

daniel eatock

ARTIST AND DESIGNER

Interview by Steven Heller

Daniel Eatock, a London-based artist and graphic designer, is an obsessive design documentarian and a champion of democratizing information architecture systems. His basic design methodology is rooted in a reductive logic that strives for objective and rational website designs. In 2005, Eatock co-created, with Jeffrey Vaska, a free, downloadable content management system called Indexhibit that enables people to build simple websites that bring content to the fore. Indexhibit's no-frills approach is evident on Eatock's own site, eatock.com, an extensive repository for objects, prints, and photographs (his own and others') that reveal his intense fascination with the art of observation and the pleasure of unexpected connections. A 1998 graduate of the Royal College of Art, Eatock interned at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis before returning to England in 1999 to launch the design firm Foundation 33, which he later merged with the creative agency Boymeetsgirl. In 2003, he started Eatock Ltd., through which he builds and maintains his database of photographic projects and completes work for a range of entertainment and cultural clients, including Samsung and Channel 4. The art world has also embraced him, and various galleries have exhibited his conceptual art. For a 2007 show at London's M+R Gallery, he stuck his collection of tape rolls to a beam and let them slowly unwind to the floor. Eatock refers to his process as "entrepreneurial authorship," which includes numerous limited-



Holes Punched, a project Eatock started in 2007 in which holes will be punched from paper until the puncher gives out.

edition works such as *Untitled Beatles Poster*, a printed piece bearing the lyrics to every Beatles song. On the occasion of the publication of his first monograph, *IMPRINT* (Princeton Architectural Press), a conceptual anthology of his art and design projects, we caught up with him to discuss how he balances all of his interests.

HELLER: In the '50s and '60s, many designers obsessively collected street vernacular, which they documented, categorized, and sometimes used in their design or art. Since this was the age of corporate modernism, I believe many people saw this as a respite from the rigid design tenets of the day. What is your motivation for your brand of documentation? **EATOCK:** Rather than documenting existing things, I feel I am creating new works. I carry my camera with me every day and find things to take a snapshot of. I then make it a work by titling it: Without titles, my pictures are meaningless. My interest is

to use my environment—the placement and alignment of things, chance, coincidence, accidents—as givens. I am noticing and embracing these things and using them as the material to make work. **HELLER:** Your new monograph, *IMPRINT*, focuses on the photographic taxonomies you've developed, and your website is a deep archive of these "accidents." Is all observed phenomena ripe for your interest? Or are there biases, prejudices, and agendas you nurture? **EATOCK:** My book provided an opportunity to explore the relationships between all the works. Unlike my website, these works are not displayed chronologically, but are juxtaposed, forming conceptual similarities and relationships. Big projects are positioned next to small projects, and quick informal works are next to important client commissions. The reader is asked to make connections with works in the same way I do when making them. **HELLER:** What do you want your audience to take away from—or give to—

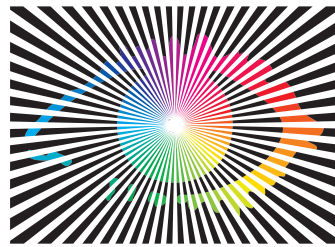
your work? Do you think about them when you are making your connections? **EATOCK:** Do I think about my audience? Yes and no. I don't do surveys or research to understand who my audience is. I make work and people discover it, and some contribute. The work makes the audience. It is not aimed at a specific group of people. Many of my works have answers; they are not completely open-ended or ambiguous. I want people to take away a conclusion that they can ponder, rather than leaving without knowing what to think. **HELLER:** Your website garners a fair share of participants. How does this influence how you work? And how is this different from working in print? **EATOCK:** Unlike the print medium, which fixes things and makes them permanent, the web is aptly suited for ongoing projects. Each medium has its own specificity and yields its own unique parameters that affect and add to the work. **HELLER:** Your "design method" on your site [which uses Indexhibit] is rather minimalist. Is this a deliberate attempt to focus attention on the work, or—dare I ask—is this a stylistic trope? **EATOCK:** The Indexhibit format sits slightly outside of graphic design and visual styles and trends. The format has evolved and is used by many websites that display a wide range of data. I made a proposal back in 2004 and invited graphic designers to embrace this format as a way of emphasizing content over presentation. The idea has grown into Indexhibit, which is both the name for the format and a tool to generate the format. Indexhibit should be customized, added to, and appropriated in the same way one would a Post-it note, a postcard, or bound pages in a book. In this sense, I believe the essence of Indexhibit is neutral, not minimalist; it is a blank space awaiting content, without which it fails to exist. **HELLER:** You've discussed your fascination with archetypes. What is the nexus between the archetypal and the generic? **EATOCK:** The archetypal and the generic connect as subjects of interests. I like original things that have become arche-



2007



2006



2003

Eatock's logos for the *Big Brother* series. CLIENT: Channel 4 Television.

typal because they work well and have been embraced by the masses. Generic things are special because they try not to be special. In a Duchampian way, I strive to create new things and meaning from existing things, by conceptually taking and embracing those things that are a given to form something new. **HELLER:** What archetypes, if any, have emerged because you've made them happen? **EATOCK:** I am not suggesting that I am creating archetypes—that would be a lofty claim. To have created an archetype would be my ultimate dream. I always wonder how rock bands feel once Muzak makes a version of their song to play in a supermarket—if I wrote songs, that would be the ultimate. [The eatock.com galleries] Rubber Stamp, Neckclasp, One Stone, Table Mat, No Smoking Signs, and Holley Portraits all have a ready-made component to them. **HELLER:** What criteria do you use to determine what is important? **EATOCK:** Any criteria are used to determine what is important; it is intuitive and unwritten. As in the Thank You Pictures [a large online gallery of "thank you" store signs submitted in part by the

public], there is no brief, no description, no guidelines. People sense what the criteria are from the submissions that are displayed. If criteria were written down, they would be restrictive; it's better left open to interpretation. **HELLER:** Before the online era, I had the leisure to produce work at a slower rate, but now the internet forces a more frenetic—and, indeed, often superficial—pace. You may not be creating new archetypes, but doesn't having this online outlet demand that you feed the monster? Are you compelled to find new material on a regular basis to keep your site fresh? **EATOCK:** I don't feel a pressure to feed it. Instead, I enjoy and embrace the immediacy of the medium by sharing the things I make as I make them. My website is like an open studio or a personal impromptu gallery. Each day, or each week, I share the project I have made, sometimes making works public when they are not concluded or fully resolved. **HELLER:** I co-chair an M.F.A. program at the School of Visual Arts called "The Designer as Author," in which students are encouraged to develop their own content and then take it to market. The web has made this comparatively easy to do—if, of course, there is a good idea at the core. Do you believe, as I do, that graphic design will soon split between service on the one hand and creator-authors on the other? **EATOCK:** I think "graphic design" is a bad term or description, but at the same time, it is generic enough to be an umbrella for many things. Maybe the only new development is that more and more things are now referred to, or connected with, "graphic design." As far as a split, I am not sure. People have always made things as authors, haven't they? Is a design author any different from an author author or an artist author? An author is just the originator of something. **HELLER:** Do you see a time when your art will supplant your design, or is it all a whole? **EATOCK:** My art is my design and my design is my art. **HELLER:** So, what do you call yourself? **EATOCK:** Daniel Eatock. 🗨️