What illustration websites linked to what in Spring 2007

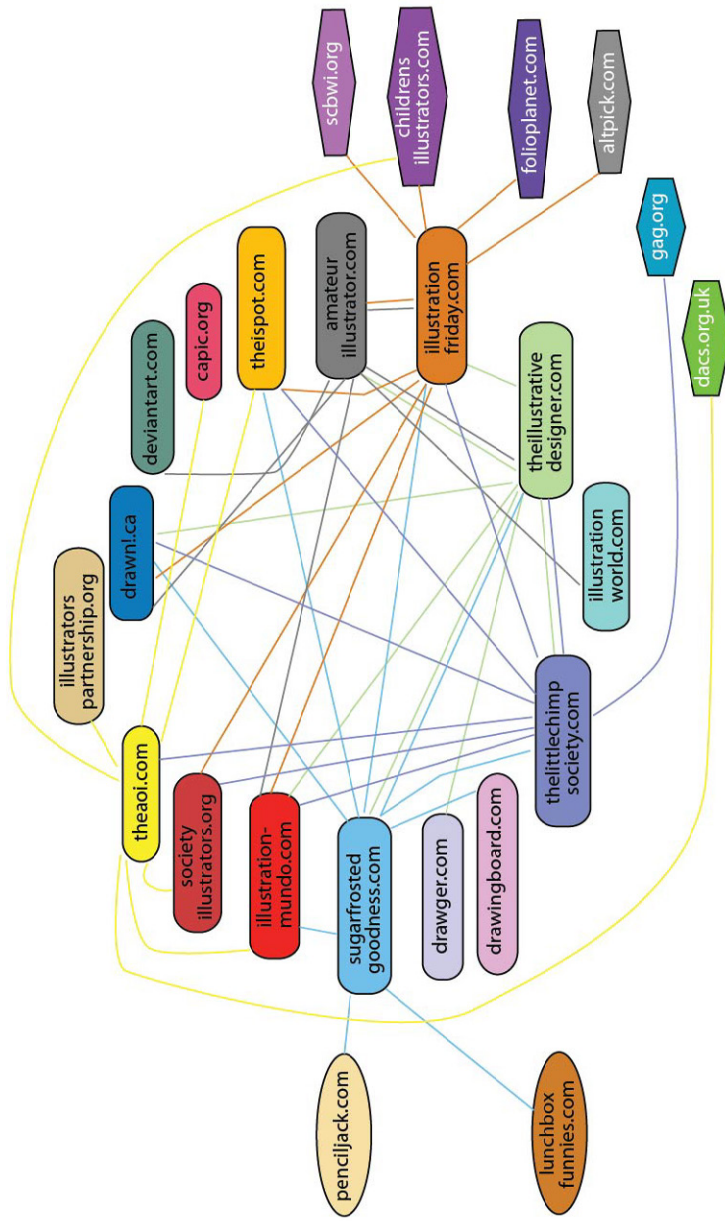# The Impact of Illustrators' Online Communities on Recent Visual Communication

By Jaleen Grove   jaleen@gmail.com   www.jaleengrove.com

Abstract

With their ability to imagine and portray concepts beyond the reach of cameras, illustrators (and animators) are indispensable in the production and dissemination of new knowledge. Illustrators lack the hubs of galleries, artist-run centres, magazines, academic discourse, and shared studios that serve to keep other artists in close contact. At one time they came together in commercial studios, but in recent decades more became freelancers working from home. Explicating illustrators' unique habituses contributes to understanding where trends in visual communication begin and how they linger. Their relative isolation from other creators combined with commercial practices, I argue, led to their developing creative approaches differing from that of gallery artists, which in turn led them to exploit the possibilities of the internet more than their fine-art counterparts. Using interview and survey data and cases, my paper looks at networks among Canadian illustrators, tracing alliances such as those that resulted from the now defunct studio system in Toronto and certain art schools in the 1960s, to the new networks formed through online communities, blogs, email newsletters, vendors and agents, and personal websites. I theorize that the return in the last ten years to a fashionable, highly illustrative vocabulary in fine art and visual communication may be linked to the newfound visibility and power resulting from creative co-operation between illustrators who were previously unable to so easily share their work and professional experiences. Illustrators made a new space of public knowledge between themselves, enabling them to take their creative approach to a wider public, which has re-engaged illustration and comics as a popular means of communication in the public sphere. I conclude with examples of imaginative, problematic, challenging and affirming imagery in the public eye, to which this newfound collectivity among illustrators is contributing.

Tom McNeely:
Expo 67 poster

Will Davies:
portrait of Tom McNeely

Tom McNeely: Swim Canada poster (circa 1981)

Will Davies:
MacDonalds Tobacco mascot

James Hill:
cover art for *The Review*, 1980

Tom Bjarnason:
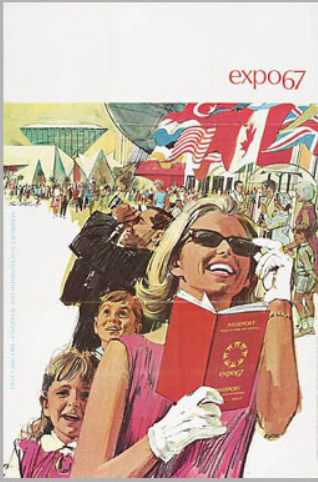stamps

Roger Hill:
story illustration

Slides and talk

1)   Title page

2)   This presentation is a bit of a history lesson, where I will follow the health of the illustration industry in Canada on a roller coaster up-down-up ride. Unless otherwise noted, all artists here are Canadian.
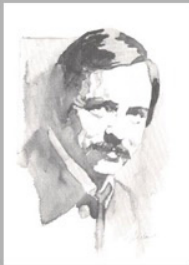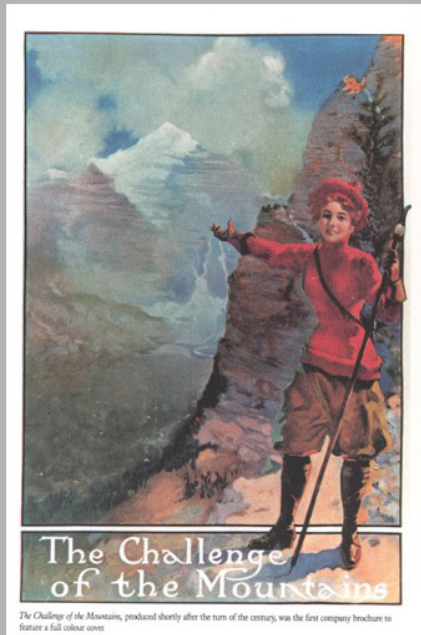
From the 1950s to the 1990s illustrators Will Davies and Tom McNeely worked in the same commercial art companies, taught at Ontario College of Art, shared studio space, and remain friends to this day. In 1981 Will wrote:

Between the two of us, [we] probably did 90% of all the figure work and backgrounds in the car ads and catalogues… Tom's work was then and still is wholesome and fresh…He has created a style I feel quite free in calling Canadian. His people and his fresh technique represent to me the image Canada projects to the world…. He is the kind of person he paints…. As an illustrator myself, I thank you, Tom McNeely, for projecting the image we all would like to have. (nd, exhibition catalogue)

3)   This statement reveals the close-knit, tightly bound and reciprocal relationships between illustrators, their work, and the messages and codes contained in them. Predominantly white, Anglo, middle class males determined and perpetuated a value system that embodied both Canadianess, and illustrators' collective self-identity.

Artist unknown: CPR ad

The Challenge of the Mountains, produced shortly after the turn of the century, was the first company brochure to feature a full colour cover

4)   This confluence went back to colonial days, and depended upon tradition being handed down through the commercial art studio apprentice-ship system.

5)   But in the 1970s, for technical and economic reasons the studio system unraveled. Illustrators left steady employment in common studios for isolated freelancing from private studios. As each illustrator had to carve out a niche for him or herself, the 1980s inaugurated an individualistic rather than team approach. Today, it is no longer easy to say there is a "Canadian" illustrator or style.
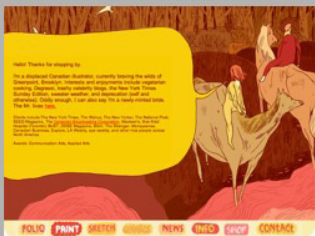

Heather Cooper
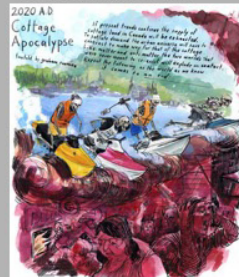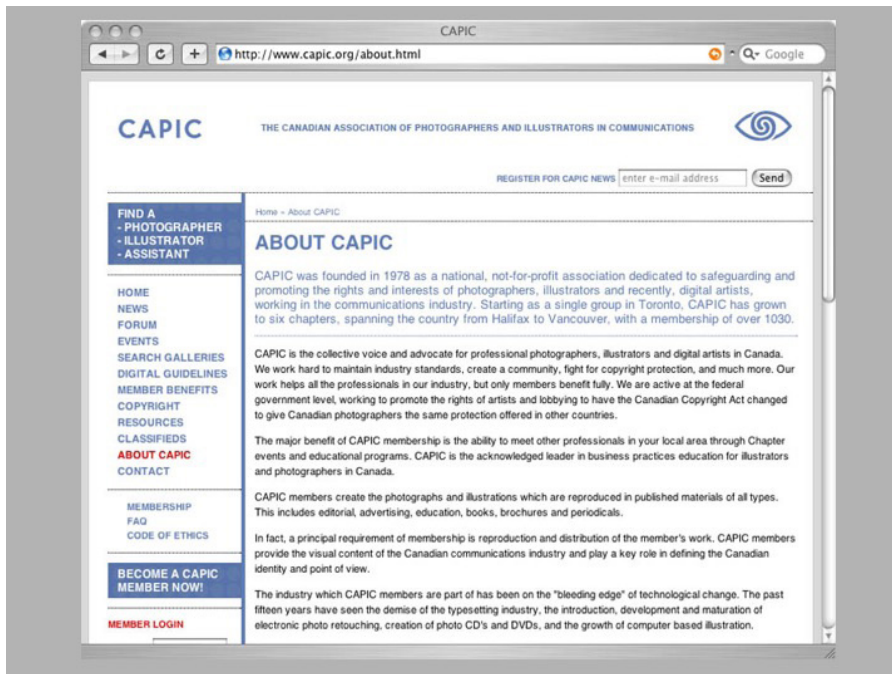
Suzanne Duranceau

Gary Taxali

Jillian Tamaki

Ron Lightburn

Graham Roumieu

6)	Yet even though former coworkers became competitors, there was an urgent need for cooperation, as contracts, copyright and promotion became illustrators' concerns. So, professional societies formed. Not surprisingly, it was illustrators like Tom and Will who had the most significant, strong networks from the studio days, who spearheaded the founding of CAPIC, in 1978, the Canadian Association of Photographers and Illustrators in Commerce.

7)	Other similar lobby groups were also formed around this time. Many informants told me they formed the societies or joined them specifically to combat the isolation of homebased studios.

Canadian Association of Photographers and Illustrators in Communication (CAPIC) 1978

Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers (CANSCAIP) 1978

Association des illustrateurs et illustratrices du Quebec (AIIQ) 1983

Island Illustrators Society [Victoria] 1984
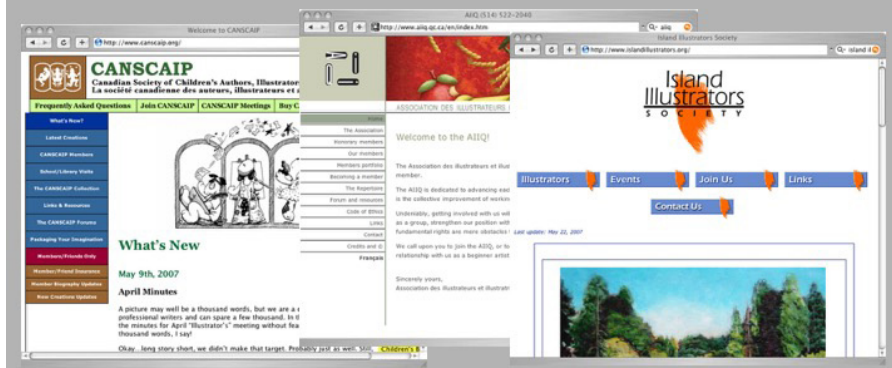
8) Source books, art directors annuals, and competitions became the three primary ways illustrators were exposed to what others were doing. But these catalogues emphasized differences rather than similarities, which worked against the formation of a common identity. By comparison, other, more social, networks were being established by more cohesive subculture groups. Those among comix artists, for instance, were so strong that comix criticism and communities were established in the 70s. Artists met each other at comic conventions, and spoke through editorials and letters in their comix. There were also zine and graffiti networks forming. Graffiti was passed around by freight cars, and "black books". …

9) Zines were distributed through the mail, and promoted in zine indexes such as Fact Sheet Five and Comicx f/x. People could write to each other directly, a precursor to the Web. No similar intercity or international contact existed between illustrators. Graffiti and zines grew in underground cultural capital on a national and international scale while illustration stayed comparatively unhip and unfocussed.
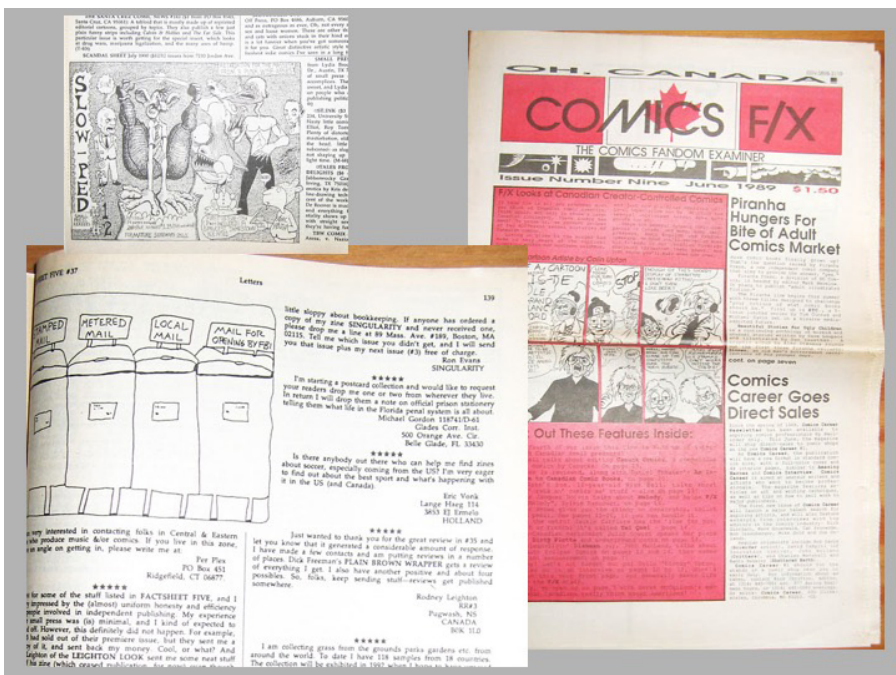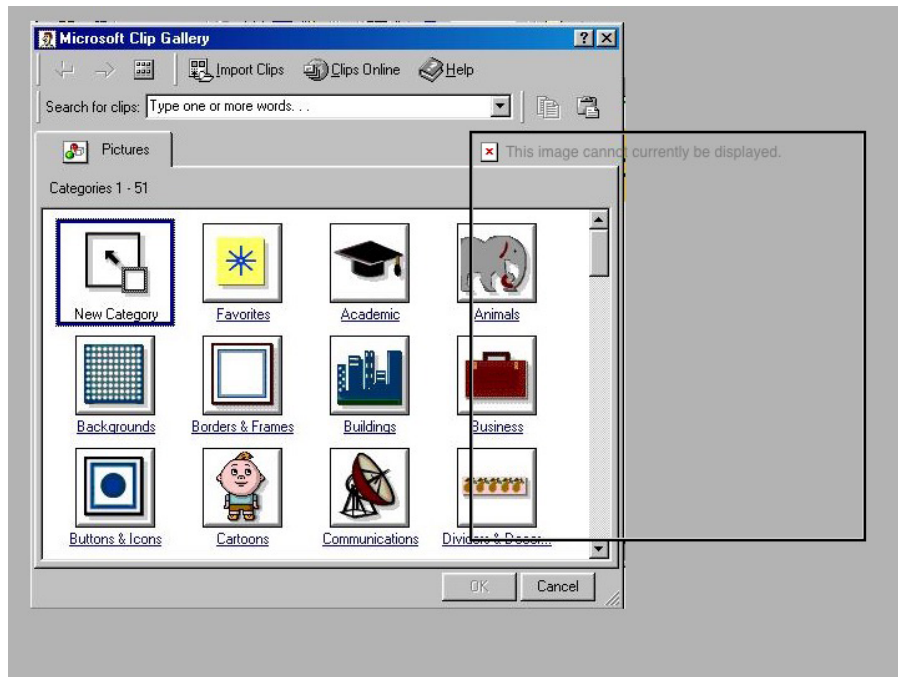
10)   Also in the late 80s, computers had a negative impact on the field of illustration. Vector art was scalable and low file size, whereas traditional raster art was not. Those who couldn't adjust got left behind. As it became necessary that illustrators get computer skills, computer courses began to replace drawing classes at OCAD and elsewhere, making a generation gap in skills, and interrupting the nurturing of the younger by the older.

Digital media also began to displace illustrators by making it easy for companies to supply discs of cheap clip art, such as that available in Microsoft Powerpoint. This effectively cut out entry-level work, preventing much talent from entering the field.

CAPIC, which was in the best position to keep illustration at the forefront, suffered from the generational split. The old, academically correct renderings looked cheesy and contrived next to punk scribbling, critical collage, ironic references to vintage styles, and the multicultural influence coming through children's books. As one informant told me, she abandoned CAPIC and her efforts to establish a proper archive because younger members didn't respect the older. This disconnection was repeated elsewhere, and contributed to the breakdown that soon faced the industry.

11)   Then came the Web. Illustrators were quick to adapt - There was an AOL forum by about 1994. Those who did not register their names were at a disadvantage – fans or competition could and did snatch domain names, as initially happened to Anita Kunz.
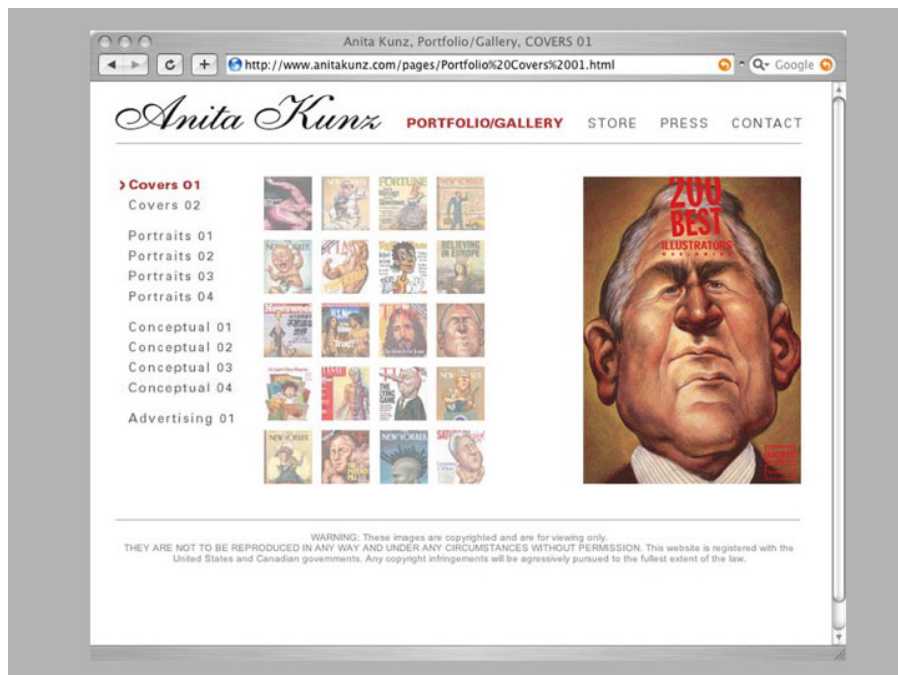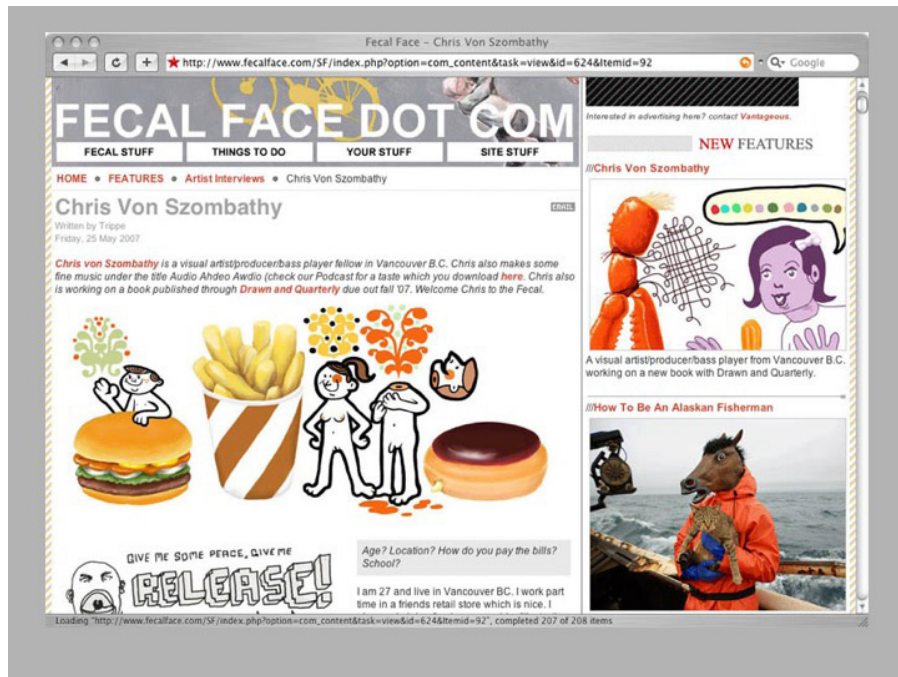
12)   The mainstreaming of manga in North America through the 90s is an example of how things spread with the web. The underground became accessible, as in when the zine Fecal Face morphed into an illustrators' online community in 2000. Stylistically, the cumulative impact of graffiti, co-mix and zines was the birth of what we now call DIY – do it yourself. which normalized the expectation that we the untalented and unschooled could create content – such as in …

13)   Deviant Art, Illustration Friday, Amateur Illustrator, and YouTube.
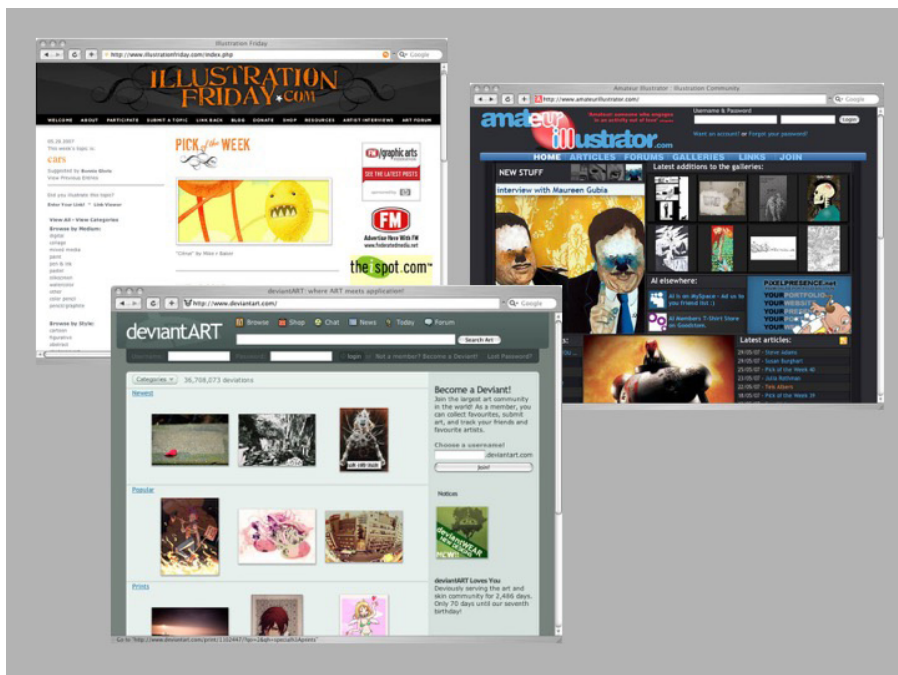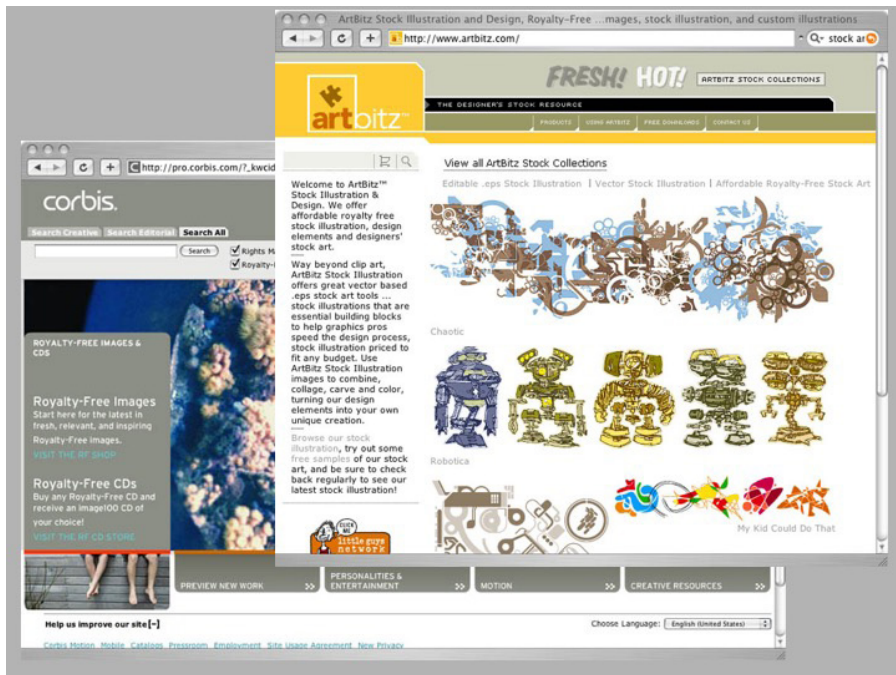
14)   But because the new medium also promoted copyright infringement, as late as 2001 some illustrators were attempting to prevent Google Images from finding their art. But more detrimentally, stock art companies now started undercutting mid-to-higher end freelancers. Naïve and isolated illustrators, removed from peers and industry codes of conduct, that stronger ties might have mitigated, laid themselves and the whole industry open to exploitation by stock art reps.

15)   Contracts dwindled to point where illustrator superstars Milton Glaser and Marshall Arisman both predicted the demise of illustration. But the crisis had a silver lining – it became the rallying point to define a common purpose and rebuild community.

The first forum that became home for illustrators is the ISpot, started in 1996. As Tim O'Brien put it, "Putting voices behind our names was a new avenue". From it, several initiatives formed for the express purpose of bringing illustrators into a collective force against stock art exploitation: 1999 ICON Illustration Conference; 1999 Illustration Partnership of America formed, the Society of Illustrators later began illustrationgrowers.org.
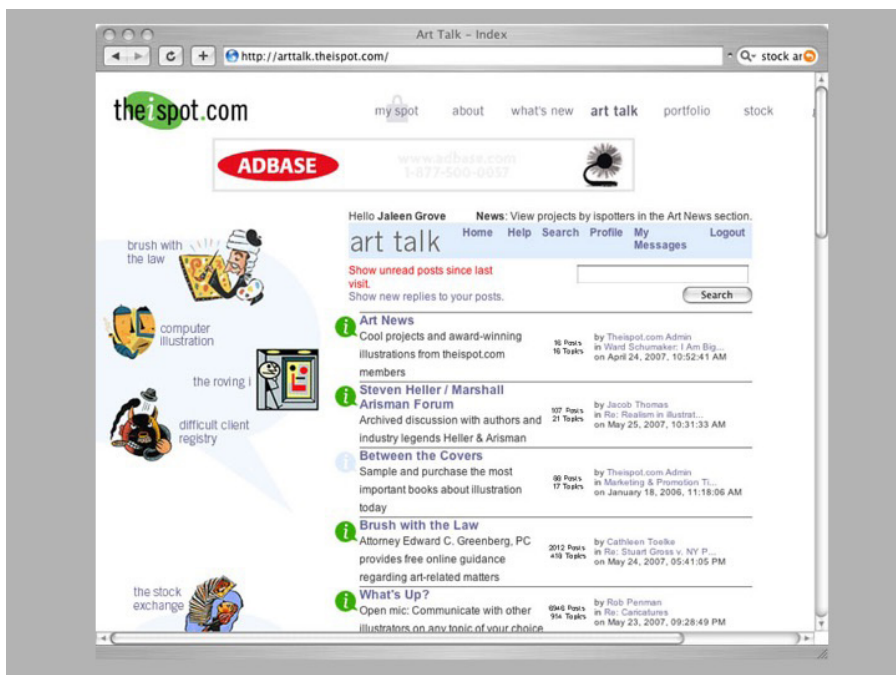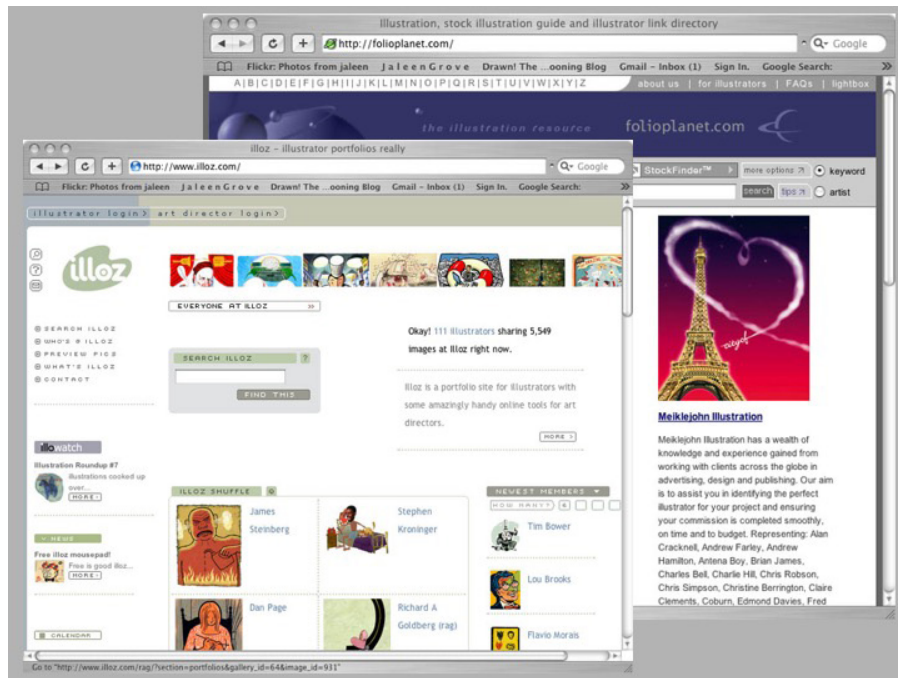
16)   Eventually, these led illustrators to form their own artist-run stock and rep companies, such as illoz and folioplanet.

17)   The sense of common purpose brought on by the stock art war has contributed to a common identity: that of those who draw. Drawing, long maligned in the high fine art world, is the shared principle in which illustrators began to take mutual pride. Online communities currently making drawing hip are these – and you will generally find most of these sites link to most of the others, and are frequently sponsored by theispot.

- DeviantArt
- Fecal Face
- Drawn!
- Illustration Friday
- Little Chimp Society
- IllustrationMundo
- Boonika
- The Illustrative Designer Podcast
- Wooster Collective
- Sugar Frosted Goodness
- Real Illustrators Blog
- Artdorks
- Amateur Illustrator
- Illosaurus

Publications since 2005 - (except Education of an Illustrator: 2000)

18)   The rise of drawing has also been accompanied by a surge of books: Education of an illustrator 2000, Hidden Track: How Visual Culture Is Going Places 2005, Illustration Now 2005, Illusive 2005, Big Illustration Idea Book 2006, Fashion Illustration 2007. 3x3 Mafazine 2005,

Illustrators are now promoting themselves more than relying on reps, and now exploit rather than fear the web's ability to circulate their work. Many artists have a holy trinity of website, a blog, and a flickr account, and some are manipulating online networks in unique ways.

John Martz of Toronto established Drawn! in 2005 as an offshoot of his blog,– Drawn took off after being posted on BoingBoing. Its influence in illustrator circles is in the top 5.
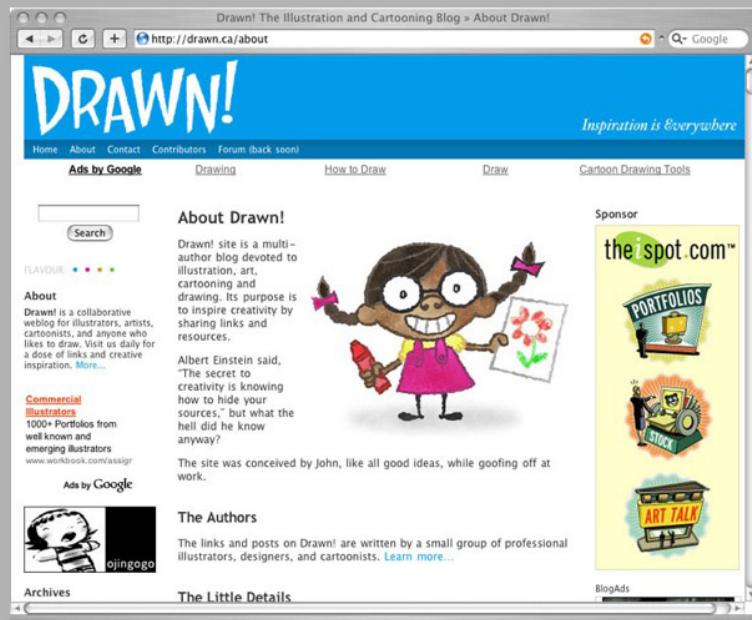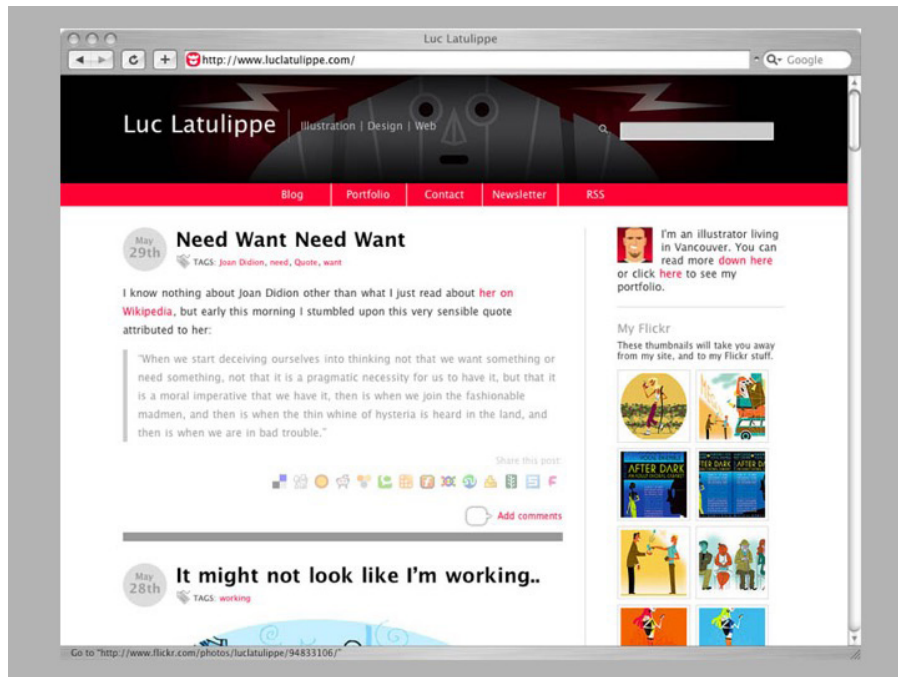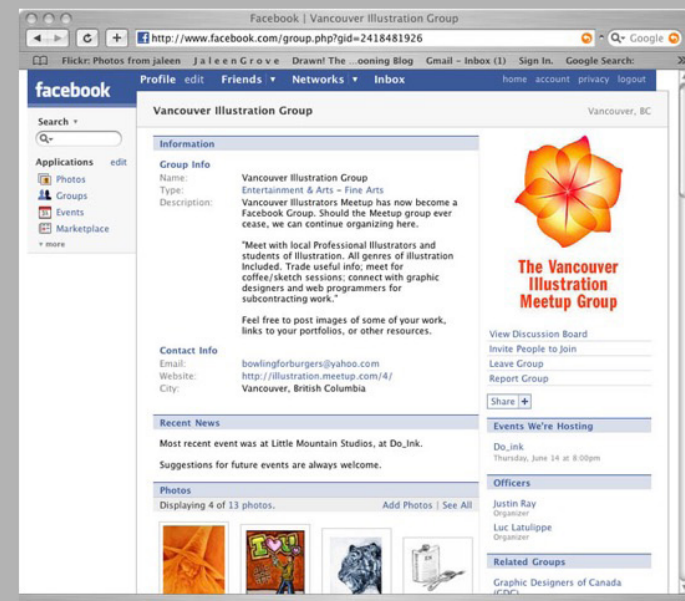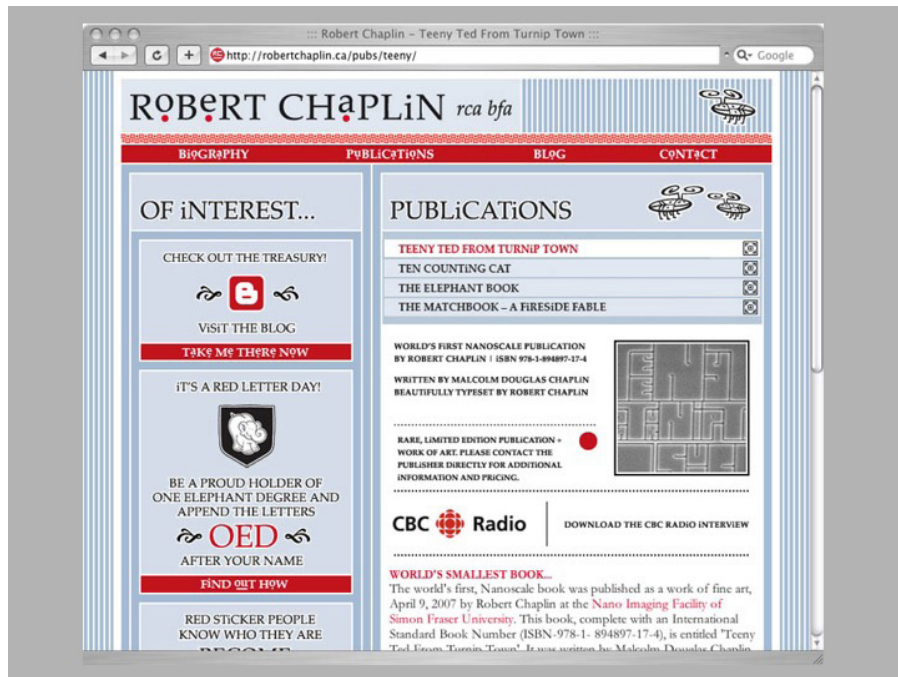
19) Luc LaTulippe - : Lulu.com or Blurb.com to test illustrated books for the market. Jupiter Project for sales and real life meetups thru Facebook. Also maintains status by contributing to Drawn and theIspot, as do I.
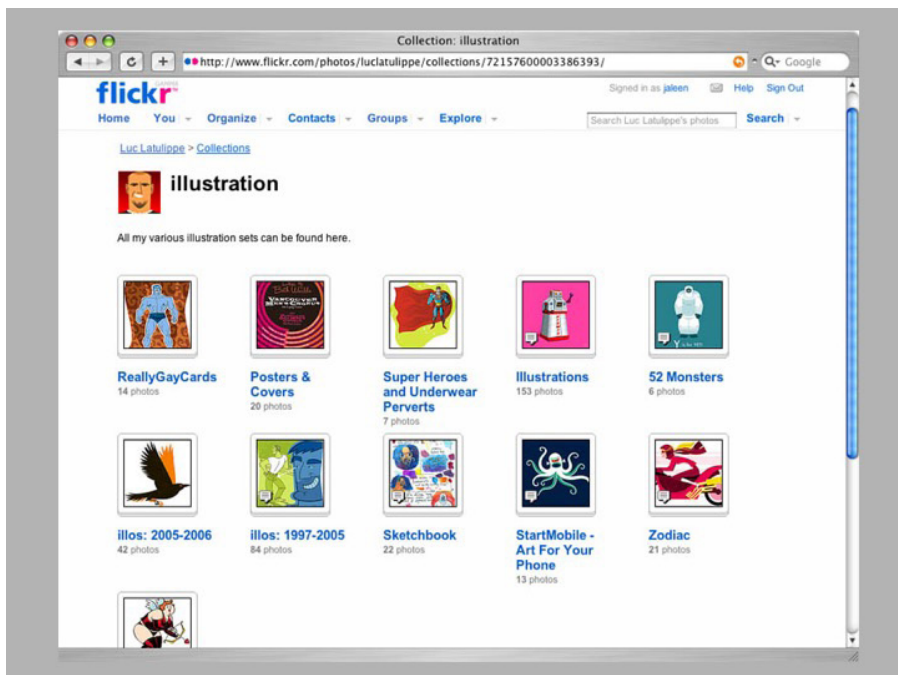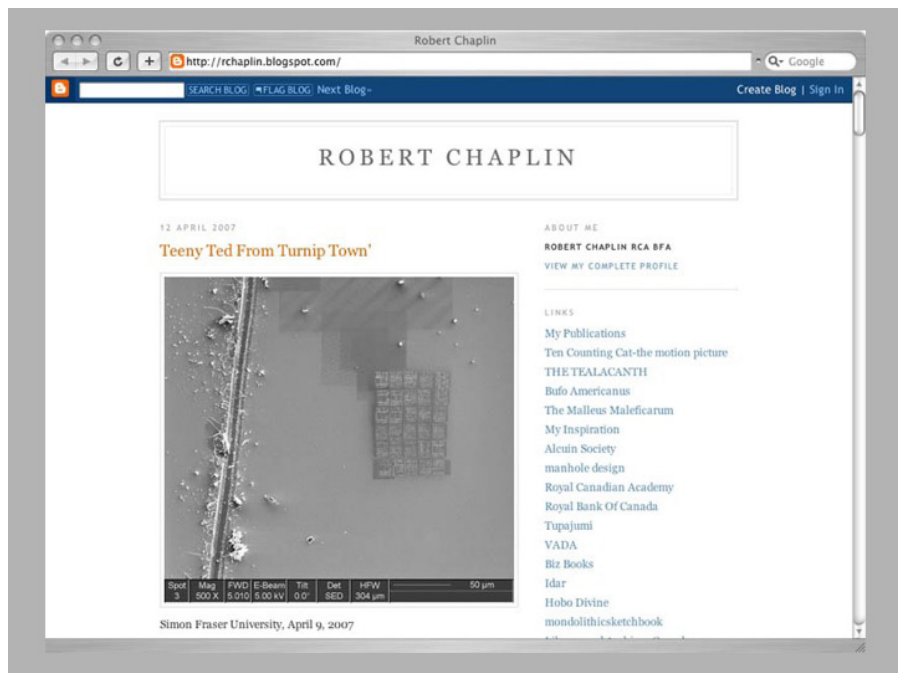

Van-illo meetups

20)   Rob Chaplin – uses a blog, personal website, but had a friend animate his book and post it to YouTube.
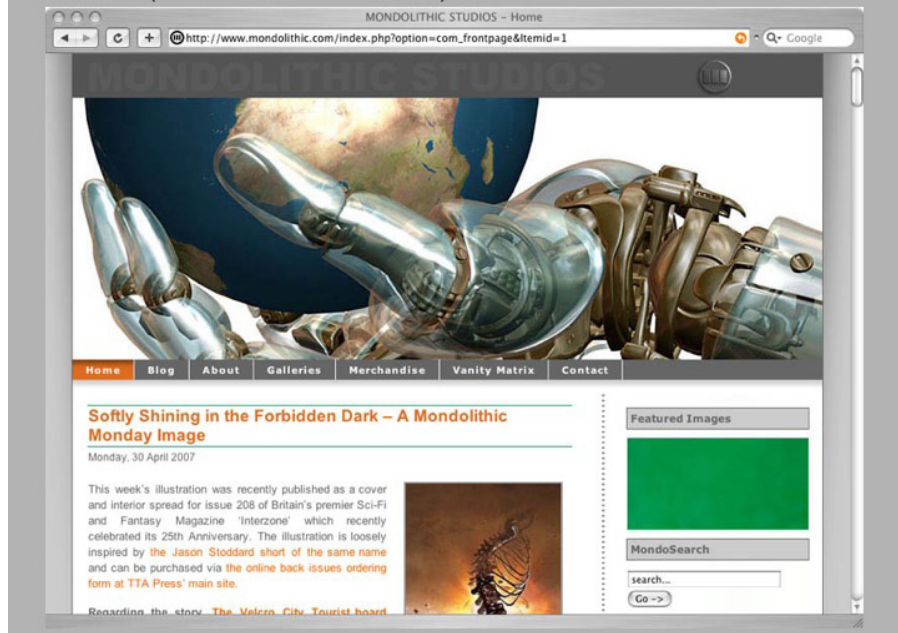
Cheen Pitney, Second Life sculptor (Kurt Reichel) : "Will They Ever Learn?" 2007

21)   Kurt Reichel is an obscure artist living in BC's Slocan Valley, but in Second Life he is the celebrated - Cheen Pitney - where he exhibits illustrative 3D sculptures.

Mondolithic (Kenn Brown and Chris Wren)

22)   Mondolithic – is the studio name of Chris Wren and Kenn Brown –They frequently post links to other illustrators' work, and they send out a newsletter with links back to their weekly image. In a particularly interesting move, they started a guild in the online game World of Warcraft, which reaches their sci-fi fan base. They also keep a news blog and another blog (in progress), complete with tagging links.
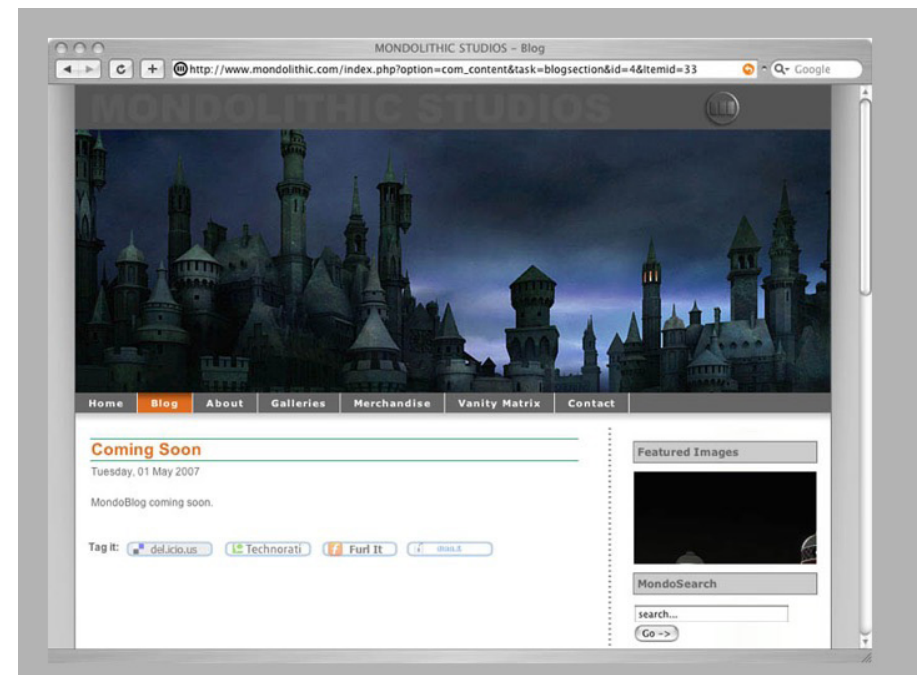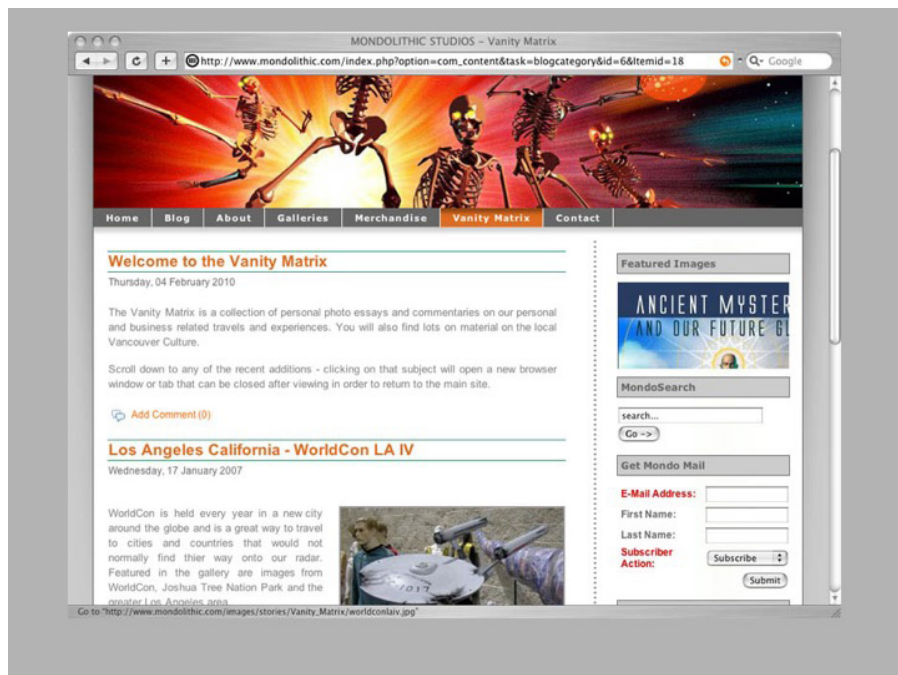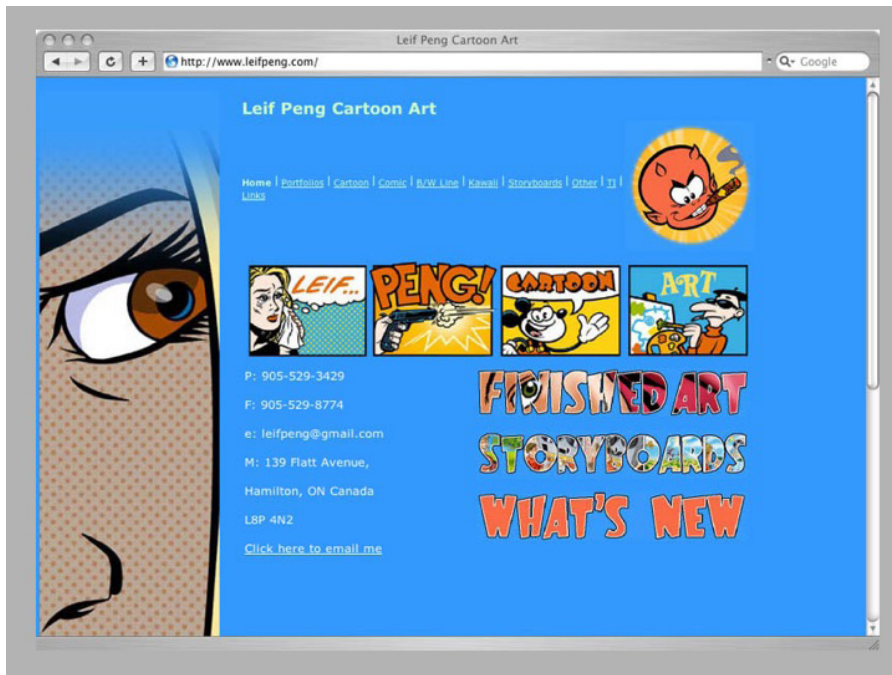
23)   Leif Peng – collects vintage magazines and posts articles and flickr sets of 20th century illustrators. – healing that old generation gap
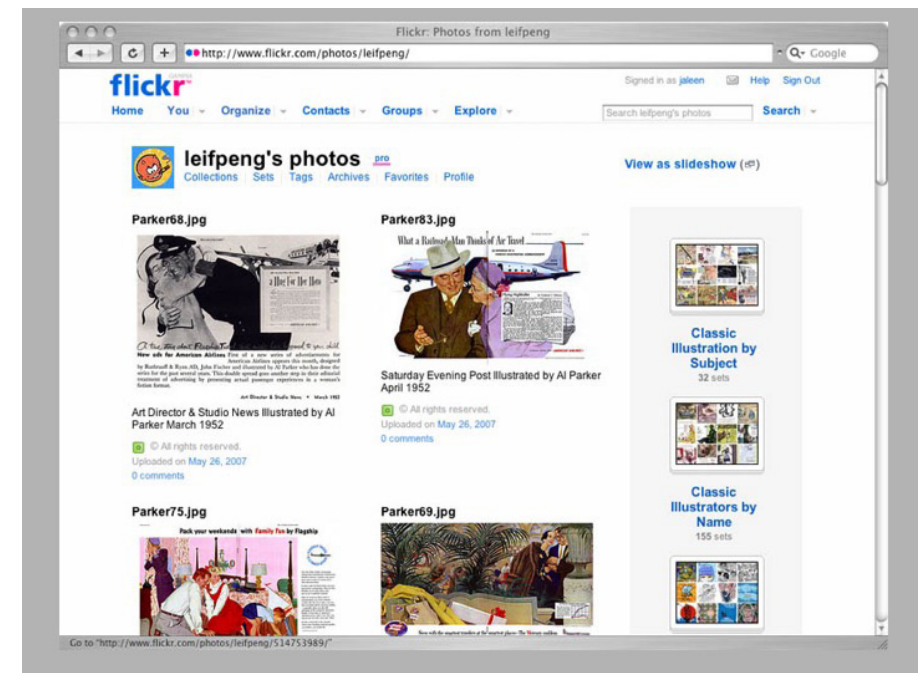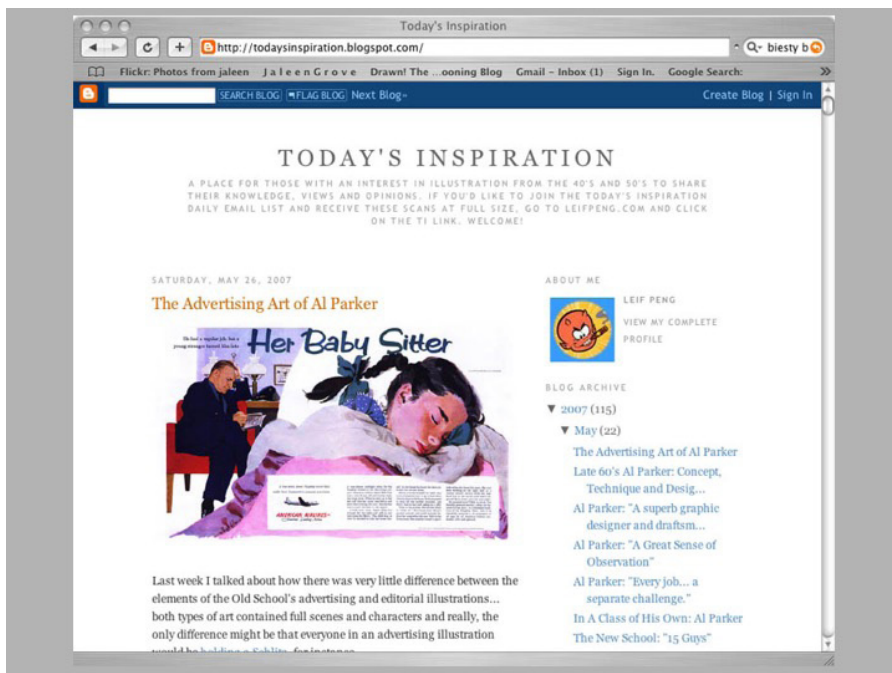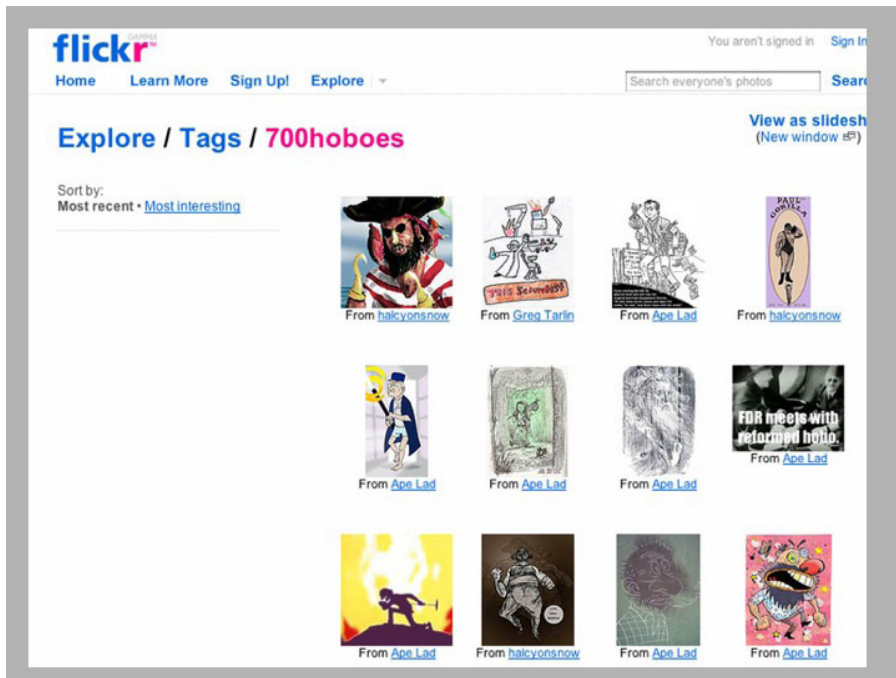
24)   700 Hobo project was a big collaborative effort where people were invited to illustrate actual historical hobo's names, posted on flickr.

25)   Len Peralta - (Cleveland Ohio) Monster Mail was inspired by the hobo project. for $20 you submit an adjective, which he then draws a monster for. He records the creation and puts it on YouTube. You get the original art for in the mail. This promotes his book Zombie Alphabet.

Drawger

26)   Most interestingly, a new "studio system" is back, where a few illustrators band together to share promotion. They feature a diversity of styles under one roof, and adhere to a common code of professionalism, and refer work to each other. Drawger, Sketch Motel; Big Illustration Group, Jupiter Project

Big Illustration Group

Sketch Motel

Jupiter Project

April 8: 118

May 26: 186
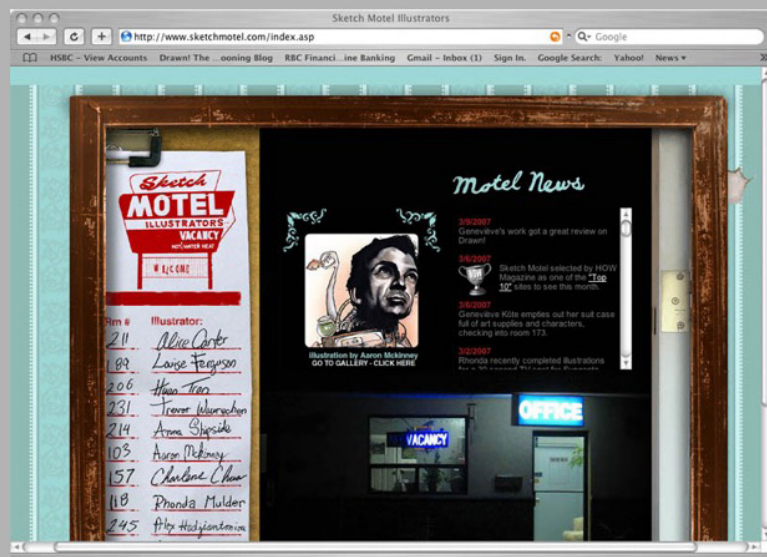
27)   Facebook illustration groups – number jumped from 118 to 186 in 6 weeks

28)   Flickr illustration groups – number jumped from 2225 to 2249 in same period

April 8: 2225

May 26: 2449

Online networks = rejuvenated interest in illustration
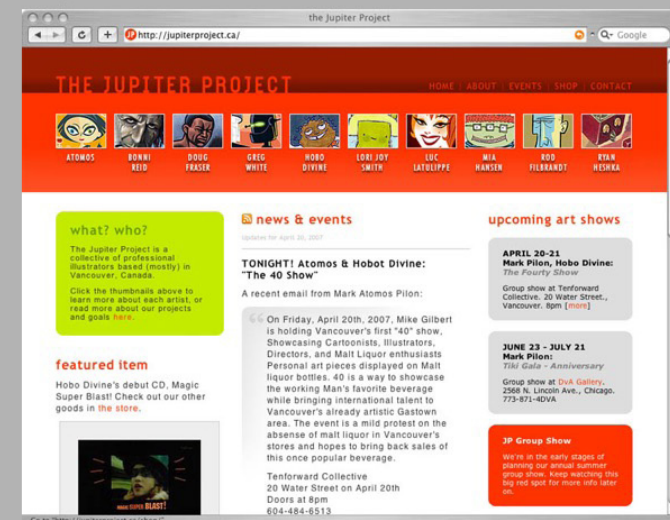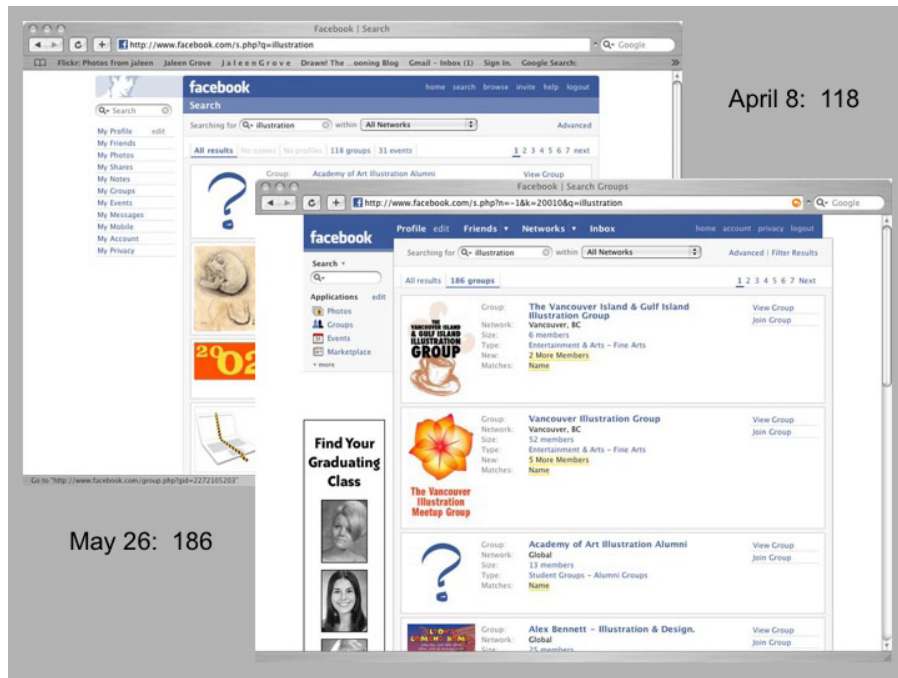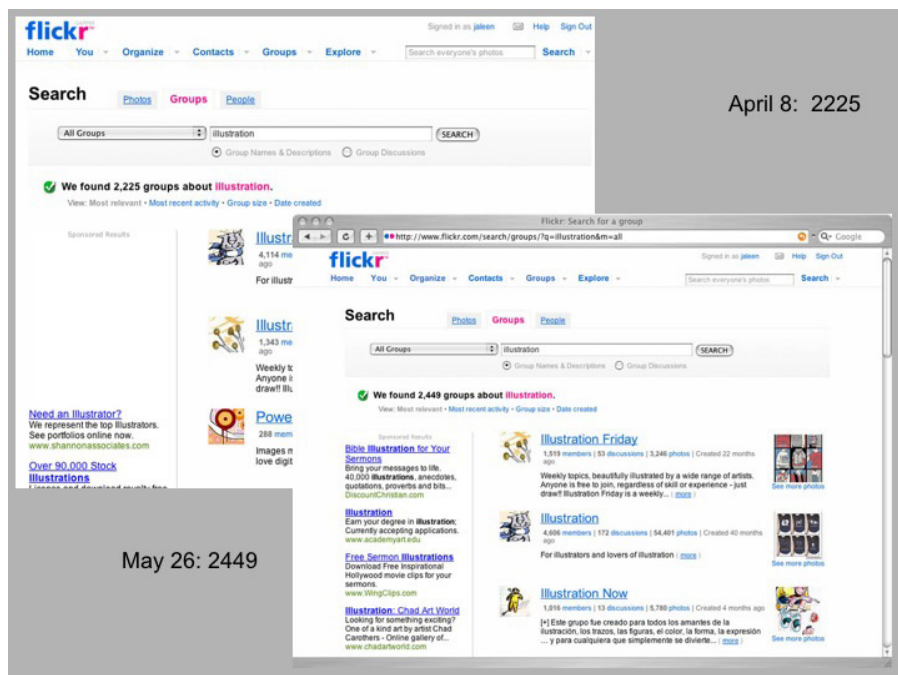

Royal Art Lodge

Marcel Dzama
(Most famous member of
Royal Art Lodge)

29)   I find that online communities for illustrators foster both many weak ties and many strong ones, depending on the willingness of the artist to make their presence felt online. Jan Fernback has called 'community' in cyberspace merely "convenient togetherness without real responsibility", but I cannot agree in the case of illustrators because for them, network capital translates to sales and identity, a matter of basic material and social survival. The digital realm is an extension of real world interaction. Because they frequently engage using their real names, show their work and collaborate, their professional reputations are at stake. The success of their professional personas depends on other illustrators' respecting them, posting about them, collaborating, and lobbying for them. When Anita Kunz's domain name was stolen by a rep it was outcry from other illustrators who learned about it online that forced the thief to return it. Just weeks ago, members of theispot successfully pressured theispot sales staff to cease promoting them by spamming social network blogs. Illustrators are significant enough in numbers that they can affect how websites are operated. For instance, after two years of censoring non-photography in its search engine, this March Flickr finally bowed to demand and created a filter for artwork.

30)   A major effect is that a structural hole has been filled between fine art and illustration. Winnipeg's Royal Art Lodge collective – with roots in comix, DIY, and lowbrow art – bridged the commercial and fine art divide in the late 90s, contributing to a movement centred in LA dubbed Postillustration.
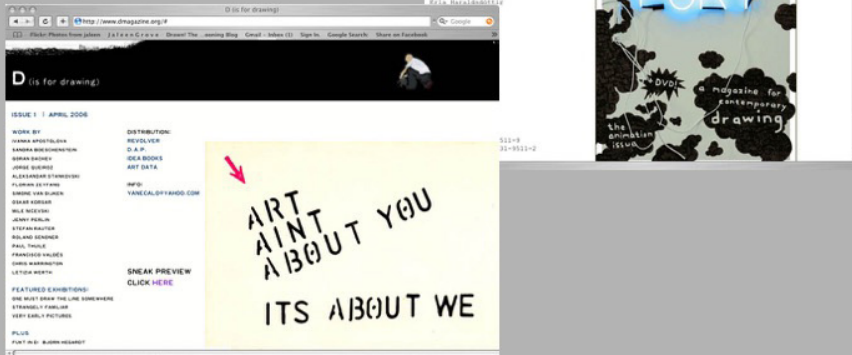
Periodicals since 2005:

Fukt (Germany)
D is for Drawing (Rotterdam)

"contemporary drawing"
"narrative art"
"sequential art"

Aaron Leighton: Zimmer Twins

31)   It is also referred to as "contemporary drawing" and "narrative art" and "sequential art" – all artworld euphemisms for illustration

32)   This has allowed illustration to claim some cultural capital, and many have begun exhibiting, combining online networks with artworld networks. It was an illustration show that exposed Aaron Leighton to a producer, resulting in his Emmy-winning interactive web and TV show, the Zimmer Twins.

James Jean (USA)

Moleskine sketchbooks

33)   Like back when studios folded, a change in working conditions has led to aesthetic shifts. As James Jean notes, "I don't like to talk about of style, especially nowadays with the Internet and people borrowing so much from each other…. [I prefer] making an art instead of a style." But, while I agree, looking at illustration as an art movement is exciting, I do think we need to examine what's happening with styles.

34)   The availability of many images in competition, the rapid evolution of fashion, cheaper, faster technology, lossless digital reproduction, an absolute boom in photographic imagery, and the coldness of vector art have contributed to a taste in warm, fuzzy DIY. The rougher looking, supposedly the more authentic it is – slickness and craft are now suspect. People now show off their sketchbooks, rather than finished work. Len Peralta – of Monster Mail – calls it "instant art" : "quick, accessible artwork that is visually appealing and just darn cool to look at." But DIY fits suspiciously well into the ever-accelerating pace of business. In 1956 a rush job was an unbelievable 6 weeks.

Stephen Biesty (UK)

Marcos Chin
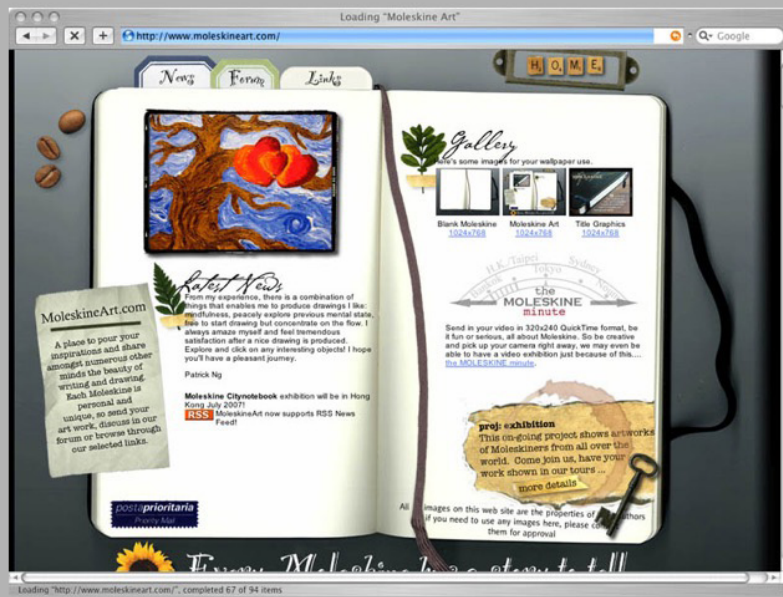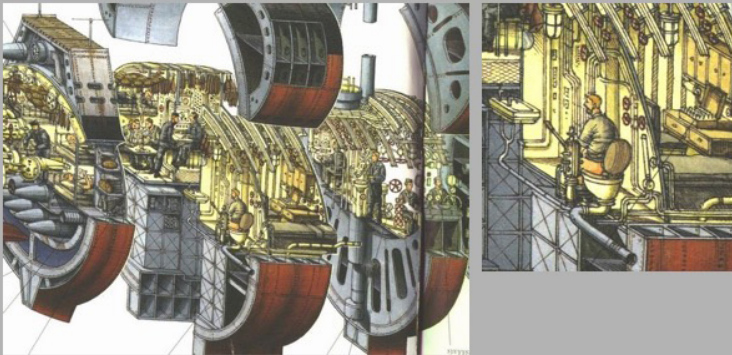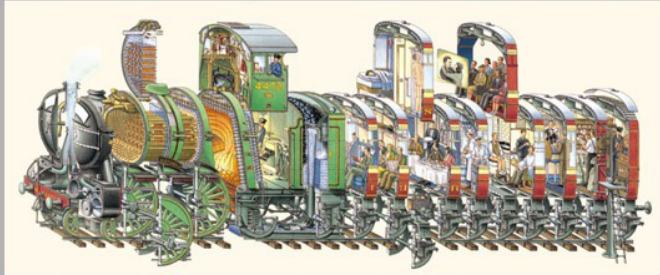
35)   ironically, the amount of time it takes to maintain a website, blog, flickr account and message board presence take away from studio time. Some of the traditional illustrators I have spoken with really bemoan what they see as a loss of craftsmanship. Clients are now unwilling to pay for finicky work due to time-is-money ideology, the availability of stock, and public acclimatization to DIY de-sophistication. And because the web is re-placing books as the way find information, styles are evolving to what reads well online. For example, Stephen Biesty – who became famous for labori-ously illustrated reference books – has had his market entirely disappear. The books do not sell as much and his work does not translate online because it is too detailed for the 72 dpi monitor. Speed is changing how we take in visual information – impatiently, and more intuitively than intellectually.

36)   Commissioned illustration is gaining popularity because it stands out against the everydayness of photography. It is conspicuous consumption, connoting effort, cost and taste. Its role is to provide difference. But too big a cornucopia combined with efficient networks makes the novel mundane very quickly. The other category of images – logos and brand identities – take on even more power as they become the solid, unchanging rocks that waves of illustration style fads crash against.

Laszlo Gal

Sonny Assu, 2003

Thank you
to the many illustrators
who agreed to be interviewed.

37)   But although illustration stays diverse and fluctuating, it is still only a reflection of the cultures that create it, and when the creators look increasingly to online sources for inspiration, much is left out – as Luc LaTullippe said to me about being a contributor on Drawn, "Sometimes I feel like I'm just recycling links." Interestingly, in the English-speaking part of the web, it is primarily Americans and Canadians I see, followed by the English. Russians, Japanese and Brazilians also pop up. The visual culture of impoverished countries evades the mix, making for a visual communication divide that parallels the digital divide.

While it is hard to say there is a Canadian style, an American illustration school dean told me "the most innovative work was coming from Canada". Canadians, due to a strong multicultural heritage and strength in high tech and networks, are poised to develop internationally legible visual communication. But we need proper support and recognition through Canada Council and art schools. Unfortunately, illustration is still treated as second class art. Illustrators' network capital, however, may slowly change that.