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Research In Context – Essay

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 world of graphic design experienced dramatic and lasting change from the mid-1980s with the release of the Apple Macintosh (the Mac) computer in 1984 - the first graphics-orientated personal computer which led to the rise of desktop publishing. This coincided with a change in attitude towards graphic design at the time, questioning the taught conventions of the past they embraced this new technology as a tool for design that broke boundaries. This essay will consider the contribution of three graphic designers – April Greiman, Rudy VanderLans and David Carson - whose work was integral to the initiation and momentum of the digital design revolution. Exploring the capabilities of the Apple Mac, the work they produced gave a whole new perspective on what design was and how it could be done which continues to have a lasting impact today.

After many years of work being produced under the influence modernist and Swiss style design in the decades post WW2, the new generation of designers started to “search for fresh approaches to design” (Müller, 2021, p. 210). Feeling restricted by the grid layouts, limited type options and the overall simplicity of designs, they started to experiment with new visual styles.

Swiss designer, Wolfgang Weingart was one of the first people to start experimenting with pushing the boundaries in design. The influences of Swiss design can be seen in the basis of his work, however, he is starting to break away from it by exploring new ways that typography and image could be placed on a page by not following a grid. While teaching at the Basel School of Design many of his students, including April Greiman, were inspired by his alternative approach to design and explored these ideas in their own work. This led to the emergence of New Wave design where designers “gave more attention to how the message was delivered, exploring the ways in which altering this communication could augment the message and add more information” instead of “focusing solely on the message to be communicated itself” (Slattery 2021).

The opportunity to break away from Swiss design principles was further increased when the Apple Macintosh (the Mac) personal computer – the first with a graphic interface - was released in 1984. Despite much outspoken rejection of this new technology by established designers, some saw its potential, and although fairly limited in what could be achieved with it in its infancy, they started to experiment with it and integrate its use into their design practice. Over the next decade the rise of computer-based design and desktop publishing and their potential embedded the revolution, leading to working digitally becoming the core tool in the practice of graphic design that is still the case today.

One designer who was at the forefront of the digital design revolution is April Greiman.

As one of the first people to use the Apple Mac for her work, she helped to change the landscape for how graphic design was done and showed the potential of early personal computers being used as a tool for design.

After gaining an undergraduate degree in graphic design in the late 60s she moved to Switzerland in the early 70s to study typography at the Allgemeine Kunstgewerberschule, Basel. While there she was taught by Wolfgang Weingart who encouraged his students to “experiment and try different things and think about type, not merely as the little column of stuff you put at the bottom of a page or flow into a grid system, but as something that could be expressive.” (Greiman cited in Miller, 2019) as a way to explore beyond the constraints of Swiss style design.

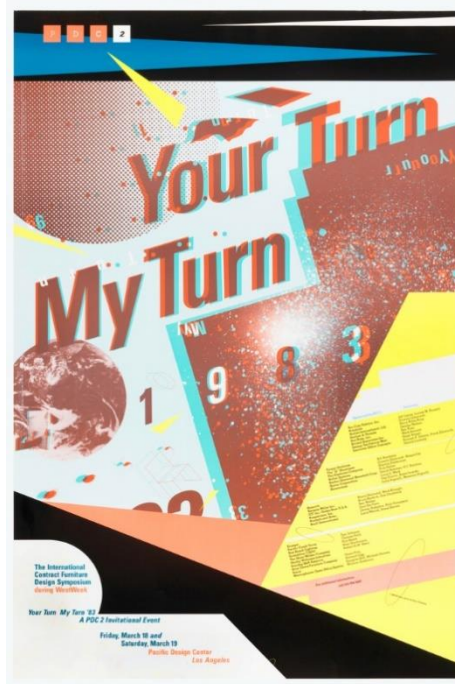


Figure 1, 'Your Turn, My Turn', April Greiman, 1983

Weingart's teaching encouraged her "to see type as image." (Greiman cited in Miller, 2019). On returning to America Greiman took these ideas forward into her own design practice, creating a design style that embraced the changing ideas in the design world and explored new ways to create imagery. Where many of her contemporaries were against the technological developments at the time, Greiman believed that there was potential for their use in design rather than technology posing a threat. This can be seen in her early work where she "made use of pixelation and other digitization "errors" as integral parts of digital art" (Famous Graphic Designers.org, 2014).

Although she was generally open to the new technological developments that could be used for her work, she was initially hesitant about using the Apple Mac for design. However on attending an early TED conference in 1984, she heard a talk about the computer given by one of its inventors, Greiman saw that it had potential as a tool that could be used for design in a way that hadn't been available before (Slattery, 2021).

Her initial curiosity and play when using the Mac soon led to it becoming an integral part of her design practice and eventually she moved to creating using only computer-aided methods. The sense of possibility that was presented through this new way to design encouraged Greiman to exploit it to its full potential and as a result show others that it was a tool that could be used for design despite what more traditional designers thought.

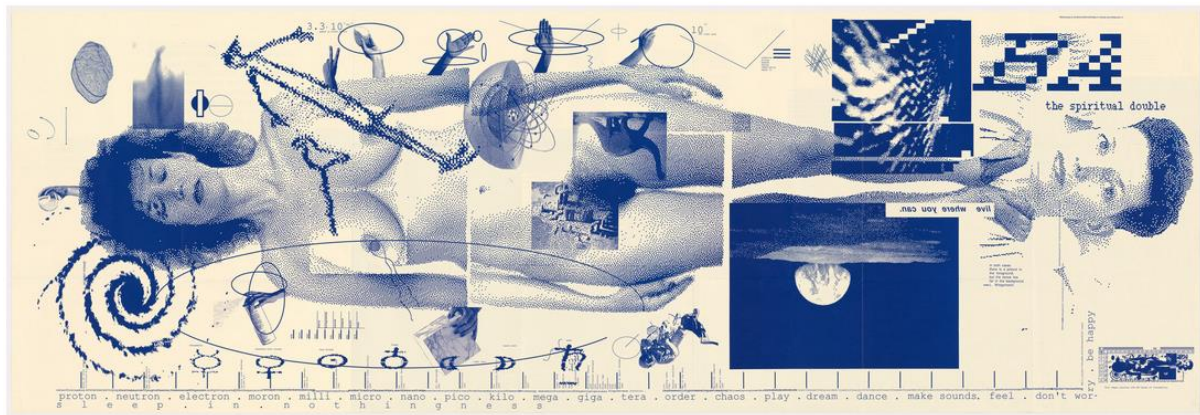


Figure 2, 'Does It Make Sense?', *Design Quarterly* no. 133, April Greiman, 1986

In 1986 Greiman was commissioned to design issue 133 for *Design Quarterly*. A magazine started in 1946 which sought to showcase the work of “contemporary architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, and product and graphic design” (Blauvelt, 2014). For her issue, rather than showcasing her previous work she decided to create something new that was made using only digital methods, whilst also questioning what a magazine was. Instead of producing a typical magazine that consists of multiple pages, she opted to make her issue as a 3-foot wide fold out poster. Combining photos, video stills, type and digital illustration the piece, titled ‘Does It Make Sense’, explores what design is and where it comes from. Although the specific subject matter did not appeal to many designers at the time, the fact that the whole piece was created digitally showed that there was possibility in using computers and helped to start to change opinions on the use of designing digitally.

Her sense of curiosity and persistence when using digital methods whilst being “intent on finding ways to circumvent the limits imposed by the medium rather than working within them” (Slattery, 2021) helped her to pave the way forward for digital graphic design, allowing designers to see that they can create in new ways and question what design is through their work, as opposed to following the ‘rules’ presented to them by those who adhered to the predeceasing dominant design movements of Modernism and the Swiss style.

In “1988, Greiman expressed an obligation to “take on the challenge of continuing forward toward a new landscape of communications.”” (Meggs, 2016, p.573) confirming her desire for an active role in defining the future of graphic design for which, within her practice, the computer had become central.

Dutch graphic designer Rudy VanderLans co-founded the magazine *Emigre* in 1984, subsequently running it with his wife, Zuzana Licko, the resident type designer. Initially a broader arts magazine, in time its focus shifted to graphic design, incorporating custom fonts designed on the Apple Mac by Licko. As print publication it was distributed widely, from Britain to Japan, bringing greater audiences to the changes that were occurring and contributing to the international revolution in digital design.

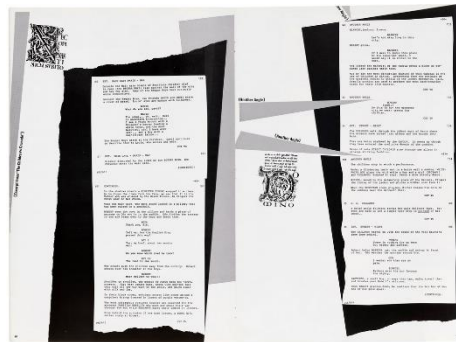


*Figure 3, A Magazine for Exiles, pg 12 & 13,
Rudy VanderLans, 1984*

As VanderLans explains (2024) “Originally dreamed up as a showcase for creatives who found themselves immersed in foreign cultures” it was a way to get their own work out into the world when it wasn’t being published and galleries didn’t want to display it. The early editions of the publication contained “everything from poetry to short stories to architectural projects and photography. In fact, anything but graphic design.” (VanderLans cited in Thrift, 1992). However, being creative director and editor gave VanderLans the freedom to play with the look of the magazine and it was designed in a way that was highly experimental, as can be seen in figure 3, a spread from the first edition.

Unconventional at the time for this type of publication, it quickly attracted the interest of designers not for its subject matter, but rather for its visual approach to the layout of its covers and pages.

The magazine had already established a distinctive design style prior to the introduction of the Apple Mac. However VanderLans and Licko became early adopters of using computers as a design tool recognising the opportunities they presented for working with type compared to the constraints of

typewriters, lettraset or using a professional typesetter that came before. Although there were many limitations to what could be done on the Mac design-wise when it was released, Licko was able to use the personal computer technology to design fonts which gave *Emigre* even more creative freedom of expression. “As there was never a typesetting budget, we always had to rely on a typewriter to do our typesetting. So when the Macintosh came out, all of a sudden we could render our own fonts and have a choice of typeface. It was really just a step up from the typewriter, though it allowed us to play around more, to experiment more” (VanderLans cited in Thrift, 1992). As Kleinpeter (2010) said, “Computer software allowed a designer, trained or untrained, to change the shape of letters. Digital typography transferred control to the designer”. Additionally, it gave *Emigre* another form of control – financial independence - it was much more cost effective as due to the fonts being created by Licko herself, they did not have to purchase them.

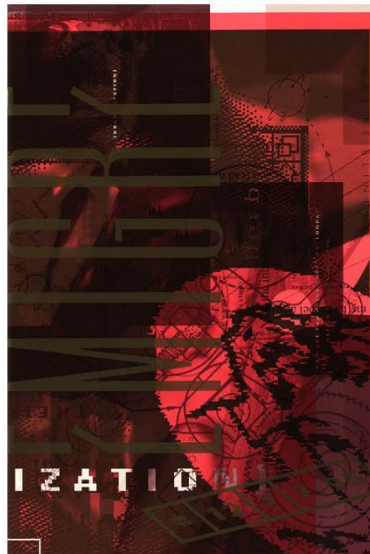


Figure 4, *Emigre* #12: *Press Time!*, cover page, Rudy VanderLans, 1989

Emigre's creation and use of their own typefaces increasingly drew attention to the magazine from graphic designers, out of the curiosity surrounding these new and unique fonts that no one had seen

before as well as their innovative layouts. “By issue #10 (the Cranbrook issue), according to VanderLans, *Emigre* “had unofficially become a graphic design journal.” (cited in Venezky. 2024) “The magazine became, in essence, about itself [...] Soon, the visual relationship between text and image took center stage” (VanderLans, cited in Venezky, 2024).

As many designers moved to working digitally, *Emigre* received an increasing number of requests to use their fonts. VanderLans and Licko realised computer technology meant that they could create copies of their fonts and share them – this led to the start of the *Emigre Font* type foundry - and licensing became an important source of income, sustaining the creative work of the magazine. The magazine ended in 2005. However as digital design had now completely changed the design world and most people were using computers, *Emigre Font* has continued to release new and unique fonts for designers as there is always an appetite for fonts.

Looking back, VanderLans has reflected that the magazine helped to give “a behind the scenes look, a first-hand report from the designers who were responsible for the changes that were taking place within the profession” (Dohman, 2010) and in this way it is both a record from the past and an on-going inspiration with wide impact.

American designer David Carson's experimental and unconventional designs changed the face of graphic design for many people in the 80s and early 90s.

As a sociology teacher and a professional surfer, Carson came to graphic design later on in life compared to many and did not have a formal graphic design training. After attending a two-week workshop during the school summer holidays at the University of Arizona, he made the choice to quit teaching and pursue his growing interest in design.



Figure 5, *Hanging at Carmine Street* – *Beach Culture Magazine*, David Carson, 1991

Using his connections in the world of surfing, Carson was able to begin designing for magazines relating to outdoor activities. He started at the magazine *Transworld Skateboarding* in 1984 and then moved on to *Beach Culture* in 1988. With both publications he was given the freedom to design however he wanted. Coming to these magazines with no formal training, Carson ended up learning how to design and developed his experimental visual style on the job.

On entering the design world at this time, Carson was able to integrate the use of the computer as a tool in his design practice from the beginning.

Asked about his approach to design in 2014, Carson stated that with no formal training "I never learned all the things I'm not supposed to do, I just did what made sense to me." (Butler). This meant he

designed however he felt best worked for the piece without being constrained by ideas that came before. The creative freedom he was awarded when working for the magazines early in his career, allowed him to create highly experimental pieces that were visually different to what was around at the time. Despite not following any formal design rules, Carson came to each design with a desire for “the work to connect with people on an emotional level” whilst trying to “reinforce visually what’s written, spoken or sung.” (2014). Striving to inspire a human connection with his work may link back to his interest in sociology, as well as helping to give the viewer a deeper understanding of what they are looking at through their reactions to it.

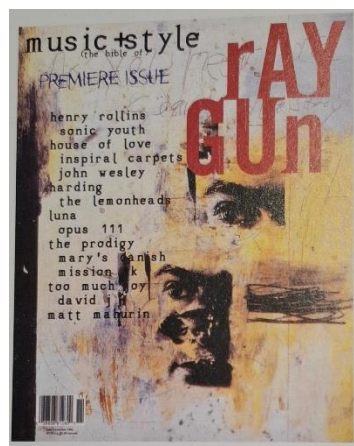


*Figure 6, Ray Gun Magazine Cover,
David Carson, 1992*

Carson gained wider attention for his design work as art director for the new music magazine *Ray Gun* in 1992. His distinct style of design drew contrasting opinions from those in the design world - some loved how wildly different it was, others absolutely hated it. Although *Ray Gun* was a publication whose content focused on music, its main audience became those who bought it to see Carson’s design work.

The growing interest in Carson’s work and experimental design at the time led corporate America to rethink their visual identities in order to increase their audience, particularly with younger people. As a result, Carson was hired by many companies, and his distinct visual approach helped them get more attention and allowed his style become part of the mainstream design world whilst also inspiring many

new designers to begin pushing and breaking the boundaries of what they had been taught design should be. "Carson became the next link in a chain of visionaries who ignored conventional expectations and sparked a design revolution." (Kleinpeter, 2010, p. 202)

Whilst these three graphic designers embraced the emerging computer technology of the mid 1980s in different ways, they all explored its potential in their design practice and the ways they used the technology within their work drew the attention of a wide audience, contributing to the digital design revolution.

Although Greiman and VanderLans worked to create designs which went against the Swiss style, contrasting with Carson who was not actively aware of the 'rules' of design due to his lack of formal training, all three helped to open up the question as to what graphic design is in relation to what the outcome is trying to say. By pushing forward with their ideas producing interesting and effective which gained attention showed there was an audience with an appetite of a new way of thinking which can still be seen inspiring designers to this day.

The integration of the new digital design methods into their practise exhibited the beginning of the possibilities that it offered for design that have expanded and increased with more designers working digitally alongside the constant technological developments in today's world.

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Figure 6: Ray Gun Magazine Cover, David Carson, 1992. Photo from pg. 314 of Müller, J. and Wiedemann, J. (2021) *The History of Graphic Design. Vol 2: 1960 – Today*