PRECURSOR●

THE
CREATIVITY
WATCHLIST

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PRE- FACE

By
Jan Middendorp

This is not an era of -isms. Manifestoes are rare, and likely to be ironic. Gone are the days when art and design magazines heralded new movements and propagated ideologies. Tens of thousands of pages featuring recent work are available both in print and online, but they are usually about presenting individuals and their projects, not about synthesis. Attempts to uncover hidden motives and affinities or to analyze underlying conflicts and paradoxes are rare. Printed publications are often about the fetishism of ink on paper rather than critical research (not a bad survival strategy, in fact) while the web offers a constant stream of new information that leaves little time to step back and see the bigger picture. To identify, in the lava stream of hot new work, strands of different colors, to single out the most significant projects, has become a highly individual exercise. Everybody has to sort out this multitude, and make sense of it, in his or her private way. We've also arrived at a point where the preference for one tool, medium, or discipline over another has lost its function of defining and legitimizing a practice or a body of work. No combination of tools or skills can be regarded as inherently more effective or pure; no single medium is necessarily more adequate or urgent than others for dealing with content matter related to our times.

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For decades we have admired Marshall McLuhan's insight that "the medium is the message" and speculated about all that it might imply. But what are the media (yes, it is a plural) today? McLuhan explained his famous phrase by referring to "painters, poets and musicians of the symbolist and abstract era of the past decades," whose attitude to their medium of choice reflected that very same emphasis on means over content. In mainstream galleries, there is still a tendency to stress the importance of these choices today: "The Return to Paint"; "The New Drawing"; "The Month of Photography". Selling the medium as the message has several advantages. For the press, it makes the work easier to pigeonhole. For commercial gallerists, it smoothens the communication with the audience/customers: turning them into collectors of painting or photography by convincing them of the importance of that particular medium simplifies the relationship. A third advantage is that the more complex aspect of an artwork's contents (Yes, it's an abstract painting/video/sculpture, but what does it mean?) is resolved by the fact that it doesn't really matter as the real meaning is in the choice of art form.

But it seems that artists of all disciplines have moved beyond the cult of the medium — as was to be expected. Among the plethora of McLuhan-related information available on the Web, there are several audio and video interviews in which the Toronto professor loosely summarized some of his ideas. On several occasions he expressed his admiration of artists as the people who are most immediately connected to the undercurrents of the times. "The artist is the one person whose antennae pick up these messages before anybody, and so he is always thought of as being way ahead of his time because he lives in the present. There are many reasons why most people prefer to live in the age just behind them. It's safer. To live right on the shooting line, right on the frontier of change, is terrifying."

Intriguing rather than terrifying, the biggest change happening today seems to be the very undermining of McLuhan's most famous thesis. The medium doesn't matter so much anymore. For instance, McLuhan attached great significance to the character of media, distinguishing between "hot" media — highly defined, requiring little audience participation — and "cool" media that have lower intensity and require more interaction from the user. Today's digital media, having absorbed the old media, be they hot or cool or lukewarm, though without completely annihilating them (books, magazines, telephone, radio, television, etc.) are beyond any such classification. It's not the medium that determines the characteristics of the work, it is the user that decides how it is experienced or used; whether the medium is interactive or not is an ad-hoc decision made in collaboration between the content provider and the user, if these two can be separated at all. Should we want to simplify this new condition into a McLuhanesque slogan, it would be "the user is the message."

Looking more specifically at cutting-edge art and design, the choice of art form or medium has practically stopped being an issue. Distinctions that until recently seemed very significant are becoming irrelevant. The contrast between analog and digital media, between the handmade and the computer-assisted, is not

charged with symbolic or ideological meaning the way it used to be. Many creative operators happily move between the two worlds, often within one single project. But it is not just the erstwhile dichotomy between the electronic and the analog that is on its way out. Today's precursors in the visual field often have little interest in defining what it is they do exactly. Decisions about technique are the result of practical considerations and are taken in view of the circumstances or the character of the project.

There are notable exceptions, of course. Portuguese street artist Vhils[1] (Alexandre Farto) creates images by stripping away layers of plastering on urban walls, revealing the stone wall underneath. For him, this process "...corresponds to a sort of symbolical act of archeological excavation. If we regard all things as being composed by layers, in order to bring to light something that lies beneath the surface of things we need to remove some of them to a certain degree. This very process of removal contains the main message of my body of work. I try to dive into the several layers that compose history." Although his pieces are striking in themselves — strong images realized


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on a monumental scale — Vhils's work is very much about the process and his choice of support for his imagery.

While Vhils has embraced a single medium to convey his message, most of today's cutting-edge work is in many places at the same time. Trying to make a distinction between art and design often seems pointless. Many operators produce art using designers' tools, or create applied imagery that may lead an afterlife on a gallery wall. There is now a type of work that in its strategy and choice of means recalls the conceptual art of the seventies and eighties, yet results in objects that resemble furniture or clothing and often function quite well in that capacity (though not necessarily with utmost efficiency). There are pieces that are made with the know-how and step-by-step production process of graphic design, yet lack any functionality, and communicate nothing but themselves — creating a kind of open object that represents (in Daniel Eatock's words) a "poetic gesture" rather than an object with a specific function or message.

"I am a designer," says Clémence Seilles, "because I am concerned with setting up real-life situations and presenting an outcome that inspires people, and that's what designers do." Yet when asked how she sees her work — which inhabits a place somewhere between play, speculation and usability — function in daily life, she candidly replies: "Nothing that I propose 'works' or 'functions' in people's lives."

Designers, be it graphic or otherwise, used to refer to non-client work as "self-initiated," projects they commissioned to themselves, as it were. This kind of description does not fit the two-faced practice many are pursuing today. As Daniel Eatock[3] notes: "That kind of language looks at things from a design perspective — 'being your own client' — and I don't think my work fits in with that. I have an independent practice in which I explore things and make work as an artist; and often the works resemble design or use a language related to graphic design, or to design in a broader sense."
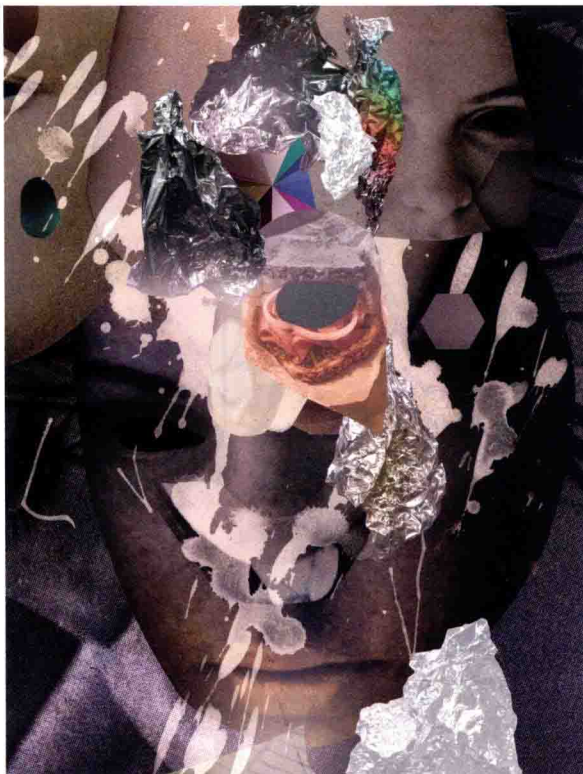
3

This book documents the current state of things by offering an unusually broad overview of work, covering art, graphic and product design, typography, web-based design, animation, fashion, performance, editing and more, with single pieces often falling into more than one category at once. The versatility of individual artists can be quite phenomenal: an artist like Kim Hiorthøy[2] combines a practice in art and visual communication with a successful career as a musician. What makes the landscape even more polymorphic is the fact that many operators have chosen not to choose when it come to the way their work looks. Stylistic decisions, too, are taken ad-hoc, responding to the necessities of the moment. Style, in fact, is another categorization system that has crumbled. The superficial formal exercises of 1980s and early 1990s postmodernism have given style a bad name — as if any special care for stylistic matters signals, by definition, a degree of dishonesty or calculation. "Don't use the word style," says graphic designer Boy Vereecken sternly. "Style for me is a negative term, related to design that doesn't serve its content and is merely about form. I don't see my work anywhere near the term 'style.'"

Again, Daniel Eatock's view on the matter is interesting. "I try to allow the logic or the concept of the piece to determine the form. And if the idea or the concept is interesting, then the visual result tends to be interesting. For it to be interesting, it doesn't need to be beautiful … I'm never driven by aesthetics. I try to remove as many aesthetic decisions from the design process as I possibly can and allow the concept to determine the visual outcome."

Which does not imply that the content of the work is now a clear-cut unequivocal message again. Eatock is one of many artist-designers today who produce work that has an openness and casualness both stylistically and in terms of the choice of medium, while also avoiding to convey a strongly articulated content: Eatock's "poetic gestures" invariably have a certain ambiguity, as do those presented in the furniture of Raw Edges or the clothing designs of Stéphanie Baechler — the work is saying many different things, and it is hard to pinpoint the maker's standpoint. Going back to McLuhan, he already pointed out forty years ago that the condition of living in an "electronic age" of global communication entails a multiplicity of positions. Asked to elaborate on his famous quip "I don't necessarily agree with everything I say," McLuhan stated in a televised public Q&A session: "A point of view means a static, fixed position. You can't have a fixed position in the electronic age — it's impossible to have a point of view, even have any meaning at all. You've got to be everywhere at once, whether you like it or not. You have to be participating in everything going on at the same time."

1

WITH

Lucas Simões / Benbo George / Raw-Edges Design Studio / Stéphanie Baechler /
Coöp / Kokoro & Moi / ALMASTY / Remo Caminada / catalogtree / Clement Valla /
Melvin Galapon / Frédéric Teschner Studio / Human vs Machine / Côme de Bouchony

DIGILOG

Digital tools are an important aspect of today's practice in almost every discipline. Not all users in the creative realm take this presence for granted. The mere inevitability of digital hardware is cause for concern or annoyance to some. They question our relationship to machines in their work, or subvert the attractiveness and ubiquity of digital language by using analog and manual techniques to make images that simulate the aesthetics of the digital.

Yet the analog and the digital are no longer each other's opposites. If there was once a gap between the two worlds, it is closing. Some of today's most significant work is truly in both realms at the same time. The act of making things has become an unprejudiced back-and-forth between analog and digital means of processing the material; whether the tool of choice for a particular phase in the process is a knife, a pen, or a digital tablet is often a matter of practicality, not conviction.

P.20-23
STÉPHANIE BAECHLER
Fabric project

This freedom of choice within the process leads to procedures as well as products that are literally multi-layered. The results of the various phases — from handmade to digital, from painstakingly crafted to automatically generated — may remain visible in the outcome, creating an intriguing ambiguity and depth of vision. What seems an image or a simulacrum is in fact a tangible object (and vice versa); what looks like the outcome of a computer calculation done in seconds may in reality be the result of hours of meticulous drawing and constructing, or the other way around.

Many of the artists and designers featured here incorporate a narrative into each work — the story of its making is as much part of its meaning as what the viewer sees at first glance. But in contrast to a kind of conceptual art where the process has become the work and vice versa, the process is now part of the work's appearance. It wears its story on its sleeve.

P.14-19
RAW-EDGES DESIGN STUDIO
Stack
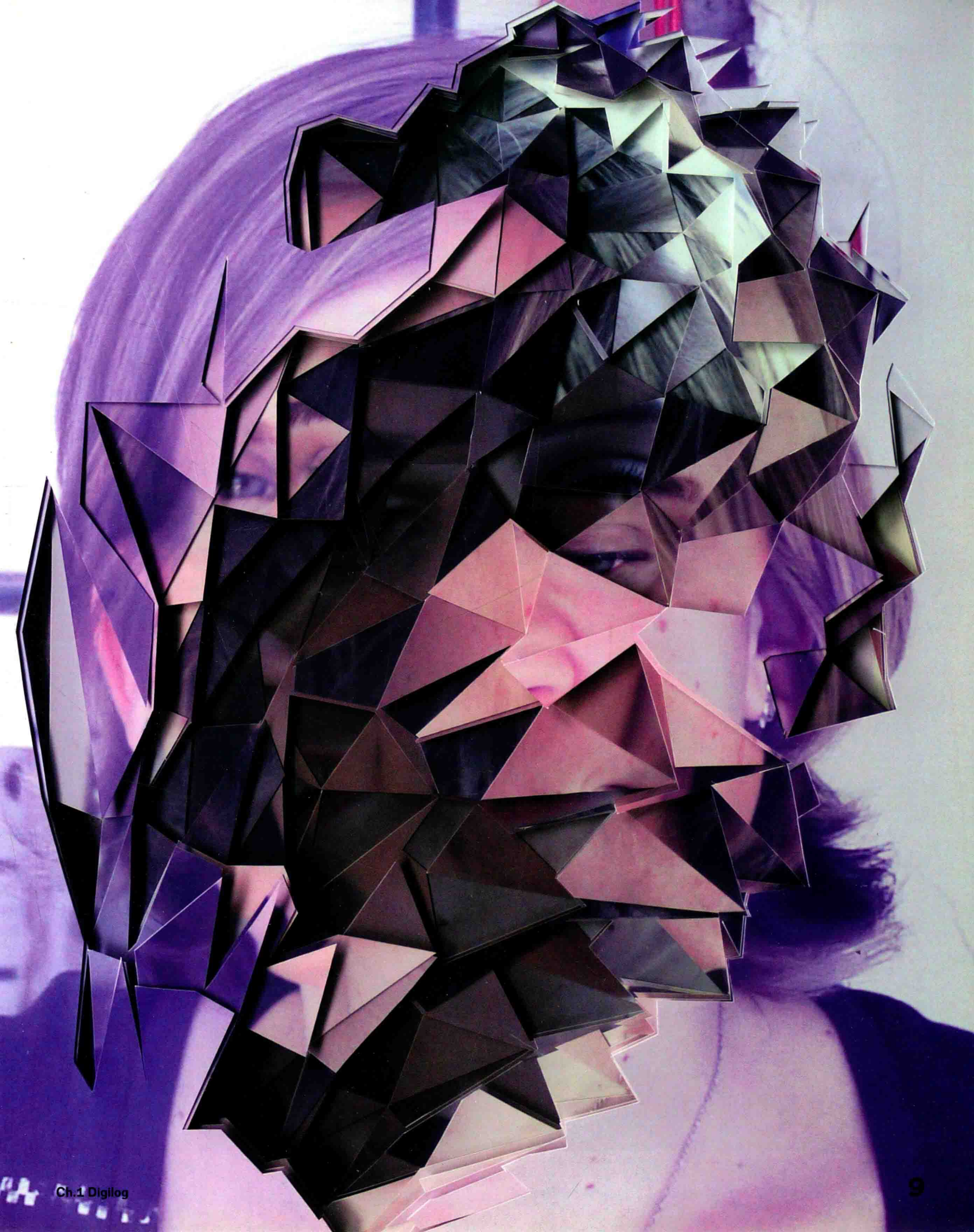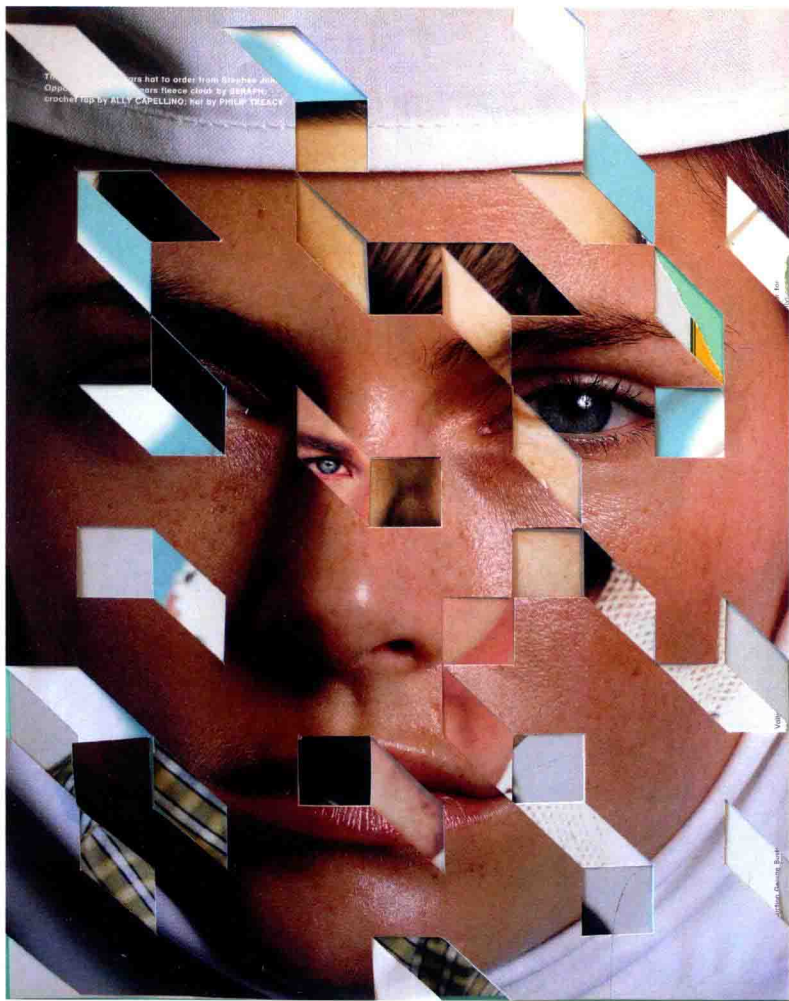
Study for Unportrait

Study for *Unportrait* and *Unmemory* series.
2010 · Cut-out magazine pages · 21 × 29 cm

Quasi-Cinema (Landscape of you)

Banal travel photographs become like movie scenes. The works consists in developing the same picture many times, each with a slightly different framing, creating the sensation that the image is in motion. The images are then sewn into small tubes that are fixed in a wood and fabric panel, creating long stripes as in a possible movie.
2010 · Sewed photographs, wood and fabric · 10 × 110 × 5 cm
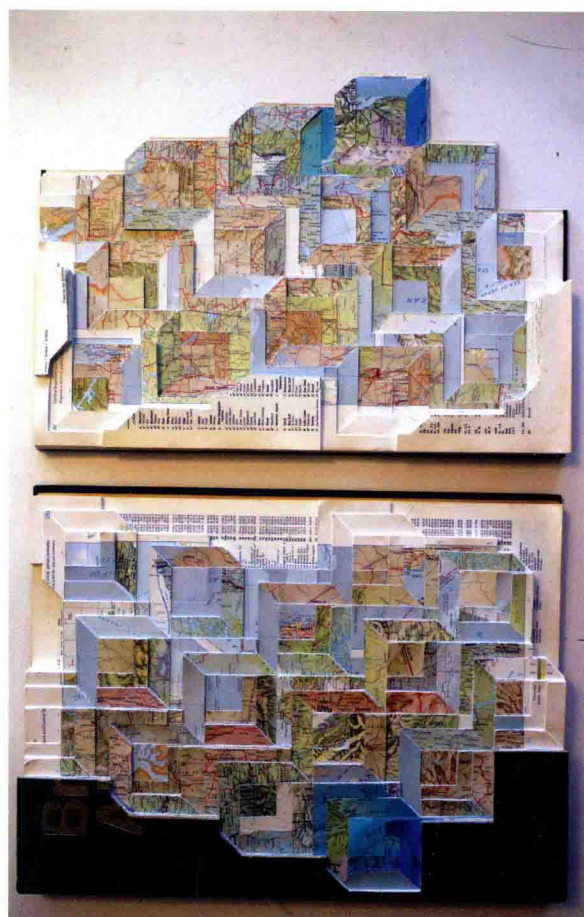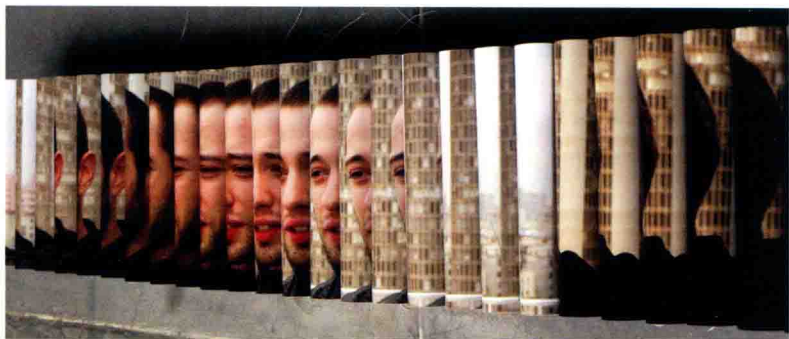
Brittanica Atlas

Simões's interventions on books address the question of culture as merchandise. Cutting into books changes their function: they stop being useful carriers of information. The interventions play with the names shown on the covers, transforming fetishes of knowledge into pure objects. An ironic view of someone who loves books and arts.
2010 · Cut-out book · 38 × 29 cm

# Lucas Simões

BORN IN 1980

BRAZIL

FINE ART, ARCHITECTURE

Lucas Simões graduated with a degree in architecture from the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas in Brazil and the Politecnico di Milano. He lives and works in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Opposite page
Unportrait (Requiem)

Simões took portraits of intimate friends while they revealed a secret. "My intention was to capture the images and not to listen to the secret, so I asked them to choose a song for me to listen to on my headphones while I took the photographs. I asked them if their secret had any color, so that each portrait would carry the secret's colors. I chose ten of these shots, cut and overlaid them using acrylic boards, to create a secret portrait, like a topographic map with depth."
2010 · 10 cut-out photographs and acrylic layers · 30 × 40 cm

Lucas Simões
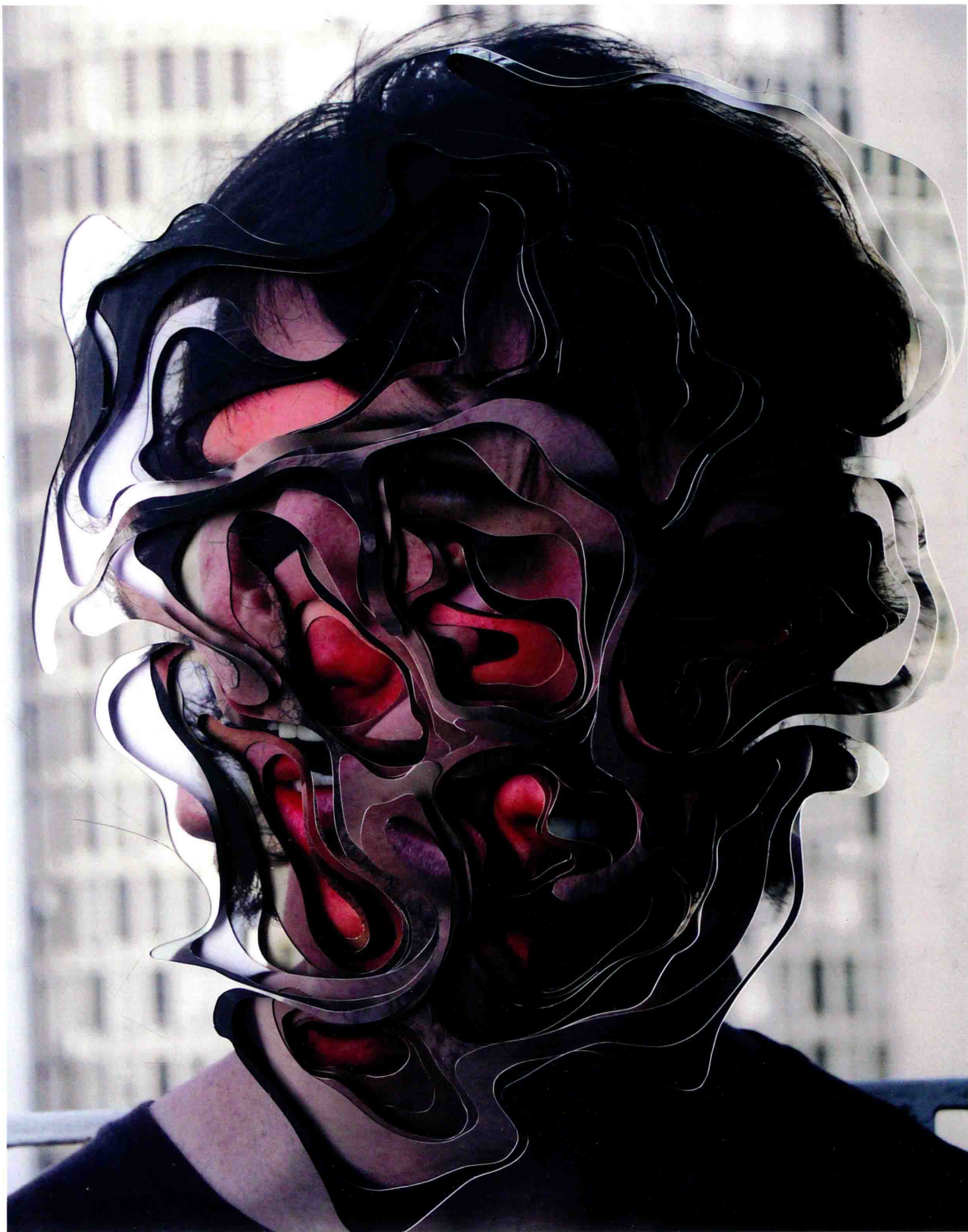
Benbo George

BORN IN 1981
UNITED KINGDOM
ILLUSTRATION

The self-taught illustrator Benbo George is based in the U.K., splitting his time between Liverpool and London. His work draws on various media.
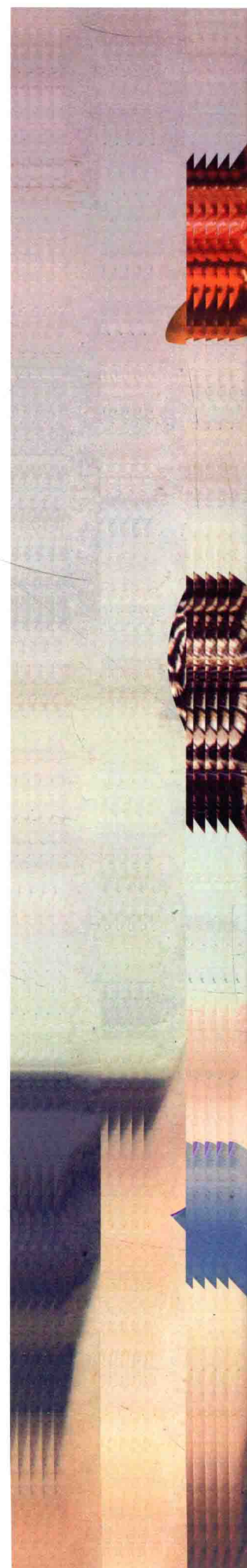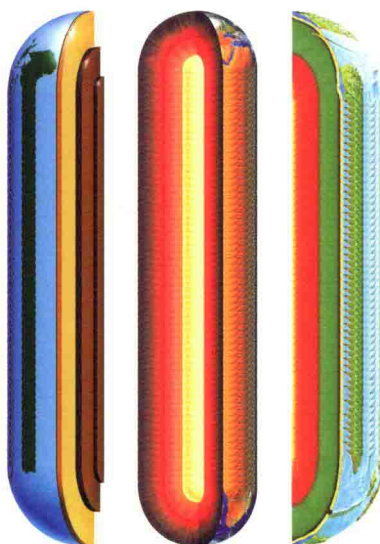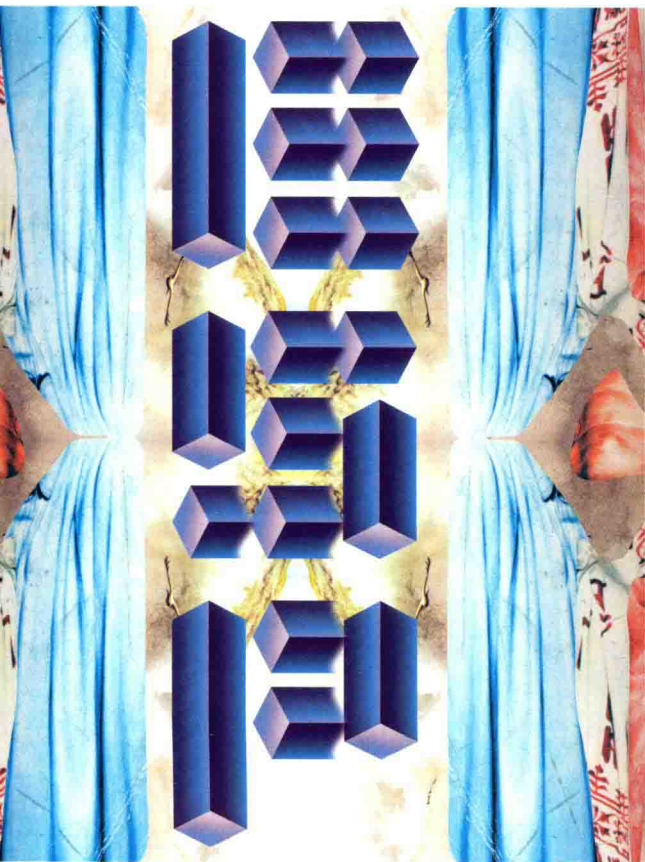
Top
Letterform M

Abstract typography.
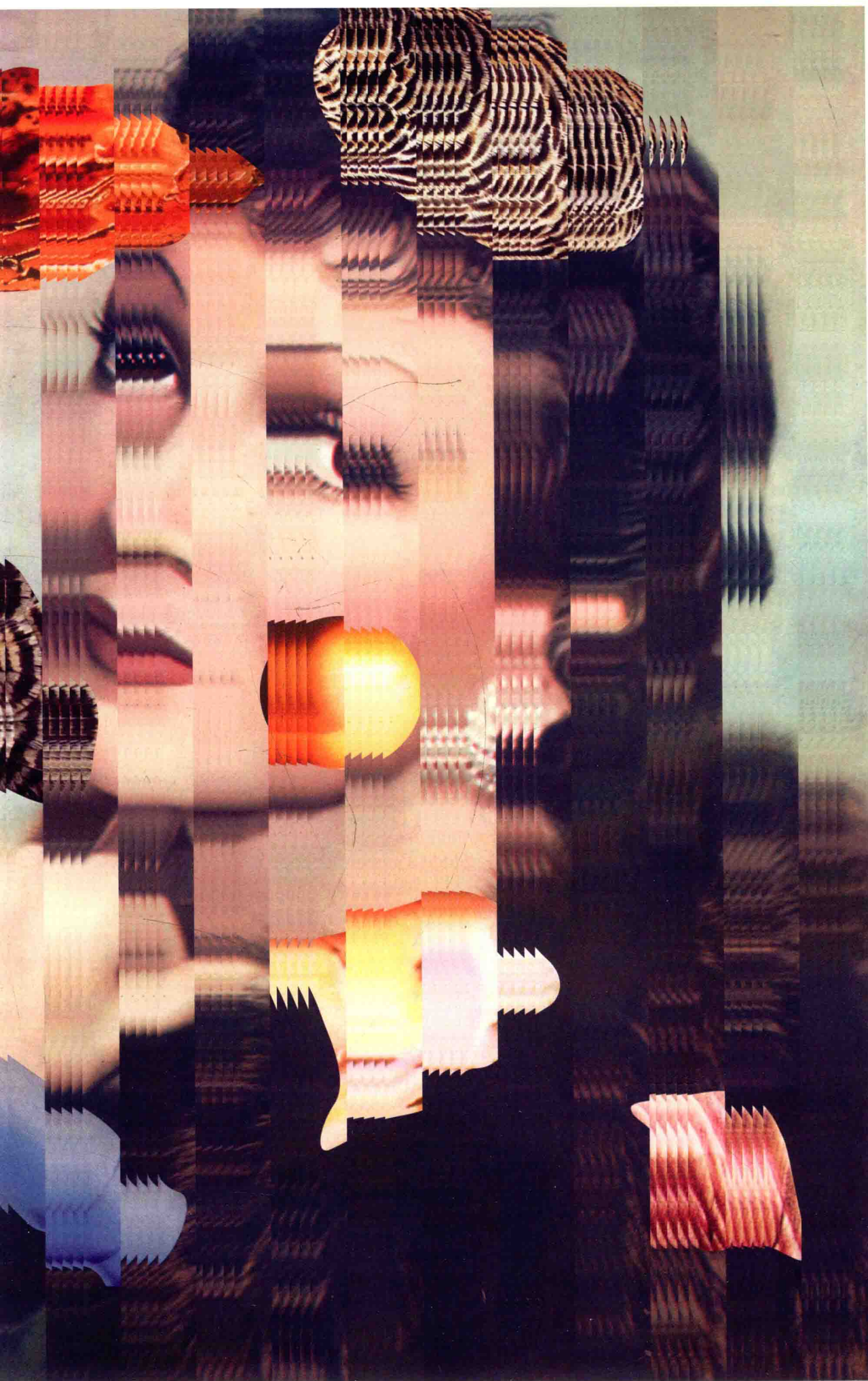2011 · Montage · 29.7 × 42 cm ·
Client: Sixpack France

Bottom from left to right
E.S.P.
2010 · Montage · 30 × 38 cm

Extend 2
2009 · Montage · 29.7 × 42 cm

Top to bottom
Enervate
Flutter
2009 · Montage · 29.7 × 42 cm

Linger
2009 · Montage · 30 × 38 cm