khoi vinh

DESIGN DIRECTOR, NYTIMES.COM

By Steven Heller

Home page of Subtraction.
com, Khoi Vinh's personal blog,
January 3, 2008

Subtraction.com's October
2006 archive page. Illustrator:
Ray Frenden.

Khoi Vinh has emerged over the past few years as a leading critical voice in the evolving discipline of web information design. Since 2006, he has been the design director of NYTimes.com, where he and his staff of information architects and designers are responsible for the look and feel of the *Times*'s website. On his blog, Subtraction.com, he addresses key questions about web standards and the marriage of design and technology. Last fall, Vinh and editor Liz Danzico launched Abriefmessage.com, where contributors critique design topics within an imposed length of 200 words or less.

Born in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1971, Vinh immigrated to the United States in 1973 and was raised in Gaithersburg, Maryland. After his family moved to the Los Angeles area in 1989, Vinh enrolled at L.A.'s Otis College of Art and Design, where his interests shifted from illustration to graphic design. After graduating, he turned his attention to new media and moved to New York to pursue web design. In 2001 he cofounded Behavior, a boutique interaction firm that designed websites for clients as diverse as JPMorgan Chase and *The Onion*. In recent years, he has been an advocate of integrating "traditional design" and internet design, and yet he fully understands the limitations of this still primitive form. Nonetheless, he is attempting to build a new genre of designer. Here, he explains the challenges.

HELLER: What's new, in the medium that you are so avidly a part of? VINH: Designing outward rather than inward. We're entering a new era of design where the brands and experiences we create are no longer closely held, highly controlled cathedrals, but rather bazaars of commerce and conversation. HELLER: What do you mean by "bazaars of conversation"? Does this imply the audience is an active participant in the process of design? VINH: Historically, graphic design has been a discipline that deals in control, in creating carefully managed, organized experiences that are then distributed to people to be consumed in whole. Digital media has upended that equation, and now—yes—the audience is an active participant in the process of design. In fact, the process is now a conversation between designers and users. Look at the way interfaces evolve over time to accommodate the needs of users. What's old is the idea that reaching new audiences through digital means can be done in the traditional, one-to-many fashion of imposed narratives and regimented consumption. Design and designers now have to mingle with the masses in order to make meaningful connections. HELLER: How does a designer do this and not get sucked into the pitfalls of consensus? VINH: There is a real difference between a majority consensus and earnestly engaging in an ongoing conversation with real people about the solutions designers can provide them. It's not about taking a vote; it's about listening to what users are responding to in a design and identifying the unexpected things people are doing with it. For the most part, this is a way of thinking that is expressed most clearly in interfaces for digital products. But it's

Essay for
Abriefmessage.com
by Dan Saffer,
November 1, 2007.
Illustrator: Jennifer Lew.

also a way of thinking that should be integrated into how brands evolve, how companies relate to their customers, and whether design can help mediate that relationship more fruitfully for both parties. **HELLER:** You began as an illustrator, then veered into design and ultimately into the web. From this perspective, what does the future hold for the "new" designers? **VINH:** For the foreseeable future, designers are going to continue to work in a fluid, somewhat unstable environment. So it remains to be seen to what extent those skills—illustration and print design—will translate online. In some respects, they've always relied on fairly fixed, knowable boundaries, which makes their future uncertain. **HELLER:** And what does this mean? **VINH:** This means we'll continue experimenting, fumbling, learning, and accruing new, workable rules for how designers will participate in this space alongside the users. It's going to take a decade to sort itself out before we can establish a canonical view of not only what the role of a designer is but what constitutes "good design." **HELLER:** What is the profile of the "new designer"? **VINH:** The new designer is adaptable across multiple media and multiple disciplines. She can design in a way that's truly native to the web, to mobile devices, to print, to environmental projects. And she can think in terms of concept, execution, and the business equation as well. She's used to doing it all herself, but she can reach out to others when she needs to—and orchestrate those teams to achieve her goals. **HELLER:** What can the web contribute to design? **VINH:** If you look back at the past decade of design, you'll see a marked increase in visibly web-influenced design flourishes: evocative iconography, highly compartmentalized compositions, and the use of a pro forma approach to de-

sign that suggests templates or limited decision spaces. I think the web, too, has been responsible for a kind of countervailing resurgence in hand-drawn illustration and decoration. **HELLER:** What can design contribute to the web? **VINH:** There's no question that users want their experiences to be guided and clear—to have designers influencing how they consume information online. Maybe the best recent example of this is how Facebook has stolen the momentum away from the less design-friendly clutches of MySpace. **HELLER:** But is this really good design? **VINH:** If you answer that question from the perspective of a century-plus of print design, then no, it's not good design. It's not singularly communicative or aesthetically pleasing. On the other hand, if you look at it from the perspective of the very recent past, and by the metric of whether the design has activated a significant audience that finds it compelling enough to use it frequently and with great enthusiasm, then it's a very good design. The question you're asking is whether these two perspectives converge. I think they will. **HELLER:** You've talked about the clash between traditional and new design and designers. What is the clash? **VINH:** Well, I think there are two ideas conflated there. First, there's a clash between traditional design and the new paradigm of digital media, where a lot of

the truisms that once held firm now seem disputed, ignored, or irrelevant. But then there's a clash between traditional practitioners of design and new practitioners— and there I don't think it's a clash so much as it is a gap. These two groups, who are actually covering very similar territory, think of themselves as separate and distinct. I think that's the problem. **HELLER:** What are these truisms? **VINH:** Here are a few: Good design demands complete control by the designer. Audiences should not have a say in how design gets made. Good typography is fixed, rather than adaptive. Impeccable aesthetics are a prerequisite for successful design. All of these are being questioned and/or subverted. **HELLER:** What is the outcome down the road? **VINH:** The outcome is unknown, but the question is: Do we want these new media to grow and evolve with or without being informed by the values of traditional design? If the answer is "yes"— and for me, it is—then we'd better close that gap. **HELLER:** Is there a need to retrofit designers from thinking in print terms to web terms? **VINH:** Only if the print designer wants to transition to working online. Then, yes, it's absolutely imperative that a shift in thinking occurs. The web is fundamentally different from print, and those print designers who strive to create online experiences that emulate print are doomed to failure. **HELLER:** How do you do this? **VINH:** In my opinion, a designer has to learn how to write HTML and CSS—at least enough to be able to build a few sites and understand the medium. Just as important, a print designer has to possess a genuine enthusiasm for the medium. Too often, I see print designers approach it with a kind of contempt. That's a recipe for failure. **HELLER:** I asked you what's new, but is that different from what's next? **VINH:** Either way, it's going to change in six months. ℗