

CONVERSATION BETWEEN TOM GEISMAR AND MARINE HUGONNIER

This conversation took place online in December 2019. Tom Geismar from Chermayeff and Geismar was in New York and Marine Hugonnier in Paris. They were meeting for the first time after 8 months of email exchanges. Marine had set up this conversation to introduce Tom to the project she had in mind for her exhibition at the Ingleby gallery, for which she wanted to use his famous 1971 Pan Am posters.

TOM GEISMAR

Hello! Nice to meet you.

MARINE HUGONNIER

Hello! So nice to meet you finally!

TG Yes, right!

MH How's it going in New York?

TG Well, everything here is so - you know, with our president everyone is so upset but otherwise everything's fine.

MH Well, it's not better in the UK. We have very little hope to stay in Europe.

TG Is that what's going to happen?

MH A while ago we still had hope that we could find a way for a second referendum, but now the chances are rather slim. We are either going out with no deal and eat apples and corned beef for some time or we are going to have a deal. Either way it looks like we are out. The UK is divided since three years and a half and we still do not know what's going to happen.

TG I know. Terrible.

MH It really is.

TG I didn't realise you were in the UK. I thought you were in France.

MH I'm both French and British. I have been living in London for 23 years, and I grew up in the US, Pittsburgh. My parents were French.

TG They were French in Pittsburgh?

MH Yes, my dad was doing a PhD in Carnegie Mellon. I've spent part of my childhood Pittsburgh. I'm a PITT girl!

TG I think you told me that the tie into the Pan Am posters was that you had one in your house in Pittsburgh?

MH Yes that is right. The USA Pan Am poster was pinned up in our kitchen. I remember it being quite big, but I was a child.

TG That is great!

MH I've looked at it for years every day in that kitchen. I remember saying to my Mum "Mum, why is there the same mountain twice in the picture?" I don't know if you remember, but there is a repetition far in the background, twice the same mountain. I couldn't make up my mind as if this was a mistake, or if it was a mirage. That stayed with me for a long time. The blue haze indexing the far away and it being somewhat of a mirage.

TG Right.

- MH I've done a lot of travelling with my work, not just to show my work but to make work. And I think I have grounded something in your posters. They have triggered so much desire. Even today when I look at them I still feel incredibly inspired. They are so evocative. They link geography and narratives. I've based my work in the politics of vision. It's some sort of an anthropology of images. The idea was not to travel the world through images but to travel the world discussing image making procedures. So your posters have probably crystallised this desire for travels. At least I'd like to think that that's what it is... that I found something of which I could say "I have done all this because of that!".
- TG Right...That's great!
- MH I have a few questions if you don't mind.
- TG Go ahead.
- MH Your posters were commissioned in 1970 by Pan Am's head office. They were designated for their main offices and travel agents around the world. Did Pan Am give you a brief as to what should be addressed? I mean was there a specific message they were after? Or did you have carte blanche creatively?
- TG I don't remember specifically, but - but at that time we had been doing a number of things for Pan Am. You noticed that Pan Am on the posters is just written in a very plain typeface. It's written as a single word, with a capital P and capital A.
- MH Yes.
- TG Their logo was quite different before then. The typeface was sort of angled feet. With Ivan (Chermayeff) we had been involved with Pan Am for many years. What we told them - and this goes back probably a year or so before the posters project - was that their name Pan American World Airways was actually too long. That long word appeared in their sales offices, on the street and so on. So we said: "Why not just say Pan Am? And in fact it doesn't even matter how you write it. Your name is so well known and so distinctive, write it as one word in a very simple typeface with a capital P and a capital A!" We then designed all kinds of things for them - a lot of their promotional materials. When they introduced the 747 aircraft, we did everything from menus and giveaways to the uniforms of the stewardesses. We were very much involved with Pan Am at the time. I don't remember anything much about a brief for the posters except that they did some kind of promotional posters every year. All the airlines did at the time. So they gave us carte blanche. I remember thinking "How can you do something fresh, something new for travel posters?"
- MH My goodness! Designing everything for an aircraft... what a dream project! Did you actually design a new version of that Helvetica typeface for them?
- TG No. We just used the main version. I mean, again, we wanted to keep it really simple. We used regular typeface and did many things with that exact version. But sometimes in the advertising campaign, they used a different typeface from the one we choose - but still they would do it with the capital P and the capital A.
- MH The logo changed is that correct? In 1971, Pan Am was written in two words and then in 1972 it became Pan Am World. Were both of these designs yours as well?
- TG Pan Am World was a later promotional campaign for Pan Am.
- MH So the promotional posters for their offices eventually became an advertising campaign? Is this correct?
- TG The posters were never meant just for their offices. They were displayed in airports and wherever they were promoting their travels.
- MH Oh! I did not know that. Do you remember how you designed them? In the 1970s, there was no InDesign or other software and I'd be very interested to know what material you had to effectively draft and design.
- TG Actually, those couldn't be simpler. The basic idea was to find great photographs. We had been doing various things with Magnum's photographers, and were aware of the quality and wide range of their work.

We thought “Let’s see what there is that Magnum already has”. So photographers weren’t sent on assignment for our campaign. The images we chose were all existing images from various Magnum photographers. In terms of production, it couldn’t be simpler. We carefully added the country name, and the simplified “Pan Am”, all in the Helvetica font, and it was pretty much done. We didn’t have Photoshop in those days! But the resulting posters were very different from the usual travel posters of the day.

- MH Right - and then you overlaid onto the photographs some kind of vinyl to place the logo as well as the name of the countries?
- TG No, you don’t do that literally - you give artwork to the printer and that artwork is separate from the photograph and then the printer combines them all.
- MH But you initially had decided where each word was to be placed?
- TG Yes, we positioned the country name and the logo on the photo artwork at the exact position and size. We also probably made a full-size mock up to show the exact cropping.
- MH And then you overlap the two?
- TG Yes, the printer then scanned the photo at a very high resolution to get the best reproduction.
- MH Do you remember how they were printed at the time? They were probably printed by offset, right?
- TG Probably offset. Yes in fact, I’m sure they were offset.
- MH What was your idea behind the design? I see your posters as emblematic of late modernism, as a work that goes beyond advertising because it pushes and challenges its limits. How did you come about to choose those specific images?
- TG Well, it wasn’t so unusual, we were doing things that way all the time. The idea was to find images that were reflective of some aspect of the location. So we looked at a number of images and made our choice making sure they were very distinctive one from the other in terms of general look and colour and so on. And then the type was applied in a position that seemed to work with the image, so the location of the country name and logo varies from poster to poster.
- MH In my view your posters offer a different experience than regular advertisements. They are anti-corporate, feature unspectacular views of particular places. They’re evocative but not descriptive. They depict a moment of loneliness; contemplation and they are solemn. Their design does not impose the viewer to stop making associations. They do not transgress the autonomy of the viewer nor do they take away from them the production of meaning. Your choice of images does not bound the viewers’ mind to think that this beach is Panama in general, or this rice field in Bali in general - quite the opposite. There is no “in general” there is only the singularity of a moment.
In general advertising’s attempt to stop the open interplay of meaning and restrict the association viewers can make so advertising becomes dictated meaning. In my view, your posters hold the potential to formalise another approach to advertising. Here’s a possible definition - in French advertising is the word “publicité”, which contains the word “public” - so what about this: advertising or ‘publicité’ - is to make public an intimate relationship to an object or a place?
- TG Well, that may be applicable to those posters and that idea. It certainly isn’t everything to most advertising, which you’re calling advertising or ‘publicité’. In this case, it was taking advantage of an opportunity, I think, from our point of view. Doing something different and something that’s not selling anything except an intriguing view of travel, which is what Pan Am was promoting at the time; they propelled everyone into the jet age. The idea of travelling around the world to different places was quite a new thing at the time.
- MH Right. My childhood was infused with that feeling, and it still resonates very strongly in me. It has made me who I am. This idea that the 17th century Grand Tour was finally on offer for the working class and that technology would make the world a better place. We could not be more far from this today!
- TG In the simplest terms, the posters were promoting the romance of travel if you will, and yes, those images

are very specific bits of those places. But there's something about them that's sort of magical and that's what we were looking for. We were looking for what was attractive and distinctive in those different countries.

MH Your choice of images would certainly not be the images that the curated albums from your iPhone would choose to feature. They are images which draw the profile of a particular traveller who would appreciate being in a landscape which doesn't feature anything particularly spectacular. That is why your design is deceptively simple and absolutely genius. They're way more than just advertising and it is fact that they are still challenging advertising even today. I see them as an artwork as they are criticising the norm.

TG Right.

MH Let's consider the USA poster again which was the one in my kitchen in 1974. The two mountains in the background are very symmetric, they are exactly the same and look like a repetition, a mirage. It is a detail but it also contains a possible question. Could it be that this mirage is a statement against imperialist views which is often embedded in the idea of travelling? I'd like to think that this could be the case, that your choice of this image for the homeland USA has set the tone for the choice of all the other images.

TG I think you're giving us too much credit.

MH Really? But that's okay, you know, fiction is fine.

TG I think we have a much simpler view. And I don't think it was political at all, at that time. Even though we had just lived through the 60s. At that time, we were working for the Kennedy family to develop the Presidential Library. But about the posters... no, I think we were just pretty simply looking for evocative, unusual, appropriate images without much more context.

MH That makes them even more genius!

TG Interesting, though, you know, they're in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

MH Yes, I know, that's how I got through to you because some of my work is part of their collection too.

TG Right. Almost two years ago, Ivan (Chermayeff) died. And, for months after, in commemoration, MoMA had the posters on display in the primary hallway, where everyone circulates near the escalators.

MH Yes, I've seen images of their installation on the net.

TG I think people do see more in them than we probably intended or thought at the time.

MH Did you choose the frames? Or were they MoMA's choice?

TG I actually don't know how MoMA got the posters - I just don't remember. We had some framed in the same way at the time, but I don't know whether that's just coincidence or what.

TG But what do you want to do with them? What is your project?

MH Well, I thought about this project for a long time and it came together when you sent me the high-resolution files of your posters via Wetranfer. I realised then that they were different from the original analogue ones, because they were JPEGs - lines of code. The JPEGs are structurally different from the analogue ones, they are ghosts of your 1971 originals. That is the paradigm that all images are going through nowadays; it is a shift between a perspectival view and a computerised one. So effectively in their materiality, what I've received from you was radically different from MoMA's original offset printed posters. This first approach, which established a material difference between the originals and the JPEGs was an essential step. From there, I looked at them for what they are: travel posters and took that literally to look at how they have been travelling on the internet, and how it has affected them. I used reverse image search engines using Thor and VPNs to do a worldwide search of all of your posters at a precise point in time - between Nov 27th and Nov 19th 2019. I had to reconcile the results between different reverse image search engines, it was quite a task that took a crew of dedicated, fantastically skilful, young internet-literate assistants.

The result gave me the occurrence of the appearance of each of your posters – in other words it showed how many times they had been uploaded on the internet. For example, the USA posters have been uploaded 64 times in the last 15 years. And those 64 uploads are all different. Not just visually different from your original but also different from one another. Their compression, resolution and hues are different. In other words - the loss or the addition of substance in between each upload have affected their appearance. So, although similar, they're all different.

TG Yes.

MH I made a selection of the ones that were identifiable as the Pan Am posters and lined them up. The result was a variation in the intensity of colours and contrast. Looking at them this way seemed to release something from the immediacy of their new materiality and offers the possibly perhaps to argue for another classification of images governed by desire, speed, intensity, definition, colour gradation, and representability.

TG Right.

MH So, for example out of the iteration of the 64 USA posters – this amount is likely to change over time off course – I have chosen 8. Each of them will have a different title which is the location and the time of their upload contained within their IPP address. Each poster will have a different geographical place as a title.

TG I understand.

MH May I make another hypothesis? Going through the digital world has magnified and possibly transformed, the inherited political message I see in your designs. Their travels have constructed a shared history of interest, a community. Every time somebody uploads your posters, they offer visibility and representation to your images. Your posters became through their travels, popular and non-consumerist as none of them prevail from one another. It is only in their 'Multitude' as a series that their imperfections are the guarantee of this revolutionary component which when you see them all together is shimmering, vibrant and alive.

TG That is interesting.

MH The Argentina series is almost ready, I will send it to you soon. Once the images are next to one another you will see how different they are.

TG Okay.

MH In the exhibition they will be printed on C-type paper and hinged inside plexiglass boxes. The Perspex boxes allowing to see the print from all side, its fragile materiality.

TG What about size?

MH I am printing them at my height (1.75m) to offer that immersive feeling I had as a child staring at them, to re-create this moment in my 1974 kitchen.

TG You know, that's actually interesting, because if I remember correctly, there were two sizes done originally.

MH Really?

TG There was a large size for the subways which were quite big.

MH Do you have any idea how big they were?

TG No but I can probably find that out for you.

MH That would be interesting.

TG But about your project...I think that's a very nice idea. I didn't realise you were going to do that... Using what's out there... It is very interesting.

- MH I am looking at the travel of your travel posters from the jet age to the digital age, in a literal way. This literality might sound disconcerting at first, but it is nested in the belief or the hope rather that a pictured subject could affect the materiality of an image or in reverse that materiality of an image could affect the pictured subject.
My favourite one so far is the Hawaii/ San Jose one. It is so intensely pixelated. It shows surfers waiting for waves in an ocean of shimmering pixels. For once the pixels serve the subject depicted, they merge with the subject, they are the sea. It is so rare to see pixels enhancing the beauty of a picture, it usually disfigures it when they are so apparent. It is the only picture I have seen that manages that. We called it the Silver Haze at the studio and we couldn't take our eyes off it for days. That is the perfect example of the materiality of an image affecting, informing and merging with its subject... Also, there are areas in that image that bring us to the edge of data. Some areas are completely white, a white that is so white that you cannot distinguish the square shape of a pixel anymore, it depicts void. I have been told that in Maori tradition when objects are hit by the sun; the white outs which shimmer as a result are a manifest of their refusal to be represented and their acceptance to be part of the earth as One. So here we are waiting with the surfers to surf on the edge of data, to the limits of materiality.
What interests me is the materiality of images and the history of their materiality and how the two can merge. Images not only tell a story, they have a history, they are objects in history. We can maybe say that images are recording devices; they register users and their environment. Images do look back at us and they talk for those who can see.
- TG How are you determining which ones to use on the internet?
- MH Once every occurrence was downloaded, I started editing them. The idea was to chart their journey. In order to do that I looked for patterns within each image, something like a crease, a fold, a stain and soon I was able to trace that a specific image had been uploaded in London and then was uploaded again in Chicago and so on.
- TG Right.
- MH What struck me was that the same images – the ones that had the same subject and the same stains, crease - the same “marks”, did not have the same resolution of course but more surprisingly did not have the same hue. To make sure we picked specific areas within each image and zoomed in at 6400% or even 12000 % to compare their hue. But why did they not have the same hue? We could speculate about this. The most obvious reason is that the user who downloaded the image inflicted some changes to it. But maybe not and we are left to think that a picture housed on a server in Tokyo may not be treated the same way as the same picture housed in Lisbon. Who knows? What we are left with is a shimmering intensity of the same and that is possibly the beauty of it.
- TG Right.
- MH I have explored your images in such depth... every corner of every iteration. I know them by heart almost on an atomic level - if I could use that word. This micro investigation forms some kind of a digital historiography of your images and brings to light the unstable materiality of data. Printing them and framing them will close the loop but won't occlude the fact that data comes to matter not just through a physical form but mostly through a collective imaginary... or what I summed up as a “community”, a community of desires for your images that shimmers of different intensity which 50 years later is still vibrant and alive. I will soon be designing the invitation card for the exhibition. I'll send it to you. Would you let me know what you think?
- TG Ok!
- MH I'll try to make it up to you!
- TG Terrific. Thanks Marine.
- MH Thanks to you Tom. I will be in New York soon and will pop in with some champagne.