

UNITED
DESIGNS

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GRAPHIC DESIGN

PRACTICE & EDUCATION

DESIGNS

CHAPTER 1

Articles

Writings on Graphic Design Education

- 02** **Design as Contemplative Practice**
Thomas Ockerse | Rhode Island School of Design, USA
- 07** **Creative, Inventive, and Visual Approaches to Design Problem Solving**
John DeMao | Virginia Commonwealth University, USA
- 12** **Outside Institute**
Scott Hutchinson | University of California Los Angeles, USA
Co-Authors: Bill Longhauser, and Ann Enkoji
- 16** **Visual Culture, Community, and Distance**
John Bowers | Oregon State University, USA
Karen White | University of Arizona, USA
- 22** **Learning, Process, and Designing**
Donald Tarallo | Samsung Art & Design Institute, Korea
- 26** **On the Turning Away**
Halim Choueiry | VCU Qatar, Qatar
- 29** **Photographic Essay: A Way to Construct Reality**
Tak-Ping Tsang | Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China
- 36** **Descriptive Terminology: Visualization, Creative, and Ideation**
John Drew | California State University, Fullerton, USA
- 46** **Conceptor: Creating the Value of a Concept**
Albert Young Choi | Hanyang University, Korea
- 56** **Creative Waves: An Online Global Creative Communication: Students, Educators and Professionals Explore Collaborative Modes of Creative Interaction, Conversation and Working Process**
Rick Bennett | University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Vince Dziekan | Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
- 68** **Poetry in Motion**
Sarah A. Meyer | California State Polytechnic University
- 80** **Issue Based Design Education: Dealing with Social Issue in a Graphic Design Curriculum**
Paula DiMarco | California State University, Northridge, USA
- 86** **The Whitney Clothesline**
Scott Santoro | Pratt Institute, USA

Learning, Process and Designing

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Graphic Designers love what they do. They go without sleep, they cringe at the sight of bad typography in the newspaper, and they are continually striving to improve their abilities. One of the primary reasons I became a designer was because, with each new project, there is new content to learn. I liked that I would, in a way, be a student for my entire career. My interest in graphic design started when I was studying painting as an undergraduate student. After my first typography class, I became eager to learn more about design. I was attracted to design thinking, process and methodology. Most of all, I was drawn to the fact that within every stage of the design process one must consider the audience. This social aspect of graphic design is what keeps me practicing design today.

The majority of my design ideas and teaching philosophy were formed during my time as a student at the Basel School of Design in Switzerland. One of the most valuable things I learned in Basel was setting limits on a project and approaching a design solution methodically. Today with the increasing importance of the computer, limits and a methodical process are difficult concepts to teach because the computer allows for hundreds of different typefaces and millions of colors. As a result, it is very seductive to exploit the effects of this machine and get lost in a world of infinite options.

I encourage my students to set limits for themselves and explore ideas methodically within those limitations. Starting with the simplest solutions is a helpful way to see the potential of expression with limited means. With this kind of approach it is easier to develop the student's critical eye toward form, content, and purpose. One understands when a simple design has reached its maximum potential because it will call for something more to be added.

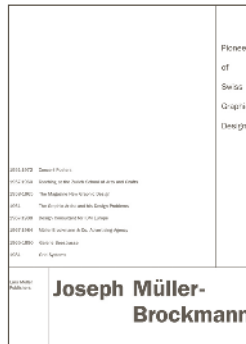
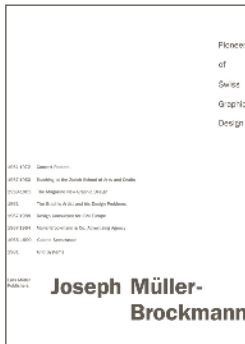
I recall a typography project I did with Wolfgang Weingart where I produced over fifty versions of one book cover. In American design schools, we usually make three or four sketches and then refine one idea, so at first, Weingart's method appeared to be horribly tedious. However, after a short while, it proved to be a very refreshing assignment.

After choosing one of about fifteen initial sketches done in pure typography, I continued working with the selected composition, introducing new variables systematically; first I added lines, then planes, and finally color. After a few variations of line compositions, I found that I was discovering all kinds of unforeseen ways to change the structure and expression of the information. With each new version, I discovered more opportunities.

As a learning experience, this was the richest and most memorable of my graphic design education. Engaging in such an extensive process helped me to realize two very important things:

1. It is impossible to speculate on the outcome of a design by thinking "What if I do this?" or "What if I do that?" It is better to go ahead and make it because there is a lot of potential that exists in a design even when we might think there is not; one just needs to learn how to recognize it.

2. Design education is more about the balance between creativity and discipline in a prescribed structure than it is about end results. The most rewarding point of Weingart's exercise was when I was working in the final color stage of the design. I felt I could not do anything more and that I had completely exhausted all potential for this project. As I stood over my composition staring blankly and frustrated beyond words, Weingart came up to me and asked me what was the matter. I told him I could not do anything more. He responded with a smile.



One thing Weingart always emphasized in his teaching was that one should not copy. Rather one should develop one's own style and way of working. After I left the school, I felt that someday, I too would develop something uniquely my own. When I attended graduate school at RISD, finding my own voice as a designer was my main intention and I decided I was going to make photography an important element in my work.

When I was a little boy, I was always playing with photography. My mother used to give me five dollars a week to help her around the house with things like feeding the dog and taking out the trash. Every week I would spend that money on film and printing photos. I used to mail my film away and I would get prints back a week later. Waiting for the day when the photos would arrive was so exciting because I always knew I was going to get some surprises. Today, that element of surprise and chance component of photographic images is an important aspect of my work.

Looking back, if Weingart had given me the same typography exercise today, I likely would have been able to develop it further. I have learned to use my camera when I reach a dead end with my work. It has become an indispensable tool in my process. It helps me to see in ways that are not possible when I am looking at my work on a computer screen.

The photographic way of seeing is different than how we normally see. There is something magical that happens when one puts the viewfinder to his or her eye and begins to make selections of the world. The camera allows us to see things from many different perspectives, to crop out and to zoom in. Without question, the most important aspect of the camera is that it gives us the ability to make prints of images. There is a special kind of poetry when light and space is translated to a flat two-dimensional surface. Today, with the ease of access to stock photography and downloading images online, the creative process of making images can easily be overlooked in favor of speed, convenience and abundance. Especially in design education, I encourage my students to print their own images. It brings one into a deeper relationship with one's work that is just not possible when the images are not one's own.

Learning design is not something that can be memorized or acquired from a book. Knowledge found in books is an important part of design education, but design is a learning process that primarily involves making; the more experience one has, the more intuitively one can design. The experience forms judgment that is grounded in a first hand understanding. Experiential knowledge is different from book knowledge. It is knowledge that is nurtured by one's own insights. In my opinion, the only way to teach this experience is to engage the student in a process of producing many variations of an idea quickly in the beginning stages, comparing them objectively and then reflecting on them.

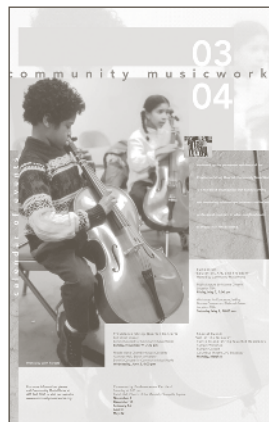
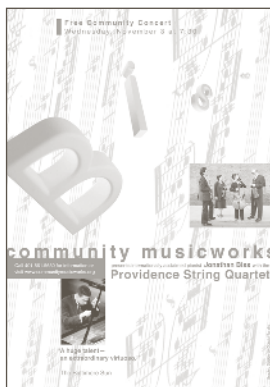
Often I observe students who are struggling to resolve an unsuccessful design because they did not allow themselves the time for initial visual research to filter out the unsuccessful attempts. By producing many visual ideas, it is easier to create distance from one's work and begin to evaluate what is successfully communicative by comparing it to other ideas.

Through research, one can be less subjective and let the design process become more objective. Often ideas are projected onto what we are making even when they are not really visually communicating them. The internal world of concepts and ideas is far too large to communicate in an external visual form. Therefore, I encourage my students to respond to and develop the visual products of their ideas and not the ideas themselves.

The process approach to design I have been discussing leads to an important issue: **Do not follow trends and avoid mimicking.** Of course, there is a lot to be learned from emulating other designers, but this should only be done for the sake of study. One should develop one's own style and let the form be derived from the content.

Being aware of design history is a great measure to understand what is currently being done, what is actually new and what could be done. History helps one to be more critical of contemporary practice.

In closing, I would like to share a few insights and suggestions for design students. Enjoy the time as a student; visit exhibitions and museums with classmates and discuss what you experience. Don't let your student status cease outside of school. Let the city be a classroom. Allow time for reflection. Know when to ask what a design is saying and how it was intended to be said. If it does not speak as intended, ask why? The most important things I learned in school were not the answers my teachers gave me to help me solve my problems, but rather the set of questions I collected to help me solve my own. The most valuable thing I believe a teacher can offer a student is the ability to teach one's self.



KYOTO

**The Consequences of Mandatory
Global CO2 Emission Reductions**

19-21. August 2003
The Oslo Spectrum Complex
Oslo, Norway

On the 10th and 12th of December
2003, environmental representatives
of 158 countries gather in Kyoto to
review the UN Framework Convention
on Climate Change.

The Norwegian Clean Air Centre is
mounting a conference to review the
key issues before they are discussed
at Kyoto. It aims in particular to look
at the EU/US Greenhouse strategy
from a Scandinavian perspective.
Political leaders and eminent experts
from around the world will participate
in this 3 day event.

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