

**IN THE MIDDLE OF A CROSSWALK,
I EXPANDED A BALLOON**

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**CULTIVATING A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP
WITH A DESIGN PRACTICE**

RAY MASAKI

In the middle of a crosswalk, I expanded a balloon is a collection of essays paired with visual experiments created as a way to navigate the ways in which I contend with running my own design practice. Over my career, I've absorbed and normalized many unhealthy behaviors and habits, and this book is a collection of my attempts at wading upstream and fighting these ingrained tendencies. The writing doesn't necessarily have any answers, toolkits, or solutions, but I hope that it does offer some sincere and honest ways to reflect and question one's relationship with work.

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PART 1: CARE & MEANING



**IN THE MIDDLE OF A CROSSWALK,
I EXPANDED A BALLOON: DISSATISFACTION
WITH MY CAREER IN GRAPHIC DESIGN**

Hi, how are you doing? Are you okay? It's around a week into 2023, and I'm writing this from my couch with a blanket over my legs. My black labrador, Konbu, gets cold in the winter time, so he's curled up under the blanket with me. Sometimes I scoop my arms around his entire body and call him my little chocolate donut.

I'm not someone who cares too much about New Year's resolutions, but the one thing I definitely want to work on this year is improving my posture and managing the persistent pain I've had in my lower back. For a good part of 2022, I was going to a yoga class two or three times a

week, and it was the first time in a while that my body felt relieved of pain. As I got more and more busy in the latter half of the year with work, teaching, grad school, and other life things, the first thing I gave up was yoga—one of the few activities in my life that felt purely restorative.

Isn't it sad that my brain prioritizes work over something that actually improves every other aspect of my life? An addiction to productivity has unfortunately become hardwired over the years and is something I'm working on unlearning. I tell myself that if I finish everything, I'll have time to relax and finally do things that are good for me, but I know that's just a lie I tell myself. The more time I spend at my desk hunched over my computer screen, the more my back hurts, perpetuating the problem. I shouldn't need the year to change over to commit to being more gentle with myself.

BURNOUT

There was a time in my life when I literally couldn't stop myself from creating. As a child, I would go over to my friend's house and we would use his mom's copy machine to make silly little zines. I later felt artistic validation for the first time when I started silkscreening t-shirts with DeviantArt-style illustrations that I would then pawn off to supportive high school friends. For a while, I was into collecting vintage fountain pens with flexible nibs and would practice calligraphy when I had some time to kill at a coffee shop. My love for design eventually

led me to pursue an expensive art school degree in New York.

As time went on, art and design transitioned from being a hobby to a career, and joy began to seep out of the creative process like wringing out a damp towel. The past several years have consisted of a prolonged burnout—a condition that seems to be prevailing over the creative industry among many others. A 2022 study released by TBWA Worldwide suggests that the needs of creative professionals are not being met, leading to widespread burnout: “When compared to the general workforce, creative talent are significantly more likely to be dissatisfied with their work-life balance and feel burned out. Boundaries, mental health and a sense of stability are revealing themselves as being the most important, and most neglected, needs among creatives.”⁰¹

There's a tendency to believe the flawed and often romanticized fantasy that working in a creative environment is enough of a reward to forgo many of the expectations of a healthy career. Over ten years into my own career now, my experiences within the design industry have extinguished many of the feelings of pleasure and excitement that made me want to enter it in the first place.

This, of course, isn't to say that I haven't enjoyed recent projects; it's more just that I'm too inside of it all to feel the elation I once did. Although there's joy to be had in gaining skill and knowledge, I've found that once you intimately understand the mechanics and inner workings of

something, you forfeit much of that earlier, more innocent sense of joy.

The constant hustle of the past ten years has also prevented me from questioning the larger capitalist system under which we all work under but that I, as a graphic designer, feel unusually complicit in. I established my own design practice at the beginning of 2022 as a way of gaining more agency, but it's also inevitably come with more accountability as well. Understanding my role as a graphic designer while critically examining the larger industry now feels more prescient to me than ever before. Thinking about these things has also brought everything to a head though. Systemic issues within the design industry will likely persist (and mutate) for as long as I live, meaning my feelings of conflict will never go away. Finding joy in my own work and overcoming the general disillusionment I feel is necessary for the sustainability of running my practice moving forwards, because one thing's for certain: ignoring these issues will inevitably lead me to another period of burnout.

CONTROL

I've been wondering if I was drawn to practicing graphic design because I'm obsessed with control, or if I'm obsessed with control because I'm a graphic designer. My career was established around this desire for control, and it's ingrained in me this tendency to over-rationalize everything, with the productivity-addicted part of my brain believing I need reasons for doing things

or else it's a waste of time and money. When working for clients, being able to explain the rationale behind a design is, strictly speaking, part of a good working practice. Limiting yourself to what can only be explained or detailed beforehand, though, is not creatively satisfying. Neither is having to operate under something or someone else all the time, and there have been many times throughout my career where I've felt dissatisfaction in being someone who methodically provides the finishing touches with decorative icing rather than the person who bakes the cake.

In order to allow myself to go against work habits and place more confidence in my own instincts—something that doesn't come naturally to me—I've constructed and edited this book by making use of post-rationalization: “a mental projection by which we create an artificial purpose or precondition of an action.”⁰² In creative industries, post-rationalization usually involves tying something that was instinctual or even just plain fun to a flowery concept as a way of presenting a more desirable narrative to a client. This is something that's been treated with disdain at places I've worked at in the past despite the fact that many designers in client-facing industries would probably admit to doing it. I suspect it's because things that aren't thoughtfully and deliberately planned out tend to be considered imprecise, chaotic, and even meaningless, which are undesirable qualities in an industry generally obsessed with perfection. However, I'm learning

that joy, surprise, and serendipity are all necessary for leading a sustainable career in graphic design, which I can say, having felt their absence in the last couple years.

FINDING JOY

I don't want to generalize for all designers, because there are many lucky designers who haven't been traumatized by the industry, and can still find joy in the everyday tedium of design. I don't know if it's possible for me to reclaim that feeling entirely, but it does make me wonder what pushed me to neglect the beauty and joy that comes from intuition and instinct? Although I'm still in the process of unlearning many of my ingrained tendencies, I'm starting to cede control and embrace processes of imprecision and chaos. In order to acknowledge and practice what it's like to let go, I've been carrying out experiments where the outcome couldn't be overly controlled or predicted and then tying these experiments back to writing—post-rationalizing them, in a sense. This process brings out the innermost part of my designer brain that I love and care for. Part of my strength as a designer is in noticing and observing unusual patterns, details, and connections, and these experiments often resulted in new and unexpected associations or perspectives that wouldn't have organically emerged if I had planned them.

You may be thinking: "But what do any of these experiments actually have to do with graphic design?" They don't necessarily, and I think

that's actually quite important, because I'm learning that not everything I do needs to be in direct service of my profession. The design industry has constantly fed me the idea that it's necessary to specialize and to categorize myself as an expert in something. When I was finishing my undergraduate degree, I was terrified that I didn't have a definable "style" to call my own, so in order to develop my own practice, I was inclined to further refine and sharpen my skills. I learned strategies for designing and defining brand identities for other companies, and used many of those same strategies for myself, but that feels wrong—I know that I'm broader and more diverse than the narrow definitions I've placed onto myself. Output is connected by the creator, and not by strict definitions of style, technique, or execution.

Despite how we're told how lucky we are to pursue a career in the creative industry, it's not a gift, a lifestyle, a religion, or a life's calling. It's a profession, which means that some of us enjoy it more than others (*which is great*), but it's also completely okay to treat it as just another job to make a living. This is something I repeat to myself in order to fight the urge to try and extract from my career some higher purpose or meaning that isn't actually there—a task my friend and fellow designer Sam Rhodes once described as like "trying to use a frozen burrito to hammer a nail." Like any other job, there's a necessity to keep a healthy relationship with your work, which means finding joy within it and, crucially, outside of it.

It's okay to take breaks, and no one will die if you miss a deadline. Design doesn't need to change the world, and there's beauty in that, too.

So, as of this writing, my top priority is still improving my back pain.

01. Analyzing data from three different global sources of creative companies and agencies (including a global quantitative study, syndicated resources Forrester and Harvard Business Review as well as 68,000 online employee reviews)

“Creatives More Likely to Experience Workplace Burnout, per TBWA Study.” n.d. The Drum. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2022/06/20/creatives-more-likely-experience-workplace-burnout-tbwa-study>.

02. Piironen, Henry M. 2010. “Post-Rationalization - When a Representation Fills a Gap in Understanding.” July 1, 2010. <https://ezinearticles.com/?Post-Rationalization---When-a-Representation-Fills-a-Gap-in-Understanding&id=4586420>.



TRYING TO BALANCE VENDING MACHINE BEVERAGES WITHIN A RAILING: PRESSURE AND PERFORMANCE

I've never had much of a relationship with my father until recently. He was largely absent during my childhood, and in my late teens & early twenties, I would have dinner with him once every year or two at a fancy sushi restaurant or steakhouse in New York when he would visit from Japan on business.

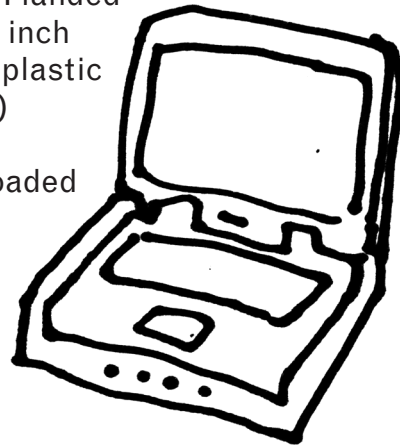
My parents immigrated to the States from Japan in the late 1980s, before I was born. They divorced when I was young, and my mother ended up moving my brother and I to central New Jersey while my father remained in New York. A lifelong salaryman of the Japanese imaging conglomerate, Canon, my father came to the US to be stationed at the company's New York headquarters. After the divorce, he spent a few more years living in New York but eventually moved back to Tokyo.

I resented my father as a child and would avert my eyes from any similarities we shared. I would flinch when people remarked how much I resembled him in photos even though my facial features undoubtedly mirror his—an elongated egg-shaped



head, slightly downturned monolid eyes, a prominent nose. Personality wise, my father was, in many ways, the stereotypical Asian dad. He seemed to care more about prestige and pedigree than showing his emotions and clearly took pride in his own educational background. Having attended Keio University, an elite private institution in Tokyo and one of the top universities in Japan, he had high expectations for his own children. I would tell relatives that I wanted to be a lawyer when I grew up because I thought it was what was expected of me, when in reality, the only thing I actually liked and wanted to do at that age was draw.

I loved watching anime from an early age and soon began taking an interest in the design and aesthetic of my favorite shows. When a friend at tennis camp told me about making crude frame-by-frame animations using Powerpoint, I became obsessed with making my own rudimentary animations on our family's shared Gateway Desktop PC. My mom took note and one day asked me if I wanted my own computer. My eyes lit up, and I spent hours on Dell's website, trying to work out the best configuration of specifications and features for making Flash animations and Xanga web templates. I landed on a behemoth Dell Inspiron laptop with a 17 inch screen and glossy white trim along its silver plastic chassis, loaded with a generous (for its time) 512mb of memory. With that computer and a freshly pirated copy of Photoshop 7 downloaded from Limewire, I began forging a path that would ultimately lead me to a career in graphic design.

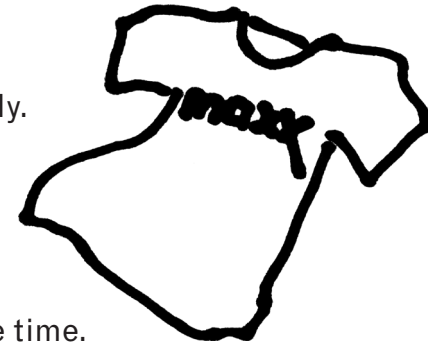


Unbeknownst to me at the time, my father was also pursuing his own interests during this period. Post-divorce, he was making nightly trips to the Bronx and Spanish Harlem and discovering the Flamenco and Mambo dance scene there. He apparently even made a small name for himself. I've never seen any photographic evidence of these stories, so my brain has a difficult time imagining my middle-aged Japanese father navigating these spaces.

When it came to applying to college, I already knew that I wanted to pursue art and design at Parsons, a school in New York just an hour's train ride from home. Although I had received some scholarship money to help with my tuition, it was still prohibitively expensive, and my mom suggested that I speak to my father. When I told him that I wanted to attend an art school, he didn't deny me outright, perhaps partly because of his somewhat limited English, but his confusion was discouraging. Perplexed as to why I would want to pursue a career in the arts, his first response was, "Where is this coming from?"

I get the feeling that my father doesn't remember this exchange, but I return to this particular moment a lot, as I think it was formative for me. This moment planted a seed in me that made me want to achieve success in design, perhaps even by challenging my father's own ideas of success.

Driven by that motivation, I managed to find my feet pretty quickly. In my first year at Parsons, a generous teacher offered me a summer job making vector illustrations and graphics for museum installations that paid \$25 an hour, an unfathomable amount to me at the time.



I excitedly called my mom and told her the details, and she replied that I was now earning more than she was. I could tell she was proud, but that was also the moment I realized just how hard she'd had to push herself as a single mother. On a salary less than \$25 an hour, she'd always provided my brother and I with daily home-cooked meals and outfits from TJ Maxx and Kohl's—both of which I would ungratefully complain about. The Dell Inspiron laptop she bought me when I was in eighth grade must have left a sizable dent in her account. I considered dropping out of school to work and gain more financial independence but ultimately decided on staying.

By the time I graduated from Parsons in 2012, I had a decent-paying job lined up, which was a huge blessing considering the great economic recession that had taken place only a few years prior. By 2015, I was freelancing in New York and landing projects with large, well-known tech companies that my father could finally understand and recognize. When I updated him at



one of our infrequent dinners, he was suddenly proud of me and finally showed excitement for my career prospects.

Rather than the massive relief I thought I was seeking, I felt hurt. My father was never vocally supportive of my creative career up until that moment, whereas my mom always was. Throughout my life, she would repeat “As long as you’re happy and healthy” like it was some kind of mantra. The crucial financial support for college ultimately came from my father, but if my mom hadn’t recognized and supported my interests throughout my childhood and early adulthood, I don’t know where I would have ended up. For my father to finally feel proud of me only once I’d found some success that met his own standards—this filled me with a new resentment.

WHERE I AM NOW

I’ve had time to process and reflect on my childhood as I’ve gotten older, especially after moving to Tokyo in my late twenties, the same city where my dad still resides. I now see that the resentment I felt was unhealthy to hold on to, and that my negative feelings towards my father were largely misguided by the naivety and angst of youth. We haven’t totally built bridges necessarily, but I do see him from a much different perspective.

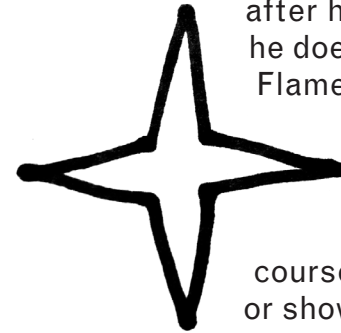
Whenever my wife and I go over to my dad and stepmom’s house for dinner, he’ll mention projects I did nearly a decade ago, and I always find these conversations to be tinged with a sense of melancholy. I’m pretty sure he holds onto these outdated fragments of my working life precisely because we never made any meaningful memories together. I say “we,” as I’m to blame in this as well. While he didn’t really keep in touch



with me, I never took the initiative to reach out either. He once told me in my early twenties that he would periodically Google my name. I found this creepy at the time, but only now do I recognize that there were not many other ways for him to keep track of what I was up to. I lived halfway across the world in New York and was pursuing a career in an industry that hardly existed when he was my age.

I obviously view my younger self from a much different perspective now as well. Much like my father had done with me,

I’d reduced my father to insubstantial bits of information, and there’s much more human and emotional complexity to him than I ever gave him credit for. He got into dancing because he was lonely after the divorce. Having overheard some custodial staff chatting about the dance nights at the Canon office after hours, he’d asked to join them on a whim. Although he doesn’t dance anymore, he occasionally still plays Flamenco guitar, has dreams of being a fishing instructor in his retirement, and loves food as much as I do. Whenever we’re invited over for dinners, I try to go on an empty stomach, because I know he spends all day meticulously preparing an impressive multi-course meal for me. He still doesn’t speak very much or show an abundance of emotion, but he’s warmer than I remember and has pretty progressive ideas on how he wishes Japan could change. There are, of course, many parts of him that I don’t want to emulate in my own life, but I am no longer ashamed of our many similarities.



Some wounds take longer to heal, though, and the strong determination to prove myself to my discouraging father was a kind of North Star for me, which permeated my core. I was so dependent on my career for orientation in life that disregarding it makes the open plane in front of me feel too vast. Without career milestones and objectives for wayfinders, I don’t know where to go or what to pursue next.

THE DESIGN INDUSTRY

In many ways, my relationship with the graphic design industry mirrors my relationship with my father.

As a graphic designer, I feel that I’m under constant pressure to prove my worth and value. After graduating from university, I was obsessed with the idea of being young and successful, keeping a watchful eye on design competitions like ADC’s Young Guns and 30 under 30 lists. I wanted to be recognized and praised by the industry for being good at what I do. Although I never won one of these high-profile awards, gaining some status early on crossed wires in my brain and falsely confirmed to me the fallacy that meaning and purpose is to be found in one’s career.



I began tying my self-worth to trivial social and financial markers like client names, accolades, or even the size of social media followings, as it seemed like the only way of gaining more recognition was through superficially impressive achievements. I'd occasionally compare my own career to those of strangers online and grow bitter or jealous of their success. When I wasn't bitter or jealous, I was viewing people transactionally, and I've found this to be the most toxic and insidious habit of them all. Even now, whenever I meet new people, there's still a small ugly voice in the back of my head evaluating how someone might be useful for my work.

Much like letting go of the resentment I held towards my father, relinquishing the bad habits and behaviors I've accumulated over my career will take time. Even once you let go of these things, though, or once they let go of you, it feels as though these pressures will always be there lingering in the back of your mind. But just because I can recognize the issues, it doesn't mean that I can easily shed myself and be absolved either; this will always remain a work-in-progress.



A VIDEO OF CANS DROPPING WITH THE SOUNDS REPLICATED FROM OBJECTS FOUND IN NATURE: A JOB IS JUST A JOB

I know I don't speak for everyone here, but I find the pithy proverb of "Choose a job you love, and you'll never work a day in your life" to be complete bullshit. Personally, I chose a job in a field that I love, but it feels like I've been working ever since.

Much of my professional design practice runs in a continuous loop of receiving work, creating work, and sharing work, so I find I need something that breaks the pattern every once in a while—something that's purely for my own pleasure. When I have the free time, I enjoy making scale plastic models of Gundam units and old cars that I like. I do it as a hobby, and it's honestly nothing more than that. However, if I were to suddenly monetize this hobby and have to start fulfilling orders, meeting deadlines, checking material inventory, dealing with taxes, providing customer support, etc., I'm almost certain that the joy would vanish and stress would set in.

In a 2022 Deloitte survey of 1,000 professionals across various industries, 87 percent surveyed said that they have passion



My model of Tallgeese III from *Gundam Wing: Endless Waltz*

for their current job, but 64 percent said they are frequently stressed.⁰¹ Not only does this serve to dispel the myth that passionate workers are somehow immune to all the work-life toil and trouble—a myth perpetuated by proverbs like the one above—but it also makes me wonder whether people who are really invested in what they do for a living are even more susceptible to stress.

A quick Google search of the “Never work a day in your life...” quotation sees it attributed to the likes of both Confucius and Mark Twain. According to the aptly named Quote Investigator website, the actual origin of the proverb is unknown, but the earliest direct attribution is to Arthur Szathmary, a former philosophy professor at Princeton University.⁰² In a 1982 issue of the Princeton Alumni Weekly, Szathmary was quoted as saying, “An old-timer I knew used to tell his students: ‘Find something you love to do and you’ll never have to work a day in your life.’”⁰³ Regardless of how great the thinkers attached to it are, the quotation never sat well with me. Loving what you do is great, and it’s obviously much preferred over hating your job, but to recommend blending work and life to the point that the boundaries disappear, sounds like horrible and potentially harmful advice.

OVERTIME WORK

Times may be changing, but there exists in the design industry a long-standing fetishization of overworking, and this seems

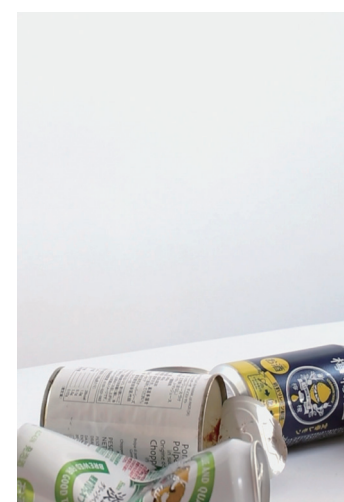
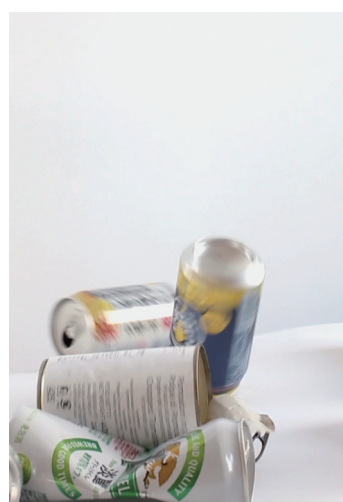
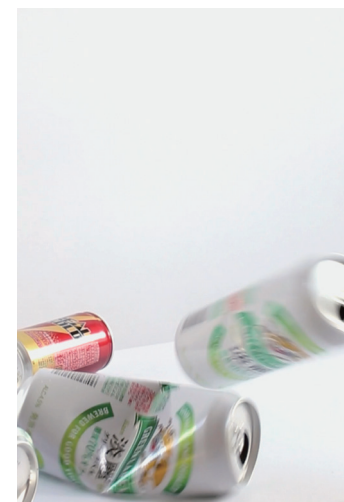
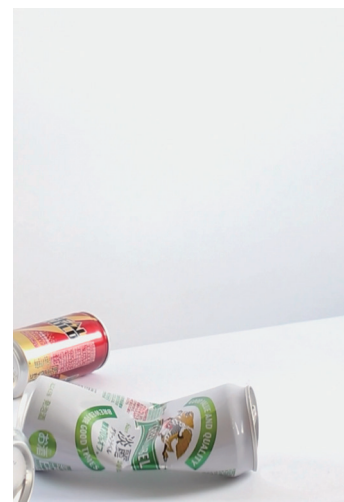
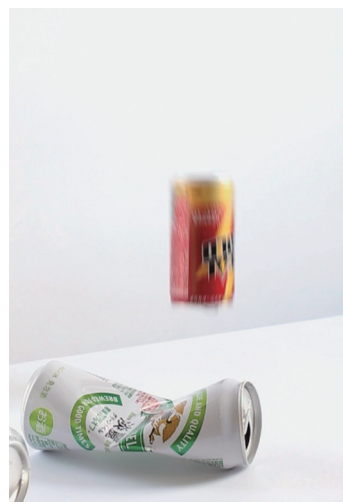
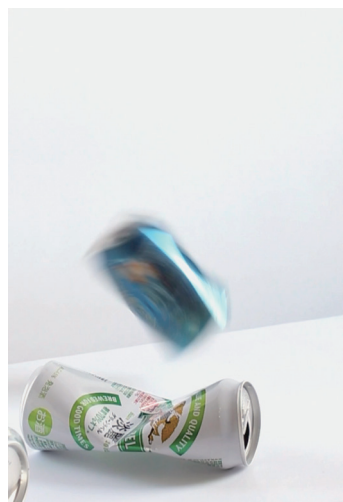
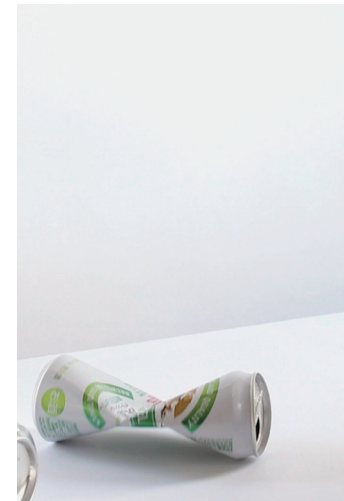
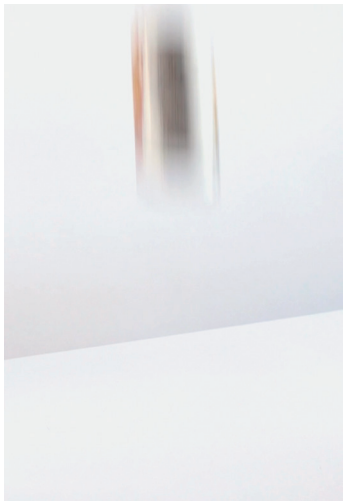
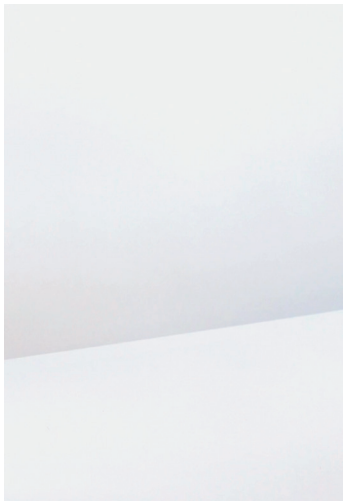
to be accentuated in Japan—a country where 残業 (*zangyo*) or “overtime work” has been normalized. Listed office hours in Japan are more of a suggestion than a rule, and many creative studios and production houses work their staff far longer than the legal limits. Overwork in Japan is equated with higher quality output and commitment or loyalty to one’s job. While there are of course detractors within the industry who are critical of their country’s working culture, I’ve often witnessed a sense of solidarity and pride even among the young designers here, who view burning the candle at both ends to be a necessary part of “paying one’s dues.”

I was recently asked by a design student in Fukuoka for advice on directions to pursue after graduating. We had a chat over a cup of coffee, and, as much as I wanted to be constructive, I couldn’t help but stumble over my words because I genuinely couldn’t figure out what to say. Working at an independent design studio definitely got my foot in the door and opened up future job opportunities, but it came with long working hours, high stress, and low pay. Meanwhile, the prospects of working at an agency or in-house aren’t that great either. The pay and work-life balance are usually better, but the work itself is not, and I personally felt much more worn down by the dull and oftentimes morally questionable projects I was forced to do at a respected agency than when I was working at a small studio. Of course, this is not everyone’s experience of the industry, and there are companies out there that care about both the quality of the work and their employees’ mental and physical wellbeing, but there’s no sugarcoating the reality that these are incredibly hard to come by. So could I genuinely recommend pursuing either of these paths, especially when they both led me to my own mental and physical burnout?

“COOL” WORK

When I was in New York, the companies I worked for were generally more cognizant of work-life balance than in Japan, but there was still a lot of pressure, especially as a freelance designer.

Freelancing requires constant networking and signaling of one’s worth and value. In the design industry, cool cultural branding and editorial projects are your best bet for gaining prestige, and, as a result, this is the type of work that gets displayed on Instagram profiles and portfolio sites. However,





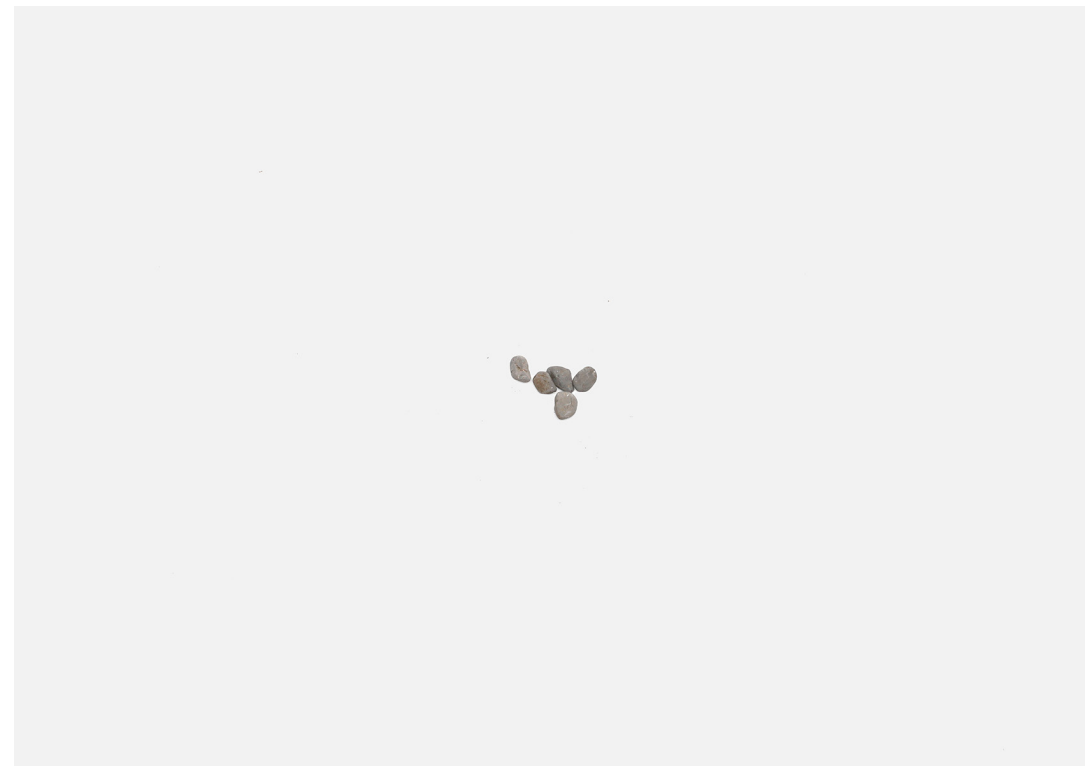
OH! LA! HO Beer Golden Ale can sound replicated with a snapped twig



檸檬堂 Lemon Sour can sound replicated with medium-sized rocks



POLPA DI POMODORO can sound replicated with large tree chunk



INABA LightTuna can sound replicated with small pebbles

in a city like New York, where the rent prices are so exorbitantly high, subsisting on this kind of work alone is almost completely unsustainable. Most of the designers I knew when I was in the city were doing large agency work in advertising to pay the bills, being bankrolled by large tech companies, or—if *we're being real*—being protected by the safety net of rich parents. So, in a city as expensive and competitive as New York, both types of work have to be consistently produced. The cool projects, which are usually produced at a loss and after hours, maintain social profiles and garner new client work, and the uncool, higher paying work earns you your bread and butter. If you were truly able to make a living off of cool projects alone, it was a sign that you'd *made* it.

DESIGNER AS CONSUMER

A designer's portfolio is expressed not only through the work they produce but also, albeit more indirectly, by their purchasing decisions. Be it their closet, apartment furniture, record collection, or even where they went on vacation, these are all indicative of a designer's sensibilities and can function as important portfolio pieces in and of themselves. A predilection for nice design—or “good taste”—is often at the core of why one might enter the industry to begin with. I'm not so cynical as to say that designers don't genuinely enjoy these purchases, it's more just that we're very conscious of how these purchases are curated and exhibited as well.

This is part and parcel of growing up in an age of rampant consumerism. It was just after World War II that President Truman, believing that the key to world peace was economic growth, helped in birthing modern consumer culture, and decades later we now live in an exaggerated and largely unrestrained version of it. In Leidy Klotz's book, *Subtract* (2021)⁰⁴, he traces our hoarding instincts back to those of hunter-gatherers to explain how we're inherently social creatures predisposed to accumulation. For us to display skill and competence to the members of our tribe, we need physical evidence, and this is why we're hardwired to consume, collect, and exhibit.

Aside from a desire to continually purchase things, another aspect of consumerism is that it's a system that perpetuates the working cycle. Consumption is our salve and signifier. Purchasing things gives meaning to the hours we put in (*or so we think*), and so it is that the designer's Vitsoe shelving



My own pair of Commes des Garçon Air Force 1s

units and their Commes des Garçon Nikes make their hard work feel like it's paying off. Before I end up sounding too judgmental, let me be clear that these are all things I can't stop myself from indulging in as well. I'd go as far as to say that the consumerist desire to signal my worth to others through the purchases I make has actually overtaken my brain. I'm at the point now where it's difficult for me to distinguish if I like something because I genuinely like it or if it's because I feel like I'm supposed to like it. How much of what I consume adheres to the lifestyle and uniform of the “graphic designer,” and how much of it is actually a reflection of my own taste?

Let's not ignore the simple fact that we do most of our purchasing on our days off. In David Cain's essay, “Your Lifestyle Has Already Been Designed,” he writes about how the 40-hour work week was designed to keep the corporate economy running and encourage unnecessary spending on nights and weekends. Nine-to-five work hours and the five-day work week are constructs that pressure us into “living for the weekend,” as we need to make the most of our off time when the hours are so scarce.

The 8-hour workday is too profitable for big business, not because of the amount of work people get done in

eight hours (the average office worker gets less than three hours of actual work done in 8 hours) but because it makes for such a purchase-happy public. Keeping free time scarce means people pay a lot more for convenience, gratification, and any other relief they can buy. It keeps them watching television, and its commercials. It keeps them unambitious outside of work. We've been led into a culture that has been engineered to leave us tired, hungry for indulgence, willing to pay a lot for convenience and entertainment, and most importantly, vaguely dissatisfied with our lives so that we continue wanting things we don't have. We buy so much because it always seems like something is still missing.⁰⁵

Something I pondered as I started my own design practice was whether there are any healthier alternatives to these established work patterns when essentially every other business operates on the same schedule. Taking the time to carefully consider my own work/life balance going forwards also led me to reflect on my complicity in the consumerist trap that Cain writes about. There's a terrible irony to the fact that I too am caught in the trap that I make a living off reinforcing; as a graphic designer, I spend much of my time feeding visual propaganda into the system, encouraging people to buy more stuff.

PURSUING PERFECTION

In October of 2020, I virtually attended a workshop held by Antionette Carroll, the President and Founder of Creation Reaction Lab⁰⁶, entitled "How Traditional Design Thinking Protects White Supremacy." Carroll opened the presentation with a quotation from her friend and colleague, Timothy Bardlavens, that read, "Design thinking is merely the privileged telling those without privilege that they know what's best for them." With that as our underlying theme, we covered and discussed topics like Tema Okun's research and framework for disrupting white supremacy in our day-to-day lives. Although the workshop was framed specifically around design thinking, what really stayed with me was the broader idea of the toxicity of perfectionism and how it informs the creation of elitist institutions and standards.

With this in mind, I've been trying to restructure my own design practice around something I call "graphic design

forgiveness," which essentially involves moving away from perfectionism. The desire to improve and the pursuit of excellence are not bad things per se, but it is naturally accompanied by the shame that comes from failing to meet unattainable standards. Perfection is an aspiration rather than an achievable goal. As well as being toxic, I believe perfectionism to be a fundamentally flawed concept in that it assumes there's some shared or universal idea of what's considered perfect in the first place. This raises further questions of who or what is even the judge of perfection. In the design industry, the process of judging, rating, and critiquing work is highly subjective, yet these decisions have a large bearing on what's considered "good" both in the design world and in wider society. Within a capitalist framework, the design industry's preferences are as economic as they are aesthetic, and the ripple effects are large.

When I consider my own struggles with perfectionism, I think of my desire to set strict typographic rules that I learned in my design education. I think about my fear of making a mistake when typing out a formal business email in Japanese. I think about achieving recognition and validation from annuals and awards. Graphic design forgiveness means putting an end to the constant striving and allowing myself to embrace things that are imperfect. Unique and inimitable styles or aesthetics, especially those that came from laborious or specialized processes, are the ones that are often held up as good. Establishing a unique visual trademark for yourself is great, but what if our criteria for what's "good" wasn't so single-minded? What if we factored in how respected and acknowledged we felt during a project, or how much extra time we had to cook dinner and spend with our loved ones?

Perhaps we should also take a closer look at the things we instantly disregard because they're "not good" or "not valid." When I first moved to Tokyo in 2017, my knee-jerk to many of the cultural differences I encountered was to instantly dismiss them as cultural wrongs. While there are still aspects of the culture that I'll always take issue with, such as zangyo, not everything I thought of as wrong back then was actually so clear-cut, and I started to realize how much my own cultural conditioning was coloring my worldview. Likewise, in the design world, we've been conditioned to favor certain forms and approaches above others, when in reality, what we really have is a set of arbitrary criteria that's been canonized by "high" cultural forms

and elitist institutions. Cultural discomfort can be engaged with as a learning opportunity—this is another truism, but it’s one that rarely gets mentioned in the design world, and it strikes me that one approach to disrupting our industry’s obsession with perfectionism is to remind ourselves of this.

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PART 2: CAPITALISM



2022.09.15 Alvin Cheung (AC) is a close friend based in Tokyo who straddles the design and business worlds. He works as a business consultant and also founded Tokyo Keyboard, a limited-edition craft keyboard company. In recent years, the concept of “capitalism” has become a bogeyman for many of society’s woes, but Alvin is the rare type of individual who can speak to both sides of the argument with knowledge, self-awareness, and nuance. Struggling with the ethics and sustainability of my own career, I turned to him for advice.

CHOOSING A BEVERAGE FROM A VENDING MACHINE WITHOUT KNOWING THE OUTCOME: MAKING PEACE

(AC) I see handling guilt as the through line in your writing. How do you enjoy this craft when it’s so commercial? How do you deal with design being a fundamental part of the sales process? The process of design is manipulation, and you can’t get away from that, but is it possible to be free of the guilt of controlling other people?

It feels like you’re wanting to create some kind of church of graphic design—a church that helps absolve designers of their sins of creation. Like, here’s this process, and here’s how we can do this properly and get rid of this guilt, right? But I don’t know if that’s possible. When I think about the capitalist market structure of graphic design, on the one hand, I picture something like a Chinatown market, where everyone has their own small shop, and then on the other hand, I see this big-box Walmart stuff. Ideally, the design industry would put its resources into servicing the independent shops because everything’s done at more of a one-to-one level. But the problem is, if it was just small Chinatown market shops,

there wouldn't be enough business for a graphic designer, and it wouldn't be sustainable financially unless you did like a hundred shops or something.

(RM) Exactly, yeah. So that's why I'm in a bind. When I started my studio, I wanted to be super pure about it, and I took on like eight projects at once that aligned with my own values. But I burned out almost immediately. I was like, "Wait, I'm working my ass off but I'm making no money." I needed money from a larger corporate gig, so that's exactly what I did—I took on some FinTech and marketing gigs so that I can do other artsier projects on the side, you know?

(AC) And I'm guessing they require the same effort, right? It's not like the smaller ones are less work.

(RM) Sometimes they require more work, even.

(AC) That's just economics at work. For you to be efficient, you have to be working with things that are already efficient, or at least also trying to be efficient.

(RM) When I look at a country like the Netherlands, though, they have a lot of beautifully produced books, for example, and a big part of that has to do with printing and book design being subsidized by government grants. To them, it's culturally important to have beautiful books, so the government supports it in spite of its inefficiencies.

(AC) The Japanese craft industry is like that too. There's a lot of stuff that doesn't make sense economically, but it's an important part of the cultural heritage, so the government has to subsidize it, otherwise everything will be lost to mass manufacturing. I think what we have in the US is just pure unregulated capitalism. That's why it's all big-box stores.

(RM) Sure, but in an ideal world, I wouldn't have anything to do with the big-box stores.

(AC) If we're talking morals and ethics, then, I wonder what something as ethically driven as veganism would look like in this market structure? What would veganism look like in graphic design? Like, I eat meat, right, but am I actually comfortable going out to kill a cow or a chicken? Could I actually kill an animal myself and eat it? At this basic level, there's this guilt that comes with realizing that something dies for us to live, and, in that sense, it's a zero-sum kind of way to exist.

(RM) Right, I get that, but I think my issues are with how corporations and capitalist greed affect that life cycle. When money or greed is involved, it's no longer a question

of sufficiency. It becomes a question of *how many* chickens can be made for slaughter? How can it be maximized? A lot of people do go hungry and there are needs for processes to feed more people. But at the same time, these processes we've settled are on are pretty fucked up too.

(AC) So then how do you come to peace with that, and is it possible to find absolution and be free? If you're having to make money from the larger gigs, I wonder if there's a sort of halal approach to all of it where it's like you killed the animal, but it's been blessed, so it's okay to eat it. You do a corporate gig, but you bring in the priest, who's like, "Don't worry the PDF is blessed, you can do this now." But you still fundamentally don't eat pork, so there are projects you absolutely do not touch, but for the projects that you do touch, you do them because you know you're making money to survive.

(RM) I think veganism in this analogy is the full purity mode. Where you're like, I will not take on anything that I think is morally dubious or unethical. That is the full one-to-one mode, which is unsustainable. And then I think there's the carnivore, like the capitalist version. Which is like, give me any and all of the biggest fucking projects, I just want to be rich. I think this halal approach is resonating, especially because I think that's how I'm approaching my practice right now. Like a lot of people say the "One for them, one for me kind" of thing. And I think, in our economic system, that's probably the healthiest approach, as both extremes are unsustainable. There's no purely ethical approach under capitalism, no way to be fully absolved of guilt.

(AC) Yeah, but I guess your guilt is also coming from the fact that, in order to do the thing you're good at and enjoy and love, you have to be complicit in this negative cycle of things. But then it's like, why are you to blame for how it is? Like why hold yourself guilty and blame yourself because you're participating, but you don't have a choice over it, you know?

(RM) The world was messed up before I even entered it, I get that. This is a weird analogy to make, but I had this Chinese friend growing up, and I wasn't allowed to go to her house because her grandma hated that I was Japanese. And it's kind of like, it's not really my fault, so why should I feel guilty about it? I have a couple ideas that go along with this.

The first is indoctrination. I was falsely taught that design





has an outsized impact or that design can change the world. Obviously, that stuff is true in some sense, like there are case studies where design affected things in such a way. But a lot of it also doesn't have a positive impact, and there's a disillusionment that comes from that, you know?

The second thing is that, even though I'm technically not to blame for how everything is, I am in an incredibly privileged situation. Like, I'm so privileged to even just be thinking about this stuff. You know what I mean? Someone who's actually struggling to get food on the table isn't fucking writing a thesis for their grad school education about it. But the thing that makes me really uncomfortable is that so many of the systems we have in place continue to harm disadvantaged people while benefiting people like myself. I won the lottery just by being born in America with upper-middle-class parents, and the people who weren't born into that get treated unfairly. With the Chinese grandma story, of course I'm not directly to blame, but the pain that she experienced from Japanese people was real, so I'm not completely free from responsibility either.

(AC) From what you're saying, it's because you have the privilege that you also have a share of the responsibility.



(RM) Yeah, exactly.

(AC) It's like the Spiderman thing. Because you can, you should. But because there's no clear path for you, there's a conflict.

(RM) Right.

(AC) I don't know how much you know about my background, but I did an MBA in design strategy, and, like with you and your college, it was instilled in me and my classmates that we were to change the world and make it a better place. The practical side to it was that by understanding people's minds and motivations, you create systems that, en masse, move people in a certain way and drive a certain action or feeling. Once I graduated, though, what I found was that, instead of making the world better, I was simply using what I'd learned to help companies be more efficient and better at making money.

(RM) There's something strange about using those same manipulative design tactics for good, no?

(AC) This was a huge piece of discussion at the school, and the head of the program's take on it was essentially that the cat's out of the bag—all the design tools are there, and you can't simply get rid of them, so what matters is how you use them. Design is manipulation, but manipulation is technically a neutral thing. Like, even if you put your coffee cup outside on the street, you're

manipulating something. You've designed the space, it's manipulation of the external.

The thing to think about is how to use those powers to lead discussion. Right now, who's leading the discussion when it comes to the design of large systems? Investors, business owners, CEOs: I think they're the ones driving things. Take the CEO of Disney—is he technically a designer? No. But is he designing things? Yeah, absolutely. So then it's like, how do you use your design tools to mess with the larger system that's already in place?

Because my realm of design is business and systems, there's a very easy channel for me to refocus. It's like, well I was designing systems for these other companies before, so instead I can start designing my own systems. But the problem with graphic design is that it's rarely in the driving seat, so I wonder how you might place graphic design in a more important position?

(RM) I don't know, it's just different levels for me. At the level you're dealing with, you have a lot more impact because designing businesses or systems has a real trickle-down effect where you're influencing the things that run beneath it. But design is already at this low, on-the-ground level, so I think there's a hopelessness that comes from that too. Not only do I feel like I'm not at the table or able to lead discussion, I also question why I should be at the table to begin with.

(AC) So how do you get to the point where you're at the table because they want to work with you specifically? Where you're not merely a function, but a key source of value?

(RM) If I think about when I've felt the most valued or have had the most impact, it's usually when I've been able to lend a very specific viewpoint on things as a designer, like with my book [*Why is the salaryman carrying a surfboard?* (2021)]. There's a lot of messaging in there that people who aren't designers maybe don't have the vocabulary to express, and the clients who have really valued my opinion are actually the ones who have also read my stuff. In those instances, it's like I've provided a vision and an opinion instead of just a service.

(AC) I wonder if scenario planning would be an interesting thought exercise for you, by which I mean you try thinking about possible future scenarios and writing them out in detail. We obviously can't predict the future, but we can think about what the world might look like from several different perspectives, and in

the process of doing so, we can learn more about the present and think about what to look out for. What happens if the graphic design industry carries on as it is—how does that look? Is it a story of decline? Does the role of the graphic designer become reduced by AI? Or what about if graphic design just ceases to exist entirely, and the whole industry transitions? On the flip side, what does a positive future for graphic design look like?

(RM) Interesting, I get it, but I think I need to spend a little more time processing all of this.

What you're describing is helpful as an exercise, but I think I'm still caught up in this idea of having a seat at the table or wanting to have more influence because, I don't know—I feel some tension there. What you're describing, legitimately, probably has the most impact and has the most downstream effect in terms of actually changing things, but, even though I have ideas of what needs to change, I don't know if I'd ever want to be the person dictating and controlling these large systems. I'm already so wary and critical of people in positions of power and industry gatekeepers as it is.

I think the things we talked about today that really resonated with me came from exploring all these gray areas, particularly the whole dietary analogy. I guess a sort of “halal” approach to graphic design means being okay with the realities of the industry, recognizing that you need to make a living, and being honest with yourself about the type of work you absolutely won't touch.



PHOTOS OF QUIET MOMENTS: A "HALAL" APPROACH

It was as I was eating this meal at one of my favorite lunch spots that I realized the restaurant embodies many of my own business aspirations. Consequently, this piece of writing is a mission statement of sorts for how I want to run my own studio.

When I was living in the Shibuya neighborhood of Yoyogi Koen in Tokyo, at least once a week I'd eat lunch at a small teishoku restaurant.

After sliding open the shop's wooden doors and entering through the white noren curtain, you see a dark and gently worn oak counter formed into an L shape, with three seats directly in front and five seats to the left—only eight seats in all. You take a seat, and the owner—a young woman—wipes down the counter with a towel and serves you cold barley tea while you decide on your order. The seats are on a slightly raised platform,



Tuesday, 10 August 2021, 12:13pm:

Mackerel tatsuta-age, blanched spinach and shiitake ohitashi, curried kabocha with minced chicken, pickled myoga and cucumber, boiled peach, hijiki and okra salad, miso soup and white rice.

with the countertop overlooking the modestly sized kitchen, so you can watch as she prepares the food.

The word 定食 (*teishoku*) refers to a traditional kind of “set meal” in Japan where all of the courses are served together on a single tray. At this restaurant, only two meal options are offered as 日替わり (*higawari*) or “daily specials.” The A teishoku set has a meat entrée whereas the B comes with fish, but both are made to order at a reasonable ¥1000 (~\$7.50). Each set includes a rotating cast of pre-prepared side dishes that also changes daily.

Teishoku are almost always composed of the same components. There’s a main course of meat or fish, an *okazu* “side dish” (usually vegetables), a pickled or vinegared dish, miso soup, and white rice. These carefully seasoned dishes offer different flavor profiles that contrast and play off of each other when eaten together with rice. The savoriness of a fatty pork belly, for instance, can be balanced with the sharp brine of pickled vegetables. There’s also usually a combination of warm and cool dishes, with the sides typically being prepared and refrigerated in advance so as not to slow down service.

The 定 (*tei*) part of “teishoku” not only refers to the set composition of the meal, but also the positioning of the dishes. Although I’m sure there are probably regional variations, the main dish is usually in the top left or center, the sides in the top right, the rice in the bottom left, and the soup in the bottom right. The placement allows for easy circulation between the dishes, making it easy to pair bites from each dish with warm rice and then wash it down with sips of miso soup.

I’d often leave this restaurant feeling a bit emotional. There’s a modesty to the owner’s approach that’s so hard to come by in a world where restraint is becoming harder and harder to practice. The small kabocha side dish and boiled peach dessert share a simplicity that hints at her appreciation for seasonality. With kabocha being a late summer to early fall squash, and peach season running from June to August in Japan, I imagine these were some of the freshest ingredients available on that particular day. Her appreciation towards the seasonal produce is clearly evident, and yet she doesn’t deploy it for marketing or virtue signaling purposes. Her respect for ingredients runs right through to the way in which she plates the food, which is elegant but not overly showy.

Keeping costs down while not compromising on quality probably comes down to limiting options to only two menu items. There’s also a subtle confidence to be found here—perhaps only two options are necessary. Her patrons clearly appreciate this and come to the restaurant knowing what to expect, and at ¥1000, I personally always felt like I was receiving more than I’d paid for.

This teishoku restaurant is the sort of business that can’t exist in a city like New York. Small neighborhood restaurants either get priced out by the outlandish and perpetually rising rent, or they’re forced to commercialize and adopt trends. There used to be a tiny mom-and-pop Japanese restaurant called SOY in the Lower East Side that did simple home cooking. The interior wasn’t done up, as it was clearly just an ordinary family home, with walls filled with drawings done by the owner’s kid. When I stopped by for lunch one day, I was gutted to find a piece of paper taped to the door saying they could no longer afford the rent and were moving upstate.









Nom Wah, Chinatown



Nom Wah, Nolita

But it's not just mom-and-pop shops that have a hard time surviving in NYC. There are many examples of famous New York institutions like Chinatown's Nom Wah Tea Parlor becoming trendy and upscale versions of themselves just to keep up. In the case of Nom Wah, they opened a second Nolita location that, with graffiti-style wall illustrations and slick neon signs, was to be based on a new fast-casual concept. I never could bring myself to try this bastardized Nom Wah, so it may be great for all I know. But a lot of the soul that made the original location so great had been lost, and the new sanitized visuals screamed of investors and stakeholders capitalizing on Nom Wah's cachet.

I fear what would happen if the teishoku restaurant in Tokyo were to suddenly draw huge lines of customers. I can tell that the owner really values her relationships with regulars and locals, and there's an intimacy to the small counter setup that facilitates these bonds. The service isn't slow necessarily, but if the restaurant were any larger, she would be forced to hire additional staff or adjust the menu. With the business and the way it is now, she seems to have found some harmonious equilibrium.

I've extracted some principles from this teishoku restaurant that I think might help me in running my own studio. Much like the rotating higawari menu, though, these principles are not set in stone, and having the flexibility to change will be important for finding my own balance.

THE COUNTER

The counter is representative of humility and transparency. Throughout my career, I've come face-to-face with the capitalist instinct to gatekeep, with designers withholding techniques and knowledge on some occasions in order to gain a competitive advantage. Not only do I want to keep my working methods open and transparent, but I also want to proactively share and exchange findings with my peers through writing, research, and teaching.

THE SET MENU

I've recently been pondering the idea of perfection in design and the unnecessary pressure it puts on the designer. Pursuing high quality and singularity is one thing, but it shouldn't need to come at the expense of one's mental or physical health. Most of the elements of teishoku are pre-determined, but the basic template still leaves room for creativity. This tows an interesting line between standardization and creativity.

SEASONALITY

It's important to be able to shift and adapt with the ebbs and flows of an ever-evolving social (and physical) climate. Seasonality in design means being flexible in one's visual design approaches, being open to new modes of thinking and collaborators, and being in tune with your own body and the world around you.

THE CUSTOMERS

Having done work for a wide range of clients, I know that trust and shared values often produce the most fruitful results, and that it's these projects that leave me feeling the most fulfilled. Now that I have my own studio, I may not be able to control exactly who walks through the front door, but I have the direct and indirect powers to attract a certain kind of customer. So long as I can be content with making just enough to lead a healthy and comfortable life, I'll be able to establish more direct and meaningful connections at my L-shaped countertop. A good project is one where both myself and the customer walk away feeling satisfied and nourished.



REPLICATING A ROCK FOUND AT A PARK: IS IT OKAY TO BUY THINGS?

A-SIDE

You make me feel special
세상이 아무리 날 주저앉혀도
아프고 아픈 말들이 날 찢러도
네가 있어 난 다시 웃어
That's what you do

I have no idea what the members of TWICE are saying in the above chorus from the K-pop group's 2019 hit, "Feel Special," but it is without exaggeration one of my favorite songs. When I sing along, I'll emphasize the English words that I recognize, and will poorly and embarrassingly emulate the Korean parts as gibberish (*sorry to my Korean friends out there*). I could easily look up the lyrics and translations, as I'm sure many international listeners do, but not knowing these things is actually key to my enjoyment. With a global pandemic, a climate crisis,

unbridled capitalism, rampant racism, and police brutality to name a few things on my mind, TWICE has become something of a personal oasis.

I used to speak to my therapist about my anxieties about the future, how I feel like we're not doing enough, and how my job as a designer is contributing nothing, and she would tell me that I can only control what I can control, and that focusing on my present and trying my best despite everything is the most that I can do. While I know she is objectively correct and I try to heed her advice as much as I can, there are also still times when I want more people to be as freaked out as I am. It all feels too reactionary and like we're doing too little too late.

My previous job was at a Tokyo-based design agency where I primarily dealt with creating brand identities and logos for various corporations in Japan. I would often look at the logos I was designing day in, day out and have a moment of reflection where I would think to myself, "Who cares?" While there is of course a part of me that innately enjoys the craft of my profession, at the end of the day, does the way I perfectly kern the letter X against the letter Y in a logotype actually mean anything when you consider the social and ecological collapse we have looming large on the horizon? Given the role that large corporations have played in getting us into this mess, my self-reflections would soon turn into self-critiques once I considered who I was kerning the letters for.

During such thought spirals, I would often turn to a piece of writing entitled "A Soft Manifesto" by my friend Cortney Cassidy, as it captures the despair of working under capitalism in a way I find to be piercingly resonant:

Like many others, I feel burned out because I lost to capitalism a long time ago. I lost before I existed; before my grandmothers were teenagers with their firstborns (my absentee parents), both still grieving the early losses of their fathers to war and illness. Capitalism is a cold indestructible mass that embraces no one. Even for the winners of capitalism, the only way to persist is to develop toxic politics and relationships.

The desperation, exhaustion, and hopelessness in both the content of my thoughts and the method of capturing my thoughts exist because I work to live without getting to actually live, or process living.⁰¹

It's grim, but it's a reality that I wish my undergraduate education in the late 2000s prepared me more for. I imagine (or hope) that many design curriculums have changed to reflect the times, but I also wonder about how my undergraduate education in the late 2000s failed to prepare me for the ethics of my work. At the core of my profession, I was sold a facile fantasy of being "cool" and having a "cool" job. I think many of us get into the profession because we genuinely enjoy investigating culture, and want to partake in the production of it. However, in almost all cases, cultural output and capitalism is intrinsically entangled; it's part of the job description. Perhaps some of us wanted to be artists, but were afraid of the lack of job security, and chose instead a profession that inherently tied art to commerce and production. I was taught the history and craft of graphic design, but not necessarily the implications and ramifications of these decisions.

Another part is the reality that considering the ethics of the design industry, while necessary, is also a privilege, especially around the time when I was graduating from my university following the Great Recession in 2008. A scarcity of jobs made the competition more fierce and refocused our work on practical and marketable skills over ethical considerations. Maybe that's why in school, we began fantasizing about arbitrary goals of achieving awards for up-and-coming designers that sell an idea of being young and successful so that we could be recognized by big brands and agencies who can use our work and identity to sell more stuff while we're still doe-eyed, excitable, and dreaming of a fat paycheck.

For some, these accolades are a means to an end or perhaps necessary for visa requirements, but for others it's a back-patting festival between like-minded individuals and judges. Capitalism doesn't necessarily reward the new or the uncomfortable or the underrepresented, and instead favors the most accessible hegemonic execution of taste. I think many of us have woken up to how broken the game of capitalism is, but the reality is that we still exist within its reign with no chance of escaping, which means that we still need to play by its rules. I still recognize the practical need to promote, brand, and commodify myself in order to be hired to create more stuff, which means I can't help but become a living contradiction.

Sometimes I get so overwhelmed by everything that I get thrown into a deep despair. I once had a conflict at my job that



Hard urethane foam added to silicone mold



Multiple casts of the rock



Casts painted with white primer



Spray paint and acrylic wash to replicate texture



The nine members of K-pop idol group, TWICE

was incredibly upsetting, and I told my wife at night as I came to tears that “I don’t know how to exist.” Looking back, it sounds melodramatic (*and it probably was*), but it’s an unfortunate paradox to always worry about the future and my role in it, because when I dissect the individual elements of my life, I exist in unbelievable prosperity. I live in Tokyo, a safe, clean, convenient city. I have a lovely and supportive partner. I have a comfortable apartment in a nice neighborhood. I have a stable job and income. I’ve reached a level in my career that a younger me would be amazed by. I’m afforded these luxuries as someone who’s “good” at my job, and if I just kept my head down, and didn’t look around too much, I’d probably be more grateful for it. And yet this idea of not knowing how to exist in an ethical way still itches at me like a mosquito bite between my shoulder blades. And ironically in these moments of despair, I find myself seeking comfort by turning to the K-pop idol group, TWICE, a living embodiment of the capitalist system I condemn.

B-SIDE

I became a fan of TWICE in early 2020, and I don’t think the timing is coincidental. At a time when the weight of the world was feeling heavier than ever, glossy music videos featuring nine girls in their early twenties singing and dancing in cheesy matching outfits provided levity. To my wife’s embarrassment and dismay, I began consuming their content and videos on a regular basis. Worldly problems and politics don’t exist in their

videos, and the most stressful thing that can occur is along the lines of if Dahyun is able to complete her secret vlog mission of hugging Sana three times on camera.

The reason I don’t look up the lyrics to TWICE songs is that the untranslated words provide my brain with a blank canvas to fill in with whatever affirmations I need at the time. The few English words that do appear in TWICE songs are like the corner and edge pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in that they provide enough of a scaffold for me to then make out or project the rest of the image. K-pop doesn’t work for me in the same way when it’s in English or Japanese. I recall going to karaoke with a couple friends once when someone queued up BTS’s global smash hit “Dynamite,” which has English lyrics. I didn’t think much of their music at the time, but the experience of reading the absolutely nonsensical English lyrics in real time was shocking. The song begins as follows:

Shoes on get up in the morn’
Cup of milk let’s rock and roll
King Kong kick the drum
Rolling on like a rolling stone

What?

Of course, the irony to all of this is that TWICE, a group belonging to JYP Entertainment, is, like much of K-pop, a lab-grown, perfectly engineered example of late-capitalist pop. South Korea’s pop music industry is far and away the most advanced in the world. It’s not as if the members happened to meet in high school and decided to form a group. Rather, they’re all highly trained and highly developed artists who’ve been nurtured and formed within the K-pop industrial complex to shoot dopamine straight into a viewer/listener’s brain. Members of K-pop groups adhere (*often through plastic surgery*) to strict beauty standards but are unique enough in looks and personality so that you can pick your favorite member and develop your own “bias.” Biases provide another important avenue of revenue, as one shows one’s devotion to a particular member by buying their merchandise. Before this, aspiring K-pop idols go through brutal training programs with the dream of eventually “debuting,” and many of them enroll before they’ve even reached double digits in age. Jihyo, the leader of TWICE, joined JYP Entertainment at the age

of eight and trained for ten years before finally debuting. Many of us turn a blind eye to the harsh realities of the industry because it's more fun believing the fantasy.

The current K-pop landscape is monopolized by three entertainment companies colloquially known as the "Big 3": YG Entertainment, SM Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment. These three companies played pivotal roles in introducing the concept of idols to the world and spreading K-pop to a wider audience. Although similar in their factory-like structures, there are differences between them.

YG, founded by former K-pop star, Yang Hyun Suk, leans much more on their hip hop-influenced sound, producing acts like Black Pink and Big Bang. SM, founded by Lee Soo-Man, has been most criticized due to the company's exploitative contracts and overworking of trainees; however, the company is also credited with kickstarting the Hallyu Wave,⁰² or the global exportation of South Korean pop culture. Finally, JYP Entertainment was founded by singer, dancer, and producer Park Jin-young, who's regarded by some as the Michael Jackson of Korea. In contrast to the edgier YG acts, JYP Entertainment is known for the formation of cute pop-centric girl groups that focus on the group dynamic over individual stars. The success of TWICE has not only cemented JYP's status as one of the Big 3 but also as one of the largest entertainment companies in the world.

With the K-pop industry now South Korea's number one cultural export, the country's push for pop dominance is showing results. The most popular K-pop group, BTS, contributed an estimated 5 billion US dollars to the country's GDP in 2021.⁰³ K-pop continues to gain popularity overseas, employing strategies to strike while the iron's hot. TWICE has recently released singles in Japanese and English as well as Korean to grab its own share of the genre's growing global audience.

Rather than define K-pop as a genre, perhaps it's more apt to describe it as a medium. There isn't a definable "sound" of K-pop; songs are instead born from genre-bending formulas that mix elements of pop, electronic dance, jazz, rock, funk, and hip-hop. Anyone can find something to like under K-pop's wide umbrella. Songs like aespa's "Next Level" or NMIXX's "O.O" sound like three songs mashed into one, presumably so they can game streaming numbers and be trimmed into 15-second sound bites for TikTok.

Whereas South Korea looked outward to spread their K-pop

gospel and absorbed Euro-American influences in the process, Japan's pop industry has remained decidedly domestic. The domestic market is larger here, and there's also still unusually high demand for physical albums and analog formats. Popular idol groups like Nogizaka46, Johnny's, and LDH, while formed on a similar conceptual foundation to their South Korean counterparts, sound and look incredibly dated. In recent songs by TWICE, there are co-writing credits for singer-songwriters like Jade Thirlwall of British girl-group Little Mix and production credits for Red Triangle, the latter of which has produced global hits for the likes of Charlie Puth, David Guetta, and 5 Seconds of Summer. It's hard to find anything remotely similar in J-pop. I'm not necessarily saying that one is better than the other, but the differences are apparent.

Perhaps this is wishful thinking because of the positives I gain from TWICE, but I'm trying to come to terms with the fact that since there's no escape from the grasp of capitalism, and like my therapist said, all I can do is control what I can control and try my best.

Most things in the world are not wholly good or wholly bad and likely exist along a spectrum of varying grays. In my work, if I have the means, I would like to partner with companies and brands that I think are ethical, or at the very least not evil. And sometimes I will use the money I acquire to buy stuff I probably don't need on Amazon with next day delivery, and sometimes I will use that money to support causes I think are important or fund personally meaningful projects.

I'd like to think that TWICE, despite being the ultimate product of capitalism, is ultimately a force for good because of the joy they bring to their fans and the respite their music provides in times of overwhelming anxiety. My friend (and fellow TWICE fan) Sam once mentioned to me that the longevity of capitalism perhaps comes from the way it generates balms for the injuries it simultaneously inflicts, creating an inescapable dependency. Of course, we should all aim for better, but it's also not realistic to drop everything that's bad and start leading a morally pure life from tomorrow. So, despite my hypocrisy, I choose to continue listening to and loving TWICE.

I want you to cry, cry for me
내가 울었던 것처럼 Cry for me
Make your rain fall
Cry for me but
Again

조금씩 조금씩 또 빠져가
사랑에 내 결심이 또 무너져가
용서할 핑계를 만들어가
I want you to
I want you to
I want you to
Cry for me

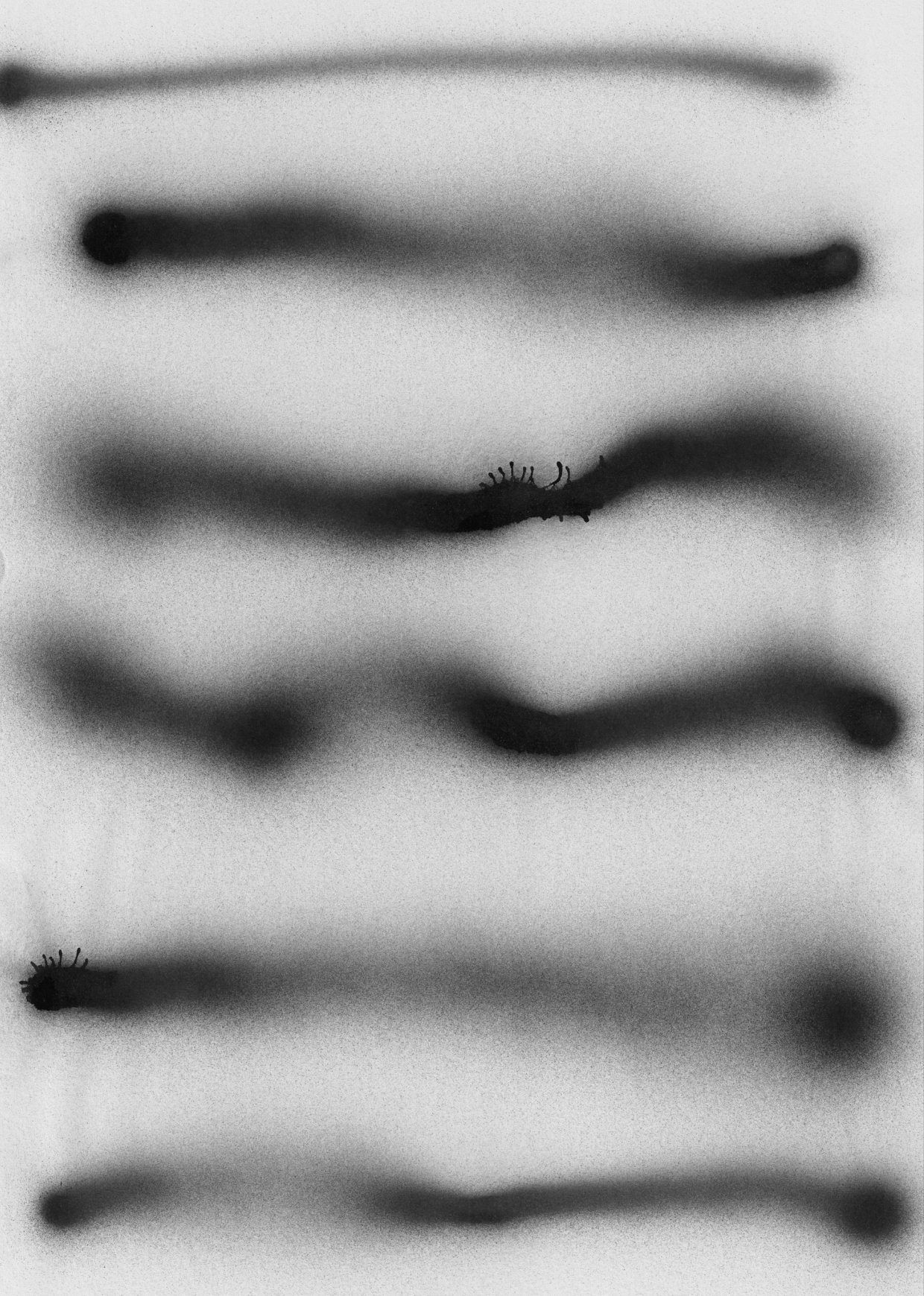
I don't know what is being conveyed in the Korean lyrics of TWICE's 2020 song, "CRY FOR ME," but I assume it's about crying about how difficult it is to keep your morals and ethics as a graphic designer under capitalism.

01. Cassidy, Cortney. 2020. "A Soft Manifesto." *Thecreativeindependent.com*. December 23, 2020. <https://thecreativeindependent.com/essays/a-soft-manifesto/>.

02. Fuhr, Michael. 2015. *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea*. Routledge.

03. Smith, Stacey. 2021. "How BTS Is Adding an Estimated \$5 Billion to the South Korean Economy a Year." *NPR.org*. August 6, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/06/1025551697/how-bts-is-adding-an-estimated-5-billion-to-the-south-korean-economy-a-year>.

PART 3: CONTROL



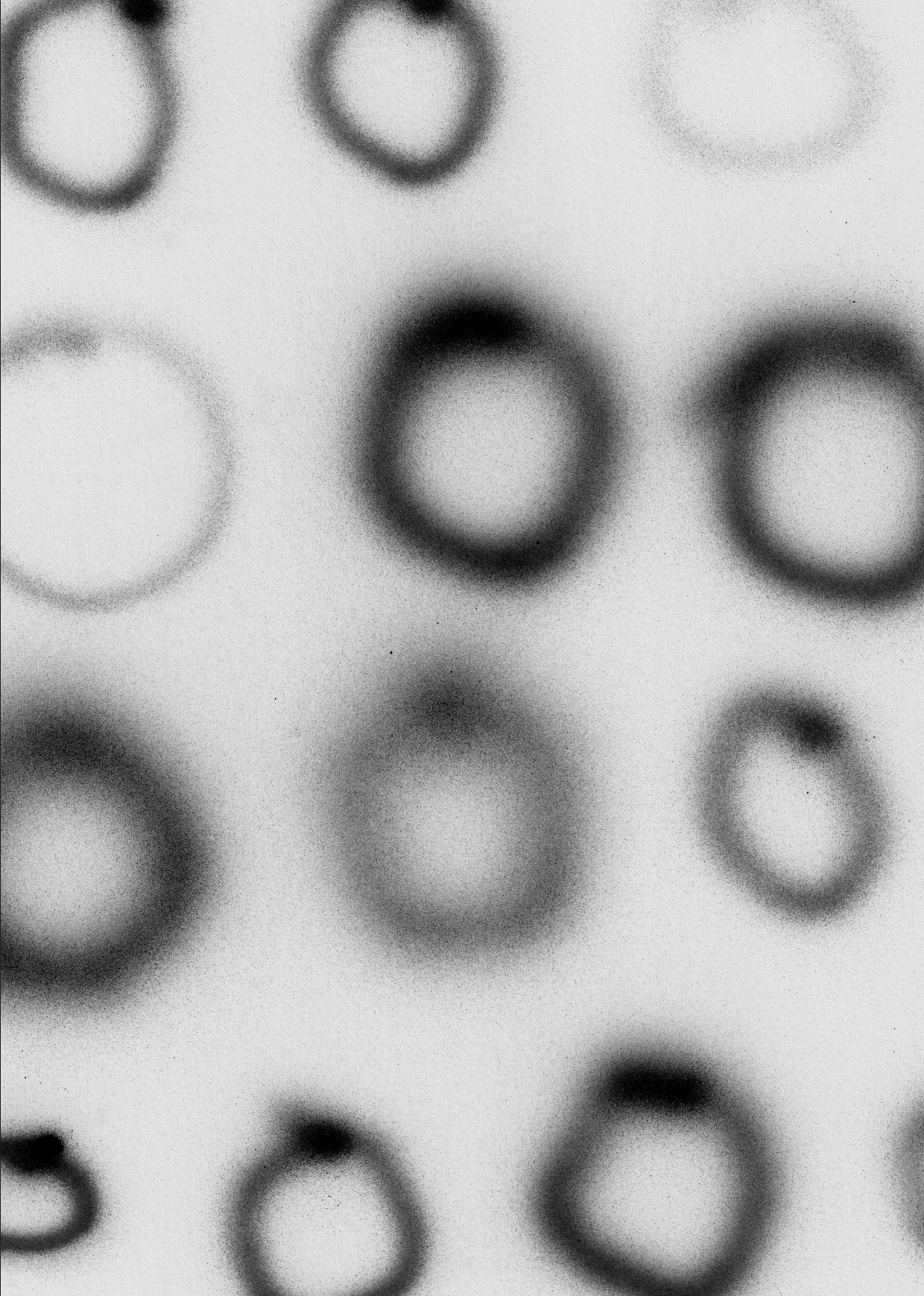
2022.09.23 Nick Iluzada (NI) is an illustrator and art director who's spent time in Texas, New Jersey, Maryland, New York, California, and, most recently, Tokyo, which is where he currently resides. I've long admired his flexibility as an illustrator and how he never seems to limit himself to one particular style. As I was graduating from Parsons, Nick was based at the Pencil Factory, a co-working studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn where all the "it" designers and illustrators were gathered at the time. We had a conversation about how our respective educations trained us to seek certain standards of execution and how we then worked against those standards later in our careers.

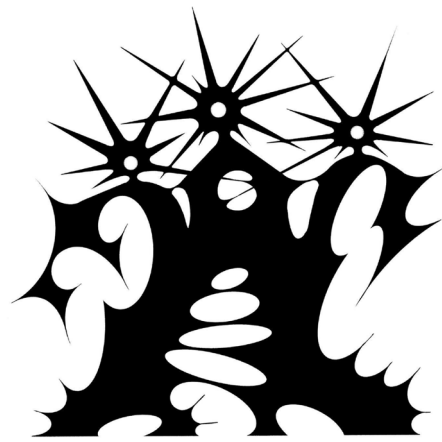
DRAWING SHAPES AND OBJECTS WITH AN AIRBRUSH: REBELLING AGAINST PERFECTIONISM

(RM) In my education, I went through a time where I fetishized technical execution in a sense. There's a naivety to being a student where, at least for me, I couldn't understand or appreciate abstract concepts, so the only thing I could hang on to were the technical aspects. I thought I could impress my teachers and peers by doing the technical things well, and I guess that was true to some extent.

(NI) It's the same for me. When I went to school, I was mostly just doing drawings. But there were other people coming from these magnet art schools who were already good technical painters. I felt like so much of the work I liked back then had a high degree of technicality to it. It's like, you see something you can't do yourself and you're like, "That's my bar."

(RM) Right, and by focusing on technique, it's easy to see what you need to work on to be more proficient and you can see when you're improving. Whereas something that's a bit more abstract, it's hard to measure the progress of that.





A piece from Nick's series, *ALCHEMYST* (2023)

(NI) That abstractness, for me, it's in the concept and the feeling. It's trying to figure out what a drawing is doing and what an image actually is, like outside of it being a reference to something already out there in the world. I don't even know if I'm drawing "well" right now. It's a constant battle in my head where it's like, do I want to draw well or do I just want to draw my drawing?

(RM) When I look at your work, the stuff I'm really drawn to is when you do those really loose, rough drawings that are both abstract but technically on point. I think that's exciting territory—that area between technical proficiency and simplicity—and I think it's something I try to strike in my own work too.

(NI) It's where I want my work to be anyway. I want my work to be good, but that doesn't mean it needs to hit you over the head with the technical execution either. It can be as simple as the way two lines fit together. Not forcing yourself to do the technical things right all the time is hard though. It takes a lot of unlearning.

(RM) I think a lot of that comes down to validation and motivation. I feel like, when you're younger, you don't know if you're good at something or not, so you naturally seek external validation, be it from accolades, your professor or even social media. But where we're at in our careers now, that stuff doesn't matter as much. So what you then seek afterwards has more to do with internal validation, or maybe you need something else to find motivation, you know?

(NI) I think social media has an interesting part to play. I wish I could say that it affects me less than it really does.

(RM) Oh really?

(NI) Definitely. As a commercial artist, I naturally feel pulled towards finding external validation. But I'm trying not to, which is one of the reasons why I'm working on a new series [*Alchemyst*, (2023)]. I have no idea how people will react to it, and maybe it doesn't matter either.

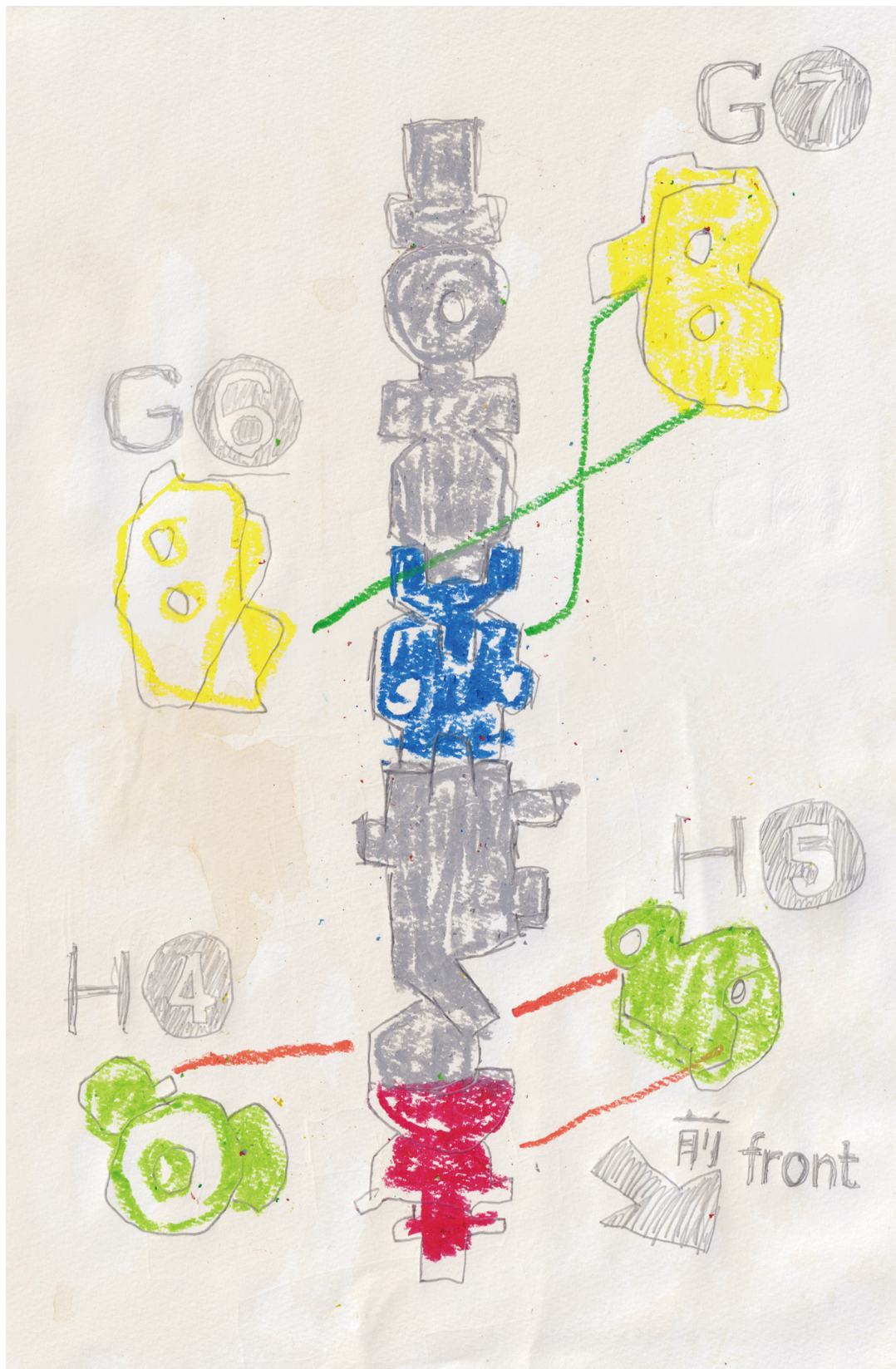
(RM) I don't think it does.

(NI) When it comes to the more internal stuff, one of the reasons I struggle to not be so technical in my work is that if I know there's a certain level I can hit, then I have to hit it. Still, I don't even know if that gives me validation, or if my work is even good by that metric. I might do some crazy rendered-out thing, but then I'm like, is it any better than these little blobby people that I can do in a day and a half? I'm not so sure, but sometimes one is more commercially viable than the other.

(RM) What happens if your blobby people become a commercial success? Is that a good thing for you? Or does that take away from this thing that was an escape from your client work?

(NI) Whatever my client work is, my own personal work will adjust to that. And if that means me venturing into being a watercolor landscape man, so be it. It's always going to play off of itself like that.

(RM) I really enjoy writing in that sense because it's a different spin on the type of output I do like, which is the stuff that comes from having a critical approach to design in general. But I wouldn't say it's escapist in the sense that it's calming, so I wonder what my version of the old-man landscape painter would be. What part of my creativity would I be engaging with if I didn't need to share it with anyone?



DIAGRAMS OF A GUNDAM RX-78-2 MODEL: THE JOYS OF BEING A BEGINNER

In the fall of 2021, I received an email from a stranger. The subject line was “Looking for some of your old work.” It turns out they were looking for an amateur music video I’d made during high school for the song “Nothing Better” by The Postal Service. This was over 15 years ago, and I had posted it on a now defunct site called Newgrounds.

“I used to watch it so many times that I saved a bookmark for it lol. I really hope you can direct me to how to find the video.” By coincidence, I’d uploaded it to Youtube that same year, so I quickly and excitedly shared the link. I remember fervently working on this video from my mom’s basement over the course of three months. The animation is crude, and the compression artifacts on the 240p video are so fuzzy that it looks like you’re viewing the screen through a shaggy rug. So much of the video makes me cringe, and it’s clearly a rip-off of an old Of Montreal music video that I liked, but it’s moments like these that remind me why I first got into design.



“Nothing Better” music video I animated in high school

My design skills have improved since then, but the same joy I felt when making that video is now hard to locate. Although I do, on the whole, feel content with my career now, any time I touch a design tool, it tends to automatically register in my head as “work.”

Trying something new can be frustrating, but amid the frustration, I find that there’s a really pure and creative joy. I often wonder whether it’s possible to maintain or revive that sense of joy when you’ve been doing something professionally for years, or whether that’s part of the bargain many professionals make where they trade joy for expertise.

Pondering ways to rekindle the joys of being a beginner, I thought one interesting approach would be to work in a medium that was completely new to me but alongside professional collaborators. Working with an experienced team would enable me to draw directly from different skill sets and knowledge bases, and shake me out of my own habits and tendencies.

MAKING A FILM

Working on directing my first ever film with an incredibly talented staff felt like I was given the keys to a Lamborghini that I had no idea how to drive. How do you turn on the windshield wipers? How do I enter a gas station? Do Lamborghinis even take normal fuel?

Towards the end of 2022, I had a chat with my filmmaker friends, Neo Sora and Aiko Masubuchi. I told them about my pre-occupation with control, and that I was interested in trying something new. I’d first met the two earlier that year, as they’d asked me to do the branding and art direction for a short film event they were organizing called GINZAZA. I joined the team, and we’ve continued to grow closer since then, connecting over similarities in our cultural backgrounds.

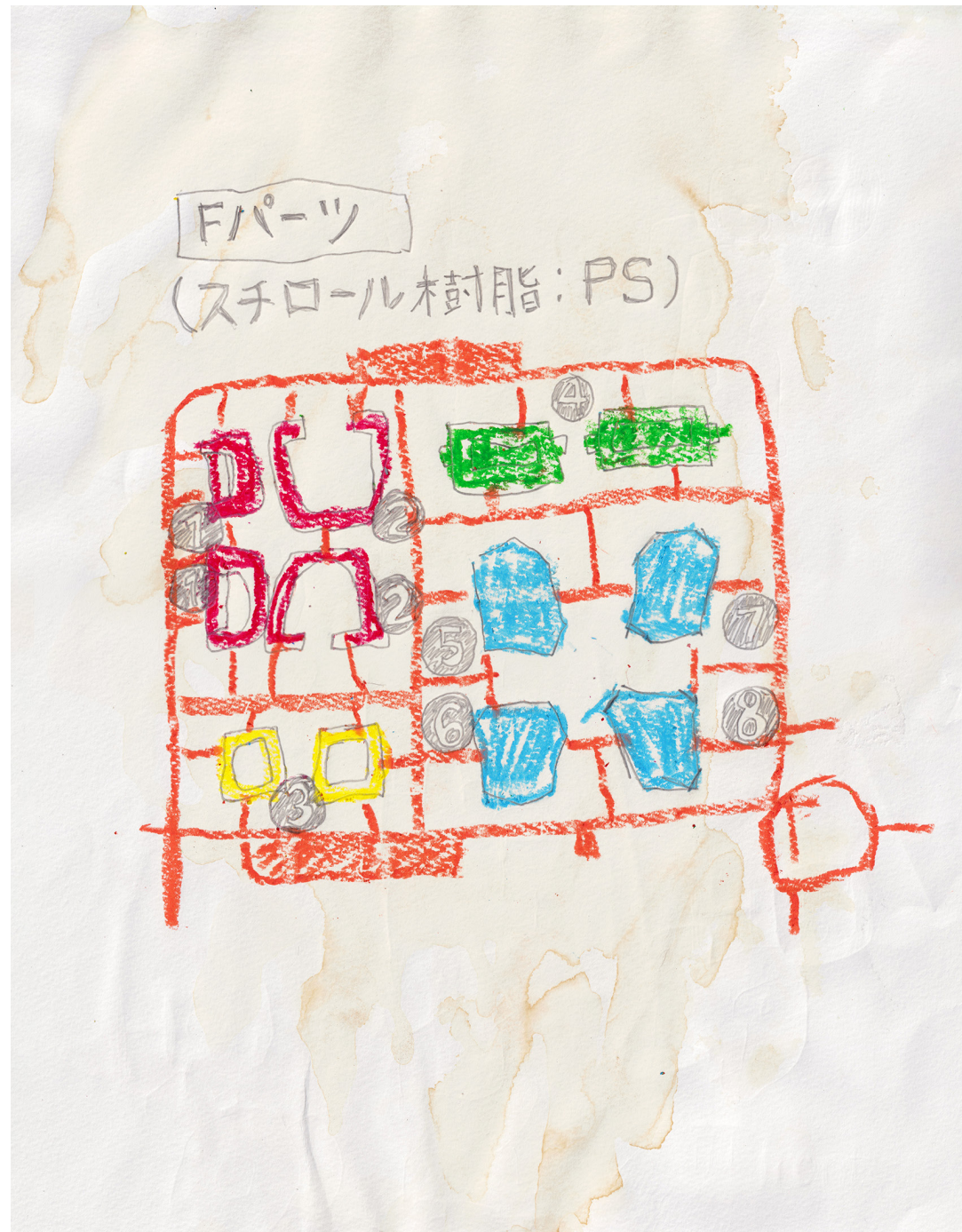
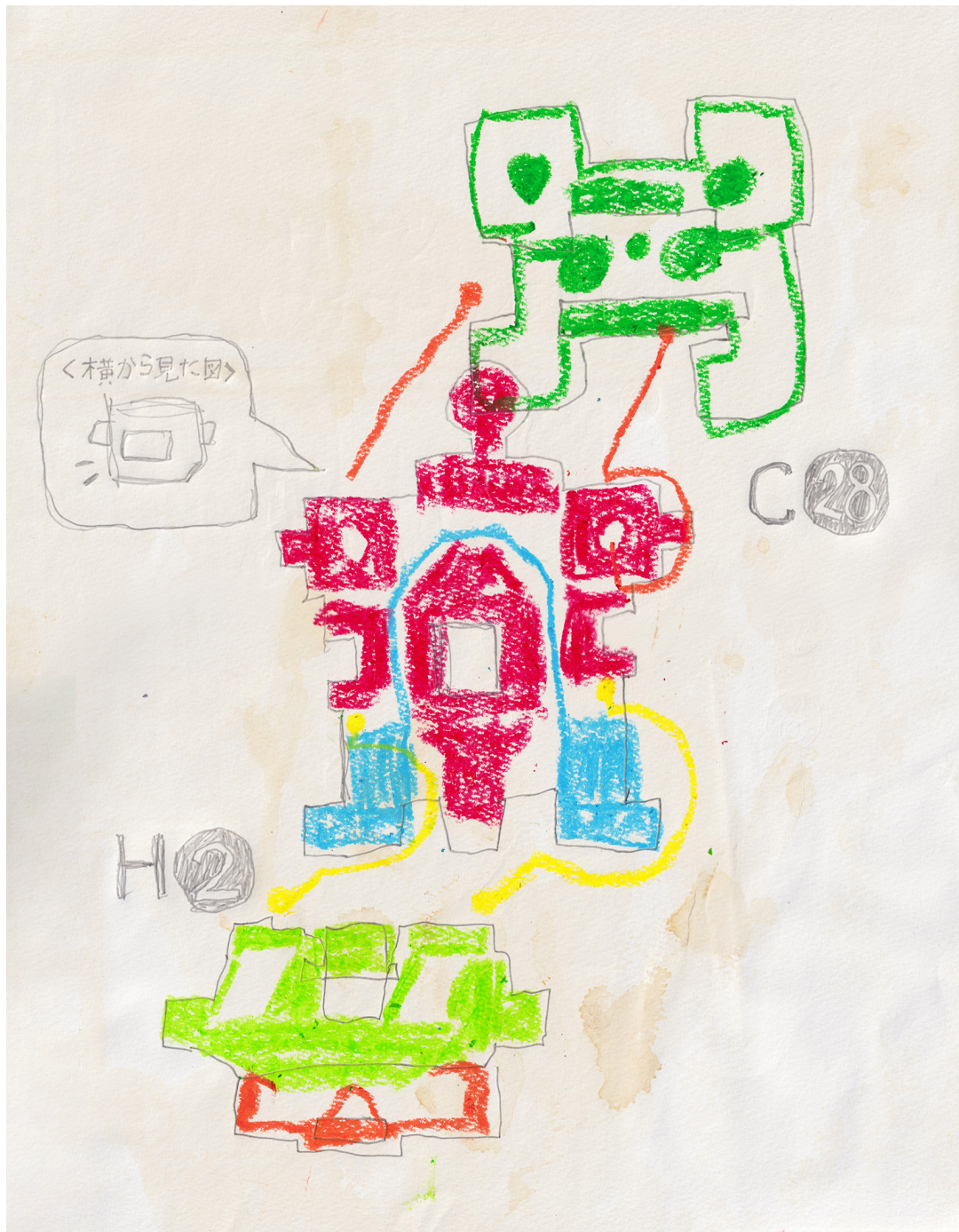
We chatted some more about the concept of control, and they decided it would be a good theme for the next edition of the event, and even proposed the idea of me contributing a film. Along with Kimi, the fourth member of GINZAZA, we later met at an Afghan restaurant and did some brainstorming.

Here’s the idea we came up with. They were to give me a script of one scene from a famous film I’d never seen before, and with only that script to go off of, I’d then try recreating that scene. Neo, Aiko, and Kimi would be there to support me along the way and would connect me to people in the industry when necessary.

An impressive roster of talent was quickly assembled, including: a cinematographer (Motomu Ishigaki) who was on the crew of one of my favorite documentaries [*Ryuichi Sakamoto: Coda* (2017)], a leading documentary editor and sound recordist (Takuya Kawakami) who worked on Neo’s film about Indigenous Ainu culture, and an award-winning filmmaker (Shun Ikehara) who would be my production adviser.

As the project gained pace and the pressure mounted, I could feel that my filmmaking process predicated on relinquishing control actually started losing control, but not in the fun way I intended. I’d completely underestimated every aspect of the filmmaking process, and I began relying more and more on the crew and all their years of combined experience. The reliance was suffused with confusion and panic, though, as the Lamborghini had spun up its V12 engine and was moving much faster than I could hold on to.

I wanted the film to be set in a neighborhood called Hatagaya, and the team came back with a list of things to consider. “We’ll need a permit to film on a public street, so you’ll have to prepare a list of filming locations with the camera placements and directions.” “We may need assistants to stop pedestrians while filming.” “Cameras need to be set up on a dolly so that everything’s mobile enough to avoid causing a





Filming in Hatagaya with Motomu Ishigaki (left), myself (right)

disturbance.” “If we’re going to have hair and makeup, we need to figure out where they can get set up.” “It will be cold, so we’ll need to either hire a van or find a place where people can wait in between scenes.” My DIY project was turning into a professional production, and the logistics were dizzying.

I called Neo, overwhelmed and dejected. I told him that I didn’t know how to get a road permit, that I didn’t know how to write a proposal to get filming permission from the ward office, that I didn’t know how to make a diagram for where we’ll be shooting. What’s more, I told him all this while I was running to class: “I’m about to go teach for the next four hours, and I also have studio work to do on top of that, but then planning this film is like a whole other full-time job in and of itself, and I just don’t really know what to do...”

He said I should take a step back and think about what the scene needs. I’d become so caught up in the preparatory checklist of things to do that I’d forgotten what I was actually preparing for. I explained what I wanted, and he told me to remember these key points for the duration of the project. He then said that directing was like chaperoning kids in a playground and trying to get them to play in the sandbox. If one of the kids brings a bunch of other toys along, they’re misunderstanding the activity, and it’s the director’s role to remind everyone of how we’re playing. As the director, you need to pivot and be flexible with your tools and collaborators—nothing is ever fully under your control—and the only things you can really keep a firm grasp on are the ideas that are important to you.

Casting my mind back to when I’d first set out on this project, I could recall wanting to make something with the air of a student film rather than a full-blown professional production. Chatting with Neo, I realized that what was causing me so much stress during the film planning was the sheer formality of it all. Intimated and conscious of my own lack of experience, I’d automatically deferred to the professionalism of my crew, relinquishing more control than was necessary. I needed to reel everything back a bit and stay true to my original vision.



By the time my phone call with Neo had ended, the conversation on our team group chat had already moved on to discussing the million other things that needed planning, so I immediately called for a pause. I reminded everyone of the rules of play, or maybe I was only just laying them down for the first time: “I know that everyone here’s a professional, but going forward, I want to make this as if it’s a student film.” With four thumbs-up lined up in response, I felt like I was finally starting to understand what it means to be a director.

At that moment, I remembered something that Kimi mentioned during our initial brainstorming session at the Afghan restaurant: “Maybe the fact that you can’t control something also brings out some of your natural instincts. If you force yourself to lose control, maybe more of your inner self actually comes out in the process.”

LAST TRAIN (2023)

Written, edited, directed by Ray Masaki

Cinematography: Motomu Ishigaki

Production Advisor: Shun Ikezoe

Sound Recording: Takuya Kawakami

Production Assistant: Daisuke Hasegawa

CAST

Salaryman: Mitsuhiro Nakazono

Boy: Shodai Kato

Foreigner Lady: Callie Beusman

Foreigner Guy: Nick Iluzada

SUPPORT

GINZAZA (Neo Sora, Aiko Masubuchi, Kimi Idonuma),

Sony Park Mini, Bar Sanita Tokyo



Stills from my short film, LASTTRAIN (2023)







COPYING A GRAFFITI TAG WITH NO PRACTICE: CONTROLLING THE CONTROLLABLE

“Human beings appear to be happy just so long as they have a future to which they can look forward—whether it be a “good time” tomorrow or an everlasting life beyond the grave. For various reasons, more and more people find it hard to believe in the latter. On the other hand, the former has the disadvantage that when this “good time” arrives, it is difficult to enjoy it to the full without some promise of more to come. If happiness always depends on something expected in the future, we are chasing a will-o'-the-wisp that ever eludes our grasp, until the future, and ourselves, vanish into the abyss of death.”

— Alan Watts, *The Wisdom of Insecurity* (1951)⁰¹



I honestly don't know what compelled me to do so, but a little while back, I decided to pick up jump roping. After watching a quick beginner's tutorial by a YouTuber named "Jump Rope Dude," I laced my running shoes and stepped out into the small neighborhood park across the street. Jump Rope Dude had told me, "Just try to do it for five minutes a day, until you get the hang of it." Five minutes sounded easy.

As soon as I started jumping, shock set in. No other activity I've done in the last decade has made me feel more out of shape. Within thirty seconds, my legs were leaden, and my heart was pounding. I felt every second of those five minutes.

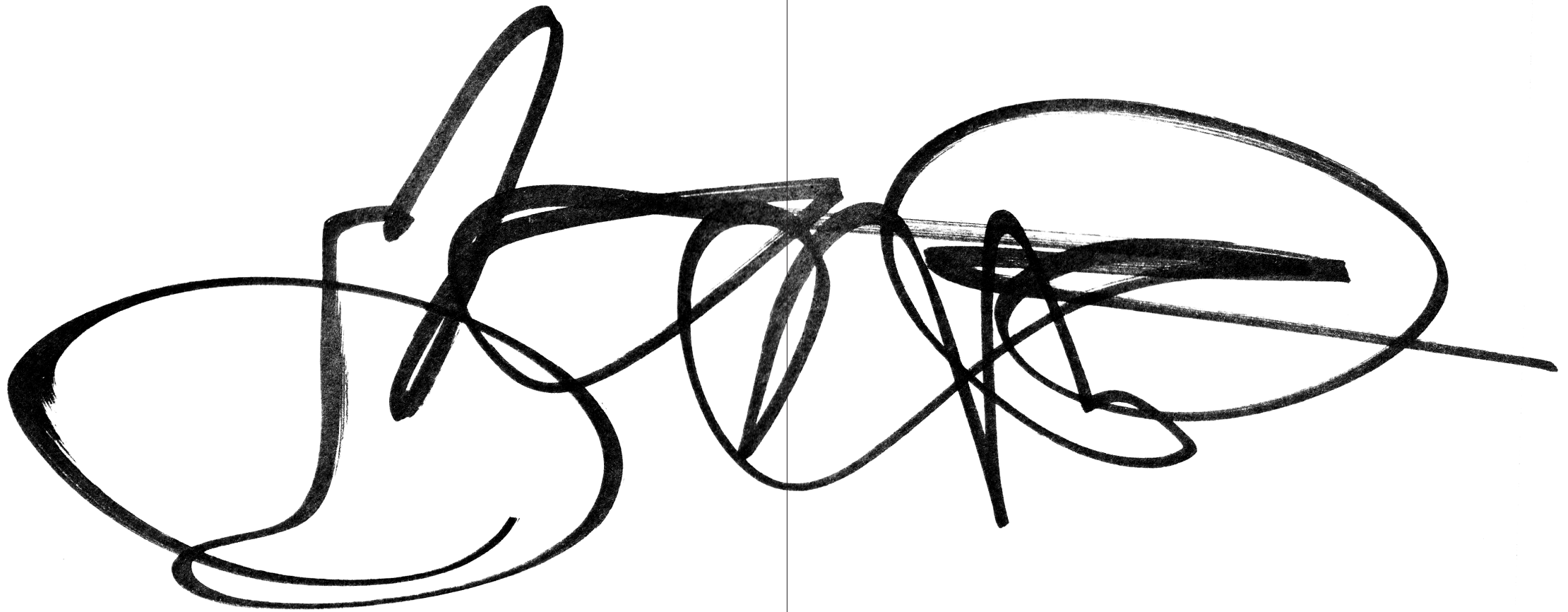
I've been thinking about how I'm not gentle enough with my own body. I hate that my brain thinks I'm being lazy when I'm taking a break or stepping away from work. The addiction to productivity

01. Watts, Alan. 2011. *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety*. New York: Vintage Books, A Division Of Random House, Inc.

02. Whitaker, Amy. 2016. *Art Thinking: How to Carve out Creative Space in a World of Schedules, Budgets, and Bosses*. New York, NY: Harperbusiness.

is difficult to escape even when I recognize the toxicity of this relationship. Part of this mentality is tied to running my own design practice. Will this humble house that I've been building up brick-by-brick suddenly come tumbling down if I'm not constantly reinforcing the mortar? Rationally, I understand that it's not the case, but I have trouble saying no to work requests due to an unfounded fear that if I don't say yes, a client may never want to work with me again. Financially, I'm doing fine, but the stability often feels delicate and fleeting.

In *Art Thinking* (2016), Amy Whitaker writes that what artists really need "is not to be paid to make the things they already know how to make, but to somehow find space inside their financials to play and take risks to develop the next thing."⁰² I've probably reached a point where I can find this "space ...



to play and take risks,” but my fears of financial destabilization prevent me from doing so. If I start to experiment and diverge from “the things [I] already know how to make,” people just might not get it and then I’ll be tossed aside. Or maybe they will get it, but the financial leap of faith that’s required may not pay off. Pursuing experimentation also feels guilty and self-indulgent, as being unburdened by financial needs and client expectations is a luxury that’s only available to the privileged few.

I’m still incredibly worried about the future, but I’m gaining a better understanding of my anxieties—namely recognizing how interior and intangible the “future” actually is. Letting my fear of the future stop me from experimenting and playing in the present is, ironically, a guarantee of future damage, because I know that finding joy in my work is



Jump Rope Dudes
<https://youtube.com/@JumpRopeDudes>

necessary for a healthy career. I need to be able to catch myself when I’m catastrophizing and have the presence of mind to simply inhabit the present moment. Caring for yourself in this way is not an indulgence.

After I got back home from jumping rope, my wife, who’d been watching from the balcony, smirked and said, “Yeah, didn’t look great.” That may have been the case from an outside perspective, but there was something mystical about the experience. This year especially, I’ve been struggling a lot with depression and have felt more anxious about the future than ever before, but for those five minutes that felt like an eternity, my mind was truly free. I wasn’t thinking about the climate crisis, or the financial stability of my work, or my sleeping issues.

I was just there, jumping.



2023.01.18 Aggie Toppins (AT) is an associate professor and chair of undergraduate design at Washington University's Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts. Before her academic career, Aggie spent a decade working at creative agencies in Cincinnati and Chicago. Her work, which sits at the intersection of studio practice and critical writing, explores the influence of visual communication on society. She's currently writing a book, *Thinking Through Graphic Design History: Challenging the Canon* (2025 [TBC]), which features global design practices that challenge received wisdom and historical research methods.

LEARNING TO GIVE MYSELF GEL MANICURES: SELF-CARE

(RM) I wanted to talk to someone who teaches design, as a question I often return to is whether it's possible to prepare someone for all the difficulties of working in the industry without completely sucking the joy out of it for them. These things weren't really spoken about when I was a student anyway.

(AT) Yeah, I don't know if it was spoken about when I was a student either. In fact, it's almost glamorized to overwork, right? Stay up all night. Something new at this point in my career is that I'm also more interested in longer projects. Maybe just one project in a semester. I want to take the student through the whole journey of the research and make the class be built around things that are fairly low stakes. They design the project themselves based on a proposal, and all semester we're just doing a bunch of workshops where they make something kind of quick and not precious.

At Wash U, we get a lot of students who are valedictorians or

have really high test scores, so they're kind of wired to achieve in a certain quantitative way. That's really different from being a designer or an artist. And so, when they come to us, students are often like, well, just tell me the right answer. And it's like, no, this isn't about right answers. This is about the creative person you are and the things you want to do. And so we have to help them unlearn the things that got them into the school in the first place.

(RM) That's really interesting. I love the idea of having a semester-long project with workshops to break it up and introduce ideas. I'm actually just finishing my first ever semester of teaching. This is in Japan, at a fashion school in Shinjuku. What you said about students having their achievements measured through test scores, I feel like it's even more of a thing here in Japan.

It really bums me out because I feel like many of my students are afraid to be wrong or to think for themselves and maybe don't even know what they like. If I were to present the idea that this whole semester we're going to be following one of your interests and stretch it out and observe it in various ways, I think a lot of them would be like, "What should I do? What's my interest? Can you tell me?"

(AT) Absolutely. I think there are all kinds of ways of approaching the sort of disenchantment you might be feeling with design. It could be about what the field purports itself to be, and how its rhetoric is often in conflict with its reality. Design is labor, but it's never talked about as labor.

What is it called when monks beat themselves as a part of their training? Is that self-flagellation? It's a little bit like that in some places still. I really try to check that, because as a teacher, I don't want my students to suffer. I want them to find joy in learning because a lot of my students are already feeling so much pressure. They'll come to me and say things like, "My parents really want me to get a job at Google."

I had a student who was so brilliant and got an internship in Montreal at a really fun, cool company, but I had to convince their parents that it was okay to go and work there. And I was like, wow, when I was 21 years old, I told my mom I was moving to New York for a job. She was like, "Cool, whatever." It wasn't even like she had a say. Maybe partly it's because college costs so much. I mean, Washington University is over \$50,000 a year just for tuition. And so if your family's throwing that into your life, maybe

they feel entitled to have more of a say. But these students certainly have a lot of pressure, and maybe it comes from their families, maybe it comes from within.

(RM) Yeah, I can totally see that.

(AT) I wonder about examining one's motivations. Like, why is one driven to work?

For me, I think it's because I grew up in a family where we didn't have enough to eat and didn't have clothes, so I was driven by a fear of going hungry. I'm a materially secure person now, and it took years to get here. There's also just the strokes of your ego when you overwork and do a good job. We shouldn't overlook this. It's also accompanied by different forms of control and punishment. It's not uncommon within organizations that if you're the one that's willing to do the work, your reward is to do more.

Maybe this sounds too dark or too negative, but we don't live in a healthy society. In the US, and maybe Japan's like this too, we don't necessarily live in places that care for people. That's why there are people writing things like *The Care Manifesto* [2020]. Care is radical. Care is political. And when you find it, it's amazing. I work at a pretty tough place, my job is hard, but I work with amazing people who take care of each other within that institution.

And that makes a huge difference to me because I think it's the difference between a rewarding institutional position and one that's toxic. Because institutions are kind of wired to extract as much from you as possible. And the other reason why I prefer it over the industry is because I have more autonomy and more security, considering the tenure system and everything. I get to decide how I'm going to overwork <laugh> instead of being assigned projects that I may or may not care about. I can do things that aren't necessarily dependent on the market and those sorts of metrics. But in the end, everybody has to measure what they do to some extent, right?

(RM) This is the stuff I'm hoping to address in my thesis.

(AT) This is a tough project, Ray. I imagine if you're focusing on self-care, labor, control, you're going to need some mechanism within this project to take care of yourself, because this is really heavy and challenging. It's almost like you would have to find a way to enact what you're studying within it so you don't depress yourself.

(RM) No, totally. I mean, that's kind of why I started this project. I wanted to find ways to help myself and then maybe



share those with others. Jobs count for a lot in Japan, even more so than in America. Freelancing and self-employment are seen as quite precarious, and that makes it difficult to apply for an apartment and other basic things. It can be really stressful.

I've reached a point in my own career where I have a studio and clients are approaching me because they've read my writing. Before I was just executing certain tasks, whereas now there's a connection in values and everything's not so service-oriented.

(AT) That's so good. Take a moment to just appreciate that because you're getting to issue your own thoughts and be hired for it. That's such a thing to celebrate.

(RM) I should be celebrating that and feeling more grateful. But at the same time—and I'm not trying to sound overly altruistic or anything—but a lot of the autonomy I've given myself has come through a lot of privilege and luck that isn't shareable or reproducible. So I don't want my writing to feel solipsistic in that this stuff just came together for me and I'm glad it worked out. Even for you, just considering academia as a possible route for others, despite the struggles you went through and all the hard work, there's also privilege and luck to factor in too. Having a tenure track job in a design position is, at least from what I've heard, not a common thing. Basically, I just worry that there are lots of people who wish they could pursue a healthier relationship with work but can't.

(AT) No, you bring up another really great point. We can try to think about methods that are ethical or idealistic practices, but at the end of the day, we're still part of this larger economic system that is based on exploitation.

(RM) Absolutely.

(AT) It functions based on the fact that some people win and some people lose. There's no way around it and that sucks. It's almost like anytime you issue out or author some kind of method or toolkit or whatever—designers love toolkits—anytime you do that, of course there are still so many other conditions that have to be right for that to work. And the question of privilege, that's a question that intersects with every possible social position, right?

(RM) Sure.

(AT) For what it's worth, I do think that the academia route is

far more possible in graphic design than it is in many other disciplines, at least in the US. There were 40 tenure-track searches last year alone, and I think that's a really interesting thing to observe at this point. There are a lot of fields that are starting to see massive declines in PhDs because there are just no jobs. You spend so long getting a PhD in art history, for example, and you may never get a job that pays you back for your years of education and the expense of a PhD. Graphic design's a little less like that, partly because the terminal degree is an MFA, so it's a lot less education.

I'm not trying to negate what you're saying, I'm just adding some context. It's true that this is a privileged life I lead, and that it's hard to achieve, and I had to take a lot of financial risks and dedicate my whole damn life to get here. And some people cannot do that. My mom didn't go to college, she never would've been able to do this. And I recognize that, but I also know that there are more opportunities than people sometimes think.

I'll share one more thing. This might be more specific to women's experience with self-care, but I'm still going to share it. Another thing with this question of work-life balance, control, and care is family planning.

My husband and I are probably not going to have children at this point. That's a decision I don't know if I necessarily had a choice in, and I sometimes wish I did have more of a choice in it. I went to this devastating panel at a conference recently. As more and more women enter academia, I'm seeing more and more panels about motherhood at these conferences. They all try to grapple with the fact that institutions are built for certain people and that these aren't people that have babies.

The period in your life where you're able to have children corresponds to the exact amount of time you'd be in school and then on the tenure track. It's also very difficult for an institution to pay you for maternity leave. That's another thing that's a source of so much personal grief and pain. At the panel, one of the speakers was talking about how hard it was for her to have a child after she had finally achieved tenure. It took her several tries and she lost a baby. I mean, it was just horrible. And I thought to myself, we're talking a lot about mental health, we're talking a lot about self-care, but this is not covered enough. That may not be within the scope of what you're doing, but I think it's worth acknowledging.

(RM) No, thank you for sharing. To be honest, it's not something I'd considered, and I definitely want to look into it

more and include it. The thing with my thesis is that I know I can't write a definitive paper on how to have a healthier career in graphic design, so if anything, it's more about exposing vulnerabilities and problems and being able to have open conversations about what's not working and how challenging everything is.

I think I made it seem like I was going for something more prescriptive earlier when I talked about sharing experiences with others. Prescribing is still not my intention here, but I think having ways to be able to communicate and talk about the things that have helped us is a key first step.

(AT) We have to accept that the idea of making reproducible guidelines or some sort of how-to toolkit, that's such design logic, right? But it's also capitalist logic, and it's something we have to resist so we can focus on the most important questions. We really have to identify, critique, and diagnose, and we have to live with some ambivalence as well. It takes a long time to make cultural changes, but I think it's an exciting time for design and that we'll see the rise of new principles. A lot of the foundational ideas and assumptions are just up for all kinds of interrogation right now. It's high time for that.

(RM) Absolutely.

personal progress I've made since starting this writing and research. When I was truly burned out years ago, I quit my job with nothing lined up, and I found everything meaningless to the point where I couldn't even find a reason to try and change my outlook. I recall staring longingly at a hiring sign I saw posted up on the window of a neighborhood ramen shop and thinking that I should just quit design and wash dishes for a while before figuring out what else I could do with my life.

It's tempting to view life as a progressive series of events, as if you're always building on what came before. I tell myself that once I finish grad school, I can get a full-time teaching job. Once I have a full-time teaching job, I can do less client work. Once I do less client work, I can get back to doing yoga and take those cooking classes I've been wanting to do. Rather than a progressive series of events, though, this "once I do this..." approach to life is more like kicking a can along a flat road.

Milestones are constructed and arbitrary, the present is tangible and real. Throughout my writing and research, I don't think I've come to any definitive conclusions or approaches. However, the one thing that I do recognize as truth is that there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all solution, and we will always be responding and wavering to the limitless variables and challenges that present themselves throughout our lives and careers. So there's nothing stopping you from just doing something right now.

Many of the problems I've been grappling with are unresolvable aspects of an unshakeable economic system. Ultimately, while we can and should be critical of and problematize this toxic system, we should not let our dissatisfaction with large institutions and oppressive industries distract us from *us*—the individuals who inhabit them. Theorizing and attempting to tackle the big issues may seem like the most pressing task, but let's also not forget the value and the immediacy of speaking openly with our peers. It's the more actionable of the two and, by consequence, perhaps all the more powerful.

Looking back on the meaningless I encountered during my burnout, I now have a renewed perspective. I actually don't think it's false to say that the work that I do is meaningless—in the grand scheme of things, I probably will not leave any meaningful legacy or grander impact. This isn't some acceptance of defeat though. Rather, it's a source of great relief. Freeing myself of the constant striving for greatness and personal success is one of the kindest things I've done to my mind and body. Of course, putting all your effort into something you deeply care about is a noble aspiration, but so is sitting atop a grassy hill and doing nothing. So from atop my grassy hill I repeat to myself the following:

“Take care of yourself now, you'll be okay, things can wait.”

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Graphic Design program at
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