

-- It has been about 2 years since you’ve started The Serving Library. How has the transition been?

well, it’s difficult to say precisely when The Serving Library started, and to what extent it’s in place now. in other words, the “transition” is gradual, ongoing, and it feels as if that’s always going to be the case. we initially described TSL as an umbrella project that would contain five not-altogether-discrete activities -- a website, a journal, separate collections of books and artifacts, and a modest pedagogical program -- all of which would bleed into each other. so the curriculum of the “school” would be based on the material released via the website and journal; the books and artifacts, which are also informed by that material, would be drawn into the live teaching in an eventual physical space.

at this point the website and journal are pretty much in place, the collections are occasionally exhibited at various locations (some of the objects are currently on display at the Goethe-Institut Library in NYC), and we’ve done one concerted trial version of the teaching program (as a summer school at the Banff Centre in 2011). as such, it’s only half-formed. it’s fully intended to be a stable, long-term institution, not a phantom touring image of an institution, but our non-profit status is still pending, we haven’t as yet found a suitable physical home, and it’s still unclear to us even *where* this should be, other than likely somewhere in the USA (even that’s not 100% sure). this lack of resolve is partly because the three of us involved are somewhat unsettled and all living in different places right now, but also because we tend to wait for things to suggest themselves rather than proactively force the issue.

that said, i guess The Serving Library officially started when we launched the website and the first batch of component Bulletins, which coincided with our closing Dexter Sinister as a bookstore and event space. even this is only half-true, as we still have the basement space on Ludlow Street, we still have books for sale (though certainly not as many as we used to), we’re still open by appointment, we maintain an online store and even occasionally hold small events there (like a book signing last Saturday). this is further complicated by the fact that a bunch of different things happened under the name “Dexter Sinister;” the shop was merely the focal point, the most stable aspect. in fact, DS was was originally intended to be a publishing imprint, if a particularly self-conscious one.

since we opened the store and workshop, though, the name has also become a pseudonym that David and I work under on projects, usually for museums and galleries, which typically revolve around publishing in one odd form or other. we still do these things, and in a way the main distinction is that DS means me and David and TSL means me and David and Angie. the former is more like a design studio that responds to commissions with an unusual degree of autonomy; the latter is an institution with an explicit mandate. but again it’s often hard, even for ourselves, to discern where Dexter Sinister ends and The Serving Library begins. both are often entwined in the same project. for instance, we recently published the third issue under the auspices of an exhibition at MoMA, and even though ambiguously related to the show itself as a kind of pseudo-catalog, it was clearly a TSL thing. but then we also made a kind of animated “trailer” for it. this played as a work in the show, and though wholly based on the material in the issue, which was as usual co-edited by Angie, she wasn’t involved in making that trailer. it was just clear to us that that wasn’t a TSL project but a DS one -- it had nothing to do with the aims of the institution. we tend to have to write very convoluted captions to untangle these knotted relations.

the other marker of the transition would be ending Dot Dot Dot and beginning Bulletins of The Serving Library, which is the biannual physical collection of the digital Bulletins released through the website that we publish twice a year. this was partly to “break” DDD to some extent, partly to make it more visibly part of the overarching Library project, and partly as an excuse to make some major structural changes to the process of publishing, most significantly releasing the individual parts online for free in advance of their printed incarnation. this is essentially the opposite way round to how DDD worked. otherwise, the Bulletins is pretty clearly an extension of DDD, and was always intended as such, even though the type of content and writing has changed more than we might have expected. this is a natural consequence of the fact that it’s now co-edited by all three of us, who have slightly different interests and editorial abilities. i think the result is much better for it.

in summary, the transition has proceeded fairly smoothly according to plan, as far as it goes -- but until we find an actual physical space (which could happen at any time), it’ll only ever be a shadow of its future self.

-- Aside from structural changes, is the editorial voice or writing approach of the Bulletins different from Dot Dot Dot in any way?

yes, i think so, for the reasons i mention above. the writing goes through many more rounds of checks and suggestions before being published, so it’s inevitably more finished, more muscular, more answerable. ideally of course this “finish” doesn’t mean flattening

Yale School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut, 2013

Mar 14 --
Hello, I'm a student in the Yale graphic design program, and I'm preparing a presentation on the work of Dexter Sinister. I don't want to take up too much of your time, but I would like to hear from you about the progress of your latest project, The Serving Library. If you can spare some time, I would (and my class certainly would) greatly appreciate your input on the questions I have below. [...]

Mar 20 --
Jenny, just so you don't think we're ignoring this, had noted, but these things take us a lot of time, if we can find the time at all. but in the meantime maybe it's no longer relevant/useful for you? let us know if so, if not we'll keep your mail in mind. best, Stuart, DS

Mar 21 --
Hi Stuart, Thanks for getting back to me. The schedule is flexible, with mid-April being the latest I can present. let me know if that is enough time or not. I understand this takes time, and I don't want this to be a huge burden on you. [...]
it's more that we tend to go on and on, and though we don't mean to take a lot of time, it always costs us to do it properly. however, i've been thinking it might be best to almost force ourselves into one-liner answers, for this reason.
[...]
[...]
[...]
[...]

Apr 3 --
I just wanted to let you know that my presentation schedule has been set. Will you be able to respond to my questions by April 12th? I also want to reiterate that you can do as much as you can find the time for. It does not need to be complete.
Sure. No worry. I have it scheduled. Sent from my iPhone

Apr 6 --
no answers yet, but just to let you know i'm flying to europe tomorrow and plan to try and answer on the plane (usually a good place for that kind of thing). then i'll send monday. if you don't have anything from me by midweek, hassle me. (i'll be in vienna.)

Apr 8 --
hi Jenny, uh-oh, i told you i go on a bit. some transatlantic responses here:

the writing, making it homogeneous -- hopefully the opposite, in fact. we often make major structural changes to pieces that make them weirder than they might otherwise be, in the service of engagement. and though we each have different qualities as editors, these themselves aren't very fixed. four issues in, we're still working out exactly the best way to proceed. at the moment we each individually work with a more or less even number of contributors for the first few rounds of assembling a piece, for example, though previously we've each been responsible for a specific operation on the whole set -- in which interacting with writers, making overall structural suggestions, and line editing are discrete roles, for example.

but you're asking about the voice. one new feature is that we now have a kind of colophon between the title page image and the text actually starting on page 3. apart from captioning the image, these paragraphs often account for the genealogy of a text if it's had some sort of former life. this genealogy is itself often *telling.* occasionally we extend these into longer introductions, or at least paratexts that have a particular editorial voice. we enjoy playing with these and are increasingly using them in different ways. sometimes there's nothing at all if that seems best. we were partly influenced by the intros in F.R. David, which i always enjoy very much. they're generous, welcoming, and especially following on from DDD, which was regularly obtuse to a fault, it seemed a good idea to extend a hand to a reader.

beyond that, i also think there's some more ineffable factor that makes Bulletins texts somewhat specific, some shared tone that is probably a more refined version of what i used to describe relative to DDD as "jocuserious," a term coined by Joyce. there's a certain amount of humor in there, anyway -- something akin to smiling with one's eyes rather than laughing out loud. it's serious, but it doesn't take itself too seriously. that's my impression, anyway. i'm sure it doesn't always work, or necessarily come across in that way to others.

and finally, the voice is surely tied up in the nature of the subject matter too, which i think has swung slightly more towards science, technology, math and philosophy than before. again, this is a matter of degree, by no means absolute, and certainly the pop end of each of those domains rather than, say, academic Philosophy. someone recently described the Bulletins as offering easy ways into what are generally conceived as difficult subjects. i think that's true. we work hard to make things clear while not reducing inherent complexity.

-- Is it fair to say that you are attempting to deconstruct the practice of graphic design through the reconsideration of the systems surrounding it, whether it be contemporary publishing practices, or the perpetuation of Bauhaus pedagogy?

no, nothing so grand. i mean, it's fine for anyone else to interpret what we do in that way, but it's certainly not how we think about what we do. i see where you're coming from, and the publishing and Bauhaus examples you mention are indeed attempts to work against a set of held assumptions, to maintain a critical awareness of the systems in which we find ourselves working. it's just that i think feel is more a result of our combined temperaments firing off each other and less a kind of disinterested critical strategy, which is what "deconstruction" implies to me. we're very *involved* and we've always been contrarian, in fact, i often recall an early project David made around the statement "SKEPTICISM IS A VIRTUE."

so i'd describe what we do more in terms of pushing for ways of working outside the accepted modes, and that try to be realistic about their actual effects, i.e. to consider whether or not 1900 copies of a 2000 print run are going to remain in some gallery's backroom for 10 years before someone finally decides to throw them out, and how to avoid that waste; or whether teaching color wheels and compositional contrast is more pertinent than teaching, say, close reading or how to articulate one's work in words. these approaches are speculative rather than convinced of themselves, and again, often fail. but they're always productive for ourselves and hopefully for other people that watch such projects in action, or observe or read the outcomes.

if you've read any of our earlier comments on graphic design you'll know we're skeptical about the discipline anyway. it seems we've ended up working in an area that there's no useful single term to cover what we (and many others) do -- or at least where the broadest senses of "editor" or "publisher" seem more apt than "graphic designer" (and certainly "artist"). i'm only half-joking when i say you might describe what we do as "speculative realism," to borrow badly from a strain of contemporary philosophy. Norman Potter once said that the labels people give to their activities often seem weirdly more important than the activities themselves. i agree with that. people tend to get very flustered about labeling stuff. we're just trying to push for useful, effective ways of communicating interesting things. all of which i conceive of this as a progressive, constructive, an arrow rather than the stopping-and-disassembling that deconstruction describes. for these reasons it often seems better to talk about a neutral "work" rather than a loaded "art" or "design."

-- What changes do you hope to see in graphic design as a result of the activities of The Serving Library?

that's a difficult one to answer, given what i've just written. i guess generally we conceive of the stuff we publish as "tools for thinking," and these, um, intellectual tools can be applied in the activities associated with graphic design as much as anywhere else. that's abstract. more concretely, i'd like to see work that breaks from the bland templates that are becoming increasingly entrenched in digital media. the examples are too obvious to mention.

on the other hand -- and this is approaching a contradiction -- what's interesting about the current state of web design, i think, is the

fact that, contrary to printed matter, sites are always changeable and, potentially at least, this can happen immediately and cheaply. this is an obvious enough point, and it's effectively always been the case since the internet was first introduced. but i think we now start to see hugely popular sites that are becoming designed very effectively by committee. we tend to conceive of this as negative -- for designers it conjures the sort of meeting where everyone wants their say and the result ends up woefully diluted, stripped of any particularity, energy, or interest. but because of the increased user-friendliness of software, and of course people simply getting more used to working at the level of programming, websites are always in the process of being refined, are never "cut off," never sent to print. i like to imagine, then, that this fosters a more positive kind or "aggregate" approach to design tasks, in the sense that users become unusually involved or influential. to be deliberately optimistic rather than skeptical for once, this could work towards formats that are eminently usable rather than simply bland, that puts the focus back on the user rather than the designer's ego.

one consequence of this tendency is that structural aspects -- the ways things work -- become more important than what i consider to be the relatively irrelevant formal surfaces of things (which is how Graphic Design's come to be generally conceived). i think we're starting to see websites that are somehow *beyond* style (perhaps this has a knock-on effect on print too). in a way it's how we tried to approach designing the Bulletins. perhaps i can better describe this in terms of *the way in which it works IS the style*. does that make sense? -- consider the "form" of Wikipedia for instance. it seems to me you can't reduce it to an equation like "form follows function"; it's much more chicken-and-egg. so i'd like to see that sort of stuff considered in a more sophisticated, conscientious way, where templates that necessarily underly a lot of what we look at are genuinely "social" -- user-friendly, adaptable, as opposed to the sad equivalent of all those aspects of monoculture we're familiar with, the monopoly of the high street and so on.

thing is, i don't think it necessarily takes people with training in Graphic Design (as it's traditionally taught and conceived) to achieve it, and it perhaps even gets in the way, because "proper" designers tend to be so invested in largely irrelevant formal issues, affording them a distorted sense of importance, unable to see wood for trees, etc. giving ourselves the benefit of the doubt then, i might conceive of the Bulletins as a sort of un-learning for Graphic Designers, where the cross-disciplinary mix fosters a kind of open-minded, generalized thinking -- an "attitude of orientation" as we once paraphrased William James. we tried to write about this a few times in issue #2, which was specifically assembled around the theme of pedagogy.

-- Would you mind giving me a sense of what you're working on now, or if there are other projects heading your way?

personally, i'm trying to finish a PhD that to some extent deals with all the above (which is why i'm opportunistically writing at length -- because it's useful for me!) because of that David and I are trying to do less rather than more this year. as Dexter Sinister we have at least one catalog project on the go, definitely in the experimental realm of a-catalog-that-might-not-be-what-we-usually-consider-a-catalog. plus there's a longer-term project we're about to start in the Fall with 3 others, instigated by British artist Chris Evans, which is premised on pitching a redesign of the UK's last surviving socialist newspaper. it already seems a great excuse to channel a lot of the sorts of issues i'm relating here. as for the serving library, we're currently making some adjustments to many of the structural aspects -- boring things like making it easier to subscribe, and trying to push for a wider readership, that typically reside at the bottom of the in-tray when you don't have separate staff to maintain such things. again, this ties with what i've been writing in response to your questions -- that these aspects are as much "designing" or "designed" than how stuff LOOKS.

-- As a final note, do you have any advice for students currently studying art/design, or for budding writers and publishing enthusiasts?

as trite as it sounds, the underlying thing we're trying to get at in our pedagogical stuff is to foster the willingness and ability to *articulate* work as much as make it -- art and design deal in communication, obviously, and being forced to communicate with a group on a regular basis, as a foundational skill, gets budding designers out of the habit of working hermetically for a small circle of cognoscenti (i don't want to immediately apply this to artists too, though there are parallels). in group situations, they're forced to deal with the reality of whether they're communicating meaningfully or not. if you can't write a paragraph clearly or articulate an idea aloud, in my experience it's unlikely you can organize a poster or signage system or website effectively either. and so i'd say a training towards those ends involves a lot of reading and writing and talking together.

the close reading classes we did at Banff were a joy. that's the thing -- you forget how infectious shared intellectual discovery is once it's out in the open. this is what Ranciere writes about in The Ignorant Schoolmaster. reading that would be my immediate advice to students of anything. it's short and eminently readable. in fact, i'd say it's very consciously DESIGNED to be short and eminently readable, and if you pause to consider Ranciere a "designer" for a moment, it might make my answers clearer. if you have this kind of skill -- the willingness to realistically communicate as a sort of fundamental machine part -- a particular given piece of work subsequently "takes care of itself," because that intelligence can be brought to bear on whatever the matter at hand. it's hardly rocket science, and yet contemporary schools often seem increasingly incapable of applying the idea.

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