An Interview with Rudy Vanderlans: Still Subversive After All These Years

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Emigre magazine has been publishing for 20 years. In dog years that makes it a cornerstone of the design establishment. In this interview we asked Rudy VanderLans to comment on the state of the magazine and the art of design and design criticism .

Heller: Rudy, I truly admire your keen ability to reinvent Emigre. Perhaps "reinvent" is an overused word, but the magazine has gone through at least six "incarnations," from its founding as a general culture tab to its golden age as the clarion of new typography, to its middle age—and smaller magazine size—as an eclectic compilation of criticism and esoteric peregrinations, to a music CD, and now with numbers #64, 65, and 66 a journal of critical commentary. You've managed to retain your unique personality while publishing your stalwart contributors and adding new voices along the way. Emigre may not be as experimental as it was in its early years, but it is a solid and respected venue for design discourse. Yet there was a point a few years ago (in its standard magazine format) when Emigre seemed to have somewhat lost focus and was leaning towards being a promotional vehicle for Emigre fonts and products. Your content was inconsistent and seemed random at times. Frankly, I presumed you were losing steam, and about to fold the magazine—and then, voila reinvention. Why have you so persistently clung to this imprint instead of moving elsewhere?

VanderLans: Where would I go? This has to be the best design gig in the world! But like every spoiled brat, I've come close to throwing in the towel a number of times. It's all the peripheral stuff, the distribution, production, subscription sales, ad sales, promotions, that usually makes me want to give it all up. Some of this was recently taken over by Princeton Architectural Press who now co-publishes Emigre. So I have more time to concentrate on the magazine itself, which helped me realize the latest "reinvention."

Heller: In the 1993 Cult of the Ugly I predicted Emigre would be a "blip in the continuum." While the phrase had a nice ring, it was nonetheless shortsighted. Emigre is an historical milestone and you have more than survived the style or legibility wars, you've triumphed. Yet looking back at the large format, experimental issues little remains today of that typographic audacity today. Perhaps Emigre's shift-changing began with Number 39 "Graphic Design: The Next Big Thing," wherein you address "the hype surrounding electronic publishing and its facilitator the Internet," but also introduced a surprisingly minimalist typographic design that belied (indeed challenged) your origins.

Everything must change, but, given Emigre's current incarnation, I wonder whether you actually have succumbed to your former critics finger wagging?

VanderLans: Perhaps we've survived because we've learned from our mistakes. I actually succumb to finger wagging more often than you think, and my "origins" are probably closer to the work I do now than the work I created during those so called "legibility wars."

But the subversion is still there, it just plays itself out on a much more subtle level. Emigre #66 was set in John Downer's Vendetta typeface, and that's not exactly your garden variety Venetian. Ask any traditional type designer. And talk about shortsighted phrases. I don't know who coined the phrase "The Legibility Wars," but whoever did was either unaware or meant to obscure the fact that those particular issues of Emigre were about much more than just legibility. Besides the experimental nature of the work that we showed, I was always drawn to featuring designers who chose to work for small clients, non profits, and cultural institutions, or designers who decided to teach or write, or those who made their own products and started small companies to disperse their own design products. I was very impressed that these designers were often forfeiting the high profile, big money jobs. They had certain social and political convictions and a need to associate with clients and collaborators they felt an affinity with. This way they were able to address small, likeminded audiences, as opposed to large faceless segments of the population. And that's why they afforded themselves such liberties in their designs. They understood their audiences and they communicated to them on a visually engaging level, and they had a high regard for the intelligence of their intended public. Of course, since the work looked rather unusual, it was quickly dismissed as being self-indulgent and breaking with tradition in a way that would hinder communication. In my opinion, it was the exact opposite. These designers had a heightened sense of who their audiences were and addressed them with the appropriate respect.

Heller: One of the criticisms centered on its viability in a marketplace that was indeed fairly conservative. The work that Emigre featured went against prevailing convention, and critics like myself could not see how it could be integrated into the proverbial mainstream.

VanderLans: Except for one or two latecomers to the scene, I don't think anybody ever considered that this kind of work was meant to be consumed by mass audiences. But the response to this work was always about how alien the work looked compared to common graphic design of the time, the kind that tried to appeal to universal values, and lowest common denominators. So the critics were usually comparing apples with pears. They would point out the flaws of this new work, but they ignored the context. They always seemed to be reasoning from the perspective of book typography, while the ideas and methodologies that upset them so much were rarely applied to the kind of readerly books that were always used as exemplary graphic design and typography.

Anyway, when people reduce this period down to "The legibility Wars" they really miss the point. It was as much about designers finding alternative spaces to work in, as it was about alternative typography.

Heller: I have a "mullet theory." When long hair was a sign of rebellion, wearers were actually in real danger of reactionary violence (see Easy Rider and Alice's Restaurant). Yet soon everyone started wearing their hair long (and coiffed), which gave way to the mullet—a stylized, commercialized, and aesthetically dumbed-down version of the original hippy look. Does this theory apply to Emigre—or Rudy VanderLans? When the methods and ideas Emigre spawned and chronicled became mainstream—thanks to its acceptance in design competitions and adoption by style mongers—did you feel, well, it was time to move on? In the beginning Emigre lead the pack, but at a certain point did you see that leadership eroding? Did you want to distance yourself from the mullet?

VanderLans: Most of all, I wanted to distance myself from some of my own failures, and perhaps the mullets amplified what those failures were. Looking back at the work that was produced during those years, there were a lot of misses. But that's what experimentation is all about.

By the early 80s my work had become completely stifled. It was probably functional, but it looked dead. Then there was this explosion of experimentation which loosened everything up. It allowed me to broaden my palette, and widen my horizon, and now I can approach design without a preconceived idea of what it should look like. And while the work may no longer resemble the extreme experiments of those formative years, it still retains many of its lessons.

Heller: I've long had the sense that you kept a cautious distance from totally promoting strict theoretical approaches, while at the same time accepting its value as part of the new design language. In the current Emigre, you state (and I'm paraphrasing) that some of this methodology, as applied to design writing, is cutting-and-pasting quotes of others' into dense discourse. In your role as editor of a publication known as a friend of "big T" Theory, how do you address this in contemporary design writing? Or stated another way, what critical models do you embrace for effective design criticism today?

VanderLans: The "critical model" that I embrace is me, and I'm not at all sure if it's effective. At times I feel like a fake. I read Robin Kinross's writing and in comparison I'm embarrassed about pretty much everything I've ever written or edited. I have no background in any of this. Effective design criticism? I have no idea what that is. But I love graphic design. And I love discussing it, and I love to understand it better, and in order to do so I ask a lot of pesky questions. That's the model I use. I'm not the one inspiring Kenneth FitzGerald or Jeffery Keedy or Lorainne Wild to write the essays that Emigre publishes. They usually propose the essays, and I'm more than happy to publish their writing because usually their writing makes me see things in new ways. They inspire me. I learn from them. My role in all this is to make sure that I understand what it is they are trying to say, which sometimes requires a lot of going back and forth, and then managing to make the work public by actually publishing it, which I think is my real strength.

Heller: In the current series of Emigres, one key design element is noticeably absent. Images. These books are designed functionally, even elegantly, but words (and perhaps word pictures) have all but replaced reproductions (with the notable exception of your memorial to Frank Heine section). Emigre was not only once rich in imagery, the image was the message—you practiced what you preached. I'm happy to read the essays without illustration

(in fact, most of these essays do not really require illustrations), but I also feel that something is skewed here. The words are placed in something of a vacuum. There is lot's of good talk about design as cultural engine (or not as the case may be), but little demonstration of it. What is your rationale for minimizing the image? Is this a response to the pervasive criticism of eye-candy or something more diabolical?

VanderLans: I understand that it's tempting to see these constant changes of Emigre magazine as reactions to what came before, and perhaps there's some truth in that, but there's much more at play. I'm in a position with Emigre to do as I please, so I try to exploit that as best I can. I think it's entirely valid for a design magazine to change its format to suit and amplify its content. Since our content has changed dramatically over time, I've played around with a number of formats. With our recent move towards more design writing, the paperback format seemed an obvious one to explore. I wanted to make a cheap trade paperback, and images simply didn't belong in that format.

Plus, right now, I find more interest in design discussions than design itself. There's a new group of young designers/writers such as Rob Giampietro, Dmitri Siegel, David Cabianca and Joshua Ray Stephens whose writing and ideas I really enjoy. I'm looking forward to seeing how and what they will contribute to design discourse. God knows we can use some new voices. Unfortunately, within the design press there's very little support for their kind of writing. There aren't enough magazines, and none pay enough to make it worthwhile for them to put in the time to sharpen their skills.

Heller: We've had a few conversations about the pros and cons of design blogs. You seem to be an avid observer who occasionally jumps into the fray. In Emigre #66 you address design blogs in your editorial and in an interview with SpeakUp founder Armin Vit, but I feel to some extent you are playing catch-up. I'm reminded of all the mail Emigre has published in the past, much of it concerning debates and commentaries that in retrospect read like blog postings. Do you in anyway feel that the blogs are making Emigre obsolete?

VanderLans: I think blogs are making a lot of design magazines obsolete. And everything must come to an end, I guess. But then I figure, Emigre never really fulfilled a huge need in the first place, so what's the harm in continuing?

Heller: It is interesting that you have not created an interactive site as an extension of Emigre. Are there plans?

VanderLans: Years ago, our webmaster at Emigre was keen on starting a blog, saying it would bring people to our website. This was during the days of bulletin boards. But I was never attracted to this format of discussion. I'm not a very quick thinker. Some people can rattle off ideas right off the top of their heads, and those are the people who enjoy blogs. I enjoy sitting down and reflecting for hours, days, and often still find I have nothing new to add. So don't hold your breath for an Emigre blog.

Heller: Despite increased blog discourse, I feel the same way Mr. Keedy does in #66. There is currently a surfeit of reheated discussions about style versus content, context versus lack-there-of, personal voice verses client aims, etc. He provides a witty yet accurate list of what "dumb questions" to avoid. Rudy, you have been through and

mediated much of this discourse. Is design the same "cultural force," you once described it when Emigre was young or are we in a kind of reinvention of the wheel-holding pattern?

VanderLans: I think design will always be a cultural force regardless of being in a holding pattern or not. Design is so all encompassing and ubiquitous, how is it ever not a cultural force?

But first of all I have to point out that it's an overstatement to say that I "mediated" the discourse. I may have helped facilitate the discourse, but that's as far as I'd like to go. I came to this whole postmodern/decontructivist era as a complete novice. In the early 80s I found myself making the same graphic gestures and felt the same kind of need to widen my graphic vocabulary—away from the simple choices of flush left or centered typography—as the people at Cranbrook. I saw Kathy McCoy give a lecture in Oakland in the late 80s and I felt an immediate kinship to the work. I noticed the similarities between their work and mine. But at Cranbrook they had arrived at this kind of work by reading Venturi, and Roland Barthes, etc. of whom I had never heard. My influence to break away from the mainstream ideas of what design should be came from Hard Werken, and Piet Schreuders. I eventually read Venturi and liked it, and tried reading Barthes and Derrida, etc., and gave up because I got nothing out of it. And I had no idea how to relate their writing to design. When visiting Cranbrook for a three-day workshop I was relieved when Scott Makela mentioned they had moved on to reading authors like Charles Bukowski, one of my favorite writers. I had no idea how to relate Bukowski to design either, but at least I could enjoy his writing. Actually Bukowski taught me how to look at LA as a photographer, but that's another story.

Heller: There are times when I think graphic design writers (myself included) are grasping at straws to find relevance for what we do as a broader "cultural force." We talk about involving "outsiders" in our universe by making what we do more than just trade talk. Actually, many of our writers understand and speak in other tongues. Yet the new series of Emigres is firmly focused on amplifying design -speak; do you believe there really is a viable way to break out of the insular into a broader cultural discussion?

VanderLans: I never aspired to make anything but a magazine solely for graphic designers. And I know it gets esoteric at times, but I'd rather not give up on that, because this is the level at which I enjoy investigating graphic design.

I've followed the discussions on DesignObserver about making graphic design more accessible to outsiders and raising people's awareness of graphic design, but that requires much more than changing the language in our design press. Actually I think a magazine like Print is fairly accessible to non-designers, yet I'm sure it's read almost primarily by designers. I believe that in order to raise the public's awareness and interest in graphic design we need to actively go out and address a larger audience. For that you need another two dozen writers or so like Rick Poynor, or you—writers who understand design and whose writing is accessible—to constantly pitch ideas for articles on graphic design to the editors of daily newspapers and weekly culture magazines. As it stands, every time I come across an article about graphic design in a mainstream, non-design publication (which rarely happens), I am usually so disappointed, that in my mind it brings into question everything else I read in those publications.

Heller: I have yet to see a new Emigre fill the "what's next?" vacuum. I think Dot Dot Dot is making an interesting niche for itself, but is not doing what Emigre did. Much of the chatter on the blogs is basically perpetuating the status quo (or repeating what has been said years ago). You have been a magnet for important developments in type and design, if not always as a creator then as a presenter, or as you say "a facilitator." You are currently taking a certain stand with Emigre, can you see down the road? Is SpeakUp the next big thing? Is there an approach to design-speak or design practice that can engender the excitement and argument? Or is this one of those periods of transition—a quiet before the storm?

VanderLans: Looking across the spectrum of design, the one thing that stands out for me is that currently there is no big "hero" designer or movement that shines brightly. One of the most ubiquitous people in design right now is not a designer, it's Rick Poynor, a design critic. He judges shows, publishes books, writes articles, gives lectures and keynote addresses, co-runs a blog, and is widely quoted. He's everywhere, and he raises a lot of interesting questions. In addition there are all these design blogs that are almost completely text based—lots of chatter and no pictures. I don't know what the significance of this is, but it looks to me like design is taking a back seat to all this. Or perhaps it's just minding its own business, doing what it's always done. Which reminds me; I always tell myself that the concerns such as you raise in your questions regarding design and design discourse and whether design is a "cultural force" or not, etc., and much of the stuff we publish in Emigre, is of interest to only a handful of design professionals. Most designers are far more concerned about design as a "commercial force." And in today's economic climate who can blame them? Although, I'm not convinced if focusing on the commercial will necessarily bring you riches. I know at Emigre we've always focused on the cultural, the subversive, the untried, and the financial rewards came nevertheless.

But to answer your question, today there are more books being published on graphic design than ever before. Besides the established book publishers there are now a number of publishers around the world who specialize in publishing graphic design books. And now there's all these blogs. I don't know what it all means. It's not exactly quiet, and I don't see any storms coming. It's more like we've reached this level of white noise that may be with us for a long time to come