

BATTLE

OF THE

BLOGS

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This year's American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) conference in Vancouver was organized around the theme "The Power of Design." Although many of the presentations focused on the use of sustainable and recyclable materials, the most heated debate was between those who see branding and marketing as design's natural power base and those who see editorial design as the moral center of the profession. This disagreement over whether to favor the cultural or the corporate has largely played out on two blogs, both of which had major roles in this year's conference: Design Observer and Speak Up.

CULTURE IS ALWAYS UNPOPULAR

At the end of Jessica Helfand and William Drenttel's lecture in Vancouver half of the audience stood up and cheered and the other half rolled their eyes and skulked toward the bar. Both reactions were remarkable for a graphic design presentation, but their lecture, "Culture Is Not Always Popular," wasn't the typical slide/caption eye candy. Citing examples of work by colleagues and former students (many of whom were in attendance) as well as work from their own studio, Helfand and Drenttel argued that designers are generally not well enough informed to exercise the kind of power trumpeted by the conference's theme. The presentation has continued to polarize the design community because it crystallized several questions that have been in the air since the end of the nineties: Do graphic designers have any

power to influence culture? Is there more to graphic design than advertising? Are Jessica Helfand and William Drenttel snobs?

Why did equating power with knowledge (certainly not a novel concept) provoke such a negative reaction among so many designers? Perhaps it was like being at a party when someone leans against the wall and accidentally flips on the overhead light. For a moment you are startled by how pale and sloppy everyone looks, and then suddenly, horribly, you realize everyone is looking at you in the same way. Helfand and Drenttel's suggestion that designers focus on work, "where acquiring a body of knowledge becomes an asset both professionally and personally," was a powerful indictment of what Mr. Drenttel called, "[the] AIGA's generally uncritical endorsement of branding, both as a process and as the primary programmatic focus for the profession."

The presentation coincided with the launch of Design Observer, Helfand and Drenttel's blog that features weekly postings by the pair as well as Michael Bierut, and Rick Poyner. The site is still taking shape, but so far it has covered a wide range of topics that are often only loosely connected to design. The authors tend to treat graphic design as a way to get to something else that is really interesting: Quakerism, landscape architecture, life in Eastern Europe. In describing their new venture, Helfand and Drenttel are quick to mention the influence of journalism blogs like Pressthink and Romanesko. These sites have developed

a following based on unique research and a strong editorial perspective unlike community-based blogs where inclusiveness and participation are the ultimate measures of success. In this way Design Observer embodies the thesis of "Culture Is Not Always Popular": graphic design can be a way to obtain a body of knowledge as opposed to a body of work.

THE THIRD WAY:

A CLINTONIAN VISION FOR DESIGN

Back in Vancouver, the publishers of Speak Up were distributing a compilation of writing from their blog entitled "Stop Being Sheep." Armin Vit started Speak Up in September 2002 because, as he told me via e-mail, "Designers are the best critics of design, and I think it is our responsibility to voice our opinions."

Although the site covers all aspects of design, Speak Up has attracted a lot of attention for its discussion of branding issues. Branding has become a focal point for much of the discussion of "the power of design" because it is the area where design most closely aligns with corporate power. You could say that branding is to designers what free trade was to Bill Clinton: a way to be on the winning side for a change. Because of its connection to financial performance, branding is largely discussed in terms of celebrating and attempting to replicate the success of established companies and their iconic marks. But this kind of analysis equates the design with the product, raising some difficult questions. If IBM had