

# THE WAY

BY SHANON LYON

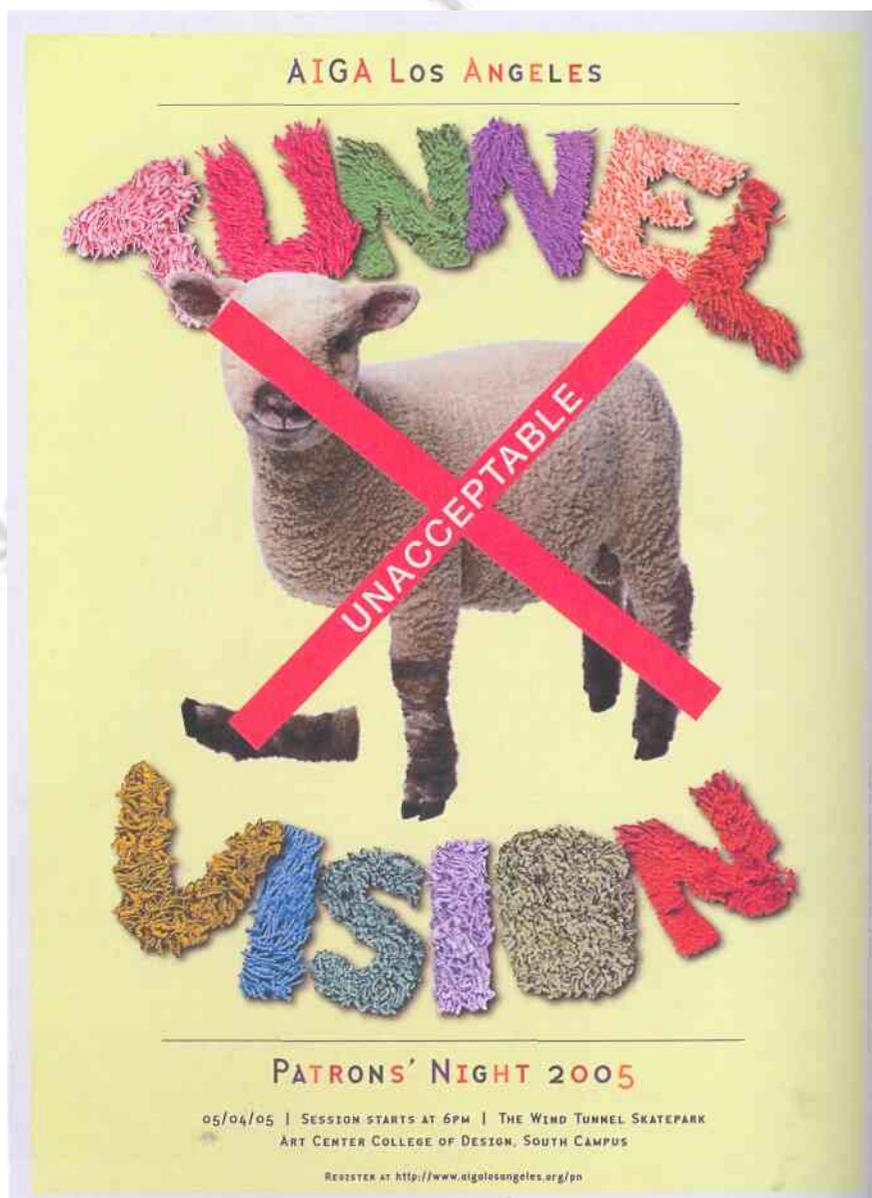


#### A LOAD OF CRAP

This poster for the 2006 Icograda design week was intended to represent the events theme, sustainability and its Seattle location. Raye focused on the often wasteful coffee-guzzling crowd. The conference committee balked at the word "Crappuccino" but granted a last-minute go-ahead. Raye's one-eyed monster alludes to the saying "In the (and of the blind, the one-eyed man is king," a subtle dig at big corporations.

#### CREATIVE COMPROMISE,

Michael Strussburger's design for an AIGA Los Angeles event befuddled his design-savvy client. After much back and forth, the amputated lamb got the green light—as long as it was covered with a big red X and the word "unacceptable."



# AT THE DOG

On the tail of their firm's 20th anniversary, the co-founders of Seattle's iconic Modern Dog open up about creative inspiration, collaboration and the Zen of problem-solving.

For 20 years, the designers at Seattle's Modern Dog have stuck to their creative guns and carefully selected clients who allow them to be themselves and do what they love. The firm garners props—and envy—for the creative freedom it ekes out of clients, and for the way it filters inspiration from other design work.

Paving their own road has definitely paid off. A new book chronicling their eclectic repertoire, "Modern Dog: 20 Years of Poster Art," has just hit shelves, and the firm recently landed five pieces in the Louvre's permanent collection.

We sat down with founders Michael Strassburger and Robynne Raye (who continues to re-read the letter from the Louvre in disbelief) to get their thoughts on creativity, originality and relationships. The two reflected on some of their favorite, if lesser known, poster designs—starting with a project that prompted some head-scratching by their freaked-out client.

**I'm really curious about your Tunnel Vision poster from 2005. I read that it was for AIGA Los Angeles' skateboard-themed sponsor appreciation night. Where does the lamb with the broken leg come in? Or does it?**

**STRASSBURGER** They called and said they were doing this event. It was going to be a skateboard thing, and they thought of us. Of course, we know what they thought. They thought we did a bunch of snowboards [for K2], and they imagined something like...

**RAYE** ... like early '90s distressed fonts and dirty graphics.

**STRASSBURGER** You can see it coming a mile away. Skateboards—Modern Dog. They think photocopying, distressed type and AIGA with a skateboarder

jumping by. So, we immediately recoil from that. I mean, yeah, we did that, but we did it for snowboarders in the late '80s and early '90s.

**RAYE** Like, 18 years ago.

**STRASSBURGER** Before it was on freaking everything. And we're really not about retreading old shit. So we thought, OK, we'll do it. Then, without telling them, we decided to do it with the attitude of a skateboarder. Like a truly rebellious skateboarder.

**RAYE** Or as if we were doing it for that market. What would a skateboarder want to see?

**STRASSBURGER** I know it doesn't connect at first. We did the shag carpet lettering and the sheep with the leg falling off. I'll have to find the academic explanation I formulated. It's something to the effect...

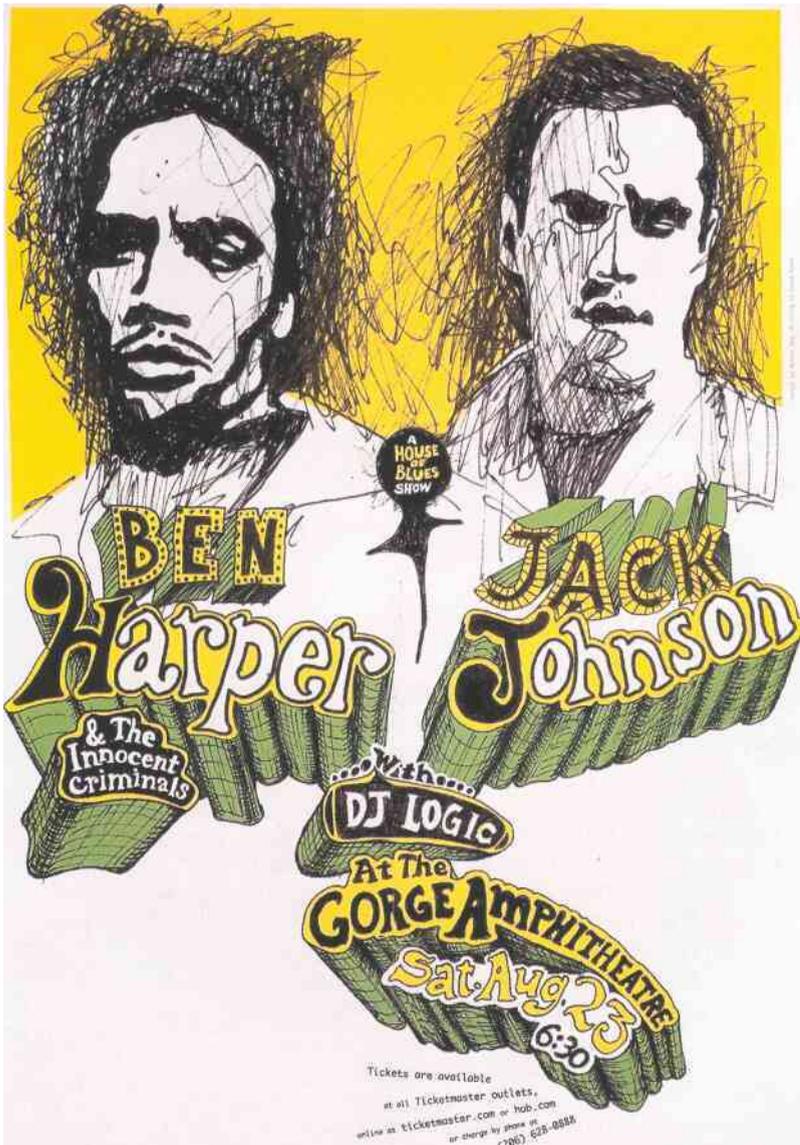
**RAYE** Uh, can I just say one thing? I think you just sort of did [the poster] and made up the reasons afterward.

**STRASSBURGER** Yeah, but that's the way a skateboarder would do it. It's like, "Let me do something really weird and funny." Then I went back and wrote this big, long-winded explanation.

**RAYE** 'Cause they freaked. A guy in a suit was basically like, "I don't get it. This is really weird. You're going to have to tell me why you did this."

**STRASSBURGER** Isn't that the perfect reaction? Like, exactly what a skateboarder would want to hear? That's exactly what we wanted to do.

**RAYE** [After showing an alternative design, the client] said, "OK, we'll go back to the original sheep, but it's still really unacceptable to us." So I said, "Would you feel better if we put a big red X on the sheep and the word 'unacceptable.'" He said, "Actually, I would." And that's how it ended up.



**SOUND MADE VISUAL**  
 Strassburger drew the 2003 three-color screen printed Ben Harper poster by hand. The scratches surrounding the musicians' faces are his interpretation of what an acoustic guitar sounds like.

**So you got a good bit of feedback from the client on the Tunnel Vision poster, but is that typical?**

RAYE It really depends on the relationship. I think a lot of people come to us because they like how we think. We're fortunate that way. That's the kind of relationship we like. We'd prefer that someone doesn't come to us with everything all figured out. Really, we don't get too much of that.

STRASSBURCjER And even if we do get a client who's really particular about everything, that's a fun challenge, too. We really try and make them happy and give them exactly what they want in a way that we think really works. We don't just give up and do whatever. We're constantly trying to make it the best possible piece. No matter what it is.

**What inspires you? Where do you find ideas?**

STRASSBURGER We have a giant library with tons and tons of books. Lots of design books and all kinds

of other random books. We have tattoo books, graffiti books, music books.

RAYE We're always looking for entertainment or for something interesting. That's the simplest way to answer it. That's what keeps us inspired. Whether it's a movie, or music or a book.

STRASSBURGER We get this question a lot, though, and it's really a hard one to answer. I'll see interns working on something, and they'll have this idea that is, from the outside, the most shallow idea ever. They're totally struggling with it. It's going nowhere because there's nowhere to go.

**So how do you get beyond that? How do you get somewhere when you're stuck and going nowhere?**

STRASSBURGER Well, people get stuck for different reasons. Because we've been doing this kind of work forever, it's easier for us. It's just the way we think. We've had all this freedom, so we come up with all these weird ideas. We get excited about them, and they actually fly and get produced. They don't get beat down to the point where we just stop having them. A lot of people don't have that opportunity. When the one project comes along, they're so stunted that it takes forever to get ...

RAYE ... loose.

STRASSBURGER Totally, loose. So they get one shot at it, and they fuck it up. Then they do all this boring work they can't get into (or so they say). Then they get another dream job, and they're still out of practice. They fuck that up. That's why you see all that stuff out there that's just, in my opinion, so lame.

RAYE Yeah, I think you have to practice. We've created a comfortable environment where we can be creative, and we've attracted clients that allow us to do the kind of work we want to do. We also talk things out. If I'm at a dead end, I'll say, "Hey, I can't think of anything." And as soon as we start talking, it usually works itself out.

STRASSBURCjER Especially if there's no time. If there's no time for something, we find we can actually force it to happen by talking and looking at things.

**A lot of designers would envy your creative freedom. So how did you set yourself up for that?**

STRASSBURGER When we were just starting out, somebody wanted us to design some invoices. I thought, "Yes! A job!" I didn't even care what it looked like. And Robynne was like, "Are you sure you want to do that? What if you're busy working on this and someone asks us to do an album cover?" So we got into

#### OLD SCHOOL

This 1994 poster, created for a Seattle music festival, was drawn by hand and each color was created with a separate Rubylith overlay. Strassburger hid a few messages throughout, like "Mike loves Anna." "I got it into Quark, and the whole thing just froze" Strassburger says of the huge art file.



this big old argument, and I said, "Fine, I'm not going to take the job."

As the years went by, I realized that by not taking those jobs, we didn't build that kind of portfolio—and because we didn't have that portfolio, we didn't get offered any of that work. Our portfolio is only stuff we wanted to do. We just kept getting more of it. I don't think we planned that. We were just really lucky that it worked that way.

**Looking back at those early years, what would you consider to be your big break?**

**RAYE** It was the early theater work that really enabled us to do the work that we're doing now.

**STRASSBURGER** And K2.

**RAYE** Yeah, K2 was a big thing, for sure. Theaters were really letting us be experimental. I didn't consider myself an illustrator, but they didn't have the budgets, so we did everything. I think it's why our work is so illustration-heavy. It's hard to say if that makes us unique, because there certainly are a lot of designers who illustrate. But I think we're fearless when it comes to trying new things. We'll try anything, even if we have no idea how to produce it.

**STRASSBURGER** Another thing we're not afraid of is looking at other designers and genres and pieces and being totally inspired by them. Almost to the point of copying, but ...

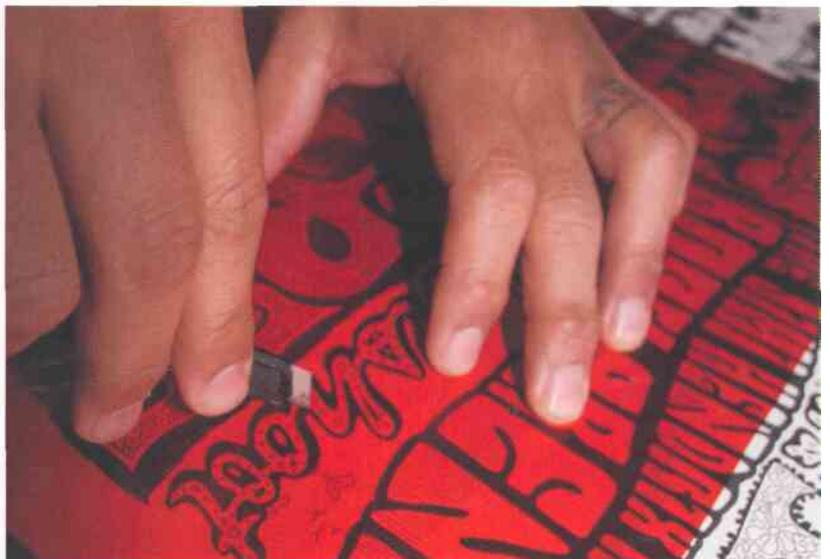
**RAYE** It's not like we sit and make photocopies.

**STRASSBURGER** No, but if you have a job, you can get really inspired just by looking at a whole bunch of stuff. As we process and develop the idea, it turns into its own thing. I think a lot of people, especially students, feel like they need to design from nothing and be totally original.

It's kind of like you want to write the most beautiful French poem without learning French. You have to learn how to use the language. You can't learn five words and then write the most incredible poem. You need to understand how they write, practice writing the way they write and get used to that whole style before you can actually produce something unique. So we advocate looking at all kinds of things and trying all kinds of genres, styles and approaches.

**RAYE** If you're going to photocopy it and stick it on your piece, that's plagiarism. But to look at something and be inspired by it, that's totally different. I just think there's a real fear around being original.

**STRASSBURGER** It's just like great painters. They start by copying the people they look up to and even doing some of their paintings. That's how they learn. Why reinvent the wheel every single time?



**TO A CRISP**

Each of the posters for Seattle Repertory's performance of "The Substance of Fire" was hand-torched; a few ended up as little more than strips of paper but were nonetheless hung to promote the show. "They knew that even if part of the location or date was lost in the process, it was going to be OK," Raye says.

SEATTLE REPERTORY THEATRE PRESENTS

**THE  
SUBSTANCE  
OF FIRE**

**BY JON ROBIN BAITZ**

**OCTOBER 28 - NOVEMBER 15**

**ON STAGE 2 • TICKETS 443.222**

Poster by Modern Dog. Printed on recycled paper by The Copy Co.

**You mention that students wrestle with the notion of originality. You're both teachers, so what advice do you give your students about creativity and their careers?**

**RAYE** Just be aware that the place that you decide to work will most likely mold who you become as a designer. That's the kind of work you're going to do 99% of the time. There certainly are exceptions, but I'm sure if I ended up somewhere else, my work would have been very different. I would have been trained to think differently. Not that there's anything wrong with that. I'm just happy it didn't happen. It allowed this whole other thing to unfold.

**STRASSBURGER** There's probably a way to make [every design project you work on an exciting challenge. Don't just crank out a bunch of designs and wait for the dream job. Any job can be a dream job.

**(Give me an example—how would you turn, say, an annual report into a dream job?)**

**STRASSBURGER** I'd find a key concept that really inspires me. Once you get that kick-start, it really drives you through the whole thing. If you're just going through the motions, it'll be empty for you. It's going to be a struggle all the way through. You're not going to find inspiration in it unless you're inspired from the beginning. That's one thing that I feel I really good about: A lot of the work we do, we get real excited about. We can't wait to see it, and we can't wait for other people to see it.

**RAYE** At this point in my life, I recognize that it's about relationships. Say as much as you want about finding a key concept, but you have to have a person who trusts you. Whether it's your boss or your client, someone has to respect and trust how you think. For me, after 20 years of doing this, I don't even see the design in [our work] anymore. I see the relationships.

**STRASSBURGER** You beat my idea down.

**RAYE** No, I'm just saying that for me, the most important thing is finding an environment where you're allowed to be yourself.

**STRASSBURGER** And if there is an issue, find inspiration in that battle. Problem-solving can be really exciting and fun, even if you think it's going to kill you. It doesn't have to be like that. It's kind of a Buddhist thing, I guess.

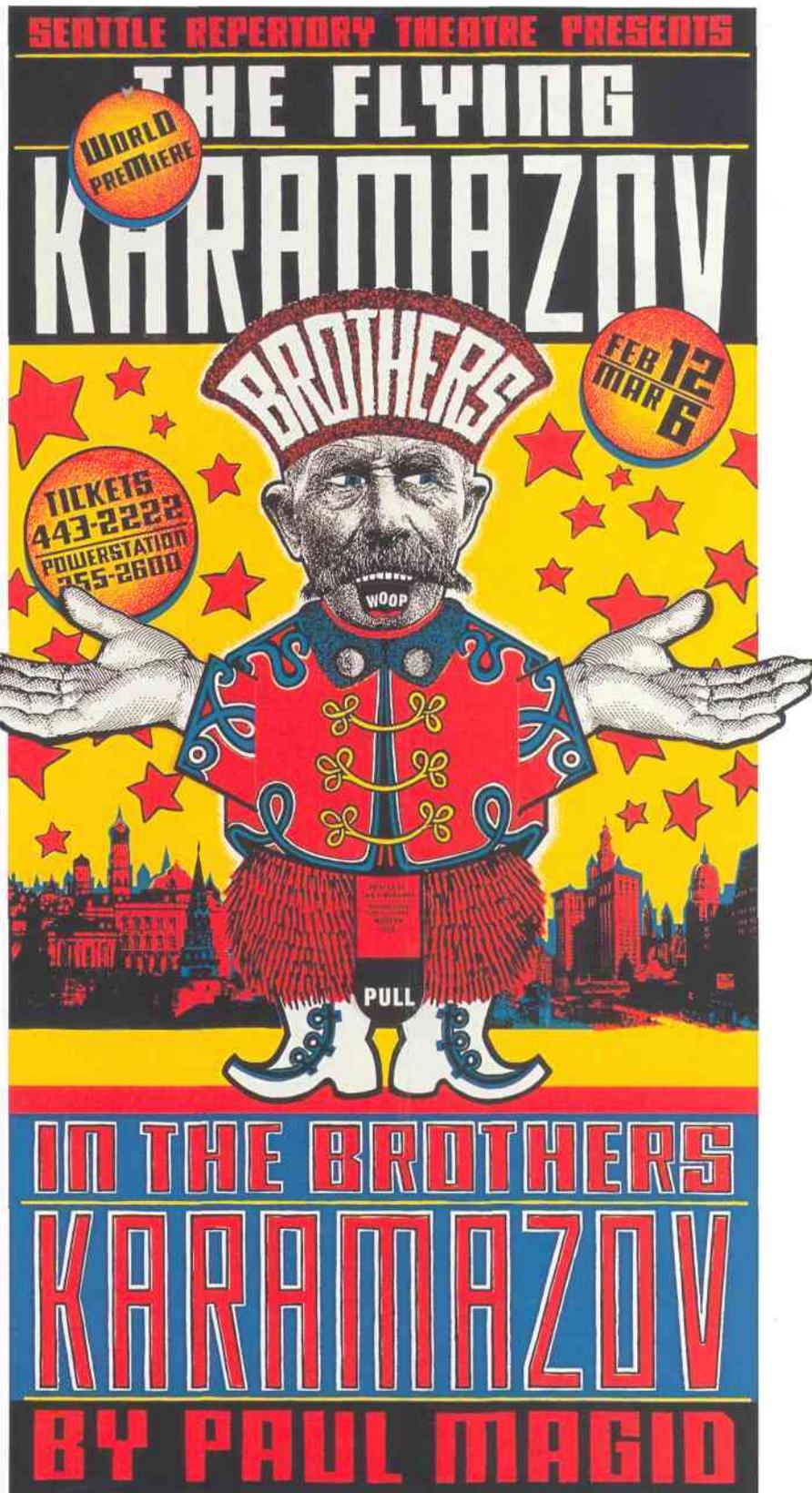
**RAYE** It is a Buddhist thing. And, it sounds really great, but in practice, I think it's very difficult.

**STRASSBURGER** Not impossible, though.

**RAYE** No, not impossible. I agree with you on that. And it's a great goal.

**Editor's Note** Robynne Raye and Michael Strassburger are speaking at the HOW Design Conference in Boston, May 18–21, where they'll be signing their book "Modern Dog: 20 Years of Poster Art."

Shanon Lyon is a *Seattle-based freelance* writer whose career includes stops at *Cranium* and *I.D. magazine*.



**PULL ON THIS**

Modern Dog's posters went interactive in the early '90s. "There were a lot of great posters coming out of Seattle," Raye says. "To get noticed, you had to do something different." The phallic pull-tab, she notes, wasn't exactly an accident. Today, Strassburger calls this 1992 poster a bit gimmicky.