Words on Image

As a way to share the wisdom of special guests who have visited the Graphic Design program at the Savannah College of Art and Design, the *Words on Image* Series offers the printed transcripts of interviews conducted during their visits to the college.

In February 2006, the preminent graphic design writer Steven Heller participated in a phone interview with an entire *Graphic Design Studio Two* class. Mr. Heller, the Art Director of *The New York Times Book Review*, was in his New York City office. Each student was asked to formulate three questions that related to their assigned readings from Mr. Heller's *Looking Closer 4: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*. The essays in the book focus on the social and cultural responsibilities of graphic designers. A single question was then selected from each student, and those questions were ordered to allow for a narrative flow in the interview. Professor Boylston organized and moderated the interview, which was conducted in Morris Hall.

Steven Heller

"Things happen, and you adapt to them, and if you happen to be a visionary, you lead them."

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Professor Scott Boylston
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Interviewed
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Student participants:

Bryan Babiarz, Swathi Ghanta, Jim Hargreaves, Matt Hindla, Cristina Martin, Jon Orchin, Jill Phongsa, Scott Reinhard, Cait Reiss, Miles Small, Matt Thomas, Q Trevino, Jennifer Vandervoet, Shayda Yavari, Kyle Younkman

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The Savannah College of Art and Design
Graphic Design Department | 2006

Steven Heller
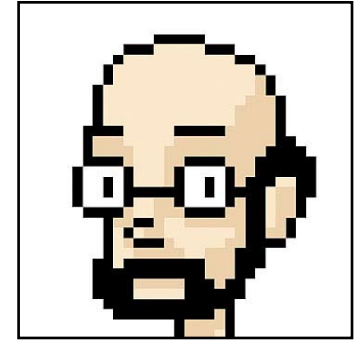
Steven Heller is the Senior Art Director of *The New York Times Book Review*, the Co-chair of the MFA Design Department at School of Visual Arts, and a contributing editor to *Print, Eye, I.D.,* and *Baseline* magazines. He is the premier design writer of our times, and has also curated numerous international design shows.

His awards include: National Endowment for the Arts; Special Educators Award, Art Directors Club; AIGA Medal for Lifetime Achievement; Hershel Levit Award, Pratt Institute; Outstanding Client Award, Graphic Artist Guild; Society of Illustrators; Richard Gangel Award for Art Direction

He has authored or co-authored over 100 books on graphic design, illustration and political art, including *Paul Rand; Design Literacy: Understanding Graphic Design; The Swastika: A Symbol Beyond Redemption?; The Education of A Graphic Designer; German Modern: Art Deco Graphic Design; Faces on the Edge: Type in the Digital Age; French Modern: Art Deco Graphic Design; The Savage Mirror: Graphic Wit: The Art of Humor in Design; The Art of Contemporary Caricature; Seymour Chwast: The Left Handed Designer; Innovators of American Illustration; Art Against War; The Graphic Design Reader; Design Humor; Cuba Style; Citizen Designer; Graphic Style; Typology; Design of the 20th Century; Merz to Emigre: Avant-Garde Magazine Design of the 20th Century; The Education of an Art Director; Euro Deco: Graphic Design Between the Wars; Becoming a Graphic Designer*

Jon Orchin:
Rick Poyner (in Looking Closer 4) talks about graphic design and advertising being closer now then ever before, and many young designers emerging from design schools are obsessed more with how cool a design looks rather than what it really means to say or the context in which it says it. I was wondering how you at SVA prevent graduating students from acquiring that kind of mind set.

I'm not sure that that mind set is accurate across the board in any case. But at SVA there are two schools, and I run the graduate department. I guess a lot of their energy is based on both concept and surface. Surface is a part of design, you can't get away from that. The Swiss Internationals[1] tried to reduce it, but even they created an image—a style. But in my program, a program called *Designer as Author*, or *Designer as Entrepreneur*, we are totally devoted to concept. It's about what you're presenting to an audience and then how you present it. If it's an audience that requires cool then you design it so it appeals to that audience. But you first have to define who your audience is, and then you create a design system or design motif to address that audience.

So there has to be a *form follows function* notion there. But I would argue that there are some people—whether they are in graphic design, product design or fashion design—who consider the surface more important than the interior, and there are others who look at the interior work and find a design that's fitting. It's not an *a priori* one or the other.

Scott Boylston (SB):
As a follow up on that, do you find that there's resistance within the students to begin before the actual design process and do that necessary research, or at SVA have you found a way in your admissions process to filter out those who are inclined to think only in terms of style?

It does come down to admissions. At the undergrad level you don't expect a high degree of sophistication, particularly from people coming in at the freshman level. By the time they are seniors, different professors kind of kick in and do what they have to do, and some are stylists and some are not. In the MFA department, we interview all applicants and we determine what their interests are. But they have to be interested in the *Designer as Author* idea. What they do as designers—whether they have a style or not, or whether they are looking for a style or not—is almost irrelevant. And it kind of filters itself because they're dealing with what the concepts are.

But, no, I don't think people are resistant. Usually if someone has a style that they are stuck on it's because they're uncertain of what their content or ideas is or are. And once they realize that they can think, then the stylistic issues go by the wayside. Style is just a dialect, it's a way of speaking. But as you guys know in the south, you have southern accents if you come up north, and if you live here long enough you may lose that accent. Just as whenever I'm in the south I kind of affect a southern accent so people think I'm a good ol' boy. But these are things that are mutable. What's fundamental is being able to think.

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Scott Reinhard: I'm curious about what route you think we as young designers should pursue to become creative in content rather than just glorified stylists?

You gotta start where you start, you know? Some of you who graduate may not end up as designers. That's just the way it works. People who study English don't necessarily become English teachers. I know a lot of people who study film who don't become film makers. There are lawyers who don't become lawyers either. You just get a good education, one way or the other. And you pursue other things and you have a variety of skills in your tool kit. When you enter the field you enter it at a place where you can get work,

basically, and hopefully that work will take you to the next educative level. Work is about getting an education; you learn on the job. And you learn what your bosses, or mentors, or teachers are offering you. If you get involved in an industry that is purely about style and fashion, then you have to figure out how to balance that with other needs you have. I think if you're aware that there are dichotomies within this field, that there are some people who prefer style over content or other people who prefer content over style, you find a way of balancing it. But it'll just happen. The bigger issue is getting a good job.

SB: How would you define a good job?

One that makes you happy. One that makes you want to get up in the morning. I'm serious. A good job is one where you're going to learn something, where you're going to progress. The problem now with graphic design being so tied to the computer is that many graphic designers become production people. And you've probably heard this little canard before, but when I was growing up you had to know production. You had to know all the ins and outs of what

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the vendors did, but it was the venders that did it. And then you just told them, *this is what I want, this is what I need*. It's kind of like a movie director with a DP (director of photography) in movies. He has the vision, and then he tells the DP to deal with it. And the photographer says *I can frame it this way, I can give you a shot with this lens, a better kind of shot with that lens, we can use this kind of film*. We live in a collaborative age, and particularly graphic design is a collaborative effort. So, I think a good job is one that allows you to collaborate, but at the same time still have an ability to be an individual.

Jim Hargreaves: Do you think the 21st century is destined for a true change in conscience, or do you feel that financial gain will continue to be the number one driving force in design choices?

I think you can't really predict those things. Some people become designers and they just do their own projects regardless of financial issues. They become these designer-artists, so to speak, or designer entrepreneurs, but everybody's gotta live, everybody's gotta eat. And so you find work that will pay you and hopefully pay you well.

Is design governed by the financial imperative? Yeah. Design is about reaching a popular audience. It's about reaching masses or classes. But it's about reaching somebody, and that's going to require investments, and it's going to require return on investment, and that's just life. But it doesn't necessarily mean you have to base your design thinking on finance. I certainly don't. I base my design thinking on what will work, what I can do to push some boundaries if possible, or what I can do just to get through the day. If you raise design to this uber-level, to this level of almost religiosity, then you're in trouble because you can never reach perfection, unless you truly are one of those rare people. But I'd say that design in the 21st century will be more important to business, and because it's more important to business there'll be more jobs, and if there are more jobs it'll be more beneficial to people like you.

SB: By extension would you say that there might possibly be more industry-wide influence on the designer's part in terms of how advertsing campaigns are concieved and developed?

Well, it'd be nice, wouldn't it? But, people are people, and people who have power are people who have power. And some people are generous and say *I'm hiring you for your expertise, so give it to me and I'll give you a decent return and I'll also give you some freedom*. Then there are people who say *I know exactly what I want and I just need you to make it look pretty*. And that's the way it works, and it's worked that way for eons. And it's not just graphic design, it's other artistic professions as well. The people we hear about most frequently are those who transcend that. But even the transcend-ers are beholden to their clients. That's where the collaboration is; somebody is gonna be your patron, and pay for what you're going to do. Unless, of course, you do something else.

I spent a few days last week with Elliot Earls, who runs the graduate department at Cranbrook[2]. But he also does this kind of

performance design. He makes films, he makes music, he does design as a component to a lot of other things. He doesn't do a lot of work for corporations or businesses. And that's his choice and he's subsidized by his work as an educator. So, you pick different things, and you can probably make different things happen for you on a variety of levels.

SB: As students are leaving your masters program, are you setting them up to become those leaders in industry so they are not merely pushing the buttons?

Ideally they're supposed to come through us and go out into the world with confidence. Now, that confidence can lead them to any number of places…for instance, we now have someone working at Pentagram[3]. She's not a chief designer there, but she may end up being so. Through our program she networked with some of our faculty, she worked on the New York Olympic bid, she worked for Martha Stewart, then she moved to Pentagram.

We have another student who has gone out into the world and is very well known now because she created this new paradamatic prescription bottle for Target[4], which has been rolled out all over the place—TV commercials, citations in every national magazine as a great design piece for 2005—and she did that as her thesis project. She still works at Milton Glaser[5], by the way, even though she did fairly well financially on the project. And her desire is to continue doing those kinds of projects that are a value to society.

Are they leaders? It depends on what you term a leader. I think she has become a standard bearer, certainly for our program. And she has raised the bar or raised the standard of what we expect from students. But not all students will come out as leaders, not all students go in with leadership capabilities. Graduate school is there to increase, enhance and otherwise re-inform people who have been working in the field or who have been students in the past. There are a whole lot of different people. We don't preselect the ones that are leaders versus the ones who are followers. Once they're in the program, there are Alphas and Betas, and we see where they're going, and we try to encourage them to go in the direction that builds their strengths.

SB: I'm proud to say that we actually have a recent MFA graduate who is now working for Deborah at Milton Glaser.[6]

Cool.

Jill Phongsa: Do you believe in Jelly Helm's challenge to the industry to ban all broadcast advertising to children under the age of 12.[7]

We have a teacher in MFA design—a multi-media designer, and one of the founding partners of Funny Garbage[8]—who sends his children to the Rudolph Steiner school. And in order for the children to be considered for acceptance, the parents have to sign an agreement that their children will not look at TV or go to the movies until they're in high school. That's kinda hard to do when your job is making animations for the web and TV. But they signed it because they felt it was the best school for their kids. They did let them go to see the *Lord of the Rings*, and the other parents were up in arms about it.

I don't think you should prevent kids from being involved in ingesting culture. It may not do any good in the long run, it may not do any harm either, I don't know. My son got introduced to video games very early on, and I wish he hadn't to be perfectly honest. But I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't. Every one of his peers was too, and it's better than him doing drugs, for example, which he doesn't do. But we live in a culture where our main industry is entertainment.

My son is now seventeen, and he's looking at colleges, including SCAD, and he wants to be a film major. He's made films for the last several years, whereas if he was from my generation he might very well have been a renderer or a designer of some kind. But he looks at motion. Anyway, I don't agree that these things should be kept from kids. But I do think there should be an ongoing dialog about it. By way of example, two years ago, when my son was fifteen he wanted to go see *Elephant*, that movie based on the Columbine

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shootings. And he had seen Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* and he was very moved by that, and I thought it was a very good movie for me to take him to. But I was a little afraid of him going to see *Elephant*, because I didn't know how it would be handled in an entertainment context. And I said *you can go, but afterwards we're going to go somewhere and have a discussion about it whether you like it or not*. And he was fine about that because he got to see the movie. But I think that's what you have to do—you have to discuss these things. To simply ban things doesn't work.

Swathi Ghanta: In our class we discussed the importance of corporate, designer and consumer responsibility. On the designer's part that means knowing your client's business practices, and researching any potential lapses in ethical standards. But how do we know where to research since such information isn't usually broadcast or talked about often. Even if we do internet research, how do we know who's telling the truth?

I think that (ethics) needs to be part of the vocabulary. If you're studying other disciplines, you do study the ethical considerations of those disciplines. It's just something that has to be developed in graphic design…

That's a very, very, very good question. And I think it really just comes down to, in school, these research skills have to be taught. And they're not really taught in undergraduate be-cause…there's not really enough time to teach a whole lot in undergraduate. But I think that needs to be part of the vocabu-lary. If you're studying other dis-ciplines, you do study the ethical considerations of those disciplines. It's just something that has to be developed in graphic design. And if you know there's a client who is doing some harm to somebody or something, you have to be aware of that and factor that into your decision. I'm not even saying don't do it, because, again, everyone makes their own decisions. But you do have to understand where they're coming from. And in some cases you'll never know, in some cases they're hidden, and that's just the way life is. But, I think the basic issue is you just have to be sensitive to these things, and if you hear bad stuff you have to weigh that, and if you read things you have to weigh that. And then make an informed decision as best you can.

SB: The internet is the primary research engine for this generation, and with the good comes plenty of bad. In terms of the whole Google thing[9] and censorship on the internet, would you advise them to keep internet research within certain boundaries for the sake of other modes?

Yes, I think you have to rely on other things, but it's very tempting, and I do it myself, to go onto the internet and find that piece of information. I wouldn't rely on it for *major* information, I'd rely on it for dates, and for other people's commentary, and then you kind of filter that commentary. Sometimes there are insights you can get, but you just have to be aware. More and more things will be mi-grating to the web so that there will be a very large amount of data that you would ordinarily go to the library for, but if you're doing something that's very serious and you really need the "truth" check a few sources, don't rely on one.

Matt Hindla: Regarding the First Thing First (FTF) manifesto[10], where would you recommend researching for work in order to better find the ethical projects or companies to work for?

Well, I think in every community there's something going on that's rather overt. Whether it's overt politics—whether you're calling for Bush's impeachment or you're trying to help a community revivify itself—you can find these things and you can find companies that at least pay good lip service to it.

So, you make a list of those companies that are in your area and you know are doing good works, and you approach them and tell them that you're *in synch* with their goals and their mission. It's relatively easy to find that kind of information. Or if you're going to work for a design firm or ad agency, you look at their client base, and when you're interviewing with them you talk to them about it. You don't put it on the level of *I'm interviewing you for the job that you're offering me*, but you do say, *look, I'm very interested in doing non-for-profit and socially-valuable endeavors, and is that something I'll have a chance to do here?*

SB: In your book you have an article by Kelle Lasn[11] that discusses how much control the media has over how we perceive reality. That particular essay, especially in light of the other essays we've read, sounded a little extreme to some of the students. Some tended to confuse the message with the messenger. But how important is it for us to have people who are willing to voice their opinions so strongly, and to suggest that we should not just aim to shape our present system, but to revolt against large parts of it?

Our democracy is based in large part on revolution; it's based on revolt and opposition. It's sad that the Democrats don't form a good opposition to the Republicans. Democracy has to have a yin and a yang. It has to have a push and pull. There has to be a tension. And there has to be a point at which somebody rises above and says that the status quo isn't working.

You could get into certain Marxist dialectics here, and I won't, but Trotsky was vilified by the communists because he was the communist's communists. He was talking about a revolution that continually had to be revolutionized. Mao and the Cultural Revolution, he allowed students to re-revolutionize the country. They felt that the country had become a bourgeois nest of reactionaries. And you can talk about all of this in political terms, but the bottom line is that stasis doesn't work. There has to be change, and if you allow the change to happen in a logical and sane manner, you get change without violence, and you get change without provoking injury to large groups of people.

But if designers want to be part of that power, they have to find those people, or find it in themselves to speak loudly and take the consequences. The consequences can be real. We've seen it in the Civil Rights era, in the anti-Vietnam War era. It's heartbreaking to me that all those things in the 60s are being wiped away now, and in part because the opposition has not

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gotten enough traction. And it is the way things happen from time to time, but it's sad. So, it's important to have those Kelle Lasns, even if he seems out on a radical fringe. But I don't think he is. I think there are much more radical people who are so frustrated, like the Unabomber who doesn't stand for anything constructive. Lasn produces a magazine that has a constituency, and he produces demonstrations, and he produces books and other things to get his message out, and it's a message that other people can subscribe to. So, I think what he's doing has a great deal of value, even if I don't agree with him all the time.

SB: So, not just valuable, but necessary.

It's necessary. You gotta have an opposition. In your class there has to be somebody who's willing to confront you. Right now.

Scott: Come on. Bring it on…(laughter…but no confrontation)

Cristina Martin: Mr. Heller…

Please call me Steve. Mr. Heller makes me feel very old.

Cristina Martin: OK, Steve, how closely related do you believe graphic designers are to the overconsumption of Americans today?

Graphic design is a part of it, I guess. We are a consumerist society. I think we have to accept that that's what we are. We don't always have to agree with it, we don't even have to like it, and we can do things that make this society better.

I think we are a part of it. But I don't think we should be beating ourselves over the head for it. We do what we do to help, and we do what we do to earn a living, and sometimes those things intersect, and sometimes those things don't. And I think consumption is part of the American way of life right now. And unfortunately, that's why we seem to be fighting this ridiculous war in Iraq—so that we can preserve that way of life. And that's where we have to start questioning how much we buy, what we buy, what we consume, and in deed, how as graphic designers we contribute to that.

SB: Veronique (Vienne) in her essay talks about how shopping has become a substitute for the act of making things.[12] How do you feel about that? And also, as designers, since we are indeed makers, would you say that we're inoculated against this compulsion to shop to a certain degree?

Shopping is shopping. I was once with Naomi Klien who wrote *No Logo[13]*, and I jokingly said, *tell me don't you go to the malls*, and she said, *yeah, I'm a Gap fanatic*. You go to places that are appealing because you do have to buy things. You do have to get shoes, and why not get shoes that look good? And you do have to get pants, so why not pants that look good? We do have necessities, and we do have desires for luxuries. This is a country that's based on a lot of luxuries. Shopping, of course, for many people is a kind of palliative. They'll say, *I'm depressed about a lot of things in my life, and the only way I can make myself feel good is by consuming*. That's a cliche, but people do that. Then they're other people who feel that's how they define themselves, and it's not about being depressed, it's just the mechanism with which to define. I don't think graphic designers are immune to it in any way just because we make things. I think we're as much consumers as anybody else, I certainly feel that I'm a consumer.

There's a Whole Foods near us on Union Square, and I went in there last night. The line—this is a huge store of natural products, right, and it's jokingly called *Whole Paycheck* because it's so expensive—and the line was stretching serpentine around the store. People buy into it because they feel they want their pure commodities, as opposed to the Gristedes a few blocks away where you can get in line and out of the store in five minutes because that's where they sell things that aren't as fashionable, or as healthy or whatever. We're all part of this culture, and if we're not, so be it, but I think designers are as much a consumer class as anybody else.

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SB: In the most recent issue of Dissent there's a good essay about Whole Foods' labor practices, and how brutal they are. Yet, the public perception allows shoppers to feel good about supporting their sustainable practices. So, while their entire public presence is defined by advertising as something that is good for our culture, it seems they're actually engaged in labor practices that are disruptive to our social fabric. Coming back to an earlier question about our ability to get the facts right; there is all of this buzz about Whole Foods being so wonderful, then you have this tiny little voice out there saying—wait a minute, there might be something wrong here…

But in that tiny voice, given the internet and given email—please send me the link to that story because I'd like to have it, and I'll probably send it to a lot of people who are Whole Food fanatics—and that's how it works. Things are viral now. You send it to me, I send it to three, they send it to thirty, they send it to a hundred. All of this information goes out, and somebody may then say, *well, is this true?* And then it'll come back again. It's the nature of having an information glut in society. You have to cope with it. You have to find coping mechanisms.

And sure there's probably philosophers out there, just as there's always been philosophers in times of strife and struggle, who come together and say this is what we should be thinking. And a bunch of people follow those philosophies, and then they become integrated into our way of thinking. William Morris[14] at the turn of the century created the *Arts and Crafts* sensibility because he was revolting, along with Ruskin[15] and others, against industrialization which was polluting the planet. But *Arts and Crafts* wasn't exactly the way to go either, so it evolved into the Bauhaus[16] which was inspired by the machine age. Things happen, and you adapt to them, and if you happen to be a visionary, you lead them.

SB: So, there's a responsibility on the individual in a society to at least act upon their own convictions.

Exactly. And you know what? When people are fed up with companies, they do stop buying from them. That's why commercial boycotts have been so effective in the past, and that's why they're so

dangerous. Esquire Magazine in the late 30s was boycotted because the Catholic Church thought it was salacious. And they boycotted some of the advertisers. The advertisers said, *if you don't change we're going to have to pull our advertising.* Well, some advertisers did and other advertisers didn't. There's always that kind of tension. And there's always a grassroots power to do something. You just have to get enough people together who feel strongly enough to do it.

SB: So if we start a boycott of Google, would you and SVA join us?

I don't know. The Google thing going on in China is disturbing, but on balance, I'm not sure how disturbing it is to me just yet. There are a lot of other things…if everybody at SCAD walked out of school one day in protest of the new Supreme Court Justice, I'd do that. We all end up picking our own battles. During the anti-war period we all picked more or less the same battle. And it worked. During the Civil Rights period, that was a similar thing. Right now there are just too many battles, and people don't seem to have a consensus on the opposition, while those in power do have a consensus, and the consensus is based on acquiring as much power as possible.

Bryan Babiarz: I was just wondering if there was any work in your past that you wish you could wipe your hands clean of?

Being a stock-boy at Melody Knit-wear. No, I've done some things in my life that some people might call offensive, but I wouldn't wash my hands of them, I'd take responsibility and, in fact, enjoy them. I was the art director for Screw magazine, and I started my own sex paper called The New York Review of Sex. At the time I felt I was doing something very political. In retrospect, I still think I was doing something very political. Would I do it now? No. But that's because the moment of it being what I consider a responsible act has passed. There are things that I've said to people I'd like to take back. There are things I wrote that I wished could have written better, but I've basically lived a fairly bland life.

SB: You mention of the counterculture aspects of Screw magazine, yet today pornography has become so prevalent. In the two essays that

Thomas Frank wrote in your collection, Why Johnny Can't Dissent, and the piece on Tibor Kalman,[17] he discuss how our culture defangs dissent simply by appropriating it. And in light of what you mentioned about the sex magazine, if we have a culture that sucks up any form of dissent and makes it a part of the status quo, what do we do?

We just keep doing it. You just keep saying it. You inveigle your way into the public's consciousness. Sunday, for example, when the news broke that Cheney shot his friend—if he shoots his friends, just think what he does to his enemies—when that came out, my son found it first on the internet. It had been kept quiet by the White House for a number of hours, and it was leaked into a local Texas paper before it was made national. When I came home last night, my wife said, man, we gotta watch John Stewart tonight. And fortunately, Bill Maher will be back on Friday. It's a good time for him to return because you need someone to put it in perspective. It's a small thing, and it's not going to change the world, but you just have to take it where you can get it, and you have to fight the power with power.

It's a small thing, and it's not going to change the world, but you just have to take it where you can get it, and you have to fight the power with power.

In the 60s, a lot of the anti-war materials that came out that made an impact were co-opting advertising techniques, in part because many of the people like George Lois were high-powered advertising people who were turning their practices towards the left. And now it's kind of turned around, where the right realizes that if they're going to make an impact they have to do what the left did, which was co-opt the mainstream. So you have to keep finding the places that will make it real for you, and *make* those places. Make the websites or magazine, that will speak to your audience and give them hope and information.

Shayda Yavari: What is your best advice for graduating seniors who are just starting to look for jobs?

I'd say that the best advice is to have the best portfolio you can, which means edit well. And how you present yourself is as important as what you're presenting, and you want to make a very strong impression. I had a student in the first year of our MFA program, and every time we had a guest speaker, he was the first one to ask a question. One day I asked him about it, and he said, *that way they won't forget me.* And the questions were good. It wasn't like he just said, *why do you have a piece of pasta hanging from your tooth.?* So, you gotta do something to make people aware of you, and then trust you. That's a big question; how do you engender trust?

We just went through an interview process for a job in the MFA program, and they were three really good candidates, and you get down to three, what is it that makes you pick the one? Part of it is experience, part of it is intelligence, part of it is character, all of those things. So, that's what you have to be aware of.

Jennifer Vandervoet: Where do you see graphic design going in the future? Will we become more politically aware of our work, or will we continue to be superficial about what we're doing?

The future is hard to predict, and you will do what you will do. I don't think politics plays a huge role in basic graphic design practice. The basic graphic design practice is framing, packaging, informing.

> *I'd say that the best advice is to have the best portfolio you can, which means edit well. And how you present yourself is as important as what you're presenting, and you want to make a very strong impression.*

I don't think superficiality necessarily washes over the practice either. I think if you're framing, packaging and informing, you want to be as clear, concise even entertaining as possible, and that requires a certain amount of depth. So, I think you as designers of the future will end up doing more of the same. But you'll also be dealing with different media, and different requisites for that media. And then what you put into is also important. Just be aware that there's going to be more integration in the media you're dealing with. If you studied letterpress, that's not gonna come in handy too often, but it's still a wonderful thing to know. If you're a great typographer, that's gonna come in handy in these other media platforms. But there's gonna be integration, and if you're not a great physical designer, and you're a really good thinker, that's gonna hold a great deal of weight as well.

SB: A common question that comes up as we talk about these things in class is what the designer could do or should do in terms of being a good citizen. Andrew Howard in an essay in your book says, "A social analysis of design's cultural and political impact should be at the core of our practice." Our students are just finishing their portfolios, and once they leave here they've got to hit the ground running and find a job. So, once financial survival in the world takes hold in a young designer, where is the place for social analysis? Howard, after all, does say that it should be at the core of our practice, not our education.

Sometimes we talk in hyperbole, sometimes we talk in idealized statements—the core of our practice, the core of our being, the essence of our strength—these are things that you just have to interpret for yourselves. I think if you go into the practice thinking you're going to screw everybody around you, that's not good. But if you go in believing you're going to be an ethical participant in the industry and through the work you do, than that's a good thing.

And as time goes on, you'll probably become more aware of it. When you're just hitting the ground running, you gotta get yourself a job, and hopefully you'll get yourself a job in a place where you can learn more about these things that we're talking about that should be in the core of our practice. I don't think that schools are teaching—or I'd be very surprised if design schools were teaching people—to shuck and jive. It's about how do you do the best possible work, and if you're doing the best possible work, that has an inherent social value.

Cait Reiss: There's a quote in your book that reads" "The Wall Street Journal reported Pizza Hut's failed plan to project their logo on the moon with lasers. This was dissuaded not by common good sense or good taste, but because it was technically impossible." Has the race to find new ways and new places to advertise gotten out of hand?

I don't think it's getting out of hand, I think it's consistent with everything that began at the dawn of advertising which was the late 19th century. And the dawn of intrastate transport and consumerism. Every place that's available is used as an advertising vehicle, and sometimes they're zoned that way, like Times Square where I'm sitting right now, and sometimes they're zoned so that you can't put advertising up, like the beautification programs that Lyndon Johnson's wife espoused in the 1960s. But I think it's an advertisers job to find places to advertise, and a way to do it so inveigles its way into your brain.

Sometimes your job is to do what you're asked to do. It doesn't necessarily mean it's a great job, or socially valuable, but you do what you do, and I think advertisers have to find different ways of finding places for their logos. That's why race cars drivers are covered from head to foot with ads, why bananas have little stickers on them, why sidewalks are stenciled, and why pop-up screens are on every website. This is also how people make money.

I work at a newspaper, for instance, newspapers have journalistic standards. We try to do the best we possibly can with our resources to inform the public in an honest and entertaining way, and an informative way. But we rely on advertisers, and some of them may be, if you open up their closet doors, the Enrons of the world.

SB: So, at the point where technology allows us to use the moon as a substrate for advertising, would that be OK?

Well, you and I may think it's not OK, but if enough people say it's OK, and they pass an ordinance that says you can do it, then I guess it's OK. Until somebody rejects it. But I don't think they're gonna to do it, just as I don't think they're going to put billboards in the national forests.

You know, there's always that group of people who will protest against those kinds of things. And I think that as long as those tensions exist, it'll be harder for those kinds of things to happen. Zoning is a really good case in pint. Unless you're in a corrupt system, most cities like New York, for example, and I presume Savannah as well, will restrict where certain things go because it's going to sully the environment.

SB: What about the new viral trends in advertising where paid individuals pretending to be just another person at the bar having a drink exclaim that the drink they're having is the best drink around? There's always been the dictum "buyer beware" but now what about "loner at the bar beware"? Is there an ethical line being crossed where it's no longer advertising as much as deep psychological manipulation?

Advertising is advertising. I think that kind of viral advertising is actually kind of amusing. People are not that stupid where they fall for it all the time. So the bartender recommends Stolichnaya instead of Absolute, or the waiter recommends the fricassee for dinner, and you wanted the spare rib. People are trying to influence you at every turn, and you have to be smart enough not to be influenced.

How many times have you gone to a store, and they ask you for your telephone number? That just ends up on a telephone marketing list. How many times do you go into an electronics store, and they try to sell you the repair plan. Well, if you're knowledgeable about these things, you'd realize that their repair plan is no better than the manufacturer's guarantee that comes with the product. But people are always trying to sell you something, that's America. You just have to be aware of it and then you just have to get used to it.

Miles Small: How important is a designer dealing with an ethical issue when compared to a politician dealing with the same kind of issue?

I think you have to rate everything by some personal and social standard of importance. But the politicians control the purse strings and the designers control the look. The purse strings are obviously more important. It's like playing rock, paper, scissors, match—what trumps the other? Politicians are more dangerous than designers.

That's why race car drivers are covered from head to foot with ads, why bananas have little stickers on them, why sidewalks are stenciled, and why pop-up screens are on every website. This is also how people make money.

Q Trevino: It states in the FTF manifesto that consumerism is running uncontested and must be challenged. What is meant by this, and how can that truly be accomplished?

Again, I think that what I said a moment ago about hyperbole fits here. Manifestos are written to incite and excite, and when you say something is running rampant, you're inciting and you're cautioning. I think what that manifesto is basically saying is let's just be aware. It's not saying go out and make revolution, because the revolution isn't going to happen overnight. But as long as you're aware you become more sensitive to the needs of change, and to the mechanisms of change, and in your own way you start changing. Or you join groups. During the last campaign a lot of people I know joined Moveon.org, and it was a major, amazing effort. And I think if you engage in an issue like rampant consumerism, and you start something the way Kelle Lasn did at Adbusters, you'll cause some friction, and you'll gather some adherents, and one hopes that in grassroots situations it will grow and grow and grow. So I think that's what the manifesto is saying; simply try your best.

Kyle Younkman: Another quote form the FTF states, "To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse." Can we really blame graphic design for the reductive qualities of public discourse or can it be better justified through the convention of technology?

I think to blame us entirely is kind of crazy, but since what we do is what we do, and if we're looking inwardly, we have to accept that we have to take some of the blame, if there is blame to go around. It's interesting, when that manifesto was first signed, I felt that there was no discussion going on about these things that we're discussing here on the telephone. And so I became a signatory because I felt it was important to discuss. There were others among the group who were much more aggresive in terms of how they felt we as designers should respond. Tibor Kalman was a case in point. While he did corporate work he also felt it was necessary to expose those things in the corporate world that shed a bad light on designers, and didn't help the society. I think right now we're in a position of stasis. We're

neither moving forward nor moving backward. And maybe this First Things First manifesto should be kind of reconfigured and re-issued, so that people do things. Because now I think we're talking about it, but not many people are moving off the dime.

SB: Katherine McCoy in Rick Poyner's essay wrote "We have trained a profession that feels political or social concerns are either extraneous to their work or inappropriate." That was written in 1999, and it comes back to what you've been saying; do you feel that the FTF has had any kind of effect over the last seven years?

I think it has generated an awful lot of conversation. It is amazing, because you're still talking about it. We published it in *Looking Closer,* and it can be downloaded off the internet because it's still there. I think that designers have an inherent desire to do things good, and I think that's basically who designers are.

And design is inherently a meritocracy rather than a kind of political patronage industry. So I think that's why it's still important in people's minds, and particularly in student's minds who are going to enter this field, and who do need some sort of moral and/or ethical measuring stick. I wouldn't go so far to say a philosophy, but a measuring stick by which to say to themselves *this is the line and this is where I stand*.

I think right now we're in a position of stasis. We're neither moving forward nor moving backward. And maybe this First Things First manifesto should be kind of reconfigured and re-issued, so that people do things. Because now I think we're talking about it, but not many people are moving off the dime.

SB: So rather than a trend—something designers are so often focused on—do you see the ideas espoused in the FTF as something that might actually be a catalyst for a long-term reconsideration of what we do and how we do it?

Well, I hope so, but designers are interested in trends. Where do they learn that? Where do they become so interested in trends? If their peers are talking about trends, if the media are talking about trends, it's going to be imbued in them. But if teachers are saying trends are not that important, that the important things are the formal aspects of design, the language of design and the ethics of design, then they'll think more closely about that, while at the same time understanding that the world is about fashions.

Matt Thomas: If designers are increasing the beauty of every-day items, why is it perceived by so many as selling your soul to the demands of commercial advertising?

I don't think design is always about beauty. I think design is about a lot of things, and beauty, while we kind of pay lip service to it, is just a function of creating a good design; it's a consequence. But not everybody has the same idea of what beauty is. If beauty is your platonic ideal, then you have to define what beauty is. For some people beauty is a kind of timelessness, for some it's a kind of timeliness, for others its just pure function. Advertising is not about pure function, advertising is about capturing the minute—not even the moment, just the minute—and conveying a message as quickly as possible and as convincingly as possible.

THE FIRST THINGS FIRST MANIFESTO of 1999

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators who have been raised in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents. Many design teachers and mentors promote this belief; the market rewards it; a tide of books and publications reinforces it.

Encouraged in this direction, designers then apply their skill and imagination to sell dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles. Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design. The profession's time and energy is used up manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best.

Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.

There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programmes, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.

We propose a reversal of priorities in favour of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication – a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning. The scope of debate is shrinking; it must expand. Consumerism is running uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design.

In 1964, 22 visual communicators signed the original call for our skills to be put to worthwhile use. With the explosive growth of global commercial culture, their message has only grown more urgent. Today, we renew their manifesto in expectation that no more decades will pass before it is taken to heart.

Jonathan Barnbrook
Nick Bell
Andrew Blauvelt
Hans Bockting
Irma Boom
Sheila Levrant de Bretteville
Max Bruinsma
Siân Cook
Linda van Deursen
Chris Dixon
William Drenttel
Gert Dumbar
Simon Esterson
Vince Frost
Ken Garland
Milton Glaser
Jessica Helfand
Steven Heller
Andrew Howard
Tibor Kalman
Jeffery Keedy
Zuzana Licko
Ellen Lupton
Katherine McCoy
Armand Mevis
J. Abbott Miller
Rick Poynor
Lucienne Roberts
Erik Spiekermann
Jan van Toorn
Teal Triggs
Rudy VanderLans
Bob Wilkinson

Steven Heller

"Things happen, and you adapt to them, and if you happen to be a visionary, you lead them."
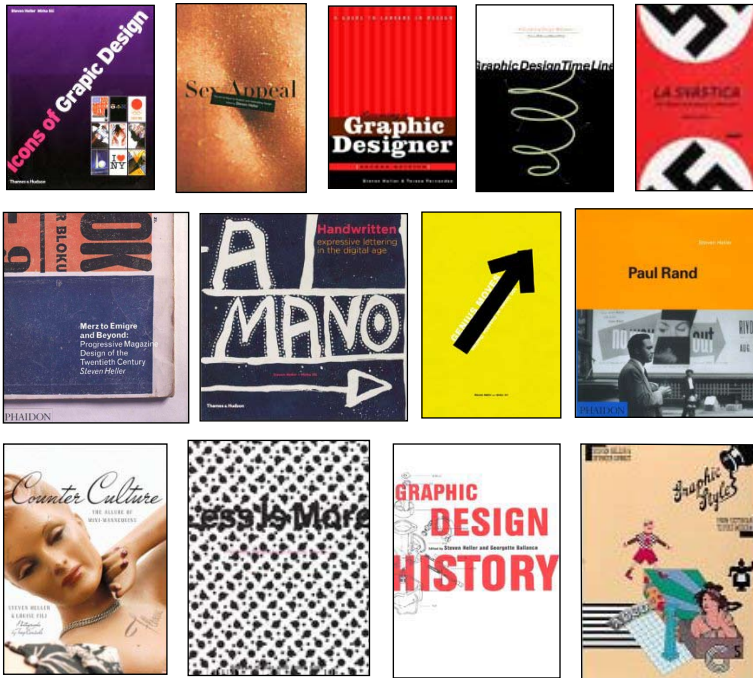
and so much more…

1   Swiss International Style–A sparse yet fluid design philosophy that emerged from Switzerland after WWII. Sans serif type faces (mostly Helevetica), bold white spaces, typographic grids and asymmetrical layouts dominated this minimalist approach. Emil Ruder, Max Bill, Max Huber, Armin Hoffman and Josef Müller-Brockman.

2   Cranbrook Academy of Art–Best known for its embracing of post-modern thought and subsequent design exploration during the late 1980s and 1990s. Run by Katherine and Michael McCoy, the graphic design program embraced fine art notions of experimentation, and explored the structures of legibility and perception.

3   Pentagram–Multidisciplinary design partnership specializing in graphic design, product design and architecture. New York partners include Michael Beirut, Michael Gericke, Paula Scher, Woody Pirtle, J. Abbott Miller

4   Target prescription bottle–Deborah Adler developed new labels for prescription bottles as a thesis project at SVA. The labels completely reimagine these small surfaces and create a dramatically more legible and more clearly defined product.

5   Milton Glaser (b. 1929)–" Prolific and versatile New York designer and illustrator whose name is synonymous with Push Pin Studio, which he co-foundedd with Seymour Chwast and Edward Sorel in 1954. Best known for witty and eclectic designs for book and record covers, magazines and posters, Glaser's work extend to corporate identity, packaging, exteriors, interiors and exhibitions."

6   Yayun Huang–SCAD MFA 2004. Yayun began as in intern at Glaser's studio. Her abilities were quickly recognized, and she was hired full-time.

7   *Saving Advertising* by Jelly Helm (Looking Closer 4) His three major claifications: 1) promote only those goods and service that benefit human development; 2)Refrain from promoting reckless, irresponsible competitive consumption; 3) Ban all braodcast advertising to children under 12.

8   Funny Garbage–funnygarbage.com

9   Google censorship–The week before this interview it was made known that Google had made a "business agreement" with Chinese government so that the Chinese Google search engine actively censored websites that feature information on "human rights", "political reform", "Tiananmen Square" and many others.

10   First Things First Manifesto–See page 21 for the entire manifesto.

11   *The People V. The Corporate Cool Machine* by Kelle Lasn (Looking Closer 4)

12   *The Spectacle: A Reevaluation of the Situationist Thesis* byVeroniqu Vienne (Looking Closer 4). The Situationists were political and artistic movement begun in France by Guy Debord, author of THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE. The Situationists, descendents of the Surrealists and Lettrists, believed that defying social constructs was the only reasonable reaction to a world increasingly controlled by the spectacle of consumerism.

13   NO LOGO by Naomi Klien (1999)– "This book is the first that both uncovers the sins of corproations run amok and explores and explains the new resistance that will change consumer culture in the 21st century." (quoted from the dust jacket). Presents detailed journalisitic information on human exploitation and pollution that occurs as the result of the third-world manufacturing operations of some of the world's largest companies.

14   William Morris (1834–1896) Leader of a movement of writers, painters, and product, textile and furniture designers who rejected the harsh realities of living during the Industrial Revolution. Founder of Kelmscots Press, the publsiher of finely crafted books that were heavily influenced by the luxurious manuscript of the Middle Ages. "His concerns with craftsmanship and truth to materials became important precepts by the Bauhaus and the Modern movement."

15   John Ruskin (1819-1900)–"the most influential art critic of the 19th century. A wartercolorist, a botanist, a sensualist, a socialaist, an economist, a romantic, and a poet." (from *Ruskin: Letters on Art,* Allworth Press, 1996). In his writing and lectures, Ruskin stressed the importance of social and environmental considerations in the face of the dehumaizing effects of the Industrial Revolution.

16   Bauhaus (building house)–"German design school which attempted to create a new unity between art and industry by rejecting any division between decorative and constructional techniques." Begun in Weimar, 1919, heavily influence by the Werkbund (1907-1930s), forced to move to Dessau in 1925 due to political pressure, then Berlin in 1933 before closing down for good.

17   Tibor Kalman (1940–1999) Founder of M&Co, the New York City design firm in 1979. Explored vernacular styles, and instigated industry-wide discussions on the ethical responsibilities of designers. Editor-in-chief of Colors Magazine for he first 13 issues. His provacative and absurd antics made him a lightening rod for controversy.

All quoted material excerpted from *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Graphic Design and Designers*, by Alan and Isabella Livingston (Thames and Hudson, 1992), except where noted.