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GRAPHIC DESIGN

PRACTICE & EDUCATION

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CHAPTER 1

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## The Whitney Clothesline

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Z banged his hand against the window he'd just been peering out of. *"Why am I more inspired by that, than by anything in here?"* I looked through not noticing anything unusual. Just a view of the backyards of upper-east-side townhouses: Patio chairs, gardens, and a few garbage cans.

We were at the Whitney Museum of Art, on the third floor of an exhibit that extended, for lack of space, into what seemed to be a maintenance area. The window here wasn't one of the odd shaped ones the Whitney is so known for. It was just a plain old right-angled one normally hidden from the public.

But then I saw what got Z going. It wasn't part of the Whitney's collection. Stretched across one of the yards to the second floor of the opposite townhouse was a clothesline full of some neighbor's laundry.

In this context, the clothesline really did look captivating. I wanted to photograph it and wished I hadn't left my camera downstairs at the coat check. Each article of clothing flapped shamelessly against the rigid, brutal form of the museum. Shapes that twisted in knots would suddenly fill, ballooning with invisible air. Familiar lines that said sock, T-shirt and slip morphed into abstraction before returning to their original form.

I was drawn back outside wanting to know who hung those clothes. *Were they members of the museum? Was the flapping sound comforting to hear? Could New York City air make the clothes smell better than the artificial clothes-dryer scents like Downy or Bounce?*

Then Z continued to answer his own question. Raising the level of his voice a bit higher for effect he said, *"Because it's not trying to be anything."*

I was secretly hoping no one heard him. A hanging clothesline isn't acknowledged as being more inspiring than the great works of art hanging on the walls around us. Z might have been misunderstood as someone uninformed, but Z wasn't uninformed. I knew this because I spoke his dialect from the land of graphic design. I knew exactly what he was getting at. Outside, in a neighbor's backyard, sat a poetic example of "the everyday." It effortlessly blended life and art, and was as deep as anyone wanted it to be.

It's as if the clothesline was metaphorically available for meaning to be pinned to it, each viewer as a potential author in a democratic kind of art. The clothesline seemed innocent of any intention other than reeling out a week's worth of freshly washed clothing. But, underneath that layer of utility, it begged the viewer for meaning to be assigned.

As Z said, "It wasn't trying to be anything." It was nice that way; like a blank canvas – ready, waiting, and full of possibility. For Z, the clothesline might have inspired a brochure design that had a linear, but flexible grid, or a down-to-earth approach that connected better with the reader. For me it brought back childhood memories of my grandmother hanging her white blummers on our backyard clothesline, the wooden clothespins held in her mouth like teeth.

The great protagonist of museums, Marcel Duchamp, would have been beaming that day at the Whitney. He's the artist that taught us to look closer at the objects that surround us in our everyday life. The urinal he submitted in 1917 to the "Society of Independent Artists," of which he himself was director, was an ordinary plumbing fixture. Flipped upside down, entitled Fountain, and signed "R. Mutt," it was promptly rejected by the committee, but succeeded in turning the art world on its head. You could say that he "flushed out" the western world's notions of what art was.

But of course Fountain's now part of the museum circuit – it's been assimilated by the Borg. I'd be willing to bet that most people understand it as an objet d'art rather than as a concept. That's why the whole clothesline experience was inspiring. It beautifully reconfirmed the Duchampian idea, yet it wasn't "set up" to do so.

Being "set up" could be the problem Z had with the museum. Paintings and photos are hung next to their meanings; legitimized by frames and signatures, validated by catalogs and past exhibits, and basically pre-chewed by those who know. All this readily digested by museum-goers hungry for art and culture. In this situation art gets defined as a collection of proper nouns rather than active verbs. The play aspect of discovery, so crucial to inspiration, is eliminated; relegated as a variable and designed out of major museums and exhibits.

Z hates overly designed "anything." I once heard him complain that his girlfriend wanted him to buy one of those new Volkswagon Bugs, but that he talked her out of it. He just couldn't see himself in it and was almost embarrassed by it. But Z's a graphic designer and teacher, so why wouldn't he have wanted to support a product that's been created by fellow designers? It could have been his weariness of an over-advertised car; and him just a cog in the wheel of a marketing campaign. Or maybe he felt that the car was over-styled, the driver too much like a seated prop in a photo shoot.

But I think the rejection was based on the fact that everyone likes the car for the same reasons, and that made it too easy and too boring. Z wants to find the qualities of a car on his own which usually turns out to be a 1960s Ford truck. The odd lines of the fender and the monotoned am-radio embedded in its dash board aren't big selling points, but the quirky and odd form stands out in need of love. There's lots of nostalgia associated for sure, but mostly the truck's seen as an underdog with a faded ad campaign. Its personality is

humanized and loved without any expectation, the union less like an arranged marriage. Maybe that was Z's problem with the museum – that he found it to be more like a Volkswagon Bug than an old Ford truck.

I personally find it strange that the Whitney window wasn't covered in scrim as the odd shaped ones were. Ultra-violet rays might have easily seeped onto a canvas, fading even the toughest pigment. Plus, it detracted focus from the exhibit – look what happened with Z. It could be that the Whitney enjoyed the clothesline, and allowed for a temporary viewing of it to be framed and magnified. But then again, the window might have simply been an oversight on the museum's part, and the clothesline a symbolic statement of a neighborhood feud along the lines of "eat my shorts."

In any case, the window's gone now, sheetrocked over. You won't find it. And any view of the clothesline from the street is blocked by the height of the townhouses. Still, the whole scene was there once, I swear.