

Handcraft as a Rhetorical Prop:  
An Investigation into What Handcraft Techniques  
Offer the Discipline of Graphic Design.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis paper examines how handcraft (making an item by analog means using specific materials) can be a compelling rhetorical tool for graphic designers to harness. Contrasting handcraft techniques with computer graphics software “unsettles” rote graphic design practices. The meaning that lies in the physical act of making, the materials that are used and the contexts with which particular handcrafts are associated can support, as well as carry, visual rhetoric in design works.

An analysis of the unconventional handcraft work produced by Stefan Sagmeister (USA), Mathias Augustyniak and Michaël Amzalag of M/M (Paris) (France), Marian Bantjes (Canada), and by this author (specifically, a design book produced in tandem with this paper) is used to demonstrate how complex meanings contained within handcrafts can be revealed and used in graphic design. The combination of handcraft and digital techniques enables designers to interweave the disparate social, physical and material qualities of the two processes into their work. In this way the work engages in disciplinary and societal discourse.

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## Handcraft as a Rhetorical Prop in Graphic Design

In a world dominated by technology, speed and machine manufacturing, why does handcraft persist in graphic design? Finding an answer to this question is challenging especially as existing definitions of handcraft are fragmented, disparate and as, contemporary writer on the visual arts Peter Dormer states: “hopeless.”<sup>1</sup> Handcraft can be classified by the level of skill and craftsmanship it embodies. It can be categorized as amateur, hobby, artisanal or Art. It can be further divided into leisure (feminine) or trade (masculine) activities. It can also be divided by social class depending on factors such as whether or not it was made for need or pleasure or the quality of the materials being used. But this inability to precisely define the meaning of handcraft has a positive side. Handcraft can be used constructively as a conceptual element within a designer’s work to comment on cultural or social phenomena. It can be used by a designer as a means by which she can develop and deploy her individual, aesthetic voice. As Paul Greenhalgh Director of the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, and Professor of Art history states: “One can take possession of the word, latch on to any number of previous and partial definitions and develop an individualized philosophy, aesthetic, technology, ethnology or economy of craft.”<sup>2</sup>

This thesis demonstrates that the disparate classifications, varying definitions and contextual significance of handcraft can be refined and shaped by designers and used effectively to communicate meaning to others. Meaning lies in the physical act of making: the materials that are used and the contexts with which specific handcrafts are associated, can support—as well as carry—visual rhetoric in design works. In what follows, handcrafted work is compared with digitally rendered work on three fronts: the physical act of producing the work, the meaning held within the materials used, and the context of the work. The act of contrasting handcraft

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Dormer, “The Salon de Refuse?,” *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*, ed. Peter Dormer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Greenhalgh, “The History of Craft.” *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future*, ed. Peter Dormer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 20.

techniques with computer software creates a discourse between the two means of rendering graphic design. This relationship is then used to unsettle rote graphic design practices. The context, the physical act (method and techniques) of making and the materials of handcraft embody meaning that is carried into the final piece. Drawing on the work of three contemporary designers, including Stefan Sagmeister (USA), Mathias Augustyniak and Michaël Amzalag M/M (Paris) France, Marian Bantjes (Canada), as well as a project created in tandem with this thesis paper as case studies will illustrate and support these contentions.

### **Working by Hand vs. Making Digital Marks**

Cutting, gluing, painting, stitching, carving, ripping, drawing, fraying—all of these physical actions of making contain meaning and the presence of the maker, which remains with the work after it has been completed. The process of manufacture is an important signifier. It speaks about both the worker and the work, socially and culturally. The use of the human hand and all of its limitations is a factor in handcraft that nothing else is capable of replicating. Howard Risatti, professor emeritus of contemporary art and critical theory at Virginia Commonwealth University describes the connection between humans, what they make and how they relate to the world:

...the human hand is limited in size, strength, skill, and even endurance and speed. These limits not only establish the scale of craft objects, but because they are limits shared by all humans, whether craftsmen or not, they also give us a sense of how to relate to other things in the world, man-made as well as natural. In doing this the hand provides a basic, universal gauge of what constitutes the human in terms of scale and proportion, material and form...<sup>3</sup>

Thus the physical act of working by hand creates unique works that are defined by the maker's individual abilities. Every artisan and designer has a specific level of dexterity, a certain amount of strength and a particular approach to making which gives their work a unique signature. Working

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function an Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007),186.

with the hand not only connects people to things as Risatti states but can also connect people with people through a shared understanding of how the hand performs.

Furthermore, working directly with materials produces spontaneous results that are unique to handcraft. Calling attention to the imperfections that occur during the process of making can separate the human and handcraft from the consistent, standardized ubiquity of machine-made items.

The physicality of making plays a significant role in the opportunities that present themselves during the creative process. Twentieth-century craft theorist David Pye's theories on handcraft are grounded in the physical process of making. Pye sees handcraft as workmanship rather than craftsmanship. For Pye, handcraft embodies the act of creating rather than an association with hobbies and amateurism. In fact he even qualifies the act of workmanship as "the workmanship of risk" because "the quality of the result is continually at risk during the process of making."<sup>4</sup> The word "risk" is significant because risk implies errors, missteps and even the possibility of failure. No matter how skilled the worker, the medium that is being used is less forgiving than that of the digital. For example, stabbing a needle through paper leaves a permanent hole that, once created, cannot be eliminated. Additionally, when creating something by hand there is always the potential for multiple and, at times, unpredictable inconsistencies. While the computer can conjure irregularities it cannot mimic how humans respond to a material's properties. The individuality in the act of making lies at the core of the making process as every artisan will work with the materials differently—when a flaw appears or a mistake is made every artisan will have a unique approach to the situation.

Contrary to handcraft, if a digital mark is placed in an undesirable location it can easily be deleted or undone. This is reflected in Pye's second classification, "the workmanship of certainty," in which he honours the skills required to work primarily with digital media by classifying it as workmanship but goes on to clarify it by adding the word "certainty" in reference to the level of control afforded the user. This control is provided by endless opportunities to "undo" previous actions and the ability to eliminate any and all mistakes. Working by hand is not as forgiving. Some

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<sup>4</sup> David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (London: The Herbert Press, 1995), 20.



mistakes require starting over altogether. But more importantly, some mistakes lead to unique and wonderful outcomes. When these impromptu occurrences are explored and worked into the overall design they can provide a more spontaneous and unique end result. Risatti states:

The “hand-made-ness” of the craft object, when understood as a process of both hand and mind engaging material together, still offers a meaningful alternative worldview to the one offered by the possibilities of unlimited material consumption that the limitlessness of machine production encourages. It does this by encouraging us to pay careful attention to how something is made so that we come to regard what something is by how it came to be; the process of making becomes an essential part of the object’s identity.<sup>5</sup>

Risatti is describing the interconnectedness of the physical act of making. The materials, process and techniques that are used become an integral part of the signifying factors of handmade objects. The tools that are used to create a handcrafted item such as a chisel, a needle or a paintbrush, are evident in the final work. The level of finish and degree of a tool’s presence can be an indicator of the skill level of the maker—amateur or artisan—or can present a specific worldview that confirms or contrasts the conventional celebration of perfection.

Moreover, curator, writer and president of the Southwest School of Art (Texas) Paula Owen states that “the object links us to thoughts, memories, sensations, histories, and relationships rather than being an end in itself with a predetermined meaning. It is instead a catalyst for any number of unpredictable effects.”<sup>6</sup> All objects whether made by hand or by machine contain a history of how they are made. The difference lies in the hand and the physical makeup of the handcrafted object. Every inconsistency can be seen as a struggle, every stitch represents a decision and in every brush stroke lies innumerable previous brush strokes through which its character is informed. All of these factors are linked to the personal history of the maker and can be used as rhetorical devices

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<sup>5</sup> Risatti, 188.

<sup>6</sup> Paula Owen, “Fabrication and Encounter: When Content Is a Verb,” *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 84.

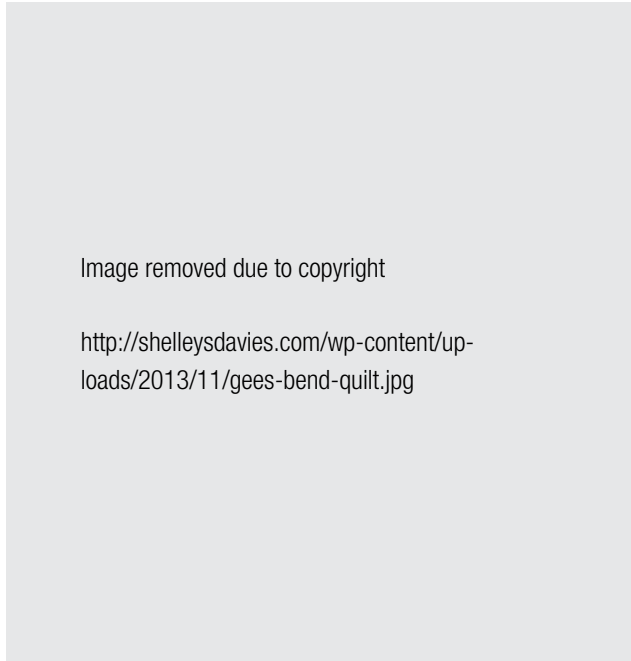


fig. 1

Quilts from *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* exhibit. (1) Mary Lee Bendolph's Work-Clothes Quilt, 2002;

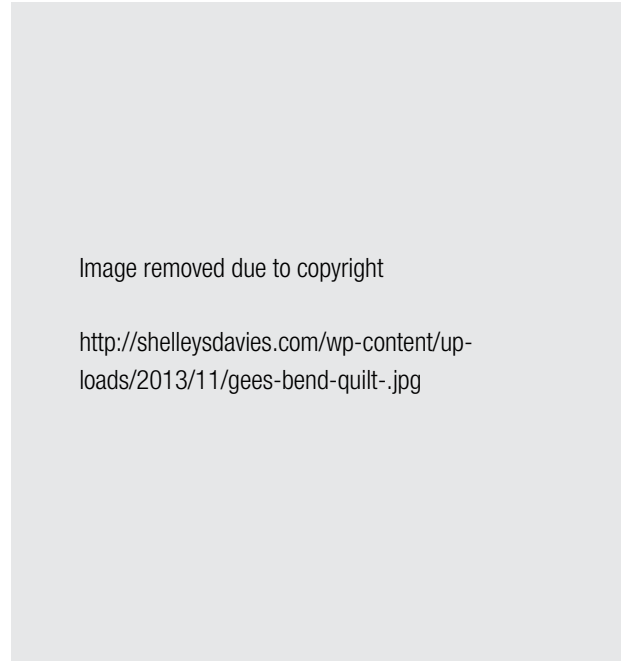


fig. 2

(2) Annie Mae Young, Work-clothes quilt with center medallion of strips, 1976.

when incorporating handcraft into design. As American poet, potter and writer Mary Caroline Richards proclaims, "We cannot fake craft. It lies in the act".<sup>7</sup>

## Meaning Held Within Materials

Handcrafts are a result of medium-based activities and the materials that are used to make handcrafted artifacts contain contextual meaning and a dimensionality that can support and embody concepts within the practice of graphic design. For example fibres used in textiles can range from high quality, expensive silk and Egyptian cotton to low quality, cheap polyester and rayon which can be used to communicate both cultural and economic status. Specific materials contain meaning that becomes intertwined with the object itself.

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Caroline Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 12.

For example *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* exhibit at the Whitney Museum of Art<sup>8</sup> in 2002 displayed quilts made by the women of a black community in southern Alabama, a state known for its earlier dependence on chattle slavery. According to Michael J. Prokopow Assistant Professor in the Communication and Design Department at Ryerson University the quilts were astonishing due to the “incorporation of West African design traditions in an object of European origin.”<sup>9</sup> According to Prokopow, on first glimpse the quilts in the museum are seen as “remarkable for their compositional originality and masterful artistry.”<sup>10</sup> On closer inspection the materiality of the quilts becomes apparent and the meaning held within the fabrics becomes clear. The quilts (see fig. 1 and 2) are crafted from old work clothes which are faded and worn from toil. Thus the worn denim fabrics used in these works are not only speaking of poverty but they are carriers of historical and social context.

This is not to say that a quilt made wholly by machine, including the materials used to fabricate it, does not hold its own latent discourse. The socioeconomic context of a machine-made quilt is very different from one that is handmade. Machine-made quilts are not typically made with patchwork pieces that form a pattern. Instead they are either made with a single piece of plain fabric, decorative fabric or fabric that has a traditional quilting motif printed onto it. These fabrics are then sewn by machine and the stitched pattern will either imitate that of a traditional hand-quilted style or use a simple row pattern to fasten the quilt together. The materiality of a machine-made quilt signifies a different social context than that of the hand-made quilt. For example the machine-made quilt in a Western context implies a wealthier society—a society in which the recycling of old work clothes is no longer necessary, where the cost of buying a quilt greatly outweighs the time required to sew one by hand and where women are no longer occupied by domestic tasks such as needlework. How something is made “describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions

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<sup>8</sup> Michael J. Prokopow, “Material Truths: The Quilts of Gee's Bend at the Whitney Museum of Art: An Exhibition Review,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, 38.1 (Spring 2003), 59. The display of quilts (normally seen as historical artifacts) in an art museum gives them higher cultural value and legitimizes them art. As Prokopow explains: “An exhibit of African American quilts at the Whitney Museum in New York City represents a striking moment in the history of public culture and cultural politics.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

of the users and the values of their culture.”<sup>11</sup> The machine-made quilt also signifies the end of a specific communal activity, that of the quilting bee, where women from a community would come together to “finish” a quilt which could take several days. Hence materials and modes of working are connotative elements that hold specific contextual meaning.

Furthermore a material consciousness (knowledge of a material’s physical limitations and the curiosity about a material’s possibilities) lends a dimension to graphic design that the computer is incapable of simulating. Jeremy Myerson, Director of the Helen Hamlyn Centre and Professor of Design Studies at the Royal College of Art (RCA) explains how the “lack of a tactile or physical encounter with materials as the basis for decision-making in design is cited by many as a reason why computing cannot yet be regarded as a craft in its own right.”<sup>12</sup> Computer software, such as Adobe’s Photoshop and Illustrator, offers the designer numerous tools with which to create designs that resemble the effects of handcraft and its materials. These tools, including options for conté, watercolour, oil paint, crosshatch and countless photographic techniques, grant the designer the ability to imitate the effects of handcraft media without having to physically work with such media. However, the computer has not yet been able to simulate all of the many nuanced and subtle characteristics of these and other materials and thus does not carry the tactility nor the personal history of traditional media.

In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard explains the degree to which the computer simulates the materials used in handcraft techniques. He sees simulation as being beyond mere counterfeit and uses the example of simulating an illness to illustrate his point: “whoever fakes an illness [*dissimulate*] can simply stay in bed and make every one believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms.”<sup>13</sup> In other words in order for the computer to simulate handcraft techniques it must produce some of the intrinsic qualities of the materials.

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<sup>11</sup> John Fisk, *Introduction to Communication Studies*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 86.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Myerson, “Tornadoes, T-Squares and Technology: Can Computing be a Craft?” ed. Peter Dormer. *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 179.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 3.



fig. 3

Michiel Schuurman's digitally composed posters (3) *BROKEN GLASS EVERYWHERE* and (4) *Quiet is the New Loud*.

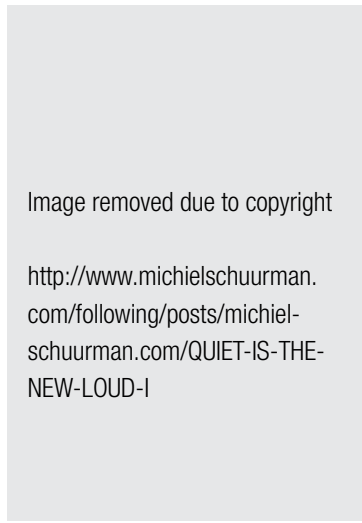


fig. 4

For example the computer is able to reasonably mimic the end result of conté by programming into the tool irregularities which imitate the uneven and rough line quality of the medium. The computer also has the ability to sense the pressure of the hand and responds accordingly through the production of tonal gradation. Thus the software masks the fact that the computer was used in the production of the handcrafted effects. The computer is able to simulate many of the variables that materials offer, however the computer does not yet account for all of them. For example when drawing with conté fragments of chalk tend to chip off the stick. These fragments leave dust and particles around the edges of the lines being drawn. The frequency and amount of dust and particles is in relation to the age and quality of the conté as well as the pressure that is being applied by the user. Additionally the substrate on which the conté is being applied has an affect on the outcome depending on the tooth, grain or smoothness of the surface. Another feature of conté is it's volatility. It tends to smudge in spots that are touched accidentally, harder conté can sometimes fray the surface of the paper slightly and even scratch groves into it. Moreover, these particular properties of the material shift depending on the user's dexterity, as discussed in the previous section, and thus the individual workmanship of risk is apparent. For example, the speed at which the individual works will alter the range and scatter pattern of the dust particles. The computer can simulate certain

materials but does not yet capture all of the subtle factors that play a role in the aesthetics of the final product and the meaning associated with those factors.

However, many designers use the computer with no intent to simulate handcraft techniques. Examples of computer graphics are Michiel Schuurman's posters that are on display at the *Graphic Design: Now In Production* exhibit. These posters (see fig. 3 and 4) are generated by exploiting software programs' "action tools" and "repeat functions."<sup>14</sup> The typographic forms are constructed from radiating patterns that reduce down to minute details that would be exceedingly difficult to create with such accuracy through handcraft techniques. When the computer is used as Schuurman does—with the intent to capitalize on options and alternatives—the work is a product of the affordances of both the software and the computer. The precision of the posters does not display the element of "risk" that is inherent in handcraft. There may be unexpected results that occur but if they are undesirable they can always be refined or deleted without any indication of them having occurred.

Working with materials is a very different process than working with the computer. Professor Gillian Crampton Smith, past professor and course director of computer-related design at RCA, states:

With the computer, you have to envisage what you want to do. You can't "work into" your material in the same way as with traditional design methods. The computer always responds, offers options and alternatives, and it stops you thinking things through. We're all lazy so we try different options instead of working it out. And there is always the same level of finish on the computer, whereas sketches are more suggestive of different possibilities.<sup>15</sup>

Crampton Smith is describing the issues with software tools that attempt to simulate handcraft techniques by explaining that trial and error performed on the computer does not equate working and thinking with materials.

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<sup>14</sup> Walker Art Center, *Graphic Design: Now in Production*, ed. Andrew Blauvelt and Ellen Lupton (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2011), 100.

<sup>15</sup> Myerson, 179.

Critic, curator and professor of art history Maria Elena Buszek is opposed to the use of software that mimics handcraft techniques. Buszek argues that the sensual tactility of craft media offers a form of communication that is more directly connected to humanity, which she sees as becoming “endangered” due to the technologically saturated information age.<sup>16</sup> Buszek appears to echo the naïve sentiments of the Arts and Crafts Movement; however, she is not rallying against technology. Instead, Buszek sees handcraft as having great potential in being an alternative to high-tech methodologies. But what about the significance of working with a combination of high-tech and no-tech rather than preserving their separateness? Adamson states, “handcraft is organized around material experience.”<sup>17</sup> How can material experience be translated into the digital realm of graphic design?

## **Reproduction of Handcraft into Digital**

Designers have utilized handcraft technologies throughout the industry’s existence such as silk screen and letterpress in which the handcrafted artifact is the finished product. However most of commercial practice today is computer generated for reasons of efficiency and cost. As a result, designers who want to work with handcraft tend to rely on remediation in which they use materials to create objects that are then scanned or photographed. “Remediation” is a process of using new media to refashion prior forms of media. In their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin state:

A medium is that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real. A medium in our culture can never operate in isolation, because it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with other media.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Maria Elena Buszek, “The Ordinary Made Extra/Ordinary,” *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 98.

Here Bolter and Grusin explain that most representation in media is a remediation of something that has come before it. Thus when using the computer to remediate hand made techniques, either through computer simulations or through scanning or photography of objects, art or environments a discourse between the differing social, physical and material aspects of both the digital and analog techniques occurs.

The remediation of materials shifts the tactile properties of the materials from physical texture to illusory texture. It also affects the context of the original. One of the most recognized theorists in the affects of reproduction on art is Walter Benjamin. In his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” he introduces the notion of the “aura” of the original work which is lost in the copy. Benjamin states: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”<sup>19</sup> Benjamin understands the social and cultural implications of accessibility that reproduction allows. By copying an original, that which is usually a one-off and available to a very limited audience is made available to a mass audience. However the context is inevitably changed depending on how and where it is copied and how and where the copy is being received.

Benjamin furthers his argument by claiming that the quality of the original is depreciated when it is mechanically reproduced.<sup>20</sup> The sensory quality of the original, its materiality, its aura, may be “lost,” however the copy becomes its own entity and takes on different social and cultural significance. The relevance of Benjamin’s theory to the material aspects of handcraft in design is the fact that graphic design is an industry of mass production and most graphic design work is made with the intention to reproduce. If materials play an integral role in the signifying factors of handcrafted items what happens when the materials are seen in the context of a reproduction? The materials used in the original can be seen but not felt. Thus, as stated earlier, it can be argued that the tactile aspect is gone and the texture has become illusory. However the social and cultural meanings linked

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M Kellner (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 20.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



to those materials remain even though the reproduced object becomes detached from the domain of tradition.<sup>22</sup> For example the photographs of the quilts in figure 1 and 2 are reproductions of the original quilts. These photographs establish the qualities such as texture, colour and deterioration of the materials that were used. However, the fact that these quilts are seen out of context as images in a thesis paper—laid out flat against a white background—signifies something different than if they are seen laying on a bed in the homes of the women who made them. They have shifted from useful household item, made from the clothes of family members and used to stay warm at night, to art forms that are being studied. The rhetorical opportunities shift as the context shifts. Depending on how the artifact is presented notions of tradition, art, family, warmth, form, etc., will emerge or fade in the discourse that occurs between original and copy.

Moreover the reproduction adds further nuance to the overall signification of the final piece in that the reproduction becomes part of the story, becomes an additional comment on society and culture, handcraft, design and materials. Graphic design is an industry in which items are created for the purpose of mass production. Writer, editor and designer Anna Sinofzik explains how work that is made with the intent of reproduction is affected differently than the original work of Art:

If the work is meant to be seen as a reproduction then the tangible composition represents an interim stage, something to be reproduced in flat media at some point. Such works will lose their literal tangibility and the Aura of the original, but will gain an additional contextual layer through the process of remediation. Meaning lies in the composition, and in the expressly loaded tension between original and reproduction.<sup>23</sup>

Sinofzik sees both the composition and the reproduction as carriers of meaning. In terms of the composition the handcrafted element gains meaning by the relation it holds to the content and arrangement of the new piece while the reproduction gains meaning through the differences of the

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<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Sinofzik, *High Touch: Tactile Design and Visual Explorations*, ed. Sven Ehmann, Matthias Hübner Robert Klanten and Anna Sinofzik (Berlin: Gestalten, 2012), 5.

mediums being used. Through remediating handcraft a rich dichotomy between old and new, high-tech and no-tech, original and copy is created. In other words, contemporary visual culture relies on the representation of a medium, within another medium, or multiples thereof and it is within these relationships that a discourse between the differing social, physical and material aspects can occur. The competition for status between the handmade and the digital and the ideas that they conjure can be used as a rhetorical device in graphic design.

## **Handcraft's Contextual Meanings**

As seen in the discussion of materiality and physicality both are strongly linked to social, cultural and historical contexts. Writer, artist and designer Walter Crane states: "Like all art craft has been divided into classes, like the society it reflects."<sup>24</sup> The outcome of making and materials, the artifact, contributes yet another contextual aspect to handcraft. Handwork, due to its pre-industrial roots, is associated with tradition and nostalgia. The tradition that is linked to handcraft can be found in the techniques which are taught from master to apprentice as well as in artifacts made by family members, which are handed down through generations.

Glenn Adamson, Deputy Head of Research and Head of Graduate Studies at the Victoria and Albert Museum, discusses how the limitations of handcraft provide opportunities:

The limits embodied by craft are not only psychologically comforting, but also conceptually useful. The implications of a decorative object in its surroundings; the sensual characteristics of specific materials; the regulation imposed by specialized tools when properly employed; the sociopolitical connotations of the figure of the artisan; and even the literal limits of time and space suggested by long days in a small shop all provide a kind of friction that keep pressing questions of form, category, and identity open for further investigation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Crane, *The Claims of Decorative Art* (London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1892), 109.

<sup>25</sup> Adamson, 5.

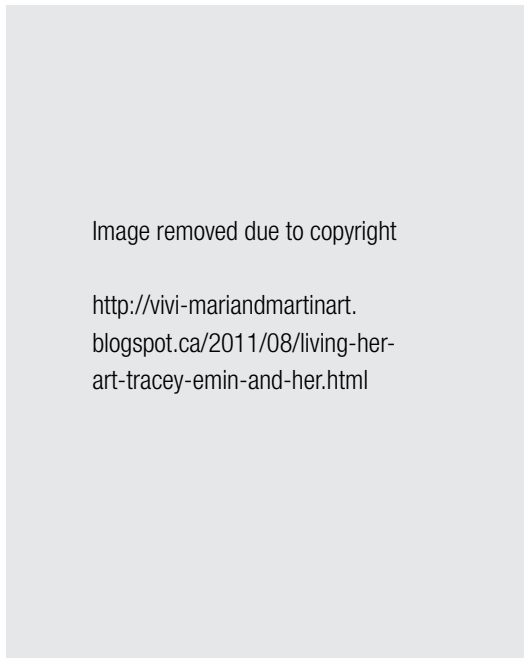


fig. 5

Tracey Emin's patchwork and embroidered works. (5) *It Always Hurts*, 2005 and (6) *Mad Tracey From Margate—Everyone's Been There*, 1997.

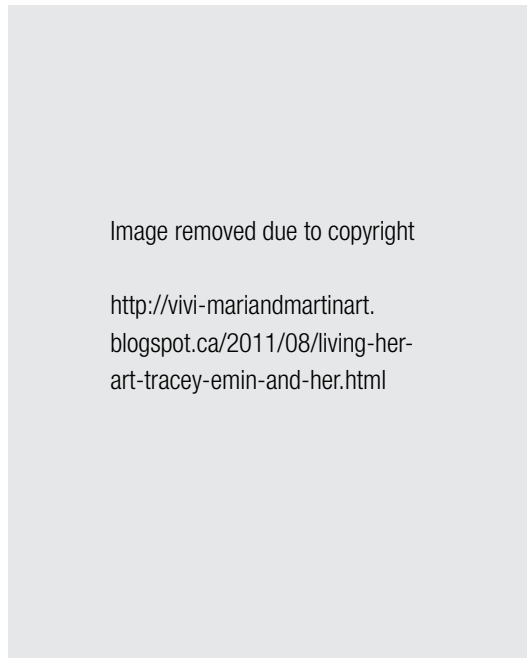


fig. 6

Here Adamson lists the strengths, weaknesses and social contexts of handcraft which he sees as having potential in the continual discussion of handcraft in relation to Art. However these romanticized aspects of handcraft could be considered a disadvantage to graphic designers as they tend to be equated with “backward-looking” ideas that result in outdated, unprogressive or conservative end-results. However, the utilization of handcraft techniques does not have to be limited to an antiquated sensibility but has the potential to relocate handcraft's historical, nostalgic qualities within a contemporary context. In this way the historical context and sense of tradition evoked by handcraft can be utilized as a rhetorical device. Furthermore, when handcraft is used in a contemporary manner the associated notions of nostalgia can be redirected into enlightened and unexpected messages.

For example the patchwork blankets created by Tracey Emin, contemporary artist and member of the Young British Artists—a group known for their shock tactics, uses stitching and quilt-making as a device to talk about rape, sexuality, trauma and violence (see fig. 5 and 6). These topics defy the domestic qualities usually associated with quilting. Sewing elicits specific socially

constructed ideals that can be traced back to the Victorian era. Sewing was done by “wives occupied with housewifery.”<sup>26</sup> Men did sew as well but in a different context than women. In “Boys with Needles” Anna-Marie Larsen describes the separation of male and female needlework:

Once textiles came to be seen as women’s work, plain sewing and all forms of needlework became subordinate, feminized, inappropriate occupations for men, or at least straight men. Exceptions are found in the history of industrialized fibre-related occupations that were and are open to all men without stigma.<sup>27</sup>

These masculine occupations would include crocheting fishing nets, furniture upholstery and tailoring. This divide was constructed due to the physical strength required to work with the materials such as fishing nets and furniture as well as the aspect of trade which is a part of public life in which women were not historically encouraged to engage. The quality of a woman’s sewing was a symbol of their abilities as a wife. Thus needlework such as embroidery, quilting and other forms of sewing for the home is associated with domestic, female and nurturing notions. However Emin’s needlework is anything but delicate:

Typically the quilts are made from an old wool blanket, roughly hemmed with blanket stitch. Capital letters cut out of felt and sections of fabrics—brightly coloured squares, printed flowers, hand-written text and drawings printed onto fabric – are all stitched to the base with deliberately large uneven stitching. Edges are left frayed; there is no attempt at a needlewoman’s meticulous craft. Instead, Emin’s quilts represent the idea of appliqué as a form of collage.... they transform the concept of the traditionally nurturing feminine craft of quilt-making into an arena for angry self-expression and revelation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: The Women’s Press, 1984), 90.

<sup>27</sup> Anna-Marie Larsen, “Boys With Needles,” *Craft: Perception and Practice*, volume 2, ed. Paula Gustafson (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2005), 99.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Manchester, *Tracey Emin: Hate and Power Can be a Terrible Thing*, Tate. Accessed 03 22 2014, [tate.org.uk/art/artworks/emin-hate-and-power-can-be-a-terrible-thing-t11891/text-summary](http://tate.org.uk/art/artworks/emin-hate-and-power-can-be-a-terrible-thing-t11891/text-summary).

Emin is utilizing the socially constructed ideology of the quilt as a platform for her message. Her quilts are paradoxical—they contrast the warmth and nurturing associated with a handmade quilt with angry words and an aggressive aesthetic style. Like Emin, designers can utilize the contextual associations embedded in handcraft to create unexpected couplings of image and message in their design work.

Merging handcraft into design practice presents multiple physical, material and contextual opportunities for creating rhetoric. Adamson would refer to this as “thinking through craft,” and not “collapsing into ‘the crafts’ as a fixed category.”<sup>29</sup> In other words handcraft can be used as an *idea*—a rhetorical device in contemporary design work. To consider this we can examine the work of Stefan Sagmeister, Mathias Augustyniak and Michaël Amzalag of M/M (Paris) and Marian Bantjes to understand how handcraft is being used in a contemporary setting as a rhetorical tool.

## **Handcraft as Rhetorical Prop in Contemporary Design Practice:**

### **Stefan Sagmeister**

Austrian-born designer Stefan Sagmeister of the design firm Sagmeister & Walsh frequently uses handcraft, most often the technique of hand-lettering, in his design work. The use of his own lettering instead of digital type forms a unique, individual signature within Sagmeister’s practice. In a dissertation entitled “Handwriting, Typography, Illustration: The Visual Word of the Russian Avant-garde” Ian Chesley states that:

Every act of writing by hand becomes a sort of signature, a direct expression of identity between the writer and the written. The visual faktura of the text, its palpable texture, then follows as a direct consequence of the physical act of writing; the writing subject locates and depicts itself transparently in every curve and line.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Adamson, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Ian Chesley, “Handwriting, Typography, Illustration: The Visual Word of the Russian Avant-Garde,” Harvard University, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2007, 2.

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<http://shape-and-colour.com/2013/01/16/stefan-sagmeister-the-happy-show/>

Image removed due to copyright

<http://www.nytimes.com/image-pages/2012/04/04/arts/JP-SAG-MEISTER2.html>

Image removed due to copyright

<http://www.designboom.com/design/stefan-sagmeister-the-happy-show-at-ica-philadelphia/>

fig. 7

fig. 8

fig. 9

Stefan Sagmeister's hand-lettered walls at *The Happy Show*. (7) Introduction to the show. (8) Incorporation of a thermostat through the use of hand-lettering. (9) The inclusion of bathroom walls as a part of the show.

Chesley claims that every individual's handwriting (or hand-lettering) demonstrates unique qualities which can support a designer's aesthetic voice. Chesley also explains how hand-lettering has distinct material properties and textures that speak to how it was made. The aesthetic qualities of hand-lettering reflect a culturally accrued mood or expression which influences the reception of the content held by the words themselves.

Writer and conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith states that Sagmeister is always in search of avenues through which he can examine the interconnection between artist and society.<sup>31</sup> The hand-lettering that Sagmeister uses on the walls of his exhibit *The Happy Show* is used as a device to accomplish this human connection. If we refer back to Risatti's theory on the individual limitations of the human hand in the physical act of making, it is apparent that Sagmeister is using this as a strategy to communicate and form connections with his audience. The hand-lettering being discussed is a thick, black marker scrawl that appears on the gallery walls, which is used to explain the various installations, provide insights into the exhibit's intentions and contributes a personal dialogue of Sagmeister's thoughts and recollections (see fig. 7 to 9). The lettering invokes the emotional and physical status of the man as he wrote. For example at times the baseline of the text bends with the

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<sup>31</sup> Stefan Sagmeister, *The Happy Film* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2012), 197. Sagmeister expresses his disdain for being called an artist. He prefers the designation of designer.

fatigue of writing vertically for a long period of time. When a word is misspelled it is crossed out and rewritten without apology, and where a thermostat interferes, it is incorporated into the overall design (see fig. 8). Sagmeister's fascination with human connection is asserted by Goldsmith when he describes Sagmeister's work as explorations into "what it means to be human."<sup>32</sup> The "risk" involved in hand-lettering on the gallery walls exposes Sagmeister's "flaws" and his "humanness," which creates a sense of understanding and affinity in the receiver.

The use of hand-lettering can also be related to the fact that Sagmeister is an avid diary keeper. Many of his works contain personal handwritten thoughts and ideas taken directly out of his diaries. The walls in *The Happy Show* allude to this personal act of recording events—a historical transcript of his life. As Chesley states "[the] historical act of writing is a tangible, physical act; the path of history is the path of the pen on the page."<sup>33</sup> The markings on the wall imply a day in the past when Sagmeister stood—where the viewer now stands in the gallery—and wrote out *The Happy Show*. Because it is hand-lettered the exhibit itself becomes a one-of-a-kind experience. Every time the exhibit moves venues, the writing must be done anew with fresh mistakes and nuances particular to the current location.

Furthermore Johanna Drucker, Associate Professor of Contemporary Art and Theory at Yale University states that some visual manipulation of letterforms call attention to the material character of the typographic signifier.<sup>34</sup> Thus the treatment of Sagmeister's hand-lettered exhibit walls, signify more than the literary meaning. As Drucker explains "form (whether visual or verbal) is historically inflected and that neither the subject, nor history, nor interpretation can escape the specific constraints of their circumstances of production."<sup>35</sup> There is a paradox which lies in the act of writing on walls, which has an overt connection to graffiti, and the fact that the writing is on the walls of a gallery.

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<sup>32</sup> Sagmeister, 2012,197.

<sup>33</sup> Chesley, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Image removed due to copyright

Peter Hall. Sagmeister: *Made You Look*. New York: Abrams, 2001. 110–111. Print.

Image removed due to copyright

Peter Hall. Sagmeister: *Made You Look*. New York: Abrams, 2001. 110.

fig. 10

(10) Stefan Sagmeister's hand lettered notes in *Sagmeister: Made You Look*. (11) Detail.

fig. 11, detail

Galleries tend to be quiet, formal places that encourage reflection whereas graffiti is art normally seen on the street. To establish *The Happy Show* as less formal, Sagmeister uses hand-lettering to break down formality and create a place that appears more open to the average person. The gallery space becomes a more personal space.

Not only are the walls of the gallery written on. The female and male washrooms are also inscribed (see fig. 9). This may be unsettling for some—Sagmeister has been in the ladies washroom. The experience makes the viewer question gender roles and societal rules around private and public spaces. Upon leaving the washroom, patrons may feel a strong desire to break away from the constraint of proper social conduct and visit the washroom of the opposite sex. In order to experience the entire show one must breach a fairly significant societal rule and enter a room that, in ordinary circumstances, they would not enter. Sagmeister is using the context of his hand-lettering in public washrooms to challenge social conventions and to encourage the audience to do the same.

Another example of Sagmeister's hand lettering appears in the margins and between the photographs of his book *Sagmeister: Made You Look* (fig. 10 and 11). It is done in a very quick style with variations in line weight and x-height and combines both the cursive and printed styles. It appears as though it was done in a hurry and without much forethought. As seen in the detail of figure 11 it looks as though, after starting to write, it became evident that there would not be enough



Image removed due to copyright

Peter Hall. Sagmeister: *Made You Look*.  
New York: Abrams, 2001. 49. Print.

fig. 12

Image removed due to copyright

Peter Hall. Sagmeister: *Made You Look*.  
New York: Abrams, 2001. 49. Print.

fig. 13

Image removed due to copyright

Peter Hall. Sagmeister: *Made You Look*.  
New York: Abrams, 2001. 49. Print.

fig. 14

Little Gold business card designed by Stefan Sagmeister. (12 and 13) Front and back of card.  
(14) The card as seen when it is spun.

room for the entire thought. Therefore the last few sentences are crammed into the remaining space in the bottom right gutter of the page. Had these sentences been typeset in a similar fashion it would be considered a “sloppy misstep” to formal typesetters. However this quality is intentional as Sagmeister could have easily started again had he believed it to be a mistake. Instead, the permanence of ink on paper is respected and the immediacy of the handmade remains. The fact that most people have experienced these issues when writing by hand and have made the same “mistakes” makes these pages approachable and easy for the receiver to relate to the way in which it was formed.

Another way Sagmeister uses handcraft can be seen in a freelance project he did for a food and produce company called Little Gold in 1987, while still a student at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. The card was to be given out at a trade show and needed to distinguish itself from the multitudes of other business cards. The unconventional card that Sagmeister designed (see fig. 12 to 14) is based on an old-fashioned children’s game in which a child draws fragments of images on either side of a card and attaches string to both ends. When the child twirls the string the card spins and the sides optically merge to reveal a combined image. When the Little Gold card is spun the pen and ink illustrations, of a chicken on one side of the card and a jar on the other, assemble themselves into a complete image of a chicken on the label of a jar and the seemingly random letters on each side spell the company name.

Sagmeister’s use of a child’s game to shape a business card brings with it historical and

social meaning which he uses as a rhetorical device in his design. Sandra Corse, retired professor of literature, communication and culture at Georgia Tech, explains that craft techniques are embedded with historical connotations due to the fact that they were relied upon before the Industrial Revolution. Therefore when used in a contemporary environment, it tends to “criticize the comodified everyday world we live in.”<sup>36</sup> By referencing a pre-industrial child’s game Sagmeister’s Little Gold business card is inciting a critical assessment of today’s society. The card expresses a simpler way of life and elicits nostalgic notions of a bygone era, an era that was wholesome and natural—in other words, an idyll. Adamson elaborates on this idea by likening handcraft’s nostalgic connotations to that of the pastoral found in art and literature—the golden years, or more cuttingly, sentimental escapism. He asks:

To what extent does craft constitute an opportunity for real creative freedom, in which critique, perspective and individualism can flourish? And, conversely, to what extent is it simply a Utopian prop, a story we tell ourselves to assuage our anxieties in an increasingly fluid, technological society.<sup>37</sup>

Sagmeister uses this contextual framework to his advantage. Thus the idea of pre-mechanization, wholesomeness and innocence attached to the child’s game is seen in connection to the food that Little Gold produces.

What Sagmeister’s work demonstrates is that the social, historical and pre-industrial contexts of handcraft can be used conceptually. The Little Gold business card is an example of how handcraft can be both a *technique* and an *idea*. It also illustrates how handcraft, specifically handwriting and lettering, can narrow the gap between designer and audience. The physical act of making links the work to the hand of the maker and will be received within the context of how and when it was made. The hand is an intrinsic aspect of handcraft in that it is a common feature of human beings and thus becomes a relatable component between object and receiver.

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<sup>36</sup> Sandra Corse, *Craft Objects, Aesthetic Contexts: Kant, Heidegger, and Adorno on Craft* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 94.

<sup>37</sup> Adamson, 105–6.

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Krzysztof Dydo and Agnieszka Dydo. *The Polish Poster of the 21st Century*. Krakow: Galeria Plakatu, 2008. 27. Print.

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Krzysztof Dydo and Agnieszka Dydo. *The Polish Poster of the 21st Century*. Krakow: Galeria Plakatu, 2008. 26. Print.

Image removed due to copyright

<https://www.galeriagrafikii-plakatu.pl/pl/plakaty/84/Henryk-Tomaszewski/1837/Utstallning-Polsk-affisch/?&imgpos=-494>

fig. 15

fig. 16

fig. 17

Sample posters of The Polska Szkoła Plakatu (15) *Wozzeck*, by Allan Berg theatre poster by Jan Lenica, 1965. (16) *It's A Dog's World, Mondo Cane, Gualtiero Jacopetti* film poster by Wojciech Zamecznik, 1964. (17) *Utstallning Polsk affisch* exhibition poster by Henryk Tomaszewski, 1956.

## M/M (Paris)

The work of M/M (Paris) illustrates the marriage of “risk” and “certainty” in the physical act of making. Mathias Augustyniak’s expressive, hand-drawn and photographic work is given to Michaël Amzalag who then transforms the handcrafted works of his partner into a more systematic, technology driven final product. Amzalag and Augustyniak find inspiration in the design of the early to mid 20th century such as the work of The Polska Szkoła Plakatu (Polish Poster School). These posters (see fig. 15 to 17) are more of a national art form than advertisement due to the fact that they formed a mode of communication that subverted the censorship inflicted on the Polish nation by the Soviet regime.<sup>38</sup> “Poland could survive as a distinct nationality only in a cultural sense.”<sup>39</sup> Polish poster artists needed to be resourceful due to the scarcity of supplies. The supplies that they did have were of poor quality. According to Polish poster designer Henryk Tomaszewski:

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<sup>38</sup> Danuta Wróblewska, *Polish Contemporary Graphic Art: Studio Graphics, The Poster, Book Design, Press Design* (Warsaw: Interpress, 1988), 7. At the end of the Second World War the Soviet regime enforced an artistic doctrine of Socialist Realism. In simplified terms Socialist Realism was “a realism of form harnessed to political content. It was understood as a mode of expression for mass contact with society, which at the same time did not cease to be itself an instrument in the class struggle.”

<sup>39</sup> Abraham Brumberg, *Poland: Genesis of a Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1983), 55.

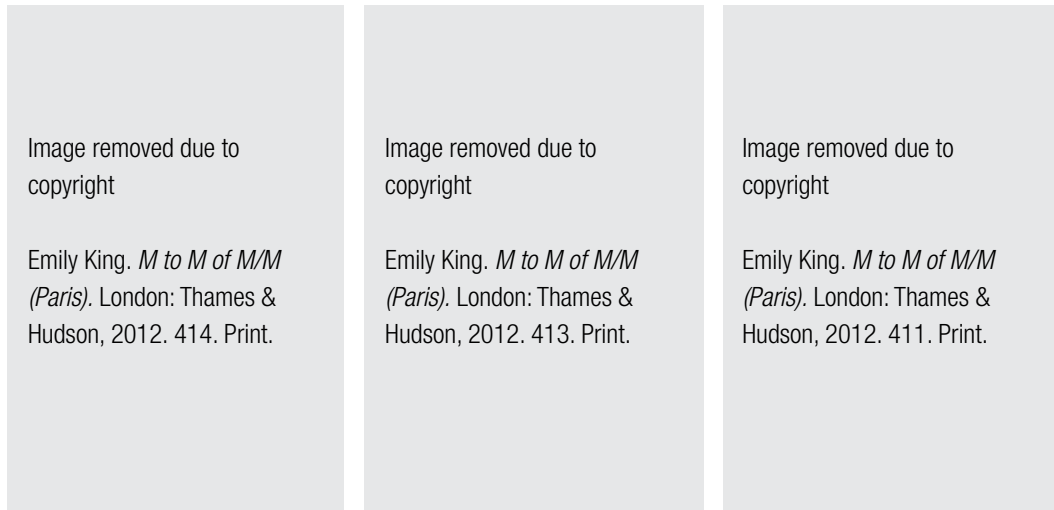


fig. 18

fig.19

fig. 20

M/M (Paris)' Théâtre de Lorient posters for: (18) *La bête dans la jungle*. (19) *Rhinocéros*. (20) *Marion Delorme*.

“We had absolutely nothing to work with. No materials. No brushes. No paint. Hardly any paper. We got powder paint from the corner shop. And the patterns we cut with scissors.”<sup>40</sup> Thus the highly handcrafted posters embody a Polish vernacular that evolved out of physical, mental and economic limitations and need.<sup>41</sup>

Like the work of the Polish poster designers, Amzalag and Augustyniak have created their own vernacular through the use of handcraft and the spontaneity which results from the “workmanship of risk.” They use a variety of techniques and materials including hand rendered letterforms, illustration and hand sculpted still lifes, which are then incorporated into computer-based design work. In contrast with Adamson’s claims in *Thinking Through Craft*, when he states, “craftsmanship draws no attention to itself; it lies beneath notice, allowing other qualities to assert themselves in their fullness”<sup>42</sup> M/M (Paris)’ work has a distinct handcrafted voice M/M (Paris) allows the accidents that occur when working with materials by hand to prove its “hand-made-ness.”<sup>43</sup> The rawness

<sup>40</sup> James Victore, “Poster Master,” *Print* (Sept/Oct 1995), 34.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast, *Illustration: A Visual History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2008), 90–91. Image dominated over information. Poster artists were subversive in their visual messages, which were largely conceptual, in order to bolster the oppressed Polish public.

<sup>42</sup> Adamson, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Risatti, 188.

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Emily King. *M to M of M/M*  
(Paris). London: Thames &  
Hudson, 2012. 412. Print.

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copyright

Emily King. *M to M of M/M*  
(Paris). London: Thames &  
Hudson, 2012. 412. Print.

fig. 21

fig. 22, detail

(21) M/M (Paris)' Théâtre de Lorient poster for *le Malade imaginaire ou le Silence de Molière*. (22) Detail.

of M/M (Paris)' style, which is also seen in the hand lettering of Sagmeister, is conscientiously suggestive of the amateur making it accessible to the general public. In addition, the confidence of the imperfection exhibited by their work is an overt comment on the uniformity found in mass produced products.

The posters designed by M/M (Paris) for the Théâtre de Lorient celebrate the nuances of handcraft techniques. The M/M (Paris) designers develop their own visual theme around each play's content, what they describe as a "mise-en-scène rather than a literal illustration of the play."<sup>44</sup> The mise-en-scène is created by arranging and photographing a still life, a constructed environment (see fig. 18 and 19) or a portrait disrupted with other media (see fig. 20). These handcrafted images are then combined with highly illustrative black and white, hand drawn titles. Contrary to the highly legible titles seen on conventional theatre posters the Théâtre de Lorient titles tend to be embellished and at times abstruse. Due to their ornate illustrative style and placement directly over top of full colour imagery, details in the letterforms are at times consumed by the background and are often challenging to read.

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<sup>44</sup> Emily King, *M to M of M/M (Paris)* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 408.

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Emily King. *M to M of M/M*  
(*Paris*). London: Thames &  
Hudson, 2012. 324–5. Print.

fig. 23

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copyright

Emily King. *M to M of M/M*  
(*Paris*). London: Thames &  
Hudson, 2012. 326. Print.

fig. 24

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copyright

Emily King. *M to M of M/M*  
(*Paris*). London: Thames &  
Hudson, 2012. 326. Print.

fig. 25

(23) Inspiration for M/MINK perfume. (24–25) Advertising campaign for M/MINK.

Almost the entire poster for the production of *le Malade imaginaire ou le Silence de Molière* (see fig. 21) is handmade by the M/M (Paris) team including the felted doll. This differs from a more conventional interpretation of a play where the main character is depicted through a more representational image—either by a portrait captured by camera or illustration. The white contour outline of the type in the title art has been placed on top of an off-white textured background, which melds type and image into one entity (see detail, fig. 22). The designers of M/M (Paris) do not apologize for the errors and cut lines that show up around the letters in the title, they do not digitally remove the scratches and scuff marks on the cardboard floor and backdrop, nor do they attempt to reduce the intensity of the shadow that interferes with the text at the bottom of the photograph. They are able to recognize the charm in the flaws of their handcrafted works which in turn grants their work a distinct visual aesthetic.

Not only is the work of M/M (Paris) atypical but so is their process. The perfume M/MINK is an example of how Amzalag and Augustyniak subvert the entire approach to a design project. Firstly, there was no perfume and there was no client. Instead they began with three unusual resources: “a fantastical formula, a photograph of a calligrapher at work and a block of ink”<sup>45</sup> (see fig. 23). M/M (Paris) then approached Byredo Parfums to create a scent based on these

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<sup>45</sup> King, 323.

references. The creators of the perfume at Byredo explain that the M/MINK scent is “a hypnotic composition opening with adoxal, the heart consisting of incense and finally revealing a base of patchouli leaf, clover honey and dark amber. At first it truly smells like ink before giving way to the idea of the creative ink that held together the three images [supplied by M/M (Paris)].”<sup>46</sup> M/M (Paris)’ advertising campaign is a depiction of how a scent becomes part of a person (see fig. 24 and 25). The campaign uses fashion photography in which the familiar elements of fashion images, such as eyes, mouth and facial expression, are obscured by giant ink smears. The ink is thus the signifier for scent and how scent can define a person. The physical act of smearing ink leads to drips and splashes that are difficult to control but can be applied to the final design in a conscientious manner as seen in the overlapping of ink over photographs in the M/MINK advertisements. The designers of M/M (Paris) make no attempt at removing these random marks and place them in such a way as to allow some splashes to partially conceal the name, the description of the product and the logo. This replacement and concealment of conventional signs in fashion advertising through the “workmanship of risk” unsettles the assumptions of design convention, including the paramount importance of a company’s logo.

M/M (Paris) illustrates how the seemingly prohibitive element of risk that is part of the physical nature of handcraft can be used as an alternative way of approaching design problems and their playful, unrestrained approach highlights the materials and techniques that they utilize.

### **Marian Bantjes**

Marian Bantjes’ design work is both computer generated and handcrafted. The specific materials she chooses to work with reveal meaning through their juxtaposition with each other as well as with the written content of the work. Her handcrafted layouts are created, reproduced through photography and then inserted into a digital layout. This calculated denial of the tactile quality of the materials creates a longing in the viewer to touch, to experience, to feel.

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<sup>46</sup> Byredo. Projects. *Byredo Parfums*. Accessed 3 24 2014, <http://byredo.com/en/content/view/projects>.

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Marian Bantjes. *I Wonder*. New York:  
The Monacelli Press, 2010. 2–3. Print.

fig. 26

Detail from Marian Bantjes' Introduction in *I Wonder*.

Bantjes' book *I Wonder* contains examples of how she uses materials to inform her concept. The book is designed in the style of Arabic and early Christian illuminated manuscripts, complete with elaborate borders and embellished dropped capitals. The borders are highly decorative, intricate, and meticulously organized. Some of the border elements are created digitally, while others are created by the arrangement of objects which are then photographed and seamlessly incorporated into her digital layout. As she states in the introduction, her intent was to “illustrate without illustrating” and create a space “where words and images are interdependent, neither able to fully survive without the other.”<sup>47</sup> For example the Introduction is designed using flower petals and leaves, which are arranged in intricate patterns (see fig. 26). The viewer understands that these petals and leaves were painstakingly arranged and photographed only to then wilt, discolour and be discarded. The temporal nature of the materials mimic the ephemeral nature of words, which will be read and then forgotten with a possibility of a fleeting recollection. Bantjes' use of these materials create visually rhetorical suggestions regarding the fleeting quality of thoughts and of the text in the pages of the book.

Bantjes does not consider imagery to be subordinate to text. She explains: “While decorative, I don't see the ornamentation being in any way superfluous.”<sup>48</sup> She accomplishes this by having the

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<sup>47</sup> Marian Bantjes, *I Wonder* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2010), 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



Image removed due to copyright

Marian Bantjes. *I Wonder*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2010. 70–71. Print.

Image removed due to copyright

Marian Bantjes. *I Wonder*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2010. 76–77. Print.

fig. 27

fig. 28

(27) Chapter spread from “Honour” in Bantjes’ *I Wonder*. (28) Spread from “Honour” in Bantjes’ *I Wonder*.

imagery aid as well as enhance the writing through juxtaposition. In other words, the elements of handcrafted imagery including materiality, physicality and context serves as both a support to the content and as a rhetorical device. For example the chapter entitled “Honour” in *I Wonder* Bantjes uses dry pasta to create the ornamental border (see fig. 27 and 28). The concept of “honour” can be located on several levels through the use of noodles such as the honoring of parents by children through the making and giving of pasta art and noodle jewelery. She states, “When celebrating the honoured, we take it out of the element of the ordinary, making our praise a display.”<sup>49</sup> Another way that handcraft is informing the concept of honour is through the physical act of careful arrangement of mundane. Bantjes is illustrating her point that a banal item can be given distinction by using it in an extraordinary way. The receiver is not expecting pasta noodles to be used as an ornamental element in a book, and thus unsettles the experience of ordinary decoding of imagery. The pasta may not immediately connect to an existing set of signifiers, but on deeper reflection and further reading of the text, an alternate, revelatory meaning arises. By assembling hand-built borders that provide rhetorical support to the text through their materiality and social contexts handcraft becomes a crucial component in her design. Instead of falling victim to the nostalgia that contemporary society

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<sup>49</sup> Bantjes, 72.

associates with handcraft, she uses these associations to reveal meaning within her piece.

It is an easy endeavor to use craft in a customary or backward-looking fashion. But many designers like Bantjes, Sagmeister, and those at M/M (Paris) are using handcraft in a contemporary setting, bringing the physical, material and contextual aspects into their digital work as a rhetorical device to the messages they are presenting. By partnering their differing handcraft approaches with digital technology, these designers are producing unique and surprising results that work with the physical, material and contextual aspects that handcraft offers.

### ***String Theory***

One of the artifacts created by this author in tandem with this thesis paper is the book, *String Theory*, which utilizes the social, physical and material features of embroidery to create multiple levels of discourse concerning handcraft in design.

Since the Victorian Age, needlework has become highly gendered, constructed as women's work, and is seen as a symbol of obedience. It is perceived to be an act that is done quietly, patiently with eyes down. The author Colette (1873–1954) taught her daughter Bel-Gazou, age nine, how to sew after experiencing pressure from her friends to be a “good mother.” She describes Bel-Gazzou as “silent when she sews, silent for hours on end, with her mouth firmly closed...She is silent, and she—why not write down the word that frightens me—she is thinking.”<sup>50</sup> Former Professor of English at Towson State University Elaine Hedges explains in “The Needle or the Pen” that the needle is a symbol of the confinement of domestic life while the pen is a symbol of the world of independence and intellect.<sup>51</sup> In this context embroidery is considered an obedient act carried out by women and is therefore tied to female oppression. However, there are others who see it differently.

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<sup>50</sup> Parker, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Elaine Hedges, “The Needle or the Pen: The Literary Rediscovery of Women's Textile Work,” *Tradition and the Talents of Women*, ed. Florence Howe (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 341.

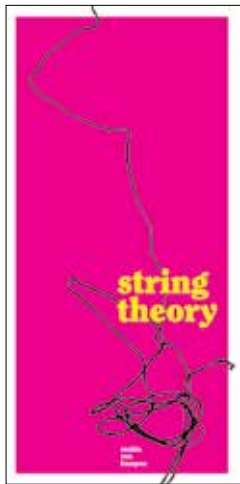


fig. 29

(29) Cover from the author's book *String Theory*, 2014. (30 and 31) Spreads.

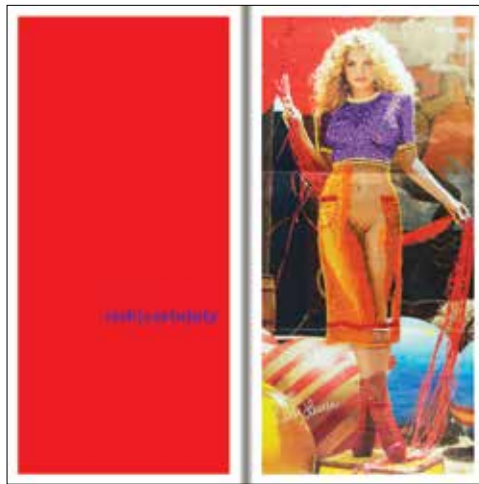


fig. 30



fig. 31

Professor of Visual Rhetoric at Arizona State University Maureen Daly Goggin argues that needlework, which is associated with mundane daily tasks, has been “mistakenly assumed unworthy of scholarly attention.”<sup>52</sup> She goes on to state that “the powerful ideological construct of needlework as ‘woman’s work’ and all that term has come to mean and the pejorative baggage it carries, obscures the richness of this practice as a potential rhetorical tool.”<sup>53</sup> Goggin sees how needlework allows for reflection on the part of the maker, is a form of self-expression and provides a manner of autonomy all of which is worthy of study.

The needlework in *String Theory* is in agonistic discourse with itself and the imagery it subverts. Stitches are used to cover the commodified, naked bodies of *Playboy* models, in an attempt to shift the models from object to entity through a symbol of female oppression—needlework (see fig. 29 to 31). The materials used are also in opposition with each other. Ordinary embroidery floss is used in a traditional way but on a nontraditional material. Embroidery is usually done on linen or canvas which holds the thread in place due to the weave of the fabric. The weave restores

<sup>52</sup> Maureen Daly Goggin, “Introduction,” *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles*, ed. Maureen Daly Goggin (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 2.

<sup>53</sup> Maureen Daly Goggin, “An *Essamplaire Essai* on the Rhetoricity of Needlework Sampler-Making: A Contribution to Theorizing and Historicizing Rhetorical Praxis,” *Rhetoric Review* 21.4 (2002), 312.



fig. 32

(32) Detail of couched stitch used on an original page made for *String Theory*.



fig. 33

(33) Detail of needlework seen from the back.

itself after the needle has slipped through and fabric is malleable and can be gripped and handled fairly aggressively. Low quality magazine paper, on the other hand, is not meant to be sewn. Paper retains the hole that the needle creates and, if pulled too hard, the thread will tear it. The constant handling of paper changes the character of the surface—it creases, buckles and the natural oil in fingertips softens its rigidity. Due to these factors the stitching cannot be too elaborate. Thus straight stitches and couching or laid work are used.<sup>54</sup> The physicality of working with this unusual combination of materials requires experimentation and adjusting of technique to accommodate the issues as they are encountered and the manner in which these issues are resolved is unique to the maker. Some issues cannot be resolved such as a needle hole that was placed in the wrong spot which remains visible because it cannot be undone. The backs of the sewn pages reveal the rips that were repaired with tape and knots (see fig. 32 and 33).

Heather Pristash, Inez Schachterle and Sue Carter Wood discuss in their essay “The

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<sup>54</sup> Parker, 27. Couching and laid work are age-old stitching techniques and can be seen on examples such as The Bayeux Tapestry which dates back to c 1080 and is attributed to Queen Mathilda, wife of William the Conqueror.

Needle As the Pen: Intentionality, Needlework, and the Production of Alternate Discourses of Power” explain how the act of stitching is meaningful:

In the discussion of rhetorical needlework, the process is typically at least as important to study as the product, if not more so.... After all, while intentionality may, often quite fairly, be derived from an educated reading of the final object, it is in the reasons for and the methods of an objects creation that intentionality is first born.<sup>55</sup>

Pristash (et al.) illustrates how the physical act of handcraft techniques hold meaning. In respect to *String Theory*, the process of embroidery was deliberate, requiring hours of sitting and stitching to slowly conceal the naked bodies—a performance in it itself, which comments on the constructs of femininity. Each stitch planned and placed, the needle piercing representations of naked women which can be viewed as a punishment for their promiscuity. Yet with each stitch the female bodies are concealed, the thread forming a blanket of protection and pardon signifying the mother. Sewing is often used to mend articles that are worn, ripped or frayed. Thus these stitches can be read as a form of reparation. Yet the stitching is incomplete, the clothes only partially there. The stitches are an attempt to block the male gaze but fail to do so. Art historian and author of *The Subversive Stitch* Rozsika Parker explains how embroidery “evokes the stereotype of the virgin in opposition to the whore.”<sup>56</sup> As is seen in *String Theory* both stereotypes are represented in the artifact and the act and both are battling with the roles society has allocated to them.

Many craft theorists discuss the oppositional play involved in using handcraft techniques in contemporary contexts. The dichotomy between techniques, technology and ideology is used in *String Theory* as a rhetorical device. The individual embroidered pages are photographed and placed into the pages of a digital layout. Although the reproduction lacks the tactile quality of the

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<sup>55</sup> Heather Pristash, Inez Schaechterle and Sue Carter Wood, “The Needle as The Pen: Intentionality, Needlework, and the Production of Alternate Discourses of Power,” *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750–1950*, ed. Maureen Daly Goggin (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 16.

<sup>56</sup> Parker, 2.

original the nostalgia, tradition and feminization associated with embroidery is ever-present. Just as the women who have been removed from the context of *Playboy Magazine* still connote their original status.

The book, despite its bright colours and almost playful interaction between handcraft and digital technology, has a rather dark undertone of the issues still plaguing women, as well as handcraft. It talks about the objectification of women and the perception of handcraft as a lower form of artistic production.

## **Conclusions:**

### **The Cult of the Unique<sup>57</sup>**

This thesis investigates the innumerable possibilities and variables that the materials, processes and techniques of handcraft offers graphic design. The combination of handcraft and digital techniques enables designers to interweave the disparate physical and material qualities of the two processes into their work as seen in the examples by contemporary designers including Stefan Sagmeister, Mathias Augustyniak and Michaël Amzalag of M/M (Paris) and Marian Bantjes. Handcraft is a fertile art form that, when used in graphic design, can provide many creative, conceptual and rhetorical opportunities for disciplinary and societal discourse.

Designers can use the computer as a platform for handcraft and its techniques to engage in a contemporary setting. The formal possibilities of handcraft are unlike those offered by computer software that aims to imitate handcraft. Making things by hand is a physical act, the nuances of which the computer is unable to simulate entirely due to the individual way in which each person works. When handcraft and computer technology are used together they can provide each other with numerous rhetorical opportunities. As Bolter and Grusin state:

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<sup>57</sup> Louise Mazanti, "Super-Objects: Craft as an Aesthetic Position," *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 74. Mazanti, used the phrase "the cult of the unique" in reference to the Arts and Crafts Movement but which is used here in a less dogmatic context.

No medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other social and economic forces. What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media.<sup>58</sup>

This statement illustrates how the computer can remediate handcraft and how through remediation handcraft's cultural, social and economic reading can be affected. By working with handcraft in combination with the technology of the computer, the dichotomy of the two techniques engage in an intriguing discourse in which the status of each changes depending on its relationship with the other. Handcraft will never rid itself of its historical connotations nor is this desirous. It can however refashion itself into new contexts, providing a more contemporary reading of this art form.

Handcraft also brings a unique visual voice to a designer's repertoire and this individuality can engage society—both object to human and human to human. As Risatti points out: “When we engage the social life of craft objects we come to understand something about ourselves in relation to other things in the world in a way that is different from that of machine-made objects.”<sup>59</sup> The difference that Risatti is talking about is that of the hand, the limitations of the hand, and the unique individual ways in which each hand works.

Designers such as Stefan Sagmeister, Mathias Augustyniak and Michaël Amzalag of M/M (Paris) and Marian Bantjes embrace the seemingly narrow limitations of handcraft, such as its nostalgic connotations and the imperfections caused by the element of risk, and place them within the technology-driven world of graphic design as a style which becomes very much their own and which demonstrates their individual worldview. As designers continue to explore the formal, material and contextual possibilities that handcraft has to offer the public will in return demand the handcraft aesthetic. As Pye discovered: “[the public] will not be content with standardization everywhere.”<sup>60</sup> In search of individuality, handcraft provides the public with a notion of the unique, of the one-of-a-kind and of the extraordinary.

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<sup>58</sup> Bolter, et al., 14–15.

<sup>59</sup> Risatti, 185.

<sup>60</sup> Pye, 22.

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- fig. 5 Vivi-Mari Carpelan. *Living Her Art – Tracey Emin And Her Life's Work (And Why It Concerns Me)* Storms in a Teacup: Artistic Survival in Troubled Times. Last modified 8 23 2011. Accessed 2 16 2014. <http://vivi-mariandmartinart.blogspot.ca/2011/08/living-her-art-tracey-emin-and-her.html>. Web.
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- fig. 7 Jeremy Elder. *Stefan Sagmeister: The Happy Show*. Last modified 16 01 2013. Accessed 12 01 2014. <http://shape-and-colour.com/2013/01/16/stefan-sagmeister-the-happy-show/>. Web.
- fig. 8 Stefan Sagmeister. *The Happy Film*. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2012. 192. Print.
- fig. 9 Ibid. 90–1.
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- fig. 26 Marian Bantjes. *I Wonder*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2010. 2–3. Print.



- fig. 27      Ibid. 70–1.
- fig. 28      Ibid. 76–7.
- fig. 29      Saskia van Kampen. *String Theory*, 2014. Cover. Print
- fig. 30      Ibid. 8–9.
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## Appendix

### PROJECT 1 – *Cadence*

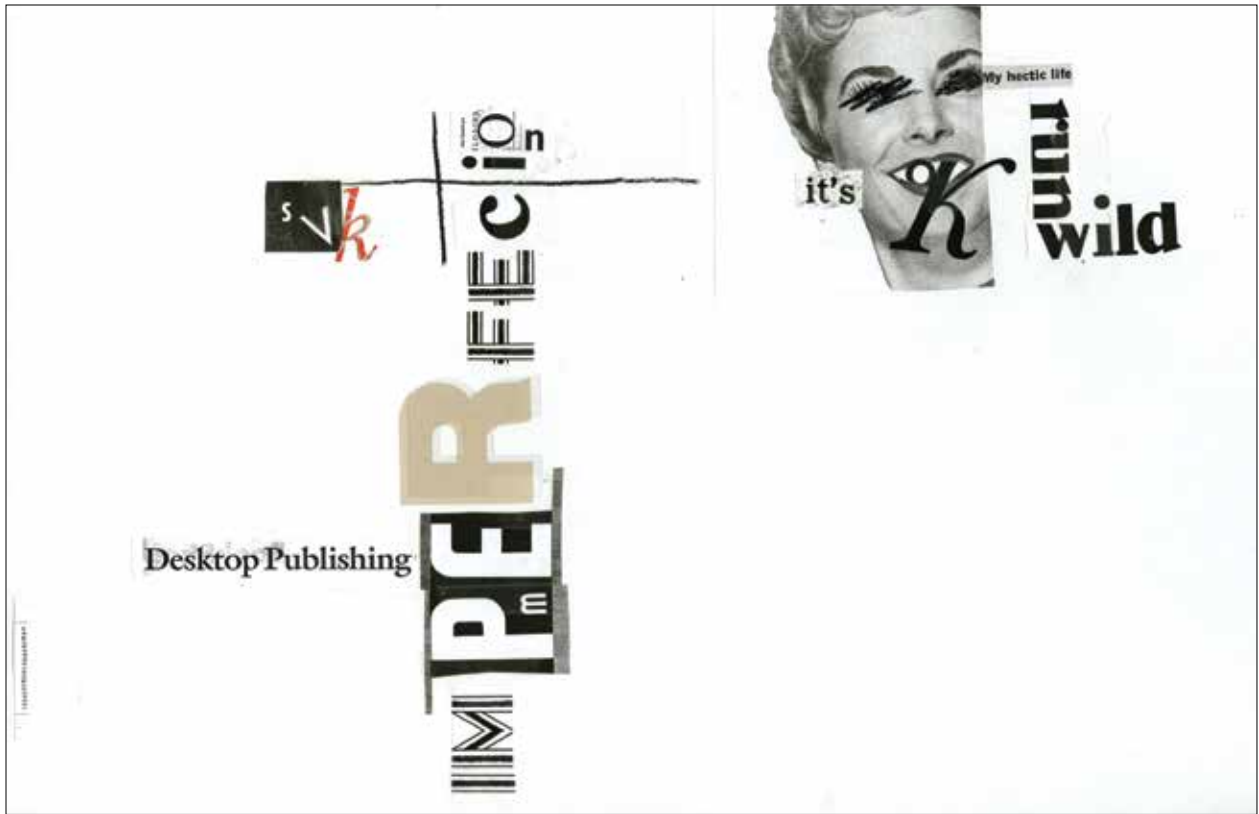
When I began working on my thesis I had finite ideas regarding handcraft and design. For me, design was to be clean, precise and generated on the computer. While handcraft was my hobby, something I did in my spare time. There was an element of shame that I associated with my craft works and thus it was separated from my design practice.

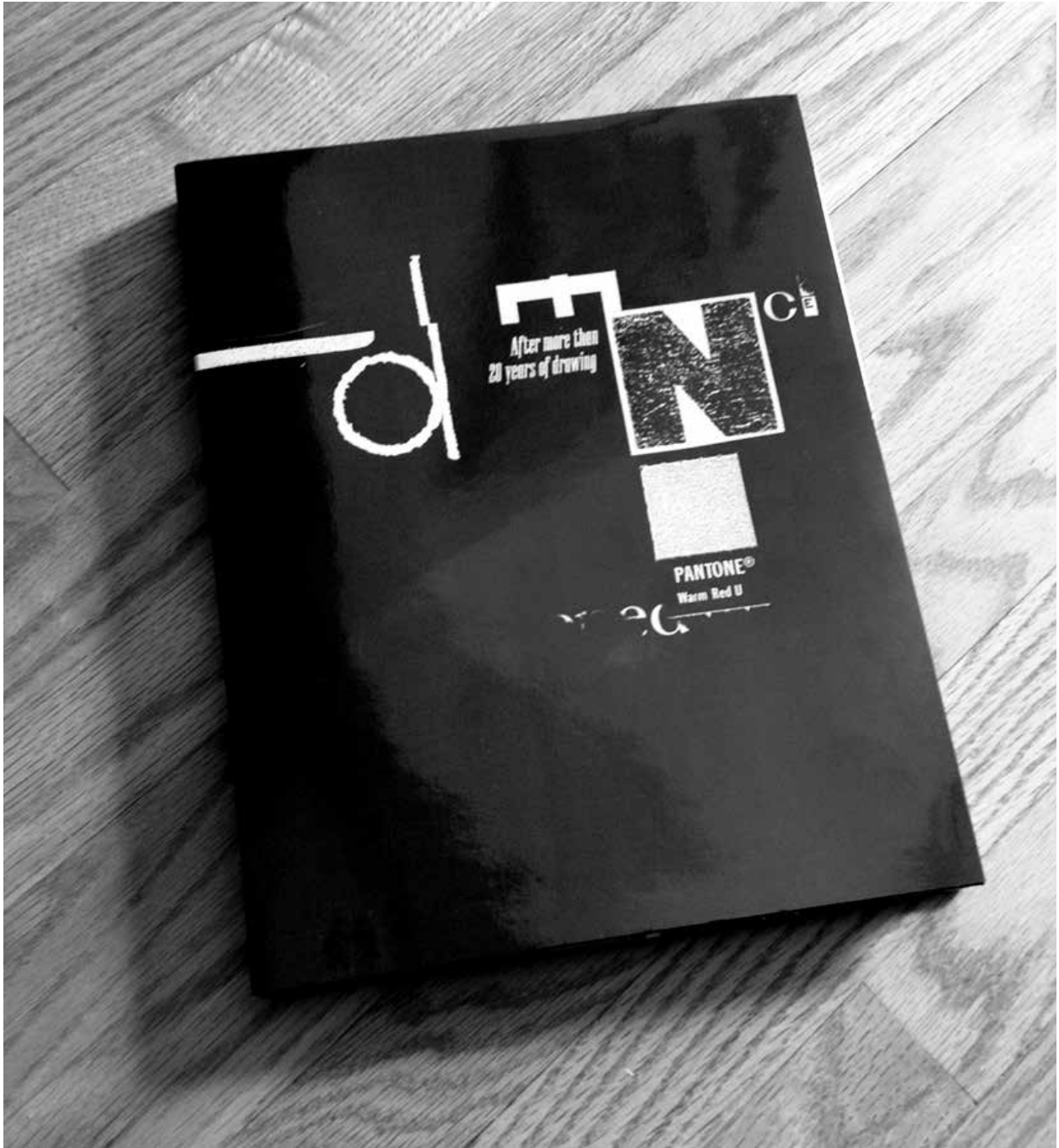
In order to overcome this segregation of handcraft from design my first project worked through iterative exercises generating multiple compositions completely by hand, which were photocopied and evolved through trial and error.

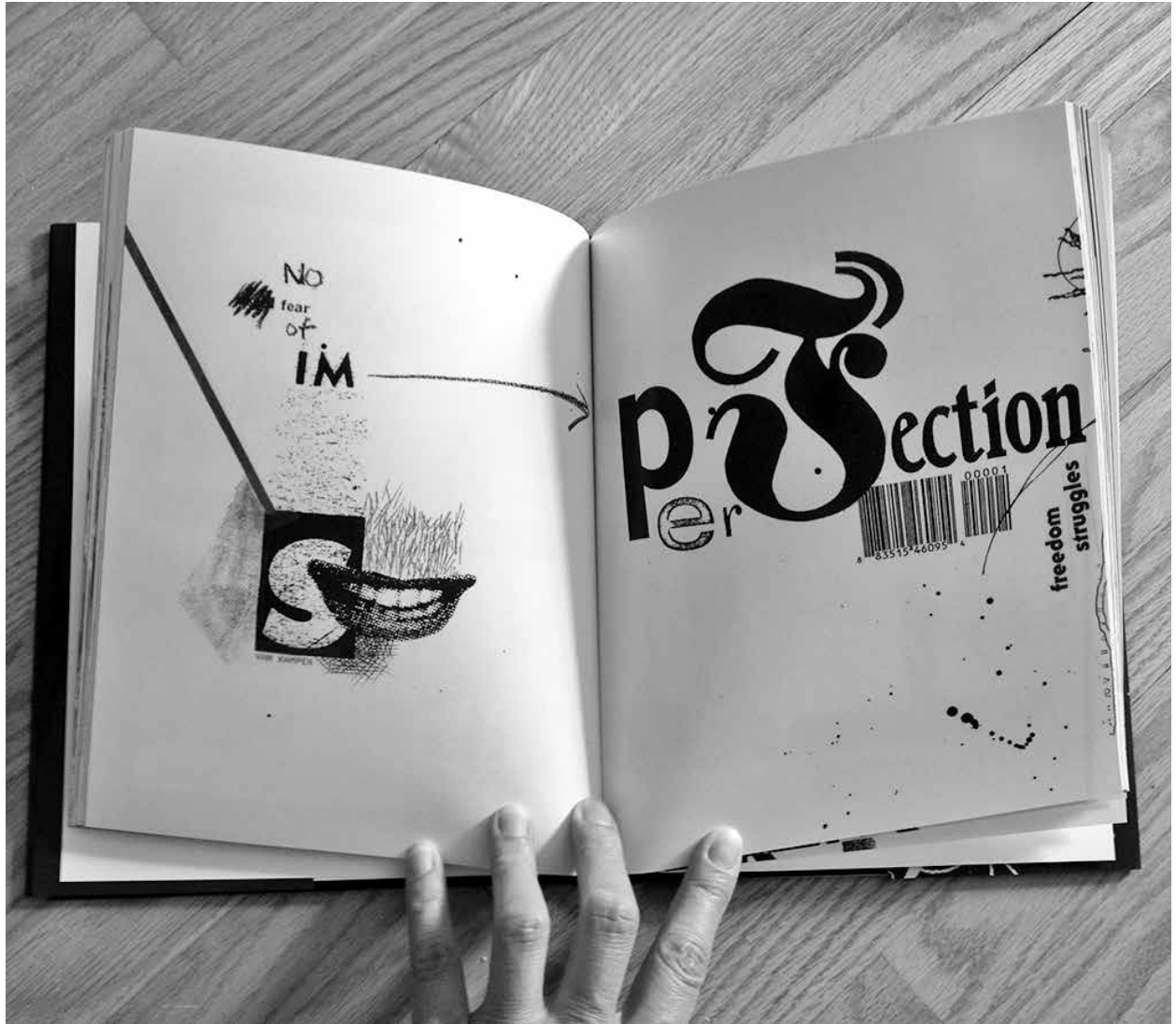
Traditionally graphic design was done using paste-up techniques where type and image were cut and glued into place and then photographed. The final composition aimed for transparent immediacy—where the hand of the maker was eliminated completely. The goal of this project was to utilize the general idea of paste-up but to celebrate the maker by allowing the cut lines to remain, the tape to show and the scuffs and dust from the photocopier to persist.

Each composition has at least five iterative stages and moves from cut and paste techniques to the addition of pen and ink drawings and finally to the interference of sewing and found objects. When completed, the layouts were scanned and placed into a digital layout for a book. The compositions were not altered through software but software was used to crop the individual layouts and to compose each spread.

This exercise allowed me to see and embrace imperfection in graphic design. Handcraft enters harmoniously into design to form the final artifact, *Cadence*. The title is in reference to the rhythmical changes that occurred during the iterative process.











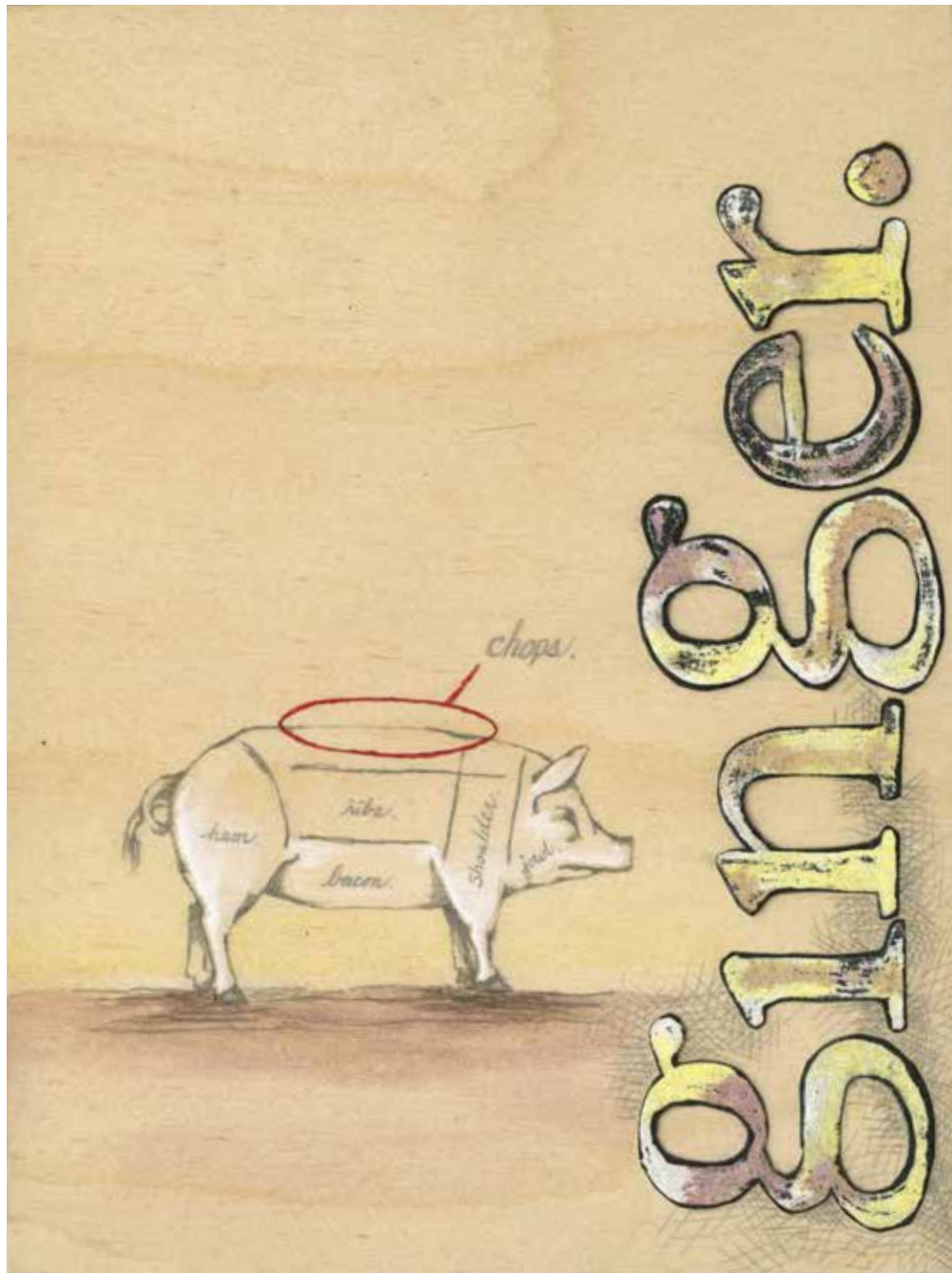
## PROJECT 2 – *Scratch*

The second project I engaged in is called *Scratch*. The title is in reference to cooking from scratch which requires tasting and multiple adjustments to improve the flavour. This project aimed at merging both handcraft and software techniques in an exploratory fashion, much like the sampling and augmenting that occurs in cooking. Friends supplied me with hand-lettered ingredient lists of their favourite dishes which were used as inspiration for seven mixed-media paintings.

The process that was utilized for this project became an exploration into David Pye's notions of "risk" (associated with handcraft) and "certainty" (associated with the machine). The paintings were scanned into the computer and manipulated using software functions. The computer was used to remove unwanted marks and to crop and reassemble pieces from the originals into new configurations. Graphic elements such as shapes and lines were added to augment the compositions, which were then fashioned into a book.

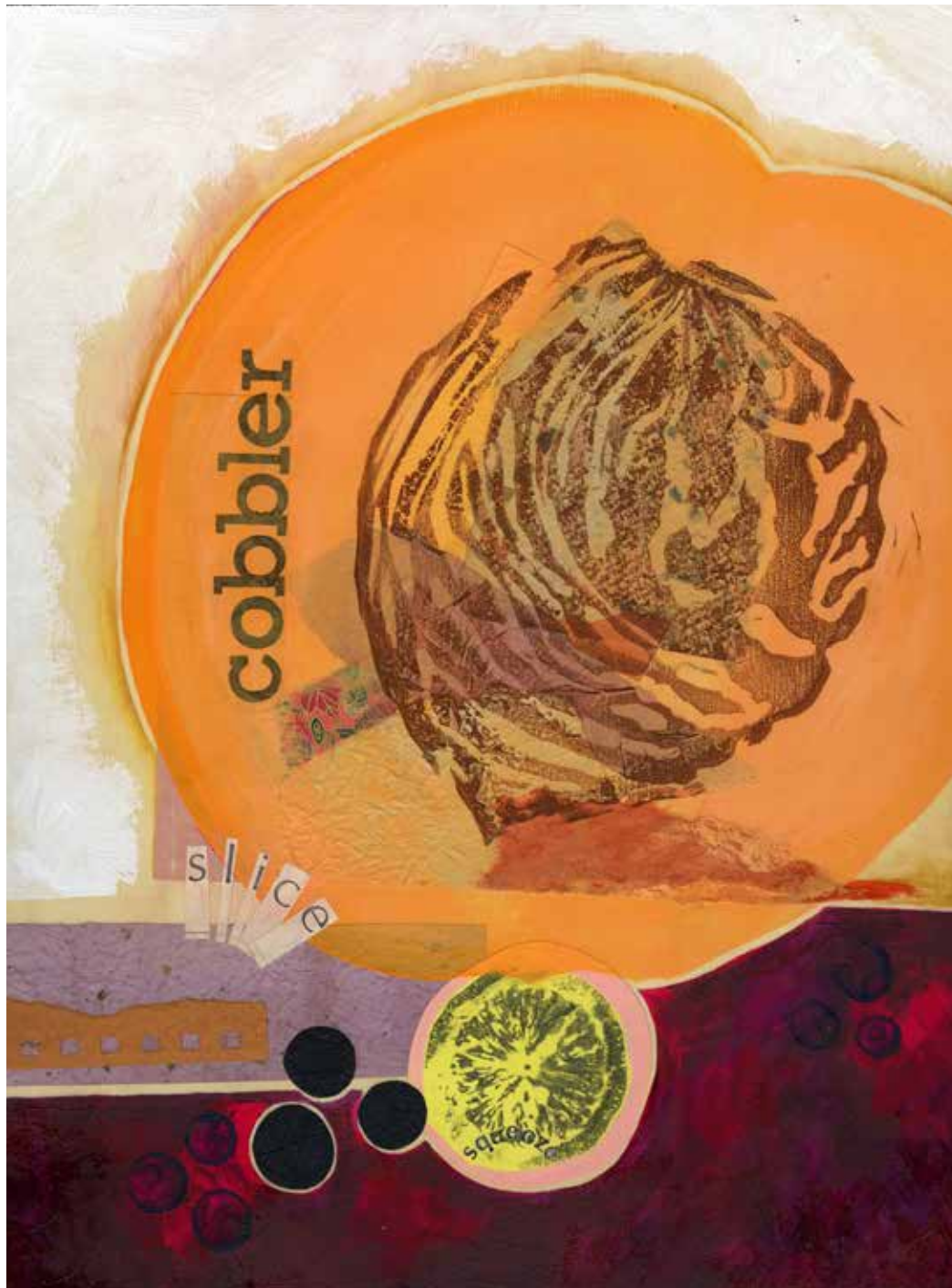
The hand-lettering from the ingredient lists is used in the final compositions as a means of honouring the contributors. Recipes are written out and exchanged between friends, family members and co-workers. Thus, sharing recipes is a way to connect with other individuals just as hand-lettering can be used as a human connection in design work.

The original works were created with the intent to be manipulated digitally and brought into a new form—a book. The digital compositions lose the tangibility of the originals and become new entities with new contextual relevance. The materiality and spontaneity of the collage is still evident but the digital techniques allow for another layer of meaning to be brought forward. The shift from analogue to digital, from a one-off artifact to a mass-produced object, is a comment on the change in society from one of private sharing to public sharing.



Ginger Pork Chops  
pork chops - no bone  
flour  
veg oil  
\* no salt + pepper  
Sauce: soy sauce  
sake  
mirin  
sugar  
grated fresh ginger

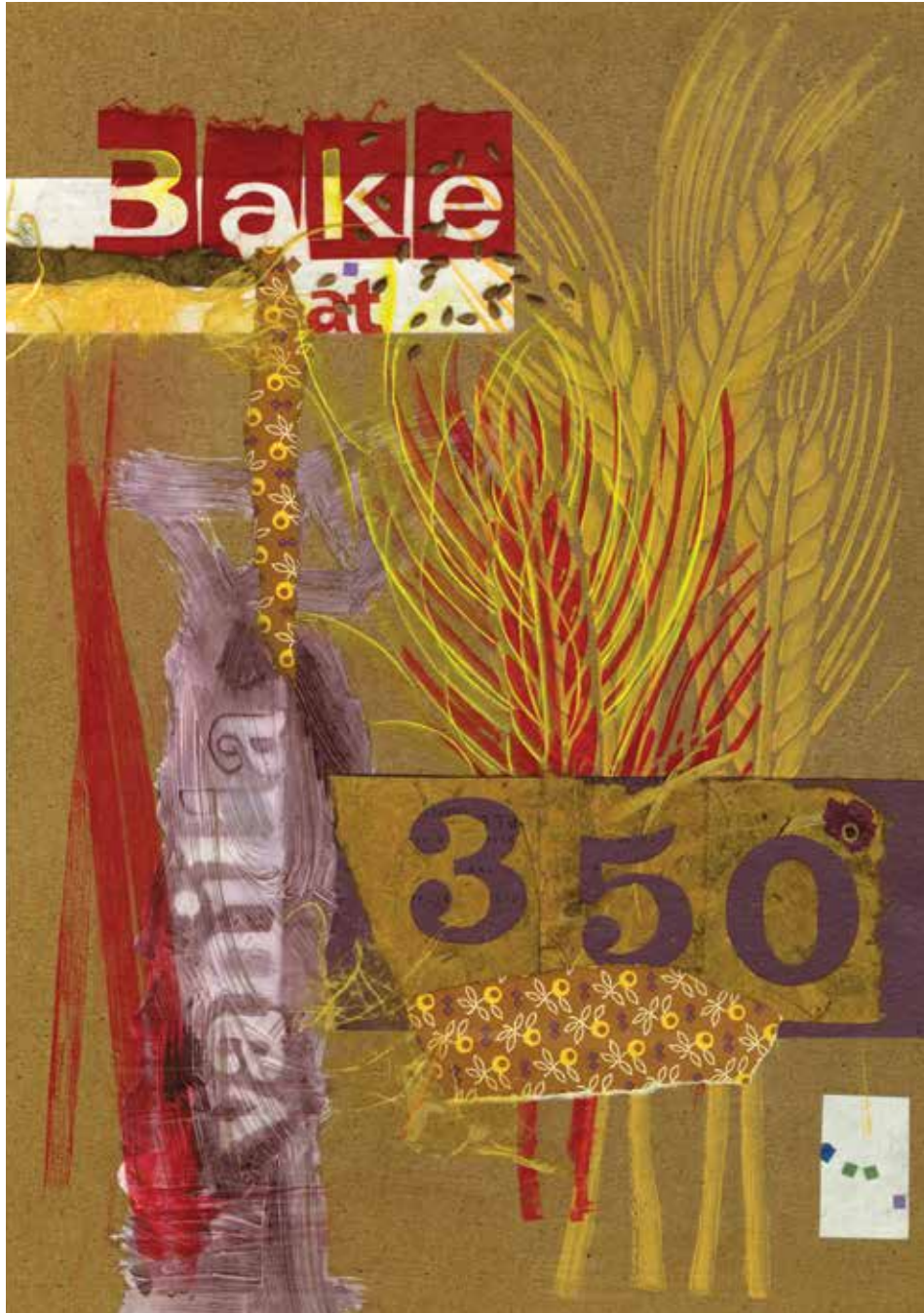
Plate 5.



Peach-Blueberry Cobbler (8-10 people)

peaches	salt
blueberries	all-purpose flour
granulated sugar	baking powder
light-brown sugar	unsalted butter
fresh lemon juice	vanilla bean
fresh ginger	large eggs.

Plate 6.



Red River Loaf  
flour  
water or juice (I prefer juice)  
baking soda  
brown sugar  
red river cereal  
raisins, apricots, nuts, etc.  
cinnamon, nutmeg  
eggs  
vegetable oil  
vanilla

Plate 7.



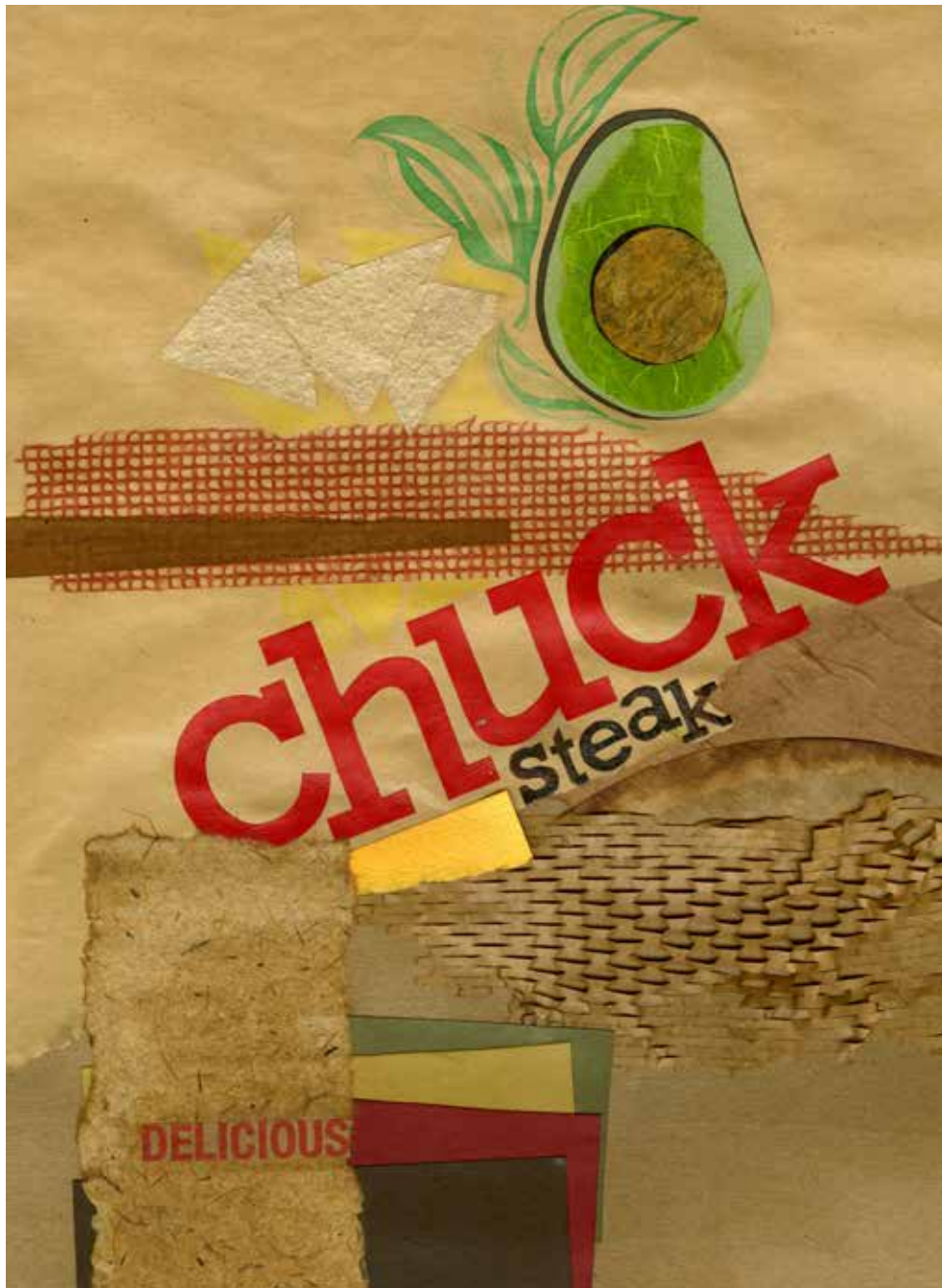
CAESAR SALAD DRESSING (NORMA'S)  
EGG YOLK  
VINEGAR  
GARLIC  
WORCESTERSHIRE  
SALT  
PEPPER  
DRY MUSTARD

Plate 8.



Riz Plaf  
butter  
minced onions  
rice  
beef broth  
bay leaves  
garlic  
cloves  
sliced ham

Plate 9.



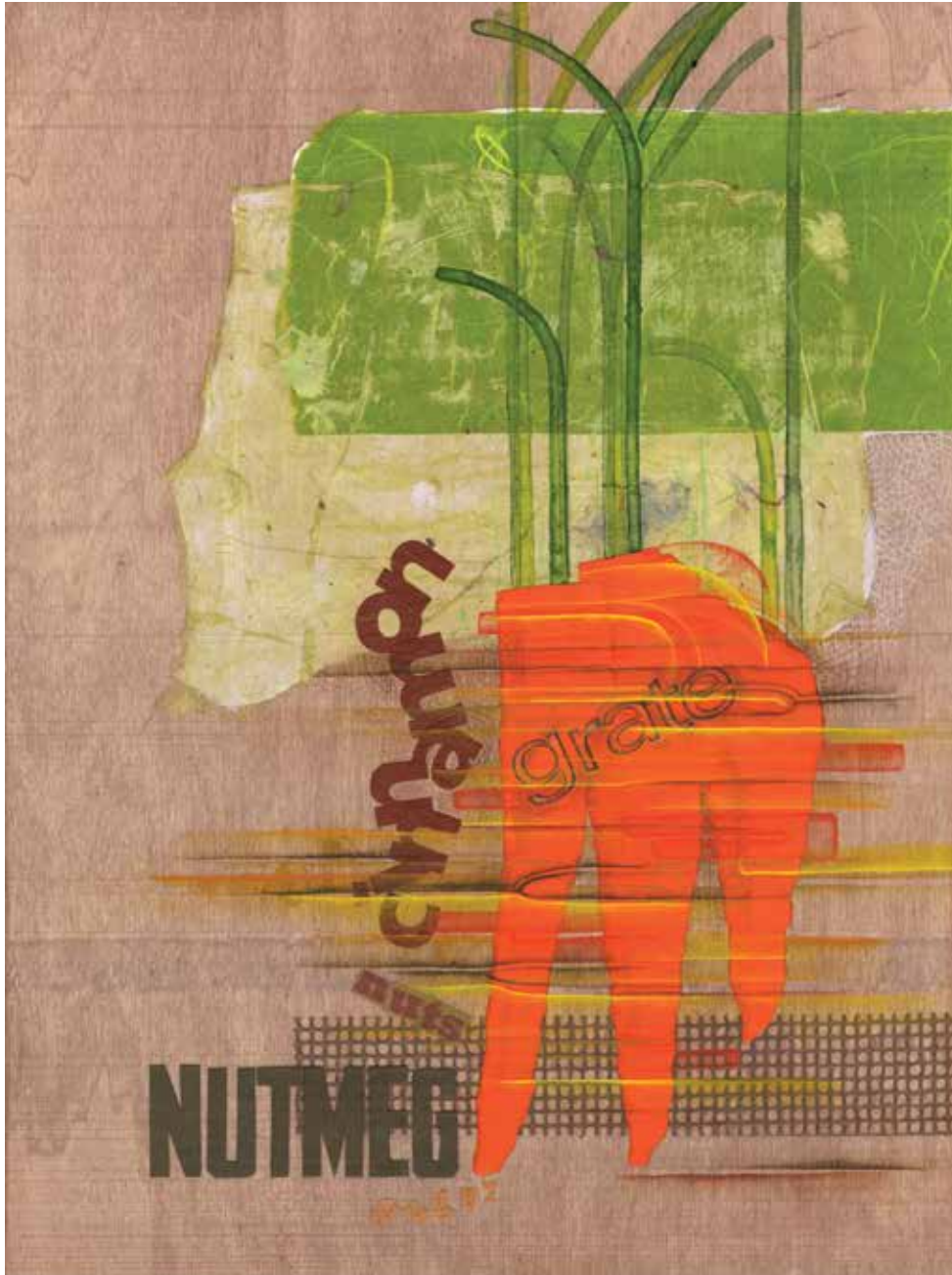
CHILI CON CARNE

ancho chiles	oregano
veg. oil	bay leaf
pork	course salt
chuck steak	tomatoes
white onion	beer
garlic	white vinegar
cumin	

topping: hass avocados  
scallions  
tortilla chips  
cheddar cheese

Plate 10.





Carrot Cake

- eggs
- granulated sugar
- packed brown sugar
- vegetable oil
- all purpose flour
- baking powder
- baking soda
- salt
- cinnamon
- nutmeg
- grated raw carrots
- raisins
- finely chopped nuts

Plate 11.





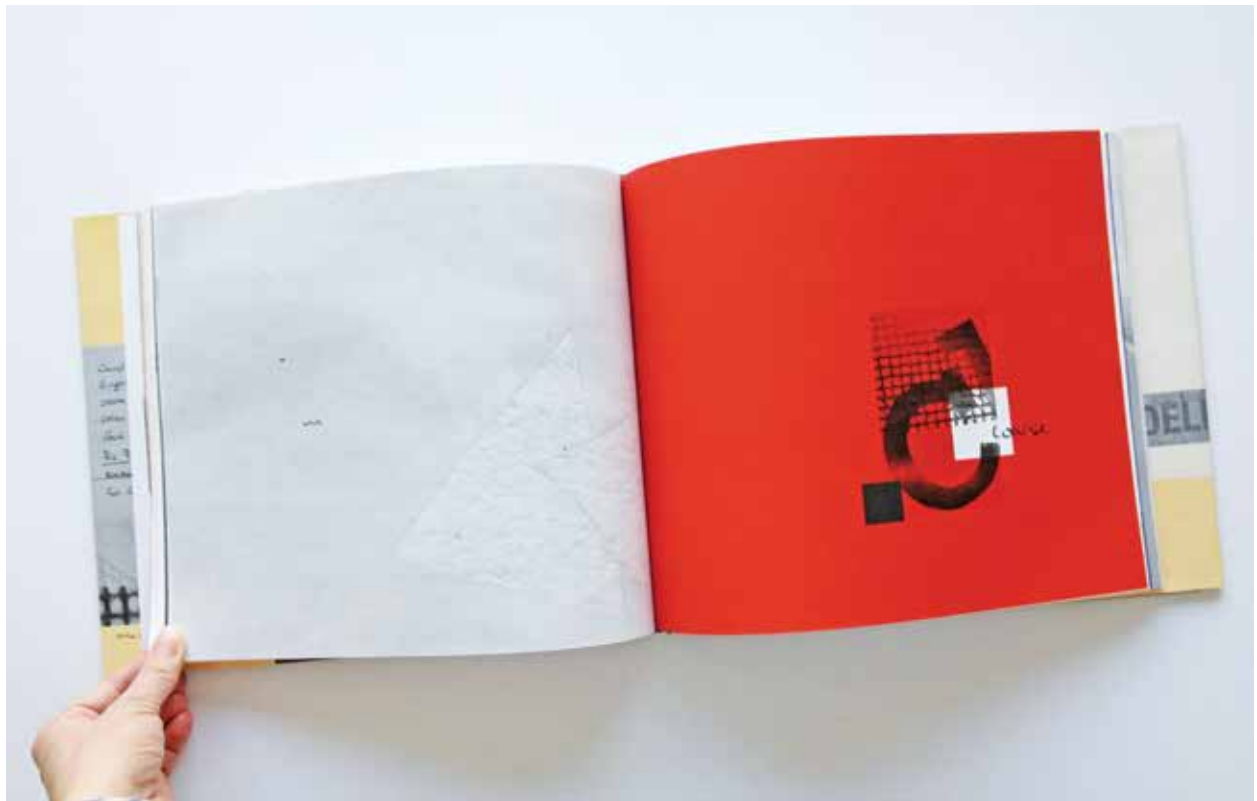


Plate 14.

### PROJECT 3 – *Patchwork*

Three patchwork posters are the result of my third project. These posters are an exploration in the use of handcraft as both a technique and idea. The act of sewing and the materials used hold social, economic and cultural relevance which complement and contradict each other in the final artifacts.

Mundane packaging for cleaning products, beauty products and food are taken out of their usual context and turned into something extraordinary. The posters encourage the reader to pay attention to material and technique and to make associations depending on their own personal history. Each piece that make up these posters is carefully selected based on colour and content and is arranged to spell out a word. The poster that spells “LURE” (plate 5) is comprised of beauty packaging, including: makeup, makeup-remover, perfume, anti-aging, anti-acne and anti-odour products. This comments on the pressure society puts upon women in regards to their body, their appearance and their behavior through everyday products.

The juxtaposition of consumer goods packaging with sewing encourages a rich discourse between the two modes of production. The act of sewing together pieces of consumer packaging is a comment on how corporate logos and slogans have become part of our homes (our domestic, private lives) and part of who we are. The posters expose how the consumption of products has become naturalized.

Meaning is also held in the labour and assembly and in the case of these posters the struggle. Machine-sewing paper leads to several technical problems – the stitching is not straight, the pieces are not aligned and the varying thicknesses and materials used adds to the clumsiness and fragility of the artifacts. The result is in direct contrast to the conventional notion of perfection in machine-made objects. The fact that these posters buckle and curl can be seen as a lack of ability on the part of the maker but, in fact, directly co-relates to the rhetorical ideas that these posters suggest—that imperfection is ok.



Plate 15.

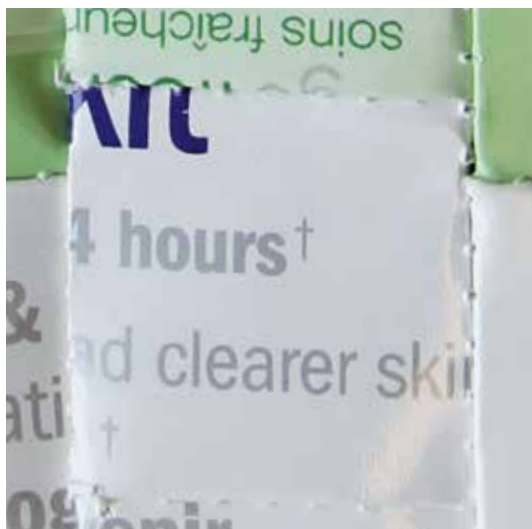


Plate 16.



Plate 17.



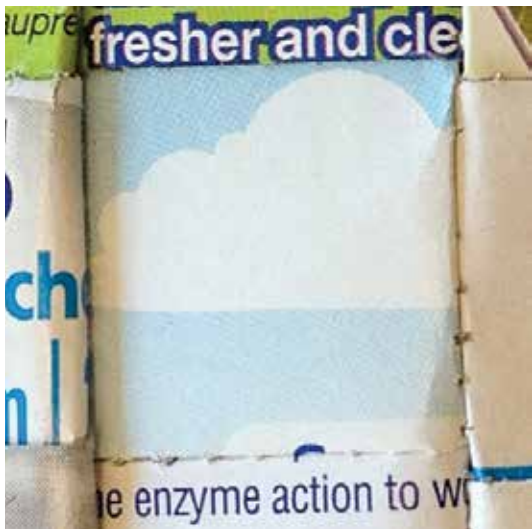
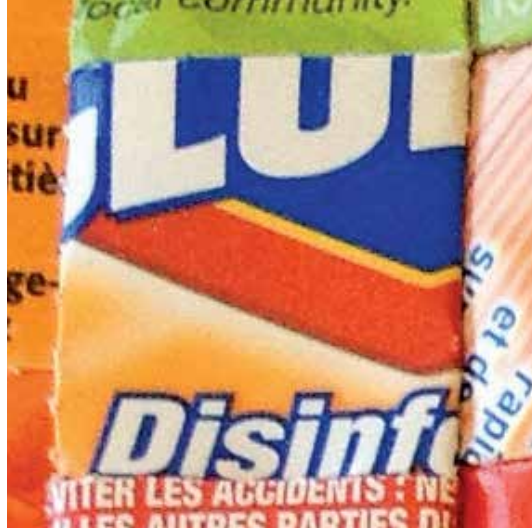


Plate 18.



Plate 19.



#### PROJECT 4 – *String Theory*

Needlework, specifically embroidery, is used in *String Theory* as an attempt to shift the models from object to entity. The irony lies in the fact that both of these elements (embroidery and *Playboy* centrefolds) are symbols of female oppression and objectification. The materials and imagery are in constant opposition and obedience with each other.

The physical act of embroidering the individual pages gave me a small window into the lives of our foremothers. The physical strain from sitting and sewing for hours had a great impact on my body. My back ached, my body hurt, my hands cramped, my fingers chilled, my neck pinched and my eyes strained. The more fatigued I became the more mistakes I made and when stitching paper these mistakes are nearly impossible to undo.

*String Theory* demonstrates the affect of remediation through the displacement of the *Playboy* centrefolds. The centrefolds shift from mass-produced images into one-off, tactile embroidered artifacts. These artifacts are then reproduced digitally into a book capable of mass-production where the materials used in the one-offs can be seen but not felt. The embroidery becomes detached from the domain of tradition but still calls on the social meaning which embroidery embodies.

The book itself is of an awkward size. It is the size of an actual centerfold having been unfolded. The size of the book and the fact that it is not a hard cover makes it bend when it is picked up. It must be cradled to be viewed. It has been bound with embroidery floss using the technique of stab binding in reference to the stitching used on the images of the models. This binding technique makes the viewing of the book uncomfortable as the pages will not open or lie flat. To truly see the inside of the book the pages must be bent or creased, which will permanently scar the book.

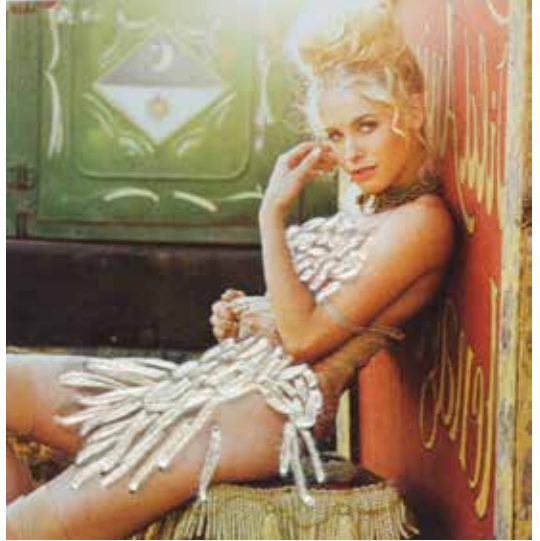


Plate 21.





Plate 23.

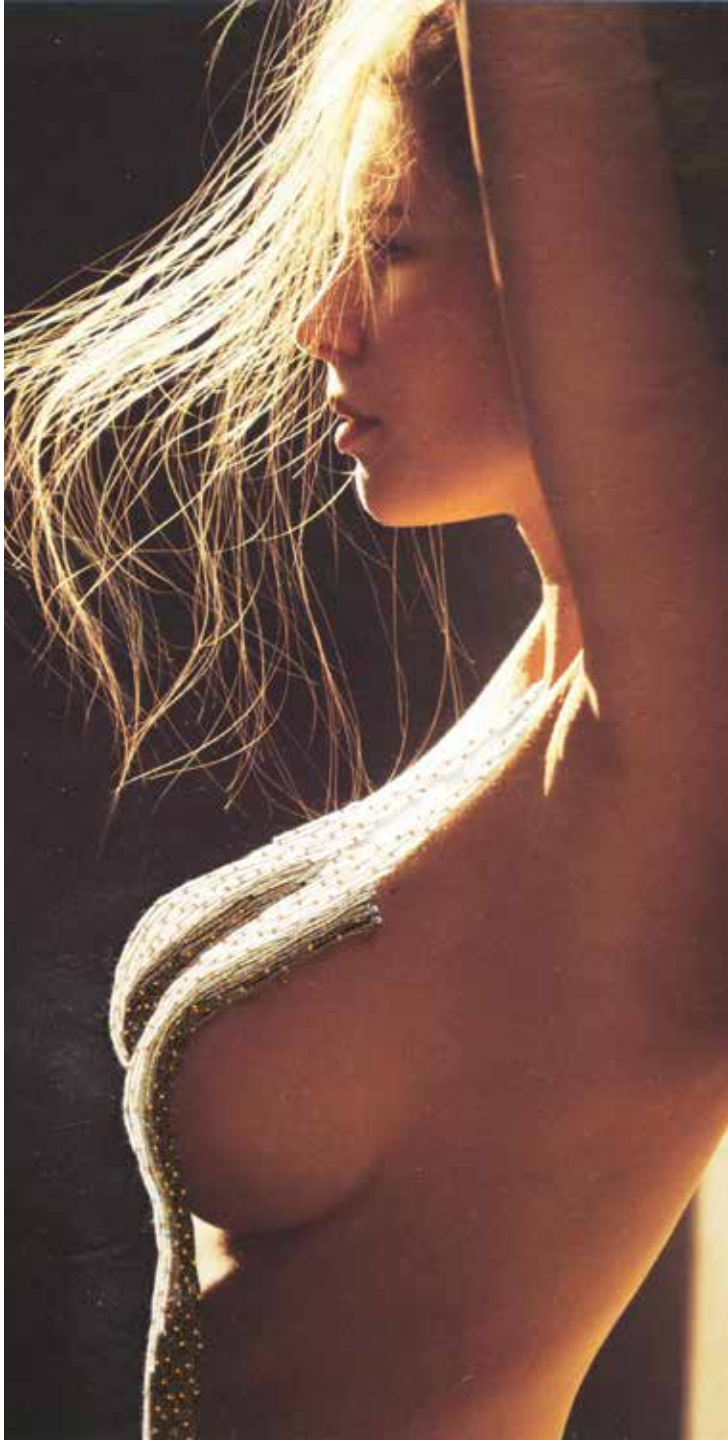


Plate 24.











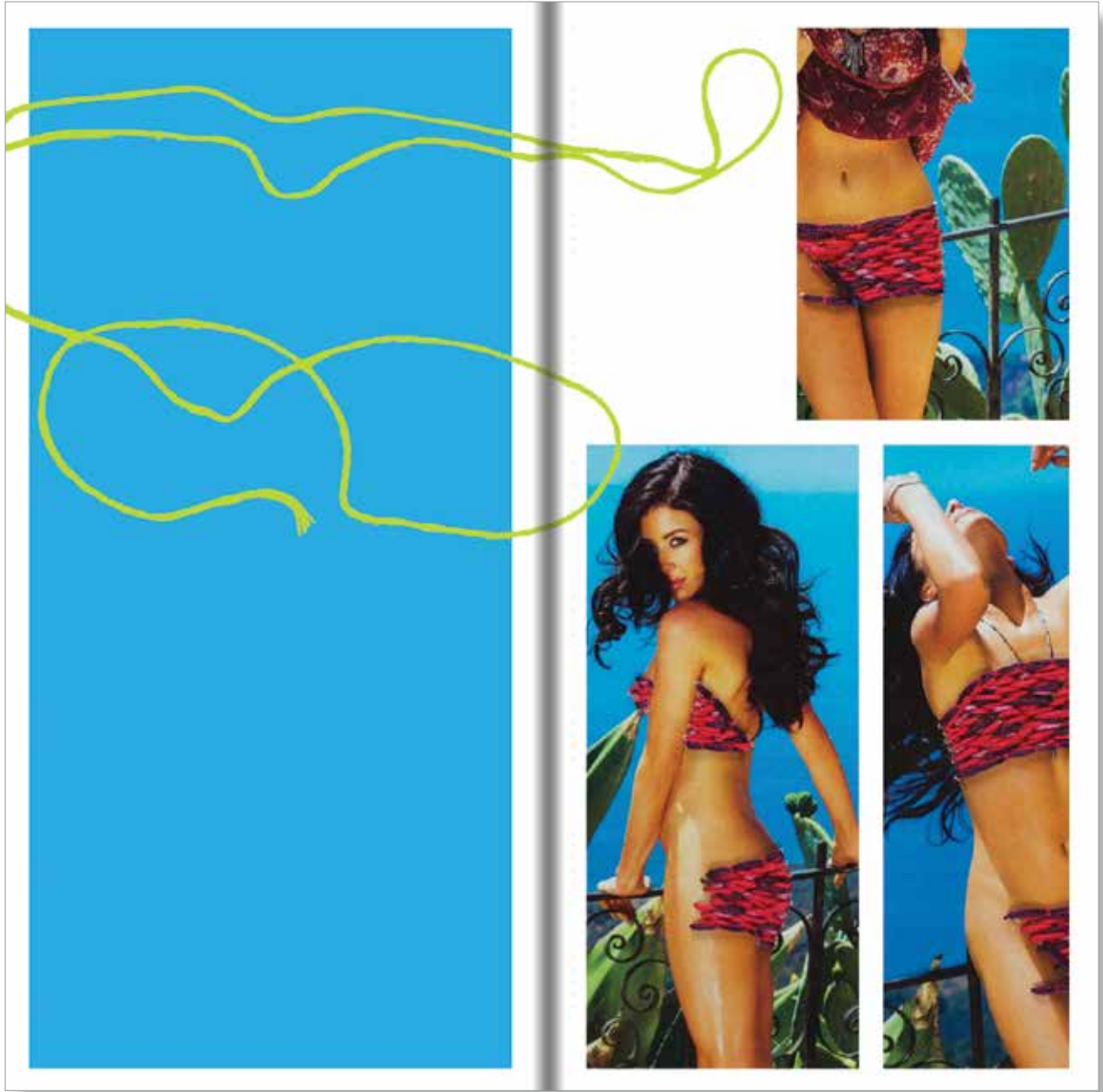
**Plate 28.**



Plate 29.

**standard | unique**





craft | art





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- Plate 6.** “Peach and Blueberry Cobbler.” Mixed-media: linoleum print, Japanese and handmade papers, printed ephemera, ink and acrylic paint on wood. Created for use in *Scratch*. Ingredient list contributed by anonymous.
- Plate 7.** “Red River Loaf.” Mixed-media: linoleum print, mono print, Japanese and handmade papers, ink, gesso, flax seeds and acrylic paint on masonite. Created for use in *Scratch*. Ingredient list contributed by Suzanne Wiseman.
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