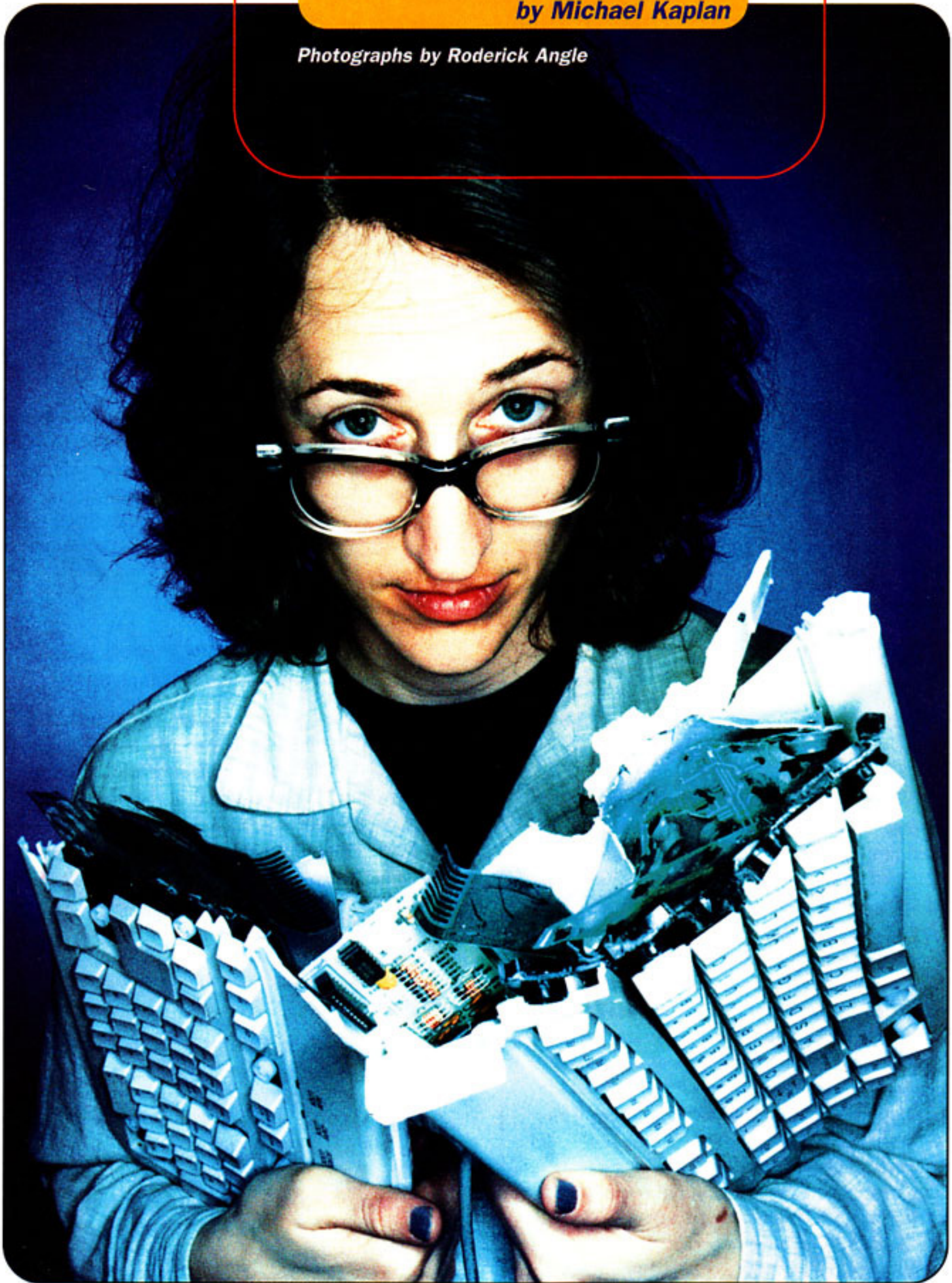# Word Up!?

by Michael Kaplan

Photographs by Roderick Angle

In the pages of their hip and trendy electronic magazine, Word, Marisa Bowe and Jaime Levy are redefining online design as more akin to directing film than laying out pages.

Marisa Bowe jokingly describes herself and Jaime Levy as "the Beavis and Butt-head of the Internet." Which one is Bowe? "Whoever's the smarter one," she quips, cracking herself up.

In reality, they are both smart—and irreverent—working as opposite sides of the collective brain behind the Web site, Word (http://www.word.com). Officially, Bowe is in charge of its text and oversees the day-to-day creation of the site; Levy (who conceived Word and, until recently, served as its creative director) consults on art and design. Despite these titular delineations, their responsibilities merge as they strive to establish a sense of seamlessness between stories and graphics on the site.

Intelligent, cheeky and adventurous, Word largely comprises personal essays and digitized art aimed at an audience in its twenties and thirties. Almost a year old, it receives one to two million hits a week, charges $12,500 per ad, and is one of the more successful enterprises on the Net. Judging by the site's art—including "talking paintings" (click inside the frame and hear a poem), weekly comics and digitally doctored photo essays—it is also one of the most thoughtfully designed. *Newsweek* heralded Word as its readers' favorite online site. *Folio:* named it 1995's best designed nonprint magazine, and Netscape has permanently logged Word on its "Cool Sites" list.

Levy, 30, has spent all of her professional life in the digital world, doing everything from producing independent electronic zines (primarily a pop-culture disk called Electric Hollywood) to working on operating platforms for IBM. Bowe, 37, traces her interest in online life to the mid-1960s when her father, then an engineer with Control Data Corp., exposed her to an early version of the Internet. She used it the way any teen-age girl would—for flirting. More recently, she made a name for herself by hosting chat sessions on Manhattan's Echo before hooking up with Levy in 1995 to collaborate on Word. Together, the two have played a major role in setting online design standards and expectations.

DIGITAL CREATIVITY: Can either of you define what the Internet aesthetic really is?

JAIME LEVY: Well, if somebody thinks that there's good navigation and the stories all make sense together, then they tend to think that it has a Word aesthetic.

MARISA BOWE: A lot of the Web-site graphics have a generic quality. Because we get real artists who are doing our illustrations for love—not to whip off a third assignment of the week—we get work with a very particular point of view.

DC: Surely some people are doing it for the money?

JL: Not if they live in New York. We pay only about $200 for 10 to 15 beautiful little illustrations. Eighty percent of the time, the illustrator is also designing the story, choosing type, and selecting background colors. So they need to be right-brain/left-brain enough to illustrate and know HTML.

DC: Why do such talented people work for so little money?

JL: Word is recognized as a portfolio. We make sure everybody's stuff looks really good. And if you're an illustrator on Word, then your logo can be clicked on, and a link to your e-mail pops up. People see the work, say, "Oh, that's fucking great, man." One hundred-thousand people see it; maybe 10 like it, and those are the people who contact you to do an illustration for a high-paying job.

DC: Has that happened?

JL: To just about everyone who's illustrated for us. We're like the temp agency of the Web.

MB: Illustrators will be building environments and working with architects. It's called cyber*space*. So there will be a tremendous demand for illustrators who can create sites that have a feeling of place. They will work with city planners and set designers, constantly analyzing and solving design and illustration problems.

DC: Generally speaking, what would you say is your primary critique of current sites on the Web?

MB: Too many of them are content-free. They're like frosting with no cake. There are three types of people attracted to this medium. Some are there because it's the next big thing and they want to be in on it. Then there are the people who are into technology. They use Java, but they have nothing to use it with. And third, there are the writers. They put information up there, but not in a visually interesting way. I'm a ranter. I constantly rant. I have tons of shit to say. Cupcake (http://www.cupcake.com) has nothing to say. They have a pose, they're about announcing they're bad girls. But they don't do anything. Feed (http://www.feedmag.com/index.html) just talks—it has no pose.

DC: What prevents that from happening right now?

MB: Bandwidth and people not really understanding the medium. Right now is very similar to the early days of movies, before anybody had thought to use pans and close-ups—visual elements of story-telling that we don't even think about. Myst is probably closest to what I have in mind. Right now, though, the people who work for us tend to come from one background or another. Their experiences aren't varied enough for them to think of everything all together.

DC: What should creative people do to train themselves?

MB: They should go down to an arcade and spend a couple days there watching people playing video games. They should think about what you try to do in a novel—getting across characters and values and thought—and attempt to convey that through a video game. That way it wouldn't just be a stupid video game; it would be as intelligent as *Ulysses*. But it would be in a new kind of medium. The really creative person gets so excited by the notion of rethinking this stuff.

DC: As technology improves and Web sites become ubiquitous, what future projects will digital illustrators be working on?

DC: And Word has both?

JL: I've heard about Word being shown around every film studio in the country. People will copy this as a model because it's a good one. But that's okay with me. I created [this] so that people would copy me. But I had my own cultural viewpoint when I did it, and there was a certain subtlety involved.

MB: [Creating something that inspires others is] the whole point of being an innovator. Hopefully, we have the chops to move on to the next thing and top ourselves.

JL: We're gonna be rich. ●

Dial up Word on the Web, and it's immediately apparent that you are in for a visually compelling experience. Icons twirl and flash and dissolve. Text is designed for interactivity, as in the story about joining the Mile-High Club (having sex in an airplane). The airplane icon used to enter the story (*above left*) is the vehicle to turn the "pages," which depict the plane engaged in acrobatics mimicking the amorous hijinx of the passengers. Beavis and Butt-head (Bowe and Levy, *above*) on Word's New York City rooftop.

DC: What comes first on Word, the illustration or the text?

JL: Eighty percent of the time, art work comes after text. Each piece is usually done specifically for a story.

MB: Most of it is created through scans in Photoshop. However, there've been times when Jaime wanted something that specifically looked painterly and not computer-generated. In other instances, though, like for this Hans Christian Andersen story we are putting up—which is really a cautionary tale about technology—we specifically wanted art with a computer-generated feel. It had to look virtual.

JL: I really don't care how people make the stuff. We have a story up there right now, called "Looking For Nirvana." All the art appears to have been created on canvas, yet it was done entirely on the computer.

DC: Is there an illustration style that does or does not work particularly well on the Internet?

JL: Dark, heavy imagery doesn't work.

MB: It gets lost and muddy. We had one photo of a group of people standing in front of a 7-11 store. In person, it looked amazing—bright and hilarious. On the Web, though, the people looked like a bunch of ants with orange smears on them. We tried to get it to look as good as possible. But if we made it any bigger, it would have taken 10 years to download.

JL: We hope that, as compression technology and monitors improve, those issues will go away. I'm working on a piece right now, called "The Chill-Out Room," where there'll be a lounge, a bathroom and art on the walls. The fucked-up thing is that [one of the illustrators] gave me these huge paintings that are formatted for comic-book pages rather than a computer screen. So now I not only have to compress them, but I have to scan them in four pieces. They're unwieldy, and I am dragging them around town on subways, trying to find a Kinko's with a scanner that's big enough. But the real question is this: When I scan it and tape it back together and smoosh it, will it look like a room or like loose smooshes? But these are beautiful paintings, and we hope to do what we can to make them look okay.

DC: Do you give artists a lot of direction?

JL: I prefer to give free range. My primary responsibility is to choose the appropriate designers and artists. They have to read the story and have a real understanding of it. Then I tell them to put up one page so I can see it. At that point, I start art directing. But it's not a case of somebody telling the illustrators exactly what to do. How much fun would that be?

DC: Do the artists have much control over how their work ultimately looks?

JL: It all depends on just how much input they want to give. I love working with other people, but 99 percent of the time the artists have no ideas about interface. A lot of times they don't even know what interface is, and they don't care. It's the same thing with the writers. I'm surprised that I don't receive a lot more complaints from people who think that I have ruined their work.

MB: Things are not nearly as integrated as I would like. People are so used to thinking of the print paradigm. Writers don't consider what the interface can be. The animation should be something integral, rather than just a gimmick.

DC: In what way do you hope to change that?

MB: I'd like to see the text become more incorporated into the art. I keep thinking of these 19th-century gardens, with mazes and all kinds of things. Maybe you are walking through a [digital] environment and a voiceover says, "You are alone in the jungle and no one else is here." Then you come upon a tree. Click on the tree, and text burns into its trunk. This way, the text, the art and the audio are totally integrated.