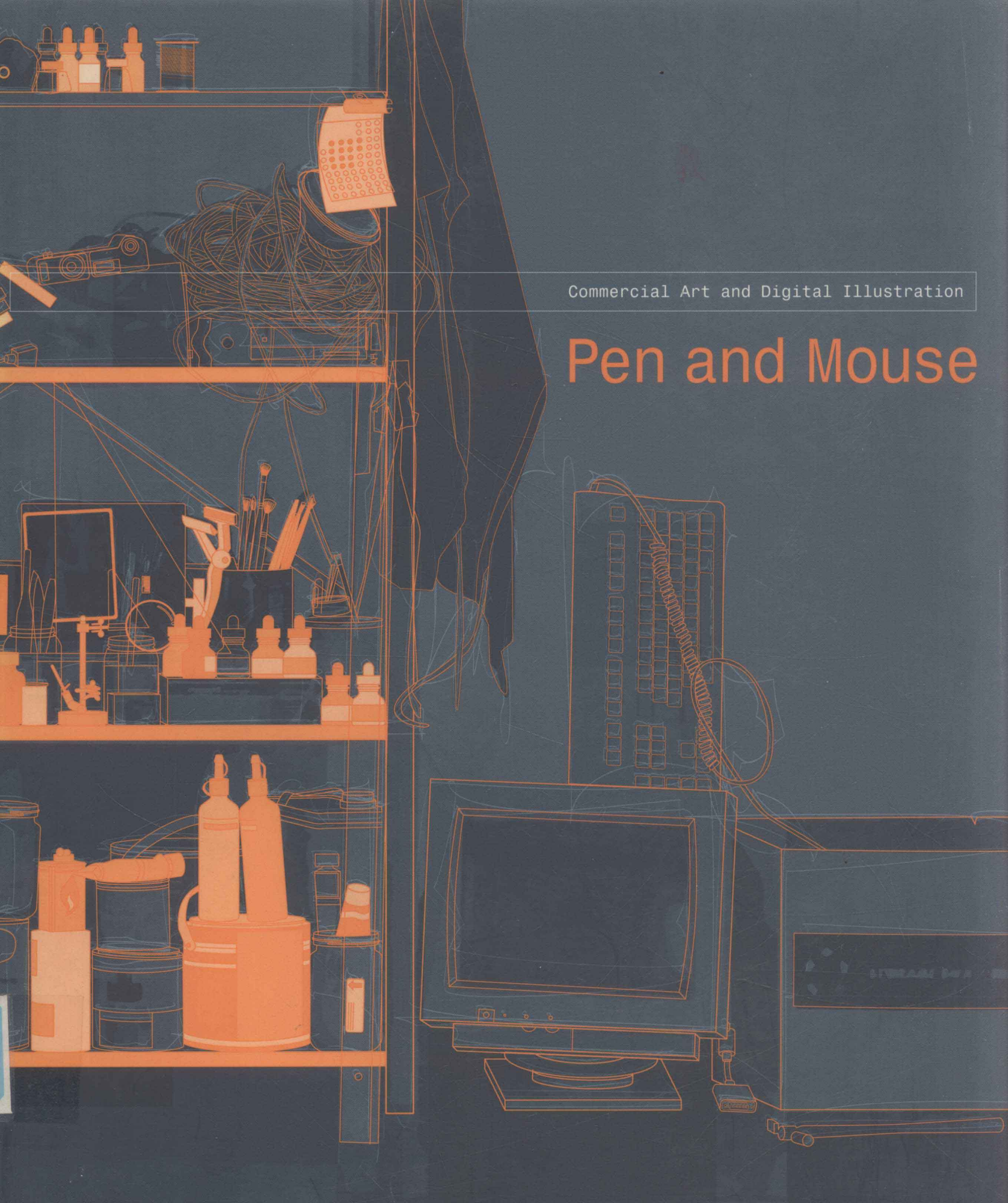

Commercial Art and Digital Illustration

Pen and Mouse

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>Angus Hyland by Nick Higgins

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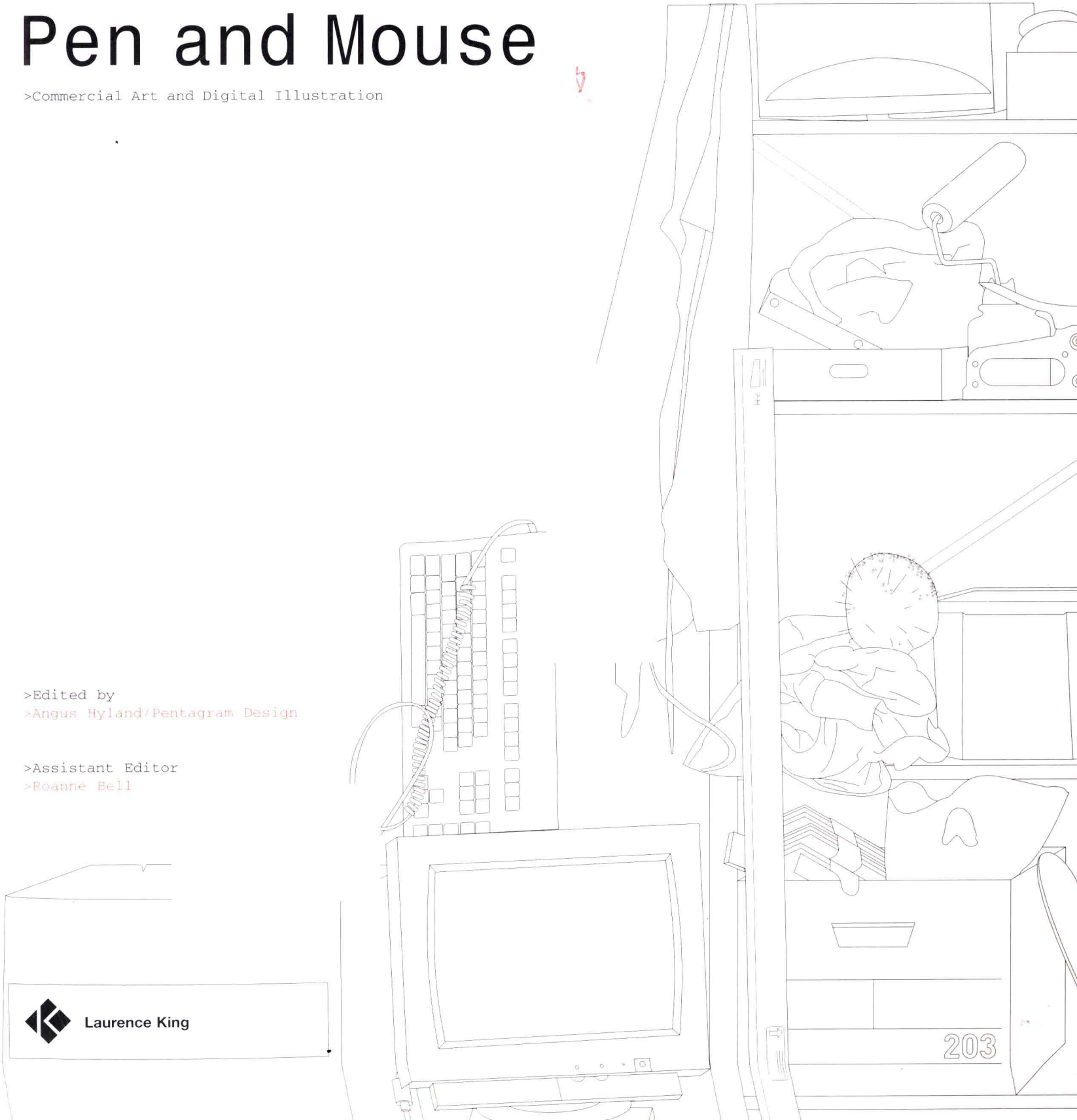

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Introduction >

Angus Hyland
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Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in illustration. It has become increasingly visible in editorial design, fashion publicity, advertising, music and television graphics. This renaissance has been accompanied by a great deal of debate on the role of illustrators – adjunct to the design community or autonomous profession – and the effect of technology on their work.

This book investigates the work of illustrators whose craft occupies the space between graphic design and fine art and whose tools are increasingly digital. It also gives an insight into the profession's own perspective on the nature of its role and purpose.

For much of the last decade, illustration appeared to be in crisis. Its traditional clientele, the design and advertising sector, had turned to cheaper and more controllable alternatives. As computers became faster and software evolved to provide Freehand, Photoshop and Illustrator, designers and art directors felt enabled and empowered to produce their own imagery. The trend was compounded by broader access to and affordability of stock house pictures and copyright-free CDs such as Photodisc, crammed with images that could be manipulated and edited at will. Furthermore, a glut of books on 'new wave' typography, such as *Typography Now*[1] and *The Graphic Edge*[2], encouraged decorative typographic layouts. This was apparent in the traditional illustrator's stronghold of editorial design, as evidenced by the gestural approach in magazines, notably *Ray Gun* under the art direction of David Carson from 1992–95.[3]

As a result, illustration grew more and more anachronistic during the nineties. It was seen as parochial, expensive, impossible to edit and aesthetically at odds with the 'typo/photo' zeitgeist.

'Much that is illustrative is not produced by conventionally trained illustrators. Instead it is designers playing with Photoshop.'[4]

'It can't have been easy being an illustrator in the 1990s. As the collective attention of designers turned to ever more ingenious ways to bend type out of shape, and the computer promised total mastery of production, the lovingly-crafted, physically fragile, handmade illustration was left looking like a quaint relic from a bygone age.'[5]

This apparent slide in control from illustrator to designer prompted increasing alarm calls of extinction from educators and commentators.

'In the wake of the digital revolution, picture making in paint and ink appeared to lose ground to Photoshop collages overnight and apparently permanently. Talk of obsolescence seemed to be looming for those working in the traditional analogue way.'[6]

1 Rick Poynor, Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1991
2 Rick Poynor, Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1993
3 As seen in Chris Foges' *Magazine Design*, Rotovision, 1999
4 Lewis Blackwell, 'New lines', *Creative Review*, July 1996
5 Rick Poynor, 'Illustration's last stand', *Graphis* 321, May 1999
6 Darrel Rees, Association of Illustrators (AOI) Seminar, held at Pentagram Design Ltd, November 1999

Yet the sources of much of the negative commentary prevalent in the 1990s were often the same individuals who perpetuated the issue. Educators still taught (and indeed many still do teach) within the comfort zone of an analog world, ignoring the new reality of a digitally aware student body. Indeed they were teaching the first generation of illustrators for whom technology was ubiquitous, and who were innately aware that the digital products causing designers and art directors to assume control were equally available to hone their own work. Those students, now professionals, see the computer and its software merely as an additional set of tools. They have maximized the opportunities that have opened up as technological limitations decrease in line with increasing affordability.

They now take advantage of control and manipulation, as evidenced by comments from illustrator Nick Higgins:

'Drawing with a mouse has now become as subliminal to me as a pen or a paintbrush always have been. The medium is better and faster for manipulation and now, cheaper.'[7]

Yet it is not only the ability of the illustrator to resume control over imagery that has caused the recent resurgence in gainful employment. It is also the simple, cyclical nature of aesthetics. Not only the graphic design community but the entire media spectrum is responding to the increasing popularity of the drawn image. For example, in the fashion world:

'Nowadays, there is no better way of targeting the nation's suspicious, style-conscious taste-makers than by enlisting an accomplished illustrator with an unmistakable visual style.'[8]

The trend has affected all forms of communication. Information graphics have reappeared, with charts, graphs and pictograms taking on increased prominence and different emphasis by being used as much for aesthetic form as for the calibration or quantification of data. The geometric pattern and technical drawing of Karl Gerstner has been resurrected in the work of John Maeda; the work of anonymous draftsmen catalogued by Henry Dreyfuss[9] and Stiebner/Urban[10] has been revitalized as evidenced in the work of British artists Julian Opie and Michael Craig-Martin[11], both bearing witness to the cross pollination of fine art and graphic design through a modern pictorial language.

This technical, almost scientific approach reaches across a broad spectrum and includes record sleeves. Sheffield-based design group The Designers Republic[12], for example, adopt information graphics for their aesthetic qualities, rather than the

7 Interview at Pentagram Design Ltd, August 1999

8 Peter Lyle, 'Quick on the draw', *The Guardian*, 25 June 1999

9 *Symbol Sourcebook*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1984

10 *Picture Sourcebook*, Bruckmann München, 1985

11 'Intelligence' exhibition catalogue, Tate Britain, 2000

12 Adrian Shaughnessy/Intro, *Sampler*, Laurence King Publishing, 1999

historical quantification or calibration of data. The trend is not exclusive to the digital world, but is also apparent in contemporary hand-drawn images, as in the work of Roderick Mills shown later in this book (pages 70–72).

The revival in the use of illustration may well be just a trend but it has served as a bridge over which illustration has crossed from the analog to the digital world.

'While illustrators don't need to use computers in their art, I suspect that it is those who do who might be in the growth area of the profession.'[13]

13 Lewis Blackwell, *Creative Review*, July 1996

However, the computer is only the medium. This is apparent in the responses to the questionnaire given to all those who submitted work for this publication. The idea behind this was to provide illustrators themselves with the opportunity to comment on their motivation and working methodology, and to give their views on the role of technology and its effect on their work. A set of questions were asked, and while some of the response is ironic, consistent threads run throughout, collectively revealing a strong overall sense of identity.

Only one respondent, Faiyaz Jafri, alludes to the digital medium in his stated job title: Digital Artist; the majority prefer the traditional title of illustrator, despite inferences that this is simply because no one has thought of anything more appropriate to date. When asked how he would define illustration today, Professor Dan Fern of the Royal College of Art, London, responded:

'It's one of those words I almost wish we could dispense with because a lot of what goes on here, and what I do myself professionally, isn't illustration. It's the provision of images to an enormous variety of contexts.'[14]

14 'Dan Fern', interview with Rick Poynor, *Eye* No. 22, Vol. 6, Autumn 1996

Within titles, many contributors have endorsed their role as illustrator with 'artist' or 'designer'. This blurring of the traditional disciplinary borders initially seems to indicate a commercial and chameleon-like willingness to be everything to all possible audiences, rather than to define a preference for a change in role.

Yet this potential role change should be more closely examined. Historically, the 'commercial artist' used illustrative, typographic, design and printing skills to produce entire works independently. This all-encompassing approach became increasingly redundant as the advertising and design industries evolved, with demarcated and specialized roles. More recently, however, the evolution in technology, and related affordability, has encouraged the designer-maker role to reappear. Individuals once again have the freedom to do everything from design and image creation, right through to unlimited print capability on digital printers. Perhaps some respondents

are gravitating to this more pluralistic approach, rather than simply attempting a more commercial title, as demonstrated by Rian Hughes' remarks in a letter to *Eye* magazine, responding to an article about the pictorial tradition in illustration[15]:

'Much of the debate seems to focus around a lament for a somewhat outdated and narrow concept of illustration that is seen as mainly editorial and has little long-term historical basis. This view seems to have arisen with the compartmentalisation in the past 50 years of "commercial art" into specialist areas, each presided over by a different "expert". Cassandre and McKnight Kauffer, Abram Games, Toulouse-Lautrec, Victor Moscoso or the Stenberg brothers would not have considered themselves only "illustrators", who (as today) might be briefed by an art director, then give over their finished work to a separate typographer, and maybe even a separate layout artist.

If the computer is eroding certain areas of illustration, it is because it has given the complete power of control back to a single author. Every time I use a font I have designed myself in a piece, I think of the extended control I have over the most esoteric and detailed parts of the image-making process – a control that was unthinkable ten years ago.'[16]

There is a school of thought that the traditional title of 'illustrator' serves as a perfect descriptor, both in a historical and contemporary (and digital) context. The dictionary definition of illustrate – make clear by examples, explain, elucidate by drawings or pictures, with the Latin root lustrare, to 'light up' – is surely the ideal description for this sector. Arguably, the first illustrators or 'commercial artists' were monks who indeed 'lit up', or illuminated, text with explanatory imagery. This communicative slant to the title is particularly evident in responses from artists such as Anthony Burrill, who wants to use illustration 'to help build a new language of visual communication'; while Roderick Mills uses the notion as a title: 'visual communicator'. John Hodkinson, Course Leader at the University of Central Lancaster, sees only relevance in traditional nomenclature:

'...I have no problems with the term 'illustration'. It is, I believe, that wonderful region which can still contain all of the best traditions and innovations which were the glory of the British Art school, so long as you keep the skull and crossbones flying from the mast and treat all waters as your own by right.'[17]

In response to the question 'Why do you do what you do?', a minority of respondents claim to be motivated by potential celebrity, with financial gain seemingly the least concern. Other motivation to create imagery is suggested as more conceptual, with artists such as Lucy Vigrass and Alex Williamson defining themselves as communicators and problem-solvers. For the majority, the root of the illustrator's motivation for creating images is twofold: pure enjoyment and inherent talent.

15 Robert Mason, 'Return of the picture', *Eye* No. 35, Vol. 9, Spring 2000

16 Letters, *Eye* No. 36, Vol. 9, Summer 2000

17 John Hodkinson, Letters, *AOI Journal*, August/September 2000

'Drawing. It's like being God – you make a world, in your own image, where nothing existed before. When it is drawing for illustration, it's a bit like the way the biblical God created the world, in that the words come first....Where once there was nothing but the blank empty space of a piece of paper, there is now a world. A world that may be dependent on the reality all around, but a reality that has been filtered through the creator (be they an illustrator or some other, lesser form of artist). Drawing, I love it.'[18]

The initiator of the drawn image may now use the same engine as the person commissioning the work, but the skill sets of the two groups are specific and distinct. The basic craft skills of the image-maker are still vital and it is these specific skills that distinguish illustrator from graphic designer.

'There is a hunger for original modes of visual expression and good reason for thinking that, in a renegotiated partnership, design and illustration might offer a way forward. Illustration's territory is the image and it was presumptuous of designers to imagine that Freehand and Photoshop were enough.'[19]

Inspiration, unsurprisingly, comes from everything. From the local environment, travel, family, mentors, peers and indeed from the imagination of those who have such keen powers of observation. Anthony Burrill also alludes to the nature of the brief in his response, being inspired by 'other people's thought processes'.

On the all-important inquiry into the difference between craft and technology, Spencer Wilson perhaps summarizes best on behalf of the majority of respondents: 'Craft is skill that is required, whereas technology is a tool to be used'.

Anthony Burrill's observation that 'technology enables craft to develop into previously unused areas' supports the view that the age of technology has increased opportunities for image-makers, rather than diminishing their role, a notion that was previously stated at the AOI Seminar, Drawing the Line, where the future of illustration was debated.

'I don't see the advance of the digital world as a threat....In fact, for those so inclined, the great range of affordable software and high powered computers offers the opportunity to add another dimension to their work....'[20]

Answering the questionnaire for this book, Kinsey responded that neither craft nor technology can survive in isolation. 'Craft uses technology. Technology comes from experiments with crafts. One won't stand without the other.' Understood in the broadest context, this statement has always been true, as suggested in the *AOI Journal*, October/November 2000.

18 Chris Sharrock, 'Drawing, I love it', *AOI Journal*, October/November 2000

19 Rick Poynor, *Graphis* 321, May 1999

20 Darrel Rees, AOI Seminar, held at Pentagram Design Ltd, 20 November 1999

'The birth of cinema did not kill off theatre, the invention of the gramophone did not murder live music and the computer has not spelt (sic) the end for the hand drawn/created image. The two exist side by side and often some of the best work is a mix of traditional and digital media. The ability to scan drawings, manipulate colours and use effects can add to the toolbox rather than limit it. If you are unsure about how effective the kit can be take a look around at the world of illustrators: George Snow, Joe Magee, Andy Martin, Marion Deuchars etc. etc. Great artists in the past have welcomed new technology, embraced it and used it to push their work in new directions; Hockney picked up the Polaroid, Warhol reinvented screen printing and Hirst has started to produce limited edition prints from artwork that exists only on disk.'[21]

The response to illustrators' techniques, current and past, loosely follows the general industrial evolution from pen to mouse. Most started their illustrative careers with pen, pencil, brush, ink and paint in hand, with many now involving one or more of the available electronic tools, including Photoshop, Illustrator and Flash. Some have embraced the digital world wholeheartedly; others have chosen to remain hands-on. Yet interestingly, most comment and discuss traditional techniques as the basis of work and merely mention 'the computer' as one of the tools they use. Many do not mention technology at all, including those for whom the digital route has become the norm, further compounding the notion that the tools are merely a means to an end.

21 Lawrence Zeegen, *AOI Journal*, October/November 2000

From: Paul McNeil / To: The Author

What do you use as a job title?
>Artist/illustrator (although it says artist in my passport in the hope that authorities will feel sorry for me).

Why do you do what you do?
>To make people happy.

What inspires you?
>Other artists and art in general (strictly modern art that is). Also the concept of breaking down the notion of what is deemed acceptable art.

Craft/Technology: What is the difference?
>No difference as far as I can see. Anything good generally has a good thought behind it irrespective of how it was produced. I presume that a loom was once considered 'high-end technology' just as a computer is now. I don't have any steadfast theories on computers; it's just something that's in my house that is ideal for producing quick, colourful images. But there is more to this question... see below

Which techniques do you use?
>I procure an evocative image from my past (often a photo) and then try and reproduce it crudely using a computer mouse and a simple drawing program. I will tweak the colours until I get it looking good and then I will draw the image on to canvas and paint it up colour-by-numbers style. Drawing with a mouse is sloppy and inaccurate like drawing with your left hand. The results can be surprising. It's also instantaneous and rewarding. I do dozens of images before I decide to paint one up. Which brings me to the painting: any computer boffin will say 'Why doesn't he just print them out on to canvas?' Well, I could but it's much more therapeutic to paint and I enjoy using my hands as well (which it's fair to say is the craft side of it).

Are these the techniques that you have always used?
>No, not really. They are techniques I currently use. But I want to keep things changing, with or without the computer. It's just a tool that can take over your life.

>1.1/Satday

>1.2/Monaro

>1.3/Birriga Road

>1.4/Surf

>1.5/Bad Thorts

>1.6/Chuckin the Peace Sign