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LIVD: Issue 15.2: "Letting Go"

Portland State University. School of Art + Design

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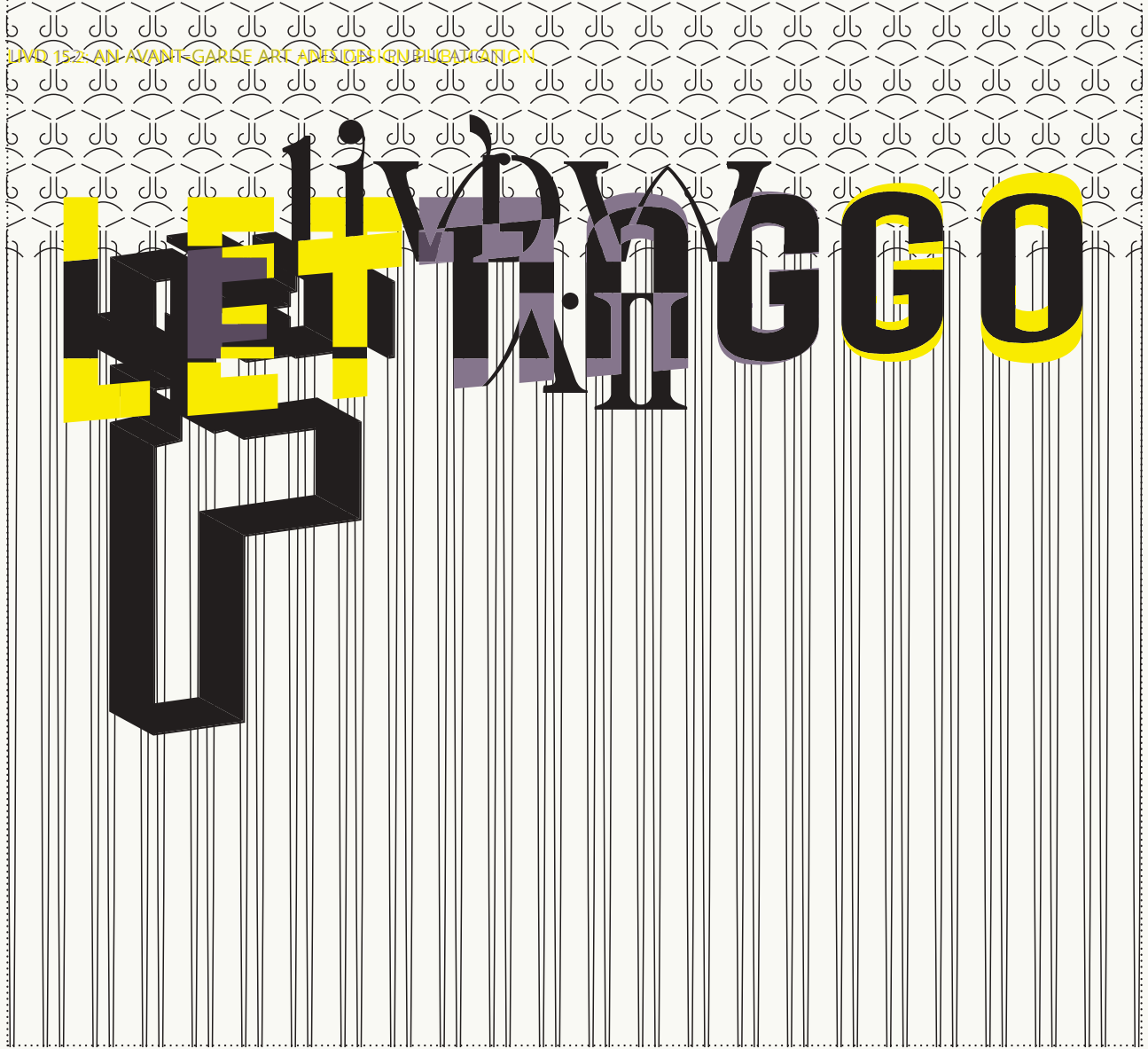
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The most beautiful and terrible moment of failure occurs when you realize,
whichever direction you choose is wrong.
This is the moment of humility.
It's the moment you see who you really are.



livd

LIVD is a semi/annual publication produced in the Pacific Northwest, dedicated to the intersection of art, design, culture and how these influence lived experience.

LIVD pays *hommage* to the inspiring and idealistic efforts of the early twentieth century avant-garde, balancing the academic with the personal and experimental.

Issue 15.2 includes contributions responding to the following prompt: *screwing up, messing up, vulnerability, shame... that sort of thing*. Why isn't the prompt simply: *failure*? Because something strange happens when you ask people to talk about failure, they start talking about something else entirely.

* I S S U E *

15.2

FREEDOM DOES NOT EXIST IN PERFECTION

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* B L A C K · W H I T E *

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keywords: livd, design, fail, screwing up, vulnerability and power, shame, problematics, narrative, risograph, grumpy, typography, publications, conversations, letting go, #meredithjam



Articles + Authors In No Particular Order

Deep Ruts: The Impact of Stigmergic Mechanisms on Cigarette Design (Among Other Things)
Nick Kuder

Subject: Path Amplification
Type: Academic

Optimistic Failure
Roz Crews and Caleb Misclevitz

Subject: Taking Risks
Type: Interview

Not-So-Final Fantasy, Game Over, Insert Credit to Continue, National Treasure, We All Knew Winter Was Coming
Doctor Kobra

Subject: Existential
Type: Poetry

How vs. Should
Meredith James

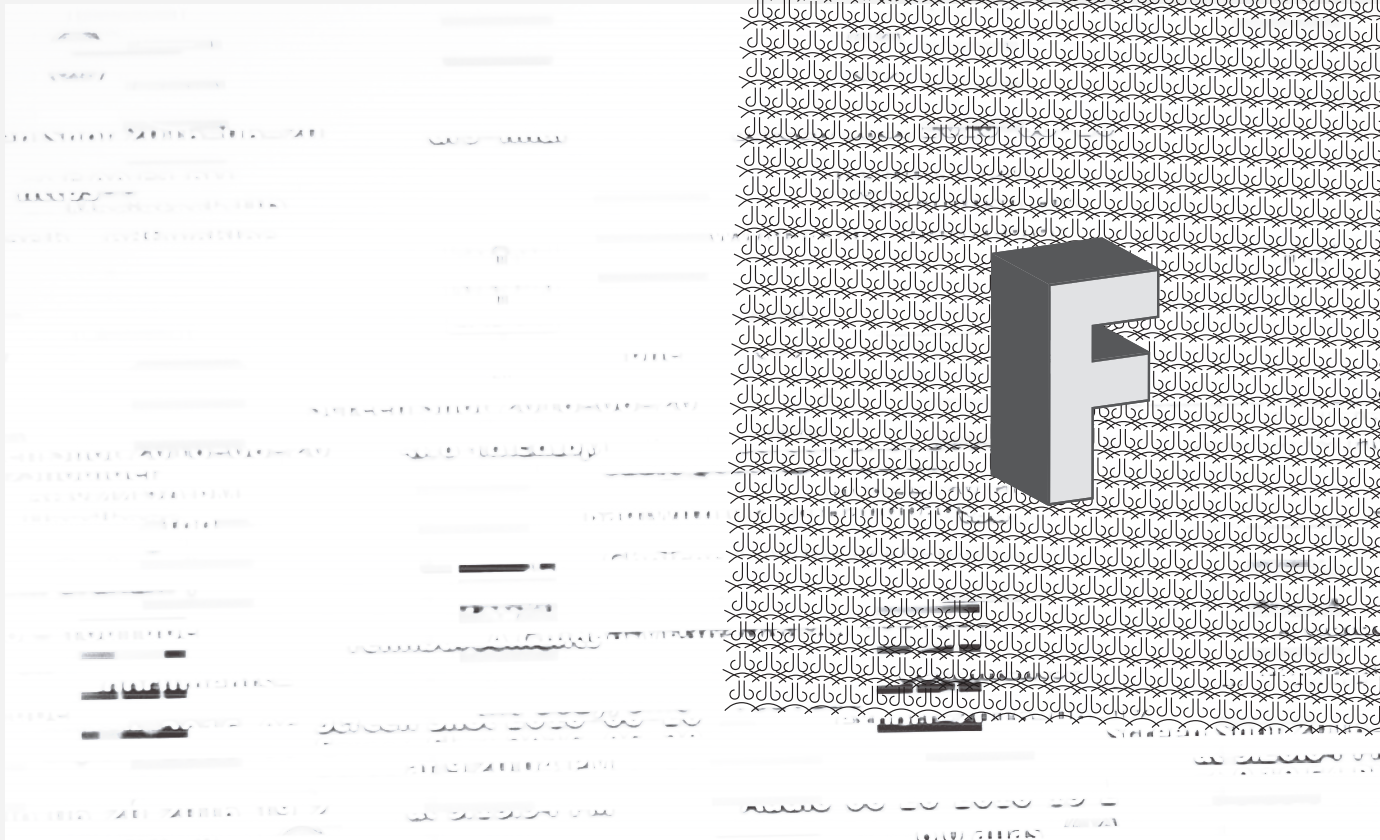
Subject: Ethics
Type: Criticism

Generational PTSD Release; An Answer, A Plan
Nimi Einstein; Tamar Rosenthal

Subject: Internal Conflict
Type: Type + Layout (Nimi) + Response (Tamar); Collaboration

A WORKING DEFINITION OF FAILURE

Failure is the difference between what is expected and what actually occurs.



FAILURE

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR • MEREDITH JAMES • LIVD • 15.2

I studied under Elliott Earls and I think he's brilliant. If you spend even the smallest amount of time around him, you realize he has a very keen mind. I knew this before I studied with him and so I spent a great deal of time listening intently to what he had to say. More than once he told us that really powerful work asks questions rather than answers them. Such a statement was difficult for me to comprehend. As a practitioner, I had been trained to always solve or answer something, and here was this man asking me to withhold a deeply ingrained impulse and live in the realm of the tricky. I mulled this idea over for years. I could see it articulated clearly throughout his own work. And I found that to a large degree Elliott's right. Most of our social ills, like racism, sexism, and privilege can't be eradicated. If we've learned anything in the last few years, it's that these sorts of problems don't even seem to be *improving*. Beyond which, working with these themes has its inherent benefits — you already have an audience and a controversy waiting for you.

As it turns out, Elliott's perspective gave me access to all the major players of the twentieth-century art world, as well as guidance for making design work situated completely in an artistic space. This little kernel of knowledge was definitely worth knowing.

But with time, I've also found the flaws in his statement. Perhaps it's because I wish us to be in a fully non-capitalist society, or perhaps it's because the tremendous errors of industrialization feel inordinately heavy. After all, we do have a lot of garbage floating in the ocean, we've made too many things that we've arbitrarily deemed disposable, no one knows how to emotionally regulate themselves, and an angry planet is responding to us with natural disaster after natural disaster. I see all of these things as failures. For some of which, the responsibility lands squarely on the designer. My problem-solving impulses can't help but want to respond.

But... what if first, some time was taken to really examine what exactly failure is and how exactly it occurs.

This is the basic premise for Volume 15.2.

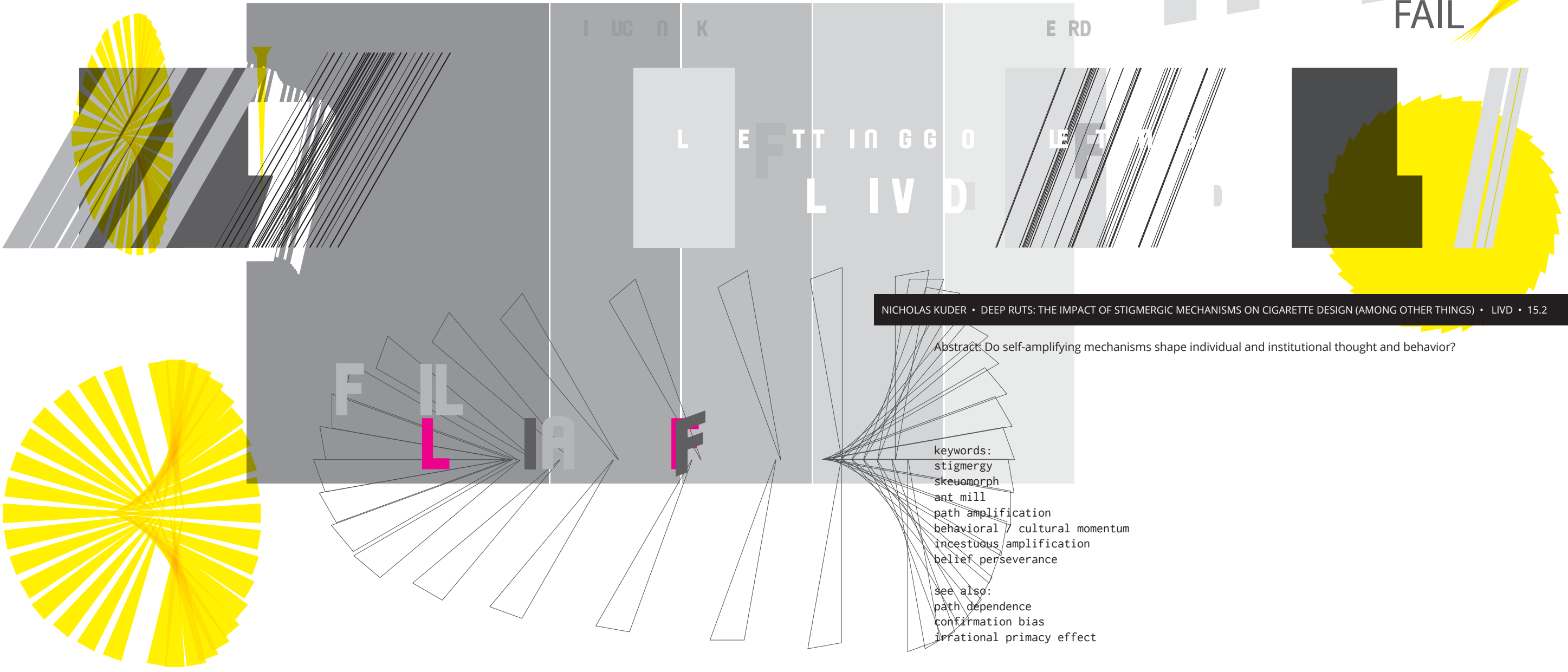
It might be relevant to tell you that I have researched (and experimented with) failure for years. Many examples land upon my desk. I would be hard pressed to find a person who hasn't been shaped in some manner by failure, but few people sit in its uncomfortable space and look around. Here are a few starters for thought, all of which come from a longer look at what failure is.

- #1. Atul Gawande wrote this compelling commencement speech, reprinted by the *New Yorker* in 2012, titled "Failure and Rescue." In it he tells us of an 87 year old woman, a holocaust survivor, who faced a highly fatal surgical complication but due to her doctors' failure response, ended up walking away alive and recovering. In his narrative and subsequent reflection, Gawande offers one of the true gems in learning to deal with consequences: "A failure often does not have to be a failure at all. However, you have to be ready for it — will you admit when things go wrong? Will you take steps to set them right? — because the difference between triumph and defeat, you'll find, isn't about willingness to take risks. It's about mastery of rescue."
- #2. Henry Murray was a college professor who developed interrogation techniques and tests related to extreme stress and mental fortitude. He brought his experiments back from WWII to Harvard, escalating them by severely manipulating and shaming his students. One student in particular had a very rough time with Murray's abuse, a young math prodigy named Ted Kaczynski.
- #3. Pruitt-Igoe is one of the first subjects I introduce when I teach courses on failure. The modernist housing complex has been saddled with all sorts of accusations. It has been called an exemplar of: the failure of modernism; the arrogance of architecture to ask, attempt, and suppose that social issues can be solved through architecture itself; a failure to understand how economic policy shapes cities; and a failure of local government to empathize with the people who lived in Pruitt-Igoe. Yet, one of the most remarkable statements made about the complex, comes from listening to the people who lived there. Our perceptions of them, of their experience, of the building itself, the failure becomes ours. Who are we — *who were we ever* — on the outside to define or dismiss what was a significant part of anyone's life experience, condemning it as failed? Hated, loved, suffered through, complex, endearing, heart-breaking, yes. But failed? That categorization is an arrogance I can't muster.

idol worship
nationalism
dismissible
of some
Some
put upon



Where there was once reason, logic, and intent behind a form, it now repeats the past as residual ornament.



NICHOLAS KUDER • DEEP RUTS: THE IMPACT OF STIGMERIC MECHANISMS ON CIGARETTE DESIGN (AMONG OTHER THINGS) • LIVD • 15.2

Abstract: Do self-amplifying mechanisms shape individual and institutional thought and behavior?

- keywords:
- stigmergy
 - skeuomorph
 - ant mill
 - path amplification
 - behavioral / cultural momentum
 - incestuous amplification
 - belief perseverance
- see also:
- path dependence
 - confirmation bias
 - irrational primacy effect

I. Smooth Odoriferous Trails

Google "ant spiral of death" and you'll find videos of thousands of ants dutifully marching in a circle for hours, even days, until they eventually die from exhaustion. Entomologists prefer to use the less melodramatic term "ant mill" to describe the strange phenomenon.

The ants aren't committing ritual suicide *en-masse*. Ant mills occur when blind army ants, who navigate by following the pheromone scent trails of other ants in their foraging party, cross over their own previously laid trail and begin to follow it. Now a closed circuit, the trail becomes amplified with each successive lap. The ants' biological programming makes it nearly impossible for them to stray.

Harvard professor William Morton Wheeler recorded witnessing one in his laboratory:

"... I have never seen a more astonishing exhibition of the limitations of instinct. For nearly two whole days these blind creatures so dependent on the contact odor sense of their antennae kept palpating their uniformly smooth odoriferous trail and the advancing bodies of the ants immediately preceding them without perceiving that they were making no progress but only wasting their energies till the spell was finally broken by some more venturesome members of the colony."
— Ants: Their Structure, Development and Behavior, 1910: p.265

In 1959, the French zoologist, Pierre-Paul Grassé coined the term *stigmergy* to describe the mechanism by which some social insects self-organize and appear to operate as a unified organism without receiving orders from a leader. The word is a combination of the Greek words *stigma* (mark, sign) and *ergon* (work, action). A stigmergic system is one where an individual's actions leave signs in the environment which others in the group sense and which dictates their subsequent actions. Or, in Grassé's words, "previous work directs and triggers new building actions" (Grassé 1963, p. 26). In the case of the army ants, the 'sign' they leave is a pheromone scent trail which other ants follow in the hope of finding food. An efficient foraging strategy — until it isn't.

II. Incestuous Amplification

Although the term stigmergy was originally used in reference to social insects, it readily applies to many non-entomological systems. Similar mechanisms are found in how past search engine queries shape future results. Amazon, Netflix, and Spotify all suggest new content based on users' past likes and dislikes, which perpetually refine and strengthen previously laid signal paths. This results in self-amplifying feedback loops. Quora, Reddit, and other sites allow users to vote content up or down — in effect strengthening or reducing signal strength. Up voted posts appear higher on the page and therefore are more likely to continue receiving up votes. That upward momentum is further amplified when the number of "likes" or up votes is displayed alongside the content, making users 32% more likely to also leave positive feedback (Muchnik, Aral & Taylor, 2013, p. 341). These sites, which seem to operate using a pure form of democracy, are far more complex and manipulative than they appear at first blush.

In countless ways, stigmergic mechanisms reinforce and influence everything from our political beliefs to what we wear. Every time you hear "that's just how we've always done it," you're dealing with a stigmergic system that has resulted in an ant-mill type pattern.

Stigmergic mechanisms are even at play in our brains. Whenever we do or think something, our

brain increases the number of synapses between neurons. These strengthened connections make it easier to repeat the same thought or action in the future, which in turn reinforces the existing neural network. This theory was first put forward by the neuroscientist, Donald Hebb in his 1949 book, *The Organization of Behavior*. It was later shortened to: "neurons wire together if they fire together" (Löwel & Singer, 1992, p. 209–212). These wired neural paths make it easier and faster to execute certain tasks. However, this efficiency comes at a cost. Wired paths make it more difficult to deviate from them, as in the case of habits, which are the brain's equivalent of the ant-mill.

III. Tiptoe Through the Tulips: Confirmation Bias

Path signal strength in a stigmergic system can be strongest when an ant-mill type pattern is in effect. *Tulip mania*, which shook the Dutch economy in 1637, is an example of such a case.

The seeds (or bulbs, as it were) of Tulip Mania were planted in 1554, when tulips were introduced to the Netherlands by way of the Ottoman Empire. They quickly became a coveted luxury item. As demand rose, bulbs stopped being sought after for purely aesthetic reasons and became the object of financial speculation. By 1636, single bulbs were selling for ten times the annual income of a skilled craftsman. Path amplification served to drive the price beyond a sustainable level, which dropped 99.999% in less than a year. Each person who paid a little more for a bulb amplified the path signal and fueled the bubble (Dash, 1999).

The tech, housing, stock, and Beanie Baby bubbles of our own time were similarly fueled. In each case, individuals based their actions on the previous actions of others, amplifying the path which led to a closed loop of amplification until the cycle was no longer capable of being sustained.

Stigmergic mechanisms also play a significant role in shaping our political and world views. Here too, they make us vulnerable to self-amplifying patterns. A staggering number of American adults today get their news from Facebook and Twitter (Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, Mitchell, 2015). Both services rely heavily on algorithms which use incestuous amplification, presenting information only from sources (e.g. friends) selected by the user. Shares, likes, and retweets are all forms of path amplification. The acts of unfriending, unfollowing, and hiding when others post something we disagree with have become par for the course. These reduce 'signal noise' and reinforce the signals which remain — encouraging confirmation bias.

IV. Skeuomorphs, Cork Filters, and the Persistence of Employer Sponsored Health Insurance Plans: Design Perseverance

"The past is never dead. It's not even past."
— *Requiem for a Nun*, William Faulkner

Over the past decade, the term skeuomorph [skyooh-mawrf] has made its way from dusty books on archeology and into the vernacular of the tech world.

The postmodern literary critic N. Katherine Hayles defines skeuomorph as "a design feature that is no longer functional in itself but that refers back to a feature that was functional at an earlier time" (Hayles, 1999, p.17). They are the ant-mills of the design world. Where there was once reason, logic, and intent behind a form, it now repeats the past as residual ornament.

Skeuomorphs are a natural byproduct of stigmergic systems. At their best, they function as symbolic references to help users understand new and abstract technology by way of reference to an older, better understood form. Others range from mildly charming to utterly ridiculous. Such are the cases of light bulbs designed to look vaguely like candles, or tiny house shutters that couldn't hope to cover the giant windows they flank.

One of the most comically persistent skeuomorphs is the orangish-tan segment printed on the filter end of many cigarettes. It was originally put there to imitate cork used on "beauty tip" cigarettes in the 1930s. Beauty tips claimed to prevent tobacco flecks from getting stuck to a woman's lipstick. Later, cork was added to men's brands — only this time it was advertised as a filter. In reality, it did nothing but reduce the amount of tobacco needed to fill each cigarette (Kennedy, 2012). Later, the cork was replaced with asbestos wrapped in a cork graphic signifier, letting the user know what the intended function was. The cork skeuomorph has even carried over to some models of e-cigarettes — skeuomorphs piling up.

While ant-mills only take a few days at most to run their course, human-made skeuomorphic systems can loop uninterrupted for decades, even centuries. One such long-running system is employer based health insurance in the United States. During World War II, the War Labor

Board enacted wage controls in an attempt to avoid the kind of hyper inflation experienced by Germany between the wars. Employers were restricted from offering new employees higher wages, so they explored other ways to attract workers. The government made a provision allowing businesses to offer health insurance using pre-tax dollars. Up until then, insurance had been purchased directly by individuals. The new system worked well because most employees stayed with a company for decades, if not for life, and rarely moved out of state. Fast forward to today and the world is a very different place. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average worker stays at a job for only 4.4 years. If we designed a health insurance system from the ground up today, would it resemble the one we currently have?

V. Escape Velocity: Conclusion

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If stigmergic mechanisms are driving so many parts of our lives and have such a profound impact on our thinking, systems, and culture, what can we do to negate — or at least offset — their control over us? The most important thing is to identify when such systems are in play. The quickest and surest way to do this is to critically examine the 'givens' or fundamental assumptions we hold. What things do we think are "beyond questioning?" What seems like it has always been and will always remain the same? Then, we must test these basic assumptions and evaluate their merits and implications in light of their current context.

In designing a product from the ground up: would we choose to make it the same as it currently exists? In developing systems: are we thinking about how they can best meet their objectives? Or, are we relying too heavily on existing models and precedents?

We must resist easy answers, instead we must embrace disruptive processes. In part, we can do this by reintroducing chance and happenstance to the digital and analog tools that entertain and inform us. We must identify the inherent biases in our systems and devise ways of correcting for them. We must seek to expand the range and quality of inputs that shape our views and hesitate before filtering out ideas which don't fit our current mental model.

From time to time, we must venture from well marked paths, even when they seem certain to lead to success — especially when they seem certain. It isn't enough to will ourselves to 'think different.' Cultural inertia cuts a deep rut that can't be seen for what it is.

We can never fully escape the pull of stigmergic systems but we can mitigate their influence by making the effort to recognize them and consciously choose to reject precedent as reason.

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Notes:

"Tiptoe Through the Tulips," Popular song by Al Dubin (lyrics) and Joe Burke (music), 1929

New York Times professional curmudgeon, Paul Krugman, devised the term "incestuous amplification" to describe the particular kind of stigmergic groupthink commonly found in political and financial circles.



INTERSTITIAL POEMS BY DOCTOR KOBRA • LIVD • 15.2

keywords:
protagonist-antagonist
video games
television
computers
existential
media
technology
contemporary myth

"Protagonist Smith: this is the Day I get out of here."

WE ARE

NOT

BETTER

but flawed

IF WE

KEEP

ON
THE SAME OLD

WE ARE

NOT

BETTER

but flawed

IF WE

KEEP

ON
THE SAME OLD

We All Knew Winter Was Coming

The Bad Dog (Bad Dog!) gnawed up, puked up a rabbit
into a red lake upon the Welcome mat,
made a shoe stink, overturned the trash,
slunk outside all night wrapped in badger sounds,
struck a pact by dawn.

We all knew winter was coming.

Watching tech reviews on devices he'll never own,
but no time for electronics, no videogames,
no space age television about crystal meth;
only the rent, the phone, the gasoline, lunch,
and student loan.

We all knew winter was coming.

A rented car, across the country no distance
she couldn't run, but the messages, the calls home,
the hospitals and schools, collapsing apartments
and cranky cars, trees, springs, and streams
carry a song she used to know.

We all knew winter was coming.

Children gather the soot and make Ash-men in the front yard.
They stick a deed in his pocket, on his lips they set the name
of a god, in his mouth a diploma written in an idea
of nothing, and add two rusted shovels for arms
as the snow begins to fall.

D. K.

Not-So-Final Fantasy

Be Protagonist Smith, down on your luck, getting by with odd jobs on the wrong
side of the tracks (as if your world had trains) while lookin' up at the stars
instead of the rusted out sci-fi/fantasy vehicles in this pisspot town. Your town
is so pathetic that only low hit-point-having slimes or other common creatures
camp out in the surrounding forest because they got nowhere else to go-- and
you either get the hand-me-down call to adventure from the weird old guy who
lives down the road or your boyfriend or girlfriend gets captured and in any case
you decide, "Protagonist Smith: this is the Day I get out of here."

And then you move on, taking your licks from bigger and badder slimes and manticores
level up with gold and experience, picking up those sweet-ass +5 weapons and
accessories, do the whole "The Journey is the Destination" business, and eventually
meet the Big Bad at the End of Everything and keep them from breaking the World.
Or You COULD be lazy and grind forever in the opening world against those no-
effort slimes and be at an advanced level BEFORE you tackle the first dungeon,
let alone any Boss, breeze through it AND be as advanced as if you were to progress
normally. Your evolved attributes would compensate for your meager tools and
you'd be an overpowered "End-Worlder" in rags at the beginning of the tale and
rush your way through the story to surprise the Big Bad.

But what you don't know is that The Big Bad often mirrors the hero's journey. You
slay monsters to save a town, he or she tramples upon innocents to fulfill an
agenda., and when you periodically encounter them, they are just a few levels of
experience out of reach to provide a sufficient challenge. When you're busy
solving a puzzle in Weird Ice World, they're getting their spell components in Mount
Final Level together to bring down the Moon and crash into the Earth. Fuck around
for a while doing side-quests or just farming for gold and when you do meet for
the final battle, you always come upon them RIGHT BEFORE they perform the Ultimate
step of their ritual. Every time. Are they watching you the whole game, checking
in on your progress, and instead of smashing you down, say to themselves, "Oh
they'll be at my SECRET LAIR next Tuesday. I can goof off until then."

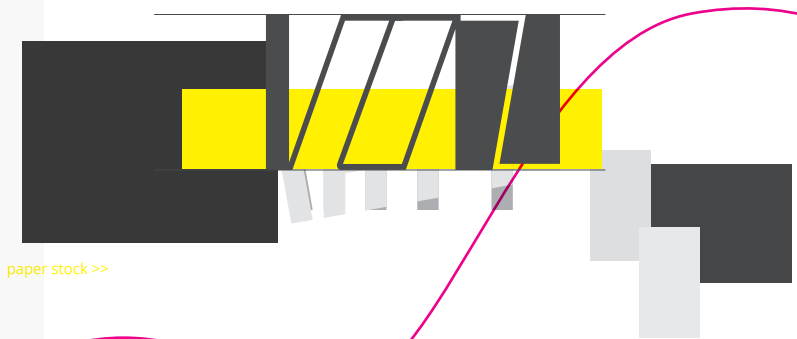
Before you decide which path to take, which path you will spend your Life on,
you have to ask yourself, "Is the Big Bad, being my doppelganger, as lazy at
evil as I'd be lazy at good?"

Before you decide which path to take, which path you will spend your Life on,
you have to ask yourself, "Is the Big Bad, being my doppelganger, as lazy at
evil as I'd be lazy at good?"

D. K.



64/70/64/73



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ROZ CREWS • OPTIMISTIC FAILURE • LIVD • 15.2

An interview with Caleb Mischlevitz on taking risks.

keywords:
childhood
intentional failure
trying
not trying
choosing your own path
conversations
art and design
growing up



RC: I'm interested in the topic of optimistic failure, and the potential of gaining something by failing. Let's have a conversation about failing and the future of failing in our lives and the past.

CM That sounds really daunting — the future and history of failure in our lives.

RC: Have you ever failed at something you were trying really hard to not fail at?

CM I have a lot of tiny, micro-failures.

RC: What's a micro-failure?

CM Forgetting to brush my teeth twice a day, I haven't been to the dentist in six years. I haven't had any major mouth falling apart moments. I just don't think about it. I'm also really bad at paying my bills, not because I don't have money, just because I would rather do something else. It's stupid. I know it's stupid. I think those things are failures, failing to be a member of society. I feel guilty about that.

When I was a kid, I didn't feel ashamed about failing. I took guitar lessons when I was five or six. I liked it, but I can't remember thinking, "This is something I want to do." My parents suggested that I do it, and I did it. The first song I learned how to play was "Brown Eyed Girl." There would be a recital every couple months at some random, re-purposed church, and I got off on not practicing or not being very good. I was playing guitar for fun, and I didn't care about being super impressive or anything. I also didn't understand how awkward it was for my parents or other people in the room when I would fuck up on stage. I thought it was funny when I messed up, but everyone else was so nervous, clenching their teeth.

RC: After you did badly on stage, would you get off stage and think, "That was great!"

CM I didn't understand being on stage in the first place. There was always free saltines and grocery store cookies at the recitals, so that was what I was in it for. I think that's sort of a parallel to the design world where you go to all sorts of events and there's free beer and snacks.

RC: At this stage in our life, we go for the free beer?

CM Well, I go for the event, too. I think it's cool to be really driven and try to do something, but if the only reason you're doing something is "to be on stage," it is kind of problematic. I don't think the stage should be a pedestal. It should be more natural, where you're doing something and people start to gather around you because they're interested in what you're doing. That could happen on or off stage.

RC: Your example of performing badly brings up a question about transference of shame. You get up on stage and think "whatever happens, happens." Maybe as a kid you didn't necessarily have an awareness of the social constructions around what it means to be on stage and what it means to do badly on stage, but your parents, grandparents and siblings are all watching you, cringing as you're up there on stage failing. It's like they're experiencing the shame for you. What do you think about that?

CM I definitely didn't try to make them feel shame on purpose. I just thought the idea of a guitar recital, to show off how much you've learned, was sort of stupid.

RC: How do you feel now about the thought of your parents feeling embarrassed about their kid failing on stage?

CM I feel worse about it now. As you get older, you start bridging the connection between being a kid and being an adult. I've realized the division between the two is not really there, there's no difference. I think, related to that, going to community college was a real eye opener for me. I saw older people coming back to school, and they didn't have any power over me even though they were older. They were my peers even though there was a difference in age. I've realized that age doesn't matter as much as it did before. I've gained perspective that has helped me empathize with how my parents might have been feeling at my recital. I started to understand how bad it would feel to support somebody a bunch, and then for the person I supported to not show off what they had learned.

I never thought of the recitals as failures because I was having a lot of fun. Just because I was not playing "Brown Eyed Girl" correctly or I forgot the lyrics, I was still playing guitar. I went on to play in bands and go on tour and do things that I think of as successes. I like to re-frame my failures to be successes. I think failure is rigidly defined and constructed by society. You can only fail if there are certain established checkpoints for success. If you ignore those checkpoints and just do what you want to do, then you aren't really failing.

I also think there's an obvious importance to pushing your own limits and making achievements in life. It doesn't make sense to be a blob and have fun and not care about things. There's a lot to be said for going to college, applying for jobs you aren't qualified for. I've been lucky in those areas. All of the cool jobs I've gotten have been through connections with people.

RC: It's nice to think about creating your own benchmarks of success. I've been using this method for a long time, and I think about it a lot. I'm working on designing a newspaper right now, and I've never designed anything before. One of my mentors, an established graphic designer, is guiding me through the process, but each iteration I make is very bad. When she sees the end-product, she might think, "This is a

complete failure." Whereas to me, I think, "This is a great success. I produced something to show you, and now you can help me refine it and make it better and better." It can be really hard and paralyzing if you always consider the things you do as failures. I think that is part of what's so great about design; as a designer, you are constantly producing new iterations of things and going back to the drawing board. I think that is something art education is lacking. Because of how art is taught, people become very attached to whatever product or idea they have, and there is a preciousness to the object or project that makes it really hard to critique work. Whether or not the process is lifelong or a class or a project, it can be hard to tell people, "No, it's not a failure, it's actually just a step in the process."

CM Growing up, sports were similar to guitar for me — except I wasn't naturally good at them the way I was with guitar. With guitar, I thought it was fun and I liked doing it, but with sports, I was more into the aesthetics and snacks at games. Between fourth and fifth grade, I tried to play soccer and basketball. In fifth grade basketball, I made one shot in the entire season, and it was on the wrong hoop. Everyone assumed that because I was a boy, I knew the rules and fundamentals of basketball. Other than hoop and ball, I had no idea, and it was awkward to ask because everyone expected that I already knew how to play. I didn't realize that at half-time, you switch sides of the court. I was not paying attention, and I made this baller lay-up, so stoked, and then nobody reacted the way I thought they would. I realized, "Oh, that's the wrong hoop." That could be devastating for some people, but I thought it was really funny. I thought, "I probably shouldn't be here, I'm bringing everybody down." I finished the rest of that season, but then I stopped playing. I didn't even think about that moment as a failure.

For four years, I worked at the grocery store near my high school. One day, a kid came in that I did not recognize, and he asked me, "Did we play basketball together?" I didn't remember him at all, and he said, "You made a hoop on the wrong basket." He is a college basketball player now.

The biggest failures I've had are in design and art when my peers and friends don't understand something that I've made. I'm involved in the DIY punk music community that clashes a lot with the "Helvetica as sacred" graphic design community. People that are making 'zines and screenprinting stuff about veganism or doing other important socio-political work sometimes feel alienated by graphic design agencies, like the ethics are somehow opposite. I struggle between these two worlds. There are aesthetic qualities about certain agencies that I love, but sometimes those agencies are producing work that I don't ethically agree with. When that tension is seen in my work and gets pointed out to me by friends is when I've felt like I've failed, like I'm doing something kind of icky. I've also felt like I failed when someone makes the DIY, feminist, punk, anti-capitalist eco-system feel like a tiny, unimportant little speck in the world. This can

The following is a conversation about growing up, taking risks, questioning ourselves, and failing. In this interview, Caleb Mischlevitz and I talk about the blurry line between being a child and being an adult, and we consider the value of failure in relationship to responsibility. How can failure be contextualized as a positive part of life? When is failure humbling? When is it empowering? What is humility? How and why do we feel shame? How can we be compassionate and selfless, but also ambitious? How can earnestness be useful, not painful? Most importantly, why do we keep going, even when we fail?

be really discouraging for making things. Sometimes I ask myself, "Why am I making this nicely typeset poster if it doesn't matter."

This relates to the struggle I have with being proud of myself and owning my identity as a person who makes stuff. If you have a talent to make art and be paid for it, I think it's wasteful to neglect it so you can be a "better person." If there's a way that you can spend your time doing something that you are excited about and it can pay your bills, do it! You also have to be responsible about it. I'm on the fence...would the extra time earned by making a lot of money at an agency that was causing gentrifying development and making garbage collateral be worth it?

RC: In life, it seems important to try to make your list of values and your list of actions match. Reflecting on whether or not your current actions are mirroring your current values is a nice way to talk about failure. Are you failing your own values? What do you think when I say the phrase optimistic failure?

CM I'm really optimistic about everything, almost to a fault. People always point that out. In my personal life, I have a really hard time getting passionately critical or negative about things. I think that is associated with a certain amount of privilege that I have. I haven't experienced anything super devastating that would give me the backbone to have passionate, critical reactions to things. I tend to be very passive, like nothing matters. Obviously, there are things that do matter, but I am really optimistic about failure because I've always been able to climb out of it.

RC: It sounds like you've had safety nets and not a lot of struggle. My life has been similar in that way. I'm really comfortable with failure because I've never had to actually deal with the consequences of failing. This lack of experience gives me a place out of where I can talk about the exciting qualities of optimistic failure, but a more interesting topic of conversation might be, "Who has the opportunity and privilege to really have that conversation?"

CM There's the Wieden+Kennedy installation that says, "Fail Harder." I can imagine a lot of people who are really failing or being failed by the system saying, "Fuck that."

RC: What do you think "Fail Harder" means?

CM This kind of phrase easily loses its meaning. You can learn a lot from failing, so it's good to fail, but maybe you shouldn't aspire to fail.

RC: What should you aspire to do?

CM My biggest goal is to have enough money to live pseudo comfortably and responsibly without having to punch-in and directly work for forty hours, play for ten hours. This year I'm

working towards finding a way to fit something together. For me that is such a broad aspiration that failing at it is not really possible.

RC: You are defining your aspirations through money. When you really think about what you aspire to and how could you fail at that, does it go beyond money? What do you really want from life and do you have safety nets for that, too? Are those things more risky?

CM My real thing is that I just want free time. I think everyone wants that — to spend with family, friends. I want to feel productive and proud of things I'm making.

RC: I want to be able to teach experiential learning, and I don't want to be required to sit in a classroom as a teacher. I like the notion of being able to ask questions as a teacher, and for the students to also be asking questions. I want to create an educational environment where we're all learning from each other and we're doing experiential activities. That's one of my aspirations. Another would be to have an equal amount of time to spend on my artistic projects. Clearly, there is a relationship to finance, but not necessarily. There's lots of ways to think about achieving those goals. Maybe it is that I'm moving from residency to residency where there's a housing component that allows me to not pay for housing. That frees up money and time.

I also want fulfilling relationships and friendships. I think it's so important, and often not part of the equation when I'm talking with people about success and failure. Personally, I have failed most at having friendships. I have lost a lot of friends because of my career ambitions.

CM I wouldn't say that I've lost friends, but sometimes I'm not a good friend. I get wrapped up in whatever I'm doing.

RC: Failing at being a friend is not something I want to fail harder at. There's a difference in how I feel about failing in my art where I might say, "I want to optimistically fail in my art so that I get better," and failing with friendships. I'm the kind of person who is working on seven projects at once, so that at least one of them turns out okay. The rest of them can fail, and I'm not dependent on the failed ones as self-esteem motivators because one of them was okay. At least one out of seven will probably be fine, and I'll feel proud of it. With friends, it's not the same because it's people! Sometimes I do fall into the same kind of mindset where I'm feeling like it's okay that I just have one friend, but more recently, I've been thinking a lot about how to not fail at friendships. What does it require? It requires optimism in a totally different way. It requires me to believe that people are good and that they want to be there for me.

CM That is so hard. You always read things in 'zines or on the internet about how if your friends aren't supportive of you putting yourself first, then they're not your friend.

Where is the person that is going to be chill with me not talking to them for two weeks because I'm busy? Where is the person who is going to not be totally upset and break up with me if I decide I want to move to a different city?

RC: Those people are far and few between. What really matters is the quality of our friendships and making that a priority. How do you make a person feel cared for? Even if you go about it in untraditional ways. Maybe it's about not thinking of relationships in terms of time because sometimes you don't have time, and you have to figure out other ways to show your affection. I'm only now starting to think about this because I have so many friends who aren't in my life anymore.

This brings up the spectrum of failure and success. I wonder if losing touch with a friend is actually something we would put in a failure category on a spectrum or maybe it would be in the "just something that happened" category.

CM I want to go back to the idea of defining failure under a certain construction. If you stop hanging out with someone or they're mad at you and don't want to hang out with you, you could consider that a failure, but it's only a failure if friendship is defined by a specific set of rules. You would have to ask yourself, "What is friendship?" Maybe if ending that relationship means that you can focus on something else or if it's a weight off your chest, maybe that isn't a failure, maybe it's just what was supposed to happen. That could be a way to be optimistic about that failure.

RC: I'm not religious, I'm not spiritual, and I wasn't raised with a particular overlay of ideals or values. I often think, "Is everything supposed to happen for a reason?" I remember my mom saying that a lot, "It's just supposed to happen. Everything has a reason." Remembering that is how I get through many of my potential failures. I think that mindset has really helped me because I don't think of those events in a negative way. I see them as parts of a larger chain of events that I don't have control over but do. It's a funny kind of relief.

CM I think that you've probably taken more risks than me. I'm accomplishing things, but I also feel like there are a lot of things I haven't done. I've always lived here in Portland. I've only been in two long-term relationships. I don't take a lot of risks. I let things come to me. I don't ever aspire to things in a way that risks failure. That's a big part of why I don't have many failure stories. At some point, I'm going to get bored and unfulfilled by having not tried to do something out of my comfort zone.

RC: Would you say you don't do anything out of your comfort zone?

CM I do, but it's always somewhat begrudgingly and by accident. I think I have a lot of social anxiety, but other people tell me I'm really good at navigating social situations. Right

now I'm an intern at a high-profile ad agency. I got the internship because of my connections. It's a weird map of stuff that got me to that point. I'm faking a lot of things. I don't think I would be a very attractive candidate for that internship if I just came out of the woodwork.

RC: I have never gotten a job that I applied for. Most of the opportunities I've had are related to personal connections I made by simply showing up. I actually haven't taken a lot of risks, either. The only risks I've taken are not doing things. I had this strange opportunity to go to grad school, and so I did it. It feels like it's just happening, not like I'm taking a big risk. Looking back on it, it is a risk because I had absolutely no idea what I was getting into with grad school, and I had no idea where it would take me. I had no plan at all.

Do you think it's possible to teach people how to take opportunities without feeling like they're taking a risk? I think that would be a great skill to teach.

CM I definitely do think it's possible. I've always wanted to be a person who does that and I didn't realize I was until right now. I try not to be too self-confident. I try to purposely be grounded because I don't want to be an asshole. I learn a lot by watching people I admire. A lot of people I know in the graphic design community are good at hacking the system of jobs and careers. I'm not interested in working at a place that is very structured and ladder-climbing oriented.

RC: Could you talk about "scrapping-it together?" Maybe this is sort of an alternative approach to having a traditional career path. Scrapping-it together might mean you are mixing things together until they work. I think a lot of artists work that way because there's no other way. Whatever normal career trajectory has been laid out doesn't make sense for an artist. They have to invent their own way. It's possible that some people consider the "doing it your own way" way to be a type of failure. This path is full of moments of failure.

CM I do think some people see the "doing it your own way" way as a form of failure. Whenever I go back to the grocery store where I used to work, it becomes really clear that my old coworkers see what I'm doing as failure. I quit my job after working there for four years, and they asked, "Did you get a new job?" I didn't have a new job, I just didn't want to have that job any more. When I told them, "I just do whatever happens," it seemed like they saw it as a deadbeat mentality. Sometimes I work at the newspaper, or sometimes I do really boring freelance jobs. My old coworkers see that as not having a job. I'm making the same amount of money that I made at the grocery store, but I work less and it's more fun.

RC: Sometimes I feel like non-freelancers project onto freelance people some idea that we are lazy or that we are doing something wrong. I sometimes wish everyone could be a freelance person, to experience the freedom of following your own path. I know the world doesn't work that way because of

the structures and systems that run it. Somebody has to fill in the jobs that maintain the system.

CM I have a really limited worldview in that regard. If I had two kids all of the sudden and I had to support a family, it really wouldn't work to not know what my job is next week. I can live on \$2,000 of savings and make sure I refill that every once in awhile, and that works for me now because my rent is so cheap in a house with seven people. I have a specific set of parameters that allow this lifestyle to work for me. I can't talk about that being the right direction. If I did have a situation that required more stability, this probably would be a failure.

RC: What is the purpose of having a word like failure? What does it do?

CM In school, I didn't care if I failed. I literally failed, especially in middle school. I had an awful teacher who was an evil person. He was obsessed with Marvin the Martian, he had a lot of Marvin the Martian garb in his classroom. He was abusive. He would kick chairs and stuff. He told me that grades don't matter at all until you're finishing high school because of the way standardized testing works. I took his words to heart. His words freed me, and I was able to just learn things without the pressure of thinking about grades. I would not do the assignments, and I would invent my own assignments and do those. I think I did them really well. Then I would fail because it wasn't the right set of parameters. Everyone always told me this wouldn't work in college, they'd say, "You need to jump through hoops, do things you don't want to do." Obviously, I realize now that it would have been better if I had followed the rules more closely. I would have been further ahead in my life. I could have graduated two years earlier if I would have just jumped through the hoops.

I was kind of on to something to think, "It's stupid to measure everyone by the same standards." But I think failure does exist, and it might be necessary. Unfortunately, sometimes the concept of failure is abused to assign value to people who might not deserve it.

RC: I want to talk more about building your own assignments and making your own parameters at a really young age. Disregarding the system and doing your own thing, being anti-establishment. Maybe if you had done the assignments you would have somehow become better, you wouldn't have failed in those moments, but maybe you were actually doing yourself a favor, setting yourself up to make your own decisions and make your own parameters as an adult. It's impor-

tant to have the skills to know how to navigate the system and make your own path even though people might make you feel like you're cheating the system. People frequently make me feel like I'm doing something wrong when I'm just following my own path. "Why do you care what I'm doing? It's my life."

RC: What makes you keep going? Why did you quit your job at the grocery store to become a graphic designer?

CM Because I have to keep going. For me, the life of graphic designer was the more attractive path to follow. There were parts of that job that I really liked, like being forced to talk to people I would never talk to on my own volition, but for me, I could see myself getting trapped in that job and feeling stuck. There was not going to be a better time to try something else. If it was five years later, I might have obligations that would keep me from taking a risk to be a freelancer. It was less about having an aspiration to "be something," and more about not being the other thing.

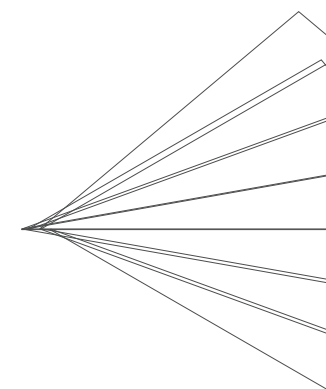
RC: That seems like a pretty big risk.

CM I think it is, but I knew I could come back if it didn't work out. I had a safety net. That's a big thing to remember. For a lot of people, it's possible to just put something on pause and come back to it if you need to.

RC: That's a nice way to think about it.



Life is tenuous and short. Because of that, it is scary.





NIMI EINSTEIN + TAMAR ROSENTHAL • RELEASE (NIMI); AN ANSWER, A PLAN (TAMAR) • LIVD • 15.2

Introduction: Nimi and Tamar have never met in person. Nimi is currently a student at Portland State University, Tamar is a professional designer and creative director based in Los Angeles. Nimi created the piece you see on the facing page, entitled "Release." After which, Tamar wrote Nimi an elegant and endearing letter, "An Answer, A Plan." Nimi's statement of intent and Tamar's response are included below.

keywords:

xenophobia
israeli-palestinian conflict
call and response
honesty
global citizens
shame
fear
acceptance
release

انا مش بحبكش
بس للحظة
خفت منك،

and I'm
working on it.

Nimi's Abstract: Exploring the power of written language and graphic format as mediums of direct communication to force us, as global citizens, to look directly at the things we hide due to shame and fear.

Dearest Nimi,

Thank you for being brave like this in the hope that you can grow beyond what your family narrative has passed on to you. You are not alone in this burden of bigotry. The presence of hate and prejudice and suffering is as common as it is horrible. Popular stories are rife with the handed-down legacies of hate that even find their ways into popular culture, i.e.: The Italians and the Puerto Ricans in *West Side Story*; The Montagues and the Capulets in *Romeo & Juliet*. No culture is a stranger to inherited hate. Nor how love can overcome it. It is what wars are made of. Our Tribe vs Their Tribe. There is comfort in numbers. Someone has your back. If you drown, you will not drown alone.

Life is tenuous and short. Because of that it is scary.

Fear resides in that most primitive part of our brain, right in the center, well-positioned to protect against most head injuries. It is this Old Brain that houses the fight or flight response necessary for our survival. My Mother had a stroke eight years before she died and was left with this primitive brain intact. She was left without humor (destroyed by the stroke) and without the cerebral tissue of emotion and empathy that was our connective bond. She was left without knowing how to feel about anything. It was a nightmare filled with unending anxiety for her. A Mother lost in a stream of incessant fear. (Which direction are we going? Where is my purse? Where are your children? Why are you crying about me? Should I be sad? What can I do? She would ask.)

Fear is natural. Survival is a biological imperative.

There is survival of the species but then there is also survival of the Tribe. It is easy to slip into the comfort of Narratives that have been passed down from our particular parents. They wanted us to understand that people, throughout history, have hated Jews. They needed us to know there are real dangers to our existence because of that hate. Our families wanted us to stay safe, to see the warning signs before it was too late. They didn't /don't know how to secure our safety. No one does. And so I feel a protective cloak of fear was instituted. It happens everywhere when the Tribe is threatened. Fear and hate become more powerful than love and meaning. It is happening in America and Europe as we write.

Our parents just need to keep us safe. When one becomes a parent, it is understandably paramount.

In my Jewish family, it was the Holocaust and the German people. I couldn't stand to hear German spoken. I wouldn't even think of buying a German car. I wouldn't ever visit Germany. For you, it was Arabs. Through both media and your parents, the Arab language was sculpted to seem angry and anti-Semitic, even primitive and irrational. The mere sound of it became a symbol, able to strike fear in your heart so you would hate Them, see Them as Other, keep Them at bay. Maybe this hate would keep you safe. Sadly, these prejudices, narratives of fear and caution, connect us. Fear is such a primitive emotion. In the end, it is the thing that may keep us alive.

Xenophobia could have served some purpose when humans couldn't find out what the Other Tribe was up to. Perhaps there wasn't even spoken language and thus defending territory meant the difference between a place to hunt and no food for the Tribe. But we live in such an entirely different world now. It is even significantly different than what our parents lived in. I can Google "Why do Jews and Arabs hate each other?" and get back 594,000 results in 0.62 seconds. We can choose a different path than what we were taught.

How do we stay connected to our Tribe but also rewrite our Narrative? How do we let new information and new experiences seep in when our Tribe tells us to keep them out? How can we change our beliefs that then perhaps will belie the beliefs of our parents? Can we be inclusive of Others while staying in the comforting bosom of our Tribe? If we are to make that journey and venture out, will we pull back the curtain — like in the *Wizard of Oz* — to find that our parents lied to us? How will we survive that? Maybe we won't.

Our hate defines us as much as our love.

Venturing out alone is really scary. Luckily my daughter has decided to take me with her. Barely out of her teens, she has chosen to study the Holocaust. This came out of both hate and love: my hate of Germany and her love of me. When it was suggested by a Professor her freshman year of college to study something that she didn't understand, the first thing that popped into her mind was me. Her mother. Ouch. She didn't understand me; why a kind, generous, caring mother could hate an entire nation, an entire people. What scared me so much about Germany and Germans that someone who rarely hated anyone, hated them so strongly?

Thus began her journey. She has been my teacher. I her student. She has taught me things I never knew about the Holocaust. She has taught me how the ability to do evil lurks in most people. The Germans are sadly not special in that regard. My hatred of them doesn't keep me any safer than I would be otherwise. People all over the world do horrible things to each other. The Holocaust was one of the worst, but certainly not one of the last. Fear rarely keeps us safe. It mostly keeps us either trapped in the past or petrified of the future, robbing us of our present and leaving us without the ability to be in our "Now." I am going to visit Germany with my daughter. She will hold my hand and weep with me at Auschwitz. Weep not because of what Germany did. But because of what the human race is capable of.

Your actions can transform fear into understanding.

I leave you with this, Nimi. Being afraid of Arabs will not keep you safe. Arabs' hatred of Jews has not kept them safe either. So, start somewhere. Take an action. Take an Arabic language class at your local University. Take an Arabic Studies class. Go to visit an Arab Mosque. Befriend someone in a hijab. It will be hard. Painful even. There may be tears of fear and even tears of loss. Losing a long-held prejudice still leaves a hole that needs to be filled with something. Maybe take someone with you on your journey. The road won't be so steep if you have someone by your side. It won't make it less scary, but it might make you more brave.

You were given this legacy burden of hate by the accident of your birth. You can reject it by the purposefulness of your actions. It is your choice and yours alone.

Life is tenuous and short. Because of that it is scary.

At its worst it is cruel and devoid of hope.

At its best it is meaningful and full of love. I've got your back.

From Strength to Strength, Tamar

Name Over, Insert Credit to Continue

Doing work, winding your way through cutscenes.
Tried to call my gun, but it wouldn't be found.
Tried to remote into my gun, but it wasn't found.

You're an old folder of fantastic stories on the computer
next to the videos they made of a happier time,
tossed off, not even backed up to the Cloud.

I run hot, toss and turn, kick the blankets off,
stretching fully and flick my toenails on a cold, brass bed frame,
waking to the alien glow of my phone: 4:04 AM
SLEEP CANNOT BE FOUND

And all you have to do is press
///boxing glove Heart crammed in a tub of crunchypeanut butter
SQUARE to call out
///scared of autos, packed in a cough on a schoolbus
SQUARE for name
///neither a warrior nor a newspaper
SQUARE for beer bottle
///raining stones raining bones
SQUARE to breathe --

The House's dandruff dawns through the blinds,
the Hollywood sign of a loading screen over your bed finishes,
and the killer who didn't even get a chance to work goes home.

"All of the movies available on celluloid never made it to VHS.
All of the movies available on VHS never made it to DVD
and not all of the movies available on DVD are streaming --

It's not even close."

D. K.

National Treasure

The President's daughter says she's on the dark side,
close to the frozen borderline.

"You're drunk. Enjoy it." The playboy smiles
and settles back into an amphibian stare.

"You're not sick.
This is how you're supposed to feel."

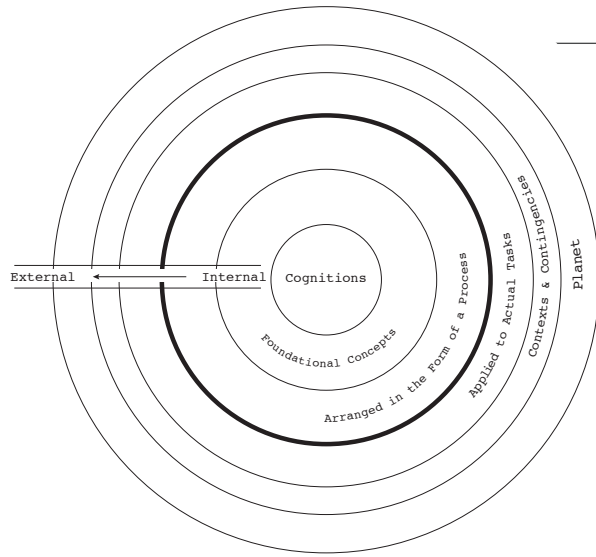
Her green eyes listen to the music.
"I'm going to go to the washroom put some water on my face."

The President's daughter crashes
on a postcard of the mountain's shadow
under a murder of crows writing
their light bleeding intestine paragraphs
with duct tape flashbacks.

"Molly, she come out? Are there people back there?"
The Detail rushes in checks every stall himself.
Molly doesn't respond; he notices an exit.
He keeps asking Molly if she came out back.
Molly still doesn't respond. He runs through the alley
and there's Molly's body in a pool of blood --
the map of the world.

"Bookbag's been taken. I repeat:
She's been taken."

D. K.



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MEREDITH JAMES • HOW VS. SHOULD • LIVD • 15.2

A short, critical essay on ethics in design.

Keywords:
 social media
 graphic design
 ethics
 sustainability
 code of conduct
 context
 critique

The question of ethics in graphic design isn't quite about prescriptive guidelines, but about each of us having the necessary critical thinking skills to decide for ourselves how to respond as practical challenges arise. Can designers actually perceive or reconcile when the work we want to make — or are hired to make — is at odds with the larger contexts of our society, natural resources, and planet? Are we proficient enough to be able to direct a project down a more ethical path, and if barred from doing so, walk away? Can we legitimize non-commercial, non-consumptive, non-materialist paths: social justice paths, design for well-being paths, artistic paths, allowing for a more flexible language and form? Finally, can designers, when working on projects that have serious ramifications on the lives of others, pull our heads out of our own asses to be... actually helpful?

Now is the time to answer. It is the age of design. And everyone's watching.

Western Historical Context
Throughout the twentieth century, American society occupied a narrow yet profusely dedicated aim: *to figure out how*. We wanted to know *how* to fly, *how* to build taller buildings, *how* to connect the country via transportation and electricity, *how* to get machines to do our work for us, and all sorts of other things. All approached through the lens of engineering. *How*, as a matter of fact, is the singular question of engineering.

Now that we're fully into the 21st century, the question of *how* has been aptly superseded by a much more valuable question: *to what end*. This latter question, which is a question of *should*, is a matter of ethics as much as it is a declaration that our work, that everything we do exists within a context. To ask the question, *how do we build this* is fundamentally different than *should we build this*. The power in the word *should*, is that it implicitly asks *why*. Not *if*, but *why*.

Asking *why* concedes that our actions have a wealth of consequences. It's astonishing to note that collective human effort is so powerful that asking *how* doesn't really matter anymore. Time and technological progress have proved the dimension of *how* as an inevitability. We can extend human life, we can build all sorts of machines to handle all sorts of tasks, and we can mine the earth to make just about anything. A doubt that must have existed centuries ago is no longer a doubt. It is certain that if we keep our efforts on a trajectory of *how*, we will inevitably eventually get to almost any end.

But what are the consequences?

If *how* is the question of engineering, *should* is the question of design. Engineering and design both solve problems, but between them, the difference is contextual. Design situates problem-solving in a context. That context includes demands from the community, culture, raw resources of this planet, and any other affected entity. Designers edge the realities of living on a finite planet with finite resources. Over the last several decades, have begun to acknowledge the impact of our projects. Consumption and disposability of material goods have ended up in landfills, or the ocean, and widely documented. Thomas Overthun, the Design Director at IDEO (a well-known global design firm) speaks about the day his colleague walked along a remote beach only to find that something they designed had washed up on it too.

Designers understand that our work is bound by nature. And being unrelenting critics, we've been questioning ourselves. Such questioning has resulted in marked progress for sustainable design. The first notable incarnation of sustainable design became known as a process of material production from its natural source to its end of use. However, questions arose because end of use isn't always the same. The "grave" part of the process became problematic, because the ground doesn't mean gone.

A second major sustainability effort evolved as a modification on this process, to be more accurately reflective of our closed-system planet. "Cradle-to-cradle" processes acknowledge that the grave is actually also the cradle of something else. Nothing is really created or destroyed, it just changes form.

The most recent incarnation of sustainable design has evolved into "moving upstream." Moving upstream means for designers to intervene at earlier decision points in a causal chain. If an intervention is made sooner, greater change and impact occur. In large part, this effort aims to address what we call "band-aid" solutions that permeate our society, but don't actually solve anything significant. Instead they inconsequentially (as all band-aid solutions are inherently temporary) address contingent problems. A good example can be found in bottled water. Efforts at increasing recycling and designing plant-based bottles are ancillary. The root issue is one of access to clean water. If you address accessibility of clean water, you don't need plastic bottle innovations. I couldn't prove my point more if I were standing in Flint, Michigan right now. No amount

of bottled water is going to offset the damage done by Flint's problem, it's putting a band-aid on it. With cradles-to-cradle and moving upstream initiatives, *should* becomes a very relevant question, one that can help critically guide which problems we solve and why.

Ethics in Our Field
So it seems that with material production, we can easily identify better problems, and better ways to direct our design-minded efforts. Ethics in graphic design, are quite another matter entirely. Our particular brand of design of course deals with matter. But in addition, we work with information, concepts, ideas, interfaces, experiences, and all things communication. Where ethics for architects, urban planners, industrial, and interior, and fashion designers center around material and process (very substantive things), our medium embodies strong non-material aspects that are difficult to recognize.

A quick survey into our discipline's ethics finds that they are significantly lacking, I suspect this is in part because of our non-material content. It's one thing to demand everyone stop printing on vinyl, use biodegradable inks, and not cheat each other, but it's a whole different challenge to ask one another to stop generating and disseminating erroneous information. The consequences (and they are hard to see, because they so often exist along a social dimension) of our work product can be as far reaching as

Compared to our sister disciplines, we have less regulation, primarily because of a common misconception that graphic design can't hurt people. As it stands, there is no professional license in the US that guarantees a certain level of proficiency in graphic design, like there are in interiors and architecture. General consequences for violating them. Other designers who put people's lives in jeopardy are at risk for losing their licenses, if not worse.

Additionally, our lack of ethics comes from lack of training. How many designers do you know who took a course on design ethics? Outside of the classroom, there is equally limited discourse. The Standards of Professional Practice from our largest graphic design organization here in the US (the AIGA) contains the bulk of our discipline's ethical code. Added guidance comes from the Graphic Artists Guild, a handful of TED Talks, the occasional published text (like Good by Lucienne Roberts), and notable criticisms (like those from Milton Glaser and Paul Nini). However, these examples are few and far between.

To be specific, the AIGA's code (and sister codes written in Canada, Australia, and as presented by the International Council of Design) are boilerplate lists that organize ethical responsibilities into categories such as: regarding other designers, regarding clients, and regarding the environment. They say things like: avoid conflicts of interest, don't do work without compensation ("spec" work), and be respectful to other designers. The AIGA's code is somewhat distinct in that it includes statements on discrimination, free speech, and human rights. It also has two very notable inclusions: an expectation that five percent of a designer's time is dedicated to "public good projects," and that a designer should "consider environmental, economic, social and cultural implications of his or her work and minimize the adverse impacts" (AIGA, 2010). These vague statements are not enough. Anyone who has practiced design recognizes the harsh difference between blanket codes of conduct and their murky implementation. What defines "public good?" What if economic incentives are in propaganda? What if I want to make satire? Does making non-client

Nini's essay includes a touch of both listed codes and that is ultimately even more important than clients and other designers. His prescriptives were notably missing from the AIGA at the time, and I suspect modifications to the AIGA policy in 2010 were in part, a response to Nini's influential essay.

Distinct from Nini and the various codes, Glaser and Roberts offer perspectives that have more depth. Glaser, in "Ambiguity and Truth," is willing to address ambiguity and philosophical lens, the section with Anthony Grayling on rhetoric provokes a very healthy discussion on design ethics.

In 1964, the First Things First Manifesto was published demanding more valid and valuable uses for a graphic designer's expertise. Thirty-six years later, with the profession suffering the same ills, another iteration of the manifesto was published. It's one small document with significant ethical implications, and we still have no response. In many respects, the manifestos are a stronger ethical compass than the AIGA's Standards of Professional Practice. Primarily because the manifestos demand that designers make a significant shift toward new uses for design. It's all fine and dandy to declare that designers must be fair to their clients and stop killing the environment, but those proclamations have nothing to do with design specifically. Shouldn't all professions be fair to their clients and stop killing the environment? FTF challenged us. The challenge remains largely unanswered. In our defense, it's gone unanswered because so few designers know how to respond, and despite the codes listed above, client ethics go so often unchallenged.

large scale lead contamination. Carting in more bottled water isn't solving the problem, it's putting a band-aid on it. With cradles-to-cradle and moving upstream initiatives, *should* can help critically guide which problems we solve and why.

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Ethical Dimensions

As far as I can identify, there are essentially three dimensions of graphic design ethics we must consider:

Material (natural / raw resource availability and sustainability)

Non-Material (standards related to research, ideas, information, communication, motive, behavior: all of the non-material content in our work)

Functional (what the intended function of our work is, and if our decisions are aligned with it)

Material ethics are obvious. Working with cradle-to-cradle awareness and design approaches can address everything from using eco-friendly inks to ending engineering obsolescence. Even one step at a time towards more conscientious practices still leads us to more conscientious practices — however slowly. As was stated by Jenn Maer from IDEO, "a 1% change in direction of the Titanic is still a 1% change in direction of the Titanic." At a bare, bare minimum, using materials and natural resources sparingly and sustainably is clearly ethical. It's obvious. But it doesn't fundamentally change the situation, because our production and consumption volumes are too extreme. Sustainable design is outpaced by consumption in a way that can only be drastically altered by behavior.

Non-material ethics incorporate research, ideas, information, communication, motives, behaviors: all of the non-material content in our work. They encompass everything from our proficiency in a given topic to choices behind what information gets disseminated and shared with an audience. It doesn't take long to stumble across a piece of graphic design that fails on a non-material dimension. A few examples that immediately come to mind are mine their behavior and personal data, power differentials, and the influence of proprietary interests (particularly noticeable with respect to gatekeeping). Decisions are being made by designers across an entire spectrum of control, from images of breastfeeding to civil rights interventions. Beyond all of which, the narrow white, young, male demographic that these tools and technologies are targeting reflects back the very same demographic (and values) of the people who create them.

As a quick and relatively minor example, ask Google, "How Many Ounces in a Cup?" The fact that Google answers you is a good thing. This wasn't always the case. But Google's answer also comes with a million-plus search results. This is an easy question to answer, but what happens when the question is: "Is Climate Change Real?" We have to be careful about which search results are promoted or more highly ranked and we have to be aware of the common behavior in users to only look at the first page of results (a digital version of "above the fold"). Which sites get ranked higher? Why? Do the rankings change if your location or demographic or browsing history changes? (The answer is yes.)

Here's a second example on the more severe end of the spectrum: "Apple has known Siri had a problem with crisis since it launched in 2011. Back then, if you told it you were thinking about shooting yourself, it would give you directions to a gun store. When bad press rolled in, Apple partnered with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline to offer users help when they said something Siri identified as suicidal" (Wachter-Boettcher, 2016). Thankfully, Siri doesn't give directions to a gun store anymore, but this is only one of many ethical issues that are surfacing. The problem is by no means limited to Siri. Researchers in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) recently published a study concerning how different digital services respond to a given crisis. The results of the study are problematic (Miner, et al., 2016).

Designers make up a significant part of the workforce at Apple, Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft, Google, Snapchat, etc., and every one of these designers will at some point find themselves in positions of enforcing an ethical stance, including how and when they choose to intervene in people's lives. These decisions are in fact being made by designers, constantly (isn't even jurisdiction or legislation) for what happens in our digital worlds. For made by a designer (or, the blatant disregard of one). This choice lacked critical function and outcome. Siri's failure was a failure on all of these levels. Its function was assistance after all, not sarcasm and not cultural critique.

It bears mentioning that a significant part of the profession has transitioned to newer media, but failures do not exist in social and digital media alone. Recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published an infographic on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome that was more social judgment and persuasion than it was information. It was so inflammatory that public backlash responded swiftly and mercilessly. This was not an isolated incident. There are many more examples of infographics created and disseminated which rely too heavily on shoddy research.

In *Graphic Design Theory*, Meredith Davis outlines a set of functions that design serves (or at least that's how I interpret pages 49-53). To talk about ethics is often to talk about intent. Having seen first hand how many designers are not really proficient at wielding an intent (in how the visual, textual, and sensory codes within their work are functioning), I could argue quite strongly for how sheerly defining the function of our work clarifies much with regards to ethics. For example, if the work we are intending to make is informative, then ethically, how well it informs determines the piece's success or failure. While a persuasive or propagandistic piece has an altogether different function and different set of

ethics. Design that seeks to be artistic, expressive, or puristly design (design for design's sake) then also has its own respective ethical criteria.

In identifying the various functions of design, there is also an implicit assignation of responsibilities. If a designer chooses to take on the role of assistance, the consequent responsibility is to assist. If a designer chooses to take on the role of informing, then the responsibility is to inform, meaning the quality of the information matters. When a given designer chooses to work within the function of assistance / informing / social betterment, then we better hold their toes to the fire.

Functional ethics are just another non-material property. They're hard to identify but are vitally important. It doesn't really matter if a designer works for a sleazy corporation or an altruistic non-profit if the content in the work is wrong, inadequate, misleading, or functionally inappropriate. Such an understanding undercuts the myth that designers are only facilitators or mediators. If the agency for Camel cigarettes creates a print campaign that appeals to youth, who is it that's responsible for an uptick in teen smoking?

When reading Milton Glaser's *The Road to Hell*, these intangible tangibles surface. They permeate. How any one designer answers Glaser's questions is reflective of their own personal (and likely changing) values. There happens to frequently be a rub between one's own ethical criteria and what, on a daily basis we are asked to do professionally. In other words, ethics wan when we're hungry. Ethics also wan when in the company of egos. No code of conduct can withstand hunger or ego without large-scale social pressure. I would argue, that social pressure needs to include all of the non-material and functional aspects of our work, not just the material ones.

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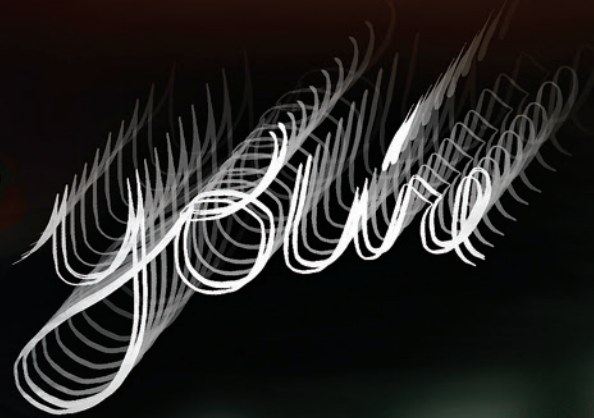
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Just Because



BIGGER
AND **BADDER**

DOESN'T MEAN

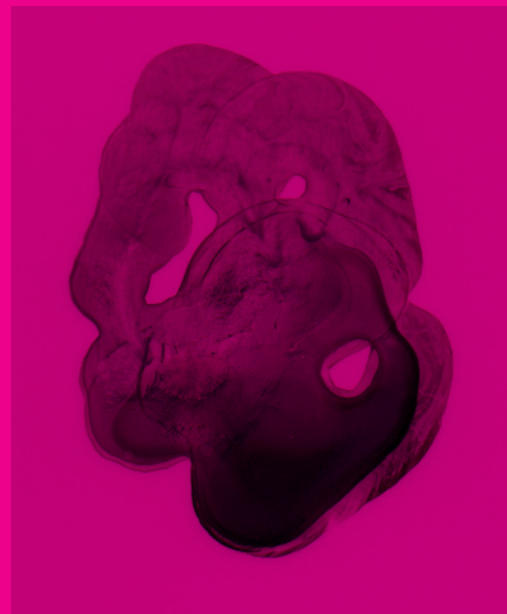
YOU AREN'T ALLOWED

A GOOD CRY

EVERY **NOW**

AND **THEN**

<< Also Doctor Kobra





A SHORT, BUT CURATED LIST OF ADDED DIMENSIONS:

- Ordos Kangbashi
- Salton Sea
- Brutalist Architecture
- Hyatt Regency Walkway in Kansas City
- MS Vista
- Tropicana Packaging
- Gap Rebrand
- Marvels of the Science with Prof. Scott Bug
- Félix González-Torres' Untitled (Perfect Lovers)
- Radenovic's Memorial Statue of Steve Jobs
- The BBC Prison Study
- Cezanne's Doubt
- Baldessari's Wrong
- Roman Signer, Engpass at Aussendienst
- Frenhofer
- Erased de Kooning
- Eating Robert Gober's Bag of Donuts
- <http://www.freepress.net/ownership/chart>
- Nimitz Highway Sign
- Napoleon's March to Moscow
- Hackers
- Kirtland's Warbler
- Google+
- QR Codes
- As Seen on TV
- Rejuvenate and ABG II
- Combined Sewer Overflows
- Suburbs and Urban Sprawl
- Tacoma Narrows Bridge
- The Design of Everyday Things (Norman)
- Design and Truth (Grudin)
- Product Complexity Leads to Consumer Complaints (Keijzers, 2010)
- Ultra-Minimalism
- Bottled Water
- Rage Quit, The Impossible Game
- Chicago Pedway
- Chernobyl
- Six Flags New Orleans
- Stuttgart 21
- Bruitt-Igoe
- Epic Fail
- Berkeley Pit
- The Prometheus Tree
- Brené Brown
- What Schoolteachers, Sumo Wrestlers and Economists Have in Common (Freakonomics)
- Crystal Pepsi
- Frappicino vs Frappuccino and the \$6 Check
- Lehman Brothers
- Rachel Dolezal
- Austerity Measures: Mars Dietz, Demian Diné Yazhi' and Keyon Gaskin
- The Museum Of Bad Art
- Museum of Jurassic Technology
- Two Thousand, One Hundred and Ninety One
- Engineered Obsolescence
- Program or Be Programmed (Rushkoff)
- The Useless Box
- Vdara Pool "Death Ray"
- Earring Magic Ken
- Colgate Kitchen Entreés
- The Dipr
- The Camel-Not
- Survivorship Bias
- Progress Traps (Wright)
- Dymaxion (Fuller)
- Project Implicit
- The Vanport Flood
- Ronan Point Apartment Tower
- Olympic and World Cup Stadia
- Challenger Space Shuttle
- Petroski's Designed to Fail
- Dubai's World Islands
- Tamarack Resort
- Flint Municipal Water
- Monsanto
- L'Ambiance Plaza
- Dismaland
- Shepard Fairey
- Richard Prince

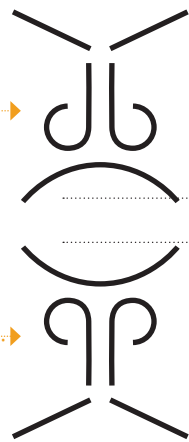
The biggest influences in my life have been my failures. ”



~~Failure is only success waiting to happen.~~
Failure is humiliating, painful, often public, and can alter or damage a life permanently. If someone ever says this to you, tell them to *put the shut to the up*.

In reality, this thing started in 2014. Just another #failure.

This is me, frowning.



This is me, turning my frown upside-down.

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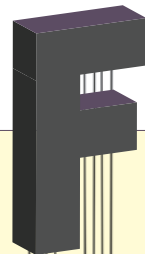
Printed digitally at Brown, with Risograph overlays courtesy of Tricia Leach and Nimi Einstein.

L I V D I S S U E X V . I I

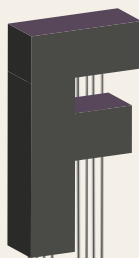
Typeset in Open Sans (designed by Howard Kettler, 1956), and a whole slew of custom letters by Meredith James. The LIVD logotype is typeset in Serif Demi (also Meredith James, 2007).

Printed with generous funding from a faculty enhancement grant through Portland State University. Thank you PSU!

Julius Sans makes a cameo. As does Courier.



COLOPHON



50.4.500



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