DESIGN AND CULTURE VOLUME 2, ISSUE 3 PP 329–340 REPRINTS AVAILABLE DIRECTLY FROM THE PUBLISHERS PHOTOCOPYING PERMITTED BY LICENSE ONLY
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DIALOG

Electrifying the Enlightenment

Interview with Peter Lunenfeld, Part II

Elizabeth Guffey and Raiford Guins

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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* (1999) and his book, *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* (2001). Lunenfeld was also the Editorial Director for the innovative series, "Mediawork Pamphlets," published by MIT Press. Within the series, Lunenfeld's own *User: InfoTechnoDemo* appeared in 2005. In a two-part, trans-journal interview, Elizabeth Guffey and Raiford Guins interviewed Lunenfeld on visual culture, design studies, art, media, and cultural critique. In part one

 DOI: 10.2752/175470710X12789399279912

of this interview (published in the *Journal of Visual Culture*, 9(2), August 2010), Lunenfeld responded to a number of questions related to his Mediawork series and his concept of the "visual intellectual." In this, the second part of the interview, our emphasis includes design theory and the digital humanities.

KEYWORDS: design theory, digital humanities, Mediawork, new media, Nowcasting, *User*, visual intellectual

Introduction

Peter Lunenfeld has provocatively positioned design theory as a kind of glue that will shape the digital humanities in the twenty-first century. These themes were explored in the NOWCASTING conference that Lunenfeld organized on October 16 and 17, 2009. In his forthcoming book, *The Secret War Between Downloading & Uploading: Tales of the Computer as Culture Machine* (MIT, 2011), Lunenfeld further examines design's engagement with information technologies in the realm of the computer. In this interview, Elizabeth Guffey, Editor-in-Chief of *Design and Culture*, and Raiford Guins, Founding Principal Editor for the *Journal of Visual Culture*, explore concepts of design theory and, in this case, its intersection with visual culture and media studies.

***Design and Culture* (DC):** Last fall you launched NOWCASTING (Figure 1), the first conference to apply design theory to emerging issues in the digital humanities. You've noted how difficult it is to "forecast" the future. Taking a term from meteorology, where storms are studied in real time, you suggest that we should "nowcast" instead. Is there something unique happening right now that begs us to nowcast the present?

Peter Lunenfeld (PL): Nowcasting is much harder than forecasting, because the data points about the present approach infinity, whereas there are limitations to what we can know or even propose about the future. That understanding the present should be harder than predicting the future fits well with my own writings on hyperaesthetics, where I called on critics to theorize in real time about the cultural transformation brought about by informatics. There are moments in which the *now* is inherently more interesting than the *then* that precedes it and the *next* that will follow, but it is up to the critics to make the case for their own moment's importance. That said, I think that our *now* is compelling for a host of reasons – ecological, political, technological, and aesthetic. This is the century that ecology – including but not limited to climatology, bio-diversity, and sustainability – will either become a chief concern of human beings, or humans may no longer have any concerns at

NOWCASTING: DESIGN THEORY + DIGITAL HUMANITIES

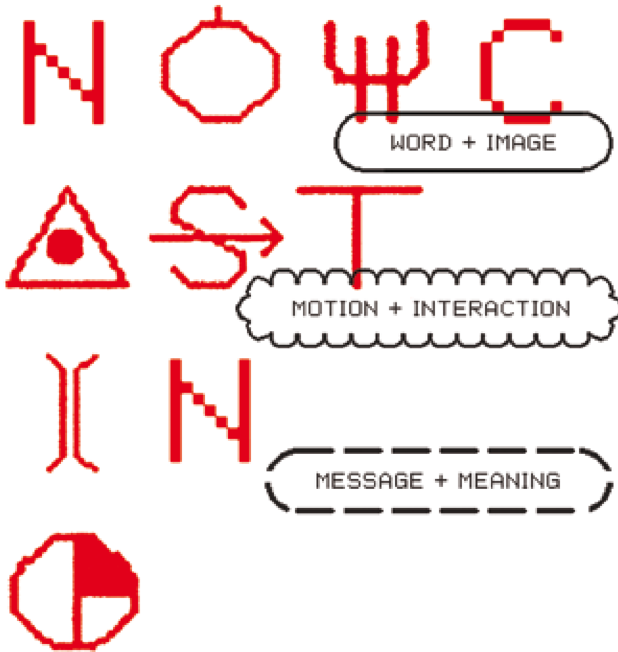

Figure 1
NOWCASTING. Design by Willem Henri Lucas and Tiffany Huang.

all. The political issues of how to feed and clothe humanity, ensure justice, and increase liberty remain, though the answers to these key problems may be framed in less starkly ideological terms than they were during the twentieth century's global conflict between market and command economies.

Neither scientist nor politician, I concentrate on the intersections of technology and culture. That series of *nows* has been remarkably compelling. At the start of the twenty-first century we are living a dream that started more than half a century ago with the first computer scientists, information theorists, and communication architects. This is the dream of a global network of creative populations symbiotically connected to powerful simulation engines. We are a population that can use one machine to create, distribute, and consume ever-expanding simulations of other media. *Now* is when the computer becomes the press, the bookstore, and the book; the recording

suite, the record store, the single, and the phonograph; the camera, the editing room, the studio, the theater; the loft, the painting, and the gallery. *Now* is a compelling moment to theorize, to react against, to understand, to contribute to.

DC: When you opened the NOWCASTING conference you noted that this is a great moment to be a humanist, undercutting fears of the "death of humanities." Instead, you argue that the sort of themes and questions traditionally asked in the humanities continue to have relevance in the digital era. More and more we're hearing this term "digital humanities," but it is often randomly applied. We've seen it applied to everything from library science and the organization of knowledge to digitization in the classroom to collaborative research projects that span multiple scholarly disciplines. What for you is the digital humanities?

PL: As noted in the answer to the first question, the last half-century has seen the emergence and general adoption of a new set of tools that have utterly transformed the ways we make, share, and consume culture. The old questions of interpretation, authentication, and analysis are being transformed by the new tools and aesthetics of the networked culture machine. These are not just incremental shifts of production, distribution, and consumption, they are full-scale transformations. The digital humanities is still being developed, but I would define it as the training in indispensible tools for understanding the world that the new modes of information, communication, and simulation have made possible. The following key words would be a good place to start: collaborative, networked, interactive, rhizomatic, locative, productive, active, intertextual, hybridizing, generative.

Just because we have been hearing about this transition since Marshall McLuhan does not mean it can now be ignored as old news. This really is an era as momentous as that which saw Gutenberg introduce movable type to the West. Yes, it is reductive to ignore the humanities' roots in Medieval monasteries, but the rational, secular, evidence-based investigation of human culture that is our default picture of the humanities is the product of print culture. In the recipe book of Western intellectual history, Gutenberg gives us the press, printing leads to mass literacy, new readers create an audience for new thought – and voila!, the Enlightenment rises like a soufflé. The "crisis" in the humanities is as real as any other crisis identified by academics, which means that perspective is everything. Yes, enrollment in German and English departments is sinking, but other fields – like design, for example– are engaging with the key concepts of the humanities in their pedagogy. This opens space for the digital humanities to become a generative discipline, where studies of multimediated culture give rise to multimediated responses that can stand on their own as new instantiations of that same multimediated culture. Economists speak of virtuous circles within markets, in

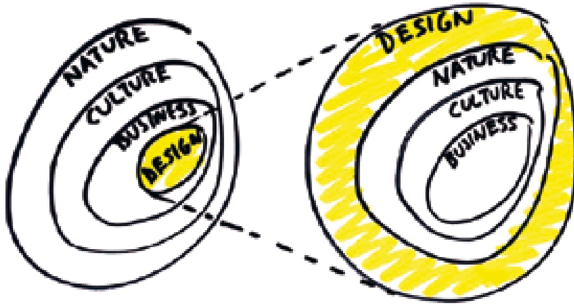

Figure 2
Bruce Mau napkin sketch. Courtesy of Bruce Mau.

which growth, especially as spurred by innovative technologies, leads to increasingly positive returns in multiple registers. The digital humanities should strive to create such generative, virtuous circles within the study of culture.

DC: The way in which you've positioned design and especially design theory as the catalyst driving the digital humanities is intriguing. You've pointed to Bruce Mau's famous napkin sketch (Figure 2), said to have inspired his Massive Change project. In it, he visually demonstrates a vision of design encompassing Nature, Culture, and Business, describing it as "one of the world's most powerful forces." Mau has been both praised and criticized for seeing design so broadly construed. There's a lot of debate in the field of design on just what "design" means. How would you define the term?

PL: As you note, what was once categorized as creative work of one sort or another now takes on the overarching mantle of "design." Given that designers have historically been touchy about their status vis-à-vis the arts and engineering, they should be flattered, but when every act of human making is design, does that mean that everyone is a designer? Yet, the expansiveness of contemporary design is balanced by its internal contradictions. Yes, design can be seen broadly as the act of human making, but design as a commercial endeavor was founded on and thrives in offering solutions to the problems presented to it. This solution-orientation has long been one of the dividing lines between design and art, yet the most forward-looking design practices, and especially design pedagogy, have long since championed the self-initiated project.

My own definition: design is a creative practice that harnesses cultural, economic, and technological constraints in order to bring useful and beautiful systems and objects into the world. In the hundred plus years we can speak of a self-conscious practice of design, much of what the field has done most fruitfully is harness technology to cultural production, either as useful design technologies in and

of themselves, or by shaping the culture's technological imaginary. These complementary processes are the heritage of those who call themselves designers, whether they know it or not.

DC: As design studies emerges as an academic discipline, scholars and researchers grapple to find not just a shared definition of the field but also common agreement on its theories and methods. The technical design subfields, for instance those involving engineering, often ignore human issues or the kind of reflective criticality we associate with the humanities. Other subfields, for example visual communications, have adopted theories current in cultural studies but ignore the benefits of systematic problem solving most often associated with design research. Furthermore, some camps hold that theorists who don't explicitly mention the word "design" should be discounted. When I (Elizabeth) swap my Theorizing Design syllabi with colleagues teaching essentially the same course, it's surprising to see little carryover. One of the most invigorating aspects of the NOWCASTING conference is how you cast design theory as a kind of glue that holds the digital humanities together. Considering that there is no consensus here, what for you constitutes "design theory"? If you had to draw up a design theory reading list, what would it include? Would you, for instance, include any of the recent new readers in design studies or design history? Because you have such a strong background in media studies, I wonder, how would you differentiate design theory from media studies theory?

PL: Anyone thinking seriously about twenty-first century design theory should start with essays by three of the most powerful and stylish critics of the twentieth century. Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has become the go-to cliché in every graduate paper on aesthetics for a generation, but that ubiquity does not diminish this essay or any of the others in *Illuminations* in any way. Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* should be read from cover to cover, and often is these days by undergraduates, but "Soap Powders and Detergents" and "The New Citroen" are the absolute musts for design thinkers. Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" are so central to the discussion of sensibility that *Against Interpretation* is another must for any library. These texts serve as a foundation for any serious study of media as well, but one mark of truly great criticism is that its style and method can inspire across any disciplinary boundaries the academy can erect.

Graphic design is lucky to have the best comprehensive histories – *Meggs' History of Graphic Design* finally has a worthy complement and competitor in Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish's *Graphic Design History*. It is odd that industrial design does not have any counterpart to these works. In lieu of that, Carma Gorman's *The Industrial Design Reader* offers a treasure trove of reading ranging from Adolph Loos' "Ornament and Crime" to Raymond Loewy's

"The MAYA Stage." Helen Armstrong's *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field* performs a similar function running the gamut from Jan Tschichold and Herbert Bayer to Jessica Helfand and Lorraine Wild. Once you get past these greatest hits collections, things start to veer off wildly.

The *Looking Closer* series has many volumes and some wonderful writing, but looking at them in aggregate does not do much to convince anyone that graphic designers have articulated a coherent theory for themselves. Likewise, Edward Tufte's books have had a huge impact on professional and amateur information designers alike, but his work has an atheoretical stance at best. The interviews and asides that Bill Moggridge offers in *Designing Interactions* contain the raw material for someone to craft a theory of experience and interaction design. Industrial design found a voice for sustainability in William McDonough and Michael Braungart's *Cradle to Cradle* and a psychologist's couch in Don Norman's *The Design of Everyday Things*. At the risk of sounding self-serving, I think that Bruce Sterling's Mediawork Pamphlet, *Shaping Things* offers one of the most provocative theories of twenty-first-century post-industrial design. Those reading Sterling and dealing with the intersections of new media and design have to look at *The New Media Reader*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, if only to get a grounding in the theoretical presuppositions of those who invented the technologies that we now design with. Finally, anyone trying to craft a theory of design should have a nemesis, and Hal Foster, with his complete condemnation of design as both practice and field in *Design and Crime* should be read, if only to boil the blood.

DC: Your current project, *The Secret War*, strays considerably from a direct (or perhaps directly polemical) engagement with design as found in the Mediawork series and the NOWCASTING conference. Within *The Secret War*, design is conceived as part of a much broader cultural project. One "tension" is apparent in your second chapter, neatly entitled, "Sticky." You premise the question of what you refer to as "meaningful uploading" by returning the reader to Matthew Arnold's equation of "culture" with "goodness." You claim, "Work uploaded into the world ought to have enough of an affordance to connect with other elements of the network to add to larger questions of meaning rather than simply shimmering there as nodes in the distraction machines." What for you constitutes "meaningful uploading" as opposed to "distraction"? Are you calling upon a new type of critic? In this chapter you are also highly critical of the notions of "convergence culture" and "participatory culture" as well as fan-produced media. Whereas "meaningful uploading" is regarded as "stickiness," media productions created by fans are positioned as "Teflon objects." Can you identify what you mean by the terms "sticky" and "Teflon"? To what extent are these qualities determinants for meaningful works of culture?

PL: The new book was written out of pleasure and astonishment: in the past decade or so, the networked computer finally delivered on its inventors' dreams. I wanted to write an encomium to our new culture machine. But I have to admit there was a deep concern lurking behind my optimism, a fear that we as a culture are fully capable of squandering the gift we have inherited. For a generation after the events of 1968, a hermeneutics of suspicion dominated theory and criticism, and not without reason. But even the fiercest of critiques can burn out, and what filled the gap was the work of those I came to think of as "capitulationists," theorists and critics who offered a Panglossian gloss on contemporary media culture, who saw any repurposing or reaction to entertainment, no matter how minor, as an act of populist *écriture*.

This capitulationism ranges from journalism – Malcolm Gladwell's single *Blink* is all you need because *Everything Bad for You Is Good For You* according to Steven Johnson – to the emergence of acafandom, where Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* limit themselves to poaching from Chekhov the Russian *Star Trek* character and never from Chekhov the Russian playwright. The capitulationists celebrate what I see as Teflon culture, little self-contained balls of distraction that bounce around the ether, that never stick together in order to accrete higher levels of meaning and complexity that go beyond the pleasures of continuous downloading. The book posits that meaningful uploading and mindful downloading should be goals, even if we do not always meet them. You ask if I am calling for a new kind of critic, and I would answer that the new critic is but a subset of the new user that I have in mind. This person would be fully cognizant of the capacities the networked culture machine offers, and would understand that reducing its interactivity to the market's choice of "buy now or buy later" is a grievous loss.

There is a subtle prodding for the practice of design in the book. In the early twentieth century, designers had utopian aspirations that they could digest, refine, and arrange complex information in ways that could benefit their communities. In other words, it was design not only in service to clients, but in service to the idea of an educated populace, citizens who need to know about science and politics and culture in order to make informed rather than emotional choices, in their lives and at the ballot box. When designers do this kind of work today, I would call that sticky, and its content meaningful. When people download this work through whatever mechanisms are available to them, that is twenty-first-century mindfulness.

DC: In part one of this interview, published in the *Journal of Visual Culture*, we raised the question of the "visual intellectual," who you describe in your Mediawork pamphlet, *User: InfoTechnoDemo* (Figure 3), as "people simultaneously making, pondering and commenting on visual culture" (Lunenfeld 2005: 93). We want to continue that discussion in the pages of *Design and Culture* by focusing on the

Mediawork series' designers, their working process, and how it relates to your construction of the "visual intellectual" (Figure 4). To remind readers, in that series you paired a prominent designer with an influential theorist. You've described your role in this project as similar to that of a Hollywood producer. You've suggested that you "served as both a channel of communication and a buffer between the author and designer" (Guffey and Guins 2010: 143). While some involved in this pairing – most notably Denise Gonzales-Crisp and Brenda Laurel – collaborated together directly, others, for instance author Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, and the designers Cornelia Blatter and Marcel Hermans of COMA Amsterdam/New York, surprisingly never met or corresponded. Is it possible for a single person to embody a "visual intellectual" (that is, a theorist and designer)? Or do you see your role as producer or intermediary as vital to this sort of collaboration? Such a necessary role does seem to challenge *how* visual intellectuality can be achieved. Does collective creative labor, or "cultural work" require an editor or an art director?

PL: For successful visual intellectuals, look to other disciplines: the French director Chris Marker has been making brilliant and beautiful film essays for decades, from *Letter from Siberia* (1957) to *Sans Soleil* (1980) to *The Case of the Grinning Cat* (2004); in contrast, during a concentrated blast in a few years during the 1960s, the artist Robert Smithson created groundbreaking essays

Figure 3
Cover of the pamphlet, *User: InfoTechnoDemo*, by Peter Lunenfeld, published by the MIT Press.

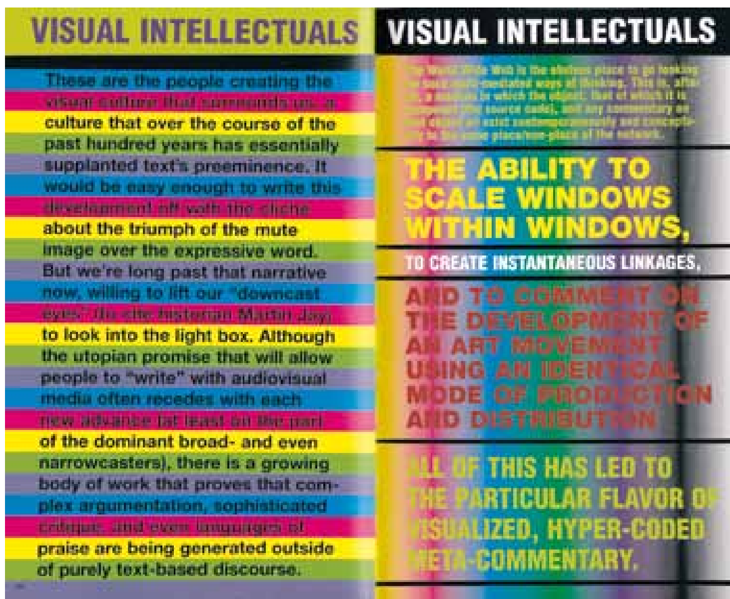

Figure 4
Excerpt from the pamphlet, *User: InfoTechnoDemo*, by Peter Lunenfeld, published by the MIT Press.

like "Entropy and the New Monuments" and "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," doing his own layouts for *Arts* and *Artforum*, adding visual richness to an already remarkable set of ruminations on contemporary culture. That said, the issue is less about texts – there are definitely people capable of generating both the content and the form of complex visual intellectuality – than it is one of contexts. What are the economic and social models of support for such work? Where will it appear? How will it build an audience? I chose the title "Editorial Director" for the Mediawork series because it indicated an overarching "vision keeping" that "art director" did not. I am not sure if visual intellectuality "requires" such a figure, but while creative free space makes for an enticing utopian dream, I am still a believer in deadlines, and hierarchies of control have a place in the creation of collaborative culture. Princeton's Anthony Grafton puts it well: "Collaboration is the thief of academic time, but it is also a delight" (Grafton 2010).

DC: For me (Elizabeth), one of the most striking features of the Mediawork series is how fertile the creative field was and still is in Los Angeles. Most notably, virtually all the Mediawork designers you worked with (Lorraine Wild, Anne Burdick, Denise Gonzales-Crisp, Mieke Gerritzen) are women (the only exception is the inclusion of COMA's husband and wife team Cornelia Blatter and Marcel Hermans). While there were notable female designers active in other parts of the country at that time, design has traditionally been a field dominated by men. Were you consciously trying to involve female designers? Or is it somehow a reflection of the larger design scene in Los Angeles? Conversely, only two women actually authored Mediaworks texts (Katherine Hayles and Brenda Laurel). You've mentioned how Brenda Laurel and Denise Gonzalez-Crisp's *Utopian Entrepreneur* was intended to represent "specifically 21st century kinds of feminisms" (Guffey and Guins 2010: 143). Was this consideration present in the other books as well?

PL: More than 15 years ago, Laurie Hancock Makela and Ellen Lupton published a dialog in *Eye Magazine* about an underground matriarchy in graphic design. A decade later, Allison Goodman could write without apology of an overt and powerful matriarchy in the Southern California design academy. I think that we have Lorraine and the graduate program at CalArts to thank, as she has taught at least four women who went on to chair departments in Southern California alone. The specific brand of feminism that all the women I have worked with follow is both uncompromised and uncompromising: gender should be a resource, not a hindrance; to think or act otherwise is a sign of profound backwardness. The series as a whole was an attempt to demonstrate a diversity that oscillates between visibility and ubiquity. It usually has to be pointed out that only one of the designers was a man, that a Latina set the

design parameters for the pamphlets, that two of the five authors are women and another is an African American male. The very invisibility of this diversity is proof that Mediawork fufilled an agenda beyond its most visible one of pairing meaningful writers with brilliant designers.

DC: In *The Secret War*, you stress that we need a social imaginary for the future that's positive. What future are you imagining? How does your imagined future encompass design?

PL: I would like to see the Enlightenment Electrified, to see Reason ascend her throne yet again, but this time with kinder, humbler, and wittier handmaidens. I would still like an interstellar jetpack, but will settle for livable cities, high-speed trains, ubiquitous computing, and intact glaciers. I hold out no hopes for a single utopia, but I am committed to the pragmatic philosophy of meliorism, of making the world more useful, and in that more joyful. As a culture, the United States, and much of the rest of what used to be called "the West," has lost our capacity to imagine a social sphere that is better than one we are living in. We can imagine personal happiness, and even extend that solipsistic bubble to include the family, but thinking through and envisioning better neighborhoods, cities, regions, countries, much less a better world, seems beyond us. Designers are among the most powerful group of "envisioners" that this culture produces. If designers, and especially design students, continue to suffer from a vision deficit, for themselves and for their societies, I think we are going to see more trouble before we see less. Envisioning the future is a muscle; if we don't use it, the muscle atrophies. Designers of the world, flex!

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