aid to all and not discriminate between victims and perpetuators in a humanitarian catastrophe. As the number of issues and disasters increases, the people who need help increase, which makes the competition among charities for limited donation dollars increase. With the large amount of money spent each year by charity organizations on marketing strategies, it seems crucial to shed light on the persuasive impact of graphics in this context, especially considering the widespread of internet communication. Therefore, a dedicated website is a good way to distribute accountability information to donors, and advocate activities in charity business. My design needs to be tidy and vivid enough to catch the eyes in front of the screen. I also prefer to enable interaction from the spectator, otherwise the website can not fully achieve its intended purposes.
Traditional posters and brochure designs are also important for the organization. For example in the public gathering environment, the humanitarian graphic design should tell through rather simple images the complex stories of suffering and oppression, making the poster a powerful means to inspire, educate and raise awareness of global issues.

3. List of works

My thesis exhibition involved different media, ranging from posters and brochures to flash movies, an interactive website, 3D animation, and even textiles.

The movie clip “motion typo” for example, is a mixture of motion and text to express ideas using video animation. The text is presented in a manner intended to convey or evoke people’s care towards the children who are more vulnerable during crises. For background music I chose the famous “We Are the World” to reinforce the mood. Transformation occurs in a tidy environment where a map of Haiti is exposed.

Another flash animation was originally designed for World Vision, a global organization exerting its effort to transform communities through disaster relief and children sponsorship. This animation was meant to move people by revealing the suffering from disasters, global poverty, and environmental threats. I used photography of children as the content in my work. I believe the context of a design work should be taken as the primary concern, especially when a design is to generate a sympathetic reaction from the viewer. From the initial concept, to the material processes which include background music; the use of montage; and switching of shots, I was trying to represent the pain of the refugee and the debate over their tragedy.

Not all the videos are designed in such a dark and sober way. One flash, named “Earthquake
Safety Tips”, is more vivid and brighter. The large number of casualties that were reported during the devastating Chinese earthquake reminded me of the importance of educating people about evacuation and rescue for such a disaster. It is an instructive animation to show people some earthquake safety tips. I concentrated more on producing explanatory scenarios rather than a self-sustained story. The purpose is to educate people on how to avoid injury during accidents.

I created another series of posters titled “earthquake”. The materials are from photos taken during the disasters. Children and hands are the main characters in my drawings. I particularly exerted effort on the picture of the sculpture of a human hand. Processed in Photoshop, I made the hand appear shattered within a darkened scene. I wanted to strengthen the communication power of this graphic in a unique way. It, along with the other graphics in the series, became my personal rhetorical narrative toward promoting the humanitarian effects that hope to lessen the magnitude of the disasters.

I also printed patterns on fabric, and made T-shirts. I realized a greater degree of manipulation could be achieved in the patterns because of the flexibility of fabric, and the patterns became more 3-dimensional. If time allows, I would like to add embellishments which could enrich the images. The shirts are designed for the Red Cross organization, especially for meetings and gatherings. The logo and pattern are notably attractive to people for donation efforts.

The brochure and website are specially designed for the Red Cross organization. The book was designed in such a way that it conveys to viewers the principles of the organization. When folded, it shrinks into a square kit, making it easier to carry or distribute. When opened, it becomes the red-cross symbol with many facets displayed. The design elements on each component of the cross are mainly children’s faces, which I believe are the most suitable subjects
for moving people’s hearts.

The website is the final piece of my project. It serves to introduce the goals of the red-cross organization; to display their ordinary charity activities; to advocate donations; and to open a platform for discussion and feedback. During the framework design, I wanted to leave enough room to encourage interactions from netizens. The foreground pictures bring enough visual impact to elicit sympathy. Although it is for a local Chinese organization, I still designed it to be filled with multi-cultural elements. The languages are not only Chinese. Words in languages awkward and different countries state love, encouragement, peace, hope or cherish encourage local residents to broader their awareness of current global humanitarian issues.

4. Summary

In conclusion, my series is intended to educate the viewer about the great meaning of humanitarian activities, especially in natural disaster relief. In the process of developing my projects, I expanded upon the materials and construction methods of digital design conventions. Using this technology makes information and images more accessible to the viewer. The exploration of different types of media enabled me to convey my specific messages to the viewers. Each of the works encompasses the layering of a central topic designed for easy interpretation. With the participation of the Red Cross organization, my work serves a more practical purpose of bringing the awareness on charity to the public.

5. References


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