The SPY that Came in from the Cold: Interview with Kurt Andersen

Written by Steven Heller
Published on November 21, 2006.

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

SPY magazine, founded by Kurt Andersen and E. Graydon Carter in 1986, filled a void left by the demise of the underground press of the '60s and the aging of The New Yorker, New York Magazine, and Esquire. SPY was part journalism, part humor, and all sophisticated irony. Through its ironic stance, it was the zeitgeist magazine covering themes and issues important to many urban baby-boomers. It parodied the increasing fawning over celebrities while uncovering dirt on those who influenced the culture. It even jabbed away at the New York Times in a column that had so much hush hush inside information it was impossible to believe an insider wasn't writing it.

This month SPY: The Funny Years by Kurt Andersen, Graydon Carter and George Kalogerakis (Miramax Books) was published. In this interview, Andersen discusses the rise, fall and resurrection of this paradigm of wickedly intelligent publishing.

Steven Heller: Before *SPY* there was *The New Yorker*, *Esquire* (particularly its parodies), *The Harvard Lampoon*, the *National Lampoon*, elements of *New York Magazine*, even *MAD* magazine, but a print version of something like "That Was the Week That Was," did not exist. I'm talking about something sophisticated yet humorous, journalistic yet critical, something that understood New York, yet could appeal to the rest of the country–at least the more savvy citizens in the provinces. It was the baby boomer's and thinking man's *New Yorker*. You've been asked this many times, I'm sure: what was the impetus for starting SPY?

Kurt Andersen: Both Graydon [Carter, co-editor, now editor of Vanity Fair] and I, as we were growing up, had magazines that thrilled us to get–MAD when we were little kids, and in the early '70s, *Rolling Stone* and *New York* and *National Lampoon*. And when we started looking back at older magazines–*Harper's* and *Esquire* in the '60s, *The New Yorker* in the '20s and '30s–we were retroactively inspired. But we found that in our 30s (I was 30, and Graydon was 35 when we started talking about the hypothetical magazine that would become *SPY*), that we didn't have that thrilling, most-favoritest magazine at the time in the mid-'80s. We didn't see our generational sensibility reflected in print like we did on TV, in shows like *Saturday Night Live* and [David] *Letterman*.

We'd both been in New York just long enough to have a strong sense that the stories our journalist friends told us were a lot more entertaining than the stories that made print, and that there ought to be a place that would publish those stories. The new celebrity-worship media culture was just ginning up big-time, and New York was just re-gaining its swagger a decade after the near-bankruptcy and a very few years into the long Wall Street bull market. All those things together were the impetus.

Heller: At first, *SPY* seemed like a humor magazine, but the mix was as much about muckraking as YUKraking. Had you edited a magazine before?

Andersen: We always wanted it to be not a "humor magazine," but rather a reported and researched magazine that was funny. I had never edited anything at all. In the '70s, Graydon had started and run a small New-Republic-like magazine in Canada called The Canadian Review.

Heller: How long into actually conceiving the magazine did you settle on its form? How would you describe the components that gave *SPY* its distinct character?

Andersen: The magazine was conceived pretty larkishly over about a year's time. In 1985, when we teamed up with our publisher-to-be, Tom Phillips, we focused and shaped the idea seriously over a few months. And then of course actually doing it decisively shaped it further in a very few more months in mid-1986.

Its distinct character came from the instinct to make mischief in as many ways as possible ("Smart, fun, funny, fearless" was our founding motto), and to do that mostly by means of:

* A comic sensibility alloyed to journalism;
* A kind of manic will to connect all sorts of dots to explain and illuminate the culture and society of New York and America;
* The design, which was driven by our own and our designers' love of type;
* Familiarity with magazine conventions (e.g., the reductive Time magazine-esque chart);
* A lack of money; and
* A desire to cram lots of stuff onto the pages.

Then, after we had a little more money, the character came from our desire to play with the form as much as we could, and bind in gatefolds and stick-on tattoos and collectible cards and watercolor kits and board games and so on; the really vast labor-intensiveness of everything we did; the fact that there was no web; and the fact that we were completely independent, without a 2,000-pound gorilla of a corporate or individual owner—controlled by the three founders.

Heller: I well remember the first issue had all the *SPY* pieces, but was not quite *SPY* in the signature sense. How did you come to hire Stephen Doyle as your first design director? And did you buy into his design concepts from the get-go?

Andersen: Actually, we had a couple of barely-English-speaking Italian designers who designed our early direct mail test before we got to Drenttel Doyle. I don't remember how we got to them, but we met, described what we were doing, looked at what Stephen had done at M&Co. and elsewhere, felt a connection, and hired them. I'm pretty sure we didn't talk to any other designers.

Stephen designed the prototype we showed investors before we started, and the first two or three issues, and then found us Alex Isley. We did buy into his and their design concepts from the get-go. Both were matches made in heaven, I think, because Stephen and Alex are both so smart and enthusiastically literate, and because Graydon and I have strong design preferences, but relatively little inclination to prescribe particular solutions. We were collaborators.

Heller: *SPY's* covers were *Esquire*-esque–often manipulated pictures of famous folk. Why did you feel it necessary to focus on the celebry-aty (or whatever you call it)?

Andersen: As you'll see in the book, at the beginning, we really focused on recruiting hip-ish or otherwise interesting (and mostly not all that celebrated) celebrities to pose for the covers. It gave this strange scary little new magazine some cultural cred, analogous to (as Graydon says) the way *Saturday Night Live* used celebrity guest hosts. We didn't do stories about our cover subjects, just used them to illustrate the cover story. In fact, we didn't do many big stories on celebrities in general. (The first digitally concocted cover we did was not until the 12th (Ted Kennedy) more than a year after we started. And most of the covers through 1991 featured real celebrities posing.)

Heller: Every so often a magazine captures the design zeitgiest and everyone copies it. This was true with *New York Magazine's* impact on regional magazines, and even Bob Priest's *Esquire* magazine on magazine typography. *SPY* had a similar impact. Likewise, the silhouetted headshots, the functional but "ironic" charts and graphs, and the famous maps of New York themes (i.e., crime and literary locales) were imitated elsewhere. Did you feel that once these traits caught on you had to stay ahead of the curve?

Andersen: Absolutely. And not just in terms of graphic devices. One part of our "success" was that the sensibility and approach started being absorbed by other media.

Heller: One of the most enjoyable features were the short factoids that ran in the margins of many front pages. How did that come about?

Andersen: We realized there were lots of raw facts that could be, in this satirical context, but with almost no gilding of the lily, fascinating and pointed and funny. One of our editors, Jamie Malanowski, was in charge of digging them up (through public records and otherwise). We called it "The Fine Print."

Heller: Speaking of enjoyable, "Separated At Birth" was a must-see (indeed you spun it off into a book). Who thought of that?

Andersen: Graydon and I were having a drink at the Blue Bar of the Algonquin when we were dreaming up the magazine, and I happened to mention that the bartender looked exactly like the Shah of Iran. That was the eureka moment. (We didn't know and/or had forgotten that Private Eye and Esquire had done similar pairings; our theft was unwitting.) The books were bestsellers.

Heller: Where you surprised at how quickly SPY took off? And did it change you in any way? I mean did it make your head swell? Or did you feel you had to "watch out" what you did in the magazine, lest you loose your base?

Andersen: It was pretty shocking, yeah. It didn't make our heads swell because along with the intense fun it was always so stressful–so much work, making so many powerful enemies, being close to the edge financially so much of the time. We never thought about "watching out" or "losing our base," except that beginning two years in, as more and more of our readers were outside New York, we did more things about national figures and phenomena. But overwhelmingly we just tried to keep ourselves entertained and challenged, and do things that hadn't been done.

Heller: Everyone who avidly followed *SPY*—and the audience among my peers was virtually 100 percent—had a favorite spy feature (at the *New York Times*, for example, we were addicted to J.J. Hunsecker's *New York Times* gossip column). What is your nominee for *SPY's piece de resistance* and why?

Andersen: It's really like having a favorite child among one's offspring. That is, I don't. The thing that gave me pleasure was having all these cool, disparate things jammed together in issue after issue. I loved the whole, wild circus, not any one acrobat or lion tamer.

Heller: In addition to your favorite feature, what was the most controversial?

Andersen: A profile we did of Eric Breindel, a former heroin addict who was then the editorial page editor and right-wing columnist for the New York Post, was the one in the early years that seriously upset a lot of people outside the magazine for being "too mean."

Heller: *SPY* set the stage for John Stewart 's *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, but it ultimately ran out of steam. At what point did you feel it wasn't working, and why? And do you believe after you left the magazine that it should have been put to sleep?

Andersen: When we were forced to sell the magazine in 1991 it became harder and less fun to do—no more independence—but I thought it was full of steam and working pretty well (and circulation continued to rise) up until the time I left, at the and of 1992. I barely read it during its final five years.

Heller: I mentioned Stewart and Colbert, and other than The Onion, which also owes its life to SPY, is there anything comparable today? Can there be?

Andersen: I think those are pretty much it in terms of comparability in this country. (Though *The Onion*, which is brilliant, certainly doesn't owe much to SPY—it's a pure humor publication, without the underlying journalism and research.) There are web things–Suck.com in its day, SmokingGun.com, Gawker–that were and are nephews and nieces of SPY, but they each did or do only one small part of what we did.

I think it would be very, very hard to do a comparable text publication today (online or print) with the impact we were able to have, because there are now so many channels competing for everyone's attention. Back in the late '80s and early '90s, we more or less had the field to ourselves. And we were lucky enough to be doing what we did near the beginning of the ironic/satiric/skeptical sensibility wave that the baby boomers created, so we had the benefit of being there early. Once a particular piece of ground is broken, those who come after may be excellent, but they're going to be plowing and planting that already-broken ground.

SPY was very much a creature of the end of the pre-internet magazine era.

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).