

Steve Baker

A Poetics of Graphic Design?

There is a continuing dissonance between the history and practice of graphic design. In particular, the stylistic experimentation and political engagement which has characterized some of the most influential developments in twentieth-century graphic design practice has not found an equivalent in the ways in which the subject's history has been written. Even when the restrictiveness and bogus neutrality of design history's conventional linear narratives have been recognized and criticized, little has been done to develop a more "spatial" writing, a writing which moves — at least at a poetic or metaphorical level — closer to the image. This article proposes that the work of the French feminist writers Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray could serve as the basis for devising a more imaginative form of critical writing which might help to draw the history and practice of graphic design into a closer and more purposeful relation.

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I am only interested in the texts that escape.

Hélène Cixous¹

*I notice that my characters, my animals, my insects,
my fish, look as if they are escaping from the paper.*

Hokusai²

It would be quite wrong to assume at the outset that graphic design history — any graphic design history — should necessarily have a close structural relation to the broader (and itself much disputed) field of design history. Nevertheless, some of the complaints against contemporary design history may be equally applicable to graphic design history as it is currently conceived. This is certainly the case, I would suggest, when it comes to considering how questions of gender are to be addressed in design writing. The significance of feminist design history's exploration of such questions is now not only acknowledged but also emphasized by some male writers. Victor Margolin, for instance, has recently proposed that "feminism is the most powerful critique of design history thus far," and John Walker has argued that "if men were to take the lessons of feminism seriously, then the predominantly masculine discourse of design history would be transformed."³ What neither these writers nor the feminist historians they praise have addressed in any sustained manner, however, are the *ways* in which the discourses of design history might be transformed by attending more closely to gender's implication in and for history. What, in other words, might an alternative and more gender-conscious design writing look like? What form might its visible language take? The argument of the present essay is that this question is particularly pertinent in relation to graphic design's possible histories. Let there be no doubt: a graphic design history is above all *a way of writing*, and the question here is the form that writing is to take — is able to take, inclined to take or even imaginable to take.

It is certainly not simply a matter of heeding calls, such as that made by Cheryl Buckley in *Design Issues* some years ago, for a

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Cixous, Hélène. 1993. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. Translated by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers. New York: Columbia University Press, 98.

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Quoted in Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing" and *Other Essays*, 1991. Edited by Deborah Jenson, translated by Sarah Cornell et al. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 117.

3

Margolin, Victor. 1992. "Design History or Design Studies: Subject Matter and Methods," *Design Studies*, 13:2, 113.
Walker, John A. 1989. *Design History and the History of Design*. London: Pluto Press, 199.

design history which would “acknowledge the governance of patriarchy and its operation historically.”⁴ The problem may be with history itself as a mode of writing. This idea is presented with particular force in the work of the French feminist writers Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, where each of them addresses — at a rhetorical rather than a simplistic biological level — the gendered character of power relations in the discourses of history.

Irigaray’s *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* explores Western culture’s hierarchical association of men with time, and of women with space or place. She writes that “man has been the subject of discourse, whether in theory, morality, or politics.” Philosophy’s historical privileging of time over space, she proposes, puts the masculine subject in a position in which it comes to be understood that “time becomes the *interiority* of the subject itself,” and in which “the subject, the master of time, becomes the axis of the world’s ordering.” She observes that “this leads, on the social and cultural level, to important empirical and transcendental effects: with *discourse* and *thought* being the privileges of a *male* producer.”⁵ This positing of the operation of a gendered division of time (as masculine) and space (as feminine) in Western philosophy might suggest that the writing of any “history” will itself be structurally oriented to the masculine.

Cixous’s earlier classic text, “Sorties,” is more forthright on this matter. Writing in the mid-1970s, Cixous sites received notions of history firmly in *l’empire du propre* (usually translated as the realm of the proper), a Hegelian realm defined by its concern to mark and to defend the boundaries of established power, privilege and self-certainty. Of this rhetorically masculine conception of history, she remarks:

*A commonplace gesture of History: there have to be two races — the masters and the slaves.... The same masters dominate history from the beginning, inscribing on it the marks of their appropriating economy: history, as a story of phallogentrism, hasn’t moved except to repeat itself.... History, history of phallogentrism, history of appropriation: a single history.... History has never produced or recorded anything else.... And it is time to change. To invent the other history.*⁶

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Buckley, Cheryl. 1986. “Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design.” *Design Issues*, 3:2, 6.

5

Irigaray, Luce. 1993. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. London: Athlone Press, 6, 7, 87.

6

Cixous, Hélène. 1986. “Sorties,” in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 70, 79, 83.

The space in which this “other history” is to be invented is for the most part that of the *écriture féminine* which Cixous has continued to explore across the range of her writings, and which she makes clear is not, in principle, restricted to women’s writing. She has stated plainly in an interview that “I do not equate *feminine* with woman and *masculine* with man.” The challenge to “the masculine future,” she suggests in “Sorties,” will come (regardless of their sex) from “thinkers, artists, those who create new values, ‘philosophers’ in the mad Nietzschean manner, inventors and wreckers of concepts and forms, those who change life.”⁷ In their feminine manifestation, at least, Cixous calls them *les désordonnantes*.⁸

In terms of the possibility of a new attitude to writing history, including graphic design history, there are good reasons to focus on Cixous and Irigaray, who are generally taken to represent the “deconstructive-psychoanalytic” wing of French feminist theory. One reason, to which I will return, is their underlying “political optimism,” their insistence on the possibility of change.⁹ Another is the light their work might cast on the current status of deconstruction and related aspects of French theory in debates on graphic design’s history and practice.

When Cixous’s work came up for consideration in a previous issue of *Visible Language* — the much discussed 1978 special issue, “French currents of the letter” — the article’s layout, like that of the others in that issue, was given a self-consciously “deconstructive” treatment by graduate students of the Cranbrook Academy of Art.¹⁰ Katherine McCoy, co-chair of the Design Department there, has described Cranbrook graphic design of the late 1970s and 1980s as consciously drawing on French post-structuralist theory, and a recent review of this work named Cranbrook “the academy of deconstructed design” and its *Visible Language* layout as “still the academy’s most uncompromising assault on typographic convention as a transmitter of meaning.”¹¹ But at a time when the adoption of this post-structuralist “attitude” is widely seen as a progressive move in discussions of design practice, it is precisely the focus of criticism for those with a more conservative concern for the history of that practice. Adrian Forty’s

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Cixous, Hélène. “Sorties,” 84. The interview with Cixous is in Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, 1991. Expanded edition. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 129-61.

8

Cixous’s phrase, “nous, les désordonnantes,” has been translated both as “we women, the derangers” and as “we, the sowers of disorder.” Neither version really conveys the full resonance of the term in her work. For a fuller discussion, see Baker, Steve. 1995. “Flying, Stealing: The Gift in the View of Cixous,” in Pat Kirkham, editor, *The Gendered Object*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press.

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Fraser, Nancy. 1992. “Introduction,” in Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Bartky, editors, *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency and Culture*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 5, 12.

10

Andermatt, Verena. 1978. “Writing the Letter: The Lower-case of *hélène cixous*,” *Visible Language*, 12:3, 305-18.

11

Lupton, Ellen. 1991. “The Academy of Deconstructed Design.” *Eye*, 1:3, 44.

response to Victor Margolin's comments on the shortcomings of much contemporary design history argued that the discipline had in fact been "over-willing" to embrace "new lines of thought," and what Forty considered specifically "unhelpful to design is the post-structuralist view that all judgments are as good, or as bad as each other." He cited Robin Kinross's *Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History* as a good example of the defense of traditional values in current graphic design history, and it is perhaps significant that a few years earlier Kinross had himself proposed that "post-structuralism promises no benefits for design theory."¹²

My concern is not, for the moment, the extent to which any of these writers may or may not be thought to misrepresent post-structuralism, and I certainly want to work towards a view of graphic design history-writing which could draw back from the unproductively polarized positions implied in the previous paragraph. It is clear, however, that in the Anglo-American debate on graphic design's histories, much still hinges on various aspects of French theory. Rather surprisingly, and notwithstanding the *Visible Language* article on Cixous, that debate continues to focus overwhelmingly on writers such as Barthes and Derrida and not at all on *écriture féminine* and the critique of the "masculinization of thought" which is found in the work of Cixous and Irigaray. Once I have briefly enlarged on a specific problem concerning the methods adopted in writing graphic design history, I shall suggest that Cixous and Irigaray offer some especially productive ways forward.

Against a "Masculine" Linearity

One of the principal complaints of feminist historians concerning the "masculine" orientation of design history has been a very simple one, and is at least superficially similar to one which is also frequently found both in male and female historians' critiques of conventional histories of design. It is the complaint that these histories are unduly linear and Pevsnerian in their accounts of a "pioneers"-based sequence of stylistic developments. Two such examples will suffice. Cheryl Buckley,

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Forty, Adrian. 1993. "A Reply to Victor Margolin." *Journal of Design History*, 6:2, 131.
Kinross, Robin. 1986. "Semiotics and Designing." *Information Design Journal*, 4:3, 196.

reviewing a history of women in design (written by a female historian), objects to its reproduction of a model of history “which is linear, progressive and peopled by female ‘pioneers,’” since it fails to see that the method itself perpetuates the legitimization of a particular view of design which results in “much of women’s design,” which is “often anonymous, traditional and made in a domestic sphere,” continuing to be “left out of the history books.” More recently Bridget Wilkins, writing about graphic design history (though not specifically from a feminist perspective), has argued that its overriding concern with the “look” of things is “modelled on the earliest approaches to art history” and emphasizes either the linear career development of the individual “hero” or a linear progression of styles. In either case, she suggests, “these linear concepts of history are ignoring some of the central issues in graphic design,” as they tend to distort the ephemeral nature of much graphic design and to ignore the question of how these communications were received and understood by the largely non-professional audience they addressed.¹³ In the present context my concern will be to address not how design history in general might deal with the avoidance of linearity, but specifically to speculate on how a way of writing about graphic design might do so.

The Gendering of Word and Image

One of the most obvious characteristics to distinguish graphic design from other fields of design is its concern with the conjunction of word and image. I shall propose here (and it may be viewed either as a rhetorical conceit or as a move with entirely practical implications) that the form of a writing appropriate to the study of graphic design might itself attempt to bring the visual and the verbal into a closer relation.

The challenge facing graphic design writing, to put it in terms of Irigaray’s gendered distinction, might thus be said to be the production of a move from the linear history-writing of the masculine word to the spatial inscription of the feminine image. Such a project corresponds in certain specific respects to matters alluded to all too briefly in J. Hillis Miller’s recent

13

Buckley, Cheryl. 1986.
 “Designed by Women.”
Art History, 9:3, 403.
 Wilkins, Bridget. 1992.
 “No More Heroes.”
Eye, 2:6, 4.

book, *Illustration*. In seeking to isolate a possible “mode of meaning specific to the graphic image,” Miller includes a glancing reference to a “traditional gendering of acts” in which the process of writing’s linearity, “engraving a furrow, the art of scratch, is seen as male,” while drawing’s conceptual proximity to the embroidering of a surface, the weaving of a cover, “is seen as female.” He suggests that in a sense the “double act of engraving and embroidering” is already present in all forms of graphic activity, since both word and image have their origin in “the primordial act of scratching a surface to make it a sign.”¹⁴

My suggestion here is that it may nevertheless be instructive to *reopen* this sign, the better to examine and understand it, and to take more seriously the possibility that words, somehow, continue to be regarded as having a masculine orientation, and images a feminine one. What would such a distinction say about the relative power of word and image? Would it be a reflection of, or at any rate seem to run parallel to, the widespread cultural privileging of the verbal over the visual (even in much of the graphic design literature)?¹⁵ By what means might it be challenged and undone? Might a form of graphic design history-writing be imagined which was consonant with the practice of graphic design, and which would challenge this sign’s gendered priorities by weaving a way of writing from (or around) one of the particular characteristics of its subject: the endlessly changing and infinitely complex relation of word and image? This would be writing of a heightened visibility, an imagistic writing, a writing which, by whatever means, sought to minimize the “remoteness” of academic writing by replenishing it with those things, such as dreams, of which Cixous complains that one finds less and less in contemporary narratives and histories:

less and less poetry
less and less angels
less and less birds
less and less women
*less and less courage*¹⁶

14

Miller, J. Hillis. 1992. *Illustration*. London: Reaktion Books, 66, 78, 75.

15

See for example Baker, Steve. 1989. “Re-reading The Corporate Personality.” *Journal of Design History*, 2:4, 275-92, in which I suggest that the work of Wally Olins, the foremost British writer on corporate identity design, betrays a thoroughgoing “mistrust of the visual.”

16

Cixous, Hélène. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 108.

Hardly Recognizable as History

It goes without saying that such a writing may be hardly recognizable as history. Its concern is primarily with what's going on *in the writing* of graphic design's histories (and where power lies in that writing), and rather less with the historical matters which are being written about. In this respect its focus on questions of gender will be distinct from that of Michael Rock and Susan Sellers, for instance, who argue that "while most design history and criticism claims to be non-ideological and value neutral, it is a fact that design has been controlled and produced by men." It is not a case simply of attending to historical circumstances overlooked by conventional histories, important as those matters may undoubtedly be, but of grasping Irigaray's point (which might apply equally to graphic design's history and to its practice) that "the generation of messages is not neutral, but sexuate."¹⁷

When Irigaray asserts that "sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our 'salvation' if we thought it through," the point is not to assume from this that questions of gender will *themselves* always be central, but to see their acknowledgement as at present constituting a most effective way of *rhetorically opening up history* to a more inquiring attitude. Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference is not only a matter of sexual politics. It extends to contesting "religiosity, slogans, publicity, terror, etc. All forms of passively experienced passions in which the subject is enclosed, constrained."¹⁸ Like Cixous's call for the invention of another history, Irigaray wants "the creation of a new *poetics*." One of the things such a poetics would make manifest is what she calls "the sexualization of discourse," even at the level of syntax. "To say that discourse has a sex, especially in its syntax, is to question the last bastion of semantic order"—an order which grimly and blindly clings to the presumption of its own "neuter, universal, unchanging" validity and transparency.¹⁹

What Irigaray imagines, in other words, is a poetics which would render history, history's procedures, history's "syntax," history's effects, opaque. A thick and treacly stuff. Like reading

17

Rock, Michael and Susan Sellers. 1993. "This is Not a Cigar," *Eye*, 2:8, 45.
Irigaray, Luce. 1991. "The Three *Genres*," in Margaret Whitford, editor, *The Irigaray Reader*. Oxford & Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 143.

18

Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 5, 72.

19

Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 5, 112, 124.

one's way through Velcro™ — the words conscious of their pull on each other. Graphic design history (like much of design history, as it happens) isn't yet sufficiently historically self-conscious, opaque to itself, and is often still deluded into thinking that the writing of a history is essentially straightforward and unproblematic and needs simply to be done "well."²⁰ What is needed, on the contrary, and what can only hesitantly be worked towards, is an appropriate *form* of self-consciousness and unfamiliarity. The historian here might aspire to something like the condition of the unfamiliar philosopher of Irigaray's new poetics:

*Philosophy is not a formal learning, fixed and rigid, abstracted from all feeling. It is a quest for love, love of beauty, love of wisdom, which is one of the most beautiful things....the philosopher would be someone poor, dirty, rather down-and-out, always unhoused, sleeping beneath the stars, but very curious, skilled in ruses and tricks of all kinds, constantly reflecting, a sorcerer, a sophist, sometimes exuberant, sometimes close to death. This is nothing like the way we usually represent the philosopher: a learned person who is well dressed, has good manners, knows everything, and pedantically instructs us in the corpus of things already coded. The philosopher is nothing like that.*²¹

Cixous, in a comparatively recent essay on painting, similarly characterizes that activity as an ongoing quest and argues that "the painter, the true painter, doesn't know how to paint."²² It might equally be true that the kind of historian envisaged here would not know "how" to write history.

Finding the Right Metaphors

In Cixous's earlier and more obviously feminist theoretical writings, which stress the imperative of women's taking up writing for themselves ("why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you"),²³ the *écriture féminine* she has in mind is itself seen as part of the "work to be done" against the fixed, coded, institutionalized and in many respects masculine hold on meaning, on discourse, on history: "There's work to be done

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Forty, Adrian. "A Reply to Victor Margolin," 132, instructs that "the aims of design history should be to write good history."

21

Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 24.

22

Cixous, Hélène. 1991. "The Last Painting or the Portrait of God," in "Coming to Writing" and Other Essays, 110.

23

Cixous, Hélène. 1976. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, 1:4, 876.

against *class*, against categorization, against classification ...against the pervasive masculine urge to judge, diagnose, digest, name....”²⁴ In certain of her recent writings, however, and especially in an extraordinary essay entitled “Without End/no/State of Drawingness/no, rather:/ The Executioner’s Taking off,” she suggests that visual imagery, and drawing in particular, might in a certain sense better allow us to get “between the lines” of the artificially complete, “finished” and orderly discourse of the *propre*.²⁵

In the present context the particular interest of this work is that the metaphors with which it is packed are essentially the same as those she now uses to characterize the forms of writing she most admires. Writing and drawing, word and image, are presented as undertaking similar work and having a similar sense of purpose. The principal metaphor is that of the cut or the blow, *le coup*, which can also be the word for the stroke both of the brush and of the pen, as well as the one describing the more violent effects of the axe or the dagger. In *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* Cixous quotes Kafka: “If the book we are reading doesn’t wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for?...A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.” The writers Cixous admires, she claims, have all written “*by the light of the axe*: they all dared to write the worst” — the urgency of their writing metaphorically illuminated by the glint of the executioner’s axe at the instant before it falls.²⁶

In the “State of Drawingness” essay the drawing’s blow is inflicted both on us and by us — no distinction is drawn between producer and consumer of the image. “This morning in the museum, I was passing in front of the drawings, in the slight alarm of the reading which doesn’t know from where the blow will come....” A moment earlier she was writing of drawing as though it were indistinguishable from our active involvement in writing: “*What do we want to draw? What are we trying to grasp between the lines, in between the strokes, in the net that we’re weaving, that we throw, and the dagger blows [les coups de stylet]?*”²⁷

24

Cixous, Hélène. 1981. “Castration or Decapitation?” Translated by Annette Kuhn. *Signs*, 7:1, 51.

25

Cixous, Hélène. 1993. “Without End/no/State of Drawingness/no, rather:/ The Executioner’s Taking off.” Translated by Catherine A.F. MacGillivray. *New Literary History*, 24:1, 96, 93. The essay was originally published as “Sans Arrêt, non, État de Dessination, non, plutôt: Le Décollage du Bourreau,” in the Louvre exhibition catalogue *Repentirs*, 1991. Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 55-64. In notes 27 and 39 below, page numbers refer first to the translation, then (in parenthesis) to the original.

26

Cixous, Hélène. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 17, 63. Cixous explained the metaphor in terms of the glint of the executioner’s axe during a conversation with Nicole Ward Jouve entitled “Writing for the Theatre and Other Stages,” Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 7 July 1993.

27

Cixous, Hélène. “State of Drawingness,” 96 (59).

The proposal that *le coup* may also be a productive metaphor for characterizing a possible graphic design history — that such a history may be thought of (though clearly not too literally) as being written by the light of Cixous’s axe, or under the aegis of this axe — will not necessarily take us as far from familiar territory as it might seem. Her active and purposeful conception of the bonding of word and image — “the to-be-in-the-process of writing or drawing” — finds echoes both in Victor Margolin’s emphasis not on design but on “designing” as “an activity that is constantly changing,” and also in Robin Kinross’s proposal that design should be “understood not as a noun but as a verb: an activity and a process.”²⁸ What is more, if the metaphor of *le coup* serves as a means of proposing a *reading* of graphic design history, such a reading may be regarded as part of the “work to be done against” less critical histories, since as Cixous herself suggests, “reading is a wonderful metaphor for all kinds of joy that are called vicious.” Miller’s *Illustration* offers a similar account of the work of reading: “Even in the case of visual...signs, the word *read*, in its emphasis on an interventionist and productive activity of interpretation that takes nothing for granted, is still the best word available.” He argues that “only an active and interventionist reading...will *work*, that is, effect changes in the real institutional and social worlds.”²⁹

Voice

The question remains as to how to get the work of that reading into writing, into a non-linear and more visual form of history-writing, which we should perhaps not balk at calling a poetics of graphic design.³⁰ Ironically, the apparently more verbal notion of *giving voice* may be of particular importance here. Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, the head of graphic design at Yale, defines her own conception of a feminist graphic design practice in terms of establishing “the equality of all voices,” and looking for “graphic strategies that will enable us to listen to people who have not been heard before.” Anne Burdick, similarly, argues that the much needed shift in perspective which would enable graphic designers to “consider

28

Cixous, Hélène. “State of Drawingness,” 91.
Margolin, Victor. “Design History or Design Studies,” 110. Kinross, Robin. 1992. *Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History*. London: Hyphen Press, 12.

29

Cixous, Hélène. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 119. Miller, J. Hillis. *Illustration*, 58, 17, 18.

30

For a comparable use of the term *poetics* in relation to the conjunction of word and image, see, for example, the 1988 special issue of *Style*, 22:2, on “Visual Poetics.”

themselves authors, not facilitators” is one which “implies responsibility, voice, action.”³¹ From the historical perspective, while the discourse of history is seen both by Cixous and Irigaray as being ordered by and oriented to the “masculine,” Irigaray observes that it paradoxically ensures “the extinction of voice in discourse.” “The text of the law, the codes, no longer has a voice.” It “holds sway in silence.” It may therefore be supposed that this authoritative discourse will be positively fearful of the “feminine” or of the unauthorized gaining access to speech and to history, “access to sharing, exchanging, or coining symbols,” access to the production of meaning — or to the means of disrupting meaning.³² This is the basis of the urgency of Cixous’s *écriture féminine*; it gives access, it gives voice, it allows “work to be done.”

Interruption, Ekphrasis and the Axe

There are obvious problems with any attempt to be prescriptive about effective strategies for a modified form of history-writing, but here at least is one modest proposal. It stems, among other things, from Sheila Levrant de Bretteville’s account of the gendered experience of designing:

There is a prevalent notion in the professional world that only if you have eight or more uninterrupted hours per day can you do significant work. But if you respond to other human beings...you never really have eight uninterrupted hours in a row. Relational existence is only attached to gender by history — not by genes, not by biology, not by some essential “femaleness.”... A relational person allows notions about other people to interrupt the trajectory of thinking or designing...³³

Might the linear trajectory of a graphic design history similarly find the form of its writing somehow *marked* by interruption, struck through with interruptions, in recognition of the complexity and fragmentation of its project (to say nothing of that of the lives of its writers)?

The form of this interruptive marking will need to be something more substantial than a typographic effect such as the

31

Levrant de Bretteville, Sheila. 1993. “Feminist Design is Caring, Inclusive, Relational.” Interview by Ellen Lupton. *Eye*, 2:8, 13.

Burdick, Anne. 1992. “Parameters and Perimeters,” *Emigré*, 21: unpaginated.

32

Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 140, 169, 141, 114.

33

Levrant de Bretteville, Sheila. “Feminist Design is Caring, Inclusive, Relational,” 14.

famous “fault line” running through the McCoys’ essay “The New Discourse” — an essay which one reviewer described as “maddening to read, because of the application of their ideas to the page layout, in which two columns of text are purposely and dramatically out of alignment.”³⁴ Applying a deconstructive “look” to ordinary historico-critical writing is missing the point. If this writing is to be hard to read on occasion, it should be because of the unfamiliarity or outlandishness of the ideas and not just the novelty of the typography.

The poetic device of *ekphrasis* will be more useful in elaborating the idea of a strategic and, in certain respects, gendered form of interruption. Ekphrasis, defined by W.J.T. Mitchell as “the verbal representation of a visual representation,” is more fully explored in an invaluable article by Grant Scott. In literature the ekphrastic description, Scott explains, might be a “featured inset” which “digresses from the primary narrative line.” Although generally intended as “a sidelight,” “it often threatens to upstage the dominant narrative. Ekphrasis frustrates linear progression and offers an alternative poetics of space and plenitude.”³⁵ In this connection the device has been characterized by some commentators as representing a “florid effeminacy” of style. Scott suggests that for such writers:

The mistrust of finery and ornament at least in part... stems from a fear of its origins in the feminine unconscious. To embellish is to do women’s work; to declare plainly and straightforwardly to further the “manly” cause. This dichotomy derives from a debate between clarity and sophistry deeply embedded in Western thought. It belongs to a long tradition of suspicion toward artists...³⁶

— toward exactly those who Cixous defines as threatening “the masculine future,” that is.

This is not to suggest, of course, that in graphic design history-writing the ekphrastic description would necessarily stick out like a sore thumb, or like a dazzling and elaborate subversion of the text. Its effect may be more discreet, but just as purposeful. A clear example is given in a discussion between Robin Kinross and the designer Richard Hollis concerning

34

McCoy, Katherine and Michael. 1991. “The New Discourse,” in *Cranbrook Design: The New Discourse*. New York: Rizzoli, 14-19. Hull, Judith S. 1993. Book review, *Design Issues*, 9:2, 86. See also McCoy, Katherine. 1991. “Book Format Design Concept,” *Emigré*, 19: unpaginated.

35

Scott, Grant F. 1991. “The Rhetoric of Dilation: Ekphrasis and Ideology,” *Word & Image*, 7:4, 301, 302.

36

Scott, Grant F. “The Rhetoric of Dilation,” 303, 305.

Hollis's book *Graphic Design: A Concise History*,³⁷ prior to its publication. Hollis complains to Kinross that too many historians fail to draw back from the flow of their narratives in order to "look at what they're talking about." It is not enough, he proposes, simply to reproduce a piece of graphic design as an illustration in order to get the reader to understand it. Hollis quotes from his own lengthy description of a Jan Tschichold poster, *Der Berufsphotograph*, in order to make the point that it is often the writer's carefully crafted description of the thing itself, rather than of its historical context or circumstances, which creates understanding. He goes on:

*So my editor is going to say "what are you doing describing something which you're illustrating?" but I'm going to insist. Unless you describe it, people will not read this image, they will just see an image, and won't understand the terrific concentrated intelligence that has produced the image.*³⁸

The *work* of the reading, the reading of the image, occurs outside of the history's linearity, in the more "spatial" plenitude of the ekphrastic description. In the space, in other words, of an alternative and interruptive poetics.

Cixous's own extraordinary ekphrases in the "State of Drawingness" essay do something similar, structurally if not stylistically. Openly ahistorical, they are imaginative attempts to enter *into the time*, into the instant, of the drawings they describe. They want to explore what happens "*during the drawing*," in the interiority of our experience (or of our imaginative reconstruction) of the drawing. As viewers we are once again also the image-producers, and our concern is with "what escapes: we want to draw the instant. That instant which strikes between two instants, that instant which flies into bits under its own blow [*sous son propre coup*]." We want "to see everything in a flash, and at least once shatter the spine of time with only one pencil stroke [*d'un seul coup de crayon*]."³⁹ *Le coup* is, here, the all-purpose figure of this multivalent interior turmoil. Its violence is very different from that of an externally imposed "History, which is always a History of borders" — these borders being defined by Cixous as "invisible lines that stir up war."⁴⁰

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Hollis, Richard. 1994. *Graphic Design: A Concise History*. London & New York: Thames and Hudson.

38

Kinross, Robin. 1992. "Conversation with Richard Hollis on Graphic Design History," *Journal of Design History*, 5:1, 83, 84.

39

Cixous, Hélène. "State of Drawingness," 97, 101 (63), 102-103 (64).

40

Cixous, Hélène. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 131.

The poetics of graphic design, which has been very provisionally gestured towards here, takes its lead from Cixous's demonstration that the visual and the verbal need not always be kept strictly apart, but can escape into each other's territories and beyond. The glint of her metaphorical axe might fancifully be thought of as lighting the way towards a critical writing on graphic design which could itself be distinctive, but without borders; characteristic of (and enacting) its own concerns without ever troubling with anything so banal as the "boundaries" of the discipline. Heedless of received ideas of its "proper" limits or "proper" concerns, it would always be exceeding its own body, multiplying its instants, its instances, proliferating, profligate, fecund. This would be a forward-looking critical writing which took the form of a pushing out towards, a working for, rather than a backward-looking gathering up of its significant moments. As Cixous rather enigmatically puts it, "you will recognize the true drawing, the live one: it's still running."⁴¹ □

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Cixous, Hélène.

"State of Drawingness," 93.

