

Sheila Levrant de Bretteville





Acting as a resistor and connector comes easily for Sheila Levrant de Bretteville. As a graphic designer her work and ethos has openly become an emblem of the resistance on a grand scale, and as director of graduate studies in graphic design at Yale University she is constantly helping students make connections between culture, history and the future of design. Meg Miller meets the woman whose radical work has inspired generations of designers.

Words by Meg Miller, Photography by Rose Cromwell

When I arrive in Hamden, Connecticut, to Sheila Levrant de Bretteville's cylindrical, salmon-coloured home—the transformed remains of an old water tank—she opens the door almost at once. “You’re very punctual,” she says by way of greeting, before launching into a description of a lecture she’d been trying to finish all day and leading me into her office to show me some uncooperative PowerPoint slides. Then quickly, on to the next thing: on the table by the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves are some boxed-up works from a recently-closed show called *Hippie Modernism*. And over in the open, curvilinear kitchen, she points out two placemats she made in 1969 by cutting down an enormous baby blue circuit board she found in the garbage. She revisited them recently for the exhibition *California: Designing Freedom* at the Design Museum in London, where she had just given a talk about, among other things, the fact that “creative freedom is not the same as lived freedom”—a stance not altogether aligned with the thesis of the show.

“I talked about resisters and connectors, because both are here,” she says, holding the printed circuit board to the sunlight, “and I am both. I’m much more a connector than a resistor. But when push comes to shove, I’m definitely a resistor.”

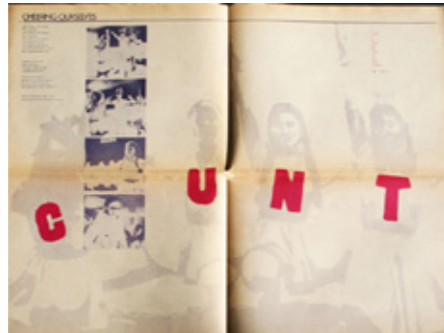
It’s a fitting self-assessment for a woman who is known for elevating marginalised voices in graphic design, a profession in which the most celebrated practitioners are still mostly male and mostly white. De Bretteville is the director of graduate studies in graphic design at Yale University, located about 15 minutes down the road. She’s held the position since 1990, when she came on as the first tenured woman in the department. “I knew that was not going to be easy,”

she says of returning to her alma mater to take the job, and she was right. Paul Rand, who had been a star faculty member at the university since the late 1950s, resigned shortly after de Bretteville came on, and convinced his long-time colleague Armin Hoffman to do likewise. De Bretteville recalls a comment Rand made to a journalist that she would “bring the outside in,” and disrupt the program. “I said ‘We are part of the outside, I don’t have to do anything to bring the outside in. We’re there!’”

While most of the faculty approved of her appointment, it did represent a paradigm shift: a program long seeped in modernism had hired one of the most outspoken feminist voices in the design community. It was a change for de Bretteville, too, who moved back to New Haven by way of Los Angeles, where she had gained recognition for work that investigated social issues through teaching and design. In the 1970s she founded the Women’s Design Program at CalArts and co-founded the Woman’s Building, once a feminist haven of art and culture. In her time there, she taught hundreds of women through the Woman’s Building graphic centre, and influenced countless others with her writing, posters, and community-focused public art installations.

If in 2017 de Bretteville is not exactly a household name, her radical approach to design has made her a cult figure for many. At the Women’s March on Washington after the US presidential elections this January, her famous “eyebolt” icon—the piece of hardware-turned-Venus symbol that first appeared on her poster for the 1974 Women in Design conference—could be found on protest posters, bobbing with renewed purpose among a sea of pink pussy hats.

“I’ve been really looking, for a long time now, for different ways to hear from people you don’t usually hear from.”



Center spread of *Everywoman Newspaper*, 1970.

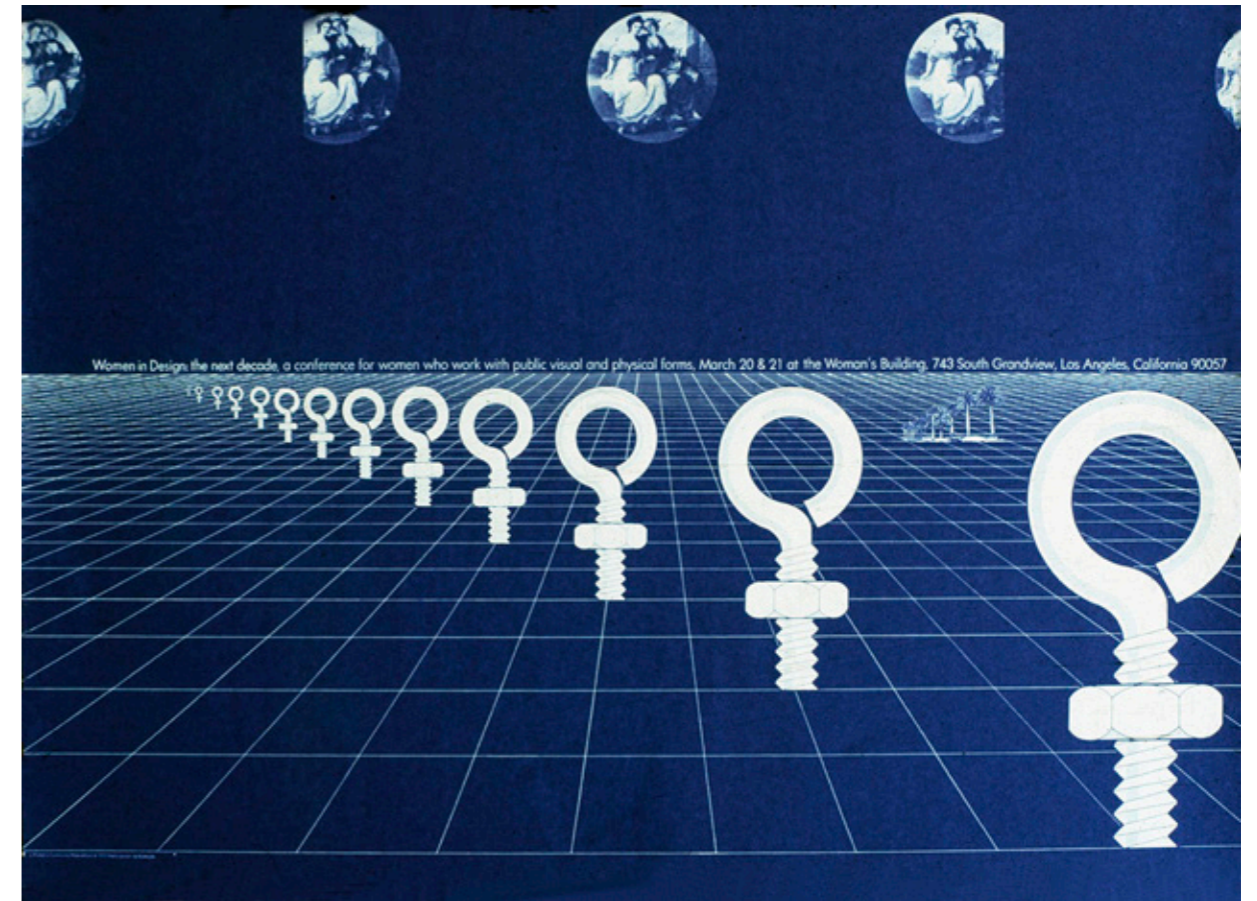
Our whirlwind tour of de Bretteville’s circular home ends at its centre, where we sit down at a long black table flanked by two floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. In conversation, she emanates the warmth and curiosity characteristic of the consciousness-raising LA feminists with which she’s associated, but with the frankness of a born and bred New Yorker. She talks quickly and intelligently, and is prone to long, impassioned asides. When I ask her if she’s always been so politically engaged, she says that in a way she feels hardwired for it. She’s the second child of immigrant parents who came to Brooklyn from an area in Russia that is now part of Poland. On the influence of her father she says, “He was incredibly smart, and I think he probably had a big effect on my political education because he was an anarchist. He didn’t like any organisation. Period.”

She remembers having a lot of freedom as a child; her sister was 15 years older and their home was often the first stop-through for immigrating family members on their way to a permanent home. As a teenager, de Bretteville sought quiet in the book-laden office of Leon Friend, a teacher at Lincoln High School in Brooklyn whose graphic design class inspired more than a few famous pupils—Milton Glaser and Alex Steinweiss among them. Friend’s mentorship set de Bretteville up to study art history at Barnard. In 1962 she went to Yale for a Masters in graphic design where she recalls being one of three women in a class of 15. Today, she says, classes

in the department almost always shake out to be about 50/50 on their own. “I’m not a bean counter, but when I feel the imbalance I really speak to it,” she tells me.

In 1969, de Bretteville moved to LA at a time when the feminist movement had already established itself in America, most prominently in Chicago, New York and LA Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, had given rise to the “second wave,” but de Bretteville found the book hard to relate to. “She was writing about suburbia and I’d never seen it,” she says. “And also my grandmother, mother, sister; everyone worked. I didn’t know who these women [who were housewives] were.” She was more interested in radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone and Eva Figes, and began to teach their writings as an instructor at CalArts. A year after she was hired, she convinced her dean to let her use her two teaching days a week to lead women-only classes. “It was like taking time out to find things out, that was what I thought was needed.” Her classes supplemented design studies and exercises with feminist analysis and more personal, Critical Reasoning style discussions. “We were meeting around ideas and about experiences that I think women wouldn’t have spoken about if they were in a mixed room.”

In 1973, de Bretteville, the artist Judy Chicago, and art historian Arlene Raven, all left their positions at CalArts to found the Woman’s Building.



Women in Design conference poster, 1974.



Clockwise: The first meeting of the Feminist Studio Workshop at Sheila's home in Silver Lake, LA before it moved to Cal Arts.
Sheila teaching in 1976. Women's Graphic Center poster.



At the start... At long last... Inwood, New York, 1999.



A vibrant nexus of women's culture, study, and creativity, the Woman's Building was home to a degree program in feminist art called the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW), as well as the Associated Woman's Press, Sisterhood Bookstore, Women's Improvisational Theatre and several galleries. In an environment that felt both safe and exciting, brimming with ideas, energy and possibility, the women of the Woman's Building took classes, held gay/straight dialogues, participated in collaborative video installations and held exhibitions that introduced ideas fostered within the Women's Liberation movement to the general public. Women traveled from around the world to conferences at the Woman's Building—like Women in Design, for which de Bretteville created “eyebolt” necklaces, to go along with her poster, for all attendees. While at the time Chicago expressed frustration of being boxed out of the masculine art world, de Bretteville remembers her time there as feeling productive and optimistic. “I felt freed being in California,” she says. “I did feel the ‘New York mafia’ aspect of design was not a good place for me.”

De Bretteville was the guiding force behind the Women's Graphics Center (WGC) at the Woman's Building, where she developed her communalist approach to teaching, and where she began to emphasise the link between individual creativity and social responsibility. Her classes sought to offer an open and flexible framework for students to work within, allowing for personal expression in both content and form. One better-known project that originated in the WGC was Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May* (1977), which involved using LAPD data to print the word “rape” over corresponding areas on a map of greater LA. In a class called *Public Announcements/Private Conversations*, designed by de Bretteville, students were encouraged to create works in public spaces that gave “graphic form to her concerns” on a social level.

When de Bretteville returned to Yale in 1990, almost a full decade after FSW shuttered due to funding issues, she brought with her a similar class called *Community Action*, in which students were asked to choose an issue from the newspaper and make a work about it. In one class in the 1990s in which the students created a pro-choice billboard, several felt so galvanised that they went on to form the social design collective, Class Action. But the student who had the most impact on de Bretteville was a young Catholic man from Texas. “He felt left out [of the assignment] and that felt wrong to me,” she says. She ended the class after that. “It's really important that a school does not legislate any particular thing. I felt that it should bubble up from the students and not come down from me.”

When I ask her if she considers this approach to pedagogy feminist, she takes a rare pause, then recalls getting a similar question from graphic designer Ellen Lupton in a 1990 interview. At the time she answered

that she would continue to use the word ‘feminist’ until women have complete and total equality. But things have changed since 1990, and certainly since the separatist groups of the 70s. When the Woman's Building was in full swing, it was a “very M-F world,” de Bretteville says, acknowledging the criticism of second wave feminism as only inclusive to some. By the time she returned to Yale as director, the third wave had ushered in a broader vision of feminism, dedicated to being multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and representing people and issues from all socio-economic backgrounds. “I resent being put back into that type of box, and I think anybody would be,” she says. “The effort is to accord to everyone the sense of being a particular kind of individual, and being an equal individual to everyone else.”

For most of her career, de Bretteville has fought for that vision of equality with and through her design. She sees graphic design and public art projects—which she considers a “kind of permanent, open-ended graphic design”—as a conduit for voices that have been suppressed, and a form of participatory democracy. Her large-scale public projects are meant to engage and represent the community in which they are embedded. In 1989, for example, she collaborated with other artists to create an 82-foot-long public mural, *Biddy Mason: Time & Place*. It honours Mason, a freed slave, midwife and activist whose work contributed to the development of the city on the site where Mason lived. A few miles from where we sit in her study, her 1994 work *Path of Stars* uses the same visual vernacular as the Hollywood Walk of Fame to memorialise the working-class people who helped build up the city's Ninth Square neighbourhood.

In some of de Bretteville's work, she uses visual cues to invite people in: Her 1999 piece *At the Start... At Long Last*, creates a mosaic of those words in the subway tiles at a station in Inwood, a multinational neighbourhood in Manhattan. The ellipses leave a space for the length of people's day between getting on and off the train, for each to fill in on her own.

When I meet up with de Bretteville, it's the weekend after the violent demonstration of white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia. Discussions that pit the removal of Confederate statues against the preservation of history are rolling through the southern US. When I tell her that I'm from Virginia, she pulls out plans for a project at Poplar Forest, Thomas Jefferson's hexagonal summer home in the mountains of the southwest part of the state. She's been reading a pile of books on the region as research for her piece, which seeks to tell the stories of Jefferson's slaves who ran the house. She plans to work with the local community, many of whom are descendants of slaves, to tell those stories. To me the project feels especially timely, though of course to de Bretteville it's not. As she puts it, “I've been really looking, for a long time now, for different ways to hear from people you don't usually hear from.” ♦



KAIROS by Lucy Hardcastle