

Chapter 9 The Creative Process from *How to be a graphic designer without losing your soul*, by Adrian Shaughnessy. New York: PIP, 2005.

Where does the creative process begin? You could argue that the creative process begins with the decision to become a designer. From that moment on, everything you see and do feeds your visual intelligence, and contributes to the making of a designer. It's one of the best things about being a designer: seeing design everywhere, and taking inspiration from anything. You can't turn off the fact that you're a designer: you will always be tuned in and receiving. Or at least you should be.

When we look at good design - the stuff that inspires us - we want to emulate it. Infuriatingly, the best design always looks effortless. We are convinced we can do it too. But when it comes to it, we find it is much more difficult than we at first thought. So what are the skills you need to do good work? I've already mentioned talent, and I've stressed that the discipline of graphic design, as it is practised today, allows a wide and generous interpretation of the word. Graphic design is a bit like the game of rugby. At school I was forced to play this semi-barbaric, often violent ball game, in mud and freezing rain. My school's Rottweiler-like gym teacher was a rugby fanatic. After picking the best players he'd glare at the unsporty residue - the ones who hadn't been picked for his team - and say gloatingly: 'Don't worry, there's a place for all types in rugby. Big or small, fat or thin, there's a role for everyone: There isn't much physical violence in graphic design, but there is room for nearly everyone with any sort of talent.

Let's assume that talent is a given. What else do you need? Industriousness, dedication and a love of your craft are indispensable. Obvious really, but if you can't say that you have all three of these qualities, then you should perhaps consider another career. I'd say that it is also essential to have a questioning attitude to your work. If you don't question everything that is put in front of you, then you run the risk of being compliant and submissive, and these two qualities are not conducive to producing great work; they are the qualities of mediocrity. By urging you to adopt a questioning attitude, I'm not advocating a carping or complaining approach. I'm saying that you should be skeptical (but not bitter) towards the business of design. Finally, you need to acquire a 'voice'. I was tempted to say 'style' here, but voice is more accurate, because it is more personal and it suggests humanistic qualities. How do you acquire a voice? This is not easily answered. A design voice, a tone, is forged by three main elements.

^^^ In an interview, Saul Bass noted a problem encountered by young designers and students: 'They are not privy to process, he noted. 'They may have the illusion that these things really spring full-blown out of the head of some designer. This is a very unsettling perception for young people, because they struggle with their work. They have a go at it ... They redo ... it gets better It slips ... It gets worse ... it comes back ... It comes together. And maybe it's something that's pretty good, even excellent. But

they say to themselves, "Gee, it comes hard and it's so difficult. Am I really suited for this?" Reproduced in Essays on Design 1:AGJ's Designers of Influence, 1991 ^^^

It is firstly a question of creative conviction: you need to have a Vision - a clearly informed understanding - of what is good, and what has real worth. It should not be a rigid creed, but it needs to be strong enough to stop you being blown about helplessly. It In be either a 'philosophical' creed ('I think design is about improving social conditions') or it can be an aesthetic creed ('I only use sans serif fonts'). It can even be a combination of these, but you have to believe in something. Secondly, it is a question of personality: you need to have an inner confidence that allows you to trust your creative instincts - although there always room for doubt and self-scrutiny. And thirdly, it is a question of an awareness of fashion, cultural trends and history. As designers we often like to think we are above fashion, but we rarely are. The human appetite for novelty, and the tidal pull of the zeitgeist, makes staying aloof from fashion almost impossible for most designers. Traditional graphic design linking warns designers of the perils of fashion, and certainly if you are a slave to fashion, you will become its victim. Yet all good designers are attuned to fashion: they cherry-pick from new and emergent trends; they adopt certain stylistic gestures and avoid other overexposed modes of expression that once seemed new and fresh. But they are careful and selective in what they take. And the way to keep the pull of fashion in check is to know your design history - which, thanks to design's protean nature, means 'yesterday' as well as a hundred years ago.

Before we look at the practical factors that have to be contended with during the creative process, it's worth mentioning a fixation, held by many designers, that has a great influence on the way designers function in the post-modern world where everything, seemingly, has already been done. I'm talking about the concept of originality. Most designers are untroubled by the notion of originality, but others are obsessed with it, and I see many problems caused by the delusional quest for originality. In my view originality is an overrated and misunderstood quality in contemporary graphic design. Copying is bad, no question. Infringing someone's copyright (stealing their work or their ideas) for personal gain is immoral, not to mention illegal in most countries. But the only people who copy are the terminally second-rate and the downright dishonest, whereas the good designer freely borrows and adapts from sources in precisely the way artists have done for centuries. And furthermore, the good designer readily admits to this 'appropriation.' It is a quality of many good designers that their influences and sources are clearly visible and readily acknowledged.

Let's not kid ourselves that day-of-creation originality is possible in graphic design. Designers are locked in an interconnecting matrix of tradition and shared sensibility. All designers can hope to do is acquire a voice, a fingerprint, that they can call their own. This voice, paradoxically, is most readily acquired by opening ourselves up to the influence of other schools of design and visual art. My personal philosophy is that it is right to borrow and to be influenced by visual material as long as you are not slavishly copying it, and as long as you use these sources to make

something demonstrably new. Yet many good designers find this hard. They have grown up in a culture where originality is prized, and as a consequence they take refuge in bland, non-expressive modes of design for fear of being called 'unoriginal: The British designer Julian House, who I worked with closely at Intro for a number of years, has clear views on this question. 'I don't believe in originality as an absolute; he states. 'I think it's more to do with interesting twists on existing forms. Borrowing from the Modernist designers of the recent past, for instance, is not plagiarism; it's more a continuation of the processes and ideas that they set in motion. I'm influenced by Polish poster art of the 1960s, which was influenced by Pop Art and Surrealism, and which in turn appropriated commercial art, comic book art, cinema and Victorian engravings, etc. I think the key to whether it's good or not lies in the viewer's response to a piece of design. Do they say "I've seen it before" or, "I've seen it before but not in that way."

In other words, it is acceptable to borrow from, and be influenced by, for example, the Victorian illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, like the English psychedelic poster artists did in the late sixties, if you make something new out of it. Picasso did it with African masks - in his use of these beautiful images he performed an act of transformation that allowed us to see something new.

Allowing influences into your work is one of the ways that you expand your expressive range. Designers enrich their work - not diminish it - by looking for ways to 'incorporate' new and radical modes-of expression into their work, especially from places outside contemporary design. Shutting out influences because of an obsession with 'originality' is a trap. But you have to be able to acknowledge the debt to your sources. Copyists never own up to it; the talented always do. That's the difference.

The brief

All design jobs start with a brief; even if it's a self-initiated project, a designer must have a brief. And the first duty of a graphic designer is to understand the brief. To do this, you must research, question it and, if necessary, challenge it. And if, after all that, it still doesn't make sense you might need to tear it up and rewrite it. In some cases you might need to walk away from it as not all briefs are worth taking on. Learning to say no to bad briefs is a vital judgment that all designers have to learn how and when to make,

Briefs can be verbal, they can be written, and sometimes they are neither. I've had clients - usually long-standing clients - who've sent me a photograph and some text and said: 'Poster by Friday, thanks: I suppose even that is a sort of brief: they know that I know what they want, so nothing more need be said, But this is not the usual way, It is much more common to have a written or verbal brief. Sometimes the brief is a discussion. This is okay, but it always pays to get clients to put briefs in writing: it adds clarity and it forces a thorough examination of the subject. However, some clients just don't do it. This reluctance should set off an alarm bell. It should prompt the question: is this client reliable and serious? Clients who don't brief properly are

potentially dangerous. It is often their way of colonizing a job, of talking it over, of gaining the upper hand. Without a brief a designer is vulnerable, and all the power rests with the client. If a client doesn't give you a written brief, you must write one yourself and send it back to him or her for approval. Writing your own brief from a client's instruction is a good discipline. It makes you think deeply about the project and it puts you into the mind of the client. And as we've noted in an earlier chapter, this is one of the secrets of a successful client-designer relationship.

Most design briefs in the commercial world are shoddy, half-baked and unpromising. When these run-of-the mill briefs come your way, you have to fight to make them into 'good briefs: Sometimes you will fail. Sometimes you will push too hard and you will come into conflict with your client, and you will be given the boot. But on other occasions, you will succeed in turning a base-metal brief into a block of shining gold. It's all a question of attitude (allied with good communication skills and integrity). Many briefs include attempts to pre-empt the creative process. In other words, they try to do the designer's job for them. Sometimes this is an unavoidable characteristic of the job. The client knows what they want and they are saying it. But generally it is a recipe for failure. How you deal with this, and other shortcomings of the briefing process, will determine your degree of success.

The first thing you have to do is start with the premise that even a bad brief is really a good brief; assuming a sound moral and ethical base, there is no such thing as a bad brief - only a bad response. But let's assume that your client has given you a comprehensive, well-thought-out brief stating all the requirements of the job; and that you have agreed to the schedule and budget. What happens next? Well, written briefs do not preclude you from having further discussions with your client about the project. This will throw up interesting information and reveal nuances perhaps not covered in the document. It will also allow you to test your preliminary thinking on your client. Naturally, you must fully absorb the written brief; don't just concentrate on the bits you like the look of, or those bits that give you the chance to do what you do best: dig deep and look for problem areas. If you are working with a team, go through it with other members of the team, make sure you all see it in the same way (remarkably difficult to achieve, everybody gets snared and snagged on different aspects of the project). And, importantly, you must look for the 'McGuffin:

The McGuffin was the name of a dramatic device used by Alfred Hitchcock in his movies to catch the audience's attention. The McGuffin had no real relevance to the plot: in *Psycho*, for instance, the McGuffin was Janet Leigh's theft of the money. Hitchcock used this to suck the audience into the unexpected final third of the film. I'm not suggesting you look for dramatic devices in design briefs. I'm co-opting the term (with apologies to the great Hitch) to suggest the magic component in all briefs that you have to find to explain them. In every brief there's a McGuffin that unlocks the essential nature of the task. You just have to find it.

Here's an example of what I mean. I was recently part of a team invited to pitch for the redesign of a staid real estate magazine. It was a journal for the professional

sector of the UK real estate market, read by developers, investors, architects and property conglomerates. The magazine had received a full-scale graphic makeover by a leading international design company in the mid-nineties, but was now showing its age. An exhaustive and detailed brief was supplied to us. My colleagues and I sifted through the well-written document. We discussed it in detail, we analyzed it, we tried to condense it, and we looked for the McGuffin.

The brief stated that a redesign was necessary because the existing design was dated. It pointed out that various navigational improvements were required to reflect the magazine's changing editorial make-up. And it listed some requirements concerning the accommodation of new features and advertising. The brief went into copious and helpful detail about its readership and its competitors on the news stands. But we couldn't find the McGuffin.

It was only in discussion with the magazine's art director and editor that the McGuffin was identified. The property market, it was explained, had changed dramatically since the mid-nineties. It used to be a business for rich men with cigars, pinstripe suits and Rolls-Royces. Today, it has become a much less formal business; it is populated by younger people of both sexes, many of whom wear casual clothes to work, and who value design (interior design, architecture and graphic design) as an essential part of the property-development process. We'd noticed that printed literature and billboards put up by real estate companies and developers had become 'sexy'. The property world, we noticed, had woken up to good design.

Here was our McGuffin: the magic equation that gave us our winning formula. We based our response on the idea that the magazine's new design had to combine informality with high contemporary style while continuing to function as a digest of news and comment, with its attendant production and editorial demands. In our presentation, we convinced the publisher, the editor, the advertising manager and the art director that this was the right answer.

Every brief has its McGuffin; the designer's job is to find it. Sometimes it's there already, identified and isolated by the client. No need to search for it, it's staring you in the face. But more often it is absent. Experience helps you find it, but so does diligence and research and asking questions. If you don't find it, you are unlikely to produce a great piece of rounded work.

Sometimes -briefs are simply wrong, and it is occasionally necessary to disobey them. 'Wrong' briefs make assumptions and outline premises that are incorrect, feeble or short-sighted. When you spot this, you have a choice. You can rewrite the brief; you can walk away from it; or you can do what is asked of you. There's yet another option, and that is to disobey the brief and do what you think is right. With this approach you risk everything: you risk incurring the client's displeasure, and you risk being sacked from a project or thrown off a pitch list. But if you are confident that you are right, and you can live with the consequences, it's worth following your instinct and being disobedient.

There is the most spectacular example of disobeying a 'wrong' brief, in the work of Bruno Monguzzi, the great Swiss designer. Monguzzi was called in by the Musee d'Orsay in Paris, after a design competition had failed to produce a winning poster with which to launch the newly opened museum. Monguzzi was instructed to design a poster avoiding pictorial imagery and using only two elements: the museum logo (which Monguzzi had designed) and the date. Monguzzi describes his response:

'So here I was at home with a new brief and began to endlessly play around with the date and the logo, the logo and the date, getting nowhere. Nothing was happening, nothing was opening, nothing was beginning. I walked over to my books, picked up a [Henri] Lartigue album, and slowly began to go through the pages. When I came to the image of his brother taking off with a glider that their uncle had constructed at chateau Rouzat, I knew I had the answer. The fly had broken the web.

'And here I was, back in Paris again, with Jean Jenger [the director] and Leone Nora [public relations], knowing I had disobeyed. I was using a photograph, and no image was to be used. Jenger got very upset. He said that we had all agreed that no work of art should appear on the poster. And that anyway it was not "le musee de J'aviation."

'I said that it was a metaphor and that the people that knew the logo knew what the museum was all about. I nevertheless added that the poster had to be their poster. That it should belong to them. But Jenger had stopped listening and began to talk to himself pacing nervously up and down the room. I tried to interrupt him, asserting that he did not have to convince me. He said he was thinking. My eyes met the eyes of Madame Nora, which were a bit perplexed, but very beautiful, and we sat down.

'Jenger would sometimes stop, look at the poster, and then start his gymnastics all over again. I think he was trying to imagine the possible reactions of all the people he really or virtually knew. A kind of French human comedy with an unexpected end. "Monguzzi," he said, "I am so convinced that the poster is right, that I will bring it myself to Rigaud" [the president of the museum]. The following day a worried Madame Nora was on the phone. The Lartigue Foundation does not allow the cropping of Lartigue's photographs. Not knowing which way to turn I asked her to try showing the project to the Foundation anyway. Not only were we allowed to use the photograph as planned, but a vintage print of that shot was given to the museum. It was the fourth Lartigue to enter the collection: 3

- Taken from Bruno Monguzzi, *A Designer's Perspective*, Baltimore: The Fine Arts Gallery. 3 1998.

There are three important lessons to be gleaned from this extract. The first is that it is sometimes necessary to disobey a brief when you know it to be wrong. It was clear that the museum director was wrong - or at best short-sighted - to prohibit the use of pictorial imagery and impose restrictions on the designer. (It almost certainly

explains why the competition entries were all regarded as worthless -they'd followed the brief and were consequently bloodless and ineffectual.) But by disregarding the brief, Monguzzi produced an enduring piece of work that would have had much less impact if he'd followed his client's instructions which effectively neutered him.

The second lesson is less obvious. In this account of his experience of designing a poster, Monguzzi illustrates the need to give new work time to become assimilated by the client. As I pointed out in the chapter devoted to clients, designers often expect instant responses to their work. We are impatient and demand immediate approval, when what clients need is time to absorb and reflect. The client brings his or her own expectations to any work they are seeing for the first time. These expectations have to be sifted through before an objective and considered response can be formulated. The museum director went from disapproval to enthusiastic acceptance, but he didn't do it instantly. And Monguzzi knew to give him time.

The final lesson is less quantifiable than the previous two. Monguzzi's story goes some way towards proving a rather misty-eyed theory of mine, which is that when a work of design is right, no matter how challenging and off-brief it may appear, it will win acceptance. I admit to a bit of designer utopianism here, and we could have an interesting debate about what 'right' means in this context. And yes, I know designers will point to cabinets full of rejected work and say 'I did this brilliant design and look, it got rejected: But, I still believe that when we get it right, when we create something that is in every way correct, it is recognized even by the most dim-witted clients. Monguzzi's story comes close to proving my rickety theory.

Self-initiated briefs

The notion of self-initiated briefs - graphic authorship, as it is often called - currently occupies a prominent position in design discourse. In my view, self-initiated projects and the notion of 'pure' graphic authorship are well intentioned but flawed as concepts. Graphic designers need briefs. A graphic designer who doesn't need a brief isn't a graphic designer: he or she might be an artist or a metaphysical poet, but they're not graphic designers. The need for a brief is hard-wired into the designer's psyche. In fact, although designers constantly demand freedom, they really crave constraint. It's a little recognized fact, but designers are only happy when they are battling with restraints. Of course, many designers like to erect their own barriers and live by their own rules, and a natural offshoot of this is the desire for self-authored briefs. But this shouldn't be confused with pure authorship: all it means is that designers are combining the role of client and designer. I'm not decrying the notion of self-initiated projects. I am saying, however, that the graphic designer's mentality is suited, thanks to education, temperament and tradition, to responding to a brief. Perhaps there will emerge a new superstrain of mutant designers who have evolved beyond the point of needing a brief; but I doubt it.

The commonly held view is that designers need briefs because designers are problem solvers. I don't like the term 'problem solvers'; it seems to play into the

hands of those who see design as a purely mechanistic process although it must be said that many of the best designers consider themselves to be 'problem solvers; and produce resonant and lasting work accordingly. But my feeling is that the term 'problem solver' only defines one part of what designers do, and often denies the aesthetic nature of design (it doesn't matter what it looks like as long as it 'solves the problem'). Designers need briefs like cars need fuel: they don't work otherwise. Designers who work from briefs are still authors, but it's authorship in the sense that they have created something in response to a set of defined requirements and taken into account a number of relevant conditions (purpose, commercial considerations, budget, time, media channels, etc.).

Research

Before starting a new project, designers frequently go off into a corner with a favorite pile of books (usually the same ones as last time) and skim through them looking for ideas. Nothing wrong with this. We all do it. We're not necessarily setting out to copy ideas; we're looking for triggers to set off a chain reaction of inspiration. But it is a good idea to try and find different sources for inspiration; it is a good idea to look for triggers in unlikely places.

Research is easier now than it once was. The Internet puts a Niagara Falls of data at our fingertips. It's easy to find information on any subject. Knowledge is power: the more we know, the better we function, and that's true whether you are a street cleaner or a designer. However, looking for - and finding - inspiration is not the same as doing research. I mentioned at the beginning of this book that cultural awareness was one of the prime attributes of the modern designer. Cultural awareness, when it's backed up with specifically targeted research, is the high-octane fuel that drives great ideas. Careful research can open up creative possibilities that would otherwise remain locked to us. It is also vital that designers do research if only to provide rationales for their work. As I've already noted, it's not good enough to say: 'I've done it this way because I like it. You have to have a reason, and that reason has to be objective.

Clients often urge designers to 'study the competition: If a company asks you to design their website, they will probably suggest that you look at the websites of their competitors. Nothing wrong with this, designers should certainly study the activities of their client's competitors. But it's worth remembering that your client is probably encouraging you to look at the competition so that you will create something that 'looks like' the competition. For some designers, this is acceptable: they regard themselves as professional servants and are happy to oblige. For the independent-minded graphic designer, however, this is anathema. Yet, it is only by studying the sites of your client's competitors that you will have the ammunition to argue your case for making a strong and original execution. Clients have a herd instinct (many designers have too) and if you want to do original and distinctive work, you will need to break this down, and you can only do this with high-end creativity backed up by well-researched argument.

One piece of research that designers often omit - with disastrous consequences - is that they don't bother to read the text they are asked to design. Now, designers are often supplied with feeble texts in the first place, nevertheless, you are not going to create anything with any lasting merit unless you read it, and respond by coaxing out its true meaning with sympathetic typography and layout. This is a tough lesson and I only learned it when I started to write about design myself. I saw the way that some publications took great care over the way my texts were presented, while others simply flowed it in giving no thought to line breaks, hyphenation, leading and all the other subtleties that make up meaningful design. Do you want to know how to be a great typographer? Learn to handle text by writing text yourself and then laying it out. Nothing sharpens up the typographer's eye more than sweating over the composition of a 2,000-word essay and then rendering it typographically; just as few things sting as cruelly as writing 2,000 words and then seeing your efforts destroyed by crass, unsympathetic typography. This simple experiment - write your own text and then lay it out - will transform your perspective on typography and layout instantly.

Process

Graphic design is now almost entirely a digital activity. Indeed, if you want it to be, design can be 100 per cent digital: as a designer you need never again hold a pencil or develop a photographic print from a negative, or create a font by hand. It can all be done with a computer. The computer has revolutionized the design process. It has made the act of designing easier, and in many ways it has improved the way we design things. Yet in other respects it has made design more formulaic, and it has standardized the act of designing. Before computers, designers worked in ways that suited them temperamentally. Some operated surrounded by piles of paper, books, type specimen sheets and drafting equipment, using pencils and markers to map out fluid design concepts. Others worked within strictly controlled parameters using methodical precision to create structured and rational work. Some stood at drawing boards, while others sat crouched over their work like Victorian ledger clerks. Today, thanks to speed-of-light microprocessors and do-everything software, we all design in the same way: we sit lifelessly, only our wrists moving, as we stare at a screen. Our focus has narrowed. We rarely look at our work from a distance. We rarely look at it from different angles. We often work in miniature. We avoid anything that can't be done 'on' the computer. The screen dictates our relationship to our work - it dictates how our work looks.

I'm not anti-computer. Far from it. The computer enables us to do more work, and it enables us to operate with greater technical proficiency. It can't do everything, but it has freed the designer from drudgery, and it has brought within the grasp of any designer who can afford a computer modes of graphic expression that were once nearly impossible to achieve, because of cost or technical complexity. The computer is a good thing. No question about it. But with the computer has come a set of problems that, virus-like, infect the actual process of design. What used to be slow and methodical is now fast and often slipshod: ask a designer to produce some logo

ideas and you'll get dozens of versions in roughly the time it takes to think them into existence.

The computer allows the designer to explore countless options. Before computers, you had to trace off letterforms, or hand-render text, or represent pictures with magic-marker sketches; it might take an entire morning to render a headline, or days to prepare a mock-up of a typographic layout, or months to create a typeface. Neville Brody tells the story of the epiphany like moment when he saw, for the first time, Fontographer being used to create a font. Up until this point, Brody had been laboriously drawing alphabets by hand (as had been the case for centuries), but now here was a way that meant it could be done in a fraction of the time. Brody became a digital convert. He was among the first high-profile converts to the computer in design.

But with speed of execution comes another problem - a very digital problem. With the ability to produce so much work, it's harder to know whether what you are doing is any good. Ian Anderson, the self-taught graphic designer and founder of The Designers Republic, was asked if he ever had designers block. Anderson replied: 'My problem in that area, and it sounds an arrogant thing to say, is there are too many ideas, and information overload. Then it's how do I get everything I want to say into this thing. I can't remember a time when I didn't know what to do or didn't know how to do it. It's much more about which route to take. If you have a block you should just walk around it or start your own journey from a different place. Looking at something in a different way requires the discipline of giving up what you already have. Sometimes the only way to move forward is to dump everything and start again. Then you will find the work you have already completed helps inform your new direction.'

Anderson has touched on a uniquely digital problem facing the contemporary designer. He is talking about the importance of the designer's role as 'editor: Editing is the great skill of the digital era. Now that we can produce a surfeit of everything, the ability to know what to 'retain' and what to 'discard' is essential. In the digital domain you can have everything you want (as Anderson says: 'too many ideas' or 'information overload'). With digital cameras we can incorporate images within seconds; we can scan anything that can be fitted onto a scanner; we can have any typeface, any effect, and we can have it now. So when Anderson talks about taking alternative 'routes'; starting journeys from a 'different place'; dumping everything and starting again, he is really talking about editing.

How do you edit? You have to ask yourself a few questions. Is the work true to your philosophy of what constitutes good design? In other words, does the work have integrity? To be a good editor, you also need time and distance. By all means create thirty logos before lunch time, but don't send them until the following day. Print them out, pin them on the wall, and go home. Come back the next day, and you will see things that you didn't see yesterday. Ask friends and other designers what they think.

This is editing: filtering your work to eliminate the feeble and promote the remarkable. Never show thirty logos to a client; of those thirty you designed, show only three, or at most four versions. Showing more shows you to be indecisive (no editing skills) and creates a picture of graphic design as a shotgun process. If you are really brave and confident show only the one you think is best (remember not to say you've done it because you like it); but it's usually better to show three versions covering three different angles of approach.

Ian Anderson also alludes to another process that is a direct by-product of the digital way of working: iteration. Digital tools allow the designer to 'iterate' on a grand scale. 'Thirty logos by end of the day? No problem. Color and mono versions in varying sizes? No problem. They'll be loaded onto an FTP site by 5 pm. Call me when you've seen them: This is business in real time. It's what the modern world is about. If you can't do thirty logos by 5 pm for your client in Singapore (you're in Seattle) someone else will. But hang on, what about quality? The iterative process means that you can work your way through countless options, but unless you are applying careful editing powers as you go, you will end up with a soup of indifferent ideas, remarkable only for their plentifulness. Modern designers must use the gift of iteration to work towards a conclusion rather than as an opportunity to explore every known avenue. In the pre-digital era, the designer had to think harder about the final destination, because iteration wasn't possible on any scale. Few of us would go back to that way of working, but we nevertheless must learn to structure our work so that we progress in a straight line rather than a serpentine loop that never arrives anywhere.

Nor must we be frightened of failure. All great endeavours flirt with failure at some point in their existence. Only the irredeemably bland avoids looking into the abyss. The great writer and semiotician Umberto Eco, writing about contemporary processes of scientific discovery said: 'Modern science does not hold that what is new is always right. On the contrary, it is based on the principle of "fallibilism" ... according to which science progresses by continually correcting itself, falsifying its hypotheses by trial and error, admitting its own mistakes - and by considering that an experiment that doesn't work out is not a failure but is worth as much as a successful one because it proves that a certain line of research was mistaken and it is necessary either to change direction or even to start over from scratch:

'Fallibilism' should be the guiding principle for all graphic designers. When the designer falls back on existing templates of thinking, and habitual visual reflexes and patterns, sterility is the result. It is only by daring to experiment, and by taking risks, that rich and meaningful design is created. This is especially so in the digital domain, where fallibilism becomes doubly relevant. The computer, with its speed-of-thought processing power, enables the designer to explore and execute ideas with a twist of the wrist. But there is no advantage in this ability to experiment if we don't use it as an opportunity to leap into the void.

Criteria for good work

What constitutes good work? For one designer, a hand-painted sign on the side of a fruit stall in Mumbai is the pinnacle of graphic excellence. For another, it is the modular typography of Wim Crouwel. For yet another, it's the street-swagger of well-executed graffiti. These are aesthetic questions, and as such are personal to the individual designer - and, of necessity, to the designer's client and audience. The answer will always be subjective. I'm not going to tell you which of these I think is best, but I can give you some practical criteria for evaluating your own work. There are three questions to ask yourself at the end of every job. Is the client happy? Is the job profitable? Is the project newsworthy?

I'm afraid these seem depressingly prosaic when spelled out baldly like this. Has all your hard work, your idealism, your love of design, come down to this? Well, I'm afraid to say the answer is at least partly, yes. But, let's look at these three conditions, they may be blunt and mundane, but they are stepping stones on the way to enlightenment.

Is the client happy? Pretty crucial when you think about it. If the client isn't happy you've got problems. You may have executed a great piece of work, it might even occupy the prime spot in your portfolio, but if your client isn't happy with it you might be in trouble. At worst, it might mean that you don't get paid: if it's a big job, with a large fee involved, perhaps substantial outside costs, this can be catastrophic. It might also mean that you don't get any more work from that client. It will almost certainly mean that you won't get any recommendations or referrals from that client. And perhaps most painful of all, you will know that you have failed as a graphic designer. By the nature of design we are obliged to make our clients happy. To fail to do this is to fail as a graphic designer.