

Indie Designers on the Rise

By Jeannie Choe



Photo courtesy of Shani Kagan

The rising profile of design is creating new demand and, predictably, more supply. But it's also creating new opportunities for designers themselves, especially those fresh-out. Indeed, one could argue that there has never been a more opportune time for young designers to snub the norm, and to pursue trajectories that challenge the definition of design and design practice. Three major factors are responsible for a recent mass-accumulation of independent design ventures: Readily available resources and graspable technologies, the involvement and application of real-world industry activity within traditional and self-propelled educational curriculums, and the internet as a powerful, adaptable open source tool for inspiration, information, and self-promotion.

We can better understand these factors by examining them through the lens of three design stories: Random International, Ian Gonsler, and Polka Products.

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In tech we trust

Techno-hype and cutting-edge breakthroughs—from USB-powered novelty devices to touch-screen mobile phones—are permeating our culture, and London-based experimental design studio Random International's unorthodox utilization of new technologies is the driving force behind their success and iconoclastic charm.

Hannes Koch, Flo Ortkrass, and Stuart Wood initially joined forces during their undergrad years at London's Brunel University. Although their degrees were granted in Product Design and Industrial Design Engineering, they focused heavily on the implementation of technology and simultaneously reaped the benefits of Brunel's special instruction in electronics, programming, materials science, engineering, graphics, 3D programming, model-making, and prototyping. This intense cross-concentration on design and technology propelled the three students' independent experimentation in the overlap of technological advancements with tangible goods. Koch likens the undergrad team to "a laboratory full of little mad professors and inventors in white lab coats."



During their studies at RCA, the group began to research and develop a system that would "allow for creative and flexible fast-response printing on a great number of different surfaces." Random's claim to fame was sealed with PixelRoller, a multi-faceted project that marries digital printing with your average house paint roller to offer picture-perfect, customizable painted surfaces. This unique fusion of digital and analog "offers the flexibility of manual printing with accurate reproduction of digital information on any surface, allowing the user to influence the output in real time."



Although Pixelroller itself is a major breakthrough, the team wished to push the concept even further, developing Pixelography and Instant Labeling/Pixel Tape. Pixelography uses a Light Roller and photographic paper as opposed to paint, exposing the digitally assigned areas to light within a dark chamber to yield a permanent print. Pixel Tape and Instant Labeling Tape are mass-produced, readily available products that allow the user to reproduce digital text by way of a familiar manual process.

The Random crew turned their preliminary experimental madness into real-world design genius. "Setting up Random International as a studio straight after school was amazing—to see how seamlessly our college projects would merge into our professional life and create the base layer of work that supported all three of us right from the start." Random International's speedy recognition and success stemmed from non-stop developments in compelling research, technologically integrated experiments, and conceptual mass-produced items. In addition to the realization of Random International, Koch and Ortkrass completed graduate studies in Product Design, and Wood in Interaction design, at the Royal College of Art. The three pass on their legacy by preparing the next generation to apply the new novel tech that awaits at their fingertips. Koch and Wood are heavily involved in the Royal College of Art's Platform 8 course, where students explore the border between art and design, while Ortkrass currently teaches Product Design at Ravensbourne College.

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Live and learn

Design students have really tightened up the game. Nowadays, they have the opportunities and know-how to jump-start the career of their dreams way before graduation. Institutions across the globe appear to be increasingly implementing instruction in progressive and practical areas including business and technological production. They have also become more active in both mainstream and avant-garde events, functions and competitions—a progressive evolution that has empowered students to legitimately take part in real industry activity. Along with such educational support, students today are more driven and fearless than ever to snag high-profile internships and the real-world experience of their choice.

Ian Gonsher is a Rhode Island-based furniture and housewares designer as well as the Independent Studies on Design instructor at Brown University. He is also a great example of a student who didn't stop at all-nighters or finals. Taking advantage of valuable supplements like design competitions and extra-curricular programs allowed him to gain some credibility as well as a true-to-life taste of the industry. "To be competitive, you have to see what others might have missed."

Gonsher's education (thus far) includes a double-major in Art History and Industrial Design at the University of Kansas, topped off with a Masters degree in Furniture Design from the Rhode Island School of Design, completed in 2006. A brief hiatus between the two schools allowed him to take on an experience that would influence his future exploits and career decisions. Boisbuchet, a series of workshops located in Southwest France guided by a group of internationally recognized artists, designers and architects, was Gonsher's chance to immerse himself in European design culture, and more importantly, to obtain a broadened scope of universal design. He made excellent connections at Boisbuchet and soon after relocated to Brazil for an internship with the internationally recognized furniture studio of the Campana Brothers, which gave him insight into the world of high-profile furniture design. During his graduate studies at RISD, Gonsher scored an internship with function-forward, Minneapolis-based furniture design company Blu-Dot. Here he absorbed the inner-workings of a modern American design outfit, and more importantly, observed a business model that would later aid him in his own pursuits.



(left) Ian Gonsher's Fruit Bowl was designed and developed during his studies at RISD. The design was featured in ID Magazine's Student Design Review issue, where he received an honorable mention as well as a burst of attention. The bowl is a laser-cut piece of maple wood slit in such a way to make the material elastic, simply held in place with a glass disc. (right) Ian Gonsher sits atop "Table Displaced," part of his new collection of illusion-like furniture that hovers somewhere between art and function. The collection playfully challenges our conventional perceptions of space, placement, and utility.

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Gonsher's string of edu-exploits, along with traditional schooling, has brought him to an ideal standpoint—almost customized, just for him. Now at 30, Gonsher instructs an Independent Studies on Design course at Brown University, stressing collaborative methods and guiding students who take an interest in design...and he's certainly carved a niche for himself as an up-and-coming independent designer to boot. "I get to work with students and develop my own work as well. It was important to me to find somewhere where I can continue to develop creatively and share what I have learned with others."

"When we finished university, we decided we would just try and see where we could go. We thought of a name (very difficult mission) and went to Milan to present our things and to see what would happen." Their no-frills approach is indicative of the indie attitude: Make an effort; wait and see if it works out.

Design (tools) Within Reach

Relying on and paying for books, magazines, and phone calls is certainly a thing of the past, as today's designer owns the invaluable license to unlimited awareness. After the millennium, striking out on one's own seemed to gather momentum as a risky, yet viable and increasingly-popular career option for those with little or no experience. The increasing ubiquity of the internet may be partly responsible for this shift, but the utility of the internet has been a boon: it continually proves to be an unbelievable treasure trove of inspiration, resources, and self-promotional possibilities—the ultimate D.I.Y. tool for indie designers-to-be. Many also step it up by mastering supplemental creative skills during school, such as graphic design, photography, and web design—all vital to creating a strong individual presence on the web. Start-ups can quickly gain valuable insights at the click of a mouse, from tips on running a business to materials and fabrication contacts. Press coverage, a vital element in gaining notoriety, goes through rapid turnover cycles online, making it a sure-fire way to see what's new, and better yet, to be seen.



(left) Polka Product partners Monica Singer and Marie Rahm. (right) Polka's Cut Lamp is an imaginative lighting solution that allows users to take control of the aesthetic nature of the shade, creating a layered and textured effect they can call their own.

Polka Products' Monica Singer and Marie Rahm can attribute their speedy start-up to a harmonious union of unique ideas and high-speed PR. The 2-year-old Vienna, Austria-based design studio is (and has been) fully functional, up and running—with a place in the press, in stores, and many homes and spaces. Singer and Rahm's combined educations consisted of overlapping and simultaneous studies in media and communications arts, textile design, and formal training in furniture and product design at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. Singer and Rahm collaborated on several successful student projects, which naturally encouraged them to continue working together after their 2004 graduation.

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Independent efforts that zoom from zero to success in no time can surely confirm that email and access to resources online are vital catalysts in their rapid growth. "Online" has become a headquarters of sorts for the design process, covering the entire spectrum from manufacturing and sourcing, to financial management, media, public relations, and sales. "We basically do everything [ourselves]. Think and design things, planning, prototyping, keeping contact with companies, keeping the press happy with answering their requests, going to fairs, exhibiting, and so on." Online tools undoubtedly supported Polka's balls-out approach immediately following their graduation. From production to show, the duo imagined up products that aimed to reveal the "extraordinary out of the ordinary." Having a website during their launch was key, as it acted as a public showcase and declaration of original work. An online presence also delegates credibility to the effort—it is a place for all to see a collection of work, learn more about a company and the people behind it, and to make a connection and network.

Shortly after its initial establishment, Polka experienced a flurry of media attention, which prompted further shows and exposure, and quickly thereafter, production of Polka Products' line of home goods. This early success proved the duo's competence, and more importantly, reassured them that they had made a great decision to go D.I.Y. A place in cyberspace means nothing if you haven't got the goods to fill it out...but if you've got it, the most resourceful place to flaunt it is online.

Final thoughts

With an accelerated knowledgebase of emerging technologies, resources, and PR, today's indie designers truly have the cutting edge. They are more equipped than ever to make it happen and make it happen fast. This growing force of independent talent possesses power in numbers, running parallel to a major demand for something styled, unique, even subversive. The general public has become keen to the lure and benefit of design, whether by natural evolution or unavoidable marketing bombardments. The time has come where the ID industry, accustomed to the mainstay of big-name consultancies, must shift and make room for a swarm of wide-eyed newcomers rapidly populating the scene, unafraid to step outside the confines of what an I.D. career is supposed to be.

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