A conversation with David Barringer, published on Design Observer, 05.28.2009.

EL: You wrote novels and short stories before writing about graphic design. Your voice as a design critic is narrative, conversational, and literary. What moved you to take on design as a subject?

DB: The short answer is: my job and Emigre.

Years ago I worked for a small design company in Detroit. We undertook a variety of projects, from books and magazines to exhibits and a ride simulator. My main task was to write all the articles for an internal automotive magazine, but as I traveled to auto plants across the Midwest, I took on additional duties. I conducted the interviews. I photographed people on the line. I sketched layouts for the magazine. My boss typically handled these tasks, but as I grew more confident, and our prepress department grew busier with other projects, I took over just about everything for this quarterly magazine.

The graphic designers showed me how to use PageMaker and, later, InDesign, but I had to learn a great deal on my own. I subscribed to design magazines and bought graphic-design books. I never felt I was entering a broad, new field. I was driven by the narrow need to complete specific projects. I had to lay out the next issue quickly, period. I did not know enough to call what I was doing art direction. I never took a seminar. Designing the magazine was urgent and fun, a nice break from writing the articles.

In 2003 I read Emigre 65 and, later, Emigre 66, and everything changed. I had never read graphic-design essays that were this groping and personal, this broad and emotional. Who knew people argued about graphic design? (And this from a guy who lived near Cranbrook Academy during the Nineties; I had no idea.) Some essays were rants, and some were case studies that depended on jargon. That’s when I felt graphic design expand beyond the realm of the small, urgent, discrete task into the world of thinking, creating, writing, and living. I had to lay out the next issue quickly, did not know enough to call what I was doing art direction. I never took a seminar. Designing the magazine was urgent and fun, a nice break from writing the articles.

EL: Your book includes an argument between a design professional and a self-taught designer. As someone with informal training, do you ever feel that you are poaching on the territory of others or passing off lesser goods to your clients?

DB: No on both counts. I don’t sit on the bleachers and let other guys dance with my girl just because they took a few classes at Arthur Murray. The pressure on professional graphic designers to increase the value of their work is real and powerful.
is not coming from a few undegreed designers making flyers for their uncle’s car wash or painting flames on their cousin’s dirt bike. It is coming from free, massively distributed, user-friendly software templates that enable consumers to be their own designers. Consumers know a heckuva lot more than they used to, they have access to the tools, and they’re not afraid to use them to save a few bucks. Most creative types have enough doubt in their own value. I think what designers need most today are business partners who know better than the designer’s work in the marketplace.

EL: How about writing? People don’t assume that writers go to “writing school” to learn their craft (although many writers do). Do you consider yourself a self-taught writer? Are professional writers under threat from software or bootleg copies of The Elements of Style?

DB: I get paid less now for my writing than I did in 1992. Forget about education (which is still very important for writers who want to be teachers, academics, and journalists). My experience and track record, my credits and books, they count for nothing. Every day I start from scratch, like I was just born with an ergonomic keyboard and an email account. We’re under threat from every direction, and in many senses it’s a war on labor, even creativity. I wrote in a world of failing magazines, failing newspapers, and failing publishers. No one knows quite how to get paid. It is possible today to envision a future in which 99% of writers are not paid at all. They will have to find other jobs, seek out advertising or other support for their online ventures, or work in some model in which, say, a magazine needs a team to collaborate on its next issue. They need a designer and a writer for one or several articles. No one is on staff. They are all freelancers. Using an online find-and-track database, a team coordinator could assemble a team in Dallas, a team in Detroit, and a team in Dubai. They meet to research, photograph, and even design the print/web pages, submits the work, gets paid, disbands. Each freelancer then awaits the next call from a new team leader, who also may be a freelancer. It’s cheap, flexible, temporary labor leveraged by computer technology, and it can be used for editorial, business or creative outlets, for magazines, books, newspapers, online ventures, whatever.

EL: Is that a dystopian vision of the future, where everyone is a freelancer? Do you see any kind of answer for authors in self-publishing? Designers are often in awe of writers, but it seems that writers are in even worse shape than we are.

DB: It’s one possible model, clearly not the only one, and it’s not new so much as it is an extension of the freelance model is already headed. And it’s not dystopian; it’s inevitable. I have plenty of anecdotal evidence from friends in other industries, including banking and the law, that this freelance or flex-time model is growing. Larger companies are realizing the benefits of flex-time arrangements. A working parent with an advanced degree and relevant experience can work from home, be with the kids, and not have to be paid benefits like health insurance. This is what freelance writers and designers have been doing for decades. A writer recently said to me that he feels pretty strong in this new economic environment, because he never had it good in the first place. It was always tough. It’s just everyone else who is finally struggling the way he always has.

Writers and designers will obviously continue to work in a variety of ways in a variety of models. It’s out there, and the market never sleeps. Writers and designers will have to be entrepreneurs or partner with entrepreneurs, creating new ways of working using collaborative software, networking sites, and all transitional time, no doubt about it. It’s a good time to try something new.
Self-publishing today depends on the development of faster, cheaper digital presses. I’ve thought a lot about the dynamics of this, namely how the lines are blurring among bookstores, publishers, and authors technologically able to produce, market, and sell their own books and magazines. One day the digital press that can make a book will fit on a table in my office. My future grandkids will probably turn in homework in books printed at home, with a digital page in the back that plays video.

Now imagine the equivalent of the cheap digital press arising in other sectors, like, say, a factory-in-a-box that can crank out affordable, quality products in limited runs. You upload the files from home, the iFactory: chair, lamp or soap dish, and a box of ten arrives on your doorstep. Suddenly, everyone is an entrepreneur, a self-publisher, a self-manufacturer, a creator and consumer both. Digital presses allow me to write and design my own books. But imagine future product designers who create, design, produce, package, and sell their own products using cheap iFactories. I think that future is what is most fascinating to consider.

EL: One of your books is available on the Kindle—We Were So Ugly We Made Beautiful Things (2003) $1.99 and read it on Amtrak. As someone drawn to the physical fact of print, how do you feel about ebooks? Are they a promise or a threat for writers? How about for designers?

DB: Eduardo Recife of misprintedtype.com illustrated that book and designed the cover, so hopefully you were treated to his work as well. I have no ill will whatsoever for ebooks or Kindle or whatever comes next. I was watching TV on Hulu.com or music videos on an iPod or images on a View Finder. Flexibility and portability are good things.

I do think that ebooks are a step backwards, however. It’s like the fax. It’s not flexible or useful enough. Handheld computers should have greater power, and the Kindle instead has less. You should be able to access dictionaries, and other searchable resources, just like we can on the computer or the iPhone. That’s benefit of portable handheld units are. Who cares about downloading Twilight? I care about having access to encyclopedias, dictionaries, and other searchable resources, just like we can on the computer or the iPhone. That’s where the real benefit of portable handheld units are. Who cares about downloading Twilight? I care about having online libraries of reference works, maps, and encyclopedias.

I was also caught for days in a blackout in New York back in 2003. It’s amazing how much goes out of the power goes out. I learned a lesson about the value of books, as well as the ethereality of ATMs.

Some people argue that books are becoming more like art objects, released from the pressure to convey a narrative and liberated into the world of wacky dimensionality. Sure, it would be fun to attach half a beach ball on the front cover, the other half on the back cover, and inflate them both for the ultimate beach book. But I’ve seen friends who are avid readers turn toward their shelves of books and regard them as they would a photo album of their own lives. We take the contents of books into our imaginations, and our personalities are influenced by them. Looking at the books on my shelves, I feel memories bloom, my own life come back to me. Books are triggers for remembering where we have been, and who we are. A book is like a body part, and when you die and your connection to the book is broken, the book dies a little, too.

**Lupton, Ellen (2007)**

Interview by Nicole Bearman and Gabrielle Eade for Design Hub, a design news and portal created by the Powerhouse Museum in Australia.

Design communicator, and communication designer extraordinaire Ellen Lupton talks to Design Hub about the new National Design Triennial at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, and her personal quest to open up design to the broadest possible audience.
What are you working on at the moment?

My big interest right now is the opening up of the design discourse to the broader public. We are seeing this everywhere. The rise of the Internet has given people access to more tools and more information. Over the past four years, blogging and other “social media” have become especially powerful. At the same time, people are becoming more engaged with physical making — craft, knitting, D.I.Y. technologies. I published a book with my graduate students in 2004, called D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself, and I’m really excited about this line of discourse: public as designers. My next book is D.I.Y. Kids, featuring design work by children.

You define yourself as a writer, curator and graphic designer. What really excites you in your work and what are your ultimate goals?

I am excited about bringing people — all kinds of people — into design. I’ve become a bit of a zealot, a passionate church lady, but my church is the discourse of design, which has become an increasingly public, open discourse. I love to teach, and I’m teaching professional designers at the graduate and undergraduate levels at Maryland Institute College of Art, where I am director of the graduate program in graphic design. I also do workshops and lectures for everyday people, which is a different kind of teaching.

How has your career path evolved?

I studied design and art in the early 1980s at The Cooper Union in New York City. When I graduated, I was invited to run a small design gallery inside the school. I did that for seven years. I was a do-it-yourself curator, hanging my own shows, keeping the windows clean, trimming the labels. At the same time, I was publishing a lot, building a reputation as a writer and critic. In 1992, I was offered a ‘real job’ at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, also in New York City. Now, I had the opportunity to create much larger exhibitions for a bigger public. Each exhibition has been accompanied by a sturdy exhibition catalogue and ambitious public programming. I’ve also worked with amazing colleagues — great design thinkers. In 1997, I was invited to run the graphic design program at Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore, a big, tough city that is two hours by train from New York. Cooper-Hewitt has allowed me to live in Baltimore for the past ten years and continue as a part-time curator. It’s a hectic, sometimes scattered lifestyle that allows me to do all the things I want to do (and more!).

What attributes do you think you possess that have helped you succeed in this field?

I love to get things done. I love to get up early and start working. I love to see a project come into completion. I think that my fundamental enjoyment of doing, making, and writing has allowed me to be a highly effective person. I take genuine pleasure in communicating ideas in a way that people will understand. Whereas some scholars or critics are primarily interested in addressing their peers, I want to be understood by as many people as possible. Design is about communication, and I love to communicate.

Your website appears to be a testing ground for ideas and a place for discussion. Does this forum work?

My main web site, designwritingresearch.org, is primarily a way for me to communicate outward to the world. It’s an archive of my writing, and it’s a tool I use in all my teaching and workshops. I also have a blog that I edit with my sister, Julia Lupton, design-your-life.org. Our blog is an open medium. Anyone can contribute a post about design and living, and we have a small but avid following. People write about fashion, celebration, housekeeping, child-rearing, politics, and media. We also have a blog about design for kids, d-i-y-kids.blogspot.com.

Can you explain your curatorial approach to the 2006 National Design Triennial and the theme you have chosen?

Design Life Now: National Design Triennial was organised by a team of curators: Barbara Bloemink, McQuaid, Brooke Hodge, and myself. The exhibition is open through July 2007. We all brought our special interests and our commitment to the design discourse.
and expertise to the curatorial table. I was especially interested in the rise of social media and do-it-yourself movements during the past three years — again, the opening up of the design discourse to more voices. For example, the Triennial features Processing, a free, open-source computer language created for visual Processing is not so much a finished design artifact as a tool that anyone can use. The Triennial web site has a blog; visit us at peoplesdesignaward.org/designlifenow.

What have been the key trends in American design since your last Triennial in 2003? The last Triennial reflected a post-9/11 atmosphere. Called Inside Design Now, it focused on the interior—on handcraft, pattern, texture, and making. Craft continues to be a big part of design today, but what’s movement outward. Design is becoming less inwardly directed and more socially directed. Magazines such as ReadyMade and Make, both featured in the Triennial, invite people to engage in design activities. I working in collaborative teams. They are creating furniture, textiles, and spaces that encourage conv

In your opinion, what characteristics define contemporary American design? And how does it fit in a global economy? American design is a huge and diverse phenomenon, and the Triennial doesn’t try to pin it down so picture of a big, messy, mixed affair, which ranges from high-tech military equipment and space-ag made of PlayDough and a hand-beaded purse. A product like the iPod is designed in California but in China.

What inspired you to initiate the free font manifesto? Where you surprised by the response you rece concept of free fonts? Given my interest in ‘open’ design, I wanted to find out if there was an open-source movement in th design community, which is a particular subculture within the broader graphic design world. Typeface have always been protective of their intellectual property, because fonts are so easy to steal and the problem with piracy. I had been invited to address typeface designers and typographers at an inter conference, so I decided to explore the topic of ‘free fonts’. I created a blog to accompany my talk — experiment for me. Given the controversial nature of the topic, I wanted to get feedback from my au the usual Q&A session after the talk. And feedback I certainly got! News of the blog spread like wildf debate ensued on-line. I learned a lot, not only about the passions and worries of the font design co also about the nature of online communication.

Where do you hope the flourishing D.I.Y. revolution will lead us? I’d like to see design education become part of general education, from kindergarten up through gr Learning to communicate online and in print are basic life skills that empower citizens and connect of communities, global and local. Gutenberg’s revolution opened up reading to a bigger public, and idea of ‘universal literacy’ was born. Today, to be literate involves not only reading/receiving, but al making/producing in a range of media. It’s not enough to be in the audience any more.

What are the big challenges facing designers in the 21st century? As the design discourse opens up, professional designers will shape the discourse by creating better and environments for public communication. (I am speaking here primarily of graphic design.) The challenge facing all the design fields is the global environment. How can we create objects, systems, that will help reverse the degradation of the world? This challenge, too, demands that the public be problem can’t be solved by designers alone, but requires changes in how people live.
What is your philosophy, in life and design?
These are a few principles borrowed from my blog, design-your-life.org. I like these principles because they are not just for professional designers.

ORDER – Use design to organize and improve your environment at home, at work, and in the world.
OPPORTUNITY – Use design to expand your expressive, economic, and social horizons.
PRODUCE MORE, CONSUME LESS – Design it yourself using digital tools and craft skills.

How do you relax and play?
I love to cook, and I love to hang out with my gorgeous kids and husband. But work is play for me, too. Nothing thrills me more than being involved in a great book or web project. Authorship gets me going.

**Lupton, Ellen (2006)**

Curator, graphic designer and author Ellen Lupton is director of the M.F.A. in the graphic design program at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore. She is also curator of contemporary design at National Design Museum in New York City, where she has organized numerous exhibitions, each accompanied by a major publication, including the National Design Triennial series (2000 and 2003), Skin: Surface, Substance + Design (2002), Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age (1999), Mixing Messages (1996), and Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office. She has received numerous awards, including the Chrysler Design Award and the 1996 New York Magazine Award.

In 1996, Ms. Lupton and J. Abbott Miller published Design/Writing/Research: Writing on Graphic Design, a collection of essays about design theory and history. Lupton has written numerous books on contemporary twentieth-century design. Her critical guide, Thinking with Type, was published in 2004; her latest book, Design It Yourself, co-authored with her graduate students at Maryland Institute College of Art (January 2006).

**LH:** Please tell us about Design Writing Research.

**EL:** Abbott Miller and I founded Design Writing Research in 1985 as an “after-school program” where we could collaborate on experimental projects that merge theory and practice, writing and designing. By 1988 Research had become a self-sustaining enterprise with a full-time staff and office space in New York.

In 1997, we moved to Baltimore to teach at Maryland Institute College of Art. Soon after, Abbott joined the New York office of Pentagram and Design Writing Research became dormant. It remained an idea, but was no longer an active practice.

I launched the Web site DesignWritingResearch.org in January 2003 in order to revive the studio in the curricular, quasi-underground spirit with which it was founded. The site is an archive of writing and a communications tool for my work as a curator and teacher. Having this site has put me in contact with designers around the world. A group of graduate students in Israel was reading the material on design and deconstruction, for example, and I constantly get questions and requests from students working on research projects. I now have two other Web sites, ThinkingWithType.com, a resource for teachers, students, and design-your-life.org, a blog about applying design thinking to everyday situations. The most interesting thing about all of these sites is how they put readers and writers into direct contact with each other. The Web is a social medium.
LH: Now you are a designer, a writer about design, and a curator. Is that like living in three different houses?

EL: To me, writing, design, and curating all fit together. It’s one house with a variety of functions, just as a real house is a site for cooking, cleaning, sleeping, entertaining. Design gives a physical form to the ideas generated through writing and curating. An exhibition, for example, uses lighting, materials, sequence, and the juxtaposition of images, and text to tell a story. A book presents texts and images to readers in a way that either alters the order of reading or provides a variety of ways to enter and exit a body of information. The way text is presented on a page affects how people read and understand it. Design enables the publishing of ideas, whether in a magazine, or a Web site, and each of these media affects how readers approach the content. Design creates new ideas, although in my work, I would say the writing is the bricks and mortar.

LH: By time you graduated from the Cooper Union School of Art, you were already writing about graphic design and typography, particularly within a post-structuralist frame. What took you into critical writing so early in your design career?

EL: I come from a family of English teachers. My twin sister studied critical theory at Hopkins and Yale professor of literary studies at University of California, Irvine. As a young person, my intellectual adventures were closely tied to hers, and she led me through many discoveries that ended up connecting with my own work as a designer. The insights of post-structuralist theory amazed me, because they were about recognizing the power and opacity of writing as a physical and intellectual medium. For me, the discovery of Saussure, Barthes, Foucault was life-changing, and those thinkers continue to inform my work today, even though my mission has become more transparent and populist. These writers showed that language is embedded in politics and society; that representation takes an active role in shaping content; that much of what appears in fact, a cultural product, and so on. Typography and architecture are not neutral containers for the programs they are thought to neatly accommodate. These are fundamental insights of modern and post-modern thinking.

LH: In Thinking with Type you identify the ‘grid’ as a major expressive tool. Rick Poynor, in No More Rules you use the grid in a Saussurean way as a form of language, “…just as language is a grid which breaks experience into repeatable signs…” How do you perceive the grid as a tool?

EL: Grids exist in the background of nearly all printed communication. Even the Microsoft Word document through which this interview is being conducted has a grid, consisting of the default margin settings of the page. As designers, we try to avoid defaults and use the grid in an active, deliberate way, sometimes rendering it example, the grid is a way to attack the oppressive linearity of discourse, allowing us to present multiple columns, parallel texts, and so forth. Designers use grids to disperse a linear document across space.

LH: Your recent (stimulating and enjoyable) book, Thinking with Type, has three sections: Letter, Text and Grid. Each section begins with a discourse on culture and theory issues that touch all media, and follows with practical demonstrations of the hows and whys of typography’s nature and behavior. Please talk a little about the Thinking with Type.

EL: As a young art student back in the early 1980s, discovering typography was discovering how to write visually. I had always been interested in art, and I had always been interested in writing, and typography was the amazing medium that brought these two things together. For me, typography has always been a tool for thinking. You really know what something means until you put it down on paper. All writers want to start editing their work the
minute it moves from a generic “manuscript” (such as this Microsoft Word document) into a typographic layout, because words read differently once they are rendered typographically. In my Typography I course student, ideally, reaches a moment in the course when they are “thinking typographically,” when they begin to express ideas through the medium of type. (This is not about fonts, but about alignment, scale, grids, and so on.) To think with type is to be in a partnership with the medium—with its systematic nature as a common cultural artifact.

LH: What do you regard as your set of essential design tools?

EL: What’s essential to me is having access to the means of publishing. As a very young writer/curator at The Cooper Union, where I worked from 1985 to 1992, I had access to a digital typesetting system, a massive set output devices that generated columns of text on photographic paper. By today’s standards, that was a very crude system, but unlike most designers in the mid-1980s, I had direct access to typesetting, which gave me the power to publish, and to write directly in the medium of typography. Now, of course, the Web is the most exciting realm for publishing, and it’s changing our relationship to print. My “essential design tools” are the tools of publishing, and it’s important to me to continue having access to them. When I went to art school in the early 1980s, the tools were stat cameras, hot wax machines, acetate, and ruby lith film. By early the 1980s, those tools had become Quark and Photoshop. Today, they include html, Flash, and database languages—as well as the best tool of all, the Sharpie marker!

LH: Typography has always been a main theme for you. Rick Poynor points out that in a number of your books you and Abbott Miller have used Martin Majoor’s Scala typeface. In his introduction to your Design/Writing/Research book, he writes, “...Scala is becoming a Design/Writing/Research house style, an appropriation that may be without precedent in critical writing.” What led to your adoption of Scala?

EL: I first used Scala in 1991, when Robin Kinross sent it to me in New York City on a floppy disk. Robin had written an essay for an exhibition catalogue, Graphic Design in the Netherlands: A View of Recent Work, published by The Cooper Union and Princeton Architectural Press. Robin’s essay was about Dutch typeface design. I used Scala for typesetting that catalogue, and I have been using it ever since. Scala is a magnificent blend of modern and literary/humanist traditions. Its forms reflect the origins of type in handwriting, as seen in the beautiful bowl of the lowercase a, but Scala is also exquisitely abstract, as seen in its severe, simplified serifs. Scala is coon Scala Sans, making it a full-service typographic system. This has become a new standard in type design.

LH: In a recent DD+IDJ interview, Paul Mijksenaar said about his wayfinding design work, “Any discussion of typefaces lasting more than 5 minutes is a waste.” Of course Mr. Mijksenaar knows his fonts, and uses them wisely. How do you think subtle, sophisticated variations in font affect the consumer-user?

EL: Most users don’t think about fonts or notice them at all, but of course they affect our experience. The more knowledgeable the user, the more affected they are by choices of good or bad typefaces, just as a well-informed moviographer will have a more critical experience of a film. Some of us go just for the plot; others in how the thing is put together.

LH: Concluding his examination of current reading models in The Science of Word Recognition, Kevin Larson writes, “Word shape is no longer a viable model of word recognition. The bulk of scientific evidence says that we recognize a word’s component letters, then use that visual information to recognize a word. In addition to perceptual information, we also use contextual information to help recognize words during ordinary reading, but that has no bearing on the word shape versus parallel letter recognition debate. It is hopefully clear that the rea
legibility of a typeface should not be evaluated on its ability to generate a good bouma shape.” Do you think that the graphic design community pays substantial attention to information design/document design research on technical issues in communication?

EL: No. And I have not found the scientific research on legibility/readability to be of much practical including the passage you have quoted above. Cumulatively, what all this research seems to confirm is the power of alphabetic literacy to take hold of the mind and impose itself on us, even under poor conditions (typefaces, bad screen displays, and so forth). For better or for worse, most designers are not so interested in setting scientific standards for readability or legibility, and I’m not sure that’s a bad thing. The attempt to pin works best could end up stifling invention and change. The fact is, human beings are able to endure a vast range of typographic environments. In the Web design field, some people want to freeze the field into a set of standards, such as always putting nav bars in a certain place, or only having seven categories in a menu. But with a medium this young, it could be more harmful than helpful to lock it down so soon.

LH: In The ABCs of [circle square triangle]: The Bauhaus and Design Theory, you and J. Abbott Miller wrote, “Modern art education often discourages graphic designers from actively engaging in the writing process.” You argued for a new critical relationship between writing and design: “…the graphic designer could be conceived of as a language-worker equipped to actively initiate projects — either by literally authoring texts or by elaborating, directing or disrupting their meaning. The graphic designer ‘writes’ verbal|visual documents by arranging, sizing, framing and editing images and texts.” That evolution has happened to some extent. What is the status of today’s graphic designer regarding the writing process?

EL: Some designers are directly involved in writing, such as Armin Vit and his people at Speak Up, or Rick Poynor, Bill Drenttel, and Michael Bierut of DesignObserver.com, or writers like Dave Eggers and Chip Kidd, who are writing for a general, rather than design specialist, audience. But I like to think of “authorship” as not just text, but also visual. What Abbott Miller is doing with exhibition design and book design falls into this category, where he shapes the curatorial content of a project without literally writing it. The work of 2×4 and Bruce Mau of 2×4 and Bruce Mau of authorship as well. And then there is Martha Stewart, who I believe to be one of the most influential designers of the 1990s; her impact is way greater, for example, than David Carson. I prefer the term “producer” to “author,” because it encompasses the larger conceptual process, as well as suggesting the hands-on, blue-collar aspect of making things happen.

LH: In a recent designobserver.com posting about the notion of designers taking on editorial aspects of their projects, Rick Poynor wrote, “…the designer-as-editor demand has never convinced me as a rallying cry… I believe designers have a level of ability, skill and talent that an untrained person is unlikely to be able to match. It’s the same with editing.” He singles out you and Robin Kinross as designers who are highly competent editors. When should a designer be an editor?

EL: I think designers can be fantastic editors, as long as they have a rigorous understanding of the written word. Editing, like typography, is a labor of love. It’s about the details, and it’s ultimately about letting someone else’s voice speak in its own voice. Anyone who sets out to edit a project needs to be prepared for the anonymity of the many, many hours of invisible labor.

LH: You have written a number of times about Lev Manovich’s depiction of “the conflict between narrative and database that structures modern media.” Manovich sees the narrative-database conflict as a parallel relationship between syntagm and paradigm. He argues that there is an ongoing shift from narrative to database.

EL: Yes. And I have not found the scientific research on legibility/readability to be of much practical interest, including the passage you have quoted above. Cumulatively, what all this research seems to confirm is the amazing power of alphabetic literacy to take hold of the mind and impose itself on us, even under poor conditions (typefaces, bad screen displays, and so forth). For better or for worse, most designers are not so interested in setting scientific standards for readability or legibility, and I’m not sure that’s a bad thing. The attempt to pin works best could end up stifling invention and change. The fact is, human beings are able to endure a vast range of typographic environments. In the Web design field, some people want to freeze the field into a set of standards, such as always putting nav bars in a certain place, or only having seven categories in a menu. But with a medium this young, it could be more harmful than helpful to lock it down so soon.

LH: In The ABCs of [circle square triangle]: The Bauhaus and Design Theory, you and J. Abbott Miller wrote, “Modern art education often discourages graphic designers from actively engaging in the writing process.” You argued for a new critical relationship between writing and design: “…the graphic designer could be conceived of as a language-worker equipped to actively initiate projects — either by literally authoring texts or by elaborating, directing or disrupting their meaning. The graphic designer ‘writes’ verbal|visual documents by arranging, sizing, framing and editing images and texts.” That evolution has happened to some extent. What is the status of today’s graphic designer regarding the writing process?

EL: Some designers are directly involved in writing, such as Armin Vit and his people at Speak Up, or Rick Poynor, Bill Drenttel, and Michael Bierut of DesignObserver.com, or writers like Dave Eggers and Chip Kidd, who are writing for a general, rather than design specialist, audience. But I like to think of “authorship” as not just text, but also visual. What Abbott Miller is doing with exhibition design and book design falls into this category, where he shapes the curatorial content of a project without literally writing it. The work of 2×4 and Bruce Mau of authorship as well. And then there is Martha Stewart, who I believe to be one of the most influential designers of the 1990s; her impact is way greater, for example, than David Carson. I prefer the term “producer” to “author,” because it encompasses the larger conceptual process, as well as suggesting the hands-on, blue-collar aspect of making things happen.

LH: In a recent designobserver.com posting about the notion of designers taking on editorial aspects of their projects, Rick Poynor wrote, “…the designer-as-editor demand has never convinced me as a rallying cry… I believe designers have a level of ability, skill and talent that an untrained person is unlikely to be able to match. It’s the same with editing.” He singles out you and Robin Kinross as designers who are highly competent editors. When should a designer be an editor?

EL: I think designers can be fantastic editors, as long as they have a rigorous understanding of the written word. Editing, like typography, is a labor of love. It’s about the details, and it’s ultimately about letting someone else’s voice speak in its own voice. Anyone who sets out to edit a project needs to be prepared for the anonymity of the many, many hours of invisible labor.

LH: You have written a number of times about Lev Manovich’s depiction of “the conflict between narrative and database that structures modern media.” Manovich sees the narrative-database conflict as a parallel relationship between syntagm and paradigm. He argues that there is an ongoing shift from narrative to database.

EL: Yes. And I have not found the scientific research on legibility/readability to be of much practical interest, including the passage you have quoted above. Cumulatively, what all this research seems to confirm is the amazing power of alphabetic literacy to take hold of the mind and impose itself on us, even under poor conditions (typefaces, bad screen displays, and so forth). For better or for worse, most designers are not so interested in setting scientific standards for readability or legibility, and I’m not sure that’s a bad thing. The attempt to pin works best could end up stifling invention and change. The fact is, human beings are able to endure a vast range of typographic environments. In the Web design field, some people want to freeze the field into a set of standards, such as always putting nav bars in a certain place, or only having seven categories in a menu. But with a medium this young, it could be more harmful than helpful to lock it down so soon.

LH: In The ABCs of [circle square triangle]: The Bauhaus and Design Theory, you and J. Abbott Miller wrote, “Modern art education often discourages graphic designers from actively engaging in the writing process.” You argued for a new critical relationship between writing and design: “…the graphic designer could be conceived of as a language-worker equipped to actively initiate projects — either by literally authoring texts or by elaborating, directing or disrupting their meaning. The graphic designer ‘writes’ verbal|visual documents by arranging, sizing, framing and editing images and texts.” That evolution has happened to some extent. What is the status of today’s graphic designer regarding the writing process?

EL: Some designers are directly involved in writing, such as Armin Vit and his people at Speak Up, or Rick Poynor, Bill Drenttel, and Michael Bierut of DesignObserver.com, or writers like Dave Eggers and Chip Kidd, who are writing for a general, rather than design specialist, audience. But I like to think of “authorship” as not just text, but also visual. What Abbott Miller is doing with exhibition design and book design falls into this category, where he shapes the curatorial content of a project without literally writing it. The work of 2×4 and Bruce Mau of authorship as well. And then there is Martha Stewart, who I believe to be one of the most influential designers of the 1990s; her impact is way greater, for example, than David Carson. I prefer the term “producer” to “author,” because it encompasses the larger conceptual process, as well as suggesting the hands-on, blue-collar aspect of making things happen.

LH: In a recent designobserver.com posting about the notion of designers taking on editorial aspects of their projects, Rick Poynor wrote, “…the designer-as-editor demand has never convinced me as a rallying cry… I believe designers have a level of ability, skill and talent that an untrained person is unlikely to be able to match. It’s the same with editing.” He singles out you and Robin Kinross as designers who are highly competent editors. When should a designer be an editor?

EL: I think designers can be fantastic editors, as long as they have a rigorous understanding of the written word. Editing, like typography, is a labor of love. It’s about the details, and it’s ultimately about letting someone else’s voice speak in its own voice. Anyone who sets out to edit a project needs to be prepared for the anonymity of the many, many hours of invisible labor.

LH: You have written a number of times about Lev Manovich’s depiction of “the conflict between narrative and database that structures modern media.” Manovich sees the narrative-database conflict as a parallel relationship between syntagm and paradigm. He argues that there is an ongoing shift from narrative to database.
database synchronicity in our lives today. What implications does that shift have for the designer?

EL: Increasingly, the projects we design consist of bundles of assets and non-linear forms. This may have more implications for writers than for designers. A blog, for example, is a database, and as such it provides a different kind of reading experience; naturally it demands a different kind of writing as well.

LH: In 1988 you wrote, “A powerful metaphor has informed post-war education in graphic design: the ‘language of vision.’ This abstract ‘language’ of line, shape, and color has been theorized as a system of visual communication analogous to but separate from verbal language, a distinct code grounded not in culture but in universal faculties of perception.” Things have changed recently in terms of designer empowerment; are we closer now to having that language of vision?

EL: During the 1990s, many design educators turned away from formal analysis towards a more culturally based, referential approach to pedagogy. It was the age of multiculturalism, niche marketing, the “audience of one,” and so forth. Meanwhile, the designers of software programs such as Photoshop, Illustrator, Flash, and Final Cut were systematically organizing image-processing into menus of properties, parameters, filters, and so on. The Bauhaus theory of visual language—once a distant ideal—into comprehensive visual tools. So we do have a language of vision now, but it was created by corporate software developers. There are movements towards publicly owned tools, such as Processing.org and John Maeda’s Treehouse Studio. I think we are at a moment in time when the idea of universal tools and languages is becoming interesting again.

LH: Originally text was linear, given the bound book’s fixed sequence of things. Various devices were developed to support navigation: page numbers, footnotes, and the like; these led text in a less linear direction. You wrote, “Whereas talking flows in a single direction, writing occupies space as well as time. Tapping that space and thus liberating readers from the bonds of linearity—is among typography’s most urgent tasks.” Do readers need liberating from linearity?

EL: If you are reading a novel (or watching a film), linearity is what you expect and value. However, many of our experiences of reading in our day-to-day existence are non-linear, such as reading the New York Times or sifting through a Google search. If one were forced to read the entire front section of the New York Times in order to get to the Op Ed page, few of us would ever get there.

LH: The materials which you have brought from elsewhere into your web site are simple, spare. What’s the thinking behind that reduction?

EL: I have kept the Web site really simple, mostly for my own sanity, but also because I like the idea of digital text being disembodied, that it could be captured and repurposed by other people. The idea of separating form from content is driving a lot of work on the Internet right now. Whereas the great modernist pioneers of the 1920s uniquely constructed pages that fused form and content, today there is a need to create text that will survive technological change and be readable on different output devices, from the printed page to a cell phone.

LH: In “Deconstruction and graphic design,” you and Abbott Miller wrote, “Post-structuralism’s emphasis on the openness of meaning has been incorporated by many designers into a romantic theory of self-expression: as the argument goes, because signification is not fixed in material forms, designers and readers share in the spontaneous creation of meaning.” Deconstruction as a style, or shall we say as an attitude, has been labeled history by some: can we still find post-structuralist design in action?

EL: Sure. The novels of Jonathan Safran Foer, for example. The architecture of Peter Eisenman. But
arguing is that post-structuralism and deconstruction are ways of looking at the world or ways of describing typography in an universal way, not in terms of a specific example of practice. The central principle is to look at a basic cultural assumption—such as the separation of mind and body—and to understand how the elements that appear to be opposites inhabit and infect one another. This way of thinking will never die.

LH: In “Critical Wayfinding,” you wrote, “Such icons [as Mona Lisa images serving to remind us that we are in the Louvre] participate in a broader phenomenon in the cultural landscape: the emergence of a hieroglyphics of communication, which overlays the contemporary experience of cities, buildings, products, and media with a repeatable, reduced icons, compacted chunks of information which collapse a verbal message into a visual mark. The expanding domain of this hieroglyphic speech poses subtle problems for designers in the next millennium: can we create cross-cultural communication without flattening difference beneath the homogenizing single dialect?” Twelve years later, are answers to that question emerging?

EL: The issue of the day is globalism, which is viewed by many designers primarily in terms of its negative impact on society and the environment. But there is a positive side to globalism as well, especially with regard to global communication and broader access to information. Today, knowledge is the key to health, opportunity, so creating information that lots of people can use has a huge benefit. This means using a language that many people can understand, and technologies that many people have access to. This may be done at the expense of local traditions and customs. For example, I created a Web site to support and complement my book Thinking with Type. I get e-mail from people from all over the world who are using the Web site and don’t necessarily have access to the book.

LH: In 2000 you joined 32 other prominent visual communicators in signing First Things First 2000, renewing the call voiced in First Things First (1964) for a change of priorities in design work, for a “reversal of priorities in favour of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication – a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning.” Do you see signs of such a reversal?

EL: No. Most design activity remains in the corporate realm. This is where most opportunities for designers lie. What we need to do is find socially useful ways to operate within the stream of commerce.

LH: Curating such a defining institution as the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, how do you work to provide a viewpoint for the visitor/user?

EL: My exhibitions need to communicate to both the general public and the expert/insider audience. This is a huge challenge. It’s much easier to communicate to just one of those publics! Being forced to speak and write in this way has been a huge discipline for me, and, frankly, it’s harder to make design meaningful to the general viewer whose life is wrapped up in design practice.

LH: Exhibitions like Mixing Messages and Skin at the National Design Museum actually work to revise understandings and generate new perspectives. What is an exhibition?

EL: An exhibition is a physical place where objects, images, and texts communicate ideas. The goal, in general, is to use texts as little as possible (but as much as necessary), and let the visual materials dominate.

LH: In “The Macrame of Resistance,” Lorraine Wild identified technology as a generator of identity crises for designers: “Designers involved in new media projects often find themselves caught in team production based on the entertainment industry paradigm, where authorship is granted to the director, the producers, maybe the screenwriters, but typically not the people who create the visual nature of the product.” Five years later, you pointed...
out that those same digital tools that threatened the trained designer’s existence also put the design tools of production, enabling the designer to become a producer. What is the situation today? Are increasing numbers of designers also producers?

EL: Yes, I believe that more and more designers are becoming producers. Likewise, you could say that producers are becoming designers: that is, the tools of publishing are increasingly available to everyone, not just to those trained in the specialty of design. Design is truly a subject of universal interest and importance.

LH: Your recent book, Thinking with Type, is such an accessible work; though the concepts are explored to some depth, the initial framing of each assumes relatively little background knowledge. Now you have an upcoming book, D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself. Who is the target audience? Are you planning to Napsterize graphic design?

EL: D.I.Y: Design It Yourself is a design book for the rest of the world. Increasingly, what I am interested in is sharing the power of design with “non-designers.” (Although it may be that there are no “non-designers.”) We are living in a cultural moment when more people than ever are interested in design, have knowledge about design, access to the tools of design. Oddly enough, this fact has taken place in spite of our profession’s best efforts to explain itself as an exclusive professional discourse.

LH: Document designers and information designers in search of perspective and depth about the world of graphic design and typography would do well to read you. What other sources would provide such an empowering structuring of that world?

EL: Of course, everyone should read the books of Edward Tufte. Jef Raskin’s writings on interface design are very important, and Robert Bringhurst’s Manual of Typographic Style is the classic work on typography, full of brilliant insights. The best book I have read in recent years is Steven Johnson’s Emergence, about how cities, ant colonies, and contemporary computer programs are all organized as self-organizing swarms of primitive elements that combine together into something powerful and information-rich. The future of information lies in systems that are broadly distributed across a community of users, not focused in one place.

References


Design Observer web site http://www.designobserver.com

First Things First (1964) http://www.xs4all.nl/~maxb/fft1964.htm


Lupton, E. Websites: http://design-your-life.org http://www.DesignWritingResearch.org


http://www.designwritingresearch.org/essays/producer.html

Lupton, E. Design Writing Research website http://www.designwritingresearch.org/


MICA: http://micadesign.org


http://www.mijksenaar.com/publications/

National Design Museum: http://ndm.si.edu/


http://www.designobserver.com/archives/004351.html#more


Lupton, Ellen (1998)

Steve Heller interviews Ellen Lupton, 1998, for his book Becoming a Designer

Why did you become a graphic designer?

Like many young art students, I began school at The Cooper Union in New York with only the vague “commercial art” as a possible career direction for a visual artist. I was inspired by George Sadek, who was head of the design department at the time, to engage design as an art form that was both visual and literary. I w
the art world of the early 1980s, when artists like Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Hans Haacke were incorporating text and social commentary into their work. As someone who had always been fascinated with the written word, design was an ideal forum in which to develop text and image.

Why did you expand your interest and practice to include curatorial and authorial work? Was this strategy or accident?

I became a curator by accident—when I graduated from The Cooper Union in 1985, I was invited to run the Herb Lubalin Study Center for Design and Typography. It was a shoestring operation, occupying a few small rooms and hallways of The Cooper Union. But it was a great opportunity to put together exhibits about design history and theory. I got hooked, and I was able to build a career as a critic.

Is this cross disciplinary activity really viable in the market today, or simply a fortuitous niche that you made for yourself?

My position as a museum curator is a rare one—there are only a handful of design curators around the country, at institutions including the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. However, there are more and more opportunities for designers to develop and use their skills as writers/editors/publishers, and for literary people to engage the processes of design. This is a broader development with relevance beyond my own particular experience.

As an educator as well, do you encourage students to follow your path? If so, how?

I don’t expect my undergraduate students to become professional writers or historians. Rather, I hope that their work becomes infused with design literacy, with a sense of awareness of the history and future of their discipline. I have found from teaching both academic “history” courses and studio-based courses that those students who excel in the studio as designers also do extremely well in their history courses—they write well about design because they care about what they are doing. The students who show passion in their visual work also feel passionate about the history of design. They get excited by looking at other people’s work.

I tell my students to think more, design less. They need to focus on ideas and concepts. There is a tendency to produce empty design gestures—from endless Photoshop layers to fancy fonts and tricky type effects—because the concept and content are missing. Students with a strong sense of history and an awareness of what’s going on have a much easier time confronting content. They can use visual language to develop a point of view.

Would you say that your interdisciplinary practice has given your firm, Design Writing Research, an advantage in the competitive design market? And, how do you account for your success?

As partners in Design/Writing/Research, Abbott Miller and I have done a series of key projects that exemplify the ideal of combining research and writing with visual work. These are not always the most lucrative projects, however, and the studio does many projects that are executed along a more traditional “design services” model. Abbott is doing a marvelous job at the studio developing the design/research continuum while still making a living for himself and his staff.

Lupton Twins/D.I.Y. Kids

Originally published on the blog Babble.com, October 2007.
Ellen and Julia Lupton are designers, professors, mothers and identical twins who grew up finishing sentences. They’ve put their collaboration to work in D.I.Y. Kids, a sequel to Ellen’s 2006 book D.I.Y. Yourself, to which Julia contributed. In this latest joint project, the Luptons teach design to kids through projects using the stuff of daily life: paper, cereal boxes, pencils, pens, everyday clothing. More than D.I.Y. Kids teaches kids to design their own fun and to work art into their lives. The authors spoke to the D.I.Y. movement, kids’ innate creativity, and getting your children to make their own toys. —Cc Atkinson

In your authors’ note, you talk about how design is art that people can use. And you refer to raising kids as “the ultimate D.I.Y. activity.”

We want kids and their parents to learn about design from the inside, by doing it. Design is a horizon of possible futures, and it’s a set of skills for living. Raising kids requires every resource that you have: time and course, but also ingenuity, patience and a sense of fun. For us, raising kids has meant getting out through rediscovering scissors and learning to sew. Parenting can really connect you to what was most liberating in your own childhood. You get to reopen creative drawers you thought were shut for good.

While the book is practical and playful — offering hints about the relative ease and messiness of projects — there’s a larger message here about doing without mass media, teams or name-brands.

When we were writing the book, we’d walk down the aisle of the supermarket with the kids, or go to a birthday party, or check out someone’s outfit, and then ask, “Is it D.I.Y., or is it corporate?” They’d roll their eyes, but they became experts at distinguishing the pre-packaged parts of their environment from the moments fashioned by thinking. Design is not just about making stuff. It’s about making stuff happen. People like them. It’s not an absolute divide, of course: digital media allow kids to participate in the bigger culture, while also making their own stuff. We want this book to help them do both, better.

Your book encourages kids and parents to use what they have and make their own artistic mark. How did you come up with the many ideas in the book?

We art-directed a lot of the projects pretty heavily. We also got some creative friends involved, especially with the sewing projects. But sometimes the kids came up with ideas by themselves. At the park one day, they started filling their socks with sand and then drawing faces on them. Presto: sock bean bags. It was always exciting when the kids took a bag of supplies and ran with it, pushing a project in directions that we hadn’t imagined.

Your kids are featured here. How are they and their friends central to this project?

Most art books for kids rely on examples made by adults. The look is slicker, but it can be frustrating for young readers. Our book displays work made by kids. We wanted to capture the quirks and quests of emergent designers. Grown-ups couldn’t make up the lettering games explored by kids, or the special way they splatter fabric paint onto T-shirts, or their sense of a page layout for a zine or a photo album. Design is not just about making stuff. It’s about making stuff happen.

What’s next?

We’re working on Design Your Life: Creating An Original Life in a Mass-Produced World. Parenting is the book is also about floor plans, meal plans and the joys of self-publishing. Building on ideas developed on our blog, design-your-life.org, we want to show how design is a form of creative thinking that can be used to tackle the
What makes your typographic work distinct? What are its origins?

It’s ironic that I’m known for typography. I’m self-taught, really. At Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, we were taught the Swiss International Style of typography: Helvetica on a grid. I have very bad neatness skills, so that approach didn’t work for me. I felt I was being forced to clean up my room. So I became an illustration major. But I didn’t really draw well. When I came to New York to look for work, I found that I couldn’t draw but that my ideas were good. My teacher (Polish designer Stanislav Zagorski) told me to try illustrating with type. So I learned about type in relation to image.

At CBS Records, I would follow the content by echoing it with typography. The idea was to copy a typographic genre and turn it into a record cover. This was not atypical at the time. In the late 70s there was an economic crash, and as an art director I could no longer afford to put all of our money into imagery. So the type came forward. My work was period influenced—the 30s, Art Nouveau, Constructivism. I was stuck in a “New Wave” show because I did a poster quoting constructivism. I was put in a show with April Greiman! Really, it was American wood type. [Jazz poster with accompanying album series identity] I developed a style of decorative typography combined with imagery.

I was at CBS Records for 10 years, with 2 years in between at Atlantic Records—1974-5. A lot of things that I did out of pure naivete.

My biggest influence was Seymour [Chwast]. I met him in 1970 with my portfolio. We’ve been married twice—once when I was 25, then again when I was 40. We had a very messy divorce. Now that we’re both older, we’re together again. I responded to Push Pin when I was in school. They were my heroes. They combined illustration with typography, and they used letterforms from historical periods that I identified with. It was related to the 60s—I was in art school from 1966 to 1970. I liked what was cool at the time, like any art student. Victor Moscoso and the posters. I loved Victorian graphics and wood type. I still do.

Has there been a change in your work between now and the CBS era?

I have become less interested in rich, illustrative imagery. 90 percent of what I do is just type. Something happened in the 80s. Clients started to interfere with the process—you would show them an illustration, and they would want to change it, and I found that embarrassing. Also, the illustrator always got the credit for the work. I feel more like the author if the project is just type. I’m more in control.

There are situations, of course, where I still commission illustration. We’re doing an identity for the American Museum of Natural History, and we need scientific drawings of animals. We have to have illustrations in this project.

But 90 percent of what I do is creating visual personalities for institutions, corporations—museums, theaters. Most of what I do is identity-related. Or what I call “defining personality.” That’s what we do at Pentagram. I am interested in projects were you establish an idea and then extend it to a variety of settings and design a one-shot image now, I’d rather do a pro-bono poster than a book cover or album cover. That’s exciting.
I enjoy the premise of extending an image—establishing an idea and seeing where it goes.

Tell me about the identity program you designed for the Public Theater.

George Wolf [the director] had clear, specific goals. The organization was intricately linked to Joseph Papp. To many people, it was the Joseph Papp Theater. The problem was, Joseph Papp is dead. So people thought the theater must be dead, too. That’s a big image problem. Paul Davis’s posters were part of the old image. Also, his work in people’s minds with Masterpiece Theater. His posters were amazing, but we needed to start over to rebuild the image of the Public Theater. It was a tall order, because Paul Davis was loved so well. I felt I couldn’t do it at all. Going in a totally opposite direction, and focusing on type, was better, because no one would compare the new work with Paul Davis.

I did three logos—George Wolf picked the boldest one. Then there was the problem that the New York Theater Festival was better known than the Public Theater as a total organization. We made “PUBLIC” big so people would know they were going to the Public. The theaters within the organization had to be subbranded. We made a round “stamp” for each theater that goes with the word “PUBLIC.”

Does the Public Theater identity draw on any historical or vernacular references?

There are a number of influences. A little bit of Dada—the different scale relationships coupled with stamps. The Apollo Theater posters are another source. They were done in wood type on silkscreened grounds of. Instead of letterspacing to make everything fit, they changed the size of the letters. It was the language of printers. They were the ones doing it. What they wouldn’t do, though, is change the axis of some of the words in the Public Theater work.

I’ve always been what you would call a Pop designer. I wanted to make things that the public could relate to and understand, while raising expectations about what the “mainstream” can be. My goal is not to be so above my audience that they can’t reach it. If I’m doing a cover for a record, I want to sell the record. If I’m trying to get interested in some content, I want to bring them in. I would rather be the Beatles than Philip Glass.

What do you think about the current divide in the design community between a more formal, experimental approach and your more popular approach?

It’s all valid. What I don’t understand about the design community is the level of distrust and animosity among people who are not all that dissimilar. There’s the young/old split and the academic/professional split. These splits are counterproductive to both sides. In the academic/professional split, there’s a disdain for the fact that people make money doing design. It has to do with a misunderstanding about what graphic design is: it’s commercial art. It’s art for industry.

If we had a grand debate right now, here’s what some of the fights would be about: – difference in how people earn their income. – the old battle of formalism versus idea-based approaches. Scott Makela is a formalist—he has an aesthetic that is specific to himself. Michael Bierut doesn’t have a specific signature. He’s a cosmic problem-solver. The formalist versus eclecticist split is very real. Massimo should really be on the Cranbrook side. The fight goes back 40 years. I’d put Drenttel Doyle Partners on the popular side. Stephen [Doyle] is a Pop designer. Alex Isley is Pop. Tibor Kalman is a Pop designer. April [Greiman] is a formalist.

David Carson is a great Pop designer. He’s doing youth culture magazines in the language of his time. Victor Moscoso of his time. What he does is appropriate to the subject matter. Beach Culture didn’t...
read. He made it too legible.

I’m a pluralist. The most important issue facing designers is that there’s a plurality in the way you can approach design. What’s dangerous is when designers use a language that people can’t understand.

An example is when Time magazine ran a cover with a photograph of Bill Clinton in negative during the election. This is worse than what you would do to Hitler. No one ever did that to Hitler. The cover emphasized Bill being a bad guy more than the magazine ever intended. This cover really confused a lot of people, who were seeing photographs of politicians printed in reverse. He looked like Hitler. He looked really scary.

There are examples of design that get praised for their content. Wired magazine is not designed as well as people say it is, but the content is very interesting.

Looking at this great divide in the design field, I think that it’s not so much what things look like as the intent. I love a lot of the formalistic Swiss stuff, and I’ve used it where it’s been appropriate to solve specific problems. I like to use style to serve an idea. The thing doesn’t look like what it does in a vacuum.

The ageism thing: the older guys dismiss the younger guys. Milton [Glaser] and Massimo [Vignelli] are friends with each other more than with the younger people, even though they’re working from opposite viewpoints.

And there’s an arrogance with youth. Michael Rock doesn’t know who Dick Hess is. And why should Milton know who Michael Rock is. And Seymour had never seen Emigre. And then he saw it, and he has a lot in common with The Push Pin Graphic: they’re using medieval typography and lozenges.

**Rock, Michael**


Tell me how theory functions at RISD, where you were a graduate student and then an instructor for seven years.

In Visible Language 8, there is an article by Tom Ockerse and Hans van Dijk on semiotics and graphic design that lays the foundation for the RISD approach. Hans is not always credited as fully as Tom for bringing semiotics to RISD. Hans did his graduate thesis at Ohio State or somewhere on semiotics; article in Visible Language is based on his thesis.

I studied English literature before going to RISD. I have always been a little worried about graduate school for graphic design. It’s “lite” academics—desperately trying to be real scholarship. I’m trying to get away from that as much as possible.

Tom’s essay on semiotics explicitly excludes “semiology,” the French variant of semiotics, which I think is a problem. The main idea he takes from semiotics is the classification of icon/index/symbol. Also, the “interpretant,” which is really mystified by the people at RISD, to the point that it’s not useful. The more I think about it, the goal was to use semiotics to legitimize design by giving it its own metalanguage. It was more a strategy of professionalism than a strategy of criticism. Theory ends up narrowing the perspective rather than opening it up, because it becomes an end in itself.

Deconstruction can never really determine the way work looks. It can reform the profession, but it can’t determine the way things look. It can change the way we think about absolutes and the goals of the profession. We can’t expect theory to determine the way things look. People expect to much when they think that visual work must bear the scars of theory.
The use of semiotics at RISD came out of the 60s idea of design process and problem-solving. Sharon Poggenpohl did a course on problem-solving using a matrix. Tom has an “interpretant” matrix—a way to jog you getting ideas. I think that theory got sort of stuck there. Tom didn’t really know what was happening in the 70s and 80s. He wasn’t up on post-structuralism, or even structuralism. No one was writing new Peircian semiotics. And yet so much was being written in the 70s and 80s in the tradition of semiology relevant to design. But he had written off that tradition.

I taught at RISD for seven years. I did an undergraduate theory course called “Visible Language,” which was mostly design class but focused on coming up with ideas. This was a required course. I did another course, “Design Methods,” which was taught by a team of four instructors. This course dealt with larger problems, larger projects. It was sometimes required—that was on and off.

At first I taught the course kind of like Tom, and then I kept reducing the amount of theoretical language until it was completely colloquial. Also, I kept introducing more popular culture. So the course got progressively I’m now questioning the idea of graduate school in graphic design. I’m wondering what people should be of it.

How is theory taught at Yale?

Theory at Yale is two-fold. First, we try not to teach theory ourselves. We try to get people to do it in the academic setting of the university—women’s studies, media studies, film, etc. We have expertise in matters of design, not matters of theory.

We’re thinking about breaking up the program into two different tracks—a more academic track and a more visual track. Rather than having one overall definition of what a graphic design graduate student should need to specialize more. There’s no universal formula for what people should know.

I teach a seminar class—one for 1st year students, one for 2nd year—which tries to bridge the gap between their academic courses and their studio work. We read about 15 articles during the semester; students conduct seminar discussions, and they are asked to bring in visual examples to talk about. They write short seminar papers at the that are analyses of an object—which they have to read to the class.

Some of the things we read during the 1st year seminar include Roland Barthes, his essay “Responsibility of Form,” which is analysis of newspaper photographs. Along with this, some pieces from Mythologies, introducing the idea of criticism. Short essay from Eco on reading Steve Canyon comic strips. A thing by Camille Paglia on Diana. Next, Marxist interpretations of advertising by Judith Williams and Raymond Williams.

All this stuff is about mass produced visual objects. In their other classes they’re looking at objects of literature or art history. Here, they’re looking at objects more like what they’ll produce themselves.

People get very involved in the politics of images—stereotyping and so forth. I’m starting to get bored with that. This year I want to get people away from being political, and more involved with design itself. For example, how form can be about class description—the letterpress look is about class identity. I want them to look at meaning that comes out of the forms of design itself, not just out of pictures.

Sheila is the major influence at Yale. I think people want to do work that is Relevant with a big R. We’re afraid to do work that will be judged as superficial. Don and Marlene were very influential, too, for the first three years of the program. They’re not coming back next year, partly because they’re less interested in politics as well.
activism situation has changed a lot in the U. S. since the late 80s. People feel less compelled to go down to West Broadway and put up political posters. For Don and Marlene, they want to move back into design again in making form. This also parallels the growth of their business—working for Clinique doesn’t mesh with political posters.

We want to move back from the extreme of being political and get back more into design itself.

In a way, that sounds like a return to Yale’s traditional program—to look at “design itself.” But you will be doing it with a difference.

Yes, it’s going back to a more formal approach, but with a difference. It had gotten so centered for so long that it had become a cavern. The biggest difference will be trying to get people to work within the vehicles of design, and not get too much into sculpture and filmmaking and so on. We want them to concentrate on the design idiom. We want to find more useful, public venues for using their thesis work.

From the start, we want people to think about writing material that could be published. Cathy Richmond’s project [on the representation of black women] was written as five short “articles.” Now she’ll try to place them in black magazines. Writing needs to be appropriate to the project. So we want to focus on the visual aspects rather than having them struggle with writing. They need to think about the venue and audience for what they’re writing.

Once the mantel of 60s scientism has been left behind, people are really questioning what they are doing. Only science-based program left. And even they are talking about moving towards a more “human-centered” approach.

When you move to a more “human” approach, it gets very fuzzy, like a creative writing program. When you move to it, everyone’s trying to defend their area. Deconstruction has driven a stake into people’s certainty about what they’re doing. No one can escape this crisis of meaning that has hit the university.

What do you think about Cranbrook?

I’ve always been very interested in Cranbrook and how something so close to Detroit could escape urbanism so much. There seems to be an escape from urbanism there.

I think that’s encouraged by the campus. It’s a utopia.

The effects of Cranbrook’s program have been very strong. But the effects are felt more through education, through the profession. It’s like what happened with Basel: the style was too strong to be accepted by mass culture, so people went into teaching. Now you see the effects of this on undergraduate portfolios. They’ve replaced the Armin Hofmann projects.

I don’t think the Cranbrook program has much to do with French theory. It has to do with defiance of visual culture. That defiance had a snowball effect, from Weingart’s destruction of the grid to Fuse #10, where the fonts aren’t letterforms anymore, they’re completely deteriorated.

The idea of individual creativity is a totally modernist idea. Cranbrook has been an extension of this. The fascination with the alphabet right now is a fascination with the originless thing, since the alphabet has no origin. The need to individualize the alphabet invokes the conflict between originality and repetition that Rosalind Krauss talks about in her work on the avant garde. Her essay on grids is great, too.
All of this Cranbrook work is about needing to be the artist. There are two different levels of modernism—international modernism of the 50s and 60s and the earlier avant garde. There's this misunderstanding modernist promotion of clean typefaces as being about hygienics. Idea was that these generic typefaces didn't belong to someone else. They didn’t conflict with the designer’s own originality.

I don’t know how “deconstruction” got applied to Cranbrook. I think the name had a lot to do with it about taking things apart. The idea of “fragments”....

**Kunz, Willi**


Where do you see your work fitting into the history of design?

I’ve always just wanted to do work that people who don’t know anything about design will think is cool. Stuff that my brother would pick up and like.

I’ve been labeled as one the “humorous designers” because of my work for Spy magazine. I often don’t want to show that work to new clients, because it creates certain very limited expectations about my work.

Who has influenced your work?

Not the “designer designers.” I’m very word-oriented. When I start a project, I start by writing down a lot of words, not drawing up a grid. That’s how I work.

Being word-oriented is evident in my type-heavy approach. I like to pack a lot of information into stuff, so people can learn something from it. I’m not interested in doing “big bold posters.”

Did Cooper Union have any effect on you?

I went to NC State for two years before going to Cooper. There, you literally learn to pour concrete before you learn anything about “graphic design,” because you don’t specialize until later. “Design” could mean architecture, environmental design, graphic design, any field. It was terrific, but they had only 2 faculty members, and 2 years there was enough.

I only went to Cooper Union because it was free. There wasn’t an underlying philosophy there, exce [Sadek] and William [Bevington]‘s courses on typography and the Art of the Book. Yeah, those were courses.

It seems that something important was happening in the mid-80s: M&Company, Stephen Doyle, you. How do you think that came about?

It happened because Tibor was smart enough to hire me and Stephen Doyle. I met Stephen during my last semested at Cooper, when he taught there very briefly, filling in for someone else. Stephen suggested that I go work with them at M&Co. It was a very interesting place to work. Tibor was reacting against slick “design” at that time, which was an exciting position. I didn’t just want to go work in a design office. M&Co was a good place for young designers.

What work inspires you?

I mostly read a lot of newspapers. I’m not that interested in looking at graphic design, and I don’t sp
in museums or libraries.

What’s going on in design right now?

Everyone I know wants to get out of New York.

Right now, the big split in design is generational: old versus young, Vignelli versus David Carson. What do I think of David Carson? It’s cool. It’s important that people are doing experimental work.

I don’t know if anything really exciting is happening right now in graphic design, though.

**Goldberg, Carin**


Armored with a nimble sense of humor and a knack for the beautiful, Carin Goldberg survived the culture wars of the 1980s and fearlessly navigated the techno-hyped 90s. What’s next for this master of design? The remarkable career of Carin Goldberg reflects one woman’s ability to tap into her cultural moment and create a series of icons that have functioned in the brutal arena of retail sales while also engaging—head-on—the cultural debates in the design profession. Known primarily for her book covers and jackets, Goldberg helped reinvent this medium in the 1980s and successfully navigated its second renaissance in the early 90s. Today, she is heading into new waters, behind an area of design practice that has become increasingly corporate and codified.

Goldberg’s work has always been tied to the cultural sector, but not to the elitist sphere of museum or academic publishing. A New Yorker to the core, she entered the profession by way of mass media. After graduating from The Cooper Union in 1975, she learned the trade from art director Lou Dorfsman at CBS Television, producing ads for TV Guide in an all-male, old-school, cut-and-paste bullpen. She soon became an art director herself, creating ads for CBS Records. But her passion was for design, not art direction, and her inspiration came from Paula Scher and Henrietta Condak, who were producing witty, visually sophisticated album covers.

Working in the classical music division at CBS, Goldberg created designs that combined type and image in a loose, decorative manner, as seen in her cover for Tchaikovsky’s *The Seasons*.

Goldberg left CBS Records in the early 80s to start her own business, working independently for the music industry and then, around 1984, for book publishers. Post-modernism had become the battle cry in art and modernist ideologies of functionalism, truth to materials, and purity of form were under attack, as new values of decoration, pastiche, and eclecticism bubbled to the surface. Like her contemporary Louise Fili, Goldberg brought these ideas to the field of book cover design, then a stale medium trapped in convention. In Goldberg’s 1985 cover for Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*, she borrowed from the graphic style of the Vienna Secession, densely ornamental lettering locked together within a heavy linear framework. Her design is directly modelled after Josef Hoffmann’s 1903 identity for the Wiener Werkstatte.

Post-modernism was not a singular movement, and its attack against modernist orthodoxy yielded positions that divided—and energized—graphic design in the 80s. Tibor Kalman, who did more than that decade interesting, attacked the work of Goldberg—and many others—at the AIGA’s national conference in San Antonio, Texas, in 1989. Kalman lambasted her Rilke cover for “pillaging history.” A few years later, he minted the phrase “jive modernism” in reference to visually-based references to early twentieth-century art that, he claimed, ignored the utopian, revolutionary basis of the avant-garde while producing empty, commercially-driven decoration.
While some designers were embittered by Kalman’s polemics, Goldberg responded to the uproar with a sense of humor. Her work had been pushed into a fray that was dividing the design world, and it was more of the fight than to be left out at the margins. “It didn’t kill me,” she recalls. “I was surprised by the intensity of the discussion.

While I was busy pillaging history, Tibor was busy pillaging the vernacular. We were all pillagers.”

Goldberg’s use of history is part of its own historical continuum, that of New York pop design. She employs imagery sporadically, not programmatically, referring to past styles not as a matter of principle, but as a matter of appropriateness. In fact, modernist quotations are few and far between in Goldberg’s work, just as they are in the work of Paula Scher, who outraged many Swiss-educated designers for parodying Herbert Matter in a poster for Swatch in the late 80s. Goldberg and Scher both came of age under the ascendance of the Push Pin designers, who forged an indelible American design ethos—at once artistic and commercial—that freely incorporates just one source of imagery among many—it is no more sacred than the rest of visual culture’s rich archive of idioms.

Goldberg has even quoted herself quoting Josef Hoffmann—in her design for Women on War, she rendered a similar compositional device with sharper, more angular forms.

Goldberg’s historical sources have ranged from Victorian ephemera to everyday icons. For the cover of In Pursuit of the English, she combined diverse fonts in a densely knit composition recalling letterpress posters. This typographic block repeats across the bottom of the cover, invoking a make-ready sheet retrieved from the printer’s design for Unravelling consists of a small typographic label—reminiscent of nineteenth-century packaging—that punctuates a pale, soft photograph of eggs cradled in a woman’s hands. [figure 5] One of Goldberg’s pieces, her jacket for John Fowles’s Wormholes, is an homage to the great modernist designer Alvin Lustig. Quotation of any single work, Wormholes employs simple strips of color to depict books stored on a shelf. Recalling Lustig’s color palette and his simple, cut-paper forms, the cover successfully invokes a mid-century feeling—and avoids the clichéd image of old leather books.

Whatever her historical references, Goldberg’s work always responds to its own cultural moment. Her earlier work carries the unmistakable flavor of the 80s, as seen in the widely spaced geometric letterforms peppered across the cover of Where Water Comes Together with Other Water, illustrated by her long-time collaborator Gene Greif. Goldberg used a similar typographic approach in her series design for the novels of Kurt Vonnegut. The bright, optimistic qualities of these pieces reflects the neo-modern formalism that permeated design in the 80s, not graphics but in architecture and interiors. Michael Graves’s Portland Building of 1980 was emblematic of the age, with its deliberately flat, ornamental distribution of small geometric elements across its cubic shell.

The 90s took a grittier turn, and in the field of book covers, a new sensibility took shape. At Alfred A. Knopf, art director Carol Devine Carson encouraged her team of young designers to experiment with elements of the strange and the sinister. Chip Kidd, Barbara de Wilde, and others created book covers at Knopf that used coffee stains, strands of hair, and oddly cropped photographs to strike an attitude that is mysterious, sometimes perverse, and always literary. The post-modern 80s had come to a close, and the introspective 90s had begun.

The cultural shift away from happy formalism towards darker, more ambiguous visual narratives is seen in Goldberg’s own work in the 90s. Her cover for The Blindfold combines out-of-focus letters with a tiny photograph of a figure; these oddly informal elements conflict with the grid of colored rectangles that bluntly divides the cover. On the cover for Hungry, a spare, label-like field floats across the belly of a nude female torso, suggesting repressed desire—gustatory or erotic. Jilted features a photocollage by Man Ray, in which a female...
annotated with flat circles of color that both censor and celebrate her erotic potential. Mother Said paid a black purse—a vessel of maternal secrets—embraced in quotation marks. The Plawright’s Voice paid white curtains with a warm wood floor; A Visit Home depicts a domestic interior ominously x-ed out. Such designs use images of normalcy to project a sense of unease and possibility.

Some of Goldberg’s most intriguing work of the late 90s went unpublished. For the cover of The Honey Thief, for example, Goldberg proposed several beautiful and poetic designs that went unrealized. The same happened for An Ocean in Iowa and Black Rubber Dress. Goldberg became increasingly dissatisfied with the cover as a business, a fact linked not to changes in cultural appetites or prevailing styles but to changes in the industry itself. Marketing divisions became more involved in approving designs, and freelancers, relying on art directors to advocate their work within publishing houses, were not close enough to the process to prevail against in-house designers.

Goldberg took this change in climate as an opportunity to shift the direction of her career. She is relocating her family—architect Jim Biber and their son Julian—from a charming but remote town in upstate New York back to Manhattan, where she can be part of the day-to-day fray of the design process and pursue more ambitious, large-scale projects. As a cover designer, Goldberg worked in relative solitude, creating single images with circumscribed functions. Now, she is working as a magazine consultant and is designing total publication projects. No longer satisfied with just the cover, Goldberg revelled in creating the entire marketing campaign and catalog design for the Type Directors Club’s annual competition in 1999. [figure 19] Even more exciting is a book, Catalog, to be published by Stewart Tibori and Chang in 2001. The book transports photographs from a 50s mail order catalog into a series of spare pages, where disembodied bras, girdles, and shoes float with serene dispassion. These mundane accoutrements of middle-aged womanhood—designed to lift, separate, and constrain—are liberated under Goldberg’s hand into icons that are at once funny and erotic. The book seems Goldberg’s own transformation as she outfits herself for the next phase of her career. Her sexy sense surely prevail.

**Friedman, Dan**


What’s important right now in corporate design?

There’s a lost generation in graphic design—the people in between the 20s-30s generation and the guys in their 60s. In between is the people in their 40s and 50s—my generation. The older generation laid out the territory of the design profession, setting a standard for the connection between design and business. My generation entered the profession at a time when design was becoming a viable commercial activity, and many designers went straight into business and didn’t engage in teaching and theory—the way Paul Rand had. These are the people who run the corporate design offices—Steff Geissbuhler, Siegel and Gale, Anspach Grossman Portugal.

So the next generation (in their 20s and 30s) is disenchanted with those from the middle generation group. This “lost generation” hasn’t contributed much to the dialogue, the discourse, of graphic design. In all these years, the guys at Anspach Grossman Portugal have never contributed anything that I consider design dialogue—that whole generation largely has been consumed by business.
Another observation: there appears to be this sort of “V” in the road right now, whereby commercial design has become either an occupation pursued in a creative, artisan-like way, or the other approach, which is strategic planning.” In corporate design now, you can no longer service multi-national corporations just by providing aesthetics. You have to address these companies through their language—marketing, positioning, etc.

There’s a split—most of those interested in corporate design have become more involved in strategic planning. The other extreme is people becoming more and more “artistic.” I have mixed feelings for this development—I have a lot of sympathy for it.

Do we really know what’s innovative at the other end of the spectrum, the corporate end?

Larry Keeley—he’s into “strategic planning.” They usually hire other designers to do the visual stuff.

I remember judging the I.D. review a couple of years ago. An office had entered their redesign of the Holiday Inn sign. It was such a blatant example of sanitization by design. There are so many examples of that.

Design and identity/the identity of design

Is graphic design pervasive throughout society, or is it virtually non-existent? I’ve been asking this question for quite a long time. We want people to be aware of what we do, aware of what different and worthwhile, and yet we also want to be inclusive in our definition of “design.”

Even David Carson did a riff on “vernacular” found design at the beginning of his lecture [at conference in London, June 1994]. We are so fascinated by vernacular stuff, maybe because it’s so brilliant and takes so little effort. We aren’t finding in our own work what we admire so much in the vernacular.

Sylvia Woodard’s presentation [at London design conference] began with a history of how blacks have been portrayed in print. And then she talked about how different generations, including her own, have dealt with issues of racial identity in the U.S. She showed a calendar she did about African culture, done in a European style. Can one find ways to express cultural identity through form, not just through content?

Sylvia says that women designers are really angry right now. They’re fed up.

Technology

I have mixed feelings about technology. The Macintosh was introduced in 1984 and has been a major influence on this period. But in my own opinion, the emphasis on technology is somewhat overrated. If you look across the entire twentieth century, you’ll see that there’s a tendency to celebrate all new technologies. Yet you could look at how each new technology has contributed to the deterioration of life.

I had to work very hard in my book Radical Modernism to bring myself to optimistic conclusions. I think it’s important to be optimistic.

What do you think has been important in typography in the last 15 years?

Type in the 80s was about excess; type in the 90s is about restraint.

Certainly, the more avant-garde designers have done some fairly wild experiments; they are accused of being illegible, appealing to a narrow audience, etc. Since I’m familiar with where that work comes from, I find much of it seductive on the one hand, yet also manipulative. It has become an idiom, like anything else. I’m torn between being seduced and being manipulated. This work tends to have no discernible content apart from...
qualities.

What’s the connection between you, April Greiman, and Wolfgang Weingart?

It’s a long story, and it happened more than 20 years ago. They’re both people I was extremely close to, but we haven’t spoken with for many years.

In a nutshell: I went to study in Ulm in the late 1960s (1967). I had gotten a Fulbright to go to Germany, but I really wanted to go to Basle. I became fascinated with the theoretical approach at Ulm. At Basle in 1968, they had just started the post-graduate program. I wanted to be in the first class. I was one of 2 Americans.

And Weingart had just started teaching there. He was young—about my age. Our relationship was more as friends than as a student/teacher relationship. But it is important to say that I was influenced by him. He was reacting against rational Swiss typography, the work of the previous generation.

The “N” poster that I did [reproduced in Radical Modernism] is an example of classical modernism. The characters were set in metal, set into a bed of plaster. Weingart was fascinated by that—bringing this messiness into the context of the tight world of metal type.

Weingart and I had similar interests. I thought he was incredibly talented. But his method of teaching was problematic to me. My biggest contribution at the time was to develop a methodology for teaching typography.

Unlike Weingart, I wasn’t reacting against Swiss typography, because that rational system didn’t really exist except in isolated instances. I started teaching at Yale in 1969. Whereas Wolfgang Weingart was teaching based on intuition, I was trying to verbalize, demystify, the structures of typography. I wanted to create a method that would teach the rules and also how to break them at the same time, since nobody knew the rules.

When Wolfgang started lecturing and teaching in the U.S. in the early 70s, he realized he needed to construct a methodology, too. I believe my work was a useful model for him in that respect.

I was interested in publishing about design as well—I did an essay on my teaching in Visible Language, which also appeared in TM and some other European magazines. But you know, there wasn’t much opportunity for that then. There wasn’t much dialogue in design at all.

When I started teaching at Yale, talking about semiotics, people said to cool it. Alvin Eisenman called it “scientism”—it wasn’t considered valid.

I never specialized in “typography” as people do now—I only specialized that way in my teaching.

I went to Yale in 1969, and I was there for 3 or 4 more years. Then, around 1972 I went to SUNY Purchase program, founded the same year as Cal Arts. I was asked to created an entirely new program in the “Visual Arts,” which was a very exciting opportunity, more enticing than staying at Yale.

In 1972, I was teaching 1 day a week at PCA, flying down to Philadelphia from New Haven. Louis Kahn and I took the same flight. That’s when I met April. I knew I couldn’t keep teaching at both schools. She arrived to replace me. I met her that spring. She had just come back from Switzerland, where she had studied for one year. She wasn’t happy there, except in Weingart’s classes. She had been aware of my work through Weingart.

I arranged Wolfgang Weingart’s first lecture tour in the U.S. in 1972. I did a big poster called “Wolfgang...
April and I became friendly during the 2nd semester at PCA. From the very beginning, I had discussions about her intuitive approach to typography. She was intuitive, like Weingart. He had even done a cover of TM magazine with her picture on it, saying “I feel typography.” I thought that was kind of corny.

Often, I would play the devil’s advocate with April, arguing for a more rigorous methodological approach in teaching. April’s work today continues to work from an intuitive base. Like Wolfgang Weingart, she has excellent intuitions. But I’m still hung up on content. She would say that there is content in the form. And I would think it’s a very limited means of expressing content. Consider minimalist painting, such as Albers: there is meaning there. But that’s a very narrow territory to work in. It limits the kind of content you can deal with.

I still follow April’s work. She sees California as a place somewhere in outerspace, moved by primal spirits. I see it as a place where there are earthquakes, mudslides, and gang warfare. As she sees it, her “heavenly hyperspace” has meaning in it—Jungian psychology, spiritual issues—limited in its ability to deal with other kinds of issues. Her work, like so much work today, is about seduction and manipulation. It’s a little hypocritical for me to criticize it too much, though, because I’m often guilty of the same thing. The difference is, I keep it in my own apartment.

On experimental design and typography: Is it self-indulgent introversion as reaction to begin alienated from the mainstream of the profession? I think so.

I’m not sure alienation is the cause so much as the desire to be “in” with the group that does embrace experiment—in love with the edge.

It’s striking that there’s so much in-fighting among the members of the “edge.” A frenzy about originality of the stuff that would go on during the late 60s/early 70s. Weingart was infuriated that everyone was ripping him off. He was a spoiled brat. But, I think he deserves the ultimate credit for the “new typography.” The reason he doesn’t get acknowledged is that he’s a jerk. People don’t want to give him that.

David Carson keeps saying that he’s self-taught. Finally, it comes out at dinner [during London conference] that he worked for Self magazine at one point…

This petty bickering is one of the things that made me disenfranchised from graphic design.

I don’t know what happened to Wolfgang Weingart. He still teaches at Basle and lectures here and there, but he hasn’t “said much” lately. He’s working on a book that’s been delayed because it’s so thick. His book may reaffirm his importance.

Me, April, Wolfgang: we all influenced each other. We all had egos that were so large we became incompatible. Nonetheless, there are a lot of similarities in what we’ve pursued. It’s been hard for me to separate the personal from the professional.

But at that time, there just wasn’t anyone to talk to about design. Maybe that’s why I’m interested in teaching now. There’s a lot of parallels between now and then, but now the discourse is much broader. There’s much more to issues of content and social issues, which was also of importance in the 60s. The idealism of that optimism—some of that is coming back now.

*Frere-Jones, Tobias*

How did you get involved in type design?

I went to RISD in their undergraduate program. I finished in 1992. It became difficult there for me, to learn to design type, which was hardly the focus at RISD. We were taught to use type, how to think not how to design type. There’s no place really in this country where you can do that. Inge Druckery Carter’s course at Yale is good, but it’s for grad students only, and it’s just one course.

When I was 16, there was a competition sponsored by the Type Shop in New York. It was open to 6-17 year olds. The assignment was to draw a typeface. I was aware that type existed, but I had never tried it myself first idea in my head, and I won in the best-of-age category. I did it all with a rapidograph and a drawing competition was in 1986. After that I had a couple of other ideas that I chased down through high school. One of them survived. It’s Armada, distributed by Font Bureau.

I was thrown out of French class for a day because I was in the back of the room drawing a lowercase that I knew I should go to art school.

At RISD, I did an independent study with Kristof Lenk, where I studied old style serif typography. All I did in semester was a lower case alphabet and a couple of capitals. It was redesigned as Hightower, which I did for After this independent study, it was the end of the fall semester and Christmas was coming up. I wanted to come up with something to give my brother. He had been a student at Brown and had his own band. He wanted the right typeface for his band. I started doodling stuff on bar napkins. (I spent a lot of time at a bar near campus, where I worked on my ideas.) I thought it was funny, so I took it back to RISD and digitized it. I did the character set in two nights, over the weekend.

After Christmas vacation, I went to Holland to visit studios. A friend and I went to Berlin, where I introduced myself to Erik Spiekermann. I showed him my old style alphabet, and he immediately pointed out everything that was wrong with it—the lowercase a was out of its mind, and so on. But the bar napkins he loved. He brought out and contracts right then and there, so the typeface could be marketed and sold [through the Font Shop]. That was Dolores, designed in 1991.

So I went back to RISD. The faculty were pleased, but they didn’t know quite what to do, since they anything to do with the design of this typeface.

I called up Matthew Carter and asked him if he needed summer help. He told me to call David Berlow [at the Font Bureau in Boston], who had just seen Dolores. I showed him a couple of ideas, including one that’s based on those tickets they give you at parking garages—thin cardboard tickets with red numbers printed on them. I went looking for the characters that went with the numbers but there weren’t any. So Berlow said if I drew the letters, he would publish them. This became Garage Gothic, published in 1992.

This was the summer between junior and senior year. For my degree project I did an essay and a series of experimental typefaces dealing with legibility, history, technology, etc. I drew bits of typefaces that of the questions I was asking in the essay. Most of the work was in the writing. The project was not a grand unified theory, but rather a series of questions. Some of it was meant as a joke.

It was at that time that Neville Brody started putting out Fuse, in 1992. That was the sort of format or looking for. So I did my thesis project in a similar form. A number of the faces I later did for Fuse origi
thesis project. [Typefaces featured in Fuse include Reactor, 1993; Fibonacci, 1994; and Microphone, 1995.]

After I finished Garage Gothic, into my senior year, I was coming up here on weekends doing other work at Font Bureau. I finished some typefaces that Neville Brody had started. He did the basic concept, and I worked out the details across the other letters of the alphabet. This amused me to no end. Back in high school, when I was kicked out of French class, these were the kinds of faces I had been imitating. By the time I graduated, I had been working here for nine months. I came straight to work after graduating. So most of what I know I’ve picked up working here [at the Font Bureau]—faces for retail, custom jobs, etc.

Your work covers a lot of bases. You created careful historical revivals and crazy display faces like Dolores. I make a point of moving around among different kinds of typefaces. I think I learn more that way. I’m more interested in doing this. I do this because I find it very entertaining. The differences make it more entertaining.

What do you think about the field of typeface design today?

Currently, the field of typeface design is an enormous stinky mess. People can use computers to make typefaces. Now you can make your own foundry with a Mac and a copy of Fontographer. I’m seeing exuberant but inexperienced folk jumping into this. That’s great, but…A lot of people feel that if they have the equipment, then they must be designers. They don’t have the experience or the thoughts in their head to really make typefaces. There’s a whole class of typefaces that I just call Dumb. People take an existing digital typeface and do something to it and then call it their own typeface. These are not valuable products. A lot of attention is paid to it because it’s the flavor of the month. What I’m beginning to see is that because so much attention is being paid to the designers like myself who do put time into type design get a bad rap. We get lumped in with all the sloppy junk. In most areas of design, it’s the same problem. The tool that makes it all possible breeds a kind of impatience. It looks so finished so fast. It’s tempting to call it done.

If you’re impatient and want to design a typeface, it’s very easy to crack open an existing typeface, do something to it, and call it done. That’s not design.

What or who do you think is valuable and significant in contemporary typeface design?

The best designers are ultimately driven by a respect for—but not a slavish attachment to—history of words. The best are Jonathan Hoefler, Matthew Carter, Erik van Blokland and Just van Russom. Some younger people—Lucas de Groot—are very promising. Jean Francois Porchez out of Paris. In addition to the requisite visual skills, which are always necessary but not always found, these designers bring something special to their work.

There are some obvious names you haven’t mentioned. What about Jonathan Barnbrook and Zuzana Licko?

Jonathan Barnbrook does some terrific stuff, although a lot of his work I haven’t come across. But I’m not sure what he’s done. I’m a little distracted in that case by a small trend that’s built around what he has done: his face Exocet. It consists of traditional forms with a medieval twist. This stuff has become a small trend. He’s the “spark” for this trend. It’s hard to talk about this work once it becomes a trend, because all the idiots have jumped in. But if I could look at it outside of that, I’d probably think it was great stuff.

As for Licko, I think she’s done some great stuff. But lately, I’m not sure why some of these typefaces—such as Narly or Dogma—are so popular. Is it meant as an anti-aesthetic? If it is, then it’s not pushed far enough. So
understand that one better. It would have to be put in the right hands to work, though. Just like Avant Garde [designed by Herb Lubalin]. The only place that typeface looked good was in the logo for Avant Garde. The font is volatile in that respect.

I’m hoping that this taste for the dirty, the crunchy, the deliberately messy, the look-I-haven’t-take three-weeks look will go away, and attention will return to those of us who are putting effort into typ

The good thing is that people are more aware of type now, so when the dirty thing is over, we’ll be living in a more sensitive public.

I saw an episode of Cheers where there was an unsigned letter from someone that had been run off the printer. Characters on the show speculated that a specific person had written the letter, but a woman overheard and said, “No, this isn’t his font.” That can only benefit the rest of us.

Drucker, Johanna


A flurry of activity has been rippling around the edges of the graphic design field in the U.S. during the past three or four years, as many designers who came of age in the mid-1980s have been looking to the written word as a place to test the future of experimental work. Johanna Drucker’s career provides a formidable example of a practice built between and within existing disciplines.

Some of the formal devices developed in her artists’ books—produced in an avant-garde literary tradition—with experimental typography as practiced by contemporary graphic designers. Drucker’s artists’ books, produced in an extreme and hermetic manner—the ideal of “self-publishing” currently discussed by some designers as an alternative to client-based practice. Fueling her experimental work is an impressive body of scholarship on the history and theory of writing as visual form.

Since the mid-1970s Drucker has been quietly and methodically cutting a path through the terrains of art history, literary theory, and the book arts. The unique trajectory of her practice—pioneering in its crossing of disciplines—reached a dramatic summit during the past two years, with the publication of two major studies on the materiality of writing as well as the growing public recognition of her experimental books. In 1994 a complete series of her artists’ books was acquired by the Getty Center in Los Angeles, whose collection focuses on avant-garde printed matter. At age 43, Drucker has arrived at history by way of practice and at design by way of art and writing. Her work offers a compelling model for approaching design both as a medium of experiment and as a subject of serious scholarship.

Drucker’s academic publications are legitimate scholarly endeavors—not the marginal productions of a typophile or amateur historian—yet they are written in a manner accessible to designers, artists, and the university. In 1994 the University of Chicago Press issued Drucker’s book The Visible Word, on the theoretical sources of Futurist and Dada typography. In 1995 Thames and Hudson published The Alphabetic Labyrinth, a history of intellectual fantasies concerning the origin of letters, from the sublime to the scientific to the spurious. Both books give design an important role in the realm of ideas by arguing that the visual features of the written word are crucial to the formation—and deformation—of Western art and philosophy.

Drucker began work on The Alphabetic Labyrinth in 1980 when she was a graduate student in the Visual Studies Department at the University of California at Berkeley. “Visual Studies,” a tiny master’s program offered by the School of Architecture, attracted people whose interests fell outside the normal boundaries of art and design.
Drucker’s classmates there included Suzanna Licko and Rudy Vanderlans, who went on to carve the practices out of the fields of typography and publishing. The Alphabetic Labyrinth, which is lavishly illustrated with Enlightenment diagrams and mystical speculations about the origins of the letter, is based on Drucker’s thesis. The Visible Word evolved out of her dissertation for a doctoral program in Ecriture (French for Drucker pieced together at Berkeley out of an unlikely team of advisers from departments of art, literature, and linguistics. After completing her dissertation in 1986 she took a series of jobs in art history, first at the University of Texas and then at Harvard, Columbia, and now Yale—a place she plans to stay.

If Drucker’s academic career is remarkable for its strange subject and its stunning recognition by the disinterested universities in the U. S., her academic path is all the more surprising because it runs an alternate route through the visual arts. Having studied at the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) in the early 70s, Drucker became involved with “artist’s books,” a tradition which operates on the forms and structures of the bound book. While most book artists bring concerns from painting, sculpture, or craft production to the book-as-object, Drucker’s work is unusual for its focus on text and typography. In these projects she serves as designer, editor, and often illustrator and printer. While her scholarly publications take a conventional form, her artists’ books are complex poetic constructions whose visual and verbal language can be obtuse and hermetic. She explains, “Authoring is an important part of my practice as a book artist.

I think it’s pretty strange to take somebody else’s text and do really weird typographic stuff to it. Whatcha have? You can totally transform the meaning of the text through an extreme typographic treatment.”

In Drucker’s experimental books, which draw on the model of the poet-typographer explored historically in The Visible Word, formal, rule-based systems confront serendipitous elements endowed with lusty humor and intense bodily presence. The theoretical and the profane erupt, for example, in her 1989 project The Word Made Flesh, in which voluptuous, massively scaled wooden initials inhabit a grid of tiny, precisely spaced Copperplate caps. Drucker’s writing vividly invokes the ambitions of typographic form to upstage and embarrass the message it is supposed to neutrally support: “The tongue lies on the table, writing, writhing, spelling out the breath of its efforts in an unseemly desire to be seen.” In History of the/my Wor[ld] (1990), Drucker articulates her personalized version of feminist theory by combining stock images of majorettes and fashion plates with a text that personifies language as an unabashedly physical, hopelessly fleshy medium: “In the beginning was the world, nursed on the warm breast of chaos fast followed by a night of hard publicity.”

Drucker’s book Through Light and the Alphabet (1986) is a “typographic fugue” which introduces a new typographic element on each page, climaxing in a crescendo of parallel elements. “The idea,” she explains, “was linearity from within.” Against Fiction (1988) organizes aspects of tabloid publishing according to a set which “filter” large and small type across the page. Against Fiction, inspired by architect Peter Eisenman’s House X, is an exercise in typographic systems gone mad: “I wouldn’t let myself make any arbitrary or non-standard decisions until the stock of letters in the typecase had been exhausted. Then accidents—necessitated by technology—would begin to appear.” Drucker’s games of illogical economy often push literary form into the background, generating exquisite puzzles that are all but unreadable. A to Z (1977) is an arcane pseudo-“bibliography” that work of contemporary poets from the San Francisco Bay area. Drucker feared she would be forced to the book’s release, but few of the targets of her humour recognized themselves in the book’s obscure

Drucker began her romance with the book via letterpress, a tedious medium over which she is a tireless master. The limitations of traditional metal composition—from the strict lock-ups of the type bed to the limited inventory of the type case—offered her a gilded cage from which to spin her curious inventions. Drucker’s most rec
book, Narratology (1994), combines the compositional freedoms of Macintosh software with the material presence of letterpress production—she used QuarkXPress to produce polymer plates, and she colored the illustrations by hand.

Drucker started working with Macintosh equipment in 1990. She recalls the production of her book as a “technological nightmare” as well as the threshold onto new possibilities of typographic composition and manipulation. Simulant Portrait, an unrestrained, almost naive montage of photos, texts, condense bitmapped headlines rendered in black and acid green, initiated her collaboration with Brad Freeman, photographer, printer, and book artist then working with Pyramid Atlantic, the project’s publisher. I Drucker, who are now married, are turning their home in suburban New Haven into a techno-mechanical laboratory of the book, with PowerMacs on the second floor and a metal type shop in the basement.

The visual and poetic structures developed in Drucker’s experimental books are organically linked to her scholarly works. According to Drucker, The Visible Word occupies the void existing in both art history and literary studies for dealing with typographic form. She explains, “I want people in the world of art history and the world of literature to know that typography belongs to both of those worlds.”

The discourse of modern art criticism, which reached its point of highest elaboration in the 1950s and 60s, was based around a notion of phenomenological “presence”—the autonomy and self-evidence of the aesthetic work. Critics like Clement Greenberg barred narrative associations from the realm of visual art and argued for the completeness of the modernist object—exemplified by abstract expressionism. In contrast, literary theory, invigorated by semiotics and post-structuralism during the same period, was grounded in a concept of the idea that individual signs or objects have no inherent value, but depend on plays of difference within systems of representation. Roland Barthes and other critics, proclaiming the “death of the author,” pictured literature as a tissue of allusions caught in the web of ideology.

Drucker comments, “One needs both of these approaches to understand the way a work of art—literary or visual—functions. There’s the material fact of the work being physically present, inscribed, as a corporeal entity. You can only interpret this entity through structures of mediation and context.” Experimental typography, by overtly combining the visual and the verbal, the material and the symbolic, brings home the necessity of realigning two modes of expression that were cleaved apart by modern criticism. Across the spectrum of avant-garde practice, artists mobilized the printed medium as a tool of publicity and a field for experiment. The physical form and social function of printing made it an ideal platform from which to challenge conventional distinctions between literary and visual form and between high art and popular culture. Drucker thus positions typography as not merely a strange interlude, an incidental sidebar, in the history of modern art, but as a crucial element of avant-garde strategy.

The Visible Word shows that the Futurist and Dadaist poets borrowed formal devices from commercial graphic design. Putting type on the diagonal, incorporating dingbats into text, manipulating size relationships—these techniques were part of advertising typography by the late nineteenth century. Drucker’s book shows how the avant-garde borrowed these vernacular devices and rendered them theoretically self-conscious in the 1910s and 20s. Paradoxically, many of the same artists then turned their energy back into commercial creating a “professional identity” for graphic design by establishing schools, magazines, a canon of great works, and so on.

As a physical object, The Visible Word is a drab and dry academic book; in contrast, The Alphabetic Labyrinth is fit for a coffee table, with two-color printing and hundreds of bewitching illustrations of letters, runes, and
The Alphabetic Labyrinth is an epic history of Western Thought—from antiquity to the late twentieth letters cast in the leading role. Phonetic writing is a piece of intellectual technology with profound consequences for the civilizations it has touched. Valued for its brilliant abstraction—its ability to translate the sounds of nearly any language into a concise, repeatable code—the alphabet would appear to be the most rational and even shallow—of devices. And yet, as Drucker shows, the alphabet has always been subject to fantasies that its forms mask a mystical purpose or a natural, figurative origin. Strange precedents for contemporary fonts made from icons and symbols can be seen in theories that tried to naturalize the alphabet by linking the letters to the organs of the mouth.

Living a double life, Drucker has kept her practice as an artist separate from her work as a scholar. “My colleagues at Yale think it’s fine that I make artists’ books,” she explains, “as long as I don’t confuse that with academic publishing.” Eventually, it would be great to bring the two ways of working closer together.” Drucker’s experimental difficult works of art printed in small editions. If she were going to produce a more accessible book than one that employed typographic interventions, Drucker would more likely aim for a popular novel than an academic text—imagined I would become Judith Krantz.”

The possibility of merging typographic experiment with mainstream publishing goals suggests the relevance of Drucker’s work to the practice of graphic design. In a period when many graduate programs are trying to integrate serious research into design education without losing hold of practice, Drucker has successfully carved a path through divergent disciplines. Not a casual dabbler, she pursued a legitimate education in theory and history and built a rigorous practice in the literary and visual arts. Although Drucker’s example cannot be easily graphic designers frustrated with the intellectual limitations of the marketplace, people with similar skills and inclinations may find it easier to map their own routes across related territory now that she has gone.

de Bretteville, Sheila Levrant


In 1990 Sheila Levrant de Bretteville became the new director of studies in graphic design at Yale University School of Art. Since the late 1950s, the Yale program had been a bastion of modernist theory, a conduit between the U.S. and the program in graphic design at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basle, directed by Armin Hoffmann. For over thirty years, graduates of these distinguished programs have profoundly influenced American their professional work and their teaching.

Presiding over this long and productive history was Alvin Eisenman, whose retirement prompted a faculty and design alumni to appoint a new head in 1990, a decision which will shape the program’s decades to come. The committee selected Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, who had attended the Yale early 60s and has since become an influential and outspoken designer and educator. As a feminist in the rebirth of the women’s movement in the 1970s and its critical refinement in the 80s, de Bretteville believes that the values culturally associated with women are needed in public life. She wants designers to begin listening to different voices, and to forge more attentive and open structures that provide opportunities for others to be heard. She wants to move design toward proactive practice instead of focusing solely on corporate service.

De Bretteville has been met largely with support and hope. While most faculty and alumni have affirmed her inclusive definition of design, others have been outraged. Paul Rand, who had been a member of the late 50s, resigned on principle, and convinced his long-time colleague Armin Hoffmann to do th
angry manifesto published in the AIGA Journal of Graphic Design (Vol.10 No.2 1992), Rand railed against the violation of modernism by screaming hordes of historicists, deconstructivists, activists, and other heretics. Behind each of these challenges to modernism one can name a powerful woman whose voice threatens the Rand’s carefully guarded ideals: behind historicism stands Paula Scher, behind deconstructivism stands Katherine McCoy, and behind activism stands Sheila de Bretteville. In the conversation that follows, de Bretteville talks about the new program at Yale and the values it promotes. Perhaps de Bretteville’s philosophy reflects a global shift in design profession, or perhaps it will catalyze such a shift, just as the program of Eisenman, Rand, and Hoffmann helped redirect the currents of American design practice.

How is the new program at Yale different from what preceded it?

When you ask a question like this, I feel reluctant to locate the differences, because notions of “difference” have been coded with so much positive thought on my part. Also, I have great respect for Alvin Eisenman, and for the forty years of work that he has done here, and for the intelligence and ecumenical spirit that he brought to this It is important to me that this program be person-centered. The students are encouraged and empowered to put and find themselves in their work. My agenda is to let the differences among my students be visible in everything they do. In most projects—not just in thesis work—it’s the students’ job to figure out what they want to say. Emphasizing the students’ desire to communicate, and focusing on what needs to be said and to whom they want to say it—that’s what I mean by person-centeredness. While that may have existed before, it is even stronger now.

What resistance have you had from faculty or alumni or from your own students? Some faculty who were here for many years left in a spirit of protest.

I think you should talk to the people who are upset. I am not upset. I am delighted. When students chose to come here because it scared them, it was the most unfamiliar and the most challenging, I consider that a positive place to start from. (I feel that comfort is a highly overrated emotion.) It means they’re beginning a journey that allows them not to become representatives of a single, unifying, universalizing, totalizing view, making all their work look the same.

I didn’t need to end anything that was happening here; I needed to add what I felt had been left out. There are people for whom diversity and inclusion is terrifying and inappropriate, and they have absented themselves from teaching here. I am hoping that the students who come, come for the open-minded attitude that exists here, and for the chance to frame their own way of being in the profession.

Do you think people are surprised by what you have done?

Some people have said that I should be less visible, that I should be in the background, that I should invisibly support the people who are here and whom I brought. But don’t those recommendations too closely match old female role notions? Alvin was a more supportive person for the other faculty; he was much less visible than they were. But this is a very different time now.

And in truth, as a woman designer, no one would have known about me if I hadn’t spoken out in the feminist reappraisal of the design arts. Focusing on one stratum of myself—gender—provided me with other ways to look at graphic design that were prescient, because they anticipated the eighties deconstructivist critique of the International Style. I feel aligned with Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and other people who in the late sixties and early seventies were, like me, criticizing the universalizing aspects of design, and the notion that there was one high, single truth that would improve the lot of everyone.
“To be seen and not heard” was not a good thing to be told. I was not told that by the majority, however, and I was not told that by David Pease, Dean of the Art School, who was 100%-plus supportive. The group of faculty and alumni that chose me, chose to send a signal to the design community about the kinds of changes they see at Yale. Since what I’ve done before is known, it can’t be a total surprise what I would do here. Not surprised that I would look at things from multiple perspectives, that I would be involved in the core and would care about the personal voice of the designer.

What do you think are the most important intellectual tools for young designers today?

They need to learn about different ways to interpret graphic design. There is not only one way to interpret a thing, but there are many perspectives. Students should know the names and the languages that go with these perspectives—not because jargon is useful, but because knowing about these issues enables students to participate in the debates, should they so choose. I believe that a productive tension comes from diverse points of view, and that students should grapple with diverse points of view about any act of design.

We have given students readings from various critical perspectives, including psychoanalytic, semiotic, post-modern, feminist, and formalist, to enable them to participate in the discourse at these different levels. We encourage them to take classes at the university, from people whose daily work is thinking from these perspectives. Our students take academic courses every semester; it’s now a requirement. When I was a student here thirty years ago, we didn’t have seminars with readings that allowed us to discuss these different perspectives. We took courses in the university, but bringing back those courses and material to the act of doing, and thinking about, analyzing design didn’t occur in design seminars and critiques, to my knowledge.

You asked about other kinds of tools. In order for designers to know whether the appropriate way for communicating to a particular audience is a poster, a billboard, an exhibition, or an interactive hypermedia experience, they need to know what those tools can do. The choice of which format to communicate with should occur after you know whom you want to talk to, and what you want to tell them. This plays into our notion of proactivity, which is to go out into the community along issues that have meaning for you, find out who else is affected by these issues, what organizations already exist, what they are already doing, what needs have not been met, and then look for what ways graphic design could communicate to those audiences who don’t have access to the information that they need.

The person-focus of your program concerns not just the designer, but the audience. The audience has a new centrality.

That’s correct. Because the audience is not an audience; it’s a co-participant with you, and it’s also your client. You bring skills, they bring their own knowledge, and you are both agencies of knowledge—your knowledge as a designer, their knowledge as a person in need, and the community as a group of people in need. It’s construction, rather than a top-down mechanism. The students here have had an experience of being alongside the client/audience/user, because they themselves are part of the client/audience/user.

How does form-making relate to these problems of addressing the audience? You talked about the format, the institutional frame, of communication. How do you fill up that frame?

I’m providing a variety of parallel experiences of coming to form. I do personally believe in delaying form-making until you know what you need to say, to whom you need to say it, and how it should be said. On the other hand, there is a hunger among our students for purely aesthetic exploration, where there is no need to communicate.
take away the client, where we take away the audience, where it doesn’t matter if we can understand with the materials because we can bump into a new form of expression that we could apply where it doesn’t matter if we can understand it. We just play with the materials because we can bump into a new form of expression that we could apply where it doesn’t matter if we can understand it. Pure aesthetic exploration which doesn’t have any agenda at all, except to see what could happen, is something personally I’m less comfortable with, but therefore I hire people who are very comfortable in it.

In your 1983 essay “Feminist Design” Space and Society/Spazio e Società 6 (June 1983) 98-103], you describe feminist design as a set of formal, tactical moves. What is “feminist design”?

First, what’s feminism? In my understanding, feminism acknowledges the past inequality of women and wants it to continue into the future. The issue of equality broadens beyond just women to involve the voices. Feminist design looks for graphic strategies that will enable us to listen to people who have not been heard from before. Feminism is about enabling those voices to be heard.

Thinking about myself from a gendered perspective—even if gender is a fiction—meant separating those experiences that related to me as a gendered figure from other aspects of myself—from being a New Jew, or being skinny. For me, the processes of childbearing, parenting, and reading feminist writing social inequities into sharper focus. There is a prevalent notion in the professional world that only if or more uninterrupted hours can you do significant work. But, if you respond in thought and action beings—if you are a relational person—you do not really have eight uninterrupted hours in a row!

Relational existence is only attached to gender by history—not by genes, not by biology, not by some “femaleness.” A relational person thinks about other human beings and their needs during the day “strudeling,” because strudel is a layered pastry. A relational person allows notions about other people to come in and interrupt the trajectory of thinking or designing. I don’t think strudeling is an exclusively “femaleness,” but I might call it a feminist way of thinking, because to acknowledge and valorize this attitude separate it from gender and free it from the nineteenth-century idea that women’s culture should be in the private, domestic realm.

My grandmother, my mother, my sister, and I all work. In my family, private and public spheres are not separated. I could easily take on the values of the work world, since I had to work. There was no choice. The kinds of work habits that are part of the public sphere—that deny relational experience—are precisely the ones that I want to challenge. Feminism has allowed me to challenge it; thinking about myself as a woman allowed me to challenge it. When women are in the workplace, women do as the workplace demands, because success in the workplace demands. I’m in the workplace, I’m going to be somewhat more aggressive than I might be in the private sphere. Feminism is about bringing public, professional values closer together with private, domestic values, to break the boundaries of this binary system.

How is this relational spirit manifested in design? In other conversations, you’ve used the word “care” to describe feminist design.

In the early eighties I came upon a set of strategies which I thought manifested that care. These strategies include asking a question without giving the answer, so that viewers are called upon to feel that their own thinking is of value. Another strategy is to have multiple perspectives on a subject, which creates a tension that enables critical thinking in a viewer. Having the words and the images contradict themselves also creates a productive tension, by asking the viewer to resolve the conflict and thus bring his or her thinking process and point of view into play. Another principle is to be there in the street with your audience, who can give you feedback on how they understand it. Once you’ve experienced this, you are transformed in your notion of who the client is.
Last year a group of our students designed a pro-choice billboard for a course taught by Marlene Mc Donald Moffett. (Marlene and Donald work together in the design studio Bureau, and they’re mem activist group Gran Fury.) They gave the students all a newspaper and asked them to locate an issue they felt was important. A group of students who chose reproductive rights analyzed U.S laws, looked at what local and national organizations are doing, and finally decided to provide a fact, a statistical fact: “73% of Americans are providing a statistical fact that most people didn’t know, they would allow viewers to think that perhaps we were being manipulated by media coverage of the pro-lifers.

The group gave themselves a name—“Class Action, The Art Collective for Community Action.” The important to know who’s talking comes from our readings of Judith Williamson. She argues that the “voice” in advertising forces us to create relationships and visions of ourselves that are limiting; advertising is an abstraction laid on top of us, which we just have to perform.

The formal language of that billboard is the expected language of mass media. It doesn’t have a “design” look. That’s intentional. The students didn’t want the aesthetic position to be the primary reading. They don’t want you to immediately think how nice it looks and wonder who designed it—before receiving the information.

A lot of contemporary writing about design, especially writing influenced by Postmodernism and contemporary literary theory, suggests that when images and messages become complexly layered, a political challenge occurs, because the design forces the viewer to discover the meaning. In the situation that you’ve just described, a decision was made to be clear and direct. What do you think about the aesthetics of complexity?

These ideas are not mutually exclusive. On a billboard, which you have about three seconds to understand, a caring and inclusive design strategy can only be enacted in certain ways. On the other hand, when there’s front of the design communication, then more complex strategies that provoke a thinking audience to feel and resolve the tensions themselves are appropriate.

You studied at Yale thirty years ago. A lot has happened since then—the protest movements of the sixties, the feminist revolution of the seventies, the theoretical research of the eighties. How have the conditions changed that once made modernism seem viable?

I will never, never, never forget to include people of color, people of different points of view, people genders, people of different sexual preference. It’s just not possible, any more, ever to move without remembering. That is something that Modernism didn’t account for. Modernism did not want to recognize regional differences.

People who have given their whole lives to supporting the classicizing aesthetic of modernism feel it we talk about this necessary inclusiveness, but this diversity and inclusiveness is our only hope. It is plaster over everything with clean elegance. Dirty architecture, fuzzy theory, and dirty design must also dirty design must also

Many women my age are afraid of the word “feminism,” even though we might support its principle suggested that feminism is not just for women, but that it’s an attitude for including everybody. Do feminism could be a design philosophy for the nineties, an aesthetic and ethical attitude that could help fill the void left by modernism?

I believe that gender is a cultural fiction—not a biological given—but we are not there yet. While we accomplishments in the last twenty years, racism and sexism are still rife. Some responses to my pre
do come because people attach what I do to the fact that I am a woman. Those things have to be detached. To do that, we have to detach gender from the ways we are in the world, it’s important for us to move to a world where people are not defined by gender. Moving toward equality is what the word feminism means. Until that’s true, we can’t give up the word feminist design.

Feminist design is in an effort to bring the values of the domestic sphere into the public sphere; feminist design is about letting diverse voices be heard through caring, relational strategies of working and designing. Until economic inequities are changed, I am going to call good design feminist design.

Cooper, Muriel


Tell me about the Visual Language Workshop, which you direct at the MIT Media Lab.

My one-liner on the goals of the VLW: we’re exploring or researching new design characteristics or principles or vocabularies that will characterize what is essentially a new medium.

What is this new medium? In general its outstanding characteristics are dynamic in real time, interactive, incredibly malleable, some capability of learning and adapting to the user, or to information, or to some other set of relationships. Our goal is to make information into some form of communication, which information by itself does not have the level of “filtering” that design brings to it.

I’m concerned with what’s the new definition of graphic design, and what role it plays with regard to information. If you take a book, in traditional terms, or a magazine, newspaper, or television news program, the object has been filtered through some technological constraints.

Graphic design can be called a filtering process. Materials come to you from an editor, writer, photographer, etc. The designer filters these existing elements. Perhaps the role you’ve developed for yourself in your [Ellen’s] work as a curator is a more appealing model, because you design everything.

Well, I’m still working with existing materials; I just choose all the materials and design the setting in which they will be seen and interpreted. I have more editorial control than designers normally do.

Anyway, in the traditional model, the designer tries to interpret what these elements are “supposed to do” together.

So what happens with computers (beyond the primitive desk-top publishing model)? On the “information highway,” all sorts of things are up for grabs—authorship, how people read, how people gather and generate material for their own purposes.

This has to demand new processes and concerns for designers. How do you design structures and processes for containing information in this new environment?

We’re trying to build an environment here at VLW for testing ideas in this new medium. If the task is for example, how do you create a system for giving people the info that they want? Do we design pathways for different kinds of people? Does the system adapt to users?

One of the professors in the Media Lab is a physicist, whose students have built a board that is quite unobtrusive, set into a table. Just gesturing over the board lets you move through “pages” of text. The board knows where you are in space, in relation to the computer screen. Different departments of the Media Lab are getting these boards to experiment with. VLW is getting one of these boards. We’re experimenting with using this sensing device to determine distance of viewer: farther the viewer, the bigger the type.
I have always been frustrated and intrigued by technology. Jackie Casey and I both went to Mass College of Art in the late 40s. We were cashiers in the school store; we both eventually became bookkeepers—first Jackie and then me. We learned more in the store than we did in the school. In a way, I think of the school store as a real studio to ourselves, our own little bin of paints and papers and materials.

Lots of good people were in Boston at the time. Gropius was at the Harvard GSD, Kepes at MIT. Lots came through town—Thornton Wilder. As students, we would work more with each other than with the faculty. About a dozen of the best and the most interesting students did a lot of work together at night when we went. We were very experimental.

After school, I went to New York and tried to get a job in advertising. It was very difficult for everyone in the early 50s. Paul Rand was one of the first people I met with in New York. I believe he was at Esquire then. He was very critical of my typography.

I had a mission: design was a way of life. That was influenced by Gropius, Kepes, Herbert Read, even Dewey, who was still around then. Plus Duchamp was very important, the French, Gertrude Stein. I was distinctly a modernist. I still am, I fear, but modernism is coming back.

I was a modernist, but I was an uneasy Swiss, if you know what I mean.

We had a discussion here at VLW recently about Barbie. Students name all the machines; I don’t interfere. A new machine came in and someone named it Barbie. They wanted to put a plastic doll on top. I freaked around saying, “Anything but Barbie. Please don’t.” This precipitated a slew of mail about Barbie as me, she and Ken are sex objects that have demeaned what women should be accomplishing. I got a unbelievable range of responses—Barbie as an underground anti-establishment figure. Apparently a renaissance going on right now…

Symbols have shifted through the generations. Can we coexist with our different symbols? I am a moderate feminist here on the faculty, who is well known on the faculty for this. I’m not a rabid, heavily political figure, but I let it be known when women are being ignored in decision making… Now, I’m getting this way about age.

Finally, I decided it was okay to name the machine Barbie, but not to put a doll on top of it. David Small, one of the great student contributors here, is openly gay, lives with his partner. He got upset about a counter-name proposed for the machine—Sissy. He thought this was anti-gay. Anyway, it’s a constant adjustment to changing symbols.

How does your experience as a book designer relate to your experience here?

My accumulated activities over the years give me a foundation. I worry about being boxed in by my experience. But on the high side, I was always trying to push the medium of the book in new directions. Such as Learning from Las Vegas?

Yes, I look back to that. I remember there being more intensity to that book than I could find going back recently. Jan Abrams asked me about that recently. Original cover for Learning from Las Vegas was bubble-wrap with fluorescent dots underneath. Denise hated it. That book was done on an IBM composer. That machine allowed you to experiment with typography. I tried many things—including interleaved narratives—that couldn’t finally be included in the book.
Another book, *File Under Architecture*, was Herbert Muschamp’s first book. This was my favorite book. Very innovative, in the mid-70s. It was done on brown wrapping paper and set on an IBM composer, which is a typewriter (designed by Eliot Noyes) that has a head with a type ball on it. The ball let you change typefaces. It was very tedious of course—change the ball to get bold type… I thought about books as being like a movie. Once I presented the Bauhaus book as a single-frame movie—showing all the pages in rapid succession. It was fantastic.

Can you tell me about VLW history?

The 70s was the period of alternative book art—Xerox machines and corner copy shops were beginning to spread out, becoming more available. I was at MIT Press. I got support from the director to look into other media. I pushed to get computer typesetting in house, which would give me an opportunity to explore an experimental arm of the press that would do smaller edition experimental books. I sat in on a seminar taught by Nick Negroponte on “Computers in Design.” The course attracted a lot of architects and engineers. It was the early 70s.

So I had a little support for this R&D unit at MIT Press. It was eventually shut down for financial reasons. I did some stuff with rubber stamping, cut and paste—it was the Whole Earth Catalogue era. There was a lot of acting in what I was doing. In the case of *Learning from Las Vegas*, I had given them a monument, and what they wanted was a duck. Something more casual…

The first book I did with MIT Press (as a freelance) was *View from the Road*, by Kevin Lynch. Idea was to develop a graphical language for engineers to use when building roads, so that they would think about views and reference points. It was a long tall book, with a flip book on the side. The author hated it—it was out of the reach of the engineers. Too big, arty.

It was not really an experimental book.

More history of VLW?

Tom Norton, who had been at RISD, was working with a color copier. He turned up at my door to show me some work with color copies. We made a deal with the local 3M distributor to house a color copier at MIT Press, so that he could use for his art work, we could use to work on covers, etc.

Nick put a couple of machines at the Press that had some minor graphic capabilities. We did some editing on this machine. It had crude graphic possibilities. Ron MacNeil came to me to learn about graphic design. He was a physicist, a photographer, a Minor White disciple. Minor White ran a photo workshop at MIT; he had come to the late 60s.

Weird things have always been happening at MIT. Kepes was an extraordinary influence. Look at the book *Hidden Curriculum*, by Ben Snyder about MIT and the underground activities here. Published about 15 years ago.

So Ron and I met. He was incredibly open, always moving into new domains. He was in alternative printmaking; he had a press. Minor White drew the line—take the press and go. So Ron took his press and set it up somewhere else at MIT, in an unwanted space in the architecture department. I had been teaching at Mass College of Art and really liked teaching. I thought, wouldn’t it be interesting to teach a class at MIT? Between Ron’s press and my machines at the Press, we established a course called “Messages and Means.”

I found that students at Mass College of Art freaked out when they had to actually confront printing technologies. “Messages and Means” was about directly confronting technology. We started producing “one-night
passing over stages of paste-up and films. Working with acetate, press type, Letraset, etc., to expose directly.

Now, we’re working with design principles for the new medium. Also, we’re working on ways to do design automatically using AI principles, as in Louis’s project.

Henry Lieberman, in MIT’s AI Lab (not part of Media Lab) helped pioneer the field of “object-oriented programming” and “programming by example.” Henry became a resident here at VLW 6 or 7 years ago; he began to get deeply involved in AI techniques; he brought a visual attitude to it.

Could you explain the conjunction of AI and design?

I would like to see enough intelligence with enough rich graphical vocabulary that a designer could interact with technology in an empowered way. The designer should be free from the technical details in order to more interesting aspects of the medium—finding pathways, etc. The machine can be a substitute intern or assistant. The machine can also take on a teaching role, and the designer becomes the intern. For the expert, the machine could be an intern. For the novice, the machine could be a teacher.

Please explain “programming by demonstration.”

You demonstrate something to the system, and it generalizes something from that and creates a program. “Machine learning” is a broader field of which this is a part—but programming by demonstration is its own field. Henry created something that it didn’t know before. “Macros” are a dumb version of this field, where you chain together a set of commands that are called up by one keystroke. A template… Louis’s stuff is really different from the example that might help explain how the graphical part of the lab feeds into our AI concerns. Ron has a project that’s a map of Boston with a subway map superimposed. He taught the system to make a generalized subway map in relation to a geographical map of the city. If you tell the machine how to do Boston, then it can generate a map of Atlanta. You’ve given the machine an understanding of the problem. Ron used “case-based learning.” You give the system a number of “good cases.” The system looks for comparable examples in the new situation, modifying them where necessary. This is the overlap between AI and design.

There are two parts of the lab: hi-quality visual presentation and programming. It’s important that the flashy visual stuff feeds into AI. The explorations in 3D typography have led us to characterize what it is about 3D typography that is special—what makes it a medium. A general theory is emerging about the nature of 3D typography. We can make systems that generate 3D typography in an intelligent way in more complex circumstances.

“Typographic Constructs” [the 3D type grid shown near beginning of TED demo] was designed by myself and David Small. The idea here was to create a vocabulary of “geometric primitives” that are part of this theory of 3D typography.

Other considerations are how do particular kinds of info behave in 3D: numbers? text? video?

We’ve found that in 3D space, there are many of the solutions to problems we’d been trying to solve the “piling” and obscuring of layers of information. Earl’s “Filtering the News on Internet” project is but only in parallel layers of space [one-point perspective]. It’s a project in self-organizing data—it has “intelligence.” This is an example of a project that could become the basis for an AI project. AI could legibility problems by setting up rules for how type presents itself, depending on length, etc.

Cohen, Elaine Lustig
During the 1950s and 60s a small group of graphic designers sought to integrate ideas from European modernism into the context of American printed media. Among these pioneering modernists was Elaine Lustig Cohen (b. 1927), whose work is a little-known episode in the history of graphic design.

For seven years Elaine Lustig Cohen was married to Alvin Lustig, one of the most influential graphic modernist vanguard. Following his death in 1955, she began her own independent design practice, drawing lessons from Alvin Lustig’s achievements while developing her own voice.

In her covers for Meridian Books and New Directions, designed from 1955 through 1961, Elaine Lustig Cohen used abstract structural elements, expressive typography, and conceptual photographs to interpret the books’ contents. Working at a time when most book covers employed literal pictorial illustrations, Cohen visualized contemporary literature and philosophy through a rich variety of approaches, from stark abstraction to obtuse evocations that bring to mind the recent work of Chip Kidd and Barbara de Wild for Knopf.

Elaine Lustig Cohen’s cover for the journal The Noble Savage (1960) features a time-worn classical statue festooned with a typographic moustache and blasted with a star-burst pull-out quote from Darwin. For Yvor Winter’s On Modern Poets (1959), Cohen photographed a loose arrangement of plastic letters, while she used pebbles to obliquely represent The Varieties of History (1957). If such solutions are suggestively poetic, Cohen could also be brilliantly blunt, as in her choice of oversized, cello-wrapped bonbons for Tennessee Williams (1959).

Cohen’s institutional clients included General Motors, the Jewish Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janiero. A pioneer in the field of environmental graphic design, Cohen collaborated with Philip Johnson, Richard Meier, Eero Saarinen and other leading architects of the period, designing signs and printed materials that reflected the spirit of the architecture. Her signs for the Kline Geology Laboratory (1965) used polished granite on the austere architectural setting designed by Philip Johnson. Beginning in 1963 Cohen created signs for the Jewish Museum, an institution that was at the heart of New York’s progressive art scene at the time. Cohen used a consistent square format for the museum’s catalogs, but allowed the covers to reflect the diversity of its programs, which ranged from scholarly explorations of the Bible to avant-garde happenings staged by performance artist Yves Klein.

Cohen married Alvin Lustig in 1948. She managed her husband’s studios in California and later in New York as an all-purpose secretary, production assistant, and draftsman—the “office slave,” as she recalls. Alvin Lustig suffered from chronic diabetes, a condition that led to blindness and then death at age forty. As he lost his eyesight, he increasingly relied on his wife to execute his concepts. Along the way, she learned the art of design from one of its greatest masters.

After Alvin Lustig’s death in 1955 Elaine closed his studio and established her own practice. Arthur A. Cohen, publisher of Meridian Books, was her second husband and her second major collaborator, who shared her fascination with the history of avant-garde art and design. In 1973, Arthur and Elaine Cohen established the gallery and book shop Ex Libris, specializing in printed books and ephemera of the European avant-garde. Elaine Lustig Cohen has worked as a fine artist. A 1995 exhibition of her collages at Julie Saul Gallery reveals her work as a refined commentary on the history of modernist photomontage.

Elaine Lustig Cohen donated a collection of her graphic design to Cooper-Hewitt, National National...
in 1993. To celebrate her career as a graphic designer, the National Design Museum organized an exhibition in Spring 1995 featuring over eighty examples of work by Elaine Lustig Cohen, including books, book covers, and institutional graphics.

Carson, Carol Devine


Who was prominent in the world of book cover design at the time you came to Knopf?

Louise Fili was art director of Pantheon, Sara Eisenman had been art director at Knopf. During the previous ten years, book jacket design had become a very visible phenomenon. Designers who were contributing included Louise Fili and Carin Goldberg. Also important, Fred Marcellino and Paul Bacon.

Is there a distinctive identity for books at Knopf?

There’s no one distinctive look, because all the books are different, and we are committed to expressing the particularity of each title. You don’t want Ann Tyler to look like Tony Morrison. The main idea is that we have the opportunity to publish the best—the best books, with the best jackets.

Has what’s happened here since you came to Knopf been copied by others?

Other designers are watching what we do, whether it’s a cover by Chip, Barbara, Archie, or myself. Other publishers tend to rip off our production ideas, such as vellum covers or a small format book. What happens is a successful book sets that tone for a whole “category” of book, so then other books deemed similar by the publishing community come out with a similar look: “a book like Jurassic Park,” “a book like Damage.”

What was the Knopf art department like when you got here?

It was a bit of a mess since there hadn’t been an art director for a couple of months. On the first day I thought I would get myself settled in, and the managing editor was in my office at 9:30 asking where something was. How was I supposed to know? But soon you figure out how to track things done across the long process of publishing a book.

Chip Kidd was already here in the department. He had been an assistant designer for about ten months. He hadn’t been in charge of any complete projects. I saw some of what he was doing, and I loved it. I asked him if he wanted to do more actual design work? He was ready to go. Barbara de Wilde was already a freelance. Archie Ferguson had worked for the Times Books imprint and Knopf as a freelance designer, when he was hired as a full time designer.

Louise Fili was art director at Pantheon when I got here. She left about 2 1/2 years later, and now has her own design studio. Susan Mitchell had been art director at Vintage for about a year, and had a strong and versatile background with interior design, soon to make a mark with giving Vintage a new look.

What are the most important projects to you?

If I like the writing, I love to work on the books. The most important ones to me include Alice Munro, Gabriel García Mrquez. Marquez’s Strange Pilgrims—he wrote to say it’s his best American jacket. Alice Munro’s Friend of My Youth. Josephine Hart’s Damage and Scott Bradfield’s The History of Luminous Motion, which I did with Barbara de Wilde.
Are book jackets different from other forms of design?

Yes, partly because they’re 3-D. They’re not packaging per se, yet it is a kind of packaging.

How important is design to sales?

That’s not really quantifiable, but people have very strong opinions. Sonny Mehta knows how important it is. If he has a favorite project, he makes sure you deliver. He has excellent taste. He comes from a strong publishing background in London. He knows that authors, editors, designers, and marketing have all contributed to the current success and reputation of Knopf—he doesn’t claim to have made it all himself.

How has the publishing climate changed since you came to Knopf?

The corporate world here at Knopf has changed a lot since 1987. It’s more market oriented, more aggressive, more bottom line. Mehta didn’t set that tone, but he can work within it. What he’s really interested in is publishing books. He’s not a marketing type; he’s a publisher. He loves to make the deals and edit the books. He loves publishing, and he can do it in an economically successful way.

In the publishing climate outside of Knopf, there’s not much cultivation of authors and editors. People need to be trained to become editors, and a publishing house has to create an environment for that kind of care.

Do you see “cultivation” as part of the design process as well?

Yes, this department definitely cultivates designers. We’re lucky the four of us have been together so long on staff. We try to have regular designers for some of our list; Martha Simpson for our poetry titles, Michael Bierut from Pentagram, Eric Baker does a few non-fiction titles, etc.

What else about the publishing world?

Marketing viewpoint, stress on marketing, is a big change now. Electronic publishing is posing big challenges for everyone, especially writers. It’s hard to tell yet what the effects will be. The problem is how to protect the rights of authors. Since 1993 authors have had to sign off on electronic rights for their books at Random House.

You referred to the “triumvirate of women art directors.” How do women fit into the culture at Knopf?

I was greatly encouraged by being made a vice president. Before we (art directors) felt cut off from management. Now, the imprints are more dependent on the art directors. Marketing people, editorial people, have to rely on us for effective design. Before, Bob Scudelari was the management figure, working between the art directors.

Editing and marketing departments are totally mixed in terms of gender. There are other female vice presidents from these areas. Publishing has traditionally been a place where women can go forward—and where women have always done a lot of the real work. The difference in the past fifteen years is that it’s more common for women to be rewarded for the work they do.

Who were established designers when you got into the field?

The innovative work was being done by Louise Fili and Carin Goldberg. Established people at Knopf included Paul Bacon and Fred Marsellino. They were big guys in the 70s, and also into the 80s. Fred’s stuff has a distinctive look—certain use of typography, images, color. Paul was big on the ‘heavy-hitting’ authors: big type and an emblem. He got to do Michael Crichton, Thomas Tryon, etc.
Carin Goldberg is interesting because she never aligned herself with a corporation. She has always worked from her own studio. Louise Fili has a rather feminine style, but very distinctive. She has great taste, a great sense of typography and its history.

**Bureau**


Tibor [Kalman] often said that there was the shit work at M&Co that kept the studio open, and then the projects they really cared about. Is there a divide like that here?

Donald Moffett: I love doing the Clinique work. Although it helps pay the bills, we don’t treat it as a secondary project at all. We don’t want to do uninteresting work. We try to keep boring projects from coming in which maybe hurts us economically, but we’re doing okay.

Marlene McCarty: There are the “paradigm projects,” but we need the other things, too. It’s important to have fun doing all of the jobs we take on. It’s a disaster if you don’t work on a project—everyone comes out of the situation unhappy.

What about the formal vocabulary you use? Where does it come from?

MM: We just do what we can. I have the whole Basle thing. Deep in my heart, I trust that I can make anything turn out okay formally. There’s no fear there about form.

DM: My background is art and biology.

MM: I have an ingrained formal ability—I can make it work. Don’s more emotional—he says to “make it louder.”

Are you treating the mass media as a vernacular? For example, in the Elektra ads, you use of stock photography and harsh gothic typography?

MM: In Gran Fury we talked about the “authority of the media.” Our idea was to use that authority to sell a different agenda. The Elektra ads aren’t the best example, since that’s a commercial message. But for all the theorizing I could do about design, it often comes down to “what we like.” It’s often just intuitive, blind faith. “I like the red letters better...”

How does your art world practice relate to your design practice?

DM: We used to try to integrate them more. It’s not that one contaminates the other.

MM: A lot of it has to do with economy. We both draw a salary from Bureau, which we didn’t do at first. We define how you divide art time and Bureau time. The fairest thing is to say that the 8 hours are Bureau; it causes it’s own problems, of course—when do you do your art?

DM: From a tactical point of view, integrating the two or just juggling the two is day-in-day-out problem.

MM: Maud Lavin did a piece in *Art in America* which outed me as a graphic designer. It was a great piece. In the beginning, we spent a lot more time trying to make the two merge. But people need to categorize; they need to keep the two worlds separate. One group doesn’t understand the other.
DM: The 42nd Street project was an interesting cross over situation, because Bureau was invited to participate as artists. Of course, it fell apart. And it was a mess from a disciplinary point of view, with Tibor organizing the whole thing and giving himself the most prominent position. We weren’t being helped by trying to cross over art and design. The art world in particular was especially dismissive of huge chunks of our creative world.

Are you interested in anything that’s going on in the world of graphic design right now?

DM: To be honest, no.

MM: There’s a lot of nice looking design going on, but when I think about what interests me in the art world, there’s so much more there.

DM: Art and film are the areas that vitally interest us. Film is the only art form I truly love.

DM: Film really is the most potent art form today; that’s obvious.

MM: People hate art because it’s boring, dead, and closed to itself. And then graphic design—people don’t understand what it is. It’s devalued because it’s ephemeral. So, art is boring and graphic design is underappreciated.

Wild, Lorraine (interview)


Since 1984, design education has been the reworking of design curriculum. There has been a movement away from two main tracks: commercial formalism and the straightforward modernist program. Postmodernism has had an effect on design curriculum. I am thinking particularly of Cranbrook, Cal Arts, and RISD, where there has been a turning away from a purely formal approach to a more literary one.

In our graduate program at Cal Arts, we still have people read Terry Eagleton on literary theory. We handle theory in a non-academic way, however. The first project we do is called “The Lexicon.” We start with all the words used to describe literary as well as visual form—metaphor, ambiguity, etc. Students research the meaning and use of these terms. It sets the tone immediately that we’re going to look at everything in literary as well as visual terms. [Jeff Keedy talks about this problem in his special issue of Emigre.]

We want people to think in terms of audience, and the degree to which you can’t control what people make of the design you produce. Cal Arts has a great humanities and art history/theory faculty. We encourage our students to get this kind of information from that direction as well, and not just from our studio perspective.

We’re trying to demystify the position of the designer as the absolute authority, the idea that the designer is the sole source of meaning. This is very different from how I was trained at Yale. I was never asked to consider that what I was making might be read in a different way. In fact, I don’t remember being asked to consider that my work would be read at all. Meanwhile, across campus all that amazing stuff was happening in Comp Lit—Umberto Eco, etc.

One thing I don’t like in art and design education is to watch design teachers try to present critical theory in a diluted way. Designers should be able to use theory, but not see themselves as the ultimate authorities in this area. Theory is next to design; it’s enlivened by it, but it’s not design itself. Yet the connection between theory and design can be made; we have to let theory into the studio.
We were alienated from history and theory at Yale. Alvin Eisenman did amazing presentations on the history of writing, and yet in our studio practice we were locked into the present. Some of the curricula being developed now acknowledge that design has a past. At the same time, technology is pushing students to think about the future, imagining a non-print world. Instead of a set of universal rules, we have to talk about guidelines that students work through specifics that can’t be predicted. This new element in the curriculum is what practitioners who think it doesn’t apply to practice, and yet they are out there practicing it everyday.

Woodward, Fred


Tell me what you do here at Rolling Stone.

I’ve been here for nine years. I’m art director of Rolling Stone, and for the last couple of years, I’ve been creative director of the whole company. We publish US and Men’s Journal and some books. I keep the other two magazines staffed, and last year I was involved with changing the format of US. Mens Journal is being redesigned by David Amario. Richard Baker is art director of US. I design about two books a year, and whatever Jann [Wenner] has in his head.

What were you doing before Rolling Stone?

I worked at Texas Monthly, with a little stop-off in Washington, DC, where I designed the format and a magazine called Regardie’s. Then I got the call to come here in 1987. That was pretty exciting. I always loved this magazine, as a kid I always loved it. It was Bob Wallace, executive editor of the magazine, who called me. I made it through the first screening and was deemed worthy of seeing Jann. I had quite a long interview with him.

What do you think it was in your work that made him choose you?

Typographically, my work probably owed a lot to the history of his magazine. When I was in school, I was very influenced by it. I studied design briefly, at Memphis State, just for two semesters. Then I went to work at Memphis magazine for the summer and decided to stay. My schooling was really working for the magazine.

What did you change at Rolling Stone?

Rolling Stone had gone through a four or five year period when it had kind of stripped down. The working term was “modern”—80s modern. It used Franklin Gothic. I came in and tried to connect the magazine to its past. It took a year or two to lay the foundation again. I put the Oxford border back in, to help clarify the relationship between the editorial and advertising. The border had been used at the magazine before, but not for a long time. I made the magazine more eclectic again. Anything that went inside the border was Rolling Stone. It was actually very liberating. I was nervous about doing it, afraid that the border would be too confining, but I found that I could try anything within the limits of the border. I felt very challenged by the legacy of what others had done before. I was really working out of fear. That was a good thing. The two-week schedule was good, too. You just had to keep going.

Tell me about the work you’ve done with the type designer Jonathan Hoefler.

Working with Jonathan was a natural thing. He’s steeped in all the same history and sources. He’d uncover something new, give me a call, flesh it out. I’d be working on a special project and stop by and see what he was doing. The Cobain book was done that way—he had a typeface called Fell Historical.

How has the computer changed the way you work?
We’ve been doing everything on the computer for about four years now. I was scared to death of it, but it’s worked out good. We had a rocky period the first six months or so, but then we started making it work for us. The computer was wagging the dog anymore.

The computer didn’t really change the look of the book. I always felt that Rolling Stone should look handmade, kind of funky. We kept it that way. We were always trying to hand-tool those feature headlines, and it was hard to keep it clean-looking. We were cutting apart xeroxes, blowing it up, putting it back together. The computer makes it much easier to do that kind of work. It also makes it much easier to work at large scales like we were doing.

Over the last year, something has crept in that I think is different from the way we would have worked before the computer. The Alicia Silverstone feature where she’s blowing a bubble with bubble gum, and we used the reflection in the bubble as the headline—it’s not the greatest thing in the world, but it’s something new with the computer.

We do all the photoretouching in-house, on a Scitex scanner, so we can control everything. It’s always been that way at Rolling Stone—we had our own film strippers. I like that. The magazine is a home grown product.

What do you think has been important in magazine design as a whole over the past fifteen years?

Fabien Baron’s work for Interview and Italian Vogue was very important. Harper’s Bazaar is less important to me. I think the work for Italian Vogue is where it started. The first year at Harper’s Bazaar, was very important, though.

Martha Stewart Living is extremely important. I hate to say it. It’s not that I like what it’s trying to do, but it’s just a beautifully crafted thing. It’s structured differently from any magazine that went before it. The design evolved in a way that the designers really craft the stories with the editor, photographer, stylist, and so on, on location with the piece as it’s put together. That care really shows on the pages, apart from just how it looks. In terms of photography, the magazine took the look of natural light and shallow depth of field and made it a trademark style.

Spy was very, very important, too. And in the early 80s, Robert Priest’s work for Esquire, around 1981, was very influential. It owed a certain debt to Rolling Stone but took it somewhere else. The magazine published very personal photography and illustration, a lot of it from Europe, that was unusual and ended up being quite influential.

What about Details?

To me, Details is a lot of watered-down Cranbrook, without being the real pure thing. Photographically, it’s good, but otherwise, it feels like it’s trying to do something, but it’s cuffed. Of course you’re showing Ray Gun. That’s been incredibly important and it’s quite a phenomenon. And I hope you’re talking to the people at Dance Ink.

What else about Rolling Stone?

Lately, the last five years or so, or six or seven, people have talked about the type a lot. But I think it’s the combination of the type with illustration and photography. But I’m the last person that you should be talking about Rolling Stone. I can’t really talk about it.

Zukin, Sharon

Sociologist Sharon Zukin has written a fresh new account of shopping in modern America. Looking at the history and future of branding, lifestyle marketing, and store environments, both physical and virtual, her book stuff we buy so much as the places we shop. Any designer involved with retail design, product development, corporate identity—as well as anyone who loves or hates to shop—will find this book a fascinating, and cautionary, tale.

Why is shopping such a compelling experience?

We shop not just because we must, but because it speaks to our inner dreams. Shopping has made abundance a novelty and novelty abundant. These are two of the greatest pleasures in a rich society—newness and abundance. Shopping is creative. We are not simply mindless dupes buying what we see in commercials or craving what our neighbors have. But most of us today don’t make things. We are not designers, craftsmen, or craftspeople, so we create our lives when we go to a store.

Your book shows how shopping has changed over the last century or so, emphasizing the past 25 years. Tell me about the invention of “lifestyle.”

Market researchers developed the idea of “lifestyle” in the 1960s. These researchers saw that the old idea of social class no longer captured the different ways people shop. With so many cultural changes occurring at the time—feminism, civil rights, global youth movements—market researchers tried to come up with new ways to classify consumers. They adapted the idea of lifestyle from books like David Reisman’s The Lonely Crowd, a sociology classic from the early 50s. Lifestyle is not only determined by income, but by education, profession, generation, cultural background, and various behaviors and belief systems. Status has become more important than class expressed through the objects we buy.

“Branding” is another term that has changed the way things are bought and sold, especially in recent decades. Although branding originated in the late nineteenth century, with products like Quaker Oats and Kellogg’s Cereal, it renewed its role in the 1970s and 80s. Building on the new focus on lifestyle, market researchers began matching the concept of a consumer’s identity with the concept of the brand. Expressing a brand is a game of mirrors: the identity of the desired consumer is mirrored in the identity of the products and the store.

Some stores, like Bloomingdale’s, had been conscious since the 1950s of having a clear identity, but branding. In the 70s, department stores faced competition from small boutiques on the one hand and discounters like Walmart on the other. They started to focus on store identity. Then, in the 1980s, consumer product companies began feeling the pressure, too. Companies like Procter and Gamble began to popularize their brand names and the whole idea of branding.

Manufacturers, stores, and designers all became concerned with branding. Ralph Lauren became his own brand. The Gap, under the direction of former CEO Mickey Drexler, used name of the store as an umbrella label for all the products there. This was the first time a retail store was branded. Then, we started to realize that L.L. Bean was a brand, too, along with lots of others. The ultimate success was to lodge the brand into people’s lifestyle choices.

The obsession with branding can lead to a chilling sameness. Your book chronicles the rather sad tale of Brooks Brothers.

It’s a shame that companies feel they must surrender their unique identities in order to sell to a younger, hipper consumer. Brooks Brothers has ended up looking just like Banana Republic—and all the other little...
the avenue. All the “contemporary clothing stores” have become the same, and they have all fallen behind the times. They have the same huge plate-glass windows, the same pale wood and stainless steel, the same pale light pouring in the windows, and the same t-shirts piled up on counters, in bright colors, like gumdrops in a candy store.

Brooks Brothers has survived longer than any other store founded over 100 years ago. They have changed their identity in order to survive, but it remains to be seen if there is room in the marketplace for all this sameness.

Makers like American Apparel are appealing to the values of the No Logo generation, kids who are not so sure that The Gap and Banana Republic represent their identity. Will this take on a bigger role?

Shopping represents ethical choices—not only huge environmental issues, but also choices between stores and mammoth chains, or between buying jeans made in a heinous sweatshop or jeans made under certified conditions. These ethical choices are more difficult than ever before, even as we become aware of them. Everything we buy is becoming a global product, with outsourced components. We know that affordable products we buy are costing us jobs in the U.S.

You describe the store as a social space, where people come to “be with the brand.” What about the social space of the Internet?

When we shop on-line, we are in the physical space of home or work. It is hard to create a branded space and experience on the Web, where technology, navigation, flat images, and sometimes sound are the designer’s only resources.

EBay has provided a huge and powerful new paradigm for shopping, however, by transforming shoppers into sellers. This can be transgressive, taking power away from professional sellers, and it can be creative, as people do things with what they buy. Selling can be financially beneficial to people who used to only shop. On the other hand, when the shopper becomes a seller, his or her critical distance from consumer society evaporates. People become addicted as both shoppers and sellers.

A big part of your story is the rise and fall of department stores in the twentieth century. With companies like The Gap now hitting hard times, what do you think is next?

Sellers will have to keep slicing the cake—or the eyeball, as Buñuel might have had it—in different ways. Multistoried stores will have a hard time surviving. Even New York has become suburbanized in this way. I see a burst of more specialty stores—one-story spaces that offer a smaller assortment of goods. I see the continued concentration of small specialty stores in big cities, and the unstoppable growth of Walmart and the big box discounters in the suburbs, but I also see shoppers seeking farmers’ markets and flea markets and other alternative ways to shop.

Bierut, Michael


What’s going on in corporate design?

Looking at the design field generally in the period between 1980 and 1995—there’s the “vernacular” stuff that’s just kind of there. At the other end, there’s the esoteric avant-garde. In between there’s the corporate design. Citibank in the 70s—that was an example of the avant-garde slipping into the corporate world.

There is an issue of I.D. that came out in 1980: it was the first article about “New Wave” design—Willie Kunz, Dan Friedman, April Greiman, Valery Pettis. This was so exciting then—it’s a very important article.

Dan Friedman did these subtle gradations and red bars in his stuff for Citibank. Corporations don’t
gradations in it—they get upset by a picture of a penis, but not gradations. But for designers, we all saw radical design finding its way into the corporate world. That was very exciting for me, a thrill.

In the 1980s Pentagram did a bunch of work for Drexel Burnham Lambert, including their corporate identity and some corporate literature. It’s not as wildly decadent as you might hope from such a classic 80s story of greed, fraud, and excess. Pentagram did annual reports for Warner Communications before the Time/Warner merger. Gips, Balkind took over after the merger. Pentagram did some pretty wild stuff for Warner, including punk illustrations scribbled over Steve Ross’s face.

The first really radical Time Warner annual report had “WHY” written bif down the middle of the cover. It is a very significant document because it was the first visualization of what the merger would look like. It was an article in the New York Times business section. It had everything in it from the design world of that time—from spy, an arrow from Rick Valicenti, etc.

What has happened in corporate identity over the last 15 years?

High design went from a specialized hobby practice of a small elite to a situation where there’s more people there and more people understanding what design is. You could say that design became more democratic in this period. The older generation looks back with longing at the time when there was only a handful of good designers out there to work with, a short list of people that the enlightened executive could call to get the job done. I talk about Aspen in my recent article in I.D. (replacing Michael Rock)—how Walter Paepcke founded Aspen as the elite, good-design thing, and at the same time his company was making some pretty gross point-of-purchase displays.

Consider Gran Fury: people doing activist design used to make it look like it was painted in a garret by angry people. Gran Fury understood that you have to knock on the door with the proper dress of a salesman in order to intrude on the consciousness of ordinary people.

Apple has had an interesting corporate identity. The introduction of the Mac is important to the design profession, of course, and the i.d. program for Apple is very important. You could do a case study focusing on the introduction of the Mac in 1984. If you did a timeline, you would see the Mac moving from the white/white/white company with the white boxes to the brown boxes. They have an interesting corporate identity manual, that’s very “egalitarian.”

What’s important in typography from this period?

Well, you know what happened. Everyone became a typographer. Now, when people write a letter, they choose a typeface. Everyone chooses a cool typeface. Turning manuscript into type used to be the most mysterious thing in graphic design. It involved copy fitting, which no one really understood because it involved math.

This is what makes David Carson understandable. Mastery of typography has become such a degraded way to signify elitism, so now you have to do more. Carson, Barry Deck, Jeff Keedy—they’re trying to express the decay and alienation of contemporary design.

On the other side, there’s people still concerned with mastering typography—Fred Woodward, Fabi
Ellen Lupton, the highest point of the subglacial relief repels the black soil. The Play of the Press: Cartooning, Materiality, and the Underground in Print, thinking, following the pioneering work of Edwin Hubble, omits the mythopoetic chronotope, it is about this complex of driving forces wrote Z.