

rudy vanderlans

COFOUNDER, EMIGRE

Interview by Steven Heller

This spring, the Centre Pompidou in Paris opened “D-DAY, le design au-jourd’hui,” one of its prestigious mega-surveys covering the breadth of international contemporary design practice. Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko’s Emigre studio will be the sole representative of graphic design. Coincidentally, in August, VanderLans will pull the plug on the 21-year run of *Emigre* magazine. After numerous incarnations, various controversies, and a disproportionate share of breakthroughs, this clarion of new digital type and typography—a seminal forum for design criticism—will become the stuff of design history, both a resource and artifact for future scholars. While the Pompidou exhibition recognizes the unique entrepreneurial contribution of a studio and type business born in the age of desktop publishing, the magazine has been the embodiment of effective design authorship. Although its circulation has declined since its heyday in the mid-’90s, *Emigre* magazine has not lost its capacity to incite and inspire, and VanderLans’s penultimate issue (No. 68) does not disappoint. The entire content is devoted to a provocative critique of design culture by an unknown designer/writer, whose essay sets a new qualitative standard for critical discourse. Taking chances comes naturally for VanderLans, and his penchant for surprise is what sets the magazine apart. In this interview, VanderLans, who plans to remain professionally and artistically active, discusses why *Emigre* magazine has run its course, why the blogs may be taking over, and what the future may bring.



HELLER: You are currently working on *Emigre* No. 69, which will be the final issue. In its current incarnation as a quarterly paperback book, you are providing a vital forum for design criticism. So why are you pulling the plug now? **VANDERLANS:** While *Emigre* magazine has been able to accommodate most of my whims and interests, I think I’ve exhausted what *Emigre* magazine can be. I’m eager to challenge myself in other areas. Plus, we’ll continue all our other Emigre activities, particularly Emigre Fonts. We’re not closing our doors. Working strictly within the confines of graphic design for so long may give a person a false sense of accomplishment. So I need to broaden my horizons. Over the past few years, I’ve been

involved with photography, and it’s both humiliating and invigorating to start from scratch again. I receive a fair amount of standard rejection letters from galleries and art magazines, and that’s no fun, but it’s a healthy process for the creative mind.

HELLER: Do you feel that you’ve done all there is to do, or are you simply passing on the baton to a younger generation? **VANDERLANS:** There’s always something to talk about. But the areas in design that generate the most heated debates today are moving into a direction that doesn’t interest me much. Branding seems to excite people no end these days. How to promote a corporation, how to sell product, how to improve the UPS logo, how to sell to the masses, market

research, focus groups—I sense that graphic design as a whole has actually become more commercial and more beholden to advertising and big business than it ever was. I’m not saying that this is good or bad, I just have very little of value to add to that discourse.

HELLER: Will design blogs fill the vacuum?

VANDERLANS: I’ve always hoped for more design discourse, but now that it’s here in the form of blogs, I’m a bit disappointed. Everybody is a critic talking endlessly about the work of others, but you get very little sense of what bloggers think about their own work. What motivates them? And then there’s a disconnect between what they’re saying and how they’re saying it. Look at *Typophile*, a blog about type and typography. They spill literally tens of thousands of words each month on the finer points of type, and it’s all set in the most unimaginative layout using a barely legible low-resolution typeface. The way the bloggers present their thoughts on type almost always undermines their own convictions. When *Emigre* discussed similar issues, we put our ideas into action, on paper, and distributed the results. We talked the talk and walked the walk. I’m all for theory, but at a certain point, I want to see ideas put into practice.

HELLER: You used to use the mantra “design is a cultural force.” **VANDERLANS:** I thought I was simply stating the obvious when I said that design is a cultural force. But it raises a related question: If design is of cultural significance, does it belong in museums? Or better yet, is design art? And the more I think about this, the more I feel that design is better off in the streets. Art, for the most part, needs galleries and museums, and the walls of wealthy patrons. That’s where it lives. That’s where it wants to be. Design, on the other hand, is everywhere around us. It feels as good on the label of a bottle of pills as it does on the pages of a popular fashion magazine as it does on a billboard on the Sunset Strip where it’s observed by hundreds of thousands. I’m sure there are plenty of artists who would love to see their work as widely integrated into society. So instead of always hungering for a place among high



Previous page: Rudy VanderLans holding *Emigre* Nos. 1–68. **Above:** *Emigre*'s warehouse in Berkeley, CA, still very much open for business. Photography by *Emigre*.

art, designers should recognize that their work is doing just fine where it is. **HELLER:** Speaking of high art (and museums), there is no greater testament to your value than the forthcoming exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in which *Emigre* will represent graphic design. This speaks to the viability and endurance of your work. **VANDERLANS:** I’m still trying to figure out why it is that our work was chosen to represent graphic design. And it is of course nonsensical to think that any single design studio could represent all of design. The curators at the museum kept mentioning that they admire how we facilitate “free debate” through our magazine, and they admire our early involvement with computers, music, and publishing. It’s interesting to me that they seem to focus not so much on the form, but on the message, the process, the product—all of which, of course, are shaped by our design and are brought to life through the process of design but are kind of intangible. **HELLER:** How do you now plan to stay ahead of the curve, if that is your desire? **VANDERLANS:** There are kids graduating from design school now who were barely born when we started *Emigre*. I doubt they’re looking to us to show the way. We are happy to have found a small niche and were able to create an environment to do work that keeps us creatively and intellectually stimulated. And in the process, we’ve been able to help expose the work and

ideas of a few like-minded colleagues who have done much to raise *Emigre*'s status far beyond what we could have accomplished by ourselves. What more can we wish for?

HELLER: It’s tempting to view your participation in this exhibition coinciding with the end of *Emigre* magazine as a capstone for a formative stage of your work. Does this mark a natural new beginning? **VANDERLANS:** I hope so. I’m looking forward to doing many other things. But at the same time, it won’t differ much from what I’ve been doing for the past 20 or so years. I’ll still be writing, designing, photographing, editing, and doing all the other mundane chores required to run a tiny mom-and-pop store. **HELLER:** You make it sound so romantic. But seriously, when you began *Emigre*, everything was about experimentation. You are a forward-thinking person. What do you see as next?

VANDERLANS: In 1984, we were given a new tool to design with, so that automatically resulted in a lot of pure experimentation. Now I try to push myself with my photography. But it’s a different kind of experimentation. A while back, a gallery returned my work saying they liked it but they wanted to know how it sheds new light on the landscape genre. Well, that’s a pretty tall order, but it’s not a bad thought to keep in the back of your head when you’re working. So, what do I see as next in graphic design? Believe it or not, I’m not that curious. **P**