



FLUX: Design Education in a Changing World

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Lebanese Graphic Design, a Homogeneous Hybrid

Abstract

This paper focuses on the essence of visual communication today in its relation to the culture it is addressing. It seeks to show design as a search to extend the possibilities for visualizing the Lebanese culture and traditions through typography, imagery, narrative and structure.

We hear of “Swiss Graphic Design”, “American Graphic Design”, “Dutch Graphic Design”, “Tokyo Graphics”, ... but no such thing as a Lebanese school of Design. Lebanese graphic design today is an amalgam of various influences, carried along in the educational baggage of academia and faculty teaching this discipline in the various universities across the country.

The presentation will showcase students project from the Lebanese American university, as well as 2 experimental typographic projects that undertake to visualize Beirut, Lebanon, the local culture, the languages spoken, and their associated set of visual artifacts. The result is a varied and differentiated expression of the sense of place. It transcends the acknowledged borders of the subject, and embodies the more universal values of social interaction and politics within a multilingual society.*

** The geographical position of Lebanon, sandwiched between the Mediterranean sea and the Middle East, makes it a funnel between Europe and the Arab world, and vice versa; and the official languages spoken there are Arabic, French and English.*

Yet, we live in an age where design has to play the important role of communicating and visualizing values, culture and mentalities. The paper will argue to what extent do we, as graphic design professionals and educators, need to liberate our visual referents from foreign influences in order to establish a Lebanese School of Graphic Design; or are we there now?

The paper will undertake to highlight the problems faced by graphic design faculty in Lebanese universities, mostly in regards to the identity of the body of work developed in the classroom. From this perspective, the issue of the nationality of design will be at stake, in an age of abundant transnational crossovers.

Key Words: *visual communication, multilingualism, identity, context*

Introduction

I see Graphic Design as a process of translating the heard and the unheard, the seen and the unseen into a new form of communication, visual language; a search to extend the possibilities for producing meaning through typography, imagery, narrative and structure.

The way graphic design informs the message takes into consideration its nature, as well as the visual referential parameters of the receivers; it is a vector of communication between a sender and a receiver, provided both sender and receiver understand and share the same code or language.

A language is at the core of an ensemble of myths, memories and other valuable symbols essential to the formation of a feeling of belonging. We will look together into the specifics of the Lebanese graphic design scene, focusing on the essence of visual communication today in its relation to the culture it is addressing.

We hear of “Swiss Graphic Design”, “American Graphic Design”, “Dutch Graphic Design”, “Tokyo Graphics”, ... but a Lebanese school of Design is yet unheard of. Lebanese graphic design today is an amalgam of various influences, carried along in the educational baggage of academia and faculty teaching this discipline in the various universities across the country, which superposes itself to the differentiated local visual cultures.

Moving from a user-centered approach (where designing for a specific audience is what matters), to another one stipulating “the designer as author” (where the designer as an individual partakes in the generation of meaning), the graphic design program I followed at the American University of Beirut is the first program to teach graphic design in Lebanon, and is only 12 years old; unlike other programs around the world, ours was a constant swing between different visions of design education, vehicled by our faculty members, who had studied under American, Swiss, Belgian, Dutch or British design masters themselves. We were taught in various ways how to see the world, and this enabled us in return to create our own visions of it. We were invited to open up to reality around us, and all we saw was a translation of what side of the city we had been raised in during and after the 15 year civil war the country went through between 1975 and 1990.

Multilingual Education in Lebanon

The Lebanese population is composed of different religious communities, some Christian, mainly Maronite, Greek-Orthodox and Greek Catholic, others Islamic, Sunnite Muslim, Shiite Muslim and Druze. The Lebanese educational system is still tributary to the Capitulations, an educational vision for the region brought by the French and English to this part of the then Ottoman Empire; in the middle of the 19th century, they established an educational framework where, on one hand, French Christian missionaries established schools and universities teaching in French language primarily, where it was very often substituted with Arabic as a first language. On the other hand, British Protestant missionaries established schools where English was taught with Arabic, but never replaced its status of first language. Today, the educational infrastructure is still tributary to this system, and education is still provided in one, two or three languages throughout Lebanon.

Whereas an education given in French as a first language will provide individuals with a certain perception of their immediate environment, an education with Arabic as a first language will produce individuals with a different set of perceptions, in terms of literature read, films watched, and activities. The question here is to what extent students graduating from a French, American, or Arabic educational systems will have similar or different processes of identifying with the idea of one's self, culture, and community: Lebanon. Just as a language or a dialect refers to the process whereby the different speakers in this linguistic community acquire “a highly similar mental grammar, culture refers to the process whereby particular kinds of learning contagiously spread from person to person in a community and minds become coordinated into shared patterns” <Steven Pinker, The language Instinct>. Thus a different education entails the formation of differentiated cultural identities.

As a result, most schools across the country have a confessional character (related to one's community). Through relying on a different language for education, they enforced a differentiated

socialization, whereby the nursery rhymes one knew were unheard of by some of one's classmates, and vice versa.

Language and culture

Apart from being the conveyor of culture and identity, language is also the means of nourishing and maintaining the questioned culture and identity. Along with religion, it constitutes the daily culture and the territory thought to be the defining artifacts of an ethnos by anthropologists.

This cultural hybridism Lebanon witnesses produced (and still does) generations that do not have a similar conception of their cultural identity at large, and their visual culture more specifically. My classmates and I then read out to each other our varying perceptions of what was considered good or bad, pretty or ugly, modern or traditional, violent or peaceful; very rarely did our readings coincide really.

“roundtable”: a typographic journey into the Lebanese multilingual scape

“roundtable” is the result of a long and tedious process of self-questioning and introspection: one's meanderings through the why's and how's of one's linguistic abilities, or inabilities rather. The frontline representatives of the various Lebanese confessional groups were questioned about several issues revolving around the objective of this investigation: how does the correlation work between one's use of language, confessional identity, and national identity at large? The interviewees were chosen from a vast array of disciplines, ranging from Education to Journalism, through Advertising, Theatre, Literature and Politics. An interesting pattern was worth being noted then: the opinions and lines of thought that were voiced fell into the identitarian framework stood by everyone's confessional group, regardless of how 'secular' some of them tried to be. This series of interviews proved to be very efficient in that it turned out as a virtual roundtable about the questions discussed in this paper. Needless to say that most of them were not always keen on being in the same basket as their fellows.

Most studies on multilingualism tend to neglect the visual manifestations of the phenomenon in favor of the psychological, social and pedagogical dimensions of the problem. This project used the method of “visual journalism”, whereby the typographic tableaux that resulted were planned to meticulously report, as faithfully as possible, the various ideologies encountered.

“roundtable”, the typographic journey, is an attempt to visualize the various opinions on the subject, as recorded during the interviews mentioned above. The methodology followed is based on a long research into the educational system and the usage of languages, which lead to outlining a spectrum of opinions that stipulated for some French as the mother tongue, and marginalized Arabic to a redundant language in a country that takes pride in its allegiance to France. For others, French was only the language of a self-proclaimed cultural elite, an elite that had no real national grounding, and Arabic was the sole mother tongue, being the sacred language of the Coran, the Muslim religious book. In the middle, one came across pragmatic English speakers, that did not need Arabic or French to define an identity for themselves, but were a by-product of families that had lived all over the Gulf region mostly, studying under American or British educational systems in places such as Dubai, Saudi Arabia or Cairo.

The problem paused through all the interviews was that of varying understandings of one's cultural/linguistic identity, and the initial question was to find a way for the resulting visual work to convey all the different readings of Lebanon and Lebaneseness into one coherent body of work. Starting with an initial interest in multilingual typography, “roundtable” laid the ground for a method of visualizing the findings into expressive bilingual typography, adopting the Arabic script, as well as Arabic and Latin typographic use.

The visual translation that follows makes use of a color code, a typographic code and a compositional one. Be it script, calligraphy, or typography, all the visual manifestations of language were referred to as units to construct the nine typographic tableaux (Figure 1-9). The color code consists of referring to the Arabic language through red, the French through blue, the English through grey, and the common grounds (where linguistic groups meet) in yellow orange. The choice of colors taken, typography was then encoded with a historical reference to the calligraphic and typographic systems of writing: while the use of Arabic calligraphy referred to the sacred dimension of the language, contrasting it with Latin or Arabic typography alluded to a more 'progressive' idea of Lebanon. Going from figure 1 to figure 9, the spectrum of opinions ranged from a French speaking/Christian Extremist understanding

of Lebanon, to a radically opposing view stipulating Lebanon as an Islamic country; both readings never met, except on the pages of the “roundtable”.

The question of this visual exploration setting itself within the boundaries of a Lebanese Graphic Design school is a valid one: how does it address the issue of a pure local visual expression, or does it fit under the umbrella of design embedding foreign influences. The answer here was brought to my attention when I went around the interviewees after having completed the project, and each one of them did recognize himself in it, with all the subtle nuances of his socio-political frame. I realized then that all of those typographic expressions brought together the previously disparate visual styles practiced inside the country’s geographical borders, without mimicking anyone of them. ‘roundtable’ indeed set the ground for a hybrid visual language, by it’s varying visual references, yet homogeneous by the different graphic codes used.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

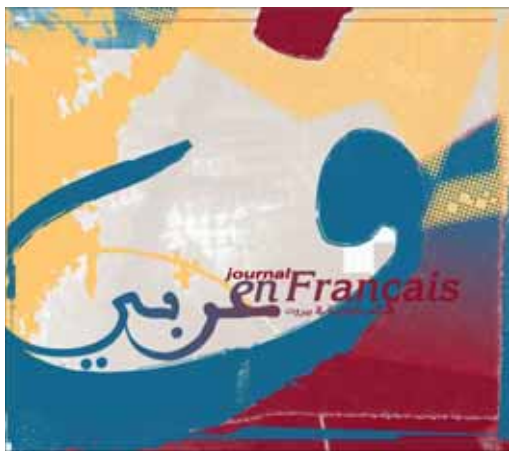


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 9



Figure 10

Beirut, 'ville mutiple'

Another project making use typographic representation was commissioned three years later, the subject of which is the representation of place. The initial interest that is behind designing this project was still very much related to language, but more specifically the colloquial Arabic commonly spoken in the city of Beirut. In it, Beirut is seen as a big digestive tube that ingurgitates everything and anything, and spits it back in a non-formulaic entity, which defies any rule of classification in the conventional understanding of the term; which is a new category in itself altogether (the same way being atheist or not taking sides in politics are a form of belonging); this new category which defines the local visual culture today has the following characteristics:

- Hybrid.
- Loose.
- Eclectic.
- Innovative.
- Multi-faceted.

It consists of a series of typographic tableaux (Figure 11) that represent the city as a digestive tube, in reference to the different linguistic trends that constitute the core of the Lebanese Arabic spoken language, in reference to the colloquial Arabic language having integrated words coming from Italian, French, and English. The second one refers to Beirut as a membrane, due to its geographical location between the Mediterranean sea and the Middle Eastern countries; it acts as a permeable filter between those two cultural entities. The third one refers to Beirut as an eclectic city, in reference to all the strata involved in the formation of its local daily culture. The 4th of this series is a representation of the city as schizophrenic, a trait reveals itself in the ambiguous relation of the citizens towards it, and the way it returns the flavor back; by alternating from being welcoming to sending its children away, another reference to its geographical location, sandwiched between the sea and the mainland. All four tableaux were constructed along seven layers, a hint to the fact that the city was rebuilt 7 times on itself after having been destroyed. The result is a varied and differentiated expression of the sense of place. It transcends the acknowledged borders of the subject, and embodies the more universal values of social interaction and politics within a multilingual society.

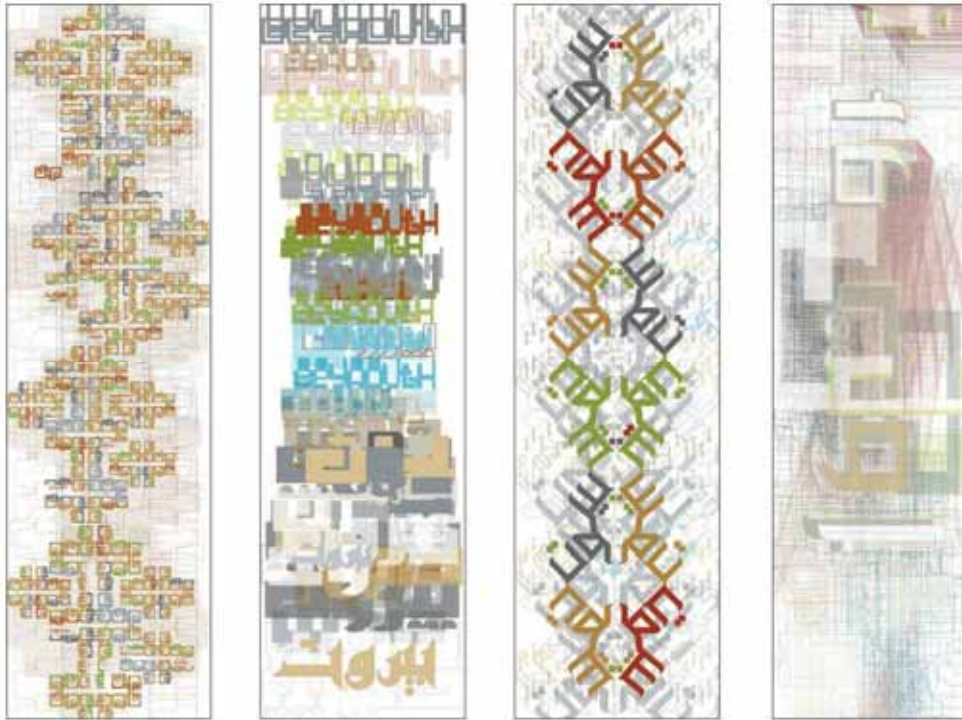


Figure 11

Design Education in Lebanon

A Lebanese school of Graphic Design is yet unheard of really. It is a subject being debated in the studios within the various Graphic Design programs across the country, and each one is still trying to bring an answer to fill in this gap. More than one academic research is being conducted in this respect, but nothing has been concretized to this day.

The schooling system in Lebanon is still very much based on spoon-feeding, which leads to students entering any Design program having no real idea of it as a conveyor of culture. The Graphic Design program at the Lebanese American University (LAU) acts as a springboard between a state of total ignorance about oneself, and a much clearer comprehension of it as well as one's social-political context. The senior year comprises a final project, consisting of a research thesis about a subject the student chooses, and its visual exploration through different routes, from print to multimedia. There are several possibilities of integrating information phenomena of social nature, into innovative visual language solutions, which reflect strongly the context they emanate from.

The different projects showcased below mirror each student's visual and cultural referential system, be it the street vernacular, the music culture of the 80's or a new reading of the Lebanese war. They highlight some of the issues faced by graphic design faculty in Lebanese universities, mostly in regards to the coherent (or not) identity of the body of work developed in the classroom.

A substantial number of the students at LAU come from different socio-cultural backgrounds, and this stirs an interesting exchange within the class generally speaking. Across the different graphic design curricula taught in Lebanon now, the references used to illustrate and 'in-form' are mostly excerpts from Western printed or online sources, in English, excluding direct links to the street vernacular of the city outside the windowpane. Books such as Ellen Lupton's "Thinking with Type", Steven Heller's "Looking Closer", Willi Kunz' "Macro- and Microaesthetics" or "The End of Print" as professed by David Carson, our sources for teaching the basics of visual language are disparate, and far from our daily realities. Students however absorb those foreign visual referents into their own realm, and regurgitate the hybridized outcome into their sketchbooks.

The examples of projects shown underneath reflect various tendencies of integrating, ignoring or neglecting one's local environment. One might wonder what happens to the content the students have to visualize when it goes through the many influences of foreign exposure, at the expense of a local

sense of the self? Will it fit under one umbrella, or are we looking at many more of those to categorize the work?

In relation to language, Nahla Kotob conceived and designed Jargonet (Figure 12), which is a glossary of all hybrid terms used by Beirut people: it includes different sections related to various categories of the daily life. Each section has its illustrations and photographs, as well as the words, their origin, her visual interpretation of the phonetics and her own assessment of Lebanese colloquial dialect. Jargonet touches indeed upon a purely local feature, the accent of the Lebanese dialect in a particular area, and the resulting visual work carries explicitly a local stamp.



Figure 12

On another register, Tamima Salam compares stereotyping, and more specifically Arab stereotyping as perceived by the foreign media to packaging (Figure 13). It puts a common label on a group of things, that are not necessarily the same from the inside as the outside package. The subject brought up in this project is free from any reference to a local expression, and the question of its identity is not really relevant, the work dealing primarily with a foreign representation of the Arab culture.



Figure 13

The global and the local are closely intertwined in the next project, where Marwa Arsanios undertakes to frame the Lebanese political parties at presence, through their visual manifestations around town. The magazine RESERVOIR (Figure 14) is indeed a collection of snapshots taken from around the city of Beirut, and is a good witness to both the presence of different writing scripts and a bland view of global brands leaving a mark around the cityscape .



Figure 14

On another hand, a whole body of work is being developed in the design studio given by my colleague. Her design agenda is a breakaway from any visual reference to the local in its familiar understanding, as stated by Ms Silia Abou Arbid (Architect and Designer):

“Design need not assume an identity but a textual element which subtends the disembodiment of the body into crucial states, that is to say, abstract ideas that make visible the possibilities of things.”

Walid Mohanna proposes a reading of the industrial culture that emerged in the early 80's (in film, performance and music) through the theories of Deleuze, Baudrillard and Foucault (Figure 15); the result of which was translated into a visual language through the use of photography and the creations of icons and a typeface.

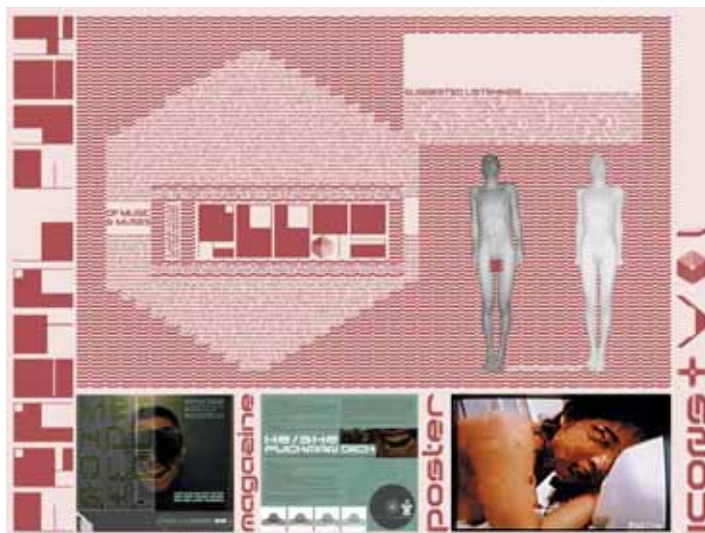


Figure 15

Taking us into his voyage (Figure 16), Malek Anouti proposes a new reading of music as a stimulant to actualize music through our bodies. He visualizes noise as another form of music where dissected harmonies and unpleasant sounds are reflected through icons and the typefaces he develops for the purpose of this project.

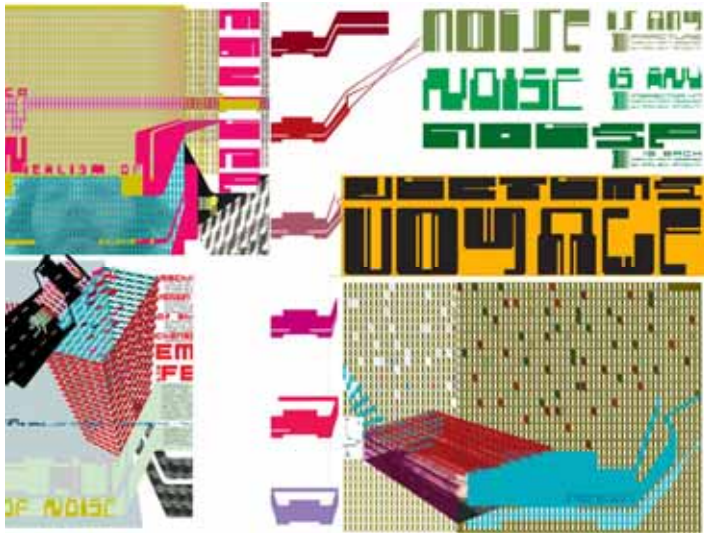


Figure 16

Rania Bitar portrays her understanding of God and what is godly through the 4 natural elements. God as giving light, shown through elevation, like fire. God as present everywhere, even in places we think are empty, like air (Figure 17). God as attracting us towards it, like earth. God as being an essential element in life, like water. Any reference to the local is absent from the three above projects, the real concern here is a universal language that does not fit under a geographical border. It touches upon the idea of design as a tool to visualize things, as opposed to the proposed view of design as a conveyor of culture.

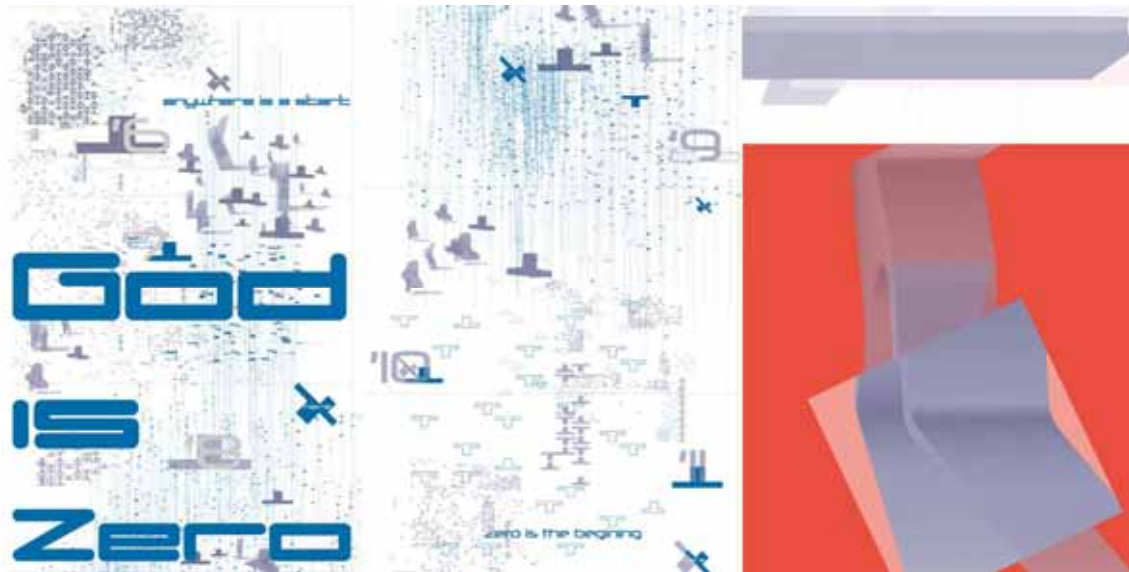


Figure 17

Following an agenda that happens in between the proposed ones above, Khalil Halwani explores the idea of the accident in design: in his publication, entitled "40", he narrates the story of a bug that infiltrates the folders on his desktop, using different random snapshots taken over 40 days on the Beirut seafont (Figure 18). In it, he explores the notion of the page, the structure of a publication, the narrative, as well as the sense and meaning of place. This project somehow bridges the gap between design as identity and design as crucial disembodiment, and does bear the label of a homogeneous hybrid in the sense proposed at the beginning of the paper.



Figure 18

The initial problem proposed in this paper, the difficulties faced by the Graphic Design faculty in Lebanon, seems somehow much less problematic now; design can be a transmitter of culture, or not, yet remain particular to a place; today, the world has turned into one locality really, and borders are crossed back and forth; has identity or nationality turned meaningless?

Conclusion

Yet, we live in an age where design has to play the primordial role of communicating and visualizing values, culture and mentalities, when identity has become referential in time, i.e. one's whole set of identitarian referents is random, constantly mutating and changing with time and new events. The media one is exposed to on a daily basis is becoming more and more globalized, and deals less with the sense of the local in its conventional definition.

Local to me refers to the milieu I grew up in, the school I went to, the nursery rimes I sang, the comic strips I read, the music I listen to, the magazines I skim through, the books I read, the language I use to express myself or to count!

With this new world order, where everything and anything is streamed through media to virtually anyone anywhere, the need to re-affirm one's mutating local flavor is more than ever necessary. Students are invited to rethink Contemporary Design as an information manager, a transmitter and perpetuator of culture, and the challenge of teaching design today Lebanon resides in the need to keeping it faithful to its context, yet with a wide open window into the global scene. The real challenge is for a bigger chunk of what is around us to make its ways into our visual output. To maintain particularities.

The question remains to what extent do we, as graphic design professionals and educators, need to liberate our visual referents from foreign influences in order to establish a Lebanese School of Graphic Design. Are we there already?



NATHALIE FALLAHA

Nathalie Fallaha studied graphic design at the American University of Beirut; she got her bachelor of Graphic Design in 1997, then moved to Central Saint Martins in London UK to pursue a Masters in Communication Design. Since 2000, she has been teaching Graphic Design and Typography at the Lebanese American University, as well as running her graphic design studio vit-e.

A lecturer, member of juries and practicing graphic designer, she has participated in exhibitions in Lebanon, Britain, France and Holland. Her work reveals a deep interest in the relation between Latin and Arabic typography. She attends various graphic design and typography conferences around the world.