

NC 0020998 8



National College of Art & Design

4th Year Visual Communication

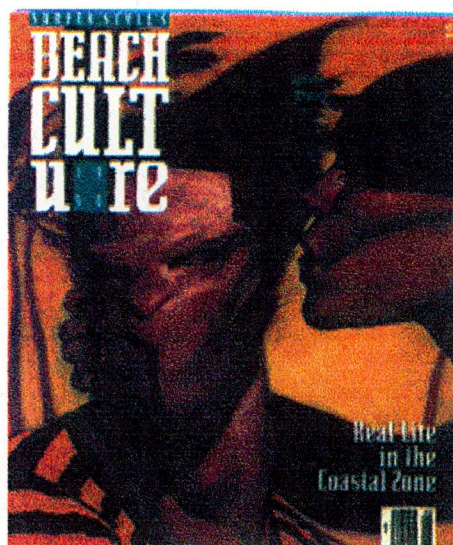
"David Carson & RayGun: Design Communication for a New Generation."

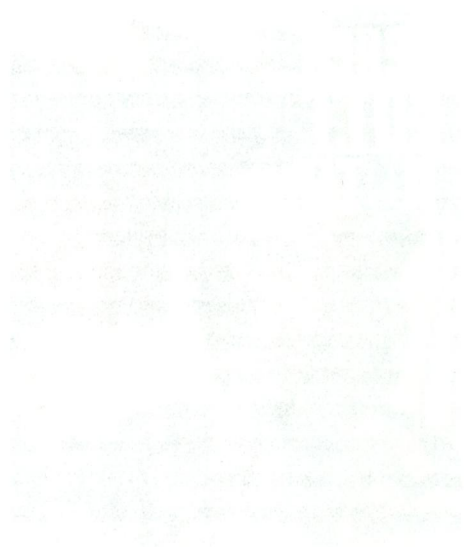
by Lee Douglas

submitted to the Faculty of History of Art & Design and Complementary

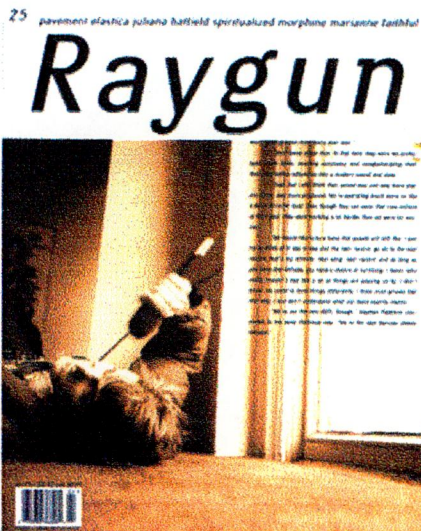
Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Design

1996





Acknowledgement is due to *Ruane  
Francy*, my thesis tutor,  
for the guidance and assistance in producing this thesis.

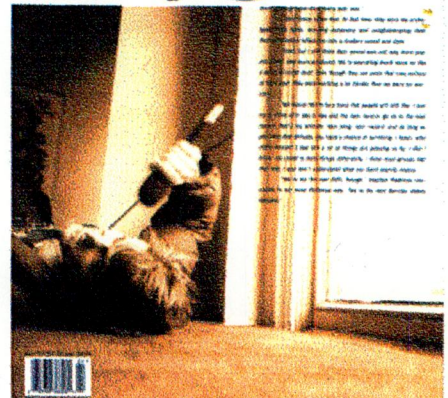


## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>		<b>P. 1</b>
<b>Chapter1</b>	<i>History of a Designer</i>	<b>P. 2</b>
<b>Chapter2</b>	<i>The Beach Culture</i>	<b>P. 7</b>
<b>Chapter3</b>	<i>Generation X: The reinvention of the youth culture.</i>	<b>P. 14</b>
<b>Chapter4</b>	<i>...and then there was RayGun</i>	<b>P. 18</b>
<b>Chapter5</b>	<i>David Carson and Post TV Culture.</i>	<b>P. 32</b>
<b>Chapter6</b>	<i>The Good Points, The Bad Points and The Ugly Points.</i>	<b>P. 35</b>

25 pavement elastica jubana halfbold spiritualized morphine marianne laddful

## Raygun





1919

1920

1921

1922

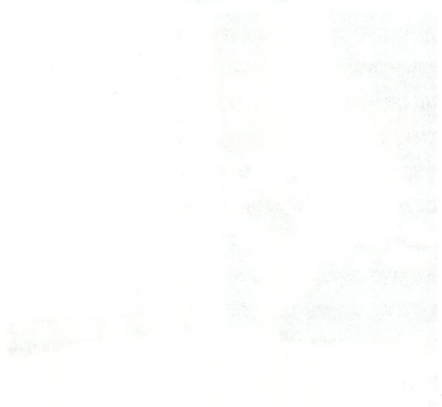
1923

1924

1925

1926

1927



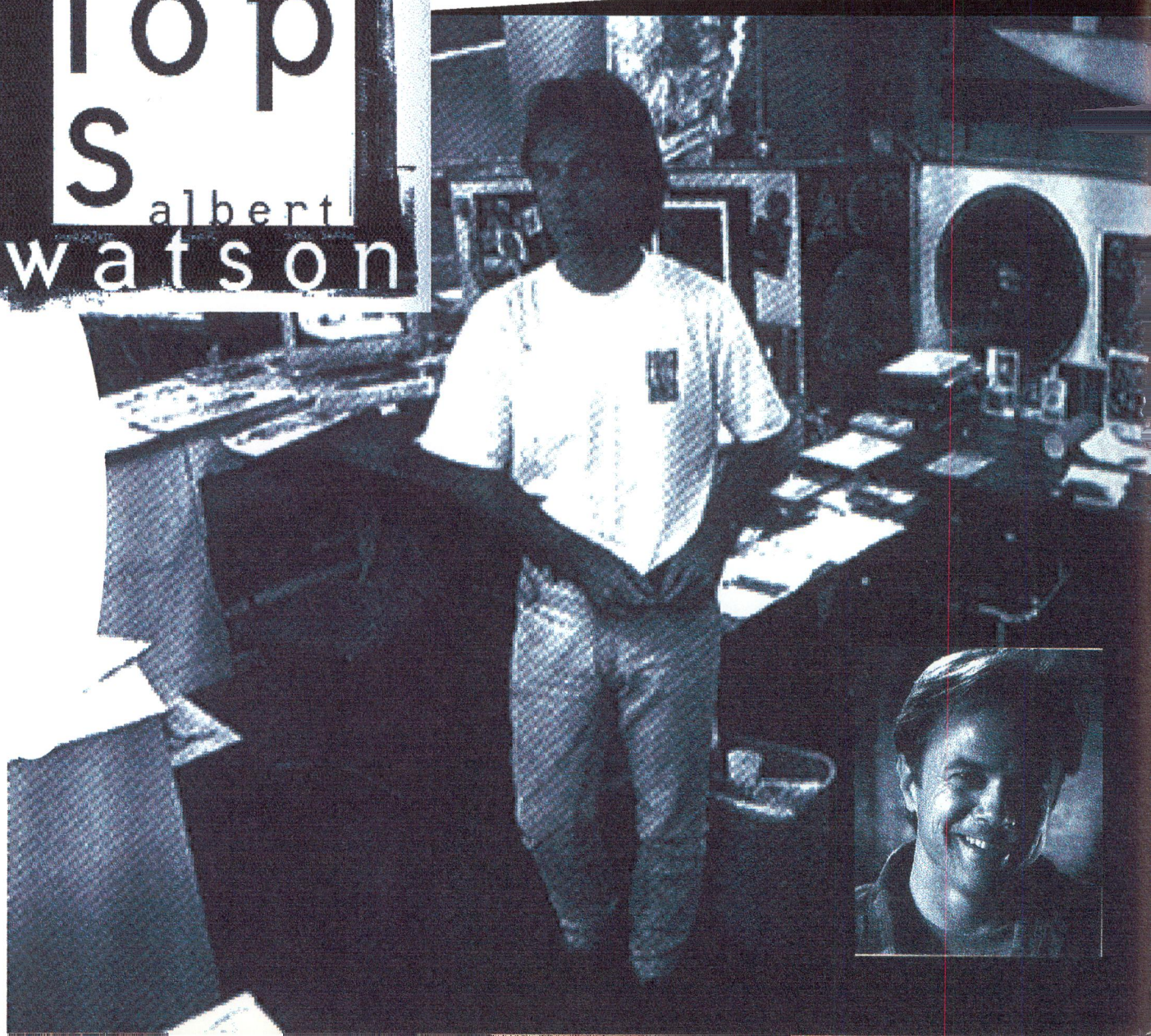
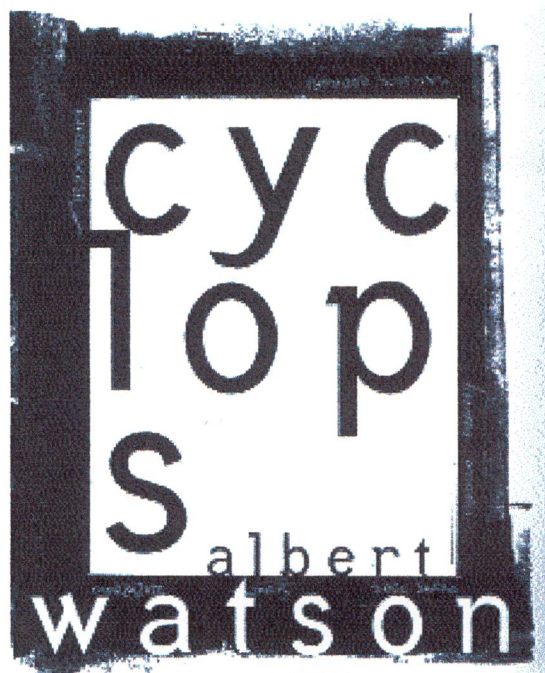
## List of Plates

- Fig.1&6* "Hanging at Carmine St." Beach Culture. Issue No.6.
- Fig.2* "Don't Mistake Legibility..." End of Print.
- Fig.3* Beach Culture Premiere Issue Cover.
- Fig.4* Beach Culture Cover Issue No.6.
- Fig.5* Beach Culture Cover Issue No.3.
- Fig.7* "Surfing Blind." Beach Culture No.2.
- Fig.8* "Graceland, Paradise Garden & St. Coca Cola." Beach Culture No.6.
- Fig.9* Contents Page Beach Culture No.6.
- Fig.10* "Bob Mould" Beach Culture No.3.
- Fig.11* RayGun Cover Premiere Issue.
- Fig.12* RayGun Cover Issue No.17.
- Fig.13* RayGun Cover Issue No.25.
- Fig.14&15* D.P.S. "The Shamen" RayGun No.16.
- Fig.16* "Dead Can Dance" RayGun No.23.
- Fig.17* "Pavement" RayGun No.25.
- Fig.18* "Juliana Hatfield" RayGun No.25.
- Fig.19* "Smash" RayGun No.23.
- Fig.20* Contents Page RayGun No.26.
- Fig.21* "Cardinal/Zumpano" RayGun No.23.
- Fig.22* "Simon Bonney" RayGun No.24.
- Fig.23* "Small Print/Jale" RayGun No.19.
- Fig.24* "Waterboys" The End of Print.
- Fig.25* "Issue 31" RayGun No.31.
- Fig.26* "Cyclops" Front cover.
- Fig.27* "There's A Movement Underground" End of Print.
- Fig.28* "Pepsi Advertising" End of Print.
- Fig.29* "Television Advertising" End of Print.
- Fig.30* "Contents Page" RayGun No.13.
- Fig.31* "Live To Death" Typography Now.

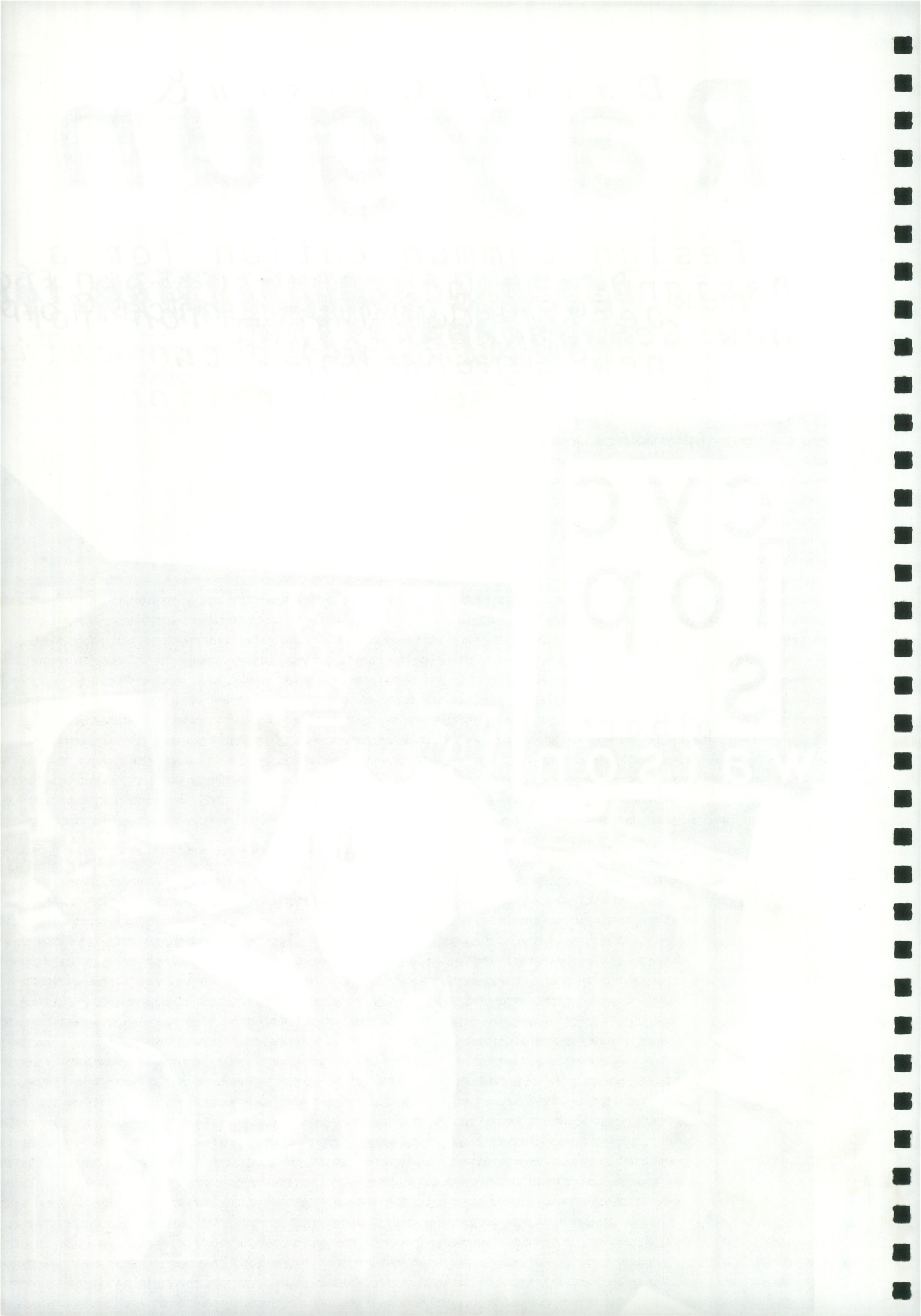


# David Carson & Raygun

Design Communication for a  
new Generation  
Design Communication for a  
new Generation  
Design Communication for a  
new Generation  
Design Communication for a  
new Generation

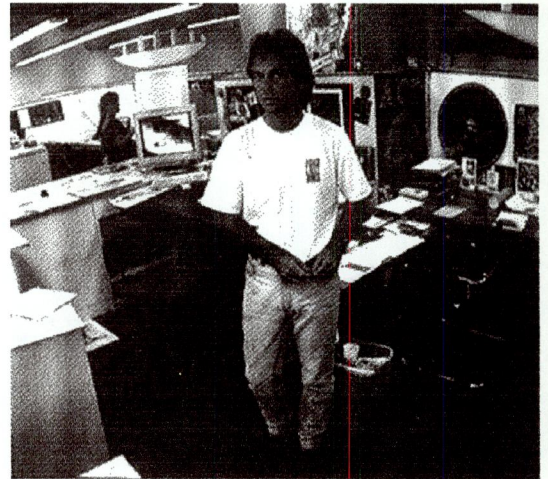






Introducing the very latest in culture:

# Carson Culture



David Carson at Surfer Studios

Having art directed and designed *Beach Culture* and *RayGun*, two seminal magazines of the '80s and '90s, David Carson has been dubbed the designer of the decade by creating some of the most era defining designs to date.

Meanwhile, the ever growing older generation of yesterday's designers have hit out against his style of work as 'deliberately senseless' art direction.

At the same time a younger generation of designers have deemed him as their knight in shining armour, providing a new way of seeing graphic design and communication. Without doubt though, Carson has arrived at a time when communication is going through a radical shift because of the evolution in how we, the audience, accept information and the evolution in communication media. But why has the design community hit out at one particular person, David Carson?

Has his work been so profound as to leave all of the older designers in the cold, worrying if their design ethos has become obsolete? Or is their angst simply a result of his ability to become the most sought after designer in the world with the least amount of formal training in design school? This thesis explores the existing magazines that Carson has designed and other more recent work, in order to uncover the answers to these questions and others, and in an attempt to provide evidence to the theory that David Carson has delivered a new method of design communication for today's generation.

By investigating the years previous to his design career, the question is raised: has the designer a unique insight into design, exposing street culture/ popular culture as being more revolutionary than high culture?

By analysing the publications *Beach Culture* and *RayGun*, one hopes to demonstrate an evolution

through the years in Carson's work towards an expressive, freer style of design that has refused to comply with the old and outdated rules and laws of graphic design. In doing so questions will be raised as to whether this direction is truly progressive and valid. Using quotes and illustrations of Carson's work the answers ought to become self evident.

Most of the material available on David Carson has come by way of articles in design periodicals but more recently a biography has been released on the designer, his work and the ethos behind it by *Creative Review* editor, Lewis Blackwell with an introduction by David Byrne. While most periodical articles are predominantly against the nature of Carson's work, specifically of *RayGun* and *Beach Culture*, there are those who believe that David Carson's work represents the way of the future for graphic design and visual communication and signals 'the end of print'.



1963  
CULTURE

1963  
CULTURE

# History of a Designer

In order to understand the design ethos and attitude of David Carson, it is necessary to analyse the years preceding his career in graphic design, specifically those of the 1970's and early '80s. By investigating this period- no matter how cursory this may be- the later chapters which observe such work as Carson's *Beach Culture* and *RayGun* become more relative to the philosophies and foundations upon which his work and these chapters are based.

There are two very distinct and pivotal areas to these years that have shaped Carson's attitude to graphic design, possibly because they have provided a greater understanding of the audience and reader group that he would ultimately be designing towards. One of these areas has developed as a sub-culture itself, called surfing, and Carson's involvement in the sport has not only influenced his design ethos but also his laid back and genial character is indigenous to the archetypal surfer. Carson was so serious about his surfing that by the age of 20 he had achieved a world class ranking as a professional surfer coming eighth overall. However by the age of 26, he had made the decision to make a radical change.



Fig.1

"he didn't want to become an aging jock, he says, so he started looking for a new career."  
(Berger. 1994 P.20)

Rather than trivialising the nature of his surfing years, as so many critics have done, it is vitally important to investigate this sub-culture and the obvious effects it has had on Carson. This is because it is from within this area that he has obtained the inspiration and motivation to create a new way of seeing design, albeit in a very indirect manner. There is no extant material available on the topic of surfing, and the theories that attempt to draw comparisons between the surf culture and Carson's designing are somewhat speculative in nature. However, in referring to any work designed by him (as in Fig. 1) it would become quite obvious that there is a certain subtle link between the street level culture of surfing and the designs of David Carson today.

## A SUB-CULTURE CALLED Surf

The surf culture began in the Hawaiian islands long before America was placed on the maps of the western world. It had many

# History of Designers



1992-1993  
A



reasons for its existence but one of the most prevalent was of a religious nature, while one of the less important was that it was believed to increase virility! Through its transition from Hawaiian culture to a sub-culture of the 1950's and '60s and then to the pop- culture status that it enjoys today, many of the original reasons for its existence are still in use. It merely depends on personal opinion as to which is more important. In the eyes of Generation X and the followers of MTV, surfing has been glamourised as cool. It draws attention and has something of a seductive power to it. It is primarily the fault of such entities as MTV and its off-spring television channels that this profound sport is merely considered as a means of entertainment.

However, through the eyes of the ardent surfer, the 'religious' meaning to the activity is the 'be-all-and-end-all' to their existence. The emotive nature, skill, the spirituality, technique and love developed for surfing has been retained throughout the years. The fanatical enthusiasm goes far beyond that of any other sport. For example would the participant of another sport be so prepared to accept the consequences of such risky actions as those taken in trying to carve the greatest wave in the jaws of the sea. It is the one-to-one nature of surfing that is its most obvious advantage over any other sport, permitting the surfer an intimate rapport with

# MIS - DON'T LEGI - TAKE FOR BILITY ICATION. COMMUN

the isolated violent spray of white foam from the rolling blue waves. It is the recognition of the masterful sea diminishing all to their mortal selves in the sight of the greater thundering waves that seems so kamikaze. An entire culture has developed around this seemingly suicidal activity, with its own jargonised language, fashion and attitude that presents it as a unique experience. However, these are the very reasons why groups like MTV have endorsed surfing wholesale and reproduced a hollow, fashionable version of their own. It is the sheer zest for life that has become the true and provocative nature of surfing and the insignia of a true surfer.

From this love for surfing comes the freedom to experiment on the waves with new moves, new skills, new dangers, risks and successes. The sea and its unpredictable ways has produced the most aesthetically sound sport of all because of the sheer amount of skill required in order to change with the moment and the movement of the ocean.

Warren Berger, in his article "What Makes David Carson Tick", infers subtly to this background of surfing when he reiterates,





# MIS - DON'T LEGI - TAKE FOR BILITY ICATION. COMMUN

"Carson says that much of his style and technique is self taught, and his work is often not influenced by other designers, but by the world around him."

( Berger. 1995 P.48 )

Without recognising the true worth of their words, Berger and many others have unwittingly touched upon one of the foundations for this new way of designing: that of the surf culture. Yet without relating this argument to his work, specifically that of *Beach Culture*, the connection remains somewhat ambiguous and too abstract to be valid.

Therefore the next chapter will attempt to provide enough evidence in the form of analysis and colour illustrations to project this theory beyond speculation. It will become obvious that Carson's experience in the realms of the surf-culture has had a definite affect on his approach to graphic design.

## TO THE WORLD OF GRAPHIC DESIGN THROUGH THE BACK DOOR.

The other important influence within Carson's past is that of the formal training he received, or rather the lack of it. This has certainly been the most

recognised factor by his critics in their attempt to render his work invalid, but in doing so they have outlined just how successful Carson has been with or without a history of design training, and so in a sense have brought doubt to the need for such learning systems as are prevalent today.

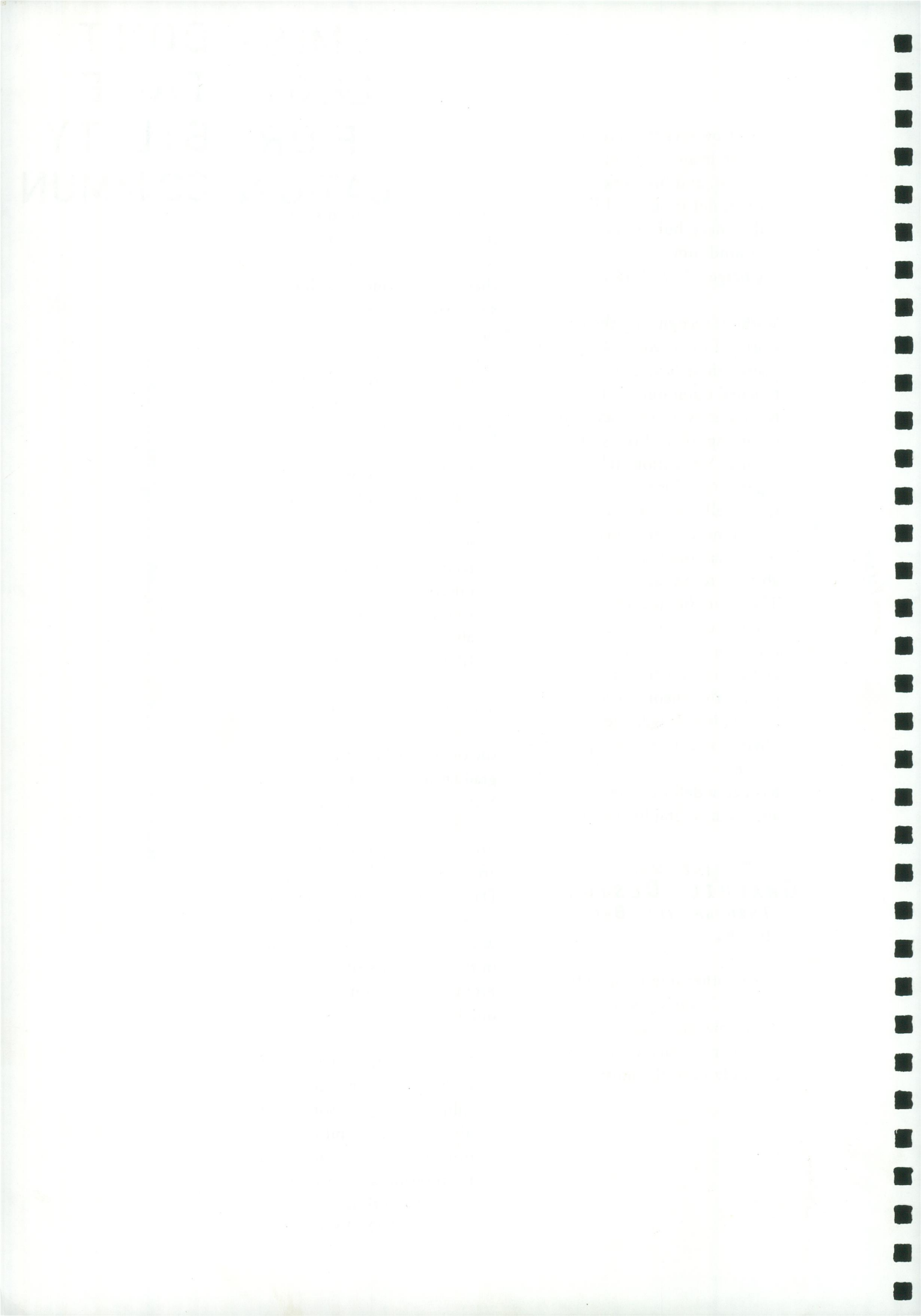
"... he didn't discover his knack for graphic design until the age of twenty-six, when he took a two week course, which raises the question: if not in school, where did Carson learn about design?"

(Berger. 1995 P.48.)

The designer's first career arrived in the form of being a sociology teacher after graduating from San Diego State University with honours and distinction. However, in nineteen eighty two, five years after beginning his first career, David Carson came across the opportunity to enroll in a two week course in graphic design in the University of Arizona. From this point on the design bug had bitten him.

"I just became so fascinated with the look and feel of the subject. I became somewhat obsessed, with a bit of tunnel vision that cost me a relationship and even my health from time to time."

( Carson. 1995 P.90 )



# MIS - DON'T LEGI - TAKE FOR BILITY ICATION. COMMUN

That two week introduction was to be the launch pad from which he would explore graphic design through other small workshops. He amassed a full three weeks of experience in Rapperswil, Switzerland under the guidance of Hans Rudolf Lutz, in a workshop that proved to be the biggest design influence he ever experienced.

In all he managed to obtain approximately eight intense months of design teaching in various colleges and institutions. Carson also obtained an internship in Surfer publications of Los Angeles in which he believes he discovered a lot of the conventional rules of graphic design that he has never applied outside of this internship. Soon, the magazine that he was working for folded due the pressures of a weakening economy, so in need of money David Carson was forced to return to teaching. But before long he was offered another opportunity to design and art direct a magazine titled *Transworld Skateboarding*. His period of stay in this 'die-hard' fanzine was to prove to be another pivotal point as no restrictions were enforced upon the style of the magazine by the publishers or the subject matter. By 1987, four years of the magazine seemed to be enough and he decided to quit before

becoming typecast as a 'skate fanzine' designer. Stints in other magazines proceeded after this with Carson crossing to the East Coast. Most notable was his job with *Musician* magazine, where he was released after a handful of issues as his layouts were of a nature 'too radical' for the publication.

But during these eight to nine years of learning and growth from his first experience of graphic design, Carson had gone about collecting the bare necessities for understanding the need to communicate, however unconventional it may have been. As the designer himself has stated,

"If I'd had four years of design school I really don't think I would be doing what I'm doing now. I'm not anti-school, but when I became interested I really didn't know what those (design) rules were."

( Carson. 1995 P.90 )

Such an unrestrained learning period as he has gone through has allowed Carson to avoid the conventions and -as Lewis Blackwell labels it,

1000

247

1100

NUMBER 111



"the hollow structure of  
designers past. Their grid's,  
their neo-classical this  
and that, their -ism's."  
( Blackwell. 1995 P.27 )

As will be explored in the  
following chapters, this unique  
approach to graphic design has  
given the designer the  
qualifications necessary to work  
in a contemporary manner, in a  
way that communicates on a  
different level than before, a  
means of communication that  
has arisen from the street culture  
rather than from the archetypal  
high culture of mainstream  
graphic design. And this is a  
means of design that does indeed  
communicate (Fig.2), otherwise  
David Carson would not have  
survived long enough to make  
such a profound impact on the  
design community.

All of this prepared Carson for  
his next task, which  
unbeknownst to him was to  
prove to be of seminal  
importance, a magazine that was  
to set him at the fore of a new  
generation of designers. That  
magazine was known as *Beach  
Culture*.

MIS - DON'T  
LEGI - TAKE  
FOR BILITY  
ICATION. COMMUN

Fig. 2



COMMUNITY  
CITY OF  
MUNICIPALITY

1. The purpose of this ordinance is to provide for the health, safety, and general welfare of the community by establishing standards for the construction, maintenance, and use of buildings and structures within the city limits.

2. It is the policy of the city to encourage the development of safe and sound buildings and structures that will contribute to the overall quality of life and the economic vitality of the community.

3. The city hereby adopts the following standards for the construction, maintenance, and use of buildings and structures:

4. All buildings and structures shall be constructed in accordance with the minimum standards set forth in the International Building Code, as amended from time to time.

5. All buildings and structures shall be maintained in a safe and sound condition, and shall be free from any condition that may constitute a hazard to the health, safety, or general welfare of the community.

6. The city reserves the right to enforce these standards through the issuance of orders, citations, and fines, and through the initiation of legal proceedings.

7. These standards shall be enforced by the city engineer or his authorized representative.

8. These standards shall be subject to amendment from time to time by the city council.

9. These standards shall be effective upon the date of their adoption.

10. These standards shall apply to all buildings and structures within the city limits.

# The Beach Culture

*Beach Culture* began its existence as a shopping and advertorial catalogue released in conjunction with the flagship magazine *Surfer*, of *Surfer* publications once a year. It came under the name of *Surfer Style*, which was soon to disappear. In 1989 everything was to change when Carson was recalled by the company to art direct the magazine. They must have felt safe enough giving him charge of such mundane material, but with the combined effort of Neil Feineman, Carson set about changing the periodical's content, name and subject material. It became a magazine independent on its own, with a bit of 'Beach' and a lot of 'Culture'. Feineman's choice of editorial matter was to provide Carson with all the inspiration required to push forward with the kind of design he had pursued before. The result was explosive. Radical frontierless design was integrated with articles that pushed *Beach Culture* further away from its original intention.

"No one ever said that a surfing magazine had to look mainstream, but neither has anyone ever demanded that it be cutting edge -or new wave. Most surfing publications are just fanzine's, void of design interest."  
( Heller. 1992 P:56/59 )

It was obvious that *Beach Culture* was not just any ordinary surfer's fanzine. It was based upon the sub-culture of surfing but that didn't mean the articles dealt exclusively with the sport. They included a broader spectrum of the surfing scene, with music, films and other sports featuring at regular intervals. And so Carson and Feineman were unrestricted in their creative outlet, exploring every possible method of combining editorial with design. The results were amazing in relation to its

success on a commercial scale, as *Beach Culture* amassed an excess of one hundred and fifty awards in its brief life span.

Fig. 3 is the cover of the first issue of *Beach Culture* where Carson used illustration rather than photography, which most-if not all-other surfing magazines would have used. This in itself was a bold step, particularly as this was the first issue attempting to set new standards for itself which it would adhere to and go beyond. David Byrne, singer of Talking Heads, has acclaimed *Beach Culture*

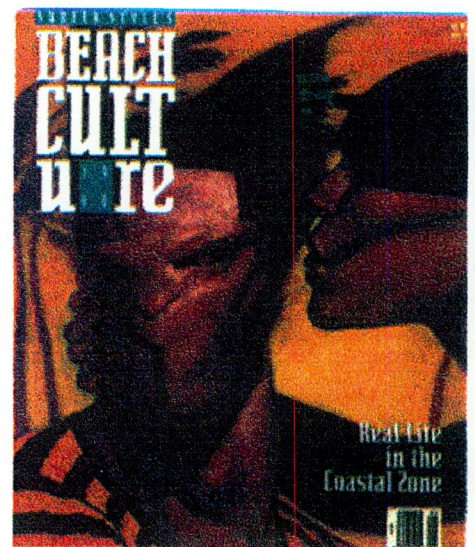


Fig. 3





in his introduction to the book *The End Of Print*.

"I first saw David Carson's work, as did a number of others, in the short-lived magazine called *Beach Culture*, and I immediately wondered what the hell was going on. Who was reading this magazine that seemed to be in the wrong place directed at the wrong audience? .... Maybe this was another step along those lines? Popular culture proving once again that it was more revolutionary than high culture." (Blackwell. 1995 P.8)

So it was becoming more obvious that the magazine was reaching a wider audience than was originally intended. This is emphasised again when one views the readership that it had gained by its sixth and final issue -fifty thousand!

Nevertheless, in the two years that it managed to survive, *Beach Culture* was able to present enough dynamic design to enthrall the devotees to Carson's style and enrage the critics. Undoubtedly, *Beach Culture* was the freshest piece of magazine design of the '80s. As well as using illustration on the first cover of *Beach Culture*, Carson debuted the typeface 'Senator' by Zuzanna Licko, wife of the editor of *Emigre* magazine, Rudy Vanderlans.

At that stage the finishing touches to the typeface had yet to be put in place, but in the true spirit of Carson's designs portraying all that was fresh and contemporary, he used the typeface anyway. The cover illustrations were always carried out by well known figures such as Milton Glaser, Matt Mahurin and Art Brewer, but apart from this the covers always lacked the free design ethos that was evident on the inner pages. They seemed somewhat conventional in layout with every aspect of the covers appearing fully legible and clear, allowing the connection between image and topic to reveal itself, whether in a direct or abstract way. In reference to Figs. 4 and 5, (issues three and six), both cases present imagery, whether photo or illustration, which has no immediate or obvious relation to the magazine's main subject matter. There is no sign of sand or sea, never mind a surfer. Yet there is an atmosphere or sensation evident from the imagery that acknowledges an abstract relationship

between picture and the title -*Beach Culture*. Again, David Byrne has captured the essence of this when he wrote,

"David's work communicates but on a level beyond words. On a level that bypasses the logical, rational centres of the brain and goes straight to the part that understands without thinking." (Blackwell. 1995 P.8)

As is stated before, the inner pages of the periodical offer a more complex yet fuller example of the wizardry that Carson was able to weave. It is in these pages that the designer has begun to explore the full extent of his typographic superiority, and a method

Fig. 4

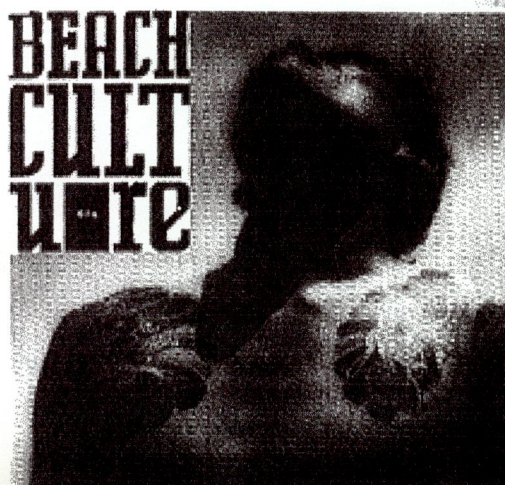
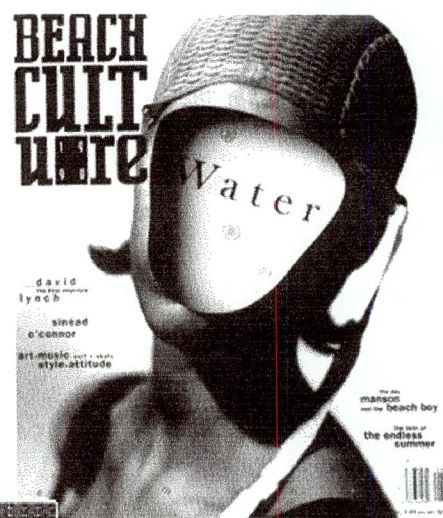


Fig. 5





of art directing that has inspired many other younger designers to approach design in a new way.

There are an abundance of spreads to choose from in *Beach Culture* and all represent a new approach to the topic in hand. Carson refused from the very beginning to adhere to the conventions of a grid system to produce layouts. Rather than just accepting the rules of design, why not challenge them? So each page of the periodical tends to do this to the extreme.

Fig. 6 is a double page spread from issue six entitled 'Hanging At Carmine St.' It is a far cry from the sun drenched beaches of California, as it is a public baths in Greenwich Village, NY. But where is the connection to '*Beach Culture*'? The opening few lines of the article appearing bottom of the left hand page describes a filming scene for the movie 'Raging Bull', which has become a cult movie on its own accord. The use of black and white throughout the rest of the spread counterbalances the colourful language, which itself suggests that even though there aren't many years of training behind him, Carson uses an intelligent response to the problem in order to create an ambience suited to the subject. For this is a subject as much a sub-

culture based one as surfing and in being so has every right to be found within *Beach Culture*. It is the kind of story that unsurprisingly interested the readership of the publication. The mixture of old and new photography, both in the same eerie style, awkwardly cropped, in black and white, accommodates the disarray of type that is supposed to be the headline. Another signature of Carson's dry humour appears with the title actually hanging upside down.

"While Carson has respect for the words his sole collaborator, Neil Feineman, has created, he knows that the look of the magazine is as integral as the text - perhaps more so, since he's developed a code that when deciphered, allows the reader to become a part of the process."

(Heller. 1992 P.59+60)

Certainly when any reader opens these pages their first impression is one of confusion. Or

perhaps the abstract content of the spread is delivered first, while comprehension will only certainly arrive if the reader is prepared to analyse the layout. It is quite possible that the main reason these pages become so difficult to comprehend is due to the fact that, through conditioning we are more inclined to comprehend pages adhering to a grid format. *Beach Culture* doesn't. Instead the pages exist as canvases upon which text and image amalgamate to produce a different kind of communication.

The overall message communicates to the subconscious, while the conscious part ruminates on the aesthetic content.



Fig. 6





"The photographer Albert Watson... says of the designer, 'He uses type the way a painter uses paint- to create emotion, to express ideas'." (Berger. 1994 P.20)

And such a spread as Fig. 6 relates to us the idea of the film being a cult classic and one directed at sub-cultures rather than the mainstream glitz of Hollywood. The alternative, risky integration of headline and photo is a far cry from the high street periodicals, leaving out the necessity for legibility, instead acquiring the sense of the films dark, brooding and classic cult content. Rather than this idea being presented in clearly defined terms; i.e. in the text and photography, it is rendered as more of an abstract idea, conveying an emotive approach. This notion of using graphic design to present ideas or emotions, like a painting, runs rife through Carson's work but moreso in the later explorations of *RayGun*. But he has always insisted -in true designer fashion- that this concept is based around a need for a problem solving response to the topic in hand. One of his most acclaimed spreads that relies on this basis of communication is entitled 'Surfing Blind' (Fig. 7), featuring a report on a person teaching the blind

to surf. The double page opener was originally heralded for its shock value because the reader was immediately met with an arresting expanse of black, extending the full size of the spread. The headline appeared in the top left corner in white at a size refusing to accept the laws of design. Diagonally opposite, the byline appears even smaller again, forcing anyone with any visual impairment to squint at these words. The byline actually reads 'More', which sends everyone else turning the page to find the ensuing article, only to realise that it isn't there. In fact it appears twenty pages later as if nothing was out of the ordinary!

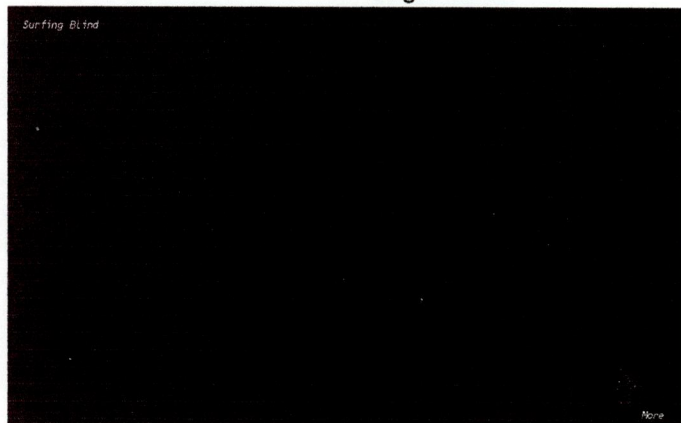
This spread has received much acclaim and rebuke, but possibly more of the latter because the full intention behind it was well over the critics' heads. It is an intelligent response to an article expressing the fear or danger of surfing without sight. To a beginner of surfing even getting on the board is a daunting task. But to everyone else, looking at these two

pages and considering this image as the final and only image for a blind surfer, brings a scary recognition of the difficulty for the blind. This has been achieved without the use of illustration or photography, which is more likely to have been the method used by any other surfing publication. According to Carson,

"My goal is to have the reader turn to a page and get a feeling -some kind of internal reaction -that hits his soul and makes him want to read." (Heller. 1992 P.56)

However, most-if not all of the critics have expressed their opinion that Carson's forte lies in his use of typography.

Fig. 7



GRA  
LANE





While this may be so, there is justification in the other belief that he has a more extensive range of design elements to choose from than just his typographical ability.

In Figs. 8 and 9 there is an obvious difference in the treatment of both articles. Fig. 8 integrates the type elements as part of the overall image. The choice of typeface, called Copperplate, has a relationship to the image that has been blurred beyond recognition. The underlying image acts only as an abstract surface upon which the letters fragment, also making the headline difficult to understand. But certain elements of the letter 'A' are repeated both on the image, as its only recognisable feature, and in the wording. Different weights of letter eventually give way to comprehension allowing the reader to recognise the title Graceland, Paradise Garden and St Coca Cola.

Meanwhile, Fig. 9 really only uses the type to create a textured map of words that are at once readable and not. Heavy overlapping of certain words prevent lucid reading while in other regions of the page the spartan blotches of letters hang off the edge of contents lists or else they have gone all the way and drifted off the page completely.

Larger sized letters converge with each other

to form abstract forms that are more a curiosity than being legible letter forms. This being the final issue of *Beach Culture*, and having nothing to lose by forcing his experimentation, it provided a passage from the adventurous risk taking and exploration of *Beach Culture*, to a new level of design wisdom, and communication with the audience that ardently followed in the wake of David Carson and the likes of MTV. One of his more predominant experimental features has been earmarked on this particular contents page. Before this issue, Carson had been playing around with the idea of removing the page numbers and with this final issue of *Beach Culture*, he made a point of removing them altogether. It was only in the last two issues that he had been introduced to the Macintosh computer. Recognising that page numbering was an automatic part of any document in the computer, he decided to work against that convention and has been doing so ever since. The overall effect in fig. 9 is

one of a complex surface texture using only type elements. While this harks back to the belief that Carson is only a master typographer, it would also be a valid point that this page and others like it appear as something verging on pure abstraction, rather like the work of the Abstract Expressionists that he has always felt an affinity for.

With these examples of *Beach Culture* taken into consideration, the magazine has proven to be a great move forward for David Carson in his attempt to locate a new form of communication. Not all of the work was a complete success as has been seen in the covers of *Beach Culture* (figs. 4+5) where Carson failed to



Fig. 8

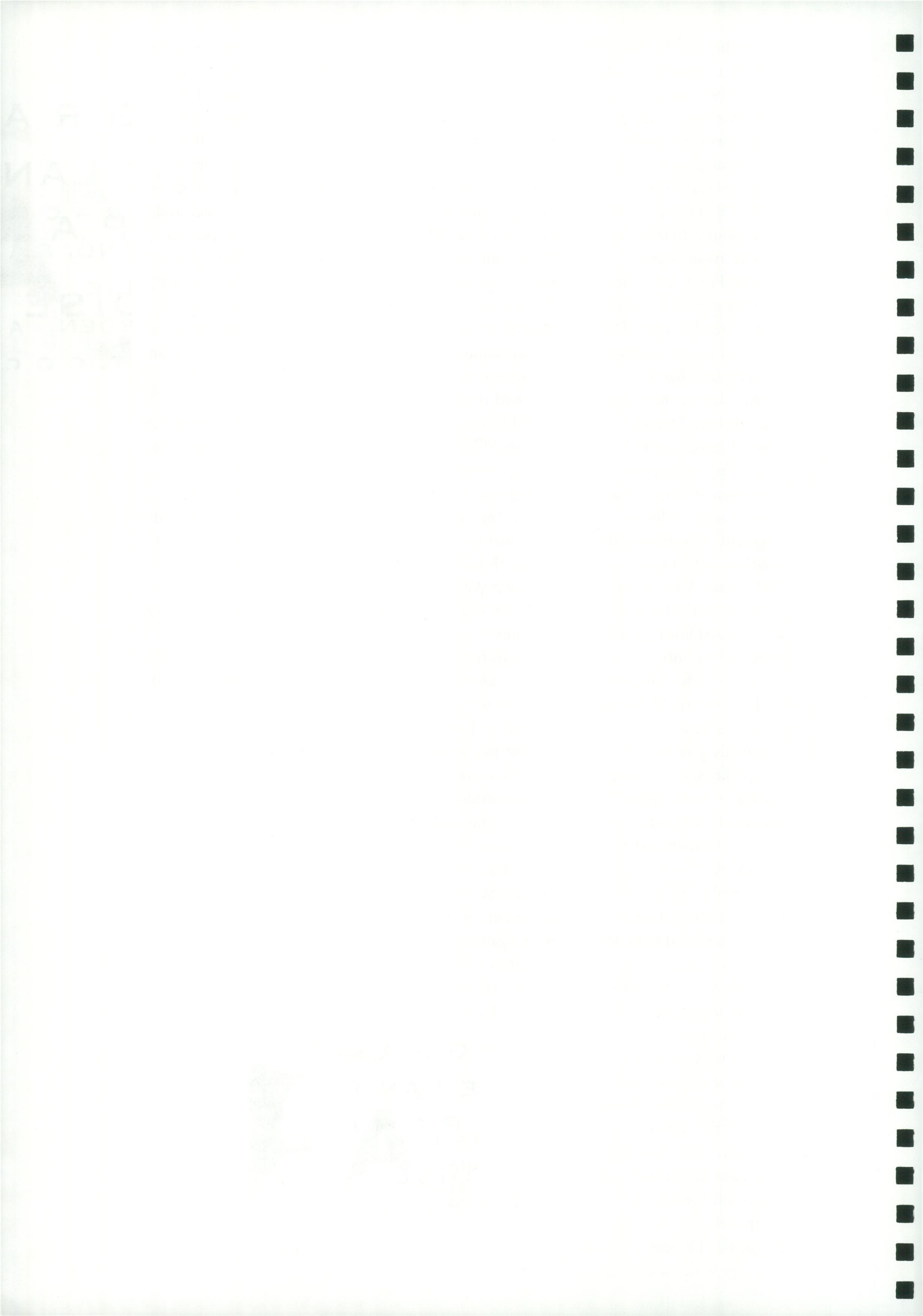




Fig. 9



Contents page from  
issue 6 of Beach  
Culture. This example  
exposes a transitional  
period of work by  
Carson from this  
magazine to *Raygun*.



continue his risky experimentation and some of the work has a distinctly '80s feel about it, (fig. 10) immediately aging the work, with the likes of *The Face* or *Arena*, and so doesn't continue in the same vein as the rest of the work which has a distinct '90s surfer feel. The pages of *Beach Culture* did provide a higher point from which he could go further again with his experimentation. It is the kind of experimentation that Carson learned in the waves of California or Barbados. It is the innate and intuitive ability to explore all possible and impossible avenues in the waves when surfing that has found its way into the pages of *Beach Culture*, allowing for a high risk-factor in the designing of the layouts. There is an obvious sign of the enjoyment that is inherent of surfing in all the issues, and it is an attitude towards design that is unique because of its freshness and vitality. But that was not to happen in the form of *Beach Culture*. With the magazine being dubbed as a 'radical' periodical, many of the advertising groups were confused or simply annoyed by its design. Fearing it would be a financial black hole, many of them began to pull out of the magazine. Only enough remained to allow the publication to continue for two years, releasing six issues in all.

By the time it was closed down due to the recession of the early '90s, Carson was broke but was still obsessively trying to keep the magazine afloat.

"I was so broke that I couldn't even afford to run a car. I used to catch the train to the office and then walk for half an hour to get there."

(Carson. 1995 P.35)

The closure occurred in the Fall of 1991 and Carson was immediately brought to work for the flagship magazine, the then thirty three year old *Surfer*. But he was too restricted in his layouts because the company was not prepared to let this magazine falter as well. The following year though he was to receive an offer that was to prove to be too enticing. The L.A. based publisher Marvin Scott Jarrett asked the duo of the now defunct *Beach Culture* to work on a magazine that was to be based upon the alternative music and fashion scene. By the end of the year Carson and Feineman had made their choice.

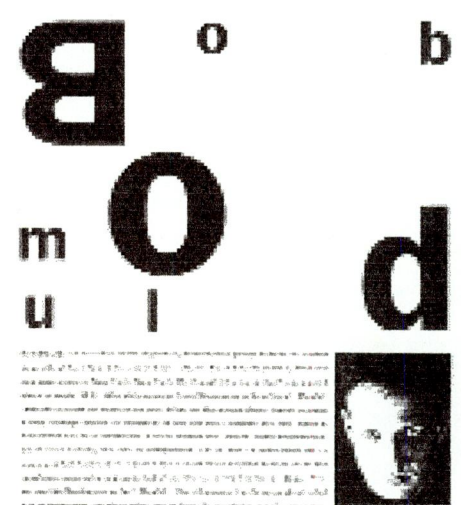
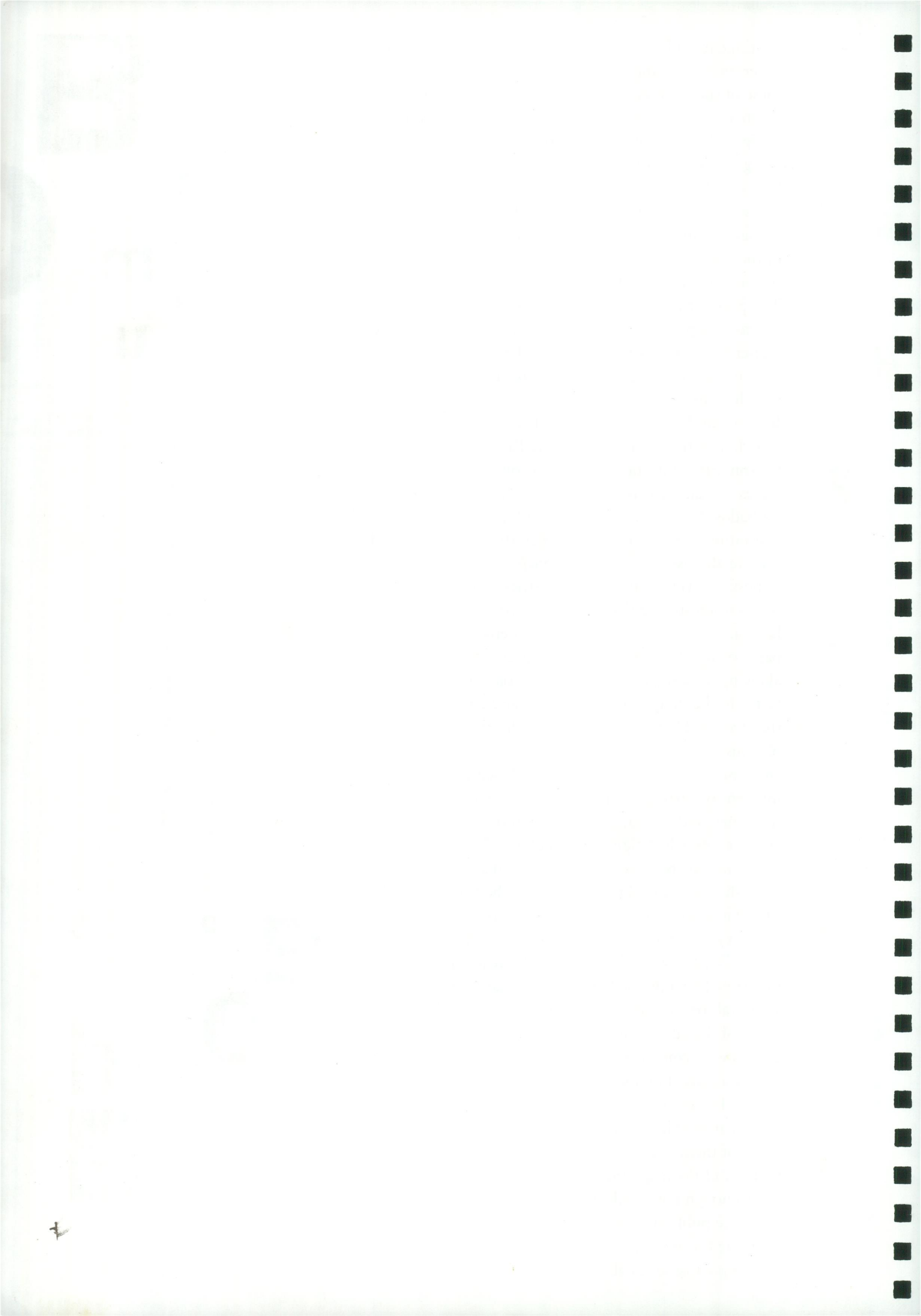


Fig. 10





# Generation

*The reinvention of the youth culture.*

# X

Before proceeding with the investigation of RayGun, it is of paramount importance to at least consider the audience that Carson's design work has so often been associated with. They share the same idiosyncrasies possibly because of Carson's own life being steeped in the natural processes of the most notorious generation of all time: Generation X.

Generation X has gained all of its notoriety through the slanders of many sociologists, claiming this particular generation to have no specific goals in life, a culture full of 'vegetables' who are tuned to one thing only: television. The apathy of this generation is supposedly the full reason for the socio-economic recession that we have gone through for the last decade.

However, it is more than likely that these arguments were born of ignorance from those sociologists who, in fact, did not even understand anything of Generation X.

If they did understand this particular group of people and all that is synonymous with them, they would have presented a different argument. What makes this generation so different to its predecessors is that its list of goals in life are of an abstract nature. There is no overwhelming desire to accumulate wealth etc. The only predominant goal, is to enjoy life to its fullest extent. This has given rise to its peculiar zest for such extensive and 'alternative' activities and the way in which this generation collects and receives information. Born of a time when television was becoming the

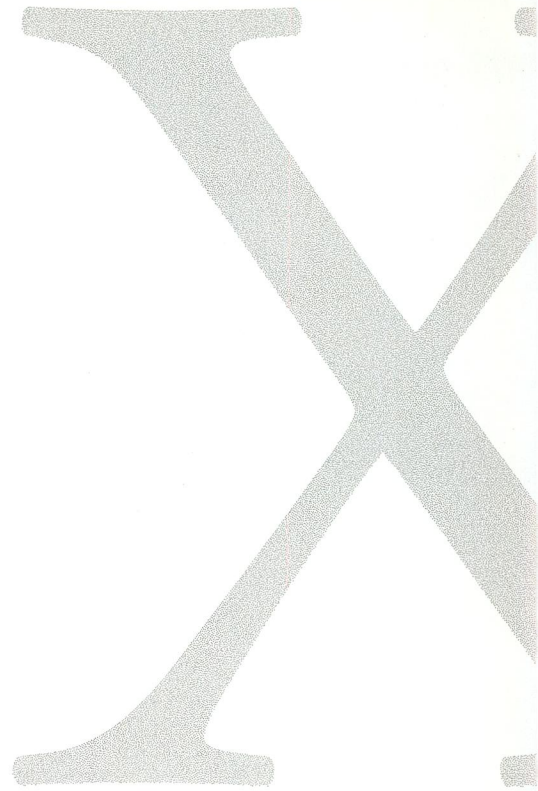




predominant source of entertainment and information, Generation X has grown up evolving in such a manner as to expect all information, in whatever form, to be delivered just as quickly and efficiently. To some extent this has given rise to the exclusion of other information sources such as books and even the older classical works of fine art. Instead they have been replaced with such things as computer games, MTV and videos. Carson himself has alluded to this in many of his interviews, relating how his own kind of work has particular relevance to those of that era (pg. 23). Information consumed by those of Generation X is done so at a faster rate than ever before and so requires all kinds of media to deliver faster and faster than before, with the

advent of TV this process has been made possible.

This need for speed has transcended all areas of life for this group including the likes of recreational activities. For example, surfing has gained a following of many other sports like it with the same adventurous risk taking involved, like: skateboarding, snowboarding, bungee jumping, freefall rock climbing, and skydiving. The one common denominator for all sections of lifestyle from Generation X is the zest for life, and by partaking in such high risk sports the 'buzz' or sensation of really knowing that one is still alive outweighs the risk factor.





# CARSON & GENERATION X

The binding factor between Carson and Generation X is the demand for fast edit information to be delivered directly and without subtlety. MTV has been the prime developer of a definitive method in achieving this with its creation of the music video and the ensuing style of design communication. Noticing that this was so successful, other networks decided to incorporate the same philosophy and so ended up producing a new kind of television programme that had the same fast-paced, information barrage all at the same time and attitude.

This is exactly what Generation X and its following youth cultures wanted. This is what they could respond to and understand. With the advent of *RayGun* this was also a predominant factor in its success. But where MTV and its similar 'copy cat' stations like ESPN had opted for creating a style, Carson had obtained the very lifestyle that his magazines were pandering to. The fast delivery of information was a predominant factor in the pages of both *Beach Culture* and *RayGun*, at times relying on the free experimental approach of the designer, but at best when Carson trusted the very street style imbued within the pages of his publications.

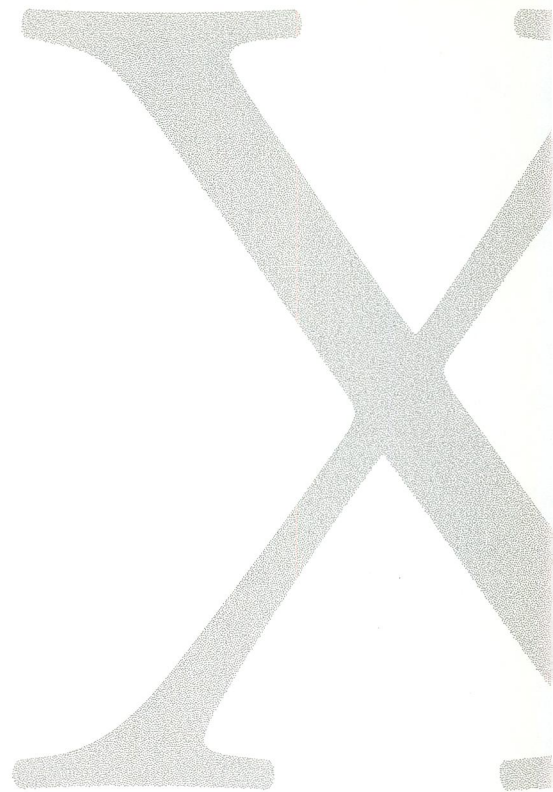
Generation X has been so successful in creating a new communication





philosophy that the youth cultures that have followed have borrowed these philosophies and adapted them with the passage of time. This can even be seen in the way computer technology has increased the ability to reduce distance and time in communication networks, particularly with the introduction of the internet and e-mail. The entire idea of information technology now revolves around its efficiency and the speed at which it is processed. These are all factors that relate to the reinvention of a youth culture which demanded a change in information technology and visual communication. That culture was Generation X, redefining the way in which we, the general public, are addressed in all the various communication

media. Thanks to Generation X we have been given the opportunity to move away from the archaic ideals of the older generations of graphic designers, to embrace the new frontierless technology of today and tomorrow.







# R...and then there was Raygun

I first noticed *RayGun* magazine in the summer of 1993 in an article in a design magazine. In the months that followed that first recognition it was easy to see that there was a growing interest in both the publication and the designer by the sudden overload of other articles that ensued. At the same time my own interest was growing constantly, until the day I got my own copy of *RayGun* and then I too was a devoted fan of the '*RayGun* culture'.

Marvin Jarrett had a dream of providing a music magazine that would challenge the once alternative, now conservative, industry of music. Its name was to be *RayGun*, a title alluding to a prophecy of the artist Claes Oldenburg, who in the '60s proposed a rebuilding of the city of New York, naming it RayGun. Jarrett had the philosophy and the title, and by the spring of 1992 he

had also obtained the designer, David Carson and the editor, Neil Feineman, though he would leave after a few issues. But Carson, was to remain and develop a magazine that is now the legacy of the '*Carson Culture*'.

"Its the kind of design that Massimo Vignelli, high priest of New York Modernism, might anathematise as being 'disgraceful', 'garbage', or an 'aberration of culture'."  
(Poynor. 1993 P.6)

Immediately the magazine gained everyone's attention even before its premiere issue. Such proclamations by Jarrett that his magazine was directly challenging the conventional music industry gained the attention of the press, while the very fact that Carson was designing and directing the magazine ensured an entire design community would be waiting with baited breath. While most of these were anticipating the opportunity to recommence their barrage of criticism at his work, others were hoping that *RayGun* would herald a greater progression in Carson's designs. No one was to be disappointed.

*RayGun* ignored every rule and regulation set for designing a magazine. There were no grids or formats used anywhere, as each page was developed in a unique form and shape of its own, taking



on the appearance of a collection of small canvases rather than the typical design of magazines. Right from the beginning *RayGun* was regarded as a bastion of experimentation and everything new in the world of graphic design. The seeds for this idealism were sown long before in the days of *Beach Culture*, as freelance illustration and the new wave of computer generated typeface's -or fonts- were constantly finding their way into the pages of the earlier magazine.

*RayGun* has been attributed with having achieved a lot more than this, particularly in relation to the new wave of fonts that was going through a boom period. With the introduction of *RayGun*'s freer artistic nature, font designer's were being provided with a vehicle with which to explore and expose their more artistic abilities rather than just providing fonts that were

boringly legible for the general public to read or use. Here they were given the motivation to explore freer letterforms began to take on characterisations of their own. These were letterforms that were so contemporary as to be endorsed wholesale by all kinds of youth cultures as well as *RayGun*. Throughout *RayGun* Carson would respond to the alternative subject matter using a medley of these fonts, combining each of their own specific personalities in different weights, sizes or styles. The newer fresher fonts were very often combined or overlapped with older and less innovative fonts, accidentally creating a new look to the fonts or providing a spark of inspiration for some other designer to create another (fig. 17). One long lasting feature to *RayGun* was the constant metamorphosis that the logotype would go through on the cover from issue to issue, highlighting a new typeface each time. Its use and presentation was always in keeping with the alternative nature of the publication, sometimes roughly pasted in, broken up or crammed together with extensive kerning. Combined with the rest of the elements of the cover, these logotype fonts, under the guiding hands of David Carson, provided a sensory 'overload' which suggested the alternative nature of the subject matter. A lot of the fonts that have been used on the front cover and the inside pages have passed from *RayGun* to provide a greater public awareness of the many font designers that have contributed to the magazine. Many of these fonts can be seen in the illustrations taken from various issues of *RayGun*.

An example of a typeface that has



1963

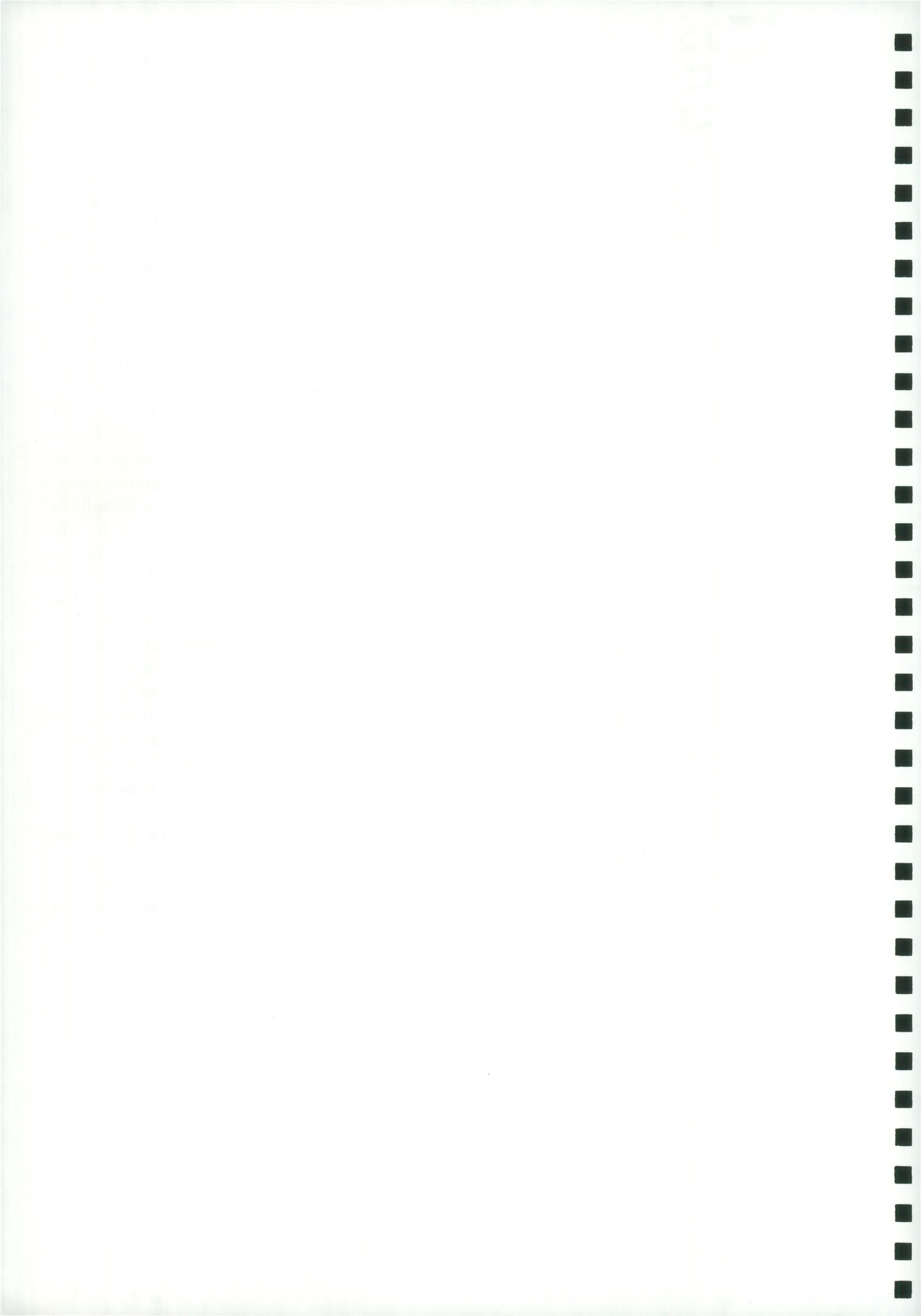
[Faint, illegible text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page]



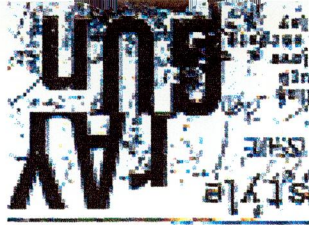
made it big due to its exposure in *RayGun* is named 'Template' designed by Barry Deck, who provided the font for Carson to use in *Surfer* and *RayGun*. Today the font has been endorsed by most of the countries world wide. In England for example, the B.B.C. uses the font for its pop music programme Top of the Pops, a programme which is directed towards a very specific audience, in much the same way as *RayGun*. This is much the same audience that the likes of MTV is directed towards, pandering towards the post TV culture and Generation X. *RayGun* has proven to be more progressive and ground breaking in its design and contents than other publications. Such sections as "Sound In Print" provided a vehicle for up-and-coming illustrators to expose their work. This section had eight to ten pages devoted to it in every

issue, portraying a song or idea through visual imagery. Because there were no restraints in *RayGun*, material like this was readily acceptable in an attempt to communicate in a broader and freer style that was more abstract and less formative than the traditional graphically designed pages of other magazines. This is probably why Carson has always been inundated with work by freelance illustrators, given with the hope of it being used in the magazine.

Other areas, like the section on fashion was giving models, fashion photographers and designers alike the opportunity to gain exposure through what was undoubtedly the most influential publication of the early '90s. The fashion items were always of the same alternative nature, wild and experimental like the typography that introduced them. But not all of the theories were lived up to, with the editorial matter leaving a lot to be desired. At the best of times the text was just typical band bio's and fairly conventional. At the worst it was a rehash of old stories used again to fill up blank pages, which at times was used as a design element. In the days of *Beach Culture*, Carson had Feineman as a source of inspiration, providing him with decent texts to work with. In *RayGun* however, he had to put up with Jarrett himself being the chief editor and the magazines articles struggled to work, leaving Carson with a more difficult task of injecting enthusiasm into the magazine. In the majority of cases he excelled, with evidence of this being how the sales of *RayGun* soared from the very beginning.







"I think Carson is a fascinating -and pivotal- figure. He has produced some of the most era defining and striking designs of the decade."

(Poynor. 1994 P.49)

## The Anatomy of Raygun

There are three very distinct features to the anatomy of *RayGun* and its design content. They are the covers, the double page spreads and the single page spreads. Each in different ways, have their own attributes and flaws. Admittedly, those pages following double page openers that contain all the text fall short of the dynamic excitement and energy of the covers or the double page spreads. The text still seems to present a creative obstacle for Carson to which he applies a restricted range of attributes. However, they still miss out on

the '30 second sound byte' sensation that the covers or the explosive double page spreads enjoy.

### COVERS

While many of the attributes of *Beach Culture's* covers still exist, including the sometimes obvious computer generated work, Carson still insisted in using a 'hands on' approach to the work wherever possible. The effect gained was of a more emotive response to whatever challenge appeared in the publication.

"Carson has created a hit by managing to visually communicate the essence of alternative music, including the subtleties and nuances of such elusive genres as 'grunge' or 'atmospheric'."

(Byrne. 1993 P.83)

Figs. 11,12,13 help to illustrate this quote as they are the covers for issues 1, 17 and 25 respectively. Even with the first cover, 11, there was an evident transition from the stylistics that governed the covers of *Beach Culture* or *Transworld Skateboarding* to the 'grunge' and alternative covers of *RayGun* in the coalescence of its various elements. The highlight of the cover, the logotype, appears in a newly published font, with an unruly use of upper and lower case letters constituting the name. A fresh 'grunge' typeface has been used on the contents list, complementing the words, 'premiere issue' that appear to have been scratched into the cover. None of the typography falls prey to convention. The logotype is crammed into the corner while the contents trickle down the cover like a stream of spilt coffee. Some of the critics of

Fig.11

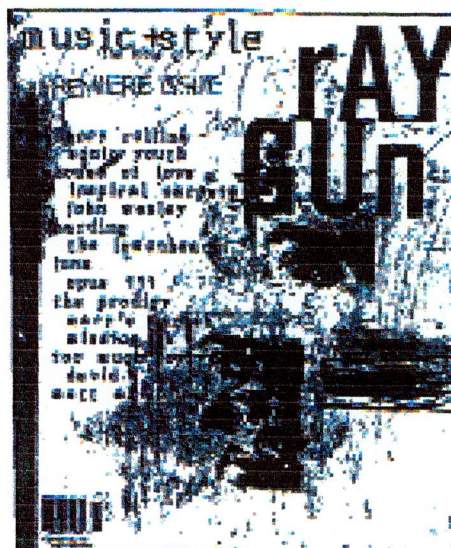
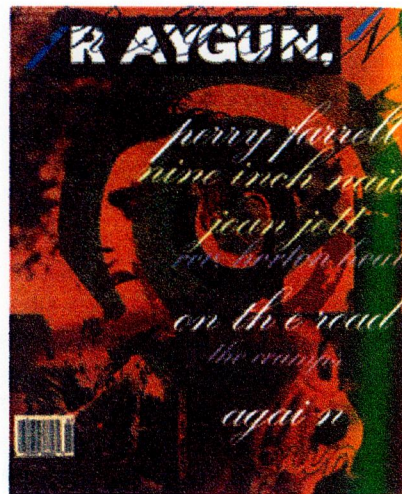


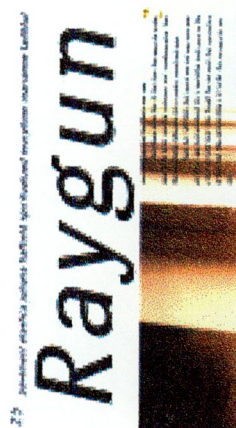
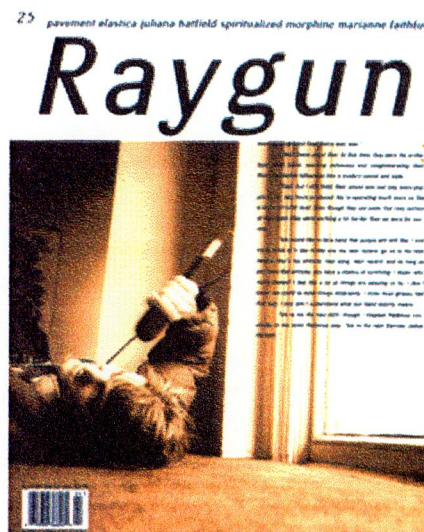


Fig.12



Two covers of RayGun showing a drastic change in design approach in the space of one year.

Fig.13



Raygun







*RayGun* consider this aspect of the covers to be self indulgence or design for design's sake. The reasoning for such an approach to this magazine is already obvious in the style of music and the audience it was addressing; the alternative and fringe/cutting edge attitude of the music and fashion scene. These are immediately evoked on the front cover of the first issue. There is no way this magazine can be mistaken for a subject it is not about, that is everything except the youth culture.

The background imagery in fig.11 involves a montage of illustration and photography, with each element having an awkward raucous feel to it. The eyes that are the sole remainder of the photo seemed to have been transferred to cell acetate and slashed away from the remaining features of the face. The

combined elements of the front cover give hints of the personality that goes along with the eyes, portraying the character of Henry Rollins. Rollins is the last of a generation of 'hardcore' punkrock musicians who has continued to be successful in the '90s with his ruthless, intense and sometimes violent lyrics. If the eyes don't portray this alone, then the cover makes up for it.

At times these covers are nothing more than an endeavour by Carson to produce rich, textural and curious pieces of artwork, such as can be seen in fig.12. This particular cover has been heralded by all as one of Carson's finest pieces of work to date. Here there is no correlation between the images that are used, constantly overlapped until certain portions of the images are completely lost. The logotype has yet again gone through another transformation, this time appearing in three different fonts. The first is a script typeface that is barely legible against the second, a more predominant logo, drawn by a professor of the Cranbrook Academy, Edward Fella. The last logotype appears in a semi-translucent form at the bottom of the page in what can only be described as a childish handwritten style. Standing out against the black background that it sits on, the byline hangs vertically at the bottom also, torn from another page and crudely pasted in. The contents have been treated with the script typeface as well, which at that time was going against the grain of using 'alternative' typefaces which were going through a phase of being hip and cool. This was just another consequence of *RayGun* being so popular.







Everyone was plagiarising the style and forgetting to take note of the content in the designs.

A stark contrast to this is fig.13, issue 25, that has few if any of the features from the other two covers. However, in response to the very music scene that this publication is based on, this cover in particular tends to resonate the mainstream existence of what was once a very revolutionary and alternative kind of music that has now become an endorsement of everything conventional. By this issue Carson had stopped all experimentation with the logotype, now remaining with one font and one layout. The contents list appeared in the same typeface as the logo, and in a very restrained format. He seemed less prepared to challenge the conventions of mainstream design than even the covers of *Beach Culture*. There were fears that

Carson was beginning to fall prey to design rules after all. An excuse was provided in the following quote from an article that had been published some time before in a design periodical:

“Carson says he is shifting his own design emphasis toward other elements, such as colour and photographs. ‘Type has been the star, but I want to explore other ways of expressing content’.”

(Berger. 1994 P.21)

At this stage Carson had spent the last two years forcing the same emphasis on type as well as the imagery, due to the pressures of publisher demands. People were buying this magazine due to its hip style and fashionable appearance. This was fine according to Jarrett but in Carson’s opinion something had to be done to avoid all the plagiarism that was going on of the ‘RayGun style’. So in order to provide a new challenge for himself as well as side stepping the ‘copy cat’ designers, he was searching for a new means of designing *RayGun*. It was too late though, as the advertising community had already decided to endorse the ‘Carson style’ and use it for their own purposes, Carson had been imprisoned in his own unique way of communicating through design. He says,

“I suppose I was surprised when they (Chevrolet) came to me, the guy literally said he had RayGun, first issue, on his desk and wanted to do the whole campaign on the font on the cover.”

(Blackwell. 1994 P.28)



## THE DYNAMICS OF A DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD

There has always been room for criticism about Carson's work, particularly in reference to *RayGun*. There is one section to this magazine, though, that no one has really found anything wrong with. The double page openers of the articles of *RayGun* have always carried an air of superiority about them, proving quite irrefutably that the designer has absolute skill when integrating the opening headline or introductory paragraph with imagery.

Fig.14 +15, which is an article on the techno dance band, The Shamen, is a prime example of this. Fig. 14 is the opening spread, immediately exposing one element of Carson's work that has actually been acclaimed by all of the design community. The scintillating rush of white takes up the most of the page, highlighting

Fig. 14



Fig. 15



DANCE



the crudely chopped, solarised band photo that has drifted off the page. Approaching the headline with the same attitude, the title is sliced apart too, though not really affecting the legibility. The effect suits the cutting edge style of the band in question. The next double page spread of the article contains all of the text, carved up in another classic design experiment of Carson's, where the text flows in curved boxes. This had never been done before, quite possibly because having gone through the system of being taught graphic design and all of its conventions, no one had ever bothered to use computer programmes to gain effects as Carson did.

Usually a plethora of different typeface's would have been incorporated into the effect of the design, but here Carson has only used one typeface exclusively, except for the word 'dance', which looks as if it has been distorted by a photocopier. There is absolutely no grid in existence. Instead, he uses the double page spread as a canvas where the text comes together with the image to create an abstract expression of the band. With image, text and title drifting off the pages, Leaving large scapes of white, Carson has pinpointed the very core of the band and its music, the cutting edge and technologically advanced approach they use and the hardcore techno soundscapes they produce. The layered effect of text drifting and colliding echoes the barrage of the various sampled sounds the band has used and speaks as many volumes as the article does. And that is possible even when certain sections of words or text have disappeared off the page, as in fig. 15. Other incredible double page







spreads such as 16 are legendary for their amazing integration of typography. The headline has become fragmented to cover all of the spread; words have become overlapped to create a pool of dense black with lines, intended to sew up all of the elements, then disappearing off the page. The deconstruction of introductory paragraphs refuses to fall to any discernable format.

Unpredictable kerning breaks up the fluency of words forcing the reader to slow down when reading the text. And as the headline spans across the width of the double page in irregular jumps and staggerings, the enigmatic and mysterious sounds of Dead Can Dance are delivered in an instant, combined with the peculiar green hues that reminisce of the layered effect of a sound so contemporary yet quite classical. Carson explains,

"Somebody said everything I designed was self-indulgent, meaning it as an insult, but I would say I hope it is self-indulgent. That is when you are going to get the best results."

(Blackwell. 1995 P.2)

17 and 18 are two more examples of the control and mastery that Carson has demonstrated in his double page spreads which are really the high points of any *RayGun* issue. They truly represent his ability to use type in large dimensions to its greatest effect, whether it is in abundance like fig.18, or when it is created like an oasis in the desert, spartan yet rich, like fig.17. In both cases the type is used like another layer floating across the top of the imagery, but at the same time being integral to the overall composition. In both of these cases the band is well known and validates the sole use of photography, but the finely tuned use of typography has allowed Carson to express a different view other than that of the photo. The addition of type really expresses the kind of music these two bands produce. With fig. 17 the disjointed headline, in contrast to its cramped byline confirms the peculiar kind of rock music this band creates, at times itself suffering a sort of schizophrenic fracturing in basic layers, just like the personalities behind the music. This is what the article itself eventually gets around to though it gets a bit boring to read. The double page spread delivers it in a second! Much the same can be said of fig. 18, exposing the fresh personality of Miss Hatfield and her new album. The spread though gives the impression of a shy and



Fig. 16





Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Two examples of the dynamic double page spreads from the magazine RayGun. As Carson progressed, so has the communicative strength of these pages.







reclusive hatchling and its egg shell. Some of these elements have inspired a younger generation of designers to attempt this more experimental approach, though not always with the same success.

## SINGLE PAGE FLAWS

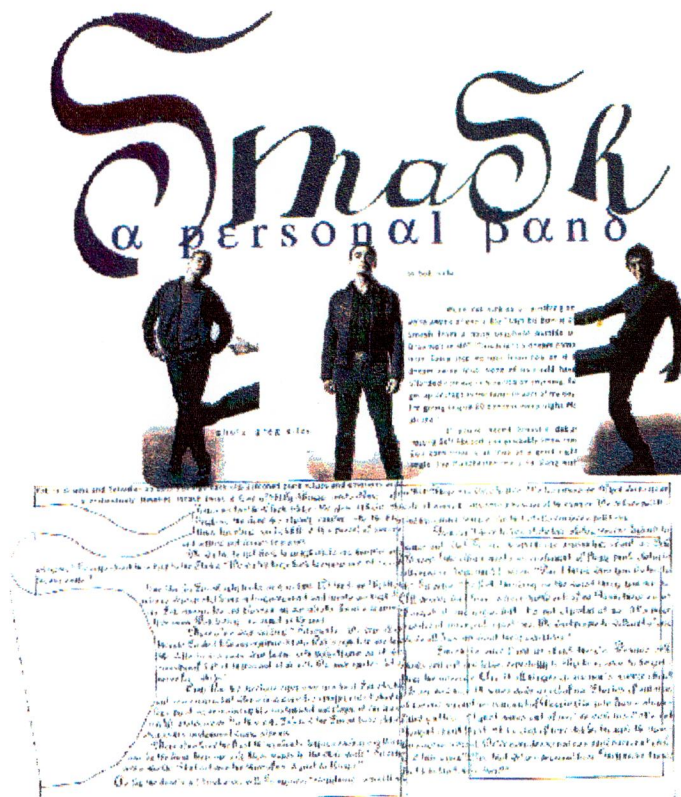
However, in some cases an honest answer from an any fan of *RayGun* would suggest that not all of the pages following each opening spread are of the same quality of design. In fact, in a number of cases there is a sharp disappointment as the rest of the article doesn't live up to expectations, as in the article of fig. 17. The dynamics of the double page spreads have not continued to appear on the single pages that either followed the opening pages of a major article or were independent articles themselves. Some attributes of

these pages are new to *RayGun*, as Carson has always found the single pages difficult to deal with. It was only through his work in this magazine that he was coming to terms with dealing with text. In such sections as the one entitled "Small Print" (fig. 23), there always seems to be a frenzy of excited experimentation, a flurry of new fonts and fearless design at work.

The new found experimentalism for text that Carson introduced to *RayGun* is evident in fig. 19. The large headline and name of the band is simulated in the converged paragraphs at the bottom of the page. Using a typeface that is difficult to read doesn't help the legibility of the article but perhaps that was the intention from the very beginning as it is quite possible the report is dull and ineffective. The font is of a quirky script style but at the same time takes on the appearance of being smashed up. But even with a variety of fonts, Carson was obviously still finding it hard to create a dynamism all of its own for the single pages.

In contrast to this, the contents page of issue 26 (fig 20), has a clean and postmodern air about it. The enlarged issue number hangs elegantly in the white space provided, in contrast to the hip and 'arty' photo of the lower half of the page. The contents list sticks to a convention -ranged left- but in relation to the rest of the page this complements the style. Fig. 21 shows how at times text floating above the image, especially when it is small point text, becomes difficult to read on such rich and abstracted artwork. In this case though the loss of legibility echoes the first line of the article 'No one knows who we are.' To the left a

Fig. 19





THE  
LIBRARY  
OF THE  
MUSEUM  
OF  
COMPARATIVE ZOOLOGY  
AT  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

NOV 19 1905  
RECEIVED  
FROM THE  
LIBRARY OF THE  
MUSEUM OF  
COMPARATIVE ZOOLOGY  
AT  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

# 26

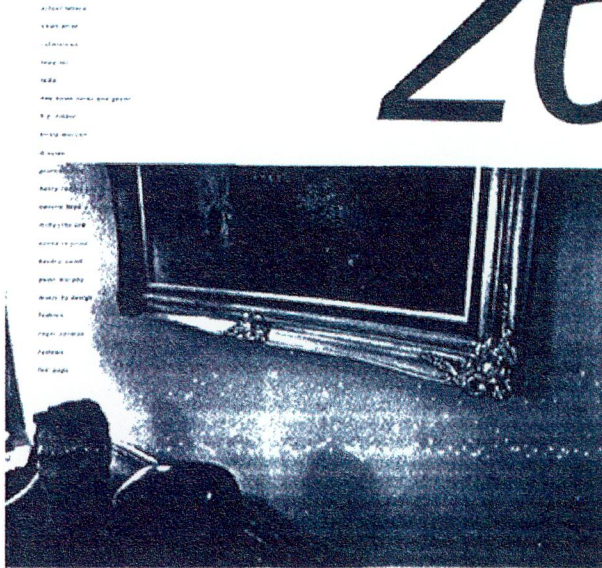


Fig. 20

Three very different examples of single pages from various issues, showing just how Carson was capable of approaching a task like this.



Fig. 21



Fig. 22







myriad of more 'grunge' fonts makes the small article all the more interesting, if only to look at. However, this page really has become an overload of information, resulting in something that has become too difficult to read or even look at. At certain times the experimentation has paid off (fig. 22) where the playful nature of the text has created a surface of type that can be plucked from the page and quite legibly deciphered. This page in particular has a real MTV feel to it in the use of type, its fractured delivery and the abrupt fast information presentation.

Fig. 23 highlights the canvas-like quality of the page that Carson has constantly instilled. But in each example, as with 24 also, the treatment varies only slightly, with Carson using the same elements such as overlapped, deconstructed,

splintered or over-enlarged type along with images that are given the same experimental treatment. In order to reaffirm such an attitude as Carson's in his attempt to consistently force the boundaries of *RayGun*, such statements as the following one are often quoted,

"Today's audience has changed. It has a different visual orientation than readers did just a few years ago."  
(Blackwell. 1995 P.15)

David Carson was trying to change his approach to *RayGun*, as a means of avoiding the situation he found himself in. The last four issues that he art directed showed signs of trouble brewing. Jarrett was reported to have spoken about a new 'simplicity' for these following issues, which was more than obvious as with issue 28, with pages adhering to design rules and regulations all the time. All text was legible, all images were kept clear of text and opening spreads lacked their almighty sense of dominance. Jarrett also avoided speaking of the desire he had for greater sales and his dream of pushing *RayGun* to the very top of the mainstream music magazine ratings. Rather than sticking to the original dream of presenting a publication to challenge the blandness of the industry *RayGun* and Carson's own style of design had become a part of the same bland industry. By 1995 everyone was plagiarising the *RayGun* style, because anything using this deconstructionist approach was guaranteed to be accepted. Undoubtedly Carson himself wanted to escape from the trap. Such groups as MTV and ESPN

Fig. 23





were endorsing wholesale the stylistics of ground breaking design like RayGun, obviously with the intention of directing it towards the same audience, Generation X and the youth cultures, but merely for its style as the fashion of today.

Issue 30 was to be the last *RayGun* he would art direct. With his departure he brought with him all the major clients he had gathered over the last few years. *RayGun* itself continued, with the Johnson and Wolverton group taking over, with the obvious condition that each issue pander to the fashion of today (fig. 25). And *RayGun* has been the fashion of the last year or more. But has David Carson become entrenched in a style that everyone else wants to hold on to except himself, or has *RayGun*'s demise given Carson the opportunity to explore new venues towards communicating to his own audience? Only time can tell as everyone watches in eager

anticipation of the next chapter in the story of the 'Carson Culture'.

Fig. 24



Fig. 25







# David Carson & Post TV Culture.

Since his departure from *RayGun*, Carson has reaped the benefits of being in the right place at the right time, having art directed the most successful music magazine of the early '90s. From this exposure he has been able to augment his catalogue of big clients, such as David Byrne, Prince, Gotcha Clothing, Burton Snowboards, Nike, Pepsi, Levi's, Coca Cola, M.C.I., Sega, American Express, Citibank, and TV Guide. While some of these clients are employing Carson because of their experience with him when advertising in *RayGun*, others have come to seek his help because of the successful transition he has made to directing television commercials. Taking on a designer who has relatively little

experience in designing commercials suggests that his reputation has allowed him to seek out new ways and media to approach design.

The one drawback is that in gaining a larger audience through television, his desire to avoid being typecast as a designer of a particular style seems harder to achieve. After all, it is the advertising industry's main aim to use the latest style, to use whatever it takes to reach their prospective audience. Unfortunately for Carson, his booming popularity from his days in *RayGun* have made him an obvious target.

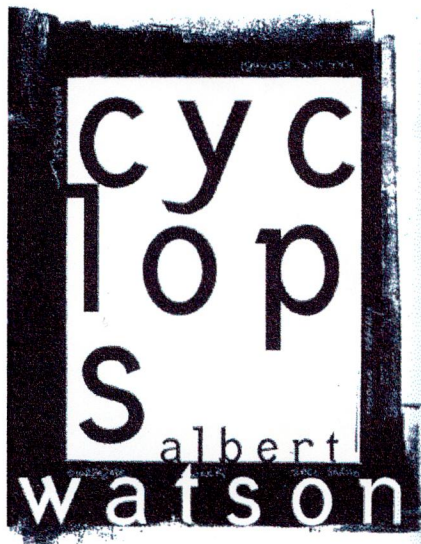
Other more positive developments have come from his new office in New York with Mike Jurkovic as partner. Lately, most of his work has been in conjunction with the photographer Albert Watson (fig. 26), partner to Jurkovic, for posters relating the the underground system in the city. More importantly, Carson has just designed the book for the photo-biography of Watson, to which much acclaim and rebuke has been proffered. His decision to use an all type front cover has not been well met by the design community. Even with those who would be considered allies, criticised him for it, like for example Rudy Vanderlans.

"David is constantly thumbing his nose at typographic convention. For someone who is considered to be a design wunderkind, it's disappointing that there's been so little progress." (Poynor. 1995 P.53)

While Watson himself heartily agreed to the design of the cover, the reason was to allow the book to stand out against the countless other similar photography books, and it does exactly this. Much the same can be said of the publicity posters for the New York subway (fig. 27), which work on a more complex array of letter forms, arresting the passersby and forcing them to read the poster. These are obvious signs of the superior skills he has with type and these are exactly what most of his clients in the advertising community want.

Carson's approach to the commercials that he is directing is somewhat similar to the work of *RayGun*, in the sense that the same dynamic use of type and image is present. The initial reaction is that most of the commercials tend to be directed at

Fig. 26







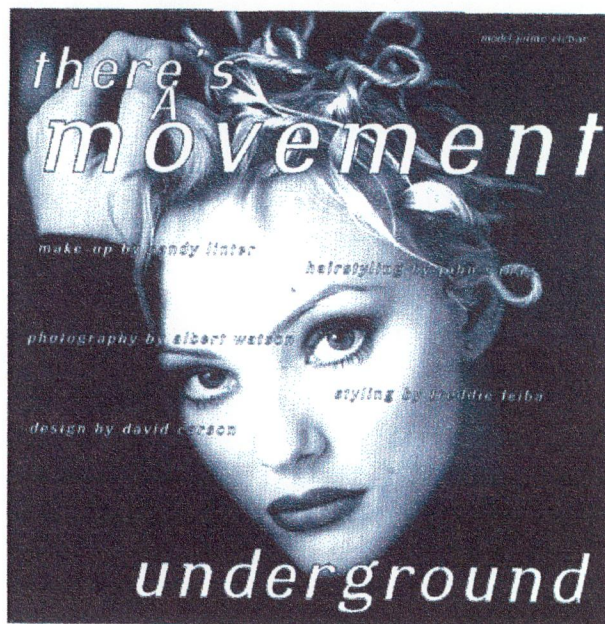


Fig. 27

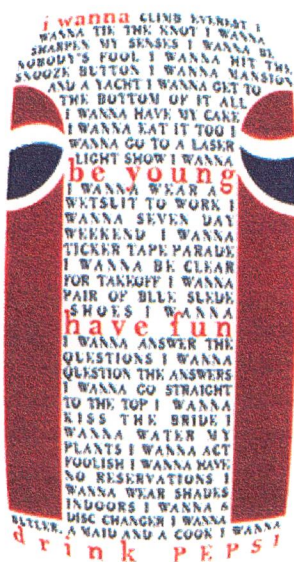


Fig. 28

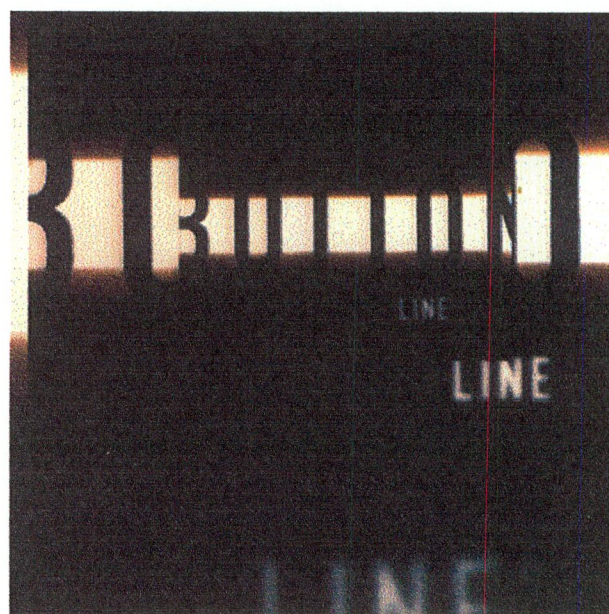


Fig. 29

Some of the very recent work that Carson has produced for television and the New York subway.

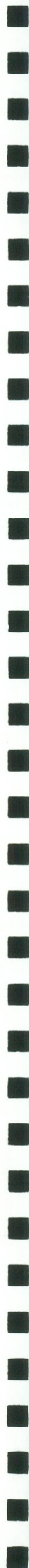
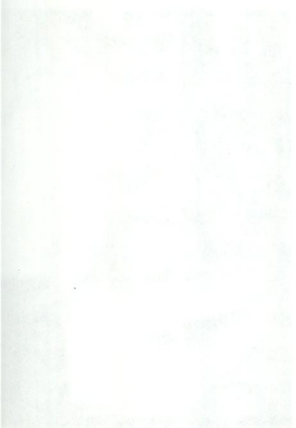


the readership group of his magazine days, Generation X and post-TV cultures (fig. 28). However, not all the prospective audiences of these commercials are of this age group, as would be the case for American Express and Citibank. Is there more to this designer's ability than has been seen in the annals of such work as *Beach Culture* and *RayGun*? Perhaps Carson is the insignia of all that is fresh, new and vibrant in the world of communication design. For such companies as American Express, who constantly wish to increase their customer base Carson is the perfect 'bait' for the younger audiences and prospective customer group. At the same time the pre-existing customer base really has no qualms about such advertising ploys, after all they too wish to be considered as part of the customer group the ads are directed at, seeing themselves as being just as young and 'with it'! It is such groups as the big corporations who have understood the meaning to the theory that visual communication has changed radically in the last ten years due to the predominance of Generation X. And David Carson is the foremost figure in the design community who has cared to address the issue. Perhaps there are signs of

this designer of the '90s having more than just a cool style to give for the audience of today. Perhaps he is so prolific because of his understanding of the nature of the general audience of today and he is the best at offering a means of communication for this group.







# The good points, the bad points and the ugly points.

David Carson has insisted from the very first time his name hit the limelight that the progression towards his own design ethos has always been a natural evolution. Some consider him to be gifted only with being fashionable, of

knowing what look is right for the audience of today. However, if one reconsiders the preceeding chapters it is hard to believe that these critics have got everything right. While these criticisms have been constructed in order to invalidate his work, Carson has always seemed to continue with success after success.

The problem, as Rick Poynor suggests in *Blueprint* Jan. '93, between Carson and the designers who have followed in his footsteps, and the older generations of designers is essentially an ideological divide in communication. While the 'modernist' designers of the past attempt to reaffirm their superiority, they have forgotten who they are designing for and what their designs are meant to do. David Carson, has managed to uncover a method of designing that does, in fact, relate to the

audience of today. He has wandered into the line of fire, just when a radical shift in design and communication has developed due to the change in attitude of the public and the greater evolution in design and communication technology. It is this change that has provoked the likes of Massimo Vignelli to speak of the disgust they have, perhaps only in fear of the new? Rudy Vanderlans, himself a figure of much criticism because of his work in *Emigre* magazine, suggests that,

"It seems they feel their own work is in danger which is not the case. Their work is so good that it will always be there, and will probably be sitting there on a pedestal in front of design classes. But I think there is room for other solutions. The problem with that is whether it is good or not, which I think is what Vignelli is trying to get at."  
(Thrift. 1992 P.5)

Carson would most certainly not agree with this theory. He instead refers to the fact his work has built upon the success of its ability to communicate in a much better way much better than the older approaches







of design, namely the work of designers like Vignelli.

While the rest of the mainstream designers have received a certain amount of formal training at an age where the rules of design seemed perpetually adhered to, Carson managed to sneak through the back door, avoiding all the formalities of design training in higher education. But before doing so, as has already been analysed in Chapter One, he received a unique form of lifestyle training in the surfing sub-culture.

While surfing may have imbued a certain typical surfers persona, (calm, fresh and genial), it also provided Carson with his own way of seeing things. Armed with this and the raw fundamentals of design experimentation, it is the intelligence and desire to communicate that has led the designer through his days of *Beach Culture* and *RayGun* and forward to today, gathering a massive following of respecting clients and admirers in the process.

As David Byrne says:

"Maybe this was another step along those lines. Popular culture proving once again that it could be more revolutionary than high culture."

(Blackwell. 1995 P.6)

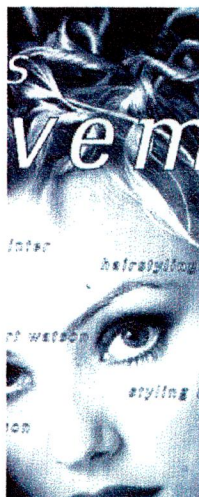
Carson himself has always insisted that this is so, that street-culture has always offered the answers for the new design of the future, but only because it was the people of the street, namely the everyday person, who could comprehend this new form. Of course Carson's success has depended on this audience

which has been the likes of Generation X. But with such companies as American Express employing him as well, it seems that market research suggests the majority of their customer group revolves around this generation. Or perhaps this form of design that Carson has developed holds a wider ability for communication than is obvious on a superficial level.

"These are people who grew up with MTV and computers and video games, they need to receive information differently- in bits and pieces. If anything, *RayGun* readers respond better to articles that are visually stimulating and challenging."

(Berger. 1994 P.21)

His work in *RayGun* has been described as 'a thirty second sound byte' (The Late Show 14/2/95), again comparing it to the 'quick-cut-barraged-by-type-all-at-the-same-time' style of MTV. But unlike MTV's zest for popular ratings and ability to sell out for the fashion of the moment, Carson's approach is based on an emotional response to any design problem and not on the desire to be seen as the superstar of design as he has been





dubbed. His philosophy is probably more in line with the practices of fine art than graphic design, but the overall effect is just as good if not better than the ethos and philosophies than the likes of the Bauhaus. Rather than communicating on a literal level, using legible type, he has opted for the more emotive response, a means that is in keeping with the demands of the audiences of today who dislike the dull and literal attitude of most work.

Carson has ruminated before on his love of the world of fine art, especially for the likes of Mark Rothko and Kurt Schwitters, who's ideals fall in line with abstraction and the need to express an emotional response. This is much the same reaction Carson gives to criticism of his work, finding a certain resonance in the words of Rothko himself:

"I'm not interested in the relationships of colour, form or anything else....I'm only interested in expressing basic human emotion, ecstasy, doom tragedy and so on.. The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you are moved only by their colour relationships then you are missing the point."

(Blackwell. 1995 P.31)

While the designers and critics have attempted to destabilise Carson's popularity, they have actually outlined their own inability to come to terms with the directional shift of

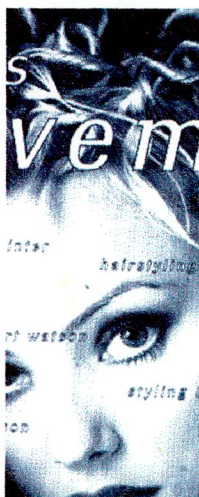
design. Such concepts as the end of print in the advent of the super information highway is absurd to them, but to Carson the notion has opened up the opportunities to force the ideas of design communication even further.

Of course, like the demise of vinyl with the arrival of the compact disc, so too does the demise of printed material seem ever more evident due to its lack of necessity. The notion of the 'end of print' harks back to a famous line in a Carson/Brody interview in which Neville Brody suggested that *RayGun* heralded the timely death of printed material. In *RayGun* the appearance of the double page spreads seemed more in tune with visual communication on television or the internet rather than the archetypal two dimensions of a magazine.

Such figures as Paul Rand have already expressed their scepticism at these changes,

"The phrase 'the tools of the future' is also suspect. It seems to suggest that the mind and hand will become atrophied."

(Rand. 1993 P.15)







While to Carson the computer is only a means to an end (producing magazines), he is well aware of the growth in the use and need for computers and computer crafted design because of the change in perception of communication media and the way we accept it.

Another excuse that the critics favour is that Carson's work is perhaps a glamorous plagiarisation of the experimental work of such colleges as Cranbrook or Cal. Arts. Such prolific designers as Barry

Deck, himself a graduate of Cranbrook, has hit out at him on several occasions for this reason:

"He's taken everything he does from the Cal. Arts/Cranbrook community and sort of ripped the heart out of it- that is he deidologised everything and delivered it to the masses."  
(Poynor. 1995 P.50)

This retort is a far cry from the high praise Deck offered no more than a year previous in an article in *BluePrint* 1994, where he describes the magazine as a 'good thing'. Perhaps the real reason behind all of the criticism is purely one of jealousy, in Deck's case primarily due to the fact that he perhaps regrets giving Carson all those typefaces freely in the early days of *RayGun* to exploit and use wherever possible. It is plausible to suggest that a grand proportion of Deck's reputation has come by way of his exposure in the publication. In relation to the experimental schools of design though the difference in attitude and approach is remarkable. Figs 30 and 31 prove

this quite adequately. The approach to the work is so different because of the difference in teaching that both Carson and his contemporaries have obtained. However, while the work of the Cranbrook graduate has a distinctive computer generated feel to it, bound by the years of design tuition, Carson's has a more intuitive feel with the text drifting, refusing to adhere to the laws of 'good' design. Fig. 31 tries its hardest to force the frontiers of the page further, but only with limited success, on the other hand though Carson's (fig. 30) doesn't even recognise the fact that there are any physical restrictions to the page. Both examples share the deconstructionist philosophy, but Carson has managed to obtain a grater fan club and a lot more awards than any of the other deconstructivist designers of the '90s. As an undisciplined designer, Carson has avoided the regular channels of learning design. Through the life style that he led before hand he has obtained the ability to understand and communicate in a way that the people of today can appreciate. Everywhere one looks there are signs of the 'Carson Culture'

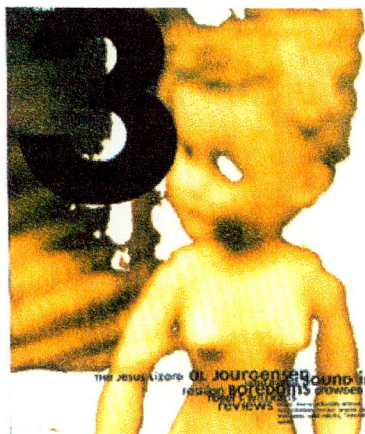
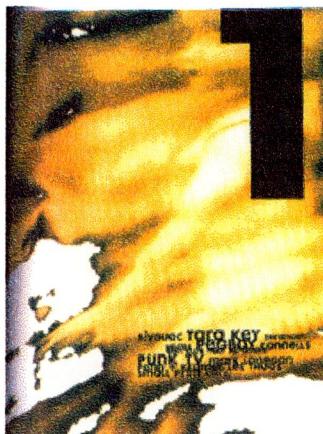


Fig. 30





appearing, as the younger generations of designers acknowledge the validity of the new design ethos. Commercials on British television have begun to show traits of the same deconstructionist attitude using Caronesque typography, as in the latest ads for 'Milk', or the 'LionBar' ads. Indeed these commercials have already had a greater impact on the public already. But not all of the RayGun copies are of the same quality as the

original, such magazines as *Harpers and Queen* have imported certain aspects of the typography of *RayGun* but with a lesser affect, with the advertising world only really seeking out the fashionable look rather than the attitude. To some of his admirers this is bad publicity for Carson and gives the critics a reason to lash out at him. Beyond all the heated diatribe and the poor excuses, it is obvious that Carson is doing something right. His designs do function. They do communicate on a level that,

"bypasses the logical, rational centres of the brain and goes straight to the part that understands without thinking."  
(Blackwell. 1995 P.6)

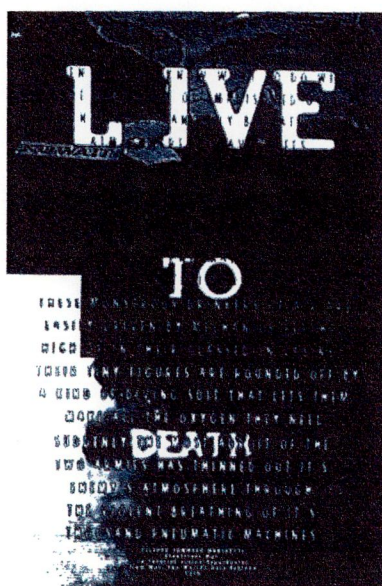
He has found an ever-extending audience that acknowledges this and they continue to do so, understanding the quick shot messages that resonate on the pages, TV screen or bus shelter. It is a method of graphic design that is preferred to the previous older generations of design, either because of the aesthetic quality of the work

or because it is more easily understood.

Perhaps the work of David Carson is becoming repetitive and *RayGun* is appearing everywhere that he goes suggesting that, just maybe, he has reached a stalemate. Or perhaps the *RayGun* style appearing everywhere is because the deconstructionist style of David Carson does communicate.

Nevertheless, David Carson has taken the opportunity to take the world of graphic design by storm, changing the course of visual communication forever and at the same time taking the limelight with his work in the pages of *RayGun*. With his *RayGun*, David Carson has conquered the world.

Fig. 31





## Bibliography

Berger, Warren. *Graphis* 295. 'The Wunderkind of Design'. February 1994 P.20/21.

Berger, Warren. *Affiche*. 'What makes David Carson Tick'. October No. 14 1995 P.46/55.

Blackwell, Lewis. *Creative Review*. 'Turning the Tide on Type'. Vol. 14, No.2 Feb. 1994.

Blackwell, Lewis. *Creative Review*. 'Face to Face'. Vol. 14, No.5 1994 P.28/30.

Blackwell, Lewis. *Creative Review*. 'Keeping Tabs on Carson'. Feb. 1995. P.14.

Blackwell, Lewis. *Creative Review*. 'Carson Splits with RayGun'. Nov. 1995. P.15.

Blackwell, Lewis. *The End of Print*. Calmann & King. London. 1995.

Byrne, Chuck. *Eye*. 'RayGun'. Vol. 2. August. 1993. P.83

Cliborn, E. & Poynor, R. 'Typography Now'. Internos Books, London. 1991.

Hall, Peter. *ID*. 'Controlled Chaos of our Times'. Vol. 40, No.1 Jan. 1993. P.49.

Hall, Peter. *Design Week*. 'Barry Deck'. Vol. 9, No. 21. May 1993. P.29.

Hall, Peter. *Design Week*. 'Word Up!' No. 21. May 1993. P.38/39.

Heller, Steven. *Print*. 'Two Art Directors and their Culture Magazines'. Vol. 46, No.3. Jan/Feb 1992. P.56/63.

Meggs, Phillip. *Print*. 'Vignelli Vs. Benguiat'. Vol. VLV:V, Sept.1991.

Nippan. 'New Typographics'. Nippan. Dusseldorf, Germany. 1993.





Poynor, Rick. Blueprint. 'Riding the New Wave'.  
No. 93. Dec/Jan. 1993. P.6.

Poynor, Rick. I.D. 'David Carson Revealed'.  
November. 1995 P. 48/53 & 92/93.

Rand, Paul. 'Design Form & Chaos'. Messberg &  
Co., Indiana. U.S.A. 1993.

Thrift, Julia. Eye. 'Rudy Vanderlans'. Vol. 2,  
July. 1992. P.8.

Treadre, Roger. Observer/ Life. 'Typeout!'. Nov.  
12th. 1995. P.46/49.

Wupperman, Peter. Form. Das Gemeindeblatt'. Vol.  
90. No.692. 1994.

runway

