

Letter to Emigre Magazine, 1994

by Gunnar Swanson

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THE INTERVIEWS IN ÉMIGRÉ #30 (“fallout”) caused me to reread Steve Heller’s “Cult of the Ugly.” I found it as frustrating as I did during my first reading. Steve raised many interesting subjects then dropped them before I knew the point. I was greeted with a toad’s sense of beauty—green and bumpy—but we hopped on to other subjects before I understood. Is beauty truly completely subjective? Or is Steve calling Cranbrook grads toads? I was told that much current design work is “aesthetically questionable,” but not what is aesthetically unquestionable . . .

Then on to the subject of ugliness, but our friend the toad and the questions he raises were unheard. Is ugly in the eye of the beholder? Is ugly purely cultural, an arbitrary category that changes from viewer to viewer? Or is there something universally true or important about “the golden mean . . . balance and harmony”? The only definition Steve gives for “ugly design” is “the layering of unharmonious graphic forms in a way that results in confusing messages.” I doubt that incoherence is really Steve’s definition of ugly, although I suspect it may contribute to the visceral (and maybe indefinable) sense of repulsion that does identify ugliness.

I share what I presume is Steve’s visceral reaction to some of the work he mentions. “Confusing messages,” in some sense of the phrase, may be at the heart of my revulsion. Certainly much “ugly” student work is part of normal youthful disrespect for the “adult” world. Saying “fuck you” to one’s elders is a fine tradition and perhaps an integral part of finding one’s own identity. There are many other good reasons to make a message offensive (visually or otherwise). But a considerable amount of graphic design seems to say “fuck you” without really meaning it. Is this merely faddishness, a desperate desire to stay “on the edge,” or some sort of visual Tourette’s Syndrome?

Although I don’t think it defines “ugly,” it is this confusion of messages that I find revolting in some of the Cranbrook/CalArts/Studio Dunbar mafia (and derivative) work I see. I don’t believe that it is always desirable to be clear and certainly it’s not always possible. It is, however, generally desirable to be honest. Form makes a

claim, and designers are responsible for the claims their work makes.

I can often applaud the layering of disharmonious graphic forms in a way that results in confusing messages. It is the layering of graphic forms with no message beyond “it’s hip to layer graphic forms” that I object to. Visually complex design usually seems to make a claim to complexity of content. When I wade through densely layered design only to discover that there is less there than meets the eye, I have been defrauded. (Time and attention are the most valuable currencies of our information age. It will become more apparent over the next few years that taking someone’s attention under false pretenses is no less a crime than taking someone’s money under false pretenses.) Dismissing the implicit claims of the form of design reduces graphic design to mere page decoration. If a generation of decorators is the best replacement we have for a generation of “visual janitors,” we haven’t come very far.

Dishonesty is, of course, not a post modern invention. Most of Modern graphic design strikes me as a specious argument at best. Instead of claiming nonexistent complexity, it makes unwarranted claims of clarity and/or functionality—the typographic equivalent of “functionalist” buildings with roofs that leak.

I guess this might argue against Rudy VanderLans’ criticism of the blandness of the design of the popular graphic design press—bland design honestly reflects the generally bland content. On second thought, something more disjointed might be in order, since the tradition of graphic design journalism leans strongly toward a series of unchallenged declarations. “Dialog,” when it exists, usually takes the form of silly pseudo debates on the level of 1970s TV’s “Point Counterpoint.”

The interviews in *Émigré* #30 took a more serious approach to design issues than we have grown to expect. Michael Dooley’s interviews were intelligent and thoughtful, as befitting the people he interviewed. He had the respect for Steve Heller to challenge him rather than dismiss him. I didn’t buy everything Steve said (nor do I accept everything Ed or Jeff said), but his views were better represented by being challenged specifically than they are when left on their own.

While Michael Rock worries [in *ID Magazine*] that the desire for newness might carry the demise of *Émigré*, the magazine seems to be reinventing itself in its desire for thoughtfulness. Keep up the good work. One possible roadblock to *Émigré*’s raising the intellect of the design press is its Q&A + letters format. While it has worked well to personalize new design, there is a limit to the kind of thought that can be conveyed in that manner. It may be time for essays, articles, poems or whathaveyou to join the interviews and letters. I urge *Émigré* to continue to expand its horizons and prove Michael Rock wrong—I’m looking forward to Mr. Keedy’s essay “And they won’t read this, either” in the *Émigré Turns 20* book.