

Design in context (part II)

By [Terry Levin](#)

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Stuck away at the far end of Africa, Design Indaba provides some much-needed perspective on our craft. Nothing replenishes a jaded inspiration better than an annual shot of pure cultural energy from New York's design elite.

From our perspective, the New York designers seem immersed in an endless literary, theatrical and artistic whirl; they get commissioned to design covers and spreads for countless magazines, books and subversive publication, posters for all manner of cultural and art events and environmental graphics that upgrade a seemingly endless supply of inner city educational institutions.



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From non-descript architecture to inspiring landmarks

Legendary [Pentagram](#) partner Paula Scher, showed work done on the upgrade of the New Jersey Performing Art campus, in which the heritage buildings provides the canvas for a hand sign written treatment, promising the excitement of the creative disciplines within.

You've got to hand it to the New Yorkers: there is a bullish chutzpah in the scale and underlying humour of their approach to these sort of projects. For example, ignoring the requests to provide a map for the facade of The Queens Metropolitan Middle School, Scher proceeds to embalm every interior and exterior facet of the campus with enlargements of her colourful, hand-painted typographic maps, transforming what would have remained a non-descript building into an inspiring landmark for the students and residents of the area.



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End bad breath

Speaking after his wife, Push Pin Studio founder [Seymour Chwast](#) in conversation with Design Indaba alumnus and everybody's favourite DJ MC, Michael Bierut, showed some of the hundreds of handcrafted typographic and illustrated posters and publications which make up his life's work of six decades as a graphic designer.

A notable example is the anti-war poster "End bad breath" - depicting "Uncle Sam" in a palette of acid colours, with fighter planes bombing Hanoi inside his mouth, which has become one of the defining pieces of anti-Vietnam pop iconography.



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"I was arrested twice for porn, but I should have been arrested for mixing those type styles"

Someone who exemplifies the scholarly approach of the New York designers is Steven Heller, who has edited no less than [150 books](#) on graphic design and held the position of art director the *New York Times Book Review* for 33 years. Like Chwast and Scher who spoke before him, showing many examples of experimental, subversive and fringe designs for publication such as *New York Review of Sex and Politics* [you can read about it on his blog](#) "I was arrested twice for porn, but I should have been arrested for mixing those type styles" is probably somewhat of an insider graphic design joke.

"An archeological dig" of 20th century design memorabilia

Heller is also a self-confessed obsessive collector whose home is "an archeological dig" of rare 20th century advertising, commercial and industrial design iconography and memorabilia - from packaging and posters to advertising mascots and shop mannequins, [questioning whether these could be our equivalent of the Roman and Greek statuary of the 20th century]. Among his numerous collection-obsessions the branding devices used by political regimes such as the Nazis and Chairman Mao, are the subject of his book entitled *Iron Fists: Branding the 20th-century Totalitarian State*.

Love letters

Heller's presentation was followed by that of his wife Louise Fili, the second New York husband and wife couple to grace the DI stage at Design Indaba 2013. In yet another marriage of design to literature, Fili has designed two thousand jackets as art director for Pantheon Books. She has published her own book called *Elegantissima* - a glorious celebration of the typographic and inspiration sources for her work and many books on typography and design in collaboration with her husband. Her inspirations - Italian food packaging, architectural typographic signage and the neon scripts of Parisian Cafés - translate into some of New York's finest restaurant corporate identities and food and wine packaging, where the typography is often hand-crafted.

Get Carter

Someone who has had an invisible hand in many of the letterforms we use in our daily communications is [Matthew Carter](#), who may well be the most famous typographer in the world.

For over 30 years he has headed the Graphic Design MFA programme at the prestigious Yale University and he designed the YALE font used on all signage and communication for the institution. Notoriously unsigned since 1701, Yale now displays examples of Carter's font everywhere including the trash bins. The university even has its own printing press!

Having worked across all forms of 20th century type production technology - from machine cut metal, hand cut metal, woodtype letterpress and 60s phototypesetting - Carter was more recently commissioned to design onscreen fonts such as good old Verdana for Microsoft. You might be familiar with some of his other fonts such as Georgia, Bell Centennial, Galliard, scripts Snell Roundhand and Shelley.

His font Mantina, inspired by a 1476 inscription found on a house in Rome, was used by Fred Woodward, the art director of the *Rolling Stone* magazine - as much an honour for a typographer as for the artist whose face is featured in the cover.

Niemann... giving credit where it's due



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Illustrator Christoph Niemann ([@abstractsunday](#)) moved to New York at the age of 25 and now commutes between there and his base in Berlin. He credits many of the former speakers such as Scher for giving him his first internship and Heller for his first editorial job.

You can while away several hours marveling and laughing at his *New York Times* [blog column](#). Especially the live tweeting and illustrating while running the [New York Marathon](#). He has applied his legendary thinking and drawing talent to a recently launched app called pettingzoo

in collaboration with Design Indaba, which sadly does not seem to be available in the ZA iTunes store.

Incidentally Heller's son has a very cool tattoo on his shoulder, which was designed by Nieman.

Once again we have to thank Design Indaba for the privilege of bringing the design aristocracy to our doorstep. Maybe they can inspire us to take more care with the dying art of handwriting, of drawing as a daily practice, and finding ways to inspire others into our streets, schools and offices to do the same.



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