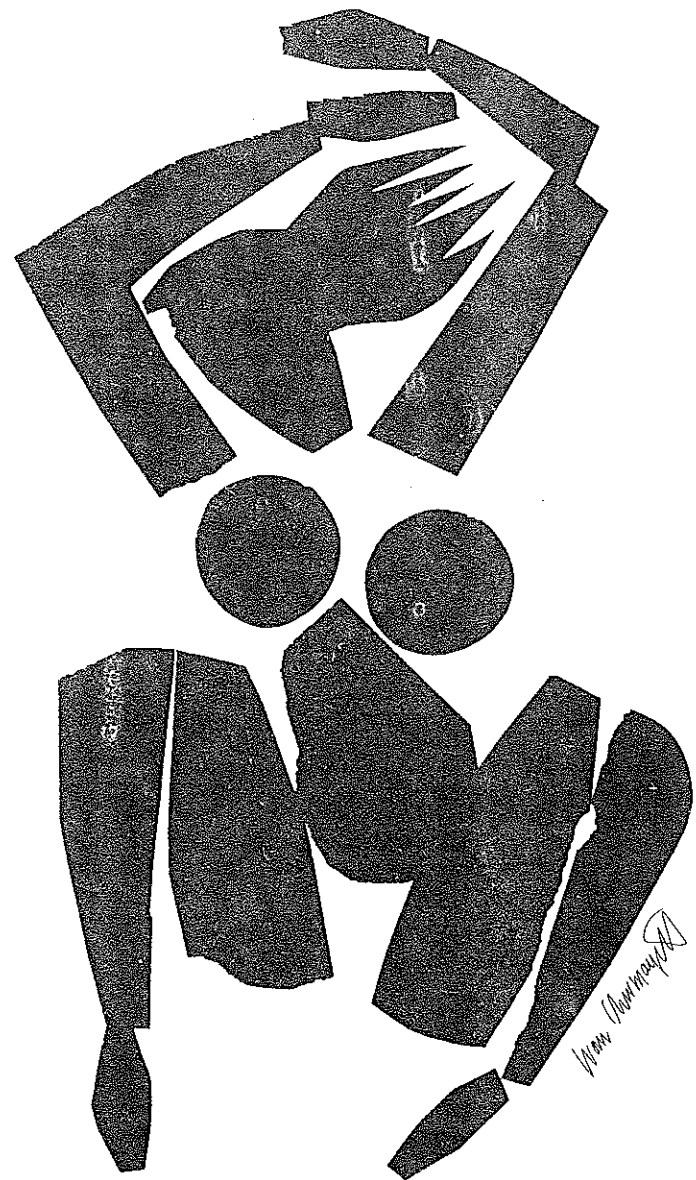


The Bodies /

Class Action provoked some unscheduled discussion at Aspen this year with their re-configurations of the Conference logo. J. Abbott Miller found out why



Ivan Chermayeff's logo for the 44th International Design Conference in Aspen: *Design and Human Bodies*

AM: How did you distribute this pamphlet at Aspen?

CA: The first day of the conference we went into the auditorium and put it on all the benches, so that people found it on their chairs. When people got there and saw it they had no clue until they unfolded it that the pamphlet wasn't an Aspen publication.

AM: And then you were invited to speak about it as part of the proceedings?

CA: The conference organizers didn't know that we were going to do something like that. We had read about the topic of the conference and thought that our work was about common issues.

AM: Human bodies?

CA: Yes. But we didn't necessarily agree with the way the subject was handled. When we saw the logo for the conference, we thought it wasn't an appropriate arrangement of form and content for a conference that we felt should be broad. We felt that we needed to make a statement about that.

AM: So it evolved as a response to the mark that was created by Ivan Chermayeff for the conference?

CA: Right, but our response was not specifically directed at Ivan Chermayeff, but was directed at all designers who have to deal with this issue. We wanted to question the conference, and ask how we deal with this issue as designers. We make these things, put them out there, they're very powerful and lots of people see them and they stand for something. That's something that we have to be responsible about, and sensitive to lots of communities.

AM: Your revision of the Ivan Chermayeff graphic was an attempt to bring out what you felt was its latent content. What made it "in-appropriate"? Is there an element of censorship in what you did? In some ways your project might be interpreted as an edict against nudity or representations of the female body in general?

CA: A plan view, that's exactly what we saw. And so we questioned how one could get into that position. That position occurs in a very few circumstances, although people suggested it's also a position for giving birth.

AM: Right.

CA: That was a positive response that some people at the conference had to the logo. They said "oh, it represents the power of women in a life-force kind of way." It wasn't that we couldn't see that, I think we saw all those things. In fact, the last panel of the pamphlet has that list: a mother, a whore, etc. We could see all those things in it. But which was the right thing to see? We were asking that question.

AM: The fact that it could be "abstracted" through different styles proved to you that it was based on a photographic conceit of a woman lying on the floor?

CA: Yes, perhaps.

AM: But what Chermayeff created was a specific drawing: he *chose* not to make it photographic but to make a collage. When you go back and invest those fragments with photographic form, then you cross an enormous threshold. That's the point at which the author of such a mark might feel compromised. It's like putting words in someone's mouth, literally putting photographs in their drawing.

Politics

CA: Yes—there were lots of things that concerned us in creating it. We wondered if we weren't perpetuating the kind of imagery that we were criticizing by using it to unmask or reveal the forms. We went through lots of deliberations about that as a group. Should we see the crotch? Should we see the vagina? Should it be covered up? We hoped that the first panel of the pamphlet would have some humor, then the second one would relate to it in an academic matter, and then the third would point to where our interests lay.

AM: Put all the cards on the table?

CA: Right. And we hoped that humor would temper our statement, but we realized that without actually making a statement that was shocking we couldn't show the shocking response that we had to that logo.

AM: What shocked you about the logo? Ivan Chermayeff declined to be interviewed, but I'm guessing that he might be surprised by the word "shocked."

CA: We felt that that form not only was fragmented and broken but the position of it was lost, helpless, and passive. We thought that it suggested someone looking down on somebody else in a dominating way.

AM: You see the drawing in a plan view? I always saw it in elevation.

It's the choice of using that particular image to represent all people that bothered us. That was only a woman, and that she was in an ambiguous position that could be violent, that the breasts were *so* large. On the tabloid-size pamphlet about the conference, the logo is on every page: the front one is the main image, and then when you turn the pages the same figure is done in different styles. One is done in pencil, another is done with an IBM-like stripe, so each one is another stylistic abstraction.

AM: Several different takes on it?

CA: Exactly. That upset me a lot. That use of abstraction moved it farther and farther away from what the image really stood for. Those pages could have been a great opportunity to have the figure move, to have other figures come in, and give it some life. Instead the same image was repeated over and over again, almost like it was stuck and incapable of movement.

CA: I think that's a point, and we experienced such responses at the conference. The first day of our workshop we wanted people to know that we did the pamphlet and that it was an example of the kind of experience that we wanted to have in this workshop. We wanted our workshop to be about having an opinion instead of being passive, making something that actually communicates. After we said that, someone got up and left, and we thought that was great. A lot of the projects that were done in the workshop were about the logo. Some people felt like "oh yes, I felt that way too, but I don't agree with what you did," and then they chose their own direction.

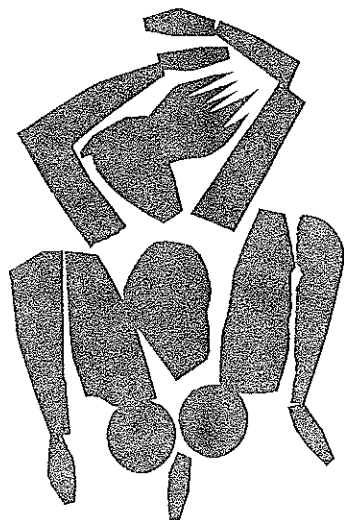
AM: Do you think there is a danger of creating a climate in which people become afraid to represent at all? Would this have been more palatable to you as a purely typographic treatment?

CA: As a group Class Action tends not to use images. We work with lots of type and use minimal means in the most pared down form. With our "Aiding Awareness" show [about HIV+ women in New Haven] we didn't feel that we should photograph these people. That would define them too much. Instead, we wanted to evoke their presence.

AM: Right.

Human Bodies

Interpretation of



CA: We let the viewer complete it by hearing the voices and imagining this person. That says a lot about what designers do, sort of play with what's seen and what's not seen and what's suggested.

AM: Well, that's what Ivan was doing with his mark, and the decision to make it a flat cut-out representation was strategic on his part. I don't think he was "hiding" a photographic image in there. I think the mark came together through cut paper.

CA: Well, again I think it's really important that we say that our piece is not an attack on Ivan at all.

AM: But it was interpreted that way.

CA: Yes, well of course it *was* a critique of his piece, but what was important at the conference was to take it to this other level of "this is a conference about bodies and what do we do?" Our aim in that pamphlet was to give the experience that we had of that logo to other people.

AM: Both projects hinge on the use of collage. On the one hand Chermayeff is in the Picasso/Braque/Matisse lineage and on the other hand you guys are in the Dada photomontage lineage, which is rooted in social commentary. The collision of those two traditions is what we're seeing here. You guys rewrote Chermayeff's logo in political terms. I am not criticizing that, I'm intrigued that it took photography to make the politics that you impute to Chermayeff clear. You needed photography to make it legible for other people.

Human Bodies

Representation of



CA: We *did* see that as a woman on her back. It made us think of the images in pornographic magazines, which are in the same position. To use just one of those images didn't convey any of the rifts or fragmentation of Chermayeff's edges.

AM: Right.

CA: Those marks of ripping and leaving pieces unconnected increased the logo's feeling of violence. Such poses are in [pornographic] magazines, and it reminded us of that immediately.

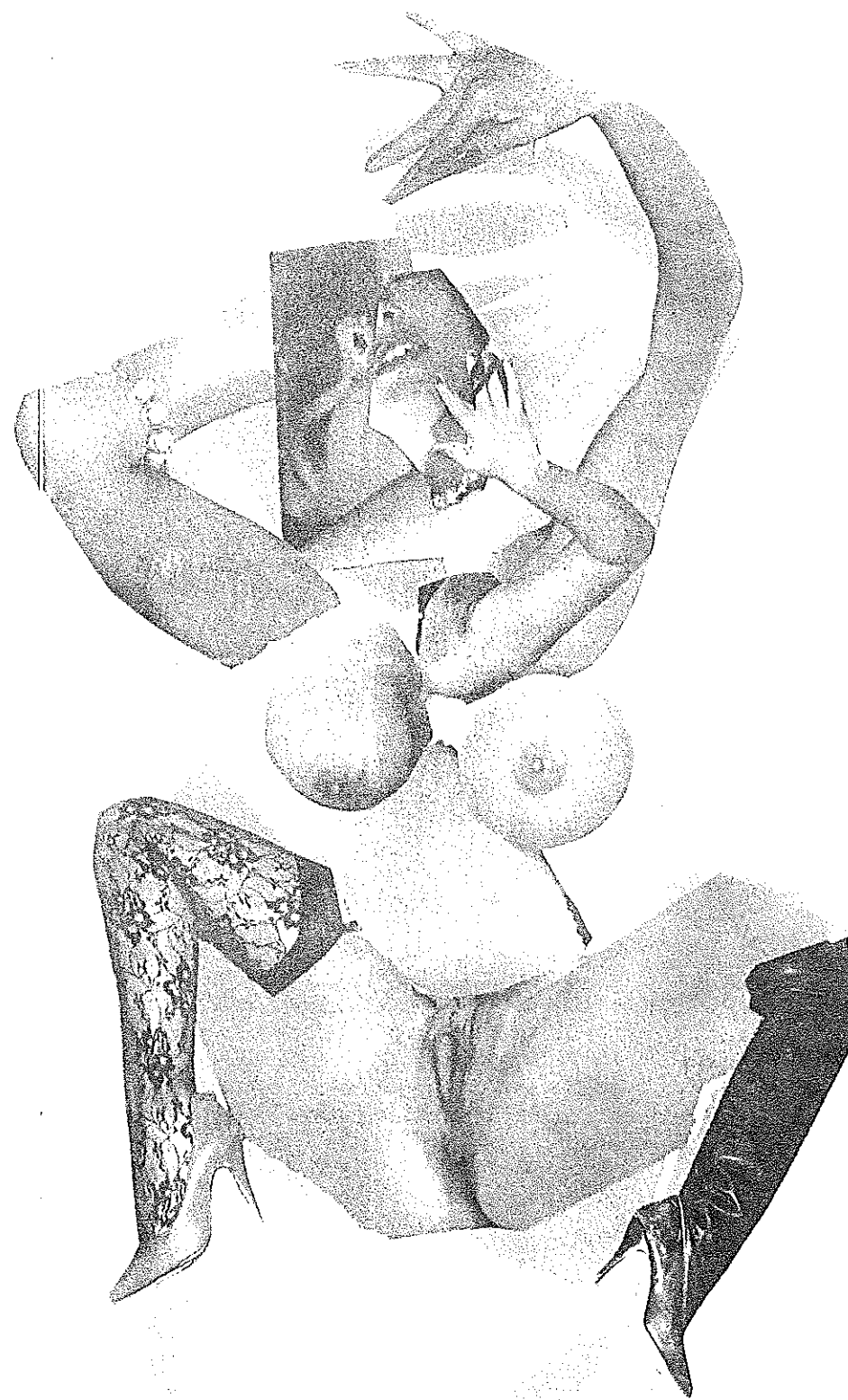
AM: Was there much disagreement between the female versus male membership of Class Action, or was it a unified response?

CA: I think the women felt the violence in it more. Once it became a project then, of course, we all got behind it and tried to do the right thing. I think the women might have seen more of the violence than the men but not necessarily.

This page: pages from the Class Action pamphlet, from left to right: Front cover, first inside page, centerfold, back cover.

Human Bodies

of



AM: Did you have any direct interaction with Ivan Chermayeff about what you did?

CA: Yes, at the end of the conference. We went and found him after one of the sessions and talked with him. He really didn't know how to talk to us. I don't remember the details of what he said. I think he was very uncomfortable and said, "Oh you're the ones," and just couldn't confront it at that moment.

AM: Had you considered warning him in advance of the conference or did you want the surprise aspect of it?

CA: We definitely wanted the surprise. And again our project was more about the conference. It wasn't about him.

AM: Right, but when something volatile is going to be published, sometimes people are warned beforehand.

CA: We felt we had to just make this statement.

AM: It's naive to think that it wouldn't be taken personally.

CA: Yeah, I think we understood that it would be taken personally and that is why we made it a point to say that it wasn't directed at him. Not because we wanted to shield him from our criticism, but more that we took that piece to the conference about human bodies because we wanted it to be an issue that was discussed. [The conference organizers] felt potentially attacked because people believed the piece was by them. They felt a need to offer participants a place to respond to this so they asked us to have a cafe where people who led workshops or gave presentations gathered informally. We were going to have a session about the representation of human bodies, but they asked us have one about this logo also.

This is an image of a woman...



naked on her back
legs spread
contorted
passive
available
resisting
willing
afraid
in control
a mother
a whore
a decoration
a symbol.

She has no identity.
She is an identity.
She is the logo for
this conference.

Class Action produced this commentary to initiate discussion at IDCA 1994 about the representation of human bodies.

AM: What role do you think the generational difference has in all of this? You come from a different aesthetic and ideological climate than the Aspen Conference. This seems to be part of the mixture, the young whipper-snappers versus the Establishment.

CA: What you were saying before about the two collage traditions of aesthetics versus criticism is connected. We have been trained to see the image-making process in a certain way. There is a tradition of representing women as beautiful objects. Its part of an accepted past, certainly a part of history and therefore it does relate to designers and the way designers have been taught to look at them. We've been taught to be more critical, to question things.

Do you think there's a danger of creating a climate in which people become afraid to represent at all?

AM: I'm curious about the implication that there is a "correct" representation of the female form for Class Action. I worry about the valorization of a codified, sanitized, non-erotic mode of representation. Is eroticism always bad? Is sexuality something that can't be brought into a conference about human bodies?

CA: I think the answer is really in the fact that this logo was for *this* conference. You know, it wasn't *one* of the logos. It wasn't part of a series of different things. The image could have been moving, in different positions, or another figure could come in. I think all of those things could have kept the sexuality of it.

Is sexuality something that can't be brought into a conference about human bodies?

AM: It seems that sexuality and eroticism of the female or male body are becoming too loaded to represent. Is it because it was a male designer and a female subject, or is it because it's only-female versus male-and-female?

CA: It's a combination.

AM: But this suggests a diminishing series of possibilities for designers to express themselves without fear of reprisal. We may be backing ourselves into a corner where we allow ourselves only expressions that are clear, clean, and sanitized. I'm imagining other designers in subsequent years who want to do something provocative, and suddenly the board, or whomever, says "Oh, no."

CA: Then show a *vagina*, you know what I'm saying? What upset us was the visual euphemism. It should have been the thing itself, not something that refers to that thing.

AM: Well, that's the nature of representation; it's *not* the thing itself. There is some mediation via the artist or designer. Is it a collage? Or a photograph? Or a drawing? You're saying that if what you're after is T & A then give it to us straight up, without the arty collage.

CA: I don't think we would have recommended *that* as a direction.

AM: This became a calling card for Class Action's response to Chermayeff's logo.

You wanted people to know how you read it?

CA: Exactly. The pamphlet is a series of steps which talk about its abstractness. It talks first about the sex of the thing, then it talks about art and how we refer to a certain kind of representation, and then it takes the actual logo and unmasks it or literalizes it.

AM: The unmasking or literalizing is I think the most critical step here: I admire its rhetorical strength. You gave the mark a little visual push and sent it over the edge.

CA: Right. You're wondering if we should have done that?

AM: That's what I admire about it, and that's also why I think it's problematic, because *in fact* that's not what Chermayeff's representation is. You're filling in the blank, completing the sentence. One could even say you've turned his work against him. It's interesting that you chose to do that pictorially rather than verbally, and therein lies the success and the danger of the piece.

CA: I think so, too, and again, once we made deliberations about the appropriate method of making our point, we wanted to give force to the experience of seeing it, to pass on our own emotional state to people who would not necessarily experience it in that way.

AM: It's not a Duchampian Mona-Lisa-with-a-moustache gesture, which was a quiet intervention that retained the object as it existed.

CA: We didn't want it to just be funny. We needed it to be cutting and critical. We're only *one* group of people who have this *one* opinion, and I don't think that we intend to be didactic about that opinion. We wanted to speak out about it, to make it known as opposed to just saying "Oh God that logo!" We were surprised that a conference that aims to represent all views for all human people about this issue would be so narrow, so specific.

AM: But I'm saying that as a logo it does, technically, function.

CA: Yeah, it has the qualities, formally, that we look for in a logo.

AM: So you liked it?

CA: From the formal perspective of what we expect from a logo, yes. Although we wished that it wasn't so derivative of Matisse. Maybe the fact that the style was so recognizable caused us to be more critical of what we felt that it alluded to.

AM: I'm curious how you would have reacted if, say, April Greiman's famous nude self-portrait from Design Quarterly had been the conference image? Would the fact that it was done by a woman as a self-portrait have altered the conditions of your response?

CA: I think the personal aspect of it is interesting, knowing who it is. It has a whole other string of associations. I think that it would be very controversial for the conference to do something like that. Probably more because it was a nude. I think that would be a problematic conference image as well, but it also wouldn't be a logo.

AM: Equal representation?

CA: Equal representation and the particular body language. We talked a lot about the body language, using the words fearful, exposed, violated, held back, dominated, tied.

We wouldn't want to encourage a sense of paranoia about design, but rather show that it is possible to make judgments.

AM: Visually speaking, this project is some of Class Action's most powerful work *because* it isn't strictly typographic. I'm looking forward to seeing that kind of visual power come into your projects at large.

CA: That's something that we've talked a lot about. In this situation we felt imagery was the only way to give the experience of the way we saw the logo. We questioned whether Chermayeff saw it this way at all.

AM: My guess is that he didn't.

CA: Probably so. That was certainly a possibility.

We were surprised that a conference that aims to represent all views for all people could be so narrow, so specific

AM: You put the responsibility for this with the Aspen Conference organizers as opposed to Chermayeff, because in a sense you were saying that Chermayeff's mark is wonderful on its own, but as a symbol for the conference it becomes a problem?

CA: Yeah it's a *logo*. It's supposed to be the thing that identifies this conference.

AM: So are you saying there are two ways of evaluating Ivan's mark? On the one hand it has its own life over here in Art Land and then over here as the symbol of the conference. In one camp, it's okay, and in the other camp it's no good?

CA: I don't know if it's okay. Yes, I think that it *does* have to do with where it's being seen. We talked about whether you could imagine that logo on a bottle of soda? To sell baby goods?

AM: I could definitely see it on a pharmaceuticals brochure.

CA: Right, but it wasn't *for* that.

AM: You guys just don't like logos! Another figure who comes to mind is Cindy Sherman. I can imagine Cindy Sherman producing an image for this conference that was every bit as explicit as what you did and every bit as fragmented. But is the authorship by a man of this image the dividing line or the point of friction? Would Cindy Sherman's poster have been totally excellent?

CA: I don't know. I am trying to imagine that. I think that male authorship—I think that's definitely significant. It had to do with it being done by a man in his position. His identity sanctioned what he did.

AM: I hope graphic design isn't sliding into a parochial position, retreating to the wrong side of the culture wars. There is a fine line between "sensitive" representation, "correct" representation, and no representation at all.

CA: I agree. Maybe we *would* have a question if April Greiman's piece was in this context because it was just a woman being exposed. If it was a man and a woman, now *that* could be great, but again that's only one of the issues that are our concern.