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# GRAPHIC DESIGN THINKING: BEYOND BRAINSTORMING

**Ellen Lupton, editor**

Princeton Architectural Press, New York  
Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore

# 02

all i want  
TO DO  
is write  
THINGS  
down for  
YOU

"Sometimes an idea can be our worst enemy, especially if it blocks our thinking of alternatives."

Don Koberg and Jim Bagnall

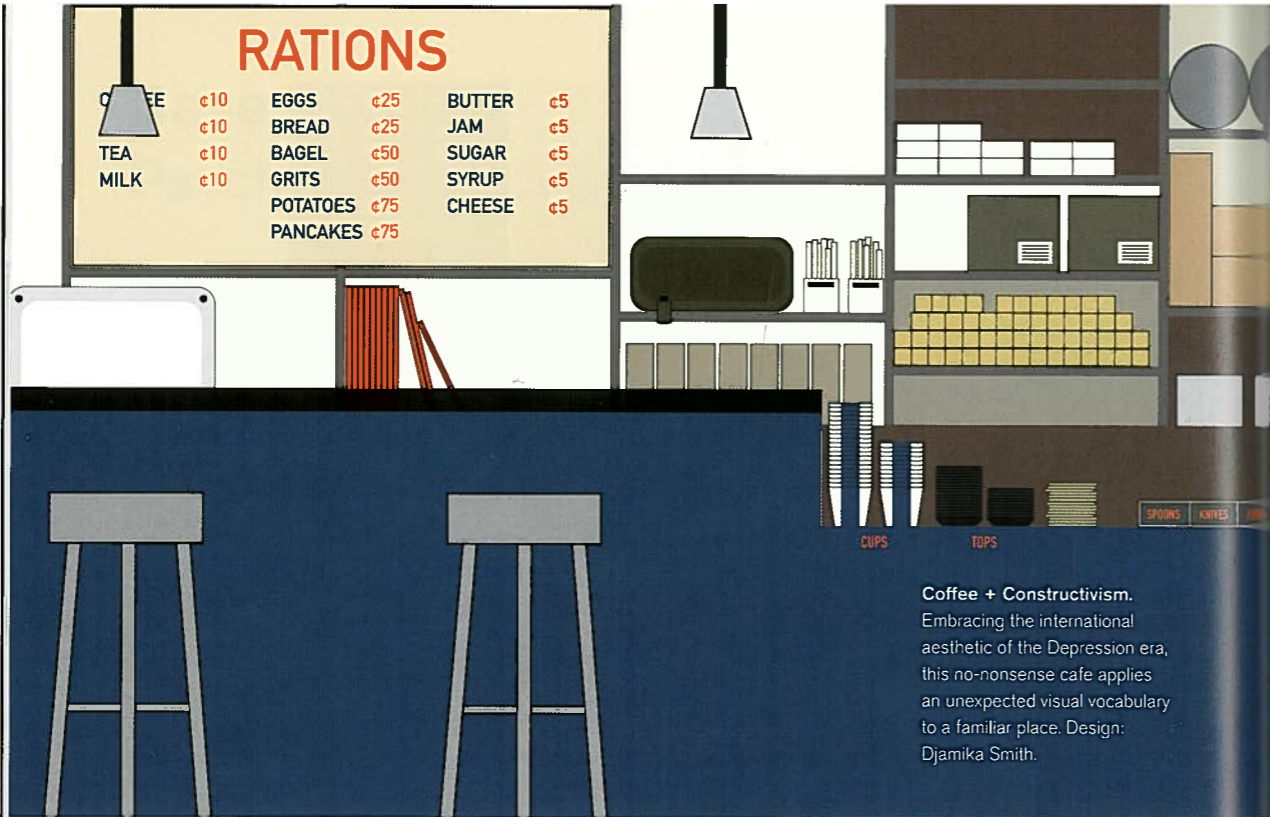
## How to Get Ideas

Once you have defined your problem, it's time to devise solutions and develop concepts in greater depth. This often means communicating ideas to yourself and to other designers on your team as well as to clients and potential end users. An intriguing sketch from your notebook or a provocative phrase scribbled on a whiteboard can now become a concept with a concrete shape and a vivid story to tell.

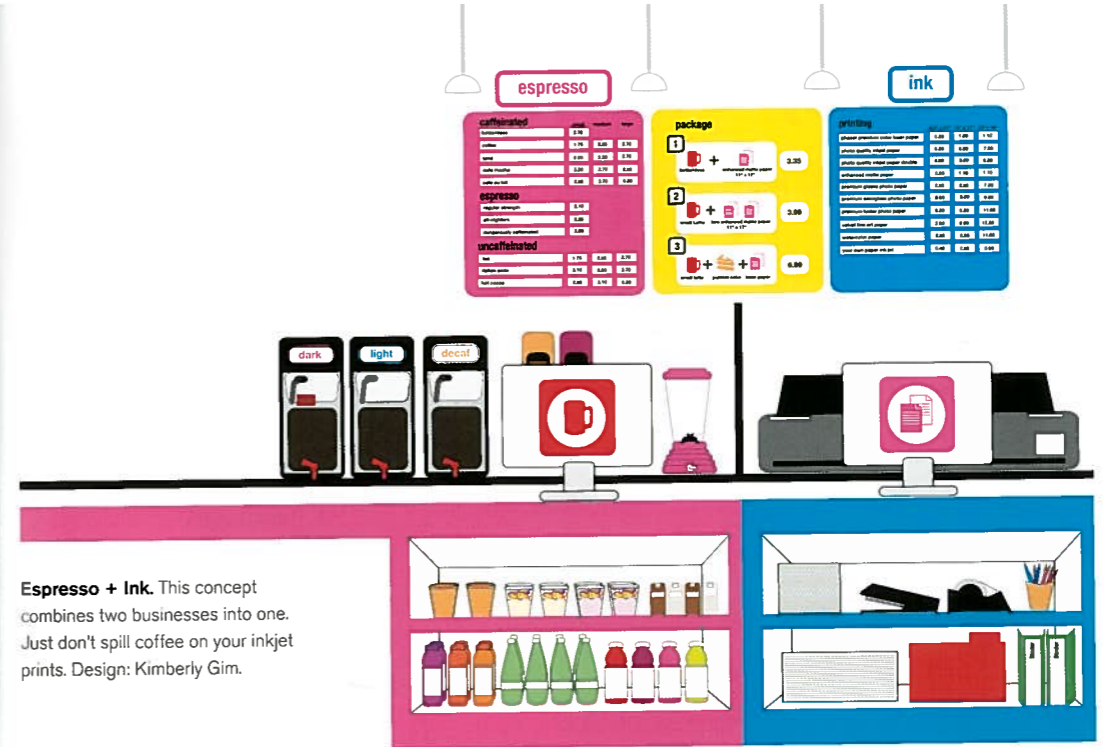
The first phase of the design process involves casting a wide net around your problem; along the way, you may come up with dozens of different concepts, from the obvious to the outlandish. Before devoting time and energy to developing a single solution, designers open

their minds to numerous possibilities and then zero in on a few. The tools explored in this chapter include ways to generate variations on a single concept as well as ways to quickly explore, explain, and expand on a core idea.

With a single-frame project like a book cover, poster, or editorial illustration, the move from ideation to execution is fluid and direct. With complex projects such as websites, publications, and motion graphics, designers tend to work schematically using diagrams, storyboards, and sequential presentations before developing the visual details and appearance of a solution. Physical and digital mock-ups help designers and clients envision a solution in use.



**Coffee + Constructivism.** Embracing the international aesthetic of the Depression era, this no-nonsense cafe applies an unexpected visual vocabulary to a familiar place. Design: Djamika Smith.



**Espresso + Ink.** This concept combines two businesses into one. Just don't spill coffee on your inkjet prints. Design: Kimberly Gim.

# Forced Connections

From cookie dough ice cream to zombie/Jane Austen novels, intriguing ideas often result when unlikely players collide. By brainstorming lists of products, services, or styles, and then drawing links between them, designers can forge concepts imbued with fresh wit and new functions. For example, most java houses today look alike. They feature dark reds and browns, wooden tables and floors, and—if you're lucky—a comfortable couch. But what if a cafe had constructivist decor instead? Or what if your errand to the print shop doubled as your coffee break? Likewise, laundromats get a rap for being dirty and dingy, yet public laundries offer a greener alternative to individually owned appliances. How could you make a trip to the laundromat a more inviting experience? Combining services or applying unexpected styles can change the way we think about predictable categories. *Lauren P. Adams and Beth Taylor*

Don Koberg and Jim Bagnall discuss the idea of forced connections as a tool for product designers in their book *The Universal Traveler: A Soft-Systems Guide to Creativity, Problem-Solving, and the Process of Reaching Goals* (San Francisco: William Kaufmann, 1972).

## How to Force a Connection

- 01 Choose a connection.** Depending on whether you are designing a business service, a logotype, or a piece of furniture, decide what kinds of connections to force. Maybe you want to combine services (gym + laundromat), aesthetics (serious literature + cheap horror), or functions (sofa + work space).
- 02 Make two lists.** Let's say your goal is to design a new kind of coffee shop. Brainstorm lists of functions—tailor, pet grooming,

- bicycle repair. Make connections and imagine the results. What would each new business be called? What needs does it address? Who is the audience? Would you want to go there?
- 03 Combine styles, messages, or functions.** Identify conflicting or overlapping ideas embodied in your core problem (museum + nature, school + lunch, coffee + economy). Create lists of images and ideas associated with each element, and draw connections between them.

- 04 Choose one or more viable ideas.** Make simple graphic images of interiors, products, and other applications to bring your concept to life. Your choices of forms, color, language, and typography can all speak to the core conflicts embodied in your concept. Use your forced connections to uncover the aesthetic and functional possibilities of your idea. Flat, graphic diagrams like the ones shown above quickly flesh out the main features of an idea without getting burdened with specifics.

## Case Study

### Multipurpose Tools

Your house is filled with tools. What happens when you combine two or more of these instruments to make something new? This quick exercise using forced connections yields some ideas that are impractical or absurd but others that could become real products with clever functions. Designer Lauren P. Adams started with verbal lists and then made sketches combining ideas from different lists.



#### Office Tools

thumbtack  
stapler  
scissors  
masking tape  
hole puncher  
pencil  
glue  
ruler  
marker  
compass  
paperclip  
staple remover

#### Kitchen Tools

spatula  
ladle  
whisk  
knife  
tongs  
vegetable peeler  
corkscrew  
can opener  
drink shaker  
measuring cup  
dish scrubber  
grater  
funnel  
rolling pin  
sieve

#### Garage Tools

wrench  
hammer  
nail  
tape measure  
T-square  
trowel  
handsaw  
clamp  
screw  
screwdriver  
level  
staple gun  
sledgehammer

**Handsaw + Ruler.** Nearly every saw cut requires measuring first, so why not add a ruler to the saw blade?

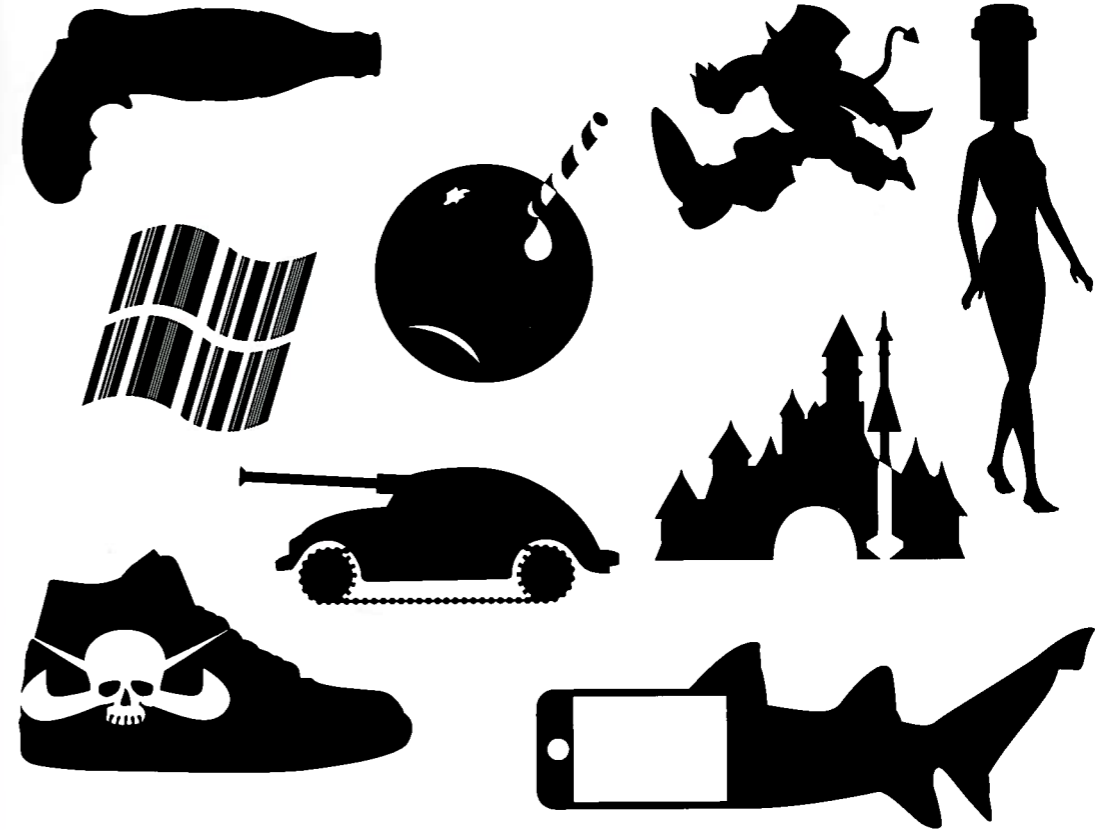
**Grater + Trowel.** Scoop up your freshly grated cheese, or crumble chunks of hardened dirt before planting.

**Scissors + Wrench.** This looks like a clever idea until you consider trying to actually cut something.

**Thumbtack + Screw.** The thumbtack head would give your hand something to grip while the screw threads make a secure connection.

**Sledgehammer + Drink Shaker.** The motion of hammering is similar to the motion used to shake a drink. (Sober up before swinging that hammer around.)

**Compass + Knife.** Cut your cookies to an exact dimension with this gadget for the cook who loves math.



## Case Study

### Visual Puns

Designers often use humor to hook the viewer's interest. Slamming disparate elements together yields unexpected offspring, and when the result is awkward enough to be funny, viewers come away with a laugh. Cleverness often carries a critical edge as well. In the visual puns shown here, designer Ryan Shelley created dark imagery out of recognizable brands, inviting the viewer into a Dr. Seuss-like world where cars, phones, and Barbie dolls take on sinister identities.

**Quality Control.** Iconic products are combined with unpleasant forms (guns, pills, bombs, sharks), creating a commentary on the grimmer side of capitalism. The designer translated these graphic icons into graffiti stencils.



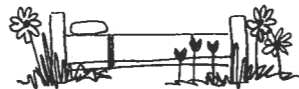
Minify: City Cabin



Magnify: Giant Garage



Rearrange: Sleep In the Kitchen

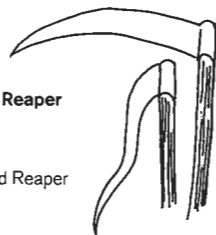


Reverse: Live in the Garden

**Rethinking the House.** Koberg and Bagnall used action verbs to think about the house in new ways in *The Universal Traveler* (1972). They got the idea from Alex F. Osborn, who presented this technique in his book *Applied Imagination* (1953). Concepts: Don Koberg and Jim Bagnall. Sketches: Lauren P. Adams.

# Action Verbs

Alex F. Osborn, who became famous for inventing brainstorming, devised other useful techniques that encourage creativity. One process involves taking an initial idea and applying different verbs to it, such as magnify, rearrange, alter, adapt, modify, substitute, reverse, and combine. These verbs prompt you to take action by manipulating your core concept. Each verb suggests a structural, visible change or transformation. Designers can use this exercise to quickly create fresh and surprising variations on an initial idea. Even a cliché image such as the grim reaper or hitting the bull's-eye can take a surprising turn when you subject it to actions. Designers can apply this technique to objects and systems as well as images. Try reinventing an everyday object such as a house, a book, or a couch by imagining it in a different scale, material, or context. *Lauren P. Adams*

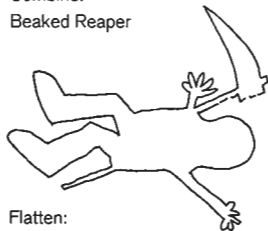


Grim Reaper

Melt:  
Flaccid Reaper



Combine:  
Beaked Reaper



Flatten:  
Chalk-line Reaper

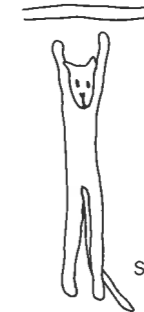
Sketches: Molly Hawthorne



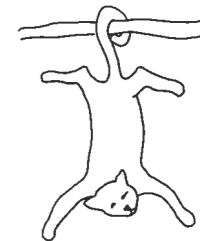
Hang in There  
Sketches: Beth Taylor



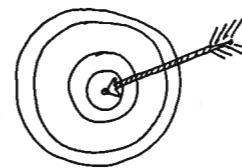
Flatten



Stretch



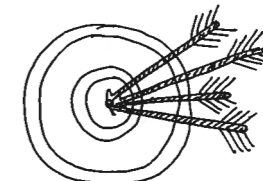
Invert



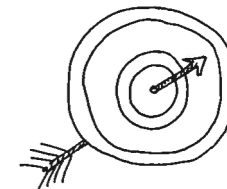
Hit the Bull's-eye  
Sketches: Chris McCampbell



Magnify



Multiply



Invert

## How to Activate an Idea

**01 Start with a basic concept.** Maybe it's an obvious idea, such as using a target to represent performance or a struggling kitten to show courage. Like many clichés, these familiar images provide a common ground for communication.

**02 Apply a series of actions to the core image or idea.** Create quick sketches. In addition to the words illustrated above, try more unusual ones like melt, dissect, explode, shatter, or squeeze. Don't judge your sketches or spend too much time on one idea; move quickly through your list.

**03 Step back and look at what you did.** Have you given a new twist to an old cliché? Have you solved a familiar problem in a fresh way? Have you a new ending to an old story? (What if the kitten falls out of the tree? What if the grim reaper kicks his own bucket?) Find your best ideas and take them farther.

# Icon, Index, Symbol

Semiotics (also called semiology) is the study of how signs work. Semiotics was conceived at the turn of the twentieth century as an analytical tool for use by linguists, anthropologists, and cultural critics. It has fueled a variety of intellectual traditions, from pragmatist philosophy and structural anthropology to poststructuralist criticism in literature and art.

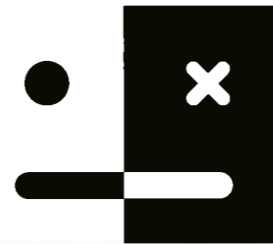
Designers can use semiotics to generate meaningful forms as well as to study existing signs and communications. For example, when creating a logo or a system of icons, designers can look at the basic categories of visual signs in order to generate ideas with various degrees of abstraction or familiarity.

The American philosopher Charles S. Peirce and his follower Charles Morris identified three basic types of sign: icon, index, and symbol. An icon (such as a drawing of a tree) bears a physical resemblance to the idea it represents. An index points to its referent or is a trace or direct impression of an object or event. A shadow of a tree or a fruit or seed that has fallen to the ground is an index of the tree. Indexical signs often signal a physical action or process. Smoke indicates fire; symptoms indicate disease; an arrow highlights a given direction. Finally, a symbol is abstract (such as the written word *tree*); its form bears no resemblance to its meaning.

Visual signs often embody attributes of more than one sign category. A bathroom sign showing a woman in a dress is an icon (depicting the human figure), but it is also an index (pointing to a toilet facility). *Supisa Wattanasansanee*

**One World Flags.** The three designs shown opposite were created for a competition sponsored by *Adbusters* magazine. The challenge was to create a flag representing "one world."

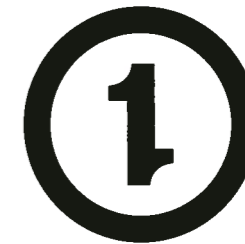
Charles S. Peirce founded semiotics in the late nineteenth century. See *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955). For a visual introduction to semiotics, see Sean Hall, *This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics* (London: Laurence King, 2007).



**One World Icon.** This solution approaches the problem pictorially, creating a divided face that represents the universal experiences of life and death. Although the face is a recognizable icon, the decision to represent death (and a closed eye) with an *x* is symbolic. Design: Justin Kropp.



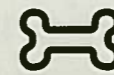
**One World Index.** In place of a static mark, this design suggests an open situation. A fill-in-the-blank form can be completed by any person in countless ways. The *x* marking a place to sign and the blank line are indexical signs that trigger an action. Design: Molly Hawthorne.



**One World Symbol.** Here, the numeral one enclosed inside a circle represents world unity through an abstract symbol and a geometric shape. The circle is not purely abstract, however—it has an iconic relationship to the Earth. Design: Aaron Walser.



**Icon.** A drawing of a dog's body or face resembles a dog.



**Index.** The bark of a dog or the tinkle of its collar indicate the creature's physical presence.



**“DOG”**

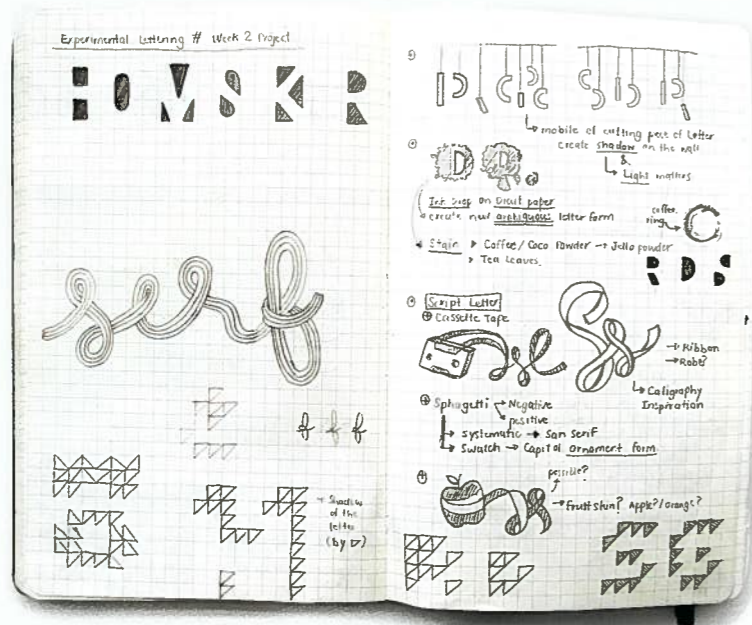
**Symbol.** The word *dog* is an abstraction that does not look or sound like a dog.

## Three Kinds of Sign

**01 Icon.** An icon uses shape, color, sound, texture, and other graphic elements to create a recognizable connection between image and idea. Although icons appear to be naturally linked to their referents, icons rely on cultural convention to varying degrees.

**02 Index.** An index points to its object rather than representing it abstractly or pictorially. Dog bones, dog dishes, and dog houses are familiar objects that can stand in place of the dog itself. Indexical signs often present designers with the most intriguing solutions.

**03 Symbol.** A symbol is abstract. The most common symbols we use are words. The alphabet is another set of symbols, designed to represent the sounds of language. The letters *d*, *o*, and *g* have an arbitrary relationship to the sounds they depict.



Sketches: Supisa Wattanasanee



**A Month of Type.** Making a new typographic work each day for a month is a workout for the eye and mind. Design: Christopher Clark.

# Visual Diary

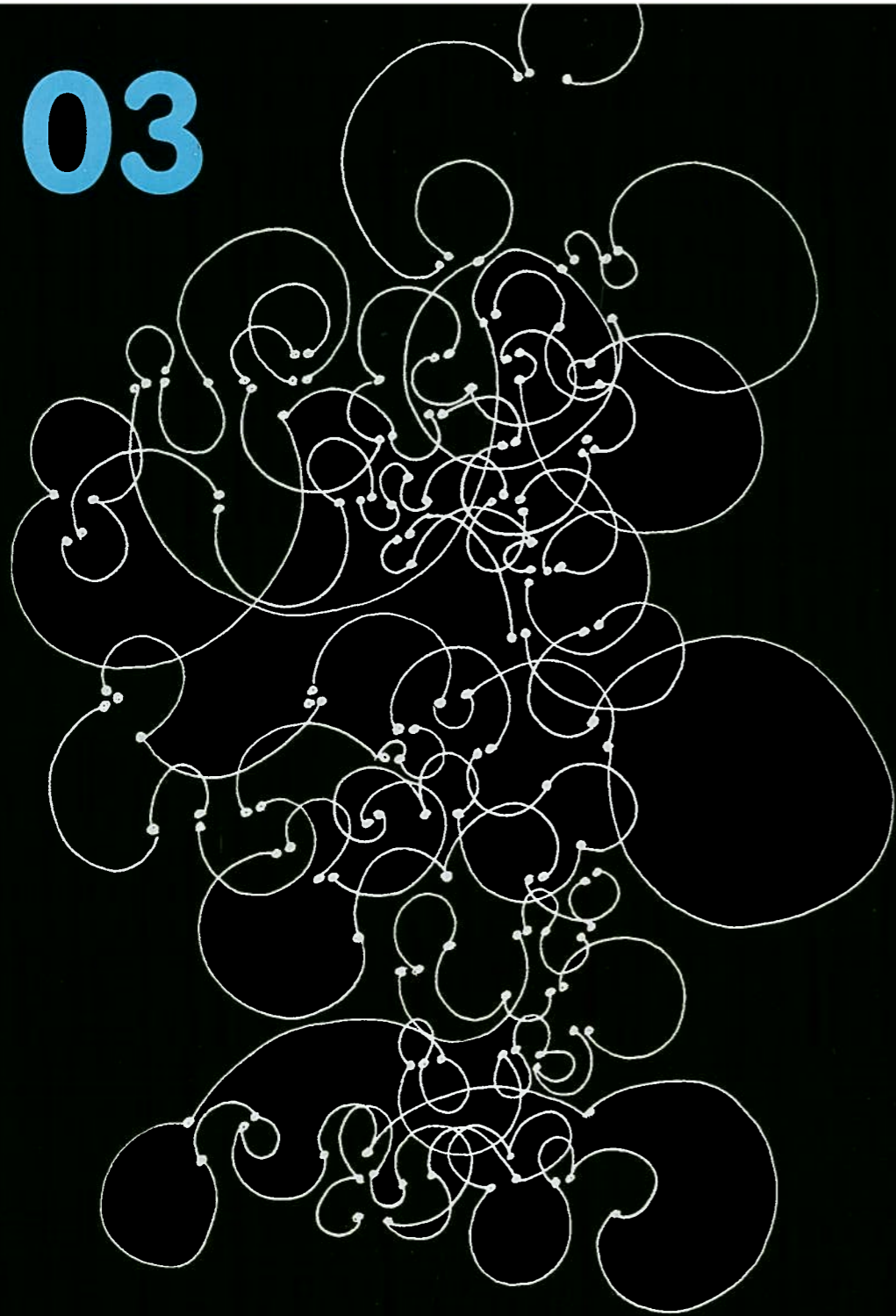
There's only one salvation from the grind of a never-ending project: break your routine and make something pretty. Designing something new every day can be as healthy for the creative mind as eating fruits and vegetables is for the body. Drawn-out projects stuffed with endless phases, revisions, and brainstorming sessions can rapidly degrade into over-cooked solutions and aimless theory. Sometimes, a big spoonful of sweet, unrefined creation can be the perfect remedy for opening up a stubborn mental block. By making beautiful things on a daily basis, you can build a library of small and simple ideas that can blossom into ambitious projects later. Making something gorgeous can be painless and fulfilling. Hydrate your mind with small pleasures reminiscent of the doodles and sketchbook pages that first got you excited about graphic design. *Christopher Clark*

Do it every day.

## How to Start a Visual Diary

- 01 Define parameters.** How regular are the entries? Will you work in a journal or post online? Will there be a theme to your diary or will it roam untamed? Ask yourself questions. Experiment with new media and shelved ideas.
- 02 Stick to the rules.** Big projects tend to dominate your schedule. Free yourself by dedicating a little time each day to making something. Fifteen minutes of unguided creativity could solve a month's worth of overthinking.
- 03 Work in a series.** If a certain medium or method excites you, try it again the next day and the next. Make each entry a thoughtful follow-up to the last. That's how little things grow into bigger projects.
- 04 Share your work.** Create a blog or Flickr account. Sign up for an exhibition at a coffee shop. Get friends and coworkers to join in on the noodling. Be inspired by the weight of an audience's gaze. (Of course, you don't have to show everything you make.)
- 05 Keep going.** The more stuff you make, the more valuable the endeavor becomes. Build up a graphic arsenal. When the really tough problems declare war on your sanity, you will be prepared to defend yourself.
- 06 Harvest the good stuff.** Glance through your journal when it's time to tackle bigger projects. You may have already found a useful solution or a viable idea.

# 03



“Learn to detect glimmers of hope among the debris of failure.”

Martin Venezky

## How to Create Form

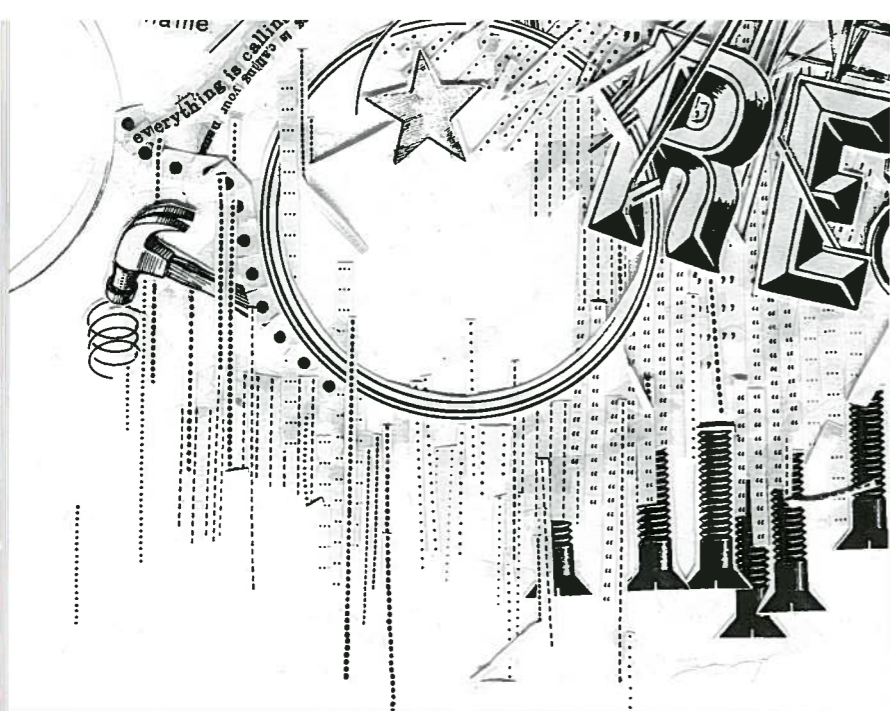
After a period of open-ended research and free thinking, designers hone in on one or more concepts to develop more fully. A wealth of ideas is a great thing, but only a few concepts will make it across the finish line. After selecting the most promising ideas, designers express them visually. As an idea becomes tangible, it comes to life. How does it work? How does it communicate? What does it mean? The answers often send designers back to the initial phases of ideation.

While research and concept development clarify the direction, goals, and underlying ideas that will drive a possible solution, executing the idea remains a crucial task. For many designers, this is the most exciting part of the work and the true test of their abilities. Although some firms focus on defining problems and strategies, leaving implementation to others, most designers are fascinated with how concepts come forward in physical objects, visible images, or usable systems. The most exciting work lies in making it real.

Indeed, some designers see making form as the essence of what they do. Visual invention need not happen at the end of a project. Molding ideas with shapes, colors, surfaces, and materials can precede the conceptual phases that are the traditional foundation of the design process. Concepts can be discovered from the vibrant detritus of open-ended form making.

Preliminary research and analysis comes to naught when concepts are executed in a dull or clumsy fashion. Two designers will interpret a single creative concept in distinctly different ways. Just as deliberate thinking techniques can guide the planning and inception of a project, so too can they inform the processes of visual invention. Conscious methods such as brainstorming and mind mapping can free the mind to discover and invent; likewise, strategies for thinking and making can provide inspiring tools or an open frame of mind that will help designers bring pleasure, delight, and illumination to their work.





**Tulane School of Architecture.** The designer created a collage out of layers of paper (left). He photographed the effects of glare (opposite) to enrich the surface of the final poster (far right). Design: Martin Venezky.



# Physical Thinking

Designer Martin Venezky creates graphic form by experimenting with the physical properties of materials. This process helps him step away from the computer and produce imagery and typography imbued with depth, imperfection, and accidental qualities. How does a piece of paper wrap around an object? What happens when a length of string falls to the ground? Slowing down the design process and observing physical forms can help designers learn from the nuances of space, light, and texture. Venezky uses this method to make fresh connections between form and content.

During the initial phases of his work, he experiments with physical materials, taking his time to develop concepts through process, rather than letting the concept drive the process. He allows surfaces and structures to speak to the content on their own. By letting the material work for him, he slowly builds the character of each project. *Chris McCampbell*

*Martin Venezky documents his creative process in his book [It Is Beautiful...and Then Gone](#) (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007).*

## How to Think Physically

**01 Draw.** Starting with some kind of source material (a photograph, a piece of text), explore lines, shapes, and their relationships with each other. Pick out what catches your eye, and make new connections. Don't worry about color yet. Don't try to make clever connections to content. It's okay to be abstract. Be critical of what is working visually and what is not. Experiment in several directions; if something is not working, try something else.

**02 Build.** Experiment by transforming your drawing into a 3-D object by working with paper, cardboard, foil, mesh, or

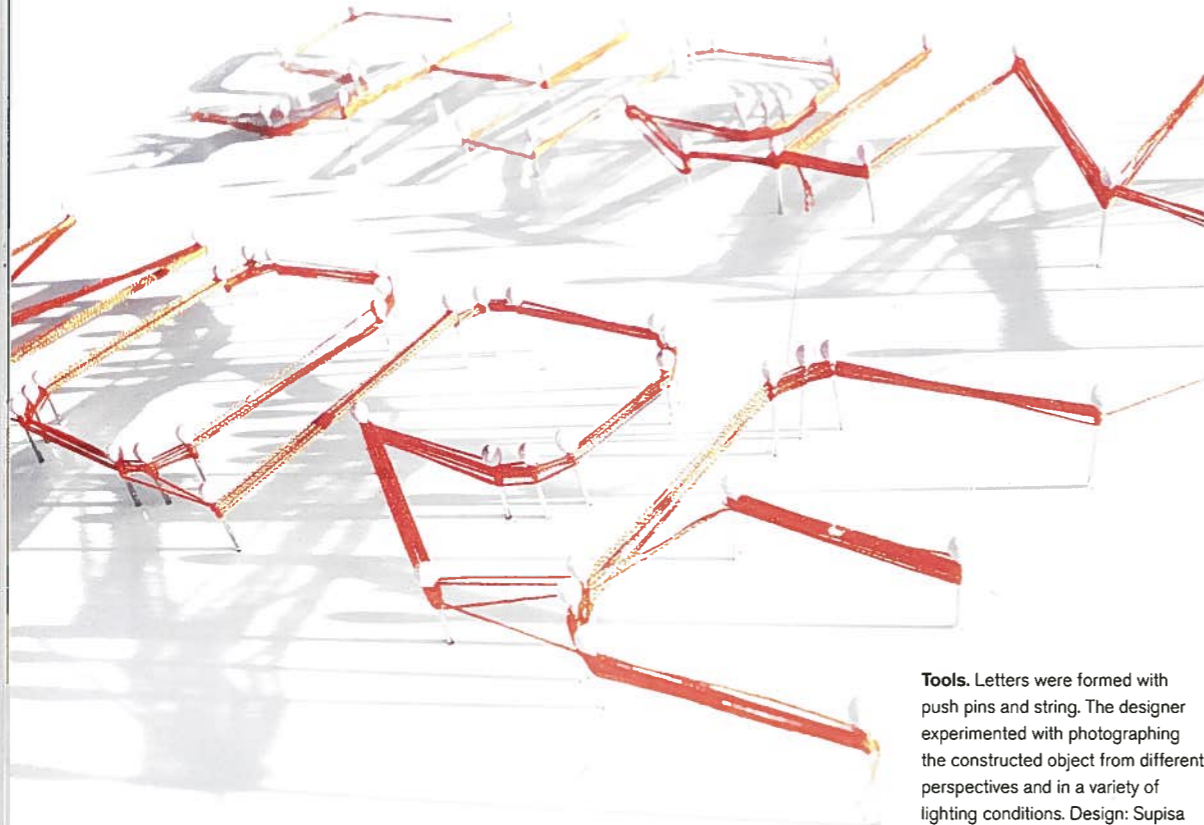
other available materials. Look for materials and objects around you—in the next room or across the street. Ignore nothing, as anything can become inspiration. Study the form of your inspiration, and try to see how it can relate to your drawing. Place pieces together to create interesting patterns, textures, or shapes. Allow things to fall or rearrange themselves. Be accepting of collisions and haphazard groupings.

**03 Photograph.** Explore your creation through the lens of a camera. What can each element say individually? What does the piece

say from different angles? Study light and shadow, and observe what changes. When you come in close, the scale of the material can change and become more abstract and universal.

**04 Conceptualize.** Begin to bring content and meaning into your studies. How can the form now communicate meaning? Add pieces that may help to translate this. Start playing with color as well.

**05 Refine.** Bring your elements together into a whole. Think of where you can place and blend elements together.



**Tools.** Letters were formed with push pins and string. The designer experimented with photographing the constructed object from different perspectives and in a variety of lighting conditions. Design: Supisa Wattanasansanee.

# Unconventional Tools

Designers often put their ideas to paper in ways that feel comfortable and familiar—usually with pen, pencil, or computer. Standard tools often produce standard results. The most efficient mode of producing ideas may not yield inspiring approaches. Using different tools—by changing the way we physically render our concepts—can end up loosening the constraints set by our own habits and expectations. The complex personalities of tools can push ideas beyond the ordinary. Brittle materials, like tape and wire, will resist your hand and add their own voice to a drawing. A peeled potato is a harmony of organic and geometric form. Deflated balloons have a beautiful sadness. Like physics or chemistry, good design can synthesize perfect ideas with the imperfect world they live in. *Christopher Clark*

Draw it like you're messed up.

# How to Use Unconventional Tools

**01 Decide what forms you want to create.** A logo might call for a circle or square. A layout might need typography that is rough and naive. Perhaps a poster requires something that looks vaguely like a keyboard or the head of Marilyn Monroe. Keep your concept phase simple. The wonder of materials is their ability to pick up our mental slack.

**02 Put down your pencil and step away from the computer.** (Unless you plan to operate the mouse with your foot.)

**03 Find some marking tools.** Try a stick from the backyard and some India ink or a hammer dipped in paint. Think of these components abstractly. For example, your marking tool might be a grid of pins fixed with red thread. After you've done it once, do it again. Put yourself at the mercy of your tools.

**04 Choose wisely.** Once you've tried different materials, choose drawings that balance form and function, beauty and clarity.

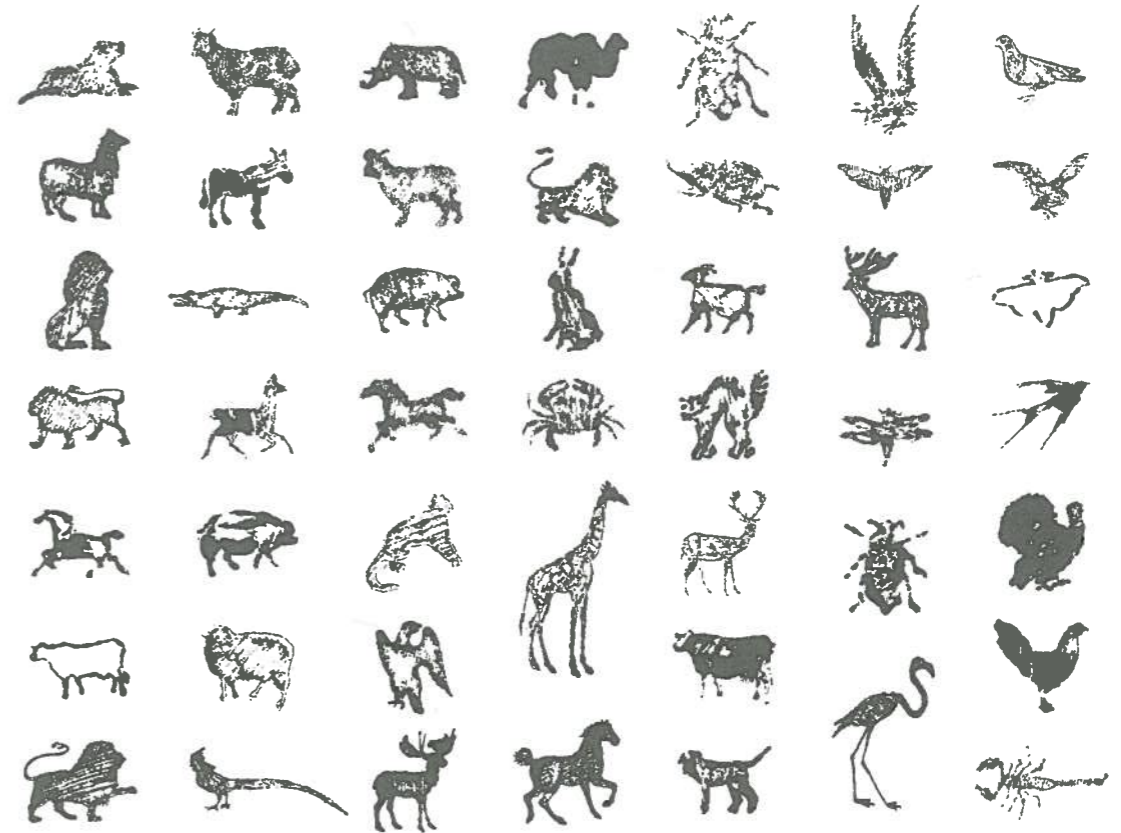
**05 Make it graphic.** Use your drawings to make marks suitable for communication. Translate your work into a medium that can be reproduced. You might create a vector path based on a line drawn with a shovel, or photograph pebbles arranged on a page.



# Case Study

## Tracing with Toilet Paper

This project was part of a course taught by Pongtorn Hiranpruek at the Alliance Française in Bangkok. The course is open to the public, so many students are new to the visual arts. They lack drawing skills and are unfamiliar with software. This tracing and drawing technique helped nondesigners generate visual images and learn how to use digital tools. First, they traced images onto toilet paper, leaving space between the drawings. Then they used markers to add color to their pencil outlines, allowing the ink to bleed through onto a piece of paper placed beneath the tissue. They scanned these blotted color images and digitally traced them with Illustrator to make vector graphics. The icons were screen-printed onto shirts.





# Regurgitation

Design doesn't always happen at your computer. If you have been sitting in your chair for too long, it's time to get up and make a mess. If your work is starting to resemble three-week-old cottage cheese, try this technique for expelling that sour smell. Regurgitation is a process for turning moldy iconographies into something fresh. Use it to restore vital materiality to familiar visual languages. Make many iterations, and make a mess. From the mass and the mess, you can come away with fresh ways of looking at commonplace artifacts. Begin the process with open-ended exploration, and end it with ruthless editing. Images produced this way can become fodder for logos, identities, illustrations, or the pure visual substance of T-shirts or posters. Learn the how behind constructing meaning as you shift connotations and excavate personality from experimentation. Regurgitate: out with the new. *Elizabeth Anne Herrmann*

Does your work resemble three-week-old cottage cheese?



**Crushed Coke Can.** The regurgitation process extracts unanticipated forms from discarded objects. Design: Elizabeth Anne Herrmann.

## How to Regurgitate

- 01 Take a walk.** Bring along a plastic bag, camera, and sketchbook. Collect weathered ephemeral matter you find discarded on the streets, especially printed materials. Choose an artifact that has text on it, such as a broken bike wheel, a handwritten narrative, a parking ticket, a sign, an aerosol can, or scraps of cardboard.
- 02 Study it.** What is it? What is it made of? What is it capable of doing? Of becoming? Explore its materiality and function.
- 03 Restrict yourself.** Using just this one artifact, reconsider and recompose. Do what you know how to do, what you don't

know how to do, and what needs to be done. Break down the object physically. Demonstrate its essence: If it has none, give it some. If it has too much, take some away. Mess around with the parts. For example, if you drive a monster truck and it has an interesting tread pattern, you could use that texture to change the surface of a Coke can. Shapes transform and letterforms torque, creating new and unexpected imagery.

**04 Document.** Using a digital camera and/or pen and paper, document the recomposed artifact. Consider environment, lighting, depth of field, and how the object is

displayed. Your means of translation could mean anything from putting the artifact on a pedestal to shooting it against a green screen.

**05 Splice and dice.** Photocopy the drawings/photographs and your notes. Bump up the contrast, manipulate the images as the light moves across the glass, photocopy them onto previously photocopied papers, and more. Cut out parts from one print and collage them with others. Play with paper and ink. Get out a pair of scissors and a glue stick. Make at least fifty renditions. Don't count. But have fun.



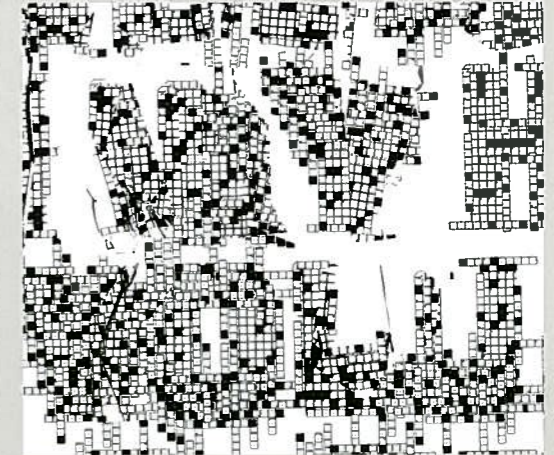
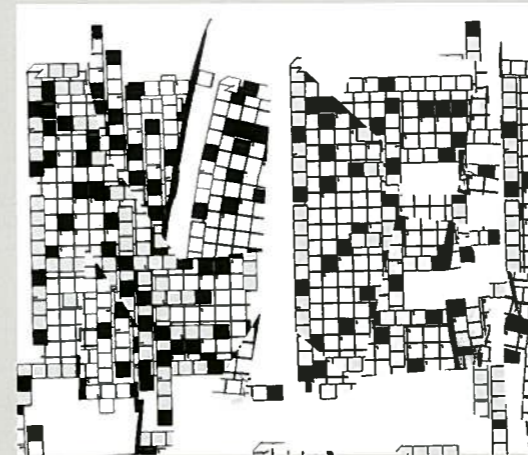
Reconstructed Needlework.  
Design: Christopher Clark.

# Reconstruction

Finding inspiration is easy. Translating it into your own language is a challenge. Collecting intriguing artifacts takes time and a sharp eye, but only hard work and careful thought can harness their expressive powers. Visual language has its own logic. Things look the way they do because of thought processes buried within them. A crossword puzzle does not look like a crossword puzzle unless the placement of black squares favors the right and bottom sides. This is because word lengths are limited from the right hand side and never the left. The texture of a nineteenth-century needlework drawing is limited by the number of stitches available and the fabrics on hand. Learn to study visual languages and implement them for new purposes in new media. The task is to dissect it, see its logic, and reconstruct it. *Christopher Clark*

Images have a language that can be learned and spoken like any other.

**Crossword Logic.** Creating crossword-puzzle typography is harder than one might expect. An even dispersion of black and white squares reads only as a checkerboard, not a crossword. The visual language of a crossword puzzle conforms to the length and direction of words in a given language. The numbering system also plays a subtle yet critical role in the unmistakable patterning of this graphic genre. Design: Christopher Clark.



## How to Reconstruct

- 01 Collect source material.** Choose your inspiration actively: Renaissance paintings, sixteenth-century clocks, or the poetry of Walt Whitman. Find what moves you.
- 02 Analyze and replicate your sources.** If you want to know how a clock works, take it apart. The same thing applies to style. Understanding why something looks a certain way comes from unpacking it and playing with its elements.
- 03 Observe.** As you analyze your sources, you will begin to notice how their means of construction make them look the way they do. Take note of the details and study their origins.
- 04 Compile a dictionary of elements.** If you were learning German or Chinese, you would study a word list. Likewise, designers can learn by building collections of shapes and marks. Use your list as a graphic vocabulary sheet.
- 05 Make your own images.** Now that you understand a grammar and vocabulary, start constructing new sentences on your own. Draw lines and shapes based on those in your source material, but communicate your own vision and ideas. As you gain fluency in your new language, the potential becomes endless.

Elizabeth Anne Herrmann asked over a dozen designers to describe their work process.

## How Designers Think

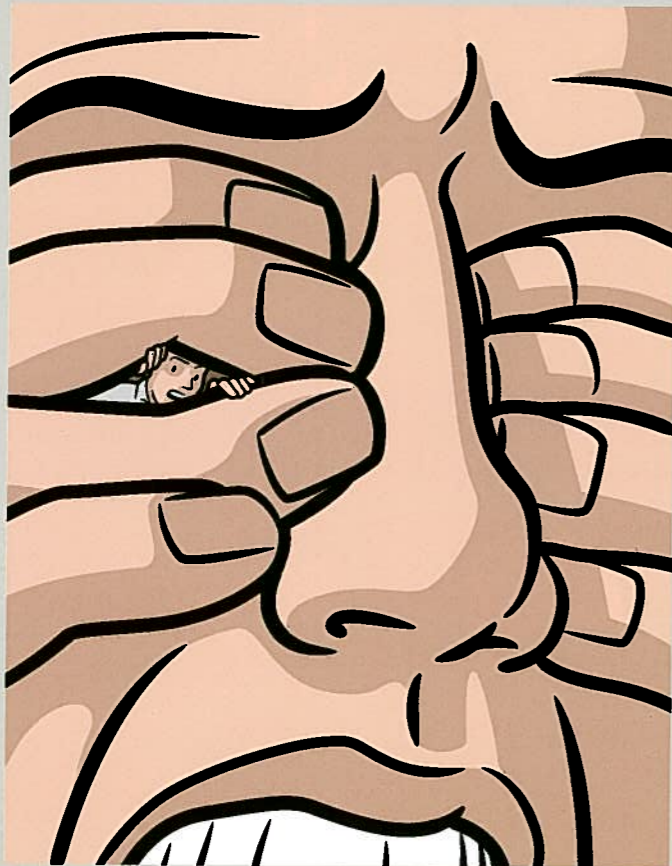


Illustration: Christoph Niemann

So you have a design project. You look at it. It looks back at you. With the time you two spend together, a relationship forms. And sometimes it's hard to get started at all. Here, designers share tips and techniques for getting in the mood to get ideas.

## How Do You Get in the Mood?

### Christoph Niemann

An intriguing idea looks effortless. Unfortunately, I have discovered that the quality of a concept is more or less proportional to the effort and agony that goes into it. Hence the question, how do I get in the mood to have ideas? is terribly close to the question, how do I get in the mood to do push-ups?

I can't have any music or any distraction. It doesn't help to look at any reference material or find inspiration in books and magazines. I just sit at my table and stare at a piece of paper. Some ideas come easier than others, but I am a bit disappointed that even after years of working, this process hasn't become any more jolly.

The one thing that makes doing push-ups more agonizing than thinking of ideas is that with the latter I can at least drink coffee.

### Abbott Miller

I get ideas by talking about a project. When you can talk with someone else, you can build on each other's observations and arrive somewhere that neither person anticipated.

### Bruce Willen

I don't think there's such a thing as a technique for getting ideas, so I'll just talk about a key principle: collaboration. This is one of the most important elements of the creative process. Working with another person can bring outside perspectives and diverse ideas and opinions that aren't possible working on one's own. Even just having a friendly ear as a sounding board can help distill one's thoughts and make it easier to separate the wheat from the chaff.

### Carin Goldberg

I usually work on insanely short deadlines, so there is no time to get into any kind of mood other than a bad one. Usually, I panic and go into idea overdrive. I sketch like crazy until something clicks, and then I work like a maniac until I design something I'm happy with. I keep a sketchbook next to my bed and often wake up in the middle of the night to frantically capture an idea. I like to keep the TV on while working. The din of inane banter keeps me calm and focused.



Design: Mike Perry

### Mike Perry

I just vomit out work. It comes naturally and in abundant amounts.

### Kimberly Elam

True creativity is unpredictable. Snippets of ideas come at odd hours in mysterious ways. These ideas are fleeting, so I always try to have something to write with so I can jot down notions, quick thoughts, or a satisfying combination of words. It's impossible to tell when suddenly something interesting will appear that begs for more investigation.

Don't underestimate the mind/body connection. Things such as refreshing sleep and strenuous exercise provide a relief from more cerebral pursuits. Getting away from the stress of creativity-on-demand helps reset the cycle. If creativity was easy, everyone would be doing it.

### Paula Scher

Ideas come in all kinds of ways and at different times. I get them waking up in the morning, or in a taxi, or in the midst of a conversation, or at a museum. I seem to get my best ideas when I am not trying to have an idea but am involved in something else. If I am blocked and unable to come up with an idea, the best thing I can do is distract myself. Going to the movies works.

### Maira Kalman

I don't have design ideas. I have deadlines. And a deadline usually gets me in the mood for illustration and writing. But I spend a lot of time wandering around, traveling, and looking at everything: people, architecture, art. I read books and listen to music. Thoughts and interests are bouncing around all the time. To really get in the mood, I take a walk. That usually provides plenty of inspiration.



Design: Philippe Apeloig

### Philippe Apeloig

The inspiration for ideas, posters, and typographic compositions comes from many different aspects of my personal life. I live in the center of Paris in a very busy district, and I am constantly surrounded by noise from the streets and people. Even the dirt and grime add elements and layers.

For me, every project is different. I combine elements from contemporary dance, architecture, literature, and photography. I also spend a lot of time in museum exhibitions looking at different art forms. When beginning to create something new, at first I spend much of my time looking at interesting new typefaces and shapes. Doodling and drawing are all a part of my process. Drawing comes directly from myself and later informs what I do on the computer.

When I begin a poster, I lay out construction lines that will serve as support for the text. Most of the time,

I start from a text, from typography, and I continue with images. I use the editing techniques from film editing: I carve my ideas into pieces and then reassemble them in a different order. I manipulate them until the composition is right and strong enough to fix itself in the visual memory of the public.

The development of ideas is a very complex labyrinth. In addition to the pertinence of the concept, I take into consideration the structure of the page. In the next step, I break up the rigidity of my composition. I like it when a poster gives the illusion of movement. There must be an impression of spontaneity, even if the result is really a product that has been precisely and minutely detailed. I also dislike working with known quantities, those that are already ossified. This explains my constant hesitation, my temptation to do and redo things.

Dear,  
This letter is to say that it is over between you and me. I'm so sorry I have to tell you this now. But don't take it personal. I hope we will stay friends.  
For some time I have believed, like you, that we would stay together forever. This is over now. Some things you shouldn't try to push, but just leave as they are...  
As I find writing this letter very & painful I won't make it too long. I don't have so much time either, because tonight (Friday 25 February 2000) I'm going to the preview of a new show by Mattijs van den Bosch, Ronald Cornelissen, Gerrit-Jan Fukkink, Connie Groenewegen, Yvonne van der Griendt, Hine Kramer, Marc Nagtzaam, Désirée Palmén, Wouter van Riessen, Ben Schot and Thom Vink, 8 pm. I think it is at 1e Pijnackerstraat 100. I forgot the exact address, but I'll see.  
Mattijs, Ronald, Gerrit-Jan, Connie, Yvonne, Hine, Marc, Désirée, Wouter, Ben and Thom are all great friends of mine. We will probably go out afterwards. But this doesn't mean that I don't care about you. I have to go. I'm already late.

ROOM invite 210x297 mm  
recycled letter

1e Pijnackerstraat 100  
NL 3035 GV Rotterdam  
T/F 010 2651859  
T/F 010 4773880  
E roombase@luna.nl

goodbye

Friday / Saturday / Sunday  
1 - 5 PM

ROOM organized by  
roos campman / eric campman /  
karin de jong / ewoud van rijm  
ROOM organized by Jerry van druten  
ROOM thanks to PWS Woningstichting

Design: Maureen Mooren and Daniel van der Velden

Perhaps you lie on your back and stare at the ceiling imagining the dots and cracks coming together to make a shaggy dog licking a dead rat. Or maybe you take a trip to a distant land and observe native peoples grind ruffage for a medicinal tourniquet. Inventing form is unique to everyone. Whether it's drawing, shooting, cutting, pasting, or smearing around some chicken blood, we each give it our own spin.

## How Do You Create Form?

### Daniel van der Velden

I'll talk about form by describing a specific project I did: an invitation for ROOM, an underground gallery started and run by friends. In exchange for creative freedom (unlimited but committed), I did these invites for them for a few years. I am still very happy about the series, which was conceived as a set of half-fictional letters containing real information.

The idea for the invitations originated with me sifting through some hilarious—with hindsight—letters I'd written or received around the age of seventeen. Handwritten letters from girls sometimes had these big dots on the *i*'s and *j*'s. I thought it would be an interesting idea to write a typical adolescent letter in the style of a Dear John correspondence, which is the ultimate rejection letter, and then make that the invite. I wrote the text on a computer and a friend of mine, Vanessa van Dam—herself a graphic designer—did the handwriting, adding big circles as dots on the *i*'s and *j*'s. The idea was that any recipient of the letter would basically feel like a seventeen-year-old receiving a handwritten letter of rejection, while the

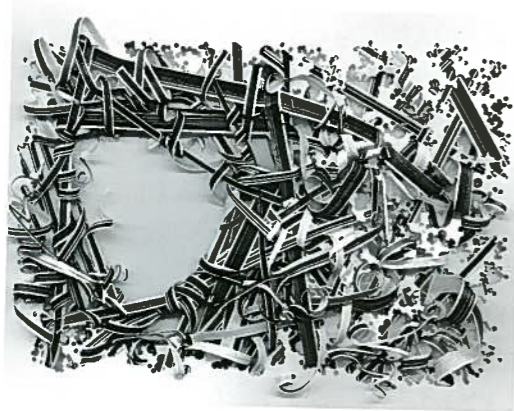
hypothetical girl-sender who'd written it would have this enormous number of friends, the artists exhibiting their work.

The idea about form is that the handwriting should convey a mood, one that Vanessa caught brilliantly! Even in an age of deteriorating handwriting and Facebook, the written letter still evokes some of that mystery of a desirable someone who is losing interest, pulling back while pretending to still care. I'm not saying that was what I experienced at the time, but that was the overall mood—an omnipresent yes and no.

### Art Chantry

Geez, after six-plus years of higher education and thirty-five-plus years in the field, I have yet to figure out what the word *form* means. It's one of those words that is in common use in academic circles that I think really doesn't mean anything. It's sort of a word that gets tossed around to sound important and intellectual but is totally vapid. Form is an abstract concept with no basis in reality.





Design: Martin Venezky



Design: Jonathan Barnbrook



Monoprints: Jessica Helfand

## Martin Venezky

I teach a class, Form Studio, at California College of the Arts, which is the first studio class that all our grad students take. A decent description of the class can be found in my book *It Is Beautiful...Then Gone*.

The principles I developed for the class are the same ones I use in my own practice.

I like to begin with materials and engage their properties. I have a storeroom of materials, tools, and drawing implements on hand to play with. As the results develop, I try to invent properties for the elements. The trick is to try and make the work feel like it designed itself out of its own inner logic rather than having a form imposed on it by a designer. Like plants that are growing in a garden rather than flowers that are arranged in a vase.

## Louise Sandhaus

How do I invent form? Hmmm. I noodle around, mostly! I belong to the form-allows-function school of thought, so first I identify the problem the design is solving, and then I work toward making something that looks as wonderful and engaging as it is meaningful. I start with images of things that already

delight me, and then I use these images as a starting place. I just play and play with my own approach and often with collaborators to get something that works. Working with collaborators forces me to articulate what I'm thinking. Conversation and noodling. Those are my secrets.

## Jonathan Barnbrook

Form comes first from a new ideology or philosophy. It very rarely can appear by just working or visually experimenting. Form has to be absolutely about the meaning of the work—what I am trying to say and the most interesting way to say it. Visual novelty is almost a distasteful consequence.

In fact, I am very cynical as to the role of new form in graphic design. Yes, there is always the need to re-create and reinterpret the world anew for each generation: it's a basic human need. However, we also have to look at how this new form is immediately appropriated. Offered up as novelty in order to sell people exactly the same thing over and over again. Designers should be smarter, aware of how their creative need gets used, if only so that they can be more careful about how they let it be used.

## Jessica Helfand

I am answering this question while spending ten weeks in Rome in a studio with pencils and paper and wire and clay and oil paint and acrylic paint and a digital camera. I have no agenda—other than the fact that I am working in a new and unfamiliar way. Well, not entirely unfamiliar, as I have been painting for nearly a decade but not in circumstances such as these. I have stripped down everything contextual about visual form and have gone back to the beginning: the line.

How do you define a line? Where does it start? Where does it go? And if indeed it does go somewhere, when does it stop being a line and become something else? When does it represent flat space, and when and how does it go from a 2-D to 3-D representation of that space? What if it breaks or shifts or migrates or deviates into something else? And at what point do we perceive that line as something more than a mere abstraction?

The line remains for me the most elemental, fundamental component in making form. For one week, I made studies in color that loosely referenced the colors I had witnessed in India earlier this winter

(2010)—bold and vivid, unusual (read “clashworthy”) combinations that I painted methodically, illuminating the gaps between them by approaching the empty space with a paintbrush. Knowing that I have spent most of my adult life at Yale, a visitor came in one day and shrugged. “Guess you had to get Albers out of your system,” she said. Albers, I probably don't have to tell you, held absolutely no role in this exercise.

This brought up another point about making form: do we need to copy others, modeling ourselves on their example, in order to achieve recognition? While I delight in looking at things in books and in museums, I don't personally feel this is how one should approach time in the studio. Philip Guston wrote brilliantly about this syndrome—about all the “voices” in your head that you have to get rid of before you can do real work. I recall this quote from him: “What kind of work would you be doing if you thought no one was looking? Do that work.”

## Doyald Young

First off, I think it's impossible to clearly answer this question. You must first define form. Form may be defined as dependent on the artist's aesthetic.



Design: Keetra Dean Dixon and JK Keller

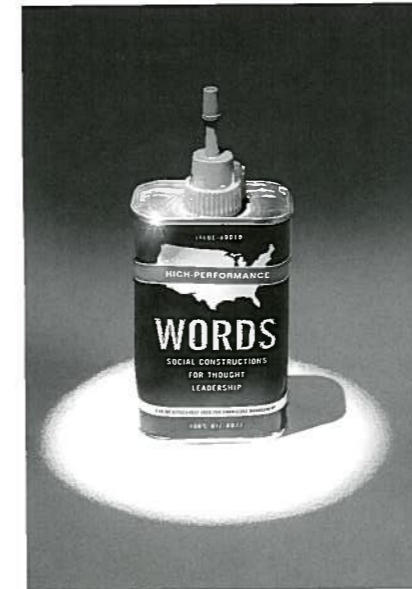
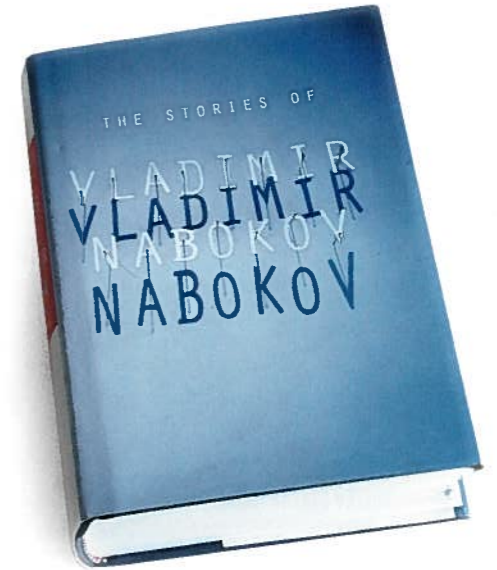
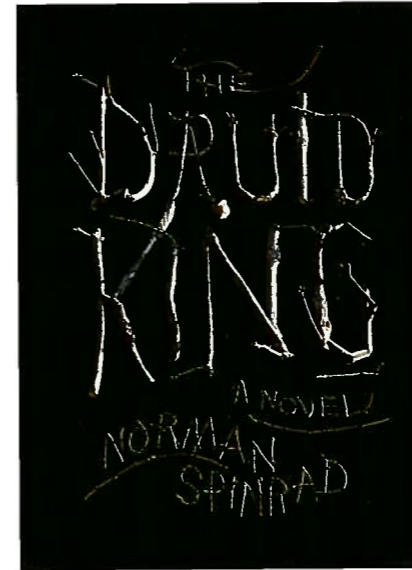
In the vernacular, if the artist can't draw well and has lousy taste, his form will be ugly. If you want to delve philosophically into the subject, read George Santayana's *The Sense of Beauty* (1896), which he later said was hogwash. Or ask yourself what makes you think one object is more beautiful than another. Or more ugly, depending on the desired effect. Why are John Singer Sargeant's portraits elegant, breathtakingly beautiful?

As for my abilities, all that I ever try to do is to draw a 2-D object as carefully as I can. The outcome is dependent on what I think is beautiful. There are many, many horrendously ugly fonts. What makes them ugly? So, I really haven't answered your question. Except I can say that every Marc Jacobs design is bone-deep ugly. And forget that it's camp.

### Keetra Dean Dixon

I routinely practice formal thinking-through-making exercises, or material explorations with no assigned outcome. This allows room to discover the unexpected. One example of this process, which I applied digitally with the help of my husband, JK Keller, is what I call digital tool breaking: using digital applications in ways they weren't meant to be used. We often partner Javascript with Illustrator to push existing effects and filters beyond what would occur via typical use.

My other favorite formal exploration method uses process. I often set up a system of rules to treat certain material and let that system play out over a period of time without intervening. Then I utilize/edit the outcome. I recently used this process to create a typographic sculpture. JK and I applied thin layers of wax to build 3-D letterforms, repeating the layering process dozens of times for a month.



Design: Stephen Doyle

### Stephen Doyle

I don't honestly know how to answer such an open-ended question, short of writing a book. But I would rather cut up other people's books than write my own. I start out by thinking about language. Not type, not letterforms, but words, because they are so very abstract—symbols for sounds that get strung together until they make one collective sound that represents a thing or idea. Then I try to think if there is a way that that word can enter into the real world, where all things cast shadows and have physical properties. I like to imbue these abstract things with properties that make them part of the world we see. But that's not how I make form, that's how I think about projects or create work for myself. When I think about form, I often just start by folding paper. And sometimes the paper has words on it.