




Stephen Kerr



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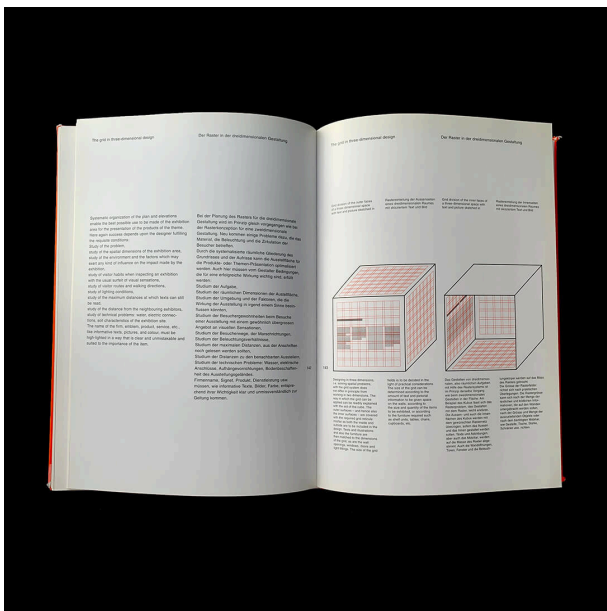
Word count: 7828 words

To de-sign design, I will assign a sign: ☒

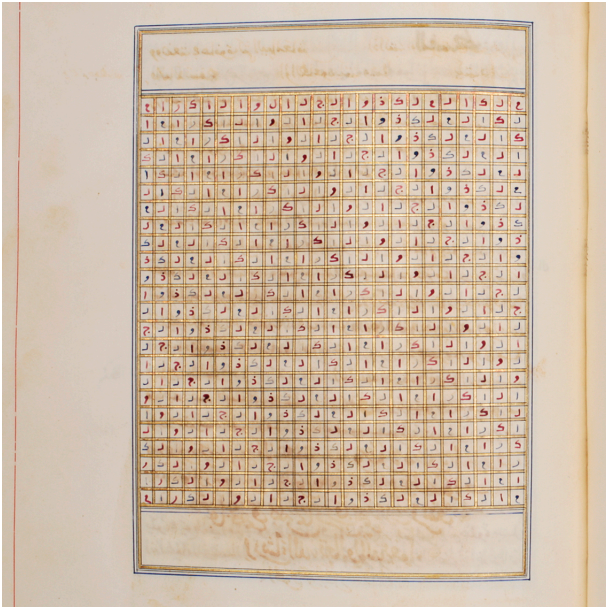
This symbol represents design in this writing in an attempt to avoid the assumed meaning of the word and examine it as something unknown, to mystify it, to examine its structure. The label ☒ is a functional part of a belief system involving order, structure, and rationality and I want to break it. Removing the label is part of loosening the object, making it available to transition (Berlant, 2022).



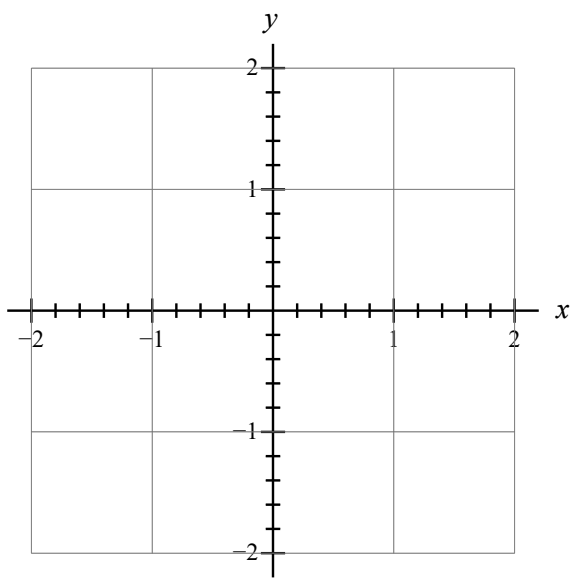
1 The Cadaster of Orange,
unknown \boxplus er, c. 100 CE.

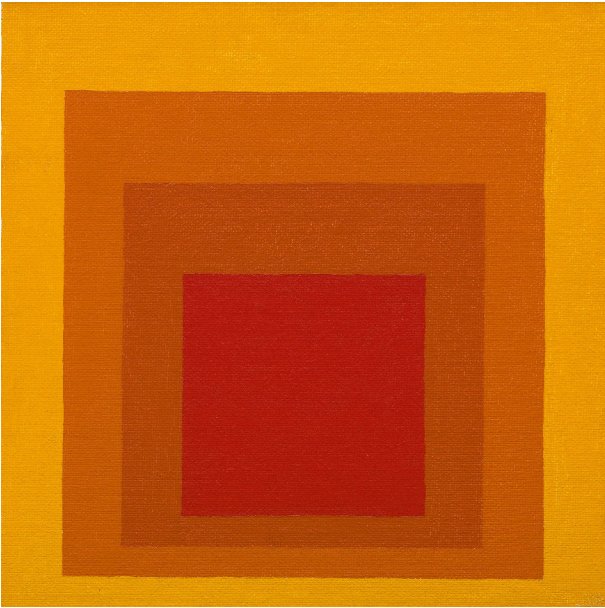


2 Grid Systems in Graphic 田, Josef Muller-Brockmann, 1981.

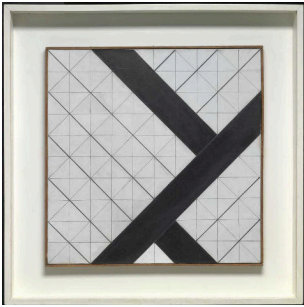


3 Shams al-Ma'arif, Ahmad al-Buni Almalki, circa 1200.

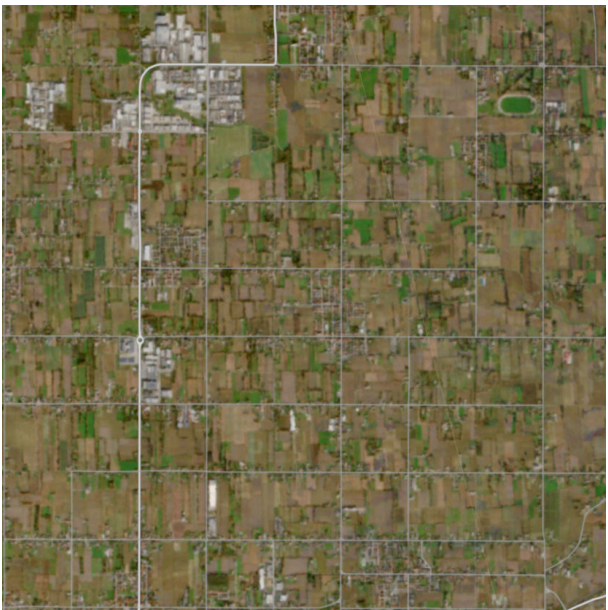




5 Homage to the Square, Josef Albers, 1954.

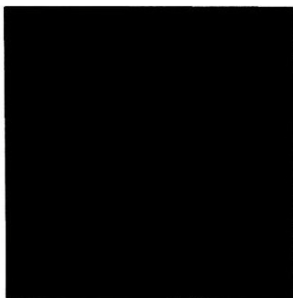


6 Counter Composition VI,
Theo Van Doesburg, 1925.



7 The Po Valley, The Roman Empire, 268 BCE.

P



8 Monogram, Piet Zwart, c. 1968.

Introduction

This document is a collection of fragments exploring beliefs about labour in the creative industries, in particular graphic ☐. Each fragment focusses on the social, cultural, political, spiritual or religious aspects of these beliefs through an ethnographic lens. They record, celebrate and question the meaning that ☐ers give to their actions and how those meanings affect the world they live in. And it's about how ☐ers feel when we live with these beliefs: we feel a bit funny and I want to talk about it.

I use various modes of address and different lenses to further fragment the definition of ☐. The origin of the word thesis is to set or to put, but I am trying to show you something liquid that can't be placed but shimmers and disappears through the sand. I document some ☐ activities, in my own work and the work and writings of others who identify with the label of ☐er. The writing dissolves and reintegrates definitions of ☐ from different voices to show the multiplicity of beliefs from practitioners, and to explore what it means to acknowledge these beliefs beside each other: the tensions and harmonies, some lineages and some breaks. What is going on here in this thing we call ☐?

This is a collection of stories about living life with particular working conditions, located at certain points in social, economic and cultural webs. In my practice-based research I gather and tell these stories through (auto)ethnographic methods: documenting how ☐er's work, conducting interviews, improvising communal performances and exploratory tool-making. This document collates and reflects on this research.

What is a ☒er?

A ☒er is a person who wakes up at 5am but refuses to open their eyes. There are birds talking outside, it's probably getting bright already. Something is wrong, not sure what. They finally open their eyes and there's the ceiling again. When the light comes in sideways over the curtains this early you can see all the little ripples and imperfections in it. Nothing. Ribcage. Stomach. The front of the ☒er's legs ache. It would be better to sleep again. Have to pay taxes again next week. A ☒er is someone who wonders if that invoice will come through I need to follow up on it. The birds are so loud.

The role of the ☒er is to count back from five to two and realise that was only three hours same as yesterday. They use ☒ thinking to never get back to sleep. They need excellent time management skills to make this short moment feel like an eternity, several times a week. ☒ers have an acute spatial awareness and an eye for detail: although the ceiling seems miles away they focus on each tiny ripple for hours. A ☒er is someone who will work the whole waking day today, but it's better than last week when there was no work. ☒ers look at their phone and see their alarm is going to go off in ten minutes, so they switch it off and get up.

The precarity of working in the creative industries, in particular as a freelancer or within a small studio, induces anxiety. There is a belief that the freelancer is empowered by their autonomy, but in fact the worker is trapped by it. Work is believed to be inherently good. Work in our society is understood as “an individual moral practice and collective ethical obligation” which shapes the worker's identity in positive ways (Weeks, 2011). The worker believes they are a skilled or talented worker, someone who possesses spatial awareness, time management skills, and the capacity to carry out work effectively and efficiently.

Workers are entangled in the Protestant religious underpinnings of the European work ethic (Pater, 2022). Work is seen as a vocation which expresses and creates the worker's identity, and the process or its results make a valuable contribution to society. People understand the world and interact with it smoothly, thanks to the work of workers. Workers pick the right materials to save the planet and increase efficiency and whatever else it is people find important. But the worker becomes anxious despite meeting these goals and becoming this person. In reality, the worker is a bot, the worker is software. Value is extracted from their time, creativity and expertise which makes them stressed. Workers are a creative cloud, a service to be tapped into, a cpu being run too hot. There is something to be learnt from the revelation that being replaced by machines proves we were being treated as machines all along.

Geestelijk

There was a belief that ☐ could be a crystal goblet (Warde, 1913), something unbiased, clear and, in more recent versions of the theory, serving the context it fits within. But the foundations of this belief in functionality and rationality don't seem to come themselves from something functional or rational.

De Stijl members, such as Piet Mondriaan and Theo van Doesburg (Figure 6), in their 1917 manifesto described a “new consciousness of the age [...] directed towards the universal”. There was a drive towards universal standardisation or pureness of culture from the rich white men. Purity is a concept that turns up a lot in Mondriaan's writings, eg *Neo-Plasticism in Pictorial Art* (1917). They claimed a shared spirit was driving this universalisation. A later paragraph of the manifesto is translated into English as:

“The artists of to-day have been driven the whole world over by the same consciousness and therefore have taken part from an intellectual point of view in this war against the domination of individual despotism. They therefore sympathize with all who work for the formation of an international unity in Life, Art, Culture, either intellectually or materially.”

In this translation it appears the authors believed in an emerging consciousness of the age, something collective which would bring an international unity. The members of De Stijl were neither aligning themselves with the capitalists or socialists but believed in an inner connection between those who were joined in the spiritual body of the new world (De Stijl, Manifesto III, 1921). The word intellectual, or *geestelijk* in the original Dutch, can also be translated as “spiritual, mental, ecclesiastical, clerical, sacred, ghostly, pneumatic”. The choice to translate as intellectual seems to be the most rational interpretation of this sentence, an effort to make the theories of De Stijl appear more materialist without the spiritual element. Compare with this translation:

“The artists of today, all over the world, impelled by one and the same consciousness, have taken part on the spiritual plane in the world war against the domination of individualism, of arbitrariness. They therefore sympathise with all who are fighting spiritually or materially for the formation of an international unity in life, art and culture.”

In this translation it is clearer that the members of De Stijl saw a link between the effects of what they made materially and their attempts to be fighting spiritually against the domination of individualism. I care about this story because of how it contextualises contemporary ☐ practice. Is contemporary ☐ practice still involved in this spiritual battle? Did the new consciousness of 1917 survive the past century, did it procreate? Can aesthetics have generational trauma? William Morris, Constructivism, De Stijl, Bauhaus, International Style, International Typographic Style, Swiss Style, then what happened. Modernist artists had spiritual beliefs, and again I care about these people from a hundred years ago because of the effect they have on the present.

Imagine I could trace this thought from Mondriaan all the way to myself, wow, cool thesis. Swiss style became corporate identity ☐ and encouraged minimalism in ☐. 21st century Flat ☐, such as Metro ☐ language from Microsoft and Material ☐ (Google, 2014), claim direct descendence from the International Typographic Style and that pretty much brings us up to date. I wonder about the use of the word Material in Google's ☐ strategy, I wonder about the ghostly absence of the geestelijk fight of De Stijl. Is Google's choice of name another example, as with the subtle change in the translation above, that the spiritual element is no longer as important a part of the ☐er's worldview as it was a hundred years ago?

**Excerpt from an interview with Conor Clarke, 1st
December 2023**

*Conor Clarke is a Director of [The Factory](#), independent Irish [The Factory](#) agency based in Dublin. His work has featured in international publications such as *Who's Who in Graphic Design*, *Graphis*, *Novum Gebrauchsgrafik*, and the *New York Art Directors Club Annual*. He was the recipient of the *Catherine Donnelly Lifetime Achievement Award* for his contribution to [The Factory](#) in Ireland and is the Course Director of [The West](#), an international summer [The West](#) school located in the beautiful village of Letterfrack on the West Coast of Ireland. ([The West](#), 2023)*

SK: What do you think is the best shape?

CC: Oh yeah, good god. square.

SK: Square? how come?

CC: Dunno, it just, it just seems resolved. I don't like spheres. Circles I sometimes like.

SK: Yeah, squares, do you use grids?

CC: Sometimes. Not always.

SK: Once you have grids squares make sense. But you like squares maybe because you like logos?

CC: If I'm in an art gallery and I see, you know Joseph Albers (Figure 5) or something I just kind of feel, I just like, or Malevich i just like that stuff. If I see a Kandinsky and all those squiggles and circles it just, that just kind of upsets me a little bit.

SK: That's a bit chaotic?

CC: Yeah. And even if I'm looking at Vermeer I can see some kind of square structure and logic, for some reason that always appeals to me.

SK: Things are a bit organised when there's squares around?

CC: Yeah. And really great artists who don't work that way I look at their stuff and think well that's just beyond me.

SK: Its something else?

CC: Yeah. so yeah.

SK: At least you didn't say triangle.

CC: Oh good god. Good god no.

Maths and grids

Why not choose a spiral or a circle if you dream of
⊞ers as shamans? Why the grid of squares? There are
strong links between ⊞ and mathematics, Josef Muller-
Brockmann's *Grid Systems* (Figure 2) for example or
Karl Gerstner's *⊞ing Programmes* (1964). I read these
⊞ theorists as you might comparatively read religious
texts. What were or are the beliefs of the authors and
their audiences?

“To describe the problem is part of the solution. This
implies: not to make creative decisions as prompted by
feeling but by intellectual criteria. The more exact and
complete these criteria are, the more creative the work
becomes.”

(Gerstner, 1964)

“This is the expression of a professional ethos: the designer's work should have the clearly intelligible, objective, functional and aesthetic quality of mathematical thinking.”

(Muller-Brockman, 1981)

These texts present a worldview where the designer can be mathematical, objective or problem-solving. In Muller-Brockman's text the focus is on the formal qualities of the designer in particular the use of grids and typographic systems. Gerstner's focus is more on the effect of the designer, and the ability of the designer to solve a problem. Rationality and creativity are presented as proportional to each other. He makes space for the intellectual by pushing aside feelings.

The graphic designer is presented as a functional actor in society who makes the world better. Gerstner seems to be implying that creative design comes from following the intellect and some rational cause and effect process. I find it interesting that the designer claims this rational basis in the same historical period when science and mathematics, its supposed foundations, became much less rational and predictable, for example in chaos theory. It makes me think that the rationality serves some other purpose.

The 田 grid and the written word

Why do 田ers believe in using a grid to present the written word, and where did this belief come from and how did it develop? It can be materially traced back to Gutenberg and metal type but that's boring. Magic squares have been used in astrology books and grimoires throughout history (Figure 3). French poet Stéphane Mallarmé is sometimes quoted as a precursor to modernist typography (Muller-Brockmann, 1981). Why did Steve McCaffrey include the manifesto of De Stijl with *CARNIVAL* (1973)? De Stijl is best known for its painters and architects, and theories from both of these fields affected later 田 theories. But they also were poets and had literary theories similar to the German expressionists. Man's attempt to find oneness with the whole of creation through a cosmic hybrid.

“An artists’ book featuring a series of typewriter concrete poems printed on perforated pages meant to be torn out and arranged into a square of four. Complete with instructions, a reproduction of a de Stijl manifesto from 1920, an errata slip, and publisher’s promotional postcard.”

Description of Steve McCaffrey's *CARNIVAL*
(The Idea of the Book, 2024)

The developments of the written word and its relationship to form in the 20th century is very much a part of the history of ☐. I care about this story because it affects contemporary practitioners. I believe there is something magical in graphic composition and the layout of typography, something that can't be grasped in the words alone. They're non-canonical for ☐ers but how have people who put words on pages like Mallarmé and McCaffrey influenced my beliefs about the written word? What makes one thing fit in the category of art, another ☐ and yet another concrete poetry?

Mystically assigning or finding meanings in ☒

This autoethnographic annotation attempts to really miss as many cultural and technical cues as possible. It's watching the ☒er, me, and being totally mystified by their behaviour.

A rhythm exists and I wonder why. There is music and there are voices, and my fingers press the keys and the colours of the screen flicker and morph. There appears to be a life or energy flowing somewhere between these things and I am curious about it.

The screen shimmers between different symbols, letters, images. The colours are symbolic. White means the ground, although sometimes it switches to white symbols on a dark ground. They are full of meaning and relationship. I press two buttons to the left of the keyboard and the screen answers with a flicker.

I count out loud to 40. It symbolises both the number of pages to be made and the enormity of the task. It represents a period in the desert, long but with an end in sight. What is the relationship of the desert to the stars? If the screen can flicker from a dark to a light ground, is it possible for the sky to also switch from day to night?

I have taken three of the forty steps.

I have taken seven of the forty steps.

⊞ is a series of movements and reconfigurations. It is a creative act and one of elision. I use the keyboard to communicate my will to the machine with commands such as “Ctrl+C” and “Ctrl+V”. I firstly inform the computer that I wish to control it. Each letter has a deep and layered meaning. CVCVCVCVCVCVCVCV. “Alt+Tab” asks the screen to flicker. The computer must match my multithreading. It must be prepared to follow my changing demands in our shared focus. FAVCV. F is to seek, but it is optimistically labelled to find. I enter the incorrect combination of symbols (“samle”) the incantation is useless and I will not find what I seek. I try again “sample” and the computer gives me what I desire. Why does the machine demand perfection? Why does it value perfection in me, what is it trying to teach me? Why wont it leave me alone?

I have taken eleven of the forty steps. I will rest.

What does ☒ do? What is the ☒er trying to do by pressing all these buttons and making the screen vibrate?

“☒ only generates longing”

(Van Der Velden, 2006)

I wasn't trying to generate longing, I was trying to make an annual report. It was a corporate job I was working on, a nice one to have because it's fairly well paid and not too complicated. A bit boring and kinda repetitive, but you can just put your headphones on and get stuck into it. I was pretty happy with the results in the end, but for sure not the type of work you're supposed to be proud of as a ☒er.

“I found myself way over my head with, believe it or not, a catalogue and price list for bathroom equipment. Nothing I've done since has seemed as difficult.”

Michael Bierut (creativechair.org, 2018)

And of course Piet Zwart's (Figure 8) famous electrical cable catalogues. ☒ is just work, chill. Is a ☒er a user or a server? Maybe ☒ is an example of our general belief in this dichotomy not quite making sense or fitting reality. The ☒er is working for whom? Themselves? Their clients?

“attempts to undo the privileged position of the agentive subject can help us understand the strange status of repetitive and quasi-robotic labour in today's digital age.”

(Hu, 2022)

This quote relates to freelancing generally in some way, and deconstructing the work or worker. Are workers things? Yeah, kinda. UIers don't have super powers, contrary to some beliefs within the industry. For example on whatUIcando.com it is suggested that we should “reUI everything!”. Let's actually not do that. UIers are mostly just humans working on computers like so many other bots. UIers try to create clarity, to assign meaning and understand: “Confusion and clutter are failures of UI, not attributes of information” (Tufte, 1990, p.53). What if the sounds of my fingers and my keyboard are not noise but music: we are quasi-robots and maybe its good to listen to our little Taylorist finger tappings and see what else is being said.

**Excerpt from an interview with the members of
Distinctive Repetition on 1st December 2023.**

Distinctive Repetition is an award-winning graphic studio based in Dublin, Ireland. Principal and Institute of Creative Advertising and past-president, Rossi McAuley, is joined in this interview by Jenny Leahy and Ben Nagle. This interview was carried out around a table with the interviewer in the bottom right corner and the three members of the studio in the other three seats.

Q: whats your favourite colour?

A: red.

A: red.

Q: really? thats it? are you fucking kidding me?

A: do i fill it in?

Q: they're warm up questions obviously they're to get you comfortable answering questions.

A: yellow

Q: if the seat of your consciousness was in your hands, like all of your feelings and your thoughts and your desires and your emotions come through your hands, can you describe to me the day that you've had so far please?

A: jelly that's not quite solid

A: not quite solidified in the fridge yet

A: and its just oozing through my fingers

(redacted sentence)

Q: that's what today has been like but its my brain thats oozing out of me

☒: yes. that's a good answer. ok will we keep going in a circle?

☒: whatever you like bro.

☒: do you ever dream about work?

☒: all the time.

☒: would you care to share one of those dreams?

☒: they're always angst-ridden, never, they're never eh, they're never positive solution-solved things, we've always like lists and lists and lists of things to do they're never resolved they're always like shit we've, its, its always problematic, and its all the time.

☒: weren't you taking grids out of drawers in a dream recently?

☒: yeah yeah.

(obscured)

☒: why were you taking grids out of drawers?

☒: emm recently I had a dream where I was giving out to ☒ about not having things done, this ☒, participant two, about not having things done, and i was opening up drawers in my office and I was like, just use this grid and the drawers were full of grids and I was giving them to her and saying just fucking use those grids for fucks sake why don't we use those grids.

(section redacted by request of interviewees)

About the interview

Before meeting them in person, I mailed a small booklet to the interviewees entitled *Enthusiasm* to give context to the conversation. The word enthusiasm originally meant inspiration or possession by a god. The booklet recounted three mystical dreams René Descartes had which he credited as a moment of inspiration or enthusiasm that influenced his later work on rationalism, and related to his work on geometry and grids (Figure 4). As well as the content of the dreams, the booklet described their relevance:

“404 years ago on the night of the 10th November 1619, three dreams were dreamt. A 23-year old man is “filled with enthusiasm” and enters a feverish sleep in Ulm, Germany. In this process of enthusiasm and dreamwork, he discovers the foundations of a wonderful science. *The Method of Properly Guiding the Reason in the Search of Truth in the Sciences* will be suppressed by the churches, both Calvinist and Catholic. They are a threat to the world view, and a threat to religion. The cartesian grid uses measurements to establish relationships. Cartesian geometry has let us fly spaceships and zone and divide land. Some things have happened. Some good things, some bad things. The link is broken or breaking or should be broken. It's rotting. Maybe there's a better way we can interpret these dreams now.”

Descartes felt that interpreting his dreams was an appropriate method to develop a rational theory of skepticism, which led to some of the philosophical foundations of modern scientific and mathematical theories. The booklet also drew parallels with Martin Luther's scrupulous doubt, “Only God and certain madmen have no doubts!”. Like Descartes, Luther's new theories helped to give the basis for the structure of thought for the following centuries. These stories were presented together to direct the focus of the conversation towards belief, rationalism and grids. The fact that rationalism is a belief system, as pervasive as it may be, and suggestively hinting through its relationship with grids that there is a relationship with \square .

☒: jelly that's not quite solid, not quite solidified in the fridge yet and its just oozing through my fingers

They seem so sad it hurts to hear them talk about the oozing. Are you supposed to put jelly in the fridge, it just needs time to settle right? My nana used to put the jelly in the freezer. There's an instability in how they talk in the interview for sure, or more a desire for stability. Was it ever stable? Do you really want it to be? Its gooey and not the way it should be but its still jelly and thats fun and its probably delicious. Their hands are there as something that is for grasping and jelly is there as something that can't be grasped. Is it terrifying, are they resigned to it?

☒: they're always angst-ridden, never, they're never eh, they're never positive solution-solved things, we've always like lists and lists and lists of things to do they're never resolved they're always like shit we've, its, its always problematic, and its all the time.

I can't explain the angst they are feeling but I can describe it because I've felt it too. It feels like I'm having a heart attack. It feels like I'm about to black out. It got to a stage where I couldn't talk to other people without being completely frozen jelly. It is the feeling of lists and lists and lists. It's the feeling of never resolved, all the time. We believe we are busy and under pressure and struggling to survive. That makes us anxious and stressed.

☒: just fucking use those grids

The grids are not being used, the grids are useless. Drawers full of them, all useless. Whats the point of sitting here in this studio. They dont fit, they dont make sense, they're trying to order something that can't be ordered. Or possibly shouldnt be ordered, the ordering is misplaced and there is a human urge to stop, just stop.

Modern work

“A cause becomes unmodern at the moment when our feelings revolt, and as soon as we feel ourselves becoming ridiculous”

Adolf Loos, *On Thrift*, 1924 (Loos, 2019)

Adolf Loos was a modernist architect whose writings such as *Ornament and Crime* in 1910 influenced modernist ideals of functionalism and minimalism. He rejected ornament and favoured the use of good materials which showed "God's own wonder". I wonder what is the relation of Loos' ideas to Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1905) that was published five years earlier. Work as a duty which benefits the individual and society as a whole, do designers still believe this today? I like taking Loos' quote out of context here, instead in the context of the feelings of the interviewees, revolting the supposedly modern cause they are working with.

But also Loos was found guilty of pedophilia and it feels kind of aggressive to include his voice here at all. This is part of the point of what I'm getting at: there's this tradition of design and so many parts of it make me uncomfortable or really disgusted and I don't know what to do with all that. I just wanted to go to art school and draw circles and maybe that's the problem and sure simple materials are pretty, but yeah jelly is exactly what it feels like, you're right.

Graphic design is often performed by paid professionals in what is known as the creative industry: as a profession and an activity, design is considered to be creative. There are some positive preconceptions about the creative industry and what it does, but I see it as an assimilation of cultural activity into a neoliberal economic framework. Creativity in this context is used to reproduce the status quo and to grow capital (Mould, 2018). But maybe we can profit from examining the margins created by this terminology: design is less functional than it seems. People in creative jobs are stressed and this is reflected in their dreams. Workers have rights and those rights are systemically undermined. Being self-employed or part of an independent studio brings anxiety and challenges. Some designers try to structure the world around them and like things to be neat and tidy, which makes us uncomfortable existing in precarious work conditions.

The Roman grid

The Roman grid was a land measurement method used in the Roman colonies for example in the Po Valley (Figure 7). With a surveying tool called the groma, the colonisers would divide the land from north to south and east to west, resulting in a square grid of roads and land. At Orange, France, a cadaster has been found which shows the division of land in a geometric way, helping the colonisers to privatise the land and allocate it to roman veterans (Figure 1). The name groma, as well as referring to the surveying tool, describes the central point of the grid, the origin. Is making grids just a way to control and colonise? Do all grids have origins? In Descartes' use of the grid there was also an attempt to order and structure chaos:

“the grid allowed an embrace of complexity: curved lines that could be described by mathematical formulas, and thereby were not a sign of chaos but an expression of the divine mathematical order assumed to be underlying nature.”

Descartes was Here, Clemens Driessen, 2020

A part of the belief systems of \boxplus ers is that the world is chaotic and their role is to order it or even simplify it. This belief may be inherited from a wider cultural belief of the same general drive: to order and simplify. Humans try to make sense of the world. \boxplus ers make sense of \boxplus briefs and structure them into something understandable to an audience or target market.

☐: for fucks sake why don't we use those grids

Is there an answer to this question, do they know the answer to this question? I get the impression they have a gut feeling about the answer but are afraid of it.

An analysis of a joke about ☒ in the early 21st century

When reviewing the AIGA Next conference in Denver Colorado, 2008, ☒ critic Adrian Shaughnessy tells a joke:

“The venue was shared with a beer festival, but it was easy to tell the ☒ers from the beer fans. The beer fans were more serious.”

(Shaughnessy, 2013)

This joke is funny because in the setup where it is easy to tell them apart, the reader should assume the beer fans are drunk and therefore raucous, misbehaving or maybe just having a lot of fun. But then he unexpectedly suggests that they were in fact more serious than the ☒ers. This gives the reader a problem to address: is he claiming the ☒ers were even more outrageous than what we assumed of the beer fans, or the beer fans were in fact taking their own conference seriously? As both seem unbelievable the true funniness of the joke hits home in it's implied meaning: ☒ers are boring as fuck.

An annotation of my practices as a graphic designer on a typical working day, 23rd October 2023

I read an email

and

I type

*Alt tab alt tab alt tab alt tab alt tab alt tab alt tab ctrl
c ctrl v ctrl c ctrl v ctrl c ctrl v ctrl c ctrl v ctrl v ctrl v ctrl
v ctrl v ctrl v ctrl v*

⊞ers interact with the computer through keyboard and mouse usage. Compared to other computer users, my interaction involves lots of pressing of function keys, something common with other technical computer users and not so much with other creative workers. What is creative in the repetitive and low level operation of a computer? Is a pianist creative? What's the difference, I think they are being creative in different ways. ⊞ers and other specialists like video editors or photo colourists are using a computer as a tool, the musician is performing on an instrument. Maybe this distinction doesn't have to be so clear though. I am questioning this here because I think there is some fairly complicated belief system about artists and their tools that has had an effect on ⊞ers. ⊞ gives itself a history of conflict and harmony between artisans and industrialisation, for example in Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius claiming William Morris as a precursor (Bayer, 1975).

I think it is important to show that ⊞ers are workers with tools, their repetitive tasks are a form of labour as are their creative processes. In the annotation opposite my aim is to mystify the manual and digital labour, rather than demystify the creative ideation part.

Following this annotation I made a digital tool to record all keystrokes on my computer. Then I printed them out with a pen plotter to celebrate the labour that had taken place. It took several hours to plot the keylogging data from just a few minutes of the ⊞er's labour.

LibreOffice

I have no idea what any of this structuring does. And I don't care. But I would like to remove the page title from the export. It is in another tab called User Interface. I also select only page 1 to save to PDF. Now I run into a software issue in this workflow: the best software for the next part of the job is Adobe Acrobat Pro. How aggressively do I want to remove this software from my workflow? Not aggressively enough I guess because here I am still using it. I don't know any other software that really gives me details of how a document will print or lets me edit PDFs on such a useful level.

For example the title still exported (it always does, is this a LibreOffice bug or just I don't know what to do with the new software yet?). It takes two seconds to remove in edit mode in Acrobat. I also delete the page number, I don't even know how to turn that off from LibreOffice. The print dialogue in Acrobat is also so powerful, its so easy to print actual size which is important to me. It is structured and reliable.

Like many other 田ers, I was trained to only use Adobe products. I try to switch to open source alternatives because I believe in using software developed and maintained by a community rather than a private company, and as a worker believe I should be in control of my tools. In this annotation, I was trying to 田 and export a single page document in LibreOffice, an open source desktop publishing software. The documentation reflects on my frustrations and struggles to switch to a workflow that relies less on proprietary software for print 田.

Proprietary software from big mean tech corporations is based on a model of society and economy where a few people own things and everybody else has a hard time. I believe the internet gives an opportunity for knowledge (including software code) to be shared. I like the idea of modifying my tools, this is easier technically and legally with open source software. I would prefer my tools to be developed by me and my peers. These are some of my beliefs as a 田er about my

work and my tools. They're a bit idealistic but also optimistic in a good way.

*my god im trying to use scribus to prepare a booklet
im going crazy
im going crazy*

Correspondance with kamo, 2024

Transitioning to open source software sucks. I spent years learning other tools and its like starting all over again. There is a dual commitment in my beliefs about how my tools should be built and my desire to get things done in a reasonable amount of time. My action of fumbling with open source programs reflects my belief that they are worthwhile, and my action of still using Adobe Acrobat Pro reflects my belief that there are better things to do with my time than restarting software when it crashes again. Some parts of graphic \boxplus have become so entangled in capitalist ways of working, it can be immobilising to try to act without engaging with the icky parts. Our dependencies on ecosystems of tools and workflows are not enforced, but it can be difficult to exist outside them, or more specifically, beside them.

"And I don't care."

It's so obviously not true. The conflict of wanting to change my workflow with wanting to complete my work tasks efficiently doesn't keep me up at night, but it is important to me and other \boxplus ers. Open source \boxplus software is unreliable and unstandardised, it takes longer to do things and then when they are nearly done the program crashes and I've lost all my work. The standards of open source software have not been widely embraced by the \boxplus community. To fit into a workflow with peers you have to use Adobe products. Even web \boxplus ers who engage with open standards can find the need to work with proprietary software, because these tools are deeply integrated into the workflows of their peers. Can you send me that in a normal file format please, I can't open it.

Work Sans

The font is Work Sans SemiBold and it is set in 10pt, colour "automatic". I think even if it wasn't automatic I would make it black, because I want to print it clearly and cheaply. I use Work Sans because I am trying to switch to using Open Font Licence and open source fonts more generally. Previously I would have used Helvetica Now or some other proprietary font. There is a visual difference between these fonts too which is also relevant buuuut this description is getting very detailed maybe not right now.

Similarly to the software changes, this documentation of my practice sees me choosing open source fonts. I'm really ambivalent about this. I do like the idea of being able to modify a font when needed, but I have done so regardless of whether the font licence allows it. I'm more comfortable ethically with a font being open source. Buying fonts is expensive for freelancers and small studios, and open source fonts are more commonly free of charge. Many designers pirate fonts rather than buy them, or are locked into a font subscription. In Adobe software, Adobe subscription fonts don't load unless a connection to the creative cloud is verified.

For my work, fonts are also a tool, one that I need to practice with and one that needs to be suitable for the job. So changing font is a little like a ceramicist changing clay. Work Sans is good for online use because Google Fonts serves it as a web font for free, the open source font I want to use is served most reliably by a large corporation I have issues with. This balancing act of practical considerations and idealistic beliefs is kind of ironic and reminds me again that my values can be inconsistent and to me a bit funny.

The use of fonts as tools is full of tensions from designers' belief systems. Like many designers, I want to use open source fonts. I also want to use fonts that will load quickly from a content delivery network for web projects. I also want fonts to be cheap and well made and I am interested in fonts that are free. The internet is full of illegal and pirated copies of fonts that are not supposed to be free of charge. I sometimes receive or am asked to send font files outside of their licence. I don't have a huge amount of respect for some of these licences. But at the same time font designers are my friends and colleagues, I have used fonts. What does a designer's actual use of fonts say about their beliefs around copyright? Do designers believe in intellectual property? What value do designers, specifically typographers, see in their work and that of their close peers, the font designers, and how does copyright relate to these values?

Follow up questions for Conor

Hey Conor, hope you're keeping well these days? I've been going through the interview from back in December and was wondering if you would mind me including this piece in my thesis:

I guess the thesis has become a lot about \boxplus ers and the beliefs they have about their work, and its effect on the world around them. I was really interested in your answer to this question because I think it shows something a lot of other \boxplus ers including me feel too; some desire to structure the world around us, to have things be resolved, organised, fitting together. And not just a desire but maybe even a belief that this is really what our job is for? Maybe I'm reading too much into it, but to me this maybe hints at part of the reason we're am drawn to a field like graphic \boxplus ? Curious to know what you think.

And if youre uncomfortable with being included in this way, Im totally fine with anonymising, removing, or editing.

Thanks,
Stephen

Follow up questions for ☐

Yo ☐, hope all's good with you these days?

I've been piecing together the interviews from December and I'd love to include this section about your dream if that's alright with you? It seems to get at something I feel as well: this system that we've built up and these drawers full of grids, sometimes there's an angst or unresolved feeling that they're not going to work, they don't fit as an answer to the problem.

For me I think it might be something to do with order and chaos if that doesn't seem too much of a stretch, I've this need to structure things and fit them in a form, and the dream seems to get at that fear that it's not going to work. The grid is solid but reality turns out to be jelly at best, but very often custard and little bits of tinned strawberry and soggy sponge.

I assumed the dream is about the pressure or anxiety of running a studio? I wonder for you, do you see it more relating to the work itself or the management around that, or are these things that you consider separate from each other? I'm curious to know if you think of it the same way, or maybe it's something else to you and I'm projecting :)

And if you're uncomfortable with being included in this way, I'm totally fine with anonymising, removing, or editing.

Thanks,
Stephen

Follow up questions for ☐

Hey ☐, hope youre good!

I'm thinking of putting this section of the interview we did back in december in my thesis. Is that ok with you? I want to include it because I think it really captures some emotions that ☐ers feel quite often, some stress or anxiety or an attempt to grab onto something more stable. But I also find it really interesting that you were talking about jelly slipping through your hands, any idea why you didn't say sand or mud or gold but jelly? To me it seems like a fun and cute material to pick, even though its a bit lumpy and maybe even kinda gross sometimes.

I've been really interested in foods made of gelatin recently and there's something so mesmerising about them even though they're never the most appetising, and for sure unnatural or over-processed. Maybe you just said it off hand, but it makes sense to me as well about being a ☐er in some way? Something enjoyable and lovable about the jelly despite its weird unnatural wiggleness. Really interested to know if you have any thoughts or maybe you meant something completely different.

And if youre uncomfortable with being included in this way, Im totally fine with anonymising, removing, or editing.

Thanks,
Stephen

Conclusion

The title of this document, \boxplus , was borrowed from the mathematical theory of free probability where it symbolises free additive convolution, a way of relating terms that is more nuanced than traditional ideas of cause and effect. In the fragmented look at \boxplus in this document, which we've reached the end of now, I hope to have done something similar: a convoluted addition, freely placing things together to be held for a moment.

\boxplus involves a wide range of activities; typing, drawing grids, communicating with other specialists, quoting, drinking coffee, working out of office hours, having panic attacks, arguing, building myths, personal expression, keyboard shortcuts, dreaming, rubbing paper and exhaling, tilting your head and looking at the screen. We have examined when and how these actions happen, and more importantly, why they do, according to the \boxplus ers carrying them out.

These stories were gathered through various modes of describing, listening and understanding. It is important that these are different from conventional ways to frame the discipline, as I think a shift in viewpoint is needed. So not “ \boxplus er as Author” (Rock, 1996), “ \boxplus er as salesperson” (Pater, 2021) but instead \boxplus er “sitting at the machine, thinking” (Brodine, 1990) or “ \boxplus er without qualities” (Lorusso, 2023). The fragments have been situated and subjective rather than objective, they have been outside of categories because the categories are broken anyway.

Conclusion

Last night I dreamt I was standing on a hill in the Swiss Alps and you were there and all of our friends and the hill was covered in little fields but not like a grid like lots of different shapes and sizes and the sky opened in two and a ring of light so bright it nearly blinded me came out of my chest and yours and they all merged into each other and everyone opened their mouths to sing and the air was filled with so many sounds and one ☒er walked up to me and smiled and said

“I dunno, I'm more confused than ever”

and they said

and then you said

“a funny feeling its a bit weird”

“I'm just trying to touch it gently and
acknowledge it”

“live the gap between
where you are and
where you could be”

and then I was them and you were me and we laughed
and fell over and the hill turned into a bright pink jelly
ocean the whole sky was this sort of green-blue and
we all surfed wobbly waves and some people's
surfboards were Quiksilver and some they had built
themselves from a git repository but the sun was a
walnut and it was definitely moving but I couldnt tell
was it rising or setting but it didn't matter to us the
surf was great and everything smelled like magnolias.

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Colophon

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