

July 25, 1988

	TRK	15P	BOOKY	ELAPSED	PROJ	WEEK
134-14	BECKER/80-89 Vaha Series	AD	—	48/2		
143-15A	BELLEVES/Show Prod	AB	12/7	1/7		
155-11A	BENEFICIAL/75th Anny Loop	AB		44/23		
150-12	BENEFICIAL/Calendar	AD	15/5		8/12	
150-13	BENEFICIAL/Employee Ctr	AD	15/2		8/13	
131-20A	CARBONELL/Day PAPER Ad	DR				
107-20C	CHINA GREL/China Series	01	SR	/	4/7	
119-11B	CNBC/21/Annotated Log	00	—	36/7		ASAP
70-10A	ETV/Talking Heads 10"	70	DR	20/7	22/0	
70-10A	ETV/Talking Heads 10"	70	DR	20/7	22/0	
97-42A	FLORENT/OS Postcard	97	00	10/4	20/9	H
97-40A	FLORENT/Day PAPER Ad	97	PR	5/0	4/0	
159-11	Fly Booklet/Fly Label	77	00	3/5	4/0	4/3 B/S
156-11A	GRAND CENTRAL PTD/P/D	06	SR	75/15	114/12	
150-11A	GRAND CENTRAL 200 Poster	50	TL	20/20	56/4	
11-118C	HBCo/Photo K&E Cover	TK	—	6/24		
11-114B	HBCo/Video POP Sign	10	01/6	10/8		TIBOR
11-118A	HBCo/Video Poster Fly	03	15/0	5/5		
11-125A	HBCo/Product Catalog	PR	—	1/0		
11-132A	HBCo/Vaha Wine	16	4/4	7/10		
11-135A	HBCo/80-89 Vaha Series (Calendar) DR/AD			17/2		
11-130B	HBCo/Star's Report	16	1/1	12/0		
11-129A	HBCo/Book Comp	AD	10/10	24/22		
11-143A	HBCo/Watch ST of Signs	03	1/4	7/0		H
11-142A	HBCo/Rev. Variety	16	2/3	14/17		
11-151A	HBCo/China Grill Sheet	06	7/0	6/0		
11-155A	HBCo/Checks	00	DR	0/0		
11-156A	HBCo/Reviews	00	SR	6/0		
11-150	HBCo/Maps/Japan			0/8		
11-153	HBCo/Rev. Tax Form					
11-161	HBCo/Apple Products					
123-12	ITV/Group Book	00	00	0/0		
140-11B	NY GARD/Book Design	06	25/12	203/111		
157-11	Panasonic/KAHGA	AD		24/0		
46-12A	PICOLA/Grain Ad	46	00	4/4	3/0	H
152-11A	TANQUADAY/Black Post. Calendar	DR		54/7		
123-13	Tea House/Tea House	71	00	62/31		B/S
71-25	Tea Tea Club/Tea House P	AD		63/19		
71-27	Tea Tea Club/Tea House Single	AD		7/1		
129-15A	Village/Pop Signs	AD		18/7		

come in common

18/13 8

Telex
Falsimile

CALL JOE @ APEX RE WHEN MID NEXT WK 8/10 - H

CALLS - CALL W/ PRKE ON WHOLE JOB - BETT CALL FOR LABEL PRKE.

JOB SHEETS FROM M&CO.'S WEEKLY MEETINGS. THIS ONE IS FROM JULY 1988, WHEN OBERMAN WAS WORKING ON NO FEWER THAN 10 PROJECTS, HIGHLIGHTED IN ORANGE. THE GREEN NUMBERS ON THE LEFT INDICATE THE PRIORITIES SHE AND KALMAN WORKED OUT TOGETHER. "THE WEEKLY OFFICE MEETING WAS THE TIME YOU GOT TO GET TOGETHER AND LAUGH AND FIGURE THINGS OUT," SHE SAYS. "THE JOB SHEETS WERE AN IMPORTANT MARKER OF LIFE AT M&CO. EACH ONE IS LIKE A SNAPSHOT OF THE WEEK."

designer from 1990 to 1993, “because I think the notion of accepting the fact that there’s a box in the first place is a big problem people have in general. And what you’re talking about with M&Co. is people who didn’t recognize—or care—that that box existed.”

CONSTANT EVOLUTION

When he joined M&Co. in 1983, Stephen Doyle, creative director of Doyle Partners, recalls walking into Kalman’s 57th Street office to see a gash in the wall behind the receptionist’s area, created with what he suspects were blunt axes. “It looked like a cartoon,” he says, “where Superman had just flown through the wall. So the minute you walked in the office, you saw this architectural wrongness to begin with.”

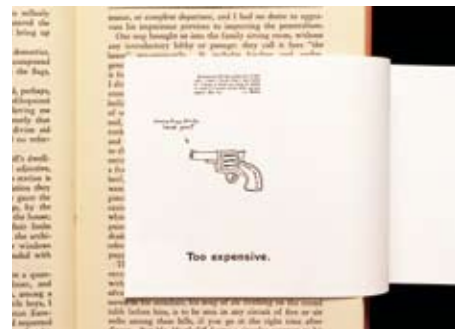
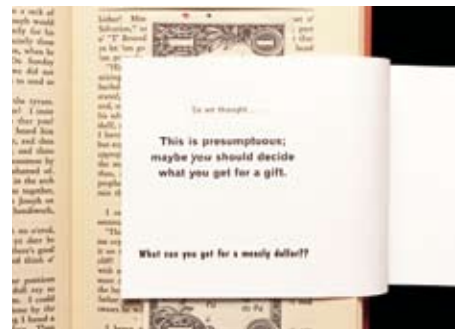
Two weeks after his arrival, Kalman fired every designer on staff but Doyle. There was, as Doyle says, “a lot of grid action happening at M&Co. at the time, and Tibor—untrained as a designer—wasn’t interested in the grid. He wasn’t interested in formalism.” Nor was Doyle. His arrival—followed by new hires Tom Kluepfel and Isley, Doyle’s former Cooper Union student—is associated with the first of many shifts in M&Co.’s evolution, this one a swing into its conceptual positioning.

Few discussions of M&Co.’s legacy fail to include accounts of Kalman’s raucous, confrontational, and sometimes self-contradictory attacks on contemporary design practice in the late 1980s, when he encouraged designers to be bad and to subvert what they’d come to accept as the design process. It’s difficult at first to reconcile that persona with Isley’s memory of his boss at early AIGA events around 1984, which has Kalman standing self-consciously in the corner, put off by the clubby atmosphere he never felt a part of. It’s a stark contradiction, but the connection between those two snapshots of Kalman—blending into the walls of AIGA or busting through them—is his outsider status, fiercely maintained and in many ways the foundation on which his celebrity is built.

Doyle, too, situated himself in the fringes of the rarified world of graphic design. “I never felt like I was a part of the design canon,” says Doyle, who had worked at *Rolling Stone* and *Esquire* magazines prior to joining M&Co., “so I was ready to try anything. And it didn’t matter to me a whole heck of a lot if I failed at something, because I never thought I was going to go all that far anyway. I used to play at work, and the designers with a capital *D* at the time worked at work. That’s not to say I didn’t take it seriously, but I took it seriously as play.”

Among other things, Doyle brought a classical sense of typography to M&Co., which he employed in the creation of sophisticated visual incongruities. On the cover of the Talking Heads album *Little Creatures*, his use of Torino against the painting by folk artist Howard Finster seemed antithetical to instinct. His cacophonous album-cover design for a Thelonious Monk compilation—one of the most layered mechanicals he ever did, Doyle says—had nothing to do with professional, “capital *D*” design. “I was delighted to make things wrong by heading in the opposite direction of what was going on around me,” he says. “It was the ’80s and it was nasty. People were doing very collage-y stuff and lots of stair-steppy things. Everything had a grid—and by grid I mean a graph-paper kind of grid. Makes me crazy, that stuff.”

To Doyle and Isley, M&Co. felt so removed from commercial practices—so “outsider art,” as Doyle puts it—that neither appreciated the impact their work was about to have. “We were totally flying by the seat of our pants,” says Doyle, “making things up as we went along.” It wasn’t until 1986, when Kalman organized the Fresh Dialogue conference at AIGA, that Isley realized M&Co.’s reputation as the anti-design firm—and Kalman the anti-designer—had captured the imagination of the design community it had very little to do with until then. The invitation, printed on cheesy paper



\$26 BOOK "NEW YORK CITY AT THE TIME WAS IN A BAD PLACE POLITICALLY," SAYS OBERMAN. "IT GOT TO A POINT WHERE TIBOR WAS MAD AS HELL AND COULDN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE, AND IT STARTED CREEPING INTO THE WORK THAT WE WERE DOING, AND EVEN THE WORK WE WERE TAKING." RESTAURANT FLORENT—WHOSE ADVERTISING VARIOUSLY ENCOURAGED CHARITABLE ACTIVITY, COMMUNICATED A PRO-CHOICE POSITION, OR TOOK AUDACIOUS SWIPES AT REPUBLICAN POLITICS AND POLITICIANS—WAS AN EARLY OUTLET, AND COLORS MAGAZINE THE CLIMAX. M&CO.'S 1989 COMPANY CHRISTMAS GIFT, DESIGNED BY OBERMAN AND DEAN LUBENSKY, CHALLENGED THE NOTION OF HOLIDAY LARGESSE EVEN AS IT MAINTAINED A SPIRIT OF SNARKY FUN. BENEATH THE COVER OF THE SECONDHAND BOOK, RECIPIENTS FOUND THE FIRST OF SEVERAL NOTES OF EXPLANATION. "A BOOK?!??" IT SAYS. "JUST A CRUDDY OLD BOOK?" AS RECIPIENTS FLIPPED THROUGH ITS PAGES, THEY FOUND A \$1, \$5, AND \$20 BILL. SO, TOO, DID THEY FIND THREE SELF-ADDRESSED, STAMPED ENVELOPES TO WHICH THEY COULD—IF THEY SO CHOSE—DONATE THE MONEY. "SO NOW YOU HAVE \$26 YOU DIDN'T HAVE BEFORE," SAYS OBERMAN. "ARE YOU GOING TO KEEP IT FOR YOURSELF, OR ARE YOU GOING TO GIVE IT TO THE GAY MEN'S HEALTH CRISIS? BY THE TIME YOU GOT TO THE ENVELOPES, YOU'RE HIT WITH THE CERTAINTY THAT YOU WANT IT TO GO TO A BETTER CAUSE." AS COMPANY GIFTS GO, THIS ONE WAS A CHALLENGE—DISCOMFETING TO THE EXTENT THAT IT FORCED RECIPIENTS TO CONSIDER GIVING AS OPPOSED TO GETTING. "IT PUT YOU IN A PLACE WHERE YOU HAD TO THINK ABOUT WHAT KIND OF PERSON YOU WERE," SHE SAYS. "IT WAS UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT UNCOMFORTABLE IN THE BEST WAY. PEOPLE SUDDENLY BECAME ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN CHARITY IN A WAY THEY WOULDN'T HAVE OTHERWISE."

with bad letterspacing, promised “Design Without Designers: or How I Learned to Stop Letter-spacing and Love the Non.” To a sold-out audience in FIT’s Katie Murphy Amphitheater, 24-year-old Isley presented a slide show of disassembled cardboard boxes in a discussion of “unseen design,” created without regard for aesthetics or audience. Other presentations similarly extracted examples of vernacular design—including the auto magazine *Hemmings Motor News*, as crude in design as it is beloved by car enthusiasts—from their intended contexts to examine and appreciate them in a formal sense. “It was one of those few times in your life when you feel you’re doing the right thing,” Isley says. “We were behind this guy who maybe wasn’t sure exactly what he was doing himself, but he was pushing against stuff. And those of us who were there wanted to see if you could love and hate graphic design at the same time. Can you know there’s something better out there even if you’re not sure what it is?”

TYPOGRAPHERS USING TYPE

Kalman frequently said he didn’t like to work on the same kind of project more than twice. “The first one,” he told Kurt Andersen in an interview in his monograph *Tibor Kalman: Perverse Optimist*, “you fuck it up in an interesting way; the second one, you get it right; and then you’re out of there.” As Kalman continued to insert himself in areas in which he lacked expertise—culminating in his role as editor in chief of Benetton’s *Colors*, where he found full expression and corporate sponsorship for his vision of design as a means to provide relevant content to a world suffering from its dearth—the improvisational quality that Isley and Doyle brought to bear continued to shape M&Co.’s output.

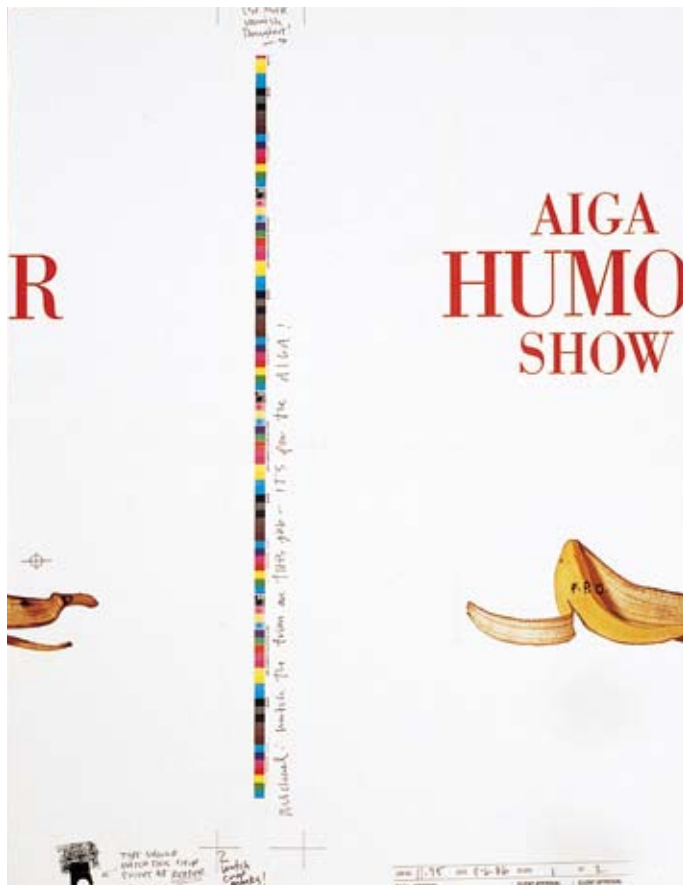
In a real sense, “(Nothing But) Flowers” was informed by a lack of insider information. While Oberman had studied filmmaking at Cooper Union, neither she nor Kalman had produced a music video before. “In hindsight,” says Oberman, “I look at that video and think, ‘Wow, we really didn’t know what we were doing.’” The video—in which the lyrics move across the screen as the band performs in a stark set—pushes typography into the role of a dynamic, narrative device. When David Byrne sings that years ago he pretended he was a billboard against the side of the road, for example, the type—projected directly onto Byrne’s face—dramatizes the lyric, essentially turning him into the billboard he says he pretended to be.

From a production standpoint, the technology that facilitated those now-basic special effects was in its infancy, rendering the concept inconvenient to produce, at best. It’s also likely that those inside the music video industry would have rejected the typographical approach as too quaint, or “bouncing ball-y,” Oberman says. “It wasn’t someone in spandex busting a move. But because we were designers and typographers, it seemed like an interesting way to tell the story.”

To hear M&Co. designers’ recollections, there’s often the distinct sense that the ground they broke was more stumbled on than sought out. Stowell, who would later serve as art director of *Colors* magazine in Italy from 1993 to 1994, recalls that his former boss once said, “Everything I do is motivated by this.” Kalman then thrust his middle finger in the air in defiance of any mite of establishment thinking that might have been floating therein. Certainly, that general outlook infused the atmosphere with a spirit of purposeful insubordination. And certainly, very little of what Kalman did to upset the established order—including his inclination to work in categories whose conventions he didn’t know from the inside—was accidental.

The perception among those on the outside was that M&Co. designers were on a crusade to shock the world with their messianic, anticorporate message. In reality, they were often just doing what they did. They were typographers, in other words, using typography in a music video. Because Kalman cultivated an upside-down way of looking at things—and because M&Co. designers often shared the inclination to do so—“what they did” invariably countered prevailing standards. “There wasn’t

AIGA HUMOR SHOW POSTER FOR ISLEY, THE ASSIGNMENT TO DESIGN THE POSTER FOR THE 1986 AIGA HUMOR SHOW WAS LIKE BEING SHOVED ON A STAGE, THEN ORDERED TO BE FUNNY. RATHER THAN CRAFTING A FUNNY IMAGE WITH A FUNNY PUNCHLINE—THE PREDICTABLE, AND IN MANY WAYS NATURAL, APPROACH—HE EXPLOITED THE POSSIBILITY OF HUMOR IN HIS AUDIENCE'S RECOGNITION OF A SHARED BAD EXPERIENCE. HIS INTENTIONALLY MIS-TRIMMED AND MARKED-UP POSTER WAS DESIGNED TO LOOK AS THOUGH ITS PRINTER HAD BOTCHED THE JOB IN EVERY POSSIBLE WAY. "MICHAEL," READS AN URGENT NOTE TO THE FICTIONAL PRINTER, "WATCH THE TRIM ON THIS JOB. IT'S FOR THE AIGA!" WELL BEFORE SELF-REFERENTIAL IRONY OF THE TYPE HAD INFILTRATED POPULAR CULTURE, M&CO. WENT OUT OF ITS WAY TO DO SOMETHING PURPOSELY SCREWED UP FOR THE PREEMINENT PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION OF ITS CRAFT—OR "SLICK OLD AIGA," SAYS ISLEY, NOW PRESIDENT OF THAT ORGANIZATION'S NEW YORK CHAPTER—WHICH TOOK A CERTAIN DEGREE OF COURAGE. "AND THAT'S THE ENCOURAGEMENT THAT TIBOR BROUGHT TO IT," SAYS ISLEY. "HE HAD A CONTRARY SENSIBILITY EVEN MORE SO THAN THE REST OF US. HE WAS OUT THERE TO SHAKE THINGS UP. HE WAS DISSATISFIED AND IMPATIENT. IT WAS LIKE, 'WHAT ARE YOU REBELLING AGAINST?' AND THE ANSWER WAS, 'WELL, WHAT HAVE YOU GOT?'"



ASKEW WATCH M&CO. WATCHES WERE A STUDIO-WIDE EFFORT FOR WHICH DESIGNERS CREATED SKETCHES DURING THEIR DOWN TIME. ALEXANDER BREBNER, WHO STILL WEARS HIS ASKEW WATCH MOST DAYS, HAS MADE A SPORT OF OBSERVING PEOPLE'S CARTOON, DOUBLE-TAKE REACTIONS TO ISLEY'S DESIGN OF THAT WATCH MODEL, ON THE FACE OF WHICH THE NUMBERS APPEAR IN JUMBLED ORDER. IT TAKES A MOMENT FOR PEOPLE TO REALIZE WHY THE ASKEW WATCH FEELS WRONG, BREBNER SAYS. "AND THEN THE RESPONSE IS EITHER DELIGHT THAT SOMEONE FELT THEY COULD DO THAT—TAKE A BASIC RULE OF SOCIETY, SOMETHING AS ESTABLISHED AS A CLOCK FACE, AND JUST TURN IT ON ITS HEAD. OR THEY'RE TOTALLY DISTURBED FOR THE SAME REASON. PEOPLE THINK, 'I COULDN'T POSSIBLY TELL TIME WEARING THAT THING.'" PROPERLY PLACED NUMBERS AREN'T, IN FACT, A REQUISITE FOR TIME TELLING, BUT THE NUMERICAL DISORDER, LIKE MUCH OF M&CO.'S WORK, ASTOUNDS PEOPLE OUT OF THE STUPOR OF HABIT. "THE TASK WAS TO DEFINE THE THING OR THE ELEMENT OF THE WATCH THAT COULD MAKE IT MORE THAN A WATCH," SAYS BREBNER, "TO TAKE THE MUNDANE ACT OF TELLING TIME AND MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT, MORE INTERESTING, OR LESS OF AN AUTOMATIC."

the sense that this is the way things are done, so let's do them differently," says Stowell, who today runs his design studio Open in New York. "It wasn't as though we'd get a job and figure out a way to give everyone the finger. We were just doing good work, or trying to do good work, and Tibor was doing the same thing."

INTELLECTUAL CONTORTIONISM

There was, in fact, a rightness to much of what went on at M&Co., whose ranks were filled with impeccably trained designers, many of whom had cut their teeth at corporate identity firms. Colorblind though it was, Kalman's eye had an otherwise precision-engineered quality, including an ability, which Douglas Riccardi, principal of Memo Productions, describes as "admirably, freakishly, scarily good," to zero in on the one concept, among hundreds of sketches, that was incontrovertibly right. "To me," says Oberman, "that talent was as important as having done the sketch in the first place. He could take a great idea and make it better. And often it would be better because he pushed it a little bit more in the wrong direction."

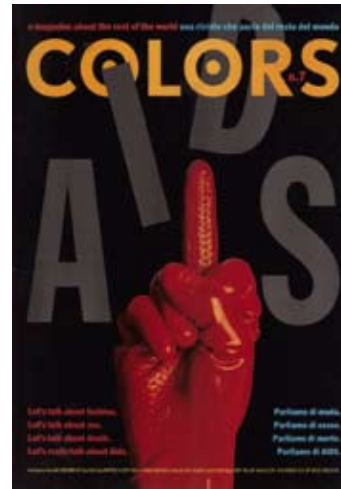
That so many M&Co. designers were versed in the rules put the firm in a more authoritative position to break them. Amid the piles of portfolios M&Co. amassed daily—one festooned in pink faux fur, another bursting with fake album covers—there would be a lone manila folder from a Swiss-trained designer. "And that would be the person Tibor would hire," says Riccardi, who himself had worked at corporate identity firm Anspach Grossman Portugal prior to joining M&Co. in 1986. "It allowed the design process to stay where it should," he says, "which is at the conceptual level. If we came to grips with the concept, if we agreed on whatever it was we were trying to achieve, he would trust that we'd pick the right typefaces and colors, but we didn't waste too much time talking about those things. So I think that part of his 'thinking wrong' was that he was just thinking, period."

As creative vice president of Bumble and bumble Alexander Brebner remembers, working at M&Co. required that he suspend what years of training had taught him as proper and right. During his tenure from 1986 to 1991, he spent a good deal of time wondering whether his work was "wrong enough, or wrong in the right way," a process he describes as a kind of intellectual contortionism, both draining and liberating. "It can be exhausting to incorporate that kind of 'thinking wrong' into your ethos," he says. "You have to constantly be prepared to ask if there's another way. And of course there always is, but you have to dig and dig. You have to go through the looking glass and put yourself in a backward context in order to contort your thinking."

A TIBOR ANGEL OR DEVIL

To this day, Kalman's creative direction is part of Brebner's process, an inner critic he calls "either a Tibor angel or devil" that sits on his shoulder, questioning whether his work could be better, different, whether he's settling for just good enough. While the intensity of that voice has diminished in recent years, Brebner says that one look at Kalman's portrait on the cover of *Perverse Optimist*, from which his former boss smiles up at him, is enough to activate the running commentary.

Upon Kalman's untimely death in 1999, a reporter from *TIME* called Doyle to see if he might provide a few famous examples of this celebrated designer's work, projects that the mainstream would recognize. For a moment, Doyle was tempted to fabricate a list of all the familiar work—the Exxon and IBM logos, for example, and the Heinz ketchup bottle—that Kalman never produced. Had Doyle succumbed to the temptation, the stunt might well have made the point that M&Co. operated neither for nor in the mainstream but against its grain. It also would have raised a one-fingered salute to the establishment, one last time, on Kalman's behalf. "It would have been a fitting tribute," says Doyle, "But ultimately, I knew *TIME* had a weapon against that kind of thinking: fact checkers." **S**



OBERMAN DESIGNED THE FIRST ISSUE OF **COLORS** (ABOVE LEFT), AS WELL AS THE MAGAZINE'S LOGO, IN 1991. KALMAN'S STATED OBJECTIVE FOR THE PUBLICATION WAS TO CHALLENGE THE NOTION OF WHAT A MAGAZINE COULD BE, AND **COLORS** MADE GOOD. "THE ONLY WAY **COLORS** WAS LIKE A TRADITIONAL MAGAZINE WAS THAT IT WAS A BUNCH OF PAGES BOUND TOGETHER, WITH A LOGO ON THE FRONT, THAT CAME OUT A FEW TIMES A YEAR," SAYS STOWELL, WHO WAS THE MAGAZINE'S ART DIRECTOR FROM 1993 TO 1994.

COLORS' COURTSHIP OF CONTROVERSY WAS ONE OF MANY WAYS THE MAGAZINE DISTINGUISHED ITSELF FROM CONVENTIONAL MAINSTREAM MEDIA—AND CERTAINLY CORPORATE-SPONSORED MAGAZINES—WHICH WOULD LIKELY SOONER PRINT WITHOUT A MASTHEAD THAN SWAP THE RACIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF QUEEN ELIZABETH AND SPIKE LEE, AMONG OTHER PUBLIC FIGURES, AS WITH **COLORS'** ISSUE ON RACE. IT WAS A MAGAZINE SUBSIDIZED BY A FASHION INDUSTRY GIANT THAT LEFT FASHION TO THE GLOSSIES.

IN THE EARLY 1990S, WHEN MISINFORMATION ABOUT AIDS WAS WIDELY CIRCULATED AND SOCIAL STIGMA DEEP-ROOTED, **COLORS'** AIDS ISSUE (ABOVE RIGHT) EQUIPPED YOUNG PEOPLE WITH THE FACTS IN A FORTHRIGHT TONE THAT STOWELL DESCRIBES AS: "HERE'S THE INFORMATION YOU NEED, OTHERWISE YOU MIGHT DIE." THE NUDITY WAS AS DISPASSIONATE AS THE DATA. "A LOT OF PEOPLE TO THIS DAY DON'T BELIEVE IT," SAYS STOWELL. "BUT BENETTON HAD NO KNOWLEDGE OF THE CONTENT, MUCH LESS CONTROL OVER IT. THE FIRST TIME THE EXECUTIVES WOULD FIND OUT WHAT WAS IN THE ISSUE WAS WHEN IT WOULD SHOW UP ON THEIR DESK IN THE MAIL, AFTER IT WAS PRINTED."