

TEMPERERS MATTERS

On the Temporal Dimension
of Graphic Design

TIME MATTERS

On the Temporal Dimension
of Graphic Design

Hoang Nguyen & David Gobber

However, when the ideology of speed colonises domains it should not, then complex ideas are flattened for instant consumption, printed matter is reduced to swipeable content, and certain aesthetic experiences are simply not possible. p.9

Allowing for more time means allowing for deeper experiences. In contexts where this is the goal, friction is not a flaw but exactly where meaning emerges and a deeper beauty can unfold. p.10

The most meaningful encounters are rarely just for an instant. p.15

Graphic design objects are usually understood as static artefacts, defined by spatial rather than temporal dimensions. It therefore comes as no surprise that graphic design is generally not considered “time-based media”, a category that encompasses video, film, sound, and related works. Definitions of time-based media vary, but commonly revolve around duration. The Guggenheim Museum, for example, explains that works “are referred to as time-based media because they have duration as a dimension and unfold to the viewer over time”. However, if we take the notion of “unfolding over time” seriously, we might need to reconsider the exclusion of graphic design.

Graphic design does not unfold through movement or sound, but it does unfold through use. While design should not be reduced to its functional value, functionality remains an essential characteristic of design objects. Philosophers such as Daniel Martin Feige have pointed out that the aesthetics of design are always also the aesthetics of function and use. This implies that graphic design objects are experienced through use. And use necessarily requires duration. Think about reading a book or a small leaflet. Even posters, which are typically designed for brief exposure, demand a certain amount of time to be seen and understood.

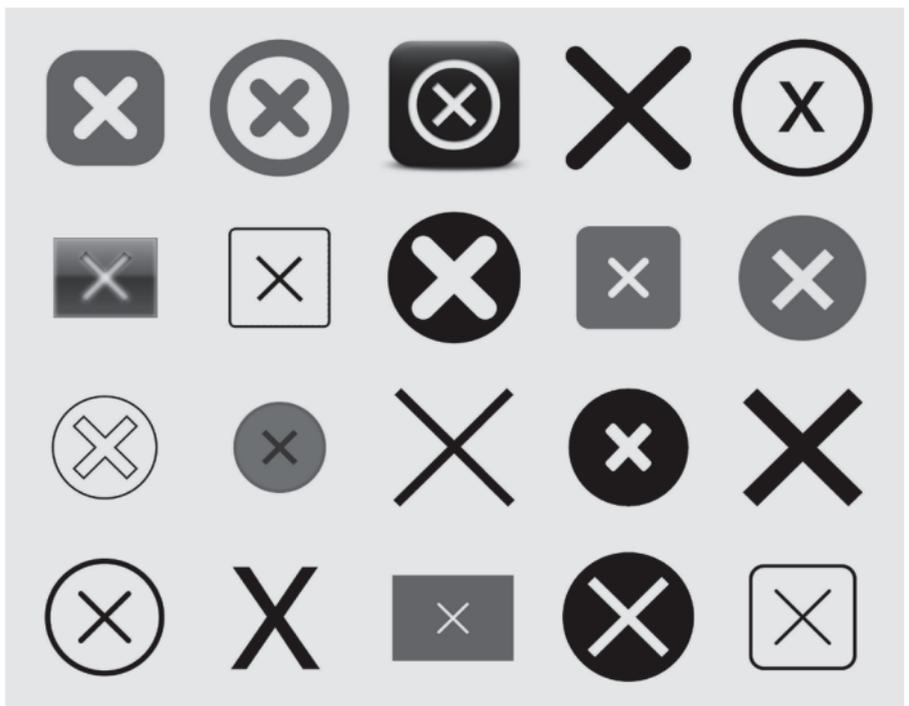
In areas of graphic design that require particularly fast modes of engagement, the modernist principle of form follows function seems entirely appropriate. Understood as optimising design for efficient use, it produces aesthetics that tend to be slick and clean. This aligns with what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes as “Ästhetik des Glatten” (aesthetic of smoothness). Han explains that this aesthetic, which is characterised by immediacy and a condensed, accelerated present, is at the centre of “das Digitalschöne” (digital beauty),



Apple iPhone Air (Sky Blue)
Balloon Dog (Blue) by Jeff Koons

today's most dominant ideal of beauty. He recognises this kind of beauty in a variety of artefacts ranging from smartphones to the artworks of Jeff Koons.

In graphic design, the ideal of “das Digitalschöne” can often be found in user interfaces, wayfinding systems, and emergency signals, all of which typically have efficient but also rather interchangeable designs. This is no coincidence. As Han argues, communication can only reach maximum speed where the same reacts to the same. When graphic design needs to be deciphered as fast as possible, there is no room for friction. The viewer should not be bothered with any novelties or irregularities. Instead, the design needs to feel intuitive, which is achieved by mimicking what is already established and thereby allowing for easy pattern recognition. Here we do not need to reinvent the wheel. Make the close icon an X, point in directions with arrows, and signal danger in red. Or, in other words, make it the same as what is already known.



A selection of close icons

This observation might come across as dismissive of design that is focused on short durations of engagement. That is not the intention here. Speed is simply a central need in some contexts. It should also be acknowledged that designing a functional navigation system is a genuinely difficult task and, in the case of emergency signals, getting it right can even be a matter of life and death. Nevertheless, acceleration comes at a cost. It does not allow for rich experiences and nuanced communication. This is no problem when there is no need for such things. However, when the ideology of speed colonises domains it should not, then complex ideas are flattened for instant consumption, printed matter is reduced to swipeable content, and certain aesthetic experiences are simply not possible.

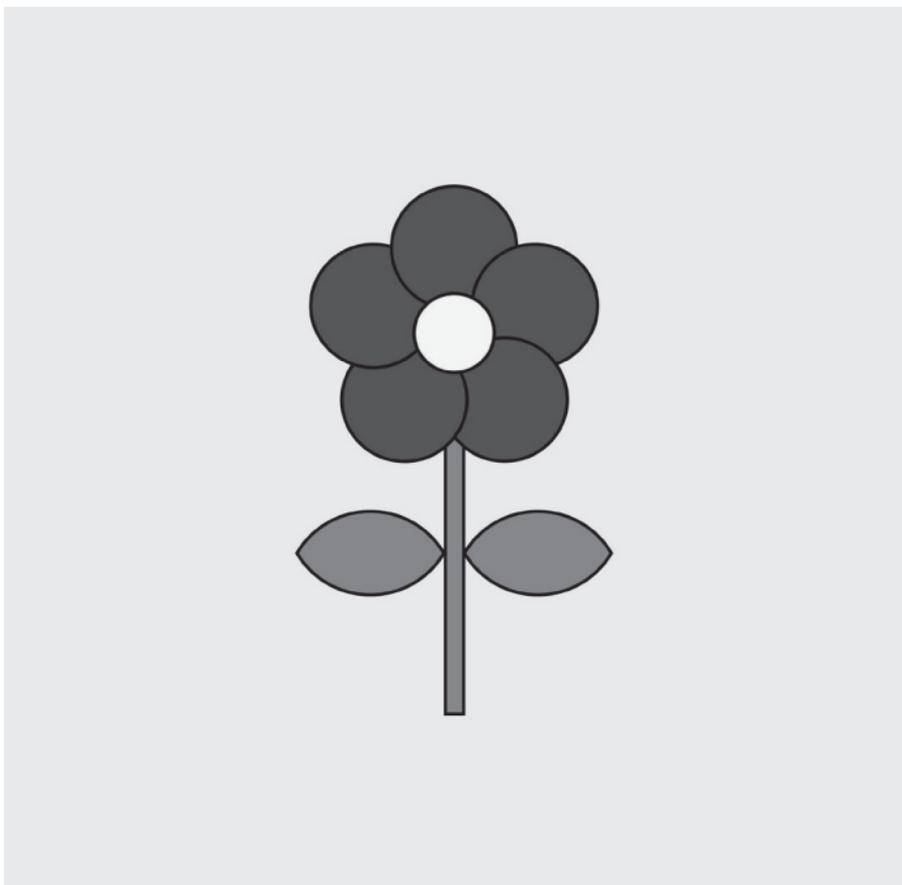
In this context, it can be helpful to think of graphic design as translation, as Ingo Offermanns suggests. From this perspective, graphic design is about taking a statement from one language and communicating it in another (visual) language. Translations tend to become easier, and therefore faster, the closer the languages are related, because many underlying concepts, metaphors, and modes of thinking are shared. The more languages have in common, the less there is to actually translate. Following this logic, one might imagine that having only a single (visual) language would be ideal. However, as François Jullien explains: “A single language would be much more convenient, certainly, but it would also impose its uniformization. Exchange would be made easier, but there would be nothing, or nothing effectively singular, left to exchange.”

Jullien’s reflections on languages connect to what we have already identified through Han in graphic design: If there were only one visual language, communication would be so easy that

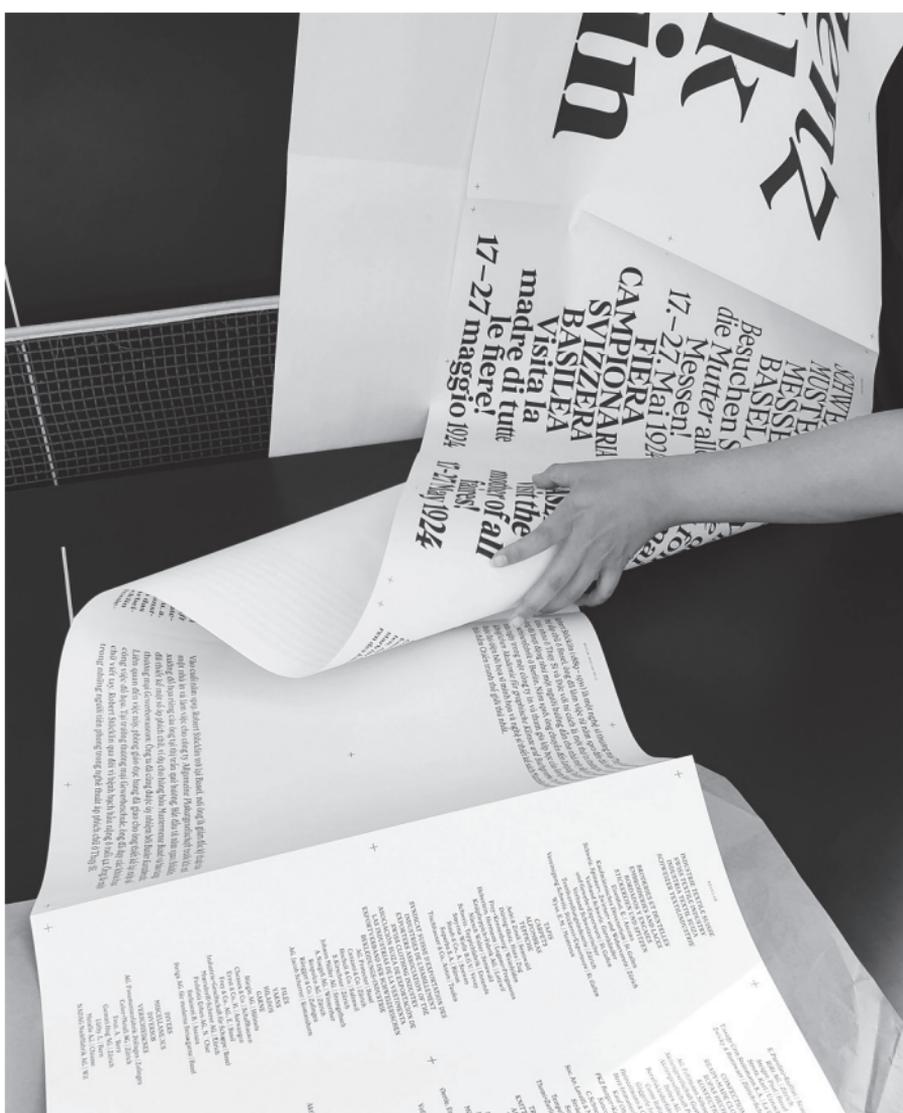
it could reach its maximum speed, but at the cost of communicative depth. A consistent visual representation allows for fast recognition, but a greater variety of visual languages—though it may demand much more time to read and decipher—can communicate more nuances and details than a single representation ever could.

Take the visual depiction of a flower as an example. If the viewer has only a small timeframe available, a generic visualisation works best. Recognition becomes easy and fast, but the conveyed idea of a flower remains rather basic. If a larger timeframe is given, however, the viewer can engage with more rewarding depictions. A single, more telling image or a greater variety of representations can communicate qualities that a generic depiction never could. This is not about visual variety or complexity—since a single simple image can be just as compelling as multiple detailed ones—but about whether an image repays sustained attention. In the latter case, interpretation may not be immediate, but it can lead to a fuller understanding of what a flower is. Allowing for more time means allowing for deeper experiences. In contexts where this is the goal, friction is not a flaw but exactly where meaning emerges and a deeper beauty can unfold.

An example in print design that makes purposeful use of friction is the type specimen for Lucifer developed for an exhibition setting. Conceived as a large-format publication, it resists quick handling and cannot simply be picked up and flicked through. The oversized pages demand to be turned slowly and deliberately. Only upon closer inspection does one realise that it is not a bound volume but an almost fifteen-metre-long leporello, a single sheet folded into pages. The paper is neither rigid nor fragile, but thin enough to require attentive handling. The speci-



Visual depiction of a flower for a small timeframe (above) and for a large timeframe (below; source: Wikipedia)

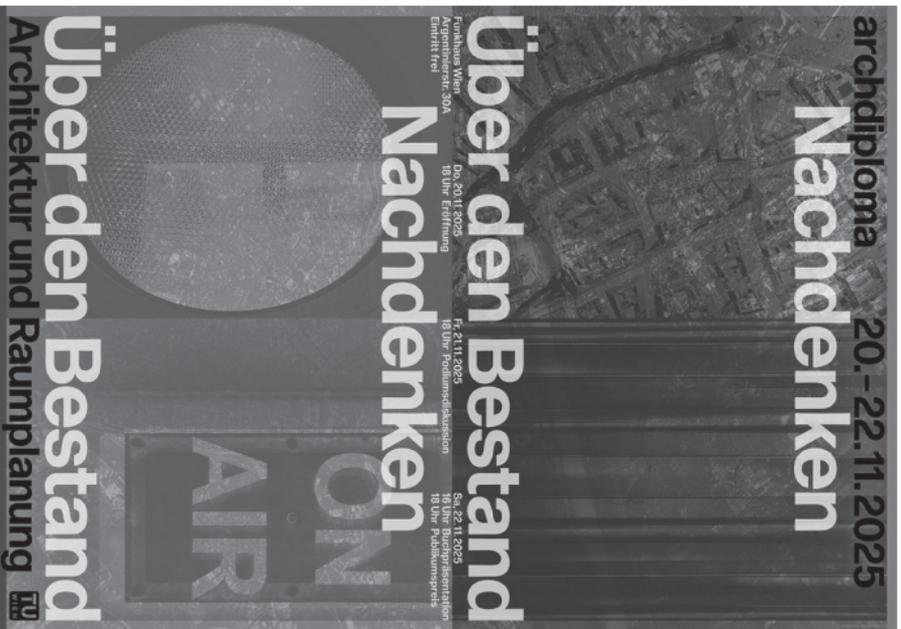
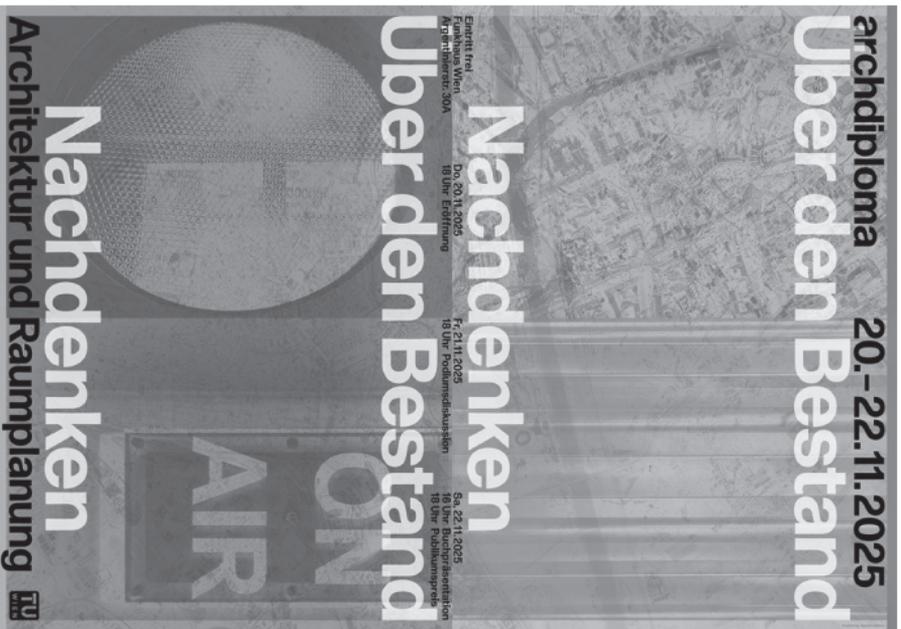


Lucifer type specimen for the Swiss Design Awards exhibition, 2023

men's scale and materiality introduce a subtle resistance that shifts the viewer into a slower mode of engagement, appropriate to what is presented.

Considering longer durations of engagement comes naturally when designing publications, since no one expects multiple pages to be read in an instant. However, a similar approach can also be beneficial when dealing with more ephemeral graphic design objects, such as posters. Conventional wisdom suggests that a poster must capture attention at first glance. But what comes afterwards? For a poster spotted briefly during a commute, the first impression may seem to be all there is. And yet, we rarely travel a route only once. If we consider more intimate settings such as shop windows, cafés, or building foyers, exposure can be long and repeated. Even when designing for seemingly short durations, focusing solely on the first impression might not be sufficient. The posters for Archdiploma and Salon skug are examples of how temporal considerations can inform ephemeral graphic design.

Archdiploma is the biennial diploma exhibition of the Faculty of Architecture and Spatial Planning at the Vienna University of Technology. The posters were displayed inside academic and architecture-related buildings, where people would encounter them repeatedly and could examine them up close. The large colour fields and title typography create an immediate visual presence. The design also rewards repeated and prolonged viewing: The colour fields reveal layers of aerial photography of Vienna and architectural details of the Funkhaus Wien. This embeds the exhibition venue into the visual language, and elements like the circular window and the "ON AIR" sign resonate with the public presentation of diploma projects.



Poster series for Archdiploma of TU Wien, 2025

The BAM! Wahlspecial poster for the cultural event series Salon skug demonstrates that designing for longer durations of attention does not necessarily require more details. It features a strikingly reduced motif: a bold symmetrical form that immediately catches the eye. But the image also rewards sustained looking. The longer one sits with it, the more the motif begins to oscillate between a pen pressing down to mark a ballot and an explosive energy radiating outward. In combination, this signifies the power of casting a vote and also resonates with the intense sound of the event's music act. The two readings complement each other, and it is precisely the simplicity of the form that makes this possible. If the design were conceived only for the first glance, this depth would be unnecessary. It only becomes relevant when the temporal dimension is considered in the design.

Thinking about graphic design as a time-based endeavour opens up a much richer understanding of what it can achieve. Although graphic design objects are typically static, experiencing them always takes time, and their design should reflect that. Smooth graphics optimised for short exposure may be exactly what is needed in some contexts, but this optimisation comes at the cost of nuance and depth. Designing with longer durations in mind is not about being deliberately difficult or rejecting efficiency, but about recognising that some ideas and experiences require time to unfold. Think back to the last time a piece of graphic design left a lasting impression, and you will likely agree: The most meaningful encounters are rarely just for an instant.



**Salon skug: BA
Wien-Edition mit
FLUCC Deck**

BAM! Wahlspecial Café Schädlweh , 27.04.2025

Literature:

Feige, D. M. (2019). *Design: Eine philosophische Analyse* (2nd ed.). Suhrkamp.

Guggenheim Museums and Foundation. (n.d.). *Time-Based Media*. Retrieved February 27, 2026, from guggenheim.org/conservation/time-based-media

Han, B. (2016). *Die Errettung des Schönen* (4th ed.). S. Fischer.

Jullien, F. (2021). *There Is No Such Thing as Cultural Identity*. Polity Press.

Offermanns, I. (2022). Anti-Ambiguity vs. Translation. In I. Offermanns (Ed.), *Graphic Design Is (...) Not Innocent* (pp. 19 – 35). Valiz.

Copyright © 2026 Nguyen Gobber
All rights reserved.

This writing is protected by copyright law. Unauthorized reproduction, distribution, or use of any part of this writing is prohibited without the author's prior written consent.

First published in March 2026
at nguyengobber.com/insights

In Time Matters, graphic design is examined through its temporal dimension. While its artefacts are static, they unfold through use, requiring time to be fully experienced. In an accelerated present, design is often optimised for brief exposure, resulting in efficient yet uniform visuals. Drawing on philosophical reflections in efficient concrete examples, the essay shows how purposely designing for sustained attention can lead to greater nuance, depth, and meaning.