INTRODUCTION

Nice to meet you! I'm Emma, and this is not quite my full portfolio...

but rather a comprehensive walkthrough of select works from it. You'll likely notice that most of the designs in my portfolio fall into two categories: square event promotions or editorial illustrations. This is because I only started "designing" a little over a year ago.

My first (and so far only) formal position in this field is currently as the lead designer at the Asian American Writer's Workshop. (I had previously done a brief work study stint at a small, underfunded, and understaffed department at my university.) Since 2017, I've worked at AAWW — first as a digital media intern and subsequently as a part-time designer and illustrator — to create visuals for the editorial and event branches of the organization.

Prior to joining the workshop, I had no academic or working experience with "graphic design;" my background had primarily been in fine arts (painting, drawing, and mixed media). As such, my time at AAWW has been spent not simply creating content but also building a foundational understanding of what design is. (For this, I'd like to briefly thank Britt Gudas and Axel Jenson for their mentorship!)

I wanted to allow a space to map and discuss my process, primarily because I don't currently have access to such spaces at school or among peers (for context, I attend a liberal arts university with no graphic design program, and one class in design that is only offered one semester a year in a neighboring college). In other words, though I'd prefer a full on critique in a studio setting, I at least hope the introspection offered in this pamphlet allows a more holistic view on my conceptual and technical methodology. I'm sincerely grateful for your time and patience in following this self-reflective exercise with me.

With love,
Emma

CASE STUDY 1:

Promotional material for *Dispatches from the Ministry of Truth* (humble beginnings!)

The workflow I follow to start a design hasn't changed much since I started, in part because AAWW, as a small literary organization, is essentially brandless.

What does it mean to design for an entity that has no "brand identity" (save its logo)? For AAWW, this means that every project has a life of its own, governed by an ethos of freeform ambiguity that could only be possible without a marketing guideline. It also meant that I needed to collaborate directly with editorial and events staff to conceptualize designs from start to finish.

This deeply collective process typically starts with a lot of dialogue, research, and hoarding. For this project, a promotional illustration for an upcoming event, I began what would come to be a famiiliar process of hours of visual research. My cues from the events department were "the ocean" and "surveillance," prompting me to start my search in the aesthetics of surveillance art/digital archiving/3D mapping.

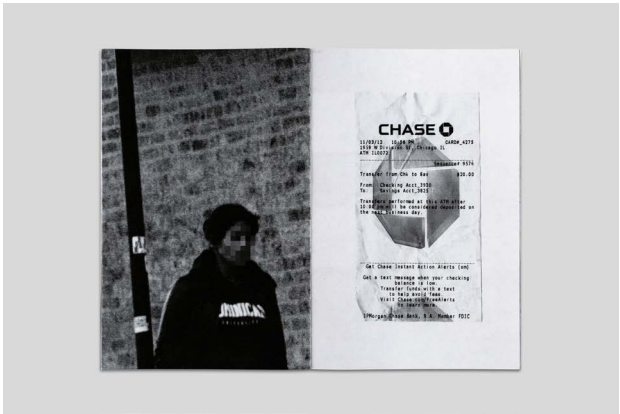Rabih Mroué
The Fall of a Hair: Blow Ups
2012

(right) *Aerial surveillance photo of the USS Bainbridge while apprehending Somali pirates 090409-N-0000X-136.jpg*

sourced from Wikimedia Commons
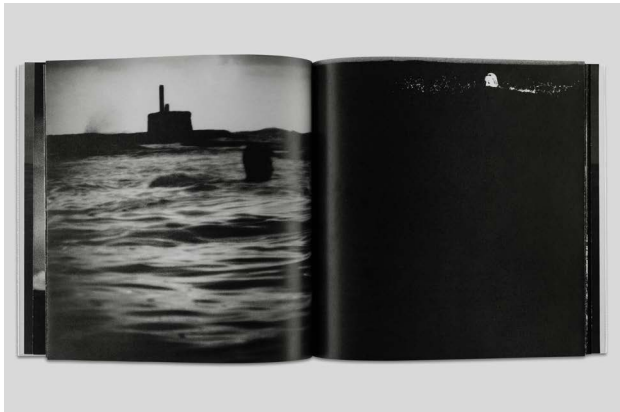
Selected spreads from an online preview of *Surveillance Index Edition One*
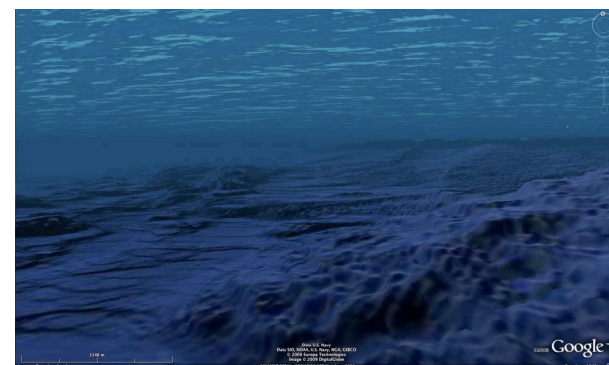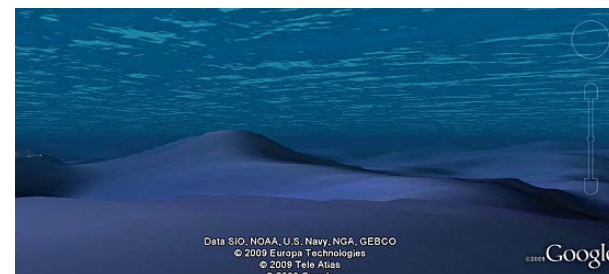
(from left: *Periscope* by José Diniz, *Getting to Know My Neighbors* by Joseph Wilcox, and *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance, and the Camera Since 1870*)
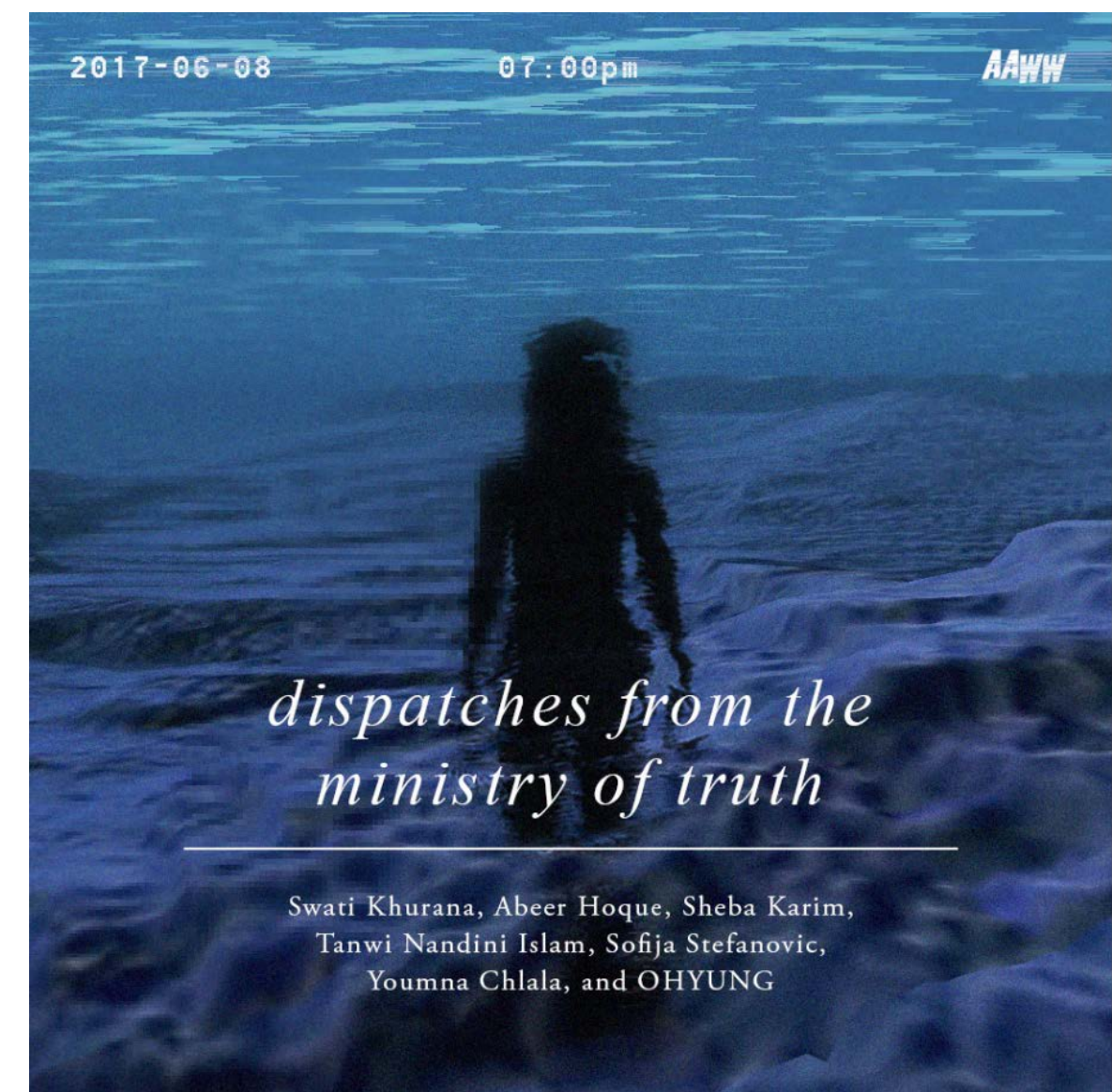
Going down the Wikimedia image well, and hoarding everything of visual interest

The final image was my very first design for AAWW! For this composition, I let the central image do much of the conceptual heavy lifting — at this time, I of course had no idea how to select typefaces, let alone design with them in mind. Most of my choices in this regard were made out of instinct; that is, I cycled through system fonts until something looked elegant. The retro/VCR-esque monospaced type at the top was a reference to found surveillance footage snapshots.

One overarching visual similarity between the sources I had collected was the low-resolution quality of the surveillance image, whether real or replicated by artists. Ultimately, I decided that I wanted to include an image of a person submerged in water in some way in order to evoke this low-res aesthetic with the organic dithering/pixel-sort/glitch effect created in the water's reflection. The above images were paired with a snapshot of an underwater landscape mapped by Google, which had a granular, artificial quality that was unsettling without losing the evocative properties of an ocean environment.

Research-driven graphic work for *Race, Music, and American Ghost Stories*

Warming up to this new workflow, I sought to produce designs that derived their thematic complexity not simply from their source content, but from the intentional manipulation of found images. Textual and historical context now informed not only my hoarding process, but also the methods I used to splice, reassemble, and superimpose forms together.

My assignment was to create a promotion for a conceptually complex event about "music and the ghosts of America's racial past." I took up the challenge to not abstract away the subject matter, relying heavily on the research process I was now comfortable with.

Combining all three major themes was daunting, but as it turns out, not impossible

Those three themes being, of course, "race," "music," and "American ghost stories." (For context, the two featured authors, Margo Jefferson and Hari Kunzru, had both published notable works regarding the cultural impact and circulation/appropriation of Black American music.)

After many hours of agonizing over this task, I finally settled on a point of reference: the gestures associated with performing music.

It didn't initially occur to me to collect photos of jazz pianists, but as it turns out, there are a lot of these photos circulating on the public domain web. Moreover, the gesture of playing the piano is distinct in that the actual piano does not have to actually appear for one to understand the action of pressing on keys (playing a saxophone or trumpet, for instance, seems to necessitate the appearance of the instrument).

Portrait of Ralph Burns, Bill
Harris, and Dave Tough, Three
Deuces, New York, N.Y. Photograph by
William P. Gottlieb (ca. Apr. 1947)

John Malachi. Photograph by
William P. Gottlieb (between
1938 and 1948)

I decided on these two images for their formal similarity (composition, angle, and subject matter), interested in how I could perhaps understand this "echoing" of the body's motion into a kind of visual "ghosting." "Ghost" as a noun can refer to an after image, or a trace of a since departed object; as a verb, it can refer to the actions of a "ghostwriter." (Just a single word held so many visual possibilities!)

It was also important that the men pictured in the photos were not of the same race — the historic origins and eventual appropriation of the jazz/blues genre (or the "ghosting" of this style) in America was something I didn't want to shy away from. This historical context would inform my research and my inquiry into the concept of the "ghost."

The central collage: giving a body to a conceptual ghost

This edited image was a fun exercise in Photoshop's lasso and masking functions. The sharp angles in the "cut-outs" were both due to the cropping of some source photos as well as a desire to convey some of the rhythmic properties of jazz music.

I continued to layer images and textures behind the main collage in order to create depth and push the overarching theme of visual discord.

Charcoal pencil marks were used to add emphasis to this idea of the gestural and rythmic (this was following a generous tip from my mentor, Axel, to refer back to Kandinsky's famous compositions). The final design (sans some of the more technical copy) is below.

RACE

MUSIC

& AMERICAN GHOST STORIES

Mouth to Mouth Open Mic Series

Starting out with image-heavy designs allowed an easy transition from a familiar realm of traditional fine arts/ digital illustration. I continuously relied on intricately composed collages and manipulated photos to carry the compositional and emotional weight of a design; my research-heavy process was distilled into images by colors and gestures. Gradually, I warmed up to the previously foreign world of typography — starting with my work for AAWW's Mouth to Mouth Open Mic series.

Obstacles to relying on type to carry aesthetic + conceptual weight

Despite the conceptual flexibility offered by the lack of a brand guideline, it was incredibly difficult to work generouly with typography. A number of technical challenges stood in my way:

1. Facebook's 20% text to image ratio algorithm — limiting the size and amount of text that could be used
2. Facebook's image compression — limiting what colors could be used
3. 1:1 and 4:3 aspect ratio restrictions

Image Text: **Medium**
Your ad's reach may be much lower.

Your ad reach may be much lower than usual because there's too much text in the ad image. Facebook prefers ad images with little or no text. Consider changing your image before placing your order.

truly, my greatest enemy...

Of course, there were also personal challenges to overcome:
lack of typography knowledge + high cost of typefaces + limited access to design mentors = images as a compositional crutch, over and over again! I would often treat type as secondary to a design, and simply fit copy wherever there was negative space.
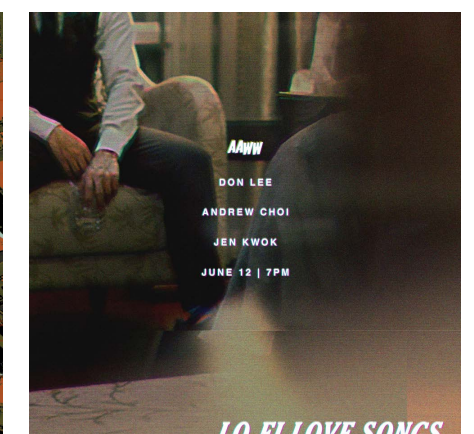
Enter: Mouth to Mouth. AAWW's monthly open mic series is not tied to any central literary theme or motif — the only commonality between all the events is its open mic format and its function as a platform for up and coming queer/trans POC artists and performers.

As a general requirement, Mouth to Mouth promotions must include portraits of the featured guests. This restriction on the type of image that could be used invited a deeper consideration of the use of type as a central compositional element.

Using type as a compositional and emotional element

My first Mouth to Mouth promotion (left) had a short turnaround time, but allowed me to experiment with a few key motifs that would guide future designs of the same genre:

1. CALL AND RESPONSE: The open mic format is not simply freeform/informal in structure but more importantly decentralized/non-hierarchical and collective. One tactic used by performers to not only gauge audience engagement but also bring the audience into the fold is to do a "mic check" exercise. Using the profiles of the featured performers allowed me to create this "call-and-response" feel that was echoed in the display type.

2. PLAY: Generally speaking, unlike other curated readings hosted by the workshop, open mic participants (volunteers or featured performers) don't need to take themselves too seriously; a spirit of play is at the center of these events. Though I feel that this specific element is strongly lacking in the typographic decisions I made here, I do think the color palette gets the idea across in a more subtle way.

3. RHYTHM/ACOUSTICS: Because the open mic facilitates performance, volume, inflection, and rhythm become critical factors in bringing the spoken word to life. This specific design is more coherent/compact than others, but suggests a bit of staccato pacing in the display type's split alignment and in geometric breaks between the event date and time.

These subsequent designs take these three princples into greater consideration and inform the use of type as a compositional element (they were also extremely fun to make!).

→ The order and geometry of Futura is unsettled by both the uneven spacing of each character and the hand-written copy (scanned and edited on Photoshop).
→ Most of the visual chaos and disjointed rhythm created by the distributed type is reigned in by the static photos and the largely monochromatic color palette. The word "MOUTH" was placed on top of both images to evoke a kind of dialogue (a call and response, if you will).
→ Had my hand not been governed by Facebook's unusually cruel 20% text rule, I would have loved to use the type to invite a more generous flow of air throughout the entire 1:1 space!
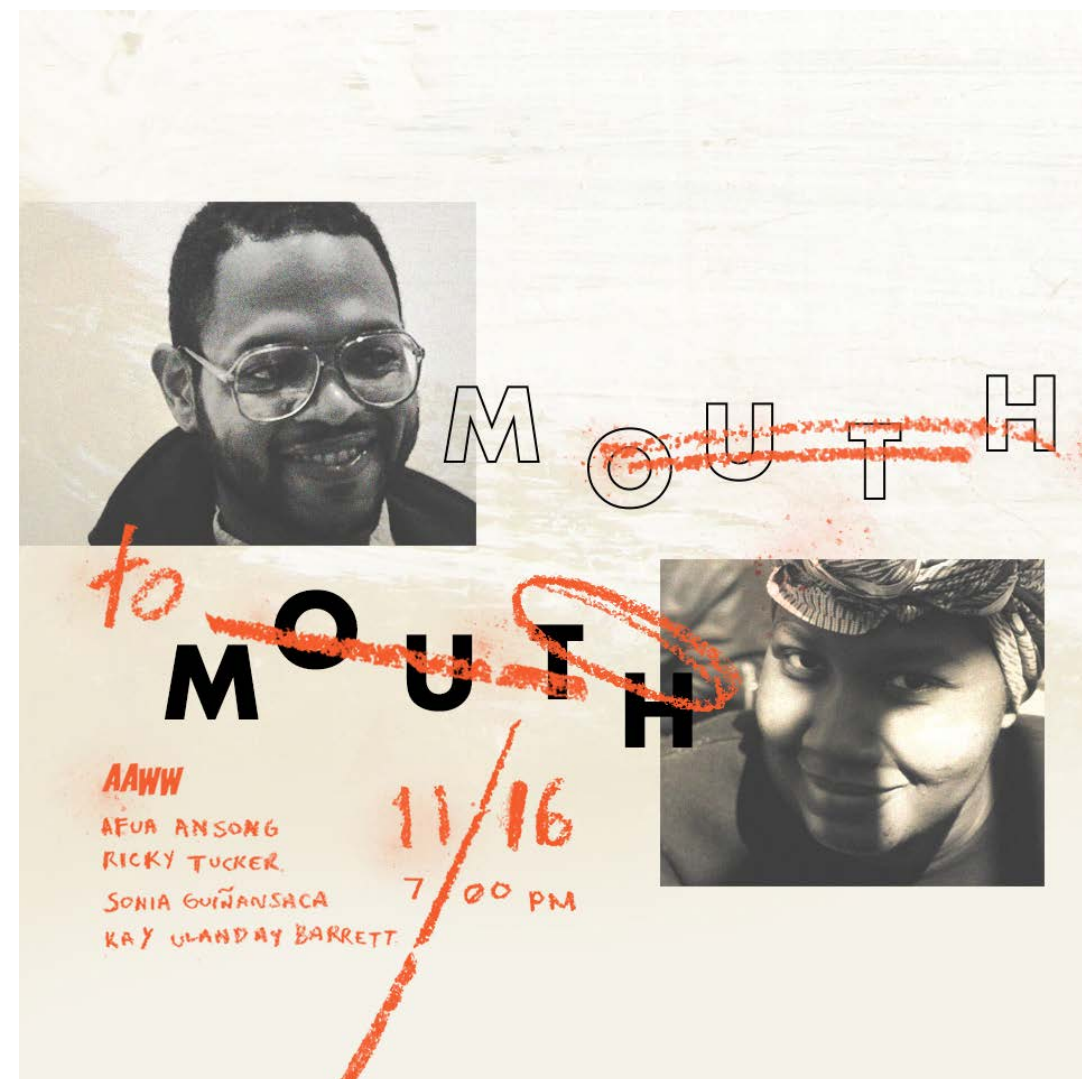
Side by side, these two designs feel as if they are converging towards a coherent identity (particularly due to similar motifs, such as a textured background, monochrome portraits, and gestural marks).

→ Here, the "playful" type motif is created by display text that snakes around the composition. The viewer's eye is invited to trail down from the top left down to the bottom right, and circle around the margins of the space.
→ Intentionally or not, the display type visually echoes part of a sound wave!
→ Pairing the more spacious and lightweight Americana with a tighter, compact grotesk (Work Sans, I believe) allows a kind of escape valve out of the compositional noise.