

Kathy Brew

The *Design Is One* co-director talks behind-the-scenes with the Vignellis



Photograph by Ana de Orbegoso

Kathy Brew found her way into film by way of a long career in media and contemporary art. After working in the Bay Area for fourteen years, Brew returned to her native New York in 1994 to begin work as an Associate Producer for “City Arts,” Channel 13’s Emmy-award-winning program on the visual and performing arts. While working on that series, Brew met her husband, Roberto Guerra, an accomplished filmmaker and longtime friend of the modernist designers Lella and Massimo Vignelli. In 2014, Roberto Guerra passed away on Massimo Vignelli’s birthday, January 10, after a six-month fight with pancreatic cancer. Just months later, Massimo died at his home in Manhattan. He was 83.

The last film that Brew made with her late husband, *Design Is One: Lella & Massimo Vignelli*, was created from footage that captures the Vignellis full of vim and verve, before health complications began to interfere with their ability to work.

Along with *Helvetica*—a documentary film about Massimo Vignelli’s favorite typeface—*Design Is One* has helped catapult the Vignellis to a new level of public consciousness. After interviewing the Vignellis and former co-workers, Brew and Guerra compressed almost fifty years of work by the creative couple into the eighty-minute feature film, introducing many to the duo that helped shape America’s typographic urban landscape and the entire field of design in the latter half of the 20th century.

Kathy speaks with Knoll about the process of making the film, the time she spent with Lella and Massimo and the lasting impact of their designs.



Portrait of Lella and Massimo Vignelli. Photograph by John Madere.

KNOLL INSPIRATION: How did you meet Lella and Massimo Vignelli?

KATHY BREW: Well, I had the good fortune of meeting Lella and Massimo through my late husband, Roberto Guerra. About thirty years prior he made a six-part series called *By Design*, which profiled a handful of designers—Richard Sapper, Elliott Erwitt, Karl Lagerfeld, Milton Glaser, Ben and Jane Thompson and the

Vignellis. Roberto and I met back in 1996 through someone who suggested that I call him for work. That turned into a work-life partnership for the next seventeen years.

Roberto had done some recent work with Lella for Poltrona Frau in Italy for a design trade show. I can't actually remember the *first* time I met the Vignellis, but it was before we knew that we were going to do the film. I felt very privileged to have met them through Roberto because he had this long-term relationship with them.

When it was decided that their archive was going to go to RIT [The Rochester Institute of Technology], one of the funders of the archive—a woman in London named Lady Hamlyn, who is very interested in design and very supportive of it—said to somebody, “We’re going to have to have a film made on the Vignellis.” The Vignellis replied, “Well, we need to go back to Roberto, because he made a film on us thirty years ago.” So, that’s how the idea for the film came about.

Initially, it was just going to be an interview with Lella and Massimo conducted by Roger Remington, the distinguished Vignelli Professor of Design at RIT who has a long-standing history with the Vignellis. Roberto and one other colleague shot the initial interview, which became the spine of the film. However, as soon as Roberto and I began working on the project, it became clear that we needed to do a full-blown feature documentary on them. The first film was shot on 16mm and the Vignellis had done a lot more work since then, so it needed an update. We took on the initiative to take it beyond that initial interview and make it into a feature-length documentary.



Roberto Guerra speaking after a screening of *Design Is One* at The Architecture & Design Film Festival in New York City.

In collaborating on this film with your husband, how did you bring your two stylistic vantage points to bear on the film?

Well, we kind of had a yin-yang dynamic. As Massimo says in the film, “People think collaboration is two people with both hands on the pencil.” We each have our complementary skills, kind of like Lella and Massimo. We actually thought it was interesting that, here we are a couple, making a film about another couple. A few people have noted that in the press.

Roberto was certainly the DP [director of photography] and the cinematographer. I can shoot but I don’t have the years of skill and proficiency he has. I mean, he’s so intuitive the way he shoots. There’s one scene in the kitchen where Lella is asking about having bread with dinner and Massimo says, “No, Lella.” She gives him this great fist. Roberto swish-pans, and you get this shot of Massimo stirring the spaghetti and rolling his eyes. Roberto had the amazing sense to capture both of those elements within a matter of seconds. One camera, one person, just being so intuitive.

So, he would do the technical things and I conducted the interviews. I was more the producer and co-

director. I would set up the interviews and make the arrangements with the Vignellis—when we filmed at Saint Peter's Church, for instance.

Roberto could make a film entirely on his own—"from the spoon to the city," to quote Massimo—he really could. But, it's more fun to work with someone. We would divide and conquer. In terms of the editing, I was better at the words, so I'd do the first pass on the interviews. Roberto articulated the sequences and folded in the b-roll footage, since he had more technical skills than I. I'm very good at rough-cut editing and so the final structure of the film came from me, in discussion with Roberto, of course. It was really a true collaboration.



CIGA Glassware designed by Massimo Vignelli. Courtesy of Vignelli Associates.

And who did you consider your audience to be?

Like a lot of the films that one makes, there are two tiers. You hope for the niche cognoscenti, because in the design world if you say, "Vignelli," and people don't recognize the name then they're not really in the design world. I think the curator at MoMA, Barry Bergdoll, put it best, "The Vignellis are known by everybody, even people who don't know their names, because we're surrounded by the things that they've conceived."

That being said, I do think that there is more and more attention being paid to design. Films like *Helvetica* and *Objectified*, those are good films. We talked to Gary Hustwit, [the director of *Helvetica/Objectified/Urbanized*], in the beginning because we were hoping to piggyback on the success of *Helvetica*.

So, in answer to your question, I think the film is for both audiences: the people in the design world and the people outside of it. The values of timelessness, simplicity, elegance and functionality can translate to any vocation that one considers.



Saint Peter's Church in New York City designed by Lella and Massimo Vignelli. Courtesy of Vignelli Associates.

What was it like to spend time with Lella and Massimo while making the film? Is there anything that happened off-camera, or material that did not make it into the film that you would like to share?

There is always more. The home DVD release, which is now out, has bonus extras—short sequences of just Massimo and Lella. There's a sequence in Saint Peter's Church with Massimo and Lella discussing the cushions and the baptismal. There's Massimo talking about his mentor, Goethe, and about how he brought Helvetica to this country. There's also a fun little one called "The Girl with the Graphic Tattoo" about an Akzidenz-Grotesk tattoo.



Still from *Design Is One* showing the design for the book *Knoll Design* by Eric Larrabee and Massimo Vignelli.

Many Knoll alumni, including Sheila Hicks, Richard Meier, Jeffrey Osborne and Michael Bierut, appear in this film, helping to create a rich, multifaceted portrait of the Vignellis. Can you comment on what each of these interviewees brought to the film?

Well, as Roberto would say, the camera gives you license to go places you wouldn't normally go and meet people you wouldn't normally meet. We sat down with Lella and Massimo and told them we wanted to talk with other people and they helped us draft up a list. However, I will say that the list was a lot of "the guys," so I said to Roger Remington, "We need a few more women." Roger gave us Judith Helfand and Virginia Smith.

The others were: Michael Donovan, who was the first associate in Vignelli Associates; Michael Bierut from Pentagram—he started out working under Massimo; Richard Meier, of course, because Richard only works with Massimo on his books; Alan Heller, because of his product collaborations with the Vignellis; and, finally, Jeff Osborne, who was the Vice President of Design at Knoll when Massimo consulted with the company and designed its graphic identity.

During the interviews, we were also looking to tease out human and humorous moments, like the fact that Richard owns more Vignelli-designed clothing than Massimo does, and the problem with the elastic giving out. Also, there is the scene with Alan Heller talking about the cup, and how it was at once a beautiful design and a commercial failure. And then, in comes Massimo with his retort, "What I don't understand is, why do you complain? Can't you just understand not to fill up the cup all the way? Or is it asking too much to be civilized?" I love that moment. I think it's important to hear that something that's beautiful can still be considered a commercial failure.



Heller Dinnerware designed by Massimo Vignelli. Courtesy of Vignelli Associates.

Speaking of Alan Heller, at one point he remarks on the nature of the Vignellis' creative partnership, "It is a wonderful collaboration, but it is at times, what they call in Italian 'corto circuito,' a short circuit." Can you explain your decision to film the Vignellis both as a pair and separately?

We felt it was very important to do some things separately. We felt very conscious of the fact that Lella needed her fair share. Again, when they first started, at that time it was an all-boys club. Peter Eisenman, the American architect, described Lella as a force to be reckoned with—we wanted to capture that and to honor her creative contributions, since so often it is only Massimo who gets mentioned.

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—Kathy Brew



"Handkerchief Chair" for Knoll by Lella & Massimo Vignelli. Courtesy of Vignelli Associates.

The Vignellis were so prolific and the film covers an incredible amount of their work, which spanned typography, graphics, corporate identity, furniture design, consumer products, interiors, packaging, books, maps and brochures. What was the organizing principle for this large body of material?

We knew we wanted to cover the spectrum, but we didn't want it to be didactic, so it had to have some kind of flow. That's why we used what I would call the interstitials, which weave in and out.

A lot of it comes together in the process of the making. My analogy is that you kind of know the beads you want to collect, even if you don't know how you're going to string them together. Once you start working with them, it is a lot of trial and error. The idea for the interstitial montage was to let the film breathe and give viewers the chance to look at more of the work, because we couldn't include it all. When we had those segues—the chairs, the silver products, their interiors and the grid—it was a means of keeping the flow going without it being too teacherly. We didn't want title cards. Because of the Vignellis' interdisciplinary nature, we felt that the montage was an organic way to present their work spatially.



1970 redesign of the New York City subway map for The Metropolitan Transit Authority by Lella and Massimo Vignelli. Courtesy of Vignelli Associates.

You mentioned the stylistic influence of "the grid." Given your documentary subjects and subject matter, did you approach the material differently than you normally would?

Well, we had to use Helvetica [laughs] for the titles and everything. It was a challenge to make a high-quality film about these amazing designers. There was a pretty high bar to make something that reached their standards, but I think Massimo and Lella felt we did reach it.

So, we were conscious of their maxims and principles in our making. We could have had flashier edits and what not—I think one of the critiques in The New York Times was that the camera movement was a little clunky and that the film lacked product and beauty shots. Massimo had a very good retort and said, "Well, that's just not how Roberto shoots." Roberto is much about more *being there* and not being too focused on the technique, so he can be seamless with the process.

Your husband associated with Albert Maysles and other early pioneers in the *cinéma vérité* movement—a style of documentary filmmaking that came to the fore in the 1960s. To what extent do the principles behind *cinéma vérité* carry over to this film?

Roberto came from Peru as a young man and he had read about the *cinéma vérité* people—Albert Maysles, Ricky Leacock, Robert Drew and D.A. Pennebaker—and wanted to meet them. He was kind of an unassuming and shy guy, but after he came to this country he proceeded to cold-call them. He always used to say that he was an electro-mechanical engineer who "corrupted" himself to filmmaking.

So, it was *vérité*. There was no script. We set out to capture what was there and "listen, above all," as Albert

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—Barry Bergdoll

Maysles would say. Again, you don't come in with ten questions. It's a conversation, and it's over the course of that conversation that something happens. Like, when Massimo was talking about his book with Richard Meier—that sparked me to ask, “Hey, do you have one of your earlier books?” And then we got that wonderful juxtaposition of his first book and his last book that might otherwise have been missed.



Still from *Design Is One* by Roberto Guerra and Kathy Brew.

Is there anything that you and your husband set out to capture about Massimo and Lella that you felt was lacking in previous retrospectives?

We tend to opt for capturing people through the humanity of their work. In other words, we wanted viewers to feel like they'd met them as people. In that sense, the film was also about a fifty-year collaboration, a marriage and about being older while remaining vital and creative.

We like working with creative people and channeling that out to a larger audience. Even if we're dealing with a social issue, we like to get into the humanism of the people involved and their experiences. For us, the highest compliment is hearing someone say, “I feel like I met them,” because that means we captured who they are.

Were there any challenges you faced in the making of the film?

One of the challenges turned out to be the talking heads—there are a lot more than your typical documentary. Since the Vignellis were in their late seventies when we started filming, most of their work had already been created, so it was hard to get a sense of their process. We did ask if we could do something in Saint Peter's Church, with changing the architectural plan, so we could get some action and movement. And when they were designing the installation at the restaurant SD26 [now defunct], that was something we could capture. Even the narrative arc with the groundbreaking and opening of the Vignelli Center in Rochester gave us a little bit to work with.

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Program designed by Michael Bierut and Britt Cobb for the Vignelli Gala at The Architectural League. Photograph by Hamish Smyth. Courtesy of Pentagram.

The film includes numerous allusions to mortality and immortality. Can you explain the choice to leave such candid remarks and observations in the film?

We felt it was important to acknowledge these thoughts of mortality in the film. Part of being in your seventies or eighties is knowing your place on the bell curve and coming to terms with the fact that you're not going to be here forever. In the film, Massimo speaks about how he loves Saint Peter's because of its permanence, celebrating the fact, isn't that great, "I'll be here forever." It wasn't about morbidity, but about acknowledging death in a creative and honest way.

Some people might have said take that out, but we felt it was meaningful to keep that in.

I stayed in touch with Massimo in the fall of 2013 when we had the release of the film at the IFC. At that time, Roberto had stopped undergoing treatment for pancreatic cancer, although the goal had been for him to be well enough to attend the theatrical premiere. Lella was in the audience, but wasn't up to being part of the Q&A. Massimo, too, had been saying, "I'm not feeling so well," but he really perked up with the screenings. He loved being there, the attention and having people ask him questions.

A few months later, Roberto died. Soon afterwards, Massimo said to me, "You know, Roberto died on my birthday. If I don't feel better soon, I want to join him." Flash forward a little more than one year—I went to visit Massimo in late May, the week before he died. He was pretty frail, and we had a very deep conversation and he spoke about Roberto and what an amazing person he was. He had all these letters, they looked like bushels. And because he was a design person they were very graphic and beautiful. He said to me, "Now my only concern is that if I don't go soon, people are going to think this was a whole set up." And I said, "Massimo, please, take it in. If this keeps you going longer, by all means, take it in. Everyone should know that they're honored and revered while they're still alive." We both laughed at it all. And then he died a week later.

Finally, what did you take away from making this film?

For me it, it was just so inspiring to see the extent to which their work is integrated into their daily lives—they live it. As Massimo says in the film: "Retire? Why would you retire from what you love to do?" I think that that is what's different about people who live creative lives: You don't punch in and out from nine to five. You're always in your process, even if you're daydreaming.

In the end, they were just beautiful people to be around.

All images are courtesy of Vignelli Associates unless otherwise noted.

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