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Over the past decade, we've watched as 'curating' has turned into a trendy term. People now use it to denote any act of selection, whether for a dinner party menu or a Spotify playlist.⁵ This reveals a contemporary conundrum: in the age of mass consumption, choosing has some influence, yet it's dangerously limited.

5. A compelling article by Thomas Frank in *The Baffler*, '[The Revolution Will Not Be Curated](#),' connects the rise of 'curating' as an overused term to an insulated leftist position—the role of

curating in the so-called 'filter bubble'—which adds a new spin to a discussion that has been happening in professional circles for a while. As curating has moved away from its original

usage and become more generalized, I sometimes find myself favoring old-fashioned but more specific terms, such as 'exhibition-making,' to describe my own activities.

Curating is not only about today's choices; it creates historical and economic value for tomorrow. The authority of presentational norms and markers—from the 'white cube' gallery space to the standard biographical wall label—determine what's accepted as 'important' or 'natural.'



Group Material
AIDS Timeline, 1991
Whitney Museum of American Art

I'm compelled by curating that organizes with an intention to unmask. Rather than exhibiting seamlessly, such curating makes visible how the display of an object shapes its interpretation.

At the same time, let's consider how curating could return to its etymological roots. Here, it might consider anew how to 'care for' fragile things, from communities to conversations—even helping to imagine alternative futures.

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In our information-ridden age, graphic design is everywhere—even if it's so embedded that it appears nearly invisible. Anytime you caption a photo on Instagram, you're creating graphic design without realizing it. But although you have the illusion of agency, you don't control the look; the interface does almost everything for you, shaping your ideas in more and less obvious ways.

How something is communicated visually—through texts, images, typography, color, form, and motion—influences what to buy, whom to choose, and how to live. So why is graphic design still seen in some circles as mere ‘form-making’?



Women's March on Washington, D.C.
21 January 2017

Design exists not only as a tool for encouraging consumption, but also as a way to deliver timely ideas to new audiences and generate formats for interaction. Its effects operate under the surface, lending them a potent authority. How can graphic design help create meaning and frame crucial messages more effectively?

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These days, too many of our experiences in the world are meant to be *smooth*—including lectures, interfaces, magazines, exhibitions, art fairs, films, songs, and even social interactions. They're optimized to be utterly digestible and eminently entertaining. 'Click, click, click—I'll take it.' Smooth things go down easily.⁶

6. As design historians Beatriz Colomina & Mark Wigley note astutely, 'Good design is an anesthetic. The smooth surfaces of modern design eliminate friction, removing bodily and

psychological sensation.' Their small-scale, high-impact *are we human? notes on an archaeology of design* is essential reading for the design novice and initiate alike. Although I encountered the

book well after developing the core ideas of this PDF, its synthetic scholarship now helps ground points argued originally from the intuitive position of a practitioner.

On the other hand, I think the power of framing disciplines such as curating and graphic design is that they can make even everyday things *bumpier*.

The idea of ‘bumpiness’—explored in multiple modes throughout *P!DF*—suggests roughness, resistance, and unpredictability, without falling into overt disruption. It’s slick enough to pass through a first filter, yet with enough texture to provoke a little bit of a reaction.

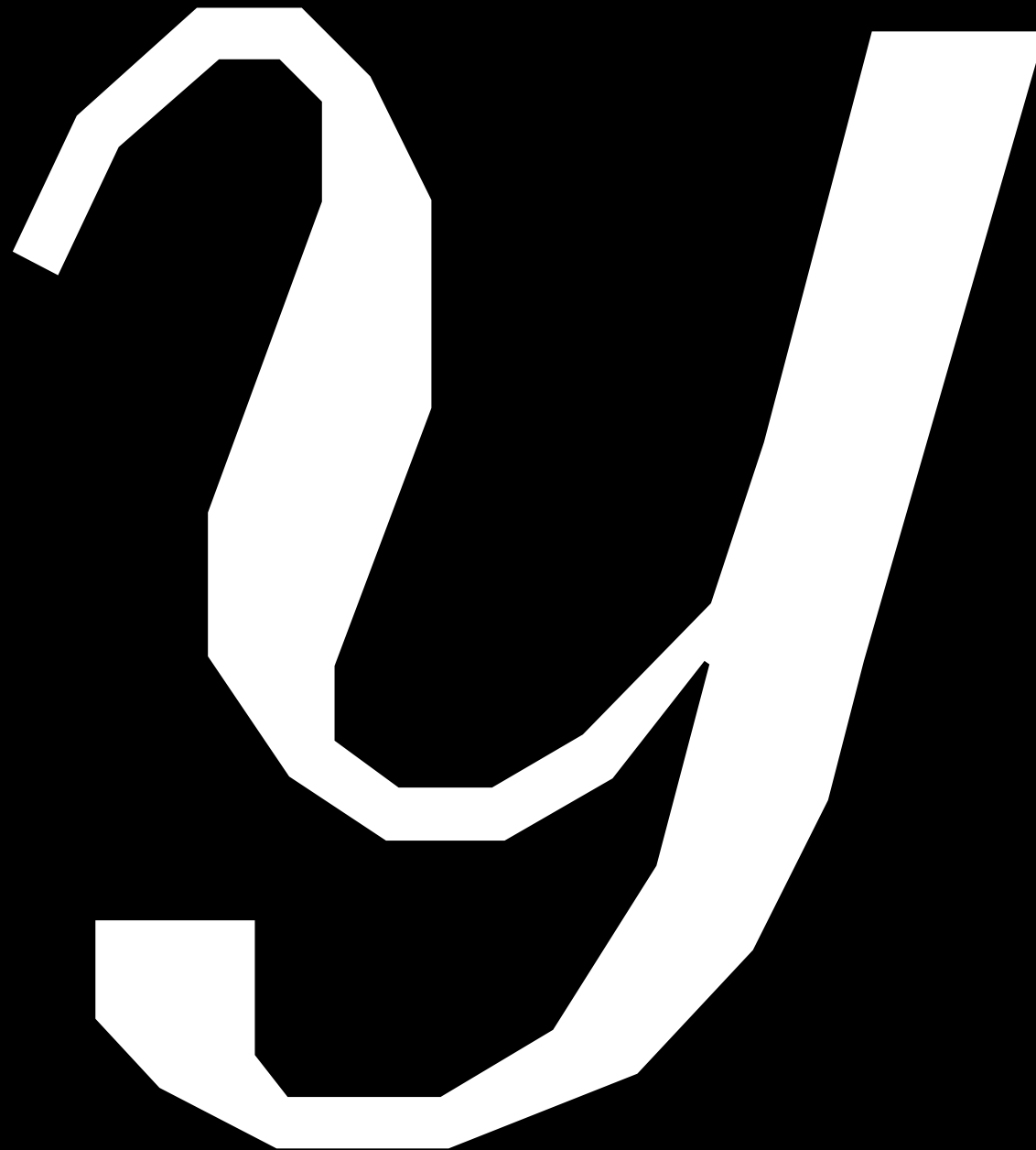
So, where does

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leave us?⁷

7. I am often polemical about mixing typefaces, in response to monovocal modernist design. This PDF uses a number of typefaces, each specific to the subject being discussed. The face used for

my main narrative voice (as well as the large letters displayed just now) is Minotaur Regular and Italic (2014), designed by Jean-Baptiste Levée. Named in reference to Pablo Picasso and

Cubism, it features dramatic, rough-hewn strokes, which disappear at text sizes. A minotaur is also a hybrid—part man and part bull—which seems appropriate to *P!DF*.

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Let me test out a natural metaphor to explain my idea of bumpiness. A rock, for example, begins rough when it breaks off of a cliff face, but smooths out while tumbling down the river. Somewhere on this path from mountains to beach, it has become *bumpy*: no longer jagged or sharp, yet textured enough to retain a unique shape and character.

In contrast with high-gloss finishes—which maintain their sealed surfaces in the face of water, oil, acid, or worse—*bumpy* objects are irregular and inviting. These contours pick up particles along the way.

But what does this mean for
curating, design, art, and beyond?

Sometimes it seems we're being taught that the main aspiration of curating and design (as well as art-making, public speaking, cooking, parenting, or whatever else) should be to create perfect products. The idea of bumpiness rejects the notion that a sexy, smooth work is the only thing worth pursuing.

In my mind, the purpose of cultural production in particular is to engage *and* provoke, enamor *and* irritate. Achieving both may require a bit of irregularity, uneven surfaces to stimulate the senses.

That being said, not every piece of design or curating should be bumpy. A highway sign that's difficult to read causes accidents; a voting ballot with a confusing layout may change history for the worse. In these examples and others, our choices are fast-paced and mission-critical; design's function has grave importance.

But most cases are not so clear cut. Many of today's choices are manufactured, with the implicit goal of *making us choose more*—the cornerstone of a society founded on the myth that choosing things, whether shoes or books or artworks or social media platforms or cities or lovers, equals freedom.

Here's where I think bumpiness comes into play. By rendering situations reflexive, turning presentation itself transparent, design and curating might start to reveal the hidden structures driving our contemporary world. Perhaps this acknowledgment could help us develop in different directions.

Even though it might involve—irony of ironies—having to make certain choices—