

# nik hafermaas

CHAIR OF GRAPHIC DESIGN, ART CENTER COLLEGE OF DESIGN

Interview by Steven Heller

With motion- and time-based media becoming commonplace in design school curricula, traditional definitions of graphic design are growing obsolete. Some undergraduate educational institutions are aggressively scrapping old ways of teaching in favor of novel approaches that combine new media and teaching methods. The Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, is one school at the forefront of change, and Nik Hafermaas, its chair of graphic design, has been a key player in kicking up some academic dust. Before coming to Art Center in 2005, Hafermaas, 41, was running Triad, an exhibition design firm in his native Berlin, and teaching environmental design at the University of Arts Bremen. Since graduating from the University of Arts Berlin in 1989, Hafermaas has moved nimbly across various design disciplines, wedding virtual dimensionality with traditional 2-D and 3-D visuals. At Art Center, Hafermaas is emphasizing that graphic design has left the page to conquer space, motion, and interaction. He has created a classroom environment that requires students to work outside of their milieu, and he is fostering a new balance between aesthetics and social relevance through more emphasis on research, ideation, and projects that establish greater ties with the industry through leadership. This, he hopes, will raise students' creative excitement, dedication, and social interaction. In this interview, Hafermaas discusses his approach and the results he has seen after two years.



Entrance to “Fresh Eyes Berlin,” an exhibition promoting the city as a creative center. The project was conceived, designed, and produced by a team of 13 students from Art Center College of Design.

**HELLER:** Art Center has been on the cutting edge of design and illustration education on the West Coast, but still, you’ve altered the curriculum. What have you introduced that is both new to this school specifically, and to design education in general? **HAFERMAAS:** I saw an alarming lack of drawing skills in some portfolios. Sketching is both a way of seeing the world and of communicating your ideas. Among other classes at Art Center, there is new emphasis on the art of research that runs across all disciplines. But the real curricular innovations take place in the final terms: Here we see way more lateral movement across different design majors. For example, there are transdisciplinary studio classes called Funded Educational Projects, frequently hosted and led by the graphic design department, that are open to all upperclassmen. They deal with design challenges put forward by brands like HP, Target, Nestlé, and Avery Dennison. **HELLER:** You also instituted something called the “Third Faculty.” Who are they?

**HAFERMAAS:** They are neither professors nor lecturers, but outstanding personalities invited for an entire year to interface with our students. Art Center calls it the “Visionary in Residence” program; our first visionary was Bruce Sterling, the acclaimed writer and futurologist. This year, we have the graphic design collective 75B, from Rotterdam, on board—its three designers take turns lecturing our students and generally shaking things up on campus. The Third Faculty provide great inspiration on a daily basis and have evolved into the preferred “go-to” people for our students. **HELLER:** What is the “wall-less classroom”? Is this just a nice term for the traditional pedagogy that involves class work and the occasional internship? **HAFERMAAS:** Temporarily leaving one’s own comfort zone can work wonders in one’s creative and social development. This college-wide initiative is marked by a variety of programs. One example is a study abroad that is led by our international initiatives department in



Shipping crates made from reclaimed cypress lumber, harvested from homes and buildings marked for demolition in New Orleans. The crates are part of Art Center's identity program for the Katrina Furniture Project, developed to cover a wide range of revitalization initiatives. Designers: Atley Kasky, Auyumi Ito, John Emshwiller; instructor: Paul Hauge, Art Center.

ones have the opportunity to study at Art Center. A good mix of different national and social backgrounds is crucial to creating an inspiring student population. After all, you learn way more from your peers than from any instructor. **HELLER:** But honestly, can graphic design offer enough challenges these days for functional innovation to take place? And are your students experienced

enough to make things happen that will be world-altering? **HAFERMAAS:** The biggest challenge today for graphic designers is cutting through the ubiquitous white noise of everyday communication. Some smart scientists recently determined that the average person is confronted with 2,500 to 4,000 commercial messages daily. It is getting increasingly difficult for institutions and corporations to reach out to their specific audiences. Graphic designers have to find new ways of translating the world around us into messages that are relevant emotionally and intellectually—we are way beyond mere ink on paper. In a sense, we have to become visual engineers, and our tools are surprise, empathy, and beauty.

**HELLER:** One of your students recently wrote, "The only advice I can give to any students participating in such a program would be to leave your egos and comfort zones at the door." What is he saying? Is your program totally based on collaboration? If so, is it possible to be innovative without having an ego? **HAFERMAAS:** On the contrary: One has to dare to be outstanding and to strive for one's own ideas. We try to foster self-confidence, a personal voice, and excellent communication skills. Striving for ideas within a group calls first for communication skills—skills that can be acquired and practiced best in collaborative projects. A vital insight to be gained is that sometimes a group can be far more nimble and intelligent than the lone genius mulling over a problem. **P**

partnerships with other institutions, such as INSEAD's MBA programs in Fontainebleau, France, as well as Singapore, where our students attend classes during one term alongside the MBA students and work on a design project. I am also excited about our new Studio Abroad projects, where a group of students and instructors set up and operate a professional design studio in a foreign country for an entire term to work on a real-life design challenge. **HELLER:** How does that work? **HAFERMAAS:** Last year, a student team went to Copenhagen to work on the INDEX: award, the world's biggest design prize. Our group conceived and produced the graphic identity and the exhibition design for public pavilions positioned prominently in the pedestrian streets of Copenhagen. Another group is living and working in Berlin to produce the exhibition "Fresh Eyes Berlin," a project that is co-hosted by our environmental design and graphics departments. Under the guidance of faculty members and local professionals such as MTV Europe's creative director, the team is producing a traveling exhibition to communicate Berlin's potential as a capital of creativity to the rest of the world. **HELLER:** You have an educational philosophy that you call NuX—new excellence in graphic design—which includes social consciousness as well as a delineation of the fundamental aesthetic tenets about design. Do you find that students truly buy into your concept?

Or do they really just want to learn the skills that will allow them to find jobs—any jobs? **HAFERMAAS:** I found students and instructors alike to be excited about the new challenges, which I associate with New Excellence. Graphic designers are no longer the "pretty makers" that are called upon once everyone else has completed their work; graphic designers can be at the forefront of research and ideation. Looking at all design disciplines, we are now able to make a shift from the old notion of designers as mere problem solvers toward becoming opportunity seekers, now and in the future. Whether developing branding campaigns for post-Katrina initiatives or creating scenarios for ubiquitous computation, students learn to embrace a proactive approach in seeking opportunities for applying their unique skills. **HELLER:** Coming from Germany, where design practice is perhaps more of a vocation than a mere job, do you find American students—and particularly students of privilege who can afford art school—to be more or less committed to the high-minded virtues you espouse? **HAFERMAAS:** The willingness to work extremely hard is much higher at Art Center than at the schools that I've personally experienced in Germany. The upside of a relatively high tuition is that students are treated more as clients than as potential disturbances to the peace of mind of life-tenured professors. Through scholarships and grants, we make sure that the most talented and dedicated