

**Elements** of composition are the basic building blocks of good graphic design. They allow the viewer a glimpse into the sensibilities of the designer. Each element may be used as a primary driver of a composition ensuring the legibility of the message. They should reinforce, reiterate and relay an overall graphic strategy that remains clear, consistent and cohesive. The elements are powerful tools and communicate in their own ways as much as any particular text or image. The appropriate selection of each element and its skillful adaptation must be practiced in order to develop an "eye" for how it will enhance the graphic quality of the work being presented.

Having a clear understanding of the idea one is intending to communicate is the first step. The elements play a crucial role in establishing, supporting and portraying that message. Whether manipulating the typography or the image, the elements are the key factors that make a statement, drawing the attention of the viewer and influencing their comprehension and response..

#### ELEMENTS EXERCISE

- design three compositions using an image, a relevant word and/or a small portion of text.
- focus the design of each composition such that it captures the essence of one of the Elements of composition.
- together, the compositions should read as a set with consistent and varying characteristics.





1.1



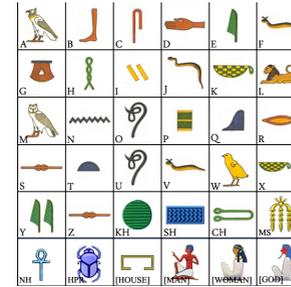
1.2

### GESTALT

- a German word for form or shape. It is used in English to refer to aspects of holism.
- an organized whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts.
- refers to theories of visual perception developed by German psychologists in the 1920's.
- describes how people tend to organize visual elements into groups or unified wholes when certain principles are applied.

### RECOGNITION

- the "mobius" signifies infinity.
- identified or recognized as a form, and at the same time, a concept.
- in mathematical terms, the same symbol is used.  $\infty$



1.3



1.4



1.5



**bird**



1.6

### SIGN

- signs can be categorized by types and normally fall within four basic categories.

### ICON

- a pictorial representation, a photograph, an architect's model of a building, imitate or copy aspects of their subject.

### INDEX

- an index has a factual or causal connection that points toward or cross-references its object. The image of a nest is an index signifying bird, because the viewer thinks of a bird upon seeing this image.

### SYMBOL

- a symbol has an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the thing signified. The interpreter understands the symbol through previous knowledge and experience. The word bird functions as a symbol for the idea of bird.

### METASYMBOL

- a metasymbol is a symbol whose meaning transcends the tangible realm of simple one-to-one relationships. History, culture, and tradition all play a role in creating metasymbols, such as the dove with an olive branch as a symbol for peace.

whisper  
**SHOUT!**  
4-10

**criticize**  
**PRAISE**  
**FLATTER**  
4-12

**explain**  
Teach  
4-14

1.7



1.8

MUMBLE  
**STUTTER**  
4-11

*Sweet Talk*

**STRAIGHT TALK**  
**DOUBLE TALK**  
4-13

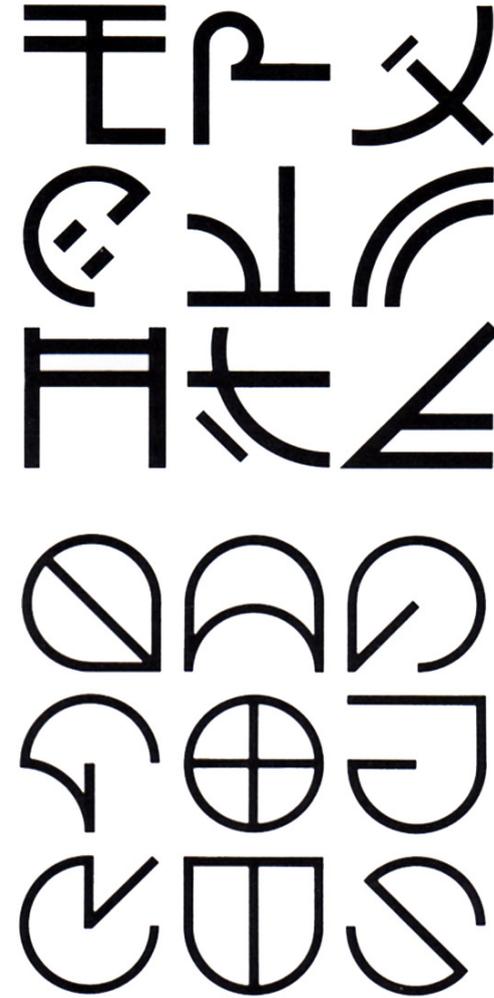
*Brag*  
*Exaggerate*  
4-15

### CONNOTATION

- typography may be used or manipulated to support or emphasize a particular meaning.
- viewer's experience and understanding of the message is further enhanced and clarified by well-crafted typography.

Connotation: refers to the emotional or psychological associations a word carries. The connotation of a word goes beyond its strict meaning to express the feelings, thoughts, and images the word suggests or evokes.

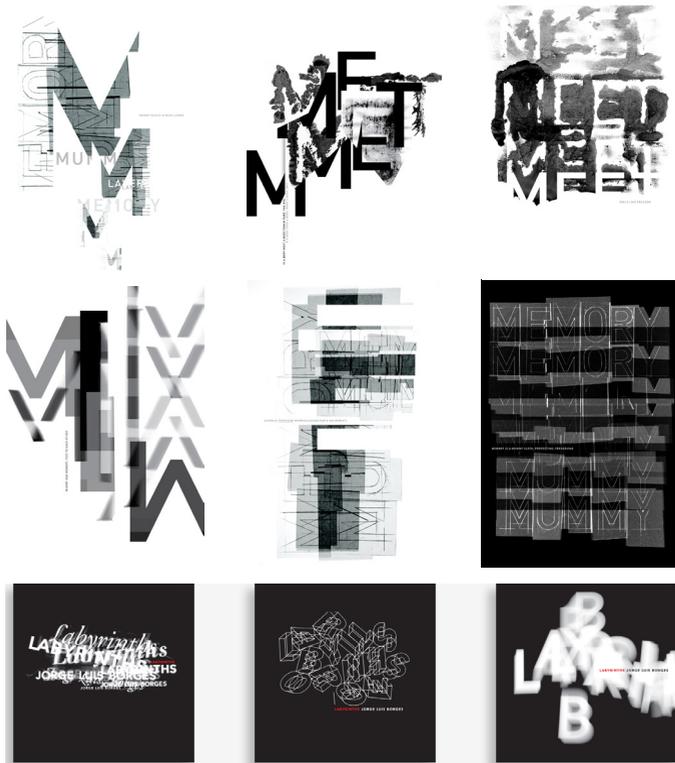
1.9



1.10

### CONTEXT

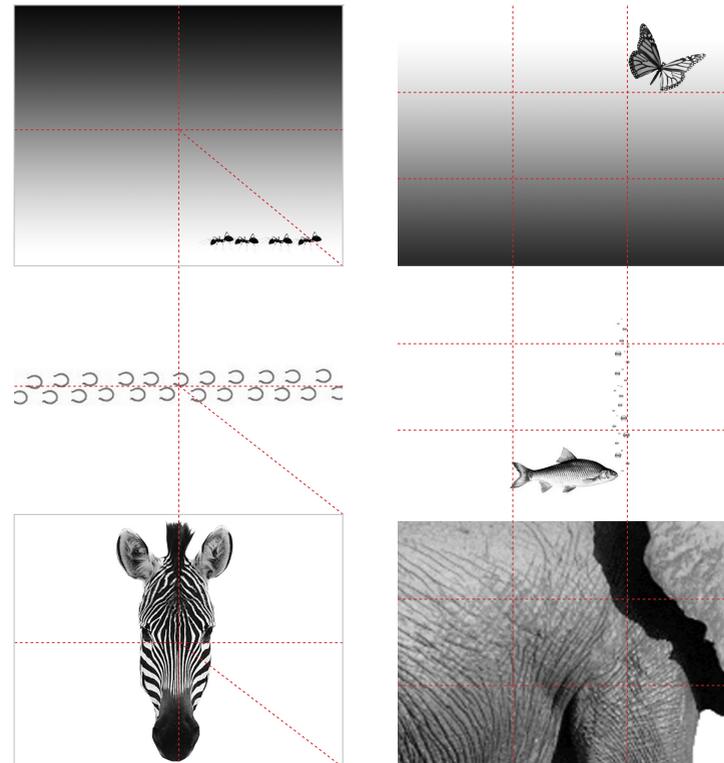
- a series of symbols may be created to represent a new idea, they may become an index or even a new language.
- once the series has been used over and over again in a particular context, it may establish itself as recognizable, repeatable and utilitarian.
- thematic variation with symbols having some constant and consistent aspects, as well as, specific variations will create an identifiable set.



1.11

### LEGIBILITY

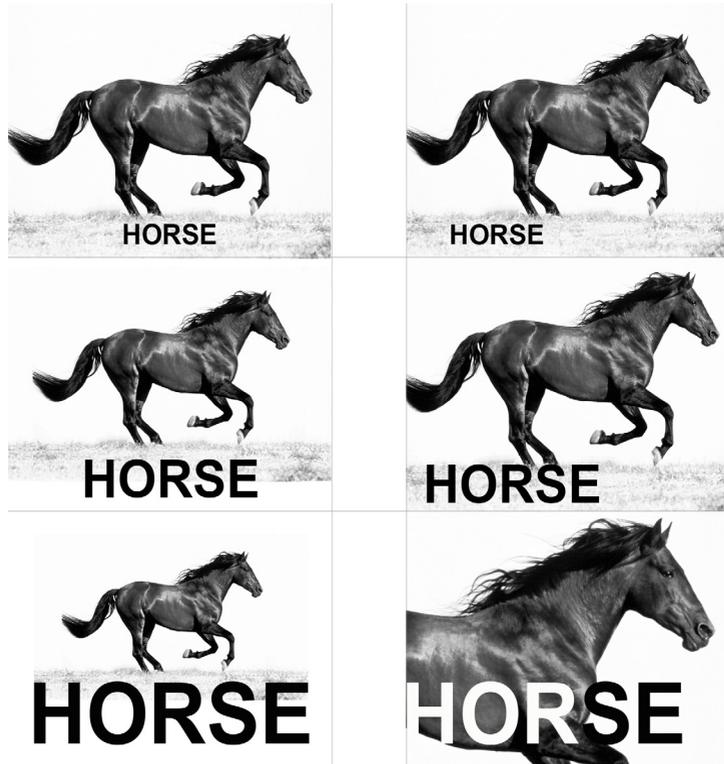
- many creative options are available when manipulating text to create an affect.
- notice and care should be given when pushing the limits of the text's legibility.
- it should be a clear as to whether or not the text is intended to be read or is applied for purely aesthetic or graphic reasons.



1.12

### BALANCE

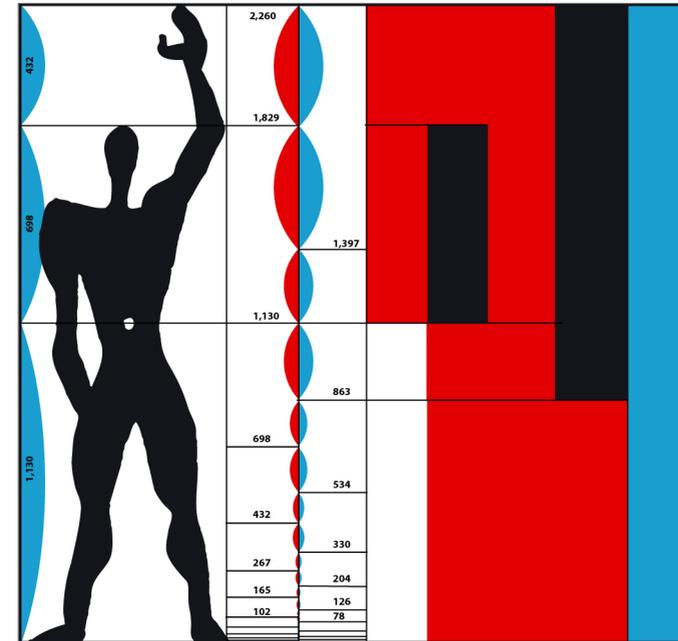
- clear and well-balanced relationships of the objects on a page is crucial to keeping the overall composition from appearing top-heavy, bottom-heavy, static or off-kilter.
- objects rendered in perspective imply that they are receding into the depth of the page or the third-dimension.
- exceeding the edges of the two-dimensional surface suggests space beyond its limits.
- manipulating and placing the text as an element, further emphasizes the compositional message.



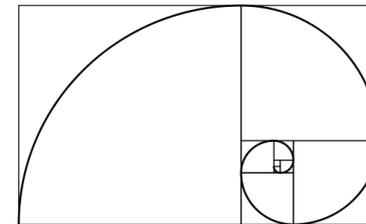
### SCALE

- relative size of text or image is referred to as its scale.
- relationships between the scale of the text and the scale of the image creates a hierarchy for the reader.
- when the scales are too much the same, one may see the composition as static.
- conversely, when the scales are clearly distinct, one may see the composition as in motion or dynamic.
- in either case, testing the relationship of scales within the composition is necessary to ensure that it remains balanced.

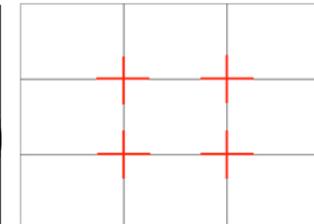
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1.14



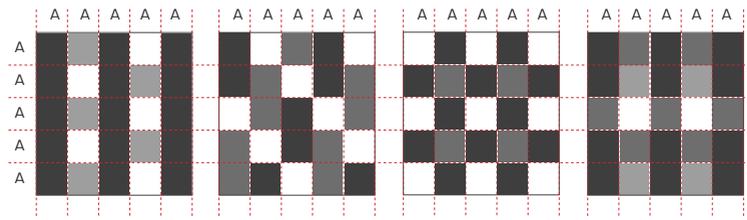
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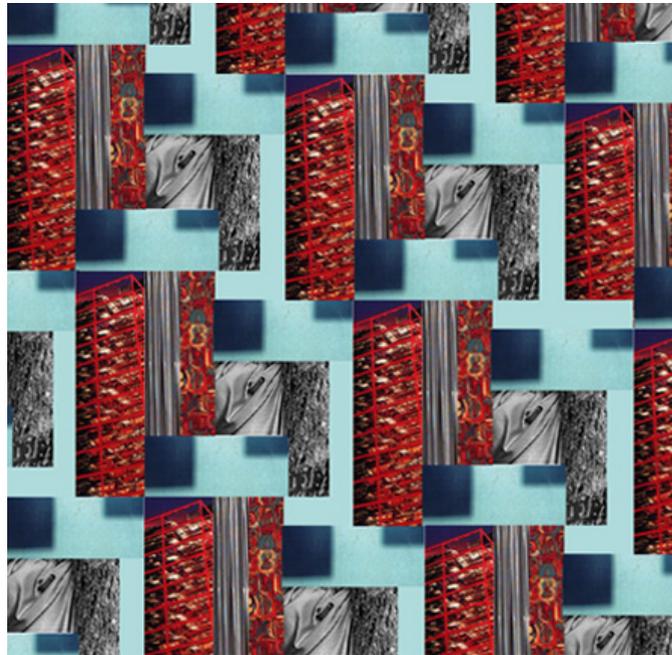
1.16

### PROPORTION

- proportion is generally defined as the relationship of the parts to the whole.
- devising an overall proportional composition may be accomplished with various and time-honored techniques.
- the "Golden Mean", the "Rule of Thirds" and others should be studied for their impact and appropriateness.
- the ratio of 1:1.618, also known as the Golden Mean, Phi, or the Divine Proportion, was made famous by Leonardo Fibonacci around 1200 A.D. He noticed that there was an absolute ratio that appears often throughout nature. The Golden Mean is thought to be universally efficient in living things and pleasing to the human eye.
- the "Rule of Thirds" is a subdividing of a composition into three sections vertically and horizontally. This system may be used to create bi-axial symmetry or asymmetry, balanced about by a 1:3 or 2:3 ratio.
- in the 1940's Le Corbusier, a dutch architect, established the proportional system now known as the "Modulor" or the "Modulor Man." By combining a number of seemingly incompatible systems: the Imperial and Metric systems, the Fibonacci Series and the Golden Section to name but a few, Le Corbusier hoped that his system would one day be used to standardize all aspects of construction throughout Europe, and possibly worldwide.



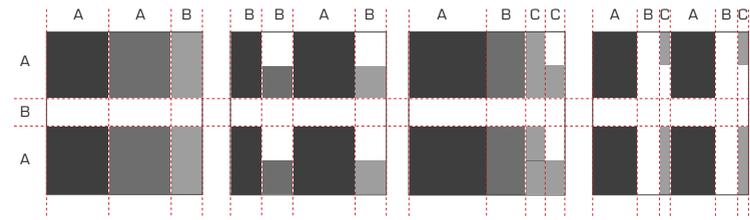
1.17



1.18

### CADENCE [REPETITION]

- cadence can promote a sense of movement, marking regular intervals across a page.
- monotonous intervals may be used to establish a repetitious organization of images or text.
- the spaces within the cadence may be further subdivided, adding hierarchy of scale.
- A:A:A or A:a:A:a:A:a

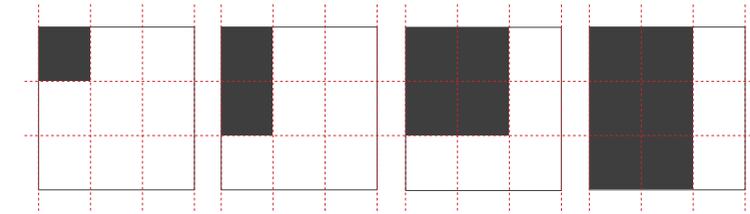


1.19

1.20

### PATTERN [RHYTHM]

- blocks of text or images may alternate to create a pattern or rhythm across a page.
- patterns may be made in vertical or horizontal layouts, alternating to create interest and avoid monotony.
- various scales of elements may be employed to add greater richness to the reading of the rhythm.
- musical scores are excellent examples of rhythm and show the spacing or intervals of the notes in a visual way, mimicking the sound they will produce.
- A:B:A or A:B:C:A:B:C

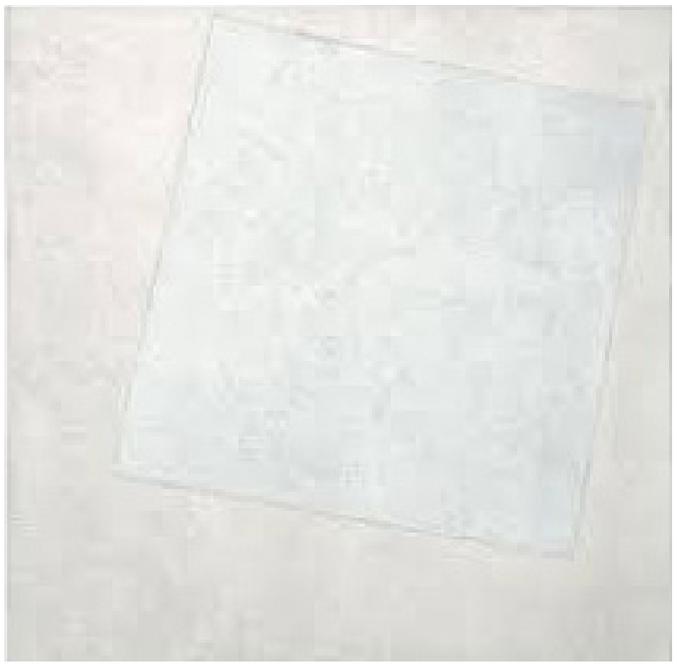


1.21

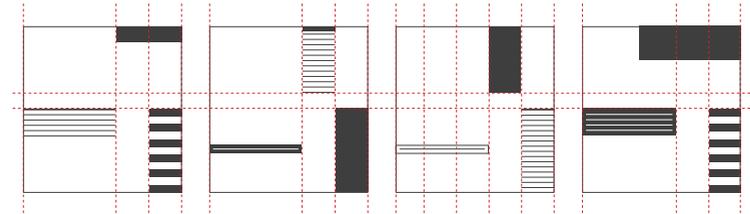
### WHITE SPACE

- white space is not necessarily "white." It is simply the open areas unoccupied by text or image.
- strategic use of white space allows the objects on the page to breathe.
- space between objects may be juxtaposed with greater tension.
- white space should be considered as one of the most important aspects of a composition, equal to or more than the other objects occupying the page.

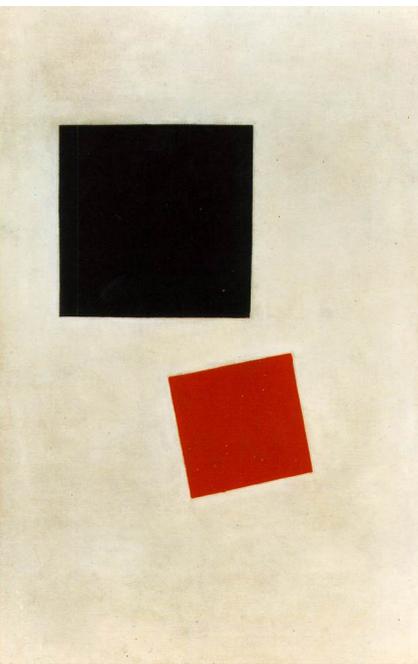
In "Suprematist Composition: White on White" (1918), Malevich displays a white square in a white space. For Malevich, white was the color of space – he said this with so many words, and all suprematist paintings show it. The white square in "White on White" is thus an image of the very space it inhabits. radicalart.info



1.22



1.23



1.24

### FIGURE | GROUND

- placement of text, images and other graphic devices on a page can be arranged to prompt the reading of positive/negative space or object/field relationships.
- relationships between the figure and its ground may be further arranged within an underlying structure or grid.
- adding variation and, at the same time, maintaining consistency of the figure/ground will allow the viewer to cross-reference information and enhance ease of transition from one layout to the next.

### OBJECT | FIELD

- objects may float on the background as an "object in field" or may be locked into a system or grid.
- negative space is read as the "field" and the positive space is read as the "object."
- juxtaposition of positive and negative space creates a tension between the objects and is crucial to maintaining an overall balanced composition.



#### IMPACT

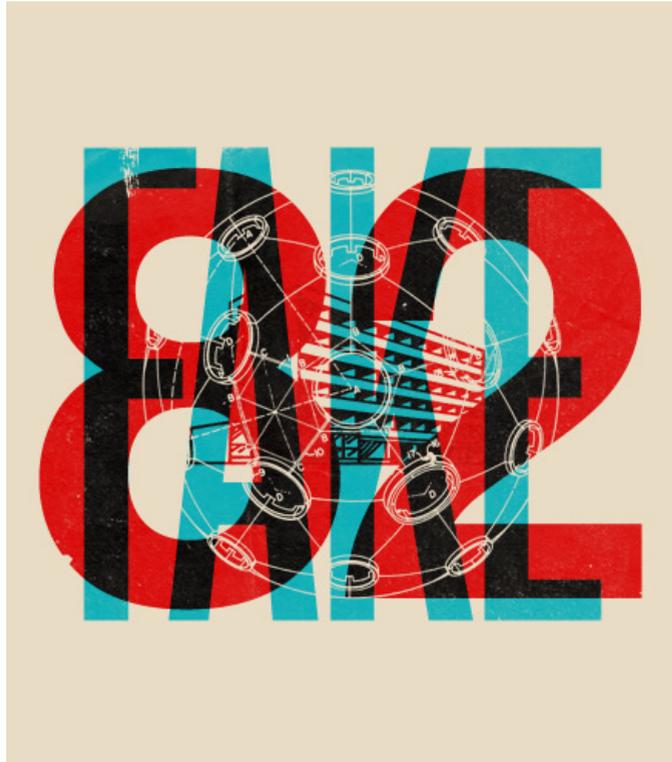
- various contrasting or oppositional graphic approaches may be used to create impact
- here, the message of "Then and Now" is represented using:

color vs. black & white  
 old vs. new styles  
 etching vs. abstract geometries  
 tearing of the image in the foreground  
 revealing of the image in the background



#### FORM

- manipulating and arranging text to suggest or mimic the form it represents is a simple, yet sophisticated way to challenge the reader and grab his/her attention.
- white space is used to provide a "field" for the form to inhabit while giving full attention to the form created by the text.



### LAYERING

- compositions using text and image may suggest greater depth by layering each on top of one another.
- hierarchy may be created and emphasized with the differentiation of scale, density, color and other graphic devices.
- [in contrast to superimposition] each layer tends to maintain its original presence without extensive transparency or manipulation.

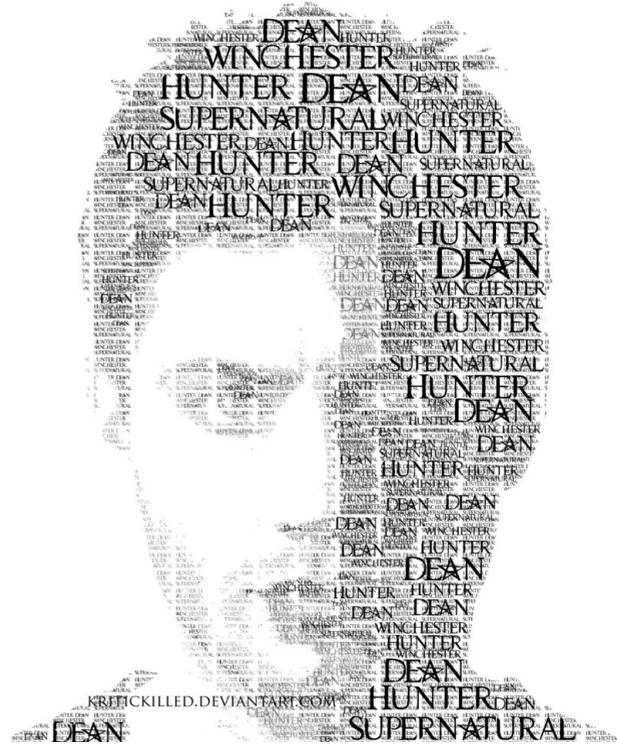
1.28 Fake by Mark Weaver 2009 - source: flickr.com/photos/markweaver/4007859355/



1.29

### SUPERIMPOSITION

- [in contrast to layering] combining text and images with manipulations of transparency, scale, contrast, and other graphic devices, creates something wholly new.
- more fully integrated layers enhance the message and add visual interest.



### CONTRAST

- variable lightness or darkness of the text and/or image can create hierarchy, balance and emphasis.
- intention in creating pure aesthetics or graphic complexity vs. the legibility of the text or image should be clear.

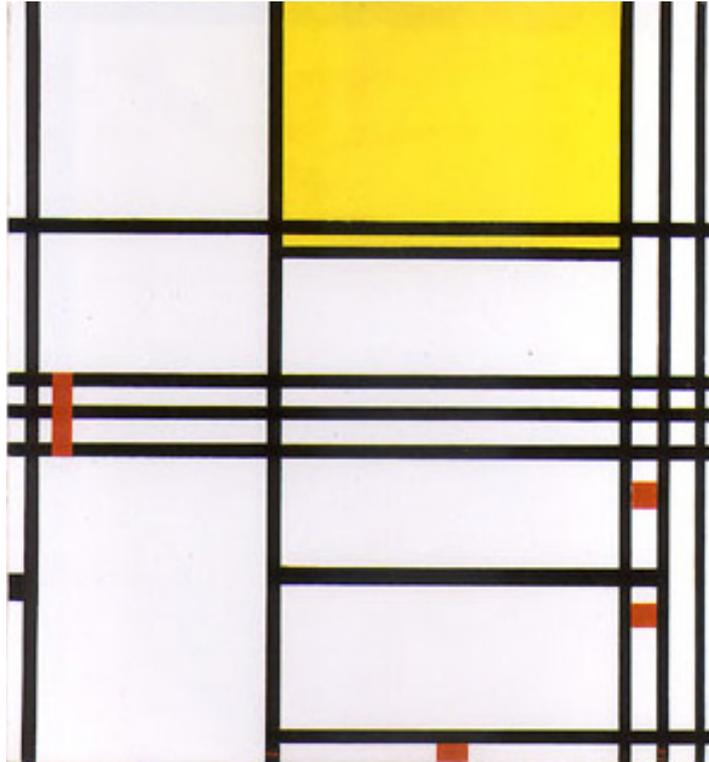
### BACKGROUND

- when using an image as a background, it should enhance the reading of the layout rather than obfuscating or over complicating the message.



### COLOR

- the use of color can be an intuitive and/or exacting process.
- a basic understanding of color theory and how the colors may impact one another is crucial when selecting a color palette and placing colors in proximity to one another.
- simple and consistent color palettes should be chosen for their aesthetic and/or symbolic meaning.



#### ABSTRACTION

- extracting and manipulating a portion of text or image may suggest the essence of a larger idea.
- innuendo creates greater intrigue and challenges the viewer to look for and comprehend the deeper meaning behind the message.

In Piet Mondrian's "Painting No. 9" (1939-42), the lines and color fields create a grid extending to the edges of the canvas, suggesting limitless space and his notion of "universal harmony".

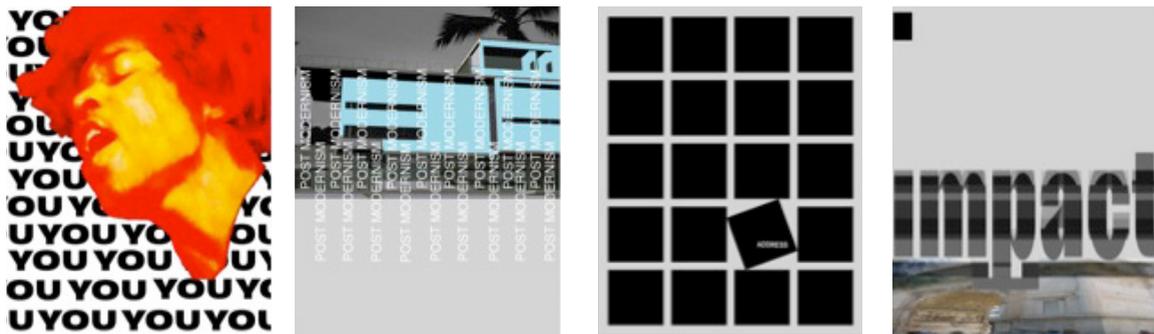


#### COLLAGE & MULTI-MEDIA

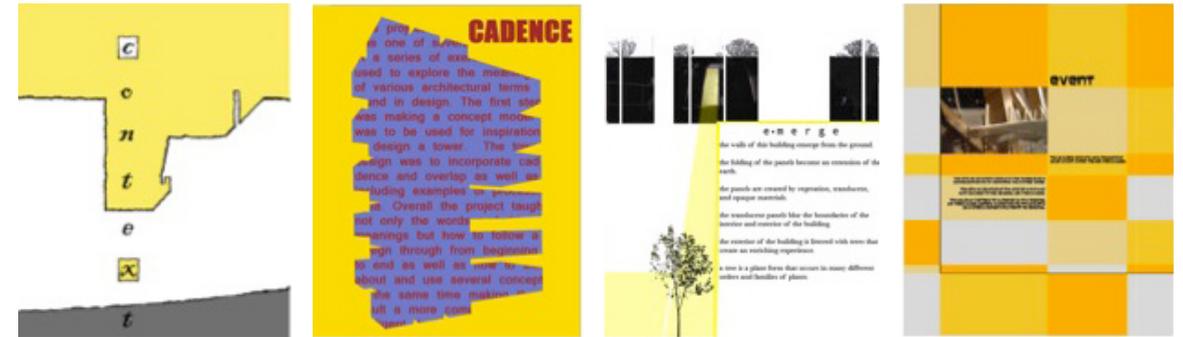
- using overlay and texture in a layout adds greater richness to a composition.
- multi-media or digital techniques may be used to imply depth and complexity.
- paper, objects, patterns, images, words and other text may be combined and manipulated to create a comprehensive and integrated composition.

balance | pattern | alignment | foreground/background | impact | superimposition

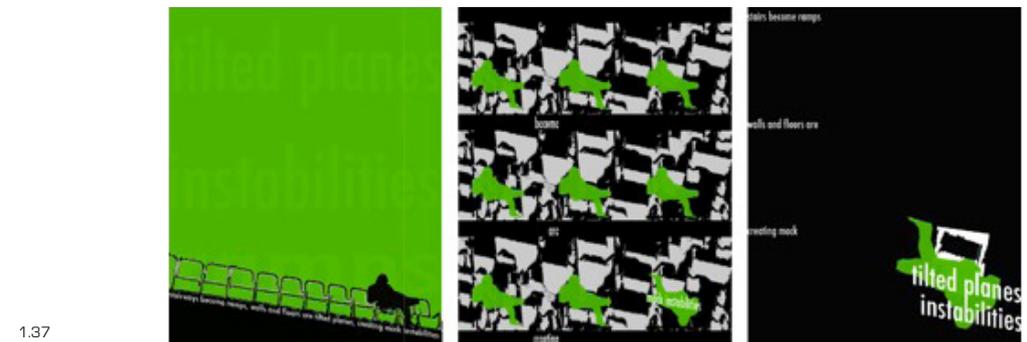
color | object/field | contrast | juxtaposition | white space | abstraction



1.34 - 1.45



1.46 - 1.53



1.37

color

rhythm

balance

## GLOSSARY OF GRAPHIC DESIGN TERMS

[<https://www.kqed.org>]

### **abstract**

Artwork in which the subject matter is stated in a brief, simplified manner; little or no attempt is made to represent images realistically, and objects are often simplified or distorted.

### **acrylics**

Quick drying plastic polymer pigment used with water.

### **additive**

The process of adding or joining parts and or visual elements together to create a painting, collage or sculpture as opposed to subtractive.

### **analogous**

Closely related colors; a color scheme that combines several hues next to each other on the color wheel.

### **art criticism**

An organized system for looking at the visual arts; a process of analyzing and appraising the work in terms of its value, correctness, appropriateness, utility, etc.

### **assemblage**

A three dimensional composition in which a collection of objects is unified in a sculptural work.

### **asymmetry**

A lack of equality of equivalence between parts or aspects of something. A compositional approach tending towards the dynamic vs. the static.

### **background**

The part of the picture plane that seems to be farthest from the viewer.

### **balance**

The way in which the elements in visual arts are arranged to create a feeling of equilibrium and harmony. Three types of balance are symmetry, asymmetry and radial.

### **collage**

An artistic composition made of various materials, e.g. paper, cloth or wood, glued on a surface.

### **color**

The visual sensation dependent on the reflection or absorption of light from a given surface.

### **composition**

The overall placement and organization of elements in a work of art, as well as the interrelationships between individual elements.

### **content**

The representations, messages, ideas, and/or feelings expressed in a work of art.

### **contour line drawing**

Drawing that represents the edges and ridges of a form, without tonal variation, shading, etc. The lines may have variation in width or weight so as to imply the directionality of light.

### **contrast**

Differences between two or more elements, e.g. value, color, texture in a composition. Juxtaposition of dissimilar elements in a work of art.

### **cool colors**

Colors suggesting coolness, blues, greens, violets and their variants.

### **design**

The plan, conception or organization of a work of art; the arrangement of independent parts - the elements of art that form a coordinated and integrated whole

### **distortion**

The condition of being twisted or altered from a usual or regular shape. In visual art, distortion is often used as an expressive technique.

### **dominance**

An emphasis of one aspect, characteristic or quality in an image in relation to the others.

### **elements of art**

Sensory components used to create and talk about works of art; line, color, shape, form, composition, etc.

### **emphasis**

Special attention or embellishment on an element, characteristic or object in a work of art that makes it stand out from the others.

### **expressive content**

Content expressive of ideas and moods in a work of art.

### **figurative**

The representation of people, subjects and scenes from

### **foreground**

Part of a two dimensional artwork that appears to be nearer to the viewer or in front of other objects.

### **focal point**

The place in a work of art at which draws attention and focus due to a particular placement or characteristic of an element.

### **form**

The particular characteristics of an artwork's visual elements, as distinguished from its subject matter or content.

### **function**

Purpose or use of a work of art.

### **gesture drawing**

The drawing of lines quickly and loosely to show movement and essence of form and/or subject.

### **harmony**

The principle of design that creates unity within a work of art.

### **hue**

The gradation or attribute of a color that defines its general classification as a red, blue, yellow, green or variant.

### **installation art**

The combining of elements into a singular artwork that is specifically located in one place; an artwork that exists only in the place in which it was installed and is not able to be relocated like a painting or print.

### **intensity**

Also called chroma or saturation; refers to the brightness of a color. A color is full intensity when in its pure form and unmixed.

### **line**

In visual art, a delineation or fracturing of space in color or black and white. Line qualities can vary in width, length, gesture, color, direction, etc.

### **linear perspective**

A graphic system used to create the illusion of depth on a flat surface. In images of buildings and objects, the lines defining their edges and features are slanted, making them appear to extend or "vanish" back into space.

### **mass**

The outside size and bulk of an object, such as a building or a sculpture; the visual weight of an object.

### **maquette**

A preliminary model -as of a sculpture or a building, usually small in scale.

### **media**

Plural of medium, referring to materials used to make works of art. Classifications of artworks, such as painting, printmaking, sculpture, film, etc.

### **mixed media**

An artwork in which more than one type of art materials are used.

### **monochromatic**

Use of only one hue or color that can vary in value or intensity.

**mood**

The state of mind or emotion communicated in a work of art through color, composition, media, scale, etc.

**motif**

A repeated pattern, often creating a sense of rhythm.

**movement**

The principle of design that deals with the creation or suggestion of action.

**multimedia**

Computer programs that involve users in the design and organization of text, graphics, video and sound in one presentation.

**negative space**

Shapes or spaces that are or represent the areas unoccupied by objects.

**neutral colors**

Black, white, gray and variations of brown.

**nonobjective**

Having no recognizable object or subject; also, nonrepresentational.

**oils**

Oils-based pigment used with paint thinner, turpentine or other non-water-based suspension.

**one point perspective**

A way to show three dimensional objects on a two dimensional surface - lines recede from the viewer and converge at a single "vanishing" point.

**organic**

Refers to shapes or forms not of geometric shape, having irregular edges, surfaces or objects similar to those in nature.

**pattern**

A design, image or shape repeated in a predictable combination.

**performance art**

A type of art in which an event or events are planned and enacted before an audience for aesthetic reasons.

**perspective**

A system for representing three dimensional objects viewed in spatial recession on a two dimensional surface.

**point of view**

The angle from which a viewer sees the objects or scene in an image.

**portfolio**

A systematic, organized collection of artwork, used to display one's work to potential employers, clients or educational institutions.

**positive**

Shapes or spaces in an image that represent solid objects or forms.

**printmaking**

The transference of an image from one surface, plate or block to another - usually paper using ink.

**primary colors**

Red, yellow and blue. From these, all other colors are created.

**principles of design**

A design concept describing the ways in which the elements of an image are arranged, i.e.; balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, repetition, rhythm, etc.

**properties of color**

The characteristics of color that are perceived; hue, value and intensity.

**proportion**

The scale relationships of one part to the whole and of one part to another. The Golden Mean [or Golden Section], the Rule of Thirds are two primary systems of proportion.

**reflection**

Personal and thoughtful consideration of an artwork, an aesthetic experience or the creative process.

**rhythm**

A series of similar or different visual elements that repeat to achieve a specific effect.

**rubric**

A guide for judgement or scoring, a description of expectations.

**scale**

Relative size or objects; the determination of measurements of dimensions within a design or artwork.

**sculpture**

Three dimensional artwork to be seen either in the round, form all sides or as a bas-relief.

**secondary color**

Colors that are created by the mixture of two primary colors, i.e.; yellow and blue make green, blue and red make purple and yellow and red make orange.

**shade**

A color produced by the addition of black.

**shape**

A two dimensional area of plane that may be open or closed, free-form or geometric.

**space**

The area between, around, above, below or contained within objects. Spaces are areas defined by the shapes and forms around them and within them, just as shapes and forms are defined by the space around and within them.

**still life**

A specific type of visual artwork representing one or more inanimate objects.

**structure**

The way parts are arranged or put together to form a whole.

**style**

A set of characteristics of the art of a culture, period or school of art; the characteristic expression of individual artists, groups or movements.

**subtractive**

Artistic method accomplished by removing or taking away from the original creative material - the opposite of additive.

**symmetry**

A balance of parts on opposite sides of a perceived midline, giving the appearance of equal visual weight.

**texture**

The surface quality of materials, either actual, tactile or implied.

**theme**

A subject or topic of discourse or of artistic representation.

**three dimensional**

Having height, width and depth.

**tint**

A slight or pale coloration; a variation of a color produced by adding white to it and characterized by a low saturation and high lightness.

**tone**

Color with gray added to it.

**two dimensional**

Having height and width but not depth.

**two point perspective**

A visual system of representation designed to show three dimensional objects on a two dimensional surface. This illusion of space and volume utilizes two "vanishing" points on the horizon line.

**unity**

A principle of design that connects a variety of elements of art and principles of design into a work of art with harmony and balance.

**value**

Lightness or darkness of a hue or neutral color.

**value scale**

A value scale shows the range of values from black to white and light to dark.

**vanishing point**

In perspective drawing, a point at which receding lines seem to converge.

**variety**

A principle of art concerned with combining one or more elements of different ways or means of organization, media, color, subject, etc.

**visual metaphor**

Images in which characteristics of objects are likened to one another and presented as that other. It is closely related to the concept of symbolism.

**volume**

Describes the space within a form, such as that of a container or building.

**warm colors**

Colors suggesting warmth, such as reds, yellows and oranges.

**watercolor**

A transparent pigment used with water. Paintings done with this medium are known as watercolors.

**OTHER RESOURCES**

articles, videos and books

**ARTICLES****Harold Linton - Portfolio Design**

<http://portfoliodesign.com/students-portfolios/>

**VIDEOS****History of Graphic Design**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTi5SNgxE3U>

**The Golden Mean**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zWivbGORIo>

**Nature's Number: 1.618033988 . . .**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKzcDZswj5A&feature=related>

**Numbers by Numbers**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkGeOWYOFoA&feature=player\\_embedded#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkGeOWYOFoA&feature=player_embedded#!)

**BOOKS****Designing A Digital Portfolio**

Cynthia L. Baron, New Riders Publishing, 2009

**A History of Graphic Design, Third Edition**

Philip B. Meggs, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998

**Type and Image: The Language of Graphic Design**

Philip Meggs, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992

**Portfolio Design**

Harold Linton, W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 2012