Writingdesign/**Designwriting**
by Louise **Sandhaus**

CLICK* *CLICK

CL*CK

Exploding ideas
about design
r
about writing

* In the catalog for the Pop Art show that toured the U.S. a couple of years ago, there was an essay by cultural observer Dick Hebdige. In it he described the term "pop" not as the "pop" in "popular" but "pop," the textual onomatopoeia of the sound "pop." But "pop" is not much of a bang for something so seemingly loud and significant as the impact when one world (the high art world) suddenly recognizes this whole other world (the everyday culture world). But we were talking about "click." Could this small, light blow be the sound of a big bang in digital space — the collision of the world of writing and the world of design?

This is an essay.

An essay explores ideas.**B-)** This is an essay that explores the idea of the essay itself and what the essay might be in the context of computer-based publications. I would like to explore the idea of the examination of ideas given that the parameters for defining form and content become muted and indistinct in digital publishing environments.**:-|**

(B-) Just to be sure, I looked up "essay" in the dictionary, thinking that I would find a definition that had something to do with writing. To my surprise, the first definition of the word was "an attempt." It wasn't until the third definition that there was anything about writing at all, and this was a "concise" dictionary, not one of those 12 volume deals, so it had to get to the point quickly.

Ed. G.W. Davidson, M.A. Seaton, and J. Simpson, The Wordsworth Concise English Dictionary, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1984), p. 329.

:-| I'm imagining something here beyond the garden variety periodical in our own digital present, where computer-based publications dot the electronic landscape like ants on a leftover Twinkie. For the most part, few are more than elaborate hyper-versions of print, only with a larger and more diverse network of links — not unlike footnotes found in print-based essays.

From *Colorcards: What's Wrong*, comp. by Clare Mathieson and Judith Queensborough. (Oxon: Winslow Press, undated). This image is from a series used to train children to recognize what's "wrong" in a pictured scenario.

These new environments are the collision of a variety of communications means (print, digital and telecommunicative), ways (words, images and sounds) and forms (stories, essays, drawings, music, etc.), (that are frequently associated with pleasure and entertainment.) But primarily, we could describe digital environments as structured spaces that are visual, textual and aural. Each aspect draws on its own language to express and communicate. :-), ;-)

Like a book (interactive and relying on the possibilities of textually-based narrative construction), like a film (scripted visual stories in 4-dimensional space), like architecture (spatial and navigational), like TV (passive, pleasurable entertainment in an intimate environment) — like all of them (relying on conventional languages) and yet not like any single one of them. No lone model, language, precedent or convention can describe the conveyance of ideas through this medium.
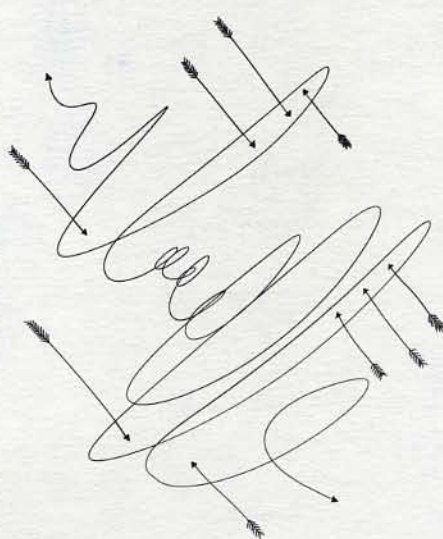
* I'm laying around the house with a friend, shooting the shit about art and literature, and in the course of things she tells me about her mom who teaches high school English. Mom gives the students the usual assignments: Read such and so and write an essay about the ideas contained in chapter _____. That sort of thing. But her mom also has her students make drawings of the ideas. I'm really amazed at this and I keep trying to picture it. (Oops, a conundrum already!) I wonder about making a picture of a written idea, an idea that originated from words: how would a student — one not trained to relate ideas in ways other than with words — begin to grapple with what kind of picture to make or how to make a picture of an idea at all?

My brain rattled around the notion of the relationship between words and images. I thought, what if you made a picture of an idea that did NOT refer to something written, what would IT look like? It was then that I understood why my friend makes drawings, or photographs, or paintings and doesn't write with words.

During a recent lunch with a friend, he tells me about an interview he saw on TV with the scriptwriter for the Surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel (of the razor-sliced eyeball fame). The writer was asked about the relationship between the script and what Buñuel made. In response he described this scene where a woman in knight's armor was to make love with a man. Well, needless to say, making love under those circumstances has to be somewhat complicated, so all the scriptwriter could do was write: "Woman in knight's armor makes love with man." No volumes of words could picture it; writing is one thing and making images is another.*
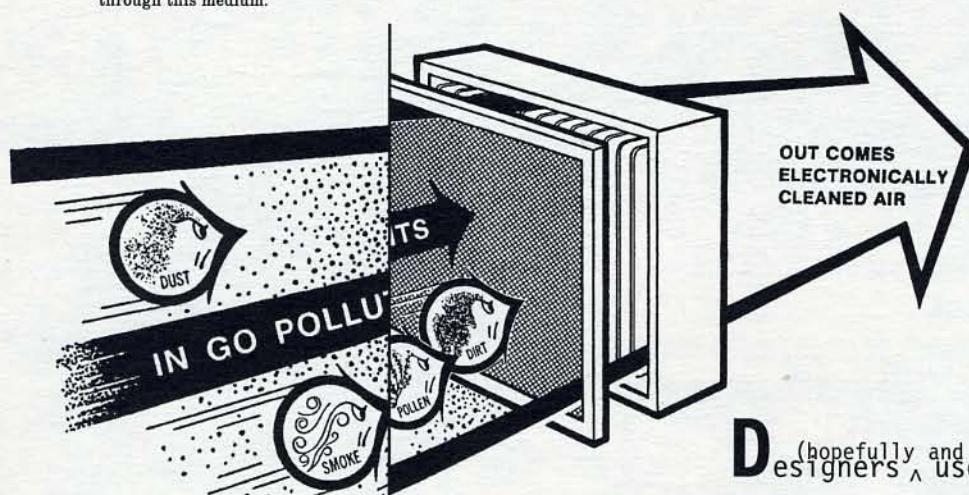
IN GO POLLUTANTS

DUST DIRT POLLEN SMOKE

OUT COMES ELECTRONICALLY CLEANED AIR

Designers (hopefully and broadly speaking) use their skills to give shape to different types of information and ideas by utilizing different means, ways and forms. We work and play in the realms of meaning and the means by which meaning is made and carried, giving form to ideas and ideas to form. We make things comprehensible within a given context to a particular audience. And since we like to think of ourselves as something other than communications engineers, hopefully we charm and delight somewhere along the way. :-*

SPACE PROBE !

ZOOM!

THE YEAR IS 5000! CIVILIZATION AS WE KNEW IT HAS PROGRESSED ALMOST BEYOND RECOGNITION!

A respectfull salute in the general direction of Roy Lichtenstein and we're off—ZOOM ARCHIGRAM goes into orbit with the SPACE COMIC/SCIENCE FICTION BIT. Interesting is the fact that these goodies produced outside the conventional closed architect/aesthetic situation show a marked intuative grasp of principles underlying current in-thinking. Which is great——

These SPACE COMIC cities reflect without conscious intention certain overtones of meaning——illuminate an area of opinion that seeks the breakdown of conventional attitudes, the disruption of the "straight-up-and-down" formal vacuum——necessary to create a more dynamic environment.

:-% ("architecture" + "telegram")

See A Guide to Archigram 1961-74, (London: Academy Group Ltd., 1984).

In 1964, Archigram ∧ Group, the experimental architectural group inspired by technological and cultural development, introduced "Zoom," the 4th issue of the group's publication Archigram. Here they maneuvered oeuvre in order to illustrate that which dense philosophical verbiage (architectural and other) obliterates. Using science-fiction comics, they explored space and spaces while making their own (essayistic) space.

Combining the abilities of designers with the nature of electronic environments, where how something is said conveys ideas as much as what is said, it seems like just the right time, place and space for some explosive idea exploring. So, "[i]f the audience has changed, and the production has changed, and the messages might change, wouldn't common sense suggest that the notion of form might evolve too?"**, :-%

:-*

"Design," according to design educator, historian and practitioner, Lorraine Wild, "is thought made manifest.[...] History has shown us that the best graphic design is synthetic — it is the work that makes imaginative connections between different disciplines or modes of thought...." Design is an activity that moves ideas across terrains, creating imaginative common ground — a "debabelizing" process that sorts through a variety of languages to create a comprehensible product. What this definition doesn't describe is a single way of expressing an idea: Writing, for example, as well as typography, could equally apply within this description.
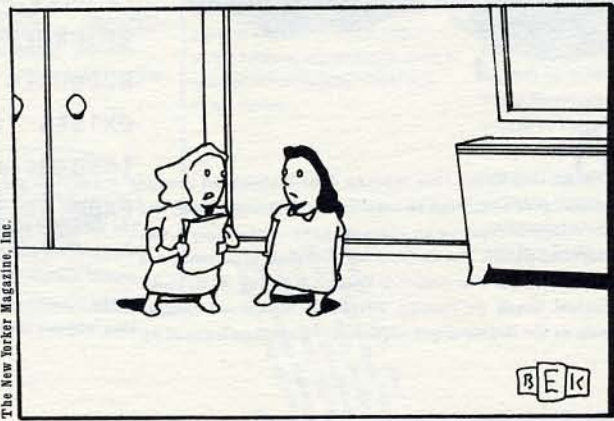
Adding to this, historian of form turned form-realizer, Frances Butler, referring to the context of computer-based media, states that designers are "familiar with the non-linear thought process called lateral thinking and are in an excellent position to attempt representation of the primal visual flux in which lateral thinking can occur...." What she refers to is that designers, already accustomed to lateral thinking because of their familiarlity with metaphor* — a lateral process that takes one form and turns it into another, richer, communicative form — are able to deal with non-linear communications — doing so for an audience that is thinking and assimilating ideas and information in non-linear terms.

Together, these descriptions put forth designers as being prepared to represent ideas in environments where different types of information exist in complex symbiotic relationships, under circumstances that call for a different type of encounter altogether.

*However, Butler also states: "Visual metaphor, the operative process within lateral thinking has not had a 'good name,' being associated with popular culture, the unschooled, or illiterate, the primitive and the female." But this story is to come.

* Lorraine Wild, "More Than a Few Questions About Design Education," The Design Journal, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Chicago: American Center for Design, 1983) p. 8.

**Lorraine Wild, "Lost and Found," from The Edge of the Millennium: An International Critique of Architecture, Urban Planning, Product and Communication Design, ed. Susan Yelavich, (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1993), p. 202.

Frances Butler, "The New Demotic Typography: The Search for New Indices," Visible Language 29.1, (Providence: Rhode Island School of Design, 1994), pp. 90-91.

:-)

[It] "...represents a highly suspect epistemology: knowledge through image and emotion, rather than words and reason, infantilising the consumer and further limiting the scope for negotiating with the real world through rationality, and its mirror, plain language. But the idea that image-based communication strategies are somehow an aberration from a plainer, essentialist language use has been one that philosophers have found increasingly difficult to justify..."

Jules Marshall, "Advertising and New Media: from Parasite to Symbiote," Mediamatic 7 #3/4, p. 211.

Drawing by Bruce Eric Kaplan; ©1995, The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

B E K

"You know, it's a picture book. Needless to say, it doesn't have a lot of narrative scope."

The difficulty with conceiving of a digitally-based essay as something other than text stuffed into 1s and 0s is that text is generally regarded as the standard bearer for conveying complex ideas. So we're talking about a considerable paradigm shift. >:-)

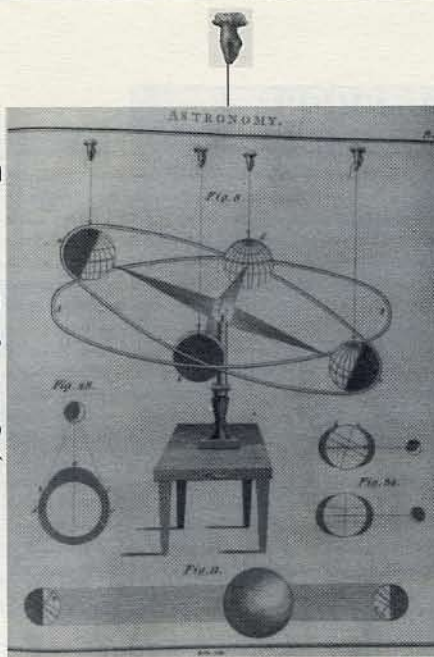**B**ut text hasn't always been the dominant medium for conveying complex ideas. In the 18th century, lively and entertaining visual demonstrations were used to cut difficult ideas into comprehensible slices. :-^

ASTRONOMY.

In her book, <u>Artful Science</u>, art historian Barbara Maria Stafford illustrates the way in which public literacy in the 18th century was largely shaped by graphic (visual/performative) demonstrations of knowledge, often using mechanical models. Popular forms of this time (incorporated into what is now deemed the "high" realm of pictorial representations, such as the paintings of Jacques-Louis David or numerous scientific renderings) were used to assist in the understanding of complex abstract ideas. Stafford draws striking parallels between the use of technology and entertainment to relate ideas in the 18th century and the use of these in our own digital present with such things as Infotainment and Edutainment. The criticisms echo as well.

Barbara Maria Stafford, Artful Science: Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1994). Engraving by Emmanuel Barlow, Astronomy, from Adam Walker, A System of Familiar Philosophy, 1799, p. 68. (Photo by Barbara Maria Stafford.)

Illustration by Anne-Lies Ihme and Gerd Werner. From Computers en robots: Over chips, software en hardware, computptrtiaal, enz. by Volker Korndörfer and Robert Scharff, (Hamburg: Deltas, 1983), p. 6. This rendering was actually redrawn from an 19th c. illustration demonstrating robotics. A machine able to operate without the intervention of a human was thought less likely of duplicity. But in this case the machine actually had no capabilities of its own — there was a dwarf contained inside the cabinet that was producing the operation.

:-^

Stafford continues that in the 18th century, debate abounded around whether the exchange of knowledge by popular visual demonstration was an "authentic" means of creating an educated polis — or simply a way of duping a beguiled public. The demand for authentic experience has been a consistent paradigm that underlies Western thinking. At its roots, found in classical Greek philosophy, Platonism pits itself against Sophism, giving us the double-edged arguments of communications vs.

These methods became associated with trickery and deception. And I believe this accounts for much of the skepticism that exists in our own technological present towards non text-based means and ways to examine serious contents. :-(

the means of communication: convincing through philosophical arguments rather than through fancy "sophisticated" devices, rhetorical or otherwise. This belief alludes to the reasoning that there is a way to actually get to the idea without the telling of it getting in the way.

This postcard was circulated around Holland in the summer of 1995. On the reverse side was a letter addressed to President Chirac of France, protesting the nuclear testing in the Pacific that France has since undertaken. The card was distributed by Boomerang Freecards.

CHIRAC RULES

HEH-HEH! NUCLEAR WINTERS ARE COOL

MEGA DEATH

FIRE! FIRE!
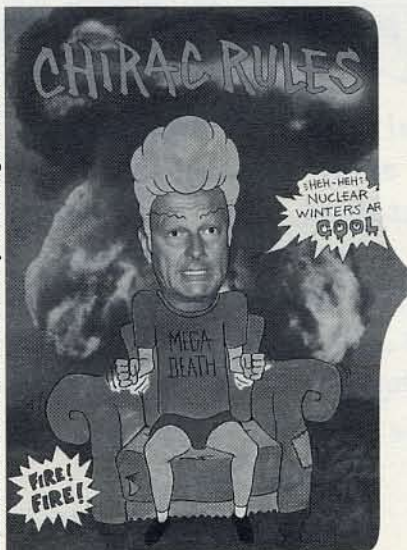
Grappling with ideas in our now time creates further anxiety: associations with popular culture. Forms that simultaneously utilize the communicative abilities of different types of information (words, pictures, sounds, etc.) — interestingly and pleasurably — are generally associated with entertainment, sales pitches or children, but not with the serious examination of ideas.
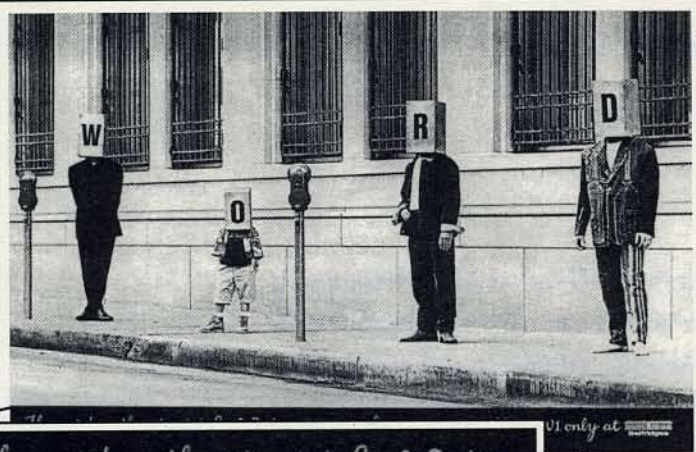
The word on the street is Paul Smith.

These popular forms are influential and powerful communications that avoid dense didactic arguments. They get the message across by maximizing the distinct communicative abilities of different expressive forms. :-o |-+

For instance, and referring back to Archigram, comics find the place where words AND pictures together carry the ball of the message — smashing together the iconic "natural" language of pictures and the symbolic abstraction of words.* At some point, they cross roles much like emoticons** do in digital communicative space.
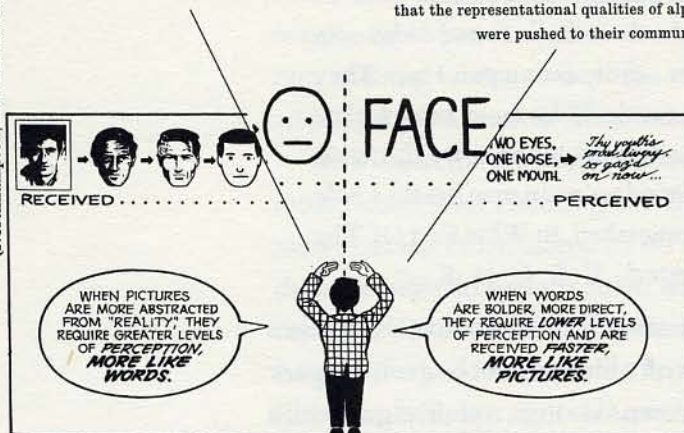
✳✳When I first saw emoticons, I was amazed and intrigued. A couple of years ago a friend showed me a print-out of a conversation that took place via the internet. These cute little icons made of symbols said to me that the desire to signify was greater than the capability of the words. The simultaneity of the exchange being at once a telephone conversation and a letter seemed to create so strong a desire to add the immediately identifiable expressive qualities that are possible in speech and handwriting (or typography for that matter), that the representational qualities of alphabetic language were pushed to their communicative extremes.

✳ If there's a heaven for examples, Scott McCloud's <u>Understanding Comics</u> is it. McCloud maximizes the communicative abilities of visual and verbal forms of expression in order to talk about maximizing visual and verbal forms.

I don't mean to ignore visual art, which powerfully addresses ideas using complex significa-tion, but the meaning of many of these works is often difficult to decipher, requiring highly spe-cialized knowledge. On a second note, artist, curator and critic, Jon Thompson brought to my attention the fact that popular culture has always kept high culture alive, from peasant tunes incorporated into the operas of Tschaikovsky or the symphonies of Stravinsky to the advertising and comics steered onto the shores of art galleries and museums by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

RECEIVED . . . . FACE TWO EYES, ONE NOSE, ONE MOUTH. → . . . . . . PERCEIVED

WHEN PICTURES ARE MORE ABSTRACTED FROM "REALITY", THEY REQUIRE GREATER LEVELS OF *PERCEPTION, MORE LIKE WORDS.*

WHEN WORDS ARE BOLDER, MORE DIRECT, THEY REQUIRE *LOWER* LEVELS OF PERCEPTION AND ARE RECEIVED *FASTER, MORE LIKE PICTURES.*

The architectonics of the essay, of the forms and their contents are up for grabs. The what and how of conveying ideas are no longer confined to the separate analog worlds of writing and design, but are united on common digital grounds: a place where everything clicks.

Drawing by Léon. Cheer up! "Com-ments" by Willy Breinholst. *Things Might Be Worse.* (London: Museum Press Limited, 1969) This book has equally pithy drawings.