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Invariably, when fashion designers unleash their primadonna voices and, backstage, after their fashion shows, explain to star-struck journalists the reasoning behind their latest collection, they are asked about inspiration. And unlike artists or film-makers, who may vaguely reference previous masters of their craft, fashion designers are never short of precise - and often far-fetched - references. "This season I wanted to mix east-German student chic with Monaco yacht owner brashness, traditional wedding cakes from Uganda and the colours of the iPad interface". And you can be sure that a mood board exists, pinned to the wall of their design studio, with printed images of exactly these references. How such seemingly unrelated subjects end up being the base for a collection of clothes is, depending on your view on the fashion world, either a sign of genius or a proof of the vacuity of the whole exercise.

By contrast, artists are usually way less mathematical and pragmatic in the discourse and argumentation that accompanies their work, if they deign giving any explanation at all. It is highly unlikely to ever hear someone like Anselm Kiefer or James Turrell citing an accumulation of precise references as the basis for a piece (although it would be fun to hear the latter describe an installation as the result of the mix of "Aurora Borealis, Windows PC screen-savers, a Yves Klein monochrome, and my mother's make-up box"). Rather, they cite influence from past masters, from everyday life, or from other artistic disciplines (the upcoming "danser sa vie" show at Centre Pompidou, Paris, explores the bridges drawn between dance and art over the last century).

Architecture also usually eschews direct referencing, probably by fear of buildings being nicknamed after everyday objects (Rem Koolhas' CCTV building in Beijing is dubbed "the trousers" by the locals, and most of Frank Gehry's structures end up being compared to messy crumpled paper bags...). Cinema may sometimes quote various influences, but its inherent reliance on good storytelling makes inspiration less of a crucial part of the craft, even if masters like Jean-Luc Godard pepper their work with nods to Greek tragedy, to literature and fine art. More often, you'll find references discreetly inserted in the decor, in a TV set running in the background, or in the book a character may be reading.

But a graphic design project, by nature, is hugely dependent on the final decision of the client, and thus needs to be argued, defended and made convincing by an array of means, from the use of reassuring (and complex) wording, to the display of references and counter-examples, via the presence of a handsome assistant (male or female) during the presentation.

Most designers will opt to show their clients some inspiration images, if only to visually educate decision-makers who more often than not have next to no artistic background. As with food, a well-presented and cleverly arranged project will be easier to swallow and more tasty than a final product unleashed bare and raw onto the client's table. And if chefs pay attention to service, decorum and cutlery, graphic designers tend to create long PDFs or piles of printed boards that progressively bring the viewer to the final result, via a long journey through carefully researched archives, rivals' work, sketches and rejected options, to finally reach a chosen design.

But what the public sees is only that final result, by itself, isolated from the context of its genesis, bare of explanations. Sometimes even the client is shielded from seeing inspiration images, often to avoid claims of plagiarism, or to pretend to a greater level of creativity than one is gifted with. This practice isn't without risks, as in the digital age the furious online mob is quick to unearth past images that bear suspicious resemblance to newer ones, and the websites joelapompe and youthoughtwewouldntnotice are full of shockingly similar ad campaigns and t-shirt designs, naming and shaming culprits.

So it is somewhat brave and foolhardy of Ill-Studio, arguably one of the best design collectives in France, to publish an annual report displaying so clearly the links between inspiration and creativity.

When they first appeared on the French design scene in 2007, Ill-Studio stemmed from a skateboarding magazine, Chill, and seemed like a loose group of creatives, an A-team of young guys possessed with the rebellious spirit of the sport that united them. They expressed themselves through a collective web page, where each member posted what he felt like showing to an online audience, from personal work to street observations and found designs. This inspiring web page closed down after a while but its spirit can be found again in the present book. In these pages, what most people would hide in a deep cupboard, Ill-Studio chose to print out and lay bare for all to see. Old posters, 1980's airbrush art, obscure architectural endeavours, antique sculptures, all gathered here next to the final result, in a frank and honest manner, at the risk of diminishing the perception of the unique value of their work. But this is a conscious act, part motivated by a deep love for the creative process, part justified by a desire to educate and inform both future generations of designers, and potential clients. Can it lead to a re-consideration of their work? Can it make us appreciate their posters, compositions and layouts less than if they'd appeared as pure creations of their minds? Will others follow?

Hard to judge, but at least this process puts us, the readers, in the coveted position of a client being led through the infancy of creation, and spreads in front of us the minds of these designers like an open book, vulnerable and candid at the same time.