

## Dr. Ellen Lupton



Ellen Lupton is a writer, curator, and graphic designer. She is director of the Graphic Design MFA program at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore, where she also serves as director of the Center for Design Thinking. As curator of contemporary design at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum since 1992, she has produced numerous exhibitions and books. She recently has focused on bringing design awareness to broader audiences. Her book *Thinking with Type* (2004) is a basic guide to typography directed at everyone who works with words. *D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself* (2006), co-authored with her graduate students at MICA, explains design processes to a general audience. Her newest project, *D.I.Y. Kids* (October 2007), co-authored with Julia Lupton, is a design book for children illustrated with kids' art. Lupton is a 2007 recipient of the AIGA Gold Medal, one of the highest honors given to a graphic designer or design educator in the U.S.

### Questions

1. **When, where, how and why did your interest in information design emerge? Why did you choose it as your main research/practice area?**

I am in love with content. I am a particular kind of designer, one who uses typography, layout, installations, and so on to draw attention to content, whether that content is a text in a book or a work of art in a museum. For me, the medium is not the message; the message is the message, and design is a tool for emphasizing and honing that message. This is what makes me an information designer. Many graphic designers focus on form, and I love those designers and I love their work; indeed, I have devoted much of my career to studying and presenting the work of avant-garde and progressive designers. For me personally, however, I use design as an act of framing and staging content, not as an end in itself.

2. **Could you historicize on your interests/projects?**

I studied art and design at Cooper Union School of Art in New York City in the early 80s. I was always interested in writing about and interpreting design, and when I finished school I became curator of a gallery and collection at the college. Later, I became a curator at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, the only museum in the U.S devoted exclusively to historic and contemporary design. I have held that position since 1993. In addition to my museum work, I produce books on my own and with my students at Maryland Institute College of Art, where I am director of the Graphic Design MFA program. In all these roles—curator, educator, author—I use design as a tool for delivering information. Recently, I have become focused on sharing the techniques of design thinking and production with a broader, non-professional audience (D.I.Y.).

3. **“Thinking with type” is a reference in several design courses in Brazil, specially because it is more critical than most typography books available to us. How do you think your approach towards typographic education differs from the traditional one?**

Typography has a rich intellectual tradition. It is also a practical art, and it is very much

alive and evolving in today's global society. I created *Thinking with Type* because I saw a need for a book that combines practical knowledge with intellectual inquiry. Readers have responded well to this approach. I am very proud of the beautiful edition created by CosacNaify in Brazil.

4. **The new technologies have brought more freedom to the graphic designer to create, manipulate, distort, animate, and deconstruct fonts. What do you think are the implications of such?**

The tools we have access to now have revolutionized our field. This is a spectacular thing. When I was a student in the dark ages before "desktop publishing," our tools were slow, expensive, inflexible, and toxic. Some people bemoan the decline of quality in the age of software, but overall, quality is much better now, and many more people have access to design processes. Sure, there's a lot of crap, but the best stuff being produced today is absolutely terrific, and there is much more design at the high end overall than there was twenty years ago. Design is no longer an exclusive boys' club, either.

5. **Practitioners usually complain that academia does not produce knowledge that is directly applicable to their reality. Do you think information design practitioners are benefiting from the knowledge "generated" by research in this area?**

I don't pay attention to a lot of academic research. I am more interested in the blogs and in everyday journalism.

6. **From your production, it becomes clear that you have an interest in bringing design to a broader audience. What do you think are the benefits of such practice? Could you also mention some of your initiatives in explaining design to the general public?**

Design is a liberating tool. It enables people to create and distribute content, often at a local scale where publishing did not used to take place. Democratic society is enhanced when more people have access to media. The more people understand design, the more respect they will have for it at the highest level. When young people learn to play a musical instrument, they gain a lifelong appreciation for music, even if they don't become professional musicians. Today, the instruments of creative education include video editing software, blogging software, publishing software, Photoshop, and more. Learning to play these instruments gives people power, and it also helps them understand the art and complexity behind contemporary media. Yes, anyone can try it, but few will devote a lifetime to it (and join the Photoshop Symphony). My projects in this area include the book *D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself*, written with my graduate students at MICA, and *D.I.Y. Kids*, created with my sister and our children (2007). I have two forthcoming books in this area as well: *Indie Publishing: How to Design and Publish Your Own Book* (2008) and *Design Your Life* (2009).

7. **Could you anticipate some of the issues to appear on your forthcoming book *Designing with Materials*?**

This new book is written with my friend and colleague Inna Alesina, a brilliant young product designer. Our book shows how to design and invent structures by looking at the behavior of materials and experimenting with them. The book has a strong ecological bent, and it reflects current thinking about product design in relation to users, functionality, and the environment.