

# DARREN BADER + DAVID PLACEK =

*You are both engaged with complex processes of naming. Please discuss the steps that you each take to begin projects. David, is there a set of initial steps that you take to name a new product? Darren, what are the steps that you take in proposing the various parts of an artwork?*

**DAVID:** We do have very clear steps before we begin creative development. It is important for us to understand the environment that the name will live in. What is the role that the name can play to help communicate the product's difference? Successful products all make a promise; we need to understand the potential promise of this new brand, how it might make life better—even if it is a very small “better” for the customer. We also talk about beauty and simplicity, and how we might create a name that achieves these two goals—BlackBerry and Swiffer are two excellent examples.

**DARREN:** Beauty and simplicity are the reason I decided to try to make art in the first place (very uncommon, I know!). But words, i.e., names, always get in the way. I wish I didn't have to “word” as much as I do. In beginning a project, I see something, then find a way to ascribe a(ny) name(s) to it, or I think of a word and start to remember what the word refers to. Then things get difficult, because simplicity on the page/screen is usually not simplicity in three dimensions. Beauty is left on standby as names are deployed/employed to try communicate “art.” Would a rose by any other name smell as sweet?

*How have text messages, Twitter, and other shortened forms of contemporary communication changed your work?*

**DARREN:** This is a particularly sensitive question for me. I feel threatened by the Twitter character limit. It certainly can provide/accomplish linguistic innovation, but it strips language of the weight and volubility that provides much of its greater richness. I'm not much at home in the aesthetics of spoken conversation, so I need the flexibility of writing, of where writing may take me—I'm not sure how long the river basin may be, so I need to feel I have the option to navigate it mile by mile. I do love shorthand and the increase

of textual permutations that have come about via texting and chat, etc. I like the play of it all, and partake in it frequently (I entertained myself similarly when I was a kid). But in my experience few people are playful with it; it's a rather rote and para-verbal regurgitation of shorthand for expediency's sake. My fear—and I'm proud to be conservative here—is that the richness of the English language, in all its glorious silliness, will be rapidly lost. In written communication's increased emphasis on economy, I don't know how language will “digest,” as I prefer it to. But I also have some faith that Twitter will beget its own backlash; there will always be someone mining/misappropriating past paradigms as a vital present to be promulgated. I haven't even answered your question yet ... Language packaged convincingly has always been an element of my work, whether I can achieve the convincing package or not. So the length of “packaging” is beside the point. Were I to spend more time reading Tweets than copying lines from the annals of literature, I might find packages I found exceptional. But it's all beside the point. The point for me is to find language that earns its keep. This is, of course, impossible to identify, short of (dubious) consensus.

**DAVID:** This is an easy question. Lexicon Branding\* works in a world much smaller than Twitter characters and lines: We need to create the title of a story—the brand name—in less than ten letters.

*In different languages, certain items, such as a fork, change gender. Do you think of your products and artworks as having particular genders?*

**DARREN:** I would be very curious to know what David has to say here. I rarely think of works being gendered, even when they happen to be marked by things most identifiable as male or female. However much my putative gender(s) may define me, so they might define the work I make—it's the only information I have.

**DAVID:** Actually, we never think in terms of masculine or feminine. We think in terms of hard versus soft, fast versus slow, smooth versus hard, mild versus harsh.

\* David Placek is the founder of Lexicon Branding.

*The work that both of you do requires being grounded in the contemporary moment—to be able to clearly and directly speak with your audience. How do you use language to do this? If applicable, how does the past—along with old models, words, phrasings, and assembly—inform what you do?*

**DARREN:** I have great fears around clarity. I'm not verbally suited to it. Semi-poetry is something like a native tongue. But with my work, I look for words, usually nouns, that approach a static meaning in hopes that I might better communicate/share something. I stick to English words, unless it's impossible (or I'm occasionally impulsive). But then there's a word like *cantaloupe*, which isn't as meaningful to many English speakers as it is to me... The contemporary always has its vertiginous qualities, so when choosing words, it's a constant battle within myself to either push the novel or the neologistic, or stick to the presumed basics, i.e., the quasi-universal. But in soliciting basics, one runs higher risk of folly, since one has fewer places to hide, fewer linguistic sleights of hand to awe, bemuse, or tickle with. At the same time, writing in obsolescing styles always runs the very positive risk of renewing interest in them. Either way, what's great about the intractable proliferation of language and its apparent exponentiality in our current culture is that language is going to win out. I can pet my proverbial *OED* all I want, but there are (per)mutations that will have their vivid days to come, however vulgar they might seem to me on a day like today or tomorrow. My friend recently pointed out to me how the word *egregious* has really done a remarkable one-eighty.

**DAVID:** When you think about what Lexicon does—it is all about language. We invest thousands of dollars every year to better understand how language is shifting, changing. We have eighty-five linguists around the world who help to keep us “tuned.” But in the end, we are solving a client's communications opportunity. In just a few letters we have to create a name that will first get attention, then hold that attention, and then connect with new associations or ideas—particularly that notion of “this product might have something for me.” Or a name could be one that just makes people feel good! Our challenge is both the trademark clutter that is out there and the global reach that is required—two major hurdles for us. This is what separates our work from the work of a writer or artist. While we all want to communicate, we are much more constrained—which, in the end, requires more thought, more discipline, and more strategy.

*David, what makes a good name for a product?*

**DAVID:** A good name, like any work of art—classic or contemporary—surprises you. It can be easy sometimes—we can do that by being clever, or using shock, or by implementing a surprising mix of color and objects. But I think the real difference—what separates a good brand name from a not-so-good name—is that the surprise leads the reader or viewer to doing something; it changes something. With art, maybe this is about changing my perspective about an

artist, a type of art, or a place that the art is housed in. I think that a good name—which makes the reader/listener think that something new has been created—is different than just being clever or descriptive. A good name supports the story. For an artist creating a picture, he might simply be capturing a moment in time, an occasion, a historical event. With contemporary or modern art (thanks to Darren I now know the difference), in many cases the goal is to break from the past, tell a story in more passionate or vivid or even shocking ways—or simply to get the viewer to look at the world differently. For Swiffer, we wanted to support a story of easy and efficient cleaning... and to put some fun in a very mundane and unpleasant task: mopping. For Pentium, it was introducing magic and science inside a computer—making a component (the processor) more important than the box.

**DARREN:** *Art, fun, and magic* are very resonant words for me. I suppose one of the, if not *the*, main reasons I became enthralled with the notion of art, i.e., art history, was its provisions of magic. There are certainly the great technical achievements of rendering two dimensions voluminous or hewing a near-facsimile out of refractory elements like stone and wood, and this could be qualified as some variant of magic. But my primary pleasure in experiencing the thing we specifically (and at times problematically) call art is one in which the magic takes hold through the devotion to the possibility that art is supra-specific, transcendental. It can be fun, too, of course, as Bosch, Tiepolo, Goya, and Matisse can show me (even if their intentions may have been sober). Art history is full of names and magic, and magical names. I suppose what remains key in understanding the meaning behind any name is its ability to, as Vincent Gallo taught us, “span time”—that a name has a meaning over a given duration. Swiffer, for instance, retains/sustains its magic for many finite periods of time. A name means something specific to any given person at any given moment (and there are never any proofs of symmetry). For me, the word *art* is a fulcrum for magic. I think humans are very interested in magic—no imperious law book has ever been able to expunge it from us. I think what branding and art share is a fundamental understanding of the metamorphic and how some sort of (semi)permanent brand is required for that to be apprehended. Religious art needs a nominative, art-historical marker, like being made by Reims or Caravaggio, otherwise it isn't art, per se; it's just faith or other (inscrutable) phenomena. Modern art knows this all too well. Likewise, with a brand name: If this thing, Pentium, wasn't presumed to have magical powers, only the rarest consumer would care to remember its existence.

*Darren, a closing question for David?*

**DARREN:** No further questions—just great admiration for someone who can think about language in such a lucid way. I could ask David to explain himself, but he already has, even if it feels like a third language to me. ==



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, all images Darren Bader:  
 Elena Harding, Wisdom, To Have and to Hold: Object J,  
 To Have and to Hold: Object T1, To Have and to Hold: Object

H, To Have and to Hold: Object [X], To Have and to Hold:  
 Object O, Rogaine® experiment; fossil.