





POSITIONS THROUGH CONTEXTUALISING

		MAGCD UNIT 2		CENTRAL SAINT MARTINS 2022-23	
					
EVELYN PRENTICE					

STOLK, M.S., BRINKERS, E. AND VAN DEN DUNGEN, D. (2000) LOST FORMATS, EXPERIMENTAL JETSET - LOST FORMATS.



It was more than two decades ago when the Dutch studio, Experimental Jetset came up with a controversial approach to address the “End of print” for Emigre magazine #57. The designers used this opportunity to address the subject of de-materialisation through the visual exploration of vanishing data and storage mediums, by compiling over 60 unique tracings ranging from floppy disks to vinyl records, to punch cards. The project emphasises on the transitory nature and fast changing pace of physical formats by simplifying visual outputs to their uttermost concrete form, as well as by using cataloguing as a tool for conveying larger and complex narratives.

The “Lost Formats Preservation Society”, as first coined by Experimental Jetset in 2000, is in fact an early attempt to understand the pressing cultural phenomenon of de-materialisation, which has only become more evident as we adopt new ways of living constantly being shifted by technology. It is also, in a way, an honest interrogation of the future of materiality and its role in the construction of culture and identity through the things we use and interact with. At the turn of the century, a time of immense change in the way we owned and transferred information, Experimental Jetset predicted how specific data, that was once confined to particular formats, would eventually disappear into the cloud, paving the way for the emergence of what they called, a “mythical non-format.” Today, we can see how this prediction has come to pass through the digitalisation of data. These “Lost Formats”, which were once mediators of identity through ownership and possession, have now become extinct, replaced by an ethereal notion of existence in the cloud.

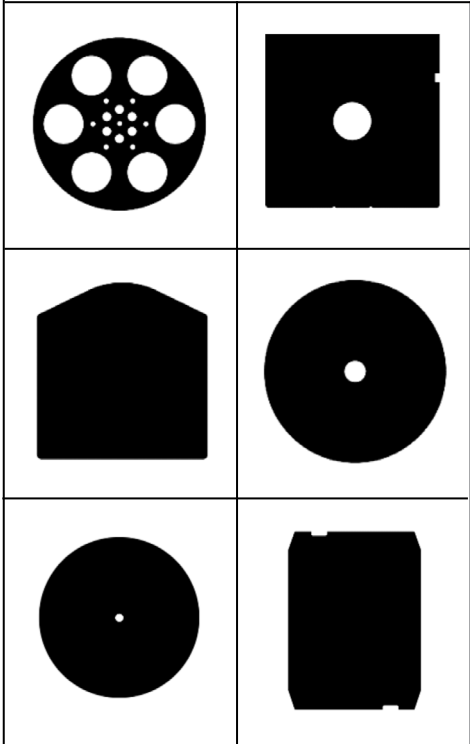
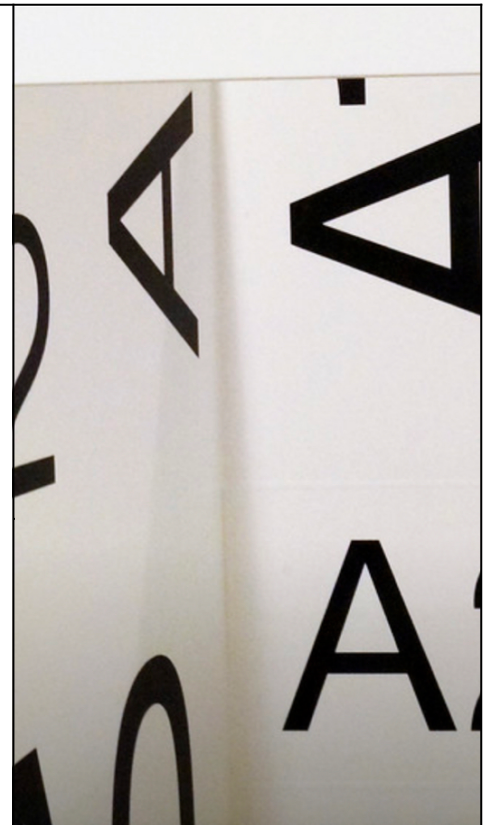
In an interview for the design magazine Ink, the team recalled one of the main aspects of their initial analysis: “What fascinated (and still fascinates) us about formats is the whole ‘dialectical materialistic’ dimension of the subject: the way content is shaped by formats, and formats are shaped by content.” (Stolk et al., 2007).

Reflecting on this symbiotic relationship between content and format, my current practice starts to question the effects of de-materialisation, and how so many objects we once knew, or place identity or emotional value in, are being constantly replaced by mostly digital counterparts, posing questions about the relevance (or irrelevance) of materiality, and reflecting on the role of graphic design in preserving, collecting and distributing material culture narratives. The idea of collecting traces becomes more pivotal, as I aim to understand the composition and material qualities of a collection of objects. As I start to document mundane objects, as well as pieces of debris, a systematic exploration of form, layout and composition emerges.

In an open ended way, Experimental Jetset responded to a somehow perplexing phenomenon happening at the time, and although the project was highly criticised back in 2001, it’s interesting to see how it has gained traction

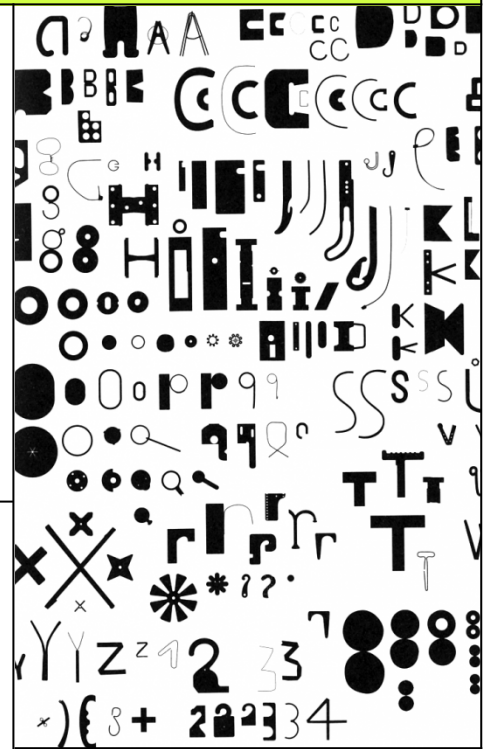
over the years as the nature of the line of inquiry becomes more culturally visible. Back in 2001 it was all about data and formats, but there's so much more that has happened since then.

As Experimental Jetset approach their practice as "Building worlds with words" or "turning language into objects", there's an interesting correlation forming between their practice and my line of inquiry as we aim to explore the symbiotic relationship between form and content. So, could there be a connection between the role of the graphic designer and that of the archaeologist? Could we systematically unearth the most basic forms of human creation and shed light into the traces of things that once were and now are becoming extinct?



"In our own way, we try to explore those obsolete formats, dead languages, forlorn utopias, forgotten subcultures, lost worlds. We still believe there is something to be said for "absolute certainty, absolute beginnings, and radical departures", if only for the tragic beauty that can be found in those failed attempts. We are fascinated by the margins of design, radical gestures, isolated ideas. We believe there are still interesting things to find in the ruins of modernist movements, in the hubris of the Old World: plans, scenarios, or, in the words of the English writer Owen Hatherley, "spectral blueprints". (Gosling, 2016)

MARTENS, K., ELLIMAN, P. AND KUITEN-BROUWER, C. (2004) 'THE WORLD IS A PRINTING SURFACE', IN KAREL MARTENS COUNTERPRINT. LONDON, ENGLAND: HYPHEN PRESS.



There's something thought-provoking about the material quality of old things, odd and even forgotten collections of pieces with their peculiar idiosyncrasies. As Paul Elliman reflects on his interactions with Karel Martens' work and with the designer himself, there's an unequivocal focus on how objects and the forms they represent, gain meaning by the act of collection and arrangement. Composition becomes in fact, as important as the actual material quality of the pieces. Visual systems start to develop through constant echoes of form, and the mental associations we create when we see a collection of things, considering the idea of framing as a fundamental factor for the elements to cooperate within the composition.

Collections serve as tools to not only portray who we are, but as a way to understand ourselves and others better. They can also be used as narrative devices where changes develop through the transformation of form or through systematic displaying, arranging and combination of elements. Making reference to Baudrillard's 'The system of objects', Elliman suggests that "the functional object resists a kind of death by collection, through its ability to make us use it and keep using it." (Elliman et al., 2004). There's an immediacy about developing visual languages from found things as oppose to devising "elements from scratch", in a way, Martens and Elliman present themselves as transformers, as arrangers, who take seemingly disconnected pieces and assemble visual constructions that are perceived as down to earth, relatable, raw, because they are echoes of the material things that still constitute a part of modern life.

What is proposed here is a system based on intuition, where the designer relies on collection and curation as the main tools for developing an iterative practice. Where there are already defined constraints set by the material or processes at play, and many of the variants are predetermined. The role of the designer here goes beyond altering the form to fit a purpose, to find collective meaning in the unaltered form.

In relation to Elliman's analysis, I find a strong affinity with the systematic arrangement of things and the continuous feedback cycle that this compositions can provide. There's also a strong element around the exploration of form as a material concept, and how industrial and natural forms, contrary in many ways, can come together to formulate new visual vocabularies. In a way, our modern path towards de-materialisation has been creating an intrinsic evolution around how we use natural forms for synthetic processes. Unlike the echoes of the 19th and 20th century, where industrial design was bound to certain formality and restrain from ornament, we see a surge in the exploration of natural forms in the creation of material objects but also in the design of digital experiences.

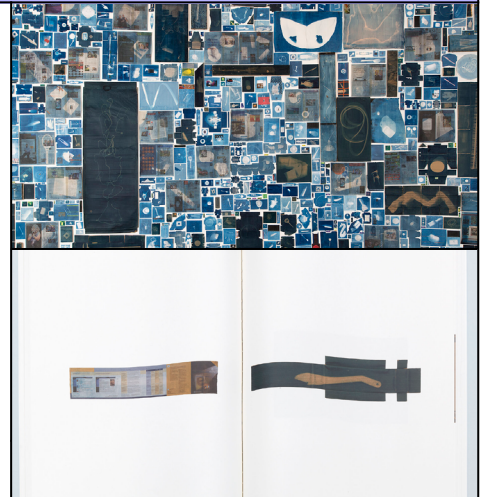
As I experiment with form studies as a tool to push my visual language experiments beyond the realm of literal representation into abstraction, I also consider the changing nature of physical things. Exploring shape through the use of twist and bend modifiers, where traces become more symbolic and less representational of a material reality until they conceptually disappears. Much alike the objects that today we use and are progressively being replaced by technology.

These collections of objects, not only disappear conceptually, but become progressively more organic and fluid in shape. This makes me reflect on the blurred lines between industrial and organic shapes, and how in my practice I want to be able to create visual languages that are not directly constrained by this formal associations.



**“A materialist view of culture is partly this; and that all of our things – including conceptual objects such as words, juts as much as physical tools – shape us, the users of these objects, by determining our practices and our perceptions.”
(Elliman et al., 2004)**

BESHTY, W. (2014) WALEAD BESHTY STUDIOS INC. – A PARTIAL DISASSEMBLING ... 2013–2014, WALEAD BESHTY STUDIOS, INC.



It's paradoxical how the artists takes things that are not meant to be kept or retained – ephemera as objects with a short lived existence – and transforms them into something to be preserved as part of a collection through a particular photographic process. The concept of ephemera is strongly rooted in the industrial revolution and has been a constant companion of any society over the last centuries.

The disposable nature of these printed objects poses a series of questions about the importance of producing and collecting ephemera in transmitting and understanding culture.

I find Beshty's work challenging as it pushes me to think outside of my comfort zone and really engage with the possibilities of materiality in the creation of multi-dimensional visual work. Considering both the surface and the imprint as both important mediums for conveying ideas is something that is becoming extinct in an ever-growing digital landscape.

The use of recycled materials and ephemera is fundamental in the development of his project as much as the printing process of cyanotype. In other words, the interface becomes as important as the image itself in conveying the message.

“Neither the studio nor the artist are the subject of the work, rather they are a lens or mechanism designed to reflect the world in some way. All depictions are the result of the tools used to make them, and thus all depictions are provisional, distorted by the means of their making, no matter how totalising or objective they might present themselves to be.” (Beshty, 2014)

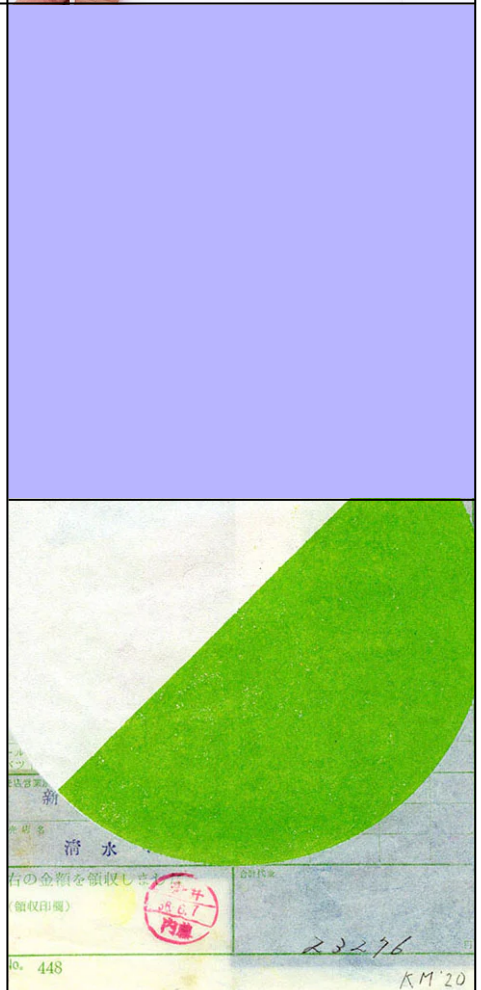


MARTENS, K. (NO DATE) KAREL MARTENS, MARTENS AND MARTENS. AVAILABLE AT: [HTTPS://MARTENS-MARTENS.COM/](https://martens-martens.com/) (ACCESSED: 13 MAY 2023).



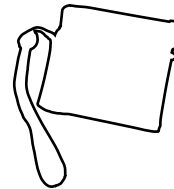
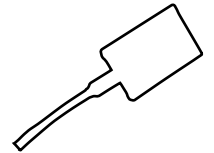
There is nostalgic quality about Martens' mono-print studies as well as about the way he uses traditional printmaking methods to boldly explore form, materiality and composition. The visual and tactile nature of his systematic language is underpinned by an irreverent note, and stands as an interesting example of design concerned with building frameworks that allow for experimentation, play, and asking questions about the materiality of visual representation.

His work becomes more interesting over time, as the very materials that he uses for his mono-prints are reminiscent of an industrial era now long passed. Based on the idea of evoking meaning rather than plainly presenting truth, Martens' work reminds me that all design evokes a sense of meaning as human perception tends to quickly form opinion according to what we see, what we value, and what we choose to ignore. This is a symbiotic relationship which can be nurtured through the role of design in organising, translating and presenting information. Through my current project I've been influenced by his approach to design practice shaped by intuition, yet strongly process-led for the purpose of translation and interpretation of visual work.

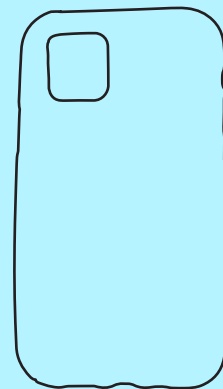


“Curiosity is a very important thing for a human being. If you see a book on the shelf, you should become curious. Absence in design is very important, the things you don't see. But designers can offer a set of ingredients and allude to certain things.” (Martens, 2020)

GREENFIELD, A. (2018) 'SMARTPHONE: THE NETWORKING OF THE SELF', IN RADICAL TECHNOLOGIES: THE DESIGN OF EVERYDAY LIFE. LONDON, ENGLAND: VERSO, PP. 9–30.



In just about 20 years we have become practically dependant on instant access and technological infrastructure to perform the most basic tasks. Adam Greenfield presents a thought provoking argument about the current landscape of cultural de-materialisation and what it entails for us as users of objects and processes which are effectively being digitalised. “In giving ourselves over to a way of knowing the world that relies completely on real-time access, we find ourselves at the mercy of something more contingent, more fallible and far more complicated than any paper map” (Greenfield, 2018). The questions around de-materialisation and the role of technology in forming new attitudes towards identity are connected to my current line of enquiry, as I pursue to gain understanding of the role of graphic communication design in preserving and translating material culture which in a way is bound to disappear. We will likely see the trend of de-materialisation accelerating in the coming years, with the rise of AI and technology that is beyond basic understanding. I believe this is a pressing matter as we consider how as image makers and communication designers we participate, contribute and shape our practices.



“But as the smartphone has come to stand between us and an ever-greater swath of the things we do in everyday life, the global trend toward de-materialisation is unmistakable.” (Greenfield, 2018)

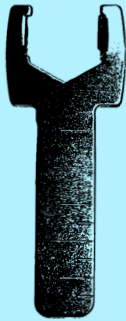
FLUSSER, V., POSTER, M. AND ROTH, N.A. (2011)
‘PRINT’, IN DOES WRITING HAVE A FUTURE?
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA: UNIVERSITY
OF MINNESOTA PRESS, PP. 47–54.



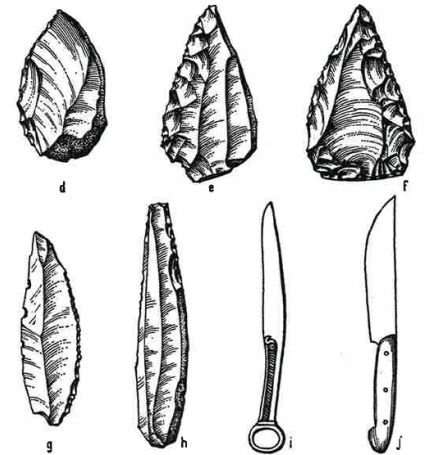
Types are not immutable, neither are constrained to be literal expressions of a particular language, they can be moulded, shifted and adapted. Types are understood as “to that which all... tracks have in common (the typical); it means the universal behind all! That is characteristic and distinctive.” (Flusser et al., 2011). Referring to tracing and representation of characters which in turn form written language and allow communication, the author discusses the connection between writing, type and trace in understanding the relevance of printed matter.

I find this idea of evolution of types, symbols and visual representations of language quite compelling, as it pushes me to think beyond the constraints of understanding types and language as static forms and think of the possibilities for new ways of interpreting language. In reference to the “invention of print” Flusser explains “...there was as yet no printing because no one was yet aware that by drawing letters, one was dealing with types. Written signs were taken to be characters.” In other words, it is through repetition and standardisation that a script is formed.

Perhaps there is a loose connection between typification and collection as way of creating standardised visual representations which feed from the relationship between the sets of characters.



COLOMINA, B. AND WIGLEY, M. (2022) IN ARE WE HUMAN?: NOTES ON AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF DESIGN. ZÜRICH, SWITZERLAND: LARS MÜLLER PUBLISHERS, PP. 1–125.



Is there an intrinsic relationship between humanity and the objects we create, use and transmit? How do we shape the material world and how does it shape us in return? Wigley and Colomina raise some profound questions on what it means to be human and the role of design in the formation, definition and expression of humanity. In other words “Design is a form of projection, to shape something rather than find it, to invent something and think about the possible outcomes of that invention. This endless reshaping and speculation about possible outcomes is uniquely human.”

(Colomina et al., 2022). Design represents a tension between looking back and looking forward in an attempt to be a source as well as an output. Somehow, this touches on the purpose and responsibility of design in shaping the future, as well as tapping into the possibilities of understating the role of artefacts in the formation of human identity. As my line of inquiry develops, I’m drawn to the role of form and materiality in graphic design when helping us to understand our own humanity, as well as in shaping the future of who we will become.

“Artefacts become truly transformative by exceeding what was expected of them, exceeding our grasp. It is precisely in challenging us - triggering the potential of new ways of seeing, thinking, grasping, and acting - that design plays its role in redefining the human.”
(Colomina et al., 2022)



BAUDRILLARD, J. AND BENEDICT, J. (2020)
‘INTRODUCTION’, IN THE SYSTEM OF OBJECTS.
LONDON, ENGLAND: VERSO, PP. 10–19.

Baudrillard’s writings reflect on the complexities of cataloguing and organising objects in the modern world, in an attempt to interpret the meaning of objects through a psychological and sociological lens. He suggests we shouldn’t “be concerning ourselves with objects as defined by their functions or by the categories into which they might be subdivided for analytic purposes, but instead with the processes whereby people relate to them and with the systems of human behaviour and relationships that result therefrom.” (Baudrillard & Benedict, 2020)

Nevertheless, my own line of inquiry still makes a strong argument in favour of using analytic and systematic arrangements of material forms in space as a legitimate way of cataloguing, which in turn, can evolve parallel to the study of objects in response to their relationship with people and culture. In a way, I agree we ought to be less concerned about “traditional” notions of cataloguing things – such as by function, time period, provenance, etc – hence advocating for a sort of cataloguing which is not merely shaped by words or concepts, but by intuition, strong focus on form and composition, and based on pursuing a sense of materiality of the catalogue as a whole instead as dealing with isolated subjects.



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Martens, K. (no date) Karel Martens, Martens and Martens. Available at: <https://martens-martens.com/> (Accessed: 13 May 2023).

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Baudrillard, J. and Benedict, J. (2020) 'Introduction', in *The system of objects*. London, England: Verso, pp. 10–19.

Greenfield, A. (2018) 'Smartphone: The Networking of the Self', in *Radical Technologies: The design of Everyday Life*. London, England: Verso, pp. 9–30.

Colomina, B. and Wigley, M. (2022) in *Are we human?: Notes on an archaeology of Design*. Zürich, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, pp. 1–125.

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Flusser, V., Poster, M. and Roth, N.A. (2011) 'Print', in *Does writing have a future?* Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 47–54.

Benjamin, W., Arendt, H. and Zohn, H. (2019) 'Unpacking My Library', in *Illuminations*. Boston, MA: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, pp. 59–67.

Saint-Martin, F. (2006) 'The Basic Elements of Visual Language', in *Semiotics of visual language*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 1–15.

