For designers, the public fate of their efforts offered a spectacle both peculiar and fascinating, as dreams of abundance were reduced to images of transience and decay. In the early 1960s, while Hains, Villegle, Mimmo Rotella, Asger Jorn and other affichistes wrenched posters from the hoardings, Herbert Spencer was documenting these chance depredations with his camera. In his pictures of ‘strange juxtapositions revealed through the sad ribbons of torn posters’, he set out to record the dissolution of an order he spent his days as a design consultant attempting to impose. His photographs of broken shop-front lettering, scarified posters and graffiti-pocked walls disclose an urban panorama in which sings of official communication have frayed into an impromptu poetry of tattered logos, shattered copylines and stuttering letterforms. In a picture of a St Pancras street, the one-way sign is sucked in and nullified by a churning backdrop that, if it weren’t for a Heinz label, would feel closer in mood to an Abstract Expressionism daub by Robert Motherwell than an ad.

Designers were quick to see that the street’s haphazard visual fabric could be used as inspiration for new kinds of design. In 1961, 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 Typographica magazine, has thirty-one pages of his pictures taken on a single trip around the city. They catalogue irregular word spacing; missing, misaligned, eroded and overlapping letters; hand-written signs; type distorted by glass. ‘The things they show have very little to do with Design, apart from achieving its object,’ Brownjohn notes (my italics). ‘They show what weather wit, accident, lack of judgement, bad taste, bad spelling, necessity, and good loud repetition can do to put a sort of music into the streets where we walk.’

By displaying professional design projects next to samples of primitive and accidental street typography, Brownjohn transformed an ad hoc way of seeing common to many designers into a manifesto for purposeful scanning of the street.

To describe the random forces that brought these images into being, Villegle coined the term Lacere Anonyme. He saw this ‘anonymous lacerator’ as the mythic embodiment of the crowd’s anarchy and dissent as it defaced every attempt at persuasion by commercial and bureaucratic authorities. His own modest role was to act as curator and select singular specimens from the lacerator’s vast oeuvre.

In the years that followed, a ‘street level’ sensibility and fascination with vernacular design became one of the international cornerstones of experimental graphics. From the late Swiss typographer Hand-Rudolf Lutz to pop deconstructionist David Carson, designers embraced the street’s disorder as an alternative ordering principle in their work. The camera continues to be an essential tool for gathering these chance-formed treasures, especially when traveling abroad. In 1991, Lutz published a photo-essay based on photographs of South American streets. In some of his most arresting examples, the same found poster image of a grimacing woman in glasses is shown six times, each example subject to a different type or degree of environmental attrition.

Carson has sometimes noted his aesthetic debt to Lutz, and in his lectures in the 1990s he showed slides of peeling posters seen on walls in Mexico and elsewhere that inspired his own typographic method. He didn’t necessarily import these images directly into his designs any more that Brownjohn and his colleagues had done thirty years earlier. Usually, it was a matter of allowing the shapes and colours to percolate in his mind, and then testing combinations of type and image with similar qualities of randomness, unpredictability and ambiguity. Brownjohn summarized the method, with laconic precision, in Typographica: ‘Bad word spacing can happen. Or it can be designed.’

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Why do images of torn posters and damaged signs exert such a powerful hold on the imagination and emotions? What quality is it that distinguishes one specimen of ‘chance art’ – as Herbert Spencer called it – from the next? ‘The fact is, most of the torn street posters or hand-lettered signs that I come across are not interesting,’ Carson told an interviewer. ‘But every now and then, the elements come together in a way that I find pleasing… and that’s totally subjective and intuitive on my part. I’m not sure I understand myself what makes one thing visually interesting to me, while another strikes me as being just ordinary.’