Cropped, caged, conjured

0x6e31 July 11th, 2022
5 Collected



Imaged in Midjourney, DALL·E 2, Photoshop, Topaz Studio. Lettering by Sun Young Oh.

Time to reshape the image

Images reproduced in print and on screens are mediated images. Long ago, the domain of the mediated image witnessed an elemental format war from which the *rectangular* emerged victorious. *Images. Are. Rectangular.* Every contemporary imaging medium is optimised-up-to-the-eyeballs for the rectangular. Yes, despite the fundamental *circularity* of the lenses attached to practically every camera and optical imaging device in pictorial history, their conical light has traditionally been projected onto *rectangular* canvas, *rectangular* film, and *rectangular* digital sensor. All light exceeding these rectangular bounds was lost to an invisible void.

How did the rectangle come to command such monolithic authority? What forces will reshape mediated images in a post-lens, text-to-image and *image*-to-image era in which even the circular has been rendered obsolete? Here I share six high-level historical conceptions of the image edge and call on graphic designers, artists, and content creators to reclaim our formats from the monotony of the rectangle.





Thomas Bewick, 'A History of British Birds', 1797

Graphic labour

Look at this lazy old squire. Little does he know that the thicket in which he is snoozing is the site of tireless graphic labour! While he wastes an afternoon, Thomas Bewick, his creator, toils at an unyielding hardwood surface with a steel burin. Hunched over his work table, Bewick can justify only those marks necessary to convey the scene. His edges exploit and disguise this constraint by assuming the naturalistic contours of clouds, leaves, rocks and grasses.



Nineteenth century photograph, artist unknown

Liquid epoch

Do you see it? A magical being preserved by a moment of alchemy! Photography itself begins as a fluid apparition, an image emerging from liquid chemistry that *stains* its substrate unpredictably. This anonymous early photographer hopes only to *invoke*, not *master* these elusive processes. Enthral to the sheer wonder of their images, they care not for formal neatness. This image displays its unstable edges unashamedly.





Jeff Wall, ‘8056 Beverly Blvd, Los Angeles ...’, 1996

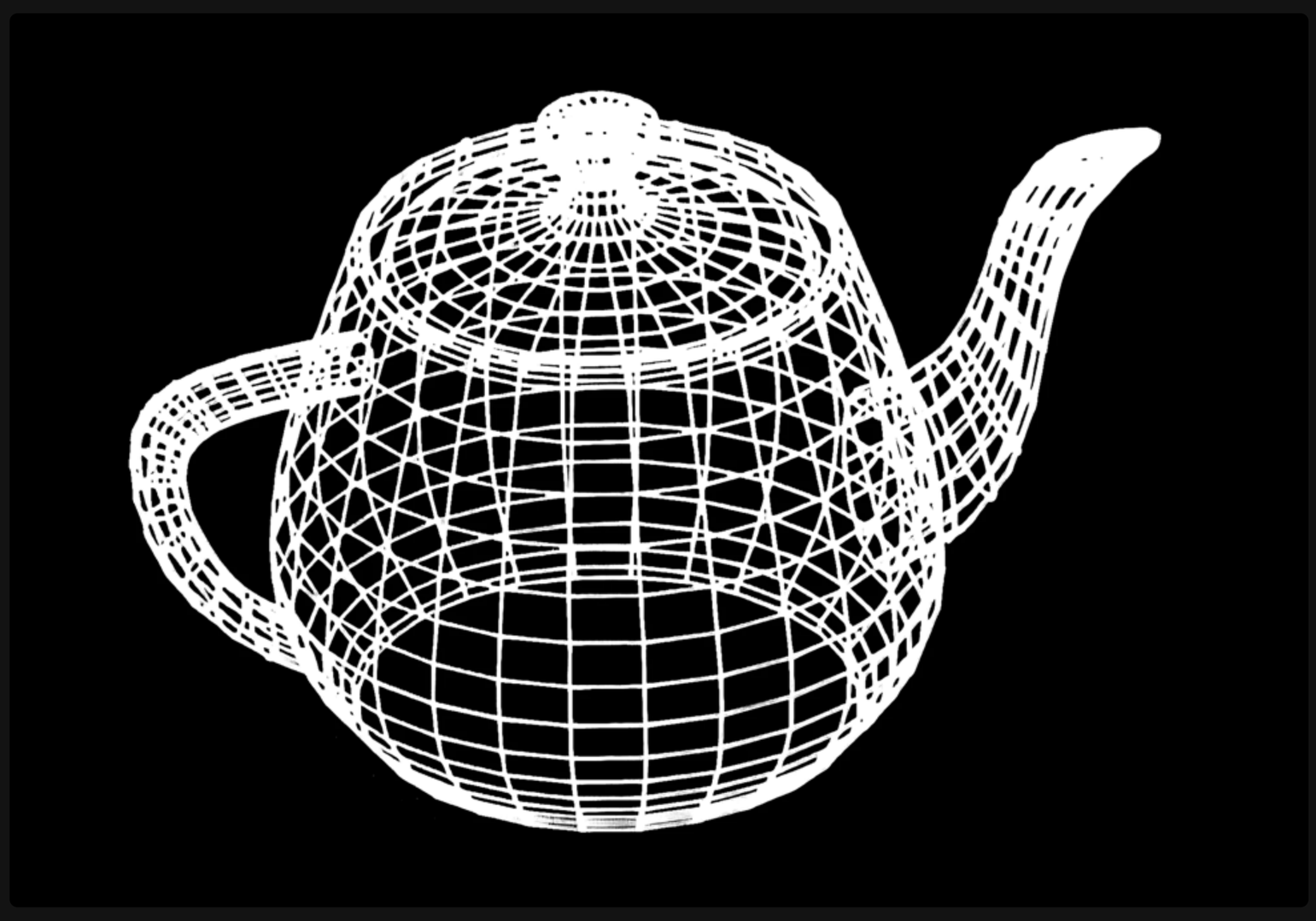
Nineteenth century portrait, artist unknown

Tight spaces

The early history of photography is a list of precious metals, and the expensive *matter* of the image was ever a factor in its visual composition. This respectable lady occupies a close-fitting oval frame not only for its quintessential elegance, but because she can’t afford to have her photographer waste literal silver and gold capturing and fixing insignificant background details. The *economising* of the photographic creates capital incentives that will converge, inevitably, on *the most efficient format*.

Full image

Artist Jeff Wall reminds us that lenses produce circular images which become darker and less sharp at their edges. But since lenses commute light — *light that beams down eternally from the sky!* — these imperfect extremities can simply be cropped off by a rectangular frame inside the camera. Whatever, it’s free. Film and photographic paper, though, are costly to produce. From this basic disparity between input and output the rectangular industrial complex results. Once instituted in the *hardware* of the darkroom and the print factory, the rectangle’s oppressive hold on our pictorial imaginary is complete.



Wireframe render of the University of Utah Computer Science teapot, 1974

Digital primitives

This new field of computer graphics seems to be going nowhere. Stick to the numbers, University of Utah Computer Science nerds. No, but really, the visuality of

even this relatively simplistic form is so computationally expensive that it requires the complete disintegration of foreground, background, surface, and pictorial space simply in order to *appear*. It will be decades before digital objects can occupy believable simulations of three dimensional space. Until then, this polygonal pot has a nascent superpower: its edges can be revisioned from an infinity of potential perspectives.



Holly Herndon, untitled, 2021

Latent visions

With the advent of images conjured by artificial intelligences, the assumption that *images are rectangular* has become suddenly skeuomorphic. Pixels are now virtually as abundant as light. The valuable rare earth elements in our devices can maintain several vague layers of abstraction from the images that their screens display. At the edges of this self portrait by artist Holly Herndon the corruption of the rectangle from within is already begun. Her conjuring tools don't want to preserve the compositional etiquette of foreground and background. They abhor the straight line, the flat plane, and the right-angle. Complex and contorted edges are what they crave. *They want to sculpt total, allover imageness*.

Uncage the image

Why should our image conjuring tools be bound by the rectangular repository of historical images on which they have been trained? Why should our graphics conform to the rectangular frames that conservative publishing platforms unthinkingly provide us with? The hegemony of the rectangular is vulnerable, but it would be naïve to expect it to relinquish its hold. Equipped with our inscrutable new tools, the moment to overpower this omnipresent right-angled oppressor has come.

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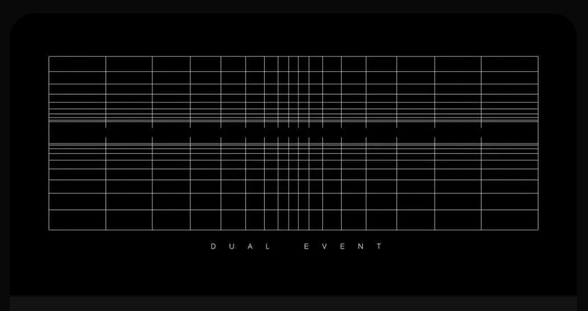
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