

**Re-envisioning Graphic Design as a Dialogic Practice:  
An Investigation into the Constructive Potential of Disruption  
within Aesthetic Practices**

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## **Abstract**

The aesthetic dimension of graphic design is often considered an “added-value” to the content, which determines the importance of the piece. As a result, the critical potential of form is often overlooked and involvement in content production and selection serves as the primary way to engage in critical discourse. This thesis however highlights the dialogic dimension of aesthetics by focusing on disruption as a constructive tool for disciplinary inquiry. It uses disruptions to the conventional norms of professional practice as a way to reconcile design’s critical potential and its commercial reality. Form-making is considered a form of *écriture* with the capability to initiate both disciplinary and socio-cultural discourse. Semiotic theory is used as a framework for investigation. As such, the thesis includes an analysis of the effect of disruption to the pragmatic, syntactic and semantic dimensions of design works, including examples from the field as well as the results of personal visual exploration.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgments .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Project Overview .....	1
The State of Disciplinary Discourse.....	2
<b>The Constructive Potential of Disruption.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Overview of the Concepts at Play .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Understanding Aesthetic Practices as <i>Écriture</i> .....	8
The Political Dimension of Aesthetics.....	13
The Notion of Active Spectatorship.....	14
The Different Dimensions Involved in Interpretation.....	15
<b>The Dialogic Effect of Disruption to the Dimensions Involved in Interpretation .....</b>	<b>18</b>
Disruption to the Pragmatic Dimension of a Work .....	18
Thesis Work Produced as an Exploration of the Effect of Pragmatic Disruption.....	25
Disruption to the Syntactic Dimension of a Work .....	28
Thesis Work Produced as an Exploration of the Effect of Syntactic Disruption.....	30
Disruption to the Semantic Dimension of a Work.....	39
Thesis Work Produced as an Exploration of the Effect of Semantic Disruption.....	42
<b>Concluding Remarks .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Appendix A: Process Work – Visual Exploration.....</b>	<b>52</b>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1:</b> William Morris. Page from <i>The Nature of Gothic</i> by John Ruskin. 1892 .....	10
<b>Figure 2:</b> Arthur Mackmurdo, Cover design for <i>Wren's City Churches</i> . 1883.....	10
<b>Figure 3:</b> Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. Page from <i>Kelmscott Chaucer</i> . 1896.....	10
<b>Figure 4:</b> Francesco Cangiullo. Cover design for <i>Piedigrotta</i> . 1916 .....	10
<b>Figure 5:</b> F.T. Marinetti. Foldout from <i>Les mots en liberté futuristes</i> . 1919 .....	10
<b>Figure 6:</b> Joost Schmidt. Cover for the journal <i>Die Form</i> , issue 14. 1926 .....	12
<b>Figure 7:</b> Walter Dexel. <i>Bauhaus Ausstellung</i> , leaflet for a Bauhaus exhibition. 1923.....	12
<b>Figure 8:</b> Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Spread from <i>Malerei, Photographie, Film</i> . 1925.....	12
<b>Figure 9:</b> Jan Tschichold. Spread from <i>Die Neue Typography</i> . 1928 .....	12
<b>Figure 10:</b> Jean Paul Gaultier. <i>Sporty Chic Collection</i> , Women's prêt-à-porter spring/summer 2007, model: Velvet d'amour. ....	19
<b>Figure 11:</b> Jean Paul Gaultier. Jean Paul Gaultier and Francis Menuge, 1985.....	19
<b>Figure 12:</b> Jean Paul Gaultier. The Modern Retros collection, Men's prêt-à-porter spring/summer 1988 .....	19
<b>Figure 13:</b> Jean Paul Gaultier. <i>House of Pleasures collection</i> , Men's prêt-à-porter spring/summer 1997 .....	19
<b>Figure 14:</b> Edward Fella. Exhibition Poster. Detroit Focus Gallery. 1987. Reproduced with permission. © Edward Fella.....	22
<b>Figure 15:</b> Edward Fella. <i>Out There Doing It</i> , Lecture Series Poster. 1989. Reproduced with permission. © Edward Fella.....	22
<b>Figure 16:</b> Edward Fella. <i>Book Review Summer Reading cover</i> . 1999. Reproduced with permission. © Edward Fella.....	22
<b>Figure 17:</b> Elliott Earls. <i>Cranbrook Academy of Art Poster for the 2D Dept</i> . 2008. Reproduced with permission. © Elliott Earls.....	24
<b>Figure 18:</b> Elliott Earls. <i>God</i> from Hypertension Exhibition. 2013. Reproduced with permission. © Elliott Earls .....	24

<b>Figure 19:</b> Elliott Earls. <i>Hypertension Exhibition</i> . 2013. Reproduced with permission. © Elliott Earls .....	<b>24</b>
<b>Figure 20:</b> Marie-Noëlle Hébert. <i>Something to do with sex</i> . 2014.....	<b>26</b>
<b>Figure 21:</b> Marie-Noëlle Hébert. <i>Philipp Plein</i> . 2014 .....	<b>27</b>
<b>Figure 22:</b> M/M (Paris). M/MINK Advertising Campaign. 2010 .....	<b>30</b>
<b>Figure 23:</b> M/M (Paris). Spring/Summer 2001 advertising for Balenciaga. 2001 .....	<b>30</b>
<b>Figure 24:</b> M/M Paris. Spring/Summer 2002 invitation for Balenciaga. 2002.....	<b>30</b>
<b>Figure 25:</b> Jan van Toorn. Spread from <i>Cultiver Notre Jardin</i> . 1999. ....	<b>32</b>
<b>Figure 26:</b> Marie-Noëlle Hébert. <i>October, Vol. 110 (Autumn 2004), pp 51-79. The MIT Press</i> < <a href="http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397557">http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397557</a> . Accessed: 13/05/2013 12:18. 2013 .....	<b>35</b>
<b>Figure 27:</b> Marie-Noëlle Hébert. <i>Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics 1</i> . 2013.....	<b>38</b>
<b>Figure 28:</b> Jan van Toorn. Pages for the month of October from <i>Mart.Spruijt 1974/75 calendar</i> . 1974.....	<b>40</b>
<b>Figure 29:</b> Jan van Toorn. Pages for the months of July and August from <i>Mart.Spruijt 1974/75</i> <i>calendar</i> . 1974.....	<b>40</b>
<b>Figure 30:</b> Marie-Noëlle Hébert. <i>Miss Vogue</i> . 2014.....	<b>43</b>
<b>Figure 31:</b> Marie-Noëlle Hébert. <i>Our Models Are Real Women</i> . 2014.....	<b>44</b>

## Introduction

### Project Overview

In his book *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, Robert Stam, an American specialist in film theory and history, mentions that practitioners of the film industry demonstrate a problematic relationship with criticism and filmic pleasure, either “endorsing entertainment uncritically and serving unthinking accomplice to the film industry, or lamenting the delight mass audiences take in vulgar and alienated spectacle.”<sup>1</sup> A similar relationship exists amongst graphic designers: most either endorse their commercial role uncritically, i.e. serve the industry by providing aesthetically pleasing form, or focus on social critique, i.e. concentrate on design’s constructive potential while deploring its commercial reality. In both cases, design is mainly used in a conventional way, focusing on representing a given content for either commercial or altruistic purposes. Only rarely do designers break out of disciplinary conventions to either critically analyze and redefine what design can and cannot do, or attempt to reconcile its commercial and critical realities. This thesis attempts to put aside a perceived division between graphic design’s aesthetic dimension and its critical potential. It demonstrates that a critical and disruptive approach to graphic design practice has the potential to help the discipline evolve and lead to a better understanding of its cultural value. By placing an emphasis on making as an investigative tool, this work explores how design can be used to reveal potential effects of graphic design and questions its dominant understanding as a purely service-oriented practice. This thesis represents an attempt to highlight the dialogic dimension of aesthetics and the craft of design by asking the question: how can disruption aid in developing the dialogic potential of graphic design?

<sup>1</sup> Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press Studies in Cinema, 1985), 237.

## The state of disciplinary discourse

This thesis identifies two main approaches to professional graphic design practice. The first is the commercial approach. In that vein, the role of design is to allow for the clear communication of a company message by producing aesthetically pleasing and digestible communications prepared for a given client. The second approach is altruistic. The role of design is then to serve the population, either by creating work for clients that are perceived as beneficial to the socio-cultural reality or informing the population so they can be empowered to criticize the system within which they live. Both approaches are often perceived as polar opposites. There are however critical commonalities between them. In each case, graphic design is often merely viewed as an “added value,” something designers provide to communicate to the public about a subject of importance. In both, design serves the same three traditional roles: “identification,” “information and instruction,” or “presentation and promotion.”<sup>2</sup>

As design critic Rick Poynor notes during a conversation with graphic designer and writer Michael Rock, “art can kid itself that it occupies a privileged zone of free thinking and critique within capitalism, design as we mostly practice it today understands itself as an integral service to and expression of capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> There are disciplinary debates surrounding the necessity for design to exist within capitalism and its potential as a constructive social tool. However, while designers often engage in discourse concerning the socio-cultural or commercial role of design, most design fails to challenge basic disciplinary assumptions and its traditional vocabulary. In fact, disciplinary debates have mainly been treated in writing; the most discussed subjects being notions of taste and the type of content that designers should accept to represent. As Jeffery Keedy writes in “Greasing the Wheels of Capitalism with Style and Taste,” designers are used to suppressing their ethical responsibilities because the client is in charge of content while designers

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hollis, Introduction to *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Rock and Rick Poynor, “What Is This Thing Called Design Criticism, 1&2.” In *Multiple Signatures: On Designers, Authors, Readers and Users*, ed. Michael Rock (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2013), 239. The conversation includes two different exchanges, both concerning the state of design criticism. The first exchange is an optimistic depiction of the state of disciplinary discourse in which the authors are looking forward to the development of an extended interest in design criticism. In the second, they express concerns with the lack of professional writing on and the general disinterest with the subject of graphic design. The quotation was extracted from the second exchange. In it, Poynor provides an explanation as to why the public has only little interest in graphic design in contrast to other disciplines such as film and architecture. He raises the question: If practitioners see design as culturally unimportant and as strictly a part of the capitalist model of production, how could the public perceive it otherwise?

only offer a benign service.<sup>4</sup> As such, attempts to produce design that is either ethical or critical are often characterized by the rejection of client-based practice or the choice of alternative clients. For example, in the year 2000, a group of 33 designers revisited the “First Things First Manifesto,” a call for a change of priority within design practice first published in 1964. The manifesto states:

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators who have been raised in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents. [...]

Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do. [...]

There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.<sup>5</sup>

While this manifesto might appear provocative and the authors seem concerned with exploring less traditional roles of design practice that go beyond its commercial use, the solution they offer fosters a traditional approach and implies that the value of a design object is determined by the content it represents. Effectively, graphic design remains a problem-solving activity as its basic cultural values are not challenged and its redemption, or alternative usages, come from a simple change in content. The manifesto fails to address the potential for graphic design’s language to act beyond representation and the place design itself can take within those debates. Additionally it fails to consider the dialogic nature of design practice,

<sup>4</sup> Jeffery Keedy, “Greasing the Wheels of Capitalism with Style and Taste, or, the “Professionalization” of American Graphic Design,” in *Looking Closer 4: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, ed Michael Bierut et al. (New York: Hallworth Press and AIGA, 2002), 199.

<sup>5</sup> Various authors, “First Things First Manifesto 2000,” in *Emigre* 51 (Autumn 1999).

i.e. how it is in living contact with contemporary reality<sup>6</sup> and can participate in the re-thinking and re-evaluation of the cultural elements that play into its vocabulary.<sup>7</sup>

Poyner also stated in the discussion introduced above that “design criticism must acquire a new ideological awareness. It must move beyond soft, easy, self-comforting assertions that sustainability is good or too much consumerism is bad for the planet. As though the problem can be fixed by a few adroitly applied band aids – and embrace the need for rigorous political analysis with the eventual goal of fundamental systemic change.”<sup>8</sup> Systemic change and the understanding of what else design can contribute to the cultural sphere thus implies a revisiting of graphic design’s impact, moving beyond a discussion in content, and focusing on a deeper disciplinary consideration.

This thesis proposes that the authoring of and involvement with alternate types of content is not the guarantor or solution to a more critical design practice. Instead, a self-reflexive and critical approach to visual production is understood as the way to conduct the disciplinary consideration that is missing from design practice today. The argument is made that graphic design can simultaneously exist within the commercial world, perform its traditional communicative function, and be a critical and investigative practice. The content of a piece is understood as vital in establishing the realm within which a design work operates, but the emphasis is placed on the discourse that emanates from its aesthetic dimension.

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 7. *The Dialogic Imagination* is a republication of four essays concerning the importance of the novel as a manifestation of cultural discourse. While the essays concern literary products, the notions discussed can be applied to graphic design as they are related to the discursive nature of the form, the choice and use of language present within the works. They describe as “dialogic” forms of writing that are embedded in the present tense and that break or challenge traditional hierarchy of genres. The “dialogic” is rooted in the interaction of two elements that are traditionally alien and the normalization of valorized ideals which allows traditionally unquestionable notions to be made tangible and available for re-examination. Graphic design practice is rooted in everyday life and the form its language takes is often deeply rooted in its cultural context. As such, it has the possibility to interact with other elements of the culture within which it lives. Bakhtin’s description of the dialogic dimension of the novel thus parallels contemporary forms of design practice.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>8</sup> Rock and Poyner, 240.

More specifically, the focus is on establishing how form-making can be used to challenge disciplinary and cultural conventions associated to the specific context of a piece. This thesis thus displaces the value of a design work from its communicative role to its potential critical and dialogic function and asks: how can we activate design's critical potential? How can we use graphic design to engage in disciplinary and cultural dialogues?

Robert Stam mentions that reflexive literature and films often share a “playful, parodic and disruptive relation to established norms and conventions.”<sup>9</sup> Disruption may thus be the key to the activation of the dialogic potential of design and the stimulation of a disciplinary debate. This potential is discussed in other disciplines with an aesthetic focus, such as fashion and cinema, in which practitioners have used disruption as a principle for creation and considered form itself as a way to engage in critical discourse.

<sup>9</sup> Stam, xi.

## **The constructive potential of disruption**

Effectively, throughout the history of fashion, dissonances and disruptions have been treated as constructive and creative ideas, with disruption considered a “vital stimuli for innovation”<sup>10</sup> and used as a motivating force for creation. Elaborating on the productive potential of disruption, German cultural and media scientist Andrea Sick notes that by introducing “unexpected and risk into the process of perception,” disruption “sets the acquisition of knowledge in motion.”<sup>11</sup> She also observes that while at first it “causes incomprehension and produces bewilderment,” the presence of a disruptive element within a piece then “drives interpretation” and eventually leads to the “creation of new system of rules through the invalidation” of the existing standards of creation or representation.<sup>12</sup> Reflection thus comes “through the interruption in transmission of what would otherwise be smooth and not looked upon twice,”<sup>13</sup> and disruption allows a work to have a dialogic function by constantly entering in conflict with, and allowing the reassessment of, the most common practices of a given discipline.

The notion that interruptions are constructive and participate in generating discourse rather than impede communication gives rise to serious disciplinary discussion when posited against design’s conventional use as a tool to communicate seamlessly. It suggests that the interruption in transmission of information and the use of design to introduce unexpected elements within the process of perception are susceptible to generate reflection both from the user in regards to what is represented, and from practitioners in regards to design’s basic functions and communicative capabilities. It enters in conflict with the ideals of transparency of design within the communicative act and suggests that what is conceived of as good practice is only a way to practice, rather than an imperative for communication.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothea Mink, Preface to *Fashion Out-of-Order — Disruption as a Principle*, ed. Dorothea Mink (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, HfK Bremen, 2011), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Sick, “The Incidence of Disruption,” in *Fashion Out-of-Order — Disruption as a Principle*, ed. Dorothea Mink (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, HfK Bremen, 2011), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Additionally, throughout the book *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, Robert Stam analyzes a vast array of movies exemplifying how the disruption of cinematic conventions allows a film to enter in dialogue with the subjects treated and the film industry while still participating in telling a story in a beautiful and pleasurable way. He shows that the introduction of this critical discourse does not negate filmic pleasure or its role as entertainment, but embraces the discipline's nature while exorcising its alienation<sup>14</sup> through the addition of a supplementary dialogic function.

Although graphic design and film have different traditional roles and constituents, namely the former makes use of visuals and text to communicate an idea, while the latter makes use of sound, image and text to narrate a story, the “reflexive strategies” described by Stam are susceptible to generate a similar effect in both disciplines. As he writes while comparing film and literature, “both media share a common nature as discourse, *écriture*; both are textual and intertextual; both can foreground their constructed nature; and both can solicit the active collaboration of their reader/spectator.”<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, graphic design relies on a visual language system. It contains sets of codes, particular types of visual elements and possible ways of arranging them, that are used by practitioners to communicate ideas to the public. French film theorist Christian Metz describes filmmaking as the working of the cinematic language system to produce a filmic text, or, put simply, a movie.<sup>16</sup> The act of designing is comparable to filmmaking since a designer works with or against certain codes of practice to produce a final design. The elements contained within the piece created are arranged according to a specific internal organization, a textual system, that makes the message contained intelligible to viewers. The act of designing is thus a process of selection and organization of signs that is comparable to writing and the design created through this process acts as a form of text. As such, graphic design is essentially textual. The textual nature of design is what links it to the concept of *écriture*.

<sup>14</sup> Stam, 238.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*, trans. Dinna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (Paris: Mouton, 1974), 285.

## Overview of the concepts at play

### Understanding Aesthetic Practices as *Écriture*

An *écriture* or a writing can be defined as a set of discursive conventions identifiable within disciplines with a textual nature such as literature, film and graphic design.<sup>17</sup> Those conventions are characteristic of a particular ideological approach to making that is adopted by a writer, a filmmaker, or a designer in the creation of their work and that manifests itself in the aesthetic dimension of a piece. According to French linguist and literary theorist Roland Barthes, it corresponds to “a level of codification whose degree of generality is intermediate between that of a language common to the entire social body,” or to a body of practitioners, “and that of style, which is proper to the individual.”<sup>18</sup> Particular modes of codification imbue the work, or the film, with a specific text in the sense described by Barthes. This text is an added level of meaning that is not necessarily fixed by the writer through the words or signs chosen, but by the specific discursive conventions according to which he writes, by the internal order according to which the elements contained in the piece are organized. This additional level of discourse exists only through active reading as it is experienced as a byproduct, perceived within the work by the viewers.

Cinema in itself is not an *écriture*, but it contains several types.<sup>19</sup> An *écriture* corresponds to a category of sub-codes shared by multiple filmmakers, categories that can often be associated to specific genres for example, or principal schools of thought, which bring to the work produced a second level of meaning, a connotation particular to the form that is added to the actual content.<sup>20</sup> The adoption of an *écriture*, a subcategory of language, is thus an adherence to a whole set of ethical and political values, which affect the discourse that emanates from a work.<sup>21</sup> Graphic design can be said to be a form of *écriture*, because like film and literature, particular approaches and sets of conventions relative to the use of its language can be identified. Those discursive conventions are not as specific as individual styles, but reflect particular ways of approaching life. As such, they are endowed with a certain ideological nature and complete a work with a text that is not related to the communicative function of the piece or the personal stylistic preferences of the creator, but to the work's internal order.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Moriarty, “Writing and Responsibility,” in *Roland Barthes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 41.

<sup>18</sup> Metz, 267.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Moriarty, 32-33.

Graphic design history provides us with quite a few examples of movements and different approaches to creation that illustrate how graphic design can be conceived as *écriture*. For example, while the development of the printing press led to a standardized aesthetic in all printed documents as the production processes became mechanized, artists from the Arts and Crafts movement focused on craftsmanship rather than letting machinery dictate the possible aesthetics (Figure 1–3). As art educator Mary Ann Stankiewicz writes: “This change in style reflected a shift from an industrial art education to an antimodern desire to return to preindustrial modes of production.”<sup>22</sup> They were using art as a vehicle to reform society, merging ethical concerns and aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> The intricate ornamentation, the specific framing of the text, the use of hand-made and nature-like forms, attention to quality and craft, and the overall set of discursive conventions chosen were representative of a specific way of approaching life and participated in carrying the ethical and political concerns of the creators into the world. The aesthetic itself carried a very particular ideological message, independently from the content of the pieces.

Similarly, the Futurists pushed forward the social role of design by getting rid of the tradition-bound technological production and ornamental refinement typical of the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements.<sup>24</sup> They embraced new technologies and created visuals that were representative of their content and of the social aspirations of the time, focusing on communicating to the masses a message of speed and aggression<sup>25</sup> through dynamic and communicative compositions (Figure 4–5). The chaotic appearance, lack of traditional hierarchy, and the merging of and interconnection between all visual elements reflected a new attitude towards knowledge characterized by a rejection of reason in favor of emotional and spiritual enquiry, as well as a belief that the world is created not of independent objects, but of fields of energy which interconnect and are constantly in movement. The form became an extension of content, a form of intellectual inquiry reflecting a recently developed belief in intuition and the use of the senses to develop a higher form of knowledge. The visuals thus represented a celebration of and a request to embrace the many socio-economic changes occurring within Italian society, reflecting a certain set of ideological concerns.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Ann Stankiewicz, “From the Aesthetic Movement to the Arts and Crafts Movement,” *Studies in Art Education* 33 (3, 1992), 165.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>24</sup> Tim Benton, “Dreams of Machines: Futurism and L’Esprit Nouveau,” *Journal of Design History* 3 (1, 1990) 19.

<sup>25</sup> Helen Armstrong, *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 20.

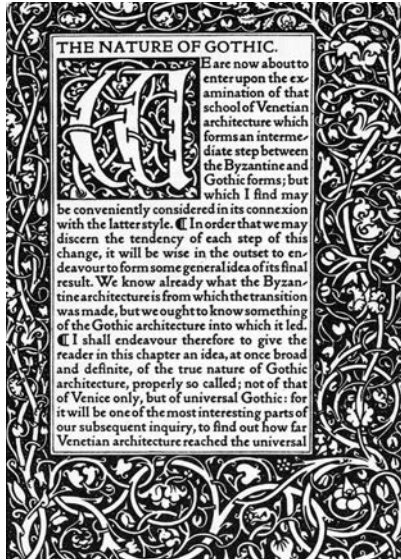


Figure 1: William Morris. Page from *The Nature of Gothic* by John Ruskin, 1892.



Figure 2: Arthur Mackmurdo, Cover design for *Wren's City Churches*, 1883.

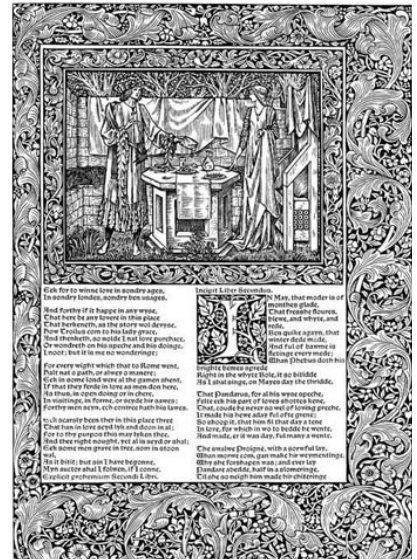


Figure 3: Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. Page from *Kelmescott Chaucer*, 1896.

The Arts and Crafts Movement advocated a return to preindustrial modes of production by focusing on craftsmanship, often using intricate hand-made ornamentation mimicking natural forms.

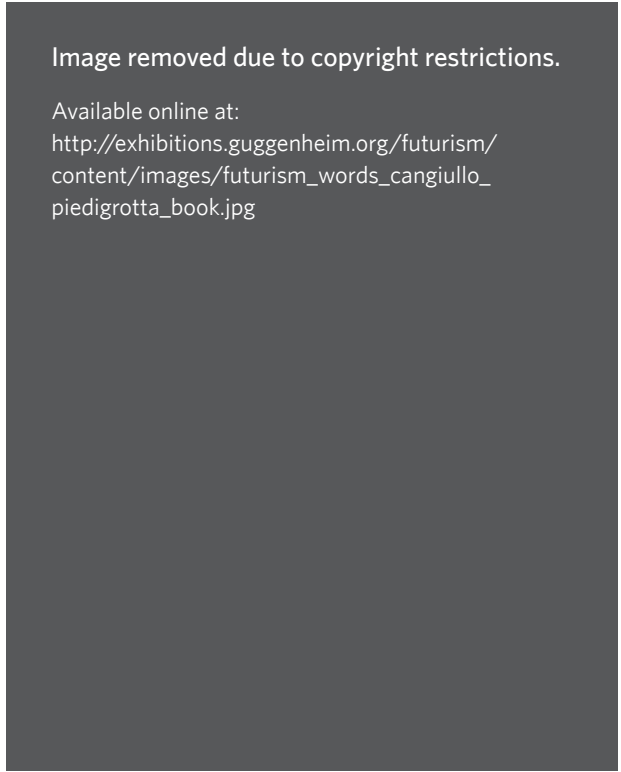


Figure 4: Francesco Cangiullo. Cover design for *Piedigrotta*, 1916.

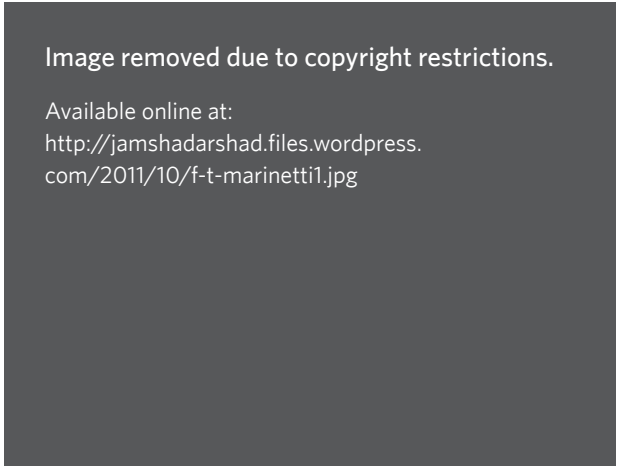


Figure 5: F.T. Marinetti. Foldout from *Les mots en liberté futuristes*. 1919.

Futurists embraced new technological developments and used dynamic compositions to communicate a message of speed and aggression. The elements used were not treated as independent objects, but merged into one communicative whole.

Later, graphic designers of the Bauhaus school of design took an opposite approach to the emotive and dynamic visual production brought forward by the Futurists. They embraced a visual system based on grids, lines and simple compositions, relying on clarity and reason to facilitate transmission of knowledge (Figure 6–9). This approach was representative of a quest for a universal clarity, logic and economy of expression developed as the amount of print material made available increased dramatically.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the visual production of the Bauhaus was associated with socialist ideals.<sup>27</sup> Effectively, the development of a universal language was a way to ensure that art would be comprehensible to all and that designs would be both beautiful and useful. Standardized aesthetics and modes of production were considered a way to help society by “educating people to recognize the world in which they live.”<sup>28</sup> It represented an attempt to break down the traditional hierarchy between fine and applied arts and to merge art and industry in order to create typical forms that symbolized the world.<sup>29</sup> Designers thus rejected traditional ornamentation for a visual rhetoric that symbolized a more functional approach to visual production. The focus turned onto a more industrialized approach to making<sup>30</sup> which, despite the mediated nature of the works, provided an appearance of objective transmission of fact because of the clear, systematized visual organization. As this new visual language developed, graphic design turned into a profession and secured its place within the corporate environment as a tool to efficiently communicate to the masses. In the process, revolutionary avant-garde ideals were left aside, “detaching design from a disruptive aesthetic agenda”<sup>31</sup> and design came to focus on reducing a message to its essential, simplifying comprehension and limiting ambiguity through the elimination of extraneous details susceptible to derail the interpretation.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Jan Tschichold, “The New Typography,” in *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*, ed. Helen Armstrong (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 35.

<sup>27</sup> Lauren S. Weingarden, “Aesthetics Politicized: William Morris to the Bauhaus,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 48 (3, 1985), 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–12.

<sup>30</sup> Armstrong, 32.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Rick Poyner, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (London, UK: Laurence King Publishing, 2003), 99.

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Available online at:  
[http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/form1925\\_1926/0005](http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/form1925_1926/0005)

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Available online at:  
[http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?object\\_id=7845](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=7845)

Figure 6: Joost Schmidt. *Cover for the journal Die Form*, issue 14. 1926.

Figure 7: Walter Dexel. *Bauhaus Ausstellung*, leaflet for a Bauhaus exhibition. 1923.

The rigid grid system and use of simple geometric forms are representative of the Bauhaus' visual rhetoric.

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Available online at:  
[http://cdn.mhpbooks.com/uploads/2012/11/IMG\\_7165-572x416.jpg](http://cdn.mhpbooks.com/uploads/2012/11/IMG_7165-572x416.jpg)

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Available online at:  
<http://img.artlebedev.com/everything/izdal/novaya-tipografika/novaya-tipografika-216-217.jpg>

Figure 8: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. *Spread from Malerei, Photographie, Film*. 1925.

The use of photography (instead of illustration) corresponded to a desire to ensure an objective and direct communication.

Figure 9: Jan Tschichold. *Spread from Die Neue Typography*. 1928.

The spread describes new standard for typographic treatment were developed. The asymmetry advocated was seen as an expression of the movement of modern life.

As demonstrated in the examples of graphic design movements described above, a certain discourse emanates from the form itself, or more specifically from the relationships that exist amongst the different elements that constitute a piece. The formal elements of a piece carry a text that is additional to, and not dependent on the content depicted and reflect the ideological concerns of the producer. This reality suggests that graphic design can be conceived as *écriture* and implies that form-making is a discursive activity in itself. As such, designers do not need to author the content of their work to participate in socio-cultural or disciplinary discourse: form-making is itself a form of writing and a reflection of a specific set of ideological concerns.

### **The Political Dimension of Aesthetic Practices**

Aside from being a form of writing and a reflection of the ideological concerns of the producers, aesthetic practices also have a political dimension. Effectively, in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, French philosopher Jacques Rancière defines aesthetics as “a system of a priori form determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.”<sup>33</sup> This suggests that aesthetic representation determines what can be seen and what cannot, what is questioned or not, what is said versus what is not. As such, it defines how we experience our reality and participates in forming our political awareness. Aesthetic representation also defines the place we take within the social structure. How a text is presented impacts how it is perceived and participates in solidifying traditional relations of domination and emancipation as it legitimizes certain forms of speech and delegitimizes others.<sup>34</sup> For example, a text whose meaning is reinforced or confirmed by its visual representation has more chances to be seen as a “fact.” As a result, opposite opinions are devalued while the point of view represented is legitimized. Additionally, if it is constantly represented in the same fashion, the particular mode of representation, or particular form of speech, is naturalized and identified as “correct,” delegitimizing alternate forms of speech.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Visuals thus have a political aspect. They participate in our understanding of the hierarchy of things that organize our lives. As such, when a visual producer challenges the traditional relation between content and form, Rancière writes “he can be linked to the revolutionary who invents a new form of life.”<sup>35</sup> More specifically, if visuals only confirm the text, then the production of knowledge is only allowed to a few who have the means of production. However, if the visuals break away from standard representation and push active engagement within the process of perception, then they distribute the means of producing knowledge and tear apart social hierarchy in legitimizing individual voices. Using forms that extend representation beyond the primary meaning of the content and introducing elements from a visual language that is atypical of a given context or that question or contradict the content are some of the ways in which a visual producer can move beyond traditional forms of representation. Those practices add a new level of meaning to the work and open up possibilities for the viewer to actively participate in interpretation. Such disruptive interventions into the normal process of perception legitimize individual voices since they enable viewers to re-examine common objects, question cultural standards and form a personal opinion that may vary from common-sense interpretation. As such, the viewer is empowered as a producer of meaning, rather than being a passive receiver. This concept implies that disruption to standard modes of representation can allow visuals to challenge the dominant order by opening up a space for active spectatorship.

### **The Notion of Active Spectatorship**

The notion of active spectatorship is associated with the theatrical movement of Epic Theatre, a form of theatrical production made most famous by German playwright and theatre director Bertolt Brecht in the 1920s. This movement represents a pursuit of a theatre without spectators, as spectatorship is associated with the “dispossession of one’s own being,” a passive act with a negative connotation for cultural emancipation.<sup>36</sup> In an attempt to turn spectators into active participants in meaning-making, practitioners of this movement sought to confront the viewer with the “spectacle of something strange, which stands as an enigma and demands that he investigate the reason for its strangeness.”<sup>37</sup> While the content of the plays were left untouched, actors were encouraged to remain somewhat detached from the character, making visible the fact that they were only a construction. By this disruption to the aesthetic dimension

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” *Artforum* (March 2007), 274.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 272.

of the work, the techniques of Epic Theatre allowed a play to enter in dialogue both with theatre itself, by challenging the necessity to stay true to the author's intent, and with cultural subjects that are part of the text represented. Such modes of practice, in a way formal interventions, disruptions to traditional modes of representation, were assumed to generate a double communication, a split experience of pleasurable spectatorship and of active engagement as, while being able to enjoy the play, they were forced to remain slightly disconnected with the story. It is this disconnection that stimulated active thinking and greater engagement with the processing of information.<sup>38</sup>

As mentioned previously, graphic designers, by using a certain type of *écriture*, participate in rendering a specific view of the world and in consolidating social constructs. Today, the dominant *écriture* reinforces the existing social structure by presenting content as unquestionable. Effectively, the visual organization of commercial work tends to be derived from the Bauhaus or Swiss Modernist approach to visual production. As such, the visual dimension of these works promotes a certain ideal of objectivity and participates in reinforcing the belief that the content itself can be seen as objective and accepted at face value. It is thus mainly used to reinforce the content and confirm its legitimacy, limiting the opportunities for the reader to get involved in meaning making. However, designers intervene with the content in a manner similar to actors or directors, by rendering it according to their own interpretations. Accordingly, if disruption to the standard modes of practice of theatre and cinema can lead to both disciplinary and cultural dialogue by allowing the viewers to engage in an active form of spectatorship and by challenging conventional forms of practice, it is possible to assume that disrupting the aesthetic dimension of a graphic design work can allow it to take up a dialogic dimension in a similar fashion. This idea opens up the possibility for designers to go beyond traditional representation and use their skills to engage in disciplinary and social discourse. Furthermore, it suggests that this discourse can occur without having to let go of design's basic communicative and commercial functions or without a change in content since the form introduces a level of criticality that is independent from the content it represents. In Brecht's Epic Theatre, specific types of interventions, namely acting without displaying any emotion, or introducing unexpected breaks within the unfolding of the narrative, were identified as promoting active spectatorship. If graphic designers want to achieve the same potential, what are the specific techniques they can use? What elements specific to graphic design can they disrupt?

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 277.

## The Different Dimensions Involved in Interpretation

In “Paradox on the Graphic Artist,” French philosopher, sociologist and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard discusses the complex relationship designers must entertain between the form they create and the content depicted. While he points to the necessity of graphic design’s form to provide pleasure, entice the viewer to give into the product represented and to be faithful to the subject depicted,<sup>39</sup> he also notes that there is a hermeneutic act involved in the formulation and understanding of a piece, both from the part of the designer and of the receiver, similar to any other form of speech or artistic practice.<sup>40</sup> The designer’s interpretation affects the aesthetic dimension of the work, which in turn affects what the viewer perceives. The visual dimension of a piece requires interpretation, and its individual elements carry meaning within them. As such, aesthetics have an important role to play with the perception of the work and the possibility of a design to take up a dialogic role since the visuals have rhetorical value, both with regards to the subject represented and the culture, or context, within which the designed object lives. Active spectatorship is equivalent to engaging consciously in interpretation. If design is understood as a form of language and the visuals as a form of text that requires interpretation, then designers can use hermeneutics theory to identify the different dimensions they can disrupt to challenge traditional interpretation.

Semiotics is a branch of hermeneutics directly involved in the analysis of how visuals are interpreted. It is “a branch of communication theory that investigates sign systems and the modes of representation that humans use to convey feelings, thoughts, ideas, and ideologies.”<sup>41</sup> While semiotics was developed in linguistics, it has been used to study a range of disciplines, including graphic design. Effectively, Barthes has often used semiotics to analyze the messages expressed through graphic design, especially in advertising. For example, in “Rhetoric of the Image,” he performs an in depth analysis of how a pasta advertisement communicates through visuals.<sup>42</sup> His analysis is based on the three dimensions of a work

<sup>39</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Paradox on the Graphic Artist,” in *Jean-Francois Lyotard: Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 46.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Ryder, *Semiotics: Language and Culture* (Denver, University of Colorado, 2004). Accessed January 2013. [http://carbon.ucdenver.edu/~mryder/semiotics\\_este.html](http://carbon.ucdenver.edu/~mryder/semiotics_este.html).

<sup>42</sup> Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 153-155. While he does not mention the vocabulary of semantics theory directly, Barthes describes the composition as connoting “italianicity” (syntactic dimension), individual elements as having a different meaning by themselves (semantic dimension), and the “Italian” connotation as only existing in a specific culture with a pre-conceived notion of “italianicity” (pragmatic dimension).

that affect interpretation as prescribed by semiotic theory, namely the pragmatic, syntactic, and semantic dimensions. The pragmatic level refers to the context in which the elements are placed, for example the time and place, or culture it lives in. The syntactic level refers to how the visual elements contained within a work relate to one another and affect each other's meaning, thus to the overall composition and visual hierarchy. The semantic level relates to the meaning of individual components used within the composition. If those three dimensions of a work affect interpretation, it is possible to conclude that disruption to any of them is susceptible to lead to active spectatorship by introducing elements that challenge traditional forms of reading, and thus to lead the design of a piece to be dialogic: to familiarize, "lay bare" and "expose" to the viewers' scrutiny the workings of concepts that otherwise seem unquestionable.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Bakhtin, 23.

## The Dialogic Effect of Disruption to the Dimensions Involved in Interpretation

### Disruption to the Pragmatic Dimension of a Work

The context of a work includes the time and place within which it exists, as well as the medium and type of subject represented. Effectively, whether a work is a book, an advertisement, or a fashion magazine, whether it is directed towards men or women, children or adults, will affect what is acceptable or not, as each specific format has standards norms of practice. Knowing that the context of a work is linked to specific standards of practice and that disruption has the potential to stimulate dialogue, one can conclude that disrupting the aesthetic conventions prescribed by a particular context can instigate disciplinary and cultural dialogue. This potential can be witnessed in the fashion industry. Effectively, disruptive devices such as the lack of functionality of a garment, the slowing of time through disruption of movement and the recuperation of old practices into a new environment<sup>44</sup> posited against traditional practices and the usual consistencies of the fashion world, such as the focus on beauty and the functionality of clothes, are used to allow a garment to become “a commentary on fashion’s techniques and principles.”<sup>45</sup> As a result, limitation of physical movements, the use of a critical approach to themes of identity politics, cultural and gender transgression, and the satire of the fashion system itself have been consistent themes within the discipline’s development.<sup>46</sup>

For example, French fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier used his garments as commentaries on the standard definitions of beauty and gender norms of their time. As Nathalie Bondil writes: “In an age that promotes pre-formatted standards of beauty, Gaultier’s imagination creates multicultural, multisexual fashion, hybrid references, gender transgressions, canons without clichés, a fluid place devoid of discrimination.”<sup>47</sup> He used the choice of models to introduce a dissident view of beauty within the fashion world. For example, by displaying a plus size model in his fashion show amidst many traditional figures (Figure 10), he celebrated the marginal, claiming that beauty belongs not only to stereotypical figures, but also to larger women.

<sup>44</sup> Annette Geiger, “Fashion and Time: The Impossibility of the Present,” in *Fashion Out-of-Order — Disruption as a Principle*, ed. Dorothea Mink (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, HfK Bremen, 2011), 153.

<sup>45</sup> Barbara Vinken, “A Complete Transvaluation of Values,” in *Fashion Out-of-Order — Disruption as a Principle*, ed. Dorothea Mink (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, HfK Bremen, 2011), 63-64.

<sup>46</sup> Dorothea Mink, Preface to *Fashion Out-of-Order — Disruption as a Principle*, ed. Dorothea Mink (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, HfK Bremen, 2011), 8-9.

<sup>47</sup> Nathalie Bondil, “The Sayings of a Humanist Couturier,” in *The World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*, ed. Thierry-Maxime Lorient. (Montreal: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and Abrams, NY), 16.

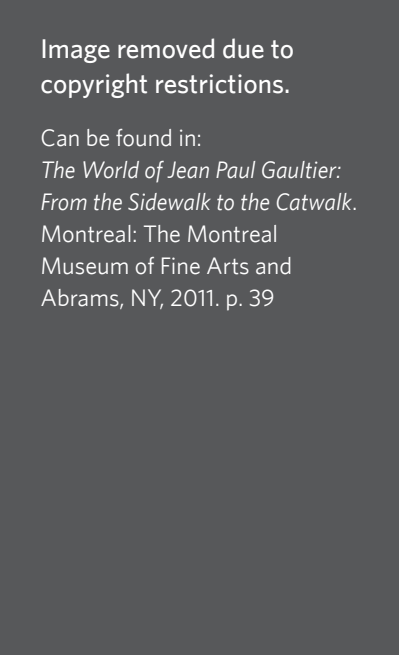
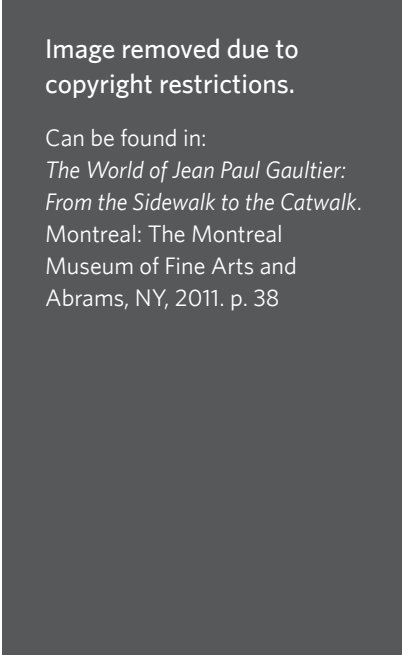


Figure 10: Jean Paul Gaultier. *Sporty Chic Collection*, Women's prêt-à-porter spring/summer 2007.

The use of a full figure model contrasts with the traditional standards of beauty advocated in the fashion industry.

Figure 11: Jean Paul Gaultier and Francis Menuge. 1985.

Traditional gender attire is inverted as the man on the right wears a man-skirt, a signature piece from Gaultier's men prêt-à-porter Spring 1984 collection.

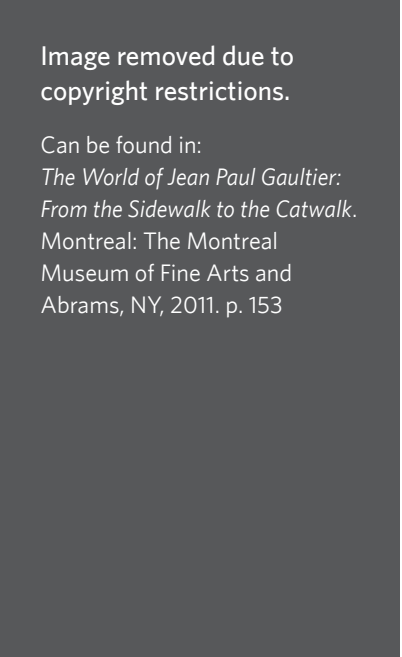
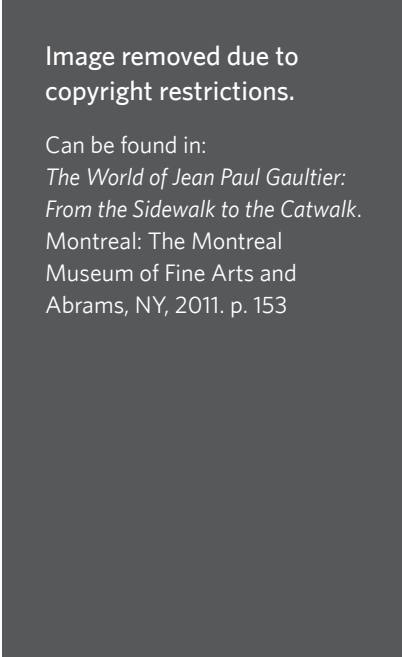


Figure 12: Jean Paul Gaultier. *The Modern Retros collection*, Men's prêt-à-porter spring/summer 1988.

Figure 13: Jean Paul Gaultier. *House of Pleasures collection*, Men's prêt-à-porter spring/summer 1997.

The inversion of gender attire introduced in 1984 continues through time as later collections contain corsets, a traditionally feminine garment.

His clothes themselves are also known to transgress societal norms and question stereotypes and conventions, disrupting norms and participating in reinventing them in return.<sup>48</sup> Effectively, his garments have been consistently used to make statements about society.<sup>49</sup> For example, in his Spring 1984 collection *And God Created Man* (Figure 11), he inverted traditional gender attire by presenting skirts, corsets, tutus, etc. in the context of a men's clothing collection.<sup>50</sup> More than shocking the industry, the garments acted as a commentary on gender definition and were opening up the possibility for a wider definition of masculinity that allowed for masculine expression of fragility, sensitivity and their power of seduction through the introduction of unexpected forms on the male body.<sup>51</sup> This inversion of gender continued throughout his career as seen in Figure 12 and Figure 13, where we see corsets from two subsequent men's prêt-à-porter collections. As a result, he consistently kept those discourses at the forefront by bringing into the masculine world visual symbols traditionally associated with femininity. Considering that fashion designers have no predetermined content —other than fashion itself— around which to drive the creation, the fact that these types of discourse occur through the introduction of unusual forms within a given context confirms the capacity of the form to engage in disciplinary and cultural debates independently of content. It suggests that disruptive aesthetics have an important role to play in the stimulation of critical design discourse, and that disrupting the pragmatic level of a work is a way to achieve a dialogic aesthetic practice.

Disruptive devices such as the introduction of elements considered as “bad taste,” visual appropriation,<sup>52</sup> and the slowing of communication, have allowed design works to act as commentaries on design's techniques and principles in the past. For example, inspired by the writings of American architect Robert Venturi, more specifically *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) in which he argues for the cultural importance of vernacular forms within the architectural language, American graphic designers and typographers started to produce new forms of work that artfully introduced “hand-drawn gestures and vernacular “bad taste” [...] into

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>49</sup> Suzy Menkes, “The Power of the Show,” in *The World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*, ed. Thierry-Maxime Lorient. (Montreal: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and Abrams, NY), 23.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Florence Müller, Introduction to “Skin Deep,” in *The World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*, ed. Thierry-Maxime Lorient. (Montreal: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and Abrams, NY), 191.

<sup>52</sup> Katherine McCoy, “American Graphic Design Expression,” *Design Quarterly*, 148 (1990), 14.

highly aestheticized, layered compositions.”<sup>53</sup> Notable among them was Edward Fella (Figure 14–16), whose particular approach, despite having included visual elements from the vernacular before Venturi’s influence, was aligned with the new forms of professional practice that were emerging. His work generated a high amount of responses from within the design community, and while some celebrated it, including graphic designer Lorraine Wild who described it as “a challenge to normal expectations of typography” involving low parody and a certain level of seriousness<sup>54</sup> others at first viscerally rejected the practice.

In the 1993 essay “The Cult of the Ugly,” graphic designer and author Steven Heller goes so far as to describe Fella’s practice as “acerb” and “ugly,” work “which might be rationalized as personal expression, but not as viable visual communication, and so in the end will be a blip (or tangent) in the continuum of graphic design history.”<sup>55</sup> While he later ended up hiring Fella to produce work for *The New York Times* (Figure 16), where he was an art director, his early discourse shows just how much Fella’s practice challenged the limits of the discipline. The introduction of handmade elements and irregular forms that were usually perceived as ugly or invalid within the context of professional graphic design practice due to their unprofessional and uncontrolled characteristics thus resulted in an aesthetic that challenged the standard practices of the time and stimulated disciplinary debate. When posited against the discipline’s traditional communicative practices and consistencies in the definition or perception of beauty, such work acted as a commentary on the limits and practices of the design discipline at the time and suggested an alternative way to produce culturally relevant work. In the case of Fella’s work, a similar discourse as what is witnessed in fashion emerged. Effectively, disciplinary discourse was driven by the formal characteristics of the work. More precisely, the disruption of the relation between the form and the context in which the work existed forced practitioners to reconsider the disciplinary importance of elements traditionally dismissed in visual culture.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 13-15.

<sup>54</sup> Steven Heller, “The Cult of the Ugly,” *Eye Magazine* 3 (9, 1993). Accessed January 2013. <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/cult-of-the-ugly>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

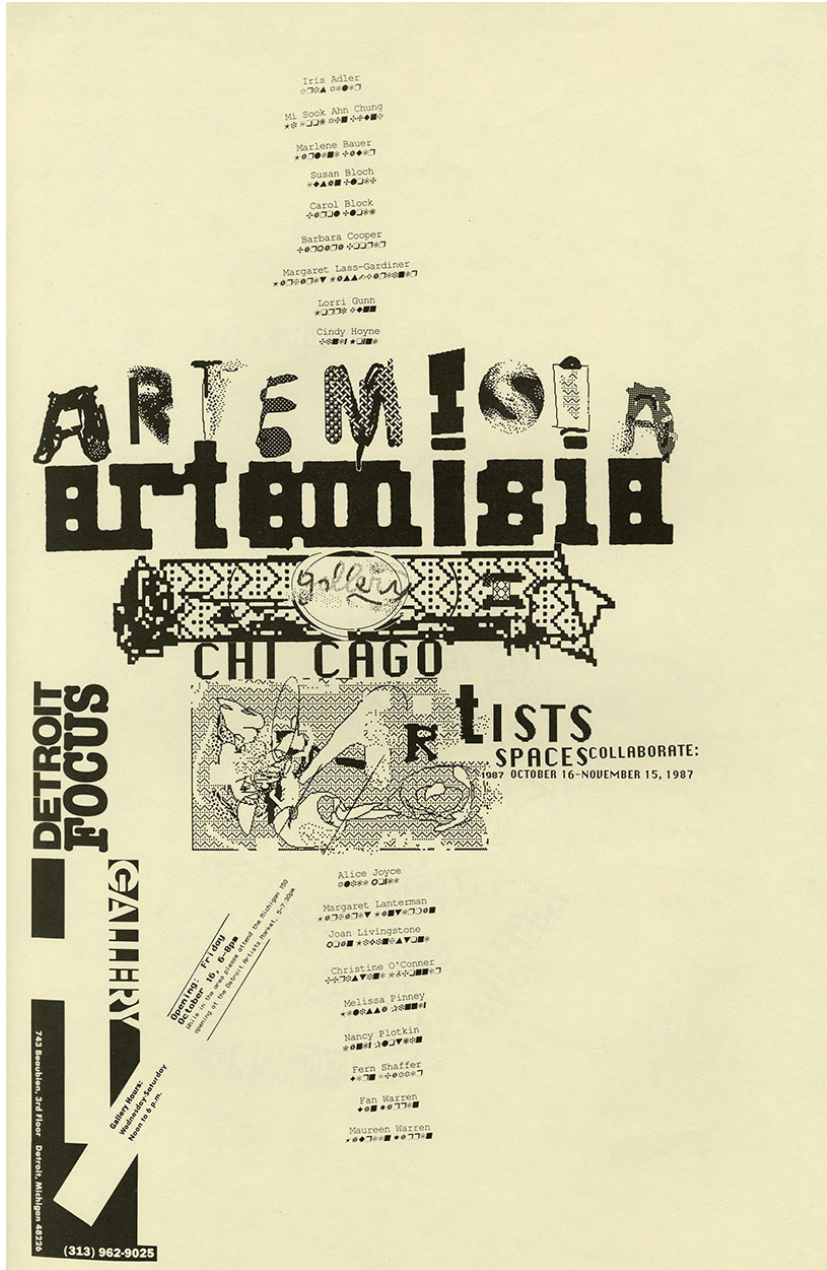


Figure 14: Edward Fella. Exhibition Poster. Detroit Focus Gallery. 1987.



Figure 15: Edward Fella. *Out There Doing it*, Lecture Series Poster. 1989.

These posters are typical of Edward Fella’s visual production, which integrates visual elements from the vernacular language within traditional design practice. Letterforms are irregular, the layout does not follow typographic rules and spaces that would be considered mistakes in the professional context are present within the type layout.



Figure 16: Edward Fella. *The New York Times Book Review Summer Reading* Cover. 1999.

A cover created for *The New York Times Book Review* under the art direction of Steven Heller six years after the publication of “The Cult of the Ugly” in which Heller criticizes Fella’s work. The piece displays hand-drawn and irregular letterforms characteristic of the vernacular language Fella uses in his practice.

The work of American graphic designer Elliott Earls also participates in challenging disciplinary assumptions through contextual disruption. His work is characteristic of the approach pushed forward by the graphic design department of the Cranbrook Academy of Arts, where he is head of the department as well as Designer-in-Residence, and thus places emphasis on the “threshold between graphic design and contemporary art.”<sup>56</sup> Earls’ practice is focused on “extending strategies and historical concerns of designers out into a material condition.”<sup>57</sup> This focus results in visual production that brings graphic design outside of its traditional context, allowing the discipline to permeate a terrain that is traditionally reserved for art. As Earls explains in a lecture concerning the philosophy of Cranbrook’s design department, design is traditionally focused on rational problem solving. It is characterized by a linear process constituted of, first, problem analysis, then, the production of a thesis, and finally, visual production that answers the posited problem with a solution. However, his approach to creation brings together divergent modes of thinking in regards to design practice, including a process of “kinesthetic and emotional learning, as well as technical research.”<sup>58</sup> This implies that visual production is a mode of research and sometimes an end in itself, an idea that challenges traditional boundaries and definitions of design practice. The technical research approach brings design out of its problem solving focus and into the realm of an aesthetic practice in which the visuals can form a critical disciplinary discourse, an understanding of design practice closer to the traditional distinction ascribed to the fine arts. As such, the visuals he creates, for example the Cranbrook poster seen in Figure 17, act as a form of discourse on the traditional conception of design and opens up possibilities for non-traditional forms of practice. Some of his work can even be read as — and situated in — contemporary art (Figure 18 and Figure 19). The visuals he creates and his approach to design practice participate in challenging the mainstream view of design’s role and good practices and act as an investigation into the nature of the discipline as they challenge its limits and the norms of practice of commercial design context. While such a practice would be seen as traditional in scholarly or experimental practice, its introduction within the commercial context challenges the necessity of design to act purely as representation of the product or service it represents. By doing so, it reaffirms the notion that form-making is a way to engage in disciplinary discourse.

<sup>56</sup> Elliott Earls, *2D Department Philosophy*, Video (Cranbrook Academy of Art, 2012) Accessed January, 2013. <http://www.cranbrookart.edu/Pages/2D.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Elliott Earls, *Elliott Earls 2013 Artist-in-Residence Lecture*, Video (Cranbrook Academy of Art, 2012) Accessed January, 2013. <http://www.cranbrookart.edu/Pages/2D.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.



Figure 17: Elliott Earls. Cranbrook Academy of Art Poster for the 2D Department. 2008.

The visuals are an exploration into the techniques used by graphic designers, including 3D rendering, vector work, as well as hand-made and digital illustration, rather than a direct representation of the content. As such, the overall aesthetic reflects Earls' concern for design that act as a form of technical research.



Figure 18: Elliott Earls. *God* from Hypertension Exhibition. 2013.

The tri-dimensional aspect of the work reflects Earls' desire to materialize disciplinary concerns. Design is extracted from its traditional commercial context as personal research is conducted and the focus is placed on the technical dimension of the work.

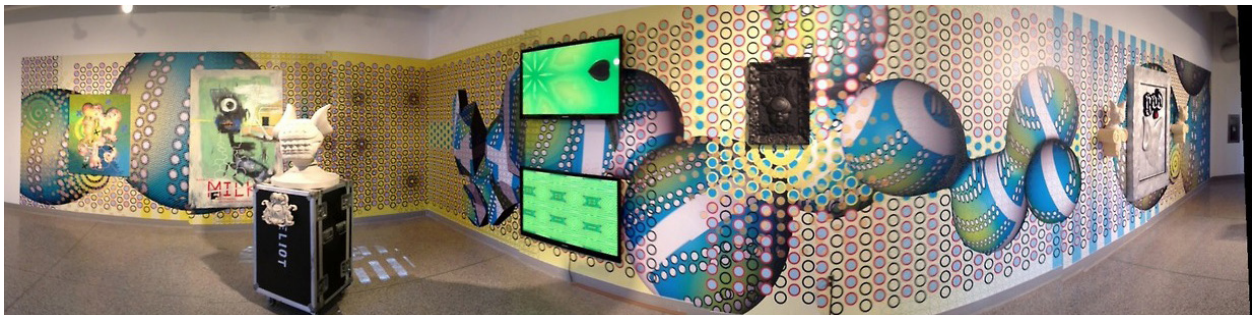


Figure 19: Elliott Earls. *Hypertension Exhibition*. 2013.

Design practice is brought into a context traditionally associated to art as a series of visual experiments conducted by Earls are exhibited in a gallery. Here design is celebrated for its technical refinement and the research involved in the making rather than for its communicative function.

### **Thesis Work Produced as an Exploration of the Effect of Pragmatic Disruption**

The previous examples confirm the dialogic potential of introducing non-traditional signs within a traditional context, as well as of creating design artifacts that defy their traditional communicative context. As discussed, while graphic design and fashion have a different relationship to content, both disciplines can stimulate disciplinary and socio-cultural discourse by introducing elements that enter into conflict with the visual language conventionally seen in the context within which they are placed, or by challenging the standard processes associated to a given context. Figures 20 and 21 show posters created in the context of this thesis. They were produced as part of an investigation into the effect of contextual disruptions within the traditional visual language used in fashion advertising. While fashion advertising often relies on beautiful, luxurious, unified imagery that connotes sensuality and “high” social ideals, the poster seen in Figure 20 displays hand drawn letterforms and images characterized by a discontinuous visual treatment. Figure 21 is a reinterpretation of an existing advertisement, but the visuals shown are a translation of the original elements into the visual language typical of the Internet, a traditionally lower form of visual language characterized by crude imagery and visual treatments considered to be in “bad taste.”

In both, the content remains untouched, as the message traditionally communicated through the imagery is either included textually or present in a different form, but the visuals carry with them an additional message that challenges traditional norms of practice. Effectively, they suggest that the traditional use of female models displaying a specific body type is not necessary for the communication of the message needed to sell the product. They also suggest that sensuality is not an imperative, or a positive representation of women, and that lower forms of visual production can be used to advertise higher forms of culture, challenging the traditional separation entertained by the conventionally used visual language. This experiment shows that the aesthetic dimension of a work can be used to engage with the viewers, entice them to stop and take time to contemplate and reflect upon the norms that are challenged. It confirms that a small contextual disruption, in this case the introduction of visual language typical of low forms of culture within a context held in higher esteem, can stimulate disciplinary dialogue by proposing alternative forms of practice which are as efficient in serving the traditional functions of design, while generating an additional level of critical discourse. Finally, it demonstrates an alternative way to approach visual creation. Effectively, rather than limiting its focus on solving a communication problem, the act of making is used as a form of critical inquiry, a way to investigate the effect of non-conventional visual language on the perception of a work.



Figure 20: Marie-Noëlle Hébert. *Something to Do with Sex*. 2014.

Instead of beautiful, luxurious and unified imagery, the poster displays hand-drawn letterforms and images characterized by a discontinuous visual treatment.



Figure 21: Marie-Noëlle Hébert. *Philipp Plein*. 2014.

Elements from an existing advertisement, namely a woman, vivid colors, and a washing machine are directly translated into the crude and low quality imagery typical of the visual language of the Internet.

## **Disruption to the Syntactic Dimension of a Work**

Similarly to fashion designers, filmmakers concerned with criticism use disruptive interventions to add a critical level to visual production. They use syntactic interventions, such as making the process and tools of productions visible within a film,<sup>59</sup> making authorial intrusions, fragmenting time, distorting space,<sup>60</sup> and introducing anachronisms<sup>61</sup> and narrative incoherence<sup>62</sup> to criticize the usual mystification involved in filmic production. Those small interventions disrupt the traditional seamless montage and believability of the image and create alternate stories that can challenge and interrogate the filmic text.<sup>63</sup> This alternate discourse can be either philosophical, political, or about filmmaking itself,<sup>64</sup> allowing a film to challenge our perception of the treated subjects and of the film industry. It is dialogic in nature in the fact that it invites the public to participate in the production of meaning.<sup>65</sup> By using an unconventional visual treatment, filmmakers can thus introduce a second level of discourse within their production while still providing the viewer with the basic storyline and content dictated by the script. Those involved within the industry will recognize non-traditional interventions that challenge standard modes of practice and question their necessity. The general public will be empowered to question the validity of traditional forms of representation and to become critical of the manipulation involved in the creation of visuals they face everyday.

The relationship between form and content in cinema parallels the one found in graphic design. The filmmaker is in charge of interpreting a given content and expressing it visually, shaping the way the public will experience it. Similarly, the designer is in charge of interpreting and intervening within the aesthetic dimension of the work, controlling the aesthetic experience of the viewer. As such, if disruptive interventions to the syntax of a work from the part of the filmmaker can participate in turning a movie into a dialogic device, it is logical that the same opportunity exists for graphic designers. Some graphic designers have experimented with challenging the traditional syntax of a work, stimulating cultural and disciplinary discourse through aesthetic production.

<sup>59</sup> Stam, 74.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

For example, French graphic designers Mathias Augustyniak and Michaël Amzalag of the design studio M/M (Paris) have disrupted the traditional syntax of fashion advertising in many instances, one of them being the advertising campaign they produced for a perfume inspired by their work created by Byredo Parfums (Figure 22). The overall organization of the pieces challenges standard norms of practice since elements that would traditionally be made central to the communicative success of an advertisement, namely the product's name and information, is partly obliterated by the visuals. In the example on the left, the nature of the product is hidden, as well as nearly half of its name. The content of the work is therefore relegated to a secondary importance. Additionally, in both advertisements, the black ink interferes with the traditional signifiers used in perfume advertisements, namely the facial features of the models, which are often used to connote sensuality and a certain ideal of beauty, preventing from reading the photograph in full. While the traditional visuals of this type of work are hinted at, they cannot be traditionally decoded due to their organization and the conflicts created by the superposition. The viewer needs to actively participate in the meaning making, filling in the semantic blanks created by the disruption.

This way of decoding the work goes against traditional practice, which tends to deliver a message as directly as possible. It suggests that design does not have to instantly communicate, but can engage the viewer and leave a space for interpretation while still performing its commercial function. Such a practice is recurrent in M/M Paris' work (Figure 23–24). Handcrafted visuals are often juxtaposed onto more commercial or traditional forms, bringing into their design an overall organization that challenges standard commercial practice. This internal order puts the importance of the visual treatment before the communicative message, displacing the value of design practice from its potential commercial use to its cultural and artistic nature. Effectively, their work constantly stresses the cultural value of the craft of design and, as Augustyniak mentions in an interview with art historian Emily King, it is related to a desire to insert art into reality.<sup>66</sup> By challenging the relationship that exists between art and design, as well as between art and the world, bringing it into everyday life, they participate in stimulating alternate readings of common elements of visual culture. They use design as a way to both “decode and rescript the world,” shifting the relationship that exists between two things, allowing “to see the world and think about signs in a different way.”<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Emily King, “Mathias Augustyniak,” in *M to M of M/M (Paris)* (London, UK : Thames and Hudson, 2012), 306.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Available online at:  
[http://lh3.ggpht.com/\\_rxnliazkEUY/TJSxUEuSjHI/AAAAAAAAAdY/U3aAYWVmguk/mminkmmparisbyredoparfumscqc02.jpg](http://lh3.ggpht.com/_rxnliazkEUY/TJSxUEuSjHI/AAAAAAAAAdY/U3aAYWVmguk/mminkmmparisbyredoparfumscqc02.jpg)

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Available online at:  
[http://lh4.ggpht.com/\\_rxnliazkEUY/TJSxV8i88II/AAAAAAAAAdc/Ra6O8VWZY0E/mminkmmparisbyredoparfumscqc03.jpg](http://lh4.ggpht.com/_rxnliazkEUY/TJSxV8i88II/AAAAAAAAAdc/Ra6O8VWZY0E/mminkmmparisbyredoparfumscqc03.jpg)

Figure 22: M/M (Paris). M/MINK Advertising Campaign. 2010.

The traditional visual hierarchy is challenged as ink blotches take over the composition and prevent from accessing the visual elements expected from fashion advertising.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Available online at:  
[http://pixel.nymag.com/imgs/fashion/slideshows/2013/03/m-m/092\\_093-balenciaga.nocrop.w1800.h1330.jpg](http://pixel.nymag.com/imgs/fashion/slideshows/2013/03/m-m/092_093-balenciaga.nocrop.w1800.h1330.jpg)

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Available online at:  
<http://charliestine.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/10-mm-paris-balenciaga-on-charliestine-net.jpg?w=620&h=899>

Figure 23: M/M (Paris). Spring/Summer 2001 advertising for Balenciaga. 2001.

Figure 24: M/M (Paris). Spring/Summer 2002 invitation for Balenciaga. 2002.

Juxtapositions similar to what is seen in the M/MINK campaign are used as the hand-drawn visuals obscure parts of the garment and the facial features of the models.

Designs that disrupted traditional syntax have also been produced by Dutch Designer Jan van Toorn, who, in 1994, called for a renewed engagement with design through “a struggle against design in the form of design.”<sup>68</sup> Rather than asking designers to reject the discipline’s usual role or to embrace it blindly, he mentions the need for design to take an oppositional stance and move away from the visual language prescribed by “common-sense cultural representation.”<sup>69</sup> He focuses on the production of multidimensional work which does not blindly accept information, but challenges the preconceptions of popular imagery and encourages the reader to engage in “a more active way of dealing with reality;”<sup>70</sup> seeking for interruptions that provide viewers with moments of awareness, and thus active spectatorship in the Brechtian sense.<sup>71</sup> An example of work exhibiting the approach he brings forward is seen in Figure 25.

This spread from the book *Cultiver Notre Jardin* was produced in 1999 and demonstrates how Van Toorn’s work stimulates active spectatorship by disrupting traditional syntax. The image bleeds across the two sides of the spread, but is divided by a smaller page containing text. Depending on the positioning of the page that interrupts the flow of the image, it is read differently. Traditionally, the text would have been placed on the side of the image, or in a position that would not interrupt its reading, as both would have acted complementarily in the understanding of the message. By creating this unexpected interruption, Van Toorn makes visible the possibility of alternative readings of a single image and foregrounds the effect of cropping and other image alterations techniques used by the media on the meaning of a piece.

<sup>68</sup> Jan van Toorn, “Design and Reflexivity,” In *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*, ed. Helen Armstrong (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 106.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Els Kuijpers, *And/Or: On Contradictions in the Work of Jan van Toorn*, trans. Peter Mason (Nuth: Rosbeek Books, 2006), 8.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Available online at:

[http://maxbruinsma.nl/VanToorn\\_Jardin\\_a.jpg](http://maxbruinsma.nl/VanToorn_Jardin_a.jpg)

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Available online at:

[http://maxbruinsma.nl/VanToorn\\_Jardin\\_b.jpg](http://maxbruinsma.nl/VanToorn_Jardin_b.jpg)

Figure 25: Jan van Toorn. Spread from *Cultiver Notre Jardin*. 1999.

The image is interrupted by a half-page containing text. The placement of the latter changes how the image is interpreted, thus foregrounding the effect of design decisions on the meaning of a piece.

As art historian and writer Els Kuijpers notes in *And/Or: Contradictions in the Work of Jan van Toorn*, the presence of those alternative readings forces the viewer to perform a more critical, less automatic interpretation.<sup>72</sup> As the narrative becomes discontinuous and fragmented through this type of interruption, the viewer is explicitly addressed through the aesthetic treatment<sup>73</sup> and the traditional perception of photography as being a form of objective representation is challenged. The viewer is provided insight into the mediation of information and is thus allowed to form his/her own opinion.<sup>74</sup> As Kuijpers continues, “the image takes on a layered structure of meaning and becomes dialogical.”<sup>75</sup>

The aesthetic treatment that Van Toorn applies to his work suggests a certain “democratization of viewing,” it represents a belief in the necessity of viewers to actively engage in the production of meaning and to critically assess the arguments that are presented to them in the media<sup>76</sup> for the emergence of a truly democratic space. It is thus a form of cultural discourse. Additionally, a certain critical discourse emerges in relation to graphic design itself as Van Toorn proposes that design is essentially political. While most of design practice is focused on serving the needs of commercial enterprises, his involvement with viewer empowerment and the production of democratic forms of communication presents new possibilities for designers to get involved in the political sphere. It extends the role of designers from commercial artists to cultural producers. Additionally, by assuming the role of image editor, he expands the functions of the designer by including responsibilities regarding content.<sup>77</sup> His visual production thus acts as a form of critical enquiry in the potential role of graphic design within the socio-political sphere, pushing the boundaries in which design is understood to exist and proposing a new set of disciplinary concerns.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 5.

## **Thesis Work Produced as an Exploration of the Effect of Syntactic Disruption**

The examples discussed above suggest that disrupting the syntax of a work is a viable way to stimulate active spectatorship and use the formal aspects of graphic design practice as a dialogic device in regards to the discipline. Experiments in this regard have also been conducted in the context of this thesis. Effectively, some projects were concerned with the disruption of the syntactic dimension of design, especially looking into the syntax of the book format. The project seen in Figure 26 is a book presenting the scholarly article “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” written by art historian Claire Bishop. It contains the article in full, but challenges the traditional hierarchy of presentation as the visual emphasis is placed on the footnotes and the main content is relegated to a secondary visual importance. Additionally, the images, which usually act as a way to reinforce some aspect of the text in a scholarly context, are deprived of all the elements that could complement the content. Effectively, all visuals of the artworks discussed have been completely removed from the pictures used. Through this simple disruptive act, graphic design ends up complicating the reading rather than facilitating it, thus foregrounding its own impact on our capacity to understand a work. The viewer is left to search through the fragments of text presented to extract information, forced into active spectatorship, as he cannot easily digest information. The result suggests that graphic design is not by nature a way to facilitate reading.

This piece works against the dominant conception of design and suggests that visuals can also participate in stimulating active readership and in criticizing the way information is often consumed. As a result, by a simple disruption to the traditional hierarchy of a work, this design suggests alternative practices that correspond to a different way of perceiving life, carrying with it values of personal engagement and active spectatorship, thus a call for the democratization of the production of knowledge. The formal organization is dialogic in regards to both the discipline and the culture in which it resides as it provides the viewer with something strange, an experience that requires investigation in order to be comprehended and leads to the questioning of common-sense practices.

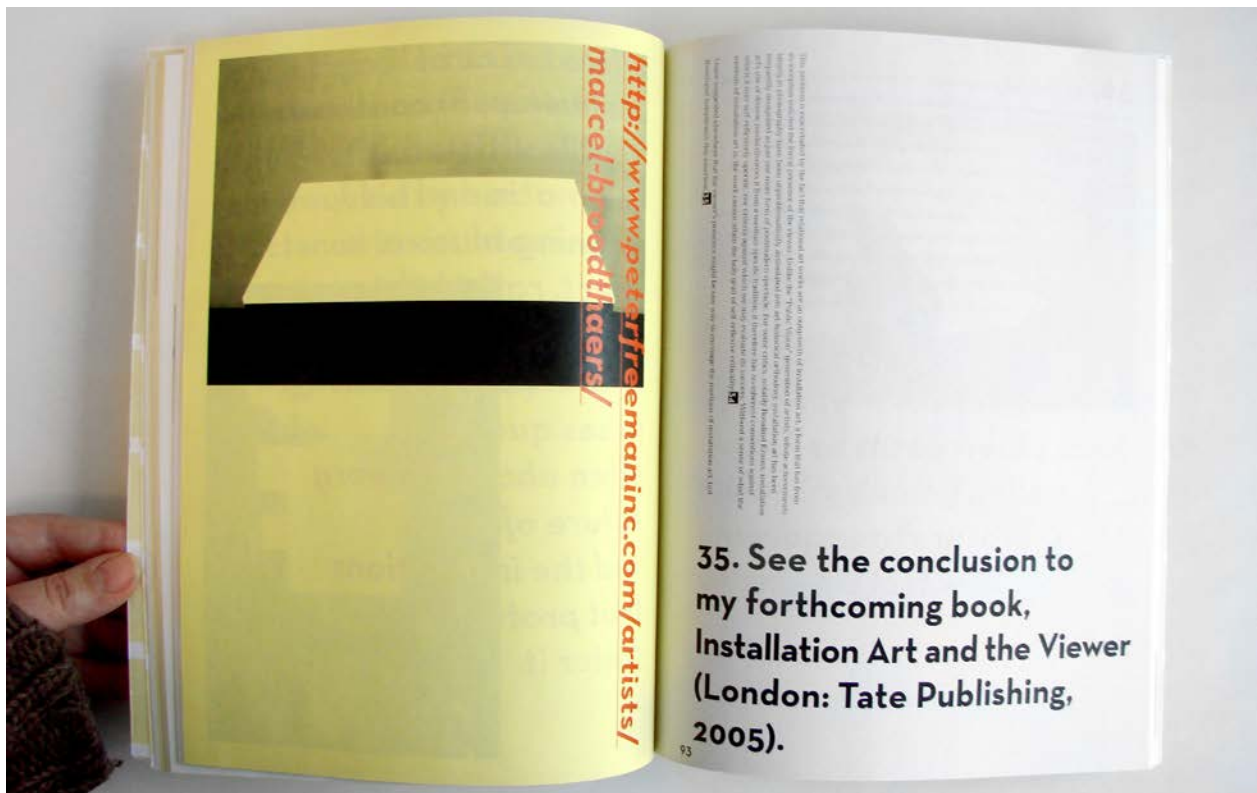
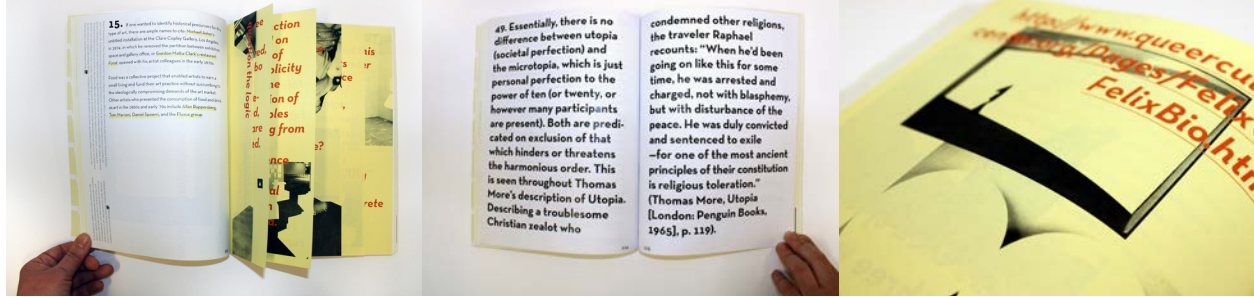
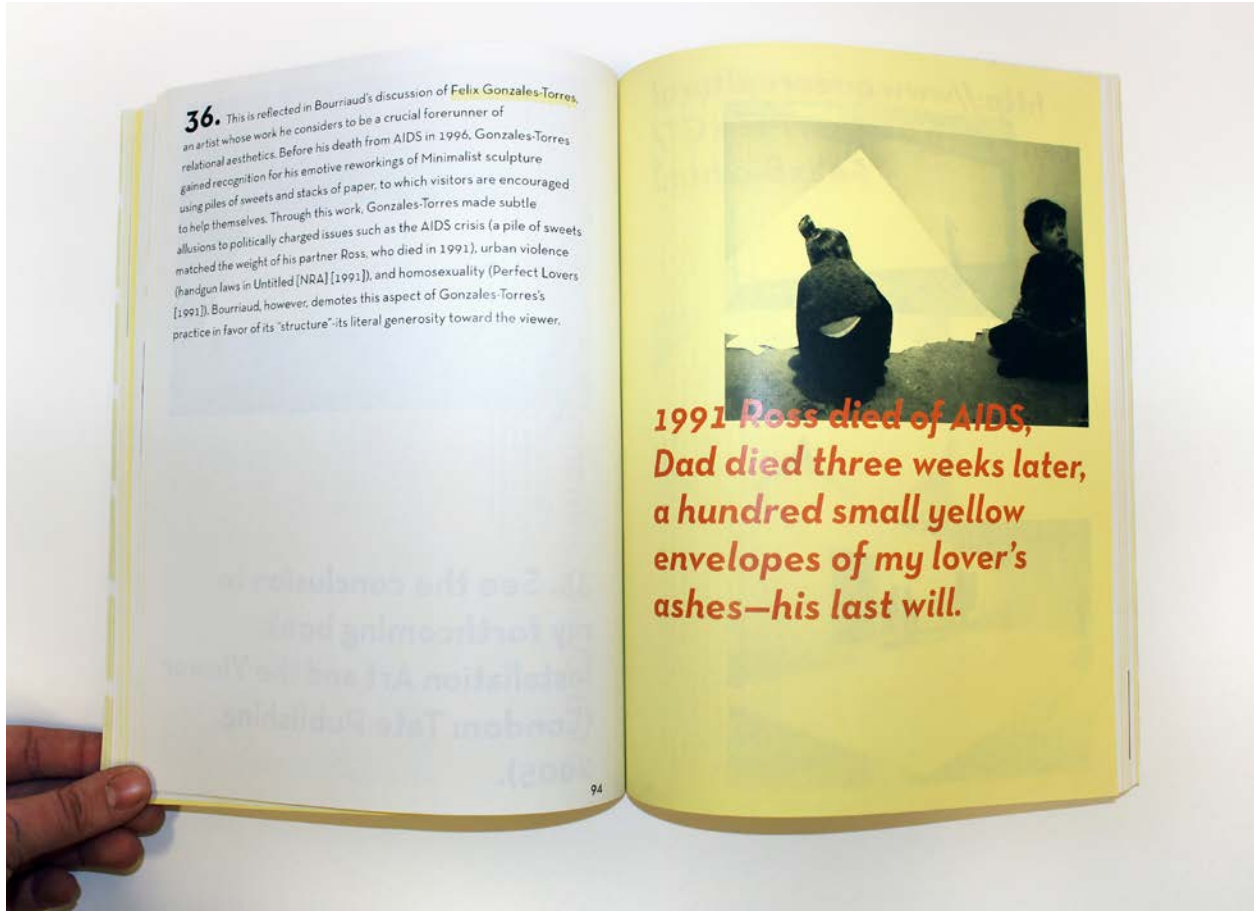


Figure 26: Marie-Noëlle Hébert. *October*, Vol. 110 (Autumn 2004), pp.51-79. The MIT Press <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397557>. Accessed: 13/05/2013 12:18. 2013



The traditional visual hierarchy of this scholarly article is inverted as footnotes are emphasized while the essay itself is relegated to a secondary importance. Additionally, the visuals that are traditionally used to reinforce some aspects of the text are removed from the photographs displayed. This project won the 2013 Artists' Book of the Moment competition held by the AGYU.

Figure 27 shows a second book articulated around Claire Bishop's article. In this particular artifact, the text is constantly interrupted by the visuals. Owing to this interruption, the reader is forced to stop and to examine that which is before him/her. The relation between text and image is foregrounded as both mediums merge and directly affect each other's reading. It brings into the conscious level the methods according to which we unconsciously process information, forcing active participation in the processing of the meaning brought forward by the imagery and in identifying its relation to the word with which it is associated. Additionally, to be able to access the content, the user needs to take the time to remove the imagery. This additional level of manual interaction reinforces the dialogic nature of design, as the viewer becomes an active participant not only in reading, but also in making the object. The book is grounded in reality as it becomes incomplete in itself and requires direct involvement. It becomes something that is interacted with, an object on which we intervene, rather than a simple provider of definitive and stable content. In a way, the user has an opportunity to reexamine the relation he holds with the object and with the design by being given agency to modify the final product.

Moreover, the images included are not a direct illustration of the original meaning intended in the text, but visuals that correspond to the first Google image obtained when looking up words related to the main concepts discussed, namely "antagonism," "relational," and "aesthetics." The meanings of images and text end up being separate as definitions from a more popular context are introduced through the images. This reality brings to the forefront the multiple possible interpretations of a single element, entering in dialogue with the traditional perception of design as a conveyor of a unified message. It also affects the semantic dimension of the work by bringing together multiple meanings for a single word. In that way, the legitimacy of the intended meaning of the text is challenged by the imagery. More than challenging the traditional norms of practice, the interventions made actually participate in disrupting the semantic dimension of particular elements included in the piece, thus allowing for an additional cultural dialogue.

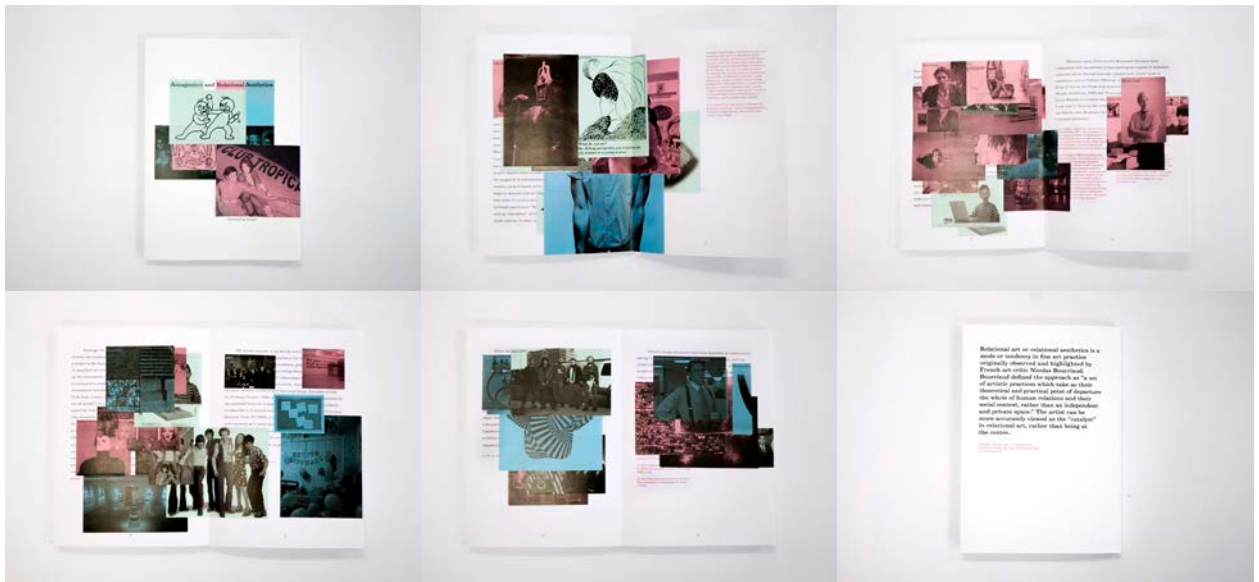


Figure 27: Marie-Noëlle Hébert. *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics 1*. 2013.

Images are stacked on top of each other and interfere with the reading of the main content, forcing the user to modify the piece in order to access meaning.

## Disruption to the Semantic Dimension of a Work

While Jan van Toorn's work was discussed above in terms of syntactic disruptions, interventions to the semantic level of visuals are also present within his work. His designs sometimes end up reversing the meaning traditionally associated to the elements he uses. For example, in the 1974/75 calendar he produced for the Dutch printing house Mart.Spruijt, a piece focused on exposing the codes of representation of contemporary politics in the media (Figure 28–29), he leaves traces of his intervention within the visual as a way to make obvious to the viewers that the images were mediated.<sup>78</sup> Some pages of the calendar (Figure 28) were dedicated to highlighting “Dutch politicians’ tendency to represent themselves as ordinary workers.”<sup>79</sup> He montages a succession of politicians’ heads on the same set of clothes, creating a non-traditional repetition and highlighting the fact that those images are constructed. Moreover, the unusual aspect of the image ends up challenging the very perception we have of the individual shown, contradicting the traditional link between signifier and signified, thus the semantic level of interpretation. In a way, by amplifying the traditional discourse of politicians, the visuals end up contradicting the usual reading, “turning language against itself by asserting both terms of a contradiction at once.”<sup>80</sup> The connection between the elements juxtaposed is paradoxical and the depiction of the political figures as “normal” individuals is read as grotesque as the perception arises that “something is illegitimately in something else.”<sup>81</sup> The visuals thus act as “an explicit commentary on the existing relations between what is displayed.”<sup>82</sup> Van Toorn's operations open up possibilities for symbols to be read independently from their traditional signification by exposing the lack of connection existing between them.

<sup>78</sup> Rick Poynor, *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice* (Rotterdam: O10 Publishers, 2008), 153.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Chapter 1: Formation, Deformation and Reformation: an Introduction to the Grotesque,” in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 20.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>82</sup> Kuijpers, 25.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Can be found in:

*Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice.*

Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2008. p.159

Available online at:

<http://books.google.ca/books?id=lubZS3-FJ6MC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Can be found in:

*Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice.*

Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2008. p.159

Available online at:

<http://books.google.ca/books?id=lubZS3-FJ6MC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Figure 28: Jan van Toorn. Pages for the month of October from *Mart.Spruijt 1974/75 calendar. 1974.*

The traditional understanding of the political figures displayed as being “of the people” is challenged due to the grotesque effect created by the repetition of the same set of clothes and the obvious use of photomontage to construct the image.

Images removed due to copyright restrictions.

Can be found in:

*Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice.* Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2008. p.156–157

Available online at:

<http://books.google.ca/books?id=lubZS3-FJ6MC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Figure 29: Jan van Toorn. Pages for the months of July and August from *Mart.Spruijt 1974/75 calendar. 1974.*

Van Toorn uses similar techniques in other pages of the calendar as photomontage and paradoxical image associations are used in many instances to challenge the way in which various political figures are represented in the media.

By using design in this fashion, he foregrounds design's potential to challenge dominant modes of perception and the validity of popular beliefs. At the same time, he challenges the traditional understanding of design as a reflection of the cultural reality in which it is produced, and proposes that design actually participates in legitimizing traditional cultural readings by not questioning them. He provides the designer with agency in regards to what message is read by the viewer and proposes design as a political activity. As such, he engages in disciplinary discourse through formal representation and by disrupting standard modes of practice, opening up a space for the emergence of disciplinary debates. His work, as Kuijpers writes, is "out to make the public realize that cultural production and social life are the result of human action, provisional, and thus capable of being changed."<sup>83</sup>

In the example above, Van Toorn uses basic figures of speech, such as paradox (by joining in a single whole contradictory elements), hyperbole (by exaggerating the usual connection made between the political figure used and the working class) and repetition. Poets, speakers, and writers have traditionally used such rhetorical figures, but designers also use them to "separate a work of design from ordinary practices"<sup>84</sup> and to get involved in socio-cultural and disciplinary discourse. Figures of speech can thus be used to question the literal or accepted meaning of particular elements used, leading to a disruption of the semantic dimension of interpretation. Owing to this characteristic, their use in graphic design amplifies design's ability to intervene in the meaning of a piece. Additionally, their use brings to the forefront the dialogic dimension of design, as the humorous effect created tends to relativize information generally understood as being absolute. It challenges the completeness of cultural preconceptions by making them approachable, destroying the traditional distance that exists between them and the public and creating a familiar contact.<sup>85</sup> Once up-close, they can be directly examined and questioned. Moreover, the use of figures of speech in design practice can potentially lead to disciplinary discourse, as their presence, when used to question cultural conventions, go against traditional commercial practice where those conventions are used to ensure clarity of communication. They highlight a different approach to design in which the viewer is empowered and active, rather than a passive recipient of information.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>84</sup> Ellen Lupton, "Rhetorical Figures," in *Graphic Design Thinking : Beyond Brainstorming*, ed. Ellen Lupton (New York : Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), 82.

<sup>85</sup> Bakhtin, 23.

## **Thesis Work Produced as an Exploration of the Effect of Semantic Disruption**

The capacity of figures of speech to disrupt the semantic dimension of a work has been examined in this thesis through the production of a series of posters examining the conventions of practice of fashion advertising. The work, as seen in Figures 30 and 31, uses hyperbole and paradox to amplify typical characteristics of such a form of design practice.

Figure 30 concentrates on exaggerating the sexual innuendos often present within traditional imagery. While the body position and individual elements used in the construction of the imagery are recognizable as being part of traditional fashion language, the whole appears strange, almost not classifiable. Like most grotesque forms, the poster inspires ambivalent emotional reactions as the reader can be seduced by the sensual nature of the main figure, but at the same time repulsed by the overt sexuality and the lack of harmony of the construction.<sup>86</sup> It “simultaneously invokes and repudiates our conventional, language-based categories,” as it is recognized as belonging to a common category of the visual language of high fashion, while contradicting its validity and our usual perception of its characteristics.<sup>87</sup> The poster exposes conventions of language that are often overlooked or naturalized within our visual culture and forces active interpretation. It “calls into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world” by making something that is traditionally perceived as beautiful, or even chic, purposefully ugly.<sup>88</sup> It also acts as a commentary on design’s techniques and principles by highlighting the abnormality of the traditional use of visual language in fashion advertisements and the objectification of the female body inherent in conventional visual treatment.

<sup>86</sup> Harpham, 8.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 3.

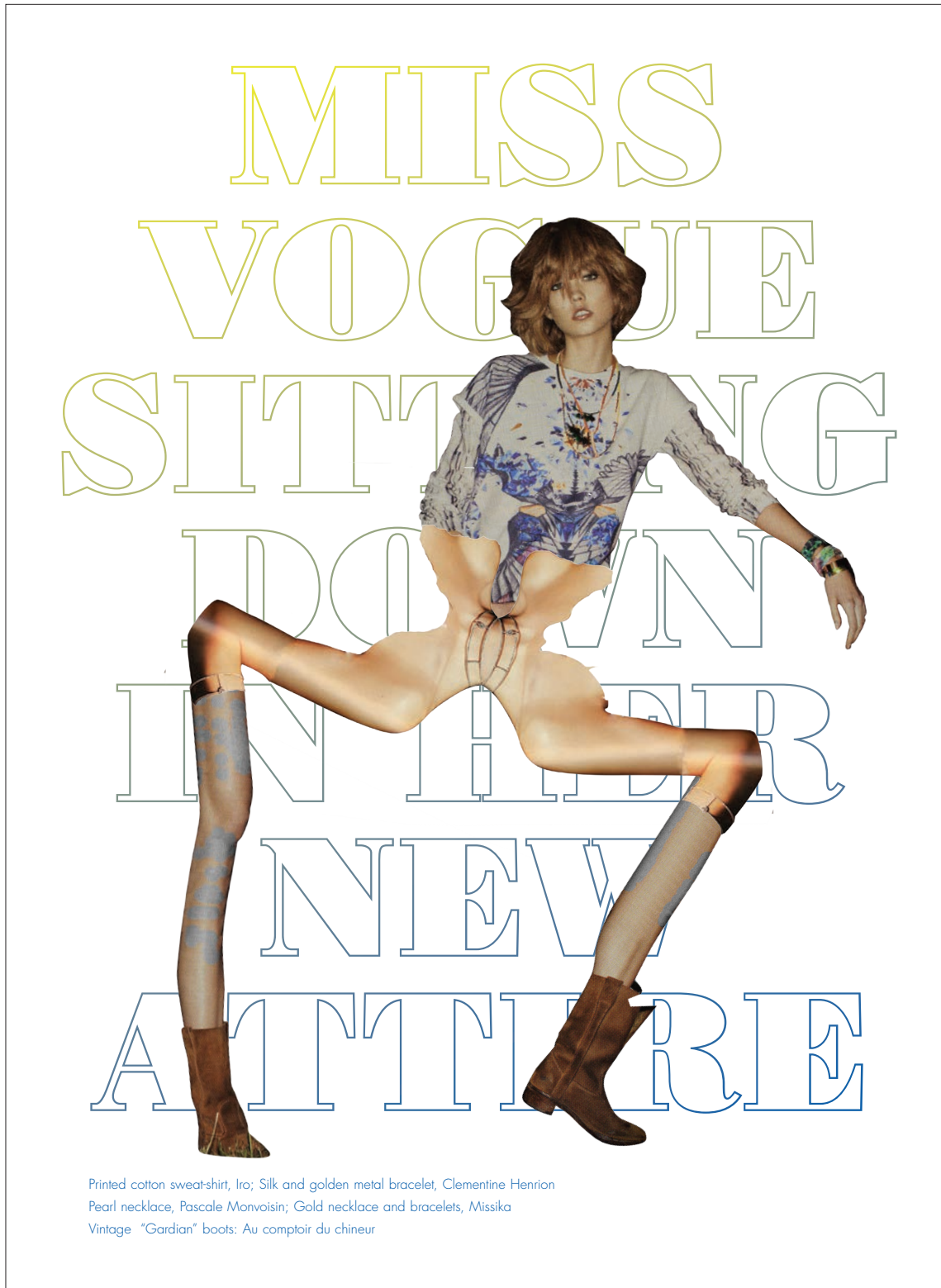


Figure 30: Marie-Noëlle Hébert. *Miss Vogue*. 2014.

Traditional elements of high fashion's visual language are recognizable, but appear strange due to the overt sexuality of the body position and the lack of harmony in the construction. As a result, elements traditionally perceived as beautiful become repulsive.



Figure 31: Marie-Noëlle Hébert. *Our Models Are Real Women*. 2014.

Standard image manipulation techniques are emphasized. The visual treatment, juxtaposed to the saying "our models are real women," highlights the paradoxical relationship existing between standard elements found in fashion advertisements.

The poster seen in Figure 31 achieves a similar effect by displaying visuals that are contradictory to the content. It capitalizes on the “ironic absurdity” created by the paradoxical relationship existing between the elements displayed to challenge a common saying. Both the use of “real women” and digital manipulation of imagery are traditionally perceived as acceptable practices within the industry despite their contradictory message. The association of an amplified modification and of the tagline exposes this paradox. Effectively, the overt manipulation of the female body becomes grotesque when associated to the saying “Our models are real women,” as an enormous strain is placed on the marriage of form and content. Both are foregrounded in such a way that they do not appear complementary, as what would normally be seen, but as struggling against one another.<sup>89</sup> The antagonism existing between the elements displayed lead the viewer to investigate the traditional meaning of each part; to question the validity of the tagline as much as the manipulation techniques. The visual representation chosen, due to its strange relationship to the content, thus acts as a commentary on design’s traditional techniques as it foregrounds manipulation that is traditionally made seamless and therefore the artificiality of fashion imagery.

This experiment confirms that semantic disruption has the potential to lead design to be dialogic, as disciplinary conventions are challenged and re-examined by the viewer due to the grotesque effect created by the use of rhetorical figures. The visuals, because they lead to understanding specific elements in the opposite way as traditional reading, call into question graphic design’s modes of practice and the traditional perception of elements of our visual culture. Finally, the posters end up stimulating discourse that is both disciplinary and cultural through semantic intervention as they question both conventional design language and the acceptability of normative representations of the female body within our culture.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 7.

## Concluding remarks

While a study of the use of disruption in fashion and cinema suggests that interventions to the aesthetic dimension of a graphic design work could allow design to take on a dialogic function, the series of works described above confirm that possibility. Effectively, as demonstrated in the previous discussions, disruption to the dimensions that affect the interpretation of a work stimulates both disciplinary and socio-cultural discourse. Whether the disruption is pragmatic, syntactic or semantic, the effect is similar as norms of practice are challenged and alternative usages of design's visual language are made visible. Additionally, cultural conventions are exposed and questioned as the viewer is lead to engage in active spectatorship due to the strange elements introduced within the process of perception. These results suggest that a critical graphic design discourse does not need to originate from the content and can be integrated within commercial practice. Effectively, while the projects discussed have a level of discourse atypical to commercial practice, they still perform their traditional functions: they present a typical content, participate in promoting a product or a text, and provide information to the viewers. This thesis thus demonstrates that design can be a dialogic practice as its aesthetic dimension can participate in confirming traditional cultural standards or in challenging them. As such, it suggests that design is not purely a commercial practice, but also a cultural one and that it can participate in the emancipation of individuals by allowing them to re-think the importance of diverse elements that shape their experience of the world. The visuals in themselves are enough to stimulate active spectatorship and engage in critical discourse in regards to both the discipline and the culture within which they live.

As American graphic designer Michael Rock wrote in "Fuck Content," a piece he wrote to clarify common misinterpretations associated to his 1996 essay "The Designer as Author,"<sup>90</sup> design is in itself "linguistic –

<sup>90</sup> "The Designer as Author," (Michael Rock (ed), *Multiple Signatures: On Designers, Authors, Readers and Users* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2013), 45-56), was written in response to a growing concern with the notion of "authorship" amongst design practitioners of the 1990s. Rock attempts to demystify how design can be related to authorship. While he recognizes that the idea is seductive as it provides designers with a sense of agency over the message of their work, he also mentions that it does not correspond to the reality of the practice as very few designers can fit the requirements necessary to be considered authors. He recognizes that a body of work could be representative of a certain vision of the world, but he defines authorship as practiced at the time as a narrow and limiting vision of the influence of design. He adds that form-making itself is an activity that encompasses multiple ways to engage in the production of discourse and argues for a design practice that is not concerned with content production, but with formal development. The text was however largely misinterpreted as a celebration of the vision of authorship he criticized and even used as a justification for engaging in the production of content. "Fuck Content" was thus written to clarify common misconceptions of his earlier writing and to develop his argumentation.

a vibrant evocative language.”<sup>91</sup> He adds: “The elements we must master are not the content narratives, but the devices of the telling: typography, line, form, color, contrast, scale, weight. We speak through our assignment, literally between the lines.”<sup>92</sup> The manipulation of form has “an essential, even transformative, meaning” and, by manipulating form, design reshapes the relationship between the user and the world. As Poynor writes in *No More Rules*, the graphic designer “writes” visual documents by “arranging, sizing, framing and editing images and texts.”<sup>93</sup> It is through these interventions that he can find opportunities to engage in critical discourse and make the design practice a dialogic one. As such, the act of making, the manipulation of visuals is enough for a critical discourse to emerge, and modes of practice that challenge tradition are susceptible to generate disciplinary discourse as they challenge the relation between user and the world, between design and content, between designers and the world. Designers concerned with the critical and reflexive dimension of design do not need to concern themselves with authoring content since the way a visual document is shaped gives rise to a text in itself. As Rock wrote, graphic design says something; it is not purely about something and “our content is, perpetually, design itself.”<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Michael Rock, “Fuck Content,” in *Multiple Signatures: On Designers, Authors, Readers and Users*, ed. Michael Rock (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2013), 92.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>93</sup> Poynor, *No More Rules : Graphic Design and Postmodernism*, 124.  
The line was borrowed from Ellen Lupton’s “Visual Dictionary,” an essay that was part of the book *ABC’s of the Bauhaus: The Bauhaus and Design Theory* (1996). In it, she describes how different visual elements participate in informing how a visual document is read, thus connecting the act of designing to the act of writing.

<sup>94</sup> Rock, “Fuck Content,” 95.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Process Work – Visual Exploration**

The pages that follow contain a variety of projects that were produced in the context of this thesis. The projects are explorations of multiple notions discussed in this paper, namely design as a discursive activity and the effect of disruption to multiple aspects of design practice, including disruption to the process of making, as well as to the pragmatic, syntactic, and semantic dimensions of a final work.

### ***11 Ways of Thinking About Design***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Poster series. 2013.

Each poster is a visual interpretation of a different approach to design practice that dominated at one point within graphic design history and represented a disruption within the design landscape of its time. The visuals somewhat mimic the visual organization typical of the approach it represents. The content displayed is either quotes from seminal writings by practitioners connected to the approach treated, or key words that represent the main concepts at play. Altogether, the series becomes a representation of multiple discourses that emerged within graphic design through visual production that disrupted standards of practice. The investigation served as a first step into understanding design as a dialogic practice connected to ideological concerns of graphic designers.

The BOOK of  
**SMALLER**  
MUSHROOM CULTURE  
S A <sup>biggest</sup> **SMALLER** S, <sup>big</sup>

CONDUCTED UNDER AUTHORITY OF THE BOARD OF REGENTS OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS, AS AUTHORIZED BY

**SMALLER**



*Department of Physical Geology and Mineralogy, University of Kansas.*

P S **SMALLER** R  
P S A L M S <sup>big</sup> **SMALLER** A V I D,  
ILLUSTRATED

LAWRENCE, KANSAS:  
MAY 1902.

The Geological Survey publications are distributed from the University, at Lawrence.

A world exists where the possibilities are only so limited,  
where the forms at hand demonstrate the logic of the machinery.





# IT'S ART NOT

in our book

the lyric and epic evolution

of our times

is

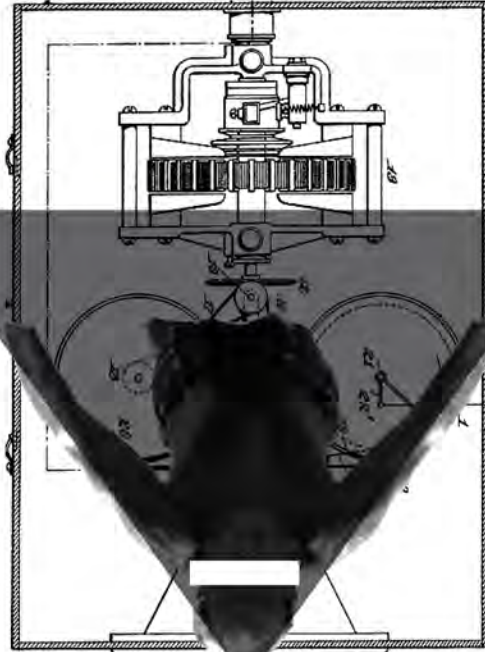
given

shape

# it's

an embrace of the forms of modern life, spreading knowledge through creation

communication



# purpose

objective



3 Sheets—Sheet 1

(Application Made May 10, 1908.)

KINETOGRAPH.

T. A. BRIDSON.

Reissued Sept. 30, 1902.

No. 12,037.



# U N I V E R S A L

let us work within the grid,  
submit to the laws of a universal validity



COMMUNICATION  
Mechanical  
Anonymous

3 Sheets—Sheet 1

(Application filed June 10, 1902.)

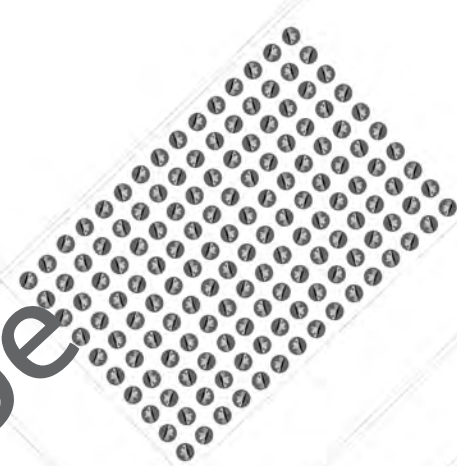
KINETOSCOPE.

T. A. EDISON.

Reissued Sept. 30, 1902.

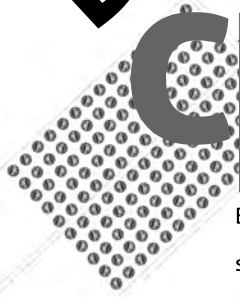
No. 12,037.

Paragraph  
Type  
must not be  
DRY.



Type may be set center axis,  
ragged left/ragged right,  
or sometimes in a

Chaos  
But even then, typography should have a hidden structure and visual order.

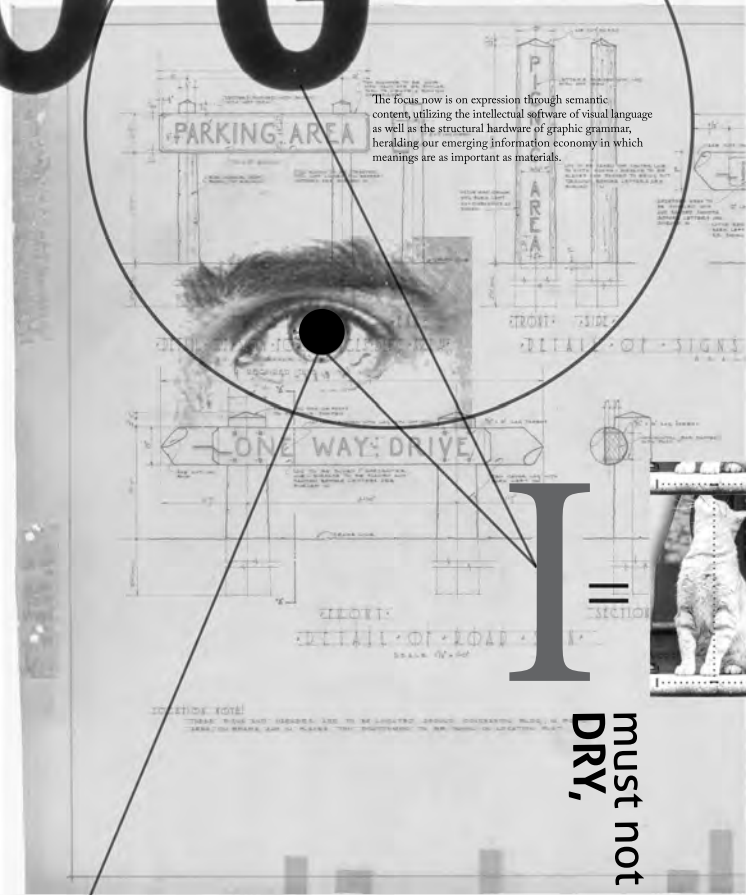


Question established typography standards,  
change the rules, reevaluate its potential,  
a new dynamic and expressive era has come.

*Sorry...*

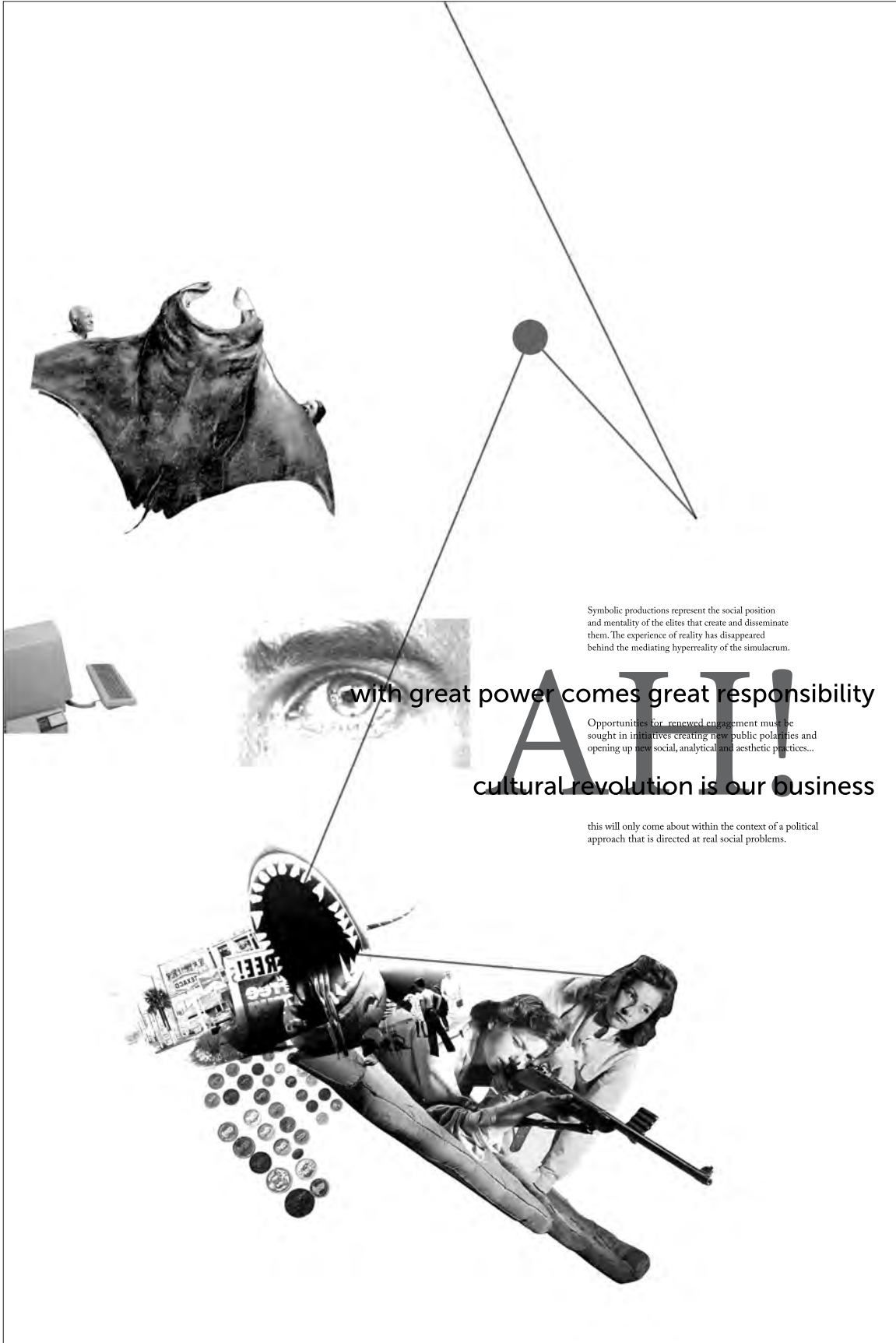
**NO G**

The focus now is on expression through semantic content, utilizing the intellectual software of visual language as well as the structural hardware of graphic grammar, heralding our emerging information economy in which meanings are as important as materials.



circle

ⓐ **B**



Symbolic productions represent the social position and mentality of the elites that create and disseminate them. The experience of reality has disappeared behind the mediating hyperreality of the simulacrum.

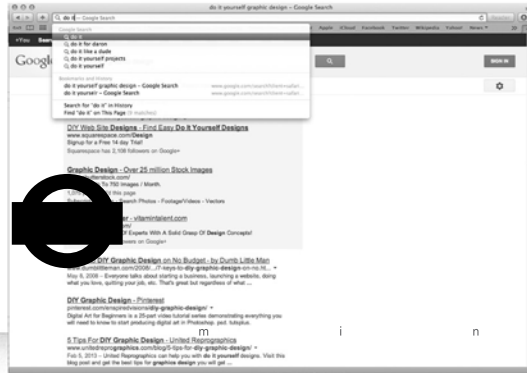
with great power comes great responsibility

**AI!!!**  
cultural revolution is our business

Opportunities for renewed engagement must be sought in initiatives creating new public polarities and opening up new social, analytical and aesthetic practices...

this will only come about within the context of a political approach that is directed at real social problems.

t e m p l a t e



f a c o i l q i t f a t n o r e

e m b r a c e d



d e 100 80 a 60 40 t 20 h 1



Let us design for everyone with everyone, favor adaptability, availability, accessibility, universality, interdisciplinarity. Graphic designity for all!

~~El Lissitzky:~~

~~Every invention in  
art is a single event in time,  
has no  
evolution.~~

~~With the passage of  
time different variations  
of the same theme  
are composed around the invention,  
sometimes more sharpened,  
sometimes more flattened, but~~

*then the time is ripe  
for a new invention ...*

*then the  
time is ripe  
for a new invention*

*then the time is ripe for  
a new invention*

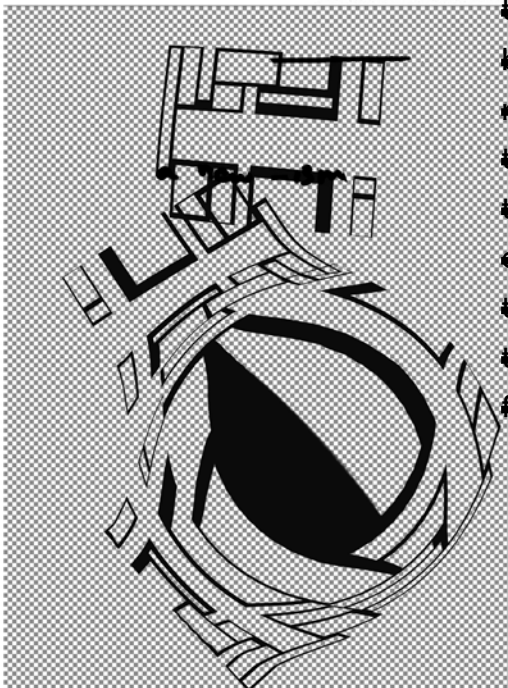
*for a new invention*

*time is ripe for*

~~seldom  
is the original power  
attained.  
So it goes on 'til after being  
performed  
over a long period,  
this work of art~~

»

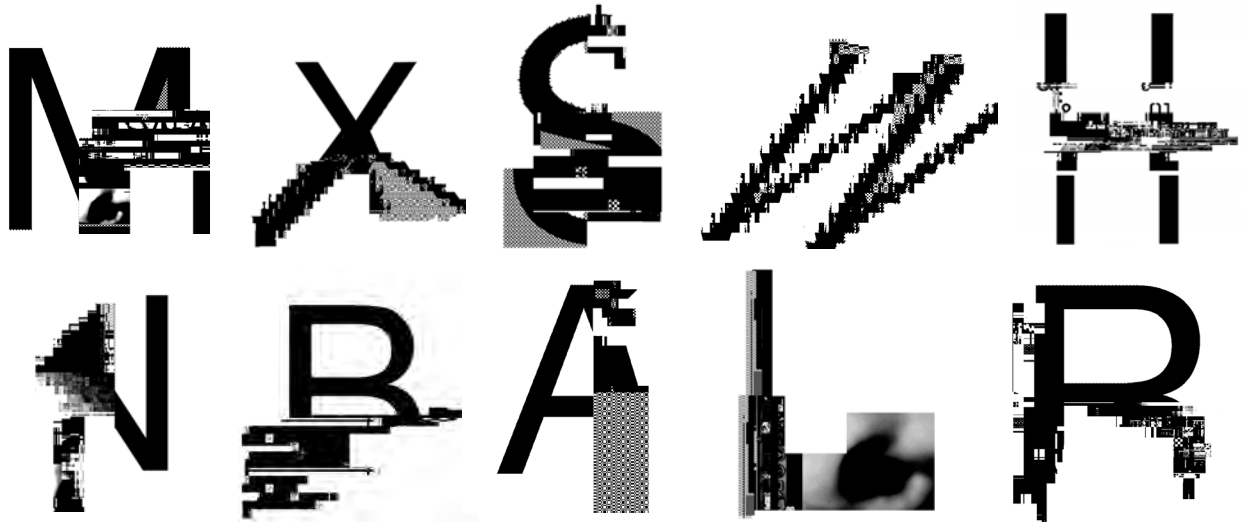
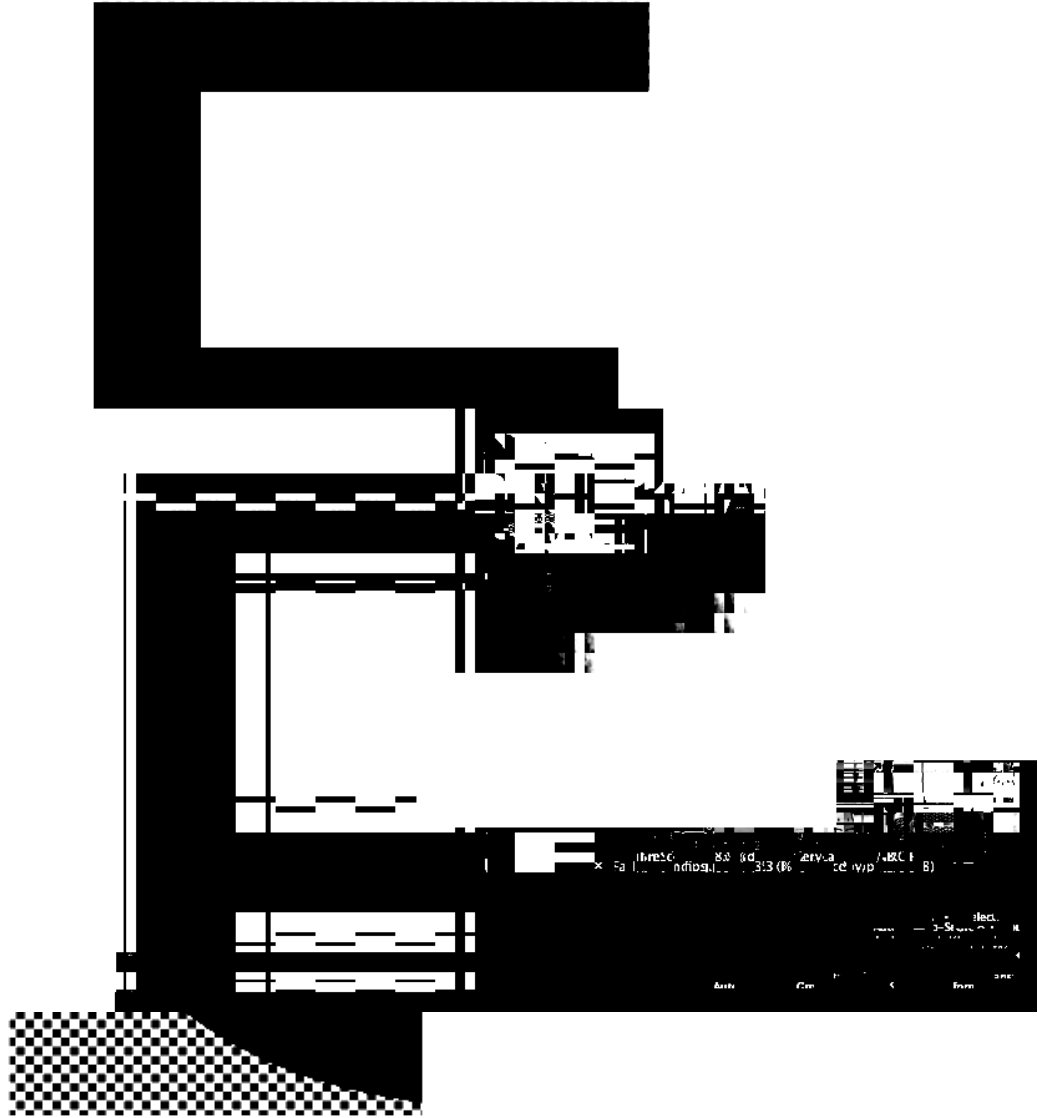
~~becomes so automatic  
mechanical in its performance that  
the mind ceases  
to respond to the  
exhausted theme;  
then  
the time is ripe  
for a new invention~~



### ***Experiments with Loss of Control***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Typeface made from software malfunctions. 2013.

This project was an experiment about the effect of disruption to the process of making. Letterforms from the typeface Helvetica were brought into Photoshop and the software was overused until a malfunction would occur. The visuals obtained were documented and kept as a new typeface. It did not create dialogic form in regards to disciplinary conventions, but confirmed the potential of such occurrence as my own modes of practice were challenged and revisited following the result. Effectively, it allowed me to reconsider the importance of absolute control over the visual production of a work since letting go of the standard control I exercise generated new formal possibilities for future production.



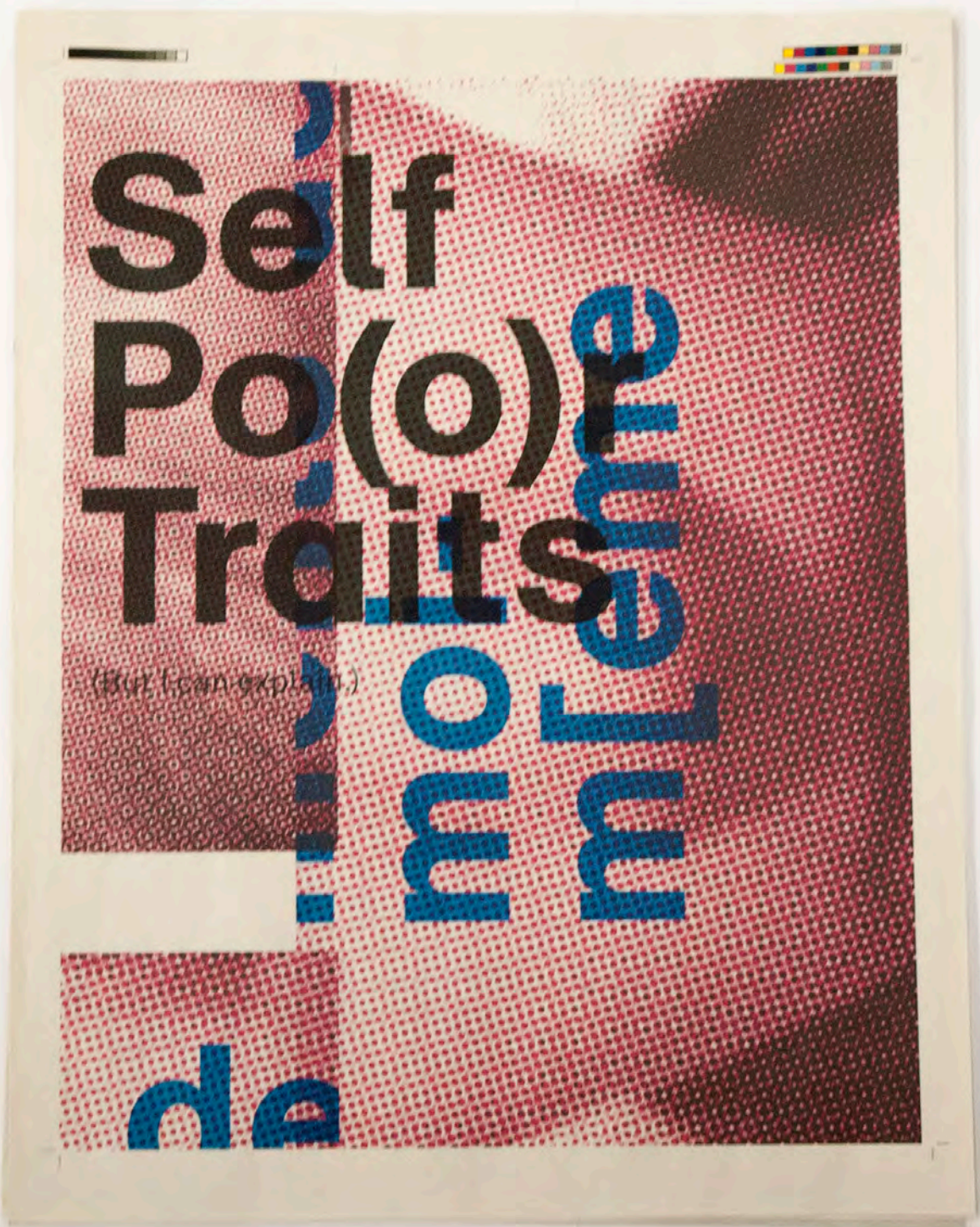


### ***Self Po(or) Traits***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Book. 2013.

This project is a continuation of the experimentation about the effect of disruption to the process of making. The text identifies certain traits of my design practice. The visuals are self-portraits. The two documents were designed separately, and overprinted at random. This process of creation was chosen in order to relinquish traditional control over the finished product. The juxtaposition of the two narratives prevent from fully understanding one or the other. It creates a break in communication that necessitates the reader to stop and construct an alternate narrative from the junction of disconnected elements. The piece is dialogic as it questions the necessity of text and images that present a unified meaning within a single work. Additionally, the reader needs to become active in the meaning making process in order to make sense of what is presented in front of him.

When folded once more, the book is abstracted even further from the communicative conventions of design as the content is so fragmented that meaning barely emerges. The relation between form and content is disrupted as the content loses its importance within the communicative act. This reality moves design away from being successful through clarity of communication, and brings forward the possibility that it might be analyzed in regard to its potential as inspiration for future practice.









Self  
Po(o)le  
Traits

I am a  
plagia-  
rist

I have  
no idea  
what I'm  
doing

I haven't  
a piece of  
design work  
done  
without

I don't  
know  
what I'm  
doing

I tend  
to be  
vulgar  
Tomb  
platt  
sans

I love  
making  
ugly things

I am  
horrible  
at  
selecting  
type

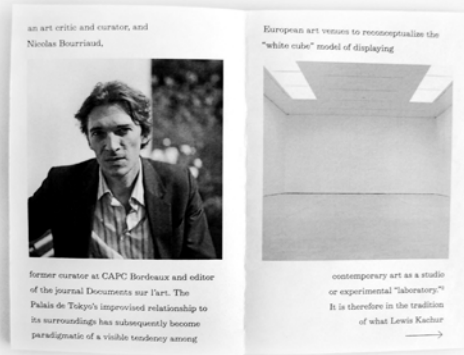
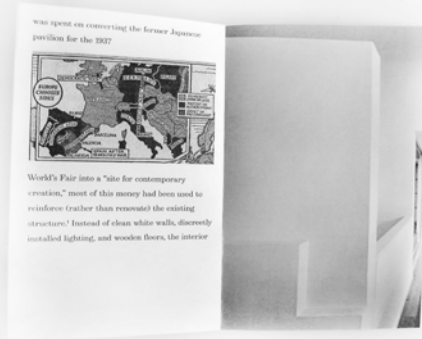
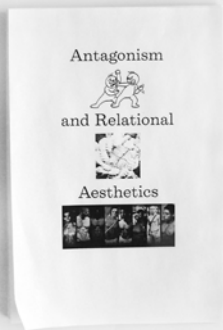


## ***Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics 2***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Book. 2013.

This project is an example of disruption to the syntactic dimension of a work. The visuals correspond to the first Google image found when searching for specific terms within the take. Those visuals take all the importance and interrupt the text wherever the element represented through them is mentioned.

As a result, the text cannot be read traditionally and the user needs to decide whether to focus on the interpretation of the relation existing between text and image, or on the content itself.



***Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics 3 (Claire Bishop is a Poet)***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Set of cards. 2013.

This project is an example of disruption to the syntactic dimension of a work and a continuation of *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics 1 and 2*. The text is fragmented and set in different directions. The front of the cards presents a scholarly article. The back contains the footnotes. All of the information is there for the content to be read in full, but the overall organization of the piece presents it as series of poems. Multiple interpretations of the same content are thus presented, leaving possibility for the reader to choose the context in which the work is the most relevant.



**Claire Bishop**

"Antagonism in the 21st Century", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol. 110 (Autumn, 2004), The MIT Press, pp. 51-73, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397557> Accessed: May

thirteen, 2013



The palais de Tokyo

On the occasion of its opening



**in 2002,**

the Palais de Tokyo immediately struck the visitor as different from other contemporary art venues that had recently opened in Europe. Although

**a budget of 4.75**



million euros was spent on converting the former Japanese pavilion for the

**193**  
**World's**

Fair into a "site for contemporary creation," most of this money

**had been used**

**7**

to reinforce (



**Instead of**

clean white walls,  
discreetly installed

**lighting**

wooden  
floors,  
, and

**the interior**

**rather than**

renovate) the existing  
structure;

1. Palais de Tokyo  
promotional  
and Website,  
"site de creation  
contemporaine"

**unfinish e**

was left

This decision was  
important, as it reflected



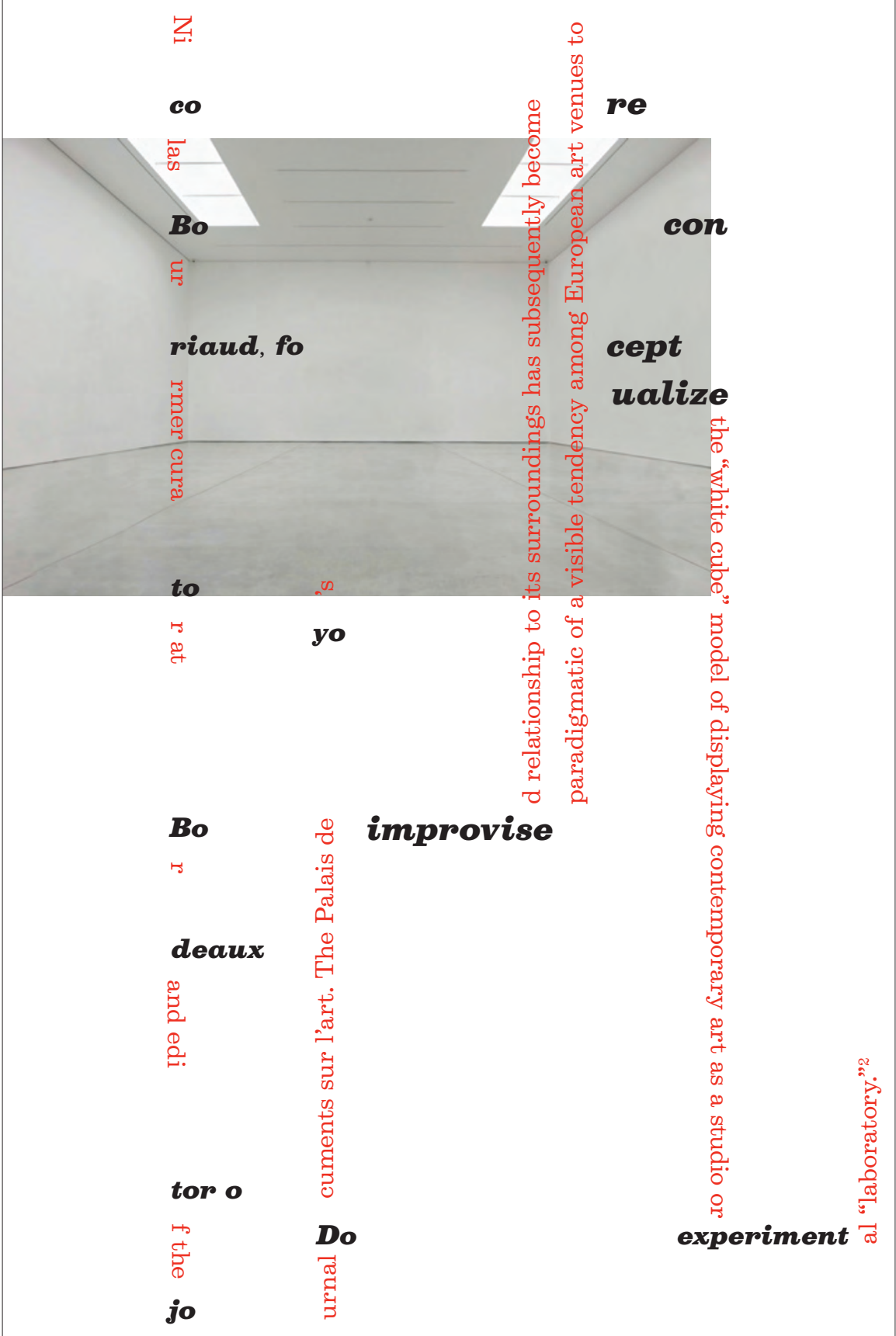
**a key aspect of**

the venue's curatorial ethos under its  
codirectionship by



**Jerôme Sans,**

**an art critic  
and curator;**



***Malleable Figures 1***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Poster series and in situ simulations. 2013.

This project is an example of disruption to the semantic dimension of a work. It uses hyperbole as a way to highlight the manipulated nature of fashion imagery. The images look standard at first glance, but upon closer look the viewers lack the possibility to identify with the female bodies presented since they are overtly disproportionate. It challenges the perceived naturalness of the ideal of beauty promoted through fashion advertising and foregrounds the impact of image manipulation on interpretation.

Through the in situ simulations, the unconventional advertisements are brought into a traditional context. The contextualization accentuates the abnormality of the visuals created, as they become grounded in reality.

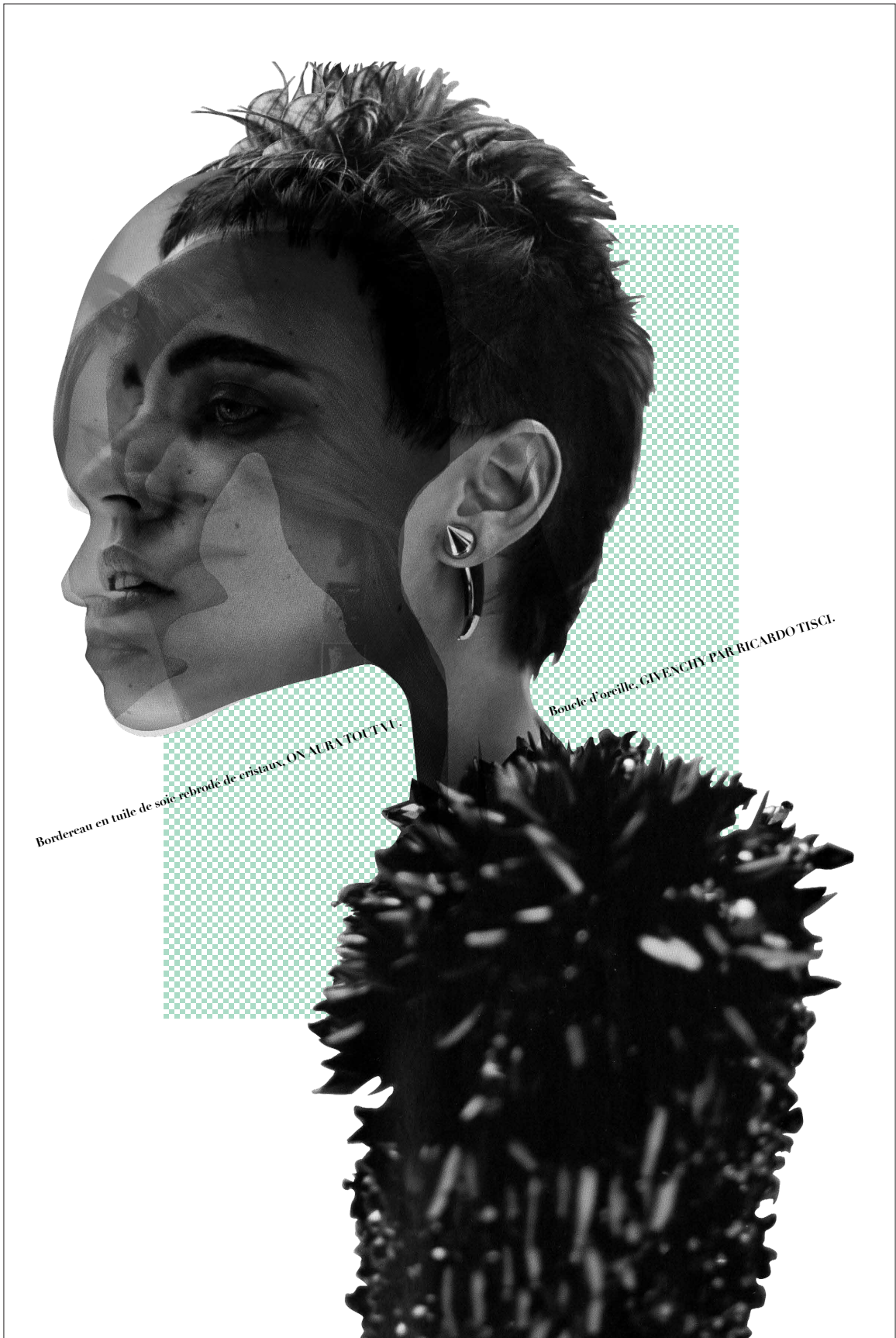


Sweat-shirt manches courtes en coton imprimé. ZADIG & VOLTAIRE.  
 Short en denim. DENIM & SEPTA. RAÏLE L'ALBES. Collier en perles. PASCAL MONSIEUR.  
 Manchette en soie et métal doré. CLEMENTE HENRIS. Botes. AU COMPTOIR DU CHINEUR.



Haut en satin. BOTTEGA VENETA. Jupon en coton. SALVATORE FERRAGAMO.

Body. PRINCESSE TAMFAM.



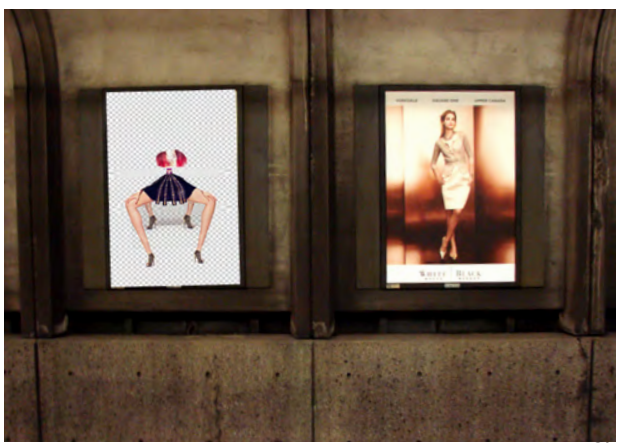


Robe en Organza de soie, ERMANNO SCERVINO.

Ruban, MOKUBA.







## ***Malleable Figures 2***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Poster series. 2014.

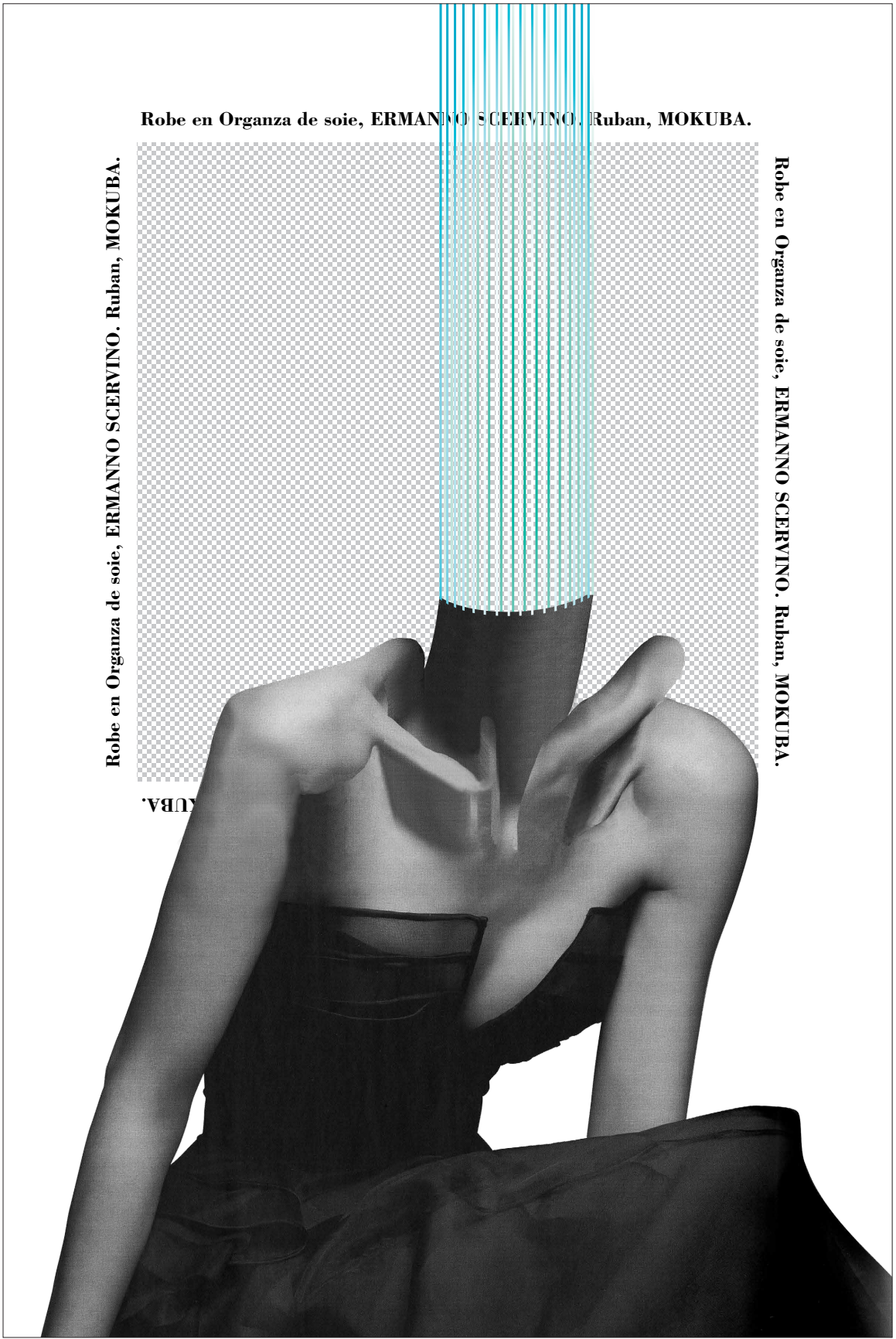
This project is a continuation of Malleable Figures 1. The experimentation was extended, as the image manipulation was made even more overt. Once again, the strangeness of the figures that resulted from the manipulation allows the design to challenge the perceived naturalness of the ideal of beauty promoted through fashion advertising.

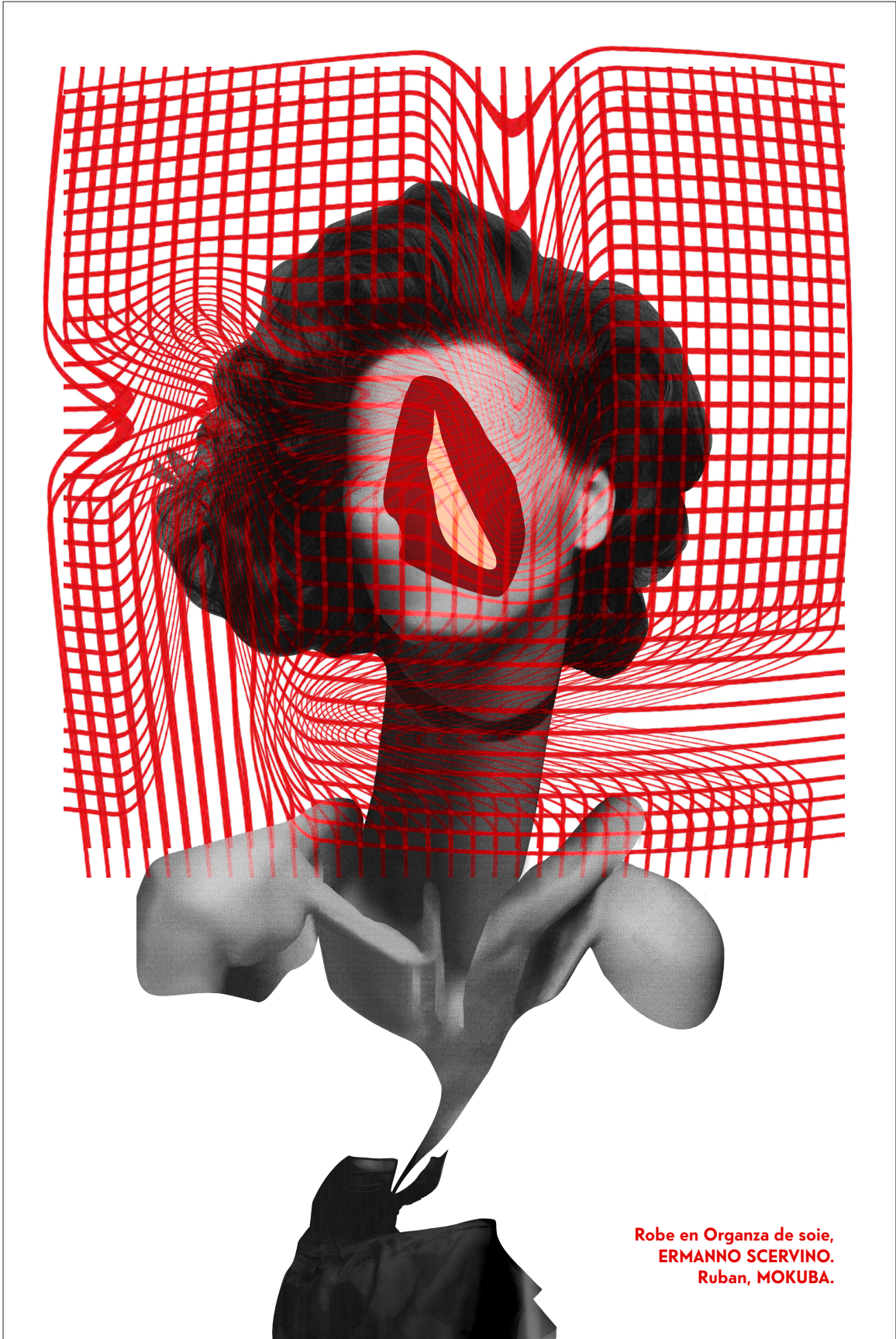


Robe en Organza de soie, **ERMANNO SCERVINO**. Ruban, **MOKUBA**.

Robe en Organza de soie, **ERMANNO SCERVINO**. Ruban, **MOKUBA**.

Robe en Organza de soie, **ERMANNO SCERVINO**. Ruban, **MOKUBA**.





Robe en Organza de soie,  
ERMANNNO SCERVINO.  
Ruban, MOKUBA.



R u b a n  
M o k u b a



Ruban,  
Mokuba.  
Robe en Organza de soie,  
Ermanno Scervino.

***Is there something missing?***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Posters. 2014.

This project is an example of disruption to the semantic dimension of a work. Every element that was not necessary to show the garment advertised was removed. The absence of the female persona makes the advertisement strange. The posters propose that the presence of sexualized females is not necessary for the advertisement of fashion products.

**Boucle  
d'oreille,  
GIVENCHY  
PAR  
RICCARDO  
TISCI**



**Boléro  
en soie  
rebrodé de  
cristaux,  
ON AURA  
TOUT VU.**



Boucle d'oreille,  
**GIVENCHY PAR RICCARDO  
TISCI**

***In Bed with Gaïa the Delicious***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Poster. 2014.

This project is an example of disruption to the semantic dimension of a work. The saying “In bed with Gaïa the Delicious” is literally translated into the imagery. The juxtaposition of the tagline with the image of an apple made of female body parts makes visible the negative depiction of women inherent in a saying that otherwise appears normal and even positive.



Au lit avec Gaïa la délicieuse, signé

**COMME des GARÇONS**  
\*

***Overt Sensuality***

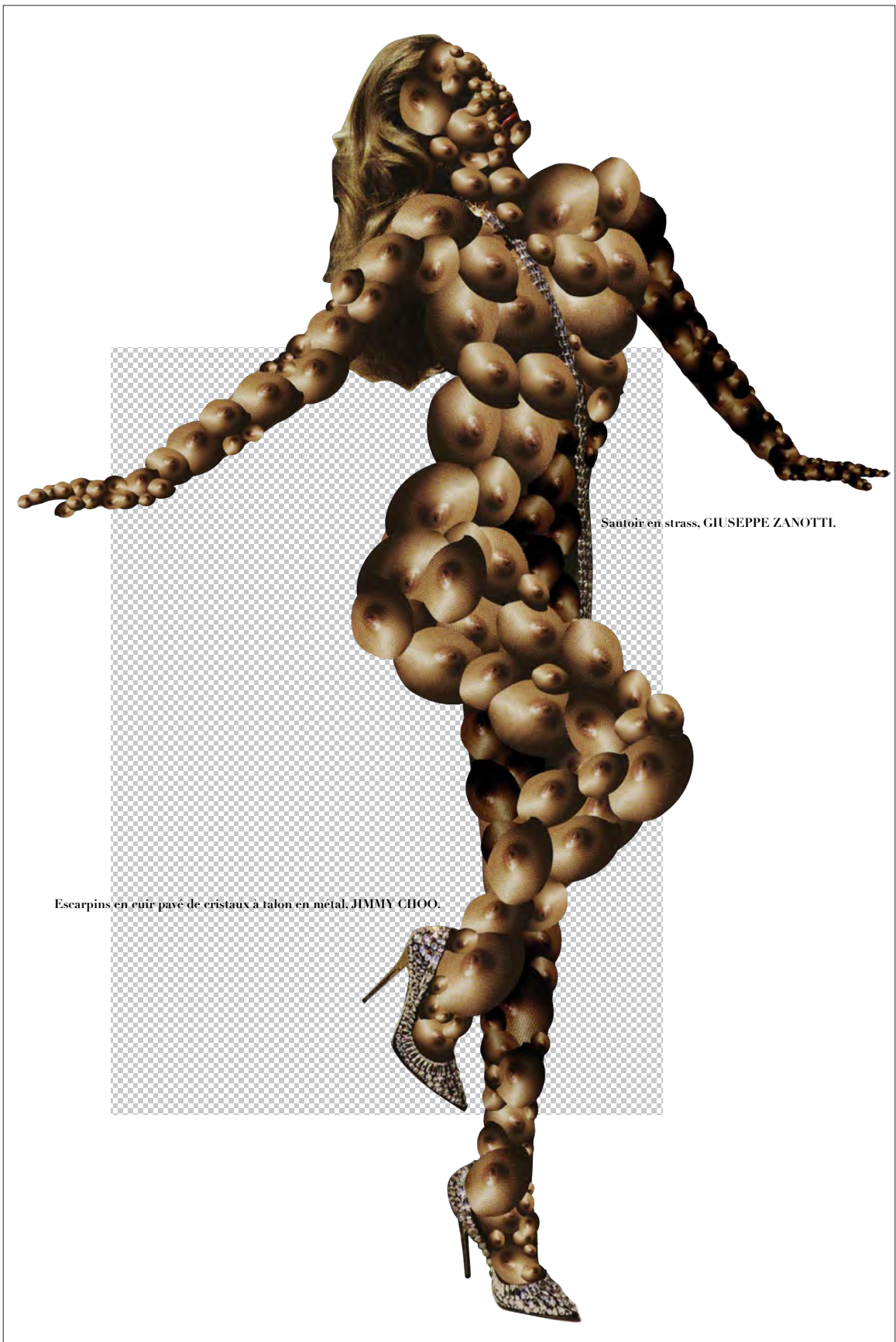
Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Poster series. 2014.

This project is an example of disruption to the semantic dimension of a work. Elements that are usually perceived as sensual are emphasized and the sexual inuendos present within the original ads are made overt. The strangeness of the overall visual inverts traditional interpretation as what is normally seen beautiful becomes repulsive.





Printed cotton sweat-shirt, Iro; Silk and golden metal bracelet, Clementine Hermon.  
Pearl necklace, Pascale Monvoisin; Gold necklace and bracelets, Missika; Vintage "Garden" boots; Au comptoir du chineur.



Sautoir en strass, GIUSEPPE ZANOTTI.

Escarpins en cuir pavé de cristaux à talon en métal. JIMMY CHOO.



Escarpins en cuir  
pavé de cristaux  
à talon en métal,  
Philipp Plein.

***An Incursion into the WWW/XXX***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Poster series. 2014.

This project is an example of disruption to the pragmatic dimension of a work. Visuals typical of lower forms of visual representation such as the visual language typical of the Internet and pornographic imagery are introduced within the high fashion language. The juxtaposition makes more tangible the sexual and objectifying character of traditional imagery by grounding it in everyday reality.





**CONTAINS AGE-RESTRICTED MATERIALS.**

Tap OK to confirm that you are 18 or over. Your content will then begin downloading immediately.

Cancel

OK

PHILIPP PLEIN  
waste  
on Dating Websites

Online Now Online Now

**Find Out My Biggest Mistake!**

[Click Here to Read My Story >>>](#)

**Sexy texts to Make Her Horny For YOU.**

**Watch Now**

**Philipp Plein**

PHILIPP  
PLEIN



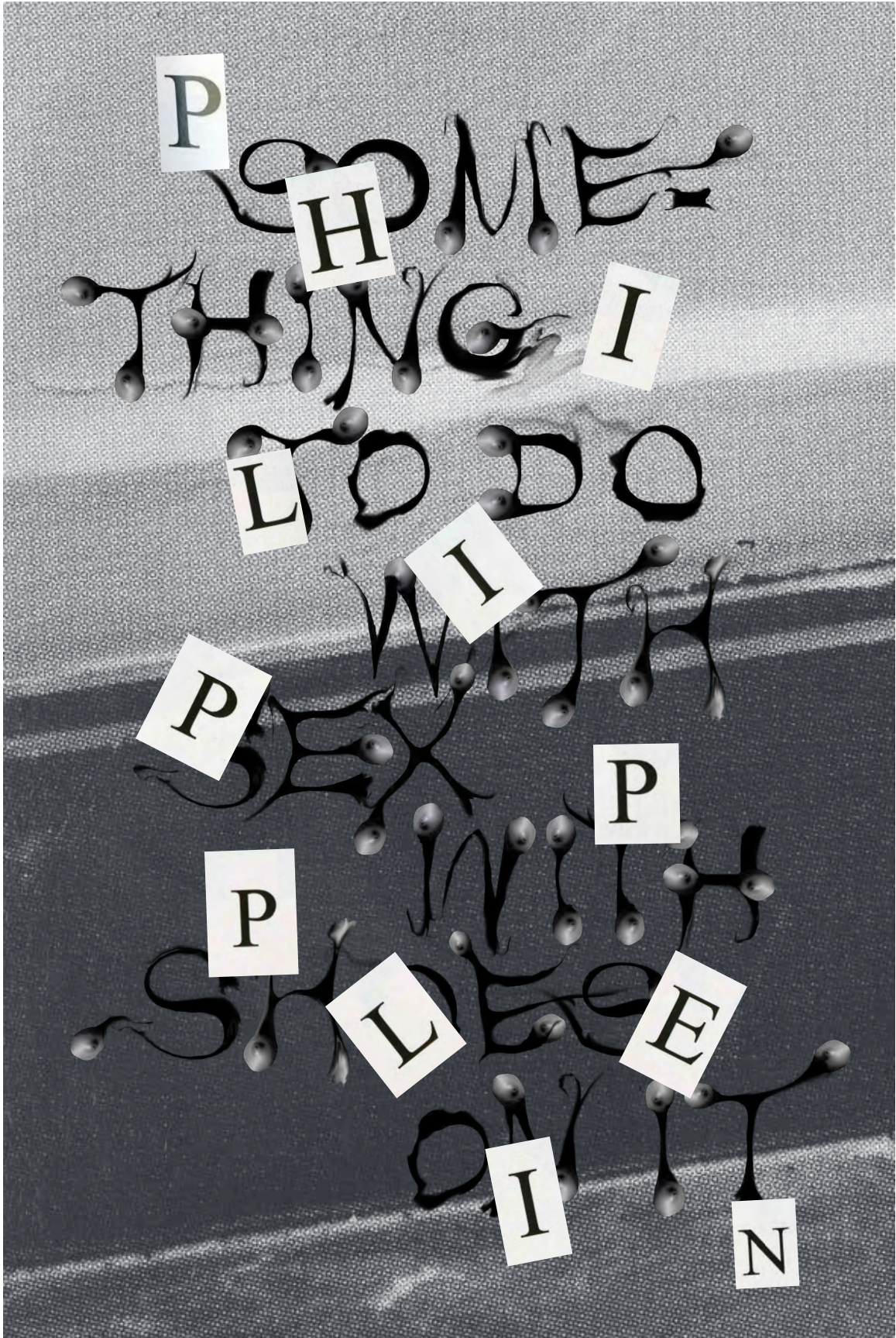


***An Incursion into the Ugly***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Poster series. 2014.

This project is an example of disruption to the pragmatic dimension of a work. Visuals typical of lower forms of visual representation are introduced within the high fashion language. Instead of beautiful, luxurious and unified imagery, the posters display hand-drawn letterforms, typefaces typical of popular fashion and images characterized by a discontinuous visual treatment.

veste  
de  
four  
rure  
et cuir,  
CIV  
enchy



Give  
in to  
your  
desires

Earring

ring

Givenchy

Givenchy

Earring  
Givenchy  
by Riccardo

tisci

tisci  
tisci  
tisci  
tisci  
tisci

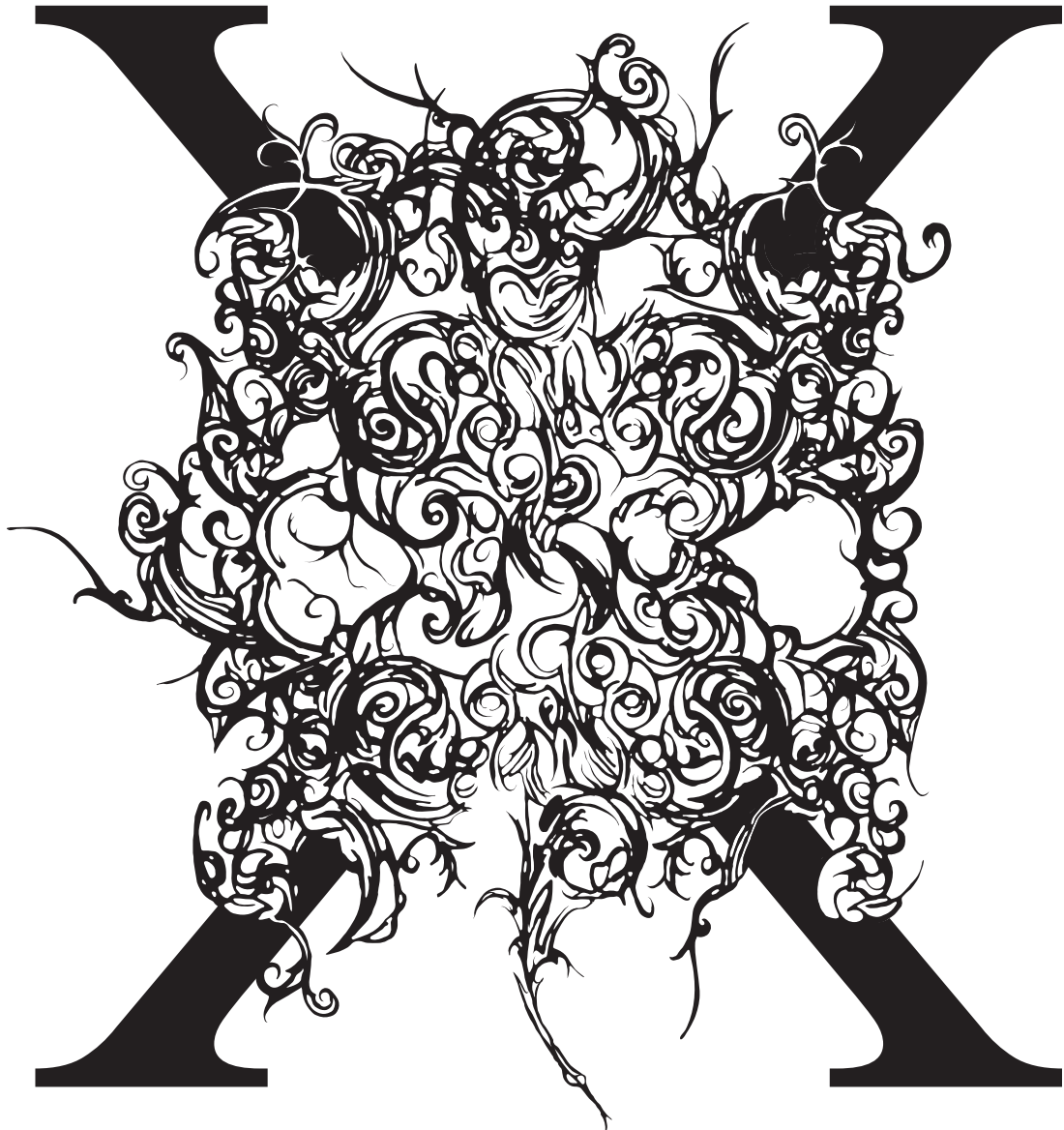


### ***Exquise - Branding and Brandbook***

Marie-Noëlle Hébert. Book. 2014.

This project is an investigation into the effect of disruption to the syntactic dimension of a work. The project consisted of the development of brand guidelines for the fictional fashion retailer which would have produced the fashion posters previously created. The guidelines contain all traditional elements, from symbol to logotype, mailers, letterhead, shopping bags, etc. They maintain a traditional content as the elements chosen represent specific characteristics of the company, but the syntax of the elements is altered as the symbol is proposed as a constantly changing item. Each element that constitutes it can be replaced and removed. The symbol is vectorized, drawn, scanned, distorted, and modified. As the modification happens, semantic disruption occurs as what was previously read as an almost traditional crest, can be read as pubic hair depending on the images with which it is paired. Additionally, traditional items such as business cards and shopping bags are left blank and it is up to the distributor to draw on them on location. Those items represent the brand, but also act as reminders that branding is only an image apposed onto a generic product in order to differentiate it.

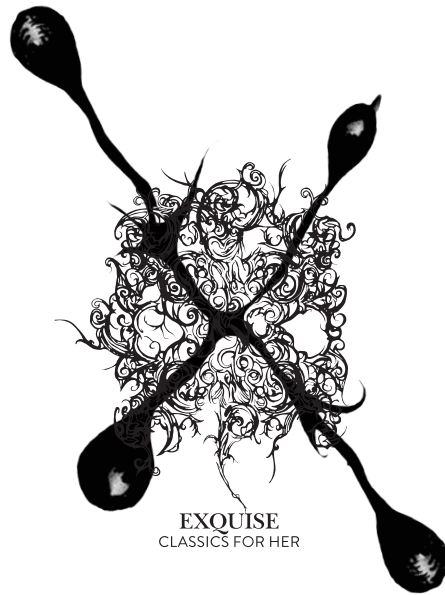
The book itself contains all of the specifications for the application of the brand image, as well as examples of the advertisements produced. However, at first glance, the reader can only access portions of images, fragments of folded posters that are assembled together and that can only be admired for their aesthetic quality. The object then needs to be destroyed in order to access the information contained. Ripping along the spine will provide the user with series of posters of the advertisements produced. If that option is chosen, the guidelines are destroyed. Ripping around the pages will allow access to the guidelines, but destroy the posters, leaving the reader with a book in which reading is constantly interrupted by fragments of the posters that used to be available. As a result, no matter which option is chosen, the reader constantly faces reminders that he/she only has access to a portion of the possible information. Recurring interruptions remind of the incomplete nature of brand image representation, allowing the visual dimension of the piece to expose and challenge design practices, while continuing to perform its traditional function.



EXQUISE  
CLASSICS FOR HER



EXQUISE  
CLASSICS FOR HER



EXQUISE  
CLASSICS FOR HER



EXQUISE  
CLASSICS

