

Overview - Poetry in motion

 By [Terry Levin](#)

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While almost anyone in the creative communications milieu at this stage of 2014 will tell you the importance of storytelling and story-making as a major creative trend worldwide, at this year's --[Design Indaba](#) held 25-28 Feb at Cape Town's CTICC, other kinds of storytelling genres emerged.

Accidental Poetry

Opening speaker Chris Gotz [@MrChristiffa](#) had shared his views of a shift from storytelling to story-making, fuelled by factors such as new technology, gaming and new kinds of creative people.

At that stage no one would have paid any heed to an arbitrary heading in his presentation, "Accidental Poetry", which was accompanied by an arresting black and white photograph of swans in a snowy landscape and the admonishment that we don't look up from our screens enough, and the need to pay more attention to our surroundings.



Cowboy poetry

Even on the second day of the Indaba, when Texan Pentagram partner DJ Stout had showed those glorious spreads from the book he had designed, documenting the little-known sub-culture of Cowboy Poets, one might not yet have picked up an underlying poetic theme.

However as a precaution, I found myself marking my notes with an asterisk every time a presenter used the word poetry in their presentation. A wait and see approach.

Concrete poetry!

On day three I was rewarded big time, via the presentation of humourist creative director Dean Poole from New Zealand, introducing himself as "loving language", Poole warmed up with witty alphabet definitions before proceeding to unpack every manifestation of text as art, word pictures, word puzzles, word play and other constructs you might never have heard of - Acrostics, diastics, mesostics - I kid you not - informing us that the pictures formed by words in the poetry of 20th century literary protagonists such as Guillaume Appolinaire, Baldessari, Carl Andre and other are known as - wait for it - Concrete poetry!

Visual poetry

The art of visual storytelling is advanced to unprecedented levels by the art of David Goldblatt. The collection of pre-digital, black and white photographs, whose stories have the capacity to make us simultaneously ashamed and immensely proud, is a national treasure.

Sharing his life's work in a series of portraits curated for this presentation, Goldblatt has documented the decades of dedication to his subjects - from security guards, to boys maimed in detention cells, street workers and Anglo mine workers to politicians such as Albie Sachs, PW Botha and Constant Viljoen to the icon of Madiba.

What gives the images their unmatched power and intimacy is the fact that Goldblatt remembers every detail of every name and every story, long before and long after the moment that the photograph was taken - in so doing giving dignity and humanity to every single one equally and unlike the accusations of some photography - taking nothing away from his subjects.

A standing ovation from an Indaba crowd is always a goosebump moment, but this one is especially moving, honouring the life work of an individual whose humble presence, finds most of our daily endeavours wanting in compassion and integrity, let alone the artistry.

The poetry of simplicity

Can it really be 11 years since Naoto Fukasawa was last on the Indaba stage? The Japanese industrial designer is a Zen master, whose products anticipate human behaviour, which is already there - a groove on the floor becomes an umbrella stand, a notch on its handle for hanging a shopping bag, a station clock becomes a watch face - ensuring organic experience and memory determine the design, often reducing rather than adding, enhances meaning, context and function.

The poetry of emotion

Keynote Indaba speaker, New York-based Stephan Sagmeister is also a crowd-pleasing Design Indaba alumnus and iconic pop culture designer at the top of his game.

His current offering, [The Happy Show](#) - on the subject and pursuit of Happiness is the subject of a TED talk and exhibition, which takes the form of an oversized, genre-blasting, visual communications installation in every medium you can name including handwriting, paper, laser cut out, experimental video, neon, typographic animations and 3D materials, variously manipulated to make up enough feel good motivational slogans, captions and phrases to delight the most ardent scrap booker - in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the factors that make up human moods and the most successful ways of ensuring more joyous, contented citizens.

Poetry in context

I must admit, I am not usually comfortable with a so-called "fine" artist on the Indaba stage, because they lack objectivity of the pure design genres. A fine artist does not have a brief, does not have to account to anything other than their own self-expression, which can be, er, a tad self indulgent, diametrically opposed to 'normal' Design Indaba content which is always about the experience of other people in relation to itself.

However, taking that into account, the proclivity of poetic expression throughout the Indaba as noted above and given the definition of poetry itself as 'literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas', I mentally checked back on some of the more arty Indaba presentations for their overall fit.

Poetry in context of design

Hans Ulrich Obrist is director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery, London. Some of his pet projects include the "Protest against the Disappearance of Handwriting", which has been described as the best example of art on Instagram, has 36K followers and which sees people including celebrities, post pictures of post-it notes (and other scraps) , inscribed with various sayings, quotes, and drawings in their own hand.

Obrist is also, along with Simon Castets, the curator of the global 89+ Movement, whose aim is investigating the generation of innovators born in or after 1989. As luck would have it, one of their forthcoming initiatives being held in Zurich from January to March this year is entitled Poetry Will Be Made By All!

Poetry Will Be Made By All

The five young artists that make up the South African 89+ contingent include Jody Brand, Kyla Philander, Victoria Wigzell, Bogosi Sekhukhuni and Harroon Gunn-Salie - all delving into the themes of identity and self expression, of trying to knit past experiences and current opportunities into a meaningful self-fulfilling whole via video, photo, performance, artistic and experiential interventions.

The theme of literary expression had also been demonstrated in the performance by award winning local sci-fi author Lauren Beukes - in a cathartic rendition of storytelling and myth as the medicine required for our nation to transform the cruel vestiges of our past into a new collective identity.

Suddenly the deformed pixelated butterfly visuals, over which local visual artist Athi-Patra Ruga had presented and which I had struggled to contextualise, began to make sense.

Archaeology of meaning

Perhaps it is no wonder, that as our communications become contracted by digital and electronic interfaces, in a world where we can make objects via 3D printers without the touch of human hand, we are clinging to the things that define us as human - our handwriting, our emotional range, our sensitivity to beauty, our ability to manipulate the written word, our compassion.

As Amsterdam-based trio Experimental Jetset had admitted: "We are scavenging the ruins of Modernism in the hope that we might stumble upon something of value, that might change the way people think, we can't promise anything."

As the networks of African communication come together and our crumpled wings unfold, you will see the joyous, colourful rising.

Design Indaba have pulled off another pretty faultless media, hospitality and design frenzy. They have also launched their own video content stream, where you can immerse yourself in all the talks from now and years gone by.

Watch the global zeitgeist evolve from the comfort of your own armchair - at <http://www.designindaba.com/video>.

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