

CASTLES MADE OF SAND

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In 1980, my friend Bill Bonnell, a very successful and elegant designer of the American-Swiss persuasion, was working as a consultant on a brochure about some sort of customer service offered by IBM. At the time, all design work for the company had to be approved by Paul Rand, who was also a consultant for IBM, though “consultant” doesn’t begin to describe the command that Rand wielded over that organization and its designers, both in- and out-of-house. Bonnell, like so many others at that period, was exhilarated by the typographic moves of Weingart, Friedman, Kunz, and probably also by the Russian avant-garde (which, after all, was the root of Swiss revisionism). There was a big exhibition on the Russians in Washington, which was one of the first times you could actually see the work that had only really become available in publications a few years earlier,¹ and a lot of young designers were excited by it.

So Bonnell, hardly a rebel but alive to all this, made the tiniest formal move on his brochure—layering a plus sign, which was a meaningful part of the text—with its own shadow in the center of the brochure. The plus sign and its shadow (approved by his client, since it functioned within a design that adhered to the IBM identity guidelines) reverberated with a sprightly energy, with its allusion to the “deep space” of an El Lissitzky composition and the Basel revisionists.

Thousands of the brochures were printed, yet when Paul Rand saw them, he angrily demanded that they be put in the trash (which they were). Bill was told to do it over and scolded like a recalcitrant school kid. I vividly remember Bill telling me this story, and how incredulously funny the whole thing seemed. On one hand, how could a little old drop shadow damn a piece of print (and its designer) to the garbage can?² On the other hand, how could a guy like Rand, who knew so much about typography, be so brittle as to think that the minimalized modernism of the 1970s was the ultimate, perfected form of visual communication, never to be altered in the least little bit?

Sounds stupid, doesn’t it? Well, if you think it sounds dumb now, can you imagine how stupid it all seemed if you were young back in the late seventies? Can you imagine a job interview where you were warned you would only be allowed to use four typefaces (with no idea of what the typefaces might be used to communicate)? Or how about being told in graduate school that correct typography consists

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of using only one font with one weight change? This would happen despite trips to the library to see great books of the past, many of them typographic *mélanges* that would cause any of your professors to drop dead. Or what if every “good designer” you knew started projects with the mechanics of the grid, and concepts seemed to be something only advertisers worried about? What if you saw the daily evidence piled up around you that the world operated with thousands of visual codes, but somehow you would not be taken seriously if you used any of them other than the desiccated form that modernism had devolved into? Could you be forgiven, perhaps, for beginning to suspect that what you were being taught was not actually modernism at all, but habit? Or bizarre fraternity rituals? The similarities to frat hazing were alarming; if you did what you were told without questions, you would be let “in”; everything depended upon emulating the cool, older guys who had managed to convince everyone that they were in charge. If you asked questions, there were no sensible answers and you definitely risked rejection.

Personally, I decided in the face of all that I had already experienced as a young designer, with doubts, to escape to graduate school, where I thought I could recuperate some sense of design as a process, with a history, an ethos, etc., etc. That’s another story,³ but while I was there, perusing the paltry literature of graphic design, I assumed that it would be minutes, just minutes, until the art history students I saw around me discovered graphic design.

After all, art historians had recently discovered photography, and in just a short while, a time certainly no longer than the years Mr. Poynor documents in *No More Rules*, a rich literature of historical and contemporary photography had appeared. And I’m not just talking about picture books, but books with ideas attached to the pictures: historical documentation, analyses of contemporary work, exhibitions, and diverse interpretations.

Sure, there was an element of careerism in this. If you were a young historian of the visual, would you rather (a) count the angels standing on the head of, say, the French Impressionist pin, or (b) wade into the relatively uncharted waters of the most basic and ubiquitous visual documentation? The perennial lack of jobs for PhDs only stoked my own little professional paranoia; that is, before I knew it, thousands of historians who knew nothing about graphic design as I knew and loved it (no matter how screwed up it was) would be studying it, writing about it, and creating graphic design history, just as they had for photography. On one hand, what a relief: one less thing for us busy designers to worry about. On the other hand, the threat of the uninitiated commandeering the story was just too scary.

About as terrorizing, it turns out, as Y2K, and similarly groundless. For reasons that are obviously complex, if not mystifying, the story of graphic design is still pretty much below the general academic radar. I would bet cash that there are still more college seminars on Madonna (or, pathetically, Britney) than there are on graphic design. Poynor himself admits in *No More Rules* that though (some) designers have used critical theory, cultural historians and theorists have still barely recognized the existence of graphic design. Not that there is a shortage of books on graphic design, but most of

them are picture books of interest to practitioners only (not that these do not play an important role in the field, but still . . .). And now we have blogs, and we do not have to worry about anyone coming up with new or original ideas about graphic design, despite the self-proclaimed rebellion in so much of the current digital “conversation.” No documentation, no footnotes, no idea that anyone, designer or not, has ever said anything about graphic design before, other than what has just scrolled by on whatever thread you are reading. Every day is a new day on the blogs.

So I cannot be anything but grateful for the publication of *No More Rules*. I do not think it is widely understood just how difficult it is to pull a book like this together: to gather the material, clear the rights, substantiate and present the story with any sort of confidence at all. Let’s just say that it is part of the reason that the literature of graphic design is evolving so slowly. Rick Poynor is one of our heroes; not a graphic designer, but a self-described “fellow traveler”⁴ who, as the founding editor of *Eye*, reestablished (and reinvented) an international approach to graphic design journalism that transcended the dog ’n’ pony show-ghetto into which most magazines had devolved in the eighties.⁵ He is also responsible for one of the most important compilations of new typography to document the work as it was happening: *Typography Now*, published in 1991; and recently, *Obey the Giant*, a compilation of his own essays on graphic design that has become required reading in many design departments.

No More Rules is about graphic design produced between 1980 and 2000. In his introduction, Poynor claims that it really isn’t a history as such, but an explanation of a period marked by new images, ideas, arguments, experiments, and technologies driven by the influence of postmodernism. I’m not sure this distinction will register with many readers, since Poynor’s book takes the familiar form of a survey. He provides a clear definition of postmodernism as an ongoing cultural phenomenon (rather than a formal fad), and he describes fairly accurately the commonly overlooked (or denigrated) relationship between graphic design practice and postmodern theory. He wisely substitutes the usual cavalcade of geniuses with an exploration of the origins of the work, and then a set of themes: Appropriation, Techno, Authorship, and Opposition.

Poynor’s selection of work for his survey is very specific: a narrow band of academic design work of all types (often not properly identified as student projects, not then, not now); some pop culture stuff (mostly record sleeves); some small-run magazines, club flyers, posters, and design used to speak to other designers, like AIGA announcements or paper promotions. Probably the most “mass-market” examples depicted are Benetton’s *Colors* magazine, the *Wired* spreads, Brody’s design for covers of the *Face* and *New Socialist*, and the infamous Swatch ad by Paula Scher.

Many of the original critics of the sort of work featured here excoriated it on the grounds that it was too marginal, not commercial enough, and ultimately unimportant (and oh, yes, “ugly”). Of course, the very reason this work is worth reviewing is that it turned out to be massively influential beyond its tiny scale. The vitality of

the experiments spoke to an audience that was ultimately seen as a market. That work and its proliferation, along with the shift to digital means, burst the bubble of the self-satisfied design scene I described earlier. But the reader of *No More Rules* would never know that from what is actually depicted, since the work is shown in isolation, without any sort of mapping of the way that the production and proliferation and consumption of the new work proceeded. There are no examples of what these designers were visually reacting to; no cause and, equally, no effect.

And that's the problem with the book, to this reader who witnessed and participated in the scene. It's missing so much of the specific energy and texture, the seriousness and rebellion, the orneriness and fun. As far as the late eighties and early nineties goes, it certainly is the only time I've ever witnessed designers arguing overtly about graphic design as if it meant something. If you read the "Letters to the Editor" from *Emigre* during those years, you begin to get the idea. Another example is that people no longer accepted the blank judgments of design competitions. Jurors' comments were insisted upon—a new phenomenon at that point, believe it or not.⁶

Poynor describes a dialogue published in *Print* in 1990 between Tibor Kalman and Joe Duffy that addressed the issue of stylistic appropriation. What he omits is that *Print* was trying to capture a public argument that had boiled over between the two at the 1989 AIGA conference in San Antonio, after Kalman accused Duffy (by name! on the main stage!) of making what he deemed phony work. Can you imagine two designers almost punching each other out over anything at an AIGA conference now? Tibor's attack, correct or not, was fueled by the same sort of crazy enthusiasm on which the designers of the postmodern typographic experiments were running. One could sense the end of a bad old system, and it was time to take it down and/or reinvent it through a challenge to its visual language.

Poynor claims that he is not writing a history, but I wish he had spoken to more people and written his book as a reporter, because the story of the big generational change that ran alongside the technological one is going to be much harder to reconstruct, as time goes by, than the citation of theoretical influences. The reductive modernism that was advocated by a tough and powerful older generation was so insular that it offered very few openings or clues as to where design might go next (other than the emulation of where it had been). Younger designers desiring to explore other avenues were on their own. Poynor really focuses on the turn toward theory, but seems to miss that this was part, but not all, of a desperate search—which included design history and the investigation into vernacular—by young designers who had concluded that the only way to reinvigorate graphic design was to look beyond its conventional borders.

One of the problems with the themes of *No More Rules* and Poynor's insistence that they all be viewed through the scrim of theory is that he imposes an artificial order where there really wasn't much. This results in the work seeming more programmed and much more dependent upon the influence of theory than it really was. Some work included thus seems anomalous because it illustrates the author's theme, not because it

is particularly representative of what a given designer did before or after the production of a given piece.⁷ I found myself wishing for more actual reportage, if not history, wondering what the designers (or the clients!) would have said they were up to—or would have revealed they were looking at—at the point of making or commissioning the work. There are a total of four “reference images” in this book (images that are there as illustrations of outside influences), all in the introduction, all book covers of theoretical texts.

I just don’t believe that Poynor really thinks that the graphic design he is describing was instigated entirely by designers obediently reading and translating theory (and in fact he does address the issue of the [sometimes creative] misunderstanding or misuse of theory), but his concentration on theory as the primary engine of change seems a misrepresentation. Without a fuller explanation of what was behind the formal experimentation, the admittedly challenging design and typography of this period can appear to be pedantic and/or pretentious. I mean, who wants to see theory illustrated, anyway?

The graphic design in *No More Rules* was simply not as purely bred by theory as Poynor describes. In the chapter “Appropriation,” Poynor connects the practice of visual quotation from either historical or vernacular sources with the critique (citing Fredric Jameson) that essentially says that when stylistic innovation is impossible, contemporary art (and by extension, design) becomes empty, and more about itself. He describes the distinction between parody and pastiche (in a nutshell: parody is meaningful/good, and pastiche is meaningless/bad). Then Poynor walks through his list: Barney Bubbles, Neville Brody, Tibor Kalman, Peter Saville, Paula Scher, Art Chantry, Charles Spencer Anderson, and on to Old Navy, describing their work as if it was created by a reaction to the existence of a theoretical debate (Old Navy?) around postmodernism, and as if “retro” was invented around 1978.

But—in the words of another genius of the postmodern eighties, Pee Wee Herman, “There’s always a big but”⁸—this ignores the fact that there was a vivid, commercial, pop-cultural phenomenon of visual eclecticism and stylistic quotation that existed as an alternate universe to young designers being trained as modernists in the 1970s. The work of Push Pin Studios was so influential in the publication design world of New York, for instance, that by the mid- to late-1960s, the cool modernist school of design associated with art director Alexey Brodovich and his successors was replaced, at least in the upscale mass market magazines of the time, like *New York* or *Ms.*, with rampant historicist typography. Not to mention the underground press; that was almost uniformly historicist as well.⁹ It is important to recognize that that eclecticism was already a reaction to the hegemony of the photographic, typographic modernism established by the fifties generation of designers, such as Sutnar, Beall, Rand, Burtin, and Golden.¹⁰

In the seventies a graphic design student might be asked to study Jan Tschichold or the classical “Swiss” books of Emil Ruder and Joseph Muller-Brockmann, but he or she was also probably spending a lot of time flipping through the bins at the local record store, which were a whole alternative typographic education in themselves. It is easy to

forget how full of nostalgia and “appropriation” the imagery of pop music was, even in the sixties (look at the typography of *Rolling Stone* to this day, which adheres to a love of the muscular advertising vernacular of the American Type Foundry circa 1920), or how detached and “ironic” the imagery of a lot of pop music already was, even before Peter Saville (though he was really great at it). Who can explain why those naked kids are clambering up rocks on the cover of Led Zeppelin’s *Houses of the Holy*?¹¹

Next to Poynor’s theory books and the big pile of magazines and album covers I’m proposing, I’d add the ironic visuals of Warhol, Ruscha, Richard Hamilton, and pop and conceptual art of many kinds; comic books, especially the underground ones; psychedelia of all sorts; “ad hocism”; the playfulness of Letraset; the relative novelty of Xerox art and mail art; Monty Python; and the deadpan vernacular of the National Lampoon parodies; not to mention all of the campiness of so much sixties culture, high and low. Poynor does mention the postmodern architects. There’s no doubt that Venturi was important, and that by the seventies young graphic designers thought architecture was pretty interesting for its debates. And people were already scavenging through the flea markets for vintage clothing, old furniture, and printed matter, too; of course. The preferred era was the stuff just on the cusp of modernism, the thirties and the forties, which was valued for its ironic contrast to the stripped down, bland version of modernism one was supposed to master.

And if you were a student at Cranbrook in the seventies, you already knew Ed Fella’s “art design” (though he did not call it that yet), which was already anticipating the tsunami of change. It was obvious. You did not need theory or Wolfgang Weingart to know which way the wind blew. And forward to the eighties: there was punk, the free-for-all of the Dutch work that was so inspiring (which Poynor does include), and where in the world is Tadanori Yokoo? I could go on and on, the point being that young designers in the seventies and eighties let life into what was a closed visual system. Though Poynor translates this largely as a search for autonomy or self-expression, I strongly disagree that this is all that accounts for the energy and effort of that work. I think the desire to make work that participated with as much intelligence and vitality as the rest of the culture was what was at stake!

That certainly was what motivated me, along with so many other young educators later in the eighties, to begin to work by revising the way that design was taught; that, and using design history, understanding that the visual conventions of modernism were not timeless truths, but instead, the results of a visual response to social, economic, and technological change, and that we were facing a similar situation. My question back in 1991 was, “If the audience has changed and the production has changed, and the messages might change, wouldn’t common sense suggest that the notion of form might evolve too?”¹²

Poynor documents a lot of work that came out of the schools, but the limitations of his survey format hinder his explanation. For a time, some of the design schools were more responsible for creating a space where a little perspective and independence about the practice and the “profession” could occur than anywhere else. The formal investigations produced by students and teachers were produced against this context,

which utilized, and was enabled by, a reading of critical theory, and had large targets. However, the forms themselves, despite the early resistance to them by an older guard, were so alluring (and so specific to a younger audience) that, like every other formal expression of a cultural idea in our consumer-based society, they entered into the life cycle of visual style; that is, they were marketed. It was not only for the students' benefit that David Carson, for instance, regularly visited several graphic design programs in the early nineties. The designer who continues to make big claims for the mystical power of intuition certainly—and wisely—saw something worthwhile in the sort of surrogate graduate study that he could access through his travels.

Another weird omission from *No More Rules* is the impact of the digital tools for motion circa the mid-nineties. There are no images of Web sites or frames of motion graphics included in the book at all! There is some discussion in the “Techno” section of the postmodern “simulacra” and the now charmingly old-fashioned optimism attached to it all in the pages of *Wired*, etc. But, again, Poynor's survey creates greater distinctions than actually existed between things that were in fact working simultaneously. Certainly the new “techno” tools had a big impact on “authorship” and this was expressed, again, through content, process, and form, since the space between conceptualization and designing (and publication) had so rearranged itself as to make the functionalist paradigm of modernism useless.

It is the ingestion of experimental styles by the marketing world that seems to have condemned the designers of these experiments (as if anyone participating in the Western economic system could escape that fate) in the eyes of so many now, including Rick Poynor.¹³ At the very end of his book, he reveals his contempt for graphic design and designers (heavily hinted at by Chip Kidd's pastiche of a cover) by dumping them into an impossible conundrum: that the “Purpose and meaning of graphic design . . . is to sell things” and that any possibility of design having meaning beyond this depressing shallowness is dependent upon “fundamental systemic change,” but in the meantime, why not ponder “resistance?” “To what sustained uses, other than its familiar and largely unquestioned commercial uses, might graphic design be applied?”¹⁴

Well gosh, there's all sorts of work that designers do that falls somewhere in the spectrum between marketing and protest (*Emigre* magazine, for instance), and I would argue that some of it is critical to the existence of what culture we have, unless you cynically write off all culture within a capitalist society as simply serving a market.

That we can even talk today about corporate work, commissioned work, independent work, designers as authors, designers as entrepreneurs, or designers as socialist resistance fighters represents one small triumph of the “experiments” that Poynor describes: that design is not just *one* thing anymore, but many (maybe too many) things. Now we have the freedom to call ourselves designers or whatever, with no one acting as gatekeeper. It's true that there are *No More Rules*. Now you are to be judged on the quality of your work, period. Today the curious question is what constitutes the designer's mind, but it's a collective problem, one that you see playing out in a lot of contemporary dialogue, even if it's not very articulate. But the generational

dissing so prevalent in, say, the recent responses to “Rant,” reminds me of what it sounds like to hear young women denigrate feminism. They have forgotten that the very ability to “make choices” is the result of the work of their predecessors, and an unflattering caricature of the efforts of the earlier generation has somehow superseded reality. The design equivalent—and Poyner’s narrative—is that all that postmodern graphic design was concerned with was supercilious theory play, or formal solipsism, and it all got used up to sell sweaters or shoes, so who cares? In “Context in Critique,” Dmitri Siegel proposes that what “graphic design needs is an opportunity for all sides in the Legibility Wars to come clean, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission of sorts. Then maybe we can move on and begin to examine graphic design as a process that inscribes economic and social context.”¹⁵ I wholeheartedly agree with Siegel: I just wish that *No More Rules* had supplied denser, richer, and more informed evidence of what transpired during the last twenty-five years, so that those who were not there to experience it firsthand might be able to make some sense of it. In the meantime, my paranoia about the historians taking over the story of graphic design has faded away, and every week some undergraduate reveals to me that another chunk of the very recent past is floating out to sea, as well. . . .

Notes

1. The catalog for the exhibition *The Avant-Garde in Russia 1910–1930: New Perspectives* (shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the summer of 1980, then at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. in the fall of the same year) states that it was the first major museum survey devoted to the Russian avant-garde in the United States.
2. In a recent conversation, Bonnell pointed out that the typography of the brochure, in which he mixed Garamond with Univers, was also cited by Rand as an abomination.
3. For a partial account of my time at graduate school from 1980 to 1982, see “That was then and this is now: but what is next?” in *Emigre*, no. 39 (summer 1996), pp. 18–33.
4. *Eye* made its debut in 1990; Rick Poyner was the editor for seven years, from issue no. 1 through issue no. 24.
5. See “Chairman’s Essay” by Katherine McCoy, in the *Fourteenth Annual 100 Show, American Center for Design, Design Year in Review* (1992), pp. 4–6. In this essay, McCoy describes her idea to adjust the common competition format by encouraging the jurors to “curate” their choices as individuals (instead of trying to reach a consensus) and asking them to describe and defend their selections for publication in the *Annual*. Under the influence of postmodernism, McCoy felt no single idea at that moment could represent design practice, and opening up the jurying to specific personal choice (while asking the jury to justify their choices, for the record) would admit idiosyncratic and experimental works into the *Fourteenth Annual 100 Show* that might not have made it in under the old and unarticulated system. These reforms were also meant to deal with an old complaint against competitions as often presenting bland work because the closed nature of the consensual jurying made the choices seem capricious. Despite the greater transparency of the competition process that her reforms produced, the selections—and the reputation of the jury—still came under attack. See Michael Bierut’s introduction “Planetarium,” in *Planetarium: The 100 Show, The Fifteenth Annual of the American Center for Design, Design Year in Review* (1993), pp. 5–7. Bierut’s attack (which was published in *Statements*, the journal of the American Center of Design, the following year) engendered further debate over the “rules” and purposes of design competitions, but it is clear to this reader, looking back on it all, that Bierut’s original attack on the results of the *Fourteenth Annual 100 Show* was as much about the inclusion of the sorts of postmodern graphic design work of which, at that point, Bierut did not approve, as it was about any qualms he had about the jurying of the *Fourteenth Annual 100 Show*. I offer this sketch of just one more of the many skirmishes over graphic design as evidence of the turmoil of the times (which is perhaps underrepresented in *No More Rules*).
6. The most glaring example of this is the *Night Gallery* poster by Art Chantry (p. 86). The prolific Seattle designer Chantry has always been extremely catholic in his use of a variety of graphic styles, and while the *Night Gallery* poster of 1991 has the right date, Chantry’s ironic use of many vernaculars predates the “theorizing” of the vernacular that Poyner describes, and seems to connect Chantry to debates to which I doubt he

paid attention. Following his discussion of Chantry, Poynor's description of Charles S. Anderson and his "bonehead" style seems to miss the deliberately anti-ironic (and completely antitheoretical) nature of his work. So while Chantry's work and Anderson's work look similar, they are still bodies of work that are quite different in concept, despite their creators' shared indifference to theory (and despite the fact that their work looks good together on a page).

7. *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* (1985).
8. For a discussion of eclecticism in publication design in the 1960s and 1970s, see "1968 and After: Underground and Up Again" in *Modern Magazine Design* by William Owen (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Publishers, 1991), pp. 102–113.
9. Visual boredom and generational contrariness are underacknowledged as motivators for formal mutation in graphic design. Two examples: years ago, while freelancing for Milton Glaser, I was telling him about some volunteer work that I was doing for the librarians at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, to help them sort some studio archives that had been given to them by the heirs of Ladislav Sutnar. Glaser's response was to tell me how awful he thought Sutnar's work was; that it exemplified the kind of design (from the generation immediately preceding his) to which he and his fellow young designers of Push Pin Studios were in direct reaction. Edward Fella also describes his early Detroit fake-Art-Deco "shiny shoe" illustrative lettering work as a joke that he launched in response to the clean modern style that prevailed even in the advertising world of 1950s Detroit.
10. Apparently, not even the designer! Aubrey Powell (member of the British design group Hipgnosis, which was responsible for some of the most iconic and "detached" album covers of the 1970s) has said that when they were commissioned to design the sleeve for Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* (1973), they were given neither a title nor music as a reference, so the designers just went ahead and based their design on a science fiction novel that they were enthusiastic about. (Pity that they did not base it on Barthes.) See www.superseventies.com/ac1.8housesoftheholly.html.
11. Lorraine Wild, "Graphic Design: Lost and Found" in *The Edge of the Millennium: An International Critique of Architecture, Urban Planning, Product and Communication Design*, edited by Susan Yelavich (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Museum of Design, Smithsonian Institution, and Whitney Library of Design, 1993), p.101.
12. Even this is not a new argument. For instance, here is Sheila de Bretteville writing in 1973: "The rigid separation between work and leisure, attitudes and values, male and female—which, we noted above, is reinforced by the tradition of simplification in the mass media and it also operates in product and environmental design. A few new voices were raised in the sixties who appreciated, not only complexity and contradiction, but the value of participation in the popular vernacular. However, the connection and response to the multiplicity of human potential was lost as their attitude became style and fashion.[. . .]" from "Some Aspects of Design from a Woman Designer" first published in *Iconographic 6* (Croydon, England: 1973), reprinted in *Looking Closer 3: Classic Writings on Graphic Design*, edited by M. Bierut, J. Helfand, S. Heller, and R. Poynor (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), p. 145. In this passage, de Bretteville raises the possibility that it is impossible for any critique that is offered via form to retain its legibility once it has entered the inevitable life cycle of style.
13. *No More Rules*, p. 171.
14. Dmitri Siegel, "Context in Critique." *Adbusters* (September/October 2003), archived at www.typotheque.com/articles/rant_reviewed.html.
15. *Ibid.*