Mt Victoria
Wellington
12 July 2006

Dear Jonty,
It's not everyone who includes a quotation from 'The Uses of Failures' in an invitation to write for a publication. [see quote p.88]

More than a little sandbagged by this rank piece of one-upmanship from a graphic designer to a writer, I've made a number of false starts in working out how to respond. Initially I started writing something about the different graphic designers I've worked with on fifteen years' worth of publications for art galleries—and sundry moments of high-end visual and low-rent literary mayhem—but the list started to look a bit like the honours board at high school, which was utterly paralysing to any further creative endeavour.
This is how it went:

[redacted], 1993-1996
[redacted], 1997-
[redacted], 1997-1998
[redacted], 1997-2001
[redacted], 1998-2001
[redacted], 2000-2001
[redacted], 2000-2003
[redacted], 2001-2003

So when I got stuck at this point, staring at a list of names, gravelled for inspiration, giving up and starting again and staring at the fragments, I remembered something a designer friend told me years ago. Never hide the weakness, he said. *Point it up*. It'll always be there, so make it the strength. He said this when fixing a pasted-up design riddled with errors that a friend had thrust his way in desperation: in the absence of money to order more typesetting (I'm showing my age with this story), his solution was to make a design feature of the mistakes, by adding multiple amendments and comments in scribbly pen over the top of the type. The result was fabulous and dynamic, a post-Warholian solution to an everyday problem. It has stayed with me as a salutary lesson in approaching any number of situations.

The roll call of my 'top eight' designers reminds me that at least two of them are not formally trained in graphic design. Now a big noise in New York, as they say, [redacted] actually studied sculpture at art school at Canterbury; [redacted], my most frequent collaborator, studied intermedia in Auckland. Both of them got their training as designers on the hoof by working in art galleries in the provinces, in much the same way I learned to be an editor. In the early days, we were all making it up as we went along, learning a lot from little failures. I recall heated arguments with you in Hamilton about things like the correct length of a dash (we settled on 2 em, no spaces); later, whether te reo Maori should continue to be italicised within English text as a 'foreign language' like French or German (following consultation with Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, we left Maori words in standard roman); and whether the first word of an essay should be indented, or not (not). This last has proved a surprisingly sticky point with several designers.

My discussions with designers seem to have always involved a constant cheerful tussle between literary style and visual aesthetics. There have been the usual foul-mouthed arguments about whether it would be OK to set ten pages of discursive endnotes in 5 point text to fit them in (no; it's the editor's job to work with the writer to cut the copy), or whether final text can be edited on screen to kill stubborn widows and orphans (a secret last-minute creative

pleasure). I can remember debates about readability ("Look, you don't need to worry, no old people will be reading this!") and marginal illustrations ("That enormous side gutter looks like a National Library publication c.1962…") and arguments about whether wall labels should be on the left or the right of an artwork ("It's the left! *Scientists have proven* that 90% of people will turn to the left when they enter an art gallery!"). Wonderfully, there was no one to question our decisions, which were variously drawn from authorities as diverse as my old copy of the New Zealand Style Manual (such a very essential book that I feel it should remain un-italicised in text, like the Bible), the Noel Leemings product catalogue (really) and ArtForum page layouts. Or were, of course, entirely made up.

It's only been ten or fifteen years, but I doubt that this freedom to invent oneself still exists in quite the same way in public art galleries. The risks of failure have been clamped down upon. Back then the consequent ability to—in fact the active *requirement* to—invent processes where none previously existed, although risky, resulted in an environment of good-humoured mutual critique and collaboration between editor and designer which I still find essential in the production of good work. My favourite projects are those which evolve organically in conversation between the designer and editor, and also include from time to time, the contributing artist for a one-person catalogue. The best projects are those where no one can actually remember whose original idea anything was: the ownership is shared, and is formed by mutual immersion in the *content* of the publication. (I suspect this approach works better for art books than for annual reports.) With their various visible and invisible collaborators, I'd count among my favourite examples of this sort of project Contemporary New Zealand Photographers (2005) and Shane Cotton (2003) [designer: [redacted]], Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance (2001) [[redacted] and [redacted]], as well as the offensively-named newspaper publication [redacted] did for the first 'Prospect' exhibition—Real People Talk About Art; and of course our own Hangover (1995), which I still love, a decade later. Working in this way, the resulting publication always transcends the limitations of its brief.

[A quick working note on briefs for designers:
1. Should be descriptive, not prescriptive.
2. Should always be diverged from if there's a good reason to.
3. Should be brief.]

The existence of briefs is what's meant to separate designers from artists: designers work to someone else's prescription, while artists invent their own. As you know, I disagree with this. Whatever their background, the best designers I've worked with operate in exactly the same way as fine artists, with a similar command of the visual world's resources and nuances. The brief is only a point of departure. Over the years, I've thought graphic design for art gallery purposes is similar to gallery architecture: the worst art galleries are those where the architect has tried to 'out art' the art, by adding jaunty angles, architectural follies in the middle of exhibiting walls, over-designed furniture and so on, rather than providing a neutral environment where the art is the star. It's a damn sight harder to pare things back than over-do them. The white cube and the white page are still the best ways that we've found to contemplate objects and ideas free from distraction. In the art gallery context, the best design work is empathetic with, rather than interpretative of, the art it supports. In appreciating and constructing this subtlety, the best designers are themselves artists.

But, at risk of failing to address your brief to write about my experiences as an editor among graphic designers, I thought that given your current role as a teacher, maybe I could take an educational angle. Though at times over the years it has seemed like groundhog day, perpetually squinting at flickering screens and

marking up endless copy—particularly in the days before PDFs, operating with PageMaker and tiny Mac screens and tedious ink-jet printers—I do believe that if working on a publication doesn't teach you something new, then you've failed to rise to its challenge. (By 'you' of course I mean me.) So in the spirit of new beginnings, I started yet another document, listing some of the critical things I've learned from graphic designers.

But in the end there were just four that seemed relevant to your current project.

1. Elementary pitch psychology, by [redacted]

Show the client four options. Make two of them utterly unacceptable. Of the two possibilities which remain, add a subtle yet distracting factor to the option you do not wish the client to choose. Comment quietly afterwards on the perspicacity of their choice.

2. The one-inch punch, by [redacted]

Not the legendary fist-sized hole in the gib of his office wall inflicted after an unsatisfactory client meeting, but the show-stopping pitch at which only a single knockout option is presented.

3. The 3am email to the client, by [redacted]

Whereby the amount of un-billable hours contributed to a project by the designer is in direct proportion to the amount of creative freedom given by the client.

4. Graphic design and Fordism, by [redacted]

Whereby you can have any typography you like, as long as it's Swiss…

As a writer and publisher, I've learned that no publication is ever perfect. Cursed with the kind of pedantic eye that picks up a stray apostrophe at 90 paces, opening a book hot-off-the-press is a form of exquisite torture. The error which no one spotted through thirty rounds of proofs is suddenly horrifyingly magnified, and blindingly obvious. How could it have been missed? All sense of proofing fatigue—where the most lively and interesting text in the world eventually starts to read like a fifth-generation translation from an early 20th century Croatian tractor manual—is instantly sloughed off in favour of a heart-numbing stab of sheer horror. I've been known not to open books for some months after they've come back from the printers to ward off this singularly unpleasant phenomenon. The very worst moment was something I picked up just as the presses were about to roll: a spelling mistake in the book's title ON THE SPINE. After a few years of nerves worn to a frazzle by this kind of thing, I've learned to be more Zen about the publication process. A couple of misplaced apostrophes here and there are no big deal. A spelling mistake on the spine's still not good, though.

Which brings me to my final point; which, rolling with your nudge towards the creative possibilities of failure, perhaps I should have begun with. *Blaming the designer*. Just how much can the editor get away with? The short answer is not nearly enough. As a rule of thumb, if text falls off the end of the page, it's the designer's fault: if the text was crap to start with, blame the editor.

Best, Lara Strongman