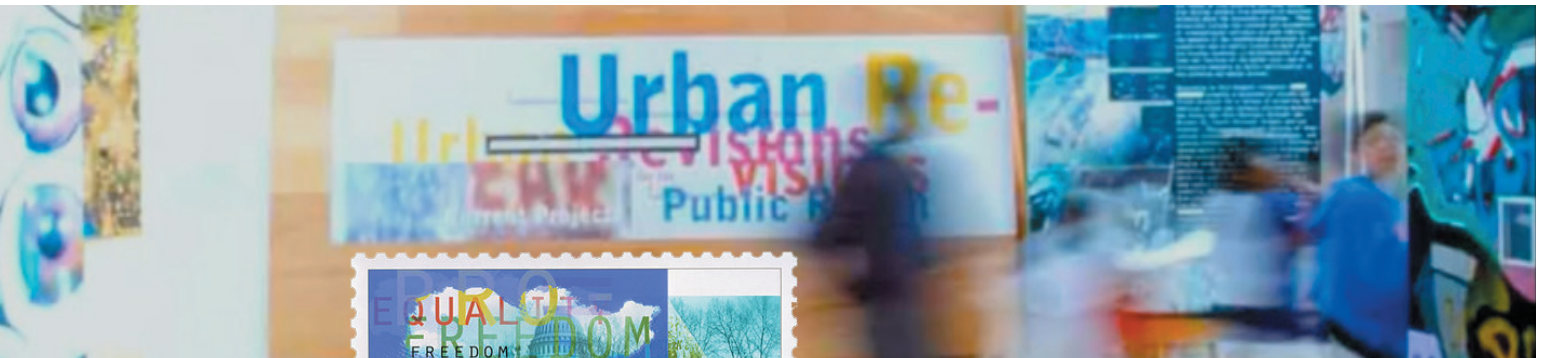# april greiman:

by jodie dubreuil
idea lab, spring 2021

"experiment, take a chance, make a move, make mistakes, catch a bit of luck! repeat!"
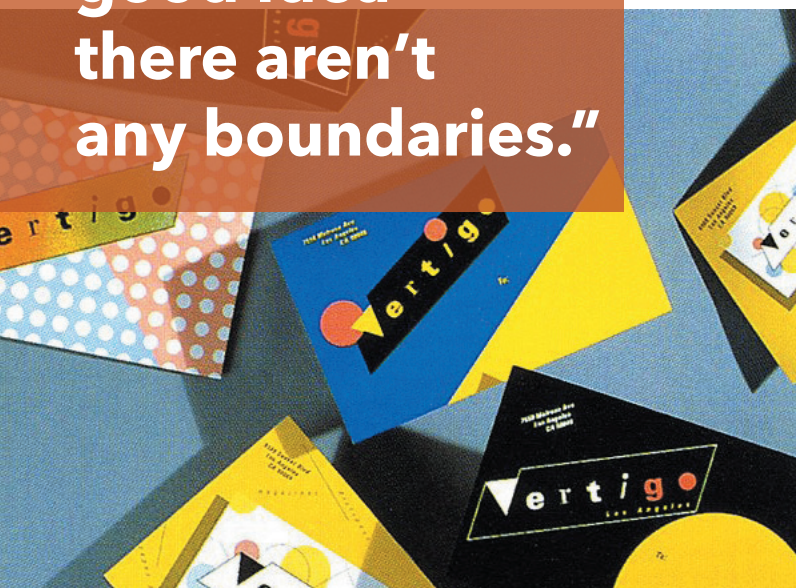
urban revisions, public installations

19th amendment (women's suffrage) commemorative stamp, u.s. postal commission, 1995

**"If you have a good idea there aren't any boundaries."**

April Greiman was one of the first designers who embraced computers and digitization of design, is a self-titled trans-media artist, and is a pioneer of digital communications design. She is versatile in many aspects of design. She is proficiently skilled in video, video paintbox, computers, and design software, motion graphics/tv spots, print work, built environment, signage and wayfinding, and more. These all encompass communications design and ultimately create hybrid processes. Greiman says, "I love this notion which exists in physics as well–that the observer is the observed, and the observed is the observer. The tools and technologies begin to dictate what and how you see something, or how the outcome is predictable. These ideas bring back the kid in me, that very pure curiosity." Greiman has always been fascinated with tools used for communication or messaging. From early childhood, an innate perpetual curiosity and questioning fuels her process to explore and inspire the cutting-edge design work that places her at the top of integrated design spanning her 50-year career.

In 1948, Greiman was born and raised New York City, She graduated from the Kansas City Art Institute with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design in

Identity, business cards, hang tags, and postcards for Vertigo, 1979

1970. Then during the early '70s, she enrolled at the Basel School of Design (then Allgemeine Künstgewerberschule Basel) to study under four renowned masters of that period– Armin Hofmann (design,) Wolfgang Weingart (typography, letterpress printing,) and Franz Fedier (painting.) Allgemeine Kunstgewerbeschule (General Arts Trade School). At Basel, she developed her interest in International Style and her later well-known 'New Wave' style. Between 2001 - 2012, Greiman received four honorary doctorates awarded to her by different institutes, including Kansas City Art Institute, Art Center College of Design, The Art Institute of Boston, and Academy of Art University. In 1984, while the head of the design department at The California Institute of the Arts, she changed

where the concept and design are ultimately her own. "I don't hire graphic designers anymore. The idea of many designers working in virtual isolation is no longer relevant. I hire collaborators (expert in his or her field) who are specialists in their own fields—a web master, a researcher, a production artist—depending on the project."

"no thinking,
if thinking,
think nothing"
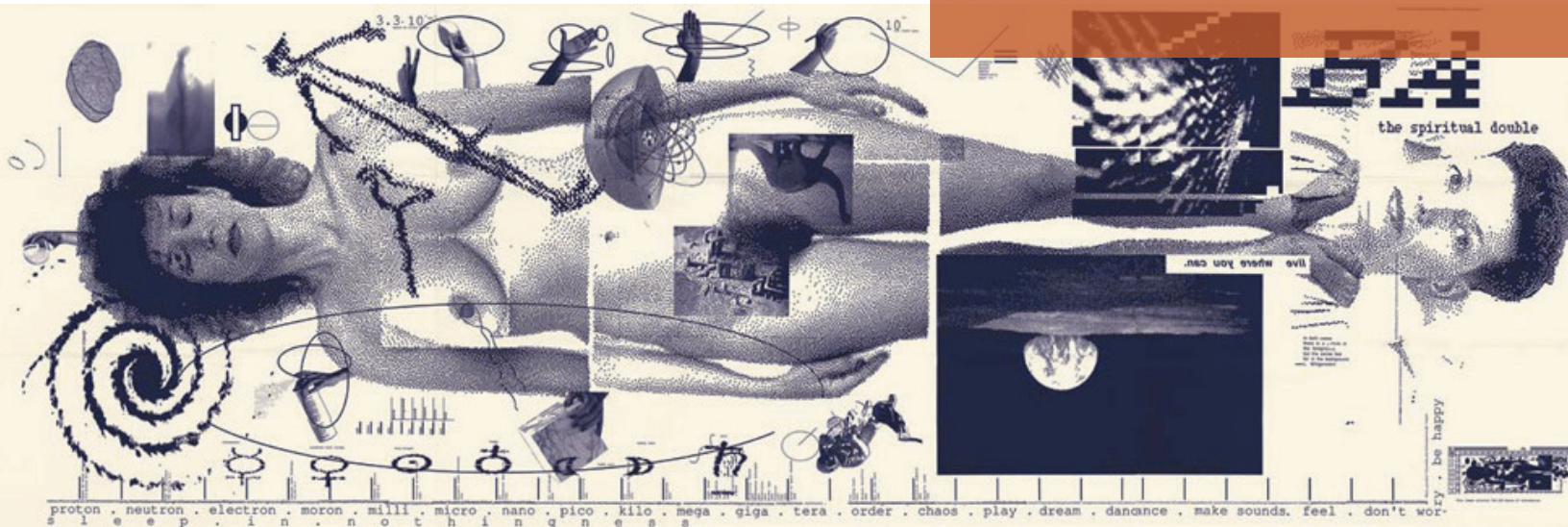
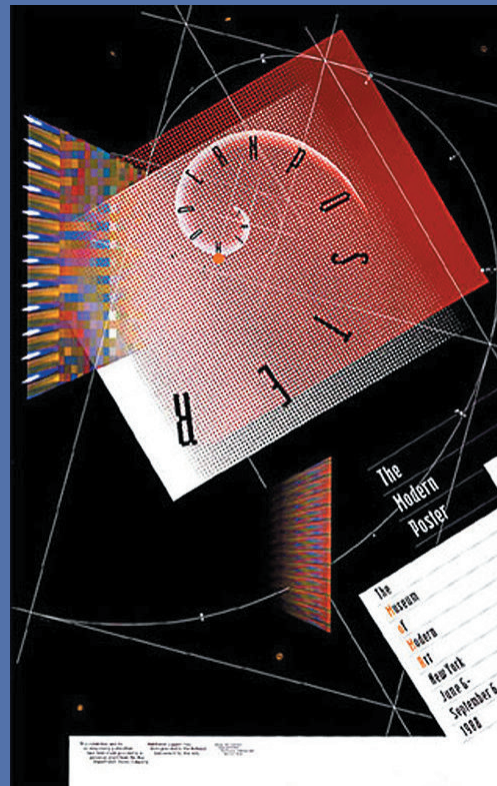*does it make sense?, design quarterly #133, 1986, MIT press, walker art center*

the program's name from Graphic Design to Visual Communications, as she believed that "graphic design" limited the range of the subject. She is currently a Professor of Design, Roski School of Art and Design, at the University of Southern California (USC), Los Angeles, California.

In 1976, Greiman founded her studio, Made in Space, in Los Angeles. She instilled the multi-disciplinary approach that has extended through her practice to date. Made in Space was, and is, the model of the contemporary design studio. Greiman considers herself both a generalist, actively involved in all parts of projects, and a specialist,

One of her most acclaimed projects was "Does it Makes Sense" for Design Quarterly #133 in 1989. Greiman created the project as a poster that folded out to almost three by six feet with her digitized, naked body interacting with varying layers of images and text. The finished piece took the place of a formatted standard thirty-two-page sequence typical for the magazine. In her process for this, she started with the new Macintosh computer and MacDraw program. Other designers at the time were wary of using a computer to design. However, to Greiman, it was a challenge to initiate a process of integrating digitized video images and bitmapped types.

An essential part of Greiman's process is to work in a robust and natural environment, such as the desert - one of her favorite places. "The desert is its own educational vehicle," she says. "While most processes occur at an invisible or microscopic level, the desert reveals its evolution in its very existence. I felt as if, for the first time, my eyes were wide open to the process of evolution, to growth, to change." She achieves absolute clarity and a brain dump of the last project she completed. This clarity gives her a rejuvenation of thinking and the methodology for a clear-headed process of approaching a project's schematic phase.

The digital landscape intrigues her in much the same way as the desert. For Greiman, it is vital to have a rolling, working knowledge of all graphic design tools, to embrace the challenge of being fluent in all technologies. As a digital communicator, it is imperative to understand information hierarchy, messaging, etc. Her advice to designers on the process is not to start with a specific typographic grid or ordering system. According to Greiman, it is too hard to get messy and creative if we do that. We should take the leap into the void and start with what we are interested in, and then the project can evolve, and we can always apply ordering systems and production needs after. April Greiman's Philosophy: Does it make sense? If you give it sense, it makes sense.

Greiman's working methods are complex. The design of the MOMA poster, for example, involves a series of steps to create the "layering" that she seeks to add resonance to her designs.

the modern poster, 1988, moma, nyc

Step 1: A background is created by entering the video image of a landscape into a computer programmed with high resolution electronic "paint-box" software.

Step 2: Greiman "boogies around" with the background images, overlaying sketches and blown-up 35-millimeter photographic slides of interesting textures and fragments of pattern she finds intriguing.

Step 3: This "layered" image is laser scanned to magnify the light-point pixels that make up the computer image. Each magnified pixel thus becomes a unique and separate geometry of tones and colors.

"Normally the digital pixels are invisible to the viewer," Greiman explained. "But when you bring them into focus, you see that each one is different and fascinating in shape and color. This is what I mean when I say that we invent the technology and then it reinvents the way we see."

The final stage in the poster design is the manipulation of the discovered textures and colors into an image that communicates an immediate yet complex message. When complete, it reads both as an art image and as a source of specific information.

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