Visual essays from *Wired*

The Fifth Dimension

ERIK ADIGARD EXPLORES THE SPATIAL POSSIBILITIES OF GRAPHIC DESIGN.

BY STEVEN HELLER

Erik Adigard is a trailblazing digital-media designer who first made a splash back in the early 1990s with a series of visual essays for *Wired*. In more recent years, his work has taken a turn away from the web to focus on installations on the borderline of art and design. He runs the design studio M-A-D with Patricia McShane and is currently a fellow at the American Academy in Rome, where for a year he can exercise his compulsive need to experiment, giving him the chance to rediscover craft while pondering a future for graphic design. During my own short stay at the center late last year, I had many intense conversations with this articulate design maker and thinker; this interview is a condensed version.

I know *Wired* is old news for you now, but how did your work there come about? I was a collage artist, graphic designer, and early adopter of digital technology when I launched M-A-D, in 1987. Much of my early work was in fashion and architecture. I had been developing an iconic design language for brochures, magazines, and books that combined photography, vector drawing, 3-D rendering, and typography. With its first issue, *Wired* started to give me visual-essay spreads—a huge opportunity that advanced my work, integrating design, content, technology, and offset techniques. As the magazine became a success, my work gained immense visibility, but I never shared my *Wired* techniques with other clients.

The objective of these essays was to create a relevant visual culture for the new ideas in the magazine. The two spreads were positioned prior to, and often included, the table of contents, which at the time was groundbreaking placement for editorial—a space that was formerly reserved only for advertising. I thought of this work as "design journalism," whose aim was to cover technology, human concerns, craft, knowledge, energy, critical thinking, risk taking, time, space, post-humanism, noise, and other current concerns.

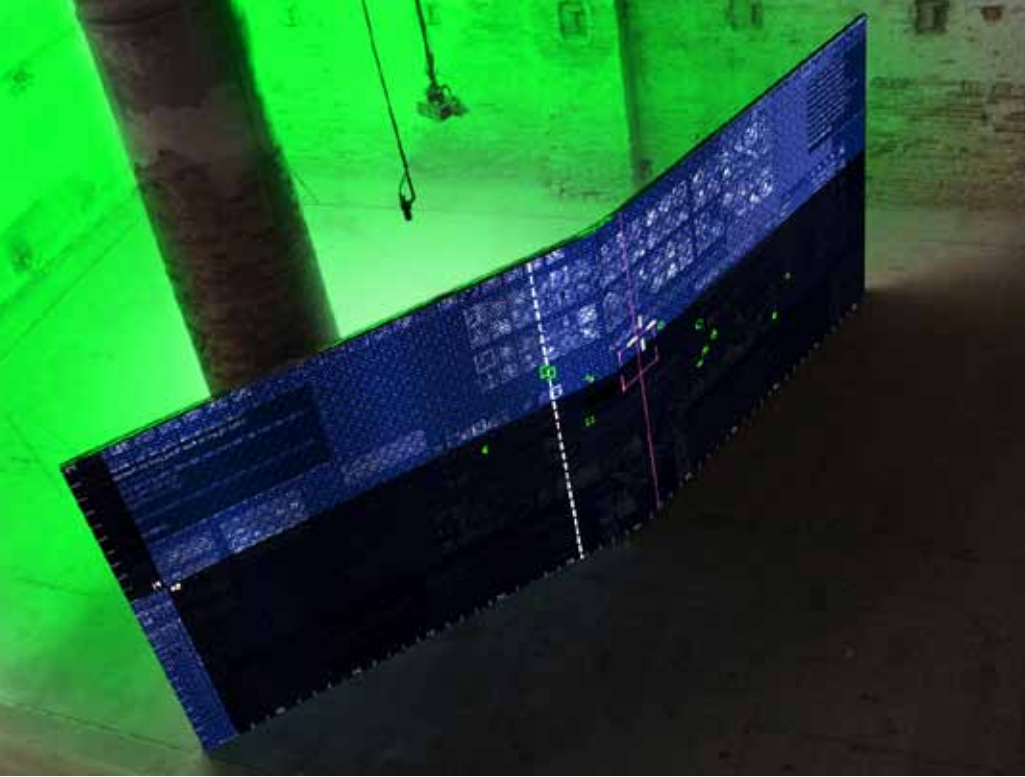**How did you think your digital work—alongside that of April Greiman and P. Scott Makela—would influence the course of graphic design?** From studying semiotics, I knew how to influence the perception of a design, but I never imagined that my digital work would have any impact on the future of graphic design, since it seemed so native to our times. I was simply lucky to be in the right place at the right time with the right people. With *Wired*, I was fortunate to have an audience primed for this kind of bold graphic expression. To my surprise, the advertisers in the magazine rapidly acknowledged the potential impact of our approach, and soon a more adventurous style of print ad became ubiquitous.

In recent years, your studio work has evolved into interventions and installations. Do these still fit into the conventional definition of graphic design? During the '90s, the discipline of traditional exhibition design was moving toward multimedia, and graphic design was being rethought through the eyes and hands of software. Typesetting shops were disappearing.

Regardless, my partner, Patricia McShane, and I are committed to the deep values of graphic design, and because of our affinity with technology companies such as Apple, Adobe, and *Wired*, we have also journeyed through a long progression that is rooted, informed, and inspired by digital media. Since browsers and other interactive environments echo physical-space concerns, they naturally led us toward the design of digitally mediated physical spaces.

In my two years as design director at Wired Digital, I worked closely with architects. They came to us believing we understood the future of spatiality. Ironically, we went to them, thinking that interactive environments had more to do with architecture than graphic design. In the end, I think we were wrong; environments are less about spatial navigation and more about content navigation, which is the essence of graphic design.

Do you still call yourself a graphic designer, or have you found another term that's a better fit? Admittedly, I practice on the less charted periphery of graphic design: in media design, interaction de-

sign, branding, video, art installations, and design strategy. At its most complex level, we work on interactive, immersive, mixed-media networked projects, which I also call 5-D design (there are varying definitions). But even when it's non-typographic, our work always relies on graphic design principles. In that sense I am not a graphic designer who contributes much to print design; today I work mostly from graphic design outward. I use it as tool, language, and methodology and from an ontological point of view.

For your data-heavy digital installations, like *AirXY: From Immaterial to Rematerial,* which you showed at the 2008 Venice Architecture Biennale, how do you find the balance between just enough and too much information? Moderating information depends on contexts and subjects. Sometimes there cannot be too much stimulation—stimulation can be information. Ideally, it is like *The New York Times* website: there is too much for a normal person to process, but each reader gets what he or she needs. If we tend to do saturated installations it is in part because of client and curator demands but also because it does reflect the world we live in. Ultimately, they are rather restrained compared to any laptop screen or Times Square.

Let's talk about graphic statements. Your optimism is contagious. You've done political work. You've contributed to the ex-

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hibition "The Art of Politics." What good can designers hope to do with paper and ink or screen and pixels?** Or bad! One of the historic phenomena that most pushed me toward graphic design was the success and tragedy of Nazi propaganda. At the same time, I grew up with the graphic explosion of consumerist culture and counterculture, so I was primed to work with images. Soon after graduation, I realized that graphic design is in fact a very ambiguous discipline—somewhere between word and image, aesthetics and necessity. And yet, because we live in times of information overload, where most of it is vain, irrelevant, misleading, or false, I am convinced that graphic design is perfectly positioned to reframe the information that matters most. Our challenge is to run a balancing act that includes sensuality and semantic rigor. We need something like a Bauhaus for

the postinformation revolution, and I think it is emerging in many places—including design schools.

You told me, if I am not misconstruing, that graphic designers deserve more respect. Why? This is the most important concern today and deserves our full attention—and much more time than I can commit here.

Our profession is uniquely prepared for complex, short-term demands and ideas. That pushes us to be more adaptive than any other design discipline. However, there is a well-publicized myth that design is at the fingertips of any computer user (thank you, Apple and Adobe), and that in turn fuels an endless supply of outsourcing and crowd sourcing. Architects used to be sheltered from this phenomenon by higher professional standards, but even they are being seriously challenged by DIY design apps.

We are in a "creation economy," as Paul Saffo puts it—which means everyone is a designer. But perhaps we need to consider if this economy is not devouring itself and then having the world of design as dessert.