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As told to Willa Köerner, 3003 words.

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Mindy Seu on making the things you want to see

How do you usually get started with a new project?

For personal projects, or self-initiated projects, I usually start by wandering. I tend to steer clear of other designers' work or design blogs, and try to find source materials that are completely outside of the project's reference point. I'll spend a lot of time surfing the web and going down rabbit holes. I'm also an advocate for literally walking outside in the world. I think it helps clarify what your ideas are, without sitting at your computer trying to think of a solution.

What do you think drives you to make personal projects? What's the motivating force for pursuing something?

I feel like people tend to make the things that they want to see in the world. Most of my projects are based on the web, specifically because I'm trying to use the internet in the way that I feel it should be used. Instead of getting sucked into echo chambers, I think it's important to try and distribute information freely, and also give people the ability to create their own content critically.

Right now this ease of access makes it really easy to dump a lot of things online without thinking about where it's actually going. Because of that, I tend to be quieter online, project-wise, and through my "internet persona." But for what motivates me, I think it does really boil down to wanting to share content and distribute information without fear of censorship or the need for advertising.

How do you go about exploring things you're curious about? If you start getting interested in something, is there a particular way it unravels for you?

Whenever I stumble upon something, I start developing this obsessive tendency to learn as much about it as I can. That can either be by finding as many references as I can, or, more often, by talking about it with my friends or other people that might be experts on it. I think it's pretty incredible how for anything you can think of, there's an expert on it somewhere, and that person is probably more than willing to talk about it with you.

How important is it to build relationships and network when you're a designer? Do you think the quality of your work is more important than who you know, or vice versa?

I think they're very intertwined. When you're a student and you don't necessarily know how to get freelance jobs, it seems very mysterious, but at the end of the day it does boil down to who you know and the people that they know. Obviously, you need the skills to execute these projects beautifully, but yeah—everyone should try to meet as many people as possible. I think that's beneficial even outside of your work life.

Do you have suggestions for how people should go about finding the right people to meet?

Surprisingly, I find a lot of people through Twitter, even if I rarely use Twitter. I think I tweet maybe once every couple of months or something—I'm more of an active stalker than a poster. But you can gather a lot through Twitter, even if the people you find have different styles. Once you find one person, then

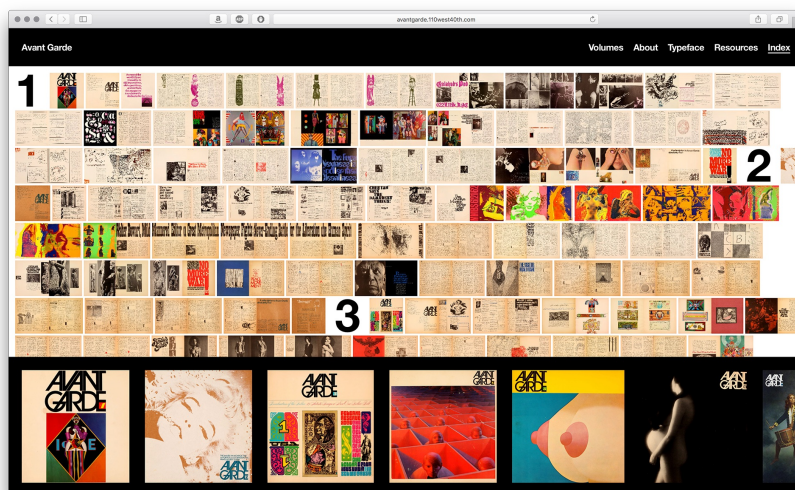
it's like a web that keeps building out.

Also, when I graduated and was living in New York, and I would often just cold email or cold direct-message people. Sometimes they wouldn't respond, but in most cases they replied and were more than happy to at least answer a question, if not meet up for coffee. The worst thing that happens is they don't reply and your life is exactly the same, or you do meet up and you have a great conversation—or, even better, you meet up and you become really good friends. Surprisingly, that's happened a fair amount.

I discovered your work through the digital archive you built for Avant Garde magazine, which is a very well-known publication in the design world. Was creating an archive for such seminal design work intimidating?

Not necessarily, because I knew what my intentions were with the site. [Avant Garde's designer] Herb Lubalin is this seminal figure you're taught about when you're a student, but while you might see a singular mark or a few spreads, it's very rare that you're able to see these works comprehensively. When I actually found a physical copy of Avant Garde at Adobe Books when I lived in San Francisco, it really sparked my curiosity. But, when I started trying to find more information about it later, I realized there was nothing comprehensive about it online. There were maybe a few Flickr shots, some random spreads, and a lot of essays about the publication without showing every page of every issue. So for me, I just wanted to surface the Avant Garde content so it could be a research tool.

As for designing the archive, I didn't want it to adopt the same styling as the magazine, because I wanted people to be able to intuitively understand the distinction between the UI of the website, and the actual content of the magazine, which is super rich. Ultimately, I wanted to make the most legible reading interface possible. I started thinking about how, when you're reading something on the web, clicking through 100 pages feels really tedious. I wanted people to be able to scan through everything really quickly, and give the work this micro/macro view. For me, just trying to bring everything into the same container—rather than having all of these disparate pieces scattered throughout the web—was what was most important.



avantgarde.110west40th.com houses the 14 issues of Avant Garde, published between 1968–71.

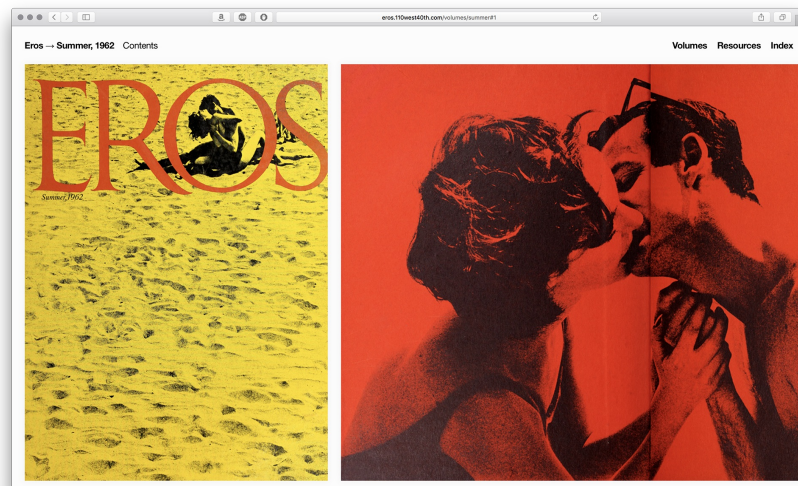
Was this archival project something that you initiated? Or did the Avant Garde magazine people find you?

I initiated it. Like I said, I found the first magazine at Adobe Books, and then I started obsessively trying to find the other 13. There are 14 total issues. Then, I made a few very quick sketches, and I contacted Alexander Tochilovsky, the curator at the Herb Lubalin Center in New York at Cooper Union. I basically asked, "I want to build this site. How can we make this happen?" He was more than willing to give me permission to release the content and wrote the introductory text. I mean, they are such a small institution. There are so many treasures that just aren't exposed because there's not enough manpower in the world to push them all online.

Then, since I'm not a developer, I contacted a very good friend named Jon Gacnik, who is based in L.A. We basically had a pseudo-residency where I flew him up to SF and he built the entire site in one weekend. It was incredibly impressive. It was a small group of us working on it, and definitely a labor of love.

That's so cool that you found this magazine at Adobe Books, wondered why there wasn't more of it online, and then pitched the whole project and made it happen. Were you able to get funding to do it, or has this all just been a passion project?

It's always difficult to try and build these sites without a lot of funding, or with no funding at all. What I've also been learning is, because I had the luxury of making a salary then, I felt like I could also make this kind of work on my own. But I'm trying to figure out how to make this a viable practice. I want to work with these small institutions and provide them with design resources. There are a lot of grants, definitely, but I think when I was starting that project I just naively built the whole thing without actually thinking about the viability of the project and how much money it might actually take.



Eros is the lesser-known sister publication of Avant Garde, which help set off the sexual revolution in the 1960s. eros.110west40th.com

When you're working with a client instead of for yourself or as a passion project, what is that like? What's your approach to getting their buy-in for the idea you think is best?

I was most recently with a studio called 2x4, which is based in New York. We worked in teams, and each designer started a project by pitching super-fast sketches to your internal group. Then, depending on what concept was selected, the team members all worked towards that idea, even if it wasn't your idea initially. By blending all of these different perspectives, you end up with three or four core concepts that you can pitch to a client. I think, more than anything, I learned various presentation tactics. Instead of jumping straight to the final product, you have to build the story around what the final solution might be.

Building a framework or a system is a really solid way to build out multiple forms of the same concept, because in most cases, our projects are not about creating single-serving sites. The work we do for most clients will have all these different applications, so it needs to work across many different media and forms.

When you're working on self-directed projects that aren't for a client or for your job, how do you keep them going? Do you feel a reliable urge to keep working on them, or do things tend to peter out sometimes?

I tend to not abandon projects. But because of this, I will say it tends to be harder to start new ones. I typically won't start a project unless I definitely plan to finish it, but that means that the initial phase of thinking things through ends up taking a very, very long time.

You don't count thinking about the project as part of the project?

Well, I think having a seed of an idea is very different from when you start working on it actively. If I see something that I want to digitize, it might sit with me for years before I even try to start sketching it for the first time. Often, that's because of other time constraints, or it can be because I need to be able to truly reflect on something before I'm ready to start working on it full-force. Alongside that there are also a lot of technical constraints. For example, if I know there will be a lot of copyright issues, a project can just be stuck in this pipeline where I'm asking a bunch of people for permission, and then waiting for them to respond. With a current project I'm working on, we'll probably end up waiting a couple years before we can even start because of copyright issues.

Is that frustrating for you? Do you wish that things could move faster, or do you like having a lot of slow-burning projects going at once?

Because they start slow-burning, by the time I start working on them, these passion projects can often be churned out within maybe a month or so, and I like that speed. Usually, there's a long-burning start where

I'm thinking about it or getting required sign-offs, and then I start working on it super fast and actively, and iterating quickly for a very short period of time. But then there's always that time period with a project where it feels it's never-ending because of minutia. I tend to gravitate towards that center active block of working on a project. You just feel like you're getting so much done and it propels you to, because you can see how close you are to being finished.

Do you think that being a designer has informed the way you approach everyday life?

I feel like certain personality traits that I have tend to benefit my design work, and these also feed into my everyday life. I am very detail-oriented, which is helpful when you're a designer. I also have this fear of acquiring objects, so I tend to keep my life very sparse. I'm very organized, so with physical objects I have or even with things that I have online, I like making sure that everything is labeled properly and nested within folders. I think that meticulous nature I've always had, but it's definitely been helpful—it's maybe even intensified by my design practice, just because you have so much content all the time, it's important to keep everything organized.

Do you think you were born to be a designer, and have always been in the process of becoming more yourself?

I don't know if I was born to be a designer. I kind of feel like there are no perfect routes in life. When you're young you're trying to make sure you make the perfect decision about the city you want to live in or the school you want to go to, but inevitably whatever decision you make will just lead to other experiences and it'll totally transform you. When I first started, I went to UCLA as a Business Econ major. I switched within my first year without having taken any business classes.

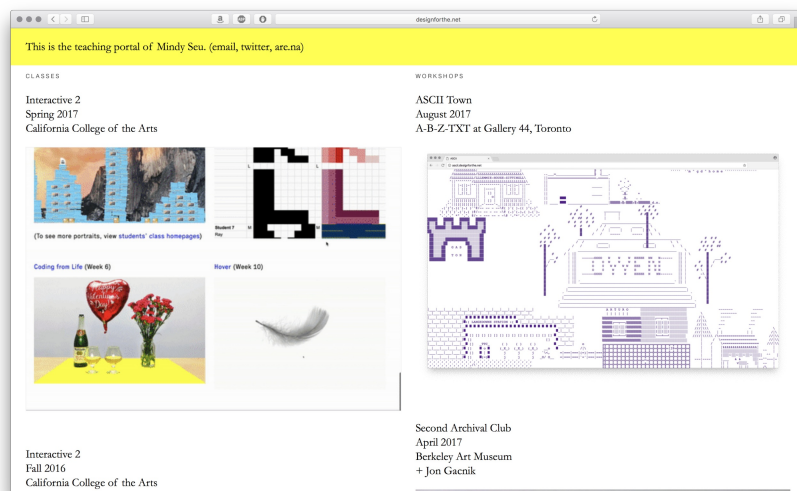
How did you know you needed to switch?

When I was in high school, I was always very design-oriented, making things for various clubs and friends, like t-shirts, logos, things like that. I don't even know how I first stumbled upon the design media arts program at UCLA, but the second I stepped into a studio class I really started thinking, "Okay, there are so many different types of jobs that I didn't even know existed before I got to college."

I saw that you taught for a while at CCA, but now you're back in school yourself at Harvard's Graduate School for Design. How did you know that you wanted to go back to school, even after being a teacher?

Well, I have always loved school. I taught for a couple of years at CCA, and I really, really loved that program. I met a lot of great faculty there, and people who I'm still friends with. But what it really boils down to is that, while working a full-time job and teaching, I didn't have enough time for my own work. I was teaching the 7pm to 10pm slot twice a week for multiple semesters, and then trying to work on my other projects outside of those two things—I just felt like I was burning the candle at both ends. Graduate school doesn't provide all of the answers, but it does give you a space to focus solely on what you would like to pursue in the future.

Having been in school for so long, and then not being a student for a while made me realize that being in school is an absolute luxury. Now, wandering around all these brick buildings and sitting in libraries all day, it just feels so precious in a way that I did not appreciate when I was an undergrad. I appreciate everything so much more now.



Courses and workshops taught by Mindy and collaborators can be found on the teaching portal designforthe.net

Do you have any words of wisdom to people who are considering whether or not they should go back to school?

When I graduated undergrad I always knew I wanted to go back and get a master's eventually. The timing felt right for me this year, because I realized I was at this point where I could definitely continue what I was doing—working as a designer, teaching with an institution, and doing freelance work—but I wanted to try and distill my ideas into more of a singular practice. I think that, for me, graduate school is a way to work towards really defining what my practice is, and what I want to work towards. It was hard for me to do that with so many other things happening. I felt like I wasn't prioritizing my own work. Also, trying to clarify the specific route I want to go down. There are so many different forms of design, so it's important to reflect and consider what type of practice I want to have.

You think that being in school will give you the time and space to really feel confident about the direction you want to narrow in on?

This is only my first semester, and I've already had a lot of mini existential crises. I think that, even if you come into grad school with a clear idea of what you want to do, it just changes so rapidly once you start meeting all these different people with different backgrounds, and learning about all these new concepts and opportunities. I've already been left with so many more questions. I don't know if these questions will be answered in the next year and a half, but I think they'll definitely push me in directions that I wouldn't have otherwise explored.

Is there something that you wish someone told you when you began to pursue a design career that you've learned over time, but had no idea about at the beginning?

I would say it's that the design community is very, very small. It's much smaller than it might appear from the outside. Because of this, it's helpful to always be generous to others and yourself. Answer others thoroughly and thoughtfully, and give yourself time to reflect and relax. And, being nice goes a long way. I think that being nice and being curious about other people's works will definitely benefit your own.

Mindy Seu recommends:

Interference Archive

Cybernetics Conference → Wendy Chun's Proxy Politics as Social Cybernetics

Issues of Radical Software on Internet Archive

This beautiful playground by Charles Forberg, Cypress Hills, Brooklyn, 1964

Charles Jenck's Garden of Cosmic Speculation in Scotland

Name

Mindy Seu

Vocation

Designer

Fact



Photo by Alexa Viscius

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