

“Unsmoothing” Against the “Good Design”

My current studio practice, centered on the concept of “unsmoothing,” deliberately introduces friction, contradiction, and systematic malfunction to expose hidden rules of design. I have also been drawn to what is lost when things become too perfect, too resolved and too seamless. The process of smoothing, whether through design systems, digital interfaces, or in daily life, is often presented as a form of refinement and a movement toward clarity and purity. Yet I am interested in the residue that smoothing erases (textures, error, friction, traces of process that reveal human touch and time). This investigative approach, which treats error as a critical tool, stands in direct and productive tension with the design philosophy of Dieter Rams, specifically his Ten Principles for Good Design. His work and his principles form one of the most powerful articulations of modernist design ethics, emphasizing on the vision of order, honesty, and restraint. But precisely because his philosophy is so coherent, it also reveals the edges of my own practice. Rams’ pursuit of purity, simplicity, and universality stands in tension with my inquiry into the uneven, the raw, and the unresolved.

Dieter Rams’ Principles

Dieter Rams’ design ethos is the ultimate expression of smoothing: the process of reducing noise, irregularity, and contraction to produce something consistent, legible, and predictable. This is not merely an aesthetic preference but a statement born from post-war Modernism, aiming to create “leeway for our own selves” by drastically reducing the chaos of stimuli that surrounds us (Rams, 1984, cited in Jong et al, 2021, p.39). Rams famously concludes his ten principles with “Good Design is as little design as possible - back to purity back to simplicity!” This statement expresses a view that aligns design with reduction. For Rams, the designer’s role is to eliminate the unnecessary until only the essence remains. His notion of “less, but better” proposes that good design reveals truth through clarity and through what is left after all noise has been removed.

The principles enact smoothing in different categories:

1. Aesthetic Smoothing (Principle 3, 5, 10): Good design is “aesthetic,” “unobtrusive,” and “as little design as possible”.

Rams resists any design that employs “bold designer stimuli” or “chaos of shapes, colors, and symbols.” This philosophy views anything that is not immediately essential to function (like the typographic interference and icon substitution used in my signage exploration) as clutter.

2. Systematic Smoothing (Principle 4, 8): Good design is “understandable” and “through down to the last detail”.

This precision ensures that a product’s structure is clear, self-explanatory, and free from error, by specifically stating “Nothing must be arbitrary or left to chance”.

3. Behavioural Smoothing (Principle 2): By optimizing a product’s utility, design makes it useful and “disregard anything that could possibly detract from it.”

This eliminates user concussion or hesitation, enabling a seamless, frictionless experience.

My exploration, by contrast, begins at the moment when this control slips. “Unsmoothing” is an attempt to see what happens when clarity is not the goal but the question. If Rams’ philosophy represents design as a process of filtering the world, my exploration looked at what occurs when the filter is removed or reversed. What knowledge, emotion, or experience merges when we stop polishing? To “unsmooth” is not to reject function or clarity but to reintroduce the messiness that clarity hides. It acknowledges that design is always entangled with uncertainty, with accidents, and with the physical and emotional residues of making.

The Contradiction?

My practice and Rams’ work were a fundamental focus on systems. Rams applies his principles as a meta system to achieve optimization and longevity whereas I apply my methods of unsmoothing to achieve critical exposure. The most profound contradiction lies in Rams’ Principle 8 against my use of randomness.

The Arbitrary

Rams' insistence that "Nothing must be arbitrary or left to chance" is the definitive antithesis to unsmoothing. For Rams, chance compromises the meticulous process and shows disrespect to the user. For my exploration, chance is a tool. The systematic disruption of the UK signage (the grid/layout disturbance, exaggeration of instructions, etc) are calculated acts of introducing the arbitrary to reveal how fragile the invisible system is. This contradiction suggests a shift in focus where the core of my design is not the final form, but the interface to the rules. While Rams achieves clarity by making the system self-explanatory (smoothing), my goal is to make the system contestable by making the rules visible even in their failure (unsmoothing).

Visual Pollution as Critical Resource

Rams' ninth principle, "Good Design is Environmentally Friendly," offers a crucial bridge, particularly with its minimization of "visual pollution". If unsmoothing introduces elements that are raw, detailed, and seemingly chaotic (the visual pollution that Rams seeks to reduce), does it align with his ethics?

- **Rams' opinion:** Visual pollution is the "non-essential", the decorative and superfluous
- **Unsmoothing process:** The noise my exploration re-introduces is the evidence of cultural specificity or systematic fragility that Ram's universal simplicity erases. This pollution can become a critical resource and the texture and friction that compels the user to stop, notice, and question the neutral design rules.
 - This practice reinterprets the non-essential not as clutter but as context. And it treats the disruption as a visual record of the system's own choices.

New Questions Arised?

The ethics of unsmoothing?

Does embracing imperfection risk wastefulness or can it actually extend the life of objects by accepting their wear and transformation? → maybe longevity is not about durability but about adaptability.

- Rams sees detail and non-arbitrariness as a respect for the user. Then if my work intentionally creates confusion does it become “anti-user”?
- Can I design an interface of malfunction that is critically honest and transparent about its rules, rather than one that is merely confusing?

Perception and speed?

Rams’ products are designed for clarity at a glance and they communicate instantly but remain unobtrusive. However unsmoothing often demands slowness as it asks the view to notice delicacy and to engage with uncertainty.

- Rams’ principles supports the desire for order that has shaped majority of modern design
- Unsmoothings doesn’t deny that but it questions its cost: what does it mean to live in a world where everything is optimized and where every edge is rounded? What happens to the sensory, the emotional, the uncertain?

Reclaiming the Principles

How can Rams’ principles be re-written or visually represented for critical and friction-aware design?

- Good design reveals its process
- Good design allows for randomness
- Good design leaves traces

Citation

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