

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Matt Keegan

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Matt Keegan interviews Milton Glaser

Matt: In *Milton Glaser: To Inform and Delight*, Wendy Keys's 2010 documentary on your life, you briefly mention that you went abroad for a semester as an undergrad at Cooper Union, and studied in Bologna with Giorgio Morandi. Could you elaborate on what your experience was like?

MG: It's interesting. I always tell the story about Morandi and the fact that we essentially never spoke about art, and he never really reviewed or criticized one's work. He was teaching at the Accademia in Bologna, and he taught kids who had no experience with etching, or in many cases, who had no experience making art at all. He was a modest man. If he had been in the United States, he undoubtedly would be teaching some kind of master class in advanced painting, but in Bologna he taught the most basic introduction to the mechanics of etching. What I learned about him more than anything was his commitment to the idea of making art. Morandi was a man of incredible integrity. His work possessed him. He would teach a couple times a week, but then he would go home and paint the rest of the day, every day, until his death. He also enjoyed a good meal, and in Bologna he was fortunate to be in a place where the food is arguably the best in Europe. So—he liked going to nice restaurants. But besides that, he seemed to be a man with almost no personal needs except to make his paintings. And thank God for that. When I finally saw the 2008 survey of his work at the Met, I realized the extraordinary variation and development in his paintings more than ever. When you look at Morandi's work quickly, you think that it's the same thing over and over again. But when you regard it with some attention, you discover that the range is fantastic. The modesty of the paintings and their lack of drama keep you from noticing at first. Later you feel changed by the experience, and you no longer look at the world the same way. The sense of attentiveness that art develops is one of the distinctions between what is art and what is not.

Matt: That's a good segue to my next question. I'm sure you've thought about this at length: Why is it that so many of your works—your illustrations, your lithographs, your logos—have had such tremendous staying power? I'm thinking in particular of the Bob Dylan lithograph of 1966, the "I ♥ NY" 1970s campaign, your work for *Angels in America*, and the more recent "I ♥ NY More Than Ever." What conclusions have you come to about why those particular works generate such strong and enduring resonances?

MG: It's a tough question, and a complex one. Why things persist in the mind is a fascinating study. One reason—the part that can be more or less logically interpreted—is that Dylan is a popular figure in American culture, and the "I ♥ NY" logo was transmitted all over the world. The frequency—people saw these over and over again—certainly has something to do with it. On the other hand, there are times when an idea or object is frequently repeated but has no staying power; it just eventually disappears. I don't understand, truly, because I don't think the reasons are logical, ultimately. I believe that the popularity came from intuitive responses to the material, and the question of what provokes a memory is a very complex one. Another reason may be related to the moment in time in which the work occurs. When I made "I ♥ NY More Than



Ever," it was a sentiment that many people in the city were feeling as a community. After 9-11, everyone realized how vulnerable the city is. And how much you loved it. It's the same way when someone you know suddenly has a heart attack and you think, "Oh my God, I really love this person!" The realization of your feelings is triggered by the sense of possible or actual loss. In some cases, as with this particular updated work, the emotional trigger probably has a lot to do with why it persists in people's memory. But why "I ♥ NY"? I went to Chinatown a couple months ago with my wife, and I hadn't been for a while. All of Chinatown is "I ♥ NY." There must be five million "I ♥ NY" t-shirts in Chinatown.



Matt: Easily!

MG: Every façade. . . All you can see is "I ♥ NY." You realize how incredibly pervasive that image has become—in part because it started here and spread out from here, and things that start in New York tend to receive an extra boost in people's consciousness. But why this particular iconography became memorable remains a great mystery to me.

Matt: After watching *To Inform and Delight* and in going through your monograph *Art is Work*, it feels as if you are directly engaged with the music, objects, restaurants, and publications that you have designed for. There is a palpable intimacy. I wonder if this engagement is what generates longevity for a particular image: your proximity. It doesn't feel like you are making just one more graphic or one more logo.

MG: Maybe the issue is related to when I started my career with a sense that modernism wasn't the answer to every design problem. I felt that you couldn't start with an idea about form until you understood the content. So early on, my work was viewed with some disdain because I wouldn't agree that reductivity, simplicity—all the tenets of modernism—were the solutions to everything that came along. Modernism was a style as much as it was an ideology. When I began a project, I wanted to find the best way to reflect an idea visually. But I've always been slightly out of mainstream design. For instance, I make no distinction between illustration and design; they're both ways of expressing ideas. Why cut yourself off from imagery that is understandable in favor of a geometric response to an abstract idea? Abstraction was perceived to be on a higher plane of narration. Everybody came to the idea that modernism was the way in, and if you did things that represented reality in a more narrative way, you were stupid. The idea that you use whatever pictorial means that you had at your disposal—I got this from Picasso, who just abandoned everything along the way. I thought his approach was nice: Do whatever you want, whenever you want to do it, and don't feel that there is only one appropriate way to work.

Matt: Another question I have is about duration and change. Over your long career, so much has changed—media has moved from analogue to digital, print to online journalism. How have you navigated these changes? In addition to the shift in hardware, so much has impacted journalism, which you've likely experienced since your cofounding of *New York* magazine and with your ongoing work for *The Nation*, particularly. Beyond the technical maneuvering, how has this reconfigured your thinking?

MG: Well, to some degree you have to adapt. Any old geezer has to realize that everything has changed—without even understanding the nature of that change. I was talking to someone at lunch today, and we debated whether people who grew up using a computer really are, by definition, more narcissistic because they rarely had to encounter the will of others. All of one's time in front of a

computer is about selecting things at random from the endless universe of opportunity, but the interaction with another user never occurs as it does in everyday life. Does that make people more narcissistic? If they get to a point where they need something directly from another person and a hesitation or impediment results, it rises from a certain lack of human experience. Something has changed. We always say tools change the user. And this tool has changed users in ways that are profound. Have people become different as a consequence? Without understanding what the difference is, I assume that the answer is yes—because a true change in environment has to change the brain. It must. So we know that everything is different, but we don't know exactly how much, or in what ways. But to assume that things are the same as before would be naïve. Part of this may be reflected in today's American political system, where there is a focus on fantasy and entertainment more than there is on a candidate's knowledge or experience. I mean, suddenly Obama's numbers changed because he gave an entertaining speech? There is such a disconnect between what the world is and our experience of the world. Again, I know there is a profound change, but I'm not smart enough to understand it. All I can do is try to adapt to what I see around me.



Matt: In *To Inform and Delight*, design writer Ralph Caplan says that you “materially affected the way we get information, the way we buy things, and in fact the things that we buy.” For over twenty years, you worked on designing various supermarkets, including the chain Grand Union, which was mostly concentrated along the East Coast. How did you negotiate the space between design and advertising when dealing with such a vast audience?

MG: You know, I'm very unhappy with the so-called role of marketing and its relationship to design, because now the two terms have become almost identical. Now when a project is initiated, you first get the so-called expert marketers, who tell you what's the most appropriate way of talking to a particular community, what things they respond to, and what things they don't respond to. The only value that is pursued in doing this analysis is selling more of a product. Usually the reason you do that is to make more money for the client. Of course, business cannot survive without that concern. But the idea of reducing every issue: the health of your audience, the development of the audience, your empathy toward the audience. Anything in terms of what a good society is cannot be reduced to the idea of simply selling more product. That always makes me nervous—encouraging someone to buy something regardless if it's good for him or her or not. So when we were doing the supermarket projects, our intention was always clarity—clarity, and not to misrepresent what people were experiencing; not to amplify it to the point where they didn't understand what the conversation was between the supermarket and them. We tried to be more straightforward and promise less. An early premise of supermarket design was to make the customer walk through the entire store first to get anything he or she needed. The stores were designed so that if you simply wanted to buy a loaf of bread, you'd have to walk through many aisles to get to the bread section. We said: That's really stupid. You should design a store where people can get to whatever they want quickly, easily, and clearly, so we planned a store with an outside perimeter, where certain kinds of common products were easily available, and an inside perimeter, both designed in terms of understanding, map-making, and function. You wanted customers to feel that you were on their side, and that you would design the space for the customer the way you would design it for your wife. You would think of them as human beings first. To me, this represented a distinction between the assumptions of advertising and the assumptions of design. So that's how we did the markets and we found, contrary to a lot of expectations, that people felt so well toward supermarkets that they went from a bottom ranking—at the time, Grand Union was second to last in people's preferences in

store popularity—to second from the top over the course of the years we were doing it, basically because we were trying to help people find what they were looking for. Advertising is so often concerned with moving people toward a situation they don't want to be in; moving them to buy more expensive things when they should be buying less expensive things of the same quality; provoking desires in them for things that don't serve them well in any way. I think design often has other intentions. Both fields are distinguished by the relationship to the people you are addressing. In design, you feel that the audience is not a market—they are other human beings.



Matt: For my last question, I want to return to the subject of New York City. There's a scene in *To Inform and Delight* in which you go to see an old building on St. Marks Place where you used to live, but it's no longer there. The city has always been in a state of flux, where one must constantly reposition one's bearings based on the constantly changing landmarks. These are broad questions, but I am curious: How do you consider New York City in its current incarnation? How do you negotiate the city as it perpetually shifts?

MG: Well, the elderly always refer to the experiences of their youth, talking endlessly about how it was better "then." But you know, it's a mixed bag. Certainly the city is in much better shape than it was in the mid-70s, when the "I ♥ NY" campaign was launched. It has more vitality, there's more curiosity, and people are expanding the life of the city to the other boroughs. Brooklyn has become unexpectedly like Manhattan in many ways, however. Things continue to change. There is a broader base for the arts. There is sadness, too, with the fact that poor people still have a terrible time trying to find a life in New York. There is less inexpensive housing for people on every level, actually, and that has made things difficult. But the vitality of the city, the energy of the city, and the ambition of the city really keep you alive. I find the city wonderful. It's hard for me to imagine living in any other place. I would not do that by choice.

Logo courtesy of David Reinfurt.

For press and visuals requests please contact Trina Gordon at 212.352.9460 or at trina@damelioterras.com. D'Amelio Terras shows Adam Adach, Polly Apfelbaum, Massimo Bartolini, Jedediah Caesar, Nicole Cherubini, Tony Feher, Roland Flexner, Joanne Greenbaum, Daniel Hesidence, Leslie Hewitt, Matt Keegan, John Morris, Robert Moskowitz, Rei Naito, Noguchi Rika, Demetrius Oliver, Cornelia Parker, Chloe Piene, Dario Robleto, Heather Rowe, Sam Samore, Karin Sander, Noah Sheldon, and Yoshihiro Suda.