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## **Earthquakes and Aftershocks: California, Los Angeles, CalArts, and the Graphic Design Program**

" the design profession can legislate educational standards, but not innovation or excitement."

– LORRAINE WILD

[Lorraine Wild, "More than just a few questions about graphic design education" *The Design Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1983]

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### **I LUV UPHEAVAL**

As I began to put together this talk in early January 2005 in Los Angeles, simultaneously and once again, the California landscape was transforming.

This time it was mudslides...

But just as easily equally it could have been an earthquake...

A fire...

...or a civil uprising.

Californians must accept and embrace change or they'll be driven to madness. (Perhaps this explains the all those crazy Californians.)

I was pondering the idea of whether the ability to deal with constant spontaneous upheaval in physical surroundings might also explain California's ease in embracing profound cultural transformations.

It was an idea that preoccupied me in 1998 when I was working on a museum exhibition entitled, *Made in California*.

[*Made in California: Art, Image and Identity, 1900–2000*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, October 22, 2000–March 18, 2001]

The show looked at 100 years of California art and design in relation to the state's popular images of itself – pictures that had built the idea of "California" in the public imagination as an icon of beauty, depravity, weirdness, fun, pop culture, agriculture, film stars, surfing, cults, etc. etc. etc.

### **CALIFORNIA SEZ TO NEW YORK AND EUROPE: "FUCK YOU"**

Looking at all this California work, it became obvious that a cultural "earthquake" had taken place at a certain moment.

In the 60s, California artists announced a loud and clear "fuck you" to Europe and New York. For art this meant that both the traditional approaches – landscape, portrait, and still life – and traditional subject matter – beauty and truth – were given the heave ho, baby, bathwater, and all.

No longer were proud and willful left coasters going to submit to the unchallenged authority of the east coast and across the Atlantic.

California began to give culture a distinct face by creating "ideas of their own time [and place] without preconceptions."

[Wild, *ibid.*]

Even design historian, Reyner Banham when trying to make sense of Los Angeles design, had to conceive original ways with which to classify Los Angeles's unique design manifestations.

"Historical monograph? Can such an old-world, academic, and precedent-laden concept claim to embrace so unprecedented a human phenomenon as this city of Our Lady Queen of the Angels of Porciuncula..? – otherwise known as Internal Combustion City, Surfurbia, Smogville, Aerospace City, Systems Land, the dream factory of the western world. It's a poor historian who finds any human artifact alien to his professional capacities, a poorer one who cannot find new bottles for new wine." – Reyner Banham

[Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1971, reed. London: Penguin Books, 1990.]

## **THE "FUCK YOU" BECOMES CALARTS**

Founded in the early sixties, CalArts as the dreamchild of Walt Disney, was imagined as a the Disneyland of Art – art students doing life drawing while the music students rehearsed Montavani music...

Meanwhile tourists would observe students at work behind glass windows and be able to purchase the output of these young geniuses at bargain prices.

But the demise of Walt before his vision of CalArts could be realized, put the institution's fate in the hands of oddball forces would push it towards more radical ends.

"Our students will not be subjected to authoritarian teaching and will be able to pursue their creative and personal lives without any kind of preconception. a strong anti-censorship stand is one of the tenets of our program. to implement our intention to seek the most talented students regardless of their possible social handicaps, i hope to find a qualified militant negro to become our director of admissions."

– Robert W. Corrigan, first president of calArts

[Peter Selz with Henry J. Seldis, "CalArts"; *Art in America*, March 1969, p. 107-9]

And so begins the initial momentum for a Design Program that, following the tenets of the early European modernists, acknowledged that time and circumstances change – culturally, economically, technologically. CalArts allowed for work to be produced that indulged itself in the possibilities of change, discovering new questions and answers to, what is made, what it looks like, how it is useful, and how it is meaningful.

## **DESIGN AT CALARTS: WOMEN! (and a few guys)**

In the early 70s CalArts' included a School of Design headed by the radical advocate of "design for people," Victor Papenek. Interests followed in the school were in more human, ecologically, and ethically driven design.

Also in the early 70s, Sheila de Bretteville, in addition to her many graphic design contributions to CalArts, founded the Women's Design Program.

Laurie Haycock Makela describes de Bretteville's, ethos of design best when she recalls seeing a poster created by deBretteville entitled "Taste and Style Aren't Enough." For Haycock it was "a deliberate commentary on the high-finish corporate aesthetic celebrated by most of her professional colleagues."

[Laurie Haycock Makela and Ellen Lupton, "Underground Matriarchy in Graphic Design", in *Eye*, n. 14, Autumn 1994, republished on [www.designwritingresearch.org](http://www.designwritingresearch.org)]

In 1982 April Greiman was invited to direct the program. She used her tenure to explore the use of video and computers to create her passionate personal work.

"Greiman predicted the impact that imaging technology would have on graphic design and made a fanfare of it." In 1984 she lobbied successfully to change the department name to "Visual Communications," feeling that the term "graphic design" would prove too limiting to future designers.

Which finally leads to the posters...

These works began to emerge as a particularly distinct-looking body of work in 1985 when Dean of the School of Art, Catherine Lord, hired Lorraine Wild as the Graphic Design Program Director. Lorraine's mandate was to realize the program she had described in her article, "More than a few questions about graphic design education": [Wild, *ibid.*] To consider what might constitute a serious, specialized, sophisticated program of study for graphic designer wanna-bes.

Lorraine's approach to design education had two distinguishing values:

One is "If we expect a student to 'make form a meaningful thing' then the student has to understand, in the first place, the importance of meaning, and secondly, the means by which meaning is conveyed." [Wild, *ibid*]

So the discussion of denotation and connotation, as the means to meaning-making became fundamental to the Program.

And the other imperative was that "students must see themselves within the historical continuum of visual and verbal communicators." [Wild, *ibid.*] Lorraine understood that design history was an essential part of Graphic Design Education, as it encouraged students to see themselves as part of an evolving culture.

This was a shocking contrast to what most of us old folks who were educated in "Commercial Art" or "Advertising Design" (pretty much the only programs that taught something akin to graphic design) were led to understand. Our education mandated that good Graphic Design was "timeless." To talk about style was equivalent to breaking the 10 Commandments, a sin punishable by being ostracized to the dark corners of graphic design's lowly cousin — sign-painting.

Lorraine Wild's ideas picked up the dropped reins of understanding that for a culture to evolve it must proliferate original, as well as critical, thinking in every form of production.

The momentum impelled by CalArts' matriarchy, but particularly Lorraine's distinct approach to design education, served and continues to live as the foundation from which the Program evolves. As the culture changes — propelled by shifts in technology and media, industry, economics — so does what we make.

As the culture changes — propelled by shifts in technology and media, industry, economics — so does what we make. But what remains consistent are the vitality, passion, and energy applied by the students in a momentum of imaginative and thoughtful contributions to graphic design as a discipline.

the end. (is just another beginning.)

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