



A Love Affair

Steven Heller's transition from the magazine's biggest fan to its preeminent contributor.



I STARTED READING *PRINT* when I was 17 years old. There were other influential magazines when I began my so-called career, fresh out of high school, in the 1960s—*Art Direction*, *Graphis*, and *Communication Arts*—but *Print* was my bible, and I could recite it, chapter and verse. My goal, like so many others just launching their professional careers, was to have the magazine publish a story devoted to my accomplishments.

Almost every time I designed anything—a magazine, poster, or flyer—I'd mail it to *Print* in the hope that someone in this esteemed higher echelon would spot my unbridled

talent and decide that I was more promising than the others the magazine celebrated.

I dreamed about receiving the following note:

*Dear Mr. Heller (may we call you Steve?):
Your work far surpasses anything we have seen.
Please allow us to kneel before your altar.*

*Sincerely,
The Editors*

Getting a feature article (I'd settle for even a brief mention) was like being plucked from the chorus line of designers and illustrators waiting to make it big—it was a sign of validation from the finder of new talent and chronicler of lost traditions. Yet issue after

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issue, year after year, nothing of mine was ever published. I waited. And waited...and waited. Even when my lone cover of *Screw* magazine was included in an AIGA humor exhibition, *Print* ignored me.

I slowly began to wonder whether, as a designer, I simply was not up to *Print*'s standard. (Although even now, I find that hard to admit.) My DIY typography and ersatz art direction for underground newspapers, which has a certain historical patina today, was of no interest whatsoever to the editors, and my crude illustrations and cartoons were not on par with the masters of realism and surrealism who were regularly featured.

In 1974, I joined *The New York Times* as Op-Ed art director and received a nodding glance from my favorite magazine, although it was because the *Times* had already been heralded for its groundbreaking illustration style developed by Louis Silverstein and J. C. Suarès, who was a *Print* contributing writer.

I eventually met Andy Kner, *Print*'s art director, who was also promotions art director at the *Times*. Once, we were discussing the design of political propaganda, and he suggested that I should write about it.

I finally saw my way into *Print* through the back door. Over Korean barbeque on West 43rd Street, I met with editor-in-chief Martin Fox, managing editor Carol Stevens, and Andy to discuss the story. They suggested I start with a little history for context and then

follow with profiles of contemporary designers who were working in the political arena. I was working on an exhibition entitled “Political Art” for the AIGA, so I thought it would be a good chance to focus on the same artists for the article. I would even be able to select my own design subjects and collect examples that proved my point.

I was excited—but also overcome by a wave of insecurity. Could I even write? It took me 18 months to turn in 1,500 words, and the story didn't appear in the magazine until many years later, so I guess that tells you something. Instead, *Print* published another piece, “The Late Great *Simplicissimus*,” based on an exhibition I curated at the Goethe House, for the September/October 1979 issue. My name had finally made it into the magazine, but I was so humbled by the experience that I waited an entire year before I even pitched another story. I eventually became a regular contributor in 1980, and since then, I have had at least one article in every issue.

In those early years, my articles included “Forgotten Illustrators,” which was later followed by “Forgotten Cartoonists” and “Forgotten Magazines”; an entire issue devoted to artists' sketchbooks; “Eastern European Illustrators”; and my perennial favorite, “Fascist Graphics,” which evolved into two books. I also wrote a fair share of profiles, including some firsts on Elliott Banfield, Matt Mahurin, Peter Sís, Chris Van Allesburg, Sarah Fanelli, and Bruce McCall.

Marty was also open to my idea for doing the first design-criticism column in *Print*, entitled “A Cold Eye.” Other columns followed, including “Magazine Watch” and “Separated At Birth.” Marty also encouraged me to write a few memoir essays. My current interview column, “Dialogue” (see p. 20), has been running for 15 years. Beginning with that first assignment, I've published more than 500 articles—large and small—about pop history, contemporary design, politics, and visual culture in *Print*. Though some are best forgotten, the editors have always encouraged me to cover design from my own admittedly left-field perspective.

Since Marty assumed the editorship in 1963, the editors of *Print* have defined the word “print” as a catchall for what I'd call “graphic popular culture,” which includes film, commercials, sound, theater, and now the web. The editorial team understands that some designers are not natural writers, and that some writers are not naturally adept at design, so their editorial shepherding is tough and opinionated. The process is rigorous—even draconian at times—but I've learned more going through *Print*'s editorial gauntlet than from any other publisher I've worked with. (Just don't touch this piece if you know what's good for you!)

What *Print* (and particularly Marty) ultimately provided me was a platform on which to grow as a design writer and follow my various curiosities. For this I am eternally grateful. Marty (and later editors Joyce Rutter Kaye and Emily Gordon) did not accept every story I offered. For each published piece, I'd pitch two or three totally different ideas. But I was nonetheless allowed great latitude in the themes I covered.

When *Print* began 70 years ago, it was a magazine for printers and typographers. During the '50s, it was a trade magazine filled with arcane factoids and articles. But for the past 30-plus years, *Print* has transcended the trade and raised the level of design writing and scholarship. Without this magazine, without its editors and writers, and without its standards, contemporary design journalism would still likely be press releases written by the promotions department. How do I love *Print*? I can count many ways. P

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