



SUPERGRAPHICS

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We can define supergraphics as large-scale or great format graphic design. The great pioneer of supergraphics during the 60s and the 70s was Barbara Stauffacher Solomon who was followed by designers like Lance Wyman or Jean Philippe Lenclos. We will study the relevancy of supergraphics at present considering that many graphic designers work in spaces and buildings using supergraphics. Paula Scher or Morag Myerscough are two of the most significant figures of this trend, named *Environmental Graphics* in the English-speaking world. Likewise we will study how contemporary art and, in particular, Street Art are closely linked and related to supergraphics.

KEY WORDS: SUPERGRAPHICS/ENVIRONMENTAL/GRAPHICS/BARBARA/STAUFFACHER/SOLOMON/ PAULA SCHER/STREET ART.

Baroque trompe l'oeuils are all attempts to modify space with the use of paint.

Works as those of Barbara Stauffacher Solomon prove that intervention of spaces both indoors and outdoors with shapes and colours was a well spread practice in the 60s and 70s. The aesthetics of the time asked for direction lines that transformed the perception of the space, many a time they were finished with an arrowhead. Many an example of this style of decoration illustrate articles in magazines of the times such as the mentioned *Elle or Life*. The trend was so widespread that an abstract North-american painter, the very Frank Stella, signed interventions in this style. At the time, the interior design programs applied to the most innovative rooms was complete and it covered walls, carpet, upholstery, etc.

The great pioneer of supergraphics was the mentioned Barbara Stauffacher Solomon (San Francisco, 1928). Her career has always been linked to the world of design and creation. She learned the trade of graphic design in Switzerland, mentored by Armin Hoffman. She studied Architecture and taught Architecture and Landscape Architecture in Harvard and Yale. Actually her landscaping projects earned her international fame. In the realm of supergraphics she is one of the most relevant names, with works as the walls of Sea Ranch in California (1966), the toilets for women and men in Marin Country Mart Larkspur Landing or the record shop HearHaer of San Francisco (1969). Her creations boast graphic strength and freshness. It seems that she did not care what media she had to paint on. She would intervene spaces globally. She achieved a compositional unity that was not so frequently seen. The interiors designed by her would modify themselves, based on geometric shapes and typographies that run across walls, piping and ceilings in a functional, dynamic way. In the article of *Life magazine* "It's Supergraphics" it is stated that "the idea of the supergraphics is to knock down the walls with paint, to change the appearance and shape of the rooms (...) and if it does

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Supergraphics may be defined as large scale or big format graphic design. The word *supergraphics* is first coined in the United States by the architect and writer Ray Smith, in 1967. He uses it in the articles that he used to write for the magazine *Progressive Architecture*, compiled in his book *Supermanism: New Attitudes in Post-modern Architecture*.¹ C. Ray Smith thus echoed the dominant trend among architects, interior designers and graphic designers of the time, consisting in modifying the architectural space with flat colours and geometric shapes. This trend aimed at playing down the seriousness and weight of architecture. This fashion was reflected in interior design magazines of the 60s and 70s, such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Elle*, *Living for Today* or *Life*. At the time we could find the term supergraphics as a hook in adverts for wall paint brands. The word appears in dictionaries in the English speaking world. However, it may be argued that supergraphics are not a new phenomenon. Pompeii paintings, Renaissance frescos and

not look right, you paint it again”,² highlighting the rise and versatility of supergraphics.

Deborah Sussman (Brooklyn, 1931/Los Angeles, 2014) is also one of the first graphic designers who, at the end of the 60s, employed supergraphics to emphasize certain aspects of buildings. She worked alongside with the Eames and with her husband, architect Paul Prejza, she would design several supergraphics pieces for the Olympic Games of Los Angeles 1984.

After the path set by the Northamericans Barbara Stauffacher Solomon and Deborah Sussman, the graphic designer Lance Wyman (Newark, United States, 1937) designed a full graphic program that covered the city of Mexico in the Olympic Games of 1968. Lance Wyman and the architect Eduardo Terradas applied ephemeral supergraphics to the outdoors areas surrounding the Olympic State and the Estadio Azteca (Aztec Stadium) in Mexico D. F., they created an Op-inspired space for the Mexican pavillion in the Triennale of Milan of 1968, based upon the image that Wyman had produced for the Olympic Games of Mexico 68.

Jean Philippe Lenclos (Francia, 1938), expert on Theory and Psychology of Colour, created vibrant, colourful murals for schools in the *banlieues* of Paris. They aimed at improving the educational environment of children. He also carried out a number of projects and proposals for decoration applying colour to indoors spaces that illustrated publications of the time, such as *Elle*. So in the 60s and 70s, supergraphics was a style prevailing in the field of interior design and which covered the exterior walls of certain buildings, such as those that Israeli graphic designer, Dan Reisinger (Kanjiza, Yugoslavia, 1934) created in the Taylet Seashore Promenade of Tel Aviv in 1971 or in the industrial complex of Maxima in the Negev desert seven years later. During the last decades of the twentieth century supergraphics was relegated to isolated interventions, this is to say, mural decoration and specific interior design work that is not ascribed to the trend described by C. Ray Smith. However, today, supergraphics has returned with great vigour, becoming part of the work of contemporary graphic designers. *Environmental Graphics* is the term used in the English-speaking world uses to define the work of certain designers for both indoors and outdoors spaces. In recent years, many design studios include in their websites entries a section labelled *Environmental Graphics*, as just one of the areas they work on. However, beyond the correct nomenclature, what stays is that contemporary graphic design and interior design comprises a current towards intervening spaces and buildings with colour, typography, flat shapes or illustrations. An example of it is the graphic designer Paula Scher (Virginia, 1948) that has signed many a work in supergraphics. Her creations for schools

and teaching centres is widely known, such as the Achievement First Endeavor Middle School where she creates a bright, practical space with typography and lively colours. In the University of Abu Dhabi, Paula Scher decorated the hall with a multitude of maps (one for her favourite images and among the ones she enjoys drawing the most) creating an enveloping graphic that goes around the entire space. In the New Jersey Performing Arts Center she uses giant typography to cover all the exterior of the building, while the great scale signage that dresses up the offices of the Grey Group employs anamorphosis, a technique consisting in painting or drawing an image that may only be finished and completed from a single, pre-established point of view. In 2010 Paula Scher also intervenes the parking at 13-17 East 54th Street in Manhattan, covering the façade of the building with the question, “Did You Remember Where We Parked the Car?”. The inner walls of the parking display phrases and indications that guide the user along space, providing additional information. Paula Scher is a clear heir of the line of work posed by Barbara Stauffacher Solomon. By covering the inside and outside of a building with different colours, shapes and typographies she succeeds in generating personalised, functional spaces as those she produced for the offices Bloomberg L.P. in Manhattan or the Queens Metropolitan High School of New York.

It should be highlighted that garages are spaces that in the last few years have been the focus for a great number of applications of environmental graphics. A well known example is the Eureka Tower Carpark in Melbourne, projected in 2008 by Axel Peemoeller (Alemania, 1976) for Emery Studio and where anamorphosis is again used to place the user in space. In Madrid, architect Teresa Sapey (Cuneo, Italia, 1962) designs the parking of the Hotel Puerta América and that of the Chueca AnDante, decorating them with typography and basic shapes.

Other note-worthy outdoors interventions are those of Tony Brook (London, 1962), co-founder of the London studio Spin, for the Design Museum of London. In this case, the project was ephemeral, since it covered the entire building of the Design Museum for the exhibition of graphic designer Win Crouwel. Also Sara De Bondt Studio carries out works of supergraphics to envelop the outside of the art gallery MK in Great Britain with geometrical shapes and large flat colour canvas.

Morag Myerscough (Londres, 1963) is a British designer whose ample production is eminently supergraphics. In her work she uses bright colours and giant shapes and typographies. In the style of Jean Philippe Lenclos, Morag Myerscough uses colour for therapeutic purposes, as it is the case of his project for the dining room in the London Children’s Hospital or Kentish Town Health Centre. Her work for

the Westminster Academy, the Movement Cafe in Greenwich, the London College of Communications or the outside of the British Pavillion for the Venice Biennale of Architecture of 2004 prove that, as she points out, “to do *environmental graphics* you must have into account the scale, distances, light, audience, time, and what you want to achieve. It is not just an image on a wall”.³ Morag Myerscough lends each space a specific identity, and she manages to draw the eye of the public with her colourful compositions, boasting typographies and lettering.

In 2005 the Hotel Fox of Copenhagen, which belongs to Volkswagen, gathered twenty-one graphic designers, illustrators and graffiti artists and put them in charge of decorating the hotel rooms. Studios such as Pandarosa, Hort, Friends with you, Tokidoki, Rinzen or Antoine et Manuel intervened several rooms. Genevieve Gauckler (Lyon, 1967) or Boris Hoppek (Kreuztal, Alemania, 1970) put their stamp on walls, furniture or bed linen, while graffiti artists such as Dr. Alderete (Patagonia, 1971) intervened other rooms. This project inspired other businesses, which echoed the idea and started to set up special environments that produce different impressions in those which inhabit them; such as the Vieux Panier Hotel of Marseille which invited graffiti artist Tilt (Toulouse, 1972) to paint a “Panic Room”, a room with one half completely painted in white, and the other half profusely covered in Tilt’s *tags*.

It shall be pointed out that today’s *Street Art* boom has found in supergraphics an ally, which makes it very difficult to find the exact limits between what is *Environmental Graphics* and what is *Street Art*. Actually, many of the design studios that exhibit their work in museums and art galleries, and the artists producing *Street Art* are commissioned with work that have more to do with design. *Street Art* is impregnated with the idea of making a more democratic art, so murals, illustrations and drawings of all kinds that flood cities and locations around the world reveal the mutant condition of our environment, which, in the last few years, has become the media for the creations of these street artists.

In 2008 London’s Tate Modern dedicated one of its shows to *Street Art*. It counted with participants as Colectivo Faile from New York, Italian graffiti artists Blu, JR from France, Sixeart from Barcelona and Os Gemeos and Nunca from Sao Paulo. The work of these artists filled the huge building facing the Tate Modern. Usually, Os Gemeos, Blu or Sixeart paint building façades, dividing walls and outside walls leaving their stamp on cities of the entire planet. JR (Paris, 1983) places his giant black and white photographs in favelas, marginal neighbourhoods or cities of Palestine, places where he resorts to high impact to demand visibility for immigrants, women in situations of inequality or a number of conflicts. Blu (Italy, 1981), as many of

these street artists, started painting illegally; he has painted his enigmatic characters and personal illustrations on the streets of Lisbon, Berlin, or Barcelona, always with a strong social background.

Also in the realm of street art, the graffiti artist Cept (London, 1972) combines codes stemming from psychedelia, pop art, comic books, and, as street artist D*Face (London, 1978), appropriates superheroes and compositions by Roy Lichtenstein for his murals, like the one in the parking area of Leonard Street, London, where he shares walls with other creative individuals as Cyrcler or Run.

Likewise, cross-discipline group Boamistura sinks its roots in graffiti. They intervene spaces writing and painting messages with a positive, social content. An example of it is one of their latest pieces, for the “Nuit Blanche” of Paris, where they painted on pillars the word *réalité*, applying the anamorphosis technique. Another example is *Respira el momento/Acaricia cada instante* (Breath the Moment/Caress Each Instant, in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea. The project *Somos luz* (We Are Light) carried out in El Chorrillo, a troubled neighbourhood of Panama City, they covered the enormous façade of a great apartment block with the sentence “*somos luz*” (we are light), while each neighbour painted the balcony of their apartment in a given colour, the actuation thus became an integrating, collective piece.

Nuria Mora and El Tono put their work on the outside walls of buildings, in cities around the world. On the one hand, Nuria Mora (Madrid, 1974) works with both irregular geometric shapes and organic ones. El Tono (Paris, 1975), paints abstract figures based upon lines running along walls. Both Nuria Mora and El Tono have participated in numerous exhibitions such as the one organised in 2010 by the Miró Foundation under the title *Murals: Pràctiques murals contemporànies* (Murals: Contemporary mural practices). It also comprised the work of artists such as Lothar Götz, graffiti artists Singapur Scope One or the British artist Paul Morrison. Lothar Götz (Günzburg, Germany, 1963) juxtaposes colour fields in exercise of *site-specific* which transform indoors spaces, while Paul Morrison (Liverpool, 1966) limits his palette to black and white or black and gold, to create large scale monochrome floral landscapes.

Many are the artists in the ranks of contemporary who use supergraphics. Michael Lin (Tokyo, 1964) covers large areas with colourful floral designs, thus transforming public spaces and reflecting on public areas and ornamentation. His work has been exhibited in the MoMA PS1 of New York, in the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, or in the Kunstmuseum, Lucerne. Michael Lin is a good sample of the tight links between art and design, since, for instance, you may acquire carpets with his design, sold by Nani Marquina. On her part, Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama (Matsumoto, 1929) floods the walls of her

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SMITH, C. RAY: *Supermannerism: New attitudes in post-modern architecture*, Dutton, University of Minnesota, 1977.

02

ANON. “It’s Supergraphics!” *Life Magazine*. (Nueva York). Mayo, 1968.

03

DESIGNBOOM: *Morag Myerscough interview. Designboom* (Milán). Septiembre 2010. <<http://www.designboom.com/design/morag-myerscough-interview-09-30-2013>> [29/10/2014]

installations with polka dots in different colours, thus creating psychedelic spaces. In her collaboration for Louis Vuitton alongside Marc Jacobs, art director of the Paris *maison*, Kusama designs prints for shop windows, handbags, shoes and accessories, and to line and cover the façade of the Vuitton shop in New York's 5th Avenue. This corroborates that artists accept certain commissioned pieces that are related to advertising and design, which therefore shows that the boundaries between art and these disciplines are sometimes blurred.

US artist Barbara Kruger (New Jersey, 1945), who is a trained graphic designer, devised for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden of Washington the typographic installation "*Belief+Doubt*" which in 2012 occupied the museum's ground floor hall with over 2000 square meters of sentences referred to power, faith or desire, which transform the space into a debate platform on universal themes. This was not her first time using supergraphics applied to her work. Always using the typography *Futura*, since already in 1991 Barbara Kruger completely covered the indoors spaces of the gallery Mary Boone with texts and photomontages. Later on, she would use supergraphics in more typical ways for installations such as *Circus* in 2010 in the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, or in *Past/Present/Future*, 2010 at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Swiss artist Felice Varini (Locarno, 1952) uses anamorphosis to modify architectural and urban spaces through overlapping flat geometries into 3D geometries. Optic illusions that he generates both indoors and outdoors induce us to reflect upon perception and perspective. Buildings, roofs, walls and streets are the media on which he paints geometrical shapes, such as those he created for King's Cross in London. The façades of nine Victorian buildings were home to the piece *Across the Buildings*. Varini has intervened places such as the Metz's Centre Pompidou, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London or the Grand Palais of Paris.

Another path related to supergraphics are image and text projections on buildings. Already in 1967 C. Ray Smith experimented with projections in his apartment, in New York. The architect and writer projected images of the Sistine Chapel, the Guggenheim Museum of New York, or the Niagara Falls on the walls of his living room, so they would modify the atmosphere of the room, thus highlighting the transformative capacity of supergraphics, which in this case are generated by light, not paint. C. Ray Smith called this experiences "*Electric Wallpaper*".

Nowadays, projections of moving images on buildings are quite common. Videomapping and 3D graphics with sound effects that the London collective Seeper, founded by Evan Grant in 1998, projects on different buildings which seem to alter the structure of architectural constructions. In the same way,

artist Jenny Holzer (Ohio, 1950), well known for the political, social messages that permeate her work, projects acid, biting sentences which cover with giant typography the architecture of iconic buildings around the world. London's City Hall, by Norman Foster, Ieoh Ming Pei's Louvre pyramid, Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, New York Public Library or the Spanish Steps in Rome have been the canvas for her work, which, for a moment, modify the night appearance of the cities in which she intervenes. In a similar fashion, the previously mentioned Barbara Kruger, in *Power Pleasure Desire Disgust* of 1997 employed multimedia elements to project texts on walls, floors and ceiling of the Deitch Projects Gallery of New York. The use of giant typographies both in the work of Jenny Holzer as in Barbara Kruger's responds to a communicative need which that goes from government messages to cultural, social and political messages.

Paint and large scale graphic work applied to buildings, either indoors or outdoors, transform spaces and generate new sensations in those going through them and occupying them. The versatile, mobile condition of supergraphics and the spatial experimentation inherent to supergraphics provoke the demolition of the existing limits between architecture, design, art and interior design. Large scales, bold colours, figurative, geometric and typographic designs are presented on walls, ceilings, floors and façades, thus creating the illusion of generating flexible, modifiable spaces and atmospheres that seem expanded or altered ●

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