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Worth a thousand words



Graphic design professor Thomas Starr shows part of his work that transformed a Boston city bus into a memorial for victims of urban violence. Photo by Lauren McFalls.

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Northeastern University **graphic design** professor Thomas Starr thinks of himself as an author.

Whether for a book jacket or a visual op-ed, he creates his stories by integrating the verbal with the visual.

For one project, Starr designed a book jacket for mathematician John von Neumann's "The Computer and the Brain," using an apple and an orange to illustrate the author's complex argument for the similarities and differences between machine and mind.

"Visually representing the written or spoken word helps people to better understand the issues," says Starr, whose research focuses

on the civic and social function of graphic design.

Over the years, Starr's heavily social and political work has illuminated issues such as U.S. military deaths in Iraq, reproductive rights, HIV/AIDS and gun violence.

Calling attention to the most important questions of the day need not be left to politicians or nonprofits, he says, noting that a graphic designer's talent for persuading a customer to buy a new pair of shoes could be used to persuade that same person to pay attention to homelessness.

"The best way for me to draw attention to issues that are crucial to society is to use my talent as a designer to create a spectacle," says Starr, who counts Milton Glaser and Shepard Fairey as two of his favorite graphic designers.

In 2005, he took on youth violence.

Funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Starr transformed a Boston city bus into a memorial to victims of urban violence.

He illustrated the impact of child homicide by printing on the bus statements made by children about other kids who were killed. "She was just a little girl," one said.

The memorial, which won Starr the Society for Environmental Graphic Design Award in 2007, confronted the entire city. "It was hard to ignore," he says. "We tried to reach people who were oblivious to the extent of the problem."

Starr also published visual op-eds in The Boston Globe for every 1,000 American soldiers killed in Iraq. The simplicity and immediacy of his design for the first 1,000 military fatalities in Iraq—an identical silhouette of a coffin for each soldier killed—documents a tragedy in a way that a photograph of the live soldier accompanying his or her obituary could sometimes sugarcoat, Starr says.

"...We don't question why we are shown vitality when the words indicate the opposite," Starr writes in one of the op-eds. "...On an emotional level...the pictures cancel out the words."

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