



# Designing Beyond the Rules

## A Qualitative Study on Rule-Breaking in Graphic Design

Fanny Åström

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# Lärdomsprov

Fanny Åström

Bortom reglerna – En kvalitativ studie om regelbrott i grafisk design

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## Sammandrag:

Detta examensarbete undersöker hur brytande av traditionella regler inom grafisk design kan leda till mer slagkraftiga och minnesvärda resultat. Studien fokuserar på fyra inflytelserika formgivare – Paula Scher, Wolfgang Weingart, David Carson och April Greiman – som är kända för sina experimentella och okonventionella arbetssätt. Syftet är att analysera hur dessa formgivare medvetet utmanar grundläggande designprinciper som layout, komposition, hierarki och typografi, och vilka visuella och kommunikativa effekter detta har. Studien utgår från forskningsfrågan: *Hur bryter inflytelserika grafiska formgivare mot traditionella designregler, och hur bidrar detta till deras arbetens genomslagskraft och minnesvärdhet?* Det teoretiska ramverket inkluderar en historisk översikt över grafisk design och dess grundprinciper. Studien använder kvalitativ metod med visuell analys som huvudsaklig metod. För att komplettera den teoretiska analysen genomfördes även ett praktiskt designexperiment. Två affischer designades av författaren för samma fiktiva evenemang: en enligt traditionella designprinciper och en där dessa medvetet bröts. Experimentet visar hur regelbrott påverkar tydlighet, känslomässig respons och visuell effekt. Resultaten visar att regelbrott ofta är avsiktliga – ett sätt att kommunicera mer uttrycksfullt och utmana visuella normer. Slutsatsen är att regelbrott kan förstärka kommunikationen och leda till innovativa och minnesvärda designlösningar.

## Nyckelord:

grafisk design, designregler, regelbrott, visuell kommunikation, designtänkande, Paula Scher, David Carson, Wolfgang Weingart, April Greiman

# Degree Thesis

Fanny Åström

Designing Beyond the Rules – A Qualitative Study on Rule-Breaking in Graphic Design

Arcada University of Applied Sciences: Online Media, 2025

## Abstract:

This thesis investigates how breaking traditional graphic design rules can lead to more impactful and memorable outcomes. The study focuses on four influential designers – Paula Scher, Wolfgang Weingart, David Carson, and April Greiman – known for their experimental and unconventional approaches. The aim is to analyze how these designers deliberately challenge core design principles such as layout, composition, hierarchy, and typography, and how these rule-breaking strategies affect visual communication and emotional response. The research is guided by the question: *How do influential graphic designers break traditional design rules, and how does this contribute to the impact and memorability of their work?* The theoretical framework includes a historical overview of graphic design and an exploration of foundational design principles. A qualitative method is used, with visual analysis serving as the primary tool to examine selected case studies through a design-theoretical perspective. To complement the theoretical research, the thesis also includes a practice-based design experiment. Two posters were created by the author for the same fictional event: one using traditional design principles and one intentionally breaking them. This experiment offers a practical perspective on how rule-breaking affects clarity, emotion, and viewer engagement. The findings suggest that rule-breaking in graphic design is rarely accidental. Instead, it is often purposeful and concept-driven, used as a strategy to attract attention, communicate ideas more expressively, and challenge conventional expectations. The study concludes that knowing when and how to break rules can lead to more innovative, thought-provoking, and culturally resonant designs.

## Keywords:

graphic design, design rules, rule-breaking, visual communication, design theory, Paula Scher, David Carson, Wolfgang Weingart, April Greiman

# Opinnäyte

Fanny Åström

Sääntöjen tuolla puolen: Laadullinen tutkimus sääntöjen rikkomisesta graafisessa suunnittelussa

Ammattikorkeakoulu Arcada: Online Media, 2025

## Tiivistelmä:

Tämä opinnäytetyö tutkii, kuinka graafisen suunnittelun sääntöjen rikkominen voi johtaa vaikuttavampiin ja mieleenpainuvampiin lopputuloksiin. Tutkimus keskittyy neljään tunnettuun suunnittelijaan – Paula Scheriin, Wolfgang Weingartiin, David Carsoniin ja April Greimaniin – jotka ovat tunnettuja kokeellisista ja sääntöjä rikkovista työtavoistaan. Tavoitteena on analysoida, miten he tietoisesti haastavat keskeisiä suunnitteluperiaatteita, kuten sommittelua, hierarkiaa, typografiaa ja layoutia, ja millaisia vaikutuksia tällä on viestintään ja esteettiseen kokemukseen. Tutkimuskysymys on: *Miten tunnetut graafiset suunnittelijat rikkovat perinteisiä suunnittelusääntöjä ja miten tämä vaikuttaa työn vaikuttavuuteen ja mieleenpainuvuuteen?* Teoreettinen viitekehys sisältää katsauksen graafisen suunnittelun historiaan ja sen perusperiaatteisiin. Menetelmänä käytetään laadullista visuaalista analyysiä. Teoreettisen tarkastelun tueksi toteutettiin myös käytännön suunnittelukokeilu. Opinnäytetyön tekijä suunnitteli kaksi julistetta samaa fiktiivistä tapahtumaa varten: toisen perinteisiä sääntöjä noudattaen ja toisen niitä tietoisesti rikkoen. Kokeilu havainnollistaa, miten sääntöjen rikkominen vaikuttaa selkeyteen, tunteisiin ja visuaaliseen kiinnostavuuteen. Tulokset osoittavat, että sääntöjen rikkominen on usein harkittua. Se voi lisätä visuaalista tehoa, herättää tunteita ja johtaa innovatiivisiin suunnitteluratkaisuihin.

## Avainsanat:

graafinen suunnittelu, muotoilun periaatteet, sääntöjen rikkominen, visuaalinen viestintä, muotoilu, Paula Scher, David Carson, Wolfgang Weingart, April Greiman

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# 1 Introduction

Graphic design is all around us – from posters and packaging to road signs, websites, and social media feeds. It’s a visual language that helps people absorb and understand information. Over time, the practice has been shaped by principles and even unwritten rules intended to ensure clarity, functionality, and visual harmony. Yet, some of the most iconic and memorable designs in history have emerged not by following these rules, but by breaking them.

This thesis explores how rule-breaking in graphic design – especially in areas like composition, hierarchy, layout, and typography – can lead to more impactful and memorable visual outcomes. The study focuses on four influential designers: Paula Scher, Wolfgang Weingart, David Carson, and April Greiman. All of them are known for their experimental and unconventional approaches that have challenged the design norms of their time.

The aim of this study is to better understand the creative and communicative potential of rule-breaking in graphic design. By analyzing how these designers use visual strategies that differ from conventional principles, the study explores what value lies in breaking foundational design rules and principles.

The core research question guiding this study is:

- How do influential graphic designers break traditional design rules, and how does this contribute to the impact and memorability of their work?

To answer this, the study uses qualitative visual analysis, grounded in both theoretical frameworks and the author’s own background in graphic design. In addition to analyzing works by these designers, the thesis includes a practice-based experiment: two posters were designed for the same fictional event – one strictly following the design principles from the theory chapter, and the other intentionally breaking them. The purpose of this is

to reflect on the findings through practice, and to further explore how design rules influence visual impact, clarity, and memorability.

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

Graphic design is rooted in a set of principles and theories that guide how visual elements are used to communicate ideas effectively. These design principles – including layout, visual balance, hierarchy, and typography – serve as a foundation for what is widely considered good and functional design. Although design is often perceived as something intuitive and purely creative, it's grounded in systematic methods that require a good conceptual understanding as well as practical application. At its core, graphic design is a form of communication, so an effective design conveys an intended message to its audience.

To get a better understanding of the foundational design rules and how they came to shape the field today, it's useful to look at the evolution of graphic design itself. Graphic design has always been shaped by social, cultural, and technological changes. By looking at the historical context, it's easier to understand why and how some practices became the foundational rules and standards. However, in history there have always been those who have challenged conventions and experimented with their designs. These innovators pushed the boundaries of traditional designs and often became the inspiration for new standards. Rule-breaking is not always just an act of rebellion, in graphic design it has played a huge role in shaping the field even today.

### **2.1 Historical Overview of Graphic Design**

The history of graphic design traces back to prehistoric times when humans looked for ways to visualize ideas and concepts and give them a clearer picture and order. According to Meggs & Purvis (2016) the history of graphic design traces back to cave paintings and early symbols, Sumerian scribes who invented writing, Egyptian artisans who combined words and images on papyrus manuscripts, Chinese block printers, medieval illuminators, and fifteenth-century printers who were responsible for the design of the early European printed books. All of these groups have been part of the visualization of ideas and become part of the rich heritage and history of graphic design (Meggs & Purvis, 2016).

Modern graphic design evolved significantly during the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. The production and consumption of goods and services increased, as did the

production of printed material – which contributed to the need for professional graphic design. Technological innovations combined with the social impact of industrialization, set the stage for the dramatic transformations that followed (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 68; Meggs & Purvis, 2016, p. 150). As a reaction against the mass production, the Arts and Crafts Movement emerged, advocating for craftsmanship and quality. The movement deeply influenced the aesthetics of graphic design by emphasizing handcrafted and artistic designs over efficiency (Meggs & Purvis, 2016, p. 188; Toppins, 2025, p. 254).

After World War I, two contrasting movements of graphic design were on the rise – Bauhaus and Art Deco. The Bauhaus movement revolutionized graphic design by emphasizing functionality, simplicity, geometric shapes, and clarity in designs, by using clear text design, structured grid systems and geometric forms. Bauhaus designers strived to create functional objects and designs, shaping the foundation of the modern design aesthetic (Davis, 2020, p. 154; Meggs & Purvis, 2016, p. 345, 352). The Art Deco movement also embraced geometric shapes but is more broadly characterized by a decorative style with luxurious details and elegance (Meggs & Purvis, 2016, p. 374). Both movements were responses to the rapid social changes at the time, and together they illustrate the way that graphic design has evolved to meet cultural, technological and aesthetic demands.

In the 1950s, a movement known as Swiss Design, or International Typographic Style, emerged. Meggs & Purvis (2016, p. 397) describe Swiss design as a style focused on visual unity, where elements are arranged asymmetrically using precise, mathematical grid systems. This style was widely impactful and influenced designs throughout the world, and its influence continues even today. Early pioneers of the Swiss design movement argued that mathematical grids were the most effective for presenting information. Both Ambrose and Harris (2010, p. 141) and Davis (2020, p. 158) state that during the Swiss Design movement the way in which information was presented was far more important than the personal style of the designer.

Davis (2020, p. 173) further asserts that modern design of the 20th century was shaped by both philosophical streams and different movement's ideals of rational and functional design. The goals of modern design arose from the conditions of society at the time,

including expansion of industrial production, urbanization, the rise of consumerism and the growing importance of style as well as social and political situations. The term “graphic design” first appeared in 1922, but entered into wide usage only after World War II. The formal study of design also came about in the 1920s (Samara, 2020, p. 4).

## **2.2 The Function of Graphic Design**

Although graphic design is in a constant state of evolution, driven by technological advancements, the core function of the discipline remains unchanged; to structure information and transform ideas into impactful visual expressions. The importance of effective and innovative communication – that helps people engage with their cultural, social and economic contexts – has reached a level unlike before (Ambrose et al., 2019, p. 10; Meggs & Purvis, 2016, p. 622). Graphic designers are communicators who use imagery, symbols, type, color and materials to visually convey ideas in a form so that others can understand them (Samara, 2020, p. 4).

Dabner et al. (2020, p. 7) stress that designers hold a significant responsibility as visual communicators. Designers are often giving voices to new and at times even provocative ideas. These designs have the possibility to reach up to millions of people with the aim of evoking reactions, impacting or even convincing them of the message. A designer is responsible for their designs and therefore also the experiences, emotions, and reactions that they awake in others – which in turn means that they play a big role in shaping the world that we live in, and even the future (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 7; Samara, 2020, p. 5).

## **2.3 Fundamental Design Rules**

In graphic design, rules act as guidelines that provide a framework for the designer. These rules are the building blocks to creating visually pleasing and functional solutions (Hannam, 2024; Lupton & Phillips, 2015, p. 250). Every field of study has their own set of rules, methods and requirements, but unlike learning laws or studying biology, mastering the fundamentals of design requires fluency in a visual language (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 8).

These rules, however, are not strict requirements; instead, they are tools that reflect centuries of experience from artists and designers across various disciplines. These tools are meant to be applied and adapted to help designers give form to their ideas creatively. While designers have the freedom to determine for themselves how to follow or deviate from these rules, doing so comes with consequences. As Samara (2020) notes, sometimes breaking one rule might reinforce another, potentially leading to an innovative solution, which then might lead to the establishment of yet another rule – which is just how creativity works.

Understanding design principles is essential for a graphic designer, as they form the foundation of effective visual communication. These principles – such as layout and grids, balance and symmetry, rhythm and proportion – are the building blocks that enable designers to organize and arrange various elements to convey clear messages (Hannam, 2024; Poulin, 2018, p. 8). Graphic design is a visual language built up of rules and principles, and a mastery of these principles allow designers to create effective visual messages (Poulin, 2018, p. 6, 8).

### **2.3.1 Composition and Balance**

Dabner et al. (2020) argue that good composition is the foundation of visual communication and is essential in all forms of art. It involves seeing the design as a cohesive whole rather than focusing solely on individual elements. Balance and rhythm are both key components of composition, shaping how elements are arranged and together they create visual harmony. Balance in graphic design serves as a way for creating structure and stability in a design as it ensures that visual elements are arranged in a way that feels evenly distributed. Designers do this by using contrasting sizes, textures and shapes to create dynamic layouts (Lupton & Phillips, 2015, p. 50; Poulin, 2018, p. 120).

Rhythm complements balance by guiding how the viewer's eye moves through a design. It introduces a sense of movement and flow, whether that be unbroken repetition or rhythms that employ change and variation (Lupton & Phillips, 2015, p. 50). Each decision a designer makes will have an effect on the emotional impact of the piece. A symmetrical composition is regarded as calmer and more peaceful, while asymmetrical composition

makes for a more dynamic and energetic feel. A deep understanding of compositional principles and techniques, enable designers to create visually harmonious designs (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 36-37; Poulin, 2018, p. 120).

Composition in graphic design consists of many different parts beyond balance, rhythm and harmony, including for instance, contrast, use of negative space, scale and proportion. A well-balanced design uses these different parts to ensure that no single element overpowers the others (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 32-33).

### **2.3.2 Hierarchy**

Effective visual communication relies on a clearly defined hierarchy, which organizes elements according to their importance. As Lupton & Phillips (2015, p. 130) explain, hierarchy establishes the order in which viewers process information. This hierarchy can be observed in for instance a structured organization of text – such as chapters and sub-chapters in a book. In graphic design, this principle guides the viewer's eye through a deliberate sequence, ensuring that the primary message is emphasized while secondary details support it.

Visual hierarchy in graphic design is achieved through the use and variation of different design elements, including scale, color, spacing, and placement. These elements serve as signals to indicate the importance of each element and guide the viewer's eyes accordingly. This process is a central task for the designer, as it controls the impact of the message and without a well-defined hierarchy the design can appear to be confusing and difficult to navigate (Lupton & Phillips, 2015, p. 130). Dabner et al. (2020, p. 78) note that often times less is more, meaning that designers should avoid having too many elements that fight for attention at the same time. Too many techniques will most likely confuse the viewer's eye and take away from the concept. When the relative importance of each element is considered, the overall design will achieve a harmonious balance that is both engaging and easy to navigate (Poulin, 2018, p. 226; Sherin, 2017, p. 83, 122).

### **2.3.3 Layout and Grid Systems**

Poulin (2018, p. 182) describes layout as one of the most powerful forms of visual expression and communications. Layout is the strategic organization and placement of type, image, color, and other design elements within a composition. It shapes the understanding and the impact of a design. A well-executed layout effectively communicates an intended message, but it can even evoke a timeless emotional connection with the audience. At its core, the basics of layout, like getting the proportions and measurements just right, lay the foundation for a design that not only makes sense but also truly resonates with the viewer (Lupton & Phillips, 2015, p. 188; Poulin, 2018, p. 7, 13).

At the heart of effective layout is the grid system – a structural framework that guides the positioning of visual elements. As Ambrose et al., (2019, p. 58) describe, grids function as the bone structure of a layout, helping designers in their decision-making by providing guidelines for how to position and organize elements. While grids help designers achieve balance in their designs, Hannam (2024) and Ambrose et al., (2019, p. 58) still emphasize that strict adherence to a grid does not guarantee effective design and can, in some cases, restrict creative expression. However, when used as a guideline and according to the design's needs, grids serve as an essential tool for providing structure and balance in a design (Poulin, 2018, p. 268).

Essentially a grid is a network of lines that organizes content both horizontally and vertically (Lupton & Phillips, 2015, p. 188; Poulin, 2018, p. 268). By breaking down a design into units, grids encourage the designer to use these alignments in either symmetrical or asymmetrical manners and leave some areas of the design open – rather than filling up a whole page. While grids offer structure, their true power lies in their ability to create well balanced active compositions (Lupton & Phillips, 2015, p. 188). Used effectively, grids bring unity and consistency to a design while enabling flexibility, ensuring that the final composition remains both visually engaging and functionally effective (Poulin, 2018, p. 274).

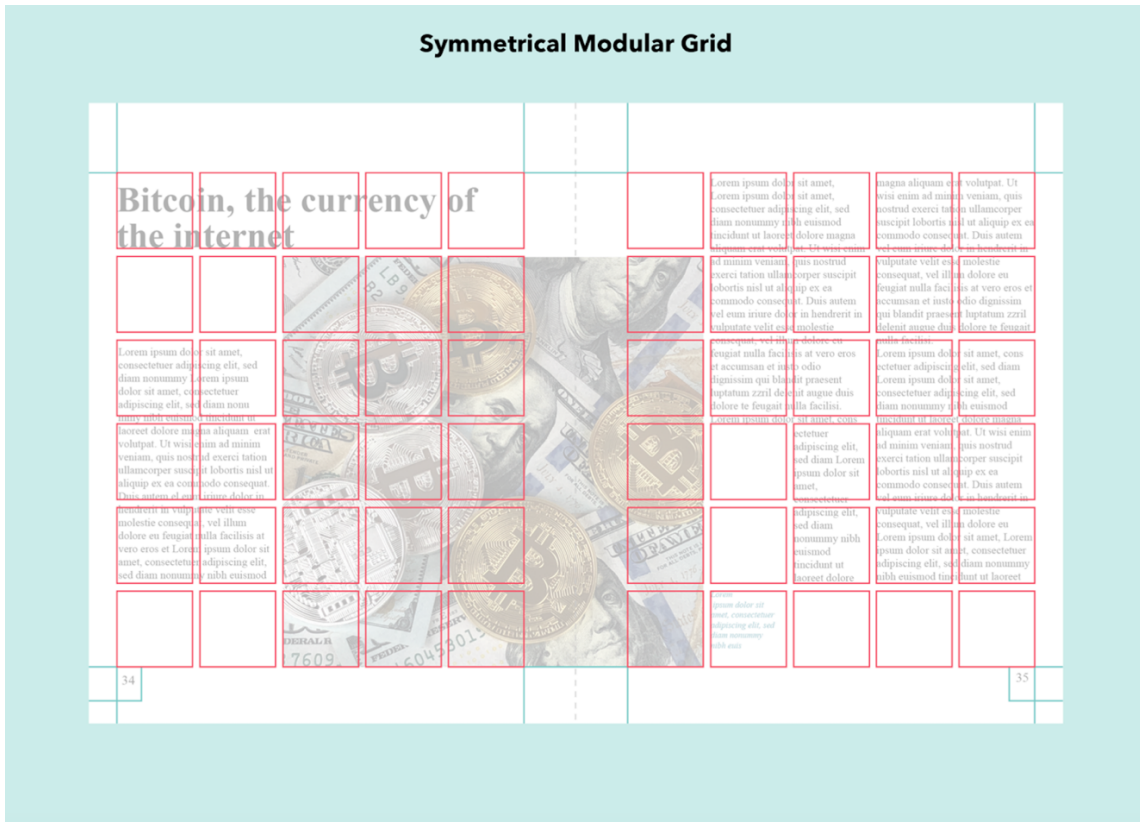


Figure 1. Example of a symmetrical modular grid, commonly used in magazine spreads (Image: Velarde, 2024).

### 2.3.4 Typographic Rules

Typography plays a central role in graphic design, as words are a vital role of communication. Typography shapes how text in designs is perceived and understood. Each typeface has its own distinct personality, influencing the mood and tone of the design (Strizver, 2014). In order for a design to reach effective communication, the designer needs to learn about different typefaces and their unique characteristics and features – and even how to use them in the most optimal way (Poulin, 2018, p. 2018; Sherin, 2017, p. 116).

Dabner et al. (2020, p. 76-80) and Dawson et al. (2019, p. 22-23, 72-86) both state that key considerations in typography are readability and legibility. As noted by Dabner et al., (2020, p. 86) and Strizver (2014), legibility refers to the clarity of individual letterforms and how easily characters can be distinguished from each other, while readability relates to the measure of how easily a block of text can be read. When choosing typefaces,

designers must consider both aspects to make sure that the text serves the purpose of the design, however if a design's audience is more likely to respond to more unconventional typography, prioritizing legibility and readability may be a secondary matter (Dawson et al., 2019, p. 19, 23).

When choosing a typeface, there are many different factors at play. The goal of the design and its objective are usually the main deciding factors when a designer is choosing what typeface to use (Dabner, et al., 2020, p. 70). When selecting a typeface, Strizver (2014) stresses that each design project requires a tailored approach, and designers should identify the target audience and its demographics, in order to choose the most suitable typeface. Other factors to consider are the intended use of the typeface, is it to be used for a headline, subhead, a body copy – or all three? The most important part is to have a clear understanding of the design goals.

Some typographic rules according to Strizver (2014) and (Sherin, 2017, p. 149) include using the appropriate size for the intended purpose, leaving enough white space to avoid making the design appear cluttered, maintain visual hierarchy and use scaling to create emphasis, make sure there is enough contrast when using two or more different types, use appropriate alignment – for example, a big block of text that is center aligned can sometimes be hard to read. There are lots of dos and don'ts in typography, so it's important that designers learn about different typefaces and how to use them and explore in imaginative ways, while still respecting the objective of the design (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 62).

## **2.4 Breaking Rules in Graphic Design**

As established earlier, rules in graphic design are guidelines for guiding the creative process and making it easier for designers to make effective design decisions. However, these rules are not absolute. Samara (2020, p. 303) asserts that rules are meant to be broken, especially in a creative field like design where no project is alike – every project comes with its own set of unique challenges. No approach or technique should be considered off limits, as long as the outcome ensures effective communication. Breaking rules often come with consequences, and it's important that the designer has an underlying understanding of the rules and why they have come to be, and also what happens when they

break them (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 66; Samara, 2020, p. 7). In some cases, practical considerations should be prioritized over aesthetic experimentation, while in other cases – when the goal of the design allows for it – innovative and creative solutions come first (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 62).

Throughout history, renowned designers have embraced innovation and pushed traditional design rules to their limits, leading to groundbreaking work that has extended the limits of visual communication (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 63). These designers wanted to make room for more creativity within design and allow for greater flexibility and freedom (Poulin, 2018, p. 141). Understanding the foundation behind design rules and fundamental design principles is of great importance for designers, but as established by many sources – sometimes breaking these rules can lead to even greater and more impactful designs (Poulin, 2018, p. 8).

### **3 Methodology**

Graphic design is fundamentally a visual and interpretive discipline, which makes qualitative research an appropriate approach for this study. Rather than aiming for objectivity, seeking universal truths or measurable outcomes, qualitative methods emphasize depth, context, and meaning – qualities essential for understanding how designers intentionally break established rules to create more impactful and memorable work. This study focuses on the visual strategies used by designers known for their unconventional practices and explores how these deviations from tradition function both aesthetically and conceptually.

#### **3.1 Qualitative Visual Analysis**

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for observation, meaning that insights are drawn from personal reflection and even subjective interpretation (Tracy, 2020, p. 5). Insights are generated through observation, reflection, and subjective interpretation, making this approach particularly suited for studies that involve visual material and design evaluation. In this thesis, my professional background in graphic design plays a central role in how I interpret the designs that are being analyzed. My knowledge and practical experience shape the way I perceive rule-breaking and innovation in design. Rather than seeking to remove this influence, qualitative research acknowledges and embraces the researcher's perspective as a valid part of the analytical process (Newhart & Patten, 2023, p. 356).

A fundamental part of this thesis is visual content analysis, a widely used method in Media Studies to study visual meaning-making (Leeuwen et al. 2000, p. 28). For this thesis, said approach is particularly suited for analyzing visual design and its elements, such as composition, typography and layout. As emphasized by Hennink et al. (2020, p. 10), qualitative methods are especially effective for studies involving visual materials, since they reflect the complexity and subjective interpretation in design. In this thesis I will be examining how rule-breaking in graphic design can contribute to more impactful designs, by closely examining specific design examples from established graphic designers and identifying which traditional rules have consciously been deviated from – and how.

## **3.2 Theory and Visual Practice**

This thesis is grounded in a theoretical framework that outlines the core principles and rules of graphic design, as explored in Chapter 2. These principles – composition, hierarchy, layout, and typography – form the basis for analyzing how each designer’s work challenges traditional norms. The literature review helped define these key visual concepts by identifying which principles are most commonly taught and referenced in the field. It also guided the selection of case studies by highlighting designers who are frequently mentioned as rule-breakers or innovators within the design field. As Newhart and Patten (2023, p. 49) note, literature reviews help define the research context and guide methodological decisions, providing a basis for identifying and interpreting rule-breaking in design.

## **3.3 Case Selection and Sampling**

The designers selected for this thesis have been chosen based on their clear relevance to the research topic. Each designer is widely recognized for deliberately breaking established graphic design rules and for achieving widely known professional success through their unconventional and innovative approaches. The selection has also been shaped by the literature review, which highlighted these individuals as frequently cited examples of rule-breakers or innovators within the graphic design field. Rather than aiming for a comprehensive survey of rule-breaking in graphic design, this thesis focuses on a small number of influential graphic designers whose work serve as an example how rule-breaking can lead to impactful works and lasting recognition in the field.

The cases that are being analyzed include graphic designers Paula Scher, Wolfgang Weingart, David Carson and April Greiman. All of these designers have become known for challenging for example typographic or compositional rules, and also for shaping the common consensus of what is possible in graphic design. Their work provides rich material for exploring how deviation from traditional design principles and rules can be used effectively. The analysis centers on one notable work from each designer and examines how they challenge the foundational principles of composition, layout, hierarchy, and typography in order to communicate meaning and establish visual impact.

### **3.4 Applied Design Experiment**

In addition to analyzing the work of established designers, this thesis also incorporates a practice-based design experiment to support the study's findings. The goal of this experiment was to create two original poster designs for the same music release: one designed according to traditional graphic design rules, and the other intentionally breaking them. This approach allows for a practical application of the theories explored in the earlier chapters and provides a firsthand perspective on how different design strategies affect the final result.

The first poster was created with a focus on fundamental design principles, such as alignment, visual hierarchy, balanced composition, and typographic clarity. A grid system was used to structure the layout, and care was taken to ensure that the design communicated its message clearly and professionally. The second version, in contrast, was designed as an intentional departure from these norms. Drawing inspiration from the designers analyzed in Chapter 4.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

As the theory of this thesis is based on a literature review and the analysis of existing work, ethical considerations have been taken into account. All sources are properly credited, original authors are named, and any limitations and biases in the material are acknowledged. Every effort has been made to represent the information respectfully, to remain true to the intentions of the original authors and designers, and to provide a balanced and honest discussion throughout.

As the researcher, I acknowledge that my own professional background influences my interpretations. This subjectivity is not viewed as a limitation, but as a valid and integral part of the qualitative research process. In qualitative visual analysis, the researcher's insight and expertise contribute meaningfully to the analysis. Throughout the thesis, every effort has been made to provide a balanced, respectful, and critically informed discussion.

## **4 Case Studies: Rule-Breaking in Graphic Design**

This chapter presents a visual analysis of four influential graphic designers who are widely recognized for challenging conventional rules in graphic design. Each of these designers has made an impact on the graphic design scene through their experimental approaches to layout, typography, hierarchy and composition. By examining these designer's works, this chapter seeks to explore how they've broken the rules, and what effects it has produced.

These designers were selected not only for their professional recognition and innovation, but also because they are frequently referenced in design literature as pioneers of rule-breaking. Their works offer rich visual examples that challenge traditional ideas of what graphic design should look like or how it should function. Through qualitative visual analysis, this chapter examines how each designer's distinct approach disrupts foundational design principles, and how these disruptions contribute to the overall impact of the work, both visually and conceptually.

### **4.1 Paula Scher**

Paula Scher is one of the most influential figures in graphic design. She is widely recognized for her bold use of typography as she uses it not only a communication tool, but as a visual image itself to create energetic compositions (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 189). Scher has won multiple awards and been a partner in the New York office of Pentagram (the world's largest independently owned design studio) since 1991 (Pentagram, 2025). Scher has defined her own approach to design as "My work is play. And I play when I design".



Figure 2. *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk* Poster by Paula Scher, 1995 (Image: Pentagram, n.d.).

This poster clearly breaks several key design rules on purpose, creating a layout that grabs attention and leaves a strong impression. Scher abandoned conventional balance and embraces chaos: bold text is layered and placed at varying angles and sizes, filling the space in a way that feels energetic and intense. There is little visual order, and the only grounding element – a central photograph – barely restores any sense of balance.

Hierarchy is also intentionally disrupted. Instead of guiding the viewer's eye in a clear order, many of the design elements demand equal attention. Scher is forcing the viewer to piece together the message of the poster themselves in an active engagement. Scher's layout also appears to reject the use of any grid. Text is layered, rotated, and crowded. Typography in the poster also goes against many of the traditional rules. Type is condensed, layered, stretched out, and even runs in multiple directions. Rather than using typography as a functional tool to convey information, Scher uses type as an expressive visual element on its own. Even though the layout of the poster may seem random – it's

not. There is a clear tension between chaos and control, and even though it is a bit dense, the information is still carefully balanced to avoid the audience not being able to gather all the information.

## 4.2 Wolfgang Weingart

Wolfgang Weingart was a graphic designer known for his typographic experimentation and the ways of pushing it to its very limit to expand the ways of working with type (Dabner et al., 2020, p. 63). He was also an author and a teacher, known for pioneering the “New Wave” Swiss aesthetic. Weingart has been awarded for his typographic explorations and teachings and is even today seen as one of the most influential modern typographers – and as Burton (2013) states “Through his experimentations, Weingart was inventing his own visual language”. (Burton, 2013).



Figure 3. *Didacta Eurodidac* poster by Wolfgang Weingart, 1981 (Image: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, n.d.).

This poster is a bold example of how design can evolve by consciously breaking traditional rules. The design is complex and layered, using photography, geometric drawings, typographic elements, and lines and dots. Traditional compositions aim for harmony and visual flow, whereas Weingart in this poster embraced displacement. Elements are placed asymmetrically, creating tension instead of balance. Still, there is a compelling rhythm in the whole that emerges from the repetition of the dots, lines, and overlapping textures. The poster creates a collage-like feeling that demands active engagement from the audience to navigate the structure.

Rather than establishing a clear typographic hierarchy, all visual elements are presented with an equal emphasis or need for attention. The event title is indeed bold and central, but it competes for attention with the surrounding elements, including the circular protractor and what seems to be a folded paper with math equations. Even though the typography used follows legibility norms, it's still used in an unconventional way. Weingart used type as a visual element, not just as a conveyor of text. Concerning grid, the poster embraces experimentation rather than structure or control. Any grid that might have been used in the making of the design is not noticeable.

### **4.3 David Carson**

Another experimental graphic designer who defies the rules and norms of graphic design is David Carson. Carson worked as the art director of *Ray Gun* magazine – an American alternative music and culture magazine in the 1990s, famous not only for its content, but for its radical graphic design (Davidson, 2019). Carson also relies on typography as a visual tool and uses it as texture, prioritizing visual impact over legibility (Dawson et al., 2019, p. 23, 63). As a self-taught designer, Carson openly rejects many of the foundational principles taught in traditional design education. In an interview with AIGA, he stated: “I’ve never used grids; I still don’t. I never studied or learned about them, and when I did I saw no reason to use them” (Gosling, 2019).

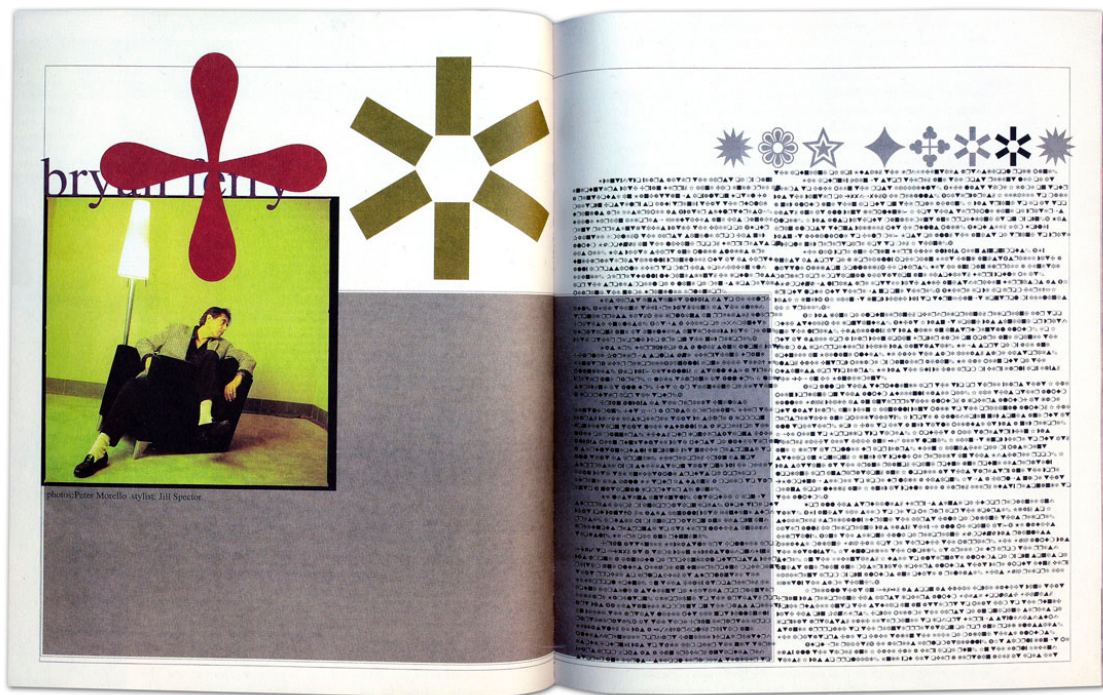


Figure 4. *Ray Gun* magazine spread by David Carson, 1994 (Image: Gosling, 2019).

This infamous *Ray Gun* magazine spread featuring an interview with English singer Bryan Ferry is one of Carson's most notorious designs. After Carson read the interview, he found it boring and decided to set the entire article in a symbolic typeface that is unreadable. He explained this choice by saying, "Why not? Says who? Let's try it" (Gosling, 2019). The design served as a commentary on editorial boredom and the designer's authority in shaping content. Miranda (2020) describes it as a bold rejection of graphic design norms and an act of rebellion that pushed the boundaries of what editorial design could be.

Compositionally, Carson's layout is displaced, resisting traditional balance. There is minimal visual hierarchy – no headings, no paragraph breaks or emphasis, and not even readable text. The layout embraces spontaneity with overlapping elements and inconsistent alignment. There is no clear balance and no sign of a grid being used. The non-existence of a clear hierarchy forces the viewer to engage with the design as a visual experience, not a conventional magazine spread with usually clear information. By setting the article in an illegible symbolic typeface, Carson violates nearly every established typographic rule: it is unreadable, lacks structure, and ignores clarity.

## 4.4 April Greiman

April Greiman is known for her influential work in graphic design and new media. She is especially known for her innovative approaches to typography, photography, and layout, and she was also among the first designers to embrace computer technology as a design tool (Crawford, 2024). Greiman has embraced the use of imagery, vibrant colors, and unconventional type and layout in her designs. She once said, “I was always thinking of things as objects in space. Why people didn’t put typography on the diagonal, I could never figure out” (Miller, 2019).

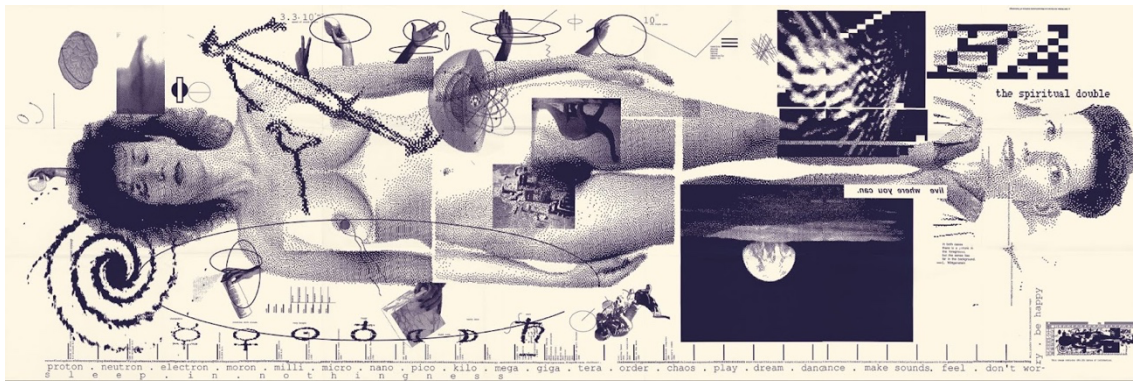


Figure 5. *Does it Make Sense?* by April Greiman, 1986 (Image: Greiman, n.d.).

This poster is one of Greiman’s most radical works. Rather than producing a traditional magazine layout for *Design Quarterly*, Greiman turned the issue into a life-sized self-portrait, digitally scanned and overlaid with abstract symbols, pixelated textures, and scattered fragments of text. This piece, like Carson’s, also challenged the norms of what a magazine layout could be.

The composition in the poster is chaotic and has no clear focal point. There are images, spirals and anatomical diagrams arranged in asymmetrical ways. Visual hierarchy is also flattened and there is no clear navigation on where the viewer should look first, instead the composition allows for the eye to travel freely. The poster also completely rejects the grid system. The layout is nonlinear, layered, and non-repetitive. Images and text float freely, often overlapping or aligning at unexpected angles and places.

Typographically, Greiman is known for using text as a texture and visual element. Type appears pixelated to showcase the digital origin of her work. Alignment of the texts are inconsistent, using varied spacing and text appears upside down or sideways. Type is used in an unconventional and inconvenient way for those who want to be able to read what it says. Greiman treats type as a visual matter, not just as a medium of communication.

## **5 Applied Design Experiment**

In order to apply the theoretical insights of this thesis in practice, two posters with the same communicative goal were created. The aim was to promote an artist's upcoming release of the single "Fractions". The intention behind this experiment is to better understand the visual and communicative effects of rule-following versus rule-breaking in graphic design.

### **5.1 Design Process and Inspiration**

The first poster was created by consciously following the fundamental design principles discussed earlier in the thesis, such as alignment, visual hierarchy, grid systems, and typographic clarity. A modular grid was used to guide the layout, creating a clean and structured composition. Color, contrast, and type were selected with legibility and clarity in mind. This approach aligns with traditional graphic design methods aimed at ensuring functional communication. The second poster was intentionally designed without following traditional design principles. Here, inspiration was drawn from the visual strategies of Paula Scher, Wolfgang Weingart, David Carson, and April Greiman.

### **5.2 Comparative Analysis of the Designs**

Both posters serve the same purpose, but the visual execution is very much different. By placing the designs side by side, it becomes possible to assess how rule-following supports clarity and structure, while rule-breaking can create emotional tension and provoke curiosity. While the rule-based design is calm and orderly, the rule-breaking version is bold, chaotic, and visually challenging – traits that may make it more distinctive.



Figure 6. Side-by-side comparison of the posters: rule-following (left) and rule-breaking (right).

The rule-following poster (left) was created using the core design principles discussed in Chapter 2. A grid system was applied to structure the layout, and the elements are clearly separated to ensure readability and flow. The typography follows conventional hierarchy – the artist’s name is placed at the top, followed by the single title and release date. The image of the artist is clearly visible, and the overall layout feels well-balanced. This design aligns with the Swiss design tradition, where clarity, legibility, and simplicity are prioritized to communicate the message effectively.

In contrast, the rule-breaking poster (right) intentionally disrupts those same principles. Inspired by the works of Scher, Carson, and Greiman, the design disregards alignment and visual order. The title “Fractions” is fragmented and blurred, layered across the poster at varying angles, while overlapping star graphics interfere with both the text and the background image. The typography is distorted and inconsistent, creating a sense of tension. Rather than guiding the viewer through the information, the poster demands that the viewer actively interpret and explore it.

While the rule-breaking design may be less accessible at first glance, it arguably creates a more memorable and expressive experience. The disruption itself becomes part of the communication, and it expresses energy. This aligns with the broader idea explored in this thesis: that rule-breaking, when done intentionally, can transform a piece of design from simply functional to emotionally resonant and culturally relevant.

## 6 Discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how influential graphic designers break traditional design rules and how these acts of rule-breaking contribute to the impact and memorability of their work. Through the visual analysis of Paula Scher, Wolfgang Weingart, David Carson, and April Greiman, the study found that these designers' success often lies in their ability to challenge conventions in intentional and meaningful ways. Their works demonstrate that breaking the rules in graphic design is not always about being rebellious for the sake of it, but rather about finding new ways to communicate, provoke, and innovate.

The research question guiding this study was: *How do influential graphic designers break traditional design rules, and how does this contribute to the impact and memorability of their work?* Based on the analysis, it became clear that breaking rules, particularly those related to composition, hierarchy, layout, and typography, can enhance the viewer's engagement, deepen conceptual meaning, and increase the memorability of a design. The designers featured in this study challenged these principles in different ways, and their work continues to be referenced and celebrated precisely because of how they challenge the boundaries of the field.

To support these findings with practical insight, the thesis also included an applied design experiment. Two posters were created for the same fictional music release: one following traditional design principles, the other intentionally breaking them. The rule-following poster employed a grid, clear hierarchy, and balanced layout. It was functional and professional. In contrast, the rule-breaking poster introduced distorted text, overlapping elements, visual noise, and a fragmented structure. This design created more tension and curiosity, demanding greater engagement from the viewer. The experiment mirrored the rule-breaking strategies seen in the work of Scher, Weingart, Carson, and Greiman, demonstrating how visual disruption, when done purposefully, can elevate a design's memorability.

Each of the designers studied used rule-breaking as a deliberate tool. Paula Scher's poster for The Public Theater broke grid and hierarchy conventions to convey rhythm and

movement. Wolfgang Weingart used expressive typography and layered elements, creating dynamic, experimental visuals. David Carson challenged the boundaries of legibility itself, using typography as a way to provoke emotion. April Greiman, with her early embrace of digital tools, disregarded traditional structure entirely.

Their work doesn't reject design fundamentals, it engages with them critically. Each designer had a strong understanding of the rules and chose to break them in ways aligned with their message, audience, or instinct. At times, this rule-breaking was driven more by emotion or intuition than function, but it still achieved impact. The applied design experiment echoed this, showing that even chaotic or unconventional visuals can succeed when the intent behind them is clear. Breaking rules can be a method of communication, not a rejection of it.

This study also expands the understanding of what "good design" can be. It challenges the idea that design must always be clean, minimal, or highly legible. Instead, it argues that good design can also be noisy, provocative, or even uncomfortable – if that serves the intended message and goal of the design. Effective communication in design is not limited to clarity; it can also rely on disruption, surprise, and emotional intensity.

Looking ahead, rule-breaking will likely remain essential in the evolution of graphic design. As technologies such as AI and interactive media continue to develop, new design norms will emerge. Future studies could investigate how rule-breaking plays out in digital and automated workflows. For example, AI-generated design often prioritizes clarity, speed, and optimization. How will human designers maintain personal expression and creative freedom within those systems? Will defying algorithmic logic become the next frontier of rule-breaking?

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that breaking the rules of graphic design, when done with purpose and awareness, can lead to more impactful and memorable outcomes. The designers examined used rule-breaking not to reject design tradition, but to push its boundaries. Their work serves as a reminder that sometimes, the most powerful design doesn't follow the rules – it's born from the decision to go beyond them.

## 7 Sammanfattning på svenska

Detta examensarbete undersöker hur brytande av traditionella designregler inom grafisk design kan leda till mer slagkraftiga och minnesvärda visuella uttryck. Syftet är att analysera hur inflytelserika grafiska designers använder sig av regelbrott som en kreativ strategi, samt vilken påverkan detta har på designens kommunikativa styrka och minnesvärdhet. Arbetet fokuserar på verk från fyra inflytelserika grafiska designers – Paula Scher, Wolfgang Weingart, David Carson och April Greiman – som alla har uppmärksammats för sina okonventionella och innovativa tillvägagångssätt inom grafisk design.

Forskningsfrågan som vägleder arbetet är: *Hur bryter inflytelserika grafiska designers mot traditionella designregler, och hur bidrar detta till deras arbetens genomslagskraft och minnesvärdhet?*

### 7.1 Bakgrund och teoretisk utgångspunkt

Grafisk design är en visuell kommunikationsform som bygger på etablerade principer för layout, hierarki, komposition och typografi. Dessa principer har vuxit fram genom århundraden av praktisk erfarenhet och syftar till att skapa tydliga, funktionella och harmoniska visuella lösningar (Hannam, 2024; Lupton & Phillips, 2015, s. 250). Gridsystem, balanserad komposition och tydlig typografisk struktur är exempel på sådana regler som vanligtvis förknippas med god och tydlig design (Hannam, 2024; Poulin, 2018, s. 8).

Historiskt har olika stilistiska rörelser betonat vikten av rationell och funktionell design, där objektivitet och tydlig struktur haft störst vikt (Davis, 2020, s. 154; Meggs & Purvis, 2016, s. 345, 352). Samtidigt har det alltid funnits kreatörer som har ifrågasatt normerna. Att bryta mot etablerade regler kan vara en medveten strategi för att väcka uppmärksamhet, uttrycka personlighet eller utmana tittarens förväntningar (Dabner et al., 2020, s. 63, 66; Samara, 2020, s. 7). Det teoretiska ramverket i detta arbete utgår från denna förståelse att designregler är verktyg, snarare än absoluta sanningar.

## 7.2 Metod

Studien tillämpar kvalitativ visuell analys som metod, vilket är lämpligt för att undersöka meningsskapande i visuellt material (Hennink et al., 2020, s. 10; Leeuwen et al., 2000, s. 28). Analysen fokuserar på ett noggrant urval av verk från de fyra nämnda designers, där varje verk studeras utifrån hur det relaterar till traditionella designprinciper. Centrala aspekter som undersöks är layout, typografi, komposition och hierarki.

Utöver detta genomfördes även ett praktiskt designtest som en del av arbetet. Två affischdesigner gjordes för samma syfte – att marknadsföra en musikrelease – varav den ena följde etablerade designregler och den andra bröt mot dem. Målet med detta experiment var att pröva teorierna i praktiken och undersöka vilka skillnader som uppstår i uttryck, tydlighet och visuell påverkan.

## 7.3 Fallstudier

De designers som valts ut för analys representerar olika sätt att bryta mot konventioner. Paula Scher är känd för sin expressiva typografi och sitt sätt att använda text som ett bildmässigt element. I hennes affisch för The Public Theater används typografi i olika riktningar och storlekar, vilket utmanar traditionell hierarki och kompositionsbalans. Resultatet är en dynamisk och energisk design som kräver aktiv tolkning från betraktaren.

Wolfgang Weingart bröt med den schweiziska stilen genom att skapa lekfulla och asymmetriska affischer där typografi användes som en visuell byggsten snarare än endast ett sätt att föra vidare information. Hans affisch “Didacta Eurodidac” kännetecknas av en layout med mycket lagring och en rytmisk struktur som skapas genom upprepning av punkter, linjer och former.

David Carson tog regelbrottet till det extrema i en berömd layout för Ray Gun där hela artikeln sattes i ett symbolostikt typsnitt, vilket gjorde den oläslig. Detta val gjordes som ett sätt att kommentera innehållets tråkighet och belysa designerns makt i kommunikationen. Trots brist på läsbarhet förmedlade designen ett starkt budskap och väckte debatt om designens roll.

April Greiman är en pionjär inom digital grafisk design och experimenterar med lager, färg och typografi på ett sätt som bryter mot alla tidigare normer. I hennes verk “Does it Make Sense?” kombineras en digital självporträtt med pixlade bilder, abstrakta symboler och typografi som är både spegelvänd och roterad. Layouten följer ingen gridstruktur och utmanar gränserna mellan tryck, konst och interaktivitet.

## **7.4 Tillämpat designexperiment**

Det praktiska designtestet bestod av två affischer med samma syfte: att marknadsföra en kommande musiksingel. Den första affischen följde traditionella regler gällande grid, hierarki och typografi. Resultatet var tydligt, balanserat och visuellt harmoniskt – ett exempel på god, funktionell design.

Den andra affischen bröt medvetet mot dessa principer. Element överlappade varandra, typografi roterades och splittrades, och strukturen var avsiktligt oregelbunden. Denna affisch krävde mer uppmärksamhet från betraktaren och väckte större nyfikenhet och känslomässig respons.

Experimentet bekräftade resultaten från fallstudierna: regelbrott kan användas för att skapa visuell spänning och förstärka det kommunikativa budskapet, särskilt när regelbrotten grundar sig i ett medvetet syfte – till exempel för att förstärka ett budskap eller för att skapa en känslomässig reaktion. Det visade också att så kallad “bra design” inte alltid behöver vara minimalistisk eller lättläst – ibland är det just komplexiteten eller förvirringen som skapar effekt.

## **7.5 Slutsatser**

Arbetet visar att regelbrott i grafisk design kan bidra till både estetisk innovation och ökad påverkan. Det handlar inte om att ignorera designprinciper, utan om att förstå dem så väl att de kan ifrågasättas och omformas på ett meningsfullt sätt (Poulin, 2018, s. 6, 8). Designers som Scher, Weingart, Carson och Greiman visar att bryta mot normer i designvärlden kan leda till nytänkande, personlig stil och kulturell relevans.

Samtidigt påvisar studien att designregler fortfarande har en viktig funktion och de bör inte ses som irrelevanta. De är viktiga i många sammanhang där tydlighet, struktur och funktion är avgörande för designen. Men genom att bryta mot dessa regler på rätt sätt kan designers skapa verk som utmanar betraktaren, väcker känslor och stannar kvar i minnet. Framöver kan regelbrott förväntas spela en ännu större roll i takt med att designfältet förändras genom teknologisk utveckling. AI-genererad design, interaktiva miljöer och digitala plattformar kommer att ställa nya krav på kreativitet och uttryck. Frågor som hur designers kan behålla ett personligt och mänskligt uttryck i algoritmbaserade system kommer att bli allt viktigare.

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