

Method of Contextualising: Written Response

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As we examined the design devices and decoded messages in the Recycled Records campaign layer by layer, we identified Coca-Cola's implicit strategies for simplifying the plastic pollution crisis. As Rock (2009) mentioned, designers can reshape viewers' perception of the world, in this case, our climate crisis, whether that shift in perception is fair or not. To investigate the actual life cycle of a Coca-Cola bottle and its impact on each stage of its life cycle, we started sourcing images related to plastic bottles and cataloguing them using methods, such as sequencing and (re)contextualising.

When sourcing these images, we mainly used two image databases, Britannica ImageQuest and JSTOR, which are available through the university libraries. Being aware of the limitations and ideologies embedded in these Western databases, I also consider these limitations instrumental in design practices. It heightens the importance of an alternative narrative and poses a meaningful challenge to depict what is absent. How could designers iterate and shape new perceptions out of limited resources?

One of the catalogues I created is organised by the images' geographic locations. I intentionally selected images of plastic waste in the Global South, where plastic pollution is used as a tool for colonialism (Liboiron, 2021). As the Coca-Cola system invests bottling facilities in regions with a history of colonialism, such as Africa and Southeast Asia, it has maintained and even reproduced a colonial relationship with Land, using its resources to produce Coca-Cola products and territories to dispose of plastic wastes, and turning People into labourers as well as consumers. In the process of sorting these images, I have deepened my understanding of our culture and history of exploitation and how they can be extended to the climate crisis we are facing.

Rock, M. (2009) *Fuck Content*. Available at: <https://2x4.org/ideas/2009/fuck-content/> (Accessed: 16 November 2023).

As designers, our devices of storytelling are typography, colour, shapes and form (Rock, 2009). When stripping away all these devices, we can see that these vintage posters of Sprite and the Recycled Records campaign don't have any actual content and all the messages lie within the design elements. These posters managed to create an illusion and evoke a feeling of nostalgia, taking us back to the good, old days when Coca-Cola wasn't the top plastic polluter in the world. What the designers also did was remove Sprite, the second most popular brand in the Coca-Cola company, from the corporate context and re-contextualise the brand as well the plastic bottle as an almost 'innocent' subject in an independent music studio.

In the documentary-style video, the use of a black-and-white filter has not only toned down the messiness of the recycling centres but also signified that plastic waste is

obsolete. In contrast, all the modern factories are shown in full colour with an oversaturated red that is on brand with the Coca-Cola company.

All these design choices convey messages and reshape experiences, perceptions and, ultimately, relationships between the viewers and the world (Rock, 2009).

Bratton, B. (2013) 'We need to talk about TED', *The Guardian*, 30 December. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/30/we-need-to-talk-about-ted> (Accessed: 15 February 2024).

In the Recycled Records campaign, the idea of a 'bottle-to-bottle,' circular economy appeals to be a world-changing innovation that would be featured in a TED talk. However, the reality of plastic pollution and its potential solutions are far more complex. When we analysed the content and the design devices, we could find traces where over-simplification takes place. As designers, how could we help our users to access, navigate and eventually engage with substantial information, related to histories, systems and contradictions? How could graphic communication enable people to think critically and alternatively rather than optimistically? The advance of technology and infrastructure does not necessarily lead to the progress of our society, not even a solution. As designers and citizens, our ability to reflect, to question and to investigate is more crucial than ever.

Abdulla, D. (2022) 'On the Contradictions of Sustainability' [Recorded talk]. Futuress. 22 November 2022. Available at: <https://futuress.org/learning/contradictions-of-sustainability/> (Accessed: 5 February 2024).

Simplification can be a powerful tool for greenwashing. We tend to fixate on technology as a solution. For instance, clear plastics are treated as a solution for plastic waste in Coca-Cola's Green to Clear initiative. As part of this initiative, the 'Recycled Records' campaign used graphic communication design to simplify and reduce the recycling process to a 10-step, bottle-to-bottle, circular process.

As a result, we overlook our social and economic systems, the global corporations, and the legislation of our governments where the climate crisis originated. Our environmental challenges are not caused by the material itself but by our use of the material. How did plastic become the material for packaging in the first place? How is recycling or the collection of plastic waste portrayed as the solution to plastic pollution? How does the idea of recycling promote mass production and consumption?

Liboiron, M. (2021). *Pollution Is Colonialism*, Duke University Press. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ual/detail.action?docID=6527589> (Accessed: 6 February 2024)

The Coca-Cola system, especially their Bottling Investments Group (BIG), can be understood as a system of colonialism. In addition to the global marketing strategies initiated by the Coca-Cola Company, the Bottling Investment Group has heavily invested in the bottling operations in South Africa and Southeast Asia, the Indigenous Land, turning People into labourers as well as consumers of Coca-Cola products. All these actions lead to an unmanageable amount of plastic waste on Land and for People while profiting the Coca-Cola company. Furthermore, it is a common practice for Western countries to export their plastic waste to neighbouring or developing countries, using Land to avoid the economic and environmental costs of recycling and landfilling facilities in their territory. Pollution isn't an unintentional by-product of economic growth; instead, it is a deliberate choice and the choice is to pollute unevenly, to shift the blame for a lack of infrastructure in the 'less developed' countries and to eventually gain constant access to Land by offering ongoing, 'civilised' solutions to the climate crisis.

Considering Liboiron's (2021) claim that pollution is colonialism in parallel to Abdulla's (2022) claim that the main drive of sustainability is economic, one has to ask: is it the colonialism that has become sustainable in the end?

Ong, J. (2020) *"Absence in design is very important": Karel Martens on paying attention to the things we don't see*. Available at: <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/karel-martens-re-printed-matter-graphic-design-020920> (Accessed: 12 February 2024).

Marten, K. and Fitzpatrick, C. (2017) *Motion*. Kunstverein München and Roma Publications.

Karel Martens considers limitations an important factor in his design practice. Possibilities can only be created in contrast to restrictions. Through the process of iterating, Martens created numerous variations from a limited collection of images. Martens also considers absence as essential as presence in design for absence alludes to curiosity.

As we were sourcing, building and sorting our collection of images for this project, we mainly used two image databases, Britannica ImageQuest and JSTOR. Being aware of the limitations, biases, and Euro-centric ideologies within these Western image databases, I also found that working with these limitations made me realise the importance of an alternative narrative.

It's easy to reject these images for its Western biases and influence, but how could we make use of these images by reading these images from different angles? What is absent in these images? How could we expose the biases and limitations in these images through an iterative and reflective design process? How could our catalogues of images offer an alternative narrative, depicting something that was not in the original databases?

Koolhaas, R. (2018) *Elements of architecture*. Koln: Taschen.

The book Element of Architecture can be understood as a house itself, consisting of different architectural elements, such as a roof and a corridor. Though having approximately 2600 pages, the book remains relatively accessible.

I found this book a helpful reference when working with complex subjects, such as climate justice. How could we break down the issues as well as the design process like breaking down a house? When looking at the campaign 'Recycled Records,' we tried to dissect all the design devices as building bricks and decode the underlying meanings of typography, colours, forms, symbols and style. How does design oversimplify the complex, systematic issues within plastic production and recycling systems and consequentially greenwash the biggest plastic polluters, the Coca-Cola company? Take the organic, hand-drawn animations in the short video for example. Though appealing simplified and innocent, we can still identify some underlying issues such as down cycling and microplastic leakage from a pile of hand-drawn dots. How could we use graphic communication to navigate and re-contextualise these design bricks to construct a different building (story)?

Thirdly, this book is a collaboration of multiple contributors. How could we collaborate and publish collectively as designers? How do the three of us create different houses using the same bricks?