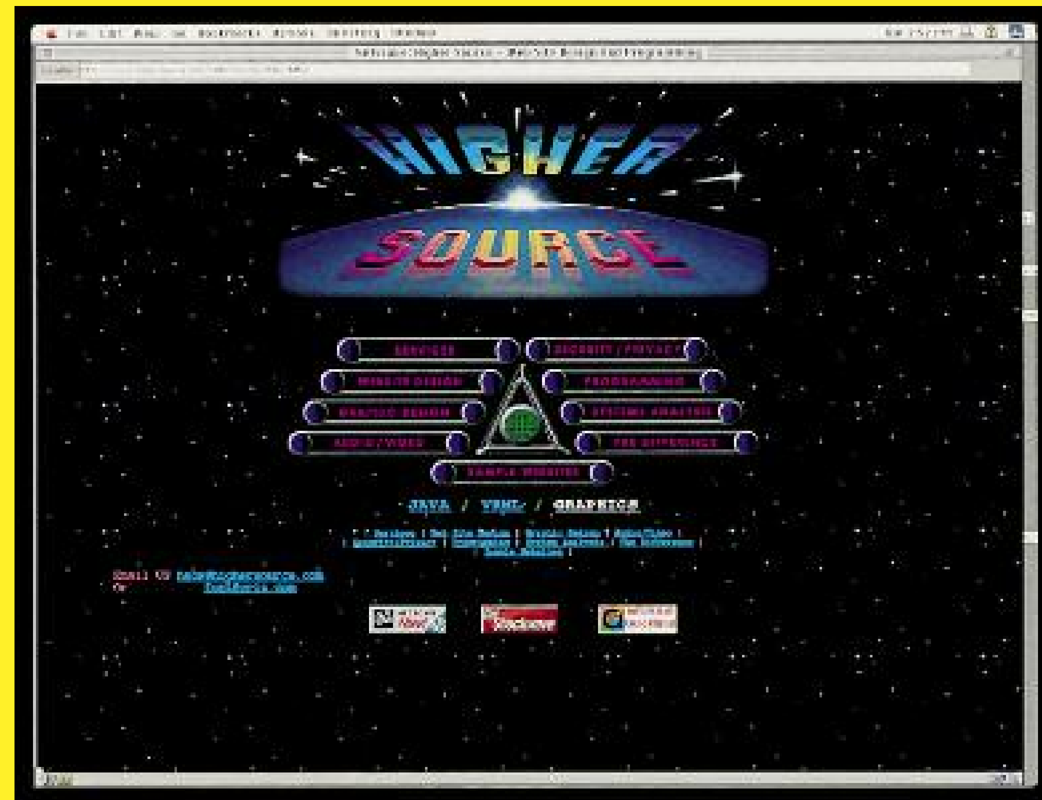


The Macramé of Resistance

Lorraine Wild

Part One: *Strategies*

The AIGA conference in 1995, dedicated to "change," really impressed me. Besides watching the woman from Adobe destroy her computer with a sledgehammer, I particularly recall the presentation where Nancy Greene and Bill Drenttel described the pleasures and pains of running design practices in the face of daily contradictions opened up by new technology. The litany of conditions they cited so honestly are now all-too-familiar: that increased media have made our problems more complex, that we have less "command" of these media, that the mass audience split into "micro-audiences" (though we are not so sure who they are) and we are all supposed to be thinking and acting globally, really, really fast.

Facing this complexity, many designers believe that our futures depend on our ability to deliver conceptual solutions; but, ironically, digital technology has driven production back into the office, requiring constant attention. Design practice today requires the intellectual power of a think tank and the turn around capacity of a quickie printer. But design is optimistic; we have new academic programs, new businesses or expanded old ones that now have "divisions," teams to collaborate on the multi-media design projects that bring prosperity.

While design education acknowledges this situation by trying, at least some of the time, to train designers to work flexibly and collaboratively, most designers think of themselves as originators, or "authors," of visual ideas. But it's not clear that anything resembling the traditional role of the graphic designer is really necessary or desired in new media. If you surf the Web, you know that lots of visual "things" have been produced without the participation of someone the profession would even call a graphic designer. Designers involved in new media projects often find themselves caught in team production based on the entertainment industry paradigm, where authorship is granted to the director, the producers, maybe the screenwriters, but typically not the people who create the visual nature of the product, even though the entertainment industry hierarchy doesn't really make sense in new media, where software blurs the line that divides design from editorial development and final production.

While many graphic designers feel that it is in their interest to embrace a "techno-optimism" embodied, for instance, by *Wired* magazine, it's also clear that the optimism masks a crisis of identity. Teams don't seem to need the hand of a design director. This is in contrast to the past, when the designer was often the invisible but valued force behind the development of our intensely visual culture. Our "pioneers" of design had no doubts about the value of what it was they did, and the high fees that they commanded confirmed their status.

So it's not surprising that some of graphic design's elders recognized technology's tendency to devalue graphic design earlier than younger designers did. In his important 1995 essay, "Design & Business: The War is Over,"[1] Milton Glaser observed that graphic designers had lost ground in many ways, and that digital technology was one of the major culprits, making it easier to produce design (and designers), putting fees under pressure; and that business had embraced design precisely because it had finally figured out how to exercise control over it. As proof, he cited those rotten but common work-for-hire contracts that demand designers to sell rights to their work unconditionally. Glaser concluded that designers would need to create "a new narrative" to restore respect for our existence.

Whether you agree with Glaser's scenario or not, this new environment of design challenges everyone. I'm interested in how designers strategize for the future. Lately, I've noticed two different types of responses floating around in the design magazines: one demands that designers become marketers; the other, anthropologists.

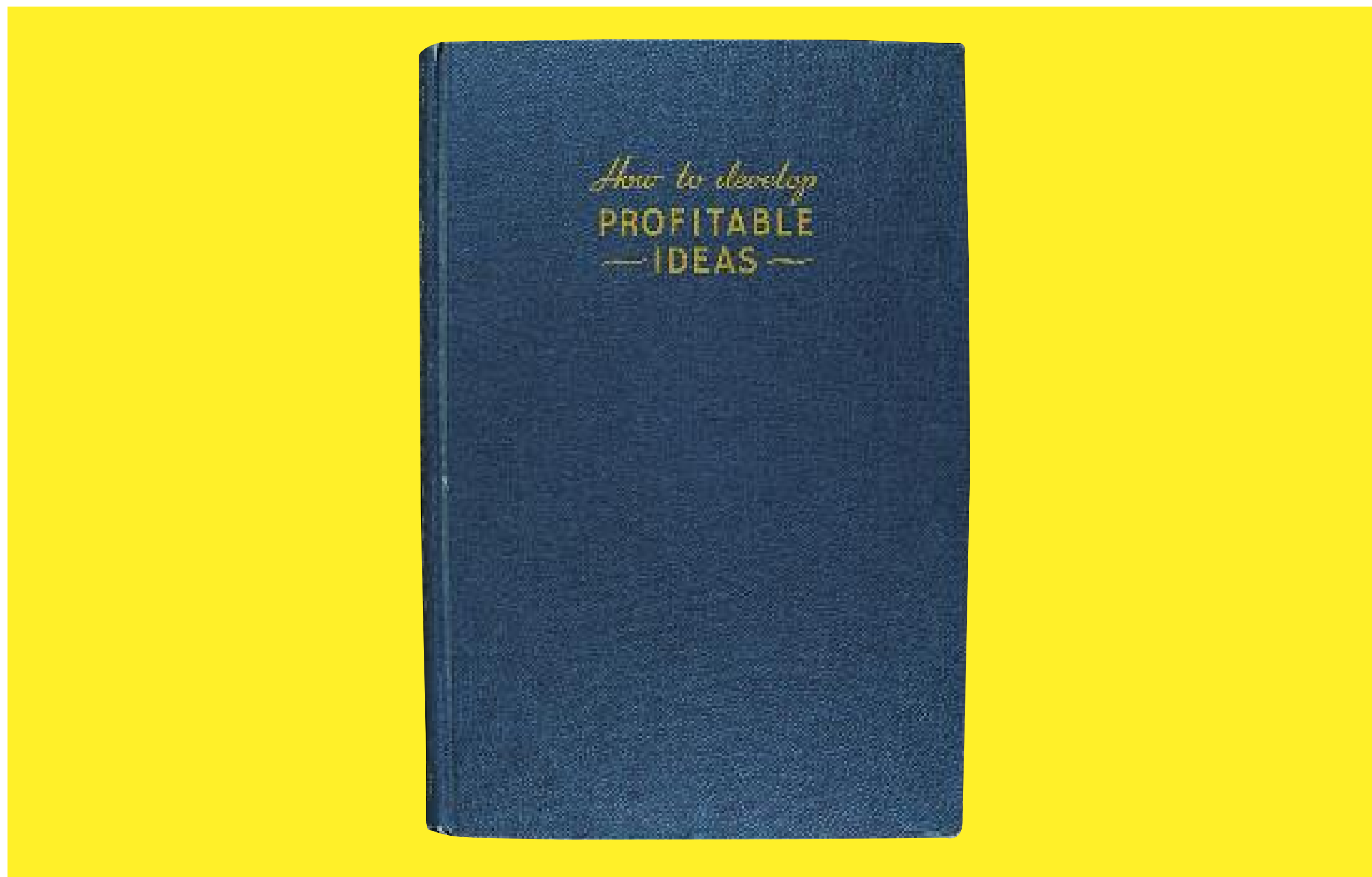
The marketing view says we should adjust all of our work to the demands of technology

and business. This view was expounded upon consistently in the early issues of *Critique*, which champions the notion that designers are public communicators who should scrupulously avoid personal artistic expression. This point of view accepts the inevitability of the lean 'n' mean business environment described by Glaser, and the old paradigm of design as invisible service.

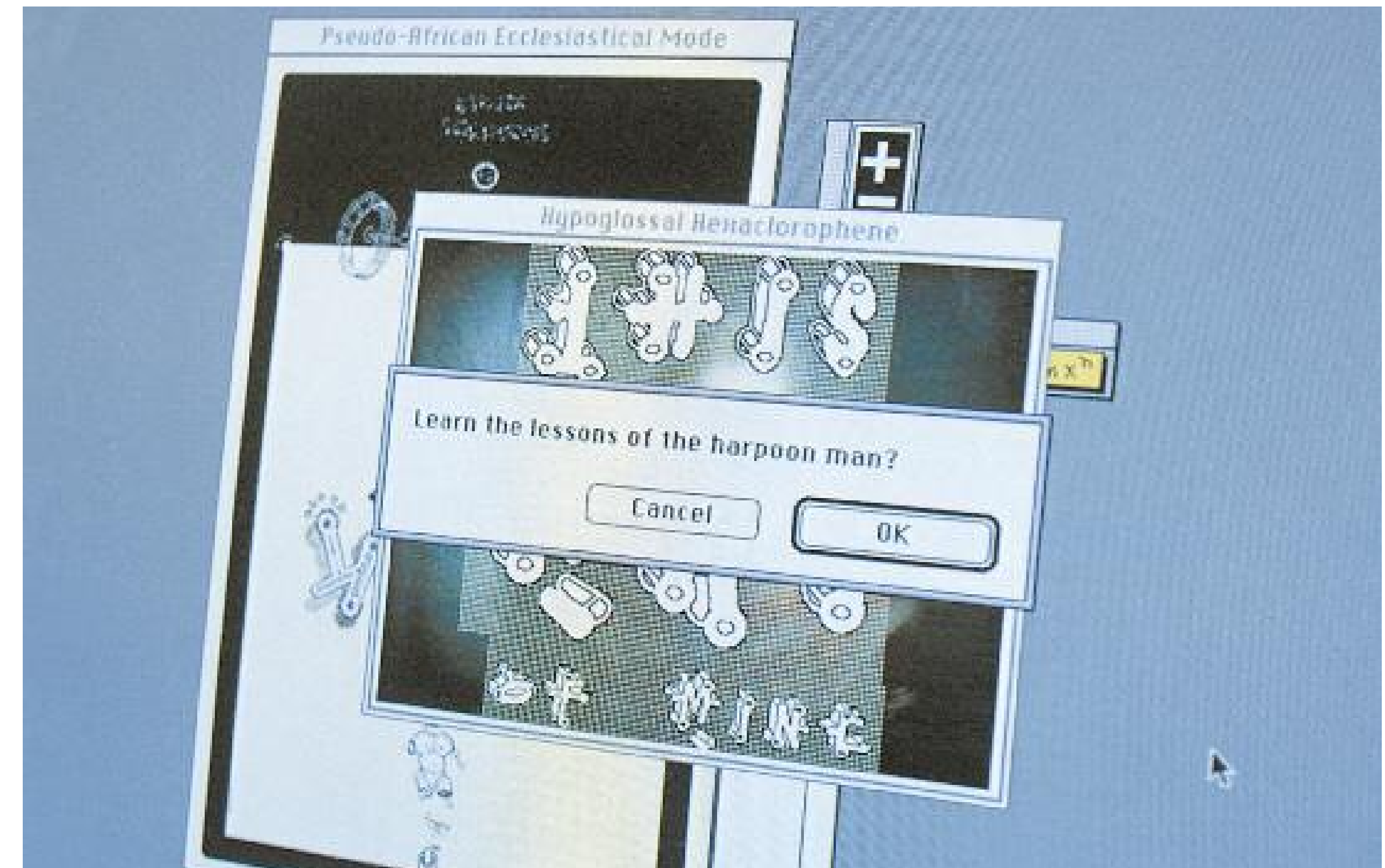
In the Fall 1996 issue, *Critique*'s editor Marty Neumeier stated "Increasingly, the haves and the have-nots of graphic design are separating along conceptual lines. The designer who demonstrates an ability to think independently... will attract the patronage of serious clients. The designer... who indulges in purely artistic pursuits will find that... wealth and power are elusive indeed... With conceptual work, you can get your idea in two minutes and charge for two days. And it will be worth every penny, because it will be stronger than a design based on looks."[2]

In contrast to *Critique*'s marketplace of concepts, the second "anthropological" viewpoint asks the designer to be an interpreter of contexts. Michael and Katherine McCoy, in "Design: Interpreter of the Millennium," focus on the designer's relationship to the audience, especially in multi-media. They state: "Design for interpretation involves the audience in the creative process... graphic communication does not truly exist until each receiver decodes... the message. Interpretive design challenges the viewer to participate... Designers will be... more involved in the design of experience... creating... open-ended situations for users to explore."[3] The McCoys go on to recommend that design education include research techniques from anthropology and marketing to better understand audience behavior.

The marketing and anthropology models propose that designers must become more conceptual because the computer has devalued their traditional skills. But what fascinates me about both of these visions is that the invention of form — something that designers have traditionally done as a way of communicating concepts, is neglected in the desire to elevate design as a conceptual activity.



BELOW:
Detail from *Eye Sling Shot Lions*, a multi-media CD produced by Elliott Peter Earls (The Apollo Program).



Part Two: School

In recent years at CalArts, my colleagues and I worry about whether or not our students, who will probably be working until 2040, are being adequately prepared for their futures. This, and the Seattle conference, influenced me to write an essay, published in 1996 in *Emigre*, titled "That was then, and this is now: but what is next?" In that essay I tried to show that much of design education is at odds with new conditions of design practice. I went along with the idea that design had to be re-defined conceptually; while I didn't really adapt the market or anthropology models, I seemed to aim at the designer as movie director.

I suggested that the following issues would have to be added to the basic skills usually associated with graphic design education: **1** learning how to learn; **2** learning to use writing to facilitate conceptual development; **3** placing an increased emphasis on verbal expression, rhetoric, & storytelling; **4** understanding film and film editing; **5** understanding the structures and narratives of games; **6** understanding the social, cultural and functional possibilities of real and simulated public and private spaces; **7** utilizing collaboration, teams, and consensus building; and **8** using surrealism, bricolage and other forms of subversion to encourage entrepreneurialism.

In arguing for a new design "basics," I claimed that educators needed to expand their assignments beyond the visual. The missing elements, if we wanted young designers to become "conceptualists," were related to language. This bias against language in graphic design teaching is part of the DNA that we still carry from the influence of the Bauhaus, which looked for universal images to supersede verbal communication. Though I tried to not deny the importance of visual training, I had to admit, practically, that if you wanted to graduate in four years, something had to give.

I now think that my conclusion, like the others I have described, needs challenging. Why? Because it's incomplete. Because most of the prescriptions for the "conceptual" in graphic design define it as verbal, falling in line with most of the language-based, rationalist, linear conventions of academic and business culture. The visual, to some design educators, is a remnant of the "old" graphic design, before we got postmodernism and theory. Disdain for the visual also falls in line with a stubborn theme in modern art education, post-Duchamp and post-Moholy-Nagy, (who, of course, said that any designer's idea that could not be described over the phone was not an idea at all). This theme fears that pesky old-fashioned techniques or traditions of visual training might cramp the spontaneous creativity of the young artist/designer. It's a common attitude in contemporary art education that meaning has priority over the techniques used to convey it.

Yet we've been going through a time when there appears to be a huge interest in form-making that reflects the expanded capabilities of technology. The current renaissance in typography is the strongest example of this. The flood of award shows, annuals, and "cutting edge" design seems to be a hyperactive celebration of visual novelty, the way the profession has always explained itself. But it's pretty ironic that this goes on while so many designers are implicitly expressing their doubts that visual talent is important in new media.

All this begs the question: is graphic design only a conceptual process? Can we really ignore the form? And where are all these design "conceptualists" of the future going to find the "commercial artists" of the future to translate their big ideas into beautiful or remotely interesting forms that anyone else will want to look at?

If you judge design only by its conceptual content or subject matter, there's a lot of important work from history that is meaningless: posters by A.M.Cassandre for liquor, posters by one Bolshevik or another extolling the next Five Year Plan, etc. As the field of graphic design history has deepened, we know that many works are treasured, whether or not they actually worked. Design becomes important historically because its form has made a contribution to our culture and we wish to understand what that means and how that works. Most importantly, the work that affects the community of design and public perception is visual. Perhaps it seems dumb to say this, but I'm beginning to think that the best way to salvage graphic design in the face of the juggernaut of technology and the demands of the market is to nurture authentic individual voices in graphic design, and to recognize that individuality manifests itself in form made independently of conceptual analysis or the market.

The issue of the designer's voice is difficult, because it's so at odds with the definition of "design = problem solving," derived from modernism, and now re-interpreted as marketing. How do designers develop form in a way that's open-ended?

The answer is clearly not in the past. The last time technique was stressed strongly in design education was in "Swiss" typography, where process was attached to the idea of "correct" form, which led to similar abstracted, stylistic conclusions, over and over again. This raises the other problem with technique: that it is hard to conceive of it independently of style, and style has a life-cycle that makes designers uncomfortable. Style starts out as originality, it's adapted widely, it becomes a cliché, it's ripe for revival, etc., etc.

Part 3: ***Craft***

Instead of technique, I think it might be useful to talk about craft. A contemporary mistake assumes that craft has something to do with papier mâché, or that it is merely the manipulation of production. It is true that the more one understands the computer or printing, the better one can devise solutions to problems. But to define craft trivially, only in terms of technique, does not address the way that knowledge is developed through skill.

My own interest in craft stems from my experience as a design student at Cranbrook, where "the crafts," like weaving and ceramics and metal smithing were taught seriously. I was always confused by what seemed like a strict but unexplained wall between design and craft; "craft" seemed to be limited to the making of one-of-a-kind things, whereas design was aimed at mass production. We all made things for use, but a deeper issue seemed to exist at the heart of how things were made.

In my search to understand this, I encountered *The Art of the Maker*,[4] a book by the late British design theorist Peter Dormer. He discusses craft in terms of two different types of knowledge. The first is theoretical knowledge, the concepts behind things, the language we use to describe and understand ideas; the second is tacit knowledge, knowledge gained through experience, or "know-how."

The tacit knowledge required to make something work is not the same as a theoretical understanding of the principles behind it. Theory might help you understand how to make something better, but craft knowledge (sometimes also called "local" knowledge) has to be experienced on another level. For Dormer, these two types of knowledge are completely intertwined.

Much of craft defies description. "Craft knowledge" is acquired by accumulating experience, and as you attain mastery you don't think so much about the conceptual basis that got you where you're going. Craft knowledge, though hard to get, achieves the status of a skill once it is taken for granted and not re-thought every time it has to be put into use. It's instinctual.

Knowledge gained through familiarity also includes that which we know through the senses; connoisseurship; recognition not only based on attribution or classification, but also just knowing what is good (having "an eye"). Craft knowledge has to stand up to public scrutiny, but it's also very personal because it has been gained through direct experience.

When craft is put into the framework of graphic design, this might constitute what is meant by the "designer's voice" — that part of a design that is not industriously addressing the ulterior motives of a project, but instead follows the inner agenda of the designers' craft. This guides the "body of work" of a designer over and beyond the particular goal of each project. So craft is about tactics and concepts, seeking opportunities in the gaps of what is known, rather than trying to organize everything in a unifying theory. As Dormer states: "…one needs the ability to experiment. Experimenting,… often described as playing around, demands judgment — it improves one's sense of discrimination." Dormer saw the search that is part of craft as a critical human function, comparing it to processes like the creative thinking practiced by mathematicians or physicists at the top of their games. Dormer claimed the activity of craft as a major part of our culture.

Thinking about this larger definition of craft, which equates investigation with meaning, it's possible to better account for the individual visions of many graphic designers who have produced bodies of work that don't seem so stuck in the limitations of the market. Too personal, maybe, or too eccentric, their work resonates anyway, looks better and better over time, and makes more sense. I look at my own list of guilty pleasures, designers whose work I love because of its integrity to itself, above all else, like W.A.Dwiggins, who re-invented American typography by bringing arts and crafts values to design for machine production, all the while running his completely hand-crafted puppet theater out of a garage in Massachusetts; or Alvin Lustig, an architect, printer, designer, educator, who refused to specialize (he is the

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Top, Metro typeface, designed by W.A.Dwiggins. Bottom, various announcements designed by Edward Fella.

LEFT PAGE:
Top, *Footnotes and Headlines: A Play Pray Book*, United Church Press, 1967. Designed by Sister Corita.
Bottom, *Dinghead Gremmy*, designed by Ed "Big Daddy" Roth.
(Photograph by Carlos Alejandro)

author of one of my favorite definitions of design: "I propose solutions that nobody wants, to problems that don't exist."); or Imre Reiner, an anti-modernist typographer in Switzerland, who rebelled against "objectivity" by coupling his own beautifully subjective scrawl with the public language of classical typography; or Sister Corita Kent, Southern California nun and printmaker who, in the 1960's, seized upon the idea of using the language of pop culture to speak to her local audience about spirituality, subverting and appropriating to communicate before those words were in our critical vocabularies; or Big Daddy Roth, and this I really can't explain, except that I think it has something to do with the pure audaciousness and delight of thinking and acting really locally; or Edward Fella, who mutated out of "commercial art" by working on problems only as he defines them. His commitment to anti-mastery (exemplified by his dictum: "keep the irregularities inconsistent") liberates design from digital perfection, getting down with everyday life, creating poetry.

Each of these designers invents in ways that transcend the clichés of "concept" that characterize so many of the current predictions of what design needs for the future. It's too easy to write this work off because of its marginality, but we need to pay attention because it suggests an alternative path. As another writer on the subject of craft, Malcolm McCullogh, in his book, *Abstracting Craft*, has stated: "The meaning of our work is connected to how it is made, not just 'concepted'." I am highly self-conscious of the weirdness, in 1998, of arguing for a re-energized and re-invented teaching of basic color theory, or drawing, or composition or basic typography that re-connects the digital with the whole span of graphic invention. But these are the tools we need to build creative independence, to liberate invention, to produce the exceptional.

A new commitment to the practice of craft will supplement design theory and help reposition design at the center of what designers contribute to the culture (and to commerce, in the long run). This is what is missing from all of the predictions for the future of design as a purely conceptual or technical activity. It's frustrating to watch so many attempt to reduce design to a theoretical argument, undervaluing the knowledge and pleasure to be gained by passionate engagement in the craft itself. The knowledge gained through activities that can be described as tactical, everyday, or, simply craft, is powerful and important, and it must form the foundation of a designer's education and work — it is how we create ideas; again, how we create culture. Why else are we here?

This essay was based on a lecture presented at the 1997 Conference of the American Institute of Graphic Design, New Orleans, November, 1998.

23

1. Milton Glaser, "The War Is Over," *AIGA Journal*, Vol 13, No.2, 1995, pp. 48–50.
2. Marty Neumeier, "Secrets of Rebellion," *Critique*, Autumn 1996, p. 36.
3. Katherine and Michael McCoy, "Design: interpreter of the millennium," *U&lc*, Vol.22, No.4, Spring 1996, pp. 4–5.
4. Peter Dormer, *The Art of the Maker: Skill and its Meaning in Art, Craft and Design*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1994. pp. 11–13.