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Danger, dirt and degenerates: The rebellious act of creativity

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ABSTRACT

Creativity: a word often associated with fun, colour and play, a sentiment reflected in companies attempting to recreate it for profit. 'Selfie museums' (exhibition spaces in which social media influencers can take 'selfies' in aesthetically pleasing environments) like the Wondr Experience litter their spaces with similar childlike aesthetics, with the superficial goal of fostering creativity, but resulting in an endless stream of identical Instagram posts and more crucially, ticket sales. This paper reveals a darker and more authentic side to creativity, proposing that discomfort is an essential ingredient. The cute spaces for 'plandids' (planned candid photographs) and the beanbags and beer fridges of hipster design studios are juxtaposed by the revelation that to engage in creative thought you have to be in a state of apprehension. Graphic designers often follow the security of grids designed by the likes of Josef Müller-Brockman; however, the piece suggests that these methods lie within the realms of comfort. This tendency for playing it safe is possibly because of the consumerist society we live in – not many designers can afford to take risks because failure means no pay cheque. In such a manner, the paper concludes with the suggestion that due to our cultural context, creativity is observed as an act of rebellion.

Introduction

The opening section explores the idea of creativity, our perceptions of it and how it can be fostered in certain spaces. Using the example of the modern phenomenon, the 'selfie museum' (exhibition spaces in which social media influencers can take 'selfies' in aesthetically pleasing environments) it lays out the common perception of creativity and how it is often presented as a colourful, fun paradise. The paper goes on to look at these environments in a more critical light, as places under the guise of being a creative space but in reality are a factory for producing Instagram content. Later on, the exhibition spaces of artist Yasoi Kusama are explored through their bright colours and lights. These elements present a problematic comparison to the 'selfie museum', as the exhibition could be misconstrued as an opportunity for a cute 'plandid', a result which falls short of Kusama's intentions. Moving away from the exhibition space, the piece discusses the work environment, particularly that of the creative agency or studio. It explores the true benefits of props put in place by these companies – the beanbags and ping-pong tables – and questions whether these are actually successful in fostering creativity, or if they are just for show. Referring primarily to the De Paoli et al.'s study on 'creative workspaces' (2017, pp. 331–52), it looks to the

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design studio 'Mother' and their use of a 250-ft table to encourage creative collaboration.

The next segment questions whether these pretty environments and props are necessary in order to be creative. It looks at the cosiness you find in the beanbag studios and the ease of the 'selfie museums' and suggests that these spaces are well within the realms of comfort and introduces the idea that the comfort zone is not one that induces creativity. Considering the environments of the 'most creative' types, that is, the child, this section compares the comfort of the archetypal playground to the treachery of the junkyard playgrounds (spaces filled with 'dangerous' items like saws, hammers and bits of wood for children to play with unsupervised) created by landscape architect, Marjory Allen. Further to this, it compares the junkyard playgrounds to the quarries inhabited by avant-garde architectural group Cavart, who involved non-professionals in their projects in order to stand against the pretension in architecture. It suggests that in environments where the subjects (whether that be artists, children or the general public) know less, they tend to be more creative, and it introduces the idea of outsider art and art brut as examples of pure creativity. This section also compares design deity Josef Müller-Brockman with the likes of Bob and Roberta Smith and the anti-design guru, Neville Brody, and criticises the approach of grids and clarity being integral to the role of a graphic designer. The chapter ends with the thought that design and creativity can be more than just a money-making activity. It argues that there is benefit in celebrating the imperfect ideas, created out of imagination and play rather than those generated as a product of commercial viability.

Hoodwinked by pink

In one of the most viewed TED Talks of all time 'Do schools kill creativity?', educationalist Sir Ken Robinson defines creativity 'as the process of having original ideas that have value' (Robinson, K., & TED, 2007). The talk discusses the inferior role of creativity and the arts in education, and how the system pushes aside these subjects in favour of more academic content such as mathematics and languages. Robinson argues that this view is limiting as it only suits one kind of student – the academically inclined – and it implies that there is only one type of intelligence. This kind of thinking places those who are more creatively inclined into a lesser position in the classroom and potentially discourages those who would excel in a more creative career from pursuing it. The stifling judgement then carries through to adult life, as found in a study highlighted in George Land's 2011 talk 'The Failure Of Success'. He discusses an 'Imaginative Thinking' study by NASA which revealed the declining rate of imagination throughout life and found adults are 98 per cent less creative than their childhood counterparts (TEDx Talks, & Land, G., 2011).

When thinking of creativity and what a creative space might look like, one might imagine bright colours, handprint paintings and children at play. These colourful notions are present when we look at examples of environments that are deemed to induce creativity. For example, let's inspect the fairly recent invention of the 'selfie museum', firstly the Wondr Experience, a place which promises visitors that they will 'experience the art of play'. The website encourages you to 'let your imagination run wild' and experience a space which encourages 'boundless creativity' (Wondr Experience, n.d.-c). The Museum of Ice Cream (Figures 1 and 2), a pop-up-turned-permanent-exhibition due to its popularity, offers a similar experience. While primarily serving as an interactive retail experience for their product, MOIC boasts that it 'transforms concepts and dreams into spaces that provoke imagination and creativity' (Museum of Ice Cream, 2019). These spaces are not dissimilar to the previously mentioned impression of what a creative space might look like. A flamboyant display of colour, particularly baby pinks (MOICs has an almost militant use of Pantone 1905C), and infantile props such as slides, swings and the trademark ball pit. What is it that the visitors to these exhibitions create? When you observe the 'creative' output from their visitors – the selfies, the Instagram posts – they all look very similar. Furthermore, the

museums often assist the visitors in pointing out the perfect vantage point for the photograph, arguably removing any opportunity for creative direction. The premise is a simple formula designed to get those dopamine-hitting likes – go to the ball pit, take a picture in the ball pit, move onto the next ball pit. Rather than being environments which foster 'boundless creativity' they seem more like breeding grounds for pummelling out the same content, with no innovation involved whatsoever. Once you have seen one photograph of a person in a rainbow tunnel, you have seen them all, and Clayton Guse of *Time Out* magazine would agree, claiming the museums are a 'faux music video set intended to facilitate the creation of insufferably basic internet content. Search the hashtag #MuseumOfIceCream on Instagram, and you'll find a never-ending stream of images that are effectively all the same' (Guse, 2018, Stop saying the Museum of Ice Cream is cool, para. 3).

Guse's scornful review echoes the thought that these spaces encourage an endless stream of vapid Instagram posts which are a shallow attempt by the visitor to appear creative to their online following. His abhorrence of the trendsetters and phobia of New York losing its 'sense of cool' is reminiscent of the old man trope who incessantly claims 'back in my day' was better. The cynicism he portrays might be construed to some as an arrogant and pretentious attack on innocent influencers who just want a pretty social media post. Rather than condemning the visitors, hoodwinked by pink, his frustrations might be better targeted at the orchestrators of these exhibitions. Does Maryellis Bunn, CEO of Museum of Ice Cream and self-proclaimed 'Millennial Walt Disney' (Wiener, A. 2017), believe her exhibitions 'provoke imagination or creativity' when the only thing they seemingly create is advertising and more ticket sales? Perhaps the issue with the idea of claiming such a place as one that generates creativity, is that its true primary focus is to make money. The companies therefore masquerade themselves as trading in something more attractive to its customers – creativity.

When we take the commercial element out of these exhibitions and focus solely on artistic expression, one artist that offers a similar ambience is Yayoi Kusama. As a kind of 'self-therapy', Kusama painted visual representations of the hallucinations she suffered from and named them 'Infinity Nets'. These giant, monochromatic depictions of tiny dots were what she described to be 'about an obsession: infinite repetition' (Yayoi Kusama, Akira Tatehata, Hoptman, L. J., Udo Kultermann, Taft, C., & Phaidon Verlag Gmbh, 2017), and are a common theme throughout her oeuvre. The nets evolved into 'Infinity Rooms' (Figure 2) with her dotted hallucinations becoming an experience visitors could immerse themselves in. Although the mirrored rooms plastered in polka dot lights are supposed to induce the stifling feeling of Kusama's hallucinations and allow the visitors to experience her obsessive nature there's something about these rooms that are reminiscent of the 'selfie museums' spaces. To the untrained eye (or just someone who has walked in without reading the blurb) the exhibition might be misinterpreted as a bit of fun they could upload onto their Instagram. This seems to undermine the underlying meaning of the colourful spots; however, it is most likely the reason for her commercial success. Kusama edges even closer to the 'selfie museum' experience in her exhibition, 'Obliteration Room' (Figure 3). She invited visitors to smother the walls, furniture and whatever they could get their hands on in brightly coloured circle stickers. Although she chose the colours and sizes of the stickers, the participants had free rein to use them in any creative way they wanted. What started as a plain white living/dining room set-up ends as a brilliantly chaotic burst of colour creating a confusing ocular illusion which plays with perspective. An interesting aspect of the outcome is that despite the limitations set by the artist, the participants still managed to rebel creatively. In the TateShots, & Kusama, Y. (2012) video, you can see that visitors have made their own images using the stickers, some leaving an initial, some are more elaborate in depicting images such as flowers and others have played with the spacing of the circles, creating block colours by overlapping.

In a true act of anarchism, some have even stuck the sticker template to the wall.

Creativity farming

Let us proceed to observe the kinds of spaces people with creative jobs inhabit and how they supposedly promote creativity. When considering the interior of a space, such as a professional design studio, one might think of ping-pong, beanbags and beer fridges. According to De Paoli et al. (2017, pp. 331–52), turning mundane, grey office spaces into these more relaxed, cool environments has been an increasing trend (or as she phrases it, a hype) in the past few decades. From an outward perspective, a person might think that this must be a fun and creative space to work in. Adopting a more critical approach, De Paoli states that the spatial manipulation of the workplace is potentially 'used for branding purposes to attract clients, but also to appeal to potential employees'. What's more, her findings in Dale and Burrell's 2010 study suggest these different arrangements of workspaces is an attempt at manipulating workers' behaviour in order to achieve organisational goals. De Paoli goes on to quote other research which reveals that the creative spaces tend to work better when the people who are working in them have a say in how it is designed, rather than being decided by those higher up (Doorley & Witthoft, 2012). On a similar note, Martens' (2011, pp. 63–79) study showed it was important for the space to be open and for all levels of jobs to work in the same area to create a 'buzzing atmosphere with people interacting and moving around'. De Paoli goes on to describe five kinds of creative offices which attempt to achieve a more innovative space. The one pertaining to design studios is named 'Home' and embodies the words 'Warm, Soft, Acceptance, Family, Togetherness' in its atmosphere to encourage more natural conversation and sharing. One of the main attributes of the 'Home' is a huge table that everyone in the company can sit around and chat or collaborate. One studio that incorporates the table to an extreme is 'Mother' in London. Their office features a 250-ft concrete table where everyone works from and switches seats every two months to ensure there is no 'spatial hierarchy' between the senior and junior members of the team (Ideal Studio & Mother, n.d.).

The office also claims to have a separate and quieter 'design room', but admits that most of the time, 'people are never really left in peace' (Ideal Studio & Mother, n.d.). Other features of the 'Home' category include break-out rooms for more intimate meetings, adorned with soft furnishings to provide a relaxed feeling. For example, the space at Pallotta TeamWorks Office makes use of storage containers for rooms filled with soft colours and beanbags which provide a hipster look to match the creative studio trope. A critique De Paoli gave of the homely atmosphere applied to the workspace is the blurring of 'work and free time' and the implication that the employees should be working 'longer hours in the spatial illusion of home'. Another criticism is that there is a connotation in this model that creativity is coaxed out of everyone in the same way. An introvert who specialises in a certain area would not benefit from receiving comments from passers-by every five minutes, which is how it might be in the Mother office. The environment might also induce a species, which has been found in many studios, known as the 'Hovering Art Director' – a Tumblr collection of photographs capturing that micromanaging spirit which watches your every move and snatches any creative control from the junior designer. Moreover, there is some implicated pressure to remain at the table unless it's absolutely necessary to break out into the design room. Such oversights might make some people uncomfortable, which is the opposite of what a 'Home' environment should achieve.

From a pragmatic viewpoint, how often would these props, such as beanbags and slides, actually be used? If we take the example of a busy design studio, especially one that is poorly managed, it's doubtful that employees would be looked upon in an amicable way if they take a slide break every hour, a jollification seen in many Google offices (Business Insider, & Google, n.d.). They would more likely spend most of the time at their desk with no time for

communication, which according to De Paoli is an essential element of creativity. A study by Bupa (Bupa, 2015) found that almost half of UK workers eat their lunch 'al desko' (eating at their desk) thus not taking the time to recuperate and build closer relationships with their co-workers. With this in mind, is it the structure of an organisation that is key in harbouring (and even offering the opportunity for) creativity, rather than aesthetic gimmicks? These superficial solutions seem like an uncreative attempt at following the hype, as De Paoli et al. would say.

Couch potato creativity

When we take away all the colour and props, what are the base ingredients needed which help to develop a person's creativity? Later on in his TED lecture, Sir Ken Robinson explains the process of creativity 'more often than not comes about through the interaction of different disciplinary ways of seeing things' (Robinson, K., & TED, 2007, 13:19).

To step out of your own specialised area and venture into an unfamiliar discipline is an activity that would remove comfort and security. Placing a person out of this zone for the purposes of rendering creative thought is not a process invented by Robinson, with countless studies going into the theory. In the book, *Unlocking creativity*, Robert Fisher concurs that creativity is a phenomenon that happens way out of the comfort zone. He explains that a creative environment is one with people who 'have the confidence to make mistakes', and instead of being 'tied to narrow targets' they are informed by the 'spirit of play and imagination' (Fisher & Williams, 2004, p. 19). Discomfort and creativity is a clichéd combination that spreads its way across all creative endeavours with the stereotype of the impoverished, undervalued artist being a familiar one. Would Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* depict the same energy and lucidity if he hadn't also traversed the dark drudge of mental illness? The seminal works of Franz Kafka were written in spite of (or due to) his tough relationship with his psychologically abusive father, and only came to be recognised after his death. When comparing the works of these creatives and the spaces they might have inhabited with the soft, spongy environments of the self-proclaimed creative spaces there is a stark contrast. This is not to say that in order to create anything of value you have to live a tragic and depraved life, but that perhaps creativity is not such a cute, fun process, and one that should be taken more seriously. Designer Paula Scher reflects on the importance of this in her talk 'Great design is serious (not solemn)' by discussing her method of 'serious play'. Scher defines solemn design as the pieces you create when you become known for a certain style and you are hired in order to recreate this. She goes on to explain that serious design (or play) is when you create something unexpected and imperfect. However the 'kiss of death' is when this serious design becomes successful, popular and the new norm, rendering it open to solemn designers to reproduce. Supporting the theory of creativity and discomfort, Scher notes 'the best way to accomplish serious design…is to be totally and completely unqualified for the job' (TED & Scher, 2009, 12:09).

If you consider the 'most creative' type of human, the child (according to the aforementioned NASA study), you can also consider where they would engage in creative thinking: the playground. One bit to climb, one high-up bit, a slide, a swing – for most children this is the reality, and it is more of a tool for their parents as a distraction for 10 minutes rather than a place for the child to create. These areas are like a nice warm hug to both child and parent – safe, familiar and no working-out to be done as the child has seen it a hundred times before. The children are the professionals of these playgrounds, the kings of the castle, and such mastership does not require any further learning or creative thinking. Marjory Allen argued that such spaces were not as safe as they seemed as in these archetypal playgrounds children get injured by misusing the equipment out of boredom. In juxtaposition to the mundane playground model, Allen created junkyard or adventure playgrounds. These places were precarious, filled with dangerous tools like hammers, saws, wood and rubber for the children to build and create together. She believed that the children were actually safer in these environments because they felt the heavy weight of

danger and responsibility when handling these tools. One thing to note about these environments is that there is not a pastel marshmallow or sickly-sweet prop in sight. The junkyard playgrounds do not come with instructions, and the children have little idea as to what they should be doing, which makes the possibilities endless. Something else to note which opposes the pretty playgrounds, Instagram museums and homely studio spaces, is that the junk playground has an overwhelming lack of comfort and thrives because of it. A normal playground is so ingrained that it is obvious how the equipment should be used, whereas with the junkyards you are left to your own imagination, and the support of your equally clueless playmates.

An instance of this kind of space in the adult world is that created by the Italian avant-garde architecture group Cavart, who often undertook projects in abandoned quarries in Italy. The project of particular relevance was 'Architettura Culturalmente Impossibili', which encouraged non-professionals and outsiders to take part. Much like the junkyards, they would create architectural structures out of found materials like 'stones, string, paint cans and leaves' (Coles & Rossi, 2013). The images captured in this environment have a strong resemblance to that of the junkyard playgrounds with an essence of genuine interaction and 'getting stuck in' regardless of potential mistakes. This use of non-professionals and common materials was partly to stand in opposition to the elitist attitude in the architectural world. Another benefit of the non-professionals is to potentially provide a fresh perspective as, much like the children in the junkyard playgrounds, they had very little idea of what they were meant to be producing. They weren't bound by the strict rules and regulations that the professional architects had ground into them. When considering the spaces of Cavart and the junkyard playgrounds, there is a stark contrast between them and that of the spaces that are consciously attempting to produce creativity. Not only are the environments filled with dirt and danger, but more trust is placed in the participants. In the Wondr Experience, it is more the case that the participant is in a trustworthy space, they know exactly what to do – take pictures and upload to Instagram. In terms of the office spaces, although they introduce things such as big tables in an attempt to abolish hierarchies, people higher up with more experience would naturally take on a more directive role, establishing the hierarchy regardless. With the Cavart projects the non-professionals' lack of experience is consciously acknowledged and welcomed, perhaps meaning the participants would be less afraid to say something stupid.

These rules in architecture can be applied through the lens of graphic design. The principles are set by masters of the profession and designed to help others create. For example, Josef Müller-Brockman and his guide to guides – *Grid systems in graphic design* – a book which is plastered from cover to cover with grids, typographic measuring systems, and mathematical columns. The book is viewed as almost biblical by those in the graphic design field and is often cited as a must-read to the malleable minds of students and junior designers. Müller-Brockman himself has earned the status of grid deity, due to his pioneering work for the International Typographic Style, with John Clifford naming him as one of the 'Graphic icons visionaries who shaped modern graphic design'. However, why is it that we decided that Müller-Brockman was worthy of this Godlike status? Take the posters for a summer festival in Zürich which Müller-Brockman designed using his famous grid system. The typographic elements are a Müller-Brockman staple – three to four small columns of text, aligned at the bottom of the page, in a sans serif typeface (his favourite being Akzidenz Grotesk) and lowercase letters. The simple, bold colour palette and geometric shapes are a common theme in his pieces as well as throughout the Swiss design movement. This iconic style has been reproduced countless times, all one has to do is enter terms such as 'Swiss', 'typography' and 'design' into Google to view a barrage of obsessive quests for absolute precision. Müller-Brockman justifies his militant use of the grid by claiming that anyone who studies it with care and a serious attitude is better fitted to find a design solution that is 'functional, logical and also

more aesthetically pleasing' (Müller-Brockmann, 1981). His rules for typography prioritise the ease of reading, and he makes his abhorrence for layout which might disturb the flow of a sentence apparent. These rules are laid out as gospel, whereas if we recollect the words of Paula Scher and compare to the designs that these rules would produce, we might construe them as 'solemn design' as opposed to Scher's more valued 'serious play'.

In contrast, the works of British artist Bob and Roberta Smith follow a less rigid approach. Let's take one of his most famous pieces, *Make Art Not War*, as a case in point. Inspired by the works of signwriters and based on their common typeface 'Signwriter's Block', the text is painted using hand-cut stencils. The handmade approach to the typography gives it an uneven look, with wonky edges and no apparent regard for typical graphic design staples such as leading or kerning. What's more, the materials used are sourced locally and available to all, with Smith using Johnstons and Dulux paint and claiming to have found the panels the piece is painted on in a skip. Like Müller-Brockman, you could argue that there are a set of principles in place for Smith too – bright colours, modest, low-cost materials and slogans. While both work with typographical elements of some kind, the main difference between the two is that Müller-Brockman's designs purely aid the reading of the text, whereas Smith's type is designed to accompany the slogan as a visual representation of its sentiment. Smith looks to non-professionals and outsiders such as signwriters for most of his layout inspiration. This is reflected when encouraging new creatives to be wary of becoming 'too professional' (Smith, B. and R., Barnett, L., & *The Guardian*, 2008), rather than looking straight to the typographic masters and Bauhaus legends that influenced Müller-Brockman.

Another difference between the two is their label, one identifying as working in graphic design and the other in art, a boundary which is blurry and full of subjective theories. Let us then look to the kitsch and nostalgic aesthetics of signwriting which influenced Smith (Figure 4). Despite the signwriter being in essence a graphic design role, the works portray more illustrative qualities than designer, a charm which Bob and Roberta Smith has applied in his slogan paintings. Although the sign shown in Figure 5 is a commissioned piece, it does not appear to have stood on the shoulders of Müller-Brockman, with more regard to being garish than to paying attention to carefully considered systems. This is possibly because their intended purpose is to stand in a busy and bustling environment such as a marketplace and grab the attention of passers-by. Something that was missing from his grid systems book is how the systems work in reality. In the chaotic scenario of the marketplace, a Müller-Brockman-esque design may fade into the background, drowning in loud colour and type where the one with the biggest, reddest letter wins. These signs have their own system of sorts which works in its own environment without the need to ever look at a grid or even go to art school.

One way of viewing the work of a signwriter is by placing it into the category of outsider art, or art brut. Coined by Jean Dubuffet in the mid-1940s, an artist who produces work known as art brut is 'unscathed by artistic culture' and the mainstream. Dubuffet argues that art is 'supposed to uproot us', and denies its existence in current high culture, claiming that art is 'allergic to the air of collective approval'. For this reason, Dubuffet argues that art brut, by its literal translation of raw art, is art in its purest form, untampered by insider acceptance and existing without the need for it (Rhodes, 2000). Signwriters exist in their own bubble of what they believe to be art, picked up from the limited collection of artistic experiences. Although by Dubuffet's definition a pure outsider is one with an experience so isolated and cut off from the world of art that their natural position is on the outside. To find an artist so isolated from the mainstream is rare but can be found in the minds of children, cultures isolated from Western society, and those cut off from reality by mental illness. Yayoi Kusama is a peculiar instance of outsider art as she has been labelled as both an insider and an outsider. As mentioned earlier, her work is largely inspired by hallucinations conjured by her mental illness. She claims that this condition ostracised her in the art

world of Japan at the beginning of her career, being the motivating factor in her move to New York. In trying to escape this kind of judgement, she faced similar challenges in the US, being 'stigmatised by her race and gender' while watching her 'male counterparts' reach success 'with ease, often ripping her off in the process' (Dazed, 2018). Despite being positioned as an outsider, Kusama is said to be one of the instigators of movements like Surrealism, Pop Art and Minimalism (Kusama, Y., & Tate, 2012). These movements are not what motivated Kusama, however, which is evident in her 2000 interview with critic Akira Tatehata. Kusama is asked several times about the movements to which she has been attached, and she responds in a nonchalant manner. To her, the work is merely a self-therapy' and a form of escapism, which coincidentally is labelled as art (Kusama, Y., Tatehata, A., Hoptman, L. J., Kultermann, U., Taft, C., & Phaidon Verlag Gmbh, 2017).

Designing disruptions

One of the key principles of the International Typographic Style is that good design should be legible and easy to read, a train of thought which has carried through to the present day with many designers (particularly those in user experience design [UX]) preaching that good design is invisible. In *The Design of Everyday Things*, author Don Norman explains that good design is invisible because it fits 'our needs so well…serving us without drawing attention to itself'. He states that bad design is obvious because it 'screams out its inadequacies, making itself very noticeable' (Norman, 2013, p. xi). Throughout the book we are reintroduced to a bountiful array of niggles and annoyances we have had to tolerate in everyday life and accept as human error. Norman argues that it is not necessarily always the users that are inept at using, and when they do 'err' it is because of badly designed equipment. But why is it that we are compelled to fix every design so it is frictionless and easy? Fifteen years after his book was first published he spoke about '3 ways good design makes you happy' in a contradictory manner to his previous words on invisible design. In the talk, Norman takes a step back from the mindset of simplicity and convenience being the main factors of a good design and exclaims that 'the new me is beauty'. He goes on to discuss items that look beautiful but are not particularly useful – some include a juicer allergic to juice and a handsome car in constant need of repair – why this sparks joy in many minds and how this is an important factor in what makes a design good (TED, 2009).

It could be argued that invisible design makes a user easy to manipulate, a sentiment UX designer Steve Krug supports in his book *Don't Make Me Think*. Designers and conceptual artists Madeline Gins and Shusaku Arakawa believed that living in the comfort of so-called good design had an effect on how long you would live for. Their work 'Reversible Destiny Lofts MITAKA — In Memory of Helen Keller', is a residential apartment building designed to stimulate inhabitants mentally and physically with its uneven surfaces and irritating obstacles. Light switches are placed out of reach and windows out of sight, all to make the users feel in a 'perpetual state of instability' (Arakawa & Gins, 2005). This kind of disruptive technique with regard to the graphic design world can be found in the works of Neville Brody, who purposefully creates ambiguous typeface designs in opposition to the Swiss design movement. When asked about the typefaces of Brody in an interview with *Eye Magazine*, Müller-Brockman scathingly stated:

> These typefaces are not suitable for advertisements and posters. They are exceptions to the rule and individual cases are not a basis for teaching graphic design. These alphabets are confused, aesthetically lacking and bad. Playing around is always an excuse for too little understanding, which makes people fall back on imagination and speak of artistic freedom, inspiration and good ideas. Such typefaces are interesting as studies in legibility. But I don't see any sense in them. They are a personal attempt to deal with a problem and I find them not only bad but senseless because they lack an area of application. (Schwemer-Scheddin, Y., Müller-

Brockman, J., & *Eye Magazine*, 1995, Reputations: Josef Müller-Brockmann)

When we look at Brody's typeface, 'FF Dirty Faces', it is obvious Müller-Brockman is very much correct in his analysis of Brody's type being illegible and confusing. With its irregular baselines, wonky forms and textural elements, 'FF Dirty Faces' makes for a tough reading, one that would have the viewer doing a triple take. Müller-Brockman's opinion on the typefaces of Brody being illegible and confusing are fixed, however, does this mean that there is no value in them? Brody's work poses similar questions to Arakawa and Gins when it comes to the design world's obsession with making everything easy, albeit in a less physical way. The work has a use in challenging the user with visual obstacles which may enhance their understanding of the piece. Brody's ability to tether the design elements to the message is characteristic in his career, first made prominent in his work for the magazine *The Face*. Something that Swiss design omits from its minimalist approach is a sense of meaning or culture through type and layout, with the focus purely being on conveying the message. If the covers for *The Face* were designed to the rules of Müller-Brockman they would not have conveyed as much emotion, culture and visual communication.

Brody's 2010 Anti-Design Festival (which stood in opposition to the London Design Festival (LDF), its perfect, commercially viable counterpart) may explain Brody's ethos and opposition to the slick designs of the Swiss. He created the festival as an attempt to defrost the '25 years of cultural deep freeze in the UK', caused by designers being solely focused on creating in order to pay the bills (Bec, A. & It's Nice That, 2010). In an interview alongside the LDF's director, Ben Evans, Brody explains that designers rarely create anything that 'isn't already in existence' for the fear of it not being profitable. He argues that LDF plays a part in this by presenting polished showcases of design work and ignoring any pieces that are not inherently linked to a pay cheque. Brody identifies this way of thinking as a mistake and challenges the design world to question it, claiming that 'ideas which aren't going to be commercial or popular are rarely being produced' and pondering 'the ideas that are left on the table because they are deemed to be uncommercial?' (*The Guardian*, 2010).

Conclusion

One finding concerns the aesthetic nature of creativity and its disparity between so-called creative spaces. The discoveries around children's' playgrounds in the Couch Potato Creativity segment highlight this disparity. When considering the archetypal playground, areas full of colour and cute shapes and animals, which seems like elements for a space full of creativity and fun but is in fact often misused out of boredom. Marjory Allen's junkyard playgrounds on the other hand are ugly, dirty places using discarded materials like tyre and wood and replacing primary colour with mud, rubber and tools. What's more, instead of relying on plastic renditions of woodland creatures for play company, the children interact with each other and work as a team to figure out how to use a spanner. There is less evidence of misusing this equipment because there is no use in the first place, forcing the children to think creatively. The misuse of the archetypal playground could arguably be seen as a form of creative thinking by the children, (an anarchic form of creativity which I will revisit later), however, the original design of the playground and the elements of it which were supposed to provoke creativity are failing, thus the point that viewing creativity in this bright and colourful way is ill-informed.

My next point pertains to the rules and boundaries set in a supposedly creative environment and whether they help or hinder the creative. Exhibitions like the Wondr Experience claim that their spaces encourage 'boundless creativity' in the participants, but looking at the Instagram content it creates there seems to be clear instructions on where to take your photo and from which vantage point, leaving little room for any creation. Likewise, the archetypal playground has unwritten rules on how to play in them, making the two activities very

obvious and quick to become tiresome. Perhaps the rules are in place due to a lack of trust in the users – the visitors might not represent the 'selfie museum' in its best light and the children might hurt themselves if left to their own devices – an issue which is not present in the junkyard playground or in the projects undertaken by Cavart. The non-professionals helping Cavart do not have an inbuilt framework of rules and principles set in their minds when it comes to building structures. Because the two groups lack the knowledge, they conjure up new ideas that the well acquainted would not usually see. Furthermore, because there are no rules in place in the two environments this allows errors and happy accidents to occur, providing the children with endless possibility for creation and for Cavart, new, novel methods which those in the know might have never considered. The rules and principles that apply to architects are present from a graphic design perspective too as shown by Josef Müller-Brockman's grid systems. These systems set a tone as to how graphic design should look, and dismiss anything else, diminishing any room for creativity. In Müller-Brockman's defence he never defines graphic design as a particularly creative role and even criticised the use of imagination and 'artistic freedom' in his review of Neville Brody's work (*Eye Magazine*, 1995). However, I would disagree with Müller-Brockman on his suggestion that the only function of graphic design is to display text and image in the clearest way possible. As evidenced with Brody's ability to convey emotion and culture (Brody & Wozencroft, 1995) through his creative play with typography, graphic design can be more than the black and white governings of Müller-Brockman. Additionally, the world of graphic design has evolved since his iconic book on guides. Born out of the Bauhaus, Müller-Brockman was of a generation where graphic design was young and still proving its legitimacy in the world as a subject independent from art. In the present day, where graphic design is a well-known vocation there is less need to prove its necessity and more room to explore beyond simply displaying text.

The trust and potential for error presented in Cavart's work, junkyard playgrounds and Brody's ability to experiment at the risk of making mistakes bring me on to my next argument – creativity is born out of discomfort. Unlike in the familiar environment of the common playground, a place where the child is king of the castle, in the junkyard playground the child is far from comfortable. The objects are things they have never been entrusted to use before so they are unskilled, adding an element of insecurity and even fear due to years of their parents warning them away due to their hazardous nature. From a graphic design perspective there is a heavy focus on creating designs which are safe and commercially viable, meaning designers often revert to tried-and-tested methods (i.e., Müller-Brockman's grids). New, experimental ideas equal discomfort and the perils of failure, so they are less valued. But where does the fear and discomfort of potential failure come from? A likely reason for the fear is due to the idea of losing money. In money we can see the motives behind a lot of the examples of the creative spaces mentioned. For instance, the main aim of most businesses is to make a profit, but the 'selfie museums' sprinkle this ugly motive with appealing words like 'creative' and 'imagination'. In a less direct way, the office spaces incorporating creative props is their fickle attempt at generating more money from the creative ideas farmed. In addition, Kusama's 'success' would not have been possible if she had not sold any tickets to hundreds of visitors wanting an Instagram post.

These examples exist in a consumerist society where the overarching motive is to make money. The creative urges you are born with are suppressed unless they have some profitability, and those brave enough to follow their natural impulse are asked 'Why?' and in some cases seen as anarchic. Anarchic creativity can be seen seeping into everyday life, in the child misusing the playground, or the museum visitor fixing the sticker template to Kusama's 'Obliteration Room' furniture. Most graphic designers are forced into the position of 'solemn' design, tediously copying and pasting text into commercially viable templates. The very few who dare to disrupt this endless flow and actually succeed are seen as revolutionary (as with Brody), until of course these designs become popular,

heavily appropriated and heaved into the same list of commercial viability. Now imagine a studio in which its main focus is to generate creativity rather than money. In this place, the designers would feel no fear in experimenting and making mistakes, thus would be comfortable making errors if it meant that they would achieve their end goal of creativity. This hypothetical exercise presents a discrepancy in the argument (provided by Paula Scher and Ken Robinson) of creativity and discomfort going hand in hand. However, the opinions of Scher and Robinson are ones made in the context of this consumerist society. In the context we currently exist in, the concept of failure is viewed through a distorted lens. Rather than being a natural part of learning and discovery, it is seen in a negative light. In the creativity haven, mistakes would be normal, if not welcomed, and people would feel comfortable going through these necessary creative processes. In a society ruled by consumerism, creativity will always be observed as an act of rebellion.

Gallery

Figure 1 (openverse, n.d.-c): "Museum of Ice Cream, San Francisco" by mliu92 (2019). Reproduced under the conditions of a creative commons license CC BY-SA 2.0.-

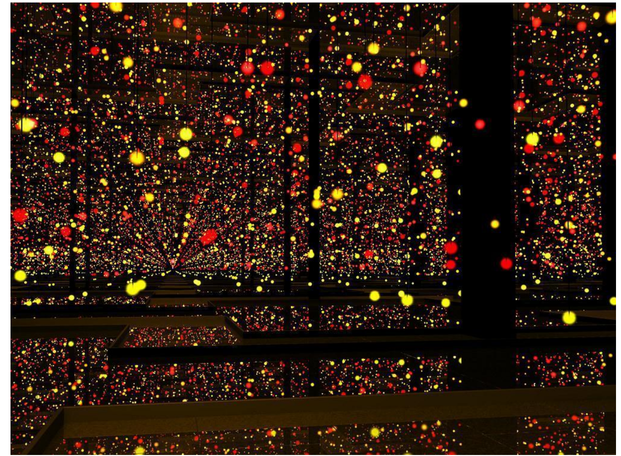

Figure 2 (openverse, n.d.-a): "A CGI Sketch of Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirrored Room" by Dominic's pics (2012). Reproduced under the conditions of a creative commons license CC BY-SA 2.0.-

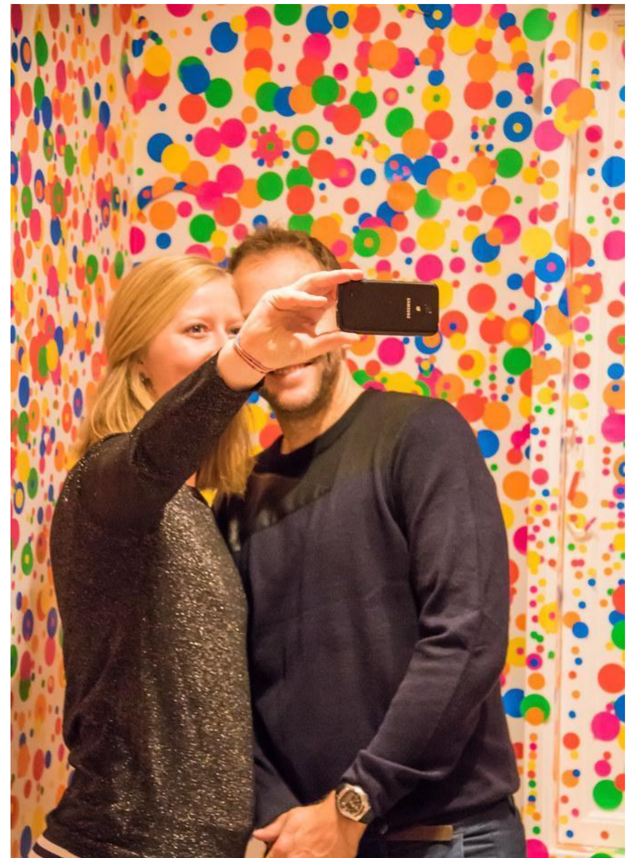

Figure 3 (openverse, n.d.-b): "Artwork by Yayoi Kusama" by Infomastern (2015). Reproduced under the conditions of a creative commons license CC BY-SA 2.0.-

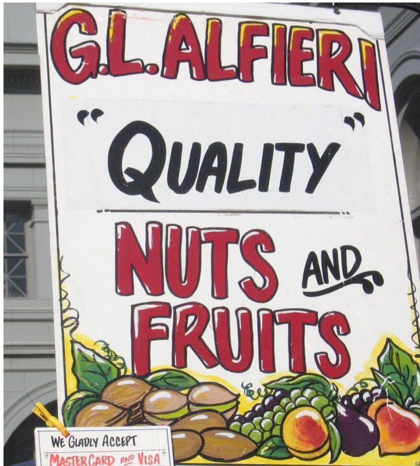

Figure 4 (openverse, n.d.-d): "Farmer's Market sign" by Salim Virji (2004). Reproduced under the conditions of a creative commons license CC BY-SA 2.0.-

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