

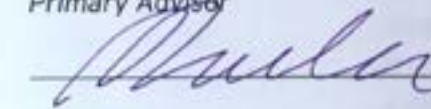
# **Content–Aware: Investigating Tools, Character & User Behavior**

**Llewellyn Hensley  
RISD Graphic Design  
MFA 2017**

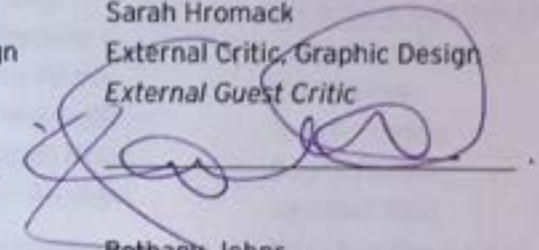


This thesis by Llewellyn Hensley is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Graphic Design in the Department of Graphic Design of the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island.

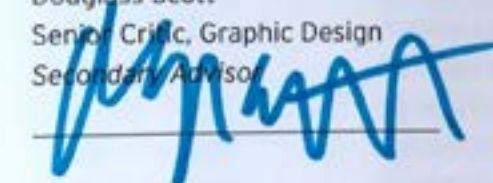
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Thank you.

Without the love, humor, strength, resistance,  
and insights of the following humans  
and cat, I may not have seen this through.

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Mary Harding Sadler  
W. Camden Whitehead  
Valley, Stan &  
Henry Haggard  
Eva Laporte  
Xap the cat, my intrepid  
adventure buddy

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## Notes To The Reader

Welcome! This document is the culmination of three years of graduate education, many previous years spent working and making images, and ongoing collaboration with a community of designers, friends, allies, and challengers.

The thesis process provides an opportunity to connect and speak with artists and designers whose studio and pedagogical practices are in conversation with my own methods of making and persistent strains of inquiry. It is an honor to situate myself and my work in dialogue with Kathleen and Christopher Sleboda of *Draw Down Books*; artist, photographer, and professor Lisa Young; designer and professor Keetra Dean Dixon; sociologist and social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson; and artist and programmer Chris Novello.

The book is organized into five sections exploring making methods, strategies, technologies, curriculum structures, and graphic practice. Each section begins with a framing essay, followed by an interview and a group of projects.

Occasional context and commentary is provided by a thesis guide and narrator: the author’s personal bitmoji (pictured below).

I’ll take it from here.  
Let’s go!



## Content–Aware

*Content–Aware* serves as a platform for investigating structure, corruption, and visual interference in the context of present-day technologies. I use fragmentation, movement, repetition, and abstraction to interrogate current methods and tools for engaging with the built environment, here broadly conceived as the material, spatial, and cultural products of human labor.

Physical and graphic spaces become grounds for testing visual hypotheses. By testing images and usurping image-making technologies, I challenge the fidelity of vision and representation. Rooted in active curiosity and a willingness to fully engage, I collaborate with digital tools, play with their edges, and build perceptual portholes. Through documentation and curation of visual experience, I expose and challenge a capitalist image infrastructure.

I create, collect, and process images using smartphone cameras, screen recordings, and applications such as Shrub and Photoshop. These devices and programs, which have the capacity to produce visual smoothness and polish, also inherently engender repetition and fragmentation. The same set of tools used to perfect images is easily reoriented towards visual destabilization.

Projects presented here are not meant to serve as literal translations, but rather as symbols or variables in experimental graphic communication strategies. Employing these strategies, I reveal the frames and tools through which we view the world. By exploring and exploiting the limitations of manmade technologies, I reveal the breadth of our human relationships with them, including those of creators, directors, users, and recipients.

Areas of investigation include:

- » photography & representation
- » networked technology
- » documentary & preservation
- » social media & dating
- » self-portraiture & identity
- » augmented reality



1 United States, National Park Service.  
*Architectural Character—Identifying the  
Visual Aspects of Historic Buildings as  
an Aid to Preserving their Character.*

# Lexicon

**apophenia** [noun]  
the human tendency to perceive meaningful patterns within random data

**built environment** [noun]  
material, spatial, and cultural products of human labor that combine physical elements and energy in forms for living, working, and playing; includes digital workspaces and surfaces

**camera** [noun]  
a device for recording visual images, including screens and smartphone sensors

**character-defining features** [noun]  
the visual aspects and physical features that comprise the appearance of an object, artwork, or piece of design; materials, craftsmanship, decorative details, and spaces as well as various facets of its site, environment, context, and intent<sup>1</sup>

**clarity** [noun]  
coherence and intelligibility, lucidity, definition; the quality of being certain or definite; transparency, translucence; the quality of being easy to see or hear; sharpness of image or sound

**collection** [noun]  
group, body, assemblage, gathering, throng, horde, pile, heap, stack, stock, store, stockpile, anthology, selection, compendium, treasury

**content-aware** [adjective]  
Adobe image editing tool used to remove unwanted image elements by filling the selection area with similar image content nearby, algorithmically blending the color and visual texture of the fill with that of the surrounding area

**destabilize** [verb]  
upset the stability of, cause unrest in, undermine, weaken, damage, subvert, sabotage, unsettle, upset, disrupt

**document** [verb] [noun]  
record, register, write, chronicle, archive

**fracture** [noun]  
breakage, cracking, fragmentation, splintering, rupture; [verb] break, crack, shatter, splinter, split, rupture, bust

**graphic uncertainty** [adjective]  
the quality of being visually displaced, fractured, or reordered; the integration of the figure and ground in a composition; dimensional or pictographic multiplicity

**information camouflage** [noun]  
deceptive coloration or patterning providing visual interference and preventing unwanted users from gaining access to protected content; types of camouflage include background matching, color changing, disruptive coloration, and countershading

**interference** [noun]  
intrusion, intervention, intercession, involvement, trespass, meddling; signal disturbance; disruption, distortion, static

**multiplicity** [noun]  
large number or variety; abundance, mass, host, array, range, diversity, heterogeneity, plurality, profusion, stacks, heaps, masses, myriad

**neutral** [adjective]  
not supporting either side in a conflict; impartial, unbiased, unprejudiced, objective, equitable, open-minded, nonpartisan, disinterested, dispassionate, detached, impersonal, unemotional, indifferent, uncommitted; inoffensive, bland, unobjectionable, unexceptionable, anodyne, unremarkable, ordinary, commonplace

**panorama** [noun]  
an unbroken, wide, or scenic view of a region or surround; vista, scene, landscape, seascape; painting or photograph containing a wide view; a complete survey or presentation of a subject or sequence of events; overview, survey, review, presentation

**panorama iPhone software** [noun]  
Apple’s panorama software uses the built-in camera to capture wide fields of view and stitch together visual information to make composite images

**pattern** [noun]  
a repeated decorative design; motif, marking, ornament; regular, intelligible form; system, order, arrangement, method, structure, scheme, plan, format, framework

**Shrub** [noun]  
released in 2014, *Shrub* is an application for the iOS camera built by graphic design studio *Linked By Air* with Jeffrey Scudder. *Shrub* converts the iOS sensor into a drawing tool which pulls image and texture information from the live camera feed

**tool** [noun]  
device or implement used to carry out a particular function; implement, utensil, instrument, apparatus, gadget, appliance, machine, contrivance; a piece of software that carries out a particular function

**toy** [noun]  
plaything, game, gadget, device; model, imitation, replica, fake, miniature

**vernacular** [adjective]  
concerned with the domestic and functional rather than the monumental; spoken or created as one’s mother tongue; not learned or imposed as a second language

**weapon** [noun]  
thing designed or used for inflicting harm or physical damage; a means of gaining an advantage or defending oneself in a conflict or contest

***We wanted to create a space where we  
could situate all these unconnected things  
and figure out a way to shape them.***

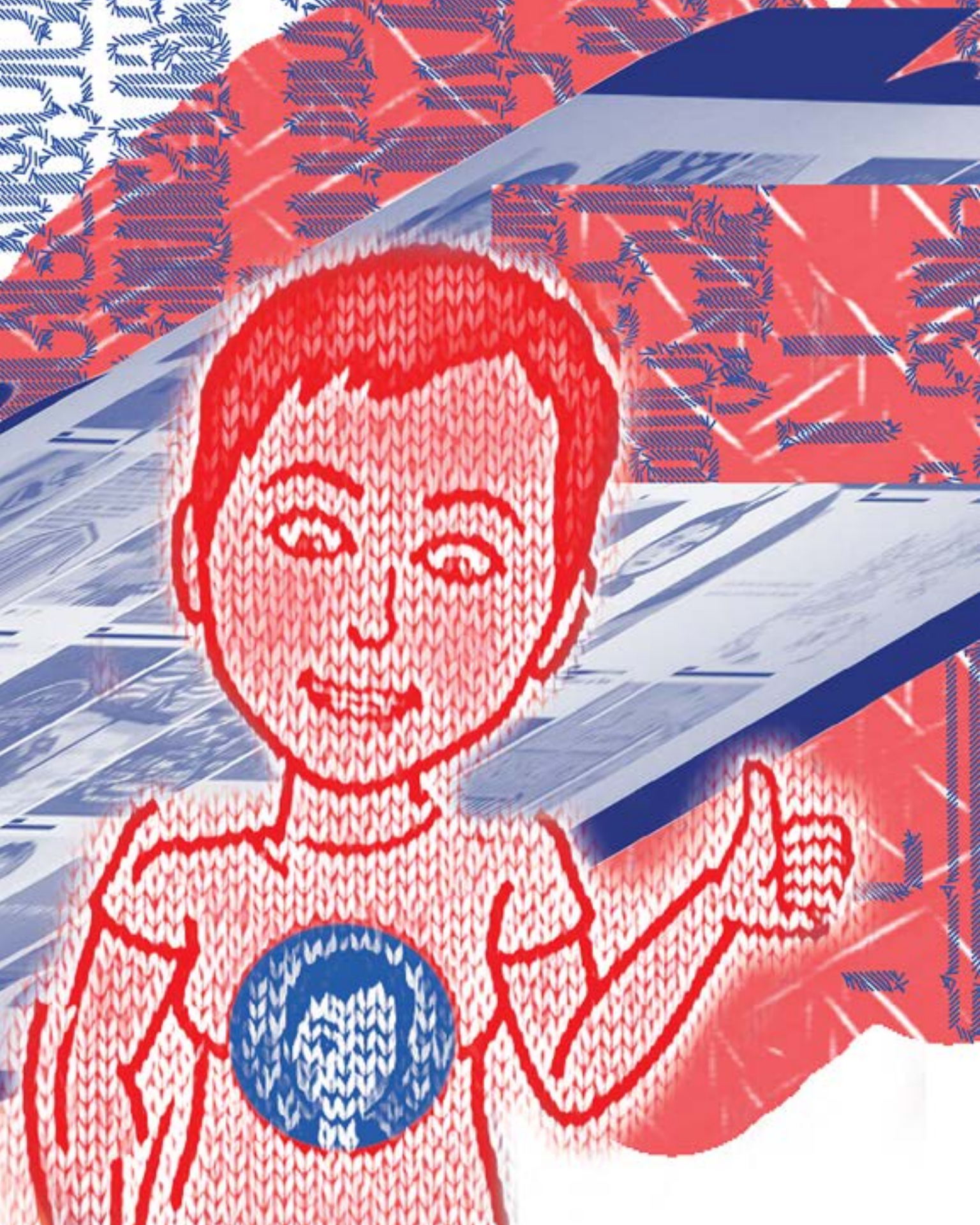
***– Chris Sleboda***

## ***SECTION 1***

### ***Preservation & Form: Building a Graphic Practice***







## Primary Communication

My work investigates the nature of culture, identity, character, and preservation. The visual vernacular of middle-class America attracted my aesthetic sense from childhood. I began photographing the built environment in my teens. When I bought a car at age seventeen, my radius of investigation grew to include nearby strip malls and abandoned warehouses outside my hometown of Richmond, Virginia. Regional visual culture continued to fascinate me after college, when I worked with an architect doing architectural preservation work. I often felt like the luckiest person on earth being paid to wander around old mills, shops, and row houses, tasked with documenting the spaces and materials of my city's built environment.

I think and remember in images. They are my primary form of communication; they aid and support my memory. I actively record visual experience in hopes that the process of collection serves to enrich my work and render its scope more elastic. By collecting and processing images, I determine their character-defining features and highlight their essential qualities. Through photography, the identifying traits and critical aspects of place are preserved. Images document and perpetuate the life of character. I continue my practice of collecting and photographing as I add graphic design and its adjacencies to my list of skills and interests.

Techniques of research, survey, and documentation formed in adolescence continue to develop in tandem with an expanding range of democratized tools and materials available for image-based form-making experiments. Collected records of character populate and inform my work. I make form and images using screens and digital workspaces as cameras.

I accrue collections of images, patterns, and typography to make videos, posters, environmental graphics, and installations. I am interested in graphic design elements, like typography and images, as environmental entities. In my work, scale, texture, and flatness are applied to space in the form of architecture and installation; graphic strategies are applied to time in the form of animated sequences.



I conceive of Photoshop, Snapchat, computers, smartphones, and cameras as aspects of the built environment. The character of our digital tools and workspaces shapes our senses of place and self. Innumerable gateways to communication and connection are thrown open. We cultivate intimate relationships with our devices. Beautiful, grotesque, and hilarious distraction happens in these spaces. People and programs antagonize, flirt, complain, buy, like, and view. We find people we love and hate.

Unity has never been closer nor further from being realized. Internet connectivity, ease of travel, and wireless communication serve to complicate meanings of place and identity. Our need to be recognized as individuals has never been stronger, resulting in more powerful and forceful separation of ourselves from those around us. With this awareness, I endeavor to understand how graphic design can help us comprehend ourselves and reignite interest in the experiences of others.



*Long Play*  
Gluekit Exhibition Catalogue  
2013

Kathleen and Christopher Sleboda are co-founders of the small publishing house *Draw Down Books*, partners in the illustration-design practice *Gluekit*, and co-teachers of the advanced form-making class *Newly Formed* in the Graphic Design Department at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Kathleen is an art director, graphic designer, and illustrator who designs books and printed materials for cultural institutions. She also lectures and writes about graphic design, independent publishing, indigenous knowledge systems, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Kathleen is a curator of [womenofgraphicdesign.org](http://womenofgraphicdesign.org).

Christopher is Director of Graphic Design at the Yale University Art Gallery, where he has overseen graphic design and wayfinding for the museum for over ten years while working closely with graphic design students in the MFA program and organizing events, including the annual *Odds and Ends Art Book Fair*.

*Newly Formed* has provided a productive playground for thesis concepts throughout my final semester of graduate study, helping me identify my own patterns and strategies. I spoke to Kathleen & Christopher about how they have developed the distinct branches of their practice, collaboration, and teaching.

**LL** = Llewellyn Hensley  
**KS** = Kathleen Sleboda  
**CS** = Christopher Sleboda

## INTERVIEW

# Kathleen & Christopher Sleboda

**LL** I'm curious how your practice developed. You do illustration work and short videos under the name *Gluekit*. How did that work transition into *Draw Down Books*?

**CS** When Kathleen and I met, we started working on projects together. We were experimenting with ways of making work in three-dimensional space. We were also working with photography and collaborating with different artists and design magazines. Eventually we started doing more professional work together. One of the reasons we started *Draw Down* was that we had a huge stockpile of work we'd created. We asked ourselves, "How can we put this out there in a way that makes more sense?" Plus we wanted a platform to collaborate with other people on projects. We wanted to create a space where we could situate all these unconnected things and figure out a way to shape them.

**LL** You created a place for your work to live.

**CS** For illustration work, we operate under the name *Gluekit*. We work with magazines to do photo-based illustrations. We also operated as makers of odd three-dimensional design constructions. We had ten years of projects—2002 to 2014. Yes, ten years of various little projects. We made that work into one of the earlier *Draw Down* releases that was called *Gluekit "Made Photographs,"* which contains all these photographic experiments. We printed in one-color offset, which tied them all together. It represents this chronology of ten years. You can see this thread of ideas that we were experimenting with.

*Gluekit "Made Photographs"* led to an opportunity to make a series of covers for the PRINT Magazine Regional Design Annual in 2008.

**KS** We struggled a bit with *Gluekit* because we were doing commercial photo illustration for clients, as well as self-initiated art projects which didn't fall neatly into graphic design or illustration. We realized it was confusing to clients who would hire us for photo illustration work and then see typography and video projects. So, we begin to split things off in 2005 to create a clear channel for photo illustration only.

Eventually we became aware of these artist book fairs. We went to a few and discovered a great of community there. We wondered, "How can we be more involved?"

**CS** At one point, we were curating exhibitions and doing more graphic design. *Gluekit's* three-dimensional photo collage work was in a Taschen book called *Contemporary Graphic Design*. We see our illustration and graphic design practices as completely separate identities. We don't design and make illustrations for the same project.

**KS** We work with a lot of partitions!

**CS** When we work with design directors, we focus on serving the client and helping tell the story.

**KS** Another reason we started *Draw Down* is because we wanted to be our own art directors. So, we're doing client-based work, but we always balance it with work where we are art directing or collaborating with other people.

**CS** It can be challenging, when you're open to and interested in a lot of different ways of making form, to direct it towards the relevant audiences. So, in a way, partitioning our practice was just as helpful to us as it was to our clients.





Sitcoms illustration  
Gluekit



Cover art for *PRINT* magazine's  
Regional Design Annual, 2008  
Gluekit

**LL** As somebody who probably needs to be more precise in defining her work areas, that sounds like a good strategy.

**KS** You want to be acknowledged for all the different types of work you do. But it helps to see how people approach your work and understand you as a maker. It's important to position yourself in a way that makes sense to other people.

**LL** I think you're right. Do you think of your third partition as teaching?

**CS** We saw our interaction with graphic design education as a big part of *Draw Down*, and we also started leading workshops.

**KS** We met faculty members and students at art book fairs. We decided that *Draw Down* could be something we do in our spare moments, in addition to all our more formal practices. We take it very seriously.

We have a limited publishing capacity, and we don't have staff. We had an idea that we could keep content fresh by distributing titles from other publishers. We became interested in what was being produced by graphic design schools and graphic design students. Christopher and I love going to thesis shows, looking at students' work. There was a lot of work being done that needed an outlet. We saw independent publications by graphic designers that we knew we could connect to an audience. That became a natural way to grow *Draw Down*. This allowed us to build relationships with designers, with schools, and then as our profile grew, we had opportunity to bring in more schools.

At first, we had a lot of representation from Yale because we knew students going through the program. Then we opened up to submissions. When we attend art book fairs, I talk to students and tell them to submit their work.

It's great way for them to get something out into the world. It's an exchange hub. As we interacted more with students, we became more interested in graphic design education. Chris has worked with MFA students at the Yale Art Museum, where he is the curator of Graphic Design. We've been visiting critics at Yale, the University of Connecticut, and RISD.

**CS** We're in New Haven and we go to the MFA thesis shows every year. We began documenting the shows through photography and then, because of Kathleen's background in archives, we started a blog called Yale Graphic Design.

So much work would go up in an exhibition, it would come down, and there would be no record of it. People are making posters all the time, but they're so ephemeral. We felt like there should be documentation of that work. When we started selling student publications, a RISD tabloid was one of the first things we sold.

It's amazing how many we would sell to customers in places like Russia and Sweden. People are really excited and interested. It's not something you can get in a store. Without a platform, many of the publications we carry would be limited to a tiny, insular community audience of students. We love opening up great material like that to a wider audience.



Gluekit website  
[gluekit.com](http://gluekit.com)



Women of Graphic Design website,  
of which Kathleen Sleboda is a curator  
[womenofgraphicdesign.org](http://womenofgraphicdesign.org)



Christopher Sleboda's  
graphic design website  
[csleboda.com](http://csleboda.com)

**CS** Graphic design faculty from different schools are a big customer base, and then we give away free posters with every order. It's nice to see connecting and to be part of sharing good work more widely. Kathleen is talking to VCU about jurying work for a brand design project.

**LL** That's where I went to undergraduate school!

**CS** We have another book project that's been in the works for a few years that's called *One-Offs*. There's a tradition in the Yale School of Art where, say, Irma Boom is coming to give a lecture. Students make a great poster for it. There's a single copy, hanging in the hallway, but it's only up for three days before it's torn down and gone. Over the past ten years, we've been collecting work as students graduate, including large installation pieces, props, and furniture.

There's been a lot of adventurous postermaking, but the student designers usually only make a single copy. When I was younger, I used to think that making one copy of something is pointless. I thought something had to be mass-produced to be real. But this project embraces the idea that something made as a single copy is just as valuable as something that there are 10,000 copies of. We hope the book will preserve and showcase these ephemeral designs and ideas.

**KS** Our interests include an archival impulse as well as access and transparency. I have a strong interest in documenting, collecting, and making things accessible.

Christopher taught before he went to graduate school. After we did some workshops, we became interested in doing a more full-hearted teaching experience. John Caserta reached out to Chris at a perfect time for us.

We love creating workshops for people. We consider *Newly Formed* to be a workshop boot camp. It's a multi-component class where there's remixing and formal investigation. These processes very much align with the methodology we use in our own practice over time.

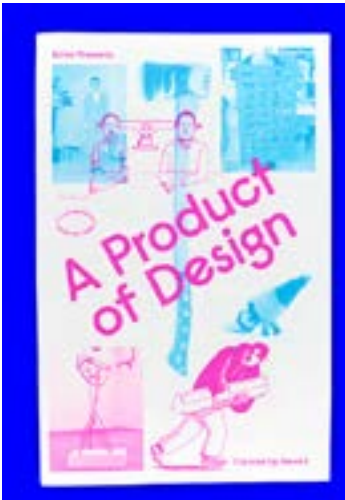
**LL** *Newly Formed* fills a gap in the existing graphic design curriculum at RISD. There's a reason why the class is filled to capacity. It allows students to sustain a high level of formal exploration. There truly isn't space for that, or dialogue around it, anywhere else.

**KS** When John [Caserta] first started talking to us, we weren't familiar with the RISD curriculum. We'd been to some book fairs here and we knew some of the faculty, but we didn't go through the program.

**LL** You both went to Yale, correct?

**CS** Yes, Kathleen was an undergraduate in history, and I was in the graphic design MFA program.

**KS** John [Caserta] and Christopher attended the Yale MFA program together, so John knew Christopher's process and strategy. John communicated that the students had interest in a course based on prolific, workshop-style form-making. He gave us a clear idea of what he thought the class could be.



A Product of Design exhibition catalogue, Gluekit, 2011



Draw Down Books website, draw-down.com

**CS** In school I had a reputation for producing a lot of work. We'd have a book assignment, and I'd bring back ten different possible solutions.

**KS** We like to do a lot of work. When we do illustration work, we tend to give our directors fifty illustrations.

**CS** I also work at the Yale University Art Gallery. The core mission of the museum is education—serving the students. The museum is free for everyone. Whenever I'm asked to give a talk or presentation, I put up this graph that shows the Yale School of Art, with its four floors. They're labeled *Photography*, *Painting*, *Sculpture*, and *Graphic Design*. My next slide is a graph of the Yale Art Gallery, which is labeled with its contents: *Photography*, *Painting*, *Sculpture*, and then the fourth area is left blank. Arrows go across connecting the department studios with corresponding areas in the gallery.

**CS** But the graphic design arrow swerves wildly off the path because graphic design doesn't have a place in the museum. I think it's important to make this argument because the Yale Art Museum doesn't collect graphic design. Students in other disciplines in the Yale School of Art have this institution that does interpretative exhibitions about the work they're studying. But graphic designers feel a little lost. The way graphic design students work and the way assignments are given is very different. Graphic design students can feel like outliers in interdisciplinary critiques.

Despite that, graphic design history has a strong presence. I look for ways to actively engage with students in the graphic design field at large. For example, we made annual calendars where we had graphic designers like Wim Crouwel and Ed Fella and sixty different graphic designers do cover designs for the art gallery publications. MFA students were given the opportunity to reach out to these prominent graphic design studios, like Experimental Jetset, and start a dialogue with them about the project.

In my role at the gallery, I can hire MFA students for up to eighty hours a week. So, for instance, we have exchange students from Asia. And they would point out that our program is pretty Eurocentric; that the program doesn't tend to focus on any designers from Japan or China. So, I'd say, "Okay, you pick a designer for the calendar cover." They would choose someone, maybe a famous designer in China, be able to write to them, and engage that designer to make a cover for us.

Maybe there is a Chinese student who wants to contact a Japanese designer, so they'd need to collaborate with a classmate to translate the emails. I'm trying to fill a void where the school doesn't address what students are interested in or who they can contact and collaborate with outside of the program itself, which might feel limited or have its own agenda.



How To Design A Product To Be Put on Display In An Art Exhibition Scion Video Art Series Gluekit, 2011



The Allure of That Product There Scion Video Art Series Gluekit, 2012

**CS** A few years ago, we started the *Odds and Ends Art Book Fair*, which featured work from all the graphic design students. We reached out to John Caserta at RISD, and RISD has had a strong presence at the fair every year.

**KS** Chris has also done a lot of programming for the Yale University Art Gallery. He brought in Andrew Blauvelt from the Walker [now director of the Cranbrook Art Museum], and [artist, designer, and illustrator] Mike Perry, and others...

**CS** We will bring someone to talk at the gallery and then fund or sponsor a workshop that they'll do for a week or two with the students. It's been great. We're developing different ways to reach out and connect students to the designers and makers they are interested in.

**KS** There's always been a culture of working with students. Students who work for Chris end up doing a lot of [exhibition] title wall development. Two students he worked with took a 19th century technical document, traced the letters, and created a typeface based on Thomas Wilfred's Lumia specimen. That typeface was included in the traveling exhibition that's going to the Smithsonian. There is a nice flow to how student work impacts the Yale Art Gallery.

**CS** There's a new modern and contemporary art curator [at the Yale Art Museum]. She was working on an exhibition about Dada's 100th birthday, and she asked me to work with graphic design students to fill a whole room with design that reacts to pieces from the Dada show. Typically, the design work we've done through this student collaboration process is on the outskirts or for the title wall. This was an interesting challenge. I thought it might be too good to be true. There had been a lot of resistance to the idea of student work on the walls in the museum. It had been an unspoken rule, and I thought this idea would probably be shut down. But we were able to follow through. We had twelve students working on the project. We did neon signs, seven video projections. We painted the entire room black, we had ceiling vinyl; just crazy interpretations of graphic design.

**KS** It was awesome.

**CS** I thought the curator who suggested the student exhibition idea would retract her offer, but she let us follow through with what we wanted to do. The show ended up getting a lot of press and attention, and people seemed to really love it. It was a great opportunity for the students; they got to give interviews and tours. It's interesting to see how graphic design's presence within this type of institution can build little by little. It's exciting to see the institution begin to embrace graphic design.



## Newly Formed 8: Portrait

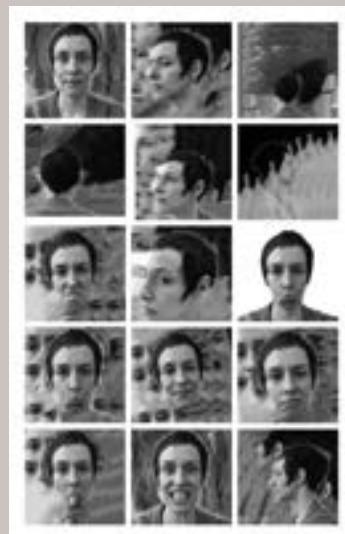
*Photograph yourself, a classmate, or a friend from every angle.*

*Be sure to include front, side profile, and back. Include head and shoulders in every shot. A shoot using a plain background or wall is recommended.*

*Present your collection of images in black and white. Next, create one design (size 18" x 24") using some of the images that also includes one of the following texts:*

- 1. Images are the principal currency of media.*
- 2. The media have no address and cannot be addressed.*
- 3. There is always something outside a medium.*

*Push your design beyond the obvious.*



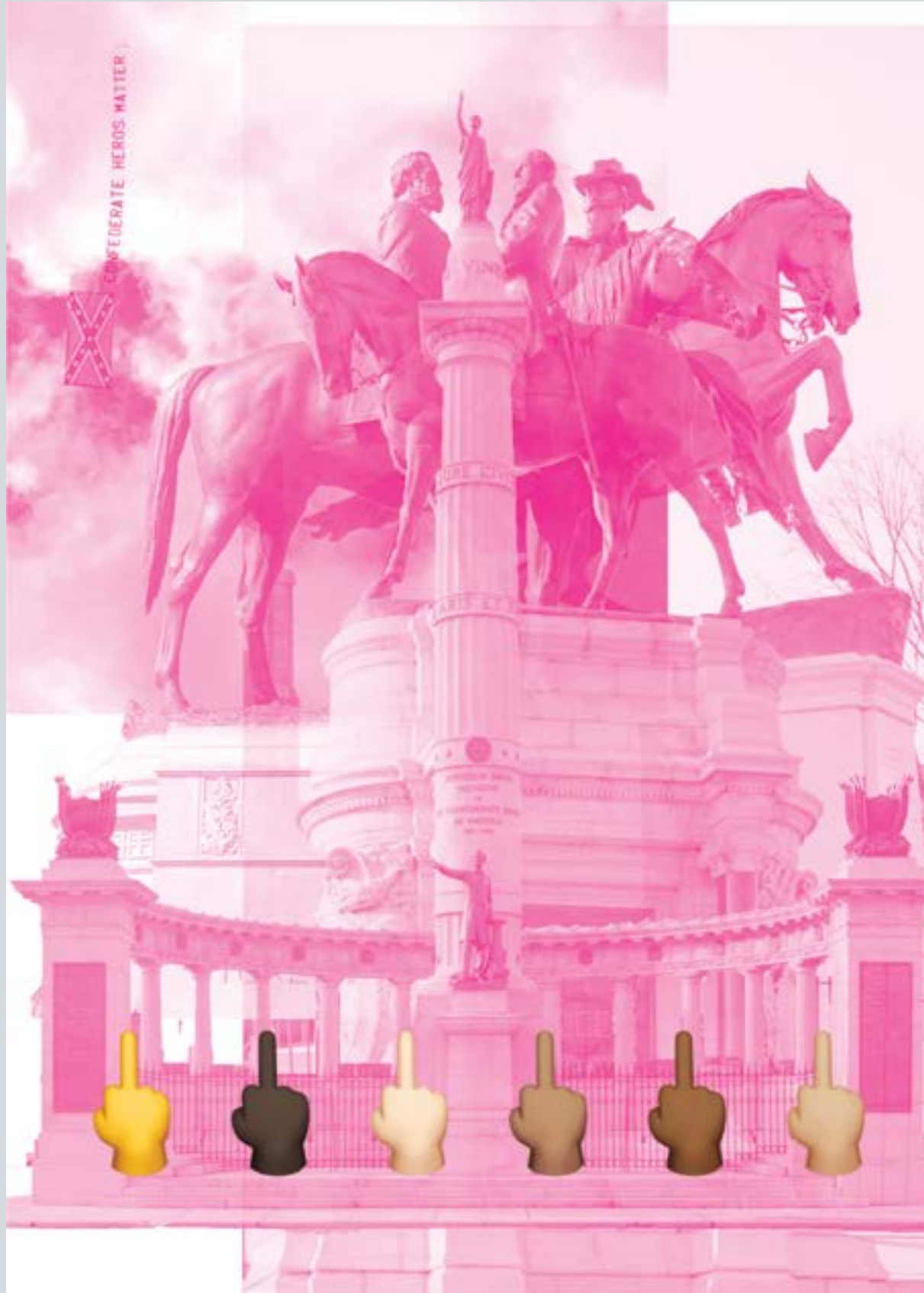
*Final Portrait poster (far left) and process images. The bottom process image was created using the content-aware fill tool in Photoshop to fill the composition with image information generated from the selected area.*

## Newly Formed 10: Giant

*Create an exciting and visually arresting form that is at least 8' x 5'. Sketch at scale. Output full size. Color or B&W. You can plot out your work, or tile it from smaller sheets of paper.*

Compositions for *Giant* were made using images from the Library of Congress's Historic American Building Survey archive. The archival photographs depict bronze statues erected to celebrate Virginian Confederate soldiers who fought against the United States in the American Civil War. The monuments were installed between 1890 and 1929 along Monument Avenue, a prominent and architecturally significant thoroughfare in Richmond, Virginia.

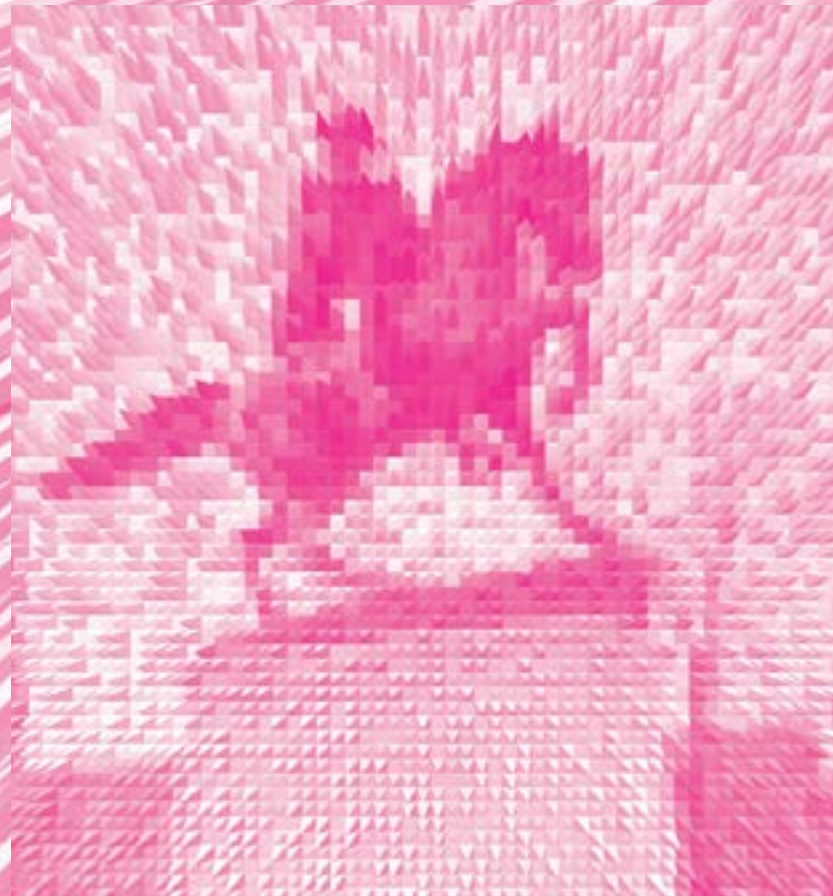
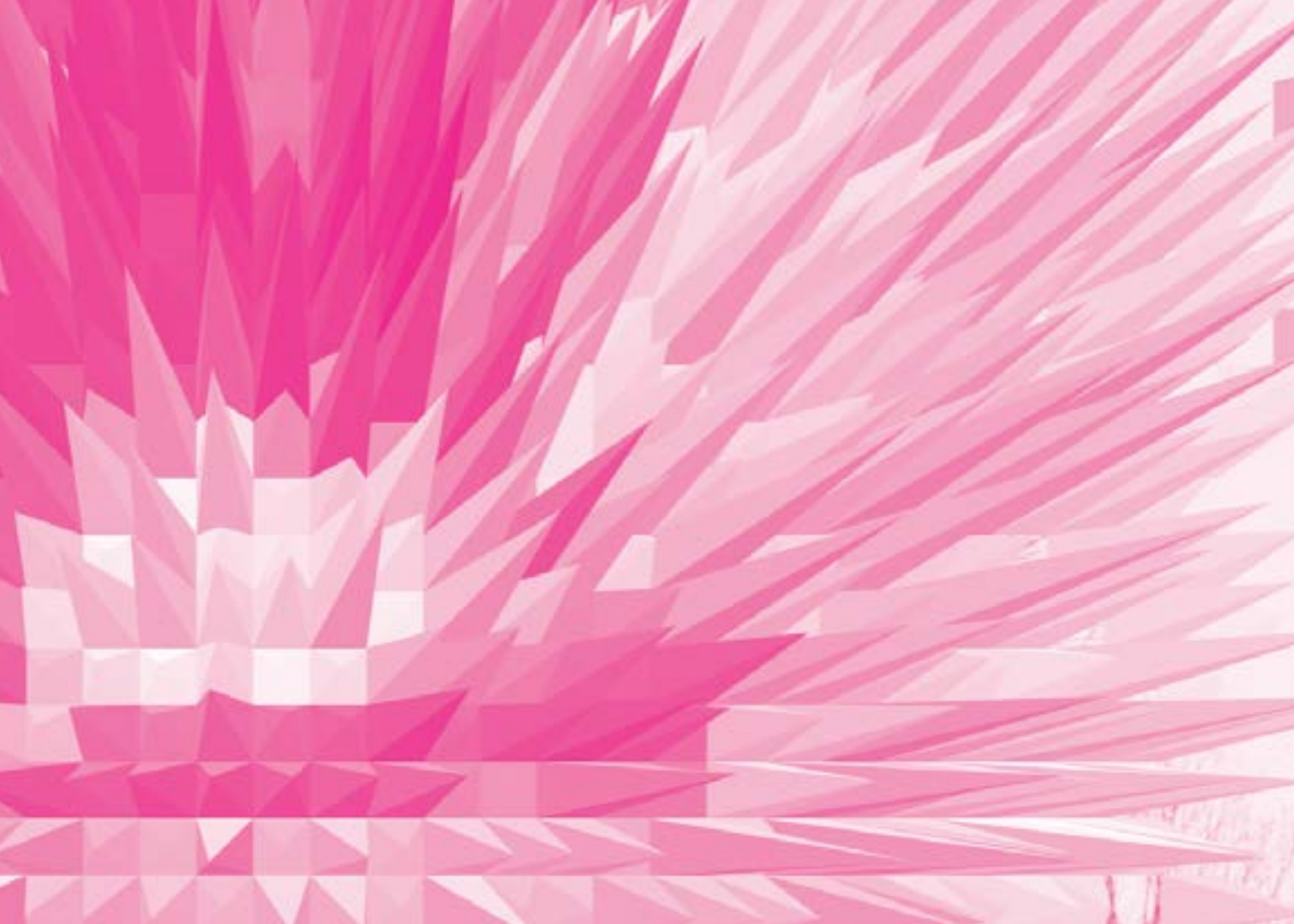
Process magenta duotone was applied to subvert the heroic, hyper-masculine forms. Along the bottom center is a row of middle finger emoji, enlarged to the point of pixelation, challenging the statues' prominence. Alternative iterations of *Giant* make use of dimensional extrusions.



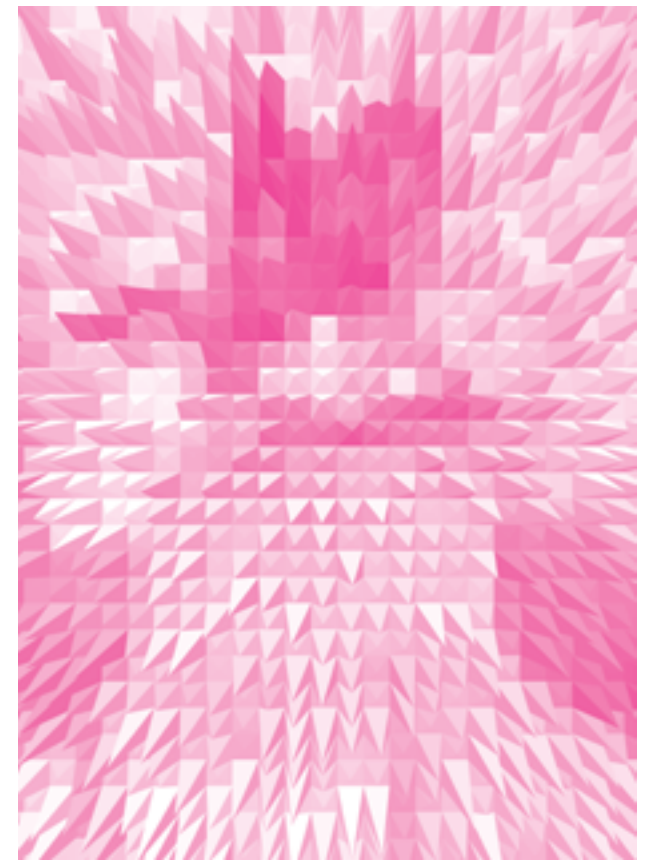
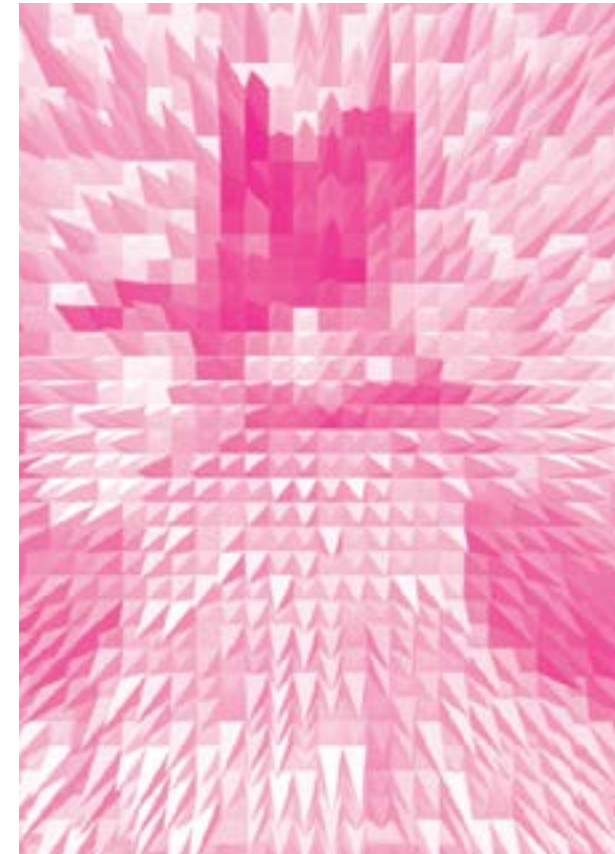
*opposite*  
Final *Giant* poster

*next two spreads*  
Process images and details from  
alternate versions of *Giant*











## Newly Formed 12: Distortion

Create 10 different distortions (50 designs total)  
for each of the following 5 symbols:

- 1) Skull and crossbones
- 2) Heart
- 3) Man and woman pictograms
- 4) BMW logo
- 5) Symbol of your choice

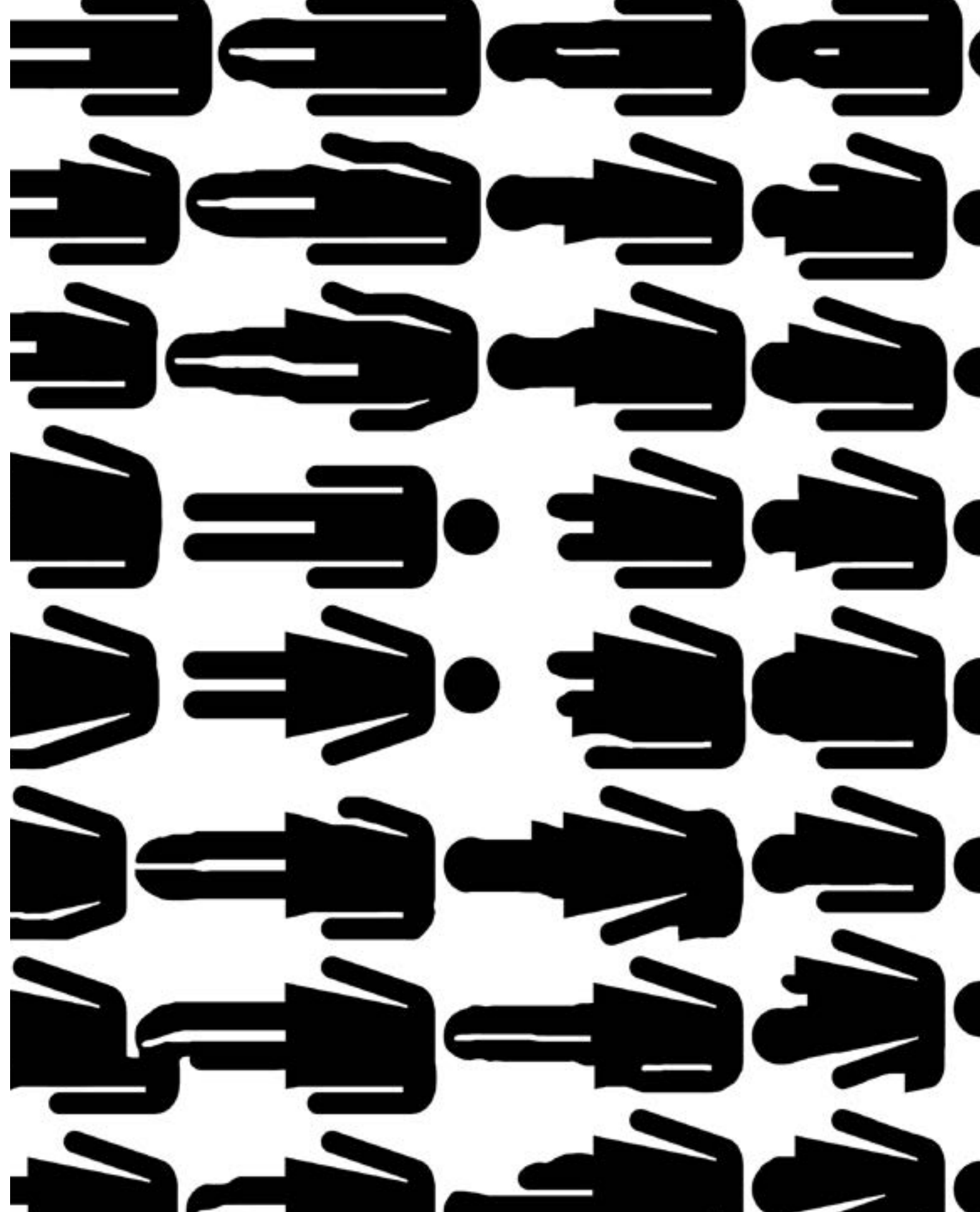
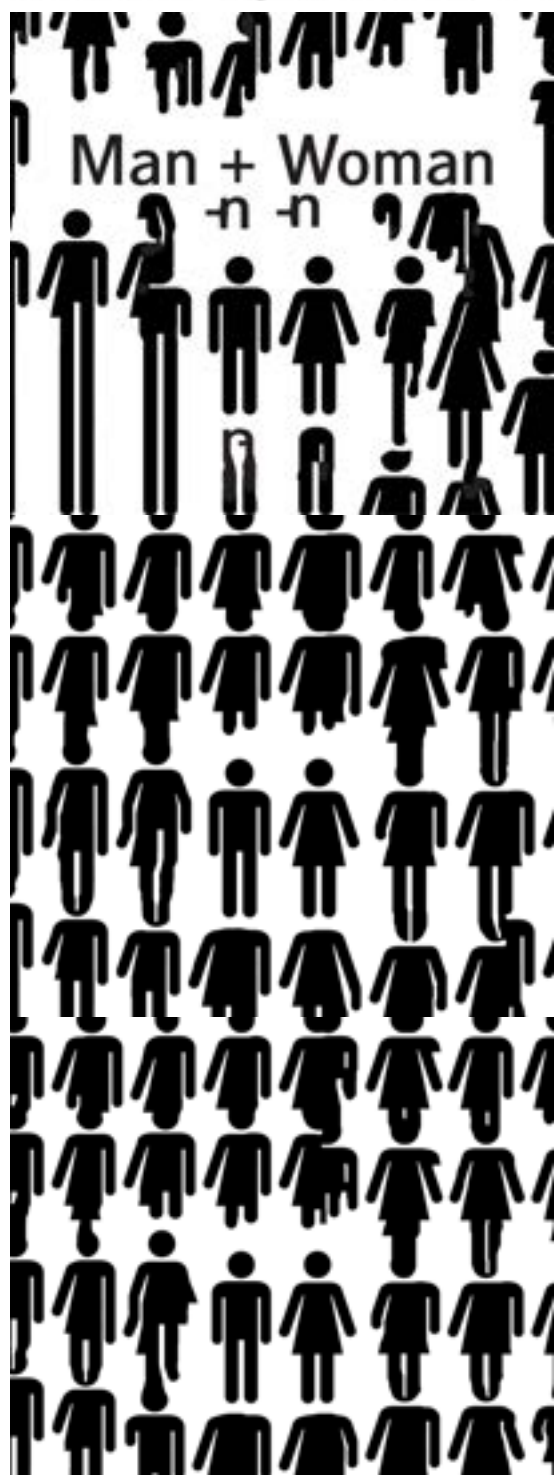
Present your work in a booklet format using a trim size  
of 5.5 x 8.5 inches.



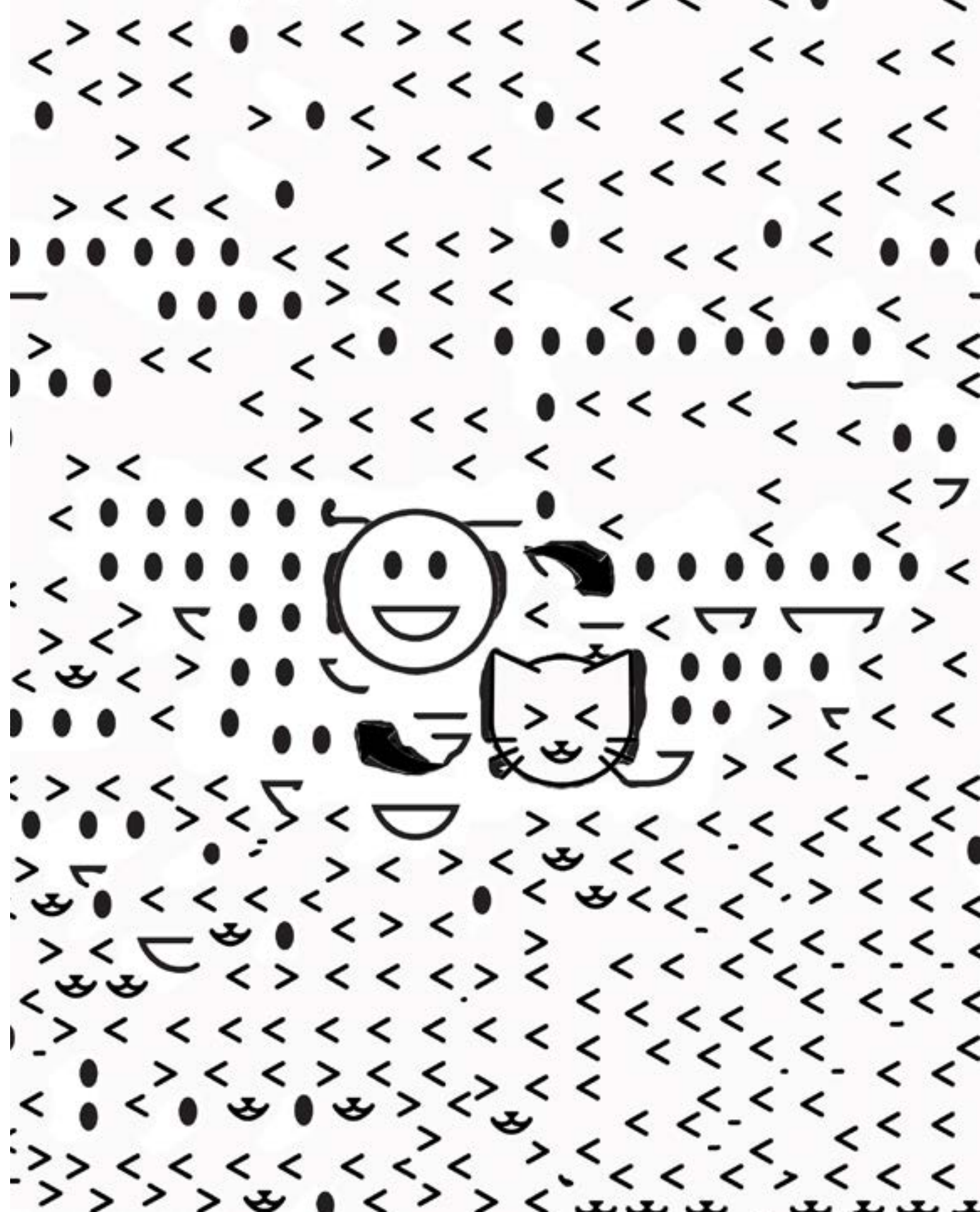
*this page*  
a portrait made using Snapchat's  
Face Swap function to "swap" the  
author's face with the *face swap* icon

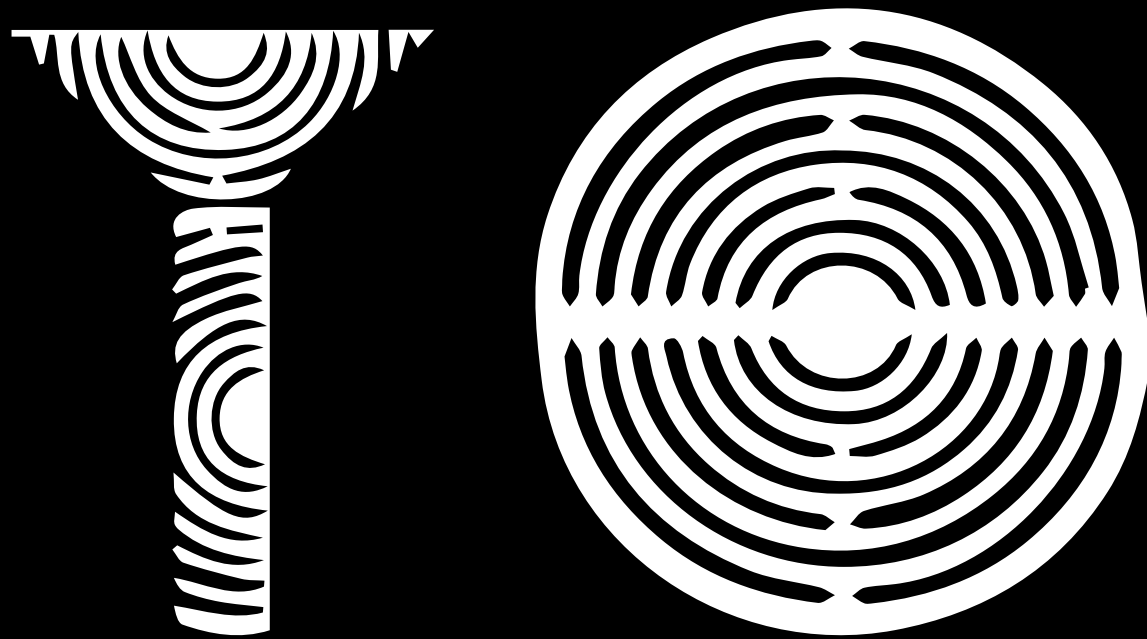
*opposite page & next two spreads*  
various iterations of *Distortion*, made  
using Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop,  
and collage











## PROJECTS

### Newly Formed 1: Alphabets

*Create three different alphabets (A-Z or a-z). Forms should be black and white only.*

*One design should be created from found objects, shapes, or forms and can be modified as needed.*

*A second alphabet should be created using a system via a limited set of parameters, shapes, and forms that are repeated to complete the alphabet.*

*A third alphabet should be created using a different method of your own invention and choosing.*

1. Object
2. System
3. Other

#### *opposite*

Letters made using a circle template

#### *next spread*

Letters made using the iOS application *Finger Quilt* to make an alphabet based on the tool's built-in grid system. Letters were drawn in the evening, with the iPhone pointed at the sky. The tonal gradient of the letters records the shifting light throughout the process of the letters' creation.

a b c d  
e f g h  
i j k l  
m n o p  
q r s t  
u v w x  
y z

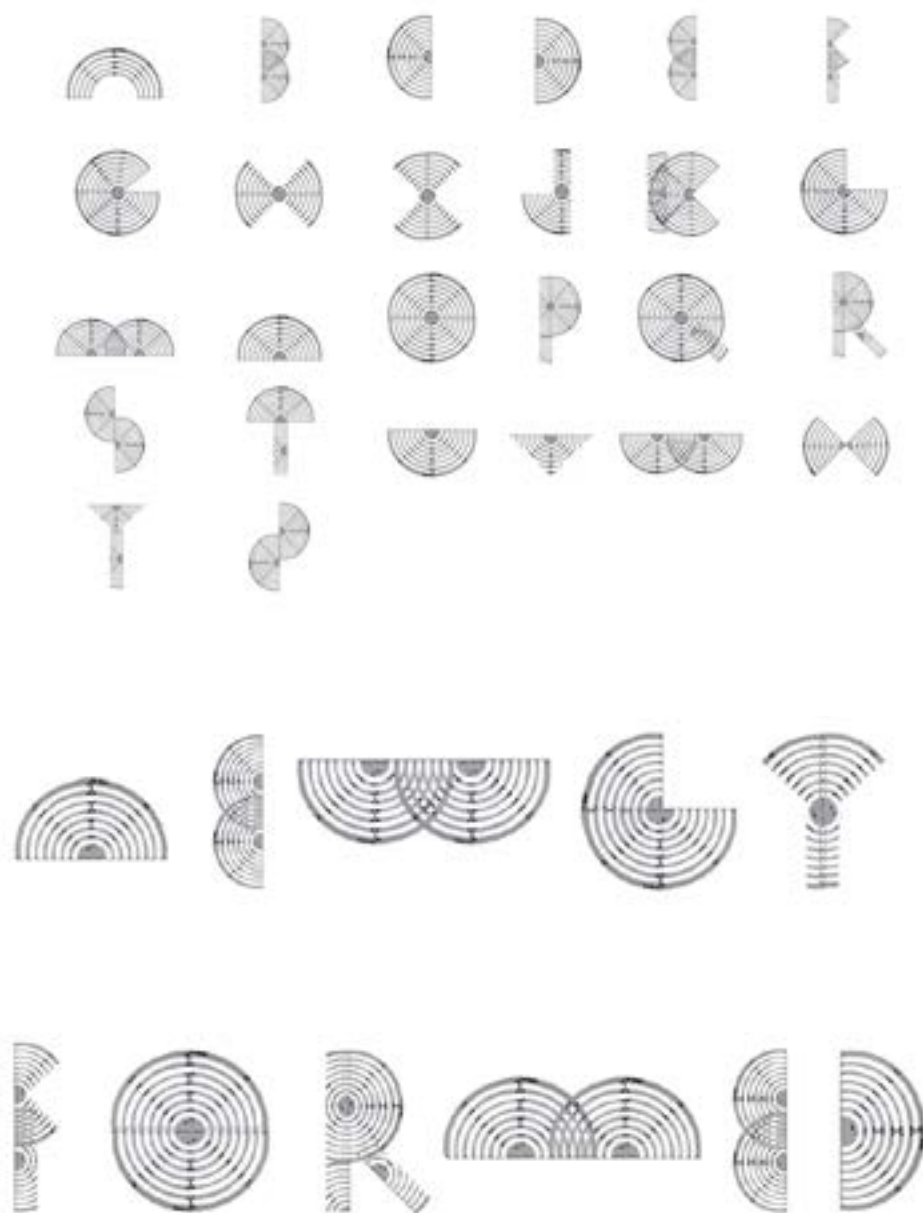
a b  
c d



NEWLY  
FORMED

A B C D  
 E F G H  
 I J K L  
 M N O P  
 Q R S T  
 U V W X  
 Y Z

A B C D  
 E F G H  
 I J K L  
 M N O P  
 Q R S T  
 U V W X  
 Y Z



*opposite page*  
This alphabet was made from scans of security patterns found on the inside of envelopes. A group of the patterns was combined, then made into an Illustrator Art Brush.

*this page*  
A circle template was used as a building block for this alphabet.

## The Young & the Risoless

This 33" x 46" double-sided poster/maze book, entitled *The Young & the Risoless*, contains a series of collage-based Risograph prints.

The products of this process rely heavily on chance. Variables include the level of ink saturation, imagery left from previous masters (the material into which originals are imprinted and from which copies are made), overprinting, and image placement. The prints were grouped and given soap opera names; one of my all-time favorites was chosen as the book's title.

This project was completed in a book structures workshop with Jan Baker at RISD in the spring of 2015.



*opposite*

The title panel for folding poster book,  
*The Young & the Risoless*

*this page*

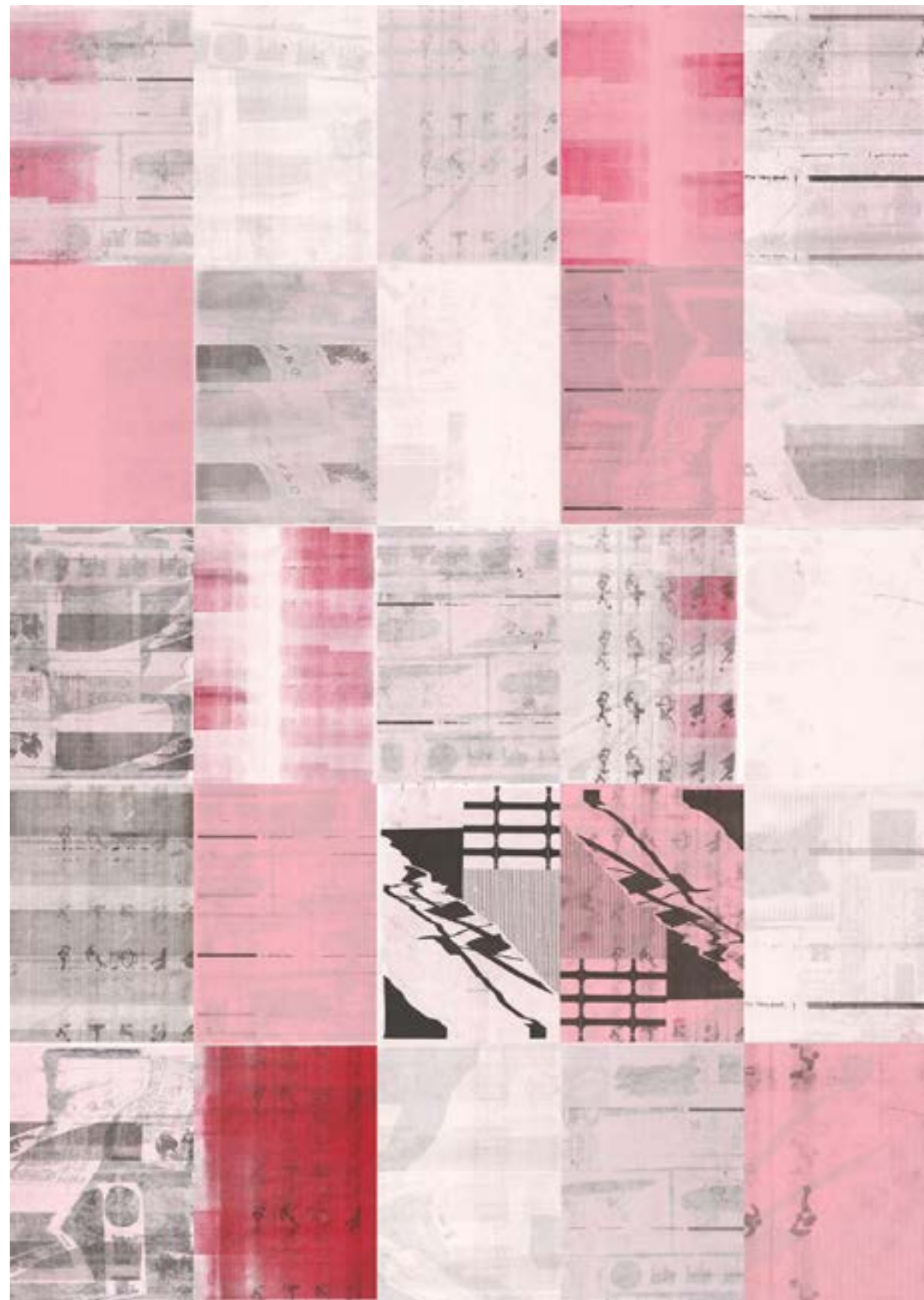
Detail of an original Risograph print which makes up one module of the poster grid.

*next spread*

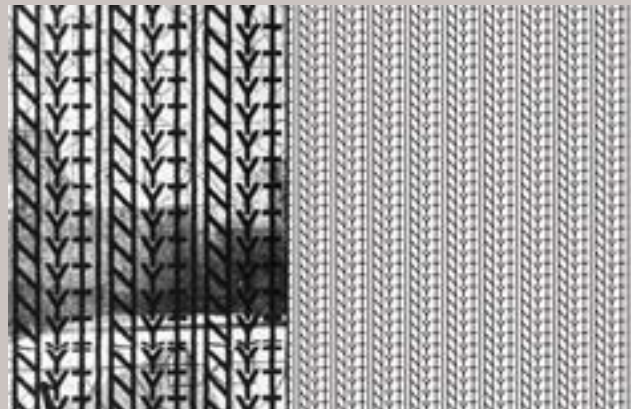
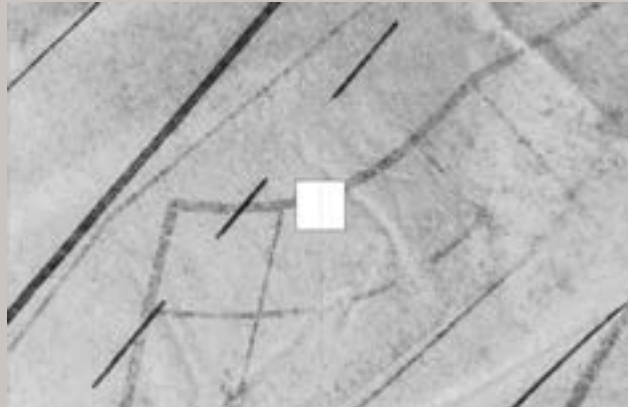
Scans of the fronts and backs of all the Risograph prints used to make the poster. Because of the age and condition of the machine, ghost prints of previous masters and other peculiarities make each print unique.











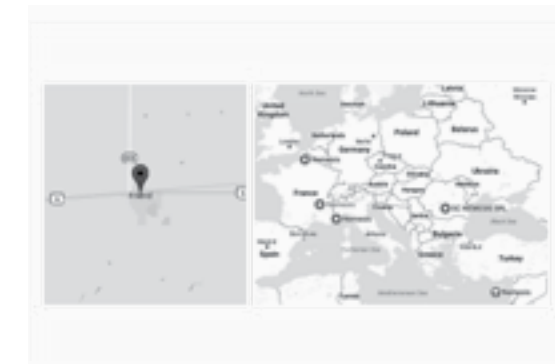
## PROJECTS

### Newly Formed 3: Contrast

Create 25 black and white designs focusing on contrast.

Consider the state of being strikingly different from something else. Use juxtaposition. Explore a range of contrasts from high contrast to low contrast. Each design should be 11" x 17" or larger.

Some of your designs must include the following words or forms: axe, ladder, clock, glasses, hard-boiled, apollo, nemesis

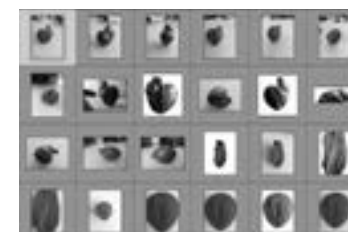
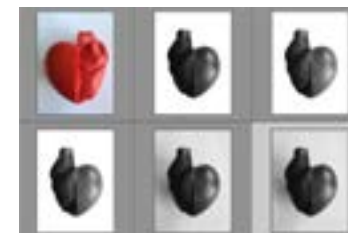
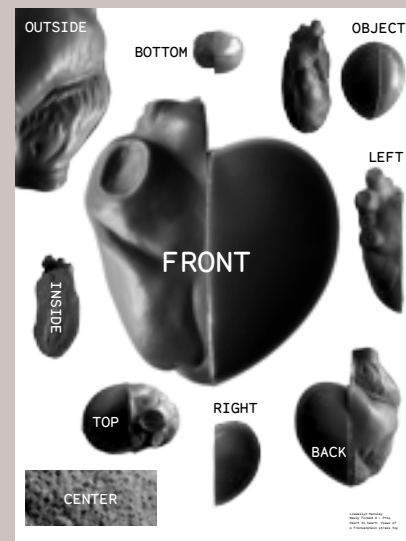
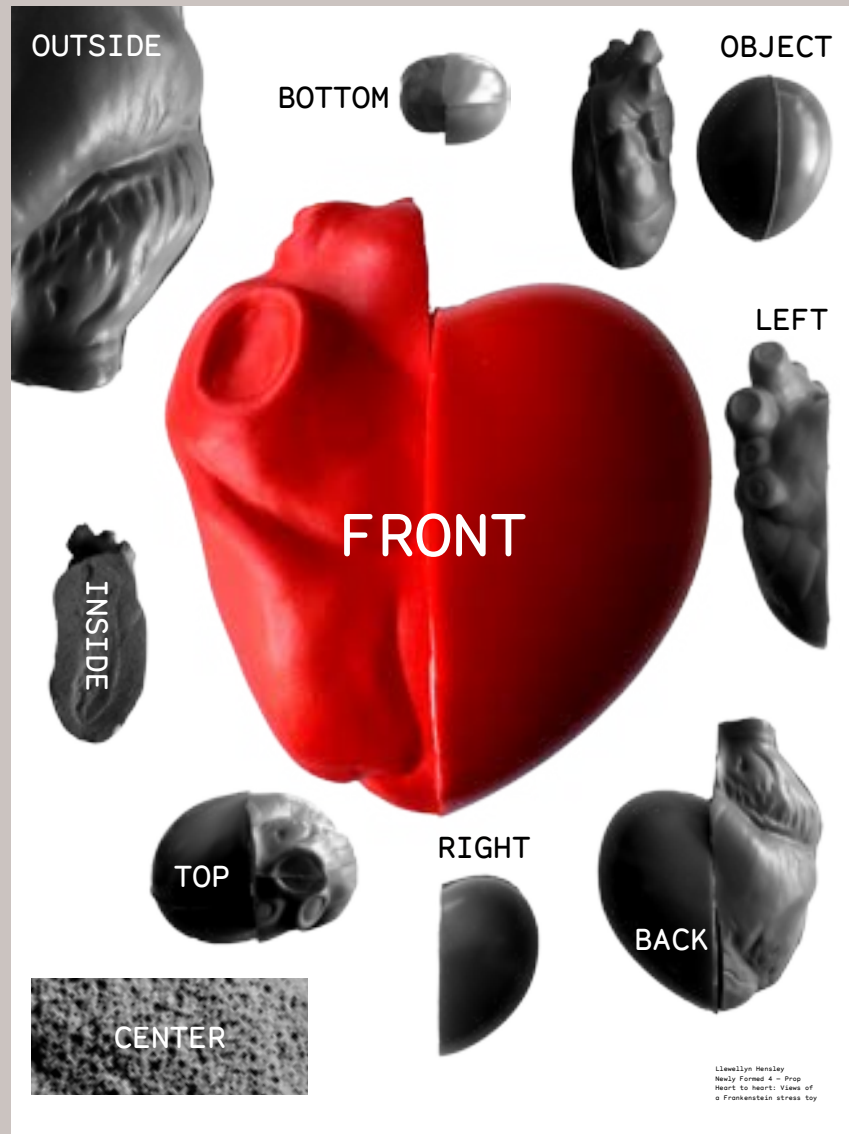


*this spread*  
Various compositions from *Contrast*, which use scale, texture, interface elements, resolution, and location to create variability

## Newly Formed 4: Prop

*Select a portable object, other than furniture or costumes, that has an appealing form. Photograph it from multiple angles. Silhouette the object, and present the object in a poster of your design. It should not look like an advertisement for the object, but a study in form that pushes, pulls, and reveals hidden facets of your prop. Your composition should exhibit and amplify the various characteristics of your object.*

*The poster should be 18" x 24" or larger.  
You must use the following text in your design:  
object, left, right, top, bottom, front, back, inside, outside, center*



*opposite page*  
Final *Prop* poster compositions in color  
and black and white

*this page*  
Process images illustrating numerous  
views of the prop, which is a hybrid  
of two foam stress toys



***I proposed that we see the curriculum as a rubber band, something that was expansive and flexible as opposed to something hidebound.***

***– Lisa Young***





## INTRODUCTION

### Character—Defining Features

*When we invent, we disrupt. When we learn, we disentangle. When we scale, we disseminate, and while each of the former is intimately connected to act of building, each of the latter is equally connected to a different act, one we might call ‘unbuilding.’*

*In building, we press forward and work with confidence and know-how. In unbuilding, we look back, make adjustments, find patterns, put things where they don’t belong, and take the time to reflect. Far from the opposite of building, unbuilding is building’s other half.*

— Rob Giampietro<sup>2</sup>

My image-making strategies are image-unbuilding strategies. Through repetitive, iterative processes, I work to reveal the frames and tools through which we view the world.

A Photoshop function developed to remove imperfections is easily hijacked to reorder the constituent parts of an image, changing its fundamental structure. The figure and ground are chopped up and tossed back into the frame together. The resulting forms displace words and fracture and rearrange materials, integrating them with their surroundings.

These methods illustrate how the means of making impact an image’s character. *“In traditional photography, both the process and the invention are ‘transparent’, mere means to an end. In my work the process becomes the subject,”* notes photographer Ellen Carey. *“...[another] question addresses the conundrum of a photographic image without a picture or a ‘sign’ to read. These two questions challenge our cultural and historically prescribed expectations for this medium...”*<sup>3</sup>

#### opposite

a photograph of *Bliss Place*, an apartment building in Providence, RI; Type from this image was isolated, proliferated, and used to make animations, prints, and tote bags.

<sup>2</sup> Giampietro, *The Art of Unbuilding*.

<sup>3</sup> Carey, *Photography and Lens-Based Art: An Introduction*.

<sup>4</sup> Carey.

My images inhabit the territory Carey describes, leaving the viewer's expectations of recognizability unfulfilled. Process-driven work confronts viewers' expectations of quality and clarity. Ambiguous, unsettled images hold the power of possibility. They are not one thing or another, but one thing and another.

Being digital, and not of particularly high resolution, my images contain traces of their sources. Pixels and jagged edges communicate fragments of their stories. *"[The poor image] is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. Only digital technology could produce such a dilapidated image in the first place..."* writes Hito Steyerl in her essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*.<sup>5</sup>

*"Apart from resolution and exchange value, one might imagine another form of value defined by velocity, intensity, and spread. Poor images are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly. They lose matter and gain speed. But they also express a condition of dematerialization, shared not only with the legacy of conceptual art but above all with contemporary modes of semiotic production,"* Steyerl continues.<sup>6</sup>

The dancing, jagged multiverse of forms present in my work reveals truths about me. The multiplicity of forms also mirrors a culture of fragmented experience. The work documents my attempts to unify segmented reality. I believe that the manipulation of durable images clarifies them. My process thus presents a set of strategies for achieving clarity through interference.

<sup>5</sup> Steyerl, *In Defense of the Poor Image*.

<sup>6</sup> Steyerl.





*opposite*  
*Bridge*, Lisa Young, 2006.  
Bridges cut from travel postcards  
are collaged onto blue backgrounds,  
scanned, and printed as inkjet prints.  
The decontextualized bridges act as  
metaphors for in-between, liminal  
spaces.

<sup>7</sup> Young, *Lyra Angelica*.  
<sup>8</sup> Young, *Calendar*.

Lisa Young’s hybrid practice includes installation, book, video, photography, and web projects. Young has exhibited at venues such as the Cue Art Foundation, the Getty Research Institute, White Columns, Hunter College, Wave Hill, and Bard College.

Among her commissioned projects are a billboard at 6150 Wilshire Boulevard in LA, an artist book project for Cabinet Magazine, and a web project developed with the Scholarly Technology Group at Brown University. Young’s work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in NY, the Rhode Island School of Design, the Harvard University Art Museums, the Rose Goldsen Archive for New Media Art at Cornell University, and the Weserberg in Bremen, Germany.

Young grew up in Illinois, completed the Whitney ISP program in 1996, and is currently an Assistant Professor in the College of Art and Design at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

During my time at RISD, I was able to take two courses that Young developed as a professor in the photography department, Image Bank and Instamatic to Instagram. The work that emerged from these courses was crucial to helping me understand my instincts, engage with archives, and begin to build an image-based graphic design practice.

**LL** = Llewellyn Hensley  
**LY** = Lisa Young

## INTERVIEW

# Lisa Young

**LL** Your projects are often organized by rigorous visual and linguistic systems.

**LY** Structure allows viewers an access point. We intuitively look for similarities and differences, repetitions, or patterns as evidence in order to make sense of what we are seeing.

**LL** How do you connect your content with organizing structure? I’ll use your video work, Lira Angelica, as an example. The video is divided into quadrants. In each quadrant is a recording of figure skater Michelle Kwan’s long program titled *Lyra Angelica*<sup>7</sup> (footage is from the U.S. National Championships, World Championships, Olympics, and Goodwill Games, respectively). One of the reasons that piece is so compelling is that the four performances begin at the exact same moment, but as they continue, each distinguishes itself. How do you create good rules so that the work has a logic?

LY I often filter my collections through visual and linguistic frameworks that serve both to organize data and transform it into something new. I enjoy using structures that also allow for random or chance occurrences. I use cropping, repetition, and sequencing as ways of organizing images. Some pieces develop through a pre-determined set of actions. Other times, I select images in a very intuitive manner; a personal meandering that evolves over time, analyzed from different angles as I determine what my relationship is to the subject.

For example, I love the way that structure can be a window which allows for closer looking. I used a split screen format to juxtapose four video recordings of figure skater Michelle Kwan’s long program titled *Lyra Angelica*. The rule here was to align the start of Kwan’s program and then do no further editing.

Kwan’s skating began in synch, but skating speed, small choreographic changes, and mistakes generated a montage of performances that fell in and out of time with one another. The audio was a sound mix of televised commentary taken from each of the four broadcasts. Together, the image and sound created a composite narrative that explored cultural definitions of beauty, perfection, success and failure. The structure allowed me to draw out a cultural critique that would not be as legible when looking at a single performance.

Like *Lyra Angelica*, my project *Calendar* also used a pre-determined structure that allowed for chance occurrences—this time with images I produced rather than appropriated. When I was working on the piece *Calendar*,<sup>8</sup> I was establishing a practice of working in grids and taking pictures of different things in the sky. I decided to make a larger scale work, something panoramic. I thought about how to achieve immersive scale using the sky as the subject, and came to the idea of amassing a large grid of sky images to achieve that goal.

I took a picture of the same area of the sky every day for a year. Using the calendar as the organizational structure meant that some key presentation decisions were implicit in the calendar form itself. The day of the week that the month starts and ends delineates the shape of that month’s grid. Each image is 4”x6” inches because that was the standard snapshot size at the time. There are many aspects of the image that I didn’t control. If there’s an airplane in the sky, if it’s raining or cloudy, those are all variables generated and controlled by nature or other outside forces.



*Beloved Object (day and night)*  
Lisa Young, 2002  
Photographs of discarded Christmas trees were taken while walking through Soho. The same area of Soho was canvassed again at night. The photographs were positioned in two grids, one for day and one for night.



*Calendar*  
Lisa Young, 2001–2003.

As a series of daily photographs, *Calendar* possessed a documentary quality, yet each photograph recorded only a fleeting moment in time. My calendar both produced a narrative and simultaneously provided a framework for looking at that narrative's limits. The specificity of the framework revealed both the sky and the gaps, the moments not represented.

Another related project, one that evolved in a more intuitive way, is *Common Objects of Mystery*.<sup>9</sup> I had been taking images of everyday objects—like paperclips, a figurine, or a pair of gloves—with a pocket digital camera. Then I made contact photo (not digital) mono-prints by exposing photographic paper to the LCD screen on the back of the camera. For a long time I didn't understand my instinct to make the photographs, or why it felt important to translate them from physical objects to digital images to photographic prints. There were no rules. But I gave myself permission anyway. Then I set the project aside for a while.

Later, I realized I had started photographing the objects shortly after I inherited many of my mother's belongings. The items were either things she owned that we had both touched, or things that belonged to me and were part of my everyday life. The objects were by turns personal, symbolic, and generic—representing the commonly used, and the outdated. From the beginning, my mother's objects looked old fashioned. By the time I completed the project, even some of my objects looked out of date.

For example, the 2006 cell phone I photographed at the start of the project had a completely different shape than the iPhone I owned by the time I finished. Simultaneously, I noticed that another set of objects I photographed were transcribing mediums: a camera, a framed photograph, and a pencil. I began thinking about the varying degrees of technological obsolescence in the objects I had collected, and consequently their relationship to contemporary and archaic photographic practices.

To finish the project, I scanned each mono-print (which now served as paper negatives) and made 50 small digital prints, housed in a portfolio box. My “common objects” were captured from life and translated through multiple cycles of digital and analog technologies. The resulting images pushed the limits of legibility—turning the familiar into the beautiful and the strange. The name of each object appeared on the back of its print, and the prints were stored in alphabetical order. I used a linguistic structure that allowed the viewer to see themselves in a moment of their own (mis)recognition and highlighted the ways in which touch and ownership affect the life of objects. By structuring the material, I discovered why I had taken the photographs.

In my most recent project, *A Vocabulary (for perfection and control)*<sup>10</sup> I used yet another organizational system to structure my material. Flea markets, second-hand stores, and yard sales are the main places I gather material for my work. In this case, I had collected a bunch of simple, black, vintage diploma frames.



*Clowder*  
Lisa Young, 2009.

The frames ended up forming the organizing structure for the project content: cropped images from the book *Balanchine Classic Ballet*. The book contains these beautiful, strict diagrams that illustrate how to achieve “perfect” ballet positions. Balanchine writes in the beginning that drawn illustrations are superior to photographs because a photograph can only show what is but a drawing can show what should be.

First, I arranged the empty frames on the wall. Then, I scanned, decontextualized, and cropped the diagrams, and made Xerox enlargements of them to control the scale. I hand-painted the ballerinas' hair, leotards, and shoes. The composition is rigorous and controlled, and it represents movement that is equally rigorously controlled.

**LL** Often I'm trying to figure out what drives me to collect a particular object or document a type of subject.

**LY** Yes. The systems of organization I use are structured attempts to figure out what attracts me to seemingly disparate images or objects. The operative question might be, why? In answering that question, or trying to answer it, I produce the piece.

**LL** That's lovely to hear. Recently I was trying to describe my thinking and goals leading up to graduate school. Much of what drove me was an urge to understand the patterns and significance of my instinctual decisions around making art and design. I think to some extent the answers are unknowable. It's part aesthetic attraction, but there's another layer—which you might relate to—about the character of images and material.

I'm beginning to develop a vocabulary for my work which grew out of practicing historic preservation. My favorite phrase from the preservation world is character-defining features. Instinctually I've started to look at images that way. A character-defining feature is a detail that reveals how an image or building was made, or an aspect that provides information about context or material.

The everyday is present in a lot of the work you make. Do you think about the everyday as being both personal and universal? In particular I'm thinking of *Beloved Object (day and night)*.<sup>11</sup>

A single discarded Christmas tree is kind of sad, but when *Beloved Object* presents a grid of them, it communicates a logic which is completely irrational. The project reveals psychology embedded within the cycle of purchasing, adorning, and disposing of Christmas trees.

**LY** Correct. You bring the tree into your home, dress it up, and then you throw it away. Multiple images have a power that a singular image does not. When you repeat something, you increase its importance. In *Beloved Object*, I'm reminding the viewer that similar actions are happening simultaneously across distance in many households.

The project started with a nighttime walk. I noticed these discarded Christmas trees and photographed them. I went out again the next day and photographed them again. There's a different emotional resonance between the daytime and the nighttime shots. In the daytime, the trees feel abandoned, dumped in the gutter and surrounded by graffiti. The trees in the night images look more like crime victims or party goers that left the bar too late.

<sup>9</sup> Young, *Common Objects of Mystery*.

<sup>10</sup> Young, *A Vocabulary (for perfection and control)*.

<sup>11</sup> Young, *Beloved Object (day and night)*.





*Flocking*  
Lisa Young, 2009.

**LL** They become anthropomorphized. I start to feel sorry for them.

**LY** There is one tree in the nighttime sequence which has been placed in a special Christmas tree disposal bag, which looks a lot like a body bag. That adds context to all the others because it really does make the tree into a corpse.

**LL** Ha! We're such a strange creatures. It's fascinating how the Christmas tree ritual has been normalized. I love that through re-presentation, residual waste can become a point of focus and contemplation—that there are more meanings and potential metaphors built into something than you can know as you're making it. Do you find that to be true?

**LY** Yes, I do. I get feedback from people that after viewing *Beloved Object* they look at Christmas trees differently, or that in comparing the grid of photographs they notice things they hadn't noticed before. It's exciting when that perceptual shift is a result of work that I make.

As I mentioned earlier, in much of my work I create collections of everyday images and filter them through structures that both organize and transform them in a critical way. I am interested in the way that the repetitive action of accumulating and organizing can create its own poetics. Through a process, I try to uncover how thought lines can emerge from examining repeated gestures, or the way transcendence can be generated through methodical, intermediate actions, or can be dependent on imperfections just outside the frame.

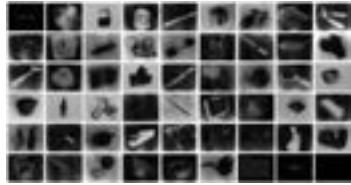
My relationship to subject matter usually changes during the evolution of a project. I'm often surprised by what the structure reveals. It's usually in those moments that the pieces complete themselves. The finished works allow me to present what I find compelling in a way that is legible to others. They read as a formal framing of my consciousness and observation, and as a series of ephemera that reflect the incomplete and transitory aspects of the sublime.

**LL** That's great. Is there anything that I haven't asked that you feel like we should talk about?

**LY** We had talked about Instamatic to Instagram, and I was thinking about what prompted me to suggest that class to the Photography Department at RISD. Photography is changing so much right now, and it will continue to change. In grad school at Tufts/SMFA Boston, there was a Professor, Pam Allara, who piloted a seminar class on Postmodernism. She admitted openly that the movement and its impacts were still evolving, and that she didn't claim complete mastery (can anyone?) over the subject. I think about her bravery in taking on a topic that was undefined yet clearly changing the landscape in a significant way. In creating that class, she was saying to us, "Let's explore this together." That gesture was both brave and incredibly generous. Prof. Allara's Postmodernism seminar is one of the courses I remember most clearly from my own graduate education.



*Lyra Angelica*  
Lisa Young, 2004.



*Common Objects of Mystery*  
Lisa Young, 2015.

Now, I have the opportunity to provide a similar space for learning and exchange within the rapidly changing medium of photographic practice. I saw an opportunity to take on emerging technologies and philosophies—and ask questions like, who is a photographer and who is the audience for photographic images today? How have new environments for photographs (Instagram, Tumblr, etc.) changed ideas of the image and of authorship? How has the Internet changed conditions for taking, viewing, and sharing images? Instamatic to Instagram provided a format and structure for exploring these questions. I did not pretend to have answers, only the desire to engage in active viewing and making together with other interested parties.

**LL** Right. What's next? Is it virtual reality?

**LY** Maybe! That prospect actually makes me nervous. The curriculum in Instamatic to Instagram generated valuable discussion. I created a space for enquiry within the Photography Department. We talked about the current (always changing) state of photography, image-making, archiving, and networked technology; with the goal of making something in response to it because we're artists and designers, and that's the way we grapple with the world. Everyone in the class was an investigator, a user, and a producer taking a journey together, seeking innovative ways of rethinking photographic practice in a rapidly changing world. The history of photography carries a lot of residual rules. I was trying to be conscious of the fact that both history and contemporary media culture have value;

both are components of making within the photographic medium. I proposed that we see the curriculum as a rubber band, something that was expansive and flexible as opposed to something rigid.

**LL** Absolutely.

**LY** Photography has always been a medium characterized by multiple modes of production, viewership, circulation, and use. A critical consideration of the photographic image is central to grasping contemporary culture and the sources of photography's social impact. Images are often defined by context in relation to physical space (archive, gallery, magazine or book), and while I would suggest that these contexts and spaces have always been shifting, the internet has enormously magnified these shifts. We can all see millions of images every day, posted by individuals who may or may not define themselves as photographers in a virtual space where roles of curator and artist elide, original contexts are lost and new readings found.

**LL** Yes! That is beautiful. It can be difficult to find institutions willing to offer courses about material as it's developing. At the same time, photography programs that aren't wrestling with Instagram and Snapchat will soon regret that. There will always be people who are opposed to these changes. I think it's smart to turn these questions—this evolving, confusing set of unknowns—into an opportunity for an active discussion where we're formulating ideas about how technologies are operating now and how it might play out.



*A Vocabulary (for perfection and control)*  
Lisa Young, 2016.

**LY** The idea of collecting links both courses that I developed for RISD, Image Bank and Instamatic to Instagram. We didn't touch on Image Bank directly in this interview, but briefly, it was an interdisciplinary studio/seminar course that investigated the archival impulse in relation to photographic imagery.

Each student created a personalized Image Bank of at least 250 examples, including snapshots, postcards, newspaper and magazine clippings, Internet images and their own photographs and then generated a series of projects using those images.

Through collecting, indexing, and juxtaposing images, students honed their skills as interpreters of diverse visual languages. So many contemporary artists use collecting or archiving practice as a structural way into making. Those methods go hand-in-hand with the mass of images we now have available to us. In this way, Image Bank and Instagram are inextricably linked.

**LL** Thank you for sharing all of this with me.

**LY** You're welcome!

emerji: emergency emoji

Emergency emoji (or *emerji*) will allow rapid communication during sensitive and critical situations, including medical emergencies, natural disasters, active shooter scenarios, and terrorist attacks. The existing emoji set is lighthearted and playful, with a focus on food, entertainment, travel, and leisure. This proposal offers a range of iconographic, utilitarian emoji which would allow communication of complex information during critical situations.

This emoji proposal was drafted and formatted in accordance with the Unicode Consortium guidelines.<sup>12</sup>

emerji – emergency emoji – Character Proposal

Selection Factors / Factors for Inclusion

A Compatibility

B Expected Usage Level

1 Frequency

Proposed emerji would be used regularly by the general public and frequently among emergency personnel and humanitarian organizations.

2 Multiple Usages

Most proposed emoji within the emerji set could represent larger metaphorical ideas as well as literal meanings. Although it is likely that emergency emoji would be used for non-emergency situations, the intention of the proposal is an icon set for situations wherein clear, practical visual communication is necessary.

3 Use in Sequences

The proposed emoji symbols could easily be used in narrative or symbolic sequence with other emoji.

C Image Distinctiveness

opposite  
Mockup of a proposed new panel within the emoji keyboard specifically for *emerji*, critical situation emoji

12 Unicode Consortium guidelines for submitting emoji characters





For the purposes of this proposal, utility is prioritized over specificity. Simple icons indicating showers and latrines would stand in for the array of haircuts, manicures, and head massages. This iconographic style, in addition to the flat red-orange color, distinguishes them as emergency-use symbols.

*D Completeness*

The evolving emoji set is lighthearted and playful, focusing on food, entertainment, travel, and leisure, and it includes a large quantity of graphic symbols. This proposal offers the addition of a range of iconographic, utilitarian emoji which would allow communication of complex information during critical situations. Existing emoji types tend towards dimensional, rendered specificity.

The spare forms of the pictograms proposed here strike a visual contrast which reinforces their context and utility.

*E Frequently Requested*

There is no immediately available evidence to indicate that a set of emergency pictograms is frequently requested of the Unicode Consortium.

**Selection Factors / Factors for Exclusion**

*F Overly Specific*

Not applicable. For the purposes of this proposal, utility is prioritized over specificity. Rather than the many specific food and drink emoji, emerji would present, for example, a simple sack of flour to indicate that food resources are available.

*G Open-ended*

Not applicable. Creation of an Emergency / Public Safety Category would allow quick access to utilitarian symbols. Although there are emoji for ambulance, helicopter, doctor, or nurse, there is no first aid emoji. Rather than being open-ended, this proposal is intended for specific but universally applicable uses.



*this spread*  
Proposed emerji inspired by public domain icons released by the Visual Information Unit of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)



*H Already Representable*

Although there is some overlap between the proposed emergency emoji category and existing emoji within the Travel and Places and Symbols categories, it seems that a practically-minded emoji collection would be a useful addition to the current set. Existing emoji which would be appropriate in emergencies and public safety scenarios are presently scattered among different categories.

*I Logos, Brands, UI Icons, Signage, Specific People, Deities*

Not applicable. There are no logos, brands, signage, interface elements, specific people, or deities in the proposed emerji set. The symbols presented here are designed to be recognizable and iconographic. Although they may be visually similar to graphics used in wayfinding systems, the proposed symbols are not signage.

*J Transient*

Not applicable. The ongoing water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and the late 2016 earthquake near Japan are reminders that the developed world is not immune to natural and manmade disasters. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs operates in more than thirty-five countries over four continents to “mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors in order to alleviate human suffering in disasters and emergencies.” The Global Humanitarian Assistance Report indicates that international humanitarian assistance in 2015 totaled \$28 billion, the highest amount ever recorded. Crisis Watch reports that over sixty million people were displaced in 2015. There is little danger that the set of iconic disaster emoji would become irrelevant.

*K Like Compatibility Emoji*

Not applicable. The argument for inclusion of emerji in the emoji set is not founded on comparison with existing emoji.





FIRE



NON POTABLE WATER



## HARRASSMENT



## LIGHTNING/THUNDERSTORM



*this spread*

The existing emoji set is lighthearted and playful, focusing on food, entertainment, travel, and leisure. This proposal offers a range of iconographic, utilitarian emoji which would allow communication of complex information during critical situations.





## American Oil Fields

Using the digital panoramic photograph collection of the Library of Congress as source material, this project focuses specifically on images of the American oil industry. The height of U.S. oil mining operations coincided with a peak in the popularity of panoramic photography. The Library of Congress collection contains more than a hundred photographs of American oil fields, from locations as widely dispersed as California, Texas, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, Wyoming, and Puerto Rico. A majority of the 104 photographs in this collection were taken between 1910 and 1920.

The photographs show vast expanses of industrial landscape. In some places, oil rigs dominate the horizon, packing the entire frame from edge to edge. Others illustrate pastoral, rolling landscapes sprinkled with rigs. An occasional gushing oil well is shown releasing its dark geyser straight into the sky.

In the decades after these photographs were made, the United States shifted its focus from production of fuel to manufacturing industries. The images are emblematic of a time in American history in which nationalism and industrial self-reliance were prioritized. Configurations of energy-mining equipment littering the countryside stand in for national power structures. The country's industrial growth reveals itself, in these photographs, as both simultaneous and synonymous with our disregard for and destruction of the natural environment.

American pride and power are on display in these images. The proud determination with which we pursued (and pursue) natural resources and global control despite their costs take strikingly straightforward form.

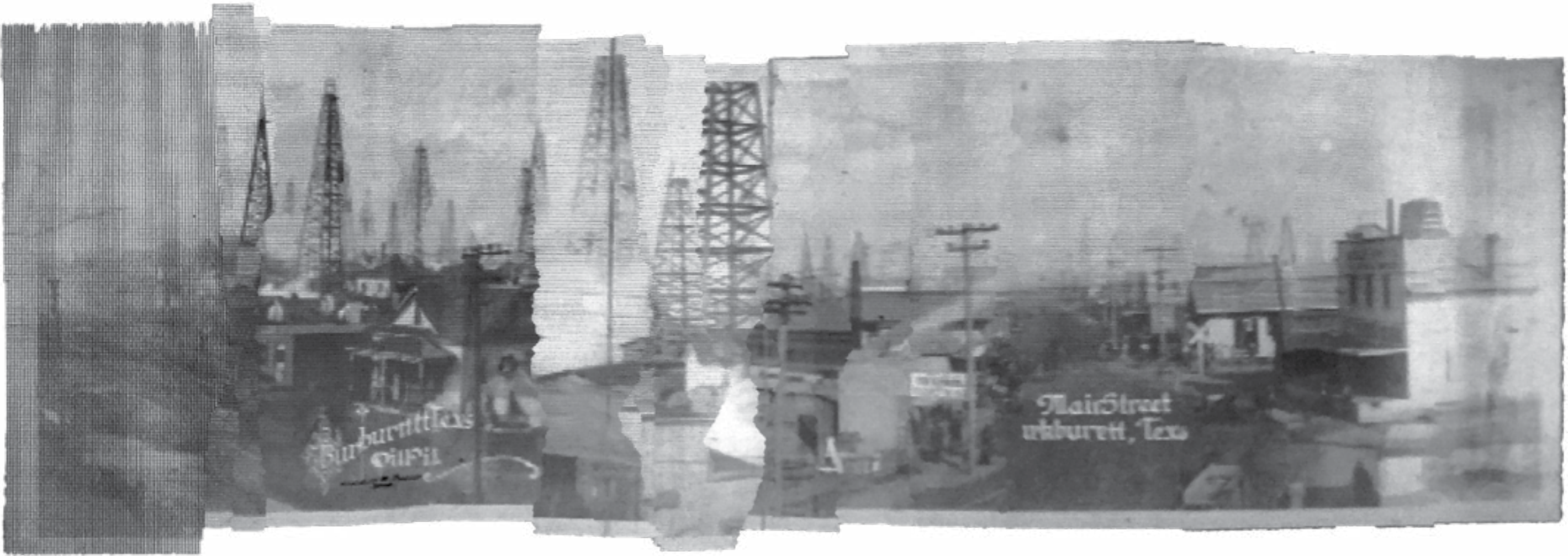
The Library of Congress digital panorama collection consists of scans made from black and white film negatives. *American Oil Fields* uses three panoramic photographs from the collection as case studies: the Burkburnett Texas Oil Field, Long Beach California Oil Field, and Standard Oil Field in Whiting, Indiana.

The Library of Congress's digital collection contains an archive of over 4,000 panoramic photographs. Of these, 48 depict America's oil industry in the early 20th century.



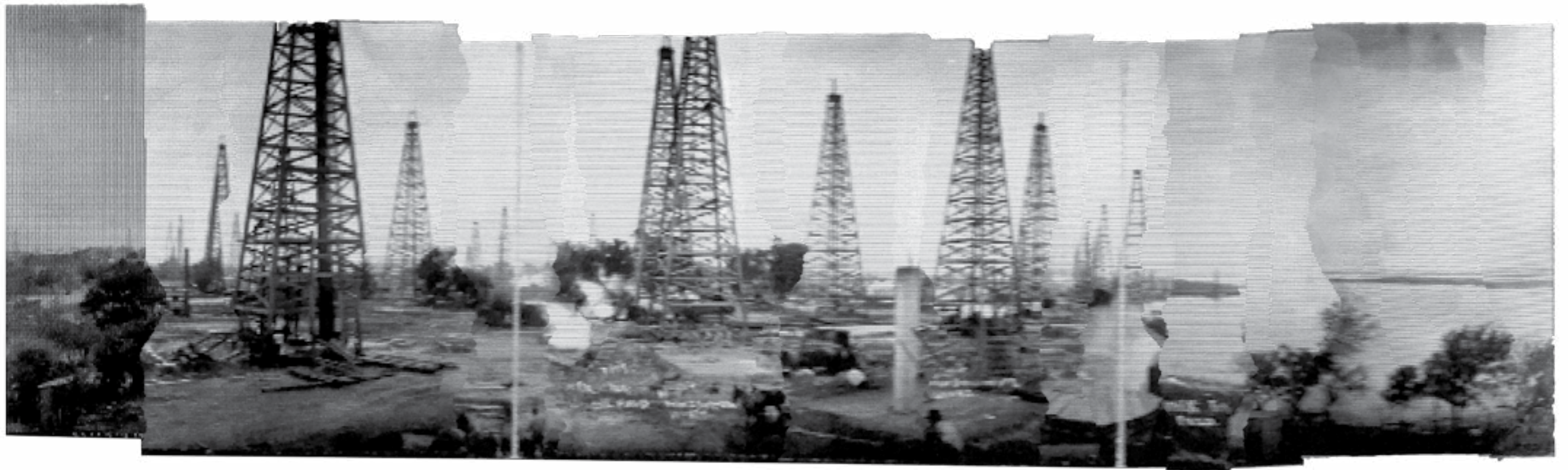
A high-resolution image of each photograph was downloaded and displayed on my computer screen, then rephotographed with the iPhone panorama tool. The process results in a digital panorama photograph of a film panorama photograph.

Visual noise of the computer screen's texture and resolution are added to the image. The iPhone camera compresses horizontal space within the image in unpredictable ways; reading, processing, and stitching together the landscape.



Panoramic film photograph taken in 1919 of oil fields in Burk Burnett, TX and rephotographed in 2016 with the iPhone panorama tool





Panoramic film photograph taken in 1910  
of Standard Oil Fields in Whiting, IN

The archival image was rephotographed  
in 2016 with the iPhone panorama tool.



Panoramic film photograph taken of  
oil fields in Long Beach, CA, 1911

The archival image was rephotographed  
in 2016 with the iPhone panorama tool.





*this spread*

Images of breast stress toy, style 1

*next two spreads*

Various other foam stress toys

found at [officeplayground.com](http://officeplayground.com)

## PROJECTS

### Living Large: A Taxonomy of Stress Toys



above

"Stills from Oliver Laric's video *Versions*, 2010 present a stunning sequence of comparative images, from images of ancient sculpture to footage from classic animated Disney films, highlighting similarities, reuse, and appropriation and changing the viewer's perception of value, originality, and context.

*Versions*...deals with historical and contemporary ideas relating to image hierarchies. It proposes that present methods of creative production challenge the hierarchy of an authentic or auratic 'original' image. Rather than privileging a primary object, *Versions* suggests a re-direction for image making, one in which bootlegs, copies, and remixes increasingly usurp 'originals' in an age of digital production."<sup>13</sup>

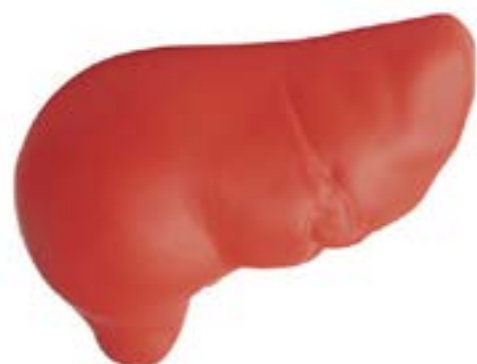
Americans suffer from a deep-seated sense of entitlement. Our economy and citizenry benefit unfairly from free trade. Inexpensive goods from other parts of the world pervade our lifestyle of comfort and plenty. This installation of foam stress toys sourced from foreign manufacturers through the internet and the accompanying video taxonomy present two distinct views of these meaningless artifacts. The video cycles through the collection in an ordered way, highlighting subcategories and links among forms.

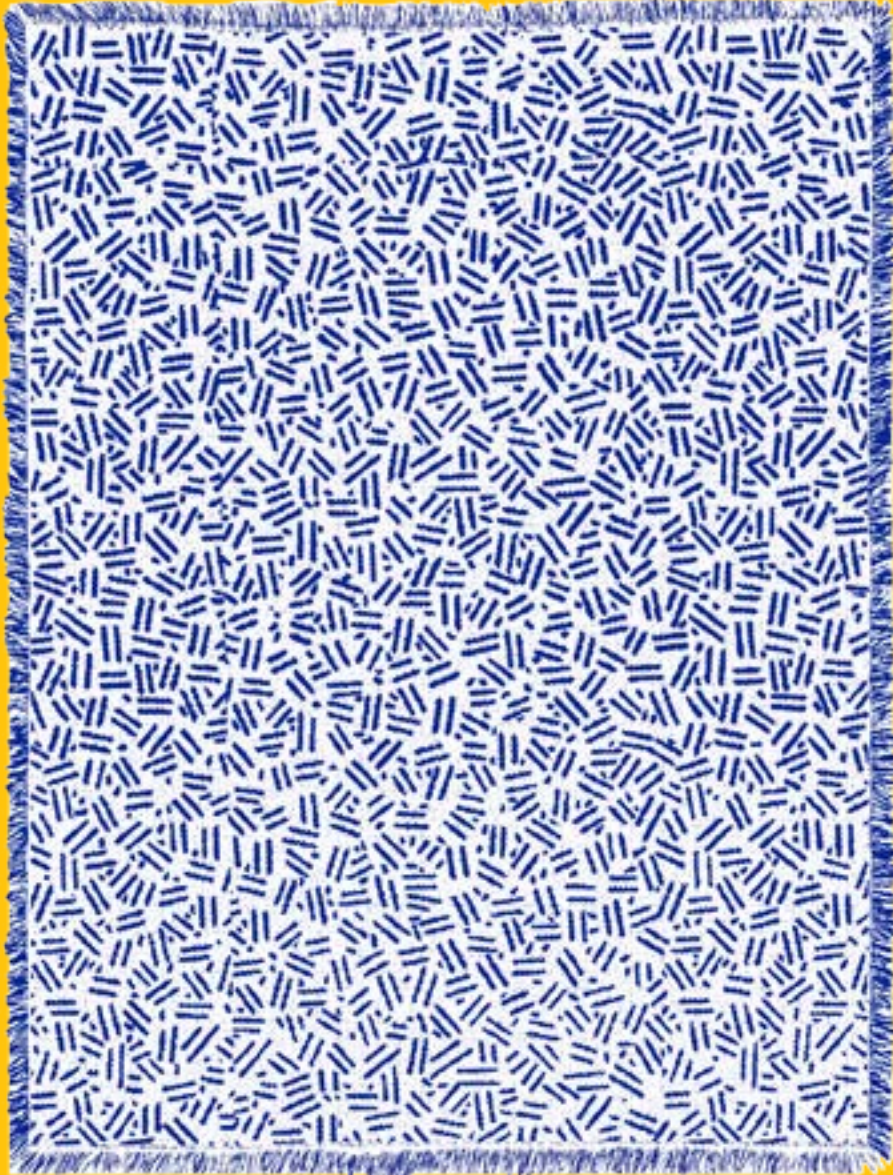
The sculptural pile, on the other hand, is a mountain of messy junk; iconic American kitsch. In both the video and printed versions of the project, sequencing is key. Transitions take into account shared form, color, character, use, and type. The gradient serves as a cultural chroma—a color wheel of useless miscellany.

Stress toys in the shapes of breasts, sperm, and body organs highlight the collection, providing a lens into the predicament of modern health and wellness. The sedentary states, isolation, and social anxiety of the American lifestyle are made manifest through these objects. These figurines offer an underwhelming symbolic response to a woeful, stress-packed, and frequently shallow first-world life.







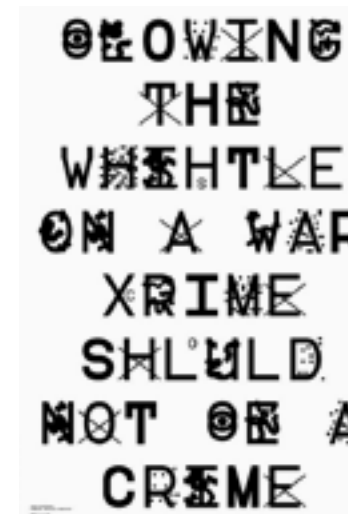


## PROJECTS

### Security Blankets (in collaboration with Diane Lee & Cem Eskinazi)

Comfort objects are used to mitigate fear and distress in uncertain times, including bedtime. *Security Blankets* are printed with densely layered patterns sourced from proven information camouflage technologies to offer a layer of protection, keeping the user safe from outside chaos. This cozy layer of added encryption keeps one's innermost thoughts and feelings private.

This project explores the nature of protection, security, and susceptibility. As we become increasingly vulnerable to breaches of privacy, we also become more reliant upon the invisible systems that encrypt our data (such as identity, credit, taxes, and biometrics). These patterned blankets thus serve a dual purpose: providing psychological comfort and making structures of information security visible.



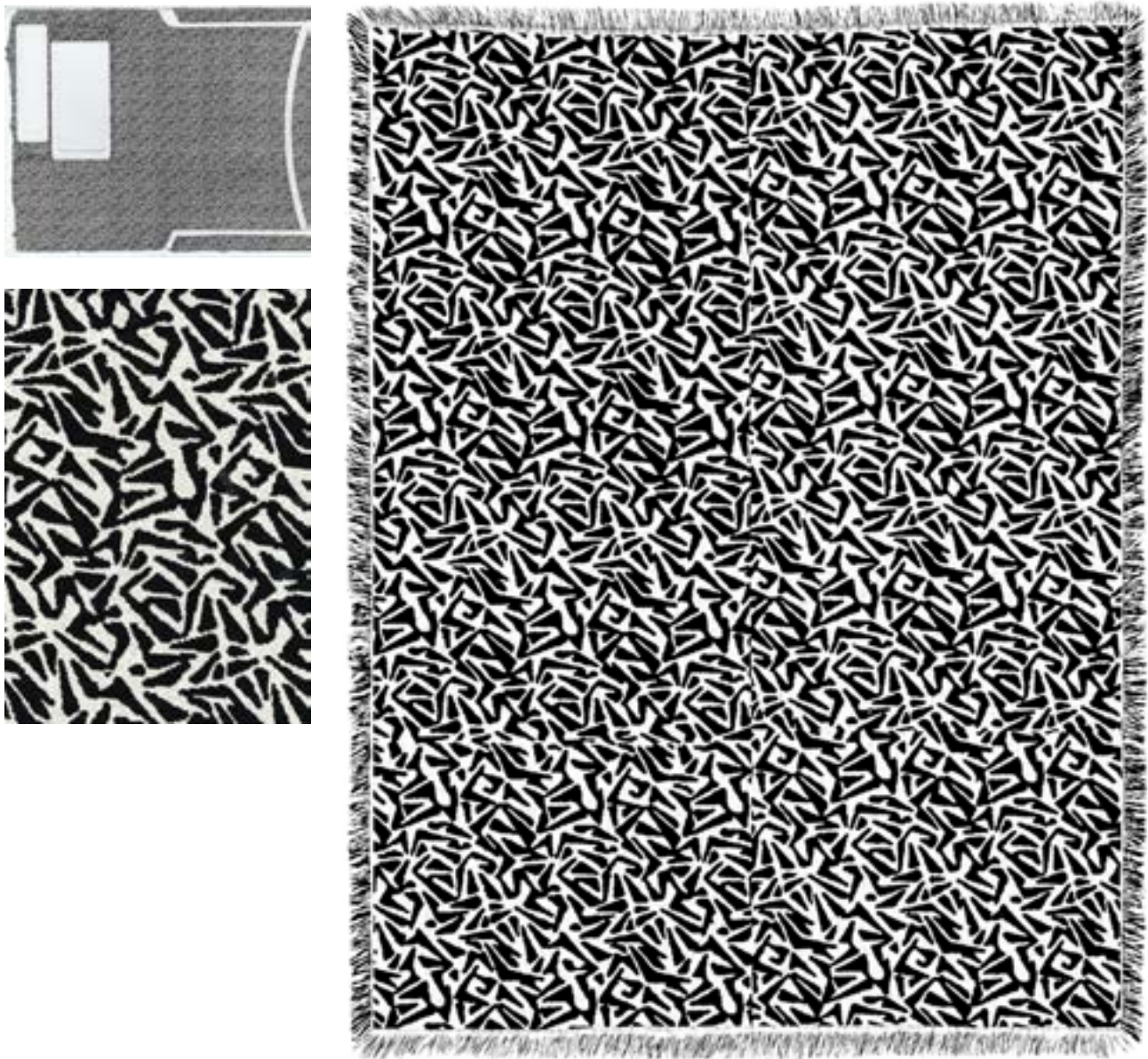
*above*

*ZXX typeface*, Sang Mun's 2012 degree project for the degree Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, RI

*opposite*

Original scan of security envelope pattern / custom woven security blanket / detail of woven blanket





*this page*  
*Security Blankets, installation view*

*opposite page*  
Original scan of security envelope pattern /  
custom woven security blanket /  
detail of woven blanket



## Newly Formed 2: Match / Cut

*In Stanley Kubrick's film 2001: A Space Odyssey, an ape discovers that bones can be used as both tools and weapons. He throws a bone into the air, and as it spins, the form dissolves into an orbiting weaponized satellite.*

*This technique, referred to as a "match cut," draws a visual and conceptual connection between the two objects as examples of primitive and advanced tools. How does this formal technique work in other mediums besides film? How does it encourage the viewer to look at form differently?*

*Find forms in the RISD library that can be sequenced into a book. Photocopy or photograph pages from a variety of different books and magazines. Each image/spread will be connected by a match cut to the following image/spread. The forms should change and evolve as the book progresses.*

*48 Images minimum*

*Trim size: 8.5" x 11"*

*Black and white*

*Every photograph is...a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality....Hence the necessity of our understanding a weapon which we can use and which can be used against us.*

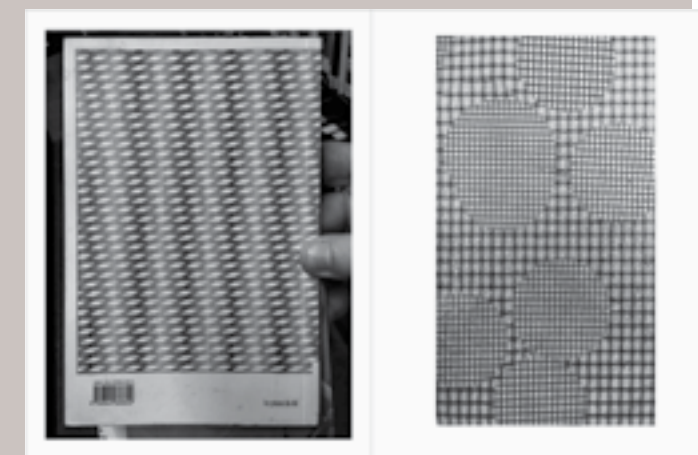
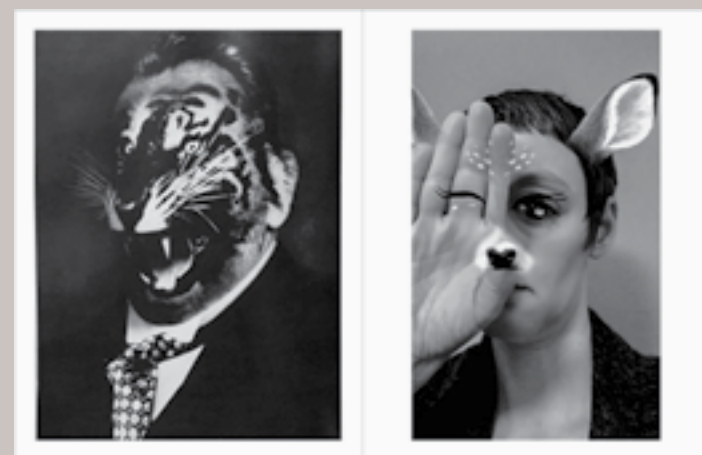
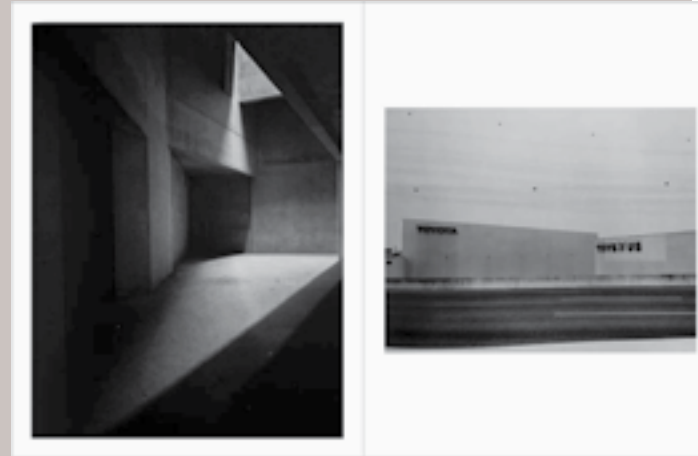
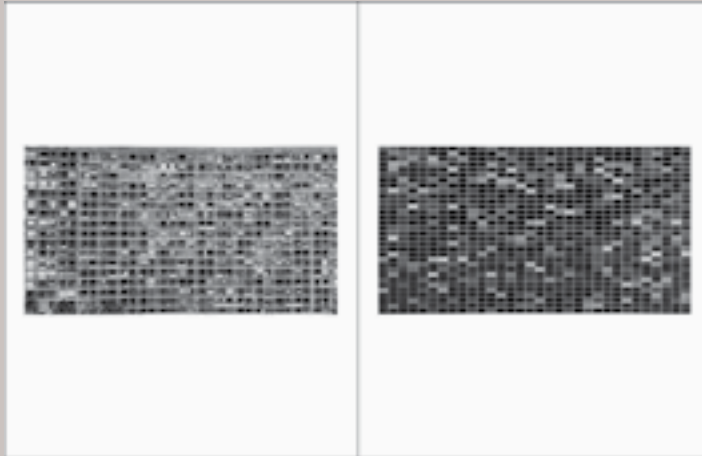
*– John Berger<sup>14</sup>*



*top*  
Portrait of John Heartfield with a cat

*below*  
John Heartfield's 1931 *SPD Party Crisis Montage* (also known as *The Tiger Montage*) refers to the close relationship between Germany's Weimar Republic SPD party and the Nazi Party.

*opposite page*  
Various spreads from *Match/Cut*



<sup>14</sup> Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*.



***Inviting disruptive change is super  
important to me as a human in general.***

***– Keetra Dean Dixon***





INTRODUCTION

Visual Truth

*In my view, you cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed it.*

– Emile Zola<sup>15</sup>

I make images to document and record both physical and visual conditions. Graphic representation by means of cameras, scans, screen captures, and recordings is the most comprehensive method I have to record visual experience. These images supplement, and sometimes supplant, memory. I trust them, and at the same time, I am intrigued by their fallibility. In my work, tools serve as perceptual metaphors, or translations of sensory experience. In a panoramic image of the ocean [left], the horizon is interrupted. Near the center of the picture plane, the line defining the sea takes a sharp turn towards the sky. In this image, the earth appears to be folding in two. The image provides a window into an imagined possibility. What might it look like if the world folded in half? The power of the image lies in its existence as one possible answer to that question.

In another panoramic photograph, slices of passing cars appear between the pickets of an iron fence. These bits of visual information were captured as cars moved through the frame during the duration of exposure. The slices reveal the otherwise hidden mechanisms that enable the panorama function to capture images and knit them together. This example illustrates how the images resulting from a particular technology can serve as doorways to understanding its programmatic logic.

In addition to expanding our ideas of what is possible, our tools help us understand ourselves. Images offer me more information than I can possibly retain. I want to save it all. I want to organize and analyze it, determining its significance. I want to use images to locate human reason and absurdity, to better understand what we are capable of, and to uncover what we believe we are entitled to.

*opposite*  
iOS panorama photograph

<sup>15</sup> Zola, *Nonfiction Film*.



Images both clarify and manipulate. They simultaneously reveal truths and spin compelling lies. As Vinca Kruk, co-founder of Dutch graphic design studio Metahaven stated in her April 2016 lecture at RISD, “There is no such thing as a neutral image.”<sup>16</sup> During her weekend workshop, *Overlay: Narrate the Hyperbole*, I came to question the concept and pretense of neutrality. We are more aware than ever of the ease with which images are manipulated. Our eyes are smart and sensitive, and still, we imbue images with neutrality. We want to believe what we see.

I define the built environment as the material, spatial, and cultural products of human labor. By building an archive of images, conditions, and contexts, I construct a visual vocabulary for asking and answering questions about this built environment. My collection of images provides a program for investigating patterns of structure, corruption, and visual interference. The more comprehensive the archive, the more accurate the work built from it becomes. Image-making tools become more interesting when they are used to construct and challenge new realities.



iOS photographs illustrate how the panorama tool software treats subjects that move through the frame too quickly to be captured and rendered normally.



Keetra Dean Dixon is a designer whose work inhabits speculative terrain, leveraging emergent technologies and process-focused making. She lived in NYC and rural Alaska before relocating to Providence to teach at RISD. Currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Graphic Design at RISD, her work has earned a U.S. Presidential Award, a place in the permanent design collection at SFMOMA, and an ADC Young Gun Award (in 2008).

Her clients include The New York Times, Nike, VW, and Coach. She acted as Design Director for installations featured at the Venice Architecture Biennale and has shown at the Walker Art Center, the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, and the Museum of Arts and Design in NYC. In 2015, Dixon was a featured speaker at the Type Directors' Club in NYC and the AIGA Design Conference in New Orleans.

**LL** = Llewellyn Hensley  
**KD** = Keetra Dean Dixon

opposite page  
*Cordial Invitations* [top]  
*Codependent Douballoons* [below]  
Keetra Dean Dixon

INTERVIEW

Keetra Dean Dixon

**LL** I really admire your optimism and openness to the world.

**KD** Thank you.

**LL** You exude an adaptability.

**KD** Inviting disruptive change is super important to me as a human in general. I like challenges and I always [say to myself], “You can do this! Acclimate!” I love humans; I love watching humans; I learn so much. I feel like I fail in verbal communication with other humans, but I get a lot from the observation. If I’m actually interacting like this, I try hard to be verbally articulate, and that drains me little bit. And I don’t believe that extrovert/introvert is a binary, but I’m an introvert in the sense that it drains fuel for me when I’m interacting socially.

The education context definitely tests that extension. This semester I’m teaching three classes and have a heavy advising load. It’s a lot of very intimate conversation which is the most important time to have capacity for active listening. By the end of the day, I literally pass out on the couch. I sleep more than I’ve ever slept before.

**LL** Wow. Because you have that psychological exhaustion.

**KD** I was an insomniac before, and I am not currently.

**LL** That’s incredible. What a way to solve that.

**KD** Making feeds me, replenishes fuel. It’s not the same fuel tank as the social stuff, but right now I’m not making at all. I need to integrate that a bit more and see if it helps balance me out. It’s lovely to hear that I’m pulling it off.

**LL** Totally. Well, I appreciate your honesty. We are trying to take care of each other in the graduate studio.

**KD** Good. When you do so much introspection, you’re going to have be in crisis. You all have incredible pressure to get such accomplishments done in this time frame. It’s insane. And then also to be rubbing against shoulders with very different humans.

**LL** Absolutely.

**KD** Emotions are contagious for me.

**LL** Yes, me too.

**KD** Weirdly, when I was little I was diagnosed with sensory integration dysfunction. They probably don’t use that terminology anymore but, it is a lack of ability to filter out all of the stimuli and most people have it better, they can focus on one thing and all of the sounds and the feelings and changing temperature and the passing conversations don’t disrupt, but yeah I can really relate to that.

**LL** Interesting! Yes! I can’t help but interact with the world and with other people with this certain intensity. And I forget that not everyone experiences life that way.

**KD** All the time in my head I’m like, “Remember Keetra, you’re an alien. Nobody is else is seeing that quite the same way.”

**LL** So, if we can shift to tools. I wonder how you approach learning and working with tools. A big chunk of my thesis work is about using tools like the smartphone camera, Adobe software, Snapchat. And in working with Chris Novello as a teacher and advisor, I’ve become aware of the systematic way users are being shut off from the way our tools work.

**KD** We don’t see behind the scenes.

**LL** Exactly. With Apple, Facebook, Google, we don’t see behind the scenes, and we’re actively discouraged from understanding how they work.





*ReTool Crayons*  
Keetra Dean Dixon

**KD** Yeah. There's a lot of thinking about transparent boxes as a symbol for new technology in an attempt to maintain the interest of young people in engineering in general. Part of the division of that façade, that break between user and functionality, stops any curiosity and understanding of what's happening there. There's zero entry point. I'm a huge believer in cracking things open.

**LL** Your practice has a robust research and development methodology. I'm sure the shift to so much teaching and advising has impacted your output. I'm hoping you could talk a bit about how you organize your own practice, knowing that some kind of structured commitment to making work is really important to the wellbeing of a designer.

**KD** Yeah. Well, I think as far as my always trying to seek new tools, and the question of how I keep the diversity of studies going, which is related to being prolific I guess. It took me way too long to realize how important learning was to my design process. If I am not learning something new with every project I have zero interest in it, and I'll be dissatisfied with it somehow. That's one objective that I've integrated. For me to say yes to it, I have to be learning something new, and sometimes it's actually learning a new tool. I call it the learning paycheck. It doesn't matter how much money I make.

That's how I learned 3D printing. I got request for a proposal from a museum and I knew that the museum would fund the project but that I would lose money on it. So, I wrote the objectives I needed to meet with my proposal.

One of those things was to learn 3D printing. And then I wanted to actually walk away with the tool. So I wrote in the purchase of a 3D printer that I could leave with.

Once I realized that I have to be learning [to be satisfied with a project, I also realized that I need to have these tools around me to enable and facilitate ongoing study. How do I do that without spending a ton of money? How do I give myself externalized deadlines that up the learning ante? That's one example of a very applied process.

Then to learn the 3D printing, I needed to use it a ton. I didn't want the 3D printing to be the final deliverable for the museum installation. I had a 90% failure rate with experimenting. So, I decided that all of my gifts for that holiday season would be 3D printed. And that I still needed to make a good gift for every individual person, which ensured a lot of diversity in what I was fabricating. Additionally, I needed to partner the 3D printing material with at least one other material for every single assignment.

I structured a crazy brief for myself. I had a timeline, so I could only spend a specific amount of time for each person. I figured out how much time I had. I sat down and listed each person, and brainstormed and then figured out which materials to use. I give myself a ton of assignments. That's the really applied strategic stuff.

For the open exploration: How do I find a new thing I'm actually interested in? Luckily I'm super curious, so just walking around the world is research.



*top*  
Drill press lathe experiment  
Keetra Dean Dixon

*below*  
*Layered Wax Type: Become,*  
Keetra Dean Dixon and JK Keller.  
Commissioned work for the 2008  
U.S. Presidential Inauguration

But also I put as much background education on as I can. I watch tons of industrial process, anything that has process involved in it, I try to put it on. I'll listen to podcasts. I'll have visuals on TV. Literally, I'll have two things going. When I'm exercising, I'm watching process stuff, and listening and I always ask, "Oh, what if? Oh, what if?" and then research.

Once I find the thing, I write it down, or I text myself notes. For example, I'll think, "You should try something with toothpaste," and, "What if the tools to work with frosting and concrete were converged? How does that happen?"

Not the material, but the tools themselves. I'm asking, "What works with that?" And, in conversation with my brother, who is now a manual laborer, everything he does I ask, "Oh, how do you that? What's that called?" Is this good information?

**LL** Oh yes! Absolutely.

**KD** Okay, cool.

**LL** I'll get to the level of texting myself a million things, but have been missing the subsequent steps: the organization, structure and assignments that allow you to accomplish things.

**KD** A precursor to the practical, client-based work, like the 3D printer example, is the study work. So, I get ideas and then I do open research and development where I get an hour a day to go through my list of ideas, processes, techniques, and tools, and I sit down and do it for an hour.

Then I cap it, and I photograph my scraps and document the process (like we are all reminded to do by our professors), I keep the photos, and that's it. I stop unless there's something that immediately leads to another series of questions. If I think I can stack those processes, or translate them, and go back and forth between analog and digital, [I'll keep going with that new process in some way].

I'll ask, "What is possible in 2D that's impossible in 3D?" Or I'll say, "This material is sticky. What if I used different materials that weren't sticky?" If there are immediate questions, I write all those questions out. Then I have to go back to real work again, where I'm goal-oriented.

**LL** That's great information.

**KD** When I have a routine practice, I'm able to do this four or five days a week for one hour a day.

**LL** That's fantastic. It's very helpful. It's so critical to give yourself the permission to try these experiments, but it's just as important to rein it in and not endlessly pursue every whim, because then you'll never make progress on the list.

**KD** Yeah, and you fail a lot too. You might waste time, but actually you're refilling something within your practice, [fulfilling the desire to try new things] and you listen to the best music and shake your butt the whole time.

**LL** Do you collaborate a lot with your husband [JK Keller]?

**KD** He works independently. I actually made him a flag that says "WORKING" so that I won't interrupt his concentration. We're fiercely independent and opinionated.



*top*  
*ME/WE*  
Lettering for the New York Times  
Keetra Dean Dixon

*below*  
*Swing Hall, Swing All*  
Commission for Northern Spark,  
MCAD, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
Keetra Dean Dixon

**LL** I'm impressed by that ability to have fierce independence but also to be in it together.

**KD** We're definitely in it together, but we have strong boundaries.

**LL** That sounds like a productive partnership. How does your practice differ from his?

**KD** I'm much more consistent and very strategic. I have a lots of externalized guides because without them I don't think I'm doing enough. I can never be at peace unless I have these rules that keep me in check, but everything [work and life] are fused together.

**LL** I can relate to that. I mean, this place has made me more productive than I've ever been in my life. I'm also coming from fine art, which can be an isolating process, to having a more collaborative environment and practice. There are both studio relationships and also service-based client partnerships.

I think that was one of the biggest adjustments that I've had to make in graduate school. Art is allowed to ask questions without answering them. Design usually can't do that successfully. At least it needs to posit a couple potential answers to those questions. It took me a year and half or two years to figure that out.

My responses to project prompts would throw a bunch of questions up in the air and would contain three times too much visual material. People would say, "I really don't know what your message is." That's understandable, but I was really confused by that for a while. I kept wondering, "What's the difference? Why?"

As insane and taxing and psychologically restructuring as the experience of graduate school has been, I feel that the stress and expense have been worth it. Because of what I came here with and what I have now. I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's good to be able to say that, even in this stressful moment.

**KD** I take your point about coming from an art background and then learning how to function in a design context. Sometimes people call my stuff art, and I don't refute it, but the process is always design. I've always had the instinct to narrow the message.

**LL** That's so interesting.

**KD** I can't imagine how hard it must have been to move from home and also be confronted with a fundamentally different mode of making. And on top of it, there was no one in your studio to understand the meaning of your background; to help you clarify the differences. That's so difficult.

**LL** I remember being mystified at the alchemy that the students with graphic design training can perform. With the project prompts, we all started with the same overwhelming mass of content, but somehow they could see this clear through-line. They had a vision of exactly how they would refine it and what would be eliminated so that it would make sense to somebody else. I'm absolutely still wandering through the woods on that, but I know it's gotten better. How did you keep your work-self happy when working for other people?



*Cordial Invitations*  
Keetra Dean Dixon

**KD** Before I realized that I had to be learning stuff to be satisfied, I would quit a job as soon as I felt like I tapped out the learning curve. I was like, "I mastered this, okay." It's kind of weird and cocky. It didn't feel as cocky as that sounds, but I would get bored, engulfed, and I'd just need to make a change.

**LL** I know what you mean. I'm trying to look at this next set of decisions as exciting, but nothing is figured out yet.

**KD** It's the thing that I envy the most because it means everything is possible but it's scary, too.

**LL** Yeah, I'm wondering, "Where's the ground?" and stuff, but I'm trying to not be freaked out because it's real. I mean going through processes like this are really good for making you less scared of disruptive change.

**KD** The weird thing is you can do anything. I was really scared to move to Alaska after New York.

**LL** Really? How long were you in New York?

**KD** Altogether nine years. It seemed like the stupidest decision ever. You write it down on paper, and you're like, "No. Objectively, this is dumb." But then I decided, "I have to. I want to." After I went up there, I realized that I can make anything happen. I'm stubbornly optimistic and also very fortunate.

We were in Alaska for two years. I was a full-time teacher for two years before that, and I said I'd never teach again because I couldn't figure out the balance. I would see people and not be able to say no. I just want to help and I never can override that.

I felt my professional practice slipping away from me. It was getting urgent. And I knew I'd never [have the flexibility to] be able to [walk away from the teaching and recommit to my practice] again, so I left. When we moved to rural Alaska, I splintered my practice intentionally. I thought I was diversifying so I could see what stuck; then everything stuck. Then I naturally ended up writing curriculum because I do self-assignments. So I'm always kind of structuring curriculum.

Then Adobe asked me to be a resident, so I sent them a proof that I was like, "This will just be the thing I do." My husband asked, "Would you ever do teaching again? I mean essentially you're writing the structures right now," and I said, "No. Well, maybe if RISD called or something." Then maybe then a month later they emailed, and that's why I moved here. Things will happen. For a long time I wondered, "Why am I working so incredibly hard and being so scared the whole time that failure is just, like, one hour away?" My entire life is work, and part of that is really absolutely choice and pleasurable, but part of that is self-torture, so I don't socialize as much as I should. But also everything I do is kind of research a little bit, so it's good and has been, but yeah, I have a horrible balance.

**LL** This place instills a feeling of, "If I'm not always busy, I am miserable."

**KD** I think that's true. Ideas come through making. So actually I think some of the best ideas come through the tool. One of the reasons it's super important to have applied knowledge.





*Divideds*  
Keetra Dean Dixon

**KD** You have to have an in-depth understanding and be working on a problem for some of the best ideas to reveal themselves. The fact that I'm not making and I haven't learned a new emerging technology in a semester or whatever, it makes me worry that I'm going to stop having good ideas.

**LL** I understand that worry very well! I hope you have an opportunity to communicate [the need for more focus on tools, technology, and computation] to the powers that be [here at RISD]. We focus so much on concept development, and that is incredibly important. But the only way that a concept has teeth is if it's communicated through the right tool or with the right medium. As students, we are hungry for more tools to be worked into the curriculum so we can make better decisions about the right forms and locations for ideas to live. It's crucial.

**KD** Yeah, the creative technologists always say "demo or die." Because, if there's no demonstration of an idea, it does not flourish.

**LL** When you say creative technologist...

**KD** It's somebody who utilizes emerging tech or even old tech. They're kind of half-innovator and half-artist so it's through the tool that their work usually manifests.

**LL** Amazing. How would you distinguish a creative technologist from a designer?

**KD** Yeah. The thinking mode is really different, which I didn't...I think that a creative technologist could be a designer, but it's not necessarily a subcategory. You would be a creative technologist-designer, a creative technologist-artist. The process has an engineering structure. Like, if you can see Chris [Novello] thinking and teaching through logical systems, that's what a creative technologist does. Those are the people who taught me how to do R and D [research and development]. Those are the people that I love. I think it's not exactly how I work, but it's half of how I work.

**LL** Was that a methodology you learned in school?

**KD** I think I learned it from my parents [her mother was a crafter, and her father a metalsmith]. We were building stuff all the time. I think that's where I got it first. I'm naturally drawn to people who are inventors and makers, like I think the maker movement has that techno mentality behind it.

**LL** Thanks for all this! You're a treasure.



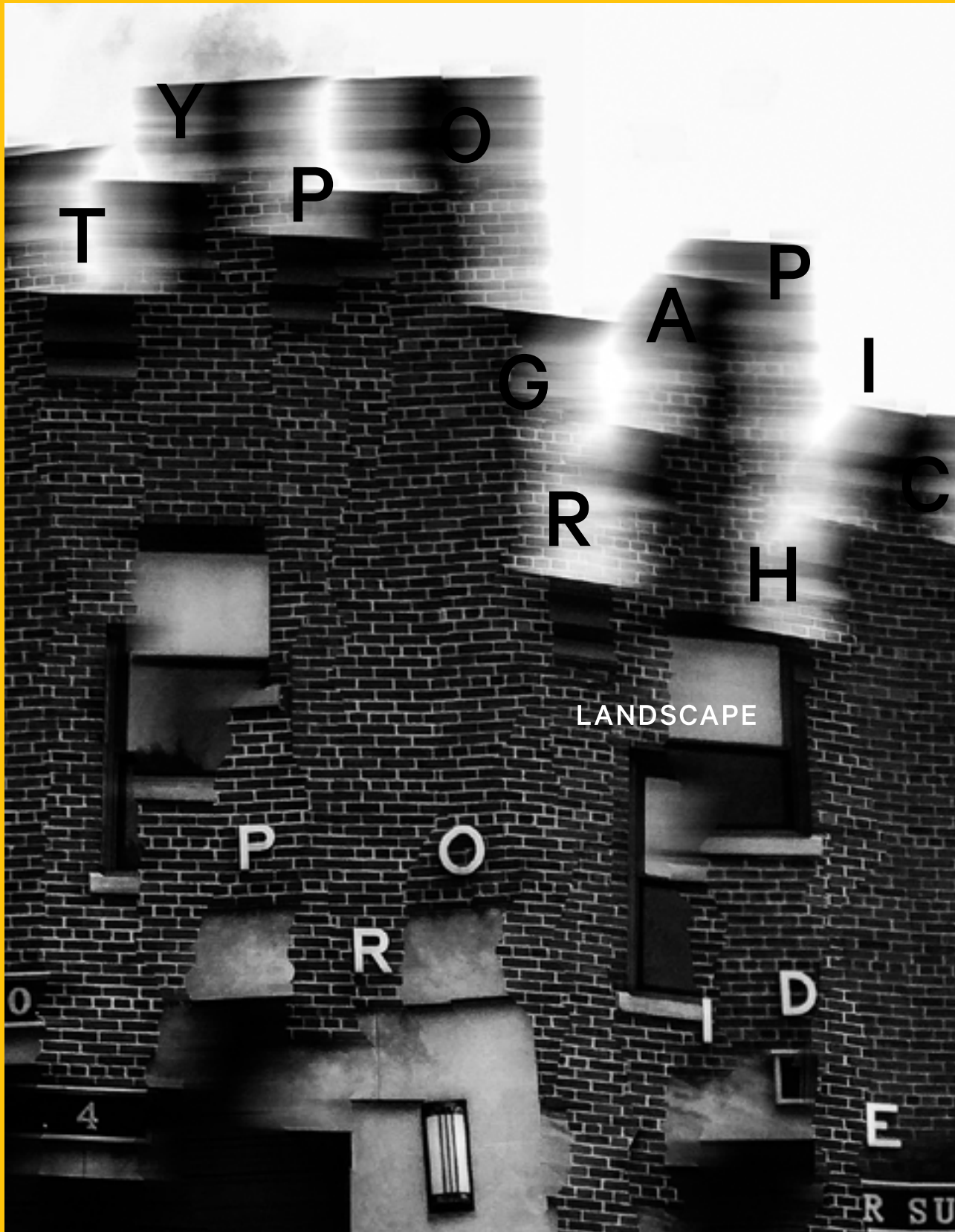
*top*

Lettering for *New York Times Book Review: The Evolution of Everything, How New Ideas Emerge* by Matt Ridley. Review by Frank Rose. Art directed by Matt Dorfman.

*below*

Lettering for *New York Times* article, *Learning to Love Criticism* by Tara Mohr. Art directed by Alexandra Zsigmond.

Keetra Dean Dixon



## PROJECTS

# Typographic Landscape

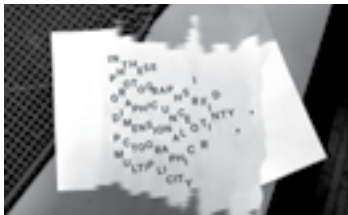
## Re-Place: A Collaborative Atlas



*Grand Panorama of a Whaling Voyage 'Round the World, Benjamin Russell and Caleb Purrington, 1848. At 1275' long, this panorama is believed to be the longest painting in the world.*



*Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash, Giacomo Balla, 1912. Influenced by Filippo Marinetti, Balla adopted the Futurist style, creating pictorial depictions of speed, light, and movement.*



*above*  
Process panorama photographs taken of typeset text for use in *Typographic Landscape*

*opposite & next four spreads*  
*Typographic Landscape, 2015*  
Various spreads from collaborative atlas book *Re-Place*

My signature from this collaborative book – completed with my classmates in the fall of 2015 – explores the concept, origin, and purpose of panorama. An atlas is a collection of maps; this collaborative atlas is a collection of experience maps, a collective network illustrating our ways of contextualizing and distilling those experiences into form.

These photographic experiments translate found environmental and print typography, landscape, and portrait through the iOS camera's panorama function. Irregular movements of the camera during exposure produce repetition and pattern, working against the camera's attempts to create smooth and unified compositions.

The resulting images displace words, fracture letterforms, and reorder materials, reintegrating them with their surroundings. These panoramic images depict multiple states or positions simultaneously.

*What happens now that we can see everything?*





What happens when type is treated  
as an environmental entity?



The scope of human vision spans 120°.

When and how did we develop ways  
to expand that?

To see things that cannot be perceived  
in whole, at once.





Panoramic self-portraits

depict multiple states

or positions simultaneously.



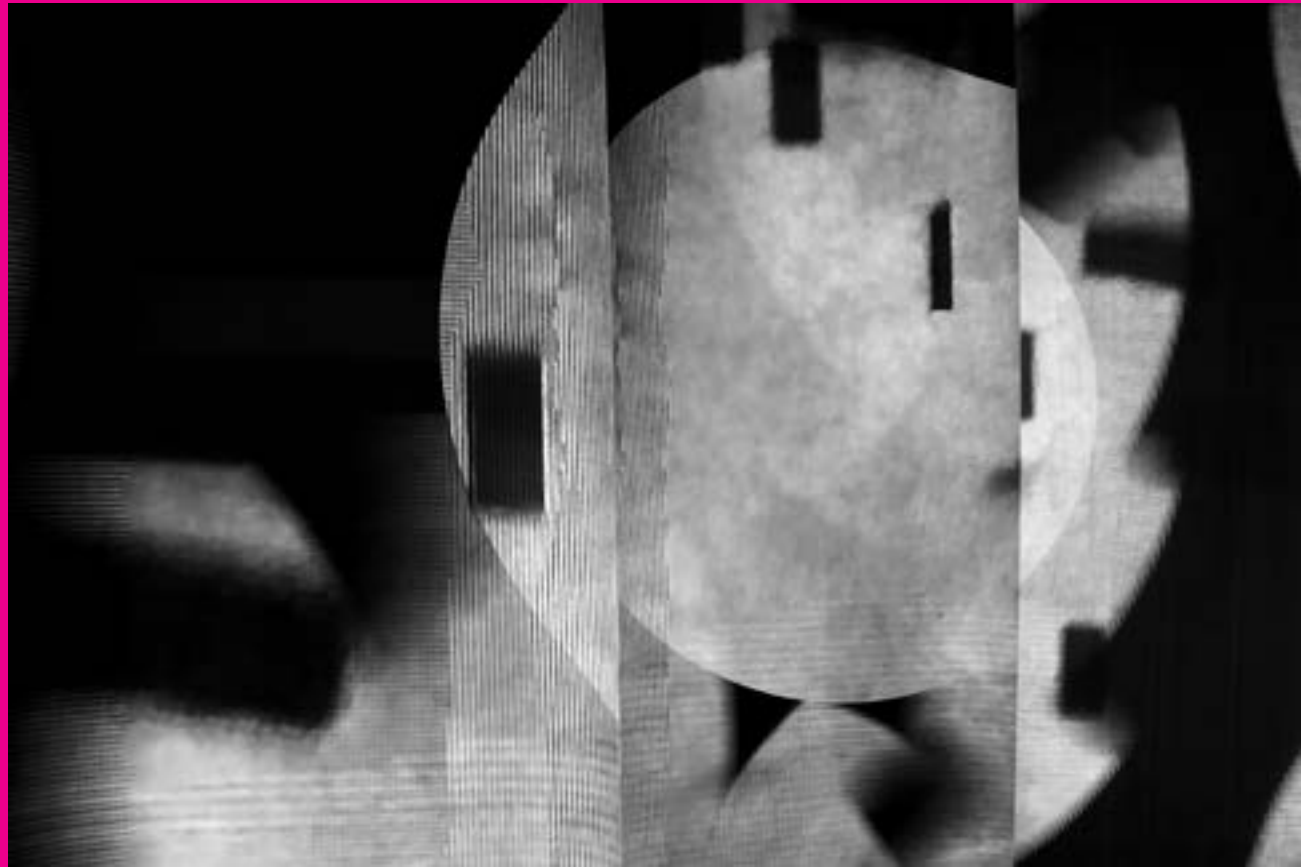
What information can be learned  
by reordering constituent parts?

These images capture graphic uncertainty,  
dimensional or pictographic multiplicity.

DIMENSIONAL  
CCTOGRAPHIC  
MULTIPLICITY







*Inclusive picture of all possibilities, from  
The Fundamentals of Exhibition Design  
by Herbert Bayer, 1939*

## PROJECTS

### Panorama Space: Installation

This project is the culmination of an Independent Study Project during Wintersession 2016 under the guidance of RISD graphic design professor Micah Barrett. My goals included the expansion of my large-format print work into a graphic environment and incorporation of a range of making strategies (vector and pixel, analog and digital, collage and photography).

These images were made by photographing vector graphics and scans of found printed material with the iPhone camera's panorama software. Movements of the camera during exposure produce repetitive patterns. The camera then compresses horizontal space in unpredictable ways; reading, processing, and re-stitching the landscape.

The visual noise of the computer screen's texture and resolution become part of the image. This work explores the limitations of this tool's usefulness and the application of these restrictions and surfaces to three-dimensional space.

*opposite*  
Detail photograph of *Panorama Space*

*next three spreads*  
Installation views of *Panorama Space*



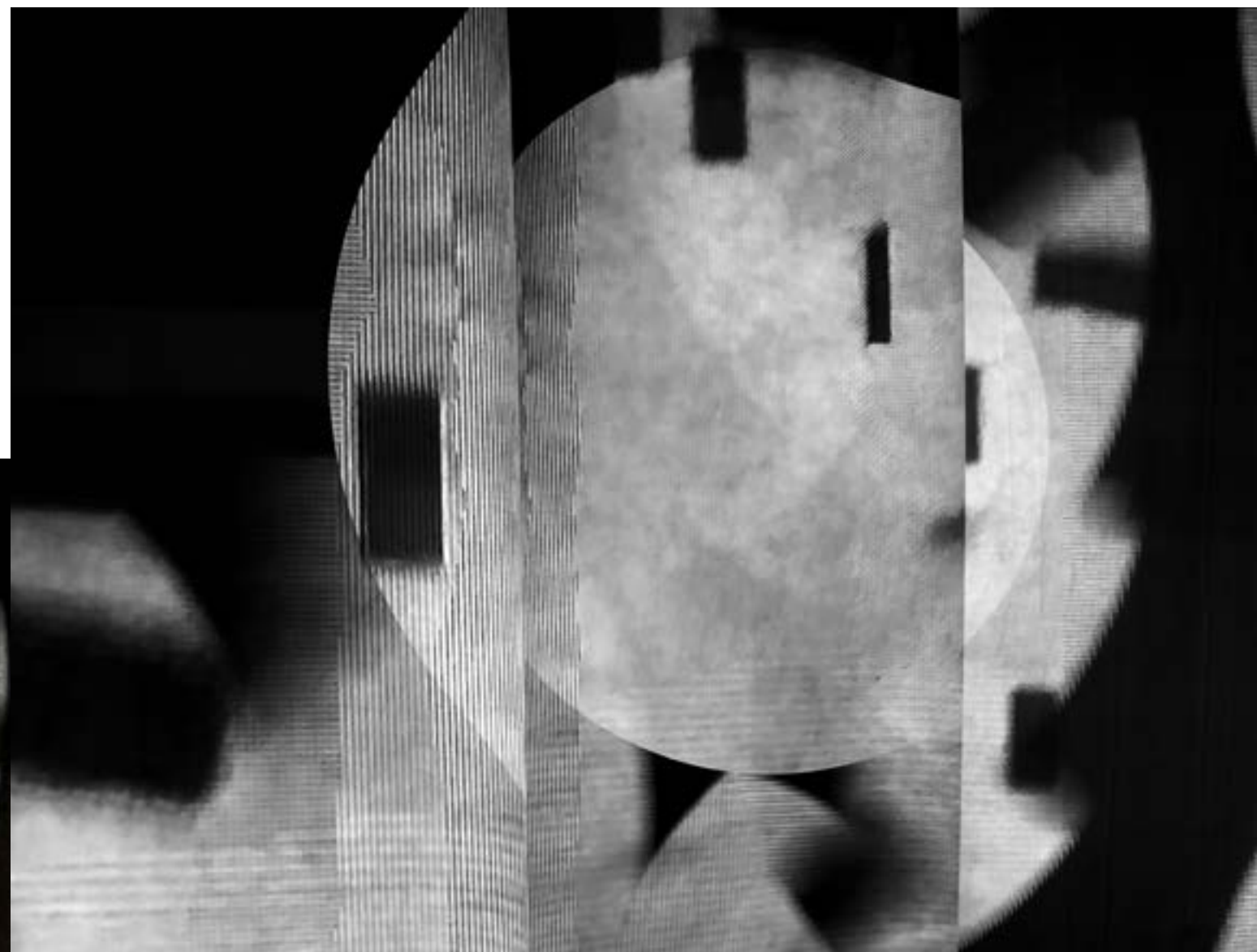








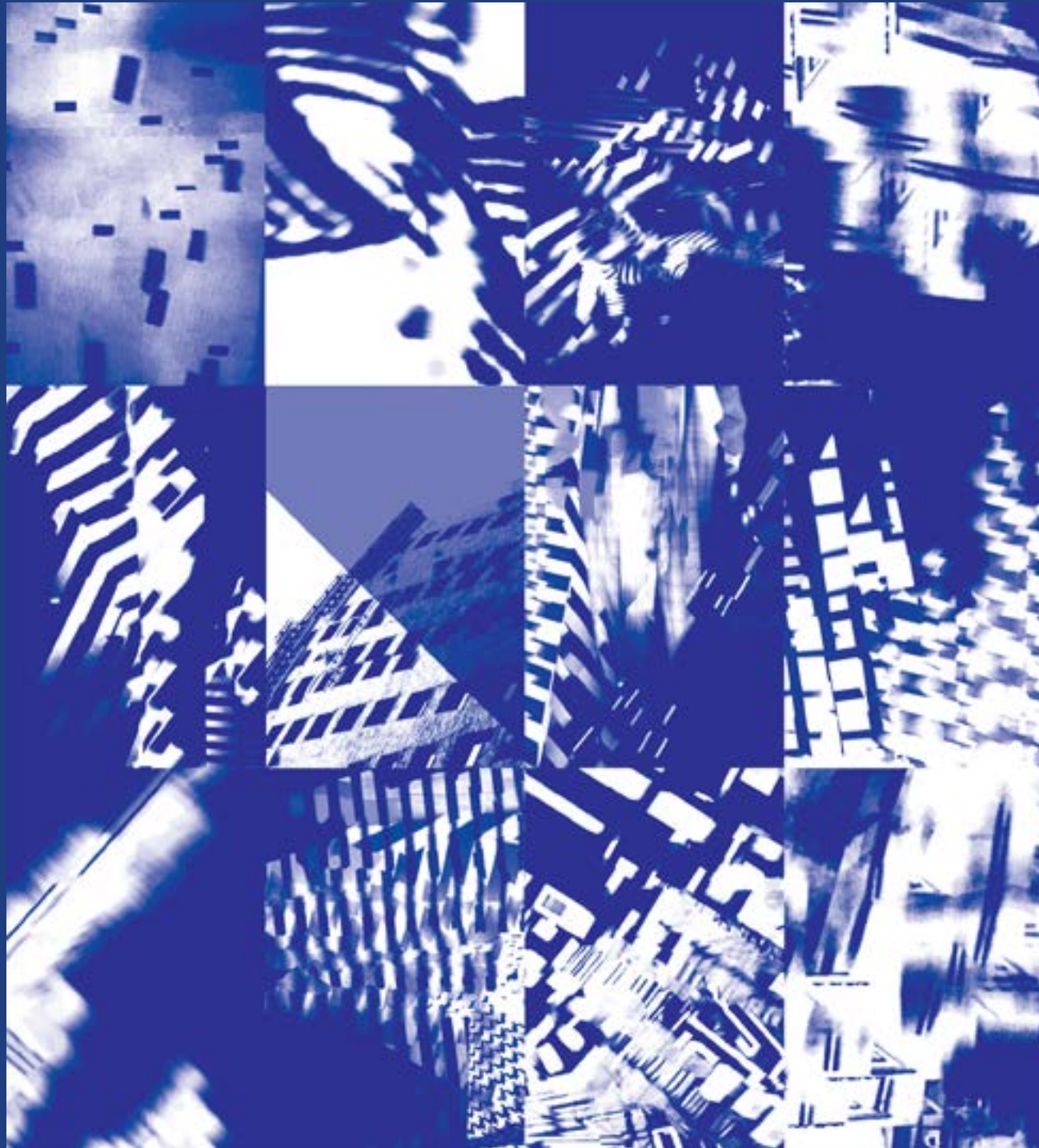




## Panorama Space: Poster Grid

An alternative version of this project was installed as a set of twelve 18" x 24" poster prints of panorama photographs taken in the lead-up to the installation project. Each unit in the grid represents an iteration of the more than fifty posters I made during the five-week independent study with Micah Barrett during the winter of 2016. The images were made by photographing vector graphics and scans of found printed material with the iPhone camera's panorama software.

Our working methods were very different. Micah introduced me to a mockup software, LiveSurface Context, that continues to foster possibilities in my projects. Our weekly conversations pushed me to identify why my methods were important. It was a productive and challenging exchange.



*Panorama Space: Poster Grid* was installed in the RISD Graphic Design Commons for *SeeHER: An Exhibition Celebrating Female Designers*, sponsored by AIGA RI





Mockups created as part of the proposal for inclusion of *Panorama Space: Poster Grid* in *SeeHER: An Exhibition Celebrating Female Designers*





## iOS Panorama: Typography Studies

Using the panorama function on an iPhone camera, I capture alternative versions of built environments. Signs, materials, and letterforms provide rich, specific data about their surroundings, including its age, materials, and uses. These visual scraps transmit a fragmented narrative history.

*If I do something to a photograph, the viewer has an impulse to naturalize what happened, to correct the mistake.<sup>17</sup>*

Photographer Lucas Blalock uses digital armatures to operate on photographic images, playing program logic against the mechanics of human vision. *Reflected, refracted, redacted (camouflage)* employs repetition and fragmentation in presentations analyzing application of digital systems to human subjects and still lifes.

*I'm trying to ask it new questions, different questions. If something is happening in a picture, I try to literally name it, then see if there might be a different way to approach it. There's a lot of sidestepping, circling back, and trying to find new ways in...I went from thinking of the program's possibilities as constricted to a burlesque of commercial practice to—as everyone started using them—thinking that the camera was really our drawing tool in a very primary sense. And as this literacy with editing software grew, this drawing tool was growing and changing along with it. There's a Michael Taussig book I love called Mimesis & Alterity where he talks about this act of copying as an enactment of a sort of sympathetic magic. We're trying to take things that are beyond us and literally draw them into our influence by rendering them.<sup>18</sup>*



*The Smoker*  
Lucas Blalock



*Reflected, refracted, redacted (camouflage)*  
Lucas Blalock

### opposite

iOS and iOS panorama photographs of Traffic Engineering building signage, Providence, RI, and bronze ornamental lettering at the entry to West Hospital, Medical College of Virginia, Richmond VA

<sup>17</sup> Dafoe, *Lucas Blalock*.

<sup>18</sup> Dafoe.



Photographer Matt Siber works by isolating signage elements to emphasize their relationships and hierarchies.

*The Untitled Project is rooted in an underlying interest in the nature of power. With the removal of all traces of text from the photographs, the project explores the manifestation of power between large groups of people in the form of public and semi-public language. The absence of the printed word not only draws attention to the role text plays in the modern landscape but also simultaneously emphasizes alternative forms of communication such as symbols, colors, architecture and corporate branding.*

*This serves to point out the growing number of ways in which public voices communicate without using traditional forms of written language. The reintroduction of the text takes written language out of the context of its intended viewing environment. The composition of the layouts remains true to the composition of their corresponding photographs in order to draw attention to the graphic design. Accompanying logos, photographs and icons help to further explore the nature of communication in the urban landscape as a combination of visual and literal signifiers.<sup>19</sup>*

Typographic panoramas served as a stepping stone to more mindful and meaningful engagement with images through a graphic design framework. By isolating images of typographic material, I began to learn what differentiates them from other images. Type confers an added layer of visual language, a logic and a communicative purpose rooting it in time and space. Type is its own material.

By stretching, straining, and challenging typographic structures, I begin to compile answers to these questions: How robust is the structure of this image? How clear is its message? What new message does the type communicate once it is abstracted from its literal meaning? Does the stressed image possess an alternative unity?



Two pairs of images from Matt Siber's *Untitled* series, where signage is analyzed, separating image elements from text.



*this spread*  
iOS panorama photograph  
of Bliss Place, Providence, RI

*next spread*  
iOS panorama photograph of  
film festival signage, Montreal, QC





The Journal of Law,  
Economics, & Organization

VOYAGES ALLER-RETOUR

CPA

QUES

you S. W.

100

圖 2-1-10





# Content-Aware: WANT WANT Tote Bags

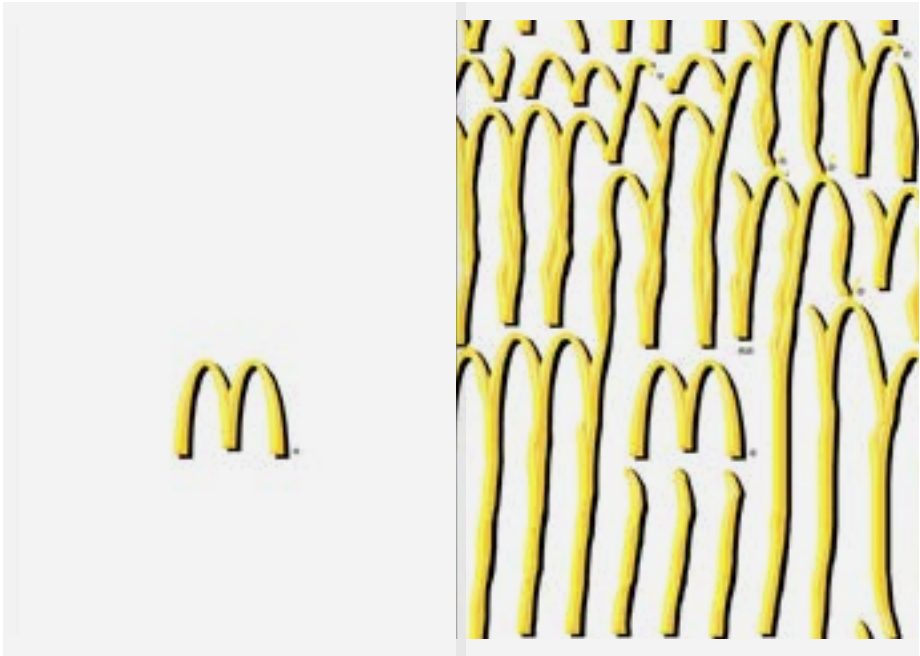
WANT WANT presents a selection of tote bags printed and manufactured on-demand using commercial iconography and type. Signage elements are first isolated from original source photographs. Then, Photoshop's content-aware fill tool is unleashed on the remaining open space. The fill algorithm uses visual information in the selection area to generate imagery to occupy the surrounding space. When a large area is loaded with content-aware fill, forms repeat and patterns appear.

Lettering and images are fractured and their forms replicated, creating an aggregate field of mutant glyphs and shapes. These surfaces call attention to the formal visual language of advertising. Textures derived from commercial graphic form are divorced from their contexts. These small wearable billboards dissect and re-present commercial symbology.

An adjacent display illustrates the pattern generation process and links to a web store where the tote bags are available for sale.

opposite  
WANT WANT tote bags

this page  
images illustrating signage at the beginning (left) and end (right) of the making process







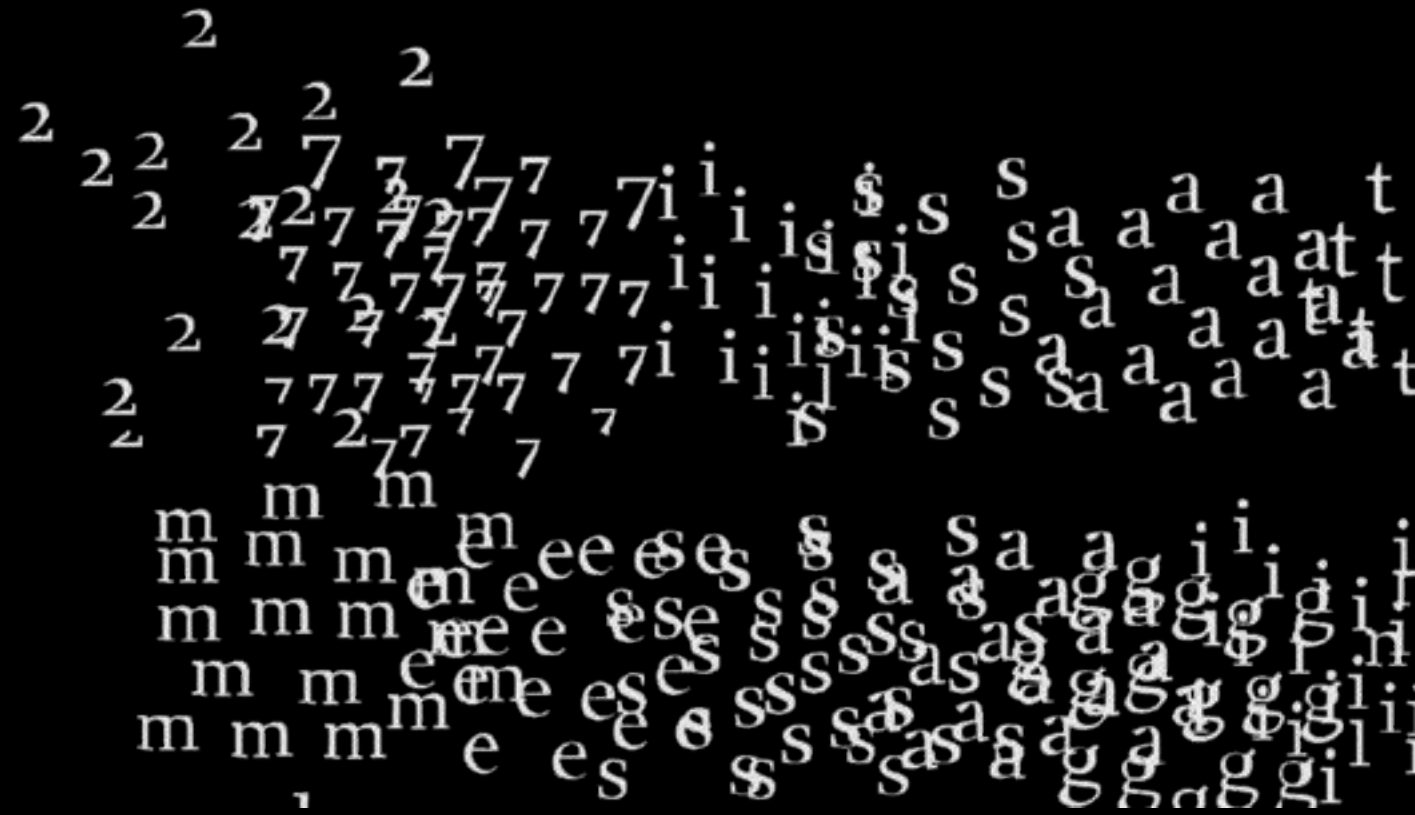
*this spread*  
images illustrating signage at the  
beginning (left) and end (right) of  
the making process for *Bills Barbecue*,  
the Mobil pegasus, and *Bliss Place*

## Content–Aware: 277 Typeface

277 is a typeface built from overlapping glyph clouds which mask content, making messages that cannot be read by a computer.

The project originated from an afternoon workshop in which we built a narrative from a New York Times archive. My story dealt with cloning and featured Dolly, the cloned sheep, who was born in July 1996 after 276 unsuccessful attempts.

This typeface is based on an altered version of the typeface Prensa, designed by Cyrus Highsmith.





*[A large section of the manuscript page containing dense handwritten text in a cursive script, likely representing musical notation or a complex letter sequence.]*

[illegible]

ss s s s a a g g g i i n n n g g w w w i  
s s s a a g g g i i n n n g g w w w

ee<sup>e</sup>  
e e e

[illegible]



## PROJECTS

### **always magic (after Italo Calvino)**

This typographic excerpt from Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* was animated using content-aware technology in Photoshop. Guided by Calvino's conceptual clarity, *always magic* discusses the function of narrative devices in storytelling. Type is fractured and its forms repeated, performing a dance as it reveals the narrative piece by piece.

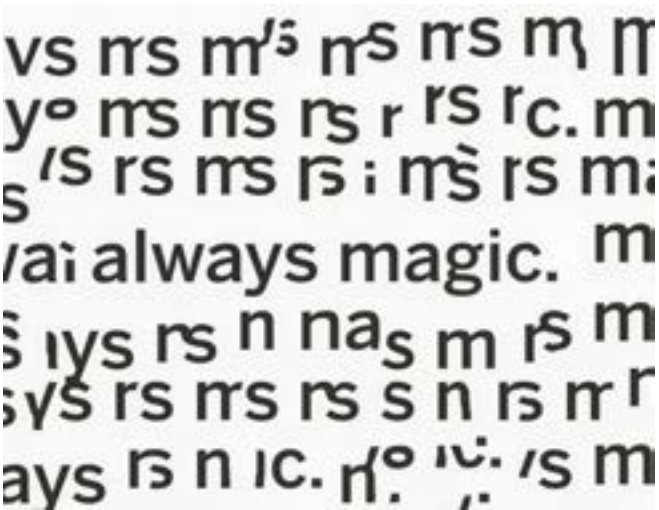
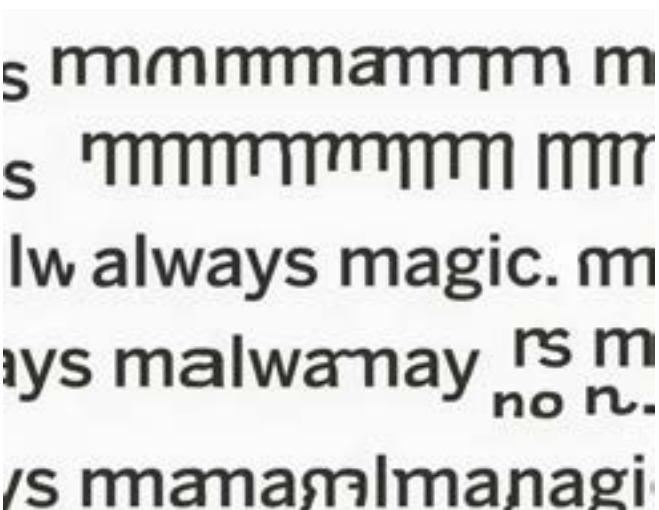
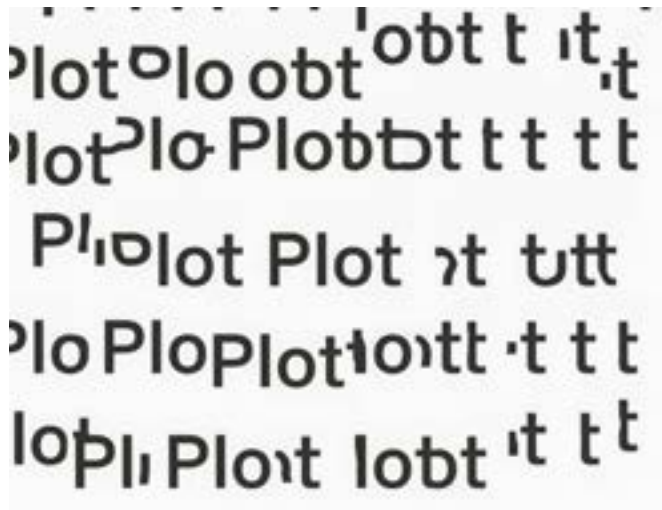
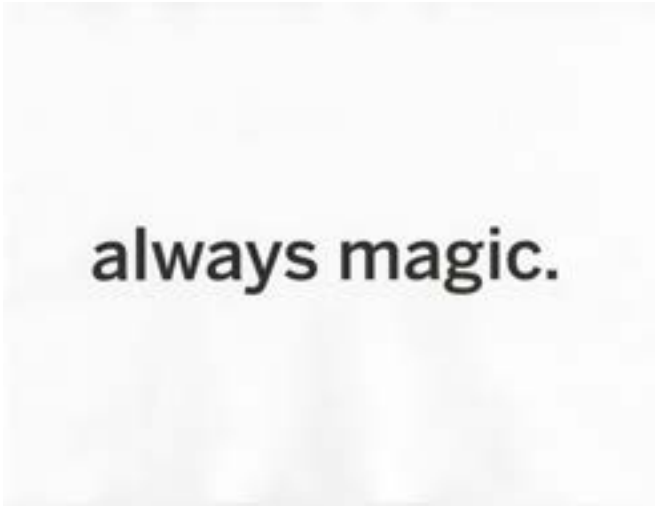
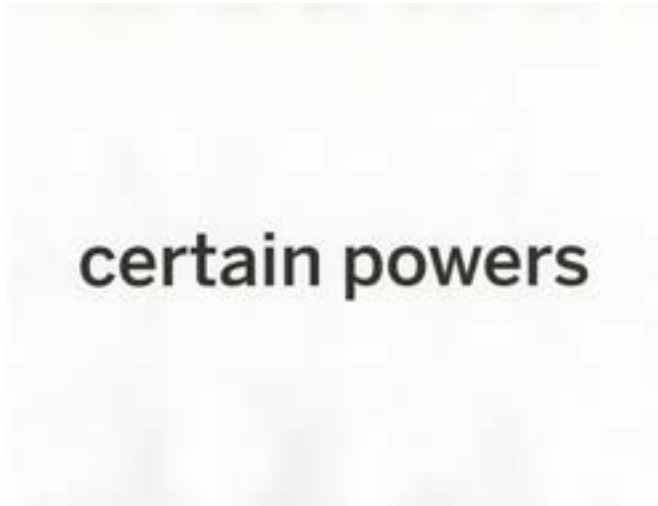
*Plot can be described in terms of the changes in ownership of a certain number of objects, each endowed with certain powers that determine the relationships between characters. The moment an object appears in a narrative, it is charged with a special force and becomes like the pole of a magnetic field, a knot in the network of invisible relationships...*<sup>20</sup>

This animation was made during a video elective course with Andrew Sloat at RISD in the Fall of 2015.

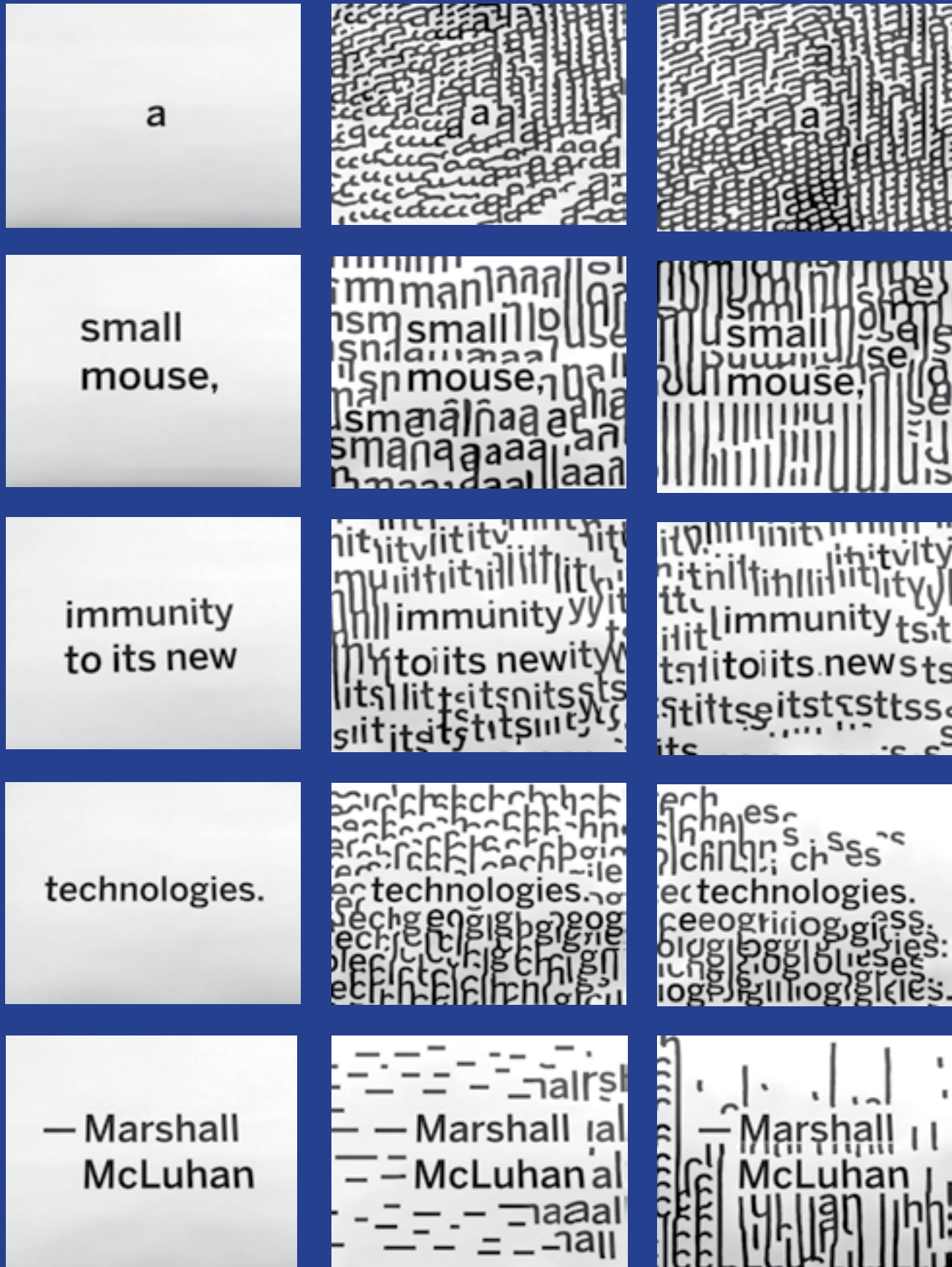
Animation frames created using the content-aware tool in Photoshop. The process was run repeatedly and files from each outcome were saved. Stills were then sequenced to create text-based animation

<sup>20</sup> Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.





Images illustrate the progression of density, repetition, and combination of forms as the content-aware process is repeated and its effects accumulate.



## PROJECTS

### to be changing (after Marhsall McLuhan)

Frames for to be changing were created in Photoshop, where the content-aware fill tool uses image information from the selection area to fill the remainder of the screen. Pieces and parts of typographic glyphs dance across the screen. Words appear individually and in short phrases, slowly revealing narrative content. The viewer encounters typographic characters and photographic images in a playful, fragmented sequence. This animated quotation from Marshall McLuhan addresses the complexities of our media landscape and its transformation of human brains and interactions. In to be changing, content focuses on the impacts of image-based media on human and animal behavior.

*James Reston wrote in The New York Times (July 7, 1957), 'A health director...reported this week that a small mouse, which presumably had been watching television, attacked a little girl and her full-grown cat. ...Both mouse and cat survived, and the incident is recorded here as a reminder that things seem to be changing...'*

*No society has ever known enough about its actions to have developed immunity to its new extensions or technologies. Today we have begun to sense that art may be able to provide such immunity.'*<sup>21</sup>

opposite & next spread  
Glyph form accumulation  
process for to be changing

<sup>21</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.



architectural  
technologies.  
geographic  
information  
systems.

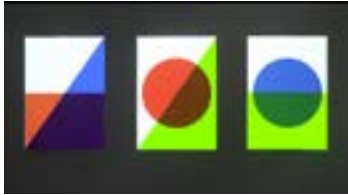
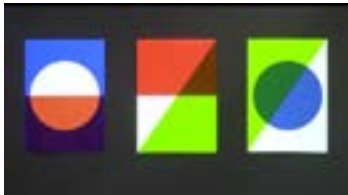


## PROJECTS

### Unstable Images



*Unstable Images* examines fundamental forms, including geometric shapes, a glass, a table, and a chair. Through this project, images of these forms are systematically subjected to destabilizing stresses. Video documentation reveals a series of image treatments – shatter, fold, multiply, warp, puncture – which are, one by one, enacted upon the image.



This project explores the instincts driving my image making process. Joseph Kosuth's work *One and Three Chairs* presents a wood chair, a photograph of that chair, and a dictionary definition of a chair, which essentially constitute three versions of the chair; the chair presented in physical space, filtered through photographic translation, and described in words. The work challenges our concepts of reality versus representation, flat versus physical, and language versus image.

Another related work, Studio Moniker's *Designer's Guide to Overprojection*, deals with the projection of color onto printed poster surfaces. The piece functions like a live-action version of Josef Albers's *Interaction of Color* (1963), playing out morphing relationships among colors depicted in ink and light.

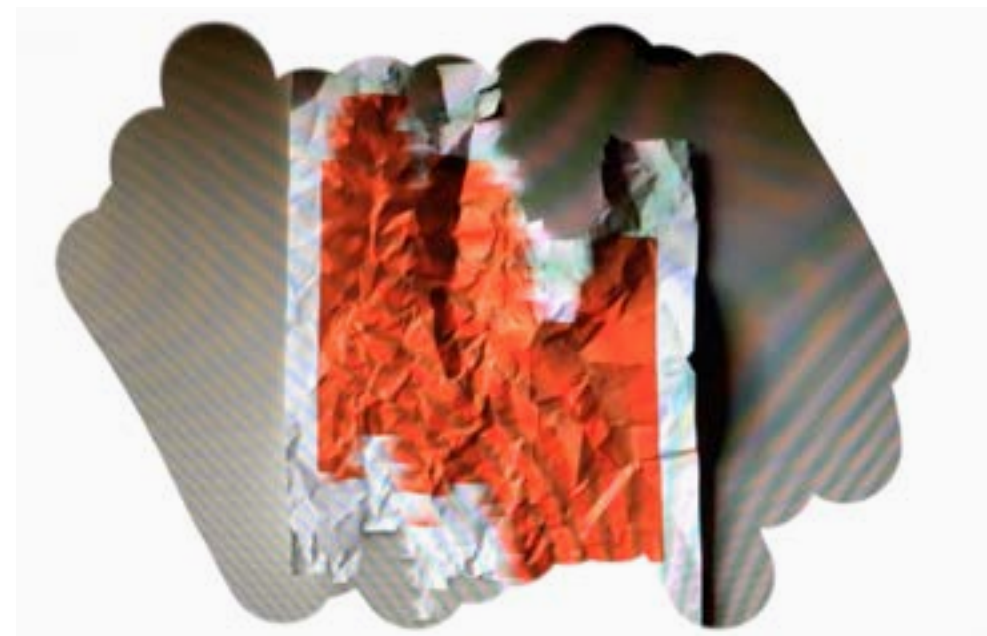
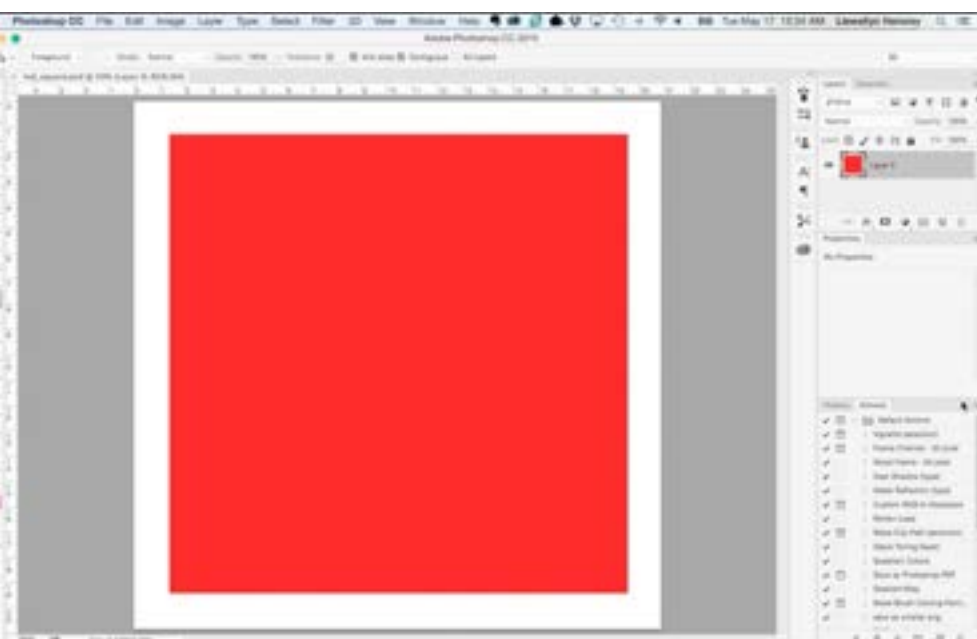
I hypothesize that the ways in which images are treated, mistreated, and destabilized impact their legibility, implications, and interpretation. I likewise contend that the destabilization of an image reveals its primal qualities and, thus, its character-defining features. Through visual analysis of the basic building blocks of form, I reveal visual metaphors of physical experience to test the durability and flexibility of image structures.

*opposite*  
Crumpled laser print of a shrub,  
taken during the process of making  
*Unstable Images*

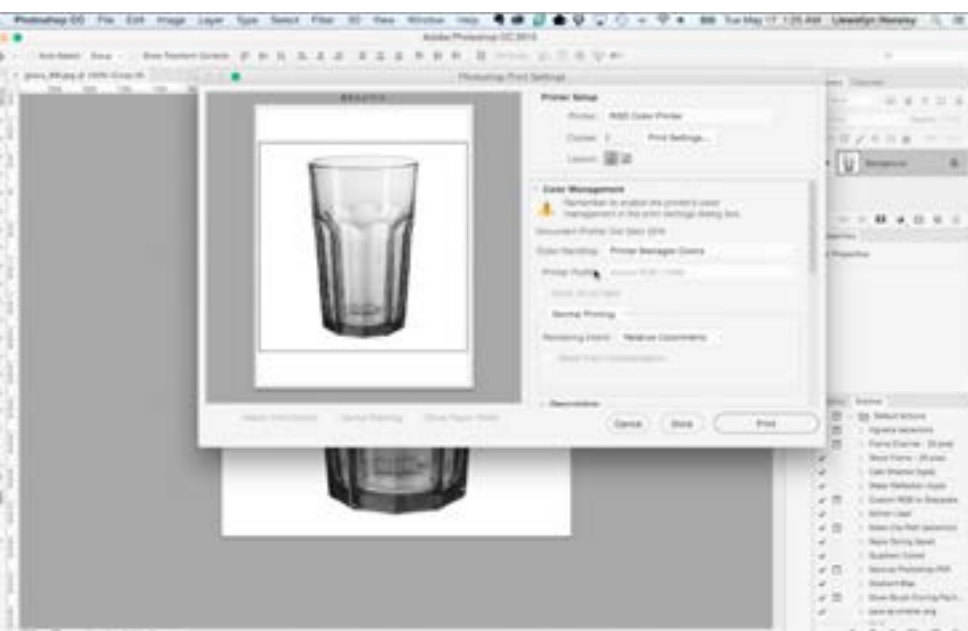
*above top*  
*One and Three Chairs*, 1965  
Joseph Kosuth

*below*  
*Designer's Guide to Overprojection*, 2013  
Studio Moniker





These images illustrate the process of image structure testing carried out for *Unstable Images*. Images of basic forms, in this case, a red square, were subjected to different stresses to test their relative durability.



This image of a glass was formatted, printed, crumpled, destabilized, then drawn with the iPhone camera application *Shrub*, resulting in an image which depicts multiple simultaneous views of the object.



***Very soon, no one is going to think that  
photography has anything to do with the truth.  
– Nathan Jurgenson***





Image of the author's cat with style transfer from Katsushika Hokusai's color woodblock print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (ca. 1829-1833) applied using iPhone application *Prisma*

# INTRODUCTION

## Sharing Our Eyes

*Photography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious.*<sup>24</sup>  
 – John Berger

*Turning the smartphone camera towards my face, I tap once, triggering an incomprehensibly complex set of algorithmic calculations based on the patterns of high and low contrast captured by the lens. When the algorithm detects a certain arrangement of contrasted areas, the program registers a human face. Next, the software identifies facial features using an active shape model, a statistical model of a face that has been gradually trained by people manually marking the borders of facial features on sample images.*

*Match points between the model and the live video feed are used to create a mesh, which is a mask that can move, rotate, and scale frame by frame as video data is received. At this point, the tool can deform the mask to alter my face shape, or trigger animations of specific movements, such as opening the mouth or moving the eyebrows.*<sup>25</sup>

*A row of icons appears at the bottom of the screen. I tap the first, and an image of my face distorts into a wide, strange pear shape, my mouth curved into a twisted smile. I swipe to an icon of a puppy and transform into a human dog costume. Whiskers and floppy brown ears appear, playfully bouncing as if I'm waiting for a ball to be thrown. The kicker comes when I open my mouth. An enormous slobbery tongue emerges from my open mouth, accompanied by a disconcerting slurping sound. It dangles in space for a moment before retreating back to its point of origin.*

<sup>24</sup> Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*.  
<sup>25</sup> Mathies, *Snapchat's Selfie Lenses*.



Snapchat is a messaging and advertising platform that utilizes computer vision to allow users to create and send images and short videos. The application is popular for its ability to run its patented augmented reality processes in real-time from mobile devices, as well as for the temporal nature of its messages. Snapchat messages disappear after one or two viewings, and the sender is notified if the recipient takes a screenshot of the message.

It is equal parts alarming and visually seductive to watch images of yourself transform in real-time into to silly, grotesque, exaggerated, and gender-flexible forms. The experience is both novel and disturbing, precisely because we know the material so well. We learn how we look through the lens of a camera, which makes it all the more compelling to interact with the strange, revolving selection of lenses, characters, and animations in order to see how they might transform us.

Sociologist and social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson speaks about our recently acquired instincts to share images and videos of everyday experience as *sharing our eyes*.<sup>26</sup> As early as the 1920s, German Jewish philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin made a distinction between information and experience.<sup>27</sup>

In the present moment, the two have been merged. That hybrid looks like tireless first-world minutiae sprinkled with police brutality. Until now, we were limited to the sharing of single, framed moments in time. More recently, the ability to quickly share videos over a vast network has allowed us to extend those moments within the continuum.

Moreover, as noted by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), we have lost the ability to see ourselves independently of the technologies we utilize. In his book, Berger argues that women had become incapable of seeing themselves without looking through the lens of the outside world because of their widespread objectification through cultural systems, fine art, and advertising.<sup>28</sup> This same phenomenon currently plays out in the life of every human with access to a smartphone.

Jurgenson describes the differences between “social photography” and fine art photography or photojournalism as being formal and cultural.<sup>29</sup> In “social photography,” quality is sacrificed for speed and accessibility. I would argue, however, that we’re not exactly “sharing our eyes” when we record video of our experiences. We are instead sharing views and experiences as the tool sees them. We are, in fact, sharing the eyes of the tool.

26 Jurgenson, *The Frame Makes the Photograph*.  
27 Benjamin, *The Storyteller*.  
28 Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.  
29 Jurgenson, *The Faux-Vintage Photo*.



Nathan Jurgenson is Founding Editor of *Real Life*, an online journal about technology. [reallifemag.com/special-issues-ways-of-speaking](http://reallifemag.com/special-issues-ways-of-speaking)

Nathan Jurgenson is a sociologist and social media theorist, founder and editor-in-chief of *Real Life* magazine, co-founder and chair of *Theorizing the Web*, a contributing editor of *The New Inquiry*, and a researcher at *Snapchat*.

His research is fundamentally driven by the understanding that we live increasingly in an “augmented reality,” a perspective that views the digital and physical as entangled as opposed to distinct, a phenomenon he calls “digital dualism”.

Following *Theorizing the Web 2017*, Jurgenson agreed to speak with me about the impacts of audience and networked archives on photography and communication.

**NJ** = Nathan Jurgenson

**LL** = Llewellyn Hensley

INTERVIEW

Nathan Jurgenson

**NJ** Tell me more about what you’re doing.

**LL** I am finishing up my thesis in Graphic Design at RISD. Most of my work deals with photography and images. In the last years, photography has become inextricable from the smartphone and messaging. My thesis focuses on the tools defining contemporary photography and communication. I’m interested in how images and representation are changing, in photography and image making, as like these imperfect tools that we rely on for so much.

**NJ** What do you mean by imperfect?

**LL** I mean changeable. We talk a lot about how images can be edited to change their meaning or to alter their truth. Images still have an ability to communicate with a language of trust. I’m curious about the questions around photography’s authenticity. I’m trying to understand how image-making tools change the way that people interact with each other and with that medium. How does this change or redefine what images mean in personal interaction?

**NJ** Yeah. I think it’s really a question of whether photography’s editability is an imperfection or a limitation. I think this really speaks about two totally different conversations around photography. It’s centered on what museums, art schools, and photo institutions are saying is photography, versus the vast majority of photos that are taken. It’s pretty telling why, if you’re in the *International Center of Photography*, let’s say, they have almost nothing to say about 99.9% of all photos taken.

**LL** Totally.

**NJ** Because it’s born from a tradition of studying professional photography, art photography, photojournalism, museums and galleries, those sorts of things. But now we have an entire culture that is speaking, and learning, and displaying themselves and socializing through the camera that’s in their pocket. That has very little to do—only in kind of weird tangential ways—with gallery, museum, and professional photography and photojournalism.

**LL** So you’re saying the way we socialize with photography has very little to do with the history of photography.

**NJ** Yeah. Suddenly the conversation of the truth of a photo, the editability of it, is born from these old concerns, which I think is really telling. I just sent a link in the chat which is centered around this idea of the editability of digital photography in which the quote is, “It may be becoming increasingly important to detect fake video and audio.” It’s an existential question. How can we distinguish real from fake?

From the perspective of the photograph as a document, as a record, as truth—kind of the old concerns of photography—that would be a vital concern. How do you know if all four hooves [of the horse] are off the ground, or if the image was manipulated?

But from the perspective of photography as communication, as comparable to talking, as more linguistic than artistic, the question is, “What are you trying to express?”





Nathan Jurgenson is a contributing editor of *The New Inquiry*, a Brooklyn-based online magazine of cultural and literary criticism.

**NJ** If you’re trying to express “I’m on vacation, I’m happy!”, the fact that you can edit the photo can help you express [your feelings and your experience] far more than fact of the matter [the factual accuracy of the photograph].

That fact that pixels and photons would correspond exactly to the original photograph has very little to do with the truth of your mood or the truth of how you feel. I wrote somewhere that, “By liberating photography from the fact of the matter, it can tell new truths.” Photography isn’t failing doing something. It’s succeeding at doing something else. It’s like, a microwave doesn’t fail at making toast.

**LL** Because you don’t ask it to.

**NJ** Exactly. It doesn’t have that function and often times the conversation around photography today assumes traditional notions about photography. In my own work I talk about the difference between traditional photography and social photography. It’s an imperfect term. I mean, what photography isn’t social? I mean that [social photography is social in the way that social media is social. It’s about communication and audience.] It’s as if we are speaking with images. That is the way that I would frame this.

**LL** Great. So, I think the really interesting stuff happens when the concerns of traditional and social photography are all balled up together. I’m going to use videos of police brutality in general, or the video of Dr. David Dao being dragged off an airplane by United Airlines security forces in particular, as an example. we’re asking cellphone videos to perform the important work of truthful documentation.

We’re asking a social media to serve as an accurate record. A tool or technology that we usually use for social communication is being asked to perform another purpose, a crucial social objective. We need those video files to validate experiences that would be easy to dismiss without proof or evidence.

Coming from a background in architecture and preservation, I think about image making as being about recording the existence of a set of certain visual conditions. It’s an aid to memory, or a form of graphic proof. I’m interested in this messy gray area, where we’re asking social media to do really important work even though it’s an informal instrument. In order for social photography to serve this dual purpose, truth must be baked into it.

**NJ** There is really no correspondence with formality and truth, or informality and non-truth. The poet can tell the truth that a scribe can’t, and vice versa. [Susan] Sontag would talk about photographers as embodying both of the poet and scribe at once. We use photography to document the world and play with the world. In that sense the world is our material. Photography has never been entirely documentary or purely creative. In coming from graphic design or art, you’re also beginning with the world. I think that negotiation is really interesting. It’s important not to be caught up in truth as objectivity. [Walter] Benjamin distinguishes information from experience. You have storytellers who aren’t at all encumbered by the truth, by being accurate, by listing facts.

I like those different notions of truth. For example, when you look at somebody who poses a lot on their social media profile, maybe they use filters, maybe they’re wearing the puppy lens on Snapchat. That can express a kind of truth.

When digital photography first came around—stuff like Fred Ritchin’s work—there was a lot of hand-wringing over the impacts of digital photography. Now photography is not literally a photon hitting film. Now there is a condition where if no computer is calling up a certain image at a specific moment, it doesn’t even exist. Photography has lost its one-to-one correspondence to the world. Very soon, no one is going to think that photography has anything to do with the truth.

There is a lot of talk about the “end of photography,” or the “death of photography.” How do people tell the truth about who they are and their lives today? Through photos. Photos have a strong relationship to the facts of who I am and what I do, and that relationship is growing even stronger. I think that’s the contradiction that you’re trying to tease out. How is it that the fact that photography has a more fluid relationship to objective reality helps us use it even more accurately for telling the truth about our lives?

From a social theory perspective, it’s very intuitive because we understand the world through the lens of our specific standpoint. It’s never through pure objective reality. We always see through our individual stories and narrative. The self is a story that we tell, which to me is very intuitive. It demonstrates how photography is becoming less of a mechanical, formal endeavor and is being incorporated into the everyday, mundane reality of how we socialize, and how we know ourselves. These image conversations are filled with messy knowledge and non-knowledge, truth and non-truth, and poet and scribe. They are all kind of mixed together, as you say. I like that.

I don’t think that there are enough sociologists and cultural social theorists in these conversations. Often times, when I go to photography panels or photography museums or something like that, it’s lucky if there is one sociologist or cultural theorist, which is me. I don’t think I’ve ever been on a panel with another one.

**LL** It seems that cultural and educational institutions are struggling to engage with networked interaction, especially the speed and content of images and videos. It feels like we’re engaging in a strange dance around tools that are hard to understand. I can’t say I fully understand them, but it seems that engaging with emerging tools and processes is an important step in that direction. It’s important to continue figuring out how meaning has transferred from other ways of communicating to the smartphone and to image-based communication. The pace of image making and sharing has quickened to the point where it’s becoming a stand-in or shortcut for verbal language. Just like verbal language, all the ums, ands, and buts are definitely present in the image conversation we’re having.

I want to talk a bit about data collection as it relates to networked technology. There is a lot of focus and criticism around data and image collection. I find it interesting that Facebook and Google treat their data collection as a treasure trove, when web developer and social critic Maciej Ceglowski, compares it to toxic waste. Since data often lasts longer than the companies that collect it, Ceglowski hypothesizes that longer data is stored, the more dangerous it gets.<sup>30</sup>

**LL** There are questions around the motives for mining data as well: What are the outcomes of these collections? Who does the collection and analysis benefit other than the corporation collecting it? What are the real limitations of data’s usefulness?

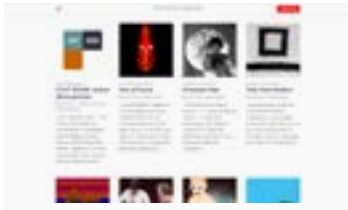
I’m curious about what happens when, for example, a feature that made Snapchat special (the temporal nature of videos and images) gets turned off. Temporal media transforms into something else. It seems that our default settings lean towards permanent archivation. You’ve written about the ways that a temporal message increases its preciousness or specialness; that temporality can make messages and images more like lived experience. How do you think we can bring that into more realms of the image economy?

**NJ** It’s about the temporality of photography. If you understand photography as something communicative, linguistic, or verbal rather than formal or documentary, then we can talk about photography as occupying the same temporality as speech. When you are at a café talking with your friend, it’s likely that no one is recording the conversation. Speech is largely ephemeral. Most of our speech is, like you say, “ands” and “ums.” Most of what we say doesn’t have a lot of meaning. It’s a form of social massaging. You ask, “Hey. How is it going?” You don’t really care that much about how it’s going, you’re just defining a situation and a social relationship. Now we’re using photographs to do a lot of that work.

It’d be weird if we recorded it all. We need and should keep both temporal and archived forms of communication, but we have to make a distinction about how people understand the factor of temporality how it plays out in social relations. Then there are the data questions: Where does the data exist? How is it held? Who benefits?

One of the things I was saying when I first encountered Snapchat was that Instagram, while being a permanent network with all posted photos archived for you to view, was the idea of a communication tool being defacto ephemeral. Photography is already defacto ephemeral because the experience was ephemeral. For example: your Facebook profile. Something you post in September of 2007 is technically still there, and there is a chance it can come back to bite you. That biting, the stigmas, are unevenly distributed across the population. Some people are more vulnerable.

Those are legitimate questions, and people should discuss them. But we shouldn’t pursue those questions to the detriment of understanding that the vast majority of what we post is not being accessed and that nobody cares about it. Do you want to describe how people experience the world? Or do you want to use these platforms to describe social problems that exist, even if they are not experienced by all people? I think they’re both legitimate, and a single work can even address both.



Screenshot from online journal  
*The New Inquiry*

But sometimes you can’t even acknowledge the familiarity of all photography, the familiarity of Facebook, because it’s experienced as ephemeral.

It’s likely ephemeral. Everything you do on those platforms is likely only for today. It’s likely that no one is going to ever see it again. No one cares about your Instagram photo from three years ago. People barely care about the one you posted today. People understand that, and they also understand that there is a chance that something can come back.

The ephemerality of a network isn’t just about where the photo exists. Adults are far more interested in the specifics around where the photo exists because there is this learned narcissism. We think that people are going to be looking at our photos from three years ago, because that’s what the network tells us. The network tells us that the worst thing is neglect. The best thing is that people like you or hate you. The worst thing is that nobody cares. We’ve brought that insecurity into our own worries, where people bring an almost wishful thinking that people are looking at our photos from three years ago. That is wishful thinking that the networks have installed into me, but it’s pretty irrational. It’s not the reality.

There is ephemerality in how people interact. The point is, for lived-privacy invisibility and publicity: If I post this thing today, is it likely that other people will see it later? Will the thing I post go beyond my intended audience? There have been hacks, and they can be really bad. No photos were publicized in the 2013 Snapchat hack, but people certainly felt uncomfortable, and that was really bad.

I hope that more digital tools are designed from the perspective of understanding everyday life sociality instead of trying to disrupt it, or record it, or anything else; to just be part of life in a more fluid way. I think Snapchat is understood as being ephemeral in that sense, but at the same time I think it’s legit for researchers and writers and critics to talk about the facts of the matter. If you save that photo to your memories, it’s sitting on a server somewhere. Who benefits from that? Who’s vulnerable if that goes wrong?

I think of the 2006 Congressional Race. There were these two races, one in Wisconsin with this guy Sean Patrick Duffy.<sup>31</sup> He was from the TV show *The Real World Boston*. It was one of the first *Real Worlds*, and he was just a drunk, naked jerk. Then he grows up to be a Republican in a suit and he runs and wins and becomes a congressional representative. His experience on *The Real World* was a very quick campaign issue. He had done lots of lewd, terrible things on the show, and the public reaction was that Duffy had, grown up and become an adult.

That same election cycle, there was the woman named Krystal Ball,<sup>32</sup> who is now an analyst on MSNBC. She’s a businesswoman and CPA. She ran for a congressional seat in Virginia. She was way ahead in the congressional race when someone publicized her college MySpace profile.<sup>33</sup>

The MySpace page had photos from Halloween, where she was dressed as a sexy Santa or something. She was wearing a short skirt and was fellating her then-husband’s glowing dildo nose.

<sup>31</sup> Wikipedia, *Sean Duffy*.

<sup>32</sup> Wikipedia, *Krystal Ball*.

<sup>33</sup> Amira, *At Least One Candidate*.



There was nothing even scandalous about the images. But those photos came to define her. They defined her campaign. No one knew anything about her professional reputation. She became the most Googled person in the world in 2010. After that happened, people became obsessed with her, her body, her appearance. I think it's an apt but tragic example. When we talk about the benefits for companies and also the vulnerabilities for people, it's important to understand that those vulnerabilities are not evenly distributed.

My photos really can't come back to bite me in the same way, because society isn't obsessed with my body. That is a very different experience. Often times, the people designing these networks come from my experience, where risk and vulnerability aren't a concern. Whereas for Krystal Ball, her political campaign was completely derailed. That will also likely impact other women who may think, "Politics isn't going to be for me, because I'm a human being with a past." That becomes a social problem worth addressing. We can ease the stigmas around having a little bit of digital dirt. We can work to normalize the fact that we're all different people today than we were in the past. To recognize that change and growth are a normal part of identity. Identity is fluid. Collectively, we can reduce that stigma. That's a worthy social project because that stigma is unevenly distributed. When we playfully say things like, "Oh, I'm so glad I didn't have Facebook while I was in high school," we're reproducing the stigma that having a record of your change is a bad thing.

**LL** What do you think about the fact that consequences aren't unevenly distributed? What you described is a perfect case study because it's a solid one to one comparison; there was the same level of "dirt" for both Sean Duffy and Krystal Ball.

I don't even consider Ball's "dirt" to be "dirt"! I mean: Ball went to a costume party in college and she wore a funny costume.

**NJ** Right. She was in college and alive.

**LL** Whereas it sounded like [Duffy] was actually guilty of bad behavior and disrespect. The distinction is crucial. It's upsetting to remember how, too often, male candidates are given the benefit of the doubt; are gifted credit for their personal growth. Whereas women are too often ascribed shame and suffer such different fates. It's frustrating that social credit is disproportionately awarded, and disheartening that social mistrust is more frequently assigned to women.

Obviously this is a huge question. I don't know how we can reprogram the collective brain to level the playing field, and I'm not sure if it's possible. But what an insane shame.

I heard some reporting on a podcast called *Trumpcast* about the allowances President Donald Trump is given to care tremendously about the way he looks. Trump is someone who goes to a lot of trouble to maintain his appearance. Virginia Heffernan was saying that because of his association with the Republican Party, because power and appearance tend to be so important to members of that party, Trump seems to have been granted a pass on matters of appearance. To be particular about the way he looks is considered part of the crucial work of reputation maintenance.

There are two things I want to make sure I ask you about before you go. You said, in referring to historic photo theory, that photography allows us to "share our eyes." Where did that phrase come from?

**NJ** That's how I describe social photography. It's not so much about sharing what I'm

seeing but sharing how I'm seeing it; sharing the experience. Again, this is the Walter Benjamin distinction between experience and information. I think the fact that video is rising in popularity over still photography, is related. Social photography is about sharing what we're seeing and how we're seeing it. To me, a still photograph is like a video with a filter on it. The edit that the user made to it was freezing reality. I see that as a kind of effect that someone places on sharing their eyes. It's like if we have the mouth-to-mouth communication of speaking. Maybe we can think about eye-to-eye communication in terms of video sharing. Social photography is something like sharing eye-to-eye.

To try and tie a bow around the idea of how we approach these questions: Who are the people that talk about these questions? Who are we citing when we talk about these issues? What are the literatures we are using to understand the new ways we're communicating? I would describe the scope of exploration of the institutions of photography as akin to if linguists only studied poetry. *The International Center of Photography* can only talk about art photography. I think art photography is the visual equivalent of poetry. Poetry is a legitimate conversation. But I think that there should be serious conversations around social photography as well. Does poetry theory tell us a lot about linguistics? Well, it says something. Just as fine art photography says something about the history of photography.

Our history says something about the communication that is happening with tools like Snapchat, but it's a sliver, right? Linguists talk about poetry, but that's a sliver of the whole story.

**LL** Right, we don't speak in poems.

**NJ** No. My sentence doesn't fail at being a poem in the same way we're talking about before. My sentence isn't trying to be a poem. It would also make really bad science fiction, because that's not what I'm trying to do. I'll participate in panel discussions about photography and a devoted fine art photographer will always try to reduce the validity of social photography by saying something like, "Yeah, but the photos aren't good." And I might say, "Right, the same way that your sentence wasn't good poetry."

**LL** Interesting.

**NJ** If we understand what we're doing with our phones as more linguistic and verbal, then "good" image-making is redefined to mean whether the images and videos convey what you wanted to convey. Does it communicate? Were you respectful? Were you creative? Were you fun? Were you supportive?

Photography has invaded normal sociality. All the things that photography does—documentation and records and truth—are coming into everyday social discourse. Now our social discourse is going to be dominated by documentation and nostalgia.

I think what happened instead was that sociality took over photography. I have noticed that in a lot of early writing about digital photography, there was an assumption or prediction that the rules of photography would take over the way we speak. Instead, what happened is the reverse. The rules of how we speak took over photography.

**LL** So photography became conversational, which means each individual image, frame, video, conversation isn't necessarily significant. In some ways maybe the compilation, the back and forth image conversation over time is what builds something.

**LL** One other thing you’ve talked about is the presence of an audience, the idea that many of the significant changes we’re talking about may be less about the tool and more about the presence of other people who are now paying attention to, and having access to, our experiences. We now have an audience consuming our imagery.

**NJ** Brownie cameras and disposable cameras have existed for a long time. We’ve had a camera in our pocket for a really long time. People think that what’s causing the changes is the ease with which we take photos now. But even early digital cameras allowed us to take a bunch of photos very quickly. We didn’t take tons of selfies or take a picture of our lattes before because those images had no audience.

The impetus or motive for taking the overwhelming majority of photos isn’t the tool but the potential audience that social media promises. Audience is an exponentially bigger factor than the fact that Apple added an extra megapixel to the latest iPhone. I think we get really caught up on the device. Something I’ve been writing about is that when we think about the word “camera” we shouldn’t think of the lens. Our brains think, “camera” and we imagine the device. I think the reality is that all the interesting things happening with photography are happening in the software. Instagram makes it so that your friends see your picture. That’s why you took the photo.

It is far more interesting to people that Snapchat can add a dog filter to your face than the fact that our smartphones’ sensors have been upgraded. When we think of the word “camera”, we should be thinking of the software processes and the network connection. Because the internet connection and software mechanisms enact the seeing and sharing. That’s another thing I haven’t totally worked out, but it’s where I think our intuition follows an anachronistic path.

**LL** Are you working on your dissertation?

**NJ** I finished that and I have also just finished a book on photography and social media which I’m going to publish with Verso next year. It will be social theory kind of stuff, nothing about reading photos. A lot of the kind of stuff we’re talking about. I’ve been throwing all my writing into the book manuscript. Once that’s out, then I’ll probably get back to publishing shorter writings. I have tons of stuff that I’m not sure whether or not to put in the book. It’s been fun to do something more long-form, but it’s also weird to have all this stuff you’ve written that no one sees. You have an idea, you write it, and then people see it if they care. Well, we’ll see how that goes. This is my first time.

**LL** Nice.

**NJ** The dissertation I wrote for five people. I didn’t write that for public consumption.

**LL** Yeah. That’s the weird thing. I totally feel that. I’ve been in grad school for three years. At this point almost every project that I’ve made in the last two years feels like it applies to my thesis ideas. It’s so tempting to throw a lasso around all of it. But that doesn’t make sense because I also want to have something to jump off from when I’m done. It’s crazy to direct the thesis for what you hope will be a broader audience.

I’m hoping to reach other designers and makers and writers. It’s just weird to figure out who the hell your audience is and what it’s important to include. I’m going to be mindful of your time. I know you need to go, but thanks so much for spending this time with me.

**NJ** Yeah. This was fun. Let me know what comes of it, and we’ll definitely stay in touch, and we’ll be theorizing the webs hopefully!

**LL** Yes! Wonderful. That’s exciting.



website for *Theorizing the Web* 2017.





Sophie Calle's excruciatingly personal performance and documentation-based projects position her as equal parts voyeur, social scientist, and private investigator. Calle takes on the burdens of human interaction and relation, engaging with strangers in unnervingly intimate ways.

In *Suite Vénitienne* (1979), *The Shadow* (1981), *The Hotel* (1981), and *The Address Book* (above, 1983), Calle betrays the privacy and presumed anonymity of strangers. She follows, photographs, and then carefully presents her subjects, taking poetic advantage of our imperfect definitions of personal and private.

It is likely that aspects of *Love Me Tinder* will engender discomfort of a similar nature in my audience.

opposite  
the *send pics ;)* bitmoji poses on a bed with a smartphone, referring to the normalization of sharing intimate images of ourselves

PROJECTS

## Love Me Tinder



At the provocation of my professor, Paul Soulellis, to make a Snapchat portrait project public, I became an embedded designer on *Tinder*. This was my first online dating experience. The only way I found to create a *Tinder* account, much to my embarrassment, was to connect it with my *Facebook* account. I set up a profile and uploaded the allotted number of photographs: six (see next spread).

My photographs were not flattering. They were photographs of me taken with Snapchat. I provided a variety of images, including several which distorted the form and shape of my face and views taken with Snapchat filters. Animal face filters, drawings, and “Face Swap” images were utilized. Face Swap is a feature of Snapchat which allows the user to trade facial features with other people in the photo frame, as well as with people in images already existing in the user’s Camera Roll.

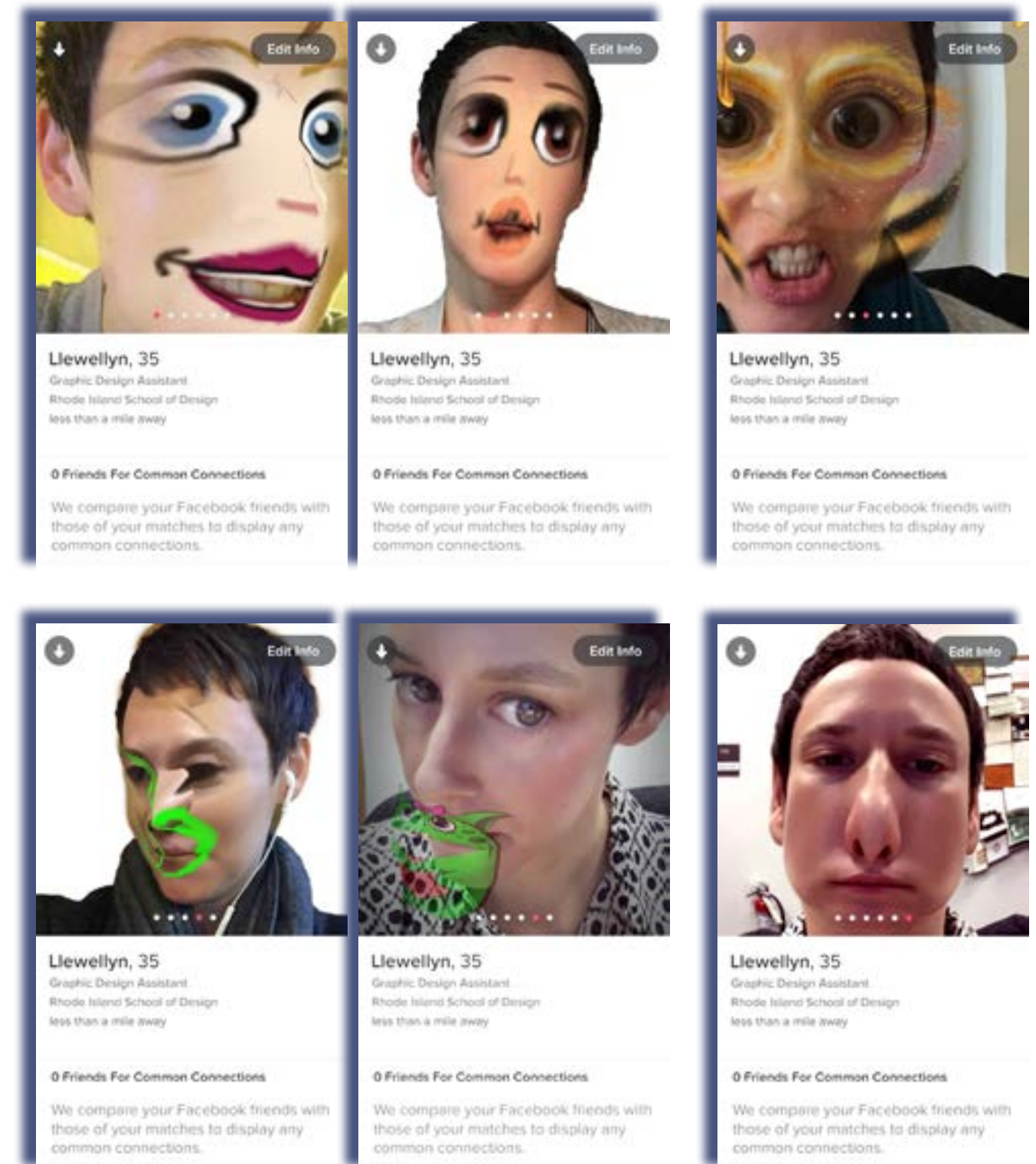
I didn’t expect anyone to match with me. My hypothesis was that I would be ignored. My hypothesis was incorrect. Within a few hours, I had several matches. In a week, I had nearly twenty. A man named TB, whose profile picture showed a 46 year-old man posing with a bald eagle in front of an older gentleman wearing a kilt, was my first match. He messaged me instantly. “Dogs! How are you.” It was going to be a strange ride.

Kevin. Kelvin. Pete. Henry. Chris. Ozzy. Sartaj. Many of the men on my *Tinder* feed gave me pause. For the first time, I was presented with a set of dating prospects based on data about gender and geographic proximity. As a 35 year-old straight woman who didn’t know better than to leave the default age and distance settings unchanged, I was viewing a group of men between the ages of 25 and 45 within twenty miles of my location.



this page  
Screenshot taken when the *Tinder* application is in the process of opening

opposite  
Each of my *Tinder* profile images was taken using face-altering lenses in Snapchat





I felt sad somehow. There were bound to be nice people among my options, but I didn't like the way that I felt vulnerable to them. I am terrifyingly vulnerable to them.

My perceived advantages fell away. We were all there together, looking for one another. Waiting for reactions. Hoping to be discovered. Being an embedded designer, gave me some special protections. I sought to maintain a playful attitude, expecting nothing in particular. I gave honest answers; I teased people where applicable.

Then I got a message from a guy named Jason, and my experiment changed. Jason's message was clear and unpretentious. We texted back and forth. He was an engineer and a dad. He asked me to meet. After he made a casual comment about having a racial preference, I called him out and shamed him mercilessly. A trusted friend encouraged me to meet him anyway. "Consider it research," she suggested. We went out. I was too trusting and enjoyed the attention. Graduate school is terrible for dating.

Almost immediately, it became clear Jason had a drinking problem. After he'd had a rough night out alone, I tried to cut him loose. He wrote me a report explaining JPEG compression to get back on my good side. It turned into a confusing few months of catch and release; of liking the attention and then being disappointed; being impressed when Jason cooked for his kids, helped his son with math homework, was unbelievably devoted to his special-needs daughter's wellbeing and happiness and then crestfallen when he was flaky and irresponsible.

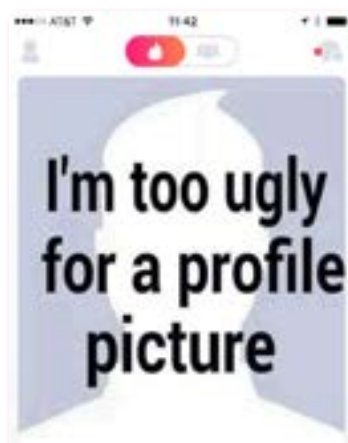
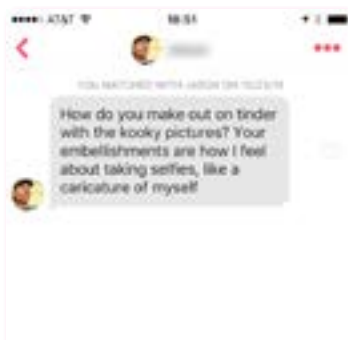
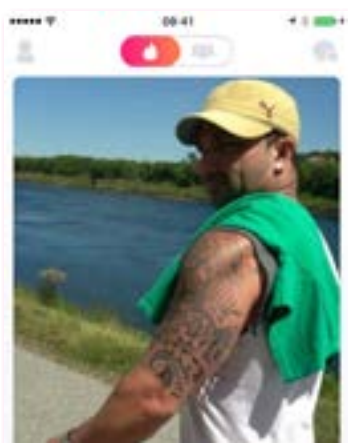
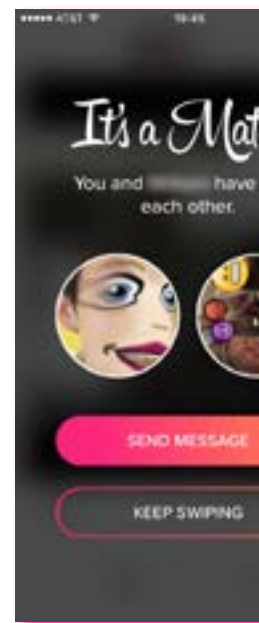
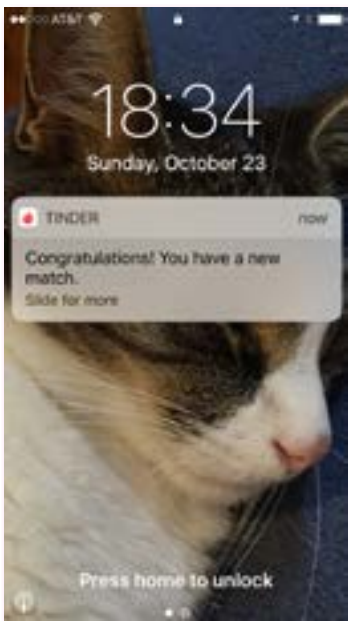
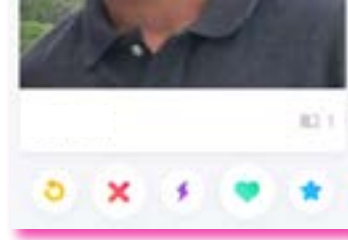
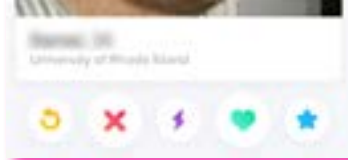
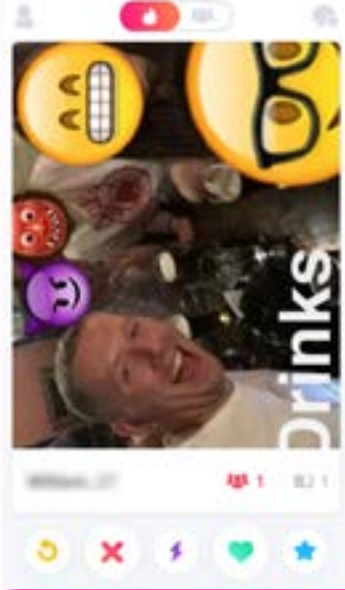
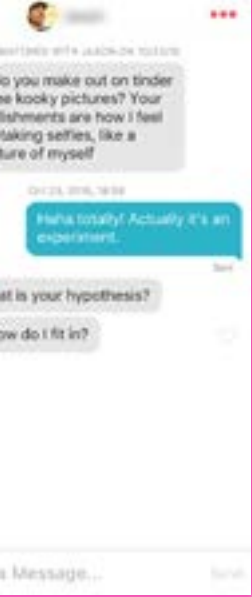
In part, my thesis is about what happens when you aren't trying to look hot in selfies—when you make strange, grotesque portraits in part because you can, because it's what all the kids are doing, because it's absurd and playful and you want to see what's possible in and outside the screen; in and outside of a critical academic framework; inside and outside my graphic expectations.



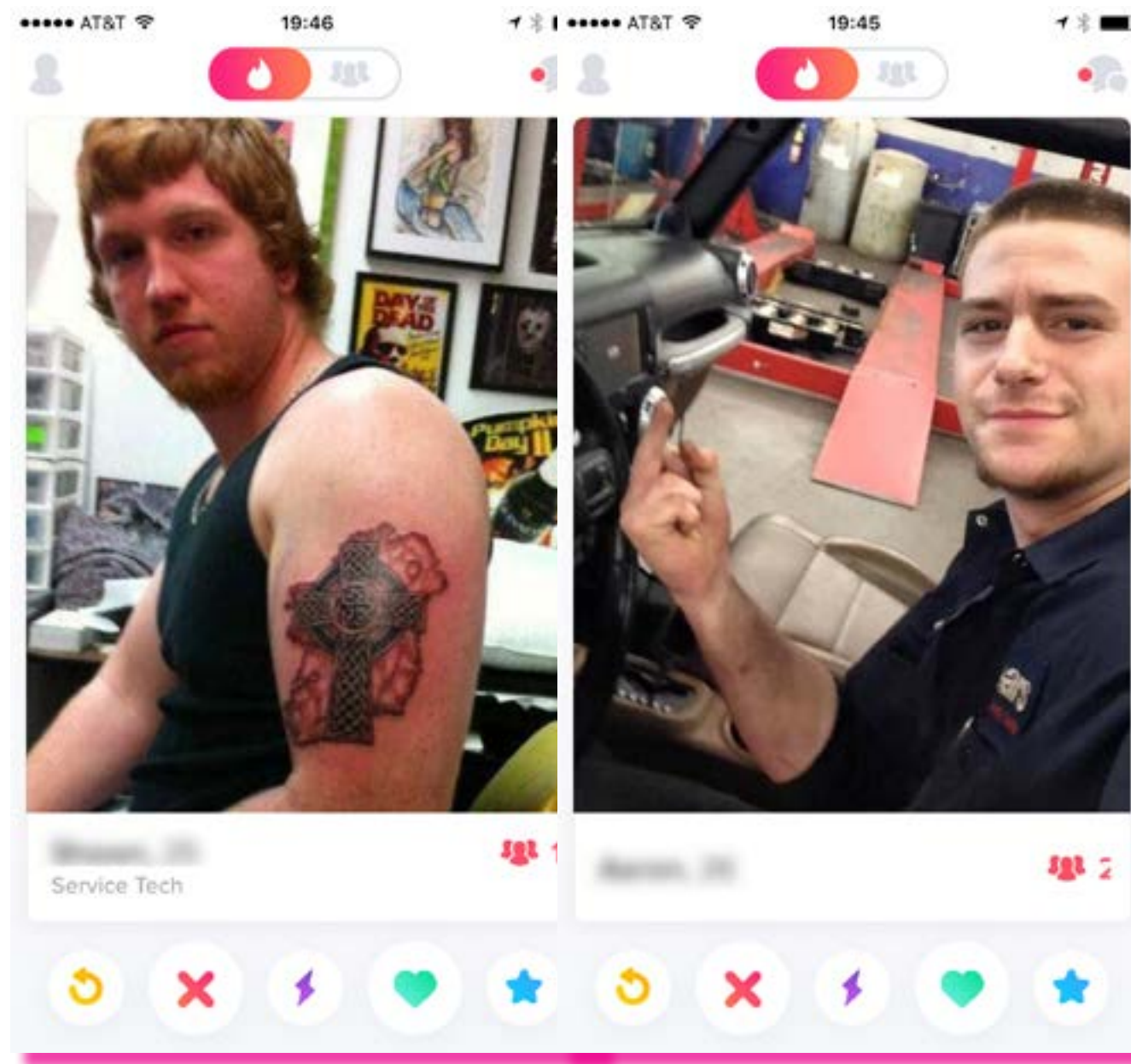
*this page*  
Profile images of Jason P. Dotson, a man I met through *Tinder*, paired with Snapchat portraits of me posing as Jason's *Tinder* profile images

*next spread*  
Screenshots of the *Tinder* interface, including profile images of potential matches, conversations, and notifications









Screenshots of the *Tinder* profile  
images of potential matches

**Explaining what I understand of JPEG compression**  
*(AKA as the strangest thing I've done to try to impress a girl)*

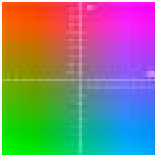
Ok, here goes. I'll try my best to not get lost in the technical details weeds, while still giving you and understanding of what is going on.

1. We start out with a picture that is made up of individually colored pixels. Each little pixel is made up of some level of Red, Blue and Green (RGB, I'm sure you have heard of it.)

So each pixel is made up of three numbers depending on the amounts of each color.

2. Now it turns out that the human eye isn't so good at perceiving color, but we are really good at changes in intensity, so the first thing we are going to do is convert our image from one based strictly on color to one that is based on intensity with some color sprinkled in. So the RGB image is converted to YCbCr (you may have seen this in photoshop somewhere).


So now the pixel is again made up of three numbers, one for intensity and the other represent where on the graph below the color comes from.



So you ask yourself, "Wait if the color is still represented by three numbers and numbers represent compression, we haven't compressed anything right?"

You are right, but because we are better at seeing intensity rather than color, we can begin to strip away some of the information that is not needed to represent that pixel.

3. So now we stick a few of these pixels together. They usually put them into a 2x4 grid.



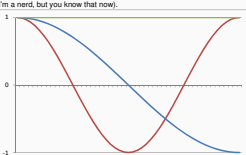
- a. The rectangle on the left is a true representation of the 8 pixels (no compression).
- b. We are good at seeing intensity. The grayscale box represents the information for the 8 pixels intensity, so we will hang on to that.
- c. But since we aren't so good with color, we can average the color across bands four pixels wide.
- d. Now when we add together the information in the two boxes on the right, we get an approximation of the 2x4 grid of pixels on the left. We now only need half as many numbers to draw out the 2x4 grid. This is the first step in

So that is the first steps in JPEG compression is the conversion in how you define color and then dumping some of the data that isn't particularly useful.

So now we get to the craziness that you showed me in the article.

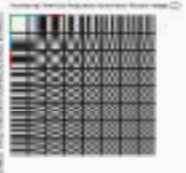
4. So now we chop the photo into a whole bunch of 8x8 pixel grids. And we try and use the Cosine function to make a representation of the 8x8 grid. This is done for the three values that represent the color information (remember there is one for intensity and two for color). Let's work with intensity.

- a. So the cosine function is just a way to make a repeating wavy line. We can make it not wavy at all, or really wavy (i.e. high frequency) by changing only one number. Below are three plots of cosine functions that I plotted in EXCEL (yes I'm a nerd, but you know that now).



Since we are talking about intensity, let's say that the green line at the top is really intense, like the 8x8 grid is all super intense. The blue line goes from intense to no intensity, and the red line lazily goes from intense to not intense and back to intense.

- b. So what the JPEG people say is that we can represent any 8x8 grid by adding together a whole bunch of these intensity wavy lines (they call them Basis Functions). Every combination possible of basis function is represented in each box of the picture below.




- c. So remember the green line above, the super intense one? It would represent the white box in the upper left. That would be a part of our picture that was chopped up into an 8x8 grid with no variation in intensity in that grid.

The blue line looks like the next box over, going from intense to no intensity.

The red line looks like the third box over.

Now the green, blue and red lines only represent the variation across the 8x8 image moving from left to right across the image. The intensity will also change going from the top to bottom of the image. So starting at the box in the upper left and going down the column, this would represent all the Basis Functions that would describe the change in intensity from the top to the bottom of the image.

So you get the rest of the checkerboard boxes by adding together the upper row and the column at the left like in the picture below.



- d. Ok now what the JPEG compression algorithm does is to combine hundreds and hundreds of the Basis Functions (each of the checker board squares), and add them up to get the best representation of the 8x8 part of the image. It keeps a count of how many of each box gets use, and each one could be used hundreds of times. So we went from an 8x8 grid of pixel data to an 8x8 count of how many times each Basis Function is used.

5. So we have done a whole bunch of work but haven't made the image any smaller. So the trick is that the human eye isn't very good at picking up on high frequency variations in an image, and these ones generally don't have much contribution to the image anyway. So here is how we get compression.

- a. An importance is assigned to each of the hundreds of the little Basis Functions, with the high frequency ones given less importance. This is called Quantization. JPEG uses one type of quantization, photoshop has a bunch of their own. It's just an 8x8 table of numbers that tell you how important each Basis Function is.
- b. Now the important ones are kept and the unimportant ones are tossed out. You get compression because now you have empty boxes in your 8x8 table.
- c. Now the file is transmitted with just the count and how they were weighted and it is all put back together on the other end, except the data deemed unimportant is lost forever.

So in summary: you go from an 8x8 grid of pixels to an 8x8 grid of how frequently these Basis Functions are used to make a representation of the pixels, and then you toss out the ones you don't need to represent the image. All the high frequency stuff is lost and you get bigger blobs out on the other end.

I hope this makes some sort of sense. Sorry for any spelling or grammatical errors. See if you can find the zero that I substituted for an 'O'.

Regards -Jason

above

Explaining What I Understand of JPEG Compression (AKA the strangest thing I've done to try to impress a girl), is an essay sent to me by Jason

opposite

Profile images of Jason paired with Snapchat portraits of me posing as Jason's Tinder profile images







## PROJECTS

### Impolitical (Unwise): Portraits Processed With Styles

Style transfer is the technique of recomposing images in the style of other images using artificial neural networks.<sup>34</sup>

“In fine art, especially painting, humans have mastered the skill to create unique visual experiences through composing a complex interplay between the content and style of an image. Thus far the algorithmic basis of this process is unknown, and there exists no artificial system with similar capabilities. However, in other key areas of visual perception such as object and face recognition, near-human performance was recently demonstrated by a class of biologically-inspired vision models called Deep Neural Networks.”<sup>35</sup>

The images presented here begin as Snapchat selfies. My face is initially transformed by face swaps with political figures and alterations of facial contours. Next, features available in Snapchat and the photo editing application Prisma process the original image, making it appear to be rendered in a different material or to mimic the brushstrokes and signature color palettes of legendary painters. In this project, I position myself as a stand-in for a generalized user.<sup>36</sup>



*this spread*

Snapchat face swap between myself  
and Steven Bannon

*TIME* magazine, 13 February 2017

*Bitmoji of the Year*,  
the author's personal bitmoji

<sup>34</sup> Wikipedia, *Artificial Neural Network*.

<sup>35</sup> Gatys, *A Neural Algorithm*.

<sup>36</sup> Prisma Labs, Inc., *Prisma*.

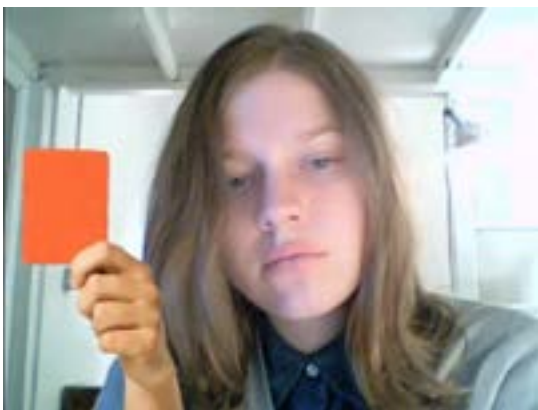
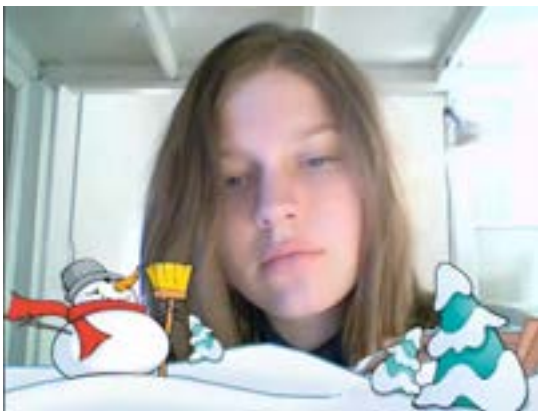
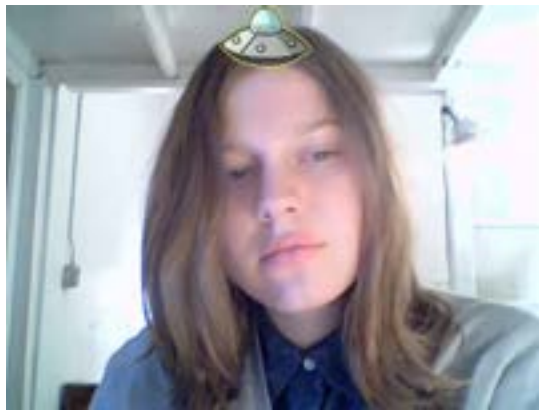
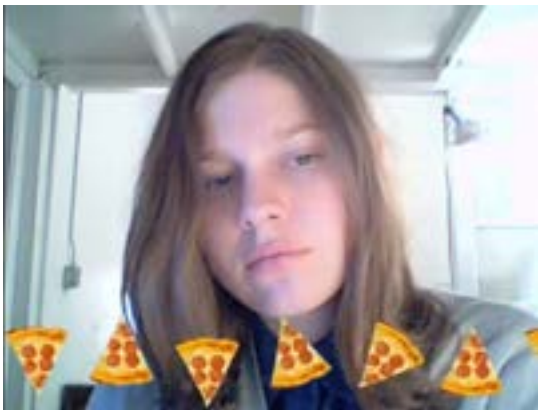
Employing similar strategies, video and performance artist Petra Cortright systematically inhabits tools and ambiguous media territories through approaches as varied as enacting the role of a YouTube star and playing with default equipment settings. Cortright employs tools as playful collaborators. An early video, *VVEBCAM 2007*, which was originally published on YouTube in 2007 and later on Rhizome.org, frames a view of Cortright in her studio space as seen from her laptop's camera.

She maintains an inscrutable expression while launching a sequence of video borders and effects preloaded on her webcam. Each animated readymade attempts to create some sense of place or environment through the movement of quirky cut-out shapes and cheap special effects. Cortright's engaged, playful use and misuse of democratized tools feels both improvisational and methodical.

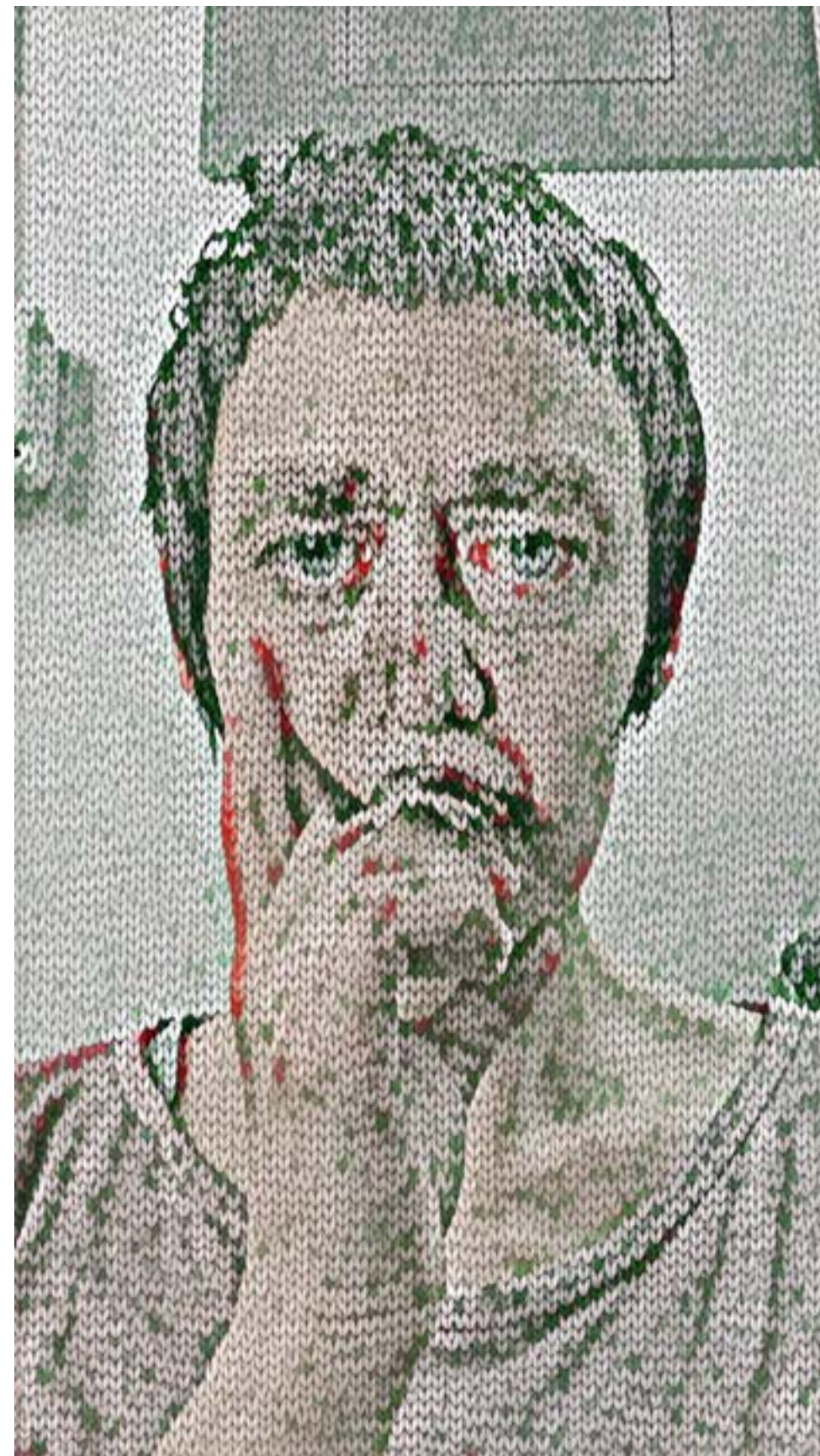
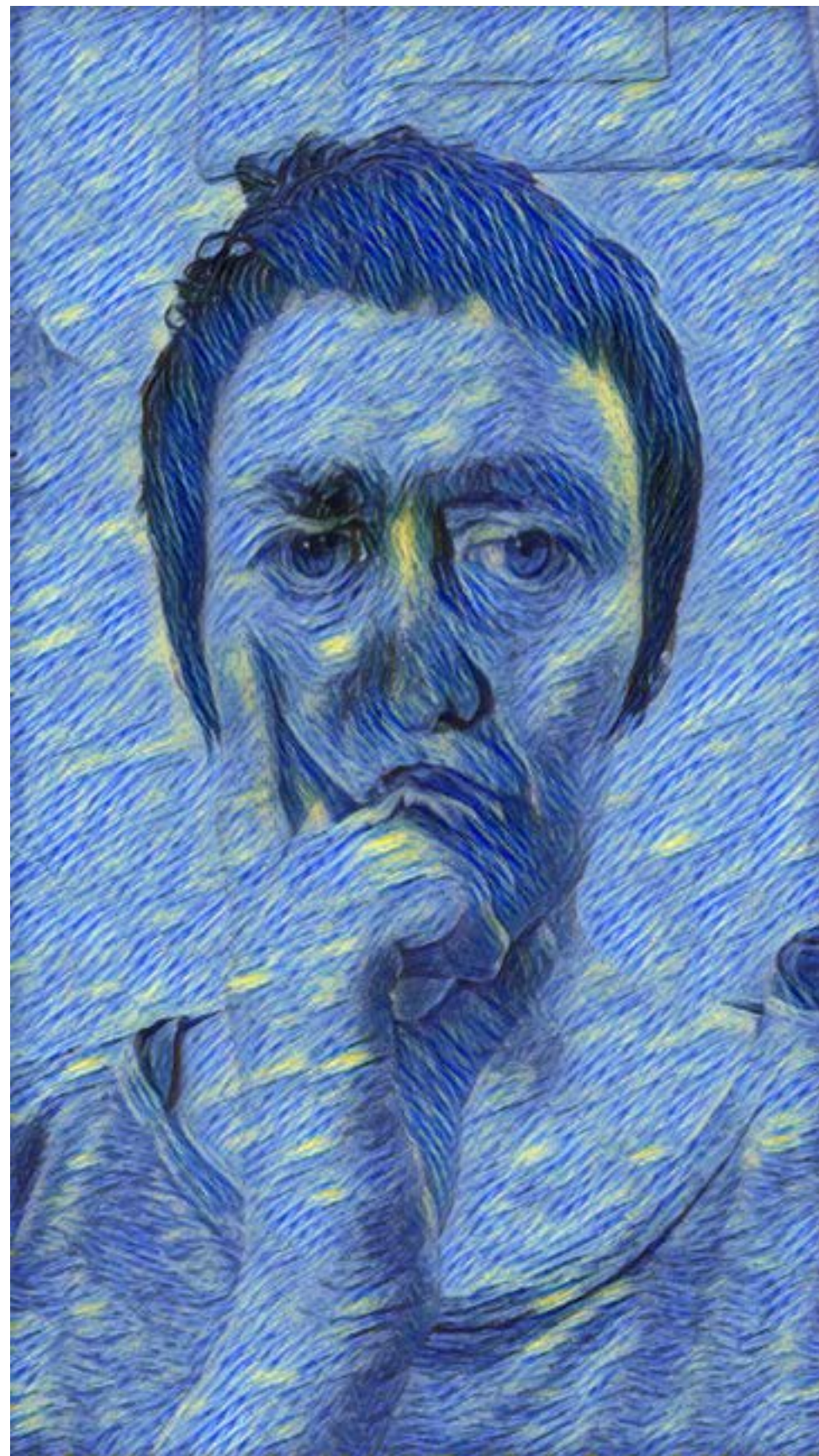
Much like my portrait projects, these works feature the creator not as a personalized, individual subject but rather as a readily accessible proxy employed to illustrate generalized user behavior.

*opposite*  
*VVEBCAM 2007*  
Petra Cortright

*next two spreads*  
Snapchat face-swap portraits  
treated with style transfers















*this spread & next spread*  
Selfie taken with Snapchat, then  
treated with style transfers









## PROJECTS

# Amplify The Mask: Direct Address



Postcards from Google Earth  
Clement Valla, 2010-ongoing.

*"I collect Google Earth images. I discovered strange moments where the illusion of a seamless representation of the Earth's surface seems to break down. At first, I thought they were glitches, or errors in the algorithm, but looking closer I realized the situation was actually more interesting – these images are not glitches. They are the absolute logical result of the system. They are an edge condition – an anomaly within the system, a nonstandard, an outlier, even – but not an error.*

*These jarring moments expose how Google Earth works, focusing our attention on the software. They reveal a new model of representation: not through indexical photographs but through automated data collection from a myriad of different sources constantly updated and endlessly combined to create a seamless illusion; Google Earth is a database disguised as a photographic representation. These uncanny images focus our attention on that process itself, and the network of algorithms, computers, storage systems, automated cameras, maps, pilots, engineers, photographers, surveyors and map-makers that generate them."*<sup>38</sup>

opposite  
Snapchat selfie

<sup>37</sup> Mathies, *The Incredible Underlying Technology of Snapchat's Selfie Lenses.*

<sup>38</sup> Valla, *Postcards from Google Earth.*

Snapchat is a messaging application that allows users to make and multimedia messages consisting of a photo or short video, which can be edited to include lenses and effects, text captions, and drawings.

Using computer vision, Snapchat uses "pixel data from a camera to identify objects and interpret 3D space." The Viola-Jones Algorithm, which uses software to run repeated scans on an image, looking for a specific pattern of contrast. If the algorithm detects a certain arrangement of contrasted areas, the program registers a face. Next, the software needs to place facial features onto the face area using an "active shape model" which is a statistical model of a face shape that's been trained by people manually marking the borders of facial features on hundreds or thousands of sample images.

The algorithm aligns an average face map with the face shape detected by the camera, scaling it and rotating it based on where the camera detects the face location. Because the match is not perfect, the algorithm analyses the contours of your face, looking for areas of contrast to adjust and refine the alignment. The match points are used to create a mesh, a mask that can move, rotate and scale in along with your face, frame by frame, as video data is received. From there, the program can deform the mesh to change your face shape, change colors of different parts of the face, add accessories at the periphery of the mesh, and trigger animations to specific movements in the mesh, like opening your mouth or moving your eyebrows.

Although the technology needed to accomplish the real-time facial recognition, mesh creation and feature application was patented in 2001, only recently has the processing power of mobile devices been strong enough to run the application.<sup>37</sup>

The application is also known for the temporal nature of its messages, which disappear after one or two viewings. The sender is also notified if the recipient takes a screenshot of the message.

By focusing on the grotesque aspects of Snapchat's facial recognition and projection-mapping softwares, I reveal aspects of the digital tool and its human collaborator.

Through this project, I take aim at the duck-faced selfie. I pit my images against those crafted in the name of preening and display. Gestures learned from software combine with a kind of filter-based, role-play roulette to normalize the strange and allow the user to inhabit a set of visualized fictional exaggerations. Our softwares learn from our data and teach us new behaviors.

Working against the temporal nature of the tool, I archive each image and video I make, saving them to my "Memories" and later downloading them to my "Camera Roll". These speculative billboards – which I hope to make real – reflect on the nature of intimacy, attractiveness, and relationship.





*this spread*  
billboard mockup created from  
a selfie made with Snapchat

*next spread*  
billboard mockup created from  
a selfie made with Snapchat

billboard text is a quote from  
2015 song *The Hills* by *The Weeknd*:

*Your man on the road, he doin' promo*  
*You said, 'Keep our business on the low-low'*  
*I'm just tryna get you out the friend zone*  
*Cause you look even better than the photos...*



You look  
even better  
than the  
photos.



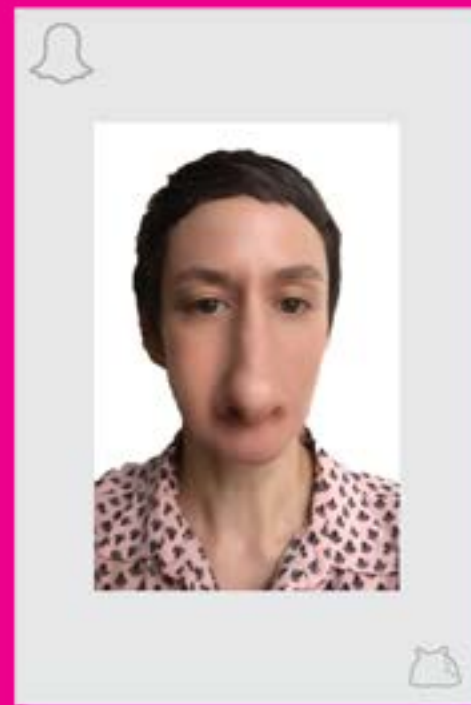




billboard mockup created from  
a Snapchat selfie made with  
a lens which applies a beard,  
mustache and square jawline  
to the user's face

the billboard text is a quote from  
2015 song *The Hills* by *The Weeknd*  
(continued from previous billboard):

*I'ma let you know and keep it simple  
Tryna keep it up don't seem so simple  
I just fucked two bitches 'fore I saw you  
And you gon' have to do it at my tempo...*



## PROJECTS

### Character Study: Snapchat Taxonomies

Character Study is an ongoing set of trading cards investigating character and feature types in Snapchat filters. Lenses appear and vanish daily. Advertisements and free “fun” filters play on our human fascination with the grotesque alongside our protective instincts and morbid curiosities. Snapchat seems to prioritize visual hyperbole and grotesquerie; the cute, the sexy, and the deformed.

The Viola-Jones facial-recognition algorithm works beautifully for straight-on views of a face, but not for those positioned at extreme angles to the frame. In this project, I hover at the edge of the tool’s capabilities. Like a live-action Mrs. Potato Head, I try on animals, genders, deformations, fur, and noses; I then rotate my head to find the angle at which the algorithm loses its efficacy.<sup>39</sup>



*Below is a categorical list of Snapchat lenses I explored, with occasional commentary.*

Unappealing Foods

[ex. My head becomes a tomato, and when I open my mouth, out pours a mess of tomato juice and seeds. What exactly is an unappealing food? Food can only become a plaything when your relationship with it is ruled by pleasure and excess.]

Appealing Foods

Alien Forms & Grotesque Figures, including Distortion, Deformity, Exaggeration, and Compression [as middle- and upper-class Americans with leisure time and short attention spans, we can afford to be curious about and amused by bizarre life forms and amusingly warped versions of ourselves]

Text, Signage, and Other Marks

[this subcategory of images is typically the result of an image that has been mislabeled as a face and is therefore available as an option with which to face swap]

Animals

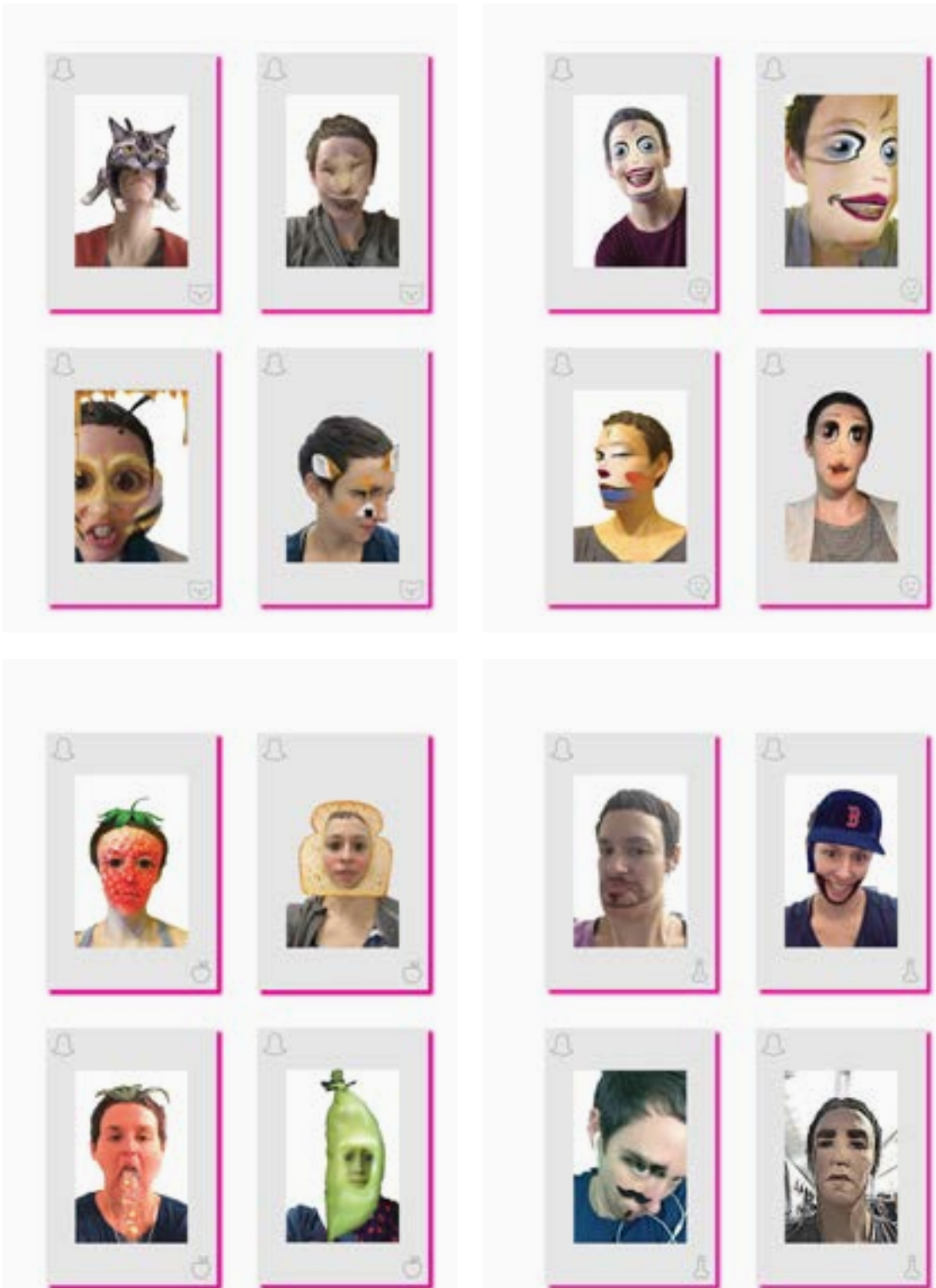
Gender-Specific

[including facial hair, chiseled facial features, and makeup including lipstick, exaggerated eyes, and eyelashes]

Historical Figures, including Art History, Painting, Sculpture

Face Swap

[including swaps with emoji, Bitmoji, objects, and other humans]



*Character Study Trading Cards,  
(clockwise from top left) animal,  
cartoon, masculine, and food editions*



Screenshot from a sponsored  
Snapchat lens advertising  
*Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*

The premise of this advertisement  
is a game, which prompts the  
user to catch grenades in his or  
her mouth to win points.

## PROJECTS

### Corporation Fantasy

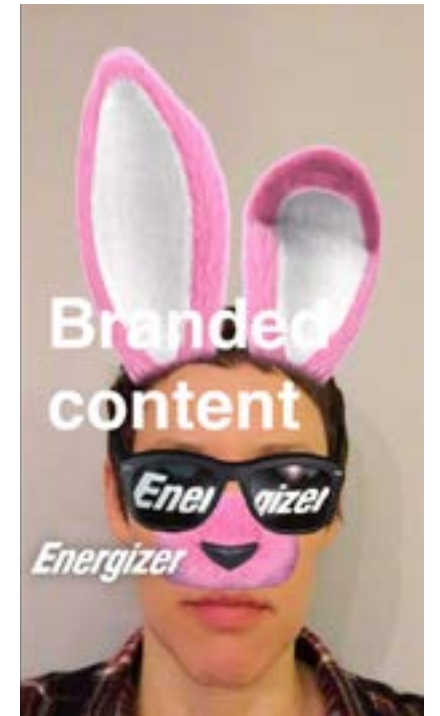
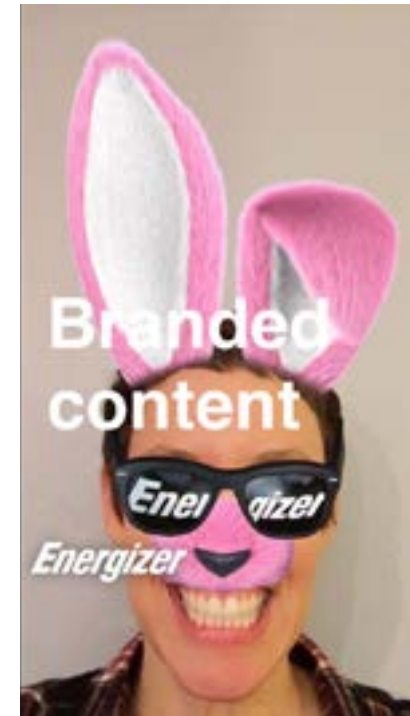
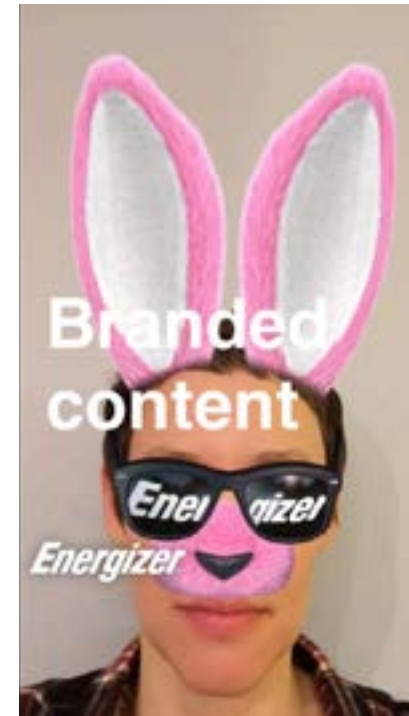
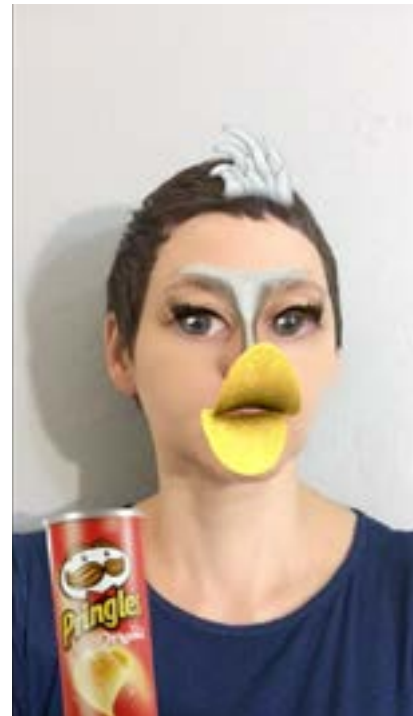
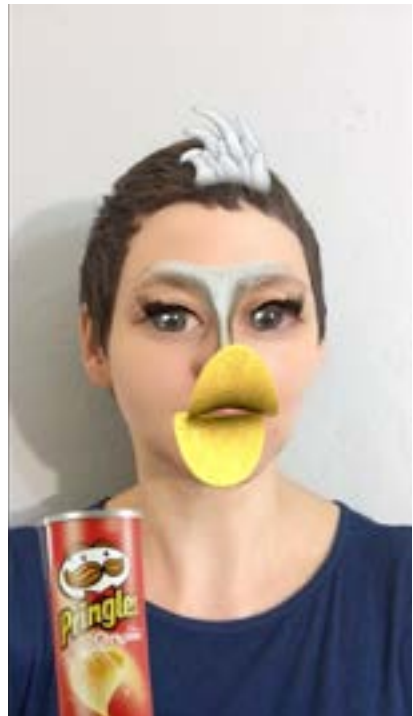
This series of short videos explores the phenomenon of inhabiting advertising. Here, Snapchat functions as a case study of branded content's pervasive infiltration of social environments and interactions.

My face is rounded and my head topped with a white tuft of feathers. My beak is yellow and curvy. "I am a chicken, and my beak is made out of Pringles® ...why am I a chicken?" I ask, addressing the camera directly.

In each vignette, I bear deadpan witness to the graphic environments of sponsored Snapchat filters. Companies and franchises including Call of Duty [Activision], Red Bull, Morton Salt, and Pringles [Kellogg's] pay for the development and distribution of these customized, temporary virtual environments. These environments take the form of games, characters, activities, and transformations. Through my refusal of participation, actively hyperbolized acts of participation, and direct inquiry or narration,

I explore the nature of these sponsored scenes. I attempt to reason with them. I remind myself of what they are and what they ask of their users. These filters ask us, as consumers, to play unpaid, starring roles in corporate, commercial messages. The expectation is that we will be flattered and honored to accept the role.





Screenshots from sponsored  
Snapchat lenses for *Sprint*,  
*Red Bull*, *Energizer*, and *Pringles*



***It's not like a pocket rectangle just got my  
friend to roll by in a computer with wheels!***

***– Chris Novello***







*opposite*  
Snapchat selfie taken with the face-  
swap lens & signage typography

40 Venturi,  
*Complexity and Contradiction*.

## INTRODUCTION

# Meaning Instruments: A Study of Representation

*By embracing contradiction as well as complexity, I aim for vitality as well as validity...I am for messy vitality over obvious unity... I am for richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning; for the implicit function as well as the explicit function. I prefer 'both-and' to 'either-or,' black and white, and sometimes gray to black or white. A valid architecture evokes many levels of meaning and combinations of focus; its space and its elements become readable and workable in several ways at once.*

– Robert Venturi, *Nonstraightforward Architecture: A Gentle Manifesto*, the introductory essay to his 1977 book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.<sup>40</sup>

The longer we live with a technology, the less aware of it we are. We develop an intimacy with our tools, and their presence is gradually integrated into our experience. We begin to see tools, and the representations they create, as part of our environment rather than as distinct technologies. Architecture, analog technologies, and—in our part of the world—the Internet, have merged with the constructed environment. Through their widespread integration, these technologies have become largely invisible to us.

Social media and augmented reality (AR), however, are especially visible right now, producing a hyperawareness of them as technologies. This awareness is heightened because the phenomena these media produce, facilitate, and create are so visual and novel, generating a perceived reality that is altered in fundamental and surprising ways. The question, though, is: are these technologies adept at creating novel experiences, or are they merely creating novel images? What happens when we mistake the latter for the former?

My zones of inquiry with respect to representation include found, generated, and hybrid archives related to current and emerging technologies. I scrutinize image material to find meaning and patterns, and I project speculative narratives. The projects that follow simultaneously investigate the capabilities of the tools themselves and the interactions between tools and users.

Through creation, organization, and framing of these archives, I use both sequencing and interference to demonstrate how present-day tools and technologies shape our understanding of representation and, consequently, reality. My projects demonstrate emerging ways of generating form imbued with a heightened awareness of the tools themselves that encompasses both their capabilities and their limitations. As an organizer and archivist, I approach this process with reverence, curiosity, and rigor.

In the context of social media—in the constructed space of tools and technology—images serve as primary evidence of experience. What does it mean, then, to document experiences taking place within image-altering interfaces and projected realities? In what ways do these new spaces impact the nature of experience, relationship, and our expectations of reality?

*I like elements which are hybrid rather than 'pure,' compromising rather than 'clean,' distorted rather than 'straightforward,' ambiguous rather than 'articulated,' perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as 'interesting,' conventional rather than 'designed,' accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity. I include the non sequitur and proclaim the duality.*

— Robert Venturi <sup>41</sup>





***I'm a human before I'm an employee.***  
***– Chris Novello***

Chris Novello is a human, an artist, a programmer, and an interface. He teaches Programming & Computer Utopias in the Graphic Design Department, and Introduction to Computation in the Department of Foundation & Experimental Studies at the Rhode Island School of Design.

The games he has played to render himself visible to institutions include completion of an undergraduate degree from the Modern Culture & Media Department, and an MFA in Digital Language Arts, both from Brown University in Providence, RI.

**LL** = Llewellyn Hensley  
**CN** = Chris Novello

screenshot from Chris Novello's web-site, which features background video, and interactive trading card screens for each project, *chrisnovello.com*.

INTERVIEW

Chris Novello

**LL** Would you introduce yourself?

**CN** Sure. My name is Chris.

**LL** How would you introduce yourself? Like as an artist and programmer?

**CN** No. Let me describe how I relate to this, maybe everybody relates to this, right? I don't like boxes.

**LL** How about: Human Chris Novello?

**CN** Yeah, that's good. So yeah, right, exactly, because those titles are just interfaces to resources, right? Those are the games you have to play to render yourself visible to institutions

or to existing value systems, right?

**LL** Yes.

**CN** There are constraints I have to operate in, and I can deal with that sometimes but... I'm a thinker. I make and I think.

**LL** Yeah, I guess what I'm saying is I want to introduce you in a way that you wouldn't roll your eyes when you read later.

**CN** Not going to work. I currently teach at RISD. I don't know, that probably makes sense in the context of what you're doing.

**LL** Okay, so what's the urgency behind the courses you offer and the way that you teach? That is so central in my mind to who you are and how you talk about ideas. It's like you opened a door in the air right here and revealed that behind the air there was a whole, like, network system matrix and that it's all right there.

**CN** How could you not have urgency? is my feeling.

**LL** Yeah.

**CN** It's a message to RISD in general. It's like, "Don't you want to kick-start the Renaissance? Don't you want to be that person? Do you really want to just get a job doing what somebody did a hundred years ago? Is that what you're here for?" I teach in a department and university that maybe don't exist, but, isn't everyone here to sculpt history? Isn't that what people are here for? Because that's the bar, that's the starting point for me. Not to say you're going to accomplish that necessarily, but there's an enamorment with history. We study what people have done before us. So my question is, "Aren't you trying to do something at that register?"

I like to ask the question: Are Mark Zuckerberg and Evan Spiegel and Kevin Systrom the only living artists? Because they seem to be humans whose hands are restructuring how humans relate to the image, to media. And in my brain that used to be the work of artists.

Isn't it obvious that computation is the medium of this century? And how could you not be excited about that? I don't know, I'm just excited by that, usually. Also, I grew up on computers; computers raised me in a lot of ways, like from video game consoles to the web in the 90s.

I'm hypermedia-A.D.D. Everyone says that's bad, but what if it's good? What if I just do that ten times as hard, publicly and unapologetically?



screenshots from the syllabus for Novello's course Computer Utopias in the Department of Graphic Design at RISD.

In middle school, I learned about illiteracy. I remember thinking, “Gosh, how are there people who aren’t able to read?” Can people not recognize that that’s the world we live in right now? That everyone is illiterate and that the handful of people who have literacy over the media of our century are restructuring society, and doing it at dog-whistle frequencies, and using intellectual appliances like cars or video or photos when those things don’t exist anymore? If you take that perspective, you can understand that there are wholly other ways of relating to those historical cultural momentums.

Meanwhile the people who are in the communities of art and design seem to be dropping the ball, by my estimation. So far as RISD doesn’t feel like it’s a flower blooming with this as electricity; it doesn’t seem to be tuned to this wavelength I’m talking about. But even the people who do call themselves designers and who are working with computation seem to be very fucking sleepy to me, right?

Disappointing. They’re dropping the ball. I don’t think the profession of design has reckoned with computation in a way that extends beyond getting a job. Maybe I’m a child, but I’m a human before I’m an employee. I’m a humanist before I’m an employee, and I’m interested in generous abstractions for composing computer media; ways of making computer media that aren’t code. I think humans could develop that just like they went from the addition sign to the multiplication sign.

Where is that going to happen? Because it doesn’t look like it’s going be like the first priority for Facebook. Shouldn’t it be a place like RISD? Shouldn’t there be a Computation Department? ...or a place to invest in? Because I don’t think teaching everyone the code is the answer. I think that’s a brittle instrument for composing computer media.

It’s going to take a while, and in the meantime empires will exponentially rise. Companies will privatize or centralize and control the fruit of computation, because everyone else is illiterate...and, just, like, how boring?! How boring that Uber is what the pinnacle of computation is!

The bar is just very low for a lot of work that gets made. It’s not even that I dislike it. There are people who come to speak at RISD, and I like their work, but I’m scared that it’s the bar. I’m scared that it’s what people think computation is about. I’m scared for the discourse or the lack thereof, and I’m scared for the sort of dream-bigger ambition and its potential impact on humanity.

Like, where is David Lynch for computation, right? Where is existential terror and dread from computation? There’s plenty of existential dread and terror from computation, it’s just accidentally falling out of product design.

**LL** Right. It’s not like an auteur’s hand. It’s a by-product of what’s being made with data and systems.

**CN** Correct, right. What would hand painting alienation and other kinds of compelling psycho-emotional spaces look like with systems and simulations media? What new frontiers of psycho-emotional possibility does computation have to offer? The urgency to me is like that.

**LL** Today’s class conversation to me is a great indicator of the lack of criticality around this conversation. Even a bunch of people in a class called Computer Utopias forget that our devices do things that we don’t want them to do because we like them so much.

**CN** These are just ideas, and I am kind of made of their energy, but, like, there are lessons, you know? There are things I’m saying that oppose a value system that I don’t always embody with my life energy.



screenshots from the syllabus for Novello's Programming Workshop in the Department of Graphic Design at RISD.

**CN** Why do people not do what they say, right? I still work in the media of civilization past, right? I am enamored with materiality and the traditions and the dignity that a place like RISD gives certain traditions, and I wish everyone had the opportunity, the agency, to choose if they wanted to invest in something like that.

I think there should be that kind of dignity given to computation because there isn’t, and the people that are addressing it are boring, or doing boring things with it.

It’s my medium, or it’s my parents, or I’m in some symbiosis with it; I wish there was something more interesting happening with it than the things that are. Like algorithmic aesthetics. Those are fine – they are good practices – but it’s not the top of my computation mountain. There’s something else, right? What is Alan Kay doing? And what if more people were doing that? And what if those people were also culturally electric? For a medium that is everywhere, ubiquitous, and quick, how is there not more investment in those directions if we’re going to let this totalize our species – and our planet – which we seem to have done? I don’t know if we can roll that back.

I just think, “Wow, what a drag that the potential of this thing is structured by nothing but companies and exponential growth!” Who even gets to go work at Facebook? Who gets to start a Facebook? Where is democracy ever going to come in from this? Teach everyone to code? Okay. I think we will teach everyone to code. It’s not like a pocket rectangle just got my friend to roll by in a computer with wheels! At least they call those cars. Adorable.

**LL** We were talking earlier about postmodernism. I don’t think it makes any sense to single-mindedly follow one logic. You’re allowed to be in love with materiality. I don’t see that and a love of computation disagreeing with each other.

**CN** I sound like I’m trying to convince other people. I’m not. I’m just talking to myself. Shadowboxing something like a phantom set of other people, right?

People who are enamored with materiality in a way that keeps them from taking on this medium, or people who participate in value systems that have been around for awhile that are dissonant with value systems that are growing out of how people use and relate to computation.

**LL** Something you said to me was that part of what you do as a teacher is take students seriously. I see you taking us seriously and honoring the questions that we’re asking, and I guess I am curious if part of what you’re teaching is a way to engage with these questions or to enact a set of processes. You say you’re not trying to convince anybody, but you know that you do convince us, right?

**CN** Yeah. I am convincing people, I think. It scares me a little bit because I’m like, “You know I’m making this up, right?”

**LL** Yes, we do, but we still believe you. We know it’s true.

**CN** Chaos magic, right? I mean, I’m rhetorically persuasive. I work through passion and thinking. There are a lot of other people that I stitch and weave together, and occasionally I synthesize something that feels closer to my own.

**LL** I promise you that we can all say that. I’m not asking how you do it, but I’m asking you what you think is important to fostering active criticality around media we don’t understand?

**CN** I want to alienate people from their practices, and, in a university context, from their departments. I want to make them feel existential dread about whatever their department name is and their identity under it, right? And I want to do that because if they come back to it, now we’re talking, right?





*super mario spacetime organ*  
(*illucia & soundplane*), a critical  
inquiry into *Super Mario Brothers*.  
Chris Novello, 2013

**LL** In terms of commitment. In order to thoroughly understand the discipline we are committing to?

**CN** If you can confront what’s happening in your civilization with this other electric form and then return, renewed, to whatever passion you have, then thank God for you. Thank God for you contributing to human knowledge and society in whatever space you’re in because it’s that important to you. The other thing is I tend to believe is that if you graft computation thinking onto any existing discourse, you get a superpower.

**LL** I think there’s something there.

**CN** I put my money where my mouth is: I’m melting plastic, I’m putting things on paper, do you know what I mean?

**LL** Yeah. You’re making physical things from a place of integration with computation.

**CN** I’m trying to cross-pollinate. I want people to see inside the meat factory, because if you’re going to eat animals, I slightly prefer the person that can look the animal in the eye and cut its head off to the person that just looks at a picture on a box and pretends that there’s not, like, industrial torture, right? So look at the meat grinder and the consequences; look at what you’re installing in society by being illiterate and letting somebody else make these decisions for you. I can see around the bend a lot of potential hazards that will come from the kinds of broken mental models everyone seems to have about computation and technology. Machine learning is a popular one in the air right now; the way people talk about so called “AI” or how people relate to data.

This is kind of the reason I love saying that a video is not a video, or your face is not your face: to just really triple underscore how these words are insufficient vocabulary for describing the phenomena of the early 21st century. And that is going to cause a lot of problems for a lot of people.

**LL** What ideas are you giving form to and what do they look like?

**CN** Well, I haven’t really published much in two years. I’ve made oceans, and there’s a whole section of it that will never get published because other companies have launched things that are superior. I was trying as a single person to raise Snapchat, and so that is weird. I was trying to make a way that anyone could make a game in ten seconds on a phone, and the hope was that you could accelerate the composition of computer media to a conversational pace, and do it by basically making templates, something in the spirit of almost a HyperCard, where it’s like clipart for behavior.

**LL** Like Mario Maker?

**CN** Totally, right, but even Mario Maker is too slow and it doesn’t have social and...that’s a crazy sentence...but [the makers of that program] didn’t understand how and why people share media. I was trying to make a product; a way to disseminate the idea of more people composing systems, or a statement-making around systems using the existing vernacular of games, because I think language usually works through people. Conversation moves fast because we’re referencing words that we share, and every now and then we slip some new thing in, and the whole arrangement creates novelty and meaning.



*EAT CELEBRITY MEAT*  
*BiteLabs* grows meat from celebrity  
tissue samples and uses it to make  
artisanal salami, Chris Novello with  
Hello Velocity.

**CN** Then the new things get context through that. I was thinking about a publishing system for small programming templates, like disposable programming languages; programming languages not in the sense of code, but in the sense of touchable ways to create interactive systems. Creating a little game and filling it with graphics and sound from your everyday life to bring more culture into games. To me, games are just computer programs with a shared pop vernacular. That project will never come to pass. I made prototypes. There was a time when I had a thing in my hand that let me hold a record button and drag a little 2D character on a screen, and the character would move in all the places I did, and then like a week ago, Snapchat did that but with 3D surface recognition, which is something that was in my brain. In this poverty thinking, “I can’t do that,” I thought, “I can’t do surface recognition by myself.”

I’ve had this two-year period of not publishing anything and then, actually, that year became Computer Utopias. I thought I was making a way for people to make games, but instead I was studying the smartphone and programming languages in a way that became a class.

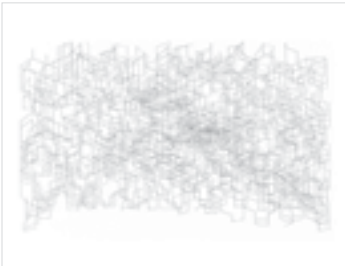
**LL** It’s a really good class. So, you were making something that was different than what you thought.

**CN** Yeah, exactly. Correct, right. All this is about a world of making meaning or being excited about a thing. The bottom can fall out from under that for me because I’m a disassembly gremlin. I’m constantly taking everything apart. I’m pretty good historically at working with an existing institution because I come to be very frustrated with it, and I want to see it be better. If there’s an institution I believe in, it usually means I’m also very critical of it. I’m like that right now with RISD.

It always has to do with believing in some golden spirit of the thing, wanting to see it actualized, and feeling like there’s a disconnect, a dissonance, or a disjoint between the internal mental model of what the institution is and its potential. I find that productive. If there’s an institution that’s worth giving that life energy to, it’s a very productive cycle for me. If the thing is strong enough to not get totally dismantled by me, then there’s a virtuous relationship. I can exist, it can exist, things are great.

When I’ve tried to, like, start things from the ground up with myself or other people, products for example, the disassembly gremlin energy gets in the way. I take it apart before it’s ready. For a while I was watching a lot of people make work about Google, and I thought, “What if they were competing with Google?”

I came to believe that a company might be one of the most effective instruments for cultural change. I was seeing companies do it, seeing them affect how humans relate to images and computation. Then also I asked, “What’s the answer to this problem of needing a good community of people to work with?” And then realizing “Oh, a company or in an institution is an instrument for that.” “How do you sustain yourself, or persist?” And the answer is, “Well, a company sustains itself because it makes money.” This is when I consumed all the Silicon Valley information, but I’m really not on that wavelength. So, I just digested it and, anyway, somewhere in there I came to believe that a network is a thing you might want to play with as a medium. Because a network is only valuable if people are using it, that means you can’t do disassembly gremlin on it. The object isn’t something that you can simulate in your mind.



*Drawings made by Zelda Enemies,  
Chris Novello*

**LL** I found that in working alone as an artist, I wasn't making very much, but that I feel like I've gained accountability working in a studio. I think it's about being in a place where there's a commitment to spending a certain amount of life energy; making something good whether or not it makes you money or leads to anything. I'm nourished by other people doing the same thing. We don't need to be working on the same project. I think it's about being in a space where other people have decided to give themselves to a process. One of my biggest concerns is about sustaining community outside of the institution. Don't you think that's why you thrive in this environment?

**CN** Yeah. I gravitate around the community that David [Kim] has nurtured in Co-Works. People don't really understand or recognize a single person's contribution [to placemaking]. You can look and just think he's, like, a really effective manager, but there's something else. He's like a community steward. I think he's turned RISD into something really important for a lot of people, in a way that doesn't immediately fall out of his job title. I don't know what it takes to get him recognition for that.

It's about space and people. I'm very inspired by RISD's students. I defected from Brown to RISD. RISD work ethic really exceeds Brown work ethic. Brown CS (Computer Science) work ethic is approximate, but RISD work ethic is something special. RISD is basically in a poverty when it comes to computation and certain kinds of critical thinking, like discourse about justice. The people here don't have the resources yet to really engage seriously, whereas Brown is a place where, if you're drawn to that, it's in the air.

**LL** Don't you think that collaboration could be better between the two schools?

**CN** Brown-RISD? Yeah, absolutely. I also want to say, "Good luck!" because, like, you could say everything you're saying [about Brown and RISD] to RISD departments first. RISD departments are still siloed in a way. I can admire certain aspects of that and appreciate why it's valuable, but there also needs to be space for spontaneous collaboration. A lot of the talk about interdisciplinarity is so stilted in general. Brown always put me off with, like, "interdisciplinary centers". It's like, the sound of the rain needs no translation, or something. Just create the space, and let it happen! Don't, like, make kitty kiss doggy or whatever, like, it is what it is, right? What if dance were grafted onto music? Not because I have any idea what that means, but just because. And, yeah, okay, there's excitement there.

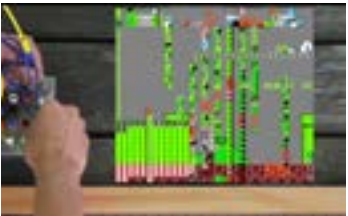
**LL** Well, something about the existing structure doesn't work.

**CN** The academic rhetorics around interdisciplinarity are really cubicle-core, right? Like "Hawaiian-shirt Mondays."

**LL** Right. Get a group of people that are already excited to make something together; build off of that!

**CN** Yeah, right, true. Sure.

**LL** For example, there's a group of RISD undergraduate students called the FRI-ENDS COLLECTIVE, that said, "There's no space for us to do our weird shit, so we're going to rent a space." That's fine and awesome, and I really like a lot of those people, but it's insane that there can't be a space for that to happen in a tiny school of 2500 people that are all weirdos. Space to do weird shit should be par for the course.



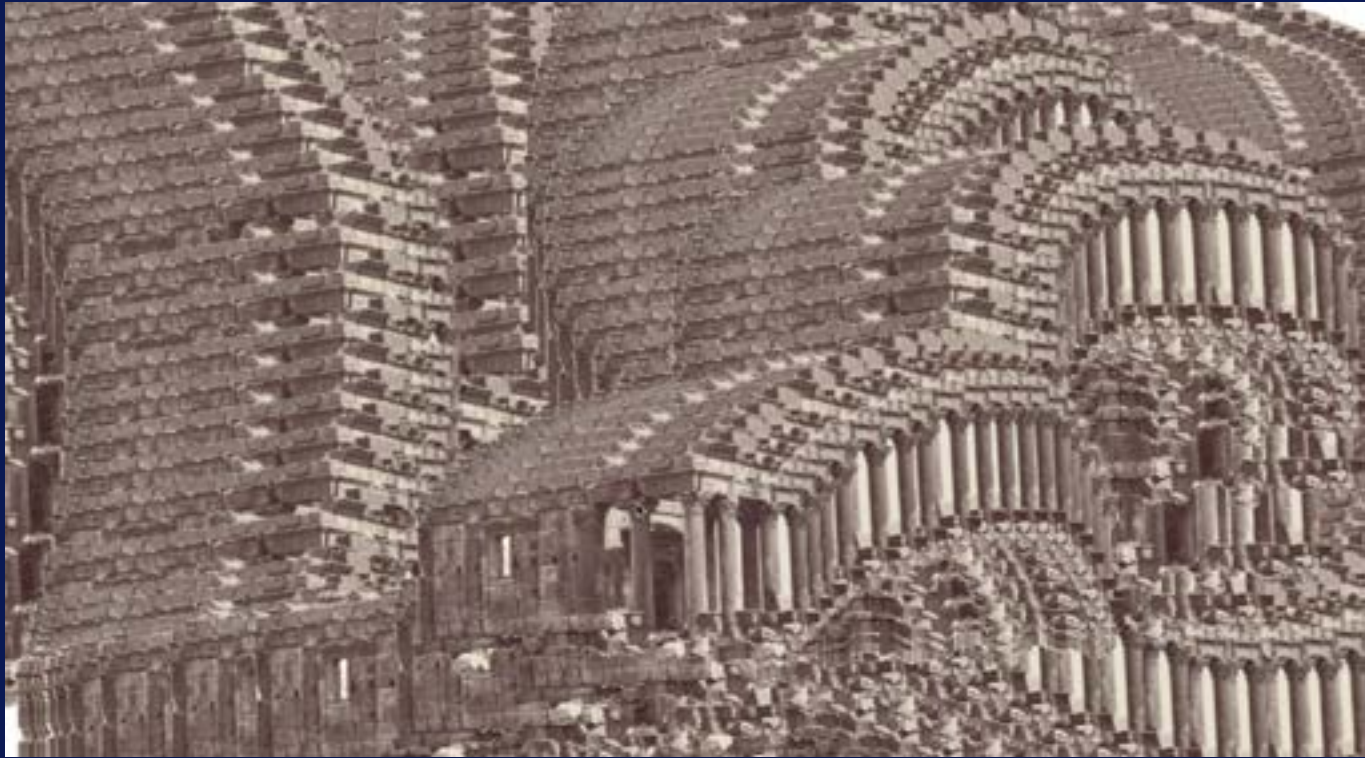
*super mario spacetime organ  
(illucia & soundplane), a critical  
inquiry into Super Mario Brothers.  
Chris Novello, 2013*

**CN** As a teacher in an institution like RISD, where students graduate every year, the lack of institutional knowledge can be extremely valuable. The freshness of ideas and new perspective is something very potent. I think certain aspects of academia could draw that out for a teacher in a way that might be valuable.

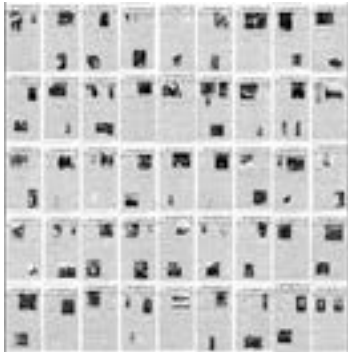
**LL** I do think that RISD is a special place. I was talking to somebody about this. I mean, I'm not going to put this in my fucking book, but I was talking with one of the graduate program directors about teaching here and then teaching at the huge public university where he and I both went to school. At a big public school, you'll have—if you're lucky—a handful of kids that are really tuned in and really excited to do the work. In RISD classes, it's really the standard to have that intense work ethic. There are very few places on the planet where you can find that kind of commitment to the work. I think that's part of why it feels good to be here, and you're not a weirdo if you care a lot.

**CN** Right. Yeah, I mean obviously I'm drawn to something about this place, and I think that's a big part of it.





## World Heritage Browser Brush



A sketch for a potential project, World Heritage Browser Brush illustrates world heritage sites impacted by terrorism.

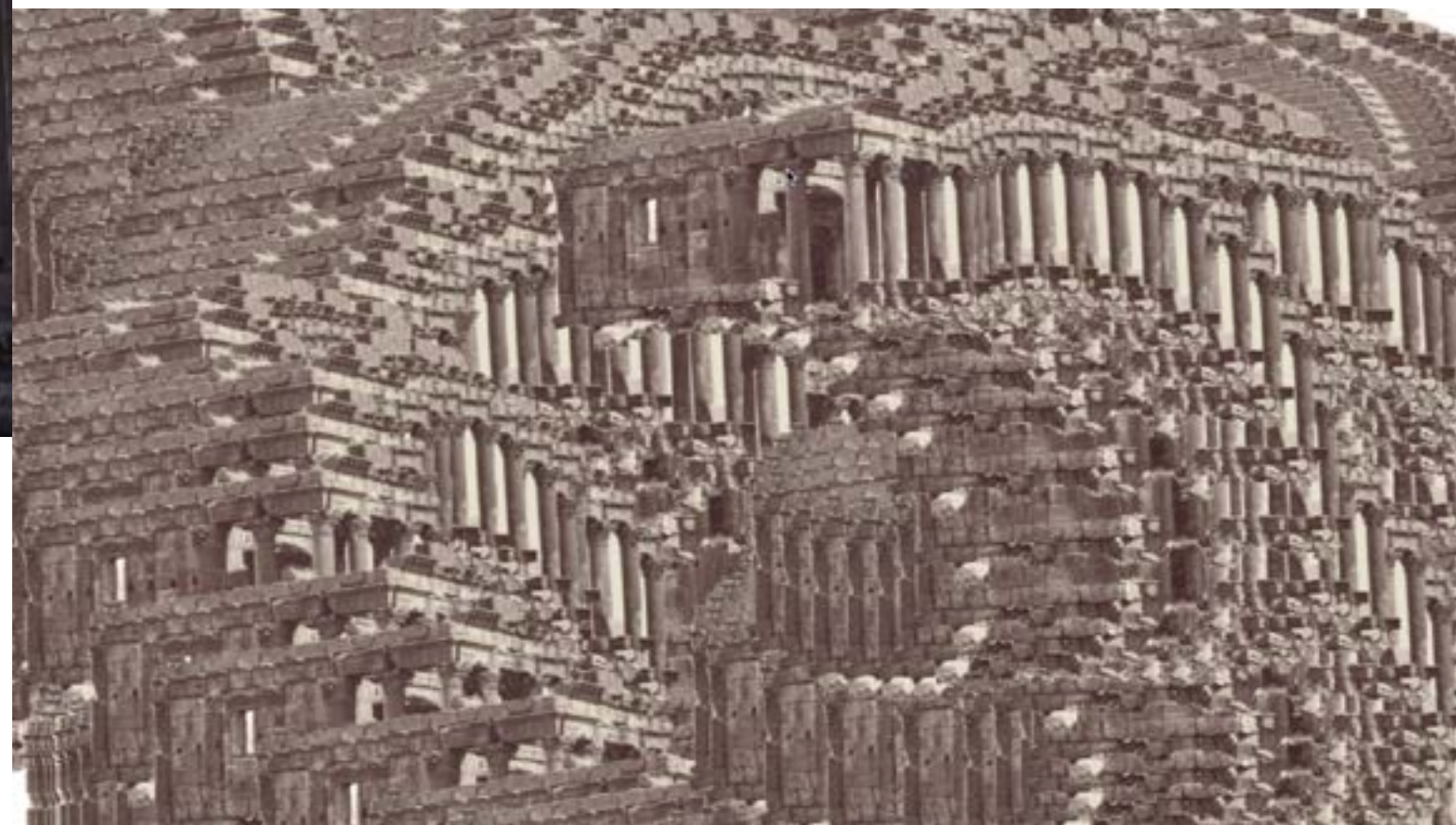
As the user navigates with the cursor on an iPad or other display, a browser window is filled with a stacked, repeating image of a cultural heritage site damaged or destroyed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The enclosed sketch of the project illustrates sites from Palmyra in Syria, including the Arab Citadel (an ancient arch) and the Temple of Baalshamin.



*from top*  
*The News is Breaking*  
*(Every New York Times*  
*front page since 1852.)*  
Josh Begley, 2017

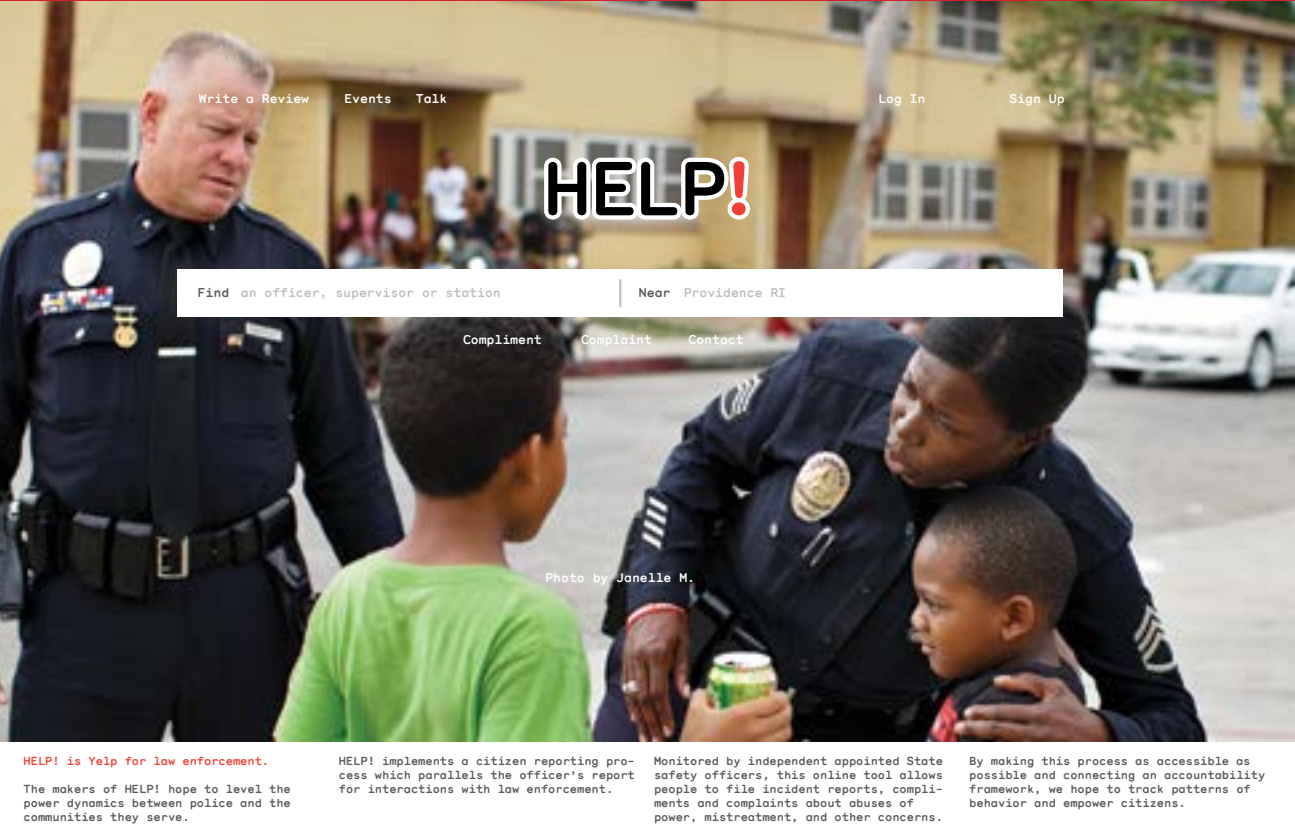
*Best of Luck with the Wall*  
Josh Begley and Laura Poitras, 2016

*opposite*  
screenshot from a sketch for  
*World Heritage Browser Brush*



screenshots from a sketch for  
*World Heritage Browser Brush*





## HELP! Rate the Police



*HELP!* is *Yelp!* for law enforcement.

The makers of *HELP!* hope to level the power dynamics between police and the communities in which they work by implementing a citizen report process which parallels the officer's report for interactions between law enforcement and the populations they serve.



Monitored by independently appointed state safety officers, this online accountability framework would allow people to file incident reports, compliments, and complaints about abuses of power, mistreatment, and other concerns.

The makers of *HELP!* aim to make access to the reporting system as accessible as possible. *HELP!* could help communities track patterns of behavior, find and retrain officers with repeated offenses, and empower the citizenry.

*top*

*Officer Involved*

*below*

*Archives + Absences*

both by Josh Begley

*opposite*

mockup sketch for *HELP!*



## PROJECT

### Facebook Stickers: Playing with Dead Fish

In his presentation *Stop Drawing Dead Fish*, interface designer, computer scientist, and electrical engineer Bret Victor calls closed systems which cannot respond actively to their users in real-time “dead fish.” “Dead fish” are trapped in a mindless spiral, built to be incapable of “behavior.”<sup>42</sup>

*People are alive – they behave and respond. Creations within the computer can also live, behave, and respond... if they are allowed to. The message of this talk is that computer-based art tools should embrace both forms of life – artists behaving through real-time performance, and art behaving through real-time simulation. Everything we draw should be alive by default.*<sup>43</sup>

In other words, “dead fish” are fine so long as you’re aware you’re making them. Facebook stickers, and many aspects of Facebook’s social applications, are perfect examples. Flat, irreverent and narrow, their addition adds almost nothing to a photograph. Taken in multiples, they quickly become unruly, inane decorations.

*opposite & next two spreads*  
Selfie adorned with Facebook stickers

<sup>42</sup> Victor, *Stop Playing with Dead Fish*.

<sup>43</sup> Victor.













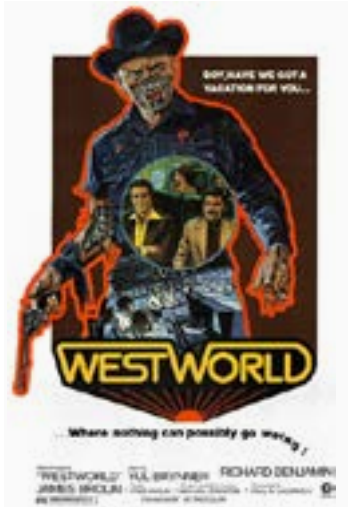
# Augmented Film History

Augmented Film History investigates the live application of Snapchat filters to footage from film history. Stills in this sketch are from Michael Crichton's 1973 film *Westworld*, an American science fiction Western thriller about amusement park androids that malfunction and begin killing visitors.

It stars Yul Brynner as an android in a futuristic Western-themed amusement park, and Richard Benjamin and James Brolin as guests of the park. Crichton's first theatrical feature, *Westworld* was also the first feature film to use digital image processing and to pixelate photography to simulate an android's point of view.

Snapchat's facial recognition algorithm is deployed onto the film's characters, resulting in inherently bizarre, confused visual juxtapositions. The project aims to playing with ideas of automated sophistication.

When and how does a toy become a tool, or become a weapon?



from top  
Theatrical release poster for Michael Crichton's 1973 film *Westworld*, designed by Neal Adams

Detail of android outlaw character in *Westworld* played by Yul Brynner

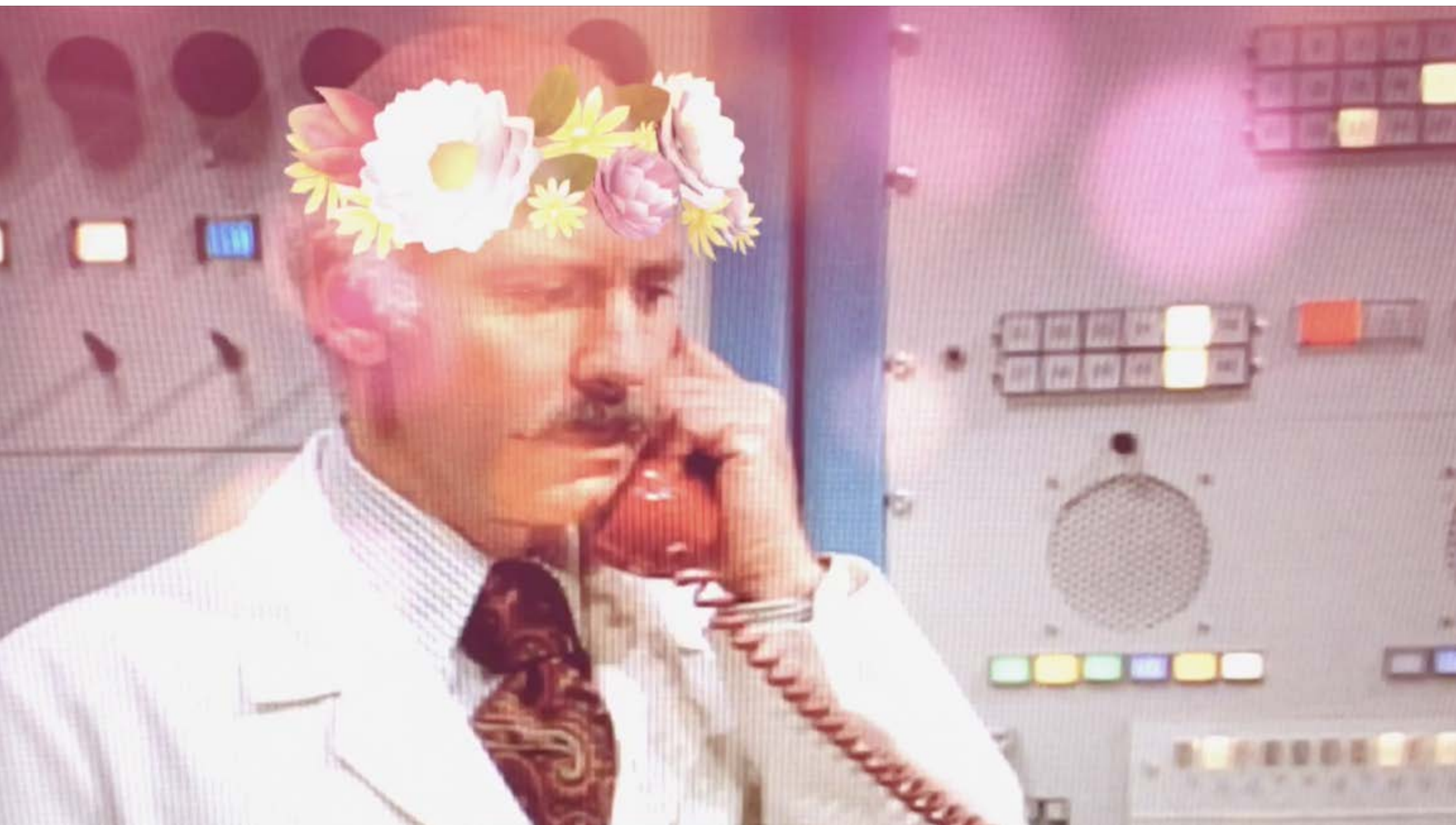
Still image from the android repair facility in *Westworld*.

opposite & next five spreads  
images of *Westworld* altered with various Snapchat lenses





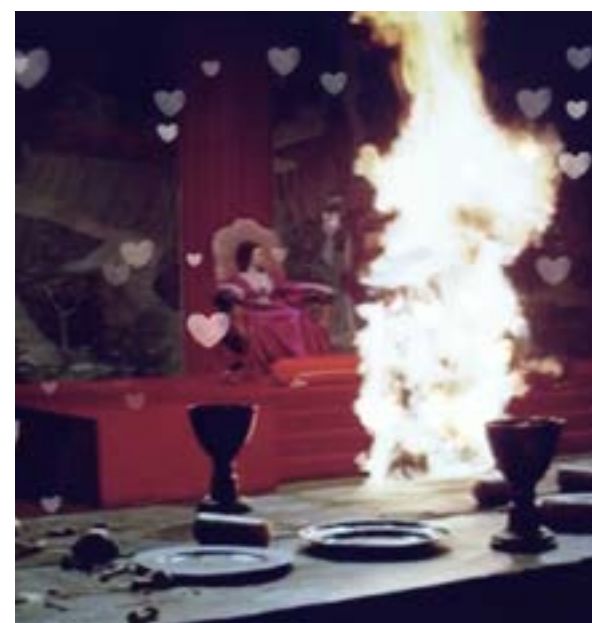




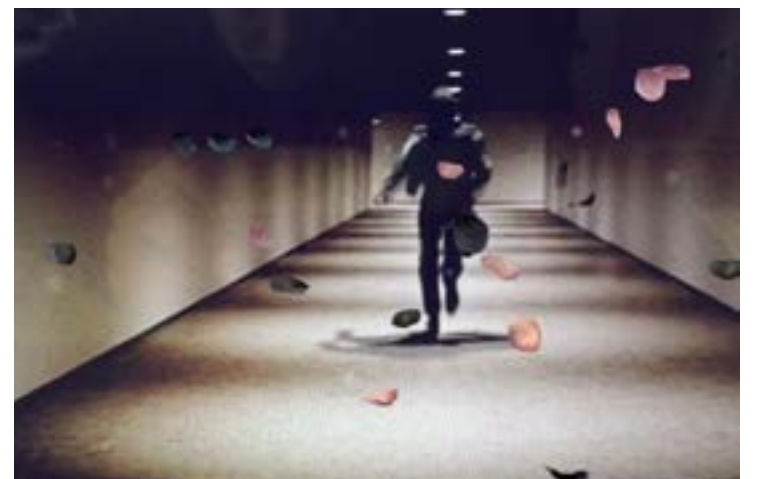
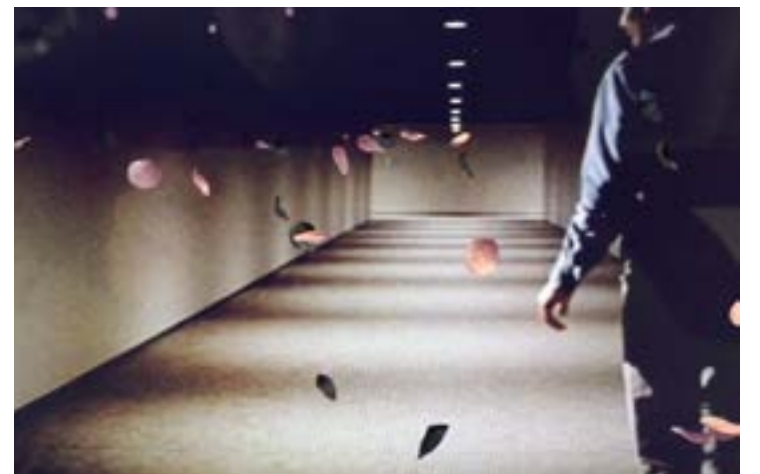














## Image Fidelity

The tools, methods, and materials presented in this thesis are responses to the present moment; there is nothing eternal or even semipermanent about the technologies discussed here. My corresponding investigations are situated solidly in time and space, and I know they will quickly become dated. If this project had been made five years ago or were instead made a year from now, each question would be directed towards the tools, methods, and materials of that moment. As such, my intention is for this document and the works within to serve as potential structures for approaching, examining, and challenging the ways we think about identity and communication and the frameworks that govern them. What I hope I have conveyed is the importance of curiosity and a willingness to engage thoughtfully and critically not only with the products of our technologies, but also with their essential architectures and broader implications.

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