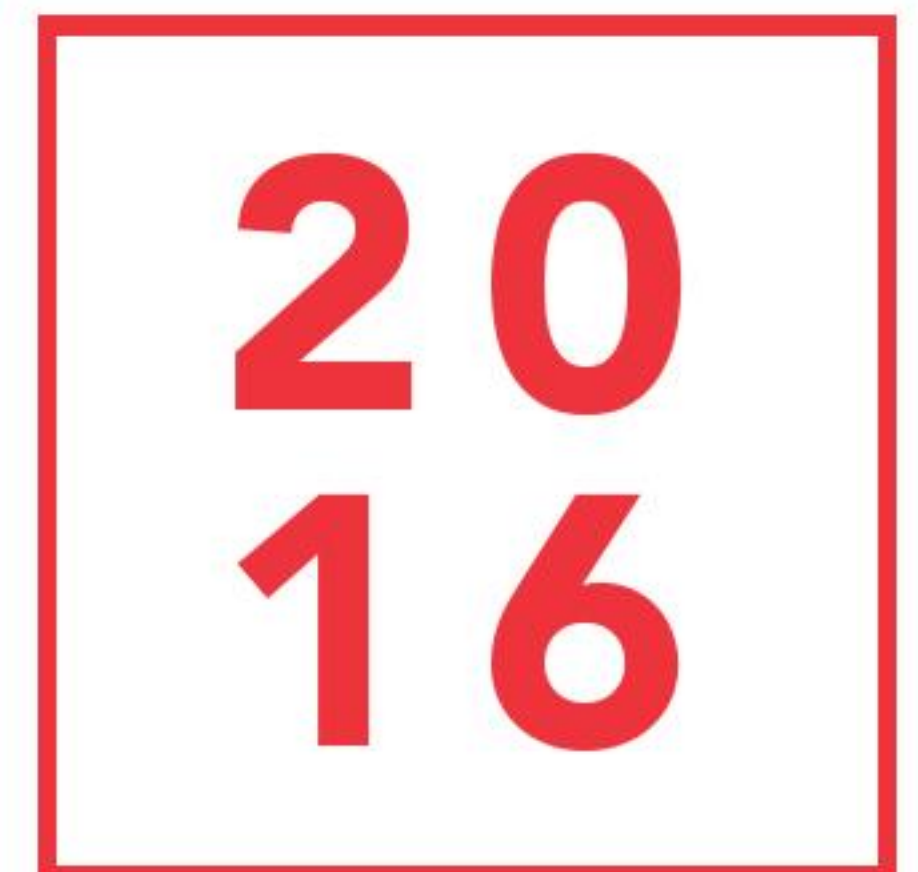
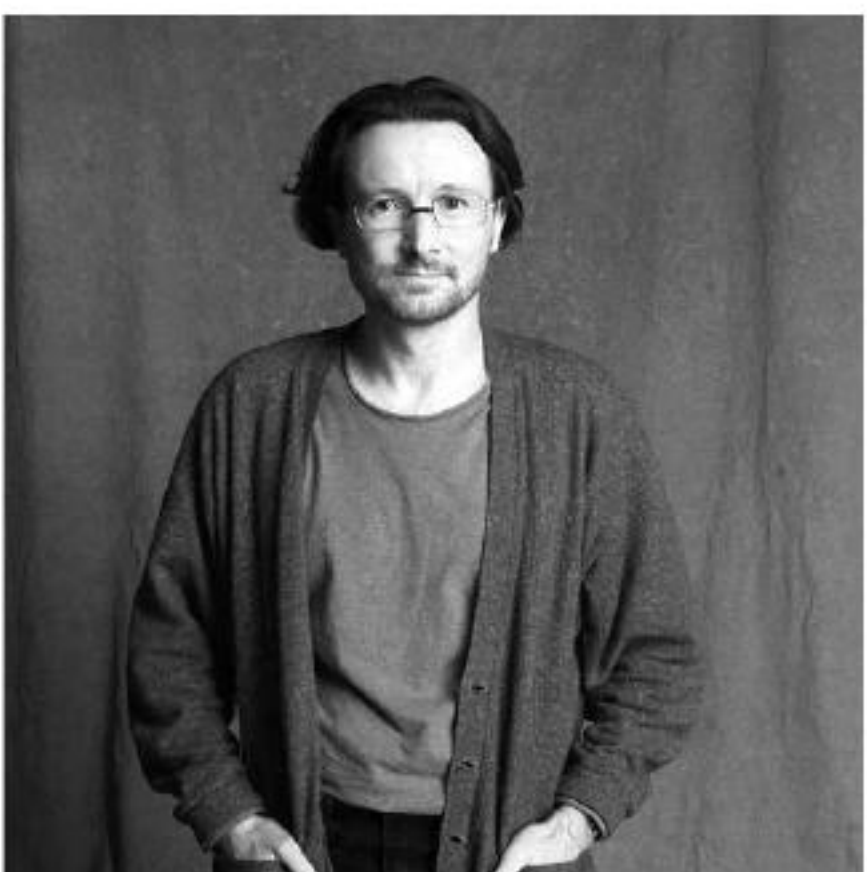




>> **WAR OF THE WORDS**
DESIGN TALKS
 DESIGN | SOCIETY | CULTURE
Edited by Rick Poyner



War of the Words | Design Talks

Design, Society, Culture

Edited by Rick Poynor

Contributors: Peter Bilak, Irma Boom, Sara de Bondt, April Greiman, Steven Heller, Jessica Hische, Jeff Keedy, Erik Kessels, Ellen Lupton, Katherine McCoy, Paula Scher, Marlene Schufferth, Typejockeys, Gerard Unger, Rudy VanderLans, Massimo Vignelli, Lorraine Wild.

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**“...only through *CHANGE*
can we continue to push
ahead in knowledge and
expertise, theory and
expression, continually
building our collective
knowledge of the process
of *COMMUNICATION*.”**

Steven Heller

“From the beginning, Modernism had the urgency of Utopianism: to make a world better by design. Today we know better. It takes more than design to *CHANGE* things.”

A black and white portrait of Massimo Vignelli, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark, crew-neck sweater over a white collared shirt. His hands are visible at the bottom of the frame, holding a pen. The background is a dark, textured wall with faint vertical lines.

Massimo Vignelli

>>Massimo Vignelli

BIOGRAPHY

One of the few designers to leave a lasting legacy, Vignelli is a giant of modern graphic design who has always adhered to his Modernist principles, you could credit him with the ubiquitous use of Helvetica, it was he who designed the New York Subway map and signage system using the Swiss typeface. It is just one example of how designer stayed true to his principles of clarity of purpose and elegance.

Born in 1931 in Milan, Vignelli grew up in a time when the city was a thriving hub of Modernism and in nowhere was the ferment of socially progressive philosophy more influential than in the discipline of architecture. As a teenager Vignelli became enthralled by all kinds of design but he was drawn to the architects of Milan, he described his youth as a sort of 'architects groupie'. In them he found kindred spirits and they were to have a strong influence on him, not only when he went on to study architecture at the Politecnico di Milano and later in Venice, but throughout his career as a graphic designer too. The underlying 'architecture' of geometric forms is apparent in all his work.

Vignelli move to New York to found the US office of a new design company Unimark International, that quickly went on to become one of the biggest design firms in the world. Vignelli was instrumental in designing the company's most iconic work including the American Airlines corporate identity, the signage of the New York City Subway system and Bloomingdale's and IBM among others.

Vignelli resigned from Unimark International in 1971 claiming that the direction he supported had become diluted as the company courted advertising more than pure design. The Italian then founded Vignelli Associates together with his wife Lella. Always true to his principles Vignelli is one of a few surviving 20th century design icons that hails directly from postwar Europe and the explosion of ideas and the formation of a design philosophy that believed design could change the world. It was a principled and ethical approach that elevated his work beyond the usual client-designer relationship, you can see his work is instilled with an inherent strength, clarity of purpose and a timeless elegance. Vignelli always emphasised the responsibility of a designer to society.

His design manifesto is laid out in his book *Vignelli: From A to Z*, which contains a series of essays describing the principles and concepts behind all good design”. It is alphabetically organized by topic, roughly approximating a similar course he taught at the Harvard School of Design and Architecture.

In 2007 he collaborated on the film ‘Helvetica’ a feature-length documentary about the typeface of the same name. In 2009 he published *The Vignelli Canon*’ as a free-to-download e-book, which is still available. In the introduction Vignelli writes,

“I thought that it might be useful to pass some of my professional knowledge around, with the hope of improving [young designers] design skills. Creativity needs the support of knowledge to be able to perform at its best.”

Ever socially aware, Vignelli was also passionate about design education and there must be a wealth of students who were lucky enough to have had him as a lecturer, educator or mentor of some kind. Now in the closing chapter of his life, his son Luca wants for those people who have been influenced or inspired by his work to write to him. Creative Review quotes Pentagram partner Michael Bierut, “Luca said that Massimo would be thrilled to get notes of good wishes from people whom he’s touched or influenced—whether personally or remotely—over the years. Luca has visions of huge mailbags full of letters. I know that one of Massimo’s biggest fantasies has been to attend his own funeral. This will be the next best thing. Pass the word.”

>> Massimo Vignelli

LONG LIVE MODERNISM!

I was raised to believe that an architect should be able to design everything from a spoon to a city. At the root this belief is a commitment to improve the design of everything that can be made—to make it better. To make it better not only from a functional or mechanical point of view, but to design it to reflect cultural and ethical values, ethical integrity. Integrity of purpose, materials and of the manufacturing process.

Integrity of purpose implies a severe analysis of what the problem is: its meaning, what the possibilities for a range of solutions are: solutions that have to be sifted through to determine the most appropriate for the specific problem—not just alternatives I may like, but one that answers all the of the questions posed by the problem. The solutions to a problem are in the problem itself. To solve all the questions posed by the problem, however, is not enough. The solutions should reflect the approach taken, and by virtue of its configuration, stimulate cultural reactions in the viewer, rather than emotional titillations. In this process, nothing is taken for granted, no dogmas are accepted, no preconceived ideas are assumed or adopted without questioning them in the context of the project.

I was raised to believe that, as a designer, I have the responsibility to improve the world around us, to make it a better place to live, to fight and oppose trivia, kitsch and

**“Modernism was
never a **style**, but
an **attitude**. ”**



**LONG LIVE
MODERNISM**

"At the root this belief is a commitment to improve the design of everything that can be made—to make it better. To make it better not only from a functional or mechanical point of view, but to design it to reflect cultural and ethical values, ethical integrity. Integrity of purpose, materials and of the manufacturing process."

all norms of subculture that are visually polluting our world. The ethics of Modernism or I should say the ideology of Modernism, was an ideology of the fight, the ongoing battle to combat all the wrongs developed by industrialization during the last century. Modernism was and still is the search for the truth, the search for integrity, the search for cultural stimulation and enrichment of the mind. Modernism was never a style, but an attitude. This is often misunderstood by those designers who dwell on revivals of the form rather than on the content of Modernism. From the beginning, Modernism had the urgency of Utopianism: to make a world better by design.

Today we know better. It takes more than design to change things. But the cultural thrust of the Modernist belief is still valid, because we still have too much trash around us, not only material trash but intellectual trash as well. In that respect, I value, endorse and promote the continued relevance of the Modern movement as the cultural mainstream of our century.

The cultural events of the 20 years have expanded and deepened the issues and values promoted by the modern movement. The revision of many of the Modernist issues has enriched our perception and contributed to improving the quality of work. The increased number of architects and designers with good training has a positive effect on our society and our environment. Much still has to be done to convince industry and government that design is an integral part of the production process and not a last-minute embellishment.

The cultural energy of the Modern movement is still burning, fueling intellects against shallow trends, transitory values, superficial titillations brought forward by the media, whose very existence depends on ephemera. Many of the current modes are created, supported and discarded by the very media that generates that change and documents it to survive. It is a vicious circle. It has always been, only now it is bigger than ever.

**“It takes more
than design to
change things.”**

As seen in a broad historical perspective, Modernism's ascetic, Spartan look still has a towering position of strength and dignity. Modernism's inherent notion of timeless values as opposed to transient values still greatly appeals to my intellectual being.

The best architects in the world today are all Modernists at the core, and so are the best designers. The followers of the Post-Modernist fad are gone, reduced to caricatures of the recent past. Post-Modernism should be regarded at best as a critical evaluation of the issues of Modernism. In that perspective, it has been extremely helpful to correct, expand and improve the issues Modernism. None of us would be the same without it. However, the lack of a profound ideology eventually brought Post-Modernism to its terminal stage. In the cultural confusion produced by pluralism and its eclectic manifestations, Modernism finds its *raison d'être* in its commitment to the original issues of its ideology and its energy to change the world into a better place in which to live.

>> Long live the Modern movement!

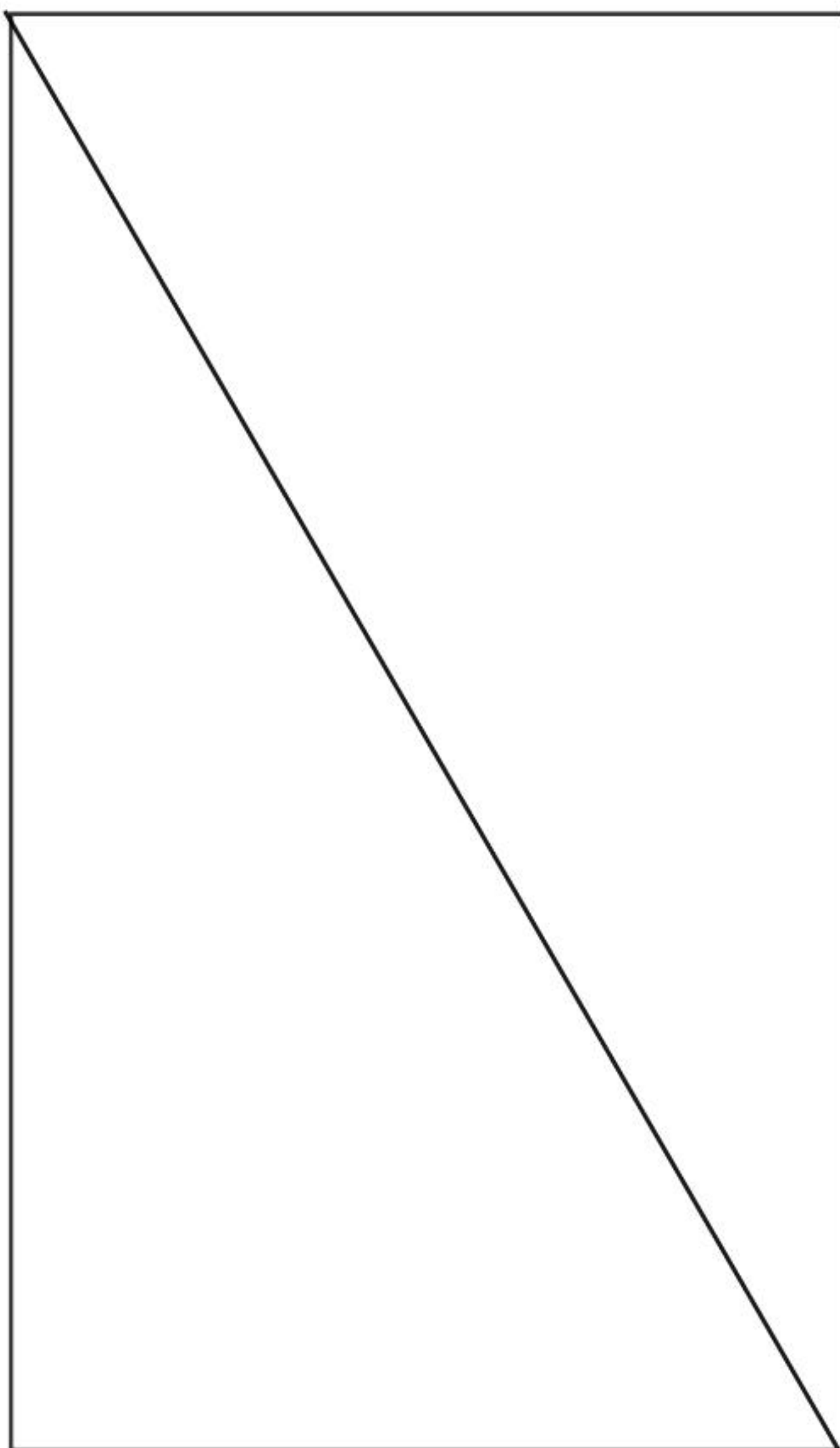
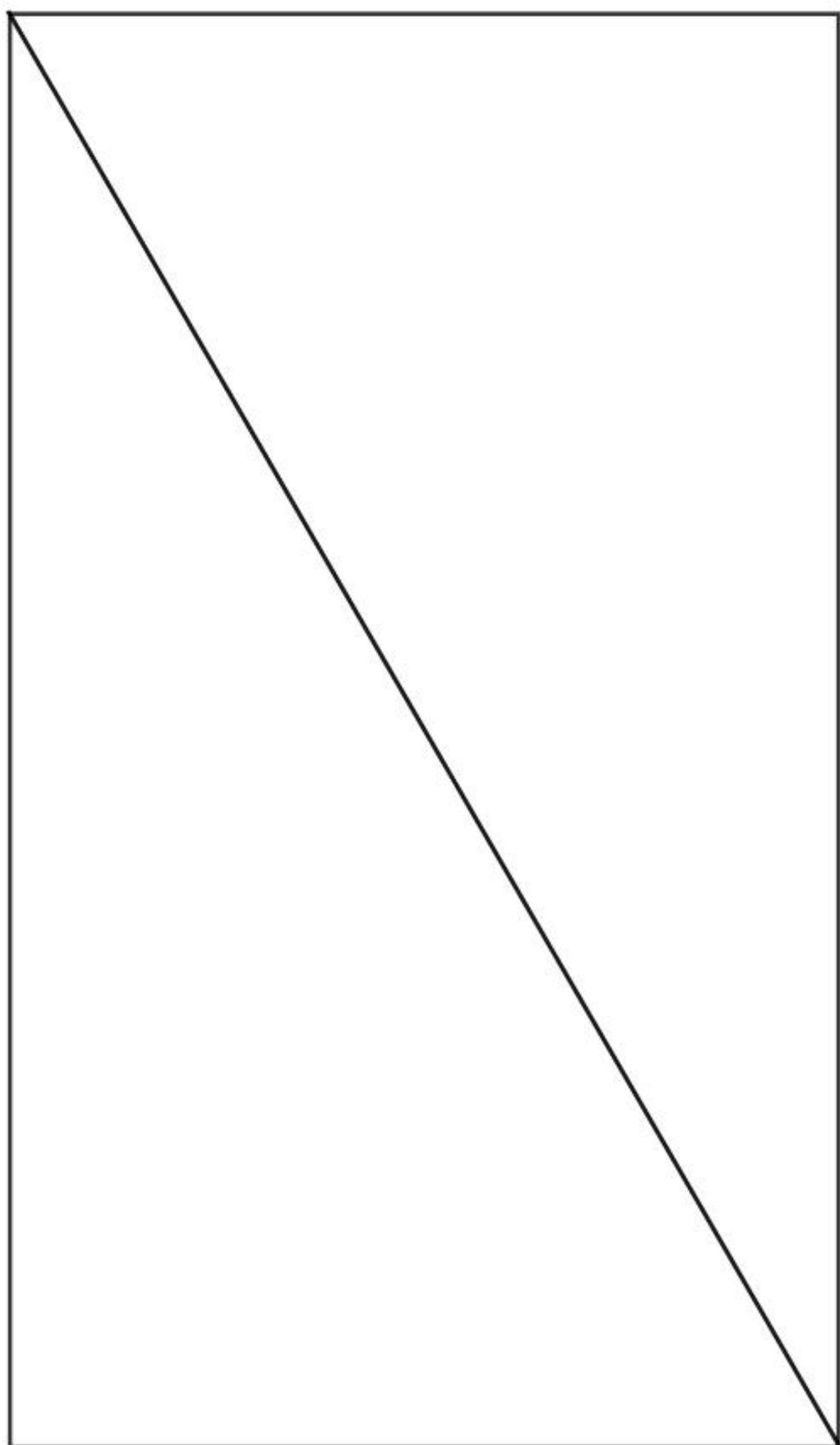
“To what degree are each of us *FUTURISTS*? To what degree are each of us hopelessly mired in the day-to-day?”



Lorraine Wild

>> Lorraine Wild

BIOGRAPHY



>> Lorraine Wild

ON OVERCOMING MODERNISM

What were you doing the day the newspapers featured that picture of the flag coming down all over what was the Soviet Union? I was on the phone going over type changes with an editor on the other side of the continent, for a book that was being printed on the other side of the globe. Had I done this project justice? Will someone in the future be able to look at this work and see all the effort and desire that went into it? Who can possibly answer these questions, as enmeshed as we are in the speed of communication, the technology, the information overload, the conflicting ethics and values of our present condition.

To what degree are each of us futurists? To what degree are each of us hopelessly mired in the day-to-day?

We know, intuitively, that our personal struggle with idealism and pragmatism is affected by the values we bring to our work and the context in which we create it. The uncertainty of values in contemporary graphic design practice and the discourse that surrounds it now (and probably will through the 90s), has led to a notion that there has been a loss of consensus as to what constitutes 'good' design. The shifting nature and context of our activity as graphic designers is now often described in terms of loss. What we have definitely lost is the ability to lean on the principles of Modernism to regain that consensus. This presents a conceptual challenge to graphic designers, because the ideals of Modernism, especially those having to do with universality,

objectivity, timelessness, ‘problem-solving’ and social values, have been the wobbly base upon which the professional identity of the graphic design community has traditionally rested.

A sense of confusion and rancour has crept into discussions about contemporary graphic design practice, questioning the meaning of graphic design that does not conform to the rules that embody the myths of Modernism. These discussions often split along generational lines, with an old guard (those who believe in the Modernist credo, even if they do not actually practice it) often demanding an allegiance to Modernist ideals and forms. The frequent reference to a unified Modernist past and its subsequent dissolution is important because those terms may well end up delineating how the new guard will be able to think through this confusing present to find the future of design.

>> Age Of Discontent

In the world of graphic design there is still abundant sentiment that nothing is inherently wrong with contemporary design that a little economic upturn wouldn't cure; and if only our clients would cooperate, we designers could return to the production of the same kinds of ‘problem solving we have been engaged in since 1950’. The trouble with that attitude is that the entire backdrop against which we solve our problems has radically shifted, and a lot of designers either haven't noticed the change, or they harbour fantasies of being able to fend it off.

In recent years universality has collapsed into multi-culturalism, focus groups, zip-code clusters, etc.; objectivity has collapsed into subjectivity, at the same time as the author and the subject, or both, have been declared dead in some quarters; and the optimistic march of progress has been canceled. The linear is harder to detect and the simultaneous has become habitual.

**“The entire backdrop
against which we
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has radically shifted.”**

All of these conditions are symptoms of what is called post-Modernity. But this term has not been very appealing to graphic designers; the ‘post’ part of it seems to imply exhaustion, decline or missed opportunities. There is also the lingering confusion of post-Modernism with a conservative, historically allusive style that characterised much architecture and graphic design of the 1980s. Some still confuse nostalgia with the sum total of post-Modernism, because a few earlier interpretations of post-Modern theory (such as Charles Jencks’ use of semiotics to elevate the stylistically eclectic work of Robert A.M.Stern) were used to support the growing conservatism of the 1980s.

Another characteristic of post-Modernity is the intellectual acknowledgment of the existence of many modernisms—a range of strategies, from the merely aesthetic to the attainment of social reform (or complete revolution). Some Modernists, such as Heartfield, were extremely temporal, and posed direct challenges to the political status quo; other Modernist, such as Mies van der Rohe, searched for an aesthetic absolute that would transcend the particulars of context and politics. Some other Modernists, such as El Lissitzky or van Doesburg, did both. But recent attempts by graphic designers to declare the definition of Modernism as a successful search for either aesthetic absolutes or social reform are symptomatic of the alienation of those who want to avoid the complexity of both the past and the present.

The influence of Modernism on American graphic designers may have originated in the work of the European Futurists or the Constructivists or the designers of the Bauhaus, but the social utopianism of the aesthetic that accompanied early Modernism never reached the United States. Indulging in sloppy thinking, fake history and romance, we attribute a fantasy of ethical accomplishment to Modernism as a reaction against the uncomfortable unknowns of post-Modernism. Some design fields have recognised this, but not graphic design. ‘Design is communication’. ‘Design is problem solving’. One hears these clichés repeated endlessly, the mantra of the graphic designers stuck in the denial and anger phases of mourning for a time

**“Design is
communication.”**

**“Design is
problem solving.”**

when we thought that the values by which we lived and defined ourselves made sense in the larger world.

Despite those who would attribute functionalism solely to Modernism, functionalism can be seen as inherent in the definition of design itself; a series of actions taken to produce a desired effect. It may be time to detach the notion of function from the failed ideology of Modernism in order that function might regain its simplicity and clarity as a design value. Weren't pre-Modernists such as Gutenberg or Diderot or Benjamin Franklin rational functionalists? Recent design historians have clarified that under Modernism, function (or simply the imagery of function) was more often dedicated to the production or distribution of an artefact than to function dedicated to the object itself. Yet graphic designers persist in talking about function as our invention, a gift we generously grant to our audiences.

Another aspect of Modernism some would like to retain (even if it is deeply misunderstood or misinterpreted by those yearning for the old days) is a defined visual style. The aesthetic security of the International Style is now missed by many of those who functioned well within it. They are attempting to revive Modernist conviction now that so many other aspects of design practice affecting form have been destabilised.

First and perhaps foremost, the complete rethinking of the production of printed materials wrought by digital technology has thrown graphic design's identity as Modern into question. The computer has affected all design practices; CAD programs are now commonly used in architecture and industrial design. The professional identity of graphic design developed at a time when the conceptual processes of layout and form were separated from the setting of type and print production, but current technology reunites those activities, and what should be merely convenient or even liberating turns out to be traumatic.

**“What should be
merely convenient or
even liberating turns
out to be traumatic.”**

>> Understanding Modernism's Mystique

It is now possible for anyone with a word processing program and a layout program to become a graphic designer. The mystery of making is gone, and while optimists predict that this will increase the public interest in graphic design, pessimists observe that the prosaic projects that used to occupy designers are now gone for good precisely when more graduates are pouring into the graphic design field than ever. The technology has challenged many of the precepts of graphic design education, which is based on Modernist interpretation of form and technique, and educators must struggle to rethink curricula because of it. Technology has irrevocably changed the way younger designers enter the field, the way projects are managed and offices are run and ultimately, the way design is consumed.

The computer has also had a greater effect on the quality of the products of graphic design than on the products of the other design fields; for example, computer-aided rendering of buildings look 'different' than hand drawing, but building in their form remain largely unaffected. But the evolving technology of electronic typesetting has taken its toll on the quality of typesetting, and a set of standards inherited from metal typesetting (which were already altered significantly during the change to 'cold' type) have been shaken.

But in the midst of this perceived decline, new developments in digital typography have brought about an explosion of font design, and the energy coming from small font publishers and distributors has enlivened typographic design. Those who are not terrified by the new typographic technologies are using them in all sorts of ways, as an opportunity to reinvent type aesthetics in response to the technology itself. Unfamiliar forms of work produced in response to major changes in technology are often classified as 'ugly' because of their formal strangeness, and interpreted as evidence of aesthetic malfeasance, the obliteration of standards and practices of craft. It is a functional Modernist impulse to submit aesthetics to the demands of the machine, but in this case the subject of the technology is dematerialised, infinitely

THE UNCERTAINTY OF VALUES IN CONTEMPORARY GRAPHIC DESIGN PRACTICE AND THE DISCOURSE THAT SURROUNDS IT NOW AND PROBABLY WILL THROUGH THE 90'S LEAD TO A NOTION THAT THERE HAS BEEN A LOSS OF CONSENSUS AS TO WHAT CONSTITUTES GOOD DESIGN.

1

THE SHIFTING NATURE AND CONTEXT OF OUR ACTIVITY AS GRAPHIC DESIGNERS IS NOW OFTEN DESCRIBED IN TERMS OF LOSS.

2

THE LINEAR IS HARDER TO DETECT

IN RECENT YEARS UNIVERSALITY HAS COLLAPSED INTO MULTI CULTURALISM. FOCUS GROUPS, ZIP CODE CLUSTERS, ETC. OBJECTIVITY HAS COLLAPSED INTO SUBJECTIVITY. AT THE SAME TIME AS THE AUTHOR AND THE SUBJECT, OR BOTH, HAVE BEEN DECLARED DEAD IN SOME QUARTERS AND THE OPTIMISTIC MARCH OF PROGRESS HAS BEEN CANCELED.

THE SIMULTANEOUS HAS BECOME HABITUAL. THE SIMULTANEOUS HAS BECOME HABITUAL. THE SIMULTANEOUS HAS BECOME HABITUAL.

3

3

3



ON OVERCOMING MODERNISM

"In recent years universality has collapsed into multi-culturalism, focus groups, zip-code clusters, etc.; objectivity has collapsed into subjectivity, at the same time as the author and the subject, or both, have been declared dead in some quarters; and the optimistic march of progress has been canceled. The linear is harder to detect and the simultaneous has become habitual."

variable; the resulting aesthetic mirrors those same qualities, and the Modernists are confused!

>> **Weird Science**

There are a few members of the old guard who are knowledgeable enough about typographic history to recognise our present condition as similar to other moments of great creativity brought on by technological revolution. Yet, it is neither possible to valorise all of the products of our current typographic mania, nor is it desirable, since the designers working in this field are not seeking the timeless or classic by any stretch of the imagination. But the refusal by so many of our Modernist diehards to see this historical moment is ironic in light of the fact that the technology of computers has brought us closer to one of the great old fantasies of machine-driven design, the ‘electro-library’ of El Lissitzky, the extension of the Modernist technological reverie taken to its logical post-Modern conclusion.

Berkeley architecture professor Mark Treib has pointed out that the essential difference in the professional status and relative levels of security between architects and graphic designers can be traced to the existence of regulated contracts in architecture and the contrasting free-for-all of graphic design practice. Architects, notes Treib, are contractually bound to be the representative of their clients in relation to the contractor or builder. Treib suggests that the lack of craft attached to function in graphic design (printing being simpler than construction) has always contributed to a more tenuous relationship between graphic designers and their clients. If Treib is right, that tenuousness would have to be on the verge of obliteration since the production-related reasons for any client to hire a graphic design consultant are decreasing steadily. Obviously, fear of unemployment is driving graphic designers crazy.

**“Obviously, fear
of unemployment
is driving graphic
designers crazy.”**

During the '80s we had to endure such inanities as Michael Peters' declaration that only big offices could offer legitimate design services; small offices were primitive and doomed to fall. At the same time, design educators suffered a barrage of criticism for not preparing students as entry-level employees for big offices. Criticism of the commercial abuse of design is always problematic: if it comes from Stuart Ewen, it's rejected because he's an academic; if it comes from Neville Brody, it doesn't count because he's English; if it comes from Tibor Kalman, it's invalid because he is somehow tainted by his own commercial practice; if it comes from Dan Friedman, well 'doesn't he design furniture now?'; if it comes from someone like me, it is written off because my practice is not commercial enough.

Our current recession grants us all a moment to reconsider our positions in light of history and the inexorable present. Speaking for myself, trained in vestigially Modern ways but practicing during this period of great flux, exposure to the current level of quandary and challenge in the design office and the classroom is, I believe, enough to drive anyone back into pipe dreams of old Dessau. To accept that design is complicit in our real environment is to reject the myth of the designer as disinterested genius or moralist super-hero. As difficult as it is, we must keep questioning preconceived notions of what good design is. This does not mean that we must reject what history we have, or that we must decline the pleasures of formal innovation. It does mean that we must become honest about the work we choose to do, the forms that we give to it, the circumstances under which we produce and how our work actually functions in the world.

The inability to describe a set of universal formal guidelines for 'good' graphic design should not be seen as a handicap (even if it often feels like one). This condition offers us a 'window of opportunity' in which we may be able to address some of those other issues that so many educators and practitioners pay lip service to but are still so easy

"As difficult as it is, we must keep questioning preconceived notions of what good design is."

to ignore as long as we can be distracted by the more immediate gratification of form. This is not to denigrate form. If the audience has changed and the production has changed and the messages might change, wouldn't common sense (dare we call it functionalism?) suggest that aesthetics are a tough call. As the educator Jacques Girard states about critiquing work in the classroom these days, 'Someone who refers to a design as beautiful, ugly, good or bad is not talking as much about the object as about himself'. Appropriateness cannot be held up as a value in and of itself without looking closely at the situations to which we pledge our obedience. And, under the current terms of our existence, there may only be particularly appropriate formal solutions instead of general ones.

For a few years now some designers have been using the metaphors of language to describe the workings of design. Actually this is not new, as some members of the old guard are always quick to point out. Yes, they taught semiotics at Ulm. But their understanding of semiotics was still affected by late Modernist design theory that trained them to look for universal signs; the interpretation of semiotic theory is significantly different now. Another linguistic theory that may lead to the development of new paradigms for graphic design is the use of rhetorical concepts as a framework for design analysis. Again, this is not a new idea in design studies, but timing is everything. In the past, academic problems in graphic design studies that used rhetoric as an analytical tool were often contradicted by the combination of expressive linguistic analysis with 'objective' Modernist typography. You didn't know what you were looking at. The revival of interest in rhetoric now comes at a time when we may be less concerned by the split between expression and objectivity.

Reception theory, another post-Modern construct, is a revision of Modernist notions of function, use and meaning. The prospect of graphic designers starting to think about meaning as a result of situations of use is a challenging one. Graphic designers have not had to live with marketing the way industrial have, and market testing or legibility testing are often seen as pernicious activities that only reinforce the obvious.

So how do you build alternative understandings of use or performance in graphic design? I doubt that the practice will ever be quantifiable in any way, but I'm sure that any understanding that evolves will be particular and local.

The pressure on the young designer today is not to become a star, a master or mistress of the universal, but to become a participant in communication process, a co-conspirator, a co-author, maybe even an author/designer. This is why the development of the personal voice or agenda has emerged as an important new aspect in the training of young designers today. Their educational experiences should equip them with this expanded, much more accountable role that will be demanded of them if they are to retain any validity in a new context.

But what about the old folks, the old guard, or those of us who straddle the two guards? We are the ones who, in the last 15 years, have complained that graphic design had an inadequate body of theory and history to guide its own development; but ironically, as more theoretical and historically informed ways of thinking about graphic design have evolved, our heroic Modernist dreams have gone to hell in a hand basket. We're distressed, we're unhappy, we're in pain! What should we do?

>> Calling Dr. Freud

In her influential book, 'The Drama of the Gifted Child', psychoanalyst Alice Miller posits that children who are consistently forced to subjugate their desires to the demand and wills of their parents will experience a kind of stunting of their own personalities, leading to depression (based on never really being able to feel securely loved) or what Miller calls 'grandiosity,' the tendency to repeat behaviour that gains approval (in lieu of love) over and over, no matter how emotionally unfulfilling. The grandiose are literally trapped in their own success, and miserable because of it.

When I encountered Miller's thesis, I thought that I had stumbled upon a good psycho-analytic paradigm to explain the inability of graphic designers, particularly American

ones, to withstand the vicissitudes of history and theory in our collective unconscious. Our old guard fought battles for us dedicated to the ideology of Modernism; the audience, in the role of parents, didn't buy the story (for their own neurotic reasons) but they rewarded many designers by using them up, ignoring their ideals, paying them for their style very, very well...but still never granting those designers the same level of status and glorification reserved for artist (even much more mediocre ones). Thus in our old guard we frequently encounter bitterness despite lifetimes of success, a lack of generosity towards new work or new designers, defensiveness, the desire for control, and worst of all, the attempt to dictate the intellectually pathetic idea of a singular history. Consider the recent spectacle of several of the most highly regarded names in graphic design excoriating the Walker Arts Centre for daring to assemble an exhibition titled 'A History of Graphic Design' (note: not 'The History'), which, they thought, failed to pay suitable homage to their accomplishments.

When graphic designers complain that their parents don't understand what they do, it used to sound like an innocent little joke, repeated to reinforce group identity; now it takes on a sinister tone, like a symptom of disease, grounds for professional counselling.

>> Remember, admitting that there is a **problem is the first step to the road to **recovery**.**

**"...Can new design - like
new science - discover
phenomena that already
exist in the fabric of
typographic possibility?
If so, who owns
DISCOVERY?"**

A black and white portrait of Ellen Lupton, a woman with shoulder-length wavy hair, wearing glasses and a necklace. She is smiling and looking directly at the camera. A red rectangular border is drawn around the lower portion of her face and neck.

Ellen Lupton

>> Ellen Lupton

BIOGRAPHY

Ellen Lupton is a writer, curator, and graphic designer. She is director of the Graphic Design MFA program at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore, where she also serves as director of the Center for Design Thinking.

As curator of contemporary design at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum since 1992, she has produced numerous exhibitions and books, including *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office* (1993), *Mixing Messages: Graphic Design and Contemporary Culture* (1996), *Letters from the Avant-Garde* (1996), and *Skin: Surface, Substance + Design* (2002).

Her book *Thinking with Type* (2004) is used by students, designers, and educators worldwide. *D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself* (2006), co-authored with her graduate students at MICA, explains design processes to a general audience. *D.I.Y. Kids* (2007), co-authored with Julia Lupton, is a design book for children illustrated with kids' art. The Lupton twins' latest book is *Design Your Life: The Pleasures and Perils of Everyday Things* (St Martin's Griffin, 2009).

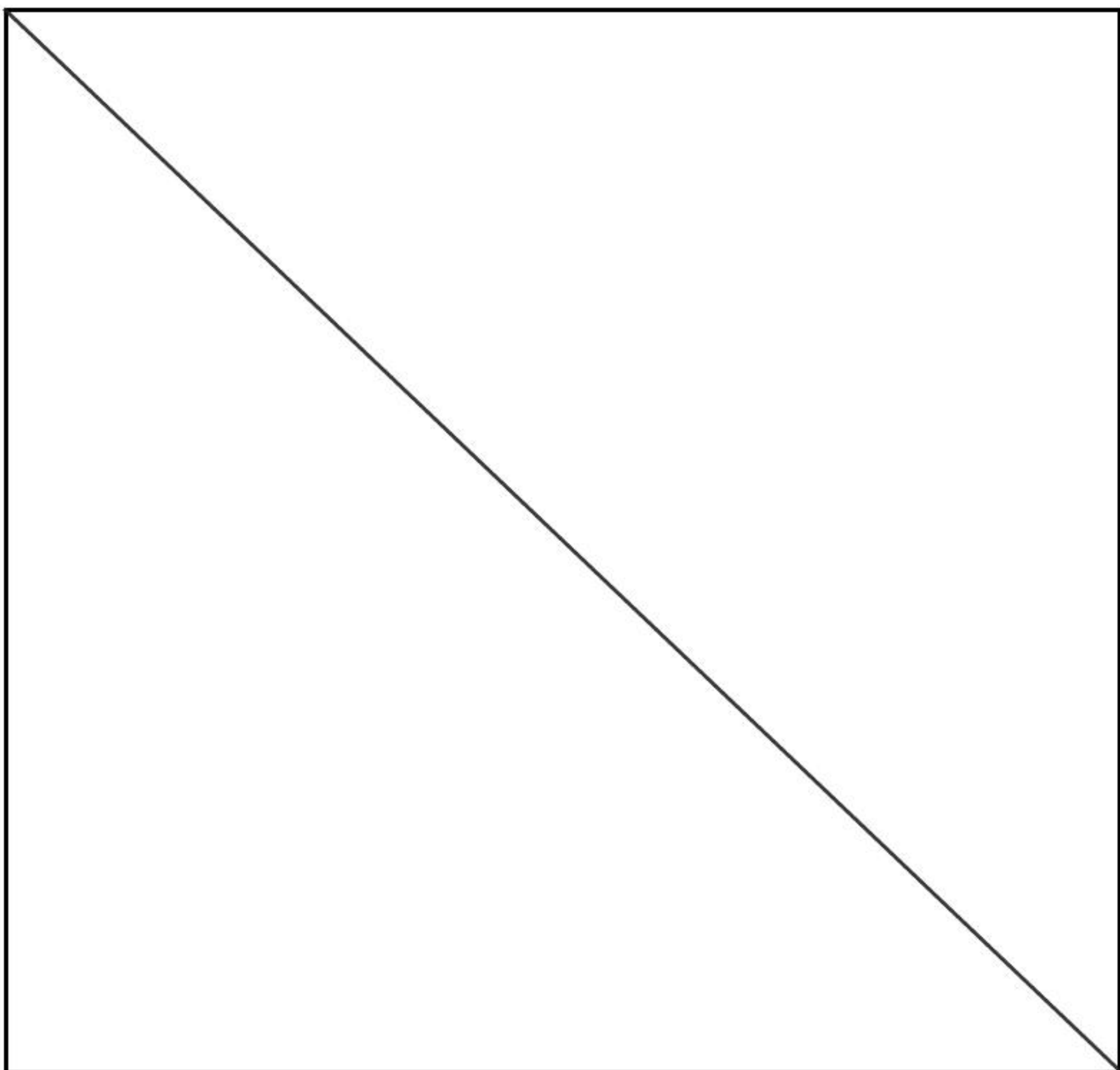
Other books include *Graphic Design: The New Basics* (with Jennifer Cole Phillips, 2008) and *Indie Publishing: How to Design and Produce Your Own Book* (2008). She is the co-author with Abbott Miller of several books, including *The Bathroom, the Kitchen, and the Aesthetics of Waste* (1992), *Design Writing Research* (1996), and *Swarm* (2006).

Lupton is a 2007 recipient of the AIGA Gold Medal, one of the highest honors given to a graphic designer or design educator in the U.S.

Ellen Lupton has contributed to various publications, including *Print*, *Eye*, *I.D.*, and *Metropolis*. She has published essays and illustrations in *The New York Times*. Other exhibitions she has curated and co-curated include the *National Design Triennial series* (2000, 2003, 2006, 2010), *Feeding Desire: Design and the Tools of the Table, 1500–2005* (2006), *Solos: New Design from Israel* (2006), and *Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age* (1999), all at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.

>> Ellen Lupton

VISION IS A PROCESS



**“Don’t imitate the present.
Invent the *FUTURE*.”**



Jeff Keady

>> Jeff Keedy

GRAPHIC DESIGN IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

Any discussion of postmodernism must be preceded by at least a provisional definition of modernism. First there is modernism with a capital ‘M,’ which designates a style and ideology and that is not restricted to a specific historical moment or geographical location. Modernist designers from the Bauhaus in Germany, the De Style in Holland, and Constructivism in Russia, share essentially the same Modernist ideology as designers like Paul Rand, Massimo Vignelli, and Eric Spiekermann. Its primary tenet is that the articulation of form should always be derived from the programmatic dictates of the object being designed. In short, form follows function.

Modernism was for the most part formed in art schools, where the pedagogical strategies were developed that continue to this day in design schools. It is a formalist, rationalist, visual language that can be applied to a wide range of circumstances. All kinds of claims can and have been made in an effort to keep Modernism eternally relevant and new. The contradiction of being constant, yet always new, has great appeal for graphic designers, whose work is so ephemeral.

Then there is the modern, with a small ‘m.’ It is often confused with Modernism with a big M, but being a modern designer simply means being dedicated to working in a way that is contemporary and innovative, regardless of what your particular stylistic or ideological bias may be. Modern designers who were not necessarily Modernist

**“First there is
modernism with a
capital M.”**

would include designers like Milton Glaser, Charles and Ray Eames, and Tadanori Yokoo.

With all the confusion in these early days of formulating theoretical paradigms, it is understandable why some designers have given up trying to connect their practice to contemporary theory. By the time postmodernism came along, many designers were quite happy to dismiss it as a trendy fad or irrelevant rambling, and be done with it. That is exactly why I think it is important to examine some of the connections between the postmodern condition and graphic design.

Although there has always been some confusion about what postmodernism is, the most obvious feature is that it is a reaction (not rejection), to the established forms of high Modernism. The second most prominent feature of postmodernism is the erasing of the boundaries between high culture and pop culture. But probably the most contested feature is that of ‘theoretical discourse,’ where theory was no longer confined to philosophy, but incorporated history, social theory, political science, and many other areas of study, including design theory. Postmodernism is not a description of a style; it is the term for the era of late capitalism starting after the 1940s and realised in the 1960s with neo-colonialism, the green revolution, computerisation and electronic information.

Postmodernism didn’t have much impact on graphic design until the middle of the 1980’s. Initially, many designers thought it was just undisciplined self-indulgence. A hodgepodge of styles, with no unifying ideals or formal vocabularies, dreamed up by students in the new graduate programs. But in fact it was a new way of thinking about design, one that instigated a new way of designing. Designers began to realise that as mediators of culture, they could no longer hide behind the ‘problems’ they were ‘solving.’ One could describe this shift as a younger generation of designers

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simply indulging their egos and refusing to be transparent (like a crystal goblet). Or you could say they were acknowledging their unique position in the culture, one that could have any number of political or ideological agendas.

The vernacular, high and low culture, pop culture, nostalgia, parody, irony, pastiche, deconstruction, and the anti-aesthetic represent some of the ideas that have come out of the 80s and informed design practice and theory of the 90s. After the 80s designers may still choose to be anonymous, but they will never again be considered invisible. We are part of the message in the media. In the postmodern era we are not just mediators of information, but individuals who think creatively and visually about our culture.

Although Jan Tschichold has been celebrated as an early proponent of modernist asymmetric typography, designers have increasingly come to respect his earlier calligraphic and latter classical work. Tschichold's body of work is an important precedent for today's postmodern typography in that it represents diversity in ideology and style. It was one that ranged from craft-based calligraphy and machine-age modernism to neoclassicism.

Another important precursor to postmodernism was W. A. Dwiggins, a designer who translated traditional values and aesthetics into a modern sensibility. He was a tireless experimenter with form, who took inspiration for his work from eastern cultures, history, and new technology. Unlike Tschichold, Dwiggins never embraced the Modernist movement nor was he deified by it. However, he was absolutely committed to being a modern designer.

Although Dwiggins's and Tschichold's work seems to have little in common, there is a similarity in how their work was initially

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misrepresented. Tschichold was celebrated as a Modernist typographer, which downplayed his more substantial body of design and writing based on traditional and classical ideas. On the other hand, Dwiggins has always been represented as a traditional designer in spite of the innovative and experimental nature of most of his work.

It has only been in recent years that discussions of Tschichold and Dwiggins have expanded to include the full scope and plurality of their work. That is because the postmodern context has encouraged diversity and complexity, and given us a critical distance to assess Modernism and its ramifications. In the postmodern era, the line dividing modern and classical, good and bad, new and old, has, like so many lines in graphic design today, become very blurry, distressed and fractured.

In the late 80s, an anti-aesthetic impulse emerged in opposition to the canon of Modernist “good design.” It was a reaction to the narrow, formalist concerns of late Modernism. It staked a larger claim to the culture and expanded the expressive possibilities in design. The new aesthetic was impure, chaotic, irregular and crude. A point that was so successfully made, in terms of style, that pretty much everything was allowed in the professionalized field of graphic design, and from then on typography would include the chaotic and circuitous as options in its lexicon of styles. In fact, most of the formal mannerisms of the late 80s have continued to predominate throughout the 90s. But now it’s no longer an ideologically relevant, or even new style - now it’s just the most popular commercial style.

In 1989 I designed a typeface to use in my design work for experimental arts organisations like Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and CalArts. I called the typeface *Bondage Bold*. Rudy VanderLans saw it in some of my work and wanted to sell it through Emigre. After adding a regular weight, normalising the spacing, cleaning up the drawings (with Zuzana Licko’s guidance), and changing the name to *Keedy Sans*, it was finally released on an unsuspecting public in 1991.

I designed Keedy Sans as a ‘user,’ simply based on a vague idea of a typeface that I had not yet seen but wanted to use in my graphic design. Most typefaces are logically systematic; if you see a few letters you can pretty much guess what the rest of the font will look like. I wanted a typeface that would wilfully contradict those expectations. It was a typically postmodern strategy for a work to call attention to the flaws and artifice of its own construction. But I never thought of it as being illegible, or even difficult to read. I have never been very interested in pushing the limits of legibility for its own sake. Absolute clarity, or extreme distortion, is too simplistic a goal, and it is ground that has already been well covered. I wanted to explore the complex possibilities that lie somewhere in between and attempt to do something original or at least unique.

At the time I had been using the American highway Gothic typeface in my design work that I cut and pasted from a highway signage manual. Another vernacular influence was the ‘f’ from the Fiat logo. But I was not only quoting low vernacular sources; it was important that I mixed in high design sources as well. So I was thinking about Akzidenz-Grotesk Black, which was somewhat exotic in America, because I liked Wolfgang Weingart’s typography. Overall I wanted a typeface that was similar to Cooper Black, extremely bold with a strong idiosyncratic personality. I think it is a very postmodern typeface in that it included ‘high’ and ‘low’ vernacular quotation, and it is self-consciously crude and anti-aesthetic in reaction to the slickness of Modernism. The initial reaction to Keedy Sans was that it was too idiosyncratic, it was ‘ugly,’ hard to read, and too weird to be very useful. It’s hard to imagine that kind of reaction to a type design today. I guess nobody really cares any more.

In 1993, Keedy Sans was still able to cause a bit of controversy among graphic designers, and it was starting to be a popular typeface for music and youth-oriented audiences. Its popularity slowly but consistently grew; by 1995 it was starting to look pretty legible and tame compared to other new typefaces on the market. Eventually

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Problems



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Designers Refuse
to be Transparent



GRAPHIC DESIGN IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

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even the big boys in the corporate world were no longer put off by my typographic antics, and Keedy Sans made its way into the mainstream world of corporate commercialism by 1997. Eight years later, it is no longer considered an illegible, weird, deconstructed, or confrontational design. Now it's just another decorative type style, one among many. Its wilful contradictions are only what is expected in design today. I still think it is an interesting typeface; that's why it's a shame that now it signifies little more than the banality of novelty. Nowadays that seems to be all a designer can expect from their work.

Resisting mainstream pop banality is an outdated attitude that only a few designers of my generation worry about anymore. Now most graphic designers need results fast; formal and conceptual innovations only slow down commercial accessibility. It is hard for a generation raised in a supposedly 'alternative' youth culture, which put every kid from Toledo to Tokyo in the same baggy pants and t-shirt, to believe that relevant forms of expression can even exist outside of pop culture. Today's young designers don't worry about selling out, or having to work for 'the man,' a conceit almost no one can afford anymore. Now everyone wants to be 'the man.' What is left of an avant-garde in graphic design isn't about resistance, cultural critique, or experimenting with meaning. Now the avant-garde only consists of technological mastery: who is using the coolest bit of code or getting the most out of their HTML this week.

Resistance is not futile; resistance is a very successful advertising strategy. The advertising world co-opted our desire for resistance and has been refining it in pop culture since the 60s. After the 60s, advertising was never the same. It was the end of the men in the grey flannel suits. To this day ad agencies are full of middle-aged 'creative directors' who talk and dress like twenty year-olds. They exploit an endless supply of new, cutting edge design talent to sell the same old stuff. By comparison, graphic

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designers were less successful at using resistance as a vehicle for changing attitudes in their profession in the 80s. That is because most designers did not want anything to challenge their continuity with a design canon they had so recently constructed.

The only thing that the design establishment in the 80s was interested in resisting was new ideas. That is why ultimately the strategies of resistance to Modernist dogma and the critique of the status quo, from the late 80s, only led to what is currently referred to as the ugly, grunge, layered, chaotic, postmodern design of the 90s. Only now there is little opposition and no resistance to what is an empty stylistic cliché. What I had hoped would be an ideological victory over the tyranny of style mongering, devolved into a one-style-fits-all commercial signifier for everything that is youth, alternative, sports, and entertainment-oriented. The ‘official style of the hip and cool’ will probably be with us for some time, as it is easy to do and little has been done to establish any standard of quality.

There have never been as many books published on contemporary typography as in the past few years. Ironically, in spite of all these new type books, there has never been less of a consensus as to what is of interest or value in typography. Although these books are fun to look at, you would be hard pressed to find any significant discussion, criticism, debate, or even explanation in most of them. They include anything and everything except critical, informative, and qualitative analysis. This new cornucopia of type books is not the result of a sudden renaissance in typography, but the result of the publishing industry’s ability to recognise and develop a commercial market. They have no interest in ‘separating the wheat from the chaff,’ so all this new work has just become ‘more grist for the publishing mill.’

One of the reasons Jan Tschichold went back to traditional centre axis typography was because when it was done by less skilled designers, he thought it resulted in less

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offensive work than when the more demanding asymmetrical modernist typography was poorly done. Unlike traditional or Modernist typography, typography of the postmodern era has not up to this point been clearly articulated, much less canonised, making that type of qualitative judgment difficult at best. This situation has led some designers to simply dismissing it all as garbage.

Even though the current publishing craze may be helpful as self-promotion for a few designers and a design aid for the creatively challenged, it may have done more damage than good to the promotion of typography as a sophisticated or discriminating craft. Fortunately, on a much smaller scale, some critical and historical ideas are still being disseminated, in spite of the smaller financial rewards. Some design history, criticism and theory has managed to get published in recent years, but compared to the picture books, graphic designers aren't buying it.

The practice of graphic design has from the beginning been intertwined with pop commercialism, but that does not mean that our values and ideals, or the lack of them, have to be dictated by the commercial marketplace. Just because thinking about design isn't a popular activity doesn't mean it isn't an important one.

Graphic designers love new things, and new things love graphic designers—like fire loves wood. Graphic designers loved the new international corporate culture. But it was the advertising industry that ultimately won the partnership with multi-national corporations. Then graphic designers loved the new desktop publishing. But it took away a lot of our low end projects, gave us the additional responsibility of typesetting and pre-press, shortened our deadlines, and ultimately reduced our fees. Now graphic designers love the new Internet. But maybe this time we should stop and ask: “Does the Internet love graphic design?”

Perhaps the Internet will simply co-opt graphic design, incorporating it into its operating system. Maybe graphic design will cease to exist as a discreet practice and just

become another set of options on the menu. Or is graphic design just a lubricant that keeps everything on the info highway moving—are we just greasing the wheels of capitalism with style and taste? If graphic designers play a major role in building the bridge to the twenty-first century, will they be recognised for their efforts? Do you remember typesetters?

Graphic design's ephemeral nature has practically disqualified it from serious consideration as an important cultural practice. For most non-designers, historical graphic design is valued as nostalgic ephemera, while contemporary design is viewed as sometimes amusing, but mostly annoying, advertising. Graphic design is not generally accepted as having the cultural significance of other less ephemeral forms of design like architecture, industrial design, and even fashion. This is due largely to its short life-span and its disposable ubiquity. Will the even more ephemeral and ubiquitous media of film titles, television graphics, and the Internet create greater awareness and respect for graphic design, or will such familiarity only breed contempt?

New media is a practical embodiment of the theoretical paradigm established by poststructuralism. It was an idea about language, communication and meaning before it was ever a technology. But now it seems that the technology has eclipsed its *raison d'être* and it exists outside of any theoretical critique. The often quoted cliché is that the new media requires new rules and the old assumptions do not apply, even though somehow the old consumers do. Curiously, the new media has not yet developed a new theoretical paradigm, or even a new lexicon, to comprehend this ideological shift. Ironically, the new buzzword is a familiar old standby from grammar school art classes—it's all a matter of 'intuition.'

Although intuition is a satisfactory explanation for a five-year-old's crayon abstractions, it's a bit weak for describing the computer-graphic

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multinational-imperialism that is reshaping our global culture. Intuition is a generic term for a perceptive insight that is arrived at without using a rational process. It is a way of saying ‘educated guess’ without defining the education of the ‘guesser.’ That one’s source of inspiration could be unknowable, or at least indescribable, after the death of the author, and at the end of history, is understandable in these post-modern times. But the unwillingness of graphic designers to recognise their indebtedness to history, education, and their peers is not. At this juncture in its history, graphic design practice needs a more rigorous and responsible discourse. Maybe we should leave ‘instincts’ and ‘intuition’ to our furry friends; then we could reinstate history, education and current practice as our centre for critical reflection, discourse, and inspiration.

Theoretical and conceptual discourse in graphic design has always been a bit naive compared to older more established cultural practices. For example, all designers have been, and continue to be taught, the history of type design in terms of the five families of type: Old-style, Transitional, Modern, Egyptian, and Contemporary. This nineteenth century terminology devised by type founders is completely out of sync with period classifications used in the humanities. As such, it disconnects type design from our general cultural history. Given this type of foundation, it should come as no surprise that contemporary design discourse is also out of sync with that of architecture, literature, and art.

Graphic designers are caught up in a media stream that is very wide and fast, but not very deep. The only way to navigate in it is to go faster or slower than the stream. To go faster you must be at the forefront of technology and fashion, both of which are changing at an unprecedented rate. To go slower you need an understanding of context through history and theory. Graphic designers are predisposed to going faster or slower according to their experience and inclination, but mostly they are getting swept along in the currents of pop mediocrity.

How we communicate says a lot about who we are. Looking at much of today's graphic design one would have to conclude that graphic designers are twelve-year-olds with an attention deficit disorder. Designers today are representing our present era as if they were using a kaleidoscope to do it. Or more precisely, a constantly mutating digital collage machine, filled with a bunch of old 'sampled' parts from the past, and decorated with special effects. Ultimately what we are left with is a feeling of aggravated and ironic nostalgia. This electronic Deja-vu-doo is getting old, again.

Maybe now it is time to dive below all the hype and sound bites of the advertising industries media stream, where graphic designers can have the autonomy to set their own course, even if it means swimming against the current now and then. Postmodernism isn't a style; it's an idea about the time we are living in, a time that w troublesome paradigm. However, I still think it is preferable to the reassuring limitations of Modernism.

Unfortunately most graphic designers are currently not up to the challenge. A few postmodern ideas like deconstruction, multiculturalism, complexity, pastiche, and critical theory could be useful to graphic designers if they could get beyond thinking about their work in terms of formal categories, technology, and media. In the postmodern era, as information architects, media directors, design consultants, editor/authors, and design entrepreneurs, we have been chasing after the new and the next to sustain excitement and assert our growing relevance in the world. But inevitably the cutting edge will get dull, and the next wave will be like all the previous waves, and even the new media will become the old media.

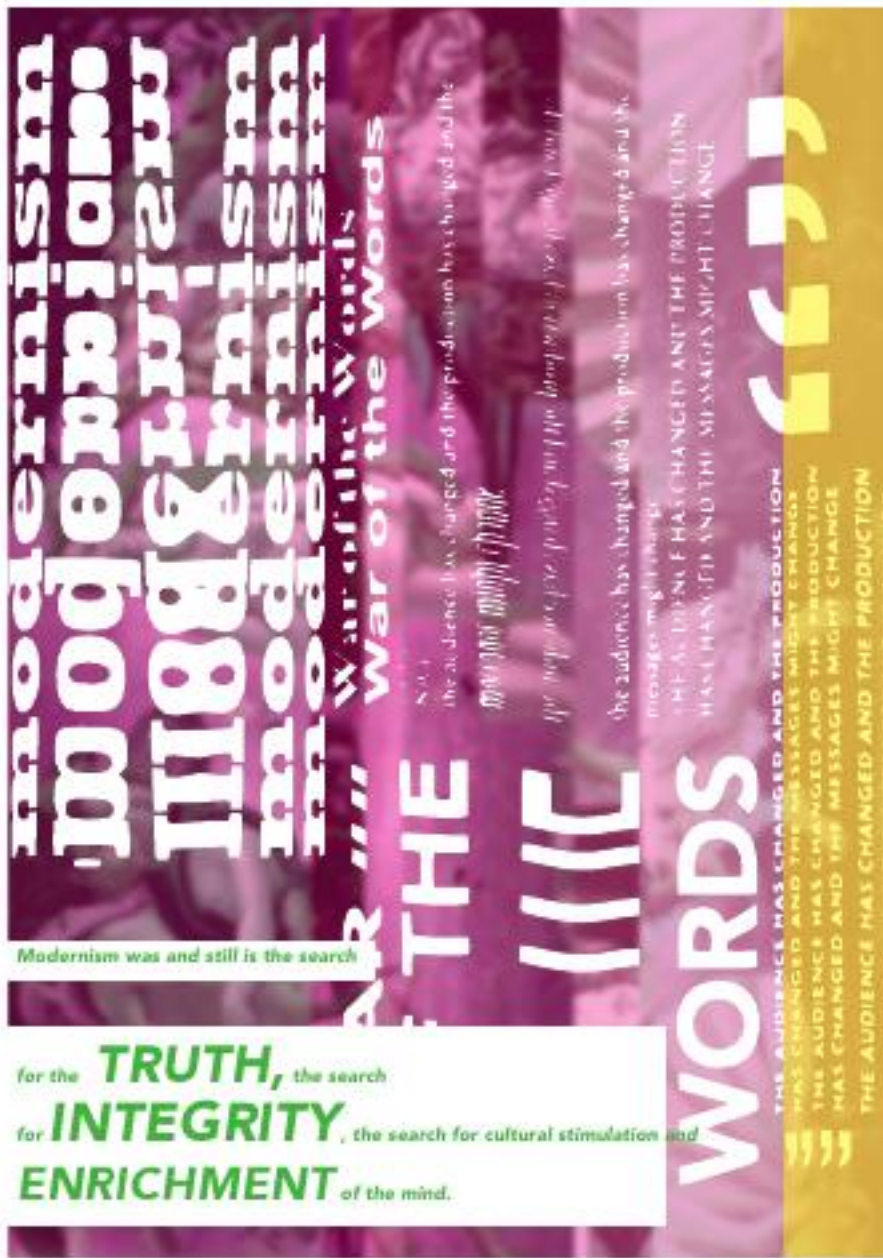
>>Then the only thing left will be the **graphic design,
and what and why we think about it.**

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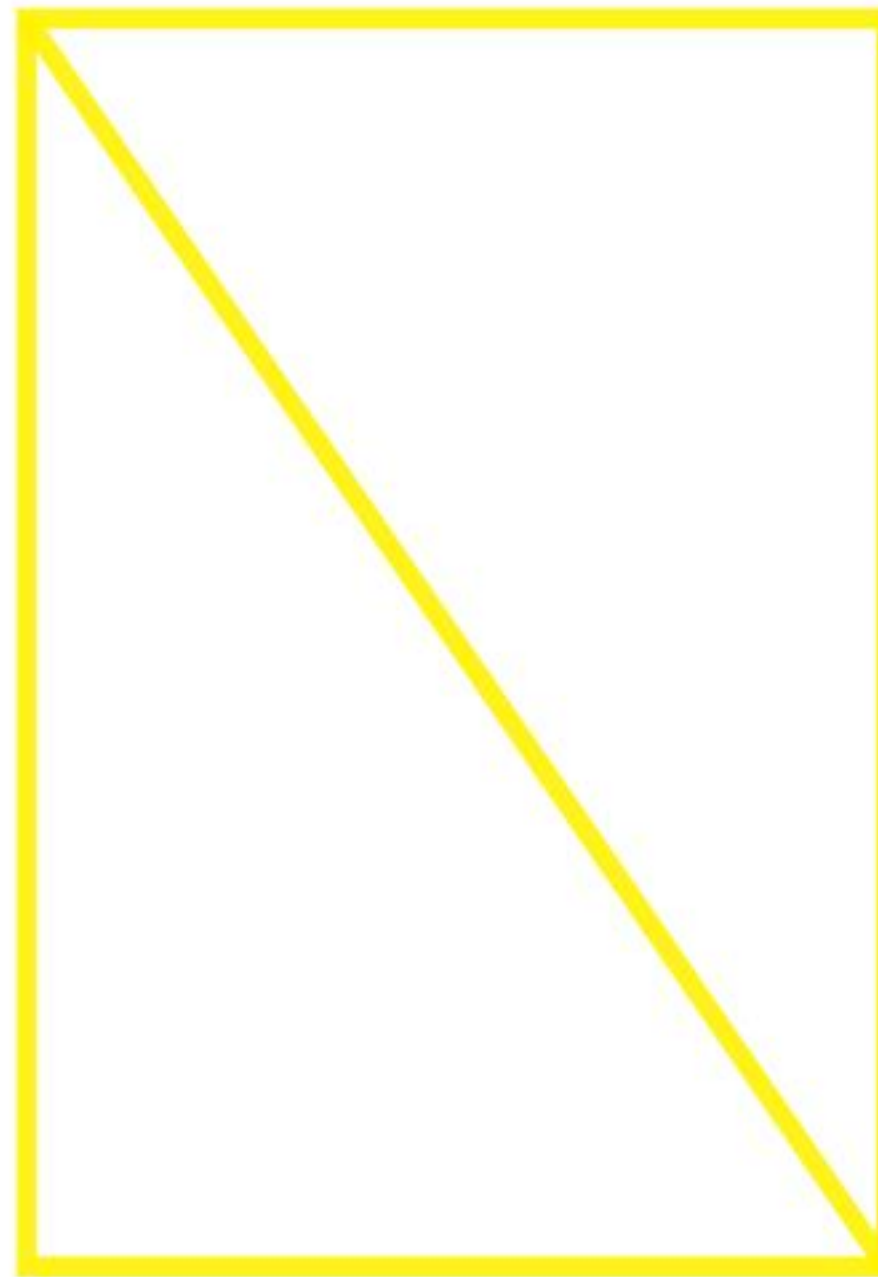
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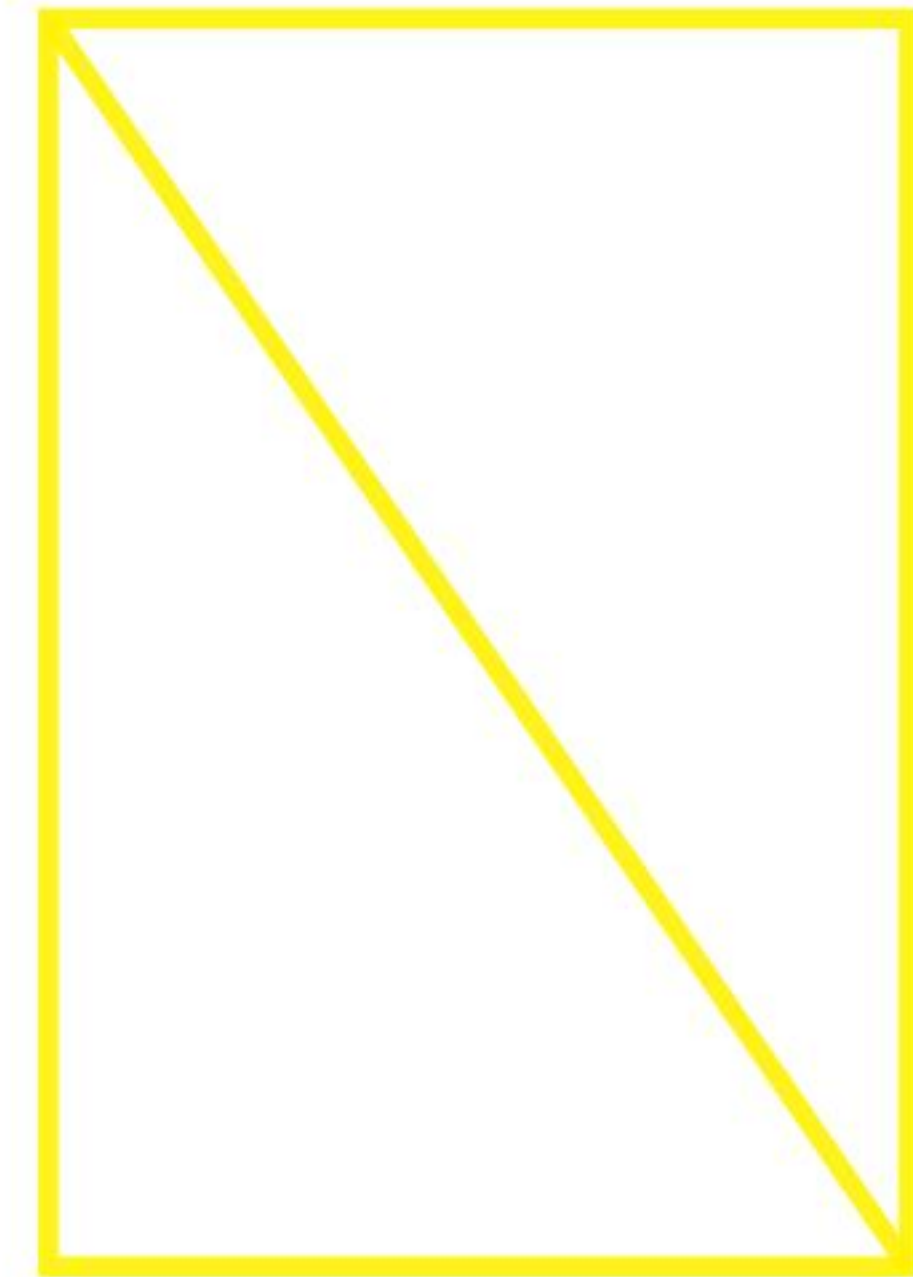
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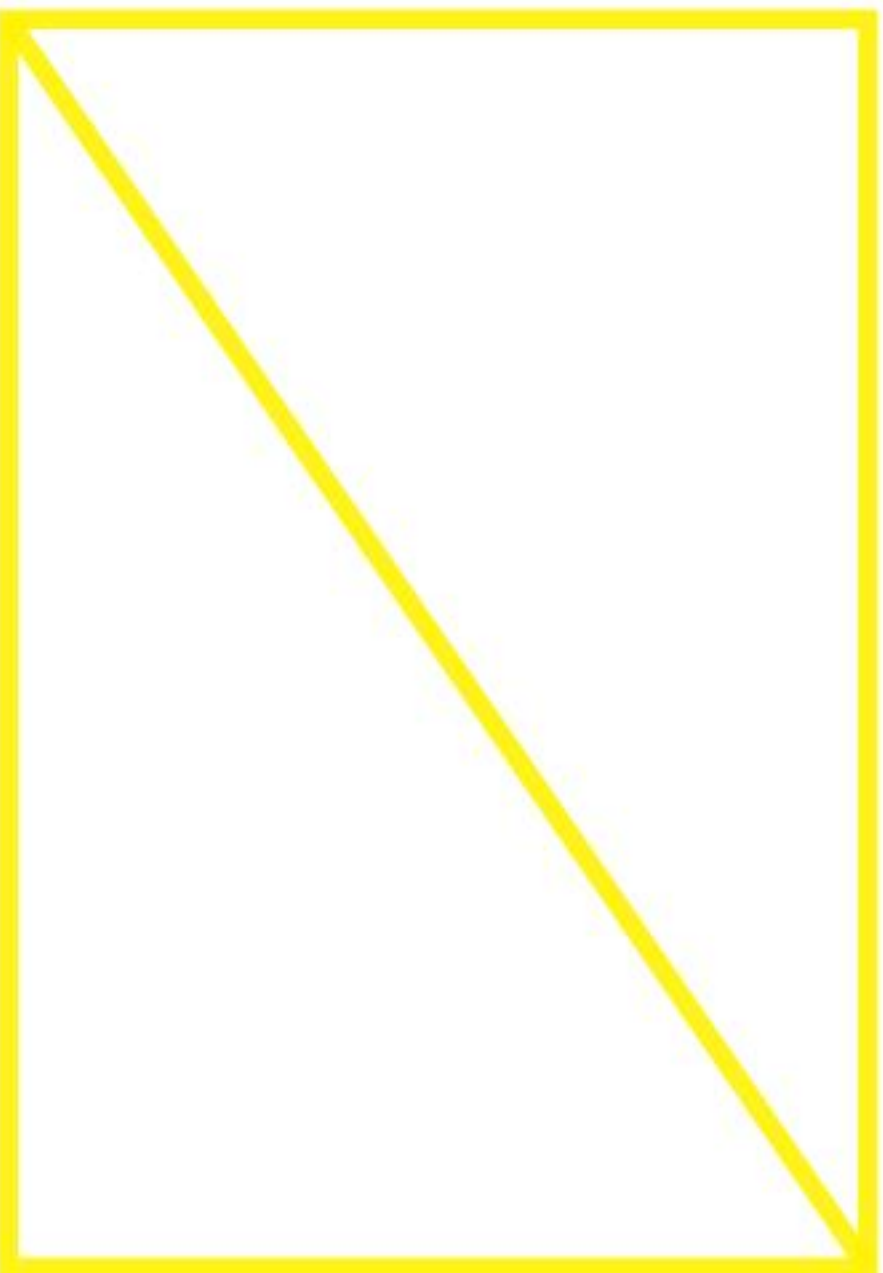
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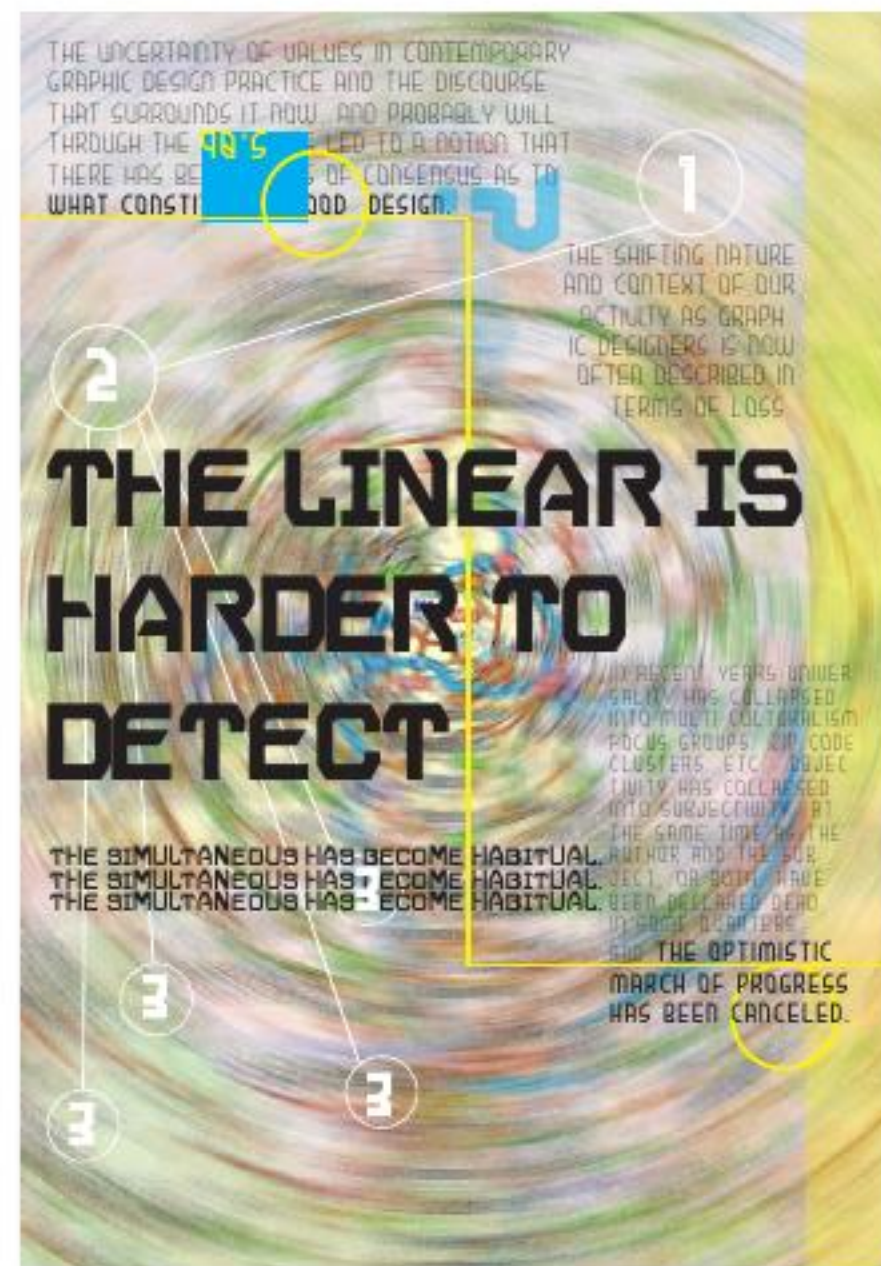
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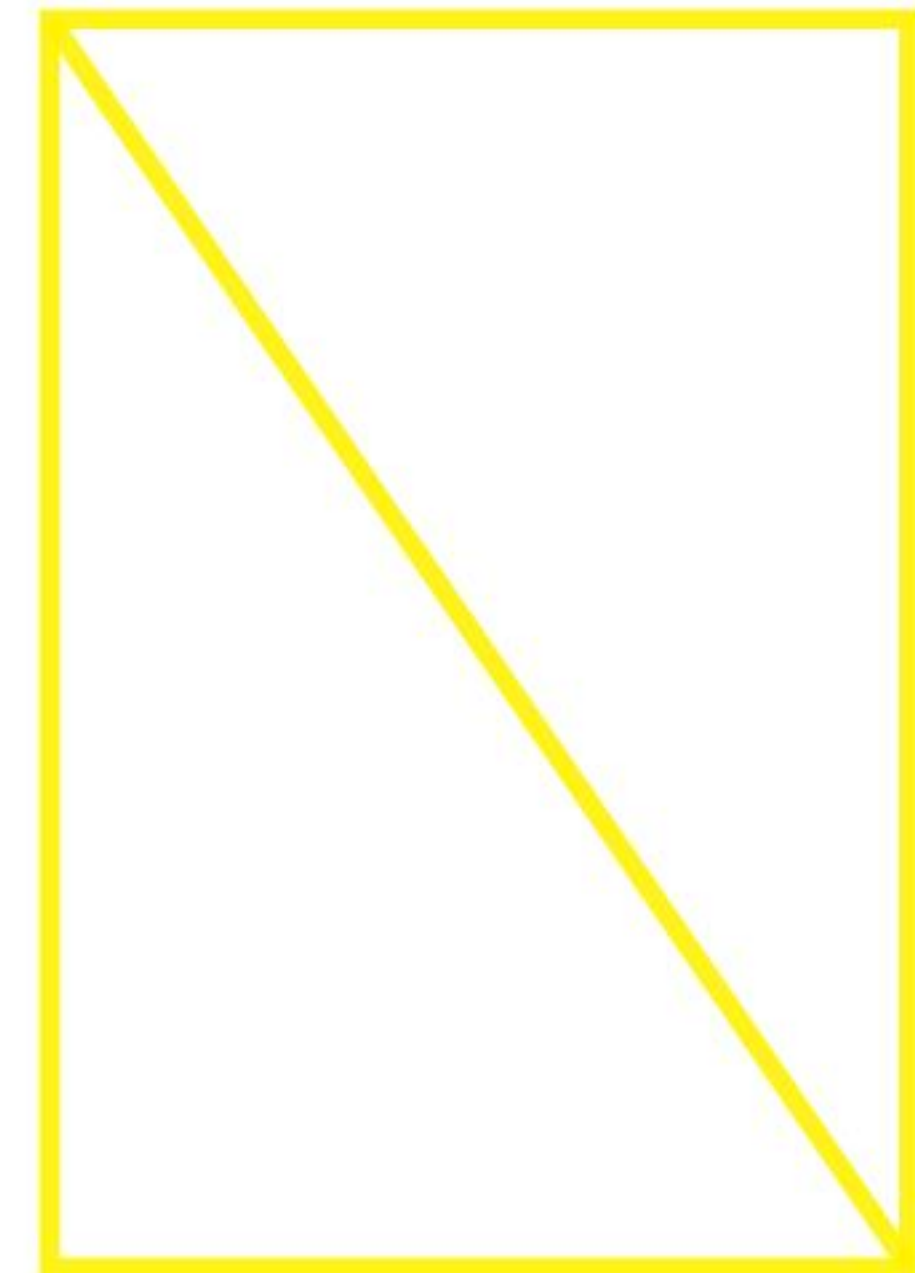
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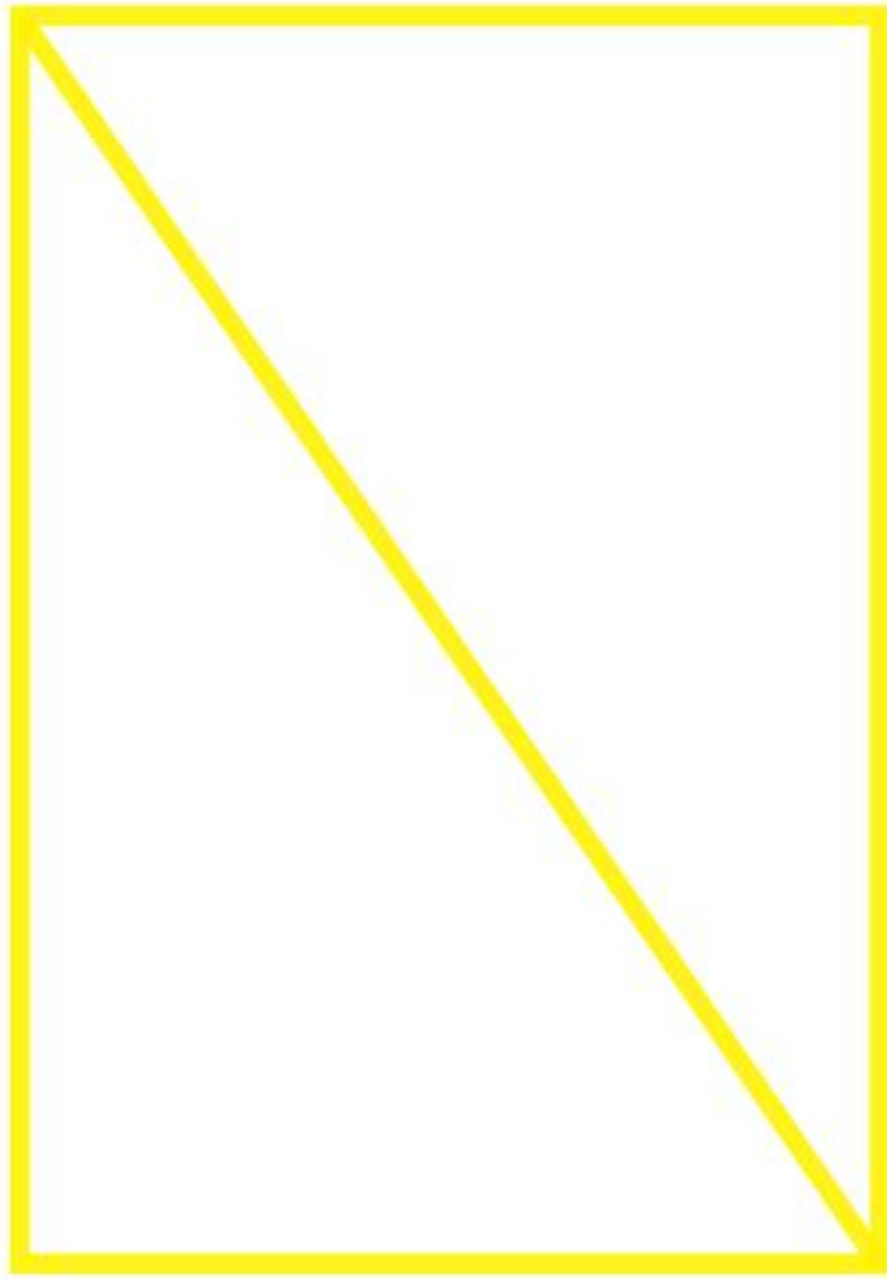
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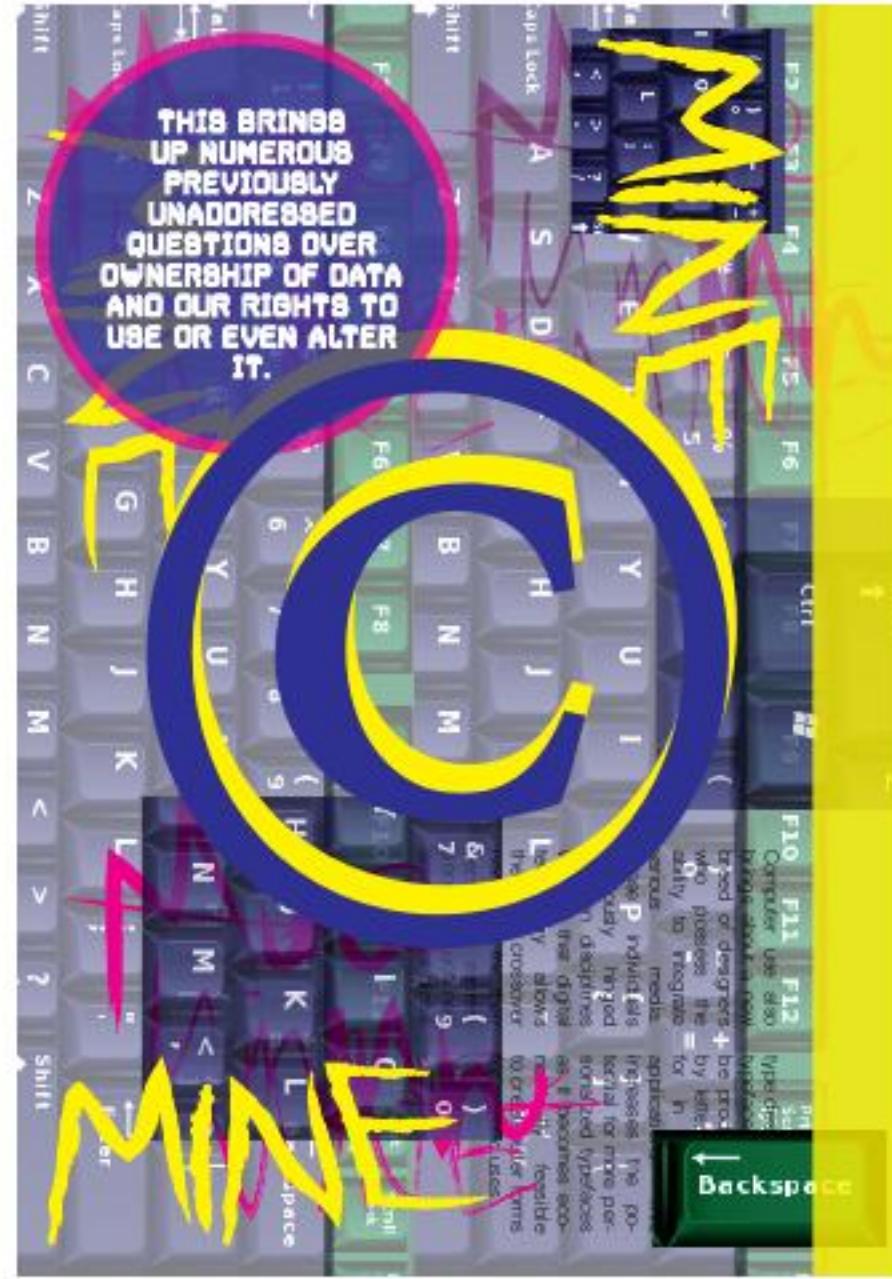
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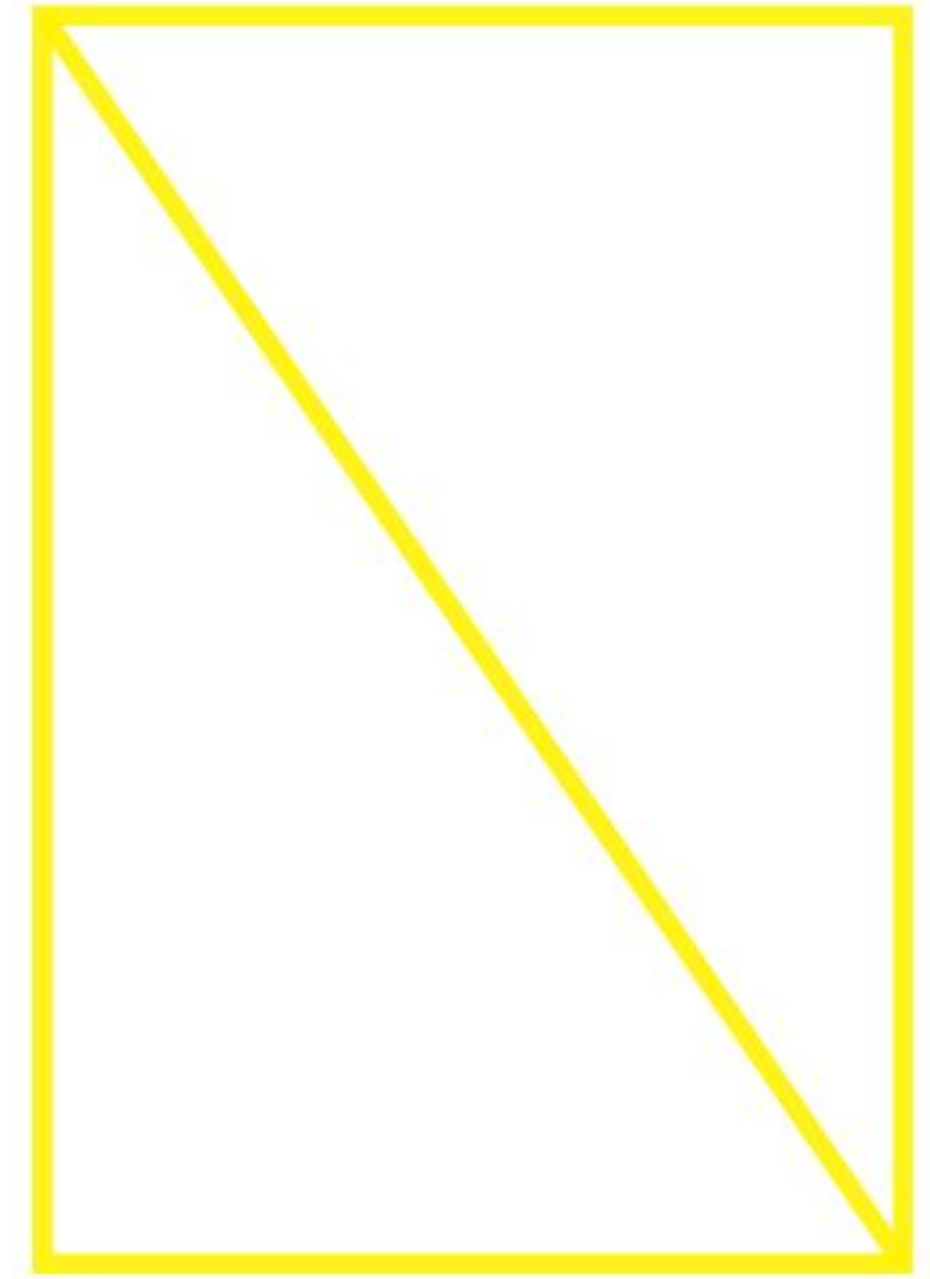
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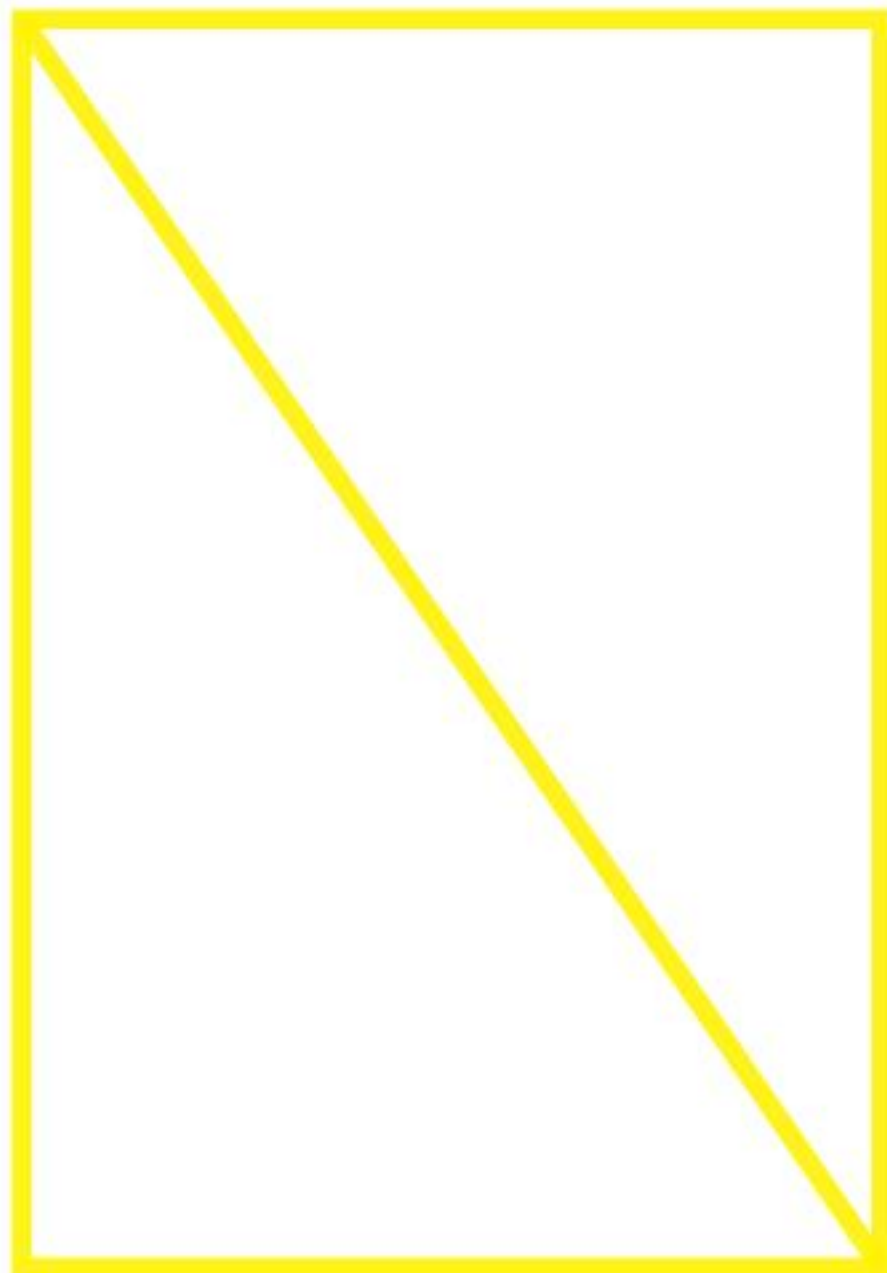
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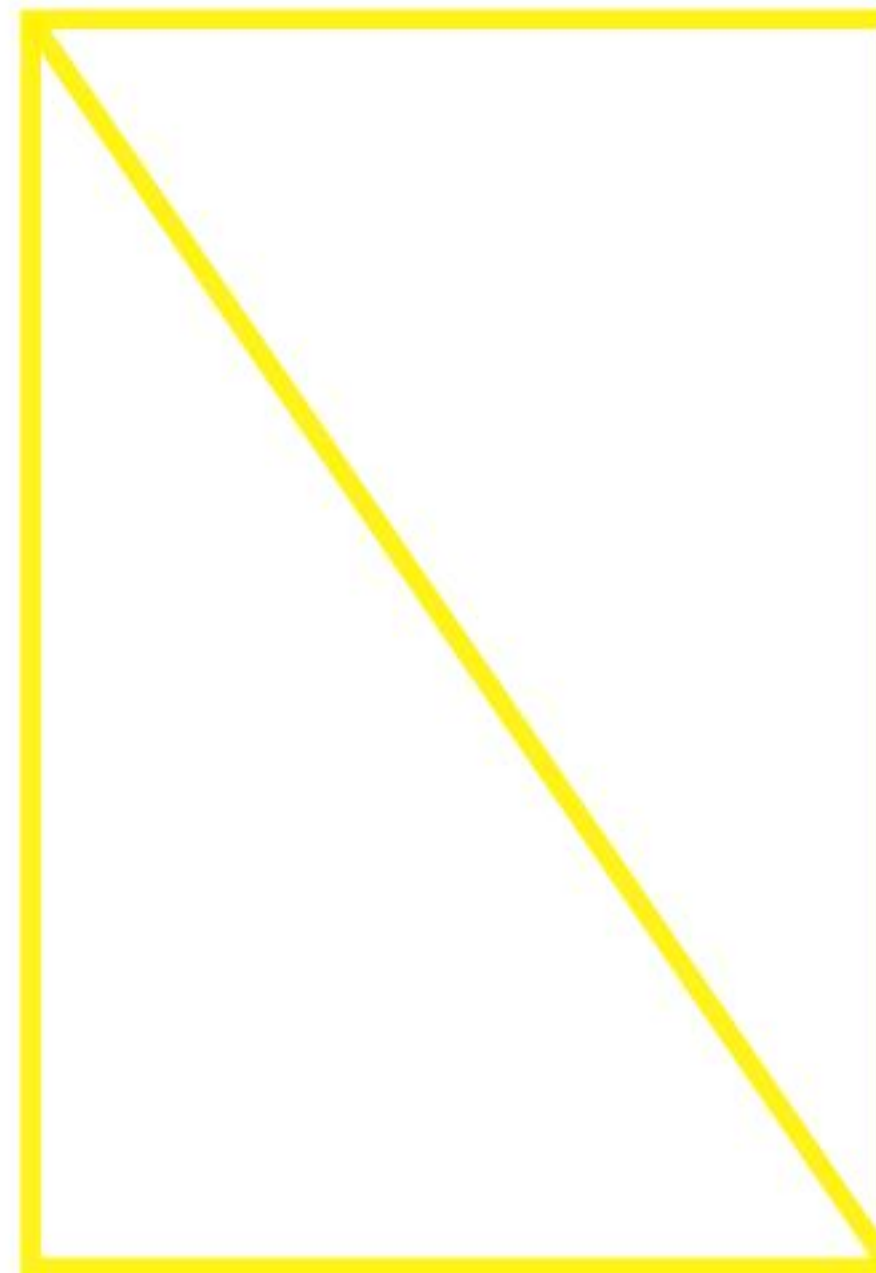
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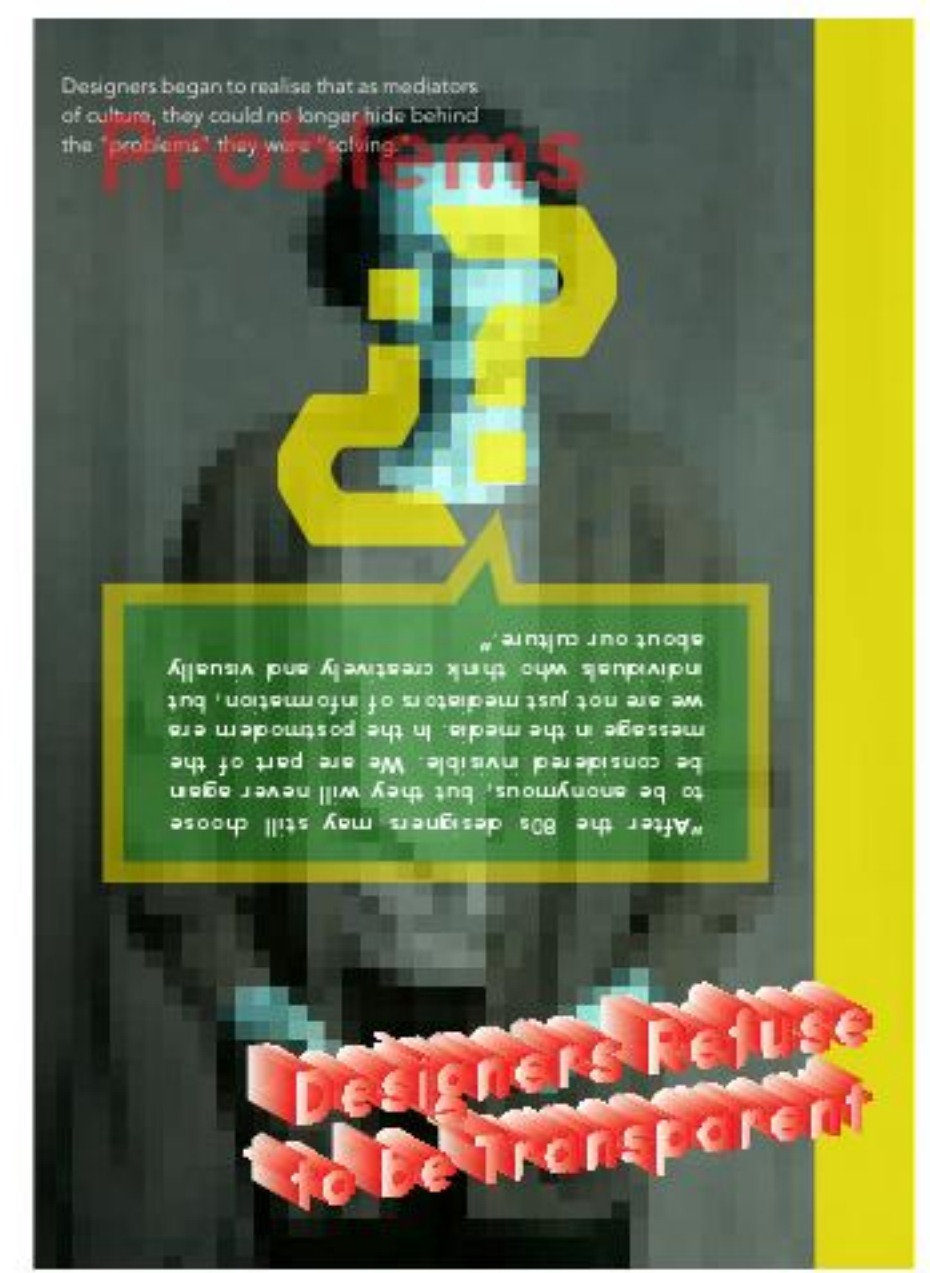
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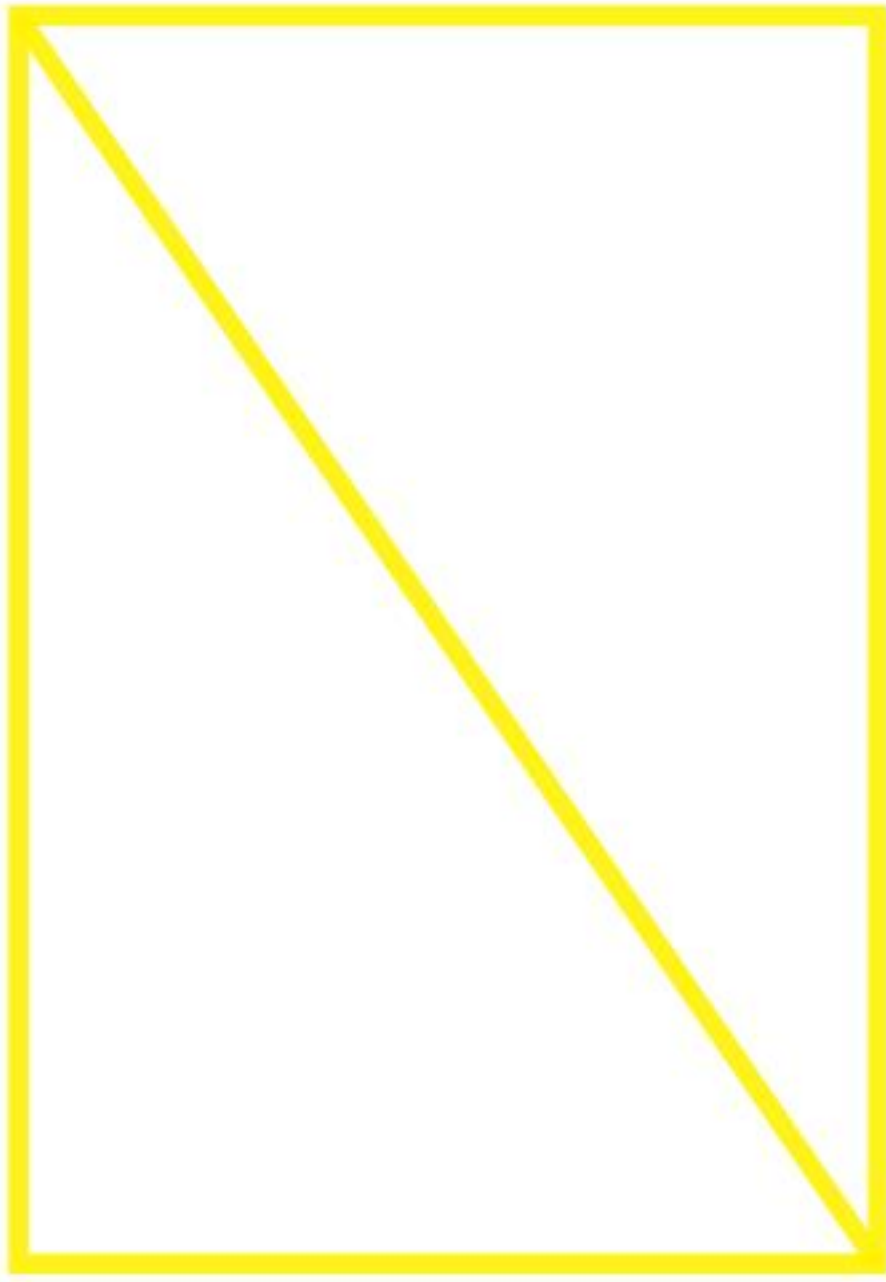
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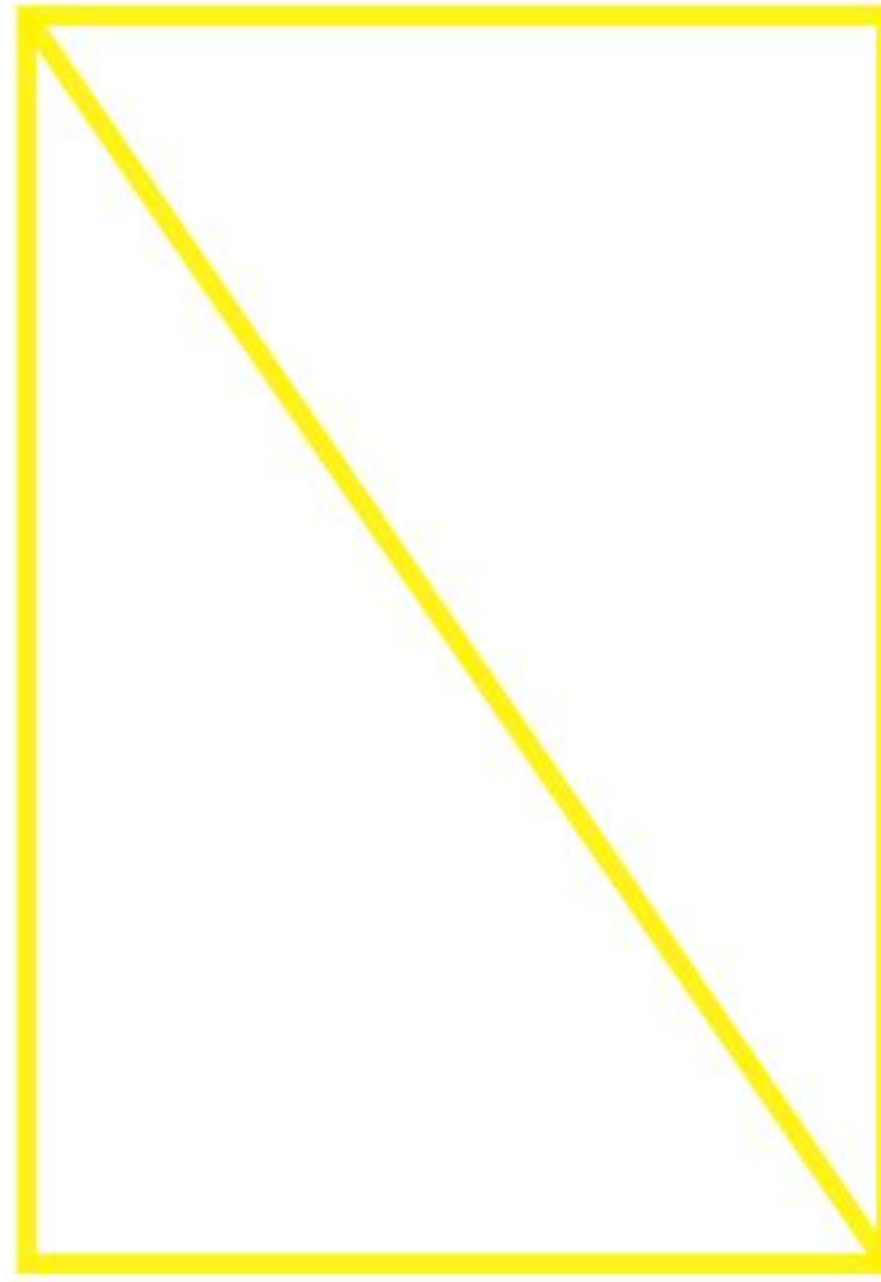
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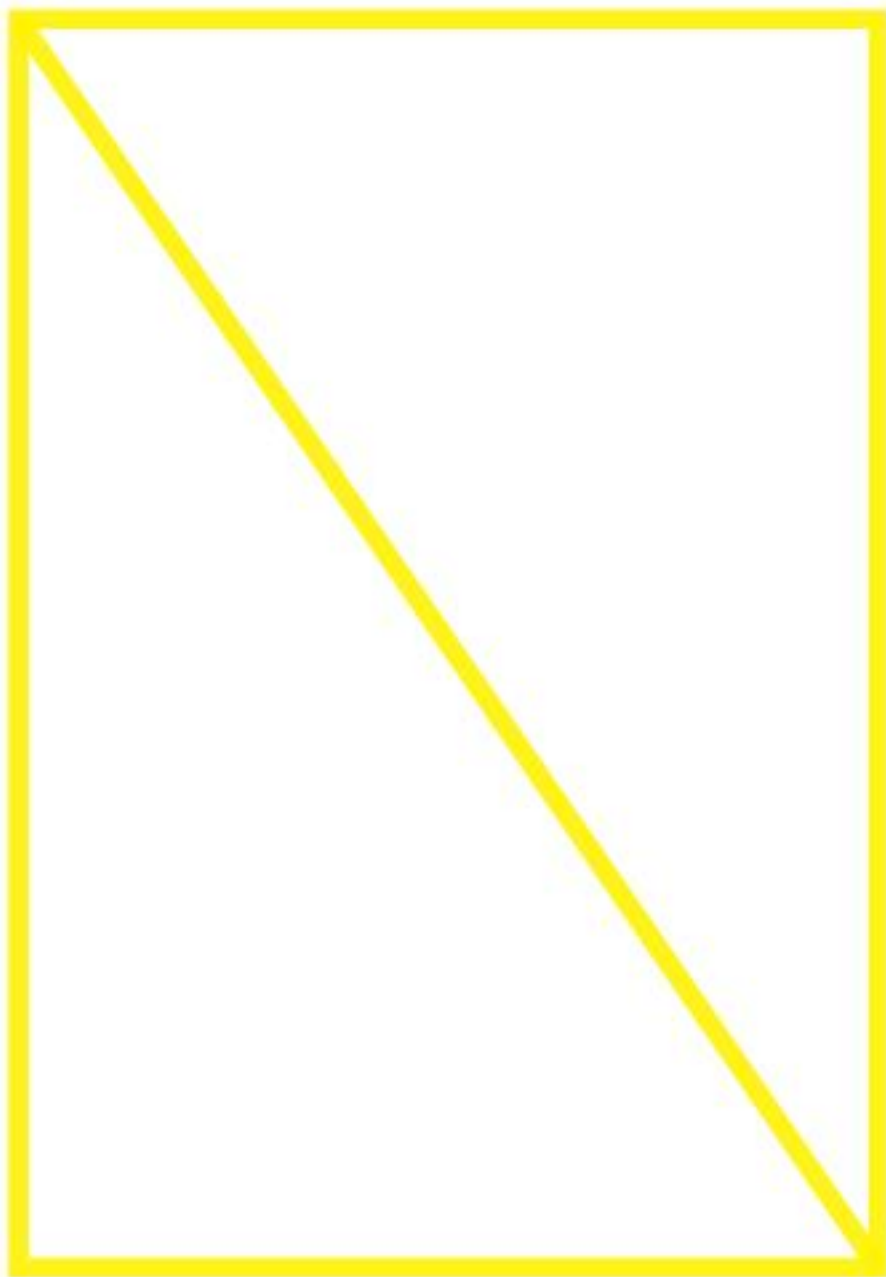
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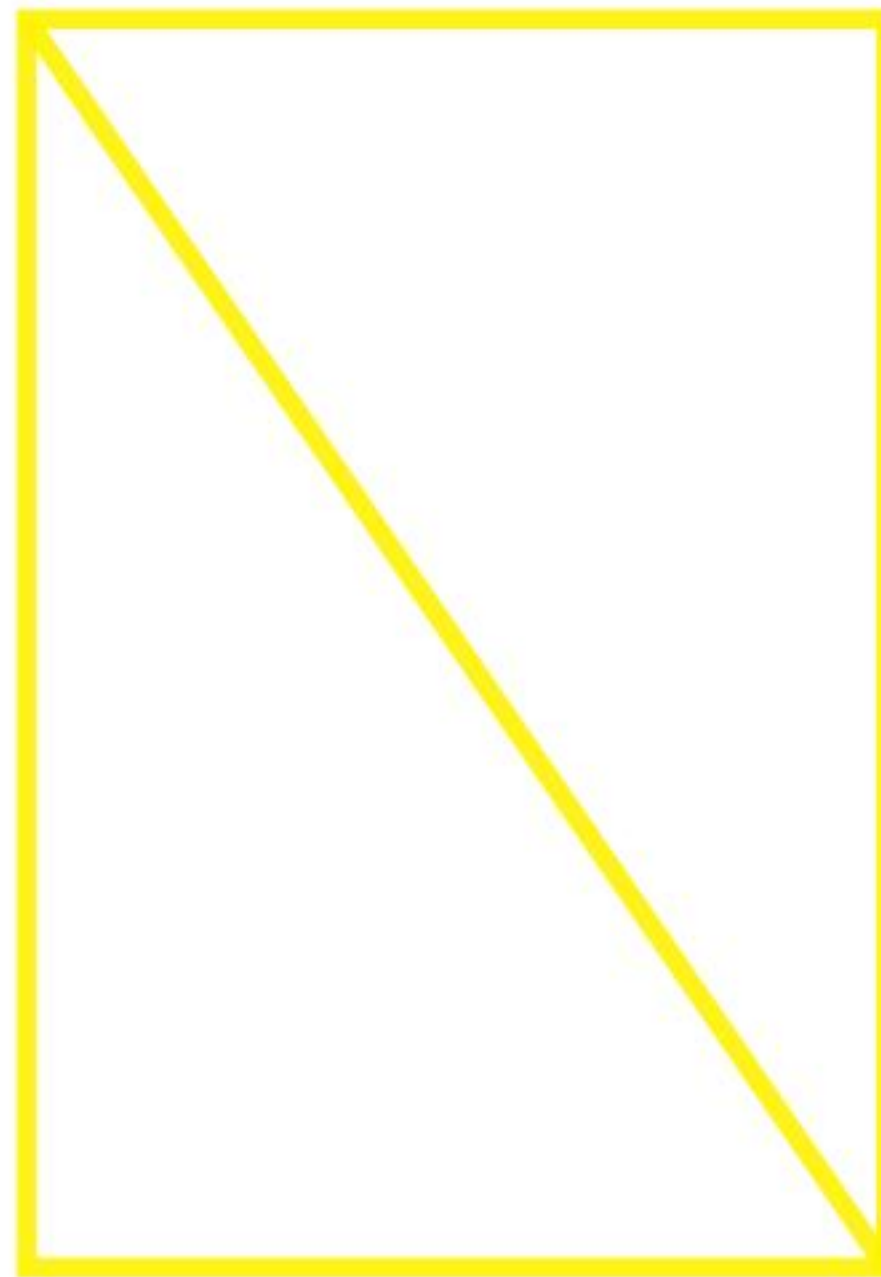
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**"History is no longer 5, 10,
15 years ago. History is
last week."**

>> John Weber,
in discussion at CalArts, 1992

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