Designers were quick to see that the street’s haphazard visual balance could be used as inspiration for new kinds of design. In 1951, the most concentrated analysis of these possibilities came from Robert Brownjohn. An American designer then resident in London, Brownjohn’s photo-essay ‘Street Level’, for Herbert Spencer’s Typographic magazine, had tireless eyes for the graphic balance on a simple city street and the city. They met with irregular word spacing, missing, mispositioned, ended and overlapping letters, hand-written signs, type distorted by plates. This thing they saw very little to do. With designers apart from engineers, Brownjohn noticed tiny details. They showed where weather, wind, wind, lack of neglect, but taste, bad spelling, neatness and good repetition can do to put a sort of music into the streets where we walk.

By deploying professional design presence to the sample of primitive and accidental street typography, Brownjohn transformed an artless way of seeing common to many designers into a mandate for purposes of beauty in the city. In the years that followed, a street-level sensibility and fascination with ornamental design became one of the most compelling forms of experimental typography. From the late Swiss typographer Hans-Rudi Lutz to pop-photographer David Choe, designers embrace the street’s disorder as an essential element in their work. The camera continues to be an essential tool for gathering these chance-formed treasures, especially when travelling abroad. In 1981, Lutz published a photo-essay based on photographs of South American streets. In one of his most moving examples, the same found poster image of a glistening woman in glasses is shown six times, each example subject to a different type or degree of environmental alteration.

Cowan has sometimes noted the aesthetic debt to Lutz, and his influence in the 1980s showed itself to be a significant trend in graphic design. In his discussion of the poster and visual design in Mexico, Cowan describes how designers directly into his designs any more than Brownjohn and his colleagues had done thirty years earlier. Usually it was a matter of letting the shape and colour of letters, in his mind, and then devising combinations of type and image with similar qualities or randomness, unpredictability and ambiguity. Brownjohn commented that with proper precision, in Typographic, “bad word spacing can happen. Or it can be designed.”

What is so enticing about Jonathan Miller’s ‘portable’ image is how aesthetically resolved, how right to the eye they seem. They are compelling as a collection, but many stand up as separate pictures. Miller and his designers have taken a number of decisions that necessarily impact. The majority are shown at the same size as the original prints and, except for a few full bleed pages, most are surrounded by white space. There are no page numbers or captions and Miller makes no attempt to give their original in time and location (the title: November in Pisa, although there are sometimes single words). The unpretentious colour changes produced by a cheap developing process – Miller, like Brownjohn, used an ordinary snapshot camera – introduce a further element of chance and level of disorganisation from the original event. ‘In the final outcome’, says Miller, ‘I preferred what I got to the picture I thought I was taking.’

For Miller, these images are ‘abstract designs’ drawn from the welding of real images, but even at their most abstract they are still artificial constructions available to the eyes of those who made them and viewed them, an unseen but persistent presence. They offer a documentary evocation of things no longer existing or imagined, of dematerialisation and evanescence as forms in the world of matter, only added to the physical meaning (Spencer’s ‘dead director’). Where fragments of再度 people are glimpsed – an arm, an eye, a pair of figures – their evanescence is even more acute. In one picture, a man’s face has been recently excised, leaving only an immaterially formed head of hair. Among the long edge of his nose faces in the sharp form of an uppercase A, a visual rhyme with the triangular shape of his hairline and brow. However he was, whatever he was trying to tell us, he has become ‘Babushka A’; a case that will never be solved.

‘Every photographed object,’ writes Jean Baudrillard, ‘is merely the trace left behind by the disappearance of all the rest. It is an almost perfect crime, an almost total resolution of the world, which merely leaves the illusion of a particular object shining forth, the image of which becomes an impenetrable enigma’.

In characteristically ectoplasmic language, Baudrillard comes closest, perhaps, to capturing the magnetic force of the seen portrait image. In an essay promulgated by his own activities as a photographer, he writes on the ‘longing image’ and ‘magical totality’ of the perceptual photographic detail, and on the world’s refusal to yield up its meaning in photographs. Dissimilitude and fragmentation are inseparable conditions of photography, and if this is always a factor drawing us to a photograph – as photography – then the seen portrait image carries a double charge. In its transformed paper layer, an inherently dimensional medium finds a perfect, emblematic match.