



**FORTUNATE MISFORTUNE: FINDING OPPORTUNITY IN UNEXPECTED PLACES**

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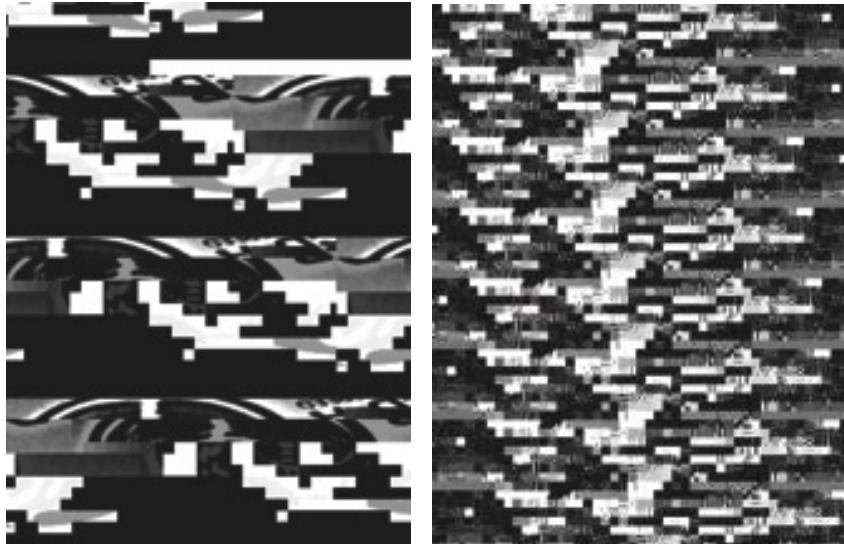
**Abstract**

For centuries, artists and designers have been finding ways to include chance into their practices. Recent technological advancements have created new visual systems for artists and designers to embrace – especially through the back-and-forth play of analog and digital realms. I am personally interested in both generating experimental work and incorporating serendipitous opportunities and methods into my designs.

Not only can making unique works alter perspectives, but when designs are too similar to what is in existence, they fail to be noticed. In the physical and visual sense, we are constantly surrounded by textures, contours, and surfaces. This abundance of stimulation makes it such that humans block out ordinary receptors, and it's only when something unusual occurs that we suddenly are aware of the change.<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

To some degree, chance is an element of every design: the city one is born in, the clients and collaborators with which one gets to work, and the moments of influence in daily life. But I am interested in the intentional uses of happenstance. A few years back, I had the (fortunate) misfortune of having my hard drive crash, at which time I discovered that my external hard drive was corrupted. I ran a recovery on the drive, and I ended up with thousands of unorganized, unnamed digital photographs, many of which were corrupt. At the time, I was too angry to go through the images. But a few months went by, and I began to slowly sift through them. Most of the files were damaged, but in a quite beautiful way. I have begun to use these as a jumping-off-point for compositions.



Above: Examples of the Glitch imagery that was created when my computer crashed.

Sometimes, things don't turn out the way you want them to. Your hard-drive fails. Your external hard-drive is corrupt. Yet, even when things appear to be ruined, there might be something more visually interesting than what you originally conceived.

It is difficult to relinquish control. But if you can allow yourself to be open to unexpected possibilities, you might find yourself somewhere greater than you could have ever imagined. As someone who likes having control (I hate flying and the uncertainty of the future), I struggle with letting loose in my designs. Worrying about “messing up” illustrations or designs would often prevent me from taking projects to the next level of refinement. Not taking risks limited my likelihood of success. I decided to give myself permission to fail. After which, I could see beauty in my own imperfections: such as my corrupted computer files, spilled ink, stained paper, and misprinted type.

Embracing (and sometimes enticing) chance and allowing for process to be visible, caused me to see design in a new light. I often struggle to find inspiration or to come up with new ideas, but by introducing methodologies that somewhat remove conscious restraints – I can end up in unexpected (and sometimes wonderful) places.

The glitch imagery that arose from my computer crash was completely beyond my control, but how I chose to view it, was not. I welcomed the visual aesthetic and let the experience shape my methodology: both through iteration and through documenting and generating computer glitches.

**Methods and Procedures**

Much of the methodology of my research is “making” based – either through my own work or through discoveries made by working with students. A large part of my process is creating multiples – that can take the form of variations of a poster, or (more often than not) filling sketchbooks with repetitive studies. By generating numerous directions, I force myself to think beyond my first concept, and chance has more of an opportunity to impact my design.



Above: Spreads from my sketchbooks on reflection (left) and leaf cuts (right).

In addition to repeating studies, I also re-create end-user experiences. As graphic designers, our work is meant to be mass-produced, but I occasionally will target individuals (in a direct marketing way, without trying to sell something). In an ongoing study of mine, what I call the "Postcard Project," I hand-make postcards and then mail them to strangers – and the only way they can find out where it came from is to scan the QR code, which links to a tumblr site that explains the project. By sending the personalized works to over 225 strangers, I get to see how a range of people would react. While the style differs greatly from card-to-card, the intention is the same: to create a positive (and strange) chance encounter for the recipient.



Above: A selection of postcards I documented before sending to strangers.

Serendipity and human error are a huge part of my work, especially when designing without the computer. Historically speaking, graphic designers strived to reach perfection – outstanding craft was necessary to produce intended results, from display phototypesetting to letterpress<sup>4</sup>. The presence of the designer was meant to be invisible in the final product. Yet with the technological advancements visual "perfection" is easier to obtain. Additionally, the market has become flooded with refined templates, so much so that "clean" design can get lost in the din. I would like to note here that I am a lover of (so-called) Swiss design, and I even think that "transparent" design has a time and a place – but in my own work, I often strive for experimentation in typography and image making.

After taking more of an interest in glitch imagery, I began documenting their occurrence – both on screen and off. I've noticed that sometimes software will handle files incorrectly; this may be as slight as a shift in color, or as major as text and images displaying jaggedly or repeatedly. Programs often malfunction when they are dealing with large documents – and I've been able to create glitch imagery in Photoshop when modifying huge files, by taking a screen shot during the error. A similar visual can result in video, when streaming movies from a weak wi-fi connection.



Above: My student, Gabby Valdespino's design when viewed in Acrobat (left) and Preview (Right).



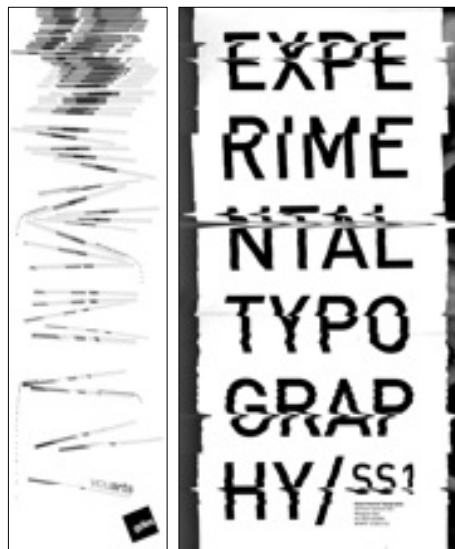
Bruce Mau, in his *Incomplete Manifesto for Growth* says, among other things, to “Capture accidents. The wrong answer is the right answer in search of a different question. Collect wrong answers as part of the process. Ask different questions.”<sup>iii</sup> Accepting unplanned imperfections has become a part of my practice.

Japanese design has a concept called “sabi,” meaning, to savor the rust of age.<sup>iv</sup> Yet, as a female growing up in America, I felt the pressures of society to be thin, young, and unblemished – so it would follow that I would want to achieve “perfection” in my design. However, I find myself resisting flawlessness in both myself and in my work. In the words of Alain de Botton, “We are drawn to call something beautiful whenever we detect that it contains in a concentrated form those qualities in which we personally, or our societies more generally, are deficient. We respect a style, which can move us away from what we fear and towards what we crave: a style which carries the correct dosage of our missing virtues.”<sup>v</sup> Perhaps I crave the rust of age.

### Results

Since I have taken several tangents, I will address the results of each. Generally speaking, for much of my work, process is product. My iterative sketchbooks are themselves, the end result – until I find a further application for them. My sketchbooks, both print and digital, are often how I will get myself “un-stuck,” when coming up with designs.

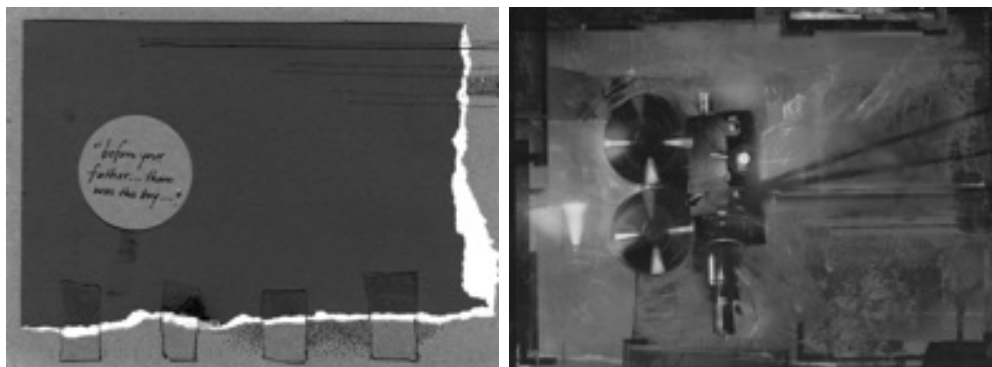
I continue documentation of glitches, and I also mimic and intentionally create errors. One of my favorite methods is to physically cut text or images, which visually carries many similarities to computer corruptions. Another technique is to move images on a scanner, while it is scanning, as this creates an altered end-result. My ongoing work with these processes is most evident in the classroom, especially my Experimental Typography courses.



Above: An example of sliced imagery (left) and type that has been moved on a scanner (right).

A strong influence of mine is Rob Carter, whom I studied under at Virginia Commonwealth University. Carter taught me to view everyday environments as typography. Through discussions of “typographic metaphor,” I began to draw parallels between seemingly unrelated items. Carter spoke of how, in looking at the world, you can begin to see compositions – that if you look out onto a river, the rocks on the horizon can translate into typographic arrangements.<sup>vi</sup> In this line of thought, some of my studies began to blur the line between fine art and design, which some graphic designers might judge – but personally, I find design compelling when they intersect with other disciplines. And I love thinking about typography surrounding us, and how I can find metaphors for layout design, in my daily life.

In regard to the “Postcard Project,” I’ve received a number of postcards in reply, in addition to a number of emails or postings. Since I do not specialize in user-feedback, it is a unique experience for me to hear back about my designs. As a graphic designer, it is rare to have correspondence with an individual, as target audiences are usually quite large.



Above: Two examples of postcards I received from “strangers” during my “postcard project.”



### Conclusion

My computer corruption of files was not planned nor desired; control was absent, yet I was able to recognize the potential within the calamity. This "happy accident" led me to explore other ways to incorporate chance and imperfection into my design process.

Flaws are human (They are also common in over-worked computers). Showing hints of a design's method of creation, or revealing faults, is simply an acknowledgement of a work's origin. It is logical to conclude that in this computer prevalent era, there is a longing for authentic human connection. Individuality has appeal in an over-crowded virtual world. Whenever a design has hand-done elements or complex alterations, it is more difficult to reproduce, which gives that work distinction.

### References

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<sup>i</sup> Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of the Senses*. New York: Vintage, 1991.

<sup>ii</sup> Carter, Rob, Ben Day, and Philip B. Meggs. *Typographic design: form and communication*. 5<sup>th</sup> edition. New York, NY: Wiley, 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Mau, Bruce. *Incomplete Manifesto for Growth*. [www.brucemaudesign.com/4817/112450/work/incomplete-manifesto-for-growth](http://www.brucemaudesign.com/4817/112450/work/incomplete-manifesto-for-growth), 1998.

<sup>iv</sup> Lafayette DeMente, Boye. *The Elements of Japanese Design*. Tuttle Publishing, 2006.

<sup>v</sup> de Botton, Alain. *The Architecture of Happiness*. Pantheon Books: New York, 2006.

<sup>vi</sup> Carter, Rob. "James River." Virginia Commonwealth University. Richmond, Virginia. 2010. Graduate Lecture.