Hungarian University of Fine Arts
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# Airplane Mode:
# Design and Disillusionment in the Attention Economy

DLA Dissertation

Vitor Augusto Bento da Silva

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Supervisor: Dr. Ágnes Rozmann DLA

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**Abstract**

The digital age has revolutionized nearly every aspect of contemporary life, fundamentally altering how we communicate, work, learn, and socialize. The infiltration of new digital technologies such as smartphones, the expansion of mobile internet, and the ubiquity of social media platforms have created the perfect breeding ground for the consolidation of the attention economy — a system in which attention becomes the primary resource to be profited from. Hyperconnectivity and digital dependency reconfigure human behavior, shaping our perception of time and altering our priorities. This dissertation explores the intersection between art, design, and the attention economy, and how digital platforms influence modes of production and self-presentation. After examining the causes of our contemporary condition, I offer insights from artists and authors which point out to an intentional use of time and attention, suggesting an intentional use of those resources as a critical resistance towards the attention economy. Finally, I detail my own artistic practice, which considers the subjective dimensions of hyperconnectivity, with a special focus on typographic design and textual expressions within (and without) the digital realm.

Instructions for living a life:

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it.*

– Mary Oliver

## Introduction

The digital age has revolutionized nearly every aspect of contemporary life, fundamentally altering how we communicate, work, learn, and socialize. The introduction of personal computers and the rapid expansion of the internet have intensified the exchange of information and changed our lifestyles entirely. With the widespread adoption of smartphones and mobile internet access, digital connectivity has become not only ubiquitous but continuous. Today we spend a huge chunk of our time online,[1] attached to our smartphones, subjected to the distractions of notifications. As a result, we are always within reach — yet never truly offline. This situation affects way more than just how we think or act: it shapes our social lives, culture, politics, art, and, most importantly, how our attention gets pulled, used, and profited from.

The infiltration of new digital technologies such as smartphones, the expansion of mobile internet, and the ubiquity of social media platforms have created the perfect breeding ground for the consolidation of the attention economy — a system in which attention is not only a scarce resource but a highly profitable one. Instead of giving corporations money, we pay them with our time. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, operating under the umbrella of tech giant Meta, have become the contemporary arena for the commodification of attention, monopolizing it and profiting from it. In this context, attention is no longer merely a personal or psychological phenomenon; it is also an economic asset.

This dissertation explores the intersection between contemporary art, design, and the attention economy, with a particular emphasis on how digital platforms influence modes of production and self-presentation. To answer these questions, this thesis adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, drawing from media theory, cultural studies, design research, and critical internet studies. Theoretical frameworks by scholars such as Shoshana Zuboff, Jonathan Crary, and Byung-Chul Han are employed to interrogate how digital technologies shape attention, behavior, and identity. Furthermore, visual and interface analysis is used to examine how the iPhone provided the infrastructure for the state of perpetual connectivity to thrive, and the mechanics employed by social media platforms to keep us engaged while extracting our data and shaping our behavior. This analytical framework is further informed by my own artistic

[1] Simon Kemp, "Digital 2024: Global Overview Report - DataReportal – Global Digital Insights," DataReportal, March 23, 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-global-overview-report. According to this report, the average adult spends over 6 hours per day online. South Africa and Brazil lead the ranking, with an average internet use of over 9 hours per day.

practice, which centers on typographic expression, and investigates how language, design, and interfaces mediate experience in the digital realm.

This dissertation unfolds across six chapters. Chapter one establishes a conceptual framework for understanding the attention economy — from its emergence to its implications. Chapter two introduces the iPhone as the infrastructure responsible for the current state of perpetual connectivity. Chapter three explores the evolution of social media platforms, and exposes the tactics employed by tech giants to maintain our engagement. Chapter four presents the end of online fun: the transformation of the digital space from a place of wonder and curiosity to an arena of surveillance, behavioral manipulation, and exploitation of attention. Chapter five considers artistic and conceptual strategies for working within — and against — the attention economy, suggesting a shift towards an *ethics* of attention.

Finally, in chapter six I detail my own artistic practice. Grounded in my technical training and professional experience as a graphic designer (with a special focus on typography and typographical expression), I am particularly interested in the intermediation of messages in the digital realm — with a particular emphasis on how it affects the receiver. Having worked both with digital design and with advertising, I developed a special sensibility to the concept (and craft) of "UX copy": digital copywriting that is short, succinct, and deceptively manipulative. With great interest I observe the employment and exploitation of artistic capabilities in corporate settings, where profit often comes at the expense of the wellbeing of audiences.

Much like slot machines in a casino, social media platforms are craftily designed and meticulously engineered to exploit and abuse user's attention. Algorithmic personalization and interfaces that employ addictive features, such as infinite scrolling and notification badges, maximize user retention and keep us hooked.[2] As a result, the average person spends hours each day shifting between platforms, performing micro-transactions of attention. Digital dependency — and its effects on our cognition and our ever-decreasing attention spans — has become a growing concern in both public discourse and academic research.

[2] Tristan Harris. "How Technology Hijacks People's Minds—From a Magician and Google's Design Ethicist." Medium, May 18, 2016. https://medium.com/thrive-global/how-technology-hijacks-peoples-minds-from-a-magician-and-google-s-design-ethicist-56d62ef5edf3.

But it hasn't always been like that. The origins of the world wide web were filled with optimism[3] and an overall sense of amazement. There was a utopian attitude towards the web and its potential in the early days, due to the many opportunities enabled by unrestricted information exchange. New forms of publishing signaled a new, more democratic and connected era of freedom of expression, unbiased journalism, diversity of thought, constructive discussion, and genuine human connection. Inevitably, under capitalism, these newfangled digital tools are architectured in the name of profit and power.

According to Shoshana Zuboff, surveillance capitalism flourishes through "automating us," creating digital environments that influence behavior and thought processes for financial gain.[4] In a similar vein, Safiya Noble exposes how algorithmic systems and search engines shape perception, commodifying attention and emotion and perpetuating injustice.[5] They both highlight the ways in which digital processes that put profit ahead of collective wellbeing are increasingly able to manipulate our cognitive, perceptual, and emotional lives.

As artists and designers, we are not exempt from these pressures. On the contrary, we are particularly vulnerable to them. As Jonathan Crary describes, we internalize the idea that maintaining an online presence is crucial in order to avoid "social irrelevance or professional failure."[6] In support of this idea, Byung-Chul Han observes that we are witnessing a shift from external coercion to internalized self-discipline: we are no longer forced by external agents to perform; rather, we pressure ourselves to optimize, produce, and self-brand in the hope of gaining traction within the attention economy.[7] This self-exploitation through self-optimization blurs the boundaries between work and life, creation and promotion, expression and commodification. To better understand this condition, we must examine the technological

[3] The concept of "digital pessimism" helps us to understand the current sense of anxiety and skepticism towards digital technologies. Far from being a reactionary sentiment against technology itself, it is a framework that helps us to understand the complex intricacies of digital technologies within capitalism. Prominent writers such as Jaron Lanier and Nicholas Carr invite us to avoid "digital determinism" – the belief that new digital technologies are inherently bad. However, understanding how these technologies operate within our economic system, offers insights into the pervasive logic of the majority of mainstream digital services which prioritize profit over people.
[4] Shoshana Zuboff. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power.* New York: PublicAffairs, 2020.
[5] Noble, Safiya. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism.* New York: New York University Press, 2018.
[6] Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep.* London and New York: Verso, 2013.
[7] Byung-Chul Han and Erik Butler, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Briefs, an imprint of Stanford University Press, 2015), 11.

advances that made the attention economy possible. The next chapter analyzes the rise of the attention economy and how it transformed contemporary life.

## 1. The Currency of Attention

### 1.1. Introduction

In an age defined by information abundance, the most valuable human resource is attention.[8] Back in 1971, economist Herbert A. Simon observed that "in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means [...] a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."[9] This insight, articulated decades before the rise of the internet, has become even more relevant to describe our current digital condition. As information becomes easily available, individuals are constantly bombarded with stimuli, notifications, and content, transforming attention into the limiting factor in human perception and cognition.[10] What we choose to pay attention to becomes both a personal and economic battleground.

### 1.2. The Rise of the Attention Economy

The capacity to exploit and monetize user attention is one of the defining features of the digital environment. The attention economy thrives in this context of abundance of information brought about by technological advances, while attention becomes an increasingly scarce (and sought after) resource. Digital platforms have been carefully engineered to capture and monetize attention at large scale. Back in 1997, physicist Michael Goldhaber was the first to frame attention as a currency, describing it as the "natural economy of cyberspace,"[11] thus marking a departure from an economic system based on material goods.

### 1.3 Designing Distraction

Digital platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are not merely tools for entertainment, communication or self-expression; rather, they are sophisticated infrastructures engineered to extract attention. Content is algorithmically picked and displayed based on its potential to generate engagement — through likes, shares, comments, clicks, and watch time. It is a simple logic: the longer a user remains on a digital platform, the more advertisements they see, and

[8] Herbert A. Simon. "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World." Essay. In *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, 40–41. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.
[9] ibid.
[10] ibid.
[11] Michael H. Goldhaber, "Attention Shoppers! The Currency of the New Economy Won't Be Money, but Attention—a Radical Theory of Value." Wired, December 1, 1997. https://www.wired.com/1997/12/es-attention.

the more data gets collected in response to their actions and preferences. This creates a feedback loop in which digital platforms are addictive by design.

The constant (and continuous) exposure to stimuli, notifications, and algorithmically curated feeds has resulted in the fragmentation of the human attention span. Tasks are interrupted by alerts; focus is undermined by infinite scrolls. Essentially, the attention economy is not merely about what we look at or where we click, but about the reorganization of our cognitive capacities by platform infrastructures. The use *and abuse* of user's attention lead to scarcity — which, in consequence, transform human behavior, cognition, and even culture itself, reconfiguring the production and consumption of art, news, politics, and identity.

Artist and writer Jenny Odell became a prominent figure for examining the attention economy from an artistic lens — and, furthermore, for encouraging and devising some form of blueprint for navigating and resisting the capitalistic productivity mindset enforced by digital platforms. In her 2019 book *How to Do Nothing* — which she describes as a "field guide to doing nothing as an act of political resistance to the attention economy"[12] — she invites us to adopt a critical posture towards the current design of our technology which, according to her, promotes a false premise of connection and expression, while it hampers true opportunities for self-reflection, curiosity, and belonging.[13]

### 1.4 From Mass Media to Micro-Targeting

In this context, tracing the origins of the media systems that have facilitated this transformation is crucial to understanding platform motivations and their invisible structures. The roots of the attention economy can be found in earlier forms of mass media, particularly television. The shift from broadcast to digital networks marks a continuity as well as a rupture: while television communicated broadly to mass audiences for advertising purposes, digital platforms offer micro-targeted precision, operating with far greater surveillance and granularity. Unlike the passive consumption associated with television, digital platforms demand interaction in the form of micro-transactions — a click, a like, a swipe — that feed into the algorithmic logic of attention capture and response.

[12] Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York: Melville House, 2019), 5.
[13] ibid, 6.

The manipulation of attention was anticipated by artists and media theorists who were sensible to the political implications of media systems. In 1973, Richard Serra, in collaboration with Carlota Fay Schoolman, created the video work *Television Delivers People*, offering a prophetic critique of commercial media. In the video, a block of scrolling text reads, "You are the product of TV. You are delivered to the advertiser."[14] Serra and Schoolman lay bare the economic logic of mass media, in which viewers are commodified and sold to advertisers. The declaration that "television delivers people" prefigures the now-commonplace adage that "if you're not paying for the product, you *are* the product."[15] Serra's pivot from his most familiar medium (sculpture) marks a significant shift in his artistic practice, signaling a broader turn among artists towards reflecting about the structures of mediation and power.

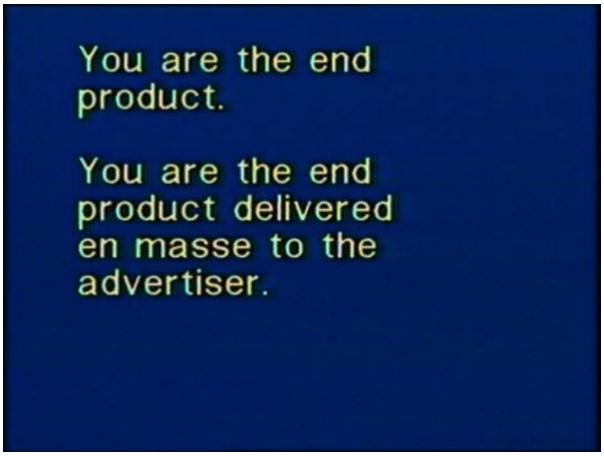


Figure 1. Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman, *Television Delivers People*, 1973, Betacam SP, b/w, mono, 00:06:00, ZKM | Center for Art and Media, Bonn, https://zkm.de/en/artwork/television-delivers-people.

Furthermore, what's more striking about Serra's work is its foresight. Decades before the invention of digital media platforms, Serra had already identified a core mechanism of what would later become the attention economy: the commodification of human attention as a business model. By making the mechanisms of control visible, Serra challenged the viewer to reconsider their role not just as consumer but as a unit of value in an economic exchange. This gesture of resistance — to reveal the invisible architectures of commodification — remains central to contemporary artistic strategies that seek to critique or subvert the attention economy.

[14] Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman, *Television Delivers People*, 1973, Betacam SP, b/w, mono, 00:06:00, ZKM | Center for Art and Media, Bonn, https://zkm.de/en/artwork/television-delivers-people.
[15] "Quote Origin: You're Not the Customer; You're the Product," Quote Investigator, July 16, 2017, https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/07/16/product.

### 1.5 Slave to the Algorithm

In recent years, scholars like Shoshana Zuboff have expanded on this trajectory through the framework of surveillance capitalism, a term coined to describe this new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales.[16] While earlier critiques focused on mass media and advertising, Zuboff shows how contemporary platforms not only harvest attention but predict and influence behavior at scale. In this system, attention is only the first step in a broader process of behavioral modification.

Zuboff distinguishes surveillance capitalism from earlier capitalist models by emphasizing its asymmetry of power and knowledge. Unlike the television model critiqued by Richard Serra — which commodifies the audience's attention for advertisers — surveillance capitalism operates invisibly, collecting vast amounts of behavioral data not only to sell products, but to shape choices, desires, and future actions. This predictive capacity turns platforms like Google and Amazon into *behavioral futures markets*,[17] where human behavior is both the product and the site of experimentation. As Zuboff notes, these systems thrive on opacity: the more users are unaware of the data extraction occurring, the more profitable their behaviors become. It marks a significant shift: from delivering people to advertisers, to engineering people for optimized behavior.

In her 2010 article *Affective Networks*, political theorist Jodi Dean has extended this discussion by examining the affective dimensions of digital capitalism. Dean argues that the compulsive sharing and engagement encouraged by social platforms entraps users in loops of affective investment that generate data while forestalling meaningful political or artistic intervention.[18] Here, attention is not only commodified but emotionally entangled — saturated with urgency, anxiety, and a sense of perpetual reaction. Similarly, Byung-Chul Han's concept of "achievement society"[19] diagnoses a culture where individuals internalize productivity as self-optimization, continuously exposing themselves to surveillance in exchange for visibility, likes, and algorithmic favor. In such a context, surveillance becomes voluntary, and the user becomes both laborer and the product. The attention economy, then, is not merely a threat to

[16] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 5.
[17] ibid, 11.
[18] Jodi Dean, "Affective Networks," *MediaTropes* II, no. 2 (2010): 19–44.
[19] Byung-Chul Han and Erik Butler, *The Burnout Society*, 11.

our capacity to focus — but a much more pernicious system that endangers established notions of identity, self-discipline, habit, autonomy, and power.

### 1.6 The Device that Sealed the Deal

The attention economy is not a peripheral phenomenon: it is the organizing principle of contemporary digital life. It dictates not only how information is distributed and consumed, but also how identities are formed, how social relations are mediated, and how power is exercised. By understanding its mechanisms, we can better grasp the stakes involved not only for individuals but for societies and cultural production. Yet these mechanisms are not abstract or immaterial: they are deeply entwined with the technologies we use every day. The smartphone — specially the iPhone — has played a pivotal role in embedding the logics of attention capture into the very fabric of daily life. With its sophisticated design, push notifications, and an app-based ecosystem, the iPhone helped inaugurate a new paradigm of perpetual connectivity and micro-engagement. In the following chapter, I turn to the invention of the iPhone and the cultural shift it promoted: the normalization of the "always-on" mindset that made the attention economy not only viable, but inescapable.

## 2. The iPhone and the Origins of Perpetual Connection

### 2.1 Introduction

Launched in 2007, the iPhone, with its elegant design and multi-touch interface, would quickly become the contemporary apparatus that centralized work, communication, entertainment, and identity. More than just a gadget, it became a cultural touchstone and a technical infrastructure for what would soon evolve into a fully immersive attention economy. Not merely a more convenient phone or a better way to check email on the go, it was a radical reconfiguration of everyday life. The gadget was not responsible for inventing the internet, mobile computing, or digital culture, but it was the catalyst that wove them seamlessly into the fabric of daily life. The legacy of the iPhone encompasses both technological innovation and behavioral change. This chapter details the iPhone's influence not just in how we access information, but in how it normalized a state of perpetual connection by integrating attention-extracting infrastructures into our routines.

### 2.2 An Ecosystem of Attention

The iPhone was built from the start to be more than just a tool for performing work-related tasks. Rather, it operates as a foundation — a portal to an open-ended integrated platform capable of supporting an entire ecosystem of apps and services. Before that, phones were mostly restricted to basic communication functions: making calls, sending texts, accessing basic services. The iPhone marks a departure from those limitations, becoming a gateway to a vast network of services, combining utility and enjoyment in one device.

The iPhone is not only innovative from a hardware perspective, but remarkable for the new opportunities it allowed: in this new ecosystem, third-party developers could transform their ideas into live experiments designed to capture (and profit from) our focus. The App Store works as a marketplace of digital experiences, showing us products that cover all aspects of contemporary life, from productivity to self-care, finance to dating. Apps are not just tools, but constant competition for our most valuable resource — attention.

Each app works as a mini ecosystem, an experiment into how to capture and retain attention. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were among the first to experience the benefits from operating under the new paradigm of attention capture. This model would soon expand beyond social platforms to include fitness apps, gaming platforms, health trackers, banking services, transportation and logistics. Collectively, these apps

constitute the entire ecosystem of attention extractors, all operating under the infrastructure created and maintained by Apple.

Designed and engineered to integrate seamlessly into users' lives, the iPhone is more than a tool or a gadget — it functions as the enabler platform for behavioral capitalism:[20] it allows for every action, swipe, and interaction to be tracked and monetized. Under this framework, apps are not mere facilitators, conduits, or service providers, but active participants in a system designed to keep users plugged in, constantly engaged, and susceptible to behavioral manipulation.

As Byung-Chul Han argues, the smartphone is the ideal tool for the "achievement society,"[21] where users can rely on it to keep constantly productive while remaining exposed to continuous surveillance. No longer a mere communications device, it occupies a central position in that person's life, serving as an extension of their lived experience, ultimately marking a shift in the relationship between users and machines.

### 2.3 The Normalization of Perpetual Connectivity

Smartphones promoted a major transformation by normalizing a state of perpetual connectivity. Before the iPhone became ubiquitous, media engagement was tied to broadcasting schedules or desktop computers. This shift has dissolved the rhythm of online experience, pulverizing it into all corners of our lives. Connectivity leaves the realm of activity and becomes an environment: we no longer *go* online, we *live* online. The temporal perception of daily experience gets flattened, as it creates a new normal where digital presence is continuous, expected, and rarely paused.

Work, leisure, social life, and solitude are condensed into one single device, blurring the lines between previously separated dimensions of our existence, and demanding constant attention from many fronts. According to Jonathan Crary, devices like the iPhone aim to eliminate the *useless* time of reflection, contemplation, and solitude.[22] According to him, this perpetual

[20] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 8.
[21] Han and Butler, *The Burnout Society*, 8.
[22] Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, 40.

connectivity is not simply a convenience, but a condition of late capitalist life that seeks to extract value even from our most passive or unconscious states.[23]

This condition closely relates to what tech writer and researcher Linda Stone described as "continuous partial attention"[24] — a mode of attention in which we remain perpetually connected, but never fully present.

> Continuous partial attention is motivated by a desire to be a live node on the network. We want to connect and be connected. We constantly scan for opportunities — activities or people — in our environment. We're always on.[25]

The multitasking features enabled by the iPhone are characterized by constant interruptions, ease of navigation, and layered modals and notifications. Its entire infrastructure encourages users to bounce from one engagement to another — whether replying to a message, checking the weather, scrolling social media — without fully disengaging or concentrating. But unlike multitasking, which is about productivity, continuous partial attention is about connectivity: being always accessible, always tuned in, always potentially responsive.

Evidently, this change in user behavior isn't accidental, but rather engineered. According to former Google employee and technology ethicist Tristan Harris, these design features exploit behavioral psychology to maximize screen time.[26] Infinite scrolls, red notification badges, and "intermittent variable rewards"[27] (for example, getting notified whenever someone likes your photo), are deliberate strategies used to keep users constantly engaged. Every interaction contributes to an infinite feedback loop: you grab your phone to check the time, get hit by a notification, and it instantly provides you with a small dopamine hit, all of which encourages you to repeat the cycle. In this way, the iPhone is not merely a functional tool, but an apparatus that nudges users into certain habits without them fully understanding, or even noticing, the underlying mechanics employed in this transaction.

[23] Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, 17.
[24] Linda Stone, "Continuous Partial Attention," LindaStone.net, 2005, accessed April 21, 2025, http://lindastone.net/qa/continuous-partial-attention.
[25] ibid.
[26] Harris.
[27] ibid.

### 2.4 Micro-Engagement and the Fragmentation of Time

One of the most subtle yet pervasive shifts introduced by the iPhone is how it completely restructured the experience of time. Unlike other forms of media such as television, radio, or even desktop computers, all of which demand episodic attention, the smartphone invites constant interaction. These interactions may last only a few seconds: a glance at a notification, a tap to confirm an information, a quick scroll out of habit. But over time they add up, occurring in a rhythm of living that gets constantly interrupted. What was previously considered downtime — waiting in line, riding public transportation, laying in bed — has been filled with micro-interruptions that displace the user from their physical reality.

Given their length, these tiny interactions feel harmless when considered on their own, but they reveal a much bigger picture. Time becomes chopped into fragments, fractionated at the right amount to enable the consumption of micro bits of content. The focus is lost, and it can take a lot of effort to regain it. Over time, we become unable to fully inhabit the present moment, always jumping from one stimulus to another, in a state of perpetual distraction.

Infinite scrolls,[28] swipe gestures,[29] and push notifications[30] aren't just functional design — they are temporal architectures, structuring how we move through our days. They encourage continuous interaction without presenting a clear endpoint. But unlike in the early days, when we used to "surf the web" freely, users are now being constantly encouraged to interact and engage — after all, each gesture provides data that can potentially be monetized. Moments of serendipity have been replaced for engineered traps of constant and unfocused responsiveness.

Micro-engagement also reshapes social dynamics. Social interactions are now mediated through screens and hijacked by the interruptions they provoke. If, in a sense, our attention has become fragmented so much that it prevents deep focus, then social relations have, too, become fractured, lacking the proper structure for deep engagement and meaningful connection. Social interactions in the digital realm happen scattered throughout our days, and are performed in small pockets of time, making us feel connected superficially but not properly gratified.

[28] Harris.
[29] ibid.
[30] ibid.

### 2.5 From Interface to Infrastructure: The iPhone as a Condition

The iPhone has quietly — and pervasively — transitioned from a personal device to an invisible structure. No longer just a communication tool, it's a condition that frames how we perceive and experience the world. It's a subtle but significant transformation. Like roads, electricity or plumbing, we don't think of the iPhone as infrastructure; that is, only when it stops working. And the more we use it, the more we learn to rely on it.

But unlike traditional infrastructure, the iPhone is deeply personal — carried in our pockets, with us at the table, at the toilet, in bed. It infiltrated spaces that were previously untouched.[31] The phone becomes an extension of ourselves, present with us at every moment, from when we wake up until we go to sleep. Through an integrated system, users' lives become segmented in categories: photos, messages, passwords, credit cards — all stored in a structure particularly susceptible to surveillance and manipulation. In this sense, every action performed with an iPhone in hand becomes part of a wider apparatus of data extraction and behavioral prediction. As Shoshana Zuboff describes, "surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data."[32] Thus the iPhone functions not merely as a convenient tool, but rather as a vector for extractability, squeezing out aspects of our subjectivity and turning them into data points.

Moreover, as infrastructure, the iPhone enforces an overall sense of discipline and compliance, by keeping users subjected to the dynamics mediated by the screen. Workplace communication takes shape in messages that lack tone and nuance, bleeding into corners of our personal lives. Informed by the logic of self-optimization[33] described by Byung-Chul Han, romantic life is mediated through carefully curated avatars and guided by frivolous gestures — swiping left and right — as a shortcut to meeting the right partner. Even the notion of opting out is confined within the system: *airplane mode* acts as a last resort for those instances when we dare to reclaim to ourselves a sliver of our attention. This withdrawal is invariably temporary, as opting out entirely means becoming dislocated from an infrastructure that accommodates social and economic participation.

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[31] In *24/7*, Jonathan Crary argues that sleep is the only frontier which hasn't yet been invaded by capitalism. Alternatively, chief executive of Netflix, Reed Hastings declared, in a public speech in 2023, that his product's biggest competitor is sleep.
[32] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 11.
[33] Byung-Chul Han and Erik Butler, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 48.

Overall, the iPhone promoted a new era of connectivity not only due to its technical capabilities, but also for its infiltration into the crevices of everyday life. In the next chapter, I explore how portability and hyperconnectivity occurred simultaneously with the rise of the social web, an environment where relationships and selfhood are mediated through digital platforms and shaped by algorithmic visibility, feedback reward loops, and the politics of platform participation.

## 3. The Origins of Social Media Platforms and the Social Web

### 3.1 Introduction

If the iPhone brought about the foundation for perpetual connectivity, social media platforms built the architecture that allowed the attention economy to thrive. Under the guise of promoting human interaction and connection, they evolved into complex infrastructures that completely reprogrammed how people interact, express, and socialize. In this chapter, I describe the emergence of social media platforms and the shift to Web 2.0, which is characterized for being the basis of extractive surveillance-based platforms, arguing that social media is restructuring the very fabric of social life. Platforms, as they are currently designed, are not merely channels for communication, but systems that reorganize visibility, reshape identity, and commodify interaction. They don't just mediate social interactions but redefine their conditions.

### 3.2 From 1.0 to 2.0: The Shift Towards Participation

In 2005, author Tim O'Reilly[34] coined the term Web 2.0,[35] and described the shift from what has been retroactively named Web 1.0. The transformation he describes is exemplified by their different characteristics. While the infrastructure of Web 1.0 was more rudimentary, with static websites as the main shape, Web 2.0 is enabled by the technological advances and the rise of high-speed internet and mobile devices. The table below better exemplifies those differences:

| **Main distinctions between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0** | |
|---|---|
| **Web 1.0** | **Web 2.0** |
| Static websites | Dynamic and interactive web applications |
| Read-only content (consumption) | User-generated content (participation) |
| Centralized publishing | Decentralized publishing (many create and share) |
| Personal websites and HTML pages | Social media platforms and wikis (collaboratively built databases) |
| Directories | Search engines and algorithmic organization |
| Focus on ownership | Focus on collaboration and sharing |

[34] Trained in philosophy, O'Reilly has become an important voice at the turn of the century, for writing critically about the internet and digital media. Aside from his contributions in the earlier days of the internet, in 2013 he coined the term "algorithmic regulation" to describe the current condition of platforms that operate within invisible systems of computer organization, demanding a critical approach to artificial intelligence — way before this debate has reached the visibility it has now.

[35] Tim O'Reilly, What is web 2.0, September 30, 2005, https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html.

Platforms such as MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006) all flourished throughout this rearrangement of the digital space. Together, they allowed users to not only consume content but to produce and circulate it — whether by uploading photos, commenting on videos, or engaging in discussions. It was the beginning of a culture that promised connection, visibility, and influence, with users impelled to become producers, aiming to achieve a status of micro-celebrity that reconfigured established notions of visibility and power. In this new model, curation is replaced by algorithmic selection, and virality bypasses hierarchy.

As this new model progressed, it was evident that users were not just producing content: they produced value. Every transaction (likes, clicks, uploads) becomes a data point in an increasingly lucrative economy. As Shoshana Zuboff noted, platforms quickly realized that our behavior — what we do, what we look at, what we like, and who we talk to — could be transformed into a commodity.[36] Web 2.0 isn't just participatory; it is extractive.

### 3.3 Social Media as Infrastructure of Surveillance and Profit

Previously, the web adopted a linear format that relied on editorial curation. Social media introduced algorithmic feeds: they use machine learning to track and predict which types of content will be more relevant to users, to keep them engaged and maximize time spent on the platform. The user is watching — and being watched in return. In this environment, artificial intelligence isn't being used just to personalize experience, but to influence and manufacture behavior.

The algorithm is engineered to provoke emotion: outrage, joy, anger, and novelty are manufactured because they tend to generate response. Content that is controversial, divisive, extreme, or emotionally charged is thus prioritized by platforms, as they usually trigger more interaction: comments, shares, and endless scrolling. Without even knowing, users train the algorithms that shape the digital environment, narrowing the diversity of content they get exposed to. In this sense, users are immersed in echo chambers that prioritize only one type of opinion, increasing hostility towards differences and enhancing polarization. Though it takes shape in the digital space, this polarization can have an effect in real life too, for example in politics.

[36] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 8–9.

As discussed previously, these features are not incidental but rather engineered to exploit psychological vulnerabilities. Furthermore, this system works well because its opaqueness encourages users to keep interacting without noticing that they are being exploited. In his 2011 article, *Surveillance and Alienation in the Online Economy*, Mark Andrejevic argues that users are "productive in their passivity":[37] by engaging with digital platforms and disclosing personal information, users produce valuable labor in the form of clicks, likes, and shares. Thus, in Web 2.0, the distinctive function of digital platforms is neither to produce content nor to provide connection, but to extract and exploit value from the labor of their users.

### 3.4 The Social Web and the Aesthetics of Visibility

Social media platforms transformed how visibility operates. Before, exposure was mediated by institutions: magazines, galleries, broadcasting systems; now, it can be accessed instantly. Anyone can be seen. This democratized system of visibility is particularly relevant for artists and designers, who now seem able to project themselves more easily and build an online audience. Yet this visibility is structured by the logic of digital platforms.

Artists and designers become progressively compliant to the rules of platforms to increase and maintain their audience. To be seen, one must post regularly. To be relevant, one must be engaging. With that in mind, artists began creating works with the feed in mind: resized for Instagram, adapted for TikTok, captioned and edited for accessibility. Aesthetic decisions become intertwined with performance metrics, and the work competes for attention in a saturated digital space. Ultimately, production becomes shaped by the formats favored by platforms. Algorithms reward frequency, novelty, and affective engagement, nudging users to produce in ways that maximize reach and reaction. Artists learn to internalize these demands, developing an intuition for what "performs well," often at the cost of ambiguity, experimentation, scope, and dimension. This new creative paradigm where artistic value is conflated with reach and performance hints at a new role for artists, who now must become marketing experts, constantly analyzing engagement metrics and adjusting their output to align with platform expectations. Furthermore, social media encourages the creation of a highly curated digital persona, one that complies to platform logic and flattens subjectivity and depth.

[37] Mark Andrejevic, "Surveillance and Alienation in the Online Economy," *Surveillance & Society* 8, no. 3 (September 9, 2010): 278–87.


Figure 2. Wasted Rita, Black handwritten text on white surface that reads "Update nothing. Impress no one," https://thecuriousbrain.com/?p=40465.

Under the pseudonym Wasted Rita, Portuguese artist Rita Gomes produces text-based artworks that reflect on digital connectivity, relationships, and selfhood. In her series of handwritten phrases over white background, fittingly shared in her social media channels, she reflects ironically on the digital environment and the demands for constant exposure. "Update nothing. Impress no one."[38] offers a cynical reflection on the cost of opting out of digital dynamics of exposure and attention. By unconforming to the demands of posting constantly, users of platforms may also relinquish the burden of having to appear fascinating, interesting, or successful. In this sophisticated engine, the freedom to publish becomes the burden of constant presence. In the attention economy, visibility becomes labor.

### 3.5 From Connection to Extraction

Connection was the main promise of the early social web. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter capitalized on our inherent human need for connection by offering to bridge distances, reunite friends, and amplify voices. The illusion of serving as a "digital town square,"[39] as Elon Musk described Twitter (now X) when he acquired it, gets constantly debased as it seems to favor

[38] Wasted Rita, *Update nothing. Impress no one*, https://thecuriousbrain.com/?p=40465.
[39] Jillian C. York, "Elon Musk Doesn't Know What It Takes to Make a Digital Town Square," MIT Technology Review, October 31, 2022, https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/10/29/1062417/elon-musk-twitter-takeover-global-democracy-activists.

content that aligns with the ideologies shared by its owner. Social media platforms owe much of their success by portraying themselves as tools that enacted the ethos of early internet culture, with its decentralized means of publishing, open access to knowledge and free speech.

However, as social media platforms gained adherence and their business models were revealed, this promise of connection became increasingly subjected to the logic of extraction. Likes, comments, and shares became the raw material from which profit was derived.[40] Interactions became data points to be harvested and monetized, and social exchanges turned into transactions placed within a broader economic system. Over time, more aspects of our lives became infiltrated by the extractive logic of digital platforms: sharing photos, expressing political opinions, listening to music, watching videos. Within this enclosed system of surveillance, everything we do is tracked, and every inch of the screen tries to keep us in. Because harvesting user data is profitable, companies do everything in their power to increase user retention. This relentless demand for presence — being visible, being responsive, being up to date — leaves users not just tracked, but drained.

The extractive nature of digital platforms doesn't just apply to data: it extends to the user's time, energy, and attention. This system of extraction ultimately leads to depletion of our most valuable resources. In the same way that natural resources are exhausted through relentless extraction, users, too, experience a form of depletion caused by the demand for visibility, interaction, and self-presentation. Digital exhaustion, as discussed by Byung-Chul Han, Jonathan Crary, and Jenny Odell, isn't just a side effect, but a direct consequence of the extractive logic of digital platforms.

### 3.6 Platform Hegemony and the Disappearance of the Web

Along with the individual and social consequences brought about by digital platforms, a structural change has occurred in the architecture of the internet itself: the slow disappearance of the open web and its replacement by a few closed platforms controlled by giant technology corporations. The ethos of the early internet has become eclipsed by the rise of commercial social networks, which created an environment of unethical practices that exploit users' attention in turn for profit.

[40] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 8.

A handful of tech companies — Meta (Facebook, Instagram), Alphabet (YouTube, Google), ByteDance (TikTok) and Twitter (now X) — control most of the digital landscape, dominating what users see, share, and discuss online. Political dissent, controversial art, and peripheral subcultures can be disfavored (or buried altogether) by algorithms. Under the guise of moderation, platforms have the power to enact forms of censorship that are informed by commercial interest rather than civility or harmony. At the same time, the architecture of these platforms discourages users from leaving — autoplay features, endless scrolling, and in-app browsing keep users confined within the same enclosed system. Over time, users interact with fewer sources of information, becoming biased and passive. Digital platforms become conflated with the much broader digital environment, with users engaging with only a handful of apps.

The enclosure of the web experience under the control of a handful of tech corporations hints at processes of privatization and monopolization. The internet transforms from a public common to a proprietary space controlled by corporate interests. The visual, social, and cultural dimensions of the digital environment become shaped by the financial imperatives of platform capitalism. Once considered the ideal arena for experimentation and critique, the internet becomes increasingly structured around the same market logics that shape mainstream media. This presents an existential challenge for artists and designers: as we become reliant on digital platforms for visibility, the same platforms undermine the autonomy and experimentation articulated by our work.

### 3.7 Conclusion

The rise of social media platforms has profoundly reshaped the digital environment. What started as a promise of expression and connection has gradually become a system of surveillance, extraction, and behavioral control. Social media isn't just an innocuous tool for communication: it is the engine of the attention economy. In this economy, the raw material — human interaction — becomes collected, identities are shaped by performative attempts at self-branding, and engagement and visibility (even if unintentionally) inform how we think and feel. We internalize the demands enforced by platform logic, and feel pressured to perform, to optimize, to constantly engage. Identity becomes interface; creativity becomes content; relationship becomes data.

The platformization of everyday life becomes the redefining trace of the contemporary digital landscape. Human experience becomes data to be monetized and profited from. In these systems, platforms are not only channels for connection, but broader structures of visibility and control. As we become compliant to the demands of being seen and remain engaged, we no longer just browse or connect: we produce labor to be exploited. If before the digital experience was unruly and we were freer to roam and explore, now our every move is tracked, and we become data points for systems governed by hidden mechanisms of control.

As this infrastructure becomes normalized, the more its cracks seem to appear. Digital exhaustion is the consequence of a digital environment designed to exploit us. As discussed previously, this shift isn't natural but engineered. Therefore, the current state of the web becomes the battleground for rethinking established notions of attention and control. In the next chapter, I offer a personal recollection of my relationship with the internet, and how it helped me shape my identity and my interests. Within the realm of affective dimensions of the internet, my memory of the early web is also crushed by its current state.

## 4. The Internet, Today

### 4.1 Introduction

Before the rise and solidification of social media platforms, the internet felt like a new frontier: a place for freedom, exploration, curiosity, and wonder. Slowly, then at all once, we became familiar with the perils and cost of constant connectivity. The covid-19 pandemic exacerbated our dependence on the digital environment: unable to leave the house, we became increasingly reliant on the internet to keep us informed, entertained, connected. In many parts of the world, especially big cities, screens were our only windows to the world. The term "doom scrolling" was popularized during that time — it describes the act of reaching for your phone in search of news, being exposed to negative content, and leaving with a terrible impression, feeling hopeless about the current state of the world and dread about the future.[41] This particular feeling is not accidental, but one of the many phenomena caused by an engine carefully designed to keep us hooked.

As the internet became more accessible, it also became ubiquitous — unavoidable, even. Previously, it was an escape from the real world. Now, the real world is an escape from the internet.[42] In his 2023 essay for The New Yorker titled *Why the Internet Isn't Fun Anymore*,[43] journalist Kyle Chayka lends his perspective on, well, why the internet is no longer fun. This shift can be easily explained by the replacement of the early web in favor of a commercial web, focused not merely on displaying ads, but on keeping users entrapped in an environment of relentless attention-grabbing structures, most notably "native ads" — advertisements that are difficult to spot because they are disguised as content — and search engine mechanics that nudge users into specific results. Discourse against the current state of search engines is abundant,[44] and user distrust is at an all-time-high. According to Kyle Chayka, having fun online is becoming increasingly harder, as "a handful of giant social networks have taken over the open space of the Internet, centralizing and homogenizing our experiences through their own opaque and shifting content-sorting systems."[45]

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[41] Merriam-Webster, s.v. "Doomscroll," accessed May 18, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/doomscroll.
[42] Noah Smith, (@Noahpinion), "15 years ago, the internet was an escape from the real world. Now, the real world is an escape from the internet," Twitter, August 29, 2017, 12:46 AM, https://x.com/Noahpinion/status/902301308702515202.
[43] Kyle Chayka, "Why the Internet Isn't Fun Anymore," The New Yorker, October 9, 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/why-the-internet-isnt-fun-anymore.
[44] Charlie Warzel, "The Tragedy of Google Search," The Atlantic, September 22, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/09/google-search-size-usefulness-decline/675409.
[45] Chayka, "Why the Internet Isn't Fun Anymore."

Kyle Chayka's writing represents a broader sensation about the disillusionment towards the current web, where the "blurring [...] between physical and digital lives"[46] hampers casual posting and "aimless Internet surfing."[47] The current (bleak) state of the web is a direct consequence of corporate interference, with huge digital platforms dictating the rules of the game on one side, and users confined and compliant on the other side. Chayka highlights the idea of "the age of self-commodification online,"[48] where "everyone is forced to perform the role of an influencer,"[49] which confirms the idea of Byung-Chul Han that assigns users the role of laborers, performing within structures devised by giant technology corporations.

Furthermore, Chayka's analysis hints at Guy Debord's renowned work *Society of the Spectacle*. The various technical advances allowed by the iPhone and the features designed by social media platforms made us spectacularize everyday life, turning every event into an opportunity for exposure in a relentless quest for platform engagement. Surveillance and visibility reshape the way social relations take place. We adopt curated, hyper-realistic online personas and perform social (or parasocial) interactions with other online avatars, all mediated through digital interfaces that flatten multisensorial, multidimensional social connection. Users spend most of their online time confined in a handful of digital platforms, a direct consequence of the efforts employed by big tech corporations to retain users, maximizing time spent in these platforms, and increasing revenue from advertising and subscriptions.

Before, digital platforms like Geocities and Blogger.com allowed for more free and innocent self-publishing, until the logic of attention capturing and monetization transformed the online experience into an extractive environment, suppressing free, unpretentious navigation and experimentation, or "aimless Internet surfing."[50] Artist and writer Jenny Odell underlines the distinction between the web then and now, claiming that the rise of *commercial* social networks is the culprit to the overall perception that current digital behavior is, ultimately and ironically, antisocial.[51]

[46] Chayka, "Why the Internet Isn't Fun Anymore."
[47] ibid.
[48] ibid.
[49] ibid.
[50] ibid.
[51] Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, xii.

The effects of exhaustion caused by extractive digital platforms are described broadly and intensively. In an essay that went viral, published first in 2019 on digital media platform Buzzfeed and later turned into a best-selling book, journalist Anne Helen Petersen calls millennials (those born roughly between 1981 and 1996) the "burn-out generation."[52] In her writing — which can be very centered around the North American experience — she details the factors that link the phenomenon of burn-out to this specific generation. According to her, millennials expected to enter the workforce and encounter prosperity and up-ward mobility but were faced with an increased cost-of-living, student debt, an insecure job market characterized by short-term contracts and the gig economy, all of which created disillusionment and exhaustion. The Protestant work ethic, very prevalent not only in the United States but in most parts of the globalized world, takes a new dimension in the digital era, repackaged and relabeled as "hustle culture"[53] — the idea that being busy and constantly working is morally better than, say, adopting a hedonistic mindset. Constant connectivity too plays a huge role in this disillusionment, as social media platforms tend to exacerbate feelings of jealousy and comparison, along with the prevailing tendency of curating one's life to make it appear more desirable and interesting, leaving users ultimately drained while still wanting more.

In this chapter, I explore the subjective dimensions of hyperconnectivity, and the byproducts created by the attention economy, recounting my own experiences of growing up together with the internet, and detailing my relationship with it. As someone born in the 1990s, I consider the rise of the internet crucial to my development not only as a designer, but also on a personal level. As authors argue, the millennial generation is possessed with an acute awareness about how different the world is before and after the rise of the internet. Being born when the internet was still in its infancy, we were raised in an offline world yet had to learn to use the internet while developing as individuals. Growing up I was taught that learning to use the computer was crucial for securing a professional future. Having online proficiency was regarded as fundamental, so my idea of a career was shaped and informed by this demand.

We knew of a world of IRL[54] eye-to-eye conversation, yet we're fully proficient in the unspoken rules and intricacies of social networking platforms and online dating. We remember

[52] Anne Helen Petersen, *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (London: Vintage Digital, 2021).
[53] Megan Carnegie, "Hustle Culture: Is This the End of Rise-and-Grind?," BBC News, April 19, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20230417-hustle-culture-is-this-the-end-of-rise-and-grind.
[54] "In real life", in internet lingo

the act of “doing nothing,” and still we reach for our phones at any idle moment. Understandably, this dichotomy creates a push-and-pull effect, where we seem engulfed by the future while we reminisce about a screen-free past. We are quick to embrace novelty, yet long for a time when the internet was not attached to us 24/7.

### 4.2 The Internet and Me

The year was 1997, and my father brought home our first computer: it was a giant robot-looking PC from a brand called Itautec, produced in Brazil. Despite the aura of mystique, enhanced by its placement it in my older sister’s bedroom, there wasn’t much to do with the computer. It came accompanied with a few CD-ROMs, which I would go through in search for entertainment and education. But that would keep me entertained for just a while.

Around that time, I would often visit my father at his office. He used to work at a bank as a manager, and he had a similar computer on his desk. While he was there doing his work, he would let me use the computer. It had constant internet access, which allowed me to get first acquainted with the internet. Not knowing how to read in English, my scope was restricted to the Brazilian web arena. Without much to see or to do, I would browse some news websites and soon get bored. Running out of things to see and do is probably the starkest difference between the web of then and the online experience of today — the current sensation is that there are, and there will always be, new things to see. The internet is an endless slot machine of novelty, ready to give us more every time we swipe.

A year later, my father would let us install the internet on our home computer. In the dial-up internet days, the price was substantially lower during the weekend, so that was the only time we were allowed to be online. During those immersive weekends, I would get increasingly familiar with the internet, exploring websites catered to kids my age, virtual spaces that would keep me busy, both appeased and excited. I would visit my virtual pet every weekend in 1998, giving him enough food to last through the week without needing my supervision and care.

I was growing and the internet was growing too. Later, I would visit chat rooms and interact with pre-teens my age. I started visiting fan pages of my favorite subjects, playing online games, and getting more acquainted with the internet and its multiple possibilities of entertainment. The web experience was limited and marginal — it was interesting enough to keep me hooked during the weekends but was never fully integrated in my life. Its use was

allotted to a specific day and time, proposed by a parent concerned with the perils of forgoing real life human interaction in favor of the passive and physically inactive experience of online browsing.

In 2003, my father, once again interested in bringing technological innovations into our home, got us high-speed internet. As infrastructure was developing in Brazil during that time, access to such services increased. We lived in a residential building in a middle-class neighborhood of a state capital, which facilitated the entry to these then-luxuries. From that point on, access was no longer restricted to weekends — and the web literally became a part of everyday life. Predicting that my sister and I would live attached to the computer unless some form of restriction was imposed, my mom also devised specific time slots for computer use, preventing us from spending all waken hours online.

Before that, my afternoons were spent reading books. I had a lot of free time and would constantly get bored. Mornings were filled with school activities, and I would often spend a part of my recess in the school library, searching for titles to take home and keep me busy in the afternoons. This behavior of preemptively combating boredom before it arrives changed as soon as we got high-speed internet. From that point on, I knew that, after going to school, I would be able to spend my afternoon online, exploring the web and everything it had to offer.


Figure 3. Montage featuring a few books from "Série Vagalume," ("Firefly Series"), a popular book series by Brazilian publisher Ática. Released in 1973, it was present in most school libraries and was a staple in every school library, https://vejasp.abril.com.br/coluna/memoria/os-livros-sensacionais-da-colecao-vaga-lume.

Afternoons of reading books were replaced by online chatting and virtual interaction. Right around that time, Orkut was invented — an embryo of a social network, very similar to the

platforms we use today. It was available worldwide but only became successful in a handful of countries such as Brazil. It piqued general interest due to its invite-only feature. Being there signaled your interest in being online — and in *belonging* online. This sense of belonging was a central element of Orkut: people would gather based on interests and niche pop culture references. But that was just a pretext to its existence. In reality, people would add their real-life friends and exchange messages, mediated by their online personas. As an early adolescent I was self-conscious about my appearance, so I asked my sister to take a nice headshot of me so that I could look cool in my profile. A precursor to Facebook, in Orkut I became acquainted with the behavior of lurking other people's profiles — something we colloquially call stalking (or cyberstalking). Suddenly, checking other people's online profiles became one more option of entertainment.


Figure 4. T-shirt from online brand Pander that reads "Going on the computer. In loving memory. 1995-2007", which showcases the collective mourning of the internet as a place you'd go to, https://pandershirts.com/products/going-on-the-computer%C2%AE-t-shirt?_pos=3&_sid=cef31046f&_ss=r.

As high-speed internet became more accessible, the digital environment too became accelerated. New platforms were constantly being released, and during high school YouTube and Twitter were hits. Back then, YouTube only allowed short videos, which means that not much time was spent in one singular video, but rather exploring the centralizing features of the platform. YouTube facilitated the circulation of short-form videos, and its database stored both user-generated content (usually memes) as well as old television shows, interviews, and musical performances from famous artists, all of which were uploaded by users. On the other

hand, Twitter was appealing because it offered a window into what other people were thinking. Friends and artists would fill your feed with their most unfiltered thoughts, and the interface was highly addictive: every time there was a new post, there would be a button signaling new updates, begging to be clicked on. For a long time, digital content displayed in social platforms was sorted chronologically — just another addictive feature launched by social platforms, one that made us come back very often as if not to miss what was there while we dared to look away. Perhaps this was one of the first instances of FOMO,[55] another digital behavior propelled by social networks.

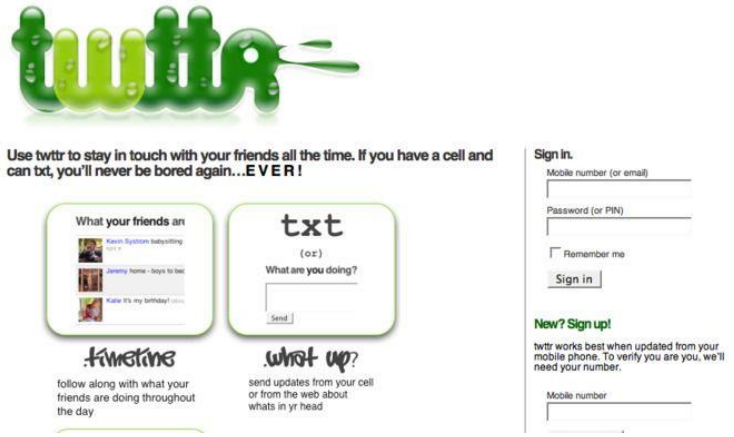



Figure 5. Screenshot of Twitter's homepage in 2006, https://www.ethicalsuperstore.com/blog/10th-birthday/ethical-superstore-10-changed-10-years/attachment/twitter-homepage-2006.

On Twitter's homepage in 2006 you could read "you'll never be bored again…E V E R !". In retrospect, this feels less like a promise and more like a threat. Never again was I bored — that is, unless the internet was not working. Soon it became clear that boredom was the problem the internet was trying to solve. Many years later, in 2014, I got my hands on my first iPhone, and there I was, once again experiencing new ways to kill boredom. Any queue, commute, waiting room or idle time was accompanied by my smartphone, a portable digital device that offered constant stimulus and distraction. Currently, an average day in my life consists mostly of juggling from the work computer to the smartphone to the television at home. And, after careful observation, I notice the same feelings in the people around me. With that much screen exposure, it is no wonder we all feel exhausted.

[55] Merriam-Webster, s.v. "Fear of missing out," accessed August 13, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/FOMO. "Fear of missing out" is a popular internet expression that describes the anxiety of feeling left out or from being uninvited from certain events.

### 4.3 The End of Fun

Then enters disillusionment. More than a decade ago, the perils of social media platforms slowly gained traction in public discourse, captained mostly by former employees of technology corporations. In 2010, as social media platforms were gaining popularity and adhesion, computer scientist Jaron Lanier published *You Are Not a Gadget*, one of the earliest and most influential critiques on the altering direction the internet was taking. When Facebook was at its peak and audiences were experiencing the enticing new possibilities of social media platforms, Lanier warned about the potential dangers of platform capitalism. In the book, he details the many ways in which digital platforms can potentially stifle human values such as creativity, authenticity, and individuality, in favor of corporate profit.[56] Later, in 2018, he published *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, a manifesto urging the common user to abandon social media platforms, supporting the thesis that these platforms act unethically, using surveillance technologies to extract and exploit user data.[57]

Very recently, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt published the acclaimed book *The Anxiety Generation*, arguing that childhood has undergone a profound transformation in recent years due to a shift from a play-based experience to a phone-based experience, marked by a paradox between the increasingly unsupervised use of digital platforms and the rise in surveillance and overprotection from parents.[58] According to Haidt, these conditions have increased the levels of anxiety and depression among children and teenagers,[59] ultimately revealing the negative impact that these tools have on humans, most notably in such an important and formative period of human life for cognition, self-esteem, and sociability.[60] Haidt's recommendations, such as prohibiting the use of smartphones for children under 14 years old or limiting social media use to teenagers over the age of 16,[61] were used to draw policies restricting the use of smartphones in schools in Australia and Brazil. Interestingly, as soon as new legislation regarding the use of cell phones in schools became restricted in Brazilian schools, teachers went on to social media to share how much more engaged and sociable kids and teenagers behaved after phone restrictions have been imposed, sharing videos of students socializing, playing instruments,

[56] Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2011).
[57] Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (London: Vintage, 2019).
[58] Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2024).
[59] ibid.
[60] ibid.
[61] ibid.

dancing, and engaging in all types of interactions that are less passive and more engaging than staring at their portable screens.

The restriction to cellphone use in schools in Brazil was mentioned to Haidt when he was interviewed in one of Brazil's most prestigious television shows in 2025.[62] He details the irony that many of the engineers that work for digital platforms invest a huge amount of money on tuition for their children at a very specific type of private school — schools that prioritize contact with nature, free play, alternative teaching methods, lack of hierarchical structures and, unsurprisingly, they restrict cellphone use. This anecdote showcases how lucrative and dangerous digital platforms are. Moreover, Jeff Hammerbacher, a former executive for Facebook, famously said that "the best minds of (his) generation are thinking about how to make people click ads,"[63] confirming that the business models of these platforms are highly lucrative, as they allow the employment of exceptionally talented professionals, who can then devise new ways of making these platforms even more engaging and therefore lucrative.

Because of their close involvement with these platforms, the so-called whistleblowers started to shed a light on the unethical business practices and incongruent discourse employed by such companies. In 2021, famous whistleblower Frances Haugen leaked the *Facebook Papers* to Wall Street Journal.[64] A former product manager for the civic integrity team at Facebook, Haugen compiled thousands of pages of internal research and communications documenting that Meta knew about the harm its products caused, including Instagram's negative effects on teenage girls, amplification of misinformation and divisive content, and failure to address hate speech and violence.[65]

Considering the ethical dilemmas and real-life consequences that these platforms have in our lives, how are artists, thinkers, and users attempting to hack, rethink, and reconfigure our current condition? Is it possible to combat platform dependency, hyperconnectivity, and the interference of technology corporations in our lives? In the next chapter, I present authors and

[62] Roda Viva, "RODA VIVA | JONATHAN HAIDT | 09/12/2024," December 10, 2024, Interview, 1:18:29, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1upX4DqpVwY.
[63] Ashlee Vance, "This Tech Bubble Is Different," Bloomberg, April 14, 2011, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-04-14/this-tech-bubble-is-different.
[64] Bill Chappell, "The Facebook Papers: What You Need to Know about the Trove of Insider Documents," NPR, October 25, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/10/25/1049015366/the-facebook-papers-what-you-need-to-know.
[65] ibid.

artists who inspire us to seek ways to rethinking the digital space, looking for ways to work within — and against — the attention economy.

SISTER SARAH-JOAN

I read your college essay. You clearly love Sacramento.

LADY BIRD

I do?

SISTER SARAH-JOAN

Well, you write about Sacramento so affectionately, and with such care.

LADY BIRD

I was just describing it.

SISTER SARAH-JOAN

It comes across as love.

LADY BIRD

Sure, I guess I pay attention.

SISTER SARAH-JOAN

Don’t you think maybe they are the same thing? Love and attention?

## 5. Resistance

### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I detailed my disillusionment with the current state of the digital environment, and its various attempts at keeping us entrapped, engaged, and exhausted. In this chapter I envision solutions for resisting the attention economy, asking how to disengage from systems specifically designed to be addictive. The internet has not just become exhausting, but inescapable. The attention economy positions users as both products and laborers, tasked with performing visibility, cultivating personal brands, and complying with data extraction in exchange for the promise of connection and relevance. Resisting this structure is, therefore, not merely an individual quest for self-discipline nor nostalgia for a pre-internet past, but about taking a critical standpoint towards the pervasive logic of digital platforms and their imperatives. Platform dependency is deeply embedded in both our personal and professional lives and defying the attention economy is about reclaiming agency over our time, attention, and creative expression.

In my pre-teenage years, books were the solution to boredom. Then, the internet came and solved the problem of boredom indefinitely. Now, as an adult, I long for boredom — having the privilege of doing just nothing. Today we see a glorification of busyness. The term "hustle culture"[66] was coined to describe this trend of constant productivity, ambition, and self-optimization. Being busy became a status symbol, something to wear as a badge of honor. The idea that success can be achieved through working long hours and being constantly productive is highly broadcasted through social media, which contributes to creating an environment of comparison, competition, and visibility.

In *24/7*, Jonathan Crary argues that in late capitalism even biological limits (like sleep) are obstacles to productivity.[67] And in 2017, Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, famously said that sleep is his biggest competitor.[68] In one of the rare instances where big executives from tech companies inadvertently reveal the unethical, underlying workings of their products, Hastings substantiates the idea that digital platforms such as Netflix act intentionally at entrapping us, with features like autoplay begging us to watch one more episode. In *Vita Contemplativa*,

[66] Carnegie.
[67] Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, 17.
[68] Alex Hern, "Netflix's Biggest Competitor? Sleep," The Guardian, April 18, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/apr/18/netflix-competitor-sleep-uber-facebook.

Byung-Chul Han argues that contemporary society abandoned contemplation in favor of action. He argues that "[w]ithout moments of pause or hesitation, acting deteriorates into blind action and reaction."[69] Digital platforms rely on that: they are constantly asking for our action and reaction, consuming our time, energy, and attention. We feel compelled to perform micro-transactions at any opportunity, to a point where we simply forget to be present and just exist. Within this scenario, we must find some other form of engagement other than action or reaction: inaction.

### 5.2 Doing Nothing

One of the most crucial and overlooked aspects of constant connectivity is the complete annihilation of time for doing nothing. If contemporary society views productivity and busyness as virtues, then we must acknowledge the constant pull towards keeping ourselves busy. In a hyperconnected world, we are constantly subjected to distractions — every notification we get symbolizes this constant demand for attention. Boredom, therefore, needs to be conquered: one must intentionally make space for it in one's life.

A few years ago, a thread went viral on Twitter (now X). In the post, professor at University of California – Davis, Manvir Singh, presented one study made in the 1970s and 1980s in which a group of anthropologists visited small-scale, non-industrial societies to observe how they allocated their time across different activities.[70] The researchers created about 60 categories of activities, which included hunting, cooking, child caring and, remarkably, doing nothing. This "doing nothing," according to them, differentiates from napping, chatting, or idleness caused by illness. In the Efé people, who lived mostly hunting and gathering in the Ituri Rainforest in Central Africa, the anthropologists discovered that the most common activity was doing nothing.[71]

[69] Byung-Chul Han and Daniel Steuer, *Vita Contemplativa: In Praise of Inactivity* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2024), 12.
[70] Manvir Singh, (@mnvrsngh), "In the 1970s & 80s, anthropologists working in small-scale, non-industrial societies fastidiously noted down what people were doing throughout the day. I've been exploring the data & am struck by one of the most popular activities: doing nothing," Twitter, April 4, 2022, 3:53 PM, https://x.com/mnvrsngh/status/1510978995269029888.
[71] Rahul Bhui, Maciej Chudek, and Joseph Henrich, "Work Time and Market Integration in the Original Affluent Society," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 44 (October 14, 2019): 22100–105, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1906196116.

The study found that, far away from Africa, the Machiguenga communities in Peru were also engaged in doing nothing.[72] In data collected in 1972 and 1973, idle time was the number one activity, while another study conducted on the same community in 1986 and 1987 found that doing nothing was among the top 3 main activities.[73] The same study also shows that across 8 diverse communities, "doing nothing" came in fourth place, only behind agricultural work, learning and teaching, and socializing. The study was conducted based on the hypothesis that work time has increased in industrial societies in the past two centuries, even though industrialization increases productivity. Regardless of that, individuals in industrial societies are believed to be working more hours than two centuries ago. In many subsistence-oriented societies, like the communities in Africa and Peru, despite the intrinsic hardships of their lifestyles, doing nothing takes up a fundamental part of their day, suggesting priorities different than ours.

The demand for being productive is deeply linked to industrial, capitalist societies. And Byung-Chul Han, in *The Burnout Society*, explains how this demand used to be external (from a boss, for example) and now is internalized in ourselves. According to him, we moved from a disciplinary society to an achievement society, in which the individual "[...] exploits itself — and it does so voluntarily, without external constraints:"[74]

> Excess work and performance escalate into auto-exploitation. This is more efficient than allo-exploitation, for the feeling of freedom attends it. The exploiter is simultaneously the exploited. Perpetrator and victim can no longer be distinguished. Such self-referentiality produces a paradoxical freedom that abruptly switches over into violence because of the compulsive structures dwelling within it. The psychic indispositions of achievement society are pathological manifestations of such a paradoxical freedom.[75]

[72] Bhui, Chudek and Henrich. "Work Time and Market Integration in the Original Affluent Society."
[73] ibid.
[74] Byung-Chul Han and Erik Butler. *The Burnout Society*, 10–11.
[75] ibid.

In *How to Do Nothing*, artist and author Jenny Odell criticizes the concept of productivity under a capitalistic mindset, prescribing "doing nothing" as a key component to resisting the attention economy:

> The point of doing nothing, as I define it, isn't to return to work refreshed and ready to be more productive, but rather to question what we currently perceive as productive. My argument is obviously anticapitalist, especially concerning technologies that encourage a capitalist perception of time, place, self, and community. It is also environmental and historical: I propose that rerouting and deepening one's attention to place will likely lead to awareness of one's participation in history and in a more-than-human community. From either a social or ecological perspective, the ultimate goal of "doing nothing" is to wrest our focus from the attention economy and replant it in the public, physical realm.[76]

Like myself, Odell is not against technology. For me, adopting a critical perception of technology derives precisely from a place of love and care, a legitimate response to the disillusionment with the web and its lost potential, a place we witnessed slowly deteriorating:

> But the villain here is not necessarily the Internet, or even the idea of social media; it is the invasive logic of *commercial* social media and its financial incentive to keep us in a profitable state of anxiety, envy, and distraction. It is furthermore the cult of individuality and personal branding that grow out of such platforms and affect the way we think about our offline selves and the places where we actually live.[77]

Doing nothing, in this sense, has nothing to do with passivity, compliance, apathy: on the contrary, doing nothing means combating the current understanding of productivity in a digital, capitalist system that prioritizes profit over wellbeing. It is about questioning our willingness to invest our scarcest resources — time and attention — in infrastructures that profit from the

[76] Odell, xii.
[77] ibid.

labor employed by their users in the form of content and engagement. It is about resisting the imperative to overstay in these platforms, to minimize their participation in our lives in favor of something less exploitative and more fulfilling.

Similarly, in the 1990s, Italian sociologist Domenico De Masi published *L'Ozio Creativo* — which can be loosely translated to "creative idleness." He details his dissatisfaction with the social understanding of work as a moral virtue, and how contemporary societies idolize productivity in detriment of rest and relaxation.[78] This state prescribed by him where working, learning, and playing are not separate compartments of life, but a fluid overlap, is called *creative idleness*.[79] Creative idleness, therefore, is not mere laziness, but freedom from rigid work schedules and to-do lists.

Creative and artistic labor goes far beyond merely crossing a list of tasks and following a linear trajectory — it involves a much broader exploration of skills, intentions, perceptions, risk-taking, and failure. While workers are not always able to determine the conditions of their work, oftentimes, whenever I am tasked with a design project which allows for more freedom, I try to apply those concepts into my practice. In *Altri Cannibali*, a project which I will discuss in the next chapter, I retroactively perceive my adoption of creative idleness — work and play are harmoniously combined to create an experimental artwork.

### 5.3 Airplane Mode

Opting out of the digital world altogether offers risks. Humans are social animals, and the ancestral need to feel included is appropriated by digital platforms, keeping us entrapped. Countless opportunities and work connections are formed with the help of social media platforms, to a point where the desire to be offline can be considered a luxury, a privilege not everyone can afford.

Humans long for connection. Above all else, as an immigrant, the internet offers me a window into the daily lives of the friends and family I left behind. Even if that contact is enacted through online personas and mediated through screens, catching glimpses of their everyday lives — either mundane moments or special occasions — makes me feel included and less isolated. At

[78] Domenico de Masi, Léa Manzi, and Maria Serena Palieri, *O Ócio Criativo* (Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2000).
[79] ibid.

best, it is faster and easier than engaging in a truly profound exchange. Where would I find the time to initiate (and maintain) a meaningful conversation with everyone I love? It is much easier to just check their 15-second Instagram story from my bed, as soon as I wake up or as I am about to go to sleep.

On the flipside, following strangers on the internet can contribute to feelings of alienation and isolation. In the contemporary context of social media networks, parasocial relations take a new dimension. The technical structures devised by digital platforms stimulate contact with strangers, offering snapshots into their highly curated lives. The current design of social networks encourages feelings of comparison, fueling scholars and writers to study and share the effects of smartphones and social media addiction both at an individual level, as well as collectively.

Since Jaron Lanier published *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, the topic of hyperconnectivity and the feelings of exhaustion and suspicion towards digital platforms has gained traction in mainstream media. In recent years, several outlets have published tips and guides for spending less time online, hinting at a broader, collective awareness about the feeling of exhaustion caused by hyperconnectivity, along with a desire from audiences to reclaim their time and attention. In 2025, The Guardian offered a step-by-step digital detox guide[80] called *Reclaim Your Brain*, sending subscribers weekly emails with techniques for disengaging with addictive digital technologies.

Because disconnecting drastically feels like an impossibility and knowing that social media platforms are designed to be addictive on purpose, it becomes even more important to develop a healthy relationship with them. When used actively and intentionally, social media can have positive impacts, deepening our connection with friends and strangers, and taking us to opportunities considered unthinkable. Understanding the underlying mechanics of social media platforms, acknowledging their business models and comprehending how they profit from extracting our data (and how crucial it is for them to entrap us) can provide a basis for a more conscious use of the technology. Moderation is key, and reclaiming the agency to log off is an important step at decentering digital platforms from the core of our existence. The time and

[80] "Reclaim Your Brain," The Guardian, accessed August 20, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/series/reclaim-your-brain.

energy we regain from using these platforms moderately can therefore be employed more intentionally elsewhere.

A short story, written by Kurt Vonnegut and published about two decades ago, offers some insights on the benefits of disconnection. In *I have become a Luddite*, Vonnegut describes a domestic scene in which he announces to his wife that he is going out to buy envelopes. Her reply is that he should not bother — after all, he can get "a thousand envelopes"[81] online, which can be quickly delivered. To that, he replies to her: "hush." From there, he describes an adventure through the streets of New York City entailing a multisensorial experience with other customers in a newsstand that sells magazines, lottery tickets, and stationery. The visual exuberance of that place prompts him to speculate about the lives of those people, wondering who they are, how they feel, or if anyone who has ever been to that newsstand has ever won the lottery. He then finally arrives home, having had "one hell of a good time."[82]

Similarly, I believe that the real, physical world is an endless source of inspiration and insight. The profusion of screens — in our workplace, in our homes, in our pockets — overwhelms and dulls two senses (sight and hearing) while flattening the other three. Through my artistic practice, I offer two possibilities: my refusal to adopt digital tools in all stages of the creative process may inspire other artists to rethink their production methods as well. Secondly, my artworks can provide reflection on audiences, who can then question their own reliance on smartphones and platform dependency.

### 5.4 Conclusion

On a personal level, deleting all social media profiles, disconnecting altogether from digital platforms, and living off-the-grid is an impossibility. The ubiquity of mobile internet creates new imperatives that force us to keep connected, to be reachable and visible. As the lines between physical life and digital life start to blur, work relations take place in the digital sphere, leading to opportunities that go far and beyond the web. Maintaining a digital presence becomes a pre-requisite for being considered for work-related opportunities, and remaining consistent and engaged maximizes chances for professional success.

[81] Kurt Vonnegut and Daniel Simon, "I Have Been Called a Luddite," essay, in *A Man Without a Country* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 55–64.
[82] ibid.

Despite these conditions, it is paramount that designers and artists devise new forms of resistance towards the imperatives of digital platforms within a hyperconnected culture. The quest for visibility can have a negative influence in creative production, as artists start to suffer interference from platform metrics, algorithmic curation, and virality. This leads to feelings of exhaustion, which can be combated through moderation in platform use, decreasing screen time and shifting our focus and attention towards physical ways of experience. With the saturation derived from our screen addiction, we can find opportunities for engaging in analog processes and physical outcomes that rely on tactile experiences, promoting a reflection on digital dependency and our obsession with our phones, and creating space for contemplation and reflection through the engagement of our multiple senses. Offline is the new frontier and turning airplane mode *on* even for a few minutes can provide the ailments against the diseases of digital saturation and dependency.

Considering all the constraints to resisting the attention economy, it is important to devise strategies that work best on an individual basis. In the next chapter, I discuss my artistic practice, showcasing the many ways in which constant connectivity can affect the creative process. I offer insights into different ways to approach design and typography in the digital environment, suggesting a perspective that decenters computers and graphical software as the sole tools of production, reclaiming analog process and physical materials as key components for resisting the attention economy — and the confines of a small smartphone screen.

## 6. My Way to Typography

### 6.1 Introduction

In 2015, while studying in the Graduate school of the Savannah College of Art and Design, I was particularly transformed by the Typographic module of my studies. Oriented by professor Sohee Kwon, we set out to work on typographic experiments for 10 weeks. After that, my understanding of what typography could be was deeply transformed, and my understanding of letterforms was changed, as I started to regard type as image. Letters as shapes that convey not only meaning but feeling. With the baggage I gathered in that short period, I changed my perspective on design and started to consider production possibilities outside the usual scope of computers and digital software — tools like Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator. Occasionally, when I am tasked with a project that offers some degree of creative freedom, my instinct is to escape from standard tools and conventional methodologies and seek out different ways to produce and portray meaning.

Figures 6 and 7. Experiments made by me in 2015 for the Typography module at the Savannah College of Art and Design Graphic Design Master of Fine Arts program.

This chapter references German designer Wolfgang Weingart's book *My Way to Typography*.[83] First published in 2000, it recounts his training in classic Swiss typography and design and showcases the many experiments he carried out since the 1960s. In this chapter, I discuss my artistic practice and detail my reasoning behind a few selected projects I worked on in recent years. Heavily anchored in typography and through the employment of experimental methodologies that decenter computers and graphical software from the creative process, my

[83] Wolfgang Weingart, *Weingart: Typography – My Way to Typography, a Retrospective Volume in Ten Sections* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2000).

practice explores analog processes and physical interaction in favor of typographical expression.

While engaging in experimental methods of production, which I have been doing periodically for the past decade, I notice two things: the first is how reliant designers have become to graphical software and digital tools within their creative process. The second thing is how different it feels to engage in something I don't quite master — the way I approach experimentalism in my practice is deeply dependent on me having little knowledge or expertise in the tools I set out to use. Experimenting with different techniques that decenter the computer from the creative process is itself an act of resistance, an attempt at countering speed and optimization and inviting failure, serendipity, observation, and reflection. Designing typographic illustrations using analog processes can be more laborious and complex, but among the many benefits is how it shifts the focus from the outcome, turning the process itself into the reward.

Published for the first time in 1932, *The Crystal Goblet, or Printing Should Be Invisible* by Beatrice Warde is considered a foundational essay that discusses the role of typography within books. According to her, typography should be neutral and not distract from the text:

> You have two goblets before you. One is of solid gold, wrought in the most exquisite patterns. The other is of crystal-clear glass, thin as a bubble, and as transparent. Pour and drink; and according to your choice of goblet, I shall know whether or not you are a connoisseur of wine. For if you have no feelings about wine one way or the other, you will want the sensation of drinking the stuff out of a vessel that may have cost thousands of pounds; but if you are a member of that vanishing tribe, the amateurs of fine vintages, you will choose the crystal, because everything about it is calculated to reveal rather than hide the beautiful thing which it was meant to contain.[84]

To Warde, typography must be invisible, serving as a transparent vessel for the ideas of the writer. To achieve that, the designer must possess a "humility of mind"[85] and get rid of any

[84] Beatrice Warde, "The Crystal Goblet or Printing Should Be Invisible," essay, in *The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography*, ed. Henry Jacob (London: The Sylvan Press, 1955), 11.
[85] ibid, 14.

element that can be considered an ornament, placing design and typography as neutral conveyors of meaning. In relation to the current context of the attention economy, Warde suggests that designers are responsible for managing attention. Similarly, in *How to Do Nothing*, Jenny Odell — who is also a visual artist — proposes an *ethics* of attention.

Despite me considering Warde's writings foundational and relevant, in my artistic practice I intend to question established notions and limits of typography. My work prompts connection at a primary level for its use of typography — which demands to be read. Furthermore, the way the text is visually represented adds a secondary level of information to that writing, creating meaning through typographical expression.

The placement of typography in public spaces is an attempt at creating a dialogue, sparking a thought without confrontation. My approach to physical space is discreet and often goes unnoticed, resembling a murmur more than a yell. Documenting such typographical interventions becomes the artistic act itself: seeing how people interact with or neglect them offers an immediate look at their reaction, something that social platforms, with their sharing features, cannot replicate.

In this chapter I will detail some works made by me since 2021. The common feature of these projects is the attempt at escaping from digital modes of production. In my poster for *Altri Cannibali*, I employed collage as a technique to construct the main visual identity, which is centered on typography. In *Fever Dream*, I composed an analogic typographical installation made from the placement of several surgical masks. And as designer at Budapest studio DE_FORM, I created two books which, after being published, were shortlisted for the Hungarian Book Design Awards in 2023.[86] These experiences provided the foundation for what was to become my masterwork at the Doctoral School of MKE: I created an illustrated book that showcases several different explorations on typography, all of which serve to illustrate key points of my dissertation. Furthermore, the knowledge I gained from designing those two books at DE_FORM in close collaboration with renowned Hungarian designers provided the foundation from which I felt comfortable building upon. The book *Airplane Mode* is a cohesive

[86] "Winners," Magyar Könyvtervezés, accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.magyarkonyvtervezes.hu/eng/winners?year=2023.

object that combines a critique towards hyperconnectivity and digital dependency in the attention economy, using the visual language of the early web to set the tone for the reader.

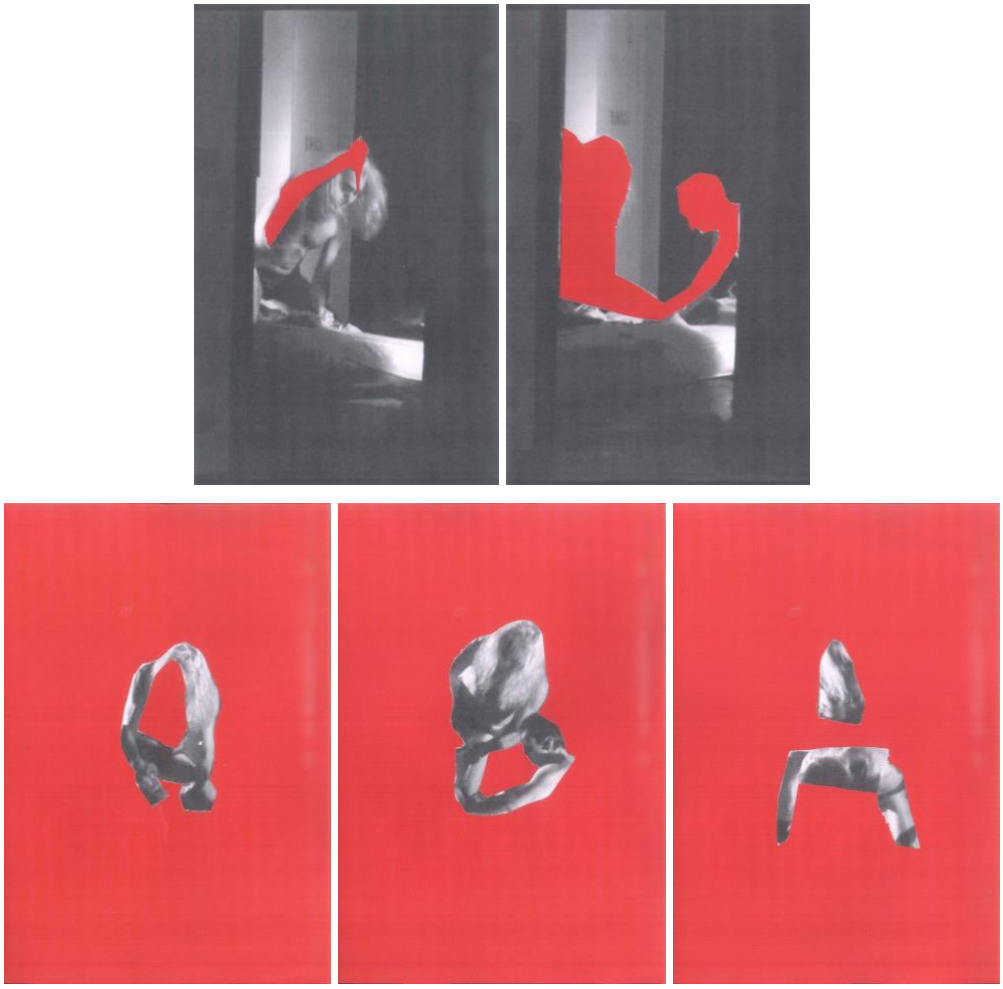
### 6.2 Engineered Serendipity

On a normal day in 2021, as I scrolled through social media, I came across an advertisement for a poster competition. Movie students from DFFB (Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie) in Berlin were offering an award for the best proposal of a poster for one of its student's films. Motivated by the cash prize, and excited about the creative freedom of the task, I accepted the challenge and set myself to creating something that excited me. My poster was not selected as the winner by the judges, but receiving an honorable mention — and compliments from the film director — was also satisfactory. To my surprise, a few days later the director of the film reached out to me via email, congratulating me for my work. Despite not getting the main prize, he asked to commission my poster to be used as the official artwork for the film.

After applying for the contest, I received a digital copy of the film to help me ground my work and understand the subject and tone to be adopted. Graphic design is, too, a means for promotion — in this case, it was an honor to employ it in favor of another form of art. From watching the film, I was fascinated by one specific scene which portrayed, in a still camera, the two main actors stabbing a mattress, suggesting their practice for a future assassination. That scene grabbed my attention, and as I followed my intuition, it became the starting point for creating the graphic language of the promotional material of the film.

As a narrative form of media, film directors deliberately use images and sounds to tell a story, and the stylistic choices employed by the director — photography, dialogue, pacing — are intentional and charged with meaning. My task was to interpret his vision, speculate on his intentions, and translate the essence of the film into another art form, graphic design. Captivated by the expressiveness of the actors' bodies, I took several screen shots of that one scene and went to a printshop to print several copies of these frames.

Unknowingly, I set out to apply Domenico de Masi's concept of creative idleness in this project: in a relaxed mood, much different from the usual tension that permeates many work environments such as advertising agencies or movie sets, I poured myself a glass of wine, grabbed a pair of scissors, sat on the floor of my flat, and started to cut out different shapes from those prints, using the actors' bodies to create letterforms.



Figures 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. Cut-outs made from screen shots of the film *Altri Cannibali* (2021, directed by Francesco Sossai.)

Despite the analog nature of this process, ironically this opportunity came across to me because of the algorithm. I was shown the ad for the poster competition precisely because the algorithm knows me and guessed it would pique my interest. The current architecture of the web, especially social media platforms, favors a type of serendipity which is anchored on algorithmic curation and micro-targeting. The algorithm learns about our behaviors and preferences, which explains how this connection came to be. On the flipside, the organizers of the contest could rely on the digital platform to promote their award, trusting that their investment in advertising would be well spent, targeted to a relevant audience. This engineered serendipity is one of the most irresistible features of the current web, and it explains why we keep coming back to it for more.

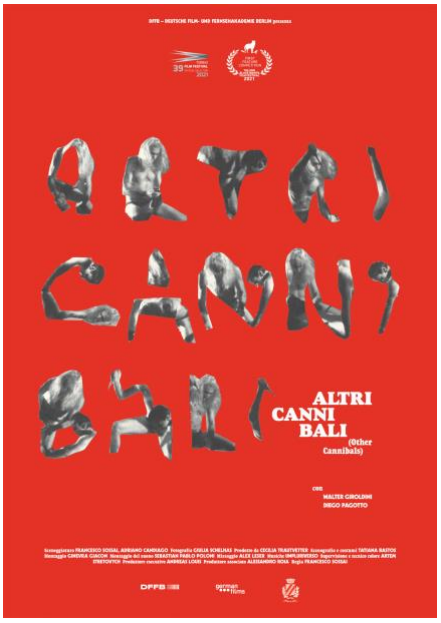



Figure 13. Final poster of *Altri Cannibali* (2021, directed by Francesco Sossai.)


Figure 14. Booklet designed for *Altri Cannibali* (2021, directed by Francesco Sossai.)

### 6.3 Decontextualization and Saturation

Fresh out of a devastating pandemic, the international students at the Doctoral School of MKE were invited by Professor Tünde Varga to organize an exhibition, the second installment of her project *Parallel Hungary*. To me, it was an opportunity to showcase one of my typographical experiments in a gallery setting, something I am not particularly familiar with.

The profound impact caused by the pandemic was exacerbated by hyperconnectivity — as the measures adopted to halter the spread of the virus (such as social distancing) made us turn to digital devices as a remedy for social isolation and anxiety. Ironically, hyperconnectivity increases this anxiety by exposing us to an unlimited amount of bad news. The term coined to describe this condition — doomscrolling[87] — perfectly encapsulates this push-and-pull effect: the more you scroll, the more you get exposed to catastrophes.


Figure 15. *Fever dream* (2021.)

Interestingly, as the pandemic rolled out, the more we became exposed to a pandemic's multidimensional aspect: not only a biological occurrence, it morphed into a cultural phenomenon and political event. The device that shielded us from catching (and spreading) the virus became a symbol, an object charged with meaning and affection. Making use of this object as a building block, I created a typographical illustration to reflect that period. "Fever dream" describes one of covid's symptoms; but it also describes the surrealness, dread, and disbelief felt by those who lived through one of the most traumatic and life-changing events of our lifetimes.

[87] Merriam-Webster, s.v. "Doomscroll," accessed May 18, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/doomscroll.

### 6.4 Books

The internet was my entryway to graphic design. It was the web that sparked my interest and enticed my sensibility to forms, colors, shapes, and typefaces. Later, when I started studying graphic design in college, my perspective was naturally enlarged, mostly due to being exposed to a wide array of works that asserted the potential of design in creating meaning and generating response. While as a pre-teenager my afternoons were spent reading suspense novels, in college my favorite hangout spot after class was this enormous, recently opened bookstore, located near my university. In the first decade of the 21st century, when digital connectivity was not nearly as pervasive as it is today, the ongoing object of scrutiny was the book. Thanks to the technological innovations happening at the time with e-readers (such as Amazon Kindle and Apple's iPad), the overarching fear was that physical books would disappear. Because e-readers were portable, easy to use, and certainly a novelty, this anxiety was justified.

Spoiler alert: books didn't disappear. After many years, it is indisputable that physical books are a shield to hyperconnectivity: they are a refuge from screens and the inevitable distractions embedded in digital gadgets. When graphic design is intelligently applied to a physical book, it can enrich the reader's experience, providing new layers of meaning and encouraging imagination and reflection. In 2015, at the Savannah College of Art and Design, in another one of Professor Sohee Kwon's classes, we were tasked with redesigning an existing book, the awarded fiction novel *Einstein's Dreams* by Alan Lightman. But instead of prescribing a clear layout that followed tradition and established notions of "good book design," we were encouraged to rethink and explore notions of clarity, legibility, and readability. We used the short stories as inspiration, moving it freely across pages, instilling our own artistic vision to rethink a well-established medium. The result, of course, is not a mere redesign, but an entirely new proposal. If a well-written book can transport the reader to a different time and place, a well-designed book can enhance that journey, adding more depth and wonder to the experience.

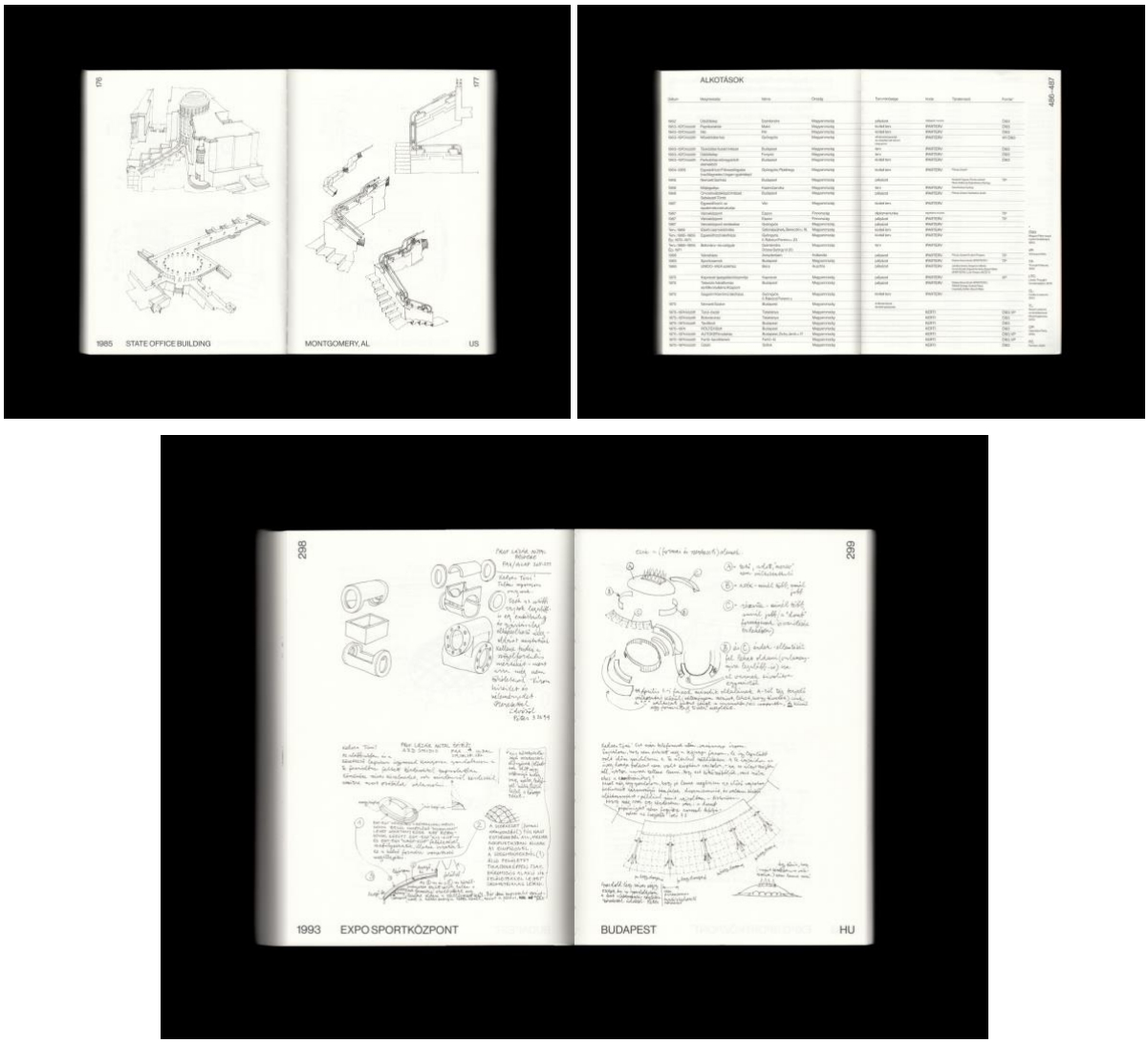
After moving to Budapest in 2019 to begin my doctoral studies, I started my research into the graphic design industry in Hungary and quickly came across the work of DE_FORM, a graphic design studio that produces visually striking work for (and with) artists and professionals of the cultural sector. Three years later they opened a position for graphic designer, and I was fortunate enough to get in. During my time there, I worked on an enormous variety of projects, but two of them are particularly relevant within the scope of this dissertation.


Figures 16, 17, 18 and 19. Cover and spreads from *Schools and museums of modern design in Transylvania around 1900*, written by Prof. Miklós Székely as his doctoral dissertation. Typesetting by János Hóllos and designed by me, while working at DE_FORM. Published in 2023.

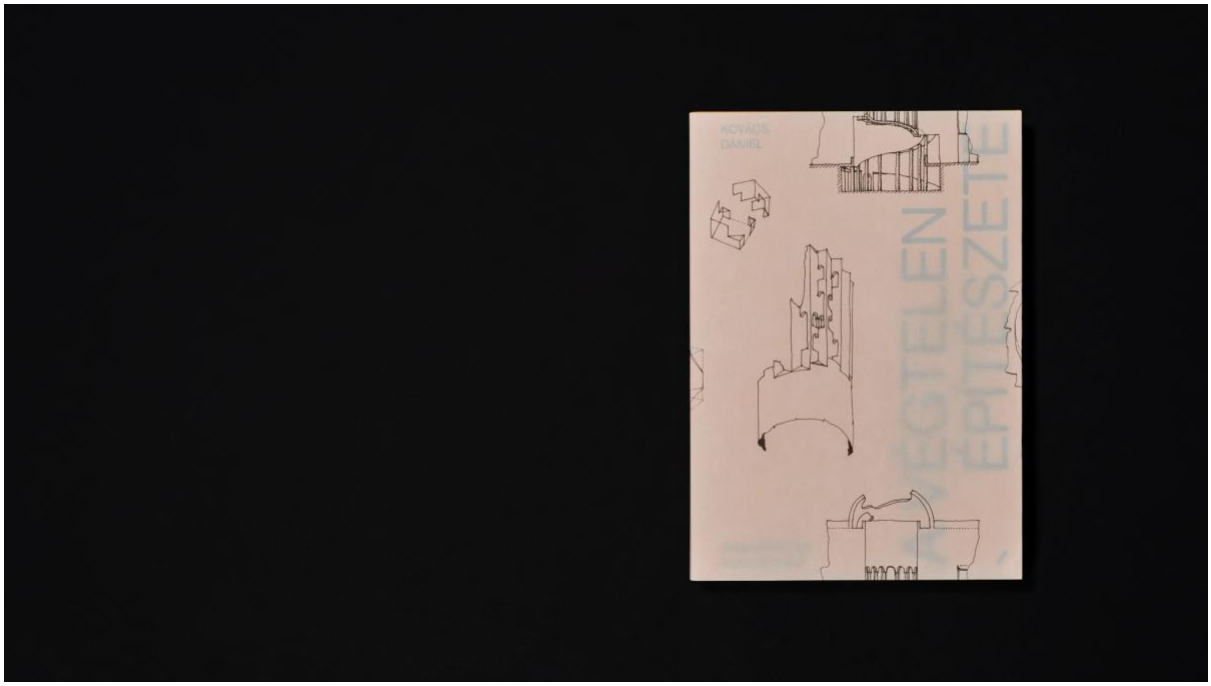
In 2022, Professor Miklós Székely reached out, commissioning us to transform his doctoral dissertation into a book. Titled *Schools and Museums of Modern Design in Transylvania Around 1900*, I set out to explore different ways to visually translate the richness and uniqueness of the subject. Using the artifacts discussed in the dissertation as inspiration, I transposed those images throughout the cover and chapter openings and selected a fresh color palette to reframe those objects as building blocks within a larger context of industrial design, proudly showcasing their inventiveness through a careful investigation of form, history, and influence. After creating the graphic design of the book, selecting colors, typefaces, and chapter openings, we invited János Holló, a seasoned typesetter, to work on the inner pages. Mr. Holló formatted the long-form text into the design parameters ascribed by me. It was an unprecedented opportunity to delegate the more laborious part of the process to someone experienced who could then apply and validate my design, transforming this into a fruitful collaboration that resulted in visually striking, awarded work.

Later, Melinda Mártonffy, chief editor of ARTEM/BOOKS, a Budapest-based publisher specialized in art books, invited us to devise the design for her new project: a monograph for Dr. Péter Magyar, a Hungarian-born architect with an extensive career as a professor in Africa

and the United States. Titled *A Végtelen Építészete* (*The Architecture of Infinity*), it showcases numerous sketches made by Dr. Magyar since the 1960s. These drawings, though very simple and straightforward, carry beautifully his unique way of thinking using only black ink on white paper. To represent the architect's creative freedom and defiance of conventional shapes, we opted for a translucent paper that symbolizes this sense of depth and autonomy.




Figures 20, 21 and 22. Spreads from *A Végtelen Építészete*, written by Dániel Kovács and designed by me in collaboration with other team members at DE_FORM, 2023.





Figures 23 and 24. Cover and dust jacket from *A Végtelen Építészete*, written by Dániel Kovács and designed by me in collaboration with other team members at DE_FORM, 2023.

Both books were shortlisted for the Hungarian Book Design Awards 2023, demonstrating that the successful employment of graphic design can elevate the work of others — writers, art historians, architects (or even film directors in the case of *Altri Cannibali*.) The initiative of awarding the most visually striking books published in Hungary is an incentive towards more intentional ways of making books, hinting at the importance of keeping this traditional medium alive and relevant.

### 6.5 Airplane Mode

After working on these two books, I became increasingly more comfortable with the medium. Making a book as my masterpiece was the more suitable choice to convey both my research findings and my artistic process. Expanding on Beatrice Warde's understanding of design as a way to manage attention, I wanted to carefully create a narrative that unraveled slowly, allowing the reader to visualize the context of my research, to get a grasp of my critical standpoint towards digital technologies, and to delight in a physical object that embodies a refusal to participate in these attention-extracting technologies that position the user as prey to be exploited and abused.

Inspired by the visual language of the internet, it borrows from its exuberance, incongruence, immediacy, and interactivity. The text columns were inspired by the iPhone and have roughly the same size, as to recollect the experience of reading from a cell phone. Using a gridded layout of modules that measure 5 mm, here I position these squares as the building blocks of the page, similarly to what pixels are to a screen. From there, all the other elements presented within the pages follow a structure that serves as a common thread that ties everything — text, analog illustrations, visual motifs — together.

The name *Airplane Mode* is an appropriation of the iPhone feature that disables internet connection. When cell phones were first introduced, airline companies started to instruct passengers to turn off their devices for the duration of their flight, as to avoid interference with the communication systems used by pilots to communicate with air traffic controllers. After iPhones were introduced, Apple devised a way to temporarily disable this interference while still allowing access to other features of the device, such as games or music players. Since then, airplane mode hasn't been restricted only to the airspace: activating airplane mode is a tactic used by those who have a deadline to meet or a task to finish, disabling all the distractive features like notifications, allowing for focus and intentionality. Considering the pervasiveness and inescapability of the digital world, turning on airplane mode is one of the few resources at our disposal for combating the attention economy and its various demands.

In a context of digital saturation, I consider physical books an antidote to the flattening, passive, and extractive nature of digital platforms. By using the lexicon of these platforms, I decontextualize their messages to expose how stark and coercive they are, placing typography as a means for expression and reflection. If the attention economy saturates our cognition and

screams for our attention, then engaging with analog modes of production, a long-format medium, and a platform-unfriendly format are a sigh of relief, a friendly invitation for a more grounded presence.

### 6.6 The Illustrations

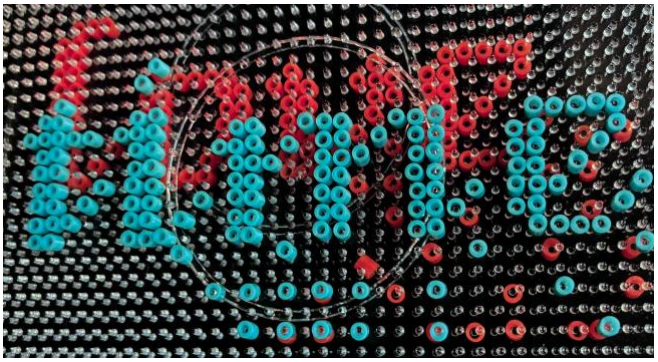
#### 6.6.1 There's No One New Around You

About a decade ago, single and living in a relatively small city, I was using relationship app Tinder to chat with strangers and possibly meet new people. On Tinder, you create your profile, add a few pictures and fill in some answers to be displayed to others based on their geolocation and preferences. On the other hand, you get presented to the profiles of other people in the same location, based on your own preferences. Then, you swipe left or right — left means you are not interested, right means you're interested. If both of you swipe right, that's a match: you get a notification and can access that person's contact information, where either one of you can start a conversation. After swiping left and right endlessly, I ran out of options and was stunned by a rather pessimistic message: *There's no one new around you*. In retrospect, that moment was probably the starting point of this dissertation. This situation exemplifies one of the many true-and-tested techniques to keep us engaged: on digital platforms, "drip feed" means releasing content, updates, or rewards in small, gradual installments instead of all at once, as a way to keep us coming back. I did come back, but eventually got tired of having my romantic life subjected to the parameters of an extractive platform.

### 6.6.2 Timelove

Inspired by one of my favorite dialogues in the film *Lady Bird* (directed by Greta Gerwig), this was my attempt at illustrating two words — time and love — and combining them to create a composition in which they visually blend together. Stunned by one sensitive dialogue of the film, I reflected on the notion that attention is a form of love; furthermore, it is interesting to see how each language approaches the notion of attention. In English, you *pay* attention, while in Portuguese you *enable* it.

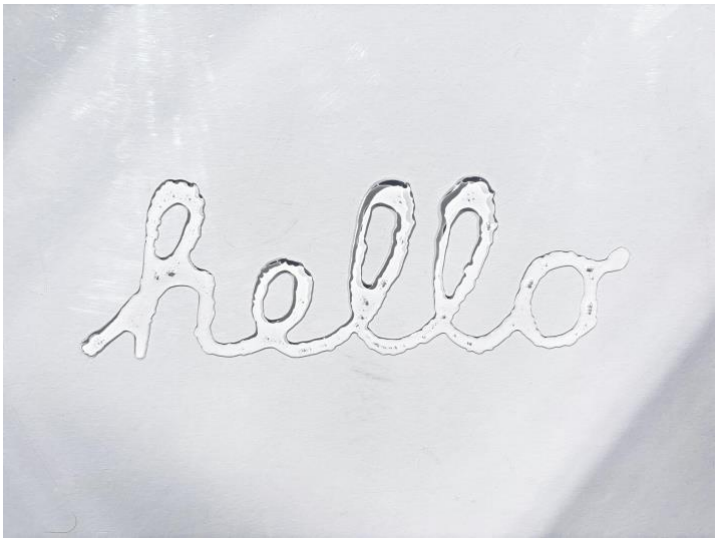
We are what we do, and what we choose to pay attention to may offer insights into who we are, what we like, and who we want to be. To visually interpret the suggestion that time and love are two sides of the same coin, I constructed the words *love* and *time* using colored beads over a transparent base, which allowed for analog experimentations of juxtaposition and interaction, while also allowing for quick explorations of image capturing using a portable iPhone camera pointed at different angles. The shapes of the letters, while constructed using physical materials, resemble the pixelated look of the early web.



### 6.6.3 Hello

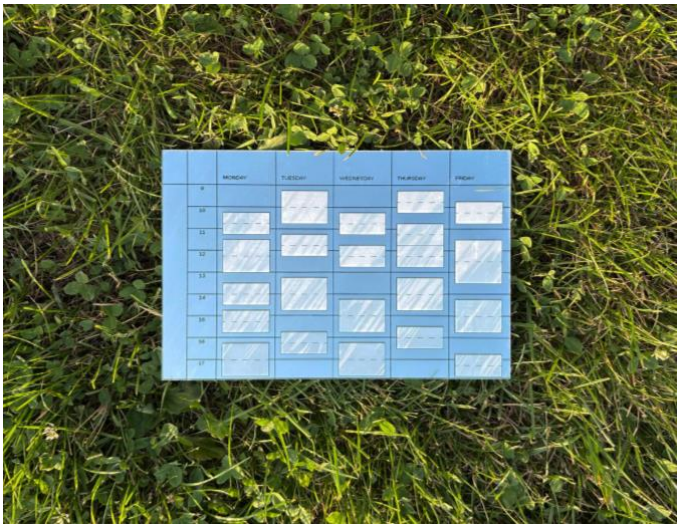
When the Macintosh was first release in 1984, its interface displayed a simple word which would later become iconic: not for its depth or erudition, but for how it looks. In the decades that followed, the look of the message was constantly refined, reaching a form that tries to look organic while still holding that geometric precision.

To counteract that, I set out to design myself the same word, by hand, testing different materials and surfaces to devise new perceptions and new meanings. Once I achieved the desired appearance after testing a composition using transparent glue, I placed it over a transparent background, which then was photographed over a white paper near direct sunlight coming from a window nearby. I wanted to give it the appearance of glass, hinting at the material that composes the screens we much look at. Afterwards, I took that composition to the park to photograph its interaction with elements of nature, creating an interesting contrast between digital and physical, natural and artificial, human and computer.



### 6.6.4. No I in Teams

This illustration was constructed based on the design of the calendar view of Microsoft Teams, the infamous tool for work-related tasks that became popular during the pandemic. The pandemic ended, but its byproducts lingered way past that. On Teams, time — which is subjective and relative — gets a visual treatment that reconfigures its character. A workday is divided into 15-minute slots, evidencing the contemporary understanding of what productivity looks like. Digital platforms are not neutral products; they are rather instilled with the ideologies of their financiers, and that perception is transmitted to everyone who uses them, whether voluntarily or not. This understanding of time as a vacuum to be filled by commitments leaves little time for self-reflection.



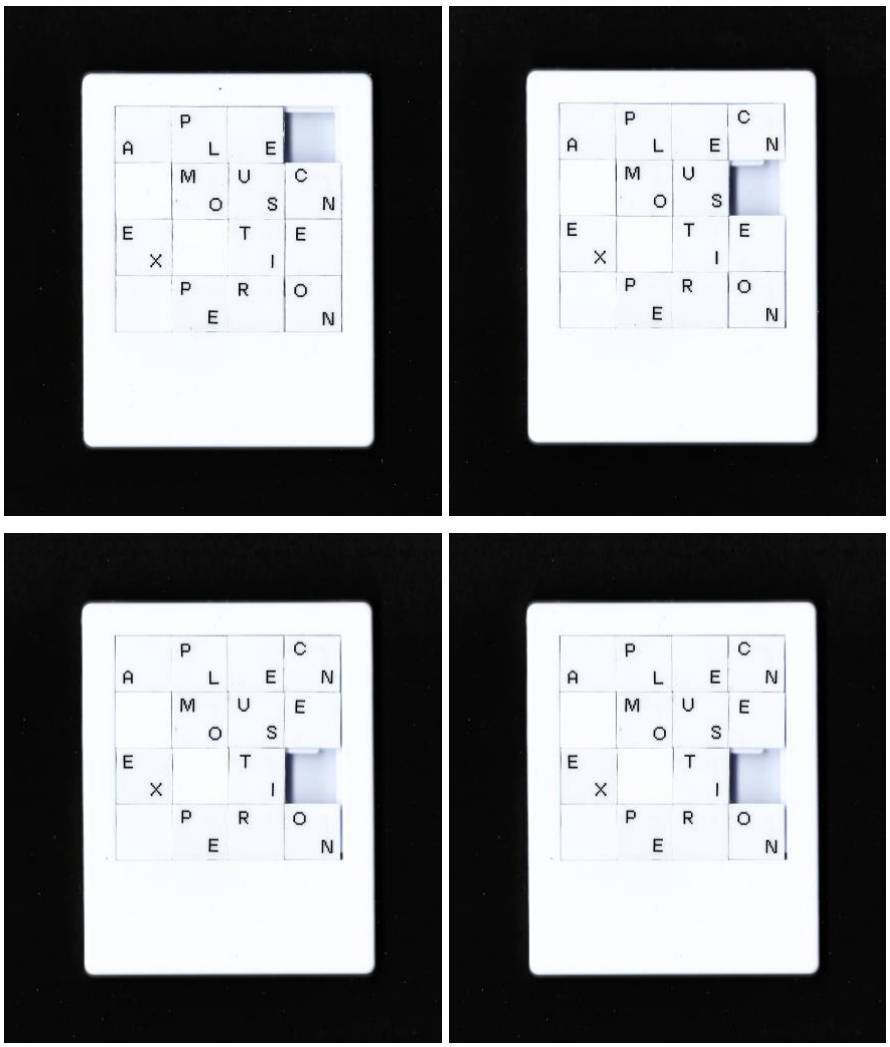
### 6.6.5 Make Your Day

Subverting the original slogan for social video sharing platform TikTok, here I propose an alternative way to “make your day” that does not involve engaging with an attention-grabbing platform designed to exploit us. To address the impulse to throw one’s phone away, I imprinted the slogan on a thin glass, using a pixelated typeface inspired by the early web, and imagined different ways to capture the visual of a broken phone screen. The result is hardly legible, but the expressiveness of the composition conveys resistance and dissent.

### 6.6.6 Motion Experience a Plus

Digital platforms have enabled the publication and sharing of short-format videos. Because the contemporary digital arena is filled with motion content, there is a higher demand for designers to possess motion design skills. Oftentimes I have found job postings that list, under the requirements, all the usual expected skills of a graphic designer, but add “motion experience a plus,” indicating a broader shift towards more dynamic forms of image-making.

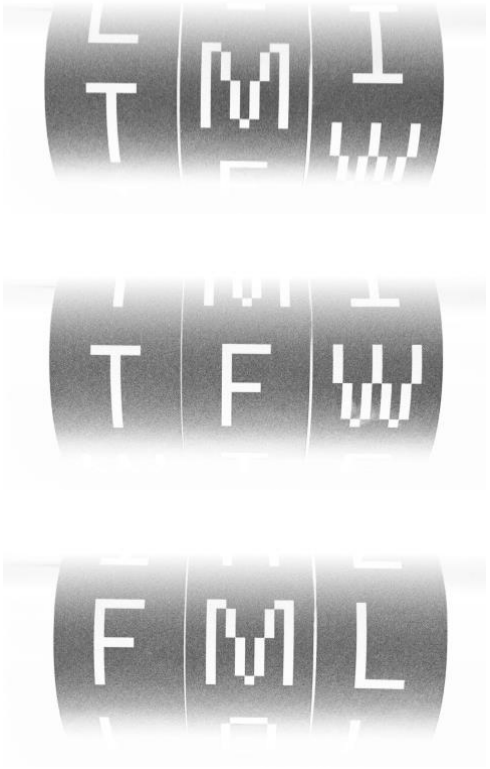
As a playful commentary on this ever-increasing list of expectations for laborers, I set out to compose a typographic illustration that uses a jigsaw puzzle as its surface, allowing for a playful and analog manipulation of letters which generates different typographic compositions, hinting at the overwhelm and strain caused by the demands of a challenging job market.



### 6.6.7 TMI

Similarly to the previous illustration, which is anchored on the creation of modular letterforms that can be physically manipulated to generate different meanings, I was drawn to the metaphor of the smartphone as a slot machine. Both are addictive and demand our constant interaction, ultimately leaving us drained.

The letters have been printed on three different cylinders which can create different acronyms of popular internet expressions, such as FML, TFW, TMI. In an online context, TMI is used to tell the other person that they shared “too much information,” something to be said jokingly when someone becomes too vulnerable or comfortable sharing a bit *too much*. Similarly, in the quest for online visibility and relevance, users may feel comfortable sharing too many personal details to a broad audience of strangers, which is an unbalanced equation that exposes how digital platforms rely on the users’ subjectivities for profit. Furthermore, the digital environment, with its abundance of information, saturation, and noise, leave us drained for how much — too much — energy and attention it pulls from us.



### 6.6.8 Live, Laugh, Love

Originally inspired by a 1904 poem by Bessie Anderson Stanley[88] which says "He has achieved success / who has lived well, / laughed often, and loved much", "live, laugh, love" has become a popular catchphrase[89] both in the digital and physical worlds, one that is often associated with the shallowness and pushiness of short-form content made to be shared abundantly precisely because of its blandness.

Made as a collage from used receipts folded against black paper, here I suggest how these three actions — to live, to laugh, and to love — are inevitably tied to financial transactions, as we move within the confines of a capitalistic system.


[88] Brie Dyas, "This Is the Origin of 'Live, Laugh, Love,'" House Beautiful, accessed August 22, 2025, https://www.housebeautiful.com/lifestyle/a7206/where-did-live-love-laugh-come-from/.
[89] "Live Laugh Love," Know Your Meme, March 28, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/live-laugh-love.

### 6.6.9 Paywall

Countering the original ethos of the web, as an open space of free navigation and information, some websites (especially news outlets) started to adopt paywalls to their sites: you are usually allowed to visit only a few articles per month before receiving a message, which usually follows the lines of "You have reached your limit. To continue navigating, please buy a subscription."

This feature, which became increasingly popular, has become particularly scrutinized during the pandemic, as audiences were skeptical of governments and wanted to check multiple sources of information in search for answers and comfort. Here, I recontextualize the message, using natural elements as background, suggesting a different interpretation that speaks to an overall exhaustion with hyperconnectivity.


### 6.7 Conclusion

Hyperconnectivity and digital dependency transform the world in more ways than we tend to account for. After experiencing the restrictions of a pandemic and the complexities of being an immigrant, the topic of digital reliance has taken different shapes and dimensions. Concerns of our dependency on digital tools — and the byproducts created by the "always-on" mindset — gained traction, going from a niche topic to a much broader conversation, with media outlets and writers detailing the effect that these tools have in our cognition, emotional wellbeing, and their political interference in everyday life.

The costs of relinquishing digital use are numerous, therefore escaping entirely from the web is an impossibility. However, one must use digital platforms with intention, otherwise they might fall prey to the tactics used to keep us engaged and addicted. Overusing social media platforms can influence artistic production as artists are influenced by platform metrics, algorithmic curation, and web optimization. Thus, restricting the use of digital platforms to a minimum is fundamental.

However, because the effects of the attention economy are extensive and are manifested collectively, thinking in individual terms might not be enough. As an artist, I intend to reflect on hyperconnectivity in two dimensions: first, I encourage to resist the pervasiveness of digital modes of production and presentation, opting for experimental methodologies, analog materials, and tactile experiences. Secondly, I propose a reflection on audiences, by decontextualizing the messages conveyed in digital platforms, and recontextualizing them in physical spaces.

Furthermore, as the awareness of the effects caused by the attention economy in our cognition, behavior, and emotion gain more traction, hopefully the implications and costs of living within this system begin to be acknowledged by audiences, who can then start to make more informed and intentional decisions regarding the use their most scarce resources — time and attention. Being a designer and artist means understanding the underlying dynamics and economic forces that shape our (physical and digital) realities, and our sensibility and skill can encourage audiences to reflect upon and escape the current demands placed by a system meant to exploit and exhaust.

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