

Review – EYE no. 68, vol. 17, summer 2008

Paul Rand: Conversations with Students, Michael Kroeger (editor); foreward by Wolfgang Weingart; short texts by Philip Burton, Steff Geissbuhler, Jessica Helfand, Armin Hofmann, Gordon Salchow; Princeton Architectural Press, 2008.

Read this very slim book of 80 pages, taking maybe one hour of your time. The main text is an edited transcript of two conversations at Arizona State University in 1995. If you have read any of Rand's several books and/or Steven Heller's monograph: What new thing have you learned about Paul Rand, esteemed American graphic designer? What does this book add to your understanding of Paul Rand and his work? Or even if this is your first taste of Rand, how is this useful in 2008?

The first conversation is between Kroeger (ASU design faculty) and Paul Rand, with brief comments by another faculty member (no students present). They discuss John Dewey's book "Art as Experience," which Rand has always quoted and praised and other readings he values. Showing Rand very simple black and white form exercises, they discuss some basic design principles, as Kroeger was developing a design fundamentals website. Returning to useful books, Rand recommends Klee's "Pedagogical Sketchbook" from the Bauhaus and Hofmann's "Graphic Design Manual" (1965); they move on to grids and Muller-Brockmann (1961). Rand teases them about needing a definition of design; he succinctly puts it, "Design is relationships. Design is a relationship between form and content. What does that mean? That is how you have to teach it until they are absolutely bored to death. You have to keep asking questions." Culture and variable meanings are broached; Rand dismisses this with, "...you're not talking about design, you're talking about semiotics, the meaning of symbols. That has nothing to do with design." (That quote one of the few times the transcript allows Rand a contraction.) Rand returns to design as form and content and states the idea will not be found in a book.

The second conversation is between Rand and a student group, with brief additions by a faculty member. Rand leads the students to 'form and content' and 'design relationships.' Responding to a faculty member's "What is important that we learn?" Rand answers with the histories of art and design and aesthetic philosophy. To a question about materials, Rand says, "... it is important to use your hands, that is what distinguishes you from a cow or a computer operator. ... the computer and all the systems...it is very unimportant compared with the problems of understanding what you are doing as a designer. That is because the computer will not teach you how to be a designer." Rand breaks down his creative process (described by Graham Wallas in "Art of Thought," 1926) as preparation (problem investigation and forgetting), incubation, and revelation (idea put down and evaluated). There are questions about working with clients, about logo design, and about not designing if working for him. And Rand states, "Design is not dated. Design is universal and timeless, good design."

In the following short texts, Burton describes Rand's passionate and ornery teaching at Yale and Brissago; Helfand her experience with Rand as graduate advisor; Geissbuhler chooses to remember Rand as a curriculum reviewer and puckish critic of one of his

projects; Salchow describes being his student and several meetings over time; and Hofmann their collaboration in Brissago.

Given all this, you might think this book an ‘essential’ Rand; true, there are characteristic and illuminating nuggets of his thoughts; many of these ideas and attitudes have become well-known through repetition. But the sessions in Arizona are an example of the celebrity designer doing a turn for one more group of faculty and students, reviewing student work (Kroeger reports on this, “Rand critiqued this work: ‘It is not better or worse than other design schools’ he had visited, which I took as a compliment.”), repeating the main points of his philosophy—in this case, near the end of his life (Rand died the next year at 82). Paul Rand was an exacting and attentive teacher. He was a careful and graceful writer on aesthetics, art, and design, producing four elegant books from 1947 to 1996. In these books he could express himself clearly, adding cherished quotations; in these Arizona talks he is reduced to answering simple questions, grabbing for favorite quotations, and trotting out his tiny complaints. This is Paul Rand, a famous and beloved curmudgeon, reduced to design bromides. It is sad.

It is sadder still, and perhaps even maddening, when one explores the rest of the series of which “Paul Rand” is the latest. This book is the seventh in a series of handsome little books published by Princeton Architectural Press, previously focused on architects and their conversations with students (and each running 96-112 pages). It is good news the publishers have branched out into other design disciplines; the bad news is not that the new branch is graphic design, or that Paul Rand is the representative (he would among top choices for many). Rather the bad news that is Graphic Design and Rand together are so poorly represented by these texts. Rand has joined the company of Koolhaas (1996), Kahn (1998), LeCorbusier (1999), Calatrava (2002), Smithson (2005) and McHarg (2007). Each of these designers has been very well served by knowledgeable and sympathetic editors framing the selections, the texts selected from documented important lectures and substantive Q+A sessions with students. Each collection presented by striking designs, printed in two colors (other than black) for interiors, and three for covers using, for all but LeCorbusier’s, a cropped and enlarged halftone photo of the designer.

For Rand, instead, we get a thin transcript, comprising all of 17 pages, that does not compliment him or his interlocutors. It is padded with full bleed photo spreads from his visit, enlarged quotes, some of his work (printed in blue only) and some ASU student and faculty work (not diminished in blue). The reminiscences provide adequate framing, but remind us of a more vibrant Rand at the top of his game. The padding extends to an uncredited and unexplained design bibliography. Given Rand’s repeated imperative to read and be informed, one might think this is Rand’s reading list (which could be useful). But it cannot be, as there are books that Rand dismissed and books published post-1996. Therefore why has Kroeger included it? It is his bibliography, and of questionable utility at that: Philip Meggs (1983 but no later), James Craig on typography (long superseded), a spotty group of historical monographs, other generally ‘modernist’ books plus a David Carson book, only one Looking Closer volume, and a 1995 book on the internet. This is from Kroeger’s website, from whence came the Rand transcripts; why is he cleaning house in this manner? And why now?

Why would one seek to publish such a book? And why would a respected publishing house lose its grip on a serious 'branded' series? One can only guess this is intended as an homage to a designer admired and respected; but sometimes an homage can be a muddled disservice, and this is one to both individual and discipline.