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DAVID CARSON; HIS AUDIENCE AND HIS DESIGN

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List of Plates:	page 3
Introduction:	page 4
Background:	page 6
Chapter 1: Content and Context	page 8
Chapter 2: The audience	page 12
Chapter 3: Intuition and design	page 17
Chapter 4: Carson's design	page 22
Conclusion:	page 38
Bibliography:	page 40



LIST OF PLATES

- pic 1: J.Mascis, Ray Gun, 1993.
pic 2: Glyn Jones, Musician, 1988.
pic 3: Sharks, Surfer, 1991
pic 4: Street Kids, Colors, 1998.
pic 5: Nike, 1994.
pic 6: Levis L-2 Brand, 1995.
pic 7: Nobodies, TWS, 1986.
pic 8: Harry Connick Jr., Beach Culture, 1990.
pic 9: David Lynch, Beach Culture, 1990.
pic 10: Surf Ohio, TWS, 1987.
pic 11: The last hold out, Beach Culture, 1991.
pic 12: Tony Hawk, TWS, 1990.
pic 13: Surfing Blind, Beach Culture, 1991.
pic 14: Jeff Booth, Surfer, 1992.
pic 15: My Beach, Beach Culture, 1991.
pic 16: Too Much Joy, Ray Gun, 1992.
pic 17: Screaming Trees, Ray Gun, 1993.
pic 18: Individual, 1997.
pic 19: Recording in soviet dis-union, Ray Gun, 1993.
pic 20: Lyle Lovett, Beach Culture, 1990.
pic 21: Cold Sweat, Surfer, 1992.
pic 22: Front cover, Cyclops, 1994.
pic 23: Cliff Love, Cyclops, 1994.
pic 24: Leslie Weiner, Cyclops, 1994.
pic 25: Dog on a beach, Cyclops, 1994.
pic 26: Front cover, Native Arts of the American People, Alvin Lustig, 1949.
pic 27: Contents page, Speak, 1996.



Introduction

When I first saw David Carson's work I was impressed. Not all of it was good, some pieces looked like little more than an ugly typographic mess. Others, however, were superb, random floating type, integrated text and photographs, all very visually stimulating images. The designer seemed to break all the design rules I had been taught. It appeared the gap between fine art and graphic design was getting even smaller. Neville Brody, the English designer, called Carson's work 'the end of print'. (Face to face, 1994, p.29) I wanted to see whether there was a method behind the work, or was it all just random.

As Carson is a contemporary designer, most of the research material for this thesis came from articles in design magazines. There appeared to be no real middle ground for the writers. For some, Carson's designs signified exactly what they believe is wrong with graphic design; a designer with no formal education breaking the traditional rules, including the golden rule; Keep It Legible. To others, his design was fresh and exciting, something different from the grid and column, and the traditional methods of design. His designs were more expressive. I hope to refer to both sides of this argument.

The desktop computer is not even twenty years old, but it has already dramatically changed the way we design. Today's designer has to be equipped with not just their intuition, their creative talent, but with the knowledge of computer programmes. Many designers now know, not only those for print, but those for the internet, website design and interactive multimedia, and as such are influenced by these new media.

As a designer entering the workplace in 1999, the questions raised in the first three chapters are directly relevant to me. How much should design reflect the content of the piece and how legible does it have to be? What is today's audience looking for, and how do you provide it? And how much personal intuition and how much traditional training is required to make a design work?

Carson started before the computer became the design tool it is today, using the traditional method of cutting and pasting the layouts. I want to see if these techniques influenced his method of design. He claims that the design is decided by the content of the



piece. I wish to examine his work and see if this is true. I also wish to look at the audience whom Carson's designs are aimed at. This is, after all, one of the most important factors in designing; you must know who you are designing for. Why are Carson's audience choosing more complex and challenging designs rather than a more traditional and legible piece? Are they looking for a more stimulating image, and if so, does Carson provide it?

A chapter will deal with the question of intuition and design, the balance between personal freedom and traditional training. Where should the balance lie between the two? Are the traditional rules of design still applicable to today's designer, or do they need to be replaced with something new? Is there a more expressive way to design?

Finally, after Carson being in the design business for over fifteen years, I wish to examine if his work has evolved or is it merely style, a few graphic tricks that will go out of fashion? Has Carson developed, is there a method behind his design, or is he a now extinguished flash in the pan? I wish to see, if we look at his work in the 'eighties through to the 'nineties, will we find a development in his work. Is there a method behind Carson's design, or is it just "car crash typography" as Rick Poyner called it? (Poyner, 1995, p.93)



Background

The final decade of this millennium has seen a vast amount of change in the field of graphic design. The computer has allowed a huge amount of people access to a previously closed profession. To be a computer illiterate designer is to be an unemployed designer, though it is not necessary to have had an education in design to use a computer. This has led to the question of whether the traditional 'rules' of design are relevant to a new breed of designer.

With new media entering the design arena, again the question arises, do the rules for the printed, static page apply to this new technology, or are there any rules? The internet, cd-rom, and interactive media are all new areas of design that simply were not there ten years ago. Is a columned grid of black text set on a white background suitable for the internet which would allow text to move, change colour and size, a dynamic image rather than a static one?

All of this new multi-media has had a tremendous influence on print, and on graphic design as a whole. It is changing preconceived ideas on what was right and wrong and allowing new processes, or methods of design, to evolve. With widespread use of the computer, allowed by ever decreasing prices, a lot of poor design has seeped into the market. The term 'desktop publishing', unheard of twenty years ago, has allowed design to become cheaper and therefore more financially viable. This has allowed many subcultures an avenue to express themselves. Due to lower publishing costs, the rise in small, specialised magazines aimed at a particular, specified market has greatly risen in the last two decades. A look at Easons magazine section will prove this, not only because of its size, but for the range of titles it displays, from Vegan Healthfood to Flyfishing.

For anyone who has been in the design business for the last ten years, the name David Carson can raise either contempt or admiration. He has been at the forefront of experimental design. Best known for his style of typography and he has created "some of the most striking and era-defining designs of the decade."(Poyner, 1995, p.49)

His blatant lack of use of any of the traditional rules of design have infuriated many who see his design as little more than the fashion of the moment; a fad of the 'Mac-designer'. This may be due to his lack of a formal design education. Originally a professional surfer ranking



eighth in the world, Carson left the sea to become a sociology teacher, the long summers allowing him time to return to the West Coast waves. His first exposure to design was attending a workshop in Arizona, where he found his calling. He later attended a three week workshop in Switzerland, becoming heavily influenced by the designer Hans-Rudolf Lutz. He designed Trans-world Skateboarder(TWS) from 1983 to 1987, getting not only his first taste of commercial design; but TWS also allowed him to experiment within a specialised market. In 1988 he moved to Boston to revamp the magazine Musician, leaving after a short period. They felt his design was too radical.

His big break came in 1989 when he designed Beach Culture, a west coast culture magazine. Though it lasted only six issues, it won over one hundred and fifty awards for its ground breaking design before it folded. He then worked for Surfer, the parent company of Beach Culture and one of the biggest surfing magazines.

Towards 1992, while still working with Surfer, Carson began on an alternative music magazine called Ray Gun. Leaving the Surfer, 'the self-proclaimed bible of music and style', Ray Gun, propelled Carson onto the international platform of design.

After thirty issues, and having seen the rise in Ray Gun's circulation, and therefore Carson's work entering the mainstream, the two parted. Since then, Carson has worked briefly on two other magazines, Blue and Speak and has worked for clients such as Pepsi, Nike, Budweiser, Citibank and Levis, to name a few.

Carson's work has caused controversy in the design world for the last ten years. His designs are far from the traditional methods of graphic design. They consist of layers, distorted typography, fractured words and seemingly random floating letters, designed for a new, visually literate, generation. Some feel his designs are jumbled messes of type and layers with no structure, that they are closer to fine art than design. Others claim that this freedom from the traditional rules is what makes his designs so exciting. Blueprint best summed it up when they said that Carson's designs "exemplify everything that the older generation of graphic designers think is currently wrong with graphic design, and everything that younger designers find influential and exciting."(Poyner, 1993, p.6)



Content and Context

Chapter 1

"At its best, design becomes inseparable from communication. Form becomes content." Amy Arnston, 1993, p.35

"The challenge of design remains in conveying a message."

Philip Krayna, <http://www.typebooks.org/z-rmixmg.htm>

One of the most debated points of Carson's design is content. Critics claim his work is illegible, that he has a total disregard for what many feel is the number one rule, Keep It Legible. The only unity to the different articles in the magazine, and the different articles themselves, is that there is no unity. Rudy VanderLans called him a "one trick pony" (Poyner, 1995, p.93), questioning whether his design has evolved or is it still "for the most part based on shock value". (Poyner, 1995, p.53)

Carson claims that content decides the design. This is not a new development. In the teaching of graphics in the educational establishment, it is stressed that the design must be relevant to the project; the project decides the output. Commercially, a design with a solid concept stands a much better chance of being approved than one that is based on personal taste. If the client does not like the piece, the first design can be explained by reason, for example, why a colour or typeface was used, while the latter is subjectively based on taste. Carson, however, took this method of designing to the edge. With Ray Gun for example, he would read over articles, listen to the band's music, and try to find an idea or concept behind them. Then he would start to design. "I set out to do things in an emotional way. When I turn a page in a book, magazine, to any graphic design I want an emotional reaction. That's probably the basis for how I judge it." (Poyner, 1995, p.93)

The discussion on personal intuition balanced by the application of the traditional rules of design is a major point of debate between the old and new schools of design. Many young designers feel that the balance should lie more with personal intuition as this often allows more freedom and less conventional results. The older school would argue that this freedom has brought about a lack of structure that the traditional rules would have applied. (This point is further developed in chapter three.)



Lotta Johnson questions these traditional rules when she wrote about Carson's work. What happens if we view the words as pictures, or give a picture the task of words to make the context more complex, deep and expansive - instead of just illustrating it?(Johnson, 1994, p.76) The words could convey more than their intended function; they could communicate something more than their traditional symbolic meaning.

After all, what relationship and differences does the verbal language have with the visual language? When we speak, we can place emphasis by tone, speed, body language; a whole range of elements to influence what we say. Similarly, the printed word needs a vehicle to communicate its message. "Words change in the telling."(Blackwell, 1995, p.29) We need this 'telling' mechanism for print. Here enters the role of the designer.

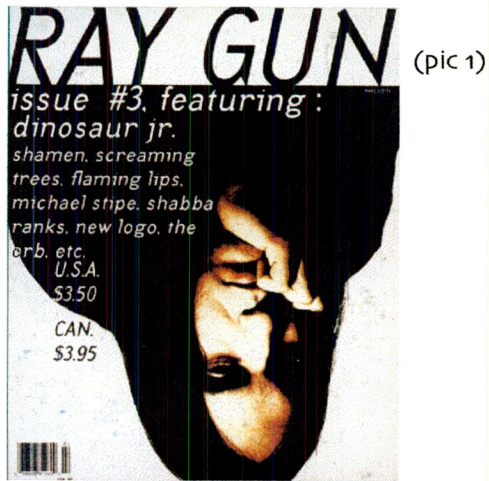
The designer is part of a chain in the production of a magazine. The writers and photographers submit their primary source material, the editor decides what is to be published and edited, and the designer arranges it all together. Many of Carson's critics felt that he was being disrespectful to the writer's work when he would make it more difficult to read, even though it would become a more stimulating image.

"Carson's detractors have zeroed in on his fractured typographic syntax and unconventional placement and cropping of images; often, they overlook the communicative expression underlying his designs."
(Meggs, 1996, p.26)

They were no longer just columns of text. They were trying to embody what the copy was saying, trying to heighten and add another element to our interpretation of the article.

Most designers are aware of the fact that they can heighten an article's meaning by accompanying it with relevant design. William Owen wrote that "at its best magazine design not only orders and amplifies editorial ideas but creates them in a considered fusion of text and image." (Owen, 1991, p.32) Layout is normally pictures and words, side-by-side but not integrated, separated; not the 'fusion of text and image' Owen talks about. It is true that a lot of Carson's best work is with type, but his use of imagery, photographic and to a

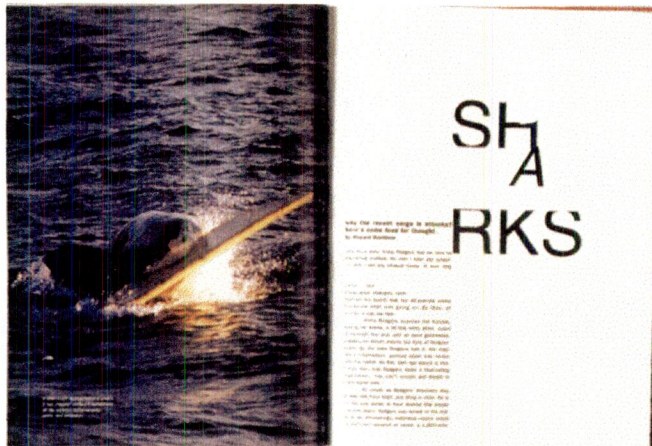




(pic 1)



(pic 2)



(pic 3)

lesser extent, illustration, accompanying the article is carefully considered as well. Used correctly, these elements can create something extra for the text. Originally, the writers for Beach Culture were incensed when they saw what had been done to their articles. Later, however, they complained because their articles hadn't been altered, because the altered articles, though they were more difficult to read, looked more exciting.

So why did Carson gain such notoriety if it is known by designers that interpreting the piece you are designing can aid it? While it was understood that context helps design, no one pushed it as far as Carson. His eccentric designs such as the upside down photograph on the front cover of Ray Gun (pic 1) stemmed from the musician's emphatic disrespect for music magazines. The murky, dark photograph of Glyn Johns (pic 2) in Musician emphasises the fact that the reclusive producer shied away from publicity. And the use of type in the article 'Sharks', an article on a recent surge in shark attacks, where the title appears with bites taken out of it, plays off both the article's content and the accompanying picture of the shark biting the surfboard.

Steven Heller was closer to understanding the commotion when he wrote that "magazine design at its best is not simply a process of imposing rigid or tried-and-true formats, but rather, of creating environments that compliment an editorial viewpoint. Few publishers want to be anything but safe because advertisers prefer it that way."(Heller, 1992, p.48)

These same advertisers are the lifeblood of a magazine, as they bring in huge revenue. Heller claims that publishers are not willing to support designers who wish to experiment, for fear of scaring off the advertisers. This may be one of the reasons why Carson received so much acclaim for Beach Culture; he had the freedom to experiment. This experimentation, even in Beach Culture's specialised market, proved to be its own downfall. The reason that Beach Culture folded after only a year and a half was due to the advertisers pulling out of a magazine they could not understand.

If Carson's work relies on content then it helps if the article is well written. Beach Culture's articles were greatly aided by editor Neil Feineman. He also made his



reputation with Beach Culture. Feineman and Carson changed the publisher's original idea for the magazine.

Surfer, Beach Culture's big brother, had so many advertisements that they felt a separate magazine should contain the adverts. In the beginning Beach Culture was going to be a yearly glorified shopping brochure before the Feineman and Carson pushed the owners towards creating a West Coast culture magazine. Feineman brought to Beach Culture his own expertise, better articles and better writers giving Carson something more to dig his artistic teeth into. (Previously, in TWS, the articles were sent in by the readers themselves.) Carson was also allowed a lot of freedom in the selection of art and photography. Together with good articles, good artwork and his own experimental design, Carson created a magazine that got the design world's attention as much as the original audience it was aimed for.

However, the greatest contributing factor was the magazine's market audience. In order for Carson's complex designs to work, they are reliant on the reader's willingness to persevere through the copy and decode it. Carson pointed this out in HOW when he said that "debates on aesthetics alone are silly; suitability to content and audience is what's important." (Thoughts on the new typography, 1994, p.69) He wanted his designs to be seen not just as pictures, but as designs as a whole, taking into account the piece's audience and context as well.



The audience

Chapter 2

“The most important aspect of any design problem is your audience.”

David Carson

(Thoughts on the new typography, 1994, p.69)

Carson’s quote continues: “Who are you trying to reach and what message do you want to send?” Here is one of the key factors in Carson’s design. He is not aiming at everyone; in fact, he is aiming at a very small, select, portion of the market. If we look at the magazines he designed, none of them were aimed for the mass market. TWS was aimed at a young, teen and early twenties market involved in an alternative sport, skateboarding, an audience that would respond to this challenging text. Beach Culture and Ray Gun were also for youth subcultures, one a West Coast alternative culture magazine, the other a magazine for the alternative music scene.

When Carson worked for Musician, he came up against a more mainstream magazine. After a few issues he was fired for being too radical with the design, his employers feeling that the readers would get scared and not buy the magazine. The magazine needed to appeal to a broader audience. His two recent magazine designs, Blue and Speak, were both cultural magazines aimed at Generation X. (He designed only a handful of issues for both. His short period may be attributed to the simple fact that multinational corporations pay better money, or perhaps he has designed enough magazines.)

Today’s audience has changed. We now look for the immediate and the complex. The Sunday Business Post claimed that the average American experiences over 5,000 marketing slogans in a single day (O’Connell, 1999, p.18). Today’s youth read visual language in a different way than their parents and generations before them. Phillip Meggs pointed out that we are dealing “with a generation that not only cut its teeth on television but honed its reflexes on computer games. This generation accepts graphic expressions that are bewildering to its parents.”(Meggs, 1996, p.234)

With the amount of visual information that is widely available, the present generation decides what it wants very quickly, but more importantly, what it doesn’t want. Today’s designer has a very small period of time in which they must not only get their audience’s attention, but also



hold it. One example of this is the internet. With so much information available at the push of a button, one can spend hours surfing the net and still get nothing. We open a web page and if it does not grab our attention fast, we move on to the next page, often before the previous page has finished loading. It is a matter of necessity that we can sift through the material on the internet quickly and find what we want. If a website is visually interesting and well designed, then it stands a better chance of being visited.

Another example would be the television. When a programme finishes, or an ad-break comes on, we flick through the channels at a rapid pace. Each station has only seconds to keep us watching, before we flick again to find something that we want to watch. Carson applied this way of reading visual information to his magazines. He removed the page numbers, therefore removing any obvious linear direction to read the magazine. He makes it more challenging to read. Lewis Blackwell saw this as "an intelligible response to reader's habits of flicking through the middle or back of a magazine. Page numbers are not needed in this situation." (Blackwell, 1994, p.59)

Forrest Richardson, an American designer, aptly demonstrated how today's reader is changing at the AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) conference in Miami in 1994. There he devised a reading test utilizing new type design. The purpose of the test was to show what people can and cannot read. The only people who scored a perfect 100 percent on the test were college students, a generation used to seeing information presented in a different way than before. (Thoughts on the new typography, 1994, p.69) In the debate about legibility, Philip Meggs says

"Different readers have different capacities for confronting the unconventional; the more a designer asks from their readers, the more likely they are to turn away. Younger audiences, of course, are likely to confront the novel or unconventional. Will an idle reader who is not particularly motivated to read a page make the effort to decode Carson's textural word play? Probably not. A reader's willingness to persevere with obstacles to legibility is in direct proportion to its interest to him." (Meggs, 1996, p.234)

This final point of perseverance and the article's interest to the reader is important. If



(pic 4)



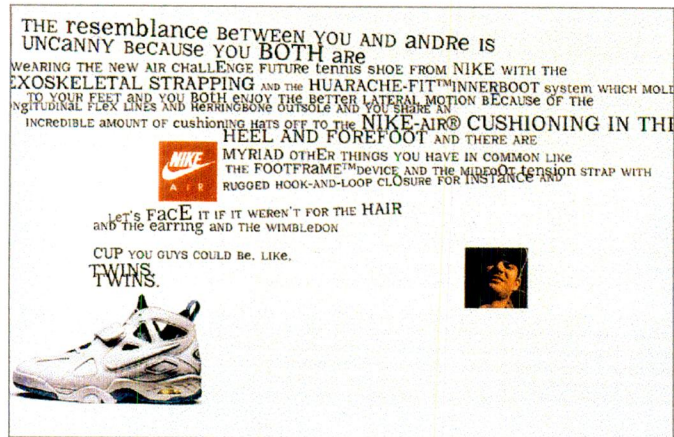
we look at Colors (pic 4), the cultural magazine by Benetton, we can see the opposite of Carson's design. The articles are set in straight boxed columns with banner headlines. The articles require a degree of legibility as they deal with difficult issues. They are very easy to read, accompanied by visually stimulating photography, often severe close-ups and cropping. Though not very stimulating design, the articles are interesting and as such readable. Similarly, if I pick up a copy of Beach Culture and find an article I want to read, I will spend the time to decipher the more difficult text. This coded copy is also used in the End of Print, a book on Carson (designed by himself) and written by Lewis Blackwell. Many of the introductory passages are written in such a way so that a certain amount of time is required to work out how to read the article. Though not very difficult, cracking the code is an effort, and while it is satisfying to figure it out, it is dependent on the reader's willingness to persevere.

Carson's designs are aimed at readers willing to decipher these articles. "The purpose of graphic design here is not to communicate with the broadest possible audience but to speak to a very narrow group with a particular visual culture.(Byrne, 1993, p.83) Blackwell claims "he [Carson] prefers to let it stand on its own, piece by piece, seen and admired or rejected by those it was aimed at."(Blackwell, 1995, p.19) Therefore, it is not aimed at everyone.

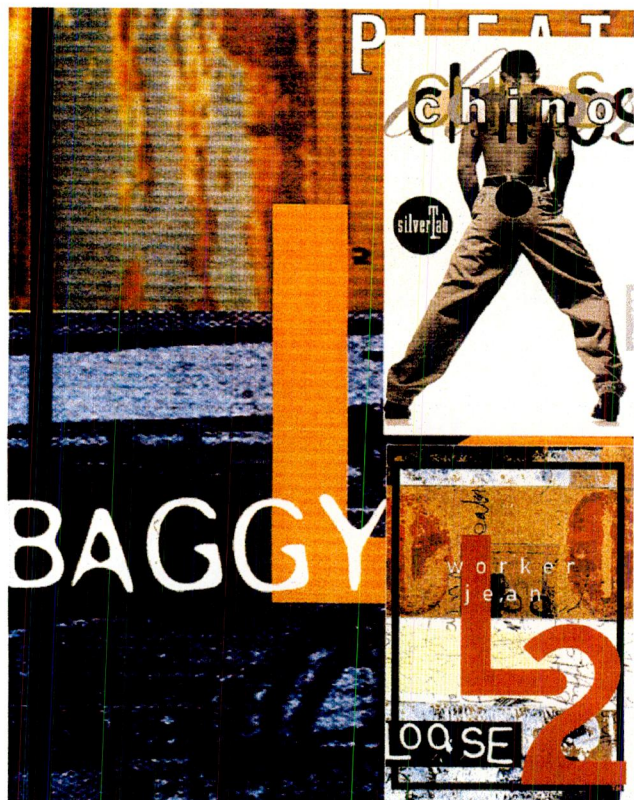
Carson's design does not seek the traditional clarity and legibility and neither does his audience. It looks for the complex; it wants us to spend time looking at it. While browsing through so many columns of perfectly legible text how many times do our eyes just slide over them. The unconventional, in this case typography, makes us sit up and take notice. His work challenges and engages us; we are no longer just looking at words; we are decoding a puzzle and are willing to do it. Carson claims that the present generation can accept more than you give them credit for. (Ogundehin, 1996, p.20) They are looking for something more complex and visually stimulating. Herb Lubalin summed it up when he said:

"through typographic means, the designer now presents, in one image, both the message and the pictorial content. Sometimes this 'playing' with type has resulted in the loss of a certain amount of legibility. Researchers consider this a deplorable state of affairs but on the other hand, the excitement created by a novel image sometimes more than compensates for the slight difficulty in readability."(Lubalin, 1994, p.69)





(pic 5)



(pic 6)

While only Ray Gun entered a slightly more mainstream market with its circulation of 150,000, (Harper, 1996, p.102), it and all of the other magazines were aimed at narrow subcultures. When Carson became involved with advertising, it opened a new chapter. Advertising is aimed at a certain portion of the market. The companies who hired Carson realised that his design appealed to the Generation X with "the accuracy of a heat seeking missile." (Thoughts on the new typography, 1994, p.68) The products Carson has worked on are mainly youth-orientated products; Levis, Nike (pic 5) and Pepsi to name three. Proof that Carson's designs appealed to these consumers was in the success of the Levis 'L2' brand (pic 6). Carson, and producer Mike Jurkovic, developed the concept together for the jeans. Jurkovic called it "a phenomenal packaging programme that helped reposition the brand, the testing was a huge success." (Poyner, 1995, p.93)

But advertising is seen as the hard sell of graphic design. David Byrne wrote in the End of Print that Carson's work communicates "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) Rick Poyner noted, however, that this method of design "is perfect for advertising. Advertising wants to bypass the reason and go straight for the emotion." (Poyner, 1995, p.93)

To Carson's credit, his design does change when the audience and content changes. TWS was aimed at teenagers who were more interested in looking at photographs of skaters than they were in reading the articles. (With the articles being sent in by the readers the standard was not very high anyway.) Beach Culture was a culture magazine with well written articles. They were meant to be read and, as such, most of the experiments were with the headlines rather than with the copy. Ray Gun was where the copy became the focus of experimentation, it was an alternative music magazine trying to interpret through the copy, not only a band's attitude, but also their music. The audience were not looking for columns of text as found in Rolling Stone or Creem, two other fringe music magazines. The audience listened to alternative music by alternative bands, implying that they enjoyed this



different, non-mainstream attitude. Ray Gun reflected this in print. They were not expecting to see the Spice Girls or Boyzone featured inside. It is logical that if they enjoyed this alternative music, they would be more open to layered and fractured typography than the twelve year old Spice Girl fan.

When Carson designed the book Cyclops, the audience and the content changed, as did the design. He was dealing with a clientele who would appreciate the stylish and artistic black & white photography. Cyclops is a book on the Vogue fashion photographer Albert Watson. The market was one with not only an interest in art photography but one with the expendable income to spend on those interests. The book itself earned Carson the title of The International Centre of Photography's Designer of the Year and won the Best Book Design of the Year, 1995.

With the End of Print and 2nd Sight, the Carson and Blackwell collaborations, the market is the design audience. The End of Print, unfortunately, ended up as little more than a portfolio of the designer's work, complete with curriculum vitae at the back. Many felt it failed to explain the designer's unique method of working and were disappointed. 2nd Sight was a more interesting look not only at the method of intuition in design, which is the focus of my next chapter, but also a look at Carson's work with student workshops around the globe which displays their work as well. Here, the text is intriguingly placed, but not difficult to decipher. More importantly, however, it is relevant information that, as a designer, I found interesting to read. Some of the quotes, it must be noted, are close to illegible, the text either so layered or so disjointed that they are very difficult to read.

So with advertisements, surely Carson has reached a much larger audience. Everyone can see them, not like a magazine or a book that we have to buy to look at. But while everyone may see the poster or advert, it is not aimed at everyone. It is aimed at a small select part of the market, the young or Generation X consumer, but it can still be viewed by everyone else. Just because you do not like an advertisement does not make it a bad one; it may not be aimed at you.



Intuition and Design

Chapter 3

Intuition: Immediate apprehension by the mind without reasoning; immediate insight. (the Concise Oxford Dictionary, p.568.)

Every piece of design has a little part of the designer in it. When a designer receives a project, they have a personal reaction as to how you should go about dealing with and designing the problem. If you give thirty designers the same project, you will get thirty different, unique solutions. This is because of their personal input. Paul Rand, one of the legends of modernist type play, wrote that "the fundamental skill of a designer is talent. Talent is a rare commodity. It's all intuition, and you can't teach intuition."(Blackwell, 1997, p.42)

Most designers balance intuition with design structure. "Intuition plays a crucial role in what any good designer or artist does. You can be classically trained, but if you haven't got the intuition to go with the training, you have got nothing."(Pickle, <http://www.typebooks.org/z-r2ndsight.htm>) Good design is a balance of the two. We have passed the point where there is only one correct solution. There are many possible solutions, some are right and some are wrong, and some are a bit of both. Design is not an exact science. If we removed our personal intuition we would become machine-like; the part of the designer that remains in the finished piece makes it that more interesting. But, to discard the traditional design is to lose out as well. That element that creates a structure or reason behind the piece: the reason why you used a sans serif typeface instead of a serif; the reason why the design is freeflowing rather than applied to a structured grid. Milton Glaser picked up on this point, when he wrote about Carson's design, saying that "it is provocative and breaks new ground, but at the same time, the magazine doesn't seem to understand the fundamental laws of communication."(Berger, 1995, p.20) It is where the balance lies between the two that has become the centre of discussion between the old and new camps.

Perhaps Carson's lack of formal education in design fails him here. It has allowed him to experiment with a vast amount of freedom and has opened many closed doors, especially to



young designers, but just like all designers, for all his provocative pieces he has bad ones as well: "I don't think any issues of Ray Gun have been brilliant...there are always some pages I'm happy with and a lot I'm not."(Thoughts on the new typography, 1994, p.69-70) Tracy Pickle picked up on this point of intuition and design when she said, "Carson fails to realise that not all intuition is good or enough."(Pickle, <http://www.typebooks.org/z-r2ndsight.htm>) The opposite is true as well, that not all structured, traditional design is good or enough. This is where the designer must strike a balance. This line between traditional design and intuition is not set in concrete with exact proportions; it changes with each new project. Carson appears to be a natural at what he does. He has a instinctual reasoning of space and shape, yet he lacks knowledge of the classical elements of design, and this can be a disadvantage.

When he was asked during a television interview who was a major influence on his work, Carson named Hans-Rudolf Lutz. As mentioned in the preface, it was on the three week workshop in Switzerland that Carson came in contact with the designer. Lutz taught the traditional treatment of typography during the day but would show the students his experimental work after class. What struck Carson was the fact that not only was Lutz serious about what he was doing, but he had a reason for every seemingly random piece.

The mainly self-taught methods of designers at present, which is facilitated by the increased use of computers and their applications, allows a certain freedom. This freedom is unrestricted by the knowledge of rules. To use the old adage, ignorance is bliss. In Carson's case it was very raw and expressive. But self-expression in art or design is not an option; it is unavoidable. It is the intuitive part of the designer that creates the wide variety of design that is out there.

When Blueprint asked Ken Wilson if he thought what Carson created was design, he replied it wasn't: "Integral to the very idea of design is a process of more or less detached analysis. Carson is all about emotional involvement."(Wilson, 1995, p.47) William Owen wrote, however, that nowadays "intuition is generally preferred to the rationalism of the



golden age.”(Owen,1991, p.32) This argument of where the line between intuition and traditional design is drawn is central to the division between the old and new schools of design. This is not to say that intuition is a discovery of the twentieth century designer. The traditional method of design uses intuition in the same way as this new wave of graphic design does. It is a question of how much intuition, and how much ‘detached analysis’ must be used, that causes the controversy.

It is Carson’s intuition, that led Kent Hunter, a design director, to say that the problem is, that

“only David seems to know how to do this well - the imitators just aren’t as good as the originals. This maybe because Carson’s designs for all their trendy, easy-to-mimic typefaces, they derive their real power from the designer’s unique and intuitive approach.”(Berger, 1995, p.20)

Carson himself said to Berger that “I hate it when people say let’s do something with a gritty, street feeling. It looks forced and artificial.”(Berger,1996, p.53)

One of the reasons for Carson’s style is his influence by everyday images or found art. In Carson’s own words, “for the most part I’m interested in things that are not planned or intentionally created to be art.”(Berger, 1995, p.48) In this way, he has been compared to the collage artist Kurt Schwitters and abstract expressionist William De Kooning. Torn posters, street signage, even cinema lettering have appealed to him. He photographs and stores these images (Many of these can be seen in the End of Print and 2nd Sight.) Philip Meggs noted that

“Carson’s designs have a strong relationship to fine art... Spontaneity, chance and intuitive placement of elements have been important to fine artists since the early twentieth century, but these working methods (or should I say anti-methods) are seldom embraced by designers.” (Meggs, 1996, p.26)

Again, this is another area of bitter discussion between old and new, the closing divide between fine art and design. What appeals to the new generation of designers, is not the rigid confines of a grid, but a freer, more expressive design, one that challenges, rather than just displays its information.

But it is important to note that Carson neither started this movement, nor, is he the only



designer on this wavelength . The major trend or movement, behind cutting edge design in the 'nineties is being labelled as 'deconstructed graphic design'. The American West Coast colleges of the California Institute for the Arts (CalArts), and the Cranbrook Academy of Art, have been encouraging this experimentation with a multitude of young designers exploring the design possibilities behind the Apple Macintosh, challenging what were once the accepted rules. The new designers are pushing the preconceived ideas of what can and can't be done, investigating new fonts and building their own, working past restrictions set by outdated technology.

Indeed, Carson used many experimental type faces from these designers. Barry Deck was one of these students who gave his typefaces for use in Surfer and Ray Gun. Deck, as well as others, have fallen under the label of 'Carsonesque design'. Deck notes that "he [Carson] got so famous for work that included some of my own that when people look at my work they sometimes think of him."(Poyner, 1995, p.53) Deck feels, along with many others, that Carson has been portrayed as the leading light in the 'nineties movement because of his international exposure. "I think he has taken almost everything he does from the CalArts/Cranbrook community and sort of ripped the heart out of it."(Poyner, 1995, p.53)

In many ways, Carson and the English designer, Neville Brody are similar figures from two different decades. Though not the only designers pushing out the limits, they were the designers who received the most media attention on both sides of the Atlantic, whose work was seen more often, and therefore, others became associated with them rather than they being associated with the movement. [Brody experimented with magazine and font design in the 'eighties with Emigre and the Face.]

More importantly, these experiments in design pushing and probing the boundaries of the 'rules' have the effect of raising questions. The big question facing designers at the end of the millennium is: do the traditional design rules still apply today?

The designer today works with tools that simply didn't exist ten years ago. For many young designers, the pen and pad have been replaced by the mouse and screen. The computer has



become their sketch pad. They begin and end the process of designing on-screen. Some feel this is relying too much on the computer, while for others, it is just a method of working.

The reason behind grids and columns stems from the printing presses of old, the moveable letterpress type being set more easily into this grid for inking and printing. To change a single letter to a different typeface, or to change its colour or size resulted in a large amount of work as rollers would have to be cleaned and re-inked, type reset in the press and the dried paper re-aligned. Now with the computer we simply click, select and click again. This is part of the reason for Carson's questioning the rules. In an interview in Creative Review with Carson and Neville Brody, Carson noted that "for the most part, magazines are done in the same way as they have been done for the past one hundred years...the machinery has changed and perhaps columns are no longer the best way to read things."(Face to Face, 1994, p.29.) So should we still be using the old rules for technology that outdates them, and if not, what are the new rules? As regards the old rules, yes, we should still use them, but, they should be used as an option. The traditional ways of thinking are still valid and serve a purpose but they can now be employed for reason rather than necessity. As for the new rules? This is what this experimentation is finding out.



Carson's design

Chapter 4

"He uses type like a painter uses paint - to create emotion to express ideas."

Albert Watson (Berger, 1995, p. 20)

"Artists of course are under no obligation to explain what they do."

Rick Poyner (Poyner, 1995, p.93)

Carson's work when it first arrived was greeted with a mixture of scorn for breaking the sacred rules, and welcome for a a break from the normal. It was groundbreaking, an integration of layered and fractured type and image, one that could not really be judged by the traditional design rules. Fifteen years later the question begs to be asked; is what he's doing any clearer? For many in the design world, however, it seemed to have a lack of direction; design that was controversial for the sole reason that it broke the rules. Seeing too much of anything, regardless of how good it is, turns it into the norm. It becomes tired and boring, last season's fashion. So has Carson's design evolved or is it still the same? Pelle Anderson nicknamed it "the Emperor's new clothes, model 94." (Johnson, 1994, p.35) Lewis Blackwell addressed Carson's critics by tartly noting that

"graphic design is often expected to be transparent or flattering to a viewer's previous experience, or both. If a new approach is proposed, then it is expected to announce itself with a declaration of intent, outlining principles rather than just doing it." (Meggs, 1996, p.234)

In 1999 it is no longer considered a new approach, so is there a method behind the seemingly chaotic pieces; has it found direction, has it progressed?

The answer is yes, Carson's design has evolved. To take a page from an early TWS and compare it to his commercial work or a page from Speak, would not only highlight the change in his style and his attitude towards graphic elements such as type and image, but also the area in which he is experimenting. He focuses on a certain area of the magazine and questions it, seeing if there is a better way to graphically handle it.

When he started with TWS, it was a popular teen magazine, born during the skateboard craze

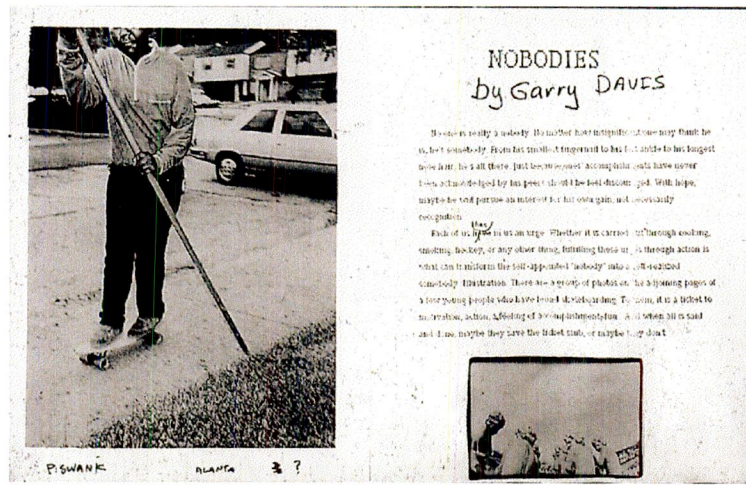


of the late 'eighties. It quickly established itself as one of the leading skate magazines and as such, was heavily supported by advertisers. It had a readership of teenagers, eager for new, alternative ideas rather than for traditional layout and presentation. It is also interesting to look at Carson as his magazine designs spans the era before and after the arrival of the desktop computer. The original layouts were cut out and pasted by hand, not moved on screen by a mouse. The designer worked with a much more hands-on approach than magazine design today, a method which is still valid. [While many designers only use the computer, many others still create pieces conventionally, then they scan them into the computer, print them, manipulate them and scan them in again, a much more hands-on approach. Neither way of designing is right or wrong; they are two different methods.]

Here, Carson began to use experimental photography and started to use different typefaces. The articles and photographs were sent in by the readers, as well as some commissioned pieces, all of varying standards. The whole atmosphere was of a magazine that was very alternative and on the edge, one that interacted with its audience by way of their submitting material. Monotone colours, acetate layovers, text scrawled over pictures, and the cut and paste technique of collage showed strongly in his early work. TWS was Carson's starting point. In 1987, his final year with the magazine, we can see that he had begun playing with type, elements that were taken on further with Beach Culture. 'Nobodies' (pic 7), an article on anonymous skateboarders, used a photograph of a skater cropped to remove his head, emphasising the article's title. The credits for the photograph are done in the usual fashion, the photographers name, the date, and the title of the photograph. Here, however, the title is a mark to emphasise this person's unknown identity. The copy itself includes the editor's name, complete with corrections written in pen, as the final piece.

The technique of using a creative accident is used frequently in Carson's work. It appears in his next magazine Beach Culture, in 1990, when a duotone photograph of

(pic 7)

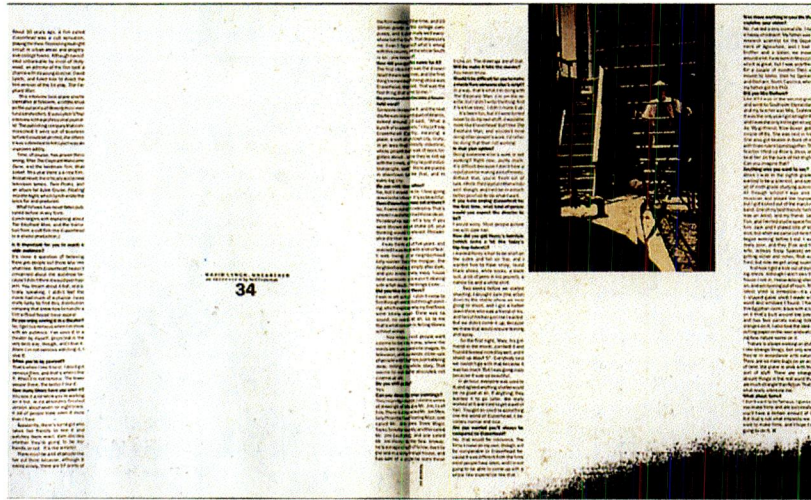


(pic 8)



Harry Connick Jr. (pic 8) has a piece of masking tape running vertically through the photograph which, without an explanation, appears to be a mistake. The tape was originally to indicate where the photo should have been cropped, but, on seeing the two elements together as an image, Carson liked the structure it made and printed the whole picture, tape and all.

(pic 9)



In 1993, with an article in Ray Gun on the Manic Street Preachers, the text boxes that are used on-screen made a structure that Carson quite liked, so they remained and were printed that way, the type surrounded by boxes, looking like a mistake. Again, in the first issue of Ray Gun, Carson cut himself during a hasty paste up. The drops of blood that fell onto the page was left to dry, photocopied for printing and used as the final image. In another instance in Ray Gun, an article on a band called Survival Research Laboratories, Carson used an experimental typeface based on scanned fingers, but when it printed, only the uppercase letters appeared. Liking the image it made, Carson ran with it, the article completely illegible, that was until you turned over to the next page where it was printed in full.

Creative accidents such as the interesting black shape that appeared on the right of a double spread on the film director David Lynch (pic 9) in Beach Culture was a result of the photocopier lid not being put down properly. The same article broke another seemingly unbreakable rule by printing a column of text along the gutter where the pages join, staples and all running through it. Lynch is known for his "subtle rulebreaking" according to Blackwell (Blackwell, 1995, End of Print) so Carson did some subtle, rather than obvious, rulebreaking. It is these accidents, and the willingness to use them, that give Carson's work part of its style. The percentage of these creative accidents, however, greatly increases with a hands-on-approach. Carson expressed his fear in Affice magazine that with many designers just using the computer from start to finish, the likelihood of

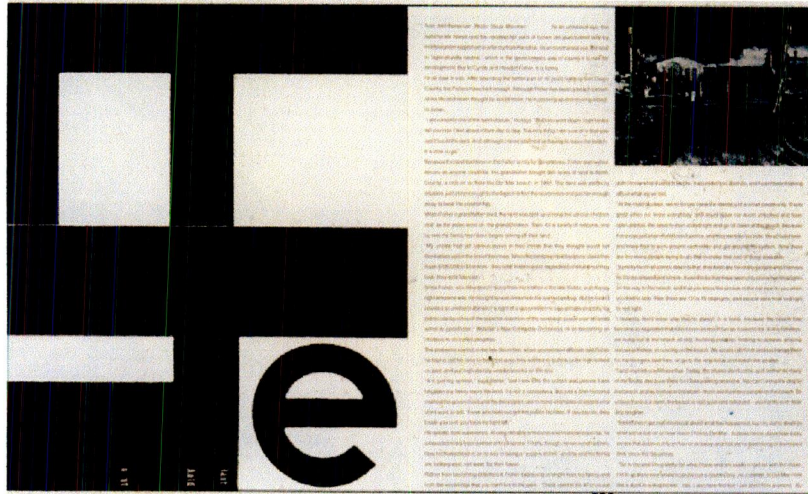


(pic 10)

early caption experiments



(pic 11)



(pic 12)

captions similar to 'Surf Ohio'

creative accidents is greatly reduced.(Berger, 1996, p.55)

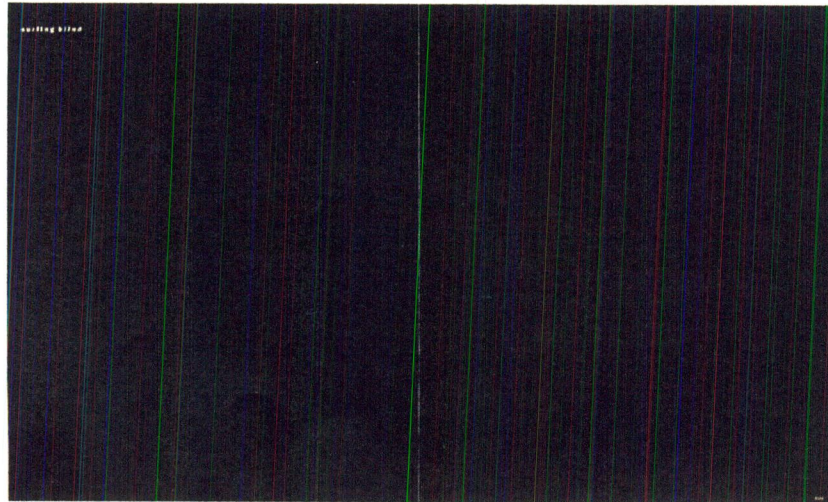
TWS was also the starting point for Beach Culture's title experiments. An early example is 'Surf Ohio', 1987.(pic 10) While its arrangement of the title, fitting 'Ohio' neatly into the 'F', is no major design development, it shows that Carson is visually aware of the shape and structure the words can make. It also shows his early experiments with captions in the bottom left and right corners as well as, what was then unusual, integration of type and image.

Beach Culture saw a much deeper and more inquisitive look at titles. 'The last hold out' (pic 11) in 1991 shows the use of the headline exploring the content of the article. The article was about the old being forced out by the new, a farmer being made to sell his land for housing development. In the title, a 1920s typeface letter 'e' is dwarfed by a contemporary typeface's 'th', echoing the article's content. Veronique Vienne wrote in Graphis that Carson is "overrated as a typographer, he is underrated as an imagemaker."(Vienne, 1996, p.14) This is illustrated with 'The last hold out', where Carson's ability to use black type against a white background creates a powerful image with the title alone. This point brings us back to Herb Lubalin's comment that the loss of legibility is more than made up for by the excitement the image creates (page 10). The images need to be seen as a whole image.

The article on Tony Hawk (pic 12), 1990, shows Carson's understanding of shape and form again. Hawk was at the time, the world number one skateboarder. The copy fits neatly into the 'O' with the red blocks representing the paragraph breaks. Though not difficult to read, it creates a much more stimulating image. Also, note the captions as they are very similar to the early experiments in 'Surf Ohio'(pic 9). Given Hawk's world ranking, the large 'O' with the the T,N,and Y make the cropped shape of a skateboard, the 'O' representing the wheel. The strong play of box and circle highlight what Meggs wrote

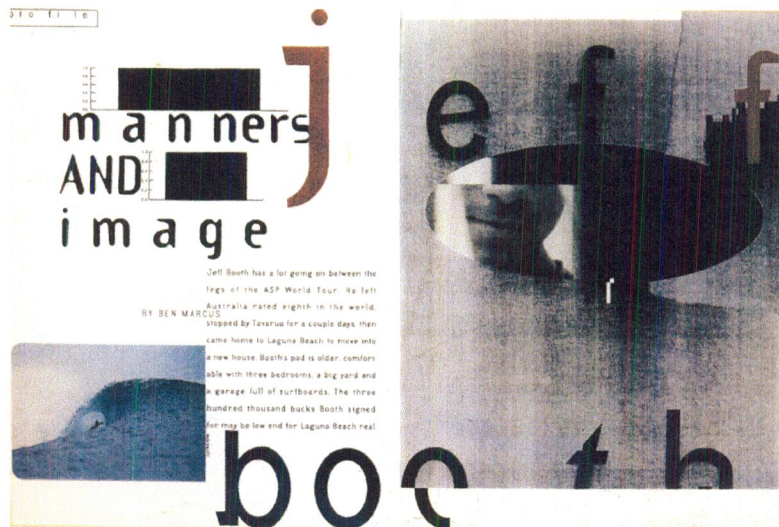


(pic 13)



as "his response to the content and his intuitive manipulation of form and space"(Meggs, 1996, p.26) and support Vienne's statement about Carson as an underrated imagemaker.

One of his best known headlines was 'Surfing Blind', 1991 (pic 13). The reader opened the double spread to reveal two black pages with the title in the top left corner in 12 point type. The only other word was in the bottom right corner, it simply said 'more', letting the reader know that there was an article to follow. The article itself was printed further on in the magazine, describing the efforts of a man who taught blind children how to surf. Michael Bierut noted in his critical review, that the concept of 'Surfing Blind' "would be familiar to most designers"(Bierut, 1996, p.81) The point he was making was that Carson seemed to be getting credit for work that any designer could do. On the other hand, it shows that Carson is not all about layers, fractured type and anti design. This piece shows a solid understanding of the content and its relationship to design. It is simple and much closer to traditional design, giving support to the argument that Carson is not just the fashion of the 'nineties. 'Surfing Blind' is one of his better pieces.



(pic 14)

Later in the next year with Surfer, the cover ran a headline 'The Bikini Issue, page 58'. On turning to the page, the real title read, 'Sexism Sucks', a large number 58 shows you had reached the correct page. A hard article on sexism in the sport of surfing followed. This was again handled quite simply with a title, illustration and columned copy. The article was on a serious issue and demanded a higher degree of legibility. An example of a more typical layout in Surfer was an article on the surfer Jeff Booth (pic 14) in 1992. Booth was known for being a shy, polite man on the professional surfing tour. When they tried to print the original profile photograph an error occurred and only the the mouth and nose were printed. Given who the article was written on they felt it was appropriate. The layout is a good example of Carson's work



(pic 15)



showing a number of his design tricks. The extreme letter spacing in the top left corner is as a result of playing with the computer option of forced justification and was used frequently. The cutting and spacing of title 'jeff booth' and the overall strong play on shapes in the layout shows a more restrained version of what was to happen in Ray Gun. As a whole, it makes a good image. The typeface used here is one of Barry Deck's experimental fonts, Arbitrary Sans.

Though not as extreme as the past Beach Culture layouts or the Ray Gun layouts to come, it is important to keep in mind, that when asked to redesign Surfer, it was a predominately photographic magazine, showing waves with surfers rather than cultural articles. It was considered the granddaddy of all surfing magazines, and still is one of the largest in that market. It had been last designed in the 1970s and was much more mainstream as a result of its large circulation, and was therefore more conservative. Carson said that "their greatest fear was that I would make it look like Beach Culture." (Jacobs, 1992, p.66) Though people wrote in and complained about what he was doing, his credentials as a professional surfer gave him an intimate knowledge of his audience. Surfer was a large jump from Beach Culture as he moved from virtually complete design freedom, to a much more conservative magazine which had to restrict the level of his experiments. He continued experimenting, though at a more subtle level and with different elements such as photography.

His experiments with titles continued into Ray Gun. In 1993, the article 'The Best Unknown Poet in America' was submitted without its title. Given the content of the article, Carson played on the fact that it was an unknown poet, and decided that the title should not be printed. Ray Gun, however, took his experiments to a different level; Carson was now more interested in how the copy worked.

Carson had early experiments with copy since Beach Culture, though titles had been the main focus. In an article with Billy Gould of 'Faith No More' (pic 15), it appeared to be a straightforward three column layout. On reading it, however, it makes no sense if you read the first column from top to bottom and then the second and third column as we are used to. It was necessary to read the first line of the first, second and

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third columns, then the second line of the three columns and so on. Only this way, did the copy make any sense. Carson was challenging his readers to read differently. Later, with an story on the band 'Galaxie 500', the blocks of text changed directions throughout, forcing the reader to move the magazine to read it, making it a little bit more interactive.

Carson was aware that the design world was watching Beach Culture. He knew that a section of his audience were looking at the magazines for its design, not its cultural articles. This was evident when an issue was released with the title 'No Emigre Fonts', a title that most of Beach Culture's intended readers would not have understood. [The Emigre fonts, designed by Neville Brody, became very popular and were widely used in the 'eighties] Though Carson used a huge amount of new fonts, he occasionally tried make sure that the design was not just about them. In the second issue of Ray Gun, he used only the typefaces that came with the computer: New York, Courier, Chicago and Helvetica, and in his second-last issue, no.29, he limited the typeface's to just three designers and some ordinary sans-serif. Were these handled this way as they would look different because they didn't use the new fonts, or was Carson trying to say that his design was more than surface deep?

While some experiments had been made with copy, Ray Gun was more aggressive in its treatment of the articles. In Beach Culture the copy had been fairly legible, the focus of the experiments lying with the titles. With Ray Gun, the type became more fractured and the layers grew; in short it became more challenging to read. Neil Feineman, the editor from Beach Culture who had brought in some excellent alternative writing, lasted only four issues at Ray Gun. He later said "I can't think that without David or at least someone of David's ilk, that magazine would have lasted as long as it did, because it's certainly not worth reading." (Poyner, 1995, p.93) The reader had changed and so had the quality of the writing. It was no longer Beach Culture's essays on difficult issues such as the effects of global warming in 1990 or Surfer's 'Sexism Sucks'. With Ray Gun he was now dealing with interviews and reviews of alternative rock stars.

With the articles of a lesser standard, Carson was freer to experiment with the copy. An article on a rock festival, Ray Gun 1993, does not require the same degree of legibility as one on a four year old boy who died of cancer in Beach Culture 1991. [With the latter the type was fitted into one column with the words 'goodbye superman' repeated in light blue behind on one page and an



illustration on the other page.]

Ray Gun would have its own problems. Roland Barthes noted that "language is the only semiotic system capable of interpreting another semiotic system...How then does language manage when it has to interpret music? Alas it seems very badly."(Ivinski, 1995, p.21) If the spoken language Barthes was talking about manages badly, then how does print manage? The designer of a music magazine has three languages to deal with, the visual, the verbal and the musical. Carson used to listen to the band's music to try and visualise a layout in an attempt to increase the article's context. A techno DJ would require a different layout to a blues guitarist to represent their different music. He continued to question the 'rules' behind the magazine, "part of me continues to see no valid reason for many of the accepted rules of design."(Blackwell, 1997, 2nd Sight) With Ray Gun he took his experiments with copy furthest. Carson, without a formal education in graphic design, comes from a different angle. He did not use the traditional methods of layout, either through ignorance or choice. He used his own method of interpreting the piece, breaking preconceived design barriers without even knowing it.

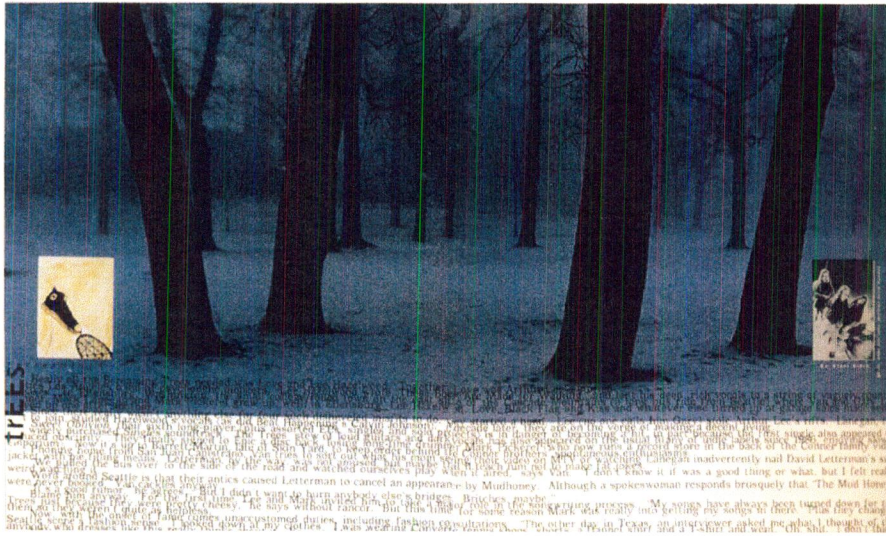
With the article 'Too Much Joy' (pic 15), the type got so layered that the first paragraph was impossible to read. Previously Carson had made articles difficult to read so that the reader would have to figure out how to read it or illegible copy would be printed clearly on the next page, as was the case with the band 'Survival Research Laboratories' (page 19). Here, however, the opening paragraph was little more than a messy black shape, impossible to read, while the rest of the article was legible.

He continued with the copy experiments using different sizes of columns and directions of text as he had done with Beach Culture. With 'Screaming Trees' (pic 17) in Ray Gun, the line spacing was at a minimum, so that within the article, the type overlapped making it an effort to read. This technique was used again in his commercial work such as the Nike (pic 5), and Individual (pic 18) (an Internet search company whose advert plays off extracting the right information) adverts. [Most of Carson's commercial



(pic 16)





(pic 17)



(pic 18)

THE resemblance BETWEEN YOU AND andre is
 UNCANNY BECAUSE YOU BOTH are
 WEARING THE NEW AIR CHALLENGE FUTURE TENNIS SHOE FROM NIKE WITH THE
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 TO YOUR FEET AND YOU BOTH ENJOY THE BETTER LATERAL MOTION BECAUSE OF THE
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 THE FOOTFRAME™ DEVICE AND THE MIDE-OR TENSION STTAP WITH
 RUGGED HOOK-AND-LOOP CLOSURE FOR INSTANCE AND



Let's FACE IT IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE HAIR
 AND THE EARRING AND THE WIMBLEDON

CUP YOU GUYS COULD BE LIKE.
 TWINS.



(pic 5)



(pic 19)



(pic 2)

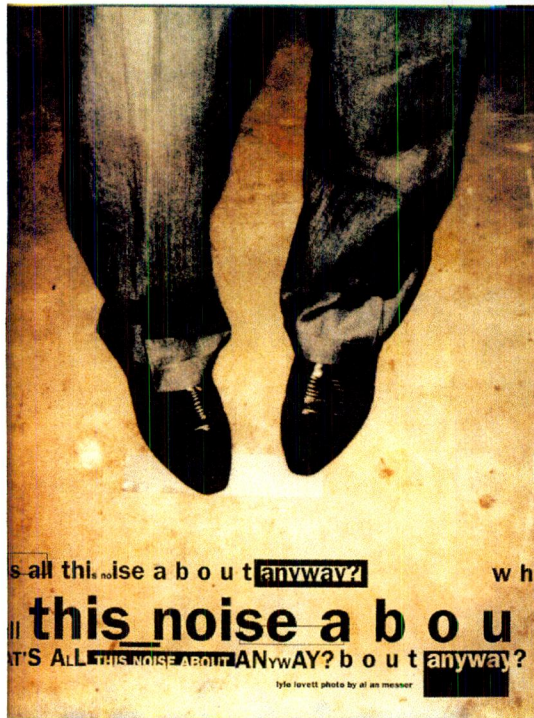


pieces are typographic, arguably his best skill.]

The now familiar extreme letter spacing associated with Carson, which is itself a result of playing with forced justification (another creative accident), as well as the curved columns of text as used in this thesis, are elements of his typographic experimentation that have seeped into the mainstream. While the experiments may have changed their focus from title in Beach Culture, to copy in Ray Gun, the idea that content decided the design was still paramount.

The article on 'Mecca Normal' illustrates this in a humorous way. It was printed with a rigid grid, straight columns and rules, and a normal banner title. It was remarkably unlike Ray Gun, however, the idea behind the design was Normal by name therefore normal by design. [The actual layout was an exact copy of a previous article in rival's Rolling Stone magazine.] He looked closely at the way type was related to image in spreads such as 'recording in soviet dis-union' (pic 19). Here the type reflects the tortured and fractured picture as does the title. The columns of text on the right are directly reflecting the direction of the three zips on the right of the picture. Similarly, a single page article on 'the Cocteau Twins' was repeated to make a double page spread, the second page was an exact copy of the first.

(pic 20)

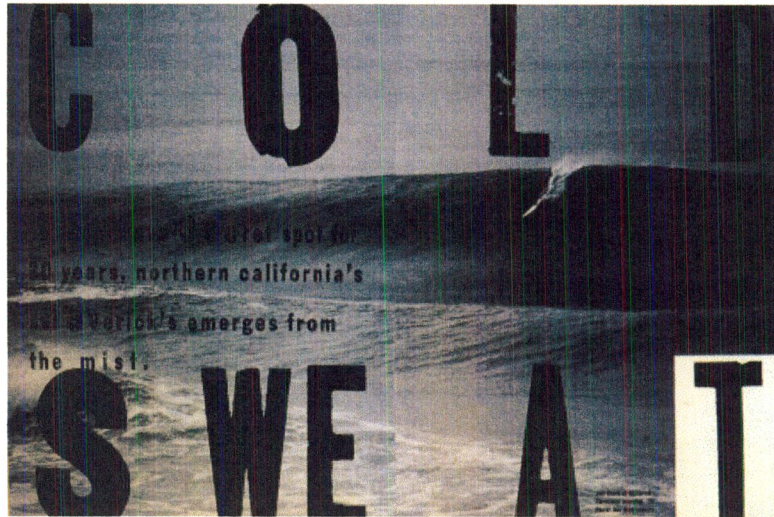


Though Carson is better known for his typography rather than his use of imagery, he carefully chooses his photographs making them relevant to the copy. Again, it is this method of the content reflected in the graphical treatment that is fundamental to his design. This applies to all aspects of the design, not just the copy or the title but to the use of imagery and photography as well. Carson used damaged photographs or ones with mistakes, images other designers would throw away. He normally used experimental photography, rather than the conventional studio shot.

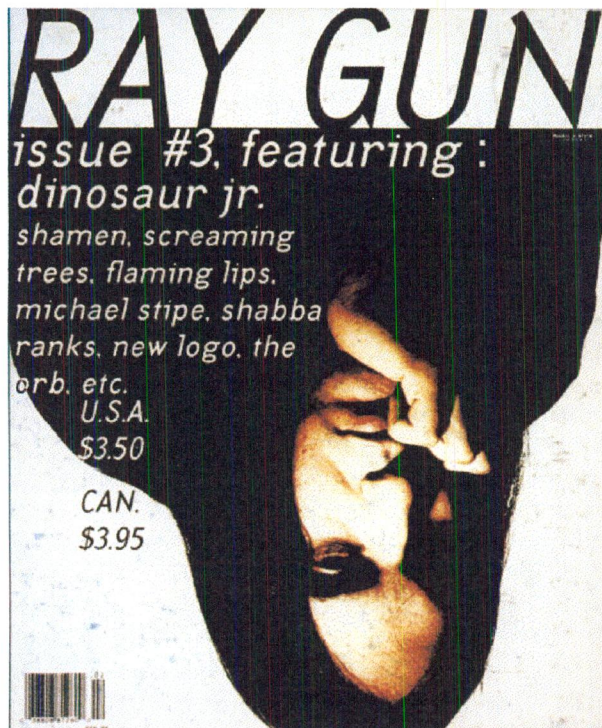
The spread on Glyn Jones in Musician in 1988 (pic 2), shows an early example of this method. An out-of-focus, dark and murky photograph that has not been printed properly, with white blotches and other misprints, was used as the main image



(pic 21)



(pic 1)



and background. The photograph was actually retrieved from a bin. The image was to represent the reclusive personality of the producer who had managed such bands as the Rolling Stones. He stayed very much out of the media light, shying away from attention. A smaller, in-focus, photograph of Jones appears centred on the left hand page, surrounded by his name. This photograph is actually a contact sheet image, complete with a red 'X' to show that this is the chosen image.

This application of unconventional photography continued into Beach Culture. In 1990, for an article on Lyle Lovett, Carson opted for an out-take picture (pic 20) taken with a polaroid camera despite other, more professional, photographs taken in the studio. The picture shows Lovett standing on the positional tape in the studio. "I [Carson] felt this showed more about Lyle Lovett than some of the shot where you saw his face and guitar..stance, clothing, boots said it all." (Blackwell, 1995, End of Print) [This image shows another Carson method. Often when the type becomes overlapped and difficult to read, Carson repeats the same text over and over so that we can piece together the sentence. In this instance, the question "What's all this noise about anyway?" is layered, but still legible.]

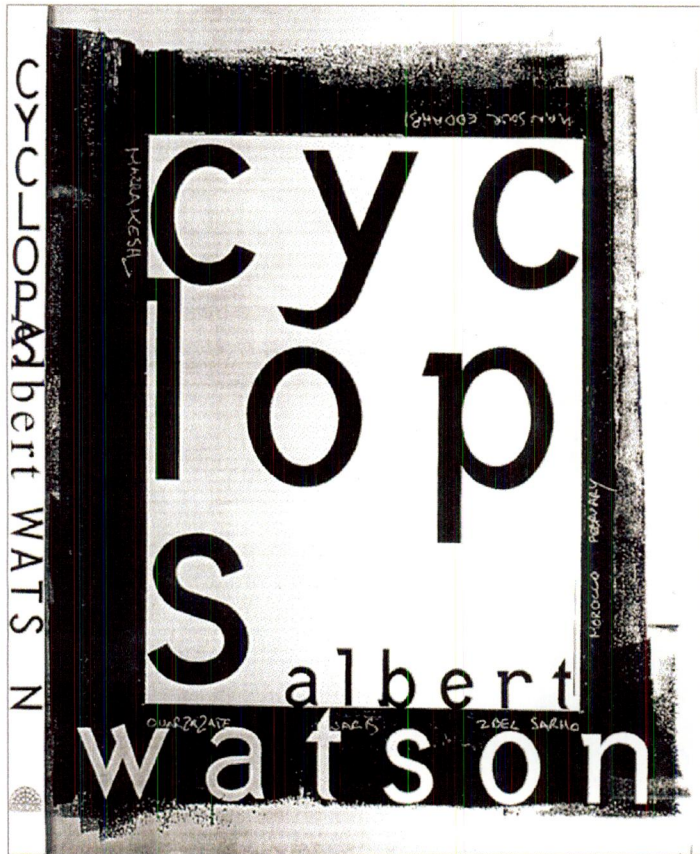
In Surfer, 'Cold Sweat' (pic 21) was an article on a particularly dangerous stretch of beach used for surfing in California. The photograph was originally a colour photograph. It was turned into black and white to make the huge waves even more threatening. A small surfer on the right gives us an idea of scale. The use of a large, broken, letterpress type in capital letters was, again, a way to create a more unfriendly and intimidating feeling.

In Ray Gun, this manipulation of photography was best used in the cover of issue three. (This was also the beginning of the unusual habit of changing the magazine's logo every issue.) The cover photograph of J.Mascis of Dinosaur Jr. (pic 1) highlights his emphatic disrespect for music magazines, so it was printed upside down. Here the photograph does all the talking, and as such the type is very



straightforward. When this issue came out, many vendors placed the magazine upside down with the photograph correct and the title wrong. For those vendors who got it the right way up, to see an upside down photograph alongside all the other conventional images must have made quite a strong impact.

(pic 22)



When Carson worked on Cyclops, he had to take a very different approach to photography. The book is on the photographer Albert Watson, and as such, it is a book about his images, not about Carson's design. Carson's creativity was greatly reduced, or at least challenged by the fact that Carson had very little copy to play with, and what he did have, had to play second-fiddle to the photographs. The photographs themselves are black and white, therefore removing any use of colour and, like his magazines, vary in presentation. Some are framed, some are boxed in, and some have no background at all. Using a total of forty-one different typefaces, from the experimental 'Childsplay' to the classical 'Bodoni', all Carson could really do was change the font, spacing, position and size. But he had to be careful that the design did not upstage the photographs.

The cover is very unusual. For a book on photographs, it is a purely typographic solution with no imagery except the frame. (pic 22) [The title refers to the fact that Watson is blind in one eye. Carson uses this again on the spine where the 'O' is left out of Watson, the shape representing the eye.]

Inside, the copy is quite simple and ordinary, and again, Carson has removed all page numbers. When it comes to the captions for the photographs, some of them have obviously been handled by Carson, such as the 'Cliff Love' double spread (pic 23). [The lefthand image of Love was actually used in Ray Gun as the contents page in issue 16.] The type in others, however, such as 'Leslie Weiner' (pic 24) look remarkably ordinary, not at all what we expect from Carson. There is a centred, straightforward handling of the text. This more traditional handling of copy plays off not only the centred photograph but is also in stark contrast to many of the other captions. With other images like 'Dog on the Beach' (pic 25) the type is chosen so that it reflects

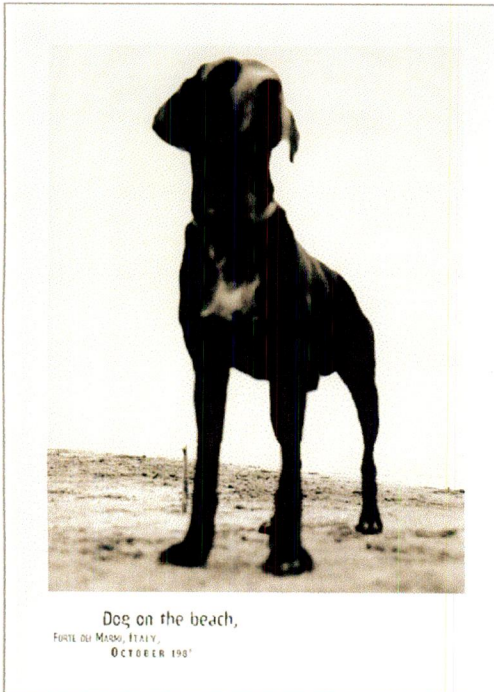
109
2



(pic 23)

(pic 24)

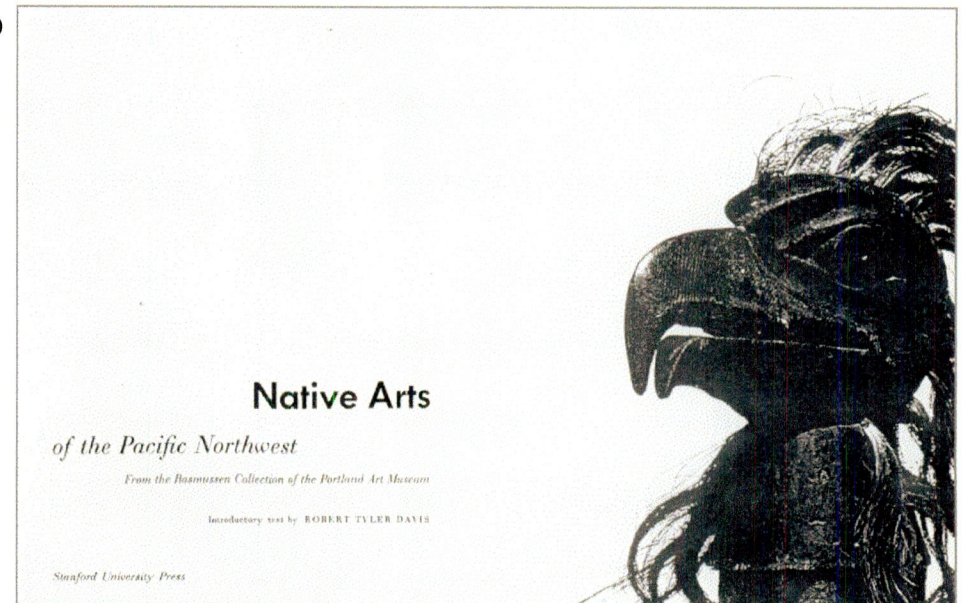
leslie weiner,
yohji
yamamoto,
london, sep-
tem-
ber 1989



(pic 25)

Dog on the beach,
FORTE DEI MARMI, ITALY,
OCTOBER 1989

(pic 26)





the handling of the photograph. Here, the blurred, distorted image of the dog is reflected in the soft, fractured shape of the caption's typeface. The book has a much more refined, yet fresh, feel to it, than some of his previous work with Ray Gun.

For all the hype surrounding Carson as the leader of the anti-design, anti-rules movement of the 'nineties, it is interesting to place Cyclops beside Alvin Lustig's Native Arts of the American People (pic 26). Lustig was an legendary American graphic design pioneer in the 'forties and 'fifties, whose work still looks remarkably fresh fifty years later. [Native Arts of the American People was designed and published in 1949.] The two designers manipulation of black and white photographs with black type on a stark white background is incredibly similar when we compare Carson's 'Cliff Love' to Lustig's front cover of Native Arts of the American People. Again, this gives strength to the argument that Carson is more that VanderLans' 'one trick pony'. (Poyner, 1995, p.93)

In 1995, the same year Cyclops was published, there appeared to be a change in Carson's attitude towards his design. He too felt that type was becoming stale, an opinion shared by many of his critics. He told Graphis magazine that "it might be coming time to de-emphasise type." (Berger, 1995, p.21) This was the same year that Carson and Ray Gun, the magazine which had propelled him into the international light, went their separate ways after three years and thirty issues. Carson claimed that "Jarrett [the publisher] asked him to make the magazine more mainstream in an attempt to boost circulation." (Carson splits with RayGun, 1995, p.15) Rick Poyner had noticed that things were changing in Carson's final three issues with Ray Gun with a story on Neil Young with columns of grey ordinary text, (perhaps an ironic joke) and a reduction in the amount of experimental typefaces which Ray Gun had become infamous for. (Poyner, 1995, p.93) While Carson wished to de-emphasise type, and change the focus of his experimentation, Jarrett wanted to make the magazine more conservative to appeal to a broader audience.

Following the split, Carson wrote that "having ended print, Blue becomes the perfect vehicle to resurrect it." (Travellin' Blues, 1997, p.28) Blue was an adventure/travel magazine for generation 2000 which Carson didn't stay with for very long. The point, however, is that



Carson was turning away from type and starting to look at other design elements. Speak was his next magazine undertaking with Dan Roller, the publisher who had tried to buy Beach Culture before it went under. Again, Carson reiterated his claim that “things are going to have to get cleaner having taken on Speak to get to the next step after Ray Gun.”(Ogundehin, 1996, p.20) Experimentally, his focus was changing again. He was moving on to the ‘next step’, away from type to new elements.

Speak saw the duo of Beach Culture designer and editor reunited as Neil Feineman joined the San Francisco based culture magazine. With Feineman handling the writing, the magazine’s articles touched on sensitive issues such as the signage of landmines for children, and what happens if they don’t understand, the development of the now extinct Joe Camel as an icon, as well as short stories, plays and reviews. With, as Roller put it, “real content to work with for a change” (Ogundehin, 1996, p.20) Carson would have to make the articles more legible as their content was deeper than an interview with a rock band. He reinforced this ‘cleaner’ typography attitude when he told Berger that “it might be time to de-emphasise type.” He said he was shifting his own design emphasis towards other elements such as colour and photography. “Type has been the star but I want to explore other ways of expressing content.”(Berger, 1995, p.21)

While Beach Culture experimented with title and Ray Gun with copy, Speak looked at the way in which a magazine was organised. Having touched on the structure of the magazine previously by removing page numbers, and in Ray Gun when an article inside continued on to the front cover, Speak took these experiments further. It questioned the accepted layout and pattern of magazines, seeing if there was another way to organise them.

Carson looked at the contents page and its function as he had done before in Beach Culture and Ray Gun. [The removal of the page numbers in the previous magazines had stripped the contents page of its ability to direct the reader to the article’s exact page, instead it merely showed the order in which the articles

(pic 27)





would appear.] In Speak the page numbers returned but the contents page moved. Instead of being in the normal position at the start, Carson moved the contents page to the centrefold of the magazine (pic 27). It contained plus and minus numbers beside all the articles, the minus numbers for those articles to the left and plus for those to the right. It was an experiment to examine the structure of a magazine, how people navigate through it.

Speak looked at the way in which the magazine was organised, and also looked at incorporating new technology. An article in one issue continued from the printed page onto the internet, to Speak's website. [www.speakmag.com] Another article began on the website only to jump to the magazine. They received handwritten letters from readers saying they hated it, and e-mails from others saying they loved it. These internet articles were "an experiment to see if it was possible if you could integrate the two mediums", though Carson later admitted "I don't think I'd want to do it." (Blackwell, 1997, 2nd sight.) The important point is that he tried, pushing our perception and acceptance of what the printed page can do.

Carson has developed throughout his career as a designer changing his focus of experimentation and working with a strong belief that the content decides the design. He and many others have made print a visually stimulating and interesting medium to those who would rather watch TV than read a book.



Conclusion

“Car Crash Typography”

Rick Poyner, November 1995

(Poyner, 1995, p.93)

versus

“Typographic Painting”

Ken Wilson, November 1995

(Wilson, 1995, p.47)

Print is under pressure. With computer literacy, the internet and multimedia becoming more and more commonplace in the western world, the pages of print are facing an uphill battle against new media, which use not only sight and sound, but interact with their audience as well.

Carson’s designs are one possible path the printed page can take in its evolution. The audience Carson has aimed at are looking for more visually stimulating images. We live in a highly visual culture and Carson designs for a particular part of the market. His audience was raised on television, computer games and the internet. It is this specific group of people that he is designing for. They accept his challenging designs.

His claim that content decides the design, is for the most part true. Many of his designs reflect the content successfully, increasing the articles understanding. Others, however, don’t. He has developed where he experiments, looking at preconceived ideas of what the magazine can and can’t do, altering their role in the magazine. One example is his use of titles, they are no longer just words, they are images which embody the copy as well. Carson keeps changing the focus of experimentation with time, keeping it fresh by examining new areas..

As for the question of legibility, this greatly relies on the content. Some articles require a higher degree of legibility than others, because of their content. Others do not need this same level of legibility. For these, treating the piece graphically, even though it often makes it more illegible and challenging to read, can aid the article.

The argument over where the balance between personal intuition and traditional design lies, is a heavily individual choice. Some claim intuition creates a more stimulating design, while others say a more structured, detached, approach is better. Carson has a natural ability to handle space and shape, and for me, this compensates somewhat for his lack of formal education. The lines between fine art and graphic design are getting hazy as the two start to cross-over. (Carson has already exhibited several times in Europe.)

Marshall McLuhan’s theory of sprung life puts forward the idea that when a means of communication has outlived its purpose it becomes a work of art, thus beginning a new life beyond the confines previously set.



(Blackwell, 1995, p.8) To say that print is dead is naive; print is very much alive and still used every day. It is, however, under threat from new media which are more than text-based. McLuhan asks another important question: "Is it natural that one medium should appropriate and exploit another?"(McLuhan, 1967, p.172)

The answer of course, is yes. Many of today's contemporary designs, including Carson's, often look like frozen stills from a television. Today's designer is not just limited to working with print; many can design with internet and multimedia packages. Carson himself is now experimenting in new directions. He and 3 Bit Communications redesigned the M.G.M. website [www.mgm.com] He has already produced two films, one with William Burroughs and a film company from New York called Charlex, entitled the End of Print, and another film for U2 on the theme of surveillance, used in the 1997 PopMart tour, as well as several television adverts. [With all of these films, type is an important factor in the final visual image.] The printed page and its designers are becoming more flexible, more interchangeable with other media.

As for Carson himself, the hype has all but died down. Could it be we have seen too much of something that has turned stale, something that has failed to move on and develop? Carson's reply; "They might. I think it's less likely if I continue to evolve as a person and a designer. If I still were doing a skateboard magazine I doubt it would be working very well...As your individual interests evolve, so should the work. Hopefully that helps keep it fresh, or at least interesting and challenging."(Thoughts on the new typography, 1994, p.72)

Philip Meggs saw it as "just graphic expressionism and experimentation gone mainstream."(Meggs, 1996, p.234) Surely this can help broaden our horizons, if only for us to say that we do not like it. As we enter a new millennium, we should not go in with blinkers on and tunnel vision. Nor should we recklessly abandon all the traditional rules either. These also need to be acknowledged as much as the experimental work does. Shaun Wolfe saw this when he wrote that "Carson's work is not a structure to teach, but an approach we may learn from."(Blackwell, 1997, 2nd sight)

The new style of graphic language is not just one, solitary element. It is influenced by print, television and video, sound, the internet, interactive cd-rom and many new media. It is a cross-breed, a hybrid. For many, the printed page will remain the same, for others, it is not the end of print we are seeing but a new beginning.



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