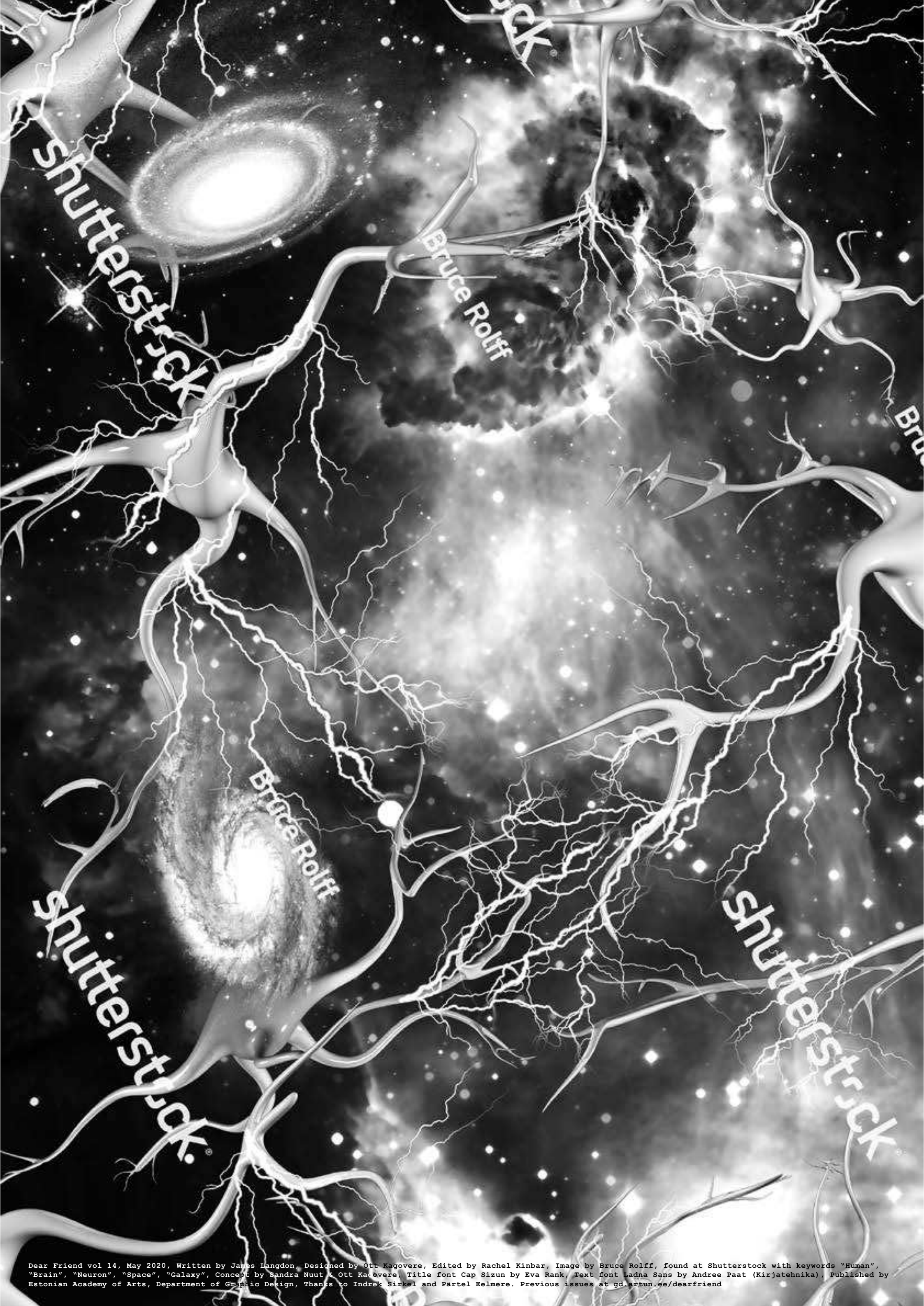


Dear Friend vol 14, May 2020, Written by James Langdon, Designed by Ott Kagovere, Edited by Rachel Kinbar, Image by Bruce Rolff, found at Shutterstock with keywords “Human”, “Brain”, “Neuron”, “Space”, “Galaxy”, Concept by Sandra Nuut & Ott Kagovere, Title font Cap Sizun by Eva Rank, Text font Ladna Sans by Andree Paat (Kirjatehnika), Published by Estonian Academy of Arts, Department of Graphic Design, Thanks to Indrek Sirkel and Pärtel Eelmere. Previous issues at gd.artun.ee/dearfriend

"HUMAN"

"BRAIN"

"NEURON"

"SPACE"

"GALAXY"

DEAR FRIEND,

I'm writing to explain myself. That was me in the audience of your lecture at the big neuroscience conference last weekend. No doubt you noticed me. I did seem to stand out. I've never felt self-conscious dressed casually in black before! Perhaps you also noticed that your presentation took me on something of a wild ride.

I came to the conference feeling dangerous. An infiltrator from another aesthetic universe. I intended a discrete entrance. I would bide my time, make my move in the Q&A. Things certainly began as expected—as if you were completely unaware that graphic design, my profession, even exists! I almost lost my composure at the very first slide. Was that your own laboratory's logo, lurking awkwardly in the corner? You must have dragged a tiny GIF file from some ancient university web page directly into your PowerPoint presentation, enlarged it without constraining proportions, and then just left it there, mangled and blurred. I glanced around the audience, expecting looks of professional alarm, but nothing. I half-raised my hand. I've spent 15 years explaining vector graphics to my clients, so I'm more than qualified, but... *Be patient*, I told myself. I was there to bring expertise and insight. I couldn't afford to come across as pedantic.

I settled in. At that point I had no reason to doubt myself. I tried to see the funny side. Indeed, I found your slides reassuringly calamitous. Single slides containing hundreds of bullet-pointed words. Tired stereotypes from the first page of a Google Images search for 'science cartoon'. Technical charts shoved on top of generic, pseudo-high-tech brains from Shutterstock, still with their digital watermarks. Right-click, Save Image to Desktop, am I right? Every lab, it seems, has an amateur Photoshop artist.

When the moment for questions finally came, a polite hesitation on my part allowed a young woman to make a lengthy inquiry about some technical detail of your presentation. No wonder she's confused, I thought. Your answer apparently required showing one of your animations again. So you clicked back to the slide, but the animation wasn't triggered. I was about to point out that you would need to click forward from the preceding slide for it to play. But what you did next took me aback. You rolled your eyes, and, without hesitation, hit the escape key on your laptop to switch out of fullscreen mode, navigated directly to the slide, and then used two three-fingered keyboard shortcuts in rapid succession to ungroup the elements and open the animation in another application with more precise playback controls! Witnessing your virtuosity with the software, it struck me. This was no calamity. The amateurism of your slides was a ruse. A nuanced visual proposition was being made in that hall, and I was the only one not attuned to it. I felt foolish.

Unfortunately for me, that wasn't the end of the ride. Since the conference, I can't stop thinking about you. I had come to tell you that, without graphic design, no one can take you seriously. Instead, you showed me that for a scientist, graphic design is a liability. Graphic design *reduces* credibility. Had you presented professional, well-designed slides, it would have raised suspicions. Your colleagues would have asked: *What is this? Who is she trying to persuade?* And so—I'm speculating here—your stumbling visual language of lowest-common-denominator digital bricolage is perfectly measured for its audience. That's it, isn't it? How did I misread you so badly? I thought it was a plea for help. But to your colleagues, the message is well understood. You signal to them that you have not compromised data for 'pretty pictures'. That you are working on the mysteries of the human brain and don't have time to consider the consistent use of colour, the relative scale of elements in your slide layouts, or their typographic hierarchy.

As you might imagine, these revelations have been unnerving. Or they were, until what follows occurred to me. A premonition, one could say. Perhaps I will yet have the opportunity to save you!

It may not be apparent yet, in academia, but the tools of the digital bricoleur are changing. Actually, things will be getting easier and more convenient for you. I expect you'll welcome it. At least at first. You won't ever have to troubleshoot your presentations again, that's for sure. Your IT department will install new presentation software with an online-only interface. Much simpler. Mandatory templates will take care of layout, stop you from placing too much text on a slide, and make sure none of those crude graphics-done-in-the-lab-on-the-day-before-the-conference find their way into a presentation. You won't miss them though, because you'll have Neurostock. It'll be called something definitive like that. Shutterstock, but only for neuroscience. They'll probably even sponsor your institution. You'll have all the gorgeous high resolution images you want, and no watermarks!

Are you seeing them yet? The warning signs? To be clear, this is not about you personally. I'm sure you'll do great. But that innocent, undesigned aesthetic that you and your colleagues have been cultivating? I'm sorry to have to tell you this: it's about to be digitally gentrified.

Perhaps you're laughing at the idea that your IT department could orchestrate such a conspiracy. But that's what it is. Just look online. Look at the website of the leading domestic air purifier on the market. Or your favourite coffee roaster who claims to pay their farmers fairly. Don't they look brilliant! Really super, super nice. Well, wake up, professor! That's the contemporary visual language of authority acting on you. It wants to sublimate you with its clean templates and elegant typefaces. I know what you're thinking. But your indifference is powerless against it. If you don't care for its templates, it will win you over by automating those seamless looping animations that you like. That would save you time, no? It doesn't matter, anyway. If the people in IT like it, you're getting it. Before you know it, your presentations will be... well, *convincing*. From there you'll only be one Neurostock image away from *persuasive*. Then what will be left of your scientific credibility?

TALK SOON?
JAMES