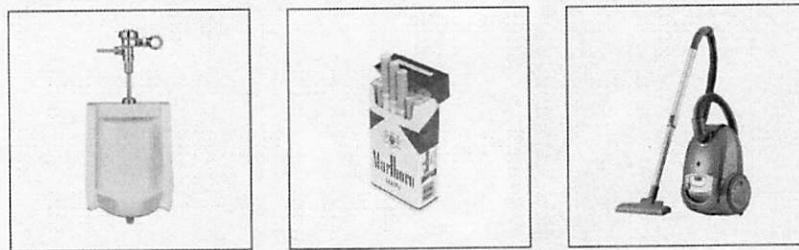


Dare to be Stupid

We asked all the tutors that lectured here this week to give a talk that placed their work in a larger context. We had considered discussing ours within the context of appropriation, but the more we talked about it the less right it felt.

Within the art world, appropriation is the act of isolating something from mass or mainstream culture, and repositioning it as a high art object. This is the case with Marcel Duchamp, Richard Prince, Jeff Koons, and others.

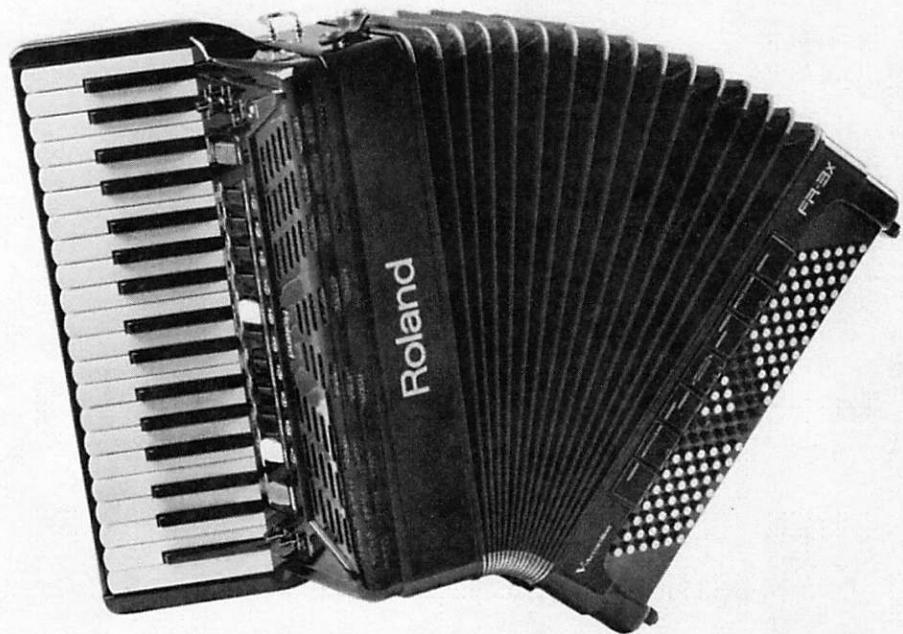


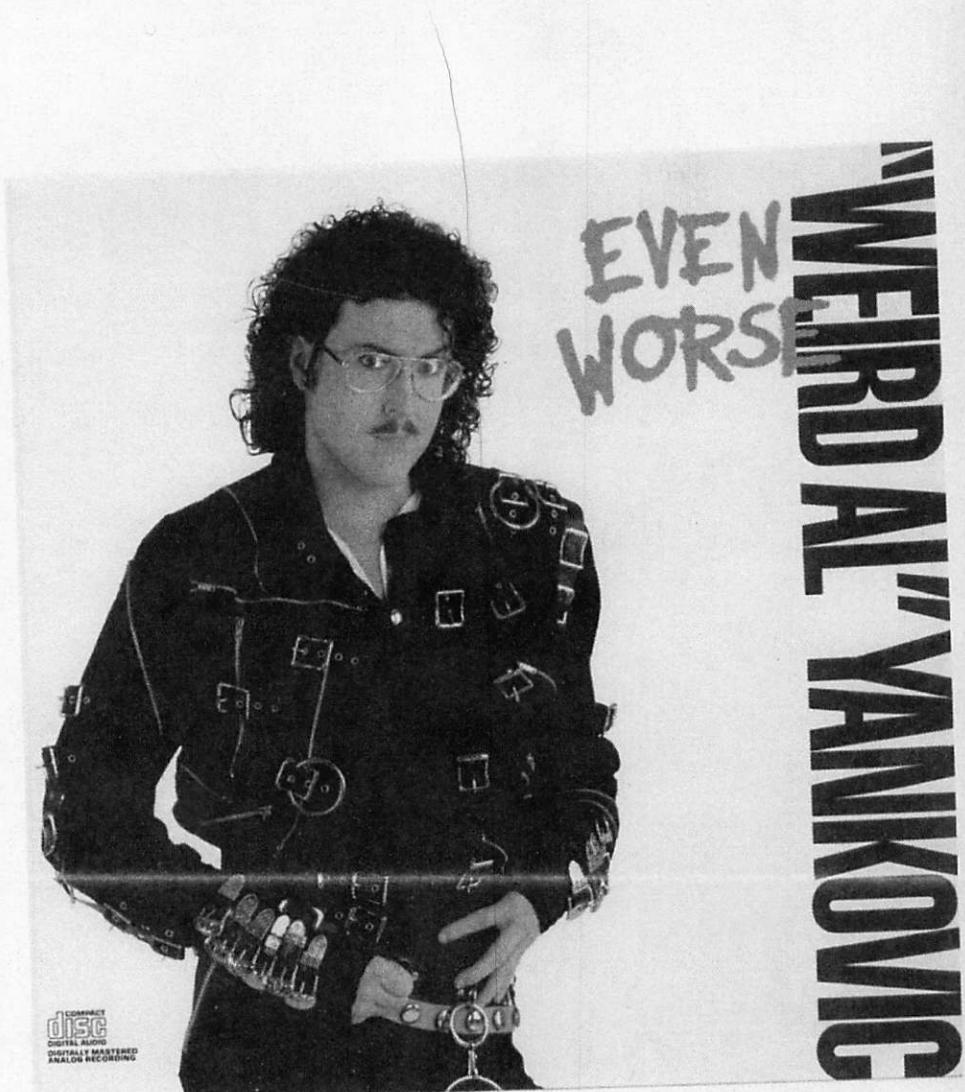
Parody, on the other hand, is traditionally about doing the opposite: taking something “highbrow” and through satire and irony bringing it down. By doing this, parodies make something that was previously meant for the few available to the many. This is also the goal, and ultimate function, of graphic design.

Parody felt like the right thing to talk about, since way before any of us were aware of Marcel Duchamp, Richard Prince, or Jeff Koons, we were listening to “Weird Al” Yankovic.

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*This text is based on a lecture given at Typography Summer School New York on August 8, 2014, which we co-organized with Fraser Muggeridge. An earlier version was given at Easy Lessoning #4, a series of informal talks we co-organized with Corina Neuenschwander and Roland Früh.*





"Weird Al", Even Worse.

Dare to be Stupid

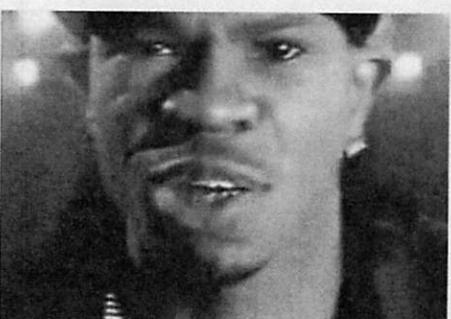
For anyone not familiar with “Weird Al”, he is an American musician known primarily, if not exclusively, for his parodies of popular songs. At left is the cover of the record where we first encountered him.

What’s really interesting to us about “Weird Al” is that his parodies comment on mainstream culture by existing within that same culture. His music video for *Fat* played on MTV right alongside Michael Jackson’s video for *Bad*. So where appropriation moves low to high, and parody typically moves high to low, “Weird Al” moves from low to low, or pop to pop. His work shifts ideas laterally within the same contexts creating an alternate reality where his sendups are as valid and visible as the originals.

<sup>1</sup> “Weird Al” appeared on episode #257 of Marc Maron’s *WTF* podcast.

In a 2012 interview<sup>1</sup>, “Weird Al” talked about how every time he releases a new song or album an entirely new generation discovers his back catalog. These kids are not only hearing his songs for the first time, they are potentially hearing them before the songs they are parodying.

They could be hearing *Fat* before *Bad*, *Eat It* before *Beat It*, *I Love Rocky Road* before *I Love Rock and Roll*, *Like a Surgeon* before *Like a Virgin*, *It's All About the Pentiums* before *It's All About the Benjamins*, *Amish Paradise* before *Gangstas Paradise*, *Dare to Be Stupid* before discovering Devo, and so on. Which is incredible.



*Mandatory Fun*, "Weird Al's" most recent album debuted a few weeks ago at number one on the Billboard Charts. It was the first time a comedy record held that spot since 1963\*. "Weird Al" has sold over 12 million records in his career, and been awarded a few Grammy's, but most of the discussion surrounding his chart-topping has centered around the fact that it's one of the lowest selling records of all time to hit number one. However, it says something that at a time when no one is buying music, people are willing to shell out for not just a comedy record, but a parody record filled with versions of the songs already saturating the airwaves.

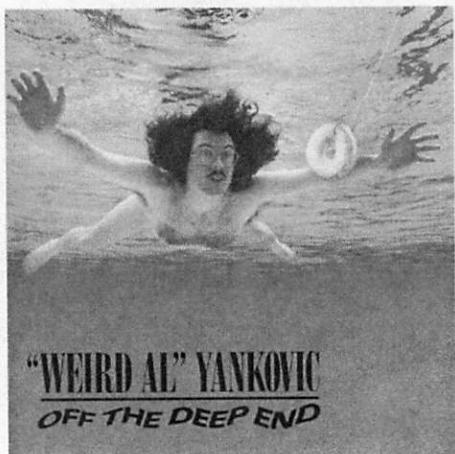
In the August 11th issue of the *New Yorker*, pop music critic Sasha Frere-Jones wrote about "Weird Al's" continued relevance in a piece called "Weirdly Popular, The Enduring Appeal of "Weird Al" Yankovic". Here's a quote:

*The opening lyrics of "Smells Like Nirvana," Yankovic's 1992 version of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," are as close to a mission statement as he has: "What is this song all about? Can't figure any lyrics out. How do the words to it go? I wish you'd tell me, I don't know." "Weird Al" has been cool for so long because pop makes everybody feel uncool; that he is the only one to admit it has made him a pop star.*

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\*The record that year was Allan Sherman's *My Son, The Nut* — also a parody record. "Weird Al" paid his respects to Sherman in the cover art for his self-titled debut album, which was released in 1983, ten years after Sherman died.

Here's the cover of the album that song appeared on:



And here's the video:

[youtu.be/FkIUAoZ6KxY](https://youtu.be/FkIUAoZ6KxY)



"Weird Al's" parodies serve two related functions. The first is providing an alternate entry point into pop music for new generations. The second is to provide a more accessible (and often critical) form through which to experience a song, that although widely popular, is simultaneously alienating to many listeners.

We're going to talk about some of our studio work in relation to all of this, but first we'd like to make the connection between parody and graphic design by discussing a 1985 essay by Milton Glaser titled "I Listen to the Market."

Below is Anton Ego, the food critic from *Ratatouille*, a 2007 Disney/Pixar movie. It's really great and worth watching if you haven't seen it. (The comedian Patton Oswalt, who provides the voice for the lead role, is also in the music video for "FOIL" a song off *Mandatory Fun*).

Anton Ego is based on Milton Glaser. This is a rumor that's been spread around, and we're happy to keep it going. He looks and sounds exactly like him.





"I Listen to the Market" is primarily about Glaser's work for Grand Union, a supermarket chain that's no longer in business. In the 1980s, he redesigned the entire store from their logo, packaging, and signage, to the layout of the aisles, food counters, and check-out area.



His idea for the interiors came from replicating small European marketplaces. The stores had "piazzas" and aisles for customers to stroll through, which turned them into meeting places where people could learn about food, run into friends, and generally have a positive — almost cultural — experience. This seems commonplace now with large chains like Whole Foods and Fairway replicating this experience, and smaller groceries behaving like General Stores, but Glaser talks about it as a very new thing — especially for suburban shoppers.

Glaser believes that through these experiences, the customers (he calls them "design-users") who are "susceptible can develop an appetite for the original" and "go back" to the real thing — to seek out an authentic experience. He admits that this happening is probably rare, but he still believes in it: "If the potential for appreciation is there, the vulgar form can eventually lead you to the original". He extends this potential to all of art:

*If high art is by definition incomprehensible, which it is, and difficult, which it is, and challenging, which it is, then it is going to be rejected, misunderstood and feared in its original manifestation, which it is. There has to be some mitigating circumstance, or a series of events that make it accessible to more than just this very refined group of super-intellectuals who can understand the emerging form.*

Glaser says these mitigating circumstances could be replications, counterfeits, or copies. In other words, parodies. But since he's using his own work as an example, we can assume he's talking about how the production and reception of graphic design can be that mitigating circumstance that makes art and ideas accessible. This could happen by designing a catalog for an exhibition, a website for a gallery or museum, or a visual identity that communicates the mission of an organization or institution.

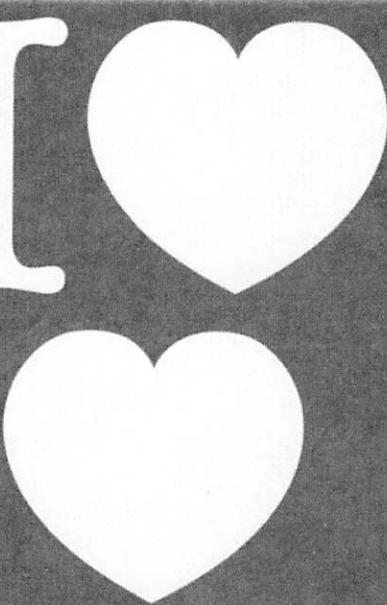
Last year we designed a typeface called Coexist, which features the individual glyphs of the Coexist bumper sticker coexisting within the rest of the alphabet. The font is available for purchase online at [coexistfont.com](http://coexistfont.com), where you can also purchase a bumper sticker of one of our favorite slogans set in the typeface. Like “Weird Al’s” parodies, these bumper stickers exist within the same context as the original as soon as they’re out in the world.

Honk  
if You  
Don't  
Exist

Between 2011 and February of this year we illustrated over 650 editorials for Bloomberg View, the opinion section of Bloomberg News. These illustrations are our equivalent of pop songs. They respond to current events, reach a wide audience, have to be digested quickly, and when we looked back on them to put this lecture together we had a hard time remembering what they were about.

# European Central Bank

AND THE  
CHAMBER  
OF SECRETS

I 

This is the catalog for ‘NYC Makers’, an exhibition currently up at the Museum of Arts and Design. It’s a crazy show with over a hundred “makers” of nearly everything you can imagine: candy, costumes, whiskey, terrariums, technology. Yoko Ono is in the show.

When we met with the curator and director they talked about wanting the show to represent the best of high and low craftsmanship. For example, beautifully fabricated sculptures and the crates they were shipped in. The design of the book plays up these contrasts: system default Helvetica is paired with Ogg, a fine serif by a new type foundry in Brooklyn; the entire book is printed four over one on a one-side coated sheet; and the binding attempts to be as fancy as possible given the constraint that it all had to be made in New York. Instead of gold embossing on leather, the bookboards are wrapped in a bright blue faux-leather and stamped with orange foil. The result is an object that vibrates between high and low, and much like the show, is overwhelming, immersive, and ugly, and attractive all at once.

NYC  
The MAD

NYC Makers

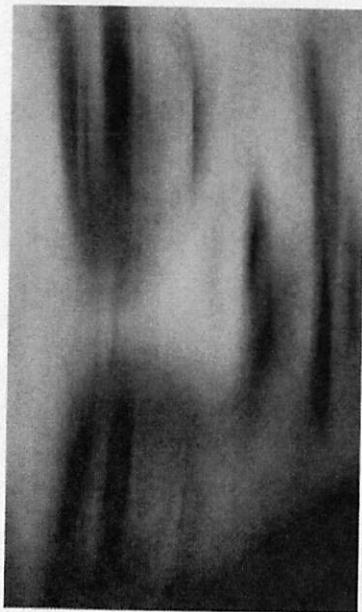
The MAD Biennial

Biennial  
Makers

1-2: IMAGINE PEACE TOWER, 2007. Viðey Island, Reykjavík; 3: Yoko Ono and John Lennon, WAR IS OVER! (if you want it), 1969. Poster, dimensions variable; 4: Play It By Trust, 1999. Garden version; © 1997 Synesthesia; 5: Vertical Memory. Photos: Courtesy the artist



4



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# YOKO Ono

# WAR IS OVER!

IF YOU WANT IT

Happy Christmas from John & Yoko

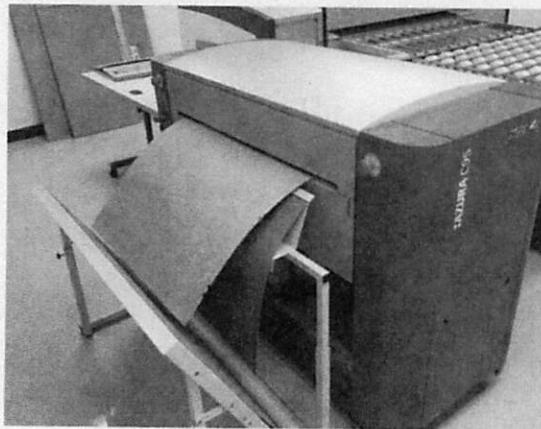
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174

1: David La Spina. Photo: Jason Polan; 2: Fort Orange Press, Albany, NY; 3: Crown Roll Leaf, Inc. Pigment Color Directory, #7000 (Orange); 4: Jack Zucker, Full Circle Child, New York. 5: The Print House, Brooklyn. Photo: Avrohom Weg; 6: Ecological Fibers, Inc. Rainbow LX, #LX220



1



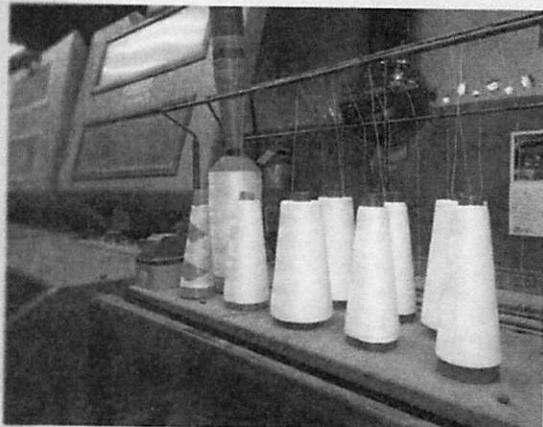
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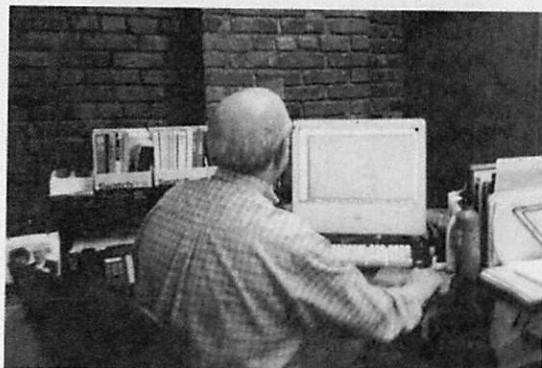
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# Other Means

Retrospective is a gallery up in Hudson, NY. It was started earlier this year by Zach Feuer and Joel Mesler, who both run successful galleries here in the city. They asked us to design a website for the space, which would focus entirely on emerging artists. The name is a joke, and they actually told us it didn't matter much if anyone came to the shows. They are fully aware of the role the internet plays in the distribution of art, and expected the website to be the primary venue for seeing the works. Zach mentioned that he sells just as much, if not more, art to collectors via email, Instagram, or just showing photos on his phone than from people coming into the gallery<sup>2</sup>.

We took that as a cue, and designed the website using open source iOS javascript libraries. On your phone, the site looks fairly normal, but on the desktop everything is too big and all the transitions are exaggerated making it feel like a super-sized iPhone app.

2. <http://news.artnet.com/market/chelsea-gallerist-zach-feuer-sees-sales-bolstered-by-instagram-4353>

# RETROSPECTIVE

I33.

34

ivegallery.com

and Sunday noon–6pm

er, Instagram

Means

Sign up for emails

Ludlow 38 is a gallery and curatorial residency program in the Lower East Side. Each year a new curator is brought in to completely reinvent their approach to programs and exhibitions.

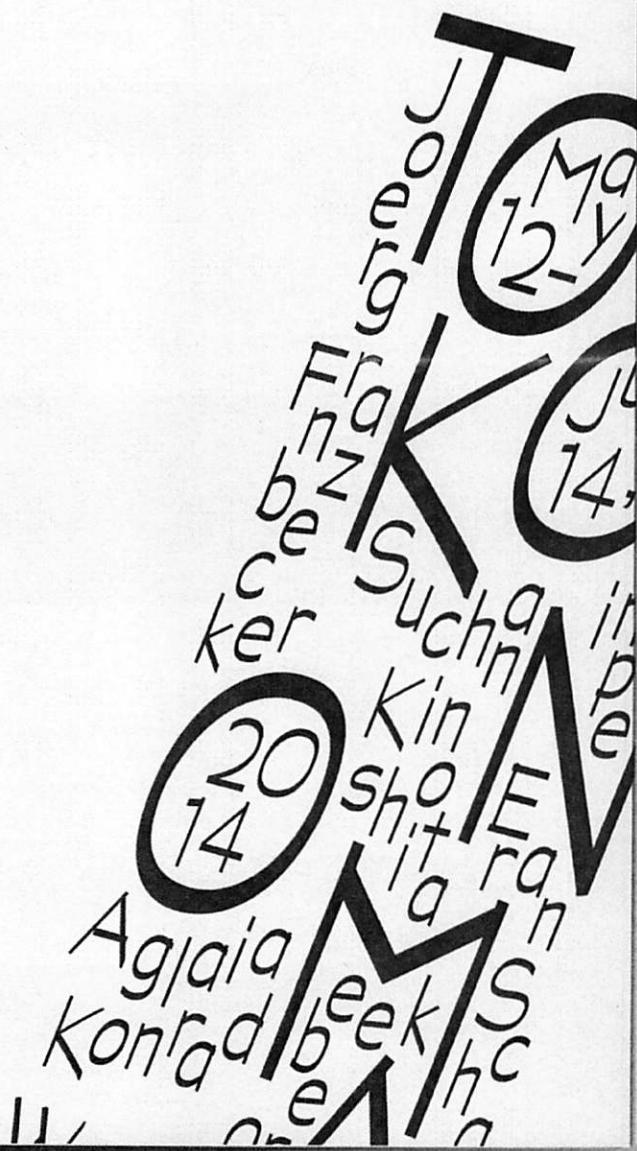
We're working with Eva Birkenstock, the curator this year, on pamphlets for each show and a new identity for the space. The only aspect of the residency that's the same from year to year is the architecture of the gallery itself, which due to it's shape (small and narrow) provides a significant challenge for the artists and curators to work with.

MINI/Goethe-Institut  
Curatorial Residencies  
Ludlow  
38

Susan  
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Sarah February 16  
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The identity is built around a large family of architectural drafting fonts that get jammed into the covers of each pamphlet. The interior of the pamphlet contains text about the exhibition, and the back cover has dates for related programs. It unfolds into a poster with work provided by the artist.

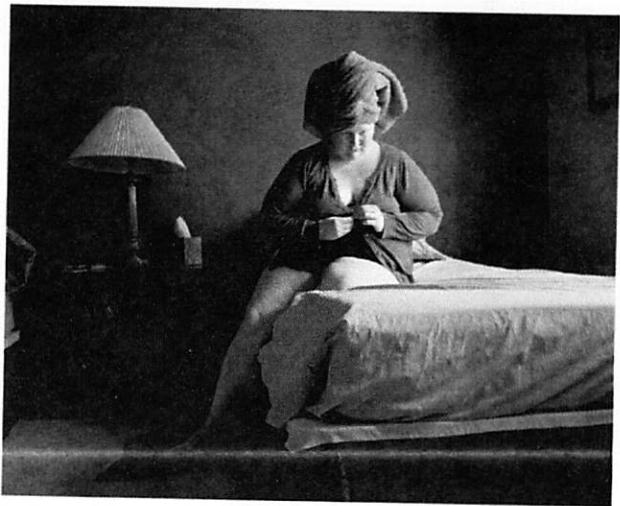




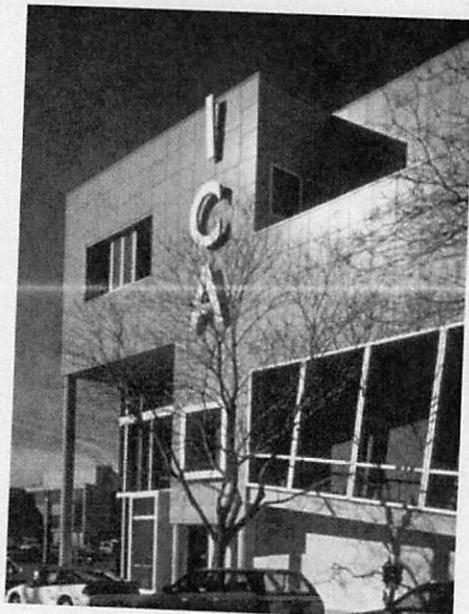
Those five projects all engage in fairly straightforward forms of parody. Bloomberg View and Coexist riff on recognizable cultural references. The NYC Makers catalog, Retrospective website, and Ludlow 38 identity subvert our expectations of certain forms (binding, paper, typography, user interfaces).

The last two projects are less obvious parodies, but they behave similarly by tweaking familiar conventions.

We worked with the photographer Jen Davis on a book of self-portraits shot over the course of eleven years. The book's title, '11 Years', sets up the chronology in the work. From the first image to the last you see Jen grow older, her body changes, she moves through different apartments, cities, and partners. She wanted the images to appear in order, but the photo she chose for the cover wasn't the first one in the series. We didn't want to repeat the photo elsewhere in the book, so we started the sequence on the cover and went along until reaching the end, which came at page 23. If you start at the beginning and flip through in a straight line, you hit this point then break for an interview, and when the photos start again you find yourself looking at a much younger Jen Davis. This subversion of chronology draws more attention to the progression that occurs throughout the series, and makes what otherwise appears to be a traditional photo book a slightly disorienting experience.



This is the exterior of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. Last year we redesigned their visual identity. You can tell based on how the windows align and various spaces jut out, that it's a strange building. The architects managed to fit two large galleries and a mezzanine into a fairly small plot by overlapping the spaces and the paths that connect them.



The signage in this photo was designed by the architects in the traditional way you'd set type vertically on a grid (the exterior of the building is a grid of square tiles) — one letter perfectly centered on top of the next. However, this alignment is at odds with the actual arrangement of spaces in the ICA so we corrected it for the logotype. By simply moving the letters outwards, it suggests the way you move through the building, and also speaks to their commitment to presenting contemporary art that challenges convention and expectations.

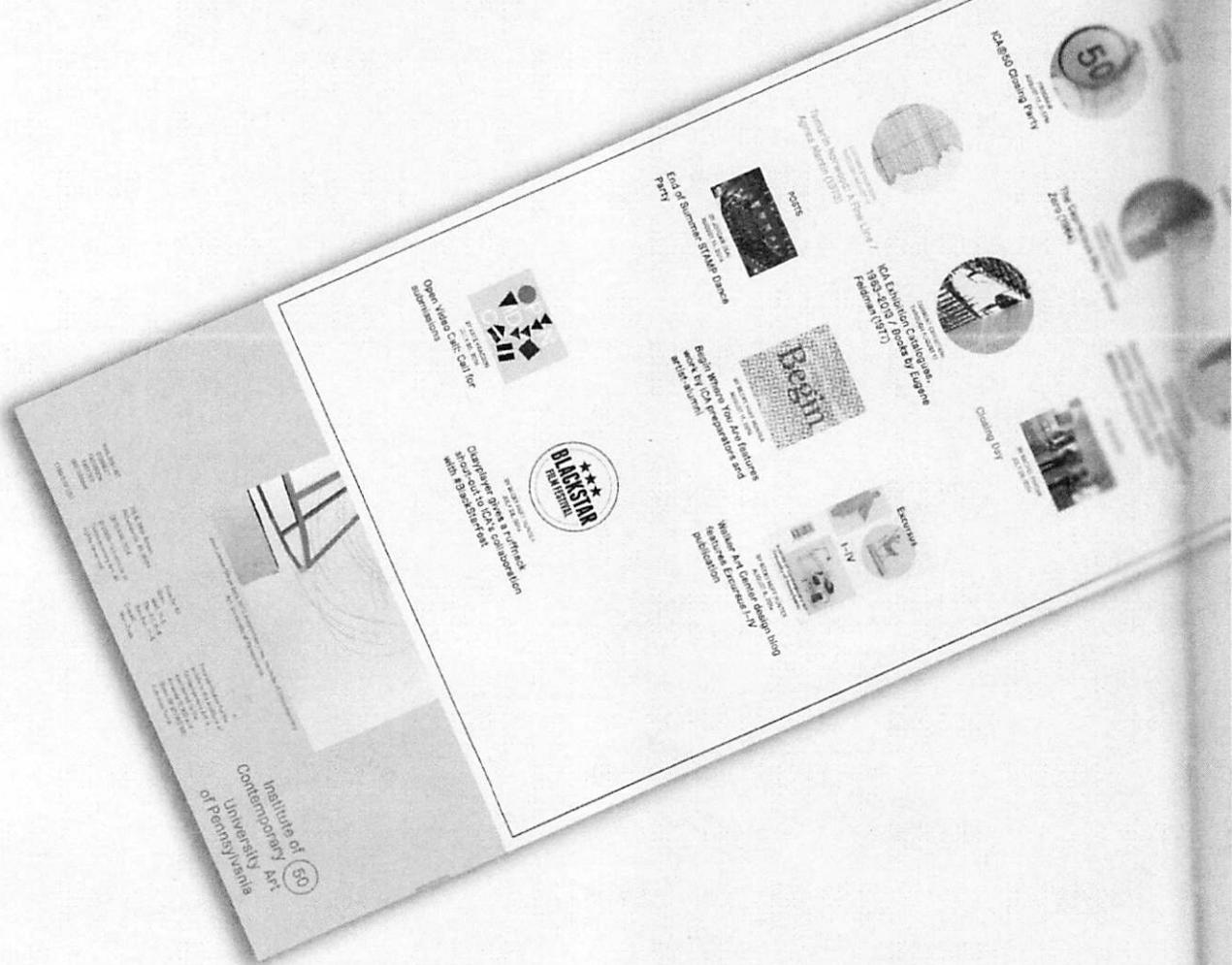
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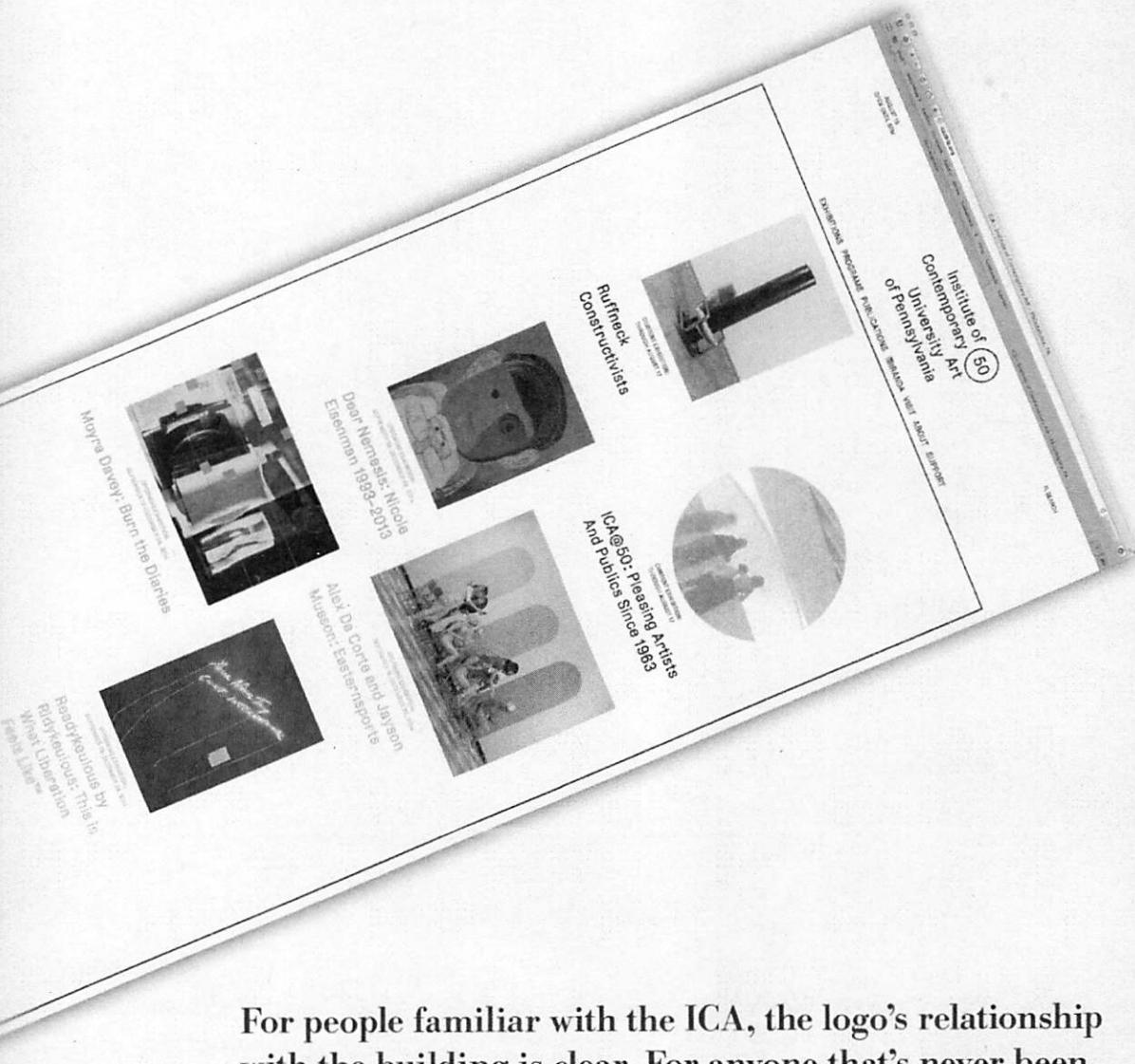
The misalignment continues from the ICA logo to the setting of their full institutional name, and is reinforced in the arrangement of typography on other materials.

Institute of  
Contemporary  
University Art  
of Pennsylvania



The wandering concept was extended to their website which we designed and developed at the same time. It makes use of an infinite scroll that loads more content as you move through the site. Only instead of giving you more of what you were just looking at, it pulls from a network of relationships to build new paths that weave through their archive.





For people familiar with the ICA, the logo's relationship with the building is clear. For anyone that's never been there, we — like Milton Glaser — like to think that they'll see it and develop an interest in "going back." And when they show up in Philly and take a walk through the building it'll all make sense.