

Failures #1

Tana Mitchell

In search of perfection, the immaculate design concept often falls victim to compromise, to rejection, abandonment, crippling deadlines, infinitesimal or non-existent budgets... the list of hazards is endless. And like any history, design favours the victor, recording the successes and ignoring the marginal and the unpopular. Design has a concealed archive—external hard-drives laden with alternate options and rejected artwork. Behind every designer's coup lies a concealed wilderness of near misses.

Here we celebrate the failures, the flawed, the misunderstood, the not-quite-there, the rejected and the ignored. We share our stories of designer heartbreak, of memorable disappointment.

Rm103 Mailer: Nicholas Spratt

For the rm103's *Dear Reader* mail-art project we had come up with a sticker that would be attached to each envelope being sent with the name of the participating artist—details about the project etc. When the sticker was applied it divided the envelope into three panels, alluding to the original Penguin books. As with much of rm103's printed material though, the stickers were laser printed and hand-cut—not the most attractive outcome, but it was in-keeping with the rest of the office-stationery materials in the mail-art piece, flexible enough production-wise to accommodate the copy was guaranteed to arrive at the 11th hour, and well suited to the tiny budget. Plus I'm a sucker for long repetitive jobs, and I found myself once again guillotining a big stack of paper to turn A4 sheets into small strips that would match those Penguin proportions. The cutting alone took an entire evening, but I'd managed to turn a stack of paper into a big mess of off-cuts and a tidy collection of *Dear Reader* stickers. Arm still aching from the cutting, I packaged up the stickers with the address labels and postage stamps and left them on the gallery bar, ready for the artist to pick up the next day. By the time I had tidied up and sorted out the package it was about 2am, and I was off home feeling weary but happy that another job had been done.

The gallery opened the next day, but before the artist arrived to pick up the package a thief managed to saunter in and steal the package, hot-footing it out of the building with an envelope full of my blood, sweat and tears. I don't think that the rm103 mailing list would have been worth peanuts on the black market, and can only guess that those stickers I'd been busting a gut over must have ended up in a bin some place. I half hoped the thief might have taken the initiative and used the package to send out their own mail-art project. But in the meantime we had no choice but to repeat the entire job.

Failures #2

Sione's Wedding: Marc Smith

This was a lesson in briefing and sign off—hard learned.

Following a briefing from both the director and the producer, I was commissioned to produce animated titles for an upcoming NZ feature. Like any good graphic intro sequence—it was to not only represent the film's credits and title in a legible manner, it was also to in some way convey themes or tones in keeping with the upcoming story. The brief included several references to the film's urban-Auckland setting, and contemporary Samoan visual culture. It was to be colourful, youthful, and upbeat like the characters, and reflect the film's comedy genre.

Following early draft options, and discussions with the director and producer, it was decided that a 'graff-art' inspired type solution was the best fit. Production started. The title plates were animated 'spraying on' over top of the cityscape, while a thumping hip-hop soundtrack by Dawn Raid provided further clues to the film's cultural influences.

Following weeks of production, the final sequence was complete and approved by all involved.

That was until a new boss (the guy with the cheque book) was introduced at the last minute. So too was his aversion to what he described as 'vandalism'. Despite efforts by those involved in the initial briefing, his position was unshakable. Graff-art gave way to BOLD SANS SERIF. Colour gave way to monotonous. Movement gave way to static. Variety gave way to homogeneity. Flavour gave way to bland. As a designer intending to 'value-add' to the basic type requirement of readability, I failed.

Jet Jaguar: Tana Mitchell

This album cover was designed a few years back now, but I can still clearly remember the Radio Active DJ who cursed the design and the 'illegibility' of the footnotes live to air.

Of course he was right, I was aware of the challenge of reading it. In fact I willingly compromised legibility for the purity of the whole. I was under the spell of the absolute—I simply couldn't introduce a second type style, I had hand-drawn the type, and there was to be no compromise. It was a case of all or nothing.

I was genuinely surprised that the DJ wasn't willing to make the effort, the effort to engage... but he wasn't the only one.

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Propaganda Tea Towel Project: Nicola Farquhar

Oh dear what do I say about this? You know this story. I think it falls in the 'abandonment' category... Mostly it makes me realise how quickly the time has gone as I retrieved this from the 2005 archive. Ralph* has even made a brand new person since then. It was a nice project to work on, it doesn't seem to matter that there never was an outcome now ;)

* Ralph Walker co-founder of the Red Bull Propaganda project who commissioned the work.

Zen Table: Kyle Williams

I had a vision/obsession with creating the most perfect outdoor table that I could build. I wanted to create a structure that was a layperson's Zen—its creation my meditation. A design created (in theory) only in wood—no nails, no glue, no impurities. A design that appeared fragile—but was strong. Success was finally achieved after building—first a workshop, and then three prototypes... constantly refining the design of the structure and the jigs that created them. Clouded by perseverance I dismissed an impracticality recognised early on. An impracticality that in the end became insufferably irritating—as my utensil dropped through the table top, and in doing so ruining my bacon breakfast. A failure remembered every summer Saturday, remedied only by a cloth veiling the beauty of the table.

It's A Mans World: Tim Checkley

So here is the story!! This was in like 2002 or something...

A brother of a friend's girlfriend or something worked at a record company, can't remember which one, like Warners or something, and he got in touch with me about a CD compilation they were working on called *It's a Mans World* and the idea of the CD was that it was a retrospective of black American music from the 50s up to today, so it went from like James Brown into disco stuff like Earth, Wind & Fire and Parliament, and then into early 80s stuff like Run DMC and then later stuff like Snoop and Dre and so on and so forth...

So I got a friend of mine Elliot 'Little Elz' Stuart who is an amazing graffiti artist and illustrator to draw this huge fold out mural-type drawing of all these artists together in one street scene, that I would colour in and turn into the CD art, like make a logo etc etc etc. Well everything was going swimmingly. But it's a really big picture and it was taking me a really long time to colour in. Cat and I had already decided to go to Japan, and the flight came up really quickly and before I knew it I was teaching English full time in Tokyo. Actually, working on this during my lunch-breaks on my laptop helped keep me sane through that time.

Well I tried to get back in touch with the guy a little later to explain that it was taking a bit longer than I thought, but he wasn't returning my emails which I thought was a bit odd, but I carried on with it here and there. It later turned out that he'd gone to work somewhere else and the job had just fallen between the cracks and disappeared... and so this is as far as I got.

Which is a shame as I think Elz did a fuggin' amazing job and it would have been great if we'd finished it, but there you go!