

1-4. Constant and variation: typographic treatment is consistent but layout is varied. Here are two print advertisements and two billboards for St. Raphaël Quinquina. Designed in 1957, this is one of the earliest examples of a kinetic mark. Design firm: Atelier Charles Loupot, Paris; designer: Charles Loupot.

# Kinetic Identity

By Chuck Byrne

*The distillation process in ID programs may have gone too far, resulting in symbols that can stand for anything. The author suggests a different approach.*

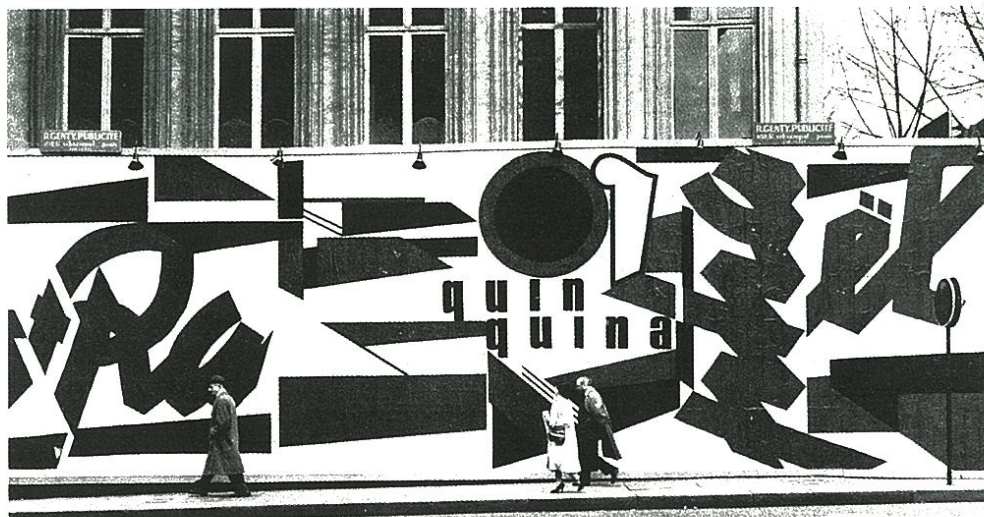
When the mark or identity for a corporate ID program is designed, the goal is to distill the meaning and purpose of the client's business to its purest visual form. The simpler it is, the better it is, or so it would seem.

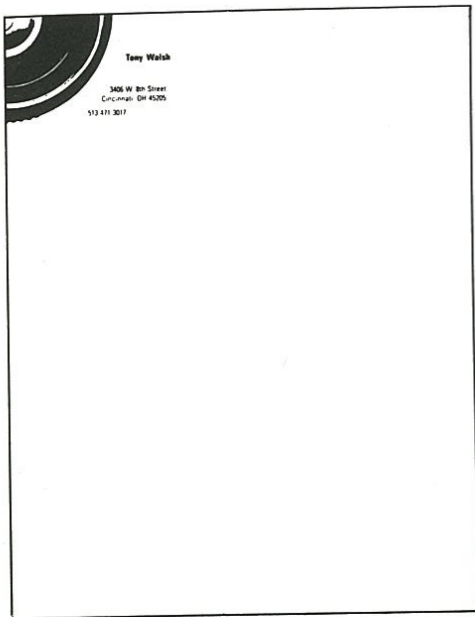
About ten years ago I noticed that this constant distillation was beginning to result in everything looking pretty much the same. What was happening was that, along with the large corporations, everybody from the corner flower shop to the neighborhood butcher was being visually equipped—manual included—for the Fortune 500. Somewhere along the way, designers were forgetting the importance of choosing an appropriate direction for the client, one offering the best opportunity for communications, as well as identification.

Common sense, it seems to me, precludes this distillation process which constantly leads to graphic symbols from always being the proper solution. The process of distilling information is becoming one of simply discarding information. Unfortunately, two black dots in a circle can stand for anything from a restaurant specializing in meatballs to invitro fertilization. Graphic designers might be creating more communications problems for the client than they are solving.

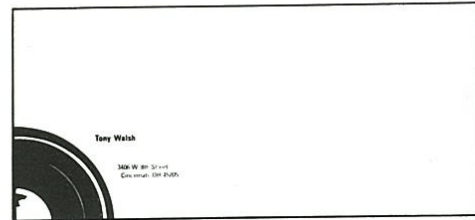
Fortunately, we have recently begun to see a renewed interest in older means of visual identity. Photography and illustration, as well as the venerable logotype, are again taking their rightful places in the graphic designer's bag of tricks. At the same time, ideographic and pictographic graphics seem to have become more informative and descriptive.

Along with the change in attitude toward these forms, a wonderful way of

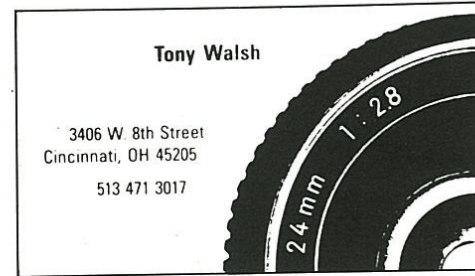




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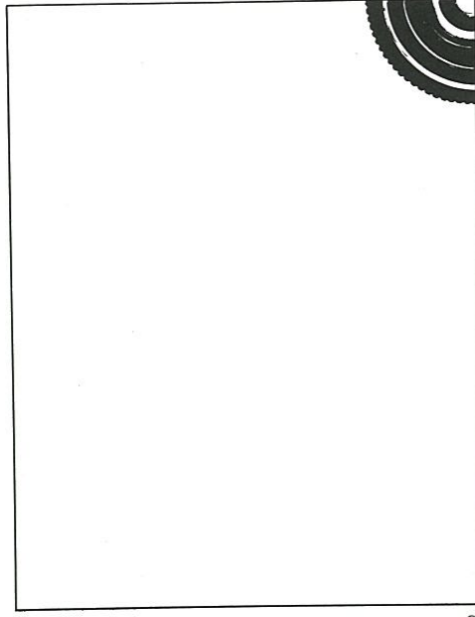
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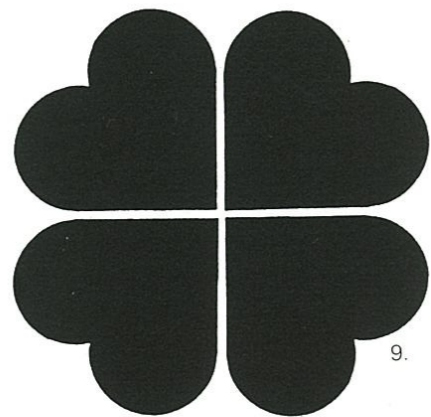
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**5-8.** Component: several different components work together to make a complete system. Shown are first and second sheet of stationery, envelope and business card for photographer Tony Walsh. Design firm: Colophon; designers: Chuck Byrne, Laura Jones.

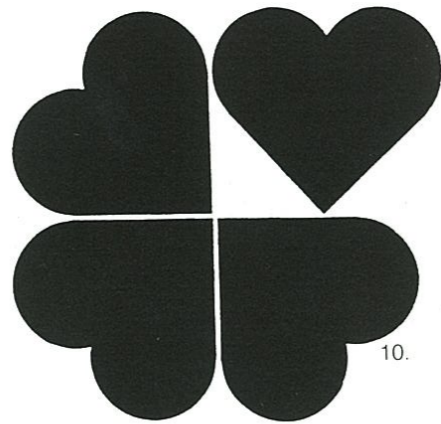
**9-10.** Synergistic: identifiable, independent graphic elements that when combined produce a reaction of which individually they are incapable. This is a proposal for a symbol for Appleton Medical Center with variation showing use for a subdivision of the facility, such as an outpatient clinic. Design firm: Colophon; designers: Chuck Byrne, Karen Reed.



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presenting them has appeared. Rather than simply developing identity programs with the mark used in a static fashion, designers are now using these same forms kinetically.

The word "kinetic" here implies the motion or interaction created by an obvious, planned change within a visual system. Simply, it is the useful, rather than destructive, use of change within an identity program. Ideally, those changes are better able to communicate what the client is about.

A few years ago, my studio was working on an identity program that involved a changing relationship between the elements used in the mark. The designers in the neighboring studio, Robert Probst and Heinz Schenker, saw what my colleague Michael Overton and I were doing and pronounced it to be kinetic. Schenker had even developed a mark for a French pharmaceutical firm (Figs. 55-58) in 1963 that was kinetic, he proudly announced.

Although there had been a popular art movement in the '60s and '70s identified as kinetic, this was the first time I had heard the term used in conjunction with graphic design.

Schenker and Probst assured me that, like everything else good in graphic design, the concept was invented in Switzerland, where both of them had studied.

In this case, they appear to have been nearly correct. Although he does not use the term kinetic, the Swiss designer Karl Gerstner published a small book in 1964, with a second edition in 1968, in which he displays and provides the theoretical underpinnings for several identity programs that use constantly changing elements (*Designing Programmes*, Teufen AR, Arthur Niggli). Previously, one of Gerstner's programs, Boîte à Musique, and an earlier one by the late French designer Charles Loupot for St. Raphaël (Figs. 1-4), were published in Gerstner's *Die Neue Graphik* (Teufen AR, Arthur Niggli, 1959). Both of these examples clearly demonstrate kinetic marks. Each use of the graphic mark is slightly different, but the identification is clear and consistent. How can a mark be consistent with each use different? Replies Gerstner: when it "has a signature and style of its own," not in the sense of an "unchangeable mark," but one that is established through consistently adapting the elements of the mark to the situations requiring it.

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Client Job No. \_\_\_\_\_  
P.O. No. \_\_\_\_\_



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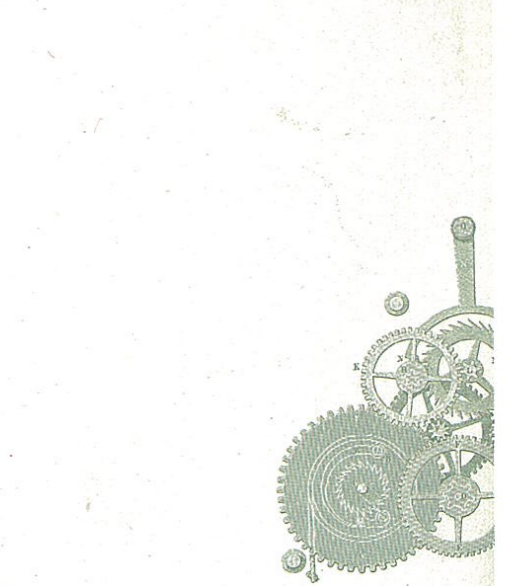
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**11,12.** Synergistic: invoice and envelope for illustrator Jeffrey Pike. Designer: Charles D. Harmon; illustrator: Jeffrey Pike.  
**13-16.** Synergistic: letterhead, envelope, mailing label and business card for Portland Museum. Design firm: Images Studio; designers: Julius Friedman, Walter McCord.

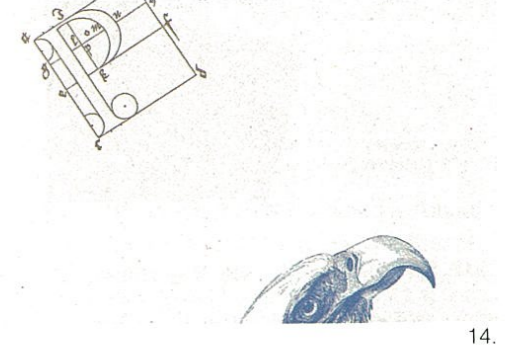


15.

Portland Museum  
2308 Portland Avenue  
Louisville, Kentucky 40212  
(502) 776-7678



13.



14.



Nathalie T. Andrews  
Director

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2308 Portland Avenue  
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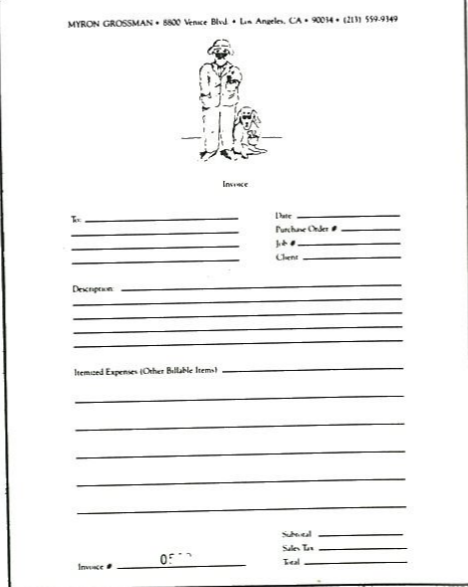


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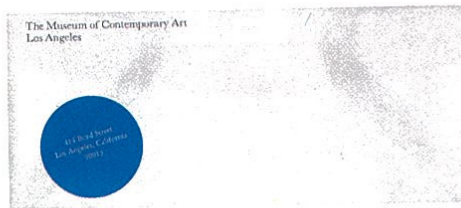


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MYRON GROSSMAN • 8800 Venice Blvd. • Los Angeles, CA • 90014 • (213) 559-9149

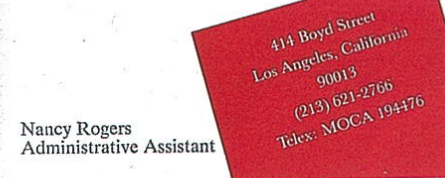


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The Museum of Contemporary Art  
Los Angeles



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17-19. Synergistic: stationery, envelope and business card for Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Design firm: Chermayeff and Geismar; designer: Ivan Chermayeff.  
20-21. Constant and variation: typographic treatment is consistent but layout is varied. Shown are letterhead and invoice for illustrator Myron Grossman. Designer/illustrator: Myron Grossman.

Gerstner says that it is "configuration" that gives a mark its "mark-like character," and that configuration must not suffer as a result of variability.

Kinetic identities, for the most part, use some form of a static mark as a foundation or starting point. They can use illustration, or photography, or typography, be ideographic or pictographic, and be kinetic.

To better understand how and why kinetic identities work, I have attempted to classify them.

The first of the four kinds I have been able to isolate is what I refer to as a *component type*. A component is one of several elements of a system, say your stereo system, none of which can fulfill its own function standing alone, but rather, only in conjunction with the other components of the system.

In graphic terms, this might translate into dividing something, e.g., the front of a camera lens, and placing the various sections on different items within an identity program.

My firm used this approach on an identity for a freelance photographer (Figs. 5-8). As a static identity, this would simply have been the line shot of the complete lens repeated throughout the program.

To the viewer, the reference to a photographic lens on each piece is, even though incomplete, still quite strong. This mark seems to work not only because it is consistent in color, scale and typography, but also because the viewer knows what the complete lens looks like, and in the mind's eye the lens appears whole. When yet another portion of the

lens is seen, it again is associated with the complete lens; it presents itself as a detail of a whole. The entire lens only appears when the pieces within the program are arranged in a certain way. The fact that they can be arranged to form the complete image of a lens does not seem to be essential to the success of any individual piece. It does, however, make it fun and memorable to the designers and art directors who are the photographer's clients.

Many of the aforementioned characteristics—consistency of color, typography, scale, and technique in the details—are common to any good identity program. But in kinetic programs they play a vital role. They help impart the consistent factors that allow the designer to make other elements change in some way.

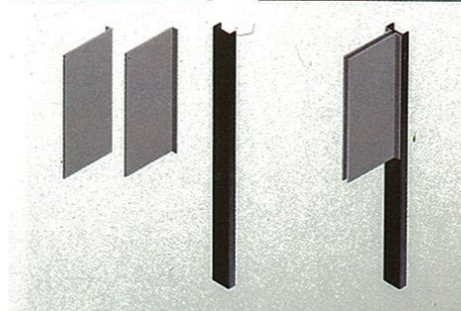
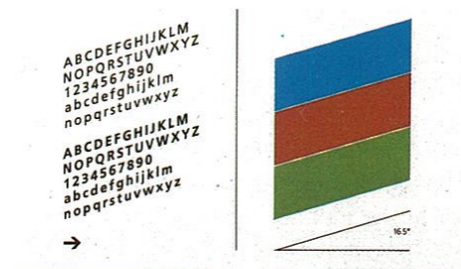
*Synergistic identity*, the second variety of kinetic solution, is composed of identifiable, independent graphic elements that when combined produce a reaction of which they are incapable individually.

A solution our studio proposed for a medical center demonstrates this kind of mark (Figs. 9, 10). We combined four hearts, suggestive of both medicine and caring, to make a shape which projects the concept of an activity center, all of which creates a flower-like image that gives the viewer a positive, healthy feeling.

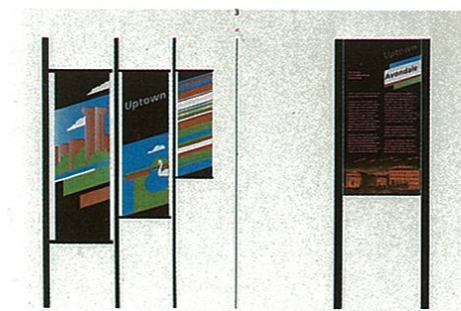
Up to this point, nothing about this mark makes it any different from a static, combination ideographic/pictographic mark, with the viewer trying to crack the graphic code. What makes it kinetic was our decision to use it with the hearts positioned differently on the program elements that dealt with specific activities



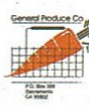
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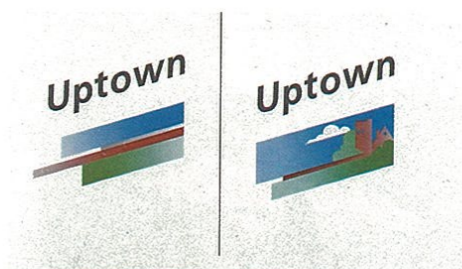
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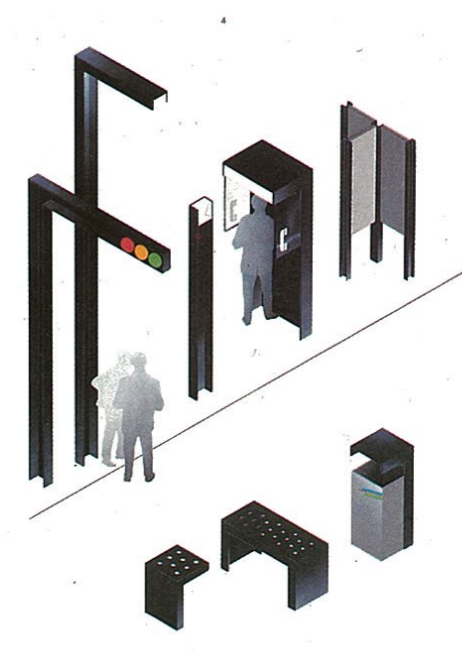
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22,23. Constant and variation: letterhead and envelope for General Produce Co., a produce supplier. Design firm: The Dunlavy Studio; designer: Linda Dunlavy.  
24-27. Constant and variation: elements from identity and signing program for "uptown" district of Cincinnati. Design firms: Colophon and Schenker, Probst + Barenfeld; designers: Chuck Byrne, Michel Overton, Robert Probst, Heinz Schenker.

within the medical center.

This simple change in thinking points out an obvious move that must be taken if a mark is to be kinetic. To be fully effective, it must be sufficiently altered to be noticeable, and obviously that means there must be enough pieces in a program to make those changes.

To see how this particular kinetic approach can work with almost every graphic element changing, we need only look at the identity done for a small neighborhood museum by Images Studio (Figs. 13-16). The program uses seemingly independent, found illustrations in various combinations to give a broader picture of the museum's activities. Certainly, this tells us more than would merely selecting one illustration or combination and endlessly repeating it throughout the program.

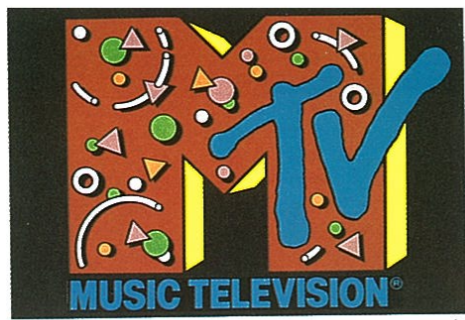
Chermayeff and Geismar accomplish the same thing by using the graphic symbols of a square, circle and triangle, separately, on their identity for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (Figs. 17-19). These shapes suggest the aesthetic heritage of the work shown there.

Each of these two programs, while using different graphic techniques, works to maintain its mark-like characteristics by implying randomness. This is accomplished through the tension created by the angular placement or bleeding of images. The randomness is controlled primarily by color, placement and scale of images, and by placement of typography.

In 1981, my firm was selected to do an identity program for the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History. Anyone who has ever worked on a program for a non-



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28-33. Constant and variation: basic logo for MTV and variations, which include Cheerio M (Fig. 29), Italic M (Fig. 30), Birthday M (Fig. 31), Hawaiian M (Fig. 32), Fragmented M (Fig. 33). Design firm: Manhattan Design; designers: Pat Rogoff, Frank Olinsky, Pat Gorman.

34-36. Constant and variation: applications of logo for Claude Neon, a company which designs electrical signs and billboards. There are five variations based on the letter C positioned on an angled matrix in a square; and there are 12 variations derived from two-color combinations of four constant corporate colors. By combining the 12 color variations and the five symbol variations, a total of 60 alternatives are possible. Design firm: Gottschalk + Ash, Toronto; designers: Stuart Ash, Fritz Gottschalk, Fredy Jaggi.

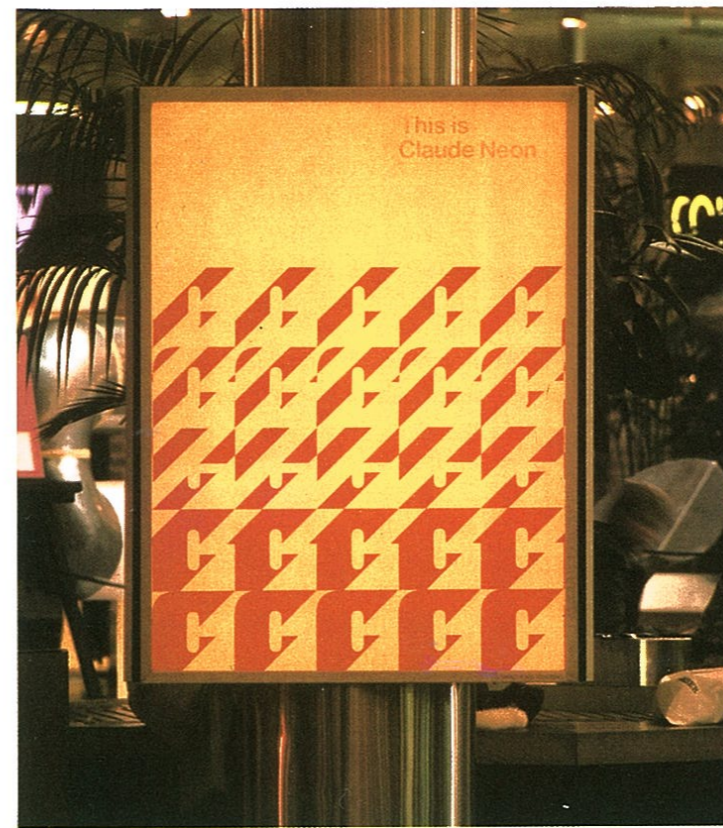
profit organization knows that maintaining the look of the program and the desire to produce exciting, unique collateral material often conflict. Because of limited resources, identity and advertising are often in competition rather than collaboration. With this in mind, our goal became to make each graphic piece sent from the museum, even business papers, a promotional vehicle as well as a graphic identity. Not only were they to reflect, as much as possible, the current events, but also the diversity of interests, of the organization.

Natural history museums deal with everything from fossils to space flight. Somewhere in the past, the Cincinnati Museum had chosen a rather mangy-looking beaver (no one remembers why) encircled by totally illegible typography as a visual identification. Rather than try to distill the institution's broad scope into one single, simple graphic mark, i.e., a better beaver, we decided to try and explore the diversity graphically.

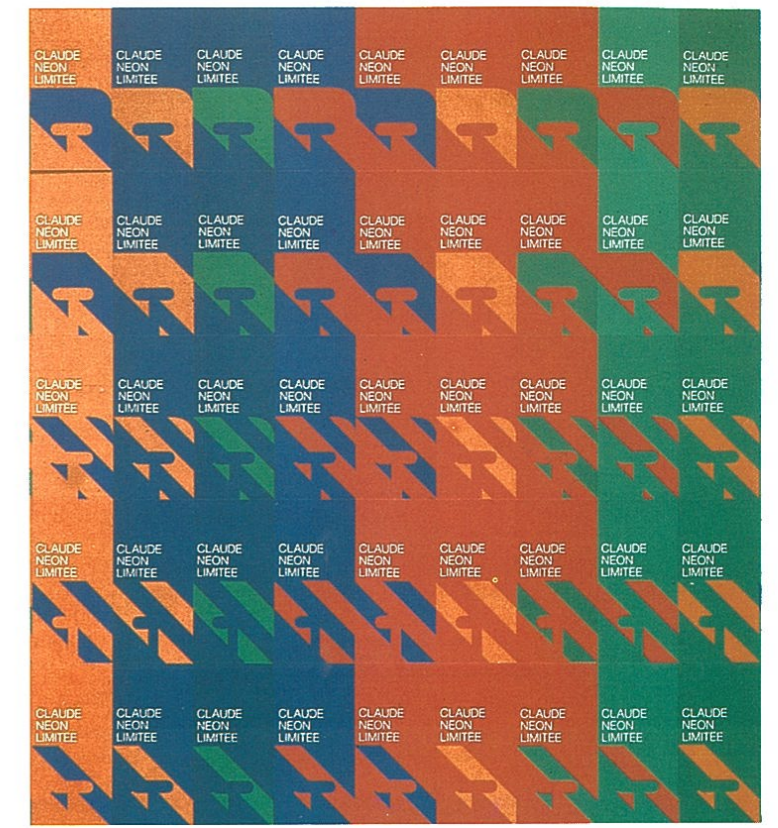
Having first set up a prominent constant in the identity, namely, the consistent typographic treatment of the institution's name in the foreground, we then began to consistently change illustrations in the background, an approach which puts this solution in a third category of kinetic marks: *constant and variation*. The variations are light-colored or screened line-shots of objects taken from the resources of the museum. This visual interaction, between the constant typography and the changing illustration, constitutes the mark (Figs. 37-43).

Clearly, this direction flies in the face of the conventional 1960s wisdom, the rubber-stamp concept of how a mark or identity program should work. It was more an act of faith, rather than certainty, when the museum tentatively gave us the go-ahead. Five years later, the program appears still to be effective, and amazingly, inexpensive pieces produced by the museum staff continue to win awards. The only serious problem seems to be the occasional guest designer who refuses to subvert his or her creative integrity, such as it is, to the simple parameters of the program.

One of the most extensive, planned uses of this type of identity is demonstrated in a project we prepared with Schenker, Probst and Barenfeld. Our joint venture was charged with developing an identity and signage program for an urban area constituting one-seventh of



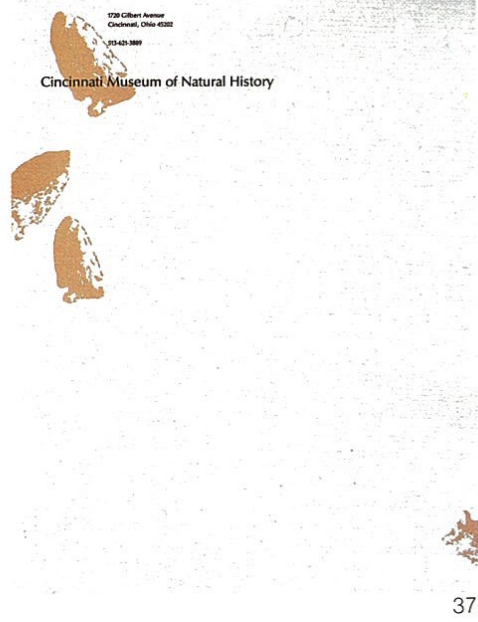
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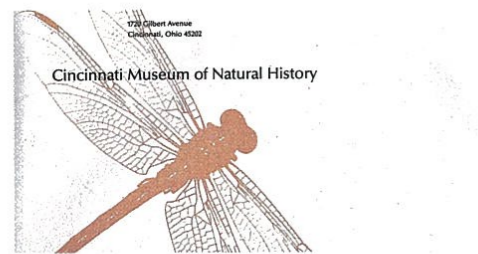
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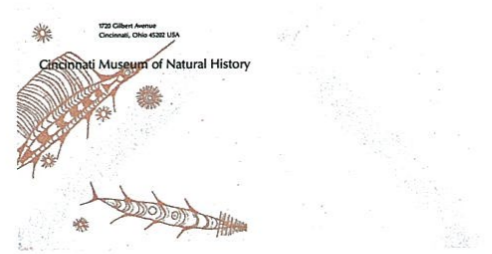


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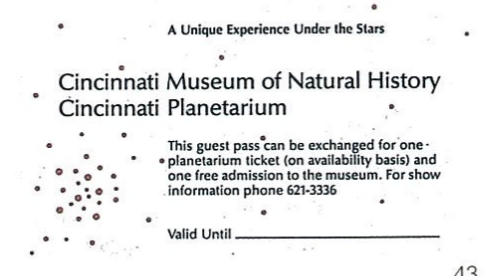
37-43. Constant and variation: letterhead (Fig. 37), envelopes (Figs. 38,39), business cards (Figs. 40-42) and guest pass (Fig. 43) for Cincinnati Museum of Natural History. Design firm: Colophon; designers: Chuck Byrne, Michael Overton.  
 44-46. Constant and variation: poster, catalog cover and promotional postcard produced by three different design firms for Santa Cruz clothing company. Designer (Fig. 44): Michael Manwaring; photographer: Brad Mollath. Design firm (Fig. 45): Vignelli Associates, which was responsible for the original concept and design of the program; photographer: Peter Ogilvie. Design firm (Fig. 46): Michael Mabry Design; designers: Michael Mabry, Noreen Fukumori; photographer: Michael Utterback.  
 47-50. Theme and variation involves a basic group of visual elements used in a changing relationship. Here are variations on basic logo (Fig. 47) for Park Restaurant, Kougless Hotel, Davos, Switzerland, including outdoor (Fig. 48) and indoor (Fig. 50) signs and menu cover (Fig. 49). Design firm: Schenker, Probst + Barenfeld; designer: Heinz Schenker.



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the City of Cincinnati (Figs. 24-27). Here, the constant is the upward-slanted word "Uptown," which refers to the name of the community. The number of variations that go with it are considerable. As a static mark alone, the typography appears with four staggered upward-slanted and graduated bars. For certain uses these bars become illustrative, displaying interesting characteristics or activities of the area. On directional signage to be placed throughout the neighborhood, these bands expand and contain directional information.

The Dunlavey Studio of Sacramento uses a very graphic illustration of a green shopping basket as a constant, with wonderful, fat vegetables in the basket as the variation, to create a mark for a produce supplier (Figs. 22, 23)—a very different graphic technique from these other projects, but based on the same kinetic principle. Also, it clearly demonstrates that a kinetic mark can and must be able to stand alone and still work as an isolated mark. The number of variations or graphic techniques this kind of identity is capable of accommodating seems almost limitless.

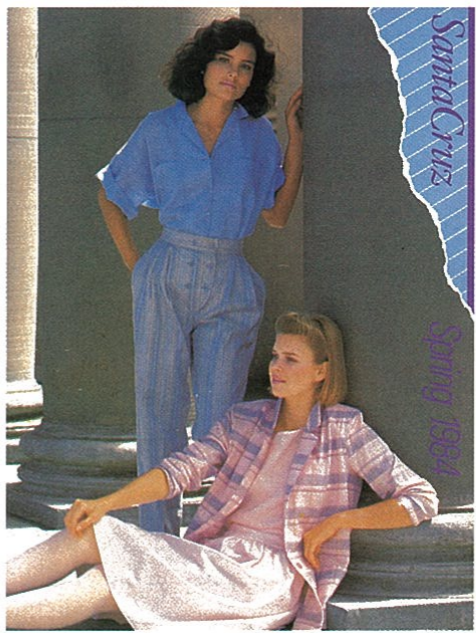
While Bach and Beethoven might take exception to my analogy, I call the final form of kinetic identity *theme and variation*. It involves a basic group or series of visual elements used in a regular, changing relationship to one another. In the case of a mark for my own design firm, I placed a circle, triangle and square within a simple, open grid (Figs. 56-59). These four elements constitute the basic theme I worked with, and the possible arrangements within the grid create the variations. To me, the various changes within the mark allude to the design process. No doubt, as with any conceptual mark, even slight changes in context can shift the visual meaning. Design process suddenly becomes a game of tic-tac-toe, but then it probably is anyway.

Designer Gordon Salchow plays the game a slightly different way. On his personal stationery, he uses typography and rules in an almost painterly fashion to make the envelope and letterhead (Figs. 51, 52). While on the surface, these two pieces have only color and a few common elements to tie them together, they are clearly related by the use of those elements.

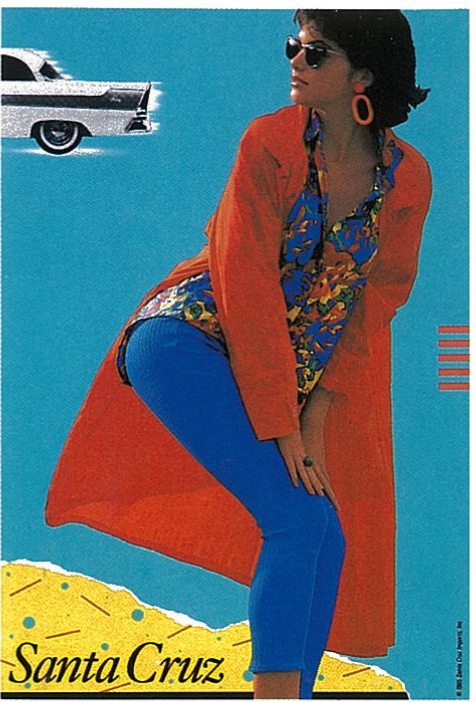
Still within this category is Heinz Schenker's identity for the Kougless Hotel, Davos, which uses various pat-



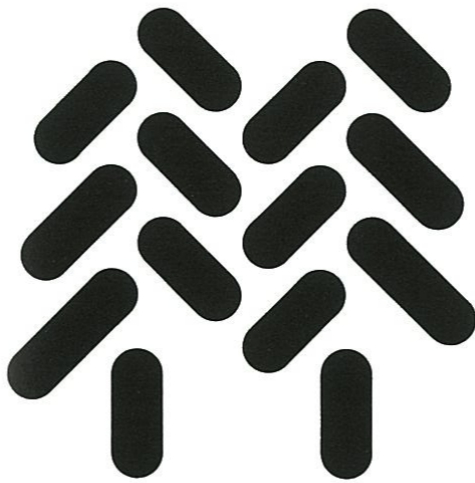
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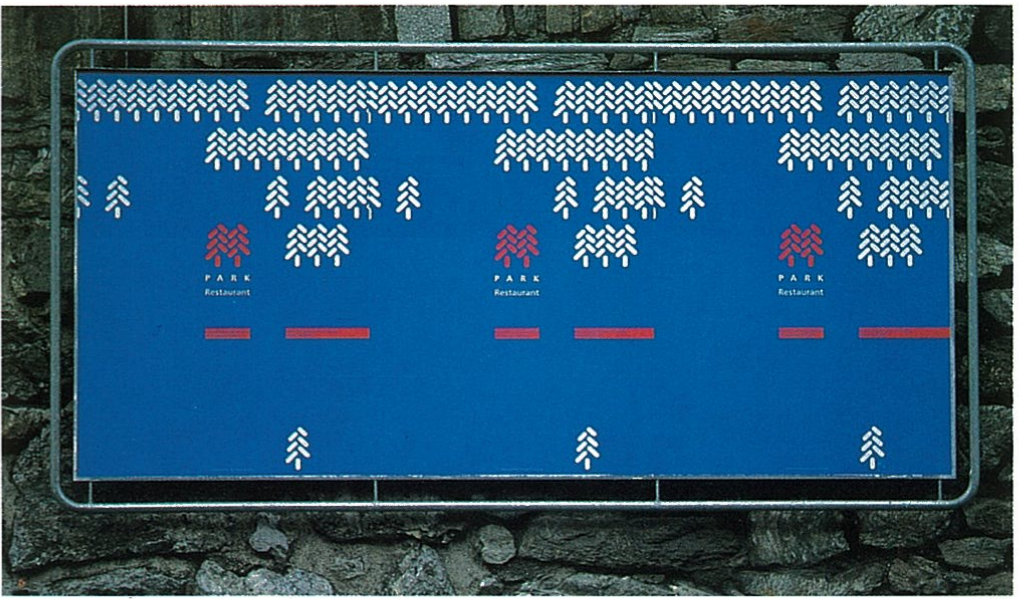
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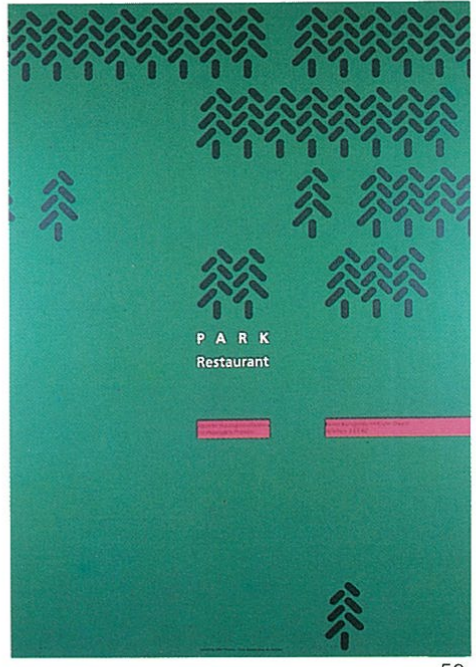
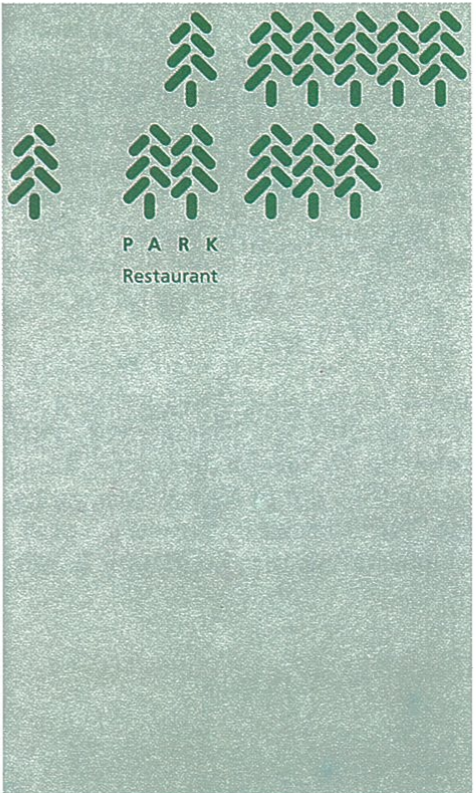
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Restaurant

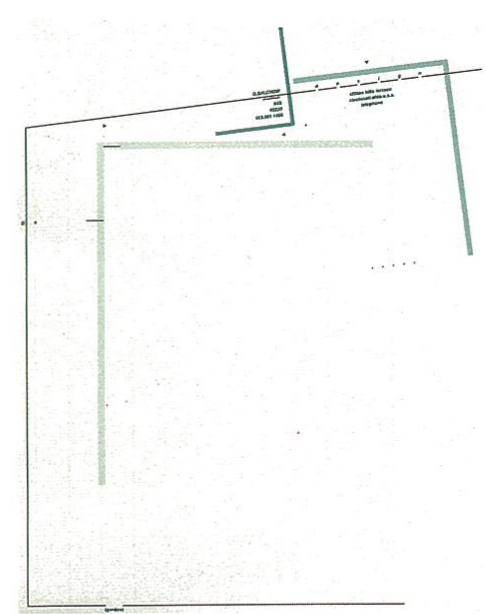
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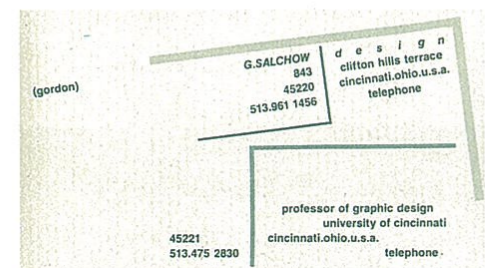
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51,52. Theme and variation: letterhead and business card for Gordon Salchow. Designer: Gordon Salchow.

53,54. Theme and variation: promotional poster and cover for the art journal, Dialogue. Design firm: Colophon; designers: Chuck Byrne, Michael Overton.

55-58. Theme and variation: letterhead, packaging and symbol variations for Laboratoires Sévigné, Paris. Designer: Heinz Schenker.

59-62. Theme and variation: letterhead, envelope, business card and symbol for the design studio, Colophon. Design firm: Colophon; designer: Chuck Byrne.

terns of the same element, a graphic illustration of a tree, to identify hotel and restaurant in a Swiss park (Figs. 47-50).

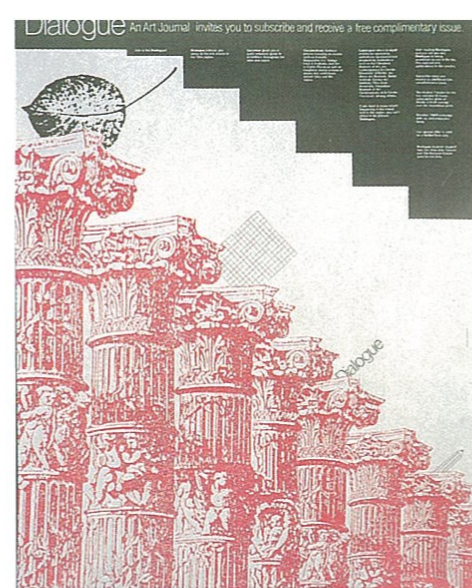
For the art magazine Dialogue, my intent was to create a very flexible, almost kit-like mark (Figs. 53, 54). This consisted of three elements, again a grid, a leaf and the typography of the name. These constituted the parts of the kit the staff of the magazine could use in a variety of ways. They are used throughout issues of the magazine and in promotional materials, separately and in various combinations. Recently they have become more and more separated. It has become clear that after an initial introduction where these elements appeared together, reader and public familiarity mentally provide the identity thread or link tying them together.

Familiarity plays a role in the ultimate success of any identity, but in kinetic identities it plays an even more important role. It is ultimately the viewer's mind that puts it all together and makes sense of it. Herein lies a limitation to kinetic marks. The designer must know something about the audience to whom the identity is directed. Some understanding of what they are capable of is essential. I doubt if the average American truck driver is going to comprehend the significance of the shapes on the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's identity, but then, he doesn't have to. He would, however, be able to recognize patterns of trees and associate them with a park. This is true of static marks as well, but owing to the quantity of visual material a viewer is exposed to, the problem is more acute with a kinetic program. There is a greater opportunity to goof.

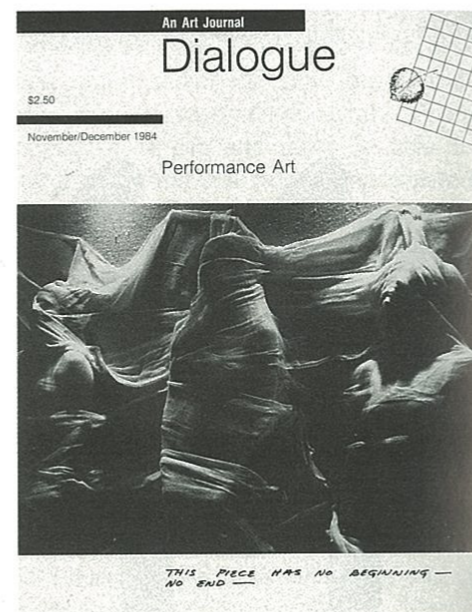
Another characteristic of kinetic programs that bears watching is the potential problem of degradation, as different designers handle the same client's work.

Vignelli Associates' identity for Santa Cruz is probably the printed kinetic program most widely seen by the public. A little confusion over whether it does more to identify this city on the California coast or the clothing company named for it seems not to have lessened the company recognition that was the original purpose of the program.

This mark, open to so many possible graphic presentations, still maintains its visual integrity and has survived interpretations by several designers—from Vignelli (Fig. 45) to Michael Manwaring (Fig. 44) to Michael Mabry (Fig. 46)—demonstrating that continuity is not



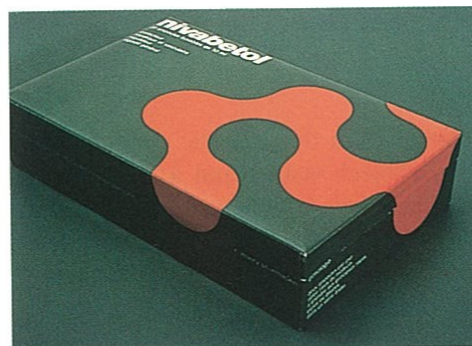
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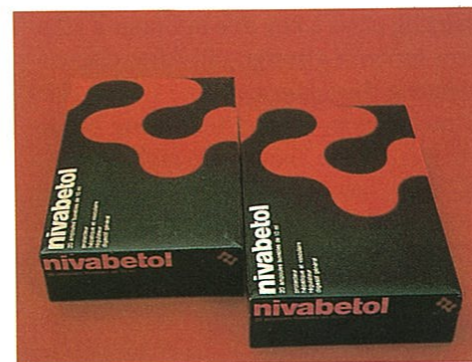
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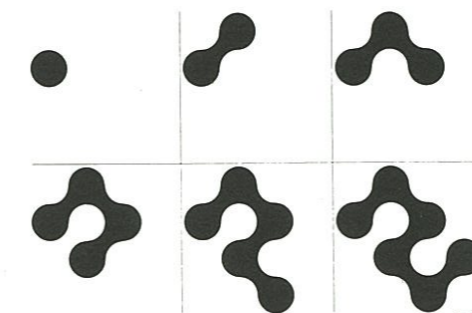
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overly difficult given a strong product placed in knowledgeable hands.

The categories to which I have assigned these various kinetic marks are not really important. Obviously, many of the programs are blends or hybrids of several, if not all, the categories. They only serve to provide some guidelines for analyzing how and why these or any kinetic programs succeed or fail.

For any type of kinetic identity to truly succeed, the various parts of the program must create a *gestalt*, the psychological phenomenon wherein the perception of a whole has attributes that cannot be derived by simply observing its parts. This sounds complicated, maybe, but if you think about it, effective graphic designers strive for a *gestalt* in most of the work they do.

While they are certainly not always appropriate, kinetic programs offer the designer an avenue to elaborate on the client and his message.

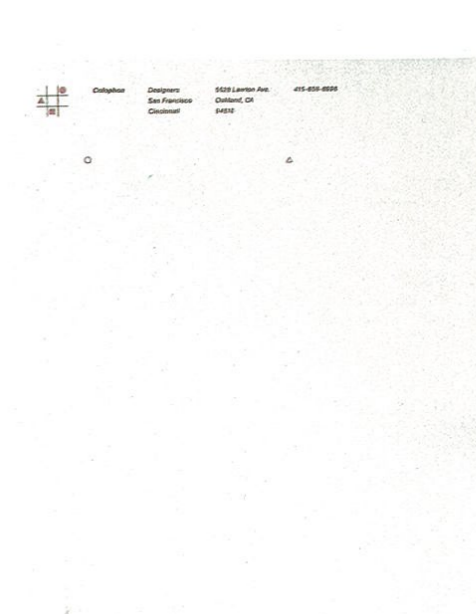
An early kinetic program by Gottschalk and Ash, Toronto, clearly demonstrates this (Figs. 34-36). Without the changes to the "C" for Claude Neon we would know a lot less, at least visually, about what things neon can do for signs. Certainly, a simple character "C" is neither as exciting nor as informative.

Kinetic programs seem to be coming into broader usage. Occasionally, they appear in publications or exhibits. If you have been anywhere near a cable TV in recent history, you know that literally millions of young citizens enjoy the antics of probably the best known kinetic identity, the "MTV" mark by Manhattan Design (Figs. 28-33), which hourly bounces around the screen in its endless assortment of kinetic costumes. Adorned with anything from polka dots to red bricks, the little "M" merrily does its job.

The basic criterion for making an identity kinetic as opposed to static should be the same as deciding on any of the characteristics of an identity—does this direction aid in communication or detract from it?

If appropriate and properly executed, a kinetic identity can mean better communications. It also offers the opportunity for visual excitement that is organic, rather than merely decorative. And finally, it offers the chance for designer and viewer alike to have some fun.

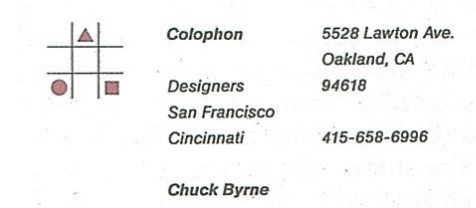
(Chuck Byrne is a designer based in Oakland, CA.)



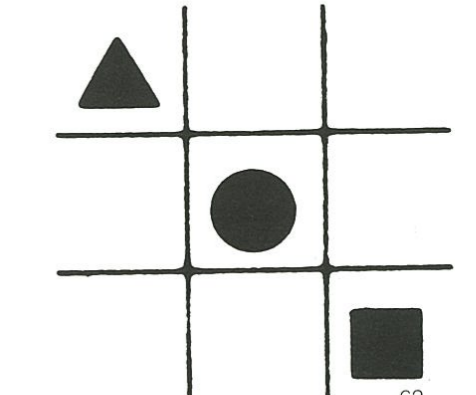
59.



60.



61.



62.