The bottom line

It's not been easy for art directors and graphic designers to maintain a career amidst rapidly changing technology and design trends.

by Nick Shinn

The digitization of graphic design has given us astounding new capabilities. But these have not necessarily benefited the status, financial or otherwise, of the majority of graphic designers.

Much is at stake. Much has changed. Many have suffered.

Two major challenges to designers have emerged in the previous decade, and will continue to dog us. The first is the ability of software to superficially mimic our skills. The second is our own ambivalence towards professionalism.

SOFTWARE'S DEROGATION OF DESIGN SKILL

For content creators, this is a business that routinely burns out its young and consigns its middle-aged to the scrap heap. Add in the challenge of keeping up-to-date with the standard software for print, while learning fresh skill sets for new media, and it's a tough row to keep hoeing. Exciting, yes; easy, no.

Consider the birth of the talkies, as told by Harold Lloyd: He was previewing his latest silent movie in 1929, on the same bill with a one-reel sound comedy,

> And they howled at this comedy. There were the punkest gags in it, but they were laughing at the pouring of water, the frying of eggs—it didn't matter—the clinking of ice in a glass. We said "My God, we worked our hearts out to get laughs with thought-out gags, and look here: just because there's some sound with it, they're roaring at all these things.

And today, folks are really impressed by a piece of dimensional typography that looks like shiny colored plastic.

The problem is automation. We invest time and effort into learning how to add human, billable-by-the-hour value to a technique, only to see a new invention imitate and automate the skill, reducing our role to that of mouse-clicking digital drones.

Worse, we get completely bypassed. Display typography had evolved by the 1980s to the extent that headlines with careful kerning and all kinds of contextual massaging of details were well respected. Then along came Photoshop and that black and white stuff looked flat, boring and old-fashioned, no matter how well done. So with much effort we figured out how to create 3D typographic effects, inspired by Adobe Press' *Design Essentials* (1992). Lovely textured type with spiffy vignetted dropshadows, tacky as all get out, but oh so impressive. Then we coughed up for the next Photoshop upgrade and discovered all that effort had been replaced by a pre-set mini-app.

How galling. The end result: what would have taken an airbrush artist many hours is only a few minutes work with software, and the type is still live! That's amazing progress, but the effect has been devalued and trivialized. You can't charge much for something so facile and ubiquitous, and you pay an annual upgrade "tax" on the software. The money goes to the software sector, and the programmers should be handed the design show awards.

While all this was going on, we were sidetracked. That little bit of decorative know-how involved in the designer's work has been blown out of all proportion. The overtitle of the Adobe book was accurate: Professional Studio Techniques, but the title delivered the new paradigm —embellishment as necessity.

Pre-digital design culture had evolved to appreciate a level of spare sophistication in the design process, but that went out the window. Now, a lot of relatively uneducated (in art and design, not in software) new players from outside the establishment were equating design with decoration, styling, and software effects. Hence the move by professionals in Ontario to accreditation and the R.G.D. designation—not just protecting our fiscal turf, but promoting an aesthetic ideology.

Design culture has become obsessed with the latest software tricks and design trends, and this does not provide lasting, financially rewarding careers for its practitioners. Even if one plays the game, running the software upgrade treadmill, staying hip to
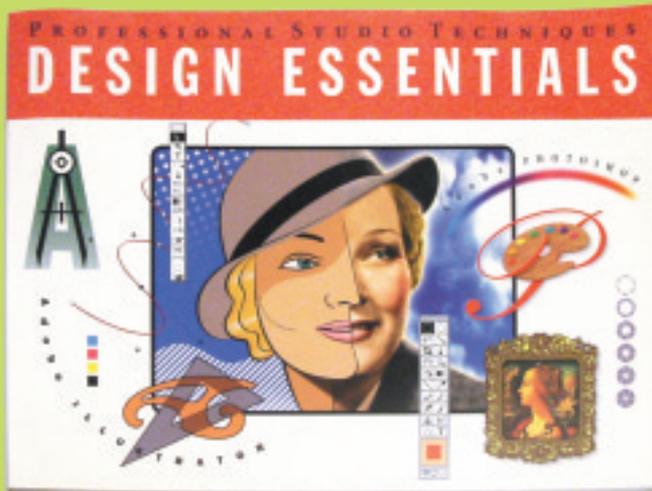
Before

c. 1985: Elegant, serifed, big x-height face, tightly tracked: it's all about the subtlety of letterforms and precise spacing—in other words, typography.

After

c. 1995: Sans serif, letter-spaced technical font, colored, textured and dimensionalized. Adobe's promotional material (left) helped redefine design as software-induced styling, aka eye candy.

the trends, it's hard to win, because the allure of "punk" special effects has eclipsed thought-out skills.

As Lorraine Wilde wrote in *Emigre* No. 39, in 1996, with great prescience,

> …we cannot pretend that this technological phenomena has been designed, or is waiting, just for us. New media will go ahead without our participation, which for many designers may be OK. The price of participation may actually be the end of design as we know it…

Change is ever thus. When the Web burst into a graphic medium, graphic design was ironically dragging up the rear, and is it any wonder?—there was a cultural divide between artist and programmer, and by all the criteria of the printed page, the Web was an ugly medium, with what worked best navigationally looking worst of all. But this is changing: there's a huge generation of web design students graduating. The majority of the workforce doesn't have that kind of an education. And now that web design software has covered its biggest hurdles, things are starting to shake down online. Young, web-savvy design graduates will make their mark, and hopefully it will be with work that is as good as in the best print media. Because design quality is not now, nor has it ever been, about resolution.

If you're part of an older generation (say, over 25), it's going to be harder and harder to compete with these graduates for well-paying new media design work.

What's happening with the Web is déjà vu for many of us who went digital in the late '80s and early '90s: we had invested in a college degree, acquired many years of experience, and were suddenly uncompetitive. All our tasty stock-in-trade was old hat. What use was a knowledge of the subtle distinctions between old-style and transitional typefaces, when they all looked the same tracked out at 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 or more? Why bother creating focus with a dynamic balance of nicely placed asymmetric elements, when you could just slap down an oval picture box? Why bother carefully nuancing a background photo so that elegant knock-out type reads clearly, when you could just beef up the type with a dropshadow?

Many art directors, graphic designers, and production artists did not want to, or were not able to retrain for the digital era. A wave of workers with non-design backgrounds stepped into the breach. In publishing, for instance, as word processing software evolved to include page layout features, writers and editors found themselves morphing into designers, and employers seized the opportunity to telescope the job functions. This was a boon for start-up publications, flooding the world with a lot of dubious typography that the reading public came to take for granted. And why not; familiarity is the foundation of legibility, and it looked just like what they were producing on their own computers.

Which is not to say that all the digital converts to graphic design mangled their words. In fact, most had more of a committment to readability than graphic designers, who are apt to consider lines of text as a series of horizontal grey design elements.

The growth of royalty-free digital stock has changed the status of photography and design. It's made photography affordable for a far wider range of publications than before. But in so doing, it has lessened the importance of the custom collaboration between art director and photographer, and mandated image manipulation on many a shooter. No, the photographer's role isn't what it used to be, and the digital stock agencies have creamed a lot of profit out of his/her pocket.

With the widespread availability of digital stock, first on CD, now online, everyone—including clients—can select pictures. This derogates the simpler, purer kind of layout, because the art director has had to find some way other than carefully choosing and cropping pictures to add value to the design process; and that way has been the "total page" with smoothly blended type and images, and lots of visual stimulation, aka eye candy. Hence the claptrap of trompe-l'oeil textured surfaces, ghosted background images, gradient-filled boxes and 3D type.

Collateral damage: the perceived value of the designer's role has shrunk, reduced to ambient page decoration. Same thing for photographers and illustrators; traditional services—design, photography, and illustration—have been reduced, if not to products, then to playing second fiddle to software skills.

In typography, where once the art director would send the layout, with the copy, to the type house to be typeset overnight,

now we have to set the type ourselves. We rarely do as good a job as the tradesman used to.

Despite the amazing capabilites of type software, advertising typography has really tanked. This has nothing to do with whether the ads are good or bad, it's just that typography is no longer as important as 20 years ago. With bitmap techniques and fonts that fake hand lettering or distressed signage, many art directors downplay the typographic component of display settings. It's overt anti-typography, resonant with the early 20th century when hand lettering was preferred for ad headlines.

On the other hand—in publication design—magazine and newspaper typography has improved remarkably, right from the late '80s. It's a question of control, and commitment to the word. The best typography is done, often in house, by companies whose primary product is editorial.

Elsewhere, the lapsed quality of typography, which is, after all, the bread and butter of the design business, bodes ill. As David Jury wrote in the UK design journal *Eye*, Summer 2001,

> Total, independent [typographic] control has been dropped into the lap of every graphic designer, yet the same technology sits on desks in every commercial business and organization. The question will be asked more and more, "Should I employ a graphic designer or 'design' it myself?" Put another way: if the finer points of typography are not addressed, then what will be the difference between a graphic designer and an administrative assistant, paid perhaps ten times less for doing the same job just as badly?

The pluses and minuses of digitization are writ large in the area of type design. Before DTP, typefaces were created by an elite coterie of designers for the very few companies that could afford the proprietary manufacturing equipment, and fonts were sold to a limited market of trade typesetters and publishers. It was a closed shop with a controlled quality that was technically superb, but in retrospect, turgid. Come Fontographer on the Mac, and anyone could make a font and sell to a potential market of millions. What a jolt of miscegenation to the typographic gene pool!—radical new life that created the most exciting burst of typefaces since the *Incunabula* of the 15th century.

But for every brilliant new typeface there were dogs by the score. And freefonts on the Net and piracy galore, coupled with Microsoft and Adobe giving away whole libraries in order to facilitate the use of software like Explorer and Illustrator, the real money-makers—all this devalued fonts, reducing the designers' remuneration, and reducing the likelihood they'd bother to perfect every last detail of a font.

NO-DESIGNISM: CUTTING ONE'S OWN THROAT

The political negativity prevalent in the fine art world for the past 30 years is seeping into commercial design. It's happened in the UK and the US, and will happen here. RGD Ontario is in the thick of it. This isn't about the contretemps between those who view graphic design as a profession and those who consider it an artistic free-for-all. It's about *No Logo* and *First Things*

No-designism: a spread from the promotion booklet for this year's AIGA conference, designed by Oh Boy. The theme of the conference is the responsibility of the design community for the excesses of consumer culture.

First. Two recent business partners of RGD Ontario are Aquent and *Adbusters*. Aquent, a temp agency, are the bad guys according to Naomi Klein in her deconstruction of the brand bullies: the agencies take a large chunk of income from workers, and prevent them from getting on a salary track with benefits. *Adbusters* is the slick publication that promotes self-loathing among the hired hands of global capitalism.

The flyer for this year's rabble-rousing AIGA conference is set in 8 pt ITC Franklin Gothic. That's all, in a dull Web-stupid layout. Is this what comes after Post-modernism, No-designism? Where's the currency in that for a graphic designer? How can you build a lasting career on a style of design that requires as much effort as flipping a burger?

Similarly, you can't be a hot young designer all your life, appropriating the hipness of the latest teenage vernacular.

The biggest challenge for the individual, and for the species, is how we choose to humanize technology. Or put another way, how we choose to technologize our humanity. Our culture is deep, sophisticated, and a huge investment over the centuries by so many people. How do we handle the progressive tradition of design with our new tools? Paul Renner (1878-1956), who designed the typeface Futura in 1926, provided the answer in 1947,

> For the Modern is an idea, an unending task, never to be entirely resolved. We seek it on a narrow ridge, which drops away on one side into thoughtlessly adopted convention and on the other side into the modish, which is mostly a somewhat foppish exaggeration of the Modern at any one time. This ridge is no comfortable middle way.

The work that the modern designer does is to be valued (as ever) not by the quantity of elaboration, but by its quality of refinement. 🔲

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