

# Dialogue



Patricia Belen and Greg D'Onofrio began their small design studio Kind Company in 2004 and continue to build upon their interest in graphic design by creating new ventures.

## Kind Design

The husband-and-wife duo behind the studio Kind Company talks shop and discusses a multitude of entrepreneurial ventures.

by Steven Heller

**B**efore they became partners in business, Patricia Belen and Greg D'Onofrio were partners in life. They had an office romance, got married, and in 2004 started their small Brooklyn-based studio, Kind Company. Opening their own independent graphic design business was “the logical next step for us,” D'Onofrio says. In addition to their regular client work, they launched—and still maintain—a website devoted to Alvin Lustig ([www.alvinlustig.com](http://www.alvinlustig.com)), who is also the subject of their first documentary.

The pair created a design history resource called Display ([www.thisisdisplay.org](http://www.thisisdisplay.org)), which is an online exhibition space for vintage design ephemera and also a bookstore. They've funded both ventures on their own with the aim of providing info and critique to

the community. Here, we speak with Belen and D'Onofrio about their roles as designers, documentarians and book dealers.

**How did you arrive at the name Kind Company?** There's no deep meaning behind the name. We liked the sound of it and wanted something a bit out of the ordinary. The two words sound nice together. And it's served us well, even in all of its different iterations, which some of our clients still get wrong: Kind and Company, The Kind Company, KindCo, KCO and so on.

**How's business?** Kind Company is very fortunate to have entrepreneurial clients, including small- to medium-sized businesses such as art galleries, restaurants, architecture firms, book authors, bookstores and archives. When the graphic

design business slows down (as it usually does in January and August), our Display bookstore helps fill in the gaps. But more importantly, it has connected us to students, designers, collectors, curators, researchers, writers, as well as to archives and libraries around the world with similar interests and enthusiasm.

**What prompted you to start the Lustig site?**

In 2000, when we first began to discover his work, Alvin Lustig was still a little-known yet hugely important design pioneer who needed to be introduced (or reintroduced) to a growing online audience. We'd seen some examples of his work from the books we were collecting, but when we tried to find out more, it wasn't easily available. At that moment, an opportunity was in front of us. We figured the best way to educate ourselves and others was to develop a comprehensive website of his work. With Elaine Lustig Cohen's generous support and your [Steven Heller's] published articles, we've been able to make his work widely available to an international audience. We like to think of it as a small but important contribution to the design community.

**How do you balance client work with your documentary and “book dealer” pursuits?**

Running a small studio offers us the flexibility to be selective when choosing clients. We rarely take on more than we can handle, and we always leave time to pursue our self-initiated projects, like Display. But in the end, it's all one in the same—our life is our work, our work is our life. After 10 years in business, we've learned to collaborate on virtually all aspects of running our studio, and we not only use our various skill sets, opinions and ideas for clients, but also on our own projects.

**Why did you start Display?** Since 2000, we've been assiduous collectors of modern graphic design books, periodicals, advertisements and ephemera. Display started out as a way for us to organize our collection and gain valuable insight into mid-20th century graphic design, typography and some of its pioneers. Unfortunately, we don't have a formal design history

education, so Display was the best way for us to educate ourselves by using our collection. Since its launch in 2009, Display has become a platform for research, writing and discoveries in graphic design history.

**What’s the goal of the site as it evolves?** It’s become our mission to document, write and share these important materials.

We hope Display educates others about the work of lesser-known designers and the lesser-known work of well-known designer pioneers—the building blocks of graphic design’s historical record. As collectors, owning the objects falls short; it’s about what they can teach us. We want the collection to move beyond inspirational “eye candy”



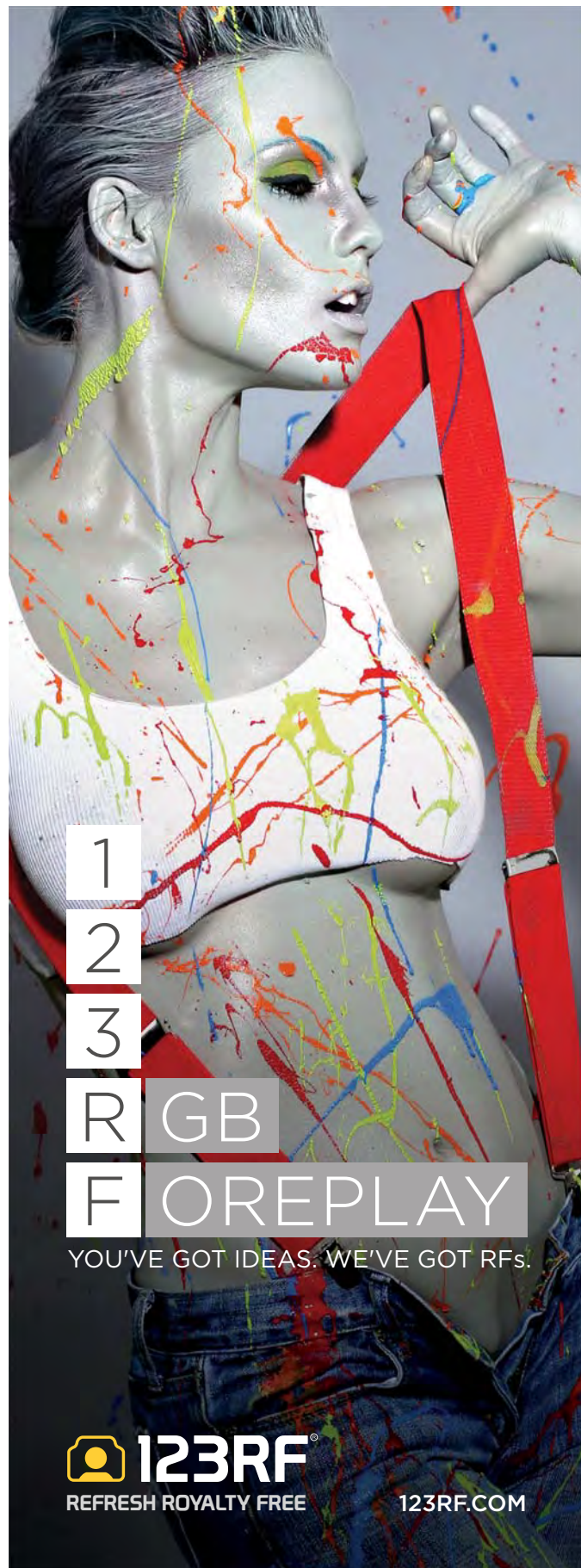
To learn more about the design pioneer Alvin Lustig, D’Onofrio and Belen assembled their research into an entire website devoted to him ([www.alvinlustig.com](http://www.alvinlustig.com)).

to become a “living” archive where students and professionals can use the objects for research. We’ll continue to loan our items to curators and institutions, as well as authors and publishers who require specific images to be published. Ultimately, we look forward to Display becoming a stepping-stone for us to author and self-publish our own materials.

**But in the end, it’s all one in the same—our life is our work, our work is our life.**

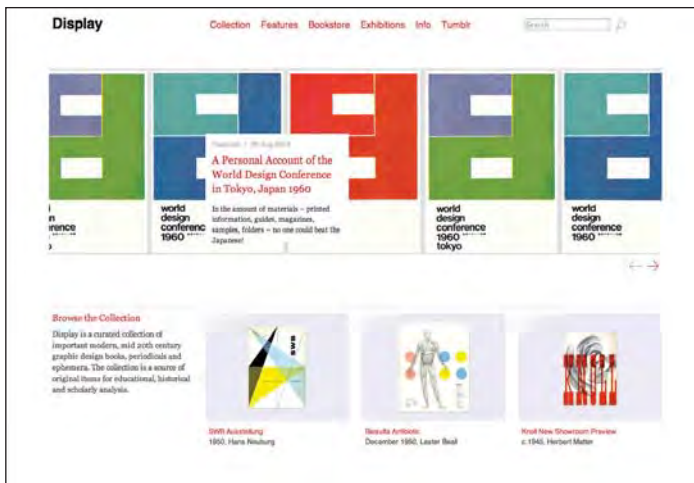
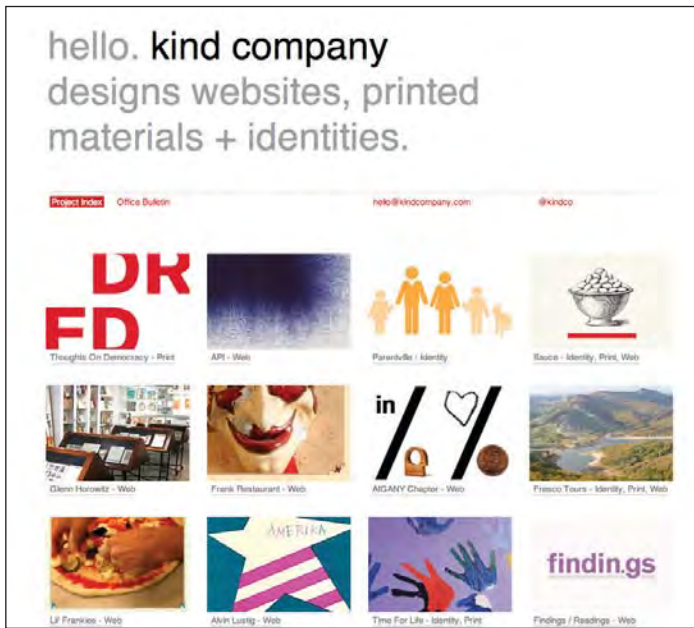
**You have a very focused Modernist bent on Display. Why? What does Modernism say to you?** There are many interpretations of Modernism. We admire the fact that artists and designers made a conscious effort to reject ornamentation and historical styles, and instead chose to embrace abstract principles, clear communication, geometric forms and visual experimentation. Most of the contemporary design we admire today has roots in Modernism. The ideology not only lives in the past; it lives in the present.

Our collection focuses on graphic design as a fundamental component of the dissemination of early to late Modernism throughout the U.S., Italy, Switzerland (and beyond), from the late 1930s to the mid-1960s. During these years, Modernism’s distinctive graphic languages moved away from its political beginning and emerged as an integral part of mass culture, extending from advertising and printed ephemera to corporate identity.





dialogue



Top: The Kind Company website ([www.kindcompany.com](http://www.kindcompany.com)) highlights the duo's design style. Bottom: Belen and D'Onofrio started Display ([www.thisisdisplay.org](http://www.thisisdisplay.org)) as a way to educate themselves about design history. Today, it's a "curated collection of important Modern, mid-20th century graphic design books, periodicals, advertisements and ephemera."

**Is holding exhibitions part of your grand plan to educate?** There's nothing better than seeing our collection exhibited and shared. The idea of collector as curator or educator is intriguing to us. We've had the opportunity to curate two exhibitions featuring works from our collection, as well as lecture students and internal design teams. As collectors, we offer insight and a distinct point of view, so curating and educating are things we'll continue to pursue.

**What does the future have in store for the store?** Ultimately, we'd like the bookstore to evolve and grow and we're thinking of ways to partner with other like-minded individuals or companies. Until then, we'll continue to search for more inventory through purchasing unique items and collections that fit nicely with our interests. ■

