STRATA

Lessons in Latency

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A Master's Thesis
Mukul Chakravarthi

stratamfa.com

To my family

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STRATA PROLOGUE

[T]he rigid isolated object is of no use whatsoever. It must be inserted into the context of living social relations…

Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*

ABSTRACT: STRATA

Every visual artifact, from a street sign to advertising commercials, is an event of culture, a cross-section of time. Crucial to my work as a designer is to build an interpretive understanding of these images as more than surface, more than banal. Embedded in their construction are dense, unseen contextual latencies—social, economic, and political forces—that combine to define a cultural moment.

This thesis offers a series of lessons in making visible visual infrastructure. It emphasizes design's semiotic potential to examine and leverage a view on what these visual signs represent as ideological constructions. Through a conscious un-layering of their deep and complex structures, I make an ethical case for producing work that augments understanding of our socio-cultural milieu, while catalyzing larger structural reform.

ESSAY:
OUT OF FIELD

Above: A local puncture shop in Bangalore, India, tending to all kinds of motor repairs.

It was the summer of 2005. I was twelve years old, and I found myself spending an otherwise perfectly serviceable weekday afternoon at the local car mechanic shop with my father. Amused by the typos I found on pieces of signage at the shop, I began to laugh hysterically.

"Appa, take a look at this," I said, pointing gleefully at the shop's sign-board that spelled "Puncher Shop."[1] Being in sixth grade, the satisfaction of putting my freshly minted yet far from spotless spelling skill to use was exhilarating. Except, I wasn't engaged in anything constructive—I was just being petulant. I continued to read every piece of printed material that the shop carried: "Tubeles tire repare," "Stepanie repare," and "Wheel alinment." What followed were continued ripples of laughter only to be abruptly stopped by the disapproving voice of my father asking me to behave myself. All he said was "Stop making fun. You have the privilege of going to school that the mechanic doesn't."

I was just given my first lesson in semiotics.[2] Back then, however, I drew a different but equally important lesson: of comporting oneself with compassion and not harboring contempt for the less literate.

The question I should have asked myself back then was, why do people make typos? Or what do typos reflect? Unfortunately, like every other profound moment of reckoning that I have had with social phenomena over the years, this one, too, occurred in the context of frivolous social media chatter. Two years ago, I encountered a genre of meme[3] pages on Instagram that documented the various typos that one would experience during their travels in India and South Asia. Much like my own reaction to these linguistic stumbles in the past, the commentary that surrounded these images was raucously contemptuous of the "culprits," as if to suggest that a shopkeeper in Madurai[4] must do better by the priggish standards of the *Instagram* prude. By this time, my cultural and political conscience had matured, allowing me to contextualize these memes within larger tapestries of the social order.

"Appa" in Tamil, my first language, means father.

[1] A ubiquitous misspelling of the phrase "Puncture Shop" in the Indian subcontinent. Puncture shops are a common typology in any Indian city, tending to all kinds of repair work.

[2] Semiotics as defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy: The general study of symbolic systems, including language.

[3] The online *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a meme as "A cultural element or behavioral trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation), is considered as analogous to the inheritance of a gene."

[4] Madurai is a major city in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Located on the banks of River Vaigai, Madurai has been a major settlement for two millennia.

The recorded history of the city goes back to the 3rd century BCE, being mentioned by Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to the Maurya empire.

Left: The Center Pompidou by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers exemplifies a formal honesty in its display of the services and structural elements that hold it together. Its structural strata laid bare for the visitor to experience.

The "Puncher Shop," then, wasn't just a typo. It was more—it had to be more. It stood for the boundless aspiration that consumed the mechanic as he tried to keep abreast with an increasingly global country. The typo captured a nation still trying to come to terms with a colonial past. It signified an implicit internalization of the corrosive belief that equated the English language with cultural sophistication. And most importantly, it attested to the several structural inequities that hamstrung the mechanic, making social mobility a herculean enterprise. As my father said, this man was trying, but the fruits of his strife it seems had made an inexorable descent into the realm of the meme.

If I learned one important lesson from the whole experience, it was that the cultural and visual decor of our lives is replete with things that seem ostensibly trivial, but are profoundly complex. Pictures of typos, shared enough number of times, become sources of sheer entertainment, obscuring the rich confluence of social forces that give rise to them. Consider another example requiring a similar conceptual pivot in order to be understood: The Art Gallery. Long considered to be a theatre of human passivity, the art gallery to-day has instead become, as the artist John Kelsey observes, "[a]n activated space where information, bodies and money are rapidly circulated, and where this power of circulation is momentarily frozen in images and objects."

The 'Puncher Shop,' then, wasn't just a typo. It was more— it had to be more. It stood for the boundless aspiration that consumed the mechanic as he tried to keep abreast with an increasingly global country.

In every one of these cases, there exists a fierce dialectic between the prosaic and the latent, and I take it to be my role as a graphic designer, the creator of visual discourse, to reveal the strata of complexity belied by the trivial.

I submit that any object or phenomenon can be defined in terms of the particular, or the universal. The typo can be defined both as a linguistic stumble, and an honest attempt at communicating a message, but neither of these definitions sufficiently captures the strident interplay of causes and contingencies that give rise to the phenomenon. Such a comprehensive definition requires us to amble back and forth between states of particularity and universality, ie., the typo as an attempt at English by a car mechanic in Bangalore to keep pace with a swiftly globalized nation, and a piece of signage on a wall with a certain formal treatment.

Above: Jennifer Karady, *Former Sergeant Jason Lemieux, U.S. Marine Corps Infan-try, 3/7 Lima Company, veteran of Oper-ation Iraqi Freedom and member of Iraq Veterans Against the War*, 2008.

5 Rosalind Krauss, in her seminal essay "Grids" described the grid as a manifestation of "modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse" and to wall "the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality.."

6 Margarita Tupitsyn, 'The Grid as a Checkpoint of Modernity', in Tate Papers, no.12, Autumn 2009, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/the-grid-as-a-checkpoint-of-modernity, accessed 21 April 2020.

Having made a transition from architecture to graphic design two years ago, I noticed that discourses within the field of design made practitioners like myself eminently capable of partaking in aesthetic critiques of work, but less capable of contending with critiques at a structural level, a domain that architectural theory has mastered. In essence, I grew adept at speaking about visual devices such as typographic grids with a Muller Brockmann-like alacrity while marginalizing the equally rich social critique of the device from figures such as Rosalind Krauss,[5] and Vadim Ryndin.[6] By extricating the grid from the political associations and historical contingencies that brought it into existence, and examining it instead in its purely aesthetic, reified form, my critique was incomplete.

To be clear, this is not to value one paradigm of critique or mode of artistic production over another, but insofar as social efficacy is a priority for designers today (as it is for me), learning to produce work that inhabits the world in a better way, as the philosopher Alan Badiou frames it, becomes an ethical obligation.[7] As a consequence, I chose to center my design practice around the erasure of aesthetic

In every one of these examples, there exists a fierce dialectic between the prosaic and the profound, and I take it to be my role as a graphic designer, the purveyor of visual discourse, to reveal the strata of complexity belied by the trivial.

autonomy and emphasize instead, the need to produce work that responds to the social apparatus that surround it—in essence, an ethical enterprise.

7 Badiou, Alain. 2001. Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil. London: Verso.

A version of this aspiration was realized in a project titled Reified Realities.[8] Comparing two species of social expression, the sixteenth century oil painting, and the modern *Instagram* feed, I chose to look beyond their immediate representational capacities and focus instead on their use as frames of competitive individualism, and conspicuous consumption where people displayed what they owned as a way of asserting their social standing.

Continuing to straddle the line between materialist critique and formal responses, I responded to the political crisis that came to consume the state of Kashmir in India in 2019 by dissecting the photographs and imagery that were being propagated by popular news outlets operating in the region. By scraping the metadata off of the photographs documenting the conflict and setting them on posters with their resultant images layered in front of them, I was able to document every visual move that the photographer made in post-producing and narrativizing the realities of the region. This hybridized strategy of orchestrating a play of image with data; of using the formal affordances of the poster to take a critical stance on a social issue helped give shape to Kashmir: The Metadata of Conflict.[9]

Left: *Reified Realities*: A comparison of Bartolomé Esteban's *Young Man Drinking*, and a photo from the popular Tumblr page, Rich Kids of Instagram. Photo by @thuniss (2012)

It is this inclination to dissolve the barrier between the formal and the social that drew me to the work of the photographer Jennifer Karady, who, over the course of several years, collaborated with soldiers and veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, restaging aspects of traumatic war events within their civilian lives. Karady intended her photographs to help soldiers reconcile with their pasts, and serve as documentation of a performance that may help people close to them understand what they had experienced abroad.[10] Similarly, the work of the London-based research and design group, *Forensic Architecture* too proved to be a model for

Above: One of the posters from *Kashmir: Metadata of Conflict*.
By juxtaposing images of the conflict with metadata gleaned from
each of those images, I sought to find out if each of these com-
munication channels evoked different responses from viewers.

It is my hope that I construct a practice around work that is as reflective as it is declarative, behaving both, as outward looking windows and inward looking mirrors; work that helps us see the complex in the trivial and the trivial in the complex…


10 Ritchin, Fred. 2013. Bending the frame: photojournalism, documentary, and the citizen.

11 Weizman, Eyal. 2019. Forensic Architecture: violence at the threshold of detectability.

12 Tanner, Michael. "Aesthetics and Ethics," 1998. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780415249126-L001-1.

Right: The Results of Forensic Architecture's Analysis Show the Distribution of Concentration of Herbicide as It Travels Westward into Gaza. Forensic Architecture and Dr. Salvador Navarro Martinez.

an ethical practice. By using traditional architectural techniques synergistically with geo-spatial technologies, the research group investigates cases of state violation of human rights around the world. To Eyal Weizman, the founder of *FA*, architecture is never static, it is "political plastic—social forces slowing into form" with buildings serving as valuable indexes of the political health of a given region.[11]

The success of Karady's and *FA*'s work, to me, resided in their ability to design across our habitual sense of the separation of the formal and the social, destabilizing the notion of a siloed aestheticism and elevating the primacy of ethical efficacy as the sine qua non of any artistic endeavor. Their work was urgent, and their method, almost Brechtian in its impact.

It is my hope that I construct a practice around work that is as reflective as it is declarative, behaving both, as outward looking windows and inward looking mirrors; work that helps us see the complex in the trivial and the trivial in the complex; work that collapses the barriers between designer and audience, requiring a constructive coauthoring to be realized in its full form; and work that shatters the age-old separation of aesthetic and ethical judgements[12] carving open space for us to be gentle moralists and strident critics at the same time.

In the end, questioning what led me to this space of aesthetic and ethical coalescence, I realize that as a designer, what I am devising is a new method for me to visually represent things in the world. And that process of representation is a factor of my ability to see things critically, and a desire to evoke the rich cultural latencies of the day-to-day. Our present moment has taught us to prize constant productivity over paused reflection, and has strung a tenuous thread equating a relentless accumulation of wealth with cultural insight. However, if I learned something fifteen years ago at a local "Puncher Shop," it was that, sometimes, the visual banalities that surround us are the most truthful windows into the current zeitgeist.
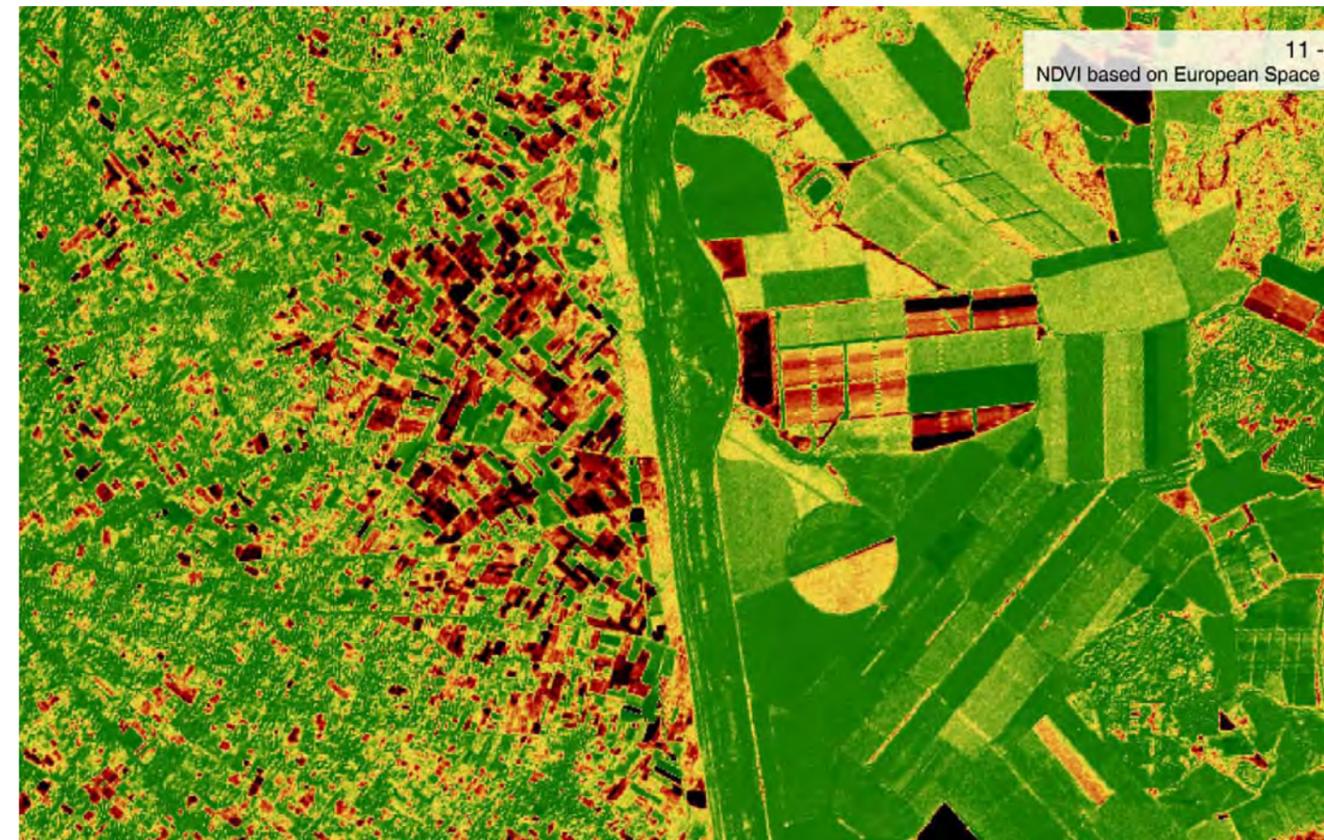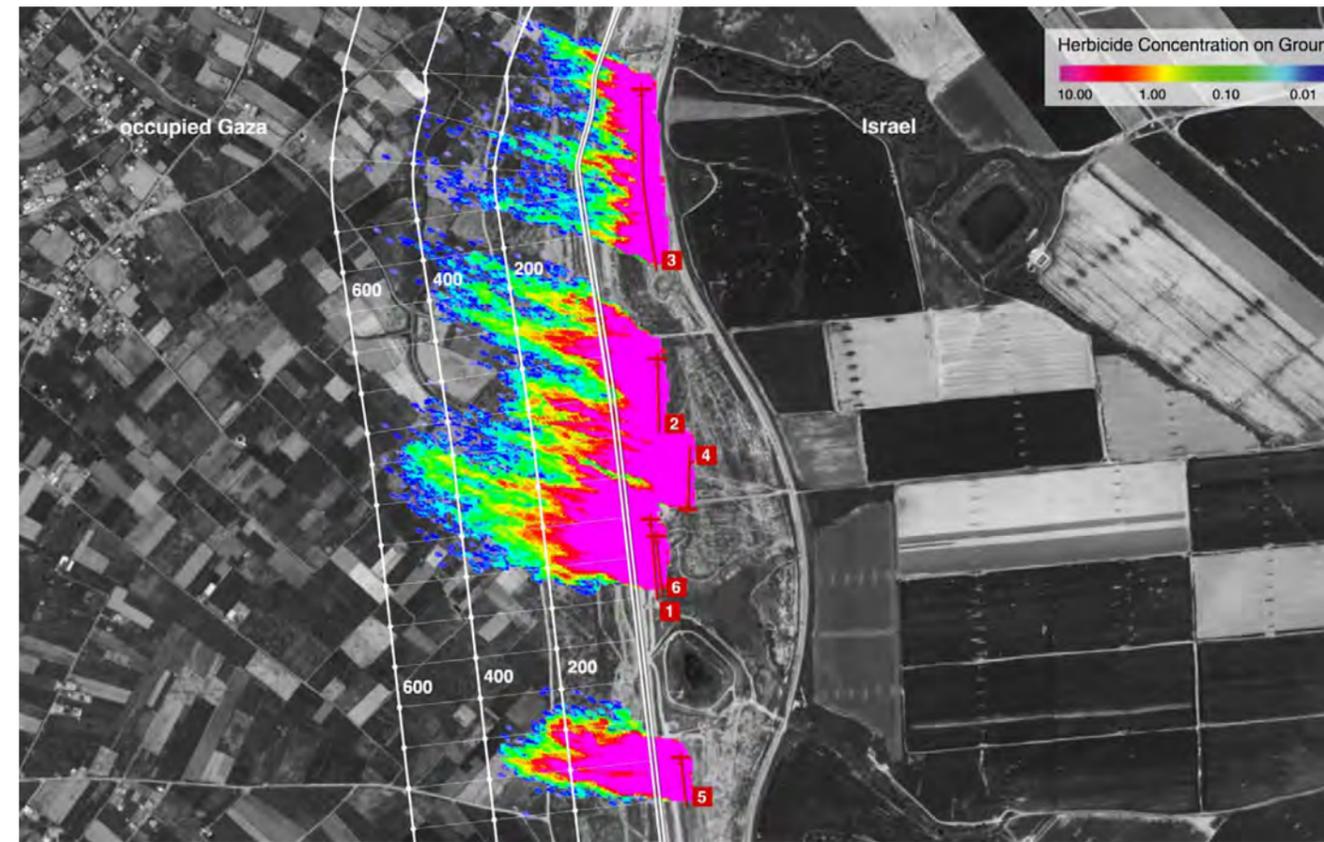
RELEVANT VOCABULARY

A list of recurring words relevant to my research and body of work. Drawing from a variety of sources and contexts, some of the following words might vary from traditional definitions found in dictionaries.

Richard Serra, *Verb List*. 1967-68.

ABSTRACTION
There exist several definitions of the word "abstraction." But every one of them involve "withdrawing," "separation," or "removal" from something. In a strictly philosophical sense, abstraction is defined as the "act or process of separating in thought, of considering a thing independently of its associations."

AESTHETICS
Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy that deals with art, or more generally what the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls that of "taste, or of the perception of the beautiful." The discipline in its modern form is primarily concerned with issues surrounding the creation, interpretation, and ultimate appreciation of works of art, and so it involves how the experience of such material is mediated through the individual sensitivity of the beholder, and the way the experience of it is shaped through presentation by cultural conventions such as museum exhibitions, artist talks, and other arenas of dissemination.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM
The collection, dissemination, and analysis of information by the general public, especially after the invention of the Internet and the mobile phone.

CAMP
In her seminal essay, "Notes on Camp,'" Susan Sontag addresses the impossibility of a strict definition of *camp*, for camp is not a strict idea, but a "sensibility" (SONTAG 288). For Sontag, camp is, "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (SONTAG 288). Camp is not a strict rule and cannot, with integrity, be mechanized.

COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS
The term *collective consciousness* refers to the condition of the subject within the whole of society, and how any given individual comes to view herself as a part of any given group.

COSMOPOLITANISM
Cosmopolitanism is the idea that all human beings are, or could or should be, members of a single community. To the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, *cosmopolitanism* balances our "obligations to others" with the "value not just of human life but of particular human lives"—what he calls "universality plus difference."

DIALECTIC
"Dialectics" is a term used to describe a method of philosophical argument that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides of the same subject.

DISCOURSE
Parting with the most common definition of the word as denoting an instance of language external to social relations, "discourse," in this document, will be referred to more as a social and communal practice.

EPIC THEATRE
The earliest definitions of the word "epic" were in reference to traditional heroic narratives as represented in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The German dramatist Bertolt Brecht however

employed the word differently, describing a theatrical style that transcended tradition. He coined the phrase *epic theatre* to describe a play or set of plays characterized by realism and exposed the artifice of the theatrical enterprise.

ETHICS
Ethics in this document is defined in opposition to "morals," defined as a fixed set of rules or laws that prescribe how one ought to live one's life regardless of circumstance. *Ethics*, by contrast, contains no fixed parameters. It instead describes a dynamic system that maximizes human wellbeing. As the philosopher Alain Badiou describes it, "the ethical principle refers to *immediate action*, while morality is to concern *reflexive action*."

EVENT
An occurrence, perceived in relation to the larger aspects of culture within a certain place, at a certain time.

FORMAL/FORMALIST
Not to be confused with the literary movement, anything that pertains to the visual or aesthetic form of an object is referred to as *formal* in this document. It is often positioned in opposition to "structural," which refers to larger social and cultural structures that operate within a society. Com-

ing from the Latin *forma*, implying beauty, the word *form* is more commonly related to the definitions an usage of the Latin *eidos*, originally signifying recognizable visual characteristics of a thing.

HYPERREALITY
Hyperreality, in semiotics and postmodernism, is an inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced postmodern societies.

IDENTITY CORRECTION
A traditional Marxist technique of fabricating information about people or corporations painting them in a virtuous light, compelling them to correct themselves in public.

IMAGE
A reification of reality, usually manifesting as a visual.

INTERFACE
The word is referred to in the context of systems theory where it is defined as the place where flesh meets metal, or, the place where information moves from one entity to another, from one node to another within the system.

INTERPASSIVITY
Conceived by the cultural theorists Robert Pfaller and Slavoz Zizek as a portmanteau

of interactivity and passivity, *interpassivity* is defined as a state of passivity in the presence of the potential of interactivity. The purpose of the concept is to "explain how works of art and media sometimes seem to provide for their own reception."

THE MAP-TERRITORY RELATIONSHIP
First introduced by the Polish-American mathematician Alfred Korzybski, the concept describes the relationship between an object and a representation of that object. The concept speaks to our natural ability of devising abstract models of representation to make sense of the world. Maps, for example, are imperfect but effective abstractions of geographical territories. Paradoxically, the point isn't to make the map as close to reality as possible. If that were to be the case, a map that represents reality on a one to one scale ceases to be a useful device. Hence, inherent to this relationship is a willful reduction of reality.

MEME
A *meme* is an idea, behavior, or style that spreads by means of imitation from person to person within a culture and often carries symbolic meaning referring to a particular phenomenon or theme.

MUSEUMIFICATION
A term coined by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard to describe the modern instinct (propelled by social media) of treating life as a collection of consumable experiences and objects. To Baudrillard, this instinct is the natural outcome of the taxonomical gaze that the advent of the camera prompted, where the present moment is seized and captured as an object, to be made docile and durable.

NARRATIVE
Narrative is the way the different elements in a story are organized to make a meaningful story. Some of these elements can be facts as in a documentary, or characters and action as in a drama. In this document, the word "narrative" will frequently be used in its capacity as a verb: to "narrativize" something. To narrativize is to imbue a story-like quality to reality, either in order to make it more intelligible, or to deceive.

NEOLIBERALISM
Neoliberalism is the 20th-century resurgence of 19th-century ideas associated with laissez-faire economic liberalism and free market capitalism championed by thinkers like Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and James M. Buchanan and implemented by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

RECEPTION THEORY
Reception theory was first developed by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall in his seminal 1973 essay, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. To Hall, the meaning of a text, show or movie is never inherent to the work itself, but is constructed through an active negotiation between the work and the reader. In essence, no work of art or any other form of content comes laden with its own meaning. It's meaning is interpreted by the reader within the realm of their own cultural and personal experiences.

PROSAIC
Commonplace or dull; matter-of-fact or unimaginative.

REPRESENTATION
The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *representation* as "an image, likeness, or reproduction in some manner of a thing." The word can also be defined through an example. Take the *Mona Lisa*. It is a painting that not everyone has access to. In this sense, we can understand *representation* as a medium in that it stands between 'the real' and the spectator. Because of its ability to be copied or reproduced, the representation becomes more accessible to be communicated on a mass level.

SEMIOTICS
The *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines *semiotics* as "the general study of symbolic systems, including language. The subject is traditionally divided into three areas: syntax, or the abstract study of signs and their interrelations; semantics, or the study of the relation between the signs and those objects to which they apply; and pragmatics, or the relationship between users and the system." Hence, *semiotics* refers more to a system of representations and their changing relationships rather than focusing on unique instantiations of meaning-making.

VISUAL DISCOURSE
Traditionally applied to written and verbal communication, the term discourse today has come to be used in contexts outside the framework of traditional linguistics. Communication today is achieved as much in the realm of images, and visuals as through the written word. Hence, when applied to the extralinguistic realm of the image, discourse is re-framed as *visual discourse*.

LEARNING TO SEE

Still from *Ways of Seeing*, 1972, a TV show on BBC. John Berger.

In his seminal 1972 work, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger lamented the inadequacy of aesthetic discourses of the time in capturing the world as it really was. Dissecting a specific piece of criticism, a two-volume study on the work of the Dutch painter Frans Hals, Berger draws our attention to the critical wastefulness of speaking about paintings in purely formalistic terms.

To Berger, conversations about art seemed to have ossified into a schema where only commentary on beauty, truth, genius, civilization, status, and taste prevailed, marginalizing the specters of labor and power that loomed large over the whole enterprise.

This ossification to him, gave rise to a dangerous incompleteness as it negated the existence of a complex web of individuals, relationships, inequities of power, labor, and capital that made a painting a reality. In essence, any failure to speak to the politics of art was tantamount to *mystification*.

The section of work that you are about to experience attempts to *demystify* and evoke the latencies of imagery that have become ubiquitous features of our lives; from *Instagram* images to visual tropes embedded in pharmaceutical commercials. This is my attempt at shining a light on the *politics of vision*.

REIFIED REALITIES

A case study in conspicuous consumption, *Reified Realities* compared displays of wealth by the *Rich Kids of Instagram* with eighteenth century oil paintings.

Year: Spring 2018
Typology: Editorial
Dimensions: 5.5 x 8 in

Material: Yellow Cardstock, Acetate
Typeface: Neue Haas Grotesk by
Max Miedinger

The visual decor of any culture is a reflection of the ideological leanings of the ruling class. Such candid, yet incisive observations on the otherwise fortified world of fine art abounded John Berger's 1972 book, "*Ways of Seeing.*"

Berger believed immensely in the power of painting, but *Ways of Seeing*, was, above all, an attempt to liberate art from the realm of abstruse discourse and make it a subject of the public vernacular.

His endeavor was premised on the view that the preachiness that abounded the fine arts was used as an ideological tool to willfully obfuscate the past that produced it. Hence, the central thrust of his book was to harness the democratic potential of modern mass media to make classic works of art accessible to the public at large.

Both, the oil painting and the *Instagram* profile are paradoxical cultural artifacts in that they serve as truthful reflections of the human condition, while being used as agents of duplicitous projection by individuals.

By comparing the representation of culturally significant objects, people, and their corresponding socio-political realities across the two media, the project sought to establish the view that despite differing representations of the same things, the two media were driven by human motivations, that transcended time, space and technology.

Left: *Reified Realities*, Cover Detail 2018.

graphics to bolster their social capital. However, the aristocratic tendency towards vanity endures, manifesting in obscene displays of wealth and sanctimony in the form of cliquish social media groups. See: *Rich Kids of Instagram*.

THE VISUAL AS POSSESSION

Rich Italian merchants looked upon painters as agents who allowed them to confirm all that was beautiful and desirable in the world. The picture represented a kind of microcosm in which the proprietor recreated within easy reach and in as real form as possible all to which he was attached.

MAN AS CURATOR OF HIS VISUAL MILIEU

To Berger and several theorists that preceded him, the coming of the camera, and all subsequent advances in the world of mechanical reproduction had dramatically changed how people began to consume images. Even here, one saw a divergence in the way individuals and institutions embraced the democratization of the image.

A consequence of this democratization was a curatorial instinct among the people. Constantly crafting our visual environments, we used fixtures of our daily lives, from refrigerators to study tables as surfaces featuring an inventive yet cohesive panoply of imagery that spoke to us. Bereft of any hierarchy, most of these boards contained images that belonged to the same language, reflecting the instinctual nature of the process of assembly. To Berger, by virtue of their honesty, these boards should have replaced museums.

Above: Comparison of *Victoria's Secret* Models with Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1528 painting, *The Judgment of Paris.*

This democratization of image-making, if anything, has allowed the general public to partake in the social projection business. More people today express themselves using ubiquitous images and

Above: Juxtaposed shot of Victoria's Secret models with Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1528 painting, *The Judgment of Paris.*

Both, the oil painting and the *Instagram* profile are agents of possession where we surround ourselves with things that we want to own, and more importantly, show the world around us that which we own.

Art was previously regarded as an agent of self expression. By contrast, today, it has metastasized into a medium where one can assert one's position in the social hierarchy by displaying all that they own with the express purpose of arousing the envy of others. Each image screams for attention, desiring to establish itself as something to be obtained instantly.

Berger described with particular derision the rise of a politics of glamour, where the oil painting was a means by which the ruling class could bolster their social capital by arousing envy in others. Glamour cannot exist without personal social envy being a common and widespread emotion.

↑ *Reified Realities* was inspired by an article written by Adam Stoneman, a contributor to *Jacobin* magazine titled "The New Conspicuous Consumption," which forged similar connections between the *Rich Kids of Instagram* and oil paintings of European elites.

Celebration: An image from the *Rich Kids of Instagram Tumblr* page juxtaposed with, Rembrandt's 1636 *Self-Portrait with Saskia.*
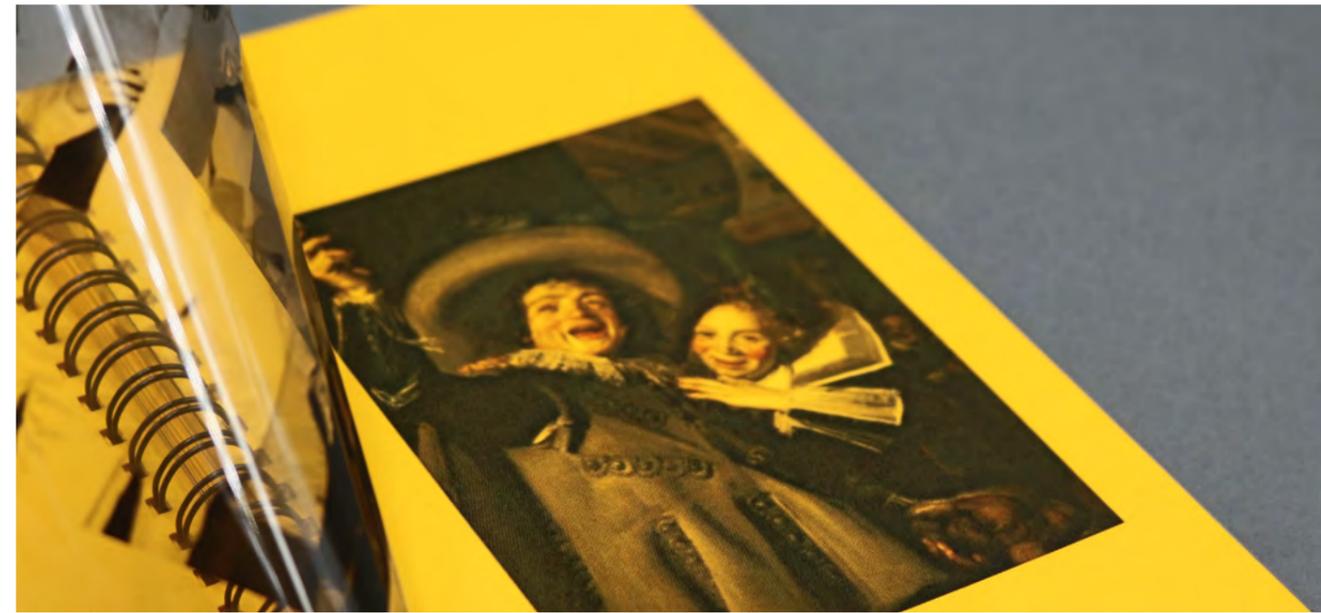
Celebration: Picture of pop icon Rihanna celebrating the new year with her friends, via her *Instagram.* **Top:** Frans Hals, *Young Man and Woman in an Inn,* 1623.

Envy as Social Capital: Art was previously regarded as an agent of self expression. By contrast, today, it has metastasized into a medium where one can assert one's position in the social hierarchy by displaying all that they own with the express purpose of arousing the envy of others.

ON PHOTOGRAPHY

A book that establishes a dialogue between two important texts on photography: Susan Sontag's seminal 1977 collection of essays *On Photography*, and fellow cultural critic David Levi Strauss's 2003 book, *Between the Eyes: Photography and Politics*.

The central idea of this project was to capture the authority, importance, and cultural significance of each text with every design choice. Sontag's writing, operating at a level that not only critiqued but laid bare the historical contingencies that gave rise to the field of photography, was lucid yet theoretical. Whereas Levi Strauss focused his attention on more immediate issues of the day like the war on Afghanistan, and the role of photography in shaping public sentiment during the World Trade Center bombings.

Even though both the authors approached the field of photography through different entry points—one theoretical and the other event-based—both Sontag and Levi Strauss

paved the way for a new ethics of seeing. To Sontag, while photography had displaced painting to become the preeminent medium of faithful representation, it didn't quite stop there. It, in fact, did something that painting never achieved: it represented the inane, the poor, the downtrodden, and the banal all in the service of a renewed truthfulness. A consequence of this endeavor was the rise of what Sontag called *tragedy tourism* where viewers looked at suffering subjects with an almost pornographic prurience and delight.

Interestingly, Levi Strauss takes a slightly different view on the role of aesthetics in capturing moments of tragedy, grief, and poverty as he speaks

SONTAG

Children fleeing South Vietnamese napalm strike near Trang Bang, Vietnam

The eyes of Gutete Emerita I remember her eyes.

A meeting of a religious community in Base, on the road to Atillo, Chimborazo, Ecuador

Over a five month period in 1994, more than one million Rwandans, mostly members of the Tutsi minority, were systematically slaughtered as the world closed its eyes to genocide. The killings were largely carried out by Hutu militias who had been armed and trained by the Rwandan military. One Sunday morning at a church in Ntarama, four hundred Tutsis were murdered by a Hutu death squad. Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, was tending mass with her family when the massacre began. Gutete's Husband, Tito Kahinamura, and her two sons, Muhoza and Matirigari were killed with machetes before her eyes. Somehow, she was able to escape with her daughter Marie-Louise Unumararunga. After weeks of hiding, Gutete has returned to the church in the woods. When she speaks about her lost family, she gestures to corpses on the ground, in the African sun.

Soldiers in fresh, dry, air recharge, Kunhoul Front.

Woman in Cloche Hat and Pedestrians, White Chapel, New York City.

Refugees from the Bihac pocket living in Batnoga, awaiting the mail. However, the refugees receive minimal help from the outside because, as displaced persons, they were not formally recognized as international refugees.

Breakfast Room at Belle Grove Plantation, White Chapel, Louisiana

Normal trance

Soldiers landing

A Yugoslav Gypsy family, caught trying to enter Italy illegally, is processed by Italian authorities.

Castro greets a nun from a girls school in a small town before his Havana arrival each, D-Day.

Wayne Holien (PFC - Marine copter gunner in Vietnam)

Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, nicknamed Gilligan by U.S. soldiers, made to stand on a box for about an hour and told that he would be electrocuted if he fell, Abu Ghraib Prison, Iraq

LEVI STRAUSS

the migrant mother with her children in 1936 to get that iconic shot which prompted the government to act, Levi Strauss too comes close to endorsing the popular maxim that an artist sometimes has to lie to tell the truth.

Most importantly, despite differing views on their larger visions for photography, both Sontag and Levi Strauss are united in their conception of photography as an arena of aesthetic and political interpenetration.

America, as see

understands how anything, least of all a photograph, could be transcendent.

Whitman preached empathy, concord in discord, oneness in diversity. Psychic intercourse with everything, everybody—plus sensual union (when he could get it)—is the giddy trip that is proposed explicitly, over and over and over, in the prefaces and the poems. This longing to proposition the whole world also dictated his poetry's form and tone. Whitman's poems are a psychic technology for chanting the reader into a new state of being (a microcosm of the "new order" envisaged for the polity); they are functional, like mantras—ways of transmitting charges of energy. The repetition, the bombastic cadence, the run-on

lines, and the pushy diction are a rush of secular afflatus, meant to get readers psychically airborne, to boost them up to that height where they can identify with the past and with the community of American desire. But this message of identification with other Americans is foreign to our temperament now.

The last sigh of the Whitmanesque erotic embrace of the nation, but universalized and stripped of all demands, was heard in the "Family of Man" exhibit organized in 1955 by Edward Steichen, Stieglitz's contemporary and co-founder of Photo-Secession. Five hundred and three photographs by two hundred and seventy-three photographers from sixty-eight countries were supposed

are perhaps the most troublesome for contemporary North American viewers, who are accustomed to that materialist dualism that finds a contradiction between radical politics and metaphysics, between history and mythology, between justice and transcendence. This materialist foe does not hold away from the center. The Argentinian philosopher and historian Enrique Dussel might have had Salgado's photographs before him when he wrote:

Beyond phenomenology the road of epiphany opens: revelation (or apocalyptic) of the other through the other's face, which is not merely a phenomenon or manifestation, a presence, but an epiphenomenon, vicarious, trace or vestige of the absent, of the mysterious, of one beyond the present. Ontology

(phenomenology) gives way to met (apocalyptic epiphany of the other) fulfils itself as a revelation of the on makes decisions beyond the horizon world frontier of the state. "

The sacred lies behind nearly eve image in Salgado's most difficult ser his photographs from the famine-ra Sahel region of Africa in 1984 and 19 Salgado did not set out to make sacre images, any more than the military pl tographers who documented the liber of the death camps in Poland did. He s out, as a dedicated documentarian, to the world what was going on so that th would pressure their governments to pu stop to it. Unlike the hundreds of "shoot ers" from all over the world who dropped

38

about the work of the photographer, Sebastião Salgado. Salgado rose to prominence through his Serra Pelada photo series that captured the plight of the 50,000 gold miners who scaled the Serra Pelada mine in Brazil everyday. To Levi Strauss, it was Salgado's distinctive aesthetic stance in capturing the mine workers that raised awareness among people and incited institutions into acting against exploitation.

Under no illusions about photography's inherent inadequacy in communicating the gravity of violence, deprivation, and poverty that afflict parts of the world, Levi Strauss insists that it is sometimes acceptable to aestheticize moments of tragedy in order to provoke action. Much like Dorothea Lange's repeated restaging of

To Levi Strauss, the circumstances in which photographers today find themselves are far from auspicious. Assaulted by a glut of images, he characterizes the environment that we inhabit as a media "pandemonium." Such a surfeit of imagery inures viewers to news that ought to provoke action, weakening photography's role as a medium of communication. Hence, photographers today face the daunting challenge of not only being able to capture the depravity of war, famine, and poverty, but also devising methods to deliver these images in a way that wades through the sea of superfluous imagery.

Below: The nearly 300 page book was conceived as a single signature, in an attempt to create an object that was physically "gluttonous," alluding to the abundance of imagery we come face to face with today.

Most importantly, despite differing views on their larger visions for photography as a field, both Sontag and Levi Strauss are united in their conception of photography as an arena of aesthetic and political interpenetration.

Above: Breakout spreads with enlarged excerpts from the authors. This particular excerpt reads "A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex."

Above: The creep of the book is an effective signifier of the composition of the book. The portions in blue signal to those spreads that have Levi Strauss's text, while the portions in white belong to Sontag's weighty theories on photography.

AN IDEAL BOY - GOOD HABITS

GETS UP EARLY IN THE MORNING · SALUTES PARENTS · GOES FOR MORNING WALK

BRUSHES UP THE TEETH · BATHES DAILY · PRAYS

GOES TO SCHOOL AND READS ATTENTIVELY · TAKES MEALS IN TIME · HELPS OTHERS

TAKES PARTS IN GAMES · TAKING THE LOST CHILDREN TO THE POLICE POST · TAKES PART IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

THE BREAKING HABITS PROJECT

A project that reconstructs the *Habit Chart*, a post-colonial Indian educational device in the spirit of the twenty-first century.

What you see on the left is a *Habit Chart*. Habit charts were cheap educational devices first distributed by the Indian government through the educational board for a democratic, post colonial India. These charts were an indispensable part of any middle class Indian household with children. While initially conceived as rudimentary educational devices that taught children about geometric shapes, important cities, prominent freedom fighters, and important manufacturing plants in India, they quickly metastasized into instruments of moral education.

Suddenly, titles of charts changed from "Important Indian Animals" to "The Ideal Boy," or "Women at Work."

Centered on making value judgments rather than the simple dissemination of information, these charts now prescribed what ideal behaviors were, and further cemented the iniquitous state of gender roles in the country.

The danger of such a thematic turn from information to values was that the people who were tasked with the creation of these charts themselves were men, and came from a narrow sliver of Indian society. In essence, the hope was that these charts produced moral citizens.

In essence, charts came to address two pedagogical axes of the Indian educational system: the need for facts, and the need for moral instruction.

Left: *An Ideal Boy*, one of the most popular habit charts in India.

Memify: Similar attempts at challenging the moralistic ten-or of the habit chart have been made before. One among them included a group of designers from the Shrishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore, India, who designed a satirical version of a habit chart originally catered to policing women's behavior. It was titled "Ek buri ladki." or "A Bad Girl." (Below).


In this project, however, I chose to reconstruct the *habit chart* in a manner totally antithetical to its original purpose; I wanted to memify it. Memes to me are modern society's most democratic development. Centered on the reckless appropriation, decontextualization and distribution of imagery, memes embodied everything that the *habit chart* eschewed. No matter the marginal utility of these charts, they were the purest form of a top-down adjudication of morality. Memes, on the other hand, are subversive, irreverent, and harbor a complete disregard for top-down control.

Hence, my goal was to make available the individual images from habit charts of the past, and upload them on to a website. Users could then either reuse these images by creating their own memes, or pair these images with their own messaging, creating new charts.

By designing a website, I sought to democratize the creation of habit charts by allowing people to realize their own ideas of morality, identity, or just make memes. The idea was to enable people to make charts and not the other way around.

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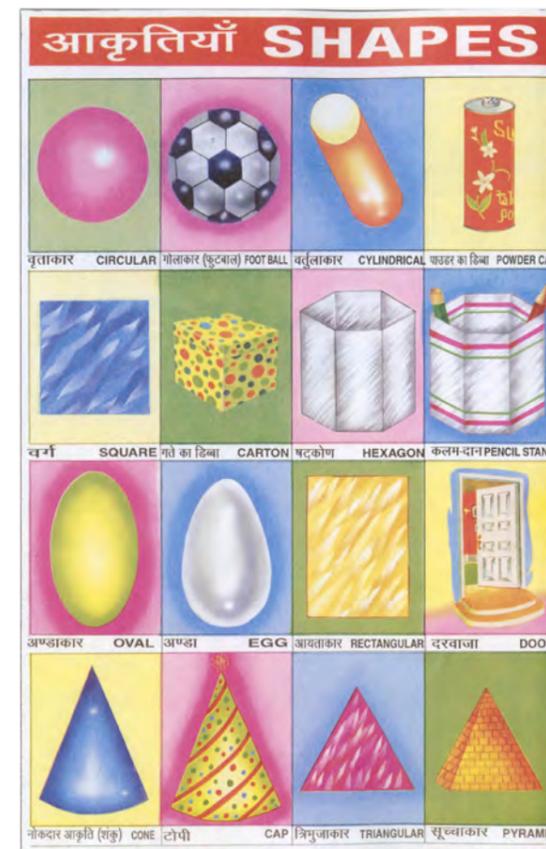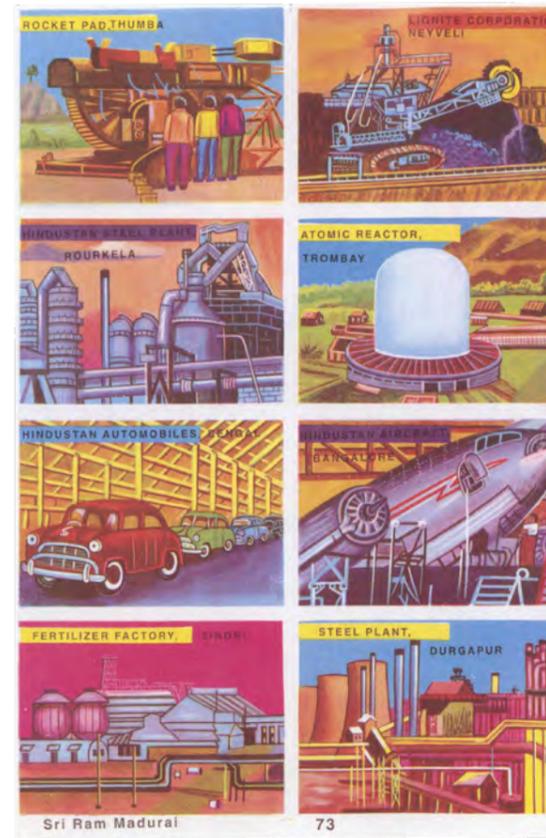
Above: Tasked with educating a rapidly developing post-colonial India, habit charts were conceived as cheap visual aids for children offering information on every imaginable subject.

4 × 3 Grid

A

AN IDEAL BOY - GOOD HABITS

01 GETS UP EARLY IN THE MORNING	02 SALUTES PARENTS	03 GOES FOR MORNING WALK
04 BRUSHES UP THE TEETH	05 BATHES DAILY	06 PRAYS
07 GOES TO SCHOOL AND READS ATTENTIVELY	08 TAKES MEALS IN TIME	09 HELPS OTHERS
10 TAKES PARTS IN GAMES	11 TAKING THE LOST CHILDREN TO THE POLICE POST	12 TAKES PART IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

INDIAN BOOK DEPOT

17"

11"

(A) Every chart came with a large masthead in sans serif denoting the theme
(B) The imagery on the chart formed a linear narrative, typically describing a day in the life of the subject
(C) Clear prescriptions of good behavior

READING A CHART

Educational charts came into the market in this form around the 1950s, when young teachers in independent India needed cheap teaching aids. Strictly speaking, their purpose is functional. Their content is largely based on state school curricula, with most themes connected to specific textbook lessons. However, it is not unusual to find the same theme rendered very differently when a chart is re–printed, so that particular versions become rare almost overnight. Charts address two pedagogical axes of the Indian educational system: the need for facts, and the need for moral instruction. In both cases, pupils across age groups (from five to fourteen) must organize information into simple, tabular formats. Chart publishers—sometimes by teachers—respond to this, taking their cues from actual examination questions. The varied and sometimes puzzling categories of people, places, animals, birds, objects, human behavior, activities and habits, are all part of a repertoire of knowledge made easy.

But information is not all they provide. Charts are just as concerned with ethics and correct behavior, insisting on codes of conduct, and narrating cautionary tales with suitable warnings.

ETHICS

But information is not all they provide. Charts are just as concerned with ethics and correct behavior, insisting on codes of conduct, and narrating cautionary tales with suitable warnings. This stern didacticism—bordering on piety—is very much part of the educational practice in India. Perhaps this is why they are completely unremarkable to most Indians. To those who actually use them accept them as a matter of course. Others—particularly privileged Indians—simply have vague recollections of having come across them. Charts are a dynamic part of Indian popular sensibility. They are published in English as well as in local languages, though the English charts are more widely available and preferred, even in schools teaching through another language. Since their strongest element is the visual, students often read them purely as pictures, with the teacher providing a rough translation. Alongside ethics come the sciences, arguably the second most popular subject featured in these devices, followed by civics—which features one's duties to the nation.

Step 01 / Decontextualize: My intention was to amass as many habit charts as possible and strip images off of their original charts, creating a mixed repository of material that users could access on the website to create newer archetypes.
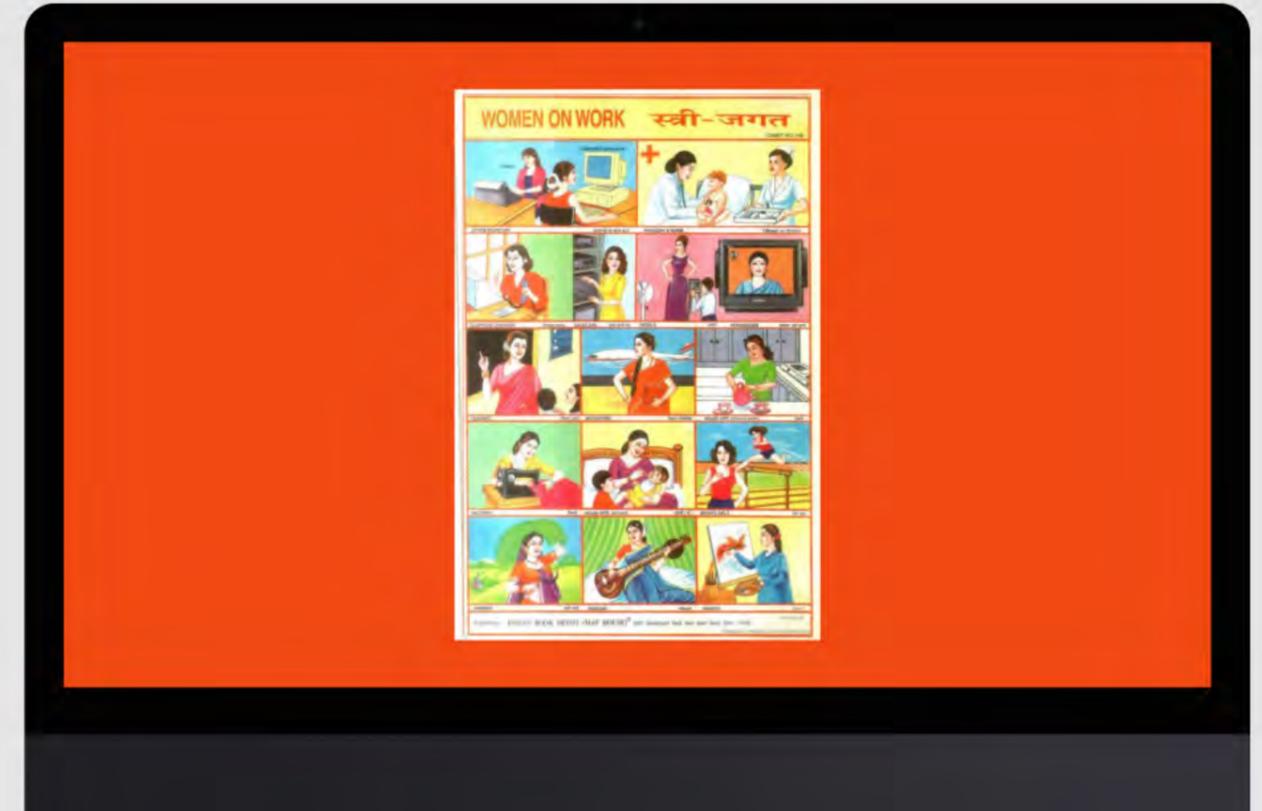
Step 02 — Democratize: Upon making these decontextualized images available to users, the hope was to encourage people to create charts that reflected personal views on society, politics, gender and identity.

The idea was to break away from the stern didacticism of the chart and allow people to visually realize their own conceptions of moral propriety, identity and civic duty.

Homepage: The landing page of the *Breaking Habits Project* site that offers a background on these charts, and what users can do on the site.

Introductory Page: The introductory page takes users on a historic tour of the circumstances that gave rise to the chart, and their cultural implications.
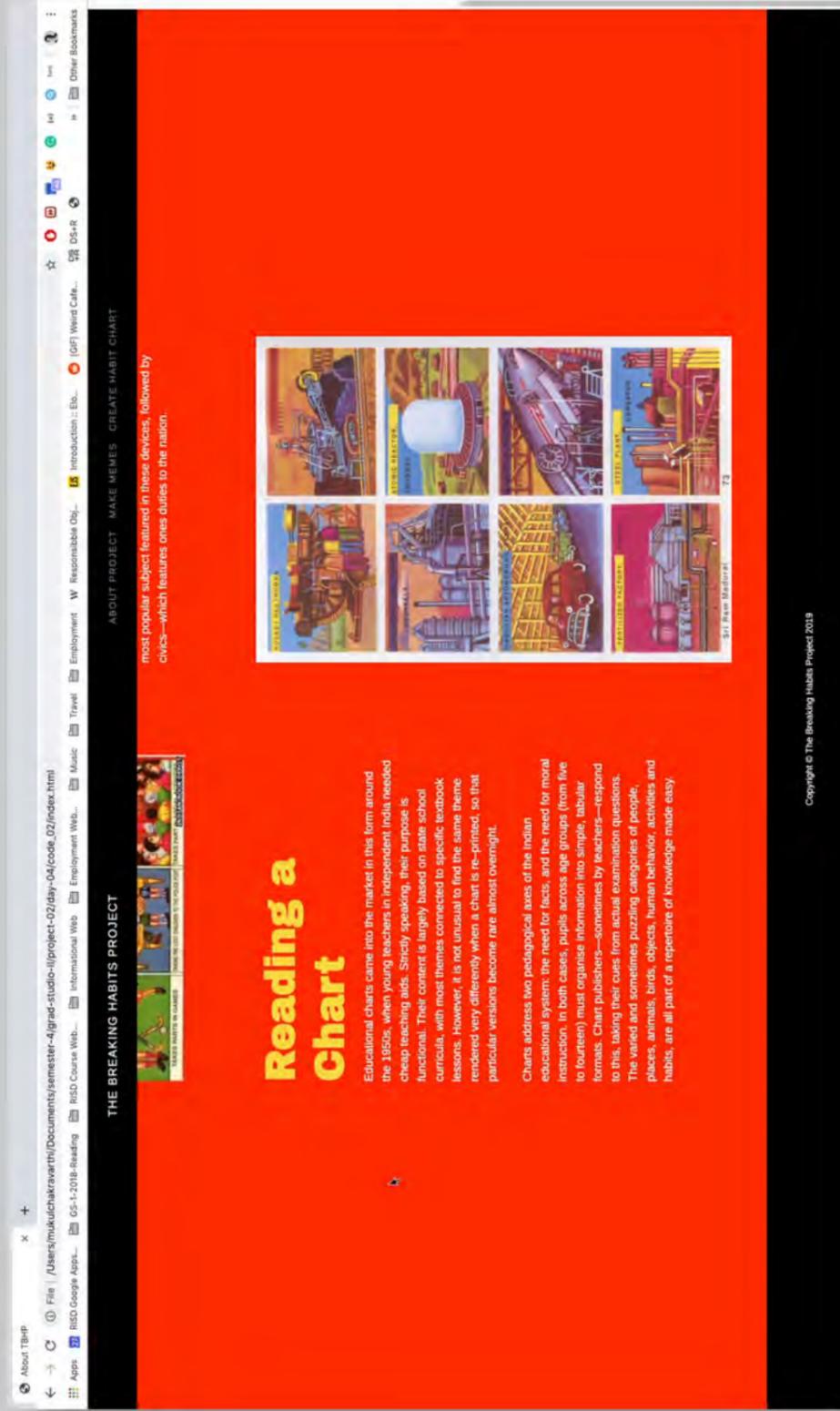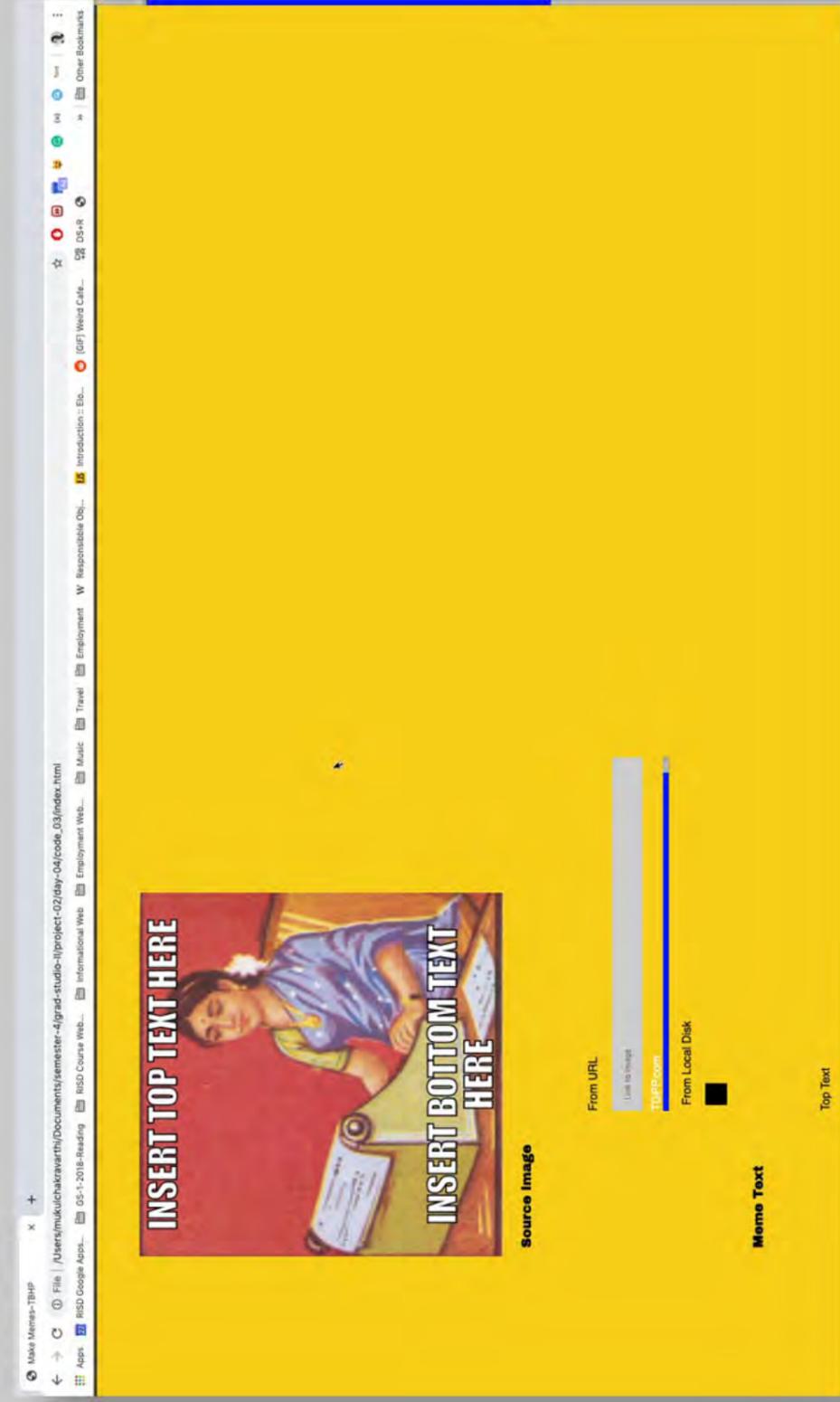
In addition to the meme generator was a chart generator as well, where people could assemble their own imagery to create thematic charts. One of the many outcomes of the chart generator: A reconstruction of the popular *Women at Work* chart into one that highlights the gender pay gap in several countries.

78 Cents to the Dollar Starter Pack
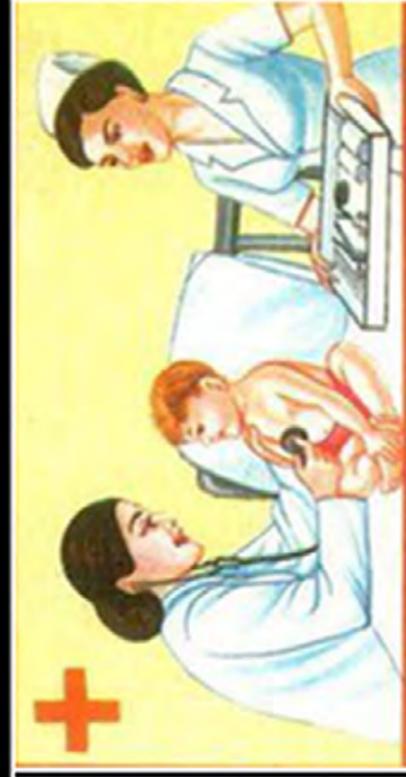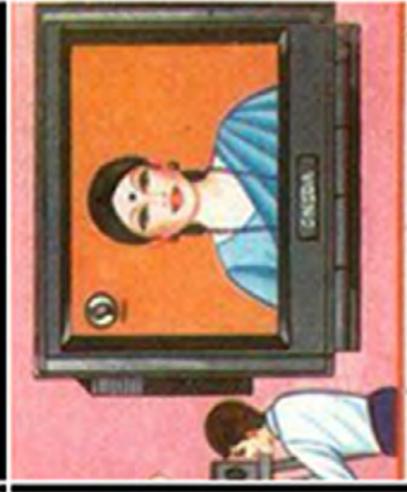
60s Bombay Fuckboi Starter Pack

RIBBON.

BELT.

TALCUM POWDER.

SHAMPOO.

TOOTH BRUSH.

PASTE.
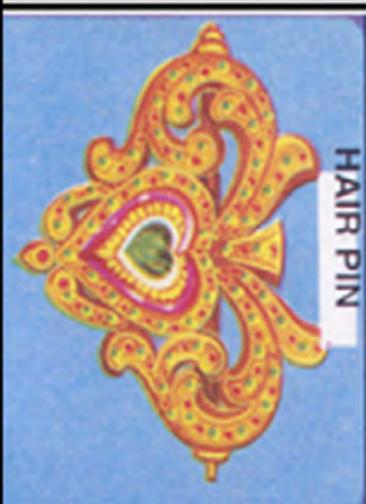
HAIR PIN

NAILCUTTER.

NECKTIE

CLIP.

HAIR BRUSH
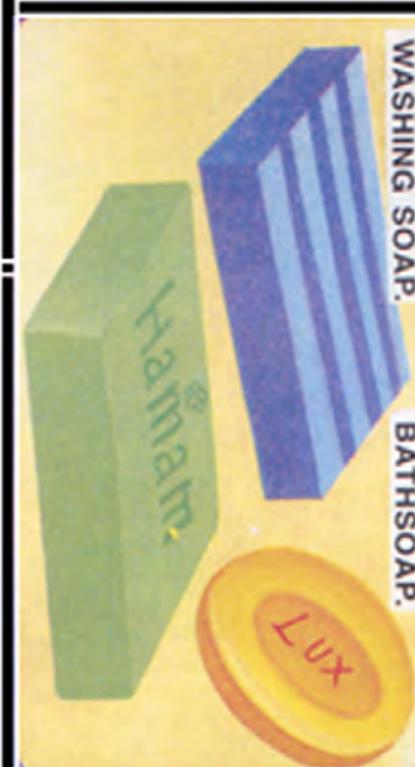
WASHING SOAP.

HAND KERCHIEF.

NAIL POLISH

SHOES.

SOCKS.

OIL CAN.

BATHSOAP.

ATLAS

A performance of twelve unique labors within Providence in an attempt to better understand my method of working, and the various cultural and social factors that influence my design practice.

By any measure, this was an unconventional design prompt. Tasked with labors that included documenting a trip from any two locations in Providence, to writing three postcards from a local park, *Atlas* blurred the lines between the personal and the academic.

I am unsure if this was the result of a South-Asian upbringing or just a personal choice, but I have always maintained a strict separation between my personal life and my professional endeavors. Education was something to be rigorously pursued leaving little room for questions of identity or feelings to influence one's decisions. In fact, the milieu that I was raised in regarded expressions of emotions and a curiosity of one's identity as being obstacles to academic progress, completely disregarding the possibility that one's success at school was a factor of one's mental wellbeing.

Above: The cover-page form for my *Atlas* was derived from a photograph of the *Waterplace Park Bridge* in *Providence*.

Centered on two conversations; one, with myself, and another with my classmate Yoonsu Kim, the *Atlas* was the first of a series of attempts to trace a thread between my identity and my design practice. The two of us spoke of cultural practices and ways of life common to South Korea, where Yoon is from, and South India, my own home.

Simultaneously, in a series of soliloquies that punctuated each spread, I express the emotions and thoughts that accompanied my move to the U.S.. Reinforcing these thoughts are images of cultural artifacts that I encountered as I performed the twelve tasks, images of eminent political figures from books that I read, articles from the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, a popular Indian magazine in the 20th century, and advertisements that pervade the urban landscapes of both nations, marking regions of cultural commonality and contrast.

Right: Conceived as a blank slate that can be personalized by each member of the cohort, Seyong Ahn, a classmate of mine, designed several variations of *Atlas* stickers that could be used to populate the blank cover in unique ways.
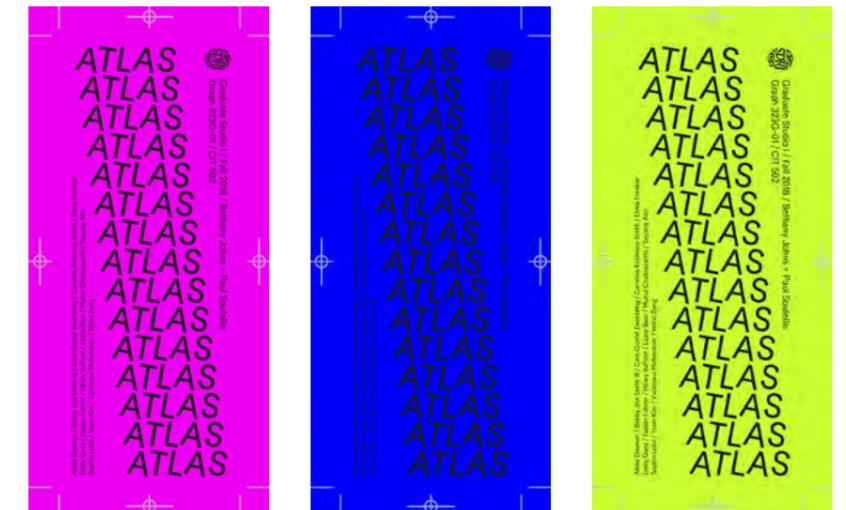
Above: A publication compiling all *Atlas* projects by the class of 2020. Cover design by Seyong Ahn.

Centered on two conversations; one, with myself, and another with my classmate Yoonsu Kim, the *Atlas* was the first of a series of attempts to trace a thread between my identity and my design practice.

"Mukul, the cultural chasm that people speak of between the east and the west, while grossly exaggerated, does very much exist. This rift isn't an immediately palpable one, but it is through the subtle banalities of daily life that one experiences it."

New York in the 50's
A Postcard from the Ocean State Job Lot

"It has been over a year since I moved to the States, and I would like to think that I have been quick to become attuned to the nuances of public life here. Culture and nationality to me, gives contours to my sense of self. And ever since I hit the one year mark here, my personal identity has come into question once again. What am I?"

An Imaginary

(Delhi. The Central Secretariat. The Prime Minister ... at his desk as Miss Marilyn Monroe undulates into his ...ice. The Chief of Protocol, looking dazed, presents the ...nguished visitor and withdraws.)

Prime Minister: Welcome to Delhi, Miss Monroe. Do ...t down. Cigarette? Did you have a nice flight?

An Imaginary Conversation: Nehru and Monroe by M.P. Bhaskaran
The Illustrated Weekly of India, October 1956 Issue.
The Brown Rockefeller Library

Yoon: "How is Bangalore as a city?"

Conversation

...ould do better. The language I communicate in is more ...evastating than his. And headlines like "Monroe Mints ...oney For India's Millions" wouldn't hurt me.

P.M: Er...yes, yes. The difficulty is where to send you ...om Delhi. Bombay has dozens of very moral Ministers, ...ho will. I am afraid, object even to your ...

Mukul: "Bangalore is a city that's struggling to find its identity. In many ways, the very thing— diversity— that strips it of an easily perceptible ethnic and cultural standing is what gives it its identity."

Crossing Cultural Bridges
Leaving Nehru's world and entering that of Monroe's, while being a privilege that not many have, presents one with some interesting cultural hurdles to navigate. The non–conformist in me commands that I stand my ground and allow my cultural proclivities to surface whereas the thriftier conformist suggests that I let my guard down and simply adapt.

What are these cultural hurdles that I speak of? Things as profound as the silence of city life, the solitude that accompanies being a student, the celebration of the individual over the collective, individual expression, the nature of public discourse, and others holding less cultural weight such as waiting to be escorted to your table at restaurants and bars.

...e Our Engineers Any Good ?
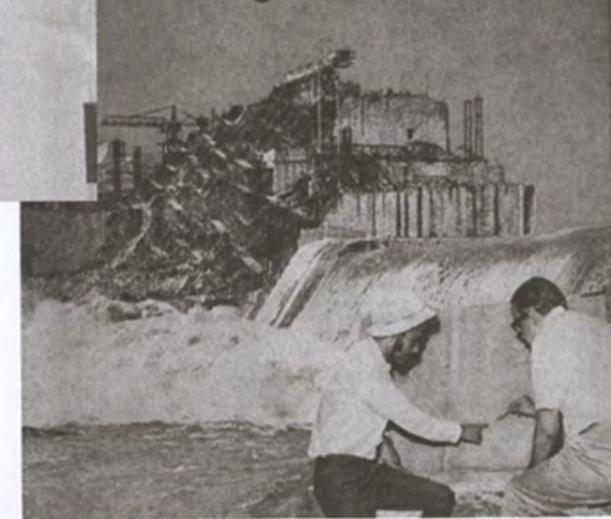
The Illustrated Weekly of India, September 1975 Issue, The Brown Rockefeller Library

Above: The opening spread poses the question: how has the move to the United States changed my conception of myself?

Continued: Each spread has three forms of typographic treatment: bold text (soliloquies); italicized (for my conversation with Yoon); and regular text (general commentary).

Silence

Sound

Yoon: "What makes something home for you?"

Yoon: "What was the most difficult thing about last year for you?"

Mukul: "What anchors me to home are the sounds and smells that pervade it. You know, hawkers selling vegetables on the street etc..."

Mukul: "The silence of it all."

"Silence is subjective, and each of us has our own threshold for it. While I enjoy silence, and positively need it for thought, it certainly doesn't help situate me to place. The irony of it all is that it is silence that's the defining characteristic of life in Providence."

Above: I documented the bus ride from *Kennedy Plaza* to *Cranston*, watching people as they hopped on and off the bus and seeing parts of Providence I had never seen before.

Internet—The Great Equalizer

Twelve Hours of Weather: Tweets about the weather from around the world.

welcome to India

West Coast, U.S.A.

East Coast, U.S.A.

Valencia, Spain

Tokyo, Japan

Sorsogon, Philippines

3:00 PM

Juan Daroqui @deVISIONnetwork

#foios desde #foios #tiempo #weather #turismo #oratge #valencia #OratgeAPunt

2:00 PM

Jimmyhoshi @jimmyhoshi

20 C in #Shinjuku Good morning !! #world #Tokyo #sky #japan #morning #summer #sunrise #jp

6:00 AM

Greg Dee @GregDeeWeather

CURRENTLY | Here is a look at current temperatures. #flwx #Tampa #weather

7:00 AM

SocialMedia 4Authors @SMMA4A

Does 3rain have a magic spell that makes us want to sleep? #weather

12:00 PM

Atomic Bethie @delerium69

Dear current #weather. Stop. The Freaking. Rain. @Montgomery-CoMD @NWS_BaltWash

8:00 AM

DaveFahy @Dave_Fahy

If you think #HurricaneFlorence is a monster I be glad you're not in the #Philippines waiting for Super #TyphoonMangkhut #Mangkhut #Typhoon #storm #weather #hurricane #Shudder

1:00 PM

censorship_is_fascism @Abolish_fascism Replying to @realDonaldTrump

God Bless #HurricaneFlorence #safety #politics #Trump #God #Weather #WeatherUpdate

9:00 AM

Ginlush @glaciaflow

This looks like a nasty fucker, America take care! #HurricaneFlorence #livewindmap #Weather

5:00 PM

Ashley Reilly @Accio_yoga

Beautiful day, nice weather so time for a walk. #walk #weather #dogsofinstagram #pitbullsofinstagram #family

4:00 PM

Morris Pondfield @mpondfield

"As #HurricaneFlorence barrels toward the #EastCoast, maybe nothing can portend the storm's wrath quite like photos taken from #space." cnb.cx/20kUyFK #NASA #Florence #NorthCarolina #South-Carolina #Virginia #Georgia #NHC #NOAA #Weather

"Mukul, don't just forget the role that the internet played in introducing you to the ideals of the west. Without it, you'd be a hopeless Luddite. Being a resident of the internet allows you to momentarily disarm yourself of any fierce allegiances to nationality, race, gender and connect with people at a human level."

10:00 AM

Scoop News PH @scoopPH20

Classes in ALL LEVELS, public and private in SORSOGON are suspended on Sept. 13, 2018 due to typhoon Ompong. #OmpongPH #news #weather

Above: Documenting twelve hours of weather through tweets on the Internet. The image above shows former President Jimmy Carter being greeted by the then Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai.

Building Bridges

"To be cosmopolitan, Mukul, is not just to be some globe trotting cultural prig. It is to constantly straddle two lines: of taking pride in one's own affiliations to nation, race, and the like, while recognizing that people and cultures are different. And your role in all of this is to expand your concern for humanity not along national or racial lines, but at a humanistic level."

Waterplace Bridge, Providence.
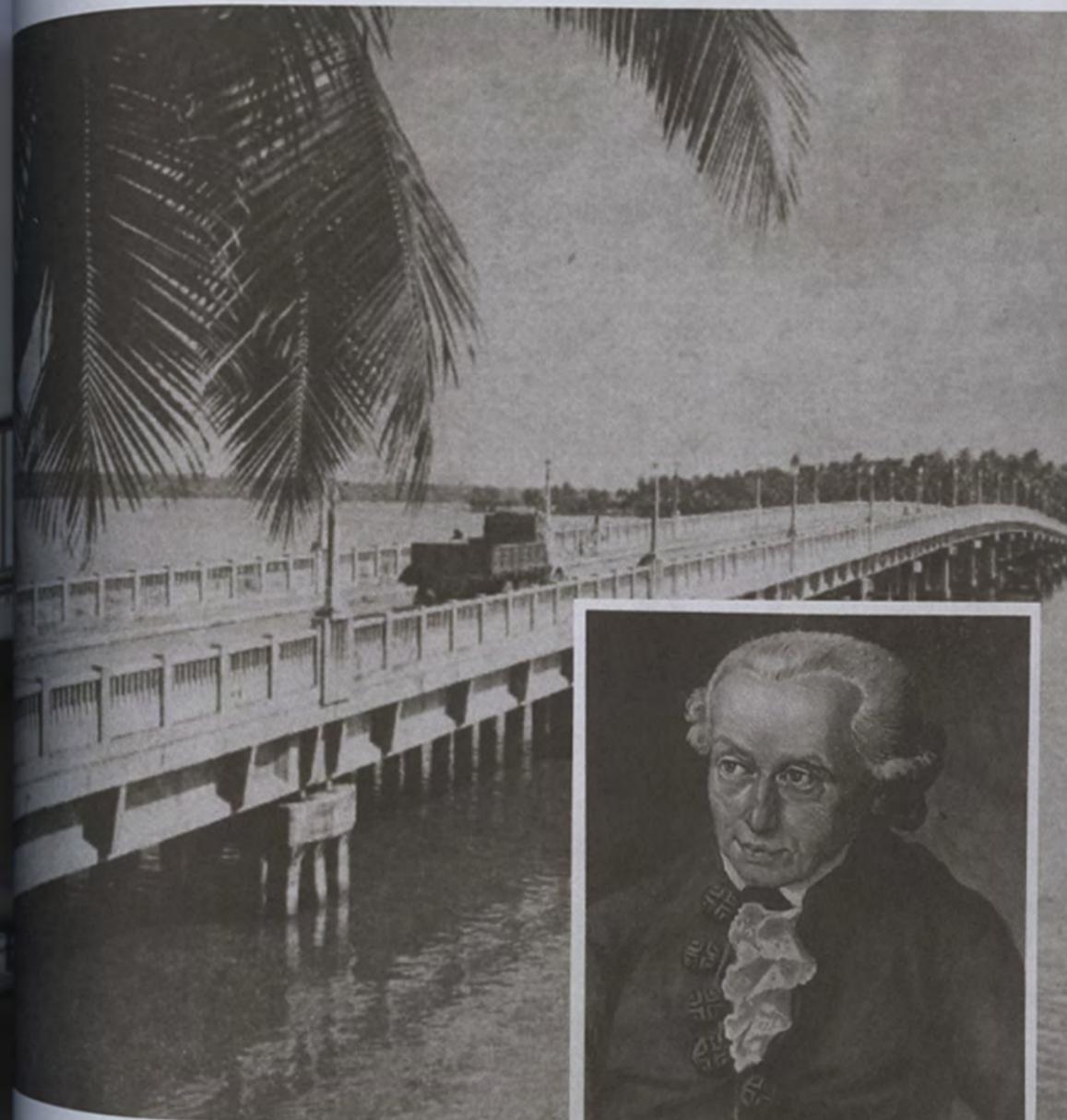
Aroor Bridge, Cochin, 1975.
The Illustrated Weekly of India, September 1975

One of the progenitors of the cosmopolitan spirit is Immanuel Kant. It was his theory of Perpetual Peace that was the origin for the idea of a League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations.

Above: It isn't all cultural chasms. Juxtaposing *Waterplace Bridge* in Providence with a South Indian bridge to signify that life isn't all that different here in the U.S..

LEARNING TO MEDIATE

A scene from Werner Herzog's 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*, centered around an opera enthusiast who is intent on building an opera-house in the Peruvian jungle.

To realize his dream, the protagonist enlists a tribe of Indians to haul his boat by hand over a mountain. To fulfill his own vision, Herzog did likewise.

Misunderstandings are the medium in which the non-communicable is communicated.

Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*

What is mediation? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "[a]gency or action as an intermediary; the state or fact of serving as an intermediate agent, a means of action, or a medium of transmission; instrumentality."

To me, apart from being creators, designers are essentially mediators of content, occupying the liminal zone between intention and realization. The act of mediation, by itself, has no intrinsic relationship to the truth. Hence, historically, it has been the translation of intent, rather than truth that has determined the success of an act of mediation.

However, if there ever was a time that a recalibration in mediation's relationship to the truth was necessary, it is now. We find ourselves in a time where information is routinely weaponized, and attention monetized. And it is amidst this unholy confluence of ideological and material circumstances that designers ought to reassert their commitment to the truth.

Someone who, in my view, has been committed to telling truths (one way or another), is the German director Werner Herzog. In several of his movies,

Herzog reliably collapses the sacred boundary between fact and fiction, using aesthetic fabrications, scripted lies, and all manner of journalistic malpractice to convey "larger truths." He terms this approach of intentionally deploying lies in the service of truth-getting, as "the ecstatic truth." To Herzog, this method gets at the emotional core of a given subject, far surpassing in accuracy the banal "accountant's truth" of data and statistics.

I find this to be a profoundly interesting strategy to take, à la Dorothea Lange's repeated restaging of the photograph of the migrant mother with her children in Pomo, California.

In the pages to come, I explore newer ways of mediating and communicating abstract concepts, and speak to a designer who routinely publishes and breaks the most urgent news stories of our time.

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BBC WORLD
BHOPAL LEGACY
"Dow accepts full responsibility"
bbcnews.com

The 20th anniversary of the Bhopal gas tragedy was a day of embarrassment for *Dow Chemicals* and the major news media around the world when the *BBC* fell victim to a hoax from a man claiming to be a *Dow* spokesperson taking full responsibility for the tragedy and announced a multi-billion dollar compensation package.

INTERVIEW
REBECCA LIEBERMAN

Rebecca Lieberman is an interaction designer at the *New York Times* covering some of the most urgent political and social issues of our time. We speak about the confluence of design and journalism, storytelling, artistic restraint, ethics, and making sense of the current moment.

Rebecca Lieberman, 2018. Photo courtesy of the designer

MC How do you describe yourself? Because you seem to operate at the intersection of journalism, visual design, code, and the news. So there is a lot that's happening here.

RL That's a tough question. I mean, I see myself as a designer. The context in which I work happens to be a journalistic one. And I think in doing so, I fulfill the capacity of a certain kind of editor in a lot of ways. But yes, the primary way that I see myself moving through the world is as a designer.

MC Great, so let's take it a step further. It looks like you alternate, and sometimes work simultaneously as a designer and an editor like you said. And your official designation is 'graphics editor.' So what does a graphics editor at the *New York Times* do?

RL Well, it's so funny. On the one hand, it's just terminology, so it doesn't really mean anything. Let's be real. But on the other, being a graphics editor means different things to different people and contexts. But anyway, within our newsroom, there are basically three teams that make up the interactive work that we do. So there's my team, which is called 'digital news design.' There's the graphics team, which is called 'graphics.' And then there's a third team, which has a totally different, expertise, and they're called interactive news. They are essentially their newsroom engineers. So they have a pretty in depth understanding of the technical infrastructure that power our interaction work.

So my team is called 'digital news design,' and we're all graphics editors. And within that, there's a range of skills specializations. There are some people like me who come more from a design background, and other folks who come with more front end de-velopment and art direction backgrounds. So everybody's a maker, but some people come more from journalism.

MC So it is clear that the lines between the design teams can be blurry. How does this play out between design and reporting teams? My work and writing of late has focused on the social role that designers can play in raising awareness about a whole host of urgent issues among the public. And I feel like being a designer in the journalistic space makes one perfectly poised to make such social change happen. Do you have room to pitch your own stories?

RL Um, I've done a little bit of reporting and I think that's what's great about being in the building is you can pitch your own stories and when you do, you can be as involved as you want.
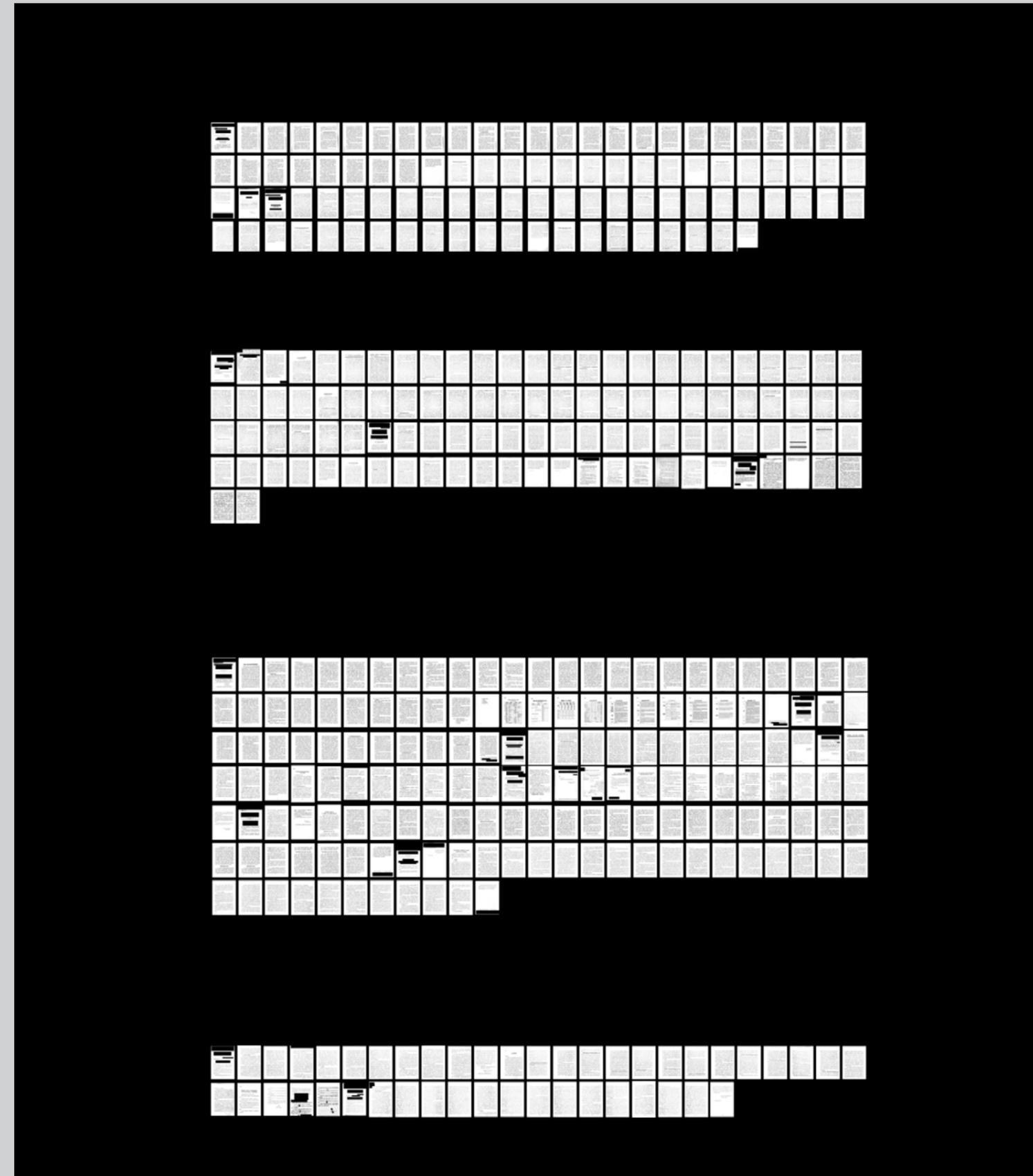
The Xinjiang Papers, November 16, 2019. Ms. Lieberman contribut-ed to the harrowing exposé revealing how the Chinese government detained and persecuted Uyghur Muslims of the Xinjiang region.

MC   That's wonderful. Now let's consider a more conventional scenario: when you receive a story, how finished would it be? And how much room do you as a designer have in determining how the story is told? Is there room to maneuver here?

RL   Yeah, sometimes a project will come to me and it's essentially a two sentence description of what the story is about. It's like "we have an idea for this," and that's one case where I'm not actually pitching the story, but have a lot of leeway to really shape what that is. And in general, I think it depends a lot on your willingness, initiative, and how much you care to do that kind of thing, of deciding how a story gets told. And it really depends on the editors, relationship building, and knowing who your audience is.

So there have been times when I've decided that a story that I just received, really needs to be a long form reported piece. Or if I know the editor who's sent me the story, and know that they're not really used to working in a collaborative way, or that they don't usually do visual stuff, that becomes a situation where I might be a little bit reticent to really try to shape the project.

Or sometimes it just comes down to lack of resources. You know, for example, if my team doesn't have a budget to get a reporter and a photo editor, but if I have an idea that's really compelling, like the Block Party story last summer, I can pitch it to the right editor and make it a reality.

MC   Let's now pivot to storytelling. You have reported on a variety of stories ranging from elections, and food, to ethnic cleansing in Xinjiang and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. This presents an interesting scenario because each story requires a different approach to storytelling with some requiring editorial restraint rather than overwrought narratives. How do you decide how a story gets told?

RL   That's a really good question. I think my short answer is that sometimes I get a story for which there's already a draft. And if the photographs don't really make sense, or the piece is too long, I will have to change it. But that's kind of the rare case.

I would say that generally the way that I would approach it is, first of all, meet with the team: the editor, reporter and the photo editor. And really, we all become, in an ideal world, collaborators on it. But sometimes I'm the one to get people to think outside the box be–cause, you know, some people at times have visual backgrounds,

Love and Pride in Alabama, June 29, 2018. Ms. Lieberman's first piece of reporting, uncovering the L.G.B.T community's fight for greater visibility and acceptance in the Bible Belt.

but a lot of people have more traditional print or just traditional journalistic backgrounds. And so they need a little touch of crazy in the room to get thoughts brewing.

But the way that I think about it is "what is the best way to tell this story?" Like, what assets do we have to work with? And I don't just mean digital assets, sometimes it is literal assets. For example, if it is a piece on Thanksgiving pies, I would think about ways to take sexy photos of actual pies.

If a story is early enough in the process, my collaborator and I go off to our separate rooms and really think about what the story really has to offer. Like is it like beautiful food? Is it firsthand images of the Guantanamo Bay complex that only our photographers have get access to? Is it, you know, data?

For example, something that we tried to do with our democratic primary election results pages and hopefully will continue to do in our general election coverage is the usage of narratives alongside data. Thinking about, you know, how we can bring more narrative onto these pages that are just a lot of numbers and how we can guide people. So one thing we did that was successful was we had reporters all over the country send us scenes from the campaign, whether it was from a bar where there was an election gathering, or a Biden watch party.

And I think it was really helpful to bring that kind of storytelling onto an otherwise typical election page.

MC This is very interesting. So I assume that even here, when deciding how best a story can be told, there is space for you to go back to the editor and say "you know what, I think we should dial down on the text. We should probably add an audio component to this piece instead." Is that the case?

RL Definitely. I mean, it's the *New York Times*, so there's always going to be a preference for the written word. With that said, I'm always going to be the one in the room being like, "make it shorter." People are not going to read that or think about how many phones scrolls that is on mobile. Like nobody's gonna read a 400 word intro.

But yeah, there's absolutely opportunity. I mean, even the Bergamo piece we did documenting the coronavirus deaths in Italy, came together really fast—faster than any other thing I've worked on for the most part. And I had a collaborator on that who was a lot more

The Coronavirus in Bergamo, Italy, March 27, 2020. A multimedia web article designed by Ms. Lieberman capturing the devastating effects of the Coronavirus in the Italian city of Bergamo. Readers are confronted by a wall of obituaries, drawing from an viral image of the obituaries section of a local Bergamo newspaper.

than China and Spain combined, many times more than the United States.

And in Italy the most deaths are in the Bergamo area. Officially 1,969 people have died there,

technically skilled with code than I was, because I knew I wanted to do a lot with transitions and fading between sections of photography and text.

So this was a story where we immediately knew that there was going to be photos. We knew there was going to be some text, and after I saw some of the initial filings, I asked if this story was going to be character-driven; like are we following these doctors and medical workers in Bergamo? Are our timestamps important? Is there a sense of how this unfolds over time? And then it became clear that these factors weren't the case. So here is a story where, as we began designing the web page, nothing was written, which gave us a lot of freedom.

And so we decided that we were going to have sections of photos that feel like they were written through the story.

And then there will be a section of text to break the photos because they were depressing, like a breather. And so that was the structure. And then we just gave it to the reporter and he wrote it, you know? And later we had to figure out how to weave his writing into the photo sections because, you know, we didn't want it to feel like any other multimedia storytelling project that split images with text.

And I remembered that I had seen this viral video about the Bergamo newspaper and how many pages of obituaries there were. And so I mentioned as an idea "what if we did something with that for the top of the story?" And so we decided to lead with the obituary.

MC   It's so interesting to hear about how you and the team put it together because I found the Bergamo piece to be very moving. I think what was so successful to me about the piece was that it avoided the kind of guilt inducing tragedy tourism that critics like Susan Sontag, and John Berger criticized in news coverage of disasters and adversity.

It was almost as if each ubiquitous gesture on the phone was conferred a deeper purpose, where a scroll took the reader to a wall of text resembling a graveyard, and a click, into photographs of the homes of people suffering. Are these intentional moves? Because to implicate viewers in the story like this requires thinking simultaneously about larger questions about readership, narrative, and storytelling, and more logistical questions like web interactive gestures, word counts and scrolls. How do you approach a story like this?

Pradalunga, March 15
She was barely conscious when Red Cross workers arrived.

Cepino-Tulo, March 15
Neighbors locked down and isolated from each other, can do little more than w...

The Coronavirus in Bergamo, Italy, March 27, 2020. A multimedia web article designed by Ms. Lieberman capturing the devastating effects of the Coronavirus in the Italian city of Bergamo. Sobering scenes of life in Bergamo accompany pieces of text.

RL No, that's a really good question. I think they are related. You know, as for the larger questions, the one thing that we do a lot, and I can't speak for other news organizations, is that we try not to hide information behind clicks, and generally keep our interactions simple, so that people can understand issues clearly.

Where I think it helped is in our election coverage. I was a big advocate for making our tables more scannable and like actually truncating them. And that way the public just sees the most im-portant results and you inform them. But I think generally we have to operate under the assumption that people are lazy and people are not going to spend a lot of time with something and people are not going to click into whatever sort of interactive device.

MC Yes and on the flip side, have you had situations where, even though you had the opportunity to include elaborate narrative ele-ments in the form of interactive gestures, you chose not to because they would divert from the integrity of the story? In other words, have you chosen not to narrativize some stories and just present them in their original form?

RL Yeah, that's an interesting question. Mmm. There definitely have been times when I've gotten a story and felt like things were working as they were, and didn't need my involvement. So I just leave it alone. Also because when the design team gets involved in things, we have a whole system for doing custom pieces and it just makes more work for everybody.

So one of the first things I worked on was this big investigation about sexual assault at a *Ford* factory. And it was already a heavily reported investigative piece. They happened to have these incred-ible portraits of the women, and they had audio testimony of them because one of the reporters had a background in radio. So she had conducted great audio interviews with them. So here was a case where there was evidence straight from the people which was very powerful by itself, and felt like my involvement wasn't as necessary.

MC One of the reasons why I am drawn to your work was that it is urgent, it has a wide reach, and in a very real sense, helps craft public understanding of social, economic and political issues. Do you ever get a chance to step back and reflect on the work you do, or does the daily grind keep you from accessing such moments of pause?

RL Yeah. I would say I'm so absorbed in the day to day that it's very rare that I do that. But sometimes, like on election nights when

How Tough Is It to Change a Culture of Harassment? Ask Women at Ford, December 19, 2017. An example of aesthetic restraint, Ms. Lieberman chose not to intervene by way of in-teractive storytelling devices because powerful testimonies were already being shared.

"A lot of women do not complain."

SHIRLEY THOMAS-MOORE

▶ LISTEN 0:32

How Tough Is It to Change a Culture of Harassment? Ask Women at Ford, December 19, 2017. Harrowing testimonies on sexual harass-ment through audio clips accompanied portraits of the women who chose to share their experiences.

I think about how many people are looking at our pages and how many people know what's going on and what to pay attention to, that's a moment where I think, "holy shit, like people are looking at my work! And people's understanding of what's happening at this current moment is shaped by work that I am doing."

Also, because of this whole coronavirus crisis, I've just been very reflective about everything and feeling grateful for the work that I have been a part of at the *Times*. There recently was a 3D piece on coughing, which I didn't work on, but was amazing. But back to your question: I am sometimes reflective, but usually just caught up in the day-to-day grind.

MC That's totally understandable. Now, bringing our conversation back to the current moment. What kind of work have you been doing at the *Times* of late?

RL I'm doing all coronavirus work and it's all fairly depressing. I was joking with my colleagues the other day that somehow, I've ended up on all the depressing projects! I worked on the Bergamo story, I worked on this obituaries piece. I'm currently working on a piece about healthcare workers, so that's really interesting.

MC Finally, let's pivot to some personal stuff. So you've been covering a stream of sobering and less than cheerful topics of late. What kind of impact has it had on your personal life, and how have you been weathering all of this?

RL Mmm, good question. I think working on the elections was different cause all it really required was limiting other news intake. I think one limiting news to just having other outlets that feel nice. Like, I've been knitting a lot — you know, this hat. I always miss making stuff with my hands, but I'm okay. And I'm just trying to find delight and creativity in work that is depressing.

You know, even working on the Bergamo obituaries piece, I was really trying to think about how we could make the project reflective and beautiful. I think there always are opportunities to introduce beauty or joy into work that is otherwise sobering.

MC And now that the coronavirus has thrown a wrench in everyone's lives, do you see it having any long last effects on the field of journalism itself? How do you think your work will change, if at all? Any silver linings that you can think of?

RL Probably, I don't know what they are. As for silver linings, I think personally—and this may sound trite— it's made me have an appreciation for the work I do and has given me a sense of purpose. It's given me structure, and a reason for me to wake up in the morning. It has also made me appreciate the people that I work with because I miss them a lot.

But on the flip side, the *Times*, being an old school organization was always resistant to remote work, believing that to make a newspaper, everyone had to be in the building. I think this crisis, having forced us to work remotely, has convinced the leadership that we can make a print newspaper with everyone working from home. That's a reassuring outcome, I think.

MC Well, that truly is a reassuring outcome! Rebecca, thanks so much for such a warm and insightful conversation today. I will be in touch. Take care.

Love and Pride in Alabama, June 29, 2018. Ms. Lieberman's first piece of reporting, uncovering the L.G.B.T community's fight for greater visibility and acceptance in the Bible Belt.

Poster Outcomes: One of the many forms
that were derived from the poster
generating tool.

ON THIS DAY: ECO'S CHAMBER

A web-based poster generating tool to celebrate the ideas of the late Italian semiotician, philosopher, and novelist, Umberto Eco.

The first day of spring 2019 began with an interesting exercise: refer to the *New York Times' On This Day* section and choose one event that you will use as the basis of your work for the next month. As chance would have it, it was the two year death anniversary of Umberto Eco.

Like other preeminent thinkers of our time, Eco too had some overarching concepts that pervaded his vast repertoire of work. His fascination with fakes and hyperreality, the innate human affinity for conspiracies and tribalism, and the allure of utopianism all made repeated appearances in his publications.

In an attempt to impart Eco's ideas in a form that would serve as a counterpart to his books, I designed a website that enabled users to read about a specific idea of his with a poster generator on the side. That way, each user could take part in the learning process and take back a piece of that learning through a poster.

Umberto Eco
- The Hyperreal
- The Utopian
- The Tribalistic
- The Conspiratorial

On This Day

02. 16. 2019

Event: Umberto Eco's Death
Date: 02. 16. 2019
Grad Studio II
Mukul Chakravarthi
RISD Spring 2019
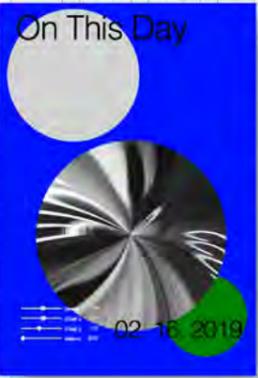
How does a person feel when looking at the sky? He thinks that he doesn't have enough tongues to describe what he sees. Nevertheless, people have never stopping describing the sky, simply listing what they see... We have a limit, a very discouraging, humiliating limit: death. That's why we like all the things that we assume have no limits and, therefore, no end. It's a way of escaping thoughts about death. We like lists because we don't want to die.

01 / Homepage: Background on the *On This Day* project and a poster tool to manipulate Umberto Eco himself, using deformative sliders.

04 / Tribalism: Sport, to Eco, long played an important role as forces of diversion, stealing the public's attention away from urgent matters. Today however, sport has been weaponized to sow disunity and amplify dormant tribal instincts.

Umberto Eco
- The Hyperreal
- The Utopian
- The Tribalistic
- The Conspiratorial

The Tribalistic

02. 16. 2019

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Mukul Chakravarthi
RISD Spring 2019

"Chatter then will be phatic discourse that has become an end in itself, but sports chatter is something more, a continuous phatic discourse that deceitfully passes itself off as talk of the City and its Ends. Born as the raising to the nth power of that initial (and rational) waste that is sports recreation, sports chatter is the glorification of Waste, and therefore the maximum point of Consumption. On it and in it the consumer civilization man actually consumes himself (and every possibility of thematizing and judging the enforced consumption to which he is invited and subjected)."

Umberto Eco
- The Hyperreal
- The Utopian
- The Tribalistic
- The Conspiratorial

The Hyperreal

The Hyperreal

02. 16. 2019

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Grad Studio II
Mukul Chakravarthi
RISD Spring 2019
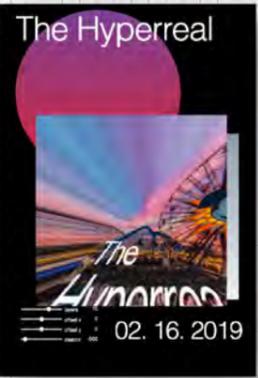
"...You risk feeling homesick for Disneyland," he concludes, "where the wild animals don't have to be coaxed. Disneyland tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can."

02 / Hyperrealism: Dissatisfied with reality, Eco felt that humans increasingly looked to realistic fabrications, like theme parks, simulations, and film for jouissance.

05 / Conspiracies: Arguably the subject Eco is most famous for, conspiracies to him are the most effective means by which an enemy can be invented, and support garnered. As long as an unknowable, unseen force exists in the minds of people, popular support is gathered, and the status quo, maintained.

Umberto Eco
- The Hyperreal
- The Utopian
- The Tribalistic
- The Conspiratorial

The Conspiratorial

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Grad Studio II
Mukul Chakravarthi
RISD Spring 2019

To imagine secret societies and conspiracy is a way not to react to the social and political life. Because you say, "We don't know who they are. We cannot react without reasoning." So it is a way to keep people far from the political environment. Conspiracies do exist. Probably in this moment in New York there is an economic group making a conspiracy in order to buy three banks. But if they succeed, they are immediately discovered.

Umberto Eco
- The Hyperreal
- The Utopian
- The Tribalistic
- The Conspiratorial

The Myth of Superman

02. 16. 2019

Event: Umberto Eco's Death
Date: 02. 16. 2019
Grad Studio II
Mukul Chakravarthi
RISD Spring 2019

The real hero is always a hero by mistake; he dreams of being an honest coward like everybody else. If it had been possible he would have settled the matter otherwise, and without bloodshed. He doesn't boast of his own death or of others'. But he does not repent. He suffers and keeps his mouth shut; if anything, others then exploit him, making him a myth, while he, the man worthy of esteem, was only a poor creature who reacted with dignity and courage in an event bigger than he was.

03 / Utopianism: Eco found fantastic creations like *Superman* fascinating. Paralyzed by the exigencies of real crises, we grasp at Utopian inventions to rescue us to safety.

Poster Outcomes: Eco spoke of four cultural opiates that have gripped humanity from the early ages. They are elaborated in the posters above.

Layers: 17
Offset X: 238
Offset Y: 89
Dilation: -640

Layers: 54
Offset X: 400
Offset Y: 89
Dilation: -640

Layers: 54
Offset X: 32
Offset Y: 90
Dilation: 343
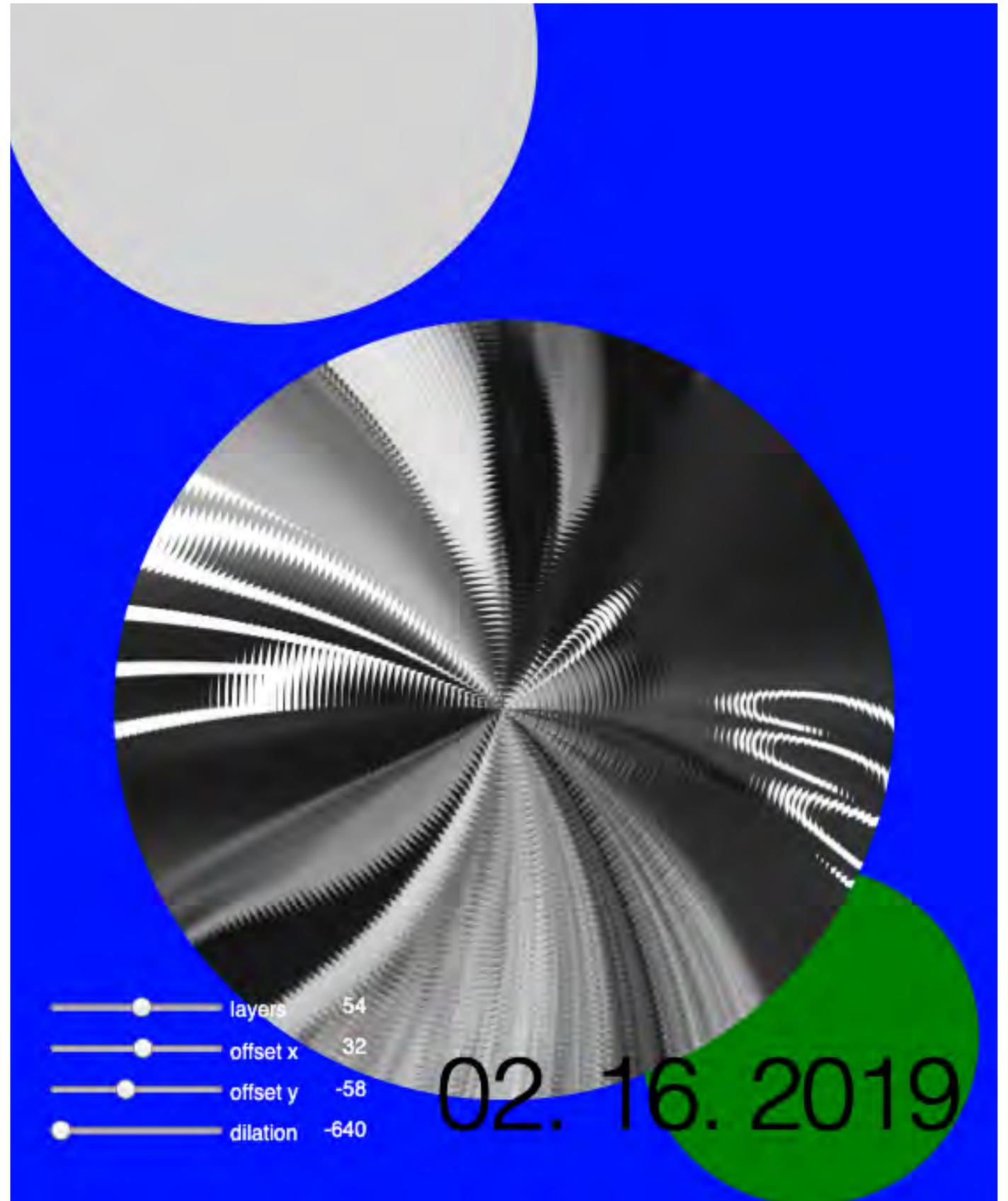
layers   54
offset x   32
offset y   -58
dilation   -640

02. 16. 2019

Above: The sliders determine how abstract the user wants the image to be. The user could split the image into several layers, move the image along the x and y axes, and warp the image using the dilation option.

ECO'S CHAMBER

Meta-posters: With the ability to re-upload imagery into the poster tool, users derived interesting versions of their former posters by further manipulating them.
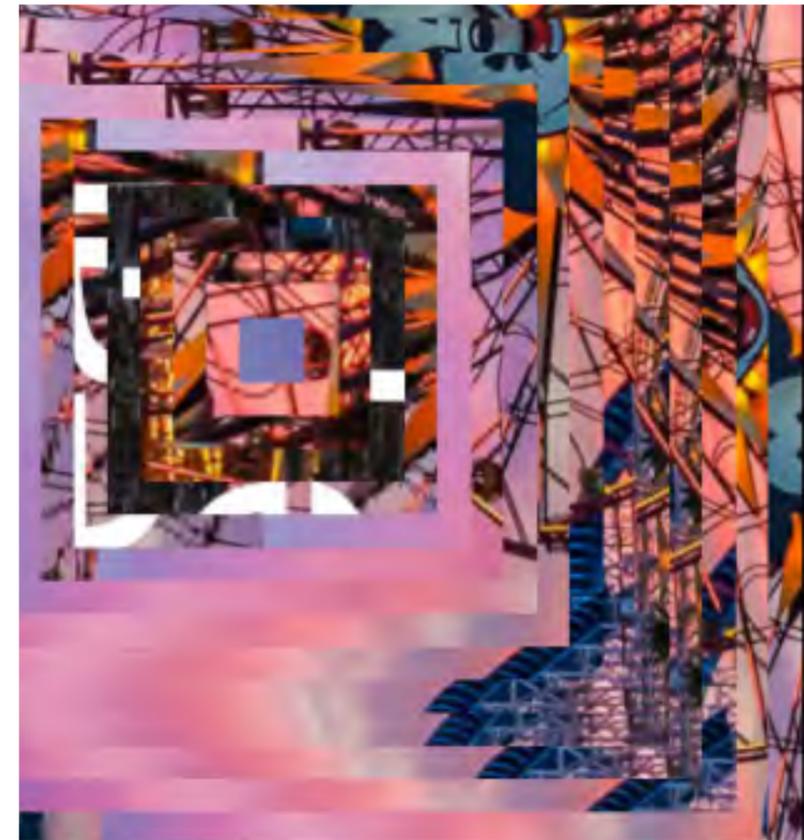
Layers: 61
Offset X: -165
Offset Y: 332
Dilation: 250

layers   61
offset x   13
offset y   68
dilation   -640

02. 16. 2019

Layers: 48
Offset X: 120
Offset Y: 498
Dilation: -342

Above: The sliders determine how abstract the user wants the image to be. The user could split the image into several layers, move the image along the x and y axes, and warp the image using the dilation option.
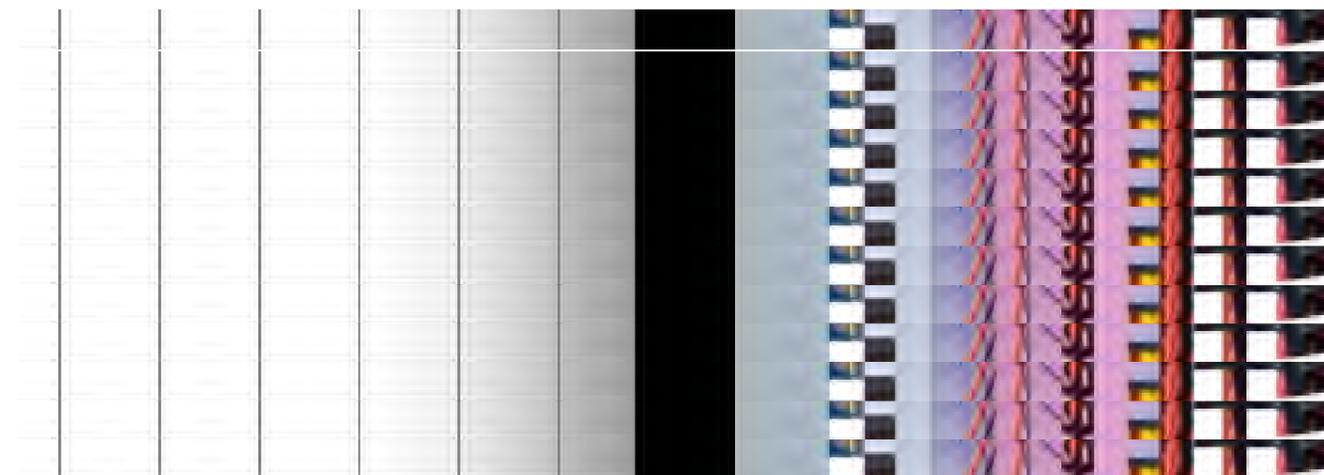
Above: The *Hyperrealism* posters yielded particularly interesting forms owing to the warped effects on the type forms on them.

ECO'S CHAMBER

Hyperreal Meta-poster: With the ability to re-upload imagery into the poster tool, users derived interesting versions of their former posters by further manipulating them.

Layers: 12
Offset X: 41
Offset Y: 367
Dilation: -632

Layers: 36
Offset X: 08
Offset Y: 106
Dilation: -632
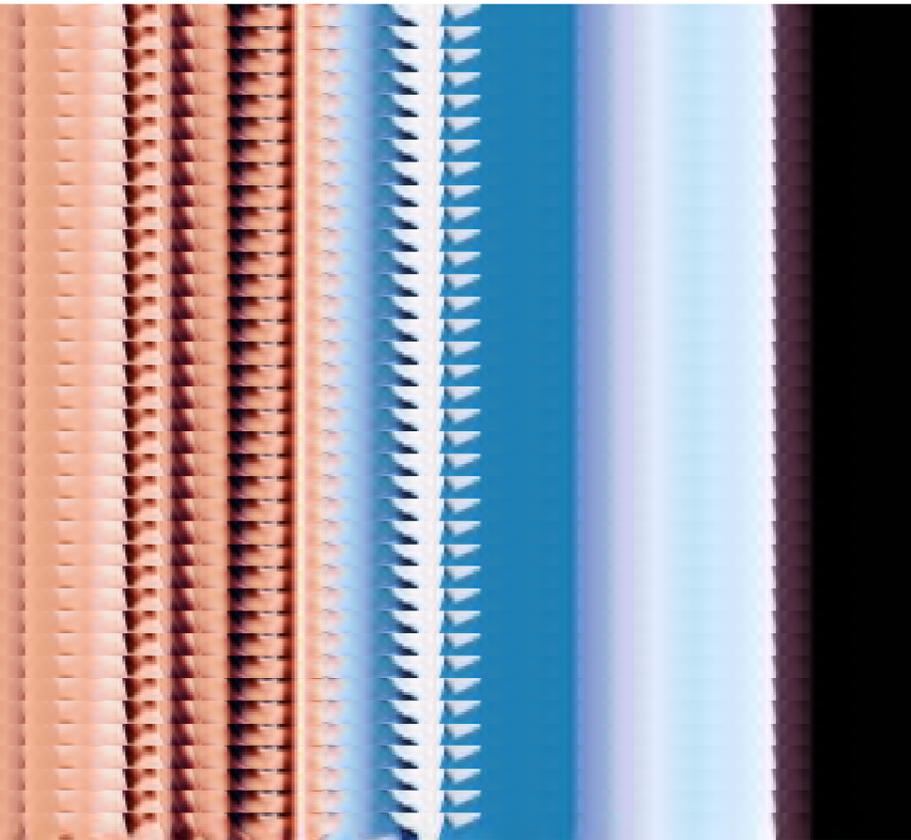
Layers: 81
Offset X: 456
Offset Y: 209
Dilation: 508

Superman
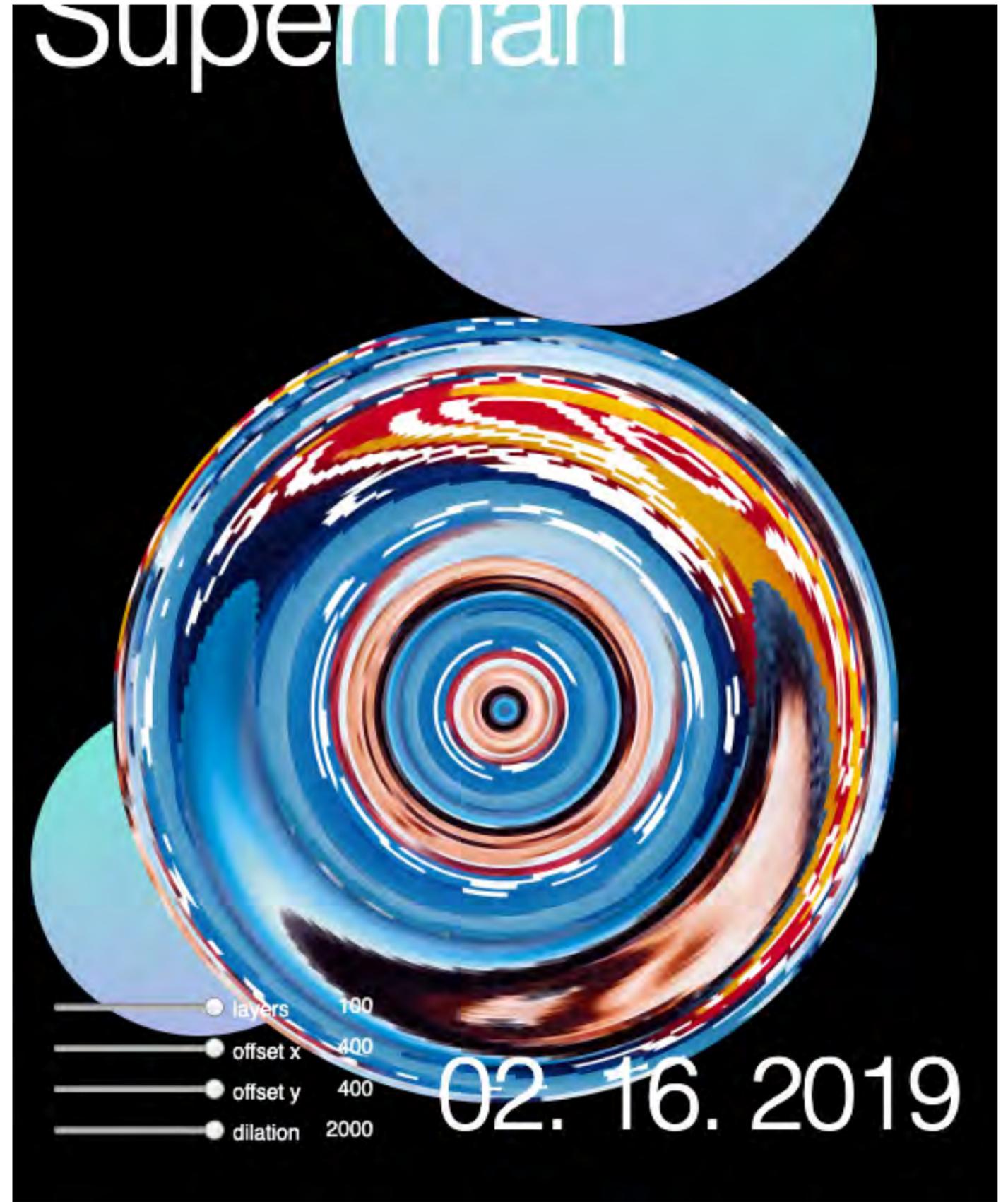
layers   100
offset x   400
offset y   400
dilation   2000

02. 16. 2019

Above: The sliders determine how abstract the user wants the image to be. The user could split the image into several layers, move the image along the x and y axes, and warp the image using the dilation option.

Meta-posters: With the ability to re-upload imagery into the poster tool, users derived interesting versions of their former posters by further manipulating them.

Above:
Layers: 38
Offset X: 0
Offset Y: 0
Dilation: 189

Right:
Layers: 90
Offset X: 18
Offset Y: 0
Dilation: 511
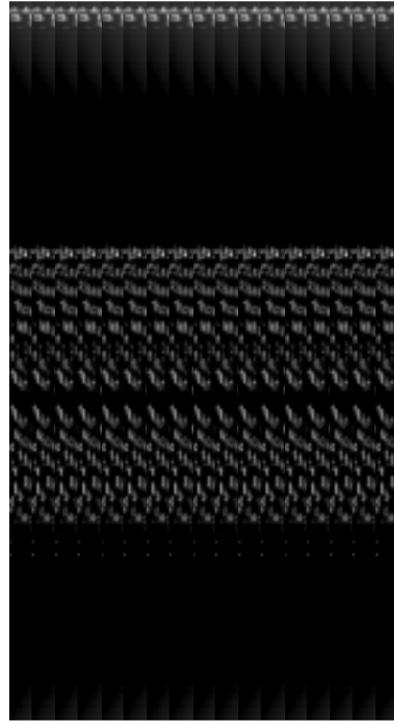
Below:
Layers: 11
Offset X: 300
Offset Y: 0
Dilation: -346
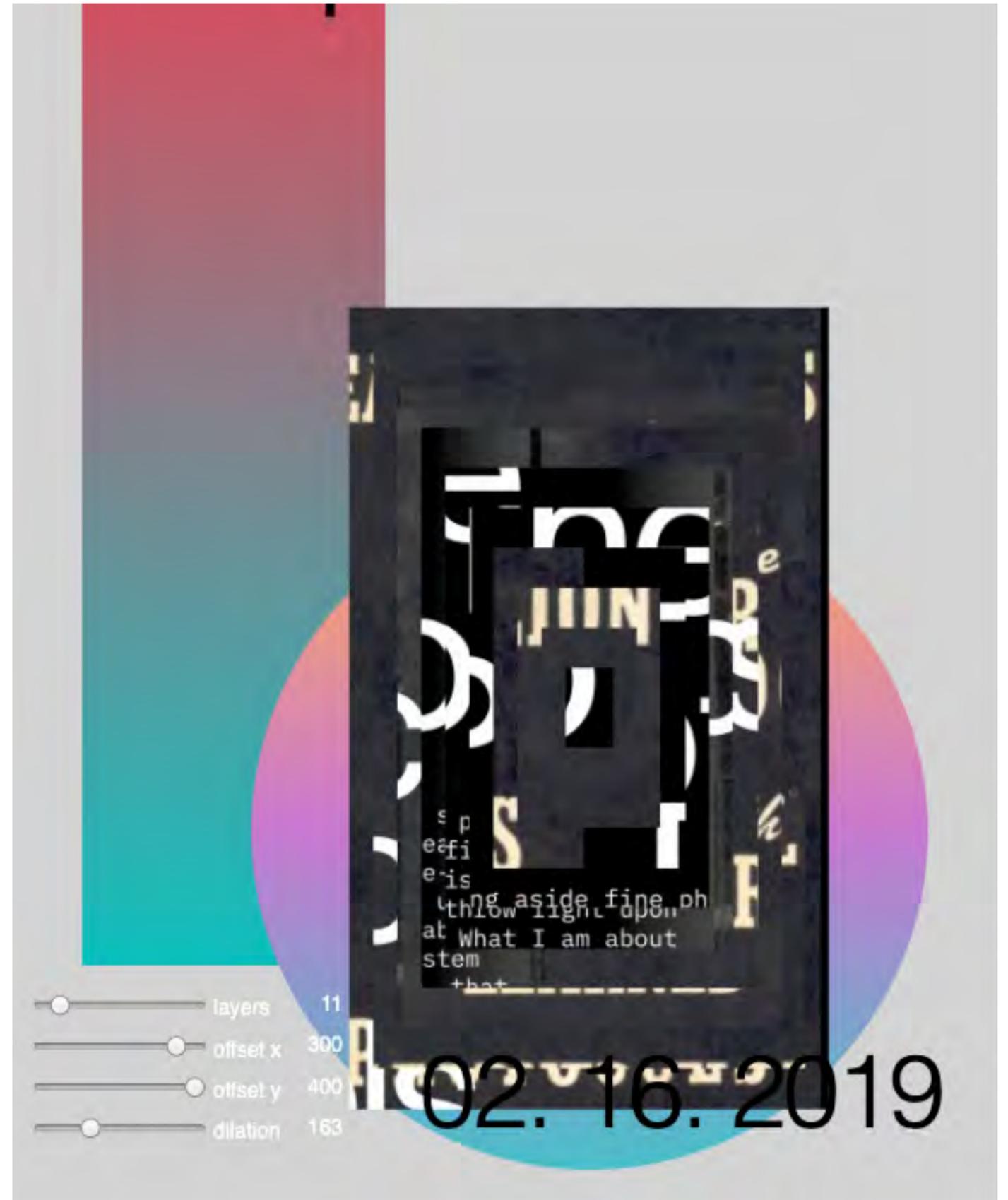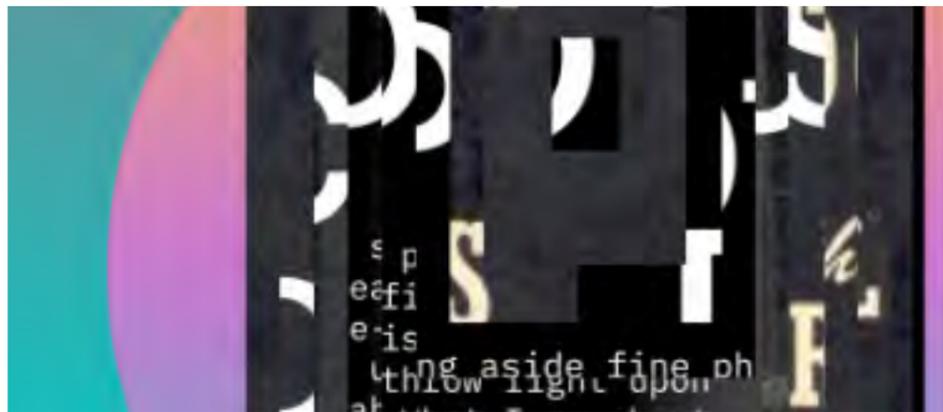
Above: The sliders determine how abstract the user wants the image to be. The user could split the image into several layers, move the image along the x and y axes, and warp the image using the dilation option.
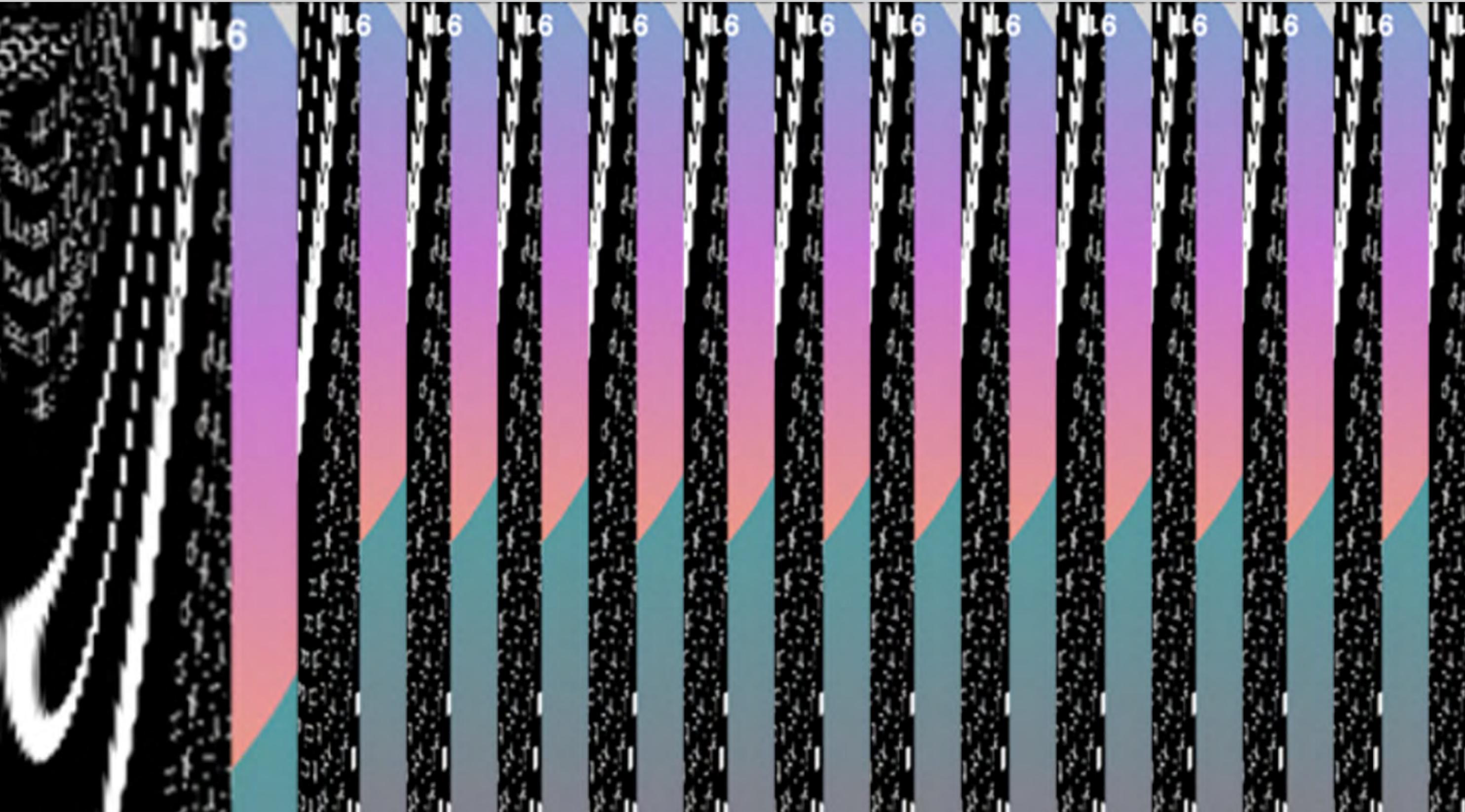
Conspiracy Meta-poster: With the ability to re-upload imagery
into the poster tool, users derived interesting versions of
their former posters by further manipulating them.

GRADUATE SEMINAR II

SPRING 2019
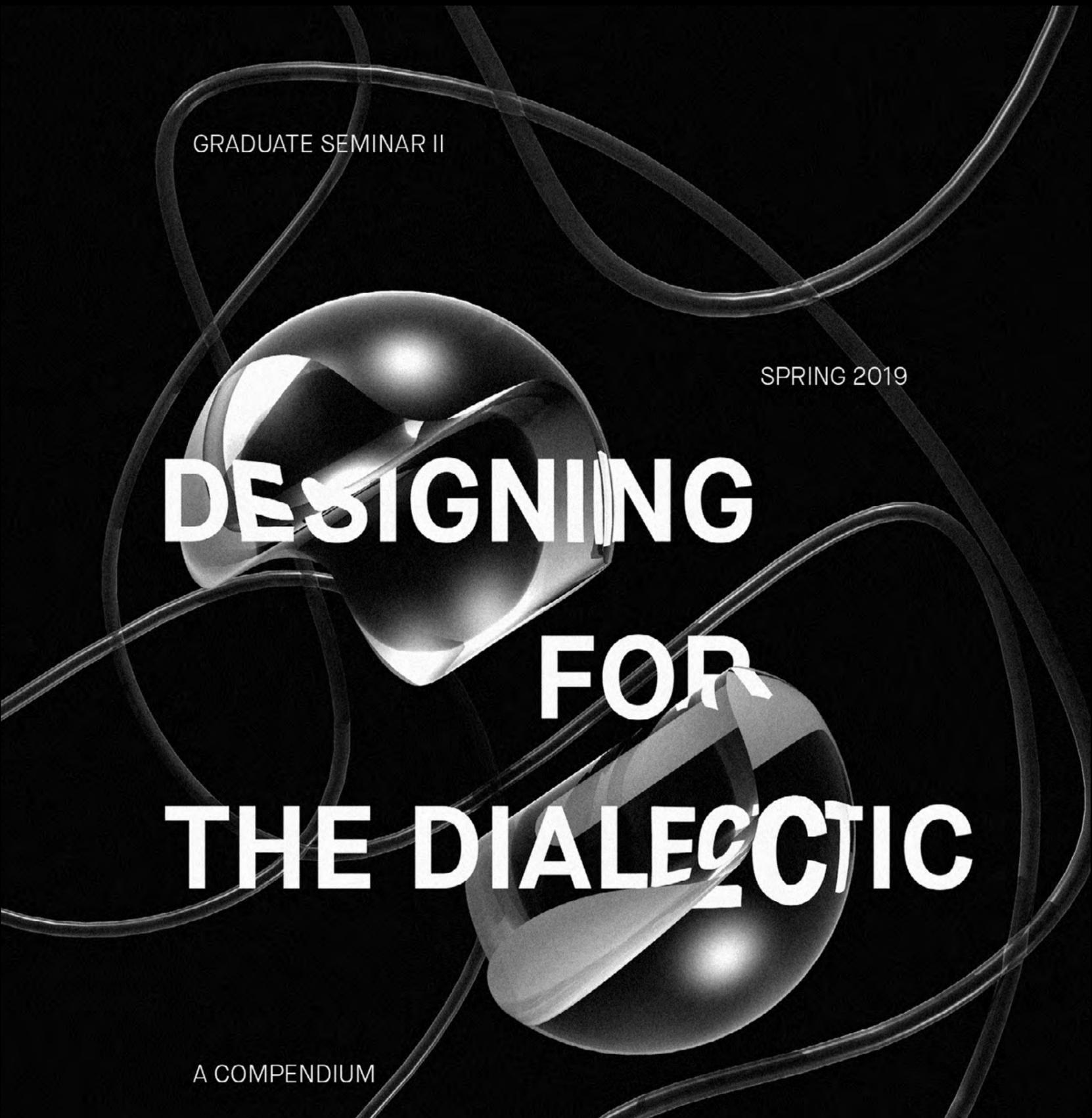
DESIGNING FOR THE DIALECTIC

A COMPENDIUM

The cover of the compendium depicting two parts of a single sphere, alluding to the structure of a dialectic.

DESIGNING FOR THE DIALECTIC

A compendium containing recollections, writing, and investigations toward forming a research plan for the thesis year.

Year: Spring 2019
Typology: Editorial
Dimensions: 5.8 x 8.5 in

Paper: Mohawk Strathmore Soft Gray 80c
Typefaces: Maison Neue, by Milieu Grotesque and ITC Century by ITC.

The *Thesis Compendium* was our first attempt at articulating a thesis research plan. Connecting what were previously isolated islands of research interests, the goal of this exercise was to identify underlying thematic and conceptual threads that spanned our work up to this point. As a consequence, we could narrow our lines of inquiry specifically to those research interests that would pave the way for our thesis the following year.

MY LEARNINGS
I learned that as an individual, I have always gravitated toward territories where dialectical tensions (in the *Hegelian* sense) ran high; where theses and antitheses fiercely collided.

In architecture, we referred to such arenas of opposition as thresholds, or edge conditions. And it was at these very sites that human encounters, conflict, and learning, were at their most intense. I have always enjoyed making work for, and within these spaces of dialectical oppositions.

For example, whether it was the Reverse Colonial Project[1] where I highlighted the importance of the colonies in shaping the English language, or reconstructing the Indian Habit Chart[2] to suit the 21st century, I was using graphic design as a means to weigh in on fiercely debated subjects, steeped in histories of colonization and political paternalism. In other words, by focusing on things

PROMPT

This is stage 01: Where I receive a design prompt. My immediate impulse is to look at the design prompt through the lens of culture, and derive my inspiration and constraints from that perspective.

EXPAND

Situate the prompt within a larger field of inquiry to which it belongs. Example: For Indian habit charts on Page 47, I contextualized the habit chart within the larger political order of the 1970s, and posed the question of how I can reconstruct it to suit the current moment.

CONTEXTUALIZE

What are the modern connotations of the field? Example: If I were to reconstruct Habit Charts for the 21st century, how could I make them reflect and address issues of the present day? Those issues could be cultural, economic, or political.

ECONOMIC   POLITICAL   CULTURAL

INTERSECT

Define the prompt within economic or political terms. How do the definitions differ? Are there points of coincidence or overlaps? What are they?

MAP

What kind of outcomes/phenomena do the intersections of these disparate frameworks result in? Map these phenomena.
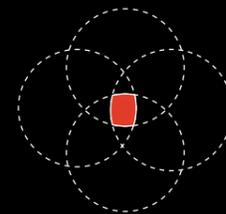
IDENTIFY

Take a closer look at these phenomena. Who are the primary actors? Who affects whom? Are there tensions?

THE EFFECTORS
THE AFFECTED
THE CATALYSTS

INTERVENE, OR NOT

Having identified the effectors, the affected, and the catalysts, understand the nature of their relations, and define how you want to change them.

Left: Like an architect running a site study before an intervention, my method of addressing any design prompt involves a contextual inquiry into how I can either improve the current state of cultural affairs through my intervention, or simply improve the discourses around important subjects.

that have become ubiquitous fixtures of our lives, like language, or dated educational devices, I can unearth their histories, and change how we speak about them in the future. In essence, I was decentering discourses.

An equally significant learning from the compendium exercise was my affinity for aesthetic honesty. Drawing from the work of figures such as Lina Bo Bardi, Renzo Piano, Carlo Scarpa, and Constantin Brancusi, I noticed that each of them operated with a simple rule: show a structure for how it was put together; and reveal a material in its purest, most unadulterated form. It was that reverence for material honesty and structural transparency that I admired. To them, there ceased to be a distinction between structure and form; the structure, in fact, was the form. To me, each of these designers was, in a small way, breaking the Brechtian fourth wall. Design wasn't about aesthetic artifice anymore. And that was tremendously inspiring to me. Buoyed by this realization, I too aspired to produce work that was honest and stayed true to the structural constituents of any design exercise.

I learned that as an individual, I have always gravitated toward territories where dialectical tensions ran high; where theses and antitheses fiercely collided.
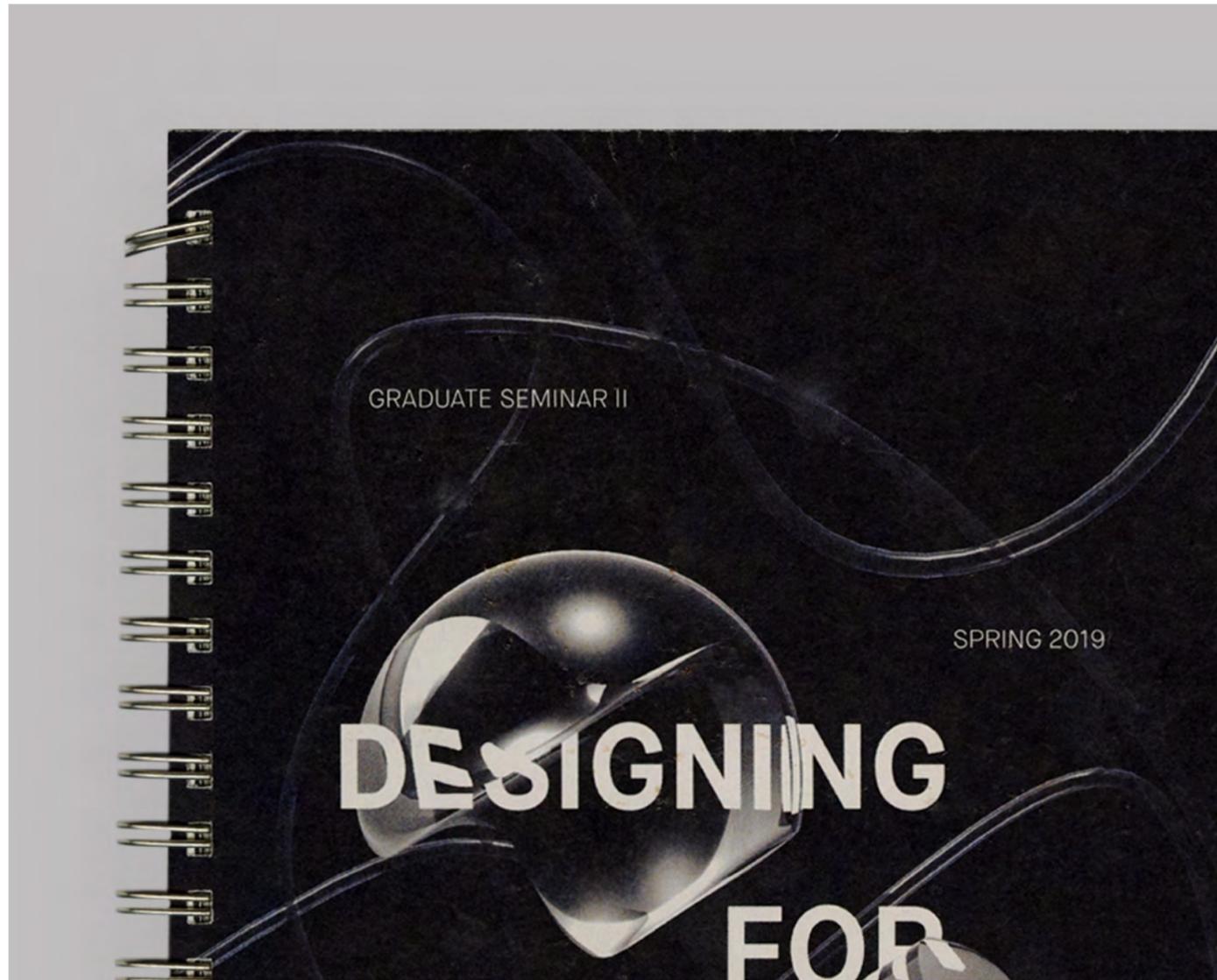
Cover Page: The cover of the compendium depicting two parts of a single sphere, alluding to the structure of a dialectic.
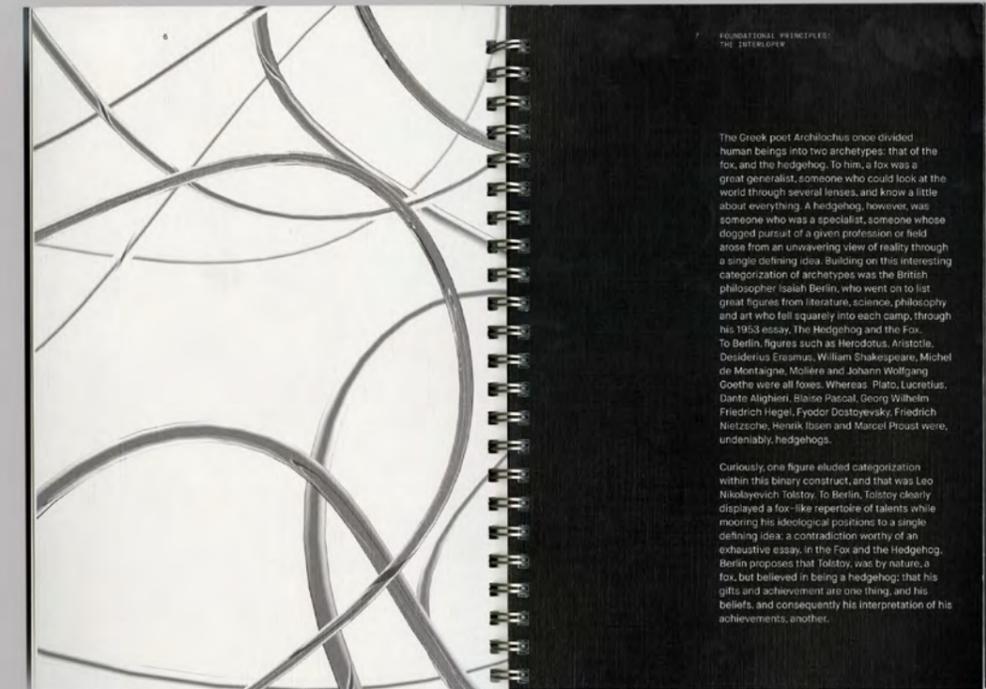
Of Hedgehogs and Foxes: The compendium began with an introspective essay where I speak of the Greek poet Archilocus who divided human beings into Hedgehogs (specialists) and Foxes (generalists). I considered myself a cross between the two: perhaps a raccoon?

Critical Terms: The compendium contained a section dedicated to terms, concepts and phrases that were important to our subsequent thesis investigations.

Critical Work: Making sense of what were previously impulsive aesthetic choices was an important step towards understanding my practice. Seen above are NLÉ's *Makoko Floating School*, Lina Bo Bardi's *Sesc Pompeia*, Carli Scarpa's *Brion Cemetery*, and Renzo Piano's *Pompidou Center* in Paris.

Structural Honesty: Any work of design that exposes its inner workings, and lays bear the source of its structural integrity interests me because of the inherent honesty behind that exposure.

22
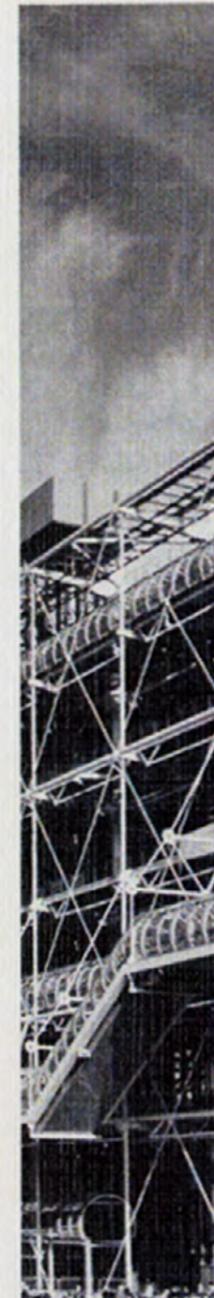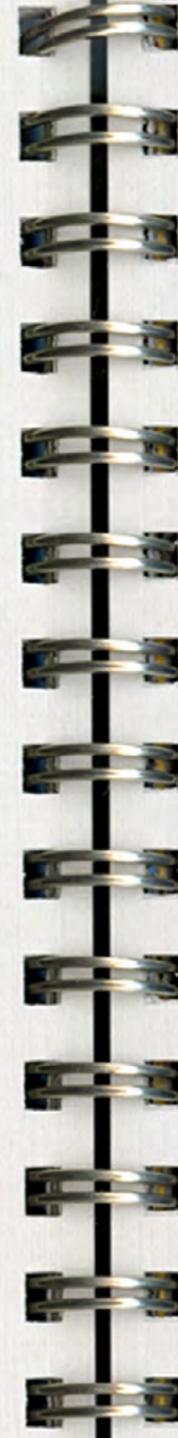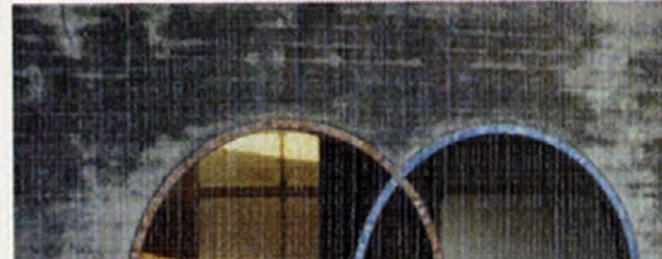
SIMPLE MYTHOLOGIES

A motion poster series capturing some of the prevailing political myths of our time.

It is said that when the French cultural theorist Roland Barthes walked into a local barber shop in Paris in 1955, he was given a copy of the *Paris Match* maga- zine to read as he waited for his turn. On the cover, he noticed, was a young black soldier in French uniform saluting what seemed to be the French tricolor outside the frame.

Barthes found the image to be powerful because it symbol- ized something far beyond the stern countenance of a young soldier. Eschewing any explicit denotations of Frenchness or militariness, the genius of the image was to connote the greatness of the French empire, where all her citizens, regard- less of race, served under her flag. The boy was used as a

signifier, and unstinting imperial devotion was what he signified.

The *Paris Match* cover, to Barthes, was a sophisticated example of a myth. Simply put, a myth was an idea or concept that was naturalized—made to look unquestionably obvious and inherent to the human condition—to serve the inter- ests of the ruling class. An example of a myth, as given by Barthes, was the promotion of wine in France as the drink of the proletariat; a great equalizer that was life-giving and pure, completely avoiding the harm- ful health effects of the drink.

Similarly, we find ourselves in a world inundated by such myths. Take for example the 30th anniversary of Nike's *Just Do It* campaign:

Left: A still from one of the five motion posters that make up the project.
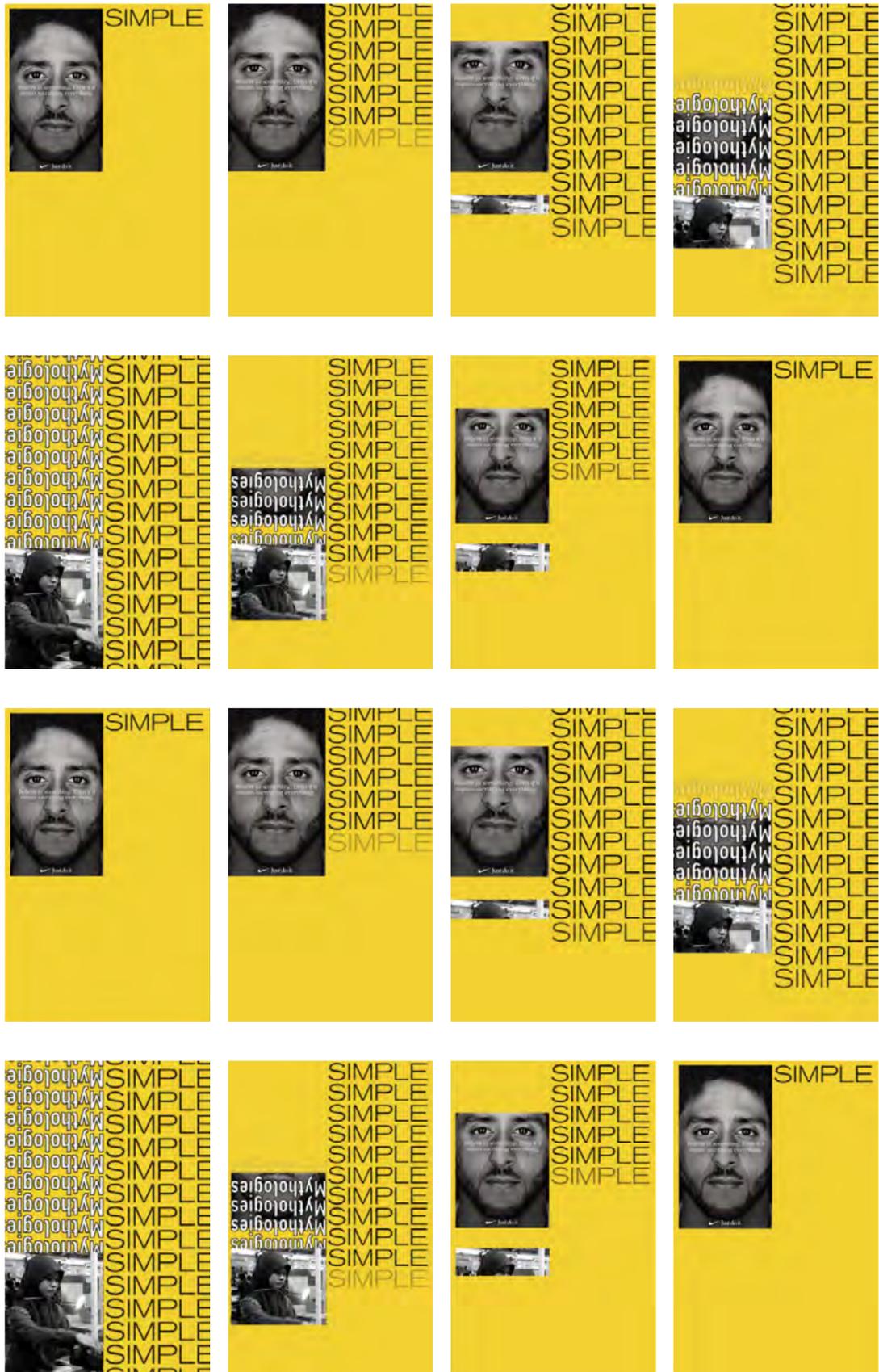
Capitalist Activism: Juxtaposition of Nike's *Just Do It* campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick with a picture of an Indonesian child working in one of the company's many workshops.

Nike chose as the face of the campaign Colin Kaepernick, the NFL quarterback who rose to prominence for kneeling during the national anthem as a way to protest racial injustice in the U.S.. His actions caused a furore about the state of race relations in the nation. Nike, on the other hand, sensed an opportunity. It launched a campaign with Kaepernick's face on billboards and commercials with the slogan "Believe in something, even it means sacrificing everything"— followed by their iconic "Just do it" line. This, to me, was a cynical capitalist ploy disguised as racial activism. One need only do a simple accounting of Nike's supply chains and production house conditions to be disabused of any notions of moral integrity on the part of the corporation.

What was astonishing was that despite the obvious duplicity behind the campaign, Nike's Labor Day sales went up by 31%, almost double that of the previous year. This was Barthes' myth, in its metastasized 21st century form. Far from being the lone infraction of the year, Nike's sleight of hand was quickly matched by Pepsi's co-option of Black Lives Matter protest imagery by having a nonchalant Kendall Jenner offer a can of Pepsi to a policeman. Interestingly, facing strident backlash, Pepsi chose to withdraw the commercial. This project is a commentary on the mythologies that surround us.

Right: An image from a *Pepsi* ad posted on *YouTube*, starring Kendall Jenner and featuring the song "Lions" by Skip Marley. Credit: *Pepsi Global*, via *YouTube*
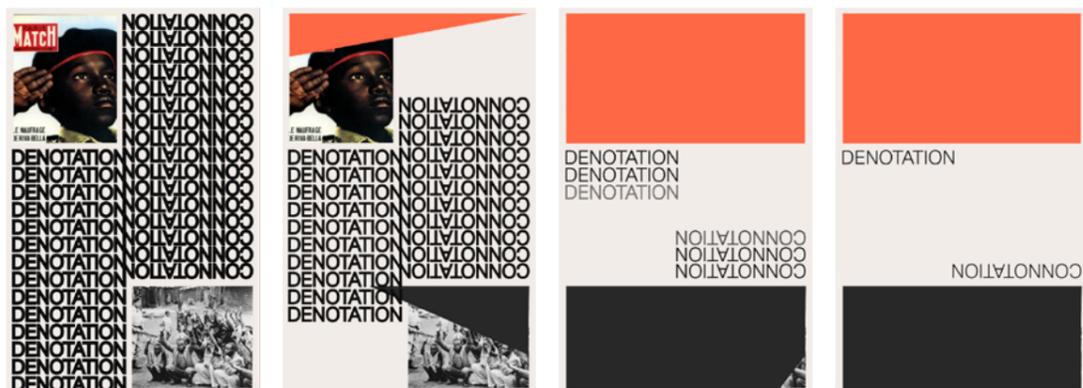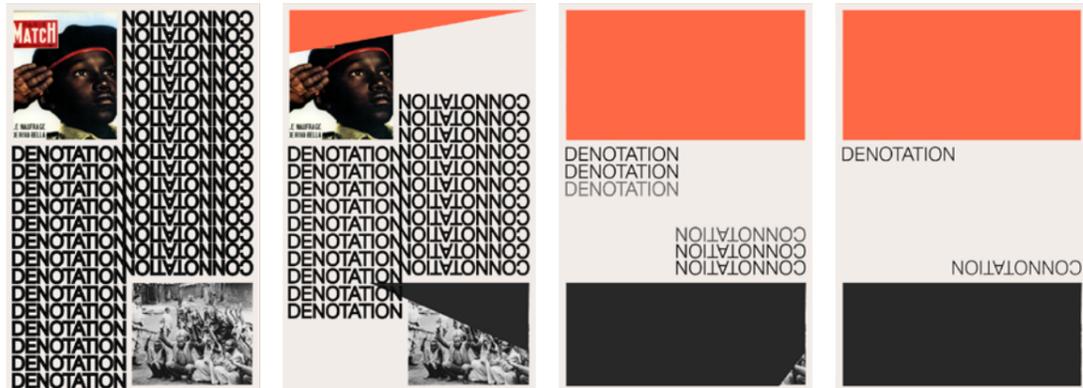
The Myth of Imperial Greatness: The image above was the picture of the young French soldier pledging allegiance to the empire, while the image below showed the French occupation of Algeria.
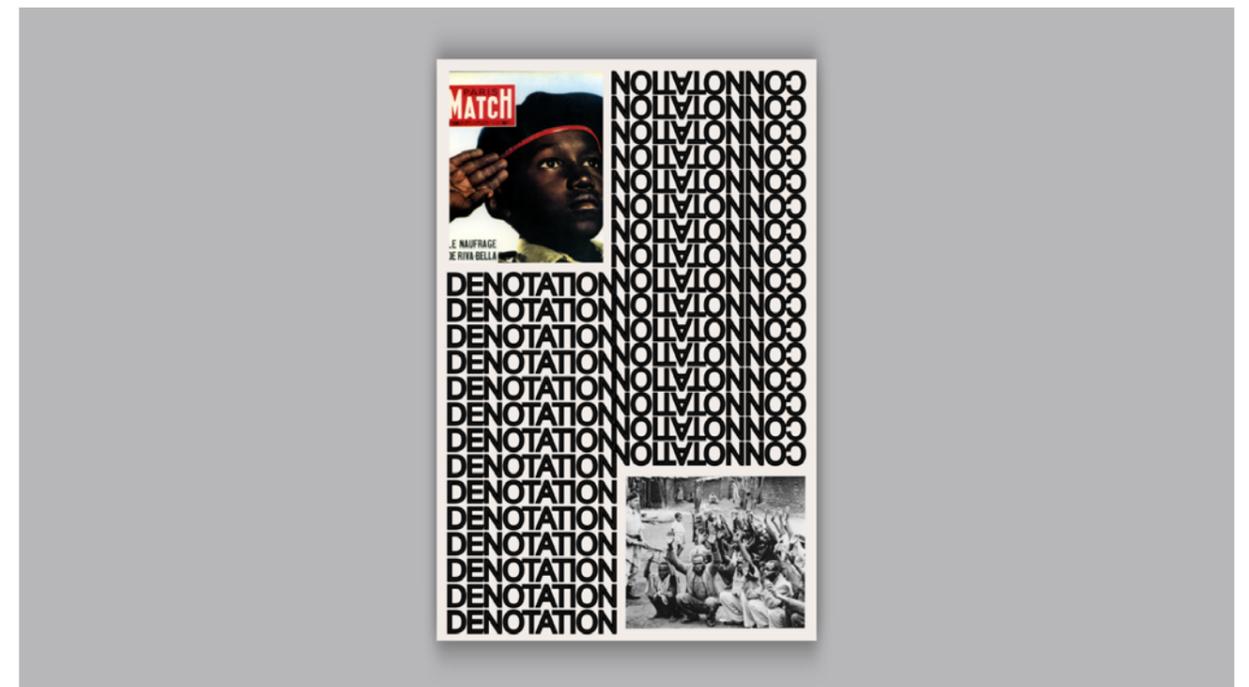
Paris Match **Edition 326, July 1955:** The use of the young black soldier as a faithful son of the French empire belied the harrowing reality of French colonialism in Algeria occurring at the same time.
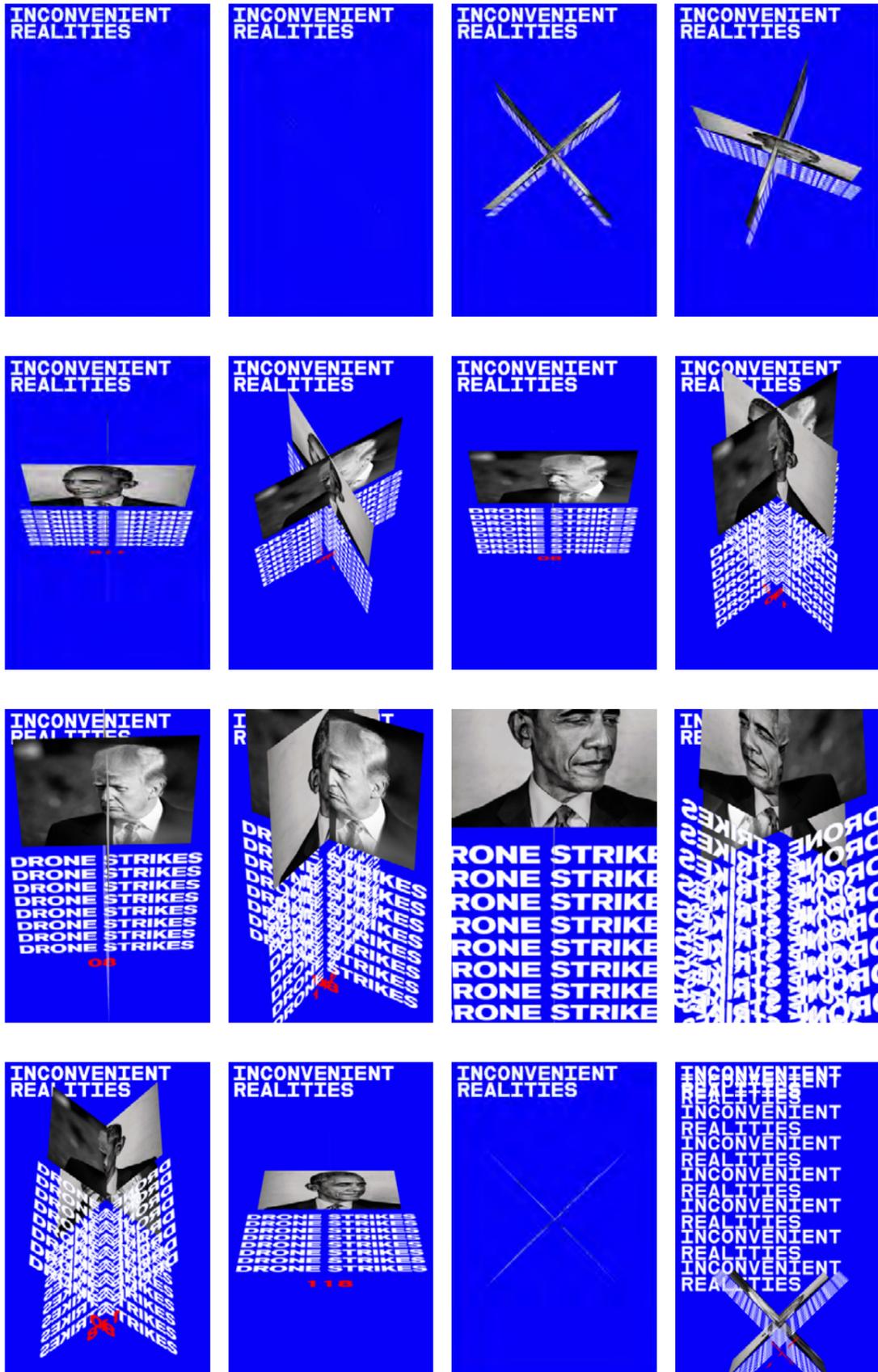
Aesthetics and Warfare: This poster is centered around a cross-hair like assemblage of two images—one of Obama and the other of Trump—that breaches the frame of the poster, much like a drone, before plummeting out of view.

Aesthetics and Warfare: War in the 21st century is an enterprise obscured by remote warfare technology and political charisma. With drone operators in Nevada being able to administer strikes in northern Pakistan, all one needs is a charismatic politician to further conceal the realities on the ground.
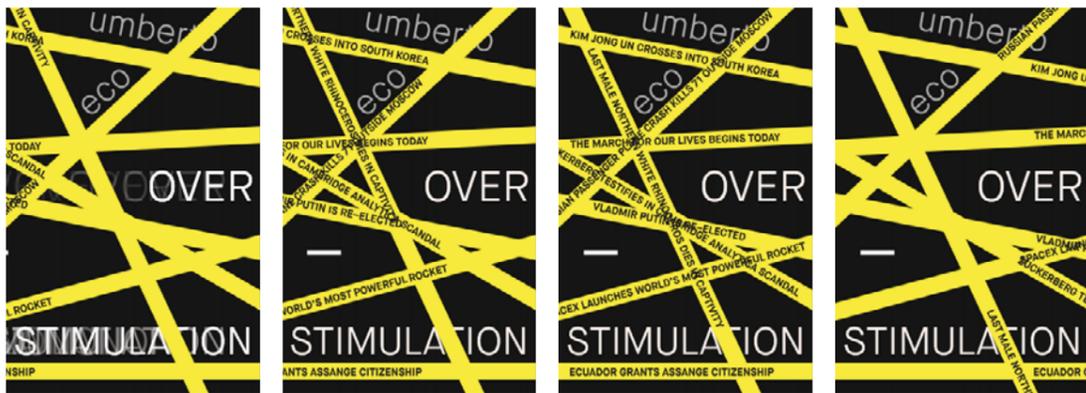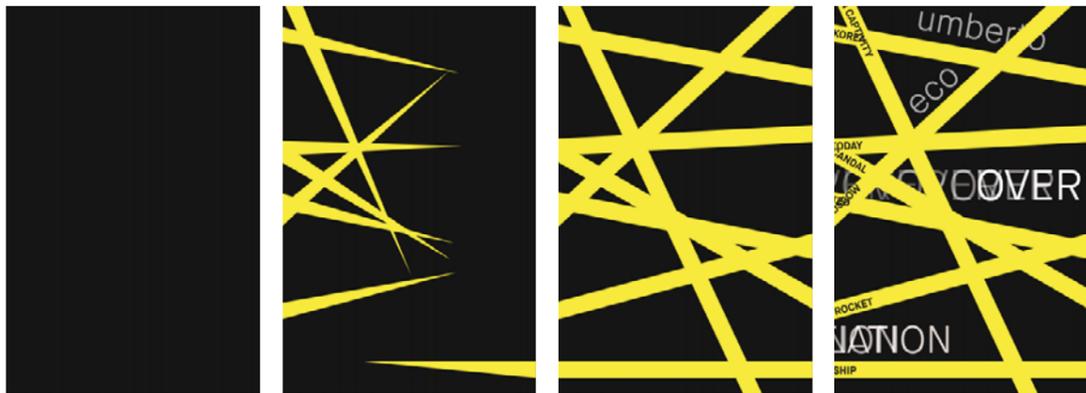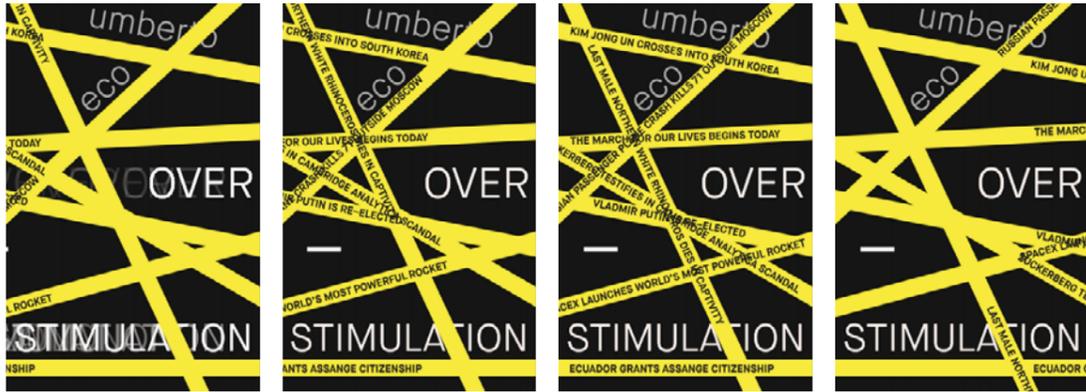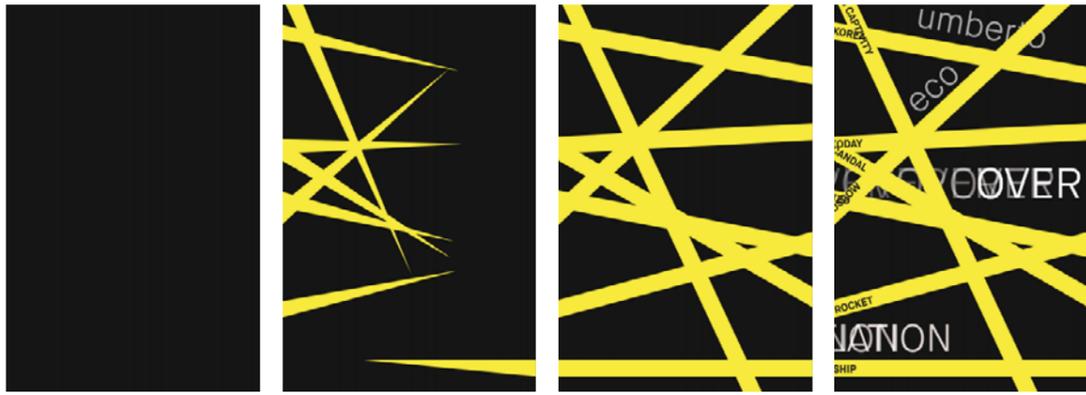
Overstimulation: Can something be both ubiquitous and invisible at the same time? To Umberto Eco, the Italian philosopher, sometimes invisibility is precisely contingent on ubiquity. And nothing today illustrates this theory better than the news
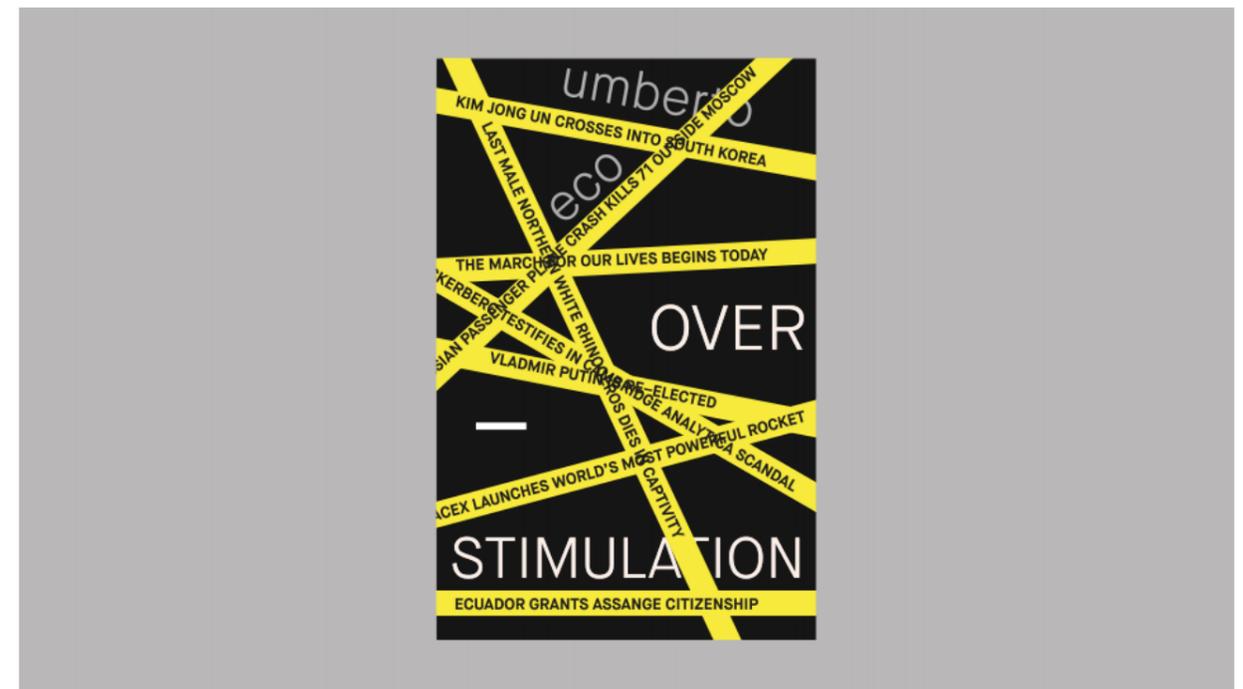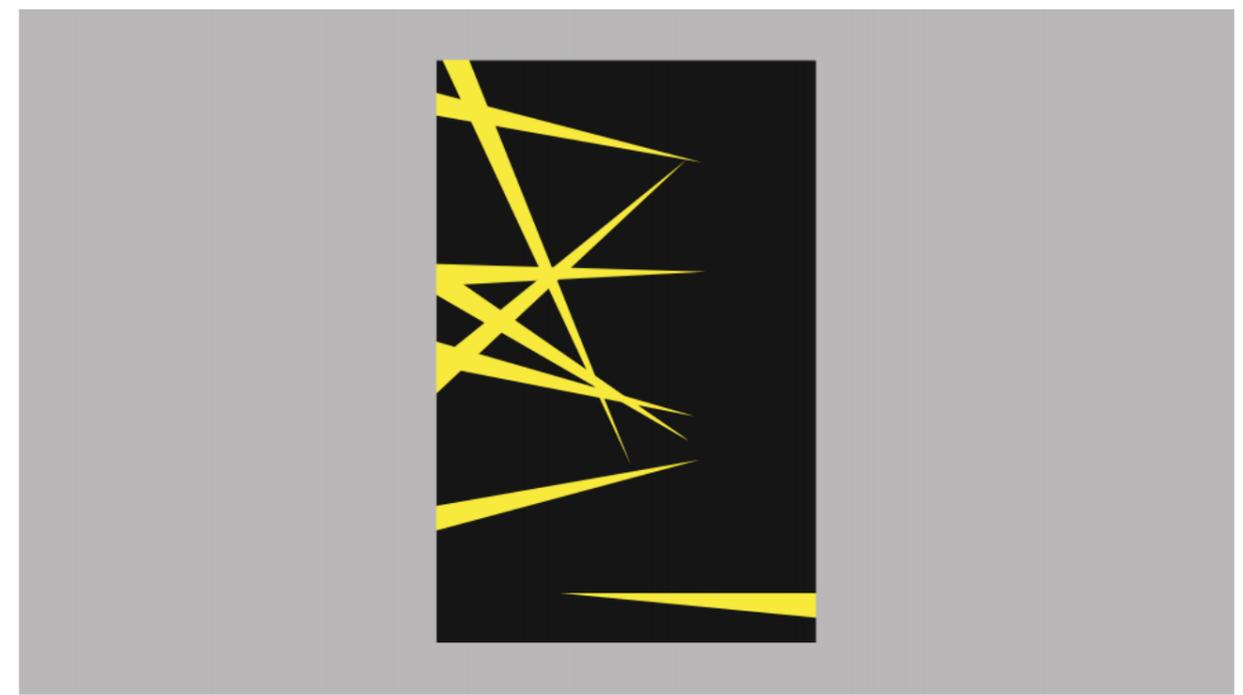
Overstimulation: A commentary on our default state of overstimulation—a result of the ceaseless "breaking of the news" inuring us to information that might, in fact, be significant.
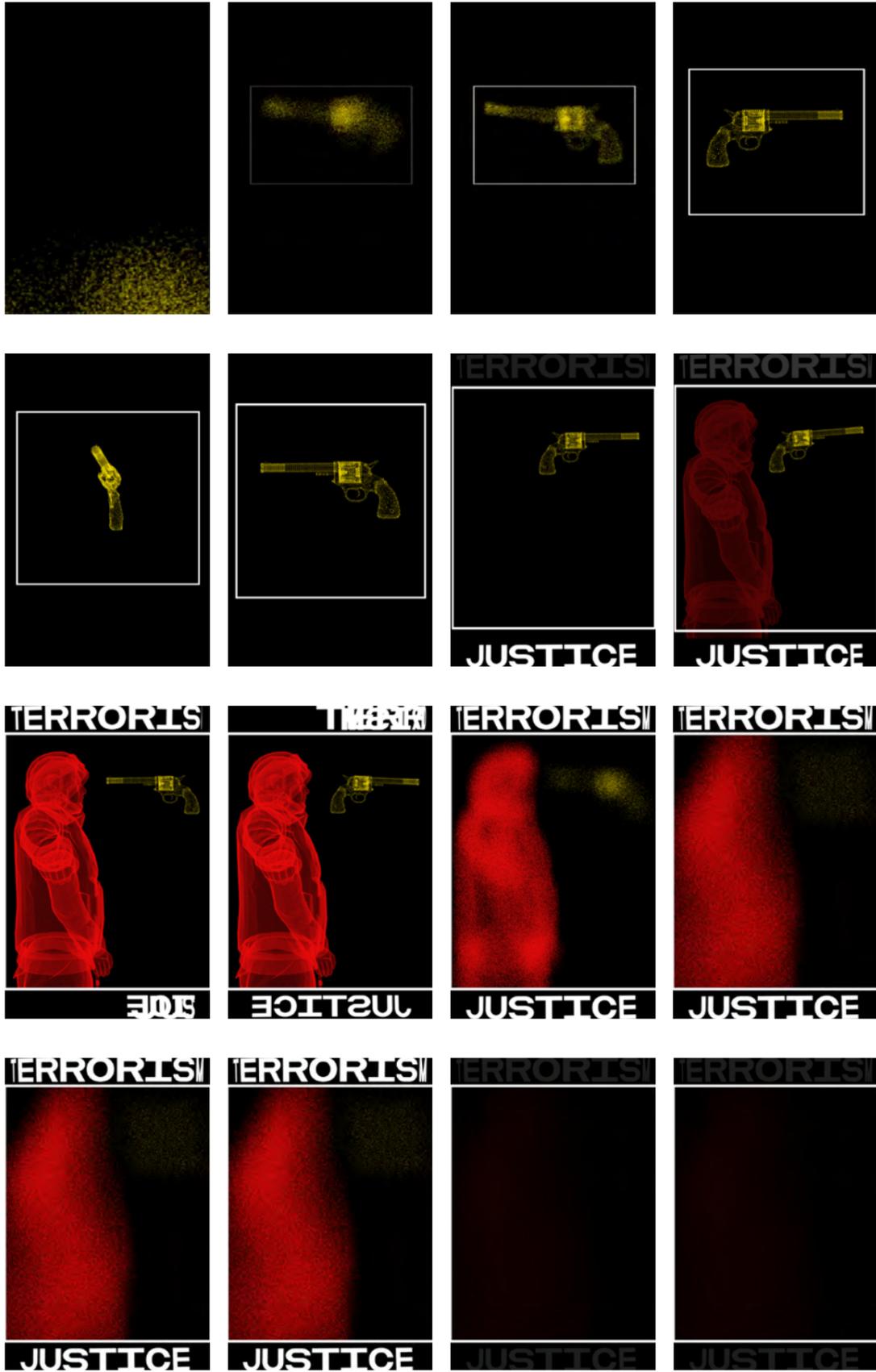
Three Movements: This poster derives its meaning from three simultaneous movements. As the yellow gun points towards the sol-dier, the word "Terrorism" is legible and when it is pointed away from the soldier, "Justice" is made legible.
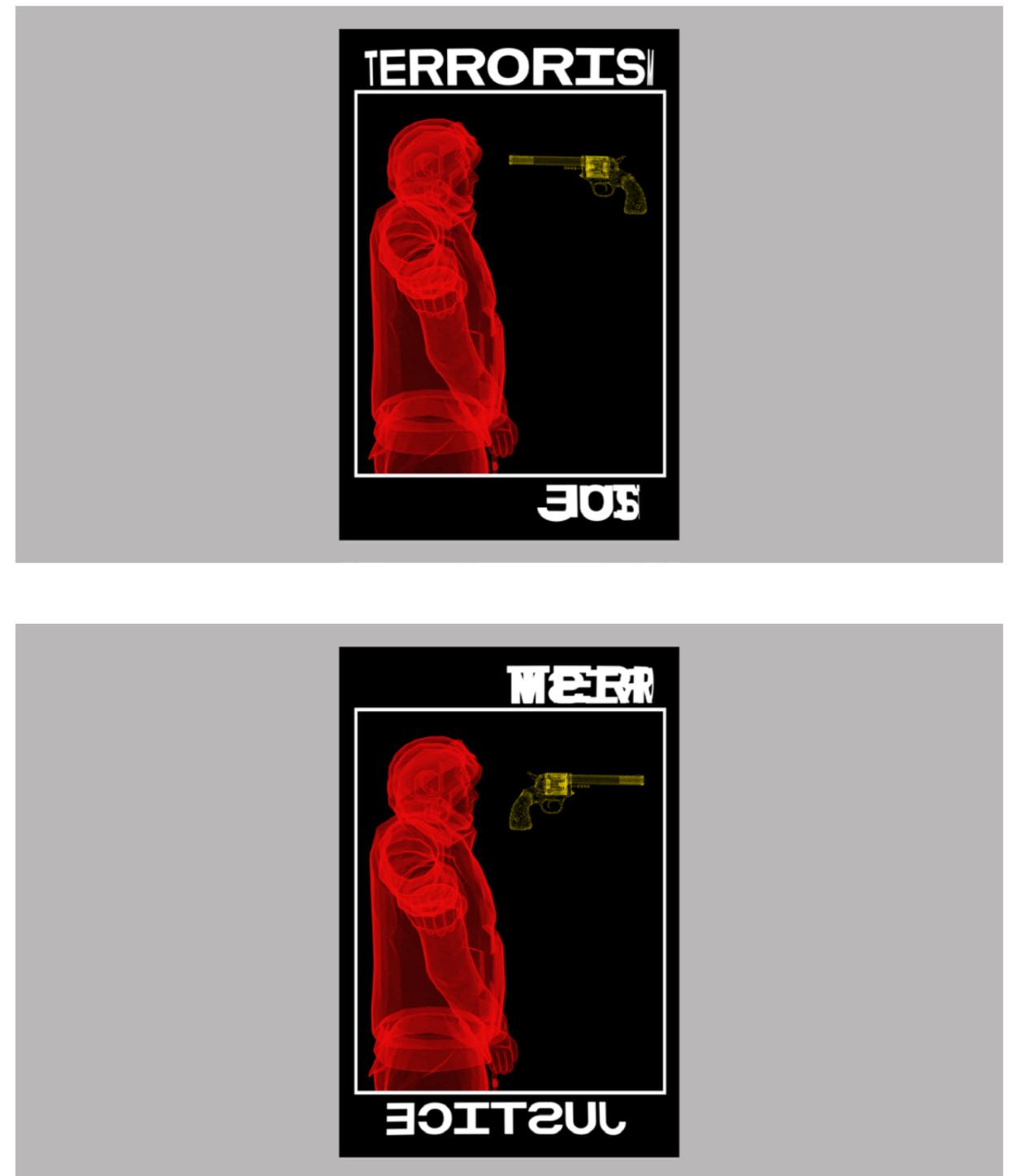
Terrorism and Contingencies: A commentary on our often skewed conceptions of terrorism and *who* a terrorist is.

LEARNING TO REPRESENT

A standard way of relating politics to art assumes that art represents political issues in one way or another. But there is a much more interesting perspective: the politics of the field of art as a place of work. Simply look at what it does—not what it shows.

Hito Steyerl, *Politics of Art*

Le Harem du Palais by Gustave Boulanger (1824-1888). "The Orient and Islam have a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert. From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing th orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist's work." — Edward W. Said

The fruits of learning to see, and learning to mediate, in my opinion, are borne in the enterprise of representation. The concept of representation embodies several meanings, ranging from the mathematical, to the political. But in the paragraphs to come, I focus on the political implications of the concept.

Representation has long been associated with notions of truth, reproducibility, and similitude to the real. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word as "[a]n image, likeness, or reproduction in some manner of a thing." Hence, we see that a representation is what stands between the viewer and the real. It is a mediating entity, and this notion of representation "standing in for some other thing or person" is borne out in subsequent definitions of the word in the OED. This second definition of the concept is a deeply political one, opening the door to historic debates about the utility of representation in society.

To Plato, representations of reality through media was an inherently deceptive enterprise giving rise to "worlds of illusion," making him opposed to the practice. Whereas Aristotle was more favorable in his views toward representation, because to him, it was an important epistemic channel–one of the very few methods by which we understood the world.[1]

While he was right that representation was indeed an important conduit to reality, Aristotle had much to answer for. What did it really mean for one thing or person to represent a larger group of things or people? The idea of using a unit to typify the nature of a larger entity was a dangerous idea, as it reduced or flattened any diverging traits within that entity. I deal with precisely this problem of representation in the projects to come.

What does it mean for designers to represent something truthfully? Is such an exercise possible? What is a designer's role in capturing and representing testimony?

To me, designers, by creating, mediating, and representing content, partake in the pivotal exercise of knowledge-creation;[2] a project with far-reaching repercussions. By representing events, tragedies, histories, testimonies and people through a range of media, designers mediate how much a society learns about a particular subject, and each choice that they make in representing a subject is an *ethical* one.

Inhabiting a media landscape inundated with increasingly creative phrases such as *fake news*, *alternative facts*, *truthiness*, and *reality-based*

community, one might be tempted to point to the ineffectiveness of representation in guiding people to the truth. I would however make the opposite point: it is precisely the effectiveness of representation– albeit of a dubious form over a credible form– that has caused a general disillusionment with the main-stream to emerge. And what this development speaks to is perhaps my biggest learning from studying the concept. It comes from the media theorist W.J.T. Mitchell who urges us to stop seeing representations as only particular kinds of objects, but instead to think of representation "as relationship, as process, as the relay mechanism in exchanges of power, value, and publicity" noting that "nothing in this model guarantees the directionality of the structure" instead suggesting a dialectical reading of the concept.[3]

I contend with these questions, of the utility of representational devices such as narratives, images, and data, in capturing the discordant, complex, and oftentimes senseless nature of reality, in the projects to come.

The Silence of Nduwayezu by Alfredo Jaar, 1997. Attempting to represent the tremendous loss of human life in Rwanda during the civil war in 1994, Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar chose to focus on the eyes of one boy, Nduwayezu, who witnessed his parents being killed and was paralyzed into silence for four weeks as a result. Jaar scattered approximately one million printed images of the boy's eyes on a backlit table to represent the one millon lives lost in the conflict, creating a teeming mass of human loss.

1 Vukcevich, Mai. "Representation | The Chicago School of Media Theory." Accessed May 16, 2020. https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/representation/.

2 Hall, Stuart. 1997. Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices. London: Sage in association with the Open University.

3 Mitchell, W. J. T. 1994. Picture theory: essays on verbal and visual representation.

THE REVERSE COLONIAL PROJECT

A video series highlighting the Indian influence on the English language.

Year: Fall 2018   Typefaces: Neue Haas Grotesk by
Typology: Video   Max Miedinger
Dimensions: 1280 x 720px

Annexing the English Language, one word at a time, the *Reverse Colonial Project* was an attempt at highlighting the Indian influence on the English language.

This project began with a visit to the *Providence Public Library* as part of Graduate Studio I, with the goal of choosing an "origin object" to set our research processes in motion. Among the displayed books at the library that day was Dr. Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755 in England. As a child, I had heard from my grandfather that Dr. Johnson was known for his wit, and that his dictionary was the first to employ humor and literary quotations in its definitions of words. For example, he

parted with any horticultural definitions of *oats*, and instead defined it as "a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people."

And so I chose the book as the starting point for my future design investigations.

Dr. Johnson, it seems, was as conservative in his vision for the English language as he was witty in his definitions of words. He belonged to the prescriptivist school of lexicography, wanting to freeze linguistic mores in time. He wrote in the *Plan* (the document outlining his desires for the dictionary), he intended to write "a dictionary by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated;

Left: A still from one of the five motion posters that make up the project.

the disappearing history of the Indian subcontinent's influence on the spoken word of the colonizers. To that end, I discovered an aptly named book, *Hobson Jobson*, that exhaustively documented all the English words that found their roots in India and Sri Lanka. Leveraging its breath of material, I decided to reify several of its definitions in a digital format. I set up a *YouTube* page named the *Reverse Colonial Project*, and began recording five-minute-long video essays on specific words every week.

Dissecting each word's history, etymology, contemporary usage, and other cultural connotations, the central thrust of the project was to offer a predominantly international, and English-speaking audience necessary background on words that we use every day.

Where did the name of the project come? Contrary to common conceptions of colonialism being a system where the transfer of economic, intellectual, and social capital is uni–directional, ie. from the colonized to the colonizer, linguists noted an interesting and counterintuitive phenomenon in the realm of socio–linguistics. An unintended consequence of colonial rule is the organic migration of linguistic features from the oppressed, to the oppressor. Under the yoke of the East India Company, we see just this phenomenon taking place: a whole host of words with Indian origins made their place in the English language in a process of reverse colonialism of a kind. *The Reverse Colonial Projec*t was an exercise in documenting those origins of words that emerged ubiquitous features of the English language.
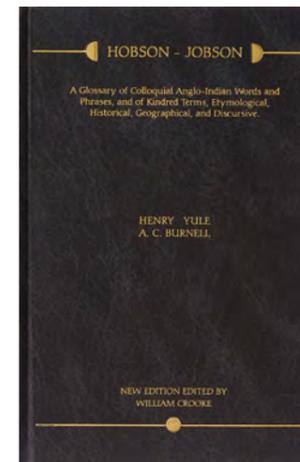
Hobson-Jobson: *A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* is a historical dictionary of Anglo-Indian words from Indian languages which came into use during British rule in India.

by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained, and its duration lengthened." There were several other characteristics that distinguished Johnson's dictionary from dictionaries in the past. For one, it was quite sophisticated in its language, assuming levels of literacy that didn't exist in England at the time. Hence, one would presume that it was a document catered to the wealthy, with its fine paper, large size, and price lending further credence to that assumption. The class implications of Johnson's work didn't quite end there. The lexicographer had a specific vision for its readership: he wanted the book to be read like a piece of literature, something that the working class simply couldn't afford to do.

Nevertheless, by combining lexical utility, wit, and literature into what was previously a banal document, Dr. Johnson breathed new life into the dictionary, making it an important cultural artifact to be read like a piece of literature and paved the way for entirely new genres of dictionaries to emerge in the centuries to come.

In response to the origin object, my plan was to stand in opposition to Johnson's vision for the English language by speaking to

The Dictionary and Class: Dr. Jonson's dictionary was a tomb of a book (18 x 20 inches) made of fine leather and ornamentation in several of its pages. It said that the current equivalent cost of the book would be close to $1000, making it unfordable to most.

Avatar: Derived from Hindu mythology describing a God taking on an explicit human form. Each video began with a stream of video snippets from popular culture featuring the word being used in different contexts. A historic and etymological focus followed.

Video Arc: Shown above is the general arc of each video essay, much like Dr. Johnson's own schema of defining words: "[S]ort the several senses of each word, and to exhibit first its natural and primitive significance," followed by "its consequential meaning," and then "the remoter or metaphorical signification."

Video Arc: Shown above is the general arc of each video essay, much like Dr. Johnson's own schema in defining words: "sort the several senses of each word, and to exhibit first its natural and primitive significance," followed by "its consequential meaning," and then "the remoter or metaphorical signification."

Pundit: Derived from "Pandita," meaning knowledge owner or learned man. Each video began with a stream of video snippets from popular culture featuring the word being used in different contexts. The historic and etymological dissection of the word followed.

Tiffin: An Anglo-Indian word describing a light meal, especially lunch. Each video began with a stream of video snippets from popular culture featuring the word being used in different contexts. The historic and etymological dissection of the word followed.

Video Arc: Shown above is the general arc of each video essay, much like Dr. Johnson's own schema in defining words: "sort the several senses of each word, and to exhibit first its natural and primitive significance," followed by "its consequential meaning," and then "the remoter or metaphorical signification."
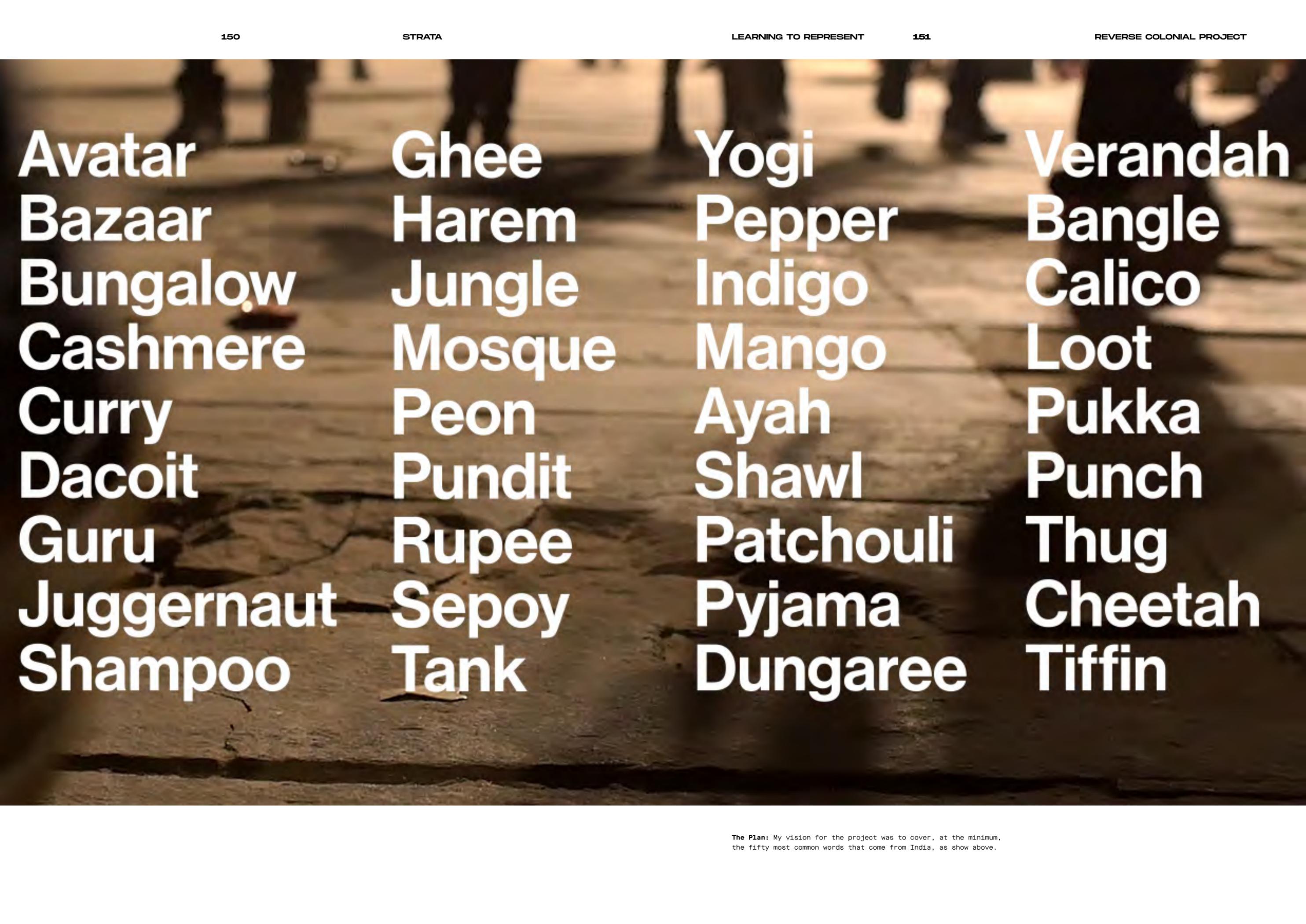
Avatar
Bazaar
Bungalow
Cashmere
Curry
Dacoit
Guru
Juggernaut
Shampoo

Ghee
Harem
Jungle
Mosque
Peon
Pundit
Rupee
Sepoy
Tank

Yogi
Pepper
Indigo
Mango
Ayah
Shawl
Patchouli
Pyjama
Dungaree

Verandah
Bangle
Calico
Loot
Pukka
Punch
Thug
Cheetah
Tiffin

The Plan: My vision for the project was to cover, at the minimum, the fifty most common words that come from India, as show above.

Conformex: My classmate Weixi Zeng posing
with the Conformex drug package as part
of the marketing campaign.

CONFORMEX: DISAGREE TO DISAGREE

Year: Winter Session 2019   Dimensions: 1280 x 720px
Typology: Video   Typefaces: Aktiv Grotesk by Dalton Maag

A satirical take on the absurdity of American pharmaceutical commercials, *Conformex* is a fake drug that purports to rid the world of conflict. The goal was to create an archetypal drug commercial with slow fades, sterile stock footage, and cold marketing photos to run a social experiment. Once the commercial was complete, fabricated testimonials of the drug collected, and the product marketing shots captured, I released all promotional material into *WhatsApp* groups that I was a part of to gauge the response. To cut a long story short, the kind of credulity that I saw terrified me. So many people were convinced that such a drug existed that I had to quickly respond with messages clarifying that the drug was, in fact, a hoax. This project spoke to the ease of releasing potentially dangerous information into our social media streams the effects of which we have witnessed in India,[1] Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

1 Goel, Vindu, Suhasini Raj, and Priyadarshini Ravichandran. "How WhatsApp Leads Mobs to Murder in India." The New York Times. The New York Times, July 18, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/07/18/technology/whatsapp-india-killings.html.

Frame 01 / Affirma Pharma: The commercial begins with the a banal boilerplate of the pharma company that makes *Conformex*.


Frame 02 / Conflict: The commercial sets up the problem with the scene of a woman gazing into the distance: we are a world riven by conflict.

Frame 07 / The Pivot: The crucial pivot to reassure you besieged people that we at *Affirma*, have you covered.

Frame 08 / *Conformex*: This is it, the great reveal. The panacea to all our problems set in a sanitized photo box for credibility purposes.

Frame 03 / Transition: The scene quickly transitions to show waves violently crashing into rocks—an allusion to the ferocity of our own rifts.

Frame 04 / Internal Conflicts: The voiceover then points to some conflicts originating from within the mind—the frailty of the human condition.

Frame 09 / How the Sausage Gets Made: This drug is being developed by scientists that operate at the highest level.

Frame 10 / The Results: A quick transition to a scene capturing the archetype of a healthy relationship.

Frame 05 / Marital: Some conflicts come from strained relationships. "We've got this covered as a pharma company!"

Frame 06 / Actual Conflict: Never let a crisis go to waste. The commercial seamlessly transitions into geopolitics.

Frame 11 / The Gaze: This scene is crucial. To show true happiness and satisfaction with their lives, eye contact is essential.

Frame 12 / Conclusion: Back to the *Conformex* logo: "Disagree to disagree."

Product Testimonials: A still from a video testimonial featuring Angela Torchio from the batch of 2019, who extolled the transformative powers of *Conformex*.

Frame 11 / The Gaze: This scene was crucial. The woman gradually raises her head to gaze at her partner, as if to say "look how happy we are?" And the scene quickly returns to a closing shot of *Conformex* using sequence to forge latent associations.

POST NARRATIVE

A quasi manifesto in poster form, calling for a rethinking of the role of narratives in representing reality.

Year: Fall 2019
Typology: Poster

Dimensions: 24 x 36 in
Typefaces: Suisse Int'l by Ian Party

This project originated as a passing thought as I was working on the Kashmir Project[1] and thought about how I could communicate what was going on in the region. There seemed to be jarring contrasts in how the conflict in Kashmir was being framed by the Indian media. Some images showed people suffering, unable to visit hospitals for treatment and locals being beaten by the Indian armed forces, while others captured scenes of urban normalcy with people going about their business. The biggest contrasts took the form of public gatherings. Droves of men in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir's capital city, took to blocking streets by starting bonfires while members of the

BJP (India's right wing ruling party) lit firecrackers and distributed sweets at public gatherings all over New Delhi.

What was true? Certainly, both public gatherings took place. But only one reflected reality in Kashmir. It wasn't business as usual in the region as some sources suggested. The whole state was shut down with communication lines cut, curfews imposed, and shops closed. The state was violently rendered into silence while media outlets and BJP party members spun grand narratives about the people of Kashmir being unfaithful opportunists and their party leader and our prime minister, Mr. Narendra Modi being the great messiah saving the nation from

Left: The poster's pipes and grids allude to a theoretical distinction made by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek between the aesthetic and the structural.
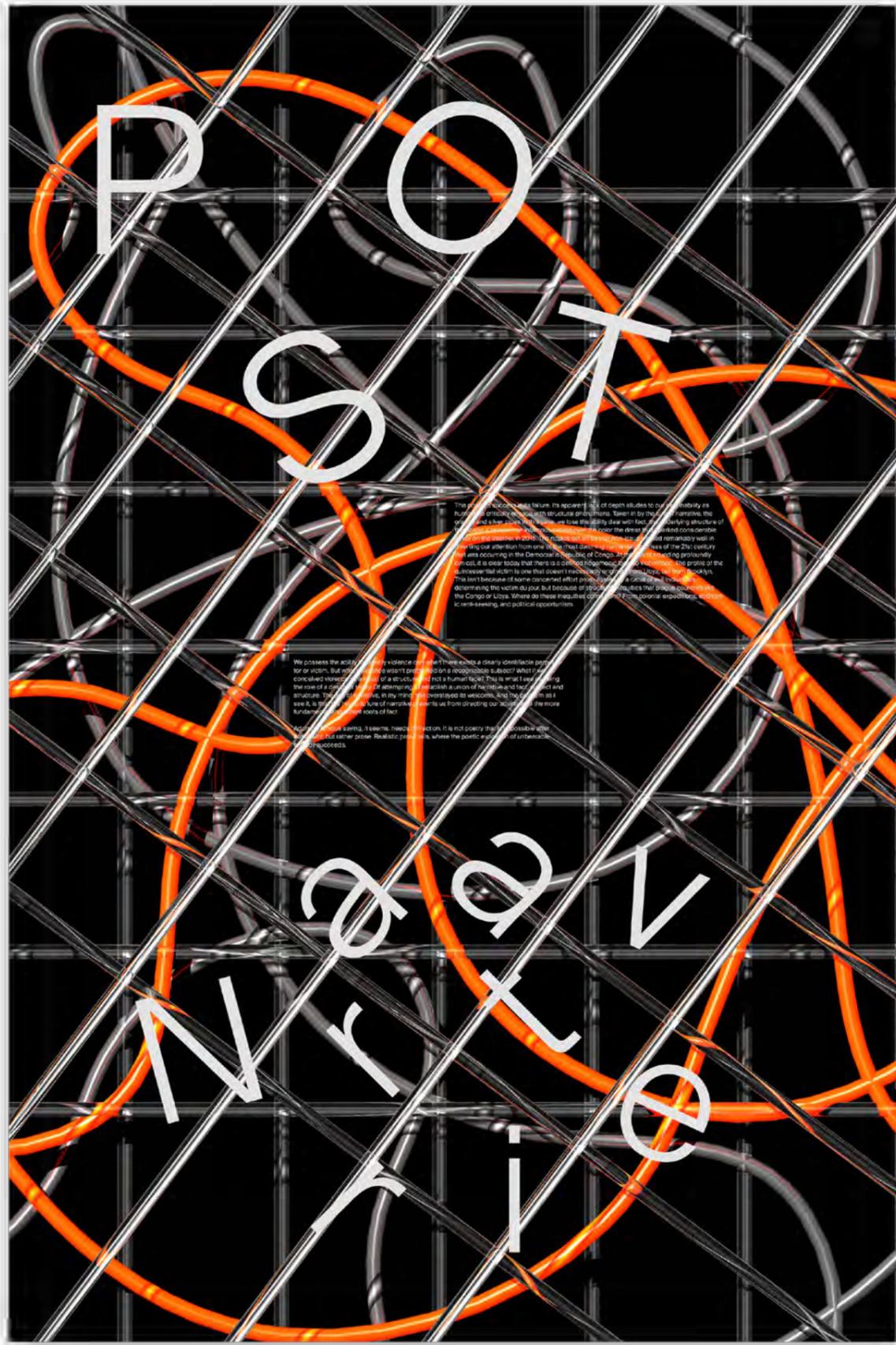
Post Narrative
Typeface: Suisse Int'l by Ian Party
Size: 24 x 36 in

economic and political doom. Does this framing seem familiar? It was, in fact, the age-old conflict-resolution narrative script being deployed to distort the public's perception of reality.

What about counter-narratives that attempted to combat rising tides of disinformation and instead deliver the truth? They weren't effective enough because other framings of the Kashmir conflict were deemed more appealing. How strange was it that reality was contingent on the aesthetic qualities of its framing? This, in fact, was the case because the battle for the truth was being fought within the province of narrative.

To me, some battles ought not to be fought within the realm of narrative. Some issues warrant a coldness and detachment in their treatment, and must remain unframed by overarching narratives that play into our impulse of reducing complex situations into a game of protagonists and antagonists. Indeed the emergence of phrases such as *fake news* and *alternate facts* signal not the defeat but the victory of a narrative approach to reality. In the case of Kashmir, narratives were deployed to portray the residents of the state (predominantly Muslim) as the other.

To me, the solution lies in a more scrupulous approach to narrative deployment. By using media synergistically—be it print, video, audio or code—the goal is to capture reality in its rawest, most human form, allowing the inherent characteristics of the media used to aestheticize what is being captured. Here, narrative isn't really the end-goal but an incidental outcome.

More on this in the pages to come.

This poster's success is its failure. Its apparent lack of depth alludes to our own inability as humans to critically engage with structural phenomena. Taken in by the fluid narrative, the orange and silver pipes in this case, we lose the ability deal with fact, the underlying structure of the poster. Consider the infamous debate over the color the dress that sparked considerable furor on the Internet in 2016. The ripples set off by that non-issue proved remarkably well in that was occurring in the Democratic Republic of Congo. At the risk of sounding profoundly cynical, it is clear today that there is a defined hegemonic loyalty to victimhood. The profile of the quintessential victim is one that doesn't necessarily originate from Libya, but from Brooklyn. This isn't because of some concerted effort promulgated by a cabal of evil individuals determining the victim du jour, but because of structural inequities that plague countries like the Congo or Libya. Where do these inequities come from? From colonial expeditions, econom-ic rent-seeking, and political opportunism.

Post Narrative Detail 01
Typeface: Suisse Int'l by Ian Party
Size: 24 x 36 in

This poster's success is its failure. Its apparent lack of depth alludes to our own inability as humans to critically engage with structural phenomena. Taken in by the lure of narrative, the orange and silver pipes in this case, we lose the ability deal with fact, the underlying structure of the poster. Consider the infamous debate over the color the dress that sparked considerable fervor on the internet in 2015. The ripples set off by that non-issue worked remarkably well in diverting our attention from one of the most damning humanitarian crises of the 21st century that was occurring in the Democratic Republic of Congo. At the risk of sounding profoundly cynical, it is clear today that there is a defined hegemonic logic to victimhood. The profile of the quintessential victim is one that doesn't necessarily originate from Libya, but from Brooklyn. This isn't because of some concerted effort promulgated by a cabal of evil individuals determining the victim du jour, but because of structural inequities that plague countries like the Congo or Libya. Where do these inequities come from? From colonial expeditions, economic rent-seeking, and political opportunism.

We possess the ability to identify violence only when there exists a clearly identifiable perpetrator or victim. But what if violence wasn't predicated on a recognizable subject? What if we conceived violence as a result of a structure and not a human face? This is what I see as being the role of a designer today. Of attempting to establish a union of narrative and fact, subject and structure. The age of narrative, in my mind, has overstayed its welcome. And the problem as I see it, is that the hypnotic lure of narrative prevents us from directing our attention to the more fundamental and potent roots of fact.

Adorno's famous saying, it seems, needs correction. It is not poetry that is impossible after Auschwitz, but rather prose. Realistic prose fails, where the poetic evocation of unbearable tragedy succeeds.

Post Narrative Detail 02
Typeface: Suisse Int'l by Ian Party
Size: 24 x 36 in

VISITING DESIGNERS LECTURE SERIES

01.

Agyei Archer

https://agyei.design/

Thursday, February 20th
6:30 PM GD Commons

Agyei is a designer from Trinidad & Tobago focusing on visual communication using type, graphics, and code. He coordinates and directs small independent teams to create forward-thinking design work. At present, Agyei

Poster Detail: A detail shot of the poster showing the abstracted pipes of a piece of furniture.

VISITING DESIGNERS LECTURE SERIES 2020

Year: Spring 2020
Typology: Poster

Typefaces: Coanda by CoType Foundry, and Aktiv Grotesk by Dalton Maag
Dimensions: 33.1 x 46.8 in

A poster designed for the *Visiting Designer Lecture Series* hosted every spring semester by the RISD Graphic Design graduate department.

The speaker lineup this year featured Agyei Archer from Trinidad and Tobago, whose practice included creative code, type design and the revitalization of indigenous writing; Ghazaal Vojdani, founder of her eponymous studio based in Paris and New York specializing in art direction and graphic design; Filmmaker, sculptor, and facilitator Virginia Lee Montgomery, and Clara Balaguer who heads the *Social Practices* program at the *Willem de Kooning Academy* and founder of *The Office of Culture and Design* in the Philippines.

With the semester being disrupted by the novel coronavirus, only Agyei Archer managed to visit the department and conduct his weekend-long workshop, leaving the rest of the lecture series to operate out of *Zoom*.
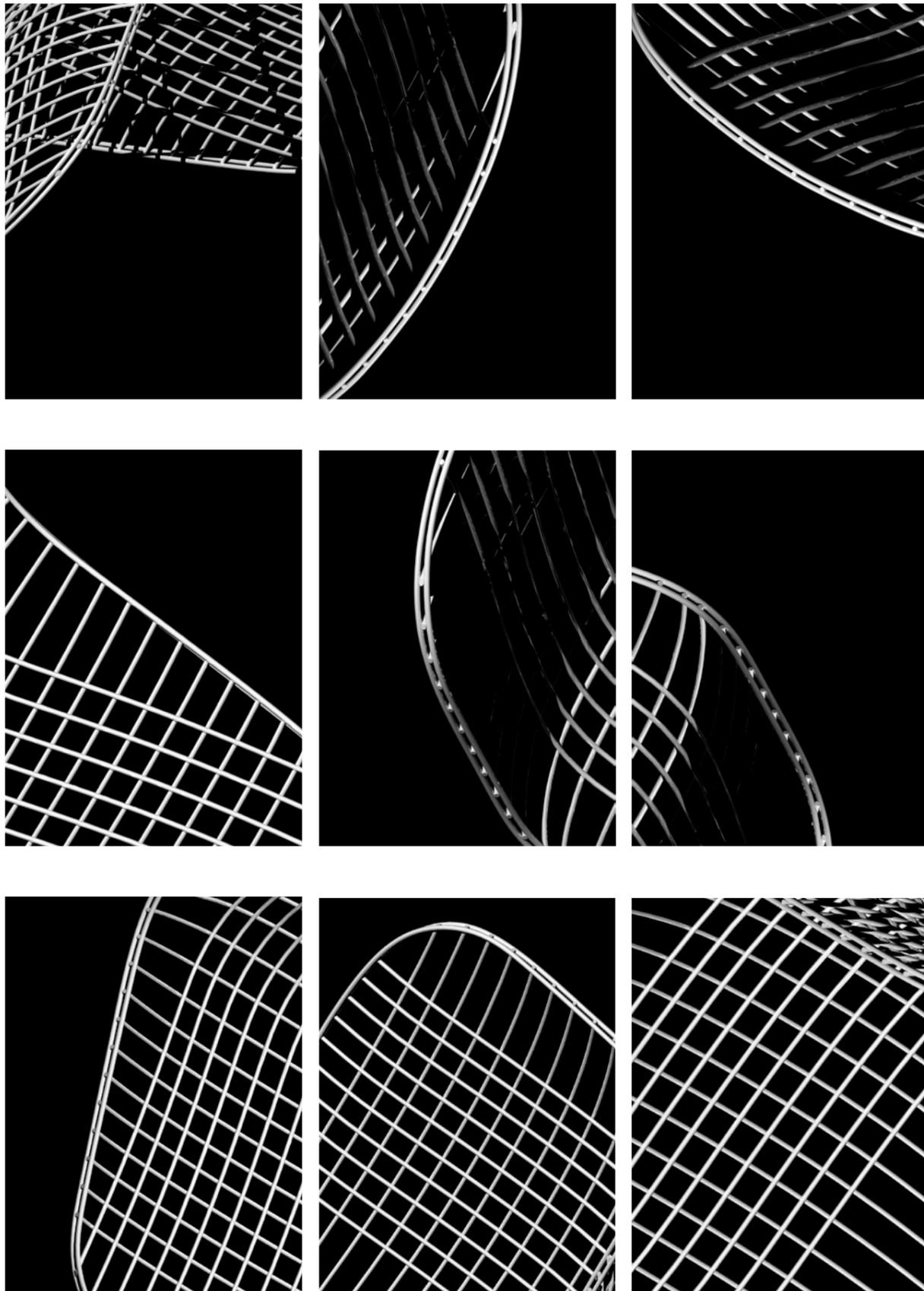
Process Step 01: Each designer came with their own distinct specializations and formal approaches. However, all of them were driven by structural goals, whether it was language revitalization or political activism. Hence I decided to 3D-model an *Eames Wire Chair* and deconstruct it, extracting individual elements.
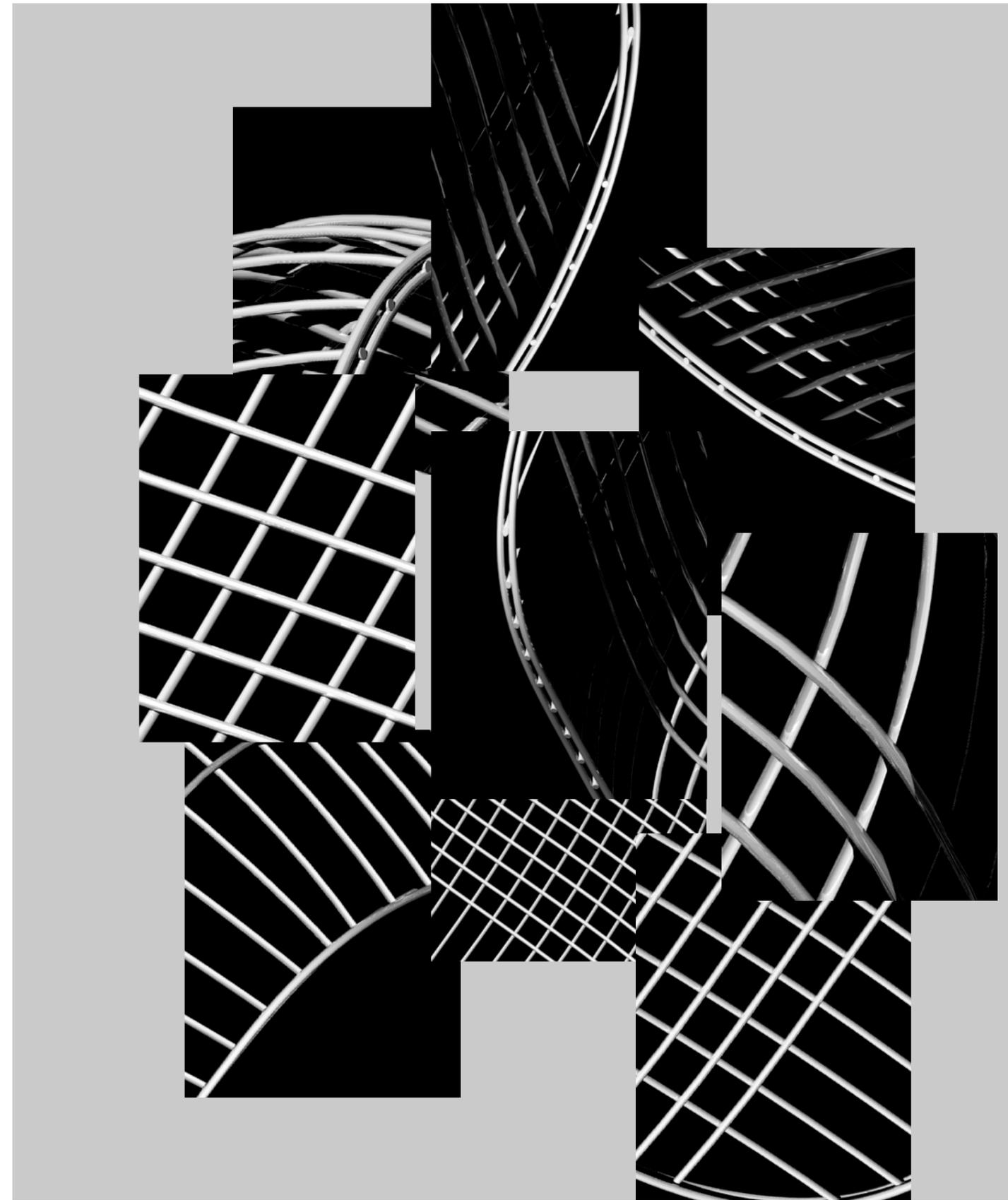
Process Step 02: Armed with individual structural elements of the *Eames chair*, I decided to scale each element up, and reassemble these elements to generate a landscape of overlapping forms and interstitial spaces. It was in these interstices that I decided to place the typographic content for the poster.

Poster 01: This particular version was selected as the official poster for the lecture series. The typography across the versions remained the same, and the titles were set in Coanda by CoType.

Poster 02: Alternate version of the *Visiting Designers* poster with a teal and orange color scheme. The typographic elements remained the same.

VISITING
DESIGNERS
LECTURE
SERIES

01.

Masthead Detail of Poster Version 01
Typeface: Coanda by Cotype Foundry, Aktiv Grotesk by Dalton Maag
Size: 33.1 x 46.8 in

02.

Ghazaal Vojdani

https://studio.ghazaalvojdani.com/

Thursday, March 12th
6:30 PM GD Commons

Studio Ghazaal Voddani is a Design and Art Direction practice dedicated to forging strong professional relationships with cultural and educational institutions around the world. Acquiring her graphic design BA from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, and an MFA from Yale University School of Art in 2013, both in Graphic Design, Ghazaal Vojdani first established her studio in New York and later in Paris where she currently resides.

| 2nd

Designer Detail of Poster Version 01
Typeface: Coanda by Cotype Foundry, Aktiv Grotesk by Dalton Maag
Size: 33.1 x 46.8 in

Ghazaa

https://studio.ghazaalvojdani.com/

03.

Virginia Lee Montgomery
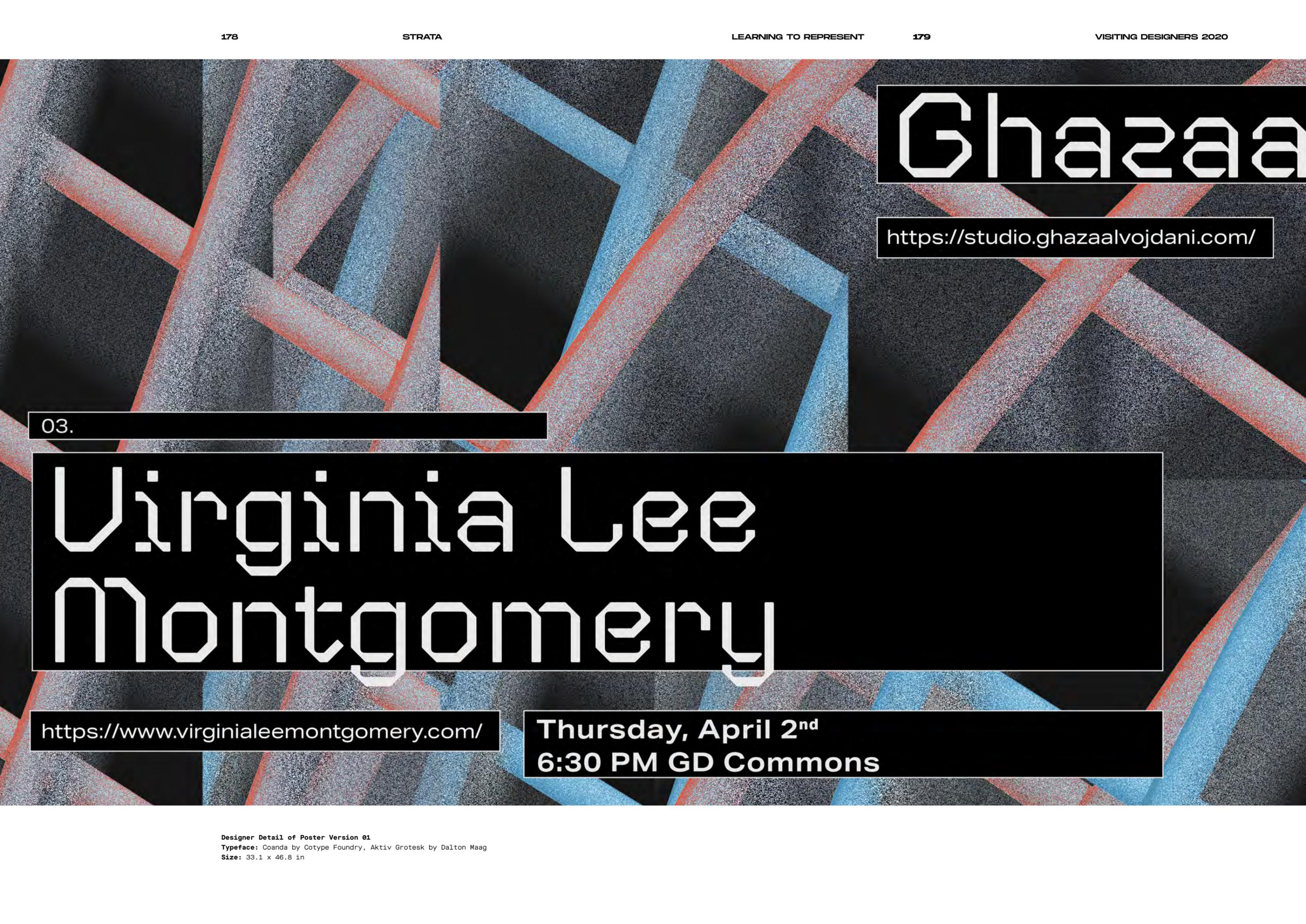
https://www.virginialeemontgomery.com/

Thursday, April 2nd
6:30 PM GD Commons

Designer Detail of Poster Version 01
Typeface: Coanda by Cotype Foundry, Aktiv Grotesk by Dalton Maag
Size: 33.1 x 46.8 in

Texas at Austin in 2008 and her MFA from Yale University in Sculpture in 2016. Working across video, performance, sound, and sculpture, her artwork is a research practice of metaphysics.

RHODE ISLAND
SCHOOL OF DESIGN

Clara

https://walkerart.org/magazine/
troll-palayan-clara-balaguer-on-de-
sign-decolonization-trolling-duterte

Clara Balaguer is a cultur
especially through the le
program at the Willem de
masters of Piet Zwart Ins
Design in the Philippines

Designer Detail of Poster Version 01
Typeface: Coanda by Cotype Foundry, Aktiv Grotesk by Dalton Maag
Size: 33.1 x 46.8 in

KASHMIR: METADATA OF A CONFLICT

An anatomical study investigating the multilayered visuality of a conflict.

In August 2019, the Indian Government led by the conservative *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), achieved what was one of the most contentious issues of their electoral mandate: the revocation of the special status granted to the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

A region long gripped by communal and interstate conflict, Jammu and Kashmir first came under territorial strife as a result of the *Partition of India* in 1947. What was considered — under British rule — a princely state (an autonomous vassal state in the service of the *British Raj*), the ruler of J&K had to choose between India and Pakistan following partition, with both nations claiming ownership of the region. The region contained rich natural resources and offered significant geo-strategic advantages due to the Himalayan range.

J&K eventually succumbed to pressure from the Indian government and decided to become a part of India with the crucial proviso of it being granted a special status: of having its own constitution, law and order system, an independent legislative assembly that determined its own citizenship and property rights.

It was this pivotal constitutional resolution that was revoked by the Indian government, setting off yet more conflict in a region mired in a perpetual state of political instability. Making matters worse was the manner in which

Hearing about what was being done to the region from several thousand miles away, I wondered how I could communicate to a predominantly western audience the complex nature of the Jammu and Kashmir conflict and the political and cultural antecedents framing this particular move by the Indian government.

Weighing the several methods I could adopt in communicating the urgency and importance of this event, I was reminded of an ethical conundrum raised by a documentary I had watched in 2016. Directed by French journalists Lemine Ould Mohamed Salem and Francois Margolin, *Salafistes* documented the rise of the Islamic State in northern Mali. Unrelenting in its depiction of human brutality and unframed by narrative or any redemptive moral lesson, the film was gruesome from start to finish. It captured the senseless logic of reality, juxtaposing scenes of public execution with private incantations of religious edicts, subverting any attempt on our part to make sense of what we just witnessed.[1] In other words, by jettisoning narrative,

this revocation was enforced. Citing security concerns, the Indian government cut off all communication lines, virtually silencing the entire region and arresting several leading Kashmiri politicians thwarting potential protest.

it facilitated a cold reckoning with reality, disorienting inner heuristics and rejecting an incongruous commingling of the horrific and the beautiful common to western documentary film-making today.

The Kashmir conflict was ripe with such senseless cruelty, discordant perspectives and opposing reactions. It was hard to capture "reality" simply because it was an inherently partisan issue. While the citizens of Kashmir lay in the oppressive silence of Srinagar, parts of Delhi celebrated what was deemed a national victory. How could one capture these jarring contrasts? To me, somehow, the narrative approach couldn't accommodate the multiplicity of voices, sides, perspectives, testimonies and experiences. It was dangerously reductive,[2] giving way to perceptions of the conflict as a battle between good and evil and hence giving license to people to justify human suffering as just another outcome of a moral pursuit.

So I decided instead on a synergistic approach, of fusing data and narrative by collecting the photographs of an AP journalist who was documenting the conflict in the region, and dissecting the layers of visual information nested in each of those photographs. This involved deriving the metadata of the image — the tools and techniques required to capture each scene, and a subject analysis,

1 Crowell, Maddy. "Salafistes." The Point Magazine, April 9, 2019. https://thepointmag.com/criticism/salafistes/.

2 Bruner, Jerome. "The Narrative Construction of Reality." Critical Inquiry 18, no. 1 (October 1, 1991): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1086/448619.

investigating the symbols, signs, products, and corporations involved seen in each image.

The idea was to leverage the consciousness-raising function of photography, with the informative nature of data and figures; a two channel approach. The agenda, unlike other guilt-inducing approaches to image production, wasn't to lull the viewer into a state of resentment or interpassivity, but to instead focus on educating viewers of atrocities occurring halfway around the world. I wanted my visual practice to speak, and speak loudly for the Kashmiri people while the state languished in silence.

Reframing History: The photographer Susan Meiselas returned to Nicaragua in 2004 installing nineteen murals of her own photographs made during the country's Sandinista Revolution in 1988. She placed the murals at the original sites of battle, helping acquaint the local communities and the youth with their past.

A layered approach to capturing the nature of the Kashmir conflict. Overlapping images of conflict with an exhaustive dissection of all the technical and symbolic details contained within those image to create this field of people, data and symbols.

Installation 01: Adopting a two-channel approach, the goal was to combine the conscious-ness-raising function of photography, with the coldness of data. The metadata in the posters captured everything from the identities of the subjects in the photograph, to details such as the cost and source of military ammunition used by armed forces in the scene.

BASIC IMAGE INFORMATION

XMP

PHOTOSHOP

EXIF

IPTC

JFIF

VISUAL ANALYSIS

BASIC INFORMATION DERIVED FROM

LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS BANNED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

PLACE AND IMAGERY

HEADBANDS :

MILITARY CAMOUFLAGE :

FACTS AND FIGURES

Installation 02: The data forming the backdrop of the image created a landscape of corporate entities, institutions, militant groups and arms manufacturers calling for a reconception of our idea of metadata.

BASIC IMAGE INFORMATION

XMP

PHOTOSHOP

EXIF

GIF

COMPOSITE

IPTC

VISUAL ANALYSIS

INDIAN ORDNANCE FACTORY BOARD

FACTS AND FIGURES

INDIAN ARMY

Kashmir: Metadata of a Conflict
Dimensions: 33.1 x 46.8 in
Shot at the Sol Koffler Gallery at RISD

Kashmir: Metadata of a Conflict
Dimensions: 33.1 x 46.8 in
Shot at the Sol Koffler Gallery at RISD

Kashmir: Metadata of a Conflict
Dimensions: 33.1 x 46.8 in
Shot at the Sol Koffler Gallery at RISD

STRATA
BACK MATTER

IMAGE CREDITS

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mchakrav.com / stratamfa.com

STRATA: LESSONS IN LATENCY

A thesis presented by Mukul Chakravarthi, 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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