



Jacob Kemp <jacobdkemp@gmail.com>

On Mendelsund

1 message

Jacob Kemp <jacobdkemp@gmail.com>
To: Brian Collins <brian@collins1.com>

Mon, Sep 14, 2020 at 1:24 PM

Hi, Brian.

As I delved into Mendelsund's books and portfolio, I was delighted (and also, slightly amazed) to discover that I had been saving his covers, brand identities, illustrations, and letterforms for years: his key art for Thin Blue Line, covers for Plato's The Republic, War & Peace, Ulysses, The Inferno, The Atlantic's rebranding, Things We Didn't See Coming, his early drafts for Stieg Larsson (when the title was still The Man Who Hated Women), Silence Once Begun, Tell Them Of Battles Kings & Elephants, House of Meetings. It was exciting to discover Peter himself, his path, and his process.

Mendelsund and I have a shared duality to our creative DNA. Yes, Mendelsund's is based in classical music, mine in acting. But I found myself surprised and in giddy stupor at our own two experiences, because different as they may seem, they continued to align. Peter's life and journey, from classical musician to designer, and my own current circumstances – from actor to designer – even meeting you and entering this new chapter – seems, for lack of a better word, in harmony.

Mendelsund began his design career in his thirties, with no design education. His path began as a professional classical pianist, in which he devoted his life to performance and discipline in a completely different (and entirely parallel) creative path.

Both of us spent our first thirty years as interpretive artists – in that the actor, and the instrumentalist, are not the composers of the stories or songs that they perform. We together, the artist and the musician, work in service of the story, to elevate it to its highest capacity, to mine the words and musical notes for all of its nectar and hidden gifts, but we have failed the material if our own creativity steals the show. We are vessels of the piece we are to perform. We shine only when we get out of the way and disappear in service of the stories we are telling.

Mendelsund works that way. His style is often difficult to place, because he is a chameleon of form. His visual style captures the essence of the very thing he is enlisted to design a cover for, and then is reimagined with each cover he designs. The book designer must analyze and reveal the inner world of a text, just as a musician must reveal the inner life of the music he performs. The designer's performance must reveal, not replace, the inner composition. As a designer, like the actor, like the musicians, in order to do their work well, they must disappear.

I once met with a fairly high-powered agent in LA, she and I were discussing the possibility of working together. But in order to begin doing so, she asked that I strengthen my social media presence by adding, under my username, a phrase that read: "you might recognize me from my roles in" – and then proceed to list the hashtags of the award-winning series and films in which I have appeared. I thanked her graciously for the advice. But I told her, outright, that if people recognized me that easily from the roles I had played, I hadn't done my job.

Mendelsund says that for him, design feels more like continued practice, a constant rehearsal, with no final performance. The practice remains the same basis of barre for the ballet dancer, or daily scales – the aim to reach full creative capacity with no final aria or performance. The practice is the only performance required. I know this well. So much of my design process is aligned with my creative practice as an actor. Whether working in brand design, key art, or book design, the task at hand is to bring a character, a world, a story to life through the means of type, color, proportion, composition, time, and coding.

Mendelsund describes the process of iterating and creating alternate versions of a design concept for rollout, to be manifested in the way a pianist or composer can take one musical phrase and develop it into hundreds of fugues. Once you have an iteration, you can

alter it indefinitely. If you can do scales, you can alter them into major or minor chords.

One of my biggest takeaways from Mendelsund is that your personal history is embedded into your design work in ways you don't expect. The way you create is intrinsic to who you are. How you design is only another iteration of how you see the world, and how you live your life.

Mendelsund, like me, was at a crossroads in his life. After years devoted to one creative discipline, a chance encounter with a designer changed his life. His portfolio came across Chip Kidd, who, quite simply, believed in him. He, too, had a chance to connect to someone who saw him for who he was, offered the opportunity of a lifetime, and the rest is history. Kidd sent him right to John Gall, and Carol Carson, who both said (cue the Ulysses cover...) YES.

In COVER, he writes: *"I didn't know how to design anything myself...[but] I knew clearly what I liked and didn't like. Nothing galvanized my desire to design, and solidified the knowledge that I could design, more than this feeling – the sense of knowing in my bones what was good design work and what was not."* Mendelsund might not have had decades of study in design, but he had years of inspiration, a high level of personal taste, and a rare concentration of skill. He knew what it took to develop craft. And he knew that with a high taste level and a keen eye, his path to excellence in design could echo his path to excellence in musicianship.

This is perhaps best exhibited in his rebranding of the Atlantic Magazine identity. In his design brief, he says that for him, **negative space is one of his biggest compositional assets**. This came to him from his background in music, and in charting time – that is to say, *time* in music is divided into proportional segments: tempos are composed by means of half notes, eighths, sixteenths, and so on. But time is also marked in pauses, or *rests*. These rests in music are equally as important as the notes themselves. Negative space, whether in composition, typography, or proportion – is like time in music. Negative space also composes the music to the eye.

In SAME SAME, Mendelsund's protagonist describes the setting as "a kind of retro-futurism," and I think that terminology captures so much of his signature style. In that it feels both in and out of time. It is both timely and essential, hewn from a clear line of imagery and inspiration, but also with a gaze directed straight out of the box. His designs balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar, striding between the dependably consistent – and the high-dive into the unforeseen.

The man is still human, after all, and there are several aspects to his work that tend to irk me. If you asked me what do *I* see, when I read "WHAT WE SEE WHEN WE READ" – I see a bad print job on bad stock paper. I see a designer who chose a primarily black and white palette to describe many visual ideas (love) but sadly, I see not true black and white – but a bad print job on bad paper. The book is printed on cheap paper, which is not white, but a damp, newsprint, almost bone in tone. This is a man who lived for years amidst ebonies and ivories. He knows the importance of contrast and pattern. If your chosen colors are to be black and white, I want **black** and **white**. Not **ash** and **ecru**. He's a book designer. Design the book for your audience, which is a design-loving, aesthetic-driven, snob. We are folks who know the difference between uncoated, gloss, and silk. We want to touch the object that you designed knowing you took the care and rigor that you are known for... I do not understand how the publisher managed this one without a major upset. Twyla Tharp did it best in THE CREATIVE HABIT. And she's a choreographer.

I also found COVER to be poorly structured, and content-wise, a sham. Half of the book's contents were written by authors praising Mendelsund for his work on their projects. I say, let the reader come to the conclusion you are a genius. We don't need to be told. Show me. I'll take process over pitch paragraphs, or additional PR. There were several times I was wondering if he published the monograph in order to get his next gig. It felt, oddly, self-aggrandizing. I believe your work should always do the talking. Everyone has seen the final covers you have designed; so I believe additional kill-coverage would have been welcome, with descriptions perhaps by the art directors who oversaw his drafts; or the publishers, who so rarely are interviewed. And who ultimately make the final decisions.

Also, Mendelsund has declared in COVER that he has "a tragic relationship to type." I'm not certain I agree. His connection to letterforms and their nuanced relationship to both content and tone, is deeply felt and always matches both content, and audience. He might not be a couture dressmaker, but he sure makes a damn good stylist.

And it gives me hope. I'm beginning with Letterforms, then onto The Essentials of Typographic Style, then Thinking With Type. Give me a few weeks, I might have words on those too. But first, Oliver Munday. And "The Architecture of Happiness."

But your urge to me, Brian – to pursue his portfolio, to glean from his covers and illustrations, from his words and his work, from his process and his manifestos, have blasted me from black and white to technicolor these past few weeks. And your mentorship has already got me feeling like I might not be in Kansas anymore.

So, here goes nothing. You said a door has been opened.
I'm walking right through, and ready to work.

Jacob

J . D . K E M P

www.jacobkemp.com

m +1.781.424.8483

e jacobdkemp@gmail.com