



Jenny Holzer, the preeminent artist who created her soul-searching “truisms”, made us conscious of the human condition by revealing our frailties:

- “Action causes more trouble than thought”
- “All things are delicately interconnected”
- “Ideals are replaced by conventional goals at a certain age”
- “A single event can have infinitely many interpretations”
- “Any surplus is immoral”
- “Words tend to be inadequate”

These six truisms make us consider our collective moral conscious. As designers, we often underestimate the impact we have on the world at large, and how our visual vocabulary is influenced by political, social and cultural events.

So here my version of Holzer’s truisms, 33 Designisms, questioning what we do, why we do it, and how to get it done.

- 01. Design does not live in an aesthetic vacuum.** Design is influenced by and influences contemporary society.
- 02. Design brings content into focus;** design makes function visible.
- 03. Design is not solely a marketing device that supports consumerism.** It can be a communicator of dissent. It can market ideology. It can effect change.
- 04. Design must surprise and inform.** And it must do so in that order. Surprise your audience with the unexpected. Then allow their curiosity to lead them to the message.
- 05. Design can be seductive propaganda.** It is our responsibility to be knowledgeable about what we are asked to communicate. We need to make educated choices about what type of work we are willing to do. Make your decisions educated decisions.
- 06. Design has a rather symbiotic relationship with style, and style is somewhat precarious.** What looks great today may look silly in 15 years, and maybe if you’re extremely lucky and talented, it will look good again in 20. Great design is, quite simply, innovation that reflects the spirit of an era and becomes a classic because of its timeless appeal.
- 07. Question the need for any piece of print communication.** It is the most elementary way of protecting the environment. Often, the communication can be executed in a much more meaningful way which goes beyond traditional design vehicles.



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- 08. Respect the power of printing.** A piece of paper doesn't necessarily go away. THAT message, THAT image, with your name proudly credited in four-point type, may last decades. A humbling thought.
- 09. Multiplicity works.** Sol Lewitt knew it when he lined up 100 white boxes on a floor. Bruce Mao knew it when he put hundreds of big, grainy pictures back to back for Rem Koolhaas, and the Gap knows it when they fill their windows with hundreds of kids' sneakers.
- 10. Design that moves others comes from issues that move you.**
- 11. Find your own voice.** By experimenting, by allowing the time to experiment, and by taking risks. Which is why being in school is a luxury. School allows you the structured time to take risks.
- 12. No design is completely original.** We are all influenced by the bombardment of visual information we are exposed to on a daily basis. But understand that influence and plagiarism are two different things.
- 13. A good designer is a great listener.** And if you listen smartly, the client nearly always tells you the solution.
- 14. A good designer is a great storyteller.** Every company, service or institution has a story to tell. Explore the narrative and banish the banal corporate speak we've read a million times before.
- 15. Typography can be revolutionary, and not in a stylistic way.** To quote Ellen Lupton: "Matthew Carter's Bell Centennial font was designed for maximum legibility at a minimum size. It is used in the US phone books. Bell Centennial has saved millions of trees."
- 16. Words are as important as images and images can be more powerful than words.** And that image is rarely a stock image. Create your own images, they will always be uniquely yours.
- 17. Accidents often produce the best solutions.** And accidents are a hands on experience. Only you can recognize the difference between an accident and your original intent.



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18. Process can manifest the solution. There are no shortcuts to smart solutions. And smart designers take the time to do the following:

First they research (the finding and gathering of information).

They analyze (how does this research inform the problem and what is the relevance of the data).

They ideate (conceiving design concepts based on this analysis).

They strategize (How many ways can each of these ideas solve the problem? And which medium is the best form for the solution: Video? Book? Installation? Advertising? Interactive?).

Then onto creation (the process of making the form).

And lastly they evaluate.

19. Passion enables us to remain true to our creative vision. Analyze, synthesize, visualize, but don't compromise.

20. Extremes work. Really large, or really thick, or really small, or really colorful, or really simple, or really dense. Really.

21. "Design must always be in service to solving a problem, or its not design, its art."

Many thanks Chip Kidd for creating such a smart, fictional character whose dialog includes that quote.

22. Reconsider absolutes, question the status quo. Question the subscribed design vocabulary for a given audience. Consider how David Carson manipulated type for Beach Culture magazine and how John Plunkett and Barbara Kuhr defined the look of the dot-com era with Wired Magazine. As radical as these solutions appeared to be at the time, they were all appropriate to the gestalt of the client and spoke to their audience in a meaningful way.

23. We are the creators of artifacts.

24. "The medium is the message." So Marshall McLuhan said. And so says Valerie Steel, Chief curator of the Museum at FIT, who wrote an excellent essay on object-based art criticism that I have used to measure and critique my own work.



A critical analysis of artifacts involves questioning how one interacts with the piece, what is the experience, how does it function, how does this piece compare to other similar or related pieces. What are its cultural, technological and stylistic forbearers? What relationship does this have to the culture in which it was produced? What does it reveal about the culture? What function does this object perform within its culture?"

By posing these questions, we are not only evaluating the stylistic structure and content of any given piece, but questioning the object itself, for example: question the annual report as the de facto delivery vehicle for corporate message and fiscal reporting. Allow yourself the opportunity to question the form of the communication delivery system.

25. Designing takes time.

26. Ideas come faster the older you get. Experience is a wonderful and painful thing, but it does give you the ability to generate more ideas exponentially each time.

27. Asking questions generates more ideas.

28. Practice articulating design concepts without revealing the stylistic approach.

29. "Seriously funny" works. Seriously. Just think of Tibor Kalman. Seriously funny was in his DNA.

30. Dichotomy works. Try juxtaposing opposites: the historical with the vernacular; the rough with the refined; the brash with the sublime.

31. Design is like architecture; we structure space to facilitate the experience. Are you creating a minimal, modernist masterpiece, or a dense maze of information?

32. The space in between is as important as the space occupied. The space between the letters. The space between the words. The space between the lines. The space from top to bottom.

33. Design can be articulated through action, words, images or form. All can have equal value and equal impact.