Preface to *Fuck Content*

In the form of the Preface of Exercises in Style (Wright, in Queneau, 1998).

Ladies and gentlemen:
From time to time people politely ask me what I've been reading lately.
So I say: *Fuck Content.*
They usually react in one of three different ways.

Either they say: "That's… an aggressive title."
Or they say: "Who's he?"
Or they say: "Oh."

Of those three reactions, let's take the third—"Oh."
It means they don't know who Michael Rock is, and don't much care
to. Still, being polite, they ask what the essay's about. I tell them it's
about how form *is* content. They nod, say "Right," which always
means "Not really."

I used to think this was their fault, but now I suspect it's mine. My
description is accurate, yet it explains nothing. The essay is not really
about "content" at all. It's about the persistent delusion that design can
or should carry more meaning than its form allows, our inability to
accept that the designed object is limited, that it can only evoke, not
encompass.

Let us imagine a panel discussion.

Critic A: So he's saying designers shouldn't care about ideas?
Designer B: He's saying design *is* an idea.
Critic A: Then what's the content of a typeface?
Designer B: The feeling of the moment you read it.
Audience member: But that's too trivial!
Designer B: Exactly. That's civilization—commodities, banalities,
vulgarities—and us.
Moderator: Thank you. We're out of time.

It's all very funny until someone realises he wasn't joking.
We pretend to want content, but what we really want is reassurance
that graphic design means something more than arrangement, that
behind the poster there hides an idea worth defending. We ask a
typeface to carry the weight of civilization, a layout to declare
morality. Yet, as he reminds us, form is never empty; it simply speaks
in smaller units: in line, color, contrast, scale and weight. Through
these, design quietly modulates the space between user and world.

He is, of course, a designer and an author, not one who writes about
design, but one who writes as design. He treats limitation as a
material, the banal as a source, the space between user and world as
the true site of invention. By manipulating form, he believes designers
negotiate that relationship, and form is now replaced by exchange.

He still designs, of course. Fewer people notice. They are waiting for
him to produce another idea worth quoting. Meanwhile, his layouts
continue to speak silently, saying nothing, and therefore, perhaps,
saying everything.

References

Rock, M. (2013) 'Fuck Content', in Multiple Signatures: On Designers, Authors, Readers and Users. New York: Rizzoli, pp. 45–56, 91–95.

Wright, B. (1998) 'Preface', in Queneau, R. Exercises in Style. London: Gaberbocchus Press, pp. 9–16.