Katherine McCoy

Is graphic design an art, a science, a business, or a craft? Since the inception of graphic design in the United States, each of these distinct identities has held sway at one time. But in today's practice, these classifications may exist side by side in a variety of projects, or they may combine to form a duality, for example, as craft and business or science and art. This identity crisis is reenforced by the lack of agreement on a name for the field: graphic design, visual communications, and visual design are all in current use, as are a variety of archaic terms, including the earliest and now generally disdained commercial art.

Unlike its venerable cousin architecture, graphic design is a relatively new expression, a phenomenon of the last hundred years. A spontaneous response to the communication needs of the industrial revolution, graphic design was employed to sell the fruits of mass production to growing consumer societies in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rapidly expanding reproduction technologies provided the means for graphic design's
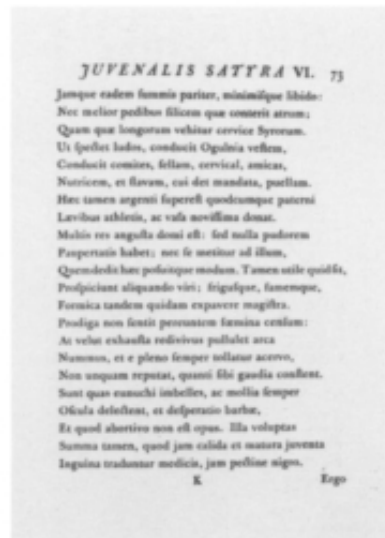
participation in the vast economic, political, technological, and social changes of that era. But the roots of American graphic design lie in European type cutting and book printing. These precursors to the profession came to America as part of our European cultural inheritance. From the invention of movable type in the early Renaissance to the twentieth century, bookmaking, typesetting, and type design were the elements of an integrated craft and industry centered in publishing houses. This long tradition approached typography and book design as the visual presentation of verbal language, with a premium placed on clarity and legibility. Decisions in type design emphasized clarity over expression, relying on the words themselves for the expression of content. Although letterforms were often inherently expressive, typography was neutral to the message and made no attempt to be interpretive. Craft was highly valued and books developed increasing elegance and refinement as the years progressed, codifying this classical book approach into the standardized traditional text format that continues as the standard of book text today.

However artful the book design, the element of function relegated this activity to the status of craft rather than art. The predominance of text made this tradition largely a verbal language expression and illustrational imagery was used sparingly in early books, largely because of technical limitations. When used, it represented literal phenomena and rarely mixed with the text or headline typography. Interpretive symbolic imagery was left to "high art," in which for centuries painters have employed whole vocabularies of nonverbal symbols to convey meaning. Their audiences were able to decode meaning through learned associations, the result of shared cultural experience.

It was not until the early twentieth century that meaning was embedded in visual typographic form. The revolutionary artists of Futurism, Dada, Constructivism, and De Stijl turned their attention to textual-visual communications as well as the more traditional areas of art,
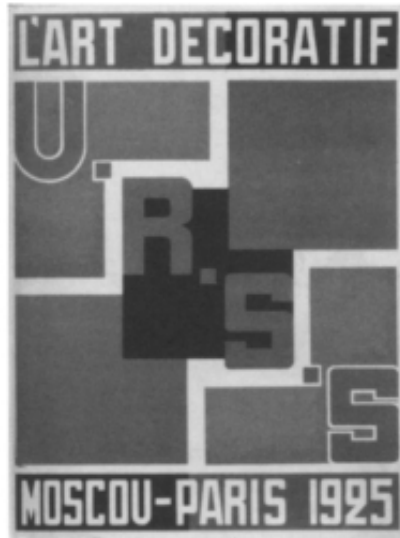
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rejecting the inherited, arbitrary divisions between the fine and applied arts. Functional expression became an integral part of the self-expressive goals of art, and use was not viewed as the enemy of art. In particular, the Russian Constructivists retained their identities as artists even as they took on the role of public communicators for the Russian Revolution. In Germany, the Bauhaus unified art, craft, and design with a coherent philosophy and sense of identity.

These European revolutionaries explored new approaches to structuring language and imagery that were radical rejections of the classical text tradition. Their visual poetry used typographic forms and composition to interpret and extend the meaning of words. One does not have to read Italian to gain an appreciation of the Futurists' energetic celebrations of industry and political confrontation. Typography became an expressive visual language as well as a verbal one.

This visual-verbal dichotomy can be understood through a simple diagram that charts the process (in the Western humanist tradition) of the acquisition of meaning. Seeing and reading are two modes through which we traditionally think of receiving messages. Image and text are two carriers of those messages. Typically we think of seeing as a visual process connected with images—we see the landscape, we see a painting. This process is intuitive, emotional, and simultaneous, experienced almost involuntarily. Upon encountering a vivid color photograph of a fire, a viewer might immediately sense fear and heat with little need to conceptualize. Or an image of a nude figure might stimulate sexual feelings instantly and involuntarily. Although associations gained through life experience influence this process, it is predominantly a direct experiential one, related to the philosophical theories of phenomenology.

On the other hand, the process of reading is typically connected with the verbal process of decoding text's written language signs—letters. To do this, one must know the code. One must have learned to read
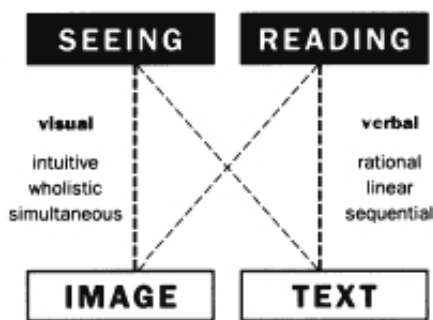
the particular language of the message. This process is cerebral, rational, deliberate, and linear. If one does not carefully link the proper sequence of signs, one cannot decode the message. Linguistics, Structuralist philosophy and Poststructuralism deal with these language dynamics.

In addition, there are two other linkages possible between seeing and reading and image and text. The early Modernists discovered that text can be seen as well as read, as the Futurists' experimental poetry proved. And images can be read. The Neolithic cave painters at Lascaux knew this, as have most painters throughout history. This process has been reconfirmed by the Surrealists, by graphic designers since the 1930s, and more recently by artists and photographers dealing with text-image relationships.

How artists, designers, or craftsmen define themselves has much to do with their use of these text-image processes. Nineteenth-century book designer-printers dealt largely with the reading of text, and aligned themselves with the verbal side of language. Many early Modernists saw themselves as integrated creators of communications, balancing the identities of artist, designer, businessman, and craftsman, exploring all four modes.

American book designer-printers continued the European classical non-interpretive traditions with extremely literal presentations of both imagery and text. But with a public that was increasingly literate, printers' activities broadened to include early manifestations of the mass media: political and commercial handbills in the late eighteenth century and newspaper advertising, popular magazines, advertising cards, and posters in the late nineteenth century. These required headline-scaled typefaces and by the Victorian years a great multiplicity of ornamental faces had been born and American wood type was developed as an inexpensive and accessible means of embellishment for popular communications. This decorative expression spoke with a louder voice than traditional text, making the reader's experience far more visual. Yet this larger scale typography contained no coding in its visual form; the process remained one of reading text.

Advertising, magazines, and posters of the late nineteenth century stimulated a new and growing field of illustration. These illustrators rendered highly artful literal depictions of objects, scenes, and narratives with growing skill, using rapidly evolving reproduction processes. But they employed little symbolism. And because they served the tainted world of commerce rather than practicing "serious" art, these first "commercial" artists were relegated to the servant class, despite their large public followings.

American graphic design was finally born out of two new factors. As the twentieth century got underway, an explosion of new reproduction technologies stimulated specialization, separating conception and form giving from the technical production activities of typesetting and

printing. Simultaneously the United States received its first wave of European émigré designers, a migration that reached its height in the 1930s. They understood design as a balanced process involving the powerful multiple modes of seeing and reading, and sensed the possibility of theory and method as guiding the creative process—the first rudimentary seeds of professionalism. These designers, including Herbert Bayer, Ladislav Sutnar, Will Burtin, László Moholy-Nagy, and Herbert Matter, brought with them Modernism's dual paths of ambiguity and objectivity. They shared an interest in ambiguity and the unconscious with new works of visual art, literature, and psychology. Interpretive typography and asymmetrical compositions seemed more appropriate in a new world in which the old ways were rapidly disappearing. Surrealism offered symbolic forms of conceptual communication that went beyond the power of the word. Therefore, these European designers continued early Modernism's exploration of abstraction and dynamic composition. On the other hand, they believed that
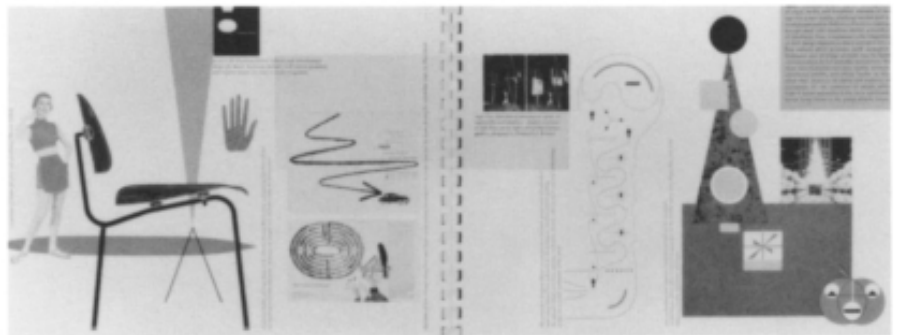
rationalism and objectivity were appropriate for a new world ordered by commerce and industry and they persuaded their clients in the United States to minimize advertising copy into brief essential statements, instead of using the text-heavy literal description favored in earlier American advertising.

Rudimentary ideas of systematic problem solving and composition were offered by such designers as Sutnar and Albert Kner. The role of the designer became that of a highly skilled interpreter of messages, a far more authoritative stance than the one taken by a hireling who follows the dictates of an autocratic client. Interpretation was central to the idea of communication. Systematic rationalism drew on science, while inventive compositions and symbolic interpretation related to art, balancing the identity between art, science, craft, and business.

These émigrés had a tremendous impact on a number of young American designers who grew into maturity in the 1950s, developing new approaches to composition, photography, and text-image relationships. Many of their discoveries formed the basis of the so-called "big idea" method of conceptualizing design solutions, which placed a premium on the flash of intuition and the individual designer's creativity—the ah ha! method of problem solving. Centered in New York in the 1950s and 1960s, this individualistic process idealized the creative genius symbolized by the maverick designer working in his studio. (Ralph Caplan has reproached designers for their willingness to play the role of the "exotic menial"—the brilliant individual serving the needs of clients, but a servant nonetheless.)

The intuitive, conceptual "big idea" method became a uniquely American expression, exemplified by Doyle Dane Bernbach's classic Volkswagen Beetle series, which created intelligent, clever interplays between verbal and visual concepts. Short ironic conversational headlines that came out of American wit and vernacular speech were juxtaposed with provocative images, drawing on the lessons of Surrealism.

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Helmut Krone for Doyle Dane Bernbach's groundbreaking ad campaign for Volkswagen
1968–1980s
Courtesy DDB Needham Worldwide Inc., New York and Volkswagen United States Inc., Troy, Michigan

Lemon.

Unexpected combinations of images and contexts created ambiguity and surprise. This "picture is worth a thousand words" semantic approach maximized the process of reading text and image simultaneously. Little attention was placed on page structure or systematic organization. Unfortunately, many designers today associate this approach with advertising's commercialism and fail to take advantage of the power inherent in the image-copy concept method.

As this highly successful form of advertising began to dominate American visual communications, the first wave of Swiss design thinking and form arrived on the American scene. First transmitted in the early 1960s through a few design magazines and books—*Graphis* and the writings of Josef Müller-Brockmann, Karl Gerstner, Armin Hofmann, and Emil Ruder—a few young American designers began to assimilate these ideas, and in the mid-1960s, a number of professional design offices began to practice these ideas to solve the needs of large corporate clients in Holland, England, Canada, and the United States. A number of

corporations and institutions including Container Corporation, Ciba-Geigy, Herman Miller, IBM, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology adopted this method and aesthetic. Eventually American corporate culture adopted Swiss design as the ideal corporate style. What was originally very difficult to sell to business clients is very difficult to avoid today.

This graphic aesthetic and method was the second wave of European Modernism to influence American designers. The antithesis of the "big idea" approach, it is based on an assumption of Modernist rational method, a codified approach that is not entirely dependent on the individualistic inspiration and talent of the designer. This had a profoundly professionalizing influence on American graphic design practice, further replacing the commercial artist's servant image with that of a disciplined, educated professional. As this method influenced the field, graphic design began to split apart from advertising design, a significant division that persists today.

The classic Swiss method prescribed an ordered process rather than the genius of inspiration, and promised far more dependable, however predictable, results. It assumed a rational systems process based on semi-scientific analysis and problem solving. The goal was the objective (dead serious) presentation of information, rather than the subjective expression of an attitude, emotion, or humor. Swiss suited the corporate demand for factual accuracy—the perfect style for an annual report—while the big idea was more appropriate to advertising's persuasive goals. Swiss tended to rely on representational photography and minimalist typography, while the big idea was far more image-oriented, employing illustration and symbolic photography. Swiss graphic expression stressed the syntactic grammar of graphic design with structured grids and typographic relationships. This form of Modernism neglected some of early Modernism's discoveries with visually expressive typography and surrealistic imagery. For the most part, classic Swiss typography was meant to be read and its imagery to be seen only in the conventional modes.

Semiotics, the science of signs in visual language, was a theory explored in the 1960s in Europe, especially at the Ulm school in Germany. This scientific approach to the analysis of meaning in communications was very compatible with the rationality of the Swiss method. Promising an alternative to intuitive design, semiotic theory began to inform the work of some American adherents to the Swiss idea. Although this difficult and complex theory was inadequately understood, its "scientific" flavor reinforced the objective tone of Swiss design and the idea that graphic design was more than a personal art form. Semiotics became the first codified theory of graphic design, a major step in the evolution to professionalism. As the Italian-American designer Massimo Vignelli has so often reminded us, theory as well as history and criticism constitute the essential trinity that distinguishes a profession from a craft or trade.

This first wave of Swiss was strongly identified with the Zurich designers Müller-Brockmann and Gertsner who were applying Bauhaus ideals. Their strict minimalist codified expression of functional messages may be described as Classic Modernism. No sooner had the Zurich Swiss become established in the United States than a second more mannered form of Swiss developed that could be called Late Modernism. Work from the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel was far more experimental and complex than its forebear. Coming from a school where students and faculty had the luxury of time and a desire for experimentation, many rules were broken and sensibilities were developed to a high level of refinement and complexity. The irreverent Wolfgang Weingart rebelled against the minimalism of his predecessor, Emil Ruder, and in the late 1960s he initiated a body of work with his students that pushed early Modernism's Constructivist experiments to their logical extremes. Enlarging on the earlier Swiss issues of structure and composition, he explored increasingly complex grids and
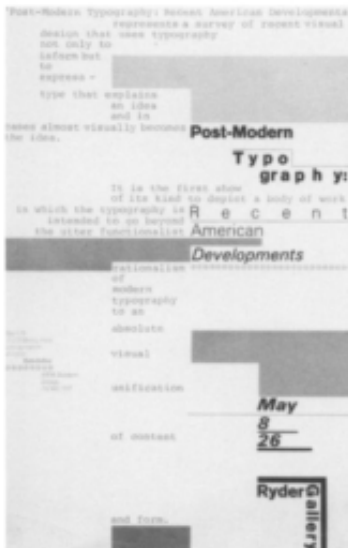
typography in experimental compositions that became quite painterly. Yet the typographic play was mainly about the grammar of typography, and neglected semantic expression. This highly formal work may be labeled Baroque or Mannerist Modernism.

The Basel school's faculty began to come to the United States in the late 1960s to lecture and teach, and in the early 1970s knowledgeable young Americans began to migrate to Basel for postgraduate training in graphic design. By the mid-1970s some of this complexity began to embellish American-Swiss design in the form of bars and rules and a playful mixing of type sizes, weights, and faces in an essentially formalist agenda, sometimes humorously called "type and stripe."

As classical Swiss discipline was gaining followers and even before Basel became an influence, Robert Venturi shook the cultural scene with his 1965 polemical treatise, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Although most graphic designers remained unaware of his premises for many years—and many may not yet realize his profound influence—

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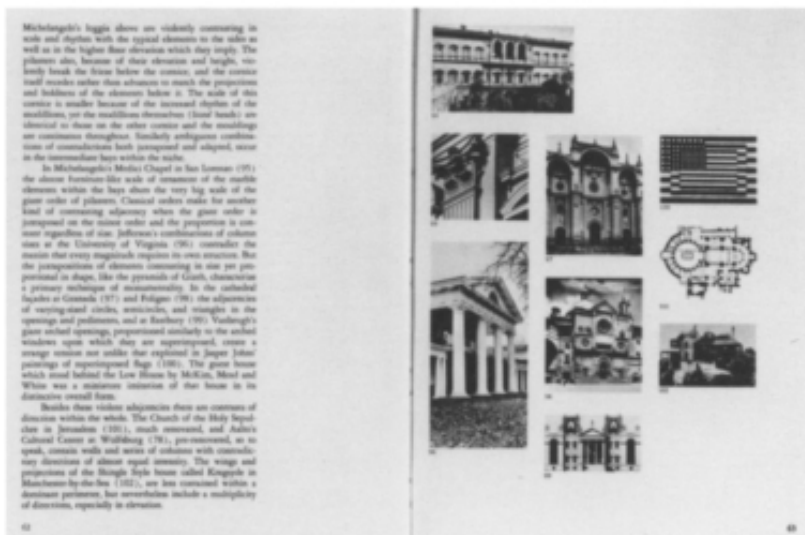
his challenges to Modernist dogma sent shock waves rippling through the architecture and design worlds, stimulating new work that came to be called "Postmodern." His arguments in favor of historical pre-modern architectural forms and crudely energetic commercial American vernaculars eventually contributed to a new phase of American graphic design.

The emergence of a graphic design history in the 1970s dovetailed with Venturi's rediscovery of pre-modern design. The recognition that graphic design had a history was a definite sign of maturation. Until then graphic designers felt that they were still inventing the discipline. The field seemed completely new—without a history—a premise supported by the Bauhaus ideal of constant newness. The first books and conferences on design history provided a banquet of historical forms for designers. The results ranged from historical homage, appropriation, and quotation to eclecticism, imitation, and outright cannibalism.


Milton Glaser
The Push Pin Monthly Graphic.
No. 19
cover
© 1959 by The Pushpin Studios, New York
Collection Ron Rae

Photograph courtesy Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, Philadelphia

But Pushpin Studios of the 1960s created a highly popular design stream paralleling American-Swiss design; they already knew about the pleasures of history. This New York studio's sophisticated eclecticism revived, exploited, imitated, and occasionally parodied decades of design styles, but with an essential difference of intention from the more academic Postmodern sensibility. Pushpin pursued a hedonistic "if it feels good, do it" free borrowing from history's nostalgia, with essentially the same intention as the Victorian eclecticism they so often imitated. Postmodernism's historicism was a more intellectualized self-conscious critique of history. Venturi, a professor as well as a practicing architect, applied a semiotic analysis to historical and vernacular styles, interpreting form as a language invested with cultural meaning. Buildings were signs meant to be read.

Popular culture vernaculars, history, and the Basel school's Mannerist Modernism came together in the mid-1970s to create a new, highly formal expression most often called New Wave graphic design. Bored
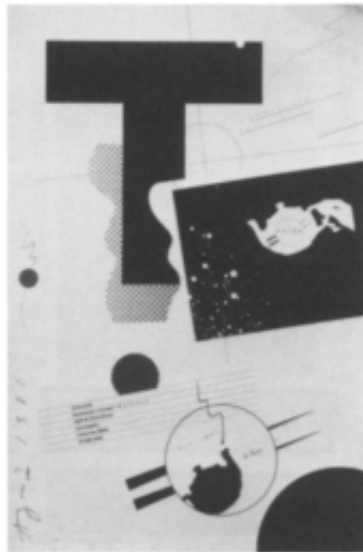
with the rigidity and minimalism of corporate American-Swiss design, American designers began to experiment. Starting from a modernist foundation, they began to dissect, multiply, or ignore the grid and to explore new spatial compositions, introducing complexity and pattern, and frankly nonfunctional design elements. Hand-drawn gestures and vernacular "bad taste" were artfully introduced into highly aestheticized, layered compositions. This expression was still strongly linked with Modernism's interest in syntax and structural expressionism, although by now it was personal and hedonistic rather than impersonal and informational. The typography shared Basel's visual complexity and was mainly expressive of itself with little semantically-encoded symbolic meaning. The use of American vernaculars was also mainly a formal borrowing of popular forms with little of Venturi's understanding of context or intention. But it was a lot more fun than classical Swiss, and New Wave quickly became an accepted graphic form. Just as Modernism's classic Swiss, this new style too was accepted in the business arena and is used today in a wide variety of corporate applications. In fact it is so accepted that the historian Philip Meggs calls it the New Academy, as prescribed a method as the Beaux Arts school of nineteenth-century French architecture.

Although often described as Postmodern, this phase may be more correctly called decadent American Modernism. New Wave's graphic Postmodernism is essentially formalist with a rather minor involvement with content—content being more a jumping off point for graphic celebrations of style than the core of the matter. Certainly the "big idea" school of earlier years was far more dedicated to the communication of content. In fine art, a more profound aspect of Postmodernism has emerged as a body of self-conscious critical theory and expression. In fact, in much Postmodern art, photography, and music the central expression is a critique of our accumulated body of culture. Appropriation and pastiche recycle our experience in highly

referential work that owes everything to what has gone before. All this has its roots in Structuralist semiotics of the 1960s, as well as in Venturi's ideas. Although semiotics never became a practical design method, it and Structuralism's successor, Poststructuralism, have provided a method of expression for the visual arts and graphic design. Coming out of literary theory, visual phenomena are analyzed as language encoded with meaning. In order to discover meaning, language is "deconstructed," exposing its underlying power and the manipulation of its form.

Graphic design is now seen as a visual language. Its audience is approached as readers as well as viewers. In the best of this new design, content is once again at center stage. Images are to be read and interpreted, as well as seen; typography is to be seen as well as read. Provocative narratives exploit the power of familiar clichés, vernacular typography, and closeknit text-image connections, but with a visual-compositional interaction as well as a conceptual-verbal one. The best new work draws on the formal lessons of Basel and New Wave while drawing on all four seeing-reading-text-image modes simultaneously in powerful conceptual expressions. There are layers of meaning as well as layers of form.

This work has an intellectual rigor that demands effort of the audience, but also rewards the audience with content and participation. The audience must make individual interpretations in graphic design that "decenter" the message. Designs provoke a range of interpretations, based on Deconstruction's contention that meaning is inherently unstable and that objectivity is an impossibility, a myth promulgated to control the audience. Graphic designers have become dissatisfied with the obedient delivery of the client's message. Many are taking the role of interpreter, a giant step beyond the problem-solving tradition. By authoring additional content and a self-conscious critique of the message, they are adopting roles associated with both art and

literature. Gone are the commercial artist's servant role and the Swiss designer's transparent neutrality. Wit, humor, and irony are reappearing in irreverent and sometimes self-deprecating pieces that often speak directly to the reader in the second person plural, often with multiple voices. Auditory typography speaks with a tone of voice and mixes image and letter in rebuslike sentences. Venturi's view of history and vernacular as symbolic languages is finally being explored in graphic design. Forms are appropriated with a critical awareness of their original meaning and context.
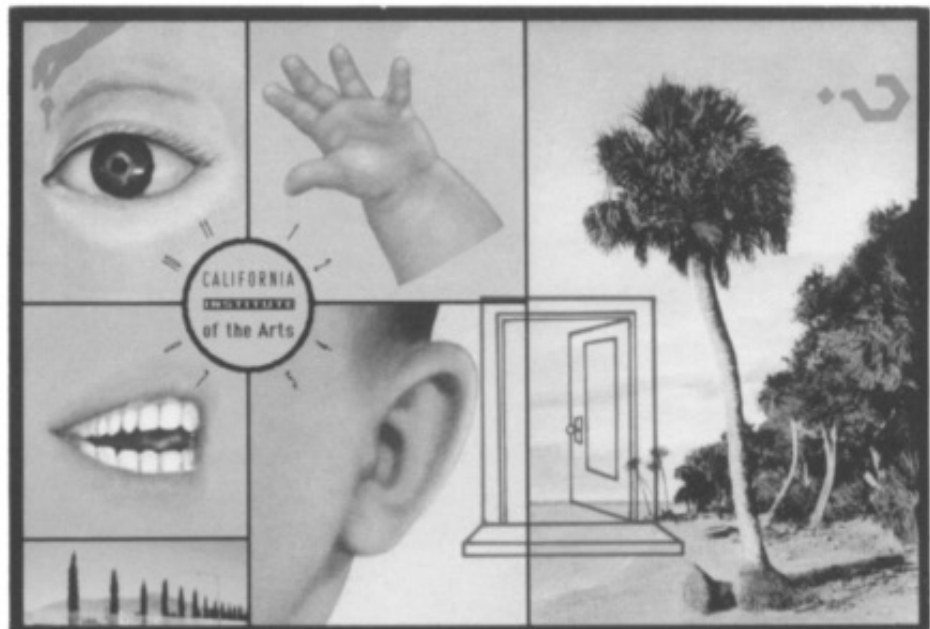
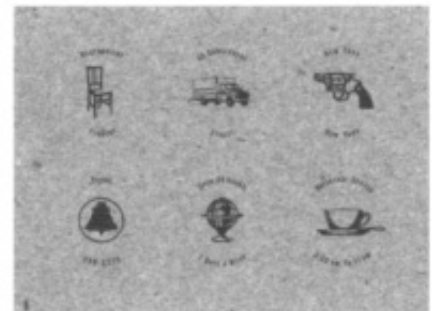**1**

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3

1   Edward Fella
    Phillip Fike & Bill Rauhauser 1987
    exhibition announcement
    The Detroit Artists Market, Detroit,
    Michigan
    Collection Katherine McCoy

2   Alexander Isley and Tibor Kalman,
    M&Co.
    advertisement for Restaurant Florent,
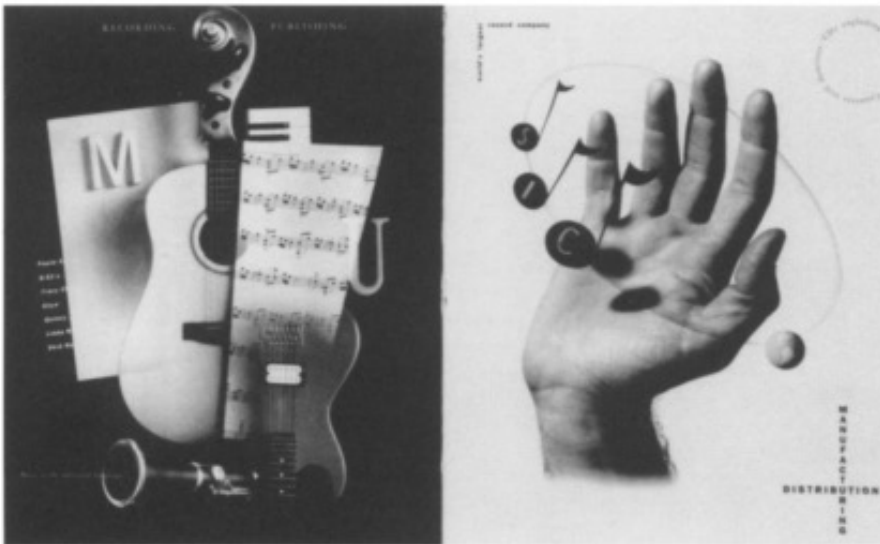   New York 1983
    Collection M&Co.

3   Tibor Kalman and Marlene McCarty,
    M&Co.
    Strange Attractors: Signs of Chaos
    exhibition catalogue 1989
    Published by The New Museum of
    Contemporary Art, New York
    Collection M&C0.

4   Alexander Isley, Tibor Kalman, and
    Florent Moreliet, M&Co.
    postcard for Restaurant Florent,
    New York 1983
    Collection M&Co.

4

rejection of refinement in graphic form │ **vernacular cliché** │ **critical use of vernacular trash**
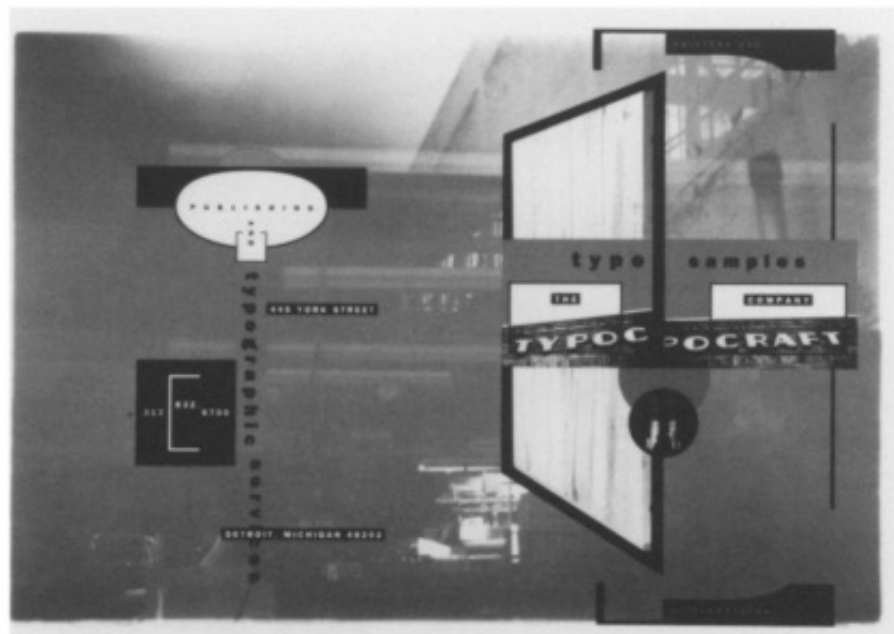
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2

1   David Frej, Influx
    business card for Design Logic,
    Chicago   1988
    Collection Katherine McCoy

2   Frankfurt Gips Balkind
    Time Warner Inc. 1989 Annual Report
    spread
    Published by Time Warner Inc.,
    New York
    Collection Katherine McCoy

3   Allen Hori
    type specimen book for The Typocraft
    Company, Detroit, Michigan   1989
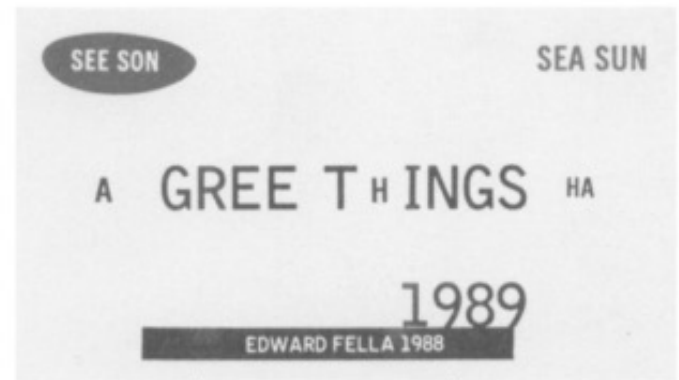   cover
    Collection Katherine McCoy

3

critical use of vernacular typography │ use of image as word │ contextual use of vernacular forms

1

2

3

1 Scott Santoro
announcement poster for Valentines
Day Party, Cranbrook Academy of
Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
1988
silkscreen
Collection the designer

2 David Frej
See Everything 1987
poster
silkscreen
Collection Katherine McCoy

3 Edward Fella
Christmas greeting card 1988
Collection the designer

4 P. Scott Makela and Laurie Haycock
Sex Goddess 1989
poster
Collection the designers
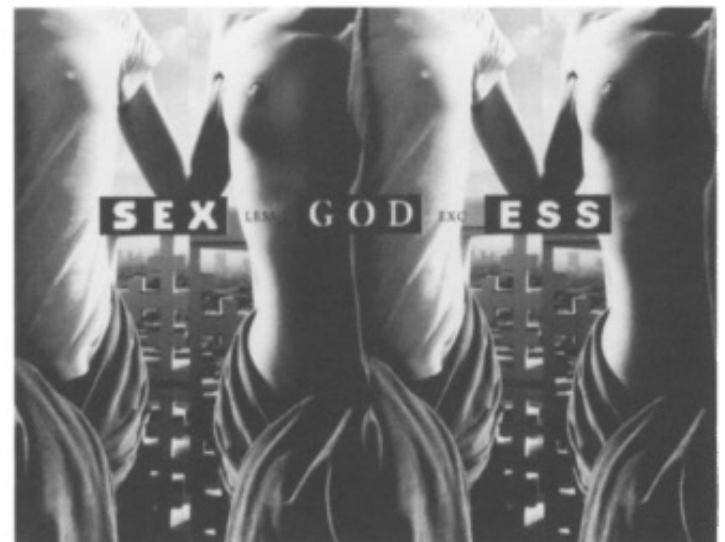
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visual pun | multiple interpretation | multiple reading | unstable meaning / multiple interpretation

1

1   Edward Fella
     Robert Thorne   1986
     typographic history poster
     Collection the designer

2   Jan Marcus Jancourt
     announcement poster for a typo-
     graphic history course, Minneapolis
     College of Art and Design,
     Minneapolis, Minnesota   1989
     Collection the designer

critical use of historical forms and styles

2

This new work challenges its audience to slow down and read carefully in a world of fast forward and instant replay, *USA Today*, and sound bites. The emphasis is on audience interpretation and the construction of meaning; it goes beyond raw data to the reception of messages. This direction seems aligned to our times and technology, as we enter an era of complex global pluralism. Desktop publishing is placing the production of low-end print communications in the hands of office workers and paraprofessionals. Even the simplest corporate report is now typeset and formatted, raising the visual expectations of our audiences. Thus there is a new demand for highly personal, interpretive, and eccentric design expressions.

The new interest in the personal content of graphic design is built on decades of progress in methodology, theory, and formal strategies. The multivalent character of graphic design continues to shift between the opposing values of art and business, visual and verbal, European and American, scientific and intuitive—all of which contribute to its richness and relevance in our complex, rapidly changing environment.

Katherine McCoy is cochair of the Department of Design at Cranbrook Academy of Art and a partner in McCoy & McCoy Associates. Her design practice emphasizes interior and graphic design for cultural and corporate clients, including the Detroit Institute of Arts and Unisys Corporation. She writes frequently for design journals on design criticism and history and has co-produced a television documentary on Japanese design. She is a Fellow and past President of the Industrial Designers Society of America, and an elected member of the Alliance Graphique International.