Elliott Earls' General Incompetence

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Elliott Earls is a graphic designer and performance artist. Currently, the designer-in-residence at Cranbrook is working on a new body of work entitled "Bull and Wounded Horse," which incorporates traditional media, including egg tempera painting, clay busts, large manipulated photo prints, and an array of robotic musical instruments, combined into a performance piece that uses Jitter-based interactive digital video. The piece is scheduled to premiere at Maine College of Art on March 18. Here he talks about melding traditional graphic design with stagecraft resulting in a delightfully curious, historically rooted, unprecedented art.

Heller: I am very amused to read that the first item on your resume is "fired from deharak and Poulin Associates NYC for 'general incompetence.'" What possessed you to work at such a Modernist firm? Did you have visions of Helvetica dancing in your head?

Earls: In 1988, when I was still a senior at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and I was offered a job by Rudy deHarak. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. To me, the office was like a design museum. Rudy had furniture by Rietveld, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. The darkroom even had a Pirelli rubber floor. The office was doing work for the New York Public Library, The United Nations Plaza Hotel, The New York Times, Cummins Engine. Rudy was a bad ass. He was designing type treatments for most of his clients. I don't know about the current addition, but in 88 "the" Design History book by Meggs had a two page spread on his work. In my mind I had achieved my goal. All my hard work had paid off. [and on this point I want to be perfectly clear. I have a vitriolic disdain for the typical bullet-proof designer who plays it cool and acts like success was easy. I worked my ass from the time I was 16 to get that job.] I had arrived.

And even though my wife and I knew exactly 14 people in a city of eight million, I felt as if we had to move out of the city. So we moved to Connecticut, and I contemplated looking for another line of work. Look, I wanted to work for Vignelli, deHarak or Chermayeff and Geismar. From the very beginning I set out to be a "Designer" with a capital D. I wanted to be twenty-three, live in New York City and wear a little black watch designed by Tibor. Sometimes life doesn't work out the way you planned.

Heller: In 1994 you graduated from Cranbrook during its "hot house" era, how did that experience alter your work and attitude?

Earls: The day I decided to go to graduate school my life changed. The moment I first set foot on Cranbrook's grounds things started to click. My actions while at Cranbrook as a grad student changed my life irreparably for the better. The true and real education that I gained though my efforts has made me a stronger, better man. Here's how I see it. Take the Cranbrook name off my resume. I could care less. Because while a graduate student at Cranbrook, I set in motion a process of self-discovery and learning that I have maintained to this day. I believe that the Academy, while flawed, was founded on a superior idea. It is a truly special experience. The McCoy's were brilliant architects of that experience, and the studio under their leadership was filled with very committed, intense people.

Heller: You are, for lack of a better term, a designer-performer, a niche you certainly carved out (though I see a relationship to the Dadas and particularly Kurt Schwitters). How did this come about? What made it so difficult for you to follow the straight and narrow professional path?

Earls: I'm currently finishing up an essay for a small book that Cranbrook is publishing on my work. The essay is entitled "A Pygmy Raised by Giants." (with apologies to Robert Anton Wilson). In the essay I discuss the idea that Paul Rand is still the archetype for the vast majority of graphic/info/interactive designers, and that he was a pygmy raised by giants. I postulate that he fundamentally misunderstood the work of men like Kurt Schwitters, and that the institutions of design (schools, museums and magazines) are bastions of neo-conservatism that seek to define design solely in terms of a designer/client relationship and a traditional problem solving methodology. Now needless to say, there are exceptions to the rule, but I'm talking about it as a whole. There was a period after World War I where some of the greatest artists of the time (the giants of which I speak) were as important to the history of architecture, painting or photography as they were to the history of design. I hear all of the time that what I do is not design. Well, frankly, I see that as a damning indictment of our times, not of my work.

Heller: Here's a hypothetical: If Emigre was not around to encourage and promote your typographical inventions, would you have created a space for the Apollo Program?

Earls: Your question proves my point that there are always exceptions to the rule. I have tremendous respect for Rudy Vanderlans. I think he is an amazing designer and at one point was almost a Moses-like figure. Back in the late eighties and early nineties, Emigre gave me a glimpse into an alternative world. It showed me the promised land. Now, I don't want to diminish the importance of my relationship to Emigre magazine, Rudy provided me with a platform for my work when nobody else cared. My relationship with Rudy and with Emigre is very important to me. But, I have to believe that a man rises or falls on the merit of his own actions. I was going to find an outlet for my work come hell or high water.

Heller: Why the name Apollo? And what was going through your head when you produced those early, quirky, sculptural typefaces?

Earls: The name "The Apollo Program" came from my desire to infuse my studio, with the unbridled optimism and can-do spirit of the Apollo space program. I wanted to set out to try to achieve great things. The Apollo missions seemed an appropriate metaphor. The genesis of the fonts springs from a rumination on the myth of the Avant Garde and how an artist positions himself. Walter Gropius was famous for encouraging his students to start from zero. When I would look at Rudy and Zuzana's work or Ed Fella's, I was convinced that you simply could not be a great designer without beginning your aesthetic from ground zero. Ground Zero to me was type.

Heller: You've done a fair number of commercial jobs for records, films, and television. What are the essential differences between these commissions and your more muse-generated authorial work?

Earls: Was it Busta Rhymes that said, "There never was a plan B?" Look, it's clear that I always wanted work and life on my terms. From the beginning (post deHarak and Poulin) my goal has been to make a good living off of my work; my posters, performances, music, sculptures etc... But as I discuss with my students all the time, until you build an audience, those more traditional design relationships can pay the bills quite handsomely. The key is not to get seduced by the easy money. So yes, I have done quite a bit more commercial work than most people might be aware, because the rest of my work has been financed by a generous grant from the "Elliott Puts His Money Where is Mouth is Foundation".

Heller: You seem to have certain religious obsessions – references to saints and the like – in your posters, where does this Catholic fixation derive from?

Earls: Yes, religion and spirituality are a consistent and central theme in my work. As terribly unfashionable as this may sound, I'm very interested in God. I'm also interest in the problems of religion. I consider myself a critic of religious institutions. I went to a parochial grade school and to an all boys Jesuit high school. You may know that the Jesuit's are the intellectual mercenaries of the Catholic church. These priests were not the child molesting variety, they were some straight-up gangsters with a deep concern for social responsibility. It was encouraged to have theological discussion without recourse to simplistic Bible thumping. I am completely opposed to fundamentalism of any kind, be it Christian, Islamic, Jewish or Extropian. Trying to come to grips with the inherent paradox of contemporary spirituality is difficult. This struggle is reflected and worked out within the work.

Heller: "Catfish," your feature digital film, is a surreal, dada, eccentric film that incorporates animation, stop motion photography, drawing, typography and live action into a seamless performance documentary. But what is this movie really about? Is it all an experimental stew, or is it Elliott Earls naked before the world?

Earls: Well, first of all, it's my heart, soul and about five years of intense work made manifest. Beyond that, it's so difficult for me to talk about succinctly. It's an attempt to explore the conventions of storytelling, graphics and performance in a completely uncompromised way. The film touches on so many aspects of my work. It involves my ideas for pop song structure and music, typography, electronics, spoken word, performance, theater etc. Frankly I was shocked and dismayed by how "difficult" the piece seemed for so many people. As an example, there is a scene in the film where I have a conversation with a fictionalized version of the art historian Dr. E.H. Gombrich. Most people that have seen the film inevitably ask me what that scene "means" or was "all about." I want to scream at the top of my lungs after pulling all of my hair out. "It was a conversation between two men concerning the role of the artist within society, the scene means exactly what the two characters were discussing. Did you hear what they were talking about?" A lot of the film is right there on the surface. I've written a new screenplay. I've thought quite a bit about "Catfish" and though the effort may be quixotic, I hope to make another piece that deals with things in a very similar way but incorporates a more traditional meta-narrative that rides on top.

Heller: Your work is so distinctly your own vision, how, as a teacher, do you convey those qualities while thwarting mimicry and imitation?

Earls: I have my students throw out dogma. No more rules. I also try to get them to give up concern for whether or not their work is "Design." It's not as if we're fraternity brothers and this is pledge week. I'm firmly convinced that reading the latest book on Dutch design won't make you a good designer. At the point where you got "the skills" being highly aware of "the scene" makes you a frat boy, or a sororitey girl. It makes you a follower. I want the next generation of leaders. I want grad students with courage, and we don't really discuss my work. It's not as if I work in a cave. My students can come over to my studio and check it out any time, but their time at Cranbrook is about them, not me!

Heller: Given the peculiar vocabulary that you've created, and the fact that in mainstream circumstances you've been "incompetent," do you have a definition of design - indeed what is good design?

Earls: As I mentioned previously, in the essay for the Cranbrook book I attempt to address this issue in a bit more depth. But essentially I think that the entire issue of a design "definition" needs to be readdressed. I'm looking at a different historical model for my practice than what is currently (and I must use the word here) "sanctioned" by the institutions of design. You mentioned Kurt Schwitters. I would add El Lissitsky, John Heartfield, and Piet Zwart.

Heller: So what's next?

Earls: I have been working very hard on a new body of work entitled "Bull and Wounded Horse." It began as an exhibition at Cranbrook Art Museum. It incorporates a lot of traditional media; egg tempera painting, clay busts, very large manipulated photo prints, and robotic musical instruments. I'm elaborating this work out into a new performance piece with Jitter based interactive digital video. I'm scheduled to debut the piece at Maine College of Art on March 18th. (I hope I get it done). As I mentioned, I wrote a new screenplay. I'm trying to raise money to

produce it. I have a 64-page book that I'm finishing up for Cranbrook, not to mention my work with my grad students. Since coming back to Cranbrook as designer-in-residence, I have really been focusing on radically fetishizing my process. I am making objects—along with my music, performance and posters. I used to make media, and ephemera. Now I'm utilizing some of the same processes but working with much more substantial materials and finishes.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century (Phaidon Press), The Education of a Comics Artist co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition and The Education of an Art Director (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).