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## **Introduction**

The graphic design revolution of the 1980s was more than just an evolution in the tools used by creatives. It forced people to move with the times, or to be left behind.

Typically, creating artwork was a tedious but rewarding process that involved working with Letraset sheets and manual typesetting, photographers and printing companies.

Design prior to this decade relied on precision, and creating artwork was a time-consuming process, and was not easily changed once made. There was a certain sense of appreciation for the time, effort and craftsmanship involved in creating artwork due to the various processes needed to create a design, but also because every detail needed to be carefully considered, as if you wanted to alter your design, it could mean starting all over again.

This traditional world was turned upside down almost instantly, with the release of the Apple Macintosh in 1984. Suddenly, creatives could now manipulate images and type directly on the screen. No longer were they bound by the physical resources in front of them. This sudden technological shift led to the creation of a new kind of designer, who could now handle all aspects of the design process on their own with ease. Some rejected this new technology, refusing to accept its potential. Others, saw it as a crucial moment in history, that they can either accept the changes that are occurring at that very moment, or they'll be outpaced by those around them.

This essay will explore three creatives who dived headfirst into this technological upheaval and used the new tools before them to challenge what graphic design was, is, and could be. They saw this new technology not as a convenience, but as a tool to

redefine their industry, at a time in history when for some, the future of graphic design was one of uncertainty.

### **April Greiman**

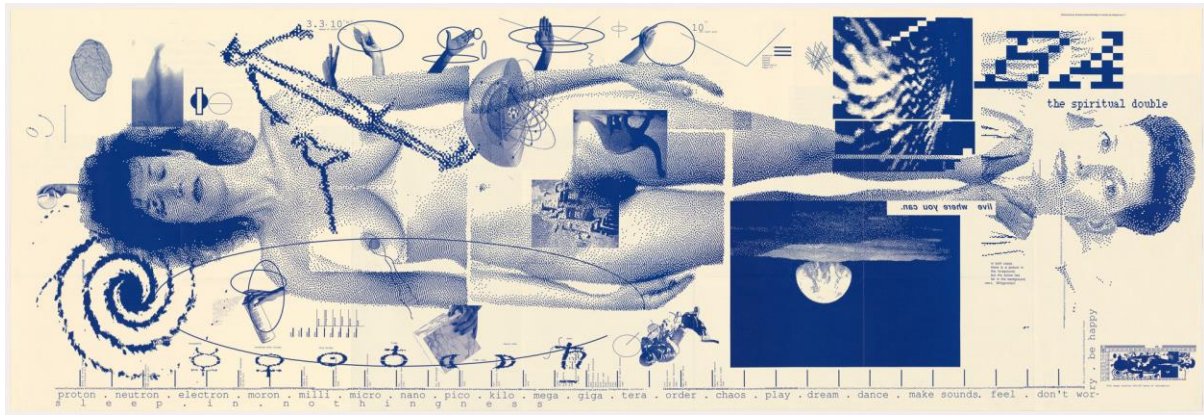


Figure 1. April Greiman, Does It Make Sense? (1986), Digital Print.

One such pioneering creative was American designer April Greiman, with her work standing as some of the earliest examples of how computers were not simply a machine of convenience, but rather a tool of co-creation, that could be used to reimagine and push the boundaries of what graphic design could be, with Greiman even preferring to have her work considered as “trans-media” (Greiman cited in Adobe, 2023.)

Training at the Kansas City Art Institute and later the Basel School of Design under Wolfgang Weingart, now the father of what is known as “New Wave” design. However, a key turning point in Greiman’s career is when she moved to Los Angeles in the late 1970s, where she began experimenting; which led to her becoming a key figure in the California New Wave design movement. With the release of the Macintosh in 1984, Greiman was one of the first to acknowledge the potential of this emerging technology,

believing that “we invent the technology and then it reinvents the way we see”

(Whiteson, 1988.)

Her magnum opus, a poster titled “Does It Make Sense?” featured in Design Quarterly #133 (1986), which is now considered a landmark in digital graphic design. At the time however, some saw it as a “radical advance in the art of poster design”, while others saw it as “self-indulgent and inappropriate.” (Whiteson, 1988.) Created entirely on a Macintosh using MacDraw, her issue was a fold-out poster that featured a life-sized self-portrait that consisted of a collage of her own nude body scan, paired with “textures of pixelated video, text, and appropriated imagery.” (Designing Modern Women, 1890-1990, 2013, cited in MoMA, n.d.)

While it is true that the early Macintosh had its limitations, Greiman decided to celebrate them, rather than cover them up, using the unique flaws and intricacies of the software to her advantage, intertwining them into her design style.

Experimentation is something that lived at the heart of April Greiman’s work, always striving to redefine what graphic design could be. In the dawn of a new era, where others cowered away from the inevitable emergence of new technology, Greiman embraced it, using it as a medium to reach her creative potential. Rather than be controlled by the pre-determined definitions of what it means to be a graphic designer, Greiman worked in a three-dimensional space, blurring the lines between disciplines (Smashing Magazine, 2014.) Her pioneering mentality helped to forever change the field of graphic design and helped to lay the foundations for the multimedia and digital mediums that dominate the industry in the modern era.

**David Carson**

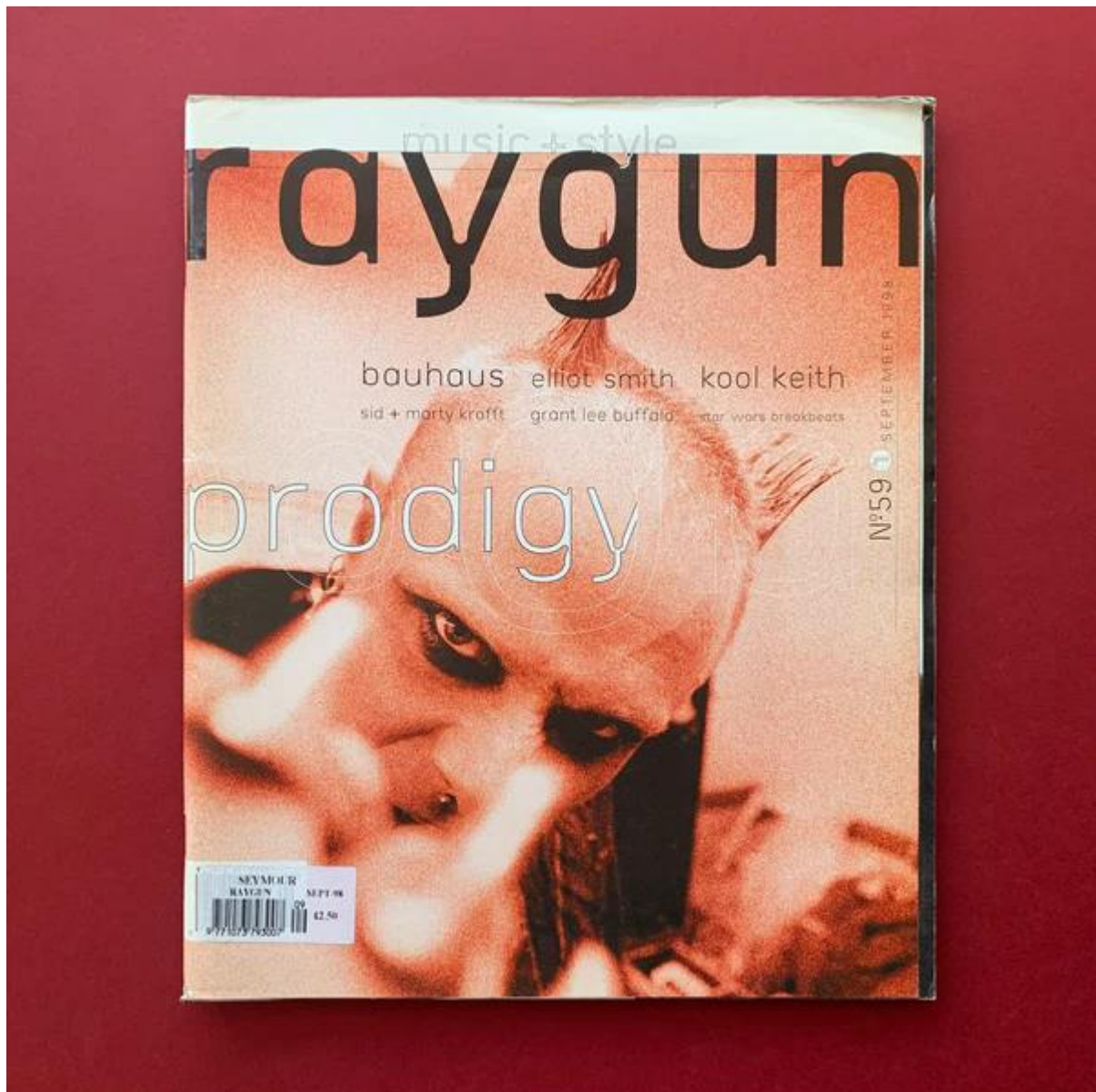


Figure 2. David Carson, RAYGUN #59 (1988), Digital Print.

As the digital design revolution continued, new creatives emerged, each with their own perspective on how to harness the power of this new technology, and how it could be used to redefine graphic design. One such voice was that of David Carson, one of the most influential figures of this transitional era into the digital age of design.

While Carson rose to prominence in the 1990s, rather than at the height of the revolution in the 1980s, Carson's work was of such a radical nature that he has since become a key figure of the revolution. What makes David Carson unique is that he had no formal training in design. Coming from a sociological background, Carson came into the design field without feeling bound and restricted by established design rules, which lead to him deeply exploring the freedom and the new possibilities of the new digital technology. Clearly, Carson's sociological background proved to be useful, with much of his work being based on emotion, claiming that he did "just what made sense" to him (Carson, 2014). Carson is also a strong believer in the importance of intuition when it comes to creating, but also that it's important to enjoy what you're creating, believing that "when you're totally committed and fully immersed in something, it's no longer work. It's play or leisure." (Carson, 2016.)

Today, Carson is best remembered for his contributions in the early 1990s with the music and lifestyle magazine, Ray Gun. With the role of art director, Carson's work with the magazine has become a collection of work that perfectly encapsulates postmodern digital design. A designer who was "resolutely grid free" (Eye On Design, 2019), his primary goals when designing did not consist of a clean layout which followed typographical hierarchy. Instead, his work featured distressed lettering and one-of-a-kind layouts that challenged the concept of legibility entirely. One of the powers of digital software was its immediacy; while analogue design often involved extensive planning, this new software allowed Carson to design on instinct, moving elements and disrupting the design in a way that perfectly reflected the music and subcultures that the magazine displayed. His work was seen as provocative and impractical, but also as being unique and a perfect demonstration of Carson's belief that design was emotional

first, and his work inspired a new age of designers to focus on feeling and atmosphere in their work rather than focussing solely on the clarity and legibility of the design.

In a time where people worried that digital technology would take away the human touch of graphic design, Carson's work proved that the exact opposite was the case. He proved that the computer was a new platform to reinvent and redefine. Not held back by any previous design conventions, Carson's unique typographic treatment, use of image and his willingness to embrace the digital era led to him becoming a key figure of the digital design revolution. While earlier creatives such as April Greiman explored the initial concept of digital creation, Carson instead represents a more rebellious side to creativity, creating provocative and immersive work that inspired those around him to challenge and reimagine what graphic design was, and what it could become.

**Emigre (Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko)**

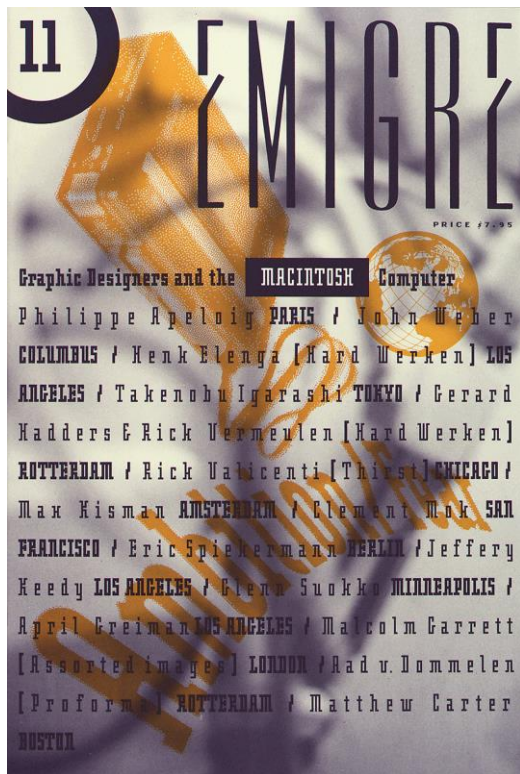


Figure 3. Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko, Emigre #11 (1989), Digital Print.

Emigre, founded by husband and wife, Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko in 1984 was simultaneously a type foundry and a publishing experiment that acted as a radical voice at a moment when graphic design was evolving, with the emergence of new computer technologies. At the time, many established designers viewed the new Macintosh with suspicion and distaste, as its limitations such as jagged rendering as a threat to the art of typography. However, Zuzana Licko embraced these limitations and saw them as an opportunity to create a new aesthetic. Her approach to the new technology was unique in the way that she believed that digital media required new forms, rather than simply trying to imitate traditional typesetting mediums; and her early bitmap typefaces did exactly this. *Emperor*, *Oakland* and *Lo-Res* did not try to be elegantly smooth typefaces, with the pixelated geometry of each letter being a defining feature of the typefaces.

Meanwhile, VanderLans used *Emigre* as a platform to experiment, with traditional editorial layouts and grid systems being disrupted by layered imagery and fragmented compositions. Each issue presented new ideas and acted as a breeding ground for discussions around the aesthetic implications of the new digital technology. While some saw *Emigre*'s work as progressive, others saw it as deeply controversial, with Massimo Vignelli heavily denouncing the work, claiming it to be an "aberration of culture." (Vignelli, 1991)

Ultimately, it was this backlash that demonstrated just how radical their ideas were. Rather than treating the computer as a means to speed up production of current styles, instead Licko insisted that digital media produced a completely new way of creating but also interacting with work. Her famous line, "You read best what you read most" (Licko, 1990) best summarises her ethos in breaking away from universal assumptions about design and legibility, suggesting it is a concept that will forever evolve with the emergence of new technologies.

Beyond their design work, *Emigre* was significant in changing the way that typefaces are distributed, moving away from the traditional type foundries and instead distributed fonts through floppy disks and later online. The proliferation of digital typefaces during the 1990s can largely be traced back to *Emigre*, enabling a new generation of independent designers to emerge. While their work existed at the edge of commercial design, their significance instead came through their shaping of theoretical discussion surrounding digital design which forced the industry to confront the implications of new technology, rather than forcing the technology to conform to established design conventions. In doing so, they played a quiet role in the idea that the computer was not

a production tool but rather a medium that could redefine the foundations of graphic design.

## **Conclusion**

The digital design revolution of the 1980s proved to be a pivotal moment in the history of graphic design, with technological innovations and pioneering creatives driving the revolution forward. Designers such as April Greiman, David Carson and Emigre collectively represent the various ways in which designers worked to evolve the field of design. Greiman, heralded as one of the earliest innovators of digital design, embraced the early Macintosh technology to create layered compositions, and to experiment with typography. She bridged the gap between graphic design and art, while proving that this new technology could itself be a tool for creation, with its own style and quirks that Greiman incorporated into her work, rather than rejecting them. With a strong educational foundation in design, her work demonstrated that digital tools could be used to expand on creative expression while keeping design principles intact. In contrast to that, Carson's work, particularly in Ray Gun Magazine, was the epitome of expressive, anti-establishment design that challenged the very idea of legibility. His lack of design education helped him feel free to deconstruct type, chaotically layer images, and essentially disregard any long-held design convention, with his work prioritising the evoking of emotions, rather than following a strict visual hierarchy. Greiman's work communicated innovation, taking what had come before her as a foundation to build upon using the new digital tools available. Meanwhile, Carson's style embraced the feeling of unpredictability surrounding the new digital tools and

wiped the slate clean; rejecting any pre-existing design rules for a new approach, built on intuition and emotion. Then, you had Emigre. A type foundry and magazine founded by Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko that became a platform to take their innovative ideas and turn them into a sustainable platform for experimentation. Their publications and early typefaces took technological shortcomings and turned them into aesthetic elements, similar to Greiman. Licko's coined phrase, "you read best what you read most" exemplifies Emigre's desire to challenge and question conventional ideas of legibility, believing that new digital mediums was bound to result in the emergence of new modes of visual literacy.

While we today reflect on the 1980s revolution rather positively, highlighting the innovative work and inspiring creatives that emerged in this time, the decade now bears a striking resemblance to the 2020s. Many designers at the time rejected the idea of digital design, being afraid of design losing its sense of craftsmanship, while others felt compelled to make the most of what was happening around them. Today exists a similar scenario, with designers having to grapple with AI tools that can generate imagery, type and layout at both an unprecedented speed and scale. The 1980s designers such as Massimo Vignelli criticise the experimental work of Carson and Emigre, fearing this technology would erode design discipline, with contemporary designers fearing the exact same thing may occur because of AI; voicing concerns about whether AI undermines the craft, and dilutes creativity, and prioritises speed instead of human instinct. While 1980s designers had to learn to harness digital tools while still maintaining core design rules, today's designers must learn to integrate AI into their work thoughtfully, ensuring that it enhances creativity and critical thinking, not replace it. It is true that many companies have resorted to AI-generated design, thinking

that it will go unnoticed, however, the matter of fact is that humans desire that which feels human. So, in the same way that designers in the 1980s learned to overcome their fears and address their concerns, creatives of the modern world must also do the same; using the lessons learned from the 1980s design revolution to gain perspective on both the opportunities provided by AI, as well as the ethical dilemmas that it presents. Throughout the history of design, we have seen that each wave of new tools both disrupts and inspires, and using the 1980s as a reference, perhaps a broader truth is revealed: while the tools we use may change, it is the combination of humanity's creative intention paired with technological innovation that has always remained central to the continued evolution of graphic design, but it is also something that people have a deep respect for, and these people have proved that their respect for human creativity will not dwindle, even if some of those around them succumb to the ease of generative AI.

In conclusion, these 3 creatives demonstrate how the emergence of digital design tools was the catalyst that resulted in a decade that reassessed and redefined graphic design, and their work proved that these new tools could be used effectively, to push boundaries and to inspire others. Their contributions, along with many others turned the decade into one of transformation, where technological innovation sparked not only new ideas, but forced a discussion surrounding the future of design itself, helping to lay down the foundation for graphic design as it transitioned into a digital era.

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