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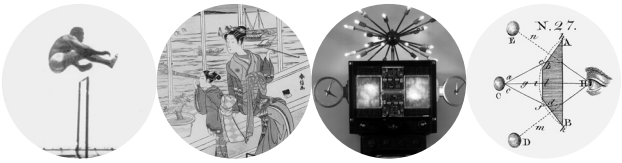

Towards Visual Intellectuality: The Mediawork Pamphlet Series (An Interview by Elizabeth Guffey and Raiford Guins, Part 1)

Peter Lunenfeld

Abstract

Peter Lunenfeld is a Professor in the Design | Media Arts department at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is well known for his edited collection, *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media* (MIT Press, 1999), and his book, *Snap To Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* (MIT Press, 2001). Lunenfeld was also the Editorial Director for the innovative Mediawork pamphlet series published by MIT Press. Within the series, Lunenfeld's own *User: InfoTechnoDemo* appeared in 2005. In the first of a two-part trans-journal interview, Elizabeth Guffey (Editor-in-Chief, *Design and Culture*) and Raiford Guins (Principal Editor, *journal of visual culture*) interview Lunenfeld on a number of topics that touch on visual culture, design studies, art, media and cultural critique.

The trans-journal interview is a collaborative initiative between academic journal editors to facilitate conversations across fields of study and subject matter by sharing a space where intellectual labor is conducted. In part one of this interview, Lunenfeld responds to a number of questions related to his Mediawork series and his concept of the 'visual intellectual'. In the second part of this interview, published in *Design and Culture* 2(3), November 2010, our emphasis includes design theory and the digital humanities as recently brought together in the form of the NOWCASTING conference that Lunenfeld organized on 16–17 October 2009 and his forthcoming book, *The Secret War Between Downloading & Uploading: Tales of the Computer As Culture Machine* (MIT Press, 2011).

Keywords

academic publishing • books • culture work • design • designers • McLuhan–Fiore • Mediawork pamphlets • new media • *USER* • visual intellectual

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journal of visual culture (JVC): To help set a context for the Mediawork pamphlet series, can you give us a little background on how it developed from the Southern California New Media Working Group?

Peter Lunenfeld (PF): The early 1990s were an interesting time for new media in Southern California. There was a critical mass of people from the arts, academia and industry revved up and working on any number of projects, articles, artworks and entrepreneurial endeavors, but almost no discursive spaces for them to communicate across disciplinary and institutional grounds. I founded mediawork: The Southern California New Media Working Group back in '94 so that theorists could talk to engineers could talk to artists could talk to scientists could talk to designers.

The regular meetings were always on Saturday afternoons and usually held at Art Center College of Design. There were occasional off-campus meetings as well. My favorite of those was mediawork 7 at the Three Clubs, a bar in Hollywood. The late poet, performance artist and self-proclaimed 'supermasochist' Bob Flanagan played the poetry he'd written for his Powerbook's voicecoder, his partner Sheree Rose showcased her digital collages, LMU's Paul Harris talked about the French avant-garde Oulipo movement and contemporary hypertexts, and Heidi Gilpin (UC Riverside, now at Amherst) discussed the impact of the computer on choreography through her work with William Forsythe and the Ballett Frankfurt.

There were also a few special topic mediaworks. 'Architecture & Imaging' at the Schindler House in West Hollywood featured, among others, transarchitect Marcos Novak speaking on cyberspace and liquid architecture, and artist Diana Thater, who spent part of the following year in residence at the MIT Media Lab, discussing her site-specific video installations. 'Magic & Media' featured Paul Haeberli, then Senior Scientist at SGI and organizer of the *Fiat Lux* underground happenings that ran during SIGGRAPH, Erik Davis who was putting the finishing touches on his book *Techgnosis* (1998), and Pae White, the Southern California-based artist who bridges the gap between art and design, showcasing her series on web-based pony girl fetishists. 'Post '89 Theory' hosted Sara Diamond from the Banff Centre for the Arts, international media activist and <nettime> co-founder Geert Lovink, digital artist/theorist and mediawork stalwart Lev Manovich, and ®™ark, the corporation which sponsors sabotage of mass-produced products. 'Print-Post-Print' invited some of the region's leading graphic designers – Anne Burdick, Denise Gonzales Crisp, Geoff Kaplan, Rebeca Méndez, and Louise Sandhaus – to show their transmedia work and discuss the Moebius strip connecting print and post-print design.

I had made a conscious decision that I wanted these quarterly mediawork meetings to be about discourse in the moment rather than as self-consciously recorded events, so I never taped or remediated them in any way. I barely took pictures. Now I have some regrets that there is so little documentation, but at the time I wanted to encourage a sense of liveness and the importance of actually 'being' in a particular place at a particular time. Five or six years into the project, I realized that the rest of academia in Southern California had caught on to what a remarkable scene had developed in the area, and that there were compelling

conferences virtually every other weekend. That was when I decided to try to create a series of publications that would capture the excitement of the working group but not function as 'mere' documentation, so, in 2001, after Print-Post-Print, mediawork gained a capital M, moved on to become a publishing initiative and the planned spontaneity of its meetings was put to the side.

JVC: Media–work–pamphlets: three different words. Can you disassemble your series title for a moment to discuss the conceptualization process that led to this appellation? For example, why are the words 'media' and 'work' joined together? And, a question that I've (Raiford) long wondered since acquiring the first in the series, why regard paperbacks of this series as 'pamphlets' and not, as many would assume, 'books'? Is there something about the word and medium of the book that did not quite capture the idea of the artifact, text, action or practice that you were imagining? Is 'book' simply too heavy an object for what you were contemplating through the lightness of a pamphlet?

PL: The etymology of 'mediawork' goes back to my first job out of graduate school. Rather than take a teaching or research assistantship within my department, I took another path and ended up running what amounted to a tiny think tank within a small hardware/software company. I was constantly going to trade shows and meeting the most interesting people, some of whom worked in academia, but most of whom did not. I was writing my dissertation at the time and wanted to think through ways to keep these productive dialogues going.

When I first started teaching at Art Center, I asked Richard Hertz, the dean of graduate studies, for money to support a series of semi-private conversations about the emerging electronic culture. At that point, Art Center was an intellectually fertile but invisible place to most of my academic peers. Housed in a black modernist slab carved into the Pasadena hills, high above the Rose Bowl, the college was best known for its car designers, and famous for taking a hard-headed approach to professional practice – which may also have influenced my choice of the word 'work'. Once I secured the funding, I wanted to brand this initiative in a way that would distinguish it from industry gabfests and the academic lecture circuit. I was then, and remain, obsessed with Marshall McLuhan, so the word 'media' was going to be a part of it, and I had just begun reading constraint-based Oulipian texts by writers like Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau and Harry Matthews. Oulipo is an acronym for 'Ouvroir de littérature potentielle', which translates roughly as the workshop for potential literature. I liked the idea of linking emerging digital practices to labor, and so the mashup 'mediawork' was born.

Maintaining 'Mediawork' for the publishing project was an experiment in conceptual branding. I had come to like the modesty of the phrase, and I wanted to match it to a spare approach to developing a set of guides to the present, which was the goal I had for the series. I called them pamphlets because the academic world was at that point producing ever longer monographs and collections. Zone Books, designed by Bruce Mau, was an obvious touchstone for anyone interested in bridging the gap between serious discourse and sophisticated graphics, but Mau was already pushing the limits of size and heft in his collaborations with Rem

Koolhaas (1997) (the impact of *SMLXL* on book people cannot be overstated) and the 500+-page edited collection *ZONE 3: Fragments for a History of the Human Body* (Feher et al., 1989). I wanted to do something different, exploring design's capacity to augment argument, in order to create compact mind bombs.

I was also interested in seeing if the pamphlet could play off of magazine formats. Pull quotes are such staples of magazines and tabloids, and I never understood why book designers so rarely use them. Pull or lift quotes can serve as alternatives to chapter and section headings and can create dramatic emphasis. For the most part, they are used by magazines to promote miracle diets and celebrity scandals, but there is nothing inherent in the form that should prevent them from being able to add clarity to complex arguments and visual pacing to dense textual argumentation.

The Latin term *Libellus* would have worked for what I wanted to do, but its direct translation is 'little book', which makes it sound like an initiative for children. That is why I chose the 'pamphlet' designation. Obviously 'pamphlet' has its own loaded set of connotations, ranging from cheapness to incendiary politics, but there is no better term in English for what I wanted to produce. History shows that new forms for books can create new audiences and new kinds of content. The now obscure publisher Emanuel Haldeman-Julius had an amazing decade-long run starting in 1919 with his inexpensive 'Little Blue Books' for working men and women (mid-century Book of the Month Club phenomenon Will Durant got his start with Haldeman-Julius), and the 1930s saw the rise of softback publishers Penguin in the UK and Pocket Books in the US, and the development of everything from the disposable beach book to the college paperback edition. That was the kind of excitement that I hoped to tap into with the Mediawork project.

In *Utopian Entrepreneur* (2001), the first pamphlet, Brenda Laurel made the phrases 'culture work' and 'culture worker' central to her arguments. Now, I see the pamphlet as having the same sort of relationship to the book as the culture worker does to the artist. They do similar things, often exactly the same, but the words 'artist' and 'book' carry such a weight of history and expectation that sometimes it is worth experimenting with new nomenclature.

JVC: What challenges existed – as an editorial director as well as author – in teaming science fiction writers, theorists, musicians, video game designers and design critics with professional graphic designers (and vice versa)? The majority of the designers who collaborated with pamphlet writers are not only professional designers but are also members of design faculties. Denise Gonzales Crisp (*Utopian Entrepreneur*) is an Associate Professor and former Chair at the College of Design, North Carolina State University (as well as former Senior Designer for ACCD), Anne Burdick (*Writing Machines*) is Chair of the Media Design Program at ACCD, Lorraine Wild (*Shaping Things*) teaches and served as Chair at California Institute of the Arts, and Mieke Gerritzen, who collaborated with you on, *USER: InfoTechnoDemo*, headed the Design Department, Sandberg Institute, Amsterdam before becoming the director of the Netherlands' Graphic Design Museum. How were the individual writers selected for the series? Did the writers already have a relationship with their co-collaborators, or were specific designers approached based upon the nature of each project?

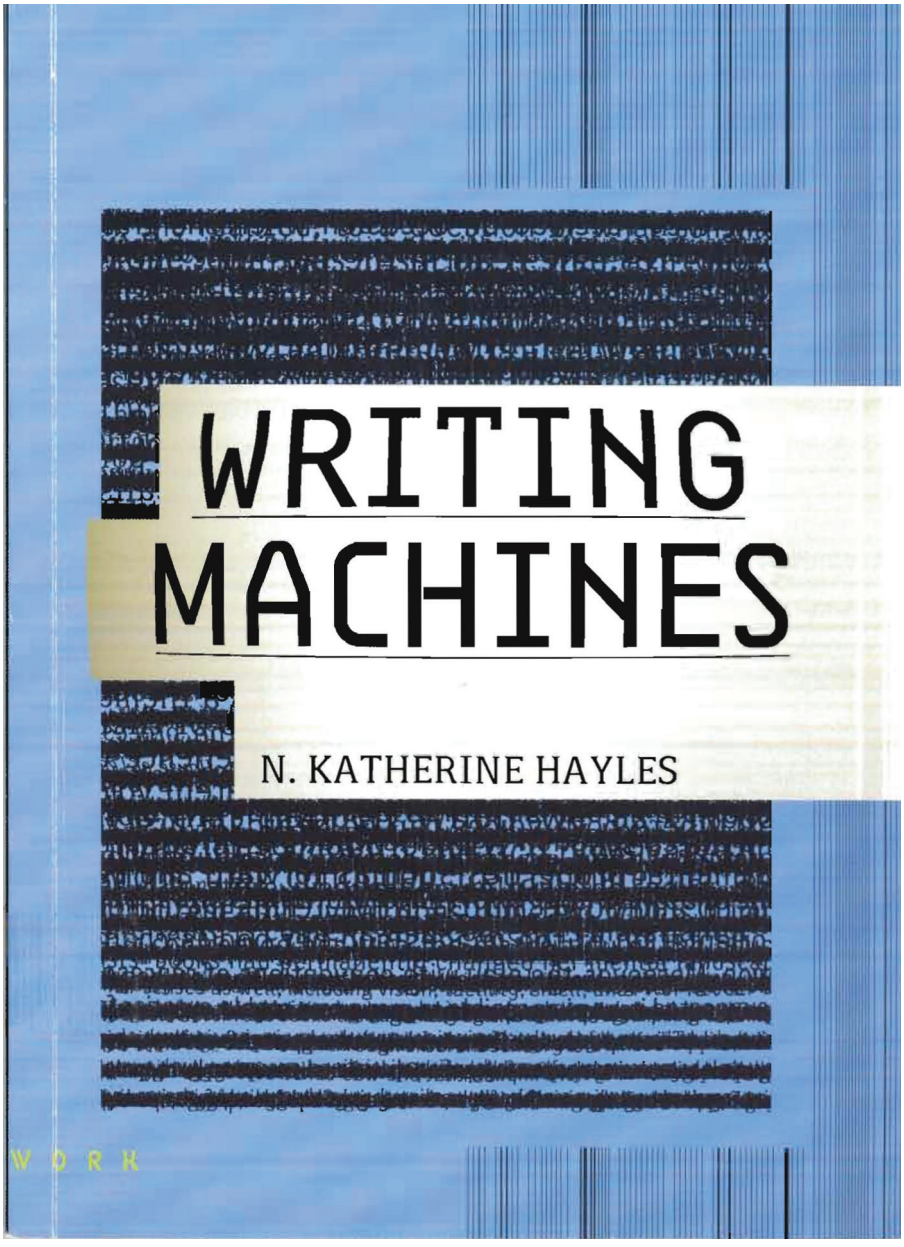
PL: The Mediawork pamphlets were never real collaborations; instead they were produced commissions. By that I mean that I decided on an author, commissioned the texts, determined what kind of designer would bring the most to the project and then served as both a channel of communication and a buffer between the author and designer.

I never thought that the pamphlets could become what I wanted them to be if I just created a sandbox and invited people to play. I had been in Los Angeles long enough to appreciate the role of the producer. Remember that at the Academy Awards, the night's last Oscar for Best Picture doesn't go to the star, the director, or the screenwriter (a thousand scribes look up from their keyboards to mutter 'as if'), the little man goes to the producer. Talent-driven and infrastructure-intensive artistic projects tend to be one-offs if there isn't a central figure who keeps the train running on track and on time. I really enjoyed the pairing process, thinking through the interrelationships between text and design, and trying to position each book and the series as part of a larger conversation.

To have a conversation, you have to have people who want to talk, and I think that explains why so many of the designers have a hybrid practice, with one foot in the academy. They have already chosen to be involved in a larger dialogue about design, with students, colleagues, critics and theorists. Denise Gonzales Crisp, Anne Burdick and Lorraine Wild all came out of CalArts (Lorraine had taught the two others) at a moment when west-coast designers in particular had a venue in *Emigre* Magazine to flex their writerly and theoretical muscles. As for Mieke Gerritzen, well, she maintains that she has no talent for discourse, but likes to collect theorists like butterflies. Cornelia Blatter and Marcel Hermans of COMA Amsterdam/New York are the only designers who maintain a studio entirely outside academia, but they are regular lecturers at design programs around the world, and actively pursue projects with deep content.

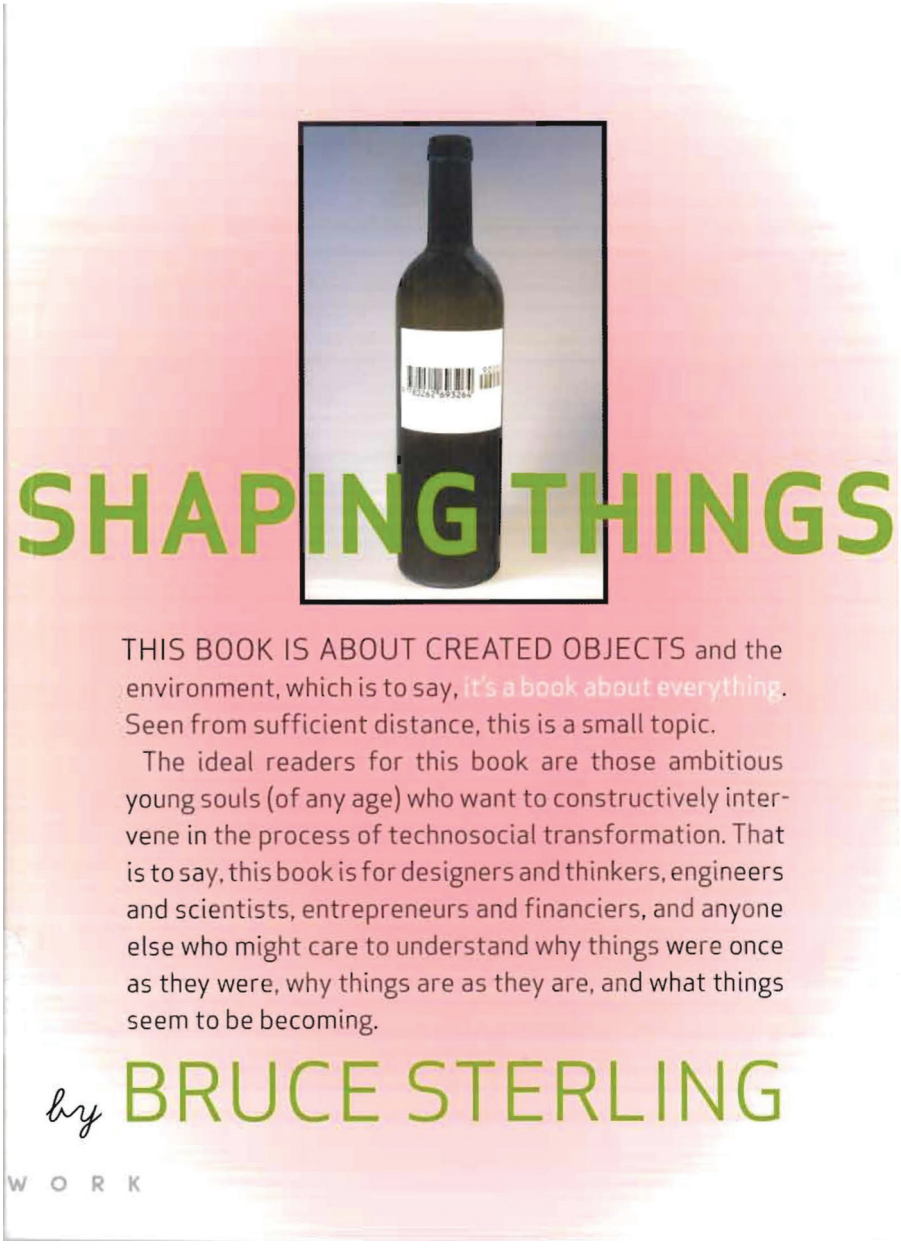
I wanted the pamphlets to model a working methodology for media makers (and consumers) in the 21st century. For the first pamphlet, I needed someone who could talk about how to function within the market economy, because I wanted to go way beyond academic audiences, and the author had to be able to engage with larger issues of content and intent. Brenda Laurel's commitment to the world of high-tech entrepreneurialism and her deep humanism were just the combination I was looking for. If *Utopian Entrepreneur* was a model for uploading culture work into the world, then next I wanted to offer a set of methodologies for analyzing that work, especially in terms of thinking about the written word, which was both enjoying a virtual renaissance because of email and web publishing while at the same time seeing its material media under great duress, in the book, magazine and newspaper publishing worlds. In the case of *Utopian Entrepreneur*, Brenda, Denise and I were all on the same faculty, so there was a lot of cross talk. I saw Brenda and Denise as working on and with specifically 21st-century kinds of feminisms. Every time I teach *Utopian Entrepreneur* to my large Design and Society lecture class at UCLA, female students come up to tell me how much they love and feel inspired by Brenda's story and the tone she adopts to tell it. Denise's decorationalism was the perfect

Brenda Laurel, *Utopian Entrepreneur* (MIT, 2001), designed by Denise Gonzales Crisp.

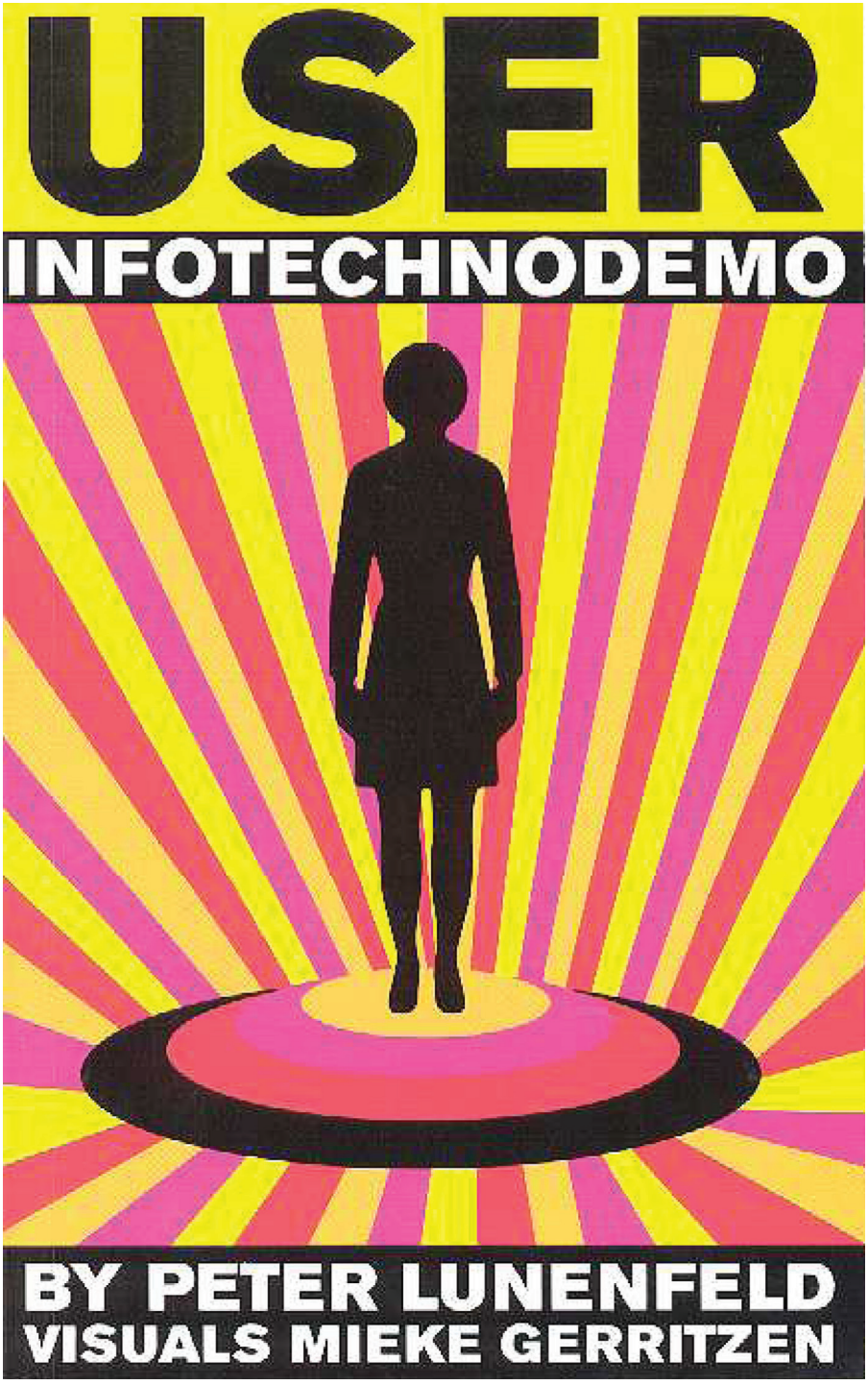


N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (MIT, 2002), designed by Anne Burdick.

Paul D. Miller, *Rhythm Science* (MIT, 2004), designed by COMA.



Bruce Sterling, *Shaping Things* (MIT, 2005), designed by Lorraine Wild.



Peter Lunenfeld, *USER: InfoTechnoDemo* (MIT, 2005), designed by Mieke Gerritzen.

fit for Brenda's prose because Denise's work plays with form so beautifully, and is exuberant with visual wit.

N. Katherine Hayles' (2002) commitment to the emergent forms of electronic literature is second to none, and her understanding of how these new technologies relate to critical theory goes very deep. *Writing Machines* was intended to be the most specifically 'academic' of the pamphlets, a potential teaching text for the exploding number of courses in e-lit. I felt that Anne Burdock was the only designer in the world to work on *Writing Machines*. Anne developed such a rigorous approach to *<ebr> the electronic book review* and the *Fackel Wörterbuch* for the Literary Scientists at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. I wanted to see that discipline applied to Kate's thesis about media specific analysis.

Rhythm Science (Miller, 2004) was anomalous in that I did not know Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid well and had never even met COMA Amsterdam/New York before the project started. I had been reading Paul's essays for a few years and really wanted to have a Mediawork pamphlet about DJ-ing and electronic music. I talked to one LA-based designer who had done a lot of professional motion graphic work, but Paul was hoping for someone with a higher profile. That was when I thought of COMA Amsterdam/New York. Cornelia Blatter (she's the CO) and Marcel Hermans (he's the MA) had recently designed Peter Halley's (2003) catalogue, *Maintain Speed* (see Reynolds, 2000). Both Paul and I knew Peter, and were huge admirers of that catalogue, which I think is a seductive marvel of information design. Paul/DJ Spooky and Cornelia/Marcel/COMA never met or corresponded. The author saw the beta design, made one suggestion about color, and that was the sum total of their interaction. That was the situation that felt most like an industrial project – where the commissioning of the text and of the design were at the furthest remove. It is also the biggest seller of the series.

Bruce Sterling and Lorraine Wild (2005), on the other hand, knew each other quite well from summers spent at Michael and Katherine McCoy's famed High Ground design confabs in the Rockies. Brenda Laurel and I had arranged for Bruce to spend the year at Art Center as our first Visionary-in-Residence, and Bruce was the only one of the authors who had a literary agent I had to convince. But Bruce, who had already created a stir with his concept of *spimes* – objects that know their position in both space and time – wanted to get the concept out in book form. Lorraine is the dean of book designers in LA, and one of the most renowned graphic designers and design educators in the country. I wanted to work with her, if only to say that I had. Bruce, Lorraine and I got together regularly to hash out the content/form issues, often over sushi. *Shaping Things* was the smoothest of the four to get out the door.

Looking back, there was no difficulty in convincing the authors of the value of design and the designers of the pleasures of working with rich content. In fact, each was hungry for the other. Obviously, a different set of authors and designers might have brought up different issues, but the people I did work with jumped in wholeheartedly. There were production glitches, one author was months late

with the delivery of the text, another clammed up after seeing the pamphlet until the first rapturous reviews came out, and, looking back, one author did flat out try to dump the design of a pamphlet, but it all worked out in the end.

JVC: Such collaborations certainly attempt to realize the emphasis on 'theory' and 'practice' that so many university/college departments working in interactive media and/or digital media design try to foster within their programs. The Mediawork pamphlet series *was* a step toward articulating the numerous modes of mediation available to writers and designers. Looking back, did the series accomplish what you hoped it would? Also, do you consider the series to be a good example of what you mean by the term, 'visual intellectual'? In *USER* (2005) you describe this as 'people simultaneously making, pondering and commenting on visual culture, but in a way that doesn't perforce adhere to the primacy of the word' (p. 93). As each pamphlet is a collaborative effort, can a single person possibly embody the combination of intellectual/designer?

PL: Asking if the Mediawork project lived up to my hopes engenders an awkward silence, as the respondent hopes to find that middle ground between parental bragging and the modest appraisal of real-life accomplishments. I think that the pamphlets demonstrated that there was a hugely productive space for concentrated, rigorous discourse to connect with compelling graphic and information design. I always said that they were intended to occupy a shelf in the bookstore between detailed academic monographs and copies of this month's *Vanity Fair*.

I had also hoped that the pamphlet series might have an impact on academic publishing, and also perhaps even trade books. What I learned was that creating publications like the Mediawork pamphlets is labor-intensive handicraft – even though produced with digital tools – and that the ideas and forms had trouble scaling from there. We are in a moment when publishing splits into multiple streams, so that Taschen publishes beautiful books with short, accessible texts (often in multiple languages) that get remaindered fast; big commercial publishers like Random House take fewer and fewer chances on 'literary' novels and 'difficult' non-fiction; academic presses, overwhelmed with their unfunded responsibilities to be *de facto* tenuring organs, devote less and less time to editing, even though they deal with dense content and obscure stylists. In short, the publishing industries (for they are plural) have difficulty figuring out how they could make projects like Mediawork pencil out under the interlocking constraints of economics, form/content ratio and presumed readership.

The Mediawork pamphlets supported a range of goals. Obviously, they were expected to be good books, with good writing and compelling design. If they were not successful in those arenas, the whole project would have been threadbare. But one of the other, ancillary, goals is, as you rightly identify it, a proof of concept of 'visual intellectualism'. I had written an essay under that name for my column in *art/text* before starting in on Mediawork, and what I was calling for in that essay was for artists, intellectuals and other culture workers to harness the power of the computer to create new modes of knowledge formation that could move

beyond the primacy of the word. I think the Mediawork project pointed out a (not the) direction that visual intellectuality could take.

A short history of the intellectual in America is needed here, and we should stress the importance not just of speaking, but of speaking to a public. After the Second World War, the United States decided that many more of its citizens should go to college, so we built huge numbers of them all across the country. These institutions had to be staffed, and one way they built themselves up was by raiding the cities. The cities had been where intellectuals used to live but, now, the people who were intellectuals became academics. They lived in College Park, Pennsylvania, not Gramercy Park, New York, San Diego not San Francisco, Bloomington in Indiana not Bloomsbury in London. 'Public intellectuals' who spoke to and with a general audience withered in direct relation to the growth of academic disciplines, which encouraged greater and greater levels of specialization and which created ever more focused niche communities. Another not-so-coincidental coincidence was that domestic televisuality rose during the same five decades that saw the decline of public intellectuality. It's my contention that at least some of this has to do with the inability of text-based intellectuals to assimilate the rhetorical seductiveness of the visual media that exploded over the past 50 years.

I think that the new generation now cursed with that awful name 'digital natives' may well have the capacity to become unitary visual intellectuals and overcome these gaps. There is, however, nothing wrong with divvying up the work: as a culture, we tend to have trouble acknowledging more than one 'author' or 'artist' at a time. The very modesty of design may be what makes it a quintessential discipline for the 21st century. Its practitioners are regularly willing to trade the capacity to put something well and thoughtfully crafted out into cultural circulation without necessarily demanding the right to 'sign' their work in all its manifestations.

As the 'millennials' (another horrible moniker) find their way into the culture, the possibilities for visual intellectuality will explode. I'm not crazy about most of the video essays I see on YouTube, but we have to start somewhere. Eventually, a group of people are going to disengage from the noise machine and recraft what they are doing, searching for deeper engagement and the generation of truly meaningful contributions, rather than recycling the call-and-response populism of fandom. Blogging can be a kind of templated visual intellectuality, but again, it needs to rise above its contemporary default of reception followed instantly by reaction and linking. Visual intellectuals will have to build in more running room for the imagination in order to break the unwinnable cycle of humans who try to keep up with machine time.

JVC: To further develop the role of the visual intellectual, how can we get scholars in the field of visual culture studies to start speaking to this in design studies? Despite so many overlaps between the two we rarely find evidence that scholars of visual culture studies consider design part of their intellectual foundation; when listing these sources, practitioners of visual culture studies will point to roots in art history, cultural studies, media and film studies, architecture,

philosophy, photography but there's little mention of design. What would it take for visual culture studies scholars to become visual intellectuals?

PL: If visual culture scholars want to become 'visual intellectuals' in this sense, they have to build in a commitment to making in their own research practice. This is not a hectoring demand for scholars of 19th-century decorative arts to go out and learn the C++ programming language, or for historians of television to take up woodworking, but rather a suggestion that the new digital tools have made making something other than 'text' a distinct possibility as the 'result' of many kinds of intellectual inquiry. Obviously internet publishing, whether blogs or more intensive web spaces are one way to make this move, but so is making a commitment to using more intensive and designed image-driven presentations – taking Powerpoint and Keynote to the next level within the academy. If scholars can build in information and visualization technologies from the beginning of their research and publishing agendas, by creating and managing visual databases, developing applications for mobile platforms and digging into design disciplines, they will be able to create more fully realized and immersive experiences.

A caveat: these 'good' technologies can have profoundly 'bad' social effects on scholars if they become the academic equivalent of neo-liberal speedup – where 'education workers' are pushed by ever more quantitative metrics into acquiring new skills without pay, which they are then held 'accountable' for during evaluation, up to and after tenuring. In fact, I sometimes worry that the present academic inability to see the work of visual intellectuality as being equivalent to more established forms of scholarship could shift quickly in the future into an expectation that in certain disciplines – like visual studies – everyone will be expected to adapt to visual intellectuality, whether they need to, want to, or even dislike these modes, and be hindered in their careers if they do not. We are already seeing that in the epochally bad academic job market expected in what I've come to think of as the neo-teens (2010-forward), the 'hot' prospects in the humanities are precisely those young scholars who have adapted themselves to the present information society and adopted its tools, networks, databases and design technologies to their research and pedagogy. I have no doubt that this generation is actively interested and engaged with these technologies, but I worry that the next one will be following them into digital humanities and visual intellectuality simply because they see it as one of the only ways into the strata of permanent rather than precarious academic work.

Another, perhaps less immediately co-optable, strategy is to embrace collaboration in order to produce new work in an expanded field of scholarship. This allows scholars to follow what they themselves are interested in, negotiating just how much engagement, training and creative energy they wish to invest and finding partners with complementary skills. This is the utopian version, of course, with the real questions within academic partnerships boiling down to who owns the project, how partners are compensated with either credit or payments, how those payments can be funded and how such collaborative work is acknowledged within the structures of academic hiring and advancement.

To respond to the question about how to integrate design into the humanities in a more cohesive fashion, we have to remember that in contrast to fine art,

architecture and film, design has been slow to accrete sophisticated aesthetic and social theories. Historically, designers themselves created a maker's discourse heavy on technical analysis. Starting in the 1980s, they occasionally added a splash of imported critical theory. Since then, the market produced a plethora of well-illustrated buying guides and style manuals, bookshelves wide but only an inch deep. Coincident with the past decade's rise of design as a cultural force, though, rigorous and informed theoretical attention to design began to emerge from the academy. Yet, even with this rise, the wide swath of contemporary humanities scholars pay little attention to design as a creative endeavor and distilling agent. As the humanities digitize, the academy is not introspective enough about the tools it picks up, the aesthetics that these tools encourage, and the ways in which certain aesthetics become defaults. Deeper engagement with design on personal and disciplinary levels can change this.

JVC: Let's discuss one of your influences for the pamphlet series: the collaboration between Marshall McLuhan and graphic designer Quentin Fiore that resulted in *The Medium is the Massage* (1967) and *War and Piece in the Global Village* (1968). As with the Mediawork pamphlets, the graphic designer actively punctuates and mediates each book's design, using image, typography, and the wonderful use of white space. What did you see and attempt to emulate in the McLuhan–Fiore collaboration? What did you seek to adjust, update, or change?

PL: These collaborations were a huge influence, as I've already mentioned, but what is forgotten is that these books were really a producer's medium. Jerome Agel is the third partner in these two books, and arguably the most powerful of the three. The *New York Times* described Agel in 1976 as 'the type of entrepreneur who has been laboring in the shadows of the book industry' since at least the 1950s, 'one of those ingenious men [who] undertake to conceive, produce, and turn over to large established firms to distribute books that will sell 100,000 copies or more.'[1] Agel was described as a 'specialist … who singlehandedly has turned out a small shelf of volumes designed to turn important but not-so-easy-to understand ideas into reading the average man will enjoy.' As a collaborator on the McLuhan books, Agel brought in Fiore, who was a great fit. He was someone with multiple talent who had studied with the Bauhaus masters, and was particularly skilled in typography. Together, Agel and Fiore worked on the two books with McLuhan, as well as with Buckminster Fuller, and even the Yippie leader, Jerry Rubin.

Walter Glanze described the working relationship on *The Medium Is the Massage*:

> [Jerome Agel] would sketch out units, draw up questions, assemble and edit textual fragments from McLuhan and other sources, as well as generating copy of his own, which he submitted to McLuhan for approval before sending them on to [Fiore]. At a second stage, [Fiore] added his own materials and touches, both visual and verbal, in the process of roughing out page layout sequences which were then worked over with [Agel]. These were then submitted to McLuhan, who, naturally, had the right of final approval.

Agel worked on the premise that he understood the book market better than anyone else involved – better than the publishers, better than the editors, better than the marketers, and, naturally, better than any author. He had a sense for what would sell and how to package it, and an adman's feel for messaging. There are still people like Agel. They produce books on recent murders and tie-ins to popular entertainments, and their work is almost without exception disposable. What is amazing about Agel is that by a combination of instinct, luck and timing (that troika we often label 'talent'), he ferreted out some astonishing partners and made work of lasting value.

I do not mean to disparage Fiore, but there were other, and more influential, graphic designers working in the 1960s who could have done marvelous things with McLuhan's texts, but there was no one else quite like Agel to bring them to market and get them before the widest possible audience. That said, Fiore's evanescence, playfulness and willingness to embrace pop elements made all of his work with Agel both exemplary of its time and worth appreciating long after its moment. The interplay between the photographic, the typographic and the just plain graphic, all with generous use of white space and copious visual wit make *The Medium is the Massage*, in particular, an absolute delight, and a model of the kind of translator function that inspired the Mediawork project.

JVC: There also exist fundamental differences in the design vocabulary of Fiore's books and the pamphlets. Fiore, for instance, relies on a single, fairly narrow column of text, he uses wide margins, the captions are in the margins, he also employs a mixture of photos and illustrations. Essentially, he accepts modernist ideas of what a book can be. To varying degrees, the Mediawork designers challenge that idea. In *Utopian Entrepreneur*, for example, Denise Gonzales Crisp, uses design to highlight the digital; for instance, she uses illustrations that refer to pixels, she jumps from modernist typefaces like Univers to others introduced by the postmodernist designer Zuzana Licko, and she breaks the text with close-ups of pixilated type. In *Writing Machines*, Anne Burdick challenges and breaks the grid that Fiore takes for granted, magnifying snippets of text, cropping so we only see part of images, introducing upside down texts, etc. To what extent were the designers asked to reference and transform the book form itself? More broadly, what, for you, is a book? How should it be read?

PL: I never asked for anything specific from the designers beyond requesting that they do their best and most innovative work. Denise and Anne had been involved in long discussions with me about the shape and future of graphic design and their investment in pushing the limits of book design predated their involvement in the Mediawork project and continues to this day. What I personally liked about the designs that all the Mediawork pamphlets manifested was their sheer joy in being allowed to exist. By that, I mean that there was a sense that we were all privileged to be working in a ludic zone with enough resources to make real things, rather than just talk about them. I remember giving a talk on the intersections of art and science at the Banff New Media Institute and, in one of the wonderful outings they organized for us, I was hiking through the Canadian Rockies with a young media designer. We started talking, and without even meaning to, I fell into one of those procedure-oriented complaints fests about deadlines, or some other such whining. He listened for a few minutes and

then noted with a gentle Canadian politeness that he imagined it was paradise to be able to have the support to do projects with the people involved with Mediawork and put them out into the world.

Of course, he was dead right. Denise's digi-stitch samplers created a sense of electronic hominess for *Utopian Entrepreneur,* and reflected the domestic showmanship that Brenda wove through her narrative. In *Writing Machines*, Anne and I spoke of the pull quotes as textual affordances, and the overall information architecture was rigorous but open. Anne took a very dense book and aerated it, replacing the steel girding of high theory with a carbon fiber hull (to adopt a naval design metaphor). COMA performed the most radical gesture of the series by making a material metaphor of the spindle through the book, which also held the audio CD in place. They also enabled three separate modes of 'reading' *Rhythm Science*: the first, as a well-designed classic text treatment, the second via the elaborately embellished, oversize pull quotes, the third, the dual-page spreads that offered Cornelia and Marcel's visual remixes of DJ Spooky's sticker aesthetic. Lorraine eschewed the sci-fi ticks usually associated with futurist tracts, and went for a home-brewed optimist's highlighter approach to *Shaping Things*. Lorraine's graphic optimism gave wings to Bruce's flights of fancy, and allowed both author and design to share their delight in worlds just now coming into being.

I too am interested in the future, but my point of entry for the Mediawork project was the book, a form that I love, which I believe in, a medium that will never go away. I'm not interested in the by now bankrupt argument about the 'death of the book', trust me, they will survive us all. This is not to say that hypertexts, cybertexts, technotexts, networks, webs, electronic paper and printing on demand won't have effects on the book, just that the book is an extraordinarily adaptable object. In fact, technology can lift certain of the obligations that books have felt constrained to fulfill over the centuries, and open spaces for experimentation and new potential for the medium.

Photography was the biggest challenge painting faced in millennia, and did, of course take over the role of documenting the world. But, as I've written, in lifting the burden of representation off painting, photography allowed for a flowering of abstraction, non-representational practice and the exploration of the picture plane – in other words, all that great stuff in museum galleries dedicated to art from 1850 to the present – from the Fauvists, Impressionists, Suprematists, Cubists, Abstract Expressionists to Color Field paintings. So, one of the research agendas of the Mediawork project was to see if bringing innovative non-fiction together with graphic design that spanned the gap from playful to rigorous could produce a new thing within publishing. So, I started with the book, and then expanded into what I call a hypercontext, incorporating the web and reinventing the academic apparatus. I wanted the Mediawork project to offer proof on the ground of how print might take on new possibilities in an era of networked culture machines.

JVC: Would McLuhan's famous probe that 'all media are extensions of some human faculty – psychic or physical' be as bold a pronouncement without the images and texts massaging our senses? Here's where the aphoristic style works so well

with the visual language of Fiore's design. Not much is written; however, much is experienced across the senses. And we, the *users*, are part of this process – part of the massage/message; we are forced to have an active, involved, co-producer role in the tactile and sensory experience of this medium. For example, when you collaborated with Gerritzen to produce *USER,* the book's ordered chaos both embodies and conveys the frenzy of early 21st-century digital media. *USER* makes the book into a visual experience that transcends words; by employing, for instance, discordant color schemes that vary from chapter to chapter, setting type in multiple sizes and punctuating text with clip art, *USER's* text and design challenge the modernist book format. Can you discuss the collaborative design process that created *USER*?

PL: Before I get to the process that resulted in the creation of that book, I need to explain the context for its production, and why I – with a huge commitment to working with west-coast, specifically LA-based, designers – went all the way to the Netherlands to find a collaborator for the project. The text of *USER* came from a column of the same name I had written in the journal *art/text*. The magazine had numerous incarnations, including being the premier contemporary art theory publication in Australia. I started writing for it when my wife, Susan Kandel, became its editor in chief when the publisher moved the magazine to Los Angeles. To distinguish *art/text* from competition like *Artforum*, *frieze* and *Art issues*, Susan concentrated on developing new voices, especially those emerging from art practice. She commissioned a number of columns from diverse figures: 'Torpor' by the filmmaker and erotic memoirist Chris Kraus, 'Lobby' by the British neo-conceptualist Liam Gillick and 'Type' by text-based LA artist Frances Stark. Each of these was eventually collected by its author in book form: Kraus's *Video Green: Los Angeles Art and the Triumph of Nothingness*, Gillick's *Five or Six*, and *Frances Stark: Collected Writing 1993–2003*.

I started to think that someone far removed from SoCal would be good to transform the 'User' columns into *USER*, the book, to bring a fresh take to the material. In assembling the book, I read and reread the columns, but felt that they needed little updating, in part because I wrote them with a collection in mind. In writing about the present, doing theory in real time as I call it, I try not to make any piece of writing overly linked to the moment of its creation. What surprised me, though, in readying them for publication was how much more positive the columns were than I remembered them. They might have looked at the boom times of Web 1.0 from an oblique angle, but they were definitely a product of that extended period of peace and prosperity. I miss that effervescence even as I share the *schadenfreude* of the non-CEO classes as they watch the Masters of the Universe led off in handcuffs yet again.

One of the many things I was trying to do with first 'User' the column and then *USER* the book was to develop an aesthetics that acknowledges the market but that is not as susceptible to the vicissitudes of the business cycle. When art and cultural historians look back on the criticism produced at the turn of the millennium, I think they are going to wonder at the complete bifurcation between the techno-positive Utopianism of net.arts criticism and the bemoaning of the end of the avant-garde from the academy and the *October*-ites. The central issue

of the emergence of an immersive, design conscious electronic environment still needed to be adequately explored.

To explain why I chose Mieke Gerritzen, I need to refer to the ubiquitous and indefatigable Geert Lovink. At the turn of the millennium, Geert was everywhere and knew everyone. I met him without even realizing that I had, when I was at the Venice Biennale in 1995 and stumbled into a cyber-event organized by the Medien Zentral Kommittee, far from the major pavilions that define that art pilgrimage for most visitors. There was a dark room with various texts being projected on the walls. I stayed, read and then left. I didn't even realize that I was present at the birth of the <nettime> mailing list, a major intellectual home for more than a decade, and to which I still post occasionally (and continue to read long after many of my other list subscriptions have lapsed). Geert was central to the rewiring of the East back into the world's cultural grid after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the emergence of central and eastern Europe as hubs of net.art. As I mentioned earlier, Geert participated in a mediawork at one point, and we published a dialogue on neo-liberalism and culture on <nettime> called 'Museum Europe'.

In 2000, he asked me to participate in a group-sourced book project titled *Everyone Is a Designer* (2000), requesting a few succinct blasts about the design economy at the turn of the century. I did not know the work of his collaborator, Mieke Gerritzen, but whatever Geert had steered me to in the past had been worthwhile, so I agreed. What showed up in my mailbox was a revelation. Colorful but stark, playful but rigorous, the design was uncompromising in the sense that it dared you to ignore it. Every page felt like a miniature poster from a more benevolent vision of 1984, where George Orwell's Newspeak merges with Otto Neurath's Isotypes and everything is set in Helvetica: MINIDES SAYS ALWAYS MAKING DOUBLEPLUS GOOD WEB IN OCEANA! I contributed to a few more of Mieke's books, including *Mobile Minded* (Gerritzen and Lovink, 2002) and *Visual Power* (Gerritzen et al., 2004), each of which followed the format of multiple contributors intersecting with one, unique design intelligence.

It was around 2004 that I began to think about what might result from bringing Mieke's signature style to bear on more unified text by a single author. I would never have had the courage to team her with another author from the Mediawork series, simply because her voice is so strong. But I felt that the 'User' columns might make for a good fit – they too were muscular statements about contemporary visual and information culture. What might result from teaming up? When I broached the concept with Mieke, she got it immediately. We wanted to distinguish *USER* from the pamphlets, by using a slightly different trim size and making it a bit thicker. What emerged followed Mieke's program for generating provocative 'strategies' through both constraint (Helvetica is the only font used) and provocation (joysticks become phalluses, color erupts off every page, and bombs have smiley faces imprinted upon them). The book is a riot of tweaked Istoypes and posturing aesthetics, but one that is tied directly to the content and, most importantly, intent. *USER* is indeed 'a frontal assault', as Johanna Drucker (2005) once categorized it.

JVC: In terms of another influence for the series, let's talk about the utility of the black leather motorcycle jacket. In the Endtroduction to *Utopian Entrepreneur*, you mention this iconic garment fashionable in the New York underground in the mid-to-late 1970s. The jacket, you pointed out, was inspirational for Sylvère Lotringer's Semiotext(e) 'Foreign Agents' book series. The idea was that one could covertly carry the translated works of Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and others, like stolen contraband (that the 4.5 by 7-inch books matched the jacket was a perk for clandestine intellectual exchanges). What are your thoughts on Semiotext(e)'s decision to reprint many of its Foreign Agents series with new covers? Jean Baudrillard's *In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983), *Forget Foucault* (1987), Paul Virilio's *Speed and Politics* (1983) and *Pure War* (1983) are being republished with face-lifted covers that look rather non-threatening. An image of a neat stack of well-read and well-worn iconic black-cover books greet visitors on Semiotext(e)'s webpage. It appears, from the image at least, that radical thought has become another object of nostalgia, a fond memory of days passed, or, possibly, repackaged for a new generation or readers?

PL: Semiotext(e), the Situationists and even the punks in their leather jackets were all part of oppositional, bohemian, avant-gardes that existed during that historical period when communism and capitalism were locked in a duel to command the allegiance of billions of people. Avant-gardist form fit revolutionary content, both were groundbreaking. As I note in the introduction to *USER*, though, I do not believe in the viability of *the*, or even *an*, 'avant-garde' in the 21st century. The fall of the Berlin Wall signified the end of visible alternatives to capitalism. Without a 'struggle' between two systems, the oppositional stance of the historical avant-garde lost its moorings. At the same time, communication networks spread so widely and sped up so much that the 'underground' and the 'alternative', much less the avant-garde, lost any of the running room they might have needed to establish their practice independent from the broader culture. The post-'89 period put into question whether culture could exist outside market economies. The vast increase of both numbers and productivity of a world-wide 'creative class' led to the exhaustion of the very term itself. When dinner-table flatware is mass marketed under the name 'Avant-Garde', it is time to retire the phrase.

Successful avant-garde gestures commodify over time – witness haut-bourgeois college students sporting Che Guevara emblazoned T-shirts and young advertising account executives who can quote *The Society of the Spectacle* chapter and verse. The radical appropriation of French theory by the art world began to lose its radicality the moment that art school professors started assigning Semiotext(e)s to their students. This institutionalization is inevitable, but being assigned a text is quite a different experience than finding one on your own. Baudrillard's *Simulations* has been in print continuously for almost three decades. In its milieu, it is the mainstream. Why should books like these not be repackaged regularly, and why should those of us who were first-generation adopters not be a bit more generous about it?

It is very hard to reboot and redesign a classic. I was surprised to see how Hedi Al Kolti had art directed the change, but he may have given the books a more

acceptable look and feel within the academic community. Sylvère Lotringer (2003) observes that when Semiotext(e) first started the Foreign Agents series translating Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard into English, certain academics would 'go out of their way to avoid quoting from them, returning to the original French texts or to more authoritative sources, as if there were something truly wrong with the volumes'. Perhaps with the move to distribution via the MIT Press rather than the more anarchic Autonomedia, Semiotext(e) wants to take on the drag of 'serious' academic publishing, abandoning the almost covert feel that they had cultivated through the 1980s. Like you, I treasure the look of the original Semiotext(e) design, but it may be an atavistic Sony-electronics-all-black-*9½ Weeks*-'80s hangover, better suited, as Sylvère noted, to the early years of 'the New World Order's aesthetic: hard and portable, compact and cost-effective'.

JVC: You note that, unlike the Semiotext(e) books, Mediawork pamphlets are better suited for the top zipper or snap main compartment flap of a laptop carrier. In the 21st century, geek chic replaces the leather-clad tough when the ubiquitous laptop bag becomes the wearable determining design. The black leather motorcycle jacket as well as the laptop bag have certainly made a notable mark on environments both visually and physically. On the one hand, the pamphlet-as-designed-artifact is easily accommodated into an existing space. The 'flatness' and textured covers afford insertion into tight pockets. On the other hand, might the pamphlets be designed a little too well? The books challenge modernist graphic design conventions. But, with the exception of the hole perforating Paul D. Miller and COMA's *Rhythm Science*, they do retain conventional book formatting. As a radical idea in the spirit of Lotringer's agents, how are the pamphlets meant to help undo, alter, shift, or, maybe even, attack the common spaces of everyday life, so wonderfully embodied in the form of their intended home, the laptop bag? After all, the pamphlets are not bound in sandpaper, an abrasive design tactic employed by the Situationist International to damage (or smooth) any thing that rubs-up-against their thought.

PL: As noted in the introduction to *USER*, I am not given to manifestos or avant-gardist language. I am interested in creating utilities for generative discourse rather than explicitly revolutionary tracts. Mediawork is transmedia publishing that designs and recrafts the hermetic language circulating through seminar rooms and studio crits in order to create affordances for visual intellectuality, and then launches salvos into larger discourse networks. In other words, as I wrote in the Endtroduction to *Utopian Entrepreneur*, I wanted to take 'private theory and turn it into public discourse' (p. 111). What this meant was that the discrete media experimentation of the design world I was familiar with had to be turned into more expansive cultural intervention. I was lucky enough to secure sponsorship to fund and promote Mediawork for almost a decade. I never thought that sandpaper covers or late Marxian rhetoric were the right way to go at the start of the 21st century.

JVC: In your forthcoming monograph *The Secret War Between Downloading and Uploading: How the Computer Became Our Culture Machine*, you propose the computer as 'our culture machine' and offer a generational history to explain how this happened. Do you see the Mediawork series fitting into this framework? Why did the pamphlet series end? Do you believe that the moment for the visual intellectual has passed?

PL: The vast majority of us using computers (which is to say the vast majority of all the people making culture at the start of the 21st century) can take no credit at all for inventing (and often even understanding) the machines we use. All we can be judged by is what we make with them.The Mediawork series was an attempt to show how digital tools and design excellence can bring serious, innovative things into the world. We did not discuss the transmedia aspects of the project all that much, but the WebTakes, which can be found at http://mitpress.mit.edu/mediawork, were models for the kind of generative process I wanted the pamphlets to initiate. I commissioned online responses to the pamphlets, released at the same time as their publication, that were examples of how the work of one set of makers could stimulate other linked, but also autonomous, cultural production. For *Utopian Entrepreneur*, it was an online comic by Scott McCloud, for *Writing Machines* an interactive Flash animation about a spine that longs to escape its book by Eric Loyer, for *Rhythm Science* a hypotext selected by Peter Halley and brought to life by Casey Reas. Each WebTake is an intriguing experience in and of itself but, in league with the pamphlets, they create an even richer hypercontext for the concerns, aesthetics and ethics of the Mediawork series as a whole. I don't like to think of Mediawork as being completed, it is just on hiatus. When I can figure out a way to make the whole process less all-consuming for the Editorial Director (that would be me), I will go out and raise more funding. The Press, and my long-time editor, Doug Sery, liked selling Mediawork pamphlets, and I liked making them. The project, to use one of my favorite terms, is unfinished business (see Lunenfeld, 1999). Visual intellectuals, on the other hand, are just getting rolling.

Note

1. I owe a deep debt to Stanford's Jeffrey Schnapp and his presentation on Agel at 'Nowcasting: Design Theory and the Digital Humanities', a conference I organized at UCLA in the fall of 2009.

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