

“Electricity has made us all angels. Technology (from psycho-analysis to surveillance) has made us all ghosts... Speaking voids, made up only of scraps and citations ... contaminated by other people’s memories... adrift...”
–Ian Penman

In Deep with the Weapons of my New Life In Deep with the Weapons of my New Life In Deep with the Weapons of my New Life
When I was hired for a contract visual design position at TikTok in 2018, they asked me if I was okay with producing “banners.” I was in my mid-twenties at the time, and had just moved across the country back to my home state, without any formal training in the field, and experience limited to art show flyers and Wordpress website’s for friends’ shaky entrepreneurial endeavors. I was eager to do anything other than what I had spent the first half of my twenties doing—selling amiable paintings as decoration for Hamptons vacation homes or as assets of recurring value to be concealed indefinitely in billionaires’ freeport storage facilities. Though I don’t think there is anything particularly wrong with working in the most unregulated industry outside drug trafficking—I personally couldn’t help feel the arbitrariness of my daily work in relation to anything else—I wasn’t even making my own artwork, just selling rich artists’ work to even richer collectors at prices threefold my yearly salary—a barnacle sales assistant on the sidelines of luxury retail, staring into the void.

TikTok—at that point located in a slick co-working space in sunny Culver City, California—represented the populist opposite of the elite cultural spaces where I had been cloistered. The smell of fresh venture-capital could not be ignored with their recent acquirement of music.ly, a lip-syncing app for preteens that doubled the Los Angeles office headcount and shot TikTok into popular American vernacular. The pay was double my previous salary, with catered meals, health insurance, a cellphone plan, a gym membership, a matching 401K, and stock options. At first these benefits appeared as a blessing—I could get myself out of debt, buy new clothing, and rent a nicer apartment. The function of these “perks,” as they are saccharinely dubbed by HR, however, have been well-documented—see the Googleplex and its ramifications. They coax you to work harder, faster, and stronger until your personal life is drowned out by the sleeping pods, work pals, gluttonous buffets, and ergonomic standing desks. This was already the case at my bosses’ offices in Shanghai where they were rumored to work a 9-9-6 instead of a 9-5—meaning 9AM to 9PM, 6 days a week.

But back to the banners—I wasn’t quite sure what one was when my manager asked if I was okay with making them, but I quickly found out as I spent the majority of my first few months designing these 1000 pixel-wide marketing graphics, comprised of hashtag titles and Photoshopped stock imagery, to encourage users to participate in the app’s challenges and engage with trending content. Though a minor design deliverable at first glance, these graphics were highly visible, reaching millions of viewers within their short lifespan of a few days before more content needed to be churned out.

the mode of production in which I wanted to explore with my work for The Box as I have started to think of it as at the heart of my process as a graphic designer.

Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners Banners

The artwork I am presenting for In Deep with the Weapons of My New Life, consists of collages made from personalized packaging tape which formally reference the banner advertisements that I produced at TikTok. Long and narrow strips of found graphic fragments are woven together into a grid that breaks down in form and function as the material sticks to itself. The resulting inconsistencies, air bubbles, and unstable linear partitions, allow me to explore a narrative that exists somewhere between the interiority of individual experience and a database of graphic referents collected through algorithmic meditation and physical happenstance. I work with far-ranging yet personal material in an attempt to flatten references—fragments of journal entries, to karaoke ballads, screenshots from influencer content, trendy locations that may or may not have been visited, and neon signage from local shops.

I am particularly interested in the the branded tape roll, as a device to signal the production costs of a globalized economy predicated on the neoliberal fantasy of unlimited consumption fueled by free two-day shipping and the hyper-accelerated speed of shifting consumer taste. Going against all brand usage guidelines in a further attempt to flatten my sources, I use a narrow color palette to design the tape, a customization process that stands in as a signifier of advanced consumerism.

Dropshipping Dropshipping Dropshipping Dropshipping Dropshipping Dropshipping Dropshipping Dropshipping Dropshipping

The goal of Web 2.0 platforms was to remove the barrier between self-expression, social interaction, and commerce. This has largely been achieved on platforms like Instagram which have pivoted to function essentially as a digital mall. Simultaneously, until the pandemic, the refinement of the global supply chain made it easy for low-cost subcultural goods to be produced, while differing lifestyles became hyper-visible through online micro-trends and niche communities. No longer was the brick-and-mortar experience the first interaction customers were having with brands, but the narratives of the brands' digital selves.

I recently saw a TikTok by a creator who was complaining about her experience ordering a dress from Réalisation Par, a clothing company best known for selling flirty patterned dresses priced at \$225. She was upset about the unconsidered packaging as it didn't align with her conception of the brand; the dress had been dropshipped from an overseas factory, haphazardly mummified in brown tape with a Laser-printed barcode slapped on the front. It didn't come with any of the custom tissue paper, stickers, or thank you cards that you would expect from a ditzy fashion house that sells mid-luxury dresses as aspirational lifestyle. Though selling the concept of "authenticity has always been about determining market value," as Ayesha Siddiqi notes—advanced consumers' expectations are still high in regards to brand consistency and cohesion of messaging—in other words, graphic design and copywriting). The presentation matters as much as the product, and the digital experience must match up to the customers' physical experience. The devil, it seems, is in the packaging details.

UGC UGC

A post-ironic celebration of consumption—or to "equally like Doritos and Dimes," (a trendy New York

City restaurant)—that has been embraced by artists as of late can be interpreted as lacking criticality. Artist and trend forecaster, Dena Yago, argues that if an artwork contains a recognizable product or brand, it will be regarded on the other side of the feed—meaning by a general public unaware of the artists’s encoded messaging—as user-generated content. User-generated content (UGC) is a term for content provided by users about a brand without being paid to do so. Often this content is repurposed by brands as advertisements because it comes across as more genuine and trustworthy than traditional marketing. Once an artwork containing brand messaging is posted online, Yago argues, “The artist’s position will be rendered illegible,” as the brand sees the interaction as a sincere gesture of “brand-love.”

At TikTok, I had to film and produce ad campaigns that mimicked UGC content on a weekly basis. This was one of my least favorite tasks as I was always at a loss for what to film. The top performing videos were always the ones with the most extreme visuals and effects. I would oftentimes put the After Effects kaleidoscope filter over my basic content and call it a day. This was fine for the marketing team as they solely cared about user conversion. The artistic or visual value I provided in this context was rendered illegible because of the prioritization of metrics over aesthetics or even cohesive brand messaging, but this is an extreme case. Most of the time, as graphic designers, we fluidly work between clients’ visions and expectations, and still maintain agency over our work. Though it works a bit differently in the art world context Yago is addressing, I feel that the division between fine and applied arts will be more blurry in the near future, and distinctions between cultural categorizations will be less relevant. I also know, just from experience, that to a general audience, an image of an artwork will never perform as well as a video of exploding colors and repeating patterns.

The Void The Void The Void The Void The Void The Void The Void The Void The Void The Void The Void The Void
For me, making artwork free from any client obligations is about privileging aesthetics—it is not about the morality or intention by the maker, or about making a critical statement. Meaning should operate within the work, not from other context imposed or the projected reaction from a general audience. At their core, the works I am presenting for **The Box** function as formal exercises in graphic design—they are the exploration of how meaning is produced or rendered obsolete by varying design choices—color shape, overlap, contrast—including production techniques, exhibition design, and material. They also attempt to relate to the larger contexts of global capital and advertising, which I feel are important topics to think about while considering one’s practice within graphic design. I see the branding and packaging that infiltrate our lives constantly to be analogous as the credit card’s worth of micro-plastics we ingest each week—most of the time unknowingly consumed and yet invisibly apart of us. It is from this point of departure I leave you with my **Box Presentation—In Deep with the Weapons of my New Life.**

—xxemma
May 18, 2022

In Deep with the Weapons of my New Life
An exhibition by Emma Hazen
May 18–22, 2022
The Box, Werkplaats Typografie
Arnhem, Netherlands