

Walker Art Center  
Minneapolis

# Graphic Design: Now in Production

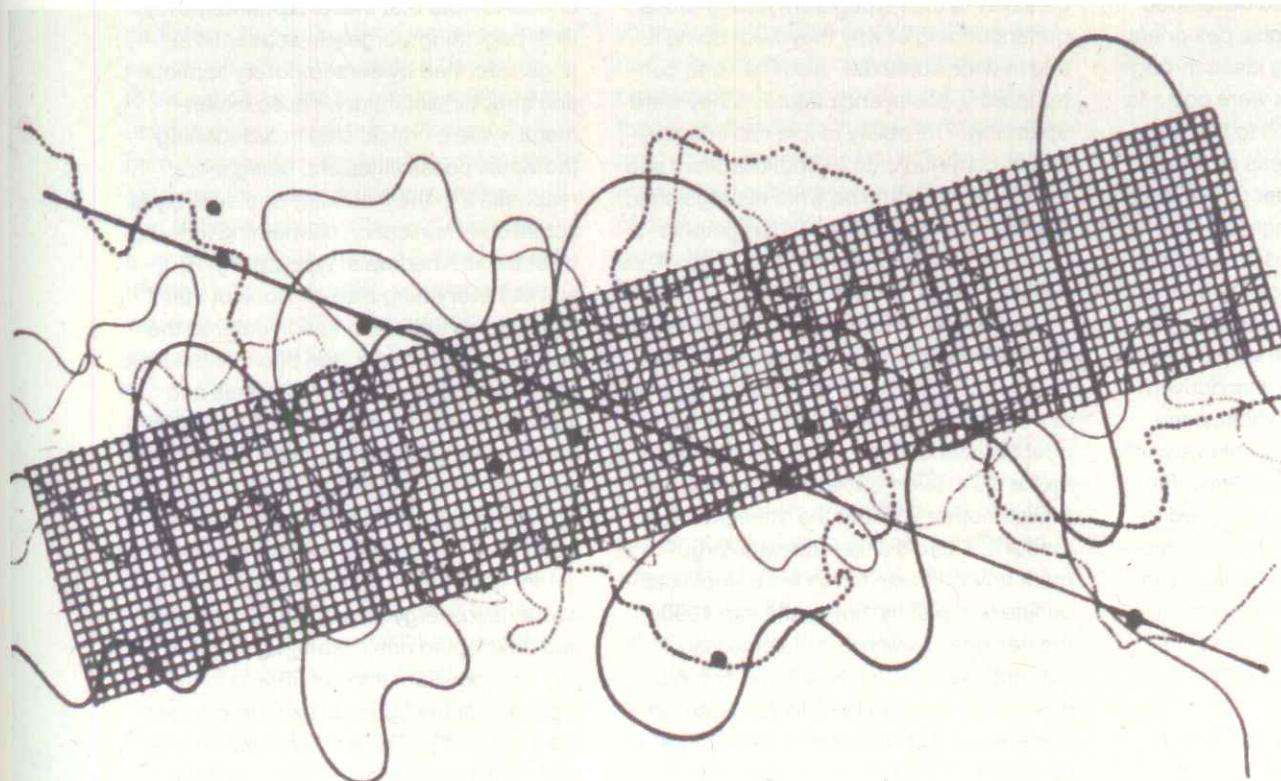
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# 2011 Unraveling Lorraine Wild



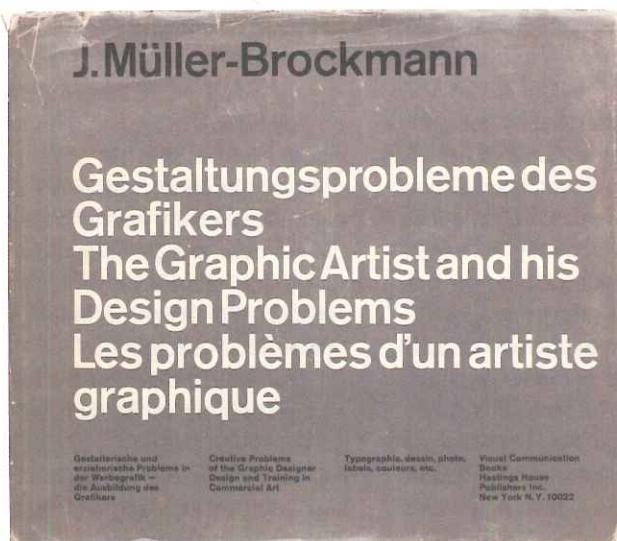
Commodore Amiga desktop publishing package from "Computer Fashions of the 1980s," *Computer Weekly*, 2009



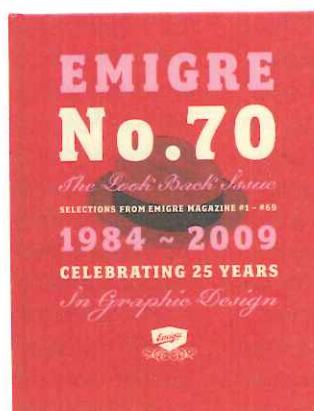
John Cage, *Fontana Mix*, 1958 (detail). Edition Peters 6712. ©1960 Henmar Press. Image © John Cage Trust.

## Defining the Decorational

I suspect it is time to move the computer past the "machine age," derail the persistent perception that it should only reproduce form languages originally invented for another techno-logic.... The decorative dares the attempt to be true to now. It honors many meanings in many forms; honors histories and contemporary currents, communal and technological invention. The decorative intends to engage the discourse of ornament with that of rational design. The decorative finds pride in craft, joy in materials (Our material is digital! Our digital is material!). The aim is not nostalgia, nor pastiche nor irony, but to reflect and be the complexity of our time (which could be nostalgic! ironic!). —Denise Gonzales Crisp, "Toward a Definition of the Decorational," 2003



Josef Müller-Brockmann, *The Graphic Artist and his Design Problems*, 1961. Courtesy Verlag Niggli AG.



Rudy VanderLans, *Emigre* No. 70, the Look Back Issue, 2009. Courtesy Emigre, Inc.

## Emigre Magazine

*Emigre* magazine was published between 1984 and 2005 on a mostly quarterly basis with a total of sixty-nine issues. Issue 70 is a compilation of material drawn from previous issues and produced in a book format and copublished with Princeton Architectural Press. Created by Rudy VanderLans, himself an emigrant from the Netherlands to the United States, *Emigre* magazine was the most influential graphic design magazine of the period. *Emigre* covered emerging graphic designers and typographers seldom profiled in typical industry publications. It showcased experimental layout strategies by VanderLans and numerous guest designers as well as the digital font designs of his wife and business partner, Zuzana Licko, and other type designers, propelling the independent font movement. It also published spirited design criticism in its pages—finding itself to be both the message and the messenger of many debates. —AB

## Desktop Publishing

This term was meant to describe the use of page layout software and personal computers to print and format documents. As designer and educator William Bevington once pointed out, the phrase "desktop publishing" is a deceitful misnomer: the equipment doesn't really fit on your "desktop" (unless your desk is the size of a station wagon), and the outcome isn't really "publishing" (a process that includes distribution as well as design and manufacturing). In the 1980s, this term struck fear into the hearts of designers and art directors, many of whom worried that amateurs and office workers equipped with PCs and Times New Roman would swallow up their jobs. By the early 1990s, graphic designers had become desktop publishers themselves, absorbing numerous phases of technical production into their own workflows. —EL

**Fontana Mix**  
This 1958 composition by John Cage is of indeterminate duration and performance. Employing random processes, the score consists of twelve transparencies and ten sheets of paper. The paper pages are imprinted with curved lines drawn in varying thickness, whereas the transparencies contain a random distribution of dots. (One of the transparencies has a grid, while the final one contains a single straight line.) By overlaying the pages with transparencies in various ways, the performer creates a unique score. The *Fontana Mix*, which is named after Cage's landmark in Milan, may be performed with or without parts written for the Concert for Piano and Orchestra, *Aria*, Solo for Voice 2, and/or Song Books. —EL See John Cage Database, [www.johncage.info](http://www.johncage.info)

"Design with an explicit interest in ways of working; in method; in method as form itself." —Stuart Bailey<sup>1</sup>

In an essay I wrote thirteen years ago titled "The Macramé of Resistance,"<sup>2</sup> I called for a renewed recognition of the value of craft in graphic design as counterbalance to the then prevailing notion that graphic design was to be reframed as driven predominantly by research. An attitude expressed in graphic design magazines, and in various conferences at that time had developed that basically said that graphic designers who focused on expressing ideas through the visual side of their work were going to be relegated (downgraded?) to the implementation and styling of ideas developed by an (implicitly) higher order of designers, who called themselves things like "information architects" or "brand architects." This bias against the traditionally defined graphic designer (the designer who was hired to come up with *visual* ideas) placed a higher value on work that was derived from language-based, analytical, conceptual, methodological, testable ways of framing and approaching problems. From that point on, problems were deemed to be too complex and beyond the scope of the kind of communications that conventional graphic design, even at its most beautiful and sophisticated, even at its most modernist and disciplined, had ever been called upon to solve.

As several others have observed, by the mid-1990s the entire panoply of digitization pointed at editorial, imaging, design, and printing processes had been reinvented, and radically democratized the tools of design, so that anyone could jump in and make things that up until that point had been the territory of the trained (or of the trade). The same digital tools also compressed conceptualization, visualization, and production into the same beige plastic box: so while a more totalized control had been returned to the designer, at every phase of production, the designer was now saddled with the minutiae of production, emphasizing the "service provider" aspect of practice in a way that made some parts of graphic design seem newly monotonous.

One could generalize that the designers who were proclaiming that graphic design should be defined as "conceptual" were slightly older, running offices, and less adept at the digital tools now required to produce the visual (a task that could be delegated to the computer-literate kids that the office had just hired). One could imagine that the surge of interest in graphic design history and theory that began to

percolate in the 1970s and 1980s, not only mirrored the then-contemporary obsession with critical theory in other disciplines, but also gained special energy in design as the practice itself was being turned inside out. History and theory (in graphic design) offered another way to transcend the "trade" or "commercial art" aspect of design. Graphic design could lay claim to a new, more reified cultural significance; smarter, more informed graphic designers would be able to bring invention and creativity to their typography, along with an understanding of why they were doing it, and in what contexts—historical and contemporary, social and cultural—they were operating. The ability to use this information to communicate to both the client and the audience would be what distinguished the professional, degree-laden graphic designer from a mere workaday user of desktop publishing systems.

When the history of the graphic design of this period is written (and this publication points to the onset of this looking back at that not-so-distant past), there is no doubt that one of the terms that will pop up for discussion is the "designer's voice" (or, in another version, the "designer as author"). There's a literature and argument around these terms too complex to outline completely, but by the late 1990s, the designer's voice laid claim to visual authorship—the insistence that graphic designers, through their forms, created content—and contributed to the culture of communication to the audience at large; and that the designer could and should develop an individual signature to their work. This could be a methodological "signature"—a consistent approach to the problem at hand—or, more commonly, a formal signature for one's own work that stamped it with a particular visual originality, not unlike an artist's individual style. Though "the designers' voice" was a relatively new term (which probably can be traced to the "crit rooms" of many MFA programs), deep down it signified an allegiance to the traditional graphic designer's role, of the designer as a maker of meaning through work that expressed itself through form. Design history, which often focuses on the form of the artifact, only increased the sense of value attached to form. To the designer's voice camp, the information architects and brand managers seemed to be trading in some sort of murky verbiage that was uninteresting (other than the fact that they had figured out how to invoice for it at much higher rates, just when the democratization of design was putting downward pressure on conventional design fees).

When I wrote "The Macramé of Resistance," I was, in fact, already bothered by the solipsism inherent in graphic designers' pursuit of their own voices (and the "two camps" scenario flaunted by the research-oriented). Designers' voices had been making themselves heard mostly through rampant typographic experimentation that regarded things like legibility and logic as issues that had already been covered in favor of a free-floating experimentation with word and image. It is critical to note that these experiments had their beginnings largely in academic settings, informed by contemporary semiotic and structuralist theory. Those experiments were a critical step in broadening the visual possibilities and being more responsive to the instability and subtlety of actual communication (something ignored by standard modernist typography). But just like everything else, the look of that typographic experimentation entered the inevitable style-cycle, and became the look of many youth-oriented magazines and marketing campaigns. So what had begun as a deep engagement of typography with language devolved into a set of ubiquitous clichés, which paradoxically seemed to signify the impossibility of communication!

In "Macramé," I observed that there was a new energy around understanding and developing one's craft in typography, composition, and color beyond the repetition of the baroque experiments of the early 1990s. The new contexts that we worked in (rather than trying to nostalgically re-create the past) would produce an environment in which graphic design could continue to operate as an intelligent, culturally viable communicative medium that the audience and even clients could actually see and appreciate. I was really only interested in the designer's voice if it had something to say and the rest of us could see (and read) it: I felt that the way to get there was to go beyond the repetition of the same visual chaos that had come to signify "voice," and direct the designer's energy toward heightened capabilities of visual expression. That I cited the work of several eccentric designers as critical examples was my vote in favor of work that did not pose one particular formal solution over all others, but which in fact would reflect personal interpretations turned outward to the audience.

However, the designer's voice lingers and has become code for the desire on the part of young designers to define their own problems. The reasons for this are complex and I acknowledge my own context of working with young designers within the

“hothouse” of an MFA program inside an art school). But to this day, the model of the *artist* stands for “freedom from the man.” In the same issue of *Emigre* that contained “Macrame” appeared Stuart Bailey’s essay “Chance,” which described a designer afloat in the world of trying to interpret random phenomena, besotted with the work of John Cage and of creating rules and “operations” to be manipulated with a minimum of artistry or personal interpretation, to see where it could take him.<sup>3</sup> At one point Bailey describes his interest in an “intellectual rather than visual aesthetic,” complaining that “conceptual” is a term to be avoided since he maintains that it is used to defend work that is “lowest common denominator design at its most sterile” (perhaps the only point where my essay and Bailey’s agree). “Chance” describes a set of conversations that Bailey has with mostly Dutch and British contemporaries who are rejecting the typographic experimentation of the time as being too ego-driven, “inappropriate and unnecessary graphic noise.” Bailey’s essay also marks an early reference to “default”—the idea that the graphic designers’ creativity was going to be concentrated on the deployment of a system or methods of operations, logic, or chance-based: the composition ordinary, the typography limited to the same fonts that anyone with a computer would be able to access, signifying an indifference to or distaste for the expression or communication afforded by a more considered or artful typography. While the default camp decried the self-indulgence of indecipherable typographic experimentation, the austere formal flatness of Default was hardly an exercise in generosity toward an audience, either.

The irony here is that both the *decadence* of the Designer’s Voice and the *deadpan* of Default are variants of the same thing, where the “Designer and his Problems” (to quote Joseph Müller-Brockmann) still occupy the foreground, and are thought to be more interesting than anything that graphic design might actually be applied to. From our current perspective, this debate might seem like a pre-2008 academic luxury: yet something interesting has emerged from the excesses of both camps, as the context in which we all work has morphed yet again. The attention to craft (and expanded technologies) in font design has brought about an explosion of interesting typographic work for print and the array of digital formats, and the accessibility of that array has become too big to ignore. You can trace the Default camp’s fascination with “ways

of working” in the contemporary interest of young designers in the utilization of various platforms and tools to reach audiences, and the engagement of the designer with users to deal directly with the definition of problems and the democratization of tools. The obsessions of the Designer’s Voice camp are there to be seen in the enthusiasm for individual production, DIY methods, design that starts with one’s own fonts, low-tech printing, and the shift toward self-publishing.

When you join both camps together, you can see the DNA of where things are now, with designers creating work as producers: where the past is informative; theory is after the fact; and the question as to whether design can be art is no longer interesting, but where the independence of design practice is assumed to be a given. When you put all this together with the now common desire on the part of so many designers to produce work that is engaged, in one way or another, with social relevance, it does seem that we are faced with evidence of a possible renaissance in graphic design pointed at an audience (or many, many audiences) in which imagination and creativity are applied not only to the language of style, but also to the generation of projects themselves, how they live in the world, how they reach out, and which purposes they serve.

Whether due to the bleak economy, or their commitment to independence, many young designers do not imagine that there are opportunities for this new integration out there, waiting for them; I think they imagine a mostly DIY future for themselves, and they may well be right. Time to shut up about the voice, or randomness: time to get to work bringing these new scenarios to life. Being the producer of one’s own work in this moment is way more challenging than the triangulated arguments of the late 1990s could even imagine. The ante continues to be raised as to just how much the Designer’s Brain will be called upon to handle. And as the scenarios and the productions become more complex and independent of models of the past, one needs to ask whether the thing we are still calling graphic design is an adequate description of what is being made these days. ☒

WAYS OF WORKING

#### Notes

1. Stuart Bailey, “Chance,” *Emigre* 47 (Summer 1998): 24.
2. Lorraine Wild, “The Macramé of Resistance,” *Emigre* 47 (Summer 1998): 15–23.
3. Bailey, “Chance,” 24–31.

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TOMS