Inhale, Exhale

Mark Fox, AIGA president 1995 – 1996

“it is often the designer who is transformed

When I assumed the AIGA SF presidency thirteen years ago in 1995, America was in a good mood. A Democrat, Bill Clinton, was in the White House, for the first time since 1981, California gasoline averaged $1.24 per gallon, and Pixar Animation and Walt Disney Pictures released the first CGI animated feature film, *Toy Story*. Business was booming — the last recession was in 1991 — and, though we couldn't know it at the time, the United States stock market was on a bull run that would last another five years. The outlook of the country was decidedly optimistic. (To put this last comment in perspective, the U.S. Consumer Confidence Index monthly average throughout 1995 was 100. As of this writing in April, 2008, the CCI is at a dismal 62.3.)

In 1995 I was 33 and not yet a father. Working six or seven days a week as a designer, an instructor at the California College of Arts and Crafts, and an AIGA board member seemed like a relatively good idea at the time. Like the rest of the country, I was optimistic too, and I directed some of that optimism (or was it naiveté?) toward AIGA SF. Although I had no experience managing organizations or other people — I worked alone at my studio BlackDog — I somehow thought I could reinvent the local AIGA and have fun doing it.

My attitude toward AIGA SF was shaped by a number of biases I developed since arriving in San Francisco from Los Angeles in 1985. Bias number one: the organization was too damn insular. As I recall, every member seemed to be named Michael. (“Michael, I would like you to meet Michael.”) Bias number two: the profession was too damn insular. Whatever appeared in a design annual was recycled *ad nauseam* in ever more diluted forms — at least until the next design annual appeared. Marcel Duchamp wrote that “as a painter it was much better to be influenced by a writer than by another painter,” and I felt the same thinking should be applied to the practice of graphic design. Bias number three: Stephanie Allen, the Chapter Director, must not quit, become disabled, or die.

Apart from keeping Stephanie happy and healthy, my single greatest focus was to open the organization up — to let it breathe, so to speak. (See bias number one, above.) I initially attempted this by increasing the size of the board to include non-designers; increasing membership, especially among students; and by broadening the nature of its events. As for the board, we added three new positions: Design History, a post first held by Professor Steve Reoutt from CCAC; Cultural Liaison, a position created for Aaron Betsky, then Curator of Architecture and Design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and, because I felt students were taken for granted, a Student Board Member. We also recruited new board members from related industries, such as paper companies and printers, a practice I believe was uncommon at the time. (One of these new recruits, Ann Worthington, did a stunning job as Membership Director and, over the two years of my presidency, increased membership 28%.)

The 1995 AIGA/SFMOMA Design Lecture Series, “5ive Iconoclasts,” was my earnest response to Duchamp and bias number two. Rather than feature five established male graphic designers, the series offered an eclectic mix of voices which included: a slightly cranky, Hungarian-speaking editor (Tibor Kalman); a British designer who opened his lecture with slides of his wife's afterbirth (Vaughan Oliver); a radical feminist art collective in faux fur (the Guerrilla Girls); a former typesetter-turned-artist (Jenny Holzer); and an idiosyncratic architectural duo whose buildings were seldom realized (Diller + Scofidio).

In the best sense of the word, the 1995 Design Lecture Series was a mess — and a mass of contradictions. The work was lush, stark, irreverent, considered, juvenile, beautiful, and occasionally brutal. The series sold out the 700-seat theater at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and it received unprecedented coverage in local and national media.

Did I mention bias number four? Content before eye candy?

In 1995 AIGA SF didn't have a web presence. Our newsletter, *Snappy Patter*, was renamed *Vox Pop* for which board member Juliana Van Horn served as editor and designer. Juliana succeeded in publishing four issues and, in my opinion, it was the best AIGA newsletter in the country at the time. Rather than simply promote events, we actually created content worth reading.

Every issue of *Vox Pop* featured an interview. Lucille Tenazas spoke with Aaron Betsky, who noted that “Design is a way of re-imagining, re-thinking, re-writing, and re-making the physical world we inhabit.” David Lance Goines told Michael Schwab that “I came here (the Bay Area) because I didn't want to be in a place that was flat — intellectually flat.” In his interview with Juliana Van Horn, Steve Reoutt proclaimed, “I am a big believer in a good education. I don't believe in God, but I believe in education because I know it works. It works every single time.”

Of all of the articles we ran, however, I am most proud of the remembrances we published in honor of Saul Bass, who died in 1996. Juliana Van Horn, Lori Rosenwasser, Stephanie Allen, and I conducted interviews with seven of Bass' colleagues, including Steve Heller, Paul Rand, Michael Vanderbyl, Lou Danziger, and Rudolph de Harak. In reading their recollections, it is clear that Saul was not only admired for his work, but that he was loved for his humanity.

We concluded the piece on Saul Bass with a quote of his that I find useful as we consider the future of our profession and of organizations like the AIGA. In a talk given to the New York Type Directors Club in 1959, Bass said that “What we do is important to the extent that people are important. Perhaps one of our problems is to learn how to provide people with experiences that open them up to growth. I suppose it is important to make people feel something — not just dangle an image before their eyes, but open up a successful communication and, if possible, transform somebody's attitude toward something.” If I might expand on these thoughts, I would add that in the process of trying to lead people to feel something — to transform them — it is often times the designer (or instructor, or volunteer) who is transformed.