

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN: FORCE OF NATURE  
BY STEVEN HELLER

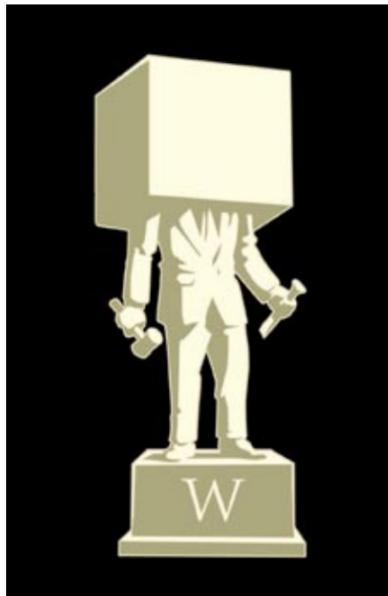
# FORCE OF NATURE

FOR DEADLY ACCURACY, AND DIZZYING SPEED, FEW COMMERCIAL ILLUSTRATORS CAN MATCH THE NEW YORK-BASED GRAPHIC MARKSMAN, CHRISTOPH NIEMANN. NOTED COMMENTATOR AND NEW YORK TIMES ART DIRECTOR STEVEN HELLER PROVIDES AN ILLUMINATING ACCOUNT OF THE COMMISSIONING PROCESS AND A DISCUSSES NIEMANN'S PLACE IN THE COMMERCIAL ILLUSTRATION COSMOS.





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2004  
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The American Economy  
2005  
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The Legacy of George W. Bush  
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100% Evil  
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At 9:30 a.m. on January 12, 2006, I was given a manuscript to be illustrated about the crisis facing the American economy caused by unceasing deficits. It was to be included in the following week's issue of The New York Times Book Review, the publication I have art directed for almost 30 years. To get an illustration into the paper demands a twenty-four hour turn-around, which involves my accepting an idea and then passing it through a gauntlet of editorial approvals. What's more, given this rather common and trite theme I needed an illustration that would be neither common nor trite. At 9:35, I attached the manuscript to an email addressed to New York-based, German-born illustrator Christoph Niemann. After pressing the send button I cross my fingers that he is available on such short notice. He has saved me in similar situations before, but since he has become one of the busiest illustrators in the US, I can only hope he won't turn me down (if he did I'd have to beg, and supplication is humiliating for any art director).

At precisely 9:37, three minutes later, I receive his reply, which reads: "I'm extremely busy, but I'll give it try." Knowing Niemann as I do, this means he's hooked. While many in his position would decline, he revels in taking these difficult illustration assignments as a personal challenge. So at 9:47, ten minutes

later – and true to form – he sends me his idea. It is a vampire's face, his mouth in the shape of a spiky fever chart that also looks like fangs, with a subtle hint of blood where the arrowhead at the end of the fever line tapers down; opposite the vampire is the victim's face (the American public) profusely bleeding from the neck, the wound in the shape of the spiraling fever chart. Once again, Niemann has taken conventional symbols and tweaked them into a memorably surprising image. Who could ask for anything better?

IT IS NOT THAT I'M SADISTIC, BUT I DO GET OFF ON TESTING NIEMANN'S TOLERANCE

Well, I guess I could. It is not that I'm sadistic, but I do get off on testing Niemann's tolerance; so at 9:53 I wrote the following: "Christoph, nice job! But maybe there's a better solution that won't insult those of our timid readers who find vampires offensive?" I press send, lean back in my chair and patiently wait until 10:03, ten minutes later, when he wordlessly replies to my email with three more sketches. Of course, he had other solutions and each was smarter and funnier than the next, yet I actually preferred the first one, and that's what he ultimately sent back as a finished piece by 10:47 a.m.

The entire process, from my original email to Niemann with the manuscript in tow to receiving his final EPS file took only 77 minutes. This was not the first, second, or fifteenth time he's made such a speedy turn-around. Niemann is a conceptual illustration

machine – a force of nature – and not just churning out rote solutions, but rather highly sophisticated ones that transcend the conventions (and clichés) of editorial illustration. Others may be more astute, and some are much finer draftsmen (though Niemann's specific craft is impeccable), still few editorial illustrators working today hit the bulls eye as frequently, and at such a quick clip. What makes him sought after by art directors (and even editors) is his uncannily prodigious ability to transform the commonplace into the extraordinary by routinely coming up with the 'ah-ah' idea that so clearly summarizes a story or notion, that it's almost unnecessary to read the text.

Those who have seen the mountains of sketches he keeps in a few loose-leaf binders know that, although he harshly edits himself, almost every scribble is suitable for publication. Not to minimize the many talented artists I regularly work with, but if there were, god forbid, a pandemic that felled illustrators all over the globe – I could fill my weekly periodical with Niemann's rejects alone.

"I ALWAYS LIKED AND APPRECIATED FINE ART, BUT I CAN'T RECALL EVER THINKING OF WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO HAVE A PAINTING IN A MUSEUM. ALL I THOUGHT OF WAS HAVING A DRAWING IN MAD MAGAZINE"

At this point you are possibly thinking that this is hyperbole. You might also be asking where is my critical detachment, nobody is that perfect and even if he is, shouldn't I have a more analytical evaluation? If it were anyone else, I would probably agree. But I am reporting on the quantifiable fact that Niemann hits the mark on difficult subject matter considerably more than he misses (yes, he does miss on occasion). I'd even wager that if there were an illustration competition like a homerun derby, where in rapid-fire succession, conceptual problems were pitched at contestants like fast-balls, Niemann would hit more out of the park than anyone in his class. Why?

Technique plays a large role. After a phase in his young career when he was producing more time-consuming, detailed renderings, he settled on a curiously generic isotype-influenced pictorial sign-symbol mannerism that allows him an ironic stylistic framework. His economical linear (instructional manual) approach is fairly popular these days, but Niemann doesn't simply mimic the style, he

incorporates it into a keen ability to make believable renderings.

Unlike the great conceptualists Ralph Steadman, Brad Holland, or Seymour Chwast, for instance, whose work relies on their quirkily distinctive expressive gestures, Niemann uses minimalism as a styleless-style. Even his more narrative images, where a complex story is allowed to unfold, are pure and concise, allowing the concept to reign. His style is so boldly transparent that each image is a veritable logo for the idea he is conceptualizing. My favorite of his Book Review covers illustrates this point. For

a review of a book called Arming America, a cultural history of guns, he conceived a skeleton hand holding a skeleton gun. In one stark, though simple image, he references America's liberal handgun laws, and the idea that guns are so ingrained in the American body politic that the object is fused into the bones.

I remember when he sent this in, how excited I was. Recognition was instant, not even a moment of contemplation between seeing and understanding – the hallmark of a great visual message.

Christopher Niemann was born in 1970 in Waiblingen, Germany, and began studying graphic design at the Stuttgart Academy of Art because he was interested in new media. Despite doing 90% illustration he considered himself a graphic designer – but conceiving ideas was his foremost skill. "I never considered fine art to be an option," Niemann once explained. "I always liked and appreciated fine art, but I can't recall ever thinking of what it would be like to have a painting in a museum. All I thought of was having a drawing in MAD magazine."

Niemann, who is nothing if not regimented, segments the heroes who influenced his career the following way: from age 4-9 Tomi Ungerer; 10-14 Albert Uderzo; 15-20 Mort Drucker and Don Martin. "Heinz Edlmann, who was my teacher at the academy, influenced me a lot. He introduced me to modern idea illustration. It is embarrassing to admit, but until Edlmann showed me their work, I had no idea who Saul Steinberg, Brad Holland, Milton Glaser or Seymour Chwast were." Once informed, however, he was hooked by their talents and became a confirmed emulator.

One thing is clear: Niemann could not conceive viable ideas at the rate he does if he were insulated from the world. So out of passion and necessity he is politically aware. "I was always an avid reader of newspapers and magazines," he explains, "but when I came to New York and started working for The New York Times' Oped page I turned into a complete addict. It was the time of the Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton scandal, when politics was a terrifically entertaining spectacle. Unfortunately it is a lot less fun to be political now, especially since I take it all very seriously, so goofy caricatures of G. W. Bush don't do much to ease my pain."

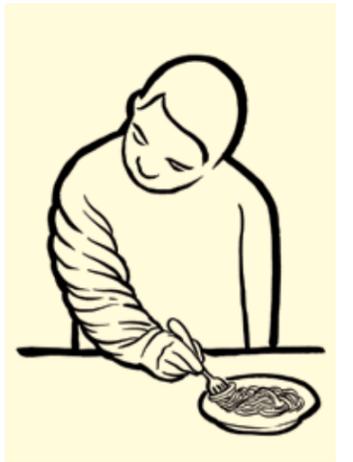
Yet to allay this pain he draws incessantly, always searching for the Holy Grail of ideas. What makes the best solution? "It may sound spineless, but I have to admit that I believe that it's funny when people laugh," he notes. "Sometimes I come up with an idea, and I am convinced it is the Mona Lisa of the 21st century. Once the third person I show it to gives me a forced smile or shakes their head I have to accept that it sucks." On the other hand, it often happens, he says, that a lot of clients praise "a piece that I thought was rather mediocre. There seem to be some

pieces people like, and I have no idea why."

When Niemann came to New York in the early nineties, more than two decades had passed since the first wave of Eastern European illustrators introduced symbolism and metaphor to editorial problem solving. In fact, the references to Dada, Surrealism, and Futurism, the influence of Saul Steinberg, and the sharp satire that had made such a mark on American conceptual illustration had become something of a stylistic cliché. Niemann's computer generated clarity and brightly colored wit was a tonic. He quickly became the quintessential New York illustrator and fell comfortably into his adopted city.

Niemann is now a destination for young illustrators who he generously advises. Moreover, with a few of his friends and colleagues he's attempted to rebuild an illustration community that had been ravaged by various fashions that sidelined conceptual illustration. With Niemann as a model, the field has been given a goose. But he notes that illustration is not monolithic, and niches are key. "What I find interesting is that despite the Internet and national magazines and TV, the rift between East and West coast illustration seems to grow ever wider. On the West Coast, illustration seems to be more joyful and decorative, moving into the art galleries and the world of toys and collectibles. On the East coast it the conceptual, subdued and sometimes snobby work still seems to be the main focus."

Snobby? Perhaps but I only know one illustrator who has the temerity to mount an exhibition of 800 of his spot editorial drawings (ranging in size from one to ten square inches) where each one is so smart there is not one single, solitary clinker. Niemann's show, "Little Niemann: 1000 Spot Drawings," which hung at the New York Times Gallery Nine throughout December 2005 and January 2006, despite the false advertising (what did happen to the other 200?), is the most awe inspiring display of visual acuity and wit I've seen in decades. So as long as Niemann maintains his unflappable energy (thanks in part to plenty of coffee – milk, no sugar – and silence), conceptual editorial illustration has a champion.



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NEW YORKER



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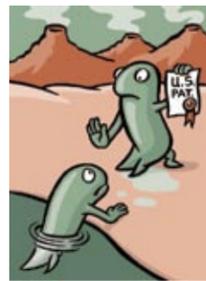
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