Graphic Design and the Next Big Thing

by Rudy VanderLans

A few months back Louise Sandhaus contacted me to see if I was interested in creating an issue of ***Emigre*** that would document ***101: The Future of Design Education in the Context of Computer-Based Media***, a symposium she had organized at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Holland. The symposium explored questions about what future graphic designers are being educated for and what the role of the designer will be. To encourage me to publish this information, Louise assured me that people were probably "chomping at the bit for ***Emigre*** to introduce this material in some intelligent and interesting way."

While ambivalent about the value of such crystal ball events, what intrigued me about this request was how ***Emigre*** continues to be regarded as the place where the Next Big Thing, for lack of a better term, is not only regularly covered but also expected to be covered. The many disgruntled letters about our recent shift in editorial policy away from such popular phenomena underline this fact.

This feeding the trout as one letter writer put it, the act of somehow keeping our readers abreast of trends, is an impossible task. Having been privy to the making of one trend in no way prepares one to recognize the harbingers of the next. I'm unsure whether this is because the Next Big Thing is simply a product of hindsight, or because it is human nature to regard ground-breaking work as the final solution, nullifying the possibility of the next Next Big Thing. The latter is particularly tempting to believe when you've had your moment in the sun while riding the Next Big Thing wave, but piques the younger generations who are eager to have their own experiences of experimentation and discovery.

Still, if you think about it, after hundreds of years of formal, typographic experimentation on the page, you would assume that we must at some point have exhausted the possibilities. Someone will come around, though, and disprove this, I'm sure. Tibor Kalman thinks otherwise when he states in ***Eye*** that "People haven't started fucking with the printed page in a serious way yet..." [1] Picturing what has passed before us, however, I cannot for the life of me think of what it could be that hasn't already been done. Actually, one could argue we reached that saturation point quite some time ago. Anything in print that appears new today can be considered a variation on age old themes. Purely from a formal point of view, that Layered Thing was fairly well explored by Piet Swart and Wolfgang Weingart. That Anti-Mastery Thing was pretty well exhausted by Fluxus and Punk, that Deconstructivist Thing was long ago mastered by just about everybody from Apollinaire to Edward Fella and that Illegible Thing was difficult to top after Victor Moscoso and Wes Wilson were done battling over who could make the reader more cross-eyed. The only significant contribution introduced to graphic design in the last 10 years or so, as Laurie Haycock Makela once pointed out, might have less to do with anything visual than with how design is produced and who it is produced by.

While the idea of the Next Big Thing is ludicrous to some, it's obvious that many hunger for it. Having documented, for a while at least, one such Next Big Thing, our magazine continues to receive inquiries from journalists and critics alike curious what the next Next Big Thing might be and where to find all the young energetic designers doing crazy new things. You can smell the desperation — with the absence of the Next Big Thing, what do they write about?

But let's imagine for a second that there will be no Next Big Thing in design. At least not for a while. Nothing to catch the attention of the design press, to sweep all the design awards, to receive all the lecture invitations, to function as a source of inspiration and discussion for all. Here's an idea to fill that void; we can try our hand at judging design by its content, by the ideas and messages that it attempts to communicate. Imagine design competitions picking winners based solely on the value of what they communicate, instead of how they communicate. The moral, ethical and political biases of the judges would come to the fore, for sure, but no more or less than the formal biases of judges who rule competitions now. Design would be discussed only as it affects the message. For instance, a submission could be considered of great public value but would not win an award simply because the design, although formally stunning, obscured the message. What would the AIGA annual look like then?

Of course it will never happen, because designers are visual types who have a tendency to either obsessively reduce or overly complicate the ideas of their clients, often without much concern for what is actually communicated. It is not that designers are insensitive or disinterested in the social and cultural functions of the messages they give form to; it's just that they don't always see the necessity (or have the opportunity) to integrate their personal ideologies into their professional work. They enjoy giving form to ideas. If designers were made of ideas, they'd be their own clients.

The World Wide Web is often hailed as the Next Big Thing in graphic design, but it's a problematic environment for graphic designers. One problem is that it has limited graphic possibilities. The coarse resolution of the computer screen, the inability to

1. Tibor Kalman interviewed by Moira Cullen in ***Eye*** no 20, 1996, p.16

fix layouts and typefaces, and the overpowering presence of the browser's interface all restrict the designer's ability to impart a specific visual character to a Web site. These also restrict the designers' ability to leave their signature imprint, which is even more problematic, since for many designers this is the single most important asset of how they market themselves. With the absence of the stylistic choices usually available in print, many designers will refrain from getting involved, while others, by hook or by crook, will try and bend the medium to fit their personal preferences for typographic expression and style. That's why so many Web sites look like what designers do in print but applied to the screen.

If there were ever an opportunity for graphic design to be more involved with content, the World Wide Web is it. With the computer functioning as the great visual equalizer, content instead of form is what ultimately may come to differentiate and qualify Web sites. However, according to my own assessment regarding the value placed on content within graphic design, judging a Web site on the strength of its content will not soon gain popularity, at least not within the narrow world of graphic design. Unless, of course, you expand the notion of what graphic design is. Which brings me back to the future of graphic design.

Whether or not designers will be able to make the transition from print to screen and whether or not the technology will ever deliver on the promise of seamless multimedia for everybody remains to be seen. But as we ponder the question of how graphic designers will cope with the seemingly inevitable changes ahead, we should not lose sight of what we're trying to accomplish. The purpose of what we do as designers will remain fairly basic: to communicate as effectively as we can those messages and ideas that we most care about. Having the option to do this differently and with more pomp and circumstance than before raises interesting questions not just regarding how but also why.

Writer Paul Roberts's observation that "The irony of the information revolution is that consumers neither like nor expect long, densely written texts on their computer screens" [2] suggests a radical shift in people's reading habits. This shift has long been contemplated by designers and critics alike concerned with how to best address the reading habits of future generations raised on MTV and video games in an era of increasing information overload. This is problematic, however, since I can't help but wonder why, as graphic designers, we should concern ourselves with pleasing readers suffering from attention deficiency disorder. How are we certain that by catering to their diminishing interest in linear reading and by relying on the power of images and sound bites as an alternative, that we actually increase such notions as comprehension and cognition?

As a result of my own interest and experiments regarding how to best aid the reader, I've become increasingly unconvinced about the power of images to tell stories and the value of open-ended narratives. Knowing where to apply such means is crucial.

2. Paul Roberts, Virtual Grub Street, ***Harper's***, June 1996, p.71

When viewing Elliott Earls's entertaining enhanced CD, ***Throwing Apples at the Sun***, I enjoy the fact that I, the reader, can construct my own meaning from the seemingly disparate elements of image, sound and text. It is the very purpose of this project. When reading an essay, on the other hand, I crave for knowing what the author means so that I can learn and respond and ask specific questions if necessary.

When Louise Sandhaus, in ***Emigre 36***, practices what she preaches and designs her essay Click in a manner that aspires to the non-linear, multi-level environment of the World Wide Web or CD ROMs, the result is a dynamic orchestration of text and images that subverts the conventional make-up of the page. Whether it functions as intended depends on who you ask. As a designer I'm drawn in by the curious visual presentation, but as a reader I'm unsure about sequence and often lose the thread of the writing due to the many distractions and options vying for my attention — not unlike when I'm surfing the World Wide Web or scanning a CD ROM.

In ***Emigre 37*** both designer Stephen Farrell and writer Steve Tomasula make eloquent arguments to support the notion of using animated texts and images to subserve reading and enrich meaning. Theoretically it holds water and I want to believe they are right because their work is so shockingly beautiful. But when I try to actually read their short story ***TOC***, the experience is not as smooth as I had hoped. The story is layed out with distinct visual gestures, but I'm unclear how to read them or what the authors mean. I'm uncertain how to fill in the gaps or make the connections. Is it my fault, as a reader, that I don't understand? Or is it the authors'? Or does it matter at all?

In ***Emigre*** we have published many such theories and experiments, but their applicability in the real world, besides functioning as the Next Big Thing, has proved to be limited. This is exemplified by designers such as Katherine McCoy, Jeffery Keedy, Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, who are often presented as the key protagonists and apologists for the new theories that have inspired recent design trends, but who in reality create designs that apply only to a minimal degree the theories that so outrage its critics.

Shooting holes in the new theories, of course, is easy, since they are usually general in scope and allow for different levels of interpretation, depending on the job at hand. McCoy *et al* demonstrate time and again that they are extremely skillful at implementing their theories. There are few books out on the market that more brilliantly combine text and image and in the process truly aid reading and extend meaning, than the books created by these designers. And the books look far more traditional than the theories that inspired them.

Instead of nipping the theories in the bud, the critics should try their hand at how these ideas trickle down to the mainstream and are applied indiscriminately and irresponsibly. The opening essay in David Carson's book ***The End of Print*** would be a good place to start. To justify his typographic aerobics on the page, Carson often refers to the changing reading habits of the audience and borrows from the theory that if you engage the readers and make them work at decoding the text, they will

better remember what they read. Granted, it did take me quite a bit of work to figure out that the sentences in the essay needed to be read from bottom to top. But what I end up remembering about the essay is not so much what I read, but how difficult it was to read it at all. This type of work, as Andrew Blauvelt suggests, has less to do with redefining the notion of readability or literacy than with creating product differentiation and establishing the personal style of the designer.

But if designers have a tendency to apply their signature styles willy nilly to whatever commissions come down the pike, design critics often tend to paint with a rather broad brush to establish their holier-than-thou agendas regarding the social responsibility of the designer, the public good, fellow readers and other such stuff. The new theories, as some critics claim, have no interest in such noble causes. However, when voicing their objections regarding the new theories and the work it has spawned, the critics conveniently steer clear of addressing specific designs, and instead use bodies of work such as Rick Poynor's anthology ***Typography Now: The Next Wave***. These anthologies present anything but a unified collection of work or theory. They consist, for the most part, of posters, covers and other commercial, experimental and student projects especially short on text, big on image, and particularly suited for reproduction in small format. Here too, besides functioning as the Next Big Thing (as the book's title claims), the work can hardly be considered as serious research addressing the needs of future communication modes. But for the critics, who rarely judge designs within their specific context, they serve perfectly in pointing out all that is wrong with today's empty, self-centered designerism. This is usually followed by bizarre acts of overextension leading to conclusions that the new theories are not concerned with society's more mundane yet invaluable means of communication such as novels, educational texts, timetables, instructional manuals, application forms, etc.

If the new theories are not much concerned with these, it is because they acknowledge that the old theory provides most of the answers for these applications. What the new theories are concerned with is that the old theory does not properly address the new media and the multiplicitous environments and audiences that graphic design now both serves and is comprised of. Which brings me back to the Next Big Thing.

If the new theories have generated disappointing results concerning conventional print design, then the old theory has shown little ability to adapt to the new environments of electronic publishing. For instance, if legibility is a social concern, why then have our most respected typographers largely ignored issues of typographic excellence on the computer screen? As we're entering the information age, which will most likely play itself out on low resolution monitors, you can either ignore what is going on around you and then later complain about the irresponsible behavior of today's designer and the general downfall of literacy and all that, or you can help provide a solution. For the graphic adventurers among us, this probably means having to abandon certain personal expressive preferences, and for our most learned typographers, it might mean adapting sophisticated typographic traditions to fit the still primitive world of electronic publishing. Somehow this combined knowledge must be able to generate a visual language capable of being both legible and engaging.

The following might seem paradoxical, because at ***Emigre***, for the short term at least, as we're trying to deal with the new technologies that surround us, we see more use for the teachings of the young Jan Tschichold than the writings of, let's say, Frances Butler. While we're being primed for sensory overload, the reality of electronic publishing still consists of system crashes, tedious downloading problems, links gone dead, incompatibility and the many stylistic restrictions described earlier. The simplicity and social concerns of Tschichold's ideals, that "communication must appear in the briefest, simplest, most urgent form,"[3] as outlined in the text Elementare Typographie, are far more practical than the multi-level, interactive, hypertextual and audiovisual forms of communication that, according to Butler, will better match the "fluid, additive, non-syntactic, and above all, extremely sophisticated thought process that are the natural birthright of all humans."[4]

3. Published in ***Typographische Mitteilungen***, no.10, 1925, pp198-200
4. Frances Butler, Retarded Arts: The Failure of Fine Arts Education, ***AIGA***, Vol.30, 1995, p.30