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“Investigate the digital graphic design revolution of the mid 1980s and the impact of technology on design, looking at the past, present, and future. Discuss the work of 3 designers who embraced this new technology, what is next for technology and the potential for technology to destroy art and design.”

“I am not getting out of bed to go see a computer” quipped April Greiman. This was Greiman’s initial reaction to the computer, in response to her boss who wanted to surveil the elusive computer that had just hit the market (Greiman, 2018). As graphic designers, we take that action every day, it’s hard to imagine using that remark today, we’d be out of a job.

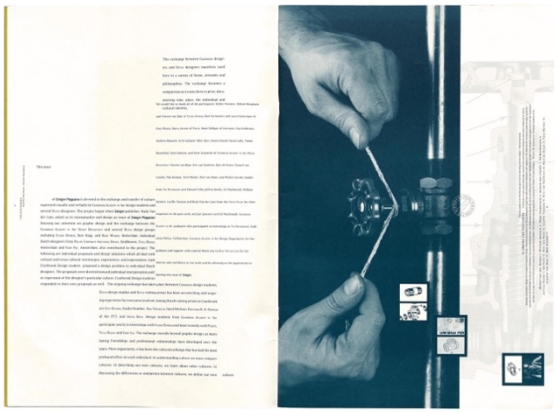
We have the mid 1980s and Apple’s Mac to thank for the way we work and design today, but what is a staple to us, was an alien invention to some back then. I want to explore the digital graphic design revolution of the mid 1980s, looking at technology’s influence on art and design. Exploring graphic designers who embraced the new technological age and the impact it had on their work. I will research what is next for technology and the potential for technology to destroy art and design as we know it.

Those who embraced the technical age were often coined radicals. Looking for synonyms for ‘radical’ brings up some interesting words from profound and primitive to far-out, agitator and riotous (Thesaurus, n.d.). This seems apt when looking back at people's acceptance of artists who embraced the movement, with both praise and criticism, acceptance, and disdain (Harper, 1999).

In the years previous, the Swiss style reigned supreme. Also known as International Typographic Style, students taught during this era were encouraged to show respect for their content through simplicity. The Swiss style is defined by its use of mathematical grids, asymmetric layouts, sans-serif type, and a preference for photography over illustration (Davies, 2022).

Pioneering advocator of the Swiss Movement, Massimo Vignelli was ardent and contemptuous towards the new radicals, labelling the movement as garbage, “we cannot put garbage on a pedestal; just because it exists does not prove its quality” (Lasky, 2010). He despised what he called the “aberration of culture”, and he wasn’t the only one who felt an uneasiness with the growing movement (Lasky, 2010).

Starting their careers at the same time as the inception of the Mac, Zuzana Licko and Rudy VanderLans of Emigre Studios were pioneers of digital letterforms. Although they had different approaches to the workings of the computer, with Zuzana’s “methodical, mathematical approach” and VanderLans piqued interest in “chance encounters and glitches”, they were both enthralled with the boundless possibilities that the Macintosh could achieve (Dover, 2010).



Fig, 1 & 2, Emigre Magazine Vol.10 (1980)

Their thought provoking, stimulus work at *Emigre* often followed themes of “the responsibility of education to design” (Harper, 1999, p.50). Often art was a response to the turbulent social, political, economic, and cultural times. These factors were integral to the design revolution, a world war brought changes to the nations and there was a move from necessity to luxury and this included the advancements in technology (Meggs 1992).

> “Against this turbulence, it is not surprising that visual art experienced a series of creative revolutions that questioned its values, approaches to organising space, and role in society..... Elemental ideas about colour and form, social protest, and the expression of Freudian theories and deeply personal emotional state occupied many artists” (Meggs 1992).

Zuzana and Rudy’s work reflected the changes that were happening around them. Their work was thought provoking and stimulating; “design is also commentary, opinion, a point of view, and social responsibility” (Tino, 1994). Gone were the disjunctive art forms of the Swiss style that were void of “political, social, or moral values and aesthetics” (Tino, 1994). Zuzana and Rudy were breaking the conservative code of design. Looking at figure 2, at first glance it may not look like the work of a ‘radical’, but on a closer inspection you can see the clear lack of hierarchy of text, the variation of font size and line spacing fluctuates throughout the article.

The works from the likes of *Emigre* cultivated a cultural shift that allowed freedom into art and design, and they brought a whole new style of work into the zeitgeist. Hierarchy of text was evolving, the old structure of title, heading, subheading, and body of text was replaced with single size type, with extreme difference in leading within the same page

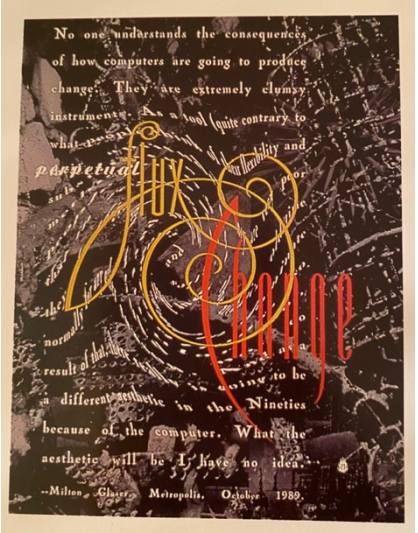
and overlapping of text. Images were distorted and effects easily added to them, there was no synchronicity between one page and the next; an amalgamation of styles, images, and text. Text became part of the image, it had its own rite of passage as an art form, rather than a vessel to communicate.

Fig, 3 & 4, Emigre Magazine Vol.10 (1980)

It raised the question of “which is primary…form or content?” (Tino, 1994). Acclaimed graphic designer Paul Rand believed form must “supersede but must not overpower content. If it does the latter, information goes astray” (Tino, 1994). Graphic design is ubiquitous in the modern era, known as an art form, a communication tool, and an integral part of life, all thanks to the technological advances of the past. Information can be shared far and wide by the touch of a button, it has changed not only the way we think about art and design, but the rules within art and design (Meggs, 2005).

Another pioneer of technology, Margo Chase, was once dubbed the ‘queen of goth’ (Heller, 2018), and it’s easy to see why with her often unusual and macabre works. Traditional formal training in biology and medical illustration plays an imperative role in

her work and design style (Heller, 2018). Not having a traditional design background seems to be a pertinent attribute of the ‘radicals’, giving way to an unmitigated need for experimentation and curiosity.



Fig, 5: Chase, M. Perpetual Flux and Change (1990)

Designers felt the need to cross the boundaries of art and design (Fox-Turnbull and Reinsfield, 2022), the dictionary defines a boundary as “something that indicates a border or limit”. They were redefining the need for requisite knowledge and processes that had become ubiquitous, particularly with the predecessor, Swiss design. “Technology has always been transformative”, it was a response to the cultural shift that was percolating, it had to develop and meet the unavoidable new needs, knowledge, processes, and opportunities (Fox-Turnbull and Reinsfield, 2022).

Chase started designing with hand lettering and typography but felt it was stymieing her creativity, so when technology was introduced to the design world, she saw it as an

opportunity to coalesce the digital and traditional (Heller, 2018). Chase responds with rationale to critics stating, “new ideas seem ugly at first” (Harper, 1999 p.84), explaining that she was pursuing to make the ordinary and routine redundant without destroying function and value (Heller, 2018).

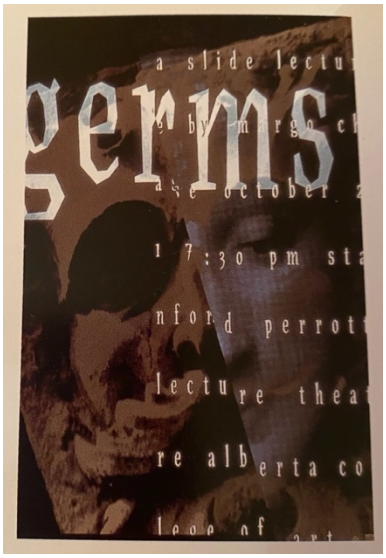


Fig. 6, Chase, M. Germs (1992)

Figure 6 is a poster by Margo Chase entitled *Germs*, created in 1992, showcasing how Chase merged her design influences and process. Here she has used the digital typeface ‘Bradley’, originally concocted for a client’s stationary company (Harper, 1999, p.80). The font is designed using straight lines, at varying degrees, neither completely horizontal nor vertical. In the context of the inception of this poster, this font would have been perceived as atypical and possibly downright strange. The accessibility and freedom of designing on a computer made the font versatile and malleable, fast alterations can be made, as well as changes in colour and weight, at a greater pace in contrast to her days as a traditional designer.

Artists were not impeded by expectations comparatively to the multitudinous limitations that designers and artists face today. They also risk becoming banal, with so much access to information, trends, techniques, and software. It feels as though every extreme has already been created, coined radical, become the standard with imposed rules and traditions and eventually lost its radical title (Harper, 1999, p.21).

Fervid graphic designer Rick Valicenti's work has been described as "refreshingly intelligible…. risky experiments that defy classification" (Bierut, 2005). One of his works, *Add a Little Magic,* 1992, a training centre schedule with information for prospective students is colourful and futuristic with a cartoonish style. He provides legible, clean, simple blocks of written information at the top of the design. He doesn't diverge from creating "art with function" (Butler, 2013), ensuring the information is conveyed correctly.

Fig. 7, Rick Valicenti, Add a Little Magic (1992)

The work looks as if it’s been created in Microsoft paint, a simulacrum of clip art you’d find on a PowerPoint presentation. It’s not the most beautiful artwork that I’ve seen from this era, and you can see why it would have been received negatively at the time. The main focal point, the ‘genie’, takes up most of the space and gives it an almost unprofessional feel. The work is a clear deflection from “professional and commercialised culture” (Maciunas, 1963), it's as though some of the design choices were selected at random purely for its shock value.

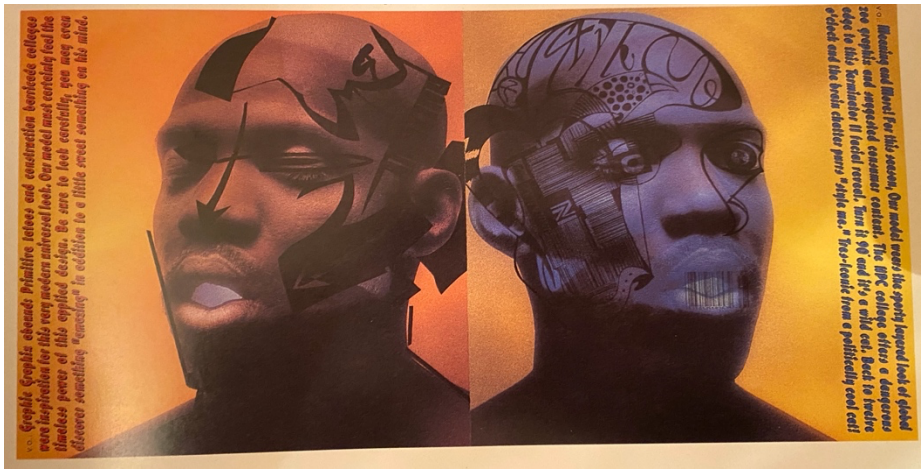


Fig. 8, Rick Valicenti, Give and Take (1993)

Another of Valicenti’s works *Give and Take*, 1993 was deemed contentious. Brenda Wilhelmson and Terry Kattleman, 90’s journalists writing for *Creativity*, a magazine commenting on consumer culture, talent, techniques, and trends, declared it “may well claim the title of the farthest-out paper promos around” (Wilhelmson and Kattleman, 1993). But can we truly call what these radical artists were doing radical? Was it technology that opened the door to a new wave of design. Everything is cyclical and

design types and styles are not an exception to that rule. A great example of this was legendary typographer Jan Tschichold.

Tschichold had an influential part to play in the development of graphic design and typography in the 1900's (Rodriguez, 2016). He redefined typography and its application, moving away from traditional typographic customs with centred serif ornamental types, "white space is to be regarded as an active element, not a passive background period… asymmetry is the rhythmic expression of functional design" (Strizver, 2018). He embraced the functionalism that he was witnessing in the modern age, design that was simplistic and purposeful, which could be reproduced by machine composition and the printing technologies of the modern era (Rodriguez, 2016). After Tschichold began recognising similarities between the fascist movement and the strict rules of modern typography (Rodriguez, 2016), he ultimately backtracked on his newfound beliefs, denouncing modernism as pernicious and returned to classicism (Strizver, 2018).

Not all transitions into technology were embraced as seamlessly as with Jan Tschichold. Written at the New York Times factory the day hot metal typesetting was declared null and void was "the end of an era, it was good while it lasted, crying won't help" (Graphic Means, 2018). All newly introduced technology is met with caution or objection, people are averse to change, comparing it to technologies of the past, hoping that it doesn't gain traction and become the new norm. Yet that is exactly what happens, it goes on to succeed its antecedents (Graphic Means, 2018).

Technology isn’t going to stop developing, and there will be newer, greater, and easier ways to get around the necessity for technical ability. In recent times there has been a rise in AI art, art that is generated via the use of artificial intelligence. Art that anyone can produce within seconds, replicating styles and techniques from the greats of the past, but the only skill involved here is being able to use a search engine. There is potential for technology to “undermine the position” of designers and instead “elevate” the consumer (Michalowska, 2015, p.4). With the ease of access to design tools and software, technology is allowing anyone to become the designer. Now, artists and designers can no longer count on their skill set and insight alone, their technical abilities are being pushed to the forefront. The Mac “transformed the principles of imagination” (Michalowska, 2015, p.4), with the ability to experiment and take inspiration from the physical and digital realm, but there is an argument as to why technology won’t supersede the artist. You need the artist's touch, it’s the perceptivity that separates man from machine (Michalowska, 2015, p.4).

Walter Gropius stated, “the Bauhaus fights imitation, inferior craftsmanship and artistic dilettantism’” (Kovalchenko, 2017), and AI art could arguably be defined as all those things. One artist, John Lewis, claims AI tools are just that, a useful tool in an artist's arsenal, involving no real skill. It doesn’t create art on its own fruition, it’s a response to imputed prompts (Foley, 2022). The technology is in its relatively early inception and therefore still flawed, often missing “the subtle brilliance, masterful angles and perspective of real artists work” (Foley, 2022).

Fig, 9: Ai-Da, Portrait of the Robot (2021)

One patron of AI art spoke out saying “at some point yall are gonna need to explain why doing this by hand is good, but doing it with a computer is evil” (Foley, 2022). It’s looking more and more likely that art and design is heading in this direction and is something we must become accustomed to. In 2021, London’s Design Museum displayed an AI android’s exhibition of paintings, which incited some strong feelings (West-Knights, 2021). It wasn’t necessarily the artwork that provoked such a response as “AI robots don’t make massively interesting art without significant human input” (West-Knights, 2021), it more raised the question of what will now qualify as art.

As we push the boundaries of what it means to be creative, we will end up promoting the impotent, giving technology a choke hold over artists and designers alike. All of this at what cost? We will involve ourselves in messy ownership and copyright laws, particularly with AI generated art, as the currency of art will begin to dwindle, when you

can supply the work yourself, within seconds of conjuring up an idea, at the touch of a button (Digicult.it, 2022).

Alas, it’s not all doom and gloom. What we must do is learn from the past and gain an insight into the challenges faced with the introduction of new technologies. You can look at it in a positive or negative way, French painter Paul Delaroche (1797 - 1856) claimed "from today, painting is dead” when he first saw a collection of photography. We know that photography actually had a profoundly positive impact on the art world, with artists moving away from realism and making way for new art movements such as impressionism, modernism, and cubism.

With technological advances we can put more power into the hands of the designer. Before the advent of the computer, trends were controlled by large foundries, influential designers, and companies such as the International Typeface Corporation (Cullen, 2001, p176) but now we can pull influence from multiple sources and styles. There is freedom in technology, and we have never been more connected and informed.

Entropy, the state of disorder, randomness and uncertainty increases over time. We get bored when things get stagnant, excogitating ways to become new and fresh, trying to reinvent the wheel. The wheel has certainly been reinvented with AI. Looking back at the creation of computers and the work that was being produced, it is amazing to witness how far we’ve come and see the endless possibilities of technology. The man-

machine symbiosis is upon us whether we like it or not, and I’m looking forward to seeing how this one pans out.

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List of figures

Figure 1, 2, 3, 4: Emigre Inc (1980). *Emigre Magazine Vol. 10.* [Digital] Online Archive. Available at: https://oa.letterformarchive.org/item?workID=lfa_emigre_0010&targPic=lfa_emigre_0010_001.jpg (Accessed 1 Nov. 2022)

Figure 5: Chase, M. (1990). *Perpetual Flux and Change.* [Digital] radical graphics/graphic radicals.

Figure 6: Chase, M. (1992). *Germs.* [Digital] radical graphics/graphic radicals.

Figure 7: Valicenti, R. (1992). *Add a Little Magic.* [Digital] radical graphics/graphic radicals.

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