

Carpenter Center

IN
CONVERSATION

DAVID
REINFURT AND

LARISSA
HARRIS

for the Visual Arts

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David Reinfurt and Larissa Harris
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Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts,
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DAN BYERS : Hi, everyone. Welcome to our event tonight. I'm Dan Byers, the John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director of the Carpenter Center. I'm really happy to have David Reinfurt and Larissa Harris with us tonight. David and Larissa will be speaking about the designer Bruno Munari's 1967 teaching residency at the Carpenter Center and Reinfurt's recent publication, *A *New* Program for Graphic Design* (Inventory Press, 2019).

Bruno Munari has an important history at the Carpenter Center. The building houses both our institution and Harvard's Department of Art, Film, and Visual Studies, which until last year was known as the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies. Design—from architecture, to graphic design, to urban design—was a key touch point for the department's curriculum, which blended design and visual studies with film and studio art. This unique curriculum and faculty, along with its relationship to the Carpenter Center's exhibitions, constitutes a fascinating history that has not been properly accounted for. This founding design curriculum and the exhibitions that

grew out of it have a latent energy in the building and in our thinking around its programs. In this context, David's work on Bruno Munari is most welcome. And I can't think of a better interlocutor than Larissa Harris, whose curiosity and original ideas are captured in her unique and generous interdisciplinary projects.

I want to acknowledge and thank my colleagues: Liv Porte for their work managing this event series, Gabby Banks for her support of tonight's program, Laura Preston for editing the booklet publications, and Katie Soule for editing the videos for each event, which will appear on the website. This is a major team effort. And now, on to the show.

DAVID REINFURT : Thank you, Dan, and thank you, Liv, Laura, Gabby, and Katie at the Carpenter Center for making this happen. This event was originally scheduled for the spring of 2020, and Dan and Liv have tracked a million details in the meantime.

I'm going to be talking about my book, *A *New* Program for Graphic Design*. I'll speak for about five minutes with a slideshow to give some background on that book, and then I'm going to read—or kind of perform—one chapter from the book as a way to give you an idea about what's contained in it. The chapter happens to be about Bruno Munari, who Dan has already introduced. From that point, Larissa and I will go into conversation. I'll share my screen now, and we'll get going.

*A *New* Program for Graphic Design* was published by Inventory Press and D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers in September of 2019, which seems considerably longer ago than it actually was. Ten years ago now, I was invited by the director of the Visual Arts Program at Princeton University, Joe Scanlan, to create a course in graphic design. The course was to be the first in the university's history, and it was to be aimed at undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines. These students weren't at Princeton to study design or art. The course was situated within a visual arts program, which is a specific setting and one which I like a lot. I like this setting because the students are generalists, which is something I relate to. If you look at my bio, you can see how many hats I wear, so I suppose being a generalist is something I'm drawn to.



David Reinfurt with undergraduates at Princeton University.

The courses at Princeton began with “Typography” in 2010. That was followed by a course called “Gestalt,” and then another called “Interface.” These three courses together constituted a kind of design curriculum for undergraduate students who came from diverse majors and who had no previous background in design. So you might have had some students who specialized in graphic design, but the majority were coming from computer science, economics, English, theater, and who knows where else. That diversity was essential to the class.

I didn’t develop this curriculum for Princeton alone, by any stretch. There have been other graphic design teachers from the beginning. Alice Chung and I taught together for many years. Danielle Aubert, Francesca Grassi, Laura Coombs, Laurel Schwulst, David Sellers, Peter Kazantsev, Nathan Carter, and Martha Friedman have all taught and have helped the courses grow.

Inventory Press, which is run by Shannon Harvey and Adam Michaels and based in Los Angeles, approached me and suggested that the Princeton courses might have some broader relevance outside of that New Jersey campus. Inventory Press is in the business of publishing books, so they asked me if I might make a book around the teaching. We discussed it a bit, and I was very reluctant to write a book, thinking that one of the best things about teaching is the way that it facilitates improvisation. It seemed like it might kill the teaching to write it all down. Plus, I just didn’t have the time or space or energy

or inclination to write the book. So we came up with a different idea, which was to *speak* the book, and then that spoken performance would be transcribed, and that would become the book.

So we moved the classes from New Jersey to Los Angeles. In the offices of Inventory Press (which is the former architectural studio of Richard Neutra), for three days in the summer of 2018 we convened six lectures a day, each one forty-five minutes long with fifteen-minute breaks fortified with modular synthesizer music, juice, donuts, and all things Los Angeles. Each day of the three days represented one of the courses I just described: “Typography,” “Gestalt,” and “Interface.” It was as if the course had been compressed into one day equaling one semester. The general public attended these lectures, as well as students from Otis, CalArts, Art Center, and UCLA.

The setup was specific; this was all done with a great degree of self-consciousness. I’m always thinking that teaching has something to do with performance, whether it’s acknowledged or not, so we set up the stage a certain way and we used the specific setting of that architecture studio to convene this mini three-day course. All of this was video recorded.

By the morning of the third day, my voice was completely shot. I was exhausted. There were students who had come to all three days. They must have been beyond exhausted. But there was this general communal spirit

in the room, which encouraged us all to get through the entire activity. And it became more and more carnival-like, which I enjoyed quite a lot.

Everything from those three days was recorded, and this footage was cleaned up, transcribed, edited by Eugenia Bell and Adam Michaels, amended, adjusted, rewritten, and finally published in the fall of 2019 as this book, *A *New* Program for Graphic Design*.

I want to play a segment of one of those lectures. This is the introduction I gave, which I repeated at the beginning of each day.

[clip from lecture “A *New* Program for Graphic Design,” 2018]:

So, this is an experiment. That’s the first thing to note. And everybody here is part of this experiment. It’s maybe a harebrained idea to perform a book rather than write a book. And so we came up with the premise that each of these three days would, um—each one covers one course at Princeton, and they would be filmed and transcribed, and that would form a basis for a graphic design textbook. So what we’re doing, what you hear in this room today, is actually writing a book in the future.



David Reinfurt delivering a lecture from *A *New* Program for Graphic Design* at the offices of Inventory Press, July 2018.



Front cover, *A *New* Program for Graphic Design*.

So here's the book. It's divided into three chapters that correspond with the three days. Each of the lectures has been transcribed and considerably reworked. They flow through the semester. Obviously, there are more than six classes in a semester, but we cherry-picked the ones that we wanted to include.

This is one of the lectures. It's called ". . . Meet the Tetracono." This is a lecture about Bruno Munari. This is also a lecture that includes a good bit of my own work. In fact, I often show students my own work, which can be uncomfortable, but I've found that mixing history and current work, and particularly work that I'm directly involved in, provides some constellation of points that students can orient themselves either against, with, beside, or whatever. It provides some structure.

So with that preface, I'm going to present a version of this lecture. It's going to be abbreviated, it's going to be compressed, and I'm going to try to do it quickly. It's going to be a combination of reading and speaking. I've severely edited the number of slides. I'm showing this lecture because I thought this would be the best way to get an idea of the contents of the book without reading the book.

Here is the lecture ". . . Meet the Tetracono." This is a lecture that happens in the third chapter, which is the class on interface. I'll begin a version of that lecture now.

In 1965, Italian artist and designer Bruno Munari released the Tetracono with an event, an exhibition at the Danese showroom in Milan, inviting spectators to "meet the Tetracono," as if it were a person. But Tetracono is a product, an austere fifteen-centimeter black steel cube housing four aluminum cones. Each is painted half red and half green, and they were designed to spin at four different



The Tetracono.

speeds on an eighteen-minute cycle. As the cones are spinning at different speeds, you see a different kind of graphic on the face of the Tetracono. Its function was to show forms while they were in the process of becoming.

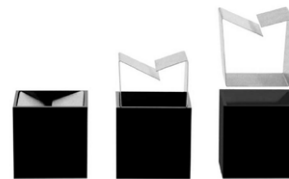
Now, Bruno Munari was an artist, a designer, a writer, a teacher, definitely an inventor, and occasionally a curator. He became increasingly disillusioned with fine

art in the mid-1960s. By 1962, he was already writing a regular column in the Milan daily newspaper. In one of those columns, he called on his fellow artists to change their practice. He said, "Culture today is becoming a mass affair, and the artist must step down from his pedestal and be prepared to make a sign for the butcher shop (if he knows how to do it)."¹ He needed sympathetic clients to do this kind of ambitious design work staged as art. One was Danese, a design gallery and publisher based in Milan.

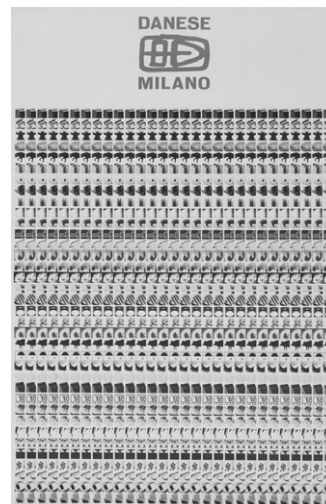


Bruno Munari.

In 1957, Munari designed a product for Danese called the Cubo ashtray. It's very simple. It's one piece of melamine plastic and one piece of folded aluminum. Together, these two pieces make an ashtray that hides cigarette butts, because Munari found the butts unaesthetic, and this was his way of solving that problem. This was an industrial product. It was mass-produced and



The Cubo ashtray.

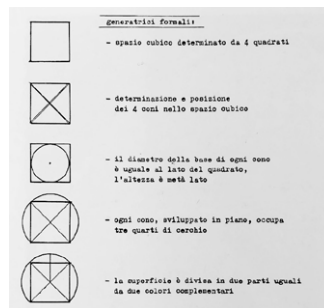


Danese Milano advertisement.

sold at a reasonable price as a regular consumer product. This doesn't sound like a shock, but this was coming from a design publisher and design gallery, which at the time was more involved in selling one-off vases and things with the touch of the hand of the artist. Munari got very involved with Danese and continued to work with them on everything from showroom displays to graphics, and eventually to other products.

In 1965, the Tetracono was released. Like the Cubo ashtray, this was an explicitly industrial product. It was manufactured in serial identical copies and circulated in standard consumer channels. But its function was really more like an artwork. It was designed to convey a philosophical attitude, Munari said, to see the universe as an indivisible unit of pure energy, which is constantly undergoing transformations. Really, it was neither exactly a product nor was it really an artwork. Tetracono was made in many identical copies and it was a multiple. Munari published a recipe for how you build the Tetracono. This is really typical of his work. His work often had a didactic quality to it, where he was just as interested in the person receiving it being able to recreate it as he was in making the work himself. And so his work often had a teaching element to it. No different with the Tetracono.

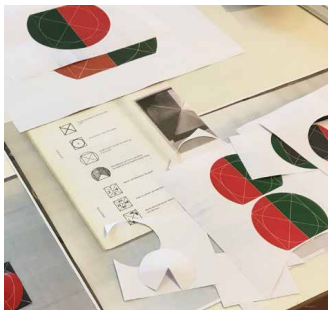
So he included this geometric formula, which works like this: you take a square, you extend that out to make a cube, and then you put four cones inside of that cube. The diameter of each cone, the base, is inscribed in a



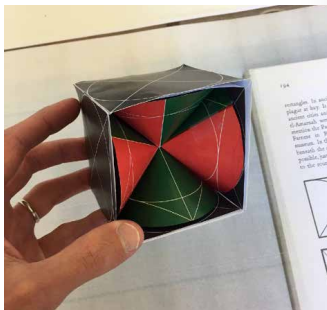
Geometric formula for the Tetracono.

square. And then each cone is divided in half, and half is painted red and half is painted green. And that's how you build the Tetracono. Munari also included a program or a script for the product, which describes how this product plays out over time. The program for the Tetracono describes the speed of the cones. At the top you have cone one, two, three, and four. They move at different speeds. So what happens is they come in to and out of phase as they turn at different speeds. The entire sequence repeats itself every eighteen minutes, going from all the way green to all the way red.

Now, let's jump from 1965 to 2017. In 2017, I had just arrived at the American Academy in Rome as a design fellow with six months and the outline of a project around Munari and the Tetracono. I started by making a paper



Making a quarter-size paper model of the Tetracono.

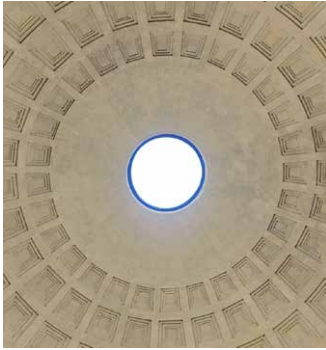


Tetracono paper model on top of Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*.

model based exactly on his formula. It was quarter-size. Making things often helps you see things around you differently, so as soon as I made the Tetracono and put it together, which seemed like a rudimentary exercise, all of a sudden I started to understand its geometry just a bit better. It's kind of classical geometry. The shape itself started moving around the studio. Here it found itself on the front of a book Bruno Munari designed around the same time he designed the Tetracono. The book is *The Open Work* by Umberto Eco.

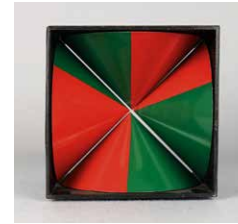
I like this image, where the book is upside down, because it was surely Munari's intent to turn it into a face. All of his work has this playful quality, which fascinates me to no end because his ideas are sharp and serious buried beneath that.

This book also helped me understand Munari a bit better in his Italian context. I hadn't spent any time in Rome previous to this, and I was living there for six months. So I started to look around and recognize some aspects of the shape all over Rome, from the hole in the Pantheon to the classically organized courtyard outside my studio window, to a forced-perspective tile floor. Or this table I really liked on an overnight ferry, or the courtyard of a church in Trastevere. That's a point I make often with students: as soon as you sit down and start making things and stop thinking, that making produces thinking. It's pretty elementary. Any beginning art student would certainly know this, but sometimes in design it gets forgotten.



Clockwise from top left: The Pantheon; courtyard at the American Academy in Rome; ferry table; forced-perspective tiles.

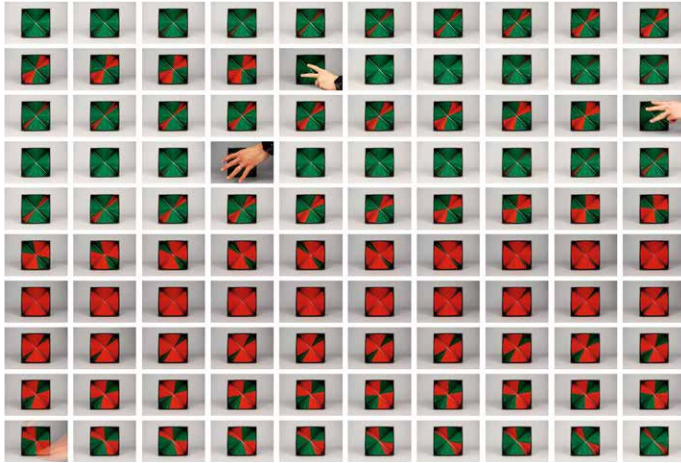
So the next step was to get my hands on a Tetracono. I had the idea to make a stop-motion video using still photographs of the object, which I would put together to make it come back alive. Here's me with the Tetracono, which I found in Milan thanks to a generous collector. I made a series of photographs. Here are some of those photographs.



Photographs of the Tetracono.

I also made a kind of temporal diagram so that I knew where the cones were meant to be at any one moment, and I laid that over my camera so I could adjust it. Then I had this contact sheet from all of the images that I made. I assembled those into a video, which I'm going to show you here. I expect that it's going to be rough over Zoom, but we'll let that go for a minute. I'll also paste a link to this in the chat.²

This video is a sped-up version of the transition so that you start to understand the phases. The thing I noticed



Contact sheet.

in living with the Tetracono is that it goes through very recognizable moments of transformation, and at the end, right before it turns to green, it seems to be a total mess. Chaos. And then all of a sudden, just when it looks like it's not going to happen, it clicks in and turns green. It's kind of a magical moment for me.

Next stop was the Danese company archive. Just as you walk in the door there is a painting by Munari. In the archives, I found a small Tetracono product brochure, which is characteristically Munari. In it, he lists the spatial dimensions of this product artwork. It's fifteen-by-fifteen-by-fifteen centimeters, a cube. But then he also does something funnier, which I love: he lists the temporal dimension of the object as 1,080 seconds, or eighteen minutes. It's just perfectly dry and sharp and funny. I also learned the Tetracono was made in the studio of Gruppo T, so I set up an interview with the group's founder, Giovanni Anceschi. At the time, Anceschi was a student at the Ulm School of Design. He would travel back to Milan on weekends carrying ideas and printed matter to share with his friends, including Munari. This is a magazine from Ulm, *Ulm 7*, and it featured a form study of cones, spheres, and cubes. Munari and Anceschi looked at it. They both loved it. They were like, let's make this. And that's where the form of the Tetracono came from.

The final stop in my investigation was an industrial-artisan screen printer in Umbria. The Italian people I met didn't find any contradiction in "industrial-artisan," which



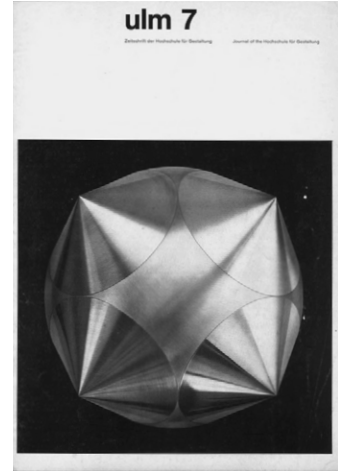
Painting by Bruno Munari in the Danese company archive.



Tetracono brochure in the Danese company archive.



Tetracono and Tetracono SM at Danese company archive.



Front cover, *Ulm 7*.

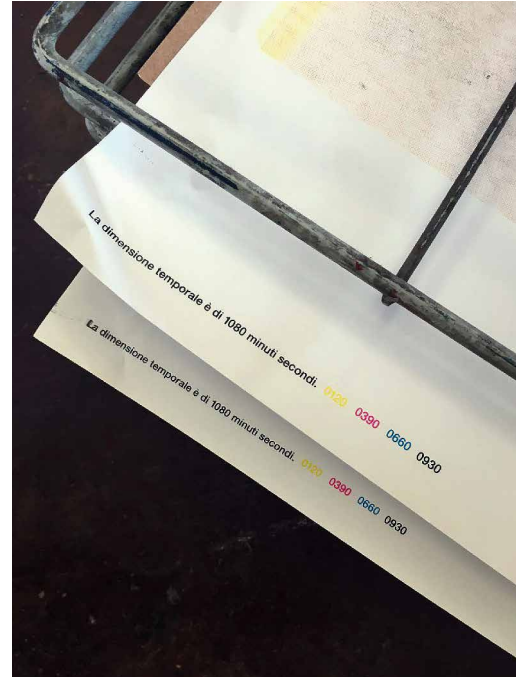


Industrial-artisan screen printer in Umbria.

I love. Four-color screen printing works by laying down one color at a time, of course: cyan, magenta, yellow, and black in a sequence. With a photographic image, only some of the ink passes through the screen.

Here we see a yellow plate from the print I'm going to show you in a second. The idea was to use that production process of cyan, magenta, yellow, black, then take the eighteen minutes of the Tetracono cycle and divide it by four to arrive at four distinct states in the Tetracono sequence.

Here's an image of the industrial-artisan screen printer making a print, which involved hand-registering the prints as they moved from one to the next. There was a machine that pulled the ink through. It really was a combination of hand work and machine work, which was lovely.



Proofs of Tetracono screen print.



Left to right: Cyan plate; cyan and magenta plate; cyan plate, magenta plate, and

The cyan plate was taken from the Tetracono sequence at three minutes. Over the top of that was what it looked like at six minutes, which was printed in magenta on top of the cyan. And then yellow came in at nine minutes, and then black came in at twelve. The final print that results is an almost psychedelic Tetracono. I like to think of it as a time sandwich. It's a way to bring those multiple points in time together into one image. At the bottom we printed a small key, which was a scan from the Munari brochure. It says the temporal dimension is 1,080 seconds. And then the colors are identified as to what time they correspond to.



yellow plate; cyan plate, magenta plate, yellow plate, and black plate.

At the end of this meandering design research project, I was left with thoughts about serial production, working in multiples, and what makes sense currently in relation to these ideas, which themselves are quite old, having been around for about fifty years. It occurred to me that now we have moved on from the industrial production of objects to the post-industrial production of information; from cubic ashtrays to bespoke emojis. And we might consider that the Tetracono is in many ways already a post-industrial product. It was a manufactured object of steel and aluminum, sure. But its purpose was

to produce a constantly changing image. Its rhetorical design was in its script, how the cones turn, the sequence, the phasing, its temporal dimension. Munari called it both a product for exploring programming and an object for understanding forms in the process of becoming. Both of these lessons seem equally or maybe more important now than they did in 1965.

There's a brief P.S: As Dan mentioned, it turns out that the Tetracono was at the Carpenter Center in 1966. It was part of a group exhibition called *Arte Programmata*, or "programmed art." This exhibition was actually organized by Munari with Umberto Eco. There were many artists and works in the show, among them the Tetracono. One year later, in February of 1967, Munari was invited to come to the Carpenter Center and spend six months running a graphic design class. It would extend from the beginning of February to the end of May. So not six months but close to it. There were fifty class meetings. Munari described it as a class for researching all the means that today's technology and science can make available to the visual operator for communication and visual information.

This class was also kind of performed. In fact, Munari was writing letters back to the Milan daily newspaper, which were printed, and which described the settings of the classes and what happened in the units of that class. The course's curriculum was eventually collected into a book, which is called *Design e comunicazione visiva*, or "design and visual communication," and it includes that

set of letters. It also includes some of the raw material and example work that Munari was showing in his class. I have a version of this book here, which I will show to give you an idea of what kind of material was in it.

It begins with the letters Munari wrote. When I was setting out to make my book, I had already known about Munari's book, and once I tried to understand a bit of the Italian I began to realize that his book was a precedent for mine. Surely it was an influence, even if unacknowledged.



Front cover of Bruno Munari's *Design e comunicazione visiva*.

LARISSA HARRIS : Thank you, David. That was super interesting.

Hi, everybody, I'm Larissa Harris. I also want to thank Dan, Liv, Laura, and Gabby at the Carpenter Center, and also David for inviting me to share this evening with him tonight.

David and I have collaborated on many projects over the years, but this is actually the first time we're appearing together to talk about his work. And as it happens, we met in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while I was working at MIT as the associate director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, which was an art fellowship program in the School of Architecture and Planning founded in 1967 by György Kepes. It was kind of founded as the last-born U.S. child of the prewar Bauhaus. While David was hired to redo our graphic identity, it quickly became clear that he was a philosophical, intellectual, and practical partner in the entire endeavor. Our main questions were, How do things work? What is expertise? In a funny way, we happily functioned under the rubric of MIT's motto, which is *Mens et Manus*, or "mind and hand." We felt that was what connected art-making with science and engineering, which was the other kind of making that was going on all around us.

Then I started as a curator at the Queens Museum in early 2009 during the darkest depths of the financial crisis. Queens Museum contains two massive miniatures. One is a forty-foot-high globe out in the front yard. And

then there's a model of the city of New York in the middle of the building. Both of these miniatures were built for the 1964 New York World's Fair. The building was also undergoing a massive physical expansion, like many museums have been in the last fifteen years. Coming from MIT, where people were constantly working on things either too big or too small to be seen by the naked eye, scale became the connecting idea between these two institutional frameworks for me. As Dan mentioned, I organized a show called *The Curse of Bigness*, to which David, this time as Dexter Sinister, also lent his mind and hand in large and small ways.

We might come back to some of the ideas in those projects, but in response to the institutional location of this talk I thought we might start this conversation with pedagogy and the context of higher learning. And I wanted to ask, David, what does it mean for you to teach nonexperts? And could you talk a little more about the idea of *A *New* Program for Graphic Design* as a textbook, albeit an idiosyncratic one?

DR : We have worked on a lot of things together, and I've learned so much over the years. At the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, we discussed the limits of expertise and what it means to teach nonexperts. I think nonexpert students are ideal for receiving the material I might present, or the way I might guide their work. I identify with that generalist point of view. I'm not so

interested in specializing in my practice, either, or encouraging others to specialize, because I think that artificially draws boundaries around disciplines whose borders change constantly. I've worked as an independent graphic designer for twenty years. Surely the field has changed a lot in the meantime, so in that case more people might know what it is I do, but then others may not always recognize what I would call graphic design as being part of the discipline.

So it's a disposition. I like nonexperts, and the students who come to class challenge any notion of groupthink that is often fostered by having an expert or authority in the room. I'm always trying to evacuate that role as a teacher, and now in this Zoom setting it's really difficult to do that, but there are ways to do it. I find you get a much more lively, engaged group of people and everybody learns something.

So, the second part of the question: *A *New* Program for Graphic Design*. The book is called a textbook, and it may look a little like a textbook, but it really doesn't operate as a textbook.

It's a transcription of the lectures I gave in Los Angeles. Those lectures have bits of design history and examples. When you finish the book, the intention is that you rip it up and throw it away and get busy building your own textbook. I wrote this to the reader in the preface. I just said, this is a constellation of references. These are my references. They're limited by my own limits. What they are

trying to do is model an approach that is about building up material to keep you working for many years. So it's a graphic design textbook in as much as it might suggest a way to make your own textbook. Is that like a meta-graphic design textbook? I'm not sure. I mean, I wish it were more straight than that. I have a desire to be more direct, but it doesn't always come out that way.

LH : Do the asterisks on each side of the "new" mean something special?

DR : I guess they do. It's an affectation, clearly. It's an affectation that Stuart Bertolotti-Bailey and I started using with Dexter Sinister, and then certainly Stuart, Angie Keefer, and I used it extensively in The Serving Library publishing project. You know what it means when you put something in between asterisks in email or in a text message. It's a little bit hard to say what it means, and I love that part about it. It's a little bit of a wink and a little bit of . . . I don't know what it is. It does inflect what's being said, but who knows exactly what it means.

LH : It's funny because if you put asterisks around a word in certain CMS programs, it will make the word bold on the front end. And so what's funny about putting these asterisks around "new" is that you're kind of indicating that the title of the book is somehow on the back end, or in a less formal zone. That's how I read it.

DR : That's a great way to read it. If anything, I would hope it has the feeling of "you can do it yourself," like a do-it-yourself guide.

LH : Right. It's like "we can't do italics or bold, so we're doing this as a substitute or indicator."

You've talked about play and how important that is to you, and I wonder if that has something to do with expertise. How do you integrate play into your teaching? I guess this question is spurred by what you were describing to me as one of Munari's Carpenter Center "actions," which is one word for them—the way he took the Carpenter Center as a site to build something.

DR : Play is certainly important. It's fundamental in Munari's work. This is something that has led him to not be taken as seriously in art discourse. In graphic design, he didn't always fit in so clearly either. He was in between these things. Especially in the United States, he was a little bit dismissed because his humor was so forward. So he was known as a children's book author, and that misrepresents what he actually did. Munari's sense of play—and I would like to take the same position—has to do with shuffling the givens. It's a way of mixing up the situation. So it's very anti-expert, that's for sure.

But play is also in some way anti-authority. Or it disperses authorities by showing that it can be arranged this way—or can you arrange it this way, or this way, or

this way? Why don't you decide how it's arranged. I heard somebody else describe play not in terms of fun but in terms of a piece not fitting the right way with another piece. "There's some play in the way my bike wheel goes together." And I liked that version of it very much—or that idea mixed with the idea of fun.

I can describe a little bit about that one Munari course you mentioned. The name of this course was "Modulation and the Fourth Dimension," and Munari invited his group of students to make the tallest towers they could out of tetrahedrons—four-sided, triangular, regular solids. He asked them to make the tetrahedrons out of cardboard at a certain size, and then to see how tall of a structure they could manufacture out of the tetrahedrons without glue. His students struggled for quite a while. And their towers went down, and individuals were getting frustrated, and they worked all day. Munari was interested in having them think about the ways in which a module played out over time, repeated and changed, could make another form. In fact, Munari made a little diagram, which I think is really beautiful, which is of an object dropping, and that movement through time creates a form. This is a serious idea, and he had a kind of ethics around it. He said it was important not just to think about the rose in one point of its life but to think about it from bud to death and understand that the whole cycle is one thing.

So anyway, the students worked and for a while they were frustrated. Then at some point they realized, "Oh,

wait, what if we all do this together? We can take all of our tetrahedrons and we can work with them together.” Munari often advocated for working in a group. And so they worked in a group, and they made a giant tower out of these things at the Carpenter Center. I’d love to find images of this. Anyway, that was all broken up finally by a reception, which Munari describes really charmingly at the end of this letter. He says that the students stood around, and they had a glass of red wine in their hand and a piece of cheese and a piece of bread. And the cheese was the shape of a triangle and the glass of wine was a truncated cone, and the bread, of course, was like the cube. I liked that idea, that abstract ideas map back onto the world, and back and forth.

LH : The idea of collaboration is super important. Going back to the context of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, which goes back to the context of the Bauhaus, working together across disciplines to make something new is such an important part of modern design education. It’s interesting that the students in this case spontaneously solved their problem by collaborating.

DR : Munari noted that all but one did it. One chose to go at it alone.

LH : We don’t know the success or failure of that one guy, do we?

I just wanted to mention one more thing on the idea of Munari and play. I can’t not mention this project of his: it’s from 1944, so it predates the moment we’re talking about by twenty years. It’s the one where he’s photographed in a series of different awkward positions in a chair.

DR : I wish I had a picture of it. He’s trying to find a comfortable position for reading. So the work is a grid of images, self-portraits of him in a chair. He’s bending the chair and sitting in all sorts of different ways. The chair is a large La-Z-Boy kind of chair. A funny chair for the time. He has the chair bent over and he has contorted his body in all sorts of different shapes as he reads a newspaper. The images were eventually also printed in a newspaper, which is kind of cool.

LH : I feel like this is another example of searching for the perfect form. He’s contorting his body around his chair in order to demonstrate that there should be a perfect chair. There should be a Platonic form of chair, which we should all be working to achieve rather than a market-based striving for originality. It’s a critique of people trying to be too fancy and creating too many new ideas just to be new. Munari was trying to get people to focus on the fundamentals of chairness.

DR : That’s true.

LH : We're talking about the importance of not knowing, but you are also super skilled. You have mad skills, actually, as a programmer, and you can make anything. So I wanted to ask what knowing does in your work and in pedagogy.

DR : Well, I don't know many things. I know about computer programming, but I'm self-taught, as tons of people are. I've just always followed my interest. I don't know computer programming exhaustively. In general, I don't know a lot of things, and I would hate to know too much in a classroom setting. I'm already worried about the physical dynamics of the room, with me somewhere in it, or the form of showing slides. To undo those dynamics is difficult at best, although there are lots of strategies I've tried. Sometimes, I just walk out of the room. That's good. I don't know too much about any one thing, and I'm quite certain I know a little about a lot of things.

LH : I, too, am a generalist.

There are so many more things that I wanted to ask you. I don't know if we have time to talk about empiricism versus rationalism.

DR : Maybe you can give a capsule description of it first. You're the one who taught me about this.

LH : I'm just going to read from William James, and then maybe that will be the end.

So, pragmatism. I was told to read the pragmatists by Krzysztof Wodiczko, who was the director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies when I was there. For William James, truth and its making is an empirical process based on working through existing givens rather than working top-down, or from elsewhere, which is a rational process. James writes, "No particular results then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means. *The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.*"³

DR : Lovely. I remember when you put me on to reading that book, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. I read it again and again, and each time I thought I grasped it, and then at some point I just realized, "Oh, right. The form is part of its argument." So James talks in circles, but he's also talking about a way of being in the world. A way that's about building it up, piece by piece, without knowing the entire structure. And that is so fundamentally my outlook on life that I find that book, and other writing by William James, retroactively describes so much of what I think and how I approach my work.

Design is an inherently rational project. Typically, it is about a top-down structure, improving some situation in the world for a group of people. And so to approach it empirically, where it's about taking one fact and building

that onto another fact, is a different approach, but it's one that helps me move from project to project. It's also an approach that orients my thinking. It makes me skeptical of experts—or at least skeptical of the value of experts. I don't want to sound like I'm not believing the science, but it's a science that has been built up piece by piece, bit by bit, and by moving through the world. And your knowledge is only ever partial, and as you do it yourself, you assemble it in your head. I think this surely has something to do with what draws me to teaching, which is to watch other people assemble it for themselves and decide, "Oh, what I heard is wrong. I see this, which contradicts that, and I'm gonna build on this, and this, and this." You end up with your own point of view. That's great.

LH : Thank you.

LIV PORTE : Hello, David and Larissa. I want to echo Larissa's thank you and welcome everybody who has logged on tonight. David and Larissa, here is a question from the audience: "I wonder if you're noticing the parallels between 1960s Italy and the Boston/Cambridge relationship to the 'industrial' in art and design."

DR : Well, Italy in the 1960s was in the middle of what they call their economic miracle, which was a complete mass industrial project post-World War II in a country that had a great division between the north and the south

in terms of wealth. So mass industry moved in and flourished in Italy at the time.

I actually don't know whether this question is about Boston now or Boston generally, but I can notice similarities for sure. I am always self-conscious about pretending to know anything more about fifty years ago than I do, which is just the little bit that I've gleaned. There was a literal, direct transfer of ideas about art and design, particularly design in an industrial context, from postwar Italy to Boston and Cambridge. Maybe you could speak to this, Larissa. You know lots about Gropius, Kepes, Arnheim, etc.

LH : I also can't jump in here with a really good account of the differences and similarities between the very last product of the Bauhaus, which was the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, and the cultural and industrial moment in Italy that David just described. David and I have talked a little bit about the attitudes and output of the Kepes and Otto Piene years at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. There are similarities but also differences between Kepes and Piene on the one hand, and on the other hand another person David has done a lot of research on: Muriel Cooper, who was at MIT contemporaneously and, like Munari, took advantage of an institution of higher learning to seize on experimentation as a way of being and as a way of moving her own practice forward.

As visual artists working up close to science and engineering, and the impacts those fields were having on society, artists at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies were always trying to go big—to make art on a civic scale. As designers, wide distribution of their work was more of a given, so maybe paradoxically Munari and Cooper felt freer to focus on process. That's what I will say, although I'm casting my mind back a while to work that I was doing and thinking about fifteen years ago. Forgive me if I'm vague.

DR : As a good empiricist, I can give a little fact from fifty years ago, which is Munari writing about his invitation to come to Harvard. From a distance, he of course thought of America as something different from what he saw when he arrived. I have a feeling he saw Italy as being overly industrial. He wrote, "Harvard University, the famous American university, known above all for its freedom of teaching and independence from any connection with the economic and political world, invited me to hold a course for designers at its Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts from February to the end of May."⁴ So you hear that and you have to smirk at "any connection to the economic and political world," because even fifty years ago, surely the university was not in any way disconnected from any part of that world. Today, it's just absurd to imagine that situation, but this is what Munari was imagining from the distance of industrial Italy in the 1960s.

LP : Thank you for bringing in some anecdotes from the archive. Here is a question from Jeffrey Schnapp: "Are you an anarchist? P.S., I have copies of Munari's teaching slides from the Carpenter Center in the Spring of 1967, if you're interested."

DR : Yes. Is that predicated on whether I'm an anarchist or not?

LP : [*Laughing*] I'm less certain about that, but the question is still on the table.

DR : Of course, I'd be very excited to see those slides. That's amazing. I'd be really curious. Am I an anarchist? Not particularly. Is that a good answer?

LP : I'm going to move on to the next question. This attendee writes, "I'm interested in the idea behind the Tetracono, to 'show forms while in the process of becoming.' How does this idea manifest in your own practice?"

DR : Repetition. Seriously, repetition. Not reinventing an idea from scratch, project to project. I think my impulse to collect a constellation of references or things I'm interested in is a way to draw lines through a practice. This is more typical of an art practice. When you talk about artists, you talk about what an artist is interested in over the course of their career. That's not a question that is

typically raised in design. I think I'm particularly interested in connecting those dots in my work, and it's not for anybody outside, it's for me. It's a way to keep moving from project to project and to make sure that I don't let ideas get pushed under the rug because of demands from any specific project. That's not to say I don't deal with the constraints in any one project. Of course I do. And that's why I work as a designer and not something else. I'm drawn to those pragmatic compromises, and everything else that happens in a design project. A lot of my work exploits the fact that the work is going to be around for a while, and I'm always interested in how it changes. Munari's and my point of view is about seeing something through all of its phases rather than seeing one finished, perfect moment. It's not a point of view that's represented in design so often. At least in graphic design—certainly architecture has longer timescales to address. And landscape architecture, choreography.

LH : I'm curious to hear a little bit more about Muriel Cooper, actually. She was interested in design systems that were "responsive," and maybe that is related to what you were just saying with regard to the connections between Cambridge, MIT, and postwar Italy. She is such an important figure in the Cambridge context as well.

DR : Yeah, I coauthored a book with Rob Wiesenberger on Muriel Cooper's work,⁵ which was published on the

fiftieth anniversary of the MIT Press. That project began with the work we did together, Larissa. As I came to the Center for Advanced Visual Studies and was there to just make a website and design a logo or posters or whatever, I stumbled upon some work that I thought was her work. It was not her work, but I knew about her work from having worked for a student of hers. She worked in several different ways at MIT over the course of forty years. She blazed an incredible trail, first as a practicing, working designer, and then as a director of media services and design at the MIT Press, and then later as a teacher in the school of architecture, and then later yet as a researcher and cofounding faculty member of the MIT Media Lab. Through all of this her concerns were really consistent, and they were based on just what you were saying. She was interested in tools of graphic design and how to make them as responsive as possible so that as one would be using these media tools, you'd be able to change your mind. And I know that part of her work has always been very exciting to me. I feel like I do that when I speak. We all do, right? I kind of edit myself as I'm going, or kind of work through an idea by saying it. Maybe not everyone does that, but I do certainly. And so Cooper wanted that for the things that we use to make electronic graphics. I respond to that because it feels like an ethical position about not working from the top down but working from the specifics, and optimizing all the variation and diversity that facts can present.

LP : I'll end the Q&A with some appreciation from an audience member who writes, "Thank you for your presentation, David and Larissa." I'm going to bring Dan back for our closing remarks.

DB : I don't have much to add except to say a big thanks from everyone at the Carpenter Center. I'm glad that we finally got to do this program, David, and we definitely need to have you back digging in the archives—or anyone who's interested in the history of contemporary art and design and the Carpenter Center, for that matter. There's much to be found there. So that's a little plug for researchers. Thank you both so much. I hope everyone will join us on December 10th for our last program of the fall 2020 season, Kemi Adeyemi in conversation with curators Jessica Bell Brown, Lauren Haynes, and Jamillah James. Thank you and goodnight.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bruno Munari, *Design as Art*, trans. Patrick Creagh (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), 25.
- 2 See <https://www.vimeo.com/orgs/tetracono>.
- 3 William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 54–55.
- 4 Bruno Munari, "Una lettera da Munari," *Bit. Arte: oggi in Italia*, vol I, no. 1 (March 1967): 17.
- 5 David Reinfurt and Robert Wiesenberger, *Muriel Cooper* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017).

LARISSA HARRIS

Larissa Harris is Executive Director at Teiger Foundation. From 2009 to 2020, she was a curator at the Queens Museum, where she organized a variety of exhibitions, such as *Red Lines Housing Crisis Learning Center* with Damon Rich and the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) (2009); *The Curse of Bigness*, which included Dexter Sinister, J. Morgan Puett, Survival Research Laboratories, and others (2010); the first U.S. museum show of Sung Hwan Kim (2011); a new work with Pedro Reyes, *The People's United Nations* (pUN) (2013); and a thirty-year retrospective of performance group Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) (2014). She co-organized *13 Most Wanted Men: Andy Warhol and the 1964 World's Fair* with Nicholas Chambers at the Andy Warhol Museum, which opened at the Queens Museum on the fiftieth anniversary of the fair. With critic Patti Phillips, she organized the first survey of the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles (2016). *After the Plaster Foundation, or, "Where can we Live?"* including Simon Leung, Sondra Perry, Caroline Woolard, and others, opened in fall 2020 alongside *The Conference of the Animals*, the first U.S. museum commission of the work of Ulrike Müller. In addition, she helped run the studio program at the Queens Museum and coproduced exhibitions with guest curators, ranging from *Peter Schumann: The Shatterer* with Jonathan Berger (2013) to *Nicolas Moufarrege: Recognize My Sign* with Dean Daderko (2019). Between 2004 and 2008, she

was associate director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, working under Krzysztof Wodiczko; from 2002 to 2003, associate editor at *Artforum*; and from 1997 to 2002, programs associate at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, now MoMA PS1. She has a BA in English from Columbia University and was a 2001 Whitney Independent Study Program Critical Studies fellow.

DAVID REINFURT

David Reinfurt is an independent graphic designer and writer in New York City. He graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1993 and received an MFA from Yale University in 1999. Reinfurt worked as an interaction designer with IDEO (San Francisco) from 1995 to 1997. At IDEO, he was the lead designer for the New York City MTA Metrocard vending-machine interface, still in use by millions of people every day thirteen years later. On the first business day of 2000, Reinfurt formed O-R-G inc., a flexible graphic design practice composed of a constantly shifting network of collaborators.

Together with graphic designer Stuart Bertolotti-Bailey, Reinfurt established Dexter Sinister in 2006 — a workshop in the basement at 38 Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side in New York City. The workshop is intended to model a “just-in-time” (JIT) economy of print production, running counter to the contemporary assembly-line realities of large-scale publishing. This involves avoiding waste by working on demand, utilizing

local cheap machinery, considering alternate distribution strategies, and collapsing distinctions of editing, design, production, and distribution into one efficient activity. Dexter Sinister published the semiannual arts magazine *Dot Dot Dot* from 2006 to 2011. After running O-R-G since 2000, and Dexter Sinister since 2006, Reinfurt in 2012 set up The Serving Library, a 501(c)(3) organization, with Stuart Bertolotti-Bailey and Angie Keefer. The Serving Library is a cooperatively built archive that assembles itself by publishing. It consists of 1) an ambitious public website, 2) a small physical library space, and 3) a publishing program, which runs through 1 and 2.

Reinfurt began teaching at Princeton University in 2010. Before coming to Princeton, he held teaching positions at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation; the Rhode Island School of Design; and Yale University School of Art. On arrival at Princeton, Reinfurt worked to reestablish the Typography Studio and introduce the study of graphic design as a practical and theoretical starting point for students from all corners of the university as well as visual artists. Reinfurt was a 2010 United States Artists Rockefeller Fellow in Architecture & Design. He has exhibited widely, and his work is included in the permanent collections of the Walker Art Center, Whitney Museum of American Art, Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art. Reinfurt was

the 2016–17 Mark Hampton Rome Prize fellow in Design at the American Academy in Rome. *Muriel Cooper*, a book about the pioneering designer co-written with Robert Wiesenberger, was released in 2017 by the MIT Press. A **New* Program for Graphic Design* was published in 2019 by Inventory Press and D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers.

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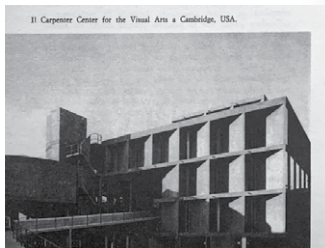


Image of the Carpenter
Center in Bruno Munari's *Design
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