



"IF YOU CATCH YOURSELF SAYING
THE SAME THINGS AND WORKING
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STUFF, STOP YOURSELF. POKE A
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IT QUILTS...THAT'S IT! POKE!"



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Job title:	Creative Director
Company:	Poke
Contact:	www.pokelondon.com
Clients:	Tate Modern, Orange

Chasing Waterfall

POKE CREATIVE DIRECTOR SIMON WATERFALL HASN'T BEEN RELAXING IN THE SHALLOWS SINCE THE CLOSURE OF HIS FORMER COMPANY, DEEPEND

Simon Waterfall can put the willies up any journalist who's sent to interview him. This time, he says that he's prepared something 'a little bit different' for us. That'll surely make you nervous. After all, the erstwhile Deepend Creative Director was known by many, pre-bust, as 'the man in a skirt'. What might he have up his sleeve?

Luckily there's nothing to worry about – he's prepared a presentation. But we do get off the beaten track and, over the course of the conversation, Waterfall delves into Darwinism, confesses that he spent much of the 1980s nurturing a flat-top fade-style haircut – leading us onto the New York old-skool combo 3rd Bass – and drifting into a comparison of the relationship between some agencies and clients with that of Glenn Close and Michael Douglas in *Fatal Attraction*. And of course he discusses Poke, his latest venture, set up in Clerkenwell, with a number of industry veterans.

"We describe ourselves as an interactive creative agency," Waterfall starts. "If you can find a better word than 'agency'... creative, consultant?" he adds. "Agency has bad connotations; 'consultant' I refuse to use, but how can you describe yourself when what you're supposed to be doing is challenging yourself?"

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

In late 2001 came the news that Deepend was dead. Regardless of what you thought of it – genius, innovative, creative, arrogant, flash – in terms of web design, the company set the standard. Witness its D&AD plaudits for the Viaduct and Design Museum sites, or its work for FCUK. Its closure was a blow to an already shaken design community. Deepend's demise meant that Simon Waterfall had to ask himself: where next?

"When Deepend went down, there were options on the table to repeat it and do exactly the same with somebody else," he begins. "I went to some interviews, and it was like one of those classic 'you're over-qualified' kind of things. I'm up for a challenge. I just want to work with really bright people and to repeat that again is not going to do me or the company any favours."

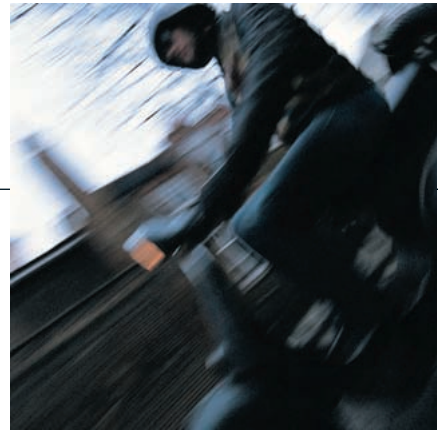
There were options to work for bigger companies, dismissed as he didn't wish to be a 'cog' for a corporate, and there was perhaps a chance to do a sort of Deepend part two, with financial backing. In the end, it was latte time.

"A group of us got together in a coffee house and asked 'why are we doing it?'" he explains. They decided: "If you catch yourself saying the same things and working the same way, giving the same examples and



Catch me if you can: Simon Waterfall's new outfit, Poke, is lithe and lean and well fitted to today's climate

Photography: Martin Burton



just bashing out stuff, stop yourself. Poke a finger at each other and call it quits. And it's at that point, Ian Tate, one of our partners said: 'Poke – that is the word'. Just poke a finger at each other and just stop it. And all of us were like: 'That's it! Poke!'

He explores the idea that to poke someone or something is one of the lowest forms of interactions possible. Additionally, the name appealed to the geeks in the crew, as it referred to old Commodore 64 parlance of poke and peep commands. And of course, there's the added irony that www.poke.co.uk is an ecommerce site selling sex toys.

CHILDREN OF THE EVOLUTION

Simon Waterfall gives away – both overtly and implicitly – that Deepend's downfall was quite a shock in many ways. But from reading and talking to veterans of the design industry, he's realised that he should put it down to experience and move on. This sort of thing has happened before, to designers, to advertising, to the motor industry and plenty of others. In fact, it's led him to consider it in terms of natural history and ecology. Think of the way animals co-exist. And think Darwin. The trick is to

find a way to survive in a hostile world full of economic and physical threat.

"The problem with us a) living in London and b) working in this industry, is that things approach us so fucking quickly," he kicks off. "It's either going to be a red bus or it's going to be a WAP thing. There are so many distractions that you can't focus on what's going to survive, what isn't going to survive. Is it that the content is really sharp or is it really going to change the world? And so it's trying to isolate that. You do that by either trying to isolate the clients you choose or the people you pick to work with, I guess that's the only way you can do it."

Deepend London grew to 120 people, and while Waterfall doesn't knock the company's creativity, he does suggest that such 'closeness' can cause you to lose your sharpness. A creature in the wild with an abundance of food and no predatory threat evolves into a giant. Think giant pandas, sharks or whales, for instance. "This was Deepend," he says. "This was 300 people in seven countries in nine offices."

Note that such giant creatures are also amongst the most endangered. Yet the same can also be true of your company if it's small, but with a single

What design is...

SIMON WATERFALL SPENT MUCH OF DECEMBER 2002 AT A DESIGN CONFERENCE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC. THERE, HE HAD HIS EYES OPENED BY THE LEGENDARY TYPOGRAPHER, MARTIN SOLOMON

On the same design lecture bill was legendary type designer Martin Solomon, a veteran in the fields of typography and advertising. Waterfall tells an anecdote of how Solomon sees design...

"One day, Solomon was walking down a busy New York street with one of his peers," says Simon Waterfall. "He said, 'I've worked out design.' So he stops in the middle of the pavement with his friend and starts talking to his friend, and he blocks traffic. Everybody's walking in the same direction. People had to go around him. He said, 'I think that worked.' Then he comes to a doorway and says, 'We'll have a chat.' They're chatting away, and some people become a little bit distracted, wondering what are they doing? He's an old man, it's not right, he shouldn't be in there. What's he doing? He said: 'I think that's worked.'

"They're walking down the street, and he stops and says 'Look up right now.' And everybody walking past also looks up. He says, 'Now point and shout' and the whole street says 'Look!'. Solomon's conclusion: 'When you design, you can obstruct and get in the way, you can distract, show them to come this way, you can either highlight stuff, or you can command.'"

Says Waterfall of the encounter: "This man, he has no idea of anything in my world, and that's my entire life!"



01-05 Online, Poke's logo takes the form of a Flash movie which changes upon interaction. "That came from us saying it's more than a brand: it's an attitude," Simon Waterfall explains



specialism. If you can't adapt, and adapt quickly, you're in trouble. Or as Waterfall so eloquently puts it: "There are WAP companies set up that don't exist now. It doesn't matter whether you're the coyote, or the fucking roadrunner."

While Poke's creative team developed the Tate Modern's Warholiser in-house, much of the company's work – including the recently won Orange account – will be developed by a collaborative network of agencies

THINKING FISH

Which brings us to the Poke model. At its core are heavyweight industry veterans: alongside Simon Waterfall are ex-Deependers Tom Hostler and Nick Farnhill, and ex-Oven man Nick Roope. Their connections enable Poke to draw on a pool of small creative agencies, or develop in-house as necessary. "I know the best games development company in London," says Waterfall, by way of example. "Player 3. They work out of their house. Is Nike or Coke going to give them the next £2 million account for two years? Really doubtful. But they'll give it to me. And if they do, I'll give it to them."

The company has a range of such symbiotic

relationships with a number of small agencies. When Poke wins a job, it decides if its own small design team is right for the work, or whether there's a specialist out there that will do it better, such as Player 3.

"There's so much more collaboration. In one way I feel like I'm defending all the small agencies and all the small groups that have set up because I feel that I can trust them and I can get them to do the work," he says. "I don't have to give them all the nasty work that I don't want. Some agencies are really good for updating and for long-term relationships, others will be good for type, others are great for marketing or interactive. And I'll just call on those. That means I don't have the overheads and I have the flexibility."

The working model – the mutualism, the collaboration – is, according to Waterfall, like a shoal of fish. A shoal is made of individuals, it's quick to react to threat and all the fish work for each other. "As a shoal you cover more ground, you hunt together, you socialise together," he says.

MISUNDERSTANDING DARWIN

Simon Waterfall has an additional point about Charles Darwin, and how the theory of evolution is applicable to Poke: "Everyone thought he said 'survival of the fittest'. He didn't. He said 'survival of the fitted'. Dinosaurs were the fittest thing. Again: gigantism, top of the tree – everything that we were – and they died. Fitted is ants. Fitted is appropriateness. Fitted is working to the climate. It doesn't matter, but that's where we're at at the moment. So if you asked what my agency was about, it becomes most fitted to purpose."

But being the fitted in today's climate won't necessarily be easy... "The market at the moment is

SIMON'S INSPIRATION

HE MAY BE INFLUENTIAL, BUT FROM WHERE DOES SIMON HIMSELF DRAW INSPIRATION?

ONE SITE:

www.bbc.co.uk – "I'm locked on that. The news is more shocking than anything else I can find out there. It's just that Java ticker tape."

MUSIC:

Ian Dury – "My dad was into Ian Dury and the Quo. Ian Dury taught me how to speak!"

ONE BOOK:

Stupid White Men by Michael Moore – "You have to read it. It's a most frightening read."

ONE FILM:

Bowling for Columbine.

ONE PERSON:

Martin Solomon – "Get him quick while he's still here!" (Solomon is getting on a bit.)

a bunny-boiling, vindictive market," he posits. "Everybody who gave us jobs back in the day jumped onto this dotcom, or whether they jumped into their creative studios, and they said the future's digital. I was always guilty of saying it – 'It's going to be fantastic, the future's digital, 30-point text'. It's a nice sound clip, but, as soon as that failed, everybody's dream was crushed. They were unrealistic dreams. As soon as that failed, all these account execs and CEOs couldn't have those three cars, their wives couldn't get their boob jobs, they've got to go back to their company cap in hand, and say 'can I have my old job back because we can't support those kinds of salaries?' So now he sits in the same place and he's the person who used to give us our jobs. Do you think he wants to work with this industry anymore?"

But this situation won't last forever. There will come a time when budgets are going to be passed, when "the CEO is not just going to read 'digital' at the top of a proposal and just go 'fuck off'." When that happens, Waterfall believes, there will certainly be richer pickings for the digital design community. It will never get back to the point it was at during the height of the boom, but there will be a healthy, flourishing, industry.

"Last year everyone clapped if you survived," he adds. "I think you might get a ripple of applause next year if you do some good work." ■

TEXT: GRAEME AYMER



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