
The Art of Designer Biographies: An Interview Kerry William Purcell

Written by Steven Heller

Published on December 26, 2006.

Filed in Voice: Journal of Design in Off the cuff.

Kerry William Purcell, author of the Phaidon books on Alexey Brodovitch, Josef Müller-Brockmann, as well as an unpublished text on Herbert Matter, has been writing about designers and photographers (Weegee) for many years. His thorough texts document the lives of these storied practitioners, but do they go further than to build a glorified resume? In this interview, Purcell examines and critiques the art and craft of writing professional biographies, and the problems that arise when the families of the subjects do not authorize the works.

Steven Heller: How and why did you become a graphic design biographer?

Kerry William Purcell: Well, firstly, I wouldn't really define myself exclusively as a "graphic design biographer." Although I have now written three design biographies (one remains unpublished), my background was originally one of sociology and cultural theory. However, I have found that having a education that is not rooted solely in graphic design has proved of immense help in writing about design, especially in my book reviews and essays.

As to how I came to write these design books, it all started when I was an archivist at The Photographers' Gallery, London. Many students and researchers would come in to look at books and essays on such photographers as Robert Frank, Richard Avedon and Ted Croner. When going through this material, Alexey Brodovitch's name kept cropping up as an important influence in these figures lives. A friend of mine at the gallery, the photographer Ed Dimsdale, shared this curiosity about Brodovitch, and we decided to make a documentary film of his life. So, entirely self-financed, we contacted Brodovitch's remaining family, colleagues and students, and traveled to New York and Paris to interview them. Unfortunately, once we returned to London, we had no funds left with which to continue the project. As the tapes gathered dust, I decided to write an article for *Baseline Magazine* on Brodovitch. Karen Stein at Phaidon spotted my essay, and subsequently commissioned me to write a biography.

Heller: Photography has been your field, you even did a biography of Weegee. Where is the nexus between photography and design, and are the subjects you address always engaged in the two?

Purcell: Well, as I came to graphics via photography, it has always been a particular interest of mine as to how designers use the photograph as an object in design process (and frequently fail to credit the photographer!). Yet, while there have been a few “how-to” books and brief histories of the image in design, it always amazes me that there has never been a comprehensive history of “Photo-Graphics.” In fact, such an absence becomes all the more remarkable when we see that the development of graphic design as a profession intersects with the growing use of photography in print. Admittedly, this has begun to change with such works as Gerry Badger and Martin Parr’s two-volume study of the photobook. However, an analysis that explicitly examines the relationship between graphic design and photography is still missing.

My essays for *Baseline* on such publications as *Photographie* and *Camera* have been my small attempt to address this. In addition, my biographies on Brodovitch, Herbert Matter and, to a much lesser extent, Müller-Brockmann, have touched on this broader history and attempted to document the lives of its key pioneers.

Heller: So far, and this is not meant as an insult, I have yet to read a real page-turner biography of a designer. At best, they are sprightly and at worst, academic, but the stories are all professional. How are design biographies different, say, from those on film stars, politicians and poets?

Purcell: No insult taken! In fact, I am now very critical of my biography on Brodovitch. It was very much my apprenticeship, and I now see its many deficiencies. Although I received many wonderful reviews for the book, alongside a marvelous letter from Richard Avedon, knowing what I know now, I wish I could rewrite it. In principle, however, I would say that there should be no qualitative difference between a biography on, for example, a filmmaker, and one on a designer. Good writing is good writing, whatever the subject.

Still, there are some problems unique to graphic design biographies. One is that they are often part critique, part showcase of the designers work. In terms of the layout of the book, you are often required to talk more directly about the work and less about the life. As such the personal/professional analysis is often a difficult balancing act. Maybe one of the reasons for the dearth of “real page-turner” design biographies is that designers, rather than writers, have written many of them. I’m not saying designers can’t write! But the level of research needed for a comprehensive biography is truly daunting, and the demands of a busy design workload would be an obstacle to any real engagement with the subject. Then again, I’m talking here as if we are inundated with biographies on graphic designers, and we are not!

Heller: In researching and writing a biography like Brodovitch or Müller-Brockmann, how much research do you do into the private lives of these figures? And once examined, how much to you cull from your final manuscript?

Purcell: Well, this relates to the question above. If anyone is going to write a good biography, I feel nothing should be out of bounds. If the subject is still alive, or the family/estate is protective of the person's reputation, then, admittedly, you have to take this into account; you are often forced to take this into account! Yet, I believe if a biographer is going to write a comprehensive and engaging work, they must fundamentally disrespect their subject. What I mean by this is that to stop a work becoming a mere promotional puff piece, a measure of critical distance is required that will preclude any easy rapport with your subject. With all the biographies I have written, people I interviewed told me stories about the designer that I knew the families would not want to be made public. As long as the interviewee was not harboring some personal resentment and the information was relevant to my account, then I have always used it. In my book on Müller-Brockmann, his widow did ask for a handful of her own quotations to be edited out. On this occasion, I was more than happy to do as this as their removal did not damage the book as a whole.

Heller: When writing the “authorized” biography, does an author have a kind of contract with either his subject or his subject’s family? When you wrote your books, did you have to get approval from the wives, children, and so on?

Purcell: With Brodovitch, there was no estate as such. His collection was scattered across Europe and the United States. This was partly as a result of Brodovitch giving his work away when old students use to come to visit him towards the end of his life. The only family member with any interest in his work was his nephew Michel Brodovitch who lived in Paris. I remember visiting him in his apartment and doing a double take, as he looked so much like his uncle! However, he really never wanted any involvement in the book.

With Müller-Brockmann, it was exactly the opposite. I worked very closely with his widow Shizuko Yoshikawa. She herself was once a designer (she trained at Ulm with Otl Aicher) and from the early drafts of the manuscript through to the layout she wanted to be involved. I was very pleased for her to read through my work, her insights into Swiss design and her late husband's life were extremely helpful.

Heller: I understand you finished an entire biography on Herbert Matter, but were unable to get rights to publish his work? What happened? As a biographer don't you, a priori, have the fair-use right to reproduce material that supports your text?

Purcell: Increasingly the families and relations of graphic designers are assuming the traditional role of estates in a manner similar to those of artists or photographers. I feel there are certain problems with this. Unlike a painting or photograph, a graphic design is often an object as amalgam. In their work, a designer may use a photograph taken by a contemporary photographer, then combine it with a typeface that was released by a foundry in the early 19th century, which is all then set by a printer. In addition to this, the completed design is a “work for hire” that was bought and owned by the company who originally commissioned the work. Yet, many families of designers are looking to retrospectively obtain full copyright control of their relation's work.

In my case, I was researching and writing a book on Herbert Matter, when I heard from an archivist at the FotoStiftung Schweiz archive in Switzerland (where they have an extensive Matter collection) that there was another Matter project underway. Of course, I was alarmed to hear this! So wanting to find out more, my editor at Phaidon tracked down this other project and set up a meeting with its initiator Alex Matter, Herbert Matter's son. All was looking positive until, allegedly, Alex Matter requested a sum of money for the reproduction of his father's work. As most design biography sales are, in the words of one editor, "a bloodbath," the margins on these publications are so slight that the possibility of paying reproduction rights was never an option. Although the Fotostiftung Schweiz owns the copyright on the Matter work (and had previously published a book on Matter with Lars Müller) they were apparently unwilling to go ahead with any project without Alex Matter's say so. This was equally so for Phaidon. That was all nearly three years ago.

Heller: Without the Matter heirs' approval, how did you research his life?

Purcell: As noted, the Fotostiftung Schweiz have a very good collection, including Matter's school books, diaries and early designs up until he left for America in 1936. I also visited Yale and MoMA to view small collections of his work held there.

Heller: How do you decide who to write about? What factors must be in play for someone to rate a full-fledged biography? And at what point in a designer's life or death is he or she ripe?

Purcell: Your own prodigious output aside, graphic design history is still a fairly young and under-researched discipline. There are numerous designers, art directors, and so on who would be worthy candidates for a biography. Through my research, I have often come across figures I would like to write about in the future. Other key factors are whether there have been any previous books on the designer and how widely known he is. However, the real problem is finding publishers interested in pursuing such works. As already noted, in terms of sales, it is widely known that design biographies don't sell in any great numbers.

Heller: In recent years there seem to be more biographies, whereas 15 years ago there were none. What accounts for this surge? And do you think it will continue?

Purcell: As a profession, I think we can trace an arc throughout the 20th century, from the emergence of modernism until the arrival of the computer, which serves as a very neat, self-contained story of graphic design (probably too neat). Within this story are numerous figures who played key roles in the development of the discipline. I don't think it's any surprise that, as this story reached its natural end, works began to appear, surmising the central players and periods. It should also be remembered that what we consider to be worthy of historical study today is very much determined by our own contemporary socio-economic and political climate.

History is not some objective thing out there, but is relived and retold with each new generation. Therefore, to know whether they will continue to be published depends on many factors from how design is taught to inclinations of the publishing industry.

Heller: Unlike with figures like Picasso or Warhol, about who numerous biographies have been written, there really isn't room for more than one on Brodovitch, Müller-Brockman, etc. In this sense do you feel the responsibility to be as definitive as possible, or do you feel at some point someone else will write another?

Purcell: As I already noted, to believe one is writing the definitive biography is to suffer delusions of omnipotence! But you are correct to note that there isn't really room for another biography on Müller-Brockmann or Paul Rand. As to whether this makes me feel more responsible? No it doesn't. Maybe as the desire for a different interpretation of Müller-Brockmann's oeuvre arises in 10 years time, someone may be inspired to offer a new take on his life and work. As long as the present keeps changing, the need to reinterpret the past will remain.

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).