



WHEN THE FIELD STOOD UPRIGHT

As design pushes into the avant garde, how can the magazines that report on it do the same?

by Steven Heller

Design magazines, like the venerable one you're enjoying right now, haven't evolved over the past 120 years. Despite the rash of digital iterations, they're still paper and ink, covered and bound. Of course, design and type styles have changed, but owing to the ins and outs of passé styles, mannerisms of the late 19th century to early 20th century recur frequently. Printing has improved (or worsened?) and color now runs throughout today's journals when that once was rare. But the fundamental goal of Print and dozens of other contemporary international journals is the same: to promote the benefits of good design by highlighting good work and good makers. A benign mission, but it's certainly a worthy one.

Since design magazines serve the design industry, they're referred to as "trade journals," not dissimilar in their basic offerings from titles such as *Plumbing Engineer*, *Today's Farmer* and *American Funeral Director*. The earliest printing trade magazines, *The Inland Printer*, *American Printer* and *The American Photo Engraver* among them, provided industry tips and advice, articles on new techniques and technologies, as well as reviews

of new typefaces and typography—all pretty standard stuff for an industry that was soon to give birth to graphic design.

Printing was one parent of graphic design, and advertising the other. Trade magazines aimed at the advertising industry were prodigious, and while most of them focused on the business of how and what to sell, a growing number from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, including *Art in Advertising* (1893), *The Billposter and Distributor* (the journal of the Associated Billposters and Distributors of the United States and Canada, 1897), which changed its unwieldy name to *Advertising Outdoors: A Magazine Devoted to the Interests of the Outdoor Advertiser*, showcased how illustration, typography and what we'd call graphic design contributed to successful, profitable campaigns. In 1910, *Advertising Outdoors* was changed to *The Poster: The National Journal of Outdoor Advertising and Poster Art*, which continued until 1930 when it was finally changed to *Outdoor Advertising*.

Trade journals pursued common goals through similar coverage, yet not all of them were—or are—the same. Some were more lavish, others more scholarly. The great German *Das Plakat*, the

organ of *Verein der Plakat Freunde* (The Society for Friends of the Poster, founded 1910), advocated poster collecting and increased scholarship, approaching the line between art and commerce.

The impact of Modern Art, especially where it crossed that nudged line with the Bauhaus, Futurism, De Stijl and Constructivism, had a Darwinian impact on both graphic design and design magazines. Simply providing industrial news and information wasn't enough to satisfy a new breed of artist/designer. So, in the 1920s, many design magazines, like the German *Gebrauchsgrafik* (founded in 1924), attempted to combine new and old methods and makers more or less equally. Arguably, these issues were evolutionary baby steps, but a greater leap came a year later with the special October 1925 edition of *Typographische Mitteilungen*, founded in 1903 as the voice of the Organization of German Typographers, in which Jan Tschichold surprisingly introduced *The New Typography* (*Die neue Typographie*), a book that set the field on its end. The November edition reverted back to its original format, but the genie was out of the bottle. Stylistically, design magazine design was given license to be as avant garde as the readers and advertisers could tolerate.

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The integration of industry news and design culture has long been a challenging balancing act. Some titles, notably Walter Herdeg's Zurich-based *Graphis* (founded in 1944), eliminated trade talk almost entirely. Others, like *U&Ic* (founded in 1974), made no bones about being an organ for the business that published it (International Typeface Corporation) and therefore ignored any news that wasn't its own.

Another shift came when *Eye* magazine was founded in 1990 by Rick Poyner with the goal of covering a postmodern generation of design and designers experimenting with early digital tools and the aesthetics they fostered. The magazine's tone was that of a passionate observer of new developments in form and content—an art and culture journal by any other name. Six years earlier, however, in 1984 the evolutionary missing link had already risen from the ooze—*Emigré* magazine, founded by Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko to show off their Emigre Fonts, obliterated the trade journal paradigm with a large tabloid-sized, fanzine-like celebration of the anti-Modernist design ethos that had sought a mouthpiece. Much like Tschichold's *Typographische Mitteilungen*, it defined a space for the new methods rooted in new social and technological developments. The doors were opened even wider for magazines with aesthetic and philosophical agendas.

Nonetheless, the evolutionary road didn't advance much further. New technologies, new platforms and new spaces for design to change form and definition have radically altered what graphic design is at this moment. Design magazines take their cues from what exists. Evolution arguably stands still while the field and the magazines that support it wait for the next big jog. ■

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