

Based in New York and formed by designers from M&Co and VH-1, Number Seventeen has successfully exported graphic design sensibilities to the TV screen and the Internet. Interview by David Comberg.

↓ In a small office on the sixth floor of an old brick building, just south of the intersection of Broadway and Canal Street, Emily Oberman and Bonnie Siegler are looking for the video tape containing their most recent work. In this studio with the cryptic name, a group of designers are producing some of the freshest design in the city. With clients in broadcasting, publishing and on-line services, they make crisp typography for print and video and clever, quirky designs for TV, only steps from the noise of Canal Street. There, in a circus of motion, street merchants in tiny stalls hawk fake Chanel bags and Rolex watches while the smoke from grilled sausages coats everything with a thin film of grease. "Magic Mouse, Magic Mouse, get your Magic Mouse - one dollar, three for two," a vendor calls out. The physical distance between the street commerce and the office is minimal but they seem worlds apart. It is within this context that Number Seventeen (or no 17 when they're feeling less formal) works. And with a batch of recently completed projects they seem poised to make a national, even an international, impression.

Formed in 1993, Number Seventeen is a design office that freely moves among the unstable boundaries that separate print, broadcast and multimedia.

Before developing their partnership, Oberman worked at the influential 80's office of M&Co., where, with Tibor Kalman, she designed their first major video project, the Talking Heads' "Nothing But Flowers" music video. Siegler, meanwhile, as design manager, helped establish the identity for VH-1, the music channel for those who had outgrown MTV. The two long-time friends worked out of Siegler's apartment before setting up their present office.

Number Seventeen stands out with its intelligent and witty sensibility, emphasising the client's need to communicate clearly while slyly delivering an intravenous dose of its own off-beat aesthetic. "The Talking Heads' video was my first foray into video and a good deal of the design happened because we didn't know a lot about the technology," explains Oberman, "we followed our instincts and ideas." In the video, they blend and juxtapose the ironic lyrics heard in the song with words and phrases extracted and placed over, around, and on top of the band's performance. "The people and the set are like a page," she says, and the word play, especially the sequential projections of lyrics on singer David Byrne's face, make for a wonderfully engaging read.

Both women are natives of the New York City suburbs, Oberman from Yonkers and Siegler from Long Island, and it is clear from talking with them that they must have watched identical TV shows and listened to the same records while growing up. When asked what has influenced their present work, they respond as if they've been asked the question before and answer alternately: Elvis Costello, the Imperial Bedroom album, and The Beatles' White Album, MAD Magazine (the intelligent and satirical comic book), Andy Warhol and Madonna. And they nod in agreement on the great cultural significance of the TV sitcoms Mary Tyler Moore Show, The Partridge Family and The Simpsons. Both are traditionally trained graphic designers, Oberman at The Cooper Union in New York, where she also studied film, and Siegler at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University, where she minored in writing. Their extra-visual interests play heavily into their work. "We've managed to get away with doing work that we want to do," says Oberman, as she unconsciously glances through the scraps of phone messages Siegler has quietly passed to her. And this attitude, that they've somehow been able to avoid the work that so many designers accept and rationalise as 'something to pay the bills', flows throughout the studio.

Office manager Nomi has finally found the sought-after videotape and Oberman sets up the first piece on the reel as she pops it into the VCR. It is a startling commercial for Conde Nast, the stylish publisher of glossy pulp like Travel and Leisure, Gourmet Magazine and Vogue. It positions them as purveyors of 'content' within the barren terrain of the information superhighway. Throughout the sixty second ad the camera moves hypnotically across an Orwellian landscape of video displays, projected images and teleprompters, circling a large microphone while Linda Hunt's low-pitched voiceover intones about the information society: "The 500 channel man is coming. He's got all the satellites winking at each other. When an anxious 50-something male speaker steps forward to begin his speech near the end of the ad, he glances down to find that the pages of his announcement are blank. The narration concludes with a solemn warning: "The importance of technology will never be greater than the ideas it is meant to convey."

Humour infects Number Seventeen's projects and their work with Saturday Night Live, the ageing but occasionally funny late-night comedy show, exemplifies the shared wit of the partners. Commercial parodies on SNL have given Number Seventeen a chance to lampoon the very design they've helped →



- 1 2 3 4
- 5 6
- 7 8 9 10
- 11 12 13

- 1) Emily Oberman (left) and Bonnie Siegler
- 2) Office postcard
- 3) Radar CD for Walter Salas-Humano
- 4) 6) 10) On-screen ident for daytime network TV program
- 5) Book cover for Double X, an encyclopaedia of feminism
- 7) 8) 9) 11) Commercial for magazine publisher Conde Nast, positioning it as a content provider within the information superhighway
- 12) 13) Logos for Latin American TV station (above)

develop. In Paradox, a send-up of a well-known Subaru campaign, they spoof a whole genre of TV design and typography. Paradox, a newly engineered car with a huge chassis (but very compact), lots of power (but no brakes) and a roomy interior (with just one big door), is consistent with the satirical style of both SNL and Number Seventeen. As in the Talking Heads' video, key words spoken by the suave announcer glide effortlessly across the screen as they are recited, creating both a visual flow and a temporal disjoint. As Oberman paused the tape I asked what liberated typography and graphics from simple scrolls and crawls and moved it to the forefront in television. Was it the replacement of 'character generators' with desktop computers? "One of the reasons typography on TV changed was the mute button on the remote control," she replied firmly. "Even with the sound off the advertisers could still get their message through with type." Siegler agreed, but added that the technology contributed, too: "As computers got simpler and younger people and designers started doing what the video technicians used to do, the whole field changed. That's why MTV was so revolutionary."

The United States of Poetry, a TV series about America as seen through the eyes of director Mark Pellington and the words of some sixty poets of all strata, has just aired in the States. The project offered the studio, which designed the show's identity, the CD-ROM package and the many on-air interpretive typographic sequences, an opportunity to play both sides of the line separating print and TV. The program has come under criticism from poetry purists for commercialising the tradition of printed-page poems.

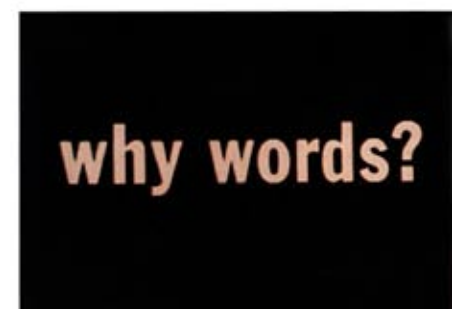
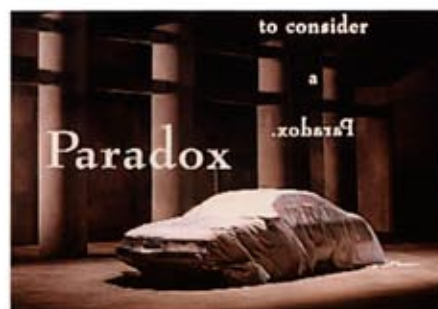
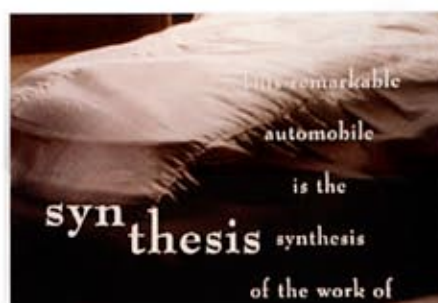
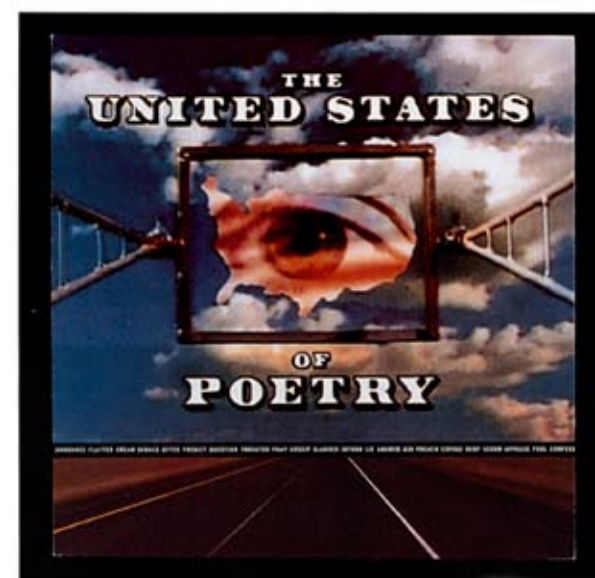
Do the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Rita Dove really need music, cinematic interpretation and expressive graphic treatments? Those questions aside, Number Seventeen's design proves typography – both printed and in video – to be an index to the time; a marker of aesthetic sensibility within a changing culture.

Oberman and Siegler dismiss my romantic perception of their small studio, working amidst the large agencies and within the system of giant media companies. Many cable channels and networks, in fact, seek small independent design firms who they feel can speak to their young audiences. And when I bring up the matter of women working in a traditionally male field Siegler abruptly ends the matter with "we don't think of ourselves as a 'women-owned' business, just as a business." They admit, however, that the question about women in design comes up a lot when they lecture and teach. Noted.

For the past two years both women have taught a semester-long course, 'Design for TV', in the Yale School of Art's graduate design program. In the corner of the conference room/screening room/lunch room where we're talking, David Israel, one of the studio's students from Yale, is working on a project for MTV. He was hired after graduating and has been with the firm for nearly a year. "It's not really that much different from school," he says, laughing about his answer and barely taking his eyes off the work he's doing. His graduate project, an elaborate multimedia production, was an appropriate bridge to where he is today. "My thesis considered TV as a model for graphic design and interactive media, rather than looking strictly at books, which is

1 2 3
4
5 6 7
8 9 10

- 1] United States of Poetry, audio CD
- 2] 4] Commercial for radio station in Chicago
- 3] 7] 10] Parody of car commercials for Saturday Night Live
- 5] 4] 8] 9] Short typographic treatment of text by artist Jenny Holzer, for United States of Poetry TV program



what I was used to doing." Oberman adds, "we look for more than well designed portfolios and technical experience, we look at the person – who they are and how they think – and we love a good sense of humour."

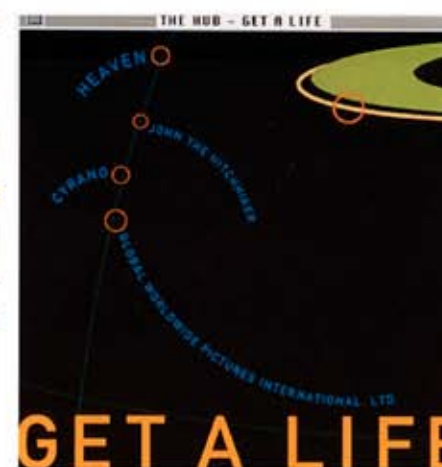
The inevitable matter of multimedia has come up and Oberman and Siegler return again to their belief that the medium is not the issue. But Number Seventeen has just completed a major interactive project, and this last project we discuss is not on the video. The Hub is a site for America Online, developed in conjunction with New Line Television. It is a synthesis of interactive technologies and television programming and offers users access to a range of programming, from professional daily Dream Analysis to a 'What Should I Wear?' forum and love advice from New York radio personality and sex therapist, Dr. Judy. The press release calls it 'new entertainment for a new generation using a new medium.' The Hub's design is consistent with David Israel's view that television provides an appropriate model for interactive media. Although it's not yet clear how much new media work will be added to Number Seventeen's portfolio, the studio seems certain to approach interactive projects with the same sense of style and spirit as it has broadcast and print projects. I asked if there was a different criteria in designing The Hub; was there something more improvisational necessary in the design process when you had little control over the experience? "We take the work seriously and find joy in figuring out how to design for new media," Siegler says about the project. "Designing The Hub was like designing a world or a theme park where you can't predict how someone will use it." Oberman adds,

with a laugh, "like going from Space Mountain over to Pirates of the Caribbean and then to Bear Jamboree!"

Within their worlds of moving type, image and sound, Number Seventeen roughs up the smooth surface of the television image, planting lures that tickle and hook the viewer like a good riff in a song. Typography and image relationships are often strikingly clear, avoiding the overused blur and fragmentation that often cripple imagination. Analogies to music are particularly appropriate referents when trying to place the work. "One of the greatest things about working in film and video," Oberman tells me, "is the fact that we get to use music and sound." Reflecting back on the video tape, I become aware of how much the process and pleasure of making are evident in the studio's designs. At the opening of the reel, before the Conde Nast spot, there was a sequence of image bits and sound, like the paper scraps left over from a print project. A cream pie smashing into the screen, the sound of a guitar feeding back through an amplifier and a finger tapping on the screen suggest the studio's eclectic and free style – while occasionally thumbing their noses at mass culture they thoroughly enjoy working within it.

Walking out and back into the mayhem of Canal Street, with billboards and lettering everywhere, the number seventeen is lodged in my mind. "It's a great name for a studio," Israel said, "people are constantly asking 'is it floor 17, or room 17?' Ordering take-out food is really confusing." A precise definition of the number is impossible but the pleasure of the questions it raises are more certain – it could be many things, or nothing, or just seventeen. □

0017
+1 212 966 5335



1 2 3
4 5
6 7 8

- 1] 2] 3] 4] 5] 6] 7] 8] Screen design for The Hub, a new America On-Line conference site with daily programming and live shows
- 7] End frame from MTV commercial, designed to 'interact' with the surface of the screen
- 8] Underwater MTV spot promoting Summer programming schedule

