

VISUAL DESIGN AS A POETIC PRACTICE:
A dialogue between the designer and the audience

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To my parents, who have supported me at every step.
To my friends, who lifted me when it was necessary.
To my professors, to whom I owe all my growth.

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In a practice, as inherently linguistic as visual design, a work cannot be reified without poeticity. Design is always a dialogue between the designer and the audience—the designer’s *intention* translates into the *interpretation* of the audience. This translation is poetic on a fundamental level. The intrinsic personality of the designer is inseparable from their work. Any attempts to diminish this presence, fall prey to an assumed “universality”. An industrialized perspective to design has made it formulaic and systemic. It is now, more imperative than ever to acknowledge the designer’s entity, and with it, the poetic aspect of this dialogue. This thesis argues that visual design extends beyond function and universal communication; that there is poeticity anyway, and there is use in embracing it, than in denying it. Visual designers must attend to the poetic potential of their work. Such work is powerful because it kindles the intellect of the audience. The visual component of this thesis revolves around making such work; the sole function of which *is* poeticity.

Keywords: Authorship, Semiotics, Myths, Memes, Poetic criticism, intentionalism, Death of the author, Post modernism, Modernism, Design thinking, Meaning-making, Images

1. Introduction

*“I cannot understand you
Tis because
You lean over my meaning’s edge and feel
A dizziness of the things I have not said”*

- Trumbull Stickney, *“The Soul of Time”*

In language, there are infinite layers of meaning. Semiotician Ferdinand Saussure breaks down “the sign” into a “signifier” and “signified”. Saussure’s work testifies that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is completely arbitrary. For instance, the word “apple” is a signifier to the popular red fruit, which is the signified. Nothing about “apple”, is actually apple like, yet the word functions perfectly in language. This arbitrariness—this disconnectedness between that which is used to signify and that which is signified, is what makes communication poetic on a fundamental level.

Howard professor Andras Sandor defines “poeticity” as a feature of language use. According to him, verbal signs function poetically when dominant nonverbal processes are activated by verbal ones. (2) For instance, metaphor is a popular tool used in poetry, which functions poetically because it alludes to something other than itself.

The unique lived experiences of individuals involved in communication, add another layer(s) of poeticity to communication. A word could mean differently to different people. Visual design is visual *communication*. So similarly, a visual means differently to different people. The way the visual form marries the written word and then interacts with a human being through a code of cultural perception is a rather romantic idea.

There is no possible way that the poeticity of anything visual, can be shunned. John Berger—art critic, painter, poet— elaborates on it heavily in his book *Ways of Seeing*. With his

famous motto “Seeing comes before words”, he asserts the position that seeing creates one’s place in the world and that, as a sensorial experience, it precedes everything. (7) A visual hence, has a power like no other sensorium. Jessica Helfand, designer and educator, reinforces this argument on an even more fundamental premise—the cellular level in our biological systems, where the visual stimulus triggers a physical and hence a “visceral” reaction. (21)

In early 2000s, design thinking began to emerge as a popular ideology, with its key premise of being user-centered and *empathetic*. Borrowed initially from the industrialized and technologized spirit of product and industrial design, it rooted for the agency to be placed in the hands of the “user”. These ideas tried to debut in visual design as well. Within a decade, popular graphic design journals like AIGA had written about it extensively. Simultaneously, big corporations incorporated design thinking into their visual designer job descriptions. These processes aim to treat visual design as “problem solving”, in turn making it almost formulaic and systemic, leaving almost no room for poeticity. Very similar to the Modernist agenda (as discussed later), these ideas assume a sense of universality; they claim that visual design must “universally” communicate.

Visual design does way more than that. Ever since medieval times, there have been several overlaps between the arts and technology, because they both share the common motivation of *poiesis*. Poiesis, in philosophy, is an activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before. Visual design is radically influenced by both art and technology, so much so that it can almost be seen as the marriage of the two. It must be

acknowledged at this point, that visual design is a form of poiesis and hence poeticity is inevitable.

Argument :

Design is always a dialogue between the designer and the audience. Visual design in particular, extends beyond universal communication because it is poetic on a fundamental level. Visual designers must embrace and explore this poeticity in order to make work that sparks the intellect of the audience.

2. Intention and Interpretation

The history of visual design observes a variety of movements (modernism, post-modernism, etc) that were shared with other disciplines including architecture and the fine arts. The ideologies behind each of these movements were products of the time period and the geographies that they belonged to. Modernism, for example, endorsed universality in and for all beings. Perhaps the political strife between capitalism and socialism and newly adopted Marxist ideas, brought about the need to rely heavily on a mathematical order and to question the classical norms of ornamentation—reducing everything to the bare minimum. The role of technology of the respective time period of the movement can also not be understated. A movement is more than just a trend, in the way that it endorses an ideology of a period in space and time. Trends come and go; but movements last because they become a part of history.

(contd. in section 3)

Today, graphic design magazines and lobbies of visual communication schools are filled with a mix of everything; visual designers of 2019, seem to have carried with themselves, a

mammoth *Pinterest* database (if you will) of chunks and bits of all these ideologies, almost mimetically. With social media just a touch away, everyone is constantly looking, seeing, absorbing, regurgitating, producing, reproducing, and so on. As there is more and more of something, there's less and less meaning—less and less value. There is too much to look at. It is not acknowledged enough, but one only produces what one sees. Standing where we are, our eyes have been accustomed to looking at everything. However, we have *not* lived and will *never* live in the times which witnessed the true need for order; or the true need to defy order. So, our eyes and minds have learned to reduce everything to how something looks much more than to why it looks that way.

This is when we witness the true need for that “why”. This is when all visual designers need to take a step back, or many steps back from their design practice and ask themselves the question, “Why does this need to be designed?”. Any visual communication is essentially poetic, not only in the way it uses rhetorical tropes, a subtle word-play here and there, an interactivity in between what is seen and what is read, but in the very way language functions. The way the author of a text chooses certain words— signs, motifs, visuals, images, graphics to represent certain ideas, and the way they are then interpreted by the audience, who is biologically similar to me, but coming from a different set of lived experiences, cultures, geographies—it is more important for me now more than ever to ask myself the question “How much of this do I expect to translate to the audience?”.

This section tries to make a case for the first part of the argument. Design is always a dialogue between the designer and the audience—the designer's *intention* translates into the *interpretation* of the audience. Richard A. Lanham, a professor of classical rhetoric, observes a similar dichotomy in his book *The Electronic Word* (1994) when he states that the meaning

is always in the reader, always in the text or always in between. (15) Visual designers must understand and evaluate the space between intention and interpretation in order to be successful “communicators”.

2.1. “The Author”

The discourse about intention is incomplete without the discourse about authorship. In order to truly understand what intention is, one needs to understand the authorship it comes with. The term “author” carries huge weight in the history of art and literary criticism. Literary theorist, Roland Barthes, discusses the strife between the author and the reader. (“Death of the Author”) This discussion can be easily applied to this thesis, if “author” is substituted with the designer and “reader” with the audience. Barthes suggests that giving a text an author imposes limits on the text and gives it a final signified. He maintains that the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the “death” of the author.

In the field of literary criticism, critics W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley define “intentionalism” as a technique used in critique of poetry, that bases the poet/author and their intention, central to the criticism. In order for an intentionalist critic to judge a work of poetry, they must know what the poet intended. If the poet does not succeed (in transpiring their intention) then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem—for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem. This is the intentional fallacy. (3)

With the rise of postmodern thought, ideas like such—that overthrew the agency of the author and gave it to the reader—became more and more prominent. Michael Rock, award-winning designer and writer, succinctly brings this discourse on authorship to the realm of visual

design. According to him, the cult of the author narrows interpretation and places the author at the center of the work. The author as origin and ultimate owner of the text guards against the free will of the reader. (“Designer as Author”) Rock’s premise is toward “open reading” and “free textual interpretation”, which he believes are thwarted by theories of authorship.

2.2. *Poiesis*

Poiesis, in philosophy, as discussed briefly before, is defined as an activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before. (Polkinghorne 115) The word is etymologically derived from the ancient Greek term ποιῆν, which means "to make". There have always been several overlaps between the arts and technology, both with the shared motivation of poiesis—both involve making things. The perfect example would be Leonardo da Vinci’s inventions, that were way ahead of their time. Whether designing weapons of war, flying machines, water systems or work tools, da Vinci the inventor was much like da Vinci the artist—motivated to make.

Visual design is a form of poiesis as well. Understanding poiesis is crucial, in order to understand deeper, the essentially poetic aspect of visual design. The paths of art and visual design have often intersected, as they will in this section of the thesis. Not only do they both experience the common forces of politics, culture and technology, but they also share the forces of an author and their intention.

Richard Lanham defines art as an eternal object that exists beyond any beholder, a perception that can be applied to anything from the Mona Lisa to Duchamp’s urinal. It is a form of sublime self-expression that is triggered by “the play impulse”. (15) Concept artist Joseph Kosuth’s famous work *One and Three Chairs* (1965) (Fig 1) makes for a perfect example for

this definition. Concept art makes one question the societal constructs that one is surrounded by. *One and Three Chairs* makes one question the linguistic constructs that surround a chair. When these constructs are questioned, concept art has the power to truly communicate an intention.

However, art does not have to be about the intention. One of the most important functions of art in the society is that it establishes a freedom in interpretation. This freedom seems to be the only way how art can bring masses of people together—the collective conscious or a “sublime collective unconscious” (to quote Lanham directly) of interpretations. (15)

Wassily Kandinsky, painter and art theorist, visualizes the motivation to create art beautifully in his book *Concerning the spiritual in art*. He claims that art springs from an inner need. The inner need is built up of three mystical elements:

1. Every artist, as a creator, has something in him which calls for expression (this is the element of personality).
2. Every artist, as child of his age, is impelled to express the spirit of his age (this is the element of style) — dictated by the period and particular country to which the artist belongs (it is doubtful how long the latter distinction will continue to exist).
3. Every artist, as a servant of art, has to help the cause of art (this is the element of pure artistry, which is constant in all ages and among all nationalities).

Ever since the late 1960s (“Death of the Author” was written in 1967), there has been a gradual blurring of the boundaries between art and design. However, among the many radical differences, there is much more allowance in art than in design. Art can afford to be as free and

forgiving and abundantly poetic as the artist deems necessary, as it is only meant to center-stage the artist/author. Art and the artist can happily dwell among the myriad of interpretations of the reader. In this way, art uplifts the intellectual quotient of the reader. Design, however rarely enjoys such affordance. There is always a purpose in design, be it curating typographic information in a newspaper to making the most comfortable office-chair. With purpose come constraints and hence lesser allowance. Design must always “function”—it cannot rely on museum label descriptions to communicate its intention.

Visual design wavers from the umbrella usage of the term “design” in the discussion above. Considering the poeticity of visuals (as discussed previously), visual design comes a lot closer to art, because it extends beyond function. There is a purpose and hence constraints, but the execution of the purpose is never free from the poeticity that an individual or a group of individuals bring to the table. Unlike the design executed in industrialized spirit, more than a problem to solve, there are opportunities to seek. There is no *right* answer. Every decision in visual design, the usage of a color or a typeface—no matter how informed it is from research and ethnography—it will be seen regardless of this original intent of the designer. It will be interpreted based on the context of time, space, and culture that it will be viewed (or used or experienced) in, but more importantly, it will be interpreted based on the context of the lived experiences of the reader—their past interactions with *that* color or *that* typeface. As established in the introduction, there is no formula to calculatedly deduce what all, the demographic in question have been visually exposed to, throughout the span of their lives and what all associations they have had with it. Even if there was, it would fall prey to a rather misguided over-simplification.

There is, hence, some amount of creative liberty that visual designers need to assume in their decisions. Whilst some decisions can benefit from extensive research and ethnography, others cannot. Thus, the author is not center-stage, but at the same time, he is never off the stage either. American graphic designer, Ed Fella puts this well into perspective in his quote/typographic poster, “Design is always permission given and allowance taken”. (Fig 2)

The work is a conversation and the designer is as much a part of it as the audience.

Intention in a work, is and can be an *extremely personal* experience; as are interpretations, because they are built on top of extremely personal lived experiences. Meaning, however is made in the space between. It has a level of fluidity, and like an ether, it surrounds the work. Meaning is sometimes a combination of varying degrees of the intention and collective interpretations and sometimes purely owing to the time, space and context, the work exists in. It is this uncertainty of meaning, rather than its certainty, that opens doors to poiesis (and poeticity), that provokes the mind to think beyond itself. A designed experience thus too has the power to raise or lower the intellectual quotient of the public at large.

2.3. Author-Audience relationship

The relationship between the author and the audience has never ceased to evolve. However, for the sake of quantification, there have been major landmarks in history which must be attended to. It goes without saying, that this is only possible because a considerable amount has been written of this evolution by art-, design-, architecture-, literature- historians, who looked back (or forward) in time to deduce patterns and hence, come up with a nomenclature for

these “landmarks”. Who knew otherwise, that the houses we lived in had political associations with the typography in our magazines? (Le Corbusier “Aesthetic of the Engineer”)

Modernism is one of such landmarks. “Form follows function” and “Less is more”, no doubt, assume a sense of universality. With the strife between capitalism and socialism, and the increased emergence of Marxist ideas, it was possibly necessary to assume such a universality, to believe in this unified sense of being for all people (poor or rich), to overthrow “ornament” as a sign of capitalistic authority, and to have a strong grounding in pure reason and function.

(Loos 34)

But as history has proven time and again, anything that has stayed long enough, has become authoritative in and of itself. This assumption of universality soon came to be seen as placing the agency in the hands of the creator—the author; and authority must always be overthrown. Visual theorist, Johanna Drucker points out that anything that claims to be universal is highly suspicious. (xxix)

Post-modernism was birthed out of the idea of balance of power between the author and the reader. Chaos and causality were more favorable than order and sans-serif typography set into a mathematical grid. The timing matched well with the advent of the first Macintosh in 1984 and the unlimited freedom, it offered, in possibilities and creativity.

After enjoying their first few decades (1980s-90s) in the “honeymoon” phase (in post-modernism), the author and the audience started to fall apart. The freedom to be able to do anything, also gave the author a lot of power. While freedom, is a liberating idea, power does not translate the same way. Hence again, even though, the movement tried to take away from authority, it ended up pushing the author center-stage and re-establishing authority. Designer and author, Rick Poyner, however argues that there is a gap between what “Post-modernism”

announces as a word versus what it really says. The image it conjures is a negative one, because no one wants to associate themselves to a “superfluous inhabitant of an aftermath”, while modernism sounds like an optimistic cause one could join. He argues that in a digital world, postmodernity is everyone’s “inescapable reality”. (“Did We Ever Stop Being Postmodern?”)

In the 2000s, design thinking emerged as a popular ideology (as discussed previously). Nearly two decades later now, the terms “design thinking” and “empathy” have suffered a similar fate to “post-modernism”. These phrases have become empty themselves. They are seen floating around in every other design studio’s website or designer’s resume. They are said way more than they are practiced. Instead of adding value to the process of design or the act of visual communication or even improving the author-audience relationship, they have become overly trivialized buzz words. Moreover, popular contemporary critiques of design-thinking argue that there is a subliminal connotation of authority that sneaks into the whole premise of “solving problems”. (Morozov 15) Other groups of critiques argue against the “packaging” and “commodification” of something as vastly creative as design into a sellable and methodical set of procedures that anyone can “do”. (Helfand 151, Kolko “The Divisiveness of Design Thinking”)

What one learns from the above discussion, is that the passage of time reinforces authority of any movement, regardless of its original intent. Perhaps, this is as much to say that, we, as a people wear out of the terms we use, the styles we prefer, and the lifestyles we let define ourselves. Perhaps, as a generation of designers, we are always seeking to reinstate the authorship of what we do, much like updating the rules of an imaginary playbook. The challenge however, is to be collectively informed and mindful of this author-audience

relationship and to let it guide the design-process, because as discussed previously, it can be easy to get lost in “how our visuals look” and “what our terms announce”.

3. Poeticity

This section discusses the forces of poeticity. These are the methods/tools/muscles, that the designer can exercise to incorporate poeticity into their work. They are as follows:

- **Sublimity**
- **Spontaneity**
- **Repetition**
- **Metaphor**

This thesis acknowledges that the design process in real time, occurs in groups larger than a single authoring individual. Authorship, in such cases disperses itself, and sometimes travels in a direction governed by the organizational structure of the studio/firm. There are many more factors that come into play, such as wicked problems (Buchanan 90), client-designer relationships, and dynamics of the people working together. However, since this thesis aims to bridge a gap between graphic design as a discipline and graphic design as a practice, (and for the added sake of simplicity) the nomenclature used would refer to the author as an individual.

There has been a lengthy discourse around the nomenclature of our practice (Graphic design, visual communication, visual design, etc.). This paper however, does not get lost in that. For the sake simplicity, “visual design” will be used.

3.1. Sublimity

For a long time, the term “creation” has been linked to the spiritual purity of “The Creator”. W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley also talk about it as *the ascetic view of poets* in their critique of “Intentionalism”. (5) Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of the famous book *Eat, Pray, Love*, in her TED Talk calls this entity the “creative genius” (01:33 min), as if it were an apparition/spirit who speaks through her work. Barthes calls it the “Author God”. What is so sublime about creating?

Within the context of sublimity in music, theorist and art critic Slavoj Žižek brings together the ideas of Rousseau, Lacan and Schopenhauer in the following excerpt:

With Romanticism, music changes its role: it is no longer a mere accompaniment of the message delivered in speech, it contains/renders a message of its own, "deeper" than the one delivered in words... instead of merely imitating the affective features of verbal speech, music should be given the right to "speak for itself" - in contrast to the deceiving verbal speech, in music, it is, to paraphrase Lacan, the truth itself which speaks. As Schopenhauer put it, music directly enacts/renders the noumenal Will, while speech remains limited to the level of phenomenal representation. (*The Wagnerian Sublime* 271)

Some artists (musicians, dancers, painters, writers, etc.) have been known to enter *other* spiritual realms whilst practicing their art. The idea is that they have been touched by “the divine”.

What does music look without sublimity? Richard Lanham furthers the discourse by talking about *Music Mouse*, a digital software (Fig. 3), where anyone can make “music” by moving the mouse over the pad.

In Laurie Spiegel's *Music Mouse*, you move the Macintosh mouse around on its pad and the linear motions are translated by the computer into musical sounds. Time and space, drawing and music, are made one by digitization. And if the music sounds good, as often it does, what does ‘good’ mean here? ‘Who’ has created the goodness? Such creation takes us deep into the aleatory world of chance so densely explored by experimental music since Cage. To yoke expressivity through one sense to expressivity through another by coaxed chance is Ovidian metamorphosis come true.

Most of this conversation remains within the realm of art (which Music undeniably is a part of). What about Design? In Design Thinking discourse, Alex Osborn, an advertiser, codifies the idea of *brainstorming*, wherein lateral thinking, and coming up with “wild” and “crazy” ideas, at provocative prompts like words, visuals, etc. are encouraged to view the problem at hand from a *unique* and *innovative* and *out-of-the-box* approach. And no doubt, over recent decades, designers have given birth to metaphors, artifacts of culture, designed experiences (solutions) which were never seen or conceived before; I would argue that they would never have been able to be conceived before, in the same way they did, by any other designer/individual. The cliched bulb-sparking-overhead-clipart-icon we see everywhere whenever anyone mentions the words “idea” or “innovation” is nothing but an underwhelming representation of the Wagnerian Sublime. Sublimity in design, could be perceived in two ways. One way comes from the ability to draw synaptic connections in the brain, of connecting one

cognitive concept/idea to another, to another and so on. This is more focused on the designer's role as a critical thinker. The sublimity here is rooted in the intellect of the designer. We could owe this to Osborn's *brainstorming*, and those Eureka/AHA moments where something clicks and makes perfect sense with the problem or opportunity at hand. Another way is through deep, meditative craft practices. The sublime designer here creates his sublime work through taking up the creative liberty/authority here to be his flamboyant self through his craft. This act can be a cathartic experience for the designer. There is clearly more focus on craftsmanship here than on critical thinking. Such sublimity is perceived more in formal aspects than in a quantifiable number of *out-of-the-box* ideas.

Like the other forces in this section, sublimity is unique to the individual. This is because it comes into being as an experience to the designer, owing to their lived experiences, historicity, and unique place in the time-space continuum.

3.2. Spontaneity

The force of spontaneity or chance has been investigated heavily in post-modernism. Reliance on chance in an authored practice, reduces the agency of the Author. John Cage, American composer and music theorist has explored it to great depth.

John Cage's effort to put chance and randomness into the heart of music reflects, surely, the same return to a pattern of evolutionary thinking. Cage saw music not as a great effect but as a current, evolving, real-time human system in which chance played a role as well as design. The dethronement of the Great Composer operated here much as the dethronement of the Great Programmer in the world of artificial intelligence. The movement from static

to dynamic, from changeless perfection to continual change, that appears again and again in twentieth-century art shows up as the crux of scientific thinking about complex systems poised on the edge of chaos....The more one looks, the more one sees twentieth-century art as an exploration of the edge of chaos. (Lanham 12)

Lanham continually pokes at the idea of “aleatory” (depending on the throw of a dice or on chance; random) expressivity through “coaxing chance”, that has been extensively explored since Cage.

Of course, central to his ideas is the “ovidian metamorphosis” of technology on the arts. But to think of it, everything that happens—our histories themselves are governed by a causality. The birth of technology and the birth of deconstruction are irrevocably tied together in a knot of “cause and effect”, much like the unfathomable question, “What came first, the egg or the chicken?”. Lanham continues the conversation:

The other arts, that is, face the same metaphysical adjustment literature faces. If sculpture is not chiseling and casting and welding, what is it? If painting is not painting on canvas and selling it to buy more paint to put on more canvas, what is it? And because all the arts face the same technological pressures, they are going to find, create, new relationships through that technology, through their new digital equivalences. Such equivalences pose the most fundamental, and most obvious, challenges to the structure and purpose of the university arts curriculum, and to the place of literary study in it.

By placing the agency in the hands of chance, the Author reduces his individual voice. There is humility in the very notion of spontaneity, in relinquishing control and the acceptance

of *Que Sera, Sera*—in the belief that the universe, much like the consequence (or afterlife) of the work, is much, much bigger than one individual. These ideas go back to predeterminism and determinism (in philosophy), which argue that all events of history, past, present and future, have been already decided or are already known (by God, fate, or some other force), including human actions.

The conversation of spontaneity, thus, remains highly post-modern. It is an extremely sharp turn from the very pragmatic way of perceiving design, where the perfectionist designer takes it upon himself to fix all the problems of the world until they *appear* solved to him.

Moniker, an Amsterdam based interactive design studio, experiments with chance to a great extent in their work. The designed experience becomes very participatory in this case. They often utilize the user's cursor movement as a way to create interactivity in the web experiences; this interactivity changes the thus often "crowd-sourced" outcome. The interactive music-video "Do not touch" makes for a perfect example. (Fig. 4)

There is a fine line of difference between "design with chance/spontaneity" and "Generative art". Generative art refers to art that in whole or in part has been created with the use of an autonomous system. An autonomous system in this context is generally one that is non-human and can independently determine features of an artwork that would otherwise require decisions made directly by the artist. In some cases, the human creator may claim that the generative system represents their own artistic idea, and in others that the system takes on the role of the creator. (Boden and Edmonds 20)

The artist here creates just a platform for the users to create their version of the artwork. This category of art although at the moment restricts itself to strictly formal aspects, could do wonders if brought outside its boundaries.

Today, many contemporary designers and design studios are experimenting with randomness and chance. Joshua Davis is one of them. He is a designer-cum-technologist whose work revolves around the aleatory realm of code. DIA, a design agency which specializes in kinetic identity systems also survey a lot of aleatory design in their work, which revolves mainly around typography. This kind of work, remains highly authored still, owing to the delivery of the work itself. What governs the level of authorship here is the interactivity of the outcome. Where, Moniker goes as far as making a crowd-sourced music video, which is quite the deconstructionist statement in the post-post-modern world; Joshua Davis's music video (Fig. 5) would explore the beauty in chance/ the causality, but it will still be delivered as was observed by him as the author. The latter case is much similar to DIA (Fig. 6), so much so that kinetic and aleatory experiments with typography have now become a part of their larger overarching narrative.

3.3. Repetition

Wassily Kandinsky makes a distinction between “personality”, “style”, and “pure artistry”. He claims that the ever-transient question of style will have disappeared in a few hundred or thousand years, but the element of pure artistry will transcend time. This is similar to how an Egyptian carving would speak to us more subtly than it did to its contemporaries. Although, the elements of style and personality make the work more accessible to its contemporaries, it is the third element of pure artistry, which defines the greatness of the artist.

Michael Rock brings the point closer to home. He claims that many great “stylists” do not make the cut because there is a missing larger message across their work—a message that transcends stylistic elegance. Perhaps it's an absence or presence of an overriding philosophy or individual spirit that diminishes some designed works and elevates others. (“Designer as Author”)

The ideas presented above revolve around *repetition*. Repetition seems to be yet another tool which designers often use to add more poeticity in the interaction with their audience. It could be manifested in many ways by the designer. One way is by being repetitive in personality or style. Another way is through a consistent overarching narrative across their body of work. A lot of times however, these two ways are hard to distinguish. This is when the larger message in the work repeats itself to the extent that it takes its own individual style and personality.

This is evident in the works of designers such as David Carson and James Victore. Carson’s work personifies deconstruction in its purest form. Victore’s larger message inclines more toward rebellion. (Figs 7 and 8) Carson’s work today however, is *mystified* (as discussed in Section 2.2) because it is an iconic player in Post-modernism. Contemporary designer Sarah Cwynar, bases her larger narrative around “kitsch” and “collage”. What links all her works as a designer and an artist is the juxtaposition of images and objects to create new meaning. (Fig 9)

What Kandinsky refers to as “pure artistry” can be elegantly seen in the work of concept artist Hank Willis Thomas, whose larger message around the “Black male identity” as perceived across popular culture seems to override any particular repetition in style or media (Fig 10). Sometimes, such repetition makes interpretation of the work, a much easier job for the audience, because the same intention is repeated time and again.

3.4. Metaphor

Metaphor is the most popular tool in poetics. The idea of a metaphor—one concept taking the place of another concept—is essentially poetic because of the deconstruction involved in the process. Barthes writes about ‘*myths*’ in a similar way. The Barthean myth supports this idea as well, and hence has much to do with poetics. Barthes defines the sign as—“the signifier is empty, the sign is full, it is a meaning”. He elaborates this thought using the example of roses that one uses to express passion. He claims that there is neither just passion nor just the roses, but only “passionified roses”. (“Myth today” 2)

Barthes breaks down myth to be a second-order semiological system—that which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. (Fig 11) When confronted with the ambiguity of myth, Barthes condemns it by saying that the intention of myth is either too obscure in order to be efficacious, or it is too clear to be believed.

This is but a false dilemma. Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflection... The elaboration of a second-order semiological system will enable myth to escape this dilemma: driven to having either to unveil or to liquidate the concept, it will naturalize it.

This naturalization of myth makes it a prominent tool of innocent speech. Meme culture works in a very similar way (as we shall see in section 4.4).

The relation of myth with poetry is an intriguing one.

Whereas myth aims at an ultra-signification, at the amplification of a first

system, poetry, on the contrary, attempts to regain an infra-signification, a pre-semiological state of language; in short, it tries to transform the sign back into meaning: its ideal, ultimately, would be to reach not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves...Poetry occupies a position which is the reverse of that of myth: myth is a semiological system which has the pretension of transcending itself into a factual system.

Sometimes the use of poetry or metaphor can be perceived as humorous. In fact, art often has a sense of humor. The naturalization of myths is that which makes jokes funny, art brilliant, a writer, a good writer, and a poet, a better poet. My lived experiences bring me with my own naturalized metaphors, my own *passionified roses*. They might be funny to you because you come with your own naturalized metaphors. At the level of intention, any form of communication might have a lot of unique myths that have been naturalized to the author; at the level of interpretation however, these myths are seen as deconstruction of one's own naturalized myths. The more dissimilar the naturalized myths between the author and the audience are, the heavier and more impactful is the deconstruction. This deconstruction is not merely entertaining; the impact (i.e., myth shattering) caused by it provokes the mind to think, to be cognitively dissonant, to be out of their comfort-zone naturalizations. This is where learning can take place. This is the place for liberal thought. This is essentially how poeticity works and how visual designers become meaning makers. The idea that visual designers have so much power is overwhelming. But more than that, it is a responsibility. Visual designers are way past the point where they just made things look pretty, or work in a formula-driven space—where a visual experience can have a purely industrialized or service-driven motivation. This is not to understate the importance of user experience and its cruciality in a designer's set of learnings. It

is to say however, that a visual designer, can and should acknowledge their power (and responsibility) of provoking liberal thought. The visual designer, in fact, is even more responsible in this regard, because a visual has so much power, as discussed in Section 1.

4. Image Anarchy

This section will discuss the ideation behind the visual component of this thesis. As observed often in this paper so far, we live in a world dominated with images. Before I go forward, I would like to clarify what I mean by the word “image”. An image, for the scope of this paper, is anything that has any visual information to offer.

The world has become more and more visual without anyone noticing. There was a time, not so long ago, when looking at an image was a breathtaking experience. Today however, we are numb to whatever the image is trying to give us, perhaps because there are too many images to care about any. It is a Times-Square-like era. Take life in New York for instance, one has no patience to be nice to anyone, which is quite the contrary to life in the south where you actually encounter smiling people. The poeticity of the arts and visual communication stands threatened by the nature of images today. With the technology and its convenient accessibility, the image in 2019 has become inauthentic. This is ironic, considering how the image (the photographic image especially) in the past, was sought-after as a medium, for its truthfulness. It almost had an evidence-like quality to it—a marker for something truly to have happened.

Add social media to this, and you get an infinitely replicating and reproducing series of naturalized myths. Social media, in this way, triggers a numbness to actual meaning. Everyone becomes an author to the extent that there is no control over the visual content consumed, authored or distributed. This is ‘image anarchy’.

Not to forget that the representative nature of image makes image fundamentally pretentious and dishonest. When a painter feels inspired by an idea and try to represent it in a painting, the idea no longer exists—only the painting exists. Hence, all representations are lies, because they substitute the idea by being.

The case of the inauthentic image, hence makes for a perfect case study for the visual component of this thesis. I intend to design experiences, using my capabilities as a poetic visual designer (which is the macro-intent of this paper), that would call out the inauthenticity of image and the society's relationship with images in 2019 (micro-intent). These individual experiences will target different aspects, in which image anarchy is encountered.

4.1. The consumed image

Images take the form of instant gratification on social media. They are bought and consumed at a cost that's not materialized monetarily. It is not realized that a transaction is in place, but it is in place all the same. Here, we witness the fraudulence of image again. It almost plays the role of currency.

A curious example is the idea of a dating app, where people are *commodified* much like fast-food or furniture. Portrayals of self are consumed like popcorn (pop—crunch—sip—burp—swipe—woof—tap—match—poke). Endless, mindless scrolling and constantly seeking more, become the symptoms of every human with a smartphone.

It is thus not a surprise how this instant-ness of social media is a huge threat to all visual arts. The attention spans of generations have been on a decline ever since the television was invented and social media only steepens the graph. It is the death of the image.

In advertising, images take the form of falsified truths. There is unquantifiable image manipulation in the images that are sold to us. The way the image (the image that is a sellable lie) is created is fraudulent. A lot of commercial advertising endorses the idea of unrealistic and eroticized beauty, much like porn. The honesty of the image is not even a concern in this aspect. This “photoshopped-ness” of the image is driven by capitalism; the idea of buying beautiful things.

But what *is* beautiful? What standards hold for *beauty* in the 21st century? Aesthetic sensibilities vary across time, space and lived experiences (personality types even). Thanks to technology, beauty can be achieved in an easier and accessible way. Does this make instagrammers aim for higher, harder-to-attain beauty? Images are manipulated and beautified for their likeability and share-ability. Eye-candy-esque beauty sells much like sex sells.

Capitalism propagates this greed for more—more likes, more hits, more views and more follows. Here capitalism is the driver but not in the form of a huge corporation, but as commoners like you and me, who unconsciously create a demand for content.

An interesting example would be the glorification of bigness. Social media and advertising (and Kim Kadarshian) naturalize the bigger butt, and hence it becomes an image that is sought after. We buy into this illusion, without consciously deciding to (We trend #s like #belfie, aka the butt selfie). Such image manipulation is also observed, more than ever, in fast food advertisements where the food is not only aestheticized but fetishized. (Fig. 12)

Images have been reduced eye-candy, made to be consumed like candy, and consumed like candy to be made, and this, in 2019, is an endless and everyday cycle. “The consumed

image” will be an exploration based on this idea. The metaphor here tries to equate our relationship with sugary-comfort-food to our relationship with images.

Online-dating-profiles of randomly selected individuals (sourced from Tinder) are printed on short-bread cookies to deliver a poetic message about our consumption of image content. The experience is time-based because the cookies are eaten as the exhibit-viewers consume the cookies and hence the content.

4.2. The authored image

Images exist as authored self-expression now more than ever before. Everyone seeks images and wants to author them, just because they can. The smartphone camera and the immediacy of content sharing are way too accessible, to not continuously be authoring content. Barthes, while discussing *wrestling* as an entertainment activity for the bourgeois in 1960s France, notes that, “what the public wants is the image of passion and not the passion itself” (“The World of Wrestling” 2). And what are we doing on social media, if not wrestling with the forces of the obligatory post, that no one cares about.

“The authored image” is seen on social media—in selfies, internet personas, avatars, and self-portrayals. Our Instagram bios and dating profiles, here become the metaphorical image; the linguistic image. They are representations of semiospheres that one identifies with. They become an issue about identity, perceptions and portrayals of self. The selfie is today’s kitschy self portrait—fueled by a smarter phone and dumber people.

The mirror acts like an iconic metaphor for representations of self. Snapchat filters were chosen as the medium for “the authored image” because they are almost like a “digital

mirror”. The series of filters are designed to highlight a person scrolling through their social media content. This content is then juxtaposed with face of the user, in different ways. The message delivered through this poetic experience is to remind the avid snapchatter that the content produced by them is only a reflection of the content consumed by them. Self(ie)-portrayals are hence as inauthentic as the images consumed on social media.

4.3. The distributed image

Another form that the image exists as, is data. Thanks to innumerable content curation platforms, content sold is based on content liked.

Psychologist and writer, Susan Blackmore, while discussing the principles of consciousness in machines, talks extensively about memes and meme culture. Memes, here are similar to Barthean myths. Memes compete for replication by human hosts. Blackmore suggests that some memes survive by being promoted as personal beliefs, desires, opinions, and belongings. This is how a memeplex (or selfplex) comes into existence.

The self could also be a memeplex; a group of memes that thrive together and is strengthened every time the word ‘I’ is used. Phrases such as ‘I want . . .’, ‘I believe . . .’, and ‘I know . . .’ all fuel the false idea of a persistent inner self who has conscious experiences. Really there are just words being copied, and memes competing with each other to make us who we are – deluded meme machines. (128)

The internet is a battleground for memes. This propagates a sameness in content. There is also something to be said about the immiscible qualities of internet. Capitalism being an

important driver once again, belief bubbles (meme-spheres) are colliding but never expanding or mixing. One never bumps into new content anymore. Take Netflix suggestions for instance. Netflix is changing how we see television. There was a time when we used to flip through channels to be able to bump into things, and we don't anymore. We have *too much* control over what we see. We 'choose' to watch something. But also, do we? Capitalism thrives upon giving people what they want. Consequently, the internet never stands for how subjective the issues of morality can be.

There is no free will over what we SEE, but there is an illusion of control—very much like an illusion of choice. The sold image is hence distributed in a deceitful way, hence the image is inauthentic again. We are not in control even though we think we are; an algorithm (human-made, corporation facilitated) controls what we see.

“The distributed image” uses the metaphor of bubbles to represent the idea of the “self-plex” that Blackmore talks about. The experience uses the medium of a bumper ball (a transparent PVC ball which is big enough to fit a person) to allude to these internet bubbles that are almost the extensions of self. The visuals are randomly generated twitter memes, to incorporate the poetic tool of spontaneity.

5. Conclusion

This thesis makes a case for poeticity in visual design. It maintains that there are infinite layers of meaning in language, and that design is always a dialogue between the designer and the audience. The translation between the intention of the designer to the interpretation of the audience, is integral to this dialogue, because this is where poiesis takes place and meaning is made. An industrialized perspective to design has made it formulaic and systemic. This diminishes the presence of the designer from the dialogue, almost leaving no room for poiesis. It is now, more imperative than ever to acknowledge the designer's entity, and with it, the poetic aspect of this dialogue. There needs to be a shift, in how visual design is treated as a discipline and by the corporations.

This thesis proves that visual design extends beyond function and universal communication; that there is poeticity anyway, and there is use in embracing it, than in denying it. Visual designers must attend to the poetic potential of their work.

The visual component of the thesis proves that poeticity helps create powerful experiences because it kindles the intellect of the audience. Poeticity can therefore help visual design become a living and breathing dialogue.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Author

He or she is the creator of a designed experience. In visual design practice, authorship trickles down or up to several levels. Sometimes the author is a collective, rather than an individual. I refer to the term in a similar way, Roland Barthes does in his paper, 'The Death of the Author' (1967).

Authorship (And Author)

The authored intention of the designer; The state of being the author or creator to a designed experience.

Interpretation

Interpretation governs the audience-end of the spectrum. After the designed experience is published and sent out to an outer, broader semiosphere, it is free to be interpreted in whichever way possible, by anyone and everyone who is exposed to it.

Poiesis and Poeticity

Philosophically, *poiesis* is defined as an activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before. Ever since medieval times, there has been a conversation in time between art and science (technology), both with the shared motivation of poiesis. This thesis examines visual design as the marriage of the two—an essentially poetic practice governed by empathic communication. Poeticity in the context of this paper, is defined as a measure of creative thought that is put into a work.

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2

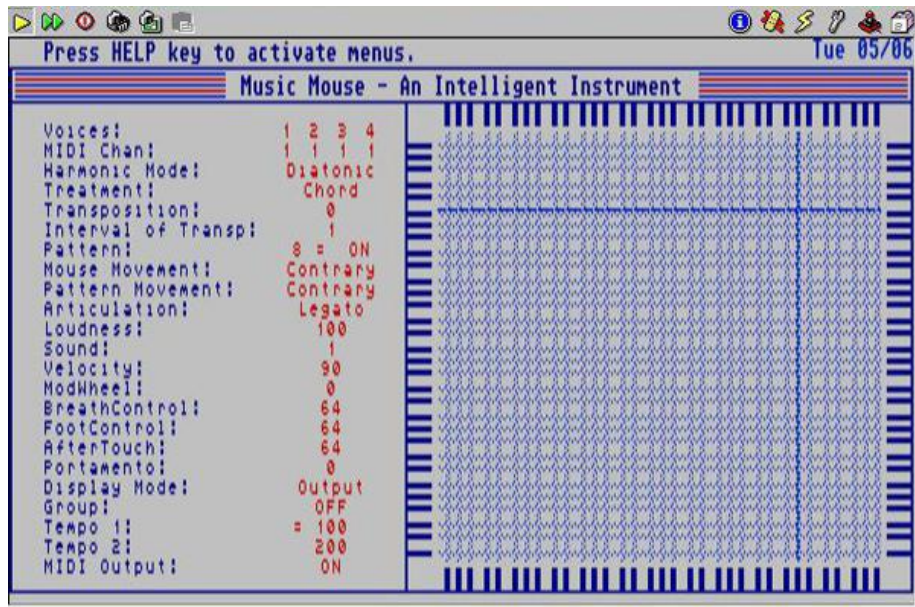


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

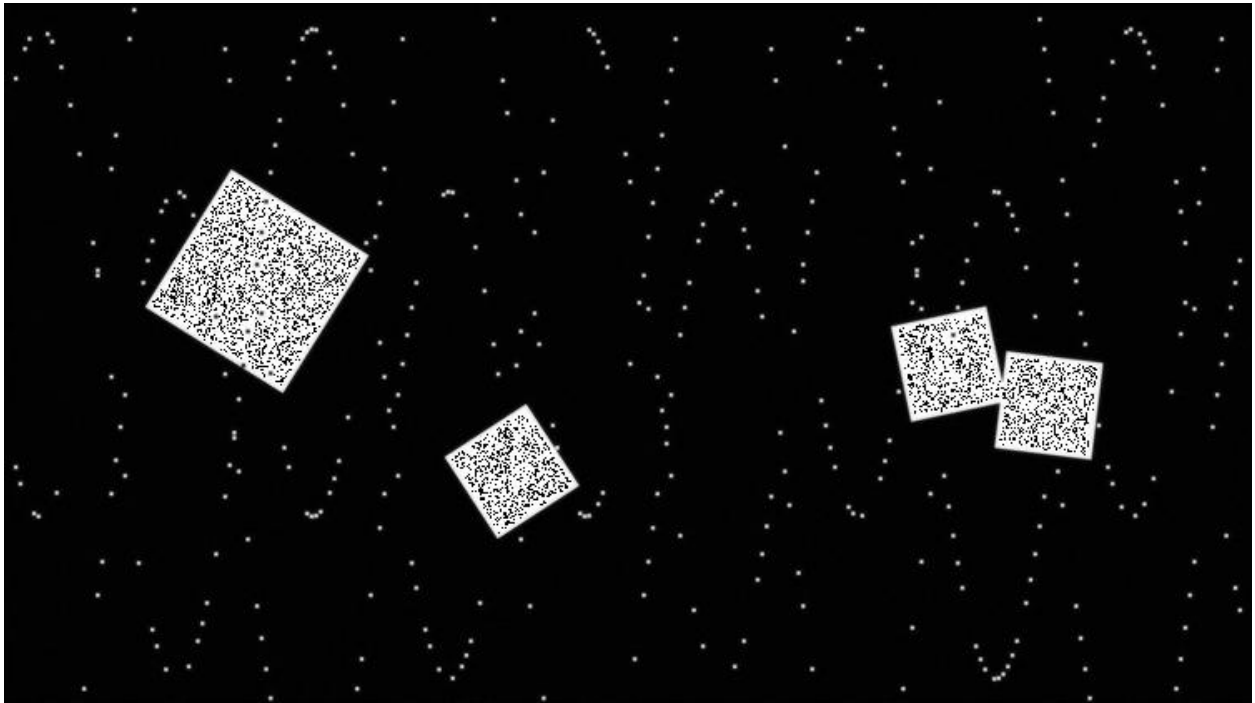


Fig. 5

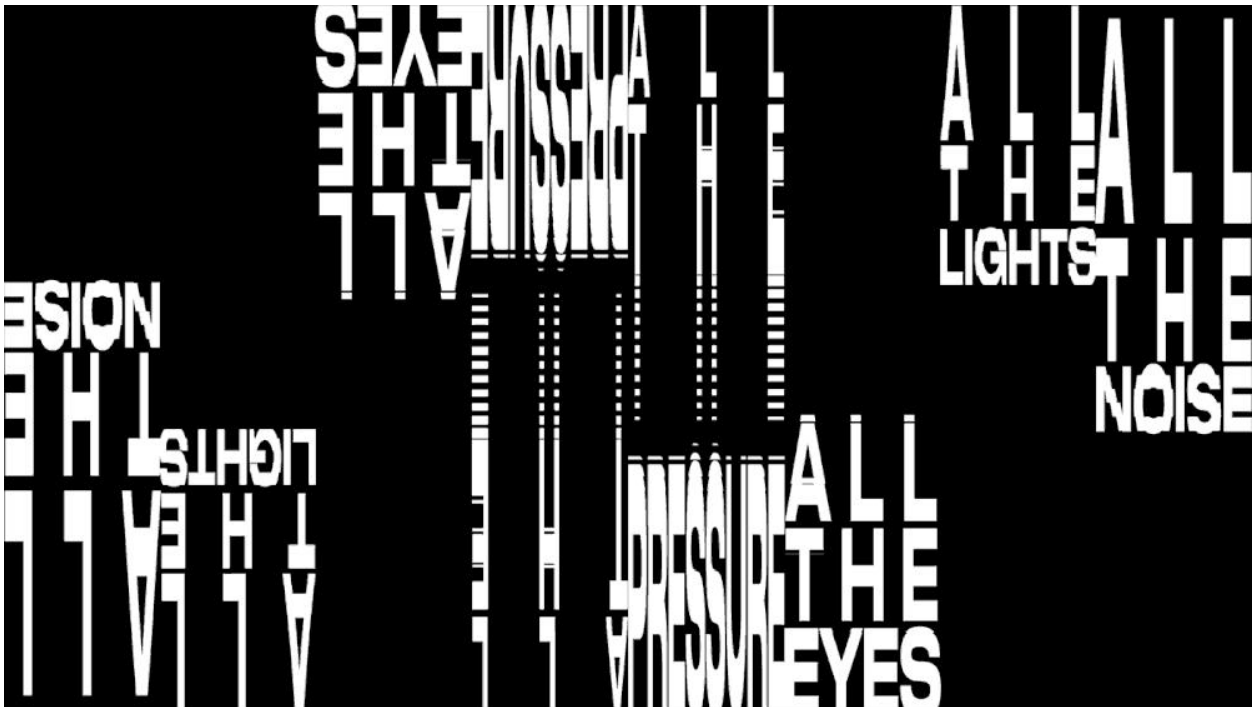


Fig. 6

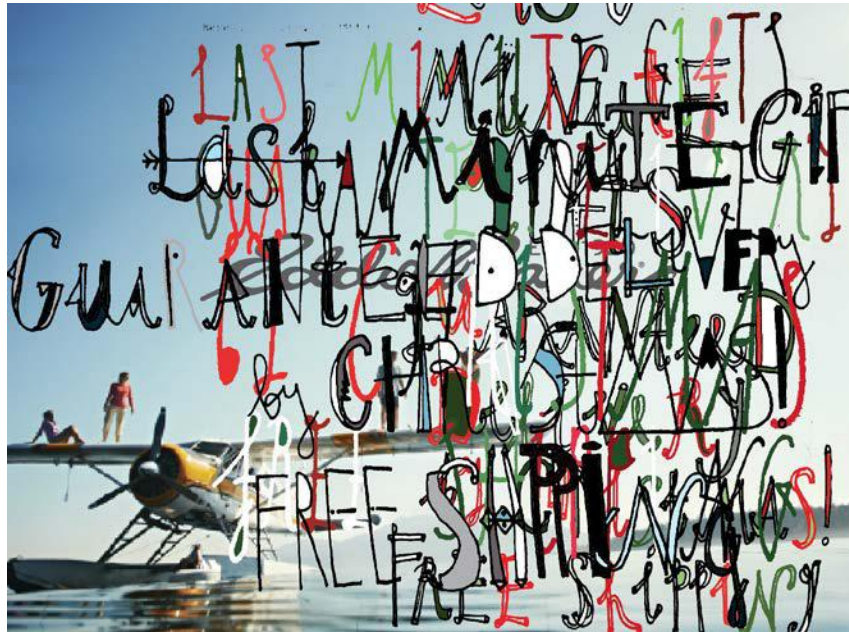


Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

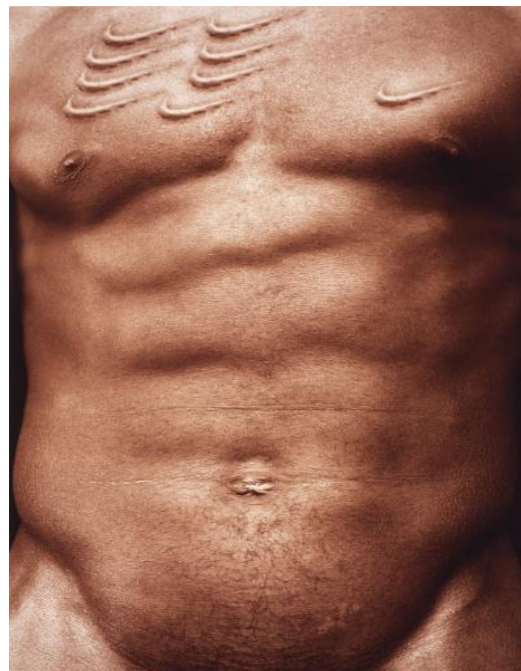


Fig. 10

	1. Signifier	2. Signified
Language	3. Sign	
MYTH	I. SIGNIFIER	II. SIGNIFIED
	III. SIGN	

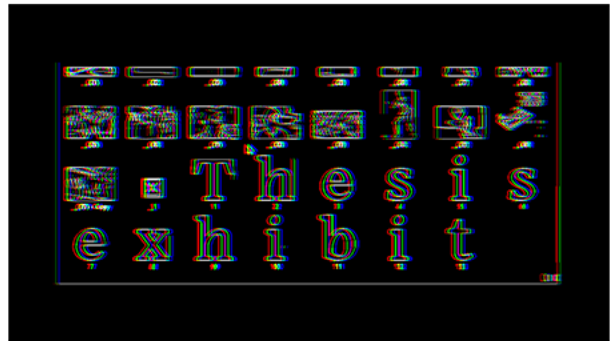
Fig. 11



Fig. 12

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Promo/Invite for the exhibit



Link to promo here → <https://www.instagram.com/p/BxqdAWpBWI3/>

Appendix B: The exhibit



Appendix C: The consumed image





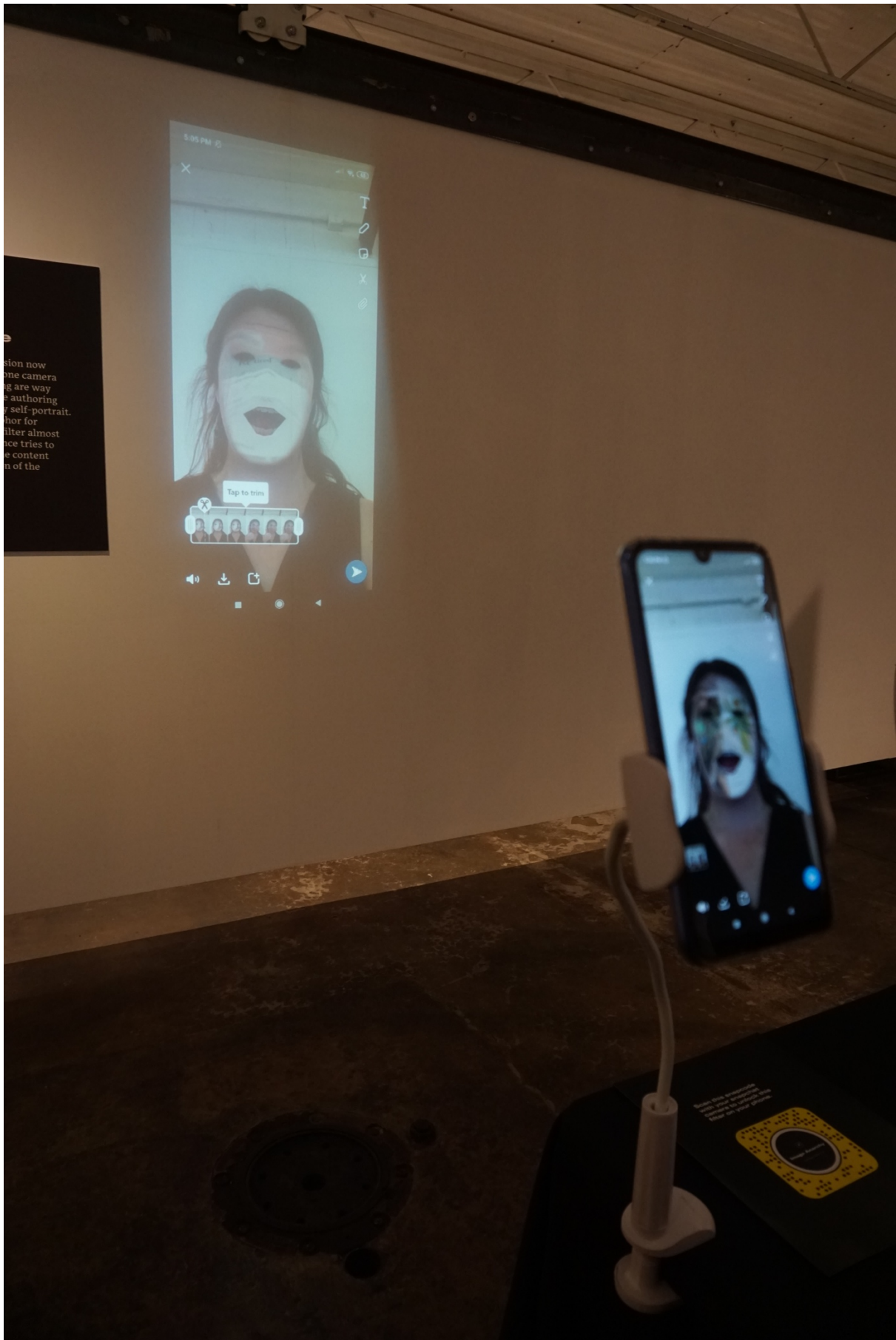






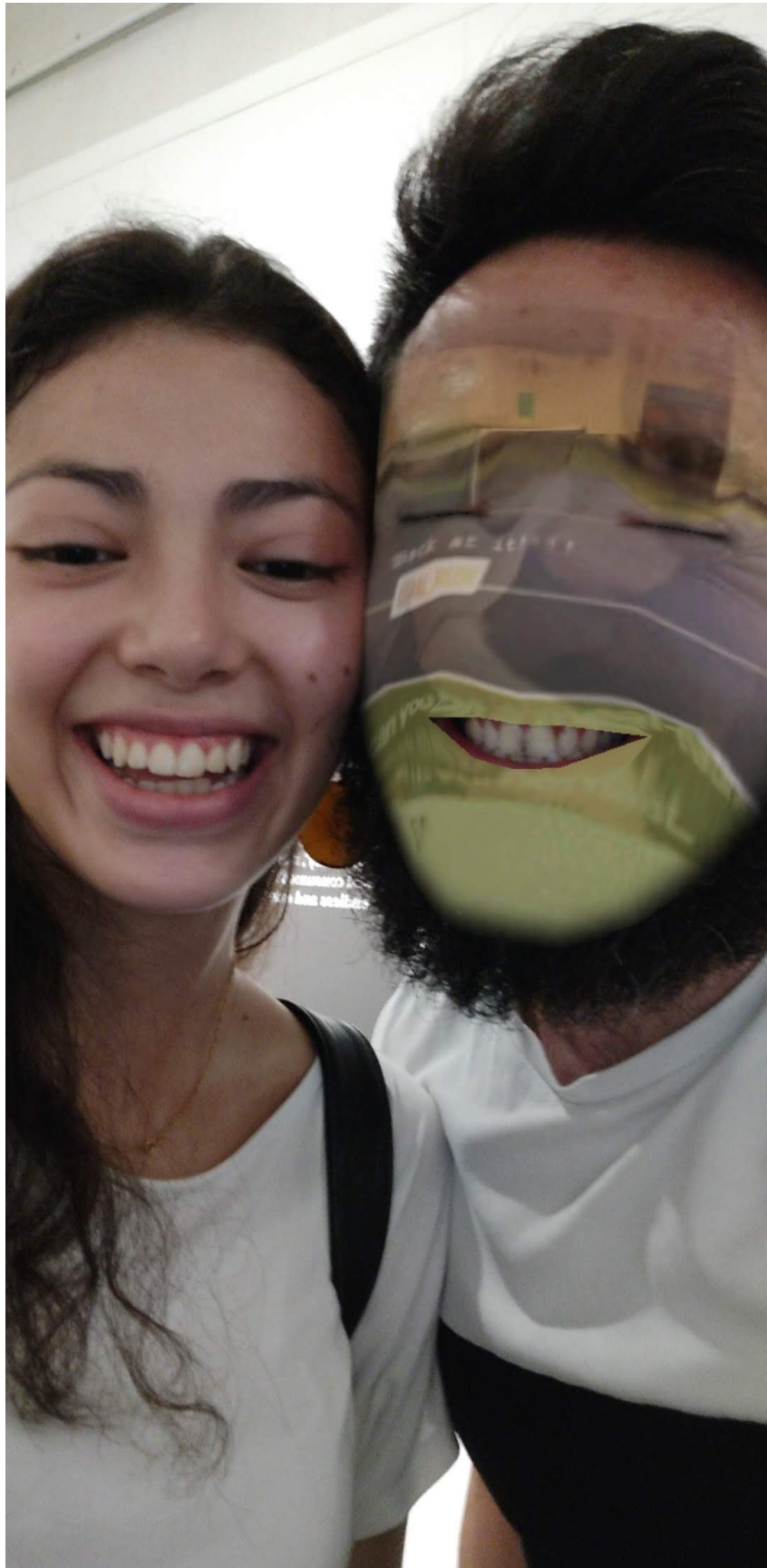
Appendix D: The authored image

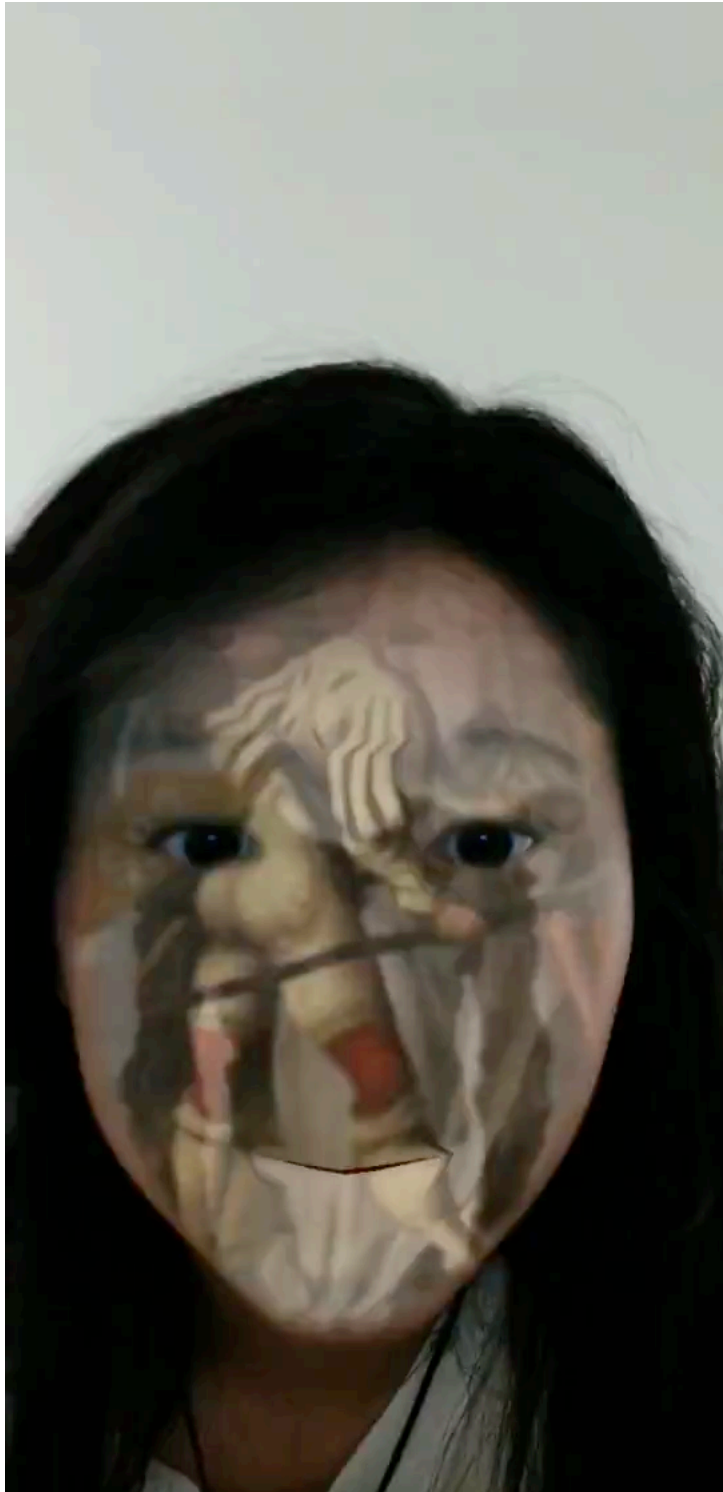










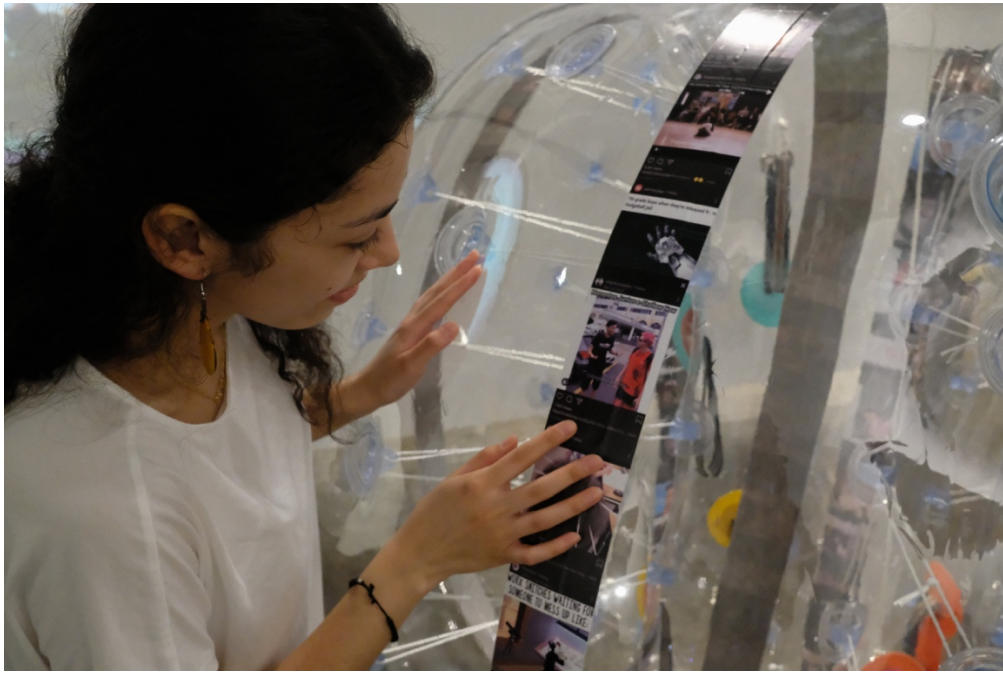




Appendix E: The distributed image



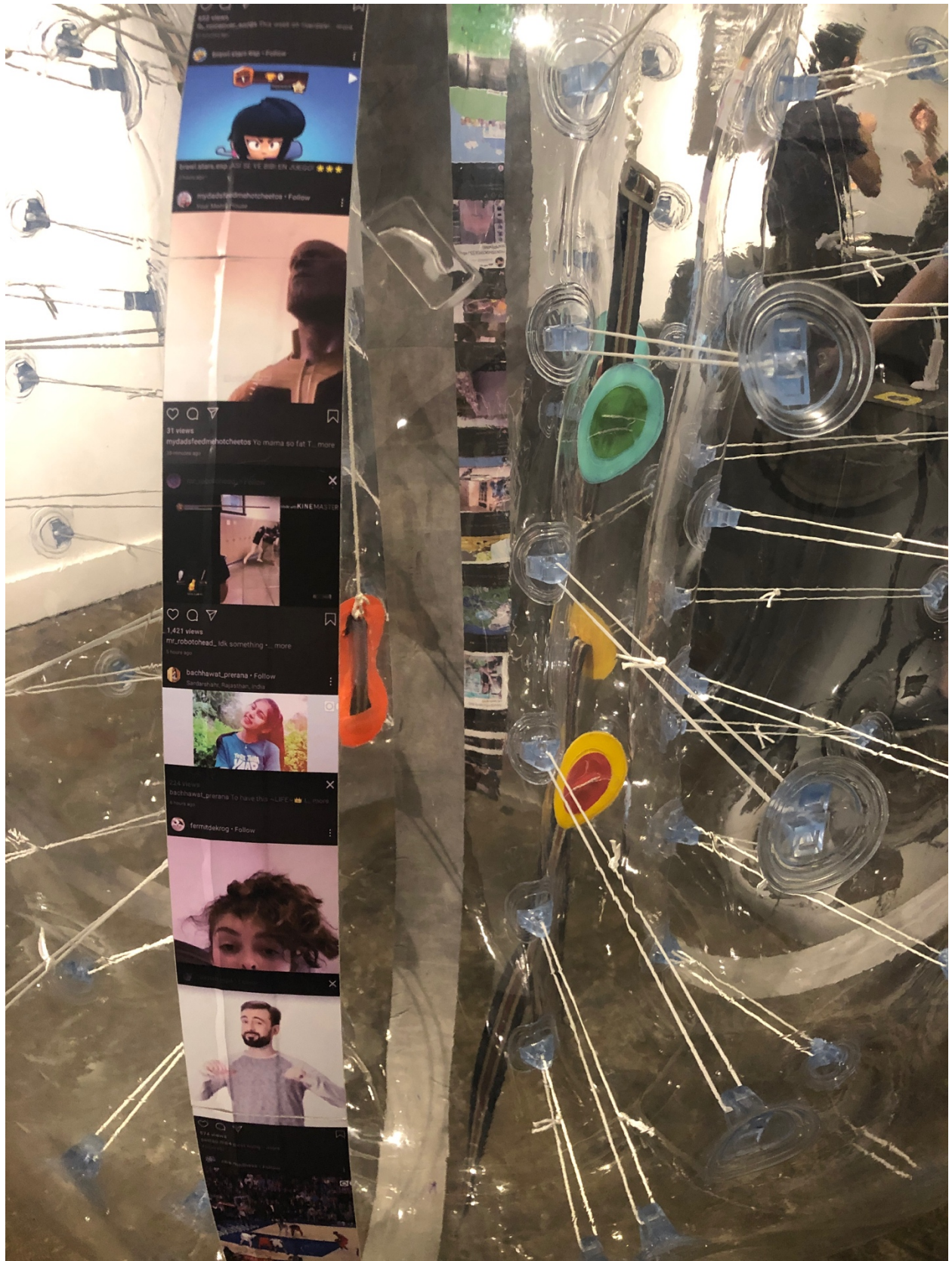
















Appendix F:

Link to videos from the show →

<https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17958708859300632/>

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