

Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design. Edited by Michael Bierut, William Drenttel, Steven Heller & DK Holland. Introduction by Steven Heller. New York: Allworth Press, 1994. 245 pages. No illustrations.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

In the past decade there has been a virtual boom in writing about graphic design. Essays that are critical, confessional, and polemical have appeared in a wide array of magazines, journals, and newsletters. What all this writing signifies is a growing interest in shifting the culture of graphic design from a purely visual one to one of discussion and debate. Criticism, for example, compared to art or architecture, has come relatively late to graphic design and, one could argue, has not yet gained a central place in the discourse of designers. As Steven Heller notes in his introduction, criticism is more forcefully engaged in by design educators than by practicing designers. He also points out that "Most writers of graphic design criticism are capable amateurs with little training in historical or critical analysis." The essays in *Looking Closer*, and there are almost fifty of them, both support Heller's statement and give evidence of change. Published mainly between 1988 and 1993, they range widely over many topics and demonstrate varying degrees of critical maturity. They originally appeared in such publications as *Print*, *Communication Arts*, *I.D.*, *Emigré*, *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*, *ACD Statements*, and *Eye*. Several pieces from exhibition catalogues were also included.

Before commenting on the individual essays and how they work together in the anthology, I want to say that the book is very welcome. There is little enough to read about graphic design and also insufficient discussion of issues that are central to design practice. The essays thus provide a cross-section of ideas, opinions, and analyses to help the student, layman, or professional designer learn more about a group of themes that currently dominate reflection in graphic design culture.

Foremost among these is Modernism which is defended by few of the authors and attacked by many. Massimo Vignelli, offers his now well-known argument for Modernism, which is extremely useful to have accessible because it has polarized so many designers. Vignelli's position is more complex than most of his detractors acknowledge. He defends Modernism for its utopian values, notably its commitment to make the world better. But he also pits particular forms of modernist design, notably his own minimalist aesthetic, against what he believes to be the trivia, kitsch, and trash that surround the modernist island of purity. Thus he angers many designers who believe in life beyond Helvetica and Bodoni while upholding social idealism against postmodern cynicism.

To counter Vignelli, *Looking Closer* has no shortage of writing that finds Modernism wanting. This criticism takes the form of frustration with its collapse into a corporate style, as we find in an essay by Dan Friedman, who indicates his wish to salvage the good in Modernism by calling himself a 'radical modernist.' It is also manifest as a boredom with Modernism's limited aesthetic. Chuck Byrne and Martha White refer in their article on deconstruction to the "aloof minimalist typography generally seen in the fifties, sixties, and seventies," while Rick Poyner cites the rebellion of younger

typographers against the "bloodless neutrality," of Swiss style modernism. In Jonathan Barnbrook's personal account of his own typographic values, we get a more extensive critique of Modernism's typographic limitations. Such pieces as Barnbrook's can be extremely helpful to the student or layperson who seeks to understand how typographers, and graphic designers in general, work. Not only does Barnbrook tell us how he draws his typefaces but he also informs us of the sometimes arcane ways that he names them. *Nylon*, we learn unexpectedly, is made up of letters from N(ew) Y(ork) Lon(don), a piece of information that I found almost as fascinating as decoding Duchamp's L.H.O.O.Q.

The battle of the moderns and the postmoderns has a strong generational flavor to it. Milton Glaser, Ivan Chermayeff, and Rudy DeHarak—all part of the old guard—are reluctant to do away with Modernism although they are not inclined as Vignelli is to juxtapose it to an evil Other. DeHarak, for example, thoughtfully explains his approach to designing the cover for an album of Mozart's music. "I was never interested in using a typeface that would be representative of the eighteenth century. Personally, I can no more identify Mozart with Caslon than with Futura." DeHarak believes in clear communication and responsible problem-solving, values that are no longer defined the same way or shared by many younger designers. The theme of clarity is echoed by Steven Heller whose now notorious article "The Cult of the Ugly" originally published in *Eye*, kept the pages of *Emigré* in flames for several issues. Because of the controversy it aroused, Heller's article has already made its way into history as a critical response to tendencies espoused and practiced at Cranbrook and CalArts.

The editors of *Looking Closer* recognize the importance of design history and include several articles on this topic. Tibor Kalman, J. Abbott Miller, and Karrie Jacobs are concerned with how graphic designers use history and they provide a witty, though not sufficiently thorough, critique, of graphic design history writing. They focus on the picture books and on stylistic typologies which they see as influencing graphic designers to crib from the past to create a new look, a problem which has reached major proportions in contemporary work. Unfortunately, Dietmar Winkler's "Morality and Myth: The Bauhaus Revisited," one of the few pieces of history writing rather than writing about history, does not support its critical stance towards the school with sufficient historical documentation.

Compared to Winkler's abstract approach to writing design history, *Looking Closer* has some excellent examples of design criticism, notably Andrew Sullivan's "Flogging Underwear: The New Raunchiness of American Advertising," and Frances Butler's "Reading Outside the Grid: Designers and Society." Sullivan's piece originally appeared in the *New Republic* and was then republished in *Print*. His close reading of selected ad campaigns, based on a solid grounding in critical theory, leads him to the interesting correlation between increasing eroticism in advertising and a "growing restraint and monogamy in the period of safe sex."

With her extensive knowledge of typographic and printing history, linguistics, and cultural theory, as well as her own impressive work as a designer of books, posters, and textiles, Francis Butler continues to set extremely high standards for design criticism. Her interpretations of design are

highly informative and a pleasure to read. By comparing pieces of graphic design in her article on the grid to cultural products in other fields, she is able to discover deep cultural meaning in work that might otherwise be seen as less significant. Her short article on "Dance and Play in Visual Design" is equally satisfying.

The positive results of Frances Butler's erudition point to one of the themes that is implicit in this anthology: how much does someone need to know in order to write meaningful design commentary? The issue is raised in the book's final section on education where Michael Beirut, in an essay entitled "Why Designer's Can't Think," expresses his concern for a lack of culture among many design school graduates and makes a strong plea for educators to remedy this. The short article by Leo Lionni, one of the most cultivated designers of the older generation, nicely supports Beirut's point. Lionni, who is an author, as well as a designer and artist, has a wonderfully subtle sensibility that he has revealed in his children's books, his advertising designs, and his marvelous fantasy textbook *Parallel Botany*. However, Beirut's call for a more cultured designer is challenged by Paula Sher who recounts her frustration with the "design speak" she heard at a conference of design educators. She believes that "Designers learn by doing" and ends her article by espousing the apprentice method, which can easily leave the cultural knowledge espoused by Beirut completely out of the loop.

What *Looking Closer* makes evident is the general disagreement among graphic designers themselves about the cultural significance of what they do and what the central issues of their practice are. Some of the essays, for example, are rather flip or kvetchy. Others are extremely thoughtful. The introduction could have been more helpful in explaining to the reader the rationale for including these essays and why they were put in this particular order. As is, the book is something of a jumble and the reader moves from highs to lows, ultimately wondering why all these essays have ended up in the same anthology.

There is, however, much to be learned from this volume. Certain debates within the design field are well highlighted, issues are raised, valuable information about new work and designers is provided, and high standards for future discourse are set by some of the authors. What remains clear, however, is the difficulty in achieving any consensus on whether graphic design is a meaningful cultural practice or simply a commercial service with an ephemeral product. Whether or not the editors of *Looking Closer* intended to do so, they have placed that question squarely on the table. Now, we have to ask ourselves, "What happens next?"

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First published in *Print Magazine*, May-June.