The Crystal Ball
or 2001 A Design Odyssey

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"I never make predictions, especially about the future."—Yogi Bera

THERE'S ONLY ONE THING WE CAN SAY FOR SURE ABOUT THE FUTURE: it will be different from now. I'll try to be a bit more specific, however. If Moore's Law isn't repealed and the speed of microprocessors continues to double every 18 months, computer clock speeds will be 32,000 times as fast in ten years. Not only do microprocessors get more powerful all the time but they get cheaper. Extend the logic and computers will be incredibly powerful and nearly free. (By now some of you are saying "Wasn't this supposed to be about the future of graphic design rather than lame computer predictions?" It's hard to consider the job of a graphic designer without dealing with technological changes; I'll get to design and designers in a minute. Other people were thinking "great—a Power Mac for fifteen dollars. Tell me more." I'll get to that first.)

A graphic designer ten years from now will be working with equipment that is much less like a Power Mac 9500 than that Power Mac is like a 128K Macintosh. (If you don't know what a 128K Mac was, ask someone really old.) I don't mean they will have better displays and more power. I mean they will be fundamentally different. What will they be like specifically? My advice is that you should not

believe anyone who claims to know that. Guessing exactly what computers will be in a decade is slightly less likely than guessing the exacta at Hollywood Park. Too many things can affect the outcome.

Obviously new technologies are unpredictable, but the perfection and interaction of old technologies are equally hard to know. For instance, right now computer monitors are expensive and bulky not because we lack cheap technology to build good flat screens. It's the craft of manufacturing them that isn't up to snuff. Flat screens are expensive because there is so much waste in the process. If somebody improves the craft we might have cheap displays that can go almost anywhere. And be almost any size. So computers can be almost everywhere. Like the computers in our cars, coffee pots, and airport toilets, we may not even think of them as computers. Or maybe other technology such as image projection will make today's flat screens seem like quaint antiques. Ten years ago fax machines were exotic (despite being fifty year old technology). Now they're ubiquitous. So now every office and many homes have a scanner and a digital printer. What might happen if we begin to tap that potential? We're just now starting to see a revolution in wireless communications, much of it based technology that has brought bad music to your dentist's office for years. How might such technologies combine?

Back to new and/or improved technology. Right now graphic designers spend a lot of money on computing power. If it becomes cheap to make powerful and specific microprocessors, why wouldn't Adobe sell you Photoshop and give you the processor that makes it work? Or maybe software won't be sold. Since typeface designers would make more money if you sent them 2¢ every time anyone sold a job using their typeface than they do now with you paying them $75 and hundreds of others "lending" each other the font, maybe some sort of automatic electronic tracking and payment will mean that the graphic design business will again become what it was ten years ago—one of the cheapest businesses to get into. But would that mean that it will be easier for designers to pay the bills or merely that there will be even more competition as millions more people have access to "our" tools?

So we're back to knowing two things: 1) Equipment will be different. 2) Change will accelerate. It's probably safe to assume the same things about the jobs of equipment users (such as graphic designers): 1) They will be different. 2) Change will accelerate. Just as computers (or whatever we will call them) will be less like our current tools than our current tools are like what we used ten years ago, graphic designers' jobs will be less like they are now than their current jobs are like a graphic designers' job ten years ago. (If you don't know about marker comps, spec'ing type, T-squares and paste-ups, ask someone really old.)

If technology is constantly changing, what does that say about the craft of

graphic design? Clearly skills acquisition will have to be more rapid. Given that, there will be many virtuosos but few masters. Since there will be ever more skills to learn, people whose business is based on craft will specialize. It is only by concentrating on a narrower range of skills that will allow them to keep up. In 1987 I owned every major graphic design related program, had the latest versions, knew how to use them, and still had time left over for actually doing graphic design. Today that would be physically impossible (as well as damned expensive). It's just another of life's little contradictions: the technology that has broken down disciplinary boundaries is likely to cause the need for its users to specialize.

All repetitive action can and will be automated. (Note that certain judgments—most of traditional typography, for instance—are repetitive actions.) As technologies change and skills are automated, those skills will become obsolete. (If you know a bit about design and a lot about html programming you're quite employable today. Don't count on knowing what <li> means buying you any more in a couple of years than knowing what "[15△[U&lc bf" means or where the j goes in a California case gets you today. Those earning a living in the craft end of graphic design need to become adept at learning new skills. Since each set of skills is destined to be obsolete (and that obsolescence will come faster and faster), those designers always need to be learning a new set of skills. If they are wise they will have multiple and unrelated skill sets to hedge against business changes.

Graphic designers, despite sharing a single name, don't all do the same thing for a living. That will continue and increase. Not only will technical specialization increase the differences, but it will create more need for those who can integrate the work of this specialized Babel. These people may be creators or they may be visionary buyers and coordinators. (This range exists among those who call themselves art directors today. It can only increase.)

People who can make things make sense will be in demand. (Richard Saul Wurman predicts that in five years 20% of graphic designers will call themselves information architects and that they will do 60% of the work. I won't vouch for the name or the percentage but it's clear that he is right in essence.)

Some of these generalists are likely to work coordinating large projects comprising many media. Some may move from role to role as projects come up, relying on technical specialists as needed. They are all going to need a wider education than we normally associate with graphic designers. Those designers will need an understanding of culture and media, engineering, marketing, and writing. They will also need knowledge of the fields they are designing for. They will have to be able to synthesize the best of many fields and apply ideas widely. While they may not be the specialists that do the tasks, they will have to know

something about editing both writing and videotape. They'll have to understand developing a product and selling it. (Supervision of process—the glorified machine tending we spend much of out time at—is not the basis for the work of this kind of designer. As equipment is improved and standardized, press checks and their electronic equivalents will not be a source of many billable hours. I'm talking about understanding more than technical knowledge. I'm especially talking about the ability to communicate.)

If designers do not learn about other parts of the world, someone else will learn some of the things that designers know and will provide the needed synthesis and coordination. That means engineers and marketers will be in charge of what we now think of as graphic design. I don't know who, if anyone, will be called a graphic designer but those who call themselves that now would be relegated to being computer operators. (If we call them computers.)

As most of what used to be graphic design becomes accessible to more people, graphic designers (at least the bulk of those currently called graphic designers) will continue to become less and less important. Paradoxically, as more people are aware of the power of type and image, graphic design will become more and more important. Graphic design will become a legitimate subject for criticism in the way that film and music are today. (Well, I hope graphic design critics do better than most film and music critics.)

If I'm right, it means most of the work traditionally done by graphic designers will be low paid and held in low regard. New technical specialties will come and go. Those who are quick and, like Wayne Gretsky claims to do, "skate to where the puck will be" will do well. Many others will not. A few others will resist the lure of design as a technical pursuit and will do whatever needs to be done to extend communication. Those few will be very influential.

If you think I'm telling you that tomorrow will be like today only more so, you're probably right. That's the trouble with writing about the future—nobody I know has been there. Of course if I really knew what was going to happen to graphic design and graphic designers in ten years, I'd figure out how to say it very slowly and I'd charge Pentagram $750 per hour to tell it to them.

Gunnar remembers what "[15∆[U&lc bf" means but always has to peek to remember where to put the j in a California case.

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