
Eye in Focus: An Interview with John Walters

Written by Steven Heller

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Founded by editor emeritus Rick Poynor, EYE came into being at a very critical time in graphic design history: it was the beginning of the digital revolution, which propelled the so-called Postmodern aesthetic and Deconstruction movements. It was a time when type and layout experimentation was fervent, and literary and other communications theories raised the "discourse" of graphic design. For the past seven years, John Walters has been the third editor of EYE (following Max Bruinsma), and for the past seven years, has assumed editorship following a unique period of discovery and controversy. On the occasion of the 60th issue Walters talks about EYE's history and what he has done to both preserve its legacy and make it relevant today.

Heller: It is a little awkward for me to do this interview since I've been an EYE contributor since its launch. But now that EYE has reached its 60th issue (and now that the magazine also has a new publisher, publishing house and art director, Simon Esterson) I believe this is a propitious moment to reflect on the magazine's contributions and look ahead to its future.

Walters: Well, graphic design is always interesting, even between so-called movements and revolutions. From my point of view, EYE is always at the center of a quiet storm of ideas and proposals and extraordinary work of all kinds. Even when my in-tray is filled of catalogues and posters with nothing but bad illustrations, or ungrammatical copy set in 8 point Univers or a "cool new brand" that's neither cool, new nor a brand, there's always something interesting to focus on, whether it's a music website, or graffiti in Sao Paolo, or Mexican protest posters, or a new way of looking at the sports pages, or (dare I say it) Nazi type.

Heller: Do you maintain a distinct editorial philosophy?

Walters: Yes!

Heller: How does it differ from that of your predecessors?

Walters: My editorial philosophy—and the way it differs from that of the earlier editors—is best expressed by the contents of EYE from No. 33 to the latest one [No. 60]. It's like the song: "It's not what I say, it's what I do."

Heller: Hmmm. Well, that does say a lot, but for the benefit of our readers can you reduce this to a few sentences?

Walters: No, but I'll try to explain my "philosophy," which is that editing EYE is not all that different from editing any good magazine or journal. My job is to find stories that will interest my readers, and to tell those stories in words and pictures. The difference is that most of my readers are graphic designers. I'm aiming to show and tell our readers something they don't already know, or to tell a familiar story in a new way. Harold Evans once said that the news is something that someone doesn't want you to know.

Now EYE is not a news mag; the quarterly frequency precludes that. But I do want it to reflect current practice and contemporary, critical thinking about design. And I want to express this in language that is accessible to the average person, and to designers for whom English is their second language, so we do our best to avoid jargon and slang.

And though we do include historical pieces and archive images, I'm looking for subjects that have a contemporary relevance, that have significance for what's happening right now, such as the piece about the pre-history of motion graphics in EYE 60, or Social vision, the feature about wartime safety posters in EYE 52.

Heller: Rick Poyner makes a distinction between design "journalism" and design "criticism," between reportage and analysis. How do you see this playing out through in EYE's editorial philosophy, and is it a conscious divide in your editorial program?

Walters: I don't think it's a divide so much as a continuum. All good journalism contains a critical and/or skeptical element. The most simple, sympathetic interview requires a critical edge in order to provoke interesting responses from the interviewee, and to assure the reader that he's not just reading a press release. I see a lot of "news writing" in the trade press that goes along the lines of: "X has left Y to pursue a new role at Z." That's not journalism; that's a parish newsletter!

We need journalists who can look and analyze, and designers who can write. It's a tough one. To go back to your question: good criticism requires a sense of journalism so that we still learn about the subject even when we disagree with the analysis. And without criticism, journalism becomes PR. Rick is a good journalist, and that's part of the reason why he's such a great critic.

Heller: Unlike most of the other design magazines in the United States and U.K. in the early '90s, EYE attempted to lead a new "discourse," not simply report on styles and trends, even to the point of antagonizing some of its readers. Where do you think this discourse has gone throughout your tenure? Do you believe designers are still interested in manifestos and saber charges, or has that activist streak worn itself out?

Walters: When I talk to readers about EYE and the reasons they value it, they often use the term "timeless" which is interesting when you consider how transient graphic design can be. But when you look at back issues, it's often the adverts that look really dated, while the articles don't.

I like the polemical articles, but they're only one part of what the magazine has done over the years. If you get too caught up in the squabbles and rivalries of particular scenes and moments, you can lose sight of what we really like in graphic design and visual culture, and I think we are defined more by what we like than what we criticize. Nobody likes criticism, though none of us is above it. Sometimes what passes for "debate" is little more than a slanging match—people who feel hurt hitting back at their critics.

Heller: Which raises the question of where EYE fits into the propagation of visual culture, vis a vis graphic design. Is graphic design an expansive enough field to truly influence the culture apart from typefaces? And how has EYE addressed this under your tenure?

Walters: Graphic design is a hugely influential and significant part of contemporary life, but this is not always understood within the culture at large. Look at the patchy way graphics are covered on TV and in newspapers. The web is actually much better, so I see some of design's renewed energy coming from the pleasure that ordinary people take in images and typefaces—on blogs, photo-sharing sites, even MySpace. For better or worse, the web is creating a whole new kind of visual literacy.

How can EYE (and I) address this? Our audience hardly needs convincing about the importance of design and designers. One thing I've been keen to do in recent years has been to look at visual culture outside design, and to examine some of the issues behind design: ethics, social concerns, readability, sexism, racism, education and so on. I'm not making any great claim for originality in doing this. All the editors I admire keep their magazines fresh by looking outside—and deeper inside—their core subject.

Also, our readers expect the magazine to be eclectic, to surprise, to go beyond what's in the other design titles, to change from issue to issue. To fulfil readers' expectations, I have to challenge them, too (while staying within a well established editorial structure).

Heller: None of the EYE editors have been designers. You, in fact, come from a music background, co-founded UNKNOWN PUBLIC, formerly a magazine in a box, now a CD-book, and write about music for The Guardian. How has this influenced how you view graphic design? And by extension do you edit EYE solely as a graphic design magazine?

Walters: EYE is first and foremost a magazine for graphic designers. I never forget this, and my readers don't let me forget it either. The great thing about designers, however, is that they have a very broad range of interests and reference points, both professionally and personally, that go way beyond the notional borders of design: vernacular restaurant signs, Richard Hamilton, graphic scores for music, Manga, EYE charts, Crumb's life drawing ... sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, the universe and everything.

As far as editing a magazine goes, it's not all that different from being a record producer, a bandleader or an arranger—things I used to do before becoming a journalist.

Heller: During your tenure, what has excited you the most as an editor? What issue or article do you feel has made the most impression or started the most controversy?

Walters: That's a really difficult question: they're all great! And the latest is always the greatest (to quote Kali Nikitas). By the time it goes to press, you've become committed to even the most problematic article. The "special issues" (like 38, 40, 45, 53, 54 and so on) are hard work, but really satisfying to pull together around a central concept, and I know that some pieces strike a nerve, like "First Things First 2000" (33), or the "Brand Madness" pieces in 53, or Judith Williamson's "Retro-sexism" (48) or "Mexico '68" (56). Time pressures mean that I don't write as much as I'd like, but I've enjoyed interviewing designers such as Terry Jones and Gerard Unger, and profiling Steve Byram, for instance.

Perhaps I should stress that I don't edit EYE to indulge my personal tastes and obsessions. I got several of my personal favorites out of the way early on, with Phil Baines's great piece about the UK road signs (34), Peter Blake (35), B. S. Johnson (36), GTF (39) and Neville Garrick (41). I often edit from a position of innocence—there's a subject of which I'm skeptical or ignorant and I want the writer to argue their case in our pages and convince me and Simon (our new art director), and therefore our readers, that this subject matter is worth caring about, is worth the space.

Heller: Who is your audience? Or stated another way, who do you want to reach with EYE?

Walters: Graphic designers. People who like graphic design. Ideally a broader, visually literate readership that realizes the huge value and creativity of design—particularly when compared with other areas of endeavor. But designers keep the magazine alive—in every sense. I'm happy about that, because I've always liked designers as co-workers, collaborators and friends.

Heller: What do designers offer you that other professionals do not—and I'm not talking about layout services?

Walters: I've worked on mags for other professionals, and they all have their merits, but I admire the can-do approach of designers, the way they pull everything together, the way they combine specific creative talents with more general life skills, the way they integrate theory and practice on a daily basis.

In "LA art school," the profile of Alex McDowell in EYE 60, Malcolm Garrett notes that with digital technology, the design studio is now at the very heart of the film-making process. This is true in many other areas of endeavor. Designers have to take on many roles, which means that they have to know a lot, and do a lot, and they have to collaborate in a meaningful and generous way with all kinds of other people. And it doesn't mean they have to change their job description. They can do all manner of things while remaining, at heart, a graphic designer.

Heller: Since we've ascertained your audience, do you feel you are making contact?

Walters: The feedback—through emails, phone calls, random encounters, sales and subs—is good. And I have a lot of confidence in my writers. Whether it’s asking Alice Twemlow to write 6,000-plus words about decoration (EYE 58) or Peter Blegvad to write a few hundred words about the Nobel Field installation (EYE 60), I know they’re going to deliver.

Heller: You are basically a one-editor and one-art director show, so what goes on in your head when planning your issues?

Walters: I could write a 2,000-word essay about that. There’s only one thing more exciting than planning an issue, and that’s completing an issue. And I have to balance that with the day-to-day duties of being the editor, which means going to circulation meetings, opening the mail, correspondence, phone calls, website meetings, mailing out copies of the magazine to contributors who didn’t get the one the mailing house was supposed to send out four weeks ago, and so on and so on. There are days when it seems like everybody wants a piece of me, so my brain can get pretty fried holding on to the detail of what will make the next issue work. So what’s going on in my head is pretty complex, but the end product is edited, distilled from a large number of ideas and words and images. In the future, perhaps we’ll organize a “brain-cam” so that really obsessive readers can see how the new issue is shaping up.

As for being a one-ed/one AD show, that means that Simon Esterson and I can make big decisions pretty quickly when it comes to molding each issue into its final shape. There are times when it would be good to delegate a little more, but a two-person team can be very streamlined and effective. To grab a record business analogy, it’s a bit like when an arranger and an engineer work together as a production team—you can play to each other’s strengths.

But we’re at the sharp end of a pretty impressive “virtual team” of writers, academics, and the all the designers who contribute images. Nick Bell, who designed the magazine from issues 27 to 57, is still on board as our “special consultant,” and EYE founder Rick Poyner writes eight “Critique” columns a year—plus other reviews and features. Then there’s my regular sub-editor Deborah Burnstone, plus several other freelancers contributing editorial expertise, picture research, etc., and designers Jay Prynne and Kuchar Swara, who work at Simon’s studio. And of course the great Anthony Oliver, who has been EYE’s photographer since issue one, volume one.

Heller: EYE is a well-produced quarterly magazine. In the UK you run up against Creative Review and Grafik. In the United States, your competition is PRINT, Communication Arts, and STEP Magazine. How do you feel you compare to these popular journals?

Walters: Difficult to say. You could say that there’s competition from IDEA, GRAPHIS, Baseline, IdN, I.D. Magazine, HOW and DOT DOT DOT too. They all have their merits. But what we do is quite different to all those magazines; I don’t see a direct competitor. However we are competing with all those magazines for subscriptions and sales and advertising and website hits—maybe for hearts and minds, too. My advice to anyone reading this is to get the others occasionally but take out a subscription to EYE.

Heller: I know your answer to this, but I'll ask anyway. With so many publications increasingly turning to the web, and with design blogs cropping up, why do you believe a magazine is not an anachronism?

Walters: Didn't people talk like that about CD-ROMs? There are those who thought TV would make print redundant, too. The web is already making a certain kind of journalism anachronistic, but that's the way technology works. Drum machines didn't so much put drummers out of work, as redefine the role of the drummer. Desktop publishing changed things profoundly, but magazines are still here, and my belief is that a magazine like EYE, with its high production and design values, is a strong argument for print. I know from many direct and reported conversations that people love the feel of EYE, the smell of the ink and paper, the tactile pleasure of opening a new "box-fresh" copy. I have to make sure that the editorial content lives up to that!

Heller: Last year EYE was bought by Haymarket publications. How has and will this change the tenor of the magazine?

Walters: Haymarket is bigger and more ambitious than Quantum, EYE's previous owner, and it wants titles that are both leaders in their fields and of the highest quality. EYE is small compared to some of its other titles, but we fit well within its portfolio: we are now part of a new division called Haymarket Brand Media. (At Quantum, we were part of the company's Hospitality division, alongside titles such as Hotel & Restaurant, Pub Food and The Publican!)

Since Haymarket bought EYE (in May 2005) we've been able to introduce a discount scheme for students. There are plans afoot for a mini-conference / debate, a photography supplement and other "brand extensions." Our circulation is rising in a pleasing manner. A few people rang me when EYE was first acquired last year, asking: "Are they going to change the content?" In fact the new publishers let me get on with it, with no editorial interference at all—they're working hard on the non-editorial aspects: advertising revenue, sales, distribution, making the website more effective, and increasing circulation, all of which are so necessary for the long-term health and security of the title.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).