

## Intuition and Ideas

1. A. N. Whitehead,  
*Adventures of Ideas*  
(New York, 1933), 228

2. Henri Bergson,  
"Philosophical Intuition,"  
*The Creative Mind*  
(New York, 1946), 109

3. K. F. Wild,  
*Intuition*  
(Cambridge, 1938), 2

4. Immanuel Kant,  
*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*  
(New York, 1967), 4: 204

5. Wild, *Intuition*, 221

"All knowledge," said Whitehead, "is derived from and verified by direct intuitive observation."<sup>1</sup> But such observation provides little comfort for those who need the security of down-to-earth proof. Judgments that lack the support of the opinion makers or of research findings are generally suspect. Some of the reasons, it seems, that intuition has not won accolades are that it is only vaguely understood and virtually impossible to pin down. "What is this intuition?" asks Henri Bergson. "If the philosopher has not been able to give the formula for it, we certainly are not able to do so."<sup>2</sup>

The semantics of intuition are, for the most part, bewildering. One can perhaps understand intuition more easily by intuitive judgment than by definition, although "it is as rich in suggestion as poor in definition."<sup>3</sup> In its broadest sense, we are told, intuition means "immediate apprehension." *Immediate* may be used to signify the absence of inference, conceptualization, causes, symbols, thoughts, justification, or definition. *Apprehension* may include such unrelated states as sensation, knowledge, and mystical rapport.<sup>4</sup>

"Though the characteristics of knowing, of immediacy, of truth, are all present, the quality which is especially present to the mind when using the word in any of these senses is that of inexplicability."<sup>5</sup> So there is really no one definition for intuition. For the sake of this chapter we can settle on: a flash of insight. Intuition cannot be willed or taught. It works in mysterious ways and has something in common with improvisation. It has nothing to do with intentions, or with programming. It simply happens — an idea out of the blue — characterized sometimes by surprise, elation, and a release of tension. Intuition is conditioned by experience, habit, native ability, religion, culture, imagination and education and, at some point, is no stranger to reason.

6. William James.  
 "Instinct,"  
*Psychology Briefer Course*  
 (New York, 1945), 398

"There is no antagonism between instinct and reason," said William James.  
 "Reason per se can inhibit no impulses.... Reason may, however, make an inference which will excite the imagination so as to let loose the impulse the other way."<sup>6</sup>

7. B. F. Skinner.  
 "Causes and Reasons,"  
*About Behaviorism*  
 (New York, 1974), 135

Intuition does not always generate great ideas. Getting into a bathtub and arriving at the displacement of water theory (Archimedes) is uncommon evidence of intuition. Most intuitive acts are uneventful daily activities. When great accomplishments are cited, they are usually the achievements of great minds.  
 "Newton could hold a problem in his mind for hours and days and weeks until it surrendered to him its secret. Then being a supreme mathematical technician, he could dress it up how you will, for the purposes of exposition. But it was his intuition which was preeminently extraordinary."<sup>7</sup>

8. Henri Bergson.  
 "Philosophical Intuition,"  
*The Creative Mind*  
 (New York, 1946), 110

The question is really less a matter of *experiencing* than of *listening* to one's intuitions, following rather than dismissing them. It is also the quality of one's intuitions that matters — whether they are banal (as most are) or exciting (as very few are). The intuitive process can also be seen as an inhibiting one. "What a strange force," reflects Henri Bergson, "this intuitive power of negation is... it forbids."<sup>8</sup> This phenomenon may occur, for example, when a good idea is abandoned because of doubt, fear, confusion, superstition, prejudice, or habit.

The words intuition, instinct, impulse, hunch, and insight, as used in this chapter, are interchangeable. Instincts, however, are commonly understood to refer to lower animals, and intuition to man.

The ability to intuit is not reserved to any special class of individuals, although many painters, writers, designers, dancers, or musicians believe that this ability is something special, something God-given. The intuitive faculty does, however, seem more pervasive in matters of aesthetics than in those of daily routine. Except in a most general sense, one cannot prove the validity of color, contrast, texture, or shape. Compliance with all the laws and systems of form, restraint, and proportion will not provide proof of the soundness of a work of art, nor guarantee its coming to fruition. This is one of the reasons it is so difficult to understand or teach art and why countless books on art are mere inventories rather than meaningful explanations. Even the brilliant exposition of historians such as Roger Fry, André Malraux, or Rudolf Wittkauer, however inspirational, however compelling, cannot directly generate great or even good works.

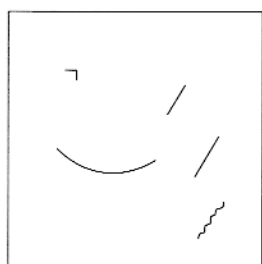
Without regard to available systems (e.g., the Golden Section, DIN proportions, typographic grids), the designer works intuitively. This is something about which one is often confused. No system of proportion, color, or space articulation can possibly insure exceptional results. Very often a system is used merely as a crutch, a kind of rabbit's foot or a good luck charm, regardless of need. A system can be applied either intuitively or intentionally, interestingly or tediously. There is always the element of choice, sometimes called good judgment, at others good taste.

Aside from practical considerations, in matters of form the typographer must rely on intuition. How else does one select a typeface, decide on its size, line width, leading, and format? The alternatives are to repeat one's previous performances, to imitate what others have done, or simply to make arbitrary decisions.

The resentment that creative people sometimes harbor against research, it seems to me, is largely the resentment of those who make decisions intuitively, without the "benefit" or interference of so-called reasonable arguments.

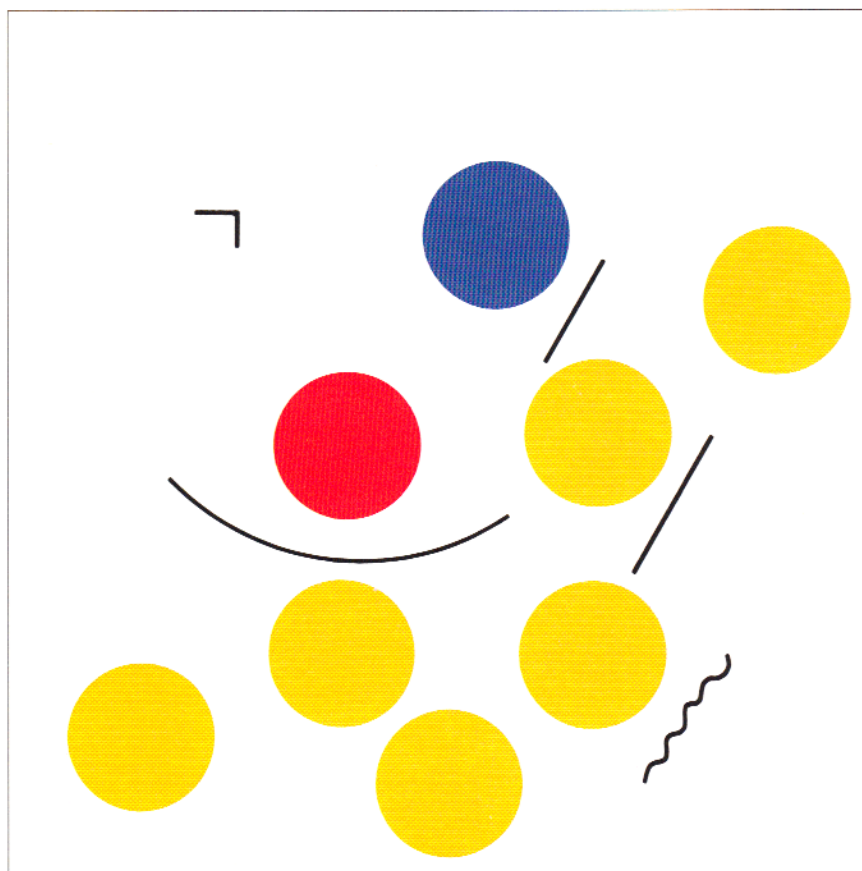
Opinion polls, in which intuition most likely plays some role, are, ironically, often used to combat the intuitive notions of creative designers and writers. It is fairly safe to speculate that most good ideas in the field of communication take shape unconsciously. Nor would it be wrong to assume that some of the best ideas in any field are in some way, at some point, intuitively perceived. "Think Small," so effectively exploited in Volkswagen advertisements, seems unquestionably an ingenious idea intuitively generated. It is a contradictory statement that evokes its opposite: Think Big. Mies van der Rohe's "less is more" is similarly effective because it involves the spectator's sense of irony.

The following playful exercise is an effort to bring the question of intuition down to earth; it may help to unravel some of its mysteries. The game involves the creation of a recognizable image out of a few scattered lines (below). This stimulus pattern turns out to be a simple demonstration of the intuitive process.



The idea of the game is to translate these lines into a recognizable image without rearranging the lines in any way. My immediate reaction to these rather uninspiring squiggles was indifference. Some time later, however, as if out of the blue, the face of this clown (opposite) appeared.

Here is a lesson in contrasts: black lines, colored dots (red, yellow, blue). By juxtaposition these elements are transformed into a lively abstraction suggestive of a clown. It is possible, of course, to make the facial features more descriptive merely by adding a little triangular cap, but simplicity and restraint are equally important — a lesson not only in economy but in appropriateness to a particular problem. This game demonstrates the role of intuition in achieving interest where there was none, a perplexing situation that confronts the designer every day.





Tokyo  
Communication  
Arts  
Osaka  
Communication  
Arts

*Poster, Tokyo and Osaka Communication Arts, 1991*

The arrangement of colored squares in the poster at left provides ample room for intriguing metaphors. What do these squares mean? The spectator becomes involved in an absorbing riddle; resolving the riddle is a source of satisfaction. The rose, as depicted in the poster on the following page, though more commonplace, sets up a contrasting relationship with the stylized bee, which is engrossing. Choosing among different possibilities is often a bewildering experience. The dilemma of choosing between a metaphoric and a literal depiction is one commonly faced by the designer and settled intuitively if not arbitrarily. If a design is striking enough, it is not always necessary to explain it. Explanations sometimes obscure more than they reveal.