

Graphic Design and Social Good

“The vagueness of ‘social engagement’ in graphic design makes it an easy target for co-option and enables it to be used as a smokescreen in ways that often impede actual social transformation”

Kevin Yuen Kit Lo, Design Against Design

Hello

Your name, pronouns, a little bit of background (optional), and what you want to get out of this workshop.

My name is Beth (she/her). I worked as a full-time graphic designer for seven years, and I'm now a *Narrative Futures* student and zine-maker. I want to know how can the co-creation process enact and explore alternative ways of doing graphic design.

2023



2026



About this workshop

This is a more of a discussion than a lecture. At the end of each sections we have time for a little chat.

After the workshop you will be encouraged to submit something for a collective zine, and your submission will be exhibited at SaltSpace gallery (next door to GZL). We will talk about this later.

Welcome:	15 minutes
Introduction:	15 minutes
Discussion and Activity 1:	20 minutes

Short Break

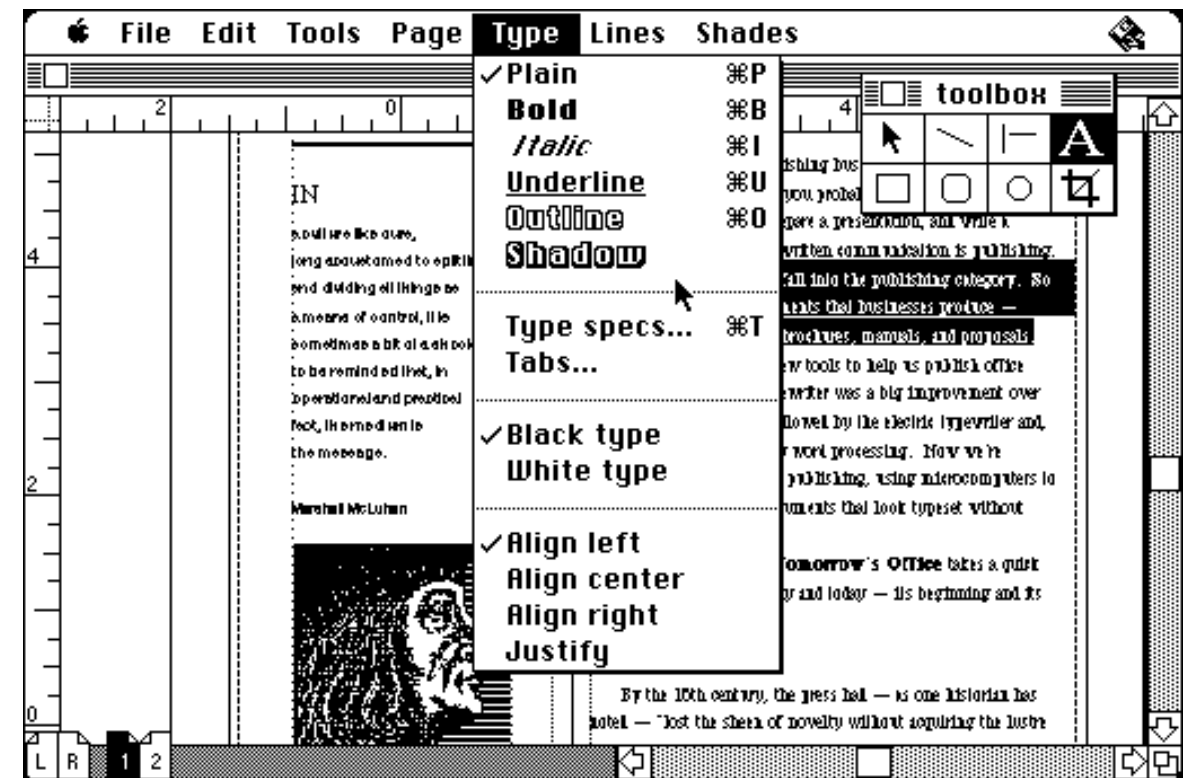
Introduction:	10minutes
Discussion and Activity 2&3:	40 minutes
Conclusion and task:	10 minutes

Graphic Design

Graphic Design as a profession

Multidisciplinary process that presents concepts, text, and images in a visually engaging way (Ambrose et al., 2020).

Became a profession in the 1950s, shaped by Modernism and industrialisation (Armstrong, 2009), and became an easy-to-enter profession with the advent of desktop publishing (Lorusso, 2023).



Armstrong, H. (2009). Introduction [Introduction to Section Two: Building on success]. In H. Armstrong (Ed.), *Graphic design theory : Readings from the field* (1st ed., p.57). Princeton Architectural Press.

Ambrose, G., Harris, P., & Ball, N. (2021). *The fundamentals of graphic design*. (Second edition / Gavin Ambrose, Paul Harris&Nigel Ball.). Bloomsbury Visual Arts.

Lorusso, S. (2023). *What design can't do: Essays on design and disillusion*. Set Margins'.

Designer's roles in a capitalist society

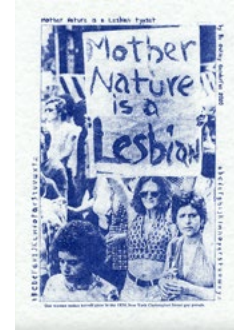
According to Ruben Pater's 2021 book *Caps Lock*



Salesperson



Worker



Activist



Educator



Scribe



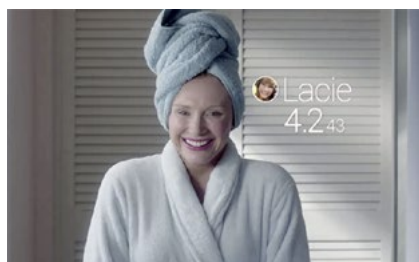
Amateur



Philanthropist



Brander



Futurist



Hacker



Engineer



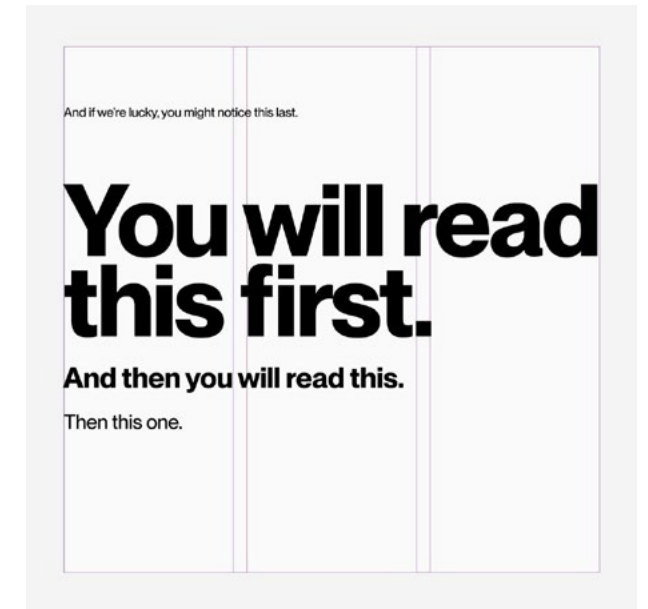
Entrepreneur

Designer's impacts

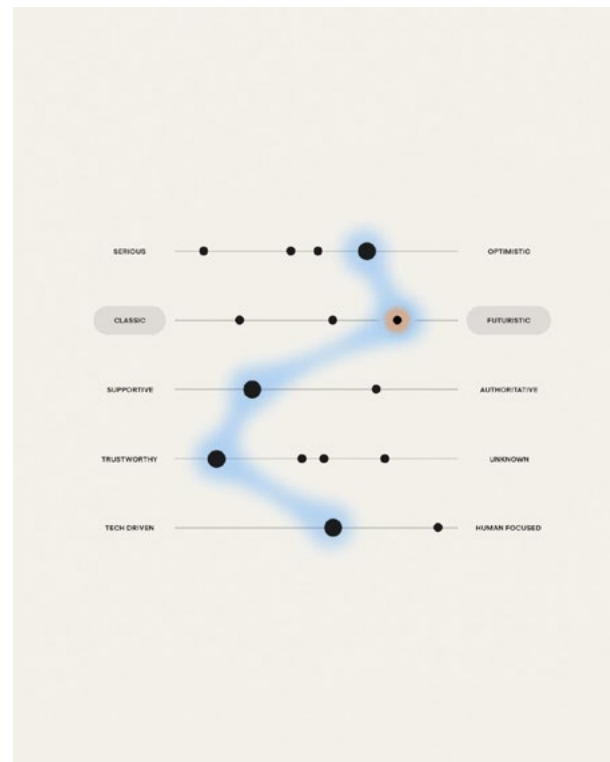
Provide useful
information



Organise
information



Visually explain
information



Foster collective
identities



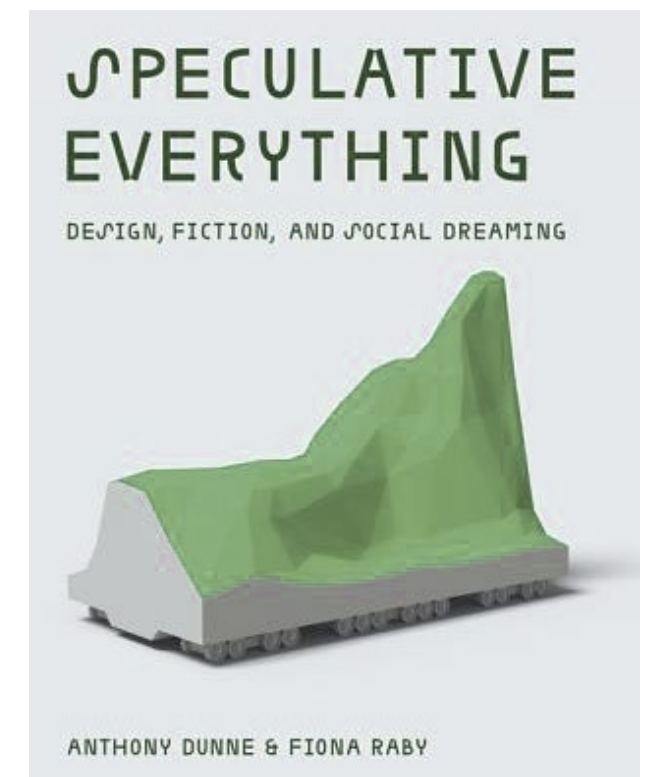
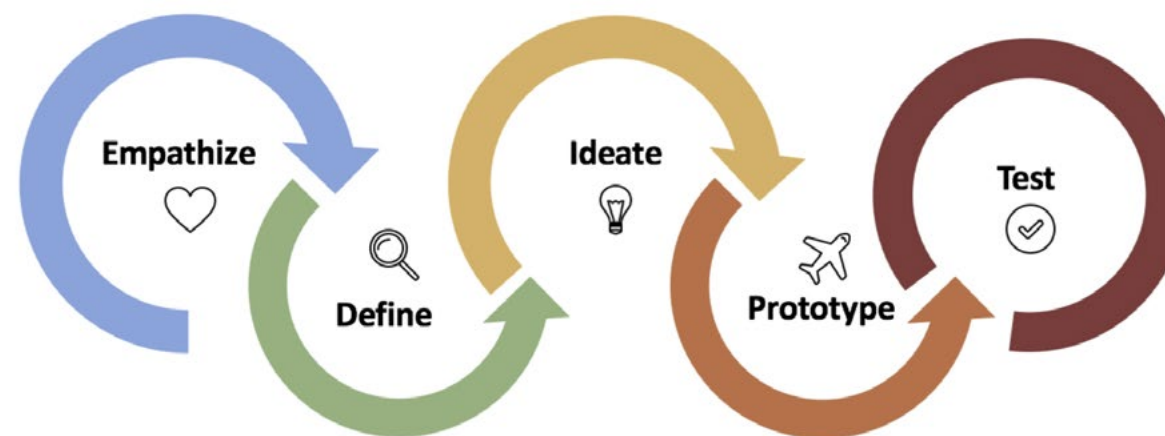
Nudge behaviours



Decorate



Provide methods



Legitimise
authorities



Signal values and
identity



Regulate
behaviours

A recruitment poster for Subway. The background is a solid mustard yellow. The text 'Sandwich Artist™' is written in a large, bold, green sans-serif font. Below it, in a smaller green font, is the phrase 'You are the face of our global brand.' Further down, in a smaller black font, is the text: 'As well as preparing and serving delicious Subway® sandwiches you will meet and greet guests and deliver exceptional customer service. You'll be the reason customers keep coming back!'.



Graphic designs are widespread and have impacts on people.
We should think about what values we take for granted
and whether they encourage socially good designs.

Graphic design is not value-free

bell hooks uses the phrase “Imperialist White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy” to describe the current system we live in.

Graphic design industry can reflect these status quo.



The Mercator map:

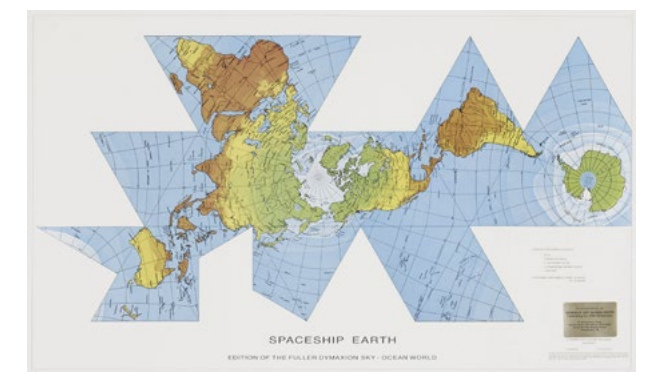
- North is up.
- Europe at the centre.
- The stretch on top and bottom makes Europe disproportionately large.



“Upside-down” map



Chinese map with China near the centre



The Dymaxion map has no top or bottom.

Social Good

Design as a tool for social change

“Positive change”, “future-proof”, “disrupt/redefine”...
Design is framed as a forward-looking, problem-solving activity, moving us towards good futures.



Problem with top-down changes

Moving us towards good futures—good according to whom? Who decides? Who is left behind?

“Better” is not universal, and when it’s forced to people, can we call it a form of violence?

“[D]esign, in and of itself, is... a form of structural violence. It delineates borders, ascribes hierarchies of value and worth, defines inclusion and exclusion, and determines access and barriers to resources and services.”

Kevin Yuen Kit Lo, Design Against Design

“Good” can be vague and undefined, serving existing power

Ben Green (2021): Without definitions of the term “social good”, we have to rely on rough proxies such as crime = bad, poverty = bad, and so on, following the assumptions and values of dominant groups.

Conflicting goals are both framed as social good.

“[Lauren Sánchez] is honored to lead a team of explorers on a mission that will challenge their perspectives of Earth, empower them to share their own stories, and create lasting impact that will inspire generations to come.”
blueorigin.com



Everything can sound positive

<i>neighbourhood gentrification</i>		<i>positive change</i>
<i>commercial entrepreneurialism</i>		<i>social innovation</i>
<i>assimilation</i>		<i>inclusion</i>

Lo, K. Y. K. (2024). *Design against design*. Set Margins’.



 **AddictionCenter**

Search By: Rehab, Treatment, Location, Drug ...

[← Home](#) / [News](#) / [Signs Of Gambling Addiction In Robinhood App](#)

Signs Of Gambling Addiction In Robinhood App

Last Updated: November 25, 2025

 **Author**
Suzette Gomez

Categories
[Gambling Addiction](#) [Behavioral Addictions](#) [Social Media](#) [Mental Illness](#) [Business](#)

Signs Of Gambling Addiction In Robinhood

Last week Robinhood made headlines when a surge of stay-at-home traders manipulated the stock market. A forum called Reddit's WallStreetBets coordinated a massive spike in a few struggling stocks. It caused a buying frenzy on Robinhood that raised \$1 billion in new funds. Yet, while people focused on the money made, experts noticed monolithic signs of [gambling addiction](#).

<https://wearecollins.com/case-studies/robinhood>
<https://www.addictioncenter.com/news/2021/02/gambling-addiction-robinhood-app/>

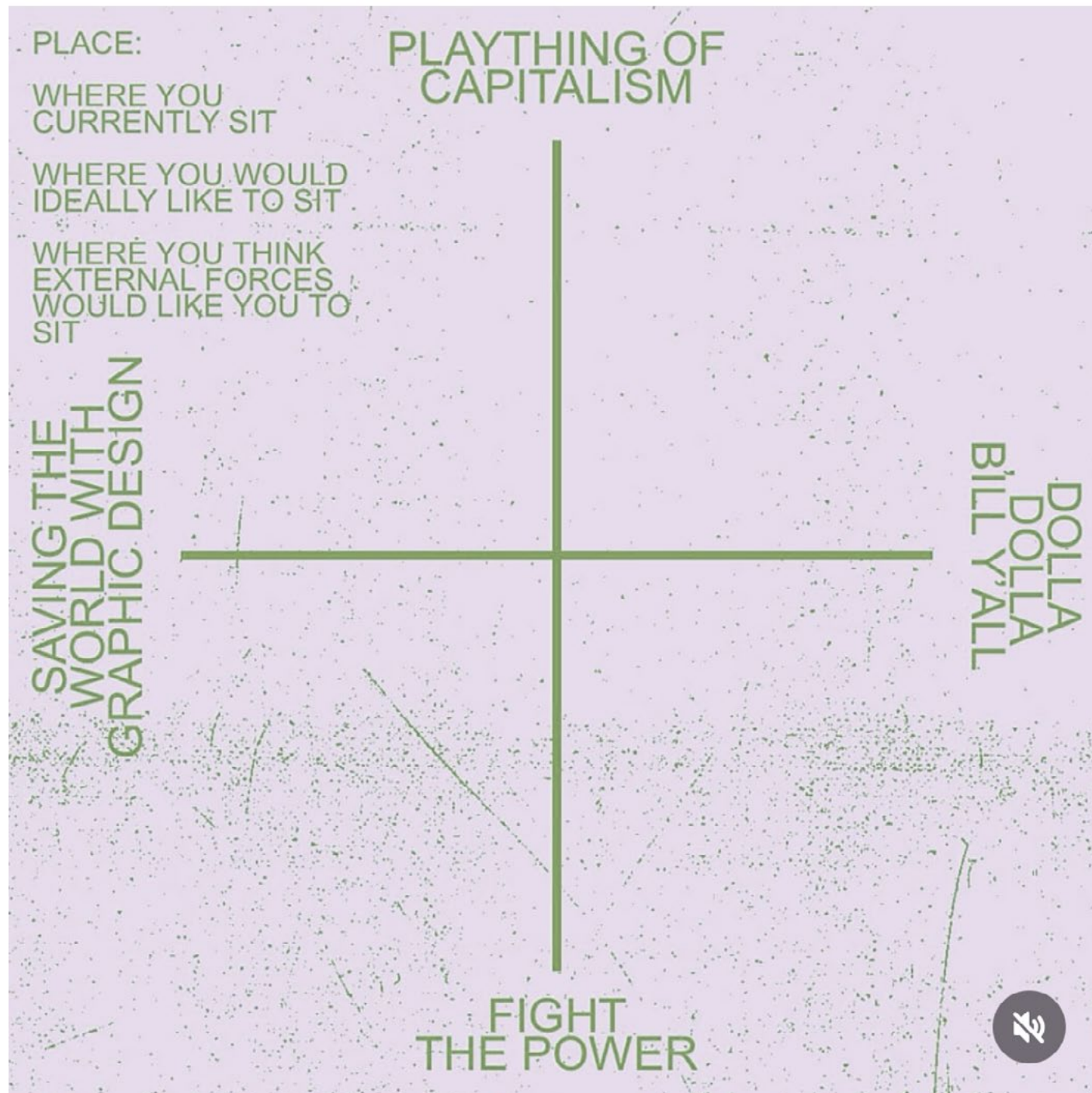
To *invest* is to imagine a brighter future & in doing so, take the *first step* towards it.

Discussion



drnraven

🎵 Myles Sergé · Trans Milenio (Hardspace Mix)



Where we want to be

Ben Green (2021) differentiates two types of change: one that improves the existing system, one look for ways to achieve where we want to be. Good intentions is not enough, we also have to consider “what type of society they promote in both the short and long term.”

Are we biased?

In the UK:

Most graphic designers are in their 20s, only 13% are over 40 years old (Roberts et al., 2015)

88% have at least an undergraduate degree (Roberts et al., 2015)

88% are white, similar to UK general population (Roberts et al., 2015)

74% graphic design students are women, yet only 47% working designers are women (Gitnux, 2026)

Gitnux (2026) Graphic Design Gender Statistics
<https://gitnux.org/graphic-design-gender-statistics/>

Roberts, L., Wright, R., & Price, J. (Eds.). (2015).
Graphic designers surveyed. GraphicDesign&.

When well-meaning systems are designed mainly by people with similar backgrounds and experiences, they may unintentionally overlook how those systems affect others and may also find it harder to notice the harms or biases that arise.



Why Western Designs Fail in Developing...

@Design.Theory 1.6m views 1 yr ago #industrialdesign ...more

Can we design good outcomes without a good process?

How we work impacts whose problems we are solving, and what approaches we take when we are trying to do “social good” with design.

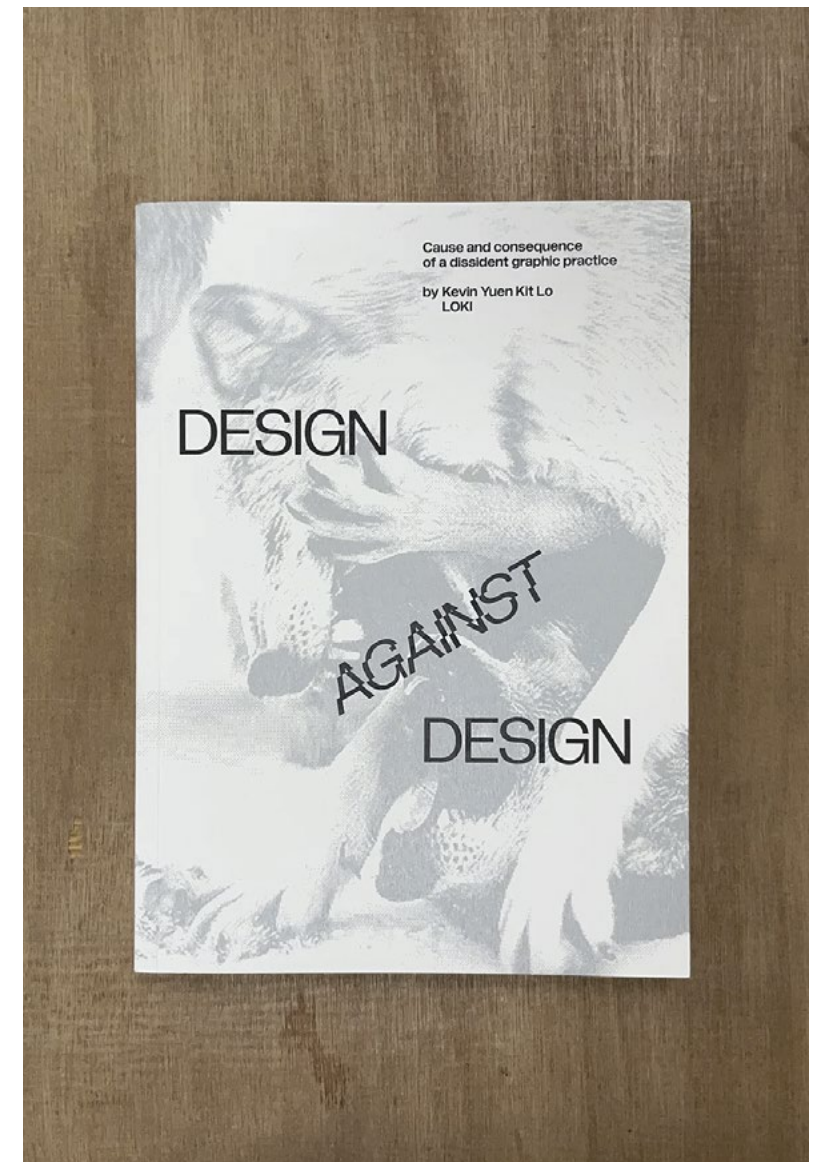
What is the structure of the workplace? How stable is the job? Can you decide how you work? Do you feel comfortable challenging your boss?

What is the design process?

For example, how much are people who will end up using your design involved in the design process? Do you solve problems you’ve never experienced?

How does everyone define success of a project? Is it client happiness? Awards and features in design blogs? Statistics? How big the billboard is?

When looking at socially good designs, think about: Who they work for? Who do they reach? How are their workplaces structured? How are they accountable to communities facing those issues they try to solve? Is the goal inclusion or transformation? What is their methodologies? Who is included as part of the design process? What do they use to define success? Is their focus on raising awareness, making information accessible, empowering communities, mobilising action, or directly confronting institutions and power? What aesthetics are being deployed and why?



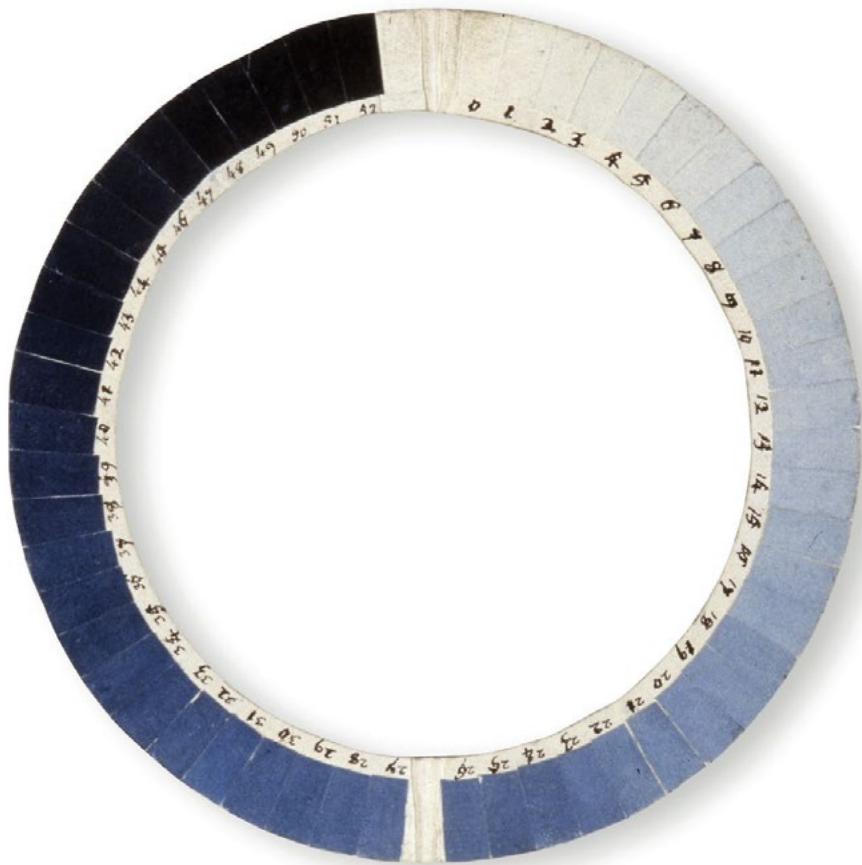
This page is informed by Design Against Design.
Available at Good Press.

Activity 1

15 minutes

Speculative design exercise: Imagine you travelled to an alternative universe. It could be a better world, a worse world, or just different. You are a graphic designer sitting at your desk. Write about a tool you are using. Feel free to ignore the laws of physics.

Write for 5 minutes and we can have a chat.



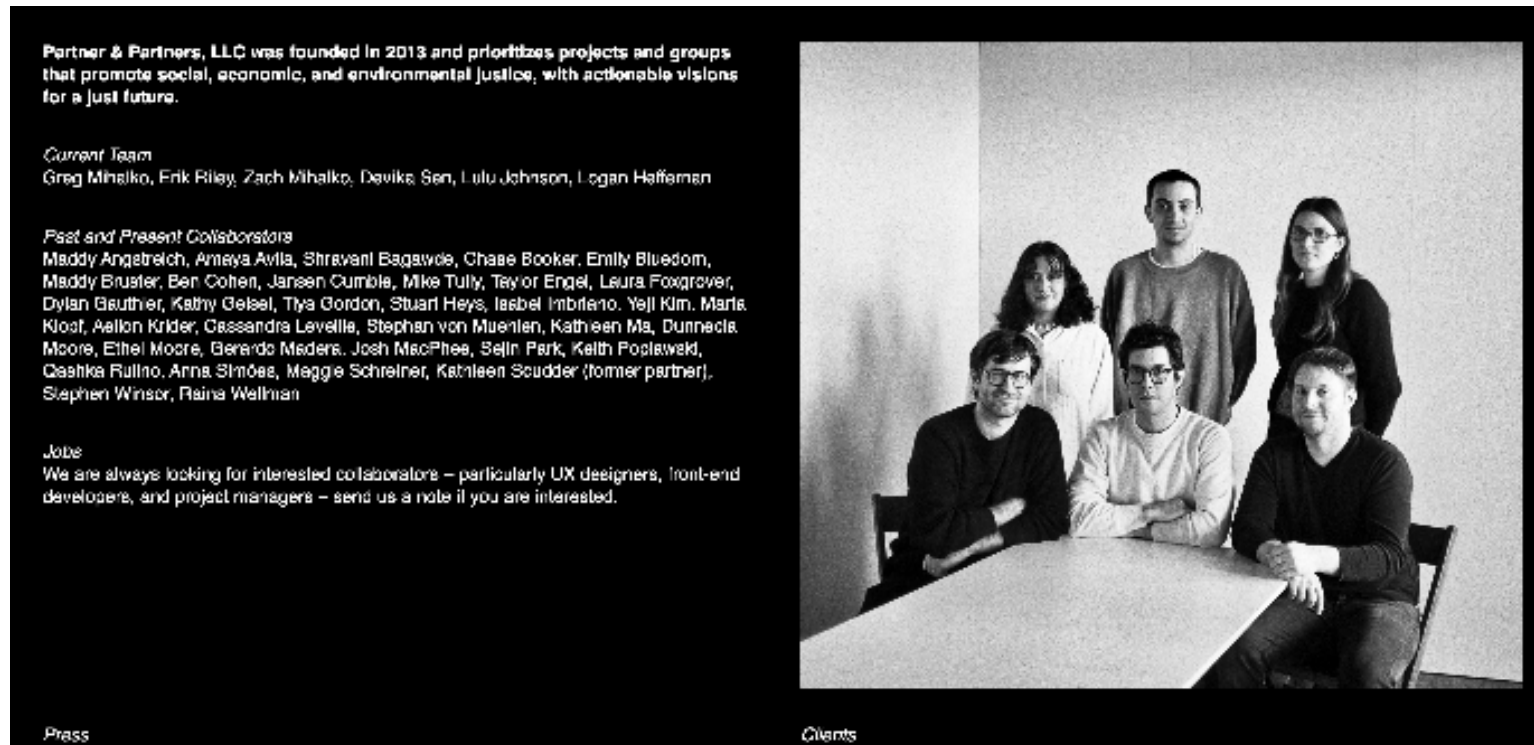
Short Break

Examples

Care, and social good for designers as workers

Partner & Partners

A worker-owned design practice



Co-op clients



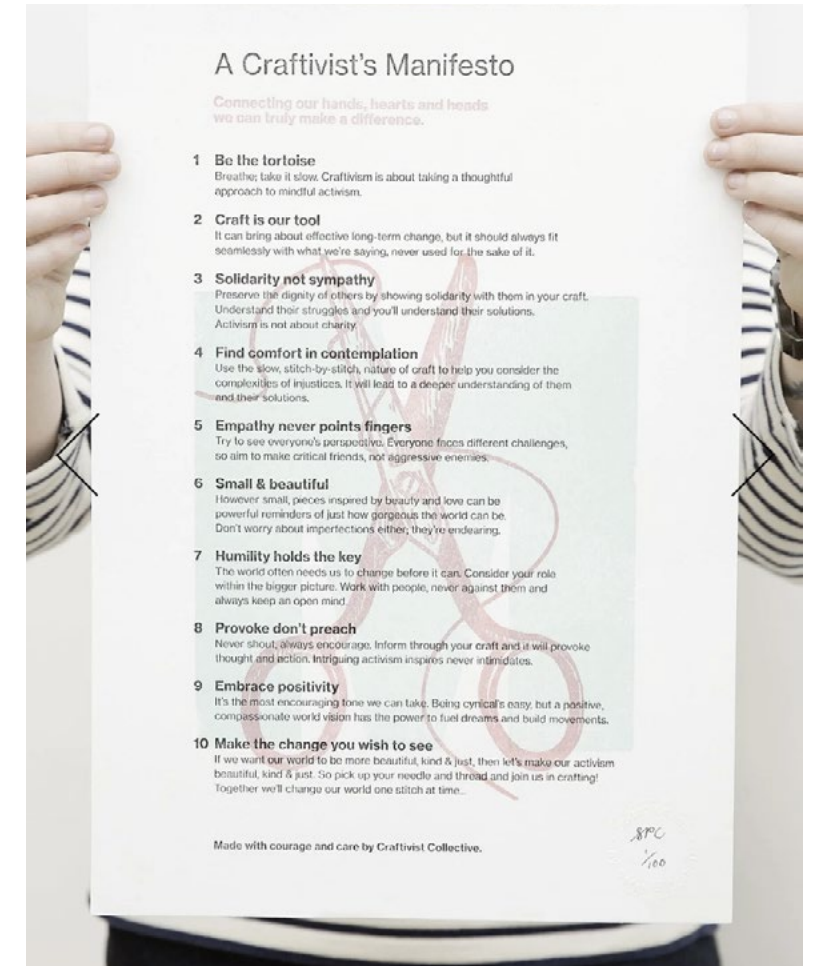
More on design co-ops



[Anti-oppression Resource & Training Alliance](#)
[United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives](#)
[Generative Somatics](#)
[Github Tech-coops](#)
[Allied Media Conference](#)
[Co-op 101: A Guide to Starting a Cooperative](#)
[Sustainable Economics Law Center](#)
[ICA group](#)
[Owner2owners.nyc](#)

Collective work, care, value in “women’s work”

Craftivist Collective



Challenging norms with new tools

Pikari Mai!

Hāmiora Bailey, a Māori artist has designed a web plugin Pikari Mai! Made with Colenso BBDO (advertising agency), it scans keywords to replace news about British royals with Indigenous news produced by Indigenous Māori outlets.



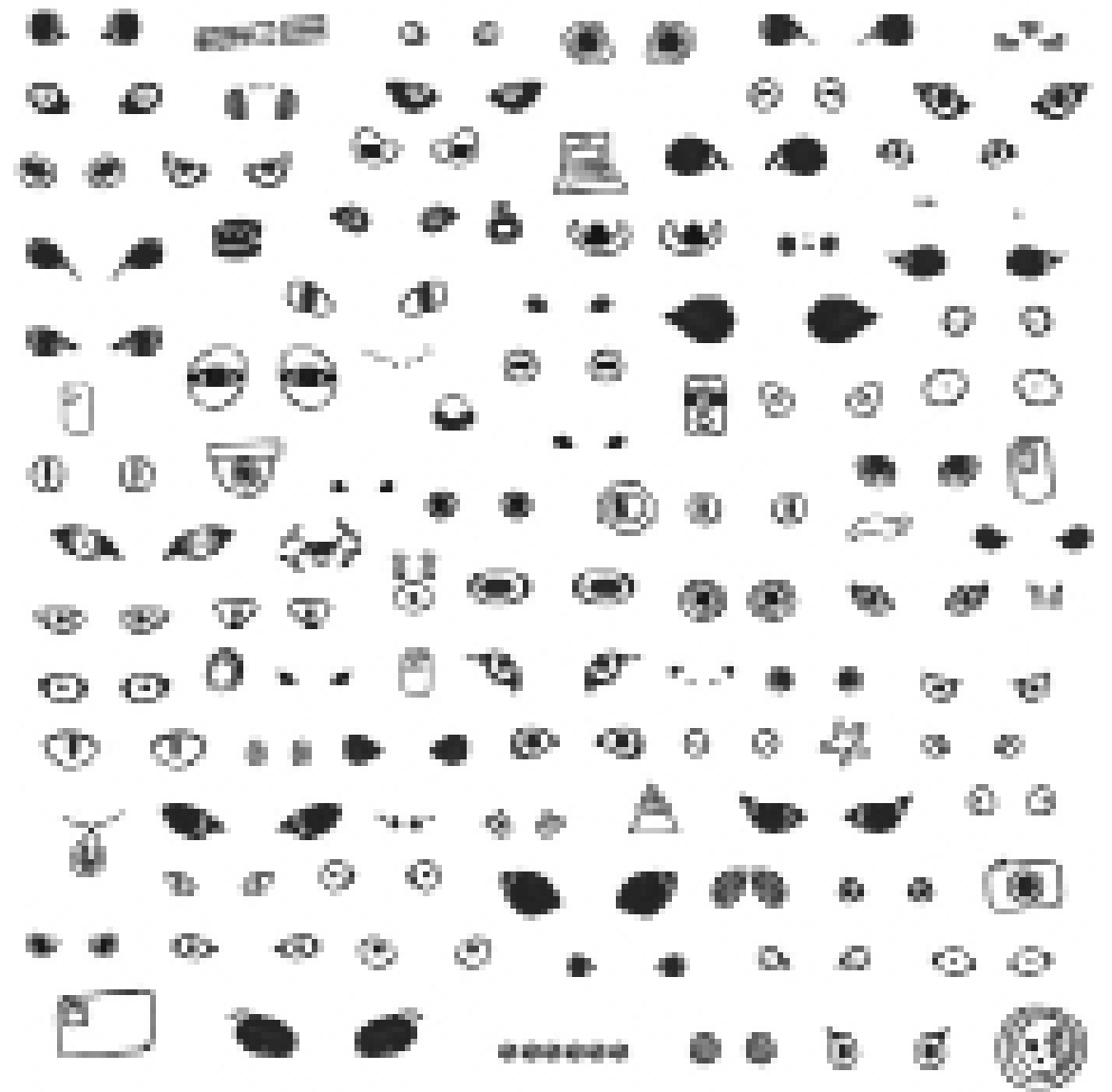
Challenging norms, taking the brief further

Conference branding by James Bridle

Commissioned by the 18th International CPDP (“Computers, Privacy and Data Protection”) Conference on the theme ‘The World is Watching’, Bridle created an artwork with a hundred sensory apparatuses from animals, plants, and machines.

“While watching, we are also being watched by machinic and non-human eyes alike, with corresponding, entangled differences of agency, responsibility, and judgement. We inhabit a shared sensory world, and it is to this shared world we ultimately owe justice and responsibility.”
Bridle, 2025

<https://jamesbridle.com/works/the-world-is-watching>



Activity 2

20 minutes

Redesign a bank note for a community you are part of.
Think about what is considered valuable to you.



The Brixton Pound



The Bristol Pound

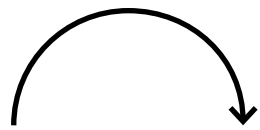
Activity 3

20 minutes

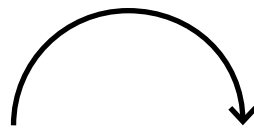
Work in groups

What conditions are needed if we want to produce socially good design work? Design a poster to illustrate the ecosystem that enables socially good designs.

Recap and discussion



Graphic design is everywhere and it has the power to impact people



Should we decide what “good” is based on vibes? Is it inherently violent?

When thinking about socially good design, we should consider things like who decides, what processes we adopt, and the direction we move in.

Creative Submission by 20 April

You are invited to submit one or two A5 pages of creative work inspired by today's workshop. Selected submissions will be included in a collective zine and exhibited at SaltSpace Gallery in August.

The zine will be risograph printed in green and pink. Please prepare your artwork using no more than two colours.

A submission link will be emailed to you in a few days.

Your submission can take any form:
an activity you completed today;
a piece of speculative fiction; a tool
for commoning, hacking, vandalising,
or reimagining; an essay; a letter to
graphic design; a case study;
a manifesto, etc.

Thanks for coming!

Please fill in a feedback form
and leave your email address.

For any questions
please email me at
s2762037@ed.ac.uk