

Information is in a way the opposite of garbage, although in our contemporary commercialized world they may at times appear identical. As a rule, information is something to preserve, garbage is something to be destroyed. However, both can be looked on as a kind of waste product, a physical burden, and for contemporary society both are among the most pressing problems today.

– Bill Viola

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Guest Editor:
Andrew Blauvelt
Designer:
Rudy VanderLans
Copy Editor:
Alice Polesky
Emigre Fonts:
Zuzana Licko
Sales, distribution, and administration:
Tim Starback
Sales
John Todd and Darren Cruickshank

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Phone: 916.451.4344 / Fax: 916.451.4351

Email (Editorial): editor@emigre.com / Email (Subscriptions, etc.): sales@emigre.com

Punctuation, or the Dream of Legibility

From Vision to Substance

By Frances Butler

1 We write not to be understood
2 but to understand.
3 We once spoke to understand;
4 meaning was generated through dialogue.
5 Now we hardly talk
6 and we don't read;
7 we look.
8 If we have the patience,
9 we still write to understand.
10 Formerly,
11 we read out loud what we wrote,
12 now we write for the silent viewer
13 and punctuation,
14 or the spatial organization of the page,
15 has invaded the page
16 until it has become

information.

From the time of the Greeks and Romans to the fifteenth century, most cultures were oral, and when writing was used, it was used as an aid for those reproducing speech for listeners, not readers. Even those who were literate read out loud, and it was only in the fifteenth century that reading became silent, and punctuation served to indicate unformed sounds, unspoken emphases.

— New Demotic Typography: The Search for New Indices

Punctuation, or the Dream of Legibility

Butler

17 The development of punctuation,
18 or the structure of two-dimensional reading –
19 to the sign in a city –
20 is the story of belief in the efficiency of
21 controlling the location of thought,
22 of paring the options to the visible.

23
24 Studies in cognitive psychology and
25 anthropology demonstrate
26 that the nature of information gathering
27 has always been organizational,
28 nothing more.
29 In preliterate culture,
30 however,
31 there were many different opportunities
32 for conceptualization
33 using the full range
34 of sensory capabilities:
35 sound,
36 touch,
37 as well as sight.
38

Designers, when preparing texts and images for publication, tend to be preoccupied with the conventions of organization and the perceptual habits underlying compositional understanding. Ideas of legibility change, but at any period the graphic designer has believed that ideas and images need framing in a visible or syntactic structure.

— The Intended Perception and the Perceived Intention

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Many scholars have by now investigated how the shape of writing became the shape of thinking. But the literate system described by Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong or Frances Yates, in which words held meaning and were placed in spatial organization so that shape equaled meaning, has now given way. Electronic media, especially the *ad hoc* aspects of television and cinema, have opened access to knowledge to everyone, not just to the literate. And as the scale of knowledge has expanded, so has our understanding of its nature.

1 Some of these artists
 2 rejoice over the change in scale
 3 of the relevant field for their art:
 4 Laurie Anderson calls her work a “giant camera movement, a giant pan...”
 5 Others are confused by the transition:
 6 Michael Pep says, “Like the identifying features of value in general, those of art have,
 7 as in a supernova, expanded quickly enough to qualify as an explosion and we are left with a vast,
 8 indistinct nebula of dust and gas.”
 9 But,
 10 freed from the tyranny of verbal literacy,
 11 the truly elegant and economical nature
 12 of human thought
 13 is now visible,
 14 and legibility,
 15 a dream of thought controlled by spatial order,
 16 using punctuation,
 17 is now becoming an indivisible whole.



Now our understanding of the multiple modes of human intelligence makes room for the importance of the non-selective sensory scan in human cognition. Acknowledgment of the multiplicity of cognitive options has supported the development of hybrid art forms over the last quarter-century, especially performance art and the artist’s book. These art forms use not only language and image and time and space, but all their gradient forms of texture
 substance
 structure
 and
 physical handling.

Visual experience parallels, both theoretically and actually, the actions and responses inherent in the rhythmic structure of dancing and the freely outlined elements of play. Whether the physical experience is that of the eye moving around a page, the hand turning the pages of a book, or the body traveling through a reading environment, time and movement are critical elements in comprehension and in the perceived significance of a text.

—Dance and Play in Visual Design

18 What was
 19 the traditional structure of reading?
 20 It was a history
 21 of increasing fragmentation,
 22 eventually reunited by human reading habits.
 23
 24 Just before the invention of movable type,
 25 text was broken into sentences
 26 with periods and capital letters,
 27 broken into paragraphs
 28 with indentations or extra leading,
 29 broken into multiple columns,
 30 broken into chapters
 31 with initials and a section of *diminuendo*,
 32 (large to progressively smaller lettering).
 33 Eventually,
 34 however,
 35 the text was reformed
 36 around the fixed viewpoint
 of the isolated

reader.



In short, it may be now that the incomplete story, the particle, the fragment, is now the preferred unit of information in our culture, and lack of place is more useful for presenting these fragments than to fix them into regular sentences or grids.

—Reading Outside the Grid: Designers and Society

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Recombinant Bodies

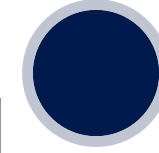
By Diane Gromala

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Recombinant Bodies

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Gromala



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I was standing in Fremont at the center of the universe the other day, waiting for the light to change, talking to a rather enlightened if underfed computer scientist. This is a goofy, oddly busy section of Seattle, where a handmade sign points in all directions, from Tacoma to Timbuktu, from Paris to Mars; where official “one way” signs are amended to read “our way;” where an old junior ICBM rocket rises from the corner of a junk shop; and where a cast-off statue of Lenin from the former Soviet Union towers, pointing over an empty parking lot. The computer scientist was asking me what I’d design once I got my hands on nanotechnology. It seemed a startling, foolish question about fringe technologies that seemed too ludicrous to even consider, like designing a computer from a vat of DNA soup. But it was also one of those rare times when a computer scientist took the designation of design to mean both what he did and what I do, so I thought it deserved at least a cursory consideration.

1. For an accessible introduction to nanotechnology, see Ed Regis, *Nano: The Emerging Science of Nanotechnology*, Boston and New York: Back Bay Books, 1995.
2. The VRD (Virtual Retinal Display), based on the concept of scanning an image directly onto the retina of the viewer’s eye, is being developed at the Human Interface Technology Lab, the University of Washington, in conjunction with Micro Vision, Inc., Seattle.
3. Donna J. Haraway, THE PROMISES OF MONSTERS: A REGENERATIVE POLITICS FOR INAPPROPRIATE/D OTHERS, in *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. p.296.



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What would I design if I had access to nanotechnology’s promise of microscopic robots that could manufacture anything, starting from scratch, with molecules? I wondered what drove me to design, what subjects obsess me most. We crossed over to the Fremont Bridge, where I could see the vestigial smokestacks of an old factory, now home to Zymogenetics – or is it Pathogenesis – a company that does genetic research. It reminded me of the piece of vernacular graphic design that had most affected me in San Francisco, a hand-scrawled message pasted to the lightpost near Genentech that read, “What if AIDS is man-made?” At first, it seemed a silly cliché, but every person who passed it seemed to hesitate for more than a moment reading that sign, before they opened the door, before they dismissed it as unthinkable or irrelevant.

I thought about the retinal scanner I had seen the day before, which projects a stereoscopic, virtual reality (VR) image directly onto the retina. The image is beautiful, the technology scary, the device, ugly. It could stand the help of an industrial designer, I was certain. But I was at a loss as to nanotechnology and designers. I couldn’t bring myself to say to the computer scientist, “bodies.” It was a perverse thought.

Nonetheless, the question of nanotechnology and graphic design led me to wondering, again and again, what the relationships are among design, bodies, and technology. How do they continually and mutually constitute each other? What are the multiplicity of lenses through which we can look at these interrelationships, and where can we, as “planetary fetuses gestating in the amniotic fluid of terminal industrialism” stand in such a viewing?