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It's Slapstick Design, Thanks! Wait! No "Thanks"-Just Slapstick Design ...

Curtis A. Bailey

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IT’S SLAPSTICK DESIGN, THANKS!

>>WAIT!

NO “THANKS” – JUST SLAPSTICK DESIGN...
IT’S SLAPSTICK DESIGN, THANKS!

>>WAIT! NO “THANKS” –

JUST SLAPSTICK DESIGN...
ABSTRACT

SLAPSTICK

I'm arguing for an approach to generating graphic form based on slapstick. Slapstick is a genre of physical comedy involving humorous portrayals of clumsiness, mistakes, and nonsense. I investigate it as an approach to form, content, process, and communication. These methods were used to construct an immersive installation loosely based on The Tibetan Book of the Dead.

Graphic design is expected to function. It does this by conditioning users to its particular patterns or by skillfully implementing familiar patterns. A slapstick approach to graphic design is valuable as a critical tool for disrupting conditioned experiences for promoting empathy by relating to people through imperfection and failure.
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ADJUST CHECK

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Congrats on your show!
Thank You.
SO...

... What's it all about?
And —

slapstick.

And —
The show is about testing slapstick as an approach to graphic design—

and using that approach to explore *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as subject matter. The thing about the—

Can I interrupt you for a sec?

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead.*
Would you mind clarifying what you mean by approach and subject matter?

Not at all.

If we were talking about Picasso’s painting Guernica, the subject matter would be the bombing of Guernica or, more generally, the “horror of war”.
So what is a slapstick approach?

I'll describe a number of strategies, but first I'd like to clarify slapstick's essentials.

**IN SLAPSTICK:**

Actions speak louder than words. Everyday tasks become performances.

Play is serious business. "Real"/ function is flipped on its head. Logic facilitates paradox.

Rigor is used to obtain low hanging fruit. Slapstick celebrates cheapness and vulgarity.

Utility is interwoven with the obscene. Judgment lapses; entropy doesn't.

**Slapstick is reacting**

in the moment.

to the moment.

or at least –

appearing to...
THERE'S A STORY THAT DESIGNERS TELL

SOME EVEN CLAIM IT'S THE TRUTH

IN THIS STORY THERE ARE UNIVERSAL LAWS FOR ORGANIZING THE WORLD INTO SOMETHING ABSTRACT AND SIMPLE AND GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

IN THIS STORY EVERYTHING HAS A PURPOSE AND ANYTHING UNNECESSARY IS STRIPPED AWAY

THESE ARE SOME OF THE DESIGNERS WHO TOLD THIS STORY

THEY DIDN'T JUST DRESS LIKE EVIL VILLAINS
THEY SHARED CORE VALUES:
ORDER
HIERARCHY
PURITY
GEOMETRY
STANDARDIZATION
CONTROL
SCIENCE
POWER
TECHNOLOGY

AN
"US OR THEM"
"JOIN OR DIE"
MENTALITY

BUT WHAT IS THE COST OF BECOMING ONE OF "US"

OH JAN

THIS GUY HELPED WRITE THE STORY

BUT HE HAD THE COURAGE

TO LEAVE IT BEHIND

FOR ME GRAD SCHOOL IS ABOUT EXPLORING A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO DESIGN

AN ALTERNATE STORY THAT IS NO LESS OF A FICTION THAN THE ONE ABOVE

BUT IT'S A FICTION THAT DOESN'T TAKE ITSELF QUITE SO SERIOUSLY
This approach is based on slapstick.

It rose to prominence during the silent film era.

And it’s founded on the simple pleasure of watching other people make mistakes.

But there’s more to it than that.

It can be more than people taking a pie to the face.

Not that it has to.
SLAPSTICK EMBODIES A PARTICULAR PERSPECTIVE OF REALITY

A PERSPECTIVE THAT CHARACTERIZES THE KINDS OF SUBJECT MATTER IT DEPICTS

ITS AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY

ITS GRAMMAR

AND ITS METHODOLOGIES OF PERFORMANCE

SLAPSTICK PORTRAYS THE MUNDANE

THE DISCARDED

BROKEN

JERRY-RIGGED

OUT OF PLACE

UNDER THE TABLE

RIDICULOUS

VULGAR

WORLD
IN SOME WAYS THIS WORLD IS A WORLD MUCH LIKE OUR OWN

A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE ARE BORED

MAKING POOR LIFE CHOICES

SLUGGISH

SELF SERVING

IMPULSIVE

AND IN A FAIR AMOUNT OF PAIN

THE GOOD GUYS AREN'T ALL THAT DIFFERENT FROM THE BAD.

AND LUCK PLAYS MORE OF A ROLE

THEN BEST LAID PLANS

SLAPSTICK IS ABOUT SQUABBLING OVER THE LITTLE THINGS

DESIRING WHAT'S BAD FOR US

THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN OUR INTENTIONS AND WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS

IT'S TRUE

SLAPSTICK IS PARTLY ABOUT FAILURE

AND ABOUT LAUGHING AT THE FAILURE OF OTHERS
BUT IT’S ALSO ABOUT EMPATHY

THROUGH RELATING TO THE PAIN OF OTHERS

AS THEY LOOK FOR LOVE PLEASURE FREEDOM FUN

IN THE FACE OF INEVITABILITIES CHAOS ENTROPY DECAY DEATH

SLAPSTICK FLIPS INEVITABILITY TO CREATE FREE SPACES

IT DOES THIS TWO WAYS

THE 1ST IS THROUGH THE PERSONA OF THE SLAPSTICK HERO

AND THEREFORE ALIEN TO US
SLAPSTICK HEROES ARE RELATABLE

They are working class every-men

Even if they are brilliant scientists

Or ace detectives

At heart they're goofballs

They can be a bit selfish.

Unorthodox and distractible

Which leads them to trouble with authority

They are typically outcasts and they feel bad about it because they want to fit in

This may not make them cool but it does make them relateable
THEY NEVER ACTUALLY GIVE UP
OSTENSIBLY THEY AREN'T SMARTER OR NOBLER OR STRONGER THAN US

BEYOND THEIR POSITIVITY

AND PERSEVERANCE

THEY HAVE TO BE RESOURCEFUL

SOMETIMES BY DISGUISSING THEMSELVES

AND MAKING DO WITH WHAT THEY HAVE

THE DIFFICULTY OF THIS KIND OF PERFORMANCE IS CRAZY
SLAPSTICK HEROES HAVE TO PERFORM INCREDIBLE FEATS

IN SUCH A WAY THAT THEY SEEM TO BE BARELY PULLING THEM OFF

THEIR SUCCESS HAS TO APPEAR AS INCREDIBLE TO THEM AS IT DOES TO US

IF THEY'RE TOO AWESOME THEY BECOME A SUPERMAN
AN ALIEN

TECHNICAL RIGOR MUST STAY HIDDEN

BENEATH A FACADE OF PLAYFUL LIGHTNESS

WHICH LEADS ME TO THE OTHER FREEDOM THAT SLAPSTICK AFFORDS

NOT TO MENTION CRAZY AMOUNTS OF COURAGE,

IT'S LIKE ASKING SOMEONE TO SKATEBOARD
DO BALLET

AND BE FUNNY AT THE SAME TIME.

IT'S A KIND OF SLEIGHT OF HAND

A MISDIRECTION
WHICH IS THE TRANSFORMATION OF LOGIC THROUGH ABSURDITY

IN DRAMAS CHARACTERS TRANSFORM

THEIR FATE CHANGES

THE IRONY OF SLAPSTICK IS THAT THEIR FATE IS CYCLICAL

THEIR LET DOWNS ESTABLISH A RHYTHM

A RHYTHM OF MINOR TRAGEDIES

That provides the audience with a sense of security that allows them to accept a deeper alteration of logic.

In slapstick it's not where you are going. It's how you get there. Because you never really get anywhere. At least... not anywhere good.
AND YET

NOT GETTING ANYWHERE IS THE JOYOUS PART OF SLAPSTICK
UNLIKE OTHER FICTIONS THAT IDEALIZE

TRANSCENDENT DE-MATERIALIZATION

PERFECT PROPORTIONS

PRIMORDIAL INNOCENCE

AND PURE SWEET BORING EMPTY VANILLA BLISS

SLAPSTICK HAS THE DECENCY TO ACKNOWLEDGE OTHER KINDS OF BLISS

SOME MAY SAY IT PLACES TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON SENSATION
BUT THAT'S THE POINT

IT CATALOGS A CHAOTIC WORLD OF STUFF

DOCUMENTS A LOSING STRUGGLE WITH GRAVITY

EXHIBITS A BODY PRONE TO ACCIDENTS

ARGUES FOR THE IRREGULAR

THE ODDBALL

AND THE PHONY

AND IN DOING SO IT SPEAKS DIRECTLY TO US

AND PART OF WHAT IT SEEMS TO SAY IS

THIS WORLD IS IMPERFECT

AND WE ARE IMPERFECT

NOT ONLY IS THAT OK

IT'S A LOT OF FUN
So what is a slapstick approach to design?
That's by no means a complete list.
And what are the benefits of this “slapstick” approach to design?

Ideally, slapstick design is a more fun, empathetic, and critical than the functionalism of Modernism, corporate branding, and “Design Thinking.” I think it also avoids some of the “artiness” of Swiss Punk and Grunge design. Slapstick design is straightforward, yet full of detours.

To succeed at slapstick one must successfully perform failures: the slapstick performer isn’t really slipping on a banana peel — or, they are really slipping, but they are doing it on purpose. It’s about highlighting imperfection but also helping us come to terms with imperfection which seems to me to be a wise response to reality.

It’s an approach that can be critical as well as empathetic. Modernity is ridiculed in Chaplin’s *Modern Times* as well as Jacques Tati’s *Playtime.* A key element in both examples is that the films signal a shift from advertised narratives of human progress through new technological processes to the people who are actually engaged in those processes (in the case of *Modern Times*) or engaging with the manufactured environments that result from them (in *Playtime*).

Is there a similar criticality in your slapstick approach?

I think it’s there, but it’s been more subconscious — I want to talk about it, but I think maybe we should come back to that after discussing the installation because I have some ideas that have implications for what comes next...

OK. So if slapstick is your approach, what’s the subject matter of your installation?

The show is a reinterpretation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead.*
That sounds pretty heavy.

Why *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*?

Initially, I was attracted to the book because it functions as a tool. It is used to guide the deceased through the experience of the afterlife. The afterlife it describes is complex and difficult to comprehend, yet the book has a utilitarian purpose. I was attracted to the disparity between the book’s mystical and utilitarian functions.

How is it utilitarian?

Well, to be fair, the way I thought it functioned turned out to be relatively superficial. I thought the book would provide a map of the afterlife that would present an interesting opportunity for mapping, diagramming, and the creation of wayfinding systems.

The book is really a tool for stimulating meta-cognitive awareness: it tries to make its reader aware of their awareness. For the Buddhist, afterlife experiences are mental illusions similar to dreams. In Tibetan Buddhism, Nirvana can be achieved instantly through the recognition of these illusions as coming from within oneself. This makes the book kind of tricky. It delineates a progression of experiences involving an elaborate hierarchy of supernatural beings while insisting that readers observe the spectacle while recognizing that spectacle as a spectacle.
Uhhh...

You know that feeling when you are at the movies and you become absorbed and forget everything?

It's kind of like...
Yeah.

Sure.
Well, it's the opposite of that.

It's about watching the movie and recognizing it for what it is.

without attraction or repulsion

And what is it?
In short, a movie.

A construction.

An illusion.
Except, in the afterlife –

the illusion occurs in an immersive virtual realm.
So... recognizing its illusory quality is quite difficult.

And, you're totally confused because you just died...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>So as a visitor to your show, should I be able to figure out that it's about the <em>Tibetan Book of the Dead</em>?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I wanted the work to do three things:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To establish a relationship between language and image that approximates their interaction in the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To create a work with an approach to representation and simulation that is in keeping with the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To create work with a humorous, slapstick tone.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is that OK?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So what is the relationship between image and text in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*?

I'm glad you asked.

The book is a guide to a series of visions one can expect to experience in the afterlife. I'm specifically concerned with the third section of the book called “The great setting-face-to-face during the Experiencing of Reality”.

This section describes a series of visions that you — the recently deceased — can expect to encounter. The sequence of these visions is similar to a two-act play. In the first act, Peaceful Deities come to shine in progressively greater numbers leading up to a grand finale consisting of a majestic tableau of heavenly beings. The second act mirrors the first except, instead of Peaceful Deities, one is set upon by horrifying Wrathful Deities. According to the book, these visions — terrifying or beautiful — are illusions. More specifically, they are illusions issuing from the infinite void of one's own consciousness in forms that accord with one's own experiences.

So they are fake? The afterlife is all a dream?

Yes and no. The forms of these visions may be artificial, but these experiences are still considered “the experiencing of Reality” with a capital “R” ...

This is where I think you can start to parse out a very interesting attitude toward “image.” The term setting face-to-face, which positions the spectator frontally toward these visions implies that they are, in fact, images.

So what's the relationship?

First that they are artificial.

The second aspect gets into how language operates counter to image in the book. The book provides directives to remind one that they should neither fear nor be seduced by images. Upon recognizing them as illusions, one should nonetheless continue to observe them. The book implores one to meet these Wrathful and Peaceful Deities alike as friends. Doing this one merges into them and attains enlightenment.

What are the implications of enlightenment if one of the paths to it entails merging into an illusion — or as you put it an image?

That's an evocative question, which I can't answer. Enlightenment is a nebulous concept; any attempt on my part to define it would be futile ...
Before I get too off track...

What I think is interesting about this part of the book that it provides instructions not for *what to do* during these visions, but for *how to feel*. The book repeats phrases such as: “Be not awed. Be not terrified.” The observer of these visions is meant to remember these directions, to remember that these visions are, in fact, not real, and to stay calm. This implies that language changes our relationship to the image; that seeing alone shouldn’t be believing.

Assuming these illusions are seamless. There’s a faith expected of a viewer that could observe monsters without being afraid.

There definitely is, but it’s not blind faith. It takes faith to maintain one’s composure, but it’s implied that if a viewer can banish fear and awe then they can recognize the reality of the visions they are experiencing, or, more accurately, their unreality. I don’t think the illusions are quite seamless. Their seamlessness is predicated on fear and desire obscuring ones senses.

So, now we’re talking about the book’s approach to simulation? Am I right?

Yes. This is a point of connection between *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and slapstick.

How so?

Slapstick is about humorous violations — particularly the body in violation of itself and the structures that enclose it. These violations often extend to the illusion of representation itself, and slapstick utilizes metafictional techniques that break the fourth wall. There’s a classic shtick in slapstick in which the performers look directly at the audience and make a shrugging gesture that seems to say, “Give me a break.” And, of course, we do.

The nature of realism in slapstick is very slippery. Few would describe it as realistic, especially when characters bounce back from grievous injuries like anvils to the head. And yet, the appeal of a performance by Jackie Chan is that he *really* does all of his own stunts. These performances occupy a strange zone between fiction and documentary — the viewer is given a fiction, but they are never expected to truly believe it nor to forget that Jackie Chan is anyone other than Jackie Chan.
So slapstick’s approach to simulation exists in a sort of limbo, and that accords it with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*?

Yes. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is both narrative and anti-narrative. You see the visions as illusions, but are expected to participate nonetheless — to participate in a detached way.

Slapstick is about playful detachment. The violence in slapstick shifts focus away from narrative toward physical spectacle. It is about reveling in-the-moment — in the particularities of a medium — oftentimes at the expense of realism.

Could you clarify what you mean by “a medium’s particularities?”

In *Super Mario Bros.* there are floating blocks and coins. Measured against our own experience of coins and blocks, this is absurd. But within the context of the game — as a game — it is perfectly natural.

Is Mario slapstick?

Definitely. Beyond the absurdism of the set-up: an Italian plumber exploring a fantastical medieval kingdom populated by Japanese folk creatures, watch how Mario moves through space and compare that to Buster Keaton hopping across train cars in *The General* or Douglas Fairbanks in *The Thief of Baghdad*.

So you’re saying slapstick simulations have an internal logic that doesn’t reflect anything external to them?

No, not quite. I’m saying they are stylized. Mario is affected by gravity — but by a gravity that’s been stretched and altered. Among gamers, games stylized to emphasize fun gameplay over realistic simulation are sometimes described as “arcade-ey.” Slapstick’s approach to simulation is precisely that: “arcade-ey.” It wouldn’t be fun to play a Mario game if Mario actually moved around like an overweight Italian plumber, just as it wouldn’t be funny if Wile E. Coyote died when his contraptions malfunctioned. In slapstick, the aesthetic has to strike a tone that allows the mechanics of the simulation to be altered: generally, a playful, absurdist tone.
So, how does all this manifest in your work?

Some of it hasn’t yet. There was a pretty extensive sketching process that didn’t make it into production. At first, I was exploring how to both show and not show a figurative image — and how to do so in a manner that maintains a slapstick tone.

After testing numerous stylistic devices, I started thinking more deeply about the call to “recognize” the visions and meet them as friends. The drawings up to that point felt too personal; they needed to be more recognizable.

In Tibet, it is assumed that the deities one encounters will accord in form with those one encounters within their own culture. My intention was to construct a representation of an afterlife that would reflect my experience, the experience of an American kid who devoted his formative years to watching cartoons and playing video games. This got me thinking that the images could reference familiar characters. If I met them in the afterlife, I would have little trouble meeting them as friends.

There are still a lot of untested solutions to the imagery. One that intrigues me is using photographs of physical representations of known mascots and cartoon characters — like a giant homemade costume of Gumby. These representations complicate our experience of these very branded characters. I’m interested in the layers of representation: screen-printed photographs of sculptural representations of animated drawings...
What about the text phrases?

I tried to restate the directives of the book in a funnier, more a vernacular tone: “Be Not Freaked Out. Be Not Too ‘Bout It. Abide in Chill Mode. C-Thru Ruse. Recognize the Hocus Pocus.” Sometimes visual decisions were based on the sound of the phrase, while others came about through experimentation with the visual structures of the words. “C-THRU RUSE” is an example of the latter approach. It’s a stencil typeface I made to approximate the feel of stenciled “DRIVE-THRU” lettering. It might have been better if it was just “C-THRU” because “Ruse” sounds a bit too lofty...
So how did you come up with this installation? What are its ingredients?

There are two main ingredients: A diorama-like space dressed up as a funky living room. And a constellation of individual painting-like pieces that violate that room by dimensionally projecting from its walls at various angles and depths.
To me the final thesis show was about designing a show — a total experience.
How did the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* influence your formal choices within the larger installation?

Cool.

(sips iced americano.)

A primary theme of the book is recognizing artifice or illusion, so I knew from the start that I wanted the installation to be an almost theatrical representation of a familiar context. I thought about a train stop and a storefront, but they didn’t feel right. When Lizzie, my partner, suggested a living room I immediately thought: “A living room for the dead? Yeah. That sounds about right.”

There’s a richness to living rooms — they’re the hub of domestic life — places where we curl up with friends and family and become absorbed in television spectacles.

If the characters in the television could look out at us, we might look dead — zombie-like — or maybe just idiotic — like stupid cattle absorbed in eating grass or whatever.

What was your process for planning and constructing the installation?

I started with preliminary models and sketches. Once I settled on the living room idea, I focused on creating a wallpaper that could give everything context. I knew
it would be black and white to contrast with the colorful works that would be placed on top. The assortment of warped cartoon characters on the wallpaper represented the book’s description of a panorama of emerging deities.

Why warped? And how?
To establish the quality of a dream. Something more open — it seemed to me that perfect transcriptions of cartoon characters would be so disparate from each other that it would restrict the range of characters I could choose from. I felt that, by filtering them through the tendencies of my hand and having them bulge forward with a fisheye effect — they would reflect the flowing transitional afterlife of the text.

It was screen-printed?
Yes. The design was screen-printed onto four long rolls of blank wallpaper. It took two screens to fill the width of the wallpaper. I printed the first screen without any help, and it took me all night. After each print, I had to unfurl the paper a little bit more, move it into position for the next print, and tape it down. This wasn’t so bad at first, but the rolls were all eleven yards long. By the end of each roll, I was spending more time walking back and forth across the room than I was printing. I enlisted helpers for the second print (in exchange for screen-printing lessons), and it only took three hours — I learned a valuable lesson about asking for help.

After making psychedelic cartoony wallpaper, how did you decide on the other elements? The yellow inflatable chair, the little TV, the IKEA furniture, the chalk outline…?
Don’t forget the molding, the vinyl wood floor, the plant, with the little pink flamingo, and the sliced plastic yellow banana peel…

The dead TV with black and white snow and the chalk outline were ideas from early on as they were both tongue-in-cheek references to deadness, and they both worked with the black and white palette of the
wallpaper. Initially, I wanted a clear inflatable chair instead of a yellow one, but they were sold out.

The yellow seems related to the banana peel...

That's why I picked it. Also I think there's something funny about yellow.

The guiding philosophy on picking elements was that they should have a light tone and, ideally, reference their artificiality in some manner. For example, I knew I didn't want a worn thrift store chair because it would be too real — too imbued with history. Such a chair would've made the installation too heavy in a way. The chair is a container — of both air and the idea of a chair — but it's also very slapstick. It's cheap and noisy when you sit on it. Because I hang my keys from my belt, I was worried I'd forget to remove them and pop it before the show.

The wooden structures protruding from the wall appear very heavy...

That was intentional.

They are meant to be more substantial than the objects in the room. I wanted the images — the whole notion of “image” really — to have more weight than objects.

According to the book, all experiences in the afterlife are merely hallucinatory mental constructions. If that's true then the substance of the afterlife IS image.

Let's talk about the “pieces.” What was the general thinking behind them?

If the space is primarily appropriative and referential then the pieces are more ... transformational. Or maybe digested is a better way to put it?

What are they made of anyway?

Newspaper, found wood, and hanging hardware. The graphics and imagery are screen-printed onto newspapers that I’d painted with thin coats of latex paint. They're wheat pasted onto the pieces which are constructed out of wood discarded in various Richmond alleyways.
So why those materials: Screen-printing, wheat paste, newspaper — how are they slapstick?

They’re cheap. They’re familiar. They’re no nonsense.

The ramshackle wood, the reclaimed materials, and their makeshift construction are references to the derelict structures pictured in Charlie Chaplin’s films and early cartoons like Popeye and Mickey Mouse. These are always humorously jerry-rigged.

The final structures involve a lot of tearing away, and sometimes destruction of the prints. Was that the plan all along?

No — or maybe a little bit — I saw it as a possibility. Once I started applying images with the wheat paste it was very natural to explore defacing, overlapping, and revealing as compositional strategies. Once the work was attached to the walls of the space, the color and text didn’t feel appropriate to the installation as a whole. I pasted new layers within the installation to orchestrate a greater sense of visual harmony throughout the piece.

Are you going to continue those strategies?

Yes.

I think there is a lot more room for exploration between spatial push and pull of torn printed matter. I was very excited with moments in which extra wall paper was applied to pieces projecting forward creating strange spatial tensions between background and foreground.

Another strategy that evolved through the process of overlapping and tearing prints came about by printing the same image in different colors or on different colored grounds. When I overlapped these prints I aligned the images, so that when they were torn, the lines of their graphic forms appeared to continue seamlessly from one print to another giving the illusion that it was their color that was shifting. Effects like these are interesting but… how should I put this? … I worry that they up looking too contrived because they don’t reveal anything. They’re just…
Yeah. Pretty much.

But gimmicks are kind of in the spirit of the project weren't they?
Well, yeah — and sometimes it’s hard to draw that line — between expressive communication and distancing mechanisms. I’m really interested in finding the right balance — the work has to have enough substance to draw viewers in — enough information to construct a narrative out of the elements — to build a world — but it has to provide this substance in a manner that deflates the reality of that world. It goes back to the tone of slapstick and the manner in which stylization allows for disruptions within a simulated experience.

It seems like you are talking about a kind of simultaneous attraction and repulsion…

I think that’s accurate. The text is about being driven away by fear and drawn in by desire — both leading to fantasies and confusion. It advocates applying a practiced attitude of detached observation to reflect on the truth of those fantasies.

The idea of luring people with images stirring desire makes me think advertising. Was that an influence?

Not really, I think it probably should have been.

Advertising feels kind of dirty, and I think some of its language would be fun to play with — the really obvious attempts at seduction through photography and the more subtle seductions of its typography.

Do you see advertising as a different thing than graphic design?

Advertising is obviously an aspect of graphic design, but you don’t see work that looks like it in the program (or, from what I’ve seen, at Pratt, MICA, or Yale). I think because it appears obvious, repetitive, uncreative, and, being ubiquitous, super un-special. The faculty and most of the students at VCU rightly want to experiment and find new visual languages. The trends at design schools seem to follow Dutch aesthetics that are typographic, geometric, and process oriented.

I think the moment is ripe to explore the kinds of type and image relationships that are really prevalent in advertising but with subject matter that is less… aspirational.

I think Tibor Kalman’s work is looking especially fresh to me right now: the language is direct, the images are tactile and hyper specific, and the combination of the two is provocative. It’s the complete opposite of the ultra formal Dutch “LEGO” typography thing. Kalman’s work doesn’t partake in advertising’s sleek veneer, but the manner in which language and image alter each other in his work is of a similar spirit.
I see him as an heir to the New York School of graphic design. Form married to concept.

Yes.

Right or not; I think of it as a very American sensibility, perhaps British too. What I like about his work — and this is what bothers me about my own pieces — is he isn’t hiding behind anything. I think formal and process-oriented explorations can yield interesting results, but without a stabilizing element, they can quickly devolve into soupy vagueness. I fear that is the case with the wall pieces. I’m completely disinterested in vagueness — to me it seems like an easy way of sidestepping rigour or a kind of shield...

A shield for what?

For deflecting scrutiny. Scrutiny of one’s message, one’s ability to communicate it, and oneself. No one wants to look dumb.

So why bother with being straightforward?

Straightforwardness is about cutting the bullshit — the “artsiness” — not putting on airs. Slapstick is populist. Great slapstick is great because it is inventive, but also because it is direct. Specificity is a means of imbuing a work with nuance. In comedy, specificity is important — the word “Buick” has more comedic potential than “car.”

I don’t like “gumbo” work. I like “PB and J” work. Work where decision-making is evident: the ingredients are clear and accessible — there’s nothing fancy about a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but it’s great.
Is it about control?
Do you see yourself wanting to control the meaning of your work?
No, not the meaning.
I think it’s a very big misconception to associate decision making with intended meaning. I don’t like meaning as a term; I don’t think we control it, and I don’t think of works as locked boxes requiring a key. In life, things become meaningful through our engagement with them. Skateboarding is meaningful to a lot of people; it signifies freedom, vandalism, a new relationship with architecture — depending on who you ask — but it has only developed those meanings because of the context and the group of people that enjoy doing it — none of those meanings are intrinsic to riding a plank with wheels.

That sounds like the kind of ambiguity that you were just protesting…

Well it isn’t as if skateboarding doesn’t have qualities particular to it; it just doesn’t have a single particular meaning. I’m a skeptical of intrinsic metaphysical essences, but there are properties that skateboards have that make them more likely vehicles for the associations they carry than… say… rollerblades, for example. Rollerblades are similar to skateboarding, but they are so uncool that wearing them after the age of nine is social suicide.

There’s the logistics:
Skateboards are cheaper, easier to make at home, and more comfortable for a kid to carry while riding a bike.

There are aesthetic reasons:
Skateboarding’s movements have more in common with surfing — which was already countercultural — than skiing — which looks dorkier and has associations with rich WASP-ey people.

Finally social cachet:
Because skateboarding is more difficult, competence at it carries greater social value.

Saying I care about specificity and disagree with singular meaning isn’t contradictory or even ambiguous. If I’m deciding between a cactus and an aloe plant to decorate a room — well a cactus carries different associations than an aloe plant. These associations are the result of a complex mixture of cultural significations, personal associations, and physiological responses, and no one can control all of those elements, namely, “the meaning.” BUT — you can decisively say, “I want a cactus in that corner instead of an aloe plant.”
And what's the significance of that decision? Cactus over aloe plant?

This may sound like a cop-out, but it depends.

On the context. On the relationship between it and the context. Relationships are actually the essential thing. In a greenhouse — a cactus probably won’t be that noticeable. However, if you choose to put a cactus alone in a room that happens to be the interior of one of those inflatable bouncy houses for kids’ birthday parties... well it would probably stand out...
I see your point. So how does this thinking play into your work and more specifically your decision making process?

I think of the works as stages: virtual spaces for different elements to form relationships within. This definition could apply to writing, drawing, posters — there's a temporal element too — the speed at which different elements come into focus ... maybe relationships is the primary idea — a typeface can be positioned in relation to an image in the similar manner to cactus and the bouncy house — but the stage is important — the sense of setting as setup.

That's one of the reasons the room seems more successful than the smaller works that inhabit it; its props are responsive to its setup. By applying the molding correctly, I've created conditions in which the curling of the wallpaper is able to have increased drama.

Not everything has to have drama. I'm actually not as interested in works in which all the elements are coordinated toward a singular purpose. I think tragedies tend to feel this way — fate is inevitable — and all the elements are building up to this critical gesture — that doesn't interest me. When I talk about setup I'm thinking of the film *Airplane*: the plane is there, the airport's there — now goof off and be as creative as possible within that framework.

If I may stop you real quick —
to segue into the critical potential of slapstick that you mentioned earlier?

At first, I thought slapstick as a design approach was critical of Modernism — which is an argument lacking real urgency.

What I’m coming to realize is that my choice of slapstick as an approach and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as subject matter reflect a critical attitude towards mediated experiences that is very relevant to contemporary culture.

How do you mean? What experiences?

The most of obvious example is digital experiences in which we communicate through an interface. However, though we spend increasing amounts of time in virtual realms, mediation isn’t a uniquely contemporary condition. In a really general sense all narratives and representations of reality are a type of mediation...

When I say I’m critical of seamlessness it’s even more accurate to say I’m critical of conditioning. I worry that the more I experience life through templates the more templated I will become. I’m trying to play around with the systems that tend to go unnoticed — that we experience as if on autopilot: all those things that are designed to be invisible.

Design is in a similar place that painting was when photography gave early Modernist painters reason to play with the very virtual, very seamless space of classical Western painting. On the one hand, imaging technologies are creating ever more immersive realities with increasing degrees of seamlessness — and on the other — technology that is able to provide real time feedback to people interacting through graphic elements like web pages or texts is changing our relationship to design in similarly immersive ways.
And you think slapstick is an approach that can tackle that?

I do.

Internet culture is inherently slapstick. This applies to both the absurdism of memes and the proliferation of “EPIC FAIL” videos documenting real-life mishaps. But web design is streamlined. It’s a funny situation, because we carry these expensive, magical frames that can show us anything, but what they show us is largely ridiculous. I’m interested in calling attention to these frames and to the bodies holding them.

With the progression and proliferation of virtual technology, the changing role of our body in culture becomes a big question. I don’t think our body is going to disappear anytime soon, but it seems easier to forget in a way.

We’re entering an interesting phase in which we can alter global events while remaining sedentary. There’s an episode of Arrested Development (“Off the Hook”; Season 4) in which Buster is unwittingly made an army drone pilot. He thinks he is playing a videogame and realizes it’s real only after accidentally destroying a hospital in Spain. Though it’s played for laughs, it’s actually a good example of the danger of what can happen when a simulation becomes indistinguishable from reality.

Augmented reality presents the flipside. It entails using apparatuses that overlay design elements over physical objects in real time. With this comes an opportunity for the world to become more stylized — more “arcade-ey” — with Facebook likes floating around our friends in real-time like points in a game. It also has a great deal of slapstick potential as there are a lot of opportunities for design to humorously complicate our experience.
I'm interested in revealing the illusion of these interfaces and playing with their expectations in humorous ways. I think malfunctions can be a critical tool for revealing underlying apparatuses, and slapstick brings an element of play to that revelation.

**Why is play important?**

Because there is no underlying truth. There's no turtle at the bottom of all the turtles holding up the universe...it's turtles all the way down. Or maybe I'm wrong... But the truth of representation: that a representation of reality is actually a lie isn't a huge revelation, is it? It's all a show folks! OK. So? I know I've come back to that point “revealing the artifice” as some kind of a goal over and over again — but the goal is actually to reveal illusions that lead to other illusions in a manner that is entertaining — to come to terms with the illusions and enjoy the illusions. “Entertainment” sounds frivolous — it is — but it's also how Scheherazade saves her life in _A Thousand and One Nights_ through imaginative stories within stories within stories. She saved herself by weaving a delightful illusion that reflected her world and transformed it.

*Enjoy the show.*
An elemental feature of slapstick is the struggle of (wo)man against the unrelenting pull of gravity. Much of slapstick’s humor derives from characters failing to resist this pull and falling down — or pratfalls. Paradoxically, as much as slapstick is about being pulled down to earth, it’s also about overcoming this cosmic obstacle: A great deal of the excitement of watching slapstick is the thrill of watching actors defy gravity by performing daring and ingenious stunts. (The films of Buster Keaton and Jackie Chan provide good examples of this kind of performance.)

Lightness is key because it is the tone that slapstick aspires to. The misfortunes that slapstick portrays are humorous partly because they are without serious consequences.

Calvino’s memos inform a great deal of my thinking. His memo on Lightness is particularly constructive, as notions of Weight and lightness are essential to slapstick.


In this article, Michael Bloom makes lucid connections between Kung-Fu cinema, slapstick comedy, and Zen Buddhist philosophy and practice.


Borges’ stories in Collected Fictions are like tiny jewels that encapsulate a vastness beyond their measure.

They have a geometrical element to them and often involve labyrinths, spirals, and loops. Though his stories are fantastical, Borges utilizes fictional supplemental material (such as phony reviews for a book that doesn’t exist) that imbues his fictions with a deeper sense of reality.


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A film about lovers on the run — sort of. Godard’s color sense is French in the best way, and his cinematic editing techniques create punchy sequences with an undeniable graphic impact.


Hofstadter’s hefty book is about layers of consciousness. It’s a heady narrative playfully told through animal fables a la Aesop.


This essay identifies and challenges a number of Modernist assumptions. A primary culprit is the formulation of form as a vessel for transmitting content.


Rick Poynor explores the influence and implications of design in culture. His ability to navigate high and low culture — their intersections and inversions — makes him a powerful role model.


A manual intended to guide one through the realms and emotional stages of the Afterlife.


A folk novel written in China in the 15th century: a magical monkey hatches out of a stone egg and wreaks havoc on heaven. It contains a great deal of slapstick elements: comic martial arts action (in which secret techniques are given humorously hyperbolic names), colorful cast of two-dimensional characters, these exaggerated characters are driven by base desires to inevitable, but humorous, misfortune.

The book, and its various film and television incarnations, are no doubt a significant influence on subsequent martial arts comedy, and a direct influence on the hugely successful martial arts comedy manga series Dragonball.
[AUDIENCE CLAPPING]

>>SO WHAT’S THE TITLE?