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Disegno

JOURNAL OF DESIGN CULTURE

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Aims and Scope

Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design and, visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavor welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academy by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

All research articles published in Disegno undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process. This journal does not charge APCs or submission charges.

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Victor Margolin's Early Years

Myra Margolin

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*Victor Margolin with Myra
and Sylvia Margolin c. 1978*



The following includes excerpts from memories that my father recorded in his last year of life. These memories, all my father's words, are indicated by italics.

When I was a small child, my father used to take me to a novelty shop in Chicago called Uncle Fun. It was filled with rows of cabinets with tiny drawers that seemed, to my small self, to reach the ceiling. Each drawer contained a small wonder: little rubber chickens, stickers of Renaissance angels, woven finger traps, wax lips, kazoos. We would venture from our apartment in suburban Chicago to this shop in the city where he and I both delighted in opening the drawers and discovering small bursts of surprise, returning home with bags of treasures. We would lay these out on the dining room table, get out his big box of rubber stamps and spend hours making kookie, kitschy art together.

Another clear memory: searching with him for the perfect Chicago hot dog. First we decided it was at Fluky's, where they gave out bubble gum in the shape of a hot dog. Then we switched our allegiance to Poochie's, where they grilled the onions and slathered on melted cheddar cheese. When my uncles visited from New York, my father eagerly engaged them in the search, taking them around the city to sample hot dog after hot dog.

My father was a seeker of culture, someone who dove into the human-made world, be it looking at paintings at a high-end gallery, questing for hot dog perfection, or buying curios with his pre-schooler. I don't think there was much difference in his mind. He was endlessly fascinated with material culture, engaging in innumerable collecting endeavors throughout his life. He kept catalogs of every film he had seen, had drawers overflowing with records and CDs of music from every continent, and for years devoted shelves of his university office to his "Museum of Contemporary Art", his collection of cultural kitsch.

He was also a big picture thinker. The biggest picture thinker I've ever met. He was always seeking to understand things in their entirety. He took epic walks, sometimes choosing an iconic street and walking its length. In Chicago, he walked Clark Street from start to finish. In LA he did Sunset Boulevard. When I was living in New York, he visited, intent on a "Queens walk", starting in Flushing's Chinatown and weaving down Roosevelt Avenue, stopping for dumplings, tamales, hand-stretched noodles.

On these walks, he followed his "rule of yes". That is, when he was with a companion, if either of them wanted to stop for any reason - to detour down an alley, explore a bakery, stop at a used bookstore—the answer was always yes. I have always thought of this rule more expansively to describe my dad—the desire to take everything in, to look at everything through a bird's eye, to map, chart, experience, understand and imagine. To be expansive.

The goal of these walks was to be immersed in the life of a city slowly, at walking pace, to take in the details of the stores, the people, the street art, the architecture, the way neighborhoods slowly shift from one to another, demographics changing. One of his favorite things to do when people visited him in Chicago was to take them on a tour of the murals in Pilsen, a historically Mexican-American neighborhood, rather than to the traditional sights that tourists visit. He was endlessly fascinated with the small (and not so small) wonders created by people to make the world more colorful, more efficient, more meaningful.

When I brought my boyfriend, now husband, home for the first time, my father organized a food tour of Chicago, driving far north for *samosas* on Devon Avenue, heading to Uptown and its cluster of Vietnamese restaurants and shops for *Pho*, then on to Swedish pancakes in Andersonville and finally to Little Village on the southwest side for a legendary *taco*. It brought my father so much joy to immerse himself in the city in this way, in the tapestries of cultures woven together in one place, and to share it with others.

I can't remember ever going on a hike in my childhood (in fact, I distinctly remember getting to high school and not knowing what the word *hike* meant). But I have countless memories of walking through cities with my parents, my mother and I going ahead while my father stopped to photograph graffiti, an unusual mailbox, a public toilet. I remember once being in a car with him at an intersection while he leant out the car's window in order to take a picture of an unusual hot dog cart. He was a collector and kept a running catalog in his head of images he was gathering: typography on restaurant signs that mimicked non-Latin alphabets, trash cans, public benches, murals. He left an archive of thousands of these photos, visual documents of the way he made sense of the world.

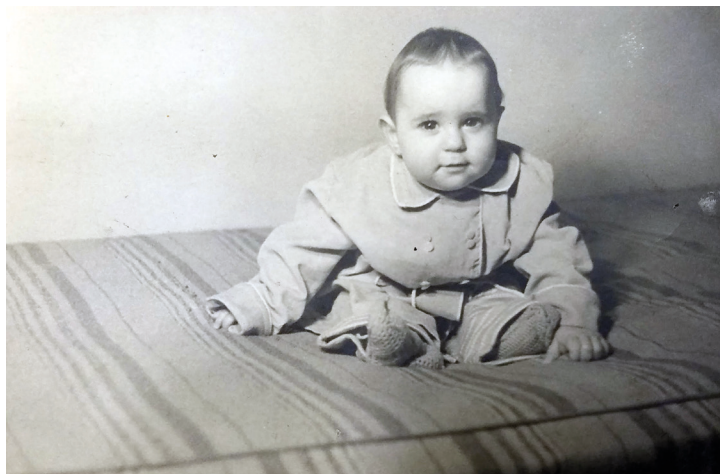
As some readers may know, in the last four years of his life my father was paralyzed from the neck down, the result of a spinal cord injury he sustained after fainting at a conference in South Korea. This was a very confusing time for my father. He went from living a healthy retired life, working diligently every day on the third volume of his *World History of Design*, consulting on public design projects in Chicago, traveling internationally with my mother and for conferences, eating out, going to concerts, and looking forward to the next twenty years of his life and the many projects he hoped to do to lying in a hospital bed in Korea, unable to move his body.

I flew to be with him as soon as we learned about the accident and stayed until he was stable enough to be flown back to the States. A memory from this time that I hold dear is reading the entirety of Ta-Nehisi Coates's recently released *Between the World and Me* aloud to him as he lay still, not feeling anything below his neck. I would pause between passages and we would discuss the ideas, unpack the text. Even during this most difficult time, what he wanted to do was learn, talk, dive into big ideas. He was an insatiable scholar.

Those few weeks were tender. I stayed with him from morning until night as colleagues from the conference filtered in and out of his room. These visits are what got him through that time. He was an avid conversationalist, choosing time with people above almost anything. I distinctly remember one colleague bringing her fiancé with her to his hospital room. He was thrilled to meet the fiancé: "She told me about him years ago when they started dating!" he told me with glee. He loved to know people's stories, to follow their lives, to help when he could. He lived for people: both his personal connections and his deep interest in the worlds they created, i.e. design.

After he had returned home, been through months of rehab, and was adapting to life with paralysis, I can still see him in his living room, wheelchair tilted back, doing what he called "wheelchair dancing", Cuban music filling the room and his legs kicking up and down. "This music speaks to my soul," he would tell me, smiling like a child.

My father was an only child, born in New York City and raised in Washington DC. His mother was an immigrant from Lithuania who served as a lobbyist for the National Council of Jewish Women for 30 years, advocating in areas such as women's issues and civil rights. His father was a lawyer. He was often lonely as a child.



At almost eight months,
January 25, 1942

"The sense of growing up in my house was one of isolation rather than family activity. My parents and I sometimes occupied the rooms together, but not as a trio of people who engaged emotionally with each other. We often ate at the Formica kitchen table with my father and mother on the two ends and me in the middle. They would bounce their comments about the latest news back and forth and I would watch the words fly as if I were witnessing a tennis match. I remember feeling left out of those conversations."

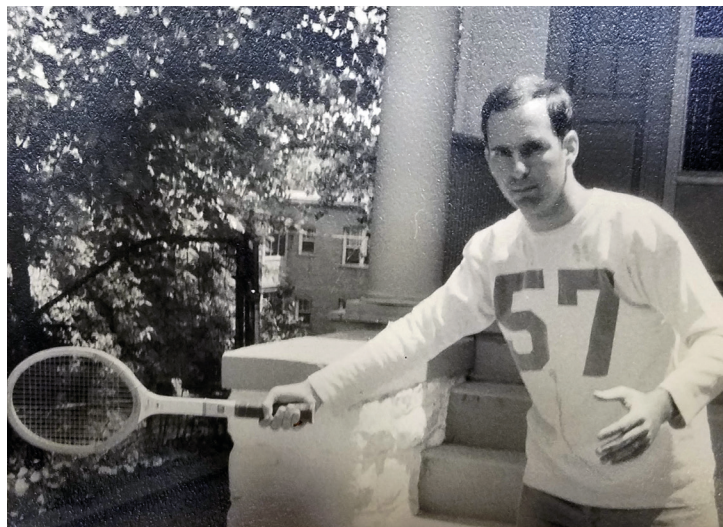
*At 19 months
in Washington, DC*



He had a lot of freedom as a child, playing on the streets with neighborhood kids, buying tin soldiers at the corner store, constructing small habitats out of cardboard boxes. He always had an interest in art. In science class, he bypassed the content, choosing to spend hours drawing diagrams of plants instead of learning their biology. He recalled a school geography project, *"Each student was given clay and a different country to research. I don't remember my country, but I enjoyed the colors of the clay countries on the map."* In middle school, his family moved to a large house in the Cleveland Park neighborhood. *"At one point, all the rooms on the third floor were free to use. I made use of them for different purposes. I set up an art studio in the central room and spent several months making pastels and ink paintings."*

As a teenager, he did a school project on the history of the pun, doing a deep dive into the archives at the Library of Congress. *"This led to my first entrepreneurial venture. At that time, I believe it was 1958, the American Booksellers Convention was holding its annual meeting in Washington, DC. One of the publishers was the Peter Pauper Press which published a series of small books of poetry, sayings, and other short topics. I approached the publisher, who was sitting in the booth, and proposed a small collection of puns. He was receptive to the idea and as a result the Peter Pauper Press published The Little Pun Book. I was listed as the editor, my first credit as an editor or author."* He was 18 years old.

He went to college at Columbia University where he majored in English, contributed to *MAD Magazine* and edited the *Columbia Jester*, the university's humor magazine. It was during this time that he had a roommate who had joined a relatively new spiritual group called Subud, a practice which my father took up then and followed diligently and with deep sincerity for the rest of his life.



Highschool
years

He was an idealist and a seeker but he also struggled with profound anxiety. It took him many years to find his path in life and the period between college and eventually landing in the field of design history was one that was both incredibly rich and personally challenging.

After graduating from Columbia he went to Paris on a Fulbright to study filmmaking. He left the program early to move to Germany where he immersed himself in the local Subud community, learning German along the way. After several months in Germany, he returned to DC where he worked briefly as a film editor at NBC. One day, realizing his dissatisfaction, he quit on the spot. This marked the end of his film career.

At the time, a friend of his was in Mexico City and my father had an inner feeling to join him there even though he didn't have any concrete plans. *"During that time (in Mexico) I began to learn Spanish on my own. I would go every morning for breakfast at a restaurant known as Sanborn's where I would have my traditional fresh orange juice, Mexican eggs and coffee. Each week I bought the magazine LIFE in Spanish. I would read through the magazine and begin to learn the language by looking up words I didn't know in a Spanish-English dictionary. I also began translating this vocabulary into spoken Spanish. This was not hard since I already knew French and was able to build on French grammar."*

"During my time in Mexico I began to make notes for a very ambitious writing project—a cosmology that could explain the way that cosmic forces were converted into social organization. In retrospect it was an outlandish task and I must have been crazy to even think about it but that's what came to me and I decided to follow the impulse."

This impulse became his earliest work of scholarship: a massive book that no one ever read. Before he became interested in design, before pursuing a PhD, before landing on academia as an area of interest, came a span of a few years that he later dubbed his "library period."

After returning from Mexico, he moved back to his parents' home in DC. "Back in Washington, for better or worse, I did not look for a job but instead I decided to pursue writing my cosmology. My parent's house in Cleveland Park was just a few minutes' walk from a branch of the DC public library. I would go there each morning with an attaché case filled with books that I borrowed from the library. Following my inner feeling, I read books on a lot of different subjects ranging from biology to international law."

"My reading was not systematic but instead derived from an instinctive impulse. I was interested in systems without knowing anything about systems theory. I was also interested in the generation of systems related to the spirit. I had been in Subud for a few years and was familiar with John Bennett, who was the founder of a comprehensive theory that sought to combine the spiritual and the material. Bennett wrote a multi-volume work called The Dramatic Universe. I also read books by several esoteric philosophers."

"My quest in all this reading was to find models for building a system that combined the spiritual and the material. I began to make copious notes on sheets of lined yellow paper. I developed a set of terms which I began to use. They were based on the tripartite relationship between the cosmos, which I identified with the prefix cosmo, the realm of biology, which I identified with the prefix bio, and the realm of society, including the physical environment such as buildings and the social structures that determine the way society is organized."

"What underlay my scheme was an attempt to show how spiritual forces were converted into material organization. I worked on parts of this project for more than two years, going from my parents' house, walking the three blocks every morning to the Macomb Street public Library, where I dutifully plunked down my attaché case full of books and began my explorations of knowledge fields with which I had previously been unfamiliar. There I sat until the afternoon when it was time for my apple pie and coffee across the street at Peoples Drug Store."

"I don't think I was running out of steam but eventually my parents felt that it was no longer right for me to stay home without working. It is actually a miracle that they allowed me to continue

the arrangement of going from home to library each day without asking me earlier to go out and get a job. I still can't fathom the reason for this acceptance. In any case the mandate to get a job was loud and clear." By this point, he had compiled around 1,000 pages of writing, pages which he carried with him through many moves only to eventually throw them away over a decade later. At that point, he felt they had served their purpose in his life, having been more for the process of writing them than the product they produced. He told me he felt an enormous relief when he finally let the book go and never felt any regret.



*In Wolfsburg, Germany,
spring 1964*

After his parents pushed him to find work, my father spent several years searching for a path. The first job he got after the library period was at the Library of Congress doing research and writing bibliographies, work which allowed him to continue reading, learning, and expanding his scope of knowledge. He had a series of freelance jobs, including curating a film festival for the White House Conference on Children. *"My role in the conference planning was to create a festival of children's films, probably because I had a film background. This project gave me experience in assembling resources. This would serve as good practice for my work on my World History of Design."* He also worked on a film anthology for the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Eventually he had a feeling to relocate to New York City and in 1972, when he was 30, he moved to a fourth floor walk-up at 77th St and 1st Ave. His time in New York is when he established the foundations on which he eventually built the rest of his professional life. It was also a time of great stress and uncertainty. For the rest of his life, he would have a recurring nightmare about being alone and out of work in New York. Even though he followed his inner feelings during this time and forged a pioneering path that eventually led him to become an innovative and broad-thinking scholar, the anxiety of the unknown left an indelible mark on his psyche that no amount of later success could completely shake.

When I revisit this period in his life, it reads to me like an often-told story of a young person exploring the world to find where they fit in. In our household, though, it was often framed with shame and a sense of failure. Of this time, my father wrote, *"Psychologically, I was not in good shape, especially feeling very insecure. I did not have a clear professional path and was not strong inwardly."* For this, I feel very sorry. I wish my father could have seen in this exploration the beauty that I see. He followed his intuition and guidance, even when it seemed counterintuitive and untraditional. He was enterprising and resourceful, acquiring skills and experiences that only much later came together and made sense. He was dogged and steadfast in his push to find a direction that connected to his inner nature, a career that matched his talents and through which he could develop the best qualities of himself. He forged his own path with an inner assurance I'm not sure he recognized in himself.

It was in New York when he took his first steps into the world of design research. After another series of freelance jobs, including as a media consultant at the U.N., he embarked on his first book project (aside from the pun books he edited as a teenager). *"I contacted WETA, the public television station in Washington, where I had worked on a projected television series handbook about World War II propaganda. We had built a large collection of color transparencies and black-and-white photographs, all related to different forms of propaganda—posters, cartoons, and related visual materials."*

"When the series did not go forward, the station had all that material, which I remembered when I was in New York. I wrote to the station to see if I could use the material to develop a book. By some miracle the station gave me the material to use as I wished. I sold the book project to a New York publisher, Chelsea House. The agreement was that I would become the editor and we would find an author to write the book. We found Anthony Roads, a British writer of fiction and nonfiction. We also found an outstanding book designer, Harris Lewine, who had experience in book design with various New York publishers. The book was completed and published in 1975. I was the editor, Rhodes was the author, Lewine was the art director. The book was beautiful and the text was informative. Rhodes was able to write it with good use of my notes."

"After completion of this book entitled Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion, I decided to try and write a book of my own. Somehow I found out about an archive of late 19th century American posters at Columbia University. I came up with the idea for a book which I called American Poster Renaissance. The subject matter was posters from the 1890s. Columbia had a rich collection of these posters. I formulated an idea for the book and hired a photographer to photograph a large number of posters both as color transparencies and black and white photographs."

"I organized these images according to theme and wrote a text that told the story of these posters according to the themes. At the end of the book I included a section of brief biographies of the poster artists with small line-drawn images of some artists. The book was published by Watson-Guptill."

Reading about these projects, I am struck by my father's industriousness. He took both book projects from the seed of an idea through to completion, refining the concepts, finding the people to back the projects, acquiring the archival images and working in a field that was, at the time, brand new to him.

At the same time that he was working on these books, he began dating my mother, a teacher who was living in Williamsburg in Brooklyn. The two met through Subud, in which they were both involved, and at a time when each was struggling to find their footing in adult life. They eventually became engaged and a friend of my dad's found him a job in the Chicago area as an interim-director for a multi-institutional effort to create an experimental Open University. They moved to Chicago where he did this job for several months followed by another string of freelance work.

"In the meantime I was giving occasional lectures about my propaganda book and the book on American posters. One of the places where I had arranged to lecture about my propaganda book was the ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations) Congress that was held in Evanston, IL in 1978. While at that conference I met a woman who told me about an organization in England called the Design History Society. Somehow that idea of

design history resonated with me. I put it together with what I knew about nontraditional higher education programs, about which I learned while working on the Open University project."

"Because of radical changes in education that occurred in the 1960s, a new opportunity for PhD education had been created. It was called the Union Institute. This new institution allowed learners to define their own PhD. I decided to apply for a doctorate in Design History. No such program existed in the United States. I was accepted and started in the program."

The rest of my father's story is more widely known. He received his PhD, the first in the U.S. in Design History, with a dissertation on three avant-garde artists, which he later turned into the book *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946*. He worked as a visiting professor at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana before getting a tenure-track job at the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC), where he would spend his entire academic career. At UIC, he co-founded the journal *Design Issues*, taught widely on topics ranging from design history to high-low art, wrote and edited several books and began work on *The World History of Design*, a project which grew from a single-volume textbook to a multi-volume, comprehensive survey of design starting from pre-historic cave paintings. He lectured and taught all over the world and helped grow the field of design history and studies over the course of four decades.

When I saw my father at the end of his career diligently getting up every morning in the downtown Chicago loft he shared with my mom, going into his office to read, diagram, outline and eventually write chapters for the *World History of Design*, stopping at lunchtime to eat soup out of cup then returning to work in the afternoon, always dogged and disciplined, stopping his workday at dinnertime, never working on weekends (as these were reserved for cultural outings and socializing), I was always reminded of that young man, waking every morning with his attache case, sitting with piles of books at the Macomb Street Public Library, diligently and doggedly mapping out a cosmology of the universe, stopping every day at 4 for coffee and apple pie at Peoples Drug Store. I always felt like the world history was a bookend to a life of searching for meaning, seeking to understand the world from a high-up, bird's eye view, but unlike the cosmology of the universe, the latter book was grounded in a lifetime of knowledge, of the pursuit of large truths through the lens of single field of study.

Design history focused my dad but I often thought that he could have landed in a range of fields and ended up in the same place. From the history of design, he increasingly wrote about broad and idealistic visions for a more equitable and just world, what he used to called the "good society". He was never more energized than when he was talking with others about big ideas about how to make the world more just and less cruel for more people.

When my father died, my mom and I received an outpouring of sympathy from colleagues all over the world. In these notes, a theme emerged that I hadn't anticipated. Of course, many of them wrote about his scholarship and his contributions to the field. But moreso, they wrote of his great generosity, of his deep and open spirit, of his willingness to spend hours in a coffee shop talking to someone about something with which they were struggling. He took immense pride in recounting how he had directed a student to the PhD program that launched their career, about how he connected a junior colleague to an editor who published the book they'd been working on, about how he had helped a young design historian find clarity in the work they were struggling with and muddling through.

His love in life was for people, for the culture that they created through their food, their music, their film, art, and writing, for the material world they constructed through buildings, murals, furniture and practical objects. Of course design is about the material, but for my father the material was simply a pathway to the human. He was a person filled with vulnerability, striving, struggle, triumph and love. And I miss him dearly.