Craig Ward

Popular Lies* About Graphic Design

ACTAR

Graphic design is easy

In as much as '*Graphic Design is Not a Proper Job*' (page 18), neither is it something that could ever be called easy. If you're doing it properly, that is. Frustratingly of course, the very best practitioners - design maestros like the *Paul Rand*s of the world - however, can truly make the craft appear effortless.

When a headline or piece of communication is presented in such a way that you can't imagine it ever looking any other way; when you can't pick a hole in the kerning of a single pair of letters; when you are struck between the eyes by a treatment so perfect that it seems almost familiar, and the elegant colourway and choice of typeface is pitch perfect... That is effortless design. To the casual observer, it may look like a simple task - and the tools we use are getting better and better (and making us lazier and lazier). For the rest of us, we have to work at it. We have to squint at the screen and stay up late. Walk away from it for days at a time, come back to it, start again, change things up, throw it away and try different typefaces in various combinations before finally - often begrudgingly - sending the work to print. Shaking our head as the file uploads wondering if there were something we could have done for it to be better.

Let's not confuse 'best work' with 'best-known work'. To my last point, the bigger agencies may get to work with larger, more visible clients but, with those clients come more meetings, more presentations to more people and more opinions having to be taken into account on each project. Good ideas very easily get buried.

The designers and studios I come back to from time to time - those whose work I most admire - are more often than not individuals or small, dynamic teams that can operate under the radar. This also means they're often overlooked in awards shows (often because they don't enter them - another discussion entirely). Don't for one moment think a big (in name or size) employer will guarantee you better work, that responsibility remains squarely with you.

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# A good idea doesn't require a budget

I'm hard pushed to call this a lie as its heart is definitely in the right place, but it's also a very naïve statement and glosses over a lot of factors. If you have an idea that pivots on a single, highly expensive realisation that can be achieved in no other way then, in all likelihood, it's probably not a very good idea. But equally, if you have a thought that by extension happens to require some more expensive equipment to create then that shouldn't detract from the quality of the idea itself.

I've managed to cajole many people into working with me on a shoestring - which is something I actually hate doing, as I think talented people should get paid properly - but ultimately, corners get cut and the final piece can end up feeling or looking compromised if you're not careful. Sometimes you just need to spend some money. And if you don't have the money, you need to get inventive very quickly and be extremely nice to people.

At that point, the enthusiasm of others for the project will act as a very effective barometer for whether it's a good idea or not.

L
E G I
B I L I
T Y A N D
R E A D A B I L
I T Y A R E B A S I C
A L L Y T H E S A M E

This is why you study. See 'An Education in Design is Pointless (Pg 26). I didn't intend this to be an educational book so I won't go into it here, suffice to say there are plenty of places you can look.

The rules are there to be broken
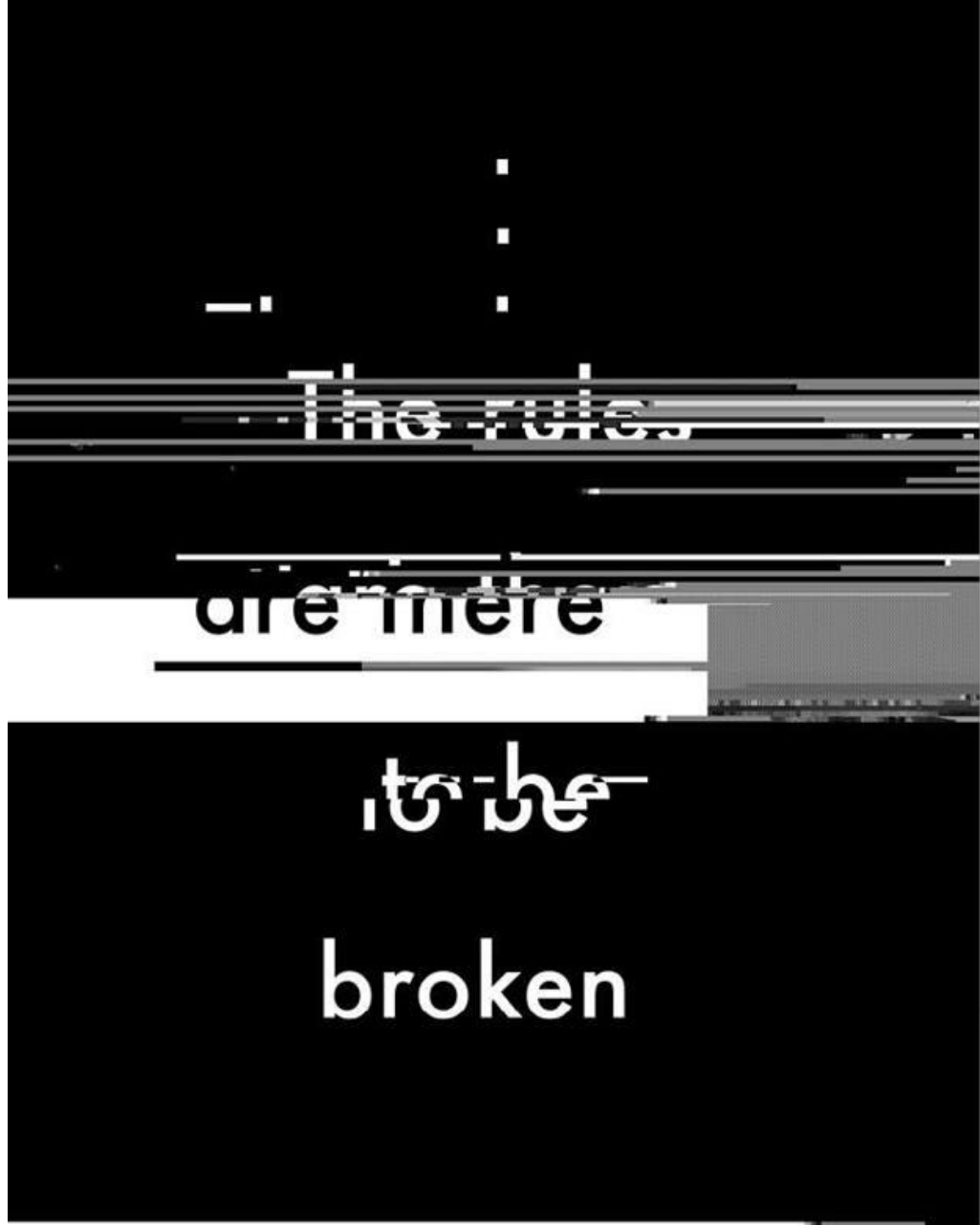
This loaded and over-used phrase both insinuates and assumes a lot of things; one being that design requires rules to be successful.

There are a large number of practitioners who see design as being more successful and expressive when it is loose and when rules are not adhered to. For my part (this is a book of opinions), I see it as more of a half truth, as opposed to an outright lie. Once you know what the rules are in the first place (see *An Education in Design is Pointless*' page 26) and you have a very good cause for breaking them, then and only then, should you consider doing something outside of 'the law'.

Comic Sans is the worst typeface ever created

Possibly the most uttered phrase in the history of design. I didn't even want to mention it but this is something I hear so often that I simply couldn't ignore it. A statement that has become popularised by design pond skimmers trying to look smart to the point that, even those with no connection to the industry of design whatsoever, know this to be a fact.

Except, it's just not true at all.

Comic Sans is a typeface that has inspired a hatred. An actual, palpable hatred. There are websites, *Facebook* groups and online petitions dedicated to the removal of it from society and a variety of slogan emblazoned t-shirts, mugs, mouse mats and bumper stickers that are greedily consumed by the masses. It even made its way into an omnibus ban bill put forward by the *Ontario Model Youth Parliament* in 2005.

To be clear, this is a typeface we're talking about. A digital file. Not a murderer or some carcinogenic substance. And what's worse, it is a completely unjustified vilification. From the vitriol you read online you would be right in assuming this typeface offends designers more than any image of Third World poverty ever could.

It used
to be the
case that
you had to go where
the work was,
and in the
past that
meant
moving to
your nearest
large city where
commercial opportunities
for designers were more
plentiful.

You gotta get   to New York*

I now live in New York
and prior to that I was
based in London, but
the fact is that 99%
of my projects come
in over email (or over   *London
the phone) from all   Paris
over the globe. I could, in fact,   Barcelona
work anywhere I choose   Berlin
to: my geographical   etc.
location has very little to
do with my
output.

The exception to this rule should probably be charity work, (though manage your expectations, see *'Charity clients will let you do as you please'* page 62) but my personal rule is to only accept direct approaches from charities themselves - as opposed to an award-hungry creative agency. Rest assured the Art Director commissioning you will not be giving up his/her wage to work on the project and nor should you be expected to in that case. Ten years in, I'm more confident in telling people where to go. In fact something I like to do is to ask the person emailing/calling me "Are you getting paid to ask me?" That's always a fun one.

Continually accepting these kinds of *'opportunity briefs'* will ultimately cheapen your own perception of your work and that filters through to the work itself. You can often tell when a portfolio is full of *'opportunities'*, particularly when you've been working in industry for a while.

I wish I could say I had the resolve to turn away from these kinds of propositions but I'm as guilty as the next designer, and, if I'm honest, some of those projects have led to more work from better paying clients. Again, the decision rests with you.
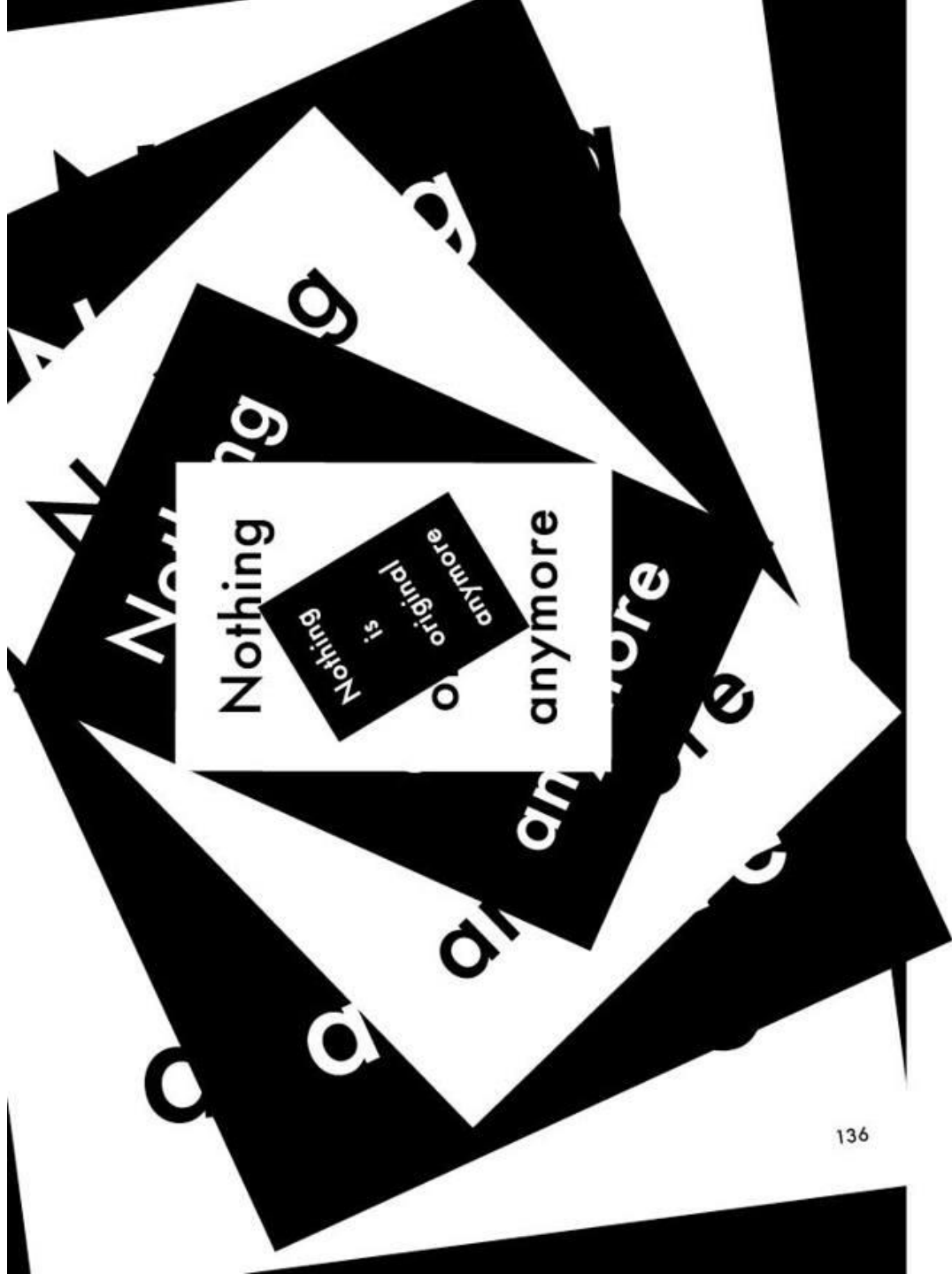
It's often said that 'everything has been done before' and I have so many problems with this statement that I barely know where to start.

The human brain is a wondrous and infinitely complex organ, its capabilities and limits still, as yet, undefined. When fed with the right combination of inspiration points a well educated, well read, hydrated and healthy brain will come up with original idea after original idea. As far as it is concerned.

And therein lies the rub.

At their best, pitches are an amazing opportunity. An unshackled chance to show what you and your agency can do. Few budget considerations. No threat of several rounds of amends. One shot. They're not supposed to be a chance to prove how late you can work, on how little sleep and how well you can push images around onscreen until they happen to fall into an arrangement that isn't entirely upsetting.

While this assumes an agency of a certain size, the best model for running a pitch, in my opinion, is to divide the time allowed thus: 35% planning and strategy, 25% brainstorming and idea generation for the execution, 35% of the time to actually create the work and allow that last 5% for your printer breaking down (it will, it always does) and production time; mounting, binding etc. If run properly, no-one needs to spend the night before the presentation at the office and turn up, bleary eyed at the train station.
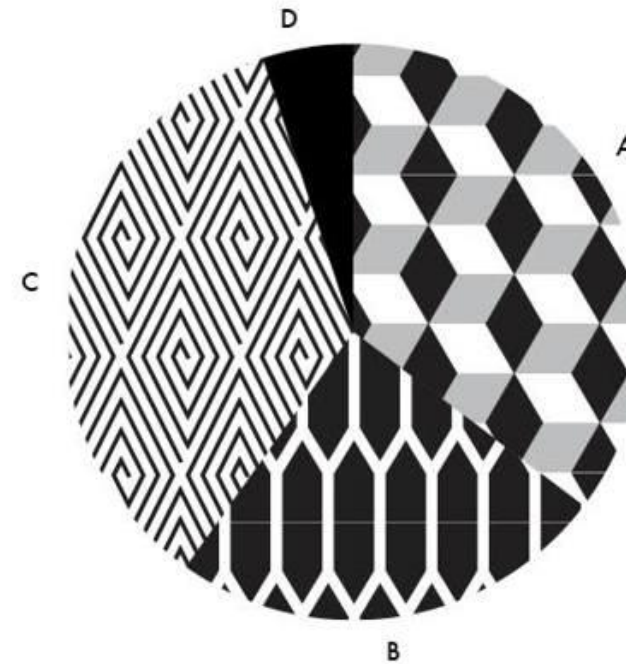
A . . . . Planning
B . . . . Idea Generation
C . . . . Work Creation
D . . . . Printer breakdown buffer

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your viewpoint) these days, a quick search online will reveal whether or not something has been executed before and to what extent but, put simply, it hasn't been executed by you. Your very involvement makes it an essentially original work and the desire to always be original can be an extremely stifling and creatively limiting way of working. It clouds your thinking and the pursuit of originality becomes an obsession that gets in the way of clear thought.

All you can do is try to come up with your best idea and realise it as well as you can. Far too much time is wasted thinking about other people's work. *Picasso* was a painter. He didn't invent painting, but he did do something new with it.

Equally, of course, the onus is on you as a designer to not seek to intentionally replicate someone's work and roll out the 'nothing is original' argument in your defence. Because that simply won't wash and you need to be honest with yourself. Let's face facts; no-one exists in a vacuum. You are and will continue to be inspired by other people's work. But, you are more than the sum of your parts and, hopefully, you will create new work that will go on to inspire others in turn.

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About the author

Craig Ward is a British Designer and Art Director currently based in New York. Over the course of his career he has been lucky enough to work with some of the highest profile clients across the fashion, music, advertising and editorial fields.

A contributor to several industry journals, former *Art Directors' Club Young Gun* (2008), recipient of the *Type Director's Club 'Certificate of Typographic Excellence'* (2009) and *TEDx* speaker (2012), his work has been shown, awarded and documented globally in countless books, magazines and exhibitions.

He wanted to write a book. So he wrote a book. The alternative being to not write a book. Which would have been lazy.

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