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Cookie Cutter Creativity

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Like many of us, I have a small addiction to my computer. It performs amazing tricks and affords a great convenience. It helps me do business far and wide, connect with friends, and it can find all sorts of information. Anything I want to know. And a whole lot I don't.

I wonder about the drawback/advantage balance. For instance, the ability to clone artwork is handy, but what about the rash of 'dittohead' design and certified graduates of "art schools" with some layout program training who present themselves as designers? A myriad of filters (many of which I hesitate to try after getting lost in GUI-land for a couple of years), may take us to unexpected and beautiful places of imagination, but what about execution on press? Not to mention the time one spends looking at and tweaking what we have created through technology in an odd mix of self congratulatory awe and horror at the monster we have created, only to have it disappear again into the mysterious world of digital phenomena.

One of my best friends of 20 years is a trade printer. Together we have experienced the wonder and tragedy of high technology applied to craft; an inconsistent journey from screen to laser proof to blueline to press, which has cost them and many designers money, aggravation and sometimes even clients. How does one look professional and at the same time say "it changes too fast to keep up with" or "I've never tried that before. Whoops."

And don't get me started with how much time I waste with email and reading news from far away countries. I mean really. This is an area of shame for me. I know it's wrong, but it's just so damned seductive.

Creativity on the computer has become a philosophical question for me. I have a background in fine art and I've been around long enough to know the difference between drawing with a conte crayon and finessing a bezier curve with a mouse. There is something lost between the artist working late into the night with paintbrush and furious passion, to the 'group mind' connect the computer provides. It all becomes just a little homogenized when individual passion is watered down in the endless ocean of surfing. More than enough phish in the sea.

I remember when art was actually a required part of public school curriculum. Not that it was great in all cases, but it was there. Now teaching technique supersedes teaching critical thinking in American education. I teach symbolism as visual literacy for designers, which you might think would be of interest to many aspiring designers, but my classes are small compared to the newest software bells-and-buzzer offerings enough of the time to know the priorities have shifted. Even with consistently high student evaluations for what they learned in my class over many consecutive years, enrollment is not what it should be and schools promote computer training well over design philosophy instruction. And my own training? Finding available classes or workshops in esoteric studies such

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as semiotics or sacred geometry are virtually non-existent in this country. Do a search on Google, you'll see what I mean. So I read and conjecture a lot. And I use, God forbid, intuition and my own experience as teaching tools. I spoke at design schools in Scotland a few years ago. There is a difference in European students' design sophistication compared to the States, though we like to think we excel in all areas. Funny enough, they also have access to esoteric teachings such as alchemy. Believe me, if you want to be a meaningful designer, you really ought to know some basic alchemy.

I'm not in a major urban center and we don't have the high end design schools of New York or Chicago, but my sense is this is not a regional or even economically driven situation. It's a change in the winds of cultural climate. Dumbed down education and ramped up technology is in direct correlation to unevolved creativity. Spontaneity has come down to technique, and caffeine overload is mistaken for passion. It's easy to take this into a conspiracy theory, but the reality is I'm not sure there's enough intelligence without creativity to intentionally redirect the course of human events. It seems that way at times, but I believe the major culprit is distraction and disconnection. The heart is never given a chance to catch up with the head. We follow an impulsive meander on the heels of the one directly in front of us. Baaaa.

We cannot reverse the button of digital time, but we could slow down just a little to allow the wind-fall of technology to ripen on the vine. Every tool is an opportunity to improve ourselves and our world. A tool that supports creativity and connection is indeed a very powerful one, and the groundwork to using such a tool should be taught with depth and patience by mentors who guide the student to their own wealth of inspiration as a contribution to the future.

Maggie Macnab is interested in better design for better communication, and to that end teaches, writes and designs to the best of her ability.