

Rebellion

The recipe for conceptual brilliance is research, reason, and a dash of nonconformity.

Marxist revolutionaries argued that power belongs to those who own the “means of production.” A century ago the means of production were the massive factories of the smokestack age. Today they’re the computers humming on our desktops and the ideas crackling in our craniums, where, according to Alvin Toffler, “society will find the most important source of future wealth and power.”

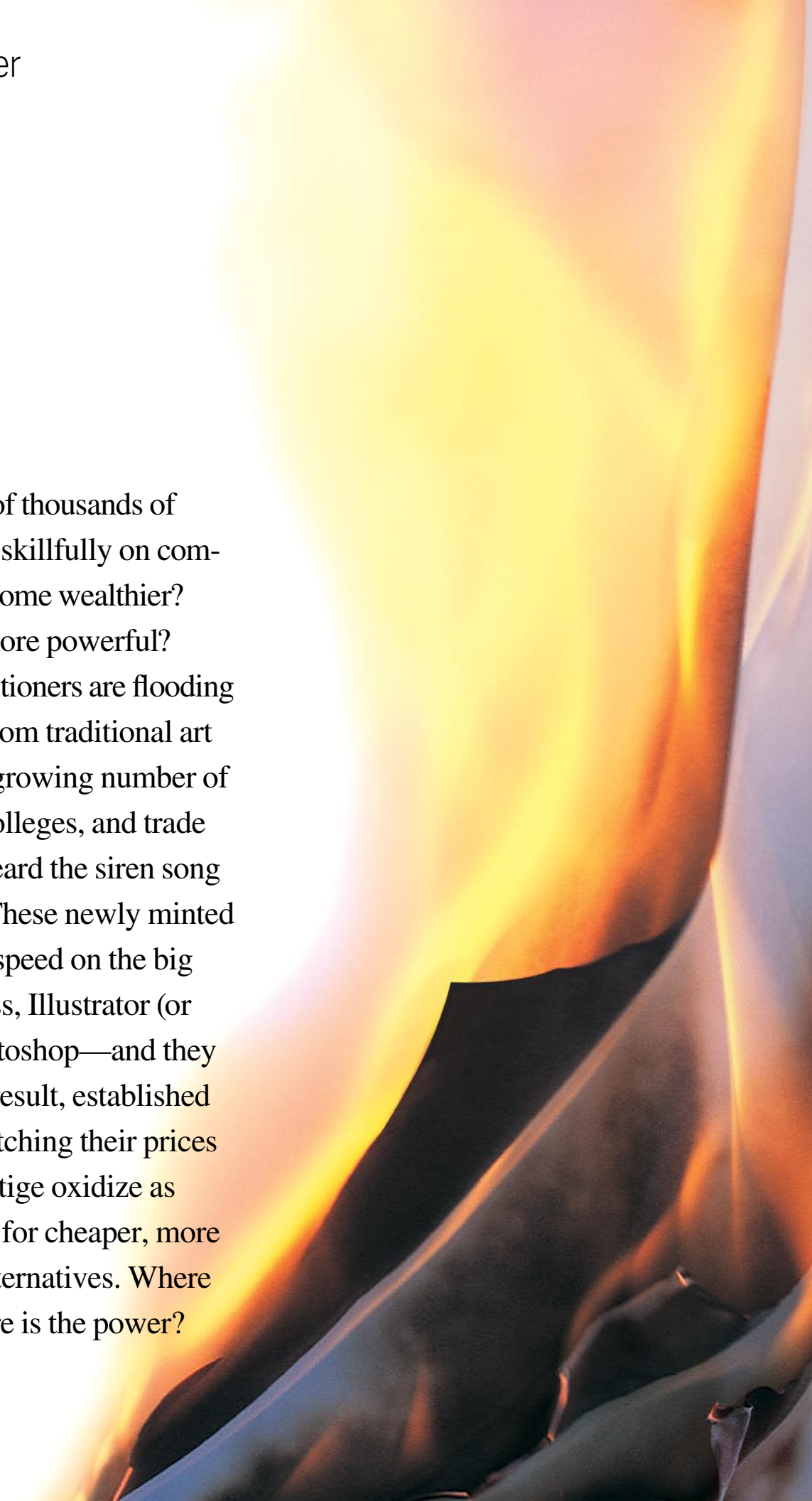
On its own the computer cannot make any of us wealthy or powerful. The graphic design industry has already

by Marty Neumeier

absorbed hundreds of thousands of people, all working skillfully on computers. Have we become wealthier? Have we become more powerful?

Now more practitioners are flooding the field, not only from traditional art schools but from a growing number of universities, state colleges, and trade schools that have heard the siren song of graphic design. These newly minted designers are up to speed on the big three—QuarkXpress, Illustrator (or Freehand), and Photoshop—and they do find work. As a result, established design firms are watching their prices erode and their prestige oxidize as clients shop around for cheaper, more malleable design alternatives. Where is the wealth? Where is the power?

It’s in concepts.



Increasingly, the haves and have-nots of graphic design are separating along conceptual lines. The designer who demonstrates an ability to think independently and strategically will attract the patronage of serious clients. The designer who follows the line of least resistance, or who indulges in purely artistic pursuits, will find that Toffler's predicted wealth and power are elusive indeed.

Forrest Richardson, of the Phoenix design firm Richardson or Richardson: "Twenty years ago, designers did their own production, but now that's changing. Today the designer who comes up with concepts is one type of designer, and the rest being churned out of school are really facilitators, production designers. They're detailers, not planners, and they work for a lower hourly rate. Soon we may see a division in the industry—design groups that just plan, and others that just implement.

"The beauty of a concept is that there's no limit to its value. It can happen in two minutes or two days. Sometimes we photograph and photograph and photograph, Quark and Quark and Quark, separate and separate and separate. This all takes time, and there's a limit to what clients will pay for these production-oriented tasks. With conceptual work, you can get your idea in two minutes and charge for two days. And it'll be worth every penny, because it'll be stronger than a design based only on looks."

Adds spouse and partner Valerie Richardson: "The designer who doesn't merely make things pretty, who develops a strategy to help a client sell more, be better, have a better image, is the more conceptual designer, and therefore the more successful designer."

"Sometimes you can come up with an idea so big," says Forrest, "that it not only solves a design problem, but actually shapes the direction of the company. Opening your eyes to these strategic possibilities enables you to come up with stronger concepts."

Okay, but what *is* a strong concept?

A strong concept is an idea so bold and so clear that nothing can knock it off course. It not only hits the target, it obliterates it. Like an atomic bomb, it destroys everything around it, so even when it misses, it doesn't miss. Copperplate is not a concept. Neither is recycled paper. Nor layered images. Nor Kai's Power Tools. A design concept is the communicating engine that drives a message deep into the viewer's brain.

Not everyone develops a knack for creating strong concepts, but for those who do, the gates of success swing wide. "He is

the greatest artist who has embodied in the sum of his works," wrote art critic John Ruskin, "the greatest number of the greatest ideas."

The myth of creative genius.

There is a widely held belief that conceptual brilliance is the preserve of so-called creative geniuses: unkempt eccentrics like Albert Einstein, or socially challenged loners like Michelangelo. In the "genius view" of creativity, a flash of insight often strikes unexpectedly like a bolt from the blue. Perhaps the genius cries "Eureka!" at the moment of impact. Einstein compared the generation of an idea to a chicken laying an egg: "Kieks!—auf einmal ist es da." Cheep!—and all at once it's there.

The mathematician Poincaré, the composer Mozart, and the poet Coleridge all reported similar stories of creative epiphany. For Poincaré the solution to a problem came at the moment of stepping onto a bus. Mozart simply wrote down entire symphonies as they popped into his mind. Coleridge took an afternoon nap and "dreamed up" every line of his poem *Kubla Khan*. While these accounts may be true from the teller's viewpoint, cognitive scientists today would contend the creative product was the work of the unconscious mind, well-stocked by experience and preparation. In fact, Coleridge's dream came only after days of frustrated effort.

Although brilliant concepts may *seem* to come from leaps of insight, it's more likely that they result from a series of small steps. Most people—even geniuses—start from what they know and then modify that knowledge to meet

the specific problem at hand. Each tentative movement into the unknown is firmly anchored in past experience.

Studies have shown that people with high intelligence quotients don't necessarily have high "eureka quotients"; there is little correlation between IQ score and the ability to fashion simple solutions from complex problems. Creative thinking is not an extraordinary kind of thinking. It becomes extraordinary by virtue of what the thinker produces, not the way in which it was produced.

Yet there are certain traits, according to the psychologist J.P. Guilford, that allow some people to be more creative than others: a *sensitivity* to problems, or knowing which aspects of a problem are important; *fluency*, the ease with which one produces ideas; *originality*, the ability to produce unusual yet acceptable responses to problems; and *flexibility*, the suppleness of mind to approach problems from many different angles.

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Where do concepts come from?

A common question asked of successful designers, “Where do you get your ideas?,” often elicits a baffling answer. “I don’t,” says London designer Alan Fletcher, “they get me.” He believes all you can really do is prepare your mind to receive solutions: “Ideas, like cats, don’t always come when called.”

Psychologists, too, have found the question difficult. The first attempt at classifying the components of creative thought came in 1926. In *The Art of Thinking*, Graham Wallas proposed four stages of conceptual thinking. The first stage, *preparation*, involves a period of intense conscious work, usually without success. The problem solver takes a break, allowing for *incubation* to occur in the unconscious mind. Often this stage of much-needed rest (at least in the conscious mind) gives rise to sudden *illumination*—the feeling of “eureka” when the idea first reveals itself. A fourth and final stage, *verification*, is required not only to check the concept against the original criteria, but to work out the completed solution and tie up any loose ends.

Of these four stages, incubation is by far the most mysterious. Can the unconscious mind really claim credit for entire symphonies, mathematical equations, and epic poems?

Says Fletcher, “I find going to bed and pulling my imagination over my head often means waking up with a solution to a design problem. That state of limbo, the time between sleeping and waking, seems to allow ideas to somehow outflank the sentinels of common sense. That’s when they can float to the surface. I find ideas often show up in the shower, or while I’m contemplating marmalade and toast at breakfast.”

San Francisco designer Craig Frazier noticed his mind start to roll while driving back and forth to work. “One day in my first year in business I realized I could imagine design solutions. I could imagine an illustration. I could imagine the shape of a trademark. I could imagine a finished page. That’s when I discovered I could turn drive time into think time.”

Forrest and Valerie Richardson find the incubation stage can sometimes be compressed to seconds. It’s not uncommon for the two of them to be discussing a project when suddenly they’ll look at each other. “The very next sentence out of both our mouths will be the solution to the problem,” says Valerie.

“I’m the most focused when I’m meeting with the client,” says Forrest. “I start to develop impressions—I might even be day-

dreaming—and I latch onto first impressions that quickly grow into concepts. If I can’t get a concept right away, it usually comes from rehashing what the client said, or revisiting material I uncovered in my reading, or remembering something I noticed in the research.”

Milton Glaser finds the ideation process defies analysis and can’t be reduced to a system. “Life is sloppier than that,” he says. “Sometimes I solve a problem by trying to solve it, and other times by waiting for it to solve itself. Sometimes I write down what I know about it so I can develop a course of action, and other times I just do it without thinking. It’s different for everybody, depending on your temperament and abilities—and how responsive your mind is on any given day.”

If idea-making can’t be reduced to a system, perhaps it can be expressed in a formula. Like the workings of the internal combustion engine, the conceptual process can be seen as a series of controlled explosions that drive ideas forward. In a car engine, when fuel is mixed with fresh air and ignited by a spark, the wheels turn and the car accelerates. In the human mind, when a problem is mixed with a new perspective and exposed to intuition, the wheels turn and we arrive at a new concept. Problem + fresh perspective × intuition = concept.

An example of this formula in practice is the invention of the printing press. Gutenberg could not figure out how to press a large number of letter seals onto a single sheet of paper at the same time. One day at a wine festival (after sampling a glass or two), he began to look carefully at a wine press. Suddenly he realized that the wine press, with minor alterations, might be trans-

formed into a printing press. *Mein Gott!* The simple mixture of two ideas, the letter seal and the wine press, sparked by a little imagination, produced one of the greatest inventions of the Renaissance.

The magic of two.

The history of invention can be seen as a series of marriages of incompatible ideas, or at least ideas that previously had not been introduced. The matchmaker in most of these marriages is the unconscious mind. The Latin word for thinking, *cogitatio*, comes from *cum* and *agitare*, meaning “mix together.” Poincaré believed the unconscious is what combines the various thoughts, judges the potential of each combination, and informs the conscious of those that are valuable.

Psychologist Arthur Koestler proposed the term *bisociation* to describe this phenomenon. Bisociation, in Koestler’s view, can only

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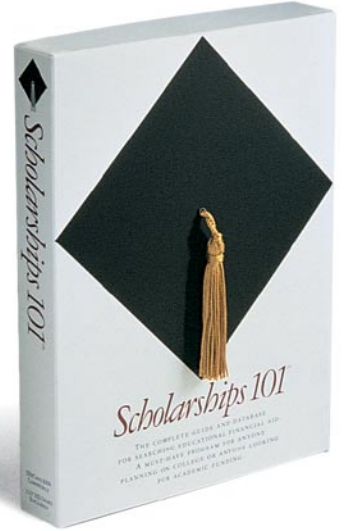
Besides running a successful firm in a city off the beaten path (Phoenix), Forrest and Valerie Richardson push the boundaries of design by adding copywriting, marketing, and product development to their mix.

This page, right: A software package breaks the two-dimensional plane to grab attention.

Below: A preschool trumpets its arrival with a three-step marketing plan: a die-cut shovel announcing the ground-breaking, a saw proclaiming the end of construction, and a key heralding the opening.

Opposite, left: Leaving no stone unturned, the Richardsons not only designed the logo for an event-planning service, but named the company as well—so the logo would work.

Opposite, right: Next time you ask where the good copy paper is, don't be surprised if you're handed Good Paper, a brand developed by the Richardsons for Four Corners.



happen after the thinker is thoroughly immersed in a problem. The problem needs to “ripen” before the unconscious can work its magic.

A cousin of bisociation is the deliberate, conscious mixing of unrelated ideas in search of a novel solution. Einstein called this exercise “combinatory play.” Graphic designers, rather than waiting for the fruits of the unconscious to slowly ripen, can use combinatory play to force the growth of new ideas.

Try this common creative exercise: write down as many words as possible that describe the product, service, or message you’re trying to communicate. Indulge your mind in free association. List colors, feelings, names, places, letters, animals, geometric shapes—anything that pops into your head. Now choose two words at random and mentally combine them.

For example, if you’re designing a trademark for Stateside Savings, you may write down words like United States, America, bald eagle, bank, vault, money, the letter *S*, and so on. By mentally combining the *S* with the bald eagle, you might suddenly notice how an *S* can be shaped into the wings of an eagle. When you test it on a sketchpad, you might see that the *S*, when repeated three times, not only creates the illusion of feathers, but stands for *state*, *side*, and *savings*. A concept! You’ve consciously combined two previously unrelated ideas, the *S* and the eagle, to make a surprising new idea. The same exercise can be done with pictures, or by combining pictures and words.

Alan Fletcher is a proponent of combinatory play, having exploited it successfully for many years with Pentagram and in his own work. His logotype for the Reuters news service, for example, combines the word “Reuters” with the punched patterns found on ticker tape.

“Statistics show that in London you’re never more than 70 feet from a rat,” he says. “I often feel the same about finding a solution to a problem. I don’t have the answer but I know it’s around here somewhere. Finding solutions means being alert to unlikely connections.”

Start with what you know.

A brilliant concept can announce itself at the oddest moment—while taking a shower, drifting off to sleep, starting your car—but only after your conscious mind has completed its homework. The more you know about the criteria a solution must meet and the more you’ve already struggled with the problem, the greater the chances your unconscious mind will cough up a winner.

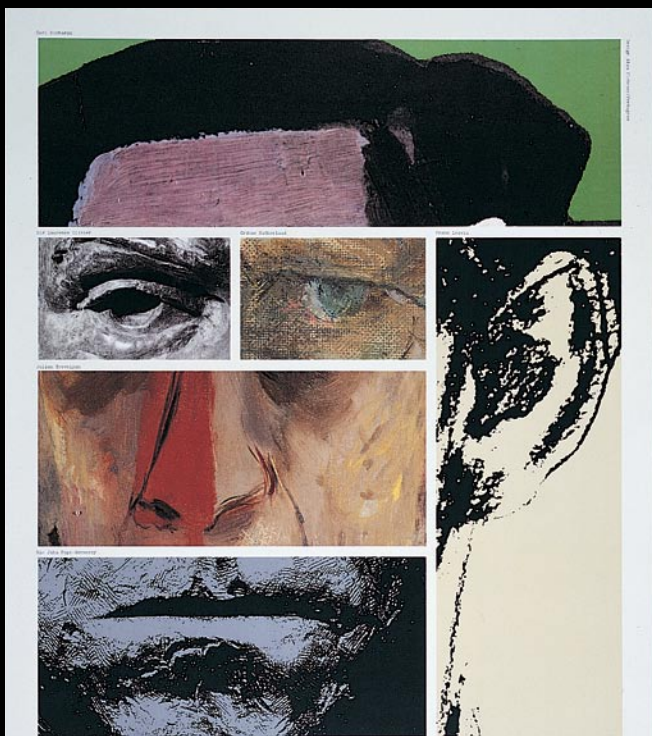
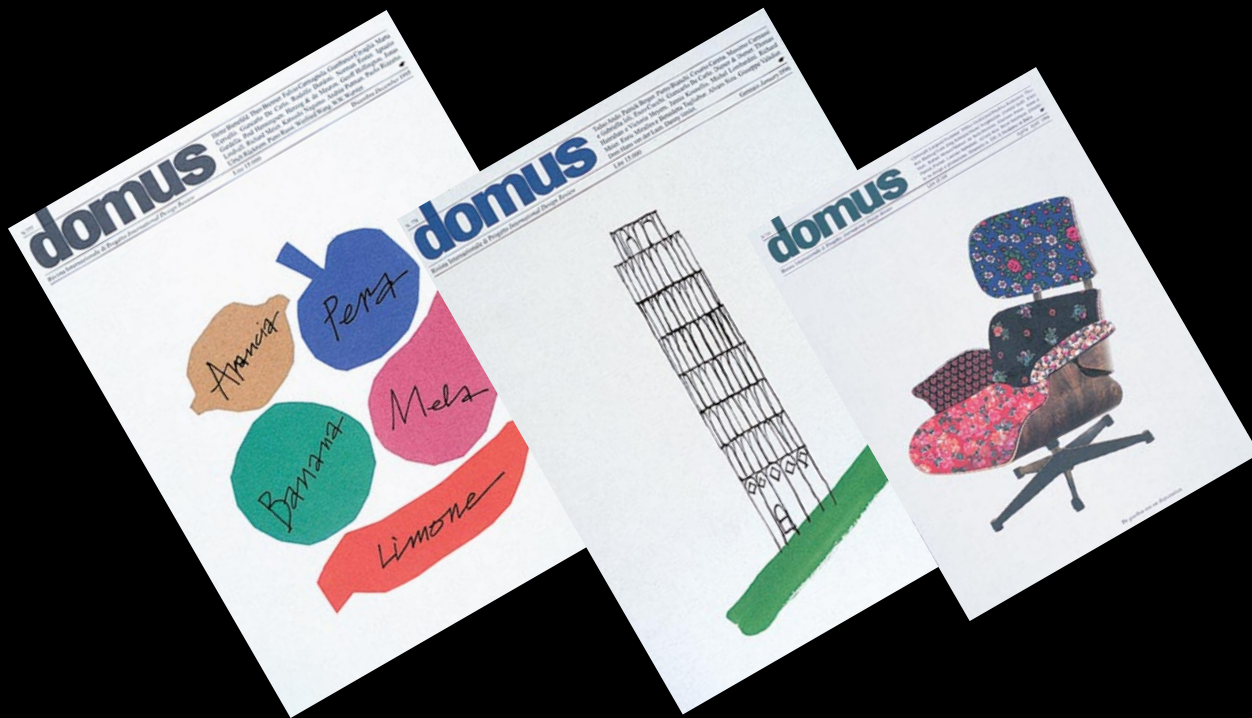
Says Craig Frazier: “I find trying to think about ideas doesn’t work. I have to think about criteria. What is it I’m trying to unlock? Who am I talking to? What are the preconceptions? Which points do I need to get across? How do I couch the message to make it more convincing? Oftentimes, in the course of laying out this huge matrix of criteria that constitutes the problem, the idea magically appears.”


Milton Glaser tells students to begin the conceptual process with two questions: “Who is it for, and what do you want to tell them? You can’t design anything without raising those two fundamental issues,” he says. “What young designers don’t always understand is that the nature of the audience determines the form. Instead of trying to be original, simply try to be clear. In the search for clarity, you may become original.

“All new ideas have to be expressed within the context of existing knowledge,” he says. “Suppose you invent something new. How can the audience understand it? What’s the possibility of introducing a concept that has no context? Of course, there’s a significant role

Details





Portraits of famous British Personalities from 1945 to the 1990's are on permanent exhibition at the 20th Century Galleries in the National Portrait Gallery. Free admission. Open 10 to 5pm weekdays, 10 to 6pm Saturdays and 2 to 6pm Sundays. Nearest  Leicester Square & Charing Cross

This page, top: Fletcher's series of covers for *Domus* takes familiar, even revered, images and tweaks them in a way that ensures a double take.

Left: This compilation of features from famous British portraits looks suspiciously like the visage of a well-known royal.

Londoner Alan Fletcher co-founded the international design firm Pentagram, which was among the first to combine business acumen with highly conceptual design. At once sly and accessible, his designs confound our expectations at every turn.

Right: Who says a logo has to be an abbreviation?

Below: While Fletcher pushes the rules of readability beyond the comfort zone of most Americans, his European audience will quickly recognize the world's favorite scooter in this jumble of wood block type.

Pavitts Products
Directors
R. Buckley
R. Nunez
F. Perry
M. Furniss
S. Vistosi

Purveyors
of quality fresh
fruit and vegetables
2 Michael Manly
Industrial Estate,
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VESPA CELEBRATES FIFTY YEARS 1946-1996

for the new under the heading of ‘experiments.’ But most design is not experimental. It’s pragmatic—it has to be effective. The luxury of introducing ideas that don’t demand to be understood, that don’t have to motivate people, is confined to a very small area of design activity. Most design is bound to purpose.”

When setting off on the trail of the wily concept, a good starting point is the obvious. Instead of trying to think deep thoughts, think dumb ones. Forget about the awards, the pressure to be brilliant, or building a great portfolio. Reach into your memory and pull out the most common, threadbare, hackneyed solution you can think of, and get a sketch down on paper. There. You’ve solved the problem. Your client will approve it and your audience will understand it. The sketch, as dumb as it is, will accomplish two smart goals: it’ll remove some pressure, and it’ll serve as a map. Now you’re ready to hunt bigger game.

Rebel against client preconceptions.

Original thinkers are rebels. You won’t find them burning flags or blowing up embassies—their rebellion is confined to that small country known as the brain, where conformity rules our normal decision-making processes. For the most part, graphic design is a product of conscious reason and research. Yet without a dash of rebellion, the conscious mind will tend to produce an altogether ordinary concept.

The first line of defense against a humdrum idea lies in questioning the client brief. Accepting an assignment at face value, although politically expedient, may seriously limit one’s chances of success. Forrest and Valerie Richardson believe the designer’s respect for the client’s expertise should be balanced with a degree of skepticism. Their conversation almost sounds like a ping-pong match between the two sides of a brain:

“Clients are always smarter about their business than we are,” says Valerie, “and sometimes the brief is exactly what we need.”

“On the other hand, I’m always looking for loopholes,” replies Forrest. “By nature I look for ways around things.”

“And I’m married to him,” she says.

“I don’t like to take the straight path from A to B,” he says. “I guess I’ve got a contrarian bent.”

“Bent is the correct word,” she says.

“So my first inclination is to look beyond the problem as presented. I don’t do it out of spite,” he says, “but because I’ve found success doing it.”

The Richardsons are quick to agree that they don’t always agree. But when they do concur on a design direction, they know they’ve got a nicely balanced idea, one that combines the practical and the

surprising in the right proportions. This cannot happen without the rigor of a questioning mind.

Rebel against conventional wisdom.

It’s been said that the brightest ideas come from the burning of old rules. The best rules to throw on the fire are the ones that grew from temporary needs and have finally outlived their usefulness. Certain practices take root because they seem to guarantee success. Later a kind of legality creeps in, hardening them into rules. The practices then become easier to follow, and the results easier to judge. At any given time, the field is thick with rules: Never divide a composition in half. Keep your headline at the top. Never use pink. Less is more. More is more. To the rebellious designer, maxims like these light up like targets in a shooting gallery.

Fertile ground for the spread of conventional wisdom lies within the pages of design annuals. Sometimes a successful new design (it must be successful—it won an award, right?) is quickly imitated by thousands of lesser talents, and before long it escalates into a full-blown trend, complete with its own special rules. Ironically, the new design has inspired followers precisely because it wasn’t following a trend. It was fresh.

Perhaps, at the risk of making another rule, we can say that fresh concepts can only come from outside the graphic design hothouse. By definition, you can’t be original by imitating someone else.

Rebel against logic.

“Computers are useless,” sniffed Picasso, “they can only give you answers.” He meant, of course, that questions make better weapons against the tyranny of reason. Logic puts an end to questioning, and therefore an end to new ideas. Picasso continually questioned the rules of whatever medium he happened to be working in. Fernand Mourlot, who owned a lithography workshop Picasso frequented, said: “He looked, listened, and then did exactly the opposite of what had been shown him—and it worked.”

The human mind derives satisfaction from making patterns, which is why we often fall into ruts. Creative thought, the formation of new concepts, comes from the brain’s defects rather than its strengths, which means we need to exploit our mistakes if we really want new ideas. Edward de Bono, an expert in conceptual training, has devised an entire method of cognition to circumvent the logical side of the brain. Called *lateral thinking*, it encourages the mind to slip sideways in pursuit of new concepts. “You can’t dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper and wider,” he explains. “Lateral thinking is digging somewhere else.”

The next time you fall into a conceptual rut, try a simple exercise.

Think of the *worst* possible solutions for your design job. If the background needs to be black, make it white. If the type needs to be big, make it small. If the product calls for a photograph, use a doodle instead. These wrong experiments can lead to concepts that are very, very right.

Rebel against yourself.

On the quest for great concepts, perhaps the greatest obstacle is our own human nature. Fear of failure, laziness, complacency—any of these can sabotage the mental machinery. Let's examine them one at a time.

Fear of failure. Most people don't think of graphic design as a dangerous occupation, but anyone who has faced a blank sheet of paper under the pressure of closing deadlines, client demands, and the scrutiny of peers has felt the tiny knots of terror forming deep within. The fear of making mistakes is the number-one idea assassin. It strikes young designers most often, turning inexperience into crippling self-doubt. The fresher the idea, the greater the fear of failure.

"In generating concepts," says Milton Glaser, "you must be courageous. You must be willing to be embarrassed. And the need for courage never goes away, because the older you get, and the more success you achieve, the more embarrassing it is when you fail. Picasso is a marvelous model for courage. At every stage of his life he was fearless about pressing forward. He didn't care whether he succeeded or failed in the eyes of the public. To Picasso, public failure was totally irrelevant."

Creative consultant James Adams wrote a popular book called *Conceptual Blockbusting*, which advises readers on how to remove various mental blocks, including emotional blocks such as the fear of taking risks. The best environment for generating ideas is one in which fun, excitement, and reward are emphasized over fear, anxiety, and punishment. The most daring thinkers are those with a high degree of self-confidence. This may explain why there are so many outsized egos in graphic design—the work requires it.

Laziness. People hate to admit they're lazy, even to themselves. But a willingness to work, and work hard, is what turns ordinary ideas into exciting ones. To paraphrase H.L. Mencken, there are no dull subjects—only dull designers.

Exciting concepts start with a thorough knowledge of the client, product, audience, and the various political pitfalls involved. Depending on the scope of the project, the designer may spend hours, days, or even weeks in notetaking, pondering, and sketching. It's true that a good concept may save labor in the production stages, but the conceptual stage is no time to spare the midnight oil.

Complacency. If rookie designers are the most prone to fear, seasoned pros may face a more insidious threat to their creativity:

A Who's Who of Creative Thinking

Graham Wallas, in the 1920s, identified four stages common to all creative acts: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification.

Sigmund Freud, in the late 1930s, divided thinking into two types: primary-process and secondary-process. Primary-process thinking is unconscious and controlled by the id; secondary-process is controlled by the ego. Primary-process thinking, or creative thinking, circumvents the ordinary laws of logic and causality, allowing two seemingly unrelated thoughts to join more freely.

Gestalt psychologists theorized that under certain circumstances a problem situation might undergo "spontaneous restructuring," producing a new solution and an "Aha!" response—a feeling of sudden insight.

Alex Osborn, in the 1950s, developed a set of rules by which a group of people can generate creative ideas, called "brainstorming." He divided the mind into two parts: the "judicial mind" and the "creative mind." The rules of brainstorming encourage "copious ideation" while discouraging "premature judgment."

William Gordon devised an approach to thinking he called "synectics" in the early 1960s. From the Greek, synectics means the joining of different and apparently irrelevant elements. Using this technique, people with diverse ways of thinking form problem-solving groups to produce new ideas.

Arthur Koestler proposed the concept of "bisociation," the marriage of two previously unrelated or incompatible ideas. The matchmaker, according to Koestler, is the unconscious.

Edward de Bono, in the late 1960s, coined the term "lateral thinking" to describe his method for generating new approaches to problems. He maintains that lateral thinking is superior to ordinary logical thinking and can be learned as a step-by-step process.

James Adams pioneered the process of "conceptual blockbusting" in the late 1970s. According to Adams, various creative blocks—emotional, cultural, environmental, intellectual, expressive—can be overcome using certain blockbusting techniques. Two of these techniques are developing a questioning attitude and freeing the unconscious.



San Francisco designer Craig Frazier is a visible exponent of conceptual design in a city famous for style. He often illustrates his work with disarming cut-paper images.

Above, left: A decidedly non-cinematic poster for a well-known northern California film festival.

Middle, left: The rebellious element in this logo for Xaos Tools is its rugged simplicity in a field of increasingly complex high-tech logos.

Bottom, left: This logo distinguishes Novell's proprietary training program from those of unauthorized competitors.

Right: The greatness of this poster (for a poster design contest) is left to the imagination.

Below: Frazier stepped outside traditional design firm boundaries to produce a series of magazine ads for Steelcase—the most-read ads in every issue in which they ran. Copywriter, Michael Wright; photographer, Jock McDonald.

Opposite: Frazier rejected the prevailing high-tech style for Symantec's 1996 annual report. The fresh illustrations were better suited to the task of simplifying the software giant's business story of a company being reborn. Copywriter, Steve Goldstein.



We start out innocently enough. But all too soon, we start having to conform to the tyrannies of chairs that don't conform to us.

High chairs. School chairs. Office chairs that reflect a concern for our status at the expense of our stature.

Unfortunately for our bodies, you can't judge an office chair's conformance by its appearance. You have to undress it, check how it's built.

Do this, and you'll discover that one chair stands apart.

It features a one piece inner shell, for example, that's flexible in some places, inflexible in others.

How do you make a shell like this? Nothing to it. You simply instruct your engineers to invent a new technology.

Then you ask them to invent another that marries this shell to the internal mechanism in a way that gives support and freedom of movement.

The naked truth.

Because the human body needs to be hugged and allowed to wiggle.

Then you ask them to invent a technology that bonds foam to fabric in a way that allows the chair to "breathe."

And to invent a low profile base that can accommodate a greater-than-ever height adjustment range without looking bulky.

Then you ask for snap-on casters and glides, replaceable cushions and changeable arms.

And before you know it, you've created a whole new kind of office chair that doesn't look like a whole new kind of office chair...until it's naked.

Sensor, from designer Wolfgang Müller-Deisig and the inventive engineers and designers of Steelcase.

Steelcase
The Office Environment

too much experience. The very knowledge that gives a designer confidence can also lead to predictable—and therefore boring—solutions to problems. Everyone is born with creative capacity, yet it can dwindle over the years as one becomes increasingly judgmental. Picasso preferred to swipe an idea from the past rather than lapse into repetition. “I have a horror of copying myself,” he said, “but I have no hesitation, when I am shown for example a portfolio of old drawings, in taking from them whatever I want.”

Craig Frazier says, “When we’re younger, we can’t have those habits, because we don’t have a backlog of successful ideas. As you gain experience, you need to consciously rebel against complacency. You need to challenge every situation, every supposition, every instance where you may be defaulting to some standard response.

“In my early years I was told by older designers that there were only five good typefaces, and I thought, God, is that narrowminded or what? Now I find myself leaning on only two—Garamond and Times—so I have to force myself to reconsider my options on every job. I usually end up with Garamond anyway, but it’s the questioning that matters.”

Are you finished?

How do you know when to stop? Is it possible to miss a promising direction in your headlong rush to generate ideas? Poincaré believed that, for artists and scientists alike, the judgment of an idea is an aesthetic one, based on an individual’s sense of “beauty.” Even mathematicians talk with reverence about the “elegance” of a formula.

“A good concept amplifies an idea into a larger scenario where all the bits and pieces dovetail neatly into place,” says Alan Fletcher. “There’s an inevitability about everything a concept embraces. It has a solid shape that’s impossible to knock over. Concepts tie thoughts together, form bridges between one intelligence and another, and offer a common point of reference.”

Says Forrest Richardson, “The litmus test for a concept is whether or not you can describe it to a stranger. Like a movie plot you can relate in a few sentences, a great concept communicates clearly even before it’s implemented.”

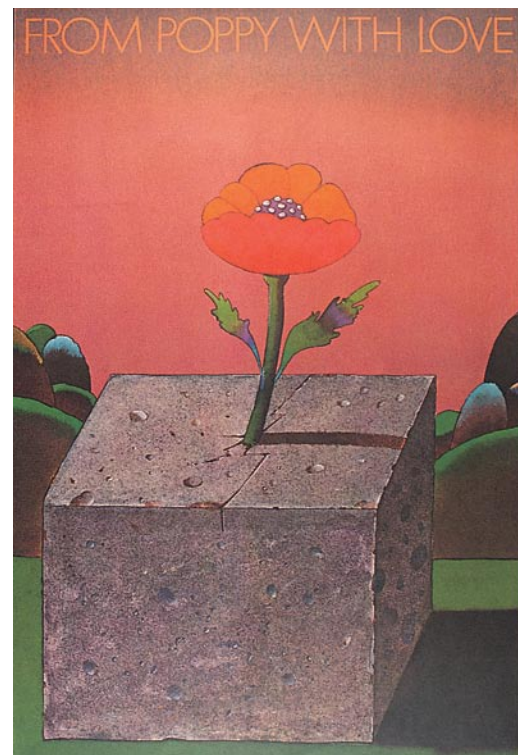
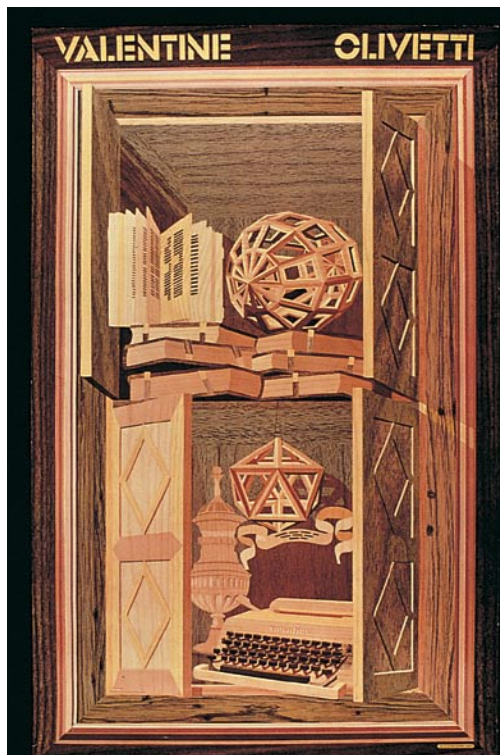
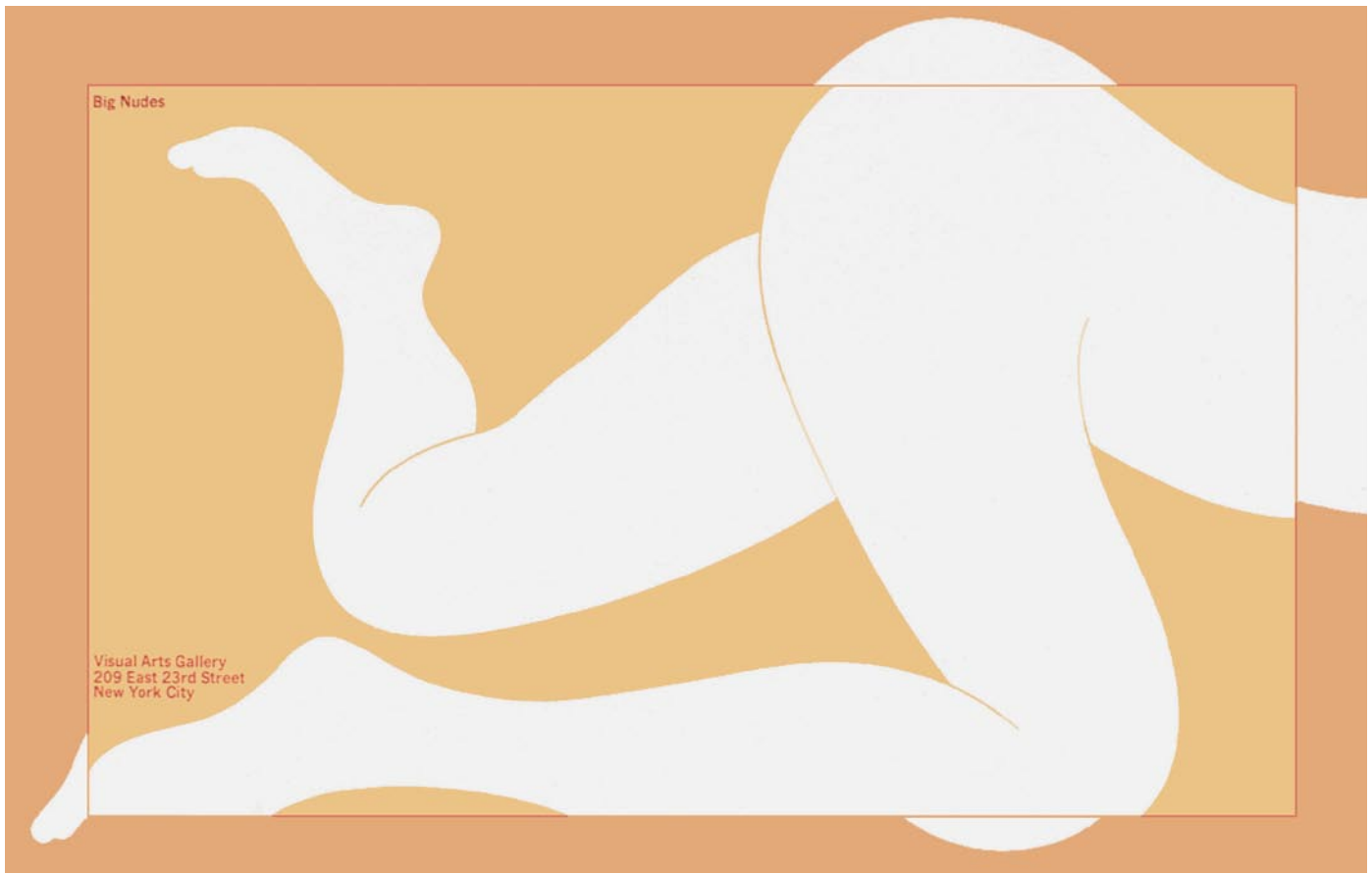
“The best concept is the simple concept,” says Valerie Richardson. “There are already too many things happening in the world. For example, the first item on my to-do list today is holding my baby. The second thing is talking with *Critique* magazine. Nowhere on my list is reading the ads in the newspaper.”

“For me,” says Craig Frazier, “discomfort is a signal of an exceptional concept. When I’m totally comfortable with a concept, I’ve probably used it before or seen it somewhere else. Discomfort is almost a prerequisite for a great idea.”

Milton Glaser believes it’s simply a question of developing judgment. “It takes time. You have to go out and fail before you can develop judgment. I only began to sense whether an idea would work in the real world when I turned 35 or so. In my first 10 years I didn’t understand what I was doing.”

Rejecting complexity, seeking discomfort, failing bravely, burning with passion—the rebellious mind never rests. The instinct to break rules and resist conformity is one of the hallmarks of graphic design brilliance. Yet it’s not the only one. There are two stages in the creative process: getting the right idea, and getting the idea right. We’ll explore this crucial second stage in the next issue. 🐼







Since the 1960s, Milton Glaser has repeatedly broken rules of good design to create even better design—in the process setting trends that have become emblematic of their time. Behind his fresh style lies a curiosity that rejects easy answers.

Opposite, above: For an exhibit called "Big Nudes," the subject is so large she doesn't fit on the poster. Glaser also breaks the rule that says a poster title must be large, making this nude look even bigger.

Opposite, below left: From a series of Olivetti posters that paid homage to famous art pieces, this 1968 design demonstrates the portability of a new typewriter, comparing it with the great inventions of the Renaissance.

Opposite, below right: A 1967 poster for a groundbreaking record company called Poppy.

This page: Milton Glaser and David Freeman conceived "The Search for Beauty: A Visual Questionnaire." They asked 82 designers and photographers to fill out a "questionnaire" with their favorite beautiful objects and back-grounds. The results were printed in a promotional piece for Gilbert Paper. As a special treat, Glaser mixed elements from various submissions, serving up some beautiful concoctions of his own.

