

A conversation with Massimo Vignelli, scourge of the "anti-Modernists," who says he is retreating from the fray—for now.

NO MORE WAR!

By Ellen Shapiro

In recent years, the graphic design profession has been polarized by an intense debate between the Modernists, rooted in Swiss/functionalist principles, and (for lack of a better term) the anti-Modernists, involved with deconstruction and unpredictability.

The debate sharpened when, in 1991, Massimo Vignelli—AIGA medalist, designer of books and publications, interiors, furniture, tableware, and corporate identity—participated in a panel discussion on typography for *PRINT* in which he called *Emigre* magazine and fonts "garbage" and "an aberration of culture." The publication of the article set off a chain of attacks on both sides.

Because one can hardly open a design magazine without reading about "the prison of the grid" (as blamed on Vignelli and other Modernists) and/or "the chaos of the new esthetics" (as blamed on *Emigre* and others of that ilk), I thought it might be opportune to sit down with Mr. Vignelli and ask him to delve into the reasoning, the specifics, behind his comments. I also wanted to ask how he responds to the criticisms of his own work.

Following are excerpts from conversations that took place in the offices of Vignelli Associates earlier this year.

Shapiro: Ever since you called Emigre "an aberration of culture," you've gotten a reputation as someone who makes dogmatic judgments about "good" and "bad" design based on style. Why can't all of us appreciate many styles of design, just like we can enjoy listening to both Mozart and Coltrane?

Vignelli: Yes, but those are both good music. Then there is junk music,

like radio jingles. And there is junk design. It is not a matter of style or taste. It is a matter of quality and non-quality.

How do you define "quality"?

Things that are done with knowledge. I am interested in work that is grounded in semiotics, the science or philosophy of communications. Semiotics has three levels: semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics. Semantics relates to how information is expressed. Syntactics relates to structure, discipline, coherence of elements, continuity. We are also pragmatic. How is it perceived by the reader? Can he or she retrieve the information in the proper way?

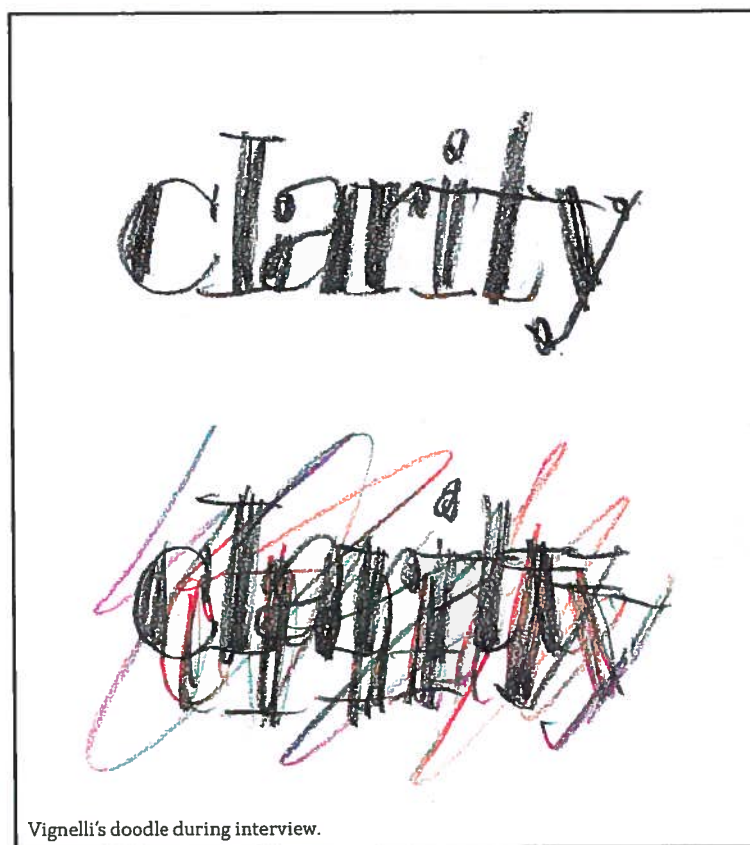
I personally find your design for Taylor's Guides to Gardening [Figs. 1-4] to be an excellent application of this.

The solution was in the problem itself. We're always asking ourselves how we can solve the problem in the way that is the most clear, most beautiful, most timeless, most elegant.

Actually, I'm tired of the words "problem-solving." There is no absolute reality. Only one's interpretation of that reality. Therefore, my solution is my interpretation of the problem filtered through my culture,

my education, my understanding, my sensibility.

To me, everything has a meaning. Typography is made of minor things, and unless you master the meanings of those things, you are illiterate. In later volumes in the *Taylor* series, the client tampered with the typography in ways that changed the visual language of the book. For example, they indented paragraphs that began with an initial cap. That is



Vignelli's doodle during interview.

Taylor's Guide to

Annuals

Based on Taylor's
Encyclopedia of
Gardening

A complete guide
to gardening
with annuals, fully
illustrated with
417 color photographs



1.

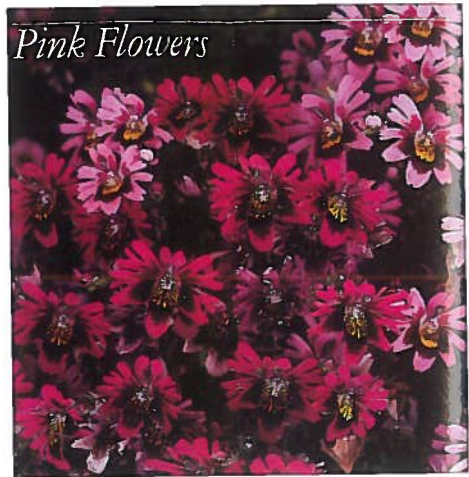
Color Key

The chart shows the
range of color in each
group of plants.



2.

Pink Flowers



3.



4.

1-4. Taylor's Guide to Annuals, from a multivolume set that includes *Perennials*, *Vegetables*, *Herbs*, *Roses*, *Ground Covers*, etc.; published by Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968. Massimo Vignelli's design, which displays plants by factors such as color, size, bloom time, and shade tolerance, is found by many gardeners to be a paradigm of "form follows function."

not the way these things should be. The initial cap should be flush left.

How can you say these aren't matters of style or taste? Hasn't Kit Hinrichs put initial caps in places that aren't flush left?

Yes, but Kit does it in a masterly way. With a sense of scale, a sense of appropriateness. Everything is perfect. The difference is knowledge. Knowledge shows.

Here is a newsletter for the American Center in Paris [Figs. 5-8]. "Good" doesn't have to exactly have these elements. But it has to be logical. The information itself provides the graphics. This is what we call civilized graphics. The content, not the designer, is what is screaming for attention. Still, there is a lot of personal expression.

The people who criticize your work say you give a similar design to every client. For example, it seems as if in almost every publication you've designed, there's at least one spread filled with very large Garamond Italic going over the gutter [Fig. 10].

All of them are getting the fruit of my garden.

Your critics say you produce the same fruit over and over again.

It's my handwriting, my language, my interpretation.

I am interested in achieving a certain effect, such as words becoming images. Every time I do that layout, it may look the same, but it's a little bit different, a little bit better. The scale may be different, the leading, the thicks and thins, exactly how the words break across the gutter.

I'm not interested in change for the sake of change or novelty. I'm only interested in a projection of intelligence that comes through refinement.

If I talked to Ivan Chermayeff about the same issue, he might say that he would never intentionally do the same layout twice; that the handwriting should reflect the client, not the designer.

Ours are both fine philosophies.

American culture is young. It's fascinated by diversity and novelty. European culture is fascinated by refinement. Obviously, I belong to European culture. We are continually refining language and the expression of it. I'm fascinated by new typefaces drawn from the past, such as our new Bodoni, which we did with Tom Carnase. We're using it everywhere.

You are known for doing everything with five type families: Bodoni, Century, Futura, Garamond...

...and Helvetica.

The five-family type Mafia.

That's a good one!

These are the ones with value. In the last ten or fifteen years, in order to generate a new direction, the young people threw away things that were good. If architecture had done this, we would have gone back to stilts and caves. The people who like *Emigre* say it's great because they have no education or sense.

Could you be saying that because it's so unlike your work?

No. Look at April Greiman's work. It's not like my work at all, but it is always exciting, always stimulating. Never gross or vulgar. I like the work of many younger designers. For example, Pippo Lionni, Leo Lionni's son, who works in Paris, Willi Kunz, and of course, Michael Bierut.

Some typefaces being designed today are very elegant. The work of Adrian Frutiger is very fine. Typefaces designed by Frutiger in the last five to ten years have fantastic refinements. The *Emigre* typefaces have zero refinement, zero grace.

Does it matter to you that Emigre fonts were originally designed for output on a dot-matrix printer, pre-PostScript?

No, I don't want to hear any rationalizations. It's all baloney. You measure these things by the end result. None of these fonts have made any contribution to typography. They are commercial and irresponsible.

"We shouldn't be surprised at what we see today: glorified infantilism. You see those scrapbook layouts everywhere."

Do you use the word irresponsible because you think these fonts are cynically being foisted on a public hungry for novelty?

No, these people are sincere in what they're doing. They know their business very well. They do what they do for precise reasons. In the same way, the writer of radio jingles is sincere about what he does.

A whole generation of students and followers is being influenced by this kind of thing. Students today need more respect for the past. Many of them know nothing about philosophy, about European history before the French Revolution or after. They know nothing of the major events of the century. They have no early training, such as the Montessori system, in building structures and using color. Instead, their finger paintings are put up on the refrigerator, and they're led to believe that these smearings are great works of art, like Abstract Expressionism. In high school, they make scrapbooks. In college or art school, they start working on computers on day one and stay glued to the screen. We shouldn't be surprised at what we see today: glorified infantilism. Look in *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* and you see those scrapbook layouts everywhere. This is symptomatic of a culture in which everything, the whole environment, is falling apart.

You say that the people who like Emigre do so because they have no education. But Emigre is a publication for the highly educated. Its readers are literate—and passionate. The letters to the editor make me think I'm back in 1968 when we were trying to burn the barricades, tear down the establishment.

The renegades got organized, they have a voice, it becomes a culture. Like the Beat Generation, they have destroyed more than they built.

Here is a page from the Font Book [Fig. 11] showing a typeface called FUck'N Pretty by Rick Valicenti for Fuse, another "renegade" publication. Do you consider this an obscene gesture toward the Modernism you stand for?

This kind of thing is nothing new. The Photo Lettering books have always had the upper class of this category, novelty typefaces, the same type of fun-house junk [Fig. 12].



9.

This exhibition celebrates the flowering of Italian creativity in the 25-year period that began with the fall of the Fascist regime. On July 10, 1943, Allied forces landed in Sicily, initiating Italy's gradual liberation. In the difficult years after the war, the country struggled to recover from the devastations of Fascist rule, Allied and German occupations, and aerial bombings. A variety of competing groups, primarily made up of former Partisans, attempted to shape the course of the

10.

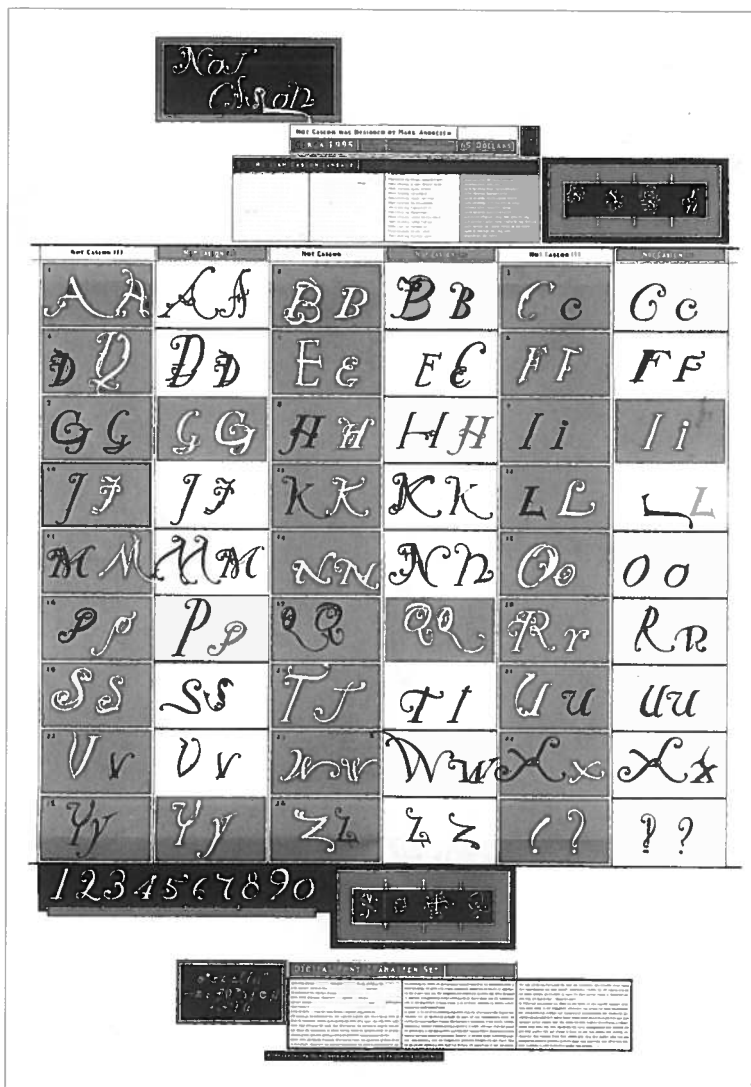
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11.

YAKOVENKO PICNIC of alphabet cracked
JAR WRECKS QUIVERING BLADE EXPER
graft kid 43 rows miss quit cozy xylophone

12.



13.

Back to the education issue, here is a mailer for Emigre's "Not Caslon," which contains a historical treatise on the history of the face [Fig. 13].

This is nothing! A bad intellectual exercise, an end in itself.

Emigre is an expression of an attempt to find a new direction. Some of the covers and layouts are not bad. But rather than come up with something of real complexity, elegance, and power—it could be something very provocative, which I would love to see—they came up with something shallow.

Look at these pages [Figs. 14, 15]. There is nothing here of value, either, especially in light of the pretentiousness of the text, a very serious quote from Jan Tschichold. This is cartoonish, with overtones of graffiti, an irresponsible manifestation of our time. People who make graffiti do not respect the rights of others and they pollute the environment.

If this is what graphic design is, then I'm not a graphic designer anymore. For years, I've been obsessed and offended by these people. I felt they were demeaning my profession. I have recently realized that they do not belong to my profession. And I do not belong to their profession. Everything they do is an accident, happenstance.

April Greiman has said that she built her career on accidents, that she's subscribed creatively to the chance principle, like recapturing images that were created by accident on the computer or on video. She's described how she enlarged an airbrush gradation on the graphic paintbox in order to see its deeper structure, which she said was like discovering the DNA code.

Right. She is into deeper understanding. A methodology and a discipline. She doesn't massacre type. Her work is the expression of her intelligence. You can never see ugly intelligence. Or, if it's ugly, it's not intelligence. Even the most controversial pictures by Mapplethorpe are extremely beautiful, although the subject matter can be offensive. You can tell quality by measuring it against things that have been done in the past.

Let's say I showed you a piece of 18th-century furniture, full of gold leaf and so forth. It's not to your taste. Is it beautiful?

Beauty could include the rejection of established values.

Right. Certain paintings of Manet were rejected by the Academy because only paintings such as those done by Ingres and David, which reflected a certain type of classical idealism or moral platitudes, were valued at the time.

Yes, Impressionism could have been considered ugly by people who had not developed the ability to look at a Manet and see it as beautiful.

It's true that I might not have developed an ability to look at some things that have been designed today. I understand that these overlappings communicate to the generation that grew up with MTV. I don't see it. For me, it is a mess. But the kids might be more comfortable.

Then are we talking about a generation gap or an absolute definition of intrinsic beauty?

We are talking about a schism rocking our profession. In one room are the information architects, a term devised by Richard Saul Wurman, rooted in history, structure, and semiotics. In the other room are graphic designers rooted in advertising, pictorial arts, and trends. Personally, I feel I no longer have anything to share with the so-called graphic designers of



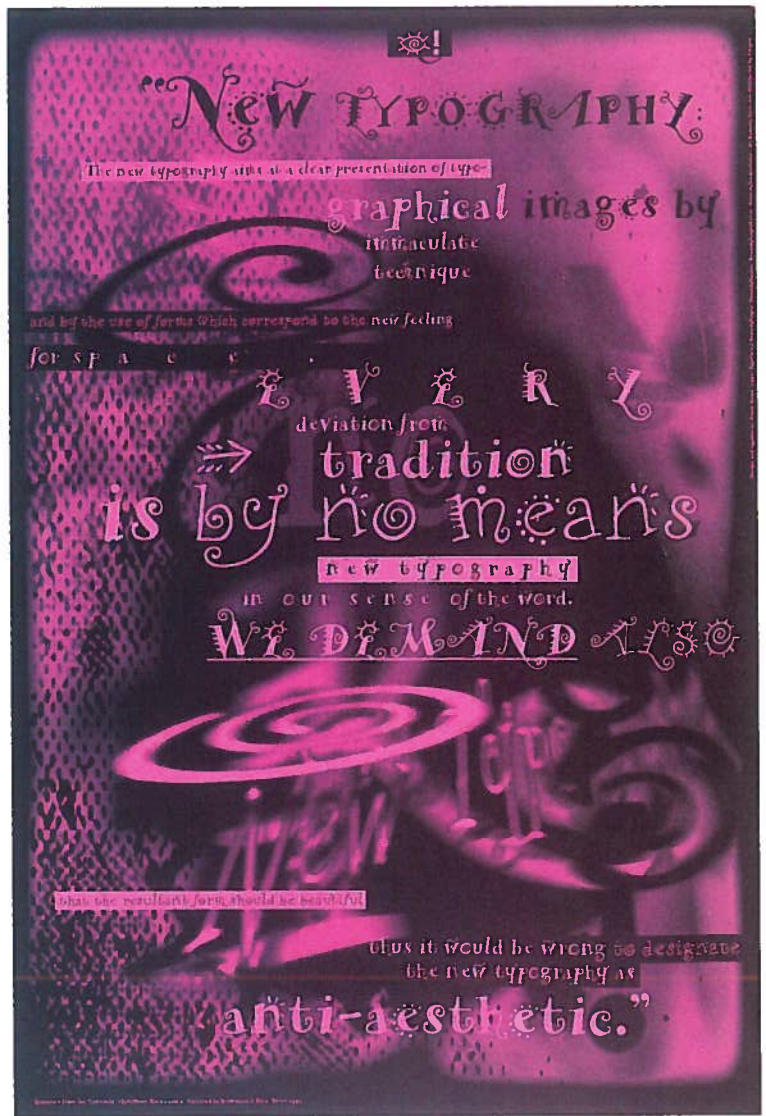
14.



16.



17.



15.

13. Mailer for Emigre Fonts' "Not Caslon" features essay by John Downer on the art of founding type and the historical progression of Caslon types. Mailer unfolds to poster showing full character set of font designed by Mark Andresen, "who rubbed down bits and pieces of dry transfer lettering, flakes, nicks and all," and digitized by Zuzana Licko. Poster designed by Rudy VanderLans.

14, 15. Spread and back cover of *Emigre* No. 24 presentation of "Remedy" font ("not recommended for inveterate Helvetica users") designed by Frank Heine. Quotation on back cover is by Jan

Tschichold: "The new typography aims at a clear presentation of typographical images by immaculate technique and by the use of forms which correspond to the new feeling for space. Every deviation from tradition is by no means new typography in our sense of the word. We demand also that the resultant form should be beautiful, thus it would be wrong to designate the new typography anti-aesthetic."

16, 17. Spreads from *Ray Gun* No. 33, February 1996. Art direction and design: Robert Hales; Brian Wilson photo by Peter Morello.