How does media design function in an era of electronic reproduction?

Media design, today and throughout time, shapes media into a form from which an audience can extrapolate meaning. Modern day media, however, is characterized by an acute sense of degradation in terms of both media output and reception. On the production side, media designers are as a whole profuse and confused; with the advent of the computer, anyone anywhere has the ability to generate media. The audience is confused, as well. In Illuminations, Walter Benjamin discusses the issue of “reception in a state of distraction”. This phenomenon, coupled with the advent of electronic reproduction, brings about a new ecology characterized by a loss of context, loss of audience attention, and a general loss of understanding. The role of media design, then, has changed--it functions to bridge these disconnects, aspires to create new contexts, and seeks to shape new meanings to achieve and regain a sense of understanding.

Throughout human history, media design has been largely centered on the print medium and its various forms. A historical analysis of media history allows us an understanding of print as a whole. Thousands of years ago cave paintings were a primary source of media, providing imagery of food, human relationships, and narratives pertinent to that time. With the advent of the printing press, text, which had been painstakingly
reproduced by hand, became widely accessible—it was reproducible, able to spread rapidly, and was very much a much revolutionary and destabilizing invention.

Print is characterized by a sense of finish. When the work is completed, it is taken and published, put out into the world. Once circulated, the work cannot be revised, reworked or distorted. With the advent of electronic reproduction, however, much of this ecology has been altered, seemingly permanently. This change is largely, if not entirely, brought on as a result of the development of one machine, the “culture machine”: the computer. The computer in its present state offers anyone with access the ability to generate, to create, to produce culture, and to do so instantaneously. In conjunction, the development of the web imbues the user with the ability to self-publish work, and, more significantly, the ability to do so instantly. The producer can then go back and edit and alter the work, at a moment’s notice. Different versions can be produced, and work is characterized by a sense of incompleteness, of “unfinish”. Thus, media design today can be seen as driven by a sense of immediacy, and confusion, due in large part to the vast amount of media being generated, by anyone, anywhere.

The context of the work has undergone a shift, as well. The web introduces a new circumstance in which work is consumed. Anything, anywhere, in any form is taken, processed, and inserted into the web, an electronic, two-dimensional, and generally chaotic space. An understanding of context, thus, is one of the first things lost in this translation. Context, something that should provide sound and solid foundation to build understanding upon, has become ever changing and increasingly volatile, more so today than ever before.
With an understanding of the changing nature of media as a result of electronic reproduction, one can readily spot the importance of the finished, completed, final work. Print, despite its antediluvian roots, has by no means become obsolete. There is a conclusive sense of finality associated with print, making it far removed from the immediacy of the computing and the web. Print, also, must be taken in the context of print itself, and is not affected by the context issues faced by electronic reproduction. Print, however, is not to remain unaffected by the dominating nature of the pervasive digital world, the effect of which is vast. Thus, this new and evolving ecology invokes a sense of invitation. It presents both a challenge and a struggle; and is one that media designers must take head on in bridging today’s electronic world with its printed counterpart.