

# 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.

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## ENOUGH

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

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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.

offspring or be considered negligent to the point of child abuse. Every engineered baby will be followed by more advanced models. "Once the game is under way," McKibben warns, "there won't be moral decisions, only strategic ones." A host of unprecedented family problems will arise. Children will acquire characteristics of consumer products. There will be children seen as "upgrades" from older siblings and engineered children considered "lemons." Some parents will suffer buyer's remorse. Consumer decisions will create a genetically based class system, and this will eventually lead to new, posthuman species, with interspecies violence to follow.

McKibben's warnings about keep-up-with-the-Joneses genetic engineering bear consideration if only because his picture of the future derives from predictions made by advocates of germline engineering. For example, in his 1997 book *Remaking Eden*, Lee Silver, a molecular biologist at Princeton University, wrote that germline engineering to eliminate severe inherited disease would "ease society's trepidation" and open the door to other sorts of gene enhancement, such as improving intelligence. Silver "conservatively" speculates that by 2350 society may be divided into 10% "GenRich," or genetically enhanced individuals, and 90% "Naturals," or unenhanced individuals. The GenRich would control everything: the economy, the media, entertainment, "the knowledge industry," art. Silver envisions *Homo sapiens* divided into four species by 2600, and by 2750 into more than a dozen. Eventually millions of human-derived species may be scattered across the galaxy. Silver's vision of the distant future is epic, and he is a lucid writer, especially when he describes biotechnological techniques. However, he has a weakness for absurdly grandiose statements such as "We, as human beings, have tamed the fire of life." He also gives very limited attention to the suffering that biotechnology is almost certain to produce.

McKibben argues that germline engineering not only will damage families and cause social disruption, but will lead to widespread loss of meaning. Biotechnology, he believes, is the culmination of a long historical process, greatly accelerated by the industrial revolution, that favors individuals over context, and leads to empowered but pitifully isolated and disconnected people. Germline engineering will

eliminate the last source of meaning: the individual self. This will take place because an engineered "self" is not a true self, but something more like a robot. "We will float silently away into the vacuum of meaninglessness."

McKibben does not use the word *soul*, but that is what he suggests when he characterizes the true self as a providentially given, unchanging essence and a primary source of meaning. This concept of self, however, is a cultural construct. Buddhist and other civilizations have flourished without cultivating it and without unleashing epidemics of meaninglessness. Science conceptualizes human beings as exquisitely intricate electro-chemical phenomena operating within much larger, almost infinitely complex material contexts. According to common, present-day cultural values, we already bear qualified comparison to robots.

Since McKibben's concept of the self is nostalgic and dubious, his argument that engineered people will be essentially different from the rest of us is also dubious. He provides no convincing evidence that for them life will not continue to be a succession of surprises, intermittently a profound mystery, and mathematically so improbable as to constitute a miracle.

This is not to say that germline engineering may not reshape our species or cause suffering. Quite the contrary. McKibben does a service by highlighting some profoundly troubling possibilities. He argues that we may already have gone far enough along certain technological paths. He favors some kinds of innovation, for example gene therapies that are somatic and not inheritable, but draws a line at germline engineering and at the world-destroying potentialities of robotics and nanotechnology. He believes that anything with the power to make us posthuman should arouse our deepest skepticism. The momentum of the new technologies may be difficult to stop, but momentum is merely inertia and has never had anything to do with progress—that is, if progress consists of movement toward human fulfillment. More to the point, we cannot predict the future. McKibben believes that flat statements that technological innovation is inevitable are ruses to stop discussion before it can begin.

What drives technological innovation? McKibben quotes leading innovators to suggest that in our time a basic force is hatred of life. For example, robotics pioneer Hans Moravec, reflect-

ing on an Isaac Asimov story about an android who wanted to become a human, said (with his typically aggressive use of the second person), "Why in hell do you want to become a man when you're something better to begin with? It's like a human being wanting to become an ape. 'Gee, I really wish I had more hair, that I stooped more, smelled worse, lived a shorter life span.'" No doubt Moravec speaks for many. The very widespread belief that we may go extinct arises both from awareness of the immense destructive power of high technology and from disgust with what we are, or have become. Today there are plenty of reasons to loathe our species. Who has not felt at one time or another that we deserve to go extinct? McKibben acknowledges this inner crisis, but does not address it. His appeals to reason and essential goodness are inadequate in the face of extinction's appeal and the misanthropy of leading scientists. This is the most serious weakness of the book.

I am less sanguine than McKibben about who we are, which paradoxically makes me less pessimistic about the prospect of germline engineering. He points out that for a while germline engineering will be extremely expensive, so only a small minority will be able to afford it, but he does not explore the implications of this. From a Darwinian perspective, wealth today functions counterintuitively: it affords no obvious evolutionary advantages. In fact, there is an inverse relationship between income and education on the one hand, and number of offspring on the other. As a group the poor, or rather the relatively uneducated working poor, are indeed blessed when it comes to progeny. The rich tend to be Darwinian losers.

Furthermore, no one really knows how biologically advantageous, as distinct from socially advantageous, characteristics such as slimness, athletic ability and intelligence are. Unless they produce more progeny, they have no Darwinian advantages. A potato-shaped, dimwitted nonentity with a swarm of children is biologically superior to a brilliant public figure, streamlined as a cheetah and childless. In other words, from an evolutionary standpoint it may not matter whether most of the germline manipulations that McKibben mentions take place: they may amount to genetic froth. The market has always generated froth. Capitalism, which moved onto the

world stage with trade in sugar and tobacco, involves bypassing our evolutionary defenses and exploiting our genetic weaknesses. We are the animal who plays tricks on itself. Consumer culture is the trickster spirit incarnate.

McKibben makes a convincing case that we would be wise to favor sustained public debate about germline engineering and to exercise great caution about this immensely powerful and potentially disruptive technology. If, however, our society does go down the path of germline engineering, there is something to be said for having the rich, the well-educated and the self-loathing conduct the first experiments on their own children.

When the poet Edith Sitwell was a child in the 1890s she had a slight curvature of the spine. In her autobiography she tells how her father, Sir George Sitwell, who would tolerate no imperfections in his offspring, had her subjected to the best available medical treatment of the time. "The steel Bastille" was a metal contraption that encased young Edith's body and caused her excruciating pain. Only the rich could afford this particular torture or permit this particular childhood. It is not inconceivable that humanity will learn important lessons from the rich about the consequences of germline engineering, just as earlier generations learned from the cruel and useless medical treatments that premodern doctors inflicted on aristocrats and their children. Today most of what we need to learn is what not to do.

### THE EDGE OF SURREALISM: A ROGER CAILLOIS READER

edited by Claudine Frank; translated by Claudine Frank and Camille Nash. Duke Univ. Press, Durham, NC, 2003. 423 pp. Trade, paper. ISBN: 0-8223-3056-3; 0-8223-3068-7.

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Roger Caillois holds a distinct place among French intellectuals between the two world wars and after the defeat of Fascism. First seen as a member of the Paris surrealists (1932–1934), he contributed to the then-vital discussion on the origins of myth by balancing his interest in poetry, as a project of being and a means of becoming, with a scientist's rationality through the lens of

biology. His attempt to bridge the distance between the two provided him with a particular view of how acute such a project is, given the values promoted by "poetry" and "biology," the traditions they stem from, and the variable confusions attending "rapprochement." That we are still prey to a general failure here, which Caillois could not extricate himself from, does not in the least diminish the urgent goal of divining the origins of myth, especially now that with technology's ever more attractive simulations the two are merging at last—and that the "absence of myth," a subject that compelled so much comment during Caillois's time, no longer matters.

I do not know what Caillois would have made of all this, save for returning perhaps to his analysis of biology as a basis for myth, eschewing much else as a detour, and his fascination with mimicry in the insect world—the subject of his influential 1937 text, *The Praying Mantis: From Biology to Psychoanalysis*—all in the service of an attempt to discern, as he puts it, a "lyrical ideogram" as an objective nexus where poetic thought and lucid reason intersect.

Caillois' combative spirit here also characterizes him, and our current interest in him, at least in terms of the world we know and our need for forceful intellects with wide-ranging passions free from careerism or institutional constraints—a freedom that Caillois advocated more in principle than in fact. But of course it was there, an animating force and a horizon toward which to turn as he did. In this regard, his break with surrealism as being overly "indulgent" on the side of poetry is also born from a desire to recast the movement's focus on myth and myth-making: from its collective origins and orphic cast to its sectarian momentum, social economy and general phenomenology. It is here as well that we can chart his collaboration with George Bataille, his work with Michelle Leiris and Jean Paulhan, his arguments with Levi-Strauss, whether for good or ill, during and after the College of Sociology, which Caillois helped to form and sustain. Among his other accomplishments, I include *Les Lettres française*, which Caillois launched from his interwar exile in Argentina (1941–1947), and the magazine *Sur*, edited by Victoria Ocampo, in which he played a pivotal role, along with the UNESCO-sponsored "transdisciplinary" journal *Diogenes*, which he established as editor in 1952, and, of course, his books.

Thus has Claudine Frank given us a sampling of Caillois's texts in translation, the most complete in English so far, written over four decades, 1934 to 1978, along with informative introductions to each period, at times to each text. Indeed, I am indebted to Frank for the historic frames she provides despite her passing disputes with other commentators, which may be of interest to experts alone, and her sometime opacity.

I have mentioned myth, myth-making and the absence of myth; I do so again. It is the ground Caillois believes to be his own, at least as far as his analyses take him. But as Caillois's thought matures, his sense of the poetic, its orphic heritage, and myth change. He comes to recuperate a type of formalism that reason embraces as an epitome of Western civilization and that Breton, for one, repudiates (see Breton's brilliant response to Caillois's thoughts on poetry in *Ars Poetica*, coauthored with Jean Shuster, which appears in the surrealist review *BIEF/Jonction surrealiste*, No. 7, June 1959).

Nor is this repudiation an abstract or literary affair. It focuses on the heart of a dispute that anthropology finally came to grips with and that Aime Cesaire targeted in his scorching critique of Caillois's defense of Western civilization, and the blind eye he turned to its murderous impulses, a critique I refer readers of Caillois to as a clarifying lens (see Cesaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, first published in 1955 by *Editions Presence Africain*, republished in translation several times thereafter).

Who was Roger Caillois? Certainly, this book will help us draw the character. Will it also act as a mirror to the reader and the intellectual or poetic currents that resonate within him or her? That is another question. It is not a small one.

### ELOQUENT IMAGES: WORD AND IMAGE IN THE AGE OF NEW MEDIA

edited by Mary E. Hocks and Michelle R. Kendrick. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2003. 376 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 0-262-08317-5.

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There is much to admire in Mary Hocks and Michelle Kendrick's *Eloquent Images: Word and Image in the Age*