CONTRAST

Contrast is established by difference; there is no contrast unless there are at least two things to compare, even if one of those things is simply the background on which the other sits. Contrast intensifies the individual properties of the things being compared: black versus white, big versus small, rough versus smooth, moving versus stationary. It influences the order in which we see things and the importance we assign to them.

Through contrast, we allocate attention to some things over others; the degree of visual difference heightens or lessens our ability to distinguish between a message and its environment and between message elements and other objects in the visual field. What grabs our attention depends on how much difference there is between something and its surrounding context, not just whether something is big or small. When everyone screams, it is the quiet person who is noticed.

We are naturally wired to detect contrast. Our survival depends on recognizing those things that are unexpected in an otherwise undifferentiated

environment. Something that moves in the forest is to be feared or seen as prey. We hide by "blending into the background," by not distinguishing ourselves by visual features or behaviors that contrast with our surroundings.

Our attention is also drawn to things that do not seem to fit conceptually with other elements in the scene. Studies of eye movement, for example, show that the greatest number of fixations (places where our eyes stop moving around a picture and rest on something in particular) occur in the areas of the picture that are least predictable (Spoehr & Lehmkuhle, 1982). A tiger in a barnyard of farm animals, for example, draws more attention than other animals, not just because it is fierce but because it contrasts with the animals we expect to see on a farm (Davis, 2012). We view such conceptually different elements as informative because we seek a reason for them being present with more predictable elements of the message. We perceive the contrast as meaningful.

Figure 3.3
Contrast

Standing out has less to do with the visual properties of the element or object than with its relation to everything around

it. Getting attention depends on contrast with the surrounding visual field. Contrast among too many elements and nothing stands out.

In gaining audience attention, designers must first separate messages from an environment of information overload. With too many things competing for our attention, important messages must be distinct from the visual or sound qualities of the surrounding conditions. Do you have trouble locating your favorite breakfast cereal on the supermarket shelves? Think about the visual qualities necessary for packaging to stand out in this visually cluttered aisle. Bright colors, big type, and a frantic layout certainly won't be enough (Figure 3.3). On the other hand, a bright and dynamic arrangement of big type can draw our attention to an otherwise unexceptional building in an industrial section of town (Figure 3.4). Getting attention does not depend on the visual properties of the message alone, but instead, on the contrast between the properties of the message and its perceptual context.

Figure 3.4
MoMA QNS, 2002 Michael Maltzan Architecture Photography: Christian Richters
The oversized signage identifies the Museum of Modern Art in industrial Queens, New York.

weight \ face-width	extended	roman	oblique	condensed	oblique condensed	ultra condensed
light		Univers 45	*Univers 46*	Univers 47	*Univers 48*	Univers 49
regular	Univers 53	Univers 55	Univers 56	Univers 57	*Univers 58*	Univers 59
bold	**Univers 63**	**Univers 65**	***Univers 66***	**Univers 67**	***Univers 68***	
black	**Univers 73**	**Univers 75**	***Univers 76***			

Figure 3.5
Univers type family, 1957 release Adrian Frutiger (1928–2015)
Frutiger's systematic design of the Univers type family includes forty-four different variations that allow designers to achieve both subtle and dramatic contrasts among information units. The first digit in the typeface number indicates weight and the second digit refers to face-width. The completeness of the system makes it possible to establish a clear hierarchy among elements without sacrificing the

harmony gained by using a single type family.

Designers also use contrast to direct audience attention to certain elements *within* messages to emphasize specific content or to signal where in the composition to begin the interpretive task. Used sparingly, contrast establishes hierarchy. It tells us where to look first, second, and third. In a word-processing application, for instance, we are able to use simple but effective differences in type weight (bold or light), posture (italic or Roman), or even underlining to draw the reader's attention or emphasize particular words.

Variations within type families (in weight, proportion, or posture) and changes in type size allow designers to differentiate groupings of content. The goal of late modernist typography, for example, was to communicate with maximum clarity the author's hierarchy among units of information. A quote was to look different from a headline. Annotations in the margin were to be different from and less important than the primary text. Modernist type families designed in the middle of the twentieth century assisted designers in this task through carefully

articulated levels of contrast among the typeface variations in the family. Bold type attracted the eyes to keywords in an otherwise light block of text. Italics identified captions or subheads by distinguishing them from other kinds of text by contrasting posture.

Adrian Frutiger's 1957 systematic design of the Univers type family, for example, ensured that contrast within typeset text could be achieved through an array of variations without sacrificing overall unity among typographic elements. Unlike many other type families, the height of lowercase letters (called x-height) set in Univers is the same across all typeface variations in the family. This standardization achieves harmony when members of the family are used together and emphasizes contrasting changes in weight or proportion by keeping height constant. And by designing many Univers typeface variations, Frutiger gave designers maximum flexibility in ways to create emphasis. While we might not detect the subtle difference between bold and regular in the same body of text, we will see contrast between bold and light (Figure 3.5).

Contrast is also important in establishing the visual characteristics of a single typeface across twenty-six letters. Typefaces are composed of very particular relationships between strokes and open spaces, thicks and thins, straight lines and curves. The degree of contrast among these parts of letterforms determines the texture of typeset text. Some typefaces maximize contrast (they sparkle), while others even out the distribution of black strokes and white spaces across the alphabet. *Bodoni*, for example, uses extreme contrast between thick and thin strokes to establish its visual character, while *Futura* has more uniform stroke widths and a consistent distribution of white space. Jonathan Barnbrook's *Exocet*, on the other hand, draws attention to very specific characters of the alphabet, using extreme contrast among individual letterforms to create random patterns within typeset text. The degree of contrast within typeset paragraphs influences how much of our attention those letters or paragraphs command in a composition (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6
Exocet typeface, 1991 Jonathan Barnbrook For Emigre Foundry
Unlike other typefaces that create harmony through similarity among the twenty-six characters of the alphabet, Barnbrook's design maximizes the contrast in certain letterforms. When set in paragraphs, the typeface creates random patterns of emphasis.

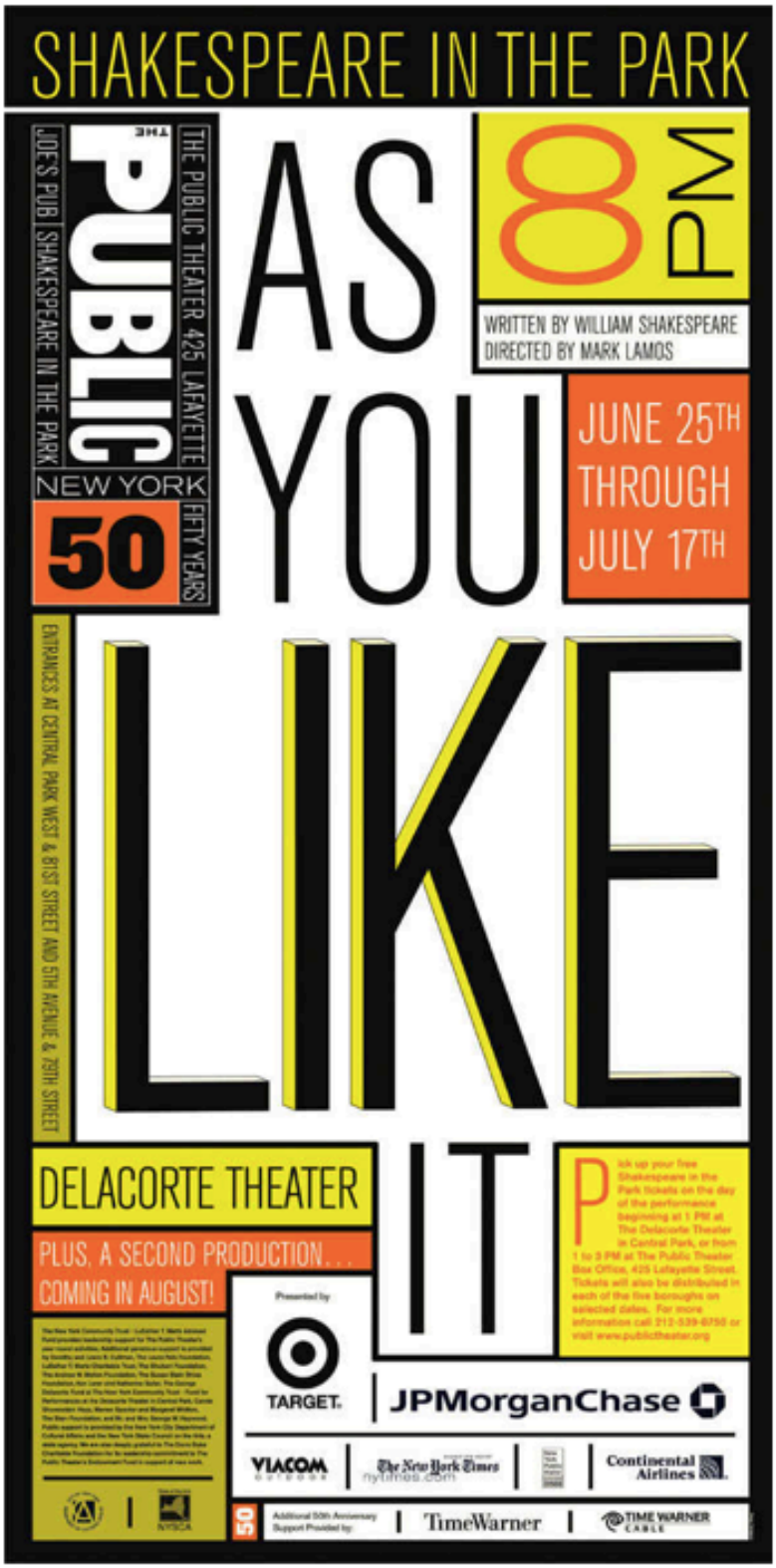
SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK
THE PUBLIC THEATER 425 LAFAYETTE
JOE'S PUB SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK
THE PUBLIC
NEW YORK
50
FIFTY YEARS
AS YOU LIKE IT
8 PM
WRITTEN BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
DIRECTED BY MARK LAMOS
JUNE 25TH THROUGH JULY 17TH
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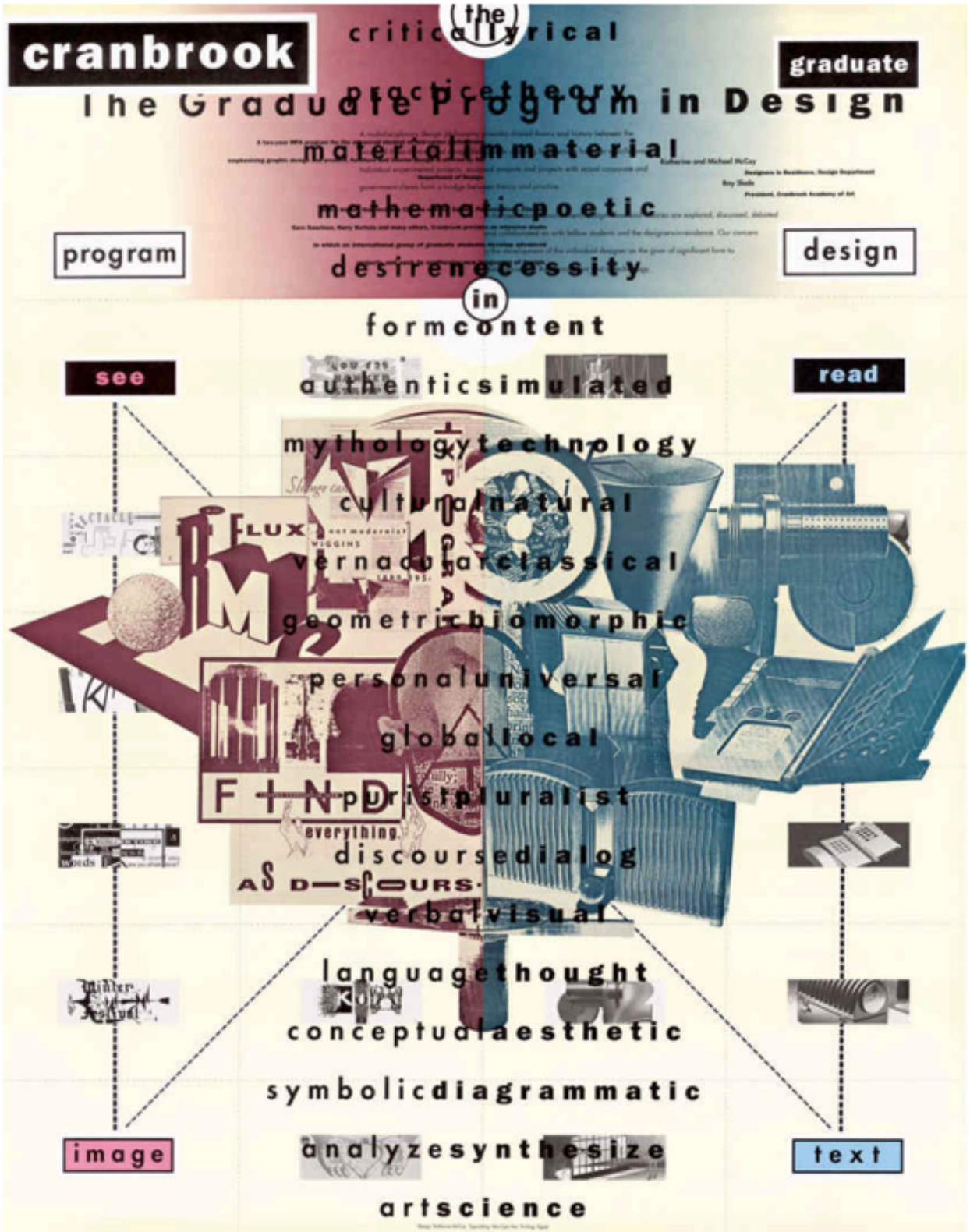
Figure 3.7
Public Theater / Shakespeare in the Park / As You Like It, 2012
Paula Scher
Contrasting size, color, and orientation in the typography control what readers see first and interpret as most important.

Under different philosophies, some designers use contrast to feature certain compositional elements over others in a clear hierarchy of importance, while other designers challenge whether design should suggest a single interpretation of the text. Paula Scher's poster for the Shakespeare in the Park Festival blows up type to cartoonish size to draw the viewer's attention to the simplicity of the phrase, "As you like it" and its importance as the title of a play (Figure 3.7). Katherine McCoy's poster advertising a college design program, on the other hand, treats all typography equally, reinforcing the contradictory nature of words in the text. The lack of contrast in McCoy's work produces no obvious visual hierarchy among elements, consistent with a theory of design that no single interpretation is possible (Figure 3.8).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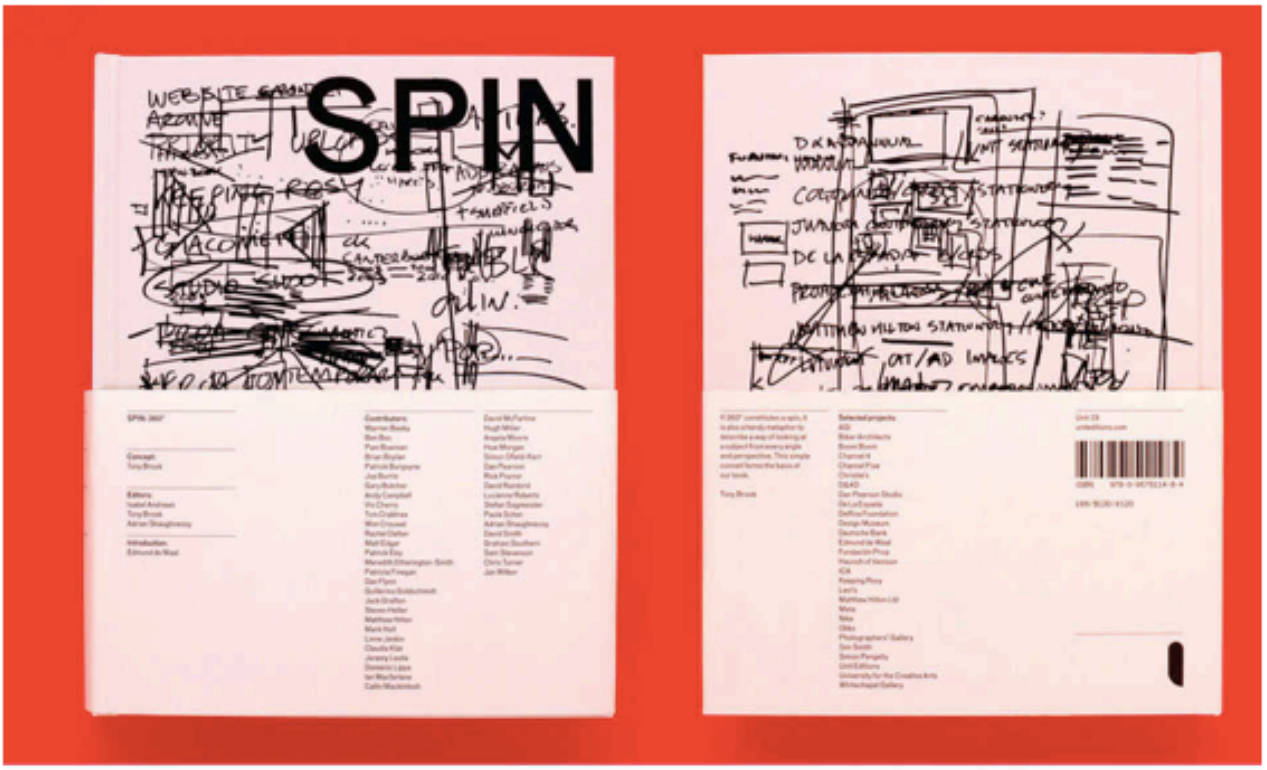
form content
authentic simulated
mythology technology
cultural natural
vernacular classical
geometric biomorphic
personal universal
global local
purist pluralist
discourse dialog
verbal visual
language thought
conceptual aesthetic
symbolic diagrammatic
analyze synthesize
art science

Figure 3.8
Cranbrook Academy of Art Design poster, 1989 Katherine McCoy
Postmodern work of the 1980s and 1990s rejected the notion of a clear visual hierarchy that leads to a single interpretation. Typography and images struggled for dominance, consistent with the theory that there are many possible meanings and that the reader "writes" the text.


SPIN

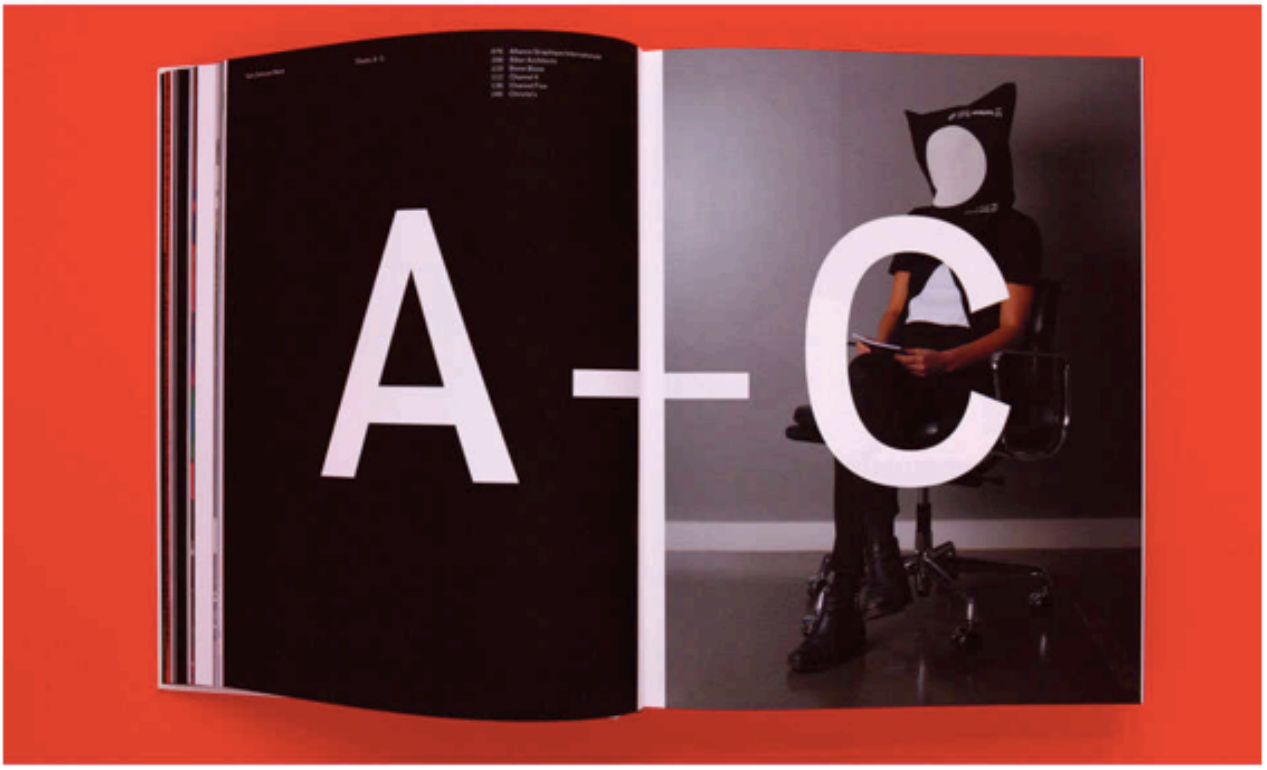
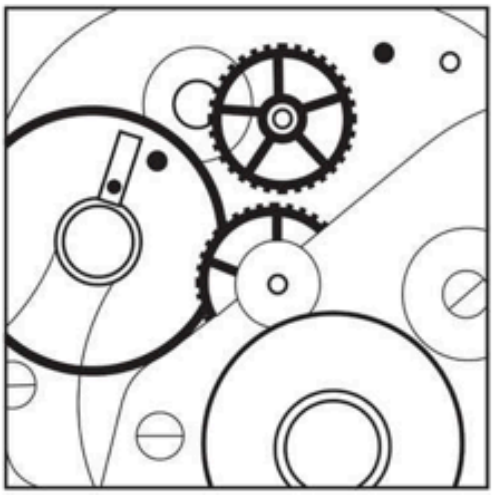

A+C

Figure 3.9
SPIN: 360°, 2015 © Spin
The book on the work of London studio SPIN juxtaposes strongly contrasting images throughout the publication: sketches with highly refined typeset text, full-bleed photographs with open pages, large typographic elements with clusters of small images, black and white with color. A recurring visual reference to a horizontal centerline provides continuity among contrasting layouts.

Contrast is important in determining emphasis among and within images as well as text. In a mostly black-and-white composition, color draws our attention. We notice organic forms when surrounded by geometry, typographic forms when surrounded by photography (Figure 3.9). In a line drawing of an object, contrast in line weight tells us what features are most important or serve a similar function (Figure 3.10).

Contrast, therefore, is an important attribute in gaining attention. It is a means through which designers emphasize what is important in a composition and how the meanings among various elements differ.




THREE
HUNDRED
AND
SIXTY
DEGREES


ökko

Figure 3.10
Line weight variations

Contrasting line weights in a drawing assign emphasis to particular features of the drawing. It is important to be consistent in the use of lines so that random changes in weight don't appear meaningless.