

To listen to designer Matteo Bologna, you could easily get the idea that he doesn't take things seriously. But his beautiful, type-driven work speaks for itself.

the funny

BY INA SALTZ

Designer Matteo Bologna bears a strong resemblance to a character in an Italian comic opera: He possesses an expressive frame, a thick crown of tousled auburn ringlets, large, liquid, deep brown eyes, and (his most characteristic feature) a 19th century-style European gentleman's upturned and pointed mustache. Gesturing fluidly as he speaks, Bologna employs an actors sense of comic timing.

Visually, he's simultaneously modern and historically referential, a study in opposites. His charming, lilting Milanese accent disguises a wicked and self-deprecating sense of humor. "Since I was born I liked to draw," Bologna says. "I (bought I'd end up as a comic book designer, but it took too long ... then I did some illustration, but I was too lazy ... actually I started my career as a porn actor."

Perhaps his sense of humor stems from the fact that Bologna didn't have a classically complete education. In Milan, he finished *liceo* (the Italian equivalent of high school, which one attends until age 19) with a technical emphasis in art. But after enrolling for a degree in architecture, he found himself less and less interested in continuing his studies and much more interested in the freelance illustration assignments he was completing for various magazines. At age 21, he ended his formal education and segued between illustration and design, eventually opening a design company with two partners.

risky business

But Italian business practices made it difficult to sustain a small business. Sometimes it took six months to get paid for a project, and sometimes he wasn't paid at all; meanwhile the Italian government required that a tax on all receivables be paid within a much shorter time frame.

"We had to show our invoices to the bank and take out loans just so we could pay the taxes on the money we had not yet received!" Bologna explains. "This economic climate is very bad for young people who are trying to start a business. So my partners and I decided to close the business instead of killing each other."

Thus, in 1994, Bologna emigrated from Italy to New York City with his then-girlfriend, now wife. "We had to get married for visa purposes," he says with a sly smile. Why New York? "All the design I do is copied from the Type Directors Club annuals anyway, so because I wanted to learn English and to see the place where graphic design originated I came to New York City. I knew a lot of other Italians here, but no one in the design business. And my English sucked badly. My accent was so bad that no one would return my phone calls. I called all the famous graphic designers and when they heard my English, no one wanted to talk to me."

Bologna claims he finally got his first job because he had a really flashy offset-printed portfolio. "I don't want to say where I worked," he says, "because I

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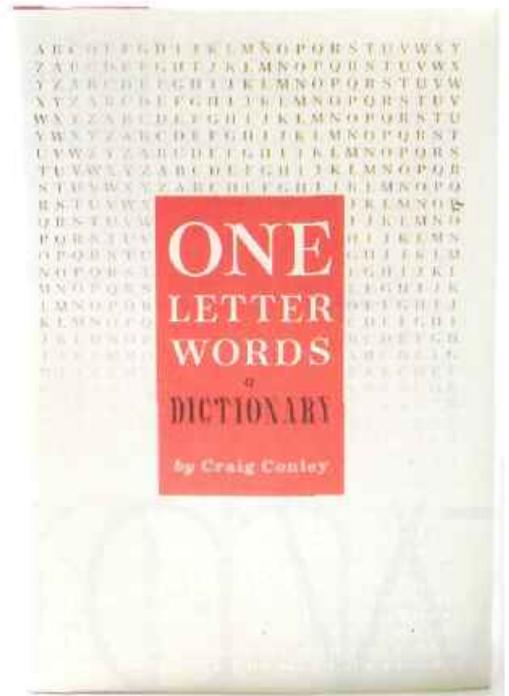
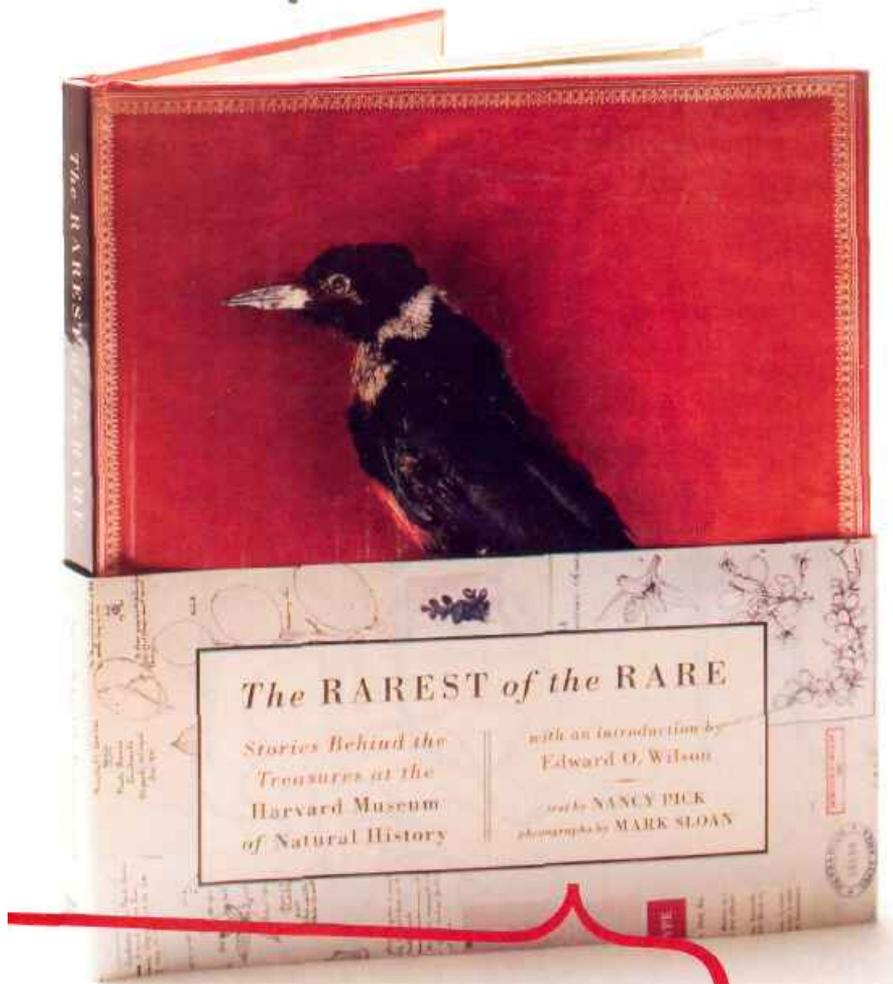
type



LOVELY LETTERS

"I was in a very boring meeting at Harper Collins, and while I was pretending to take notes I sketched this typeface," Matteo Bologna says of the design for the André Balazs letterhead system (left). The simple, elegant design belies the complicated production of the business cards. They're engraved front and back, pasted together then painted on the side. (Matteo Bologna, creative director; Christine Celie Strohl, art director/designer)

The portrait of Herman Melville (above) was created by Bologna and longtime collaborator Roberto de Vicq de Cumplich for "Words at Play," a book they designed for Adobe.



BIRDS AND WORDS

The cover of "The Rarest of the Rare" (above) started with a photograph of the bird from the museums collection. (Designer: Andrea Brown) "One Letter Words" (right) features a text typeface that Bologna designed as a test for himself. [Matteo Bologna, art director; Crisлина Ottoiini, designer]

worked there illegally, but at least I was paid regularly, and I was paid much more than I would have been paid in Italy!"

coming to america

"From the moment I arrived in New York I felt like I was in a wonderland," Bologna continues. "The book jackets in the local bookstore were fantastic: covers by Chip Kidd, Carol Devine Carson. I saw books I never would have found in Italy. Graphic design is not nourished in Italy; it is like an afterthought."

A few years after he started working at Ralph Applebaum Associates, a museum design firm, Bologna began designing book jackets for Rizzoli. "Rizzoli gave me more and more work," Bologna says, "and eventually I worked out a part-time arrangement at Ralph Applebaum. The rest of the time I did the book jacket design from home. Then I hired an assistant.

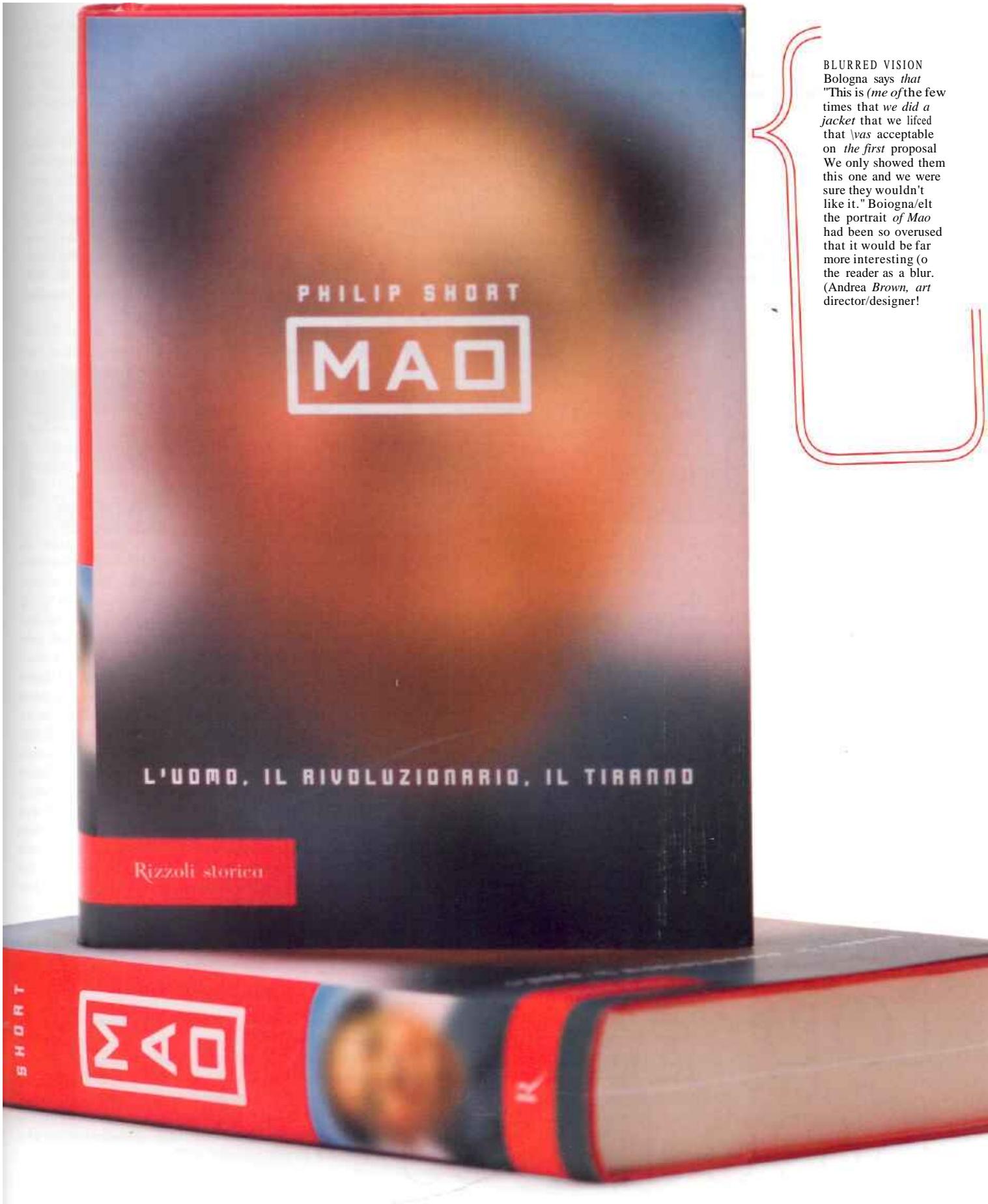
"Eventually my wife kicked us out of the bedroom (where we worked) and I started renting desks in Chinatown. We moved six times in four years. I think I lost a lot of clients because the office was so messy ... we grew too fast and didn't have enough space."

Bologna's firm, Mucca Design, now has a more suitable office, one where he hopes to remain for some time. It's spacious, modern and filled with light, but copies of all the books he's designed are already overflowing his shelves. (In fact, there are thousands of books, stacked double, front to back, most designed for Rizzoli.)

Eight full-time designers work in rows, and a conference room with Lucite chairs showcases the restaurant identity projects and product branding work that is the other side of Mucca Design. Bologna's private office is chockablock with collections of 3D lettering, design hooks and a few musical instruments, including a guitar and an electric bass fiddle. (There's some music-making late at night. Bologna admits.) Taking up most of one wall is a huge historical map of New York City, with a much smaller map of Italy as an inset. And there's an original Mac. Bologna beams when surveying his domain. "Now in our new space, we have clients come visit," he says.

Where did the name "Mucca" come from? "In Italian it means cow," Bologna explains. "I was in the lawyer's office signing the papers to incorporate and he asked me the name of the company, and it was the first thing that came to my mind."

One reason that Mucca Design has grown is its long-standing relationship with Rizzoli. Bologna says



BLURRED VISION
Bologna says that
"This is (*me of* the few
times that *we did* a
jacket that *we liked*
that *was* acceptable
on *the first* proposal
We only showed them
this one and we were
sure they wouldn't
like it." Bologna/elt
the portrait of *Mao*
had been so overused
that it would be far
more interesting (o
the reader as a blur.
(Andrea Brown, art
director/designer!

RULE NO. 1

"Don't listen to Massimo Vignelli, because he says you can only use five typefaces."

Bologna often mixes many typefaces to create an elaborate rococo style, as he did in the multiplicity of logotypes for the restaurant Country in New York City.

RULE NO. 2

"Try to reach the end of your career using all of the typefaces of FontShop so Erik Spiekermann will die rich and happy."

Actually Bologna shows no favoritism in his use of typefaces and draws on many sources; he often designs his own type or modifies existing type with the help of his frequent typographic collaborator, Joshua Darden.

RULE NO. 3

"Try to buy your typefaces; if not, borrow them."

No comment.

RULE NO. 4

"In case of emergency, never use Helvetica."

Since Bologna's use of type is eclectic, capricious and often whimsical, one might understand his opposition to Helvetica, which has been called "invisible," "boring" and "bland" by some. Read more about Helvetica and its alternatives on page 74.

RULE NO. 5

"When you're designing packaging for cosmetics, use Optima if you want your product to look like all the other products on the market."

By now, it's clear why Bologna never uses Optima or Helvetica. He's too Italianate; flourishes are in his blood.

the company does 500 to 600 covers a year for the publisher; it's still Mucca Design's largest client. "With Rizzoli I have had yearly contracts, so at least T could know what was coming in," he says. About half of Mucca's work is covers and the other half consists of branding and product design.

"We have clients who are virgins and who need everything, so we do everything including their websites," Bologna says. "We work with a firm that does the coding. For example, we recently did the identity for Butterfield Market, an old family business, a specialty store on Lexington Avenue that had never been branded. Now we are doing everything for them, including their delivery boxes. We used to be 90% print work; now the web is 30% to 40% of the branding side of Mucca."

But growth has sometimes been rocky. "We've made so many mistakes," Bologna says. "When you grow without a plan, starting out with everyone being equal, you eventually realize that democracy backfires. . . . T could not devote enough time to each project, and projects were suffering. Now we have an 'open hierarchy.' I take three to four hours every week to look at portfolios, because now that we have reached a certain size there are always people coming and going."

just the type

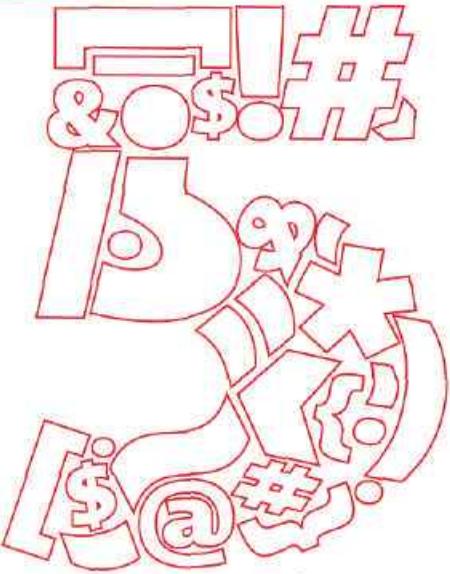
Business matters aside, Bologna's true passion in design is for gorgeous typography, which dominates his work. "I'm a type nerd," he admits. "My knowledge of type is not scholarly, but it comes just from using type. I pirated all of the typefaces when I got my first computer . . . but of course I never steal fonts anymore. In fact, I love to design typefaces, but I don't sell them. We sell them only to our clients. If I had time, I'd design more typefaces. Joshua Darden takes my designs and makes them work for my clients or he designs typefaces for my projects; we've been collaborating for almost three years."

Another frequent collaborator is Brazilian-born Roberto de Vicq de Cumptich, former art director of HarperCollins, whom Bologna met at a dog run shortly after his arrival in New York. Among many joint projects, they designed "Words at Play," a book showcasing Adobe's typefaces, and the identity for the Adobe Design Achievement Awards, as well as many type-centric book jackets and posters.

When asked about the wellsprings of his creativity, Bologna smiles and quips, "Crack cocaine." But seriously? "I'm never serious," he says. But he finally admits that "I like things to be clean. I see graphic design everywhere, and when I see things I don't like (Styrofoam cappuccino cups, for example), it impels me to design well."

"Louise Fili was a big influence," he continues. "Like Louise, I try to show a sense of history, of heritage, in my designs. And books give you vast experience; each is a completely different style, and all of this creative experience gets transferred to the branding part."

Matteo Bologna's top type rules





B IS FOR BEAUTIFUL
 Butterfield Market, an old New York specialty food store, established in 1915, needed a new identity because "what they had was never done by someone who was a professional in communications design." Bologna says: "We played on the fact that this place had a long history in New York and we wanted to express their heritage. The letter B is hand drawn. Christina started it and I finished it." (Matteo Bologna, creative director; Christine Celic Strohl, art director/designer)

eat, drink, man, woman

Also like Fili, a lot of Mucca's non-book cover work is food-related. "About 10 years ago, through a friend of a friend, I met Keith McNally [the New York City restaurateur] and I did the identity for Balthazar, so I got 'branded' as a restaurant/food person," Bologna says. "We still do work for Balthazar, and now we have done almost all of Keith McNally's restaurants, including Pravda and Fastis. The most recent one is Morandi."

Bologna describes the difficulties of working with a client who's famous for changing his mind. "Keith is the best client I have ever had, because I have learned a lot from him, but this has been a painful process. For Schiller's Liquor Bar, I made 15 proposals."

During the design process, McNally changed the name of the restaurant three times. "It was Alcohol and Kaminsky's before he settled on Schiller's Liquor Bar," Bologna says. "Because I always design letters from scratch, and I don't use any existing typefaces, it's very labor-intensive. I kind of got fed up. So when he wanted me to design the identity for Morandi's, I told him I would accept the project only if I could design the typeface, and whatever name he finally chose would be in that typeface!"

Mucca has also done restaurant design for hip hotelier Andre Balazs, including the identity for his holding company, Andre Balazs Properties. Other noteworthy projects include The Standard Downtown LA (a chic hotel in Los Angeles), The Presidio Social Club fa

restaurant in San Francisco) and Country (a restaurant in New York City).

"For Country, we did 30 different logotypes which are all used simultaneously," Bologna says. "The logo must be the same for branding when it appears in different environments. But I reverse that when it is a restaurant; you can play with the redundancy, you don't have to harass people with the exact same logo over and over again in the same space."

Bologna's latest production, **however**, has nothing to do with branding or covers. His wife Cristina is pregnant with their second child (their daughter Olivia is 3 years old). "We are 90% sure it is another girl," he says. "It is either a girl or a boy with a very small penis, so for his sake I hope he's a girl."

Bologna would have gone on, but his managing director (it's no surprise that he needs managing) raises an eyebrow in warning. So if you're interested in his unprintable dirty jokes, Bologna suggests, you can contact him directly. www

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