

FIA BACKSTRÖM AND JOSEPH LOGAN

FIA: once I sent you this picture of this graphic design in the subway, which says, "Exit middle of plat, very efficiently putting form before information. We've had many conversations around graphic design and its purpose.

JOSEPH: I think they just ran out of space.

FIA: It looked like they made a conscious choice of cutting it.

JOSEPH: Right, well, it could have been a budget choice too. Like they made a mistake and they couldn't afford to fix it.

FIA: Though they did re-write what they had. Did you ever do that?

JOSEPH: Well yeah, all the time. Sometimes I'll fix it so it fits the design better, which is what designers are known for doing. But sometimes, particularly in the advertising world, I fix it because it's not very well written.

FIA: Really?

JOSEPH: Oh yeah.

FIA: It's sounds like the head of the Main Art Museum in Stockholm in the 50s' who was fixing up the Monets.

JOSEPH: He was actually repainting the paintings?

FIA: Yes, of course.

JOSEPH: Wow.

FIA: In a crafty view of your content.

JOSEPH: But that's kind of different, when you're doing that to someone's artwork in a museum.

FIA: Why? (laughs)

JOSEPH: Maybe he had the same intentions as I did.

FIA: But what about *Continuous Project*.

JOSEPH: It's very hard to describe *Continuous Project*. Partly because there are four people, so there's nothing very singular about it.

FIA: But all of your roles...

JOSEPH: Rogues?

FIA: Roles.

JOSEPH: Oh, I like rogues.

FIA: You don't have clearly defined roles, the way you would have in say a fashion magazine.

JOSEPH: Yeah, that was the idea from the beginning. For example I think a lot of the good design decisions are collective or someone else's. And these decisions sometimes go against the logic that a designer would normally use.

FIA: In one of your books you have blank pages for notes at the end in a classic manner.

JOSEPH: Right. We had notes, yes.

FIA: It would be great if you could collect those books again to show the notes.

JOSEPH: Oh yes. I would wager a bet that no one has written in those note pages.

FIA: (laughs) For the same reason? I think it's appalling with the painting museum director, who did not treat the works like artifacts. What about the bulletins you did?

JOSEPH: Well, we have started to call them facsimiles. And we also call them Xeroxes. But it's not really a Xerox, it's a printed scan, which is then Xeroxed.

FIA: It's funny the word Xerox is one of those products where the name of the company has come to give the name to the product.

JOSEPH: Oh, right, like Kleenex. The Xerox is somewhat antiquated like the fax machine—we thought it would have disappeared by

new, but it hasn't. **FIA:** It's a fantasy that fax would be more legal than a signed PDF, but

Xerox is unsuperseded in what it does.

JOSEPH: Yeah! **FIA:** So for *Continuous Project*, if you don't make the design decisions what is your input?

JOSEPH: Oh yeah, the decision making it's totally fluid.



JOSEPH: Oh yeah, the decision making it's totally fluid. I have to say, there is a role that Bettina ends up taking care of a lot more stuff than other people, which is unfortunate. And it's awkward because she's the only woman in the group.

FIA: Really? I think the aspired neutrality of both the facsimile bulletins makes gives them an un-stylized and raw surface, which can be quite subjective.

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JOSEPH: Yes, Bettina came up with that.

FIA: Inserting one publication into the other.

JOSEPH: Right.

FIA: I'm actually inserting *Continuous Project* into *North Drive Press* with my sequence of conversations here with all of you. I'm simply repeating your move.

JOSEPH: Right. One could repeat it forever.

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FIA: ...like a hall of mirrors, so what happened to the bulletins?

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JOSEPH: You would have thought that was the easiest one to do. We got really hung up on what kind of paper they were going to be printed on. We even had a whole set printed when we were doing this show at Cneai. We didn't like the paper it was on, which seems absurd now. Maybe we should just have sent them out, but that's what killed that project. It got too considered.

FIA: The bulletins are beautiful, but the design is lifted or re-appropriated?

JOSEPH: For the bulletins we pretty much copied the look of the original art & project bulletins... and on our other projects, I guess I would say that they don't really look designed.

JOSEPH: Of course there's design—the decision to make something look “not-designed” is a design decision, so there is design. The whole idea of reproducing these publications at a one-to-one size on eleven by seventeen—this format can hold a lot of different reproductions because it happens to be larger than most books. And the fact that we don't change the size for anything—With *Eau de Cologne* we could only get a single page on an eleven by seventeen sheet. It's a way of limiting the design decisions.

FIA: This strict program works like a late modernistic process—say minimalism—relying on the means of production to make decisions. You're not going to cut up the paper. You're just leaving the paper with its given size. You give it over to the givens of production to give decisions back to you.

JOSEPH: Right. I think that's true. But then we made this book that looks very designed. Every piece of writing has a different font and a different style. I was starting to feel confident with type so I decided to do every piece with a different font. Its sort of goofy looking, but I like it.

FIA: Sorry to cut you off, but this may be a parallel story. For the tablecloths people ask me how I made the decisions for the patterns. I cannot make font choices because the logo is a given. The layout choices come down to interpretations of the galleries. But in your case...

JOSEPH: But for the patterns, you're making lots of decisions.

FIA: Yes, of course, for example the Fredrich Petzel Gallery one has straight columns. I thought of a Germanic strong antiquity or a straight German situation.

JOSEPH: How'd you decide for the floral one or the leaf one?

FIA: Well, I was never invited by the gallery itself, all of them are made on invitations from other artists. I just slid in. It comes to show the power of the logo in this reflexive manner. With the snow-white mirror one seems to be able to enter any context...

So the floral pattern was for Ann Craven's show; *Deer and Beer*, with paintings of deer standing on cute flowers beds.

JOSEPH: Yeah, I remember that.

FIA: That gallerist, Tanya Grunert, is very strong and loud, so I thought that was a turned into a nice contradiction. So when you did text in the different font faces, what were your decisions based on?

JOSEPH: Well, sometimes I would ask the artist or the writer what font they liked or wanted, and other times it was just up to me. I have this small group of fonts that I end up coming back to which are quite classical. The way that I learned about typography was from a commercial design studio where we only used a few fonts, and all the fonts were in very good taste. Nothing was very outrageous or kitschy, so I was very wary of taking other fonts outside of that.

FIA: There were these subtle mutations in the publication. I remember for the *New York* twice one, you put my text in columns, just like a newspaper article.

JOSEPH: Well yeah, I was trying

to have every page look subtly different, to not have one system throughout the whole thing.

FIA: The text starts to take on meaning from its form. When one writes, I can read across the page and see full sentences. With your column re-formatting, different and shorter line breaks occur. You go chacka, chacka, chacka, chacka. At first, I wondered what was going on, the rhythm was off, but then it's

a really great thing when it becomes something between two people. As it gets sent along to another person, things happen to it, formats change.

FIA: That's what I mean, a private interface.

JOSEPH: It doesn't feel like it has passed through a filter.

FIA: It's like pure experience: Times New Roman.

JOSEPH: It feels purer or something... I don't know.

FIA: Do you think Times New Roman is pure as a font face?

JOSEPH: I don't know. Isn't Helvetica more pure?

FIA: I think this is the most bollocks idea of the entire twentieth century!

JOSEPH: That's how its been used.

JOSEPH: But who knows if it's good or bad.

FIA: No, but does it matter? Your version might be more digestible.

JOSEPH: This is kind of embarrassing, but when I'm doing the layouts for *Artforum*, I get the pages printed out in Word, in double-spaced Times New Roman usually. I enjoy reading it that way more than in the magazine. (laughs)

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entire twentieth century!

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FIA: But don't you think Helvetica is a life-style font?

JOSEPH: Hmm... you mean recently, as when mid-century modern furniture became popular in the nineties? But Helvetica was definitely part of this modernist search for a clean neutral look...

FIA: ...which was never neutral. In fact, in the sixties and seventies it was a utopic and progressive font, that stood for somebody who was updated with the new.

JOSEPH: Of course its not neutral in that sense, but I guess what I mean by neutral is that it embodies the idea of something without history, something that you're talking about.

FIA: Yeah, a very brilliant font face to front us such.

JOSEPH: Maybe Times New Roman is the one you're talking about.

FIA: It was already used to signify objectivity in industrial design and modernism. When you open a Word document most people remain in default and write in Times New Roman. I usually change to Helvetica...

JOSEPH: Also, Times New Roman is supposedly easier to read because of the serifs. But about Helvetica, I don't think you can totally throw out the idea of it being neutral when you look at it—it comes back to this sort of classical idea of form—a kind of reduction and balance... I think that there is something neutral about that font.

FIA: Did you see the movie?

JOSEPH: Yes. I really loved it.

FIA: Memoirs of a German typographer. I should we start to make them?

JOSEPH: That'd be great.

FIA: We should do one of Didot right? That's the one you used to use in Germany.

JOSEPH: Yeah. Its one of the classic ones. It came back to over and over again.

FIA: Universal, cross-national. This font

formed the base for Helvetica and many

others after war. It was a balanced symmetry.

FIA: Which ones are they? Would you say this on the record?

JOSEPH: Helvetica, Franklin Gothic, Futura, Akzidenz, (which is actually the pre-cursor to Helvetica), Didot, Bodoni, Garamond, Jansen, Caslon, Baskerville, century, modern...there are others too...and this is just my basic knowledge...I have never studied typography.

FIA: What about Georgia and Verdana? They were created as screen-friendly versions for Times New Roman and Helvetica.

JOSEPH: I never use those. I don't even remember what they look like. I guess any time technology changes there is a reason to have a bunch of new fonts.

FIA: I've never used Jansen and Akzidenz.

JOSEPH: I like Jansen...I should. I'm going to give myself a lesson not knowing that I should talk about this too much.

FIA: No, I have a feeling the font face was the whole point.

JOSEPH: I like the "font" (laughs) I don't hear that often.

FIA: Or fish face. Don't people say this?

JOSEPH: I don't think, but I just haven't heard it much.

FIA: Hmm, anyhow for the face piece, I wrote this text: *What is Left to do - What is the Right thing to do*, which I used as an interface to various fonts and frames. So the same text recurs as form for the font faces and the framings, which in turn becomes content or ideological position markers changing the way the text is read on its way to meaning. For example the Fire edition is in Helvetica, with red caps center justified, in a red frame the same way emergency signs are dressed.

JOSEPH: Are there any other ones?

FIA: Yes! It's ongoing, there are about fifteen editions by now. My favorite is the French revolution—the bourgeoisie one.

JOSEPH: What color is that?

FUND OUT THAT HERBERT BAYER DID CREATE

IT FACE UNIVERSAL LETTERING TO COUNTER

.ZI FONT FACE LUFTWAFFE OR FRAKTUR,

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FIA: That's in an ochre Edwardian script-font inserted into a gilded decorative frame. Then there is the Apple one, and that New German in the Luftwaffe font face, with brown text in a thick black frame of course...

JOSEPH: Is that font Luftwaffe a serif or a sans serif?

FIA: It's the Germanic one, probably serif.

JOSEPH: So it endlessly shifts between these polemical ideas of left and right depending on the visual frame?

FIA: Uh-mmm. How did we get here from Helvetica New again? I guess it was about ideas of font faces being ideologically based non-neutral.

JOSEPH: The fonts that I end up coming back to over and over again are the same set of fonts everyone in advertising uses so often. I'm not using them because I want my work to look like advertising, in fact I don't...but there are reasons we all keep using the same fonts.

FIA: Once you start towards the idea of design, to make it look good you rely on taste as a class construct from naturalized social and cultural customs.

JOSEPH: Yes.

FIA: I think about them like these signifying dresses. Through its history they gather semination as sign. Once you start to reduce them in this modernistic way they get embedded or contained in that form and all else gets suppressed.

JOSEPH: Right, yes, definitely.

FIA: For example, do you remember I asked you for a Whiskey font face?

JOSEPH: A Whiskey font, what is that?

FIA: I was looking for some font faces from the '70s or the Cold War I imagined, for that left-right project. Like a Whiskey ad font, to which a dark male voice would read, or a French '70s soft porn movie, like *Emmanuelle*. *Emmanuelle* was written in Carousel font-face. Naively I thought everybody would think about a porn movie if I used this font face. Okay, it sort of read like the '70s, but...

JOSEPH: That reminds me of our conversation about

neutrality. When a font is used so much, for many different purposes, it becomes more neutral. There's not one specific reference when you see Helvetica, there's a million.

FIA: You override it through use...?

JOSEPH: Just because it's everywhere. You associate it with the subway or you associate it with American Airlines, but not just a soft-core French porn thing.

FIA: Exactly, it doesn't work this specifically, but neither does it work all innocently. You once spoke about making something look good, that you've never seen before. It's funny because even if you somehow bypass taste, there is the nostalgic gaze formed by your personal memory. Things look good because we recall their appearance. If you have no reference you won't know if it looks good.

JOSEPH: Yeah. Well, I know that I'm good at making things look clean and organized, but I don't always totally trust my intuition to do so. I think I'm especially aware of this in the world of design. There is value to things that are arbitrary, or complicated, or messy. I think one of the things that look good about the way you're doing things is that you think you're cleaning things up. But I'm used to cleaning up. I sometimes describe what I as just being like a type janitor. I just clean it all up to make it look attractive and legible.

FIA: The janitor doesn't sound like such a great connotation. It sounds like you're putting yourself down when you say that.

JOSEPH: Yeah, to some extent.

FIA: You just said I didn't do a good job of cleaning up, and this is part of that other side of design, which is legibility? There is such a focus on productivity—that the sign has to show up with a sense. But you have a double duty—the visual part and people also want to use this, to read it.

JOSEPH: Those don't conflict, usually. To make something legible is usually to clean it up, but maybe I'm misunderstanding the question.

FIA: Exactly! For example, I may try to complicate the reading. Or if when you lay out *Artforum*, if you would start to efficiently layer text over other text, now this might be a great visual experience, but...

JOSEPH: ...it would get in the way of some things.

FIA: Some writers might be a little irritated. (laughs)

JOSEPH: Yes, they would.

FIA: The purpose is different, you have obligations to fulfill!

JOSEPH: But I'm also saying that I think there's something actually good looking about not cleaning up the text.

FIA: But this idea of good looking, what is that then?

JOSEPH: I have no idea. I'm really embarrassed with this philosopher here.

WOMAN: I feel like I'm interrupting. I thought this was open to the public.

FIA: Yes, yes, it is!

JOSEPH: Maybe you should participate too.

WOMAN: No, I'm a word person.

JOSEPH: Well, that's what we're talking about.

FIA: Do you think the editor and the designer in their professional roles work against each other?

JOSEPH: No, they need each other!

WOMAN: No, we are both janitors of content.

JOSEPH: But the editor's content precedes—well no, sorry, the writer's content precedes the process. But you're also a writer.

WOMAN: Yeah, well you're not just a designer either.

JOSEPH: Well, actually I am just a designer. Any time I start talking about any of this, it just becomes all about my own insecurities about the relationship of design to art....

WOMAN: The insecurities point to the complicated relationship of art and design. I don't think it's so personal. I think you just relate to it...

JOSEPH: I wanted to be an artist before I became a designer.

WOMAN: Like Warhol upside down.

JOSEPH: But didn't he want to be an artist the whole time?

WOMAN: He wanted to be a commercial artist.

JOSEPH: He did? In the beginning?

WOMAN: I think he just thought...he just was beyond that somehow. Or one was like the other, but he knew he had to pitch it a certain way. He took context from places, whatever that is, because he had to keep moving.

JOSEPH: So ask me another question.

FIA: How many magazines have you worked with, two or three?

JOSEPH: How many have I worked at? Three.

FIA: Did you redesign French Vogue too?

JOSEPH: Well, I redesigned it with a very famous art director: Fabien Baron. And actually, I would say he redesigned it...

FIA: ...after the redesigns by M/M?

JOSEPH: Yes.

FIA: Was it weird coming to *Artforum* with the traces of all the people who put their hands on it before? As when M/M did French Vogue, there was some design of the old left.

JOSEPH: Right, although not much was left. I think mostly in a fashion magazine...

FIA: Can one overhaul it like that?

JOSEPH: Not just that you can, you're supposed to. The fashion world is all about everything being new every second.

FIA: What happened with the logo of Vogue, French Vogue? Did they never change it?

JOSEPH: No.

FIA: Did you? But is it the same logo that is on the American Vogue?

JOSEPH: There are slight differences, but it's all based on Bodoni or Didot, I'm not sure which one. FIA: Didot. Maybe we should write a joint love letter to Didot. JOSEPH: To Didot? Didot is French and Bodoni is Italian, I think. FIA: I guess it depends on our national taste then. But Artforum was not refreshed that easily. I remember you told me that you had to leave some things for later. JOSEPH: I was told by the publishers that they were open to change, as long as they were gradual. In the end, I didn't introduce a new type face, maybe one or two. I reduced it to two typefaces that were already there. They'd been using sixteen thousand versions of Franklin Gothic. I just took one of the weights and used that all the way through. I always had plans to change it later on, but now I doubt my impulse to change it further...I don't want to change it just to put my own stamp on it. That's not really a good enough reason. FIA: Why? That would be any artist's reason, to put stamps everywhere. JOSEPH: I don't think it's the role of the designer of Artforum to be an artist. FIA: But don't you think it's the role of a designer, let's say? JOSEPH: To put your stamp on something? No, I don't think so. FIA: That's **beautiful**, moving against ego driven **expression**. JOSEPH: Right, art is totally about an ego thing. There are a lot of designers who will want to come up with something new. But there's this practical function of design. That is what I like most. It might not be useful to make it new. It might be useful to make it old looking or use something that's already been there. FIA: So sometimes the old is the new and vice versa... thinking of design, M/M seem to come from an ideological point where their presence should be known. JOSEPH: Yes, they definitely do. FIA: ...while you think your design works best if nobody can see that you were there. JOSEPH: Well, particularly for an art magazine. I think a kind of transparency to design is useful, especially for Artforum, where the texts are so serious and difficult and it's enough to read a text. I don't think you need to be challenged by the design. WOMAN: I feel like I should leave. (laughs) FIA: Bye Bettina. JOSEPH: Bye Bettina. It will be nice, her coming in and out. FIA: Yeah, like a theatre script. So this idea of designers being present or absent? JOSEPH: Being somehow transparent. FIA: We don't have an audience any longer. Now it got boring. (laughs) JOSEPH: Certain magazines never change their design, like the New Yorker. I've been pushing Artforum towards that kind of look. FIA: Towards the New Yorker? Why? JOSEPH: So that design doesn't become this thing you have to think about, and make decisions about every month. There is a template, which works. FIA: This is so corporate! But at the same time there is something about anti-entertainment. When I worked with websites for **Panasonic**, they had a style guide and it wasn't short! The style guide sets the parameters of your behavior, or your visual possibilities. For example, there were twelve colors you were allowed to use, only in Helvetica Neue of course. Every company uses this font, the Helvetica Neue thing is so corporate, as if it's seamless. It looks true while selling you life-style fluff. For something like Artforum could you set up a style guide once and for all? JOSEPH: Sure, a template... FIA: Of alchemical magic numbers that you derive. (laughs) JOSEPH: I like that, I never heard someone describe it as **alchemical**. FIA: The idea is that you're going to feel a difference of one pixel if things are off. JOSEPH: Well, if you make a decision you should be specific. FIA: That somebody considers and moves things one pixel over makes the **magic** of design. JOSEPH: But for Artforum, there's another challenge, which is that you have three thousand pages of ads and each one of them has a million colors and a million fonts, as with most magazines now, if you're not familiar with the magazine, you have to kind of study the page at first to figure out if it's an ad or it's editorial. So with Artforum, I just want to make it very clear what was an ad and what was editorial. And so if you pick up the magazine one or two times, and you see that same font there, I think it's easy to tell. FIA: Do you have power to choose where the content lands in the magazine? JOSEPH: No. FIA: Who decides this? JOSEPH: The publishers, and the whole editorial team decide what order the editorial comes in. We have some say about the ads, but generally the publishers work to find where the editorial falls vis-à-vis the advertising. FIA: It's sort of rhythmically laid out, like a song. Like, bam, comes a big chunk of ads and then, dadalill, a little bit of content, dun-da-dun-da, more ads and then you have some snippets of chicka-chicka-chicka-chicka. JOSEPH: I think they're trying to not ever have too many of one before going back to the other, a kind of balance. I want to hear more about what you think about M/M. I think there's an **interesting** discussion there about when good design is transparent and when it is calling attention to itself. FIA: Does it have to be either/or? That seems so modernistic. Their collaborations with artists have been very interesting, specifically with Philip Parreno. JOSEPH: I think what's great about them is that they seem to be relentlessly putting a stain or stamp on things—cutting into a texture of corporate design. Which is great! FIA: When they did French Vogue, they decided to be quite organic and constantly change, but they must still have had a style guide? JOSEPH: Oh, totally. FIA: That sounds like a signature style, but it is honest because it doesn't try to lie about the neutrality of itself, but I don't know what happens with useful design then? They actually questioned the idea of a corporate style program for Palais de Tokyo, without a real logo in the technical sense, and with the website and the real site merging. So if you visited the virtual site prior to the real space, you would feel at home navigating, and you were made aware of the institutional address, which did not try to look neutral. JOSEPH: That's true. But then it becomes more complicated when you start putting that look on the wall with the art, and on top of the art. FIA: or more **honest**... a similar thing happened with the labels for the work they made for Parreno's show. The labels were set in blinking light-boxes in a super crazy illegible font face they had created, so that the text painfully flickered in front of your face. They were the most visually arresting presence in the show. I thought this was an **amazing** way to offset the hierarchy of importance in an exhibition space. It commented on how perception, a show, and viewing work operate. This can only function as a gesture. But I do agree, if you read The New York Times everyday, or a text you really want as content, this wouldn't work obviously. I don't actually understand why the serif fonts are easier to read. JOSEPH: When its small there's something about letters looking more different from each other in a serif then they do without a serif. Where do you think Artforum falls in that spectrum from The New York Times to Phillip Parreno and M/M? FIA: I hope that it would fall in between somewhere, that it could be legible as well as retain some playfulness while being the institution of Artforum, and what it stands for. With M/M for French Vogue, it was like a **clown** in a circus. Every spread had new colors and new font faces. That wouldn't seem serious for Art Forum. JOSEPH: M/M are so good at doing that—having so many varying styles, but all of them looking “like M/M.” So you don't confuse one of their pages with an ad. FIA: I understand the practical logistics behind the differentiation between ads and content, but as with product placement in **Hollywood**, why couldn't the ads start to infiltrate the content and the content the ads. JOSEPH: Well, it could. It would be a lot of work. There's a lot of energy spent making the advertisers feel like they're treated equally and fairly. FIA: A collective of advertisers. The placement of advertisements is so political, but it's faux political, with the imperative of neutrality so that for example you can't have a review written by this person, because she knows this person, when actually everybody knows everybody, and yes reviews are a form of advertisement... JOSEPH: I think there's something very useful about maintaining some ideal of being objective and being neutral. I think that's actually really valuable. FIA: Why? Like Helvetica you mean? JOSEPH: Because I think it would just be a free for all if there weren't some structure there that was intended to keep some kind of evenness. Which might sound quite conservative, but that's my point of view. FIA: For Artforum, if you could have free reign, what would you do? JOSEPH: If I got free reign, I would separate the ads and the editorial, two different books that came in a sleeve or something. FIA: Why? You purist, again! JOSEPH: I know. FIA: (laughs) But what about these alterations we spoke about before like writing on top of writing, or what about if you liked one text so much, would you do it twice then? JOSEPH: Oh, do it twice in the same issue? FIA: Um-hum. JOSEPH: I would do that in a different publication, but not in Artforum. FIA: Did you ever create a font face? JOSEPH: No, there are so many **fucking** fonts out there. FIA: It's the same with images. There are so many out there that I prefer to call somebody to borrow one. Let's not put more content into the world when we already have a lot to go around. ■■