

Can graphic design be used to communicate and inspire joy?

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Summary of topic:

This essay will explore art and design as a method to communicate, inspire, and experience joy. It will introduce several imagemakers and examine their work in the context of joyful design and the ideas of popular theorists.

This essay will discuss the role of the graphic designer as someone who is responsible for communicating ideas and influencing thought, as well as introducing some recognisable attributes of joyful design. It will also address the limitations that subjectivity presents for a designer attempting to inspire joy in order to answer the question: Can graphic design be used to communicate and inspire joy?

Introduction

In this essay, I will be exploring the idea of art and design as a method to communicate, inspire, and experience joy. As a Graphic Design student, I am approaching this subject with a leaning toward graphic design attributes, however, I also make reference to case studies from people who do not necessarily identify with the title of “graphic designer.”

The idea for this independent research project arrived at the end of a particularly challenging situation during lockdown in early 2021, whereby I experienced a sudden overwhelming feeling of joy. It was this experience of transcendence and liberation that began a visual research project over the summer months to try and articulate or communicate the experience I had through design and photography.

The subject of joy is particularly prevalent in light of the COVID-19 pandemic which has for a large part caused a worsening of pre-existing mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression (Mind, 2020). This is in addition to some people experiencing challenges in their emotional and mental health for the first time. According to mental health charity Mind (2020), 60% of adults 68% of young people said their mental health got worse during lockdown as of June 2020. It may be important to note that this study was taken relatively early into the coronavirus pandemic and statistics may have changed since.

The intent of this essay is not to suggest that the responsibility of public wellbeing or mental health lies with the graphic designer. It is, however, a suggestion that in

times of particular unease or societal challenge designers and artists can utilise their skills in visual communication to make a significant difference to the lives of the individual and the communities around them, should they be inclined to do so.

Discussing abstract concepts such as the experience of human emotion can prove fairly challenging due to the subjective and highly personalised nature of the human experience. The subjectivity of this experience means that emotional responses to art and design can be difficult to quantify. As psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1971) stated, “The psychology of feeling [...] is to a large extent the psychology of personal opinion and conviction.” Despite this, I will attempt to be as objective and comprehensive as possible in my approach to the topic and use case studies to support my findings.

Chapter 1 will establish a baseline understanding of graphic design as a practice and profession, as well as underlining the roles and responsibilities of a designer in today’s society.

Chapter 2 will explore the definitions of “joy” and “happiness” as concepts outside of design and will illustrate the significance of joy in the life of the individual and wider society.

Chapter 3 highlights subjectivity as a factor contributing to how joyful design is perceived. It will discuss subjectivity as being outside of the designer’s control and the potential for subjectivity to limit or enhance the perception of an image.

Chapter 4 will highlight some recognisable attributes of joyful design and introduce the methodologies of three image makers as in-depth case studies: namely, Ingrid Fetell Lee, Lakwena, and Corita Kent.

Chapter 1 – Role of a Designer

When considering the role and responsibility of a designer, we must consider what a graphic designer actually does. At a fundamental level, Graphic Design is the practice, art or profession of arranging design elements, such as colour, typography and images to convey information or create an effect (Merriam Webster, 2011).

Today, design can be used to meet a variety of purposes including the establishing of corporate brand identities, the promotion of political opinion, for commercial advertising or the communication of public information. However, these suggestions do not define an imposed framework for what a designer can be limited to.

Designer, Milton Glaser, states that the work of a designer “has consequences” and subsequently, designers are “responsible for transmitting ideas that occur in [their] work to others” (Roberts, 2005). This would imply that the work of a designer has the potential to influence thought. This is particularly prevalent in today’s climate whereby the work of many designers seek to directly reflect the tensions, division and changes in society. Moreover, technological advances and increased social media usage allow artists and designers the potential to reach individuals and influence belief, feeling or opinion at a widespread level perhaps quicker than ever before. Graphic designers do this through signs, codes and messaging.

As a way of example, a by-product of living in a pandemic is that graphic design uses signs and codes as frequent cautionary reminders of the risks to public health.

Throughout a singular day, we are often confronted with images of hands being washed, masks, and arrows indicating one way systems. Whilst these are no more

than signs and in any other given context may take on new meaning, when put in the context of a global crisis, emotional connotations and thought responses can be attached to them. They may make their viewer feel anxious, reassured, or frustrated, for example (Wong, 2020). Whilst seemingly unrelated to the topic of 'joy,' this recent example demonstrates the capacity of the designer for influence on an individual level. Two important aspects for designers to consider within this area of influence are the need for understanding their audience and the capacity they have to evoke something; a feeling, a thought, a shift in perspective. Whilst many pieces of design may be simply appreciated by a viewer, others are capable of causing a powerful and visceral affect whereby the design resonates with them at a deeper level.

In his book, "Camera Lucida," (1981) literary theorist Roland Barthes draws attention to this type of response by suggesting it is the effect of something tangible within an image that breaks through and "punctuates" the more general appreciation of it. He states, "This time it is not I who seek it out...it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me." (p. 26) Whilst Barthes was primarily focused on photography, the principle is applicable to a wide range of creative mediums. With the vast amount of visual stimuli we have today, many examples of design may simply "please or displease," but the capability to "pierce" is something more exceptional (Barthes, p. 27). In this extended essay, I am particularly interested to explore this effect through design that is joyful in nature.

Chapter 2 - What is “joy?”

When exploring the relationship between joy and graphic design it must be considered what is inferred by the word, “joy.” Many associate joy with a feeling of happiness and will therefore use the terms “joy” and “happiness” interchangeably. Some link the term “joy” to a momentary and involuntary experience of transcending happiness or insight (Cottrell, 2016). In this context, joy can create possibilities of hope for the individual and a general sense of optimism towards the future (Close, 1981). Alternatively, others would suggest that “joy” is more closely attached to the ongoing development of long-term happiness and well-being in one’s life. In this context, joy is not a short lived experience but a longer lasting one that leads to improved health, decreased stress and general sense of contentment (Cottrell, 2016). Despite any absolute definitions of “joy” and “happiness,” it is accepted that both are universal human experiences across cultures and people groups (Cottrell, 2016).

Author and research professor, Brené Brown (2013), suggests that joy can be developed in our lives through practicing gratitude and that in order to experience joy, humans must also embrace their vulnerability. Brown (2013) also states that developing inner joy can fuel “resistance” as a form of emotional strength to lean upon during adversity. This idea of joy as fuelling resistance will be explored in Chapter 4 when discussing the imagemakers Lakwena and Corita Kent.

On its surface, joy and happiness may appear to be fairly light themes. Despite this, joy and happiness have very real and tangible effects on society. For example, the desire for joy can affect policy and political change in society. The philosophy of

“Gross National Happiness” has been implemented in Bhutan for instance, with the aim of improving long-term levels of societal joy and happiness through policies and initiatives that prioritise wellbeing (Alkire, 2008). A similar approach was reflected in New Zealand’s introduction of a ‘wellbeing budget’ seeming to prioritise better levels of public happiness over capital gain (Samuel, 2019).

To summarise, whilst joy is a broad and multi-faceted term there are some ideas that are generally agreed upon; experiences of joy, whether fleeting or long-lasting, can be experienced even in circumstances of great difficulty and can contribute towards a sense of hopefulness, resistance and better general well-being (Cottrell, 2016). With a clearer understanding of what is meant by “joy,” the next chapter will examine its relation to design in more detail.

Chapter 3 – Intention and Perception

A significant contributing factor to the exploration of joy and design is the matter of subjectivity. Within graphic design, there are certain spoken and unspoken ‘rules,’ guidelines and structures that are taught and practiced. It is these guidelines in regards to colour, typography and layout that lead audiences towards a certain thought process or way of thinking. There are elements relating to their work that graphic designers can control; the aesthetic components and techniques that make up their work, for instance. However, there are aspects to their work the designer has no control over. To illustrate, design is not a mathematical formula that can guarantee a desired outcome will be successfully achieved. The way in which design is received is subjective to an audience’s own context; age, gender, location,

socioeconomic background, religion or spirituality (Conrad, 2010). This indicates that the perception of their work is outside of the designer's control. In the context of joyfulness, the designer may set out to create something that will inspire joy, gratitude or contentment in their audience by carefully mastering and arranging all the aesthetic elements to achieve this outcome, but the extent to which something sparks joy for one person may be completely different to another depending on their cultural context.



Figure 1 - "The colourful apartment buildings of Tirana" (Dufresne, 2007)

For example, the city of Tirana, Albania saw a city-wide restoration under artist-turned-prime minister, Edi Rama, that featured colourful murals and wall art designed to brighten and bring joy back to a worn-out city. For context, the city's resources had previously been squandered through decades of corruption, crime and oppression under a Communist dictatorship that included the burning of books and banning of 20th century works of art (Lee, 2018a).

Whilst there is no obvious denoted message presented in the paintings that would fix the walls to the specific cultural circumstance in Tirana, these designs perhaps have more significance and influence within this subjective context than they would in another context. It could be argued that it is the particular context of adversity that gives this expression of joy a deeper layer of meaning that it wouldn't have in an affluent city, for example. This context is a controlled aspect of the designers work. In essence, inspiring joy can be held as a designer's intent but to what extent that intent is achieved is largely dependent on subjective contexts and nuances specific to certain audiences.

In the words of John Berger, "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (1972, p. 8). With this in mind, joyful design may not always be perceived in the way intended due to established pre-conceived beliefs. If a person's life experiences have taught them to be wary towards ideas of joy or contentment, a designer cannot control the outcome of their responses to be positive. However, as established, the designer can control the context in which the design is presented in an attempt to affect its perception. For example, does the audience encounter the image through a 1080 pixel x 1080 pixel post as they scroll through their social media feed during their commute home, or is the design presented on a large scale banner in a derelict area of a city? These are things to consider that will largely contribute to how joyful design is received.



Figure 2 – “Love, Hope & Joy” by Anthony Burrill. Covent Garden. (Fulcher, 2020)



Figure 3 – Close up of Anthony Burrill’s “Love, Hope & Joy.” Covent Garden.

(Fulcher, 2020)

Anthony Burrill was commissioned to design an installation that was displayed in Covent Garden from June to October 2020. Burrill compliments vibrant colours and rounded shapes with bold letterpress wood type that asserts, “Love, Hope & Joy,” against a plain backdrop. Burrill’s intent was to communicate something “positive and

life affirming,” and to remind the public of the importance of these “positive human qualities” during COVID-19 (Fulcher, 2020). He stated that the intention of using letterpress wood type was to add an element of warmth and humanity to the image (Brewer, 2020). However, simply because this was Burrill’s own intent does not guarantee his audience will receive his messaging.

Daniel Conrad illustrates the potential for disconnection between the artist’s intended message and the viewer’s response in “A Functional Model of the Aesthetic Response” where he states:

Artists try to convey an intent or vision, to have an effect on the audience, but this does not always carry a fixed meaning. Meaning, in the sense of message, is not always there; and when it is, it may or may not be vital to the effect. Renaissance paintings of religious themes do not necessarily affect us through their theology.

(Conrad, 2010)

Putting this into context, the explicit messages and meanings issued by the artist isn’t always what affects the audience. Simply stating the closed and very literal message of “love, hope and joy” does not inherently mean those emotions will be evoked in his audience. As established, that is not within Burrill’s control.



Figure 4 – An image by Marcus Branch (Kho and Moraski, 2020)

In comparison, this image by photographer Marcus Branch has a semantic openness by which there is no fixed anchorage text to denote any direct meaning. Branch himself stated in reference to his work that he takes pleasure in the ability of the black community to find joy and celebration despite adversity, and that in that sense, joy is a form of power (Kho and Moraski, 2020). The image denotes a person decorated in jewellery and flame-shaped sunglasses as they smile playfully with their tongue pointed out. The image has no words and yet the intent of displaying joy is arguably implied and understood. Reemphasising Conrad's point once more: "Meaning, in the sense of message, is not always there; and when it is, it may or may not be vital to the effect" (2010). Whilst Burrill's intent of inspiring joy relies on an understanding of the English language, Branch's intent can be understood through

the cross-cultural understanding of a smile. The point here is not to argue whether one image is more effective than the other but to highlight that design does not always need to be clear in its messaging for the effect of joy to be felt.

Moreover, if Branch's image was presented in the same historic and geographic context as Burrill's "Love, Hope & Joy," – at the height of protests against racial discrimination in the UK - the perception of the image would be massively altered. Branch's elevation of joy in the midst of adversity could be perceived with greater appreciation or understanding. This demonstrates once more the importance for context in location and cultural moment to be considered when designing to inspire joy.

In summarising this chapter, when setting out to create work that evokes joy in a viewer, it is important for designers to remember that they can control their choices and intentions but cannot guarantee how the work is perceived by audiences due to subjectivities beyond their control.

Chapter 4– Recognisable Attributes of Joyful Design

Ingrid Fetell Lee is a designer and author who has conducted in-depth research on joy and more specifically, the relationship between the human experience of joy and the visual stimuli in their surrounding environments. Lee coined the term "aesthetics of joy" to refer to identifiable design characteristics that evoke a distinguishable feeling of joy. These design attributes are divided into ten key themes or "aesthetics": energy, abundance, freedom, harmony, play, surprise, transcendence, magic, celebration and renewal (2018a). Some of the characteristics attributed to joyful

design, according to Lee, include negative space to communicate a sense of freedom, symmetry to create harmony, and vibrant colours to convey energy (Lee, 2018a). This idea can be applied to the work of many designers to assess if it could be considered as inherently “joyful.”



Figure 5 – “Nothing Can Separate Us (Series)” by Lakwena (2021)

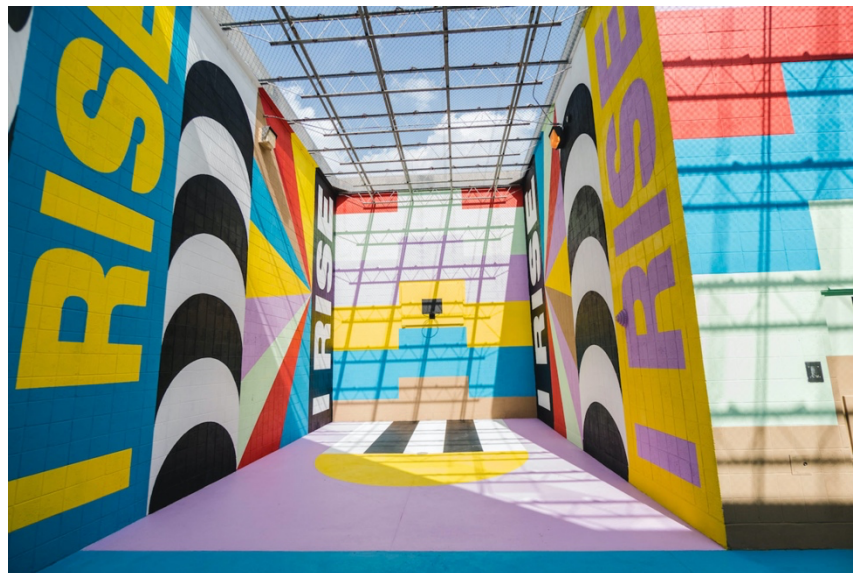


Figure 6 – “Still I Rise” at Fort Smith Juvenile Detention Centre, Arkansas.

Lakwena (2017)

If we consider the work of London based image-maker, Lakwena, as an example, it is notable that Lakwena's distinctive style corresponds with Lee's 'aesthetics of joy' due to the codes and conventions she uses. For example, in the images above, 'Abundance' is communicated through repeated pattern and the clashing palette of multicoloured, vibrant colours. For audiences who encounter one of her large-scale pieces in their often unexpected locations - the floor of a basketball court or the walls of a juvenile prison, for example - its intentionally amplified scale and location may inspire joy through unanticipated 'Surprise' (Lee, 2018a).

Vibrancy is a recurring feature in design that is considered joyful. However, according to Lee, such vibrant and colourful displays in design are frequently disregarded by influential figures throughout art and design history as being "gaudy" or expressions of "childishness," contributing to a bias towards minimalism and a repression of joy in Europe and wider Western civilisation (2018b). Lee argues that these views are evident in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Theory of Colours," (1840) where he writes:

...it is also worthy of remark, that savage nations, uneducated people, and children have a great predilection for vivid colours; ... that people of refinement avoid vivid colours in their dress and the objects that are about them, and seem inclined to banish them altogether from their presence.
(Goethe, 1840, p. 130)

This suggestion proposes some historic colonial and classist prejudices that may have a direct negative impact on the way expressions of joy in art and design are perceived. Subsequently, it could be argued that a shift in perception towards what is

considered 'good' art and design could lead to an embracing of more exuberant or joyful expressions of design in mainstream Western culture.

In regards to creating work that challenges such societal beliefs or messages, Lakwena herself is informed by Roland Barthes beliefs on mythology and the artist's role as "mythmaker," to challenge myths that dominate from one particular perspective (McLaughlin, 2021). Lakwena states that she works to "subvert prevailing mythologies" (Luke, 2020). This aim captures the power and depth of joyful design; it has the capacity to challenge systems and the status quo whilst being bright, joyful in nature and with positive messaging.

Similarly to Lakwena in this regard, the humorous and playful approach of artist Corita Kent challenged the culture within the Catholic church, which she found to be restrictive during her time as a practicing nun (Ault, 2006). Kent used screen printing methods to communicate reflective and spiritual messages to ordinary working people, and her popularity saw her work widely circulated on billboards, posters and t-shirts. Kent's work is recognisable by its distinctive experimental approach to composition and colour (Ault, 2006). Her poster "Mary does laugh" (1964) imagines the sacred figure of Mother Mary to be laughing, wearing bright orange and shopping in a local supermarket through hand-written typography and Kent's signature screen-printing methods. Another poster, "the juiciest tomato of them all" (1964) as shown below, humorously appropriates the Del Monte canned tomatoes slogan to credit Mother Mary as being the "juiciest tomato of them all." This particular piece declared as blasphemous by the Archbishop of Los Angeles, Cardinal James McIntyre, and was banned from public display (Wild, 2007).

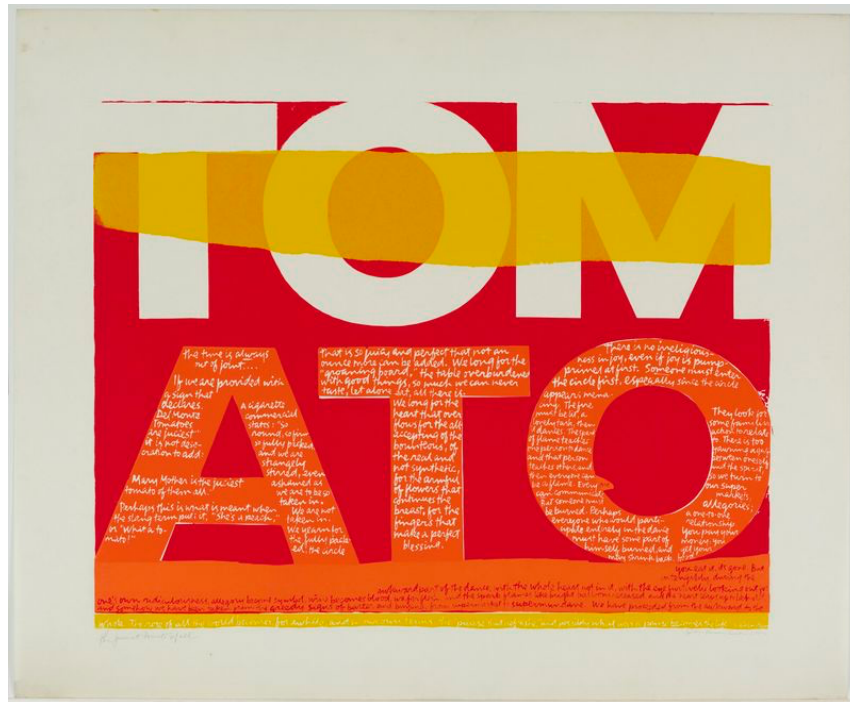


Figure 7 - "The juiciest tomato of all" by Corita Kent (1964)



Figure 8 – "Look" by Corita Kent (1965).

Kent's frequent reappropriation of commercial advertising and wider pop culture indicates an understanding of her audience in their cultural context, as she practiced her work during a surge in commercialism and consumer culture post world war. These intertextual references contribute to a sense of immediate familiarity and rapport within Kent's work which allow a larger mainstream audience to understand and receive her joyful messaging. This is particularly demonstrated in her piece, "Look" (1965) which appropriates the logo from *Look* magazine followed by lyrics by The Beatles. For designers seeking to inspire joy today, perhaps using widely known and appreciated references may allow for an ease of communication. Moreover, in "Look" (1965), Kent's application of bold shapes in close proximity to each other are akin to children's toy blocks, bringing a playful sense of nostalgia and further supporting Lee's idea of aesthetics of joy (2018a).

There is an interesting comparison to be made here between Lakwena and Corita Kent's approaches to using brands and popular culture to inspire joy. Whilst Corita Kent generally uses the wide plethora of visual cues that popular brands provide to subvert their meanings and create new joyful ones, Lakwena works alongside brands to enhance their own public image whilst being given the space to communicate her own ideals for good. In a personal correspondence with Lakwena in preparation for this essay, Lakwena stated that she feels a responsibility when designing for public spaces to inspire good things, particularly in regards to brand advertising which "dominates our visual culture" and is largely designed to inspire discontent (Lakwena, 2021). This suggests an intent of almost subverting what is expected of consumer culture to make way for more joyful and hopeful ideals.

To illustrate this, Lakwena's collaboration with fashion brand Fiorucci on a clothing line and accompanying zine, entitled, "J.O.Y.," sees the user literally covered in joyful messaging through colours and typography. Referring to the link between the power of joyful design and its ability affect your personhood, in this instance, Lakwena states, "What do we adorn ourselves with? What do we put on?" (Stanfield, 2021). Similarly, in a commissioned mural for Mini, Lakwena subverts typical conventions of brand advertising by using a car brand campaign as a means to challenge notions of societal division and recognise the benefits of love and collective unity (Mini, 2021).



Figure 9 – Fiorucci x Lakwena: Nico Jacket (2021)



Figure 10 – “BIG LOVE” mural by Lakwena for Mini (2021)

It reads: “Different but good together. Big love.”

Furthermore, although Lakwena’s works largely dominate the spaces they occupy due to their confident style and design characteristics, the designer offers a balanced viewpoint that joyful design should be ‘inspiring’ rather than ‘dictating’ joy, as cited in our personal correspondence:

Life isn’t all about joy ... As an image maker who contributes to visual culture, I personally definitely carry a sense of responsibility to create images that inspire good things. Though good doesn’t always mean smiley. ... That’s definitely my intention, though I don’t feel comfortable dictating that to people with a completely different worldview.

(Lakwena, 2021)

As previously established, it is of high importance for designers to understand their audiences and the current ‘problems’ they face in order to address them in a way that is appropriate and sensitive to their context (Rawsthorn, 2018). In essence, design that is perhaps too obvious or “smiley” in its joyful messaging may risk alienating audiences by appearing ignorant to real issues or ‘tone-deaf.’ A designer’s

awareness to their audience's real issues is summarised well by Corita Kent herself when she states, "It is a huge danger to pretend awful things do not happen ... I am trying to make hope" (Kreps, 2019). It is therefore imperative that designers attempt to understand their audiences and engage with a level of empathy to determine whether their joyful design is appropriate to the context.

The idea that design can be used to inspire joy is supported by the public responses and reactions to the work of Lakwena and Corita Kent, which may signify their intentions having a measure of influence. As already considered, the reception to an image can largely indicate whether the designer has achieved their intent. For example, Lakwena's work has been described in mainstream press as stirring joyous and hopeful emotions in the viewer (Parker, 2021). Creative Review described an encounter with one of her works as being "enough to stop you dead in your tracks" (McLaughlin, 2021). This language alludes to the ability of an element within the image to "pierce" the viewer, as previously discussed in Chapter 1. Moreover, Corita Kent's approach towards political protest in her later work has, in recent years, given her the title of the "joyous revolutionary" (Inglis, 2019) demonstrating the ability for joyful design to challenge.

Conclusion

Graphic design is a practice or profession that provides the opportunity to influence thought, feeling and action at an individual or corporate level through visual communication. Joy, whether a fleeting experience or as part of an ongoing lifestyle, affects well-being, mental health and how we view the future, and I believe it is

therefore a worthwhile cause for artists and designers to contribute towards. As a result of my research, I propose that it is possible for designers to inspire joy through a variety of means and mediums, however there are limitations to what extent this will be achieved.

Designers can seek to inspire joy through very literal messages, as shown in some of the typographic examples provided by Anthony Burrill (Figure 3) and Lakwena (Figure 10), with text in these images suggesting positive affirmations or offering alternative perceptions to prevailing societal ideas. Alternatively, artists and designers may attempt to inspire joy through work where the meaning is open-ended or ambiguous, thus provoking the audience to draw their own interpretations of how the joyful messaging relates to them in their circumstance. This may include the image by Marcus Branch (Figure 4) and much of Corita Kent's work (Figure 7). More importantly than asking what the image means, we can ask: what are the effects of the image and what does it do? (Conrad, 2010) Does the intention or 'spirit' of joy from the designer resonate with the viewer, even if it is not explicit in the way it is communicated?

To conclude, I refer back to Roland Barthes' idea that the emotional resonance an image has on a viewer is the result of something tangible within the image breaking past their general appreciation and "piercing" them (1981). From my research, some of the recognisable attributes of joyful design that may contribute to this effect include the use of vibrant colour, distinctive and eye-catching typography, and messages that

are affirming in nature. Designers may use pop culture references to achieve a sense of familiarity or warmth.

However, whilst these are suggestions that correlate with Ingrid Fetell Lee's 'aesthetics of joy,' there is no set formula or aesthetic component that will absolutely guarantee the intended outcome of inspiring joy. This is due to the subjectivity of each viewer's context and lived experience affecting how they respond to any form of art and design. As established, the way audiences see is affected by what they believe (Berger, 1972), and subsequently, joyful design may not always be perceived in the way intended due to established pre-conceived ideas or experiences, as well as the viewers' cultural context; age, gender, location, socioeconomic background, or spirituality (Conrad, 2010). The designer can make aesthetic choices to best achieve their desired outcome of inspiring joy, however to what extent they are successful is out of their control.

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