ON SEEING AND BEING SEEN

ON SEEING

BY MEG MILLER

As one designer goes blind, another emerges from under his shadow

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ALVIN LUSTIG AND ELAINE LUSTIG COHEN.
COURTESY: THE ESTATE OF ELAINE LUSTIG COHEN

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On Amazon, you can buy a new, hardbound copy of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* for $1,788.01. The play is one of Williams' most famous, and allegedly his personal favorite. But the reason behind the price tag is more likely the cover than its contents; a milky galaxy wraps around the spine, and the monosyllabic words of the title stack up the center like a chimney. At a talk in 2013, Elaine Lustig Cohen, who was widowed by the book's famous designer, Alvin Lustig, turned to Steven Heller, her interviewer on stage. Pausing to locate the cover in her memory, she said, "The jacket that you're talking about for Tennessee Williams, that was very late. And that was a jacket that Alvin actually never saw."

Elaine wasn't referring to the final jacket, published the year that Alvin died at just 40 years old. What she meant was that Alvin never saw the jacket at all: not the initial sketch, not the paste-up, nor any of the proofs. By the time Alvin was designing *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, he was virtually blind. The diabetes that had plagued him since childhood had damaged the capillaries behind his eyes, and for about two years before his death a thick veil of fog gradually obscured his vision. By the year 1954, he no longer sketched his designs because he no longer saw them. Instead, he would verbally dictate what he imagined in his mind's eye to Elaine and the assistants working at his design office.

"He would tell us go down a pica and over three picas, and how high the type should be, and what the color should be," said Elaine. Sometimes his reference points were past projects—"the beige that we used on such and such"—or the colors of furniture he'd picked out for interior jobs. In one particularly poetic instance, he described the shade of yellow he wanted to use as "the dominant yellow of Van Gogh's sunflower."

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COURTESY: THE ESTATE OF ELAINE LUSTIG COHEN

Elaine became a visionary designer in her own right, and the self-appointed preservationist of Alvin's legacy decades after he died in 1955. Before her death, Heller called Elaine "a living link between design's modernist past and its continually changing present" in an article honoring her for the AIGA Medal. She died a renowned designer and painter, and one of the very few mid-century women designers who are celebrated at the same caliber as their male contemporaries. However, it wasn't until after Alvin that she was seen as a designer, or even considered herself one.

Elaine got her first taste of art as a teenager, when one day she stumbled upon Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in New York City. She had come into Manhattan from New Jersey for an orthodontist appointment. The exhibition was of Wassily Kandinsky's work and the music piping through the gallery speakers was Johann Sebastian Bach, who also worked through fading vision. "I still remember walking in there," she said in a 2009 oral history with arts journalist Grace Glueck. "I didn't know what it was all about. I had no idea. It blew me away."

When Elaine met Alvin, she was nearly 21 and volunteering at an art gallery in Beverly Hills. He was 12 years her senior and already an established designer, famous for his designs for the New Classics book series from publisher New Directions. In her first year of marriage, Elaine taught art at a public school in L.A., but found it a drag to leave the apartment-slash-office that she and Alvin shared on Sunset Boulevard—full of high-profile clients and interesting conversation—to go to a classroom of 14-year-olds. So she quit. She helped run the office, where she later executed Alvin's verbal instructions.

Around age 27, Elaine became the only person who knew how long her husband had to live. The doctor told her first, and she told Alvin when keeping it to herself became unbearable. "The last year was the most difficult, as you can imagine," she told Glueck. "He was impossible. I was impossible. He didn't want to be helped, but he had to be helped." Still, Elaine was devoted, describing herself once as Alvin's "blind disciple."

As his eyesight worsened, Elaine's tasks went from purely administrative to doing the physical labor of design at the time; she learned how to order type, make

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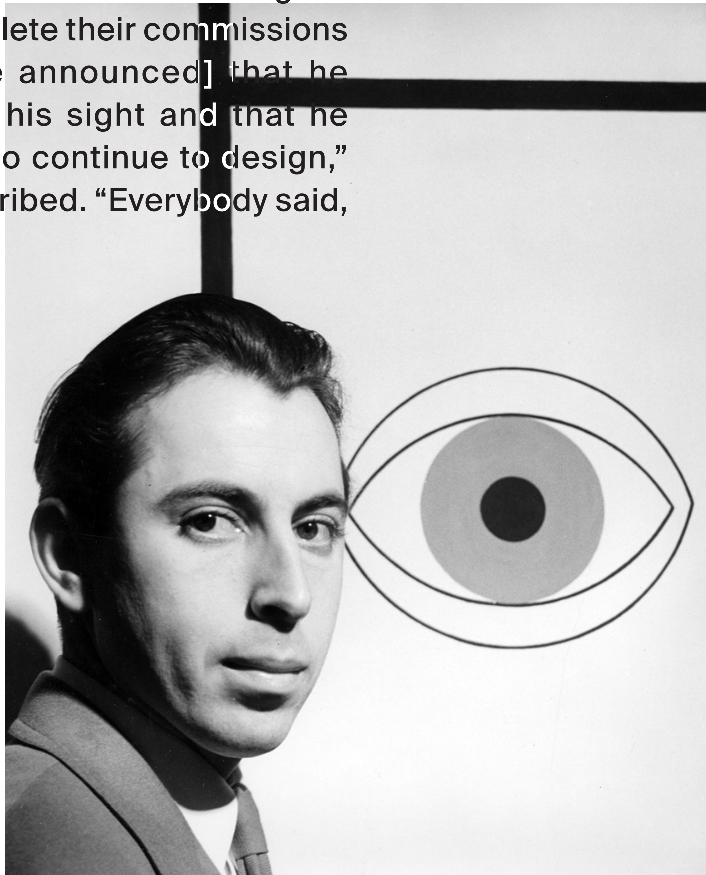
a mechanical, make paste-ups, design a page in a book, and specify it. Later on she would drive Alvin up to Yale to teach, and would pass the time by sitting in the back of Josef Albers' classes, listening in on his lectures.

When Alvin's rapidly degenerating eyesight could no longer be kept a secret, the couple threw a cocktail party for their friends and clients to break the news. Nobody seemed to doubt that the confident, well-known designer could complete their commissions blind. "[We announced] that he was losing his sight and that he was going to continue to design," Elaine described. "Everybody said, 'Of course. Fine.'" The architect Philip Johnson even gave him a new project: the signage for the Seagram Building in New York.



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Alvin was a skilled illusionist from the beginning. In high school he became a magician, teaching himself design by making the promotional posters for his shows. He was bored in class—far smarter than his peers—so his teachers let him skip class to tour other schools performing magic tricks. Then one teacher, whom he later described as "enlightened," introduced him to modern art, which had a profound impact on him.

"This art hit a fresh eye, unencumbered by any ideas of what art was or should be, and found an immediate sympathetic response," Alvin wrote in a 1953 issue of the *AIGA Journal*. "This ability to 'see' freshly, unencumbered by preconceived verbal, literary, or moral ideas, is the first step in responding to most modern art."

As a professional designer, Alvin trained his eye on books: His work played a major role in elevating the book jacket from something purely promotional to a vehicle for artistic expression. His own style of jacket design was constantly evolving, from photographic and pictorial imagery to eclectic typographic compositions, to total abstraction, and, later, to the simpler geometric forms that he produced while blind. From 1945 to 1952, his designs for the New Classics series rejected the popular commercial styles of the time for a system of abstract symbols in the vein of Paul Klee and Joan Miró. For Noonday and Meridian Books, he took a quieter, more Swiss approach to a series of academic paperbacks. The publisher, Arthur Cohen, who would later become Elaine's second husband, credited Alvin with opening his eyes to the importance of design. "A young publisher such as myself was characteristically prejudiced and blind," he said. Until meeting with the designer, he felt that the text was "all important," and that the physical book was a much lesser issue.

Although Alvin is most famous for his jackets, his approach toward design was holistic, and his talents were incredibly wide-ranging. In his 20s, he studied under Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin East, before becoming frustrated with the lack of freedom and running away in the middle of the night. In L.A. he was friends with the Eameses and Richard Neutra, and often took on architectural and industrial design projects alongside his graphics work. His office in New York worked on book covers, museum catalogs, magazine design, identity design, as well as architectural, furniture

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and fabric design projects, too. In the late 1940s he even designed a helicopter for the aerospace company Rotoron. "I always think of Alvin as a visionary," Elaine has said. "He saw himself as using design to do everything with; to change everything in the world."

Elaine has described Alvin as clever and playful in private, but in the public eye he was reserved and distinguished, serious about his craft and aware of his talent. Alvin had always ascribed to the Bauhaus idea of design as a curative force, but once he knew that he was dying, his ambitions verged on messianic. His ability to think in both two and three dimensions no doubt helped him dream up compositions even without the benefit of sight. His confidence in his ability to master any design discipline, coupled with his near-religious conviction that visual communication could solve the world's problems, drove him to continue working when he easily could have stopped. In his final years, as his health eroded and vision dimmed, Alvin designed the inaugural *Industrial Design* magazines, numerous New Directions and Meridian covers, the interiors of several apartments, a Lightolier showroom, and an identity for the Girl Scouts, among other things. At the end of his life, he planned to travel to Israel, believing that his skills could positively impact the country. He's rumored to have felt Christ-like; he believed that he had a sense of power and responsibility as a designer.

As his abilities began to fade, Elaine's sharpened. She learned the technical aspects of design out of necessity, becoming the invisible hands carrying out Alvin's vision. But when it came to the actual design process—the creative direction, the conception of images and forms—it was all Alvin, up until the end. As was common at the time, Alvin was the only person in the office who designed. Of course, if your boss is blind, there are certain liberties; Ivan Chermayeff, who briefly worked as one of Alvin's assistants, once told the designer Art Chantry that Alvin wasn't such a good colorist, so he would secretly tweak the palette. "Who knows whether we did what he wanted, I don't know, but we did it," Elaine admitted. "I was learning more, but still I wasn't designing. Not really. I was one of the office slaves."

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Johnson's Seagram Building signage was never completed by Alvin. It was done by Elaine, who took up the office's unfinished commissions after Alvin died. "I did not even think whether I was capable [of designing]. It never crossed my mind. There were so many people telling me I could do it that I guess I just struggled through the beginning," she said.

The Seagram project was mostly a matter of carrying out Alvin's wayfinding vision for the famous New York building. But when Cohen asked Elaine to continue designing the forth coming titles for Meridian, it was a different situation: For the first time, she had complete creative control—a terrifying prospect, but one she was more than prepared for. "Of course, I was immediately prejudiced by everything I learned that Alvin prefered. It took me a while to really make my own evaluation of what I liked."

Elaine emerged from her late husband's shadow with a distinctive style. Her design work is often sharp and serious, heavily concept-driven, but also bold, colorful, clever, and experimental. Her book jackets combined modern geometric and organic elements, and were influenced by movements like Constructivism and Dadaism. With Johnson's help, she picked up more clients, among them the architects Eero Saarinen and Richard Meier, and soon closed Alvin's office to become one of the only women designers to run her own freelance business in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Like Alvin, she "worked on the edges," as she termed it, forgoing the more lucrative advertising projects for book covers and museum catalogs. One of her best and longest clients was the Jewish Museum, which was at the center of New York's avant-garde design scene at the time.

Even while doing some of her biggest commissions—and much of the work she's now famous for—Elaine still claimed to feel largely unseen, if not exactly bothered by it. "People say to me, 'What was it like being a woman designer?' I'd say, first of all, there were so few of us. The male designers couldn't have cared less about me. They never talked to me. They never included me in anything, and I never thought about it. I just did my design."

After several years, Elaine became bored of doing the same sort of design and shifted her focus to her art and Ex Libris, the rare artbook collection, gallery, and bookshop she ran with Cohen

(whom she married nine months after Alvin's death). Her first husband never encouraged her to paint—"He always said painting was dead. That was one of his slogans. The other was calligraphy is dead"—but Arthur did. Elaine's paintings and collages have been hung at reputable galleries, among them the Julie Saul gallery, where she held a show called "The Geometry of Seeing." By the time she died in 2014, Elaine had produced a lifetime of artistic production spanning several disciplines, despite her late start. And shortly before her death, she was finally recognized by the design community, though by that time she was focused solely on art. In addition to her own prodigious output,she also preserved and sustained Alvin's legacy. Forgetting is also a kind of blindness, and Elaine was vigilant about the upkeep of the design world's collective memory.

Elaine was 28 when Alvin passed away in 1955. When she gave Gleuck the oral history in 2009, she had every bit of the bravado that Alvin had when announcing to his clients that he would design blind. In the interview she looks back on her life with the confidence, clarity of thought, and generosity of someone whose artistic vision had evolved over a lifetime, and had strengthened with each new phase. She spoke like a woman who knew her worth. "I always say a really terrible thing," Elaine told Gleuck. "I always say that either I would have remained this shy, unproductive person, or I would have grown up and divorced [Alvin] if he hadn't died. I don't know, because the person that I became would have never put up with what I was doing. But we'll never know."

Whatever the case, Elaine was left with little choice but to start designing. After Alvin's passing, there was only $400 left in their bank account. "When he died, the two people that called me immediately were Philip Johnson, who said, 'Okay Elaine, you do it.' The other person who called, because he was in love with me, was Arthur Cohen, and he said, 'Okay. You do it. Do all the jackets. Finish this.'

"And me, I'm very practical. I said 'Okay.' And I did it."

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