

TOOLS VS. TEMPLATES

A Commentary on Modern Graphic Design Ethics and Advancing Technologies

by

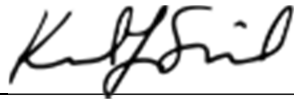
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine
Arts in the Department of Art

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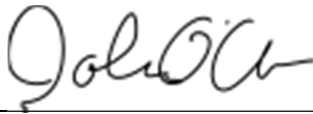
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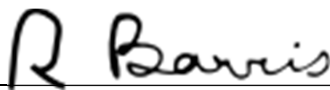
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Abstract

My thesis focuses on modern currents and the use of technology in the graphic design industry and academic programs at the collegiate level. It expresses a major concern with the reliance placed upon technology by those within the profession, the misconceptions this creates about the actual roles of graphic designers, and the abuse of professionals by non-designers and/or clients that this behavior encourages.

This project has developed from the combined years I have spent as a student, educator, and professional, and from what I have observed as recurring trends. I give a brief historical overview of the onset of design technology, leading into the use of it today, before describing “templates” (prefabricated design forms) and the problems and misconceptions they generate and promote. After this discussion, I provide suggestions to thwart these issues, based on my experiences and observations thus far as a member of the graphic design industry. Lastly, I discuss in greater detail the process involved in researching, writing, and developing the artwork which accompanies the writing. My art—6 digitally designed posters displayed in large, printed format—seeks to bring further awareness to the popular yet false impressions surrounding the graphic design process. They are stylized as Public Service Announcements, utilizing hyperbole to dramatize the message to draw in the audience. They help connect the troubling movements seen in graphic design to those who are uninformed or indifferent to their impact.

My intentions with these written and visual narrations are to inform the unaware and also aid in shaping my path through graphic design. Articulating my thoughts has forced me to clearly define how I will approach both creative and instructive processes

for the greater good of the industry as a whole. The process of creating and completing this project has instilled in me a stronger confidence moving forward as a productive member in all aspects of graphic design. I hope my work will positively impact the future of graphic design and help realign those practices which have diverged from its true nature.

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Department of Art, 2015

Radford University

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Chapter 1. Introduction

In July of 1985 a company named Aldus introduced PageMaker as a viable graphic design technology,¹ and it has all been downhill for the industry since then. A technological streamlining rapidly reshaped the production process in graphic design but also steadily crept into the creative process. Though these advances were first met with skepticism and a reluctance to overturn well-established practices, the measured success using new software programs won over professionals and industry leaders. Previous operations could include upwards of six separate specialists: layout designers, camera operators, production artists, typesetters, platemakers, press operators;² each was responsible for one step of the larger whole in producing completed graphic design work. Suddenly an automated computer, programming language, and software system could mathematically calculate layouts, typography, imagery, and print output. Armed with design know-how and coded algorithms, six specialists dwindled down to two or three. Today it might be just one from start to finish. Doing design “by hand” is just a nostalgic whim to many modern graphic designers who know nothing but the digital era and doing things “by mouse.” Has our work suffered because of this? In the decades that followed PageMaker, expansions within graphic design produced visual milestones which perhaps even the ad men of the golden late 1950s and ‘60s of advertising could not have envisioned. Technology forges ahead with every passing minute and with this, the visual capabilities and impact of graphic design. So, maybe not all downhill.

¹ Phillip B. Meggs and Alston W. Purvis, *Meggs' History of Graphic Design* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 531.

² *Ibid.*, 530.

Fresh off the heels of the release of Apple Computer's Macintosh model and Adobe Systems' PostScript programming language of the mid-1980s, PageMaker indeed ushered in a new form of graphic design. The resulting constant evolution since that introduction has made trying to define graphic design as a job or a function one large grey area. As mediums within the graphic design niche become more in-depth and distinct from one another, specialist streamlining is beginning to be reversed. In 2015 we are still in the midst of this process, but the diverging is apparent nonetheless. From my observations, companies looking to hire within the graphic design industry—specifically those who exhibit some knowledge of its inner workings—know to seek more than a generic “graphic designer” but instead one who has specialized in just a few areas. Of course, there are still some businesses that continue to search for those generic graphic designers who boast a little knowledge about a lot of areas. We may never be rid of the latter, but the former is gaining ground quickly.

Still, the graphic designer today enjoys many modern conveniences, allowing him or her to dabble in various graphic design mediums without the need to devote entire careers or lifetimes to attaining proficiency in one area. While this has obvious benefits, the cost of this availability seems to be increasing automation and streamlined processes. Technology does a lot in the background of our software programs and hardware devices to ensure easy access to design manipulation. A simple click here and there, and the entire aesthetic of a poster has shifted. Drag and drop for a brand new web space. Check these options and presto!—print ready files. It's arguably not all negative, but the irking thought not many seem to consider is capability versus responsibility. Asking “Can it be done?” instead of “Should it be done?” does not adequately address the impact of

advancing technology. Is eliminating extra steps, which eventually eliminates knowledge, truly beneficial to our design industry? Without answering any of those questions, the updated technology remains widely available and almost universally used. No proof of competency is needed to acquire graphic design software or programs, which invites “untrained or marginally trained practitioners to enter the field.”³ Learn the program, and you have learned design?

Before I make a hypocrite of myself, let me clarify. I absolutely benefit from the automated processes available in design software and in no way consider myself proficient in every medium associated with graphic design without their use. However, in my education and experience as a graphic designer, I have learned how to manipulate the software, going beyond surface operations, to achieve design solutions. I understand that these conveniences are tools of my trade, but not templates; they will not solve design problems on their own. Modern technology does not replace theory and principles, and finding the answer will never successfully substitute for creating the answer. There is a notable difference between utilizing design convenience and depending on it, which I fear has become a more and more prominent practice. It seems especially prevalent among amateurs and those new to the industry. While I do believe true professionals view these amenities as tools, there is an alarming number of graphic designers (and non-designers) finding moderate success treating them as templates.

The posters I created to complement my writing further address this misconception and abuse of modern technology. Developed from wanting to visually expand upon my commentary, they strip the misguided process of using templates down

³ Ibid., 532.

to its essence in order to make a bold statement about such use. The art simplifies my dialogue into a more widely understood message about the practices associated with graphic design, even if the associations are wildly inaccurate. Through hyperbole and mild paradoxical undertones, the idea that true design can be accomplished with such automated and prefabricated templates is blatantly rejected in these posters. They serve as a warning against fraudulent design practices to any who subscribe to the illusion that authentic design is generated in this fashion. I designed this content to be striking in visual form to parallel the strength of my convictions in written form.

Chapter 2. What Are Templates?

The idea of templates in graphic design is a driving force behind this commentary and consequently must be elaborated on within this context. Referencing graphic design software, hardware, programs, and technology generalized under the blanket term “templates” is a hazily defined approach. For this purpose, templates are automated processes or prefabricated blueprints which allow the user to streamline or skip steps within the process of creating the final output. From this perspective, industry standard programs like Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, or InDesign are in fact broad templates themselves, not to mention the plethora of templated effects and design options contained within. These design-aiding programs point out there is a place and proper use for such design amenities in our modern world. They, their features, and the computer which facilitates them “allow for ambitious design experiments at minimal expense.”⁴ It is when they are abused as a quick means to an end with no unique solutions applied during the design process that a problem arises.

Consider stock photography or typefaces and their various fonts. They are nicely packaged design products in virtual stock across the web and often can be found for free. Though cost cannot be a guarantee of quality, the distributors of these seem to have a grasp on what is worth paying for in the eyes of a graphic designer. The very accessible possibility exists to take one’s own photographs for a project or to create a typeface from scratch which fits the work’s aesthetic, so why outsource design needs? Most often time and money dictate this answer; it may be too costly to hire photography models or too

⁴ Steven Heller and Julie Lasky, *Borrowed Design* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993), 160.

time consuming to formulate a new typeface. Buying one of these products includes a license outlining personal and/or commercial use. Your computer comes out of the box loaded with typefaces—once designed by someone at some point in time—for your unlimited use. A good designer is assisted but not restricted by these aids. A beautiful photograph will look terrible if it's pixelated, just as a decorative typeface fails if it's illegible. These are convenient in the right hands and false hope in the wrong. Similar to photography or typeface licensing are identity books, the outlined standards and guides to the proper usage of branding elements within a visual identity system. A designer creates a design accompanied by a template of how, when, and where to use it. In this instance, the template ensures consistency of the unique design choices already made.

The problem is when all the design choices are already determined. There are a multitude of downloadable blueprints and prefabricated designs freely available across the internet. From logo design to business cards, portfolio displays to presentation slides, to tutorials and even entire web pages, you simply click, open, drag, and drop. Other than switching out “John Doe” for your name, the work is done. Several on-demand print services offer a myriad of designs ready to go. Select the “right” combo for you from the menu—would you like to supersize that?—and your new visual identity is all boxed up for you. These companies “provide public access to the means of design and production, at whatever levels people deem satisfactory.”⁵ The bigger problem might be “that some clients can't see the difference, don't care, or are not willing to pay for it.”⁶ Templates are

⁵ Meredith Davis, “Raising the Bar for Higher Education,” in *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. by Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2005), 15.

⁶ Ibid.

generally quick and easy, though they “encourage formulaic design.”⁷ Whether it’s a client masquerading as a graphic designer or “real” graphic designer masquerading as competent, it’s simply not graphic design. Templates are the rules, which “are made to be broken,” if “only exceptionally.”⁸ Professionals understand the exceptions. This instant-design formula understands nothing but the means to an end. If design is a response to mass production,⁹ is it not tragically ironic that design has become mass produced?

Shelved closely to the virtual stock of templates are design contests and competitions. While some professionals make a living winning these, use them just to hone skills, or as a networking tactic,¹⁰ the majority of those submitting bids or designs are amateurs. A client simply posts general guidelines and requirements, and those competing respond with designs and bids for payment. It’s the WebMD of design. List your symptoms and in no time at all your diagnosis appears. Select the winner for treatment options. The whole institute cheapens and “amateurize(s)”¹¹ the profession and design process. Perhaps appropriate at student levels, in the professional world it seems the negatives drastically darken the positives. It gives clients unrealistic expectations and little understanding to actual graphic design and its benefits. These contests remove the trial-and-error and development process essential to cultivating good, successful design. They may elicit custom-fitted solutions but still promote a one-size-fits-all culture in that the answer must be among the responses with little care to how that answer was provided.

⁷ Heller and Lasky, *Borrowed Design*, 42.

⁸ Lorraine Wild, “That Was Then: Corrections & Amplifications,” in *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. by Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2005), 52.

⁹ Katherine McCoy, “Education in an Adolescent Profession,” in *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. by Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2005), 3.

¹⁰ Jessica Carew Kraft, “Confessions of the Crowdsourcers,” *Communication Arts* 400, Jan./Feb. (2015): 192.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Raw templates in all their various forms and applications miss the learning curve. They do not explore possibilities or consider wrong answers,¹² but simply lead you from start to finish in an unwavering, straight line. You can achieve interesting design without the theory and knowledge to back it up—though “if design is about looking cool...it’s going to be a hollow enterprise”¹³—but then you ignore what has shaped the industry into its current state. Proper graphic design has context and meaning, not just pleasing visual form which on occasion may also function. Templates create a dystopian design culture propagandizing that design answers—have you even asked the right question yet?—already exist, and there’s no need to create them. Again I say, any number of these templates have the potential to be useful to professional designers, but it is the manipulation of the effect which validate their usage, the customization process which crafts automation into unique visual expressions. They are then tools, not templates.

The environment this creates for designers, non-designers, and clients alike is a gross misjudgment of the actual graphic design industry. Named for the psychologists who developed this theory, the Dunning-Kruger effect explains this cognitive bias. The unskilled or low-skilled participants think their surface-skimming knowledge to be far more advanced than is reality, whereas the highly skilled participants are more liable to miscalculate their own competencies. The low-skilled fail to acknowledge their deficiencies, and the highly skilled underestimate their proficiencies as general ability.¹⁴

¹² Leslie Becker, “Catching Up with the Past: Shifting the Pedagogical Paradigm,” in *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. by Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2005), 55.

¹³ Terry Irwin, quoted in Sara Breselor, “The Blank Slate,” *Communication Arts* 400, Sept./Oct. (2014): 34.

¹⁴ David Dunning, Kerri Johnson, Joyce Ehrlinger and Justin Kruger, “Why People Fail to Recognize Their Own Incompetence,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12, no. 3 (June 2003): 83-87.

As Darwin was quoted in the original 1999 paper, “Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge.”¹⁵

In September of 2013, Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer and team revealed their logo design update, and in her Tumblr blog posted about her involvement:

“So, one weekend this summer, I rolled up my sleeves and dove into the trenches with our logo design team: Bob Stohrer, Marc DeBartolomeis, Russ Khaydarov, and our intern Max Ma. We spent the majority of Saturday and Sunday designing the logo from start to finish, and we had a ton of fun weighing every minute detail.”¹⁶

She also professed her “personal love” of logos “and, most of all, Adobe Illustrator...I’m not a pro, but I know enough to be dangerous :)”¹⁷ Granted, marketing research and some development occurred before the two days in which the final logo came about, but the dangerous aspect here is Mayer’s assumed knowledge of design through her admiration of branding and tinkering in Adobe Illustrator. The problem is not that she took an active role in branding development, but that she overestimates her competency on the matter, which is harmful to graphic design.

¹⁵ Justin Kruger and David Dunning, “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77, no. 6 (1999): 1121-34.

¹⁶ Marissa Mayer, “Geeking Out on the Logo,” *Marissamayr, Tumblr*, Sept. 2013, <http://marissamayr.tumblr.com/post/60336044815/geeking-out-on-the-logo>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3. Impact on the Graphic Design World

Desktop publishing is plaguing the industry in that it projects a false perspective. More and more clients want to buy the software themselves, learn the program, and by extension, learn to design. Why pay a graphic designer to slap together fonts and images, when anybody can do it from home? In my Art Appreciation courses, I ask students at the beginning of the semester whether they consider certain images I show them to be art or artful. It's a mix of mediums, -isms, and time periods. Although many falter seeing abstract expressionism, the most resounding and confident rejections I get are when I show them graphic design work. "Anybody could do that, it's just a fancy font." The debate of distinguishing design from fine art aside, the exposure to what they think they know regarding graphic design has negatively altered their impression of the industry, part of the "democratizing effects of technology."¹⁸ If they can apply a photo filter, pick a "fancy font," or build a website on their own, what's the big deal?

More important, what's the answer? "We cannot...restrict the use of any new development in information technology to ourselves. If others want to handle the gear, however ineptly, who's to stop them?"¹⁹ True, and as the wide availability of such technology does have useful purpose among professional graphic designers, removing access does not make sense. Before Lucian Bernhard's 1906 Priester Matches poster, graphic design was not even considered a formal profession.²⁰ Since, it has "transcend[ed]

¹⁸ Breselor, "The Blank Slate," 31.

¹⁹ Ken Garland, "Anxious About the Future?" in *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. by Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2005), 39.

²⁰ Steven Heller, "Graphic Design Magazines: Das Plakat," *U&Ic* 25, vol. 25. no. 4 (Spring 1999), https://www.typotheque.com/articles/graphic_design_magazines_das_plakat.

the needs of commonplace business.”²¹ Graphic design is a narration through visual communication, not just simple visuals. The story element is key, and “flair with software doesn’t make you a designer.”²² “The real innovation lies in crafting the right story and finding the right platform on which to share it.”²³ The disconnect between perception and reality must be addressed.

It’s not an issue of losing jobs to DIY’ers or one of pride in constantly defending what I do to outsiders. It’s that for graphic design to continue moving forward as a valued profession and cultural commodity, that culture must be informed. During a recent freelance job, I had a client request I prepare a tutorial on how to achieve some effect (at no additional charge to the original contract) so that he could replicate my design theme on his own in the future. Would you expect any other profession to instruct you for free so that you need not pay for those services in the future? Some designers sell their work via the web but have “illustrations frequently ripped off and reproduced without consent.”²⁴ It’s hard to combat that offense, but why does the culture think it permissible to abuse someone’s livelihood in that way? Because it isn’t a product in a store, it is yours for the taking? Because it’s creative, it’s not work? “The fact remains that no other industry gives it away like we do.”²⁵

The fault is not entirely in the uninformed non-designer culture. Some lies with the amateur designers willing to do the cheap work or whatever a client requests,

²¹ Ibid.

²² Kenneth Fitzgerald, “An Instructor of Concern,” in *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. by Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2005), 161.

²³ Brian Howlett, “Why Do We Pitch,” *Communication Arts* 401, September/October (2014): 28.

²⁴ Sandra Dieckmann, quoted in Lisa Hassel, “From Maker to Seller,” *Communication Arts* 400, Nov./Dec. (2014): 32.

²⁵ Howlett, “Why Do We Pitch?” 28.

sometimes in fear of losing the paying job or sometimes in lack of design knowledge. The difference between the amateur and professional is likened to that between advertising and branding. The former is a short term solution, a template with which to fill your name and number. The latter is long term strategy, a tool with which to develop an idea. Amateurs are likely to exaggerate their skills, both in their mind and to the client, and provide a quick answer. Professionals may at times underestimate their competencies, but they develop a solution to the design problem. “With sophisticated computer programs and templates, which offer a wide menu of mix ‘n’ match stylistic elements, the application of style is made even easier than selecting the day’s outfit.”²⁶ Those that believe this is graphic design, both designer and non-designer alike, only perpetuate the problem.

Perhaps the greatest of ironies is the unwillingness to accept graphic design as a valuable commodity, when it surrounds and impacts our lives daily. Design seems to be of little interest to the general public, yet it’s everywhere and manipulates just about everything in daily life. Though the long reach of graphic design encompasses more knowledge and skill than a single practitioner may ever attain proficiency in, it also means the influence of graphic design is far-reaching. From clothing to packaging to books to magazines to advertising campaigns to manuals to street signage to bathroom signage to that pen you stole from your doctor’s office with a brand name prescription featured on it—a graphic designer had a hand in it. Perhaps that this influence is sometimes only received subconsciously negates proper respect to its source. “Design

²⁶ Heller and Lasky, *Borrowed Design*, 99.

changes the way we live.”²⁷ Even more simply addressed by Paul Rand, “Design is everything. Everything!”²⁸

²⁷ Hank Richardson, “How We Teach. How We Learn What Is Taught,” in *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. by Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2005), 239.

²⁸ Paul Rand, interview by Michael Kroeger, Arizona State University (Tempe, AZ), February 1995, quoted in Michael Kroeger, *Paul Rand: Conversation with Students* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), i.

Chapter 4. Improvement

The possibilities for improvement on these misconceptions and misuses of technology exist in both the realms of designers and non-designers. The latter need better awareness of the design industry, its potential for impact, and its depth of complexity. The former need more responsibility and accountability with the conveniences of modern design technology and a more consistent application of professional services as practicing graphic designers. Our culture needs to be shown the value in design, and designers need to be asserting their value. The more graphic designers are willing to engage in amateur practices, both within the design process and relationships with clients, the more non-designers perceive the environment as one they control and dictate. It's a dangerous circular current. When non-designers dominate this exchange—with little actual knowledge supporting their actions—design industries are forced into acquiescence for the simple notion of maintaining status quo. Though there certainly are relationships which do balance designer and non-designer interactions with appropriate respect and understanding of the design process, there are far too many personifying the first description.

Non-designers need more, or just perhaps better, exposure to modern art and design. Most liberal arts based academic programs require some course related to art appreciation. In my experience, these tend to focus on the fine arts, as distinct from design, spending the majority of the syllabus in a historical perspective. While I would not suggest altogether forsaking the historical angles, I do propose a better balance between what has led to modern culture and an examination of that modern culture. I also propose that if an institution only offers and/or requires one course in the appreciation of

the applied or visual arts, the curriculum must encompass a greater variety of these arts: fine arts, design, architecture, craft movements, etc. I would rather see multiple course offerings and requirements in a liberal arts structure, but presume altering current single courses instead is the more realistic approach. I strongly believe non-design or non-art students will have a better response to their forced interactions with art if it is presented in a more meaningful, tangible context. Show them the impact of art and design as more than a learned trade but rather a modern profession; explain the impact of technology in the arts; reveal the creative processes in addition to the final product. Above all, these courses must remind students of their everyday interactions with art and design: that our society is not immune to their significance and cannot remain apathetic to their existence.

Aristotle expressed his belief that a student's lack of exposure to subjects beyond his or her immediate chosen field of study or trade rendered the student "unserviceable for the external exercise of goodness."²⁹ My agreement stems not just from my passionate concern for my profession and its future but also from my personal experience. Non-designers benefit from arts exposure, and vice versa: those seeking careers within the arts benefit from introduction to non-arts topics, beyond those of basic educational foundations such as reading and writing, or general mathematics and sciences. On several occasions have my studies in calculus, chemistry, geography, or literature—courses not directly related to my field—stimulated unexpected creative ideas or given me better understanding of how to approach a design project. I have started publishing my own editions of literature classics which have passed into the public domain; understanding

²⁹ Aristotle, quoted in Gunnar Swanson, "Graphic Design Education as a Liberal Art: Design and Knowledge in the University and the 'Real World,'" in *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. by Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2005), 23.

cartographic foundations and physical geography have helped me create maps and diagrams of both interior and exterior spaces; witnessing the interactions of mixtures and compounds in chemistry has helped me realistically render natural elements in my own work; and I was once specifically sought out to collaborate on a project, creating presentation elements and illustrations of graphing formulas, because of my background in calculus.

MIT's legendary Building 20 led to some of the greatest advancements in acoustics, photography, radar, and many more for over fifty years largely because the hastily constructed building forced unlikely interactions and collaborations of experts in seemingly unrelated fields.³⁰ This is not to say a student should not focus their efforts during formal education. My argument is simply one for exposure to (not competency of) studies outside one's field, regardless of being a designer or non-designer. For designers, however, this extra knowledge can also bolster a proposal when more than design principles support its application. "Hearing 'we trust your design judgement' is hardly ever true,"³¹ and possessing solid foundations in subjects outside your immediate field can often be used in defense of design decisions, which make the design more relatable to a client. These "complexities involved in becoming a graphic designer will forever require solid educational foundations" which include liberal and illiberal pursuits "in a serious academic environment."³²

³⁰ Phillip J. Hilts, "Last Rites for a 'Plywood Palace' That Was a Rock of Science," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Mar. 31, 1998, URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/03/31/science/last-rites-for-a-plywood-palace-that-was-a-rock-of-science.html>.

³¹ Kimberly Coles, quoted in "Overheard," *Communication Arts* 403, Mar./Apr. (2015): 35.

³² Steven Heller, introduction to *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2005), x.

Within a graphic design course of study, there are also adjustments to be made in order to continually promote professional practices and discourage amateur operations. As mentioned before, template design teachings can be as useful as they are harmful. They aid professionals and make several design avenues more accessible, but in the hands of students or amateurs, can falsely impress upon them the encouragement of shortcuts and product over process. Even online tutorials, which break down the software steps to achieve specific visual results, can be misused if those participating do not learn to apply this knowledge further than the original content or example. This self-teaching and exploration should still be valued³³ and encouraged, but only if it leads to greater understanding and application as a concept instead of a singular iteration.

Design professors must emphasize development by suggestion and not dictation. Much can be gained from the critiques and advice of experts in the field, but particularly with graphic design, students should agree with the feedback before altering their work—even if that agreement comes only after pursuing every other adjustment first. It is extremely important for young graphic designers entering the field to be able to lead clients in making design decisions, not simply follow the will of the client. A balance should be struck but only one which recognizes the services of a graphic designer in a professional consultation capacity. Academic environments have the dangerous potential of acclimating students into a dictating relationship with a project overseer (whether professor or client) in which their role is greatly diminished. Students should be regularly expected to present their work—both the physical manifestation and the conceptual components—in a professional manner, and apply any critiques in a way conducive to the

³³ McCoy, "Education in an Adolescent Profession," 4.

context of their overall design goal. “Too often...courses are taught as superficial surveys of graphic style with no examinations of social, cultural, and political, contexts. This only furthers many graphic design students’ tendency to stylistic” submission and “imitation.”³⁴

Though out of modern necessity formal graphic design education has to include the technical skills of navigating through design programs and technologies, it should also include understanding the limitations of these programs as replacing the graphic designers themselves. Learning the programs or using prefabricated templates does not a designer make. Though the programs regularly update their interfaces and capabilities, calling for a refresher course from time to time, they create largely stagnant knowledge requiring no expansion of skill. The design process and creative skill also taught in formal education is a constantly evolving enigma which demands constant attention. It is more than new styles or new techniques—though that does play a part—but rather learning new design context, cultural and social impact, and new applications of your profession. “Lifelong, self-initiated learning” must be emphasized to keep the graphic design industry relevant because there is a “tendency for these [recent] grads to regard education as...complete in four years.”³⁵ Students and young graphic designers absolutely need to engage in continual development implemented in their work for “if these lessons are not applied, the lessons are lost.”³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 8.

³⁵ Ibid., 9

³⁶ Nancy Mayer, “Putting Criticism into Critique,” in *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. by Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2005), 99.

Chapter 5. Art and Process

From the beginning, this project has been about creating a commentary on modern graphic design in specific relation to technological advances and its perception outside the industry. Although the shape of this work has shifted throughout the research process and even during the execution of original intentions, the central purpose has remained. My regard in this matter is not just of self-interest but of concern for the graphic design industry and the future of design in our culture.

When I began considering this concept as a thesis pursuit, I started with very general ideas based on my almost seven years in academia, mostly as a student but some as an educator, and six years working part-time as a freelance graphic designer. I wondered if my experience was too limited in range to have formed observations that might apply to an industry as a whole. Thus I began reading other commentaries, essays, articles, and shop-talk about graphic design, both in education and in practice. The research mostly lent support to my opinions and offered a great many alternate perspectives and ideas which I found incredibly enlightening. Beyond the scope of this written component, my readings have influenced how I will continue to approach graphic design as a practitioner and an educator. Even in teaching art appreciation courses, I have found opportunities to “practice what I preach.”

In this process I have found that many thoughts which I made clear in my head but had trouble articulating were more easily expressed once I branched out into others' expansions on the subjects. Occasionally it was coming across writing I disagreed with which facilitated my articulations. The research process altogether was largely a validation, which gave me confidence to move forward in my own commentary. Not that

I found others' opinions to regurgitate, but that I discovered my observations had merit and were not unfounded due to my relatively young age in graphic design, gave me conviction in purpose.

Finding varied resources further prompted me to fill a void from my own education and experience thus far. In my small undergraduate program, which was still finding its own voice in development during my tenure, exploring outside of the classroom was encouraged but not emphasized nearly enough. Some students took it upon themselves, but I largely did not. Looking back now from the near completion of my master's degree, I think I was simply intimidated to find out just how much I did not know or was not capable of, which would confront me with my own inadequacies. In the latter half of my undergraduate program, I began to overcome that and did start to explore graphic design outside of my bubble. Certainly a portion of the blame falls on me for my late start, but I believe had the emphasis existed in my beginning years I would have altered my behavior sooner. This project has reminded me to constantly seek out new inspiration and to not lie still within graphic design.

Originally my intention was to create design work which directly utilized templates in the design process. It was to show what work would be achieved using the template as it was given—as an amateur or non-designer might do—and using the template as a mere tool or starting point to be manipulated into a unique solution—as a professional would do. The further into my research and creative process I went, the more I became disenchanted with this visual narration. Although it illustrated a key point I sought to make in my commentary, it fell flat in conceptualizing a bigger disconnect in

perception and reality of the graphic design industry. I needed a stronger message and more unique answer.

As my project progressed, it occurred to me what I really hoped to communicate with my design work was a wake-up call for both designers and non-designers regarding the state of the industry. I wanted it to serve as a warning of what I believed was a realistic expectation of the future of design were technological advances not properly vetted before being embraced with reckless abandon. Wanting to produce these warnings in a sensationalized form to gain attention led me to seek inspiration from propaganda posters from World War I and World War II and modern Public Service Announcements (PSAs). They are bold visual messages which reflect(ed) topical social and political currents in society and culture. Their approach blended perfectly into the way I hoped to present my concerns for graphic design. Both of these types of prints heavily influenced the direction I moved my written and visual work, ultimately leading me to choosing large format, printed posters as my medium.

I decided to proceed with more emphasis on the writing portions first because organizing my notes and research into a cohesive form seemed to inspire visions of potential poster designs. The connections I was drawing to models outside the design industry was a good way to approach them. The designs featuring imagery would make references to situations a non-designer might be more familiar with than direct information regarding graphic design. For designers, the poster context would still be familiar enough information to also make that connection. It was important to be able to reach both audiences, which is why I felt utilizing exaggeration and metaphor could be a unifying element. I created six posters to serve as PSAs about modern design.

In the beginning I started work with color and a desire for vibrance in text and illustration. I soon became unhappy with the results, however. The color became a distraction and turned the message into a more overt attempt at humor. While I think there is an underlying dose of wit or wry humor to my work, I do not want that to overshadow the earnest concern I am expressing. I decided to move into a mostly black and white palette with a few uses of gray scale. Making that decision also altered using lots of imagery—doing so would have created an abundance of grayscale on the page, meshing everything together into a neutral appearance. I wanted a stark, bold composition which forced itself into the audience’s attention. Stripping down the poster designs into bare elements felt more natural to my own design process. Normally, with any project I start work in black and white (or just monotoes) first. Even if my color palette is decided already, I want to create work which stands on its own for design merit and is not dependent upon color to make a statement. Moving my posters into this raw state felt entirely appropriate, for I wanted to expose the raw reality of graphic design. In this I was strongly influenced by Lucian Bernhard and the Plakatstil movement, which had focused on object recognition and association to communicate effectively. Bernhard helped launch graphic design as a profession beyond skilled trade, and his stylistic preferences have always inspired me. His approach to using minimal yet strong design elements helped propel me in this new direction.

I also began thinking of one of my favorite literature genres, dystopian fiction. Some of the uses of modern design technology remind me greatly of novels like *Fahrenheit 451*,³⁷ *1984*,³⁸ or *The Hunger Games*,³⁹ in which a controlling faction dictates

³⁷ Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1953).

the culture. Things aren't created, save by a select few, but are just given as is. That reality is accepted by most, rejected by few. Thinking of these stories and their emphasis on cultures which quelled creative and unique thinking influenced the rejection of superfluous ornamentation in my designs to further demonstrate my arguments.

Beyond the black and white palette and size formatting, another connecting element between the posters is the icon in the lower right corner which reads, "this is not graphic design." In keeping with a PSA format, I created the icon to unify all the messages to the greater idea or cause behind the work. The icon is mostly text with a few simple design elements, all solid white fill on a black background. The background field leaves a larger margin at the bottom in conjunction with the usual format for mounting and displaying graphic design work. The typeface is a straightforward sans serif with various sizing to align three lines of text on the left and right side. The bottom two lines align to the vertical strokes of the T's in "this is not" in the top line. The O of "not" features a slashing line through the center which is universal signage for prohibited behavior. The G in "design" has been altered, which also impacts the E. The cross on the G continues through to the other side of the letter when it then angles upward and tapers, crossing through the I and S to connect as the middle cross of the E. The symbolic significance contains dual meaning. The G as a whole now resembles a padlock which has been unlocked, as I have aimed to reveal an inner truth in graphic design, an exposure to the true nature and meaning of such work. The lower half, which reaches over to the E, illustrates a pipe, inspired by Rene Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* and its questioning of preconceived beliefs and accepted realities. Magritte's work also inspired

³⁸ George Orwell, *1984* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949).

³⁹ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic, 2008).

the text of the icon as a whole, as that painting displays “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” which translates to “this is not a pipe.” It plays on the idea of remembering the difference between artistic renderings and actual objects, as my concept seeks to remind our society the difference between template and actual design.

Two posters feature only quotes: *Dangerous* and “*Design*.” *Dangerous* is a quote from Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer after her company revealed an update on their logo and branding identity. Her blog describes the creative process in greater detail, but she likened the design process to a weekend at design camp where the result was their logo. She corresponds her love of logos and branding to actual skill in creating one, her knowledge of Adobe Illustrator to knowledge of design—that a software program makes the difference. “*Design*” is a quote from a previous client I wish to remain unnamed. After working on several successful projects for him, the client informed me that he had purchased the design software so he could now do it himself. He asked for a tutorial on how I had designed and laid out a logo and brochure so he could do that work from here on out and not have to pay (me) for it. He wanted the tutorial for free, and did write it as “design.” I soon after stopped working with that client, without giving him the tutorial, but it’s indicative of the expectations of many non-designers who are woefully ignorant regarding design. Both quotes are emblematic of the larger issue in education lacking adequate liberal arts emphasis in modern context.

Cake and *Large #8* have paralleled prefabricated design to food mixes and fast food drive-thrus. *Cake* refers to templates requiring just a few simple ingredients to add to the mixture to complete the recipe: in this example just adding your business name. *Large #8* refers to templates existing as combinations of branding elements awaiting your

selection and ready to be served before you've even paid. Both speak of the quick and easy mentality many assume when seeking design services. Customers want it cheap and fast in lieu of quality. It completely undermines the goals in design to create solutions to specific problems. This process puts it backwards, anticipating needs instead of addressing them.

1,2,3 and *1 of 1000* also reflect the misconception that design is simply stringing a typeface, an image or logo, and color palette together to create instant design. *1,2,3* specifically refers to this selection process and also plays on the dependence of technology to create in our stead. No matter what foundational elements are selected, letting the design be processed outside of your direct control is not graphic design. Similarly, *1 of 1000* hints at design on demand sites which lay out hundreds (maybe thousands) of choices to select from without even knowing the needs of a client. Sure, you can filter the search results, but the remaining choices are still short-term visual snapshots. Simply adding your brand name does not make the design become your brand name. All of the posters reflect misconception and abuse of technology which plagues the graphic design industry.

In Closing

The entirety of my work in writing and designing has been centered on the current state of graphic design in our society from the perspectives of both designers and non-designers, and the illusions which cloud reality. The process has boosted my confidence as a graphic designer and an educator and has given me inspiration as I move forward in my career. Regarding this project specifically, it will translate into my teaching efforts and creative process. I will implement the previously outlined changes to curricula and programs to the extent my capabilities will let me, and I will propose necessary changes to entities beyond my direct reach. I will continue to work as a graphic designer in a manner befitting my ethical standards to promote my work as a professional creative service. I hope my work will have an influence on future graphic designers and always remind them of the difference between tools and templates in their own work. This project has been a long, evolving process that has provided me an outlet to express my experience in the graphic design industry thus far. It is the culmination of seven academic and six professional years which has led me through this work and an introspection of my creative process and approach. It has given me a rough template on where to proceed from here, but more importantly given me the tools to make that journey uniquely mine.

Figures

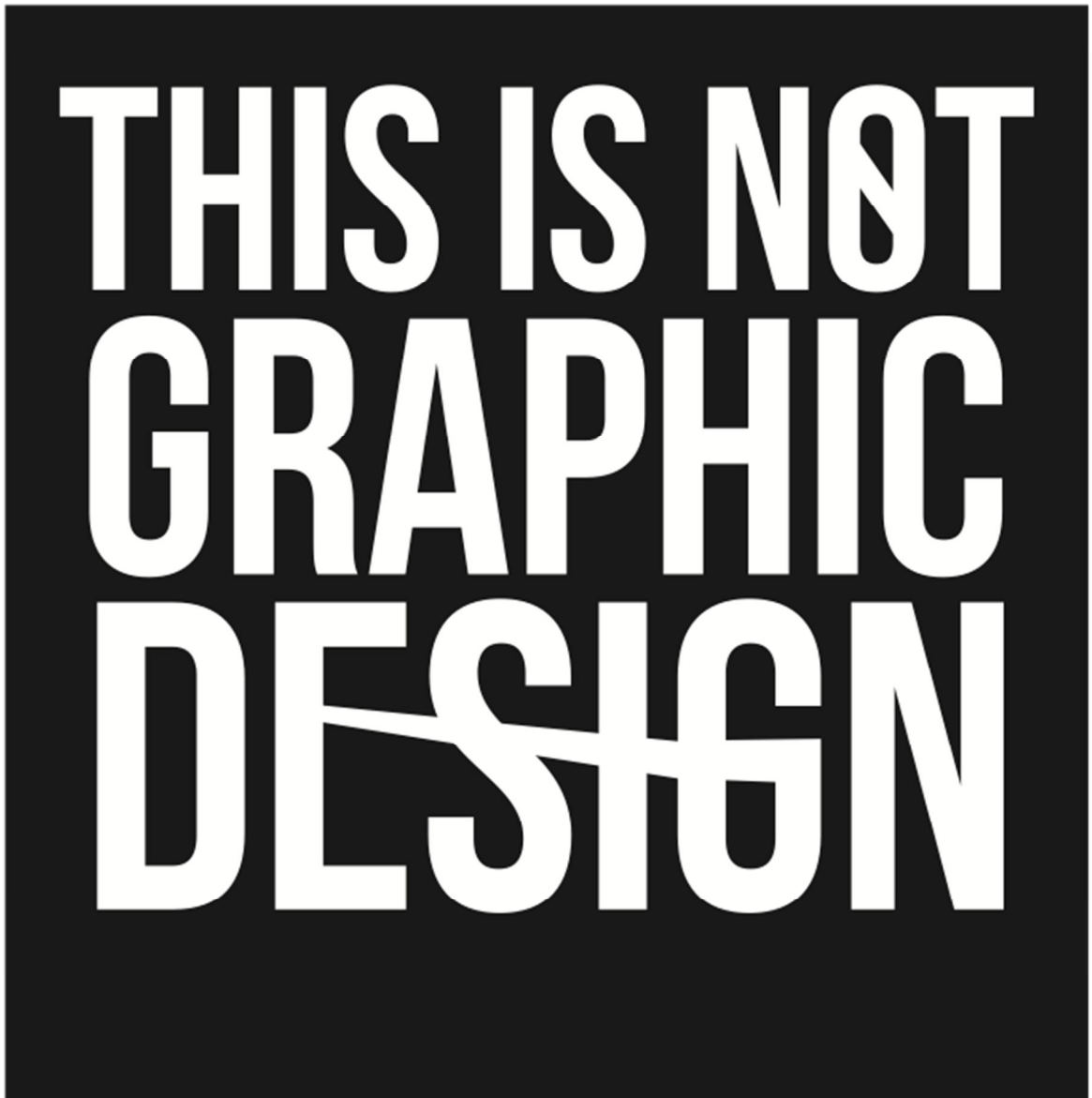


Figure 1. *Icon*



**ADOBE
ILLUSTRATOR...
I'M NOT A PRO,
BUT I KNOW
ENOUGH TO BE
DANGEROUS :)**



Marissa Mayer; Current President and CEO, Yahoo!; September 2013, on her involvement in updating the company logo.
Love of design does not beget proficiency in design, and knowing how to press a button is not the same as knowing why to do it. The danger lies in the assumption of skill in the acquisition of knowledge. It is certainly not professional, and definitely not enough. This is not graphic design.



Figure 2. *Dangerous*



OK, I bought Adobe.

**CAN YOU JUST SHOW
ME HOW TO DO IT**

**instead of
“designing” it?**



...So I won't have to pay for it.

Former client, remaining unnamed; December 2014, regarding updating and beginning new projects.
Ownership of tools is not possession of knowledge. The potential exists but is in no way guaranteed. From what other profession would you solicit free tutoring in order to no longer pay for professional services? Design is not DIY. This is not graphic design.

**THIS IS NOT
GRAPHIC
DESIGN**

Figure 3. “Design”

NOW ON SALE

WEBSITE
MIX



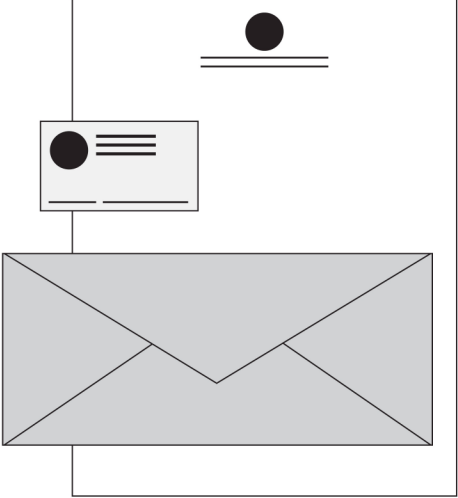
Just add
YOUR
NAME!

ADVERTISING
MIX



Just add
YOUR
NAME!

STATIONERY
MIX



Just add
YOUR
NAME!

Ready-made mixes are convenient answers, not unique solutions. Adding a few ingredients is following the recipe to the same results as everyone else. True design requires starting from scratch and writing the original recipe. It should never be a piece of cake. This is not graphic design.

THIS IS NOT
GRAPHIC
DESIGN

Figure 4. *Cake*

DRIVE-THRU DESIGN

 #1	 #2	 #3
 #4	 #5	 #6
 #7	 #8	 #9

_____ **WOULD YOU LIKE A WEBSITE WITH THAT?** _____

Cheap and fast in lieu of quality is hardly a bargain. There are reasons for both the low cost and speedy delivery, none of which should you desire for yourself or your brand. Choosing from a menu assumes what you want instead of asking. Choose none of the above. This is not graphic design.



Figure 5. *Large #8*

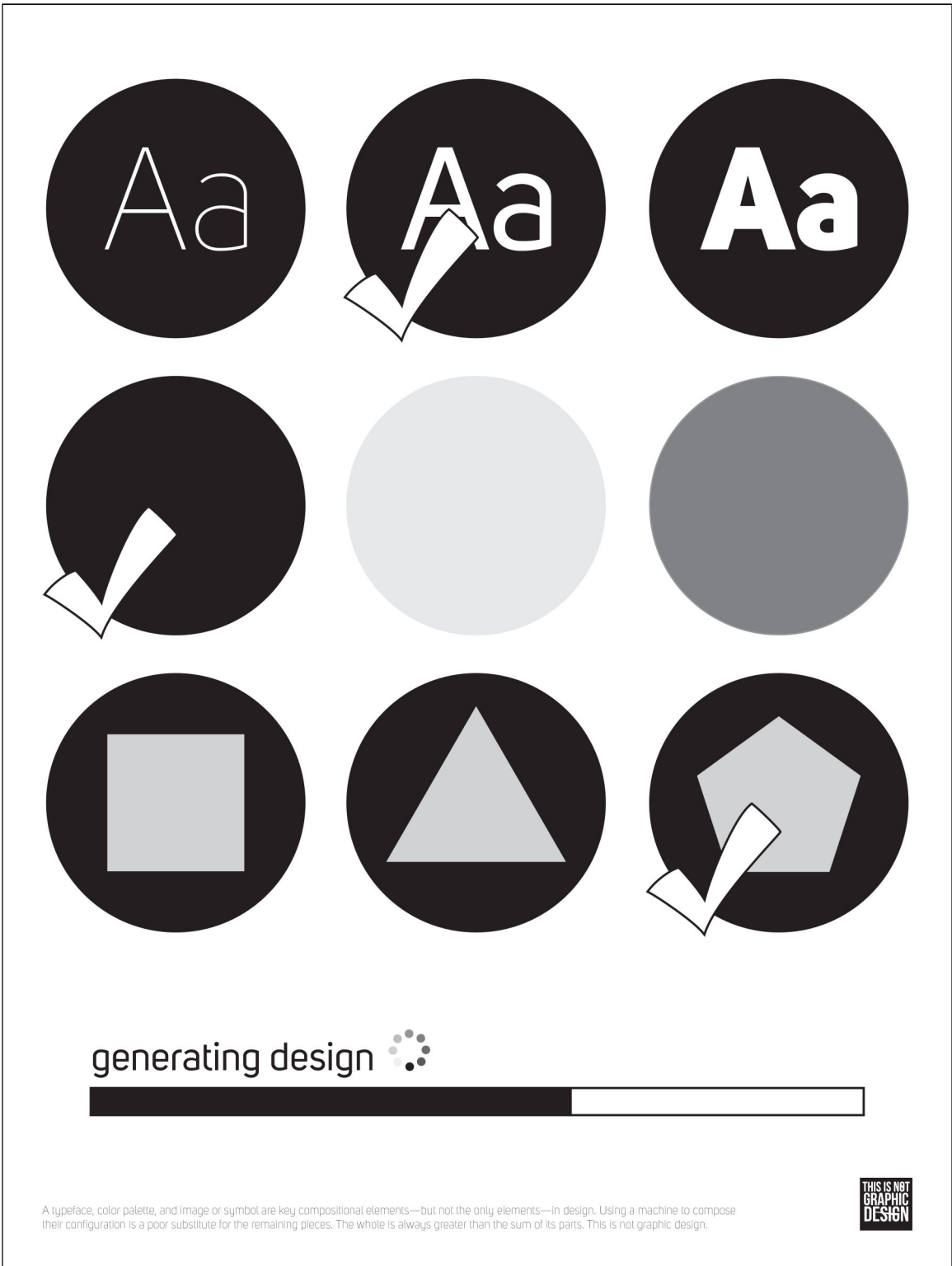
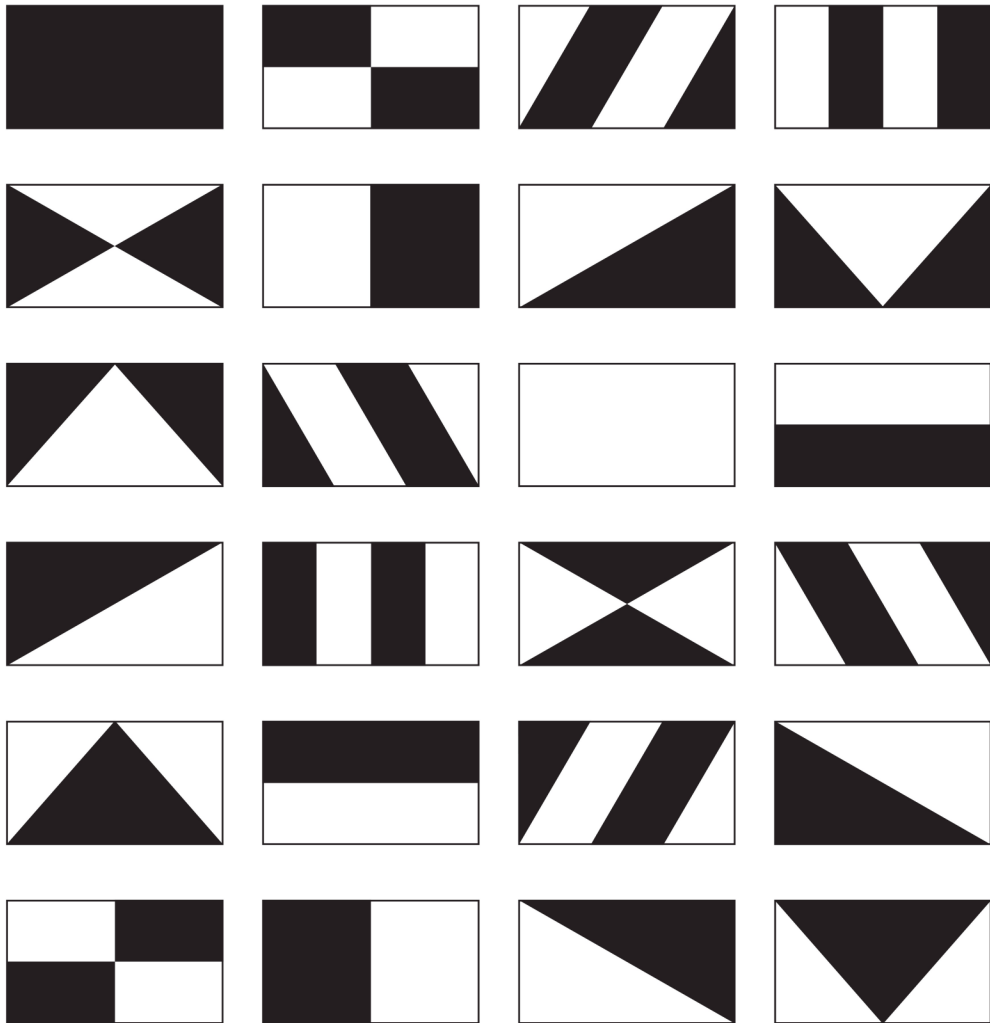


Figure 6. 1,2,3

**PLEASE SELECT ONE OF THE
FOLLOWING IDENTITIES**



PAGE 1 OF 1000 NEXT >>

No matter how many choices are offered, selecting a design from stock undermines the true nature of professional design. Filling in the blanks to accommodate your name instead of "Your Name Here" forces you to fit the design. Good design fits you. This is not graphic design.



Figure 7. 1 of 1000

THIS IS NOT GRAPHIC DESIGN

Tools vs. Templates

A Commentary on Modern Graphic Design Ethics and Advancing Technologies

Graphic design, including its accompanying technology, has evolved rapidly since its first conception and recognition as a profession in the early 1900s. Like many professions so entwined with technological advances, the practice of graphic design today is a many-times removed descendant of the original methods—thought at the core their aims remain the same. While undoubtedly this progress is overall beneficial and allows for far more possibilities, the progress has thrown open the door in invitation of non-designers and amateurs to grossly misrepresent the industry and practice.

Because the technologies modern graphic designers utilize today are so widely available—there is no proof of competency required for use—anyone can use them to masquerade as a designer. While true professionals understand their limitations and appropriate usage, non-designers and amateurs tend to abuse these developments, falsely thinking of themselves as real practitioners. They egregiously overstate the importance of software and hardware and vastly understate the creative process and unique expressions of content. They promote design as the result of templates, not tools.

My experiences leading to these observations come from seven years in academia and six years serving as a professional practitioner. The reliance on technology has started to expand into the realm of accepted practices for young designers, necessitating the need to reevaluate the education of graphic designers and ethical standards of operation. My work should serve as a commentary on current trends and what changes need to be made in order to safeguard the graphic design profession and propel it successfully into the future.

These six posters reflect the dangerous currents flowing through graphic design and the popular misconceptions which have resulted. They utilize hyperbole and parody to communicate sensationalized warnings. Though adorned with these embellishing elements, there is a distinct ring of truth in their content. They seek to engage all viewers, designers to non-designers alike, by stripping away jargon and superfluous design to focus on singular, clear messages—or warnings. The posters serve as Public Service Announcements to discourage further behavior similar to what they describe.

My written and visual narrations both stem from my passion for graphic design but also from my personal journey and frustrations within the industry. I am concerned for the future of graphic design; from that concern I am motivated to continue to promote the changes for which I call. The process of creating this project has helped me outline what I prioritize moving forward. It has given me a guiding template on directing my work with the tools to make the process and outcome distinctly mine.

Figure 8. Artist Statement poster

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