

## **Technologies of the Book: A Conversation with Ellen Lupton**

By Rachel Schreiber

On December 27, 2001 I interviewed Ellen Lupton on issues regarding the current and future status of books, in light of contemporary developments in media technologies. Ellen is the chair of the Graphic Design department at the Maryland Institute College of Art, curator of contemporary design at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, and the author and designer of many books on design and related issues, including *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office*; *Design Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design*; *Mixing Messages: Graphic Design in Contemporary Culture*; and *The Bathroom, The Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination*.

**Rachel Schreiber:** Let's start by discussing Gutenberg's invention of movable type. Marshall McLuhan makes the grand claim, in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, that the book and the invention of print fostered such forms in our culture as the nation (and hence nationalism), the public, and politics.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not one agrees with McLuhan, the invention of the printing press certainly has had a major impact on how we communicate. Many people now are claiming that the Internet is a technology on the order of the Gutenberg press. Do you think it is possible that the Web is having that important an impact on our culture?

**Ellen Lupton:** When the printing press was invented, Western societies were basically illiterate. The alphabet was the sacred property of priests, kings, and lawyers. Printing had a much larger impact on that situation than what we are experiencing now, because we no longer have essentially illiterate Western societies. We do not have an oral culture, we have a culture that is thoroughly shaped by print and literacy—alphabetic literacy. (Obviously, our culture is also influenced by all other media forms like television and film.) The Internet appears within a culture where alphabetism is already entrenched, and in which

the book is already extremely powerful and hegemonic. It is the seat of formal knowledge.

One of my favorite statements that McLuhan makes in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is that printing was the first commodity, because it takes form through mass production. The book is the first true consumer good, the first product made through the principle of modern factory production, which involves dividing a task in parts, and making a substantial capital investment in an initial pattern that can be replicated indefinitely at low cost. Think of the book as the prototype for the car and the toaster. It's just like industrial design. Designing and prototyping a microwave oven is very labor intensive, but then making a few million is not. With a book, you first produce a prototype and then a large number are made to be marketed and sold. The product is knowledge, which is given form in the shape of a book, but the object's relationship to its ability to earn money is much like any other commodity that is mass-produced.

**RS:** Do you think there is anything about book literacy that is unique? Is there anything dramatically different about the way we are literate when we are reading or writing electronically than when we read or write print?

**EL:** The Internet has had its biggest impact on people who need to find specific information; it's simply easier to look online. I get all my bibliographic information from Amazon rather than going through my own files. On the other hand when you do a Yahoo! search, you might have to wade through hundreds of spurious connections, weeding out what's irrelevant to your search. So the way people find specific data is totally different and transformed.

I feel less certain about literature, partly because I have no personal interest in reading stories or poems on the Internet; I use the Internet for work and to find things. I know a lot of people use the Internet for playing games, or looking at network art; I'm just not interested in that. For me the Internet is instrumental. Nonetheless, it's poorly edited and otherwise unreliable. Books aren't completely reliable either, but the "do it yourself" qualities of the Internet—its so-called democratic aspects—have led to a breakdown of authority in that form.

**RS:** I'd like to discuss this idea of authorship and authority. Regarding McLuhan's claims about print creating a public, a nation, politics—do you agree with that? And, if that has something to do with the materiality of print, is there something different about text on the Internet?

**EL:** Maybe the crucial medium here is not exactly print, but typography. Typography is reproducible language. For hundreds of years the book has been the main vehicle for typography. In the 19th century, advertisements and magazines and newspapers were added to the mix. What stayed important was the ability to disseminate writing, to replicate it, to spread it around the world, to get it to different audiences in a consistent form. The book is an object that we love and respect, and it is useful in many ways. But it is just one vehicle for reproducible, written (not spoken) language.

**RS:** In that case, the Internet is just more.

**EL:** I think it's more text. Obviously it's not just text, it's images, as with the book. Magazines and newspapers also use a mix of text and image. But none of these forms would have as much power without text.

In regards to your question about the nation and the public, yes, it was initially the book that generated that impact. I don't think the book is at the heart of nation-building now, but certainly access to language and literacy is.

**RS:** So while the issue is typography, you're not really distinguishing between words in print vs. words on a screen. Aren't there differences between the two? When I read something on a web page, I don't know how much of it is original; I don't know if it was copied and pasted. I know that I can alter it before I give it to someone else. I always have that sense I bring to that reading, of that text as very mutable. And somehow, even though I know it's false, I have faith in a published work. I give the publisher that authority, so that when I read something in print, something that has a Library of Congress number, something

that someone took the time to edit, I believe the text to be more...fill in the blank—authoritative, verifiable, serious, etc.

**EL:** There's a lot of truth to that, because making a book is very labor intensive. It was even more laborious before desktop publishing, but it's still very labor intensive today. Once you get your proofs corrected, though, it's very reliable—all the copies are the same, just like the example of the microwave oven. Putting content on the web is not as labor intensive; it requires less capital, less up-front investment and resources, less investment of time, of expertise. And so people trust it less.

In terms of typography on the screen—people don't like reading a lot of text on a monitor. I like finding text, and then printing it out, or saving it, so I can scan it later for information I need. Again, this use is instrumental, because I need the information. If I wanted to read *Bridget Jones's Diary* I certainly wouldn't read it on the Internet, and for me to download it and print it out would waste about as much effort and resources as for me to just buy a nice edition on creamy paper. I'm not going to print out a few hundred loose pages, with shitty looking type.

**RS:** You can't take it to the beach...

**EL:** Yes, I'd rather take a book. It's different if what you're looking for is a furniture catalogue or a *New York Times* article. I don't want to keep copies of the *New York Times* in my house, but I can do a search based on an article I recall a few words from. But I still don't want to read the article on the screen, I'll go ahead and print it out.

**RS:** That makes me think of e-books. They are basically small units used to play a module, so you go buy the *Bridget Jones's Diary* module. The industry keeps trying to push that. There's always a segment of the population that's into gadgets, but do you think that's going to go anywhere?

**EL:** Ultimately, I think electronic ink would be more pleasurable and successful than reading on a screen. What you're buying is a book, but the pages change depending on what module you buy. Electronic ink is paper that can be electrically charged. You're downloading text, but onto pages. Scrolling through a little Palm Pilot doesn't appeal to me. Then again you have to ask, what are people using this text for? If it's for entertainment, just having a book is more handy, but if it's to look for a phone number, it would be great never to have to look in the Yellow Pages again.

**RS:** I guess what you're distinguishing between is, Yellow Pages-type information—indexed, reference material...

**EL:** Yes, reference material has always been, quote, nonlinear. People don't read dictionaries from front to back, they access them according to what they need.

**RS:** So if it's nonlinear anyway, it's better off in a hypertextual environment, and if it's more linear, print is still more useful. That's interesting, because I was trying to categorize the difference between reference vs. running text, but it's the same as saying the difference between non-linear and linear text, whether electronic or not.

My next question is, have any of these factors that we've been discussing had an effect on how you might design or write a book, or how you work with publishers?

**EL:** This gets us into desktop publishing, starting with the primeval phase of the digital writing revolution. This was around the same time I was becoming a writer, and the "do it yourself" aspects are parallel to the Web. For me, it's been totally formative, the idea that you can write a page but also determine what it looks like. That is who I am. The collapse of those skills into one another is central to what I do, and it is something that started in a real way in the 80s, although Muriel Cooper and a few others were doing it earlier with heftier, more primitive computers.

In 1985, my partner Abbott Miller and I founded a studio. We called it Design Writing Research, which reflected our belief that these three processes are continuous, that how something looks affects how it means, and that to design is the create and organize knowledge. Our book, *Design Writing Research*, builds on these ideas, through image and typography.<sup>2</sup>

When I started writing, it was the ability to control the typography that made everything work for me. Of course, now that's commonplace, that's how people write. But the Internet increasingly affects how I work as well, because it is how I gather information, especially when I deal with international contemporary design. Suddenly everyone is available to you. One thing links to another and suddenly you're talking to the person (in text). Also the Internet allows me to gather pictures as research. As a curator, I've always kept a database of my exhibitions, but only this past year have I assembled illustrated databases.

**RS:** I've also experienced that with writing. When I talk about authority in print relative to the Internet, mostly I am thinking of the fixed nature of type in print vs. type on the web. But I've done this too, where I'm citing a book, and I want more information about it, so I e-mail the author and ask about it. It's not hard to find someone's e-mail address and I can get a direct answer. I find that very interesting—it's another form of the breakdown of authority because there is no longer as distinct a separation between published authors and a reading public.

**EL:** Yes, and that whole cycle of things definitely influences the way that knowledge products of various kinds are made now, whether they're books or magazines or web sites. That's really cool, it makes one really productive. It's wild.

**RS:** On a material level, how has the advent of electronic writing and distribution affected the book industry?

**EL:** Currently, as a writer, even if the final product is going to be a book, you are no longer creating "copy", it's not so abstract. You are now creating something

that has material possibility. The text is not completely fixed, because you can repurpose it and turn it into a web site, which is great. If you put all the effort into editing a document, then you have this material that you can make into other knowledge products. I'm thinking of Dave Eggers, who edits *McSweeney's*, and wrote the book *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.<sup>3</sup> He is a serious writer, a literary creator, who is completely in control of the typographic message. He is not primarily a designer, or some more hybrid type like myself. He is an editor, a writer, and a publisher, and his domain is literature. But he is using typography in powerful, hugely influential ways.

**RS:** How do you differentiate that? If he is really controlling the typographic appearance of his writing, doesn't that make him a designer?

**EL:** Well he's also designing, but what I mean is that people generally identify their work in a disciplinary area. Someone like Eggers is a writer who is also in control of what the text looks like, and he's not just doing that because of a theoretical interest, like e. e. cummings, but because typography empowers him to become a producer. For me that's why I want to do both. It's not because I want to make crazy looking pages. It's because I want to control the product, and it's totally empowering to do that.

Another example is Chip Kidd, the great book jacket designer, who's just published a novel, *The Cheese Monkeys*. The whole novel was written in Quark XPress, and the way the text looks on the page is very specific.<sup>4</sup> Or Lemony Snicket, who is writing best-selling children's novels. They are very fin de siècle, full of negativity and evil (like Harry Potter, but even more so). These books are beautiful. He didn't design them, but he insisted that they have this physical presence. The publisher argued that kids don't care about that, but actually they do, and it lends to their sense of the tragedy of objects. A physical thing is destined to suffer, even die. Snicket's books are luscious little volumes. Even as kids become digital and everyone wants instant information on the Internet, there's still the appeal of the object, of the thing. Maybe more so, because people are more typographically literate, more aware of what they are looking at.

**RS:** That's interesting, because I remember that when desktop publishing was first starting out, most of the designers I knew were really upset. I thought this was odd, but I knew a lot of designers who thought it was distressing that the general public could set type. This was not only going to put them out of work, but also create a plethora of bad design in the world. You're coming at that from a different place, and saying that, if people know the difference between Times Roman and Helvetica...

**EL:** It's a huge step, enormous.

**RS:** One thing I always tell my students is that when we were kids, you never saw your name in print. You could use a typewriter. But I remember when I was an undergraduate graphic design student, and we first learned how to use this enormous and complex computer typesetter, the first thing you did was you set your name, and you thought look, there's my name in print. People who are students now have never had the sense of that moment, because they've desktop published all their lives and written their elementary school papers on a computer and chosen a font for it. And as teens, if they wanted to make zines or other forms of homemade books, they could figure out how to do that. I don't know if that's relevant.

**EL:** I think it is. People are more typographic now, and that has a big impact on how we think about our books as well as the other forms of print that we live with.

**RS:** There is a really simple question, which is what is the future of the book? I do believe that the book will persist. People used to ask, if magazines or newspapers are available online, who will bother to print them anymore? But clearly they are still being printed, even as they are available online.

**EL:** Right. The book becomes just another knowledge product. I like to read books and magazines on an airplane, or on the toilet, and I'm not going to sit at my computer and read a magazine. The New York *Times* has, of course, an online



version, but it doesn't replace the paper edition. I wish it would, in a way, but I wouldn't read it.

**RS:** It would be more ecological.

I guess I'm fishing for a prediction here: given all these sorts of possibilities, and given that books will continue to be made, in what ways might they change?

**EL:** I think there will be more and more hybrid forms, like electronic ink, or publishing on demand. This is especially important in higher education—the end of these grotesque, generic, largely useless textbooks. A professor creates her own textbook for her class and students buy it at a central place. It's a book, and its bound, but instead of buying ten different books because there are ten pages in each that the teacher wants, you publish one new book with bits from all the others. College students comprise a huge segment of the publishing market.

**RS:** It sounds like a kind of advanced form of a course reader.

**EL:** Yes. It's automated and centralized and in a way that protects the authors and the investment of the publisher. This is already happening, using Docutech technology that can make mass copies from a computer file; the machine prints it and binds it and you have this big, ugly, useful thing, 8 1/2 x 11. That's a hybrid product. And there are many kinds of technical literature that shouldn't be printed but should be made available on demand.

**RS:** What about hybrid forms, such as a book that has a CD with Internet links, so that as new information becomes available, or as the information changes, the updates are available?

**EL:** Yes, for as long as that CD is current and can be read by your system. The book is still far more reliable, and more durable, more cross-platform, than any of that stuff. Web sites come and go. But we can still look at a bible from the 10th Century. As for the future of the book, it will indeed persist. For 200 years its

dominance as a form has been challenged by other media, so this current challenge is not unprecedented. The book has been challenged by newspapers, magazines, advertising, and by radio, television, and the movies. I think the book as an object remains very compelling—although I would certainly rather write one than read one! I love books. I have too many. It's oppressive, but so is love. My son is basically battery powered, but he still loves books.

What's the future of the book? We are doomed and destined to live with books for a long time, given their sheer mass and permanence, their infiltration into our lives and libraries. Among the billions of books already in existence, some will become irrelevant, some will be discarded to make room for new books or new media, and some will stay with us, clinging to their own stubborn immortality. And new books will certainly continue to appear. The codex remains a brilliant format for distributing text (and image). But like the grandmother at Thanksgiving dinner, the book's matriarchal preeminence has become largely symbolic. The daughters of new technology have set the table, and they'll do the dishes, and with all that labor comes a good bit of power.

Notes:

1. Marshall McLuhan, **The Gutenberg Galaxy** (New York: Signet Books, 1969).
2. Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, **Design Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design** (London: Phaidon Press, 1999).
3. David Eggers, **A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). **McSweeney's**, an online magazine, can be found at <<http://www.mcsweeney.net/>>.
4. Chip Kidd, **The Cheese Monkeys: A Novel in Two Semesters** (New York: Scribner, 2001).