

Linda Cooper Bowen



Trigger

When Designers Create Without Clients

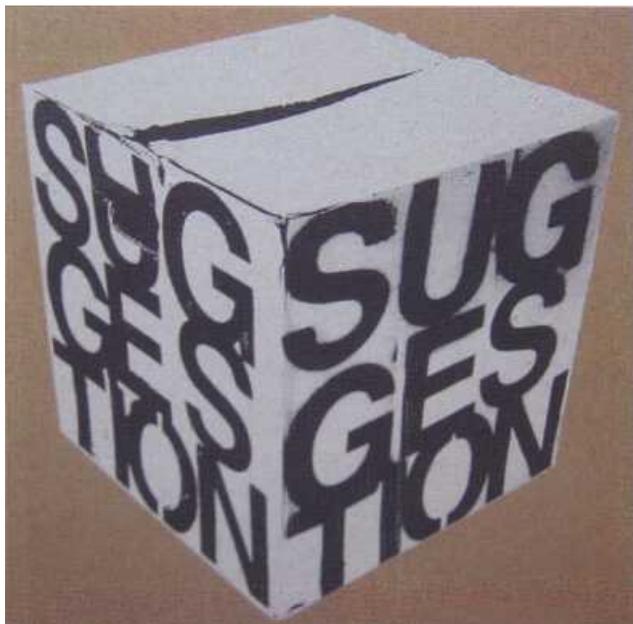
Designers sometimes complain that a client's demands resulted in the compromise and distortion of their original concept. However, commercial work for hire exists only to serve the corporate client, the brand and the company's bottom line, graphic design is not a fine art. If the work goes on to win awards and the admiration of other designers that is a welcome yet secondary bonus. But when designers develop their own self-initiated ideas with a distinct social, political or personal message, they are then free to express themselves with intelligence, wit and passion. Self-generated projects sharpen and expand the mind, strengthen moral resolve on meaningful issues and offer the chance to have some fun—isn't that one of the reasons you became designers in the first place?

This past winter, a provocative exhibit in New York at Fordham University at Lincoln Center, *Trigger: Projects Initiated by Graphic Designers* looked at what designers create without a client—when the designer is the "trigger."

The work shown ranged from baby clothes to videos, books and sculpture, as well as print. Curator Jacqueline Thaw, a professor in the Visual Arts Department at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, conceived of the idea for the show from work she has been doing as a member of the design collective, Class Action. The group of five develops their own content and have addressed the issues of AIDS, domestic violence, gun control and funding for the arts. They research subjects, create the design and find relevant avenues of distribution. Projects include billboards, magazine pages, TV spots and large-scale outdoor projections. "I've been greatly inspired and influenced by the process of collaborating with my Class Action colleagues. Because we initiate this work, I feel a stronger connection and commitment. We generate our own motivation—no one's paying for it, after all—and thus, it has to be meaningful otherwise why bother? In the past decade, graphic design has seen a new interest in problem-finding as well as the

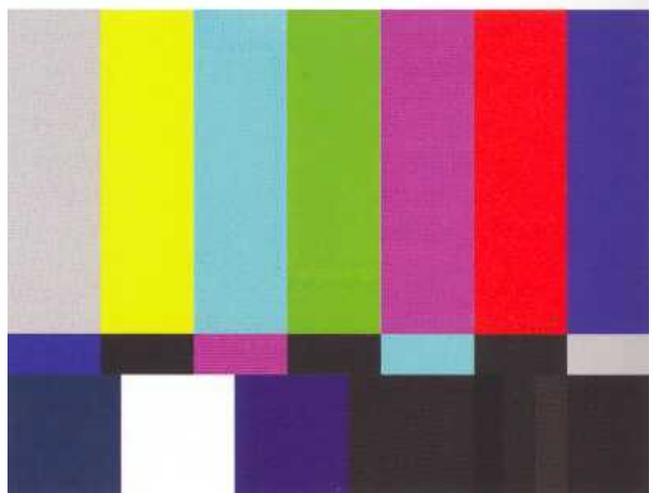
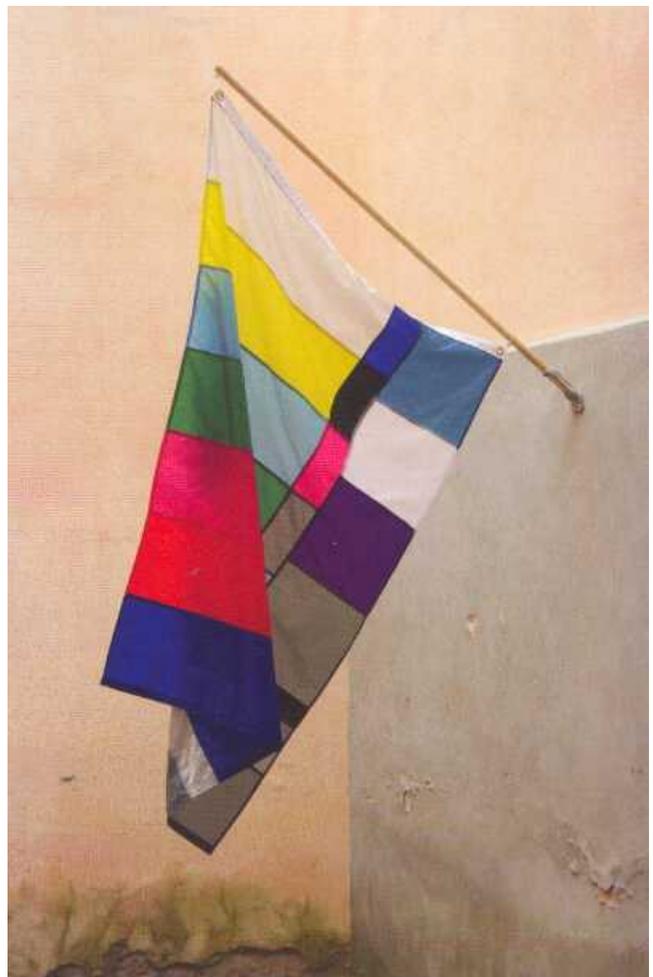


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traditional problem-solving." All the designers in *Trigger* found their own problems, acting as their own clients, and addressed them with powerful, thought-provoking, often witty solutions. "These are not expressions of one's hobby interest, but are intended to be seen, shared and reacted to by the public," says Thaw. "*Trigger* celebrates these uncommissioned works, which take dramatically different forms but share graphic design's essential concerns with language, symbols, information and the public consciousness."

The concept of the show was an ambitious one and, although the gallery space was limited, the range and variety of media and subjects certainly triggered the imagination of viewers. It is especially interesting to see the mix of designers in the show who range in age and experience from recent graduates to well-known professionals. What do they all have in common? The self-powered projects gathered here are statements of the designers' commitment to issues that they care deeply about, the sources of inspiration either humble or of global concern. That Paula Scher, whose work is known for its bold color and typography, chose to express her thoughts on news headlines with hand-drawn and subtly colored text for a series of intaglio prints, *All The News That Fits*, is surprising and personal, the style reminiscent of Outsider art. *Speck* is a collection of ephemera originated as Peter Buchanan Smith's master's thesis in design at the School of Visual Arts with Maira Kalman as his thesis advisor. This collection was published as a book by Princeton Architectural Press. *Catalog* by Carin Goldberg is a small illustrated volume of products



Above, left: *Suggestion* is a project by Illegal Art (Michael McDevitt & Otis Kriegel). Illegal Art canvassed the five boroughs of New York City collecting suggestions from passersby, "young, old, filthy rich, homeless, mouthy and shy." Over 300 handwritten suggestions ranging from hilarious or cryptic to inflammatory or heartwarming have been compiled as a book, published by Chronicle Books 2005. Cardboard, paint, stencil lettering, 18" X 18" X 18," first box created 2002.

Above: *Stand By*, by Brian Janusiak & Elizabeth Beer. Nylon, 45V4" X 62V2," 2005. *Stand By* is an ironic commentary on television's ubiquitous role of social calibration which supplants all nationalist, political, ethnic or cultural alliances. The flag was created for an exhibition in Estonia on micro-nations and statehood.

creativity

that first appeared in a 1950's mail-order catalog found at a flea market. It wasn't nostalgia that attracted Goldberg, but the elemental forms of prosaic objects. Taken out of the original context, a woman's slip becomes sculptural as well as an object of allure. The book was published by Stewart, Tabori & Chang. One cannot be too young to participate in making a visual political statement. Small Roar is a collection of baby clothes dedicated to free speech. Mike Weichert developed Small Roar as his graduate thesis at Maryland Institute College of Art, and brought it to the marketplace with his wife, Stephanie. Each garment is 100% cotton, sweatshop-free and American made, logos are "Pacifist," "Free Speech," "The Future," "Mom" (tattoo) and "Fully Charged."

The Worldstudio Foundation, founded in 1993 by David Sterling and Mark Randall, runs a series of innovative programs to link the creative professions with social change; scholarships allow economically disadvantaged young people to pursue studies in art, architecture and design. As a mentorship program, the foundation pairs underserved youth with professionals to produce real-world, community-based visual projects and publications. "The overall vision of the foundation," explains Randall, "is to make a tangible impact on people's lives, to give back, not simply to preach or produce. Our scholarship program raises money through a variety of sources: nonprofit foundations, corporations, fund-raisers and, most recently, with the AIGA. To do projects without clients requires entrepreneurial thinking, which is something we were never taught in school. It is a matter of ownership, what you personally want to do. You have to have a passion for these projects and the possibilities are endless. Doing work apart from client-driven assignments generally elevates the design profession by establishing us as thinkers. Although my foundation work is the antithesis of profit-making, I find it both refreshing and emotionally fulfilling."

Unlike a pro-bono job when there is a client but no remunera-



Worcester MA by Gerry Beegan. The "books" consist of the band list from a Metal and Hardcore Festival in Worcester in 2000. Beegan mapped the names of the bands onto the spines of his own books retaining the typefaces, colors sizes and positions. The piece explores the ephemeral nature of the Festival advertisement against less transitory books. Digital print, wood, paint, each shelf 11 X 24" X 9," 2001.

tion, these projects are totally self-generated. Speaking for Class Action, Thaw explains, "Typically a project starts with one of us reacting to a situation or fact that is so compelling that it demands a response. Collaboration is key to our process. As a group we are able to do more research, writing and production than we could do individually. We all contribute new information and share contacts as well as ideas about audience and possible venues. All of our work attempts to elicit action from the audience. The important thing about self-generated work is to find a subject that you want to explore and understand better."

Brian Janusiak and Elizabeth Beer of Various Projects Inc. offer some additional thoughts, "Any client-free project has to come out of a genuine interest. It doesn't matter what, it just has to be honest. Start with a small, achievable project, submit it to a show, sell it through a local bookstore or on a Web site, give it away or exchange it. Make your product visible and tangible. You are free to produce anything, a good idea doesn't have to be expensive. Produce locally or find a reliable online custom resource. Consult with the fabricator or printer. Despite initial resistance to do things

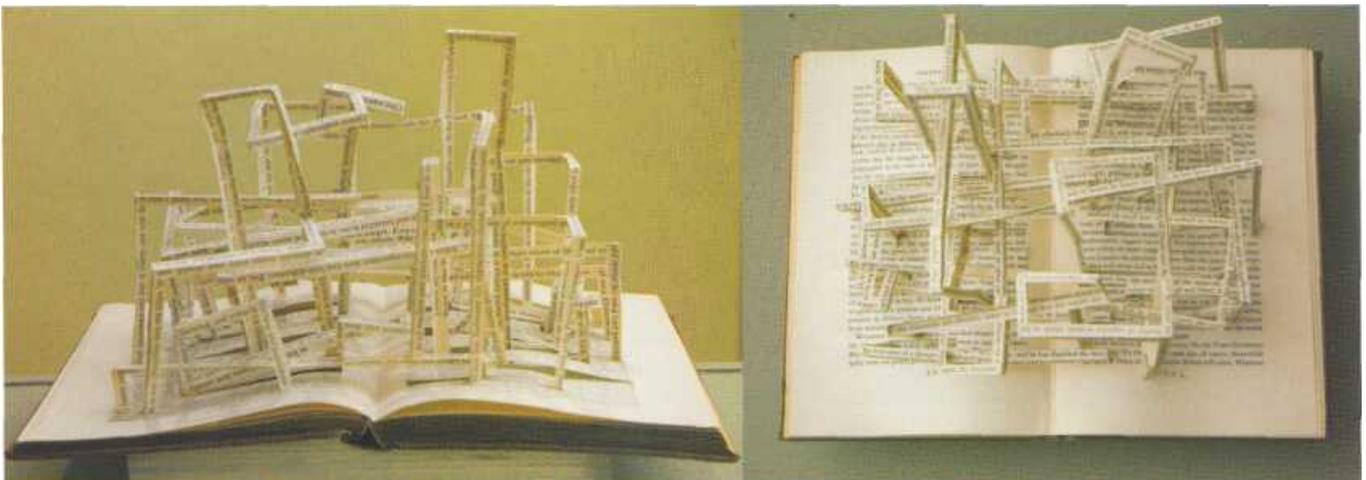
that are out of the ordinary, they are excited to be involved with unusual jobs and can help you find ways to save production costs. Our most interesting problem has been distribution. As designers we are really good at establishing markets for our client's products so we should be capable of serving our own ideas and discover smart ways to engage people in something other than tooth-whitener."

Artists have always positioned themselves among the avant garde, addressing contemporary issues through powerful, thought-provoking images. Fortunately some of today's designers continue to honor this tradition by initiating opportunities to comment about things they care deeply about. These projects not only reply to the question, "What is graphic design?" but dramatically demonstrate how graphic design can make a positive social contribution. Not incidentally this visibility introduces the designers and their work in a way other forms of self-promotion are not able to do.



Small Roar by Weichert Design. Silk-screen on cotton baby clothes, 2004. Small Roar www.smallroar.com is the fusion of graphic design, free speech and baby clothes. Each garment is 100% cotton, sweatshop-free and American made.

Without the necessity of dealing with the client's agenda, designers are forced to assume the client role and find themselves facing new problems to solve like marketing and distribution. It is a real-world learning exercise. The designers in this show are exemplary because they have realized their vision by following through on ideas that most of us consider only in an idle moment. Taking time away from their day jobs, they have conceived, pursued and produced these projects enthusiastically, without guarantee of remuneration. Not all goals were of a lofty, socially responsible nature, some are simply playful or personally fulfilling. In a few cases, the projects became entrepreneurial and resulted in a product or book, yet profit factor aside, one feels that these designers would have done them in any case. "Never confuse your job with your work," a wise person once said. Designers who have sought opportunities beyond their day-to-day commercial assignments have found the revealing experience a validation and a welcome liberation. CA



Poetry as a Means of Grace by Stephen Doyle. This is one of a series of sculptures called "hypertexts" where texts follow the logic of computer hypertexts to an illogical extreme, linking freely with other texts and transcending the rational order of sequence and syntax. Each work consists of lines of text cut from one single book and reconstructed into an architectural form. Book pages, bookbinding glue, 10" X 7" X 6," 2003.