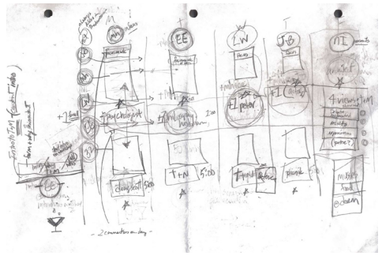

DESIGNINQUIRY ...an anecdote Margo Halverson (2005)

When the Maine Summer Institute in Graphic Design finished its tenth season in 2002, I found myself questioning the effect of the teacher-student relationship. I had developed and run the summer program since its inception, so I was familiar with challenging its value and continuance. A day in late August 2002 became an anniversary of questions that a decade of MSIGD had brought to a head: could the substance of a workshop make a relevant and urgent contribution to the profession? Weren't the most inspiring moments at my dinner table when faculty overlapped in the weekends, when hierarchy of teacher-student was removed? I had invited Melle Hammer, typographer and design educator, living and working in the Netherlands, as a MSIGD faculty member several times. He understood these questions. Our conversation in my backyard garden suggested a different kind of workshop that focused around one design issue — not on teacher-student relationships, not on core skills, not on designers teaching designers. We talked about including people from outside of our design profession to inform and influence the topic, we added a goal of publishing to get the ideas out and into the public.

And so, together, Melle and I pursued developing a flatter hierarchy wherein each participant offers workshops or presentations around one theme. We invited outside influences and began publishing the work. After thirty-something week-long workshops with amazing world-renowned educator/designers*, Maine Summer Institute of Graphic Design became DesignInquiry.

DesignInquiry has become a more responsive, fluid event that brings together cross-disciplinary energies that inspire and connect the personal to the professional endeavor of design. The first couple years of DesignInquiry were transitional: still working within the Maine College of Art's summer program structure, we invited educators and designers to lead simultaneous workshops around a topic. We added presentations that represented the arenas of psychology, anthropology, journalism, philosophy history, theater, architecture, and even some juggling.

Now, DesignInquiry is no longer connected with Maine College of Art, nor does it partner with AIGA as it did for one year. No one is paid for organizing the events and it has applied for non-profit status. DesignInquiry has a board and is independently run by volunteers who have built the website, the blog, the everything! Each year, DesignInquiry's 'framers'—Melle Hammer, Peter Hall and myself—develop a topic, get the word out, and work to get participants to merge and inform. Each year we continue to move to an egalitarian structure with workshops or presentations to push the topic into unfamiliar and unexpected corners; before, during, and after the event.

In 2006, DesignInquiry was held on Vinalhaven, an island off the coast of Maine. This was the closest realization of what we had envisioned six years earlier: twenty-two participants worked (around the theme of "More than Business as Usual") and took turns leading the group. We did this without internet or cellphone reception, with only laptops, a projector, cameras, pens, pencils, and paints we'd brought, along with things scavenged on-site. We were together at The Poor Farm, a large house and studio owned by artist Alisen Hildreth. The experience is like that hallway or that bar outside of the conference. It is that dinner table where we find like minds that inspire and move our work into the arena of "what-if"?

Instrumental in the revamped summer program hitting the ground have been Elliott Earls, Jessica Helfand, William Drenttel, Natalia Iyin, Douglass Scott, Nancy Skolos, Thomas Wedell, Lorraine Wild, Ellen Lupton, Marlene McCarty, Matt Soar, Louise Sandhaus, Lucille Tenazas, Rick Valicenti, and everyone who joined in the experiment.

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DesignInquiry is a non-profit educational organization devoted to researching design issues in intensive team-based gatherings. An alternative to the design conference, it brings together practitioners from disparate fields to generate new work and ideas around a single topic. www.designinquiry.net
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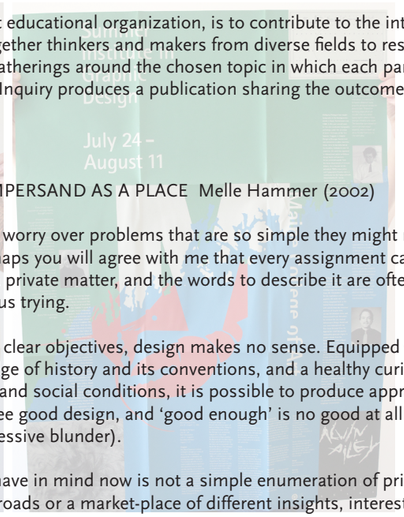
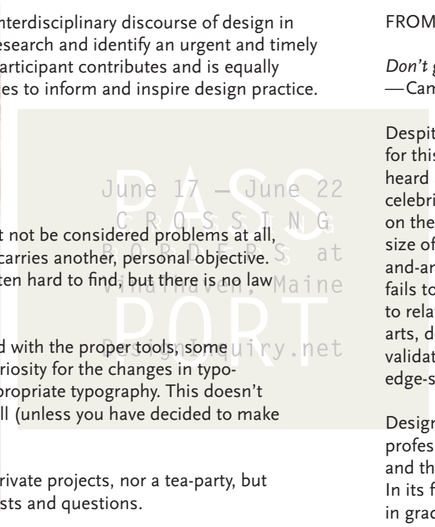
DesignInquiry 2010: Being Here released July 30 2010

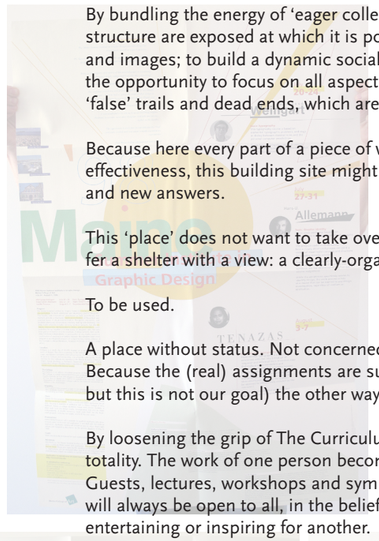
From *Maine Summer Institute in Graphic Design* to *DesignInquiry*:

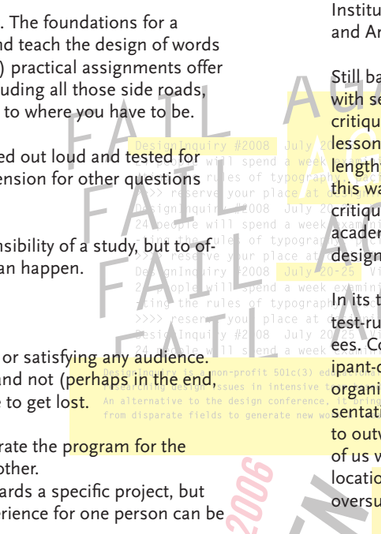
A History

one > Margo Halverson was founder and director of MSIGD (Maine Summer Institute in Graphic Design) beginning in 1992. She invited Melle Hammer as faculty in 2000 & 2002. two > Together Margo & Melle designed a new program, inviting Peter Hall to help drive this experiment in 2004. three > DesignInquiry left the umbrella institution (Maine College of Art) and began again on an island off Maine so we could all cook. Literally. four > In 2007 DesignInquiry became an educational nonprofit organization (501(c)3) with a board of directors. Now we're flying, grateful, busy, determined, and happy.









***Maine Summer Institute of Graphic Design, 1992–2002**

2002
Elliott Earls
Michael Rock & Susan Sellers
Lorraine Wild
Melle Hammer
Mark Jamra

2001
Douglass Scott–*Inspiration and Influences: New Ways of Thinking about Design*
Frans Oosterhoff–*Recharge: Exercises in How to Analyze, Transform and Reload Images*
Lucille Tenazas–*Lost/Found: Journey Through Public Space*

2000
Bruno Monguzzi–*Image Interaction/Interacting Images*
Melle Hammer–*A room with a view/for a few–a journey through typography*
Nancy Skolos/Thomas Wedell–*Type, Image, Meaning*

1999
Hans-Ulrich Allemann–*Graphic Identity*
Wigger Bierma–*Typography as Attitude*
Lucille Tenazas–*Visual/Verbal Exploration*

1998
Wolfgang Weingart–*Basic Typography*
Hans-Ulrich Allemann–*Topic: Graphic Identity*
Lucille Tenazas–*Experimental Typography*

1997
Nancy Skolos/Thomas Wedell–*Poster Form and Application*
Wolfgang Weingart–*Basic Typography*
Ken Heibert–*Image Transformation Studies*
Dorothea Hofmann–*Drawing from Still Life and Nature*

1996
Wolfgang Weingart–*Basic Typography*
Deborah Sussman–*Exploring the Environment Emphasizing Color*
Nancy Skolos/Thomas Wedell–*Poster Form and Application*

1995
Wolfgang Weingart
Steff Geissbuhler
Dorothea Hofmann

1994
Ken Hiebert
Wolfgang Weingart
Dorothea Hofmann

1993
Hans Ulrich Allemann
Inge Druckrey
Wolfgang Weingart

1992
James Cross
Rudolph de Harak
Bruno Monguzzi
...

The mission of DesignInquiry, a non-profit educational organization, is to contribute to the interdisciplinary discourse of design in three ways. First, DesignInquiry brings together thinkers and makers from diverse fields to research and identify an urgent and timely topic. Second, DI organizes team-based gatherings around the chosen topic in which each participant contributes and is equally responsible for the content. Third, DesignInquiry produces a publication sharing the outcomes to inform and inspire design practice.

THE AMPERSAND AS A PLACE Melle Hammer (2002)

I know I worry over problems that are so simple they might not be considered problems at all, but perhaps you will agree with me that every assignment carries another, personal objective. This is a private matter, and the words to describe it are often hard to find, but there is no law against us trying.

Without clear objectives, design makes no sense. Equipped with the proper tools, some knowledge of history and its conventions, and a healthy curiosity for the changes in typographic and social conditions, it is possible to produce appropriate typography. This doesn't guarantee good design, and 'good enough' is no good at all (unless you have decided to make an impressive blunder).

What I have in mind now is not a simple enumeration of private projects, nor a tea-party, but a cross-roads or a market-place of different insights, interests and questions.

By bundling the energy of 'eager colleagues', an agreement arises. The foundations for a structure are exposed at which it is possible to question, coach and teach the design of words and images; to build a dynamic social environment in which (real) practical assignments offer the opportunity to focus on all aspects of the design process. Including all those side roads, 'false' trails and dead ends, which are apparently necessary to get to where you have to be.

Because here every part of a piece of work can be directly discussed out loud and tested for effectiveness, this building site might generate the right level of tension for other questions and new answers.

This 'place' does not want to take over anyone's individual responsibility of a study, but to offer a shelter with a view: a clearly-organized site where anything can happen.

To be used.

A place without status. Not concerned with commanding respect or satisfying any audience. Because the (real) assignments are supposed to serve the study and not (perhaps in the end, but this is not our goal) the other way around. –We have a license to get lost.

By loosening the grip of The Curriculum, individual projects generate the program for the totality. The work of one person becomes the environment for another.
Guests, lectures, workshops and symposia might be directed towards a specific project, but will always be open to all, in the belief that what is a learning experience for one person can be entertaining or inspiring for another.

The collectively-generated program and the sharing of results eventually form the quality of this 'academy'. The most this place has to offer is not facilities, but exchange.

In doing so, such an institution will no longer be The Inventor, but The Caretaker, looking after the areas where the research projects can take place, enabling a systematic approach to acquire some knowledge of method rather than work by intuition or accident. And, because madness is a rule in groups, The Organization's responsibility is to accommodate change and evolving needs, to formulate and defend the conditions by which this 'fluid state of affairs' can continue to exist, to tend to the garden, organizing it in such a way that everyone can cross each other's paths.
...

FROM MAINLAND TO ISLAND Peter Hall (2006)

Don't go to conferences! It's mini-vacations, boondoggling. No more conferences!
—Camille Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*

Despite the massive growth in the numbers of designers in recent years, conferences catering for this burgeoning profession are often lacking in consistency and rigor. Common complaints heard about professional design conferences are that they follow a show-and-tell format of celebrity designers wheeling out well-rehearsed presentations of their work, or simply focus on the delivery of tips and tricks of business development and software operation. The large size of conferences often precludes meaningful participation beyond applause and question-and-answer sessions. Conference themes are often vague, and the level of discourse often fails to get beyond a general agreement that design is useful/powerful/important. In contrast to related disciplines such as architecture and art history or the relatively new arenas of digital arts, design conferences seem to struggle to get beyond a communally expressed desire for validation. At the same time, professional gatherings are important opportunities for knowledge-sharing, networking, and collaborative learning—activities too important to neglect.

DesignInquiry was established as a response to a perceived gap between academic and profession-based learning; between the richness of participatory learning at design school and the frequent lack of time for experimentation and research in the working environment. In its first years, 2004 and 2005, the event attracted an extraordinary showing of key figures in graduate-level design education, with heads from programs at schools including California Institute for the Arts, Cranbrook Academy, Rhode Island School of Design, Yale School of Art and Art Institute of Boston. Approximately 50 participants attended each year.

Still based at Maine College of Art, the event was organized around a central topical issue with several concurrent faculty-led workshops supported by frequent "walkabout" inter-room critiques and morning lecture presentations by faculty. These first two years yielded some lessons: The open structure and concentration of high-profile educators initially bred rather lengthy discussions of professional and educational issues in the early days of the event, but this was subsequently subsumed by a frenetic atmosphere of making. This progression from critique to production was in many ways a literal realization of graphic design's shift in the academy through the early part of the decade from critical theory to the idea that the act of designing can be a form of criticism (also termed critical practice).

In its third year, 2006, DesignInquiry was extracted from its host, Maine College of Art, and test-run in a large farmhouse on the island of Vinalhaven with a smaller group of 22 attendees. Conceptually, this event was the most true to the ambitions of the program, to be participant-driven, seminar-like and non-hierarchical. As before, workshops and shift events were organized around a central topical issue, but each participant was invited to give a lecture presentation relating to the overall theme. The benefits of the more rural, nimble format seemed to outweigh the disadvantages: the sense that the event was a "retreat" helped refresh those of us who commonly default to rote techniques within the classroom or studio. The remote location might have been deterrent to prospective applicants, but by 2007, DesignInquiry was oversubscribed and applicants had to be turned away.

Underlying DesignInquiry's push for a non-hierarchical learning environment is an implicit nod to the early education concept of proximal learning zones, whereby an unfamiliar setting and focus on a single, topical theme can in fact produce startling developmental progress or, in the professional world, innovation. The incorporation of practical issues, such as catering, into the design "problems" posed at DesignInquiry also aligns the event with recent developments in "relational aesthetics"—the term coined by art theorist Nicholas Bourriaud to describe art rooted in the notion of non-utopian, incremental improvements or deterritorializations of moments of everyday life. More important, preparing food, eating and cleaning can be non-hierarchical moments; particularly when ageing philosophers, famous designers, students and six year olds have an opportunity to discuss the ideas of the day. This, I think, is true design discourse. As Melle Hammer has noticed, it is in the nooks and crannies of the gathering—over dishes or out on the deck—that people have the chance to digest and share what they've experienced. So far so good. To conclude with Melle, DesignInquiry is not quite there yet: the experience is certainly there, but the next step is to care for the mission, to contribute to the interdisciplinary discourse of design through publication. This part is just beginning.