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art/science

Nothing pulls you into the territory between art and science quite so quickly as design. It is the borderline where contradictions and tensions exist between the quantifiable and the poetic. It is the field between desire and necessity. Designers thrive in those conditions, moving between land and water. A typical critique at Cranbrook can easily move in a matter of minutes between

mathematic / poetic

a discussion of the object as a validation of being to the precise mechanical proposal for actuating the object. The discussion moves from Heidegger to the "strange material of the week" or from Lyotard to printing technologies without missing a beat. The free flow of ideas, and the leaps from the technical to the mythical, stem from the attempt to maintain a studio plat-

precise / necessity

find his or her own voice as a designer. The form that supports each student's search to

the new discourse

and faculty to encounter their own studio is a hothouse that enables students process that is at times chaotic, visions of the world and act on them — a conflicting, and occasionally inspiring.

Watching the process of students absorbing new ideas and influences, and the incredible range of interpretations of those ideas into design, is

metaphor / technology

an annual experience that is always amazing. In recent years, for example, the department has had the experience of watching wood craftsmen metamorphose into high technologists, and graphic designers into software humanists. Yet it all seems consistent. They are bringing a very personal vision to an area that desperately needs it. The messiness of human experi-

purist / pluralist

ence is warming up the cold precision of technology to make it livable, and lived in.

Unlike the Bauhaus, Cranbrook never embraced a singular teaching method or philosophy, other than Saarinen's exhortation to each student to find his or her own way, in the company of other artists and designers who were engaged in the same search. The energy at Cranbrook seems to come from the fact of

individual / communal

the mutual search, although not the mutual conclusion. If design is about life, why shouldn't it have all the complexity, variety, contradiction, and sublimity of life?

Much of the work done at Cranbrook has been dedicated to changing the status quo. It is polemical, calculated to ruffle designers' feathers. And

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BIRTH OF THE USER

Barthes's model of the text as an open web of references, rather than a closed and perfect work, asserts the importance of the reader over the writer in creating meaning. The reader "plays" the text as a musician plays an instrument. The author does not control its significance: "The text itself plays (like a door, like a machine with 'play') and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which reproduces it." Like an interpretation of a musical score, reading is a performance of the written word.

Graphic designers embraced the idea of the readerly text in the 1980s and early 1990s, using layers of text and interlocking grids to explore Barthes's theory of the "death of the author." In place of the classical model of typography as a crystal goblet for content, this alternative view assumes that content itself changes with each act of representation. Typography becomes a mode of interpretation.

Redefining typography as "discourse," designer Katherine McCoy imploded the traditional dichotomy between seeing and reading. Pictures can be read (analyzed, decoded, taken apart), and words can be seen (perceived as icons, forms, patterns). Valuing ambiguity and complexity, her approach challenged readers to produce their own meanings while also trying to elevate the status of designers within the process of authorship.

Another model, which undermined the designer's new claim to power, surfaced at the end of the 1990s, borrowed not from literary criticism but from human-computer interaction (HCI) studies and the fields of interface and usability design. The dominant subject of our age has become neither reader nor writer but *user*, a figure conceived as a bundle of needs and impairments—cognitive, physical, emotional. Like a patient or child, the user is a figure to be protected and cared for but also scrutinized and controlled, submitted to research and testing.

How texts are *used* becomes more important than what they mean. Someone clicked here to get over there. Someone who bought this also bought that. The interactive environment not only provides users with a degree of control and self-direction but also, more quietly and insidiously, it gathers data about its audiences. Barthes's image of the text as a game to be played still holds, as the user responds to signals from the system. We may play the text, but it is also playing us.

CRANBROOK DESIGN: THE NEW DISCOURSE Book, 1990. Designers: Katherine McCoy, P. Scott Makela, and Mary Lou Kroh. Publisher: Rizzoli. Photograph: Dan Meyers. *Under the direction of Katherine and Michael McCoy, the graduate program in graphic and industrial design at Cranbrook Academy of Art was a leading center for experimental design from the 1970s through the early 1990s. Katherine McCoy developed a model of "typography as discourse," in which the designer and reader actively interpret a text.*

Design a human-machine interface in accordance with the abilities and foibles of humankind, and you will help the user not only get the job done, but be a happier, more productive person. —JEF RASKIN, 2000

Graphic designers can use theories of user interaction to revisit some of our basic assumptions about visual communication. Why, for example, are readers on the web less patient than readers of print? It is commonly believed that digital displays are inherently more difficult to read than ink on paper. Yet HCI studies conducted in the late 1980s proved that crisp black text on a white background can be read just as efficiently from a screen as from a printed page.

The impatience of the digital reader arises from culture, not from the essential character of display technologies. Users of websites have different expectations than users of print. They expect to feel "productive," not contemplative. They expect to be in search mode, not processing mode. Users also expect to be disappointed, distracted, and delayed by false leads. The cultural habits of the screen are driving changes in design for print, while at the same time affirming print's role as a place where extended reading can still occur.

Another common assumption is that icons are a more universal mode of communication than text. Icons are central to the GUIs (graphical user interfaces) that routinely connect users with computers. Yet text can often provide a more specific and understandable cue than a picture. Icons don't actually simplify the translation of content into multiple languages, because they require explanation in multiple languages. The endless icons of the digital desktop, often rendered with gratuitous detail and depth, function more to enforce brand identity than to support usability. In the twentieth century, modern designers hailed pictures as a "universal" language, yet in the age of code, text has become a more common denominator than images—searchable, translatable, and capable of being reformatted and restyled for alternative or future media.

Perhaps the most persistent impulse of twentieth-century art and design was to physically integrate form and content. The Dada and Futurist poets, for example, used typography to create texts whose content was inextricable from the concrete layout of specific letterforms on a page. In the twenty-first century, form and content are being pulled back apart. Style sheets, for example, compel designers to think globally and systematically instead of focusing on the fixed construction of a particular surface. This way of

On screen readability, see John D. Gould *et al.*, "Reading from CRT Displays Can Be as Fast as Reading from Paper," *Human Factors*, 29, 5 (1987): 497–517.

On the restless user, see Jakob Nielsen, *Designing Web Usability* (Indianapolis: New Riders, 2000).

On the failure of interface icons, see Jef Raskin, *The Humane Interface: New Directions for Designing Interactive Systems* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 2000).

Web users don't like to read....They want to keep moving and clicking.
—JAKOB NIELSEN, 2000

thinking allows content to be reformatted for different devices or users, and it also prepares for the afterlife of data as electronic storage media begin their own cycles of decay and obsolescence.

In the twentieth century, modern artists and critics asserted that each medium is specific. They defined film, for example, as a constructive language distinct from theater, and they described painting as a physical medium that refers to its own processes. Today, however, the medium is not always the message. Design has become a "transmedia" enterprise, as authors and producers create worlds of characters, places, situations, and interactions that can appear across a variety of products. A game might live in different versions on a video screen, a desktop computer, a game console, and a cell phone, as well as on t-shirts, lunch boxes, and plastic toys.

The beauty and wonder of "white space" is another modernist myth that is subject to revision in the age of the user. Modern designers discovered that open space on a page can have as much physical presence as printed areas. White space is not always a mental kindness, however. Edward Tufte, a fierce advocate of visual density, argues for maximizing the amount of data conveyed on a single page or screen. In order to help readers make connections and comparisons, as well as to find information quickly, a single surface packed with well-organized information is sometimes better than multiple pages with a lot of blank space. In typography as in urban life, density invites intimate exchange among people and ideas.

In our much-fabled era of information overload, a person can still process only one message at a time. This brute fact of cognition is the secret behind magic tricks: sleights of hand occur while the attention of the audience is drawn elsewhere. Given the fierce competition for their attention, users have a chance to shape the information economy by choosing what to look at. Designers can help them make satisfying choices.

Typography is an interface to the alphabet. User theory tends to favor normative solutions over innovative ones, pushing design into the background. Readers usually ignore the typographic interface, gliding comfortably along literacy's habitual groove. Sometimes, however, the interface should be allowed to fail. By making itself evident, typography can illuminate the construction and identity of a page, screen, place, or product.

If people weren't good at finding tiny things in long lists, the *Wall Street Journal* would have gone out of business years ago. —JEF RASKIN, 2000

Typography, invented in the Renaissance, allowed text to become a fixed and stable form. Like the body of the letter, the body of text was transformed into an industrial commodity that gradually became more open and flexible.

Critics of electronic media have noted that the rise of networked communication did not lead to the much feared destruction of typography (or even to the death of print), but rather to the burgeoning of the alphabetic empire. As Peter Lunenfeld points out, the computer has revived the power and prevalence of writing: "Alphanumeric text has risen from its own ashes, a digital phoenix taking flight on monitors, across networks, and in the realms of virtual space." The computer display is more hospitable to text than the screens of film or television because it offers physical proximity, user control, and a scale appropriate to the body.

The printed book is no longer the chief custodian of the written word. Branding is a powerful variant of literacy that revolves around symbols, icons, and typographic standards, leaving its marks on buildings, packages, album covers, websites, store displays, and countless other surfaces and spaces. With the expansion of the Internet, new (and old) conventions for displaying text quickly congealed, adapting metaphors from print and architecture: window, frame, page, banner, menu. Designers working within this stream of multiple media confront text in myriad forms, giving shape to extended bodies but also to headlines, decks, captions, notes, pull quotes, logotypes, navigation bars, alt tags, and other prosthetic clumps of language that announce, support, and even eclipse the main body of text.
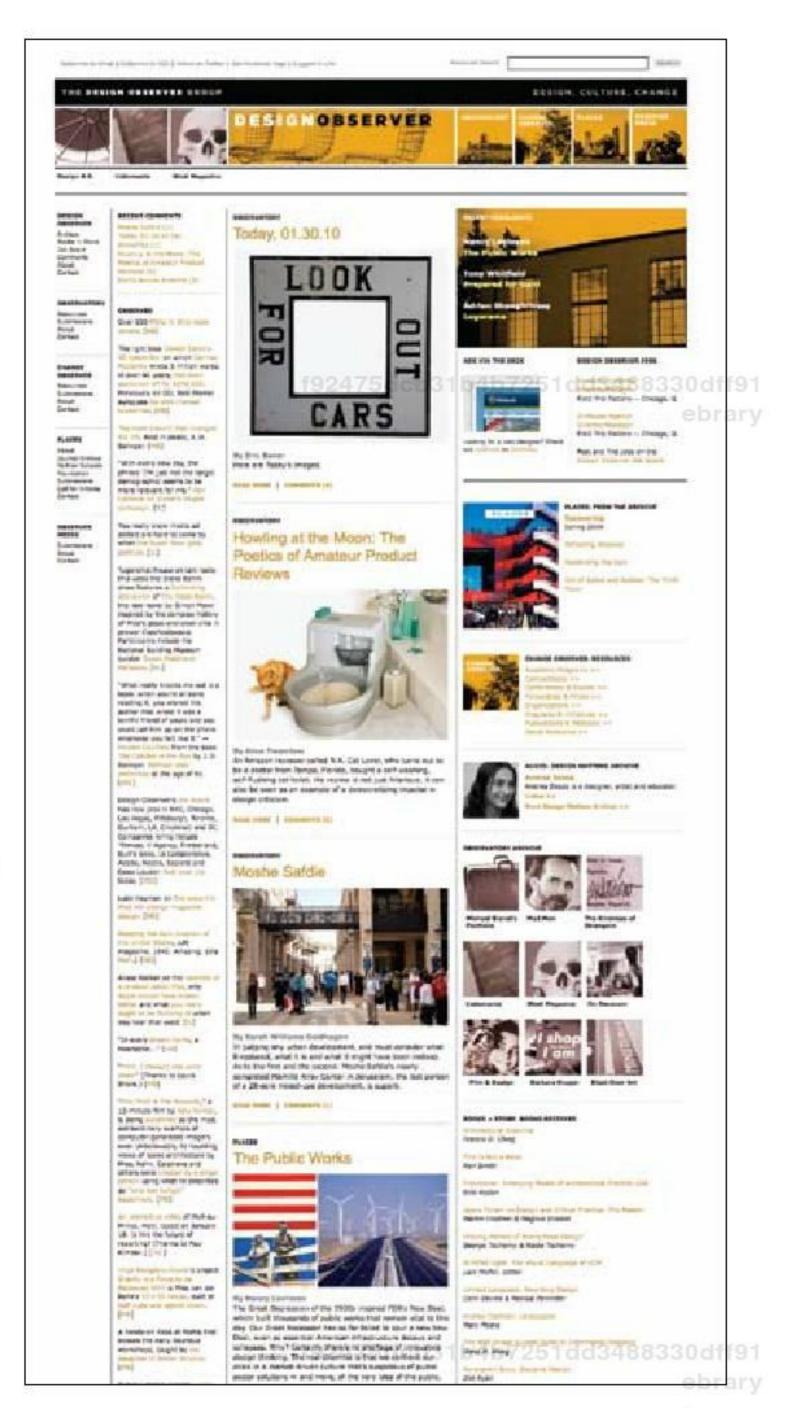
The dissolution of writing is most extreme in the realm of the web, where distracted readers safeguard their time and prize function over form. This debt of restlessness is owed not to the essential nature of computer monitors, but to the new behaviors engendered by the Internet, a place of searching and finding, scanning and mining. The reader, having toppled the author's seat of power during the twentieth century, now ails and lags, replaced by the dominant subject of our own era: the *user*, a figure whose scant attention is our most coveted commodity. Do not squander it.

On electronic writing, see Peter Lunenfeld, *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001); Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), and Stuart Moulthrop, "You Say You Want a Revolution? Hypertext and the Laws of Media," in *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Monfort (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 691–703.

Hypertext means the end of the death of literature. —STUART MOULTHROP, 1991

DESIGNOBSERVER.COM Website, 2010.
Design: Jessica Helfand, William Drenttel,
Michael Bierut, and Betsy Vardell. *Packing
an enormous volume of content onto its home
page, this design discourse supersite brings
print-quality typography to the screen.*