



# **The Poetry of the Poster**

**Myth and Metaphor  
in the Work of  
Nelu Wolfensohn**

**ADRIANA DREDGE**

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# I HAVE A LOVE FOR POSTERS OF

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**A Celebration  
of Canadian Artists  
at Expo 86**

**L'art en fête...  
Les artistes canadiens  
à Expo 86**

Le ministère des Communications est heureux de contribuer à la réalisation de manifestations culturelles et artistiques présentées lors de l'exposition internationale à Vancouver, du 2 mai au 13 octobre 1986. La série «Le Canada présente» rend hommage à la créativité des Canadiens.

The Department of Communications is pleased to support cultural and artistic performances at the International Exposition in Vancouver, from May 2 to October 13, 1986. The "Canada Presents" series is a tribute to Canadian creativity.

Government of Canada  
Département des Communications

## **PREFACE**

It was the turn of the millennium when I first encountered Nelu Wolfensohn's work and his ability to tame images. I have always been aware of the fact that pictures have a life of their own, telling stories, coming together and drifting apart as they pleased. So I was impressed by the large digital posters in Wolfensohn's exhibition *Manipulations*: here the images were sized and ordered following the will, and the whip, of the artist.

I also have a love of posters, this undervalued and under praised medium, in which art and design, aesthetic and functionality work side by side: I like the fact that we don't have to choose.

Writing about Nelu Wolfensohn's posters, I keep referring to him as "the artist". He gently corrects me - shouldn't I say "the designer"? I am surprised by what I consider to be his modesty, as my (and possibly many readers') perception is that art, with its limitless conceptual and execution possibilities, is in some way on a more elevated plane.

Different, yes. But the need for functionality widens, rather than limits, creativity. Design follows different rules of rhetoric, the poster has a role to fulfil, inviting us to leisure, pleasure, above all to persuade.

So this book is about posters produced by Nelu Wolfensohn through the years, through the pretexts, looking at the tropes and methods, trying to understand the motivation, the passion. The posters took me on a journey of my own, through other times, other myths. Whether the artist himself was inspired by these earlier images, or the poster I was looking at recalled the work of earlier painters only to me, I was invited to travel along.

I added the words to the pictures, and sometimes the words gathered themselves into poems, related to the images by some whimsical association, that may or may not be evident.

Throughout the book, the reading and interpretation of works are mine; they often, but not always, concur with the artist's intentions. The reader is invited to compile his or her own.

ART  
1986

# **ABOUT A POSTER**

*A picture is a poem without words*  
(Horace)

The poster is an art form so ubiquitous, it rarely attracts the attention of art historians and critics. It does, however, attract the attention of the passer-by.

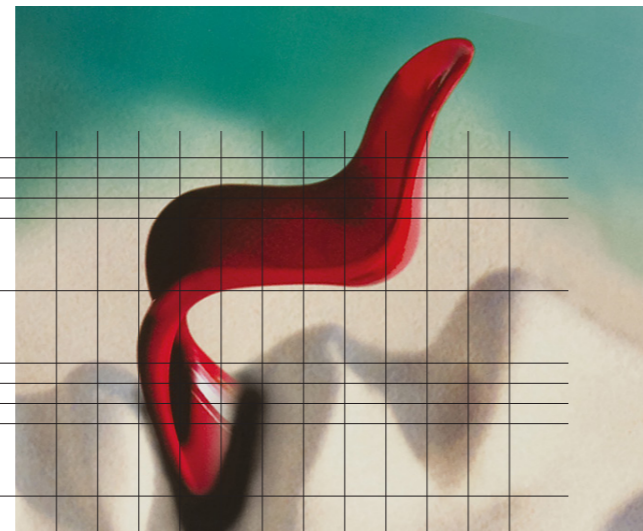
During a very hot summer a few years ago, I came face to face with a poster for a soft drink. It featured a drinks can with a well-known logo, drops of condensation sliding on its cylindrical side, indicating the coolness of the liquid inside it. A single word "Thirsty" was followed by a question mark. "Yes! Very thirsty," I replied to the poster in my mind – and made a beeline for the nearest kiosk to purchase a can – identical to the one on the poster. I don't even like sweet drinks. But the poster made me aware of a need I didn't know I had. The ad man knew better.

As a familiar presence in the street or on public transport, the poster has ceased to receive the respect it deserves. Much of the teaching and writing about modern art bypasses the poster and even advertising literature features it scantily. Given its power of delivering messages quickly and effectively, it is hardly surprising that the advertising industry has adopted it as a favoured medium. When we consider the ability of a TV advertisement to inform, educate and reposition a product in 30 seconds, we are rightly impressed. The poster can and does change attitudes and behaviour in the fraction of a second it takes to glance at it. But it is possible that the poster's rise in importance in advertising has also contributed to its neglect as an art form.

As it stands there, glued to a wall (or a post), immobile, the poster works silently and effectively towards delivering the message. We know that an image is worth a thousand words, we recognise the power of words – but the combination of words and pictures provides an incredible synergy, a powerful way of communicating: it can create contrast, it could imply or include alliteration, it invites interpretation.

Wolfensohn defines himself as a designer; he has done a lot to explain design, and the fraught relationship between the designer and the consuming public. A series of posters for the School of Industrial Design invites the viewer to understand and appreciate the discipline. What has design ever done for us?

Let's speak design, are the words on this poster, repeated in several languages. Not "talk about" design, as one would automatically read the sentence, but speak this language called 'design'. The red tongue coming out of the mouth of the marble-like woman is a red Panton chair, a symbol of design. Created by designer Verner Panton, the chair that bears his name is an S-shaped moulded plastic piece of stackable furniture. It is aesthetically pleasing as well as practical, and it became a symbol of what is best in design.



The woman in the poster appears to be chiselled in white marble, her features and expression reminiscent of Renaissance sculptures. Not incidentally, the classical figure is female; not incidentally, she is beautiful. Design is born of such beauty, of centuries of practice. The figure is modern too: her features, lit from above, are quite contemporary, like a fashion dummy in a city centre window, and the pale turquoise background is soft and surprising. *Let's speak design* the poster invites us. It's a language, suggests Wolfensohn, with its symbols, it's metaphors, it's codes.

LET'S SPEAK DESIGN  
2000



## ADVOCACY AND PROPAGANDA

In the sense of disseminating a message of a biased nature, designed to promote a specific point of view – all art is propaganda and each artist projects his point of view, by whatever means he considers to be more effective.

The propaganda posters of Lord Kitchener pointing out to YOU, Uncle Sam wanting YOU for the US Army three years later and Dimitri Moor's poster for the Soviet Army addressing YOU, although quite different in graphic style, bear more than a passing resemblance. They illustrate eloquently the explosive power of the image combined with the word, the ability of this juxtaposition to attract and engage the viewer.

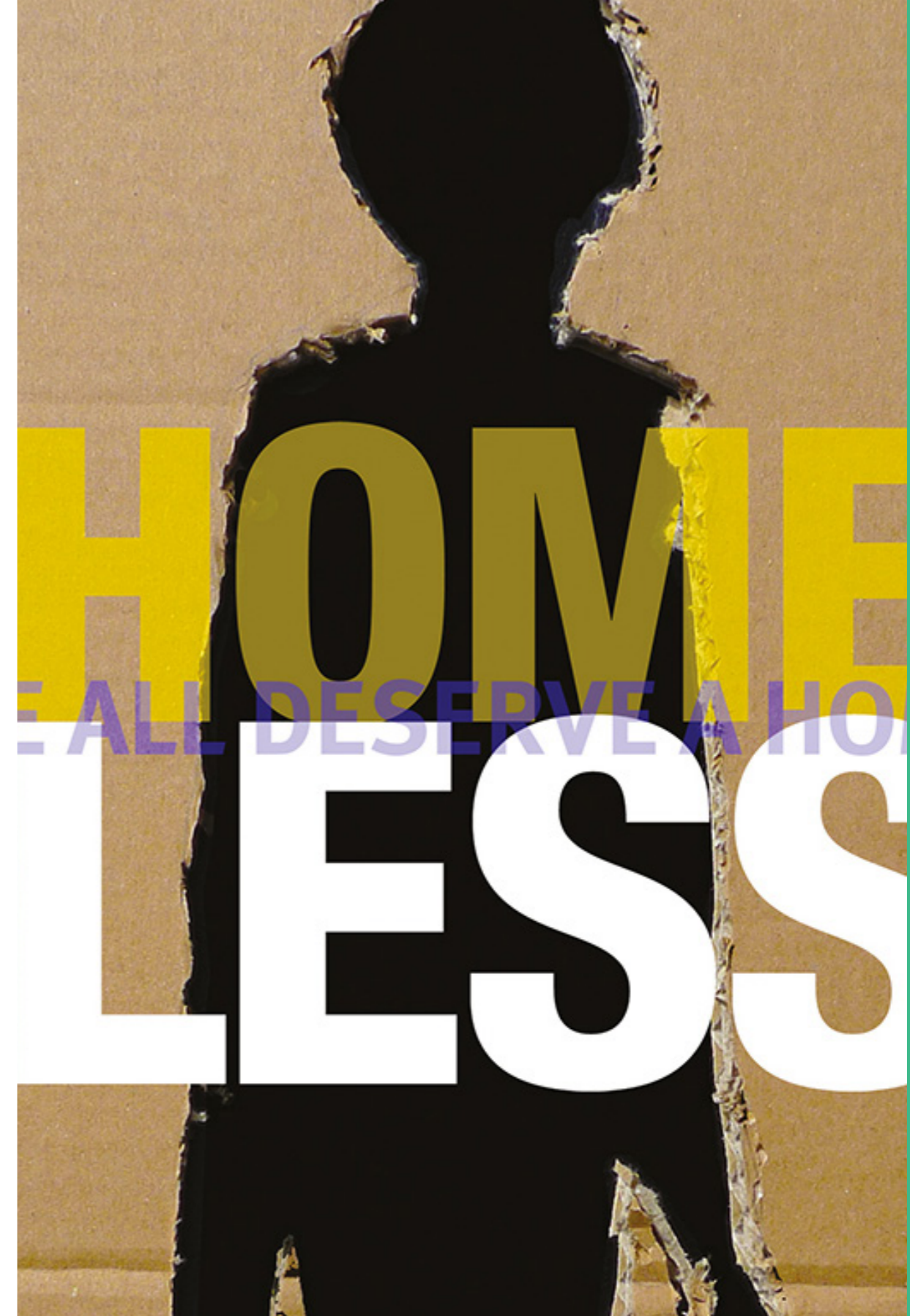
Soviet propaganda posters used bold blocks of colour, mainly bright red and black, and strong lines. They created a form of street art which decorated the walls of the cities. Themes like the empowerment of women, education for all and cooperation of workers were depicted with limited but effective artistic and technical resources. The style and technique of these posters continue to inspire our designers. Today's society is still struggling with inequality, homelessness overconsumption and disease – topics that increasingly preoccupy Wolfensohn, as reflected in his recent work.

It is clear that a rectilinear chronological analysis of the role of the poster is not possible. Nor is it useful to separate into categories such as advertising or ideas posters, since all posters are based on an idea, and the artists are committed to advertising this idea.

One artist likened the poster to a short circuit, a dramatic connection between idea and image, with explosive results. Attracting attention, informing the viewer, engaging the viewer – it all needs to happen immediately, or it doesn't happen at all. All works of art have limitations; the poster is limited in time, it is the art of the present tense. Like a good joke, the poster has to get to the punch line quickly, or it is no longer amusing.

The message of the poster has an immediate meaning – at a particular time in a specific culture. The primary effect must be direct and immediate, although it can contain layers of meaning – and there is always room for misinterpretation, even for unintended offence. Increasingly in the current environment the poster takes its role of conveying a message seriously. Because today's message is serious. It has to do with the failures of our society, it aims to promote equality, food and education for all, combat racism, reduce consumption and save the planet. All in a day's work for the humble poster.

Talented designers make the most of the symbiosis between image and word, stark shapes and bold colours (red is still a favourite) to create a conversation with the viewer. The element of surprise, sometimes the juxtaposition of contradictory concepts, often the originality of the message, attracts attention, holds it, makes the viewer curious.



HOMELESS  
2013



**NELUWOLFENSOHN**  
«VOIR ME COÛTE D'OUVRIR LES YEUX À TOUT CE QUE JE NE VOUDRAIS PAS VOIR»  
ANTONIO PORCIA  
**MANIPULATIONS**

CRÉATIONS RÉCENTES AU CENTRE DE DESIGN DE L'UQAM

DU MERCREDI AU DIMANCHE DE 12H À 18H • ENTRÉE LIBRE • 1440, RUE SANGUINET, MONTRÉAL • (514) 987-3395

22 NOVEMBRE AU 9 DÉCEMBRE 2001

VERNISSAGE : MERCREDI 21 NOVEMBRE À 18H

RÉALISATIONS DE NELU WOLFENSOHN, PROFESSEUR À L'ÉCOLE DE DESIGN  
ET DIRECTEUR DU CENTRE DE RECHERCHE DES IMAGES NUMÉRIQUES (CRIN) DE L'UQAM  
EXPOSITION RÉALISÉE GRÂCE AU PROGRAMME D'AIDE FINANCIÈRE  
À LA RECHERCHE ET À LA CRÉATION (PARARC) DE L'UQAM ET AU SOUTIEN DE L'ÉCOLE DE DESIGN  
LE CENTRE DE RECHERCHE DES IMAGES NUMÉRIQUES BÉNÉFICIE DU FINANCEMENT  
DE L'INSTITUT DE DESIGN MONTRÉAL (IDM)

RENCONTRE / DÉBAT AVEC PETER GHELERTER, CÉLINE MAYRAND ET NELU WOLFENSOHN  
MERCREDI, 28 NOVEMBRE À 18H, SALLE D'EXPOSITION

[www.uqam.ca/crin](http://www.uqam.ca/crin)

## KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON



The familiar slogan, the white sans serif font on a red background, with the crown above it is one of the most recognisable modern icons, and an interesting moment in the history of the poster. Sometimes society or cultural groups fall in love with a certain style, or a certain medium. Our relationship with the poster endures: we didn't actually fall in love with the genre, and we are not going to divorce it either. Over the last hundred years, the poster had to adapt to many changes of style, preferences and fashion. In the 21st century it continues to morph and adapt – the poster carries on.

As we spend more time looking at our tablets and phones than at the city walls, the poster has migrated to the tablet. The internet has enabled – indeed has forced – a paradigm shift in the creation and production of posters. The manipulation of images, fabulous colours and an infinity of shades, graphic design programmes and super-size printers have been used to create very impressive posters.

It may be safe to predict that the poster will no longer have to elbow its way into the history of art, as a bona fide artform. It may be safe to predict that generations of talented designers, with brilliant ideas and using modern techniques will continue to produce posters that will stand proudly alongside the best works of art.

MANIPULATIONS  
2001

# **THE RHETORIC OF THE POSTER** **OR THE ART** **OF PERSUASION**

*Creativity takes courage*  
(Henri Matisse)

What are the conceptual possibilities – and limitations – of design? We would not dare ask this question in relation to art (its possibilities are limitless) but design is functional, it has a job to do. It is its functionality that, according to the artist, and of his choice, banishes the poster from the (supposedly) elevated realm of art and places it firmly in the real world of design. Here, where it defines the art of design, it meets the emotional and functional needs of the viewer.

Because of modern politics speak, the meaning of the word rhetoric has changed to signify the unscrupulous use of language in order to achieve self-serving aims. Not only people do not allow themselves to be persuaded, they doubt the sincerity of the message and its originator.

We will use the term here in its original Aristotelian meaning, as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. Persuasion requires knowledge and understanding of the message receiver, knowledge and ability to maximise the use of techniques available and mastering of the skills that enable the artist to use the tools in a most effective way. The art of rhetoric has been controversial in the past and it is no less so today: people question the motivation of the artist, try to resist persuasion.

Revived in the middle of the 20th century, new rhetoric goes beyond speech and it is seen as a technique used to reach audiences in various media. Technological advancements facilitated the mass production and distribution of visual messages and the growth and acceptance of advertising as an industry meant better visual techniques, aimed at persuading ever-increasing audiences.

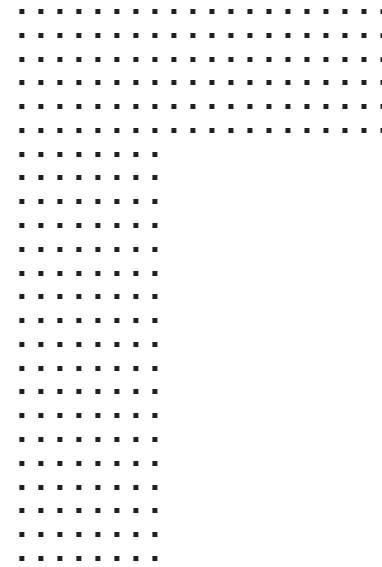
If originally the art of rhetoric referred to the spoken language, visual rhetoric is about persuasion achieved with the right choice of shapes, line, colour, composition. Images are sensory expressions and perceptions of the shapes and colours in a personal, social and cultural context; together, they create meaning.

Visual rhetoric was first mentioned in 1977, but existed long before that date. Roland Barthes was analysing the images in advertisements – in terms of the denotations and connotations of graphics, colour and composition – in the mid-60s, while Magritte's *La trahison des images* was painted in 1929.

IN TRUE DIALOGUE  
BOTH SIDES ARE WILLING  
TO CHANGE  
2012



**THE POSTER IS NO LONGER  
A MEDIUM  
IT IS A REALITY IN WHICH  
THE VIEWER  
SUBMERGES WILLINGLY,  
IMMEDIATELY**



À LUNDI  
2004

THE INSTITUTE  
OF DESIGN  
MONTRÉAL AWARDS  
2004

As it stands stuck to the wall (or the post), the poster uses the tools of rhetoric to fulfil its multifaceted role: inform, invite, persuade, challenge, motivate, mobilise. It does that without sound or movement, in the second it takes the viewer to interrupt his erstwhile train of thought and give his attention to the poster.

In the work of Wolfensohn, the initial shot, the first fraction of a second is crucial and he displays a plethora of artifices to successfully arrest the viewer: a striking colour, the unexpected juxtaposition (the fly on the cheek of Mozart, the triangle suggestive of a woman's hidden genitalia as a flying kite, the mouth of a baguette-crocodile ready to swallow an eye, a cucumber revealed by peeling a banana), the stating of the obvious in a non-obvious way.

The first of five canons of rhetoric is 'inventio': the good idea, the invention. This is not often a thunderbolt, but more likely a process of brainstorming, sketching, erasing, redrawing, until the right image emerges.

'Dispositio': arrangement. The images, the text the colours will be positioned on the page in the most effective way, to make the message as clear and persuasive as possible.

There are infinite ways of arranging images, letters and colour on a canvas, as there is an unlimited number of sequences of words, generating sentences and ordering them on

a page – but only one way of getting it right, of creating a story that stimulates, provokes, incites.

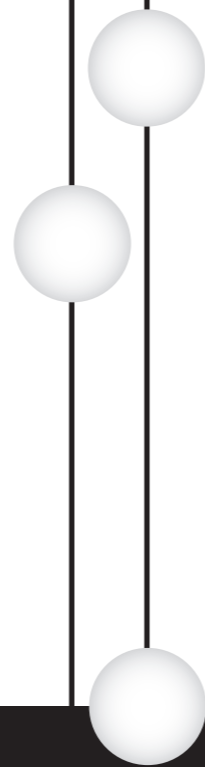
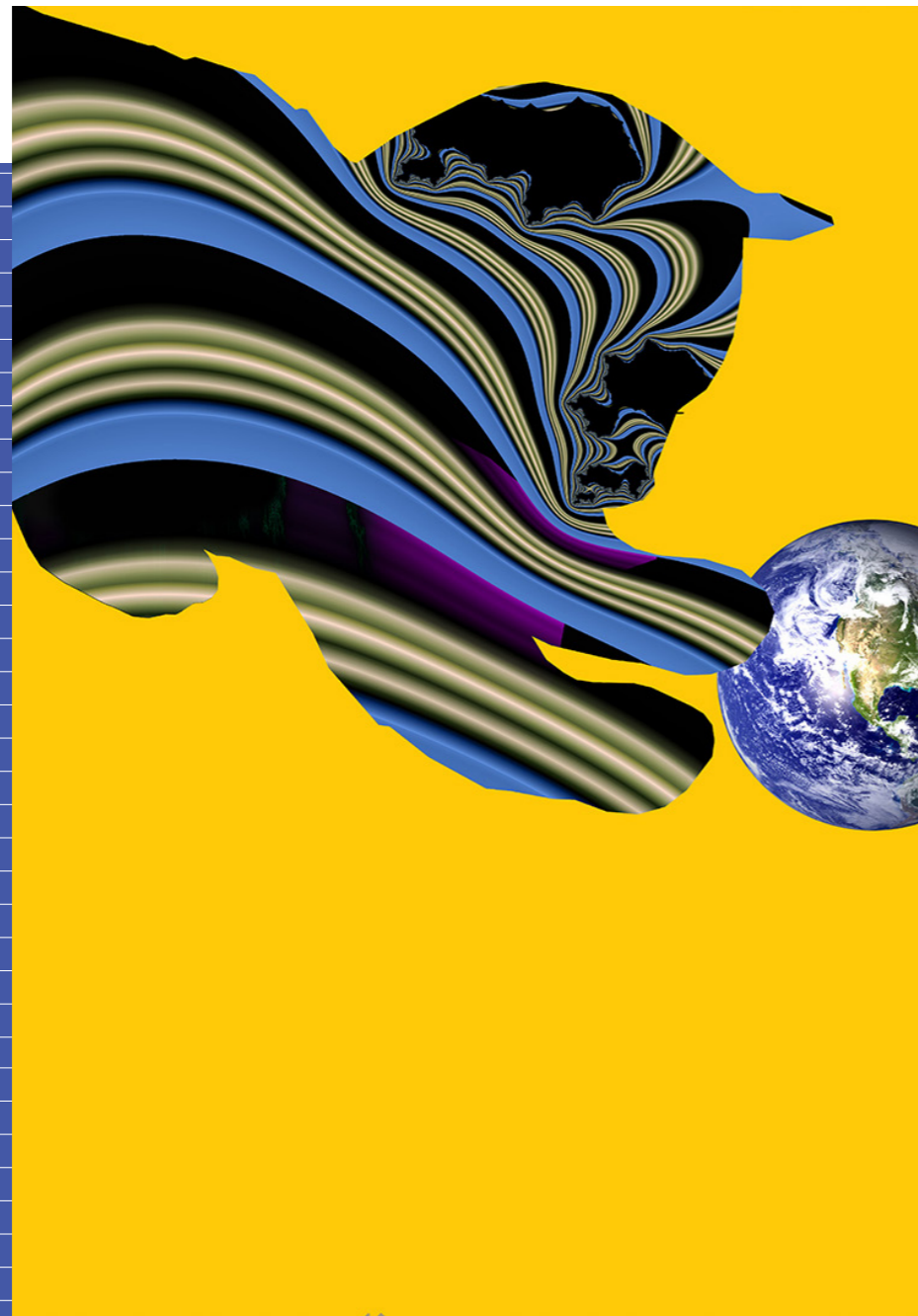
The third canon is 'elocution', or style: the choices the artist makes to impact the viewer, to arouse her emotions. This is the fun part of design, or speech, the introduction of pathos – the tropes that brings tears and/or laughter.

'Memoria' and 'pronuntiatio' are aspects of rhetoric that refer to knowledge – of the topic, of the audience – and the delivery of the message, the small but all important finishing touches. Formulating and sending a message is not sufficient to achieve communication; the message has to be received, decoded, understood and acted upon. As the etymology of the word implies, for communication to take place there has to be commonality – of language, culture, interests – between the sender and receiver. It is the task of the message creator to ensure that he has profound understanding of the audience, so that the message is fashioned and delivered effectively.

If rhetoric is the control of events for an audience, Wolfensohn's posters present the speaker/the artist's version of events within a given situation, in order to affect the audience's decision-making. This requires understanding of the situation, of the audience and of the audience's attitude to the situation. What is the audience's position versus consumption? Gender equality? Education? The artist is not afraid to tackle head on any subject, however controversial or sensitive - from music to homelessness, from industrial design to the environment.

If we accept that design is a form of rhetoric, with its own communication model, with its own logos (rational) ethos (ethical) and pathos (emotional) appeal strategy, the objective is to simply guide us on how to live our lives: what to believe, what to do, how to do it. The language of design, like the language of art, is the visual generator of emotion: line, colour, composition.





SCIENCE AND HUMAN VALUES  
2010

PROJET MOZART  
2001

Projet Mozart.

Midi, quinze...  
abandonnez-vous  
au plaisir gratuit  
d'entendre  
une heure de Mozart,  
tout en savourant  
votre collation en silence,  
car comme le disait si bien  
Sacha Guitry,  
même le silence  
qui entoure sa musique  
est signé  
Mozart.

Trente pièces pour piano solo  
composées par Mozart de dix-huit à trente-cinq ans  
comprenant l'intégrale des dix-huit sonates

...neuf concerts-midis  
dans le hall d'entrée  
du Centre  
Pierre-Péladeau  
les mercredis  
24 et 31 janvier,  
7, 14 et 28 février,  
7, 14, 21 et 28 mars  
2001

Interprète : Pierre Jasmin sur piano Steinway  
Musicologue : Claude Dauphin

UQAM Centre Pierre-Péladeau

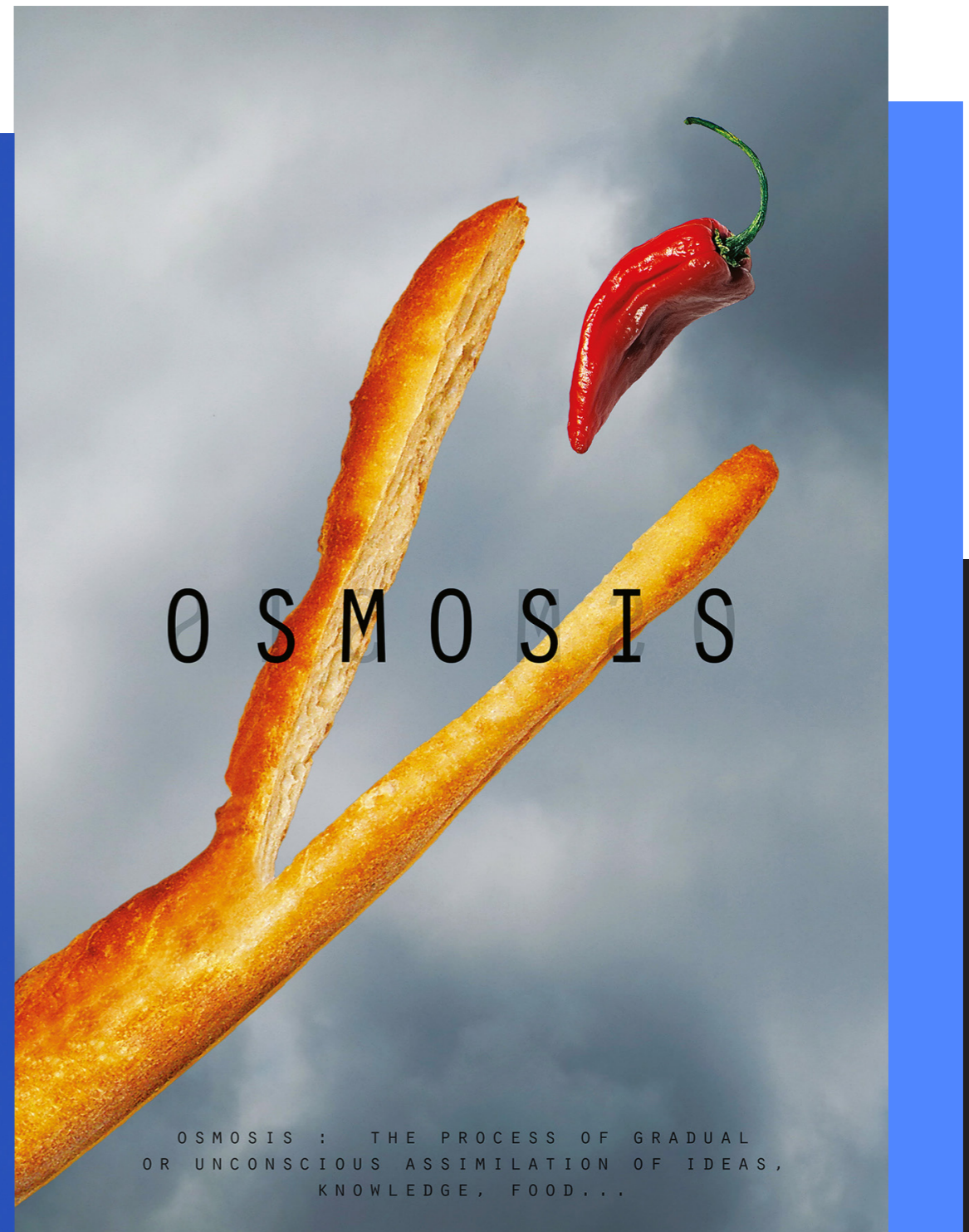
This aim is established and declared from the start: a fundamental characteristic of rhetoric is a transparent objective. The intention of the poster is to invite, amuse, educate, arouse emotion, call to action – or any combination of those. At this point I come to agree with Wolfensohn that the poster is more design than art: the poster is judged by its effectiveness in achieving its objective.

But beware! At first sight it appears that the intention of the artist is to amuse: Mozart with full make-up including the fly, a grain de beauté on his rouged cheeks, the French baguette cut halfway like the mouth of an alligator ready to swallow rather than be swallowed, the gold fish in an otherwise empty head, the hen with a question mark egg floating above its head...all rather drôle. Of course humour is not the end, but a means to an end. A way of arresting the viewer, holding his attention for the time it takes to deliver the entire message.

Humour is more than that: it is part of the ethos in rhetoric strategy, the means by which the communicator establishes his credibility. It helps to put the audience at ease first, before taking it onto the persuasion path. Laughter, or just a fleeting smile, makes the public relaxed and more inclined to accept whatever message is delivered by the person with the joke. Mozart sticking out his tongue is ready to attract a much wider audience than the serious version of the composer; it also indicates that the event is going to be entertaining, relaxing, inclusive.

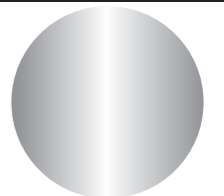


Paraprosdokian – the unexpected shift in meaning – is often used in the Wolfensohn’s work, sometimes to comic effect, more often to expand or divert the real message. The *Ode à la joie* (1990) is sung by a choir of nine Beethovens (because it is the 9th symphony) nearly identical except for the centre figure, who is apparently listening. A banana is peeled to reveal a perfectly formed cucumber, Mozart sticks his tongue out, a kitten plays with a small ball that is recognisable as our planet.



THINK POSITIVE !  
2010

OSMOSIS  
2014



The linearity of time gives the orator an advantage over the visual rhetoric: he can use a parapsydokian trope and take his audience by surprise. Even an amateur Cicero would pose for effect before delivering the humorous words. The visual artist has to display his tropes all at once; the viewer needs a number of tools himself, a cultural context, in order to decode the elements of the message and get the joke. This type of expectation-defying twist is often used in comedy, and the visual version in film (Spielberg is a master of the parapsydokian ending).

The use of homophones (like "buy" and "bye"), birds, animals and vegetables in various roles are there to amuse before delivering some authoritative instruction.

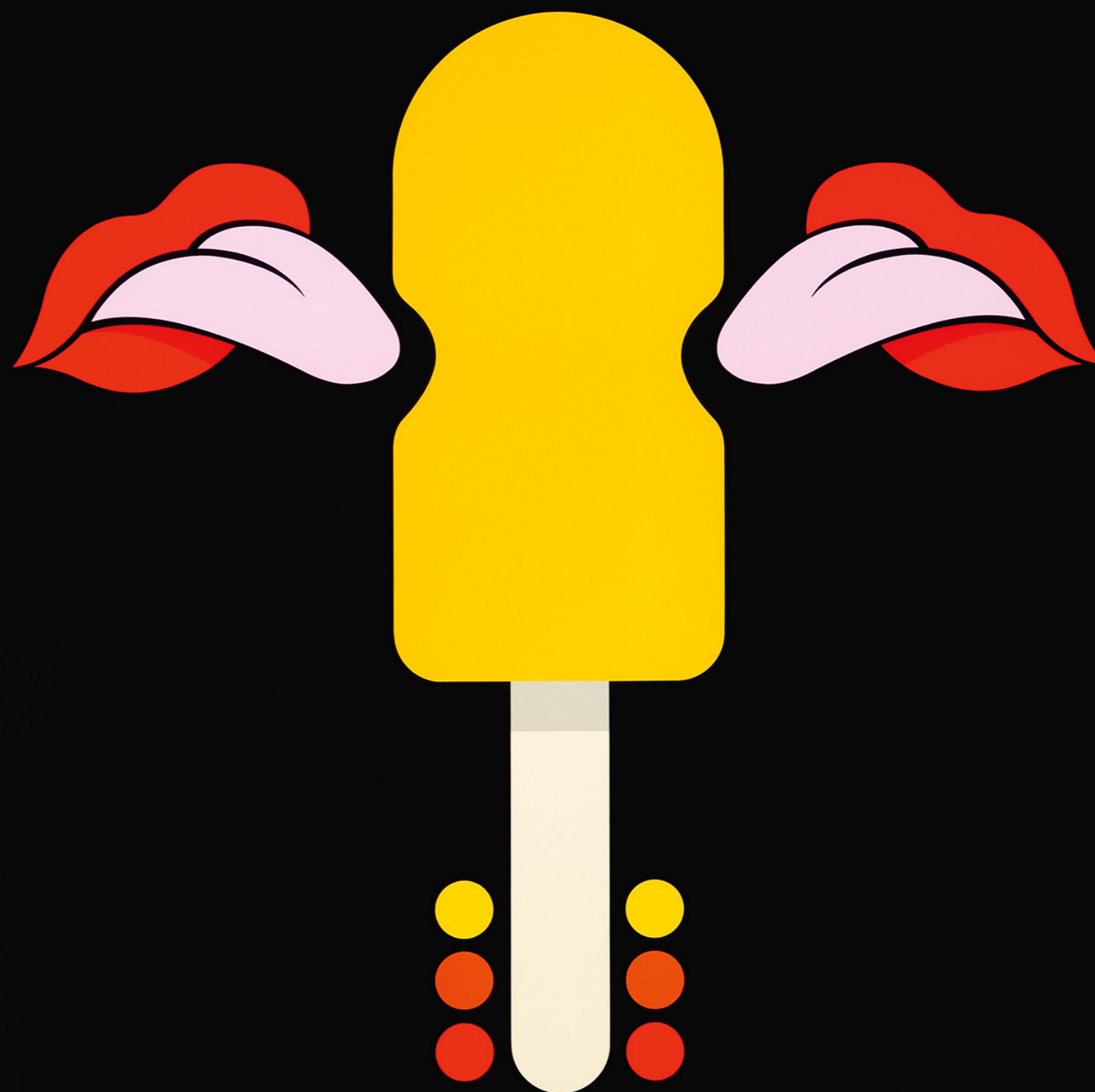
Humour helps the artist to establish a level link, the illusion of a relationship of equals with his audience. Laughter unites public and rhetor, establishing the latter as trustworthy, his message both desirable and useful.

Although more successful than oration, visual persuasion cannot be taken for granted; it has become naturalised, pervasive, an everyday event, mere visual muzak that we no longer perceive. To our detriment, because in our blindness and deafness we lose the freedom to choose; the public's liberty to actively form the public sphere is diminished. The role of the orator, or visual persuader, is an act of civil participation, a civic duty.

The public is so accustomed to images competing to persuade that we no longer see them, the same as we blank out and not hear muzak. To cure this blindness, the poster has to use images that are "new" in some way. The beauty of Wolfensohn's posters is that his images are new and often unexpected; and although complex, not cryptic.

32ND CHICAGO  
LATINO FILM FESTIVAL  
2016

FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL  
DE LANAUDIÈRE  
1991



**FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DE LANAUDIÈRE**

DU 22 JUIN AU 28 JUILLET 1991

MILTON GLASER

2020

International Compost Awareness Week May 3 – 9, 2015  
**BE LOYAL TO YOUR SOIL**  
**Compost!**



MILTON GLASER  
2020

The logos – the rational and intelligent structure of the argument – is that the product (the poster) is capable of doing the work that it has been designed to do. The poster image is frank, its intention transparent: the intention of effectiveness – be it an invitation to pleasure or leisure, generating awareness of social issues or to win a design competition – is honest and transparent.

*The advertising image is frank, or at least emphatic* (Roland Barthes). Poster images are both frank and emphatic. Stated clearly and loudly, the message insinuates itself into the conscience of the public by appealing to its emotions and social circumstances. Yes, the choices made by the artist (form, colour, composition) are those most likely to help achieve a change – in perception, attitude or behaviour. The use of metaphors and myth emphasises the commonality of language and culture with the viewer, invites the spectator to join the club, get on the same page, in order to be more persuasive.

From the artist's consciousness to our own, from objective to perceived reality the images of an ideal, desired world fluctuate according to age, religion, wealth but it is always ruled by universal human values. From food to philosophy, from climate change to consumerism, the issues Wolfensohn deals with are important to him, and he engages us, the viewers, so that they become important to us too.

BE LOYAL TO YOUR SOIL, COMPOST!  
2017

# **THE TRANSMISSION** **OF MEANING**

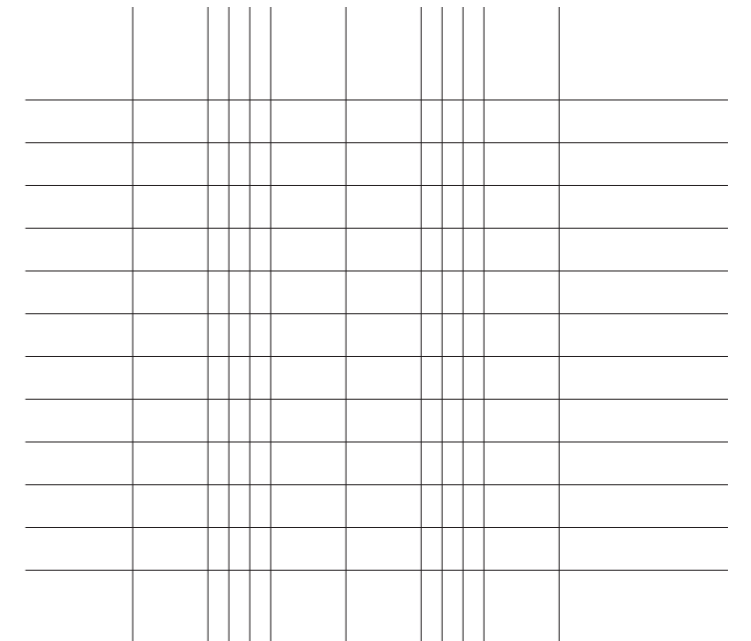
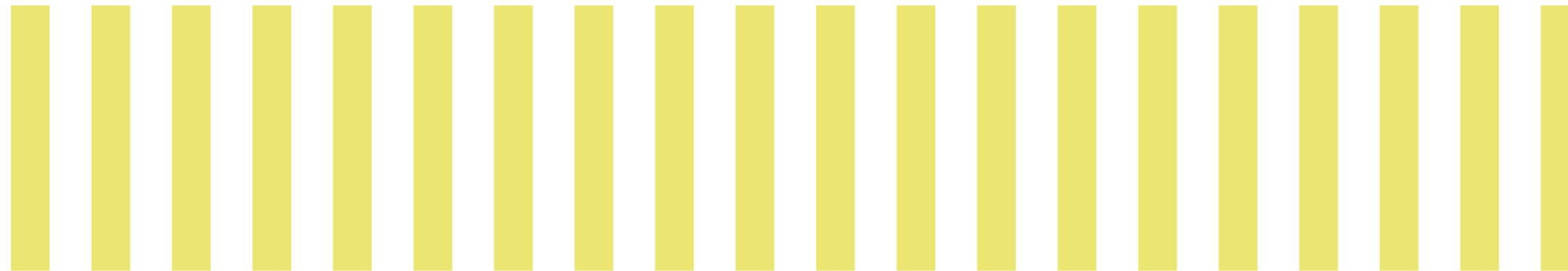
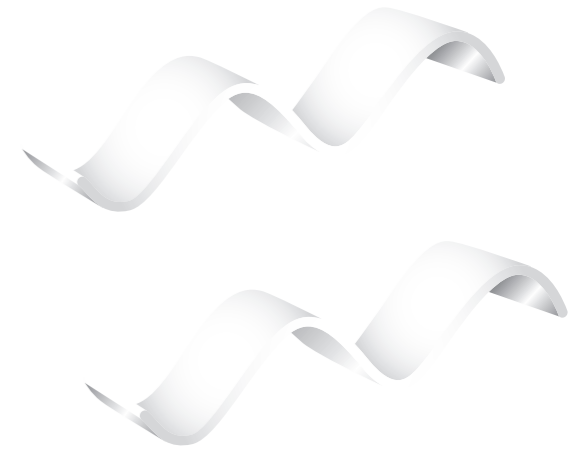
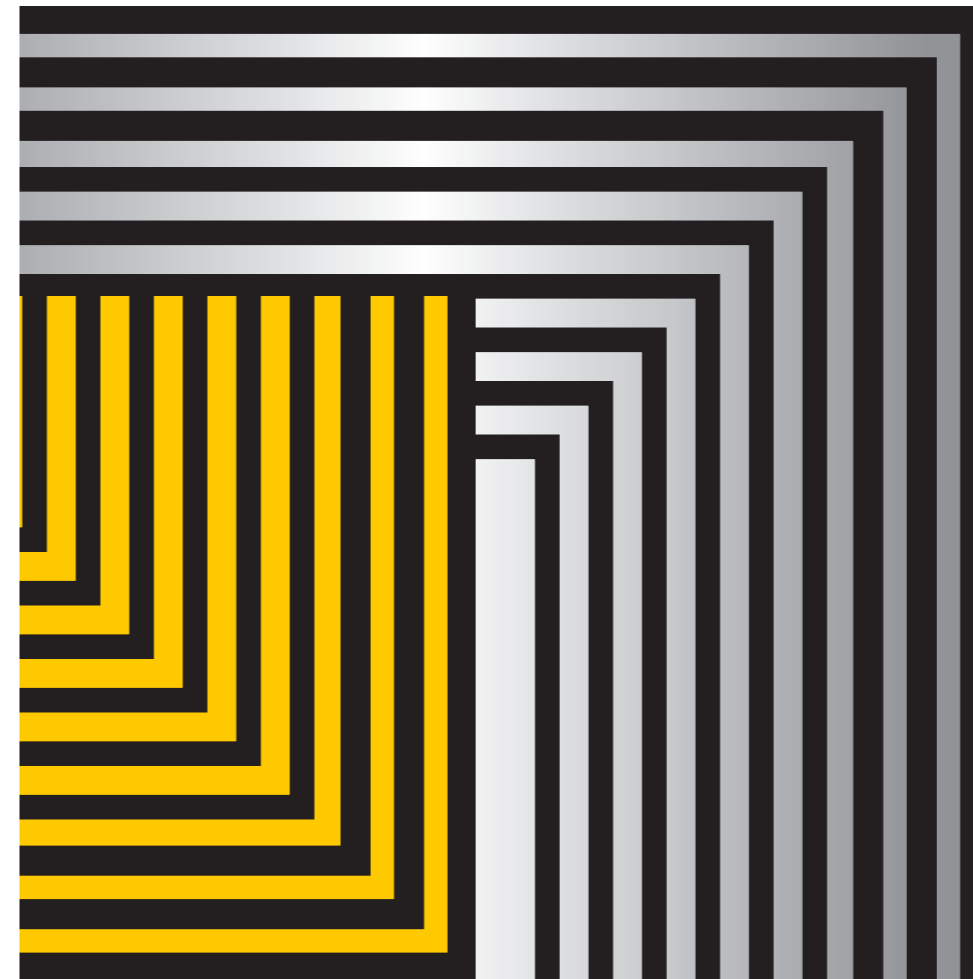
*The single biggest problem in communication  
is the illusion that it has taken place*  
(George Bernard Shaw)

Placed precariously between art and craft, between artistic expression and utilitarian artefact, the power of the poster – as much as its weakness – lies in its immediate impact. Power, because everyone is in such a hurry, always. If one has something to say, it better be said quickly, and clearly (and, if possible, amusingly) otherwise nobody's stopping to listen. The poster often achieves this rapid and concise communication. Weakness, because there is a limited array of tools in this two-dimensional, static medium and the messages conveyed are often very complex.

The immediacy, both visual and cognitive, of the poster makes its function as a medium

almost disappear. The poster is no longer a medium, an element between the sender and the receiver of the message, it is a reality in which the viewer submerges willingly, immediately. The ephemeral nature of the poster – both form and content – adds to its aesthetic value. The poster becomes poetry.

Choosing the poster, for an artist, is an act of courage. But in the same way that falling in love is an act of courage: is there really a choice? It is obvious that Wolfensohn likes a challenge: He chose the poster (or did the poster choose him?) to encapsulate some of the most significant aspects of our 21st century. His posters tell our story.





## TRANSFER OF INFORMATION

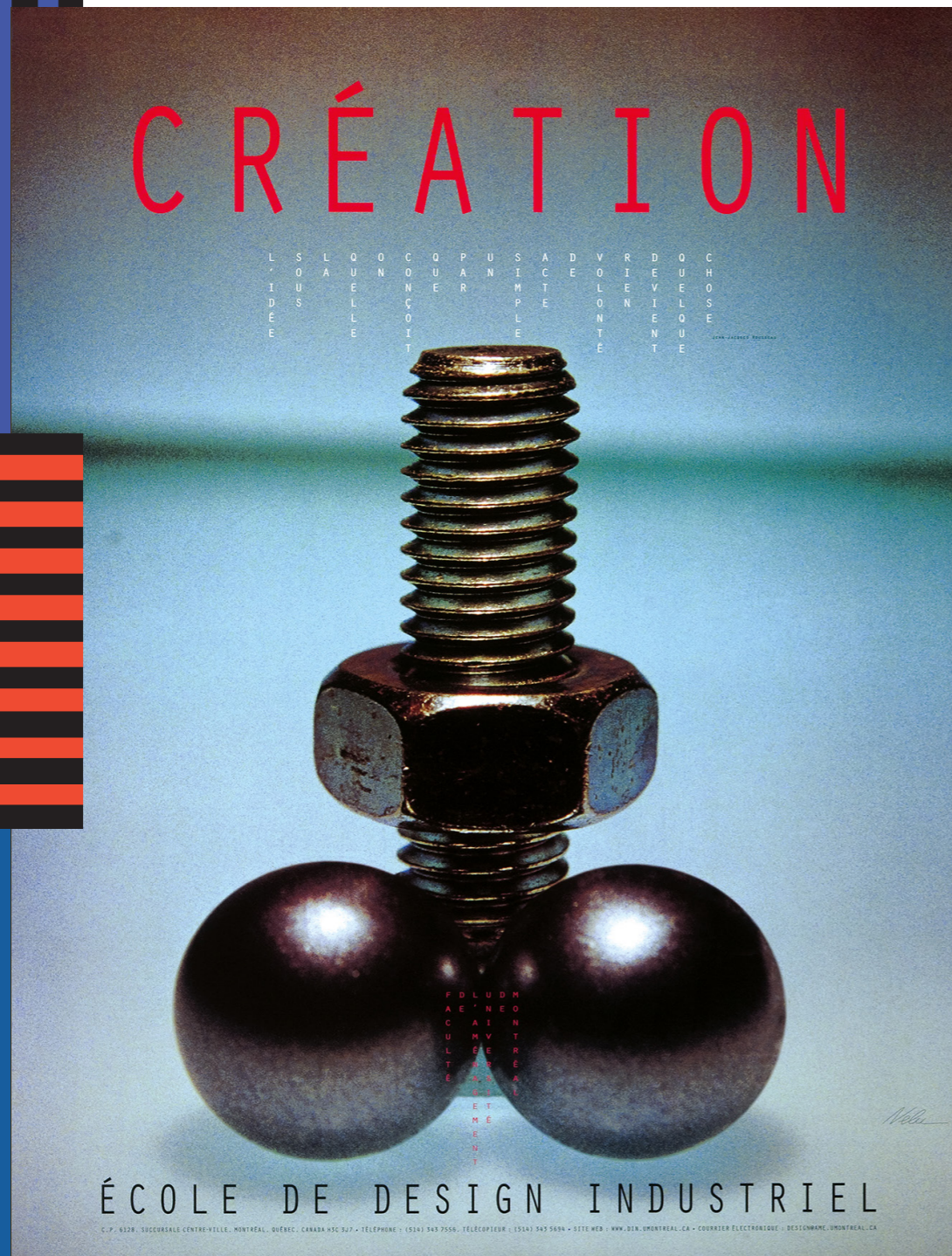


An imperfect yet effective communication tool, the poster is created by an active force wanting to convey a parcel of information, to an audience with limited opportunity for feedback. Since its origin, the poster had a significant role in transmitting information. In order to fulfil this role, the creators use intense colour, clever choice of typefaces and combination of words and images to attract and hold the attention. The fly on Mozart's cheek, so real we want to shoo it away, is even more effective than the bright yellow speech bubble that states "...Monday".

Information such as dates, times, location, names of the performers are present in relatively small print, white reverse out of colour. But the reader's attention is captive, still trying to imagine Mozart in his red and gold attire, powder on his face, rouge on his cheek, ready to impress the Austrian court with his exceptional talent. He gazes back at us with insolence, as if daring us to challenge the idea of a beauty spot below his eye. Is it really a fly? And as we look again, we take in more small white print information.

À LUNDI  
2004

## TRANSFER OF MEANING



CRÉATION  
1999

As an imperfect act of communication, the poster has also been the victim of many attempts to explain it, by simplifying this complex process and squeezing it into the tight formula of a model. I find it difficult to place the poster in one single box of, say, Shannon and Weaver's rectilinear model (information source - encoder - channel - decoder - destination). However, the transmission model is still an appropriate way of analysing mass media messages. The transport of goods or individual messages (an epistle, an order) may fit into this model. Although widely discredited by communication theorists, Shannon and Weaver's transmission model, and Laswell's version of it (Who, Says What, in Which channel, To whom, With what effect?) were useful in creating an understanding and a platform, however simplified and mechanistic, for the academic study of other forms of communication. The advertising industry in particular benefited from a framework which helped to identify the message and the audiences, and provide some tools for measuring effectiveness.

The disruptive element, noise, is one that the poster suffers most in its natural environment: posted on a wall (on a post), in the street, surrounded by a multitude of other messages, competing for attention. So an arresting word, or a striking picture, or both, would cut through the deafening noise. A controversial image usually works, by attracting and holding the attention, and none more controversial than a phallic image, captured in the act of mating, represented by screw, nut and ball bearings: mating in an industrial, mechanical world.

With the title *Création* the artist is transferring the universal biological process of creation - in which male and female elements are involved - to the philosophical concept of creation, the action of bringing something into existence. This is the meaning that Wolfensohn wants us to extract from this poster. In reality, meaning is not extracted, but constructed. How the audience construct the meaning of this particular message depends on gender, education, faith, experiences, intelligence, social context and many other factors.

The name of the sponsor at the base of the poster further clarifies the type of creation we are contemplating: not the religious, or the biological concept, but "creation" in the sense of innovation, invention and works of art: industrial design.

In linear, one-way models, the creator of the message is an active force, while the receiver is passively absorbing the information. But in Wolfensohn's posters the receiver cannot remain passive: he is invited to participate by decoding the message, solving puzzles, constructing meaning.

To paraphrase Michael Reddy (*The Conduit Metaphor*, 1979) the poster is the container in which words and images are placed and sent along to a receiver, who takes them out of the container. Even with the proviso that sender and receivers share a common language (to read and understand the words) and culture, the meaning doesn't jump out of the containers.

The viewer has to be an active participant, to use the words and images wisely, in order to construct a meaning that makes sense to him. There may be varying degrees of discrepancy between the meaning intended and the one manufactured by the audience: successful communication means a minimum of divergence between the two.

A yellow star on a red background may have more than one connotation. Here, we need the words to eliminate some of them: it's the 2001 Design Month in Montreal. The title of this poster could well be "Design is matter turned into spirit" and the way to achieve this miracle is through the burning power of creativity. This is my meaning-making; yours could be different while the artist's intention was to invite us into the process.

One flaw of the transmission model is that it considers "decoding" as the reverse of "encoding", but this can only occur if the two minds - sender and receiver - are identical, which is, of course, unlikely to occur.

The transmission model also fails to mention the importance of context. Meaning - intended or created - cannot be divorced from the social, geographical, cultural political, historical context. It is a key influence on the artist's choice of form, style and content. The heritage of other artists - from Leonardo to Brancusi - makes itself noticed in several of Wolfensohn posters, as does the artist's own background, family, loves and travels.

The *umwelt*, the world as it is experienced by a particular being, the self-centred world, is a key influence on what is perceived as appropriate form, content and style, both by the creator and by the receiver of the artistic message.



MOIS DU DESIGN  
MONTRÉAL MAI 2001

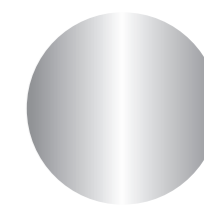
VKHUTEMAS 100  
2020





## NEARLY ONE YEAR

*When autumn sobs its autumn tears  
leaf after yellow leaf fall on my face  
like yellow fears  
her tears hit lips and eyes and heart  
sweet inoffensive tears.  
Not like the tears of spring  
the tears of change  
not warm like summer tears  
foaming in cascades of laughter.  
The salted cold tears  
we cry with the autumn.  
When the spring cries  
her tears are drops of joy  
and we foolishly expect better times.  
When winter sleeps its winter dreams  
I swim in its sea I fly in its sky  
like so many flakes  
like so many forgotten lovers  
trying to swim into my dream.  
My winter sleep.*



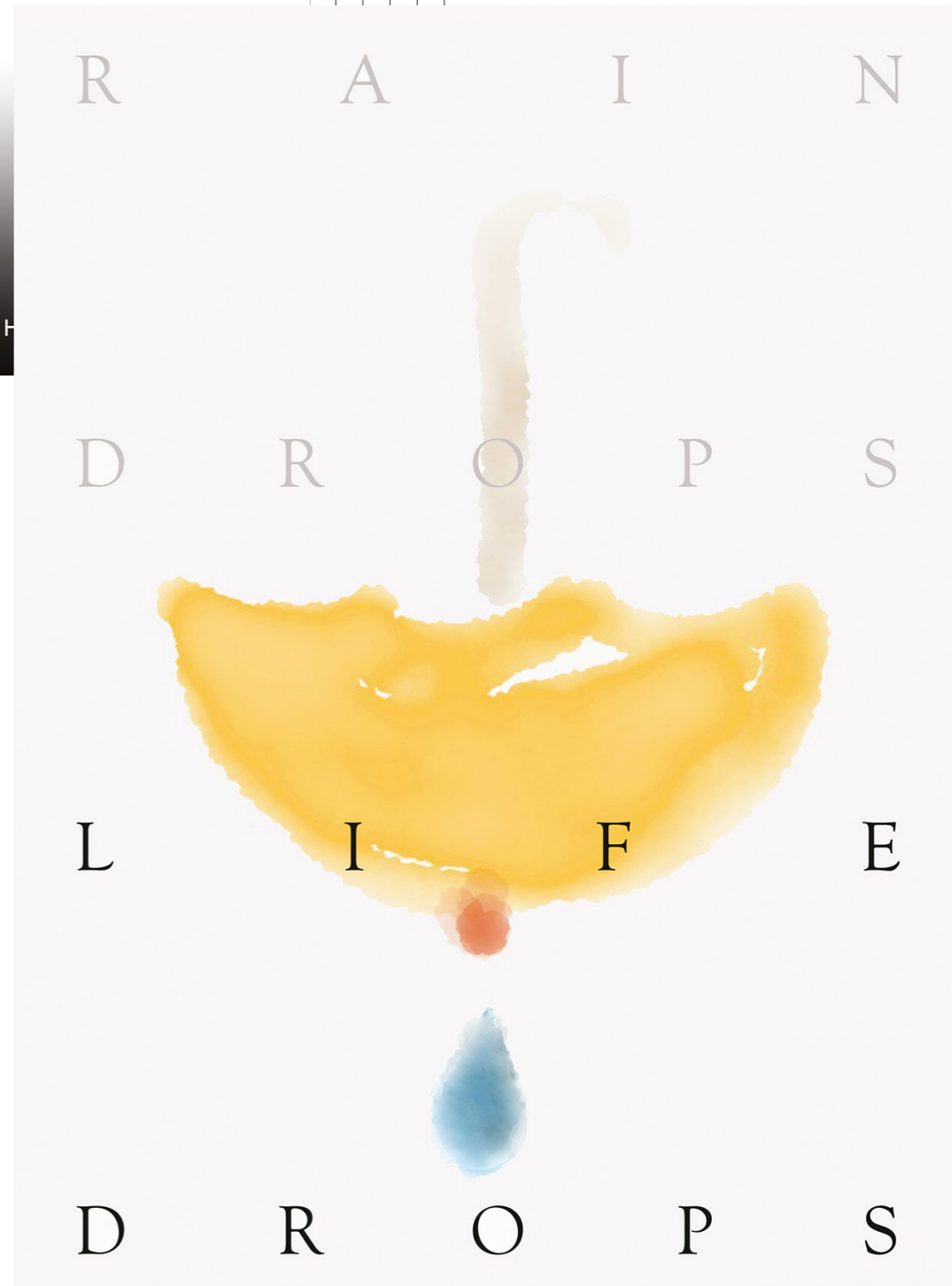
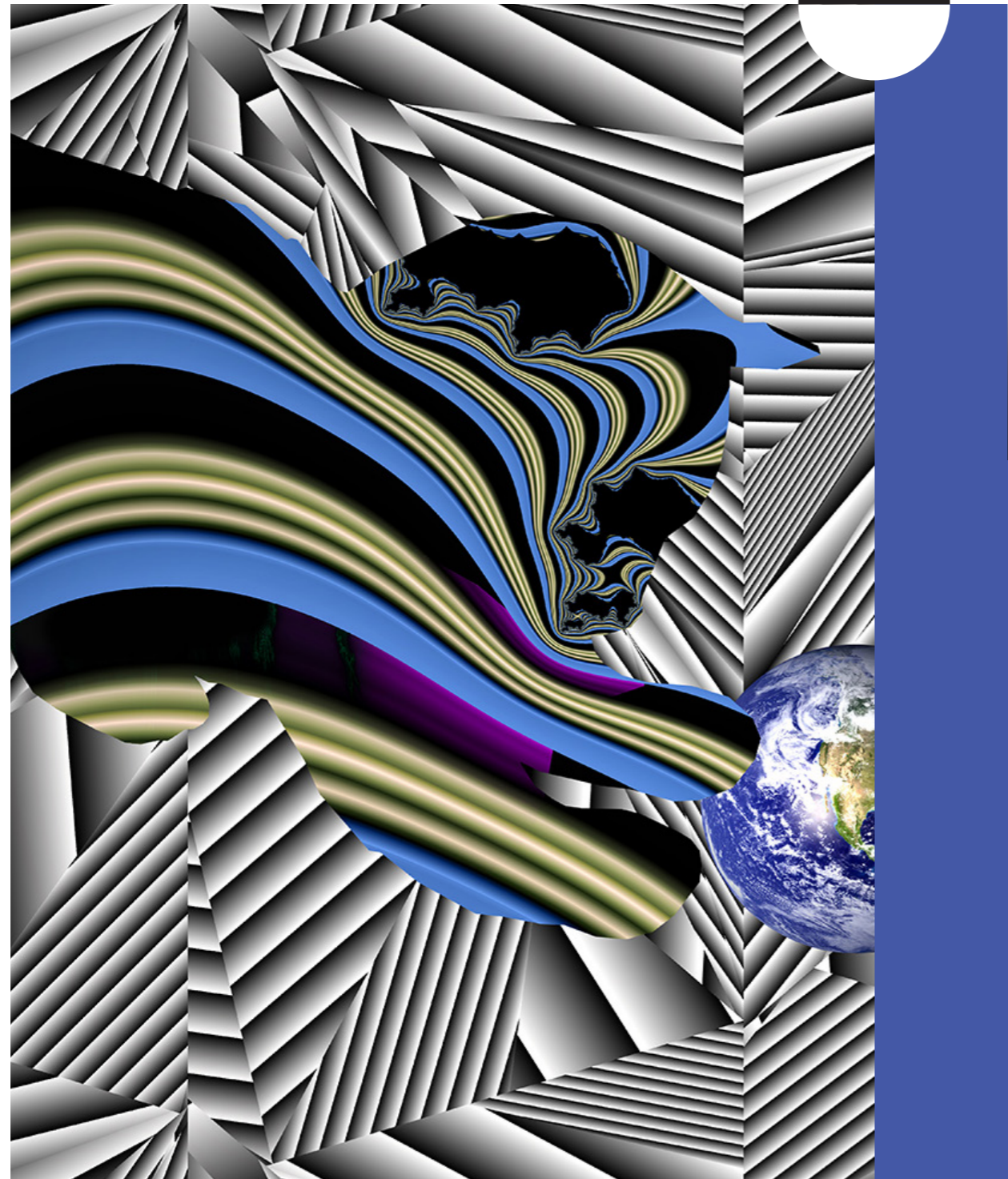


**A SIGN  
IS EVERYTHING  
THAT STANDS  
FOR SOMETHING  
ELSE**

HUBERT REEVES  
CONFÉRENCE:  
SCIENCES ET VALEURS  
HUMAINES  
2010

WALLS DOWN  
2011

RAIN DROPS  
LIFE DROPS  
2013



# OF SIGNS AND CONCEPTS

*Or take a black pebble*

*(Roland Barthes)*

Our world is ruled by signs. Signs tell us where to go, what to do, when and where the bus will stop. It helps us to communicate facts, intentions and feelings with a certain degree of success.

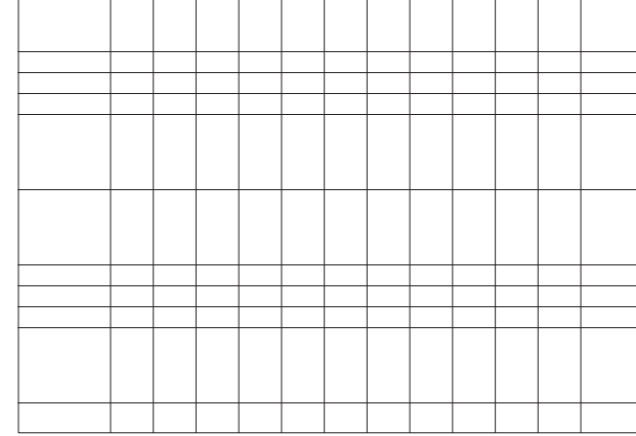
A sign is everything that stands for something else: words, certainly, but also gestures, objects, images, sounds, smells. And images of objects, images of gestures and so on. The signs relate to each other to form - and convey - meaning, in a complex and fascinating system. Signs consist of two inseparable elements: the material (word, sound, colour) the "signifier", and the reality it represents - the "signified".

Our language - one of the most complex systems of signs - our mother's tongue, the language we were born into, is not really ours. We cannot make the rules, just have to obey the existing ones. Words have denotations - a designated, primary meaning. A cat cannot be anything else but a small domesticated feline, despite its name being used for other meanings (catty, catcall, fat cat, sex kitten, etc.). The relationship between the small feline and the sound /kat/ or the letters c a t is entirely arbitrary. In Saussurian semiotics, the word "cat" is the signifier, and it stands for something else, the signified, the real thing. The two (signifier and signified) cannot be without each other and together they make a sign.

With unlimited talent for refined communication, we take it further: "umbrella" means "a circular canopy of cloth on a folding metal frame supported by a central rod, used as protection against rain". An image of a stylised umbrella on a weather forecast obviously means "rain" (take an umbrella today), an umbrella protects you from rain water, but the related concept of "protection" is more widespread. Insurance companies show a gigantic umbrella protecting your home or car, smaller organisations act "under the umbrella" of a larger, more powerful one, etc. We refer to these second level meanings as connotations.

Cats and umbrella can be signified in words as well as images, as denotations or connotations. Other signified - vanity, revolution, abstract, peace - while relatively straightforward denoted in words, require other methods, and a different "language" when communicated through images.

Signs were obviously developed for the purpose of communication. A sign is a sign only if it is being interpreted as such (by the receiver), in the same way we acknowledge that communication has only taken place when the message has been received and understood.



For that, we need to speak the same language, literally or figuratively, we need to use the same codes. The direction of traffic will be followed by people belonging to a culture that understands bows and arrows. The colour red will suggest danger in Western culture, joy and prosperity elsewhere.

As we move into connotations (ideas or feelings evoked by a sign, dependant on a person's experience, education or culture) and myth (a symbolic narrative with a strong role in a specific society) the importance of linguistic and cultural codes becomes more significant.

Making and interpreting signs is a full-time human occupation. Semiotics - the study of signs - is one of the most useful methods to start the study of art, poetry or cinematography.

The act of standing in for something else, which defines it, makes the sign both vulnerable and powerful, depending on how, when and where it is used. Between the signifier - the symbol - and the signified, there is a space in which the artist invites us to participate, to create connections.

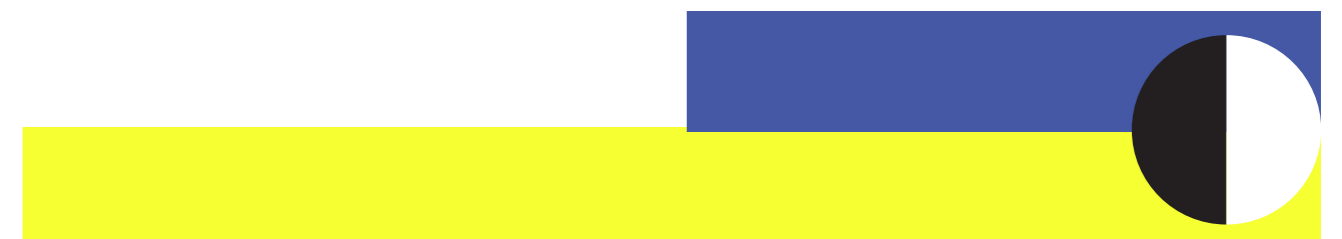
Unlike words, no denotation has been assigned to line and colour: the artist can use the tools to express whatever he believes appropriate, what he needs to create his message.

The image sign is often so stylised as to become non-mimetic - an element of our culture as remote from reality as the sound of a word that bears no relation to its meaning.

Signs are vehicles for the conception of objects - in other words they help us to think, to understand.

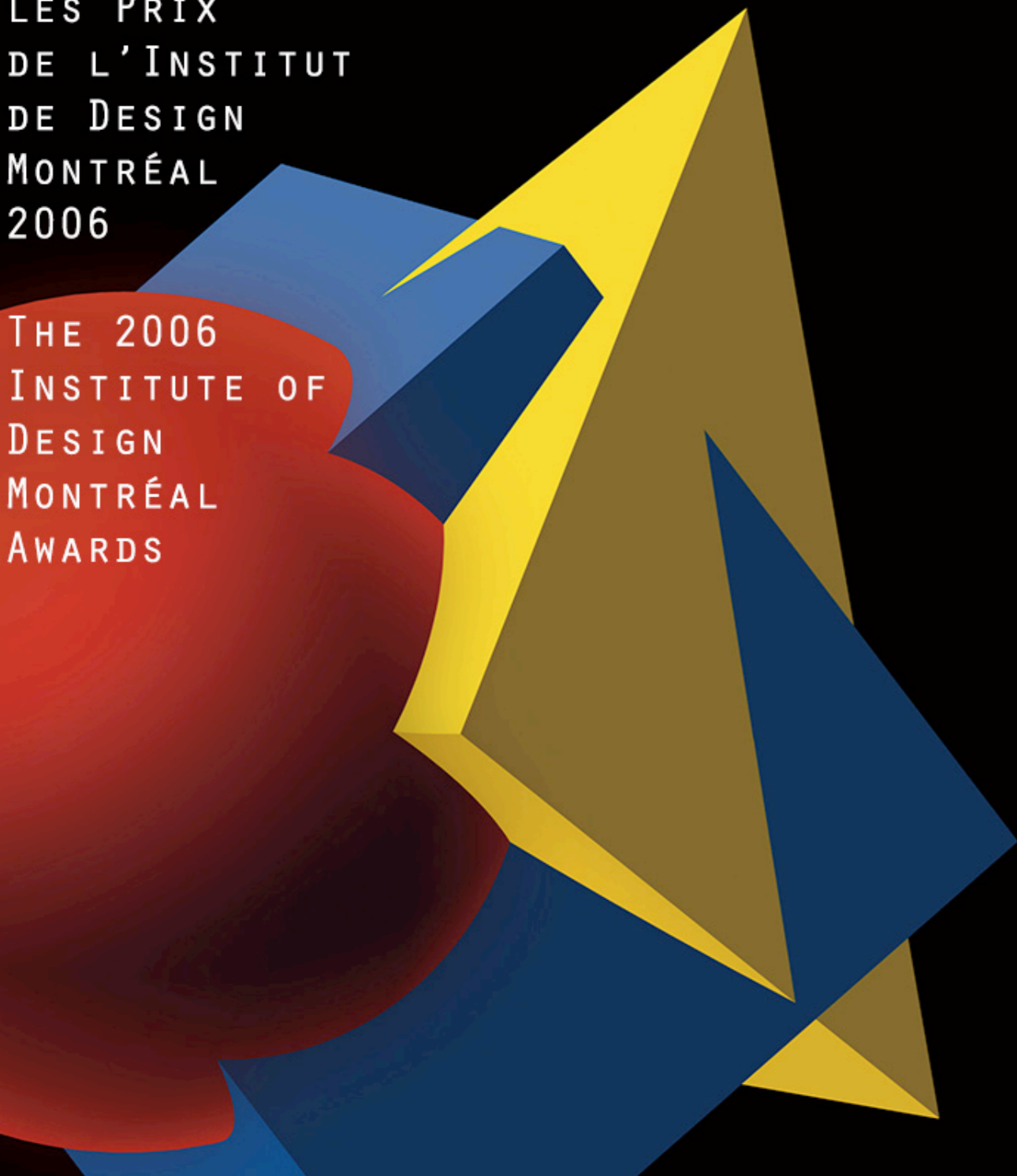
Wolfensohn takes one such element and presents it to us in a shape and pose that is recognisable yet unfamiliar. The canopy that is supposed to protect us from drops of rain is turned upside down; it is no longer sheltering us from the rain, it is now protecting the water from the potential hazard that we - the viewer - could be. The concept is still that of protection, but not just of a person, in a moment, but of all of us, for ever.

Renaissance and Pre-Renaissance paintings contain a number of symbols that invite the viewer to read and interpret - like a puzzle or a riddle. In addition to their decorative value, pictures had a message to convey, as often moralistic as religious, to discuss and interpret. Painters and art lovers engage in an exercise of communication using the code of visual language.



LES PRIX  
DE L'INSTITUT  
DE DESIGN  
MONTRÉAL  
2006

THE 2006  
INSTITUTE OF  
DESIGN  
MONTRÉAL  
AWARDS



THE 2006  
INSTITUTE OF DESIGN  
MONTRÉAL  
AWARDS

## THE SPHERE, THE TRANGLE

*Car le parfait consiste en choses rondes*  
(Pierre de Ronsard)

Like its two-dimensional cousin the circle, the sphere is a symbol of completeness, continuity, eternity, perfection. From the atoms to the celestial sphere, our bodies and our world is made up of spheres of matter in a variety of sizes. We live on a sphere that circles around a big sphere of fire.

Of all the images we experience, the geometrical and symmetrical are most easily perceived and retained. The use of images that can be identified, controlled and manipulated by the mind is an obvious - if not imperative - methodology.

As an experienced graphic designer, Wolfensohn is well *au fait* with the meaning and the grammar of shapes, how they combine with each other and with colour to make us feel what he intends for us to feel. In his poster for *The 2006 Institute of Design Montréal Awards*, Wolfensohn gives away the secret: the building blocks of design are the shapes (the sphere, the cube, the pyramid) and the primary colours (red, blue, yellow). The architect, the landscape designer, the fashion designer, is invited to use the shapes and colours to create something unique, beautiful and useful. Until they do so, on the poster, the raw materials of design are entwined into a nondescript shape, floating in cosmic darkness.

The geometric image and its connotations return in 2019 in a series of posters created for the 100th anniversary of Bauhaus. The exploded three dimensional intertwined forms are the recurring theme in all four posters, celebrating the vision and the innovative spirit of the movement. An artistic as well as ethical and philosophical school, the story of Bauhaus is told through these three colours, three forms, in three-dimensional embrace.

BAUHAUS



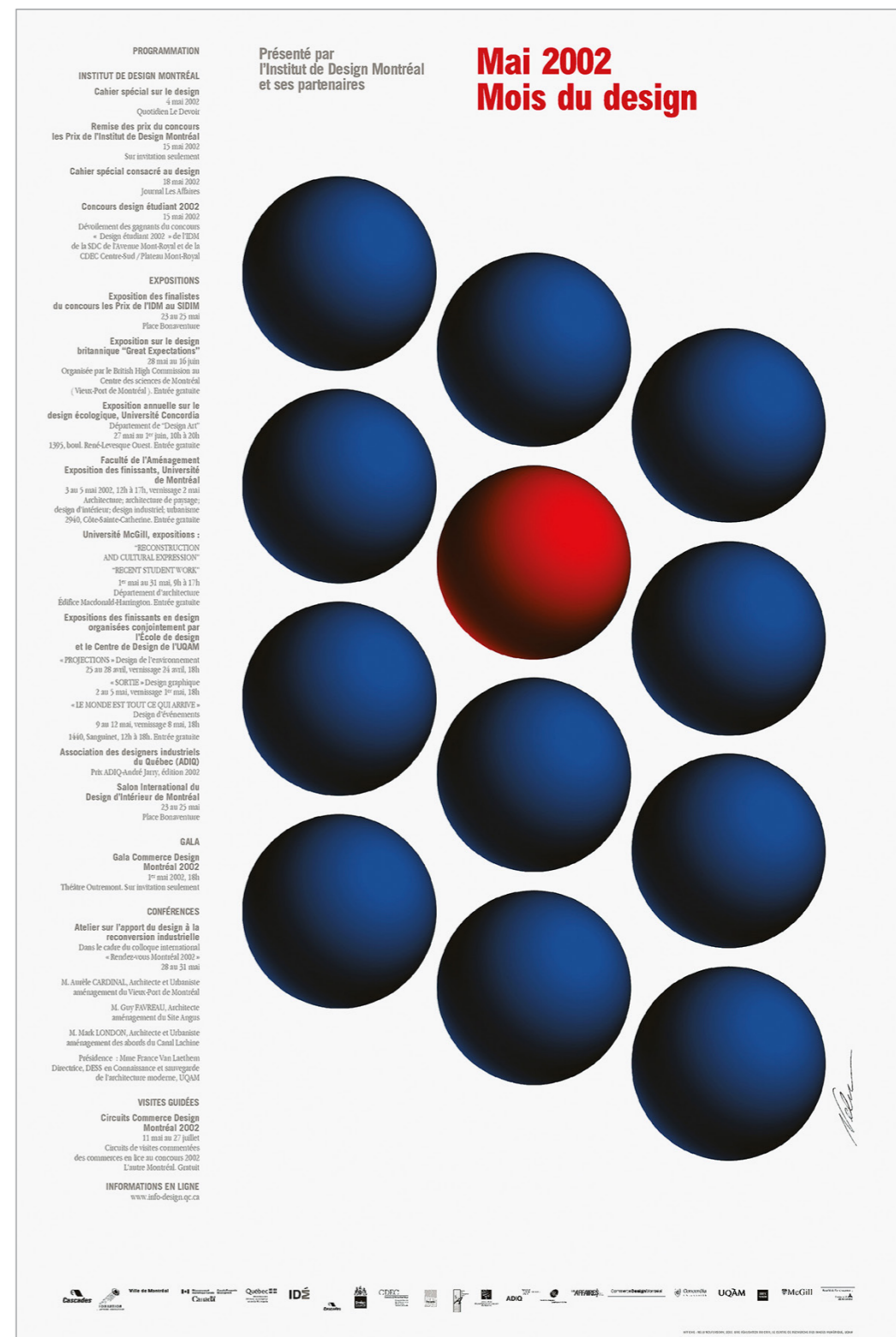
A GERMAN CONCEPT

BAUHAUS  
A GERMAN CONCEPT  
2020

Earlier, for the Design Month 2002, Wolfensohn was using the red sphere, the perfection surrounded by dark blue spheres in a 3x4 parallelogram pattern. On a two-dimensional medium, he wanted to make sure that these are balls, not circles, and that, although the same size, one sphere (the 5th – as the Design Month was May) will shine distinct from its siblings.

Born in Bucharest, Romania, Wolfensohn would have grown up familiar with the three main primary colours of the country's flag. According to a well-loved Romanian patriotic song about the three colours of the flag: red is the fire of courage, the sacrifice for the freedom of the people; yellow is the gold of the fields, the fruit of the fertile land; blue the skies above – so sang thousands of red scarfed schoolchildren. In his poster for Romanian Presences in Quebec conference, the artist uses a historic version of the Romanian flag: same colours, but with horizontal stripes, the blue stripe at the top. The flag first adopted in June 1848 had the horizontal stripes with blue at the top. This version was short-lived and followed, in July of the same year by a decree establishing the flag as having vertical stripes, with the blue near the wood and "the red flattering", similar to the French flag. A few years later, in 1862, a new version of the tricolour was introduced by the then ruler, Alexandru Ioan Cuza, as the official civil flag. It had horizontal stripes, red at the top, and it was used for a number of years. The next version – vertical stripes again – lasted until 1948, when the socialist coat of arms, the hammer and sickle, was added in the centre of the yellow, to be removed by the revolution of 1989.

PLEINS FEUX  
SUR LA  
ROUMANIE  
2001



MAI 2002  
MOIS DU DESIGN



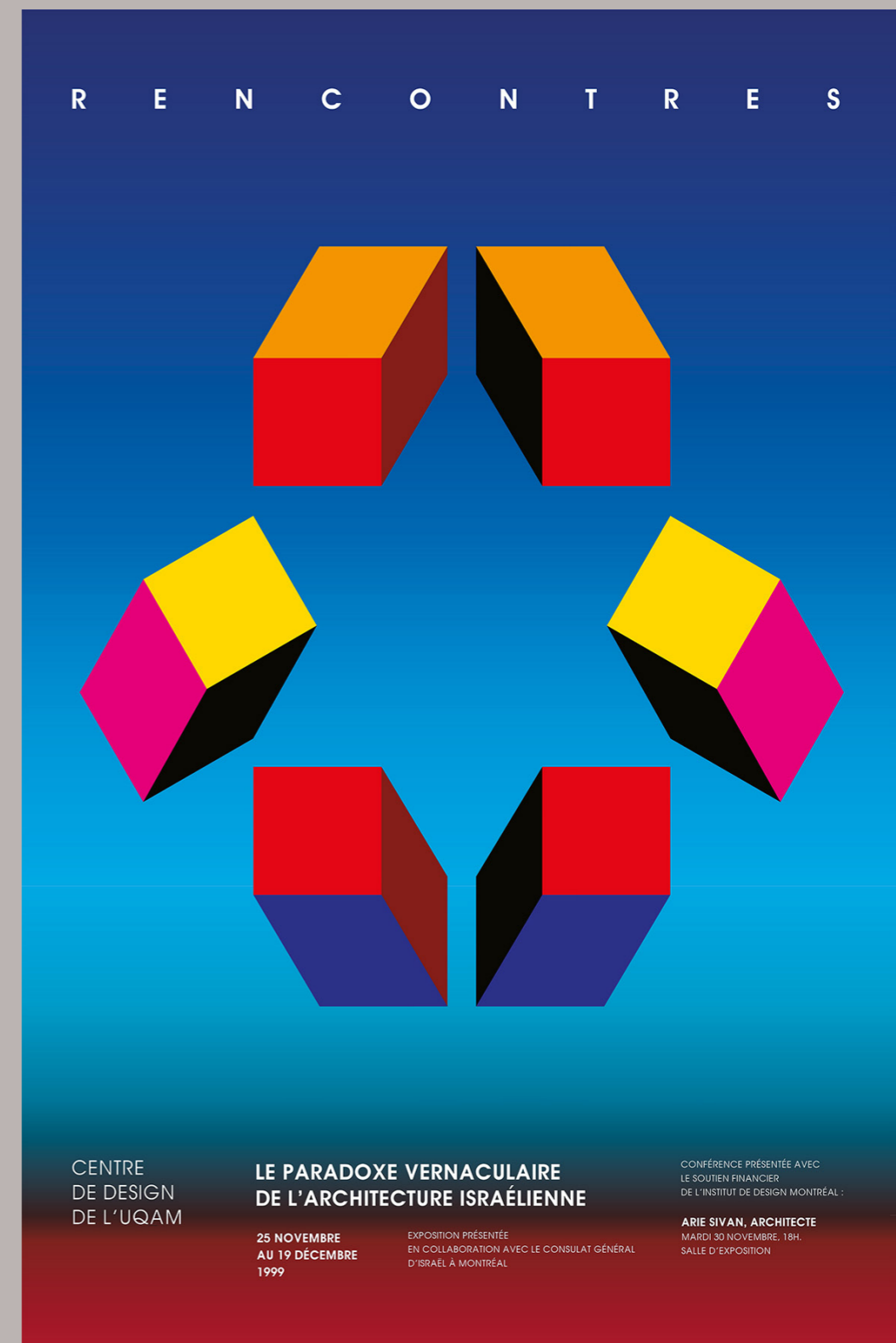
On Wolfensohn's poster, the three spheres feature on the flag – the same tricolour, but with the blue on the right. Rotate the entire composition anticlockwise and we get the flag the right way, "red flattering", the balls in the order of the original flag. So is this exercise in spheres and stripes a vehicle for a brief history of the Romanian people through its flags? Are the three perfectly formed spheres a symbol of the triumph of perfection, completeness, continuity over the prevarications of history and politics? Even if not intentionally, the poster reflects Wolfensohn's knowledge and understanding of the country's history.

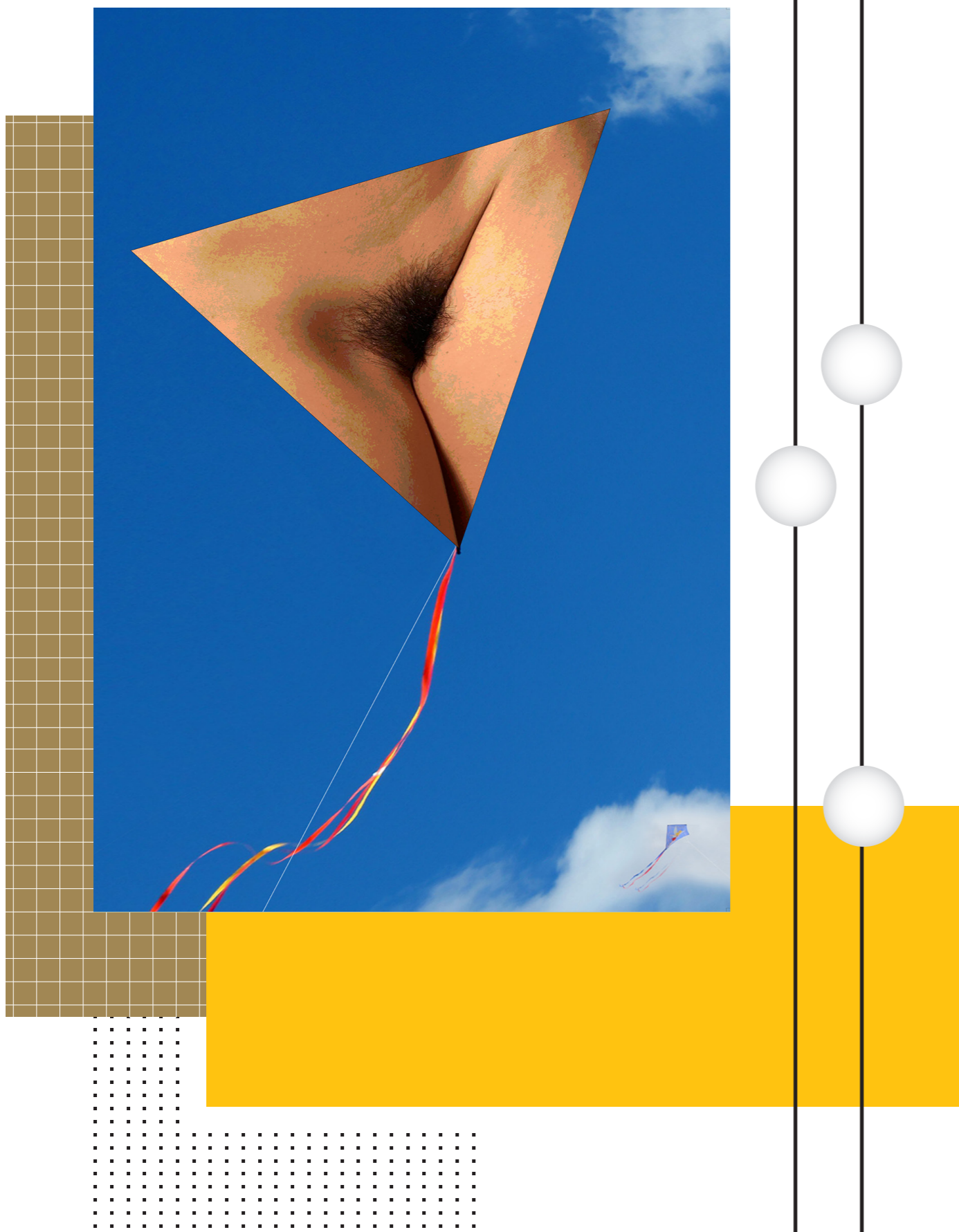
Spheres are also at the base of *Création*, a poster for the School of Industrial Design. Circles and spheres are graceful, feminine, warm. Outside the strong sexual connotation, the contrast between the coldness of black metal and the softness of the two spheres, lit from above, the mechanical alignment of the objects comes together to create something symmetrical, balanced.

Often thought of as the counterpart of the sphere, the cube is the squaring of the circle: solid, permanent, immobile. In general, Wolfensohn avoids the cube, where all facets are identical, opting instead for the rectangular cuboid. In any case, the facets are not the same, each of the three visible ones being of a different colour. In *Rencontres*, a poster for the exhibition of Israeli architecture at the Design Centre of UQAM (Université du Québec à Montréal), the colourful blocs float against a beautiful azure background, to form a hexagram. The six-point star, or David's star, is a symbol that relates to Judaism rather than Israel; it is, however, present on the Israeli flag and in this context it stands for Israeli culture. The tones of yellow, red, orange and magenta defy the angularity of the forms to create a feeling of lightness, happiness alongside the order and solidity of the shapes.

PLEINS FEUX  
SUR LA ROUMANIE  
2001

RENCONTRES  
1999



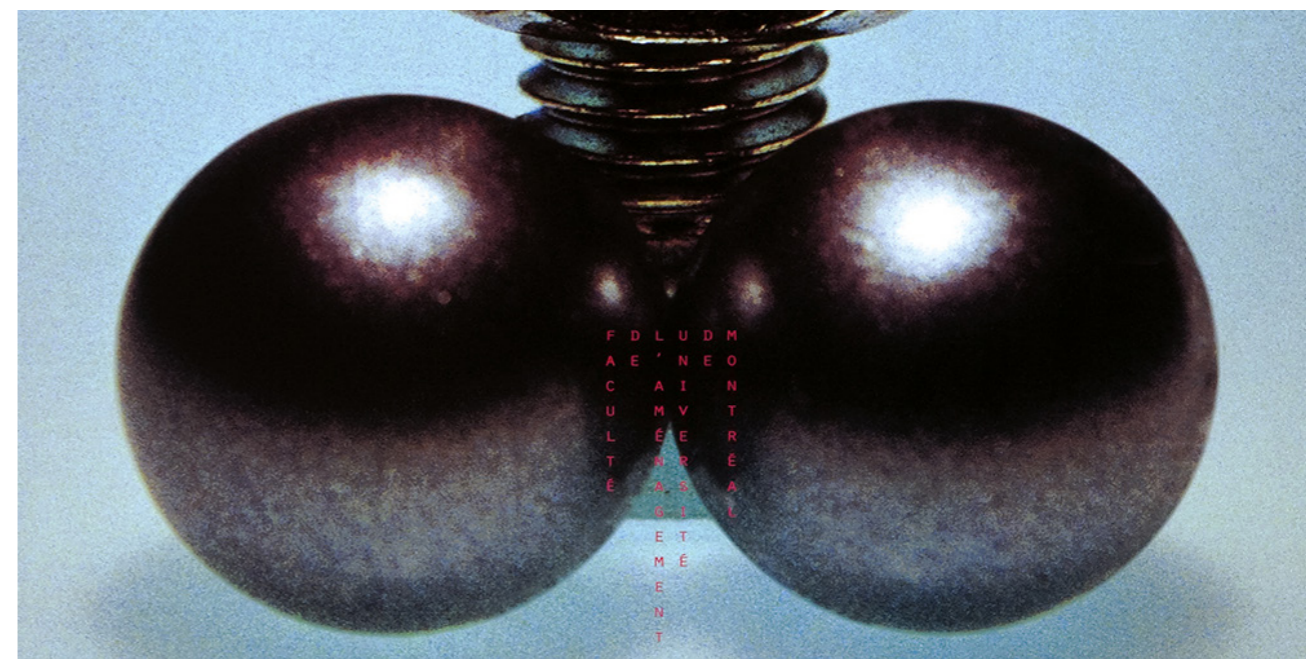


In a more recent poster (2016) entitled simply *Shape*, the shape we see flying above the clouds is a triangle. The symbolism of the triangle is strongly linked to the Eye - as the Eye of Providence, usually surrounded by rays of light, is enclosed in a triangle pointing upwards. In Christianity, the triangle is a symbol of spiritual hierarchy, each point a significant element of the Trinity. A point-up triangle - like the one featuring the Eye of Providence - represents ascension towards a higher spiritual realm; also a solid base, a strong foundation and stability. Triangles, especially equilateral ones, are strong shapes.

SHAPE  
2016

CRÉATION  
1999

Wolfensohn's kite in the shape of a triangle is also an equilateral one. It floats against a bright blue sky at an angle, one corner pointing towards the fluffy cloud on the top right-hand corner as if on its way to exit the poster. The picture enclosed in it is that of a women's pubic area.



In *25 ans • Cinémathèque Québécoise*, a series of double and triple triangles, in velocity movement like arrows, pierce the black background giving a real sense of being in a cinema theatre. The fragments of triangle lead to the antenna at the top and the Eye – the logo of the Cinémathèque. The eyes are triangles in *L'acteur, l'actrice en scène* (1995), in which the small triangle on the angular profile of the man on the left extends to become a larger triangle that unites with that extending from the profile of the woman on the right – or vice-versa. The mouth – the speech-is

represented in the same way by triangles that come together. At the base of the (triangular) composition, the arms come together in an embrace that gives a solid base of harmony and cooperation to create the magic that actors achieve on stage.

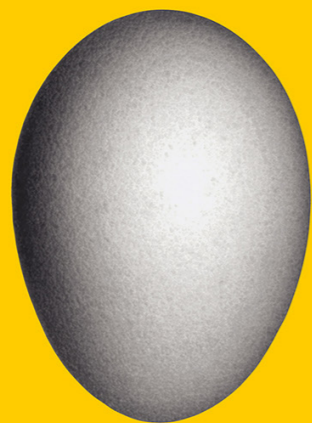
Like Renaissance painters who developed the technique, Wolfensohn often adopts a solid triangular composition, with the base on the ground – the lower part of the poster – and the top pointing to the centre of the title: *Création*.

25 ANS  
CINÉMATHEQUE  
QUÉBÉCOISE  
1989

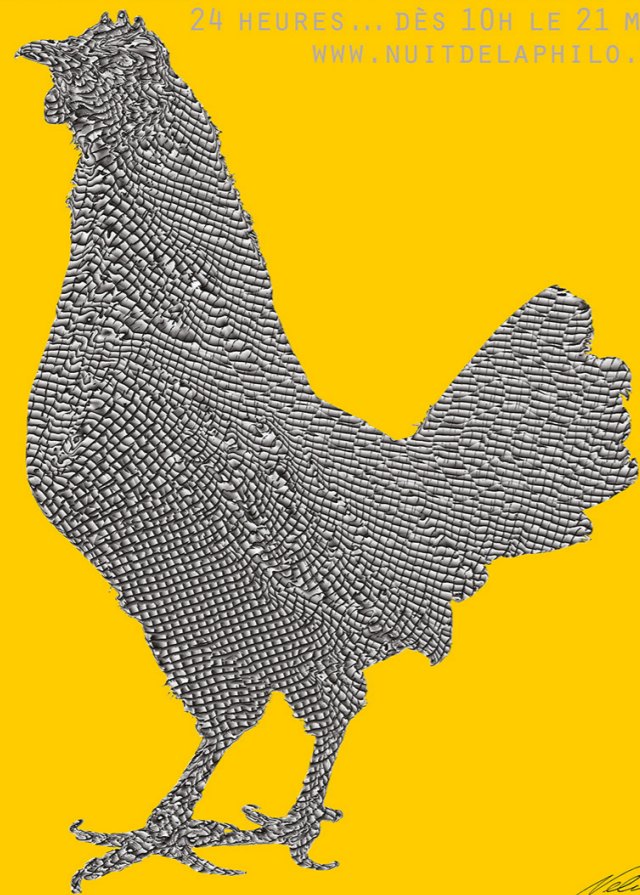
L'ACTEUR  
L'ACTRICE  
EN SCÈNE  
1995





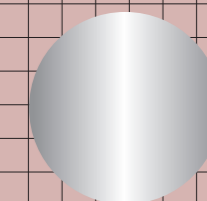


LA NUIT DE LA PHILOSOPHIE  
UQAM GRANDE BIBLIOTHÈQUE CINÉMATHÈQUE QUÉBÉCOISE  
24 HEURES... DÈS 10H LE 21 MARS  
WWW.NUITDELAPHILO.COM



*Alain*

**Anyone who thinks  
this is a simple question,  
easily resolved by the first  
book of the Bible or by  
science, should try  
a simple answer – and see  
how many more complex  
questions it rises**



LA NUIT DE LA PHILOSOPHIE  
2009



**THERE IS MORE  
TO PUTTING  
LETTERS TOGETHER  
THAN JUST MAKING THE  
MESSAGE LEGIBLE**

**BYE**

*er-consumption: it's over and done with*

**BUY**

**MON  
BRUNO  
G  
GUZZI**

Bruno Monguzzi  
Lundi 21 septembre 2009  
École de design, UQAM

Image et signification  
Master class sur la  
perception de l'image\*  
local DE 3240  
9h30-16h

The Naked Word  
Conférence sur la typographie  
local DS R510  
18h-21h

BYE BUY  
2012

BRUNO MONGUZZI  
2009

CITY EVOLUTION  
2013

**CITY**  
**LOVE**

## THE TYPOGRAPHIC METAPHOR



MX  
CA  
70  
:)

The typeface is the message, as every designer knows. From selecting the font family and the face size, to tracking and kerning - there is more to putting the letters together than just making the message legible. It has to fit in and complement layout, the image, the colours. It has to be credible too. And emotional. Inspiring.

The way the letters are sized and shaped, positioned in relation to each other - conveys a meaning. The design qualities of the letters, their arrangement in the composition, give form to a range of connotations.

Let us take for example the poster announcing a Bruno Monguzzi conference; it is composed of black and gold letters. Unable to resist a word play, Wolfensohn arranges them in a T format, inviting the viewer to read the word "Mon" (my) set horizontally, and linked by the use of black to the rest of the surname, while "Bruno" is overwritten in gold. The use of clever lettering to announce a conference on typography is not only appropriate, but the poster is also an homage to Monguzzi style and predilection for solving design problems with typography solutions (like Monguzzi's famous logo for Musée d'Orsay).

Strong, black letters and numbers read like a graphic shorthand in the poster celebrating 70 years of diplomatic relations between Canada and Mexico (2014). Here, the two-letter country codes are arranged to form a cohesive vertical bloc suggesting equality and unity. The colon and parenthesis punctuation make

up the smiling emoji, giving the statement an approving, lighter finale, to contrast with the stark black on white lettering.

Sometimes the words are sufficient, no other image is needed for Wolfensohn to express even powerful messages, especially in word play. *City Evolution* (2013) is achieved through *Love*, by mirroring the first half of the word *Evolution* and making it stand out in red - as opposed to the rest of the letters which are black and against the grey concrete background.

Word play and colour are also the tools for anti-consumerism poster *Bye Buy* - shorthand for "Goodbye unnecessary and compulsive buying, overconsumption is a thing of the past, it is destroying our planet" and many millions of words that have been written this century to try and persuade people to buy less (compared to the zillions of words written and uttered in the last century to persuade us to buy more). Here Wolfensohn chooses happy colours - bright yellow background, blue and pink lettering. Despite the light tone - the use of homophones, the nursery palette - the words are strong, the typeface serious and enforced by the shadow in the opposite colour, reflecting the earnestness of the message.

NEXT PAGE:

IRAN VOTE  
2009

KNOW BAU HOW  
2020

70 YEARS OF DIPLOMATIC  
RELATIONSHIPS MEXICO - CANADA  
2014

2009

IR  
POSTERS  
BAUHAUS

WHERE IS MY VOTE?  
POSTERS BY DESIGNERS FROM THE WHOLE WORLD  
PROTESTING AGAINST  
THE RÉGIME OF AHMADINEJAD  
AND HIS 'GUARDIANS OF REVOLUTION'  
A BRUTAL, CLAUSTROPHOBIC AND OBSCURANTIST  
GOVERNMENT WHICH STOLE THE  
RESULTS OF THE IRAN'S 2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

AN INITIATIVE OF SOCIÉTÉ DES ARTS ET MÉTIERS  
A BUS POSTER BY THE TYPESETTERS OF PARIS ASSOCIATION

KNOW  
BAU  
HOW

100

B A U H A U S A N N I V E R S A R Y

The inspiration for a poster could arise from – and focus on – just one letter, like the T in *Terre et Trame* (Earth and Weft, 1982) where the T is a three-dimensional bloc of red and black shadow, repeated on the upside-down mirror light green. The blue background and the diagonal composition create more action than would be expected from a singular letter – like the synergy in ceramic and in weaving.

The single letter D has come to symbolise the concept of design in Wolfensohn's work. It features on the poster of his exhibition *Notes Vagabondes* (2016), in which D is half of a circular blade, with such a sharp edge it has dissected the eye (the viewer, the consumer of images) into two smaller Ds – a vigorous representation of the power of design.

To create an image for art itself (1986) Wolfensohn makes the three letters of the word dance in a colourful embrace. The three-dimensional A, R and T in red, yellow and blue, are linked to form an elegant diagonal composition, like a continuous form puzzle. The colours melt into each other, on a background of grey fading to white at the base of the poster.

By changing the colour or the type, Wolfensohn invites us to rearrange the letter, to read several messages in one word. As well as achieving economy of space, this kind of puzzle-solving is an effective way of engaging the audience in a shared game.

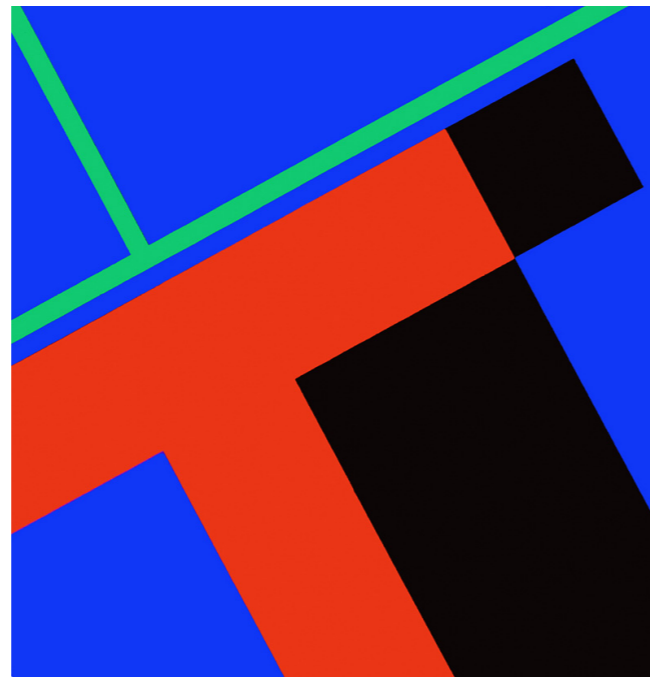
TERRE ET TRAME  
1982

INSTITUT DE DESIGN  
MONTRÉAL  
1999

NOTES VAGABONDES  
2016

An international poster campaign celebrating 100 years of Bauhaus has attracted a number of contemporary designers. One of Wolfensohn's contributions features three groups of letters: *KNOW*, *BAU* and *HOW* – to be read as Know how and/or Bau how – to suggest Bauhaus (albeit at a stretch). All in capitals, the letters are slender and elegant, the blue, yellow and orange words neatly lining at the left on a black background.

The poster for the *Institut de design Montréal* (1999) is also an audience participation exercise. The first three letters are the initials of the Montreal Design Institute: IDM. But, as we reach the third letter, it changes colour (from black to gold) and falls sideways: it is no longer an "M", it became an "E" and by adding a couple lightly scripted letters, the word is formed: Ideas. This is what design is about, this is what the IDM is there to do: to generate ideas, to develop and process them, to deliver them into the world. The use of different typefaces and colours in one word reflects the diversity of ideas: no two great ideas are the same, but they all shine loudly and clearly on a glorious red background.



## SOME SIGNS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS

I was surprised to read that the sign for “equal”, as in “1+1=2” was invented as late as 1557 (by Welsh mathematician Robert Recorde). Until then, and for some time afterwards, the concept of equality was expressed in words (“is equal to”) or by the first letters of the Latin word *æqualis*.

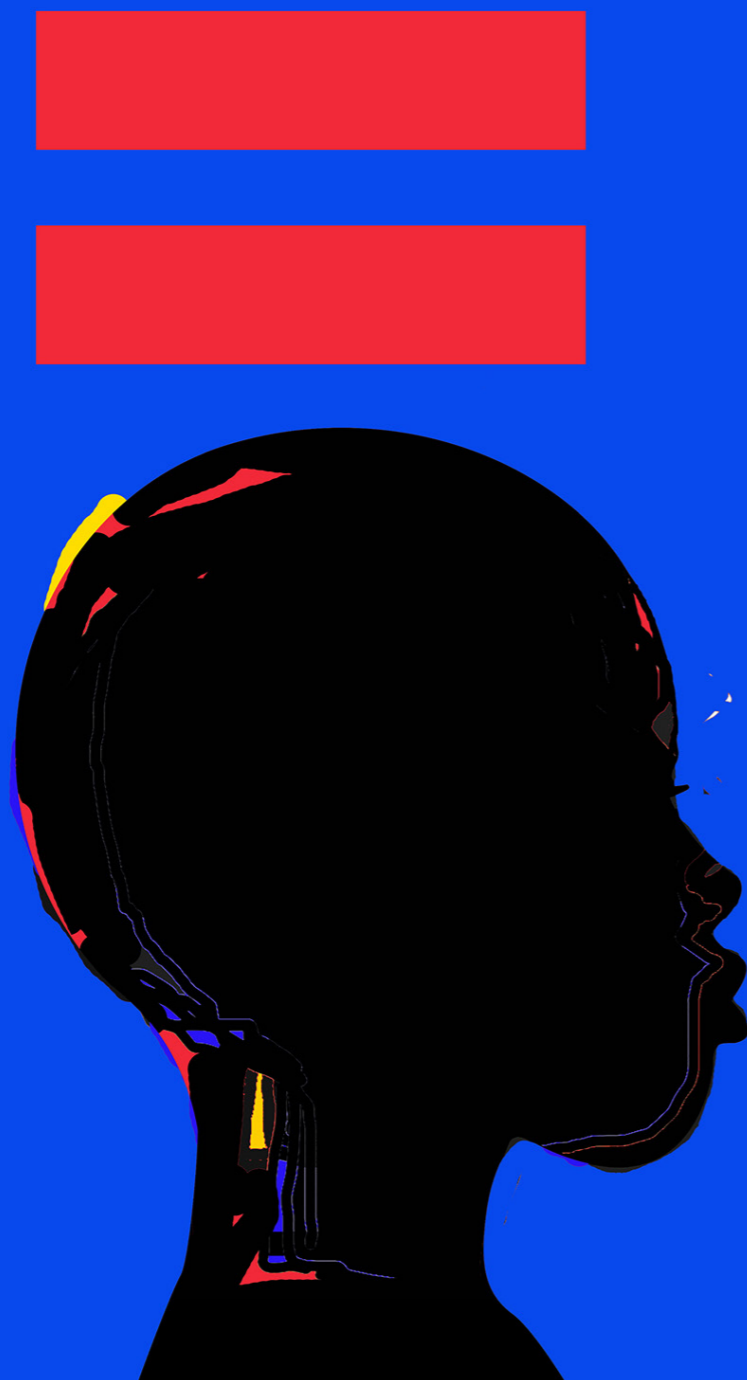
The difficulties experienced by mathematicians writing down new formulae and equations apart, the symbolic expression of equality is a helpful shorthand for the concept as used in social and political context. It is applied to indicate quality and value, as well as quantity.

Which is how Wolfensohn uses it in the series of posters on education (2012). The equal sign in bold red lines is firmly positioned above a girl’s profile. The girl is recognisable as black – and the text at the base of the poster reiterates the message: *When it comes to education, all children are equal* – regardless of gender, race, etc. The next poster is even more succinct: just the “equal” sign, the horizontal lines are black, white and brown – on a yellow background. Yes, there are three parallel lines, but we automatically recognise the equal sign – or signs, as there may be more than one equals symbol.

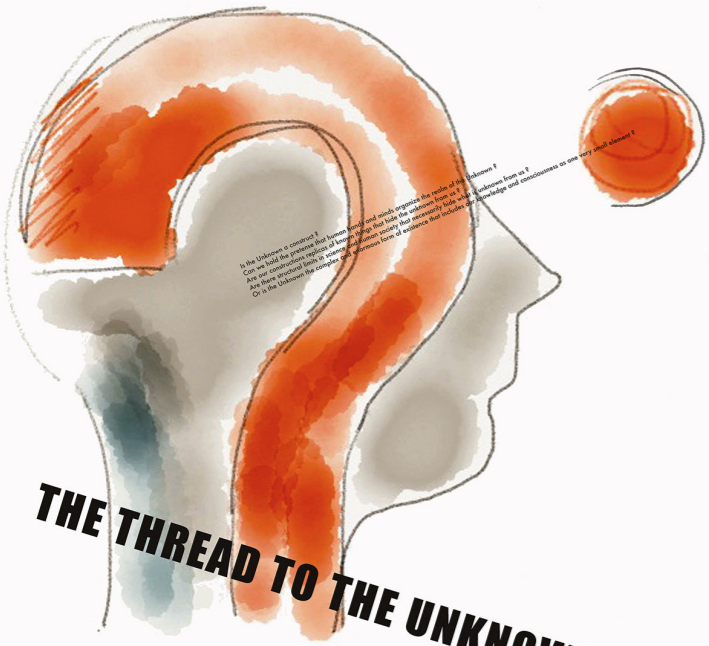
Predictably, the most recognised symbol for gender equality also features the equals sign, usually alongside – or in between – the male and female gender symbols. Wolfensohn selects the use of letters – dynamic, painted in a hurry letters to indicate urgency. The letter “E” in “MEN” has been replaced with the two parallel lines of “equal” without diminishing readability. Above it, two red letters “WO” complete the narrative in just one word: women and men should be equal, we demand gender equality now.



WHEN IT COMES TO EDUCATION, ALL CHILDREN ARE EQUAL



WHEN IT COMES TO EDUCATION  
ALL CHILDREN ARE EQUAL  
2012



THE THREAD  
TO THE UNKNOWN  
2012

GENDER EQUALITY NOW!  
2012

CONSUMPTION:  
THINK TWICE!  
2012

HELL!O DANTE  
2014

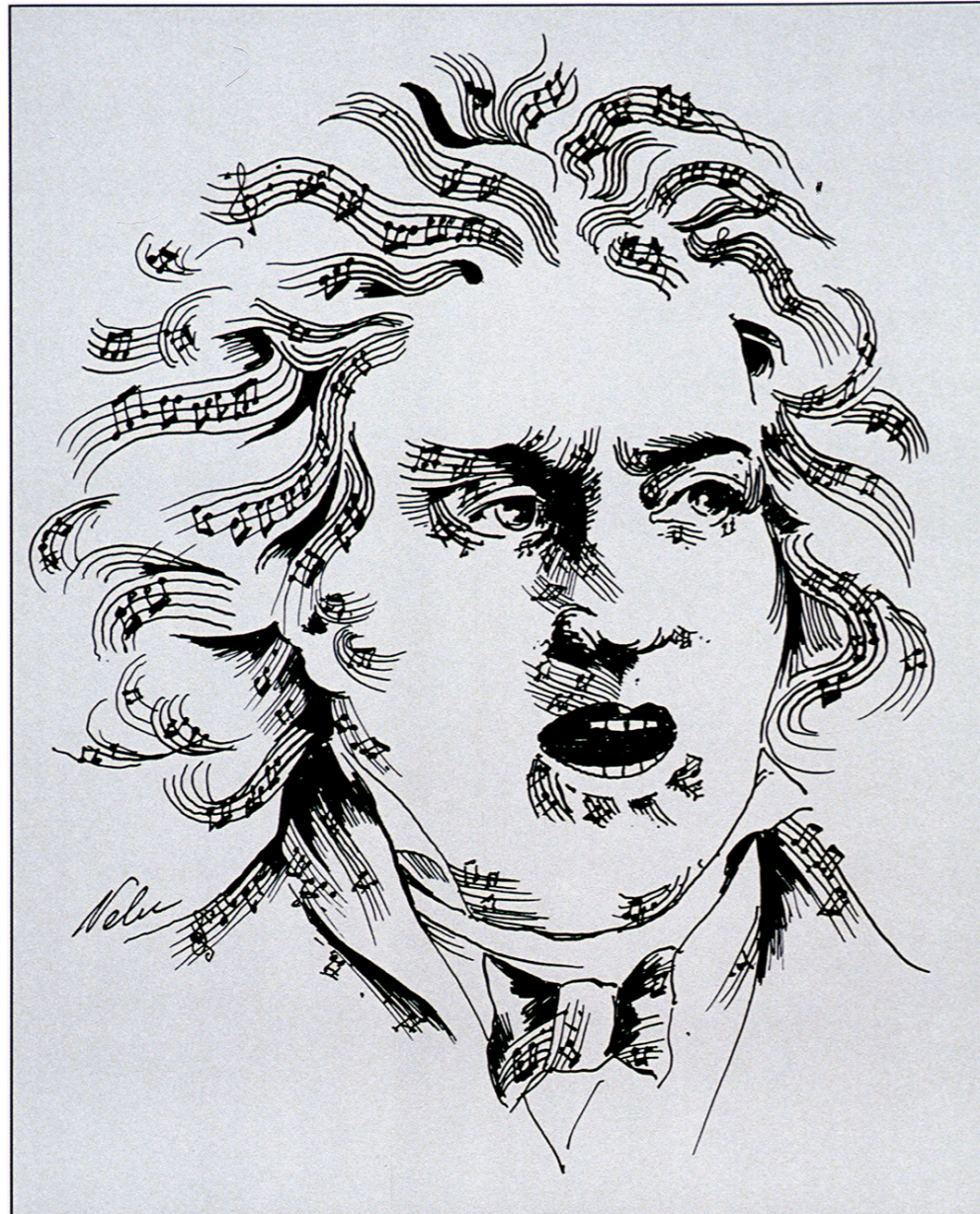


**CONSUMPTION: THINK TWICE!**



**HELL!O**  
The 700th anniversary of the writing of "Inferno", first part of "The Divine Comedy" by Dante Alighieri  
**DANTE**

## SMALL BUT MIGHTY!



# LA NEUVIÈME!

Dans le cadre des célébrations du 350<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de Montréal l'Orchestre Métropolitain présente la neuvième Symphonie de Beethoven en Concert bénéfice. Chef d'orchestre: Agnès Grossmann, Claudine Côté, soprano, Maria Popescu, mezzo-soprano, Darryl Edwards, ténor, Alexandre Savtchenko, basse. Le vendredi 15 mai à 20 heures. Eglise Saint-Jean Baptiste (angle des rues Rachel et Henri-Julien).

  
ORCHESTRE MÉTROPOLITAIN

The admiration mark – better known today as the exclamation mark – is not very big, but has the power to change the sense of a statement – words, images or a combination thereof. Like with any sign (word, image) overuse dilutes the power of significance, so Wolfensohn uses the exclamation mark sparingly: not shouting, but admiring.

Beethoven's 9th is the stuff of legend: written after the composer has lost his hearing; it is the first choral symphony; it is also one of the greatest pieces of Western music, ever. Most people recognise it from the first notes. The familiarity and uniqueness of this piece of music is conveyed by the exclamation mark in the poster *La Neuvième!* We see the image: one of the most recognised images of a composer. Mouth open, he is singing (it is a chorale, would he be the tenor?) and his image is created by undulating staves, some notes floating around his wild hair. It catapults one to the premiere of the 9th, in Vienna:

At its premiere in Vienna in 1824, Beethoven himself conducted, that is, he stood in front of a conductor's stand and threw himself back and forth like a madman – according to the violinist Joseph Böhm.

One can almost hear the movements, which the composer could not hear, and see the enthusiastic reception of the public, the five standing ovations, the hats and handkerchiefs in the air, the atmosphere of jubilation. Expect the same at this concert, the poster suggests. Make an effort, viewer, to find the details (time, place) of this extraordinary event.

On occasion, the job of the exclamation mark is to emphasise an order (Compost! rather than Compost, or Think Twice!), as per its definition, to give the viewer a start and prompt to action. But sometimes it is given its own role in changing the meaning of the message, just by moving a little to the right: Hell!o Dante (on the 700th anniversary of Dante Aligheri's *Inferno*), or Hell! Dante. You choose.

Or should you? Artists, like children, should and do question everything. Curiosity and creativity are twin sisters. What is the relationship between the vast amount of human knowledge and the Unknown? How can one get to know the Great Unknown? The questions formulate in the human brain like a thread linking the curved eroteme to the "point" somewhere ahead - in space or time. The human profile is a simple outline, line and colour appear to be sketched, hesitant, fluid, suggesting a lack of certainty. This is not the finished work, it seems to say, there are more questions, fewer answers, there is no end to the brain's quest for the mechanism of the imagination.

I would argue that the exclamation mark is the certainty and exuberance of youth, while the question mark is the doubt and ambiguity that comes with age; but this argument may be easily contradicted.

LA NEUVIÈME!  
1992



BYE BUY  
2012

## THE COMFORT OF NUMBERS

*Numbers are such comfort  
reliably same*

*They come together, they grow apart  
and when they reconvene  
they are unchanged  
triumphant  
always making sense  
in their orderly groups  
like an army.*

*We can trust numbers  
for equal, for square  
always gentle and same.*

*But letters are treacherous*

*The way they write  
And how they sound  
They gather into words  
Same letters different words  
They gather in phrases to catch us out  
Do not trust the letters the words  
They can distort the phrases  
They may not tell the truth  
or the entire story  
from death and old age  
to freedom and youth.*



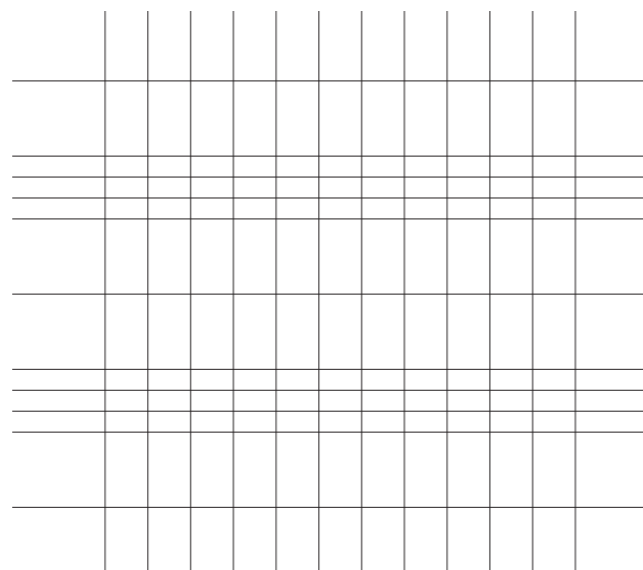
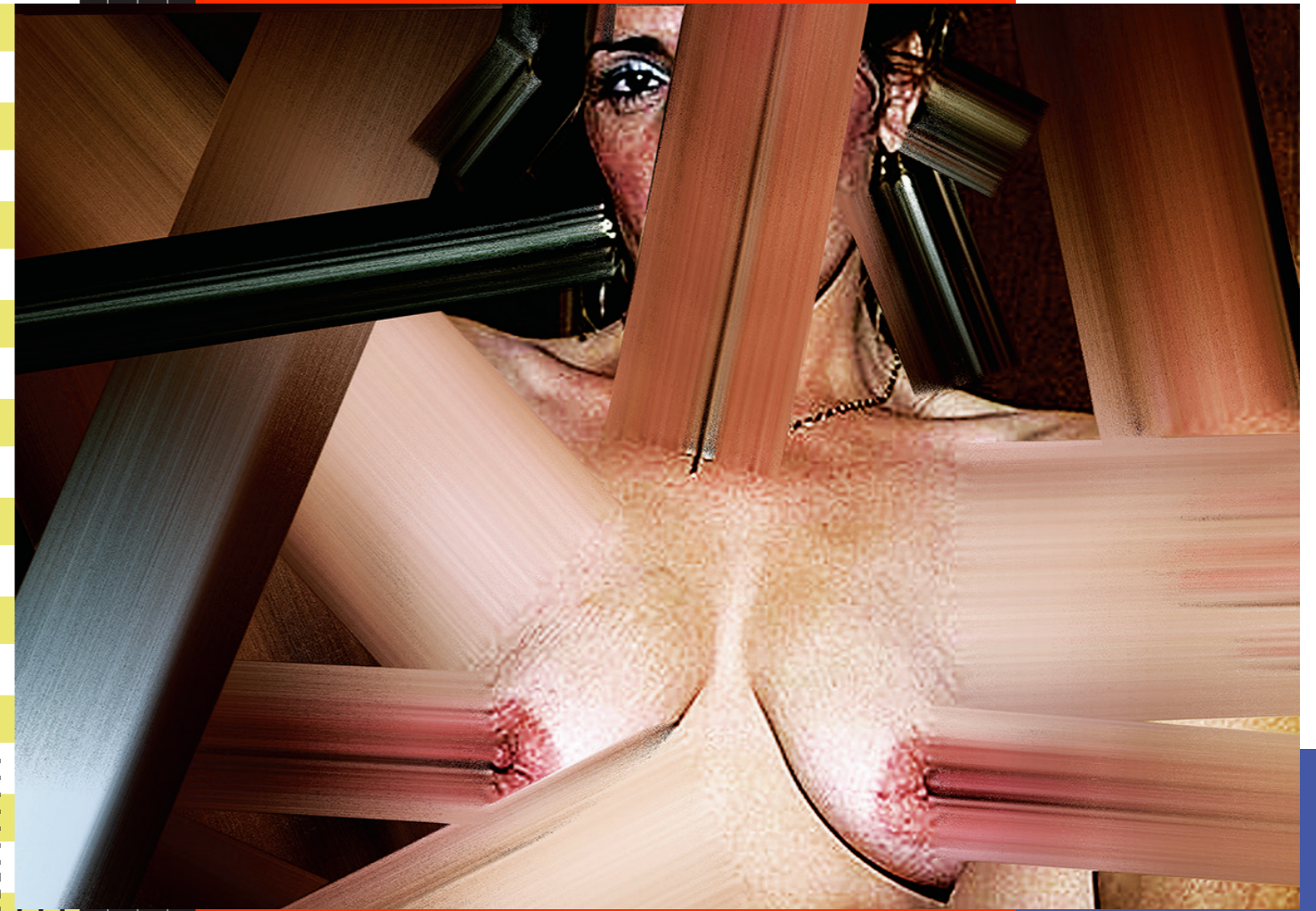
The symbols – words, images, sounds – we use to tell our story are the same as those used to tell lies. For the artist to be believed, he must choose a different tool, select the one or the combination that only tells the true story.

To tell his story, to survive, the artist often needs to create his own symbols, his original myth, instead of, or alongside using existing ones. How can the artist create a myth? By definition, a myth is a story or set of stories, made up a long time ago and passed on through generations, in order to explain the unexplainable: life, love, natural phenomena, the universe. Or is a myth a belief mistakenly held, other people's story?

Praxiteles made a nude statue of Aphrodite around 330 BC – the first known life-size statue of a woman. The people of Kos were so shocked by the nudity, they didn't want her so she was bought by the island of Knidos, who knew a bargain when they saw one, and it ended up there. She was so beautiful, men wanted to have sex with her, and at least one sailor tried, leaving a stain of shame on her thigh.

He is said to have then jumped off a cliff to his death. In his defence, the statue is a tease: one of her hands is moving to cover her pubic area, in a way that seems to draw attention to it. "Just how did Praxiteles see me naked?" she asks in a later Hellenistic poem, apparently complaining at the invasion of her privacy, and at the same time confirming her nakedness. The signifier became the signified and the artist would take pride in creating such close similarity that the two can be confused.

Since prehistoric times storytellers have continued to create myths and they always find a large audience, because people need to hear the stories. A good story is one that makes us suspend our disbelief.



MANIPULATIONS  
2001

## THE MYTH OF DESIGN



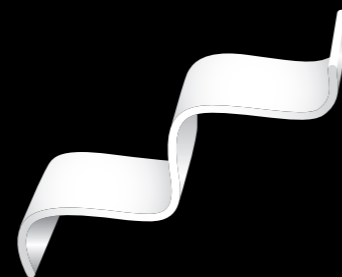
One story tells of a beautiful woman, with a delicate nose and high cheekbones. Her skin was pale as if she were made of marble. In fact, she was chiselled in marble, and at times painted, by many artists. This classic beauty opened her mouth and delivered objects that also pleased our sense of aesthetic; what's more, they were things we could use, like the red Panton chair. And this is how it happened that one icon – the classic female profile – gave birth to another icon – the stackable plastic chair. Combining beauty with functionality is the contemporary myth of design.

Wolfensohn takes us through several levels of significance. First (but this is not a hierarchic, or logical, order) the words: "Let's speak design" in three languages. Not, as we would expect, "Let's talk about design" – but Let's speak this language called design. The marble-like woman speaks design – as design comes out of her mouth, a scarlet tongue in the shape of this metaphor for design, the Panton chair. "Language" is in most languages synonym with tongue (langue, mother tongue, etc.).



PARLONS DESIGN!  
LET'S SPEAK DESIGN!  
HABLEMOS DISEÑO!

LET'S SPEAK DESIGN  
2000



# DESIGN IS CREATION

*L'idée de la création, l'idée sous laquelle on conçoit que, par un simple acte de volonté, rien devient quelque chose, est, de toutes les idées qui ne sont pas contradictoires, la moins compréhensible à l'esprit humain.*

(Jean-Jaques Rousseau)

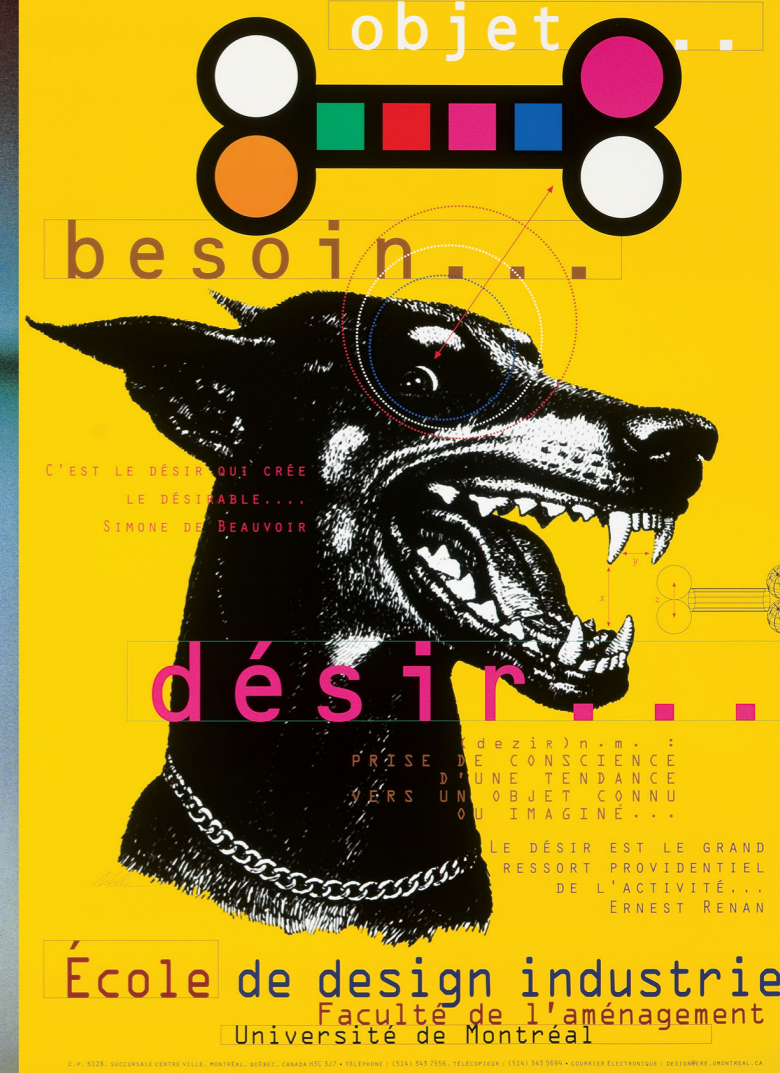
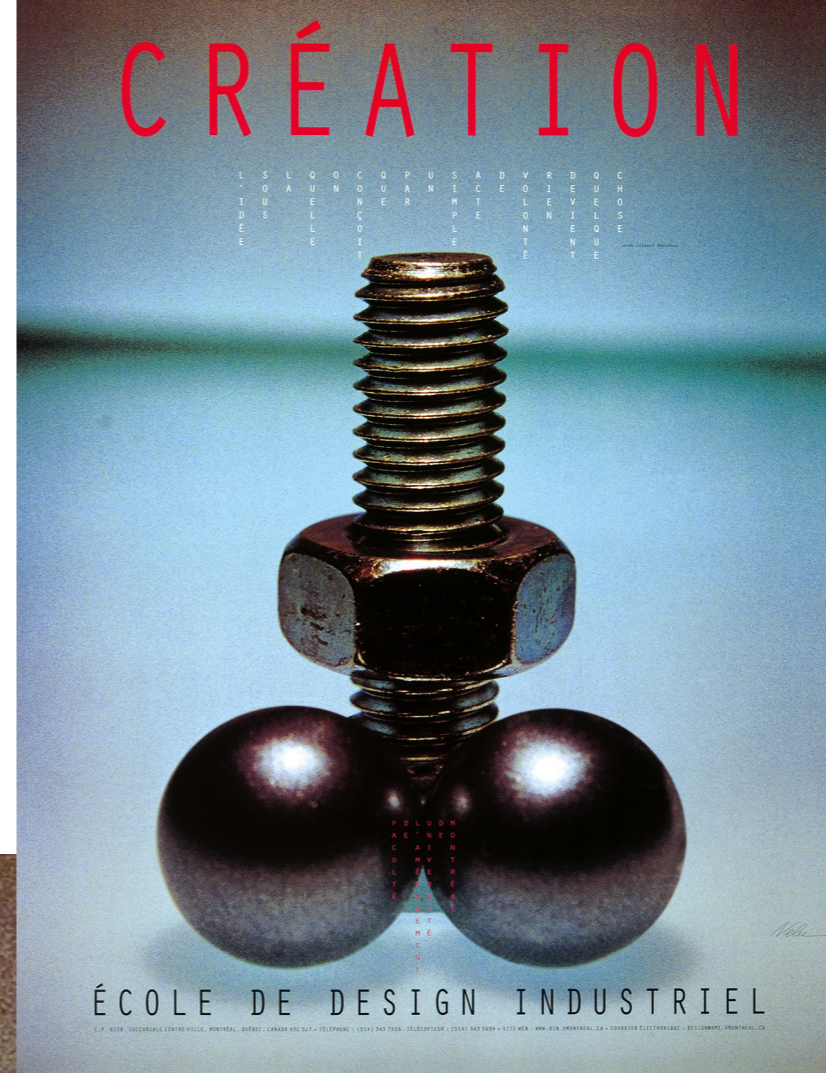
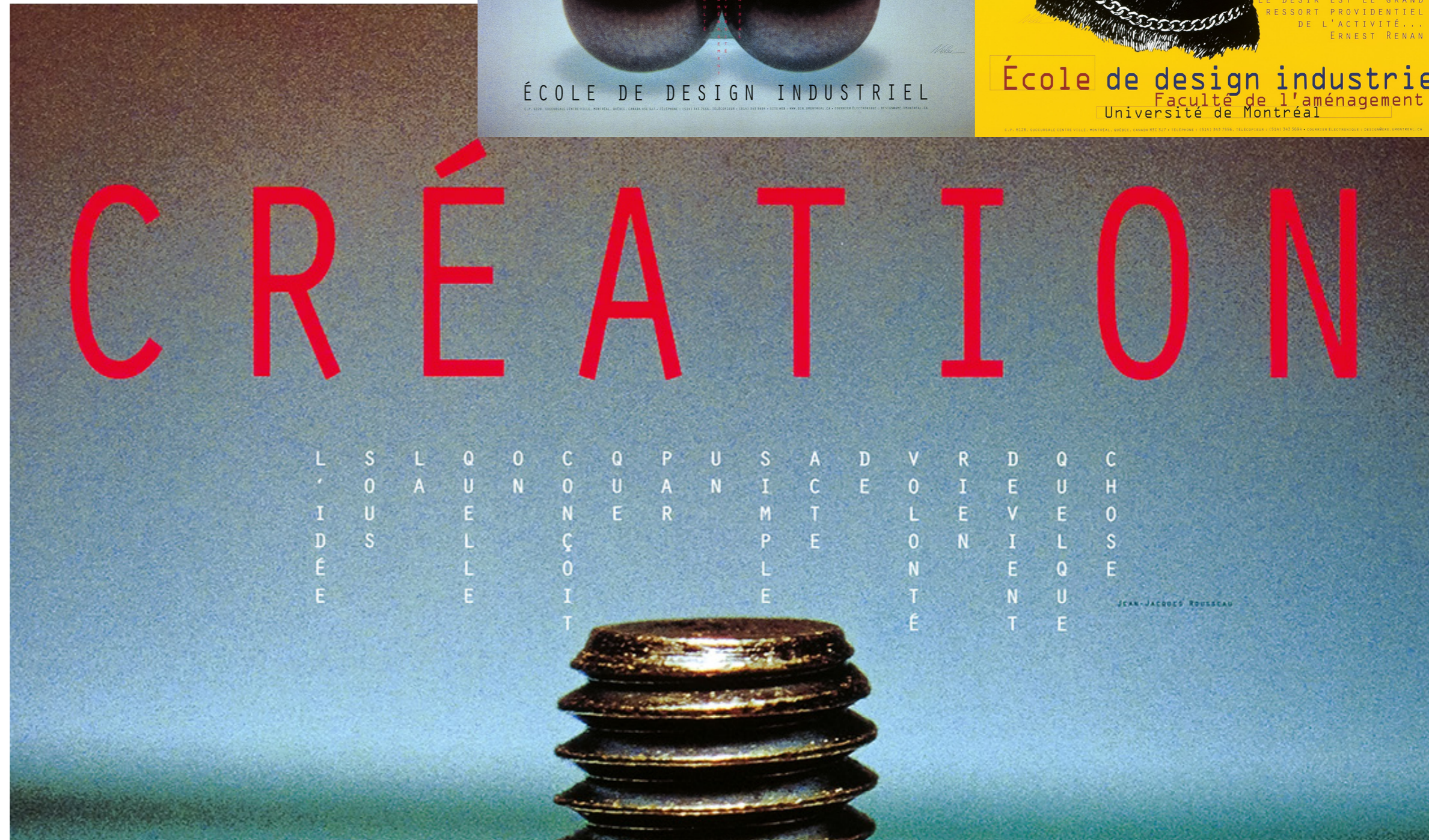
CRÉATION  
1999

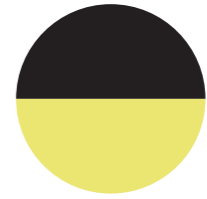
*The idea of creation, the idea that, simply by an act of willpower, nothing becomes something, is, of all the contradictory ideas, the least comprehensible to the human spirit.*

Jean-Jaques Rousseau is quoted in Wolfensohn's poster for the School of Industrial Design produced in 1999. The words of Rousseau, in small white print vertical lines, drop from the sky like a prophecy, or a blessing. A deceptively simple, symmetrical composition balances the word "CRÉATION" in red capitals with the illustration of a black shiny object made up of a screw, nut and balls and looking very much like a metal penis. The message is clear: like sexual encounter in the creation of new life, the design ideas are the fire that creates something out of nothing. A miracle.

How do we respond to design? Like the dog in Pavlov's classical conditioning experiment, suggests Wolfensohn, we create associations, generalisations. We respond to new stimuli with a condition response. As 21st century well-fed citizens, we consume images the way we consume art, education, democracy.

OBJET, BESOIN, DÉSIR  
1997





Two elements appear frequently in Wolfensohn's work: the eye (seeing, image, creation) and the mouth (swallow, ingest, consume).

In a poster entitled *Where Are We Heading?* (2008) the eye is held by a black and white hand, which is also holding a pencil, or, like the expression of choice, on the other hand, a USB. The two photographic hands are identical, the eyes too. The symmetric butterfly-like composition prefers to withhold the answer.

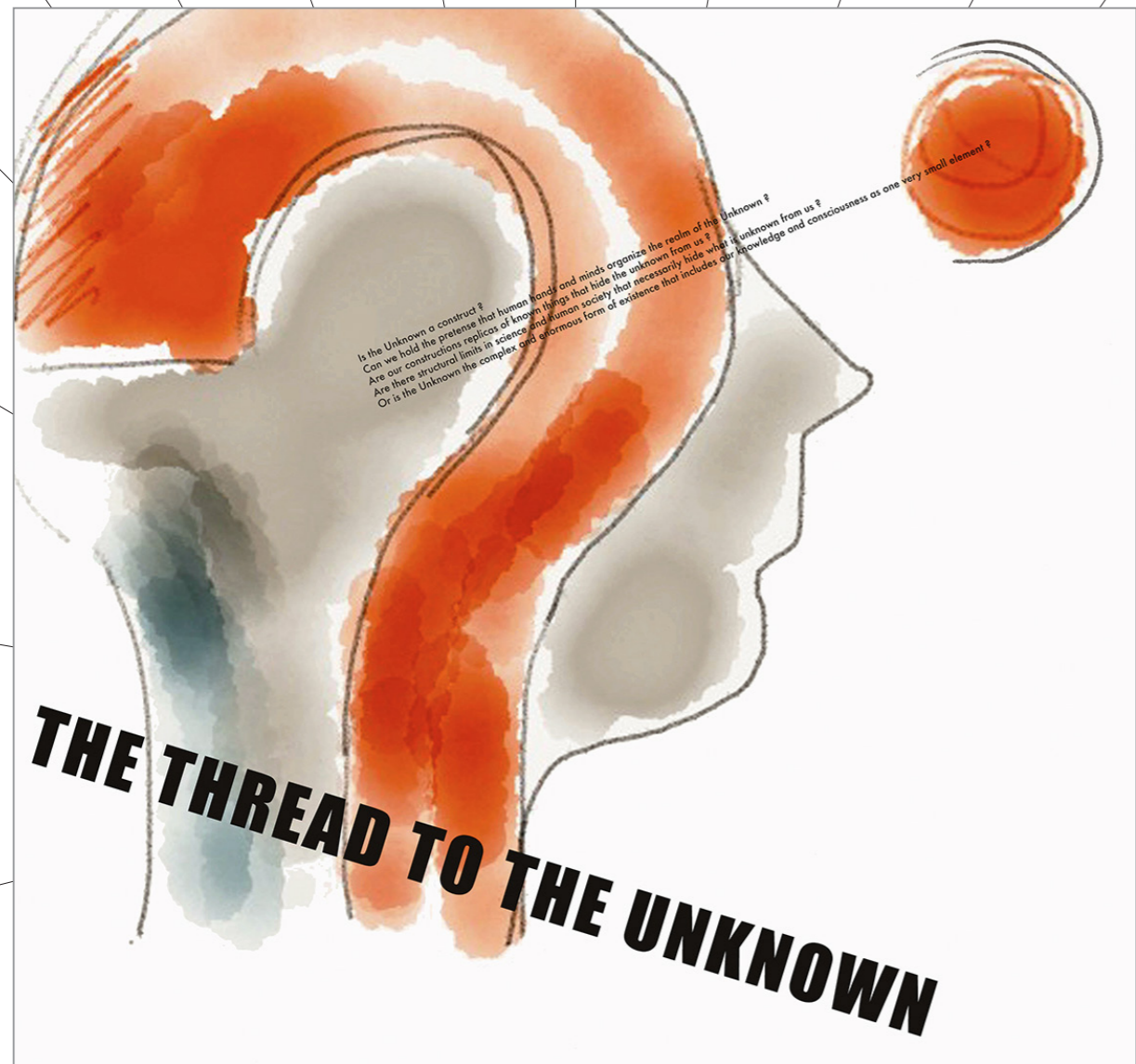
This is how a myth is created, says Barthes: starting with a signifier and a signified, we have a sign, the association of concept and image. This sign becomes a signifier for another signified = a new, second degree sign. We can – and we do – go on to an increased level of significance. The relationship between the three elements, says Barthes, "is not one of equality but one of equivalence". It is also one of interdependence.

Images (words, ideas, concepts) are repeated until they become familiar, cosy. They become a commodity. We use them to tell our story, or our lies. For the artist to be believed, he must choose different tools, the ones that only tell the true story.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING ?  
2010

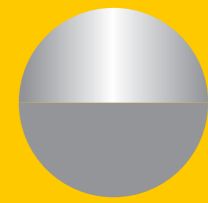
DISINFORMATION  
2019





THE THREAD TO THE UNKNOWN  
2012

INTERROGATION VERTICALE  
2001





## THE MYTH OF THE UNKNOWN

*Knowledge is not made for understanding;  
it is made for cutting.*

*(Michel Foucault)*

Are design and science some constructs to hide reality (and art) from us? Questions Wolfensohn in *The Thread to the Unknown* poster, designed for the Image Conference in Poland, 2012. The head, a lightly sketched grey profile, is a big question mark. The text directs to the point of the question mark, positioned in front of the human profile, setting the direction of his/her gaze. "Are our constructions replicas of known things that hide the unknown from us?" In other words, are the signifiers we created used to hide the signified, rather than express it? Are we using the tools of communication in order to conceal the truth?

The temptation to get inside the head, especially inside the head of the artist cannot be resisted. How does the brain create images that never existed in a physical reality? The workings of the human head are a puzzle waiting to be solved. Vertical Interrogation, a digital collage from 1999, raises as many questions as it provides answers. On the left, on a pure black background, the exterior, visible to all: monochrome, immobile, chiselled in marble. On the right, like a colourful ultrasound picture, a volcano has exploded into red, yellow and magenta flames. Knowledge is fluid and too hot to be handled.

The inside of the head theme returns in 2006, for the Design Month poster. The same right facing profile, this time more elaborate, and on a pedestal of fine red, yellow and green lines. The background is blue, the head, transparent, is a lighter shade of blue, but we are privileged to look inside: a surreal array of biological and mechanical shapes, bright colours, snake and undulate into each other like melting paint. The grey matter is actually colourful and full of creative movement, like Dylan's hair in the psychedelic posters of the 60s (Glazer, Unknown). Somewhere near the forehead, a reminder of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man overlaps the corner of a prominent "D" (D is for design).

But knowledge is made for cutting, and design is always at the cutting edge: for fashion, for interiors, for the stage, for our day-to-day objects. The consuming public is ready and willing to swallow design whole, like the devouring mouth of the crocodile- baguette – a recurring theme in Wolfensohn's work.

MONTRÉAL MAI 2006  
MOIS DU DESIGN

# THE MYTH OF LOVE AND DEATH

“What will survive of us is love”

(Philip Larkin)

Love and art go together like a horse and cart. The opposite of death is not life, but love, and so are love and death united in mythology, in art, in literature. The two concepts meet on several levels: they both conquer all; they last for ever; they offer inspiration and desperation.

Expressing such profound human sentiment in a visual way is a challenge that energised many artists over the centuries. Love between a man and a woman, between Cupid and Psyche, is often translated in painting and sculpture as an embrace. We may never know the identity of the two lovers in Rodin's sculpture *The Kiss*, or Klimt's golden canvas with the same title. The couple in Magritte's 1928 canvas *The Lovers* is even more mysterious. Hiding under a white veil, Magritte's lovers are embracing, their heads tilted towards each other, but *Ceci n'est pas un baiser*, the surrealist kiss doesn't happen and the lovers remain separated for eternity by the death-like veil.



The scenario suits Wolfensohn's perception of romantic love: if approached at all, the subject should be treated with a healthy dose of cynicism, or at least vague irony. And in the context of something bigger, more real – like death, for instance.

Like in Brancusi's sculpture, *The Kiss*, the actors in *L'acteur, l'actrice en scène* (1995) could have been cut out of a single slab of stone.

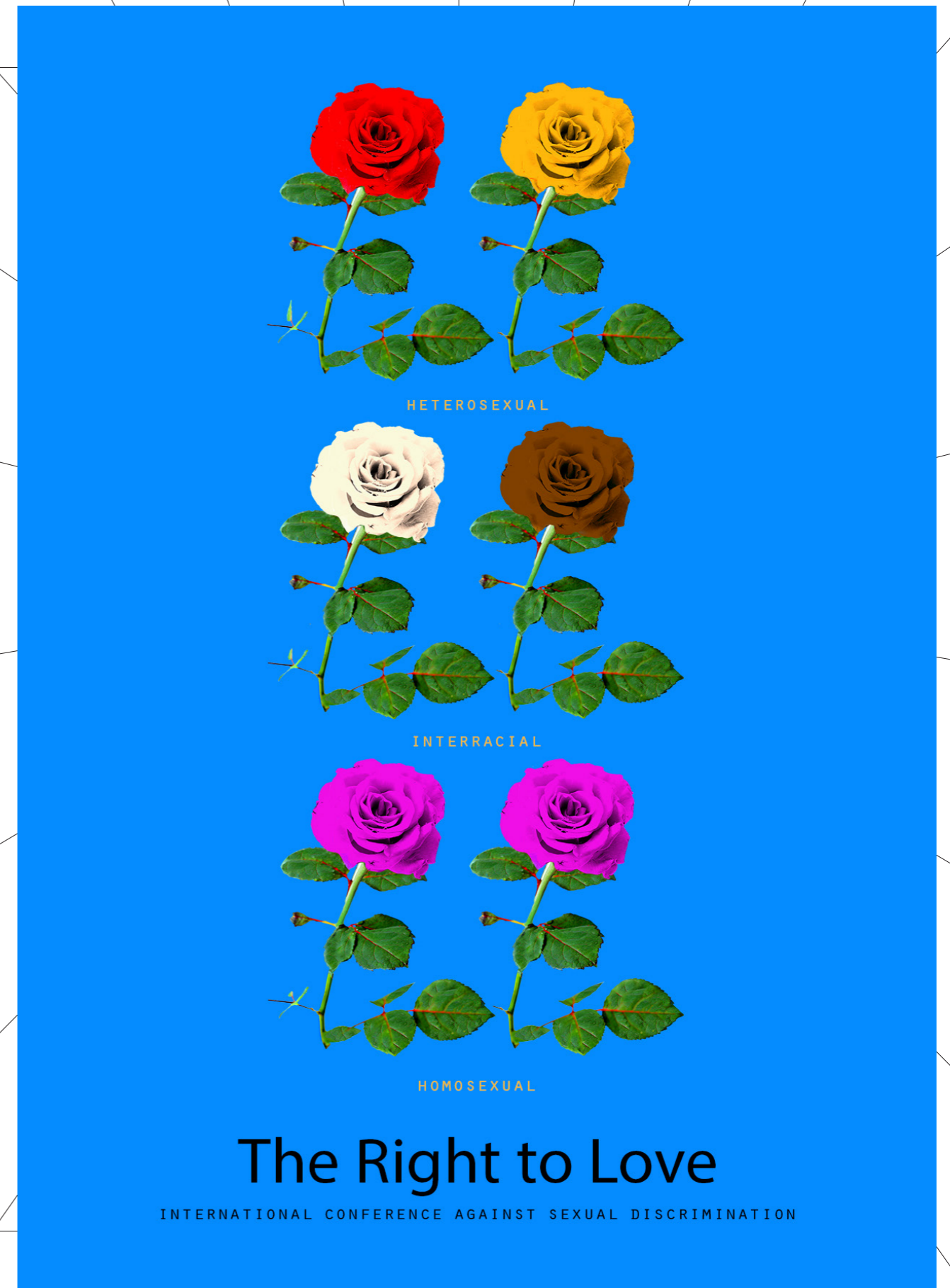
What is the story of death, and how can it be related visually, with sensitivity and tact? It is as natural to die as it is to be born, and probably just as painful. But as we were not there for the first, we would rather not be there for the latter, as Woody Allen put it “I am not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens”.

“After your death, you will be what you were before your birth” comforted Arthur Schopenhauer. As not many of us remember the feeling of that prenatal state, we are not entirely reassured by the prospect.

Fear of the unknown characterises the concept of death in Western culture. Religion didn't make it better when it invented some terrible stages to get through before we even get to the prenatal state of peace and nothingness.

L'ACTEUR, L'ACTRICE EN SCÈNE  
1995

THE RIGHT TO LOVE  
2017



The destination of a fresh corpse, or the spirit that inhabited it, is quite complex and never attractive: there is Heaven and Hell, Purgatory, Paradise and, the most frightening of them all, Limbo. It is not easy to understand the qualification required for a place in each of them. In Christianity, the after-death is seen as punishment or reward of a life lived within or outside the rules it imposes. He who was bad, rots in Hell (although, technically, the matter described as prevalent in Hell is not inductive to putrefaction). Hell was not invented by Christianity, or even by monotheism. The Sumerian, the Greeks and the Egyptians all had a version of it, mostly involving fire and eating dust. In Jewish folklore, people in Hell have food, but only long spoons and, as they are unable to cooperate by feeding each other, they starve to ...er, death.

The fate of the wicked, from shame and public contempt to eternal purgation in molten metal has, over the centuries, given inspiration to opera, poetry, film, painting and more recently action video games. As in the case of Dante's *Divina Comedia*, poetry in turn inspired drawings, paintings and posters.

The first part of Dante's epic poem was composed between 1308 and 1320. In *terza rima*, Dante describes the nine circles of the Infernal Funnel and indicates the place for various sinners. Based on Dante's description, Botticelli created a map of Hell, along with 91 other drawings that illustrate *Divina Comedia*. In the 19th century, artists like Gustave Doré and William Blake gave us images of the enchanted forest and the monsters that torment the sinners in Hell.

One of Wolfensohn's posters celebrating the 700th anniversary of this writing, is a conversational greeting: *HELLO, DANTE*, as to an old acquaintance. An exclamation mark divides the first word to read *HELL!O*, but the exclamation mark is black, like the background and the letters of "Hello" and Dante are large red capitals, so at first glance it is a friendly greeting to the Tuscan poet. The portrait of Dante, sketched (scratched?) with white lines on the black background, is based on the statue by the sculptor Enrico Pazzi. Pazzi's monument was erected in Piazza Santa Croce in Florence in 1865, to mark the poet's 600th anniversary. This approach seems to indicate the fact that we don't know for certain what Dante looked like. There is a beautiful profile by Botticelli, but this was painted some 200 years after Dante's death. The Botticelli portrait echoes a description we have from Giovanni Boccaccio (who changed the name of *Comedia* to *Divina Comedia*)

*His face was long, his nose aquiline, and his eyes big rather than small. His jaws were large, and his lower lip protruded. He had a brown complexion, his hair and beard were thick, black, and curly, and his countenance was always melancholy and thoughtful.*

(Giovanni Boccaccio)

HELL!O DANTE  
2014



**HELL!O**  
The 700th anniversary of the writing of "Inferno", first part of "The Divine Comedy" by Dante Alighieri  
**DANTE**

# INFERNO

The 700th anniversary of the writing of the first part of "The Divine Comedy" by Dante Alighieri – "Inferno."



The other *Inferno* poster brings us brutally into the 20th century and the Hell brought by the Nazi regime. The sign "Arbeit Macht Frei" at the entrance to Auschwitz and Theresienstadt concentration camps is immediately recognisable as a synecdoche for the Holocaust and the horrors of war. This is death at its grimmest, most cruel, the worst *Inferno* of all. Rendered more repellent by being brought on people by other "humans". There were 15,000 children at Theresienstadt, less than 150 survived.

"Arbeit Macht Frei" at the entrance of concentration camps was a possible attempt to cruel irony. A more appropriate sign would have been Dante's phrase from Canto III of *Inferno*: *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate* (*Abandon all hope, you who enter here*).

Western religion and history have created a culture of mystery, pain and fear around death. We don't talk about it for as long as we can avoid the subject. We don't mention death in front of the children, so as not to upset them (how long for?). It takes a long time to understand and accept that death, as inevitable as taxes, happens to all of us, and the more prepared for it we are the better.

*While I thought that I was learning how to live, I was learning how to die* wrote Leonardo da Vinci. (This level of mortality salience is apparently related to high self-esteem).

Like everything else that lives, sooner or later all humans die. The cause varies: illness, warfare, punishment, self-sacrifice, martyrdom, accident. The disposal of the physical remains also varies – burial, cremation, cryonics, mummification – depending on customs and beliefs.

The plethora of emotions caused by mortality – anger, confusion, fear, hope, sadness – has inspired great works of art, literature and film.

Personification – The Grim Ripper, carrying a scythe – is a way of coping. Death is just an ex-human, hiding the fact that it's only a skeleton by wearing a long cape and/or a hood. The skull, a shorthand signifier for death, features in painting from Medieval times to Damian Hirst.

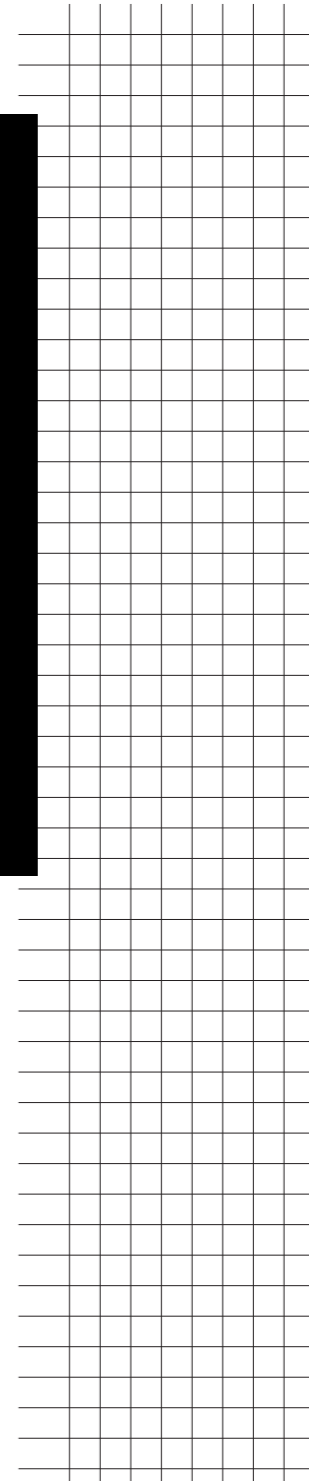
INFERNO  
2014

**THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE**  
**THE JUXTAPOSITION**  
**OF CONTRADICTIONARY**  
**CONCEPTS**  
**ATTRACTS ATTENTION**



TO DEATH  
WITH A SMILE  
2015

TO DEATH  
WITH A SMILE  
2017



Do we dare to make fun of death? Artists and caricaturists often do.

As the Mexican novelist Octavio Paz put it: *The Mexican ... is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it. True, there is as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away: he looks at it face to face, with impatience, disdain or irony.*

At the start of November, Mexico celebrates the Day of the Dead (*el Día de los Muertos*) when the souls of the dead visit their living relatives. Like with any reunion, there is food, drink and music. The celebrations include parades and costumes, mostly based on skeletons and skulls; the festival is on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

On the subject of death, the Mexican Museum of Design MUMEDI organised an international poster competition "To Death With a Smile". It invited personal approaches to the way a designer's own culture fears or deals with death. With a nod to Dia de los Muertos,

Wolfensohn's contribution features skeletons and skulls, and a comic element: brightly coloured accessories (yellow sunglasses, red shoes). It is interesting to observe that this approach is quite removed from the traditional Western art, which has always regarded death with respect, seriousness and sadness, maybe because our part of the world has experienced so much of it, so untimely.

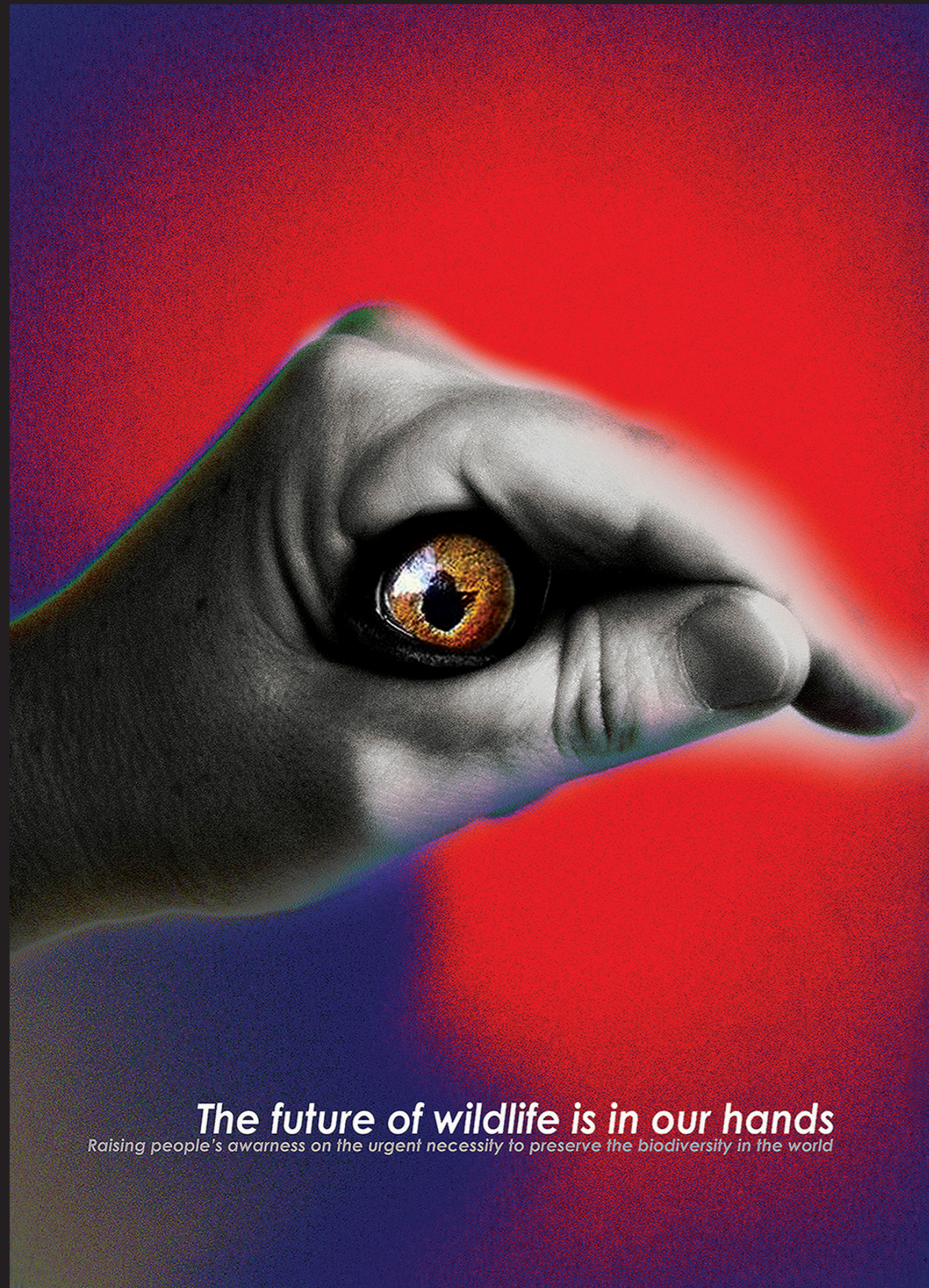
Traditionally, the closest we come to death while still alive, is sex. Romantic love also leads to death in many of our legends and myths. In *Relax Baby* we can admire the curves of the bikini girl, but the purple bikini is worn by a faint skeleton, melting into the darkness, nearly disappeared. Relax baby, don't worry - it's going to happen.

The last verse of Dante's *Divina Comedia* summarises his entire work: love is the meaning of life, the universe and everything:

*L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stele* (Paradiso XXXIII) (*Love, that moves the sun and the other stars*).

RELAX BABY  
2017





**The future of wildlife is in our hands**

*Raising people's awareness on the urgent necessity to preserve the biodiversity in the world*

## THE MYTH OF THE ARTIST'S EYE

*The world only exists in your eyes*

*(F. Scott Fitzgerald)*

*The eyes are the mirror of the soul and reflect everything that seems to be hidden; and like a mirror, they also reflect the person looking into them. (Paul Cohello)*

As I look at paintings, I feel like the baguette/alligator in Nelu Wolfensohn's poster: hungry, greedy, ready to swallow one work of art after another, chasing after the eye, the image created by the artist. A consumer of art, like a consumer of fashion, or technology, is never satiated.

From the eye of Horus to the Eye of Providence - the eye is one of the most powerful and multidimensional symbols in Western culture. It has been linked to myths, legends and beliefs, playing a significant role - sometimes positive, sometimes negative, but always powerful - in the life of humans. The eyes are an essential organ of communication, as important as speech in face-to-face exchanges - in several languages "to see" means to understand. The eye is the mirror of the soul and the artist's most valued tool.

We are used to seeing the eye as the synecdoche for the artist himself. In Wolfensohn's posters, rendered with photographic precision, the concentric iris, luminous and with a perfectly round pupil, is shown at the cutting edge of design, at the centre of the hand holding the pencil, ready to be swallowed by a baguette - the all-consuming public.

In Egyptian mythology the eye was not the passive organ of sight but more an agent of action, protection or wrath. Horus was god in the form of a falcon (not unusual for an ancient Egyptian god); his right eye was the sun, symbol of power and quintessence, and his left eye was the moon, representing healing. In one myth, his brother Set, god of the desert, gouged out Horus's left eye. The eye was later restored through magic and Horus offered it to his father Osiris, designating the eye as a symbol of sacrifice and healing. The eye of Horus, or the Wadjet, remains one of the best-known symbols of protection. Western culture has devised other metaphors for protection: two hands forming a pitched roof, umbrellas, etc. In the poster entitled *The future of wildlife is in our hands*, the hand is protecting the eye which is reflecting the silhouette of a tiny, vulnerable bird. The message is loud: to help preserve biodiversity in the world, we need to see (i.e. to understand) it. The future of wildlife - the future of the planet - is in our hands. The bird, a small and precious thing, and the hand protecting it is monochrome on a background of red (danger) and blue (hope).

THE FUTURE OF WILDLIFE  
IS IN OUR HANDS  
2016

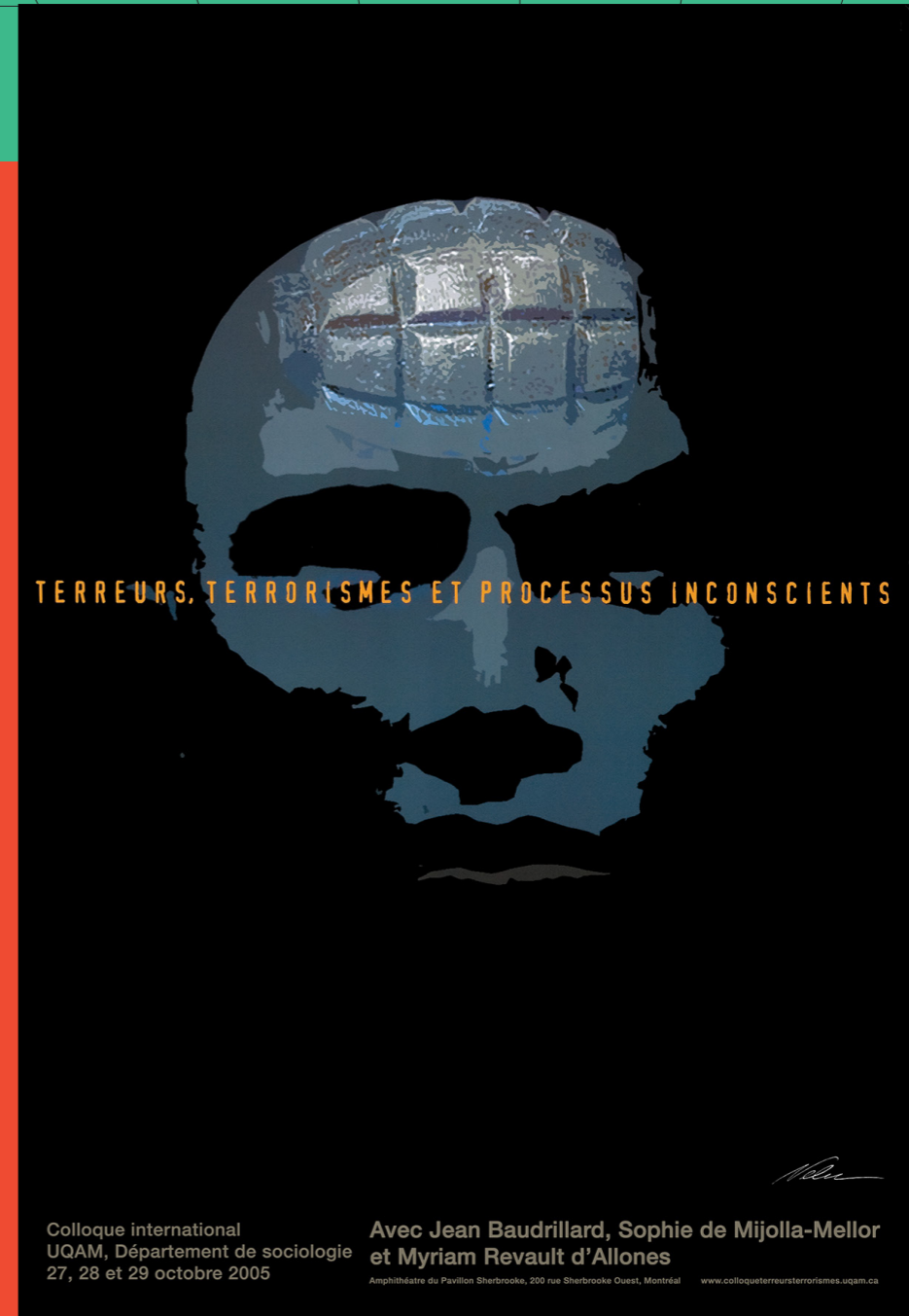
And there are other eyes in Wolfensohn's posters. There is the Eye of Ra: like the disc of the sun, the source of heat and light, a frightening, sometime aggressive power.

The power of Ra - the red circle - is used in Western imagery as a symbol for "Stop" "Forbidden" "No Entry". In the centre of the composition, on a black background, it is used to create a shocking impact - required for the treatment of the subject: Stop homelessness; Housing is a universal human right.

Sometimes the eyes are conspicuous by their absence. The eyes of the dead are closed, as they gaze into another world under their eyelids. Or, in *To Death With a Smile*, under mirror sunglasses, reflecting a festival of fireworks and fun.

Hidden eyes are often a reason for concern, even fear. We cannot read the feelings, the intentions of the character. In the poster for the conference on Terrors, Terrorisms and Unconscious Processes the illustration is a grenade-like cranium coming out of the darkness, the eyes concealed in black shadows. We can distinguish some of the features, but not the eyes, and this is frightening. Like in the parody of Munch's *Scream* and the skull wearing sparkling mirror sunglasses, the absence of eyes, the inability to see into the soul of the one seeing you - this is the stuff of nightmares.

HOUSING  
A UNIVERSAL RIGHT  
2013



TERREURS, TERRORISMES  
ET PROCESSUS  
INCONSCIENS  
2005



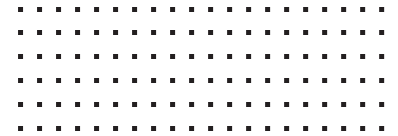
MONTREAL  
MAI 2006  
MOIS DU DESIGN

NOTES VAGABONDES  
2016

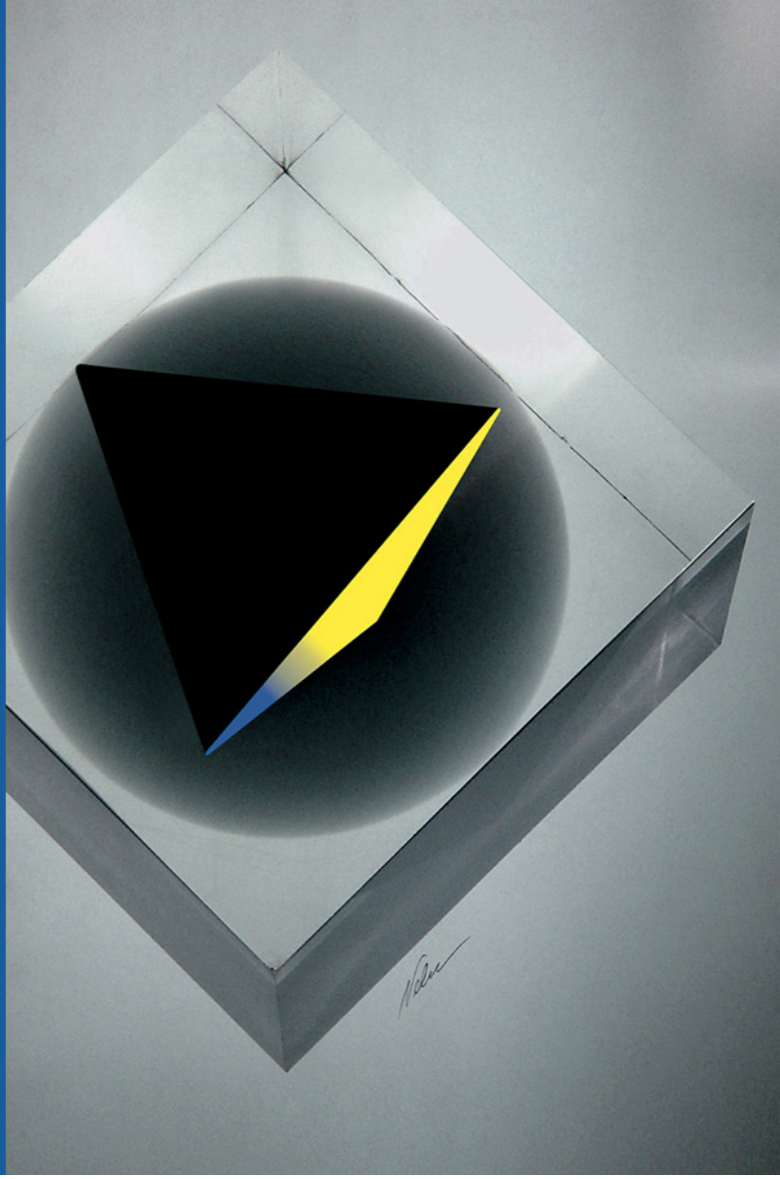
LES PRIX  
DE L'INSTITUT  
DE DESIGN  
MONTREAL  
2005



HES  
 N DE L'UQAM  
 11 DÉCEMBRE 2016  
 ANCHE DE MIDI À 18 HEURES  
 EDI 16 NOVEMBRE À 18 HEURES  
 LYNE LE BŒUF



As Wolfensohn is a designer, it is the eye of the artist that he prioritises. Design Month May 2006 pictures a profile on a clear blue May sky background. We can almost hear the whirr of the intense activity inside the head: complex shapes and colours, Leonardo's Vitruvian man, tell us that this head is busy with creative and technical ideas. We don't see the eye, though: where we expect to see an eye, a large D - for Design - features instead. And from behind the square, the triangle and the circle fading into the darkness, shines



brightly; the light, the vision of the designer, like a sleepy eye, yet ready to become all seeing, like the eye of providence (*Les Prix de L'Institut de Design Montréal 2005*)

On the poster for Wolfensohn's 2016 exhibition Notes Vagabondes - an homage to the surrealist eye. Recalling the eye in Dali and Buñuel's 'Chien andalou' the letter D (for Design) is a sharp razor slicing the image of an iris.

## THE MYTH OF THE ARTIST'S HAND

*It follows that the soul is analogous to the hand*

*(Aristotle)*

Holding a pencil or a mouse, a quill or a stylus - the creative waves and eruptions in the brain are translated into art via the hand.

Since the discovery of their ability to paint, artists have naturally been fascinated by their hand, the hand that holds the brush - this instrument of creation. Witness Cuevas de la Manos in Argentina: a somewhat disturbing sea of waving hands have been stencilled by a graffiti artist using his right hand to spray colour around his left, which was resting on the wall. The work is dated at around 7300 BC. I like to imagine this artist, nearly 100 centuries ago, looking at his own hand with wonder, the way babies do, then admiring its image on the wall of the cave.

One of Wolfensohn's early (1992) posters features such a hand - this time decorated by a rainbow of finger puppets. The poster reflects the innocent time when we believed globalisation to be a good thing for all nations.

Conforming to restrictions imposed by the Bible - as it suffered many translations and interpretations - Jewish and early Christian artists did not feature God in their work. To express his actions, or his influence, or even his voice, they would use the hand as synecdoche, more precisely his right hand (*Dextera domini*). This metaphorical reference remains in usage in modern English - and possibly other languages too. Indeed, languages remain rich in idioms featuring the hand in a variety of roles: hand in hand, hand in glove, free hand, heavy hand, bite the hand that feeds you, upper hand, safe hands, etc.

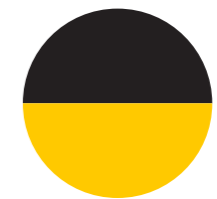
The complex expressiveness of hands have been a subject of fascination to Renaissance artists. They studied hands in a variety of poses and movements, trying to represent them as close to reality as possible.

*Behold the hands, how they promise, conjure, appeal, menace, pray, supplicate, refuse, beckon, interrogate, admire, confess, cringe, instruct, command, mock, and what not besides, with a variation and multiplication of variation which makes the tongue envious*  
(Michel de Montaigne)

It was important for Renaissance artists to portray the human body as lifelike as possible; painters and sculptors' studies of anatomy enabled the creation of some remarkable works - beautiful images of hands, arranged in expressive poses, detailed rendering of delicate bones and cartilages of the fingers and wrists.

The tool of tools, as Aristotle defined them, hands are the instrument of creation: the spirit becomes material through the action of hands.

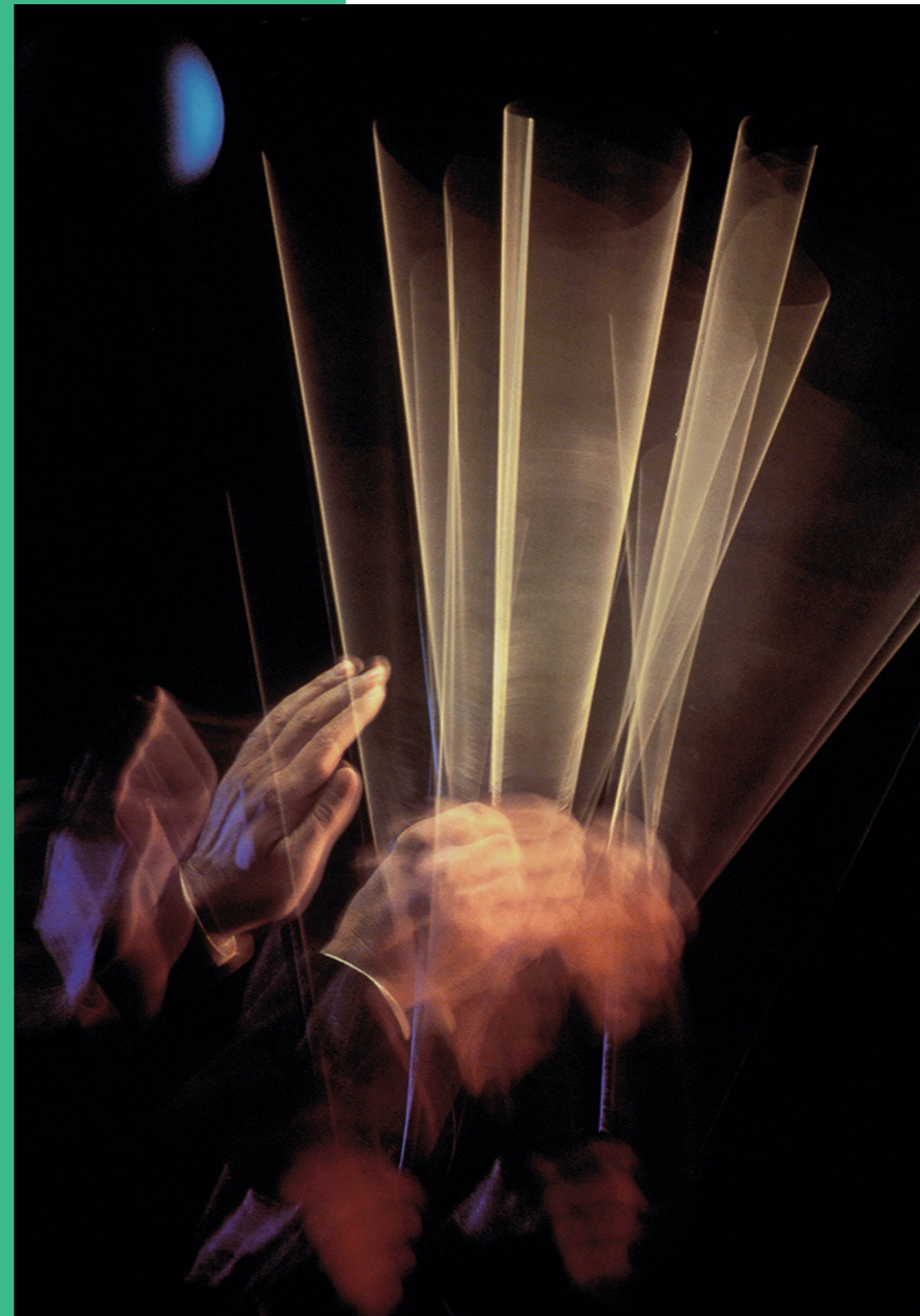
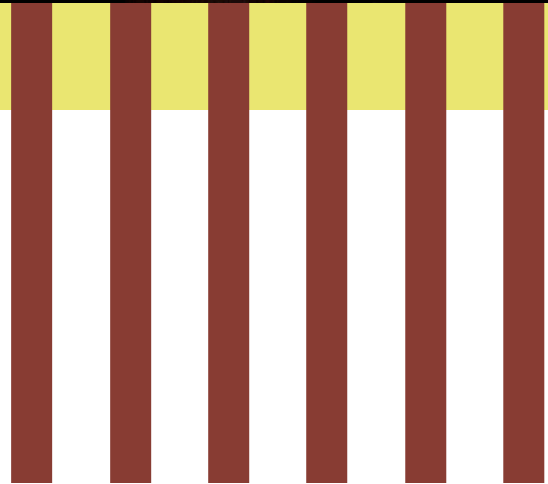
Actions, as well as expression - from tenderness to strength, human interaction (shaking hands, holding hands, kissing a hand) the relationship between man and God, hope and order - can be read in the hands. In Michelangelo's *Creation of Man*, God's hand doesn't quite reach the hand of his creation, Adam, but the nearly touching index fingers belong to nearly identical hands and arms; a reminder that man was created in God's image, destined to be himself a creator. The hands of Renaissance were not just anatomically correct, but charged with a complexity that gives their paintings a vibrant, dynamic significance. Artists have focused on the expressive possibilities of the hand to represent identities, conflict and collaboration, as well as their own emotions.



UN DÉFILÉ  
À FAIRE REVER  
1990

MARIKA BOURNAKI  
RÉCITAL DE PIANO  
2006

SIR NEVILLE MARRINER  
ACADEMY OF  
ST MARTIN  
IN THE FIELDS  
1987





## WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF GRAPHIC DESIGN. MONTREAL, MAY 2010  
 EVENT PROPOSED BY CRIN (THE RESEARCH CENTER FOR DIGITAL IMAGES)  
 SCHOOL OF DESIGN, UNIVERSITY OF QUEBEC IN MONTREAL

## OÙ EST-CE QU'ON S'EN VA?

COLLOQUE INTERNATIONAL SUR L'AVENIR DU DESIGN GRAPHIQUE. MONTRÉAL, MAI 2010  
 ÉVÉNEMENT PROPOSÉ PAR CRIN (CENTRE DE RECHERCHE DES IMAGES NUMÉRIQUES)  
 ÉCOLE DE DESIGN, UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

From the realistic working hands of Van Gogh's peasants to the surreal, scarlet fingernailed hands of Salvador Dali's passionate woman; from Diego Rivera's painting of Dr Moore's hands severing the root from the tree, cutting through the female body to M. C. Escher's hands that appear to be drawing each other - the representation of hands was instrumental in the creation of character, atmosphere, mood, message.

As a metaphor, the anatomical precision matters less than its role in the composition. Giorgio de Chirico can therefore borrow the right hand and forearm of a famous sculpture and place it in a frame at the centre of his canvas in *Metaphysical Interior With Hand of David*.

Liberated from the chains of realistic detailed drawing, artists have moved from hands-on (as it were) practice to conceptually based work. Wolfensohn's hands are lifelike achieved by high definition photography. The designer's right hand is holding the pencil. On the left-hand side of the poster, the designer's right hand is holding a USB. The poster is asking "Where Are We Heading?" but whatever the direction of design, the degree of technological intervention, it is clear that the artist's hand has the decisive role.

Like Magritte, Wolfensohn associates the hand with the eye, the seeing with conveying the vision. At the centre of the hand that holds the pencil/USB, there is the all-seeing iris, the photographic image of a perfectly round, black surrounded by yellow, iris.

Giving and taking, accepting and rejecting, comfort or coldness are themes that occur frequently in works of art. And often the representation is through hands open in acceptance and comfort, closed in rejection and animosity. Used to express hopes and anxieties, but also fundamental feelings like friendship and dependency, a desire to protect and nurture. The hand that creates, as well as the hand that protects (*The Future of Wildlife*) is the hand that sees.

In Wolfensohn's work, the hand is often a synecdoche for the artist: the hand that draws, the hand that creates. So I find it intriguing to compare the static hand of the designer with the hand of the piano player, the conductor.

A poster announcing the participation of Sir Neville Marriner at the Lanaudière Festival features the violinist's hand as a focus point of the composition, making the rest of the image blurred by light rays, by movement.

In another poster, for Marika Bournaki's piano recital, the hands of the dazzling pianist are at the foreground of the poster, her Pre-Raphaelite beautiful face and golden hair dominating the centre of the composition. Yet the focus appears to be at the lower part of poster, where her hands and the piano are in a dynamic pose, inviting the eye to move across the composition at sharp angles.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING ?  
2010

# ALL THE WORLD'S A ZOO



Humans are animals. A thin curtain of culture separate humans from the rest of the animal kingdom, yet part of the culture is a series of parallels drawn between the two, in legends, fables and visual arts.

From the Ice Age Mammoth in the Pech-Merle Cave to Albert Durer's *Rhinoceros* (1515) and Damien Hirst's *Away From the Flock* (the famous 1994 sheep preserved in formaldehyde) artists have considered animals interesting and mysterious subjects, to be immortalised in painting, drawings and installations.

Understanding and translating metaphors is an instant, nearly automatic process and animal metaphors are a direct and powerful method of exploring our relationship with another part of nature. In Western culture, animal symbolism is multilayered, with roots that can be found in mythology, the Bible or local legends.

The gods of ancient Greeks and Romans had a habit of metamorphosing into other creatures in order to seduce or defeat humans – and unsurprisingly that action has inspired many artists. Most – but not all – zoomorphic (the use of animal metaphors for human personality characteristics) are unflattering, reinforcing our desire to distance humans from other mammals. At times they are used

a shorthand for the immediate characteristics: the fox sly, the snake is treacherous, the dog is a symbol of fidelity, but sometimes also treachery, the wolf suggests cruelty.

However, not all animals are evil, and some (like cats and horses) are beautifully designed.



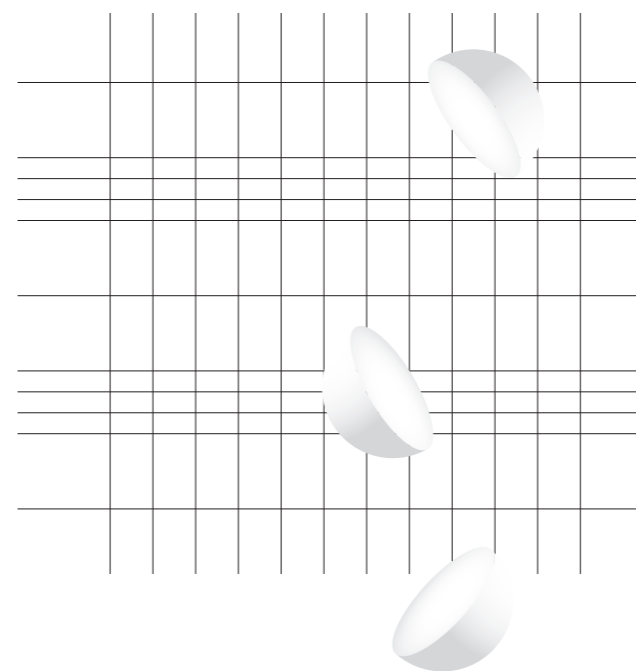


## COCK A DOODLE-DOO

With its luxurious plumage, red crown and powerful voice, the rooster is a colourful and frequent presence in art and crafts. As a Chinese zodiac sign, one of the symbols of Portugal, Italian ceramics and ubiquitous ornaments in French kitchens, roosters hold an enviable position in art. If the rooster's pomp and brightness are not enough to attract attention, his crowing certainly does. A symbol of masculinity and pride, it is linked to the dawn, the sun, new beginnings. He is good at announcing, the cock, and fits so naturally into a poster.

In a tribute to the Théophile Steinlen poster announcing an exhibition of Art Nouveau artists, Wolfensohn's poster for his own exhibition of posters *Metaphors and Memory* features a rooster, entering from the left to make his announcement.

However, Wolfensohn's composition is decidedly modern; his rooster emerges out of a smooth egg (as they do) onto an egg-yellow background; the plumage is made of steel curls and his crown is gloriously red. The text, limited to essential words, is in black, clean and slim all upper case.



METAPHORS AND MEMORY  
2018

espace  
la veillée

LES PRODUCTIONS ARCHIPEL  
PRÉSENTENT:  
DOSSIER RIGOLETTO

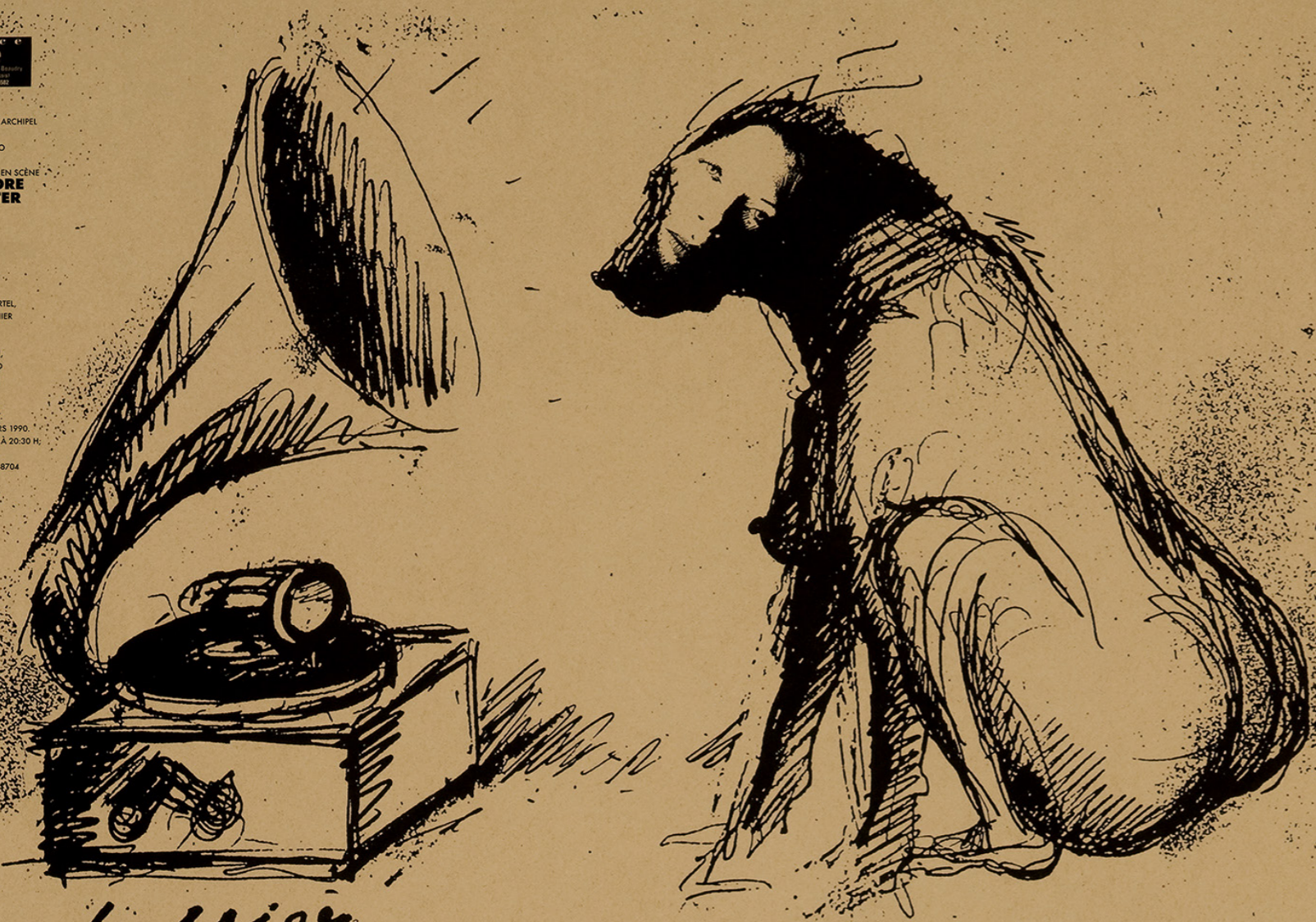
CRÉATION ET MISE EN SCÈNE  
**ALEXANDRE  
HAUSVATER**

JEU:  
**DANIELLE  
BISONETTE,**  
PIERRE LAVIGNE

SCÉNOGRAPHIE:  
JEAN-CHARLES MARTEL,  
PAULE-JOSÉE MEUNIER

TRAME MUSICALE:  
BERNARD BUISSON,  
D'APRÈS RIGOLETTO  
DE GIUSEPPE VERDI

ESPACE LA VEILLÉE,  
1371, ONTARIO EST,  
9 FÉVRIER AU 4 MARS 1990.  
MARDI AU SAMEDI À 20:30 H.  
DIMANCHE À 15 H.  
TÉL.: 843-4621-272-8704



*dossier*

# RIGOLETTO



La Rentrée

LA RENTRÉE  
2000

DOSSIER RIGOLETTO  
1989

## THE LOVEABLE KITTEN, THE FIERCE DOG

From the ancient Egyptians who cast it in bronze, to millions of Instagram pictures, who doesn't like a kitten? Mysterious and fearless, cats have domesticated and charmed us with their elegance, independence and curiosity. They are said to have nine lives, and as such represent rebirth and resurrection. As well as the combination of laziness and agility, it is the playfulness of cats that appeals to many artists.

The poster for 2010 Hubert Reeves conference, with a kitten playing with planet earth reduced to the size of a ball, reminded me of the ultimate argument against the flat earth theory: "If the world was flat the cats would have pushed everything off it by now", as it appears on pins and T-shirts, complete with grammatical error. Wolfensohn's kitten is stripy, blending into and emerging from the stripiness of the universe. Hubert Reeves is a French Astrophysicist born in Montreal, and the conference that pays tribute to him is about science and human values. This information along with the time and place is featured on narrow black bands that frame the image.

Every kitten aspires to be a big tiger one day - and some achieve this dream. The tiger- lecturer calling all back to school for the start of the academic year (2000) doesn't seem to intimidate the cat student below. The cat appears impassive, bordering on bored, compared to the excited tiger in the red bubble.

Unlike the cat, the descendants of wolves have been domesticated some 40,000 years ago. Greek bas-reliefs and Roman mosaics testify to their use as hunting companions and guards. Every century has examples of canine art, spreading the myth of the pet's loyalty, unconditional love and protection, and even contemporary artists would paint portraits of dogs, with or without their master.

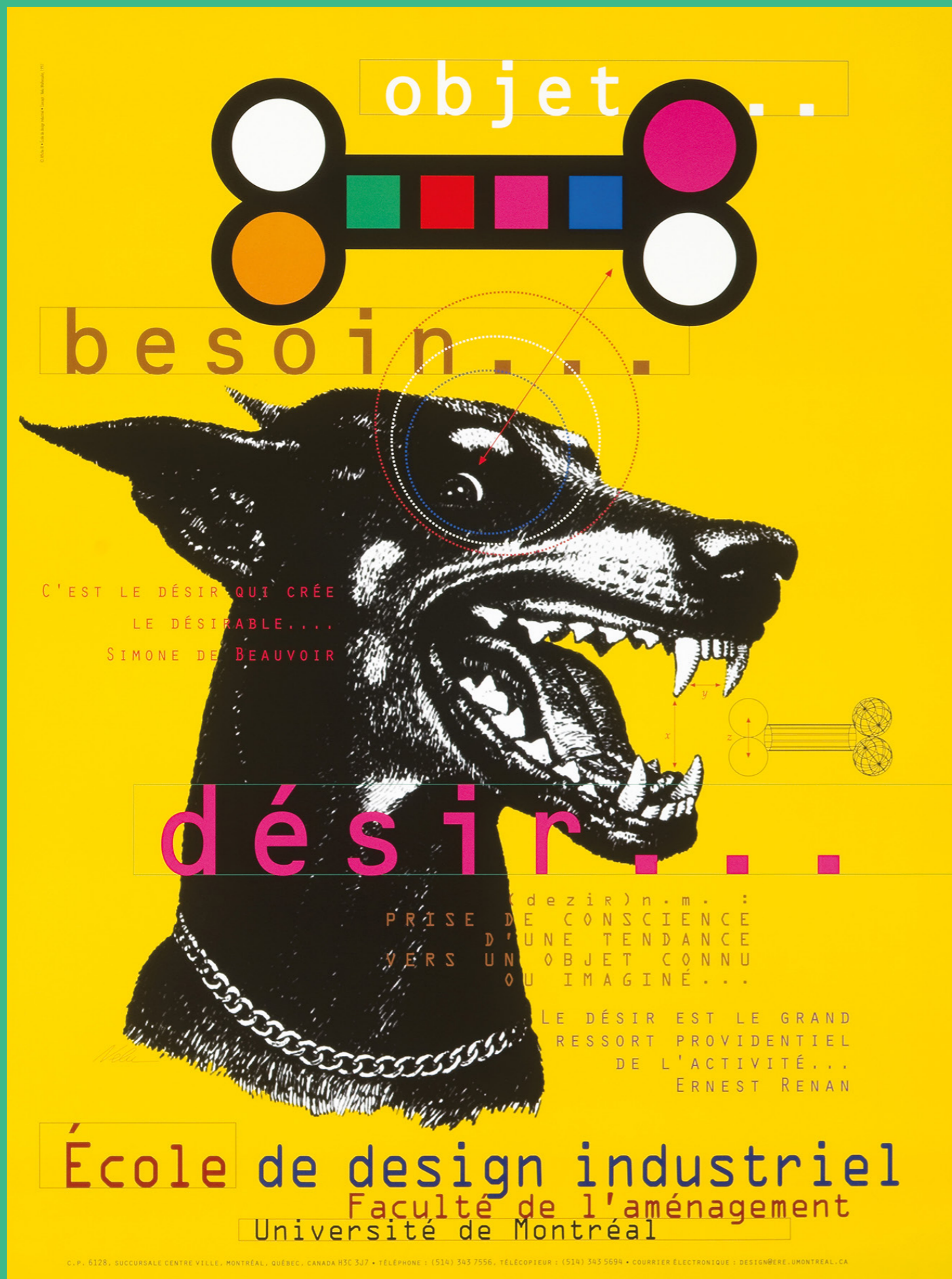
None is so famous as Nipper, the Bristol mix terrier who was painted by Francis Barraud looking intently into a cylinder phonograph. The image of the loveable dog's puzzled expression, together with the slogan "His Master's Voice" became the trademark for British record label HMV. Today music doesn't need a phonograph any longer, but in Wolfensohn's poster Nipper is still listening; his head tilted to the left, his gaze focused on the voice of his master - a roll of dollar banknotes. Yes, the music industry is always listening, as the 2015 poster proclaims, and we all know who it is listening to, who is its master.

The dog can be an aggressive animal, but sometimes he can experience - and express - fear and submissiveness. In his 1989 poster for a theatre show, Wolfensohn superimposes the face of a woman on the dog, seated on human haunches and showing a hint of human breast in profile. The submissive woman is a bourgeois conception frequent in opera, probably none so evident as in Verdi's *Rigoletto* (with misogynistic arias like "Questa o quella") featured in the poster title. For the *Dossier Rigoletto* poster, Wolfensohn opted for a sketchy and ironic execution.



HIS MASTER'S VOICE  
2015

HUBERT REEVES  
CONFÉRENCE :  
SCIENCES ET VALEURS  
HUMAINES  
2010



The relationship between designer and consumer is a complex one. The Pavlovian unconditioned stimulus – unconditioned response may not be the most obvious way of explaining it, but Wolfensohn's 1997 poster for the School of Industrial Design attempts to do so. The fierce-looking dog is salivating at the thought of the bone floating above it. In front of his open mouth, revealing sharp threatening teeth, the technical drawing of a bone is teasingly close. This Simone de Beauvoir quote clarifies: "It is the desire that creates the desirable". Object. Need. Desire.

Let us not forget – the dog is actually a wolf. But the real wolf is much more frightening. When he shouts "Vote!" from a red rectangle above, the poor sheep run. Are they running to the polling station, or away from the wolf? Being sheep, they probably have no idea. Ironically, the poster is titled *The Right to Decide*. The sheep make an appearance again in the same year (2015), this time in jolly colours. The four animals are identical, in purple, yellow and blue, with the one on the foreground in black. Is it the leader of the strangely titled *Leadersheep*? Or is the leader the wolf of the previous poster?



OBJET, BESOIN, DÉSIR  
1997

VOTE  
2015

LEADERSHEEP  
2015

Back to a higher plane of spiritual superiority and glory. The deer (or elk, or wapiti) is, in many cultures, a symbol of authority. When Sir Edwin Landseer's iconic painting *The Monarch of the Glen* was exhibited at the National Gallery, visitors could understand why this Victorian melodrama felt so emotional. The deer's antlers stretching towards the sky makes it sacred; and as they fall and grow again, they symbolise rebirth and timelessness. Unlike *The Monarch of the Glen*, with its quiet authority, Wolfensohn's deer is happy, friendly and funny. Looking straight at us from the centre of the poster, the animal proudly exposes his antlers, morphed into musical instruments. The colours are bright against the night sky, and the stag is dressed in black tie – as indeed one should, heading to an International Music Festival (1994).

FESTIVAL  
INTERNATIONAL  
DE LANAUDIÈRE  
1994





EXPOTEC 89:  
ZOOM SUR LES SENS!  
1989

And then there is the best among beasts: the monkey. Closest to humans genetically, one step behind evolutionary, primates are the most recognisable in portraying human characteristics. The famous saying "see no evil,

hear no evil, speak no evil" (*mizaru, kikazaru, iwazaru*) did not include any reference to evil in its original Japanese form, but the repetition of *zaru* could have been interpreted as *saru* – monkey. So the three wise monkeys are not so much wise, as devoid of senses (see not, hear not, etc.)

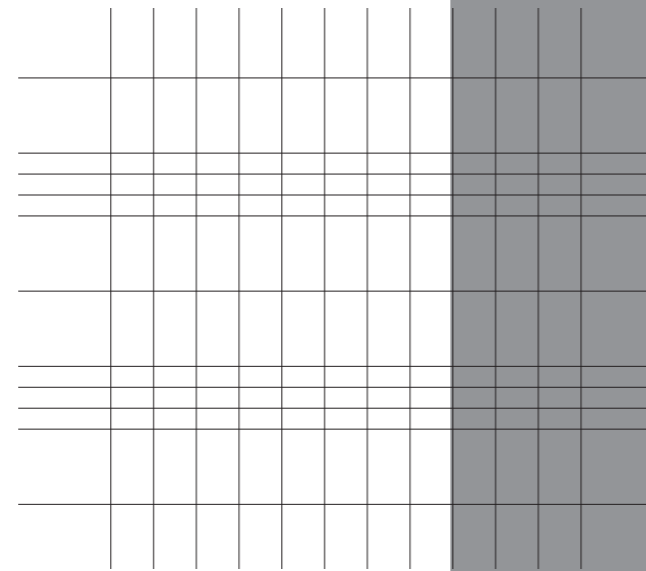
In Wolfensohn's poster for Expotec 1989, the three monkeys have their senses restored. One is listening, one is shouting, the third is watching something far ahead. Zoom on the senses is the exhibition theme, with the subtitle "for those plugged into communication"

where speaking and listening is essential. The monkeys look cute and friendly, sketched in dancing short lines and coloured in gentle pastel shades of blue, green and purple.

The ape is really a man, give or take a few millennia of evolution, and it represents the primaevial desires and actions of man, before he was reshaped by civilisation. Before it changed. *Change is Good!*, proclaims succinctly the 2009 poster on the theme of the positive aspects of change. It features the ape, already walking on two legs, determinedly striding forward. The small text on the left tells the story of evolution, by mentioning Darwin's theory and Lucy – the collection of fossilised bones discovered in Ethiopia in the 1970s said to date 3.2 million years ago. The drawing is simple but eloquent. Sketched in a few decisive lines on the yellow background is the ape, leaving all this narrative of evolution behind, walking confidently towards its future, busy with a conversation on her mobile phone.

But here Wolfensohn can't resist the joke: the only other colour is a patch of red on the animal's behind, corresponding to the red of the mobile phone. Change is good, change is progress, but let us not forget the human condition and our link to the animal world, to nature.

Artists hold many tools of storytelling. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I shall begin.



CHANGE IS GOOD!  
2009

SOCIALLY  
RESPONSIBLE  
DESIGN  
BEGINS IN  
MELBOURNE

POSITIVE  
POSTERS  
2009

THEME:  
CHANGE

DARWIN'S  
EVOLUTION  
THEORY IS A  
TRANSCENDENT  
VISUAL  
SYMBOL  
FOR  
CHANGE

AND,  
FOR  
SURE,  
WE  
CAME  
A LONG WAY  
SINCE  
LUCY...



**CHANGE IS GOOD!**





MONTRÉAL À BUCAREST  
2003

## ADRIANA DREDGE

As a critic, collector and consumer of art, Adriana Dredge is curious about the talent and torment that underline creativity.

For the love of art, and books, and books with lots of pictures, Adriana studied History of Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for her first degree. What started as a genuine desire to know and understand more about art and artists, developed into a lifelong passion.

Following an MA from the Sorbonne, her career took her into the interesting world of public relations and advertising, and later higher education.

As senior lecturer at the University of the Arts London, Adriana Dredge challenged her students to investigate the use of images, words and sounds as communication and persuasion tools. She has written a number of articles on branding, marketing and advertising.

The passion for art continued throughout her 20 years' academic career and remains the centre of her interest. Since 2016 Adriana's writing has focused on art and design. She likes to explore the artists' motivation and analyse the creative process. A keen observer and constructive critic, her articles offer an objective view, inviting the reader to discover and enjoy their own enthusiasm for culture.

Adriana is a regular contributor to Wall Street International Magazine, publishing articles about art, design and architecture (<https://wsimag.com/authors/577-adriana-dredge>).

## NELU WOLFENSOH

There are moments in life when we suddenly take a different fork in the road, for no apparent reason, that turns out to be a lucky move. Such was Nelu Wolfensohn's walk pass the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem, and the encounter with the School's general secretary. It was 1962, the summer holiday. As a result of this serendipitous meeting and the ensuing interview, Wolfensohn abandoned his plans of medical studies in Bologna, and accepted the offer to join the Graphic Design course at Bezalel. The world may have lost a doctor, but gained a prolific and uniquely talented designer.

Nelu was born in Bucharest, Romania, in 1943. As a child (an only child), he drew and coloured and dreamed of becoming a mural painter. The course at Bezalel was followed by postgraduate study in History and, most significantly for his development, an encounter with computers in 1981 as part of Visible Language Workshop at MIT. Living and working in Israel, USA and Canada enriched his cultural perspective and visual vocabulary.

Whilst still studying, Wolfensohn joined a graphic design studio in Jerusalem, then in 1974, Advertising Designers in Los Angeles. He worked on projects ranging from medals and postage stamps to annual reports. He continued to build on this experience - of rigorously adhering to briefs, while allowing freedom of creativity - when he moved to Montréal in 1976.

For the following 14 years, he was Art Director at Lavalin Group, a large multinational engineering company; during this time Graphisme Lavalin, the group's in-house design team, won a number of prestigious graphic design prizes.

By 1992, it was time to share this experience with the next generation; Wolfensohn joined UQAM (Université de Québec à Montréal) Design School where he is Professeur Titulaire. Students are inspired by his vision and commitment to their progress, and under his guidance produced original, complex and often controversial projects.

Since 1975, Wolfensohn has exhibited, either solo or as part of a group, nearly every year, throughout the world. He has been a regular contributor to poster competitions, winning a range of prestigious awards.

Fascinated by the ability of computers to create and manipulate images Wolfensohn founded CRIN - Centre de recherches des images numériques. He also established the multilingual website Concepts for All, a bank of free images available for humanitarian and other not-for-profit organisations, all conceived and realised by UQAM students.

Nelu Wolfensohn is an honorary member of Quebec Society of Graphic Designers. As recognition of his contribution to Canadian art, 27 of his posters have been selected to form part of the permanent collection of Montréal Fine Art Museum.

THE POETRY OF THE POSTER  
MYTH AND METAPHOR IN THE WORK OF  
NELU WOLFENSOHN

AUTHOR  
ADRIANA DREDGE

PUBLISHER  
POURLEBIENPUBLIC

BOOK DESIGN  
NELU WOLFENSOHN

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*Iris photography (pp. 1, 21, 69, 86, 108, 114, 115, 136)  
by Benoît Fillion.*

ISBN  
978-2-9816321-3-5

DÉPÔT LÉGAL  
BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DU QUÉBEC, 2020

DÉPÔT LÉGAL  
BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DU CANADA, 2020

