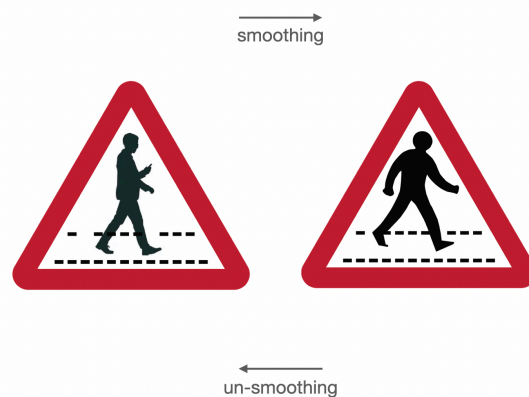# "Unsmoothing" Against the "Good Design"

My current studio practice, centered on the concept of "unsmoothing," deliberately introduces friction, contradiction, and systematic malfunction to expose the hidden rules of design. I have 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(structural ambiguity, error, friction, and 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 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: The Ultimate Smoothing

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 Klemp & Mattie, 2017, 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, or a subtractive process. Simplicity, in this context, is achieved by taking things away 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.

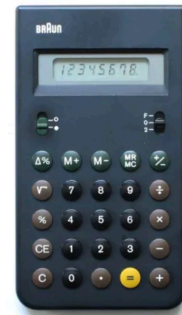The principles enact smoothing in different categories, relying on both subtractive and additive restraint:

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. This is achieved through a subtractive process (eliminating all extraneous detail) and an additive process (ensuring nothing arbitrary is *added* in the first place) by specifically stating "Nothing must be arbitrary or left to chance" (Klemp & Mattie, 2017, p. 122).

Examples of "Good Designs" for each principle shown in the book
Dieter Rams: Ten Principles for Good Design.

Principle 4: *All-wave radio T 1000 (1963)*   Principle 8: *Sprocket calculator ET 33 (1977)*

Behavioural Smoothing (Principle 2):

 By optimizing a product's utility, design makes it useful and "disregard anything that could possibly detract from it." This relies on a subtractive process to eliminate user confusion or hesitation, enabling a seamless, frictionless experience. The goal is an environment where no extraneous variables are introduced to distract or impede the user.

Principle 2: *Pocket radio T41 (1962)*

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, such as the systematic disruption of the UK Road Signage system, looked at what occurs when the filter is removed or reversed. To "unsmooth" is not to reject function or clarity but to reintroduce the structural ambiguity that clarity hides. It acknowledges that design is always entangled with uncertainty, with accidents, and with the physical and emotional residues of making.

Aesthetics & Functional Conflict

The conflict between Rams' principles and unsmoothing can be categorized into two structural areas: *Aesthetic Value*s and *Functional Purpose*.

A. Aesthetic Values: Order vs. Randomness

Rams' Aesthetic Value:ORDER	Unsmoothing's Aesthetic Value: RANDOMNESS
To achieve purity, neutrality, and universality. The goal is a visual experience that is unobtrusive, allowing the user's self-expression to fill the space (Principle 5).	*To achieve critical awareness and contextual specificity.* The goal is a visual experience that is obtrusive, using texture, error, and residual complexity to force decoding and reflection.

The Contradiction in Visual Language:

Rams resists any design that employs "bold designer stimuli" or "chaos of shapes, colors, and symbols" (Rams, 1984, cited in Klemp & Mattie, 2017, p. 39), viewing such elements as clutter. My practice, through the typographic interference (mixing English and Korean in signage) and icon substitution experiments, deliberately generates this chaos. I argue that the noise/chaos is evidence of political or systematic choices that the smooth, ordered aesthetic attempts to erase.

Visual Pollution as Critical Resource (Principle 9):

 My unsmoothing process re-introduces this visual pollution (the raw, detailed, and seemingly chaotic elements). The noise my exploration re-introduces is the evidence of cultural specificity or systematic fragility that Rams' universal simplicity erases. This pollution, therefore, becomes a critical resource, the texture and friction that compels the user to stop, notice, and question the assumed neutrality of the 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.

B. Functional Purpose: Utility vs. Reflection

Rams' Functional Focus: UTILITY	Unsmoothing's Functional Focus: REFLECTION
Utility and Understandability (Principle 2, 4). The system must perform its primary functions seamlessly, eliminating all hesitation and error.	*Communication, Reflection, and Contestation.* My practice is concerned with function, but the goal is to create a system that works by exposing its own flaws.

The Contradiction of the Arbitrary:

The most profound functional contradiction lies in Rams' Principle 8 against my use of chance. Rams' insistence that "Nothing must be arbitrary or left to chance" functionally guarantees user respect by

ensuring reliability. My unsmoothing practice, however, employs chance as a tool. The systematic disruptions of the UK signage, like the grid/layout disturbance or the exaggeration of instructions, are calculated acts of introducing the arbitrary.

My practice's function is to fail constructively. It uses systematic malfunction to create an interface for reflection on civic authority, rather than one for efficient wayfinding. The core of my design is not the final form, but the interface to the rules. While Rams achieves functional clarity by making the system self-explanatory (smoothing), my goal is to make the rules visible so they can be contested by the user (unsmoothing), prioritizing awareness over efficiency.

New Questions & Triangulation

The conflict between these two functional ethics leads to new, focused questions for my final project phase.

The Ethics of Unsmoothing:

Rams sees non-arbitrariness as a respect for the user. If my work intentionally creates confusion (such as the deliberate malfunction in signage), does it become "anti-user"? This requires me to ask: 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:

This functional conflict extends to the very speed of perception. Rams' products are designed for clarity at a glance; they communicate instantly but remain unobtrusive, aligning with the modern demand for efficiency and speed. Unsmoothing, however, intentionally demands slowness from the viewer, asking them to notice delicacy, decode friction, and engage with uncertainty. Rams' principles support the desire for order that has shaped the majority of modern design, but unsmoothing questions its cost: What does it mean to live in a world where everything is optimized and every visual surface is rounded for immediate consumption? This obsession with speed and seamlessness often leads to the erasure of the sensory, the emotional, and the uncertain, which are essential dimensions of human experience.

Adaptability and Longevity:

 The functional clash also raises questions about longevity. Does embracing imperfection risk wastefulness, or can it actually extend the life of objects by accepting their wear and transformation? Adaptability is achieved by creating a system whose rules are visible and open to incorporating new, unpredictable variables (chance/randomness). This suggests a different path for longevity: one that prioritizes adaptability over unattainable permanence.