

# The Aesthetics

In Unit 2, I explored embodied practices to represent and re-evaluate standards within graphic communication design. My journey started during the final feedback on the Methods of Iterating Brief. Among the tools we could choose to start our iterations, I decided to start learning screen printing and experimenting with different methods to hijack the tool. Initially, my aim was to enhance how screen printing challenged a portrait's identity and uniqueness. Before this, I first researched its original and industrial use, and I reflected on how the pace of production can affect the quality and message of imagery.

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## Challenging standards through embodied practice

he combined screen printing with painting, I explored how these two methods interacted and challenged each other. Since the goal was to subvert the tool, I challenged its original use: the technique I used was painting by hand on the screen rather than using a stencil. During a discussion with my tutor and peers, I intentionally showed the final iterations and my many unsuccessful attempts; I assumed everyone would see them as ugly as I perceived them—yet, surprisingly, not everyone in the room agreed with me. My experimentations prompted

## of Discomfort

a discussion that led me to reflect on the beauty and the standards that come with it. I picked that snippet to start questioning beauty standards in my practice as a graphic designer.

During Positions through Iterating, I first began playing with multiple digital iterations of a single image of my screen printing results, experimenting with changes in colour, shape, and form. I compiled these variations into a book, aiming to challenge the audience's perceptions of beauty and image. Working with different techniques like 3d, collage and digital painting helped me to seek a fresh perspective on the creative process. Moreover, I compiled all my work into a flip book to add another layer of

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than using a stencil. During a discussion with my tutor and peers, I intentionally showed the final iterations and my many unsuccessful attempts; I assumed everyone would see them as ugly as I perceived them—yet, surprisingly, not everyone in the room agreed with me. My experimentations prompted a discussion that led me to reflect on the beauty and the standards that come with it. I picked that snippet to start questioning beau-

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seek a fresh perspective on the creative process. Moreover, I compiled all my work into a flip book to add another layer of experimentation. The book enhances the fluidity of shapes and the multiple possibilities of identities. It reflected the mechanical rhythm of screen printing, which is where my practice began.

The struggle and discomfort I felt while creating pushed me to go beyond my limits and explore new ways of express-

ing this feeling in my work. I realised that the struggle I've faced with my projects during this course comes from an educational background very different from my current experience. My previous education taught me to be critical, but in a way that often led to unproductive self-judgement. Everything in my work had to be neat and clean. This approach also reflected my idea of beauty and aesthetics. After reflecting on this, I frequently felt discomfort with my work, but instead of avoiding it, I chose to

embrace it. I recognised that discomfort could be a valuable tool for growth, pushing me to expand my creative boundaries. Rather than seeing it as something that was holding me back, I began to view it as an essential part of the process, one that opens opportunities for deeper exploration and self-discovery. As my practice progressed, I

discovered new definitions related to beauty and the body, which I translated into the concept of embodied practice. This allowed me to begin exploring how my own experiences could challenge conventional beauty standards.

How could I redefine beauty through my own experience and

my work? How can graphic communication design help me in achieving this? Is the “aesthetically pleasing” essential in what we produce as graphic designers? Questions began to emerge without self-judgment, such as: how long can I sit with these feelings? And beyond the negative emotions, how can this energy be redirected into the act of making?

**Arnheim Rudolf (1954), *Art & Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.**

The book by the author Rudolf Arnheim gave me a scientific perspective about how I could create different iterations and convey different perceptions of form and colour. At the beginning of my practice, I believed that having an objective and almost distant approach to my work would help me raise new prompts and thoughts about it. Since I was interested in knowing what and how I could stimulate the audience’s mind, I decided to incorporate some principles quoted in the book into my work, such as Gestalt psychology, and phenomena like grouping, similarity, proximity etc. Then, I delve deeper into the research about the eye and the perception of colour (like Colour blindness and trichromatic theory). During my tutorial, I was interested in discovering what my peers perceived in the different iterations I made, and indeed, I had various and multiple perspectives on them, which helped me with my research. I also believed that starting my practice with this type of approach was both safe and limited to my work. I collected data and information about groups and individuals, but it didn’t allow me to have a deep conversation about my point of view and my perspective of things. I think, for example, that Gestalt psychology is really fascinating to study, but simultaneously, it refers to norms of perception

During my research, I found multiple references that helped me reflect on and challenge my practice. They inspired my work and helped create a narrative throughout my journey. While producing work, I then formulated new enquiries that unconsciously took form from my iterations.

that can limit my practice. It didn’t allow me to push boundaries and take an explorative method to my practice.

**Benjamin Walter (1935), *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, New York: Schocken Books.**

While Walter Benjamin used his book to discuss both the positive and negative effects of technology on art and its authenticity, I unknowingly applied some of his theories in my work and then compared his ideas to my

new iterations. This helped me challenge my practice and it created different insights on this theme. Turning my portraits into digital made me reflect firstly about time. The making process was faster but at the same time, after the 50th iteration, I felt mentally tired, a bit unsettled, and almost lost interest. That didn't happen when I was in the screen

printing lab. While I remember feeling exhausted from being there all day, it was always very exciting to see each portrait coming to life.

I agree with Benjamin about how every original and unique artwork possesses an 'aura'. I think every portrait that I made had a personal 'aura'. I disagree with the author's criticism of the capitalist system, particularly the implication that mechanical reproduction diminishes the critical and emancipatory potential of artworks. Considering that the book was published in 1935, I believe that things have evolved significantly

since then. Nowadays, technology has made art more accessible to everyone, empowering people to form personal opinions and adopt a more critical approach towards everything.

The Metahaven publication helped me form a new line of enquiry about my iterations. The title of this book made me

reflect on the definition of Uncorporate Identity. During the previous brief, methods of iterating, I frequently mentioned

concepts of identity and uniqueness, but I now realise that I didn't deeply consider what message I wanted to convey with

those ideas, nor did I stop reflecting and formulating critical thoughts about it. I felt drawn to this new notion because I had a feeling it was relevant to my experimentation and I decided to delve deeper into

it to bring in missing perspectives in my understanding.

Personally, I think that defining identity is one of the most complex and difficult things ever. Although I believe placing "uncorporate" before "identity" helps me clarify what I aimed to achieve with my work. I feel that leaving it indefinite is a part of my journey and perhaps it's something I'm not ready to give a definite meaning yet. The unsettling feelings and uncertainty evoked by these various portraits have become part of the process, and I'm learning to embrace them and appreciate whatever emotions they bring. These emotions are uncorporate, as they don't have a corporate structure or established norms.

**Sondergaard Marie Louise Juul (2020), *Staying with the Trouble through Design: A Critical-Feminist Design Manifesto*, Available at: <https://mljuul.com/Design-Manifesto#:~:text=By%20staying%20with%20the%20trouble,end%20up%20as%20tomorrow's%20problem>.**

Sondergaard's Manifesto served as the initial spark that ignited my journey of using my creative work as a form of therapy. Throughout the entire project, I struggled several times, often finding myself at odds with my self-criticism, to the point where I hesitated to even open my laptop for

days on end.  
Reflecting on this, I realised that I tend to be overly harsh on myself, judging my work too much.

At first, when I came across this article, I didn't like it too much. It seemed to present a very limited "European" perspective, offering simplistic solutions to complex issues that couldn't possibly be resolved with just a few sentences. As I

read through the points of the manifesto, I found myself confused about its classification as a “Critical-Feminist” Manifesto. I couldn’t quite grasp why it was labelled as feminist. Maybe “#11 Use feminist humour. The critical-feminist designer uses feminist humour and a playful approach to engage with trouble.”? In my creative journey, I’ve come to understand the significance of addressing feminist perspectives within artistic practice and the importance of doing so thoughtfully. I think the Manifesto talks about different parts of feminism, but they don’t really fit together coherently. Each point feels somewhat isolated, without a clear line of reasoning that connects them. On the other hand, as I started my journey, I found myself revisiting certain points of the Manifesto and some of them resonated with my practice. To cite one, “#1 Designing should not be a way out of trouble, but a way of staying with the trouble. In troubled times where social, cultural and political issues are inherently intertwined with technologies, design is not the solution but rather part of the problem. By staying with the trouble of present issues and technologies’ inherent responsibilities in the unfolding of these issues, the critical-feminist designer uses design to stay with the trouble rather than propose (yet another) solu-

tion that will end up as tomorrow’s problem.”

I found this quote about design and responsibilities particularly interesting. It prompted me to reason about how I often fail to take responsibility for the challenges in my work. Instead of acknowledging the difficulties I face, I tend to immediately criticise myself for not being able to produce something quickly and polished enough. This creative journey has not only led me to explore my discomfort with my body, but it has also taught me the importance of “staying with the trouble”. This also means embracing those times when I lacked

motivation in my work. However, I’ve realised that when I allow self-judgment to take over, my ability to think critically becomes stifled, leading to a destructive cycle of negativity.

Out of all my references, I decided to include this Manifesto, even though I wasn’t entirely convinced of its value initially. However, as I progressed with my work, I came to appreciate how it pushed me to engage with it critically, rather than simply highlighting aspects I liked.

**Eco Umberto (2007), *On Ugliness*, Bompiani publishing house.**

While researching perceptions of beauty, I encountered a book titled *Storia della bruttezza*—translated as *On Ugliness* in English. However, I find the original Italian title more intriguing, as it means “The Story of Ugliness,” giving it a fairytale-like quality. I learned that Umberto Eco, an Italian philos-

opher and novelist, published this companion volume to his earlier work titled “On Beauty,”—or better, “The story of Beauty”.

what it is addressed in this book. I liked how Eco conducted proper research about this topic using not only words but also illustrations. Furthermore, aside from the analyses

The concept of ongoing unease that I was describing above follows along the line of

he conducted based on cultural and artistic expressions, I found it amusing how he explored the topic with a provocative tone, sometimes coming across as judgmental. I also think it was quite courageous of him to talk about something so personal and changeable with this confidence. If I imagine a social media influencer discussing this today, I think I would find them almost arrogant.

Back to my practice, this book challenged my idea of

beauty and helped me reflect on the relationship between beauty and ugly, not only for me but also for the audience’s perception. Another question that crossed my mind was whether there is a difference between what I perceive as “aesthetically pleasing” and “pretty” and how much I, as a designer, need to expand my understanding of these concepts to ensure my artwork is accessible to the audience.

**Taggart, Emma (2022), *Dieter Rams and the ten rules of good design*, Available at: <https://www.linearity.io/blog/dieter-rams/>**

Being an international student, I often faced diverse difficulties during this first year and I struggled especially during the process of making something quickly and often unfinished, finding myself stuck and unable to come up with a specific concept. I think part of my way of working comes from my education in my home country – Italy. Being catapulted into a different reality made me realise how difficult it is to change your way of thinking, and I'm still struggling with that. What I'm learning, though, is that this struggle doesn't need to be hidden but I noticed that it emerged organically in each of my projects – like the current one.

I frequently defined myself as an 'aesthete', but during this year I challenged this idea of myself several times and I'm learning to embrace what makes me uncomfortable. That's why I think this article is important to help me understand certain things about my practice. Perhaps a few months ago, I would've agreed with the industrial designer Dieter Rams, who defined 'norms' about design and dictated how it should be conducted. But today I don't agree especially with one rule, which is "Good design is aesthetic". I'm interested in delving into the meanings of good and aesthetic. What exactly constitutes 'good design'? And what does aesthetics entail? Why establish ten rules for good design when it is such a broad and subjective field?

Moreover, what can be objective and subjective in design and communication? The difference between my previous brief and the current one is that initially, I tried so hard to make something beautiful to my eyes, but I didn't really consider my audience. This brief, and all the processes that come with it, helped me reflect on the diversity of beauty and how sometimes feeling a bit of discomfort can help you be more critical about things and formulate questions that can be relevant to your practice.

**Varda Agnès (2000), *The Gleaners and I*, Paris: Ciné Tamaris.**

Agnès Varda's approach to looking at everyday life objects inspired a change in my work perspective. While watching this film, I remember feeling a bit disturbed by what she showed. However, her way of describing the reality around her made me progressively curious during the screening. Varda finds curiosity and beauty in the mundane and the discarded. She captures the aesthetics of objects that are often considered ugly by conventional standards. Through her lens, even decaying items become subjects of beauty and contemplation. On my journey, I tried to place myself in another perspective of things as she did. I embraced my disturbing emotions to make room for my discomfort and use it in my practice.

**Wharol Andy (1967), *Marylin Diptych*, silkscreen ink and acrylic paint on canvas, Factory Additions, New York.**

Because my practice started with screen printing, I decided to pick as a reference one of the most repre-

sentative artworks in silkscreen history. I think Wharol's work relates to my practice in terms of the relationship between industrial mass production and the uniqueness of a portrait. While Wharol used screen printing to address society's obsession with fame and materialism by using an icon and a human being, I did the opposite. I challenged screen printing's orig-

inal use, and I inverted the process. Taking the portrait "Girl with a Pearl Earring" by the artist Johannes Vermeer, I deconstructed the original portrait and its icon, but I used the same process



(painting) on a tool destined for mass-produced artworks. This process helped me formulate an enquiry: What does it change? And how?

I think what I share with Warhol's process is the approach to the silkscreen technique and the way we both challenge art and reproducibility in terms of mass production but in different ways. My method emphasizes uniqueness and handiwork, whereas Warhol embraced mechanical reproduction to critique society and the economy of the time. What I aimed to achieve was to push boundaries and invite the audience to reconsider the relationship between art and technology.

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**Alleyne Allyssia (2021), *Eww, I love it. When did illustration get so gross?*, Available at: <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/grotesque-illustration-231123>.**

"Opening Instagram can feel like stepping into a world of stylised, sanitised imagery, where harsh realities are carefully omitted and imperfections are buffed out to a hyperreal shine. But of late, the platform's developed a slimy, sweaty, subversive streak, as artists across disciplines – from digital painting and 3D design to AI-assisted generative art – embrace clashing colours, exaggerated textures, and revolting motifs that disturb and draw you in at the same time. Welcome to the gross-out renaissance." I chose to include this reference in my list because it reflects the work I'm doing in my research and adds a new layer of insight to my project. Beyond just the illustrations, I believe the article uses the right language to discuss this topic—clear and engaging, and it resonates with various aspects of my practice. In my work, I explore themes related to my educational background and how I used to focus solely on creating an "aesthetically pleasing" graphic design outcome. However, I think my way of working changed over this brief, and I was drawn to how Allyssia Alleyne discusses a new "gross-out renaissance". Indeed, working on this project felt like a personal renaissance for me and I embraced a different perspective and explored themes that pushed me out of my comfort zone. It was refreshing yet challenging to start working with a different approach.

**Bugter Chet (2020), *Fat Belly Boy Booklet*, self-published.**

**Bugter Chet (2021), *Selfieing Together: Exploring the Wider Scope of the Selfie as Self-Love Praxis*, Available at: <https://www.fashionstudiesjournal.org/digital-engagement-d/2022/8/8/selfieing-together-exploring-the-wider-scope-of-the-selfie-as-self-love-praxis>.**

Chet Bugter's exploration of self-love through the medium of the selfie has been profoundly inspirational for my work. If we think about graphic communication design, there are infinite ways in which we can convey our message. What struck me most was his innovative choice to use something as ordinary as selfies to tackle such a profound topic. By doing so, he prompts reflection on beauty and self-acceptance, and he also manages to create a sense of community,

inviting everyone into his personal introspections. During this course, I learned the importance of accessibility in my work, and I think his work is a great example of that. He inspired me to put myself and

my own experiences into my work and explore personal topics through embodied experience, which I hadn't done before. His work encouraged me to push the boundaries of my practice, prompting me to experiment with different mediums and adopt a more explorative approach. In doing so, I've come to appreciate the value of embracing imperfections and the journey of creation rather than solely focusing on having a neat and final outcome of my work. Moreover, his work helped me grow as a graphic designer practitioner. It made me reflect on how my previous education affected the way I work and the way I look at things – especially at myself.

Visually speaking, I believe selecting the zine format was the best choice for him to convey his concept and that's also why I found the topic and the choice of medium particularly intelligent in terms of accessibility for everyone. At first, I also considered creating a zine featuring various iterations of my exploration into the imagery of my nose and its reflection on beauty standards. Ultimately, I opted to ignore all guidelines and rules to remain coherent with my exploration journey. Instead, I embraced experimentation with my iterations and I was excited during the process of my making. The structure of Bugter's zine isn't rigid, which inspired me to adopt a similar explorative approach in my practice. While I typically prefer defined layouts, I found that the lack of structure convincingly complemented the theme.

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What also struck me in his practice was how he engaged with the personal experiences and testimonials of others. In the beginning, my work was very objective and detached from my personal experience. I felt like I hadn't been giving importance or space to my thoughts, which may have contributed to experiencing "writer's block" during my journey. However, one day, I opened up to one of my peers and friends in my course, and that proved to be incredibly helpful. Our conversation allowed me to reflect on myself and to hear her own different experiences that somehow resonated with mine. Communicating with her showed me a broader perspective on my work and, most importantly, on the audience I was creating it for. From that day, I began collecting testimonials about societal beauty standards, and each one served as inspiration for my work and research. With my practice, I aimed to speak for them and provide them with a sense of understanding and comfort through my efforts.

After gathering all my work together, I could see how my narrative developed and changed through each iteration and how it evolved during the different briefs. While working, I sometimes felt my projects were disconnected, and the path didn't feel clear or straightforward. However, looking back over my outcomes as a whole, I realised that my work moved from a broad context to specific, interconnected themes. The choices I made led

me to think critically about my research and consequently challenge my knowledge and my way of thinking through working.

As my practice moved forward, I struggled to shift a new perspective on my path. Rather than focusing solely on beauty standards, I considered a broader approach to 'standards' in general, which included not only beauty and body image but standardisation in graphic

design. As mentioned earlier, I often questioned, through my work, how my educational background shaped my thinking and conditioned me to work in a specific and standard way, emphasising the necessity to produce a finished, neat and polished outcome. I realise that throughout this course, this has been the path that continually challenges both myself and my work, pushing me toward different investigations that prompt me to be

critical and reconsider my knowledge.

I believe what I'm challenging is the standardisation of how graphic design should be created and explored, and since embodied practice is the lens through which I'm critically approaching this topic, I immediately thought about how our human body can also be reflected in the body of a book. Moreover, I remembered an episode that happened recently during my time in my

hometown, Rome, when, walking through the streets, I was asked in front of a popular bookstore when was the last time I held a book in my hands. This made me reflect on the importance of books as physical objects.

The human body has always interacted with the physical form of a book, creating a connection between the two. I think that, over the years, with the rise of technology, PDFs, and e-books, printed books have become rarer and less of an everyday necessity, reducing books to pure content and depriving the reader of a sensory engagement and an embodied experience.

Continuing to compare the human body to the body of a book made me realise how many common features they share and how interconnected they are. Every book, just like every human body, has an identity that should not be forgotten. My aim with this project would be to reconnect and enhance the connection between the two bodies – both human and book – to create a sensory experience and potentially a new methodology for people to engage

with books. When I refer to the senses, it's because our interaction with a book relies primarily on them, even if we don't engage all of them. This leads me to reflect:

the body, much like the book, is a complete entity. So, why not engage all the senses to strengthen our connection with the books?

To explore this, I felt the necessity to work on breaking the standardisation in book design. Thinking back about my educational school of thinking, I can't help

but think about the Swiss International Style, particularly **Josef Muller-Brockmann's work *Grid Systems in Graphic Design* (1968)**. His approach to graphic design is purely systematic and logical. With his work, he enhances clarity and functional beauty, making sure that with his system, the content is organised and visually appealing, which inadvertently brings me back to my previous practice on the perception of beauty and aesthetics. The author,

through these systems, aims to restore objectivity and reduce subjectivity

in design, which contrasts with my practice.

*“Working with a grid system means submitting to a discipline that forces you to work in a systematic and logical way and creates unity in design.” (Müller-Brockmann, 1968)*

One of the goals I want to achieve with my practice is to emphasise the unique and sensory relationship between the book and its reader, questioning the predictability of Brockmann’s standard norms. The first approach that I took was to take existing books and publications and play with them, subverting their bodies to change the content’s order and readability. While I think Brockmann’s approach reduces personal expression, I aim to enhance the individuality and uniqueness of both the body and, consequently, the book.

*“The use of the grid system means submitting to laws of universal validity. The use of the grid system implies the will to systematize, to clarify; it implies the will to penetrate to the essentials, to concentrate on the essential, not the incidental.” (Müller-Brockmann, 1968)*

Moreover, going back to what I was reflecting on as the book lost its ‘identity’ during the technology era, I think Brockmann treats the book in a somewhat mechanical manner—very structured and calculated. I believe the link between the physicality of the book and the human body also raises awareness of the imperfections and the changeability that are in tension with my reference. As I’m embracing chaos to formulate new enquiries about my iterations, I found along my path that sometimes, having settled rules can limit your creative approach to your work. While book design doesn’t need to disregard all these established rules, it is worth questioning whether standardisation is always beneficial or if breaking these rules can lead to more engaging and meaningful outcomes. This approach may also encourage designers to adopt a more critical perspective on their work.

While producing my new iterations, I started to create new lines of enquiries. In the first place, I was wondering what were the rules that dictated how books are created and defined and if there are any limits to how a publication can be made. Can I challenge those limits with my practice? Moreover, how does our body interact with books, and what defines the body language of reading books in a predetermined way?

With Brockmann’s guide, I was able to answer some of those questions. However, as I proceeded with my practice, these questions evolved into additional layers, such as: what does the grid system sacrifice in designing a

book? Can a book’s physical form, when subverted and “un-standardised”, change the way the reader perceives information?

During my practice, I tried to set aside what I learned about book designing, binding, etc., in my previous education. I also observed that reshaping and redesigning the physical form of the book inherently changed its content and influenced how I interpreted it. This shift not only changed the visual and tactile experience but also led me to reconsider the narrative of the book and the engagement with the form of the book. I noticed during the making how every little change adds layers of different interpretations to the content of the book,

and it also changes the language that the book originally had to communicate with the reader. It was amusing playing and distorting this language, almost like “making fun” of the book – indeed, treating it as a human.

My journey continues to evolve in different and interconnect-

ed forms. While I have a clearer sense of my aim, as discussed earlier, I am currently taking an explorative approach to expand my thinking and become more critical of my practice. Some of my iterations have been unsuccessful and didn't really provide interesting insights within my enquiries. However, I believe that only through this vulnerable and

human experience can I achieve an outcome that defines a new methodology—one that engages both designers and readers with books in a fresh way.

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