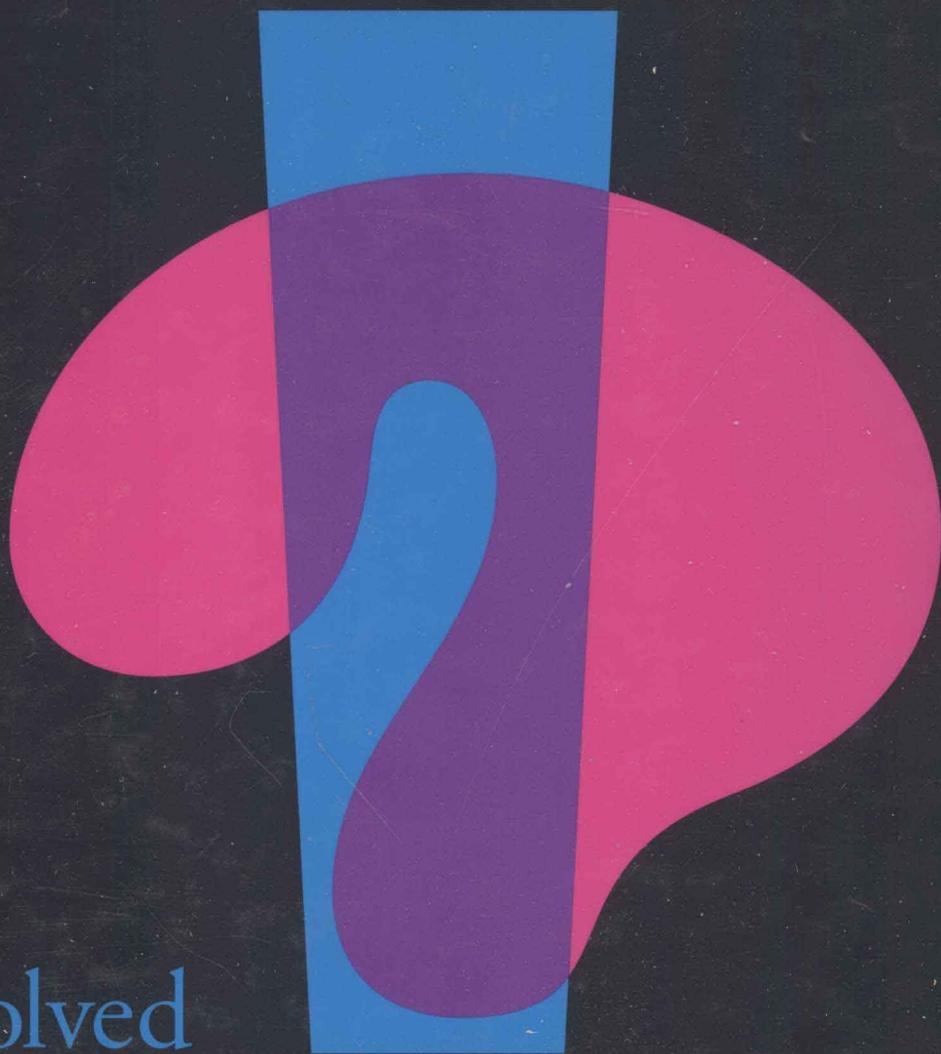
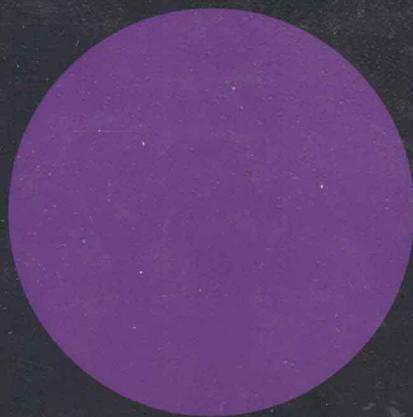


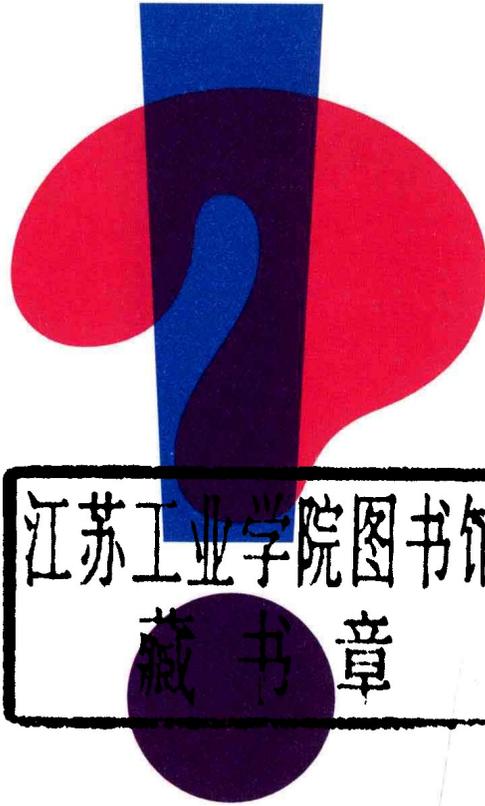
*A primer in design and communication by Michael Johnson*



# Problem Solved



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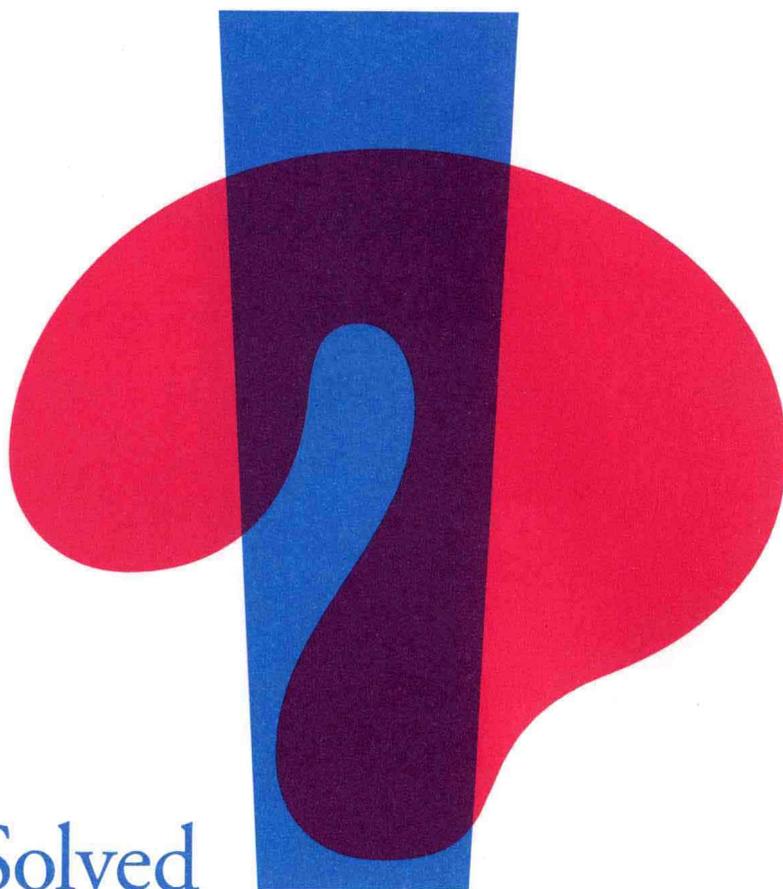
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Michael Johnson  
johnson banks  
June 2002

The symbol used opposite and  
on the cover of this book is called  
an *interrobang*

It is derived from a printer's mark  
which used a question mark  
superimposed onto an exclamation  
point – a simultaneous question  
and exclamation



# Problem Solved



*A primer in  
design and communication  
by Michael Johnson*



*The RE-APPRAISE OR DIE problem*

*Often older brands, companies, or even countries sometimes become so caught up in their past that it overtakes them. Only when faced with extinction do they realize that they need to challenge people's perceptions head on.*

*The ASTONISH ME problem*

*Sometimes plain old flat, straight and normal just doesn't get people to sit up and take notice. How can you create the illusion of something that isn't really there?*

*The SOAP POWDER problem*

*With products and services becoming increasingly similar, the onus falls more and more upon designers and advertisers to create believable brands – often out of thin air – that stand out from the crowd. But do customers still fall for it?*

*The MESSAGE IS THE PRICE problem*

*The brief most professionals dread is the one that focuses on price or value-for-money. Dealing with a cheap 'n' cheerful message is one of the toughest assignments, but communicating 'expensive' and 'exclusive' has just as many pitfalls.*

*The CHARITY BEGINS AT WORK problem*

*Blue-chip clients with generous budgets buy the respect of their creative consultants, but they can't buy their love. Enter the charity clients, seemingly grateful, initially respectful. But make the most of it – it may not last forever.*

*The PARADIGM SHIFT problem*

*It's the holy grail for a designer or communicator – an opportunity arrives in a marketplace where a big idea can really make a difference. But breaking out of the mould can be a difficult and frustrating process.*

# Contents

*The FUNNY BOO-HOO problem*

*It's the default setting of many creatives. Struck for an idea? – use a funny. There's no doubt that humour makes people warm to a person, a product, or an ad but does it sometimes get in the way of the real message?*

*The NOTHING SHOCKS ME problem*

*Communicators around the world often resort to shock tactics to get their message across. But how often are their tactics legitimate, and do they work? What happens if it's just shocking for shock's sake and has little to do with the actual product or service on offer?*

*The EVOLVE OR REVOLVE problem*

*Very few ideas, brands or identities survive unchanged forever – something eventually has to give. But inertia often sets in – it's always easier to evolve a brand than to revolve. Is it always the correct decision?*

*The CARGO PANTS IN MIDDLE AGE problem*

*Some companies just can't create a viable image for themselves for a different, younger generation who would never buy anything from them. So they create new, 'junior' brands under assumed names and hope that no-one will notice. Does it work?*

*The INFORMATION REJECTION problem*

*It's claimed that we are all subjected to thousands of marketing messages a day. But we've trained ourselves to filter out all but the absolutely essential. The modern communicator has to find ways to present information in a way that the public will absorb, not ignore.*

*The ETHICAL problem*

*Can creatives produce potent work for a cause they don't believe in? Do you have to smoke to do great cigarette ads? When does a creative's ethical responsibility kick in and the client's kick out?*

*The CAN'T LEARN, WON'T LEARN problem*

*Designing for education is difficult and unglamorous but the power of an educational poster, effective exhibition, or breakthrough in children's books can win over even the coldest hearts and minds.*

*The OLDER CAN BE BETTER problem*

*To make something seem like it's been around for ever, even when it hasn't? Now there's a challenge. It helps if a product or service has legitimate heritage that the designer or communicator can latch onto. But sometimes they are asked to 'create' heritage out of thin air, and this may not work.*

*The OVER-DESIGNED problem*

*Sometimes design and art direction just gets in the way. If someone's spent too long agonizing over a layout or picking a typeface, the viewer can often tell. If it looks tortured, it's less likely someone will believe in it.*

*The GROUNDHOG DAY problem*

*People working outside design and communication expect the profession to be infinitely varied, with new problems to solve almost every day. Practising professionals know only too well that they are often faced with re-interpreting essentially the same elements, over (and over) again.*

*The FEAR AND LOATHING problem*

*A creative may think he or she has come up with the best idea in the world. But that will not help the designer who shows the ideas to a junior trying to second-guess their boss, or the manager who refers every critical design decision to his art-student children.*

*The NOBODY READS ANYMORE problem*

*The theory goes like this: ours is an increasingly visual culture, no-one's got time to read anymore. So stop writing lots of words and concentrate on the pictures. But is the theory right?*

## Problem: Where's the best place to start a book?

### Solved: At the beginning, of course.

Ask a 'creative' within design and advertising what it is that they do, and many will explain to you that they are a 'problem-solver'. It's the closest thing there is to a central tenet of most creative professionals' lives.

But what is problem-solving, exactly? Some weird kind of masonic practice they only teach at art college to the privileged few? 'Hey, I learned how to problem-solve today, Dad – I would tell you about it but I'm sworn to secrecy'. I don't think so.

We all know what problem-solving is, surely? We problem-solve constantly. Wake up, problem – bath or shower? Then another problem – cornflakes or muesli? Then another: bus or train to work? Problem: latte or cappuccino? Problem: take the lift or walk up the stairs?

In many respects problem-solving is our whole lives and maybe the ability to problem-solve is innate; it doesn't need teaching. But in a profession that depends on clients walking through the door with significant problems to be solved, you can see why some teaching might be needed. There's money at stake. And whilst (to paraphrase a friend's quote) a fine-art student can get away with creating his or her own problems to solve, a communications student is usually handed someone else's, with a looming deadline thrown in.<sup>1</sup>

When I began this project I was startled to find that there was no book called *Problem Solved*. So this book sets out to remedy that. I also wanted to distil two decades of working, reading and writing in design and art direction into one single book rather than a big and expensive bookshelf. (You'll find a selected list of further reading on page 284 which might help if you want to find out more).

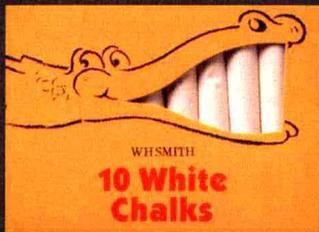
This book is aimed fairly and squarely at those who may be new to, or training in, the communications business. Or those mildly interested, or the many who are practising but who never read much. And creative types are notorious for never really reading anything. Look – ufoi hbsoi kpogj bnpo sdjd sgbpj bpod jprob fgposj gbposj bgpoj? See? (None of you actually read that bit did you; you were just busy looking for the next picture).

The book was inspired in its style by a wonderful book by John Berger, called *Ways of Seeing*, which I strongly urge you to read, if you haven't already.

For some reason (maybe because of its origins as a TV script), *Ways of Seeing* is designed in quite an odd way where the words and the pictures are almost

BELOW  
*Ways of Seeing*, John Berger





ABOVE  
WH Smith Chalk packaging  
IAN LOGAN DESIGN COMPANY  
UK 1995

intertwined – Berger talks a bit, then there's a picture. Bit more chat, another picture. And so on. And eighteen editions (and counting) later it continues to educate the world's art students as to his particular way of looking at the world.

So this book, as you will notice, has pretty strict rules as well. If we discuss a project there's a picture right next to the text. Here, I'll show you. Problem: Cheap pack for white chalk please. Solved: Cartoon of alligator and hole in the pack, chalk makes teeth. Round of applause for the designers, please.

This book has its roots in graphic design. But as its reach broadened, it became apparent that keeping 'design' and 'advertising' separate was a fairly petty exercise since the boundaries between the two disciplines continue to blur on an almost daily basis. My apologies if you don't agree, but my advice to you if you think you only need to know about design and not advertising, or vice versa, is to wake up and smell the coffee. The communications business has become one big blender with someone pouring all the stuff in the top, while jabbing away at the 'pulse' button on the side.

Since more and more colleges don't ask their students to specialize until later and later into their courses (and sometimes never), that seemed another reason to keep the reach of the book as wide as possible. And then of course there's the best reason of all – it's much more interesting this way. The communications business is a fascinating one: in what other world can you be expected to name a company one minute, write an ad the next, re-design a logo tomorrow and design an exhibition the day after?

I'll admit that my own personal love of the poster has affected the selection of a lot of the examples illustrated here. But I'm not losing too much sleep about that either. All graphic designers would probably quite happily bash out posters all day, and the truth is that within advertising, it still remains the quickest way to assess an idea. If the thought doesn't work as a quick picture and a scribbled headline, well, it's probably never going to work.

Then there's the tricky subject of my own work. Having been persuaded early on that the last thing I should do was a showcase of my own work, I then deliberated extensively as to whether to include any at all.

In the end I fudged it. There are twelve and a half of my own projects in this book (three of which were abject failures) out of over 600 projects in total (and more than 1,000 images). So forgive me for that paltry 2 per cent. I just needed them occasionally to make a point.

Anyway, back to solving problems. To a certain age and experience of designer 'problem-solving' had become associated with particular style and

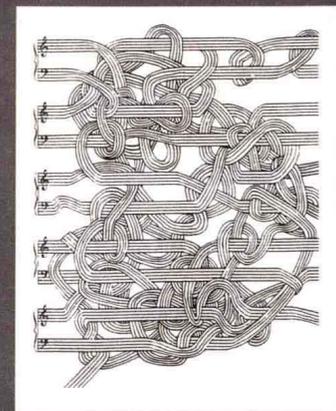
approach of a particular brand of designer. It probably all started with the 'New York School' of graphic designers (see 'the *funny boo-hoo* problem', page 106) whose disciples spread out on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1960s.

One of them, Bob Gill, wrote a famous book, *Forget all the rules you ever learned about graphic design. Including the ones in this book*, which succinctly illustrated his particular way of solving problems, often by turning the questions upside-down to reveal a new starting place entirely. Gill's re-interpretation of the brief to make a graphic representation of jazz ran thus: 'Since jazz is improvised music, make an improvised musical graphic image'.



Inspiration for this new way of seeing could come from anywhere. American illustrator Saul Steinberg used thumbprints to illustrate his passage to America in the 1940s and 1950s, immediately handing the language of the thumbprint to an up-and-coming new generation who then merrily recycled it in their layouts.

In fact, for a while there, problem solving seemed pretty simple. One British company told anyone that would listen that there was always one, irrefutable solution to a client's problem and they would, of course, find it first. A famous visual encyclopedia, first printed in 1980, made it clear that if you were searching for ways to solve a problem about, say, listening, that ears were the way forward. And if that weren't enough, they happily printed nine ear layouts for you, just in case you felt like indulging in a spot of appropriation.



The message had become obvious – there are clearly defined solutions to the problems we face – use them and your life will then become a lot simpler.

Some firms simply peddled the same solution with minor tweaks for

TOP RIGHT  
'Last word on jazz' illustration  
BOB GILL USA 1960

ABOVE LEFT  
'The Passport' illustration  
SAUL STEINBERG USA 1954

ABOVE  
Save the Alps poster  
PER ARNOLDI DENMARK 1993

LEFT  
*The Dictionary of Visual Language*  
PHILIP THOMPSON  
& PETER DAVENPORT  
UK 1980



ABOVE  
Corporate identity solutions  
SAUL BASS & ASSOCIATES  
USA 1964-85

TOP RIGHT  
Canadian Railways symbol  
ALAN FLEMING CANADA 1959

British Rail symbol  
DESIGN RESEARCH UNIT UK 1965

Dutch Railways symbol  
TEL GRAPHIC DESIGN  
THE NETHERLANDS 1967

Japan Railways symbol  
NIPPON DESIGN CENTER 1987

RIGHT  
Apocalypse poster  
WHY NOT ASSOCIATES UK 2000

each completely different problem. Surely all of the companies that walked through their doors had different problems at first, but when they had passed through the Saul Bass & Associates design factory, they all left with a curved-edge symbol centred and hovering in white space above a piece of quasi-modernist, sans-serif type.

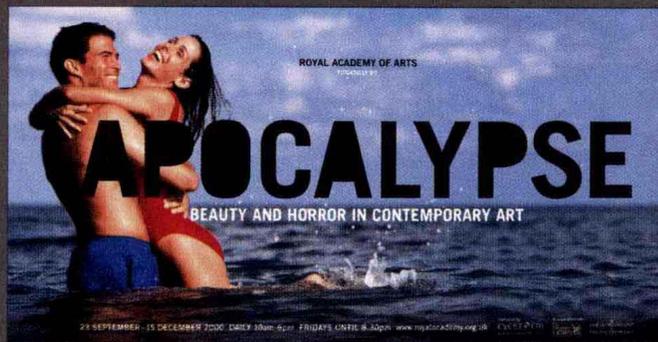
Once Canadian Railways had established the default setting, the railways of the world seemingly flocked to symbolize themselves with sinuous continuous lines echoing the sinuous continuous rails of their services.

Little wonder that a generation of designers training in the 1980s came to deride what they saw as a formulaic approach to design. Big ideas went out of fashion. 'Style' became the new idea, soon to be replaced by another, 'self-expression', as design and communications veered closer and closer to art, especially that of the conceptual variety.

But this reaction to problem solving in its original guise as expressed by the newer generation wasn't with the principle of *solving a problem*, it was with the idea that there could ever be a *set of generic solutions*.

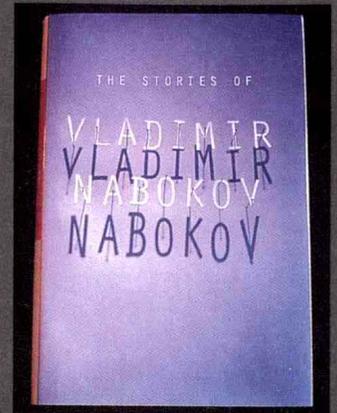
When British design company Why Not Associates produced this poster for an art show entitled 'Apocalypse', they turned their backs on their previously style-based way of working to produce a disturbing piece that jars with itself – and its subtitle – 'beauty and horror in contemporary art'.

By placing a crudely adapted piece of type across a stock idyllic scene they had suggested more horror than any of the exhibits were ever going to – a genuine 'stopper' that no amount of layered type would ever have surpassed. Not only had they stepped away from their conventional way of working, they had also solved the communication problem in a manner that suggested that 'problem-solving' as an approach was far from dead.

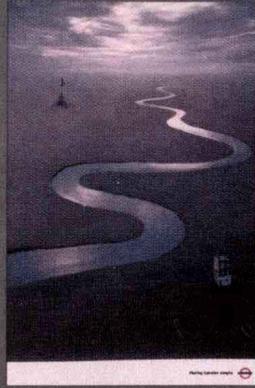


The point of this book is not to identify generic solutions. I'm not preaching for a return to the old received order. Far from it. All that this book concerns itself with is grouping together eighteen recognizable generic problems, and then showing you, the reader, how various communicators have dealt with them.

For example, communicators long ago learned that to make their customers sit up and notice their messages, a degree of astonishment was going to help (see the chapter on page 20). So this book of stories by Vladimir Nabokov (keen collector of butterflies in his spare time) suspends the letters of the author's name like trapped insects in the 'frame' of the book cover.



ABOVE  
Vladimir Nabokov book jacket  
DRENTTEL DOYLE PARTNERS USA 1995

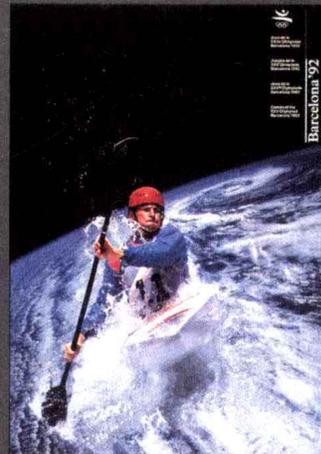
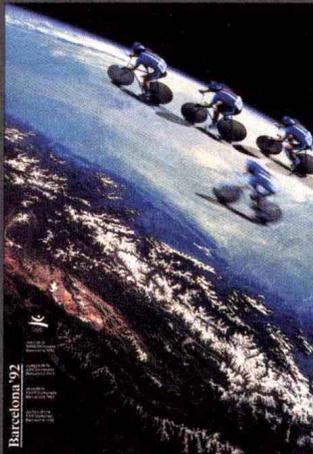


LEFT  
Making London Simple poster  
BMP DDB UK 1997

This information poster shows us how simple life becomes (union difficulties apart) when using underground railways. It takes out everything on a map of London apart from the viewer's home, the river Thames and their final destination, the middle of town. Some images are plainly impossible (like this set

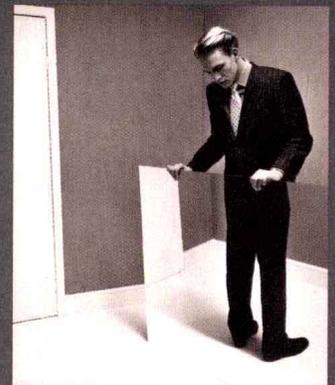
BELOW LEFT  
Barcelona Olympics posters  
ADDISON UK 1991

BELOW  
Image from Paul Smith  
ad campaign  
ABOUD SODANO UK 1998



of images for the 1992 Olympic Games or fashion shoot for Paul Smith) but we enjoy looking at them, we play the game, we interact with the poster's information. The surreal tricks played by the creatives have made us absorb the message: Problem Solved.

Sometimes creatives are given the opportunity to re-assess an entire area of design or advertising. The problem of communicating the strategic sense of the merger of Time Warner in the late 1980s fell to American design group Frankfurt Gips Balkind with their 1989 annual report. But rather than solve this particular problem within the tedious and stuffy vernacular that report design



RIGHT  
Time Warner Annual Report  
FRANKFURT GIPS BALKIND USA 1989

BELOW  
Rémy Martin cognac re-design  
LEWIS MOBERLY UK 1998

BELOW MIDDLE  
Yes logo and image from  
‘Tales from Topographic Oceans’  
ROGER DEAN 1973, 1974

BELOW BOTTOM  
Yes ‘Big Generator’ album sleeve  
MOUAT/AI UK 1987

had then acquired, the company managed to completely turn a particularly sedentary business sector upside-down with an astonishing paradigm shift that simply asked ‘why’ on the front in huge black letters. They then bombarded the reader with fluorescent inks, amazing imagery and attention-grabbing layouts inside.

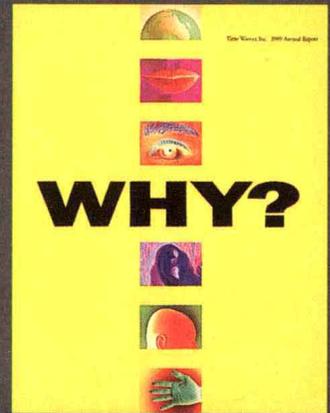
If the designers had begun the project intending to move the goalposts of report design, they certainly succeeded. But also, and probably just as importantly, they showed the world that hugely expensive and serious documents such as this could have style, wit and panache, and could still communicate that year’s message.

Sometimes the problem faced is whether a company or product should undergo radical or evolutionary change. When world-famous cognac producer Rémy Martin approached Lewis Moberly to look at their highly prestigious champagne cocktail, the designers simply put them on an evolutionary road, putting the bottle on a kind of diet and making it just a little taller and slimmer. A good example of evolving, rather than revolutionizing, an historic brand.

But sometimes other factors come into play. When British supergroup once known as Yes reformed themselves after a lengthy hiatus, they faced significant problems. Firstly, it was by no means certain that they could ‘trade’ under the ‘Yes’ moniker since important members of the original band were no longer present. Secondly, the graphic style of the band was umbilically linked to that of world-famous artist Roger Dean.

At the last minute, permission was granted to use the original name, but the decision had been taken to radically change the graphic style of the band’s output, which was dragged kicking and screaming into the 1980s with some computer-generated, squashed pink and yellow type. Never has an identity change been more marked.

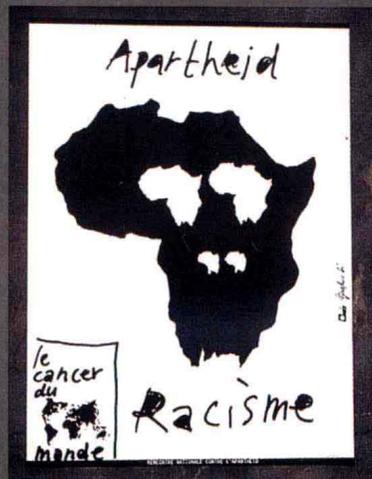
But whilst the graphic revolution signalled the shift in musical style that the new version of the band had taken (a sort of glossier ‘stadium rock’ take on their original ‘progressive’ roots), it didn’t fit with the fans’ image of their heroes.



Since merchandizing now plays such a significant role in touring income, when the new style didn't 'sell', it came as no surprise when the next incarnation of the band happily returned to their airbrushed homeland in search of some floating fish, foggy scenes and Tolkienesque landscapes.

Sometimes the problem isn't so much with the brief, it's with the person doing the briefing. I've called this the 'fear and loathing' problem (see page 250)

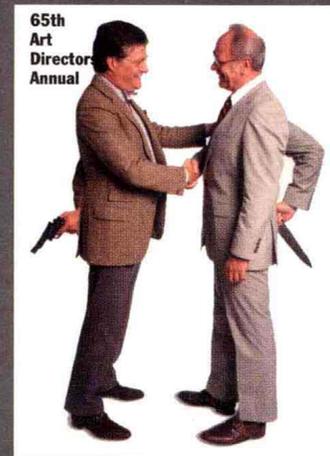
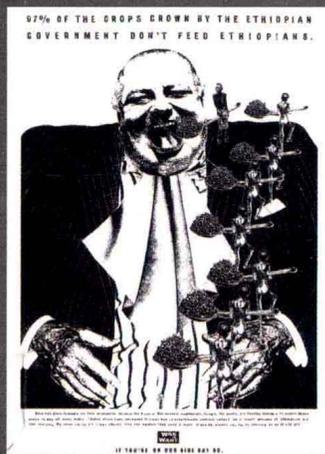
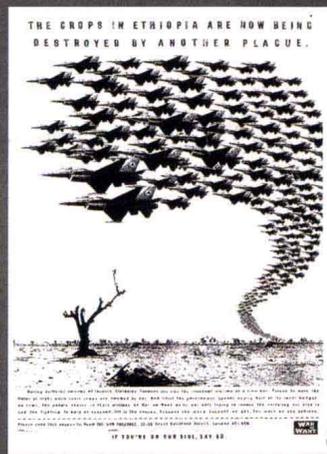
and it's beautifully visualized in this image developed for the cover of an awards annual where the creative (we presume sporting the obligatory bow-tie) shakes hands with the client (decked out in innocuous grey suit) but each hides an instrument of death or torture behind their backs.



problems. One concerns apartheid, the other a play about an ex-concentration camp doctor reliving his past on an archeological dig. Both communicate with enormous economy of means, proving that it can sometimes take very few elements to solve a communication problem.

A more traditional way of solving the problems of the world (and perhaps legitimizing a creative's other, less than ethical, paying clients) is the time-honoured route of 'the charity client'. These powerful and dramatic press ads for War on Want are a classic of their genre; probably briefed to be hard hitting and uncompromising, they definitely succeed.

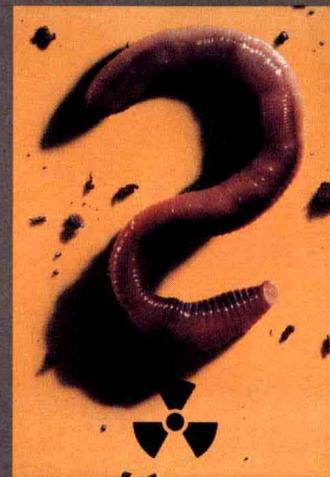
But as you will see in the chapter on page 76, there is more to the charity client (and the agencies pursuing them) than meets the eye. Suffice it to say, creatives who give their all to producing subversive



ABOVE  
Art Directors Club of New York  
Annual cover  
BOB GILL USA 1986

LEFT  
Anti-apartheid poster  
GRAPUS FRANCE 1989

BELOW  
KambeK poster  
GUNTER RAMBOW  
GERMANY 1987



LEFT  
War on Want press ads  
BOASE MASSIMI POLLITT UK 1986



communication (such as this poster from American agitators The Guerilla Girls or the 'No-shop' project shown left) without falling prey to the lure of megabucks from megalopolis are pretty rare. The 'McShit' student project shown left rails against the power of the multinational, but will she stay true to her beliefs when, and if, she sees the colour of their money?

Bizarrely, the new and welcome obsession with ethical responsibility takes us down some strange paths. Some of them seem to suggest severe repercussions for the communication arts; the project below shows copies of a British newspaper from succeeding days with broadly similar editorial content.

The significant difference is that a financial institution paid, on the second day, for all the ad-space, resulting in a newspaper with no ads, on less paper which used less trees and simply let you read the paper's contents, unimpeded by any advertising interruptions.

What this has got to do with a fairly staid building society isn't entirely clear. What is apparent, however, is that such as this has significant implications for the way many of us will approach the future.

And in the end, that's all I'm trying to do with this book. Simply grouping the world's communication problems into eighteen types may sound unlikely, but it at least allows me to show you the massive variety of solutions that can come from a similar starting place. Problem-solving is not a restrictive art but a liberating one.

If you get as much out of this book by reading it as I did by writing it, then I've succeeded and the problem – that there are no books on problem-solving – has been solved. (I hope so, because that was a confusing sentence to write).

Anyway, back to the real problem: how to end the introduction?

Solution: use an unexpected ending.



TOP LEFT  
'No Shop' project  
KRISTINE MATTHEWS/  
SOPHIE THOMAS  
UK 1997

ABOVE  
McShit student project  
JOHANNA CHUA  
LONDON COLLEGE OF PRINTING  
UK 2002

ABOVE RIGHT  
'Do women have to be naked  
to get into the Met. Museum?'  
GUERRILLA GIRLS USA 1989

RIGHT  
Independent newspaper,  
with and without ads.  
Project sponsored by the  
Bradford and Bingley  
Building Society  
M&C SAATCHI UK 2001

*The RE-APPRAISE OR DIE problem*



Often older brands, companies or even countries become so caught up in their past that it overtakes them. Only when faced with extinction do they realize that they need to challenge people's perceptions head-on. Sometimes they are ripe for re-appraisal and a designer is given the chance to question perceived wisdom. It's probably the most interesting brief there is, but it's an obstacle course for the uninitiated.