

***THREE WISHES:***  
***(What Your Students Want, Even If They Don't Know It Yet)***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

(This paper is a loose educational extension of another essay I wrote, also called "Three Wishes," published in *Emigre* 66, and also included as an appendix here.)

Back in dark ages, when I was an architecture student at Carnegie Mellon University, I took an elective seminar in the History department called "Society and the Arts". Taught by Richard Schoenwald, the course description read: "Human existence means finding ways to symbolize what is going on inside human beings. 'Art' refers to some of these ways. In this course we want to gain both some general understanding of human symbolizing, and a more specialized grasp of how art works."

We read a broad range of authors including Friedrich Nietzsche, T.S. Eliot, Sigmund Freud, and Gertrude Stein, viewed the permanent collection at the Carnegie Museum, and listened to Beethoven symphonies performed by our school orchestra. This material was arranged and presented along a linear timeline to track the progression of culture through history. In class discussions (Schoenwald never lectured) we unearthed the forces and structures that created these landmark works of art and how history helped shape them.

The papers Schoenwald assigned were ambitious and unique. One was, "Discuss the main ideas of the authors you've read in this class. Then identify the major problems in your life and talk about how these authors might help you solve them." (That's some heavy shit for a 20 year old.) He always demanded absolute rigor in analyzing the subject matter in relation to its historical context and was very particular about helping us craft arguments to defend our opinions. This, he said, empowered us to be true citizens in the world. But by also adding a personal component to the paper analysis, we were forced to take this newly acquired knowledge and apply it to our own lives as a way to further understand our own beliefs and place in society. For my young heart and mind, this was an absolute epiphany:

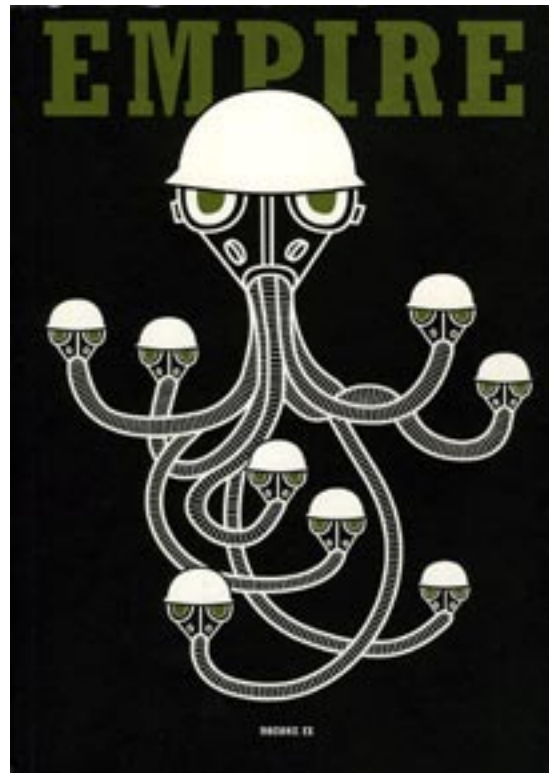
"Wow, I am connected to all this."

Through this class I began to understand my personal

relationship with the world and more importantly I could speak convincingly about it to others. It also gave purpose to my creative work that previously had very little. This epiphany sprung not from my studio class experience, but from a single course in the Humanities.

Until a design student has such an eye-opening realization, how can we expect him or her to create meaningful output? In our classrooms we stress form, content, typography, craft, professionalism, and probably most importantly, cultivating a personal design voice. But how can a design student cultivate a voice they don't yet know they have, nor know how to access? We often ask our students to take a stand with their work, to be authors. Have we ever stopped to think that maybe they don't know HOW to do this?

Most of the graphic design in this country seems to fall comfortably into two categories: on one end of my personal all-encompassing design stick there is the market-driven commercial work; on the other, the more inwardly focused work that often comes from within academia's walls or from the fringe realms of fine art. There is a small amount of work, though, being done in between these two poles that combines the consumer galvanizing motivations of the commercial with the self-initiated, critical mores of the academic. There is a rich history of this work, from the self published work of Pentagram and the Pushpin Group, to



*Colors* magazine, to Sheila Levrant de Bretteville's site-specific installations. A few recent examples are Nicholas Blechman's recent issue of *NoZone*, "Empire"; 826 Valencia's *The Future Dictionary of America*; AIGA's Design for Democracy Initiative; Chen Design Associates' *Peace: 100 Ideas* book and exhibit; Winterhouse Editions' more accessible pamphlet of the Patriot Act text; and even Bruce Mau's "Massive Change" exhibit/initiative (though I'm still not buying the hairless chicken presumption).

These are projects that go beyond blind devotion to the market, and outside the realm of the self. Projects that try to contribute rather than just sell or emote.

I am not condemning the work at the each end of this proverbial stick. I myself do both kinds, and appreciate what they provide spiritually and financially. But by only providing our students the abilities to articulate the shell instead of the whole entity, and worse, in a moral vacuum, this is all that they will do. Undergraduate design instruction that breaks down the wall between studio and the Humanities might help produce graduates that not only create more work in this aforementioned in between area, but also elevate the inquiry and quality of work on the two ends of this proverbial stick as well.

### **WISH 1:**

#### **(The) KNOWLEDGE (and how to get it)**

A few years ago I decided to see if I could somehow inject my Graphic Design 3 class at the California College of the Arts with more of a Humanities component. This required studio usually involves one topic expressed over multiple projects. Past examples include designing collateral around a documentary film, a historical figure, or a single subject museum. But the research component of these curricula seemed too easy in my mind. There were already enough readily available opinions on the subject matter that a student could coast on the intellectual study and move straight to the making. I wanted to see if I could devise a project where the students would have no choice but to invest serious effort into the research and make a convincing argument from what they had unearthed. Too often students simply regurgitate the information they find, rather than make a personal, yet supportable, judgment on what the research is telling them. Often because they don't

know any better.

I decided the course would revolve around the students' birth years. The students were forced to conduct research outside their usual comfort zone, from collecting information on anything regarding their year from major events, to politics, science, literature, film, art, sports, or fashion; but also interviewing their parents and others who were alive during the year. They ultimately posed and defended, in written form (after many drafts), a thesis on the overarching theme of their birth year by connecting the separate dots of their research. This thesis then became the conceptual guide for their work.

The projects were a timeline poster, a visual narrative, a time capsule, and an urban installation or short film. Each completed assignment had to visually communicate their birth year thesis in a memorable, clear manner, but also make a personal statement that would resonate with contemporary audiences. The timeline poster was a warm-up project for the students to take a first stab at visually encapsulating their research. Specific artifacts from the birth year drove the others. For the visual narrative, the students selected a text: fiction, poetry, criticism, screenplay, drama, news article, whatever; for the time capsule, they chose an important person; for the installation/film, a specific event.

Mark Buswell's thesis claimed that 1977 was a cresting of society preferring surface over substance. Amidst the trials of Vietnam, Watergate, and the Energy Crisis people were turning away from Sixties soul-searching, and more towards the comfort of a seductive veneer with clear morality, even if it sheathed very little of consequence. Think *Star Wars* and disco. Mark used a famous scene from the film *Network*, when the spurned wife (played by Beatrice Straight, who won an Supporting Actress Oscar for essentially one scene) chastises her philandering husband (played by William Holden) for having an affair with his gregarious younger news producer co-worker (played by Faye Dunaway). By deftly replacing the subject of the mistress in the two characters' conversation with the television in his visual narrative, the TV screen shaped piece becomes a dialogue between two people about the lure of media and its surface concerns instead.

Mark selected Calvin Klein for his time capsule because 1977 was the year Klein introduced the first designer pair



of jeans, moving the clothing item from its association with utility and function to simply image-conscious fashion. The capsule has a very alluring exterior (much in the spirit of Klein's aesthetic) and the packaging of the items (labeled Beauty, Sophistication, Wealth, Truth) inside it follow suit. But the contents of these boxes are anything but seductive. Beauty contains used makeup applicators like cotton balls, Kleenex, and eyeliner pencils; Wealth, overdue credit card bills; Sophistication, cigarette butts. Only when you open Truth, is redemption offered: "What happened to the life of living? Swallowed up by vanity and reflection, this void will only hamper good intention."

Through these projects, students not only engage with history and all its cultural trappings whether cultural, political, or societal, but they are forced to make their OWN statements regarding this history, both in writing and in design. This study gives them knowledge and analysis skills, but more importantly it EMPOWERS them to make their own decisions and the ability to defend them, which leads us to wish two.

**WISH 2:**  
**(The) EMPOWERMENT (and the glory)**

I'm currently co-teaching for the second time an "Investigative Studio" (a studio elective course that focuses on a more specific area of design) with my colleague, Jeremy Mende, called "Thinking and Making." This class exposes students to an abbreviated history of theory—starting with Liberal Humanism, moving through Psychoanalysis, Marxism, and ending with the two-headed monster of Structuralism and Post Structuralism/Deconstruction—but also shows them how theory might inform their own work and thought processes by applying it rigorously to practical design problems.

The topic of "theory" has been thrown around a lot in art and design school and is often used to cloud and exclude, rather than clarify and reveal. Our goal here was to not have the students create remote, navel-gazing design about theory, but to use it instead as a critical wedge between problem and solution.

The approach is fairly simple: Assign reading, discuss the theory in question, identify its key points, analyze a carefully chosen artifact (verbally and in written form)

through this theoretical lens, and then use the theory as the filter in which to complete a practical design problem.

The pitfalls are many: we assumed that the students had reading and analysis skills on par with our own, but most of them have never applied themselves with such rigor to this kind of material (if at all). We also soon realized that the students—so accustomed to the pluralism and grab bag nature of creating design in our contemporary world—have a very difficult time committing themselves to a singularly defined point of view. And let's be honest, neither Jeremy nor I possess degrees in theory, so the homework for us to fully grasp the material is extensive.

For the Liberal Humanism lens we assigned each of the students a non-profit organization and asked that they design a new logo for it. Liberal Humanism's basic premise as applicable to design, quickly, is that work should celebrate all that is good about humanity, through timeless values and universal symbols; form and content are fused organically, meaning no extraneous, ornamental strokes; the presence of the human hand should be evident in the work; demonstrative not explanatory.

These are two logo projects—the one on the left by Matt Jervis for a mission that helps the homeless, the other by Katie Wilson an affordable housing advocate—that fulfill the criteria pretty well.



For Psychoanalysis, we then gave the students each a song and then asked them to design a CD single package through this filter. The primary directive in Freudian Psychoanalysis is to locate (and then illustrate, clearly and evocatively) the covert (or unconscious) narrative of the song not even the songwriter is aware of, through interpretation of the symbols in the overt (or conscious) narrative.

This example is for the song, "Airbag," by Radiohead. The designer, Steven Knodel, saw the overt narrative of the song as about brazenly pushing the envelope without fear, as there will always be an airbag to save us if we go too far. He saw covert narrative, though, as Radiohead's uneasiness and anxiety over the possibility that each time they move further from the mainstream with their recordings

their "airbag"—their audience, label, anything that supports them financially—will burst, or abandon them.

Now these projects may sound overly dogmatic and unrealistic in our "anything goes" modern world, and to some degree they are. The theories inevitably point the students to a similar conclusion in their analyses. But this class is more about methods than final product and by putting the students on the hook for following, to a T, a particular theory's tenets, they develop a rigor in the way they approach their work, where every decision matters. This hopefully makes them more confident and empowered to apply the same rigor to developing and defending their own theories on how to make work that is of value, to them AND to others (whether peers or future clients).

These exercises all lead to their final project, which is a personal manifesto that outlines their views on what design should be in nothing less than unequivocal terms, that they both write and then design appropriate to its content.



**WISH 3:**  
**(A funny thing happened on the way to the) FORUMS**

The last wish we must grant for this proposal to work is more forums for our students to express their newfound knowledge and inspiration.

City as Canvas is another "Investigative Studio" I created with my business partner Adam Brodsley. We wanted to teach a class that asked students to engage design at a larger scale in the urban environment, as well as provide an arena for students to focus on socially motivated subject matter.



The class emphasized research, both into the communities students chose to do work for and the feasibility of their projects. The students were required to conduct interviews, collect extensive documentation of their project sites, propose itemized budgets, troubleshoot their proposals in class, and ultimately present their proposals to actual government and community organizations.

The students started with smaller exercises focused on their personal relationship to the city and then moved into larger scope projects that addressed specific issues and causes. One of these larger projects was a site-specific installation within the CCA/San Francisco campus grounds that either called attention to—or (better still) provided a solution for—a school-related beef the student harbored.

Rob Williams felt that the intensity of the CCA design program, with all the necessary hours logged in dreary computer labs, was sapping his and many of his fellow students' spirit.

He created these signs and installed them strategically around the school, their intent to simply supply his compatriots with sunny reminders and confidence boosters amidst coffee fueled, angst-ridden all-nighters, whether they were on the phone or in the bathroom.





The final project was a comprehensive proposal for a public work including the design, budget, logistics, schedule, site studies, and cultural research.

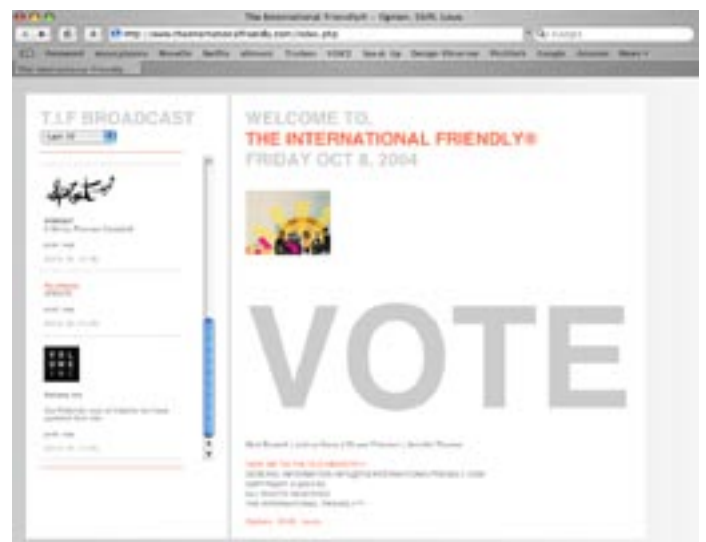
Larissa Walters went into downtown San Francisco and interviewed people about their workdays, and what she discovered, primarily from white collar workers, was that their days were sometimes so repetitive and cubicle-contained that it was near-numbing. So she created a flash cards series of “fun” activities one could do at or during work, that would be left in office building lobbies and postcard racks in restaurants. She also proposed posters hung around the downtown area as well.

**So does all this work?**

Well, one can never be really sure, but a handful of former students, many with who I am still in contact and have guided outside the classroom since, have created work since taking my classes that seems to link back to some of the ideas I and my co-teachers were pushing on them. I won't outright claim any credit of course, as these students are smart and talented, but I'd like to mention these projects because I think they are very inspiring.

Four students who were in my first year of birth studio class—Mark Buswell (whose work I showed you), Sean

Petersen, Joshua Carey, and Jennifer Thomas—started a website/collective soon afterwards called The International Friendly ([www.theinternationalfriendly.com](http://www.theinternationalfriendly.com)), created to showcase their own work, as well as promote colleagues, new work, and issues they find important and interesting in design and life. They also have added a message board component to the site now, as they wrote to me recently, “to have a dialogue about the larger global world of art and design.”





Three former students, two of whom were the best students in the City of Canvas class—Yoshi Matsumoto, Melissa Tioleco-Cheng, and Rob Williams (whose work was illustrated earlier)—were recently awarded the largest grant (\$50,000) from this year’s Sappi Paper *Ideas the Matter* competition for their proposal on behalf of Friends for Youth, a youth mentor program in the Bay Area. When Sappi realized they had awarded the grant to a group of very recent graduates, they were shocked.

Lastly, I want to show you a thesis project from a former student that I feel really expands notions of what graphic design can do. Brooke Johnson’s “Cup of Sugar” project started from the simple desire to know her neighbors and ballooned into this anthropological study of how we relate to each other in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Over the course of four months Brooke borrowed a cup of sugar from over 60 physical and virtual neighbors. She meticulously archived each cup and created both an installation and book documenting the entire process. The stories she collected make an amazingly moving archive of quirks and insights into the way we relate to each other in contemporary society, but I’m most moved by how Brooke’s mother, inspired by the project, borrowed a cup of sugar from her neighbor that in 12 years of living next door she had never met, and now the two are friends.

The recent words of Milton Glaser tell us, “If our field aspires to be significant and worthy of respect, it must stand for something beyond salesmanship.” So should design education.



# ***APPENDIX***

## ***Three Wishes: A Graphic Design Spew Cycle in the New (and Scary) George W. Era***

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**WISH 1.**

***Let's get over this inferiority-to-artists complex.***

Last week I attended the local AIGA lecture by Golan Levin, who (according to the promotional copy) “develops artifacts and events that explore supple new modes of reactive expression.” Golan’s work, from a spectacle point of view, was quite impressive. Who wouldn’t be seduced by cellular phone symphonies, computer programs that log the amount of instances a certain number appears on the Alta Vista search engine, and goggles that reveal color “blobs” that come out of people’s heads every time they make a vocal sound? Then again, what does this work have to offer other than spectacle? As a former student wrote to me after the lecture, “[Golan’s work] was very inspiring and engaging in a brave-new-world kind of way. It made me wonder, though, how many answers can we really find in technology, and how [can] we transform experiments into design [that forwards] positive social change?”

A friend of mine, Andrew Milmo of EAR studio, who was in town last week for the lecture, also creates work that occupies this fluid area where art, design, and technology crisscross. His most recent piece is a Pong game for the blind. It starts with a small table of 40 pennies arranged in a circle. Two crank-like “paddles,” hinged in the center of the penny circle, are slid (or “swung”) over the pennies, triggering an amplified sound from small metal arms that tap the bottom of the corresponding plastic cup on the 40-cup “chandelier” above. Instead of looking for a ball (as in normal Pong), they “listen” for it, and swing their “paddle” towards the oncoming sound to “hit” the “ball” back. Coincidentally, the local news this past Sunday featured a story on a local Easter

egg hunt for blind children, using eggs that emanate sounds so the children could participate in a ritual previously off limits to them. These are examples of design that also just happen to be art.

Levin was a graphic designer at one point and maybe he’s better off creating his idiosyncratic media art now, but I rue the trend of graphic design simply acting as a stepladder for talented people who feel only the label of “artist” will do, leaving that (sigh) lesser design to the rest of us. Golan Levin’s work is design-based, but strives awfully hard to be art. Nobody likes the kid who is always trying too hard to be part of the in-crowd, so is it any wonder the art world doesn’t like us? We come off as dilettantes. So maybe then we should try to be designers when we design. It doesn’t make the work any less valid (or less fun), and we may finally get out from under art’s thumb in our minds, and the minds of those outside of design, to forge our own unique practice that isn’t just advertising and is only incidentally, not self-consciously trying too hard to be, art. We need people as smart and inventive as Levin using their talents in the design world. How do we keep them?

**WISH 2:**

***How about some new dialogue?  
I think we’re in a rut!***

Last week, I received two publications in the mail: the new *Emigre*, subtitled “Rant”, and the new issue of the AIGA National publication, *Trace*. From all the emails I received from *Emigre* over the last few months trumpeting this “Rant” issue as an important treatise on the state of graphic design, I was expecting a jump start to the bad economy-induced lull in design discussion. Unfortunately, after reading this selection of essays, my response is “That’s it?” After First Things First 2000, after 9/11, after an economic recession, after the Voice 2 conference, after going to war, we’re still just going to talk about FORM and STYLE?

Mr. Keedy, in “Modernism 8.0” gives us a comparison of the first modernist style and the one being recycled today. I admire his tenacity on the issue only because I can’t imagine caring this much about it in the context of today’s world, design or otherwise. He might have used this comparison to push the importance of design history and context, or talked about the return to a more minimal visual style might be about designers not wanting to bury their messages in illegibility and ambiguity. Instead, Keedy sounded as if this Nouveau Modernism was his next-door neighbor’s dog that’s keeping him up at night with its barking. Rick Valicenti’s “Cranky” provides a nearly incoherent rant that supplies some additional id-based rage, but not much more. Shawn Wolfe serves up a more coherent spew than Valicenti, but his talk of the redesign for the packaging of Doublemint gum also feels slight, serving up only one good zinger at the end, “My passage to the past, to my personal past, is furnished with gum wrappers and old soda machines and ‘brandcestors! For me to fret about these facelifts is surely a sign of misplaced or displaced values.”<sup>1</sup> Even Jessica Helfand and William Drenttel, usually above such frivolities, only offer up “Wonders Revealed: Design and Faux Science,” a by-the-book critique of the popular appropriation these days of scientific imagery. The excerpt from a dialogue between Denise Gonzales Crisp, Kali Nikitas, and Louise Sandhaus, “Visitations,” begins to give some more depth to the form and style arguments, but it feels as if we missed the first third of their discussion, leaving more questions than potential answers. Andrew Blauvelt’s “Towards Critical Autonomy or Can Graphic Design Save Itself?” does better than the previously mentioned articles, but spends too much time on a design history most Emigré readers would already be familiar with, and gets to the most compelling argument—experimental design vs. critical design—far too late in the piece and doesn’t explore it in any depth.

Only the first essay, Kenneth Fitzgerald’s

“Quietude” draws any blood. Fitzgerald’s piece does a good job of striking all the lightning rods in graphic design today, from addressing the lack of outside voices in design criticism, to insightful critiques of the deluge of recent vanity monographs, even putting a chink in Stefan Sagmeister’s usually untarnished armor. Ultimately though, “Rant” offers few solid ideas on where graphic design could go from here. Émigré’s return to it’s critical format ends up being simply an extension of the frustration most designers, educators and scholars are currently experiencing, rather than illuminating possible paths they could follow.

I like to think of *Trace* as a switcheroo version of its last incarnation, the AIGA Journal of Graphic Design. Instead of the combination of some interesting articles and stately design, it is now featuring mostly historical or curatorial topics with an avant-garde design (courtesy of New York-based 2 x 4). This issue, subtitled “Postscript” in predominant reference to the tragic events of 9/11, doesn’t subvert the paradigm (9/11, despite its historical significance, is nearly a cliché now), but it does benefit from Rick Poynor and his article, “The Citizen Designer.” You have to admire Poynor, if only because he’s dedicated to graphic design more than most graphic designers. His essay is more thought-provoking than anything in Émigré’s “Rant.” A review of the AIGA “Voice2” conference, Poynor gives the graphic design community no quarter despite the good intentions of the conference. He dismisses their fear of sounding or acting too politicized, as if it would be too “off-putting,” and demands more designers stand up and speak out. “The consumerist status quo pumps out a vast, overwhelming, massively resourced slurry of consciousness-shaping propaganda,” Poynor writes, “What on earth is wrong in producing and taking support from some alternate points of view?”<sup>2</sup> But in the next line, he stresses this will never be enough, and a Citizen Designer this does not make. No, it requires us to leave the safe

confines of our computer screens, where we are in complete control, and venture out and engage with the world. Poynor continues, “without such a level of self belief (backed up by real ability) there is no way in which designers will ever exert fundamental influence. [But] essential to this...is a willingness to mix with civic leaders, appointed officials and volunteers.”<sup>3</sup> Poynor then quotes Bennett Peji, a former president of the AIGA San Diego chapter, who puts in 20 hours a week running his business and 20 hours in voluntary work by serving on the boards of 5 local non-profit organizations. Peji says, “The key to truly affecting any group’s design perspective is to effect change by serving on the board, not just being a pro-bono vendor...Design is not the end goal. Design is simply a tool to help us connect to our communities and make a difference.”<sup>4</sup> Peji then talks about the results of his endeavors, which rallied a complacent design community, tripled its AIGA membership and gave support to city art programs at the service of disadvantaged neighborhoods. Poynor concludes by chiding designers for being too insular and urges those who wish to be architects of real change to find “strength in numbers” and “press design’s case where it counts most—in places where power resides.”<sup>5</sup>

**WISH 3:  
Curiosity, Empathy, Humility.**

Jane Fulton Suri, a psychologist and head of the Human Factors division at IDEO, delivered the final lecture at the recent Graphic Design “Concept” Symposium at the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) based around modes of research. Most of the IDEO design team’s research is based on observing people, but from the standpoint that the designers must be expansive with their observations by letting the intended audience reveal possible solutions to them, as opposed to imposing their own preconceptions onto this same audience. The

process is made of two facets: “empathy”—looking at human experience with a sympathetic eye to see what is truly needed by the audience—and “curiosity”—having an interest in the lives of the audience so to further an understanding of what is needed in a product. One case study Suri presented was a design for a baby stroller. The IDEO team observed, first, that parents always seem to carry many accessories when they take their kids out for a jaunt; hence the final design incorporated more storage. More interestingly, they observed (through a technique called “shadowing”) that in encounters between two or more adults with strollers, the children would often strain their necks to look up at the adults because they instinctively wanted to be part of the adults’ conversation. So the design team made the stroller seat much higher than usual to help the child feel more a part of the interaction and possibly less prone to tantrums. It seems apt that only a non-designer like Suri, whose focus is more on the audience’s behavior and reaction to the end product rather than it’s physical beauty, could have come up with such a system. The formal characteristics of the IDEO projects, though beautifully realized, were secondary, if not incidental, to their function. This is a true illustration of design: an ideal combination of beauty and utility. Why has graphic design neglected the latter so much?

The design professor Paul J. Nini, in his “A Manifesto of Inclusivism,” written in 2001 for AIGA Chicago’s local *Inform* publication, calls for a more “user-centered” approach to graphic design. He goes on to say, “While it’s clear to us that the potential value graphic designers bring to communication can be great, shouldn’t we perhaps agree that what we deem to be a ‘successful’ project must at least meet the basic needs of those for whom it was created? We routinely celebrate work in our profession’s publications based mainly on how it looks. What if these competitions also required designers to demonstrate how they interacted with users or

audience members, and how input from those groups helped shape communications that successfully met their needs? The results of such a collection of work might not necessarily look much different from what we see today, but one could argue that such criteria for inclusion might move us away from an emphasis solely on the aesthetic and at least acknowledge some sense of the functional.”<sup>6</sup>

Nini goes on to admit that all designers have experienced frustration working for organizations that they feel don’t “support” their efforts, but also questions how graphic designers not engaging in user-based research can still honestly call their design “good”? “We ignore [the end user] at our peril and should take steps to allow their voice to be heard and address their needs in more significant ways,” Nini writes, “We must attempt to move beyond our, at times, contemptuous view of users, and instead see them as collaborators or partners...For our profession to fully contribute to a democratic society, it must become as inclusive as possible.”<sup>7</sup>

There are currently some interesting examples of graphic design going above and beyond the usual line of duty. The AIGA, delivering on its using the Florida butterfly ballots as its *raison d’être* for the original “Voice” conference, has helped establish Design for Democracy, an Illinois-based non-profit established to both study and then implement improvements to voting materials, processes, and procedures nationwide. It’s a team that includes, in addition to graphic designers, industrial designers, interface designers and specialists in anthropology and usability. Another project was collaboration between sociologist Patrick Ball and designer Matt Zimmerman. Ball, who specializes in human rights and social measurement, traveled to the Kosovo war region and interviewed thousands of refugees as they crossed the border about what had happened to them and why. Then he and Zimmerman created a series of informational diagrams to illustrate what was happening. During the World Court trial of former

Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, Ball offered his materials to the prosecution. Surprisingly, he was the only person in the world that had collected any real data about the refugees. Ball testified in court for four hours, and he and Zimmerman’s work was some of the most effective, understandable, and damning evidence of the whole trial. As Nathan Shedroff continues in his text from *Adbusters* 44 about both projects, “While these solutions don’t elevate their designers to celebrity status, they genuinely change the system and subvert the dominant paradigm—much more than, for comparison, MTV’s ‘Rock the Vote’ campaign.”<sup>8</sup> Not only are these projects elevating the role of graphic design, but helping it get out of the commercial realm we so often love to hate, and hate to love. They also show that for graphic design to really matter, it has to go beyond protest art that is, more often than not, preachy and oversimplified (I, myself, am guilty as charged). Unique opportunities are out there, but are the sexy enough for us who have been weaned on the flashy series of “Typographics” books and designer monographs?

In my office, we are currently working on a collateral for the upcoming Monterey Design Conference put on by the American Institute of Architects California Council. The conference theme this year is “Doing Good, Doing Good” and this translates to a conference that is seeking to reconcile what we as creatives consider doing good for ourselves (i.e. with this project I really subverted the dominant paradigm, I got a lot of positive responses from my peers, I built a great model for this project), and doing good for others, the world, etc. Normally we would start the process with some basic research involving gathering of materials related to the subject matter, and start sketching immediately. But with this project we decided to take Suri’s talk to heart and see if we might involve the users in some way. Via email we sent out a survey to people in all walks of life, not just creative ones, that asked what the two “doing goods” were to them. The initial results

were revealing in that one, they showed that most people, if not consciously acting, at least consider the idea of doing good for the external world in their work. More interesting though is that many of the surveyed expressed how much they wished to discuss and possibly get involved in “doing good,” but had no forum in which to do so. Sitting at home or in the studio or in the office alone, without the power and confidence a group gives, left them prone to do very little but ponder these notions. We realized that this conference was one of those rare forums and our goal here was for the materials to do everything it could to foster dialogue between people. Our initial design ideas are to include these survey questions on both the poster and web registration forms and use them as content for the onsite materials such as the conference guide, badges, and screen graphics, plus provide interactive opportunities for attendees to continue the dialogue for all to access during the conference itself. This is all before we made a mark in our sketchbooks. Certainly this isn’t earth shattering—and we will be providing the requisite “eye-candy” to give the conference an appealing, appropriate look—but to us this shows how these aforementioned methods can inform our everyday design practice.

This argument isn’t a call for more professionalism, or an end to explorations of form and self-initiated projects. Obviously, we can’t engage in intense research in every project. We don’t always have the time or money, we like to be in control, we have our own opinions, sometimes we just want to make cool things and play. We are human, after all. *Emigre* editor Rudy VanderLans, in his article, “The Next Big Thing,” says that the formal issues, so prevalent in the 90s, have run their course and maybe graphic designers should “try [their] hand at judging design by its content, by the ideas and messages that it attempts to communicate... picking [competition] winners based solely on the value of WHAT they communicate, instead of HOW they communicate.”<sup>9</sup> After all the earth-shattering events

of the last few years that have made us question our role as designers, shifting some of our work and thinking to a “user-centered” approach just may be one of the “next best things” that truly delivers on the concept of design beyond just making pretty pictures.

**(Bonus) WISH 4:  
We should do it with,  
and for, the kids.**

The best place to percolate these ideas, of course, is in the classroom. Students are more idealistic and impressionable, teachers more free to try out new ideas than they would be as practitioners. The tradition has always been that new design theories should start in the academy and radiate out into the world from there. Contemporary design education’s primary goal is to be as expansive as possible, without losing the center core, so to speak. In our work, we have to be (or at the very least, consult) anthropologists, scientists, psychologists, researchers, and politicians just to name a few. Our field covers so many possible areas of study that we also need to be aware and consult our sister disciplines such as industrial design, architecture, and art. This means providing instruction on subjects outside our normal graphic design scope, and it means encouraging collaboration with these other disciplines. If enough students come out of school with these expanded notions of what graphic design can be and do, the profession will undoubtedly change. Education needs to lead the charge in graphic design evolution, not wait on the profession to dictate the terms of what the ideal graphic design graduate is. Only then will we expand the public perception of graphic design as solely a service industry, to a cultural and political force as well.

This is already happening. Bruce Mau and John Maeda, frustrated with the design education establishment’s slow pace in evolving, are initiating their own graduate programs. This summer, John Bielenberg is starting Project M, a month-long design

intensive inspired by the late Sam Mockbee's Rural Studio (where students design and build housing from reusable materials for the rural poor of Alabama) that will involve multiple instructors (including myself) in various disciplines encouraging students to "think wrong" and refocus their creative energies to solving non-commercial, more socially motivated problems. Both the graduate and undergraduate graphic design programs at CCAC (where I also teach) are also taking up the cause in the form of diverse student bodies, investigative studios, thesis projects, and new theory and history-based classes that are more expansive in their scope.

A quote from Terry Irwin in the March/April 2003 issue of *Communication Arts* magazine sums up our plight succinctly: "A significant perceptual shift is required of us—a shift in our perception of ourselves; a shift in our perception of design; and most importantly, a shift in the way we view the world. Such a shift could lead to new design methodologies and more appropriate and responsible design solutions, and it is necessary to transition this profession and design education to the next level."<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shawn Wolfe, "What's My Motivation?", *Emigre* 64: "Rant", Winter 2003, 105.

<sup>2</sup> Rick Poyner, "The Citizen Designer", *Trace*, Volume 1, Number 4, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Paul J. Nini, "A Manifesto of Inclusivism," *Looking Closer 4* (Allworth Press, New York, 2002), 197.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>8</sup> Nathan Shedroff, "Can Designers Think Outside the Commercial Box?", *Adbusters*, November/December 2002 (44).

<sup>9</sup> Rudy VanderLans, "Graphic Design and the Next Big Thing", *Looking Closer 4* (Allworth Press, New York, 2002), 184.

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn McCarron, "Expanding Our Field of Vision", *Communication Arts*, March/April 2003 (319), 22.