In visible Systems

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visible Systems
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Graphic Design MFA 2023
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We are immersed in an efficiency-and-profit-obsessed world where products are advancing for the sake of updates without meaningful outcomes. The products’ seemingly simple and seamless interfaces bear the marks of deception and promote the world’s obsessions as a norm. My work defines the visual language and methods that hides complex truth within invisible systems. I aim to strike through invisibility for greater transparency and visibility.

I employ techniques that disorganize the guidelines and components of invisible systems, reframing expectations and opening up new ways of understanding our surroundings. I intend whimsical reconfigurations to act as a mirror, providing a moment to reflect on the current systems in which we operate and opening up a room for visual languages that manifests more meaningful values.
A Reflection as a UX Designer:
Is done better than perfect?

It is 2018, and I’m at the office in Merchandise Mart, Chicago, cleaning up what was my desk for the past two years. Here, I questioned whether my work as a digital experience designer was meaningful. My inbox was full of email threads about new features for the next product release, but they were often tech for tech’s sake or new features to beat the competitors and drive more sales. Face filters were added for the sake of popularity, and the smart camera’s “smartness” didn’t resonate with me as “smart” or emotionally sensible. This wasn’t a problem with the particular company that I had been working at. It was rather a prevalent phenomenon in the industry. In the competitive tech-centered world, user-centered design was no longer about users. The term and methodology were used to crank out digital products that users crave and rely on so much that the devices became an extension of our bodies. These products were packaged in a wrapper called “innovation,” with its meaning nowhere to be found.

Why does technology proliferate unhealthy lifestyles as it advances despite the scale of the workforce and capital invested in the industry? Annual product launches or developer conferences are common business events where tech giants reaffirm a brand’s goals and ethos to the public. In 2016, Mark Zuckerberg presented Facebook’s ten-year roadmap at F8 based on their mission to make “the world more open and connected.” However, only a year later, Zuckerberg updated this grand mission, admitting that “the fundamental flaw [was that the mission] didn’t push for any specific positive outcome from more connection.” Facebook, now rebranded as Meta, was continually used by over 2 billion users around the globe as this change took place. This shift in business goals occurred just as the filter bubbles created by Facebook’s personalized news feed altered the 2016 US presidential election. Like Facebook, digital products are launched on the app store with the expectation that they would be readily

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available while constantly being updated. This immediacy and iterative nature showcase Silicon Valley’s “fail fast” mindset and the start-up hype for capital investment. Products are made and widely distributed even before their purpose and concept are fully evaluated. “No matter how often we say we’re creeped out by technology, we acclimate surprisingly quickly if it anticipates what we want.” Inevitably, we are already immersed in technologies that advance at a faster pace; we must ask ourselves whether we are building a healthy and meaningful future.

Media theorist Wendy Chun said, “new media matters the most when we no longer pay attention to them and move to habitual,” a statement that can apply to any technology or subject. As new technologies rapidly become habitual, we face a paradox: we are deeply engaged with them, but the engagement has become automatic and unconscious. We are less aware of what makes up more of who we are, and the more natural something becomes, the less likely we will question and change it. Thus, to be critical requires probing at what we are not actively perceiving.

Invisible Systems

For my thesis, I define habitual visual language as an invisible systems. My work point out what we are not actively perceiving and highlights systems that support society’s obsession with efficiency and profit.

Don’t Make Me Think is the title of a canonical web design book by Steve Krug, and it reflects the goal that design should be as invisible as possible. Invisibility allows people to focus on tasks and communications instead of calling attention to the design itself. It echoes Beatrice Warde’s idea that typography should be like a crystal goblet, a transparent vessel and an unnoticeable vehicle for communicating ideas. This perspective is understandable when considering cases where clarity is critical. A confusing medical software UI can cause nurses to give a wrong prescription, leading to a patient’s death.

However, this idea is exploited. Things become so efficient to use that our consciousness don’t recognize them as design. To Krug’s standard, this very obliviousness is the sign of a great design: “It doesn’t matter how many times I have to click, as long as each click is mindless.”

With an emphasis on invisibility, invisible systems take the shape of a seemingly simple and minimal interfaces, ones that a user can feel empowered to use through direct manipulation instead of inputting programming languages. However, this interface is “obfuscatory as it’s revealing” because it hides the true complexities of the technology. As Chun points out, “seeing no longer guarantees knowing.” If someone without any coding knowledge were to open the inspect mode on a browser, they would immediately be confused with the very lines of code that enable the site to function.

The simple interface aesthetic permeated beyond the screen with the exponential spread of the smartphone after 2007’s iPhone release. This release pushed businesses to digitize their brands further. Brand systems catered to various screen sizes and prioritized the mobile ones. By implementing these new systems to digital and physical space, invisible systems are now surrounds us more ubiquitously. They are at every point where design guidelines are applicable: from signage and billboards on streets to packaging, prints, and the screens that we hold. To note a few examples:

In 2011, about a year after launching their mobile application, Starbucks revealed an updated logo that eliminated the word “Starbucks Coffee,” and the ring around the mermaid, a move toward minimal identity to bring “flexibility to explore innovations and new channels of distribution.”

In 2016, Mastercard updated their identity to bring “simplicity and clarity with an increased emphasis on the interlocking circles... [the identity] is optimized for use in digital contexts.”

In 2019, Warner Bros. renewed their logo to “perform across various platforms and scales, from the small spaces of the digital world to giant installations like the iconic water tower on the Warner Bros. studio lot.”

7. Ibid.
The hallmark of these brand system changes is Google’s 2015 update to make the brand present whenever and wherever. Helvetica, which dictated the corporate branding is less prevalent, but the modernist spirit it represented continues today in form of Silicon-Valley’s high-modernist identities. This visual language that surrounds us continuously, at this very moment—it is current and ubiquitous like air.

Also, invisible systems are functioning in the context of brand operation. User Friendly also introduces the case of Disney and how Disney tried to create a more seamless theme park experience with MagicBands. Using the wrist band as an interface, Disney tried to conceal any friction that visitors may experience due to the scale and complexity of their theme parks. However, “the seams... still persists because [theme park experience] reflect how the companies themselves are built: the groups inside them fighting for control.” This connotes any smaller parts that make up a brand can be subject to invisibility. For example, subsidiaries can be considered parts of larger systems of invisibility—they are branded differently to make their parent company invisible to consumers. Brand campaigns that hide exploitation and deceive consumers also act as invisible systems to maximize the profit. Thus, invisible systems are not only ubiquitous but they operate in different contexts in a variety of forms.

My body of work demonstrates how I disorganize invisible systems and subvert their seamless and minimal visual language, revealing their form and function. I apply techniques like defamiliarization, glitch, sarcasm, and metaphor to disorganize system components and guidelines.

Defamiliarization is an artistic technique that presents common things in an unfamiliar or strange way to interrupt our automatic perception and force us to see the world differently. It stems from attempts by early 20th-century Russian formalists to combat habitualization.

If defamiliarization alerted the fear of war in the early 20th century, today it can alert us to rapid and unhealthy technological advancement. The technique can be used to push against what Chun earlier described: new media becoming habitual. As part of my research, I defamiliarized UI components by removing them from their original context. For example, /inventory_of_interfaces extricates the UI components we commonly use from their original apps or sites of origin and displays them as purchasable commodities. These commodities include wearable garments, which further decontextualize the UI components from digital to physical environments. By leveraging the flexible nature of the fabric, the virtual and flat form of UI components are distorted into textured wrinkles.

Glitch is embraced as "a participatory action that challenges the status quo" by Legacy Russell in Glitch Feminism. Russell argues that glitch...
generates ruptures that open up landscapes of possibilities. I adopted this technique to break the efficiency-oriented invisible system and turn the user experience into uncanny realism. For instance, `snooze_maze` breaks the alarm UI while `/flat_minimal_world` illustrates a glitch inverting the digital and the physical space. In the same way glitches create an absurd and unfamiliar state, sarcasm adds humor to the rigid guidelines that build invisible systems and can be used to push the boundaries of design outcomes. Finally, I use metaphors like a flag to reveal the hidden exploitation of the fashion industry, where invisible systems are utilized to achieve maximal profit.

I intend to create a moment of reflection and do make us think. Instead of promoting “mindless clicks” for efficiency and profit, I believe that the purpose of product development should be diversified, and systems should be built to reveal instead of deceive.
dis-org.
systems

dis-org.

dis-org.
systems
dis-org.systems is a hub of experiments that disorganize the prevalent invisible visual language of digital space.

Worklist

/ flat_minimal_world
/ inventory_of_interfaces
/ snooze_maze
/ browse_guidelines
/ imagining_with_prompts
/ flock_of_brands
In her essay, "On Software, Or the Persistence of Visual Language," Wendy Chun discusses how an interface is a distilled representation of complex technologies that are appealing and appear easy to use. To interact with this simple interface means to consume a filtered version of reality, one where we spend about 7 hours daily. The screens we face—laptops, smartphones, and wearable devices—have become increasingly portable, and we can easily predict that they will become even more immersive as AR and VR advance. /flat_minimal_world inverts the visual language of the inside and outside of interfaces to illustrate how immersed we are in the digital space.

The fact that computers compute—that they generate text and images rather than merely represent or reproduce what exists elsewhere—get forgotten. Computers do not simply allow one to see what is on the other side but rather use glass to send and receive light pulses necessary to re-create reference. The computer—most nonvisual and nontransparent device—has paradoxically fostered "visual culture" and "transparency."—Wendy Chun

1. On Software, Or the Persistence of Visual Language. Chun, p. 27
2. Facebook changes mission statement to 'bring the world closer together'
This short film starts with a scene where a closed Macbook placed within typical home office-like desk setup alongside a notebook, calendar, snack, and mini plants. A person enters the scene and opens the Macbook to begin working. As the person starts to interact with the screen, the flat aesthetic inside the screen begins to expand beyond the screen, glitching and taking over the three-dimensional physical space. Everything transforms into flat icons where details of the physical world are distilled down to rigid minimal lines.

This short film does not intend to promote skeuomorphism. Skeuomorphism is also a form of distilled truth, but is an exploited metaphor that attempts to make technology visual and recognizable. Instead, /flat_minimal_world puts a pause on screen time. The fact that we spend about a third our day on screens indicates that the aesthetic inside the screen dictates much of our attention, even if we don’t see it in our physical world. The film calls out this invisible force in our daily lives, and asks what our visual culture is turning into.
inventory_of_interfaces is a fictional multi-brand store that sells interface components. These components are ones we commonly interact with and recognize as we get tasks done. I intend to provide a new perspective and ask about the value of these items by turning these into commodities. How can we appraise them? Does their price reflect the hourly pay of the designers and engineers who made them? Or should they cost more based on the number of clicks they receive, or how many people interact with them? Since they embody the functionality of digital products, how much would each cost if a brand’s valuation was broken down in terms of UI components?
These questions indicate UI components, as part of systems, represent more than their functionality. It references the idea of spectacles by Guy Debord: “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.” As representations, UI components are “not [just] collections images, it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.” It can further be described as “a worldview that has actually been materialized...an objective reality.” Accordingly, **inventory of interface** challenges the “mindless clicks” that Steve Krug celebrated and forces viewers to think about what they mean and how they embody value.

FACEBOOK'S REACTION BUTTONS AS A SCARF.
The smartphone’s alarm interface is almost an exact replica of an analog alarm clock, except that it lets a user set an unlimited number of alarms that can be snoozed indefinitely. With its’ infinite quantity and duration to hold alarms ringing, the digital alarm deceivingly promises that one can delay waking up and hold the time forever. However, the 9-minute sleep guaranteed by snooze buttons is unhealthy. A prolonged snoozing of your alarm confuses your circadian rhythm, disturbing REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep, the most restorative of all sleep states.

To reflect this luring and deceiving nature of the alarm interface, I turned the snooze button into a glitch which deconstructs the alarm interface into a three-dimensional maze. Produced as a duvet cover, the snooze maze manifests a scale and materiality that literally covers, wraps, and weighs down a person trying to wake up and puts them back to sleep.
Where can I go when I am in a snooze trap?

there's no stop
SNOOZE MAZE AS A DUVET COVER IN ACTION; IT COVERS, WRAPS AND WEIGHTS DOWN THE PERSON TRYING TO WAKE UP.
Over the past year, AI image-generators like Dall-E, Midjourney, and Deep AI have been released to the public, and they’ve continued to evolve rapidly. The images users can generate with these bots are shocking and uncanny at first glance, but they quickly give viewers a feeling of burnout. Even images created a few months ago seem old. As I experimented with these new digital tools, I wanted to explore my own assumptions about AI image-generators: are they good or bad? Will they challenge how designers work? Would it change what it means to design?

/imaging_with_prompts documents my exploration with Midjourney to generate renderings of everyday objects using different design systems’ styles from companies like Google, Apple, and Microsoft. I used the primary command, “/imagine,” and then wrote prompts like, “a tree made with Google’s Material Design System” or “a floor lamp made with Apple’s Human Interface Guidelines” to acquire the results. Midjourney provided each prompt’s output as a tile of four images. Exercising my ability to curate content, I randomly selected a single image from this quadrant, choosing the one I felt most clearly illustrated the style of the design system.

This exploration led me to speculate that a future design process with AI would shift a designer’s role to writing and curating rather than directly
creating or manipulating visual form. Midjourney contrasts with WYSIWYG tools like Illustrator, Figma, or Cinema 4D in that it has a command line interface, as do most other AI image-generators. I supplied Midjourney with natural language prompts to receive results rather than moving anchor points or dragging bounding boxes to adjust sizes and shapes. Yet, I found less control with Midjourney than front-end coding, the ultimate command line interface. It was not because Midjourney lacked parameters I could adjust. One can get granular with Midjourney by refining the prompts. However, I felt there was less autonomy because I was spending more effort responding to Midjourney’s output than maneuvering the form to make my imagination visible. Midjourney took a more active role in making images than I, the creator. In this technology-assisted process, human creators are responsible for editorial roles like judging, selecting, and curating. My resulting questions were: what am I selecting and curating? Where were these materials from? How does the algorithm decide which is the most representative or standard image for the prompt?

Hito Styerel compares today’s AI apps, like Midjourney, to “the invisible hands of the market which supposedly knows and fixes everything.” And she points out how this invisible hand reflects the bias of the person who trained it, which is our society. For example, the outputs I received for the prompt “electric outlet” all showed the rectangular 110v plug used in North America, regardless of the design system I added to the prompt. I had to specify “220v” as a part of the prompt to change Midjourney’s output. Also, the results for the prompt “flag” were mostly national flags of the US and the United Kingdom. These examples indicate what AI considers the default may be hegemonic, embodying a dominant cultural, social, or political viewpoint. Using English as the primary language for writing prompts is an unmistakable signal that AI image-generators primarily draw cultural references from
English-speaking nations. Also, the decision makers for AI products are mostly white males with higher education from the US or the United Kingdom. They choose what data to feed the algorithm. The AI generated images then become part of the data, reinforcing the essence of the original data instead of diversifying it.

Hito Steyerl even gets at the nature of AI as a discipline rooted in eugenics, implying that the essential part of AI lies in learning data and filtering it through the binary process. Thus, the outputted renderings from AI image-generators should be a starting point for questions and new lines of inquiry rather than simply visual material to be adjusted or refined.

I formatted the book to provide different ways to compare the resulting images. Outcomes from the imagining section shows the variation of the styles per word (subject matter), while the prompts matrix section shows images per style. I ask whether they reflect the current visual spectrum of design systems: do similarities imply uniformity of design systems across the brands, or is it limitations of today’s AI image-generators? Do the differences connote a variety of visual languages that should be reinforced even more?

As AI image-generators rapidly evolve, I’d like to continue this exploratory process and stay responsive by reflecting, positioning, and repositioning my views. Continued exploration will be a way for me to stay open-minded and maintain a balance between blinded positivity and criticism. While reflecting on my exploration, I’d like to remember that AI-generated images mirror our society’s bias so that I can leverage AI image-generators as a tool for revealing the embedded biases we may take for granted.
dis-org systems

/ imagine

word prompts

11 a cup of latte
12 a bowl of salad
14 spoon
15 fork
16 round table
17 furniture
18 table lamp
19 floor lamp
20 outlet
20 printer

opella's human interface guidelines

/ imagine

furniture

opella's human interface guidelines

/ imagine

google's material design

furniture

furniture

furniture

microsoft's fluent design system

microsoft's fluent design system

microsoft's fluent design system
There are many examples of brand guidelines from the 1960s, when corporate identity began to flourish after the end of World War II in 1945. One can hypothesize that the growing scale of corporations in the late 1940s and 50s drove institutional organization efforts, which led to standardized and published style and identity guidelines. These graphics manuals state and demonstrate how each brand component should be applied across various channels of communication. Looking at these brand books, one can realize how the visual languages around us are designed to function as a connected system. Guidelines continue to be developed today, and expand now to digital products, Google’s Material Design is a prime example. However, guidelines can be restrictive when they focus too heavily on streamlining and making the design process as efficient as possible.

Browse is a fictional brand that creates an atypical browser; the guidelines for Browse break the rigidity of existing brand guidelines’ traditional format. They subvert the guidelines’ original intention of creating a streamlined systems, instead prompting participants for unexpected results.
Window Frames

A window has an outer frame and an inner frame—a rectangle inside a rectangle.

The inner frame displays the content, while the outer frame holds the inner frame and the rest of the interface components.

Draw the outer frame, then check the weather.

For a sunny day:

Make a wide and tall inner frame to let the sun in. Vitamin D is vital in maintaining mental health, especially if you're in grad school.

For a rainy day:

Make a small and short inner frame to hide the grey sky.

For a windy day:

Make a vertically tall inner frame to ventilate.
Search Bar

The search bar allows users to pinpoint a destination on the web. Yet, it quickly becomes an entrance to a rabbit hole when it loses its bar shape.

Make the search bar as wide as or longer than the inner window frame so that it doesn't become a hole.

Draw it either above or below the inner window frame.

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Close & Minimize

Small
Close & Minimize

Medium
Close & Minimize

Large
Close & Minimize

---

Check the exit from Brow, inaccessible be tempted

For screen time between three to five hours:

Make the close and minimize buttons large so users can leave some room for gargle.

Make the close and minimize buttons smaller in case users access Brow.

The buttons can be on any side and can be seperated.
The close and minimize button are exits from Browse. These should be the most inaccessible components as users may be tempted to exit Browse to procrastinate.

Check the average screen time for your smartphone this week.

Make the close and minimize buttons small size to make it hard to exit Browse.

Make the close and minimize buttons medium size.

Make the close and minimize buttons large size to leave some room for procrastination.

The buttons can be on any side and can be separated.

The full screen allows a user to maximize the window, demonstrating the user's determination to focus on the content rather than multi-task.

Keep the full-screen button more prominent than the close and minimize buttons to steer users into a focus mode. Its width (or height) should be longer than the widths (or heights) of the close and minimize buttons combined.
Bookmark stores pages that users are unlikely to come back to. However, it provides a sense of relief to users that the web pages are now part of their collection.

Look out a nearby window.

If it’s nighttime, ensure the bookmark icon is larger than the brightest star you see outside the window.

If it’s daytime, ensure the bookmark icon is larger than the sun you see outside the window.
Tabs are temporary bookmarks. Tabs provide a sense of relief to the users that the web pages are readily accessible regardless of how rarely they visit the pages.

Count the number of books on your shelf that you haven't read.

Make the tab as tall as the count (use mm as your unit of measurement). Draw it above the search bar.
The back and forward button allows the user to “undo” (ctrl-z) their path, like a time capsule traveling to the past.

Check the time on a wall clock.

Draw the back button at the angle of the hour hand.

Draw the forward button at the angle of the minute hand.

Users will look for a refresh button when the wifi connection or the server is unstable.

Estimate the stability of wifi connection based on the crowdedness of your surrounding. Count the number of people around you and make the size of the refresh button larger than your count (use inches as your unit of measurement).
As a participatory exercise, designers in RISD’s GD MFA studio were given Browse’s guidelines to draw a wireframe of a browser.

**Prompt**

As a designer at Browse, please follow the following guidelines to wireframe a variation of Browse’s browser. It should contain all the interface components below:

- Window Frames
- Search Bar
- Bookmark
- Tabs
- Close & Minimize
- Full Screen
- Back & Forward
- Refresh

PARTICIPANTS FOLLOWING THE GUIDELINES RECORDED IN TIMELAPSE.
This is an interactive visualization for brand subsidiaries, which the corporations own as a business strategy to monopolize the market and maximize their profit effectively. Because the branding for each subsidiary is designed to be distinctive from another, it is hard to tell which subsidiaries belong to the same parent company. This invisible system lies at the heart of global business operations. In this visualization, a flock of birds acts as a visual metaphor, showing a parent company surrounded by its subsidiaries. Each time a person clicks the screen, the flock updates and a new gaggle of brands appears.
opening the closet
opening the closet
By opening the closet, I intend to make the invisible systems within the fashion world visible.

Worklist
- Inherent Vice
- Made in Italy, by Chinese
- A Way to Colonize Atacama Desert
- Sensing Fashion
Inherent Vice

The 2022 RISD exhibition Inherent Vice aims to make the behind-the-scenes of the museum more accessible to the public. Displayed in the Costume and Textiles gallery, Inherent Vice features a series of damaged and almost ghostly-looking gowns from America’s Gilded Age (1870s–1910s). Normally, the garments in this state would never be shown in a museum gallery; instead, they would be candidates for the process of deaccessioning. Yet, the RISD Museum has repurposed the pieces as an opportunity to “make room for neglected narratives.” As a graduate assistant at the museum, I had an amazing opportunity to design the exhibition identity, projected wall motion graphics, and labels for this exhibition.
The installation for Inherent Vice was still in progress when I first entered the gallery, and there was barely any light on. The dresses for the show stood quietly at the entrance of the dimly lit room, some inside a glass showcase, some hanging from the ceiling, and the others placed on mannequins. Seeing them guarded by the showcase securely, I felt as if I had sneaked into an haute couture shop after its opening hours. The dresses seemed to glitter with sequins and beads from afar, but as I got closer, I noticed tears and rips on them. What had seemed like the featherly fabric was shattered, tattered, slowly building piles of debris inside the showcase. The stark contrast between delicate beadings and rough débris was parallel to what used to be a luxurious past and dying present of the dresses. I used these débris and rips to create the installation.
from the dresses as an inspiration for the exhibit identity design. As a projection on the wall, the identity showed letters being shattered and falling into pieces.
THE IDENTITY DESIGN FOR THE INHERENT VICE EXHIBIT.

→ THE SEQUENCE OF INHERENT VICE IDENTITY SHATTERING AND FALLING DOWN.
THE IDENTITY DESIGN WAS PROJECTED ON THE WALL OF THE TEXTILE GALLERY IN LOOP MOTION.
Inherent vice, also known as inherent fault, is the tendency in an object or material to deteriorate or self-destruct because of its intrinsic internal characteristics, including weak construction, poor quality or unstable materials, and incompatibility of different materials within an object.

— American Institute for Conservation
Opening the Closet
This first encounter with *Inherent Vice* allowed me to reflect on the storefronts of Hong Kong. As a city famously known for luxury shopping, Hong Kong boasts many shopping centers and streets dedicated to luxury brands. My parent’s office was nearby Canton Road, one of the most crowded shopping destinations. Whenever I walked down this road, the clothes inside the showcase were shining under beaming lights and decorations. This glamor resembles the initial look offrom *Inherent Vice* dresses and raises questions: if such luxurious pieces like *Inherent Vice*’s garments are falling apart, what would the clothes from the storefronts of my youth look like now? Would someone still be wearing them? Would they be hanging in a closet or somewhere else?
A Way to Colonize the Atacama Desert provides one potential answer to the questions that were raised from Inherent Vice exhibit. The poster shows the beautiful scenery of the desert on the top half, which is one of many image search results for “Atacama Desert.” However, when the word “dumpsite” is added to the search, the results will show endless piles of clothing garments, and the scenery of the desert is no longer visible. One of the images from this search was used to create the bottom half of the poster to show how the Atacama Desert has turned into a clothing dumpsite. Without knowing about the dumpsite, one would get a false perception from the image search that the Atacama Desert is well-preserved.
opening the closet

→ THE IMAGE RESULT SHOWING BEAUTIFUL SCENERY OF ATACAMA DESERT.

→ THE IMAGE RESULT SHOWS ATACAMA DESERT GETTING FILLED UP BY CLOTHING WASTES.

a way to colonize atacama desert
The peaceful view of the Atacama Desert on the top half resembles images that a fashion brand would use for its sustainability campaigns. These campaigns claim that the clothes are made with recyclable materials, but only a tiny portion of those garments are recyclable—sometimes just the price tag. Thus, the garments we throw away accumulate up to 65,000 tons yearly and get dumped in the Atacama desert. This waste is expanding its territory like a colonizing force and has been visualized with flags in the poster. The flags claim the ownership of the Atacama Desert, and below them are the piles of clothing waste physically taking over the land.

Although the format and scale are entirely different, this poster shares the same goal as Inherent Vice: to reveal the hidden phases of clothes' life cycle. Inherent Vice achieves this by opening a private part of the museum to the public and allowing RISD students to use the garments as creative inspiration. A Way to Colonize the Atacama Desert shows this by juxtaposing images and collaging flags as a symbol. Both cases provide fresh perspectives on clothing by taking them outside their familiar context, the closet.
INSERT A SUSTAINABILITY COPY HERE
Made in Italy, by Chinese

If A Way to Colonize Atacama Desert looked at where garments go after they have been thrown out of the closet, Made in Italy by Chinese looks at the production stage of the garments. It reports the exploitative reality behind luxury fashion empires in a tapestry form. Often, the brands claim that their products are "made in Italy," connoting an image of Italian artisan's craft to make the products more desirable. The reality is that most of the workers are Chinese who work under wage at factories located in Italy. The white flags stand for each brand's empire and are linked to the letterforms in the background with yellow threads that represent exploited Chinese labor.
Opening the Closet

↑ CHINESE WORKERS' NUMBERS LEFT ON THE WALL IN PRATO, ITALY.

→ A FACTORY LOCATED IN PRATO, ITALY WITH CHINESE WORKERS.

← A CLOSE UP OF MADE IN ITALY, BY CHINESE TAPESTRY.
Opening the Closet
Sensing Fashion, the 2023 exhibition that followed Inherent Vice, asks: What happens when a garment designed to be worn enters a museum as a crisp, new envelope without the storytelling potential of wear and tear? Second-hand clothes donated by RISD textiles alum as design resources and their textures were observed with a microscopic camera. The resulting investigations are projected on the gallery walls for an immersive and intimate experience with the textiles.

I designed the motion identity for this exhibition so that the type is fragmented both in vertical and horizontal directions, referencing the woven pattern of the textile. The motion added to these fragments depicts how the microscopic camera moves through the texture of the fabric.
Opening the Closet

A PHOTO OF RISD MUSEUM'S TEXTILE GALLERY WITH SENING FASHION EXHIBITION ON VIEW.

The Sequence of Sensing Fashion Identity.
Opening the Closet
visible
letter-forms
Visible letterforms plays with the crystal goblet to create discernible fonts.

**Worklist**

- Transport Accelerated
- Camouflage
- Prototype Mode
TRANSPORT ACCELERATED

The 1950s was the golden age for public transportation in the UK, as the end of petrol rationing in 1950 boosted car sales. Even those who couldn’t afford a car got a motorbike with a sidecar as an alternative. The increase in traffic had to be managed with clearer road signages, which led to the birth of Transport. Margaret Calvert and Jock Kinneir designed Transport for British highways, and it has become “the blueprint for modern road signage all over the world.”

In The Visual History of Type, Paul McNeil describes Transport as a typeface that “performed so efficiently for so long that most people are completely unaware of them.” It is a perfect example of what Beatrice Warde described as a crystal goblet, a transparent vessel, and an unnoticeable vehicle for communicating ideas. Highways could function more safely and efficiently with the help of this invisible typeface. Yet, it is ironic that the highway is criticized as a structure that “destroy[s] cultural and economic centers and bring[s] decades of environmental harm.”

Transport Accelerated was designed to subvert the invisibility of Transport and make it a expressive display font. It illustrates speed utilizing letterforms as animation frames.

A PHOTO OF BRITAIN’S FIRST FULL LENGTH MOTORWAY, THE M1, TAKEN NEAR TO THE LUTON SPUR ON FEBRUARY 11, 1959.
JOCK KINNEIR OVERSEEING THE PRODUCTION OF ROAD SIGNS.

ROAD SIGN MAQUETTES WITH TRANSPORT FROM ST BRIDE LIBRARY.

ROAD SIGN DOCUMENTATION WITH TRANSPORT.

TRANSPORT DESIGNED BY MARGARET CALVERT AND JOCK KINNEIR.
For conventional roads, the principal legend on guide signs are in letters at least 6 inches (150mm) in height. A letter's height was set following this. Then, to depict the accelerating movement, the letters were duplicated, each to be used like animation frames.

The five duplicated frames were distributed into linearly increasing distance by an inch. Counters on the last frame are expanded and merged with the counters in the previous frame.

Counter shapes are adjusted to match the geometric curves. Counters on the left-most frame are merged into a single counter. Rightmost stems are made narrower approximately by half. Ellipse shaped counters are adjusted to match the curve of relatively more geometric shaped counters.
TRANSPORT ACCELERATED ALPHABETS.
SPREADS FROM TRANSPORT ACCELERATED TYPE SPECIMEN BOOK.
A SET OF POSTERS DESIGNED WITH TRANSPORT ACCELERATED.
Warning signs are used to draw the driver's attention to an upcoming or possible hazard that will affect how they drive.

Guide signs state distance, mileage, and location-specific information such as exit and entry signs for a freeway.

It also alerts the driver to circumstances that they cannot easily spot, such as potential pedestrians, animal crossings or a speed bump in the road.

Route signs also fall into this category as well, as they signal the route number and county travelers are in to help keep them up-to-date on their current location.
Warning signs are used to draw the driver’s attention to an upcoming or possible hazard that will affect how they drive.

It also alerts the driver to circumstances that they cannot easily spot, such as potential pedestrians, animal crossings or a speed bump in the road.

Guide signs state mileage and location-specific information such as exit and entry signs for a freeway.

Route signs also fall into this category as well, as they signal the route number and or county travelers are in to help keep them up-to-date on their current location.
A POSTER SERIES THAT SHOWS THE US HIGHWAY. THE LENGTH OF THE POSTER VARIES DEPENDING ON THE LENGTH OF THE HIGHWAY.
TRANSPORT ACCELERATED APPLIED ON A TAXI BILLBOARD.

HOW DO WE STOP THE ACCELERATING SPEED

PRESS THE BRAKE
TRANSPORT ACCELERATED APPLIED ON A TRUCK.
According to the crypsis hypothesis, stripes allow an animal to blend in with its environment. — A prompt from Newly Formed

The animals disappear from the predators’ sight and recede into nature by embodying patterns on their body. I saw resemblance to alphabets and how their forms recede behind the content. In other words, viewers don’t notice the shapes or curves of the alphabet as they are reading, because what we consider to be legible letterforms defend the alphabets from being recognized.

I inverted this legible state by making each letter blend into the previous alphabet and the one that follows when placed in an alphabetical order. The kerning was set to negative value to achieve this. When one types using this font, shapes of the alphabets become more noticeable while the content is veiled and protected. As a result, the letters become camouflaged between other letters inverting the relationship between the content and the letterforms.

Camouflage

According to the crypsis hypothesis, stripes allow an animal to blend in with its environment. — A prompt from Newly Formed

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## CAMOUFLAGE ALPHABETS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
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</table>
CAMOUFLAGE IN DIFFERENT TRACKING.
I asked the cheetah, are you yellow on black or black on yellow?
I asked the zebra, are you black with white stripes, or white with black stripes?
Wing patterns that resemble leaves or tree bark help camouflage insects.
Prototype Mode

Prototype Mode is a variable font made leveraging the interaction paths that is only visible to designers. In Figma’s Prototype mode, a small UI components were laid out along the each alphabet letters. They were then connected by adding interaction paths. The lines that indicate interactions are invisible in the preview and design mode, but only becomes visible in the prototype mode to the designers who are making the design. The curve of these lines are automatically determined by Figma and are fixed as one zooms in and out, creating a varied state of letterforms.
A small component was used as points along the letters.

In prototype mode, the interaction lines are visible, connecting the components to create letterforms.
In Design mode, when the components are not selected, they appear as dots, unable to make the letters visible.

All components are selected.

In prototype mode, selecting different interaction states highlight applicable lines.
Interviews

inter-
views
Deroy Peraza
Creative director & partner at Hyperakt

Deroy works with numerous non-profit organizations to create visual systems that communicate organizations’ mission to make more just, equitable, and healthy communities. He generously shared his design process: how he goes through the strategy phase for each client to ensure what the brand’s mission is and how he builds system for different client needs.

MINA KIM: How would you define branding in your own terms? Hyperakt’s site said “branding is defined not just as a logo or website, but it’s sum of what you do, what you stand for, and how you achieve your mission.” I also saw that you compared branding to a person’s personality—would you add or change anything about that definition?

DEROY PERAZA: I would add that your brand is your voice and it’s your channel for communicating with the outside world. When we say that brand is our language, we literally mean that it is the way that organizations speak as a whole. So visual design is one aspect of that. Identity is another aspect of that. All of that is rooted in a clear positioning and brand strategy that encompasses purpose values, mission of the organization that tone and character communicate with. So we think of it more as a language.

MK: I see. A visual language. So when you’re designing visual identity, it’s a visual version of a language.

DP: That’s right. And so the process that we undertake with a client in the brand strategy phase is to bridge the work that our clients tend to sit more in, like the organizational strategy, because they’re thinking about their organizational objectives, not just visual design. When we explain any decision or visual design, we always refer back to the brand strategy work, so they understand it in those terms. And the bridge that we create between strategy and visual design is the core brand idea. That core brand idea is a sort of synthesis of the organization, the role of the organization that can be sort of interpreted figuratively and serve as a launch point for visual design for the creative team.

So it’s a way for the design team to be able to make decisions about color, about typography, about the system and the organizing principle behind the system, the logo that they can very clearly point back to the tone, the character, the sort of DNA of the brand.
MK And when you're building that do you consider them to be a flexible design system? For example, like your work for the Donor campaign.

DP Yes, in different ways. The flexibility is interpreted in different ways depending on the needs of the brand and the use case. So for example, in the case of the Pete campaign. The brand needed to have slightly different feelings and different tones depending on where they were using it geographically. And so we have a very broad color palette and we have this kind of flexible system of state and signage that has very local character. In that sense, that brand is about really stretching to meet different audiences.

In the case of Donors Choose, they have a lot. They have an in-house design team that’s very capable. And they have a lot of programming and a lot of marketing material, and they don’t have photography really at their disposal. They needed something that sort of conveyed the joy and wonder and possibility that Donors Choose provides in classrooms. Without photography, very heavily on illustration. And on a very vibrant color palette, and the illustrations are sort of like a toolkit of parts, like Lego blocks that can be stacked and built together to add meaning and to change to illustrate different things. So it’s like a modular illustration system that allows them to then create assets.

MK Would you say both are flexible but catering to different audiences and needs?

DP That’s right. And then we’ll have some of the most common asks that we hear from clients for flexibility, which is primarily so that clients can extend the brand on social media easily—assets for different posts. And so for that, the ask is like, “can you give us an emotional range to work with?” —what if we’re posting serious, [joyful] or more academic content? And so having a design system that tonally - through color and type - can adjust to those emotions, for different types of communication is really important. The other sort of constant variable is what kind of content is it? Is it a long quote, or is it just like a short announcement? We have photography that can accompany it, or is it just like a background color or like a graphic element? So the spectrum for content type is another spectrum that we look at.

MK How do you balance between scaling to different needs versus the consistency—staying intact with the brand’s core visual element?

DP We create guidance. We keep typography consistent across the board, we have a limited set of colors, we have instructions for when to use parts of the color palette and when to use other parts. We often have layout grids that we provide to clients in our templates and the instructions we give in the brand guides. We show a bunch of different examples in the brand guide—what is in the bounds and what is out of bounds to keep the system consistent.

MK When you hand it over to a client, how do those flexible elements work the way you hand over to the client?

DP When we give them a brand guide, sometimes it’s a digital brand guide, a PDF, or a figma file that has the template elements already in place. It sort of depends on how capable the design is on the client... with actually carrying out that consistency—it sort of depends. Ideally, when we work with design teams that are very capable on the client side, it’s very easy for them, because all they’re looking for are some rules to guide their work. And they really appreciate having that structure and reference. It just gets hard when they don’t have that expertise in house. And so for those we try to keep the system very simple.

MK Do you ever go back to them to reorganize the system?

DP Yeah, so we’ve had situations where new programs get created, new areas of work are created, and clients need us to think about the sort of architecture of the brand again, and help us reorganize things. There are situations where a year or two after we’ve created a brand, there’s like sort of new realities and brands need to get adjusted. So that definitely happens.

MK I also noticed the toolkit for the Donor Choose and Pete campaign, which is a participatory aspect to it. What are some considerations that you have to make, so that they also stay consistent? I’d guess users are different from clients.

DP So in that regard, when you’re creating something for the general public, you can only do so much. You have to be okay with them breaking the system. Because we can’t expect the general public to learn how to be designers. So the spirit of it is in that sense, what we wanted really was...
to make it easier for people to support the campaign. And there’s a visual language of campaign support signs that are like homemade. And we actually wanted to embrace that, because that conveys personalization and authenticity that means people are really invested and excited. So we didn’t want it to feel super corporate and perfect. We wanted people to really take the brand and do something with it. And the general guidance was there. So hopefully, they will keep it in the ballpark. But in that case, I’ll share some—let me share my screen.

MK Oh, yeah! that’d be great.

DP So these are all things that people made with the assets—like you see this Colorado sign over here, like the lettering. We made the logo, but people took that and they put the mountains behind it. And that’s cool, you know? Somebody made that illustration right there and used the colors and put the logo on it. People went with it and expanded on it. And in this case, that’s kind of exactly what we want it to happen. So they are designers in a way, unintentionally, an amateur. But that’s fine. That’s great.

MK And on your part, you intentionally left that room of freedom for people to play with the branding system?

DP I mean, by giving them access to the assets to the original assets in vector form, so that they’re editable. You’re basically like, I mean, we literally said, “Show us what you make,” and that’s how we got all those other images, people would post them and hashtag them. And we were just giving people freedom, and people appreciate that, that makes them feel like they own part of the brand. And for a political campaign like this, that was very much the intention. In other cases, it’s not the case. In other cases, you want it to stay controlled, and but you don’t give it to the people that you know, you sort of keep it in house, this is that the Donors Choose stuff. So you can see this, there’s this kind of pattern eating and it’s, you know, different symbols that can be combined in different ways. And, and then, you know, you can kind of use them to build things like this. So these are some example illustrations that we give them, and we give them sort of a kit of parts for people. Also, you can see here, and so they kind of take these and combine them with, you know, their grid, you know, their elements and build new illustrations with them.

MK It’s like lego parts they can play with?

DP Yeah, so you can see here, some of these, you know, use some of those lego parts, you know, and then these are like, sort of the more open free ones. Sometimes they’re masked and contained.

DP Yeah, So here, for example, they also have a toolkit for their teachers. And they also can sort of like choose different combinations of illustrations and color, and they can build these assets, and download them and use them for social media.

MK The illustration style and the color palette is what holds the system together.

DP Yeah. So here, for example, they also have a toolkit for their teachers. And they also can sort of like choose different combinations of illustrations and color, and they can build these assets, and download them and use them for social media.

MK And I’ve also noticed how, like many digital companies, they make their assets shareable online? Do you think that it’s going to be the trend, and there will be more participation from the user?

DP I think that depends on what the brand is used for, and what the company or organization is. I think if it’s, if it’s a company who’s very much in control of their brand, they aren’t going to give you freedom to use their brand however you want, because they like to have very tight control over how it’s expressed. That’s how they control their brands, the value of the brand and all of that. But if you’re talking about organizations, like the ones that we work with, who often are campaigning for ideas or issues, or who are trying to build communities, people who are very engaged, you know, then there’s a different purpose behind the brand. And so it’s more sense to include people and have them feel like they’re part of it, rather than separated from it.
MK For sure. Then I'm seeing a lot of cool examples. Would you mind maybe sharing examples where you mentioned, like for a nonprofit organization that didn't have resources to maintain the design system?

DP Yeah. So for those we keep it really simple. And so this is a very small profit, for example, and it's mainly type and color. And we have a few simple geometric shapes. We knew they weren't going to be doing a lot since they didn't have the team to be building a lot of assets. So it's mostly just using the color, type, or solid form for images, and keeping a very, very simple system like that.

MK It still looks very dynamic and vibrant.

DP Yeah, I mean, you can do a lot with color; but it's a very simple system. Some of these initial Pete graphics also were fairly simple. Like, they were mostly just photography and type in or background color and type. But they had a lot of different colors. And we had a couple of different marks that we could use. So that gives you some variations and variability.

MK And Supermajority, which is a women's voting bloc organization. This was like figuring out the difference between the two, the edu fund and no more action organizations.

DP Yeah. Also a slightly different creative direction. So this is for the calmer one, there's like, you know, very clean backgrounds centering on close up or more close up shots of the individual. There's a little bit more density, more people. So slightly different vibes for the assets. All different kinds of systems.

MK Interesting, because it's like one design system, but within it, there are two systems.

DP I mean, I think "flexible" is not a very descriptive word. Because I think all systems in their nature need to be flexible. Yeah. At least when it mission statements. And different voices present themselves, so you can see like planting seeds of hope, whereas this was like light a fire and solidarity. This one's about stirring courage, so more active language down at the bottom.
comes to branding, it’s just that they need to be flexible in different ways that make sense for the individual. Right? If something is inflexible, it’ll die right away. There’s just not enough room for anything to happen. So you just have to define how, what makes sense for each brand, and how they are going to be flexible.

So flexibility is given and you’re tailoring to different brands.

Yeah, tailoring to how they need to use the brand. And who they need to use it with.

Right, and I’m also seeing another project on the screen.

Yeah, so this is a website for an organization called Civilla, a service design organization. Their new identity is very much based on DNA and how it’s very meta because their identity is supposed to represent their own flexibility and their own process. And so there’s no one colorway. You know, this little sort of DNA strip, that is the logo that comes in different look and color combinations. And so we’ve used it to color code the different sections of the site. So in the CMS, there’s available colors for each page which limits the colors of that section. So it’s not like you’re just using one color to color code a section, you’re using sets of colors.

DNA strips are holding it together.

Exactly, [sets of colors are holding] the shape and the structure of the page and making it feel consistent. See? So yeah, it’s always this push and pull of how you build in as much flexibility as possible and still make it feel like a unified system.

Here’s another one with a variable logo for a community for new grant making efforts. It was a foundation that wanted to fund after-school programs, instead of just determining themselves what the best programs were, they designed the whole process that engaged a thousand teens to participate very actively in defining what kind of programs they wanted, what they value, and what’s important to them. And they had dialogues with the ethical providers that were competing for the grants and were very much involved in the grant making process. The whole brand was around giving them a voice and capturing the broad spectrum of Generation Z. So the logo itself basically allows people to create different z’s. And there’s the consistent holding pattern—the box basically that you can fill in.
The students all published essays that look like this that are around their themes. And they got to pick their color, a zine, or upload [the essays] as they customize pages within the broader experience. For social networks, we used stretching grid and collage. It’s like [having] pieces that we can drop in and contrast with like a rigid grid—a clear type system that contains chaos in a way.

MK That container is really holding elements together. I’m seeing a lot of variable branding coming up like this example. Do you think that’s also going to be a trend?

DP I think it’s been trending for a while. But I think, again, it depends on what the brand is and what the brand needs to do, you know, [variables for] the sake of variable branding, just creates confusion. When you create a variable brand, you’re really saying, this brand is either made up of a lot of different content, people, and ideas. It’s a container or platform for a brand, product, or company that you need to think of as one entity. And so that’s when it makes sense to have variable brands. When it’s trying to represent a lot of diversity.

MK Yeah, for sure! Do you see this process of making design systems or brand systems changing in any way?

DP I think they change, I think it changes all the time, depending on technology, pop culture trends, what’s happening socially within organizations. As a result of cultural or social change, brand [changes] the same way that language changes with new words. As you know, a new song comes out and the use of the word or phrase becomes part of the Zeitgeist. It’s the same with branding. It’s a language that’s always changing and always being built on, modified, organic. So you have to be kind of ready to always react to that.

MK Just as a speculative question, what if there’s no branding in this world? Could you imagine how that world might function?

DP Yeah, going back to language, what you’re saying really is [what if] there’s no visual branding. But there’s always branding of some kind as long as they [exist]—there’s language. So you know, the way somebody speaks, the way an organization speaks, the language they choose, the demeanor that they take, that’s all branding too. Even if it’s not represented by a logo and colors and type. Like your personality is your brand. What we think of as visual identity is just like a visual shorthand for that personality, right? It still gives you an easy shortcut to interpreting the entity behind what it stands for. Without it, we just interpret based on whatever information we have [left with] our interactions or the behavior of the entity or the person.
Aron has designed numerous identity systems like MIT Media Lab, Nuts.com, and Mohawk. He shared how he creates dynamic and expressive visual language by visualizing how a brand or technology functions.

MINA KIM
So then I'd like to start by asking your own definition is for a flexible branding system.

ARON FAY
Sure. It’d be helpful to start by defining what a system is in general, which I think gone are the days of having a logo and putting it at the top left of a piece of stationery and saying that’s what our brand is. I would argue especially within the last ten years it’s become almost essential for any business to have a proper visual identity. It’s no longer like, “Hey, can you just make a logo for me?” It’s more like, “Hey, what’s the logo? What’s the color palette? What are the typefaces that we’re using? To get even more granular with some larger brands, how do we make sure that all these technical things are right?” I think you and I probably take for granted having an impact on how people see and understand brands out there.

So to talk about what it means to have a flexible identity system can mean a few things to me personally. And sometimes I get a little caught up in the terminology. You’ve probably seen this a little bit in your research how people call flexible identity systems different things and they can have different meanings. But to me, when we work with clients, for example, a brand new company, we’re basically asked to help shape that vision for people and how they understand that vision. So I think when you create a flexible identity system, especially in the case of a young business, it’s important to be flexible about how this company’s business needs are actually going to change quite a bit over time. And so creating a system that allows them to scale up over time also allows them to have some flexibility in terms of how they are positioning themselves in the market, which is a key. For example, the company is now making widget A, but years down the line, they might be making widget A to Z, your needs can be completely different. The days of putting your logo on top left of a piece of stationery have changed with all these different channels and that’s where flexibility comes in. If your widgets are in a store, the way that you show the packaging...
is probably going to have a different context than sending some email about it, right? So it’s about having flexibility and being able to respond to different contexts to which the identity needs to work in.

MK So flexibility acts as an advantage for scale. Do you think there’s any other advantages?

AF Yeah, scaling and also allowing part of the role of a studio and creating an identity for someone. Let’s say it’s a startup without any designer on staff, but five years down the line, they have a couple of designers who are working with them [who need to] take your guidelines and apply them. I’d argue that building flexibility into the system from the outset allows for a better sort of handoff between designers. You and I don’t think exactly the same as designers, right? Even if we’re looking at the same guidelines document, if someone asked us to design a website, we might do it slightly differently. So I think building in that flexibility and understanding that there isn’t a right way to do every single specific thing when building a toolkit will give an advantage.

MK I see. How do you think one can manage the balance between being flexible and staying intact with the brands? Do you think there is a risk of being too flexible?

AF Yeah, for sure. So not to sort of go against what I just mentioned in terms of building and flexibility from the outset. I’ll give you a little context. Let’s say a startup asks us to design an identity for them, then we’ll listen to their goals and what they are trying to communicate out in the world. Sometimes we do strategy work like these to put the company’s goals on paper. But once we get to the design phase, we show some different options on how a simple logo can look as a system and its applications: how does it look on a business card, website, or any format they might need. Showing you what your logo and system can actually do is super helpful in terms of people understanding the bigger picture.

One tricky thing is when there’s one way they can apply the system, right? In general, it might be pretty simple to take different elements that we put together that can be the world that it creates. I think the cool part about creating an identity system is that you’re not just stuck in that world. That’s just a starting point. I’ll use Dropbox as an example. Dropbox created a really simple identity, right? But some of the advertising that they’re doing took those system elements and made them look very different from their core product and that’s because they were able to flex their identity in different ways. I think that’s the ability to pivot and be able to talk to different audiences.

MK Oh, yeah. Flexibility can also act as a business strategy.

AF Yeah, it can respond to actual business needs that a client has over time.

MK Then you’ve been working on a lot of branding like MIT Media Lab and Mohawk, what was the design process like? Has the approach changed since you started your studio?

AF Yeah, that’s a really good question. It has, in some ways, in some ways, I think it’s been just an evolution. MIT Media Lab, in particular, is actually like 20 different identities in one identity. In a way, it’s creating a framework that you could basically paint in pixels to make different names, the groups that are there. That was just the total response to what the actual business need was—such a diversity. When you think about it holistically, you’re like, “Oh, maybe it shouldn’t be just a single logo, but we should be thinking about it in a more flexible way like the actual places.” I think part of what I’ve built on as we started to create, as I started my own studio is: how do we take more traditional processes of working with clients, but also start to think about different ways in which they’re starting to communicate and thinking about the future. How can we build in new technologies that will allow us to communicate more effectively?

Part of my studio is not even necessarily design focused—we do a lot in the creative technology world. I can show you a couple examples too. Thinking about how we can create logos that actually move and morph with things that are happening at the client’s headquarters at a given time, thinking about how we can tell different stories with some new communication methods is, to me, really exciting. And so we’ve been trying to build quite a bit of that into the work that we’ve been doing. We have a balance—not every client needs that too, by the way, not every client needs a logo with different permutations. Sometimes you just need a simple logo, which is totally fine, right? But other times, I think there can be some with new technology advances, that can be some really interesting and cool things that I think can evolve in the future. I’ve been doing it the same way for a really long time but it feels like now is a time where things can actually start to change and evolve.
MK: For sure! And having your own studio must give you more liberty. And you mentioned identities with permutations—do you have examples you think was a good branding that used generative design?

AF: Sure. A lot of it, at the end of the day, is about creating tools and about thinking about how we can allow clients to have a bit more autonomy, which I think is important with a flexible identity system. This was for the MIT libraries, which has multiple libraries within. So we came up with this idea of a floating screensaver like design that has six different points for each of the libraries. And they all move in different ways. And you can actually capture different crops or instances, because libraries are really like information systems that are continually morphic.

MK: It’s like a web, like a network!

AF: Yeah, exactly. So in this case, we created a deck and a desktop application, but they can be created on the web now. A pretty simple tool that allowed the client to make the graphics and export it themselves. So basically providing tools to generate their own assets as they need them.

MK: So then, there’s no longer guidelines or guidelines becoming more of a tool?

AF: I mean, I think it’s still necessary to have guidelines. This tool is great for them to export different assets they need for different reasons. For example, the back of their business cards have different iterations. But guidelines are still important because it helps you to use the tool the way it’s intended.

This client is called Lobe and its spacious sound is essentially like a room feed. Imagine a room and speakers placed throughout the room, also the floor so you can actually feel sound happening in three dimensions. They are omnidirectional speakers that shoot sound anywhere that you want it to be in that room and feel vibrations in the floor. You get to experience sound in three dimensions as if you just went outside. You have spatial awareness—it isn’t like your headphones with just two speakers and you lose that spatial quality entirely. So we thought: how can we showcase how that works? It’s what the founder is dealing with—this hyper complex tech they use that can send sound anywhere and it’s great for interactive performances and much more. So we created an application that takes four letters of the company name (Lobe) and makes them move as the sound
actually moves in space. We were able to link up the sound source inside the actual room [with the letters] to control the size and location of each letter accordingly.

MK: It syncs with the actual sound that's being played. Oh, wow, that's really cool.

AF: It can also just [allow them to] create different iterations of their wordmark as different skills, alignments, colors, and export vector files for video work that they are doing.

MK: So it really provides a ton of flexibility but also is a perfect match to the technology's behavior.

AF: Yes, definitely. I think technology can be a way that we can start ... it can be the sort of mechanism that allows you to take an idea and align it with.

MK: I'm seeing how sound becomes input to that generative system. Do you see user or consumer input becoming part of branding? Maybe like a participatory system?

AF: For sure, I mean when I was back in school, about 10 years ago, the term "participatory" started to emerge and a lot of my classmates did social design trying to figure out how we can involve communities within the design process. So I definitely think it has a place in design. I think it becomes a little bit tricky in certain cases. I don't have a fully formed answer for you on this, but acknowledging certain people's voices more than the other—there's certain social dynamics that can be really difficult when you start to get into that space. And things really need to be thought through before giving two design options [for people to choose]. Are those people on the same level? Usually, there's something behind the scenes that can potentially shift priorities. So I do think in general, it's really important that we think about audiences especially in the branding space... Being perceptive to who the audience is, who you are speaking to, how you engage the community.

MK: Yes, for sure—I'm speculating what the future would be and was wondering if the participatory aspect could play a larger role. Because I'm seeing branding elements becoming more and more dynamic. I'm also curious about challenges you're facing while you're designing the toolkit for generative branding.
AF Yeah, I think first and foremost there has to be a reason for creating such a system because it actually makes sense for some businesses to not have [generative system]. It’s really important to establish at the outset of any project with a client. I think [a challenge is] in a way you are providing a tool anyone can do whatever they want. So like I said before, we do spend quite a bit of time with guidelines and making sure how these tools [to be used] at the end of the day. And making sure that the tools are beneficial to what they need. I think it’s really easy for clients to, especially with new technology that they want the new possible application that seems cool. But sometimes they don’t need that exact thing that they’re saying they need. Maybe they need something a bit adjacent to that, but [they say they need] new, novel, and cool technologies. So I think it’s also about making sure to take your role seriously, as a designer, and making sure that you are setting them up for success and not just doing something because it seems cool.

MK For sure. I think that touches on the responsibility of a designer. I know it might not be directly related, but do you think branding has power to maybe change our community or society even?

AF It’s such a loaded question, right? Do I feel optimistic today? Do I feel pessimistic today? No, I think it has. I don’t think logos necessarily change the world. But I think we have to be careful with some ways of visual communication. I do think the design can benefit communities—it can be a tangible thing. I don’t use it because we particularly love consumerism but if you can see easy metrics, if a company ends up selling a lot after you brand them, it’s a simple way of understanding. Within the community space, even just thinking about a new restaurant, there’s multiple ways you can look at it. Is the restaurant being successful? What’s their impact? Are people in the neighborhood eating better because of them? There’s so many different ways that you can come at it. And so I think it’s not a simple answer.

MK Then going back to how we might define things, do you have a separate definition for brand versus flexible system?

AF Yeah. People always use different words, right? Because they use the words their brand has a synonym for the company, which I understand why that happens sometimes. But to me, a brand is who they are as people. It’s not how they occupy the world and not necessarily what the business structure is like. I think there’s some confusion about how you define what a brand is versus digital identity versus a company so on and so forth. I think these are all words that get used, but I’m not sure I have the answer on what thematically each of them actually represents.

Visual identity system, like I said before, is creating the toolkit of how people can visually communicate their ideas out into the world. People use the word, verbal identity, sometimes we use the word, strategy, sometimes business strategy. There’s all of these other pieces for how do you talk to your customers? I think all these layers contribute to the larger idea of “brand.” The brand might be tucked out in its totality, basically. And the company may be like, what are the inner works of that or structural setup of what it is that the entity is trying to do in the world.
epilogue
Acknowledgements

I often feel like there’s an invisible gap that I can’t fill between how much gratitude I feel versus how much I can express that in words. I hope to make my gratitude towards the RISD community visible by continuing to produce and evolve the work I started at RISD. If you are reading this, thank you from the bottom of my heart—this thesis would not have been possible without your generosity.

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Thank you