CULT OF THE UGLY
BY STEVEN HELLER

'Ask a toad what is beauty… He will answer that it is a female with two great round eyes coming out of her little head, a large flat mouth, a yellow belly and a brown back.' (Voltaire, Philosophical Dictionary, 1794).

Ask Paul Rand what is beauty and he will answer that 'the separation of form and function, of concept and execution, is not likely to produce objects of aesthetic value.' (Paul Rand, A Designer's Art, 1985). Then ask the same question to the Cranbrook Academy of Art students who created the ad hoc desktop publication Output (1992), and judge by the evidence they might answer that beauty is chaos born of found letters layered on top of random patterns and shapes. Those who value functional simplicity would argue that the Cranbrook student's publication, like a toad's warts, is ugly. The difference is that unlike the toad, the Cranbrook students have deliberately given themselves the warts.

Output is eight unbound pages of blips, type fragments, random words, and other graphic minutiae purposefully given the serendipitous look of a printer's make-ready. The lack of any explanatory précis (and only this end note: 'Upcoming Issues From: School of the Art Institute of Chicago [and] University of Texas,') leaves the reader confused as to its purpose or meaning, though its form leads one to presume that it is intended as a design manifesto, another "experiment" in the current plethora of aesthetically questionable graphic output. Given the increase in graduate school programs which provide both a laboratory setting and freedom from professional responsibility, the word experiment has to justify a multitude of sins.

The value of design experiments should not of course be measured only by what succeeds, since failures are often steps towards new discoveries. Experimentation is the engine of progress, its fuel a mixture of instinct, intelligence or discipline is in the mix. This is the case with certain of the graphic design experiments that have emanated from graduate schools in the U. S. and Europe in recent years work driven by instincts and obscured by theory, with ugliness its foremost by-product.

How is ugly to be defined in the current Post-modern climate where existing systems are up for re-evaluation, order is under attack and the forced collision of disparate forms is the rule?
For the moment, let us say that ugly design, as opposed to classical design (where adherence to the golden mean and a preference for balance and harmony serve as the foundation for even the most unconventional compositions) is the layering of inharmonious graphic forms in a way that results in confusing messages. By this definition, Output could be considered a prime example of ugliness in the service of fashionable experimentation. Though not intended to function in the commercial world, it was distributed to thousands of practising designers on the American Institute of Graphic Arts and American Center for Design mailing lists, so rather than remain cloistered and protected from criticism as on-campus "research", it is a fair subject for scrutiny. It can legitimately be described as representing the current cult of ugliness.

The layered images, vernacular hybrids, low-resolution reproductions and cacophonous blends of different types and letters at once challenge prevailing aesthetic beliefs and propose alternative paradigms. Like the output of communications rebels of the past (whether 1920s Futurists or 1960s psychedelic artists), this work demands that the viewer or reader accept non-traditional formats which at best guide the eye for a specific purpose through a range of non-linear "pathways", and at worst result in confusion.

But the reasons behind this wave are dubious. Does the current social and cultural condition involve the kind of upheaval to which critical ugliness is a time-honoured companion? Or in the wake of earlier, more serious experimentation, has ugliness simply been assimilated into popular culture and become a stylish conceit?

The current wave began in the mid-1970s with the English punk scene, a raw expression of youth frustration manifested through shocking dress, music and art. Punk's naive graphic language – an aggressive rejection of rational typography that echoes Dada and Futurist work – influenced designers during the late 1970s who seriously tested the limits imposed by Modernist formalism. Punk's violent demeanour surfaced in Swiss, American, Dutch and French design and spread to the mainstream in the form of a "new wave", or what American punk artist Gary Panter has called "sanitised punk". A key anti-canonical approach later called Swiss Punk – which in comparison with the gridlocked Swiss International

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