

# OUTERVIEW

Jason Franzen to Joe Wachs

The following "Outerview" took place in December of 2007 over the course of several weeks via electronic post. Questions were posed by Joseph Alan Wachs (joewachs.com), a New York writer/actor/artist/director, who was first introduced to Mr. Franzen at his home on the outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona in early 2001. Subsequently, the two have exchanged and shared concepts, music, and visions as comrades-across-distance over the years. The following is intended to capture Mr. Franzen's individualized perspective on the world of design and to serve as context to the content contained within the portfolio you hold in your hands.

**New York, New York <> Dallas, Texas**

November, 2007

[JW] Jason, since I am accustomed to viewing the world through the eye of a stage director, I've often been intrigued by your design choices, that is, the very clear conceptual narratives, which surround your work, whether in the form of sculpture, photography or digital graphics or print. Can you tell me a little about how your personal design aesthetic has evolved? More specifically, how far back can you remember experiencing the origination of a so-called aesthetic and under what circumstances? I use the term "aesthetic" loosely, to refer to your style, your choices, and the general feel your work, which I sense is rooted in sculpture.

[JF] Well, I appreciate your recognition of my work as clear. That seems to be one of the consistent themes to which I've returned again and again. With each project or concept in which I am involved there is Clarity of Purpose / Clarity of Message / Clarity of Outcome. These are probably subconscious initiatives I hold deep within myself when I approach a problem.

For years, that illustration resonated within me as the essence of the relationship between education and learning which I believe is, or should be, the underlying concept of all design work. This has remained in my memory ever since. I should mention it didn't hurt that my teacher was a dead ringer for Linda Carter (Wonder Woman), so I was particularly attentive in class!

As I think back, in response to your question, an image comes to mind of a poster in my first grade classroom. There was an illustration poster of a cat on one wall with the words: "The cat is black" (written in Helvetica bold, most likely) printed along the bottom of the illustration. I clearly remember this striking a chord of simple perfection. I understood it. It was meaningful, as a teaching device, without possessing any unnecessary decoration or confusion. The teacher (and presumably the designer of the illustration) wanted me to associate those words with the image—and it worked.

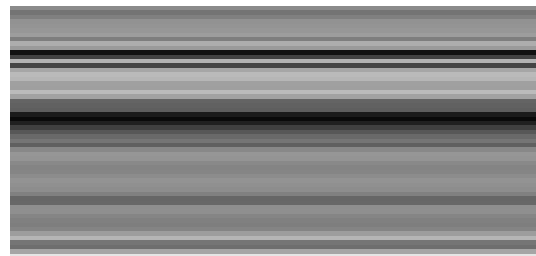
Now, the question might be: Was I predisposed to be attracted to this poster, or did the poster cause me to be attracted to it due to its clarity of message? My memory gets fuzzy before then, so I want to think it was an inherent attunement that I happened to recognize as important and filed away as a nice filter for future decision-making. I think I have remained true to this tenet of simple perfection as a goal for communication and design. Only later did I understand the concept of simple perfection as part and parcel to a greater school of thought and philosophy.

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	
<b>ENTITY</b>	Galápagos Sportswear		WhereHöws Studios				sabbatical	
<b>LOCATION</b>	Colorado Springs, CO			Denver, CO			Chicago, IL	
<b>PRINCE ALBUM</b>	B-Sides	800 New Funk Come Black Album (official)	Gold Expeirince Exodus	Chaos & Disorder Emancipation	Crystal Ball Kamasutra The Truth	New Power Soul	The Vault Rave un2 the Joy Fantastic	
<b>FORMULA 1 CHAMPION</b>	Renault Williams	Benetton Schumacher	Benetton Schumacher	Williams Hill	Williams Villeneuve	McLaren Hakkinen	McLaren Hakkinen	
<b>MAC OS</b>	OS 7				OS 8		OS 9	
<b>CAMERA</b>							Canon EOS 1 35mm Film	

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
	Zoomm		Zoommville			Buchanan Architecture		
	Scottsdale, AZ	Phoenix, AZ			Dallas, TX			
	The Rainbow Children		One Nite Alone	N.E.W.S.	Musicology		3121	Planet Earth
	Ferrari Schumacher	Ferrari Schumacher	Ferrari Schumacher	Ferrari Schumacher	Ferrari Schumacher	Renault Alonso	Renault Alonso	Ferrari Raikkonen
	OS X Cheetah	OS X Puma	OS X Jaguar	OS X Panther		OS X Tiger		OS X Leopard
			Rollei 6008 Medium Format Film	Canon D30 Digital				Canon 5D Digital
								Leica D-lux 3 Digital

It's evident "clear communication" is more critical to you than "abstracting ideas". I say this because some of your work is based on abstractions, or rather, the obfuscation of information, yet your end game remains that of Clarity, for example, your StripeTease series. Subjectively speaking, these pieces mean nothing to me without the background narrative of the subject behind the source photo presented in tandem.

In some, you've used publicity shots for celebrities as the source data. I find these visually compelling even without knowing the source. However, once I am privy to the source, that is, the narrative behind whom each stripe has derived, more meaning comes spilling forth. Tell me how you came up with that concept and whether you agree with me that the narrative behind each is important to the piece as a whole. With this in mind, you used the term "simple perfection" above. How would you define "perfection" in this context? And, can these StripeTease works be perfect, albeit, abstract?



pamela anderson, 2003

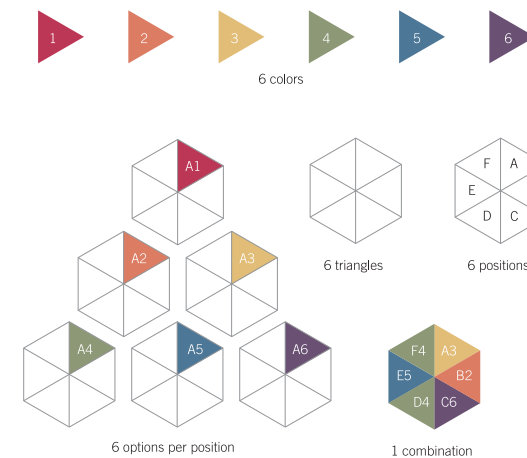
I do think my only interest in a project comes from the opportunity or the challenge to clearly communicate an idea—be it my own or that of a client. An idea is inherently abstract. Therefore, translating that idea into a visual manifestation is my method of giving the idea a visible/tangible/tactile foundation. It does not replace the idea, but merely presents or communicates the idea. A poster or a painting or a book is a vessel by which the idea travels. My series of StripeTease paintings are the tangible evidence of an abstract idea; the *idea* is the art, not the painting itself. In fact, I have very little interest in making the actual painting itself, because once the idea has formed, the execution is simply a mechanical process. These works, and even more so my Hexicons project, represent the types of creative "concepting" that I find most exciting: Can I convince my audience that it is the idea that is most valuable, and not the product of that idea. I think most contemporary artists work within this framework. By "concepting", I mean the manifestation of a concept, as opposed to mere conceptualizing, which gives me nothing tangible in the end.

When Duchamp displayed found objects, or when Warhol painted soup cans, the challenge to the viewer was obvious: *My idea is interesting, and if you find value in my idea, here is something you can see (or buy) to remind you of that idea.* In the case of the StripeTease series, the idea was to break down a celebrity image to the most minimal representation, present it out of context with the "tease" of a celebrity name to beg the viewer to dissect what it is they are viewing—or, missing. Once the subject is revealed (through investigation on the viewer's part) the idea is then fully present and then, and only then, complete. I hope they also look nice, of course.

With regard to "simple perfection", I suppose my aspiration is to pare down an idea to only the minimal components needed to fully express the concept. Not too far, for then it becomes too abstracted, but far enough to be intriguing. To me, that is perfection through editing. Now if only I had done that with my answer!

You referred to these StripeTease works as "Paintings". Why? It was my understanding these were photos, or rather, digitally manipulated photos. Do you relate them more to the artistic process of painting? Or, are you responding to the final project, which resembles more a painting, than a photograph? What is/are the Hexicons project mentioned above?

Oh, nuance. You are correct that the StripeTease pieces are digital in origin and production. A digital file is manipulated and then printed with ink to paper, which is then mounted to Plexiglas. In my world, the painting part of the process occurs on the computer screen and the rest is mere production. I do feel they are frozen pixels from my screen, like dry paint, yet technologically transferred to the final material hanging on the wall.



$$6 \times 6 \times 6 \times 6 \times 6 \times 6 = 46,656 \text{ combinations}$$

The Hexicons project [thoroughly documented herein] is a solid concept-yet-to-be-realized, which is one of my favorite "abstractions" molded into a physical object. In this case, the abstraction is mathematical. Given six (6) colors and six (6) triangles, there are 46,656 (no more, no less) combinations. My concept is to create one of all 46,656 combinations as individual sculptures.

Each sculpture is an original Hexicon, to which a value may be assigned, much like a code language. Each person or organization that purchases a Hexicon will be allowed to assign that Hexicon's value to the central database of Hexicons (Hexicons.com) for the world to see. Thus, each sculpture acts as a symbolic icon of an idea. Once again, the physical product itself is only a vessel for the idea contained therein. The Hexicon is a representation of that idea. The Hexicons will be made in various sizes and shapes and with various materials. Some will be as inexpensive as plastic Lego pieces, while others can be made from steel and glass. Each one will still share the same basic mechanics: Six (6) triangles of varying combinations of six (6) colors.

I would suspect that most people today do not realize that the U.S. Dollar is a representation of money, that is, a promise of money, with no intrinsic value. I think this is a fascinating idea; non-valued objects having value because of the concept they represent. Would the paper Hexicon representing "love" be more valuable than a titanium Hexicon representing "paper"?

**Good question. I'll get back to you on that...Now, to maintain the pumping of conceptual syrup through your veins, tomorrow is November 22nd, Thanksgiving Day, 2007. If at tomorrow's feast, you were confronted by a distant in-law who asked the horrifying question often posed by in-law aunts and uncles to artists at gatherings throughout the ages since time immemorial: "So, Jason, what exactly is it that you do?" Given the few glasses of wine most likely in your system and given the possibility you've successfully fought the urge to reply with some facetious banter, what would be your response?**

I avoid most holidays in general. Besides, how much fun is a holiday when the Apple store is closed? If I had to pick one favorite holiday, I'd go with Groundhog's Day. What a farce.

What do I do...? What do I do...? (holding...back...facetious...banter...hold...hold...breathe in...and...release): I am a design entrepreneur. I look for, and occasionally find, ways to turn design ideas into business ventures. I am most happy when I'm involved in projects (not "work" per sé), which marry the need for creative design solutions together with the potential for great riches. For I, with Ayn Rand as my witness, am a proud capitalist on a mission to bring smart solutions and clean aesthetics to the world, in exchange for fair compensation (orchestra swells...). I believe thoughtful design is a noble cause with great potential to influence people's thoughts and hearts and ultimately, I strive to make the world a better place than when I found it. I believe offering solutions and accepting payment is the very core of the American entrepreneurial spirit and those of us willing to risk our time to focus our efforts to benefit—not only ourselves, but the greater mankind—should be respected and compensated to at least the level of Paris Hilton's perfume licensing deal.

**That's Hot™ (used without permission). You pointed out earlier a specific influential childhood memory: The Cat is Black. Of course, that question was only intended to get you warmed up. Digging deeper, what could you identify as your earliest professional design assignment, or rather, the first experience you were asked to design for compensation? What was the context and what was the outcome? How did this influence your future work as a designer and what influences outside of yourself did you draw upon?**

Throughout elementary school, I was the "artist kid" who drew all of the time. My specialty became *Star Wars* characters and off-road trucks. Then, in junior high I was involved in the yearbook, assigned to photography and layout, which is where I fell in love with straight lines. I remember I would only draw on graph paper (my mother supported this obsession with frequent trips to the office supply store, instead of the art supply store). To this day, that's all I carry with me. Throughout high school, I continued to hone my skills with the straight line. Then, with the combination of an early Mac and a Laser Printer, I was off and running. Working for the high school newspaper, I would occasionally meet with potential advertisers. One such company was TransVideo, an outfit that transferred old home movies to VHS. They wanted to advertise in our newspaper, but they didn't have a logo. I stepped up and said I would take care of the logo and they bought the ad. I think I charged them \$25. They ended up using the logo on their signs. I was 15-years-old and thrilled to see my work 10-feet-wide at the shopping center. It would be a stretch to suggest I drew from any particular influences for that work, but I was driven to present a professional, well-executed piece of design. The technical aspects of design were my first priority. Once I mastered that, I began to develop my voice.

**There must be a series of outside influences that have helped shape that voice. I presume there is a list of prominent artists and/or designers who have influenced you over the years. Who would be on your "Best" list and why? Is there any one individual in particular? Obviously, you are interdisciplinary. What influence, if any, has there been on your work, which may have stemmed from outside the world of visual art? What would you say was the primary catalyst for mastering the technical aspects?**

My shortlist of influences is specific. However, I should point out these influences are much less style-based than conceptually-based influences. I have more of an admiration for people's ideas, than their stylistic approach. My A-list represents a group of individuals from varying fields who share what I think is the most important trait for any artist or entrepreneur: A steadfast belief in defining their own path.

**Andy Warhol**; Artist, filmmaker, publisher, entrepreneur

**Christo**; Environmental conceptual artist

**Enzo Ferrari**; Entrepreneur

**Prince**; Musician, composer, producer, vocalist, performer

**Ayn Rand**; Writer, philosopher

**Steve Jobs**; Entrepreneur

**George Lucas**; Filmmaker, entrepreneur

The above influences have developed the scope of my "voice" more so than having any particular stylistic impact. To me, these few (and certainly others like them) represent an ideal to which I aspire. They set the bar very high by showing how an individual with a focused vision and belief in his or her abilities can truly impact the world and help to make it a smarter, more beautiful place. I have no desire to be the "next" of any of these (the next George Lucas or the next Ayn Rand), but I do aspire to one day be the first Jason Franzen.

Allow me to expand on one of these influences as an indulgence to your own majestic reverence: The Artist Currently Known As Prince. Like the Cat is Black poster, my first exposure to Prince's music struck me with such clear resonance that I cannot imagine myself developing artistically without his music as the soundtrack playing in the foreground. At a fifth grade birthday party for my then girlfriend, Tricia Hill the opening title track of 1999 beckoned through some cheap speakers with a Cyclops-like, yet playful voice: "Don't worry/I won't hurt you/I only want you to have some fun." Despite my shyness, when the drums kicked in, I jumped up and danced. To this day, that moment marks the turning point for embracing of my own path.

What struck me most about the album, and the majority of his albums thereafter, were the tremendous clarity and precision of the electronic drum machine, keyboards, and multi-layered choral vocals. Prince somehow managed to fill his machines with life—a rather impressive feat when you compare it to the mostly lifeless electronic music of the time (and henceforth). His "living-machine-perfection" was the answer to me: The Snare Drum is Crisp. This was the audio-equivalent of the cat poster. That same year (1984) my favorite film, *Blade Runner*, was released—a movie in which the Tyrell Corporation aimed to create machines ("replicants") that were "More human than human." This, coupled with Andy Warhol's proclaimed desire to be a machine, became the underlying current that would influence my work thereafter.

Prince's music (unlike Warhol or Blade Runner) had the added benefit of being able to be played over and over as the soundtrack of my life—to the extent that the audio became one with my ears, which is to say it was the only sound I heard. You would be hard pressed to find a better example of an artist marching to the beat of his own drummer (pun intended). Through his individuality and unwavering dedication to originality, I found a voice that encouraged experimentation and set the standard for professional artistry. Looking back over these past 23 years since hearing those opening bars of 1999, I'm proud to say I have, in my own way, stayed true to my artistic vision.

As for the mastery of my technical skills, this is an area of constant investment. Just as owning a typewriter does not make one a writer, the owning of any of the wonderful technical advancements introduced to the design industry over last 20 years does not make one creatively talented. They do, however, make possible a more rapid realization of ideas by encouraging experimentation and exploration. To that end, I have always invested time and resources into the latest technology and tools. The end goal, of course, is to teach myself to be proficient (with computers, design software, digital cameras, etc.) so that my ideas can be realized quickly and with finished quality without relying on outside sources. This has allowed me to work autonomously for the past 15 years, with special thanks to Steve Jobs and his designers at Apple.

**You've spoken to me at length in the past about the impact architecture has had on your work, particularly on your philosophy of art and design. Please explain this influence in greater detail? Do you see a difference between art and design? How do you define each? What particular concepts of architecture have influenced your art, as opposed to your design? More importantly, how has your recent return to architecture impacted your work on the horizon?**

This strikes a dramatic chord within me and addresses the core concepts, which I believe lay behind the relationship of creativity, design, architecture, and, if I may, science. When I first became interested in architecture, I saw it as the perfect blend of creativity and science, which, for this discussion, I propose are polar opposites. My naiveté and youth allowed me to see architecture as the ideal practice for incorporating equal measures freeform ideas (creativity) and solid math/engineering (science). Yet, when I began studying architecture in college, it soon became apparent that more likely, the real world mix would be 10% creative / 90% science. Ultimately, this led me to stray from architecture in search of other fields, which better balanced my two desires of creative science.

This search for balance led to the "design entrepreneur" edict noted prior, which has served me well for the past 15 years or so. In this scenario, creativity is balanced by the science of business. This satisfied the part of my personality oriented towards precision as equally as that portion oriented towards pure math or engineering. That being said, I should point out I remain in constant struggle searching for the perfect balance of all my idiosyncratic desires. My ideal projects are creatively exciting and challenging, while requiring fair amounts of analysis and deep thought in providing an enticing financial upside.

What is my connection between architecture, design, and art? I define *Design* as intelligent, elegant problem solving. I define *Art* as creative expression. *Architecture*, for our purposes, is the realization of a building for a purpose. "Good Architecture" would be problem solving on many levels within the context of expression. Architecture typically has unbelievable constraints: Location factors, budget factors, material limitations, etc. These restrictions place tremendous limitations on free-form creativity and require layered problem solving across four dimensions. That is the joy of the design challenge for me. Limitations and restrictions are much more exciting to me, than a blank canvas and limitless budget. Restrictions are a part of reality and that is where art takes a different tangent.

Art can be absent of so many restrictions, that most of the challenge is missing. I think even in my own art works, I have self-imposed limitations to act as creative catalysts. In fact, almost all of my art projects are more design experiments than they are pure expression. The thread, which connects all of my work together, might be described as deriving from: The confrontation between limitations and creativity. Over the years, I have gained a certain confidence in my ability to resolve these often-opposing concepts and I thrive on that tension and challenge.



**The Shirt is Black.**

I think we're coming in for a landing. In closing, I'd like to touch upon your influences once again. All of those on your list noted above: Prince, Warhol, Ferrari—One thing they all have in common is their distinct trademark branding of themselves. Prince, like Warhol or Alfred Jarry, became his own creation in daily life, and further, took the concept full tilt by identifying himself as a symbol or hieroglyph; an image he'd used for years, until one day this morphed into his identity. As a graphic artist, logo designer and identity consultant, what would be your trademarked identity? How would Jason Franzen be communicated through a symbol, object, art piece, icon, item of jewelry, or logo?

It's surprisingly difficult for me to imagine a single icon or logo that I would want to represent myself as a brand. I will avoid the difficult task of a graphic logo and for now, I will choose to represent myself with the simple black button-down shirt as my brand icon. I have unconsciously filled my closet with these perfectly adaptable shirts, oftentimes buying three or four of the same type at a time. For me, they represent the combination of a creative ethic within the context of the business world, and it is this combination that I think best represents myself and my work. On any given day, odds are you'll find me in this shirt, a comfortable pair of jeans, with no tie, and the sleeves rolled up ready to get to work.

**Conducted + Edited by Joseph Alan Wachs**

**PHOTOGRAPHY**