

# LEONARDO REVIEWS

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### BOOKS

#### MERZ TO ÉMIGRÉ AND BEYOND: AVANT-GARDE MAGAZINE DESIGN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by Steven Heller. Phaidon Press, New York, 2003. 240 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 0-7148-3927-2.

*Reviewed by Roy R. Behrens, Department of Art, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0362, U.S.A. E-mail: <ballast@netins.net>.*

In the summer of 1969, I was a drafted U.S. Marine in San Diego, CA, struggling to survive psychologically in the inhospitable ambience of boot camp. At that same moment, a somewhat younger rookie named Steven Heller was working as a graphic designer in New York, doing the layout and paste-up for two notoriously offensive underground magazines, *Screw* and the *New York Review of Sex*, the latter of which he describes as “an odd mix of new left politics and sexploitation.” Five years later, he leapfrogged to the rank of Op Ed art director at the prestigious *New York Times*, where since 1986 he has art-directed its *Book Review*, while also serving as co-chair of the graduate program in design at the School of Visual Arts. In his spare time, he collects tons of printed ephemera from the history of design and writes about it, with unequalled richness and detail, in magazine articles and books. At last count, he has written, edited or co-edited about 80 books, many of which are among the finest surveys of the subject. With that as background, I would not hesitate to say that this book, which is one of his latest (I say that because another came out as I was writing this review), may be

the best he has ever produced. It is also directly connected to his own experience (as a former art director of underground magazines), since it consists of a verbal and visual account of the role that irreverent magazines play in the comet-like existence of avant-garde movements—the main function of which, as Heller explains, is “to make trouble.” As he also argues, the manner in which they cause trouble (and this is the primary point of the book) is not just by promoting ideas that the *ancien régime* finds offensive, but, just as often, by being visually offensive as well: almost always by the use of discomfiting layouts, annoying typefaces and discordant combinations of things that do not belong together. The entirety of Heller’s text (which is exhaustive in its range and depth) is both stirring and beautifully written. But the book’s single feature that will be of particular value to designers, artists, teachers and students is the way in which it functions as a design aficionado’s “museum without walls”—that is, its visual examples (with 550 full-color illustrations, nearly all of generous size) are not only thoughtfully chosen, but also painstakingly printed. It is a breathtaking journey to turn to reproductions so precise that it feels as if one’s eyes can feel the creases, scuffs, smudges, paper fibers and other tactile features of the original object. The book’s range is wider than indicated by the title, in the sense that it actually covers some of the 19th century, far in advance of the founding of *Merz* (by Dadaist Kurt Schwitters) in 1923, while, on the other end, it also moves beyond the start of *Émigré* (edited by Rudi VanderLans and Zuzana Licko) in 1984. The one thing I found most appealing was the reproduction (on one spread of this book) of a sequence of as many as 18 page spreads from a single publication. Judge for yourself, but I do not know a finer example of sequential (cinematic) spread design than the page layouts created by Russian Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko in 1940 for an issue of *USSR in Construction* (pp. 94–95). Like so many of this book’s examples, I have never before seen this reproduced, much less been able to watch it unfold.

(Reprinted by permission from *Bal-last Quarterly Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Winter 2003–2004.)

## ENOUGH

by Bill McKibben. Henry Holt, New York, 2003. 288 pp. Trade. ISBN: 0-8050-7096-6.

*Reviewed by George Gessert, 86070 Cougar Lane, Eugene, OR 97402, U.S.A. E-mail: <ggessert@igc.org>.*

Will biotechnology give us wings? Make us posthuman? Damage us irreparably? These are a few of the possibilities that Bill McKibben considers in *Enough*. According to McKibben, biotechnology will soon be able to deliver better health, greater intelligence, longer lives, genetically determined happiness and maybe even dazzling good looks. However, if we pursue these goals through germline engineering, the costs will be prohibitively high. According to McKibben, germline engineering, which involves making genetic changes that can be inherited, will “break us free from the bonds of our past and present” and make our children into “putty.” This will lead to an “arms race” of all against all, in which parents will be forced to engineer their

**Reviews Panel:** Peter Anders, Fred Allan Andersson, Wilfred Arnold, Roy Ascott, Curtis Bahn, Claire Barliant, René Beekman, Roy R. Behrens, Andreas Broeckmann, Annick Bureau, Chris Cobb, Robert Coburn, Donna Cox, Sean Cubitt, Nina Czegledy, Shawn Decker, Margaret Dolinsky, Dennis Dollens, Luisa Paraguai Donati, Victoria Duckett, Maia Engeli, Enzo Ferrara, Deborah Frizzell, Bulat M. Galejev, George Gessert, Elisa Giaccardi, Thom Gillespie, Allan Graubard, Dene Grigar, Diane Gromala, Rob Harle, Craig Harris, Josepha Haveman, Paul Hertz, Amy Ione, Stephen Jones, Richard Kade, Curtis E.A. Karnow, Nisar Keshvani, Julien Knebusch, Daniela Kutschat, Mike Legget, Roger F. Malina, Jacques Mandelbrojt, Rick Mitchell, Robert A. Mitchell, Mike Mosher, Axel Mulder, Kevin Murray, Frieder Nake, Maureen A. Nappi, Angela Ndaliamis, Simone Osthoff, Jack Ox, Robert Pepperell, Kjell yngve Petersen, Cliff Pickover, Patricia Pisters, Michael Punt, Harry Rand, Sonya Rapoport, Edward Shanken, Aparna Sharma, Shirley Shor, George K. Shortess, Joel Slayton, Christa Sommerer, Yvonne Spielmann, David Surman, Pia Tikka, David Topper, Rene van Peer, Stefaan van Ryssen, Ian Verstegen, Stephen Wilson, Arthur Woods, Soh Yeong.