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THE PUBLIC POSTER

An Exploration of Storytelling in Poster Design

Elizabeth Hiler

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of
Fine Arts in Visual Communication Design

School of Design
College of Art and Design
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY

Fall 2021

COMMITTEE APPROVAL
THE PUBLIC POSTER
An Exploration of Storytelling in Poster Design

Elizabeth Hiler

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Adam Smith, Chief Thesis Advisor
Associate Professor, School of Design College of Art and Design

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Mike Strobert, Associate Thesis Advisor
Senior Lecturer, School of Design College of Art and Design

ABSTRACT

Research suggests that it is incredibly difficult for a person to change their mind. Confirmation bias and echo chambers are just a few of the reasons people do not give themselves the opportunity to explore new stories, ideas, beliefs. It is now our challenge to connect with people in unconventional ways and explore storytelling in new spaces to give difficult topics more accessibility to public discourse. The Public Protest Poster can be found at the start of most movements for social and political change by creating a simplified statement with a strong graphic for instant impact. Yet, protest posters rely on viewers having some previous knowledge about a particular topic in order to fully understand the scope and target of the poster. This form of visual communication lacks any opportunity for greater context or connection for the viewer to take in new perspectives. This project seeks to explore adding animation to poster design to elaborate on a story that will encourage audiences to engage with topics they may not normally reflect on.

Key Words - Graphic Design, Poster Design, Protest Poster, Animation, Digital Collage, Narrative, Storytelling, Gender

A number of heuristics have been studied that indicate humans are irrational[7]. Confirmation biases, echo chambers, and the idea that beliefs are deeply rooted in our identity, are all representative of how hard it is for people to change their mind.[2,3,4] We not only surround ourselves with information that confirms our beliefs but we also have a tendency to downplay or even wholly ignore evidence to opposing viewpoints. Our collection, interpretation and memory of information becomes heavily skewed to meet our own perspective.[5] Social media and other internet platforms depend on users and use algorithms to use our data to keep us scrolling,[3] "potentially distorting our perception of reality" and even lead to radicalization.[7] Ultimately, we are confined by what we choose to believe.

Access and exposure to differing opinions is critical to learn and adapt as individuals and as a society. The challenge becomes how to connect people with new ideas in unconventional ways and create opportunities for open mindedness. The public protest poster can be found at the start of most movements for social and political change by creating a simplified statement with a strong graphic for instant impact. Yet, protest posters rely on viewers having some previous knowledge about a particular topic in order to fully understand the scope and target of the poster. Whether or not you initially agree with the poster often dictates its power. By exploring animation and storytelling in poster design, we can utilize the impact and accessibility of public protest posters while also providing context and narrative for empathy around difficult topics.

CASE STUDY: AN ARGUMENT ON GENDER LABELS ACROSS TIME

This project aims to explore pronouns and gender labels. While there are a host of arguments for or against non-binary gender expression, my project focuses on how, as an element of language, pronouns are no longer informative or useful in public spheres. I am not advocating the complete "degendering" of modern society, but rather by focusing on words as a tool of communication and categorization, the argument calls into question why gender labels are such a pervasive part of our interactions when they carry no real value to conversation. Are we capable, as an intelligent, expressive species, of moving forward without gender identifiers everywhere all the time?

One theory posits that the origin of gender roles came from pre-industrialized society when families worked and tended to their farms.[1] It suggests that because field work is incredibly labor intensive, requiring effective upper body strength, men were the ones called to work outside the home. Yet it can also be suggested that women were just as much bound by their bodies. I assert that because of the physical toll of pregnancy and the importance of reproduction in an age of poor medical care and high infant mortality rates,[8] women were anchored to work in the home. Both genders were pushed into different roles because of their bodies and their reproductive abilities. "She" and "He" as labels were accurate representations of not only our sexual functions, but also but also how we lived, inspired by our drive to survive. "She" and "He" become the "Pot" and "Plow."

This idea becomes the basis for the project content and design. As we progress through time, opportunities change and we see that our identity is tied significantly less to our duties originally established in "plow culture."[1] Gender is no longer an indicator of how we interact with the world around us. Yet the problem with language and labels is that they continue to maintain expectations and connotations set firmly in place by our past. Pronouns, no matter how small or insignificant to some, carry with them the weight of our own assumptions about the world and our roles within it.

In an essay on the futility of war, Jonathan Schell reflects that there are "moments in history when a crack in time seems to open and swallow the known world" and that "solid seeming-institutions, rotted from within, collapse or are discarded."[6] Judith Lorber, Professor Emerita of Sociology and Women's Studies at The CUNY Graduate Center and Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, believes in the not-so-far future this could be the case for gender divisions.[4] If gender labels no longer have measurable value as a tool for communication, if these words no longer convey any meaning in conversation or categorization in public spaces, maybe our reliance on this language is already beginning to crumble. Maybe more people simply need to take a moment to reflect about their identity and consider: are you more than your reproductive role?

DESIGN ANALYSIS

My project approaches an animated narrative by incorporating both a timeline to frame the visuals while also relying on standard plot conventions to create a more believable argument. If placed in public spaces to increase accessibility to a wider audience, these stories would need to rely on an initial hook to grab someone's attention in order to encourage them to explore the content further.

By utilizing public protest poster aesthetics, I was able to create impact through three major characteristics. In my exploration, I found that the most captivating protest posters had a simplicity of message, in both visuals and text, an emphasis on high contrast, and what I refer to as the "Human Element," a very real presence of what is human, whether in handmade design or in photographic content. Early iterations of my work were much more illustrative, inspired by artists like Saul Bass. Relying more simply on shape and color, my designs were too reductive and gave me less opportunity to play with overlapping symbols. I discovered that moving toward digital collage helped resolve this problem while also grounding this argument in reality with the use of photographic elements.

Designing digital collage and using the medium to explore a narrative proved challenging. I had to find balance between simplicity and complexity, consistency and diversity, fluidity of animation and the "stiffness" of paper collage. Above all, to fully succeed in my solution, it was important that I make my message understandable, but still have it be striking in its complexities to encourage people to engage, rewatch, and reflect.

CONCLUSION

My focus for this project was to explore animated narrative in poster design. I was compelled to tell stories in unconventional ways that would connect with people in unexpected moments. By the very nature of how media is presented to us, our worldviews are reinforced, and rarely questioned. The public poster offers a unique opportunity because it’s presence in public spaces increases accessibility to people of all beliefs and it relies on a quality of design that fights to grab your attention. Simple statements, high contrast graphics, and handmade elements all encourage someone to look even for a moment. But now, with animated narratives, that moment can extend- where stories could be shared and minds may be changed.

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APPENDIX A :

EXPANDED DEFENSE PRESENTATION

THE

PUBLIC POSTER

creating narrative in unconventional ways
to elicit empathy around challenging issues

an exploration of **STORYTELLING** in poster design

ABSTRACT

It is incredibly difficult for a person to change their mind. Confirmation bias and echo chambers are just a few of the reasons people do not give themselves the opportunity to explore new stories, ideas, beliefs. It is now our challenge to connect with people in unconventional ways and explore storytelling in new spaces to give difficult topics more accessibility to public discourse. The Public Protest Poster can be found at the start of most movements for social and political change by creating a simplified statement with a strong graphic for instant impact. Yet, protest posters rely on viewers having some previous knowledge about a particular topic in order to fully understand the scope and target of the poster. This form of visual communication lacks any opportunity for greater context or connection for the viewer to take in new perspectives. This project seeks to explore adding animation to poster design to elaborate on a story that will encourage audiences to engage with topics they may not normally reflect on.

PROMPT

It is our challenge to connect with people in unconventional ways and explore story-telling in new spaces to give difficult topics more accessibility to public discourse.

PROBLEM

How can we animate posters to create a longer narrative that will give greater context around a given issue?

SOLUTION

With an established visual timeline, we can build a series of posters that will hook a viewer's attention, engage them in an elaborate narrative, and provide a moment to return and reflect on the main idea.

THESIS

By exploring animation and storytelling in poster design, we can utilize the impact of public protest posters to increase accessibility of difficult topics while also providing context and opportunity for empathy and open mindedness.

CHANGE MY MIND

CONFIRMATION BIAS

ECHO CHAMBERS

BELIEFS ROOTED IN IDENTITY

Challenge to **connect with people** in unconventional ways and **increase accessibility** to new ideas, beliefs, stories

PUBLIC POSTERS

IMPACT

HOOK

PUBLIC POSTERS + ANIMATION

ENGAGE

ELABORATE

GENDER AS A CONSTRUCT OF TIME

Language Labels Identity

other considerations for

A NARRATIVE ON GENDER

with an unexpected start

CONFIRMATION BIAS

without relying on already established symbols

ECHO CHAMBERS

without anger or judgement and with a sense we all have control over our own identity

BELIEFS ROOTED IN IDENTITY

How to incorporate TIME in design and content

When a story isn’t expected, how do we keep people engaged and encourage a viewer to reflect on a difficult or uncomfortable topic?

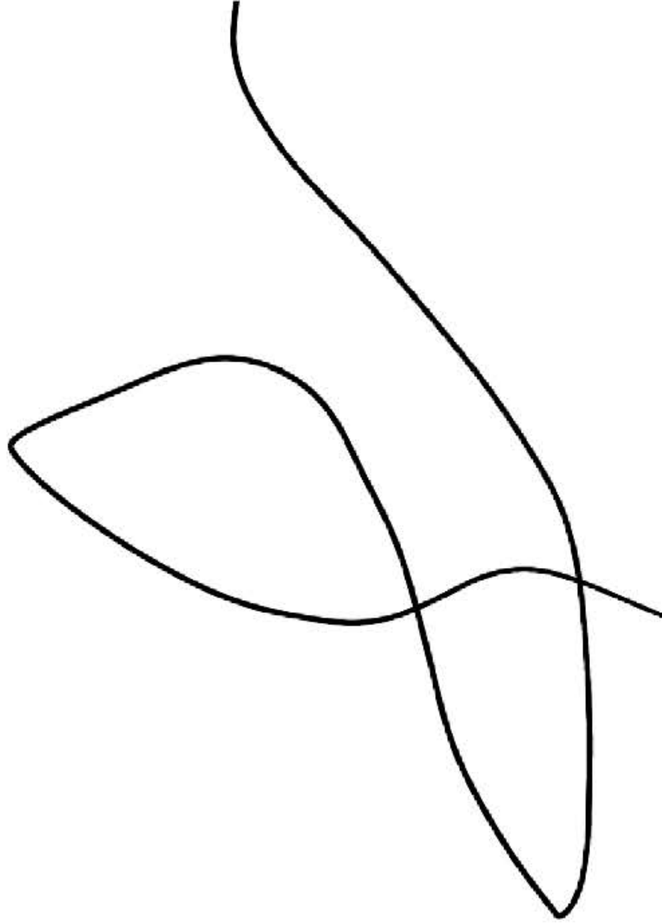
BUILD A SERIES
of posters

A STORY

HOOK
ELABORATE
REFLECT

DISCLAIMER

Conent with **MATURE THEMES**



https://vimeo.com/654190883

HOOK

DESIGNING PROTEST POSTERS

DESIGNING A PUBLIC PROTEST POSTER

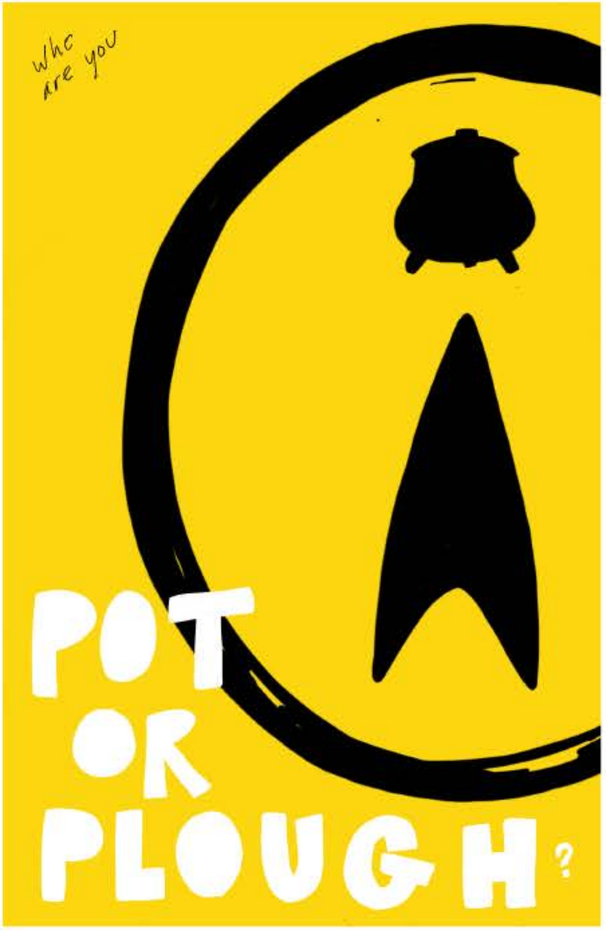
simplification of
visuals and text

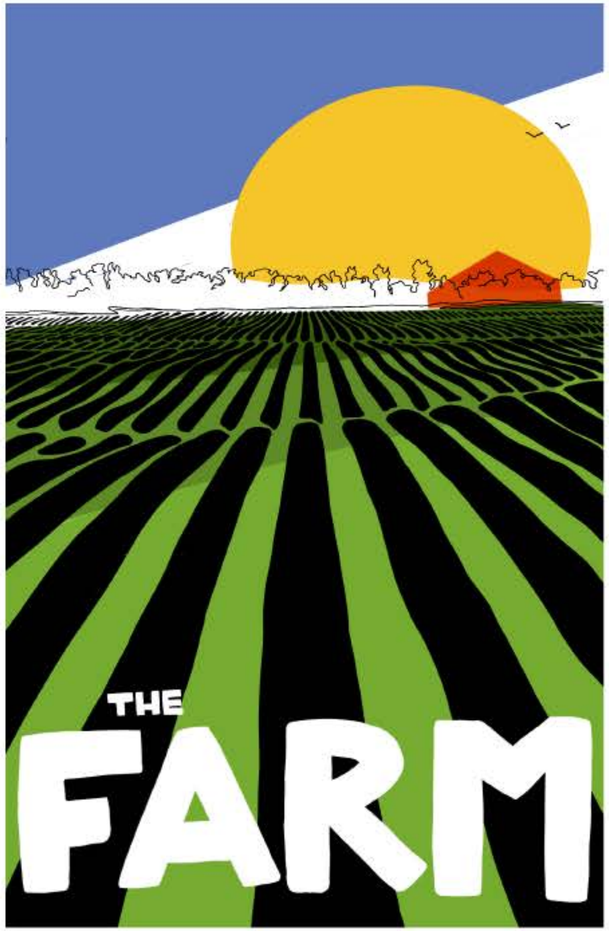
high contrast

handmade elements
and human “quality”

DESIGN

EARLY ITERATIONS





Illustrative

Difficult to simplify without confusing the message/meaning

After the death of my hard drive in late April 2021 and with most of my files lost - chance to explore something new

DIGITAL COLLAGE

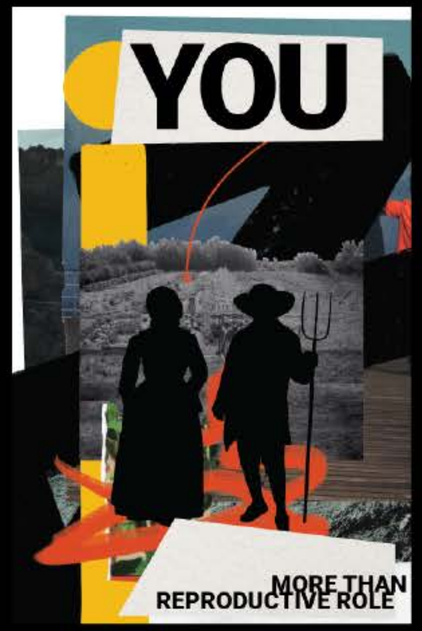
Use of Photography -
Grounded in reality

Layering content to explore
complexity vs simplification

Handmade roughness associated
with protest posters

Notes on

ITERATIONS



UTILIZE INTRO LINE BETTER (CREATE ORDER)

LANGUAGE + CONVERSATION

EARLY ITERATION FOR TIMELINE INTRO

NEEDS TO MAKE A STATEMENT

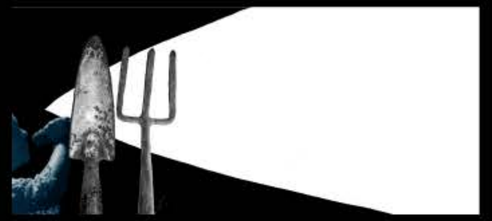
≠ NOT FOCUS

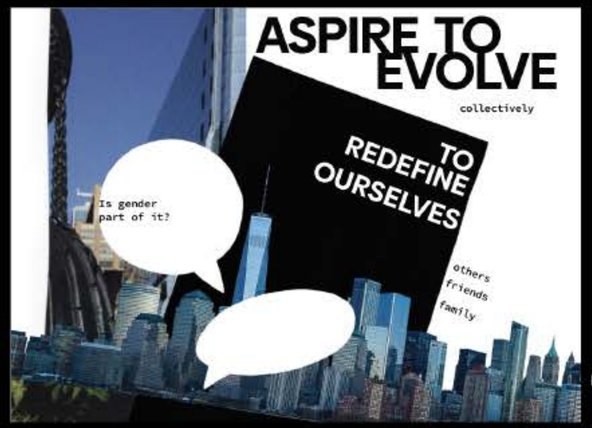
PERIOD EXCLAMATION POINT QUESTION MARK

HOW OBCURED CAN THINGS BECOME BUT STILL READS

QUADRANTS EXPLORATION

REMOVE UNNECESSARY "CHARACTERS"





BALANCE DIFFERENT
DIRECTIONAL BASELINES

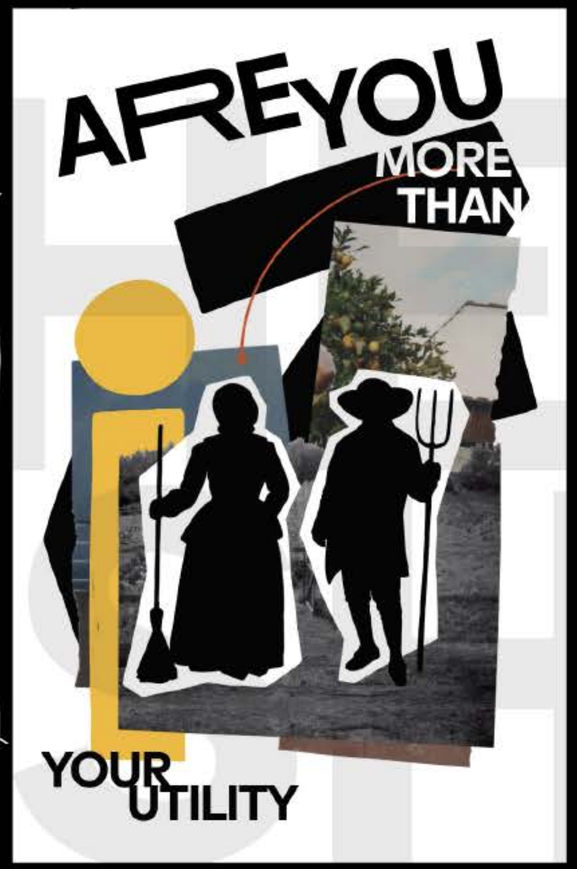
TYPE START ONE PLACE +
MOVE TO ANOTHER

REMOVE RED
COMPETING
FOCUS

INCREASE
CONTRAST OF
"CHARACTERS" +
DESIGN

MORE B/W

INCREASE
READABILITY
@ DISTANCE



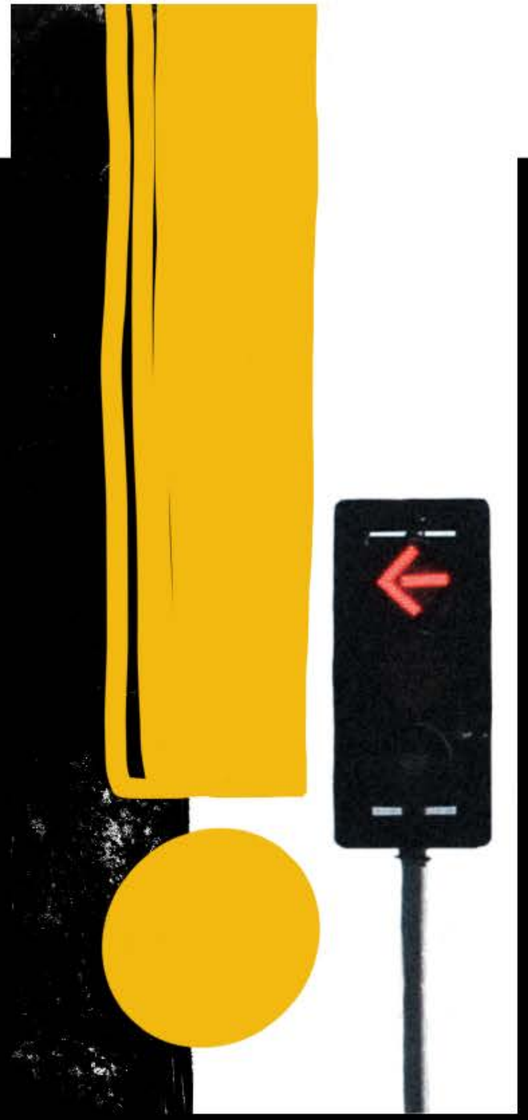
NO

SHRINK TIMELINE
FOR FULL OBJECT
"ZOOM IN" EFFECT
[DURING ANIMATION]

ADD BROOM
[UTILITY + BINARY BALANCE]

SHORTEN ¡ FOR
VISUAL SPACE

→ SIMPLIFY



EARLY MOBILE LAYOUT ANIMATION CONCEPT = DIMENSIONS OF POSTER COULD TRANSLATES TO MOBILE [FOCUS

TYPE

BIENNIAL BOLD

roboto mono

Distinct weight differences can create interesting ways of interacting with each other- floating visual balance

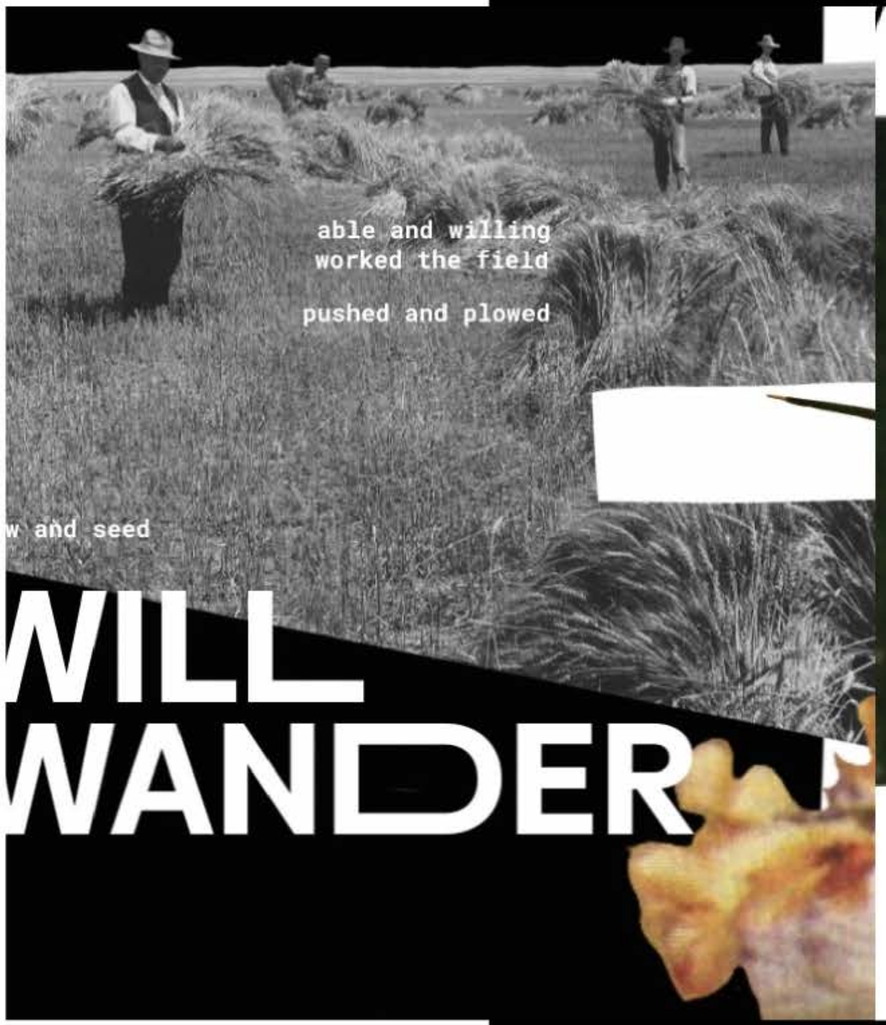
Round BIENNIAL BOLD works well with stretch - elongate

WORDS

transform through

TIME

creates difficulties in composition and readability



WEIGHE
BY
HER
WOMB

worked and
stewed

stirred

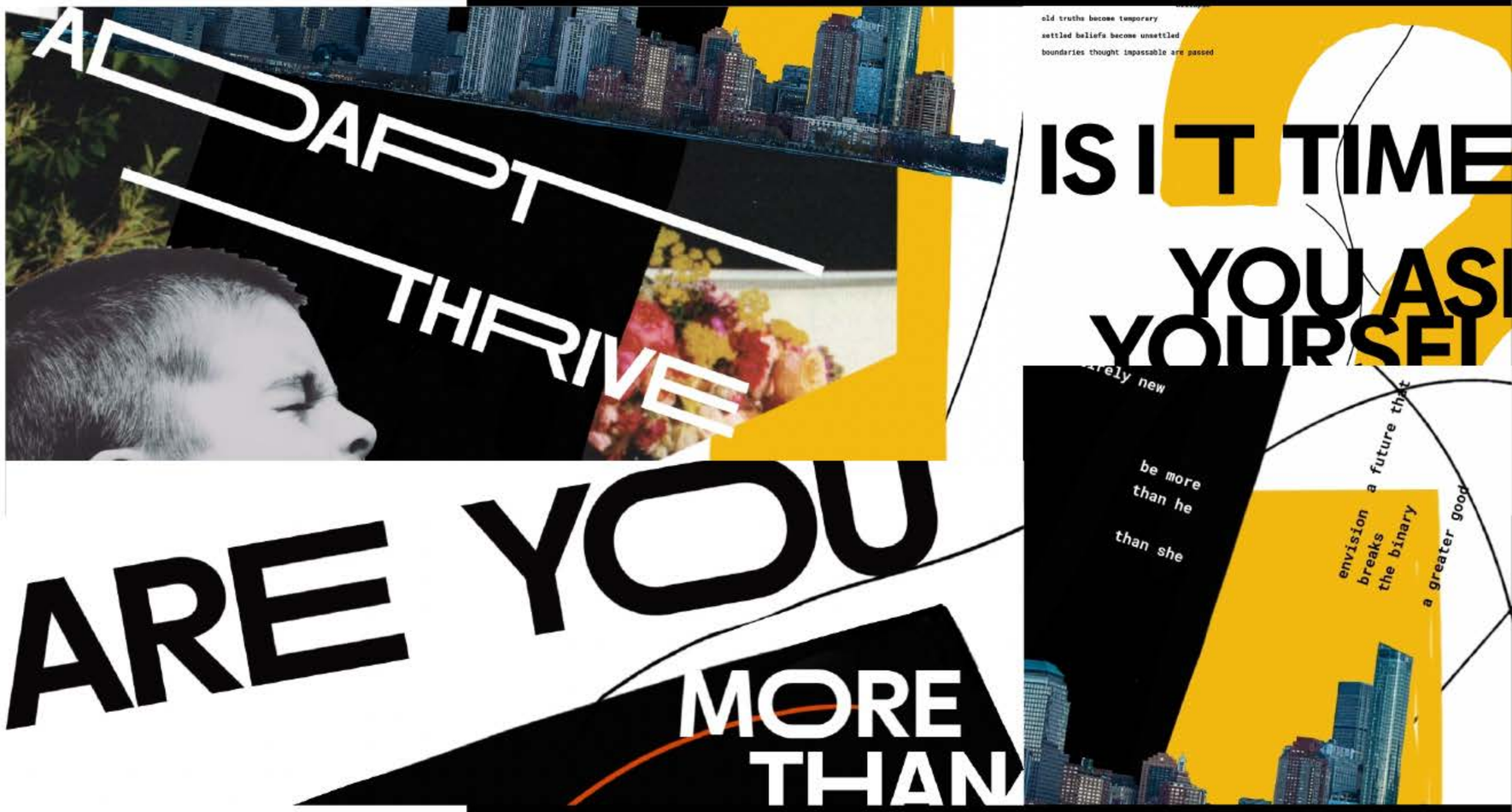
at the home

reproduce
repeat

II

GENDEF
INFORM
if we are told nothing
about a person
except
their gender,
what do we learn about them
their body
their brain
their job
their skills
their hobbies
their taste in music
their kind of intelligence
their cooking ability
why rely on this language to
CATEG
shapes
opportunties
N
WHA

III


ADAPT
THRIVE
old truths become temporary
settled beliefs become unsettled
boundaries thought impassable are passed
IS IT TIME
YOU ASK
YOURSELF
ARE YOU
MORE
THAN
be more
than he
than she
envision a future that
breaks
the binary
a greater good

ELABORATE

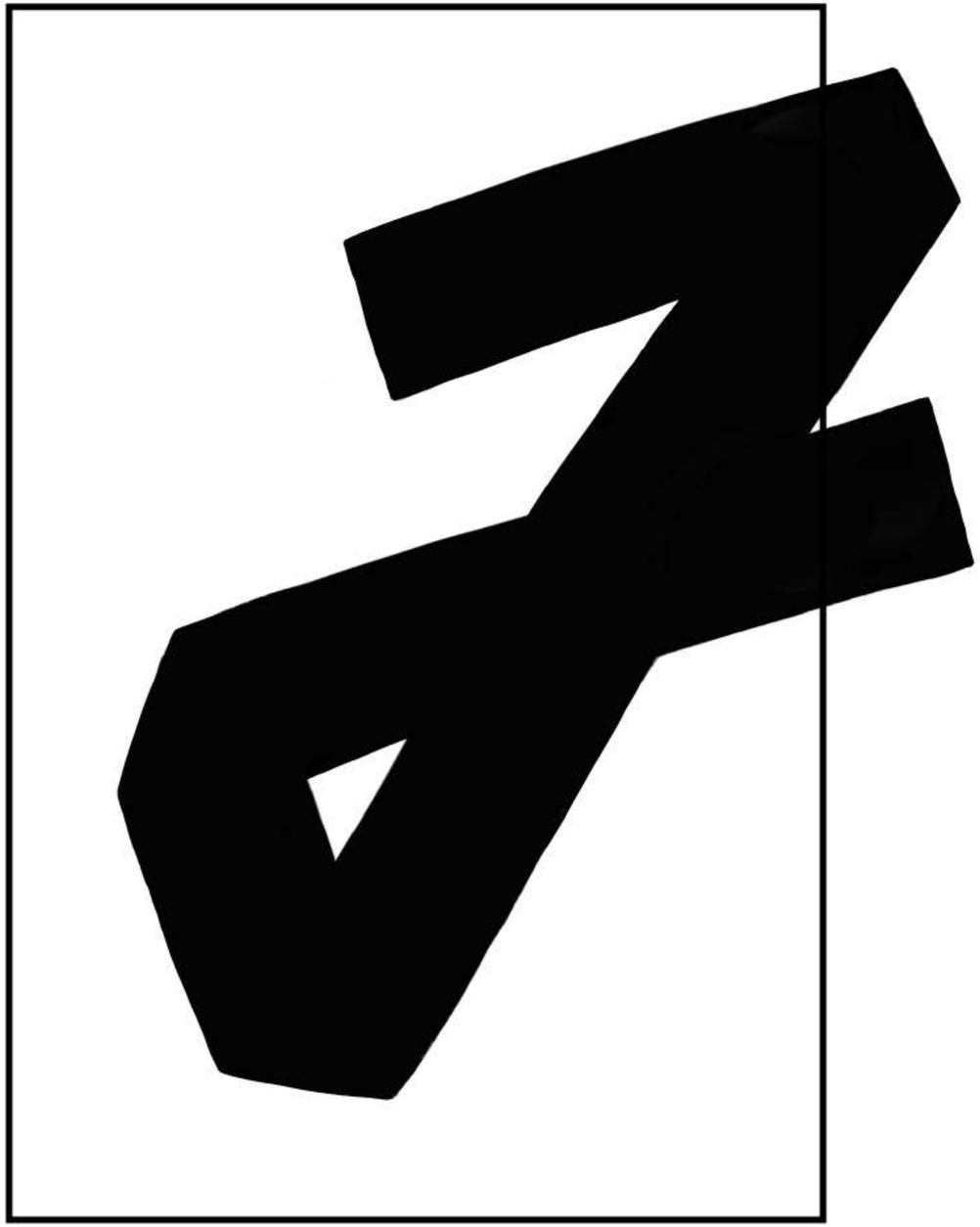
ANIMATING A TIMELINE

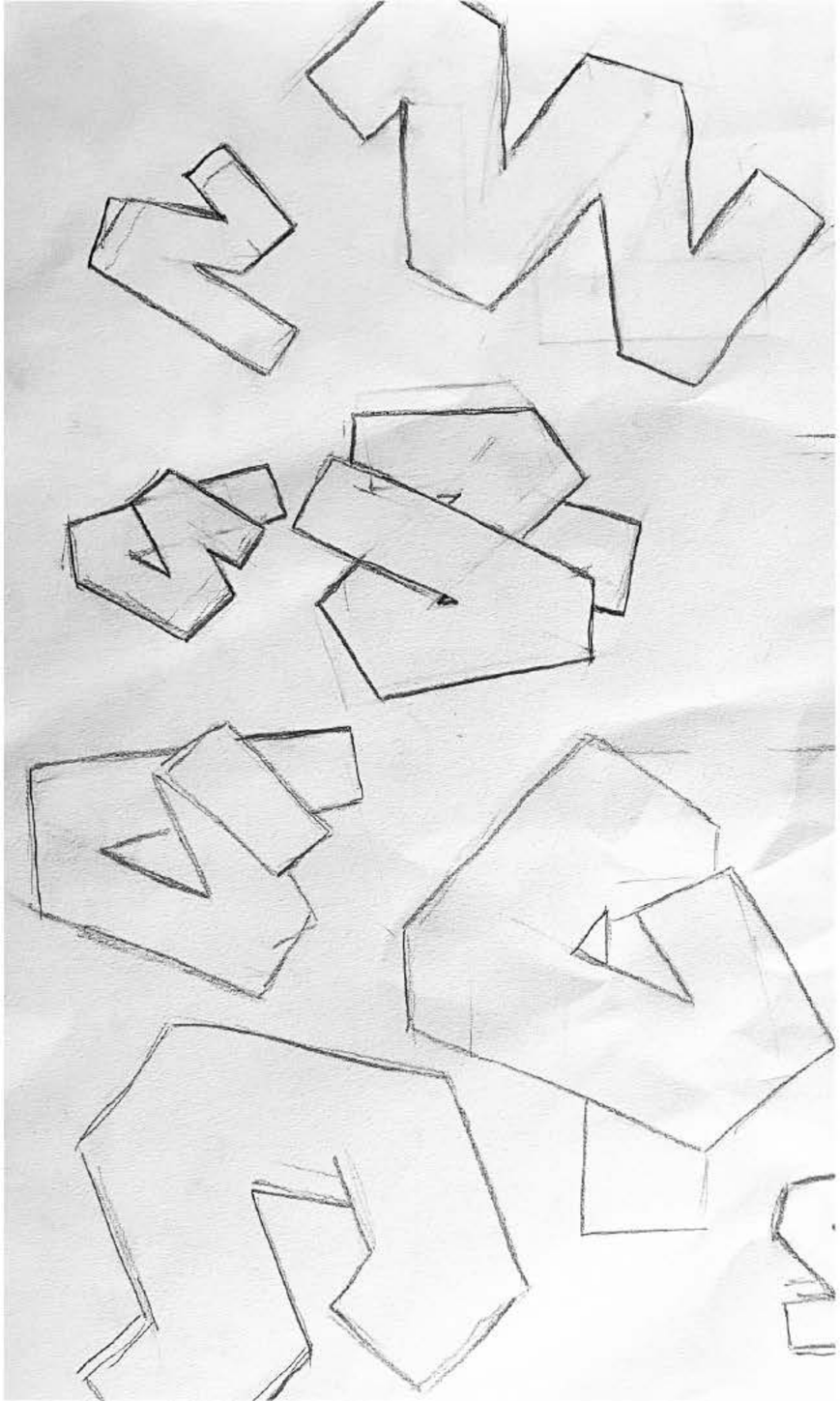
TIMELINE

relates to the original statement

can be dissected

a clear beginning, middle and end



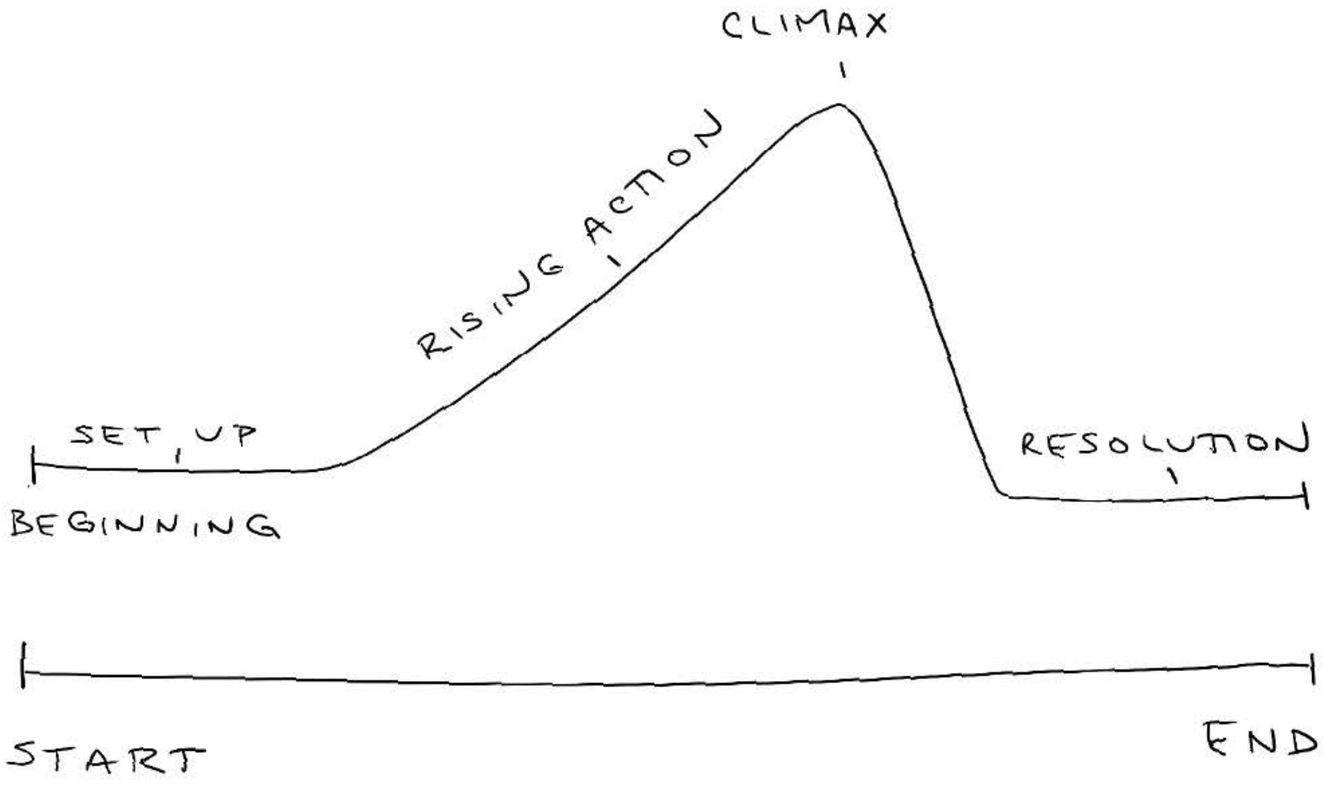


Base for Main Poster

Shape chosen early on-
felt abstract yet directional
(forward and backward)

a yellow circle

a black line



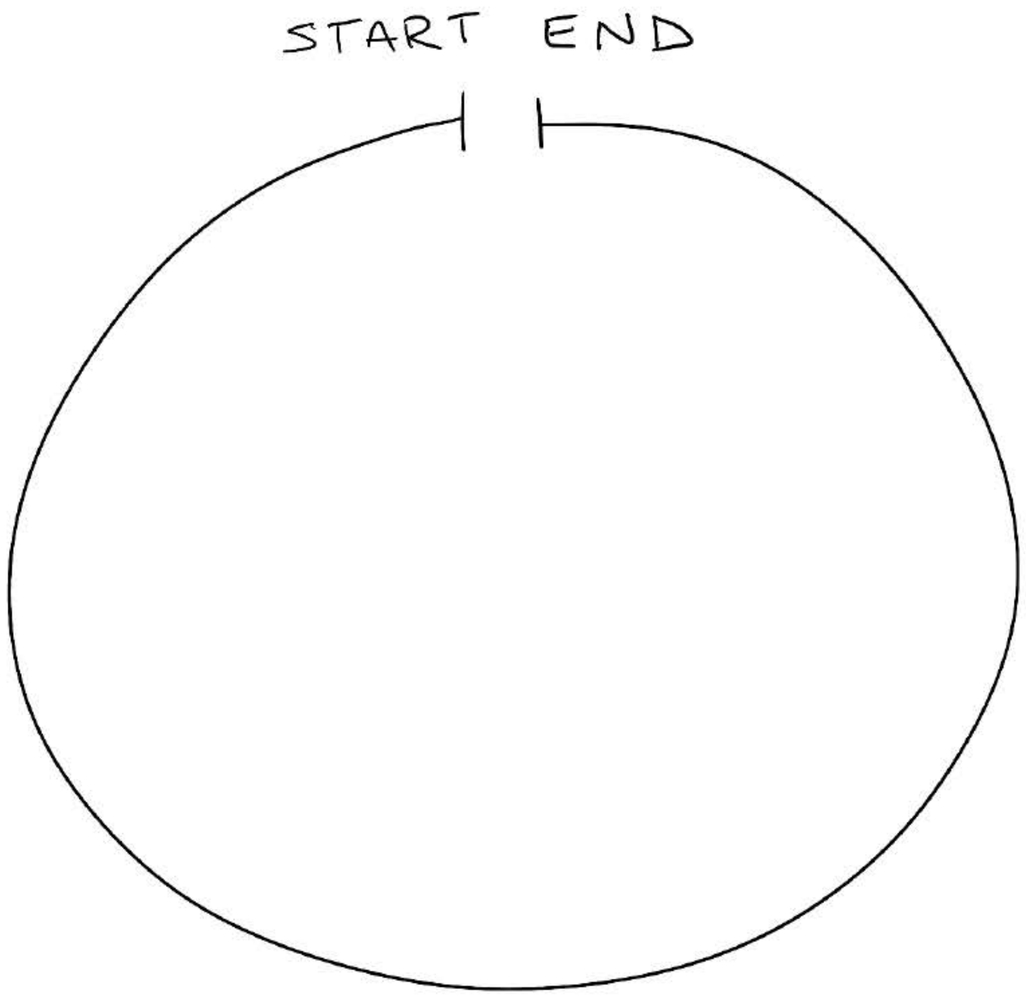
STORY ARC

a standard story has a determined sequence

rely on **FAMILIARITY** to help connect a convincing “argument”

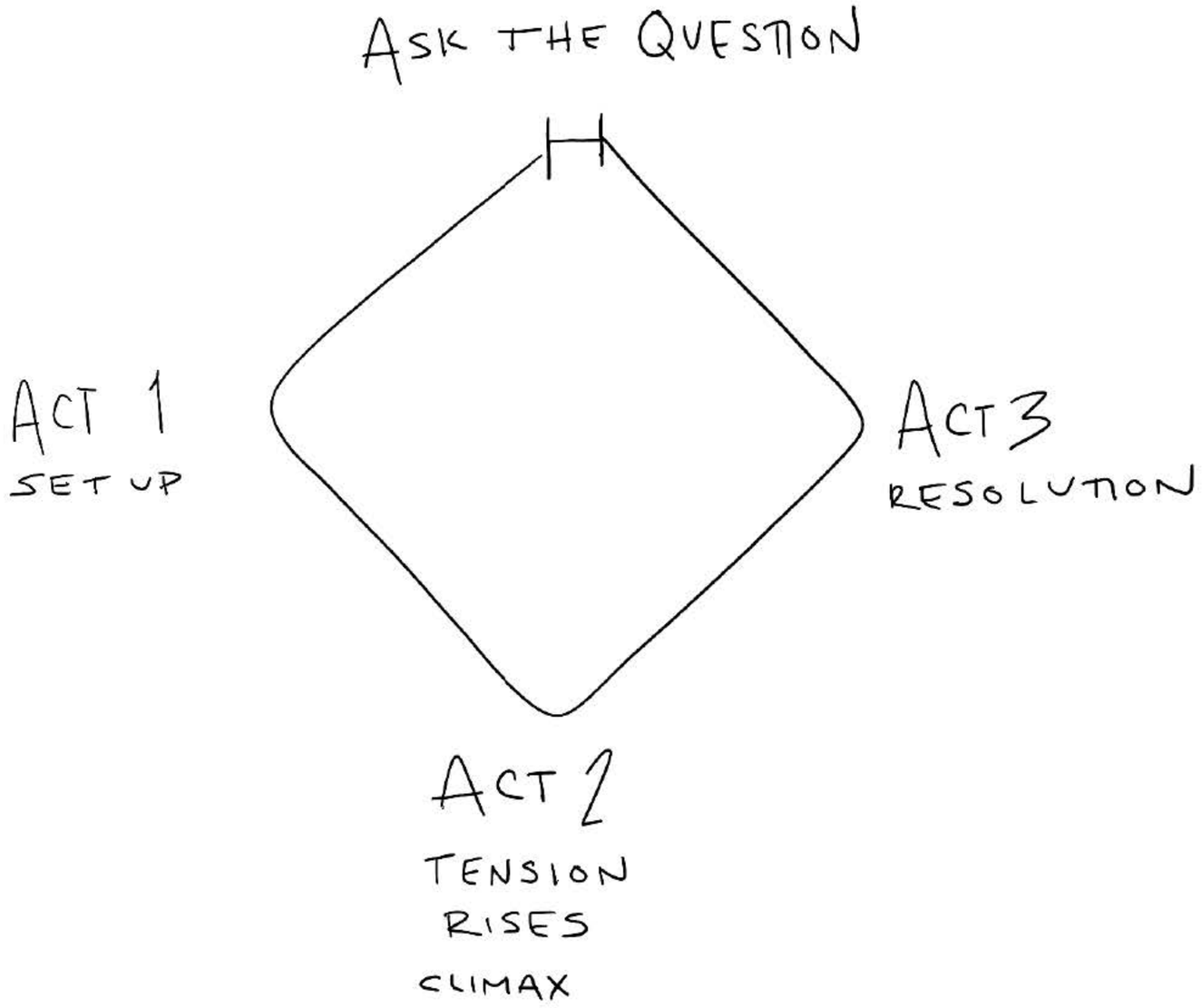
REFLECT

RETURN TO ORIGINAL QUESTION



A POSTER

a chance to **RETURN**
and **REFLECT**



BUILD A SERIES

of posters

A STORY

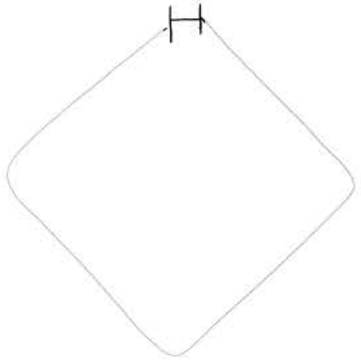
THE QUESTION

Asserts a singular statement

Focuses directly to the viewer

Contains ambiguity to inspire engagement

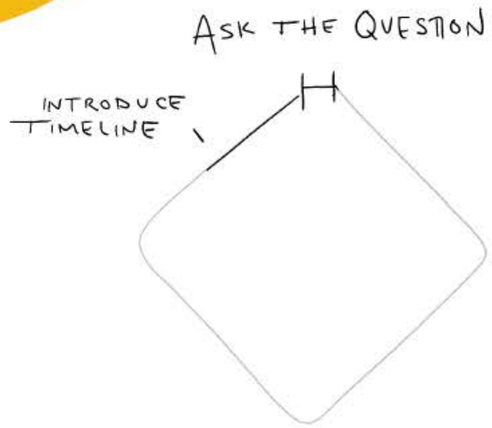
ASK THE QUESTION



Establishes a relationship
to the TIMELINE

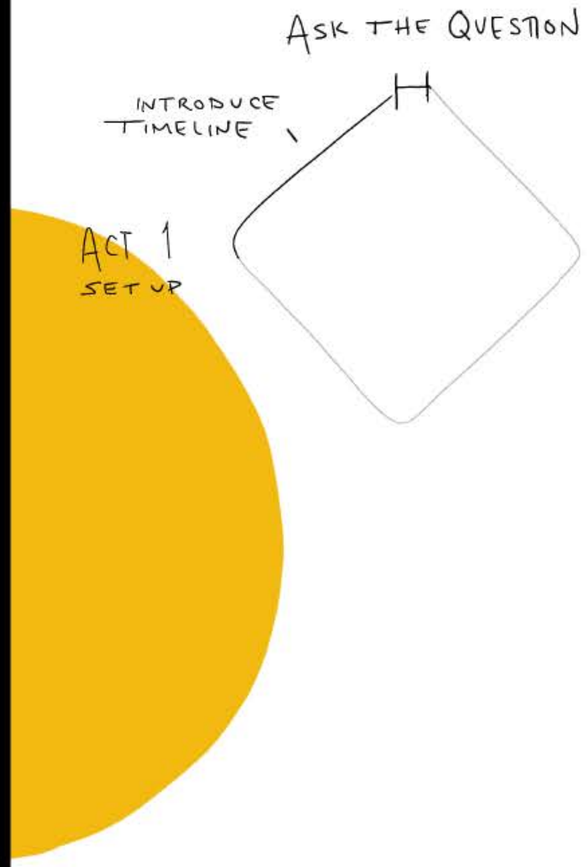
Emphasizes its importance

Transitions from conversation
to narrative



HIghlights base for the binary

Builds up on the history of our gender labels



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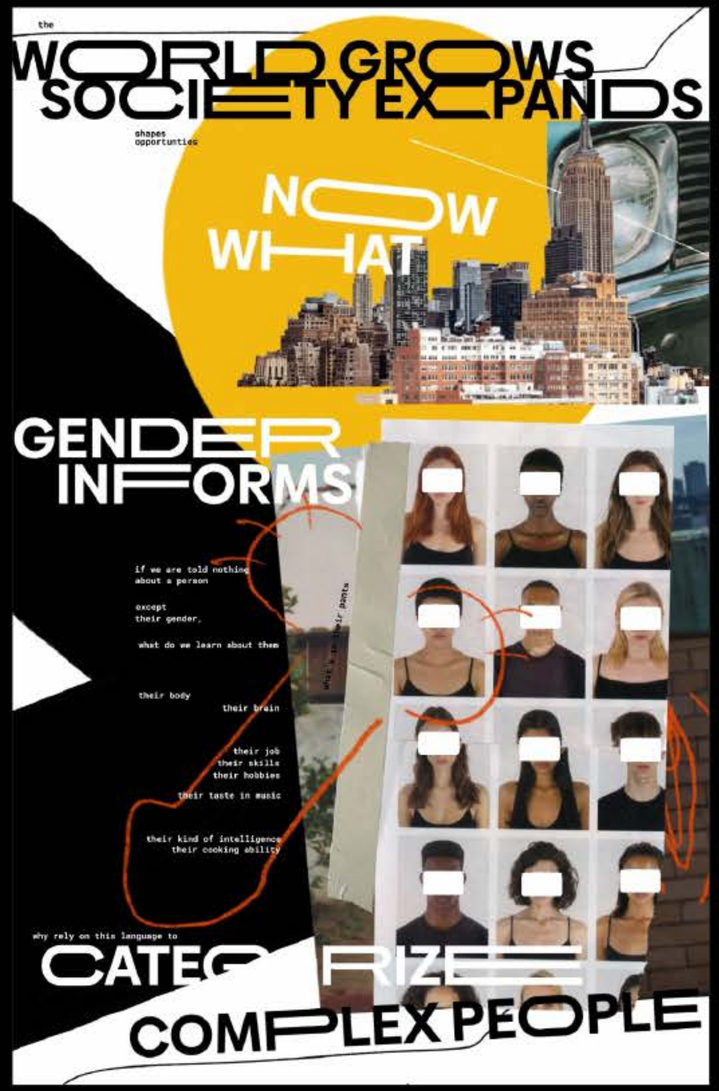
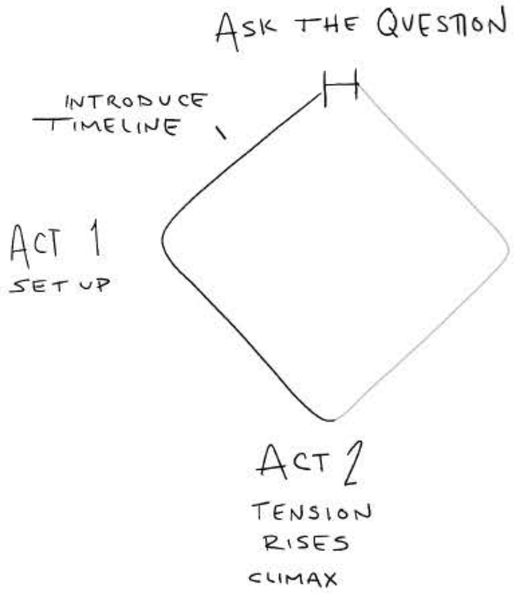
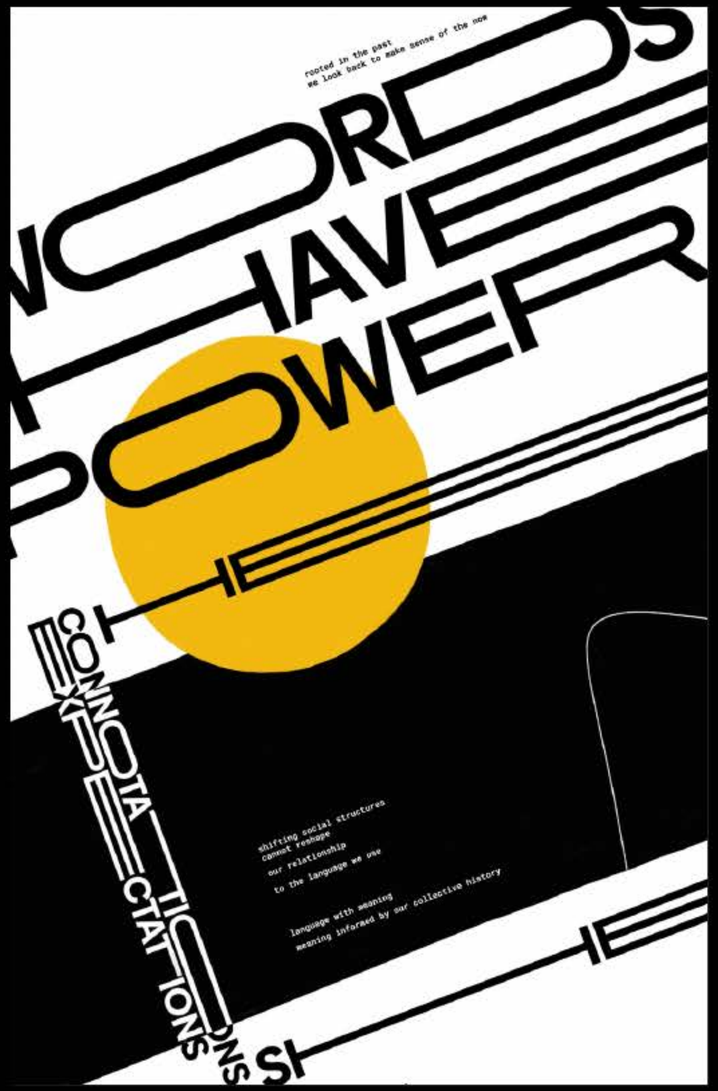


Emphasizes compositional conflict

Highlights a point where the timeline turns back on itself - the way we move is not inherently linear

Elicits shock and discomfort of viewer

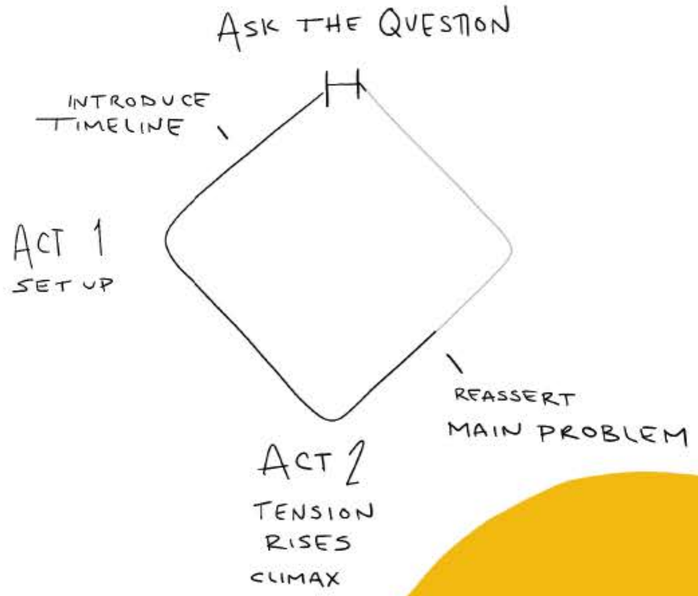




THE PROBLEM

Creates clarity in simplicity

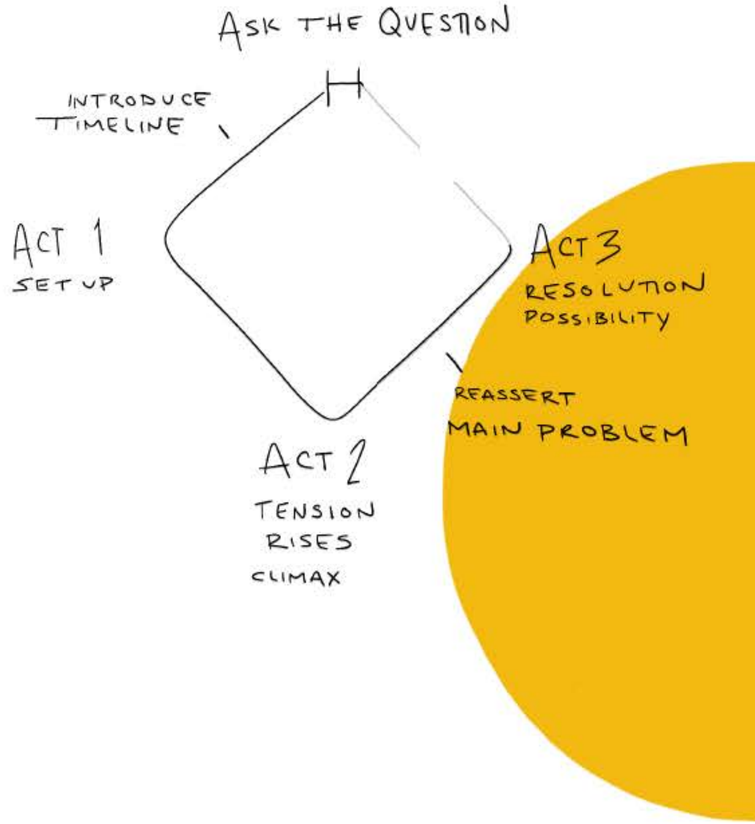
Focuses on text to emphasize the point/problem

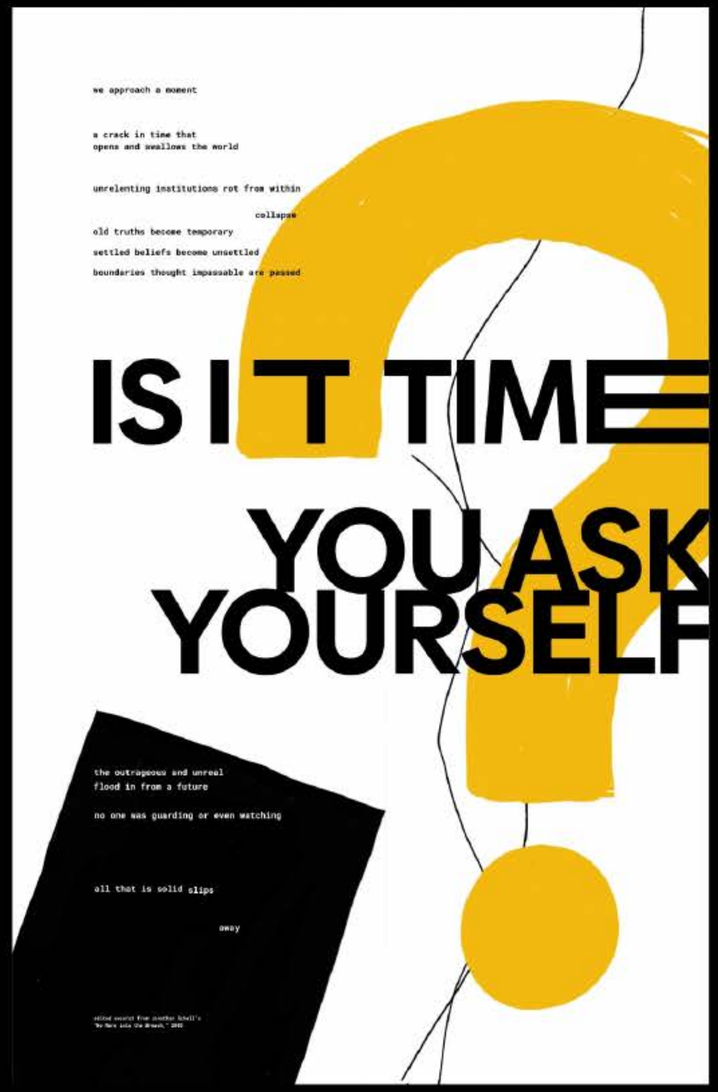


III

Aims for a resolution
to break the “rules”

Finds resolve in unbalanced

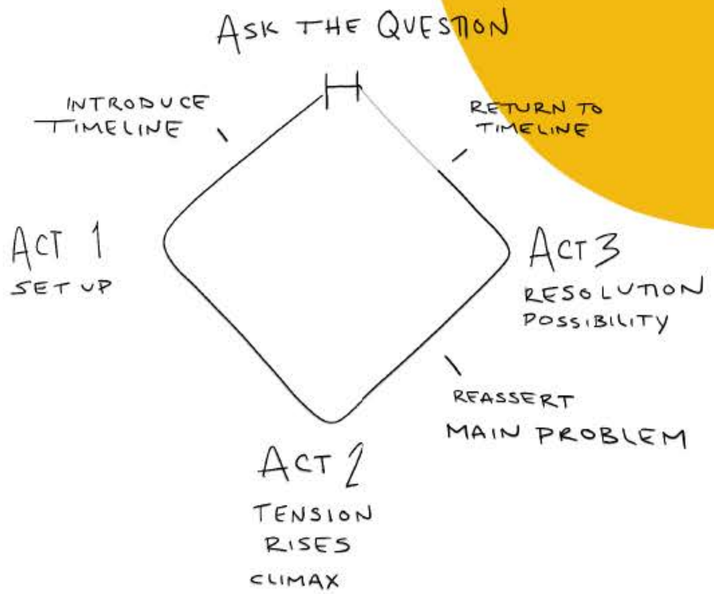




Relates back to the TIMELINE

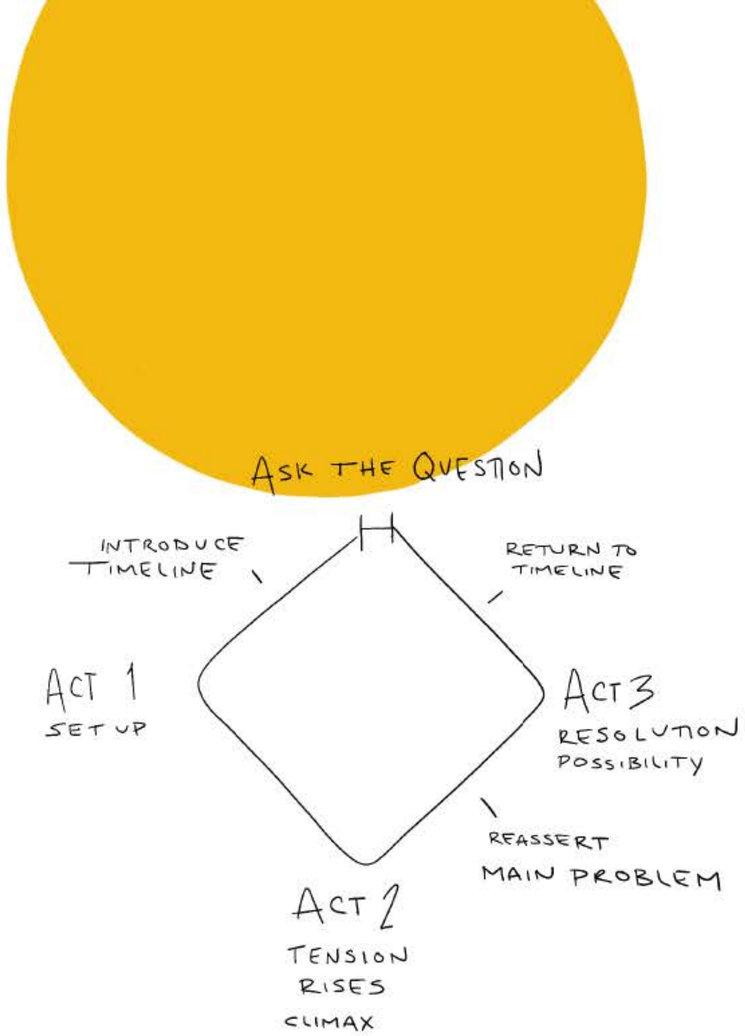
Approaches a moment, a present opportunity to change

Reclaims the conversation with the viewer - a return to “YOU”



THE QUESTION

Reinforces a moment to reflect



FINDING BALANCE

simplicity vs complexity

diversity vs consistency

rewatchability

considerations **FOR THE FUTURE**

application
complexity in interaction

HOOK
ELABORATE
REFLECT

THE PUBLIC POSTER

Elizabeth Hiler
RIT VCDE Thesis
FALL 2021

APPENDIX B :

BIBLIOGRAPHY & REFERENCES

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APPENDIX C:

SCREEN CAPTURE
CASE STUDY PAGE

RIT | College of Art and Design
Visual Communication Design

THE
PUBLIC POSTER

creating narrative in unconventional ways to elicit empathy around challenging issues

Date of Completion
Dec 2021

Design Tools
Illustrator
Procreate
After Effects

CHANGE MY MIND

A number of heuristics have been studied that indicate humans are irrational. We not only surround ourselves with information that confirms our beliefs but we also have a tendency to downplay or even wholly ignore evidence to opposing viewpoints.

CONFIRMATION BIAS

ECHO CHAMBERS

BELIEFS ROOTED IN IDENTITY

Access and exposure to differing opinions is critical to learn and adapt as individuals and as a society.

Challenge to **connect with people** in unconventional ways and **increase accessibility** to new ideas, beliefs etc.

Prompt

The Public Protest Poster can be found at the start of most movements for social and political change by creating a **simplified statement** with a strong graphic for **instant impact.**

Problem

Protests posters **rely on viewers having some previous knowledge** about a particular topic in order to fully understand the scope and target of the poster. This form of visual communication **lacks any opportunity for greater context or connection** for the viewer to take in new perspectives.

Is there a way to incorporate **ANIMATION** into **POSTER DESIGN** and turn an abstracted, symbolic statement into a **STORY TO PROVIDE CONTEXT AND ELICIT EMPATHY?**

Using protest poster design aesthetics, my project uses animation to connect and build a series of posters to engage viewers in a story that will give them context to reflect on the original idea.

HOOK.

ELABORATE.

REFLECT.

CASE STUDY: GENDER LABELS

While there are a host of arguments for or against non-binary gender expression, my project focuses on how, as an element of language, pronouns are no longer informative or useful in public spheres. I am not advocating the complete "degendering" of modern society, but rather by focusing on words as a tool of communication and categorization, the argument calls into question why gender labels are such a pervasive part of our interactions when they carry no real value to the conversation. Are we capable, as an intelligent, expressive species, of moving forward without gender identifiers everywhere all the time?

DISCLAIMER

Conent with **MATURE THEMES**

CREATING THE HOOK

DESIGNING THE PROTEST POSTER

Protest posters can be found throughout history as iconic imagery that became the face for social and political change.

Their unique aesthetic helped **capture the attention** of the public and rally the people behind a singular statement or a powerful cause through...

1 simplification of visuals and text

2 high contrast

3 handmade elements and human "quality"

Early Iterations

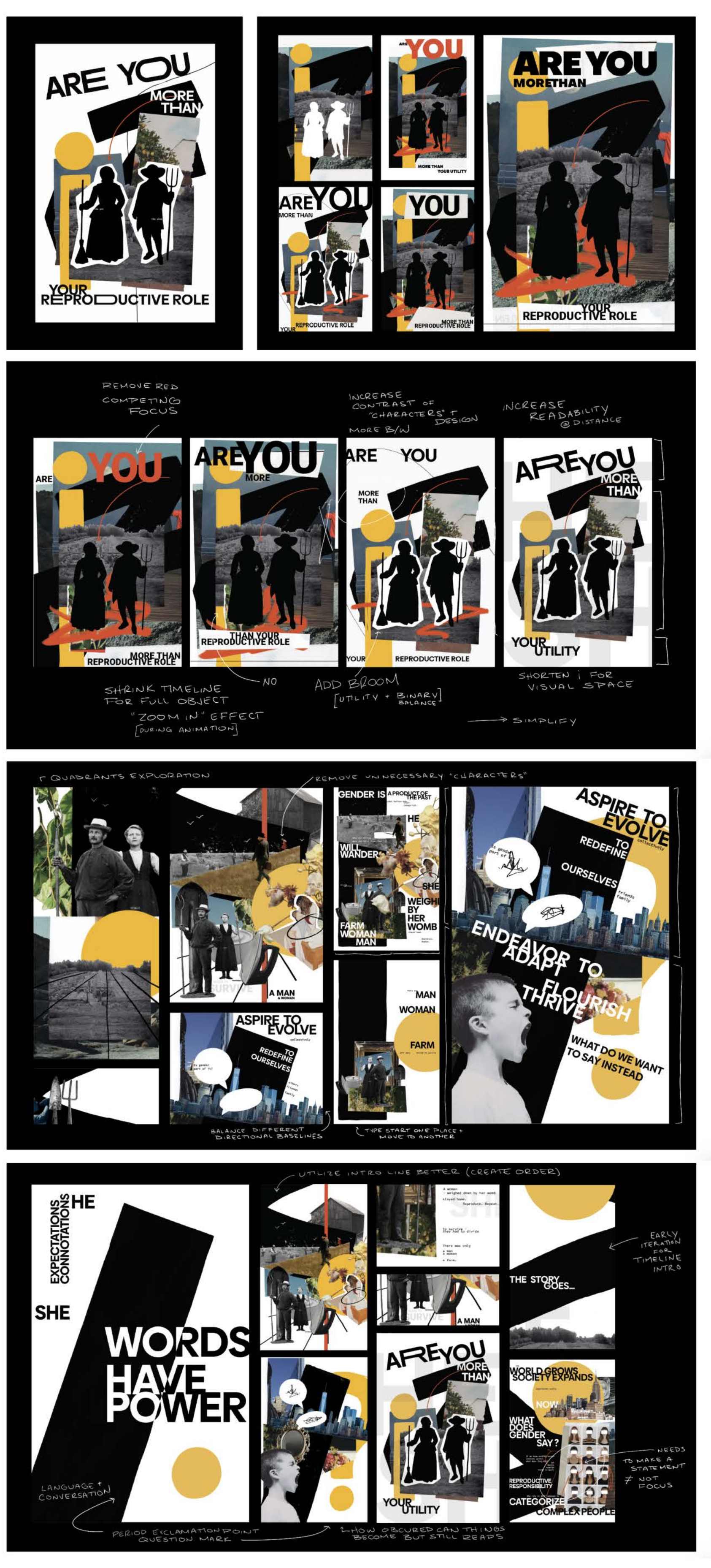
Relying more simply on shape and color, early illustrative designs were too reductive and gave me less opportunity to play with overlapping symbols.

DIGITAL COLLAGE

With the use of photography, the story felt more grounded in reality.

More visually dynamic to layer content and symbols.

Handmade roughness associated with protest posters.



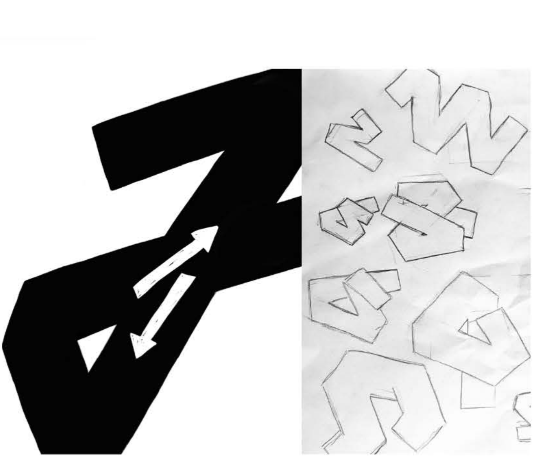
ELABORATING A STORY

ANIMATING A TIMELINE

A visual object that can relate to the original statement

Can be separated into subsections

Assumes a beginning, middle and end to the story



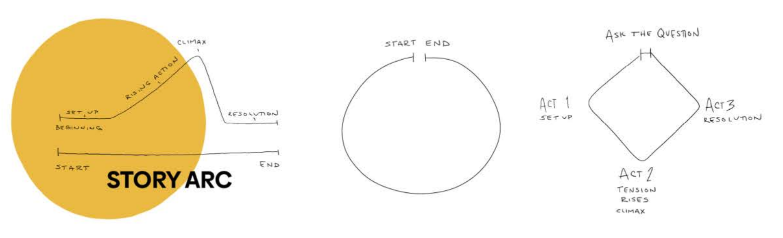
Shape was chosen early on as base for main poster.

Abstract and directional.

Suggesting idea going backwards and forwards in time.

RETURNING TO REFLECT

CIRCULAR STORYTELLING



With tough topics, using **standard story** conventions I can help create an **approachable and believable** narrative.

Using posters, I have the unique opportunity to **begin and end** with the same point.

Starting with a question, a story could develop our understanding of the content and **change our perspective** by the end.

Has our own understanding of the question changed?

FINDING BALANCE

simplicity vs complexity

diversity vs consistency

rewatchability