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Task: Question 3: Investigate the digital graphic design revolution of the mid 1980s.

Discuss the work of 3 designers who embraced this new technology to challenge the past and define the future.

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The mid-1980s saw the digital graphic design revolution in which major transformations took place regarding traditional methods of design and their shifting towards a more digitally focused process. This timeframe introduced digital tools and personal computers, fundamentally changing how designers worked, raising questions on how authentic and moral these new tools were, and how they would affect traditional craftsmanship. Juxtaposing this, positive views on how this would open design up to a plethora of new opportunities in terms of freedom and experimentation also circled. Designers such as April Greiman, Neville Brody, and Paula Scher took advantage of this new technology, producing works that would forever change how design would be defined. In the long term this transformative period not only changed the identity of design but had an impact on socioeconomics, effecting design indefinitely.

This essay will explore the historical context of this period, focusing on April Greiman, Neville Brody, and Paula Scher, and how the digital design revolution changed the design indefinitely.

Historical Context

The digital design revolution began with the introduction of the Apple Macintosh in 1984 and software such as PageMaker, and in later years, Adobe Illustrator (1987) and Photoshop (1990). With the newly accessible Macintosh's GUI and mouse, designers were now easily able to manipulate graphics digitally, which was a major shift from the more difficult and tedious analogue production that preceded it. This now faster and cheaper digitally based system allowed designers to have more freedom and flexibility regarding the production process. This led to more experimentation and the resulting

rise of new trends such as distorted type, digital collage, the ‘grunge’ movement, and the more contemporary ‘minimalism’ movement.

According to Poyner (2003)

“The last twenty-five years have seen profound changes in the field of graphic communication. One by one, the old certainties about the techniques and purposes of graphic design have been questioned and torn apart. With the international take-up of the new technology in the 1990s, there was an explosion of creativity... but as a professional activity, graphic design faces an uncertain future now that the new technology has opened up graphic production and expression to many more people.” (Poyner, R. 2003, p. 17.)

As said by Poyner, not everyone was convinced by the digital design revolution, with many viewing it at the time, and even now, in a negative light. Many thought that design as a craft was lost to these new, easy to use, contemporary tools, which also lead to an oversaturation in the industry and many saying design had become quantity over quality. Juxtaposing this, however, were many designers that thrived from this revolution, becoming major influences in the industry to this day, one being April Greiman.

April Greiman

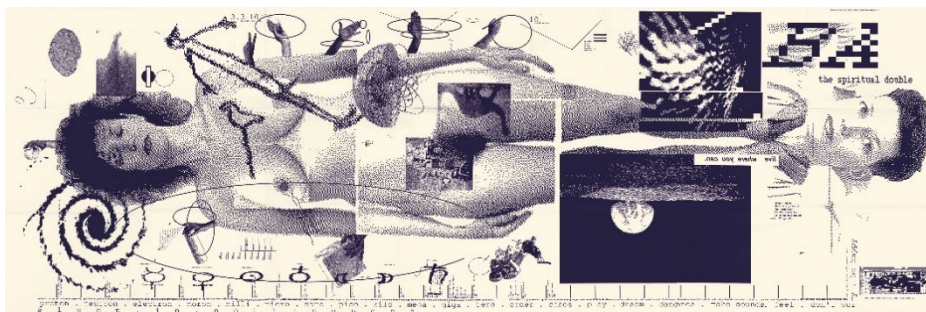


Figure 1, Greiman, A. (1986), *does it make sense?*

April Greiman was one of the first designers to take the Macintosh fully on board, utilising its technologies to broaden visual language. Rather than seeing this new technology as a threat, Greiman embraced this shift from analogue to digital, seeing the opportunity and possibilities that this held. One of Greiman's most well-known pieces is 'Does It Make Sense' (Fig 1), a six-foot-long poster that folded out of a 32-page magazine, which Greiman produced on the Mac using Macpaint for *Design quarterly* in 1986. This piece was seen as controversial at the time for more than one reason, one being that the piece was too personal, being a nude self-portrait, and the overarching issue that it was produced with the use of the Mac, which at the time, its technology was seen as underdeveloped and unprofessional. The piece made use of a new concept that Greiman defined as "hybrid imagery", referring to the layering of analogue and digital art forms. Greiman utilised early digitisation methods to transform physical media such as photographs and paper cutouts, and layer them using the Apple Mac to create a sense of three-dimensionality in her pieces. She would then add different distortion effects, type, and shapes, as well as intentionally highlight pixelated imperfections in statement that digital tools could produce quality works. "The image deliberately looks as if it contains "mistakes" in its composition, lending it an energy that is often lacking in the products of the International Style". (Eskilson, S. 2007, p. 350.) As the Mac was in its early stages at this time it was deemed unfit for professional use for reasons such as low resolution, however Greiman utilised these inconsistencies as a part of her aesthetic. In doing this she was able to effectively integrate analogue techniques and digital systems to produce unique pieces that defied the fears and threats others had regarding the digital design revolution and shifted them into opportunity and possibility. In my view, April Greiman is a significant figure in

conveying, through her bold visual language, that analogue and digital ways of design can coincide, and be used in conjunction with each other to produce distinctive and communicative pieces. With her embrace of digital tools, I feel that Greiman and her work was able to contribute to the rewriting of the boundaries of graphic design, and ultimately highlight the importance of innovation and adaptability regarding staying relevant in a contemporary world of design

Neville Brody



Figure 2, Brody, N. (1983), *The Face* magazine (No. 42)

FF Blur

Figure 3, Brody, N. (1991), *FF Blur*

Neville Brody was another influential figure of the digital design revolution known for his experimental and unconventional approach to graphic design in the 1980s. Brody was again, another of the first few pivotal designers who embraced the digital design revolution, seeing digital technologies as a means to push the limits of typography and visual communication. Brody has a background in magazine design and typography being the designer behind magazines such as *'The Face'* (Fig 2) as well as iconic typefaces such as 'FF Blur' (Fig 3), 'FF Gothic', and 'Arcadia', helping to shape the early digital design revolution and the rise of modernist editorial design and expressive type. *'The Face'* (Fig 2) was a British youth culture, music, and fashion magazine the Body was art director for from 1981 to 1986 in which shaped the visual culture of the 1980s. Being given complete freedom over the magazine Brody used this as an opportunity to experiment with his radical and unconventional ideas in which stemmed from the capabilities of the Mac, becoming one of the first most influential designers to use this new technology for professional uses. Brody challenged conventional design approaches and saw typography as a means of expression rather than solely a way to give information, creating typefaces such as 'Industria' for 'The Face' giving it a unique visual identity that stood out amongst competitors and design overall. Moreover, Brody built layouts in which challenged traditional magazine production, placing text horizontally or in shapes, using a range of text sizes, and increased kerning in text to slow down readers and allow them to appreciate more what they are reading. These innovative approaches made significant impacts on the industry, branding *'The Face'* (Fig 2) as the most influential and contemporary youth magazine of the 1980s.

One lesser-known fact about Brody is his experimentation with "generative" design in the 1980s where Brody worked with "algorithmic typography" to create unpredictable

letterforms. For example, Brody's typeface 'FF Blur' (Fig 3), one of his most influential as mentioned previously, took the simplistic letter forms of 'Akzidenz-Grotesk and repeatedly blurring and increasing the stroke weight, then vectorising, to erode the sharp simplistic edges of the original type. Due to Brody's systematic approach to this, he was able to keep the legibility and cohesivity of the type. Many tried replicating this with the impression it was done with ease; however, it could not be replicated to Brody's standard, and then in 2011 it was permanently added to the Museum of Modern Art's collection.

Overall, Brody had a major impact on the design industry, embracing experimentation and new technologies, and encouraging a new generation of designers to push the boundaries of creative thinking, embrace risk, and to think outside of the commercial and conventional box.

According to Brody in an interview (2013)

"We don't think of the industrial revolution as the steam revolution. Steam enabled the industrial revolution. Digital is just steam for the 21st century. It allows you to drive engines and forge new models for design and distribution. Steam enabled transport. Digital does the same but in a knowledge space. It's a creative and a knowledge revolution – almost like a renaissance." (Brody, N. 2013)

In my judgement I feel that Neville Brody has had a lasting influence on the industry and well demonstrates how its crucial, as well as inevitable, that designers will need to adapt and move away from primarily traditional tools and trends in the contemporary world of design in regard having a career in design, but also to be able to experiment and innovate outside of conventional constraints.

Paula Scher

THE PUBLIC THEATER

Figure 4, Scher, P. (1994), *The Public Theatre*



Figure 5 Scher, P. (2015) *USA Counties and Zip Codes* Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery, New York.

Paula Scher was another dominant figure at the time of the digital design revolution known for her typographic approaches, similarly to Neville Brody. Scher's earlier works featured album covers which she did for CBS and Atlantic Records in the 1970s. Notable covers include 'The Rolling Stones (Still Life)', Eric Gale (*Ginseng Woman*)', and

'Boston (Boston)'. Due to the lack of technology at the time, these pieces were done through analogue methods such as by hand drawing type, mechanicals and paste-ups, as well as through collaborations with illustrators and photographers.

According to an interview with Scher (2013)

“New York has made my work look the way it does. People are impacted by where they’re from. Some of it is the influence of their collective community, and some of it is the landscape. A lot of my work is very architectural; I use type in all caps and make it long and thin, powerful and loud. My work is structured like New York and is very gridded and sometimes angled.” (Scher, P. 2013)

Scher took great inspiration from her time in New York, being her most significant influence, with the strong density and intensity of her work stemming from this. In addition, approaches such as ‘Russian constructivism’, and ‘art deco’ also played a roll, giving her works a contemporary touch, overall, making for expressive and dynamic compositions that became quintessential in the industry to this Day.

During the 1980s, when advances were made in technology, Scher moved over from analogue tools over to digital, though Scher highlights that she may have changed the process, however, the fundamentals of design remained with the concept coming from the designer not the machine. Scher’s visual Identity for ‘The Public Theatre’ (Fig 4) in 1994 was of her most significant works in relation to using digital tools, where she rejected modernist views on design, with the identity featuring bold and sporadically placed type, accompanied by a bright colour scheme. The work, drawing its inspiration from ‘Dadaism’, and ‘Russian Constructivism’, proved to be a paradigmatic use of typography and its uses beyond simply conveying information. Scher greatly disliked ‘corporate’ style and rebelled against it, instead bringing back and utilising older

typefaces such as 'Art Deco', and manipulating its shapes, again, seeing type beyond its functions, much like Brody.

In conjunction with this, the 1990s featured Scher's 'Map Paintings' in which partly took inspiration from her father's work as a photogrammetric engineer for the U.S Geological Survey, with him stating all maps are distorted, they are not literal fact, In addition to her time in art school where she was taught Swiss design – design that favoured clear, ridged grid systems – design that she was inspired to reject and juxtapose. These works featured hand-painted distorted typography that layered and weaved chaotically, creating maps of the world, and on a smaller scale, places such as the USA (Fig 5), Africa, Europe, and China. Scher believes that maps are portrayed as being factual however due to their inconsistencies in what is labelled, enlarged, and highlighted, she feels that there is bias and people should reflect on this. By purposely over-exaggerating these inconsistencies, Scher was able to convey the subjectivity of geography and how the world is inevitably shaped by perception.

Overall, I feel Scher is inspiring in her approach to the digital design revolution and how she altered the industry of design, refusing traditionalist approaches that defined it.

Scher shifted from Swiss design and pushed boundaries, encompassing experimentation and bold visual language, seen not only through her album covers and visual identities, but even when returning to analogue methods with her map painting, and how she carried digital trends back into analogue means.

Conclusion

The digital design revolution of the 1980s was the most transformative movement in the entirety of visual communication thus far, with designers such as April Greiman, Neville Brody, and Paula Scher all contributing to the reshaping of the industry and how we use digital tools for design in the contemporary world. As a collective, these designers played essential roles in redefining design and demonstrating that though there were initial judgements and fears behind the rise of the digital era, that design isn't the tools that are used alone, but the mindsets of the designers, who devised new trends and aesthetics, and ways to utilise these new tools, which inevitably propelled design towards a more dynamic and expressive era. Though these designers worked together in a sense, they all approached the digital design revolution contrarily. Greiman was revolutionary in her use of the Apple Mac, utilising it in a professional sense, which was looked down upon at the time, creating complex compositions made up of a range of physical and digital medias. On the other hand, Brody approached this digital movement through typographic means. Brody did this by challenging how far he could deconstruct type whilst keeping its clarity and legibility. He did however approach this in a way similarly to Greiman, in his way of experimentation and the breaking of traditional, Swiss design rules. Paula Scher was another designer who also rejected traditionalist design, with her time in art school driving her dislike for it. Alternatively to Brody and Greiman however, Scher selectively used digital tools, though alike to Brody used them for typographic means, with her uses of it mainly focused in brand identity. She did however state that computers often made new designers "lazy", and that designers should always start with sketching, bringing a slight negativity to the use of digital tools, unlike Brody, and Scher. As a whole, these designers embraced the digital design

revolution, albeit in a range of different ways, but ultimately reshaped the design industry and graphic communication in the contemporary era.

Overall, most viewed the digital design revolution positively, however there were those who thought otherwise and were fearful of unemployment. With the message being anyone could design with these new technologies, many overlooked the fact that in order to be successful, one required talent and skill, and although this technology revolutionized the industry, those who did not have the eye for design were unable to utilise this new equipment effectively. Though many viewed the revolution as a way to replace designers, this being wrong, many did however lose their jobs as feared. Jobs formerly only possible by hand such as platemakers, type setters, and production artists, faded over time, with this process ultimately incorporated into the designer's design process. I feel this can be compared in some respects to the rise of artificial intelligence in the current period design. With the uprising of AI and its use within the industry, many fear that it will take over entirely. Despite this there is evidence to suggest people's admiration for the craft overwrites this in the fact that uses of AI within the industry often garnish negative responses. An example can be seen with the 2024 and 2025 'Coca-Cola' Christmas adverts being made entirely with AI and receiving extensive backlash, with people highlighting that high profit companies especially, should be paying for high quality work by talented designers and not outputting extremely low-quality work made cheaply and ineffectively.

Overall, April Greiman, Neville Brody, and Paula Scher are three definitive designers that greatly influenced the design industry regarding their works that pushed the boundaries of design and redefined the industry irreversibly as a result of the digital design

revolution. With these new powerful technologies, designers were able to experiment and visualise ideas with ease, expanding the industry of graphic design and its possibilities. Though designers feared digital technologies initially, ultimately, they have empowered designers, giving them the means to experiment, push boundaries, and as a whole advance the field of graphic design to what it is today.

As said by Kranzberg, “Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.” (Kranzberg 1986, p. 545)

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