

DAVID CARSON'S WORK IS LOVED AND LOATHED IN ALMOST EQUAL MEASURE. HIS GRAPHICS INSPIRE SOME, HORRIFY OTHERS, AS DOES HIS ATTITUDE. BUT DOES HE STILL MATTER, ASKS PATRICK BURGOYNE?

AT THE END OF FEBRUARY, DAVID Carson spoke at the Design Indaba in Cape Town: eventually. Earlier in the week, delegates were told that he was ill and his talk was pushed back until the last day. At the appointed hour, he was announced from the stage, but was not in the room. An uncomfortable silence ensued. Search parties were sent out. And then in he strolled, beer in hand, and proceeded to give a funny, sharp, bravado performance, full of great stories and sound advice. Afterwards, he was surrounded by enthused attendees, for whom he patiently signed books and answered questions.

The organisers were a bit miffed, the delegates delighted: yet another of the many paradoxes that



surround the man and his career. There is a perception that all he does these days is give talks, that he is famous for being famous. And yet he has a client list to die for – including Nike and Microsoft – and is now in the enviable position of being the art director and designer for the estate of Marshall McLuhan. In the 90s Carson was the most famous graphic designer on the planet: correction, he was pretty much the only famous graphic designer on the planet in the sense that the general public might actually have heard of him.

No other graphic designer provokes such extreme reactions: an interviewer for website Speak Up once asked him whether it worried him that “any tale about you from a designer ends with ‘what an asshole?’” (It didn’t.) And yet this is a man who spends a huge amount of time each year talking to students and young designers, running workshops all over the world, the vast amount of which are unpaid. The public persona is that of the superstar designer with attendant ego and groupies yet, Carson insists, he is essentially shy.

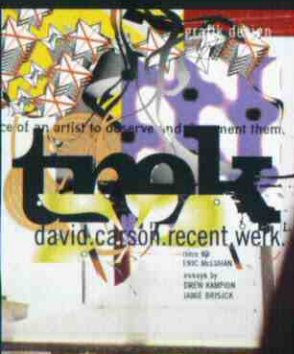
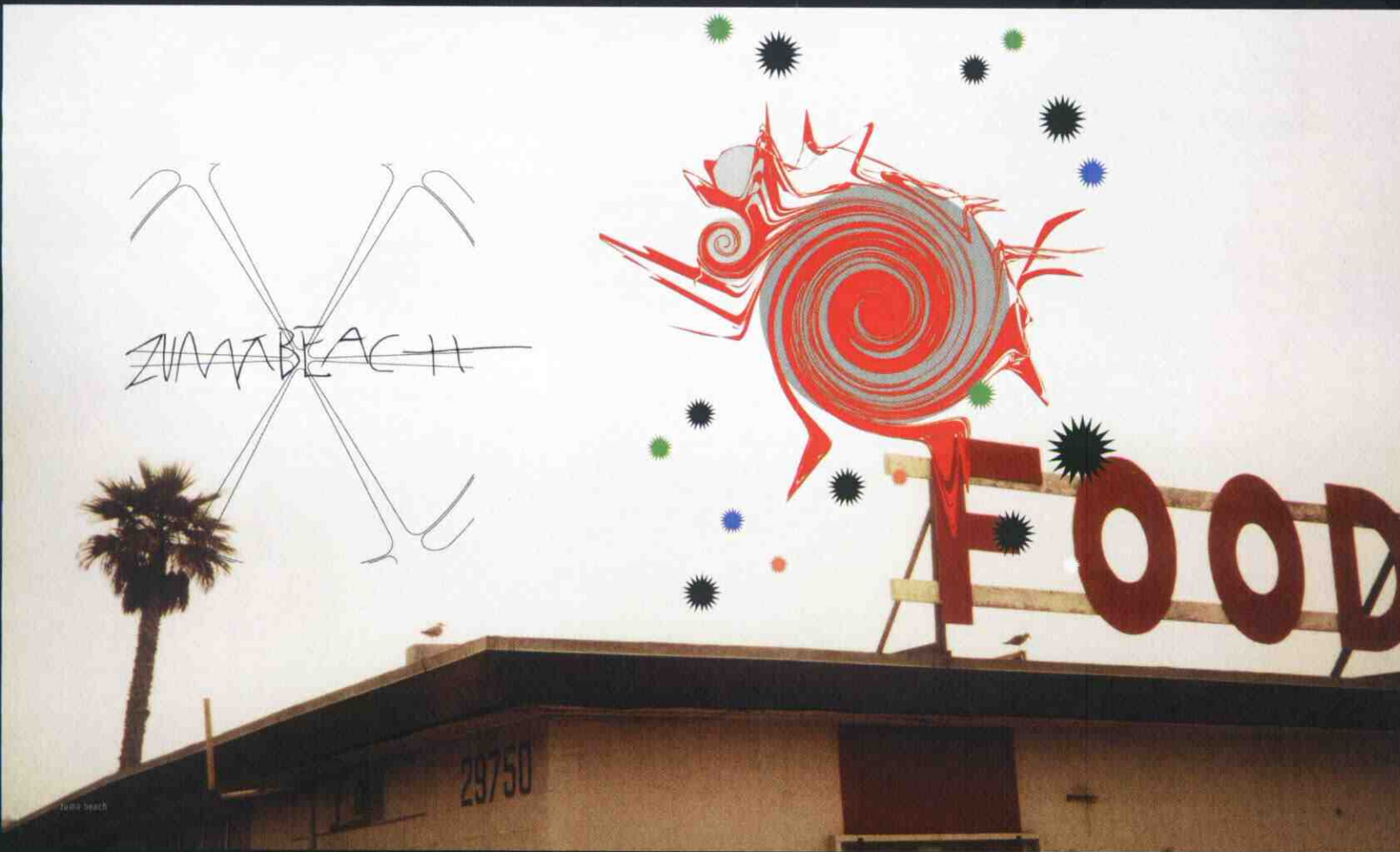
What is beyond doubt is that David Carson was a very influential figure. His work at Beach Culture and, later, Ray Gun magazines fired the imaginations of designers across the world by giving them permission to experiment and to put themselves into their work. They may not all have liked his style, but his message, that it’s OK to trust your own instincts and be self-indulgent, was seized upon. His book, *The End of Print*, has sold over 200,000 copies, making it comfortably the

best-selling design book of all time. He was profiled in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Newsweek*. And yet little has been seen of him recently. When compiling this piece, I mentioned his name to several designers, all of whom asked “what’s he doing now”?

After his Indaba talk, Carson revealed what he has been up to. “I spend a lot of time in the winter down in the Caribbean surfing so I maybe do a little less work, but I have this eclectic group of clients – Quicksilver, Nike, Nine Inch Nails – plus Karim Rashid’s just asked me to do his book and I’m going to Turkey in April to shoot three Neutrogena commercials,” he says. Carson has been doing a lot of moving image work, claiming that he finds it much more exciting than print. Even some of the print that he still does comes out of the moving image work as he freezes video frames and prints off the results.

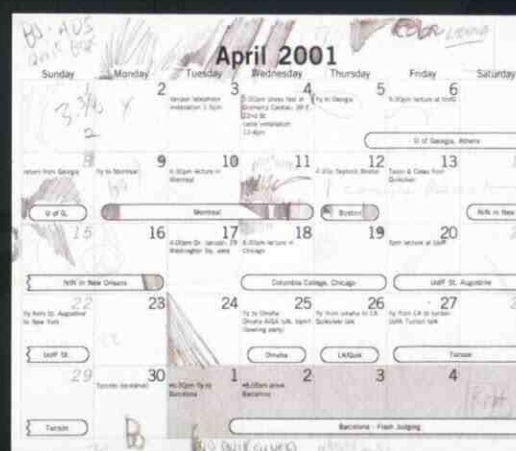
In addition to the Virgin Islands, Carson also has a studio in New York but is mainly based in the less glamorous surroundings of Charleston, South Carolina. “I was in New York for seven years but then my ex-girlfriend moved to Charleston and we have two kids, so I moved to be near them,” he explains. “Not being in New York has cost me some work but I’m glad I did it.”

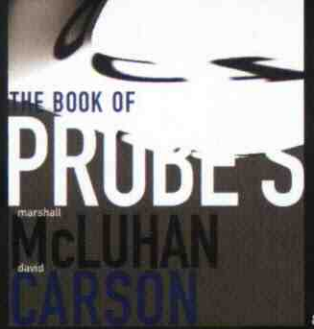
It has probably also cost him some profile so that, having been damned for playing the superstar in the 90s, his diminished exposure is now used as proof that his work had no lasting worth: “I can’t win on that one,” he laughs. “When you get ▶



1. Surfboard graphics designed by Carson for Longlife, a charity auction organized by surf brand Oxbow last year in aid of Surfers Against Sewage, UK. Carson's new book *Trek* (cover shown, 6, published by Gingko Press, \$45) covers the past five years of his career. "People who follow my work and like my work will find it interesting, those who don't will have a lot of new ammunition," he

says. 2. Intro spread. 3. Beer can shot in Portugal. 4. Ideas for Fox Sports on-air identity. 5. Zuma Beach. A page from Carson's diary (7) illustrates how many talks and workshops Carson continues to do. "David Carson has been called 'the most famous graphic designer in the world,'" says the jacket blurb. "And a lot of folks have said really bad things about the work too"





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◀ your initial awareness from doing a magazine and then suddenly you're not doing one, your visibility drops dramatically."

With a new book out, however, Carson's visibility is set to rise once again. *Trek* is a 460-page compilation of his work from the past five years. The style has not mellowed, if anything his trademark radical image cropping and determinedly unconventional typography have become even more extreme, but the book has a different tone of voice to its predecessors. "It's a lot more personal so, for me, it's probably a better book [than *The End of Print*]," he says, "but that is also where it will probably be attacked."

The chief target will no doubt be his decision to reprint hundreds of emails from designers around the world, largely thanking him for being such an inspiration. "I wanted the book to be personal and this is what I get – so I felt that they fitted in. I'd love to know that kind of stuff about other people – I'd love to know what emails Neville Brody or Peter Saville get. Part of me thinks I should have put some bad ones in but I don't get them. If they don't like the work, they don't email me, they write it in a review or talk about me at parties. People who follow my work and like my work will find it interesting, those who don't will have a lot of new ammunition."

Why does he feel that he attracts so much animosity? "One theory is that some people are upset because I have such a worldwide following, it bugs the hell out of them. David Byrne was once asked about what happened to Talking Heads and he said that, when it started, they were all equal, but then he began getting all the press and that drove a wedge between them. A similar thing happened to me in the early 90s. A lot of us were doing experimental stuff for a lot of reasons, some valid, some not. I became a figurehead and that alienated people, but if I was unfairly singled out, where are those other people now?"

Carson also acknowledges that, of that group, he had the best story: he had no formal training and was the eighth-ranked surfer in the world which instantly made him far more interesting than most designers. "If I was a 400 pound black guy," he admits, "I wouldn't have got so big." His background and lack of a design education, save for a few classes, also informed his relationship with the industry. Surf culture is almost obsessive about "keeping it real" and not showing undue deference and Carson never studied design history; the combination meant that he was never in awe of its establishment and never felt part of it. These weren't his heroes. "I've always been an outsider," he says. "I didn't join the club. I didn't support Emigré or join AIGA and that may have been a mistake but that's not my personality. I'm basically shy, but it pissed them off and it continues to do so to this day."

What also won him few friends was his outspokenness: at the last Fuse event, for example, in San Francisco, he criticised the conference from

One of Carson's most intriguing new projects is an art director and designer to the estate of Marshall McLuhan. For *The Book of Probes* (cover shown 8, spreads 9-12, Gingko Press, £32), Carson takes some of McLuhan's most famous texts and reinterprets them in his trademark style. **13. The now famous interview in *Creative Review*, May 1994, which brought Neville Brody and David Carson face to face. "For me Ray Gun represents the end of print," says Brody, "I like that," Carson replies. "You could say that print can't compete, there's too many other things and you just give up; whereas I think that Ray Gun says that it can compete with video games and computers and MTV"**

the platform. "They were livid," he remembers. "I do piss people off who've invited me to speak at events and it's gotten me into trouble," he admits, but what appears to motivate him is a frustration at the clubbiness of the design world, especially in the US, rather than vindictiveness. Unfortunately, this reputation for being difficult has meant that a lot of the good things he does get overshadowed. "What people don't see is when, say, I'm in a village in Ecuador, going through some young guy's work with him: there's been so much of that, I've talked to so many individual students who've been inspired but people only want to talk about some speech I missed. No-one gives more talks to students than I do but then I read that I'm an egomaniac – and most of this is written by people who've never met me."

The nature of Carson's work has also sat uncomfortably within the design establishment. It is unapologetically personal and self-indulgent. It relies not on the interpretation of theory or adherence to rules but is entirely intuitive. His work is at the forefront of the debate between those who believe that design should be led by strong concepts and those who put the beauty of execution foremost.

Carson was an unacceptable role model for the design industry at large: many, you feel, were waiting for him to fall. And, as is the way with celebrity, a vertiginous rise, led to an equally sharp fall in interest. Some who raved about him in the 90s woke up at the turn of the century hunched and guiltily wondering what they ever saw in him. "I'm surprised it's lasted this long," Carson admits of his fame. "The next big thing hasn't happened yet. There was Neville Brody in the 80s and, I think I can say, me in the 90s, but there hasn't been a next big thing and I didn't expect that."

As the author of *The End Of Print* and, in his time as editor of *Creative Review*, one of the first to spot Carson's talent, Lewis Blackwell is better

placed than anyone to assess what, if any, lasting effect Carson has had on design. "He showed you could have a lot of fun and make beautiful and amusing pages by questioning all the rules," he says. "He has a great eye, seems truly shameless and, at times, is an original. Don't be misled by the cynicism of magazines or the hyper-critical British scene: out in colleges, in studios around the world, a generation wanted to do their own version of David Carson." You wonder whether this is part of the reason for the inclusion of those emails in the new book. Are they, perhaps, Carson's answer to all the criticism his personality and his work receives from the mainstream: a 460-page fuck you to the industry?

For designer Alexander Gelman, Carson remains one of the most important figures in the business. "In the 80s graphic design became very conformistic, a parody of itself," he claims. "David Carson, with no formal design education, doing everything wrong, was confronted by the design community who didn't want to accept him. But students embraced him because there was great honesty in what he was doing."

His work never quite delivered on some of the more grandiose promises made for it but he did help give print back its confidence in the face of the multimedia onslaught, proving that it could still be vital and engaging. And if, with his workshops and talks, he makes a real difference to the lives of real people, should it matter if he puts a few people's noses out of joint along the way? It is his continued worth as an inspiration to generations of young designers that should concern us more than his personality traits.

"Some of his work will be published in text books for years: that makes him more relevant than most," Blackwell argues. "He converted an abstract, somewhat dry area into something a little sexy. Briefly." And for that, every graphic designer working today should give thanks. **GM**

FACE TO FACE

Neville Brody and David Carson, the two art directors who perhaps the most famous in contemporary design, are sitting together in a room in London. Carson is wearing a black t-shirt and a black jacket. Brody is wearing a black t-shirt and a black jacket. They are both looking at the camera.



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