

designer's notes

For years now I have been attending a gathering of designers at the somewhat inconveniently located Rocky Mountain compound of my old teachers, Mike and Kathy McCoy. The McCoy's invite a multi-disciplinary group for two and a half days of what only can be described as "design chat," though I guess I am being a little coy here as to the revitalizing, if not downright necessary nature of the discussion that ensues: which is why year after year we get on trains, planes and automobiles to make our pilgrimage to the event called "High Ground." During the weekend, attendees give 10 minute talks on what that they are thinking about, or working on, which the group then hashes over. At the end of the weekend, we analyze our discussions as a way of taking the pulse of design at that moment. Bruce Sterling has been a High Ground regular for a while, always giving the rest of us the distinct impression that he was there for anthropological observation, to record the folk habits and foibles of our tribe, fodder for his sci-fi-design fantasies. But he participates, too, and in the summer of 2004, he delivered a rant about the future, about the absolute necessity for re-thinking the way we do just about everything, if the earth is to survive, if future generations will not loathe us. It was one of the more moving statements ever delivered up there in the thin air of Buena Vista.

His High Ground diatribe was, I quickly realized, the draft for this book. It was there that his analysis of the techno-social

ecology of objects and call for the development of spimes made their debut. And while there was an urgency to his message, a challenge, and plenty of black humor (for what else can we do in our current predicament but laugh), there was optimism at its core. Sterling respects design too much to imagine that it has no answers. So I felt that the design of this text would have to be driven by the same attitudes expressed by the author, which were so humanistic and so heartfelt. This book had to contain a riposte to the reigning visual clichés of technology: the intimidating complexity, mirrored surface of omniscient virtuality, and corroded surface of digitalization run amok.

During that same summer, two teenagers (one niece, one cousin) were house and studio guests of mine for several weeks. They hung around scanning stuff for me, taking pictures, IM-ing incessantly, posting on their blogs, and silk-screening t-shirts on the lawn behind the house. I thought how the future Bruce spoke about so urgently was theirs, and noticed that they are not freaking out about anything quite yet. However, there is an urgency and an agency in the way that they connect with the world that felt right. Their attitudes were not naïve but instead unfettered by the consciousness of critique to clip their wings (and powered by a deftness with technology that we all know is taken for granted). The personal identity and expression visible in everything they produced, from the cut-and-paste

websites to science fair graphics (on the genome, for gawdsake!) were inspirational to me. I wanted to channel that energy, that incubation of the future, and bring it to *Shaping Things*.

No time-machine will turn me into a teenager, but I am a perennial student. It is the language of the hi-lighter and the written-over text-book, the embrace of new information that I see in my nieces's mark-making, the enthusiasm my daughter brings to learning to read, and my own studiousness that I have tried to infuse into this book (with the invaluable and steadfast assistance of Stuart Smith). I have had to read it about ten times in order to design it, and *Shaping Things* has not gotten old yet. Mr. Sterling (has no one given him a PhD yet?) has a way with words, and I was most anxious to shape this book in a way that would enlarge his already expansive view of the promise of design and the future, so that it can be seen in more ways than one.

As I worked on the design and mulled over Bruce's typology of objects, it dawned on me that the book as a communicative device is one of those rare things that actually is, to use his terms, an artifact, a machine, a product, a gizmo, and gosh-darn it, a spime as well (certainly the barcode is the gateway to that condition) all at the same time. So, while I accept his statement that "tomorrow composts today" and all futility that that implies, I do think that the book, the object upon

which I have lavished so much thought and attention, is somehow an exception in the techno-social ecology he describes. Which is why, in the end, the savvy Peter Lunenfeld, upon commissioning such an interesting, forward looking set of texts he edits for this Mediawork series, still would have to orchestrate the process to its logical conclusion: as pages printed on re-cycled pulp with ink, glued together, wrapped and boxed and shipped and unpacked and displayed (or maybe not) until it reached the hands and eyes of you, dear reader, in a format not too different than that devised by the various Plantins of Antwerp who, in the sixteenth century decided that it would be nice to have books small enough yet important enough to carry in one's pocket.

No matter how far-reaching the ideas, in other words, we are always back to the reliance on a mulch of all-too-physical stuff, only here it has a life-span that way outlasts our own organic selves... which somehow reminds me of an inscription I saw in Houston, Texas year ago, on a tow-truck painted solid black:

"Al's Auto Mortician /

Sooner or later, I'll come and get ya..."

My work on this book dedicated to Rosalie Wild, Sarah Wild, Ana Xiao-Fei Wild Kaliski, Bruce Sterling's daughters, Peter Lunenfeld's kids, and all the other young ones bound to live in the world we are busy "fabbing" everyday.