

Great Expectations: A Postscript on the *AIGA 365* Debate

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Footnotes begin on page 24.

This essay was prompted by a public debate posted on the American Institute of Graphic Arts' (AIGA) Website during the summer of 2001, and while the debate may seem to have passed into history, the release of the 2001 *AIGA 365* annual perhaps marks a good moment to assess the fallout. The online discussion centered on the design merits of the 2000 annual, *365: AIGA Year in Design* by San Francisco designer Jennifer Sterling. Many of the comments took issue with Sterling's treatment of the published work: Sterling's design crops book covers, selects poster details and, in general, presents fragments of the winning entries. It rejects the customary—and accustomed—layout of book spreads, silhouetted images on a neutral, white background, and full-frame posters. In contrast to accepted conventions, Sterling's design engages us with a "cult of texts."¹ While this phrase was coined by Jennifer Sterling in relation to a specific moment, it is intentionally misused here. By misreading Sterling's statement, by expanding its interpretive boundaries similar to what Roland Barthes lays out in *The Pleasure of the Text*, fecund possibilities will open up for the discourse and analysis of design.²

Specifically, I was provoked to write after reflecting upon a comment made by designer, educator, and critic, Lorraine Wild. Wild's comment seems to be the final word as it were, since hers was the last posting among the numerous comments of others, many of which call for a return to the standard format of "book cover and spread." It is Wild's general assessment that design annuals should function as a historical record "of what was valued by the community of designers in any given year. [This] is the record that will last after we are all dead and gone." And, as a record, annuals should demonstrate a neutral or transparent attitude toward the work they are intended to display: "So, twenty years or thirty years from now, when design historians look to *365* for an idea of what the profession was interested in in 2000, they will have a very hard time figuring it out. (On the other hand, they'll have an excellent idea of what Jennifer Sterling was into!)"³ There are two points that are troubling here. The first is the assumption that work selected for publication reflects the overarching interests of the profession, when in fact, annuals sanitize our history by narrowing its representative value. Wild's identification of "what on the other hand" a single voice was into, hints that all is not as uniform and tidy within the profession of graphic design as annuals would lead us to believe.⁴ The second

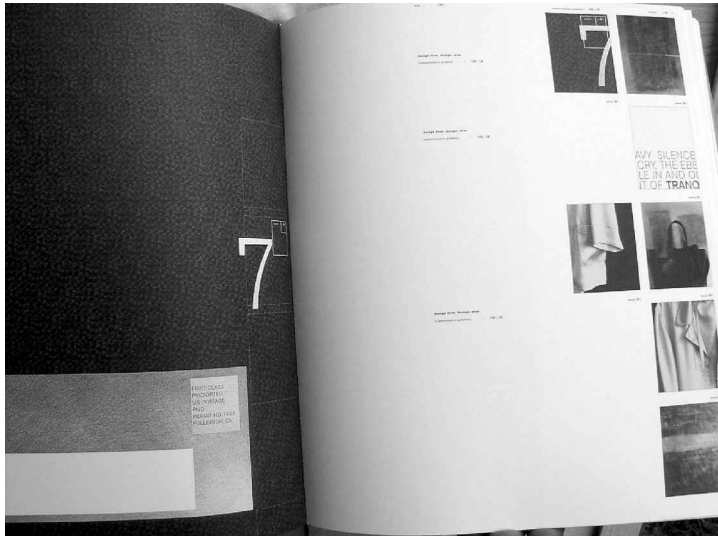
Figure 1
365: AIGA Year in Design Jennifer Sterling,
designer. Cover detail.
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Figure 2
Interior spread.
© Copyright 2001, AIGA



Figure 3
Interior detail.
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assumption is that Sterling's handling of the design is personal and therefore opaque to understanding. What is of interest here is Wild's side note, parenthetically set apart because the commentary has moved from a general discussion of the book to a remark on individual vision. Like the sidebars of spoken language—slips of the tongue, parapraxis, forgotten names, et al.—such marginalia often are more revealing than the focus of the discussion itself. Wild's comment suggests that had Jennifer Sterling handled the design in a different manner, we would somehow know less about what Sterling "was into" with regards to design in exchange for a "truer" display of the work of others. I think it is obvious that had Sterling designed the AIGA annual differently, it *still* would have been a product that reflected the design interests of Jennifer Sterling. However, it would have been a different book. What is at issue then, is not the interests of the designer but the *genre* of the book and, by extension, the institutionalized sociopolitical practices that created the genre.

The term "genre" is used to bind together a particular group of properties whose expression reflects a specific codified form; while "expression" is used here to suggest that these properties have discursive value, this value being the cultural mores of a given society. "In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constructed by that codification. A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties."⁵ Genres occur in all disciplines—the visual arts, language, and music, among others—and can be what both allows a discipline to emerge by establishing parameters, and what prevents the expansion of those same parameters. Many of the comments on the AIGA Website reflect a desire to maintain the formal expectations of the art catalog, that the design should be transparent to its content. Postings critical of the book's design include calls for a "traditional approach"; statements that "some things don't need to be rethought"; and accusations that "innovation in format, gratuitous decoration and styling, sheer self-indulgence, or leaving behind a valuable artifact is grandiose in thinking and irresponsible." These views reveal that the genre of book design—the representational conventions of an art catalog—are well established. But the breaking of a code or convention sets into play a discourse with the practices of culture which attempt to enforce those codes. It is the departure from the inherent inertia of a genre which allows for *speech*, the possibility of critique, and engagement with society and culture.⁶

Wild's sidebar is a reflection of the generally held belief that graphic design should foreground the conventions of objectivity, "the natural," or "the real," and that such forms are sanctioned as true. This realist attitude conceals the socially relative and constructed aspect of design. It helps to confirm the prejudice that there is a form of "objective" design which is somehow natural and transpar-

ent, rendering reality “as it is”: “The realist or representational sign effaces its own status as a sign, in order to foster the illusion that we are perceiving reality without its intervention.”⁷ This realist belief also shares the notion that because Sterling’s design is interpretive—following the conventions of fiction—it emphasizes the designer’s voice or vision at the expense of content. However, the presence of the interpretive in the arts, that is, “the textual,” requires an active reader but is no less informative about the world. In literature, myth, parable and literary tropes such as metaphor, allegory and paradox among others, are no less valuable as devices for providing information, nor are they any less pleasurable.⁸ They can be, however, more challenging. The conventions of narrative fiction follow the linear plot structure of introduction, character development, conflict, and resolution, but “In novels in which the conventional structure of narrative is faded or indistinct [Joyce, Beckett or Pynchon for example], the reader must construct the narrative by sifting through the debris of the text. In these works, meaning resides in relations of parts and structures—or apparatus—rather than in...explicit narrative content.”⁹ Meaning in these unconventional structures, “lies not in a one-to-one relation between thing and concept but in a constructive operation upon many possible connections.”¹⁰ It is not impossible to discern the design logic of the material presented in the AIGA annual, but it admittedly is difficult. A “cult of texts” makes visible the codes and experiences employed in the act of reading and understanding by destabilizing our expectations of a transparent relationship between form and content, the real and the fictive, but is no less meaningful.

In its most general form, graphic design combines a verbal message with a visual image—simply put, graphic design uses *words* and *pictures*. However, this deceptively simple structure is complicated by the fact that unlike other arts, the graphic designer can satisfy the obligations of communication without exceeding the basic requirements of delivery, the graphic designer can convey a message without communicating an *idea*. Unless it achieves the communicative excess necessary for architecture, a building remains mute. Similarly, clothing does not attain the status of fashion without acknowledging its own codes and constructed language. But graphic design is inextricably linked to the communicative role of basic language, and its message is often mistaken for the content of an idea. The assumed transparency of communication in design is a symptom of modern society’s canceling of distinct experiences (“Design should look neutral”), and eradication of disciplinary specificity (“Designers shouldn’t appear to be expressing their interests”). The social reality of modern society (read “capital”) desires a rationalizing, quantifying, and leveling of operations to serve its appetite for an ever-expanding consumer market. This leveling force is immediately evident among the comments posted on the AIGA Website: “I think it’s important to emphasize that groundbreak-

ing design should do more than look cool in a design annual. ...it should also lead to great results for our clients." and "It should be something we could give (or show) to a client."¹¹ Although Sterling's design does not prohibit either action from taking place, the preceding comments suggest that the book's value—because of its explicit interpretive perspective—is somehow compromised. The authority of the natural attitude suppresses its own ideological roots in order to promote the illusion that the "objective" is the only true vehicle for viewing the world. In this passage by Terry Eagleton, "signs" could just as easily be substituted with the word "design": "Signs which pass themselves off as natural, which offer themselves as the only conceivable way of viewing the world are by that token authoritarian and ideological. It is one of the functions of ideology to "naturalize" social reality, to make it seem innocent and unchangeable as Nature itself."¹² Wild's "historical artifact" may attempt to sustain a similitude between everyday life and communication, but its "transparent"—and ultimately communicative—content is suspect. The unmediated design is simply an illusion: it is the product of an ideological position. And with the assumption that transparency is neutral, that content remains untainted by so-called "objective delivery," ideological consumption is made complete.¹³

In specific literary terms, this intertwining of the real and the fictive in the AIGA annual can be identified as the trope of "the grotesque." "When we use the word 'grotesque' we record, among other things the sense that though our attention has been arrested, our understanding is unsatisfied."¹⁴ To invoke the grotesque does not mean that I am speaking negatively here. I am speaking about strategies, genres, and conventions. However much Sterling's design challenges our expectations, it equally challenges the limits of graphic design as a discipline if one is to judge by the numerous negative comments found on the Website as any indication of disciplinary abuse. "[T]he grotesque, and those who indulge in it, frequently encounter a backlash that takes the form of genealogical abuse, with accusations of illegitimacy, bastardy, or hybridization, terms that indicate structural confusion, reproductive irregularity or typological confusion."¹⁵ Does this perform a disservice to those whose work is included in the annual? Hardly. Sterling's design puts into use pre-existing codes, reterritorializes them and demands the invention of new skills altogether. The rethinking of the genre results in an extended life of habits and routines, new meanings of knowing, belonging and practicing. But this interpretation is also dependent on our effort and desire to come to terms with what we see. "Grotesque forms place an enormous strain on the marriage of form and content by foregrounding them both so that they appear not as a partnership, but as a warfare, a struggle."¹⁶ Sterling has given us something new, and the work of the winning entries may actually live on, longer than if they were shelved as some historical relic.¹⁷

It is graphic design's possibility to act as a form of expression which may allow it to claim the status of a discipline—as a way to see the world—over service industry. In doing so, graphic design may actually begin to critically engage the structures of social and cultural reality rather than merely perform subject to its bidding. It may actually have something to *say*: graphic design(ers) might begin to ask questions about meaning, values, language, feeling, and experience. The challenges posed by new forms are not the occasion to retreat to a conservative position. However, I won't hold my breath. The general public tends to condemn the interpretive in favor of the representational in architecture, painting, music, and literature—disciplines that are much older than graphic design.

1 Sterling coined this phrase to describe her approach to the redesign of the American twenty-dollar bill that appeared in *ID Magazine*. Jennifer Sterling, "Fresh Mint," in *ID Magazine* 46:2 (Mar/Apr 1999): 68. "Cult of texts" refers to conceptual circumstances which Jennifer Sterling has specifically outlined: "Several designers were asked to redesign the twenty-dollar bill. I suggested that, instead of using the image of past presidential figures—whose reputation tends to be judged on America's cultural mood at the moment, and therefore enjoys a type of sliding-scale affection—we instead used the language our nation holds dear: the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, or the inscription on the Statue of Liberty (to name a few). Hence, the phrase 'cult of texts.'" Jennifer Sterling in correspondence with the author (February 2002).

2 "...what I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface [...] It is not (logical) extension that captivates it, the winnowing out of truths, but the layering of significance; [...] the excitement comes not from a progressive haste but from a kind of vertical din (the verticality of language and of its destruction)," Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Richard Miller, trans. (New York: Noonday Press, 1975), 11–12.

3 Lorraine Wild's complete posting is reproduced here: "One thing I wanted to say about this year's annual and those of the future: I think it is in the duty of the AIGA to its profession to acknowledge that in publishing the Annual it is creating a public record of what was valued by the community of designers in any given year. That is the record that will last after we are all dead and gone. I know from experience, from doing design historical research, that the Annuals are an important guide. Individual pieces of design (especially things that are not archived permanently, like books in libraries) are incredibly hard to track down, and sometime their appearance in annuals is the only record of a thing existing. So, twenty years or thirty years from now, when a design historian looks to 365 for an idea of what the profession was interested in in 2000, they will have a very hard time figuring it out. (On the other hand, they'll have an excellent idea of what Jennifer Sterling was into!) So, ignoring the issue of what constitutes an 'interesting' or 'boring' annual, shouldn't the base line of discussion be whether or not it actually creates some sort of viable record of what work the organization honored at the time of publication? Or will the AIGA annual become a one-off piece that is only valuable as a sample of work by the person who designed it? (If that is the route taken, one has to ask why the organization sink its resources into it, and why people would pay money to enter the competitions?) If you look at old Annuals, there are good ones and bad

ones, and many of them are very interesting artifacts in and of themselves: but the current Annual is only of interest for itself, providing a very unreliable record of the work of all the others contained within, pretty much useless for the researcher of the future, our ultimate audience!" Lorraine Wild, 365: *What's Next? Discussion* Online posting. July 9, 2001 <<http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm?contentalias=365discussiondisplaynew>>. See the Website for the complete list of posted comments.

4 Ironically, Wild herself has in the past argued for many of the points being made here: "Perhaps it seems dumb to say this, but I'm beginning to think that the best way to salvage graphic design in the face of the juggernaut of technology and the demands of the market is to nurture authentic individual voices in graphic design, and to recognize that individuality manifests itself in form made independently of conceptual analysis of the market." Wild's essay concludes by championing the work of individuals whose histories would not be found in graphic design annuals, including Sister Corita Kent, Big Daddy Roth and Ed Fella: "Too personal, maybe, or too eccentric, their work resonates anyway, looks better and better over time, and makes more sense." Lorraine Wild, "The Macramé of Resistance," in *Enigme* 47 (Summer 1998): 15–3.

5 Tzvetan Toderov, *Genres of Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 17–8.

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- 6 As used here, "speech" and "communication" in graphic design are two distinct, yet related, concepts.
- 7 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 136.
- 8 See Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* 2nd edition. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); and Sharon Crowley, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (New York: MacMillan, 1993).
- 9 Jennifer Bloomer, "In the Museyroom," in *Assemblage* 5 (1987): 63. Jennifer Bloomer is an architect and theorist. Her book, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)cripts of Joyce and Piranesi* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), investigates the relationship between writing and architecture and pursues many of the same representational questions raised here.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 365: *What's Next? Discussion*.
- 12 Eagleton, 135.
- 13 The term "ideology" is, of course, problematic because it "always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count for truth," when this essay would suggest that there are discourses that are neither true nor false, but plural. See Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 109–133.
- 14 Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5.
- 15 Ibid., 7.
- 16 Ibid.

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- 17 Referring to graphic design as a discipline simultaneously necessitates and retroactively establishes a sense of continuity (like architecture, which draws from its own history in the act of creation). Ultimately, it is this self-awareness of its own past which produces resistance and criticism, and maintains the life of art. Misusing Sterling's phrase was a way to enter into a discussion of continuity in her work. This understanding does not render Sterling's process reductive or calcified. On the contrary, I take immense pleasure in assuming that each question or project presented to a designer is unique, and produces a unique solution. At the same time, I assume that a strong designer will have as much an intellectual signature as she may have a design signature—it is something that allows (and propels) one to work.