CULT OF THE UGLY

'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, in not likely to produce objects of aesthetical 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. Experimentations 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 byproducts.

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 unharmonious 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 practicing 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 Style was menacingly chaotic, though rooted in its own logic – was born in the mecca of rationalism, Basel, during the late 1970s. For the elders who were threatened (and offended) by the onslaught to criticise Swiss Punk was attacked not so much because of its appearance as because it symbolised the demise of Modernist hegemony.

Ugly design can be a conscious attempt to create and define alternative standards. Like warpaint, the dissonant styles which many contemporary designers have applied to their visual communications are meant to shock an enemy – complacency – as well as to encourage new reading and viewing patterns. The work of American designer Art Chantry combines the shock-and-educate approach with a concern for appropriateness. For over a decade Chantry has been creating eye-catching, low-budget graphics for the Seattle punk scene by using found commercial artifacts from industrial merchandise catalogues as key elements in his posters and flyers. While these 'unsophisticated' graphics may be horrifying to designers who prefer Shaker functionalism to

punk vernacularism, Chantry's design is decidedly functional within its context. Chantry's clever manipulations of found 'art' into accessible, though unconventional, compositions prove that using ostensibly ugly forms can result in good design.

Post-modernism inspired a debate in graphic design in the mid-1970s by revealing that many perceptions of art and culture were one-dimensional. Post-modernism urgently questioned certainties laid down by Modernism and rebelled against grand Eurocentric narratives in favour of multiplicity. The result in graphic design was to strip Modernist formality of both its infrastructure and outer covering. The grid was demolished, while neo-classical and contemporary ornament, such as dots, blips and arrows, replaced the tidiness of the canonical approach. As in most artistic revolutions, the previous generation was attacked, while the generations before were curiously rehabilitated. The visual hallmarks of this rebellion, however, were inevitably reduced to stylistic mannerisms which forced even more radical experimentation. Extremism gave rise to fashionable ugliness as a form of nihilistic expression.

In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819), the Romantic poet John Keats wrote the famous lines: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Yet in today's environment, one standard of beauty is no more the truth than is one standard of ugliness. It is possible that the most conventional-busting graphic design by students and alumni of Cranbrook, CalArts and Rhode Island School of Design, among other hothouses where theoretical constructs are used to justify what the untutored eye might deem ugly, could become the foundation for new standards based on contemporary sensibilities. Certainly, these approaches have attracted many followers throughout the deign world.

"Where does beauty begin and where does it end?" wrote John Cage in Silence (1961). "Where it ends is where the artist begins." So in order to stretch the perimeters of art and design to any serious extent it becomes necessary to suspend popular notions of beauty so that alternative aesthetic standards can be explored. This concept is essential to an analysis of a recent work by the Chicago company Segura, who designed the programme/announcement for the 1993 How magazine 'Creative Vision' conference and whose work represents the professional wing of the hothouse sensibility. Compared to the artless Output, Segura's seemingly anarchic booklet is an artfully engineered attempt to direct the reader through a maze of mundane information. Yet while the work might purport to confront complacency, it often merely obstructs comprehension.

A compilation of variegated visuals, the How piece is a veritable primer of cultish extremes at once compelling for its ingenuity yet undermined by its superficiality. Like a glutton, Segura has stuffed itself with all the latest conceits (including some of its own concoction) and has regurgitated them on to the pages. At first the juxtapositions of discordant visual material appear organic, but in fact little is left to chance.

The result is a catalogue of disharmony in the service of contemporaneity, an artifact that is already ossifying into a 1990s design style. It is a style that presumes that more is hipper than less, confusion is better than simplicity, fragmentation is smarter then continuity, and that ugliness is its own reward.

But is it possible that the surface might blind one to the inner beauty (i.e. intelligence) of this work? Ralph Waldo Emerson in The Conduct of Life (1860) wrote: "The secret of ugliness consists not in irregularity, but in being uninteresting." Given Emerson's measure, it could be argued that design is only ugly when devoid of aesthetic or conceptual forethought – for example, generic restaurant menus, store signs and packages. Perhaps, then, the How booklet, which is drowning in forethought, should be 'read' on a variety of levels wherein beauty and ugliness are mitigated by context and purpose. Perhaps – but given the excesses in this work, the result can only be described as a catalogue of pretence.

During the late 1940s and 1950s the Modernist mission was to develop design systems that would protect the global (not just corporate) visual environment from blight. Yet while Modernism smoothed out the rough edges of communications by prescribing a limited number of options, it also created a recipe for mediocrity. If a Modernist design system is followed by rote, the result can be as uninteresting and therefore as ugly – according to Emerson's standard – as any non-designed newsletter or advertisement. So design that aggressively challenge the senses and intellect rather than following the pack should in theory be tolerated, if not encouraged.

For a new generation's ideas of good design – and beauty – to be challenged by its forerunners is, of course, a familiar pattern. Paul Rand, when criticised as one of those 'Bauhaus boys' by American type master W. A. Dwiggins in the late 1930s, told an interviewer that he had always respected Dwiggins' work, "so why couldn't he see the value of what we were doing?" Rudy VanderLans, whose clarion call of the 'new typography' Emigre has been vituperatively criticised by Massimo Vignelli, has not returned the fire, but rather countered that he admires Vignelli's work despite his own interest in exploring alternatives made possible by new technologies. It could be argued that the language invented by Rand's 'Bauhaus boys' challenged contemporary aesthetics in much the same way as VanderLans is doing in Emigre today. Indeed VanderLans, and those designers whom Emigre celebrates for their inventions – including Cranbrook alumni Edward Fella, Jeffery Keedy and Allen Hori – are promoting new ways of making and seeing typography. The difference is that Rand's method was based strictly on ideas of balance and harmony which hold up under close scrutiny even today. The new young turks, by contrast, reject such verities in favour of imposed discordance and disharmony, which might be rationalised as personal expression, but not as viable visual communication, and so in the end will be a blip (or tangent) in the continuum of graphic design history.

Edward Fella's work is a good example. Fella began his career as a commercial artist, became a guest critic at Cranbrook and later enrolled as a graduate student, imbuing in other students an appreciation for the naïf (or folk) traditions of commercial culture. He "convincingly deployed highly personal art-based imagery and typography in his design for the public," explains Lorraine Wild in her essay 'Transgression and Delight: Graphic Design at Cranbrook' (Cranbrook Design: the New Discourse, 1990). He also introduced what Wild describes as "the vernacular, the impure, the incorrect, and all the other forbidden excesses" to his graduate studies. These excesses, such as nineteenth-century fat faces, comical stock printers' cuts, ornamental dingbats, hand scrawls and out-of-focus photographs, were anathema to the early Modernists, who had battled to expunge such eyesores from public view.

Similar forms had been used prior to the 1980s in a more sanitised way by American designers such as Phil Gips in Monocle magazine, Otto Storch in McCalls magazines, and Bea Feitler in Ms. magazine. For these designers, novelty job printers' typefaces and rules were not just crass curios employed as affectations, but appropriate components of stylish layouts. While they provided an alternative to the cold, systematic typefaces favoured by the International Style, they appeared in compositions that were nonetheless clean and accessible. These were not experiments, but 'solutions' to design problems.

Two decades later, Fella too re-employed many of the typically ugly novelty typefaces as well as otherwise neutral canonical letterforms, which he stretched and distorted to achieve purposefully artless effects for use on gallery and exhibition announcements. Unlike Gips' and Feitler's work, these were aggressively unconventional. In Cranbrook Design: the New Discourse, Fella's challenges to "normal" expectations of typography are described as ranging from "low parody to high seriousness". But the line that separates parody and seriousness is thin, and the result is ugliness. As a critique of the slick design practised throughout corporate culture, Fella's work is not without a certain acerbity. As personal research, indeed as personal art, it can be justified, but as a model for commercial practice, this kind of ugliness is a dead end.

"{J}ust maybe, a small independent graduate program is precisely where such daunting research and invention in graphic design should occur," argues Wild. And one would have to agree that given the strictures of the marketplace, it is hard to break meaningful ground while serving a clients needs and wants. Nevertheless, the marketplace can provide important safeguards – Rand, for example, never had the opportunity to experiment outside the business arena and since he was ostensibly self-taught, virtually everything he invented was "on the job". Jeffery Keedy and Allen Hori, both of whom had a modicum of design experience before attending Cranbrook, availed themselves of the luxury of experimenting free of marketplace demands. For them, graduate school was a place to test out ideas that 'transgressed' as far as possible from accepted standards. So Wild is correct in her assertion that it is better to do research and development in a dedicated and sympathetic atmosphere. But such an atmosphere can also be polluted by its own freedoms.

The ugly excesses – or Frankenstein's little monsters like Output – are often exhibited in public to promulgate "the new design discourse". In fact, they merely further the cause of ambiguity and ugliness. Since graduate school hothouses push their work into the real world, some of what is purely experimental is accepted by neophytes as a viable model, and students, being students, will inevitably misuse it. Who can blame them if their mentors are doing so, too?

Common to all graphic designers practicing in the current wave is the self-indulgence that informs some of the worst experimental fine art. But what ultimately derails much of this work is what critic Dugald Stermer calls "adults making kids' drawings". When Art Chantry uses naive or ugly design elements he transforms them into viable tools. Conversely, Jeffery Keedy's Lushus, a bawdy shove-it-in-your-face novelty typeface, is taken seriously by some and turns up on printed materials (such as the Dutch Best Book Designs cover) as an affront to, not a parody of, typographic standards. When the layered, vernacular look is practised in the extreme, whether with forethought or not, it simply contributes to the perpetuation of bad design.

"Rarely has beauty been an end in itself," wrote Paul Rand in Paul Rand: A Designer's Art. And it is equally mistaken to treat ugliness as an end result in itself. Ugliness is valid, even refreshing, when it is key to an indigenous language representing alternative ideas and cultures. The problem with the cult of ugly graphic design emanating from the major design academies and their alumni is that it has so quickly become a style that appeals to anyone without the intelligence, discipline or good sense to make something more interesting out of it. While the proponents are following their various muses, their followers are misusing their signature designs and typography as style without substance. Ugliness as a tool, a weapon, even as a code is not a problem when it is a result of form following function. But ugliness as its own virtue – or as a knee-jerk reaction to the status quo – diminishes all design.