Seventy-nine
Short Essays on Design
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Seventy-nine Short Essays on Design brings together the best of designer Michael Bierut's critical writing—serious or humorous, flattering or biting, but always on the mark. Bierut is widely considered the finest observer on design writing today. Covering topics as diverse as Twyla Tharp and ITC Garamond, Bierut's intelligent and accessible texts pull design culture into crisp focus. He touches on classics, like Massimo Vignelli and the cover of *The Catcher in the Rye*, as well as newcomers, like *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* and color-coded terrorism alert levels. Along the way Nabokov's *Pale Fire*; Eero Saarinen; the paper clip; Celebration, Florida; the planet Saturn; the ClearRx pill bottle; and paper architecture all fall under his pen. His experience as a design practitioner informs his writing and gives it truth. In *Seventy-nine Short Essays on Design*, designers and non-designers alike can share and revel in his insights.

79 Short Essays on Design Details

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From Reader Review 79 Short Essays on Design for online ebook

Jaireh says

Though most of the articles hover between snobby graphic designer insider banter and thoughts on kerning, grids, Massimo Vignelli's preferences for writing implements, gossip between different graphic design camps and movements, there are about five articles that save this book:
a) the essay on bullshit wherein Beirut admits openly that a lot of work that involve creativity and aesthetics involve a creative leap (all of which are counter to whatever rationale aka bullshit you'll have to come up with to justify your decisions
b) the coverage of the early days of Tibor Kalman where he argues that graphic designers (or all applied artists)'s main purpose should be to create trouble and I quote," Were not here to help clients eradicate everything of visual interest from the face of the earth. We're here to make them think about what's dangerous and unpredictable. We're here to inject art into commerce. We're here to be bad"
c) some handwringy article about an a designer's dealing with concepts of "authenticity" -- its awkward and unresolved but I share the same feelings
d) a mention of Hitchcokian McGuffins!
e) a great article on Josef and Anni Albers retrospective wherein Beirut argues art can be cold and design can be so celebratory of life (who would have thought!)

Andrea says

A collection of very short (2-4 page) essays on design ~ mostly graphic design, but also the culture of design, designers, advertising, architecture, and life in general. Bierut, of Pentagram and Design Observer fame, astutely notes that design is about life, not just typography and style. I'll admit I skimmed a few of the essays, as some caught my eye more than others. The book itself is a visual pun, with each essay in a different font. Good observations. Could make a nice gift for the right design-critical friend.

Marjolein says

Not all articles were relevant to me but it was still a good and interesting read!

Annie says

Yes, short essays indeed. Short essays that don't really say much of anything. To me, his book is a waste of time. I was forcing myself to read it hoping it would get better, but couldn't really bring myself to finish it. The fact that it wasn't design heavy wasn't the issue, he warns you he's going to veer off into different topics, hoping to open your eyes to more than design, but that can't really be done in an average of 2 pages with type that constantly changes without the perspective constantly changing. Design doesn't have to be obvious, especially when we're trying to read. The looking closer series are better. Maybe I will pick this up when I want to give it another chance, or when I have nothing better to read.

Jacob says

I picked up 79 Short Essays on Design the way I pick up most of my nonfiction: It was on sale, featuring a topic I knew nothing about but could see enjoying learning about, and a little voice in my gut said, "Yes." (Not to mention a quick look-up on Goodreads, something I do for most blind book purchases.) Not bad criteria, really--I've had pretty good success with the method so far--but it explains some of the problems I encountered while reading.

The first problem is a me problem: I am not the intended audience. The intended audience is people who actually know something about design. Professionals, doubtlessly. Students studying design to become a professional. Perhaps learn-on-the-go types without formal training, but who've thrown together some websites. The closest I come to design is trying to pick which free, pre-made Tumblr layout best frames my reblogged content. I reckon, like a lot of people who appreciate art and creativity, I feel like I know good design when I see it, but that doesn't equip me to be able to understand design on any real level. And because I am not the intended audience--a random, lay reader--I think it goes without saying that I would not be able to grasp 79 Short Essays on Design's strengths like someone who *does* understand design.

Luckily, while I am not the type of reader author Michael Bierut was envisioning, he has a good, casual writing style that smooths over some of the knowledge gap. Also helpful are the short chapters (that my Kindle routinely estimated at 3 minutes in length) and a semi-regular focus on identifiable topics, including the old red The Catcher in the Rye cover, Stanley Kubrick, the Target logo, and the foibles of exercise.

The chapters vary between personal anecdote, rumination on "current" events, critical analysis, historical perspective, and lecture. The variety (as well as the aforementioned bite-sized essay length) helps keep things moving. And even though I don't speak the language of design, a lot of Bierut's observations can be helpful to any sort of endeavor, especially creative ones. I could see applying various bits of advice to writing or music composition; we think of design as visual (like a magazine layout) or utilitarian (how a product is put together), but really, while we don't say we "design" a novel narrative, there are similar principals at play.

Unfortunately, the biggest flaws are those that can't be chalked up to simply me not having a design background.

Most of the essays in this collection were pulled from Design Observer, a website co-started by Bierut. Thus they take on a blog post tone which, to me, is a much different feel than the word "essay" implies. I don't want to denigrate blogging, which is itself a fine artform, but it does lack the sort of rigor I expect from an essay. The "essays" just sort of peter out at the end of their allotted length and often feel oddly weighted, as if Bierut excited wrote a page and a half introduction to an idea then only had a page to ruminate on it. Sometimes the focus is hazy, sometimes it feels like Bierut doesn't really know what he wants to communicate about the subject and simply cycles around an idea for three pages.

Also, it feels like the content wasn't adjusted at all for book compilation. None of the essays are aware of each other, so there is duplicity, even in basic things like what acronyms mean or who various people are. Bierut, who seems to write based off of what is inspiring him at the time, makes regular use of "Recently," or "Several weeks back" or other non-helpful time designations. These are completely unhelpful in a book removed from the original time-stamped context of a website. It becomes even more amusing when looking

up an event that prompted a "recently" and seeing it was in 2004. Even when the book was published (2007) I'd hesitate to call that recent.

But in my mind the most egregious error was the failure to add any visuals. It's a book about design and it's very weird to be reading an essay about the design of something specific (Rob Roy Kelly's woodcuts, say) without a visual example for the reader to see. Maybe a lot of them are basic enough Bierut didn't think their audience would need a visual reminder, but I'm confident that the majority of graphic designers won't be familiar with *everything* Bierut talks about.

I'm neither displeased that I read 70 Short Essays on Design, nor that I bought it. But it feels like a lesser product than it should be.

Michaela says

I really enjoyed most of these essays which have been compiled from Michael Bierut's blogs on http://www.designobserver.com. I love that each is set in a different typeface. i found myself looking to the back of the book each essay to see if i was correctly identifying them. Each one is only a couple pages so if you arent very interested in one of them you can quickly move on to the next. I keep this book on my desk at work for quick amusement and enlightenment. Absolutely a great book for any designer.

Salomé Esteves says

To read this book while being a designer is to be faced with two realities: the first is that familiarity you have with some of the stories and, on the other hand, to be confronted with the million of other things you have left to learn. I love Michael Bierut's work as a designer, and, turns out, he can be a good writer too: simple, to the point and with a bit of humour that always makes a good impression when you talk about design. For me, as a designer who is writing a master's project on design, this was usefull, practical and funny. But I do have a point to make, designways. This book was the hardest to read. I usually read on public transportation on my way to or out of work, which can be hard because of curves, bumps in the road, shadows or traffic. This 79 short essays are set in 79 different typefaces. Although it is theoretically well thought, this makes reading hard. I actually had a couple of headaches due to the constant variation of typefaces in addition to be reading in a moving vehicle. Turns out, reading a three page essay set in futura light italic is not very easy.

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jonathan berger says

Good clean fun. Beirut may be a little eager to fall in line with the establishment, but that's kind of refreshing in an industry glutted with self-congratulatory nonconformists and wannabe revolutionaries. He's a talented writer, and has a nice way of drawing substantial connections or narrative arcs in two- and three-page pieces. Also, the gimmick of the book--79 typefaces for 79 articles--works surprisingly well.

Chris says

Before: I've wanted to read this since it came out, but it's not available at our library and I kept putting off purchasing it. This week the e-book was marked down to just a few dollars so I finally have it in my hands! I hope the layout doesn't suffer from the e-book format, but the content should be great regardless.

After: The design didn't suffer at all. From what I could tell by looking up the paper version online, the two are very similar. There aren't any images in the book, and it was fun to test my memory of typefaces or iconic images as I was reading. I really enjoyed the essays and learned a bit along the way. The last one had me laughing out loud in a waiting room.

Steven says

The majority of what's collected in this book are reviews, but they sometimes read like essays. Because of this, Bierut's writing refers to controversies and hot topics at the time and they occasionally show their flaws in the light of the passing years. Some are remembrances of influential designers, artists, photographers, and creative persons who have recently passed away and played some role in shaping Bierut's life. But the best work comes in the form of the more recognizable essays, that is, the writings that transcend time while capturing it. A shining example of Bierut's congruent power of writing as a designer can be seen in "On (Design) Bullshit." Bierut recounts one of the major confrontations between architect Richard Meier and artist Robert Irwin in the 1997 documentary, "Concert of Wills," which chronicles the construction of the Getty Center in Los Angeles. He finishes the piece with an example from his years working as a designer with Massimo Vignelli. What is evident in reading these 79 articles is that designers are influenced by any and everything, even falling off a treadmill at the gym.

Given that this is a book on design written by a notable designer (Bierut is a partner in renowned international design agency Pentagram), the content and how it is packaged are presented in a clever manner: each article is presented in a different typeface, most of which is connected to or referenced in the article. (See "I Hate ITC Garamond.")

Viktoriya Tsoy says

This book was recommended to me by my typography teacher. What I really appreciated from him [teacher] was the way he connected design to life and life to design. Well I guess this recommendation is not surprising because this book does just that. Michael in a brilliant and eye opening way tells a story of life. It's the life most creatives are familiar with - judging your role in society, anxiously working on things that are to be unique and creative and battling stubborn clients. (This book however is also very very humorous, the kind of book that both educates and inspires you while making you chuckle at the subtle remarks.) I've learned so much about the design world that I was unaware of, I related and discovered things about both past and present. I now know more about Michael and his road to where he is now, as well as his interests and thoughts. (Creepy, I know, but somehow prideful fact.) Either way, designer or not the book is a great read. It will have you agreeing, laughing and questioning Michael. However you feel about design, you will walk away with a great insight to that world, as well as a deeper understanding of the resin behind our madness.

Sarah says

Clever, witty, and certainly well-informed, Bierut takes the reader on a romp through the "behind the curtain" of graphic design life, interspersed throughout with his own musings and accounts. As a graphic designer, it was fun to read a work written by someone so talented and renowned (who writes just as adeptly as he designs). Really lively prose.

Leila says

Michael Bierut is one of the few famous graphic designers who is also a genuinely nice guy. And one of the best critics, I've ever had. I spent the whole time reading this book, smiling and nodding, laughing to myself and thinking, "Yes! Thank you for saying that!" I recommend it to everyone I know who is not a graphic designer so they'll know what all us designers are nodding and laughing about.

Plus, every essay is set in a different typeface.

27 says

A must read. Why? Informative without being a dull textbook. Rich of well-known names and experiences that summarizes a decent amount of knowledge for the immature Graphic Designer.

kkurtz says

Don't let the title fool you. This book could just as easily be called 'Seventy-nine Short Essays on Life'. Michael Bierut is a designer & co-founder of the blog Design Observer, where the majority of these essays were culled. Like that blog, this book touches on just as many non-design aspects of life. That is until the reader realizes how much design we actually do come in contact with on a daily basis. The lead essay, 'Warning: May Contain Non-Design Content' sets you up for what is in store. The following seventy-eight wonderfully written & engaging pieces cover such a dizzying array of topics (simply peruse the table of contents on the cover to wet your appetite), that you might just forget you are reading a book on design.