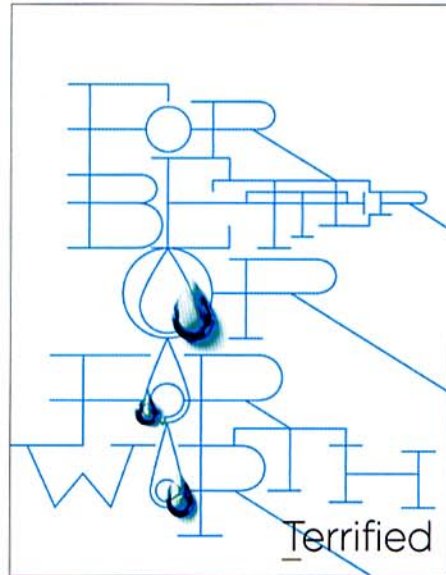


rick valicenti

DESIGNER, ENTREPRENEUR, PROVOCATEUR

Interview by Steven Heller

Before founding R. Valicenti Design in 1981 in Barrington, Illinois, Rick Valicenti was practicing conventional corporate design and heading toward a career of blandness. Restless from composing generic layouts, Valicenti immediately leaped headlong into grid-busting experimentalism in his new shop. By 1988, when he founded his next venture, Thirst, his work was so anti-corporate it was considered to be anti-design. Nonetheless, he emerged as one of the leaders in the new digital typography era and was an early exponent of the computer-driven design movement. Valicenti's signature mannerisms—typographic eccentricity and visual wordplay—filled books, posters, and videos with graphic puns and exploding pictures. As his digital type output grew, he co-founded Thirstype as a source for new typefaces. Although Valicenti has since given up control of that venture, he continues to evolve as a creative innovator. As a partner in Wild LuV, a new collaboration with designers Lorraine Wild and Louise Sandhaus and architect Tim Durfee, Valicenti is designing an exhibition of Target's corporate history for the company's headquarters. Through Thirst, he is inventing an automated means of designing catalogs for Wright Auctions. His 2005 monograph, *Emotion as Promotion*, builds on his tell-all speeches to design audiences. This fall, Valicenti, 55, was awarded the 2006 AIGA Medal for Lifetime Achievement. In this interview, he professes his love/hate relationship with the design practice and reveals some of his personal tempests.



HELLER: You've evolved from being a strictly corporate designer in the 1980s to becoming an expressive designer straddling the line between function and art. You admit you have an ambivalent relationship with graphic design, so how do you feel about receiving the AIGA Medal? **VALICENTI:** I do have an ambivalent relationship with graphic design—I love it and I hate it. Yes, I am surprised and humbled by the AIGA's recognition—and deeply honored. While thrilled to be awarded the AIGA Medal, I am serious when I say I love design and I hate design. I wonder how many other recipients also felt this way? **HELLER:** Why do you hate design? **VALICENTI:** As much as I delight in the presence of great design in my life and community, I feel so violated by the shit that is everywhere; bad design seems to ooze into culture at every turn. This is the design I hate, as it is a reflection of such scant respect for those who must be in contact with it. At the core of design's practice is the virtue of respect—for the process, for the craft, and for the message-making and distribution. There are only three types of messages designers are invited to help express:

messages of value, messages about value, and messages of no value. Only two are really worth our time and passion, but the pressures of commerce and life encourage us to be less discerning as to where we practice design. And it is this circumstance that I also hold in contempt. Design has the means to be a healing, one-to-one exchange and be a rewarding medium that enhances, not contaminates, one's quality of life. **HELLER:** You've written and spoken about shaking things up, and your work sometimes toys with our senses and preconceptions. But I get the impression that a lot has to do with style. Is style a dirty word for you, or do you relish the opportunity to make it? **VALICENTI:** While style is certainly present in my expressions, it is both the message and a sidekick to the messenger. In my case, I am usually very conscious of what style I use, and in using a particular style I let it speak its legible code in concert with whatever I am saying. In my work, style is complicit. **HELLER:** Will you also admit that in the Valicentian universe, style sometimes gets in the way of the message? **VALICENTI:** The fact that the question is even in play suggests that style—my style—has a way of being too present in relationship to the message. I do subscribe to the mindset that everything has meaning. That suggests that even the cake's decoration is to be taken in as part of the cake's experience. Sometimes the frosting on the cake is good to look at and makes the cake; other times it even satisfies one's taste. **HELLER:** That aside, you've performed—and I'd say a lot of your work is performance—in the commercial sector. A client must truly want you for you. Don't you feel there is a kind of arrogance in your work? Are you challenging the status quo simply to see

how far you can push tolerances? **VALICENTI:** Good pitches, Steve . . . high and inside. For sure, clients want me, in spite of the threatening risk that my method of making measurable client success brings with it. Yes, the results, for my small- to medium-scaled clients, are easy for me to identify and point to. In doing so, this particular breed of client sees that I am a very good investment—both personally and professionally. Arrogant? I am simply confident and willing to risk falling on my face—which happens, too.

HELLER: It's safe to say that some of your work has not only been apart from the mainstream, but also sometimes offensive. I recall the motion-graphic piece you did using a nude woman on the Internet to create letterforms with her body. What were you thinking of? **VALICENTI:** "Just My Type" was a nine-minute sequential animation of screen grabs taken from a 79-minute session with a woman who had placed herself in front of a video camera and offered to do anything I might type for around a dollar per minute. Her name was Alice World. I promised to myself that if, by the letter *E*, she was not with the program or performing my suggestions, the request line would be over. By the letter *D*, Alice World had taken to it like an eager student of typography, moving her body into conceptually surprising and compositionally beautiful [letter] forms. **HELLER:** Nonetheless, it was offensive to many women—and men—who did not appreciate the irony. Having Ms. World's permission does not make it right—or does it? **VALICENTI:** I admit that I went too far. While Alice World was complicit in the piece, the audience was not. In turn, my own personal motivations were put into the public context without permission or invitation. My ego was out of line to think that showing this personal episode and reflection, albeit one that looks and feels like design, was suitable or appropriate for a public of my peers. Mea culpa. **HELLER:** Your recent monograph is indeed a tour de force



Previous page: Work from a promotional book for Real Eyes, a digital imaging company. Designer/typographer: Rick Valicenti; tears: Bill Cornman/Real Eyes. **Above:** Page from Thirst's new catalog for Wright Auctions. Art director: Rick Valicenti; designer: John Pobjowski.

of explosive graphics. I believe in the '90s you helped alter the standard and prefigured in print many of the bells and whistles that we now see in motion FX. I find myself lost amid effects and techniques. What is your narrative? What is it you are really saying through this work? **VALICENTI:** Funny—I, too, often get lost in the effects and techniques within the Thirst portfolio. The *Emotion as Promotion* experience is a bit like an episodic channel surf. The "I love design/I hate design" narrative does run right through each chapter and on every one of the pages and serves to illuminate my personal and professional experiences and pass on my hopes relative to design to those entering the profession. What I might be saying is "Enter at your own risk," or "Invest in yourself," or "In the end it all comes down to touchy-feely." But the theme and tenor remain, for the most part, consistent throughout: A good design process yields good design. A bad process of making design yields design whose quality mirrors its process. It all comes down to the choices designers make. **HELLER:** So there is a dichotomy between your commercial and personal work? **VALICENTI:** My personal

work usually makes manifest my disdain for the dreadful and cowardly output called design. As a profession, we have learned to be responsive, to comply, to be of service, and sometimes all of this service-providing yields a collective disrespect for humankind. As a culture, we deserve the best. Designers should simply step away from conference tables when they hear "That is too good" or "You are too creative." **HELLER:** You paint with a very broad brush. You work for clients such as Herman Miller who give you creative license. So who's the best client? **VALICENTI:** I also continue to work with [designer] Holly Hunt or [Wright Auction's] Richard and Julie Wright. I have named, packaged, and launched small design-driven companies like Cool Warmth, manufacturers of the Fireorb fireplace; and have been instrumental in the sustained market presence of Gilbert Paper for 16 years. Since 1998, I have also sustained and grown a relationship with the Lyric Opera of Chicago. In the very suburban orbit of Thirst, we also serve a handful of not-for-profit clients—but the best Thirst client of all is still *me*. **HELLER:** Tell me about Wild LuV. What can you do with design as a collaborative that you could not do in Thirst? **VALICENTI:** Essentially, WildLuV is a conceptual engine that takes me to design that I might not get to on my own. With the other thought leaders, I am immersed in the company of insightful and often challenging expertise that pushes the design's process along with much more steam. **HELLER:** What would you like to do that you are not doing now? **VALICENTI:** After 25 years of self-employment and over 30 years of practice, I still enjoy the practice but would like to create economic security for myself in the same way I help do it for my clients. I am quite good at making things, and it appears as if those I work with are quite good at making money. I imagine a day where I am quite good at making very interesting things that make *me* mo' money. **Ka-ching.** 🎯