

Reviews

Tight focus

Typophoto: New Typography and the Reinvention of Photography

By Jessica D. Brier

University of Minnesota Press, \$29.95

Reviewed by Richard Hollis



Typophoto is a book as tightly focused as its one-word title. Jessica Brier's academic interest is in photography: here she describes the medium's 'reinvention' in print media. She sees graphic design of the 1920s and 30s as a crucial part in this process and its methods as foundations of the profession's practice today.

The first page of the introduction to *Typophoto* lets us know what a daunting but exhilarating book faces the reader. It is rare to find such terms as 'communications industry' and 'visual literacy' in histories of graphic design, nor are we likely to come across diagrams related to psychology in advertising or illustrated discussions of optical illusions. With such topics Brier lays the ground for a detailed account of the pioneers of modern graphic design in western Europe. She centres this on the New Typography and, in particular, the movement's development of photomontage.

Brier emphasises the mechanical halftone's role and its effect in translating the continuous tone of the photograph into a printed image. The 'translation' is in fact a transformation. The photographic print can first be modified in the darkroom, even created as a photogram. The original can be cut out, retouched, have colour added, be combined with other images in a collage or montage. And the process of reproduction could be exposed – as an enlarged halftone screen, most obviously – to become a design element. Photography in print media merged written, spoken and visual communication. This was 'typofoto'.

Arranged in five chapters, the book starts with 'Photographic Language', a survey of the work and theory of the chief proponents of typophoto, and continues by considering the concept of legibility and the psychology of perception. The third chapter examines the practical use of 'the new photomontage', quoting definitions by Jan Tschichold, whose visit to the Bauhaus exhibition in 1923 was inspirational, coupled with the essay in the catalogue by László Moholy-Nagy on the New Typography. Moholy-Nagy considered that a photograph strengthened typography, 'with clarity, legibility and efficiency', a view that accords with Brier, who in further chapters follows the mechanical and

industrial craft techniques of reproducing photographs and concludes with the influence of phototypography on advertising.

Most impressive is Brier's setting out the theories surrounding early photomontage and the New Typography. The understanding of a montage as a 'construction' is from a section on *Gefesselter Blick* [*Captured Glance*], the book of designers' contributions put together in 1929. In an eight-page commentary on the book, Brier connects the perception of words and images with ideas from the eighteenth-century German Enlightenment. But she overlooks the 1920s influence of film, as Modern as photomontage. The introduction to *Captured Glance* describes graphic design as: 'a more or less dense grid of images, like film. Film is function interpreted by images. Text is simply a succession of symbolic signs. Images are basic, supported by signs. As to images, the camera must behave as the viewer's eye.' Brier sees the reader as coproducer of graphics.

Here the geographical restriction of the book prevents a discussion of the theories of montage. Not only was Moholy-Nagy friendly with with Russian designers in Berlin before his Bauhaus period, he was a frustrated filmmaker. A discussion of montage would have to include Soviet filmmakers (Eisenstein, Vertov), and although Brier includes Lissitzky, the absence of Soviet innovators in photomontage (Klutsis, Rodchenko, Telingater) and others in Switzerland and Czechoslovakia leaves the history incomplete.

But the book's detailed presentation of the leading phototypographers is impressive, the result of tireless research in German archives. As with the Soviet designers, Brier steers away from politics or the social context of developing mass media: no notice is taken of the Hitler regime's use of the new graphic techniques. The text is generously illustrated with examples of 'text-image composites' and diagrams, complemented by a 32-page section of colour plates, mostly familiar, but with clear captions and complete translations of text.

Reproductions of more recent work by US designers from the 1970s and 80s do little to suggest that typophoto is more than an image with slogans applied but not fused with a photographic image (Barbara Kruger, see pp.108-09) or the pretty 'cocktail graphics' of April Greiman's cover to *Wet* magazine. Both artists in fact produced convincing contributions to the development of typophoto: Kruger in *SZ Magazin* (2011)

and Greiman in *Design Quarterly* (1986). Digital technology such as that employed by Greiman brought with it the concept of layering, and completed the first period of typophoto.

The author's extensive notes to the text comprise 68 pages, almost a quarter of the book. Original and absorbing, they list sources, clarify contrasting views, translate historical texts and provide bibliographical references. Every page of this book introduces a fresh idea or adds a piece of history. Brier has provided an absorbing, scholarly tribute to graphic design in the pre-digital time.

Reality bites

What Design Can't Do: Essays on Design and Disillusion

By Silvio Lorusso

Published by Set Margins', €22

Designed by Federico Antonini

Reviewed by Eric Heiman

When I saw the release of Silvio Lorusso's *What Design Can't Do*, I bought it immediately based on the title alone. One of the book's opening epigraphs (by Antonio Gramsci) sums up the predicament of a designer in 2025 perfectly: 'The challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned.' The back cover blurb is more blunt: '[I]f you feel cheated, disappointed or betrayed by design, this book is for you.' Regardless of age, I'd wager this describes more than a few working in design today.

Positing design amid a series of precarious 'middle' states, then splitting into two sections, 'Expectations' and 'Reality', *What Design Can't Do* promises frank talk and Lorusso delivers with a thorough, learned walk (496 footnotes over its 340 pages) through all the ways that graphic design yields disillusion. The book's design is as sobering as the subject matter: predominantly text-based, printed on uncoated paper stock reminiscent of trade paperbacks, the occasional imagery (mostly internet memes) reproduced in black and white with coarse line screens. It vibes more manifesto than monograph. However seemingly modest the packaging, *What Design Can't Do* is a colossal achievement of scholarship, synthesis, and, most importantly, honesty. Lorusso dismantles just about every Pollyannish framing of design, from the crassly professional to the most academic and rarefied.

Lorusso's lucid and refreshing frankness is rare in a contemporary

design discourse that is often polarised between the ethically challenged promotional sycophancy of the professional set and the speculative dreams in, and insulated by, academia. That alone makes the book a success. He readily admits that the book is 'about describing more than prescribing', and 'the point is not to fix disillusionment but to understand its origins and the way it affects beliefs and behaviour.' The first time through, the book was a bitter pill to swallow. But to just snicker cynically alongside the clever memes felt, well, like *giving up*. Isn't there *something* about contemporary design practice worth saving?

Re-reading it a year later, *What Design Can't Do* now raises the possibility that this current moment of design disillusionment is as much one of outsized expectations as it might be a collective collapse brought on by the external forces of technology, late-stage capitalism and the over-saturation of both students and faculty in academia. Graphic design has long been captivated by the miracle of the iconoclast solo practitioner, who is later rewarded with publication features, a deluge of social media followers, and admission to rarefied echelons such as AGI, AIGA Medals and the Cooper Hewitt National Design Awards. That extends to the discourse surrounding them, which rarely spins out beyond an audience of design peers because the work itself is pitched to that peer audience above all others. Even if the renegade spirit of these superstars still provides inspiration and resilience for new and long-time designers alike, there's only so much room in the pantheon, and the odds of ascending get increasingly longer as the glut of newly minted designers continues to overflow.

Aspiring designers are equally mesmerised by the increased opportunity of large-scale work across media platforms, usually for big agencies and corporations. These systems – brands, campaigns, websites, digital products, *et al* – created for often millions of people, are usually cloaked in unadulterated optimism but equally blind to the ethical ramifications of the work once it goes out into the world. Lorusso elaborates: '[F]rom the point of view of design, pessimism appears vulgar and easy. Optimism, instead, is praised. But optimism can also be easy and vulgar, it can be mesmerised by abstract possibilities at the expense of a callous reality.' Living adjacent to the Silicon Valley dream factory, I've heard plenty of outsized promises and seen first-hand the downsides to the short-sightedness of these endeavours once they go out into the world. Endeavours enabled by well paid designers.

Whether this was Lorusso's intention or not, *What Design Can't Do* hints at a potential way forward for practitioners, educators and everyone in between. My favourite meme-able phrase from this book is: 'Design is compromise with the



Cover of *What Design Can't Do* (Set Margins', 2023) by Silvio Lorusso. Design: Federico Antonini.

real'. *Compromise* is arguably what makes design 'Design'. *Real* rarely fits into the increasingly simplistic and outdated frameworks that graphic design too often privileges, making them ripe for automation. Maybe this is an additional Lorusso 'middle' that could actually be a way through? The 'AI revolution' on the horizon will only displace designers if they cede themselves to the streamlining of design systems that also increasingly bland the world we live in. Unlike the often impersonal, macro-sized endeavours that design frequently touts as successes but rarely supports with meaningful data or metrics, perhaps designers should lean into a more modest approach, more micro-scale thinking, more context and collaboration with actual people, more idiosyncrasy and cracks in the proverbial veneer. Maybe 'reality' isn't so 'callous' if we shift our perspective? That it can be an asset, not a hindrance? On its last pages, *What Design Can't Do* concludes with an inspired pitch: '[D]esign culture is cohabited by two sets of values: a culture of smartness and one of contribution. Smart culture ... privileges the new idea, the concept that makes you go "a-ha" ... the thing that distances itself from the others, and by extension, the maker that stands out from the crowd Contribution culture, on the other hand, is humble, it *builds upon*. When a useful idea emerges, it helps it flourish.' I'd definitely read a sequel that further grapples with that premise.

In the meantime, I don't see *compromise* or *real* as a pejorative but as rallying calls. Despite all his scepticism and dour outlook, deep down I think Lorusso does, too. Calls for *all* designers to realise that a constraint, a context, a community – *outside* of design, even – may not be a hindrance to one's work, and instead a huge opportunity. If we choose to take it.

Right. *Untitled* (*That's the way we do it*), 2011 / 2020, is made from online images that imitate Kruger's signature bold white text out of red. Plus an animated LED jigsaw of *Untitled* (*I shop therefore I am*), 1987 / 2019. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Opposite, top. *Untitled* (*Forever*), 2017 / 2025, floor-to-wall quotes from Virginia Woolf and George Orwell in Spanish and Basque.



Way with words

Barbara Kruger: Another Day. Another Night'

Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain

24 June to 9 November 2025

Curator: Lekha Hileman Waitoller

Reviewed by John L. Walters

Barbara Kruger's career began in magazines, but for the past four or more decades she's identified as an artist, making works and installations for galleries and in the public realm, on bridges, buildings and taxis. For this show, at the landmark gallery designed by the late Frank Gehry, a Bilbao city tram was plastered in her distinctive typography.

As Kruger declared to Karrie Jacobs in a Reputations interview in *Eye* no. 5 (1992), everything she does is editorial design. Visitors were immediately confronted by images and words, a barrage of typophoto expression. The selection of words can be shaded, ambiguous, yet at the same time simple and economical. 'Your body is a battleground', in Futura Bold Oblique, is now more statement of fact than campaigning slogan. Though it was first used as part of a 'women's right to choose' protest, it has meaning for all sides in the debate, and relevance to issues around gender, cosmetic surgery, body image and the unrealistic expectations raised by fashion and glamour media.

Kruger's images are immediately recognisable, drawn from mid-century mass-market print media, blowing up crude, newsprint images in a way that emphasises their halftone grids.

In the 1993 work *Untitled* (*Why are you looking at me like that?*), a man's face can be glimpsed looking back through a circular camera filter or lens held between the finger and thumb of his right hand. The image of a hand with splayed fingers