

Article Group Newsletter Issue 2 - On Fierce Reduction and Creative Focus Through Simplicity, Surprise, Utility, and Beauty (June 2023)

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Exploring the messy, contradictory, and human side of creativity June 2023

On fierce reduction:

"You are, in fact, a mashup of what you choose to let into your life," says artist Austin Kleon. So, what have you been letting in? Or perhaps the question is, what haven't you been letting in? We've noticed you, bleary-eyed, endlessly thumbing through mediocre social feeds when you could be nourishing yourself with something wholesome, or wholegrain, or even just enjoying a meal. And what does this mashup mean for your life?

The world is busy. And we're not hating on that reality, or questioning the multi-tasking it takes to live and thrive in this modern Western frenzy, or even side-eyeing hustle culture (mostly). But...c'mon, this is all a bit much, right? We say this knowing you'll nod your head in agreement, though you probably can't pinpoint which godforsaken stream, endless scroll, or moment of self-proclaimed "self-care" pushed you right over the edge last Thursday.

Honestly? We might never know. Same goes for our work. Whether we're brainstorming for the next big campaign idea or crunching numbers to optimize the character count of a tiny mobile ad, our workflows are filled with what-ifs and regrets. Our teams draw inspiration from a multitude of sources—art, music, competitive advertising, sneaker fashion, macaroni-and-cheese packaging, some random comment from that dude at the bar over the weekend—and thankfully, they also have their own idea-filled brainpans. It's a mix that leads us to hit the mark sometimes (that's the best), and hopefully stumble less often.

But here's the thing: We always end up with too many ideas in the mix.

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that we should chase after it all. But let's be real, that's rarely the key to achieving creative focus. Frankly, it's never the answer.

What we try to do then to combat this too-muchness is a useful and honest and sometimes brutal exercise we call fierce reduction. It's no groundbreaking revelation, but perhaps it's a muscle that has atrophied slightly in the face of overwhelming stimuli, a labyrinth of possible channels, and the microsegmented audiences that define marketing right now.

So, here's our remedy, our little secret — a quartet of criteria: Simplicity, Surprise, Utility, and Beauty. In any given project, one of these aspects may take precedence over the others. But simplicity's our favorite child. It's our job as marketers to declutter and let our audience make their own decisions. And it's refreshing as hell to actually do it.

If we leave you with nothing else this month: shed one thing. Work, life — let go of something. Unveil the true desire, the right words. Be sincere. If something can withstand the scrutiny of raw authenticity, it may find its place just yet. Embrace the stillness that comes with shedding, too. Lots of okay (and even charmed) decisions get made between express train stops.

And if you absolutely have to keep all those plates in the air, please find a juggler to join your circus. The solitary bubbles we've been taught to inhabit, safe and efficient as they are, can't replicate the weird and wonderful things that happen when we sit at a table together and enjoy our food. We'll see you there.