

A conversation with:

# Steven Heller

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“I think Graphic Design is a major part of our visual culture. And I’m just trying to say to students who are authorial that what they do with that skill of designing can extend into the cultural fabric.”

—Steven Heller

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# A Conversation with Steven Heller

Steven Heller is co-chair of the design Master of Fine Arts degree program at School of Visual Arts, together with Lita Talarico. He is also Senior Art Director for *The New York Times Book Review* and is a contributing editor for *Print, Eye, I.D.* and *Baseline*. Steven has written around 100 books on graphic design, illustration and political art. He received the AIGA Medal for Lifetime Achievement, among other awards. Creative Process Research (CPR) is an academic forum, connecting people from all parts of the art world, in a mutual exchange of ideas and experiences connected to the creative process. CPR is advised by Malcolm Grear, of Malcolm Grear Designers, and RISD design chair emeritus. CPR interviewed Steven Heller at his office at *The New York Times*.

**CPR: Please share a memory from your youth that shaped the person you are today.**

SH: I have so many memories that I've tried to suppress all my life. I'll tell you a memory that formed part of my professional life. When I was fifteen, I was doing illustrations – cartoons – and the person I admired most was Jules Feiffer (but I loved *Mad Magazine* and that kind of thing) and I took my work to see somebody who was then a very well known, famous art director for a magazine that I loved, called *Evergreen Review*. I remember leaving my portfolio there and when I came back to pick it up there was this specter in the background. Light was coming from behind and he looked very dark. I could see his eyes and they looked scornful. I picked up my portfolio and it looked like nobody had touched it. And, from that moment on, I said I would always see people who brought their portfolios to me.

And I've done that for the last 35 years. Usually six people a week, people who are not engaged in my school, not people who I work

with on a regular basis, just new portfolios with people attached to them.

Ironically, years later, I became the Art Director of that magazine, and I ended up knowing that guy, and I used to tell him what he had done to me. And then he died. Somehow it all came around again. So that's that memory.

The other memories are much more primal. My parents used to – and still do, even in their 80s – go away a lot. And they used to leave me home a lot, alone. I learned how to fend for myself. And what I used to do to compensate for the loneliness was work. Not necessarily on school, because I was a terrible student, but I would make projects for myself. I still do that.

**CPR: May I ask about your ethnicity, and how your background influences your work?**

SH: Well, I was born Jewish, a New York Jew. I kind of exploit that as much as I can, in the same way Woody Allen does. Since being bar mitzvahed I haven't been a practicing anything. Except, you

know, I get pissed if there's anti-Semitism around me. And I try to point out that most people are anti-Semitic just by nature. I know it's a joke, but it's also part serious. I'm obsessed with the Holocaust. I've written a lot about that and I'm writing a big book now, called *Branding the Totalitarian State*.

Yesterday a very funny thing happened. A woman who I'm working with on another book, who happens to be black, was at my place. I have a separate apartment just for my library and working collections. Things that I use for books. She was there and she was going through a bunch of materials and it was right next to where I've been putting all this Nazi stuff that I've been accumulating – I have to work from original artifacts – I can't work from reproductions. If I'm using something in a book, eight of ten times, it's the real thing that I either own or have borrowed, or it's a transparency of a real thing, but not a second generation. So there were these two things sitting there, one of them happened to be this Hitler Youth armband. I had written a review for *The Times* on

“Some create to solve problems. Some create because they feel the muse. Some do both. But I’m not even a good craftsman. I’m an art director; I’m not a designer.”

a book about Hitler Youth. I was quite interested in it. And I got their handbook – the original handbook. This woman was sitting there going through all this stuff and I knew that she put this off to the side. And then I went downstairs yesterday, the day after she did it and I couldn’t find the material. And I thought, “Well, maybe she picked it up by mistake and put it in her bag and went to scan.” So I left her a message on the phone. And she called back and told my son, “Tell Steve that I did accidentally take it and I put it in my bag, which is see-through, and I was walking down the street and somebody just said to me, ‘F— You!’” And so, that was a real Woody Allen moment.

When I was a kid – and I’ve written about this in one of my books – I used to have this Nazi flag and I’d wear it like a cape and it drove my grandmother insane. But she never let on until much later in my life why it upset her. And it upset her because she had lost some family in the Lodz Ghettos. And when I learned that, it changed my attitude. But I had no sense what this iconography was all about, it just was cool. So, for many years, I wouldn’t even touch this

kind of material and then I started writing more about it, and it became an excuse both to research but also stimulate this fetish I have. And, I admit, it’s a fetish for the power of this imagery. To feel the evil in your hand is really amazing. And I have lots of stuff – lots of stuff – that I buy from Neo-Nazis. I get it from people who really know what they have.

So, my ethnicity, for what it’s worth, is New York and, you know, I’m Jewish. I’ve been married three times and they’ve all been Catholic. My son isn’t raised Jewish. He’s not raised anything, but he understands the Holocaust.

I write about things that interest me. I’ve written about posters in Tel Aviv before the state of Israel was formed. I have a project working now on Zionist posters of the ’50s. I’m not sure where that’s going to go yet. I have written something online, where, a woman who I was once very supportive of did this poster show of pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli posters. I just felt there was an undercurrent of anti-Semitism and I got very indignant. We’ve been at each other’s throats ever since.

**CPR: Is there is a spiritual side to you that carries over to your art? How do your moral values carry over to your art?**

SH: Well I don’t call this art. I’m not an artist. If I were an artist, I wouldn’t be an art director. I’m somebody who likes to be involved in art, but I don’t make my own. I work with people who are terrific artists, whether they are artists in the high sense of the word or the low sense of the word. They create. Some create to solve problems. Some create because they feel the muse. Some do both. But I’m not even a good craftsman. I’m an art director; I’m not a designer.

Although I’ve designed, I’m not a very good designer because I have limitations. It’s like if you were born in Germany and you learned German until the second grade, came here, and spoke only second-grade German, that’s all you would be. You would be very limited. And to design, that’s me. I never studied design; I always worked at design. So my academic level is second grade, third grade, fourth grade. I have more instinct. And with design,



unlike verbal language, you can do it on instinct, but it's limited. So, I don't think about myself as an artist.

Moral issues? They always come into play. I'm writing something right now about a poster that has racist overtones. My knee-jerk response I wrote immediately when I saw the thing. Then I started questioning various African-Americans on whether this thing was indeed really racist. And a few of them said "no, but it's insensitive." And I'm writing about that. At first it was steeped in indignation but now it's more scholarly – or more academically critical. Things like that occur. I hate George Bush. I will always hate George Bush. And I inject that into my classes. I once asked the President of SVA if he felt that was all right, because a friend of mine who taught at Yale – not Yale design, but Yale undergraduate English – he said you cannot inject your personal point of view. I have an uncle who used to teach at Columbia, and a cousin who teaches Constitutional law at Columbia, and, you know, there is a fine line you must draw. My president said, "Sure as long as you don't penalize them." And I make

sure, if they disagree, they have to talk about it, but I do inject it. And I sometimes do it in a very snotty, arrogant, sarcastic way, but that's for them to figure out.

**CPR: Please talk about your leftist leanings during your career at *The New York Free Press* and your work for *Mother Jones* magazine. Have your ideals changed over time or have they become stronger? What steps do you take to achieve your ideals?**

SH: Well, I only did one story, maybe two stories, for *Mother Jones*. I was never really involved in that group. *Free Press* was my first real job. Yes, it happened to be left. Yes, it happened to be at a time when being left was fashionably correct. It was Vietnam, civil rights, sex, drugs, rock and roll. I came out of a liberal background. My parents were always Democrats and voted the liberal line. And I came out of New York. This uncle I mentioned, he was once Communist, but I never knew that until much later. And his Communist leanings changed considerably.

Fortunately, they didn't go in the way of *Commentary*, you know, old left neoconservative. So my leanings are the same. I tend to be very idealistic and not as pragmatic as I might. But, at the same time, even in those days I was pragmatic. To the point where, while all my buddies in 1968 were voting against Hubert Humphrey – not for Nixon, but against Hubert Humphrey. I voted in my first election that I could vote in for Hubert Humphrey and in fact campaigned for him, even though I didn't particularly like him in relation to Lyndon Johnson. But I did not want Richard Nixon in office. And I knew from my past what that was all about. I had done a book called *Red Scared*, which is all about the McCarthy era. It's a goofy book; it's not serious in the sense that it's not scholarly. But it is taking a broad-view look of how graphics played a role in that fearsome time. And you know, my kid when he was two years old, we used to have him say, "George Bush is a bad man." And he goes to a school that is very left. In fact Angela Davis used to go to this school – at their 75th



“I used to think there was a black and white in politics, and there isn’t.”

Anniversary, they had somebody from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade come todder out and talk.

I’m not a dogmatic leftist. If I were to march in a peace march, which I can’t do because of my job here – we’re not allowed because I belong to the newsroom – but, when I used to, I wouldn’t march with the Palestinians. And there were lots of groups that I didn’t want anything to do with under the Left banner, and that’s what I always felt was a problem of the Left. It’s too inclusive in terms of things that we don’t want. In fact I did a book, years ago, with a guy named Ralph Shikes. He was, at one time, Henry Wallace’s press manager, when Wallace ran in 1949 or ’48 for President. He was Roosevelt’s Vice President for a while. And he was looking out at the crowd, the masses screaming his name, and he turned to my friend Ralph and said, “Ralph, if we win I’m leaving the country.”

So, I used to think there was a black and white in politics, and there isn’t, and it disturbs me. I lean more towards the ideal and less toward the pragmatic in that sense.

**CPR: How have the environments where you have lived influenced you – your sense of design, your creative sense?**

SH: Well, I’ve always lived in New York. I briefly lived in Sweden when I was fourteen, and we have a house up in northwestern Connecticut, which is near people like Seymour Chwast, who’s my best friend. Other than that, environment is environment. Being a New Yorker makes you cynical and street-smart and nervous and makes you aware of things that you wouldn’t necessarily be aware of elsewhere. But at the same time, there are so many people I know who come from other locales, whether in the U.S. or abroad, who have very different points of view, and interesting ones. The answer to that is, one is stimulated in New York but you can be stimulated anywhere. I consider myself very provincial. Being in New York makes me very narrow minded in many ways. And that is a kind of provincial sensibility. Whereas New York, being this melting pot, has people, my students included, who

come from all over the place – a very different open view, which I find very appealing.

**CPR: What is one of the most interesting stories from your career path?**

SH: I have a bunch. In my book *Graphic Design Reader* I kind of talk about them. I was involved at one point with the mafia. I was too young to know how stupid I was. I think anytime you’re deeply involved in a life activity, things happen to you, and things rub off on you. I remember being involved in an armed robbery. I used to work during the day at the *New York Free Press* and, at night, I’d work as an usher at a movie theater on 57th street, because *The Free Press* didn’t pay me a lot of money, and neither did the ushering, but at least it paid. At *The Free Press*, we’d often go for many weeks without payment. So I was at this theater. It was a fun theater. It was Joseph E. Levine’s Premiere Theater, he was a producer. He only showed one movie for six months at a time and this one happened to be *Lion in the Winter*

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with Peter O’Toole and Catherine Hepburn. Great Movie, but after 50 times seeing it, it loses its charm.

I remember the head usher, the manager of the theater, was this kooky guy. He looked like Karl Marx, and I guess that’s why I enjoyed being there. He looked like Karl Marx during most of the year and Santa Claus during Christmas. And he’d wear a tuxedo. Every night he’d come out and say, “Who’s gonna come with me to the bank to drop the money in.” And one night I remember we let some guys in the theater – they said their girlfriends were in the theater and they wanted to wait for them. And I knew we made a mistake, but we let these two guys in. They were normal looking people, you know, they looked like you. And when the guy came around the corner and said, “Who’s gonna come with me,” I knew what was going to happen and they pulled out two guns. One I remember was a Lugar. I just saw it. They told us to turn around and walk. I thought it was over for us.

**CPR: So, you weren’t actually part of the armed robbery.**

SH: No, I was a victim of the armed robbery, and I was a victim of another armed robbery at another time.

I used to be the Art Director of *Screw*. And there, too, we would deal with a lot of cash. *Screw*, in addition to being what I consider a highly political magazine, politicizing sex, was also a venue for prostitutes to sell little space ads to get work, and they’d come in on Wednesday and bring cash, so the office was full of money. Al Goldstein was the editor – a flamboyant, crazy guy. And we had started a magazine called *Mobster Times*. It was a kind of a humor satire magazine about political crime; Watergate was bubbling at that time and we also took it from the point of view of the Mob, which is a longer story, in any case.

As our props, we used to photograph ourselves doing mobster-like things and we had weapons, real ones. And we’d dress with Al Capone hats and stuff. I was 18 or something, and I’d walk around the office with a

shoulder holster and this .32. I had a couple of rifles next to my desk and Al Goldstein and I would play Cops and Robbers with these guns. They had firing pins but they were never loaded.

I came up from where my office was, all the way in the back, and I saw a guy, pointing a gun into Al Goldstein’s office. The first thing that jumped into my mind was not “there is some danger,” but that he found another playmate. So, I just walked up there with a big grin on my face – fortunately I was not wearing the gun. This other guy comes out from behind the door and grabs me and puts a gun in my nose, and I can see the bullets. He throws me into Goldstein’s room, and there are 30 people on the floor, including a lot of the prostitutes. All I remember is Al Goldstein taking off his Rolex surreptitiously and hiding it under his father. His father was the messenger. And then they left. First we called the mob to come in. And they did a policing action – they questioned us all. Then we called the cops. And the cops came. Ultimately, it turned out another family was

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pissed off about something Al Goldstein had written. So that's that story.

**CPR: Please talk about your role-models in the past, not limited to artists. Also, which artists are you friends with currently who had some influence on you? What struck you about them?**

SH: Brad Holland, the illustrator, is the person who changed my life majorly. I met him when I was 17 and I was just starting to publish a little magazine. We met through an ad in the *Village Voice*. He basically taught me what design was. He was my school, as far as that went. To get the real flavor of it you have to read the piece “My Mentor” in the *Graphic Design Reader*.

But there are lots of people I'm influenced by in many ways. My wife, for instance, Louise Fili; she's one of the most elegant designers I know. She's fantastic. I look at what she does and I look at the fact she even has her own business and has had it for 17 years. It's really admirable because I couldn't go off and do my own business. I can do a lot of things, but I need to be protected.

And when you go into business you're not protected, except through the laws of business. But she's also just a brilliant designer.

So I learned a lot from her. I learned that I was not a good designer. But I also learned what good design was. Seymour Chwast is my best friend. We've worked together on a lot of projects. I admire him greatly.

When I knew Paul Rand, even though his work was not the kind of work I would do by any stretch of the imagination, I still admired him greatly. There are lots of people that just walk through the door and you can admire them.

Christoph Neiman, whose work is out in the hallway there, I think is amazing. Every time I look at his work I'm inspired. Not inspired to do it, because I can't do it, but inspired just to know that I can use him.

I love film. My son wants to be a filmmaker. I encourage that. So there are lots of filmmakers who turn me on. I was just watching *The Third Man* on TV last night. Orson Welles, you know, he's the *crème de la*

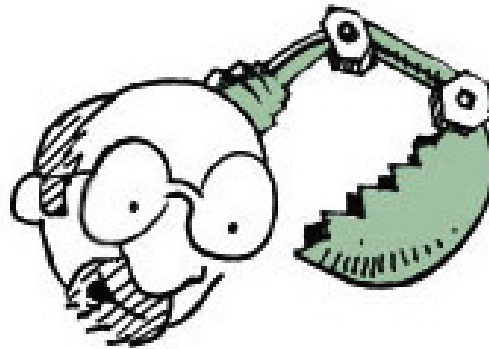
*crème*. Truffaut, all these guys who can tell stories. Phillip Roth is my favorite author. But there are other authors I read and enjoy.

Art Spiegelman is a very dear old friend. If not for my wife, I don't think *Maus* would have been published, because she was the Art Director of Pantheon at that point and they had already rejected it, but she brought it back. I've known Art for over 30 years and, every time I listen to him – I happened to see him on TV the other day – I'm just so amazed how articulate and erudite he is. He's amazing. The only thing wrong with him is he smokes, *ad naseum*. I once had him at one of my conferences and the only requisite was that he had to have the cigarette. I'm willing to lessen my life by three days to have him speak.

**CPR: Do you have any favorite books on design, typography or art in general?**

SH: I don't have favorite books on those things. There are lots of things that I read and have read. W.A. Dwiggins's writings, I did an exhibition of Dwiggins's work, so I was reading a lot of Dwiggins.

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I'M A TRAWLER.

I enjoy that. I enjoy Paul Rand's writing. He used to send me things before they would be published or he would publish them in journals that I edited. But, they're not storybooks. You can learn a lot. But even the new Philip Meggs book, for example – I started reading it, his posthumous book – there are things that I wince at. Although I think it's a very important book. And I'm sure people wince at things I write, as well. In fact I wince at my own things.

I don't think this is an area that has reached the pinnacle of its literary promise. I don't know whether it ever will. Natalia Ilyin wrote a book on meanings of modernism and basically it turned out to be an autobiography using modernism as a kind of glue, and I'm going to review it for *Eye Magazine*. I liked it a lot. I winced a lot at the beginning and then I just found she was making connections – human connections – that were very interesting to me. But, for pure enjoyment, I'll read Phillip Roth and I'll still learn an awful lot. I was trying to think the other day about books that I had read because I try to read one every three weeks, from cover to cover, and that

doesn't always work. I read a book called *War Trash*, which was just wonderful. It's a book by a Chinese author about Communist Chinese prisoners in American prison camps during the Korean War. And it's just a brilliant, brilliant book. And I read Jonathan Safran Foer's most recent book, which was fun to read. And I remember reading *Bee Season* and enjoying that. So there are a variety of things. If you can catch me on the first 20 pages, I'm caught. If you can't, then I can't do it.

Graphic design books you read as work. And even mine, I try to make them enjoyable. I tell classes, “Read it! You gotta read it. This is your job.” If you want to read for enjoyment maybe you'll find something. Who knows?

**CPR: How do you gather your source material, most notably the *Merz to Emigré* book?**

SH: I was working with a researcher who actually works [at the *Times*] who dug up materials that I wouldn't have been able to dig up about Surrealism and modern art. My areas of interest have always been German. That's how I started in

this field: by doing an exhibition of German satiric art from the turn of the century.

So I read. I buy. I go to museums. I go to research centers. I talk to people who have been involved in these areas. *Merz to Emigré*, I used material from a few different private collections. The book is really a bunch of essays that make one book. But the first section was all the research I had done 25-30 years ago. The section on “alternative publications” – I lived through it. So, it's a whole jumble.

**CPR: Does your wife help your creative process and vice-versa?**

SH: I don't know whether I help her creative process, but I'm inspired by her. And the fact is, once I've written a book and I hand it over to her, which we're doing right now, I just can't wait to see what she and her collaborators – she has an assistant – come up with, which is not me. I can give some guidelines. How she interprets what I'm doing is very significant. Sometimes it works very brilliantly. Sometimes we get into little tussles. But ultimately it's a two-party process. I'll research



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and I’ll write, and she’ll research and she’ll design – particularly in the Italian Art Deco book, which I only did as a kind of birthday present for her, because she’s a super Italiphile and she wanted excuses to go Italy and dig up things. So it’s kind of like archeology. She went to Lazzaroni. They were very open with their archive. She went to the Depero Museum. You find different ways of getting things.

**CPR: What is your primary role as an editor, for example, in the *Education* series of books? What do you look for when selecting which essays should be included?**

SH: Well, in the *Education* series, it originally started as the *Education of a Graphic Designer* and I just wanted different takes on how people looked at teaching. How people taught. How people received the information. It really stemmed from a conference that I put on called *How We Learn What We Learn*, then it became *How Teach What We Teach*.

The conference was the stimulus for that book and I used some of the papers that were given in that book, and then asked other people

to write things or give me things they have written. I tend to look at these things as kind of receptacles. There are a lot of people who write in various directions on this theme and I see myself as filtering them and making them accessible. All the other *Education* books follow that basic idea. Just get different voices and put them out in the world.

**CPR: Is it more about scope than depth, in that sense?**

SH: Well it has to have some depth. If it was just scope it would be a vast wasteland, but vast. No, it’s both. I want material that says something new about the obvious and I want people to talk about things that are not so obvious. I’ll do editing; somebody will send me something and I’ll read it and, from a conceptual point of view, I’ll say whether it works or it doesn’t work or how it could work better. I might even go in and do some real heavy lifting, but I don’t do strict line editing. Which is why I love editors. They do all that dirty work that makes things better. When you’re talking about an editor there’s the conceptual editor and then there’s the functional editor.

And I’m not a copy editor. I’m not a backfield editor. I’m just bringing it in. I’m a conceptual editor, but I’m also a trawler. It’s an extension of editing journals, like the *AIGA Journal* or, now, *AIGA Voice* online.

I like to give people the opportunity to do things, but the opportunity can only go so far because a really good line editor will help make copy better. What I do is just invite them to join in, make sure the material is suitable, or adequate, hand it over to a managing editor or copy editor and hopefully they will make it better. If they don’t, you know, it just means somebody’s got a printed piece where they might not have had one before.

**CPR: You’ve written about trends in graphic style with Seymour Chwast, and about the use of handwriting in design in particular. Now that we are fully in the digital age, could you comment on the role of hand-crafted elements in design today?**

SH: It’s just another option, basically. It’s fun to look at from a stylistic point of view. It goes counter to the more sterile, computer-driven, grid-driven

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work, but it’s just an alternative. This book came out two years ago. I think the paperback edition will be available shortly [*Handwritten* by Steven Heller and Mirko Illic].

It’s old. People are doing it now and it’s this kind of style that when it’s done well, it’s done well, otherwise its just part of the flow of style, the wave of style.

But I do think that nothing has really come along since the outset of the computer revolution that is significantly and iconically different. There’s nothing that’s pointing to a new direction. I’m not going to do it because that’s what young people do. Somebody else is going to have to do this and it’s going to have to be noticed somehow. I mean, there are these directions. If you look at vinyl toys, for example. Its huge now, this industry. And it’s wonderful. I’m totally seduced by vinyl or the little plastic toys that are made by illustrators, and designers and artists. Gary Baseman is probably one of the bigger ones. I just did an interview with the owner of Kid Robot, in fact, which is down in Soho. It’s, like, I wish I had started on this from the beginning because

there is such a richness here to write a history about. It’s still young. It’s only about five to ten years old, but it’s because something that’s beyond the computer. Even though they’re all mass-produced, it’s about mass-producing limited editions. And it’s this bridge between art and sculpture, and functional toy making, functional art.

**CPR: What practical steps do you take when solving a design or creative problem?**

SH: I just pray I have the right phone number in my Rolodex. I’ll think about things. I’ll do some conceptualizing, but mostly an art director calls somebody else. So, I’ve got to call the right people, but, at the same time, not the same people all the time – and I’ve been getting into that rut lately. Because time is limited, because I want to be sure of something, which doesn’t mean the solutions are predictable. I just had somebody do something, and the solution was wonderful, and I wouldn’t have predicted it at all, but it’s one of the same people I go to all the time because I know that person is going to come through.

**CPR: Do you agree with such classifications as right-brain or left-brain? How would you describe your thinking.**

SH: I don’t know enough about those cognitive classifications. I can never remember which side to put the fork on. I constantly have to ask Louise which side, and she gets mad at me. I can’t do mathematics; lately I’ve had a hard time remembering anything. I’ve always wanted to learn languages. I took French for eight years and can’t speak a word. Practiced the piano for seven years and can’t play a note. So whatever brain that is. I think it’s no brain.

**CPR: Your role at the *Times* bears largely on connecting the right person with the right job, for example, the illustrations in the *Times* book review. So, what is your process for deciding who you should connect with a job?**

SH: Sometimes it’s just expedience. Something comes up, I read it, or I read a summary of it and I know that I have 20 people in my stable who can handle anything. They’re just a great repertory. It’s kind of like, going



“I’m literally an author, but I don’t consider myself a design author. If I were a design author, I would be creating a total project; instead, I rely on others. I’m a design producer, but not an author.”

back to Orson Welles, when he had the Mercury Theater he had a whole bunch of people who could play any role. I was watching Joseph Cotton yesterday – he played one role here, one role there, he played, in a Hitchcock movie, an evildoer. That’s what it’s all about. It’s about looking at the personae and matching a character to a part and hopefully that character can pull off the part. There are certain people who I know can’t do political conceptualizing, so I keep them in the fiction area. There are some people who can only do portraits and won’t do anything stridently satiric. You know those things. You get to know that stuff. But what’s interesting is to try and give work to people where you’re not just pigeonholing them; you’re not putting them in a box.

I’ve had artists who’ve argued with me that I was putting them in their box and my argument was, “Well, I can’t see that you’re going to do anything else.” And we’ve parted company. And they’ve gone on to do other things. That’s the process. You kind of intuit things. You look at things in a very practical or

quantifiable way. Sometimes, it’s those things you can’t quantify at first that become the best.

**CPR: Regarding the MFA program at the School of Visual Arts, how do you get students to think differently? You once said that you want them to develop ideas based on their thoughts; ultimately, you want them to do come out as ‘design authors.’ What do you mean by that, and do you consider yourself a design author?**

SH: I’m literally an author, but I don’t consider myself a design author. If I were a design author I would be creating a total project; instead, I rely on others. I’m a design producer, but not an author.

In the MFA program, presumably, people come into the program understanding what our idea is. Right now, our biggest success, which has raised the bar extremely high, maybe even too high, is Deborah Adler who designed the prescription drug packaging for Target. It just was in the *New York Times Magazine* section this week and *Time* two weeks ago as the most important design invention, or one of

them, of 2005.

It started as her thesis. It started as an idea.

The students are given this mandate: they have to create a product that can go to market. They have to understand the audience. It can’t be an art project, although art can be a part of it, or art can be a result of it. They have to be able to quantify that audience. Even if that audience is only ten people, they still have to determine who it is. It has to be for more than them. Which means, they have to do a considerable amount of research to get to that point. And they have to be able to define and prove that this thing doesn’t exist, that there’s a real value in it. It can’t just be a blue-sky exercise. There has to be a certain amount of functionality inherent in the project.

And some designers don’t think that way. Some designers don’t want to think that way, even some who get into our program, even though we *quiz* them about it. They have to understand what they’re getting into because it’s a major investment on their part. It’s not always easy. Often its surprising what people do

“Ultimately, they’re learning something. I think what they end up learning is a certain confidence in their ability to create from themselves, rather than just solve problems and listen to creative directors tell them what to do.”

come up with, and wonderfully so. Sometimes the people you think will do the least, do the most and visa-versa. But it’s a process. Ultimately, they’re learning something. I think what they end up learning is a certain confidence in their ability to create from themselves, rather than just solve problems and listen to creative directors and art directors tell them what to do. And at the same time they meet a lot of people, like Milton Glaser, who teaches a wonderful class, Stefan Sagmeister and Warren Lehrer, and Bonnie Siegler, and they learn how these other people think. And some of them become influences and some of them are just people passing in the night as they go through their lives.

**CPR: You also said that students should be told stories that inspire and excite. You were speaking of a graphic design history class, but it seems the idea can be applied more generally, as well. Can you share an anecdote regarding this?**

SH: It was about a design history class and how design history isn’t really taught as a discipline. You

know, someone came up to me and said I should really start a design history MFA program. And I said, “no.” And the reason is, there are no jobs. Nobody wants it. And you can’t just beat yourself against a wall because somebody coming into an MFA program has to pay 25,000 bucks a year, minimum. So, don’t give them nothing. There has to be some reason for them to come in. They’ll learn, of course, and they’ll learn how to communicate. Maybe they’ll become writers, but in this particular field, at the moment, it has to be embraced by art criticism and art history, where there are jobs: academic and gallery and museum curatorial jobs. That was my response.

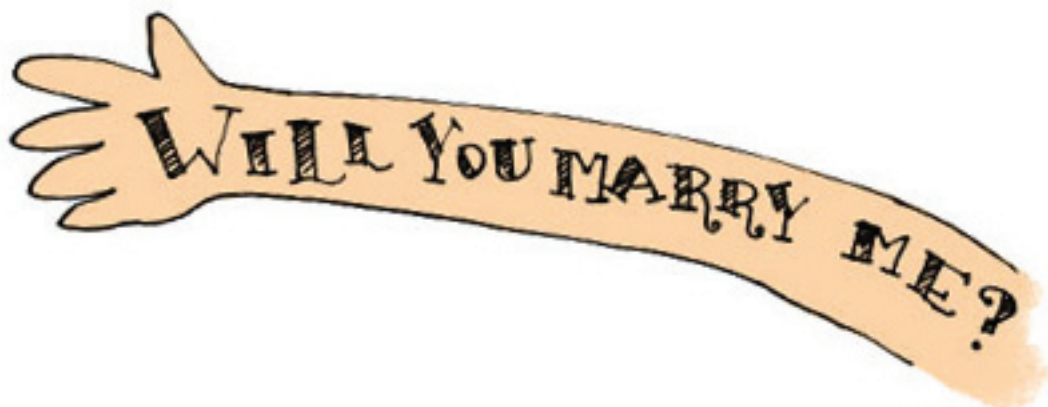
We give two, maybe even three design history classes in the MFA program. They’re short, they’re small things, like I do a seven-week seminar and I offer three extra weeks to the students if they want to come in on a Saturday. And it’s telling stories. It’s usually telling stories based on the books that I’ve done or I’m doing. So I’ll do something on *Branding the Totalitarian State* or *Merz to Emigré* or I’ll do something

on the ’60s, or I’ll do something on the ’39 World’s Fair – which I did a book on – but that comes out of just loving that period and the inventions that were created by designers at that time. Overall, everybody has a story to tell.

Stefan Sagmeister’s class is about touching somebody’s heart. And it may sound almost greeting-cardish, but it’s not. They have to do three projects. One is touch someone’s heart that you know, one is touch somebody’s heart that you don’t know and one is touch an amazing number of hearts – and, last year, one of our students did this thing, which was great for the school: she made a poster of all the security guards in the school and their little biographies, because no one knows who they are, they’re anonymous.

She’s a transfer student from Harvard, and she’s just terrific and she did that wonderful thing. This year one of the students for her first project, touch somebody you know, created a series of posters that she put all around her home down on the Lower East side or wherever, and it was asking her boyfriend to marry her. You know, he slowly sees

“Stefan Sagmiester’s class is about touching somebody’s heart. One of the students created a series of posters asking her boyfriend to marry her. It was great, you know.”



these posters happening until the crescendo. And it was great, you know.

**CPR: How would you respond to this quote from Mark Twain: “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education?”**

SH: Well, I never did. I mean, I was thrown out of SVA. I was thrown out of, well, kind of left NYU. But I wrote a piece recently called “Me Feral Designer” – I think it’s on the internet – it was in *Eye* magazine but it’s also connected to the AIGA Philadelphia Revolution Conference because I gave it as a keynote speech.

I feel like it used to be, “I never let any education get in the way of what I could learn otherwise,” but everything is an education. That said, I miss an awful lot of the formal stuff that I really wish I had. Don’t know how much I would have retained it. Don’t know how much would be of interest to me today. I When I was in high school I studied Russian literature and I rarely use that now. But I miss it and I feel diminished by it. So, I think Twain was a great wit. And his witticisms were also truisms and there is so

much in education that is done by rote, that has no real meaning to you as an individual. I went to a bunch of schools. I went to a Military school, where I learned a lot. I went to a prep school, where I learned a lot. I went to a Progressive school, where I learned a lot. It’s just I never made it in college. Fortunately, it hasn’t interfered with my basic life, but not going to college has interfered with other parts of my life. I never learned how to drink.

**CPR: You also stress the importance of graphic design in the context of society and culture. Can you elaborate on that?**

SH: Sometimes it’s just a phrase. I mean, I think graphic design is a major part of our visual culture. And I’m just trying to say to students who are authorial that what they do with that skill of designing can extend into the cultural fabric, as Deborah Adler’s piece certainly proves, and others have also proved. You know, we’re hit with it everyday. It’s obvious. What I’m saying is just obvious. But when you’re at an undergraduate level you don’t look at that way, you just look at it as “I gotta

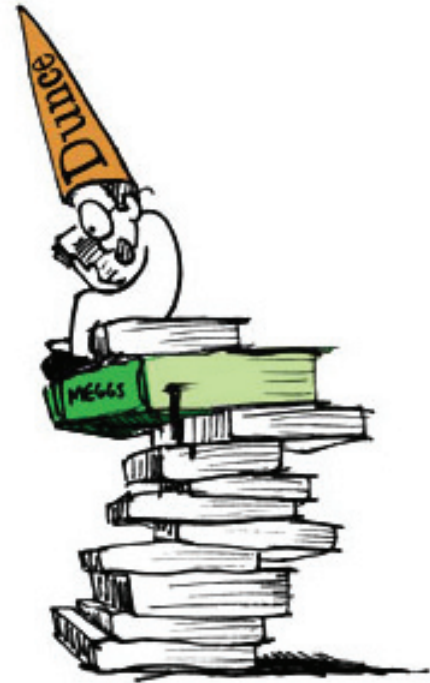
learn my programs and I gotta learn to put my pages together, I gotta learn how to make web stuff,” and they don’t look at a larger picture. So I usually say it merely as a bromide.

**CPR: What do you hope readers will take from the book *Citizen Designer*, and did you intend that book as a call to action?**

SH: It wasn’t a call to action, *per se*, because I don’t want to impose. I never want to impose my beliefs on anybody else. That’s the paradox of being a liberal. I’d be much better suited as a fascist. Seriously.

I was reading something the other day where Lenin was talking to Pavlov. It never even dawned on me that they were contemporaries or that they would meet each other. And Lenin said to Pavlov, “How can you do for me, for our society, what you’ve done for dogs? There’s been too much individualism under the Czar,” which is an odd thing to say. But he was looking for a society that marched in step and served the State, because the State would provide the best hope for humanity, as opposed to the

“It used to be, ‘I never let any education get in the way of what I could learn otherwise,’ but everything is an education. That said, I miss an awful lot of the formal stuff that I wish I had, really wish I had.”



bourgeois tendencies of the Czarist state. There are always a lot of complications.

Anyway, the book *Citizen Designer* was originally going to be called *The Education of a Citizen Designer*. It was just going to be that and we were going to have syllabi in there as well as essays. It turned out the publisher didn't think it would work as an *Education of...* book. And again, this is how a variety of people think about these particular subjects. And then we broke it down into: citizenship and social relationships, citizenship and professional relationships, citizenship and cultural relationships. And there are very different ways of dealing with it that overlap sometimes and intersect. But it wasn't a call to action. What it was was simply a way of stimulating thinking. If you could read this and lock into one or two of the ideas, positively or negatively, you can talk about it and expand your horizon. There are a lot of designers who do things that are not design related, but social related. And we're just trying to say, "Integrate the two if you can."

**CPR: You have said that you encourage the sharing and building of very different viewpoints. This suggests a lot about you as a person. How do you encourage dialogue, knowing that people are going to disagree?**

SH: Oh, disagreeing is fine. The disagreements that I don't like are on the web. I hate blogs, even though I encourage our students to blog. I'm really not a fan of *Speak Up* or *Design Observer*. Everyone has to say something, even if they said it before. And that kind of stuff I really have no tolerance for. But in a classroom, it's a Socratic thing, you throw out an idea and people are supposed to respond. That's how you stimulate thought. I wish I did it better. I wish I knew how to do it better.

Design students tend not to be as verbal or vocal, going back to left-brain, right brain, or whatever brain it is, that forced them into a visual communication. You just lay things on the table. And I continually say, "Look, I am not right all the time. So hit me. Hit me with what you have to say." They might say something that

gets under my skin and then we can argue. It hasn't happened that much to be honest.

Last year, some students of mine put together a magazine pegged to the election. And I figured the majority, if not all of them, would be left-of-center. They invited everybody to take part; there would be no editing. They would just take what somebody would give. They would make some determinations, but once it was there, it was there. There were two things in there that were highly right-wing. One was quite interesting and kind of sensitive. And the other was very interesting anti-abortion rhetoric, but it was very interesting. I wrote about it somewhere saying that, as a person, I would have preferred them not to have run these people – as a partisan person – but as a teacher, I give them A's. That the conflict. That's the paradox. I don't want to listen to right-wingers all the time. It pisses me off when John Stewart has them on his show. But at the same time that's what we're made of.

“Disagreeing is fine. In a classroom, it’s a Socratic thing: you throw out an idea and people are supposed to respond. That’s how you stimulate thought. I wish I did it better. I wish I knew how to do it better.”

**CPR: What are some of the most important messages you want viewers to get from your work?**

SH: There are so many that intersect or conflict. One is: ego. One is: want respect and love. That can really be an unfortunate goal, and a difficult one. There are some people who can deal with it very well because they are extremely egotistical. There is a person, whose name I won’t mention, who I cannot just tolerate being around. He’s not dumb. The world revolves around him and his work. His work is fine, sometimes bordering on very good. But, not worth it. So, the other message: If I do have something to say at any given point I want people to at least take it seriously. They don’t have to agree. It’s nicer if they agree, then shower me with flowers and candies, but – and the third is: I don’t want to be stagnant. I don’t want to descend into some sort of intellectual pit or mental paralysis. There’s always danger. It’s like, we all have our limitations.

I said something about my parents, who still take five cruises a year and they’ve still been to places in this world that I would never think of going. Never. I mean, they’ve been to Vietnam, North and South. They’ve been to Cambodia. They’ve been to places I won’t go because I’m afraid of getting illnesses. My father one day had a stroke and five days later he was on a boat. He just wouldn’t let it get the better of him. Doesn’t mean they’re totally flawless people (they’re not!) but it’s interesting. Other people their age kind of sit and vegetate. And you can’t, even if you’re active prior to vegetation.

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**Contributors**

Lucia Colella, Russell Gossett and Adam Rotmil sincerely thank Steven Heller for this interview, and Malcolm Gear for his review of it.

CPR stems from a personal project during Lucia’s Master’s studies at the Art Institute of Boston, where she, Russell and Adam met and quickly became friends. The three work together on current CPR projects.

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