INTRODUCTION
REVISITING THE AVANT-GARDE

The texts in this collection reveal ideas key to the evolution of graphic design. Together, they tell the story of a discipline that continually moves between extremes—anonymity and authorship, the personal and the universal, social detachment and social engagement. Through such oppositions, designers position and reposition themselves in relation to the discourse of design and the broader society. Tracing such positioning clarifies the radically changing paradigm in which we now find ourselves. Technology is fundamentally altering our culture. But technology wrought radical change in the early 1900s as well. Key debates of the past are reemerging as crucial debates of the present. Authorship, universality, social responsibility—within these issues the future of graphic design lies.

COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP
Some graphic designers have recently invigorated their field by producing their own content, signing their work, and branding themselves as makers. Digital technology puts creation, production, and distribution into the hands of the designer, enabling such bold assertions of artistic presence. These acts of graphic authorship fit within a broader evolving model of collective authorship that is fundamentally changing the producer/consumer relationship.

Early models of graphic design were built upon ideals of anonymity, not authorship. In the early 1900s avant-garde artists like El Lissitzky, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Herbert Bayer, and László Moholy-Nagy viewed the authored work of the old art world as shamefully elitist and ego driven. In their minds, such bourgeois, subjective visions corrupted society. They looked instead to a future of form inspired by the machine—functional, minimal, ordered, rational. As graphic design took shape as a profession, the ideal of objectivity replaced that of subjectivity. Neutrality replaced emotion. The avant-garde effaced the artist/designer through the quest for impartial communication.

After WWII Swiss graphic designers further extracted ideals of objectivity and neutrality from the revolutionary roots of the avant-garde. Designers like Max Bill, Emil Ruder, Josef Müller-Brockmann, and Karl Gerstner converted these ideals into rational, systematic approaches that centered around the grid. Thus, proponents of the International Style subjugated personal perspective

1 Josef Müller-Brockmann, *The Graphic Artist and His Design Problems* (Zurich: Niggli, 1968), 7.

2 Michael Rock, "The Designer as Author," *Eye* 5, no. 20 (Spring 1996): 44–53.

3 The DIY (Do It Yourself) movement encourages people to produce things themselves rather than depend upon mass-produced goods and the corporations that make them. New technologies have empowered such individuals to become producers rather than just consumers. For an explanation of the Free Culture movement see http://freeculture.org. This movement seeks to develop a culture in which "all members are free to participate in its transmission and evolution, without artificial limits on who can participate or in what way."

4 For a discussion of the network structure and our society, see Pierre Lévy, *Cyberculture,* trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001).

5 Dmitri Siegel, "Designing our Own Graves," Design Observer Blog. http://www.designobserver.com/archives/015582.html (accessed April 28, 2008).

to "clarity" of communication, submitting the graphic designer to their programmatic design system. Müller-Brockmann asserted, "The withdrawal of the personality of the designer behind the idea, the themes, the enterprise, or the product is what the best minds are all striving to achieve."[1] Swiss style design solidified the anonymous working space of the designer inside a frame of objectivity, the structure of which had been erected by the avant-garde.

Today some graphic designers continue to champion ideals of neutrality and objectivity that were essential to the early formation of their field. Such designers see the client's message as the central component of their work. They strive to communicate this message clearly, although now their post-postmodern eyes are open to the impossibility of neutrality and objectivity.

In contrast to the predominate modern concept of the designer as neutral transmitter of information, many designers are now producing their own content, typically for both critical and entrepreneurial purposes. This assertion of artistic presence is an alluring area of practice. Such work includes theoretical texts, self-published books and magazines, and other consumer products. In 1996 Michael Rock's essay "The Designer as Author" critiqued the graphic authorship model and became a touchstone for continuing debates.[2] The controversial idea of graphic authorship, although still not a dominant professional or economic paradigm for designers, has seized our imagination and permeates discussions of the future of design. And, as an empowering model for practice, it leads the curriculum of many graphic design graduate programs.

Out of this recent push toward authorship, new collective voices hearkening back to the avant-garde are emerging. As a result of technology, content generation by individuals has never been easier. (Consider the popularity of the DIY and the "Free Culture" movements.)[3] As more and more designers, along with the rest of the general population, become initiators and producers of content, a leveling is occurring. A new kind of collective voice, more anonymous than individual, is beginning to emerge. This collective creative voice reflects a culture that has as its central paradigm the decentered power structure of the network, and that promotes a more open sharing of ideas, tools, and intellectual property.[4]

Whether or not this leveling of voices is a positive or negative phenomenon for graphic designers is under debate. Dmitri Siegel's recent blog entry on Design Observer, included in this collection, raises serious questions about where designers fall within this new paradigm of what he terms "prosumerism—simultaneous production and consumption."[5] Siegel asks