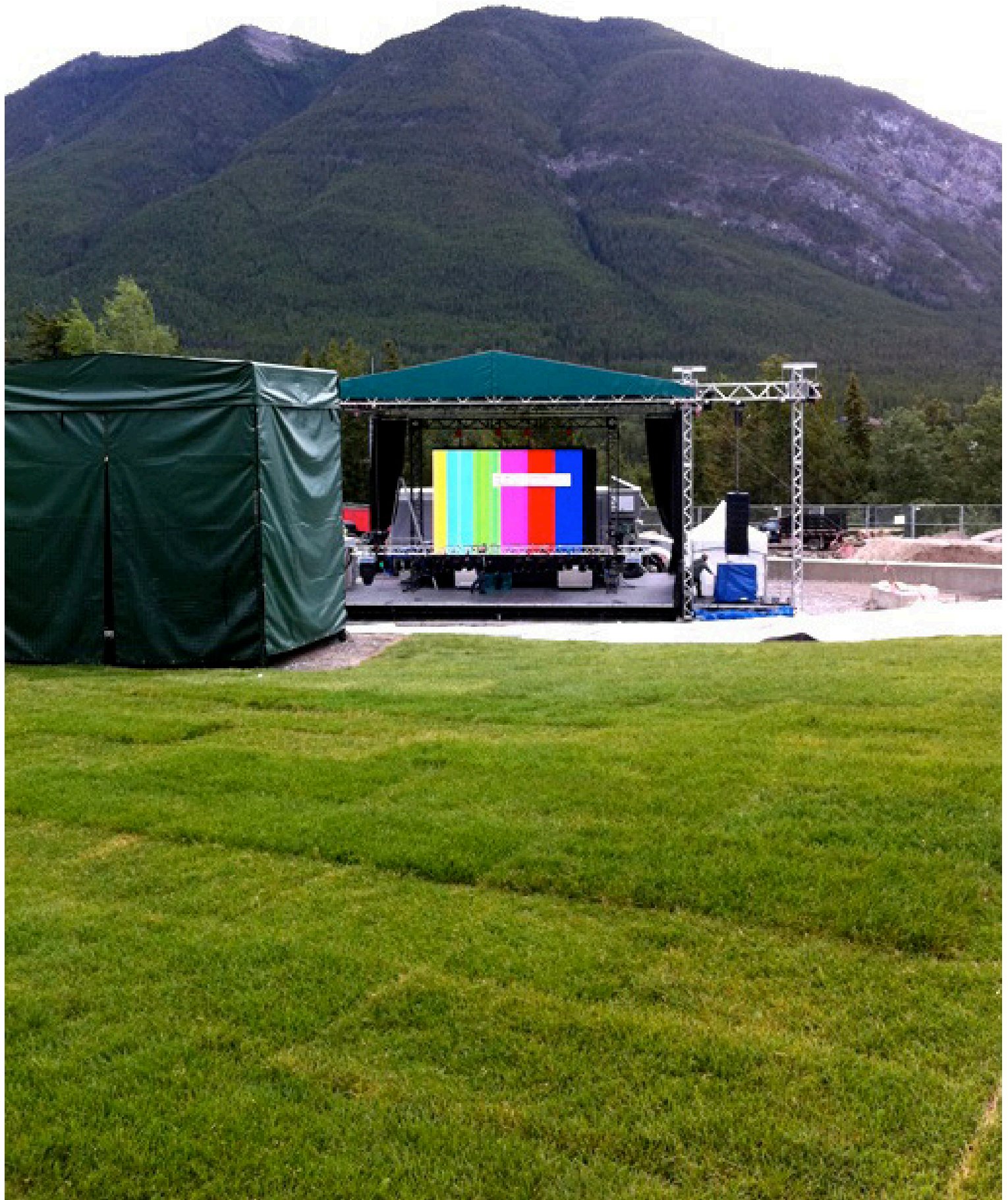
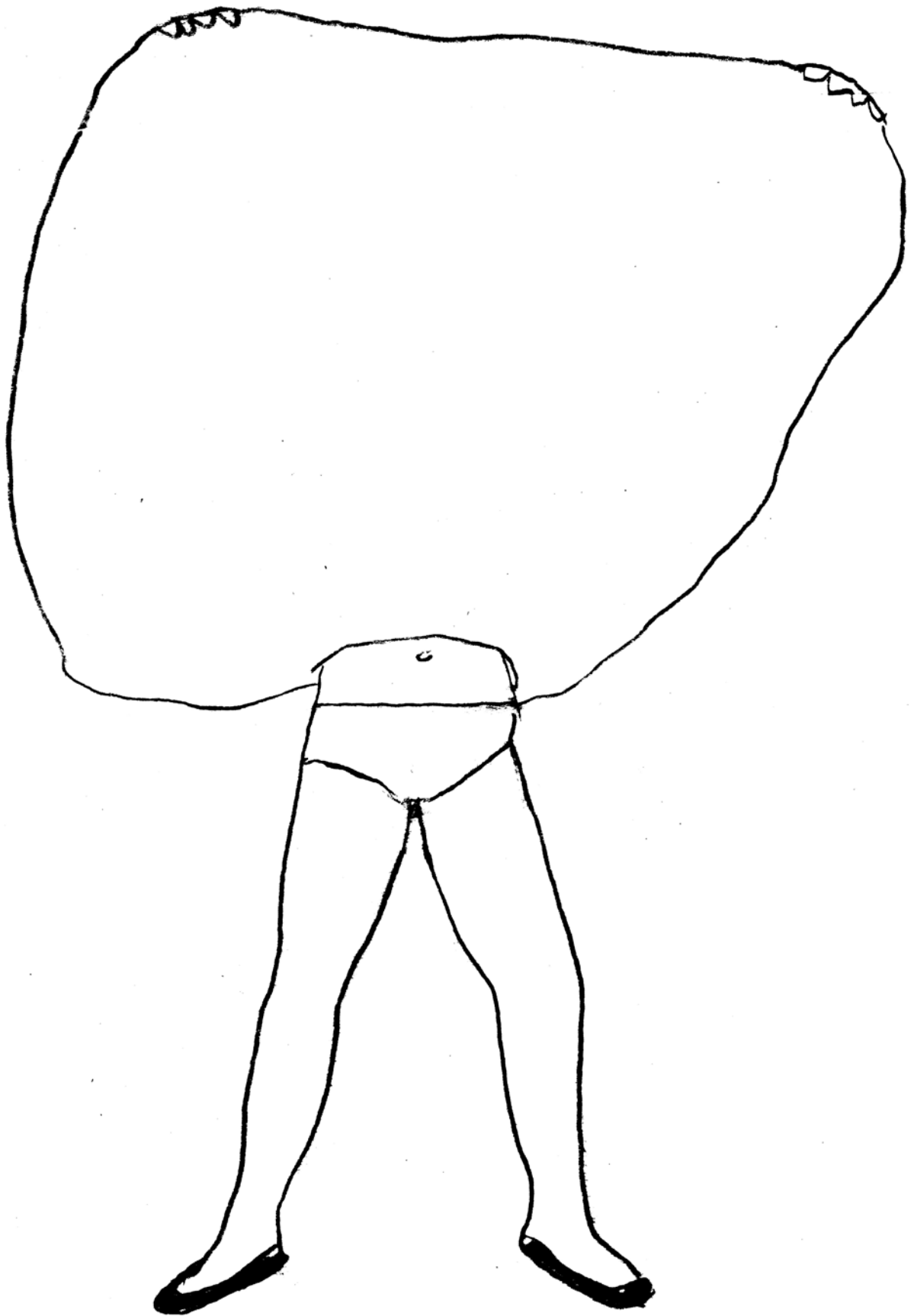


**Towards a Critical Faculty
(Only an Attitude of Orientation)
From the Toolbox of a Serving Library**





(Only an Attitude of Orientation)

Another pamphlet concerned with art/design education compiled by Stuart Bailey as a sequel to “Towards a Critical Faculty” Edited and published by Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Oslo, winter 2009–10

Like its predecessor, this pamphlet aims to provoke a discussion around how a contemporary art/design school might reasonably reconfigure itself in light of recent and projected changes in how institutions and disciplines actually operate in the early 21st century.

Here's an opportunity to freely imagine what should be done, unhindered by administrative worries about what can't possibly be done. (Stark, 2007)

The premise of “Towards a Critical Faculty” was to attempt to grasp what my colleagues meant by “design thinking.” Though I initially considered this term a tautology, they considered it a major aim of contemporary art/design education. And so I ended up trying to perform what I presumed it meant—a kind of loose, cross-disciplinary problem solving—by collecting past and present fragments of insight that I thought ought to inform a future mandate. Where the majority of those excerpts were directly concerned with pedagogy, from seminal Arts & Crafts and Bauhaus statements onwards, this follow-up looks further afield, seeking tangential reinforcement and extension of the same line of thinking. Its sources are drawn from the poppier end of sociology, philosophy, and literature. In fact, most of its sources touch on all three.

If the first pamphlet tried to summarize the lay of the land, this one tries to summon the outcome its inhabitants might be teaching *towards*. Readers are referred to the disclaimers listed the first time around, and are particularly asked to bear with my sidestepping such basic distinctions as art/design and under/postgraduate. Although I think this reflects the general confusion, the idea isn't to perpetuate it—only to focus the energies of this reader elsewhere for the time being. I should, however, add one new point: this approach isn't *against* teaching basic skills and techniques (whether analogue or digital), history or theory, only *for* an explicit consensus regarding the whole those components are supposed to constitute. Before beginning, I'd like to reiterate that these pamphlets make no claim to authority, only to engage and entertain both staff and students—ideally at the same time.

1. Pragmatism

Although I consider this pamphlet a reader like the last one, this time I'm going to paraphrase its sources instead of directly quoting them, hoping to absorb their lessons deeply enough to pass them on with conviction. Actually, I'm going to start two layers out, by paraphrasing my colleague David Reinfurt paraphrasing William James, the American philosopher who began his famous series of lectures on Pragmatism with the following anecdote.

On a camping trip, James returns from a walk to find his fellow campers engaged in a hypothetical dispute about a man, a tree, and a squirrel. The squirrel is clinging to one side of the tree and the man is directly opposite on the other side of it. Every time the man moves around the tree to glimpse the squirrel, it moves equally as fast in the opposite direction. While it's evident that the man goes round the tree, the argument revolves around the question: *does he go round the squirrel?* The group is divided on the issue, and James is called upon to make the casting vote.

The philosopher recalls the adage “whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction,” and proclaims that the correct answer depends on what the group agrees “going round” actually means. There are two possibilities: if taken to mean *passing to the north then east then south then west*, then the man *does* go round the squirrel; if taken to mean being *in front then to the left then behind then to the right*, then he *does not*. Make the distinction, says James, and there is no ambiguity—both parties are right or wrong depending on how the verb “to go round” is practically conceived. The key here is the word “practically,” as James's point is precisely founded on hard facts rather than soft abstractions.

James recounts the anecdote because it provides a “peculiarly simple” example of *the pragmatic method*. I was first introduced to the idea by David, who opened his own lecture with the same story. Titled “Naïve Set Theory,” this talk comprised three parts, each a compressed story of a man's lasting contribution to his discipline, as chronicled in a particular book. To cut this short story even shorter, these were: William James's conception of Pragmatic (as opposed to Rationalist) philosophy, Kurt Gödel's Naïve (as opposed to Axiomatic) approach to mathematics, and Paul R. Halmos's Naïve (as opposed to Axiomatic) approach to logic. By the end of the talk it's clear that, despite hopping across disciplines and skirting around some quite complex ideas (at least for newcomers), each example is an articulation of the same basic idea: that the ongoing process of *attempting to understand*—though never really understanding completely—is *absolutely productive*. The relentless attempt to understand is what keeps any practice moving forward.

James's (and David's) attitude is marked by both a rejection of absolute *truths*, and faith in verifiable *facts*. This is staunch empiricist thinking, founded on the notion that “beliefs” are—practically speaking—“rules for action,” and that we need only perceive their potential function and/or outcome in order to determine their significance. James sums up the pragmatic method as *only an attitude of orientation*, of looking away from first things (preconceptions, principles, categories) and towards last things (results, fruits, and consequences).

There are two introductory points to draw from this. First, that an *attitude* like empiricism might be usefully identified and its implications drawn out and considered across disciplines. Second, that it's useful to start with the result in mind and work backwards, in order to design a method oriented towards achieving that outcome. And so in accordance with both: the hoped-for results of our as-yet phantom course are precisely the attitudes demonstrated by the following examples.

2. Discomfort

In 2001 the British cultural critic Michael Bracewell published *The Nineties*, an account of the decade's art, society, and, in particular, pop culture. In an introductory conversation between two “culture-vulturing city slickers” that frames the rest of the book, one remarks to the other that culture is “wound on an ever-tightening coil.” He's referring to the momentum of art assimilating and reproducing itself according to the logic of the phrase “Pop will eat itself” (itself the name of a very nineties' band). This account of unprecedented cultural self-consciousness is backed up by a list of dominant trends, that include the subtle shift from yuppie bullishness to its rehabilitation as “attitude”; irony supplanted by “authenticity” as the temper of the zeitgeist, most patently manifest in Reality and Conflict TV; and the encroaching sense of culture having been distinctly *designed* by media, retail or advertising—a state of high mediation, of “culture” wrapped in quotation marks. In other words, Bracewell argues, millennial culture is characterized by how it wants to project itself, how it *wants to appear to be* rather than *just being what it is*, and this gap between appearance and actuality is getting bigger.

Largely assembled from a collection of concise, diverse profiles originally written for a variety of style and Sunday supplement magazines during the decade itself, *The Nineties* operates at an odd speed. The book combines the immediacy and involvement of real-time journalism with the delay and detachment of reflective commentary. Its affairs remain too recent, and their effects too tangible, to be considered at a comfortable remove, as “history.” Considered in relation to a school with an obvious stake in contemporary culture, what we might call the book’s *keen disinterest in immediate history* offers a working model, an editorial premise that aims to register the condition *in situ*—or as close as seems feasible.

One of Bracewell’s more vivid conceits is to isolate “frothy coffee” as the decade’s all-purpose signifier, one of a few infantile treats he suggests amount to the “Trojan Horse of cultural materialism.” On reading this, a friend noted the not unlikely scenario of reading about what Bracewell calls the “Death by Cappuccino effect” *while drinking a cappuccino*, and it occurred to me that in an art/design school, such discomfiting self-awareness might be harnessed towards realizing a sense of “criticism” more pertinent than the usual discussion of work within whatever disciplinary vacuum. A “criticism,” rather, that refers to the ability and inclination to confront, engage with, and communally discuss a subject *as it happens*—whether a piece of work, a cultural condition, or the relation between the two. The end of Bracewell’s summary seems to call for as much, diagnosing the cumulative outcome of the nineties as “post-political,” a state of impotence characterized by a “fear of subjectivity.” Slavoj Žižek similarly evokes a state where reflection and reflexivity have been undermined to such an extent that “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Capitalism.” The aim of this exercise would be to nurture this critical attitude in view of reinstating a more athletic sense of agency.

In his essay “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” Italo Calvino describes the constructive generosity of literature that deliberately sets out to disorient its reader. He argues that by means of recursion, involution, and other heady techniques of metafiction, the labyrinthine constructions of such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jorge Luis Borges lead away from any comfortable sense of narrative continuum, and that the effort of maintaining a mental grasp on the writing, of constantly reorienting oneself to cope, constitutes its own very particular aesthetic experience. Such experience has obvious pedagogical implications, and Calvino himself referred to such techniques as a kind of “training for survival.”

3. Definition

Calvino is essentially describing (and promoting) the process of making a form strange in order to resist both one’s own preconceptions and the weight of others’ opinions. (“Make it new,” as Ezra Pound famously translated Copernicus.) A usefully exaggerated example of this is Semantic Translation, a poetic technique conceived by the Polish writer, film-maker and publisher Stefan Themerson, that manages to be at once ferociously ironic and straight-up hilarious. According to its inventor, Semantic Poetry Translation (SPT) is “a machine made using certain parts of my brain,” as demonstrated most prominently his novella *Bayamus*. Fundamentally, SPT takes a grey area of meaning and attempts to pinpoint and clarify it. He introduces the process in order to reclaim poetry from the mouths of “political demagogues” who in the twentieth century began to adopt the tools of poets—repetition, alliteration, etc.—towards their own dubious ends. The idea is to restore emptied-out words, clichés and platitudes with their fullest, specific meanings by supplanting them with their precise, verbose dictionary definitions. The method is usually demonstrated by comparing existing poems or songs with a semantically translated version.

For example, from this:

The wine among the flowers,
O lonely me!

—to this:

The fermented
grape-
juice
among the reproductive
parts
of
seed-plants

O! I’m conscious
of
my state
of
being isolated
from
others!

But Semantic Translation is more double-edged than this brief description suggests. Although it is *ostensibly* an attempt to reclaim the “truth” behind words, the proposition is essentially ironic, not proselytizing. It’s more accurate to say that at best “truths” are more properly “beliefs,” and that beliefs should be treated with the utmost suspicion. One of the great benefits of the technique is that it reminds us how “the world is more complicated than the language we use to talk about it.” The nature of reading through the pedantic extent of a piece of Semantic Translation is to experience language made strange, to perceive both its technical depth along with its limitations. Themerson referred to the process as “scratching the form to reveal the content.”

In an astute summary of Themerson’s intentions, Mike Sperlinger recently noted that his promotion of “clarification of meaning” is essentially parodic. The clarification that’s *actually* happening, says Sperlinger, is that it’s *impossible* to “truly” clarify meaning because “meaning is always going to escape and proliferate.” I had this in mind when recently asked to write a definition of Graphic Design for a new *Design Dictionary*. I used the opportunity to attempt a discipline-specific overview in the same candid spirit as Bracewell’s culture-wide *Nineties*, i.e. to summarize the general landscape as plainly and accurately as possible, as opposed to the version a school administration would advertise (whether to sell to parents or students). Here’s an excerpt:

Rather than the way things work, Graphic Design is still largely (popularly) perceived as referring to the way things look: surface, style, and increasingly, spin. It is written about and documented largely in terms of its representation of the zeitgeist. In recent decades, Graphic Design has become associated foremost with commerce, becoming virtually synonymous with corporate identity and advertising, while its role in more intellectual pursuits is increasingly marginalized. Furthermore, through a complex of factors characteristic of late Capitalism, many of the more strategic aspects of Graphic Design are undertaken by those working in “middle-management” positions, typically Public Relations or Marketing departments. Under these conditions, those working under the title Graphic Designer fulfill only the production (typesetting, page makeup, programming) at the tail-end of this system.

On the other hand, in line with the ubiquitous fragmentation of post-industrial society into ever-smaller coteries, there exists an international scene of Graphic Designers who typically make work independent of the traditional external commission, in self-directed or collaborative projects with colleagues in neighboring disciplines. Such work is typically marked by its experimental and personal nature, generally well-documented and circulated in a wide range of media.