

**2006 AIGA Medalist:
Rick Valicenti**

Recognition
2006 AIGA Medal
Born
1951, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

By Marian Bantjes
September 13, 2006



Recognized for the passion and intelligence of his influential work, inspiration to his colleagues and mentorship to a generation of students.

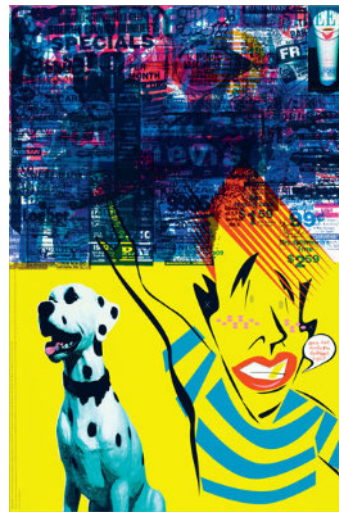
In January 2000 at a New York AIGA event, Rick Valicenti presented a work called “Just My Type,” in which an internet porn actress is guided online to make letterforms with her body. Many people walked out, and the piece became buried under a furor of controversy. It has been resurrected in the monograph of Rick and his company Thirst’s work, *Emotion As Promotion*, and while, on the surface, it could be interpreted as a commentary on sexual politics, commodification and subversion, it bears (as with all his work) further scrutiny.



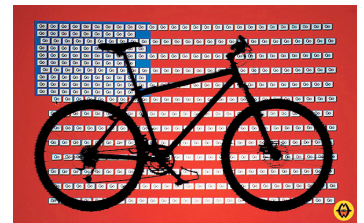
Portfolio piece: For Better or for Worth, 2005



"It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood" poster
commissioned for a tribute to Mr. Rogers, 2005



Portfolio piece: gee dad, modern design, huh?, 1994



Ads for Gary Fisher Genesis Geometry and Sugar
Geometry, 1999

This piece, more than any other, shows the role that relationships play in his work. In the beginning of the narrative, the designer and the actress meet from very different perspectives, each with their own expectations. The interaction begins as almost frustrating, with each struggling to find common ground. Rick wants letterforms; the actress wants to play a scripted sexual role. By the letter “F,” however, they begin to understand each other, and as the actress starts to appreciate and enjoy making letter shapes with her body, Rick begins to engage in their mutual seduction. Viewpoints are exchanged and the result is the connection of both parties, not necessarily controlled by either. To me, this is the key to all of Rick’s work.

Rick Valicenti formed Thirst in 1989 as the evolution of a career already eight years under way. And while employees and contributors have changed over the years (*Emotion As Promotion* lists 82 collaborators), there exists a consistency of personality throughout. I can think of no other body of work by any designer that has the amount of strength that Rick’s does, while simultaneously plundering the depths of style and defying uniformity.

Personality, and indeed Rick’s own personal history appear so often in his work, that to view it as a whole is like taking a walk through his life. But to those who say there is no room in design for the ego of the designer, it should be noted that his work is ultimately collaborative, and that he forms long-term relationships with his clients based on the very things that some criticize him for.

His work with Gary Fisher Mountain Bikes challenged the very concept of how to display, sell and promote something as tangible as a bicycle. Often otherworldly, and sometimes dripping in political or social commentary, Valicenti and Fisher rode in tandem to fame partly on these

electric, visceral pieces. And it is worth noting that bike enthusiasts—not just designers—remember these pieces from a time when personality in product as well as promotion was both appreciated and desired.

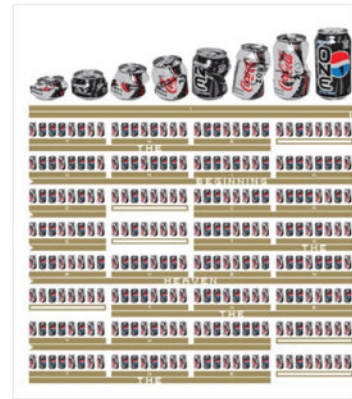
What Rick forms with his clients is a relationship, what they give him is trust, and what results is a personal conversation which draws on all of their experiences and fuses the boundaries between expression and promotion. While each individual piece may at times seem bizarre, slick, cold or inscrutable, the work as a whole has continuity, love, passion and depth. While Rick's style has been emulated, the essence of his work has rarely been repeated.



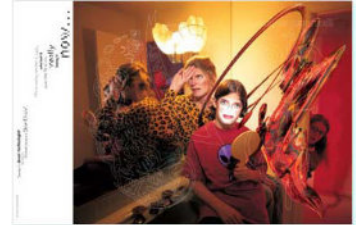
"Tannhauser" poster for Lyric Opera of Chicago, 1988



Portfolio piece: America: Heaven's Gate, 1999



Portfolio piece: Intelligent Design: Creating an evolved red vs blue state of mind (The Thirst Theory), 2005



"The Next Generation" from The Good Life: Bliss in the Hills for Friends of Gilbert Paper, 1997

Since 1988, The Lyric Opera of Chicago has been a client of Thirst. In an arena where most operas are promoted by art kitsch and cliché, The Lyric Opera benefits from Rick's emotional force to evoke the drama and human controversy inherent in operatic works. In a way, this is a perfect fit, as in a sense, Rick Valicenti is an opera of design—though I think perhaps more "Bluebeard's Ghost" than "The Magic Flute."

Another long-term client relationship is with Gilbert Paper, which has resulted, to date, in 16 years' worth of paper promotions and the brilliantly witty identity of Gilbert's paperclip "G." A transcribed conversation between three successive client contacts, as printed in *Emotion As Promotion*, shows the strength of the personal bond between client and designer. In addition to illustrating the level to which Rick was able to push the design outside of their comfort zone, the conversation is extraordinary in revealing the depth of affection these business women felt for their design partner.

In Rick's personal work, all of his love, humor, angst and anger come to the fore. Slyly political, visually sarcastic, aggressively angry, sorrowful and lonely, the work both repels and attracts, toying with our reactions to a bloody heart pinned, still pumping, to his virtual sleeve. And while he is a master of wordplay, the communication in Rick's work is ultimately visual. If graphics are a language, Rick uses it to Shakespearean levels—with abundance, exuberance and sheer delight in visual play.

Always known for his early adoption of technology, and never afraid of special FX, Rick's interests have turned to technology's use as visual production, as evidenced by his 2005 piece "Intelligent Design." Perhaps a commentary on the Religion of Commerce or the Commerce of Religion, this piece employed the use of programming to convert the Book of Genesis to binary code, and then replace the 0s and 1s with an image of either Coke or Pepsi. He has since used this program to collect and place large numbers of images in other projects, and continues to scour the universe for technologies he can bend to the designer's hand.

The man is not dead yet, and as designers and ordinary humans, we can look forward to decades more of collaborations with Rick in mutual seduction, as we learn to bend in ways not previously

imagined. When done, his life's work will be his life: his story as played out on the retinas of countless human presences. One piece of his reads, "I often wonder if I'll have anything profound to say," but to those who look, it's clear that he already has.

Rick Valicenti has a BFA from Bowling Green State University, and an MA and MFA in Photography from the University of Iowa. He has juried countless design awards, including the President's Design Awards, National Endowment for the Arts. His work is included in the permanent collection of The Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum; has been featured, critiqued and lauded in design publications worldwide; and has garnered awards from AR100, *Graphis*, *CA*, *Print*, *Step*, New York Art Directors Club, ACD100, Tokyo Art Directors and *ID Magazine*, among others. He has lectured extensively and exhibited his work around the world. He is a member of the Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI), has served as President of the Society of Typographic Art and was awarded the AIGA Chicago Fellows Award in 2004 for his steadfast commitment to the education of design's future generations.

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