Reweaving the Web
Where is graphic design in the new order?

L ast summer a large black-and-white spider, an *Araneus cavaticus*, to be precise, made his home in my Brooklyn garden. He moved onto my side porch in late summer to catch flies and a bit of the breeze away from the competi-tion of the other spiders in my garden. In the fall as the temperature got nippy, this spider had by now become quite substantial and, framed by a perfectly designed web, had earned the name Milton Glaser. I'd meet with Milton in the morning and admire his portfolio of gnats and moths, artfully and individually wrapped in gooey white threads. I smiled when Milton made it past the first frost, but then I closed the doors to the side porch for the winter, and that was the last time I saw Milton Glaser.

Early this spring, I noticed a ball of what looked like sawdust hanging on a cobweb on my Clematis, right near the porch. As I picked up the ball to move it off this rather finicky plant, millions of tiny yellow spider babies scampered about on the silken cloth on which they lived. Milton Glaser had given birth to millions of spiders I mused. When I laid their web back down on a bush nearby, they returned to a huddle. The first warm day, the ball was gone. These tiny spiders had dispersed all over my garden, each with its own well-designed three-thread web (you have to start somewhere). And I won-dered, "This new generation of designers; these children of Milton Glaser—how many will survive?"

Has technology surplanted craft?

When the Internet came on the scene some thought it was a fad, some thought it was fire. Many graphic designers simply ignored the Web: its tools too crude, its form too limited. Designers couldn't make the Web pretty, they couldn't control it, so they dismissed it. But now the Internet has become an integral part of life, and this has changed everything: the possi-bilities are proving endless and good design has become an acknowledged asset. In many ways virtual media is eclipsing print media, and the Web (and technology in general) is indeed home to the new generation of designers. But what of the traditionalists, those who still fail to embrace the Web?

Design it yourself!

With technological advances, everyone can be a graphic designer if only to create a personal Web presence, video, CD label, photo book, personal papers, newsletter, T-shirt, greet-ing card. In fact, designer Ellen Lupton edited a book recently, *D.I.Y. Design It Yourself*,[1] to make it easier for everyone to create his/her own designs. The popularity of graphic design is both good and bad. Good if it causes people to act on their own creativity; bad if there are no standards, if anything goes.

Has the new Web-savvy generation turned its back on the substantial legacies of Glaser, Ivan Chermayeff, Tom Geismar, Massimo Vignelli (who are all well into their 70s and still working)? Is there a new, more democratic way of thinking about graphic design?

The paradigm shifts

I met Craig Kanarick back in 1995. He told me he had just started a company called Razorfish. They designed Web sites. "Razorfish," I thought, "What a crazy name." And when I saw their work I thought, "I don't get it. Where's the concept? Where's the design?" When I saw Kanarick (who was not a designer, I might add) less than a year later, he had green hair and he was talking intranets and extranets and he really got my attention when he said, "By the way, Razorfish now has 1,000 employees." Not too long after that (blue hair this time), he boasted, "We have offices all over the world, 2,000 employ-ees and we're worth $2,000,000,000." Breathtaking! This was a whole new paradigm. But sure enough, not long after its IPO, Razorfish was washed up. And then there was a notice in the *New York Times*; Kanarick was getting married (looking quite conventional, I might add, in the accompanying photo) and moving on to photograph candy on the Lower East Side. To photograph candy!

UPS and downs

Sometime in the late '90s, UPS hired a really big graphic design firm (to be referred to in this column simply as the Design Firm) to rebrand the company and, to teary-eyed designers, dethrone the iconic Paul Rand logo that had served UPS so well for decades. What happened after that is something on

which we can only speculate. Maybe the UPS marketers came to the Design Firm with the directive: "look into" a different color scheme. One imagines that several of the most talented partners (to be referred to as Talented Partners) caucused and presentations were made. We have no idea if the Talented Partners thought this represented their best work. But, to everyone's surprise, in 2002, Futurebrand was hired to replace the Design Firm and the UPS brown was restored to its rightful status of Valuable Brand Asset.

Assuming the UPS marketers were not looking for the Talented Partners to take the lead, it's logical the Talented Partners caved in to the client's wishes and designed an identity that ignored the obvious: Shipping is brown, UPS owns brown, ergo UPS is brown. But maybe UPS asked what the Talented Partners thought of brown and they replied, "old fashioned" or "the color of an unmentionable excretion." Maybe the Design Firm was

asked to sign Work for Hire, which would have eliminated any control they had in the end product and certainly would have dampened their enthusiasm for generating original thinking. Maybe there were a whole slew of Design Firms asked—a kind of Logo Bake Off. Maybe the marketers got cold feet choosing an evolutionary instead of a revolutionary approach to its rebranding. Or maybe UPS was ambivalent about giving up their beloved Rand logo and just could not jump off the fence. Or maybe Futurebrand approached UPS, talking Brand Speak, impressing the UPS marketers, and bolstering the marketers' confidence in their process versus the Design Firm(s). Or maybe Futurebrand saw the presentation from the Design Firm(s), and exclaimed, "Where's the brown? You own brown. We can build a whole campaign on brown. *Find out what brown can do for you.* Hire us." And so they did. Maybe that's what happened.

Whatever the circumstances, the result was stunning. There went Rand's brilliant logo, out the window, replaced by a clunky, overweight shield in shades of gold, straight from the logo factory and, of course, brown.

Many graphic designers have given branding a very narrow definition. Jim Coudal, graphic designer and principal of Coudal Partners in Chicago, says, "Designers think branding is the same thing as identity." Yet account executives are doing something that's very different and far more complex and strategic, and it *is* branding, which may not be primarily a visual expression. Designers choose not to understand what branding is, and this knowledge gap is hurting their credibility.

Techne: Greek for craft

Has technology surplanted craft? Coudal, who reviews design portfolios of newly graduated designers on a regular basis, adds, "Anyone can say they are a designer and no one can tell them they aren't. We find inspiration but a total lack of craft in our portfolio reviews. The software does so much for you, it's as though the designers don't have to understand what the technology is doing. Technology can be dangerous in that way." The Coudal Partners's Web site, which gets 10,000 hits a day, doesn't contain much client work because they are not that interested in showing that work on their site. Coudal says, "For us, its about communication." This is quite a different approach than traditional designers who primarily use their Web site as a portfolio. Many designers show their work as a

series of tiny posters, and shrink their work to postage stamp size. In the process, they fail to communicate their value, and diminish the craft and integrity of their work dramatically.

Driven by love

Firms like Futurebrand and Razorfish seem to be driven by a power motor. And branding has a power buzz, much the same way the Web does. Both can bring in the big bucks to consultants or agencies because both are highly valued by business—seen, often irrationally, as a magic bullet that can turn a company around. But graphic designers (at least the ones I have known and admired) have never been driven by that engine: their motivation is creative expression. It's about tackling a problem with gusto and arriving at an exquisite design solution; more specifically, it's about creating beauty, and loving the beauty they create. "Traditional designers are afraid of the Web because they can't control it, but the Web is all about giving up control." Jason Fried, principal of 37 Signals, an interface design firm in Chicago, says. "That's why their Web sites are simply portfolios. They don't incorporate interactivity or commentary into them [because they can't control the typefaces or colors which may change depending on the browser]. So their Web sites are flat and lack imagination." A firm of self-taught interface designers, 37 Signals creates and markets innovative Web-based applications, including Backpack and Basecamp.

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By clinging to a print view of graphic design, designers limit their value to clients who need to interact in a multi-dimensional world, and need good designers to help them do that effectively. C. Dennis Guastella, chair of visual arts technology at Washtenaw Community College in Ann Arbor, Michigan, says designers need to consider that, "The viewer completes the work—they don't need to be spoon fed. [The magazine] *Raygun* was a perfect example [designed by self-taught designer David Carson]. Every page was a visual experience. Like the Dadaist, Marcel Duchamp, Carson invited the viewer to study the message."

Survival of the nimble

Coudal, who shares a loft space with 37 Signals, says, "Bigger agencies may be clinging to the [less tech intense] past, but the nimble, smaller firms have been able to grow because of technology. What a designer is is changing because of technology." The relationship to the work and the options now available to designers are wide open. Coudal continues, "We [as one of the small, nimble firms] have a great deal of freedom,

and we've made a conscious effort to take control of the creative by either partnering with clients or developing companies of our own. In that way, we make our own rules." Coudal Partners designs brand identities for large companies like Go Roma and the Houston Astros, and creates entire companies and brands like Jewelboxing and The Show as well. Their work is indeed as wide as their interests yet the Coudal Partners's Web site is well crafted; simple and classic in design. He adds, "We are a small firm but we can act like a big manufacturing company. Because of technology, we have been able to eliminate the client." They have become the client.

Of the "traditional designers" we looked at for this article, Milton Glaser's Web site is the simplest, most elegant and technologically robust. It includes video clips and essays as well as posters for sale and, predictably, case studies of client projects; projects where it's clear he was given creative license by working with key decision makers (not marketers or middle managers). The site's written in the inimitable voice of the master himself: an authentic and accurate reflection of his spirit and trademark conceptual thinking.

Contempt for an idea: the greatest barrier to learning

Barriers like ignorance, fear (of branding, of the Web, of technology) and resistance to progress have left many graphic designers (and sadder still, traditional Graphic Design as a field) in the dust while other creative professions (i.e., architecture, filmmaking, fashion, music, product design) have welcomed technology into their midst. The changing needs of the global marketplace have pushed other creative professionals to reshape themselves as they reestablish their relevance to these contemporary times. But what visionary graphic designers do we listen to today? Where is our Frank Gehry, Isaac Mizrahi, Wes Anderson, Thom Yorke, Philippe Stark?

The death of the iconic designer

Traditional graphic design, has become more and more about style, not content. And perhaps there are not going to be any more Milton Glasers, Ivan Chermayeffs, Paula Schers, Stefan Sagmeisters. Is the role of graphic designer too undistinguished to command much authority?

Coudal says, "There's too much competition. Someone around the corner is willing to do the job, sign Work for Hire agreements and work for less of a fee." Work for Hire, unlike All Rights, curtails any control the creators may have had over the destiny of their creative efforts. Work for Hire also eliminates any rights the designer would normally have as author of his or her own work. The designer simply ceases to exist. This sort of thing does not encourage great, original work. This is neither good for graphic design as a profession nor is it good for business in general.

Milton Glaser
Michael Vanderbyl
Tibor Kalman
David Carson
Stefan Sagmeister
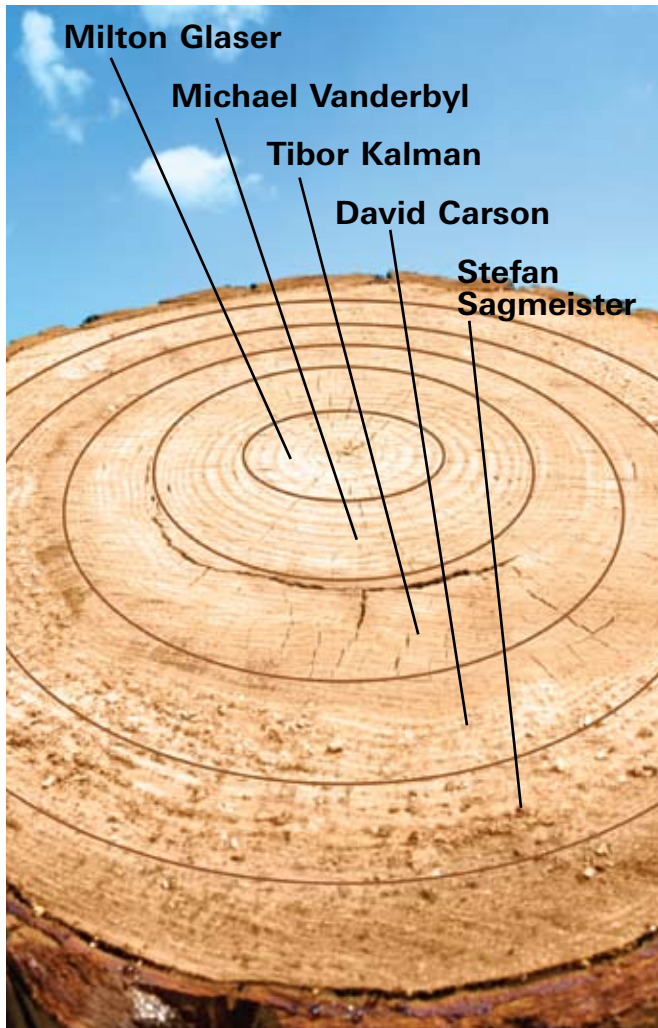
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Milton Glaser had a pet Belgian dwarf rabbit named Mr. Hoffman. Being a very charming creature, Mr. Hoffman was often asked to be in commercials. A limousine would arrive at Glaser's home and whisk Mr. Hoffman off to a photo shoot. But Mr. Hoffman went into sudden retirement when the talent agent called one day saying, "We won't be asking for Mr. Hoffman anymore. Mr. Hoffman has developed a mind of his own." When Glaser told this story at the beginning of the AIGA Conference Dangerous Ideas in 1990, he added something like, "And I was reminded that having a mind of one's own is a very dangerous idea."

Michael Rock, designer and principal of the New York firm, 2x4, and a Yale professor, is in his mid 40s, says, "The conditions have changed. The field [of graphic design] is so diversified and fragmented now, I am not sure there is still a place for a single leader to set the agenda. The concept of 'genius' is more of a media construct anyhow. If you look at Tibor Kalman [M&Co], for instance, he was the classic 'author-function,' unifying the work of a whole range of people—Stephen Doyle, Alex Isley, Emily Oberman, Stefan Sagmeister, Scott Stowell—who both made the design happen and informed his vision." Kalman was not a designer. And,

while most of his senior designers have gone on to run their own studios, none (except possibly Stefan Sagmeister) have ever become the kind of force Kalman (who died in 1999) once was.

Rays of hope

Rock sees that now, "There is no one hero. I don't think my students are defining success as becoming a Milton Glaser either. The field's too complex for that. They see celebrity doesn't get you very far and that it's more interesting to do work that is innovative—even if not so public—on the edge of and in between traditional disciplines because there exists a kind of deregulated space that hasn't been exploited by their elders. This is great news for young designers."

But where is the peer review of the future going to take place? Are design annuals and gold medals anachronisms? The community is morphing, splitting. AIGA, the design schools and design magazines must therefore adapt and become relevant to a new generation of diverse, high-tech designers or diminish their value to the profession on which they depend.

"Students emerge from design schools ready to design anything," Rock says, "because they are more fluid in their thinking about technology." Students graduate able to write clean code. They know they must master technology to succeed.

Christopher Vice, designer and teacher at the Indiana University Herron School of Art and Design, says, in spite of the fact that technology is incorporated into the curriculum, "Most design schools are still approaching the teaching of design the same way they did 50 years ago. Like exceptions such as Art Center College in Pasadena, IIT (Illinois Institute of Technology), University of Illinois at Chicago, and Herron, design schools need to rewrite their curriculum following a model of relevancy." Guastella adds, "Graphic designers now have to think in more dynamic sequential relationships, in three dimensions. In comparison, the old way of designing was static."

My garden, however, is adorned with the shimmering, well-designed webs of dozens of interesting spiders representing an array of species, but not one *Araneus cavaticus*. **CA**

Editor's note: I wrote this article with the help of Ben Whitehouse. We collaborated and organized material on http://backpackit .com. Interviews for this article were recorded with Skype and AudioHijack Pro and edited using Adobe Acrobat 6.0 Pro. —DK Holland

1 The Do It Yourself movement is commonly called DIY in Great Britain. *D.I.Y. Design It Yourself*, by Ellen Lupton, is published by Princeton Architectural Press.