

New Edition

# How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul

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Written by Adrian Shaughnessy

# **How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul**

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**New edition**

Adrian Shaughnessy

Princeton Architectural Press, New York

Published in 2010 by  
Princeton Architectural Press  
37 East Seventh Street  
New York, New York 10003  
For a free catalog of books,  
call 1.800.722.6657  
Visit our website at [www.papress.com](http://www.papress.com)

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Published simultaneously by Laurence King Publishing Ltd, London

Text © 2005, 2010 Itzy

14 13 12 11 10 5 4 3 2 1 Second edition

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For Princeton Architectural Press:  
Project editor: Nicola Bednarek

Special thanks to: Nettie Aljian, Bree Anne Apperley, Sara Bader, Janet Behning, Becca Casbon, Carina Cha, Tom Cho, Penny (Yuen Pik) Chu, Carolyn Deuschle, Russell Fernandez, Pete Fitzpatrick, Jan Haux, Linda Lee, Laurie Manfra, John Myers, Katharine Myers, Steve Royal, Dan Simon, Andrew Stepanian, Jennifer Thompson, Paul Wagner, Joseph Weston, and Deb Wood of Princeton Architectural Press—Kevin C. Lippert, publisher

Shaughnessy, Adrian.

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How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul / Adrian Shaughnessy. —New ed.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-56898-983-9 (alk. paper)

1. Graphic arts—Vocational guidance. 2. Commercial art—Vocational guidance.

I. Title.

NC1001.S53 2010

741.6023—dc22

2010010954

Typeset in Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk

Printed in China

*Seeing comes before words.*

John Berger,

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*Ways of Seeing*

## Introduction to the new edition

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No one was more surprised than me when the first edition of this book started to sell in healthy quantities around the world. We're not talking *Da Vinci Code* numbers here, but since *How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul* first appeared in 2005 it has been translated into several different languages and has brought me into contact with some remarkable people, mostly individuals and groups I wouldn't otherwise have met.

I wrote the book in 2004, and much has happened since then. To hardened watchers of the international graphic design scene it sometimes feels like being on a high-speed train and seeing stations snap past so quickly that there isn't time to read the names of the stations. No sooner had the first version of this book appeared than parts of it felt out of date. I wrote it before web design became the primary occupation of many thousands of graphic designers; I wrote it before the digital realm threatened every aspect of media hegemony; I wrote it before blogging software created writers out of countless designers; I wrote it before the widespread renewal of interest in design with a social focus; and I wrote it at a time of relative abundance—plenty of work for everyone and plenty of opportunities for employment among graduates and young designers.

But it's not only graphic design that has changed since the relative calm of 2004: the entire world has changed. In 2008 there was a global financial crisis that caused every developed nation to lurch into the abyss. I can remember waking up every morning and switching on the radio only to be sucked into the snake pit of impending financial collapse. People we'd been urged to admire and envy—the bankers—suddenly appeared to be no better than bandits in a wild west movie; politicians who had extolled the virtues of unregulated financial markets suddenly looked like seedy racecourse bookmakers who had just seen the rank outsider win a dozen races; the financial innovations that we had been encouraged to think of as dazzling examples of human genius, turned out to be not much better than fraud.

After months of this, however, my gloom eventually lifted and was replaced by a new optimism. Yes, we taxpayers were going to be paying for the banker's hubris for decades to come; yes, some designer friends had lost their jobs; and yes, I suffered a scary drop in my own income as an independent designer and writer. But beyond the worry and despondency, I saw something else. I saw a growing revulsion for the pursuit of money and a rekindling of interest in the common good. I saw an interest in looking afresh at the way we live and the way we earn our daily bread.

Surprisingly, I saw this most clearly in the many design schools I visited. Previously there had been an all-consuming interest among students and graduates in joining the style wars and producing stylistically radical work, but I now found a new interest in doing work that had a pronounced social focus. Suddenly, an obsession with design's purely stylistic qualities felt selfish and backward-looking, and instead, young designers (and some older ones) were asking themselves—How can I use my design skills to make the world a better place? Suddenly, it was hip to be looking at ways of using design to prevent crime, to stop waste, and to benefit all members of society and not just the cool design-loving elites.

I recently encountered an interesting example of design skills being used to drive social change. I heard about three students from fashionable London design schools who'd taken on the task of reclaiming a strip of public land near a housing project. According to one of the trio, Richard Knowles, the exercise was a way of bringing the community together. "At the start we weren't sure what we wanted to do. We approached them with a few ideas for how to redevelop a communal space that was not being used and this started a dialogue between the residents and us. We saw this as a good

way of bringing the community together to think about how they could use this green area.”

—So far, so good, but surely someone who had studied urban planning or one of the social sciences would be better placed to help? I wanted to know how a graphic design education had benefited the group in their task. “I think it helped us to visualize our ideas so we could continue that dialogue with the residents,” said May Safwat, another group member. “We made countless diagrams and models and took them to community meetings and it helped the residents understand where we were coming from”. Knowles was equally clear that graphic design skills were an essential part of the process. “Whether this is a graphic design project or not, it comes down to a process. Start with research, finding problems and thinking about ways to solve those problems. We continually talked with the residents; they know the area better than us and really we came up with a solution that they had thought of but didn’t quite know how to express themselves visually”.

A few years ago these students might have hoped to use their skills to design CD covers or identities for art galleries or theaters, yet here they were working on a project with a purely social focus. It felt like a big change in what it means to be a graphic designer, and takes us back to a time—the early years of the twentieth century—when the Modernists saw design as a democratizing and inspiring force for good.

And yet, much as I welcome this new development in design, I am someone who is fixated with shape and color, form, and texture. In other words, the look of things. For me, the message isn’t always what matters: graphic design doesn’t always have to be “solving problems” or embodying well-tooled business strategies, or even performing a useful practical purpose such as signage or information delivery. If graphic design can do these things and still be visually captivating—which it often can—then so much the better, but sometimes it’s enough that it is a thrilling arrangement of letterforms, shapes, colors, and imagery. One of my favorite books is an old battered paperback from the 1970s of mainly German logos. I barely recognize any of the companies or institutions represented and therefore remain unaware of the strategy behind, or appropriateness of, the hundreds of markings on display. Yet I get a thrill looking at these well-formed, incisive pieces of graphic expression. I like the look of them.

To have a visual sensibility means that the appearance of things is sufficient reason to appreciate visual design. But of course, this view is anathema to many designers—and clients—who only recognize design that has a purpose and a conceptual underpinning. This is all well and good, but the sad fact is that more often than not, this leads to dull design and the visual expression of sameness and uniformity. We only get truly great work when designers retain an intuitive and visionary approach. And as I’ve argued repeatedly with clients, the best way to get a message across is to be different.

I’d add one more reason why a preoccupation with the “look of things” is justified. My sense of history is based largely on a reading of the visual codes of past times, and nowhere is this stronger than in the modern era—the era of graphic design. Few elements of life evoke periods, flavors, and memories more potently than graphic design. When I look at some austere geometric letterforms by Wim Crouwel or a psychedelic poster by Martin Sharp, I get a vivid recreation of the times that the work comes from, and it’s every bit as evocative as written texts, the fashions of the period, or photographic records.

Jonathan Barnbrook alludes to this way of reading the culture in his interview on page 126. He talks about the influence of psychogeography on his work, which he defines as the effect on the emotions and states of mind of our geographical environment. He says: “Graphic design is one of the major ways this is transmitted to me. It can be an old sign somewhere or the small details you see when you go to a new city; we all react emotionally to these things, in a way often quite unintended by

the designer. I try to put these feelings in particular into my typefaces. It's quite hard to explain—feelings of nostalgia, ennui, some quite painful, some to do with a beauty that has been lost, but they are all because of the ephemeral and prominent nature of design. There is an attempt in my work to express it to other people. This is the one where I hope to connect in a different, less quantifiable, logical way”.

This is my view, too: graphic design is part of the psychological, cultural, and physical ecosystem we live in, and this book is an attempt to assist people who see the world in a similar way. But as the reader you are entitled to ask: in what way is this book different from the first edition? Well, it has been extensively rewritten. Outdated and irrelevant material has been pruned and new avenues have been explored. In addition there are two new chapters (2 and 8) dealing with the major changes that have taken place within design. One thing is unchanged, however: it is still a book for those designers who, as I wrote in my [original introduction](#), “believe that graphic design has a cultural and aesthetic value beyond the mere trumpeting of commercial messages.”

In the years since I wrote those words, being that sort of designer has become more, not less, difficult. To produce work that has worth and meaning has become a struggle. And yet, with the cultural changes that have been brought about in many parts of the world by the banking crisis, I think that the struggle might become less arduous in the coming years. There is plenty of evidence to show that people are fed up with ungovernable wealth creation, wars fought on false premises, the destruction of the planet, and ruthless me-me-me behavior. Maybe, just maybe, there is an opportunity to be a designer with preoccupations other than being a force for consumerism or commercial propaganda.

I hope that anyone who shares this view of graphic design will consider that this is a fight worth fighting. This book is offered as a map of the battle terrain and provides survival tips and a few ideas to help avoid becoming a casualty of the graphic design wars.



I love being a designer. I love thinking about ideas freely and observing them taking shape; I love working concentratedly on a project all day, losing myself in the work, and, even after having been involved in this field for almost twenty years, I still love getting a piece back from the printer (if it turned out well).

There are so many fantastic designers working today: creators like Jonathan Barnbrook and Nicholas Blechman who emphasize the social role of design; designers who produce breathtaking forms, such as M/M in Paris, Nagi Noda in Tokyo, and Mark Farrow in London; designers who blur the boundaries between design and technology like John Maeda, Joachim Sauter, and their students; and a new generation who manage to work with one foot in the art world and the other in the design world, like the young Swiss group Benzin and the American designers involved in the “Beautiful Losers” exhibition, including Ryan McGinness and Shepard Fairey.

I recently taught the spring/summer semester at the University of the Arts in Berlin, and was happy (and a bit astonished) to see how smart the students were. They are better educated, more widely travelled and more culturally astute than my generation was. On the same note, the range of students I currently teach in the graduate design programme at New York’s School of Visual Arts includes a biology major from Harvard and a senior designer from Comedy Central.

There is also a new emphasis on how design is reviewed and critiqued, driven by Steven Heller’s *Looking Closer* series, *Emigre* magazine’s reconfigured essay-heavy format, Rick Poynor’s *No More Rules* and *Obey the Giant*, and maybe most significantly, by the emergence of design blogs like [underconsideration.com](http://underconsideration.com) and [designobserver.com](http://designobserver.com). I don’t think there ever was a time when design was reviewed so critically and enthusiastically by so many people in so many cultures.

Of course, as it became a wider discipline, graphic design became more difficult. It now embraces what used to be a dozen different professions: my students compose music, shoot and edit film, animate, and sculpt. They build hardware, write software, print silkscreen and offset, take photographs, and illustrate. It’s easy to forget that routine jobs like typesetting and color separation used to be separate careers. A number of schools have realized this and opened up the traditional boundaries between graphics, product design, new media, architecture, and film/video departments, encouraging the education of a truly multifaceted designer.

For me, it has become more difficult, too: as I get older I have to resist repeating what I’ve done before; resist resting on old laurels. Before the studio opened in 1993, I was working at M&Co., my then favorite design company in New York. When Tibor Kalman decided to close up shop in order to work on *Colors* magazine in Rome, it didn’t feel right to go and work for my second favorite design company. So I opened my own studio, and concentrated on my other great interest, music. I had experience working for both tiny and gigantic design companies and having enjoyed the former much more than the latter, I tried hard not to let the studio grow in size.

I feel a lot of designers starting out want to be concerned only with design and find questions about business and money bothersome. The proper setup of a studio and the presentation of a project to a client—in short, the ability to make a project happen—is, of course, as much a part of the design process (and much more critical to the quality of the process and the end product) as choosing inks, colors or typefaces.

I learned a lot from my time at M&Co. They had used timesheets, for example, and I thought, it’s not too square for them, it can’t be wrong for me. I am glad I did too; it’s the only way to find out if we made or lost money on a project. If I’m not on top of the financial details, they will soon be

top of me and I won't have a design studio any more. It is much cheaper to sit on the beach and read a book than it is to run a financially unsuccessful design studio.

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Everything else about running a studio I learned from a book called *The Business of Graphic Design*. A pragmatic business book giving the reasons why you should or shouldn't start your own company, it talked about how to design a business plan and estimate overheads. It described the advantages of both setting up alone and of partnerships.

I was also influenced by Quentin Crisp, now—sadly—remembered mainly as the subject of Sting's song "An Englishman in New York." He talked to one of my classes, and he was such an inspiring character. Among the many smart things he said was: "Everybody who tells the truth is interesting." So I thought: this is easy, just try to be open and forthright and it will be interesting.

I recently took a year off from clients. I used the time to make up my mind about all the fields I did not want to get into (but had previously imagined I would). I surprised myself by getting up every day at 6am to conduct little type experiments (without a looming deadline). It made me think a lot about clients. I decided that I would rather have an educated client than one I have to educate. Tibor Kalman's line was that he would only take on clients smarter than him (but remember, a client does not have to be design literate to be smart). After reopening, I also decided to widen the scope of our studio to include four distinct areas: design for social causes, design for artists, corporate design, and design for music.

So how does a graphic designer avoid losing his or her soul? Having misplaced little pieces of mine, I'm not sure if I am the right person to answer this question. What soul I have left I've managed to keep by pausing; by stopping and thinking. In my regular day-to-day mode, I get so caught up in the minutiae that I have little time or sense to think about the larger context. Because I used to work in different cities, a natural gap occurred between jobs, allowing for some reflection. When I got tired of moving and decided to stay put in New York, I created those gaps artificially by taking my year off of work by teaching for a semester in Berlin. But even three days out of the office, alone, in a foreign city can do the trick.

I hope this book helps young designers find their way. I don't think that the "designers don't read" bullshit is true. A good book will find good readers.

To paraphrase Frank Zappa: here's just what the world needs—another graphic design book. Graphic design books are nearly as common as celebrity diet books or airport blockbusters. But for the committed designer there are few better ways to spend an hour than immersed in the pages of a toothsome design book—we enjoy the bug-eyed envy that comes from looking at work we wish we done ourselves, and we are inspired by the dizzying range of graphic expression on view. And of course, as much as we enjoy the work, we also like to find fault with it. Moaning is important for designers; it's something we do well. But although design books can sometimes be accused of contributing to the widely held misconception that design is an effortless activity practiced by successful designers who never break sweat as they glide from triumph to triumph, they are, on the whole, *a good thing*.

And yet there's something missing in this encyclo-pedic coverage of design. When we gorge ourselves on the succulent work in the books, and when we slurp through the numerous magazines and web sites that chronicle the design scene, we rarely get the back-story; we rarely get the grubby bits that go with almost every job. Designers are quick to tell us about their sources of inspiration (“I really into Otl Aicher’s pictograms and I like this beet-flavored chewing-gum wrapper I brought back from Osaka”), but they are much less willing to reveal tiresome matters such as how they find clients, how much they charge, and what they do when their client rejects three weeks of work and refuses to pay the bill. <sup>1</sup> If you want to learn how to be a designer, you need to know about these and other messy matters. It's as much a part of being a designer as knowing how to kern type or design the perfect letterhead. In fact, how you deal with the grubby bits is how you learn to be a graphic designer.

This is a book written by a designer *for* designers. It combines practical advice and philosophical guidance to help the independent-minded graphic designer deal with the knottier problems encountered by the working designer. I've added the phrase “without losing your soul” to the book's title because it seemed the best way to emphasize a key aspect of my intention: namely, to write a book designed to help those who believe that graphic design has a cultural and aesthetic value beyond the mere trumpeting of commercial messages; a book for those who believe that we become graphic designers because we are attracted to the act of personal creation; and a book for those who believe that design is at its best when the designer's voice is allowed to register, and is not suppressed in favor of blandness and sameness.

This book is also a response to the fact that more people than ever are studying and practicing graphic design. Where once it was seen as a purely artisanal occupation with not much status attached to it, it is now regarded as a meaningful, even mildly glamorous activity. Today, you can say that you are a graphic designer without people looking at you as if you've just announced that you do salsa dancing. Fashion designers, architects, and product designers are already part of the new cultural elite: Tom Ford, Frank Gehry, and Jonathan Ive are frequently interviewed with breathless reverence in newspapers, magazines, and on television. And although graphic designers are not yet regarded with such slack-jawed wonder, David Carson, Peter Saville, Stefan Sagmeister, Neville Brody, and a few others have a star rating that lifts them into the lower reaches of the celebrity designer cosmos.

According to a recent US Department of Labor report,<sup>2</sup> there are 532,000 designers employed in the United States; 212,000 of these are graphic designers. In her book, *The Substance of Style*, Virginia Postrel points out that at least fifty graphic design magazines are regularly published around the world (there were three in 1970); and she quotes Pentagram partner and noted design commentator Michael Bierut: “There's no such thing as an un-designed graphic object anymore, and there used to be.”

However, despite all this graphic abundance, most of the design that surrounds us lacks emotional character or aesthetic value. It's just there, clogging up the arteries of our visual lives. As the designer Paula Scher (also of Pentagram), noted in a 1994 essay published in the *AIGA Journal*: "Everyday I find myself in supermarkets, discount drugstores, video shops, and other environments that are obviously un-touched by our community ... just plain old-fashioned non-controversial bad design, the kind of anonymous bad design that we've come to ignore because we're too busy fighting over the aesthetics of the latest AIGA poster."<sup>3</sup> The prevalence of "bad design" is a consequence of an increasingly competitive and globalized economy, where risk is anathema, where the herd instinct predominates, and where sameness is the default position. It is unthinkable today that a powerful global brand would employ a contemporary designer in the way that IBM once employed Paul Rand, or that a commercial magazine sold on the newsstands would grant the freedom *The Face* gave Neville Brody in the 1980s. Focus groups and marketing imperatives would smother such initiatives at birth.

Design itself is now intensely competitive; so much so, in fact, that many designers have become browbeaten into timidity and compliance. This is hardly surprising, since it's hard to take a stand on matters of principle when there are countless other firms and individuals willing to do the work if you don't. But, hang on, what's so bad about giving clients what they want? Isn't design a service industry?

This takes us to the heart of one of the most important debates in design over recent years. On the one hand, we have those who believe that graphic design is a problem-solving, business tool and that designers should suppress their desire for personal expression to ensure maximizing the effectiveness of the content. While on the other hand, we have those who believe that although design undoubtedly has a problem-solving function, it also has a cultural and aesthetic dimension, and its effectiveness is enhanced, and not diminished, by personal expression.

The former remains the dominant view among professional designers. But this traditionalist view of graphic design has always been subjected to critical attack and scepticism by radical voices in design, especially since the anti-globalization movement threw down a challenge to corporate behemoths in the late 1990s. And this pragmatic view of the designer's role doesn't hold true in other areas of design: we don't ask architects or fashion designers to suppress their personal voices—quite the opposite. In fact, we value most those who are capable of investing their work with personal statements. Nor, paradoxically, does the pragmatic view seem to have a basis in commercial reality. Increasingly, the messages that get noticed are the ones where the designer's thumbprint is clearly visible: the ones that contain a rebel yell of defiance.

Nor is this schism as simple as a mere divergence between conservatives and radicals. If you read the design press you might think that the desire for creative freedom, or self-expression, was confined to superstar designers: it's not, it's actually universal. We become graphic designers because we want to say something. We want to make a visual statement for which we can stake a claim for authorship; in some cases it is a very modest claim, but it's a claim nonetheless. And even for those designers who fervently subscribe to the notion that the designer's contribution is always subservient to the client's needs and wishes, these individuals still want to perform this function their way. Let me put it another way: I don't think I've ever met a designer who didn't have the instinct for self-expression. You can see it in the universal reluctance to have ideas rejected, tampered with, or watered down. There's a mule-like instinct in nearly every designer—even the most accommodating and service-minded—that bristles at the command "Oh, can you change that" and the "Just do it like this" attitude so frequently adopted by design's paymasters—the clients. It's an instinct, inherent in all designers, that says: a little bit of my soul has gone into this and it is not going to be removed without

a fight.

~~The situation is further complicated by the fact that all graphic designers agree that there are unquestionably, purely practical and utilitarian roles for graphic design. Applications such as road signs, medicine packaging, timetables, and the presentation of financial, scientific, or technical data require design of the utmost clarity and precision. It is broadly agreed that there is no room in this sphere for notions such as personal expression or experimentation. A badly designed road sign might kill you: death by typography is a real possibility. And yet, show me a designer who doesn't want to execute even these tasks in the way he or she sees fit?~~

To arrive at a definition of what this book will tell you, it might be easier to say what this book will *not* tell you. This book will not tell you how to work the trapping functions in QuarkXPress. It will not tell you anything about hardware, software, or the minutiae of Apple's latest operating system. There are countless books on these subjects, and in my experience designers learn these skills only when they need to, and they learn them from other designers or by working them out for themselves.

This book doesn't tell you what sort of designer you should be. In matters of styles, trends, and schools of design, this book is agnostic. It will not tell you what typefaces are cool nor what the current trends in layout, photography, and illustration are. It will not advocate the supremacy of formal design over vernacular design, or the desirability of Helvetica over Bodoni. You can get this information by looking at books and magazines, by reading about graphic design history, by talking to other designers, and by experimentation within your own work. And although the great Josef Müller-Brockmann said "All design work has a political character,"<sup>4</sup> this book assumes that political questions are a matter for individual consciences. If, for instance, you are asked to design the packaging for a canned drink which contains dubious chemicals, you have a moral decision to make. Your conscience might tell you not to do this work, but if you are struggling to pay your bills you will find it hard to say no. This book doesn't tell you what to do in this situation: only you can make the decision.

Nor does this book tell you how to file your tax returns, prepare management accounts, or deal with the complexities of employment law. There are much better equipped writers than me to tell you these things (a bibliography and appendix are provided at the back of this book), and in my experience, designers are, as a rule, not interested in this sort of information and also not very good at absorbing it until they have to. However, if you are going to survive—either as a freelance designer or by running a small studio—you are going to have to know about these things. So, rather than tell you how to do these things, I am going to tell you how to find accountants and other professional advisers to do them for you.<sup>5</sup>

I think the reader is now entitled to ask, well, what *does* this book tell me about? It gives the answers to some questions that designers ask themselves repeatedly. The urge to write this volume came from speaking to—and more importantly, listening to—students and young working designers. As a frequent visitor to design colleges, I am asked questions such as: "How do you respond to creative briefs?"; "How do you stop clients demanding unreasonable changes to your work?"; "How do you find interesting work?" I hear similar questions when I talk to designers who've been in practice for two or three years: "How do you do good work and make money?"; "How do you stop clients changing your work?"; "How do you avoid spending your whole life doing unpaid pitches for low-budget work?"

It occurred to me that here was a stratum of questions—a mixture of the practical and the philosophical—that graphic designers found hard to get answers to. The art schools are preoccupied

with producing “broadly based” graduates and have insufficient time to prepare students for every aspect of working life. The glossy design press devotes its energies to chronicling the work of the latest hot designers, but avoids the practical issues facing working designers. Design writing and critical discourse rarely touch on the practicalities of life as a designer.<sup>6</sup> And as more and more designers emerge from higher education only to be faced with the realization that there are not enough jobs to go round, they are having to acquire levels of entrepreneurial determination that previous generations didn’t need until much later in their careers. “How to be a graphic designer ...” sets out to fill some of these gaps and offers advice and guidance that suit the sensibilities of independent-minded designers.

So who is this book aimed at? You might say that this is a book for designers who accept design’s conventional role, but who also see a parallel role for design as a culturally and socially beneficial force. If you want to narrow the book’s focus still further, I’d say it is a practical and philosophical guide for students emerging, or about to emerge, from higher education and for working designers in the early stages of their careers. It is first and foremost a book for the free-thinking designer.

But who am I to tell you about these matters? I am a self-taught graphic designer. I started out as a trainee in a big studio in the pre-digital era. I was informally apprenticed to a group of experienced designers who taught me the basics of typography, showed me how to prepare mechanical artwork and gave me a CMYK color percentages chart, and left me to get on with it. This was daunting, but it was also my lucky break. I’d been a bit of a wastrel up until this point. But within a few weeks I was producing acceptable commercial design and artwork, and as a reward I was given a full-time job as a junior designer. You could say that graphic design saved my life.

Until recently I was creative director of a design company called Intro. I co-founded the company in 1988 with my then business partner Katy Richardson. We won awards and built up a small but steadily growing reputation in the UK and overseas, as a reliable, well-run, and inventive design company. Our clients were an assortment of record labels, blue-chip corporations, arts organizations, educational bodies, and media companies; we even had the British National Health Service as a client and managed to produce effective work for them, while also working for bands like Primal Scream and Stereolab. We were early proponents of the new cross-media approach to graphic design; we were among the first companies in the digital era to combine design and film-making (digital and traditional) under the same roof, something that has become more common since.

As the company grew (we were forty-strong at one giddy point) I did less and less design. As creative director, I was involved in finding and developing young designers, and acting as the bridge between our designers and our clients. I discovered a talent for advocacy, and I learned that communication skills are one of the most valuable abilities a designer can have. In December 2003 I left Intro and set up as a freelance art director, writer, and consultant. At Intro we came as close as possible in a tough and unforgiving world to being a profitable (although not rich) design company that also did groundbreaking work. Our combination of creativity underpinned by business rigour worked well; but it was hard graft, and after fifteen years I began to feel the strain. Intro continues to prosper and do excellent work.

The book also contains contributions from leading designers. In a series of interviews they reveal their approaches to common problems faced by young designers making decisions early in their careers.

A final word before we start: you can ignore every piece of advice contained in these pages and still become a successful and fulfilled designer. All my advice comes with an override button: there

no such thing as a set of rules that will turn you into the complete graphic designer. In my vision of how to be a graphic designer there is always room for the maverick, the difficult, and the downright contrary. I'm not trying to create homogenized designers. Far from it: what I want to do is provide the reader with a series of clues, hints, and prompts to help make working life more enjoyable and rewarding. I want to talk about subjects that are not often discussed, and matters that are "assumed" to be understood, but which rarely are. I want to help you avoid making the mistakes that I made. I want to help you become an effective and self-reliant graphic designer—without losing your soul along the way.

<sup>1</sup> Stefan Sagmeister's book

### *Made You Look*

is one of the few design books that attempts to show a warts-and-all picture of the working life of a designer. He reproduces his failures ("the bad stuff") as well as his triumphs, he itemizes the fees he received, and in a pictorial cartoon reveals that even superstar designers have their work tampered with by meddling clients.

<sup>2</sup> This report, among others, can be found at [bls.gov/oco/ocos090.stm](https://bls.gov/oco/ocos090.stm)

<sup>3</sup> "The Devaluation of Design by the Design Community,"

### *AIGA Journal*

, New York, 1994. Reprinted in Robyn Marsack,

*Essays on Design 1: AGI's Designers of Influence*  
(London: Booth-Clibborn Editions), 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Interview in

### *Eye*

19, winter 1995.

<sup>5</sup> In America, the aptly named

### *How*

magazine covers practical issues relating to professional practice, with many useful articles on the less glamorous aspects of life as a designer, often written by practicing designers. In the UK,

### *Design Week*

, which claims to be the world's only weekly design magazine, regularly devotes space to practical matters.

<sup>6</sup> The US writer and designer Kenneth Fitzgerald touched on this subject in an

### *Eye*

magazine article titled "Fanfare for the Common Hack" (

### *Eye*

27, spring 1998), in which he urged theorists not to turn a deaf ear to "down-in-the-trenches" designers.

Attributes needed by the modern designer Cultural awareness / communication / integrity. A discussion about the key attributes required by the contemporary graphic designer. Or how to prevent your work being mangled by irate clients.



What are the essential qualities needed to be a graphic designer? There was a time when all we needed to earn a living and call ourselves a designer was talent and mastery of a few craft skills. Today we need more. The modern designer needs to be a diplomat, a business thinker, a researcher, an aesthete, an ethicist, an innovator—in fact, a polymath. And yet, it seems to me that all the necessary qualities to be a designer can be boiled down to three essential attributes that we need to combine with talent and craft skills: cultural awareness, communication skills, and integrity. They may sound grandiose and intimidating but, as we shall see, they are really everyday qualities that many designers possess naturally, and that others acquire over time, through hard work and dedication.

## Cultural awareness

There are thousands of definitions of graphic design. Here's one that really hits a vein, by the American designer and writer Jessica Helfand: "Graphic design is a visual language uniting harmony and balance, color and light, scale and tension, form and content. But it is also an idiomatic language, a language of cues and puns and symbols and allusions, of cultural references and perceptual inferences that challenge both the intellect and the eye."<sup>1</sup>

Helfand's first sentence is a conventional summary of graphic design; few would argue with it. But her next sentence is a blockbuster. It alludes to design's power to evoke emotion and generate an intellectual response. Cues, puns, symbols, allusions, cultural references, and perceptual inferences are the essential elements that give authority and resonance to visual design work. The only way we can introduce these qualities into our work is by taking a tireless interest in everything that goes on around us. In other words, we must develop an insatiable curiosity about areas other than graphic design—politics, entertainment, business, technology, art, ten-pin bowling, and mud wrestling.

Hang on. Cultural awareness? Surely this is just old-fashioned research? Surely every designer knows that when we start a new project we have to do some mental (or actual) legwork and swot up on the subject. This is true; research is a vital part of being a designer. I once turned up for a meeting with some people from an art gallery who were looking for a new design company. Arrogantly, I didn't do any research. I relied on a shaky notion of who I thought my potential client was, when in fact, I'd mixed them up with another gallery. My mistake was exposed and I got a frosty response. Needless to say, I didn't get the gig.

By cultural awareness I mean something deeper and more wide-ranging than research. When the British writer Iain Sinclair was asked if he did research for his books, he replied that *his whole life was research*. I can't think of a better motto for the modern graphic designer. Without constant scanning, scrutinizing, and absorbing everything that goes on around us, we can't hope to become successful and effective designers.

The graphic designer and typographer Erik Spiekermann has employed dozens—perhaps hundreds—of designers in his career. In an interview I asked him what he looked for in a candidate:

"...they have to have general knowledge. I hate people who don't read. I hate people who don't cook, or don't know anything about music. I couldn't work with anyone who only goes to McDonald's. I want people who know movies, who know music, who read books. As you know, not all graphic designers are 'multi-dimensional.' They don't read, they don't do anything else, and I couldn't work with those people. I need team people who have general knowledge because that's what we do..."<sup>2</sup>

I once read that safe-crackers rubbed the tips of their fingers with sandpaper to increase tactile sensitivity. It makes them ultra-sensitive and enables them to feel the nuances of the lock mechanism as they rotate the dial in search of the magic combination that will open the safe. It's the same with graphic design: we need to find ways to make us more sensitive to the world around us.

Designers sometimes imagine that the world revolves around graphic design. And when we are working fourteen-hour days and thinking about design problems from the moment we wake till the moment we go to sleep, it's hard to remember that there are other things in the world besides typefaces, colors, and paper stocks. But the best designers are always characterized by an interest in life beyond their subject; design is their main concern, and it provides them with a consuming and stimulating career, but it doesn't eclipse other interests.<sup>3</sup>

Non-designers often accuse graphic designers of being nerds who are only interested in ourselves and our work. This is a pretty damning appraisal, since the single most important thing a designer can do when discussing a project with a new or potential client is to demonstrate understanding of the subject under discussion and show knowledge of the way the world works and the way people think and act. The designer who shows only signs of self-absorption and narrow focus is not going to inspire his or her client.

However, many designers use encounters with clients as opportunities to talk about themselves and boast about their skills and achievements. These are often the same designers who complain that their work is frequently rejected or that they are never allowed to "do what they want to do." This is hardly surprising. They are guilty of the worst crime a graphic designer can commit: they are revealing themselves to be self-centered and to have a limited outlook. For the ambitious designer this is fatal. To counter this understandable instinct for self-promotion I have a rule when meeting clients: I never talk about myself until they ask me to. Instead, I let them talk, I ask them questions about their business, and I allow them to have center stage. Then, a little bit of magic occurs; the (usually) turn to me and say—*OK, tell me about you.*

Of course, there's a paradox here: to be good designers we have to be utterly dedicated to our chosen career, yet our dedication is often mistaken by clients as self-centered obsessiveness and makes them think we are unreceptive toward their needs. However, if we can talk about the project on hand; if we can show that we understand the cultural or business context into which their project fits; and if we can listen instead of prattling on about ourselves, we will find our clients more receptive to our ideas and willing to take us seriously. It's another paradox, but the less we make a client/designer relationship about ourselves the more it will tip in our favor.

## Communication

As well as keeping our surveillance cameras pointed at the world beyond graphic design, the modern designer needs to be a skilled communicator. This doesn't mean making eloquent speeches at design conferences, or delivering blockbuster presentations to boardrooms full of marketing executives. What we're discussing here is the ability to speak about our work to clients and non-designers in a coherent, convincing, and objective way without resorting to the language and idioms that we might use when talking to other designers. And since communication is a two-way street, it is also about listening. An inability to listen is a serious handicap for a designer—it's like trying to sprint while wearing full scuba-diving kit.

But why this emphasis on talking about our work? Surely the point of graphic design is that it speaks for itself? Well, it's true that graphic communication is required to function without the benefit of written or spoken commentaries describing the designer's intentions: we can't stand in the street beside a poster we've designed and draw the attention of passersby to our subtle use of Akzidenz Grotesk, with its mute evocation of Modernist rationality and truthfulness. Yet there never was a client who didn't demand to know why we've done what we've shown them. If we can't explain our decisions in a convincing and objective way, we risk rejection and failure. As Norman Potter notes

in his seminal text *What is a Designer*: “This aspect of design work is frequently underestimated: a ~~ability to use words clearly, pointedly, and persuasively is at all times relevant to design work.~~”<sup>4</sup>

Persuading clients that our ideas are good, and that their money is being spent wisely, requires carefully formulated arguments combined with lots of stamina and determination. But for many designers, this requirement is a source of lip-chewing frustration. All good designers focus their efforts on their target audience, yet are compelled to spend almost as much time and energy persuading clients to back their ideas. This is one of the inescapable facts of life for the modern graphic designer: we always have gatekeepers (clients) standing between us and our intended audiences (end users, or human beings as I prefer to call them).

This is why the way in which we present our ideas is as important as the ideas themselves. When a good idea is rejected, it's often the presentation of that idea that is being rejected, not the idea itself. So far I've talked a great deal about clients. But really I'm talking about anyone who we have to make presentations to. And no matter where we find ourselves in the graphic design landscape, we always have to make presentations. Designers who work in corporations or small businesses often report to non-designers; junior designers in design studios are required to present work to creative directors, team leaders, or senior designers. These people are “clients,” and how we treat them determines how they treat our work. For the ambitious designer, being good at presenting work is as important as having a head for heights for a high-wire walker.

However, considering the importance of presenting our work, it's surprising to discover that many designers are often not much good at it. In [Chapter 2](#) I discuss the finer points of making a presentation (think of it as the graphic designer's equivalent of the Japanese tea ceremony), but for now I'll just make the point that knowing how to talk about our work, how to explain it, and how to present it, is fundamental to becoming a well-rounded designer.

To help young designers develop the verbal skills they need to talk about their work I sometimes ask them *not* to show me what they've done but to describe the work instead. I do this to encourage them to talk about their work with objectivity and passion. I know experienced designers who can persuade clients to sign off complex (and expensive) projects purely on their ability to talk compellingly about their ideas. I've also seen resourceful designers rescue disastrous presentations by coming up with instant ideas and describing them in vivid and simple language. I don't recommend verbal presentations as an alternative to showing mock-ups; clients always want to see what they are buying. But the ability to describe our ideas is an essential component of any presentation. Any designer who thinks it's enough to throw work on the table and say nothing will soon be stacking shelves in the local supermarket rather than designing the packaging that sits on those shelves.

As I've already mentioned, communication is a two-way street. This means that no matter how good we are at talking about our work, we must also remember to listen. The reason for this would become instantly clear to any designer nimble enough to climb inside the heads of one of their clients: they'd discover someone fretting about spending money on something that he or she can't see or touch. Think of it like this: imagine going into a chic furniture store and telling the sales assistant that you'd like to buy a sofa. “Sure,” she says, “we've got lots of wonderful sofas. I can sell you one—but I can't let you see it.” If this happened you'd walk out and go to a furniture store where you could see what you were buying; at the very least, you'd want to check the color and sink yourself into the upholstery. Yet when clients buy design, especially from a new and untried graphic designer, they don't know what they are buying until it is delivered. This aspect of design leads to more unhappiness and failed projects than any other factor in the relationships between designers and their clients. But by listening intently and identifying the factors that worry our clients, we can help to make the

commissioning process, the presentation process, and the creative process far less of a gamble for our clients.

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Before we go much further, I need to say here that I'm assuming that the readers of this book are designers who have a point of view—or, to put it another way, designers who don't see themselves as doormats. Doormat designers are people who take the view that design is about giving clients exactly what they want. There is nothing wrong with this; there is plenty of work for anyone who gives the clients whatever they want with no arguments, no questioning of briefs, and no rocking of the boat. But, for designers who want to produce work that has depth and resonance, being a doormat designer isn't an option. So, assuming that I'm talking to designers with a viewpoint, and assuming that I'm talking to designers who want to find a way of expressing their viewpoints, we arrive at the most important aspect of communication between designer and client: clients will take our opinions seriously only if we give their opinions the same value. In other words, there has to be a balance of interests. All great work comes about when viewpoints are balanced; when both client and designer feel that they are being listened to and that their views are respected. When we find that point of balance in a relationship, we hit gold.

This brings us to the central conundrum at the heart of graphic design: the conflict between inner conviction and the need for external rationality. What does this mean? It means that we become graphic designers because we discover that we have an aptitude and a compulsion for what Jessica Helfand calls “uniting harmony and balance, color and light, scale and tension, form and content.” To complicate the matter still further, we also discover that we have something called creative intuition for which we can't always offer a rational explanation, but which is nevertheless a tangible and vital part of our life as a creative producer. In practice, this means that we use fonts, colors, layouts, and imagery because of an inner aesthetic conviction—and when you think about it, it would be an odd designer who used elements that he or she didn't like. Even when designers are being totally subservient to the brief, they still use styles and modes of expression that they are personally convinced are right. And here's where the conundrum kicks in: we have to learn to present these “inner convictions,” these “intuitions” as rational and objective.

The designer Rudy VanderLans identified this problem when he wrote: “You have to listen very carefully to what the client wants and be careful not to approach the project with a preconceived idea of what it should look like. In my own experience, too often I approached a design job wanting to use a certain font or a particular typographic mannerism, simply because it's what I felt comfortable with at the time. But that wasn't always what the client wanted.”

This is a hot potato for all designers—even for the most pragmatic and service-minded. Few clients will accept the argument “I've done it like this because I like it,” yet this is often what we've done. But if we want to see our ideas come to fruition, we have to dress them up in the objective language that clients understand. It's a subject that the designer Michael Bierut has dealt with in an influential blog post on Design Observer called “On (Design) Bullshit.” He wrote: “It follows that every design presentation is inevitably, at least in part, an exercise in bullshit. The design process always combines the pursuit of functional goals with countless intuitive, even irrational decisions. The functional requirements—the house needs a bathroom, the headlines have to be legible, the toothbrush has to fit in your mouth—are concrete and often measurable. The intuitive decisions, on the other hand, are more or less beyond honest explanation. These might be: I just like to set my headlines in Bodoni, or I just like to make my products blobby, or I just like to cover my buildings in gridded white porcelain panels. In discussing design work with their clients, designers are direct about the functional parts of their solutions and obfuscate like mad about the intuitive parts, having learned

early on that telling the simple truth—‘I don’t know, I just like it that way’—simply won’t do.”

~~In lectures and talks when I’ve discussed the subject of disguising or obfuscating personal convictions and intuition, I’ve been accused of promoting hypocrisy and dishonesty. The charge sticks. I’d like not to have to put a spin on what I do, and my aim in all client relationships is to quickly get to a point where it is possible to be frank with them, and in turn, for them to give honest appraisals and reactions. But until that point is reached—the point of balance that I mentioned earlier—we have to indulge in a ritual dance that everyone knows is bullshit, but that few of us feel able to dispense with. To me, the role of bullshit in design is a bit like good manners in daily life: if we always say what we think, we end up offending everyone we come into contact with. Instead, we develop codes by which we allow each other to coexist without the need to punch each other at every utterance.~~

A last word on communication: our clients are not the only people we have to communicate with effectively. If we have designers as partners, or if we employ designers, we have to be able to communicate with them in such a way that they feel inspired and encouraged. We also have to be able to talk to suppliers and collaborators, not to mention IT people, bank managers, tax officials, and window cleaners.

## Integrity

After extolling the virtues of bullshit, it seems strange to now extol the virtues of integrity. So what does integrity mean in design? Does it mean being true to ourselves and standing up for what we believe in? Does it mean behaving professionally at all times toward our clients? Or is it about doing the best we can on behalf of our intended audience? Well, it means all of these things. Yet there’s no denying that preserving our integrity in the remorseless climate of modern business is not easy. Integrity often becomes a bargaining chip. We give it away in return for a job that comes with a lot of cash, or we hang onto it in order to do the work we want to do, often for little or no money. It is tough to retain integrity and make a living. But it’s not impossible.

As designers, we are free to conduct ourselves in any way we want. Specific offences such as copyright infringement and software theft are punishable in law, but unlike lawyers and real estate agents, designers don’t have codes of conduct, and we are as free as the marketplace allows us to be.

I’ve always relished this freedom, but in recent years I’ve come to question it. I now hold the view that designers, and design itself, would benefit from an ethical code. This is not just my view; I see a hunger for ethical guidelines expressed in design blogs and by the rise of interest in design with a social focus. I also see it in the students I talk to who are keen to do work with an ethical focus. I’ve also noticed that, as a general rule, designers who behave ethically don’t suffer in the way they might once have done. Take those studios that advocate a green approach to design; there was a time when they might have struggled to attract clients, but now they are seen as an attractive option for the many clients who want to work sustainably. The same is true of studios that operate ethical codes relating to the sort of work they will and won’t do; at one time they might have been avoided, but today they are sought out by the many bodies and institutions that have their own ethical requirements and standards.

Professional design associations have made attempts in the past to draw up ethical codes, but they have tended to be undermined by shifts in public and business morality, or overtaken by rapid technological change. In the 1971 edition of her book *The Professional Practice of Design*, the British writer Dorothy Goslett wrote about the codes of conduct advocated by SIAD (Society of Industrial Artists and Designers, now called the Chartered Society of Designers). She notes that one of the rules states: “A member (of the SIAD) shall not knowingly accept any professional assignment on which

another designer has been or is working except with the agreement of the other designer or until he is satisfied that the former appointment has been properly terminated.”

In today’s market economy, where willingness to indulge in the competitive “belittling” of one’s rivals is legitimized and encouraged by governments and business leaders, the SIAD’s prohibition on poaching clients seems touchingly outmoded. But is it? I was talking to a designer friend recently and I mentioned that I’d heard on the grapevine that a large upmarket retailer in central London—a world-famous name—was looking for new designers to commission. My friend thanked me for the tip-off but said that he couldn’t approach the retailer because a designer friend of his already worked for them. I was struck by his old-fashioned loyalty. It’s what I mean when I talk about integrity, a personal philosophy that is not abandoned at the first sign of personal gain.

Of course, there are lots of ways of having integrity. At its most earthbound, integrity might be as simple as a love of design expressed in such a way that clients can see that it is something more than professional expediency. Alternatively, it might take a more practical form; it might be a refusal to take part in “free pitches.” Free—or unpaid—pitching, is a hotly debated issue in contemporary design. Very few jobs of any size are assigned without a competitive pitch, and frequently these pitches are unpaid. In an era of transparency in financial reporting, and new tendering rules in Europe, nearly all public bodies (and many private firms) are obliged to offer contracts up to open tender as a way of avoiding corruption, nepotism, and favoritism.

Whenever designers gather to discuss their work, the subject of free pitching arises; various professional bodies around the world have tried to formulate a correct response to this practice, but without much success. It is now so prevalent that it is almost impossible to avoid if you want to be in contention for many of the plum jobs that are offered to designers. Yet free pitching obstructs one of the fundamental ways in which good work is achieved; for good work to emerge, designers and clients must form a partnership and explore all avenues together in a mutually trusting and open way. This is rarely possible in a competitive pitch. No matter how good the brief, the designer is not able to interrogate the client in the way that a client would be interrogated in a proper commission: the designer is merely taking part in a beauty parade, or more, a lottery.

When we make this argument to clients, some of the smarter ones can see the merit in our case but most see only the substantial benefit they derive—at zero cost—from being presented with a range of free responses to their brief that helps them to make and justify their final choice (they have something to evaluate it against). In other words, clients are receiving a quantifiable benefit that they do not pay for. Despite the widespread dislike of unpaid pitching among designers, there is not much chance of the practice becoming any less common; in fact, the opposite is happening, with even smaller projects being offered up for pitch. Laudable as it is to encourage fairness in commissioning, designers who are expected to produce creative work without payment seem unduly penalized by the new drive for fiscal transparency.

But here’s a funny thing: there are many studios and individuals who take a principled stance and say no to free pitching and, perhaps surprisingly, they seem to survive pretty well. The English designer Jonathan Ellery runs the design company Browns. He makes the following statement on the homepage of the group’s web site: WE DON’T LIKE SAYING NO, SO PLEASE DON’T ASK US TO DO A FREE PITCH OR WORK FOR UNETHICAL CAUSES.<sup>5</sup>

Are Browns damaged by this statement? Not at all. Instead they are seen as dignified and principled, and continue to attract high-quality clients. So, could it be that by standing up for what we believe in, studios actually grow rather than diminish in stature? It certainly appears to be the case that designers who believe in nothing only ever attract clients who don’t believe in them.

This was true of my early days as a designer: when I started out, I was so keen to please my clients and employers that I avoided having any opinions and told them only what I thought they wanted to hear. In other words, I demonstrated the morals of the marketplace and consequently was treated like a commodity: my services were bought at bargain-basement prices and my opinions rarely valued. And here's another funny thing: in a world with no principles, people often most respect those who have principles.

It is not just in our work that we need to display integrity. We must have integrity in the way we deal with other designers, with our suppliers (printers, web programmers, technicians), and with the people we meet in professional life (everybody from office cleaners to bank managers). We must also have integrity in the way we handle the creative work of other designers, of photographers, and of illustrators. Many of us will have been cavalier at some point in our working lives and used typefaces, photographs, or graphics software that we didn't pay for—but this is theft as surely as if we'd gone into someone's house and taken their possessions. Most important of all, we have to show integrity to the three “audiences” for which nearly all design is created: our clients, our intended audience, and ourselves. Designers will differ on the order of importance in which they place this trinity and in my view, if we want to produce meaningful work, the demands and responsibilities of all three have to be equally balanced.<sup>6</sup>

By standing up for ourselves, by having beliefs (creative and ethical), and by questioning what we are asked to do as designers, we can acquire self-respect, and self-respect is the first step on the path to earning the respect of clients and other designers. We might also get the sack, or incur the wrath of our clients, but that's integrity for you—there's a price to be paid for it. Just remember, it's always less than the price of our self-respect.

## Conclusion

So far, I've only dealt with some rather grand notions about how to be a graphic designer. In subsequent chapters I'll tackle more mundane matters such as how to find a job, how to prepare a portfolio, and how to have good ideas. Yet without the attributes of cultural awareness, communication skills, and professional and personal integrity, you won't grow as a designer. Some designers are born with all the qualities they need; the rest of us have to work to acquire them. That takes time, and there will be disappointments and setbacks along the way.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Virginia Postrel in

*The Substance of Style*  
, New York, HarperCollins, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Shaughnessy and Tony Brook,

*Studio Culture*  
, Unit Editions, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The designer Lorraine Wild describes the benefits of understanding the “larger context” in which her work is situated: “I used to do more research and now I'm more intuitive. I've gotten better at understanding the materials that I'm given to work with by writers, editors, curators, artists and architects, etc. I have always been conscientious about knowing the material, but now I've accumulated a library in my head which helps me read the larger context that surrounds the subject I'm about to work with...” “Reputations,”

*Eye*  
36, summer 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Potter,

*What is a Designer*  
, London, Hyphen Press, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Our policy at Intro was to participate in unpaid pitches if they opened doors that would otherwise remain closed to us. Because we weren't a conventional design group, we were often added to a pitch list

a wildcard entry, so the client could demonstrate that they had asked a variety of studios to compete. We used these opportunities to good advantage, often winning jobs by doing our homework as thoroughly as the others but also by bringing freshness to what was new territory for us, and thereby exposing the formulaic nature of our more sector-experienced competitors. But, before agreeing to a pitch, we always asked for a pitch fee (sometimes, to our surprise, we got one; sometimes we didn't). We insisted on knowing who we were pitching against and we made a friendly protest (through gritted teeth) about the inadvisability of pitches being the best way to commission design.

[6](#)  
Peter Saville told

### *The Times*

of London (15 September 2004): "The trouble with graphic design today is: when can you believe it? It's not the message of the designer anymore. Every applied artist ends up selling his or her soul at some point. I haven't done it and look at me. People call me one of the most famous designers in the world and I haven't got any money."



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