

THE NEW GRAPHIC LITERARY JOURNAL

an interview

with

STEVEN HELER

“If ever there appears on this earth such a thing as an editorial art, it will be when commercial timidity is removed from the inner office and a spirit of free and genuine sport is enshrined there,” wrote Max Eastman in his 1916 book, *Journalism Versus Art.*



The new graphic literary journal is a transitional species in the evolution of a book to a magazine. The traditional lit journal aspires to the artistic permanence of a book while the new graphic lit journal willingly risks the disposability of a magazine by cavorting with contemporary graphic design. Lit journals define themselves by an emphasis on the short story, essay, and poem. By engaging contemporary visual culture, they have a new dimension in which to strive for Eastman's "editorial art."

The risk is the same one identified by Eastman ninety years ago: "the aim of a money-making magazine is to give neither intense pleasures nor intense displeasures to a few, but to please everybody a little all the time." The traditional lit journal occupies a small niche of the magazine market, greatly pleasing a very few. The new lit journal aims to enlarge its audience and, through the use of contemporary graphic design, please a whole lot more.

OPIUM—With your knowledge of design (especially given your book *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant-Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century*), what do you think makes for successful "editorial art" in the realm of the little magazine? Are you on the same page with Eastman, or is he outdated?

STEVEN HELLER: Max Eastman was a smart editor. Interestingly, when he edited *The Masses*, the "editorial art" was decided upon by the contributors: George Bellows, John Sloane (the art editor), Art Young, Boardman Robinson, among them. According

to histories of *The Masses*, these contributors presented their work to people assembled in the editorial offices in Greenwich Village on a specific night. The approval or disapproval came more from these huddled masses than the editors. That for me would be a nightmare. I'm all for art for the people, but having the lumpen determine what is good art is dangerous, if not foolhardy. I think Eastman finally took more control later on, but this kind of democracy can be injurious to any art. Granted the art of *The Masses* was meant to be polemical, but individual expression can be extremely polemical, too, without neophytes offering their uneducated opinions. I think successful "editorial art"—which includes typography, illustration, ornamentation, and other visual matter—is best when the artist has free reign to create. An art director or art editor can push, pull, and otherwise make better (if necessary), but the initial impetus must come from the artist or designer, who, after all, is the expert. An editor (indeed many editors) feel they know about art, but rarely are they truly fluent enough to make a mediocre piece good, and often make good work mediocre.

OPIUM—How did, say, one or two great little mags of the past express this “editorial art”?

SH: There are so many little magazines, and each has or had unique ways of creating content. I am reminded of the anti-fascist magazine *Direction*, published in the late '30s and early '40s. Paul Rand did many but not all of its covers, and had the freedom to do what he wanted. He was paid a small sum in return (and given some original art by Le Corbusier as payment, too); he dictated what the look and feel of the covers would be. Inside, the magazine layout was rather simple and pedestrian, but the covers set the memorable tone. Similarly, in the '60s a French magazine called *Opus* allowed a single artist, Roman Czechlovitz (wrong spelling), to design almost each cover. His work was bold and smart—sometimes conceptual, other times not. But his continued contribution insured their identity, and also gave the artist a chance to grow. There are many magazines past and present that allow individuals to carry the graphic weight. I think this is very beneficial. But there are other little magazines, like *The Ganzfeld*, for example, that are rooted in visual content, and employ many different artists, cartoonists, and designers. Since the magazine is a visual entity, the variety is expected, even if the various expressions are surprising.



OPIUM—What can today's lit journals, who are embracing graphic design, learn from these great little mags of the past?

with *McSweeney's*. Moreover, even though his journal is word-driven, his design and choice of artists are key to the success of his identity and content. He makes the selections—he is the final arbiter—but it starts with a basic, fundamental, and overriding trust in those who make the visual decisions.

SH: Trust! Trust the designer or artists to do good work for the benefit of the journal. Dave Eggers accomplishes this

OPIUM—Lit journals are periodicals that look like books, some of which are now trying to look more like conventional magazines. The forms can be at odds because, as you say, the magazine is primarily a visual entity while the lit journal is word-driven. One compromise might be to focus on typography. What little mags in the past have successfully embraced typography as a means to enhance the graphic while still emphasizing text?

its typographical scheme, as is its sister publication, *The Believer*. Take a magazine like *The New Criterion*: it is typographically bland but nonetheless pristine. It obviously chose not to be overt, but uses a limited palette of elegant faces. Some editors understand type; others do not. Some little magazines can afford a typographic stylist; others cannot. It's a crap shoot.

SH: Going back in history, typography was always important. It just wasn't flashy or illustrative the way magazine typography is today. *The Little Review* back in the '30s was typographically sophisticated—some issues were even risqué in a Dada or Constructivist sense. The original *Playboy* of the '20s was likewise ambitious. And as I've noted, *McSweeney's* is very much about



Images on this and other pages from *Merz to Emigre and Beyond* (Phaidon ©2003) by Steven Heller.

OPIUM—Many of the aesthetically strong avant-garde magazines in your book *Merz to Emigre* are politically motivated or they are propounding a new literary or artistic movement. This critical attitude seems to galvanize a visual identity which in part consists of a struggle to achieve a new relationship between word and image. Is there something about strong emotion (outrage, anger, resentment) that fuels good magazine design?

SH: Not at all. But first can you define what good magazine design is? The Dada journals were not good—in the conventional sense—design, but they served their purposes: to shock (at first) and to convey material in an irreverent manner. Design can be used for ideological reasons which may, in turn, define a periodical's stance.

But I've seen many politically radical magazines in which the design stinks. That said, in retrospect, a periodical like, say, the Black Panther Party newspaper or *The East Village Other* are badly designed or non-designed, but now have a patina of history, which makes the design less onerous and more understandable.



OPIUM—Wyndham Lewis's *The Enemy No. 2* (1927) could serve as an inspiration for the lit journals of today: personal, idiosyncratic, and more like a book than a periodical. What were the graphic contributions of the Futurist/Vorticist periodicals, like Lewis's, to the development of the little magazine?

SH: Those were the days when little magazines and journals were the first lines of "offense" in the war against complacency. So they had a huge impact on each other. Like the internet, many of these magazines were the connective tissue of a movement, given out at

exhibitions and passed from one art group to the other. I doubt they had a big influence on major mainstream magazines, although some of the visual conceits rubbed off. The French *VU*, for instance, was heavily photomontaged, just like the Communist party's *USSR in Construction* [IMAGE ABOVE LEFT] or *AIZ*, the German communist paper.

OPIUM—For the editors of traditional lit journals, looking down on graphic art is often still part of what it means to be literary. In the 2006 *Artist's & Graphic Designer's Market* book, for example, one journal sniffs that they use art, not graphic art, and only for their covers. This view stems from an ignorance about the history of graphic art and its relationship to the little magazine. I'm fascinated, for example, by the relevant examples of *Minotaur* (1930s), *View* (1940s) and *VVV* (1940s). What was so unique about how these magazines managed to pack up art, culture and literature in their designs?

SH: Have you heard the term "The Whole Work of Art"? I can't remember it in German, something like *Gestemswerk*. There were few distinctions between art forms because that was the nature of these art movements. The Futurists saw advertising as a mass-appeal medium and sought to engage in it as they engaged in painting. Of course, fashion, architecture, packaging, etc. were also part of this equation. The magazines of which you speak were born out of this sensibility. They did, however, reject mass-market magazine conceits and

traditions, but replaced them with their own versions of "applied art." They also wanted to make statements that could be best presented in multiple mediums. Graphics were poetic, words were conveyed through graphics. It was also cheaper to produce these magazines back in the late '30s and early '40s. By the '50s and '60s, costs mounted for half-tones and color separations.

OPIUM—When lit journals go graphic, some seem driven not by an obsession to create "editorial art" but by a desire to increase their audience. So they look to popular magazines for reference. Using more graphics is the very strategy for becoming more like popular magazines. What are the dangers here?

SH: The danger of emulating the mainstream is always the slavish perpetuation of cliché. That said, little magazines like *Poetry* (with its long tradition) or *Story* use or used great illustrators who also work for mass-

market mags. *Poetry* uses a lot of the excellent conceptual illustrators—like Henrik Drescher—and *Story* (while it was still publishing) had each cover done by R. O. Blechman. I don't think they were copying the mainstream as much as using great talent that can be found more readily in media than those starving painters who hang in garrets.

OPIUM—*Tin House*, for example, uses a recognizable magazine format both in their covers and their layouts. *Zoetrope-All Story* invites guest designers to give each issue a visual look, but, as I understand it, they can't touch the text. Even *Ninth Letter*, a remarkably ambitious periodical produced by students and faculty at the University of Illinois, uses graphics mainly as background framing for untouched columns of text. The graphics are uniformly pleasing, pretty, and safe. What strategies can get a little magazine out of these design *cul de sacs* (assuming it wants to turn itself around)? Or do commercial aspirations doom a little magazine to the aesthetics of emulation?

See Subinterviews #1 and #2.

SH: Good art directors and designers can make a big difference (of course, that's a self-serving answer). One of my favorite little magazines today is *Esopus* (I even contributed to it, and may be on the advisory panel). It is edited and designed by Tod Lippy, a former editor of *Print* magazine and *Scenario*, and former publisher of another little magazine. He was never trained as a designer, but he's one of the most creative art directors I know. The magazine is a cinematic experience because he was also a filmmaker in a past life. I also love *Zembla*, which regrettably has stopped publishing. But it was brilliantly designed by Vince Frost, a remarkable designer. It was actually a joy to behold and read.

See Subinterview #3.

ESOPUS

Subinterview #3
Tod Lippy
Editor, *Esopus*

The mission for *Esopus*, a nonprofit, is to offer an unmediated space (no ads, no publicity-driven editorial material) in which artists can connect directly with the general public. That underlying goal underlies pretty much everything I do as its editor: from selection of content all the way through to design and production (and even distribution). I keep the content wide-ranging to attract the broadest possible audience. I look at and listen to the content (and, if I have the luxury of time, live with it for a while), and then frame it in a minimal way that feels right. Rather than taking an overall design template and applying it to whatever comes down the pike, I design on a “case-by-case” basis. This makes *Esopus* less magazine-like, and at times this might be confusing for readers. In the end I think it serves the content better. Regarding design examples, I’ve always been an enormous fan of **Alexey Brodovich**. I embrace a multidisciplinary approach and love including inserts, posters, CDs, etc. The magazine is an object filled with objects. I try to avoid repeating myself in obvious ways. This is partly to avoid boredom on my part, but I also love surprising readers every time they crack a new issue. Although my filmmaking background has probably influenced some content selection, flipping through a magazine is much more of a “push” than “pull” experience. I think how I assemble the content in each issue is really fundamentally about editing, and my favorite part of filmmaking was always cutting: juxtaposing things for maximum “pop.” I’d also like to think there is a kind of loose-knit narrative to each issue, and one could argue that comes from that film background, too.

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OPIUM—Eastman thought a freedom from commercial timidity could unleash a sporting spirit, and you've said the work is best when a creator has "free reign." So here are these transitional lit journals with a perfect opportunity to be sporting, to be polemic, to serve as the vehicles for strong critical creativity. Without pressure to maintain high circulations, without the need to compete with the slick glossy magazines, and with funds for a year or two of a little magazine, how can an obsessive creator make the most of this opportunity?

SH: Avoid being rigid. Too often rules are established at the outset and they're the wrong rules. I don't believe in anarchy, but I do support license at least until a personality is well established. Brodovitch's motto was "Astonish Me!" The design for his magazine *PORTFOLIO*, which lasted only three issues, was truly astonishing. It was risky, because the editor/publisher took no advertising, and the money dried up. BUT for the moments it existed, the creative sky was not even the limit.

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Interviews conducted by David Barringer. The spread on the following pages is from *Merz to Emigre*, pages 136-137. Alexey Brodovitch designed *Portfolio* No. 1 (1950).



