## "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

M Deep with the Weapons of my New Life In Deep with the Weapons of my New Life In Deep with the Weapons of the Indian Contract Visual design posi-

tion 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 doingselling 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 a 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 viral potential of design which I encountered with the banners, is what interests me about the medium; design is a memetic language between individuals, entities, and networks that structures, mediates, and transmits. As the face of any brand, product, or printed object, graphic design is the most liquid of the arts, as it can shape-shift to fit a number of different forms, from fine art, commercial advertising, straightforward function, or ornate decoration. It is the interface in which we see our desires reflected back onto us, a nonverbal language of signs, a litmus test of a collective unconscious.

Though what is interesting about graphic design is also its downfall. The medium is in a moment of existential crisis brought on through networked communication, the common practice of ripping off style, tutorial culture, and quick production techniques, which I think has lead to a distrust of anyone employing cookie-cutter frictionless graphics—such as premium-mediocre millennial branding, the 2021 C.I.A. rebrand, or the Corporate Memphis illustration style."With global visibility and effortless distribution, nobody's work is safe from being incident in a client's moodboard," Toby Shorin writes. In an oversaturated market, opting out becomes a luxury available to designers who already have secure clients or have the financial resources to remain aloof. Though even without an Instagram, a designer's work will eventually be posted and referenced ad infinitum by others. Social media, in that sense, has made everyone image producers and broadcasters. We are all in the media business now.

Remix of a Besides existing within a digital panopticon with the pressure to produce consistently excellent work in order to land more work, there is also an insistence to constantly share bite-size bits of content with followers to keep a razor-thin margin above competitors. But why are the accounts that offer fast-paced microblips of content rewarded highly through algorithmic engagement? Besides the pace in which social media operates, these bits of ephemera can be easily remixed into "increasingly novel, bizarre, and random combinations," to appear as something new, as Nemesis, a creative consultancy, notes in their essay, "The **Umami Theory of Value." Consumers are looking for** new experience, pushing outwards to avenues of advanced consumption. Nemesis uses the example of the rainbow-swirled bagels that were seen all over New York Instagram a few years ago. It's not so much about if the bagel tasted good, but if the novelty of an experience could generate enough attention from followers. In a dystopic sense, remixing is the logic of "gentrification, not only of the city, but also the self, culture, and civilization itself," (Nemesis).

And yet, in the 2020s, we are living through a remix of a remix. Art critic, Dean Kissick, tweets in 2022: "Nostalgia looks 20 years back. So now we're nostalgic for the 2000s, a decade in which some (like Mark Fischer) believe new ideas stopped appearing in culture. Now we'll find out: What happens when we're nostalgic fo a decade already nostalgic, already haunted?" I think we'll find that creative direction (backed financially by large companies)—through its merging of art, commerce, design, technology—as well as its pursuit of collaborations and crossovers will be where the arena where the most intriguing ideas will be (re)generated in the 2020s, though I am sure at some point the novelty of the infinite remix will become tired, our dopamine receptors refried to senselessness. This remixing or collaging process is

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 Banner

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 Drops

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 copywrighting). 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.

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 feedmeaning 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 tions 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