



Steven Heller:

Gail Anderson may be quiet, but she's extremely eloquent, typographically speaking. Like the legendary Herb Lubalin, Gail is one of the most playful and stunning typographers I know. Almost everything she touches turns to type, from twigs to bottle caps to mosaic tiles, even small, furry domestic animals—but that's another story. Sometimes when we're working together I see her staring at me so intensely, I can't help wonder whether she's admiring my movie star good looks, or sizing me up as a letter form. Doubtless, it's the former.

Few designers I know are able to make letters sing and dance. Gail is not just a typographer; she's a choreographer. In her hands letters perform dramatic and comic feats, and in just two measly dimensions, they emote, express, and exude energy that transform a page into a stage. In her graduate design class at the School of Visual Arts, Gail's students are made to sync type to music in some of the most elaborate typographic ballets I've ever seen. Not surprisingly, music plays a huge role in how she practices design, and what ultimately emerges.

Deceivingly reserved at times, she is definitely not shy when it comes to design. She tackles her work with unbridled passion and symphonic energy. She's devoted to her craft and frets for days over the minutest typographic detail. For Gail, God is in the doodads. She also has a relentless, though always natural, pursuit of whimsy that distinguishes her brand of quirkiness from all others. Some might call Gail's method retro, but her work defies stylistic pigeonholes. She is neither modernist, nor post modernist, but rather fusionist. She embraces the vernacular, but respects the classics. She extols the old and makes it new. And don't be deceived. She's one hell of a dragon lady when it comes to kerning and letter spacing.

During the digital '90s, when typography was alternately under and over adorned, Gail exacted the right balance with compositions that were elegant, yet demonstrative, complex or minimal, depending on mood. For Gail, type is like paint on canvas, a means to create shape and color, as well as meaning and message. Whenever she's designing a book that we coauthored together, getting her comps are like receiving gifts on Christmas day, or Hamentashen on Purim.

Now, a little background. After graduating the School of Visual Arts, Gail started her career at Vintage Books. She next moved to the Boston Globe Sunday Magazine, and later graduated to Rolling Stone. There she concocted or helped devise much of the great conceptual typography that defined the magazine's feature pages. And doing so, she significantly contributed to the eclectic typographic trend that prevailed during the 1990s. Working in a cramped office filled with -- from floor to ceiling with all kinds of visual detritus, she fine-tuned her vocabulary of signs and symbols, methods and mannerisms. Her work influenced a slew of designers, who at times borrowed or copied her graphic eccentricities. After Rolling Stone, she joined SpotCo, founded by her former SVA classmate, Drew Hodges, which is now one of the leading entertainment agencies in New York, and where she is now creative director of design.

For the past half dozen years, her poster designs and those she's art directed for Broadway and off-Broadway theater have illuminated bus shelters, subway stations, and billboards.

She has many greatest hits, but maybe she'll be best known for the Avenue Q for her puppet logo, a delightfully witty and indelible brand for the play. About this, she once lamented to me, "I'm definitely wittier on paper than in real life." But I don't believe that for a second. The reason for giving Gail this AIGA award is to recognize her for, and I quote --although I think I actually wrote this -- "Eloquent --"

[Audience laughter]

Getting old. "Eloquent, editorial, and entertainment design using bold innovative typography, illustration and photography to engage audiences with a new standard of emotional and visual connection." Not bad. This is all true, but only part of the story. The official citation fails to acknowledge Gail's extraordinary influence on others as a professional and an educator. The fact is, she is the quintessential mentor, and many in this room can attest to that. I've seen her in school at all hours and weekends, conferring, guiding, and just plain schmoozing with students. She sees the best in all of them and works hard to make certain that that "bestness" comes out.

Gail also has a special flair for working with illustration, and for decades she's been a strong advocate of illustrators. Her former Rolling Stone art director and medalist, Fred Woodward, told me, "With her keen eye for fresh talent, she nurtured a whole generation of illustrators, while staying loyal to the greats as well." Anyone who has watched Gail through her career knows that she always seeks out the visual wink or tiny gesture that adds so much character, in fact, so much joy to her work. She once said about her passion for wood type and other printers' jewels and ornaments, "I love making those crunchy, little objects into other things." Design history is not comprised only of monumental works. Those crunchy little objects also define our rich legacy. Gail's collected doodads, as well as her iconic posters and typography, are just as significant to the past, present, and future of this field. So I am very, very, very, very pleased to present this medal to one who has such an influence on so many, and I love dearly, Gail Anderson.

[Applause and music]

Gail Anderson:

Thank you so much for this incredible award. Thank you to my parents, Lloyd and Nola, who are here this evening.

[Applause]

And my sister and brother, Gerry and Mike, for their continuing and unwavering support for my career choice, especially as a teenager in the Bronx.

I decided to go to SVA to study what was then called commercial art at the encouragement of my high school art teacher, Christine Francis, and the Paul Davis SVA poster that said, "To be good is not enough when you dream of being great." When I think back, I actually chose my college based on that poster. This is true, my first taste of the power of graphic design.

As an aside, the day that Ric Grefé called about the news of the AIGA medal, I'd gotten a call from SVA about doing this year's subway poster. It felt like too many good things at once for

someone who lives in anticipation of an anvil falling on my head at any given moment. So after both incredible things happened in the course of a week in January, naturally I assumed that I would be struck by lightning, and that would be it. And ironically, my house was struck by lightning, truly, just a few weeks ago. So in the end, things have evened out.

So thank you to the mentors and friends I've worked for and learned from. Fred Woodward, for our 14 years at Rolling Stone. Lynn Staley and Ronn Campisi at the Boston Globe, and to Drew Hodges, my boss at SpotCo, who took a chance on a classmate and magazine junkie who wanted to try something new six years ago. And of course, my thanks to my SpotCo co-workers and our clients who have come here this evening to share this great evening with me tonight.

I'm especially honored to have entertainment design recognized. I sometimes wonder if what we do has the same potential for impact as other types of design. But after all these years, I now realize that drawing readers into a story or encouraging them to see a show, making them think or just giving them pleasure, that those are really life enriching services that we're providing.

Thank you to Steve Heller and Louise Fili who've influenced my life and career in so many ways, and to Paula Scher, who I've learned so much from. And to Richard Wild, who introduced me to teaching at SVA almost 20 years ago. I've probably learned as much as I've taught in the classroom, and teaching has proven to be one of the most consistently rewarding things I do.

It's been a tremendous ride so far, and I deeply appreciate the good fortune and belief in me from my friends, my family, and from the design community. Graphic design has evolved so much since my commercial art days in high school, and I'm excited to see what my next 25 years bring, assuming lightning doesn't strike again. So thank you.

[Applause and music]