"ED FELLA'S "ONE LINERS" USED IN MFA, CRANBROOK THESIS; as of MAY 1987

Design is assigned sign, playing air art with no caution but obedience, posing ordering systems as explanations and indulging the same self again anew while attending and singing in a strict construct. Art makes me nuts.

MY THESIS STATEMENT, 1987

This side of sign.

Design precedes Art.

More into less.

Execution before conception, meaning before perception.

Yes, I don't know the feeling.

Professional Graphic Design is class and/or cultural connotation as an applied aesthetic put to a disciplined communication in the form of two-dimensional visual and/or typographic solutions to a given problem in exchange for some sort of remuneration.

Art is an ethnocentric cultural construct that you don't gotta have.

A flying pickle or the great pile; influence measures criticism.

Make insignificant forms that give insufficient meanings.

Geomorphic and biometric.

Design in a bordertown.

Attend to marginal features.

Stabilize the referent.

Forget about history so you can repeat it.

Design is always permission given or allowance taken.

I hate 'fine' anythings.

Ask as opposed to what?

Work out of duplicity, not conviction.

It looks good and seems to mean.

Type reads, type talks.

A design not about itself, but about the designer.

Add to the canon.

Hack like mad.

See it, say it, see it.

Two flyers for the Forum for Architecture and Urban Design. Left - Ed Fella, Jan 89, right - re-contextualized by Mr. Keedy, July 89.

from EMIGRE MAGAZINE #17, 1991

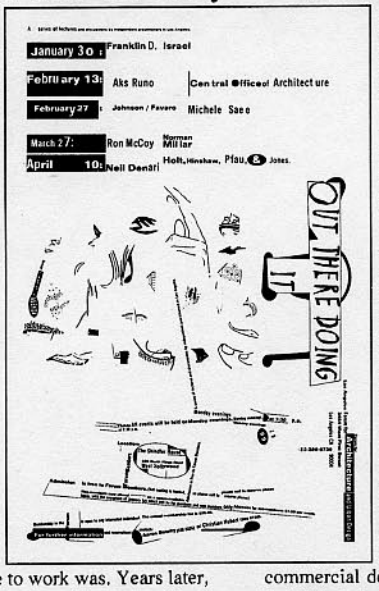
A CONVERSATION WITH Edward Fella AND Mr. Keedy

Mr. Keedy: You were trained as a commercial artist and illustrator and worked in various commercial art studios in Detroit. After 30 years in a successful career, why did you go to school, first at Center for Creative Studies and then to Cranbrook?

Fella: One reason was I had spent all these years in the commercial art business and I never felt I was really "legitimate." So I thought if I went to school, getting a degree would somehow legitimize what I did. By this time, design degrees were quite prevalent in the profession. Another reason was that it would give me the option to teach.

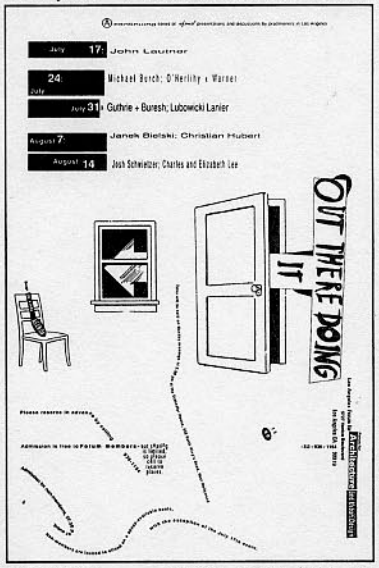
Mr. Keedy: These were not really considerations when you started your career?

Fella: Not at all. I went to Cass Technical High School. I never attended a university. Despite being offered a scholarship when I graduated, I didn't go, because I received such good training as a commercial artist in high school, I entered the art business immediately and became a practicing professional by the time I was nineteen. In the fifties, going to school and having a degree, especially with my Detroit working class background, wasn't that important. Being able to work was. Years later, I came to regret that. By the mid-eighties, I had another opportunity to go to school. My children were grown up, about to leave home to go to college, and I thought, "*Wow*, why don't I do the same thing? Then I won't feel this kind of separation anxiety." I had spent the last fifteen years bringing up my children as a single parent, all while working of course. Which is easy to do in the design/art business, since you make your own time and hours and determine your own income.



Mr. Keedy: Going to graduate school at the age of 48 was also easier for you because you happened to be friends with Kathy McCoy?

Fella: Right, that was another connection. In the late sixties, I was working as a designer/illustrator at Skidmore Sahratian, a Detroit art studio, when Kathy McCoy was hired on as a designer. She was different from most of the other people I'd known in the art business, because she had actually studied design in college, whereas most of my peers hadn't. Though we were all very successful commercial artists, most of us had either technical high school backgrounds or had come up through the apprentice system, a sort of on-the-job training. Kathy studied industrial design, and then she went on to work as a graphic designer for various corporations. Through her I became more involved in an analytical approach to design than I had ever considered before. This approach was more typical of academic, "pure" graphic design... What I opened up for Kathy, which later fed into the program at Cranbrook, was an understanding and sympathy for the "low end" of commercial art and the vernacular. This happened at the same time as the transition between Modernism and Post-Modernism, and the influence of the Venturi books. In the studio, we commercial designers would kid Kathy about her high design background, and she would kid us back, but we developed a common respect that really changed my own practice and made it much more considered. It helped me put the design part of my own work into a sort of historical perspective, which I hadn't connected before. In commercial art studios, illustrators like myself were very aware of the history of illustration and knew some design history too. I knew the Museum of Modern Art version of the history of design, Futurism, Dada, the Bauhaus. Like a lot of other advertising designers, I wasn't aware of the ideas behind later versions of Modernism, like Swiss Design; I thought it was just another style. It really didn't mean much to us because we weren't corporate designers and we weren't involved in design systems. But we did recognize the stylistic signs of that work. This was in 1969 or 1970.

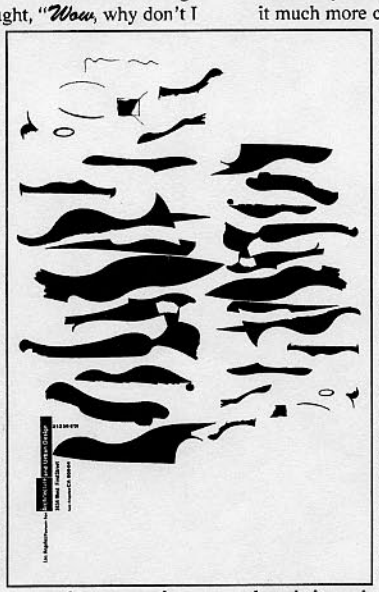


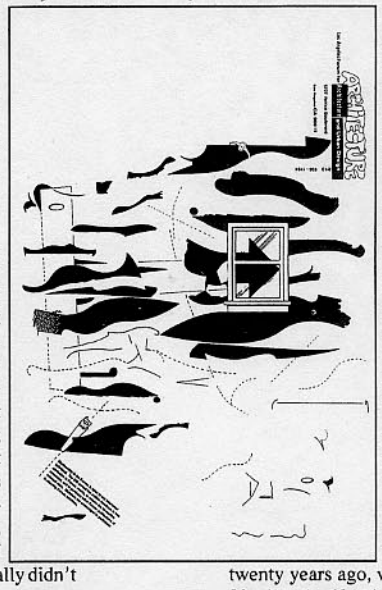
Mr. Keedy: The vernacular is a very hot issue in graphic design today. However, most graphic designers think and use the vernacular differently from you, since you came out of commercial art.

Fella: I was the vernacular! I was like those people that Robert Venturi wrote about, right? The guys that made the signs in Las Vegas. On a somewhat higher level of course, kind of a mid-level of vernacular. It wasn't the folk vernacular, which commercial artists were very fond of. We all read *GRAPHIS* and articles about various kinds of folk art and signs. Since I was also a decorative illustrator, I was especially interested in things that were crude or naive, unlearned, because that is what decorative illustration took so much inspiration from.

Mr. Keedy: When you entered Cranbrook, and were really immersed in "high design," did it change the way you thought about the vernacular and what it means? You could have just completely dumped the vernacular and become a sophisticated Modernist designer.

Fella: I guess I could have, but I was too cynical for that. I saw this "high end" design being as much a style as the various vernaculars.





Mr. Keedy: So you are interested in them equally then?

Fella: Yes, and one of the things I wanted to bring to "high design" was the vernacular or commercial art, which had had a really bad name, as did advertising, since the sixties. Somehow graphic design was considered to be more pure, despite it's connection to the corporate world. Today, corporate, Swiss (International Style) graphic design has a bad name, like commercial art or advertising design had twenty years ago, which is kind of ironic.

Mr. Keedy: You have a lot of polaroids of signs. And have been collecting examples of the vernacular for a

long time, is that for use, or just because you like collecting?

Fella: It's something I like doing. Commercial artists and designers have always looked at the vernacular and had a love/hate relationship with it. You love it because it looks so great and it seems so free and innocent, but then you hate it because you can't do it like that. And frequently the work that professionals do seems almost contrived next to it. Another reason I was interested in the vernacular came from the fact that all during the sixties, Pushpin Studios was a big influence on my generation of designers and illustrators. Their work made us aware of it. And also I think commercial artists always were interested in historic styles, street culture and signs, and all that stuff. It's part of the tradition of commercial art. Although I can't figure out exactly when one vernacular ends and another begins. I really think that vernacular is more than just low end. Now it goes up into the middle, don't you think? For example, a lot of advertising and professional design has become a vernacular.

Mr. Keedy: Graphic designers haven't always used the vernacular. Since you claim to come out of the vernacular, how do you (as opposed to other graphic designers, with strictly graphic design backgrounds) use it?

Fella: I use two kinds of vernacular. One is the low culture vernacular, that everybody likes. I used it in those light decorative illustrations that I used to do. Then there's the mid-cult vernacular, which took me a while to recognize. I was an illustrator and designer who did this stuff in a pure way, without any self-consciousness or irony about it. Now they both inform my design equally.

Mr. Keedy: Another thing you have been involved in all along, which is sort of odd for a commercial artist, is the fine arts world.

Fella: That also goes back to my training. At Cass Tech we studied fine art along with commercial art. It was based on the Bauhaus ideal; there wasn't much distinction made between the two. So we looked at artists and designers like Herbert Bayer and Moholy-Nagy, who were both designers or "layout men" or commercial artists and painters. After I left school, even though I worked as a commercial artist, I always thought of myself as an artist and a designer. I continued to produce paintings and drawings right along with commercial work. And I never ceased doing it; I still photograph, do collage and draw. Today there seems to be a bigger split between the two than in the innocent days of the Bauhaus, when the new ideal was that the artist could function within the culture as a commercial and fine artist.

Mr. Keedy: Why can't experimentation be done in your commercial work?

Fella: Well, I couldn't make it work; I had difficulty crossing the middle ground. On the one hand, I did this work that was highly experimental or "*arty*," for which I had a reputation. And on the other hand I did pretty mundane stuff. The problem, for me, was that middle ground, which I never quite found. Actually that's an important point in my practice. It's both my failure in a way and my success. Somehow I was able to do this really idiosyncratic and detached kind of experimentation, totally free of many necessities and constraints, done within the context of the design world, and then I also did my commercial work. And even though that was on a high level, professionally and commercially, the level was no higher than the standard. So in other words, I won awards in art directors' shows and illustration shows right along with my peers, but it was for work that was only as good as the current work, not anything that was really outside or beyond that.

Mr. Keedy: But today all the work you do is printed and is for clients. And when I show your work to other people, the first reaction is, "How does he ever get away with this? I could never get a client to accept anything like this."

Fella: But that is work I do for arts organizations.

Mr. Keedy: Are those the only clients who would accept that type of work?

Fella: That kind of experimental work, yes. But in general, even art organizations didn't accept it very readily. Besides being a practicing designer in Detroit, I was involved in arts organizations as an artist, in the mid-70's. I volunteered in supplying them with design work, since I worked in a studio and had access to all sorts of facilities. I also understood production and could get things printed cheaply. I got type by adding it to the galleys of my jobs. To make a case for my experimental graphic design, I used the argument that they were funded by the government and by patrons to show the work of artists and photographers who didn't have a commercial outlet. My claim was that I did experimental design that didn't have a commercial outlet either, and it should be supported by the same money that funded a space for artists. I made sure that the messages were legible and intact, because I wanted it to function. I did find out how conservative some artists are when it comes to graphic design. They want things to look like the stuff they see all around them. They don't want people to experiment with their communications. But I must add, I did have a lot of support for the work from many of the artists in Detroit and one gallery director in particular, Geri Baskin of Detroit Focus, has been especially understanding of this idea. Especially since some of the Focus pieces take a slightly perverse delight in commenting on the process of art reception and art making. None of them have any connection whatsoever with the artist's work or their individual styles, other than broad categories like "sculpture" or "selection."

Mr. Keedy: So alternative, experimental graphic design has to find its own kind of support network. You don't see it supported by the commercial market.

Fella: Not usually, especially work that is highly unconventional.

Mr. Keedy: But then what's the point of doing unconventional or experimental work?

Fella: Just to keep pushing. It's part of our culture to constantly keep pushing. There is always the need, almost a tradition, for wanting something different, something new. It happens in technology and the arts simply want to follow. And it goes deeper than that; it is the need to continue to explore possibilities within conventions of communication. And when you change them, you don't necessarily change the way legibility functions. I want to fuss with typography and what constitutes and generates it, and its letterforms. I don't design to be servile.

Mr. Keedy: What is the difference between art and design?

Fella: In design you must have permission, whereas in art you don't need permission other than permission of the culture. Culture gives permission to make abstract paintings in the twentieth century. It didn't give permission to make them in the fifteenth century, although it was totally possible to make them. With graphic design it is the same thing. The designer always has to have permission from someone to do it, because somebody has to pay for the printing and somebody has to need it.

"Art makes me nuts" because art is the only way out of the constraints of design which are its very definition. It is assigned and obedient, yet while it lets you indulge yourself aesthetically in many instances and even renew yourself conceptually, it is always something given by someone outside; a restriction on the totally free self. So any solution is still a solution to the initial problem that needed solving. "Problems are my friends," said Milton Glaser. *Art*, on the other hand, is open. It extends in all directions with no closure ever really possible. *Art* has no hold other than the small part you make your individual definition through your expression (even if it's within a whole class of other like-minded artists). But *art* is still ultimately ungrounded by its undefinability. And that can make you crazy, or maybe you have to be crazy to do it, not (as Freud said) internally, but externally.

Mr. Keedy: People that are not familiar with your new work are probably baffled most by your irregular letter spacing and the anti-aesthetic or anti-mastery, as you yourself call it, that you use in your work. What is this irregularity, inconsistency and anti-mastery about, and where did it come from?

Fella: It comes from the culture that I function in, that I participate in, and mediate as a designer and artist. It comes from a realization that things are just getting smarter and smarter and I feel that there's a particular conceit in that. In order to open things up again, you can't endlessly design one more legible typeface, one even more legible than the rest. So at some point you just have to take that conceit away. Especially in graphic design, we're surrounded by really slick design. It's an extremely neat-handed profession. In order to break out of that, you either have to become the most facile professional of them all or chip away at it somehow. Chip away at that conceit of the slick profession that gets ever and ever tighter.

Mr. Keedy: But as you talk about chipping away at that conceit or going against it, the kind of irregularity and anti-mastery that you're exploring is not exactly naive.

Fella: No. In fact, the irregularity is rigorously thought out, based loosely on deconstruction. If deconstruction is a way of exposing the glue that holds together western culture, I thought, "What is it that holds together typography? It's space." That little bit of space that you have to work with. If letters are spaced too far apart the space doesn't make the connection between letters to make a word. If it's too tight a space, if the letters run into each other, than you can't read the word. So the idea was simply to play with that little space and see if you had a bit of room to maneuver with that glue that holds it all together. There was always a quest for the perfect spacing, for perfect letters and perfect words and lines. Look at ITC typefaces, for instance; they've gotten so perfect that nobody likes them anymore. They are almost slippery, you can't see them anymore. I was also interested in the idea of time and the irregularity of time. Time on the one hand drums on, and on the other hand is flexible. Sometimes it seems longer, sometimes it seems shorter. I thought of that in terms of letters also. On the one hand they just have to move along, but there is that little bit of flexibility called duration... Also, I was hearing nothing but complaints about bad kerning in computer type. Especially from professionals who thought they knew better and probably did. So I thought, why not take all of these things and explore them as an aesthetic condition? In a kind of analytic way.

Mr. Keedy: Is the idea of similar differences related to this also?

I HATE FINE ANYTHINGS

MAKE INSIGNIFICANT

Fella: Right. Similar differences, different similarities, like taking two serif faces and putting them together.

Mr. Keedy: But those two serif faces, unlike the traditional way of thinking, explore contrast by their similarity, not their difference.

Fella: It's like language, words are different and yet they're the same. It's the slight differences that make a word ... between bat and cat. And it's also those slight differences that are the operating factors in all typefaces.

Mr. Keedy: That gets into the area of legibility, then. Designers have different ideas about what is legible and what is illegible. I know that some of your work has been called illegible by some designers.

Fella: Yes, but it is not really illegible. You can read everything. It's just the conventions of legibility that are being challenged. If you take the time you can really read everything.

Mr. Keedy: Why do you think designers are so obsessed with clarity and legibility?

Fella: Oh, that's a time factor again. Nobody wants to give design any time. Messages have to communicate quickly.

Mr. Keedy: Why do you think people are reluctant to give design any time?

Fella: Well, because they are victims of the same conventions. Artists at first weren't given the time to abstract something or distort it. People wanted to see realistic paintings. They didn't want to look at blue trees. Yet Art won all those battles. Although it's amazing how Philistine some artists can be when it comes to design, by not allowing designers to take the same liberties with time that they want or insist on for their own work ... a certain difficulty of reception, the idea that you have to bring a knowledge to it.

Mr. Keedy: But the conventions of legibility seem to come and go, even in a short period of time. Don't you think that in your earlier days as a practicing commercial artist there was more tolerance for that? Do you agree that Swiss Modernism/International Style might have decreased some of the tolerance that existed at one point?

Fella: Oh, yes. That kind of rationalism was a real attempt to reduce everything scientifically to a state of complete legibility. It took all the quirky, idiosyncratic expression out of letterforms and typography. And now it's being put back in through deliberate, self-conscious efforts. Post-Modernism has brought it all back; the idiosyncratic, the personal, the expressive. And it's all Neo now, because we're aware of it, we're self-conscious. All the stuff that I do is very knowingly done. I'm a Neo-designer too!

Mr. Keedy: That's an important point. A lot of people see your work and quite often make the assumption that it isn't done knowingly, that it isn't self-conscious. Too often designers, more than the general public, make the assumption that because something isn't done the "correct" way, it's done out of ignorance. They assume you did it wrong because you don't know the "right way" to do it, rather than thinking that you might have done it for a reason. Much of your work is about questioning what is right and wrong.

Fella: Yes, it is always fun to poke and prod at the designers' notions of correctness, and to constantly question the conventions. Modernism, in many ways, was a reductive project, and Modernist design closed itself off. Post-Modernism was just more interesting. It opened up a consciousness of marginal expressions. History is no longer an authority but a referent. It let styles co-exist. It wasn't the "either/or" but the "both/and," as Robert Venturi said. And, as Hard Werken put it, "A lot can be used." In commercial art "a lot" was always used. It was blatant in ripping off anything possible. Now it has come full circle, and we call it appropriation and suddenly it is all legitimate. I like mining and I'm old enough now to dig around in my own history and re-work it. I want to reinsert my present self into it. I would add the Chicago designer, David Frej's comment, "And, there is a lot to be done."

Mr. Keedy: Your work has obviously been a big influence on quite a few designers, myself included. I would like to know what you've been influenced by.

Fella: Well, everything and everybody that I've ever come across! But the first was that experimental mode of European Modernism and the American tradition of the always new. I was somehow indoctrinated into it from high school in the fifties on; the idea of knowing history and the surrounding work of all my contemporaries. Pushpin Studios was a big force in the business in the early sixties, as was the culture of Pop Art. And I always read art magazines along with design annuals and design publications. Designers used to look at artists, that's what *Paul Rand* did. Although I think that changed somewhat by the eighties. Design doesn't follow art anymore and art doesn't necessarily follow design; they co-exist feeding off the culture simultaneously. Then secondly, I read, or misread, a lot of stuff. I've always been interested in literature; especially literary ~~criticism~~ and poetics (Roland Barthes, Structuralism, and semiotics). What fascinates me is interpretation, the idea of reading into something. And theory: how meaning is created, deliberately or unconsciously or determined by our culture. That everything has a multiplicity of meanings that can never be pinned down; the supposed impossibility of a closed meaning. I like the play of loaded messages and hidden ones, too. Once you get into this idea, it easily translates into how meaning in design can be created. Not just on a surface level, but structurally, that you can encode it, that you can put references into it that may not be evident on the surface but that take a closer reading ...

Mr. Keedy: Are there any individuals that have influenced you?

Fella: Yes, one model for me has been the work of Vladimir Nabokov. I not only read his books but I've read about his work. His novels are very complex in dealing with the element of play and of double coding. Under the guise of a simple narrative will be an extremely complex weaving of elements. This kind of self-reflexivity can be a lot of fun for a designer. The Focus Gallery flyers are full of this sort of stuff. I put a lot into them and I always fantasize that a smart critic could do a lot with them. But on the other hand, maybe someone could come along and completely deflate my pretensions. I don't know.

Mr. Keedy: All of your students at CalArts work with computers and I know that you are getting a computer yourself. You've worked for a long time without one. Why, after all this time, did you decide to invest the time, money and effort that it takes to become a computer literate designer?

Fella: Well, I've always been interested in the computer. I never said that the computer doesn't do anything that the pencil doesn't do, or the computer is just a typewriter or anything like that. I have always recognized that the computer was something altogether different and that it was the future. I actually feel that I started thinking like a computer a while back, almost inadvertently or instinctively. Some of my work preceded the computer, in that I was doing all these things that are difficult to do manually, but are so obvious and easy to do on the computer, like the *mixes* of typefaces, the slight differences in size, the distortions, the irregularities, all that kind of stuff. I guess I didn't get into the computer earlier because I have all these hand skills and have used them to the same effect. Also, computer technology is becoming more seamless. I just avoided the whole first phase of the computer, the **bitmap** phase. Initially, the professional world didn't really deal with computers either, as they are now. That was something that started in schools and in smaller practices. But now, the computer has become the only way to make graphic design. Everything else is, in a sense, outdated. A designer now has the kind of control that you could have before if you were a skilled jack-of-all-trades. You had to be a typographer, a photographer, and have access to stuff like whole archives. Now it's all in one machine. Another thing is that the computer is an incredible drawing device. It doesn't in any way replace drawing. In fact, I think it's going to open up drawing to whole new levels.

Mr. Keedy: How has teaching at CalArts affected your work? Or has it?

Fella: Well, it affects my work in that I probably do less of it. One of the problems of teaching is that a lot of your energy goes into teaching and the results end up on the students' drawing board. The students have to sit down and do the work. And I think that you can vicariously work through them. On the other hand, school is a real laboratory for trying out new ideas. Students can also be very inspiring and energizing. The trick is not to despair and say "God, they do better work than I do, maybe I should quit," which I think some design teachers do as they get older. It's easy to retire into teaching, as it is easy for young people sometimes to go into teaching and never really practice. I really do want the two things to balance out and to work and teach, and there's no reason for that not to occur.

Mr. Keedy: Some designers, particularly older ones, complain about the future of design and younger designers. What's your take on the future of design?

Fella: I think the future of design is going to be glowing. All futures basically are. The computer is opening up so many possibilities. Graphic design with the computer, printing media, film/video and yet-to-come technologies are going to be really incredible. We're at the brink of a whole new era. A wonderful cliché, even if it's true!

Mr. Keedy is a graphic/typeface designer in LA and instructor at CalArts with his pal Ed.

FROM: www.fontshop.com/tribe02 WEBSITE

Guru: Ed Fella

Hand Magic

This bit of doggerel, craftily hand lettered out by me and cleverly set into digital motion by the editor of this magazine, is something I can't really decipher other than as wordplay on the well-known line conjurers use.To try to unravel that as an explanation for the "magic" of handwork would be to question whether such a thing could even be.

Other than how it was actually made, what gives one thing a handmade look and another a mechanical or digital look? Can one be easily fooled by the differences? Or not? Is it in the eye of the experience of the viewer? Or in a particular visual culture of the past? In other words, are these words a gestalt of the spontaneity of a hand-to-mind-to-eye-back-to-hand gesture or just some play on a traditional history of vernacular and commercial lettering styles?

All I can answer is, it's what I know, or claim to know, or want to know, or need to know. My tech is a set of ellipse guides with pen and colored pencils, my form,my own past as an all-around, old-fashoned commercial artist: that is, letterer, typographer, graphic designer and illustrator. It also helped to read a little art and lit crit theory over the years.

Ed Fella was a commercial artist in Detroit for 30 years, before receiving an MFA in Design at Cranbrook in 1987. His work and education is now of great influence on modern typography. HE TEACHES GRAPHIC DESIGN AT CALARTS IN LOS ANGELES (SINCE 1987)

: ed fella

USA

- INTERVIEW from IN MAGAZINE, 2002 Vol 1, Issue 3 published by Ken Miller & Shu Hung

IMAGES AND TITLE ILLUSTRATION BY ED FELLA.

I use the line that I'm currently a 'former commercial artist.' I worked in Detroit for 30 years, from 1957 to 1987, as a graphic designer/illustrator doing automotive advertising. In Detroit, the auto unions used to have a slogan, saying "30 and out." Saying that, after 30 years, you'd still have some life left, and another worker could take your place and also have a chance at 30 years of productive work. So I figured after 30 years, I would stop doing commercial work and do my own work.

Currently I'm teaching at Cal Arts in the graduate design program. I'm still involved in design, but I've become my own client. Which is kind of like being an artist. My work constantly evolves. Now it can evolve totally in the direction that I'm interested in. The other thing about being an 'exit level designer' is that you don't have to worry about being in the mix. You're basically done. The truth is, my work entered history, so to speak, 15 years ago. It's had its blip through the culture and now I'm history, so now I can do what I want.

My interest now is [in] commercial art – all this wonderful stuff that commercial artists have done through the whole century. I've always used a Polaroid camera – illustrators use Polaroids for references. I just kind of walked along and I noticed lettering and signs...kind of 'distorted' lettering. I got more and more into it, and I started taking pictures for the beauty of the forms.

[The book Letters to America] is a graphic designer's view. It's not a documentary of vernacular lettering and signs. It's just a graphic designer walking around and picking and choosing what appealed to me for my own uses. My wife edited all the photographs. There were 3,000 of them, and I couldn't deal with them, so she put them together and made some sort of a structure. Before that, I would just randomly tape them together on these huge sheets. Nothing really related to anything. We realized the book needed to have some kind of structure. So if you look at the book now, you'll see that there's some kind of relationship between the pictures on the page.

Does art belong in design? Does design belong in art? There's a lot of crossover now. The stuff that's out there is beautiful. It's idiosyncratic. It's got odd little twists. It's personal. It's these endless variations on these 26 [letter] forms that people do – casually, deliberately, spontaneously, naively....

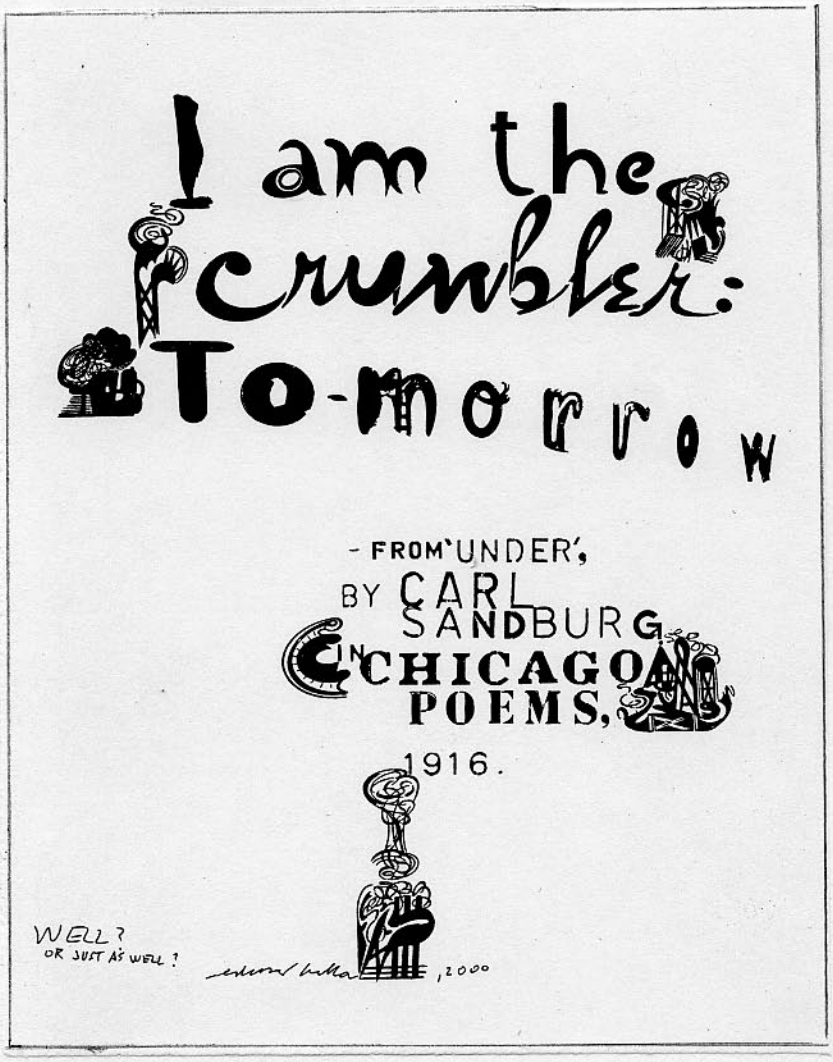
Endless logos and packages. Look at all this incredible stuff that we have in our own history and look at how beautiful it is, how clever. It's also very personal. Modernism blew it all away by saying you needed to take out all of the expression, all of the reference, and just make it readable and legible – typography should just disappear so that it just holds the message. The postmodern thing is bringing all this back again. We've studied psychology and semiotics and all that.

The same with logos now – they're a common shared language that we all know. You can put a star on something and it's patriotic. Some are arbitrary. What do the golden arches mean? Does it refer to the arch in St. Louis? Starbucks just made a logo. It's recognizable because it's green and you've seen it a million times. There were a million circles with lettering before that, but you didn't associate them with Starbucks. Everybody wants a sign or a logo or an identifying mark that they feel people will gravitate towards or trust. I trust McDonald's when I drive across the country. More than the food, the golden arches means "clean bathroom." ≡

We want things to look good. Clay pots, arrowheads. The earliest kind of stone work is beautiful stuff. It works functionally, but it's pleasing, aesthetically. People decorated their bodies with beautiful scarification and tattoo work. It kind of goes back to Day One, doesn't it? People always say "kids' art is so beautiful, so free and so loose and so spontaneous." But you know, kids don't think that at all. They want to draw realistically. They want to make it perfect. You'll say, "Oh, what a beautiful drawing," and they'll say, "No it's not. I want to get it right." The truth is, they're right. They want it to be right.

This wonderful American vernacular lettering that includes commercial art to garage sale signs. From high design to oil logos. A person putting out a 'for sale' or 'come back later' sign. It's these 26 forms, with endless variations. The irony is that they are really discreet forms. It still has to be an A. If it can't be read as an A, then it's not an A anymore. It has to have a certain form to it. But within that form, there is so much variety.

Every culture had shields and signs that they used. That's about the oldest thing in the world. If you put it on your body, it was an identifying mark. They're more deliberate now, but it's the same idea. If you look at the old ones, they had the same kind of meaning, we just didn't understand them. My mother's family had a snake in the crest. The name of that snake was the same as the family name. That's all lost, but there's still a snake on the crest.



Under

I
I am the undertow
Washing tides of power
Battering the pillars
Under your things of high law.

II
I am a sleepless
Slowfaring eater,
Maker of rust and rot
In your bastioned fastenings,
Caissons deep.

III
I am the Law
Older than you
And your builders proud.
I am deaf
In all days
Whether you
Say "Yes" or "No."

I am the crumbler:
To-morrow.

—*Carl Sandburg*

Carl Sandburg, *Chicago Poems* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Incorporated, 1994).

EDITOR'S NOTE:

In 1913, Carl Sandburg moved to Chicago, where he joined a group of writers responsible for the city's literary and artistic renaissance. This was an age of rapid industrialization and change, and Sandburg's writing reflects a wholehearted optimism toward contemporary life, yet also cautions against conceit. "Under" was published in 1916, as part of Sandburg's famous Chicago Poems *series. Like much of the poet's work of this era, it celebrates factories, smokestacks, and machinery—as does Fella's piece, which reinterprets early twentieth-century commercial art, produced in large quantities in Chicago before World War II.*

Says Fella: "Sandburg was absolutely right—all of those things are now gone. But isn't it just as well that the future crumbles almost everything: You don't want to hang on to too much stuff from the past, or you'll have nothing to redo. I've been working as a designer since 1957 and for me, everything I've ever hoped for has come to pass. My tomorrow's now here; the future is for all of you young people who are still plugging away.

As for the little remark on the bottom of the page: it's a commentary on the modernist idea of a 'timelessness' in design versus that continual change of styles, however timebound, of my good old commercial art past. 'Well?' is a challenge to disagree with Sandburg's statement from the side of timelessness, and 'just as well' not only agrees with his statement, but argues that that's as it should be. Time will tell with time!"

from INFORM : a Journal of Design Awareness published by AIGA CHICAGO 2000 Vol 13 No 2 pp 22, 23

A FUTURIST'S MANIFESTO

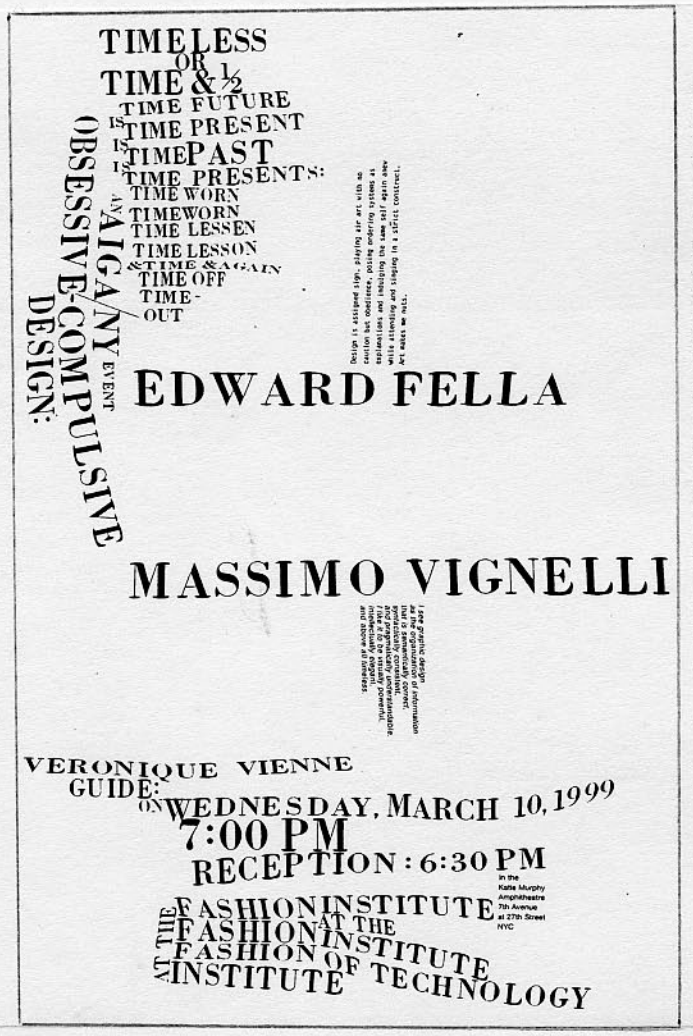
How far forward is to-morrow?

EDWARD FELLA

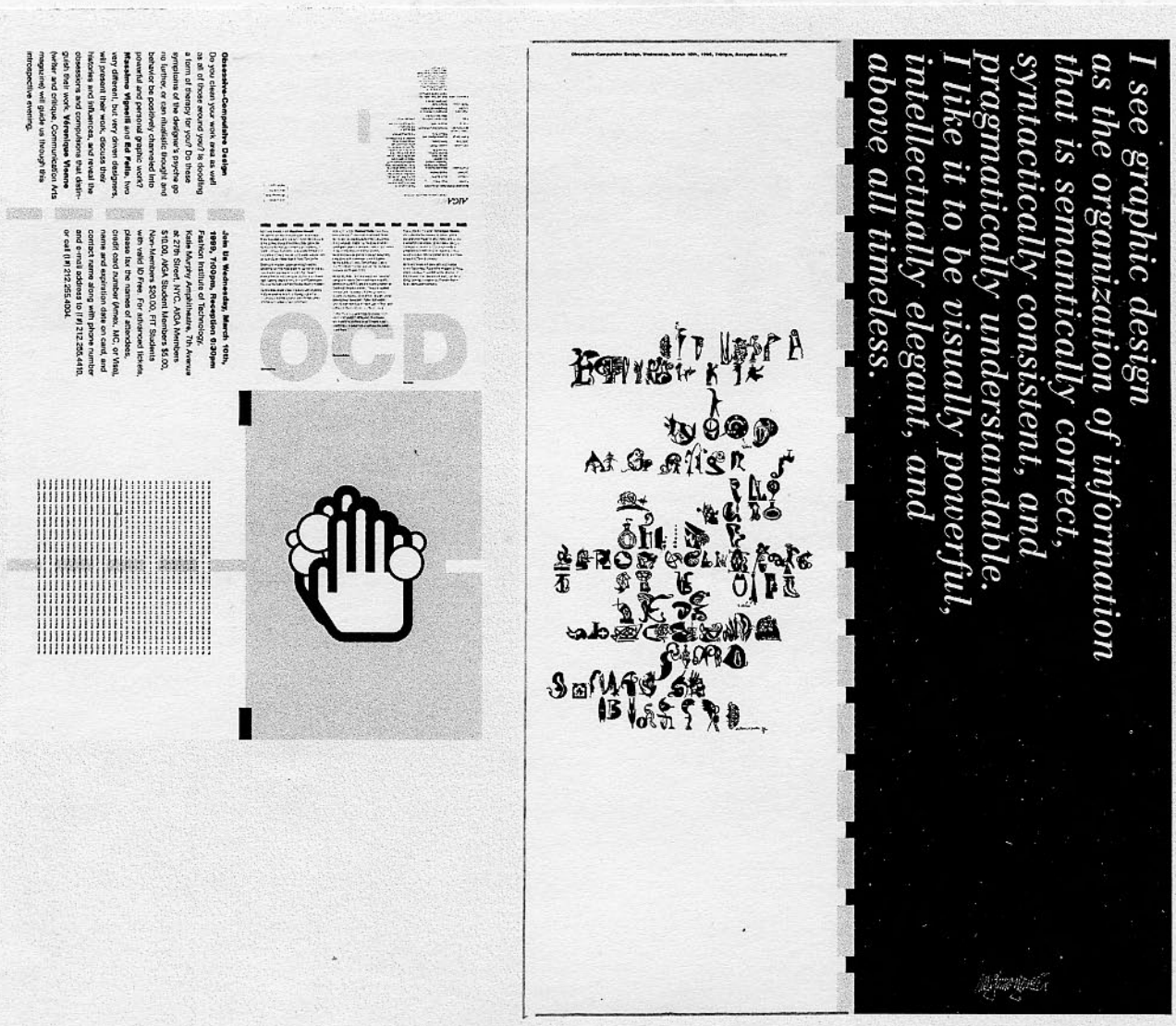
profession/title(s): *currently a former Detroit commercial artist (1957-1987) and presently teaching (since 1987) at CalArts in Los Angeles* looking forward to most this decade: *the digital economy* dreading most this decade: *the political economy* dogmas subscribed to: *the design economy*

FOLLOWING PAGES FROM =

* 100 HABITS OF SUCCESSFUL GRAPHIC DESIGNERS: INSIDER SECRETS ON WORKING SMART AND STAYING CREATIVE
written & designed by PLAZM
SARAH DOUGHER & JOSHUA BERGER, ROCKPORT, 2003



63 Provide service to your design community

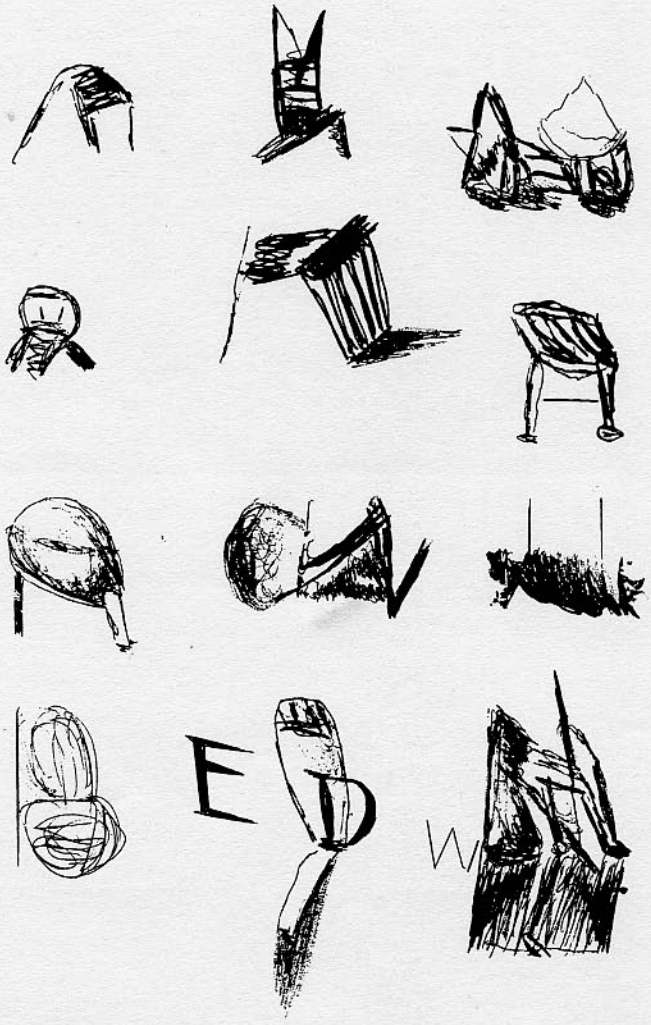


AIGA New York poster
Worksight

Working with the New York chapter of AIGA allowed Scott Santoro of Worksight to do work that he found really exciting and interesting. He saw his involvement with AIGA as a chance to actually follow though with some of his ideas about lectures he wanted to give and speakers he wanted to see. He was first asked to be on the "Fresh Dialogue" speakers series in 1991, and this opportunity provided the impetus for his involvement. Santoro's board service came out of an interest to create events at which members could extend their understanding of design. "One of the first events that I chaired involved Ed Fella and Massimo Vignelli, not because they were two famous 'celebrity' designers, but because they were the two most obsessive-compulsive designers I could think of to pair for what I named 'obsessive-compulsive design,' OCD."

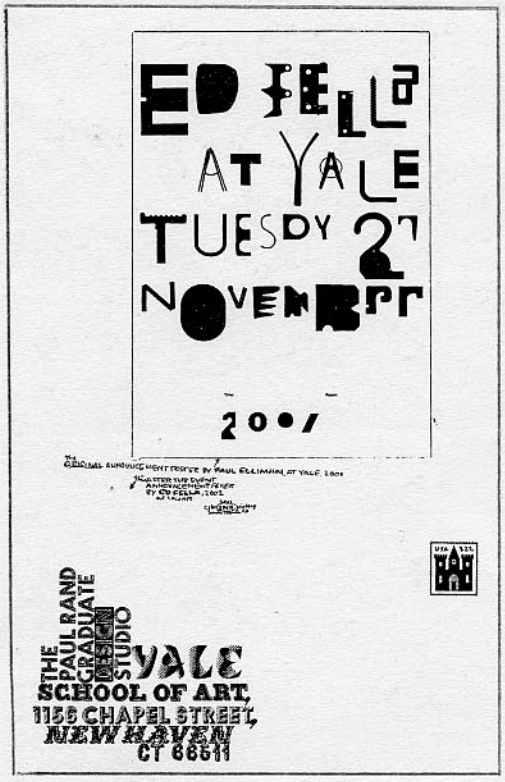
Although it took up a lot of his time, Santoro learned a lot about event management—how to get people to attend events and how to work with a board of directors. Santoro felt the experience was important to his development as a member of a wider design community in New York. "The administrator at the New York chapter was worried about my spending too much time working for the chapter, but I really wanted to put some good time in during my tenure. I knew I was getting something back that I couldn't put a price tag on."

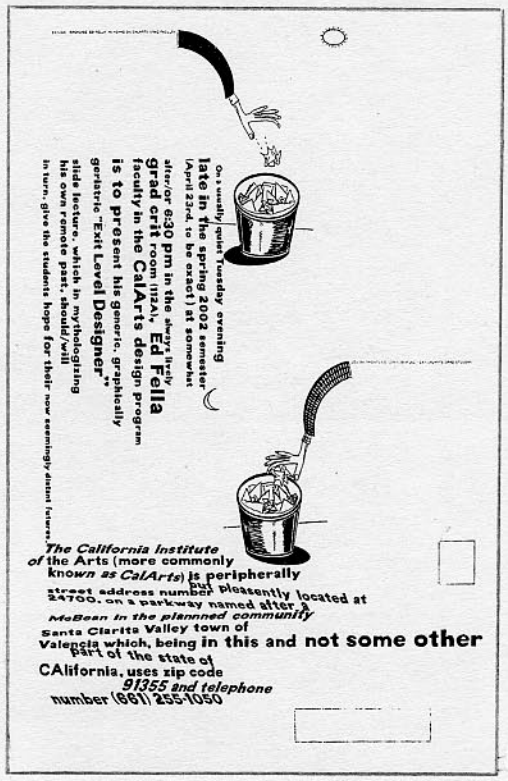
Designers: Ed Fella (left), Scott Santoro/Worksight (right)



FELLA.

PRESENT
IN AN ART DESIGNER 1ST TYPE SLIDE PRESENTATION
AT YALE UNIVERSITY
8 PM graphic design
TUESDAY 27 PROGRAM,
NOVEMBER 27 SCHOOL OF ART





⑫ Create after-the-fact flyers

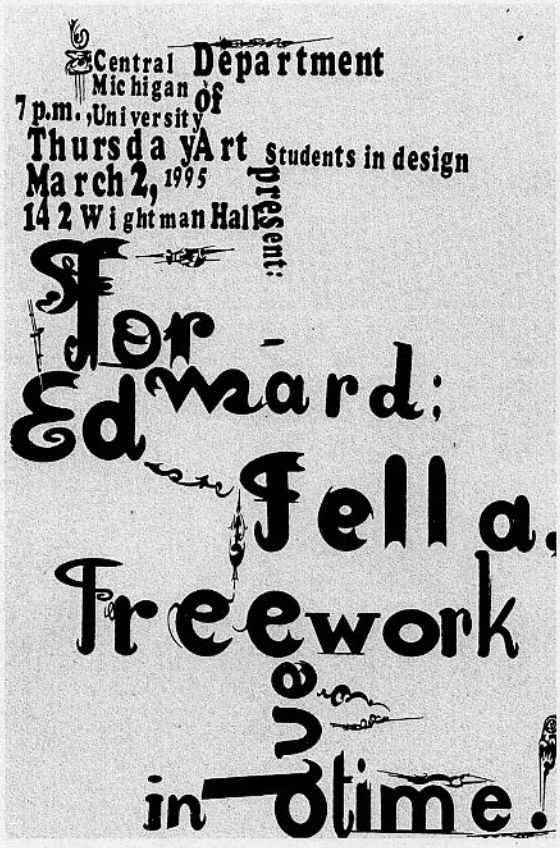
Announcement Flyers
Ed Fella

To complement his typographic experimentation, Ed Fella started experimenting with direct mail advertisements, or flyers. He began creating what he calls "after-the-fact" announcements, which function as a souvenir for the event they advertise. "The one I'm doing now is from a lecture I did at Yale University in November 2001, so I'm just now working on the flyer. I'll print it—a couple hundred copies, that's it. They become a kind of idea about art design and art practice. Those other ones that advertise, they function as real flyers—they print a couple thousand of them and mail them out. I would just get my 'cut,' 50 copies or so. The whole idea of what I'm doing now is to just print the designer's cut, not the announcement—just do an edition."

In the poster shown here, Fella combines sports lettering from Yale with odd kinds of old-fashioned lettering, creating a look of sports nostalgia mixed with thoughtful graphic design. The result is an eclectic mix that has nothing to do with the present. Fella notes, "I guess it's a kind of post-modernism. These pieces function autonomously. They don't function in the design world; they occasionally make it into the art world, into a gallery or a museum. The posters that I do are very specific to a very small audience. The Yale poster won't make any sense to anyone besides people who are involved with the Yale graphic design program. They will be the ones to get the nuances. Yet it works as a piece, an announcement. It's readable; it gives you the time and the place of the event."

All graphic design announces something: it is worthless after the event is over. Fella's philosophy of the edition drives him to create these seemingly obsolete pieces. "I make all these announcements for things that are already over. I pay for them myself. There are no editions; there is just the archive edition. In advertising you send out 200 posters and hope that 20 people come to the event. When you do it after the fact, you just make the 20 and give it to people who actually came to the event." Fella's experimental graphics give him an opportunity to create work associated with events but that do not advertise them ahead of time. They are graphic souvenirs and function to promote ideas rather than events, thus clearly reflecting the work and thought process of the designer.

Designer/Illustrator: Ed Fella



⑭ Use the Robin Hood theory

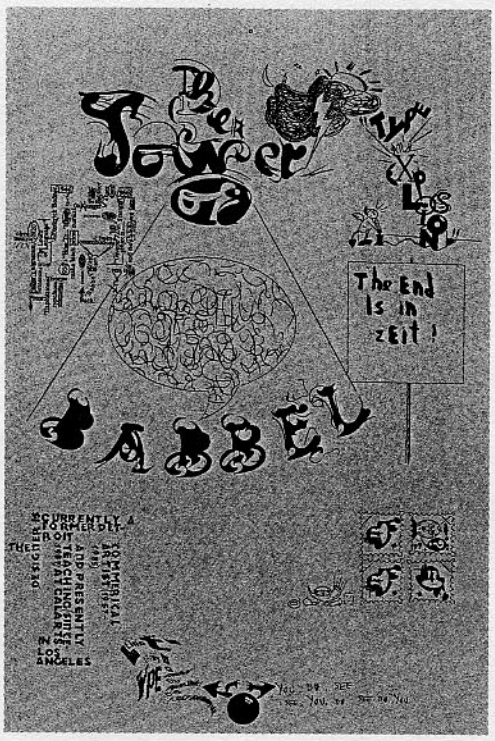
Announcement Flyer
Ed Fella

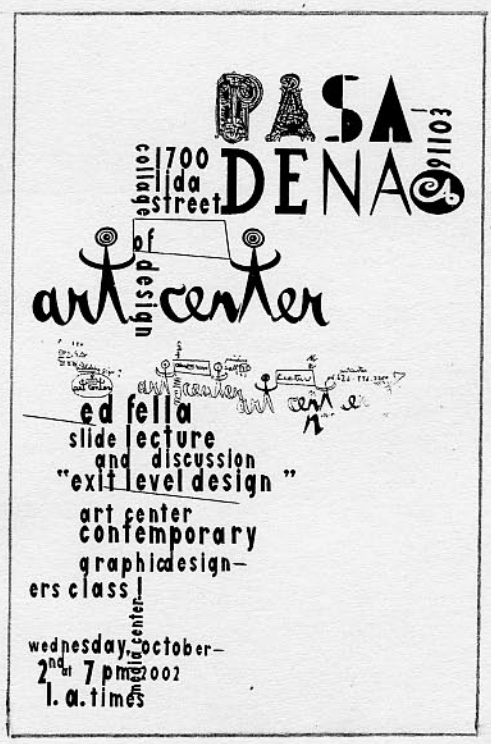
Ed Fella worked throughout the '70s for arts organizations in and around Detroit. In addition to designing *Detroit Focus Quarterly*, a local art magazine, he did thousands of posters on which he would execute his typographic experiments. He contributed his design time as well as the facilities of the shop in which he was working. To get new typefaces, which at that time had to be purchased, he would piggyback the typeface from a paying job onto pro bono jobs. "I'd do a job for a car company for which we'd put on a few lines of type and send it out, so I'd get the type. I'd use the studio facilities. I couldn't have done that work if I didn't have a job. I couldn't be a starving artist and do this pro bono work. I never made a penny on it. Now it costs so little, I never have to pay much for printing. You know, I make 100 copies and it only costs 50 bucks. If it were a real project, it would cost thousands of dollars to print."

"My work for nonprofits was entirely based on the fact that I had this big studio at my fingertips. I had the board to do the mechanicals, type, wax, pencils—all of that. I would always give credit to the company I worked at—they didn't mind. It wasn't like I was taking work money away from them. They probably threw more stuff away than I used for the arts organization anyway. I robbed Peter to pay Paul."

Designer, Illustrator: Ed Fella

㊵ When you retire, deal with the possibilities, not the necessities





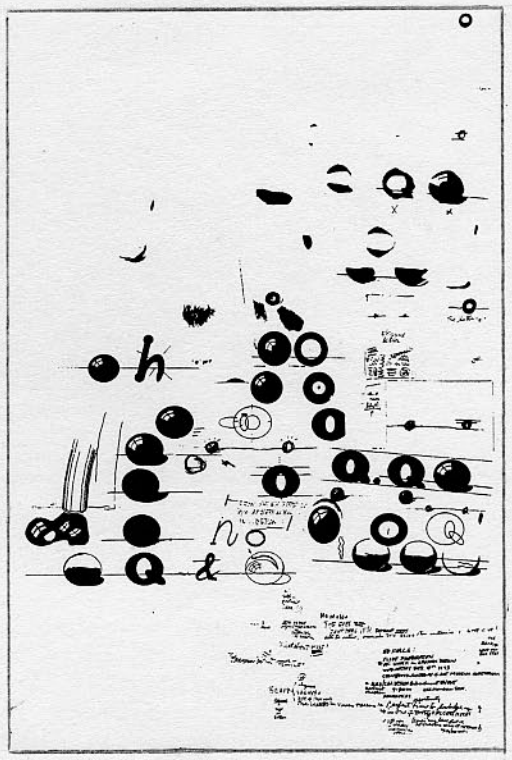
Announcement Flyers
Ed Fella

Ed Fella describes himself as an "exit-level" designer. He now co-teaches a general graduate-level graphic design seminar with first- and second-year students at California Institute of Arts (Cal Arts) in Valencia, California.

"The reason I do this is I'm retired. I'm not in the business anymore. I haven't done professional work for about 15 years, and I don't use a computer. I just make my own handmade pieces." Fella is also profoundly disinterested in business knowledge. He doesn't see the world of business today as any different than it was in the '50s, '60s, and '70s, when he was actively working. In addition, he doesn't know how to use a computer to do design—an essential element in the nuts-and-bolts education for design undergraduates today. "I don't really want to think about that anymore. It's part of the student's obligation to have to deal with professional practice, obviously. I have plenty of wisdom to impart, but I don't have so much knowledge anymore about the professional business and all the digital stuff. I enjoy my graduate seminar because there are other faculty involved with it. I can be kind of a grand old man of technical problems. Now I'm 65. I did teach full-time for about 13 years after my career in professional work."

Staying engaged with the creativity of his older students and colleagues and maintaining his own studio on the Cal Arts campus keep Fella involved with a somewhat rarified corner of the design world, but that is OK with him. "In the grad program at Cal Arts, we deal in the possibilities, not the necessities. In undergraduate education you have to teach people how to be graphic designers. Graduate education is more experimental. By the time you come to graduate education you already are a graphic designer. In graduate education you deal with possibilities and experimental stuff."

Designer, Illustrator: Ed Fella



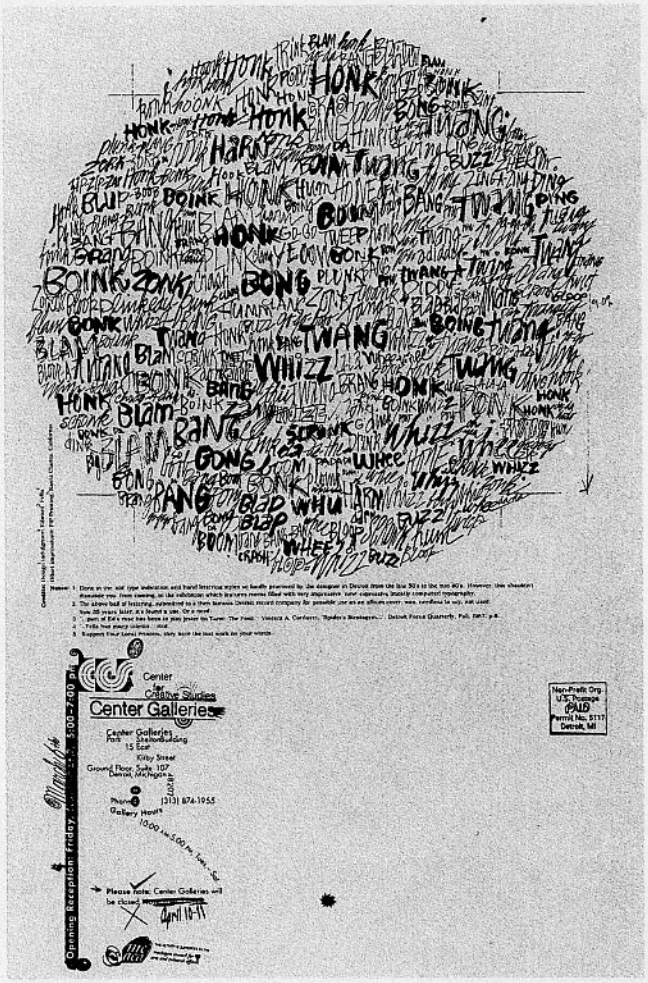
㊶ Go back to school no matter how old you are

Announcement Flyers
Ed Fella

Ed Fella worked in Detroit at a large design studio for the first half of his career. He had received what he calls a "Bauhaus" model of high school education—a rigorous trade education larded liberally with humanities topics—and when he got out of high school he went right to work. "In Detroit in those days you did work in large studios. It wasn't like now when designers are in small shops or individuals. We had studios with 60 people in them—that was how the profession was in those days. I did that work for a long time. I did it honestly and wasn't cynical about it. My father was an autoworker. I didn't have any problem helping to sell the cars."

"I finally went back to graduate school. I was 48 and said, 'Well, now I can become a full-time teacher and end the professional design career.' It was that Detroit idea of 30 and up, that Walter Ruther thought up—that you would work for 30 years and then you'd retire. You wouldn't be burnt out, and another person would take your place. I also could retire from professional design to teach, and I'd have time to do my personal work, which I've done since then. I'm famous now for my personal work, which is ironic—no one gives a shit about the 30 years of design work—the automotive industry, the heath care industry. These things are collectors' items now."

Designer, Illustrator: Ed Fella



㊽ Develop and sustain an art practice throughout your life

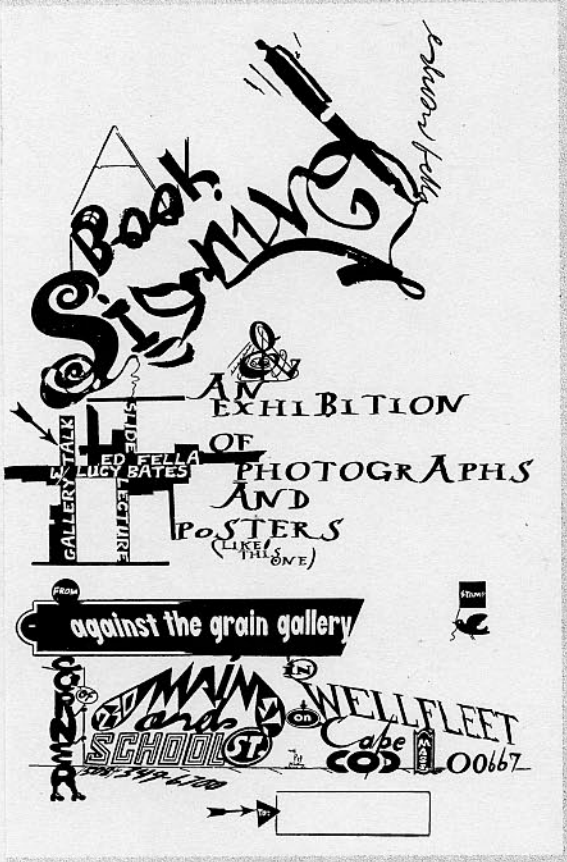
Announcement Flyers
Ed Fella

Ed Fella occupies a unique position as a retired designer, functioning somewhere on the edges of the design world but not fully in it. "I've carved out this odd position where I'm still a graphic designer using graphic design but as an art practice. Graphic design has to have a subject, a deadline—all of that. With these pieces, I'm the subject—it's the opposite of graphic design, where the artist is never the subject. The designer is never the subject."

Fella recently published *Letters from America*, a collection of his Polaroid photographs of lettering and surfaces. In addition to this, he has a backlog of work that he hopes to eventually get out into the public world. "I have a bunch of books sitting here, but I haven't really gotten around to them. I have one all on faces and landscapes. They are signs or windows, or posters with faces and landscapes painted on them. Polaroid format. I have thousands of those. My wife has put them together and edited them, but we haven't gone to any publishers. I have about 80 sketchbooks with 100 drawings in each one. They are shown here and there, but they haven't been published. I like to make stuff, I don't really like to put it together. It is always such a pain in the ass, just to send stuff to shows. I get plenty of calls, so I haven't gone out there and pushed." Although he supported himself doing conventional graphic design for many years, Ed Fella's personal work has been his most enjoyable, as well as his most successful and critically regarded.

Designer, Illustrator: Ed Fella

⑥⑦ Recognize the limits of digital technology for creative work



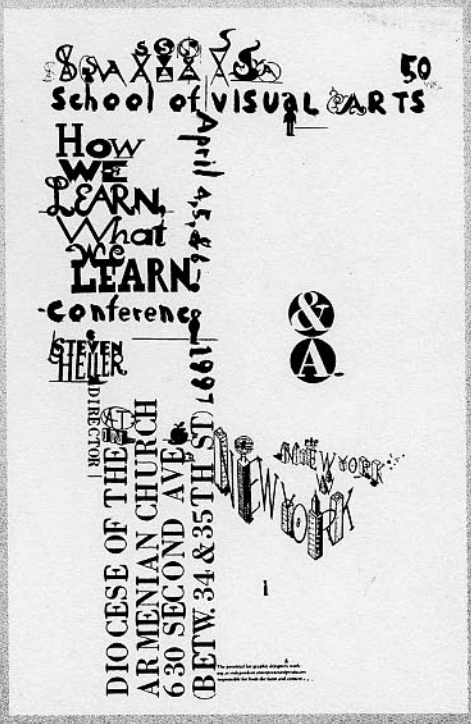
Announcement Flyer
Ed Fella

There is a significant disconnect between Ed Fella's teaching and his art. He does not teach the hand-lettering and use of old commercial techniques for which his work is known. "It's not because I don't want to," he notes. "It's just that nobody really wants to learn it. Even my own daughter, who is a graphic designer, never asks me, 'How do you do this lettering?' People want to work with digital technology now. You can't really do anything in the contemporary commercial scene unless you can use the computer to make documents. I can still do what I do because I take my work to a printer, and he scans them in for me, makes the plates. He doesn't even have a camera anymore!"

Ed Fella contends that at 65, he is too old to use a computer. When computers first became readily available over ten years ago, he made a conscious decision not to use one because he didn't really do professional work anymore and, consequently, didn't need it. "I wanted to explore the work I do, and I thought I'd waste a lot of time doing what the next generation is doing." Despite the fact that he doesn't use a computer, his work has had an important impact on designers who have learned from his unorthodox style. "I don't mind it, that history. If you look at Meggs's *History of Graphic Design*, between "Cranbrook" and "David Carson" is my paragraph. I made a link between that kind of stuff. David Carson went and took it all to the world, whereas in my case it was pretty academic stuff." Ed Fella's work serves as a formal source, which was then adapted by many artists who pushed the boundaries in new media.

When Fella won the Chrysler "Innovation in Design" award (a $10,000 prize), he wanted to do something with the money to improve his technical skills and abilities. He bought himself a video camera but admits to never having actually used it. "I wanted to do some motion stuff, but I never did. My daughter did. I was enticed, but I can't really do it. It's too hard. It's too much effort. I have a hard enough time learning how to do e-mail. I had to hire a student to give me lessons." Although many exciting experiments in font technology were filtered through the unique lens of Ed Fella, he is content to never get himself too involved with technology. He quips sardonically, "Let the next generation do that, make a living doing it. Old guys should get out of the way."

Illustrator, Designer: Ed Fella



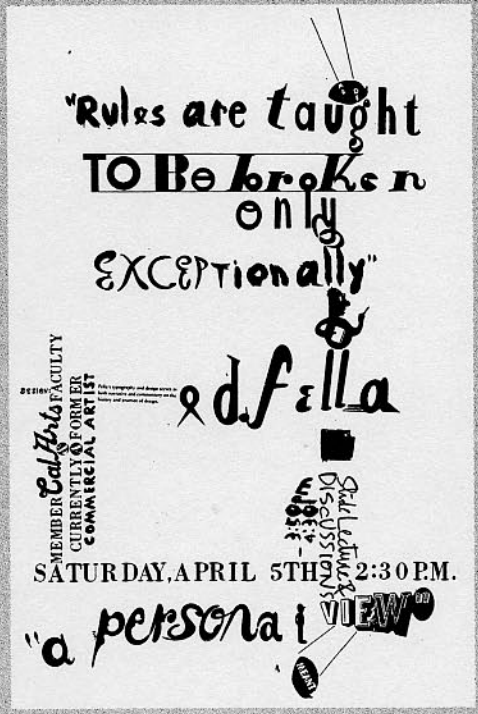
⑧⓪ Practice and preach, don't theorize and teach

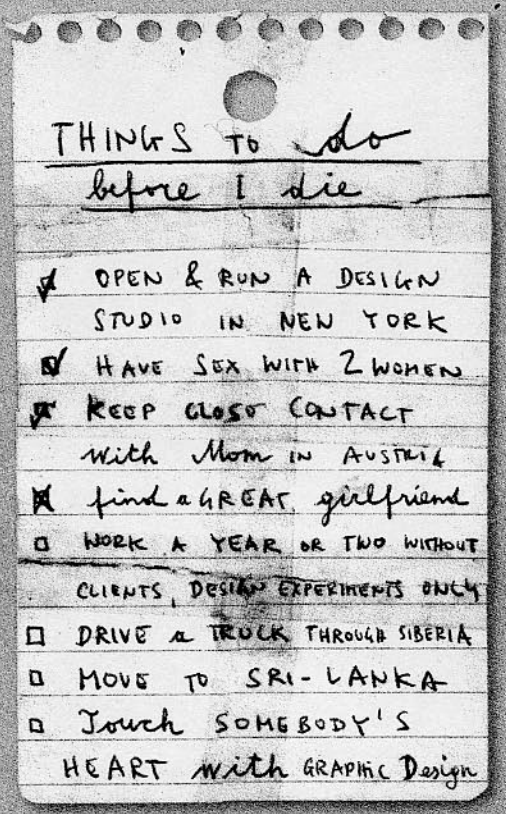
Announcement Flyers
Ed Fella

The work of a commercial graphic designer and the work of a graphic design teacher have very different demands. Nonetheless, these activities share certain elements, and Ed Fella, who has experienced both, has many insights on the subject. After working for over 30 years in Detroit in a large design shop, Fella returned to school at age 48, when he went to Cranbrook to get his master's degree. After graduating, he made his way to Southern California where he taught at Cal Arts for 15 years. He is now retired.

His aphorisms, such as "Rules are taught to be broken only exceptionally" and "Practice and preach, don't theorize and teach," serve as words to the wise as well as pithy summations of his sometimes eccentric approach to design. The precise work of a font designer, for example, is often disrupted in Fella's mostly hand-done lettering experiments. His inimitable style clearly cannot be taught as such, but it can be "preached"—rather than displaying a series of rules to follow, Fella's work and teaching style emphasize courageous creativity. Deeply schooled in the theory of design, he eschews theorization per se in favor of a strong practice and also believes teachers teach best by doing rather than theorizing.

Illustrator, Designer: Ed Fella





⑧⑦ Take some time off

To-do list
Stefan Sagmeister

The year before Stefan Sagmeister took time off from client work had been the most successful to date. Business was flowing in, and the then-booming economy had filled their coffers. In addition, the small firm had won many important awards; Sagmeister had gained an international reputation and was invited to speak all over the world.

The only problem—Sagmeister was bored. The work had become repetitive, and the client demands stifled his flame of creativity. When he was invited to Cranbrook to give a workshop, he observed the students' work and lifestyle. "I actually got rather jealous of all the mature students there being able to spend their entire day just experimenting," says Sagmeister "Then Ed Fella came into the studio and showed me all the notebooks with his freewheeling typographic experiments. That did it. I settled on a date a year in advance, and I called up all my clients."

Sagmeister tried to fill that year with happy experiments. "My work during that time can be summed up by a list of all the things that I felt would be worthwhile exploring but never had the time. This included things as simple as thinking about the whole wide world and my place within it, all the way to more concrete projects, like designing fictitious CD covers under time pressure—doing them in three hours rather than my customary three months—and seeing how that self-imposed restriction changes the process and the result."

Sagmeister spent his time developing a number of what he calls "seed projects" for future collaborations with clients. He comments, "Because my brain has a tendency to follow the well-beaten path, I thought it might be helpful to start a project not from within itself but from an outside departure point, again with the hope of arriving at a different solution."

Although he claims that the results of his sabbatical are not yet clear, Sagmeister has learned to approach his design work with a new enthusiasm. "In any case, I got my love for design back, so it was definitely worth it."

THREE NEW FACES

by Laurie Haycock Makela

This is the second in a series of projects in which DESIGN Quarterly commissions artists and designers to address familiar aspects of the design environment. I had the pleasure of asking two digital-type designers and one graphic designer to create one typeface each for this magazine, seen on the following pages and used throughout this issue. DESIGN Quarterly's current format, which I devised in 1991, strives for a modest tension between classical and lyrical qualities on the one hand, scientific and industrial attributes on the other. The startling character that these three new faces bring to this effort proves that personalization and idiosyncrasy can enliven the visible forms of language.

Massimo Vignelli, the all-purpose designer who, for thirty years, has made significant contributions to his field, recently evangelized to a large Minneapolis audience about modernism. He chastised those designers who may not be full-fledged functionalists for being diseased, disobedient, and misled. He dismissed all but four typefaces in the world's collection of thousands; disapproved of historical appropriation; and berated British and American experimental type design — in particular, all new work from the West Coast, the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, and *Emigre*, the avant-garde graphic design magazine and music label based in Sacramento. However, Vignelli's bourgeois concepts of universality and order cannot fulfill the needs brought on by our nation's quickly growing cultural diversity. As it happens, a new generation of digital-type designers share an impulse to humanize and ornament letterforms.

Matthew Carter, a pioneering digital typographer, says about his new typeface, SOPHIA, "As technology advances, I become interested in older and older letterforms — unconventional because they are preconventional." Zuzana Licko, the principal type designer for *Emigre*, combined spirited serifs with spiked descenders to create a musical, neo-folk typeface called QUARTET. While none of the three designers is motivated solely by the prospect of monetary gain, Edward Fella is perhaps the least concerned with permanence and marketability. His typeface, OUT WEST ON A 15 DEGREE ELLIPSE, is a send-up of serious type design. Unhappy with arbitrary divisions between art and design, he draws letters to form an awkwardly elegant alphabet, influenced by the vernacular of America's Old West. These innovative fonts demonstrate the rewards of new type design by and for those who break decades-old rules. As will happen again and again, particularity, expressiveness, and surprise outperform typographic stasis.

Page 23: typeface and page design by Matthew Carter, available through Carter and Cone Type, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts. *Page 24:* typeface by Zuzana Licko, page design by Rudy Vanderlans, available through *Emigre*, Sacramento. *Page 25:* typeface and page design by Edward Fella, available free of charge by copying directly from the page.


Out West on a 15 Degree Ellipse: A Typeface
Designed by Edward Fella
the quick brown
fox jumps
over a lazy dog
A LAZY DOG?
ED FELLA
DESIGN Quarte
15°
15 DEGREES WEST
ABCDEFGHIJKL?
MNOPQRSTUV
WXYZ1234567

Steven Heller

Is it art of is it type? Its art type!

Ed Fella's Art Font Outwestdesigned by Ed Fella, Emigre Fonts

When digital "fontography" was introduced in the late Eighties and early Nineties scores of non-type designers frenetically and passionately designed alphabets that broke the venerable rules. At first glance Outwest designed by Ed Fella in 1993 is one of those. At second, it is a beautifully structured and precisely balanced design that fuses calligraphic, constructivist, and expressionistic traditions under a rubric that I would call illustrative lettering. And, incidentally, its all based on a sketch of a ten gallon hat.

With Emigre Fonts as its launch pad the face was quickly thrust into the design world as an icon of the digital epoch, but it really could have been issued at any moment from the Victorian period to the present. Of course, its appearance on contemporary posters, magazine layouts, and flyers determined stylistic categorization—and when combined with exclusively digital typographic concoctions Outwest was considered resolutely grunge. But viewed independent of the fashion frame and simply as the obsessive doodling of an artist who, having been a professional commercial artist, was revolting against conventions, it really defies any stylistic pigeonholing. I hazard to say it is a new Helvetica, but there is a curious commonality between the two disparate faces—Outwest actually has remarkable range and utility. While I wouldn't use Outwest for an iota of the corporate assignments for which Helvetica is a requisite, I would indeed argue that it has many more applications than most commercial novelty faces. In fact, I would not even call Outwest a novelty because the word implies ephemeral.

Outwest may have satiric qualities that address a particular aspect of the current scene, but it is not only rooted in its time. What I love about the face is its authority and versatility. Okay, maybe its not the most appropriate text face, though I've seen it used fairly effectively in 12 and 14 point text blocks, but it has great power as a headline, logo, and also in billboard sizes. It is also one of Fella's most disciplined works.

Will Outwest survive the next wave of typographic hijinx, whatever that may be? No one can tell. And because type use tends to be governed by turns of fashion, Outwest may have run its course on a superficial level. But for me, Outwest is timeless and will be effective today, tomorrow, or in two decades from now when it will doubtless be revived anyway. But Outwest is more than a typeface. It is an art face, the nexus of art and design, the epitome of expression. It is more than the sum of its typographic parts. It is what it is. Yippee-hi-ho-ki-yay. TRAD 184

→ MILES NEWLYN, LEICESTER, UK, 7/93

On the iconography of the Fella page.

As Carducci says "His running of text sideways interrupts our casual reading — it also serves to turn the catalogue itself into sculpture because one must turn it in space to continue."

This statement suggests a way of experiencing our environment that is rooted deep in the distant past, indeed to the time when sculpture and stature were the only forms of human expression. Since then humanity has become increasingly removed from its environment and consciousness has become increasingly "internalised", the world experienced through the 2 dimensional visual field — painting, print, film, video and graphic design.

The following is a brief description of how the six mailers I received from Ed Fella can be analysed and interpreted as pointers toward a return to earlier forms of visual consciousness, deconstructing some of the modern visual codes en route.

To start with all the mailers are two sided, so to view them completely they have to be handled. Most often the concept of top and bottom is nearly ignored. On the reverse side of "Party to WELCOME" thirty of Fella's "insignificant forms" are laid out in parody of upper and lower case type, each form reproduced twice in two sizes. They have been balanced on a rule (a straight horizontal line) and highlight the arbitrary nature of graphic design's most fundamental principals — that of the baseline. Like an alphabet of an alien civilisation from a place with no gravity, they fallen to Earth and have been manacled by a baseline culture taught in schools by ruled exercise books.

Is the map below this arrangement free from this tyranny? Unlike a usual map where place names conform to the same cartesian grid, the words cling magnetically to their own geography.

The "UP" in the centre, supported by an arrow, can be read in a number of ways, I might decide it is a pretentious stab at the hierarchical concept of north and south, or the postman's guide to correct rectitude, but I prefer to see it as an empty sign of the gravitational axis that is the most prevalent iconography of modern design, and the fundamental aesthetic of the TV and most modern experience, of which these works resist. This difference is also present in the Pollock like, "flat on the desk" calligraphic piece.

The iconography of Fella's own slide presentation mailer, a page of half finished spheres is reminiscent of the first "steps into space" as the black spots appear in various stages of disengagement from their paper environment, a theme often echoed in the many three dimensional renderings of words.

'Feller,' says he 'you have spilled the form.' Indeed he has, those first steps, which happened in the middle of the first millennium (about 600BC) as Egyptian and Greek statuary disengaged itself from it's stiff planar backdrop of stone with a leg forward "step into space" composition, is echoed here. Like those statues these spheres remain idealised and lack any recognition of themselves or the viewer (there is no perspective). Neither does the text below, it is not presented to us, the message of the piece remains a note to define itself, not to communicate to the viewer. Instead the emphasis is on our experience of it (emphasised by the gold star stuck to the surface), not the encoded meaning.

This "object" nature of the mailer, that is the 3D experience of it, is in direct contrast to the dominant preference of the 20th century for two dimensional visual experience as represented by the packaging of three dimensional experience on TV's small visual field, in front of which we sit, passive, transfixed and often isolated. This mailer, and some of the others where for example the stencilled lettering is left half filled-in, invite the viewer to carry on the drawing, and thus form a closer bond with it.

Yet there is an irony when one knows something about Fella, he admits to loving critical theory, and the possibility of these works being interpreted at this level, and yet the iconography he uses (as I have understood it) is opposed to it. Turn up the light of intellectualising, and the glass immediately darkens, vision dims. If, as Poynor states, "Critics in the design camp, if they comment at all, say that the work is "design about design, that it is too visually and conceptually complicated, that it is too personal....", then they (the critics and Fella) are totally out of sync, or is the page iconography out of sync with the 'content'?

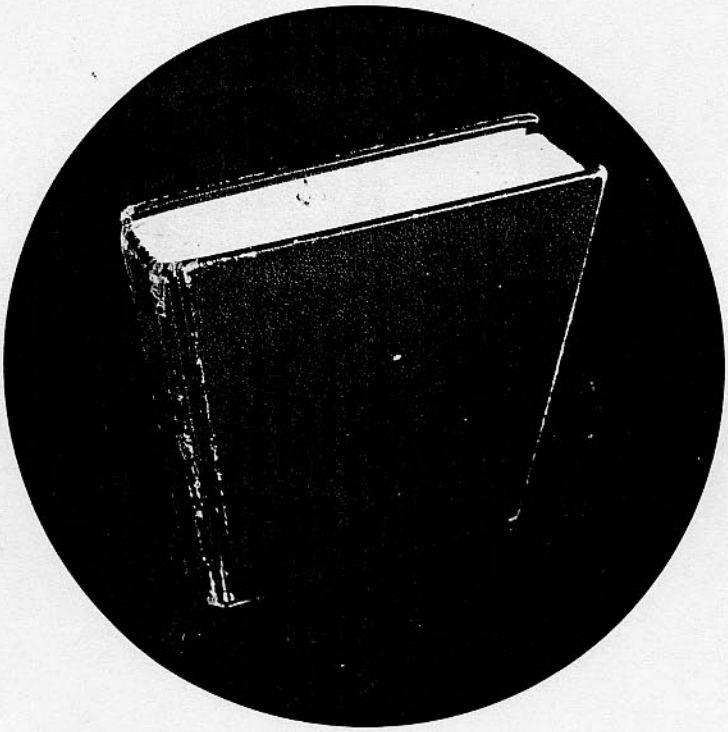
In removing the slickness of design he has destroyed the code that identifies the visual field as something through which we expect to receive information and experience, instead it functions as information itself, or a product.

Cultural criticism, by contrast, is limited in it's approach to this work because of its 20th century detached 'onlooker' mode of consciousness, search for abstraction and insistent removal of things from their natural context for individual scrutiny.

EYE MAGAZINE #23, 1996

Fellapages

For thirty years Edward Fella was a commercial artist. In his sketchbooks, he applies his mastery of lettering and illustration styles to brilliant improvisations. *By Rick Poynor*



Edward Fella carries a sketchbook with him wherever he goes. In spare moments watching television or waiting for a film to start, listening to a talking book on his Walkman or a radio phone-in, sitting in a faculty meeting at California Institute of the Arts or dining in a restaurant, he takes out the book and, almost compulsively, with no particular destination in mind, begins to draw.

Since he acquired the habit in the mid-1970s, Fella has filled more than 45 books of different sizes with collages, intricate pencil and template drawings and, since 1987 (the year he moved from Michigan to take up a position teaching graphic design at CalArts), with obsessive quasi-surrealist doodles created using his standard kit, a four-colour Bic ballpoint and yellow pencil. The sketchbook above, from which the pages shown here are taken, was completed between 30 May and 16 October 1992 and contains 110 drawings on the theme of lettering, each one occupying a single right-hand page.

In these crackpot improvisations, using words and phrases plucked from the air, a prodigious array of lettering styles and cartoonish imagery, Fella doesn't so much take his line for a walk as force-feed it hallucinogens and release it babbling on to the page. If he sometimes makes "mistakes" as his ballpoint flicks across the paper, he covers his tracks so well you would hardly notice.

The precision is a reminder of the 30 years Fella spent as a versatile and highly disciplined commercial artist, whose career began in 1957 as an eighteen-year-old apprentice in a Detroit art studio that supplied agencies with design services, photo-retouching and mechanicals. Then, as now, Fella was never a realist; there was always an element of distortion in his decorative lettering and spot illustration. As an echo of those days, almost every page in his sketchbooks has a faint pencil line to mark the edge of the design.

Fella more or less withdrew from commercial practice after gaining an MFA in his late forties at Cranbrook Academy of Art and becoming a teacher. But, as he himself observes, after so many years of professional practice "the machine is still running". In the sketchbooks, he uses his formidable technique to make art about the commercial art he once used to make – with a knowing salute to outsider art and the folk vernacular along the way. There is a sense also in which the machine is now running in reverse, churning out signifiers that no longer signify, "undoing" the coherent meanings of his professional career (though not, Fella says, in any way disowning it). He likens the act of drawing to a form of "withdrawing"; his attempt to extricate himself from the page by a series of ad hoc formal manoeuvres is the process by which the drawing is made.

The sketchbooks have another, more practical purpose. "It's a kind of really far-end experimentation," says Fella, "a system that I've set up for myself that allows the subconscious to come out – within a structure – by shifting my attention to something else." Many of these explosions of spontaneous form will inevitably lead nowhere; others may find an outlet in the 11 x 17-inch posters that Fella designs – after the fact – to "announce" events at CalArts. Beyond this, the question arises as to whether the sketchbooks might be exhibited or published. Fella claims to find them "kind of boring" and their relentless, almost profligate, visual invention is certainly as overwhelming as it is seductive. "Nobody has the patience to deal with hundreds of these pages," their creator laughs. "But a small sequence, you can study." e

OPPOSITE: ENLARGED DETAIL

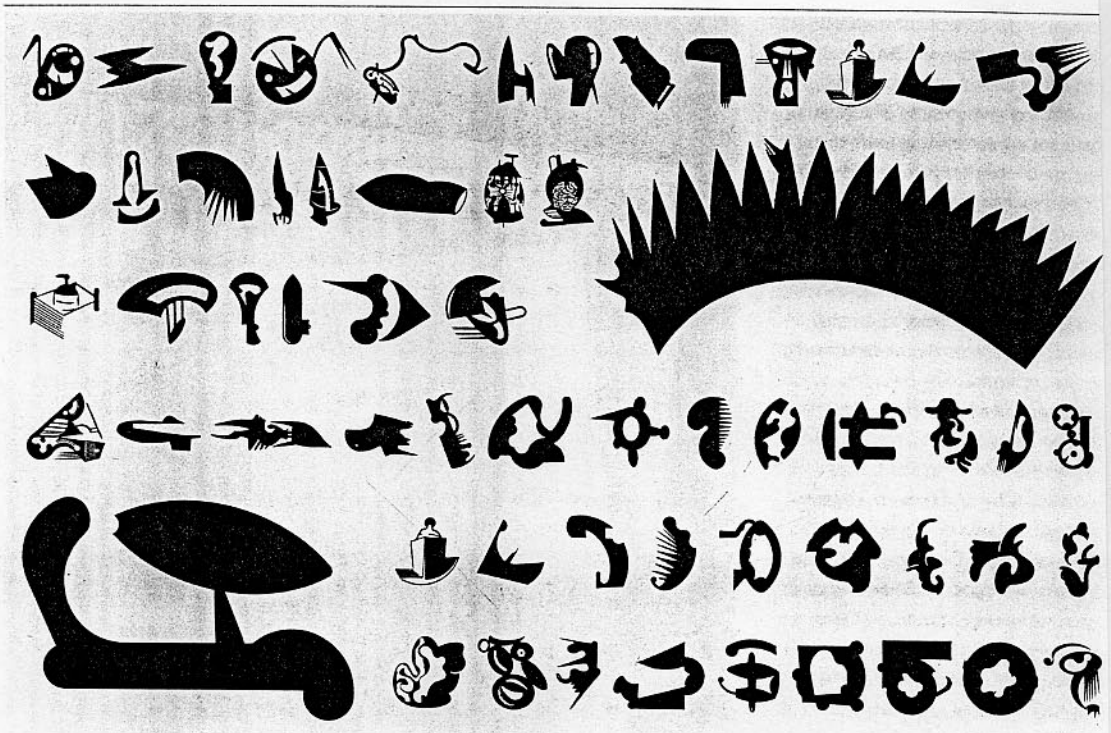
from EYE MAGAZINE NO.13, VOL 4 1994

by MILES NEWLYN

Fellaparts

In an attempt to increase their credibility in the fine-printing arena, the digital foundries have recently released a flurry of ornamental and dingbat fonts: floral and foliate, swash strokes, representational illustration (telephones, aeroplanes) and geometric (Didot ornaments). The use of almost any of these lends a job a quaint, if not archaic, feel – either because ornament has no place in the contemporary aesthetic, or because none of the available ornaments is in harmony with it. I believe the problem to be the latter. Certainly the majority of these new fonts seem inspired by a truly outdated language of ornament accrued from, as Massimo Vignelli would put it, the trash can of the past, easily digitised (no spacing or kerning) and offered to allay our post-modern panic.

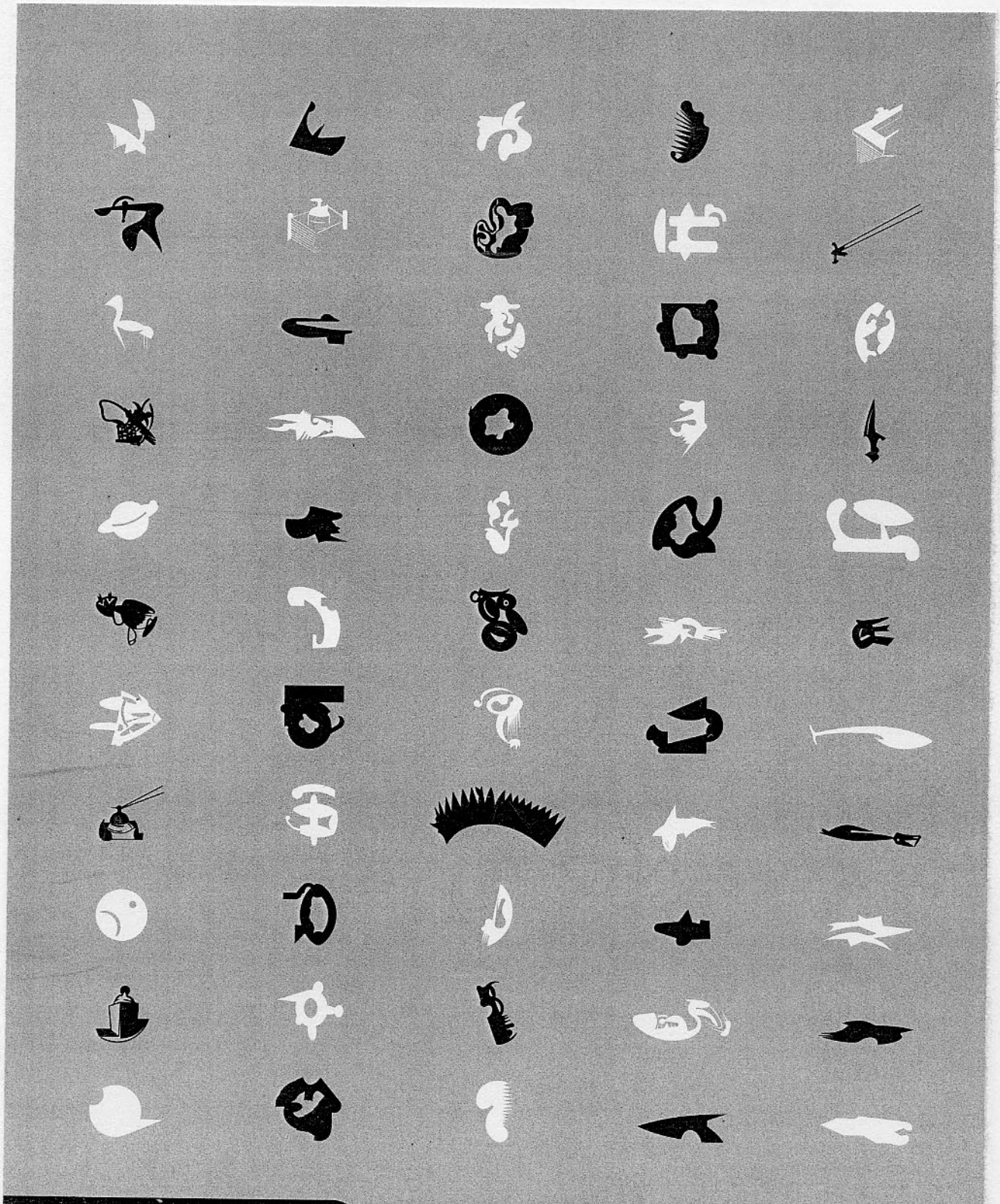
Modernism and post-modernism have left a hiatus in the evolution of ornament, a process described by Barry Deck as taking place "in response to a continual sampling of daily life in conjunction with a culture's dominant notions of beauty, often rooted in the technical means by which it is produced". Fellaparts, a new release from Emigre Fonts, addresses the problem of creating an ornament appropriate to contemporary design. A collection of 170 elements designed by Edward Fella and digitised by Zuzana Licko, it is Emigre's second collection of



illustrations, the first being Big Cheese (*Eye* no. 10 vol. 3). Fellaparts were submitted to Licko on A4 paper without any indication of a right way up, and though they were all drawn by hand, they can be manipulated easily and elastically by the spacing and styling technology of the keyboard.

Like left-over snippets of Letratone, plankton-like morphoses or insectoid scratchings, Fellaparts have a non-representational plasticity that is in tune with our time. In this electronic age of instant information, both time and space disappear. Time has traditionally been represented in typography by elements that communicate "care" – long artistic swashes, richly decorated drop capitals and filets. Space has been delineated by borders, rules and filigrees. It is the absence of both time and space as *modus operandi* in contemporary graphic design that makes the re-released ornaments from the mainstream manufacturers appear anachronistic and outmoded. Casual and flippant, Fellaparts provide an easy liberation from traditional ornament, a similar progressive step to that which gave us the lower case – which came about, in case we have forgotten, from a combination of speed and lack of care

Miles Newlyn



FELLA PARTS REGULAR (1993)

EDWARD FELLA

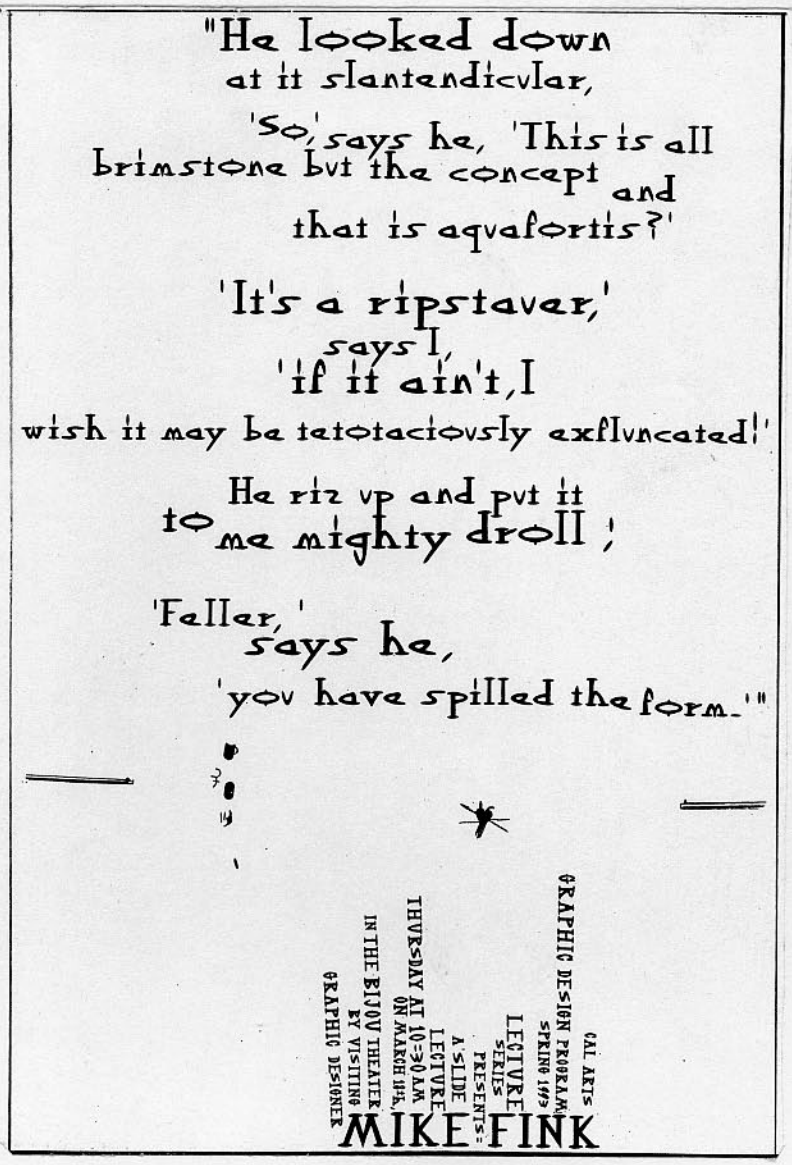
EMIGRE FONTS

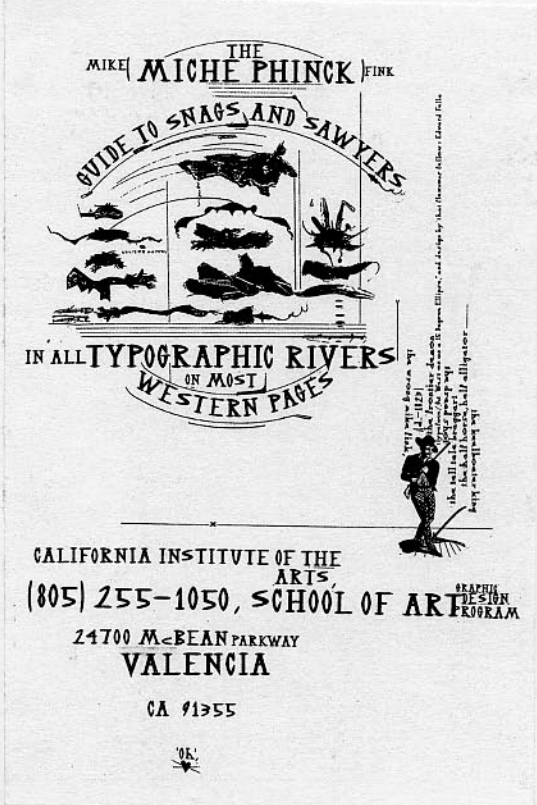
Edward Fella is the guru of the new expressive typography. Fella Parts Regular is the first of a collection of his sketchbook drawings—abstract, anamorphic, and inherently witty designs—that were digitized by Zuzana Licko.

STEVEN HELLER

FROM: GRAPHIS TYPOGRAPHY 2 P. 118
edited by CLARE HAYDEN & HEINKE JENSSEN, GRAPHIS INC, N.Y., 1997

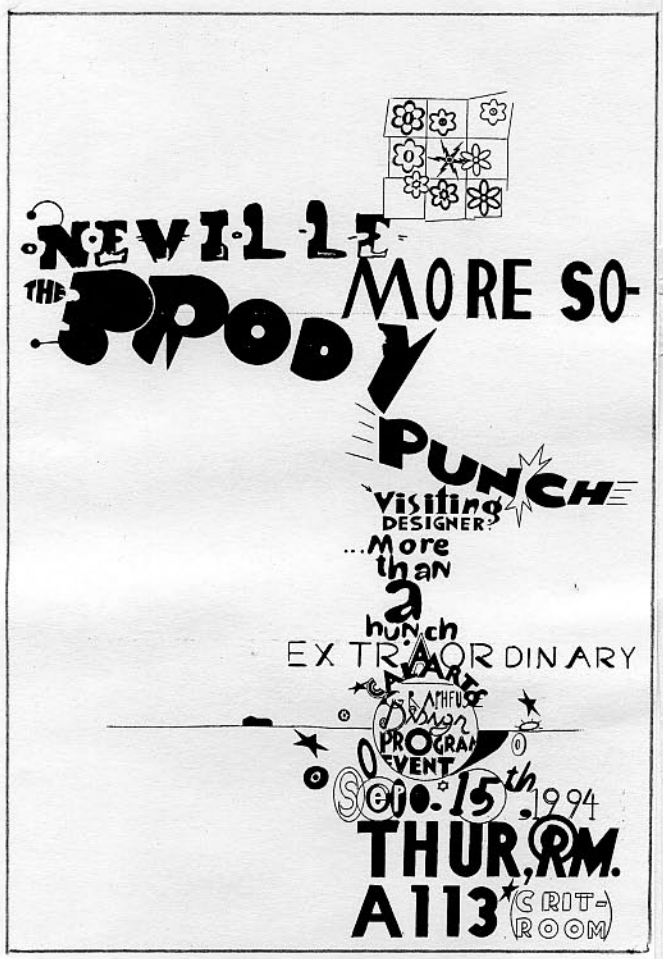
This is part of my series of announcements designed and self-published after the fact (the event). The subjects are designers who lecture at CalArts. While all the information concerning the event (time, place, venue, etc.) is used (and readable!), the "style" of the designer is not, and is about something else (anything other than the designer's work!). In the case of this piece it's the name of the designer, Mike Fink who practiced in Los Angeles. The "wrong" Mike Fink is the Western figure who figured in the Davy Crockett legend and died in 1823 and was know as the "keel-boat king." In this case you must know who the "wrong" Mike Fink was, and how he died and the language used in the early 19th Century American frontier for a kind of ritual bragging and the use of "Americanisms" added to the "King's English." The "typeface" used on this is the hand drawn version of what became "Out West," which was originally done for *Design Quarterly* magazine. Favorite Typefaces: lettering on paintings and photographs, commercial artists' lettering during teens and 20s in America, lettering on buildings in old Western photos, lettering "outsider" artists use on their paintings and objects, the lettering professional sign painters use in the rural and small town environments





1995 AMERICAN CENTER for DESIGN show

Neville Brody
Visiting Designer Poster



entrant's comments

This is one of a series of after-the-fact announcements for visiting designers' lectures at California Institute of the Arts. The piece conveys all of the information of the actual event, but in a style (or aesthetic) and content opposite to (or different from) the subject's work. For example, the punning of "The Brody Punch" with reference to the Brady Bunch television sitcom of the 1970s, and the all hand-lettered "typography" is done in American supermarket/circus vernacular, while the source for the fuse project is "electrical."

caryn aono

This is one in a series of posters that Ed Fella has been working on for several years. It is inexpensively produced (11-inch by 17-inch format, one ink, on bond paper), but its impact on design is worth noting. This designer works in his own vernacular, speaking in a highly personal yet approachable language. These are very rich, formally and poetically. Different messages and forms reveal themselves on subsequent readings. What I also find intriguing is the designer's obvious amusement in creating intentional misreadings like "Brody Bunch" for "Brady Bunch." Groovy.

Designer
Edward Fella

Writer
Edward Fella

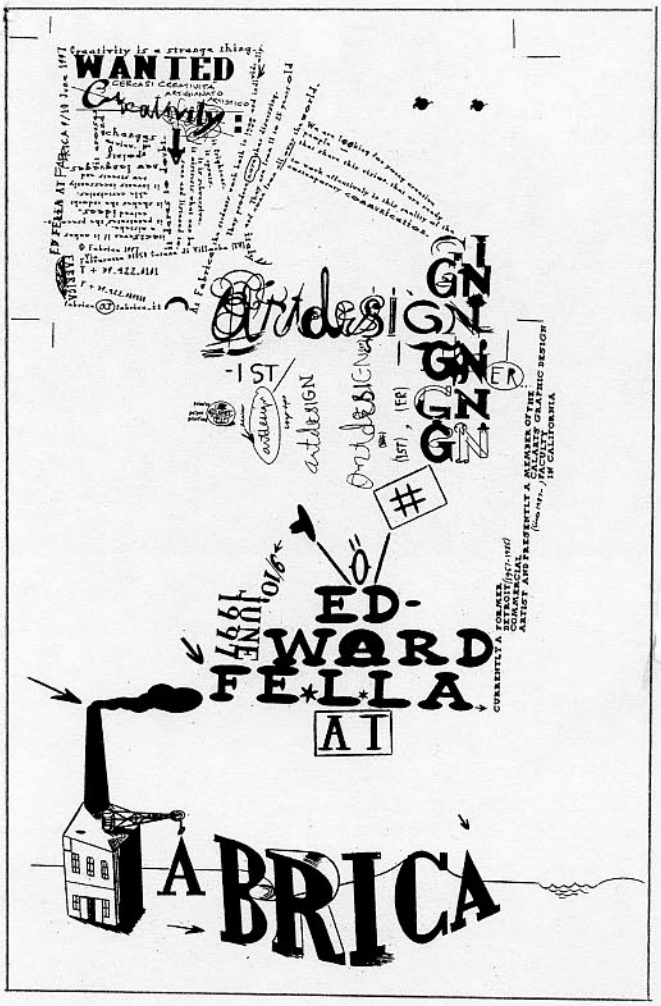
Illustrator
Edward Fella

Client/Publisher
CalArts, Program in Graphic Design

Typographer
All Hand Lettering/ Edward Fella

Printer
Printmasters #115, Valencia, California

Paper
Text Bond, Ivory



FABRICA FLYER

ART DIRECTOR/DESIGNER: Edward Fella

ILLUSTRATOR: Edward Fella

CLIENT: Edward Fella/designer and design educator

COLORS: One, black

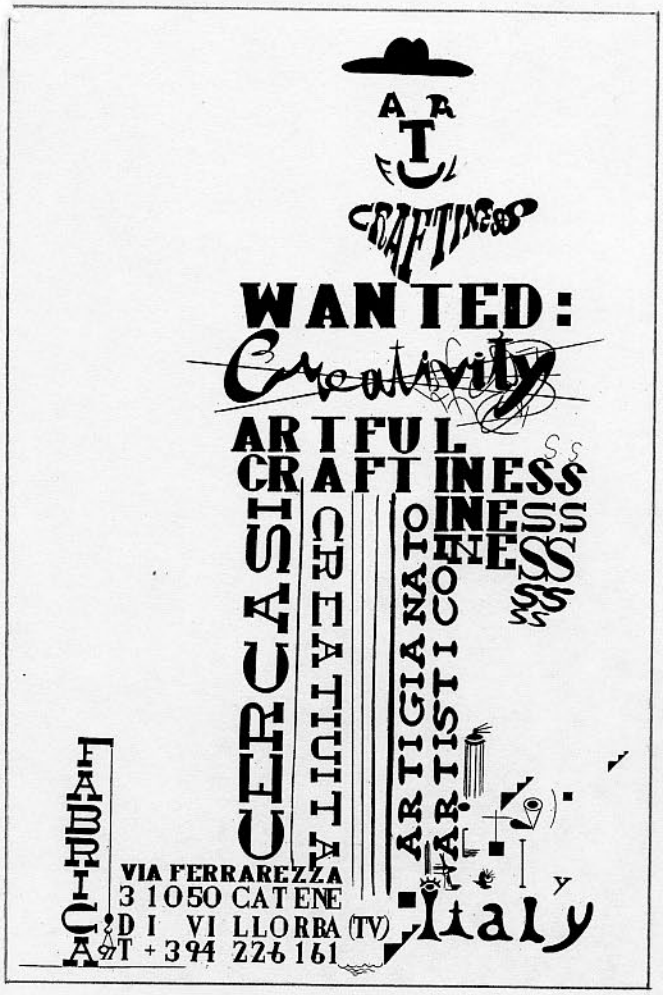
PRINT RUN: 350

COST PER UNIT: $.03 or $.04 US

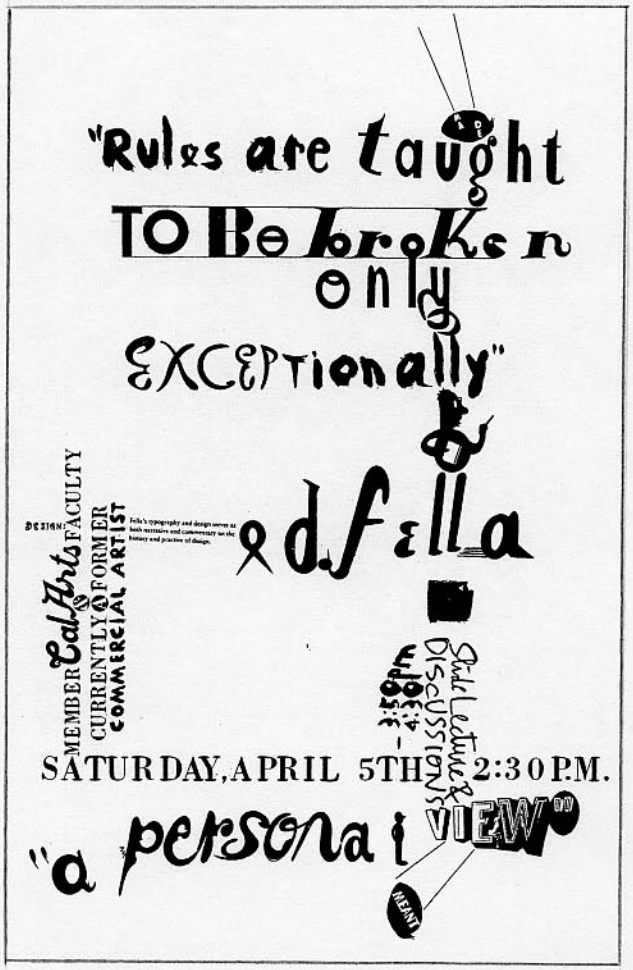
TYPEFACES: hand-lettering, OutWest

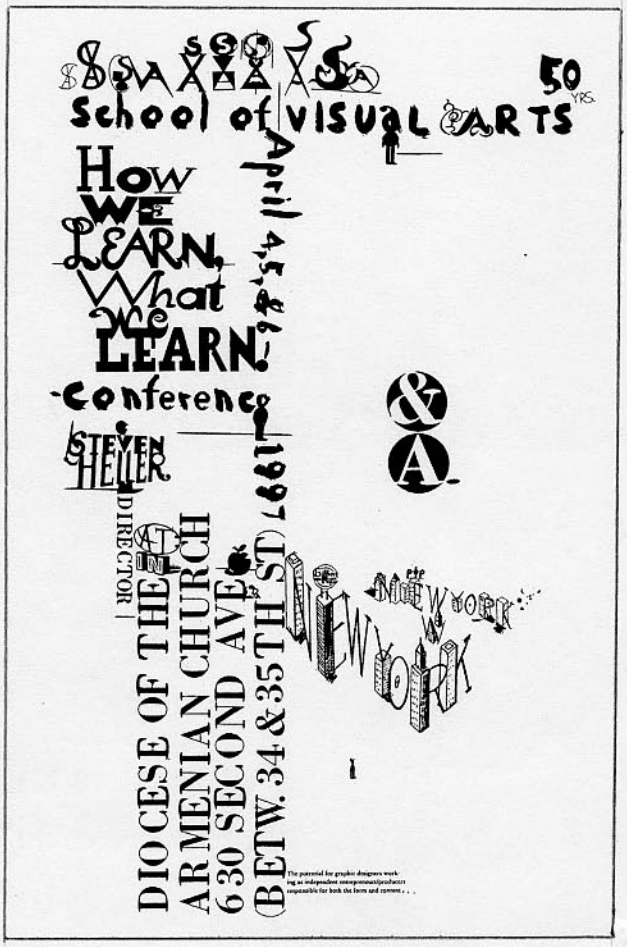
TYPEFACE DESIGNER: Edward Fella (hand-lettering, OutWest)

CONCEPT: Edward Fella says that the idea behind this flyer was that "'artful craftiness' is a better description or definition of the word *creativity* that was wanted by the Italian design school Fabrica. The face is a cowboy or clown or a gondola man. The composition on the back also refers to the map of Italy. The front has me agitating on a soapbox outside a factory about 'art design' while becoming a form of 'art design' due to the style it's drawn in."



FROM TYPE: CREATIVE EDGE
by LYNN HALLER
NORTH LIGHT BOOKS, CINCINNATI, 1999





RULES FLYER

ART DIRECTOR/DESIGNER: Edward Fella

ILLUSTRATOR: Edward Fella

COLORS: One, black

PRINT RUN: 500

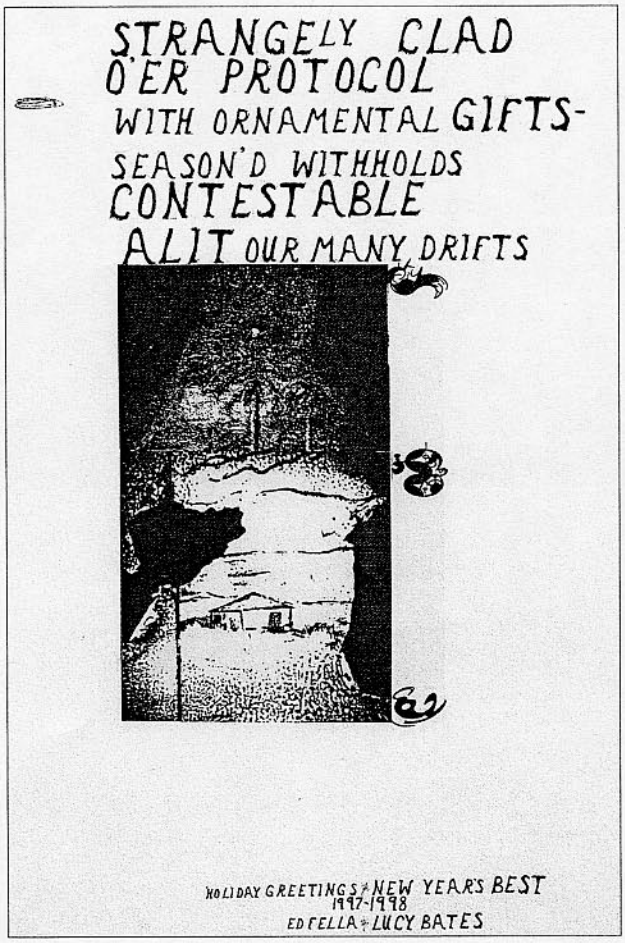
COST PER UNIT: $.04 US

TYPEFACES: hand-lettering

CONCEPT: Edward Fella says this flyer commemorating one of his lectures addresses the notion that his work is simply about breaking the rules; he meant to point out that at CalArts, where he teaches, he and his colleagues teach that the rules are to be broken only exceptionally—in both senses of that phrase.

As with other pieces by Fella on pages 11 and 24, this flyer was designed to be distributed after his lecture, so that students would have the opportunity to design the actual announcement/invitation for the lecture.

SPECIAL TYPE TECHNIQUES: "All the text was hand-lettered (with the exception of very small text lines, which were taken from the conference announcement bios)," says Fella. "What text that wasn't hand-lettered was taken from two typefaces I designed, one a brush face and the other Bodoni that I reworked by adding extra weight to some of the serifs. In both cases, I simply draw out the twenty-six letters of the alphabet and then photocopy the number of letters I need for the lines and just paste them down."



HOLIDAY GREETINGS FLYER

ART DIRECTOR/DESIGNER: Edward Fella

ILLUSTRATORS: Kagiso Fella, Larona Fella

PHOTOGRAPHER: Edward Fella

CLIENTS: Edward Fella and Lucy Bates

COLORS: One, black

PRINT RUN: 500

COST PER UNIT: $.05 US

TYPEFACE: hand-lettering

TYPEFACE DESIGNER: Lucy Bates

CONCEPT: This holiday flyer designed and distributed by Edward Fella was a family affair, with Fella's wife and two nephews involved in the creation of its type and images. The back of the piece is a collage of drawings done by Fella's nephews, aged nine and ten, which Fella photocopied from a sketchbook they sent him from their African home. The subject matter reflects typical young boy interests, but Fella selected and arranged drawings that he felt would make the most interesting composition and content. Fella feels that the front image vaguely resembles the design of a book cover with the three "fellaparts" (dingbats designed by Fella) representing the Three Wise Men's gifts and/or a book's spine.

SPECIAL TYPE TECHNIQUES: Edward Fella's nondesigner wife, Lucy Bates, did the typeface for this piece. She drew out the twenty-six letters and Fella photocopied as many as he needed and cut and pasted them.

SPECIAL PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES: The Christmas star was actually a spot of correction fluid that Fella hand-applied to all of the 500 flyers.

MEMPHIS FLYER

ART DIRECTOR/DESIGNER: Edward Fella

ILLUSTRATOR: Edward Fella

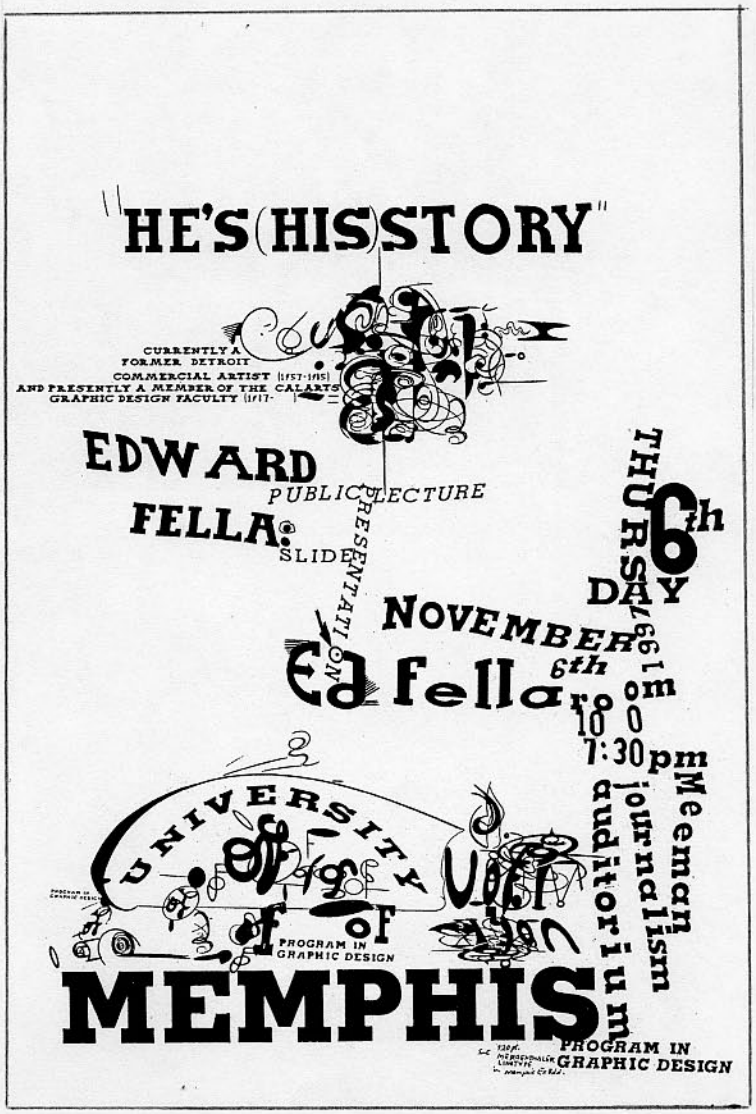
CLIENT/SERVICE: Edward Fella/designer and design educator

COLORS: One, black

PRINT RUN: 350

COST PER UNIT: $.03 or $.04 US

TYPEFACES: hand-lettering, Mergenthaler Linotype Extra Bold (statted out of a 1924 font book)



CONCEPT: Edward Fella says that the idea behind this flyer for one of his lectures was that "by now I'm 'history' and my lectures about my work simply become my story (he's 'his story')." The lettering of the words "The sublime, The vernacular, The commonplace" is a take-off on the title of the lecture series.

SPECIAL TYPE TECHNIQUES: Some of the typography is photocopied, rephotocopied and distorted and then rearranged and pasted together.

Title:
CalArts flyers

Origin:
USA

Client:
Self-initiated

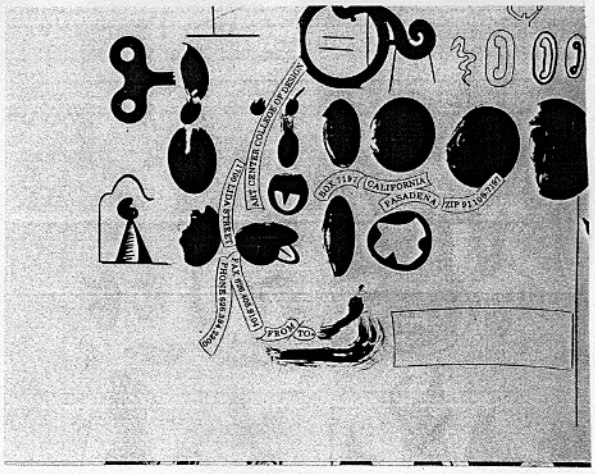
Studio:
Ed Fella

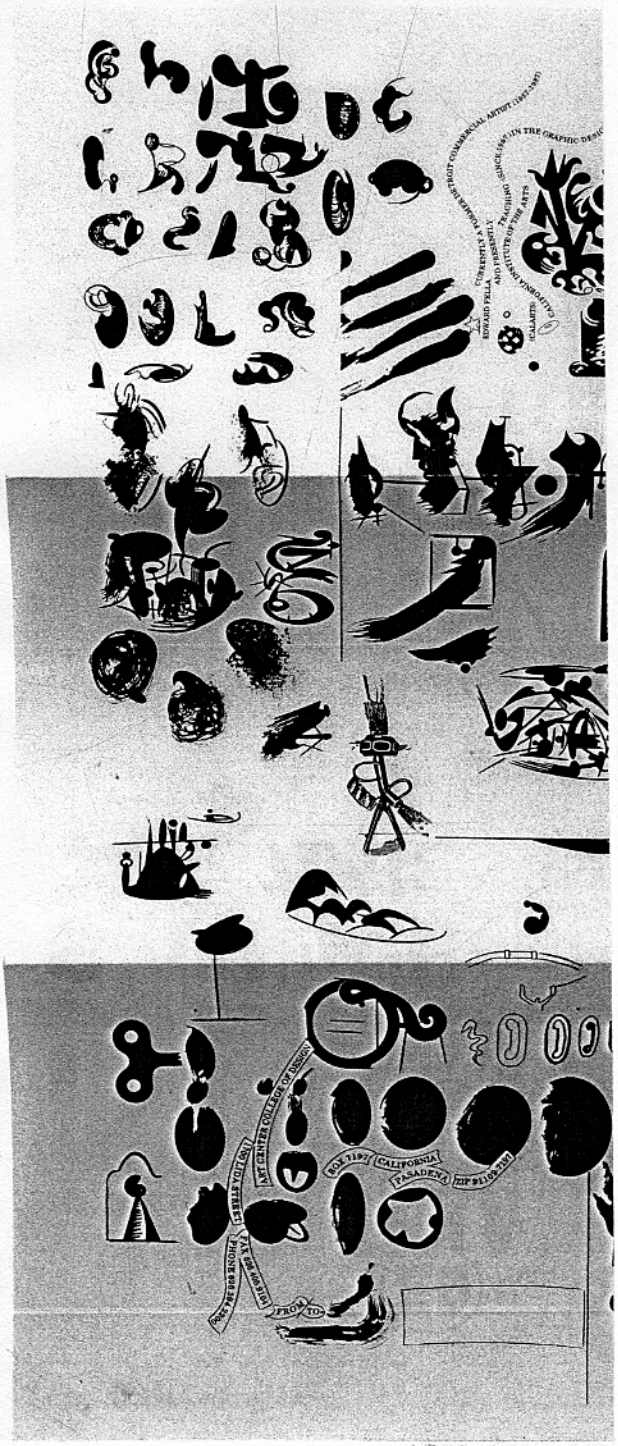
Dimensions:
431mm x 280mm
16.9" x 11"

Description:
American Ed Fella is a remarkable graphic designer. Self-taught, he started work in the commercial art studios of Detroit, where he worked quietly and conventionally until the age of 47, when he enrolled at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. There he became a pioneer of the new deconstructionist theories that revitalized visual communication in the 1980s and '90s. He is currently Professor of Graphic Design at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).

To publicize his energetic programme of talks, lectures and exhibitions (he is in his 70s and, with self-deprecating wit, refers to himself as an 'exit-level designer') Fella prepares a mass of effervescent mini poster-flyers: neatly folded, they make compelling (and collectable) documentation that chronicles his activities.

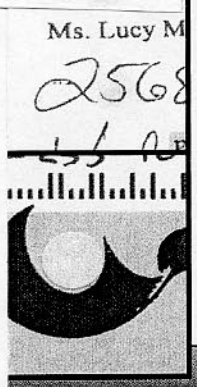
Fella's work is characterized by highly illustrative typography; neither pure graphic design nor pure illustration, it is an invigorating amalgam of the two.





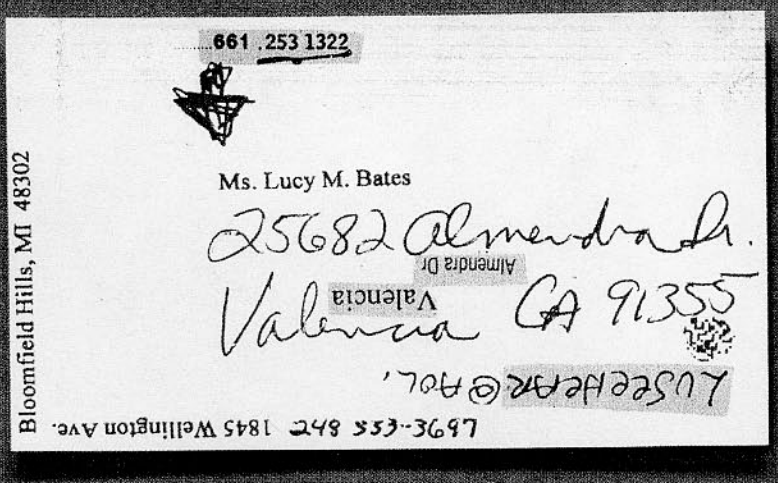
from
LOOK AT THIS:
CONTEMPORARY BROCHURES, CATALOGUES and DOCUMENTS
by ADRIAN SHAUGHNESSY
laurence king, LONDON, 2006

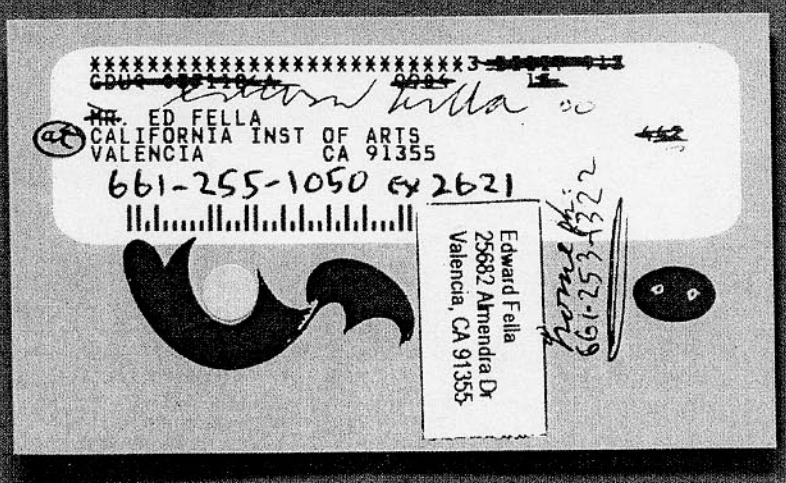
from CREATIVE EDGE: letterhead & Business Card Design edited by LYNN HALLER
North Light Books, 2001
pg. 96



STUDIO: Lucy Bates, Valencia, California **DESIGNER:** Lucy Bates **CLIENT:** Lucy Bates **PAPER:** Card stock **COLORS:** Two, match **PRINT RUN:** 500 **COST PER UNIT:** $.02

STUDIO: Ed Fella, Valencia, California **DESIGNER:** Ed Fella **CLIENT/SERVICE:** Ed Fella/graphic designer and educator **PAPER:** Card stock **COLORS:** Two, match, plus one for the sticker **PRINT RUN:** 500 **COST PER UNIT:** $0.02 **CONCEPT FOR BOTH PIECES:** Ed Fella says, "The second-year production class in CalArts's graphic design program does a gang-up sheet for students' business card designs. This year there were two spots left open, and the instructor asked if I would be interested in them. (Twelve dollars per five hundred—a deal!) He would need them the next day, as he was off to the printer. So I took an address label from a magazine and one of those return address stickers, added a signature, a few handwritten phone numbers and a quickly drawn flourish. That and a fast color break and it was done. I took it home that evening to show my wife, Lucy Bates (a nondesigner) and asked if she wanted me to do the same for her for the remaining spot. She said 'No, I'll do it myself if it's that simple!' and she proceeded to put together her card in the same manner. The two designs went on to the printer, and here is the result." **SPECIAL TYPE TECHNIQUES:** Collage, handwriting **SPECIAL PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES:** Scissors and glue stick, ballpoint pen; for the Fella card, each card has a little yellow sticker to add another spot color. **SPECIAL COST-CUTTING TECHNIQUES:** Twenty business cards (all different) were printed on one sheet five hundred times and trimmed to make sets of twenty individual cards.



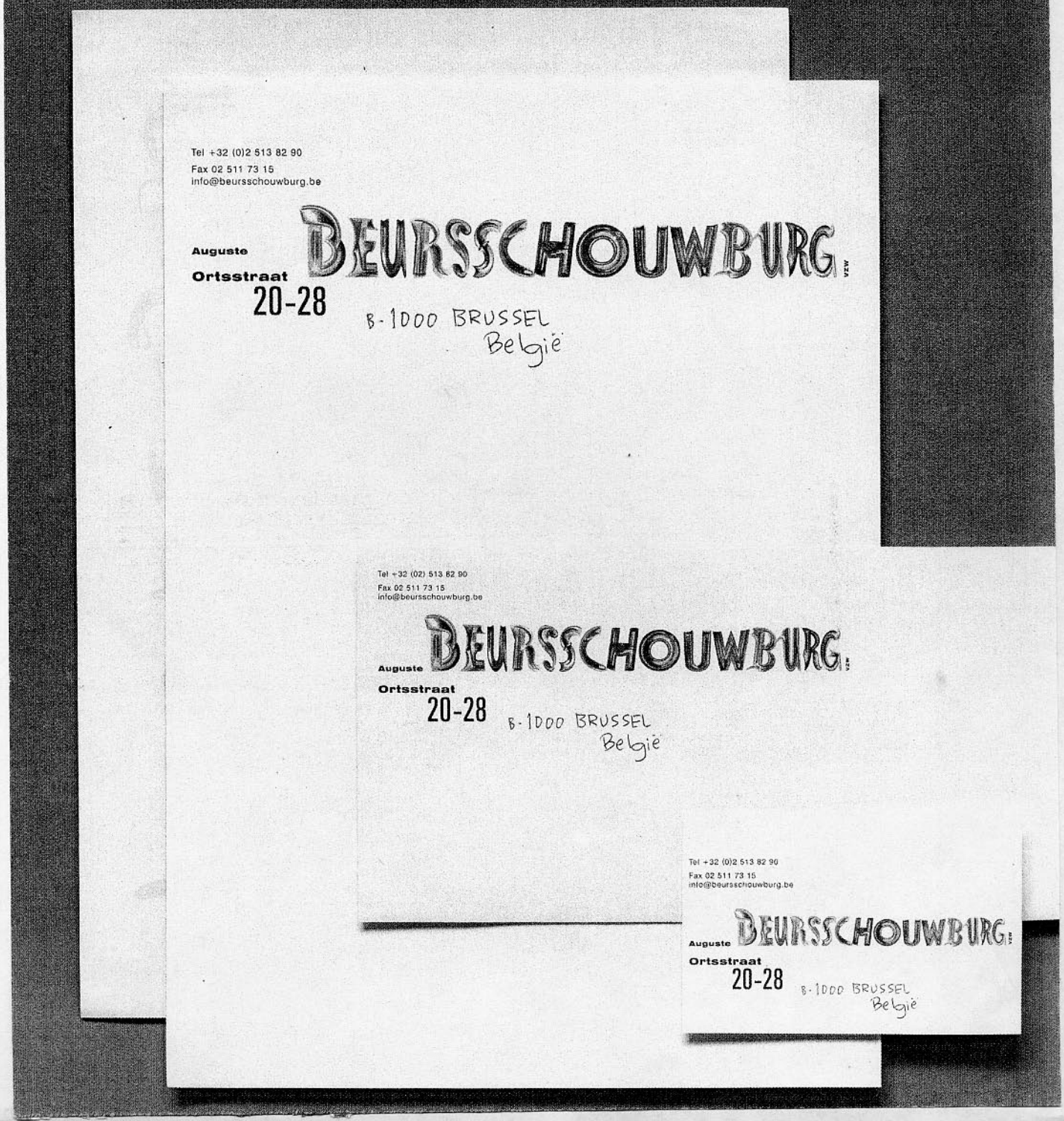


MDM CREATIVE EDGE: Letterhead & Business Card Design
edited by LYNN HALLER, NorthLight Books, 2001 Pg. 94

RUSSEL
België

8

STUDIO: NSD, Brussels, Belgium **ART DIRECTORS/DESIGNERS:** Jean-Marc Klinkert, Olivier Lamy **ILLUSTRATOR:** Ed Fella **CLIENT/SERVICE:** Beursschouwberg/state-supported avant-garde theater and performance venue **COLORS:** Four, process **TYPEFACES:** Helvetica, hand-lettering **CONCEPT:** Three years ago, Ed Fella was approached by NSD, a studio in Brussels, to hand letter a poster for Beursschouwberg, a theater and performance venue. They were so happy with the result that they approached him again to design their identity system. Fella, a design professor who doesn't design professionally anymore, says he told them he'd be willing to do the lettering, "but as far as the rest of the project, let the young local designers do it along with the production, paper, printing and all that stuff I'm retired from! I did the strip of lettering (in Prismacolor pencil as well as a black-and-white version) and sent it in a hand-addressed package to Brussels, neglecting to put the name of the country on it. (The lady in the post office did it, eventually). I didn't hear anything for a long while. Finally they called, all done, all printed, all happy. They asked if they could fly me over to Belgium to give a lecture at the theater and present the new logotype to the public. So I went. I had not seen anything of the project until I arrived there, and to my amazement there was the finished system with my logo in beautiful color reproduction with some set type and some handwritten lettering which I didn't recognize. They told me they got it all off the package! So it was mine, the postal clerk's and good old Helvetica on the complete letterhead and ID package."



Edward Fella: Letters on America $50.00

with essays by Lewis Blackwell and Lorraine Wild

In a period when so much graphic design is formulaic or recycled, Edward Fella stands out as a remarkable individualist. Renowned for his wry and obsessive hand-drawn alphabets and glyphs, his work combines the power and spontaneity of raw art with an idiosyncratic perspective on the theory and practice of typography and design.

Edward Fella: Letters on America is the first book on Fella, and is in itself a new Fella work, created in collaboration with writer Lewis Blackwell, photo editor Lucy Bates, and graphic designer Lorraine Wild. Here, Fella's extraordinary photographs, taken as records of vernacular lettering and composition, are combined and juxtaposed with the finest examples of his unique hand lettering. The result is an unprecedented journey into the unique world of Edward Fella.

Edward Fella returned to graduate school after a thirty year career as a commercial artist and proceeded to pioneer the application of deconstructive theory in graphic design. He is currently a professor of Graphic Design at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), the Los Angeles-based school at the forefront of progressive design education.

With 1212 illustrations, 1187 in color

Lewis Blackwell is International Creative Director of Getty Images, and is the author of numerous books on graphic design, including *The End of Print: The Graphic Design of David Carson*, *Whereishere* (with P. Scott Makela and Laurie Haycock Makela) and *G1* (with Neville Brody).

Lorraine Wild is a graphic designer and educator in Los Angeles. She teaches design and design history at CalArts; her writings on contemporary design practice have appeared in numerous publications, including *Emigre* and *ID* magazine.

Lucy Bates is a photographer. Her 15 years of experience in non-profit art galleries have included exhibition design, documentation and photo editing for arts publications.

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COMMUNICATION ARTS
PHOTOGRAPHY ANNUAL 42
AUG 2001

Book Reviews

Edward Fella: Letters on America

By Lewis Blackwell, Lorraine Wild and Lucy Bates
176 pages, hardcover, $50
Published by Princeton Architectural Press
37 E. 7th Street
New York, New York 10003
www.papress.com

Letters on America is a collection of nearly 1,200 snapshots of signs and letterforms assembled by graphic designer and educator Edward Fella. These color Polaroid images are strikingly similar to Walker Evans's later type-based experiments—in two or three shots, Evans and Fella could have been standing on opposite sides of a street photographing the same subject. But while Evans used typography as a subtle compositional element, Fella has a different take. His garish, bold images chronicle the cross-country proliferation of signage, which he has described as "a very American kind of clutter."

Hand-painted messages, stick-on letters, graffiti and neon, even initials and names cut into the bark of trees by amorous lovers, have captured Fella's attention. He meticulously crops his subjects, selecting particular phrases or letters to render his photos ambiguous, humorous or full of hidden meaning. Words float behind the reflections of storefront glass, are faded by the sun, are cracking, flaking and falling off, or are obscured by Fella's own shadow.

At age 47, Fella stepped away from an established career as an illustrator and commercial artist in Detroit to attend graduate school at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. In his downtime at studios, Fella created pen-and-ink doodles and typographic collages that echoed the look of naïve, untrained lettering. By studying design, he could dedicate more time to develop this personal work. In 1987, as Fella was completing his degree, he traveled to San Francisco for a research trip. His attention was drawn to local street signs, and armed with an instant camera, he began what would become an extensive catalog of vernacular typography. Later that year, Fella joined the faculty of the California Institute of the Arts, where he continues to teach.

Fella began to work with various Detroit arts organizations that were receptive to his quirky, uncommercial approach to design. He manipulated typefaces, chopping off serifs and subtly altering the integrity of letterforms, and then pasted up his experiments in a haphazard, inaccurate manner. His hand-lettered announcements for The Detroit Focus Gallery have been credited with inspiring many of the digitally-distressed typefaces that are popular today.

The square Polaroids in the book are reproduced at nearly exact size, arranged on a grid of nine photographs on each page. Interspersed among the photographs are numerous typographic doodles and snippets from gallery invitations, faculty events at CalArts and other projects. These collages mesh neatly together with the images and provide an example of how Fella's photographic archive informs his unique style. While his graphic design work remains the most charted side of this designer's typographic journey, *Letters on America* offers us a glimpse into another part of the mind of Edward Fella—the obsessive, itinerant photographer.

—Philip Krayna

EYE MAG #39
SPRING 2001

LOOKING THIS WAY AND THAT

Edward Fella: Letters on America
Edited by Lewis Blackwell
Laurence King, £25

This Way: Signage Design for Public Spaces
James Grayson Trulove
Rockport £29.99/US$45

Reviewed by Phil Baines

In his introductory essay to Ed Fella's book Lewis Blackwell writes: "America, unlike Europe, for the most part does not have urban space that is made up from the accretion of building forms over many centuries. Instead, the rich layering of most of the built environment has arrived with the industrial and post-industrial age ... Thus signage is part of the environment, of the built form, a part of the tradition in a way that does not apply in the capitals or small towns of Europe." This centrality of the sign to America is what links these two books, but the choice of which signs and the America they represent could hardly be more different.

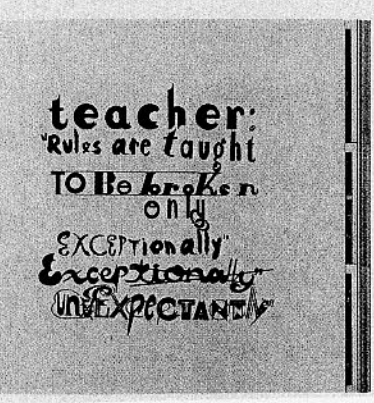
This Way claims to showcase "the latest and most effective designs in graphic systems for navigation and identification". To someone with a love of urban areas, the way they grow and change, and the way design becomes part of that whole, this ought to be a book worth opening and reading seriously. For European readers much of the content is a real culture shock and therefore the book could be an important eye-opener. However, prejudices may then get in the way of appreciation: it would be easy to dismiss much of the illustrated work as context-free, brash, oversized and even saccharine. Easy, but probably wrong. The solutions which are unashamedly all of those things are also the strongest in the book. When they try and do "posh" it just isn't as successful.

The problems with the book concerns its look – it feels and reads like a corporate brochure – and its ambition. The book contains chapters on exhibitions, identity, spaces, signage and retail, each of which are quite different disciplines. In a book of only 192 pages, 59 projects are squeezed in. While there are many that merit closer inspection and detailed, detached discussion, there is simply not the space here to do them justice.

Ed Fella's book, in direct contrast, documents another aspect of US signage. It shows 1100 Polaroids, one-third of a collection taken over the past twelve years, of every kind of non-corporate, hand-made, weathered, imperfect piece of lettering you can imagine. These are interspersed with examples of Ed's own drawn letterforms and accompanied by essays by Blackwell and Lorraine Wild.

The book is well designed by Fella himself and Wild: the Polaroids are reproduced same size, and different paper stocks are used as appropriate to the subject matter. Although not immediately suggesting the seriousness of *This Way*, its beguiling simplicity and coherence of vision make it by far the more interesting of the two books.

Above: giant graphics identify a food court. From *This Way: Signage Design for Public Spaces.*
Below: spread from *Letters on America*, Ed Fella's documentation of US signs and letterforms.



from I.D. MAGAZINE - OCT 2000

from ONE MAGAZINE JAN 2001

Letters on America

EDWARD FELLA
ESSAYS BY LEWIS BLACKWELL AND LORRAINE WILD
176 PP.; 9¾ X 9¾"; HARDCOVER

The American cityscape, so cluttered with signage, might lead an anthropologist to believe that we're a nation of readers. From this world of words was born our foremost man of letters, commercial illustrator turned graphic designer Edward Fella. Obsessed with public displays of typography, Fella doesn't bother with what the signs say. He's focused on how they look. For 13 years, he has documented letters in their natural habitat, shooting fragments of casino neon, gravestone carvings and drugstore tiling with

his Polaroid 680SE. *Letters on America*, which collects more than a thousand of his street-wise photos, is the result of his wanderings and a testament to the nostalgic eloquence of letterforms themselves. The book is made richer by its occasional digressions (presented on uncoated paper, to resemble a sketch book) into the hand-drawn lettering he creates for his lectures at graphic design schools around the world. Framed by Fella's eye and hand, the fragmented shapes tell the story of life in America before our shared language went digital. —*JK*
(PRINCETON ARCHITECTURAL PRESS, $50)

Designer Ed Fella's expansive collection of Polaroids of "found" American lettering, taken by Fella between 1987 and 1999, have been edited and reproduced in book form in *Letters on America*. The collection—featuring more than 1,000 images—forms what seems to be a forensic trail of evidence for the recent history of Americana, illustrating the wealth of cultural insight that can be uncovered by focusing a lens on the uncelebrated work of commercial sign painters, stone carvers, graffiti artists and the like.

A few significant factors distinguish Fella's work from other designer's photo-collections that wink and smile condescendingly at the picturesque styles of vernacular. Foremost is Fella's accomplished eye, which consistently zeroes in on details; a full sign is rarely revealed. The absence of a complete message, as Lorraine Wild points out in the book's accompanying essay, "forces the viewer to concentrate on what is there—an intense observation of the vagaries of form."

The typological rigor with which the images are ordered is equally important. Contemplating a page of Polaroids showing details of historic plaques, for example, we find ourselves wondering not what the plaques say, but why they're always forged in metal, in the same Civil War-era style. We start to enjoy the qualities of letters painted on brick walls and enjoy, with Fella, the new meanings that can be created by, say, cropping in on a (presumably) *No Parking Fire Exit* sign so that it reads instead *King Fire*. Sun-bleached, handscrawled, tree-carved and time-ravaged signs each have their own category, evoking subtly different responses in the reader.

Interspersed among the photos are pages (on different stock) of Fella's own quirky handlettered notices, signaling the link between the "untrained" lettering artist and the "trained" eye of the author, a former commercial-artist-turned-academic. For the intrepid reader, there are also occasional ghostly reflections of the camera flash or the photographer himself, standing opposite a window sign, camera in hand. They serve to remind us that between the signmaker's original intent and the reader's own interpretation are several intermediaries, and that what you make of each page is completely up for grabs. Thus what initially looks like a picture book turns out to be a slow, compelling read.

PETER HALL

from SURFACE ISSUE No 26 NOV 2000

EDWARD FELLA

graphic language

He has, arguably, made his contribution to American culture by making things a lot more difficult to read. Or a lot more fun. After a 30-year career as a commercial artist, Edward Fella returned to graduate school and proceeded to pioneer deconstructive theories in typography and graphic design. ***Letters on America*** (Princeton Architectural Press) is a thick compilation of Fella's hand-drawn typeface designs. His work is married with over 900 Polaroid snapshots of vernacular signage and symbols taken by the artist across the States over several years. Rather than an egocentric retrospective of his prolific career, what emerges is a smart and inspiring romp through the communication systems of the country—from block letters promising hot pastrami on deli marquee menus to the wistful bubble lettering of vegan cafés. The book reveals the trajectory between the instinctive market savvy of small business and the knowing high-concept design strategies. As a documentary work, it uncovers an America straddled between hippie counterculture, anachronistic chintz and slick commercialization. Sure to provide an inspiration for fellow designers, the book also makes for a clever time capsule of the markings of the most powerful nation at the turn of the century.*

POLIESTER MAG
Vol 8 # 26, FALL
MEXICO CITY 1999

by LEWIS BLACKWELL

PGS. 16-21

Ed Fella lives in Valencia, a suburban new town 25 miles north of Los Angeles. Here he teaches postgraduate graphic design students at the California Institute of Arts and works at his 'exit level design'. That description is his little joke (but one with a serious intent) about how he escaped the commercial world of design and illustration in his late 40s, having done the '25 years and out' that was expected of workers in the Detroit motor industry. While he wasn't on the production line, it was the industry that preoccupied much of his working life as a native son of that city and one of its most talented illustrators, the car and truck industry feeding the studios in which he worked. He didn't move from Detroit until transplanting to Valencia in his 50s, to his current part-time post. This after two years at the influential Cranbrook College of Art and Design, near Detroit, in the mid-1980s, from whence began to grow his guru status floating near the top of the current generation of leading American designers. His student contemporaries now populate many of the key teaching posts in graphic design around the United States, while his fans include the likes of David Carson (the international pop sensation of graphic design in the 1990s).

Now in his sixties, Fella's exit level strategy involves (besides the teaching) a dedication to a thoroughly personal vein of work. He eschews commissions. Instead, he quietly works away on adding an image a day to his series of sketchbooks, a massive treasury of thoughts-as-images, swerving between strange nonsense poetry in weird warps of lettering, to quirky collages. This vision is fed by a separate photographic project, which has resulted over the past 12 years in perhaps 4000 Polaroid images, close-ups for the most part of the signage of America.

These images are now gathered in a book (Letters On America, to be published by Laurence King in the UK and Princeton Architectural Press in the US, spring 2000). I worked this fall with Fella and his wife Lucy Bates and the designer Lorraine Wild on assembling this book which juxtaposes more than 1100 of his photographs with some of his lettering, work which clearly draws on the Fella insights into the remarkable inner language of vernacular signage.

As Fella has traversed the country over the past decade, driving regularly from coast-to-coast each summer, a Polaroid 690 camera loaded with 600 film has been close at hand. Near useless for scenic or even middle-distance shots, the camera has come into its own for Fella as a device for recording the particular properties of the lettering, old and new, temporary and permanent, slick and crude, that shapes the American roadside environment. Each picture is taken not as documentary, more as a form of note-taking for work that Fella might do. That glitch in the spacing, that irregularity in the surface, that bloat or smear in the character... these and many more details

that make the reality of signs so much richer than the theory of a letterform is captured by Fella and feeds his own lettering and sketches.

"The photographs are deliberately, precisely, composed," says Fella. "I am not taking them because I am particularly interested in the words, indeed I deliberately cut off bits of the words or letters in part to disturb their reading.

"Each photo has its own investment for me. I was aware they were interesting, and while I took them for a reason I could also see from early on that they were of value in themselves: they were part of my process, but it became an end in itself."

The Polaroids of signage began on a field trip to San Francisco while he was still at Cranbrook, where he played with the distortion of lettering that happened when viewed at an angle. But he quickly moved on: "I realised I was into more than this distortion," he recalls. "The Americana of the images became important to me, the letters were a reference to history and more."

Fella has gained a degree of skill with his camera, a quirky mechanical/electronic model first launched in the 1970s and which is remarkable for being a Polaroid camera with a half-decent glass lens. But he doesn't seek for conventional values of photographic perfection: "I like the lack of perfection in the photography, the greyed out, or going a little blue or orange, depending on the light and how the film copes. The resulting colours are a little reminiscent of my own work."

He admits to having thrown away only a handful of images over the years, and he rarely takes more than one shot of the sign he wants. He composes, shoots, puts the instantly-developing image in his bag and walks on, often without looking at the result until later.

And the value of the result? It is neither a precise archive of signage, faithfully recorded to some cohesive standards, nor is it a clear project with a particular objective... instead it is an unending quest to note the inner music of language as put across in signs, an unrecorded music that is constantly being written and performed all around us.

Fella records the things beyond the meaning of words that make words so unique and richly messaging out their on the road. He is at home responding to a weathered old sign as he is to a new offering in a window in the local mall, or as interested in a crudely drawn felt-tipped hand-sign as intricately wrought characters in a metal gate. In all this he is uniquely alive to the often bizarre quilt of language that lays across the American environment.

His images help us read the spaces between and around characters and letters as intimations of the hope, time, happenstance, and everything else that melts down into the historical evolution of language... we see in these close-ups clues as to how language, visual and verbal, emerges. □

Lewis Blackwell es autor de varios libros sobre diseño gráfico, maestro, crítico y director creativo de Getty Images.

is the author of many books on graphic design, a teacher, a critic and creative director at Getty Images.

FROM INFLUENCES : A LEXICON of CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC DESIGN by ANNA GERBER & ANJA LUTZ
DIE GESTALTEN VERLAG, BERLIN 2006

Ed Fella in Berlin. Photograph by Andrea Tinnes.

THE FAX MACHINE

"What fascinates me about fax machines is all the bits of dirt that usually accompanies pages sent by fax: ink stains, fragmented dotted lines, and the way the machine often distorts the text. In all this, I can retrace a couple of obsessions of mine: the idea of unpredictability as well as the idea of non-linearity, uncompleteness, etc." FABRIZIO GILARDINO

FEEDBACK

"Insightful feedback from both clients and the public domain is a big catalyst for development. Show as many → people as you can what you're thinking and process the feelings that you gain from taking that step. It always refines ideas and work standards. I can't remember where I read it but someone wrote something like, 'An idea is → nothing unless it's in the head of others'." ANDREW FOXALL

FEHLER

Fehler is Christopher Murphy (b. 1969), a graphic designer based in Northern Ireland. Fehler founded Fällt in the mid-Nineties with W. Conrad Röntgen. Fällt is a mixed media publishing organisation specialising in experimental → music, fine → art, design and → criticism. They have created installations for galleries and festivals and have released over thirty works on CD. **"British graphic designer and cross-media artist; our correspondence has been an important source of → inspiration to me. He runs Fällt, a multi-media publishing house in Belfast."** → ANGELA LORENZ

FELDMANN, HANS-PETER

Hans-Peter Feldmann (b. 1941) is a German artist. In the late Sixties, Feldmann designed small booklets made up of found → images such as postcards, magazine clippings and posters. Feldmann drew upon his own picture → archive, which he assembled and organised himself. He has had numerous solo exhibitions around the world. **"Feldmann's → books are beautifully conceived, sensitively designed and never over bearing with their own intelligence. The 'artist book' is a broad field, but Feldmann's books are always the ones that come to my mind when recommending books to students or hoping that a project I am → working on could be more single-minded. What I mean by more single-minded is what we call 'single idea' works in the → studio. Two popular examples would be the overflowing paint and bouncing ball adverts for Orange and Sony, retrospectively. Both very singular but stunning for exactly that reason."** JONATHAN HARES

FELLA, ED

Edward Fella (b. 1937) trained as a commercial artist. Fella worked for many of Detroit's advertisting agencies before enrolling on the graduate programme at → Cranbrook Academy of Art at the age of forty eight. He is now a self-proclaimed 'exit-level designer' and teaches at CalArts. **[1] "The man who talked our ears off at Cranbrook is the real deal: inventor as Ed thinks with his hands. He mistrusts → computers (so wisely). And he very rarely – okay, never – backs down from a position. He's not stubborn; he's just five steps ahead of the rest of the design community. I remember Ed casually advising younger designers against stealing ideas from Design Annuals. Rather, they should go to a museum and extrapolate design ideas directly from the → art world's masters."** ARCH GARLAND **[2] "Edward Fella's sensibility of collage and → vernacular → communications."** KATHERINE MCCOY **[3] "Ed's an artist-designer who is happy to discuss → contemporary art and design issues over a hotdog at the corner diner. The booth we sit in might seem to confine our → conversation, but Ed's open enough to extend the boundaries of listening further than normal. In other → words, he's loud. It's wonderful though because our waiter, and even the → people at the next table, can overhear the talk about → graphic design as if we were discussing the → weather. In reality, he's educating the public as to what we do."** SCOTT SANTORO **[4] "Ed Fella's beautiful doodles and all his visual inventions as well as his enthusiasm and obsession for any aspect of visual culture continue to be a big stimulus, fuelling one's imagination, causing an irresistible impulse to go back to work and 'make stuff'."** ANDREA TINNES

FEHLER

Born in Hong Kong, in 1969. Fehler is an internationally respected digital artist who has been described as a 'William Morris for the digital age'. In addition to his work as a partner in web-based arts organisation Fällt, he has worked within the field of audio-related design for the last decade.

Alorenz, Berlin [→ Lorenz, Angela]
Jorge Luis Borges [→ Borges, Jorge Luis]
Code
Emigre
Errors
Eye magazine
Pixels
Sound, noise and music [→ Music]
Systems
Andy Warhol [→ Warhol, Andy]

ED FELLA

Born in Detroit, U.S., in 1938. Fella is an artist, educator and graphic designer whose work has had an important influence on contemporary typography. He practiced professionally as a commercial artist in Detroit for thirty years before receiving a MFA in Design from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1987. He has since devoted his time to teaching at CalArts and his own unique self-published work which has appeared in many design publications and anthologies. His book, Letters On America, was published in 2000.

Art: history and practices
Charles Ives composer [→ Ives, Charles]
Oscar Micheaux film maker [→ Micheaux, Oscar]
Robert Weaver illustrator [→ Weaver, Robert]
Max Ernst artist [→ Ernst, Max]
Vladimir Nabokov writer [→ Nabokov, Vladimir]
Early Push Pin Studios design
László Moholy-Nagy collage [→ Moholy-Nagy, László]
Lee Friedlander photographer [→ Friedlander, Lee]
Bauhaus philosophy [→ Bauhaus]
Dutch design
Literary Studies / Poetics
Theory
The vernacular
Folk and Outsider Art [→ Folk Art]
Commercial art
Americana [→ America]
Art Moderne

LAURENT FETIS

Born in Orsay, France, in 1970. Fetis founded his own studio in 1999. He works across graphic design, art direction and film directing. He has published two books about his own work and he has been involved in many exhibitions and lectures around the world.

Books
Martin Kippenberger [→ Kippenberger, Martin]
Allen Jones Figures
Angst (Schizophrenia), Gerald Kargl
Peter Halley [→ Halley, Peter]
Bret Easton Ellis [→ Easton Ellis, Bret]
Hipgnosis
Peter Saville [→ Saville, Peter]
Charles Burns [→ Burns, Charles]
John Miller [→ Miller, John]

DAVID FOLDVARI

Born in Budapest. Foldvari is an illustrator based in London. His clients include Nike and Dazed & Confused. He recently exhibited at the Parco Gallery in Tokyo as part of a group show.

British people
Budapest
The writing on the wall
Murcof
Photek
My Dynaudio sub-bass speaker [→ Dynaudio sub-bass speaker]
Late Eighties Acid House
Teddy Bano [→ Bano, Teddy]
Chuck Palahniuk, Kurt Vonnegut, Bret Easton Ellis, Paul Auster
[→ Palahniuk, Chuck → Vonnegut, Kurt → Easton Ellis, Bret → Auster, Paul]
Kidney stone

JOSEPH FOO

Born in 1967. Foo is co-founder of Trinity Visual Communications (3nity) and Trinity Interactive. He has worked in the U.S., Singapore and Malaysia, before establishing 3nity in 1996 with two other partners. Foo's interest in exploring Asian thoughts and identity through graphic design has led to the inception of Art4Soul, a division of 3nity which produces more altruistic work.

Nothing
God
Tuhantu
Jesus
Lao Zi
King Solomon
Jerry Seinfeld [→ Seinfeld, Jerry]
Students [→ Art students]
Being ambidextrous
Mistakes
Death (back to nothing)

ANDREW FOXALL

Born and raised in Scotland. Foxall worked in Italy and the U.K. with Future Concept Lab, Neil Barrat, Boxfresh, Deutsche Bank and Ideo London after graduating from Domus Academy, Milan with MA Distinction in Fashion Design and Marketing. He set up 20ML Istanbul in 2003 with two Turkish partners and is currently a producer and the creative director of projects.

Pattern recognition
Feedback
November Paynter [→ Paynter, November]
Nancy Martin [→ Martin, Nancy]
20ML Istanbul
Kindliest of critics
(un)FASHION
Worlds Of Possibility
Qin Shi Huang
Procreation