

A dark gray right-angled triangle is positioned in the bottom-left corner of the page. A red line originates from the top-left vertex of the triangle and points towards the text.

Twelve Strategies
Bruce Mau

Our work with Zone Books convinced us that design is a temporal practice; it concerns the controlled release of events in time as well as space. It deals with sequencing, composition and memory. What we perceive as uniquely spatial is, in fact, also always temporal. (How does an object—understood as an occupation of space—unfold in time?) The printed book is a frozen moment in a process of growth and development that continues its evolution in the hands and mind of the reader. Perhaps it has more to do with cinema than is usually acknowledged.

1

**Time: consider
objects as events**

Every object incorporates other objects just as it is itself incorporated by other systems. The discrete object must always be considered in its manifold of relationships to its milieu. Failure to account for this embeddedness discredits the richness of simplicity by cutting the object off from the events it generates and from the events that generated it. Scale offers a technique for apprehending both the object and its milieu. We strive to recognize the complexity of simple things.

2

Scale: the end of
the discrete object

In our work, it's not a matter of dumbing down to a common denominator but of opening up to the broadest intelligence. We seek to work at the intersection of maximum density and maximum access. Robert Wilson has said that the best performers perform for themselves first. They open up a mental space and allow the audience into it. This is a generous approach to ideas, one without compromise.

**“Things should be
as simple as possible. But
no simpler.” — A. Einstein**

Two men sit awkwardly at a café table, both with pained expressions, as one says to the other: “Do you not be happy with me as the translator of the books of you?” Translation is an unsettling process. Moving an idea from one medium to another—for instance, from film to book, from architecture to cinema—brings into focus the qualities, potentials and limits for expression of each medium, as well as the structure and technique of the work itself. The translator’s challenge is to trace the effects of the original work, and to direct the translation towards producing those effects in a new way.

Found in the translation

Push a convention beyond its limits and surprising events occur outside the typical economy of attention and distraction. Filmmaker Chris Marker's homage to Akira Kurosawa, *AK*, opens with a shot of a man's face, motionless, staring at the camera as though it were a still-image. Marker holds this shot to the point of discomfort. As a viewer, one asks oneself: "Is he dead? Is this a hoax?" One comes to realize that the man is alive, and is, in fact, the master Kurosawa himself. One passes beyond the frame in which images are typically received, through a stage of anxiety and frustration, to a point where one begins to look at the face with new intimacy, as if one had never looked at a face before. In the work of Chris Marker, we see the possibility of evolving a practice that strategically maintains and moves away from accepted norms of visual communication.

Holding a shot too long

Signal carries noise and noise carries signal. If lacking in signal, pump up the noise. These days most “new” design increases noise at the expense of signal: increasing obscurity, decreasing legibility, turning readers into viewers. Often, of course, this is because the signal itself is simply not as rich as the noise. We are not so quick to abandon the signal. The studio believes in design which, through resonance, grows richer with time.

Signal to noise ratio

Exaggeration pulls a quality into the foreground; by amplifying its particularities the quality is clarified. In order to create a manifesto (a cultural organism that can survive in our corrosive information context), we must create extremes of clarity. Legibility is our ability to distinguish a particular quality against the background noise of the milieu. Amplifiers or exaggerations become emblems—Online and high-contrast.

Exaggeration amplifier

Describe print-based media in the quantitative terminology of new media and what becomes apparent is the extent of "bandwidth" carried by the non-text based qualities of an object. The tactility, colour, material, smell, history, image, and portability of an object produce what we call associative bandwidth, subliminal signal—or, signal below the threshold of awareness. All of these serve to inflect the meaning of an object. They make it speak of intelligence, consideration, contemporaneity, criticality, accessibility, or generosity. Although we may not focus in a cognitive sense on these qualities, the channel remains open. The real effect and power of the work emerge in the tension between our cognitive and associative engagement. Perhaps the most challenging constraint facing Online design application, and the reason so much of it seems anemic or impoverished, is simply how narrow the bandwidth is—effectively stripped of all that conventional signal.

**Associative bandwidth
(subliminal bandwidth)**

There is nothing worse than burdening a project with too many archived ambitions, too much attention to detail, too much finesse, too much intelligence. Part of the work is the work between the work—how our projects, and the dilemmas, conflicts and opportunities they generate, resonate with one another. It requires a "critical mass" of production to maintain an economy of application. Innovation on one project can be applied to another and the ease and liberty of relaxed speculation finds its expression in the work.

Work work work

The work doesn't happen where it seems it ought to. We expect the work (of graphic design at least) to happen on the surface. Instead it happens in the "thickness", in the turning of the page, like a spark jumping a gap. The third event—the meaning and power of the work—occurs between images, between a text and an image, a void and an image. The third event is the cut. The violent Einsteinian moment where two apparently known quantities catapult themselves into a (third) new domain. The power of the third event can only be produced in the mind of the reader when they transform the potential energy of an image into the kinetic energy of meaning.

The third event

Design the design. Defining a project by shifting constants into variables and vice versa will produce new results. Design the definition. Design the problem. Design the equation. We sometimes find ourselves applying our work to the wrong end of a problem. Remember, conventions become conventional through ubiquitous reinforcement. A left handshake would be just as friendly if it wasn't so unexpected. Often, a project is defined in conventional terms. The expectation is that work will be confined to the typical variables while the usual constants remain. Thus, the logo should be a fixed form, its placement variable; the font should be consistent, its size variable; the business card should be the standard size, its typography "unique"; architecture should have three dimensions, graphic design two. So often the constants threaten the work with conventionality, and banality.

Constants into variables

Sometimes one must rely on gut instinct, and simply go where the feeling is good.

A little song, a little dance,
a little seltzer down the pants