

Steve Heller: Documenting Design Paradigms

By Kolean Pitner

Graphic design champion Steve Heller is one of the design world's most consummate jugglers. With aesthetic dexterity and amazing endurance, he has thoughtfully and expansively documented our design times. He is author, co-author, and/or editor of more than 100 books on design and popular culture. Heller also has been a contributing editor to *Print*, *Eye*, *Baseline*, and *I.D.* magazines for over 20 years.

In the early 1980s as editor of the *AIGA Journal*, Heller turned the newsletter into a serious forum for design criticism and helped launch the careers of several young design writers. He also began lecturing at the School of Visual Arts on the history of illustration in the early '90s and was director of SVA's *Modernism & Eclecticism: A History of American Design Symposiums* for 10 years. Heller is also the founder and co-chair of the MFA Designer as Author program at the School of Visual Arts (SVA).

Impressive contributions to the design profession, right? But what is truly mind-boggling is that all of this writing, editing, and class preparation gets done BEFORE Heller starts his day job! His workday starts at 4:30 a.m. He answers his email and writes until 8:45 a.m. Then he goes off to his office at *The New York Times* where he has been an art director for the past 33 years, first on the *Op Ed* page and for the last 30 years on the *Book Review*. Steve left his full-time position at the *Times* last May and is now on contract as a consultant for the art department and writes for the *Book Review*.

Heller's dedicated efforts have deeply enriched the lives of all graphic designers. If history is the synthesis of countless stories, he is one of the graphic design profession's finest storytellers. It is no wonder that he was the recipient of the AIGA Medal for Lifetime Achievement in 1999, the Art Directors Club Hall of Fame Special Educators Award in 1996, The Pratt Institute Herschel Levitt Award in 2000, and the Society of Illustrators Richard Gangel Award for Art Direction in 2006.

Heller truly appreciates graphic design. Today we take for granted the wide variety of design history books, magazines, and conferences. But I'm old enough to remember that when I was in graduate school at Pratt Institute in 1980, there were no serious history of graphic design classes or design history textbooks. So I decided I had to educate myself. It wasn't easy. But, thanks to pioneering design writers like Steve Heller and Philip Meggs, I began to learn about my design heritage. Their work inspired me to write my Master's thesis on the history of graphic design. That thesis became the starting point for the history of graphic design and illustration classes I developed and continue to teach today at the College of Visual Arts (CVA) in St. Paul.

Every semester I tell my CVA students that I believe the ultimate goal of design history should be to help each of them to become better designers, illustrators, and/or artists. It should instill a sense of purpose and develop an ethical value

system they can use to create meaningful and fulfilling professional lives. Those are lessons I learned from Steve Heller, and they are lessons I try to teach my students. I will be forever grateful that he taught me to be a design history teacher.

In anticipation of Steve's upcoming November 1 lecture for the *2007 CVA Leaders of Design Series* at the Minnesota History Center, I asked him the following questions:

KP: Now that you are no longer art director for *The New York Times Book Review*, do you have a more civilized schedule?

SH: Hmm. No. I still get up at 4:30 a.m. That gives me a half hour to do email and write for the *Print* forum, this column of tidbits called "The Daily Heller." Then I go to the gym at 5:30 and I'm in my SVA office by 7:15. When I go to the *Times* once a week, I get there around the same time. The only difference is that I do get to see my wife for a few minutes in the morning.

KP: Honestly, how can you write books faster than I can read them? Do you have a clone, or are there legions of interns doing research for you?

SH: I do a lot of work myself, but I don't always get things done when they are supposed to be done. It's easier to get articles finished because the deadlines are so tight. Books like to languish and linger. I also work with a lot of great collaborators, co-authors, and researchers. As Hillary [Clinton] says, "It takes a village."

KP: What publishing projects are you currently working on?

SH: I'm trying to finish several books right now. *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* for Phaidon, a biography of Alvin Lustig for Chronicle (with Elaine Lustig Cohen), *Illustration: Style and Substance* for Harry Abrams (with Seymour Chwast), and *Becoming a Design Entrepreneur* for Rockport with Lita Talarico). I know there are a few others, too, but I'm having a brain freeze.

KP: What first inspired your passion for studying graphic design history?

SH: Well, I was passionate about design since I was a teen and working for underground newspapers. Working on layouts was like making collages. It was very therapeutic, like basket weaving. But the history part came primarily from my friend Brad Holland (the illustrator) who knew so much about the history of political art. I was always political and became a fanatic about how the Left satirized the Right.

KP: What are your present inspirations and interests?

SH: My work on *Iron Fists* is consuming much of my brain space. I'm just fascinated by how totalitarian regimes have branded themselves and made identities that are as effective as Coke or IBM. I read a lot about the Holocaust, so that is part of the equation, too.

KP: What books would be on your “top ten list” for serious students of design history?

SH: I’m reading Al Gore’s *The Assault on Reason*, which is actually a fairly solid “design” book. I don’t have a top ten “best” list, but I do have a few “best” books to recommend: *The Shape of Content* by Ben Shahn, *The Wood and the Graver* by Fritz Eichenberg, and Michael Bierut’s new book *79 Short Essays on Design*. Oh, there’s another new book that truly excited me, *Jan Tschichold: Posters of the Avant Garde*.

Frankly, there are so many books that should be read on a number of design pioneers such as Alexey Brodovitch, Josef Muller-Brockmann, Robert Brownjohn, etc.

KP: What are your thoughts on the current state of design education?

SH: I think there is a need for a lot more of it, particularly since the web is forcing designers to look at new problems. There must be much more DESIGN thinking on the web, and I don’t mean wire frames or information architecture either.

Right now most major websites are not driven by traditional design aesthetics. The so-called designers are information architects who come from non-design areas. Designers and typographers need to be able to inject their experience into this new medium. From this, a new design paradigm may emerge. This is something we are trying to address in our design curriculum at the School of Visual Arts.

KP: Describe your work as co-chair of the MFA Designer as Author program at the School of Visual Arts.

SH: I co-chair with Lita Talarico. She’s a remarkable colleague and friend. I work directly with students, devise new courses, etc. I am also co-founder, with Alice Tremlow, of the new MFA program in Design Criticism at SVA, which will launch with its first class in fall 2008. We are developing the curriculum and starting to recruit now. I’m also working on developing other new MFA programs that are top secret.

KP: When you look into your crystal ball, what changes do you see in the near future for graphic design and designers? Any advice? How about some words of wisdom for us baby boomers who are having a hard time adapting to and keeping up with all of the technological changes that have come along with the digital revolution?

SH: I don’t have a crystal ball. I also have bad eyesight. But I do think that the integration of different media platforms is essential. I’ve also said for years that design entrepreneurship is rearing its head. As graphic design merges with other design media, more designers are developing their own products. In other words, being a designer will not be simply client driven.

Regarding the rapid pace of technological changes, we have to be aware and not resistant to change. Sometimes it's easier said than done. It's easy to stick with what we know. Many of us who were weaned in the print environment have to alter our thinking to include product design, environmental design, and architecture.

But anyone who has kids who are involved in file sharing, Facebook, etc., can see the implications very clearly. It is deciding how to be involved that is the challenge.

KP: How will you connect your *CVA Leaders of Design Series* lecture to the opening of the *365: AIGA Annual Design Exhibition* at the CVA Gallery?

SH: Frankly, I haven't thought about it yet. But it will be a fun challenge.

KP: What is the value of producing this exhibition every year?

SH: It is always useful, and sometimes rueful, to see what's going on each year. But now I think it is the beginning of the end for traditional graphic design (print media and its traditional compositional and typographic models). It will be important to track this change.

You can meet Steve Heller, get his autograph, and soak up his insights and observations on design at the 2007 CVA Leaders of Design Series on November 1. Don't miss this opportunity to listen to graphic design's original marathon man.

Kolean's Biography

Kolean Pitner has 30 years of experience in graphic design, art direction, and corporate communications. Before starting Pitner Design in 1986, she was a graphic designer in New York and Minneapolis. Her passion for design history fostered her teaching career. Kolean has taught History of Graphic Design and History of Illustration at the College of Visual Arts in St. Paul for the past 20 years. She received her Master's degree in communication design from Pratt Institute in New York City. As a member of the Minnesota chapter of AIGA, Kolean is active with the Business Leaders Forum and has served on the chapter board as education director. When she's not trying to keep up with Steve Heller's latest publishing feats, she is trying to keep up with her two active teenagers.