KATHERINE McCOY GALVANIZED THE DESIGN COMMUNITY DURING THE LATE 1970S AND 1980S. UNDER HER LEADERSHIP, EXPERIMENTAL WORK UNDERTAKEN AT CRANBROOK ACADEMY OF ART IN MICHIGAN TRANSFORMED GRAPHIC DESIGN INTO PROVOCATION. Balking against the modern constraints of Swiss typographic systems, her students ushered in a period of complexity, ambiguity, and subjectivity. Moving beyond the more formal radical experimentation of Wolfgang Weingart, McCoy explored "new relationships between text and image." The resulting multilayered, personal work consciously provoked interpretation from the audience. Modernism's emphasis on form gave way to a highly individuated study of expression. Typography became discourse to be evaluated and discussed within the dense cultural context of philosophy, linguistics, and cultural theory. Angry modernists protested the work as "ugly" and "impractical," kicking off the "Legibility Wars" of the 1990s. This uproar drives home the importance of Cranbrook. The work at this small rustbelt school forced the modern tenets underlying our profession to the surface. There they could be critically examined and addressed through fresh postmodern eyes.

TYPOGRAPHY AS DISCOURSE

KATHERINE McCOY WITH DAVID FREJ | 1988

The recent history of graphic design in the United States reveals a series of actions and reactions. The fifties saw the flowering of U.S. graphic design in the New York School. This copy-concept and image-oriented direction was challenged in the sixties by the importation of Swiss minimalism, a structural and typographic system that forced a split between graphic design and advertising. Predictably, designers in the next decade rebelled against Helvetica and the grid system that had become the official American corporate style.

In the early seventies, Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* emerged alongside the study of graphic design history as influences on American graphic design students. Simultaneously, Switzerland's Basel school was transformed by Wolfgang Weingart's syntactical experimentation, an enthusiasm that quickly spread to U.S. schools. Academia's rediscovery of early-twentieth-century Modernism, the appearance of historicized and vernacular architectural postmodernism, and the spread of Weingartian structural expressionism all came together in the graphic explosion labeled as New Wave.

Shattering the constraints of minimalism was exhilarating and far more fun than the antiseptic discipline of the classical Swiss school. After a brief flurry of diatribes in the graphic design press, this permissive new approach

IF DESIGN IS ABOUT LIFE, WHY SHOULDN'T IT HAVE ALL THE COMPLEXITY, VARIETY, CONTRADICTION, AND SUBLIMITY OF LIFE?

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quickly moved into the professional mainstream. Today, however, the maverick has been tamed, codified into a formalistic style that fills our design annuals with endlessly sophisticated renditions. What was originally a revolution is now an institution, as predictable as Beaux Arts architecture. It is the new status quo—the New Academy, as Phil Meggs calls it.

Determining whether New Wave is postmodernism or just late Modernism is important in understanding new work today. New Wave extends the classical Swiss interest in structure to dissections and recombinations of graphic design's grammar. Layered images and textures continue the collage aesthetic begun by Cubism, Constructivism, and Dada. But the addition of vernacular imagery and colors reflects postmodern architecture's discovery of popular culture, and the reintroduction of the classic serif typefaces draws on pre-twentieth-century history. Taken as a whole, however, New Wave's complex arrangements are largely syntactical, abstracting type and images into baroquely Modern compositions.

The New Academy's knowing, often slick iterations have left some graphic designers dissatisfied. As a result, long-neglected design elements, such as semantic expression in form, text, and imagery, are beginning to resurface. Much of this recent work steps outside the lineage of Bauhaus/Basel/New Wave, and, not surprisingly, some of its practitioners come from fine art, photographic, or literary backgrounds rather than graphic design training.

When one looks for experimental typography today, what one finds is not so much new typography as new relationships between text and image. In fact, the typography so celebrated over the past ten years of structuralist dissection is disappearing. The look and structure of the letter is underplayed, and verbal signification, interacting with imagery and symbols, is instead relied upon. The best new work is often aformal and sometimes decidedly anti-formal, despite the presence of some New Wave elements. Reacting to the technical perfection of mainstream graphic design, refinement and mastery are frequently rejected in favor of the directness of unmannered, hand-drawn, or vernacular forms—after all, technical expertise is hardly a revelation anymore. These designers value expression over style.

Here on the edges of graphic design, the presence of the designer is sometimes so oblique that certain pieces would seem to spring directly from our popular culture. Reflecting current linguistic theory, the notion of "authorship" as a personal, formal vocabulary is less important than the dialogue between the graphic object and its audience; no longer are there one-way statements from designers. The layering of content, as opposed to New Wave's

formal layering of collage elements, is the key to this exchange. Objective communication is enhanced by deferred meanings, hidden stories, and alternative interpretations.

Sources for much current experimentation can be traced to recent fine art and photography, and to literary and art criticism. Influenced by French poststructuralism, critics and artists deconstruct verbal language as a filter or bias that inescapably manipulates the reader's response. When this approach is applied to art and photography, form is treated as a visual language to be read as well as seen. Both the texts and the images are to be read in detail, their meanings decoded. Clearly, this intellectualized communication asks a lot of its audience; this is harder work than the formal pleasures of New Wave.

Much new typography is very quiet. Some of the most interesting, in fact, is impossible to show here because of its radically modest scale or its subtle development through a sequence of pages. Some is bold in scale but so matter-of-fact that it makes little in the way of a visual statement. (One designer calls these strictly linguistic intentions "nonallusive" typography.) Typefaces now range from the classics to banal, often industrial sans serifs. Copy is often treated as just that—undifferentiated blocks of words—without the mannered manipulations of New Wave, where sentences and words are playfully exploded to express their parts. Text is no longer the syntactic playground of Weingart's descendants.

These cryptic, poker-faced juxtapositions of text and image do not always strive for elegance or refinement, although they may achieve it inadvertently. The focus now is on expression through semantic content, utilizing the intellectual software of visual language as well as the structural hardware and graphic grammar of Modernism. It is an interactive process that—as art always anticipates social evolution—heralds our emerging information economy, in which meanings are as important as materials.