

DESIGN IS PLAY

WHAT IS THE REASON FOR THE NAME OF YOUR STUDIO?

“Play” can be understood as freedom of movement within a defined space. It can also be understood as freedom of thought within the confines of a particular problem. We believe that design is playful when it succeeds in balancing structure and fluidity, logic with emotion.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU HAD A STUDIO?

Design is Play is a creative collaboration between Angie Wang and Mark Fox, now in its fourth year. Prior to this, Mark worked under the name BlackDog for more than twenty years.

HOW MANY EMPLOYEES (FULL-TIME AND FREELANCE)?

Angie and Mark are the only employees.

HOW MANY PRINCIPALS AND EMPLOYEES ARE DESIGNERS?

We are both designers and educators. Angie is more type-and systems-oriented; Mark is more symbol-oriented.

OTHERS?

No.

DO YOU HAVE A STRATEGIST OR ACCOUNT PERSON ON STAFF?

No.



ABOUT: For the CraftForward symposium we juxtaposed two square glyphs: a circa 1909 typographer's ornament (symbolizing “craft”), and a QR code linked to the symposium website (symbolizing “forward”). In this context the QR code functions as a modern ornament, but one with embedded content.
PHOTO: Mark Serr

DESCRIBE YOUR CLIENTELE.

Our clients tend to be entrepreneurs and, as a result, they are curious, intelligent, informed, and decisive. They appreciate fine food and wine which, believe it or not, is not that great of a leap from fine typography or fine printing. Our clients appreciate nuance and quality.

ARE YOU ATTEMPTING TO BROADEN YOUR CLIENT BASE?

Always!

DO YOU SPECIALIZE? OR GENERALIZE?

We specialize in working with certain kinds of clients. They tend to be small or closely held businesses, and we work directly with the owners. The medium that we work in varies according to the particular design problem and our clients' needs.

We know how to problem-solve and how to make images and forms. As long as we understand the parameters of a given medium, our skills are typically translatable.

ARE YOU PRIMARILY PRINT OR VIRTUAL, OR BOTH?

We design for both print and screen, although we have a particular love of the tactile experience that printing (or signage) offers. Whenever possible, we do our best to deliver a sensory experience through materiality.

One example: In our work for the CCA CraftForward symposium, we combined foil stamping, letterpress printing, offset lithography, laser printing, and screen printing with a mix of substrates, including chipboard, blotter paper, newsprint, DayGlo paper, and cotton organza. While the budget was lean, we nonetheless designed a range of pieces that cumulatively created a rich experience for the symposium attendees.

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO START A STUDIO?

We want the freedom to succeed—and to fail. We can't realize our creative vision while executing someone else's ideas.

HOW DID YOU DETERMINE WHERE YOUR STUDIO WOULD BE LOCATED?

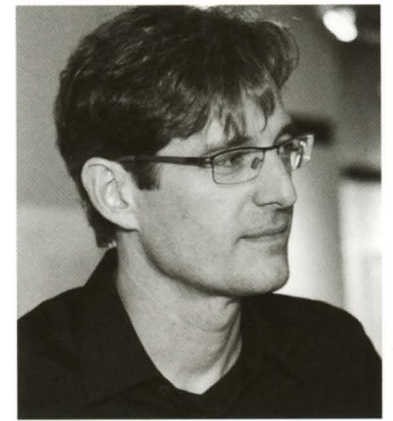
We love living and working in San Francisco. We are in the midst of a vibrant visual, literary, culinary, and technological culture, and our work is influenced by the particularities (and peculiarities) of this culture.

We are part of a community of visual artists who made a choice to leave somewhere else to settle in the Bay Area. Some of these folks include: Bob Afuldish (Ohio), Dennis Crowe (North Carolina), Vivienne Flesher (New York), David Lance Goines (Oregon), Steve Lyons (Massachusetts), Michael Mabry (Illinois), Jason Munn (Wisconsin), Ward Schumaker (Nebraska), and Michael Schwab (Oklahoma). Although stylistically different from our own, the work of our friends continues to inspire and challenge us.

DESCRIBE YOUR AESTHETIC, STYLISTIC (EVEN PHILOSOPHIC) APPROACH TO DESIGN.

Much of graphic design is considered ephemera, the origin of which—“ephemeron”—refers to the mayfly and its notoriously short lifespan. Our approach to design is partially driven by a desire to make the ephemeral less so: to extend the life of our work through thoughtfulness, functionality, and craft. All of this takes time, of course, and so our approach is slow, but we don't consider this a shortcoming in the least.

In an effort to craft our work, we place great emphasis on working by hand and not letting software



PRINCIPALS
MARK FOX
ANGIE WANG
FOUNDED
2008
LOCATION
SAN FRANCISCO, CA
EMPLOYEES
2 FULL-TIME

become the default design tool. We still hand-ink much of our work with a Rapidograph inking pen, and we relish the physicality and tempo of this process. (By contrast, we find drawing on the computer to be a simulation of drawing.) We also hand-set type from old type specimen books and shoot our own photographs for various projects. We are committed to authoring our own images whenever we can and when appropriate.

Finally, we try to utilize vendors who value traditional methods of "making." For example, New Bohemia Signs specializes in painting signs by hand; Acme Screen Printing still hand-pulls screen prints; and Dependable Letterpress lives up to the promise of its name. If we as a profession (and a society) want a robust print and craft culture, then we need to support the printers and craftspeople who are still in business. We can't blame others for the loss of printing (or books) if we ourselves don't buy print.

HOW MUCH FREEDOM DO YOU ALLOW INDIVIDUAL DESIGNERS?

We allow ourselves complete freedom.

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE COLLABORATION AS PRACTICED IN YOUR STUDIO?

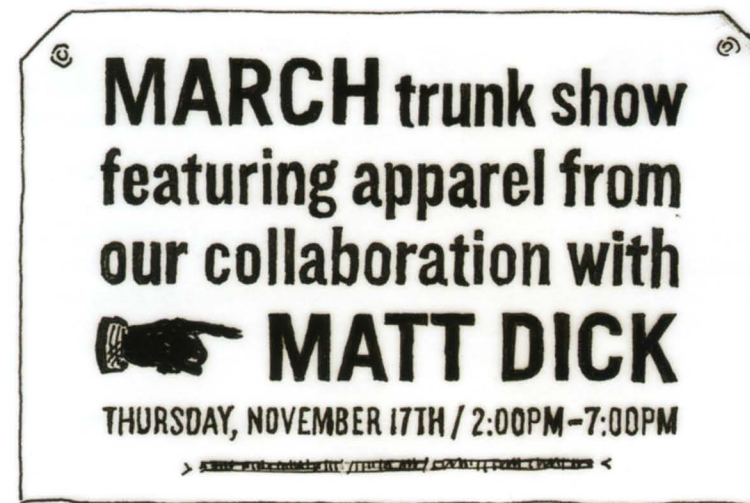
Our collaboration is fluid, and we regularly critique and edit each other's work, whether that work is visual or textual. At its most liquid, the process of collaborating yields hybridized results that surprise both of us.

COULD YOUR STUDIO GET ALONG WITHOUT YOU FOR ANY PERIOD OF TIME?

Would the Catholic Church get along without the Pope?



March Pantry packaging PHOTO: Kirk Amyx



(TOP & MIDDLE) ABOUT: Our original sketch using hand-traced type for an invitation to be screen-printed on a Tyvek apron. The sketch is 3½ inches wide, but the client liked it so much that it became the basis for the final 23 x 35 inch piece. CLIENT: March Pantry PHOTO: Mark Serr (BOTTOM) Anson Mills identity

DO YOU HAVE A LONG-TERM PLAN FOR SUSTAINABILITY OR GROWTH?

The long-term plan is to find more clients who share our values. Once we find them, we will stick to them like boll weevils. (Only well-behaved boll weevils, of course.)

WHAT IS THE MOST CHALLENGING PART OF HAVING A STUDIO?

Paul Rand noted that design is a conflict between form and content, form being the problem. For those who choose to operate a design studio, this is but the first of many conflicts!

The most challenging part of running a studio is working with other people in all capacities: as co-workers, as clients, as vendors. Graphic design is not a solitary pursuit but a collaborative one, and opportunities for miscommunication (and conflict) are legion.

DESCRIBE THE MOST SATISFYING PROJECT(S) OF THE PAST YEAR.

Anson Mills of Columbia, South Carolina is unique in contemporary food culture: They specialize in growing, harvesting, and cold-milling organic heirloom grains—all dating from the antebellum South and bred exclusively for flavor. They are zealously committed to regional authenticity and to the resuscitation and repatriation of near-extinct varieties of corn, rice, and wheat.

We are honored to work with Anson Mills, and we proudly serve their grains to our children. To date we have redesigned the Anson Mills identity and packaging system, and we are currently at work on a redesign of their website.