

Graphic Design, Power, and Aesthetics

“A design cannot be disconnected from the values and assumptions in which it was created, from the ideologies behind it... ideology is in everything around us, we perceive it as neutral”

Ruben Pater, 2016

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 section 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:	10 minutes
Introduction:	20 minutes
Discussion and Activity 1:	20 minutes

Short Break

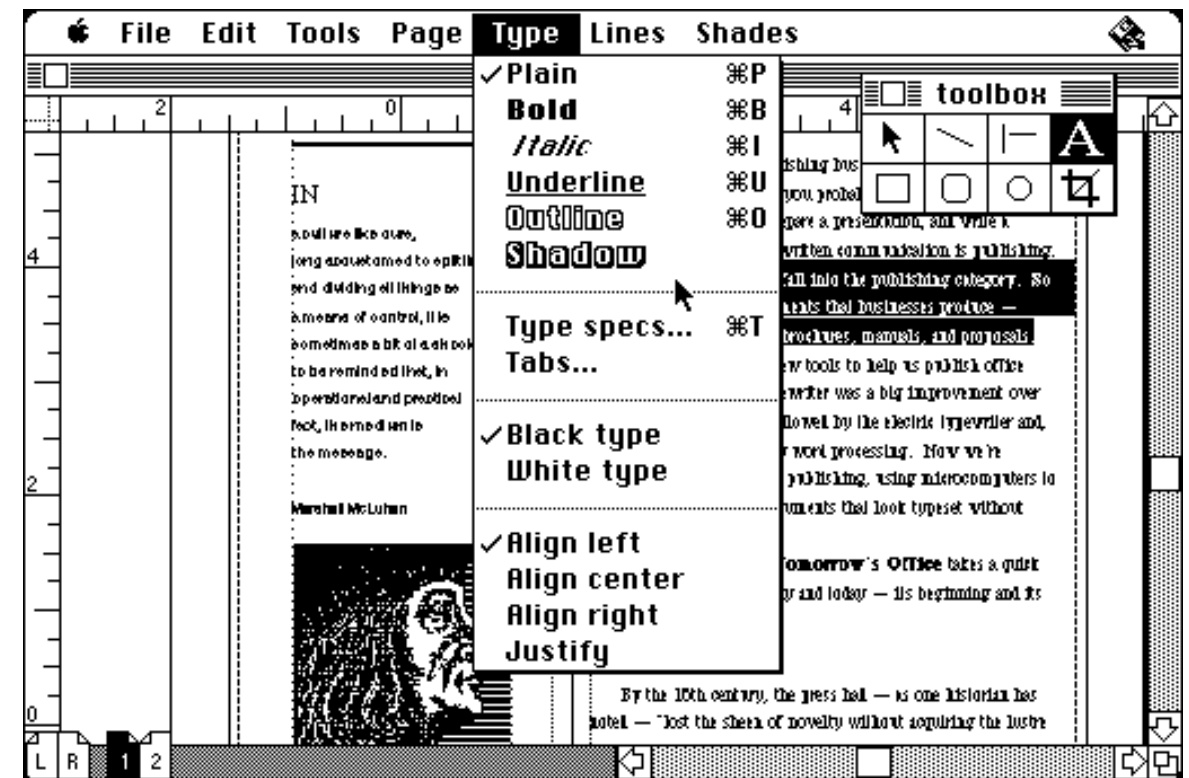
Introduction:	20minutes
Activity 2 and Activity 3:	40 minutes
Conclusion and task:	10 minutes

Power of 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

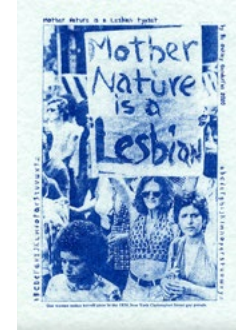
According to Ruben Pater's 2021 book *Caps Lock*



Salesperson



Worker



Activist



Educator



Scribe



Amateur



Philanthropist



Brander



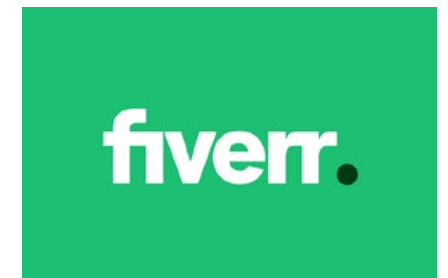
Futurist



Hacker



Engineer



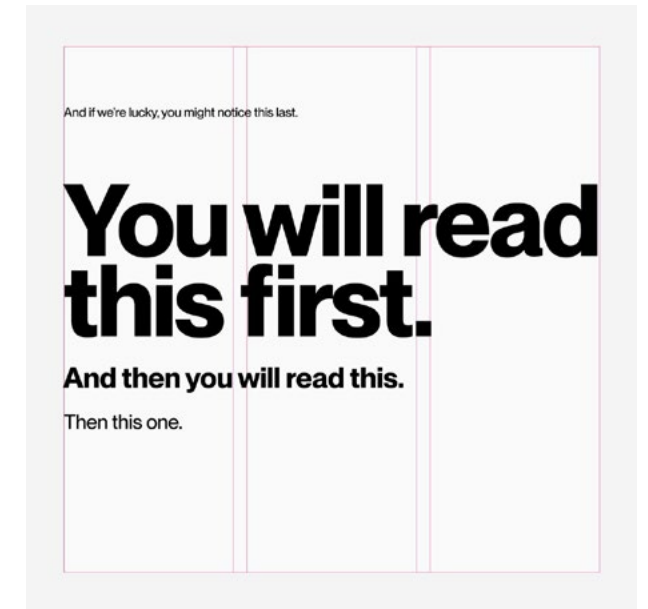
Entrepreneur

Designer's impacts

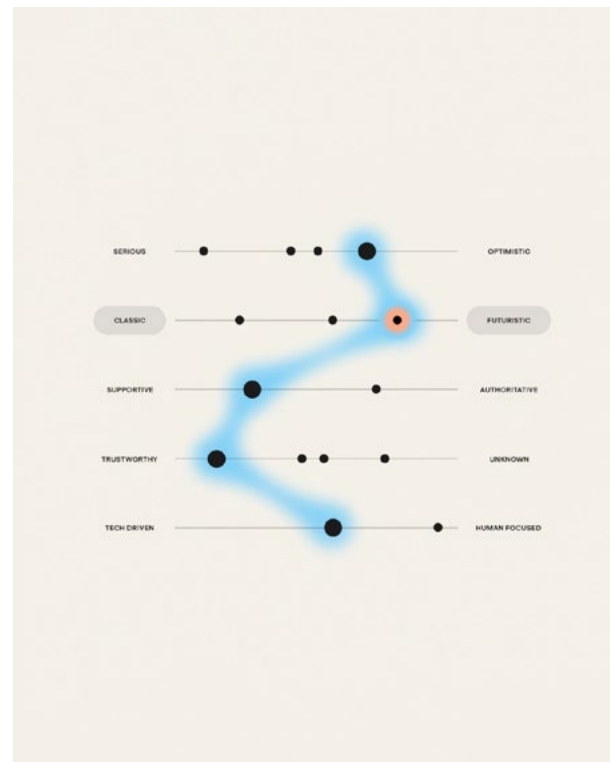
Provide useful
information



Organise
information



Visually explain
information



Foster collective
identities



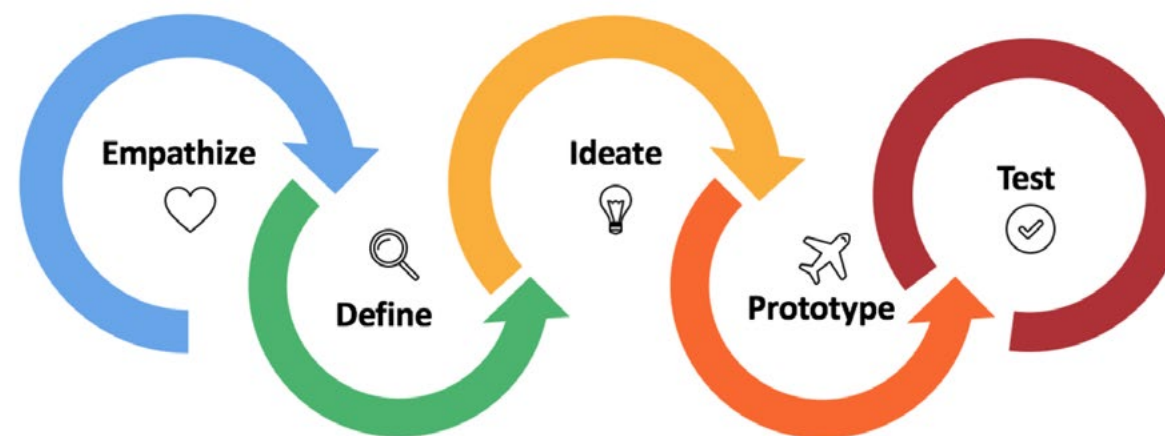
Nudge bahaviours



Decorate



Provide methods



Legitimise
authorities



Signal values and
identity



Regulate
behaviours

**Sandwich
Artist™**

You are the face of our global brand.

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!



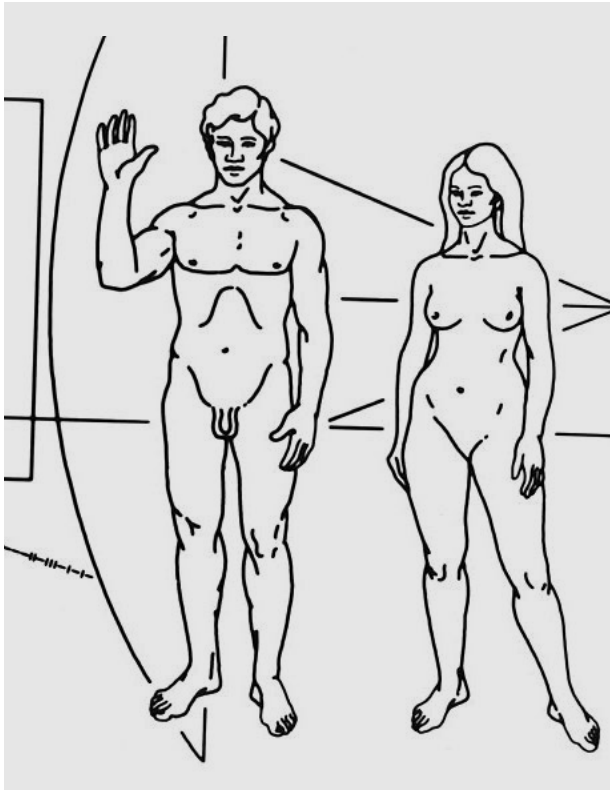
How power influence graphic design

Graphic design is not value-free

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

Design is influenced by these power. It cannot be apolitical/neutral, because “neutrality does not mean value-free—it means acquiescence to dominant social and political values, freezing the status quo in place. Neutrality may appear to be apolitical, but that is only because the status quo is taken as a neutral default (Green, 2021).”

“Neutral” designs with embedded values



The Pioneer plaque: What body shapes, ethnicity, and cultural norms (posture, hair styles) are seen as universal?



The Mercator map:

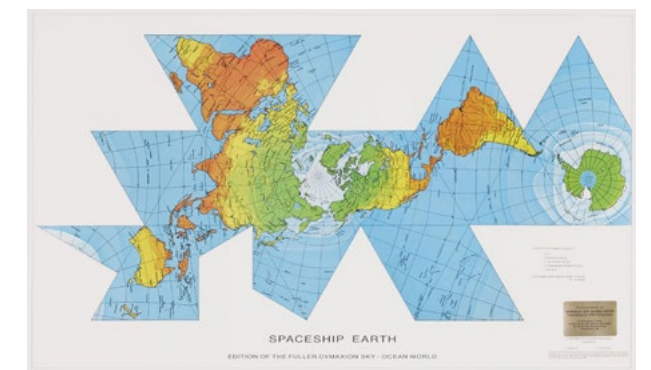
- North is up.
- Europe at the centre.
- The stretch on top and bottom makes Europe disproportionately large.



“Upside-down” map

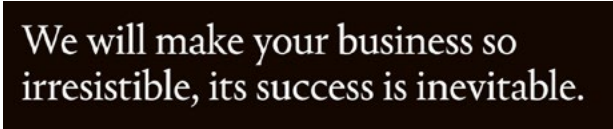
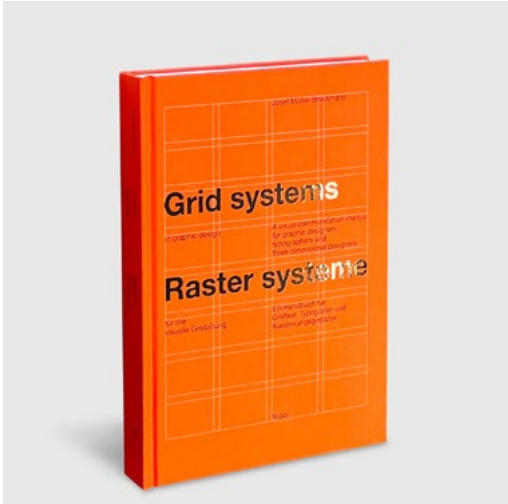
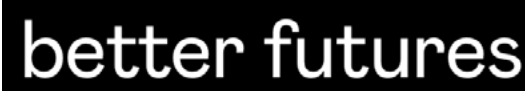


Chinese map with China near the centre



The Dymaxion map has no top or bottom.

What's shaping our norms?

Tools	Process	Goals	Values
What do these tools decide for us?	What type of outcome do these processes produce?	How do we define success? Whose interests matter?	What do they actually mean? Who is empowered?
			
			
			
			
			
			
			
			
			

Activity 1

10 minutes

Group of 2s

Introduce to each other a case study you are familiar with.

What tools, processes, goals or values do you think they embed?

What would be difference if you change one of them?



IKEA offers residents free blinds for their windows if they agree to present adverts on the street-facing side

Short Break

Aesthetics

*Let's take aesthetics as a subject
to further discuss how design is
influenced by the social environment
and assumptions we take for granted.*

Aesthetics' relationships with power are not fixed

People prefer the same aesthetic for different reasons

Cottagecore: leisure, magic



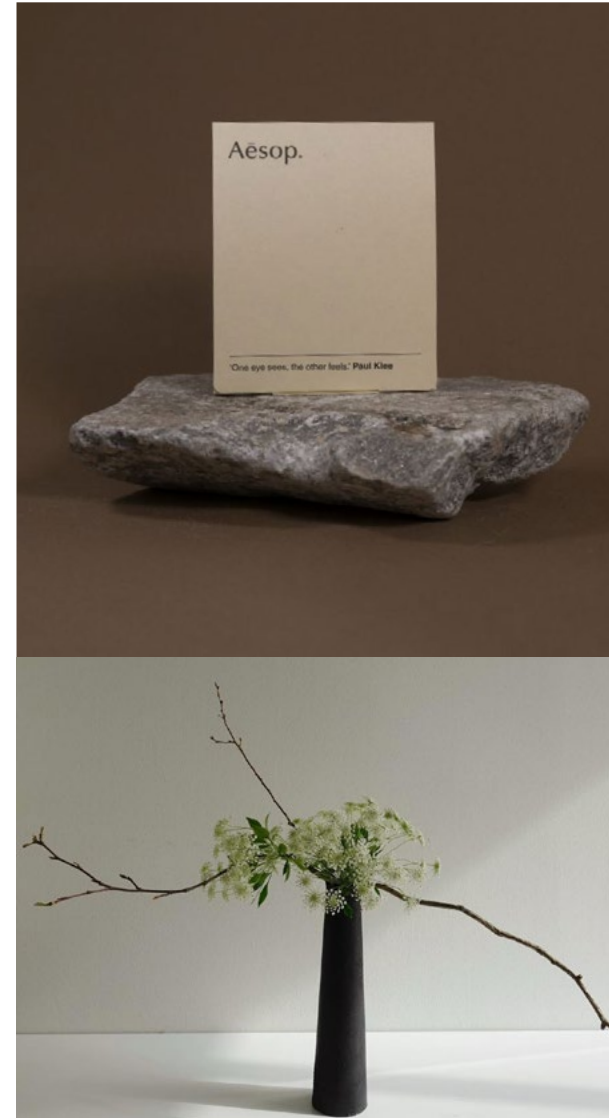
Aesthetics of power - for legitimacy



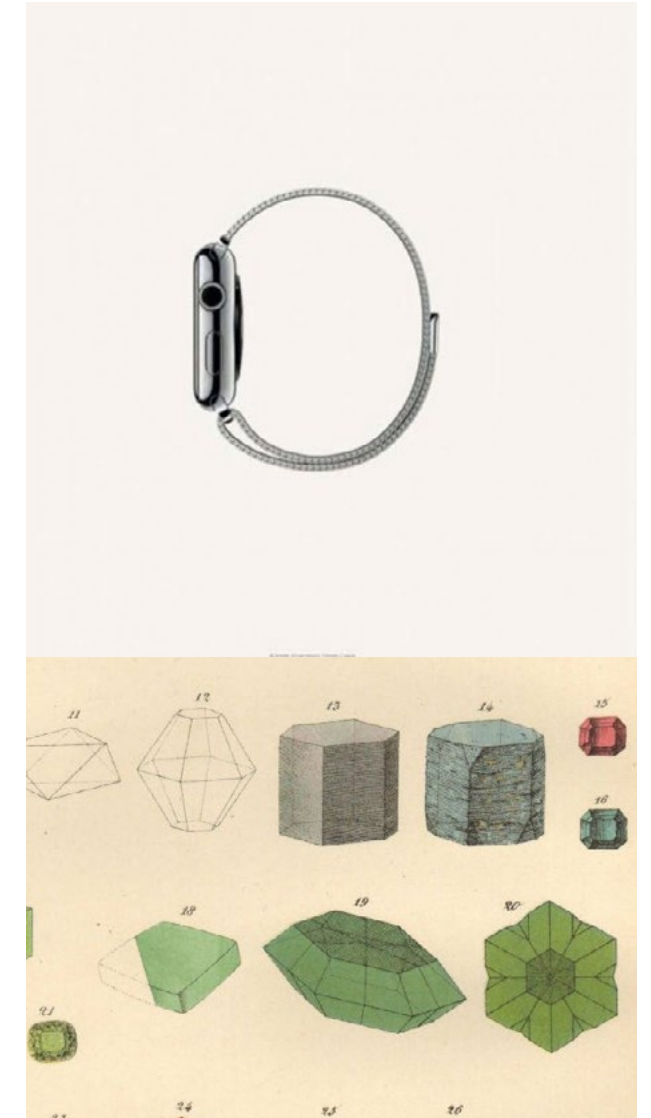
Embossing:
Understated luxury,
signaling wealth



Gold:
Precious, worthy



White space:
Having time and
space.



Floating render:
Scientific, exists as
pure idea.

Aesthetics of countercultures and vernacular designs - for energy and “authenticity”



Protest signs:
Making the brand
a hero, a market
disruptor



Doodles:
Connecting the
brand with love,
hope, innocence

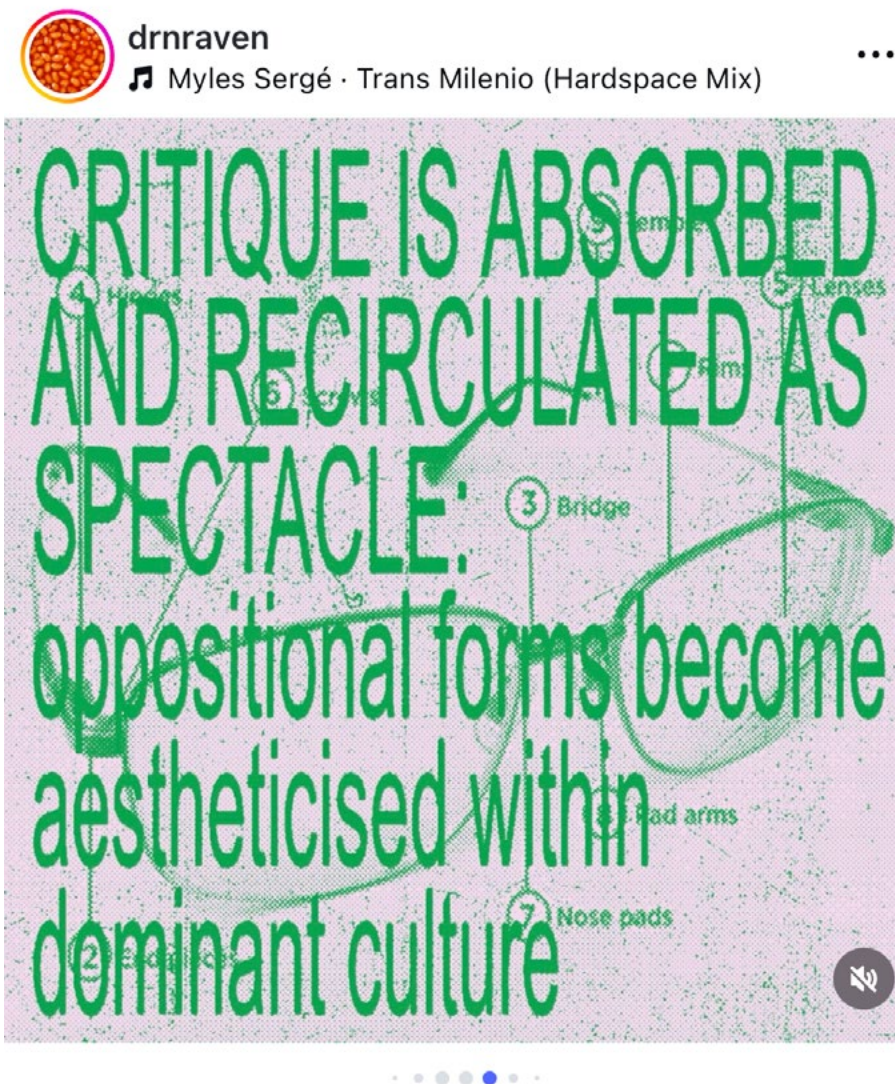


Imperfections:
Small-batch look



Chaos:
Relatable, fun,
down-to-earth

How brands adopt culture to justify themselves



Darren Raven [@drnraven]. (2026, March 18). *Public pedagogy 077 - 18/03/26 - plaything of capitalism* [Image Carousel]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/DWAT_ipjNH-/?hl=en&img_index=1



The cycle

Vernacular practice:
Ordinary, functional.



Subculture:
Adopted and stylised by
communities, become
symbols of belonging.



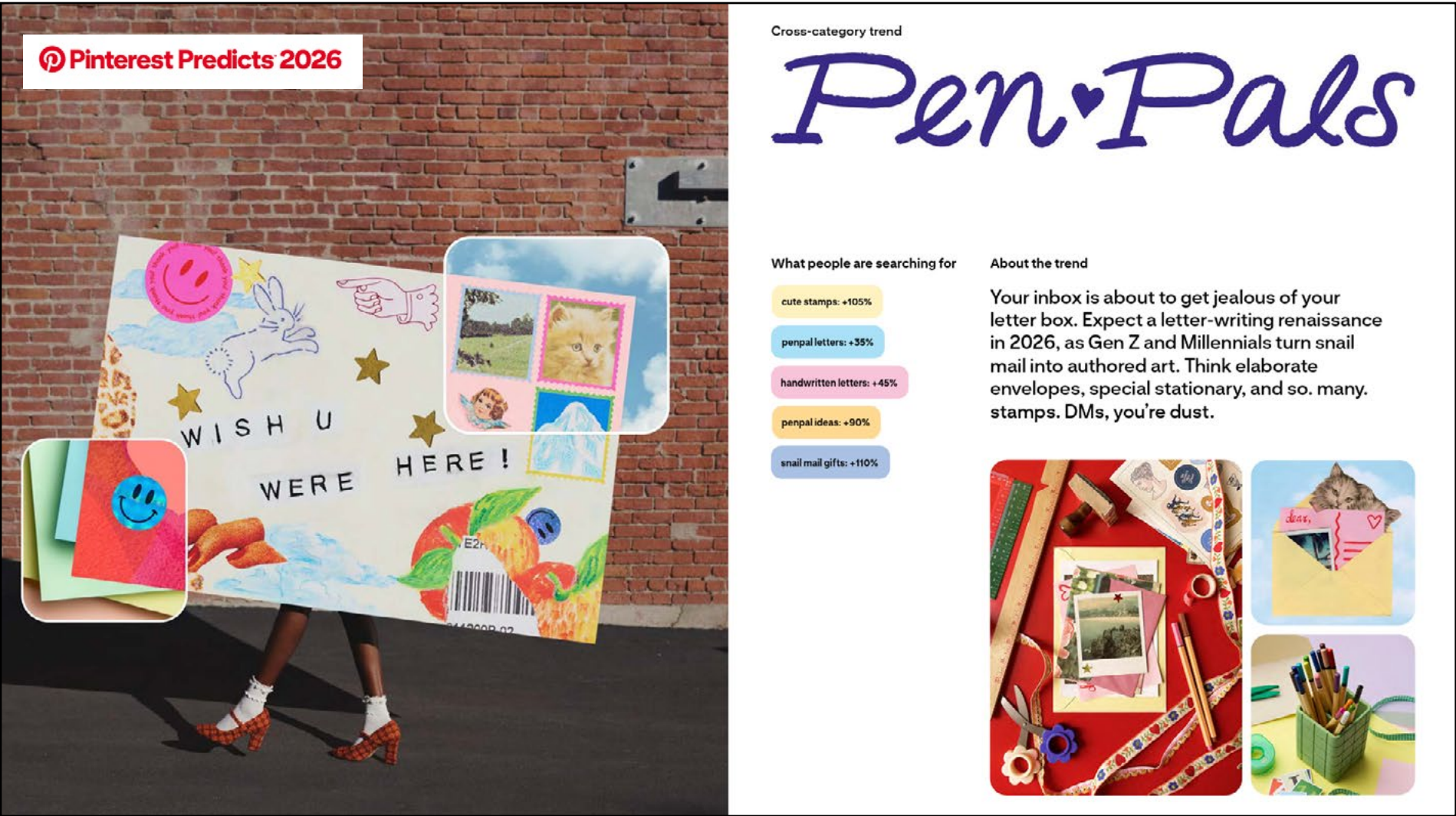
Mainstream:
Commercialised and
legitimised within
dominant cultural markets.

Power absorbs challengers.



Gucci x Balenciaga
“The Hacker Project”

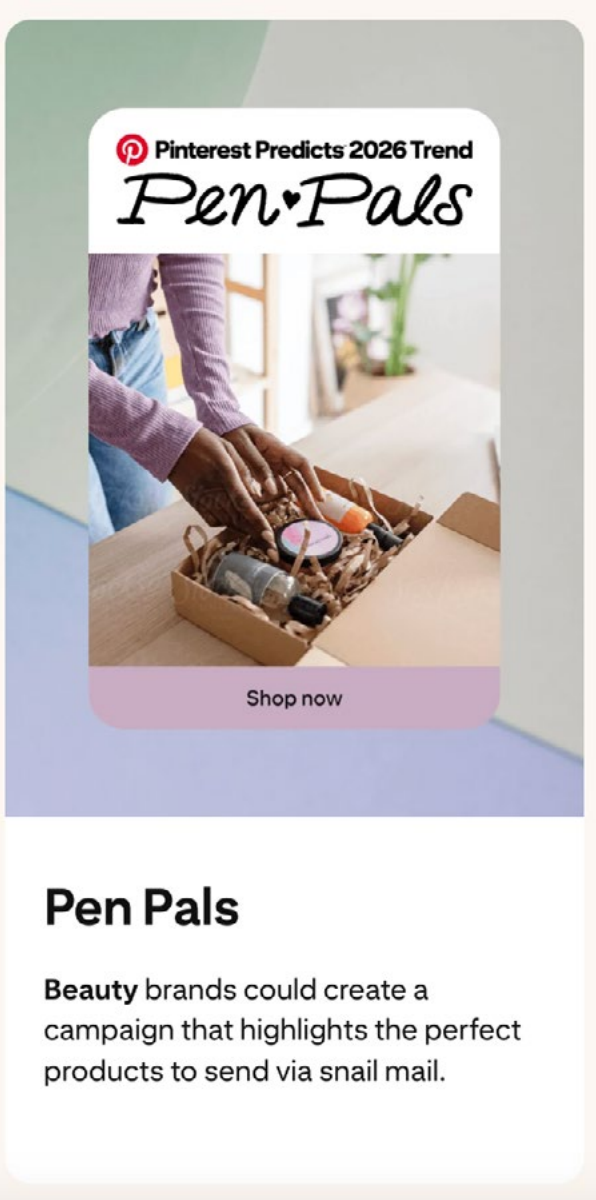
Cool hunting as design process



Pin on Pinterest Predicts UK's *Pen Pals* board



Pin on Pinterest Predicts UK's *Pen Pals* board



Pinterest Predicts 2026 marketing tips



Saldo's DTC Bottles Channel Small-Batch Energy

By [Chloe Cordover](#)

Published April 28, 2025

Filed under [Wine & Champagne Packaging](#)

Saldo's DTC packaging, designed by [Co-Partnership](#), leans into a DIY sensibility that feels personal without trying too hard. Each bottle features handwritten varietals scrawled on strips of faux masking tape, an intentional contrast to the clean SALDO wordmark above.

The typography is casual, but purposeful, adding a sense of maker's mark to each pour. Combined with subtle shifts in label placement and wrap textures, the design balances polish with play, making it feel like a one-off from a winemaker's own stash.

Authentic look vs. “authentic” look

Shaped by real conditions> Mimics of the original constraints

Meaningful within a community> Taken out of context

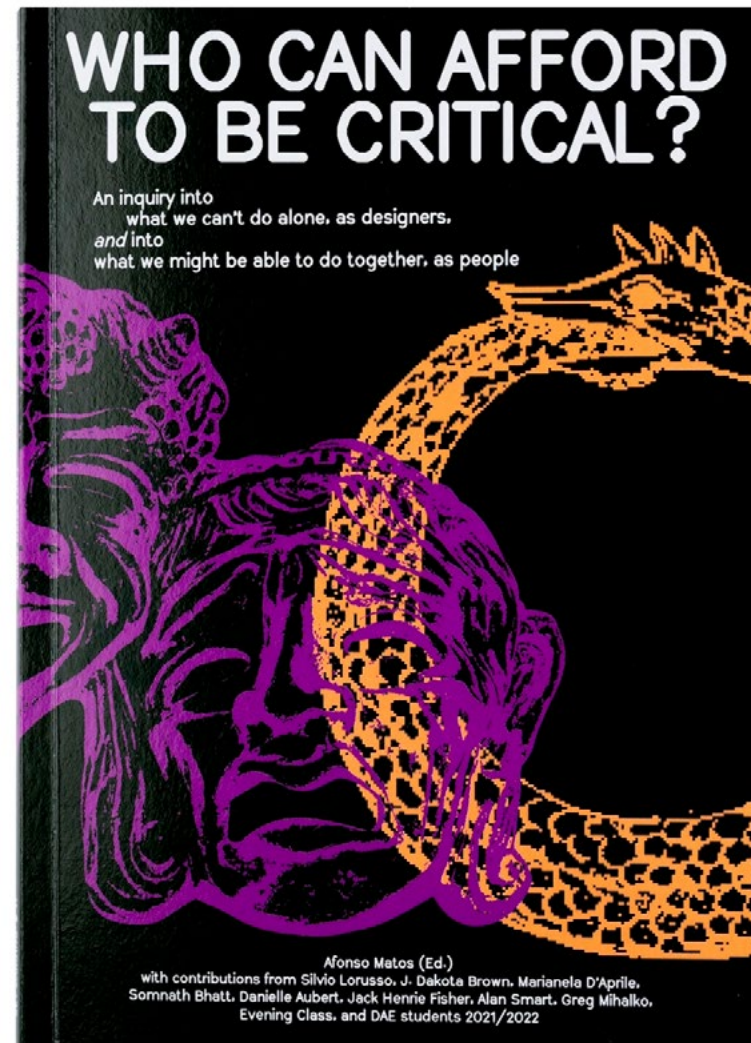
“If we ignore capital for a few minutes, we can imagine another model for design based on the lived experience of the communities we exist within. Communities created through shared values and knowledges, based on lived experience, concretised through design into cultural objects... then circulates back into an expanding community.”
Kevin Yuen Kit Lo, Design Against Design

Discussion: what can we do as individual designers?

Is it individual's responsibility to reject problematic approaches to aesthetics? When we work under precarious conditions, do we get to decide what we design? If not why do we bother talking about it?



image by Instagram account @ethicaldesign69



Matos, A. (2022). *Who can afford to be critical? An inquiry into what we can't do alone, as designers, and into what we might be able to do together, as people*. Set Margins'.

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

Examples

Aesthetics kept relevant to their origins:

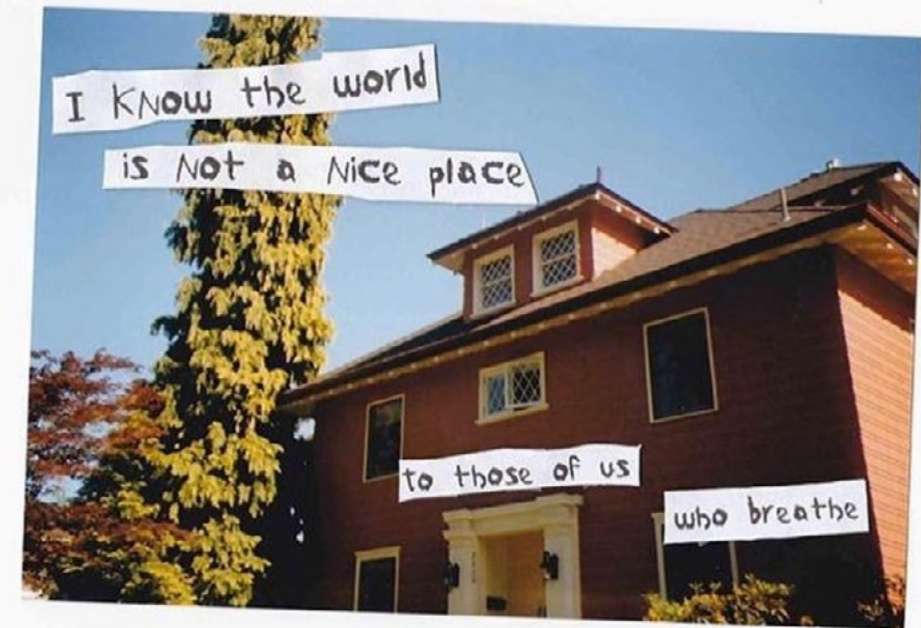
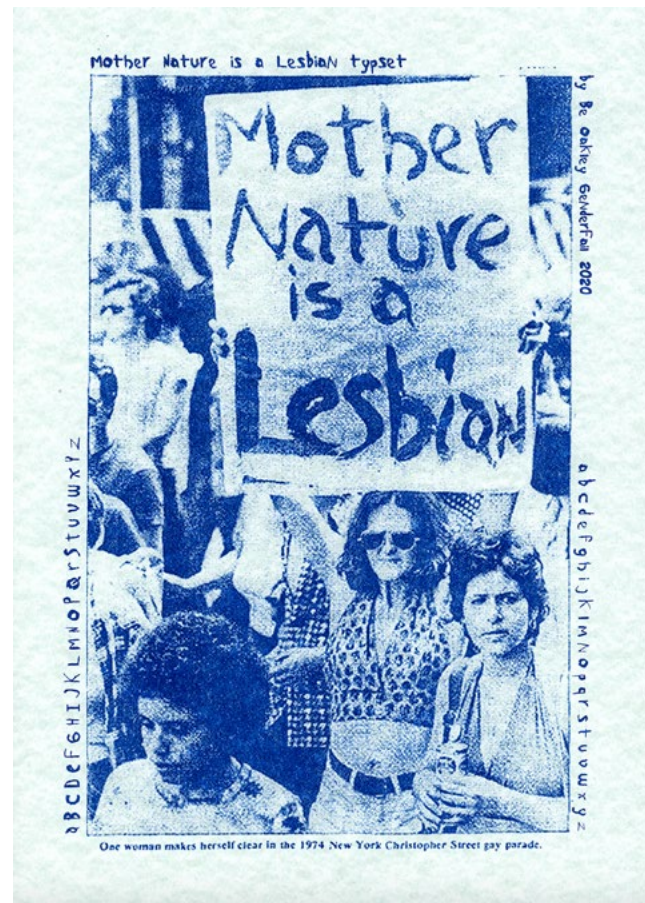
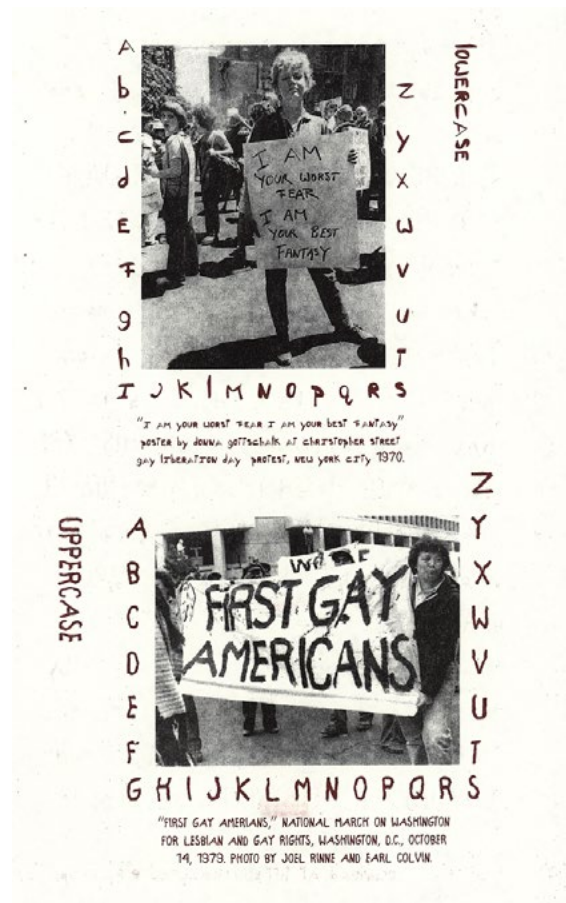
Protest-inspired fonts by GenderFail, only available for marginalised users

GenderFail Open Sourced Protest-inspired Fonts

Since 2018, GenderFail has been making fonts based on protest signs from queer and trans projects, the protests for black lives since the Stonewall Riots of 1969 to the present.

Terms of use

Queer, trans, and non-binary folks, black and Indigenous folks can use any of these fonts for personal, for-profit, non-profit, mutual aid and fundraising uses. Please consider donating (if you have the means and want to support this non-commercial work) via our PayPal account at genderfailproject@gmail.com or [online here](#) if you can. If you are a sizeable for-profit business or corporation, don't you fucking dare



Days of Rage

DARK MODE ☐ ON ☒ OFF

ABOUT

This is about how **design** lives through us: our bodies, our memories, our activated minds.

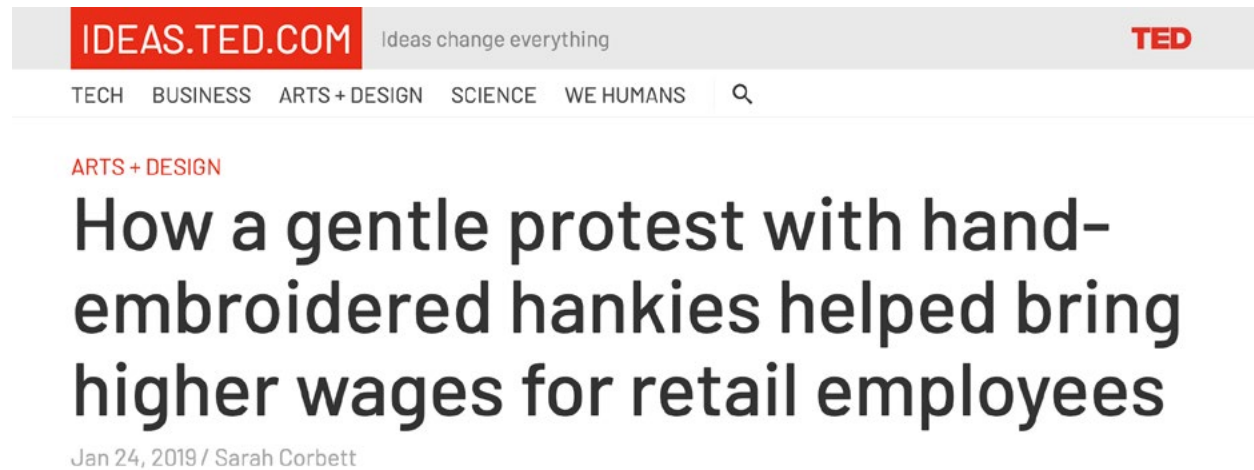
Aesthetic of a promise:

Kenya Hara's Umeda Hospital signage design (2001). Fabric way-finding system's promise of care and hygiene only stands when the hospital can genuinely maintain the standard by washing them regularly.

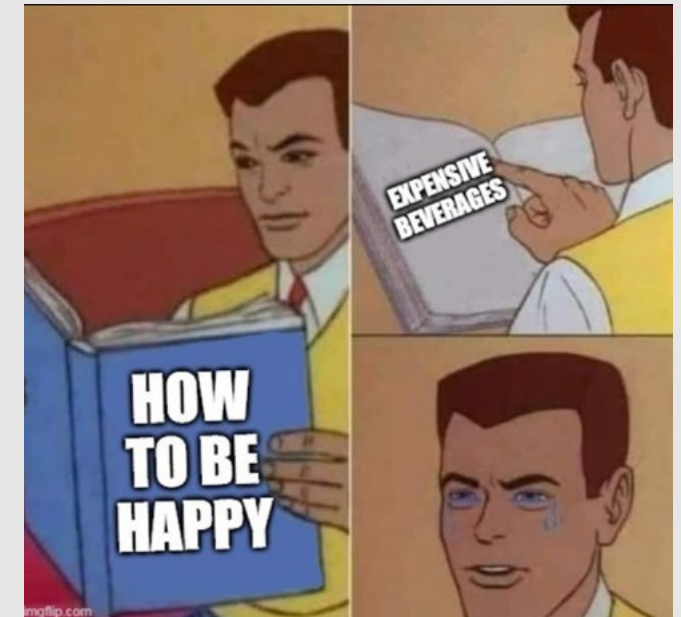
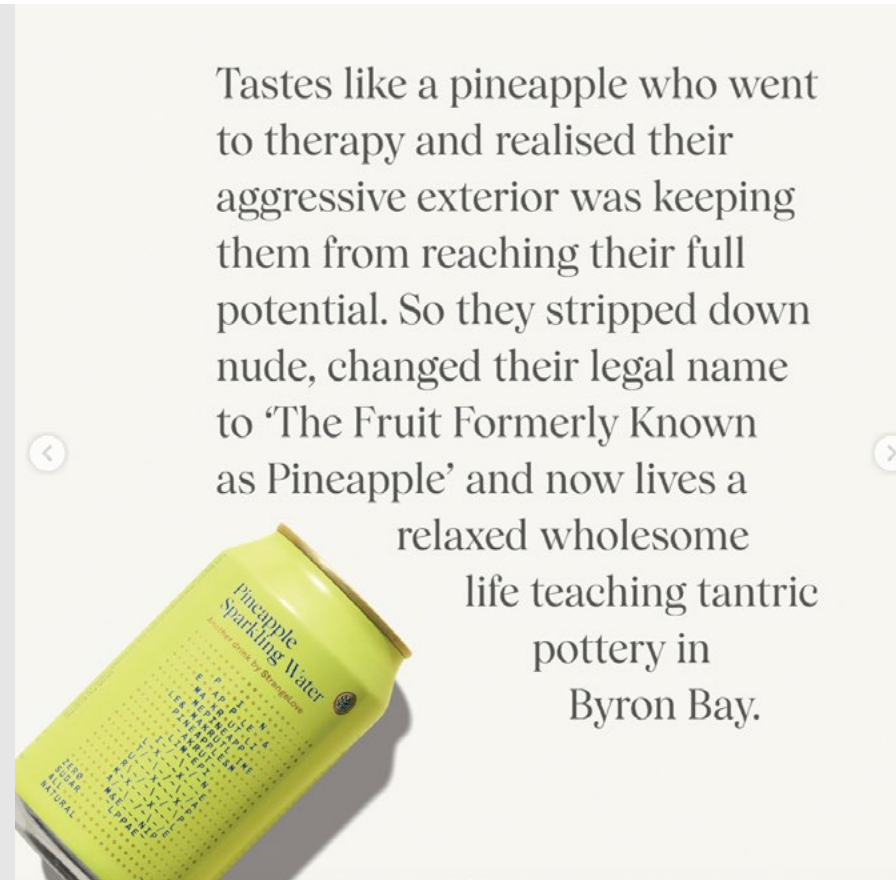


Aesthetic of care and effort:

Craftivist Collective runs workshops, events, and sell craftivist kits. It showed how a piece of design have extra power when the look revealed time and effort put into it.



Commercial brand with founder's personal voice: StrangeLove, built on founder's fun and chaotic personality



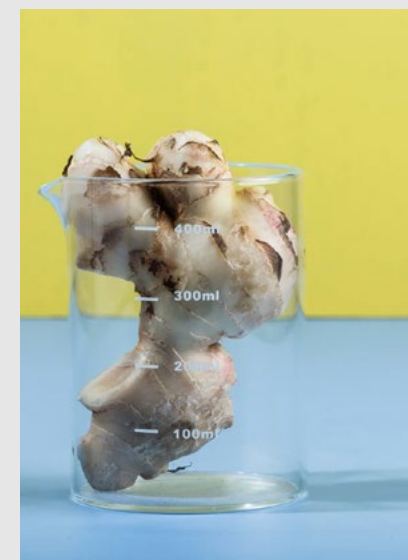
Gifts for problematic people

Inspired by the old 'hide your hip flask in a hollowed out bible' trick, these new gift packs open to reveal something far more interesting than a guy with fabulous hair performing a few magic tricks. Instead, open up these faux-self help books and reveal an even neater magic trick - the elements to craft your very own bar quality cocktail.

Booze Book Volumes 1 & 2



Booze Book Volume 1: Drinking Fast & Thinking Slow



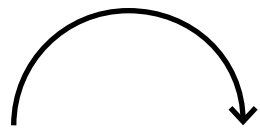
ch is too much?

2013

Some Like It Hot

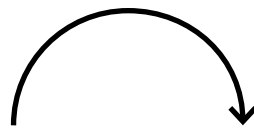
Our first drink - released in 2013 - was an Organic Ginger Beer Energy Elixir. As you can tell by the last sentence, we had absolutely no idea what we were doing. However, we knew what a ginger beer should taste like. So, with little regard for hifalutin concepts like "profit" and "cash flow", we packed so much ginger into our first product it clogged up the multi-million dollar production line we borrowed to bottle it. After the lawsuit, people told us they really enjoyed the drink and that it tasted very gingery. Success!

Recap and discussion

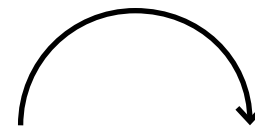


Graphic design is everywhere and it has the power to impact people

At the same time, what designers do is shaped by norms, which is shaped by power



Take aesthetics as an example within design. Power legitimises itself through co-opting trendy aesthetics.



Is authenticity the ethical answer? Can individual designers afford it? Examples

Activity 2

20 minutes

Use material provided to make a collage, that changes the original meaning of the words and images you use.



Collage is one of the most common method of zine making. Magazine collage by Beth Xia.

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 two colours. 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