



The Ego is Dead. Long Live the Ego.

To be truly effective creative thinkers, we need to break down our conceit and foster the "ego" that tames our rampaging desires and raw creativity.

By Matthew Clark / *Applied Arts Magazine "By Design"*

Some 10 years ago, I remember hearing the esteemed Bob Gill speak at an international design conference. He described his essential process of breaking down the ego in order to create good work, and it has always stuck with me. His experience was that fear and feelings of extreme inadequacy were stronger motivators than confidence and pride.

My personal creative process often mirrors his: I walk into a new project feeling 10 feet tall and bulletproof. "I know what I am doing," I think. "I've been doing this for a while." Then out come so much initial garbage and clichés, it really is quite embarrassing (it goes on the "wall of shame" in our office). At some point, the fear and loathing and doubt set in. "Maybe, I am not nearly as smart as I think I am," I mutter to myself. And it goes downhill from there. "I am a total fraud, and people are going to finally see the real me: no talent, hack ideas. Oh, woe is me, this surely is the end." And after copious amounts of weeping and gnashing of teeth—and a good dose of solitary brooding—I am finally ready for some real ideas to come.

Somehow, breaking down the ego seems to allow the design muse to be seen and heard. I have always wondered why. And I suppose I am curious about the mechanics of how that happens.

Breaking down the ego as "conceit"

There is plenty of self-importance in our industry and, for the most part, I am perfectly comfortable with it. Confidence, competitiveness and a certain degree of courage and bravado really can fuel the creative fire. But an overdose closes the mind and restricts creativity. In my experience, truly great ideas are like muses or Plato's "Forms" (noesis); they originate from "out there," and we

are more conduits than creators. Rampaging ego, in this sense, stifles collaboration, kills objectivity, closes the mind to feedback and encourages lazy thinking. If we are self-absorbed and the unmoving centre of our own universe, then the barrier to outside thought is simply too great to be surmounted. And let's face it, big egos are simply not fun to work with.

Breaking down the ego as "self"

Pre 1800s, the Latin term "ego," which simply means "I," referred to the metaphysical "self." The "I think therefore I am" part of who we are. This is often the most important and overlooked "ego" to break down in the creative process: Losing yourself—literally—to find great ideas. As designers, we are working for our clients' brands, and it is their "personas" that should dominate our thinking. Nothing is worse than a designer bringing his own agendas, preferences and tastes to a project instead of allowing the client's brands to be the true "self." That's why "stylistic" design firms have never made sense to me, offering the same solution for every client. While our personalities and individual ideas should and will always influence our work, they cannot be the central "ego" at play.

Embracing the ego as "ego"?

Freud's work in the early 1900s brought us all the great psychoanalytical terms we love to use, from Oedipal Complex and autoeroticism to libido and others. The terms are fully familiar to all of us with creative (and neurotic) minds. But Freud's definition of the ego made a distinct change to how we use that word, apart from its "prideful" denotation.

While the id is our raging, infantile and animalistic pleasure principle, and the superego is that distinctly



human sense of morality and conscience, the ego is our pragmatic, logical and realistic side.

The ego is what mediates between the id (“I want people to adore me and give me an award”) and the superego (“I shouldn’t kill my coworkers to get one”), and says, “Maybe if I help my client succeed AND really push myself, I can have the best of all worlds.” The ego helps us make our “thinking visible” (to paraphrase Saul Bass). And it is what helps us overcome client objections, misfortune and difficulties along the design path with rationalism and pragmatism.

Perhaps this is the ego we all need to tame and nurture. This ego marries creative freedom with practicality. This ego is common sense, reason and control. This ego can allow our ideas to roam free and then takes them in to a place that makes sense. And while the ego may not be the most creative force, it is the “fence” that separates design thinking from artistic thinking.

Of course, if you have taken Psychology 101, you’ll know that the ego is also responsible for the defense mechanisms of denial, displacement, intellectualization, fantasy, compensation, projection, rationalization, reaction formation, regression, repression and sublimation.

But that’s a topic for a later article.

Matthew Clark is principal and creative director of Subplot, an internationally recognized brand design firm based in Vancouver.



Originally Published in
Applied Arts Magazine
Vol. 27, No. 1
March/April 2012