MICHAEL ROCK   2 × 4

MULTIPLE
SIGNATURES

ON DESIGNERS, AUTHORS,
READERS AND USERS

RIZZOLI
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Multiple Signatures
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Gallery in Tokyo, 2009.

"Post-Occupancy" by Rem Koolhaas first appeared in
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"Deprofessionalization" is a 2012 reconsideration of
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"What Is This Thing Called Graphic Design Criticism"
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"Empire of Screens" was adapted from the lecture "All
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"On Museums" and "Proposal for a Museum of the
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Design beyond Design conference at the Jan van Eyck
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For Silas and Winslow

Will the GenZ consumer be able to make more informed decisions about her consumption with unprecedented access to peer reviews and decentralized information networks? Will she have more agency or less? Will she demand economic, environmental and social responsibility along with sustainability? Have these values arrived, and if so, are they here to stay? Demographically, there will be fewer consumers, with more (inherited) wealth to spend, at least in the developed countries of the western world (after all, no money, no consumption, no heal-the-world). If you accept that even consumption can be counter-culture, revolutionary, game-changing, paradigm-shifting, you might actually end up making a legitimate statement.

TWO TRANSLATIONS

DAN MICHAELSON
TAMARA MALETIC

How to describe the difference between content and form? *What* and *how?* *Idea* and *voice?* *Words* and *grammar?* *Band* and *producer?* Each is too simple. The difference between form and content is unstable, a shiftable thermocline contingent on circumstance. That dynamic differential should itself be an object of design and a predicate to form.

We've been described, sometimes approvingly, as being uninterested in form. But we're actually not that interested in content either, except in the broadest sense. We want users to articulate their own content. More than content, we're interested in tactics, game-play, relationships, duration, and the qualities we can give those moments of exchange.

All economies are focused on relationships. Graphic design is no different, always obsessed with its own duration and use, and with the network effects of its distribution schemes. To borrow a definition from politics, design is concerned with strategizing the art of the possible. The designer creates the rules of the game and tries to plan how the field of play will look and feel in use. One of the greatest and most surprising privileges is to watch the game unfold thereafter, and to react.

The gallerist Julien Levy remembered being taught to play chess by Marcel Duchamp like this: "I was a real amateur at it but I learned what his feeling for chess was …. He said it wasn't a war game, it's an aesthetic game, and you feel the shape of the board as it begins to shift its pattern and you make it become beautiful, even if you lose."

The following two projects suggest the ways in which the role of form in graphic design focuses on such relationships. Both were projects Linked by Air undertook in collaboration with 2x4. At Prada's New York Epicenter, eleven plasma screens hanging among the clothes racks had recently been upgraded with onboard computers. By mounting video cameras above each screen and installing a different computer program in each one, we transformed the displays into eleven kinds of mirrors.

The mirrors had several precedents. 2x4's recent work for Prada and others had focused on surveillance and narcissism, and the ways mosaics may serve to redact. Many artists have experimented with video mirrors; Nam June Paik is a favorite of ours. We weren't trying to invent a new structure. Rather we were curious about what qualities we could create through such a structure: a little punk, a little glam, beautiful, quick, and light. Each mirror ran a different program; visitors experienced them in sequence simply by moving from one screen to the next. The code we used to create each screen was trivial, no more complex than dozens of similar examples that could be found on the Internet at the time. The screens were fun and fast to code, and we rejected as many sketches as we used.

Perhaps in contrast to John Maeda's *Mirror Mirror* from that same year—part of his Reactive Book series—the Prada digital mirrors weren't so much about algorithm or even interaction, obvious conditions of the modern world, but about creating lived qualities through the disposition of algorithm and interaction. None of the eleven programs contained images; rather, they were algorithmic procedures for processing video streams. The engineering of those procedures, and the way they intersected with the movement of visitors throughout the space, created both form and qualitative experience. So the design object was neither the input (the visitor) nor the output (the constructed image). The object of design was the platform on which the exchange took place.

We later employed the same conceit, with starkly different effects, on a project for a European urban campus comprised of offices, workspaces, labs and public meeting places. Answering a brief for a signing and public-information system, we proposed an invisible wayfinding capability available through mobile-phone text messaging.

Precedents at the time included the new geo-messaging services Socialight and Google SMS; the five-digit SMS micropayment systems common in Europe; telephone interactive voice response (IVR) systems; audio guides, and interactive text adventures like *Zork*. Other inspirations included the voice (or voices) of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and Salvatore from Paul Elliman's *Sirens of Venice*.

We named our voice Johan (56426), relating both to the name of the campus neighborhood (Saint John in English) and suggesting the ethereality of the service. Johan was conceived as a guide. Creating a natural-language conversation system is difficult, but Johan's sphere of expertise was limited.

Users could only ask Johan about the campus, and only particular kinds of questions. Like the Prada mirrors that manipulated input in eleven different ways, Johan supported several specific genres of conversation: greet, locate, describe, direct, inform, identify, and elaborate. While the mirrors translated pixels, Johan processed street names and building numbers, personnel directories, listings, and site-specific markers placed for the project.

Visitors could employ these different conversation modes as needed by texting a question to 56426. A typical query was comprised of a noun (name, building number, marker) and a verb. Punctuation could constitute a verb. "199–88" signified "directions from marker 199 to building 88."

Context was a vital asset that helped minimize difficult user input and maximize the value of Johan's responses.

Johan did not rely on GPS or any other locative technology. Instead, he built on each person's previous query, so the exchange was necessarily dialogic, conversational. He knew, for example, that no markers had the same numbers as buildings. There was
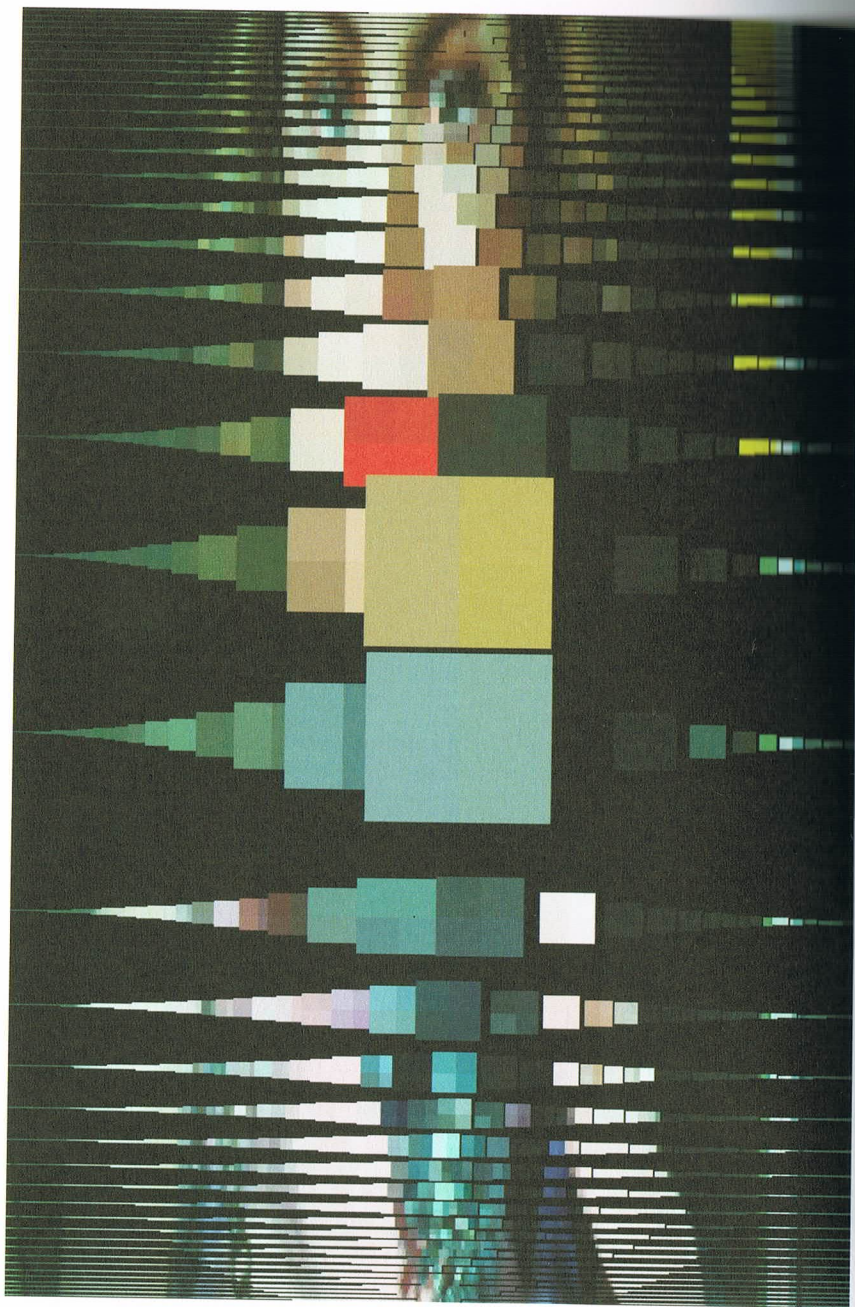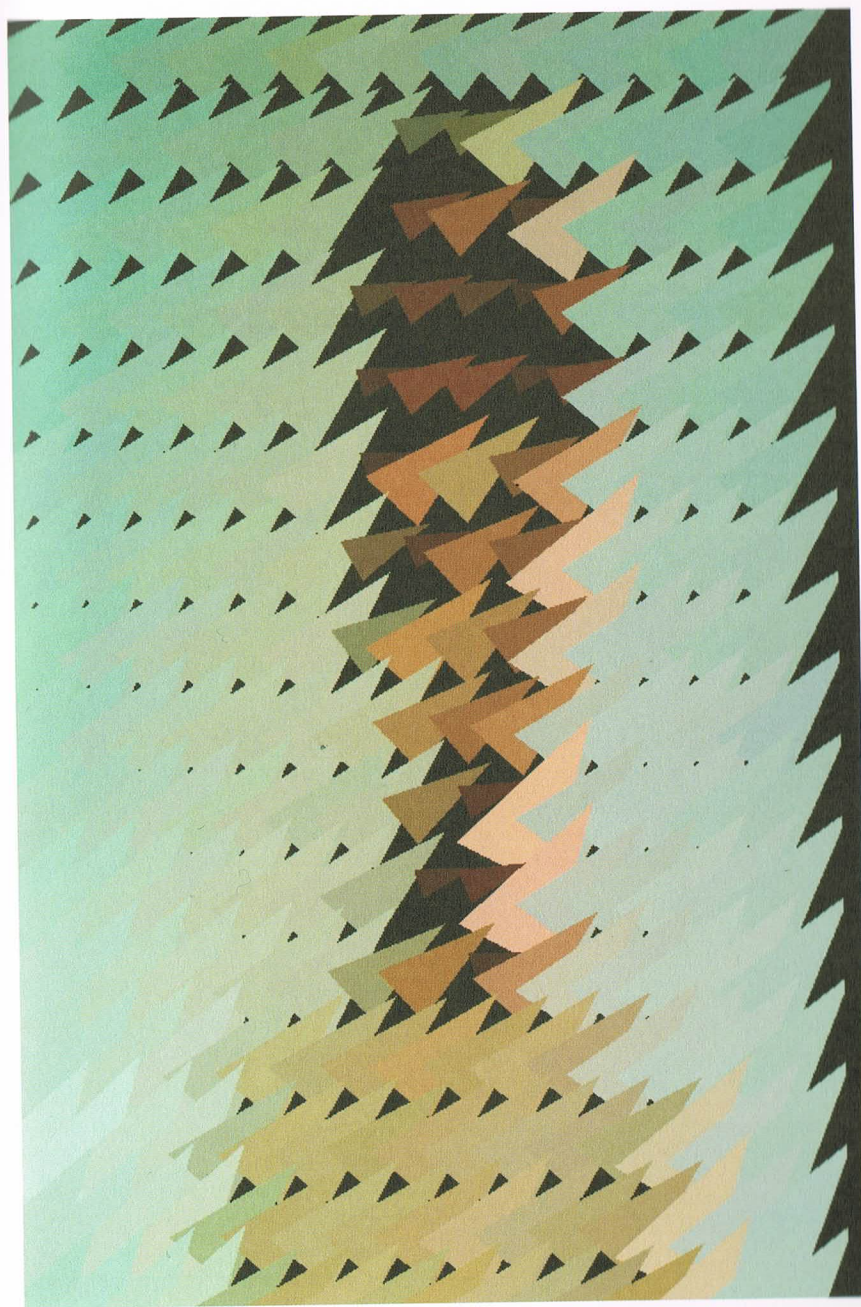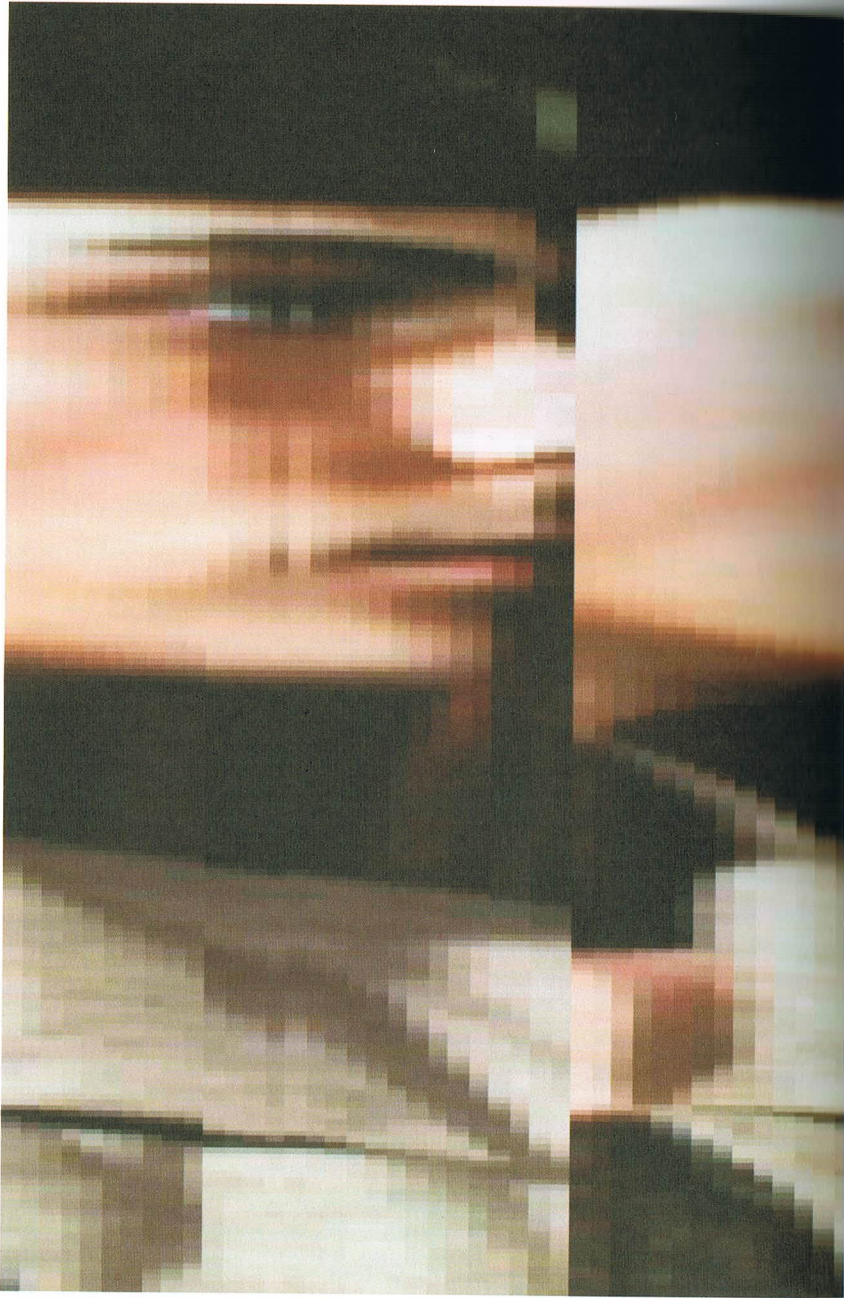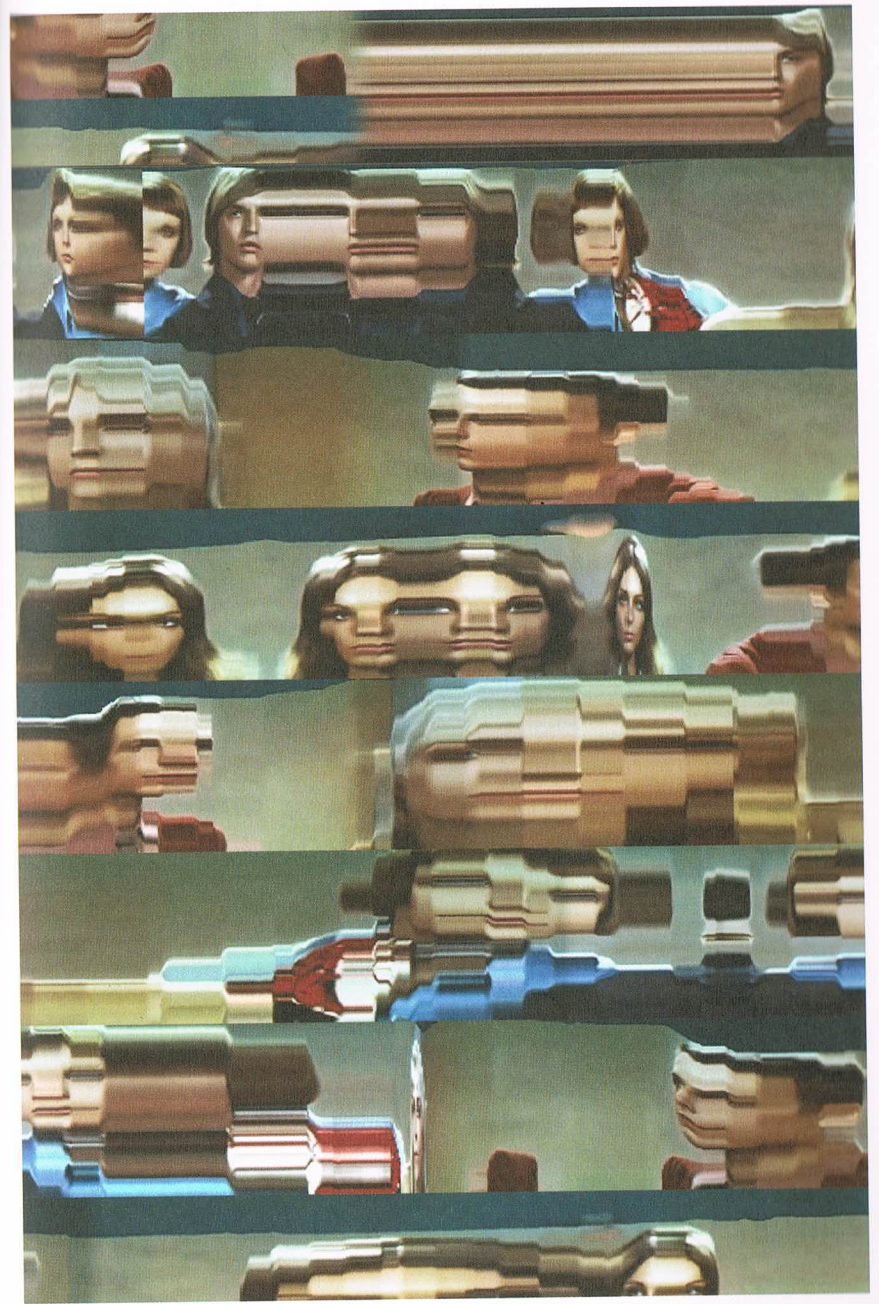
little ambiguity in his database. He wasn't artificially intelligent; he was just a set of filters.

With the nouns and verbs determined, the focus of our work became Johan's typographic language and syntax—his voice. Johan worked through simple SMS messaging, an intimate technology available on every phone. He had to seem comfortable in German, French, and English. We thought about the alternation between male and female voices on the New York City subway, and about the sound effects that are used in some telephone IVR systems announcing a new menu.

We made his voice terse but not brusque, fitting for a concierge, a professional transaction, and an SMS message. At the same time, we used an idiosyncratic punctuation scheme to structure his responses visually within the limitations of SMS, and to give him a certain approachability. As with the mirrors, the establishmentof Johan's database and algorithmic structure was only a predicate for our real interest: the exploration of the constricted typographic structures of the SMS system and their relationship to the movement of the user. Johan was realized as a prototype but never implemented.

One of the most relevant futures of graphic design is the interfaces of people with, and through, the overwhelming transactions and movements of contemporary social and information economies. We have no interest in simplifying, smoothing, or reducing those movements. We are also aware of the pitfalls and potential ethical issues of engaging with design as a set of modern network effects; there are many networks and relationships that we wouldn't touch. In the end, we are not so interested in visualizing or mapping these translations; we want to make them speak.

ON MUSEUMS

WITH
SUSAN SELLERS