

Giving What You Don't Have

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Femke Snelting **Performing Graphic Design Practice**

Leipzig, 7 April 2014

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What is Libre Graphics?

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Libre Graphics is quite a large ecosystem of software tools, of people – people that develop these tools, but also people that use these tools; practices, like how do you then work with them, not just how you make things quickly and in an impressive way, but also these tools might change your practice and the cultural artefacts that result from it. So it's all these elements that come together, and we call Libre Graphics. [00:53] The term “Libre” is chosen deliberately. It's slightly more mysterious that the term “free”, especially when it turns up in the English language. It sort of hints that there's something different, that there's something done on purpose. [01:16] And it is a group of people that are inspired by free software culture, by free culture, by thinking about how to share both their tools, their recipes and the outcomes of all this. [01:31] So Libre Graphics is quite wild, it goes in many directions, but it's an interesting context to work in, that for me it has been quite inspiring for a few years now.

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The context of Libre Graphics

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The context of Libre Graphics is multiple. I think that's part of why I'm excited about it, and also part of why it's sometimes difficult to describe it in a short sentence. [02:04] The context is design – so people that are interested in design, in creating visuals, in creating animations, videos, typography. And that is already a multiple context, because each of these disciplines have their own histories, and their own sort of types of people that get touched by them. [02:23] Then there is software, people that are interested in the digital material – so, let's say, excited about raw bits and the way a vector gets produced. So that's a very, almost formal interest in how graphics are made. [02:47] Then there's people that do software, so they are interested in programming, in programming languages, in thinking about interfaces and thinking about ways software can become a tool. And then there's people that are interested in free software, so how can you make digital tools that can be shared, but also how can you produce processes that can be shared. [03:11] So there you have from free software activists to people that are interested in developing specific tools for sharing design and software development processes, like Git or [Apache] Subversion, or those kinds of things. So I think that multiple context is really special and rich in Libre Graphics.

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Free software culture

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Free software culture... And I use the term culture because I'm more interested in, let's say, the cultural aspect of it, and this includes software, for me software is a cultural object – but I think it's important to emphasise this, because it's easily turned into a very technocentric approach which I think is important to stay away from. [04:01] So free software culture is the thinking that, when you develop technology – and I'm using technology in the sense that is cultural as well, to me, deeply cultural – you need to take care of sharing the recipes for how this technology has been developed as well. [04:28] And this produces many different other tools, ways of working, ways of speaking, vocabularies, because it changes radically the way we make and the way we produce hierarchies. [04:49] So it means, for example, if you produce a graphic design artefact, for example, that you share all the source files that were necessary to make it. But you also share, as much as you can, descriptions and narrations of how it came to be, which does include, maybe, how much was paid for it, what difficulties were in negotiating with the printer, and what elements were included – because the graphic design object is usually a compilation of different elements –, what software was used to make it and where it might have resisted. [05:34] So the consequences of taking free software culture seriously in a graphic design or a design context, means that you care about all these different layers of the work, all the different conditions that actually make the work happen.

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Free culture

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The relationship from Libre Graphics to free culture is not always that explicit. For some people it's enough to work with tools that are released under GPL (GNU General Public License), or like an open content license, and there it stops. So even their work would be released under proprietary licenses. [06:18] For others it's important to make the full circle and to think about what the legal status is of the work they release. So that's the more general one. [06:34] Then free culture – we can use that very loosely, as in everything that is circulating under conditions that it can be reused and remade, that would be my position – free culture, of course, also refers to the very specific idea of how that would work, namely Creative Commons.

[06:56] For myself, Creative Commons is problematic, although I value the fact that it exists and has really created a broader discussion around licenses in creative practices, so I value that. [07:11] For me, the distinction Creative Commons makes, almost for all the licenses they promote, between commercial and non-commercial work, and as a consequence between professional and amateur work – I find that very problematic, because I think one of the most important elements of free software culture, for me, is the possibility of people from different backgrounds, with different skill sets, to actually engage the digital artefacts they are surrounded with. [07:47] And so by making this quite lazy separation between commercial and non-commercial, which, especially in the context of the web as it is right now, since it's not very easy to hold up, seems really problematic, because it creates an illusion of clarity that I think actually makes more trouble than clarity.

[08:15] So I use free culture licenses, I use licenses that are more explicit about the fact that anyone can use whatever I produce, in any context, because I think that's where the real power is of free software culture.

[08:31] For me, free software licenses and all the licenses around them – because I think there are many different types, and that’s interesting – is that they have a viral power built in. So if you apply a free software license to, for example, a typeface, it means that someone else, even someone else you don’t know, has the permission, and doesn’t have to ask for the permission to reuse the typeface, to change it, to mix it with something else, to distribute it and to sell it. [09:08] That’s one part that is already very powerful. But the real secret of such a license is that once this person re-releases a typeface, it means that they need to keep the same license. So it means that it propagates across the network, and that is where it’s really powerful.

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Free tools

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It’s important to have tools that are released under conditions that allow me to look further than its surface, for many reasons. There is an ethical reason. It’s very problematic, I think, to, as a friend explained last week, to feel like you are renting a room in a hotel – because that is often the way practitioners nowadays relate to their tools, they have no right to remove the furniture, they’ve no right to invite friends to their hotel room, they have to check out at 11, etc. So it’s a very sterile relationship to your tools. So that’s one part. [10:24] The other is that there is little way of coming into contact with the cultural aspects of the tools. Something that I suspected before I started to use free software tools for my practice, but has been already for almost ten years continuously exciting, is the whole... let’s say, all the other elements around it: the way people organise themselves in conferences, mailing lists, the fact that the kinds of communications that happens, the vocabularies, the histories, the connections between different disciplines. [11:07] And all that is available to look at, to work with, to come into contact with, even to speak to people that do these tools and ask them, why is like this and not like that. And so to me it seems obvious that artists want to have that kind of, let’s say, layered relation with their tools, and not just accept whatever comes out of the next-door shop. [11:36] I have a very different, almost different physical experience of these tools, because I can enter on many levels. And that makes them part of my practice and not just means to an end, I really can take them into my practice, and that I find interesting as an artist and as a designer.

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Artefacts

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The outcomes of this type of practice are different, or at least the kind of work I make, try to make, and the people I like to work with. There’s obviously also a group of people that would like to do Hollywood movies with those tools. And, you know, that’s kind of interesting too, that that happens. [12:21] For me, somehow the technological context or conditions that made the work possible will always occur in the final result. So that’s one part. [12:38] And the other is that the, let’s say, the product is never the end. So it means that because, in whatever way, source materials would be released, would be made available, it means that the product is always the beginning of another project or product, either by me or by other people. [13:02] So I think that’s two things that you can always

see in the kind of works we make when we do Libre Graphics – my style.

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Libre Fonts

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A very exciting part of Libre Graphics is the Libre Font movement, which is strong, and has been strong for a long time. Fonts are the basic building block of how a graphic comes to life. I mean, when you type something, it's there. [13:40] And the fact that that part of the work is free is important in many levels. Things that you often don't think about when we speak English and we stay within a limited character set, is that when you live in, let's say, India, the language you speak is not available as a digital typeface, meaning that when you want to produce book in the tools that are available, or publish it online, your language has no way of expressing itself. [14:26] And so it's important, and that has to do with commercial interests, laws, ways that the technical infrastructure has been built. And so by understanding that it's important that you can express yourself in the language and with the characters you need, it's also obvious that that part needs to be free. [14:53] Fonts are also interesting because they exist on many levels. They exist on your system. They are almost software, because they are quite complicated objects. They appear in your screen, when you print a document – they are there all the time. [15:17] But at the same time it's the alphabet. It's the most, let's say... we consider it as a totally accessible, available and universal right, to have the alphabet at our disposal. [15:29] So I think, politically and, let's say, from a sort of interest in that kind of practice that is very technical but at the same time also very basic, in the sense that is about "freeing an A," that's quite a beautiful energy – I think that that has made the Libre Font movement very strong.

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Free artefacts / open standards

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It took me a while to figure out myself – that for me it was so obvious that if you do free software, that you would produce free artefacts, I mean, it seems kind of obvious, but that is not at all the case. [16:12] There is full-fledged commercial production happening with these tools. But one thing that sort of keeps the results, the outcomes of these projects, freer than most commercial tools is that there is really an emphasis on open document formats. [16:34] And that is extremely important because, first of all, through this sort of free software thinking it's very obvious that the documents that you produce with the tool should not belong to the software vendor, they are yours. [16:49] And to be able to own your own documents you need to be able to look, to inspect how they are produced. I know many tragic stories of designers that with several upgrades of "their" tool set lost documents, because they could never open them again. [17:12] So there's really an emphasis and a lot of work in making sure that the documents produced from these tools remain inspectable, are documented, so that either you can open them in another tool, or could develop a tool to open them in, to have these files available for you. [17:38] So it's really part and parcel of free software culture, it's that you care about that what generates your artefact, but also about the materiality of your artefact. And so there, open standards are extremely important – or maybe, let's say, that file formats are documented and can be understood. [18:04] And what's interesting to see is that in this

whole Libre Graphics world there is also a very strong group of reverse engineers, that are document formants, document activists, I would say. [18:19] And I think that's really interesting. They claim, they say, documents need to be free, and so we would go against... let's say, we would risk breaking the law to be able to understand how non-free documents actually are constructed. [18:37] So they are really working to be able to understand non-free documents, to be able to read them, and to be able to develop tools for them, so that they can be reused and remade.

[18:54] So the difference between a free and a non-free document is that, for example, an InDesign file, which is the result of a commercial product, there's no documentation available to how this file works. [19:10] This means that the only way to open the file is with that particular program. So there is a connection between that what you've made and the software you've used to produce it. [19:24] It also means that if the software updates, or the license runs out, you will not have access to your own file. It means it's fixed, you can never change it, and you can never allow anyone else to change it. [19:39] And open document format has documentation. That means that not only the software that created it is available, and so that way you can understand how it was made, but also there's independent documentation available. [19:55] So that whenever a project, like a software, doesn't work anymore or it's too old to be run, or you don't have it available, you have other ways of understanding the document and being able to open it, and reuse and remake it.

[20:11] Examples of open document formats are, for example, SVG (Scalable Vector Graphics), ODT (Open Document Text format), or OGG, a format for video that allows you to look at all the elements that are packed into the video format. [20:31] What's important is that, around these open formats, you see a whole ecosystem exists of tools to inspect, to create, to read, to change, to manipulate these formats. And I think it's very easy to see how around InDesign files this culture does not exist at all.

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Getting started

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If you would be interested to start using Libre Graphics, you can enter it in different levels. There's well-developed tools that look a bit like commercial photo manipulation tools, or layout tools. [21:19] There's something called Gimp, which is a well-developed software for treating photos. There's Blender, which is a fast-developing animation software, that's being used by thousands of thousands of people, and even it's being used in commercial productions, Pixar-style stuff. [21:43] These tools can be installed on any system, so you don't have to run a Linux system to be able to use them. You can install them on a Macintosh or on a Windows, for example. Of course, they are usually more powerful when you run them on a system that recognises that power.

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Sharing practice / re-learn

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This way of working changes the way you learn, and also therefore the way you teach. And so, as many of us have understood the relation between learning and practice, we've all been somehow involved in education, many of us are teaching in formal design or art education. [22:43] And it's very clear how those traditional schools are really not fit

for the type of learning and teaching that needs to happen around Libre Graphics. [22:57] So one of the problems that we run into is the fact that art academies are traditionally really organised on many levels – so that the validation systems are really geared towards judging individuals. And our type of practice is always multiple, it's always about, let's say, things that happen with many people. [23:17] And it's really difficult to inspire students to work that way, and at the same time know that at the end of the day, they will be judged on their own, what they produce as an individual. So that's one part. [23:31] In traditional education there's always like a separation between teaching technology and practice. So you have, in different ways, let's say, you have the studio practice and then you have the workshops. And it's very difficult to make conceptual connections between the two, so we end up trying to make that happen but it's clearly not made for that. [24:02] And then there is the problematics of the hierarchies between tutors and students, that are hard to break in formal education, just because the set up is – even when it's a very informal situation – that someone comes to teach and someone else comes to be taught. [24:28] And there's no way to truly break that hierarchy because that's the way the school works. So since a year we've been starting to think about how to do... Well, no, for years we've been thinking about how to do teaching differently, or how to do learning differently. [24:48] And so last year for the first time we organised a summer school, just as a kind of experiment to see if we could learn and teach differently. And the title, the name of the school is Relearn, because the sort of relearning, for yourself but also to others, through teaching-learning, has become really a good methodology, it seems.

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Affiliations

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If I say “we”, that's always a bit uncomfortable, because I like to be clear about who that is, but when I'm speaking here there's many “we” in my mind. So there's a group of designers called OSP (Opens Source Publishing). They started in 2006 with the simple decision to not use any proprietary software anymore for their work. And from that this whole set of questions, and practices and methods developed. [25:51] So right now that's about twelve people working in Brussels having a design practice. And I'm lucky to be an honorary member of this group, and so I'm in close contact with them, but I'm not actively working with the design group. [20:11] Another “we”, and overlapping “we”, is Constant, an association for art and media active in Brussels since 1996, 1997 maybe. Our interest is more in mixing copyleft thinking, free software thinking and feminism. And in many ways that intersects with OSP, but they might phrase it in a different way. [26:42] Another “we” is the Libre Graphics community, which is even a more uncomfortable “we” because it includes engineers that would like to conquer the world, and small hyper-intelligent developers that creep out of their corner to talk about the very strange world they are creating, or typographers that care about universal typefaces. [27:16] I mean, there's many different people that are involved in that world. So I think, in this conversation the “we” are Contant, OSP and Libre Graphics community, whatever that is.

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Libre Graphics annual meeting, Leipzig 2014

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We worked on a Code of Conduct – which is something that seems to appear in free software or tech conferences more and more, it comes a bit from the U.S. context – where we have started to understand that the fact that free software is free doesn't mean that everyone feels welcome. [28:02] For long there still are large problems with diversity in this community. The excitement about freedom has led people to think that people that were not there would probably not want to be there, and therefore had no role to be there. [28:26] And so if you think, for example, the fact that there is very little, that there's not a lot of women active in free software, a lot less than in proprietary software, which is quite painful if you think about it. [28:41] That has to do with this sort of cyclical effects of: because women are not there they would probably be not interested, and because they are not interested they might not be capable, or feel capable of being active, and they feel they might not belong. So that's one part. [29:07] The other part is that there's a very brutal culture of harassment, of racist and sexist language, of using imagery that is, let's say, unacceptable. And that needs to be dealt with. [29:26] Over the last two years, I think, the documents like the Code of Conduct have started to come out from feminists active in this world, like Geek Feminism or the Ada Initiative, as a way to deal with this. And what it does is it describes, in a bit... let's say, it's slightly pompous in the sense that you describe your values. [29:56] But it is a way to acknowledge the fact that these communities have a problem with harassment, first; that they explicitly say, we want diversity, which is important; that it gives very clear and practical guidelines for what someone that feels harassed can do, who he or she can speak to, and what will be the consequences. [30:31] Meaning that it takes away the burden from, well, at least as much as possible, from someone who is harassed to defend, actually, the gravity of the case.

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Art as integrative concept

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For me, calling myself an artist is useful, it's very useful. I'm not so busy, let's say, with the institutional art context – that doesn't help me at all. [31:03] But what does help me is the figure of the artist, the kinds of intelligences that I sort of project on myself, and I use from others, from my colleagues (before and contemporary), because it allows me to not have too many... to be able to define my own context and concepts without forgetting practice. [31:37] And I think art is one of the rare places that allows this. Not only it allows it, but actually it rigorously asks for it. It's really wanting me to be explicit about my historical connections, my way of making, my references, my choices, that are part of the situation I build. [32:11] So the figure of the artist is a very useful toolbox in itself. And I think I use it more than I would have thought, because it allows me to make these cross-connections in a productive way.