





DEAR FRIEND,

I am not sure if you remember, but when we first met a few years ago in a busy bar, we bonded over our mutual interest in contemporary classical music. We were both graphic designers, so naturally the conversation flapped between design and music. At some point I blurted out a concern of mine—*don't you think it's strange that improvisation, so common and natural in music, seems to lack an equivalent in graphic design?* Immediately after, I felt silly for saying it. Of course there is improvisation in graphic design! There must be? My nervous inner monologue took over, but your response was calming. You told me that you have been dealing with this throughout your whole career. We talked about it for a long time but were never able to exhaust the topic. What is improvisation in graphic design? What is improvisation in general? There are too many answers, too many nuances to take into consideration.

In improvised music, I am not interested (at least at the moment) in free form, out of the blue, spontaneous expression, but rather in *composition* as a condition of improvisation. Perhaps this sounds counter intuitive? After all, composition and improvisation seem to be in the opposite corners of musical expression, but let me explain further. A composition of that kind is written so that it leaves room for other people besides the Composer. The composer proposes a score with empty blanks, and the musicians (sometimes even the audience members) are meant to fill them in. These blanks are demarcated by a set of conditions and together they form a space that invites or perhaps even demands improvisatory (musical) gestures. This approach takes into consideration the fact that a piece is not complete without a collective—the musicians and the audience. It does not see music as an abstract, almost platonic idea, but as something that happens in a certain place at a certain time and is possible only when it is actually played and heard. To some, this might seem radical or strange, but in my opinion it is the most realistic view on music. Everything else seems to be an idealization.

There are many examples of this approach, but the musical piece “Tschirtner¹ Tunings for Twelve” by Antoine Beuger² is a good example. The score is a collection of 30 pages from which the players themselves can choose any number of pages to play. Each player has only one or two tones assigned for each page and they can choose any octave or tuning for the given pitches, as well as when to play them. The dynamics are soft throughout and the duration of the piece is meant to be long or very long. That's the score—as open as a door.

When played, the piece feels strange and empty. Perhaps unfinished? Without a clear ending or an overarching theme. Like Tschirtner's drawings, they exist without telling us why. They make us think about the art or the music itself, not something secondary, like a plot or a moral conclusion.

The piece is also interesting because it is an event, not an abstract construction. The composer cannot pre-listen to it in his “mind's eye”. The composer becomes a member of the audience, because

the actual realization of the piece is as much a surprise for them as it is for anybody else. An approach like this seems very clear, but why was it so hard to find an equivalent of this in graphic design?

Looking back at my thinking, I find several misconceptions. I always thought of the designer as the composer, whereas recently I have come to realize that the designer's work is much closer to the interpreter or the musician. A client comes to me with a score (a brief) and my job is to make sense of it and propose an interpretation. Sometimes the score is very loose. Just a few ideas, associations, a couple of texts, a deadline. Other times it's very fixed. Occasionally the composer (the client) knows exactly what, how and when they want it, and all they ask of me is to play along. At times the composer drops off the score like a burden. They can't bear it any longer. There is too much stuff. They need someone to make sense of it, someone to have a conversation about it.

When thinking of the designer as a composer, I was too fixated on myself and my creation. Whether I wanted it or not, it became the lonely road of the solitary genius trying to create *ex-nihilo*. But when thinking of design work in terms of interpretation, it becomes a dialogical endeavour and only partially reliant on me.

Another misconception is thinking of design as something abstract. Perhaps even something finished and under control. A much more realistic way of seeing design is to think of it as an event. In that sense a musical event, like a concert, and a graphic event, like publishing a series of letters over a period of four years, are very similar.

A friend of mine told me that she does not understand the publishing schedule of *Dear Friend*. The letters seem to arrive at erratic intervals. This comment amused me a great deal because for me the publishing schedule has been the clearest thing about the endeavour—one letter each month! But of course this is an abstraction. In reality, it gets stretched out and the most surprising publishing rhythms will occur. Sometimes the letter comes in the beginning of the month, sometimes in the end, sometimes we are a little late and it comes in the beginning of the next month, and then it might happen that you get two letters within the same month. Or you get none because they get lost in the mail—anything is possible. But even if the publishing schedule is somewhat flexible, the important thing is that whether you expect it or not the letter will eventually arrive.

This realization has made me see *Dear Friend* as an extremely long graphic event. The event spans four years. Similarly to the *Tschirtner Tunings*, it has a partially fixed score: a fixed format, a fixed folding system, and a fixed colour scheme. The tempo is slow or very slow, not fast or immediate (like daily news or social media) and its tone is undemanding—you can read it if you want to. If not, no harm done.

I am relieved to say that after all these years, I finally understand what you meant. I too have been dealing with improvisation throughout my whole career. I always have. I just wasn't aware of it.

OTT KAGOVERE

¹ Oswald Tschirtner (1920-2007) was an Austrian artist who spent most of his life in mental institutions. His drawings are very minimal, sketch-like, mostly line-based depictions of people. I recommend looking them up; they are breathtaking!

² Antoine Beuger (b 1955) is a Dutch composer and founder of the Wadeweiser group.