a show of hand

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Within 2 decades, design has gone from paste-up to slick digital techniques — and back again. Get the scoop on this handmade trend and how it's influencing modern design.

Recently, designer Kevin Grady came across a cardboard box. In it: Some of his work from the early 1990s—and a copy of Emigre 29. Published in 1994, that issue of Emigre featured a 12-page insert by the British collective The Designers Republic.

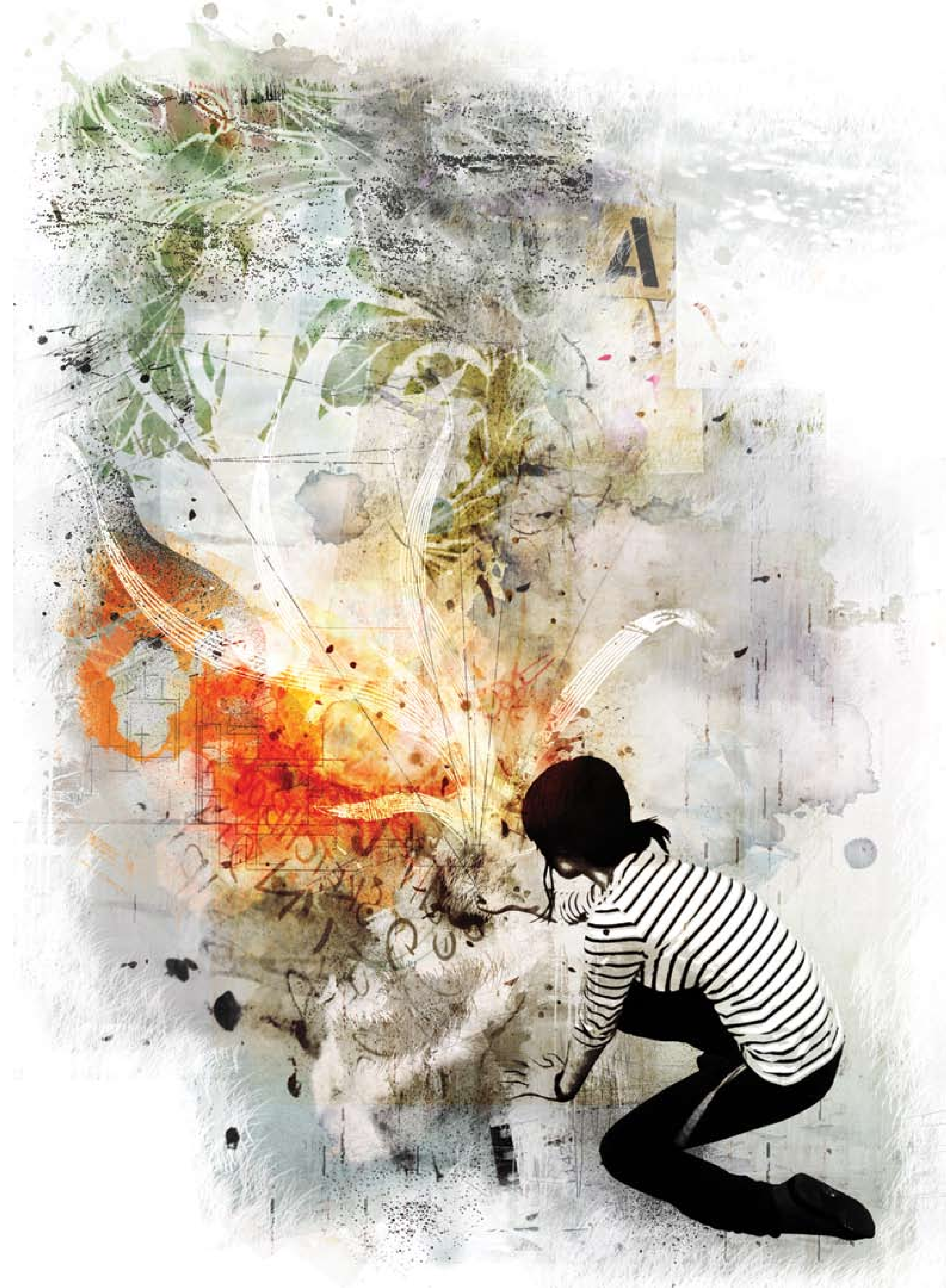
"I have to admit, I was kind of shocked," says Grady, partner of design firm Grady&Metcalf and editor-in-chief and creative director of Lemon. "When that issue came out, I remember being totally blown away by it. And it was one of the most celebrated issues of the magazine."

No doubt, he concedes, that Emigre really did break great big swaths of new ground. But in hindsight, Grady realizes that it was also a product of its time: That was a period in which designers were piling layers upon layers of vector art, stretching type and throwing enormous ellipses around everything—just because they could.

"The typography of that era was very much about itself," he says. "It was very apparent that designers were just figuring out the computer. It was like, 'Wow, I can stretch type. So that's what I'm going to do.'"

One turn of the century later, designers have fully figured out every feature and filter. The novelty of the Mac—the thrill of stretching stuff they couldn't previously stretch—has worn off.

In the past few years, they've rediscovered the process of working by hand, producing a marked surge of design incorporating diverse elements of handwork. Some are using letterpress and screen printing to produce small-batch or one-off products like invitations, posters and handmade paper. Others are feeding their artwork—like hand-drawn or painted type and illustrations, mixed media, and collages—back into the computer, scanning and manipulating those elements to lend a handmade quality to large print runs.



TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY NOSTALGIA

This isn't the first time designers have checked the rearview mirror, says Julie Mader-Meersman, associate professor of graphic design and program coordinator at Northern Kentucky University. Historically, she says, any point at which human beings round the bend on a major time-based landmark—as when centuries turn over—we look back. "Certainly at the last turn of the century, the leaders of the Arts and Crafts movement were examining and returning to methods of production from the past as they expressed concerns about the future."

Today, Mader-Meersman places a number of new millennial trends within the context of "turn-of-the-century nostalgia," including nesting, crafting and the surge of the handmade in design. "As we've moved into the first decade of a new millennium, that tendency to look back shows up for us in graphic design," she says. "You see people looking fondly at letterpress technology, for instance, which has a charming obsolescence and beautiful tactile properties that modern printing processes don't offer."

Unlike the Arts and Crafts movement, however, which staunchly opposed the technologies of its day—or more specifically, the industrial revolution and its exploitative effects on labor—contemporary designers embrace technology as a means to evolve their handmade work. For Grady, this is just the natural progression from the design he found in that cardboard box. When designers work by hand today, he says, they're demonstrating a reluctance to let the computer dictate their design. But it's not some revolt against the Mac.

"Now we're not amazed by what the computer can do so much as by what we can do with the computer," he says. "So it makes sense that the next stage would be to make things with our own hands, using what we know about technology to take it to the next level."

Designers who lived and loved the days of the paste-up—and those who never left them behind—have long beseeched the new guard to see the Mac as just one tool in their arsenals. Of late, that counsel seems to have sunk in.

PLAY THE HAND YOU WERE DEALT

Not everyone left their waxers back in the '80s. At Seattle's Modern Dog, designers have always worked by hand—and clients hire the studio because they want to be a part of that visual language. But when designer and Modern Dog co-founder Robynne Raye asks her interns to shut down their computers and work instead by hand, they struggle.

"I notice that people belabor and worry over the work to the point of sucking all the life out of it," says Raye, who blames a lack of practice for all the fretting. Although the idea of working by hand implies a sense of freedom, it's not the type of thing you can pick up at will. "If you don't do work regularly by hand," she says, while sitting within reach of paintbrushes, Sumi ink and, yes, a waxer, "the results can end up feeling forced. Instead of waiting for an excuse to incorporate handmade into your work, you really need to live it."

Raye also traces the struggle back to design training, which has a way of educating people's instinct to play right out of them. And play, she says, is a big part of working by hand. "So many designers learn to remove the imperfections that come with doing things by hand. But those imperfections are what make the work human. So you have to be comfortable forgetting what you learned and just letting it happen."

THE REAL THING

As part of the culture around them, graphic designers pick up and articulate what's floating in the air. Cultural touch points like graffiti and tattoo art show clear influences on this recent shift in design, especially from an aesthetic vantage point. But it's the DIY/crafting revolution—which has reclaimed everything from knitting to felting to screen printing—that shares a set of attitudes, not merely an aesthetic, with contemporary handmade graphic design. In fact, it's hard to tease apart the crosscurrents of influence between the two movements.

With his work and book "Hand Job: A Catalog of Type," designer Michael Perry has emerged as a star of the handmade in design. "Hand Job" features a group of innovative designers who use their digital literacy to advance and evolve their hand-drawn typefaces. For his part, Perry identifies not only with the use of handwork in commercial graphic design, but also with DIY culture at large. He talks about the first time he screen printed a T-shirt with slightly mellower delivery than a man who's had a religious conversion experience.

"I was like, Oh, my God!" he recalls. "This is amazing. I just made a T-shirt! And it's the real thing—it's not some mock-up of the thing." For Perry and others, working by hand—whether that's with T-shirts or type—reconnects the maker of the thing to the thing itself. "It creates this super-rich network of relationships between the designer, the product and the consumer," he says.

Perry's DIY leanings formed in college, which is where a lot of young designers are exploring and merging DIY ideals and handmade approaches to design. About five years ago, Jean Orlebeke, founder of Obek Design in Oakland, CA, started to notice her design students picking up craft projects. "I saw them reading ReadyMade," says Orlebeke, whose essay appears in "Fingerprint: The Art of Using Handmade Elements in Graphic Design" by Chen Design Associates. "I saw them making limited-edition, handmade objects. They were graphic design students, but they were making their own clothes and hats, duct-tape wallets and their own versions of Uglydolls."

Around the same time, says Orlebeke, her students developed a ravenous appetite for Letraset type in their design work. "They could make anything on the computer," she says, "but there they were, using rub-down type and scanning it to get it to a digital format that they could apply to something else." If she had to venture a guess, Orlebeke would say the craft revolution came first. It created an atmosphere of permissibility to explore methods beyond the Mac.

THE HOBGOBLIN OF LITTLE MINDS?

For many crafters, their movement—sometimes called "craftivism"—is tightly wrapped in politics. There's little doubt that crafting is a consumer culture, centered on the buying and selling of stuff. But the difference is that it's conscious consumerism; it's set up as an alternative to big-box meaninglessness and corporate waste. In her documentary film "Handmade Nation," Faythe Levine talks with designers and crafters around the country about their work and the ascendancy of DIY art, craft and design. At its 2009 release, the documentary will accompany a book of the same name, co-written with Cortney Heimerl.

"Personally," Levine says, "I think that the act of creating something by hand is political, whether that's your motivation or not. You're stepping away from the process of mass production, making conscious decisions about the materials you're going to use. In this day and age, that's an inherently political move."

When graphic designers discuss the handmade in their work, the overtly political, anti-corporate language slinks into the closet. For most professional designers, it has to. But there's a clear sense that, for many, the rules of brand consistency in corporate America offer only the stingiest dose of fulfillment and meaning. And that's taking a toll. "It's extremely hard for designers to infuse any kind of personal expression in commercial work," Grady says. "I don't think many clients are interested in doing anything other than being consistent with their brand."

That's reasonable enough, Grady says, since branding is very effective. And yet, the prospect of designing a brochure that looks just like the last one—and the one before that—won't sate even a moderate appetite for self-expression. That's why Grady first founded his award-winning magazine, Lemon; its design is beholden to neither client nor advertiser.

Lately, he's seen more designers following a similar path of initiating independent projects that allow them to explore handmade design and other self-expressive approaches (see "Paper Market" on page 64).

Designer Abbie Planas Gong can relate. She launched the San Francisco firm Passing Notes in 2003, when she came to believe that design was losing its heart. "It seemed like a lot of designers were more concerned with how much money they could make to cover the cost of overhead than with anything else," Gong says. "It wasn't about the lives they could touch through design. But that's what has always inspired me to do design."

Passing Notes' limited-edition solutions reflect her clients' values in a deeply personal way. When two pastry-chef clients decided to tie the knot, for instance, Gong used chocolate to create guest place cards for the wedding tables. For another client, this one homeopathically inclined, Gong designed a Christmas card on handmade, sage-seed-infused paper—which recipients could plant later.

PAY TO PLAY

Given her ultra-custom materials and methods—whose costs don't go down as quantities go up—Gong faces unfavorable economies of scale. "That is a challenge," she says. "Not everyone can afford this kind of design. But the clients I work with appreciate the fact that only 99 other people have the card I made for them, for instance. They appreciate the fact that it wasn't put into the world because the board of directors in some company said, 'This product is doing well. Let's make 10,000 more.'"

Designers who create limited-edition products aren't the only ones to encounter budgetary restrictions. Anyone who uses handwork in their design will likely encounter reality checks to convince clients that the aesthetic is worth the cost. Even when those hand-drawn typefaces become digital files for use in massive-scale print runs, the iterative process—the drawing, the painting, the open-ended exploration—requires an additional time investment. As clients in an ailing economy constrict budgets and look longingly toward the path of least resistance, they're less likely to leap at the prospect of paying for "play."

According to Raye, designers can do much to chip away at that resistance by clearly communicating the ways a handmade concept will reflect and advance the brand's values, mission and message. "Too many designers don't have a good reason for the ideas they present," she says. "If you want your client to support an idea, whether you're using handmade design or not, it has to be appropriate."

And the smart designer doesn't talk like one. "You can't tell a client you like the idea of using the handmade because it will create a rich tactile experience," Raye says, "or that the handmade connects designers to their roots as artists. Because they don't care. When they hear something like that, they think, 'I'm working with an artist.' You have to talk to your clients in a way that shows you're not just experimenting on them."

JUMPING ON THE HAND-WAGON

For all the challenges, demand for handmade design is high. Just as Gong's clients value the no-one-else-will-have-it nature of her work, consumers in general appreciate handmade touches because it counters the monotony—the mediocrity—of abundance. "In a world that gives consumers instant access to anything, any time, anywhere in the world," says Ann Mack, the director of trendspotting at advertising agency JWT, "products and services that were once unique—from luxury goods to music—have become commodities." In response, says Mack, those products that are handmade or personalized in some way will stand apart to become the new premium.

Marc English of Marc English Design in Austin, TX, agrees. He believes that in a homogenous world, designers are turning to the handmade as a way to distinguish themselves and their work. En route to all that distinction, however, they'd do well to avoid a gaping pitfall. "What I love about a lot of the work we're seeing is that it has a MacGyver quality," he says. "It's like, what materials do you have around and how are you going to use them to tell a story? But there's definitely a trendy aspect. I mean, have you seen enough silhouettes lately? Last year alone, I judged three shows full of these hand-drawn silhouettes surrounded by baroque-y swirls."

In other words, it's possible—easy even—to mistake handmade design for what's come to be its style-driven shorthand. According to Debbie Millman, president of the design division at Sterling Brands in New York City, what we mean when we say "handmade" is honesty. "When someone sees something that's handmade," she says, "it's a visual cue that what's in front of them is an honest and authentic endeavor."

The point at which that can fall apart: Intent. Millman challenges designers to scrutinize their motives. "If you're doing something handmade because that's the current fashion—in the same way you'd buy a pink dress because pink is in style this spring—then I'd ask you to reconsider your motivation." Ask yourself, she suggests: Am I employing handmade tactics because it's an authentic statement and reflection of the brand's spirit? Or am I doing this just to get in on the coolest, new trend?

It's inevitable that some will do the latter, Grady says. He was hardly surprised to see hand-drawn type in a recent McDonald's ad. "These things move in cycles," he says. "What begins as unique is almost always appropriated, and pretty soon McDonald's is doing ads with hand-drawn type. Now, that ad wasn't done well, and it definitely came across as corporate, but you can see that they were going for that look. And, personally, I think that's OK. Because there are followers and there are innovators, and we all know who we are."

Perry, who's pitched his tent in the innovator camp, isn't daunted either. "I just don't have that fear that big business is going to destroy the handmade aesthetic," he says. "Brands might try to jump on board and pick up the cool new thing—but they don't usually stay on board long enough to actually kill it." More important, Perry says, this is only the beginning. "I don't think that the aesthetic my peers and I have developed will become stagnant. I'd like it to constantly develop. I think that as makers, we'll all grow and change in a constantly evolving economy and world. And so will handmade design." HOW

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