
Exceptional Command: An Interview with Nichelle Narcisi

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This past October, the design community gathered in Denver for the 2007 AIGA Design Conference to talk about the future of design. What could be more “Next” than the bright young talent of tomorrow? By now most everyone has heard about the wildly successful Command X, graphic design’s first “reality show,” in which seven designers under 26 competed in daily design challenges, presenting their solutions on the conference main stage to be judged by an esteemed panel. All were impressive but one especially talented designer emerged: 24-year-old Nichelle Narcisi, whose youth-targeted voter awareness campaign, with the tagline “Except You,” garnered a standing ovation and even tears from one of the jurors. Here, we spoke with this up-and-comer about her rise to AIGA stardom and why there’s no more room in her life for voter apathy.

Heller: You certainly exuded a great deal of poise, as well as wit and self-confidence, in addition to vulnerability. How did you feel getting up before two thousand AIGA’ers to present your work?

Narcisi: I’m usually comfortable speaking to groups but a mob of designers was a little different. The first round was the most awkward, none of us knew what to expect and there was the initial shock of seeing the crowd for the first time. I owe most of my composure in the later rounds to the judges. Bonnie [Siegler] and Emily [Oberman] were great and everyone helped to keep things light backstage. They were all extremely supportive throughout the entire process.

Heller: Where have you been working, and what have you been doing?

Narcisi: Both myself and fellow Command X’er Ryan Smoker are with Go Welsh in Lancaster, PA. I’ve been here almost a year, my first real job since graduating. I work mostly on print projects but there have been a few websites in there as well. It’s been a great learning environment and I feel good about the work I’ve done so far.

Heller: What is your background?

Narcisi: My entire extended family has always been supportive of my “gift” and will pull out drawings from my childhood at random. I was lucky in that way. I never had to fight being creative. Everyone encouraged me.

My mother is artistic, too. She has always been making and collecting things. She loves to work with materials—most recently she’s been doing stained glass, but ceramics and textiles were in there somewhere, too. She’s pretty much my idol.

Heller: Why did you become a designer?

Narcisi: Originally, I thought I’d be a painter. I’m much better at that sort of thing. Design is a challenge. Art always came naturally, so when I found myself floundering in my first type class it sparked something. I loved looking at design, figuring out why it worked and what I was reacting to, stumbling with my own stuff until I understood it. Tyler [School of Art in Philadelphia] was the perfect school for that. Everything that comes out of that place has tons of character; even if it’s not polished, there is a motive and voice present.

Heller: It was striking how well you and your colleagues on stage addressed the respective problems at hand. If you can recall the three projects, what prompted you to do what you did for the first two, for the Denver Broncos and Jimmy Dean, respectively?

Narcisi: I was excited when I found out that the first project was [redesigning] an NFL team logo. I’m from Pittsburgh, and I know it’s cliché but we are a little bit insane about football, probably to an obnoxious degree. I spent a lot of time drawing dirty uniforms and trying to manage the logistical end of things. I probably took it too seriously.

At first I was a little apprehensive about working on the [breakfast] dog, but the more I thought about it the more obvious the whole cowgirl riding a sausage became and I just went for it. There wasn’t enough time to consider the level of inappropriateness in that. I’m glad, though. I love the way that it turned out.

Heller: Your answer to the voting project was so sophisticated. Too often agencies don’t really understand their audience. How close was this issue of not voting to you and your ultimate solution?

Narcisi: As most of the conference found out, I’m dating a nonvoter and it drives me nuts. He’s a very intelligent, politically aware and vocal person, but he doesn’t waste his time with voting. I’ve heard every possible reason, many of them valid, but I just can’t accept giving up like that. We—my generation—are so busy rejecting everything that we gave up our political power. I simply pointed that out and did so in a way that might be more confrontational than is comfortable.

On a side note, my boyfriend has decided to vote this time around.

Heller: See, we all can make a small difference. But now that the dust has settled how would you improve on your idea?

Narcisi: There are some wording issues that I'd change but the biggest thing is what comes after you see one of those PDFs. There has to be a comprehensive and clear web aspect that engages people to stay involved and vote. That's the biggest project I'm working on now, getting the site up by late November so that we can start pushing the campaign through election year.

Heller: How has the process of being in Command X changed you, if at all?

Narcisi: I feel better about what I do everyday. Just being at the conference was refreshing, but to speak with people like Noreen Morioka and Brian Collins candidly about what we do for a living, it was invaluable. So was being tested on such a large stage. We had so little time to work out our projects and then present them to that many critical eyes. I don't know how anyone could walk away from that without feeling changed. I feel stronger, smarter and more capable now, and I'm excited about what I do.

Heller: People are dying to know—did you get a hundred job offers after your performance?

Narcisi: I did, actually. It was really alarming. I'm in the process of organizing them all based on "best view" and "most regular work day." There have been some discrepancies...

Heller: What I found truly wonderful about Command X was the introduction of so many intelligent, younger designers. Did you feel it was a unique grouping? Or are all the designers your age that smart?

Narcisi: We are all incredible and should be feared for our collective intellect. I'm kidding. I have no idea, really, but I agree with you that our group was especially clever. I was probably the least astute one there, to be honest. I expect that the next round of Command X will have even sharper contestants.

Heller: What is your goal as a designer?

Narcisi: I'm not that interesting in this regard. I just want to make things that I enjoy and have those things be effective. On my best day I would hope that the piece has a personality, one that you would want to know.

Heller: If you had that Command X experience to do over, what would you do?

Narcisi: I'd try to see some of the actual conference. I'm looking forward to Memphis because I'll be able to enjoy all of the presentations instead of working the entire time! I don't think I'd change anything, though. All of the people I met affected me and it was an incredible lesson in what I do and how to do it better.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).