

# BROUSSE & RUDDIGKEIT

Cover: BALTIC SEA PHILHARMONIC, 2016

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DESIGN FRIENDS



Lea Brousse and Raban Ruddigkeit established their design studio in Berlin after years leading successful solo careers. Though their natural affinity to the process of creation may be different, they, nonetheless, share a common vision and that vision brought them to develop a design code.

These new rules of design are more in tune with the digital age and immune to its pitfalls. Together with their clients, they develop concepts that rest on the pillars of flexibility and openness and thus allow their corporate identity to be fluid and adaptable.

**Afsaneh Angelina Rafii:** There is a whole generation between you. How did you come to discover each other's work and finally decide to collaborate?

**Lea Brousse:** When we met we became a couple and I was working for a company in Canada. I was the lead designer for Zafin, a digital banking company. And Raban was working for his own company, Ruddigkeit. For some of his projects, he asked me to collaborate with him and do something different. We realized that we were really complementary in our approach. Both of us are creative but I have an intuitive creativity and I come from product design and Raban is very much structured in his creativity.

**Raban Ruddigkeit:** Yes, job-like.

Together we have a real understanding of each other. At the beginning though, I was not very keen on working with him and wanted to focus on my own things.

So the personal predated the working relationship?

Yes. It was Raban's dream to work with his partner. So, a year and a half later he asked me if I wanted to work with him and I was very sceptical because I always believed that it wasn't good to work with your partner, the person you were in a relationship with. But then we tried. It wasn't easy in the beginning because we have two very strong personalities, and of course, when you live with someone and work with them, things can get complicated. Eventually, we were both really happy with the results.

The results were better for both of us. Today, there are so many things to do and work on. It's not just about finding the

right visual. It's better to have a real partner. I have had a long career and I have come across a lot of so-called creatives, and I can say that Lea is one of the best I have ever seen and that has nothing to do with our private relationship. We are very different. I am more black-and-white and she is more colorful. It sounds simple but within the context of the daily work we do, it gains a deeper meaning. There are so many things that we have to decide on, so talking things through helps us make better decisions together. It's no time for having ego's like those of rockstars anymore. Nobody can fulfill the whole range of questions that come up alone. So it sounds like you are saying that Lea has more of an emotional response to things, whereas, you, Raban, have more of an intellectualized approach. Or is that too simplified a way to look at it? Let's put it this way: we discuss a lot. She discusses in her French way and I discuss in my German way. She is very emotional, and I am very, let's say, German.

**Pragmatic.**

Yes, pragmatic, so we must find a middle ground.

When you say that objectively Lea is one of the best designers out there, what are the elements that really strike you in her personal work and that you admire?

The emotional aspect in her work means that she finds solutions that not only work but also live. They have a heart and a soul. This is complementary to my work.

What about you Lea, what did you admire in his work?

I tend to go in a lot of different directions and I can go very far in developing concepts, and projecting into the future, especially when I am designing logos for example. Raban is really good at saying, ok let's come back and do things step by step. Let's present this first, then the next item. So he brings a lot of structure to my creativity. His work is thoughtful. He comes at it from a different angle and is capable of better stripping down my work.

After more than twenty years, I am not just a designer; I am more of a strategic

partner for my clients. I have a strategy in mind and I think about whether the ideas work within the strategic context. I am older. So I have more experience in briefings etc.

Do you still work on personal projects or is most of what you do as a duo nowadays?

**Most of the time we are together.**

But you have your private projects and I have mine. Not too many though. Lea more than me. She is doing some art projects. (But we also do illustrations for newspapers together.) I am not an artist. Lea is more of an artist. I need to have questions that I can answer. I cannot be absolutely free in that way.

I use design, illustration, my creative work to, of course, respond to our clients' needs first, but also to communicate to the world, because I am not really very vocal. Before I started working, I was really introverted. Not shy, but it was just hard for me to communicate with people. So for me this work, these drawings, the process of creation is a way for me to communicate and open myself, to show who I am. It's my language.

Yes, for me too. Some things I cannot say but I can find a picture of it.

You broached the idea of what the advantages are of working together because you complement each other, and you can channel each other in the right direction as well as bringing a different kind of vision to your work, but what do you find challenging in working as a duo?

**Sometimes it is just the fact of having a different point of view.**

When you are a designer you are also a kind of psychologist and so at times you have a point of view of your clients: he wants this and this and he said this and this. I am analyzing everybody all the time. I mix intuition and analysis. And at times we don't necessarily agree on what I took away. I have to then debate a lot to convince him.

But then we find compromises. We don't present them our most radical solution first for example. Working alone for me is ok, but there are just too many facets you need to take care of: the strategy, the beauty... to ask yourself all these questions. It's tough. Of course, it can also be tough when it is two of you, just because every day is not necessarily a good day in our business. We are not always on the highway to success, with the sun shining above our heads and music in the background. There are hard times too. But still, it is better together. Also when we talk about complementing each other, there is the simple aspect of having a different vision because I am a man and she is a woman. So we must find ways

to harmonize these differing perspectives and balance them. Yes, but I have always worked with men, so I am used to it. I understand their language. Now, I am actually trying to find more projects with women.

Visually, as far as your language, I was interested in exploring the landscapes that have influenced both of you culturally. Raban, you were raised in the GDR, Lea, you hail from France so you have a different vocabulary that you grew up with. I am interested in exploring the things that nurtured that love of design within you.

I grew up in the GDR and there was a strong graphic design scene there too, with quality logos and workable design ideas. My dad was a painter and graphic designer too and my mother was a Germanist, so I grew up between these two worlds of word and form. But for me my idols were people like Wim Crowel from Holland who built design systems. Today, for us, it is not about just doing design but finding a special way to build corporate design...

**It's more about systems.**

It's about creating flexible systems, not about one logo, one typeface, one color and that's all. You can no longer work like that. The history of graphic design is 100 years old. It means nothing. So, when we say there are some rules, we can say ok, but these rules are only 100 years old, can we talk about the future? The future in this particular case means the World Wide Web. For me, that changed everything. The idea of having a piece of static paper is over. Today, everything is open and everything is changing every day. You can

change the color of your mobile phone and immediately the question becomes what does that mean for brands. So we look at what design can do for brands in this moving world.

Social media, technology, today everything is different. We no longer have to spend a week to build a typeface. It's another pace. That's why we have to adapt ourselves to make it more simple and adaptable to different mediums.

As things become more complex, we have to simplify the graphic design and design in general. I come from France, but I come from two cultures, French and Arab. I grew up in the South where it's really narrow-minded for women.

My father was an architect. To draw and to create was my world.

So both of you grew up in artistic families.

Yes. Crazy.

Culturally do you remember images growing up that triggered your love of product- or graphic design?

They were simple things really. I come from Leipzig where there was an important publishing house, there was

the Leipziger Messe with their double M as a logo. I am connected with the branding in the GDR, also because my father would comment on things we would see around us. There was not much money, but there were some good ideas, though most of them were black and white and badly printed.

I was born in the 80s, so I remember the graphics of the 90s. I was exposed to a lot of things. My father was very pragmatic, we had a minimalistic home but he built some mobiles for me. I didn't have a lot of toys or furniture around me and was constrained to use my imagination a lot.

Raban, you have said that you see yourself as a transmitter, as someone who is the vessel of other people's visions, thoughts, and ideas. It strikes me as an unusual definition because as a designer, especially one who has been on the receiving end of many awards, I would expect you to be the originator.

Yes, an originator in the sense that I have to find the most innovative way to talk about an image, but I must first see the image, the story. It's not my story. It never is. A client has his own story but I can find the best way to present it or the best new point of view. I am not an artist... not really at least. For me, it's ok to say this, because I don't have this kind of ego attached to that idea. We had our illustration project for the Tagesspiegel that was our way of saying something about what we see in the world, how we view politics, but our work for our clients is different. Again it's not about egos, but rather about bringing solutions.

What is the primary function of design in your eyes then?

Function is a good word for me. You know the old saying “form follows function”, well today I believe more than ever, that “form is the function”. Look at your mobile form, look at your screen here and now, every form has its function and not only that, the form is the function. There is no difference between the two. So that’s what we work on: finding the perfect form for a concrete question.

For the graphic design field and for our clients, we tend to develop flexible identities, ones that evolve with time and needs because corporate identity is like the identity of a person you don't always stay the same, and you are always changing. Of course, you have to have a basis. With our design code, we try to develop recognizable identities that you can transform over time.

As someone who has more of an intuitive approach to design would you agree with that definition or do you feel more of an affinity with art? Or do you feel like that does not fit into the realm of design?

That’s something that’s difficult for me to answer because maybe for me it’s something in between. What would you say?

When you do your art, you do your art, but when you work for clients it’s not about us.

It’s always a bit about us, but it is more fundamentally about understanding what they want and cannot formulate into ideas. It’s about understand-

ing that and bringing them face to face with what they want to be visually.

It’s a translation. We translate things.

You translate ideas into a visual language...

Yes. But it’s not about what we have to say. It’s about what they have to say. Even a Shakespeare translator can bring in a bit of personality... but not too much.

You touched on the Internet and how your creative agency focuses on branding for the digital age. What are the key elements that set the digital design apart from more traditional forms of design?

I can show you an example. You can see what happens with a brand when you go on a social media platform like Facebook for example. Microsoft Windows usually has a square logo, but because of the Facebook platform, it becomes round. But that’s not the logo. That’s only a small example of what kind of problems brands face. The logo has lost its power in this world. You need more. Google design is more about four colors; it’s not really about a brand. What’s the logo of Facebook? Is it an F? So things become more and more open. When you look on a mobile phone, on these little screens, you must have more of a corporate DNA.

That’s really the essence of what we do. The code



is the DNA that can evolve, more than a logo.

It's much more challenging though.

Of course. It's most challenging to explain these concepts to people. They tend to be more skeptical and we have to convince them with arguments.

Then they end up loving it. At the beginning, it's too abstract for them. It would be easier to make a static logo with a nice elegant typeface but it's not what we are keen on or what we believe in. It's challenging because it's new and surprisingly people of my generation are more skeptical than the generation of Raban for example – or even older.

Why do you think that is?

Most of the people who study graphic design right now are conservative. We have done some conferences where the feedback is split between people who think what we are doing is great and those who think it's shit. It's funny. Some people really don't get it. It's too strange for them. It disturbs their mentality. It's too evolved.

Yes, and in my life, I want to go further and further. I don't want to ever think "Oh now I know how it goes in graphic design or corporate design."

Because you have experienced more. Maybe the younger generation is too attached to the notions that they have learned in theory. They haven't been exposed to the breadth of possibilities that

come with experience and can be adapted to new situations.

Yes, at the moment we see more and more of these flexible systems. We are not alone but there isn't too much of it out there.

Can you put into words what you really mean by flexible systems? When you talk about brand DNA, it's a certain imagery that I, as an observer, can recognize and come to associate a visual language with a specific brand?

Yes, that's a perfect description. It's also the fact that we maybe have one, two or three flexible elements. In the end, the most important notion is this openness; because the future will be that your brand will start from your customers. Ten years ago it started with the first customized shoes or cars, but now we will see more and more brands that will communicate with the customers from a bottom-up approach and no longer the traditional top-down approach. You must be open. You must be transparent. You must be flexible. Remember Nokia started with footwear, then with mobile phones and now they make web things. There's an evolution.

In a sense, there are two revolutions though. You talked about how the Internet changed everything. But social media changed everything again. Within the context of the Internet, you can still have very

static imagery in a sense, but it is social media that really transforms the language.

Yes, absolutely. At the end there are two or three meta things like transparency and globalism.

You talked about the notion of truth.

I am not sure I understand what that means exactly in the context of design.

Well, within the context of transparency, you have to be truthful. Twenty or thirty years ago, brands were really image-driven. "I am the biggest car." "I am the biggest jeans." "I am the best beer." Whereas, today, you have to say: "I am a beer, but I am like this." Because there are other beers out there with other characteristics, so it is no longer enough to claim to be the best. You have to really dive into the reality of a product.

So it's going back to the DNA that you were talking about.

To be true, is essentially the best idea a brand or a human being can have because lies just complicate things.

Don't you think social media complicates the idea of truth?

Un peu.

**It brings a lot of confusion.**

But it just means don't fake it. Don't try to be more than you are.

**Or don't be superficial and follow trends.**

It's about being authentic. When you are a bicycle, don't try to be an elevator.

Another one of your codes and something, which you have touched on is flexibility. It can be challenging to grasp this notion within the context of the visual identity of a brand. It can pose a challenge because there are these traditional ideas of not touching a logo or a typeface. But when ten brands have the same typeface it's not very different. You know what I mean? Within this global context, you are no longer just in one city with three other brands and two newspapers. We are surrounded by so many things, that it is no longer enough to just have a logo. Try to think of a logo that doesn't remind you of another logo you have seen around the world. It's almost impossible. Before people would go to the movies and they would leave and talk about it briefly. Now you have these complex TV shows that are so much more interesting than any of the Hollywood movies because they go deeper. So you could compare the logo to a brief movie, and what we are trying to do to something deeper that connects with people.

**Also we give our clients what they want to have but the idea is that in the future they can still use what we have prepared for them even if they are not designers and just adapt it**

and use it as they want. We did this project that worked really well, Danceyear. It's a platform for dance in Germany and they really appreciated the idea to build their own things and not always solicit the intervention of a designer. It's interesting to be able to reappropriate the creations of the designer and collaborate with other designers also. We did some posters, 16 in total and it exposed the work of every designer. We did an exhibition around it. It was so successful that in China a teacher asked us to send the material and he created an exhibition there. It was great publicity for everybody. It was more artistic. We believe in being open with our creative work, even if it seems odd to think like this. It's our philosophy.

To think in logos is a very hierarchical way of thinking. The logo is on the top and the rest follows.

Today we think it is more circular. The Danceyear project is basically OTF typo with three forms in it and that's all, and we can work with it, and change it, and work with other designers.

How important is typography in the work that you develop?

Typography is really interesting because it is also changing every day. When you think about Arabic and Hebrew for example, a young female designer just developed a mix of both alphabets, you can read both in the typeface. A typeface can also

represent a lot of pictures and we use type in very special ways. We do calendars about it and we develop some really special typefaces for our clients too. The best way to build a brand today is to have a good typeface for yourself as a starting point.

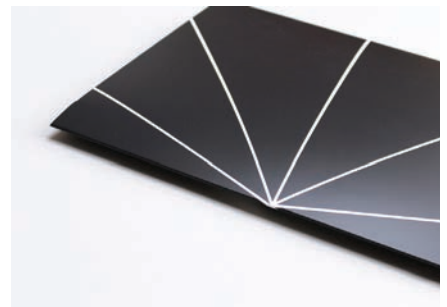
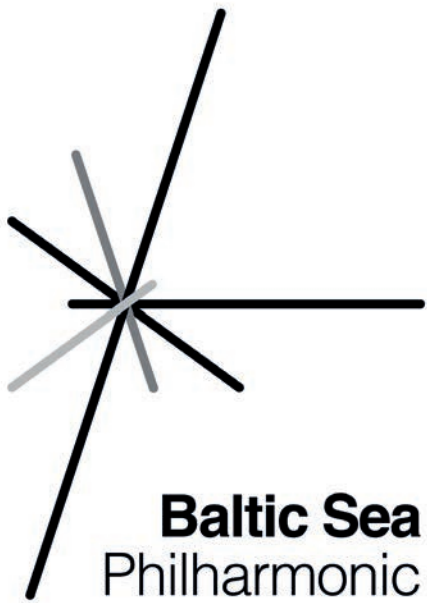
Which of your vocations is closest to your heart: illustration, graphic design or developing concepts?

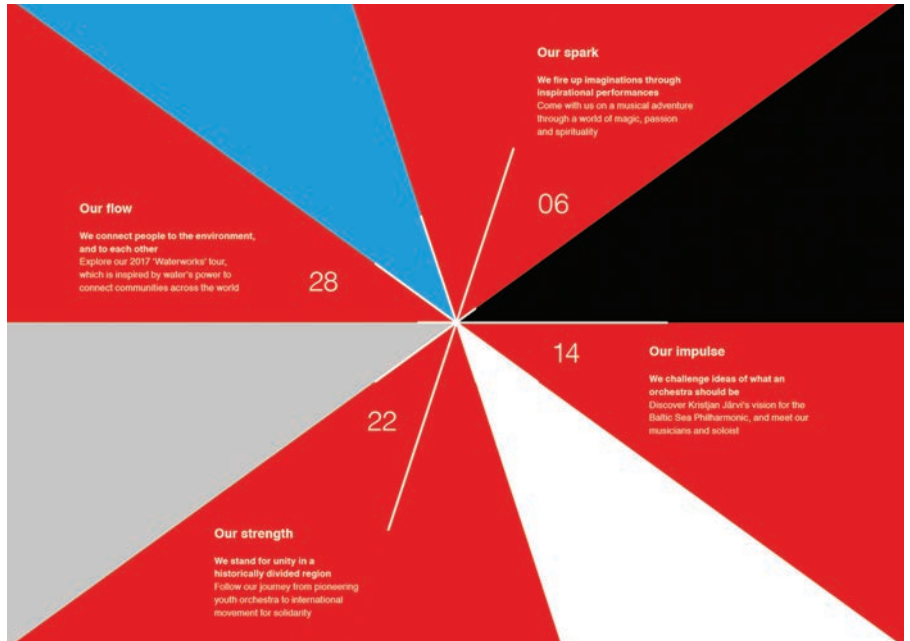
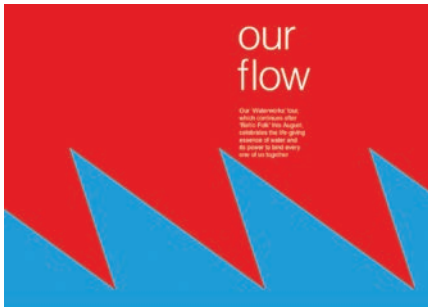
In graphic design, the best moment for me is the beginning, when you go in search of ideas. I really love this moment.

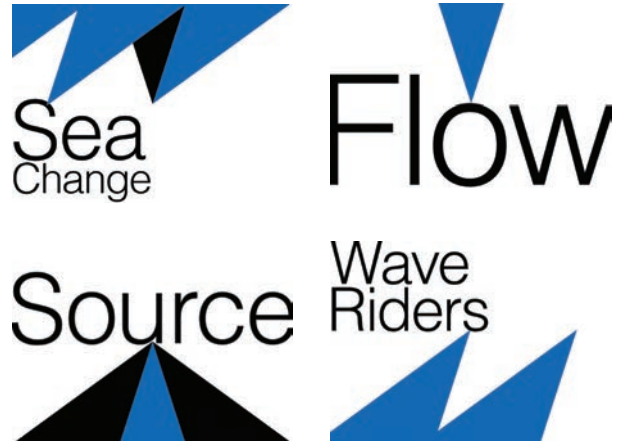
I love changing, when I do too much illustration, I like moving on to graphic, when I do too much of that, I like finding concepts.

You used to have 10 rules of design, how did you now boil it down to five rules for your Design Code, which are: Simple, Different, True, Flexible and Open.

10 rules are simply too many. Nobody can remember 10 rules. When I talk to my students or our clients we talk about these five rules because it is really enough. Simple and Different are part of the old rules, but they are still essential. What is new and represents the future are the further three rules of Truth, Flexibility, and Openness.



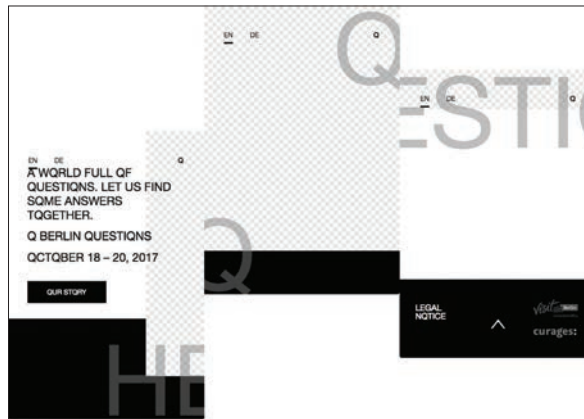
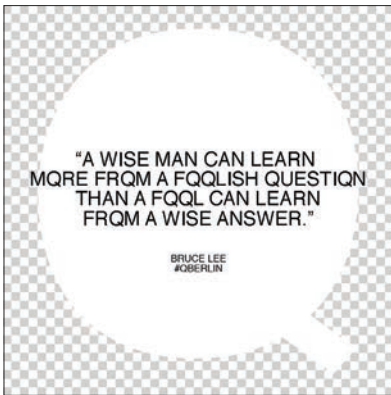
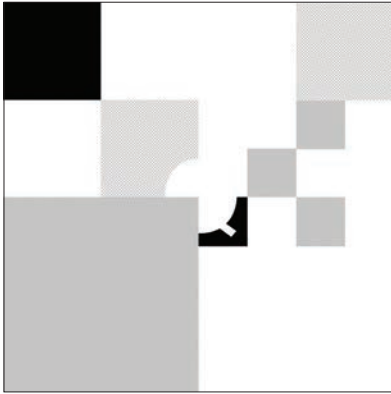


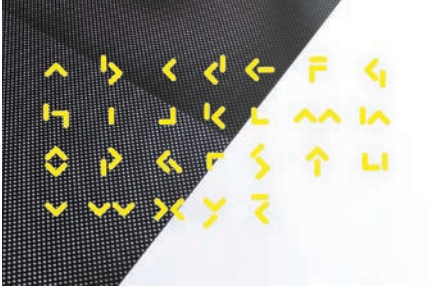










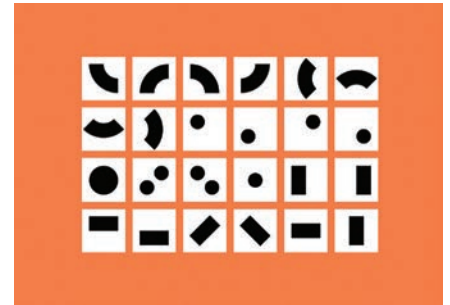
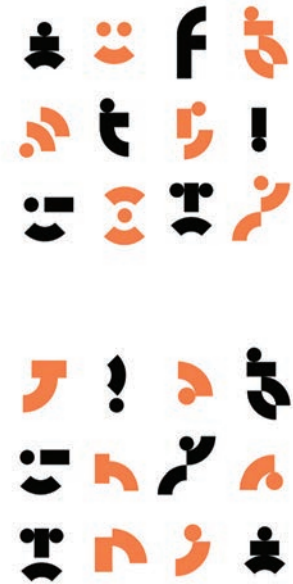


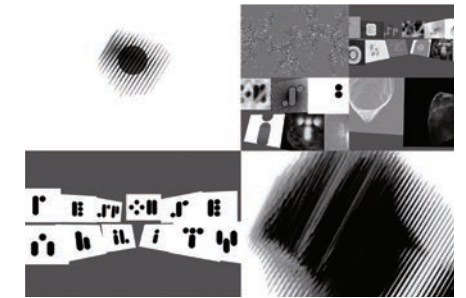
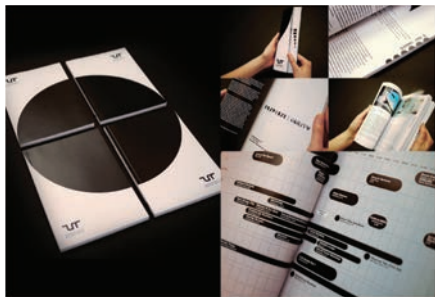
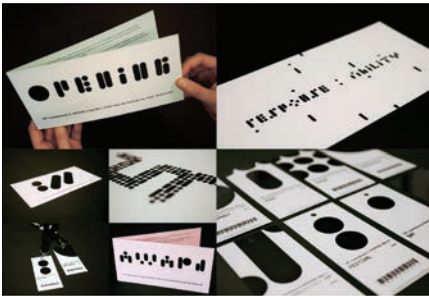
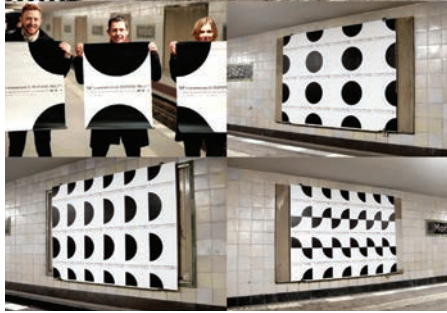
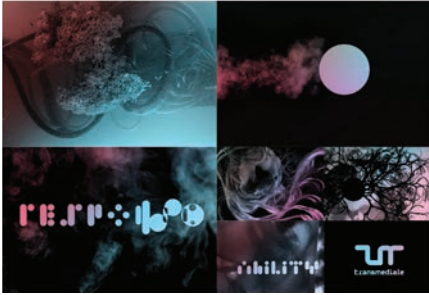
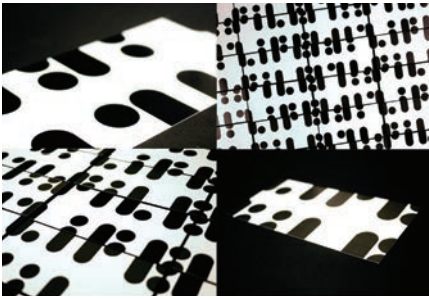
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