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
We write not to be understood but to understand. We once spoke to understand; meaning was generated through dialogue. Now we hardly talk and we don’t read; we look. If we have the patience, we still write to understand. Formerly, we read out loud what we wrote, now we write for the silent viewer and punctuation, or the spatial organization of the page, has invaded the page until it has become the sign in a city – is the story of belief in the efficiency of controlling the location of thought, of paring the options to the visible. Studies in cognitive psychology and anthropology demonstrate that the nature of information gathering has always been organizational, nothing more. In preliterate culture, however, there were many different opportunities for conceptualization using the full range of sensory capabilities: sound, touch, as well as sight.
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.

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

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
I was standing in Fremont at the center of the universe the other day, waiting for the light to change, talking to another 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.

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 cliche, 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?