

**Life Noise**

An essay by Paul Davis

From the book *Constance* by Jonathan Ellery

## Introduction

The only works of art in Jonathan Ellery's light, airy meeting room at his design company's headquarters are by himself or by Lawrence Weiner, and they look good together. We are in Borough, just south of the Thames in London, to discuss art, graphic design, the past, sex, ideas, the edit, books, influences, obsessions, effort, responsibility, definition, set-ups. This is done with an openness and alacrity that is enjoyable and humorous. You only suffer from envy when the object of envy is very impressive. And it is here.

Ellery has a three-floor building comprising a working studio and a living space. The frames on the walls throughout illustrate the success of his design company, Browns, originally set up in 1998 and now owned solely by Ellery. He's worked with far too many clients to list and is very well respected in the design world. This, when I tell him, usually brings a sigh and a smile – he knows he's good at what he does, but also that he couldn't do it without the proverbial help from Nick Jones and his splendidly overworked crew. They are essential in his success and he knows that. Good ideas are one thing, but realising them is probably impossible without the occasional bout of shouting and frowning.

When the learning curve of running a company reaches a certain plateau, a decision has to be made, and it seems Ellery decided to keep the Browns engine spinning while embracing a direction that was always close to his heart: making art. Design has clients, deadlines, obstacles, whereas the pursuit of making art is to him, as far as his romantic nature will allow, less problematic. "It's an anti-angst balm to me," he says. It's important to stress, though, how much he loves and will always love design. Maybe the Weiner prints are a testimony to exactly that, in the way that most folk, when looking at a Lawrence Weiner, aren't sure whether it's art or graphic design or possibly both.

The transition starts with his books. Ellery has made many of them, especially over the past few years. You can see their volume-set-ness, a kind of edition of three, all white, in the same dimensions with simple black sans-serif type. The first is *136 Points of Reference*, followed by *87* and finally *In and Out*, published in 2005, 2006 and 2007.

*136 Points of Reference* features, very simply, 136 objects that have a profound meaning to him. There's the "shut the gate" sign his father made in his childhood, a biro-scrawled Groucho Club drinks coaster, numerous books on (mostly) photography and art, enigmatic road markings and photographs taken in the back of yellow cabs. Four people were included as points of reference: Martin Parr, the late Alan Fletcher, Erik Spiekermann and Lawrence Weiner, each of whom contributed five of their own points of reference. An idea within an idea: tidy, but good thinking.

The book is an edit of his life so far and we should all try it. Lists are everywhere: Desert Island Discs, Room 101, every newspaper printed includes some kind of a three-minute interview – what's your favourite meal (pasta), how do you relax (I don't – too busy at all times, not enough hours in the day), how often do you have sex (mind your own business!). What's their point? Ellery's book is interesting in that it has depth. When he was invited to show an excerpt at the Andrew Roth Gallery in New York, Ellery said: "it was interesting to have a show by Jonathan Ellery with none of my work in it."

*87*, again simply, is a book of 87 numbers in different weird and wonderful, some esoteric, some prosaic typefaces that start from 1 (on page 7) and count, number by number, page by page, up to 87, all black and white apart from 87 itself, which is DayGlo orange. It shouldn't work but it does. It might be because of its knowing perversity.

*In and Out* continues that thought and starts with a small black dot, which gets larger and larger as you leaf through the book until about mid-way through, where you find a page completely black. Then all hell breaks loose and the next twenty or so pages are a startling mix of DayGlo and mirror paper with all credits sandwiched in the centre, as if cowering from Ellery's gleeful creative urge. The second part of the book starts with another fully black page, from which a square appears, growing smaller and smaller over the remaining pages until it is tiny and then disappears.

It caused a bit of a stir. "Waste of paper." "I just don't get it." "It's ridiculous" I heard people saying whilst they swigged the free wine and enjoyed the snacks at the launch. All these books were published and designed at Browns and beautifully printed by Westerham Press. Other artists that Browns have been involved with in a publishing context include Paul Graham, Alexander Gelman, Lawrence Weiner, Susan Meiselas, Bruce Gilden, Martin Parr, Dries Van Noten and Felice Varini.

With the design studio doing good work and earning everyone a decent living, Ellery embarked on his first major show, *Unrest*, at The Wapping Project in 2007. He wanted to emulate the atmosphere of a Byzantine church. In the show were large, very heavy, square brass plates hanging from the ceiling at eye level – it was a very sculptural experience. They were the only things illuminated and machined on their surfaces were an array of images: two jellyfish, lipsticks, stiletto heels, type saying "THUMBING IN A SOFTY" – all of them looking as if they were floating, which is incredible when you realise that in total they weigh in at nearly a tonne. In another room the numbers one to eighty-seven were projected in sequence, at differing speeds, onto three large screens with a disturbing white-noise soundtrack. In another was *136 Points of Reference*. Altogether it worked well aesthetically. The lighting

was phenomenally accurate given the nine-metre high ceilings. The cavernous dark space of The Wapping Project's main Turbine Hall is dramatic enough when it's empty let alone trying to install a meticulously planned show. The edit worked well too and the result was playful as well as seductive; cool as well as passionate. The tension in the show was palpable too or, as Ellery puts it, "full of friction". Ellery: he is a frictional character.

One good thing about doing a successful show is the irrepressible desire to move on to the next one; to prove the fact that you're not only as good as your last show; that you're not a one hit wonder. *Unrest* was his first major show and although it relied quite heavily on graphic elements, it was deemed a success.

For *Constance*, Ellery's decided to commission a piece of music for the drums and ask a fully-dressed woman to take off her clothes (*not* to strip), become naked and then put her clothes back on again. The drummer and the model will be beautifully lit and the only elements in the show. The one-off live performance will take about 20 minutes and thereafter exist only as a film. Unless another gallery wants it as a live performance, of course, which they should. It's a big departure from anything he's ever done and all the more commendable for it. It might seem over-simple and slightly crude but it's not at all. I don't believe in the doctrine "less is more" – that's an impossibility.

The leap into the world of performance art is worth a thought. Most "contemporary" artists I've met hardly ever run out of ideas; they still seem excited about what to think of next. "How can anyone run out of ideas in this day and age?" said one, dismayed at the thought that anyone could suffer from artist's block. "Art is so crucial to these days. The task of understanding this life using art has never been as compelling. Art's not some bucolic fable-based exercise in sentimentality anymore, it's about *now*. More specifically, it's about us as individuals and where we are. Right here, right now." She took a deep breath and added: "Where are the movements? We used to have movements. Nowadays, we have no movements in art any more; the contemporary art world has perfectly destroyed that. The 'contemporary' is here to stay. Forever." "Why," I asked, "surely there could be some kind of anti-contemporary-luddite movement?" "You mean outsider art?" she barked. "Or the Stuckists? God help us."

So, we're all on our own, trying to make head or tail of what's going on in this strange existence we find ourselves in, and if it wasn't strange then I guess half the thoughtful "conceptual" artists (I thought all artists were conceptual) would disappear. We are trying to work things out without rules or regulations, without barriers, direction or movements. Just thinking and doing and making. Ellery is, I am and maybe you are, too.

## Interview

We spoke for a while and some topics kept cropping up: sequence, balance, symmetry, definition, separation, tension.

**Davis:** Are you a graphic designer or an artist?

**Ellery:** (Pause) I think I'm both. I really love Browns and the design work we do there but I also, equally, love my own work, the realisation of my ideas, seeing them come to some sort of fruition. Though I know I have to be careful about it; it's a balancing act between running a company and doing stuff I have to do. I like the fact that there aren't any clients to deal with when I know my ideas can work in reality, but there again, I enjoy the studio and the people who work there. I'm passionate about both areas.

**Davis:** Why is the show called *Constance*?

**Ellery:** Well, I love the name – it conjures up a kind of sophisticated European woman, someone who dresses well, someone you might see in the Hotel Costes in Paris, someone poised, sexy, beautifully clothed but very strong. I'm very attracted to that. Plus, it's a move on from my other work, from my books to another place, but still a progression. A consistency, a constancy. I suppose it used to be America that influenced me but now it seems to be Europe. I think doing work with Dries Van Noten really opened my eyes. It was orchestrated brilliantly. So for *Constance*, I would sit down with the stylist Dipika Parmar Jenkins and talk about movies, talk about Paris, try and articulate colour palettes. The film *The Piano Teacher* by Michael Haneke was discussed, a lot of sexual oppression, sexual frustration, a lot of angst, a lot of anger.

**Davis:** What's it all about then?

**Ellery:** It's about love, sex, politics. But more importantly it's about my relationships with women. It's about the politics of women, the love of women, the sex of women, the innocence of women. I'm a fan of women; when they try it on, when they need help, when they're confident or not...moments define relationships too so mine would be angsty moments, sad moments, sexualised moments, moments of warmth. And tension. It's about the edit too. With the book we shot so many pictures and saw so many actresses. I had to control everything. Which would be right, I suppose – being in the studio, publishing and what have you. I've learned a lot about that from being a designer: millions of photos spread all over the floor, dynamics going off left right and centre, the client to think of, deadlines. But this was different – there wasn't as much pressure, it was my work. Same as when I did *136*, bringing all those elements together, sequencing, moving things around, seeing what you've got to form something new. Unlikely relationships, friction. Great.

**Davis:** Which is the edit.

**Ellery:** Which is the edit, yes.

**Davis:** Do you worry you're giving too much away with all this?

**Ellery:** Sometimes it's a bit intimate – you bare your soul a little bit. The book *In and Out* was a bit tricky. Not only did it provoke, people criticised it without thinking. The book was about cancer – my father died from it – and when I point this out they go “oh, I get it...” it's something that grows and is unpleasant and I had to do it. A lot of good came out the other side.

**Davis:** But I've known you to be provocative. You're very level-headed in some ways (business) but in others you don't seem to be scared to show yourself.

**Ellery:** True, but that's what it's all about, surely. It's also about ownership. I own my work, even though, like at Andrew Roth, when I showed another edit of *136 Points of Reference* at Wapping, people were still saying well, you know, you didn't do that and I quite enjoyed that...friction.

**Davis:** I have to ask you this because so many people are intrigued. How does it feel to have a working studio that helps you attain the vision of Ellery? Not of Browns or Browns Publishing but of Ellery, the artist?

**Ellery:** I'm very lucky and I've worked hard to make it work. An important point is that even though I love craft, I don't feel the need to make it any more: you know, take the photo, carve the stone. I made this decision five or six years ago.

**Davis:** What made you do that?

**Ellery:** Well, based on people like... Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. Or Warhol. Or, if you think about it, court painters, you know, the masters, just painted the faces and the rest of the studio filled in the rest. Not that I think I'm on a par with any of them. It's an ability to unleash an idea and see it happen. I mean the people I work with are fucking brilliant. Koons has a building with a design studio, administration, welders, thousands of assistants, engineers, all under the same roof so he can give birth to an idea

[Tuna sandwiches and crisps arrive.]

whenever he wants.

**Davis:** You are a man with extraordinary energy. So I guess what you're doing fits perfectly with everything you're about; all your interests and obsessions and your irrepressible urge to make something because we're a long time dead!

**Ellery:** I love being in the studio and I'm completely committed to Browns, one hundred per cent, all the

way; it's a big part of my life, it's not going to go away. But as you get older it seemed to me that you are defined by other people; and I thought it was time to define myself. Intellectually there comes a point when you have to work out your own point of view. Realising *my* ideas has taught me that. You design a piece of Portland stone for an exhibition, phone the Portland stone man, get the man to break the stone, phone the stone carver to make sure it's perfect and yet it's still my work.

[Pointing to the stone]

**Davis:** Yes, there it is, and lots of other pieces of your work.

**Ellery:** Yes, well, I know what you mean, surrounding yourself with your own work...but all the studios and houses of artists and designers I've been to all surround themselves and it's fascinating to see it. These things remind me of what people can achieve and being here surrounded by them and being here in this building acts as a mechanism for me to continue to achieve things. Artistically, financially, everything. It's a delicate balance combining the two things, me and Browns, but still somehow keeping them separate.

**Davis:** Back to *Constance*. How are you hoping the audience will respond?

**Ellery:** When people come and see this as a performance piece, I want them to interpret it in their own way as opposed to telling them how they should react, and that's the battle I have with this at the moment: trying to define it and me. Things like us talking help to do that. I mean it's going to be powerful whatever happens – she's going to feel edgy at the midpoint when she's completely naked and I would imagine so will the audience. But you never know. She's also in a position of power so she might try it on a little to salvage herself. At this midpoint, I'm determined to make it very very fucking hard for people: she's going to start to look at people and resent them. It's about relationships. Again with my mother, my girlfriend(s), women. One of the strongest moments in the performance is when she's just put her ring back on again. And I love the ending too, of her standing there after all the chaos. I think it would be a very different experience for a single man to watch it compared with watching it with your wife. Or watching it with your girlfriend and the sex had dried up. Or watching it with your new girlfriend and the sex is new and wonderful. Also, I can only imagine what it would be like as a single woman watching on your own. All this was on my mind when we were casting. No way did I want a stripper. I wanted an actress. And she is great because I can articulate to her the moods and angsty-ness I'm looking for.

**Davis:** More angst. So does working hard and creatively help rid your tender soul of the angst and worry that you seem to thrive on?

**Ellery:** Yes. A lot of this is a release of ideas, a release of thoughts. It's a love affair too. With books, with creativity, with all this. And good not to have to stick with one medium: graphic, photographic, sound, movement, lighting, Portland stone, brass. I'm enjoying it so much. And with the brass work you can see similarities: the high heels repeat; it's all part of a sequence.

**Davis:** Are you happy with it?

**Ellery:** Yes, I'm really excited about it, really delighted with it. Although it is a bit odd doing this book before the rehearsals.

**Davis:** Is there something to be said about the loneliness of both elements in the performance? A woman taking her clothes off is a very raw and solitary act and the drummer, too, with no other instruments to help him along would feel pretty exposed. Plus, they're separated by some distance so they can't really rely on each other for support. And the audience will feel pretty uncomfortable as well. Why have you designed it in this way?

**Ellery:** Friction. But they are equal. And apart. And the music, the drums, like this catalogue, have symmetry.

**Davis:** And friction?

**Ellery:** Yes, friction.

**Davis:** I hope it goes well. Thank you, Jon.

**Ellery:** My pleasure. Thank you.

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