



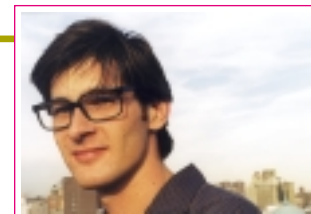
# IN NOTHING FLAT

A CONVERSATION WITH TSIA CARSON AND DOUG LLOYD  
BY DANIEL JANOFF

It used to be that when Tsia Carson and Doug Lloyd rolled out a new project, folks called the cops. In the mid-'90s, while attending The Advanced Computing Center for the Arts and Design in Columbus, Ohio, they sparked media frenzies unveiling installations such as the S&M-themed haunted house *The House of Cruelty*, and their media hoax *The Arm the Homeless Coalition*. Not many art school students can say that Rush Limbaugh critiqued their graduate work, or that their thesis statement was so potent the FBI chose to analyze it. Carson and Lloyd are in just that position.

These days, however, it would seem that the members of the art, business, and law enforcement establishments who predicted Carson and Lloyd would amount to no good were wrong. In 1997, they opened the multimedia design firm Flat, offering web design and strategy for a host of mainstream clients that includes Showtime, Urban Outfitters, the Museum of Modern Art, and Children's Television Workshop. Far from threatening democracy or people's livelihoods, Carson and Lloyd have received praise for the way their sites educate children and optimize customer contact. Yes, it seems that the rowdy artists who've been inseparable since their teens have finally straightened out. But that's just appearances.

Ask these web designers, and they'll tell you that the web pretty much sucks. Ask these multimedia strategists, and they'll tell you that virtually all the major players driving development on the web are doomed to fail. Ask this couple what they do to unwind, and they'll say, "Wrestle."



**Daniel Janoff: What have you been working on lately?**

**Tsia Carson:** We're working on a site for the Brennan Center for Justice, which sounds incredibly dull—but it's actually the most amazing thing. I'm so proud of it.

**Can you describe how the site works?**

**TC:** They gave us a data set with numbers on every political ad run on television during all federal 1998 campaigns across the nation. And the site we built takes that information and generates these really beautiful, simple visual reports for each ad: what kind of ad it was, the theme of the ad, who spent money on which campaign, and how much was spent. So you can see who is, basically, electioneering—which [for a corporation or interest group] is totally illegal—and who's actually doing issue ads.

**Doug Lloyd:** Hopefully, we'll be able to get more money and do a version with the election data from this year.

**TC:** Oh, man. The thing is so cool. And it looks really pretty too.

**That's surprising to hear you say, because your firm seems to shy away from doing "pretty" design.**

**TC:** My version of pretty. It looks like Sesame Street for adults.

**DL:** Yeah. I think everything we're doing these days is like Sesame Street for adults.

**What do you say when one of your designers comes up with a design plan that is right on visually, but won't work functionally?**

**TC:** Beat them with your fist [laughs]. No, we have these fantastically talented visual designers, and here, designers also understand systems, also do interactive design, and are just smart that way.

**DL:** Visual designers have been laying out information and interactive systems for hundreds of years.

**TC:** Like the Torah, for instance.

**DL:** There's a rich history that informs the "new" discipline of interactive design. Engineers—they've only been developing software systems for probably 20, 30 years. A visual designer, I think, has a much better sense of how information should be organized than anybody, because of that rich history they're drawing on. The computer is just another medium for them.

**Do you find yourselves any more or less creatively engaged as the heads of a design firm, as opposed to being the hands-on designers/artisans of a project?**

**DL:** Definitely more so. It's awkward to say that a designer is creative but

a salesperson is not. That's just about determining value through abstraction. In that regard, the art world is the perfect distillation of capitalism.

I get that question a lot and I'm never quite sure why. I guess it's a natural question right now since what society defines and values as a creative activity is always in flux. Sixty years ago the ultimate American creative endeavor was to write the Great American Novel.

Thirty years ago it was to write the Great American Screenplay. Now it's to write the Great American Business Plan. What's thought of as a worthy pursuit for a creative person is still a question of class, race, and gender.

**The web: cool or lame?**

**TC:** Lame [laughs]. Next question. Well, if you ask me, "Is the web cool or lame?" I'd be inclined to say lame. But the internet, which is not the same thing—that's incredibly cool. The web is simply one way of viewing the information that's on the internet. And it's not the most interesting way. It just happens to be the most widely used. The way Napster works, and systems like that...that stuff's way more interesting than some "cool, groovy, animated website" is ever going to be.

**DL:** The web browsers have really limited what people can use the internet for. You can have output to a web browser, but you don't necessarily have to have that. The web is much more for accessing static information.

**What's it like, then, having the vision for all these other things you can do with the internet, yet having clients continually asking for the same old web-design solutions?**

**DL:** Well, it's incredibly limiting, because they don't understand. They're still learning.

**TC:** You're working against monolithic corporations that want to maintain control over the software system. So browsers are dominant because of the strength of Microsoft and AOL/Netscape.

On a pessimistic day, I feel a lot like the public transportation system that was built in Los Angeles. Like, any minute, the oil companies are going to come in and enforce a highway system, and the great utopian dream of that public transportation system will be over.

**DL:** Which is essentially what Microsoft and Netscape have done by narrowing what you can do on the internet as a developer.

**If that's the case, then what force do you think helps bring about the alternative internet technologies, like Napster, for instance, that keep popping up despite the numerous pressures against them?**

**DL:** Well, I think the Napster thing's great. On one side of the debate is the music industry saying, "CDs are the way in which music should be distributed because we can charge people for it, and we control that distribution route." And on the Napster side, it was, "Look, people are trading music through another distribution route that circumnavigates your hold on the music industry. It's just a distribution venue, and we can figure out payment schemes and ways for artists to make money, and it screws up your existing business logic."

**TC:** I don't know. People like to fool around. That's why stuff like this keeps popping up. But how long will people be able to fool around in this medium? That's sort of an open question.

**DL:** That's the nature of a complex system: things emerge out of that complexity. Like in a living system, anything can emerge out of it, with a life in and of itself, and you can't really control life or nature.

**TC:** Old media people just don't get the medium. They're desperately trying to make it into a broadcast medium, and maybe with broadband they will. But then again, maybe they won't. And as long as it's still interesting, I'm still interested, for the time being, to play with this, too.

**DL:** The existing players, you know...it's like they're putting stuffed animals into a swamp. The stuffed animals aren't interesting in relation to the rest of the swamp. They're not going to survive. They're just going to rot away. They're hashing out the same thing, which is about creating broadcast-style shows and episodes for the web and the internet, thinking people want to come and just blindly consume broadcast content.

**How did the two of you meet?**

**DL:** At an ice cream social.

**TC:** Yeah, we were seventeen. It was love at first sight. We were just inseparable. It was just chemical or something.

**Did you connect creatively as well as hormonally right away?**

**TC:** Same difference [laughs].

**DL:** Yeah, we started collaborating on stuff immediately. We moved in together sophomore year of college in San Francisco and have worked almost exclusively together since then.

**TC:** We chose collaborative media. At first we did film, and then we did site-specific installations, performance work. I think one of the things we both really groove on is a collaborative environment.

**DL:** And that was really the impetus for creating a company: to create a healthy collaborative environment in which to produce culture.

**Do you think that most creatively inclined couples could benefit from collaborating, or do you think you're the exception?**

**TC:** I couldn't recommend one way or the other. All this stuff, I think we really get off on it, but I can't imagine that intensity level is possible for most other living things. It's like those bacteria that survive in the mouths of volcanoes, where the water's like 300 degrees. To me, it feels like bath water, but I can't imagine most couples could survive that crucible. But then, most couples don't meet when they're seventeen.

**DL:** For me, the activity of producing culture or being artistic—it's too hard to separate that activity from my everyday life. It just doesn't make any kind of sense to try and separate our relationship from my creative pursuits.

**Tips for couples who are thinking about collaborating on a project?**

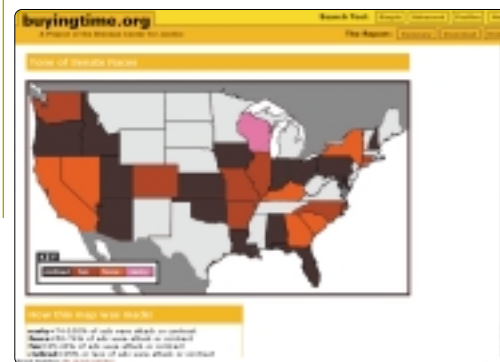
[Laughter from both]

**TC:** I think that, often, couples that work together discover things about their partner that they probably really shouldn't know. One thing that helps is that I think Doug is the coolest person in the whole world, and I've thought that pretty much from the moment I met him. I don't know if most couples really, truly feel that way about each other—each other's ideas, anyway [laughs].

**FLAT PROJECTS**

**buyingtime.org**

Robust search tool to enable public access to campaign financing data. Sponsored by the Brennan Center for Justice. Search query result: map.



**eyebeam.org**

Created website for Eyebeam Atelier: a new museum of arts and technology in New York City. Website.



**getcrafty.com**

Ongoing development for web community of women making art out of everyday life. Website.



**wnyc.org [wnyc\_future]**

Future design for website of most-listened-to NPR affiliate. Design comp.



**wiredkitchen.com**

Creating B2B marketplace for food professionals: responsible for everything from corporate identity to interactive design. Website.



**flat.com**

Corporate brochure. Chock full of DHTML.

