

# CRITIQUE

Inside the Minds of  
23 Leaders in Design

**CHRISTINA BEARD**

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Peachpit Press

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**Christina Beard**

Peachpit Press  
www.peachpit.com

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*To my nephew Kai,  
who has helped me see the world  
in so many new ways*

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# FOREWORD

*Ellen Lupton*

What goes on inside a designer's head? Alas, we will never know. What we see of that mental process is what's left behind in sketches, drafts, prototypes, and the occasional post-facto press release. Digital tools allow designers to create endless iterations of an idea, and yet these ephemeral phases of life are often erased at the journey's end. Our digital clouds would crash to Earth under the weight of every designer's iterative load.

Christina Beard set out to record the process of creating a single poster, and she sought to make her endeavor a collaborative one, seeking out advice from leading designers in the field. Much of what happens in the making of a poster, publication, or brand campaign doesn't take place on screen or page at all; it unfolds in conversations between designers, clients, users, and other stakeholders.

This remarkable book tells the story of Beard's encounters with designers around the world who agreed to look at her work and advise her on where to go next. Beard gave herself a simple rule to follow: No matter what her mentors told her to do, she would try her best to do it, even if it sent her on a sudden U-turn or down a dark forest path.

At the core of her experiment was a generic brief: Create a poster encouraging people to wash their hands in the restroom. This universal message intends only to reinforce a simple behavior and awareness in its viewers. And yet the approaches to achieving this end are myriad. Should the poster rely on facts, emotions, or feelings of disgust? Should it praise the viewer or judge them, inform them with data or shake them up with images of pestilence and filth? Should the poster emphasize the social impact of disease control or should it speak to the viewer's private longing for personal well-being? Should the imagery be literal or abstract, scientific or suggestive?

Beard's project, which began as her MFA thesis at MICA (Maryland Institute College of Art), has yielded a compelling story about the design process. As we watch this poster repeatedly reinvent itself, we are invited to join her conversations with a diverse range of designers and critics who speak to us about the state of the field and share their thoughts about design research and experimentation. Designers, educators, and students will have much to learn from Beard's brave quest, as they witness an initial idea twist, turn, and transform in response to fresh waves of input from some of design's most fascinating personalities.

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# INTRODUCTION

Design is limitless.

There are many ways to approach your work, to think about your audience, and to express a message. And there's never one perfect design solution. This book takes you on a journey, meeting with 23 design leaders to see how they would approach a simple task: Create a poster to encourage people to wash their hands.

Throughout this journey I met with leading designers with my poster in tow. At each stop the designer critiqued the current version of the poster and talked about his or her design approach. I then redesigned the poster, based on our meeting, and traveled to the next designer with the new poster.

Meeting with each designer gave an inside look at how they approach their work, what process they use, and where they see the future of design. Each conversation revealed how a designer's background, experience, and personality shapes their work.

This journey started as a graduate thesis at Maryland Institute College of Art. I wanted to design a year-long project that allowed me to gain a broad perspective of the current state of design, rather than concentrate on one school of thought. Each conversation allowed me to learn and inhabit the mindset of an established designer, and the quick iterations enabled me to explore their approach.

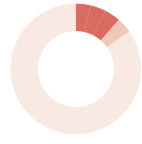
I wanted to know how designers think about their designs. I wondered, "What do they think about first?" "What do they think about last?" "What helps shape their work?"

Learning about their process and approach was important, but it was also essential to observe how they physically responded to the work, how they talked about design, and how their personalities shaped the way they think. I made a set of rules to guide me. It was important for me to meet in person with every designer, a decision that took me to Europe and throughout the United States. The poster had to stay a poster and keep its dimensions of 18" x 24". And finally, it was essential that I strictly follow the advice of each participant, even if it was difficult or uncomfortable.

This book guides you through 23 unique ways of thinking, with short design briefs to inspire you and reshape or redefine your own thinking. It's not meant to be read front to back. Jump around and get to know the designers you're drawn to first, and then return to the ones you're not so familiar with. This book offers an action-oriented guide to mix up your design routine with fresh perspectives. I invite you to explore and experiment by inhabiting the mindset of 23 leaders in design.

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# JESSICA HELFAND



**LOCATION** Yale University, New Haven, CT

**EDUCATION** BA Graphic Design and Architectural Theory, Yale; MFA Graphic Design, Yale

**EMPLOYMENT** Partner and Co-Founder, Winterhouse Studio; Co-Founder, Design Observer; Faculty, Yale University

**DURATION OF REDESIGN** 6 days

*“You want someone to think, ‘Oh shit, I have to wash my hands.’”*



**BEFORE** Jessica's feedback

*“Design is improvisation.”*



Jessica, responding to the poster

“It should feel visceral and emotional and theatrical,” Jessica said, waving her hands in the air.

An hour earlier we met in the dark Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University. We decided to go outside since I would be filming. We walked through the long nave of the Gothic revival building as thousands of stained-glass panes flashed down on us.

“So how many times will you redesign this?” Jessica asked. “And do I get to see all of them?” She seemed excited about the project as we walked quickly looking for a spot to sit outside.

I was nervous. Jessica Helfand is a powerful voice in graphic design. She is a founder of Design Observer; a partner at Winterhouse Studio with her husband, William Drenttel; and a Yale University professor and alumnus.

We sat on a bench in a courtyard. “This is really a great project,” Jessica said. It was a warm September afternoon.

I pulled out my latest iteration. Jessica looked at the poster, pulled back slightly, and responded firmly, “I’m of the old-school, Paul Rand view of the poster.” She looked at me over the rims of her eyeglasses. “It’s the rare time we have the chance to make impact with pure graphic form.”

“You want someone to think, ‘Oh shit, I have to wash my hands.’” She looked down at her hands and acted out the moment. Jessica proposed an action-oriented poster, visceral enough to make someone wash. The poster was too digitally rendered, she said, and the germ culture didn’t read from a distance.

“The illustration looks like a detached piece of cleaning equipment,” she said. She encouraged me to get away from the computer, get my hands dirty, and improvise.

“Design is improvisation,” she said, shaking her fists. She described her own experience with improvisation while drawing a bird’s nest. “It occurred to me one day, drawing the nest, that if I drew the nest the way the bird makes the nest, it would look more like a nest. I just started to draw the lines and started to think about the way they put the twigs together. They go like this and sometimes they go like this, and suddenly it started to have the feeling of a nest.” Jessica proposed I do the same and improvise with behaving like bacteria and exploring new materials.

“It’s an easy thing for you, procedurally, to explore,” she said. “You could put your hands in stuff.” She described many ways of making forms, while actively performing gestures onto the poster. She talked quickly, sometimes stumbling. “I would encourage you to investigate it two ways. One, open up the investigation formally and just see what that thing could be. Does it repeat? Is it a spore? Is it a cell? Is it a bug? Is it many bugs?”

“What if you started out with a totally clean poster and started putting all the crap on top?” She smacked and smeared her hands against my poster. “Then I would just work out the typography on a white space and do this as a second layer, totally separate, and bring them back together and see how they coalesce.”

Jessica paused. She scanned the poster once more and then looked up to me, her glasses slipping down her nose. “I would really blow this thing out. What do you have to lose?”

Jessica’s spirit was contagious. Her energy and optimism inspired me to want to go back to the studio and start redesigning immediately. On the train ride home, I watched the video I shot of our meeting and wrote about the experience. I felt completely reinvigorated about my entire project.

Back at my apartment, I pulled out every tool and material I had—paper, charcoal, acrylic, and watercolor paints—and started to explore. I printed out photographs of bacteria and drew by looking and then moved on to creating imaginary forms. I felt free to make things that didn’t have to work within a poster. I spent two days playing with materials with no end result in mind. I photographed my hands, smeared my hands over charcoal, dipped my hands in paint, and drew little bugs with ink.



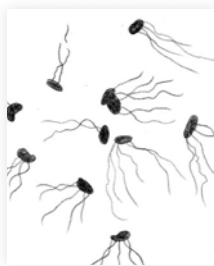
Drawings by Jessica Helfand



Poster from National Library of Medicine



Page from Jessica’s book *Scrapbooks*



**PROCESS** Drawing bugs

Then I examined what I had and developed only the parts I liked. After a couple of days, when I merged the elements together digitally, the poster felt so much more disgusting and gritty. Jessica energized me to improvise, to put my hands in stuff, and to explore the bacterial form before ever touching the computer.

At the same time, her guidance was open-ended enough to empower me as a designer and, ultimately, to express my own creative personality within the redesign.

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## JESSICA HELFAND ON THE HUMAN TOUCH AND EXPANDING THE FIELD

*“...human beings consume design, so why isn’t the process full of that?”*

**Do you have a unique process or approach to design?**

Besides making bird nests the way birds make them?

I studied theatre when I was in school, so I find myself drawn to the actual metaphors of choreography and movement. Actual human beings look at posters, and human beings consume design, so why isn’t the process full of that? When I went to school it was very Swiss. It was very dogmatic. I feel like I’ve had to fight for that right. I think your generation, my students now, feel much more open to varied kinds of work.

As time goes on, the balance for me is more into fine art and less into design. So I find that the more time I spend in the studio, the more facile I become in finding new ways to build form in my design studio.

*“You learn from looking, and look from making, and make from looking.”*

**So this is something you’ve developed over time?**

Very much over time. There was a period when I was very stuck. The times I’ve been stuck have been because of technology.

**If you’re stuck on a solution what do you do?**

Write. Draw. Drawing has taught me the more you don’t know in your mind what you’re going to do, the more it comes out in your hand. You learn from looking, and look from making, and make from looking, and it’s all part of this ongoing process.



### **How often do you experiment?**

Daily, hourly. The other day I was incredibly exhausted. I thought, 'I really need the nap and I don't have the energy to draw,' but I sat down in a chair and I drew for 20 minutes. I felt completely reborn. It's so hard because it's a total blank slate every time you start a project; but you look and you think and you reflect and you draw again and you go back to a drawing you made the day before and you go forward and backward. Drawing is really, really important.

### **How would you describe your voice as a designer?**

Classical. I love history. I wrote a book on scrapbooks, and I teach a course on getting students out of the studio and into museums to look at primary sources like letters and journals and books and playing cards and artifacts. It's about really looking at the world before 2010. I have an incredible love for anything historic. I love vintage clothes. I love old movies.

I find it's that theatrical evocation of something that existed before Starbucks or iPhones, before we became homogenized. I love justified type, really classic typography, photography, old photographs. I love things that can evoke a sequence of time.

### **What's the future of design?**

I think the future of design is much more international. Design is much more collaborative than it used to be. All the designers I know, who I respect, are making their own work. They're not waiting for a client to come to them with a problem.

The profession has an incredible opportunity to become something much greater than just commercial art because, let's face it, that's how it started. But I think it really requires a complete 360 on how we educate students and how we think of ourselves. Even if schools aren't able to make the pedagogical shift right away to thinking more broadly and internationally, we can offer exchange programs and travel grants and getting foreign students here. But it's also about learning how to make design more accessible in other parts of the world.

The world needs people to do much greater things, that have to do with people and their needs and education and communication. That's my new crusade. I want to make more things and I want to make things for and with people outside the confines of my practice.

It's a great time to be a designer because it doesn't limit you at all. But you have to think of it as a portal into something much greater than just making a poster or making a brochure.

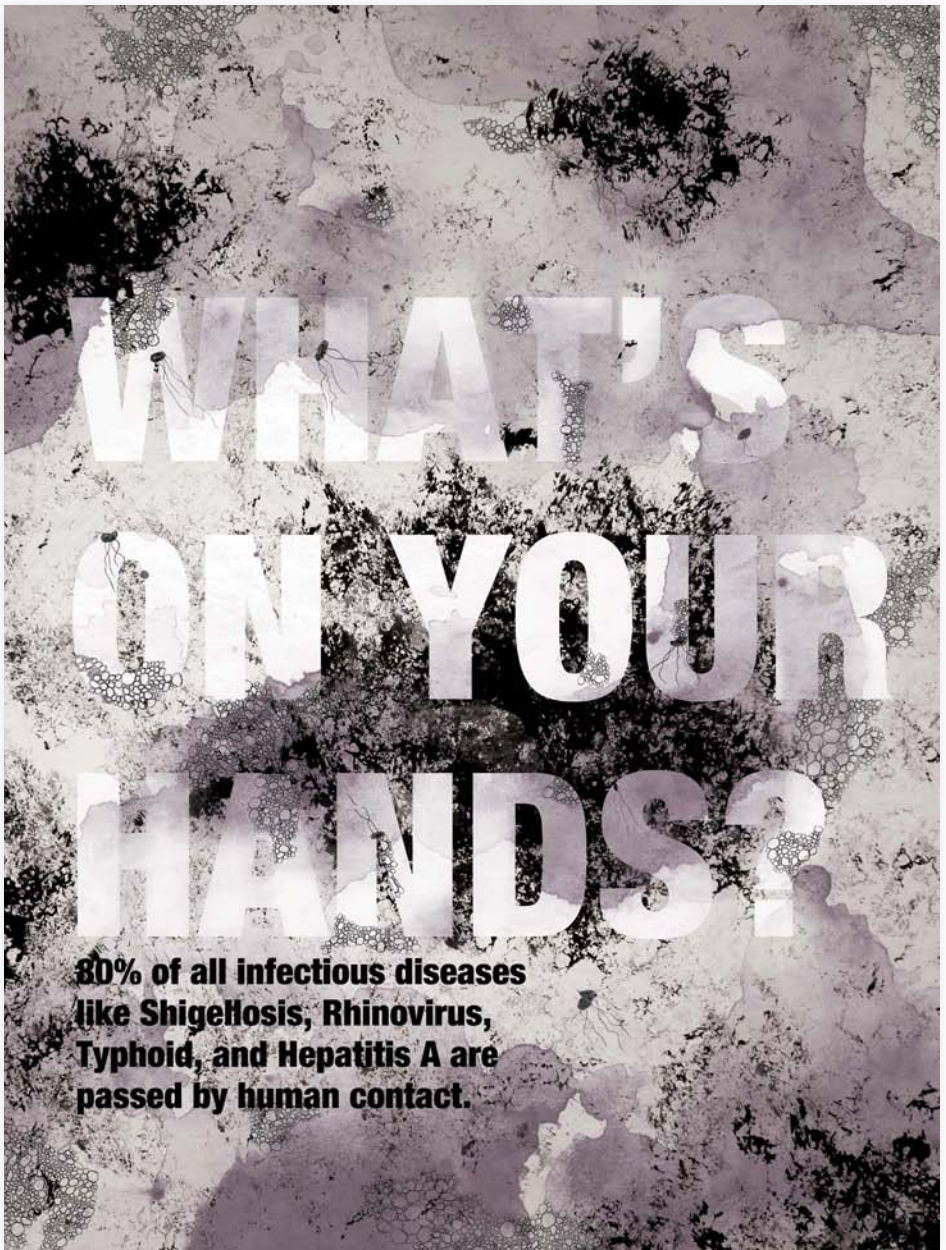


Book by Jessica Helfand

# IMPROVISE WITH DESIGN, BECOME YOUR SUBJECT

Think about becoming your object, whether it's a germ or a character. Draw and write and don't think about the end result. Just free yourself to explore. After a thorough exploration, pull elements you want to move forward with and start forming them into a layout.





AFTER Jessica's feedback

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