

## The Sideways Blogging Career of Art Chantry

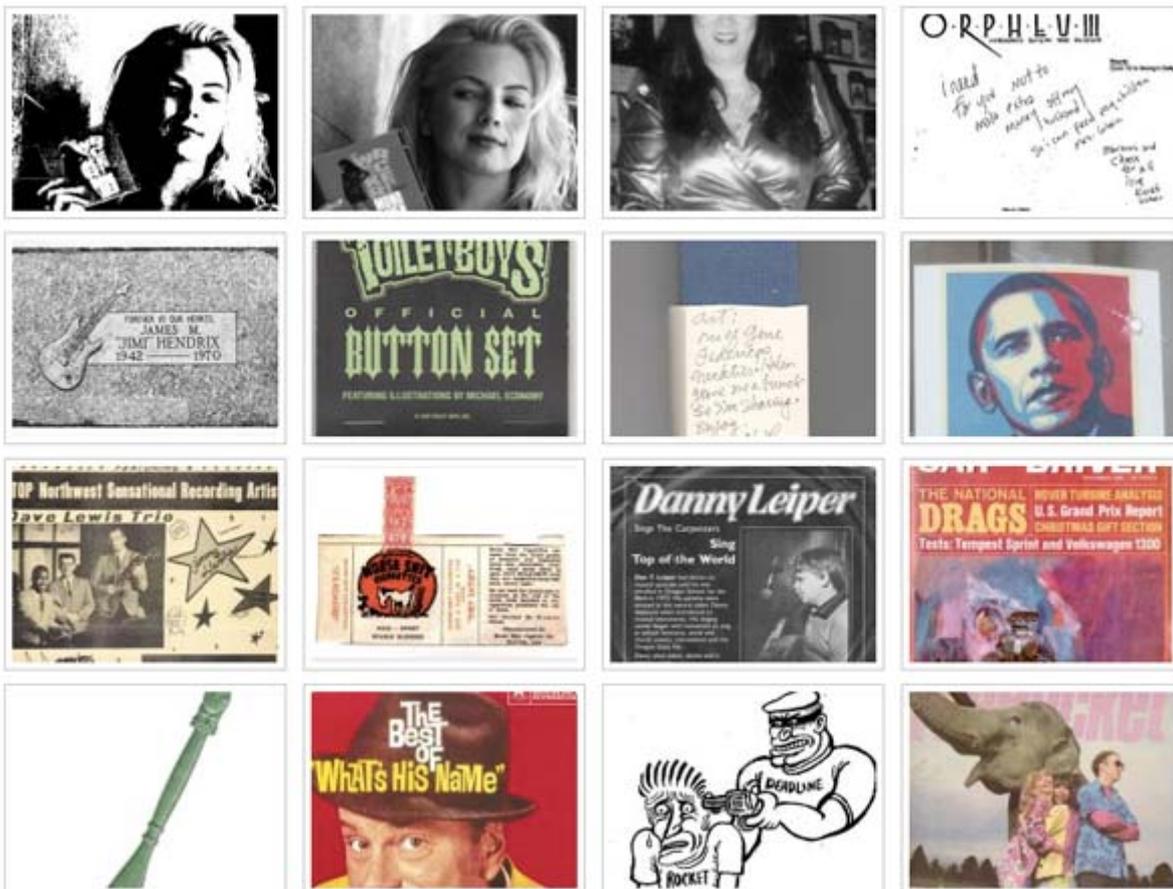
Alan Rapp

There are two prominent features of Art Chantry's design career: volume (in a few senses) and independence. Chantry's prolific graphic output (which he estimates as "a shitload"), especially in the poster medium and music packaging, has been a platform for an unapologetically referential design philosophy, which he has often vigorously debated with design peers and critics alike. It is perhaps not surprising that he has emerged as something of an elder statesman of contemporary design, though in a typically sideways fashion. This hero of indie print graphics has a huge platform online; even weirder, it started on Facebook (upon which he compulsively appends™, a typical gesture that constantly disorients people about his sincerity).

Perhaps there is less irony here than seen at first. Chantry is a populist raconteur who prefers media with maximum exposure through minimal means. Moreover, one could see this as a small measure of co-opting corporate control mechanisms, in this case Facebook's unbloggy posting protocols. For the premier exponent of the view that mainstream design either hypocritically or ignorantly rips off what is otherwise routinely dismissed as lowbrow, crude, or kitsch, his history-intensive and deeply analytical Facebook posts represent another flipped bird at Chantry's corporate bugbears.

But seeing as how Facebook asserts dominion and ultimate ownership over the material it hosts, these posts are migrating over to their own home at Dan Nadel's Picturebox, where classic Chantry posters are also sold.

I asked Art about how and why Facebook has served as a platform for his particular take on design history, and how online communication has expanded his soapbox. Quirks of usage and capitalization have been retained throughout.



**Art, when did you start to write your extensive Facebook posts about some of your favorite pieces of design, both from your own work and from your extensive collection of ephemera?**

i can't date it exactly. maybe about 10–12 months back? i just started doing it as a "show and tell" sort of thing. bob newman and jesse marinoff reyes had started doing a "featurette" with "magazine cover of the day" and that was interesting, but they didn't really (at first) talk at length about the covers they chose. they just had cool covers posted and that was about it. i really wanted more info about them.

so, i started by teaching myself how to post an image and all that (there are no instructions, so i messed it up a lot at first until i had a formula). i would just plop down an image or an object from my voluminous amounts of interesting crap i have sitting around my junk store/studio. then i started writing what i thought about it, why i thought it was interesting, the history of the work or style (if i had it). eventually, i just used the images as jumping-off places to talk about stuff i cared about.

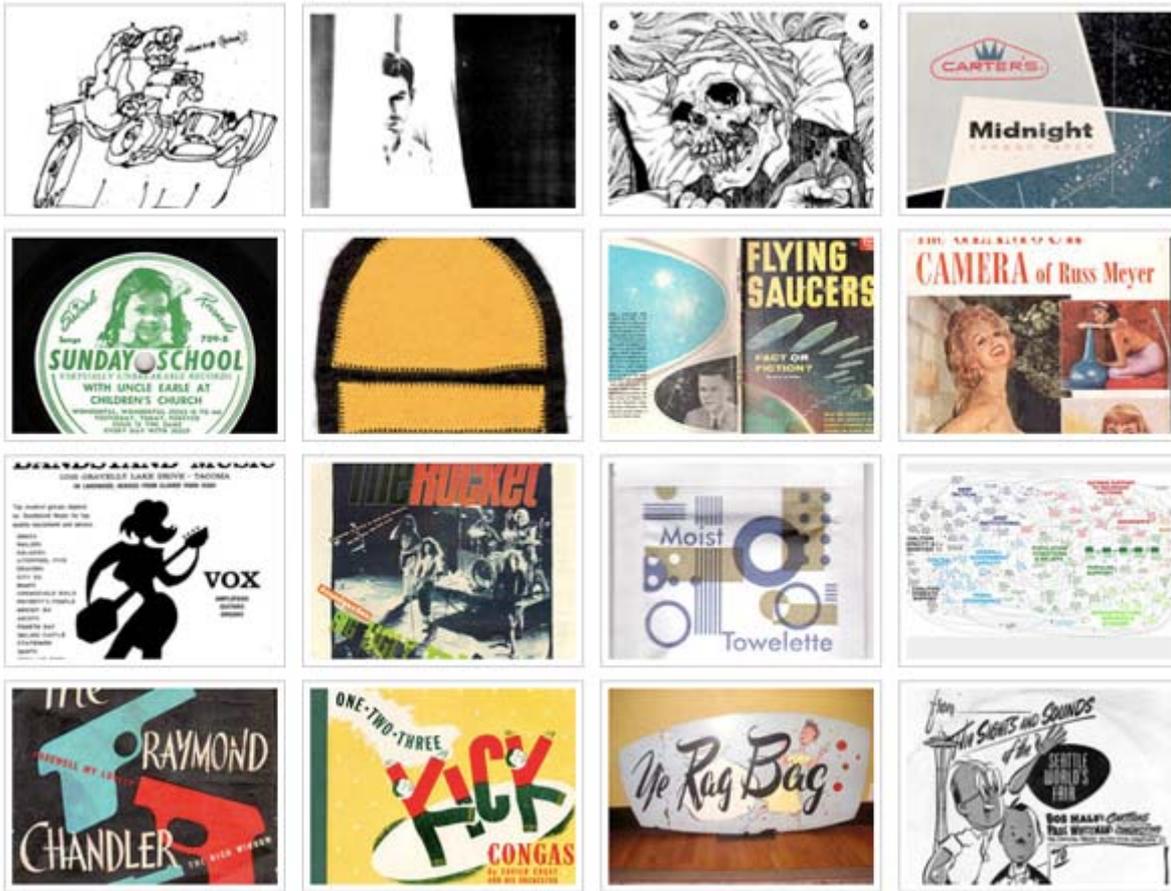
when people started to ask me how i was able to write more than (what's the limit?) 420 characters in my comments, i began to realize i had tripped across something odd. my essays were essentially "photo captions." there were no limits on word count with a caption like there was in a regular comment. so, i think i was exploiting a glitch in the system.

when i told a few others about it, they all began to write longer essays, too. now, i see more and more people going for it. i'm finding out that facebook™ can actually be a place of information as well as trivial commentary.

the other thing i really wanted to do is teach myself to write easily, quickly and with attractive content. the way i have gone about it is that every day i sit down and almost randomly grab something sitting around, scan it and post it. then i start writing. my essays are first drafts. as i start to write, i literally have no idea what i'm going to say. i just start typing. it's actually fun.

so, i feel like i now have the discipline to write every day and to make it fairly interesting and informative and entertaining. dunno if anybody else thinks that, but i like it. it gives me a chance to finally attempt to order and document all of the graphic design history that i've been gathering in my mind for the last 35–40 years. i think the stuff i write about is every bit as important as the accepted narrative found in most academic design history text books. my fantasy goal is that maybe somebody powerful out there will actually read this stuff and agree and attempt to include it into the narrative it deserves to be. i'm not holding my breath on that, though.

if nothing else, i've got a relatively organized collection of my own essays to use as reference guide for future projects. dunno if that will ever be of use. but, at least i've begun to collect it in one place.



We worked on your monograph *Some People Don't Surf* together about a decade back. When I asked you about writing another book, positioned as a kind of secret or alternative history of design based on your deep knowledge of lowbrow and pop culture, music packaging, novelty items, and ephemera, you basically told me that you were too busy doing work that pays, and wouldn't have the resources to do the kind of book that merited the effort. But since you hit the web, you've basically been kicking out a lifetime of research and design experience in long and informative posts that generate discussion threads by dozens of people. So it seems like you're giving it away now. All that to ask, what changed your mind? What are the advantages of publishing online?

well, that's true. this idea of a history of all the graphic design that is officially ignored (but copied) by the "fine design culture"—basically the world of the popular voice in graphic design. it's a beautiful history with amazing trajectories and long dialogs that span centuries. its major figures are as interesting and intelligent and erudite as anybody you can name in mainstream design acceptance. but, the mainstream ignore the authorship and dialog and simply lumps it all into a huge undefined category of "vernacular"—as if it grew on a tree or something.

i would love to be able to correct that ignorance. it's such a vast interesting territory that it makes you realize how narrowly defined the accepted design narrative actually is. if it were a pie chart, the "history of graphic design" taught in academia today would be about 1/10 slice of that pie. once you delve into this turf, you see how enormous and long-term a language graphic design has been and continues to be. it's sort of breathtaking.

all that said, i'm a freelance graphic designer, have been my whole "career." i have teenie small unknown non-corporate clients and very small businesses. so, i live close to the bone—always have, always will. it's just a fact of life for guys like me. to properly research and write a book like i/you describe would be a huge major effort consuming most of my waking hours for a minimum of six months (the least amount of time i've ever committed to a book. this project would honestly take a couple of years). so, during that timeframe, i wouldn't be able to work on anything to actually support myself. nobody pays advances of any size any more,

either. so, i'd have to spend all my own money and time on what would amount to a spec project. publishers these days want to see the finished book before they will commit to publishing. that's like building the empire state building from the ground up on the hopes that they will actually pay to to build it. make sense? no.

so, it's a sort of "rock and a hard place" issue for me. i can't afford to write a book, or even spend the time to do proper research on it. this facebook™ "show and tell" thing is something that gave me an opportunity to actually record this skeletal information and get it to the public, even in a small awkward way as it is. it keeps this info from getting lost and inspires many others to continue the "good work." it's amazing how many people writing comments have actually added to my knowledge base (doing the research for me). it's also mazing how many people have picked up this information and continued looking into it and who knows? maybe someday a nice book by somebody else will show up, filling in even more gaps.

**You can be contentious with your fans—correcting, sometimes scolding them. And FB is the place where you're in constant dialogue with others. How have your relations with online colleagues and fans been overall?**

i know i have a reputation for crankiness. i don't think i'm cranky at all, just frank. i'm an iconoclast. when somebody tries to pick at me, tries to anger me, i get angry. so, i've become a play target for a number of folks over the years. one of the really great things about facebook™ is that you can "unfriend" and delete people. that has been a lifesaver for me. it allows me to control the dialog and prevent people who take sport in baiting me. at this point i've actually had to (after repeated warnings) delete five people, two for excessive insufferable religious dumping and three for just being too nasty to me. not bad, when i have a "friend" list of almost 4500 folks. the results has been noticeably peaceful.

please keep in mind that i work on the fringes of acceptable society. my clients have included an enormous number of odd people that most designers would never encounter. as a result (for instance), i've experienced four separate bouts with death threats. i mean, i'm a graphic designer! why would anybody get so angry at my design work that they threaten to kill me? or ANY designer, for that matter? yet, it happens to me. so, i have to be a little careful. when you want to do extreme and interesting work that is a little crazy and "out there," you have to have similar clientele.

so, in answer to your question, i guess i have to say, things are going well. people are much nicer on facebook™ than on other sites i've participated in (like gigposters). nobody tries to kill me any more.



**How did you come on board Dan Nadel's Picturebox blog? And how do you select what to post there versus Facebook?**

well, dan simply contacted me through a mutual friend (norman hathaway—an old rocket dude). dan published norman's latest book on the california airbrush scene of the 60s and 70s, called "overspray." dan wanted to start a relationship with me and we're taking some tentative steps in that direction. he's doing a test trial sell of a few random posters i've done (great prices, kids!) and also he wants to select and run past essays that he finds of interest to his readership. it's just the beginning of something that may pan out into beautiful things. we'll see.

frankly, several people have picked up and run my old essays. i've always said "ok" if they ask, since if they wanted to do it without my permission, there is no godly way i could stop them. you don't really have any sort of control over the internet. once it's on there, it's open season. it's sort of the "von dutch rules" of copyright. he wrote a manifesto that states, "go ahead and take it, i'll just make more." basically that means that if you are so lame that you can't do it yourself (and have to steal it), then you are pathetic. i can always just make more—and you can't.

i tend to live by those rules. the best revenge is doing good work.

**Fonte: Imprint, 2011.[Portal]: Disponível em: <http://imprint.printmag.com>. Acesso em 15 fev. 2011**