Out of the Lab:
An Interview with John Maeda

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In a bold move, the Rhode Island School of Design announced in December that John Maeda, associate director of research at the MIT Media Lab, where he has served since 1996, will take over as RISD's 16th president starting in June. Maeda has long been an advocate for humanizing technology and for marrying design and computer science in a seamless whole. As a designer he has experimented with motion typography and has developed complex systems for clients such as Cartier, Google, Philips, Reebok and Samsung. He has also authored books including *Creative Code* and the most recent, *The Laws of Simplicity*, which has been published in 14 languages. Needless to say, this announcement came as a surprise to many in the design field. How will assuming the presidency of a major design institution alter the ways Maeda works? More importantly, how will Maeda alter an institution with so much history? Although all will become clear after he assumes the seat of power, we couldn't wait to hear his reasons for taking on this challenge and his immediate plans for the future.

Heller: John, it's difficult to know where to start—indeed, it's been hard to pin your career down. However, you state in your online video that you relish new things. And one constant for you has been the MIT Media Lab. Tell me about that experience and what's prompted you to leave the fertile ground of MIT.

 Maeda: The Media Lab is a unique singularity point in the history of academia. It was the result of combining two visions: Professor Nicholas Negroponte's stunningly accurate prediction of digital convergence from the '70s, together with former MIT president, the late Jerome Wiesner's passion to contextualize science and technology in the human equation. Wiesner, having worked on the Manhattan Project, knew firsthand that technology did not live in a vacuum separate from human concerns.

I started out, first and foremost, a product of MIT and not the Media Lab. My undergrad and grad studies were in electrical engineering and computer science at MIT—after which I was at the Media Lab for a year as a PhD student, only to drop out because of a negative experience with my faculty advisor. I am always grateful to my old advisor—if it were not for him I would have never gone to art school. The "lucky accident" we often describe in making art or while designing is prevalent in life in general.

I came back to the Media Lab in 1996 to fill the shoes of the late Muriel Cooper. After 11 years, the shoes still feel quite loose, as Muriel had spent decades going after many "grails" of visual design. My interests have always been very broad. I like creating in all kinds of media, especially words like I write now. The RISD presidency seemed particularly attractive because I would then be able to broaden my interests even further. There are so many more Cooper-esque folks out there that are younger and more talented than myself, like Martin Wattenberg, Ben Fry and Casey Reas. I feel it is more their time than mine. Mine has passed in this area of visual research, but of course I still continue to dabble.

Heller: Most university or college presidents are involved with the image and wellbeing of their respective schools. They are the corporate face of the institution and also the prime fund-raisers. Your academic career has been focused on developing innovative curricula. How do you reconcile your creative needs with the conventions of a presidency? In other words, are you going to be the conventional college president?

Maeda: At the Media Lab as associate director I have been managing the Lab's cash flow and have turned things around, with my right hand, Becky Bermont. So, fundraising and also the more important challenge of funding retention has been part of my job. In business it is often said that it is always better to effectively keep a customer versus focusing solely recruiting new customers, because your best customers do the job of selling you to new customers for free. I look forward to the fundraising challenges I face ahead.

Heller: But you are also an artist…

Maeda: I think my MO has always been to find design and art even in the most inane tasks. If "administration design" was a field to invent, or even "administration art," then I am up for the challenge. The number one request I heard from RISD students was, "If I am at the most creative school in the world, then I should see that reflected in the administration—no, demand it." Innovation can play a role in any situation, I believe.

Heller: Everyone is curious to hear what went on in the meeting that convinced you to take on this role. Without betraying confidences, can you paraphrase the moment that sealed the deed?

Maeda: Really from the beginning, I thought I'd never have a chance at getting the job. Once it had materialized as a possibility I recall my wife, Kris, [jokingly] betting all my kids—five girls—that "Daddy can't get this job." Add to that I showed up 30 minutes late for the interview, as I was stuck in a meeting at MIT that I couldn't leave. Somehow I got the "callback," and after that point somehow remained during each phase of the process.

When it came to me in the end, I kept thinking how the review panels, search committee and the board were all composed of crazed innovator-types that wanted to show the world that RISD was the only place in the world that would be willing to make the leap to hyperspace. Sort of "Look at us, world—we're going to go where no art

and school and design has ever gone before!" I figured if they were willing to press the hyperspace button, then I couldn't turn down the chance to boldly go where no artist/designer has gone before. Note that I'm not a Trekkie or anything but am known to channel James T. Kirk once in a blue moon.

Heller: I'm a Kirk fan myself. But I'm certain that the minute you considered this as real possibility you began, as Paul Rand would say, to sketch out the solution to the problem. What are the challenges you are facing?

Maeda: Well, I have a lot of experience and interest in how communities are designed and implemented using modern technology, but also the old-fashioned handshake. So I've been thinking, designing, stressing—channeling Paul every other day to find nobleness.

Heller: And can you give a hint as to your responses?

Maeda: As for hints as to where I am right now, there is a hidden online community that has launched at RISD concurrent with my announcement, called "One RISD." In the process, I discovered some incredible human resources at RISD that executed my impossible requests in an amazingly short amount of time. It turns out that "Scotties" [or "miracle-workers"] abound at RISD and really pulled a rabbit out of the hat in technology deployments I requested, in addition to design refinement. As of today, the day before Christmas and a little over two days after the announcement, I count 252 unique visitors that span an even mixture of students, staff and faculty that are currently educating the "pre-frosh" that I am—that's close to 7 percent of the entirety of RISD mobilized already online, and the school's on vacation right now! The visitors keep growing.

As for what I have further down the pipeline, I will save that discussion for a later date. Sorry for the secrecy. You know, I aspire to become the Steve Jobs of university presidents [smile]. Seriously, though, I envision RISD as the Apple brand in the university world.

Heller: By taking on this institutional role, are you going to put your own creative efforts on hold? Is this a hiatus time for your talents or a repurposing of them?

Maeda: No, people ask me that a lot right now. I plan to continue to create—to the extent that I still do my job well as president, of course. I need to create to live, so you will continue to see me do random, small projects. My recent collaboration with Reebok on the Timetanium sneaker portends some more things coming down the line from my favorite, local shoe source. I also plan to continue to show in art galleries and write books—but not at a breakneck pace.

Most people don't realize but I have no staff of assistants for my creative work. All the books, images and objects I've produced were created by my two lousy hands and confused brain. So I have no overhead nor project management needs—I just need three hours or so and can make what I need to make. I'm always envious of folks with major studios like Bruce Mau or Karim Rashid that do such big, bold and amazing projects executed to perfection. I've always just been one guy making stuff. I figure that's unlikely to change.

Heller: I presume that RISD has made this very bold appointment because they want to move into the future of art and design. As you see it, what is the future of art and design education?

Maeda: Don't know yet. I have to understand what the present situation comprises. The worst thing to do is to buy a bunch of computers and install Adobe this-or-that everywhere. First of all, you'll go broke quickly with just paying for the regular upgrade costs; secondly you'll make the exact same images/objects that every Tom, Dick and Jane in countries from Taiwan to Turkey run natively. It all looks the same because it's made the same. Any vision I might have for RISD would have to be about the 10–20-year future, not about now or next year.

Heller: Will you try to make RISD into a new MIT Media Lab or take a clean-slate approach?

Maeda: Clean slate, definitely. The Media Lab had been around for 20+ years now. It was at the right place and the right time, and served an incredible role in the digital revolution. I prefer to look out further and beyond, but fueled by the incredible traditional and classical core at RISD that represents more of the "what is good" versus just the more technology-centered approach of "what is new." You see it today so often—we desire great experiences, not just new experiences.

Heller: There is a lot of talk about how teaching—and learning—will be transmitted in the digital era. Of course, distance learning has picked up steam. Do you see the old models of the academic institution changing radically? Will the campus be transformed into something else?

Maeda: Having both will be critical in the future—a great "bricks and mortar" campus and a great "clicks and bits" campus. You're speaking to a guy that got his MBA online—it was much more difficult and rigorous than I expected as it wasn't one of those programs where you slip your Visa card and get a diploma emailed to you in 24 hours. Over an intense, two-year experience I realized firsthand that education will, and can, be delivered in the future as an online experience, in an interactive and challenging manner. But the tools and technology for learning are still no better than the teletype technologies of the '70s, as they are still so primitive. I see great opportunities for designers to imagine the next phase of online education—and I am for sure not talking about just things like Second Life (I'm not a big believer in VR, yet).

Heller: What's most interesting to me about your appointment is the connection to graphic design. This discipline is not often so well represented. When David Brown was president of Art Center he came out of a graphic design world, but was not himself a graphic designer. Do you think the way graphic design has been taught is ripe for reinvention?

Maeda: I think of myself as able to span many disciplines and do not feel wed to solely graphic design. That said, I think that the ticking time bomb of our future is the explosion of information readily available and mutable to all—it is so expansive that we will never be able to fathom it all. I imagine before the book was invented, society never thought it might be possible to organize massive amounts of info as bound copy. The conceptual equivalent of the book has not yet been invented, and I'm not talking about websites here.

Heller: Along these lines, and perhaps an odd question, is this new role for you a kind of entrepreneurship? Do you look at this opportunity as one to build, not a business per se—although that is the nature of the educational institution—but a laboratory from which new ideas and models and standards must emanate?

Maeda: It's not a lab—it is an institution comprised of a world-class university and a world-class museum. What I have going for me, and RISD, is that it is comparatively tiny compared to Stanford or MIT or Yale, and thus, in theory, more agile and nimble. Like a Cooper MINI. Maybe RISD needs a racing stripe that goes all the way across to make it look more like the racing Cooper version... hmmm.

Heller: OK, finally, on that first day or week or month that you start, what will you do?

Maeda: I will probably turn on my computer and start the day with a green tea as always. Then hit the accelerator pedal and see how fast this baby goes. I start June 2008. Stay tuned.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press). He is co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.) and *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press). His book *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) will be published this spring.