Designed in the UK, printed in Asia,
shipped to the USA and Europe
for further international distribution

C's first professional conspiracy was harmless. They had fallen into a career as a graphic designer in London, doing invitations and posters and identities for clients in contemporary art. Museums, publishers, commercial galleries. In the early aughts niche practices like that were viable for one person to sustain. The laptop was the studio. C had studied art but they'd known long before graduation that they were too thin-skinned to be an artist. They'd begun making flyers for openings and events at art school. Just for friends, at first. Soon they found themselves doing the work that many young graphic designers trained for and aspired to do. The art catalogue, not the album cover, was the most covetable commission among graduates from the best design schools now, that much C knew. Opportunities to do that kind of work were few, but came relatively easy for C, familiar as they already were with the art world. They had studied with artists who were offered representation by well-regarded London galleries directly out of school. Artists who could bring C along with them on their enviable career trajectories. Fortunately, the minimal aesthetics of the commercial art world were easy enough to achieve even for C, self-taught and, just then, quite ignorant of the esoteric aspects of typography. Mostly white space and a few lines of black text — name, title, dates — in plain sans-serif type in the corner. Don't crop the images. The computer made it easy.

Some of their artist friends progressed into the upper echelons of the art world, and one money job could subsidise half a year of C's more adventurous but poorly paid projects. Catalogues were the cash cow, coveted by artists and perfect, portable, sales tools for galleries. In any case, C had gotten through university before subsidised tuition was scrapped and loans in the tens of thousands became the only option for students whose families couldn't afford the fees. C had no debt. Rent was their only concern. They hadn't planned for this career, but they wanted to progress. They longed to identify as a cultural producer. And they would. The computer gave C an autonomy that previous generations of graphic designers had never known. If all the parts of a project aligned: if the artist's images were good, if C could build rapport with the gallery, if nobody's ego threw things off, there was the potential to do great work and earn a reputation.

If. More than once C had laboured over the design of an announcement card, a poster, a cover, only to have the client secure a corporate sponsorship which required the supporter's logo be prominently added. It was the most cliche of grievances for a graphic designer. Always awkwardly proportioned they were, the logos, and accompanied by unreasonable dictates for their size and position, as if formulated precisely to unbalance C's considered compositions. There was no negotiating with corporate marketers about this. Sponsors were not about to accept a graciously worded acknowledgement in small type. The whole point of these transactions was to achieve the proximity of their brand marks to culture.

C's tamest of conspiracies took place at a print factory. They were there to check that the colours of an artwork looked right on a poster. Stood next to an operator at the workstation of an offset press, a machine the size of a single decker bus, C embarrassedly pointed out how one particularly egregious sponsor logo had compromised the design. Unbidden, the press operator volunteered a solution. The black printing plate could be modified manually, they casually proposed, at the end of the run. In order to get off a small stack of copies for C's portfolio without the offending logo. It was easy enough to do and the client never need know about it.

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'Make doing what you love into your job!' L heard that sentiment ad nauseum in their last year of high school. Not having grown up around money or career entitlement, it never resonated for them. What they loved doing, at 16, was making video game fan art and sharing it online. Other gamers came to L for character art which they would use as their profile pictures in group chats. They paid in-game: skins, items. Clearly, to L, this was not the kind of productive initiative which that smug, creative industries mantra was meant to capture.

As their school friends began taking things seriously and applying for universities, L had no plan. They got a late place on a foundation

art and design course at the local college. No particular conviction. It sounded believable when their careers teacher said it back to them. Foundation was only a year, and, encouraged by a tutor there, L got pointed toward fashion marketing. They were accepted at Manchester for fashion and business and in the winter term of their second year they interned at a major brand in Paris. They were warned to be prepared for long hours and demanding personalities. An all-consuming and formative experience. As it happened, the office, in the eighth arrondissement, was nice, the people were pleasant, and the communication straightforward, even gentle. At least for L and the others who didn't speak French. The most substantial task L was given during their six weeks was writing English copy for a leather bags campaign for the US market. Everyone seemed happy with the text, but, as far as they knew it was never actually used. Nor did the communications interns get to attend the January shows. L didn't hear that there had been a "perturbation" on the runway until they arrived at the office the next morning.

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C's on-the-job education in preparing files for printing had been charmed. In the first year after art school, before they had the confidence to call what they were doing an "independent graphic design practice", they worked as a marketing assistant at one of London's public museums. Sourcing images, organising mailings, sending out press releases. The museum's state funding was being cut and there was talk of replacing their graphic design agency. C, with uncharacteristic opportunism, put themselves forward to take over this work in-house. In fact, they told their manager, holding up a purple plastic zip disc which they had been supposed to return, they already had a copy of a digital design file prepared by the agency for one of the museum's regular programme leaflets. C naively proposed to duplicate this file and simply work over it, adding in new text and image content to produce the next edition, keeping the layout and typefaces consistent with the agency's design. Not an ethical move, on reflection, but the agency seemed not to mind when C's manager informed them that their services were no longer required. They drove big cars and dressed in high-end designer clothes, so they were probably glad to make time for better paid work. A museum could be a prestigious client for a graphic design agency — some did this kind of work pro bono, C would come, painfully, to realise — but after a few years and enough jobs to showcase on the website, well, they'd already banked the cultural capital.

Hearing that C would be taking over from the agency, the museum's regular printer, financially obligated to keep its presses running 24/7, was altogether more motivated to retain the account. Someone in the pre-press department there had apparently been tasked with nursing inexperienced C's design files along, to avoid any errors which might reflect poorly on the printer and jeopardise the relationship. It was through tactfully-worded phone calls with them that C learned how they needed to make each successive page a few millimetres narrower in a roll-folding format, that pictures intended to fill a page should extend beyond its edges to allow for small inaccuracies during trimming, and countless other pieces of arcane knowledge which someone in C's position would be unlikely to intuit until it was too late and a job had to be reprinted at the museum's expense.

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Headphones were not allowed in the warehouses. The forklifts were fast and it was good sport to scare the temps. As they worked, L listened to podcasts through their phone speaker. Politics, culture, climate. Tucked it into their hood where it was just audible over the radio blaring. They had seen out the second year in Manchester, never started the third. They took shifts picking and packing, through a recruitment service, to pay off the student loans. Most of the work was nights, on the industrial estate near their old high school. Assembling huge orders. Hundreds of electrical components to be individually retrieved from the racks and put into crates. Temps worked on foot, for insurance reasons, presumably. That suited L. They kept themselves out of the regular staff banter. They'd be given the order lists at the start of the shift and then left uninterrupted. In their own headspace.

L worked on their art and writing during the days. Whatever they wanted to do and whenever they felt like doing it. They hadn't stayed in touch with anyone from Manchester. They'd resented having to

force the appearance of ambition on which those bonds depended. For every professional creative living their best life, L told themselves, there had to be so many more who would be happier had they kept their art and their need to earn money separate.

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Full-time freelance and sharing a small studio in Vyner Street, C was building up a roster of regular clients and learning to manage a business. In a gentle escalation of their professional disobedience, they had been inducted, by an account manager at a printer in the midlands, into a scheme for charging their art clients hidden fees for print-buying services. Print estimates prepared on C's behalf were marked up: inflated by a small percentage which C could either keep or, if it were more advantageous for tax purposes, could be kept by the printer and put toward producing a "passion project" of C's. Self-publishing a book of their own work, the account manager had suggested, sincerely. This was supposed to feel like a personal favour to C, but was, presumably, a routine part of an account manager's effort to ingratiate themselves with a promising designer and earn loyalty. It was a minor deception, perhaps not even. Perhaps it was expected by clients. C was certainly led to believe that it was normal. Still, it was not to be spoken of with clients.

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An online acquaintance had invited L to the group's server. They called themselves a "utopian conspiracy". L knew practically nothing about cryptocurrency. They'd followed some leftist talk around Bitcoin and decentralisation, but never thought it was for them. The extent of their financial literacy was shopping around for a consolidating loan after they'd decided to leave Manchester. People they respected were buying and selling digital art on there though, and there was apparently money in it. L knew that anyone with even half an art education was supposed to turn their nose up at this, but somehow the overt, unashamed financialisation of crypto art instantly appealed to them. Looking at an artwork in a web browser, surrounded by price-trend graphs and low-ball offers from accounts wearing profile pictures of penguins and sinister chibi girls actually made sense to L. At least they preferred it to the IRL galleries with pristine white cube aesthetics and a BP logo tastefully placed in the corner.

The group had members who were obviously insiders. L became an attentive lurker. They bought some crypto and got themselves "white-listed" for early access to an art project which the group seemed to be affiliated with. They collected a piece for the equivalent of two or three pounds. The whole thing sold out in minutes. Following the group's lead, L sold it on, within hours, for two thousand. To some other anon, one step further down the information food chain. Over the next three months L repeated the trick again and again, becoming an unlikely digital art trader.

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It was humiliating, what they had to put up with. All of the blue-chip commercial galleries C worked with employed over-educated young curators as Artist Liaisons, a euphemism for the role of attending to the whims of artists during the week or so that they were in town installing a new exhibition. Their training had prepared them to navigate the intellectual currents of global art and culture with fluency and guile, but here they were confronted with boorish artists, emboldened by fawning sales managers, wordlessly handing them an iPhone on 1% or demanding something be urgently brought across London only for it to turn out, predictably, not to be necessary.

C was sat at their laptop in the offices of a gallery, with an artist and the gallery's publications manager. They were looking at sequences of images in a page layout for a catalogue. Brusque, the artist was having C rearrange the sequence this way and that. What exactly they were after could not be communicated, and none of the options which they had explored thus far was it. A cardboard tube of colour proofs had been delivered downstairs and was brought into the room by the artist liaison, who used it as the premise to join the meeting, confident that this would be the most intelligent conversation of their day. Scatter proofs: ten or more large sheets of paper on which all of the images to appear in the book were arrayed in grids. Anxious to avoid a misguided digression about paper, C was explaining that these proofs were produced on a standard glossy proofing paper which was not the same as the paper which they

had chosen for the actual production. The artist interrupted. They were suddenly enamoured with the sequence of images on one of the proofing sheets. A sequence they had not considered. Fascinating, unexpected, they said. Who had made this arrangement and could they be brought in? Before C could explain that the images appeared in an arbitrary order determined by their file names, the artist lurched forward and began attempting to recreate the sequence at the computer and, unable to do so, gesturing at C to take over.

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The group didn't see the crash coming. Their talk of equitable creator economies abruptly ended. People lost money. L should have been cashing out regularly to clear their debt, but there had always been a next project to reinvest in. Whether it was to cope with this shared financial trauma, or out of a genuine desire to sustain the community created in those heady months, people stayed active in the group, L included. The chat tended disillusioned, but there was a perceptible desire for something more. Other interests came to the fore. There were organisers among them. Researchers. Designers. One had been part of the climate movement in London, until the law had changed. They said anyone who wanted to be involved with climate now had to confront the prospect of prison just for being at a protest. Back on nights, temping at the warehouse, L dedicated their energy to plotting with the group.

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C had chronic wrist pain from too many hours working at the laptop on trains and hotel sofas. A build-up of fluid around the tendons. C's whole career had been enabled by a laptop, a single software license, and the expertise of the printers they worked with. There were fewer people with real technical know-how around now though. Having been there, C empathised with the gallery marketers who they were working with. But these people had no clue. C would routinely resort to downloading a new client's own logos and assets from Vectors of the World, or one of those other websites presumably maintained for this exact purpose, or extracting them from PDFs at the client's website, rather than go back to a marketer again and have them email a compressed low-res JPEG file again. That's just how it was.

Designers, too. Younger designers who C met never went to the print factory, never got any more involved in production than was necessary. They worked on the file. The PDF was their artefact. For them its output as a physical object should simply and ideally conform to how it appeared in one of those online services for creating realistic photographic mock-ups of a book or a poster from a PDF. Even the print factories succumbed. Where the press operator's workstation had been, where C used to stand with the operator, and an apprentice, pointing and comparing as the machine idled, awaiting their decision, now there was an impressive console. An oversized computer display with a live, data-driven overview of the press's functioning, video feeds from each of its modules, the whole apparatus digitally calibrated. The press operator was really only needed to receive the stacks of perfect print on a pallet truck.

It all suddenly seemed so consolidated and optimised. There was less choice: of papers, bindings, finishes, but the standard of the best work was higher than ever. For C, print-buying had always been international. There just weren't the bookbinders in the UK to make catalogues which could compare to what was produced in Switzerland or the Netherlands. In the art world quality mattered above all. As the UK extricated itself from the continent, and the single market, European print became unaffordable. Asian production was the logical alternative for C's clients. Which only meant more time spent on flights and trains and in hotels. When C flexed their wrist inwards a hard protrusion appeared at the joint, like a knuckle. It looked concerning and throbbed in the evenings.

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When it came to writing the text, L's confidence faltered. The distinctive style of earnest corporate prose that was required, despite its having been so masterfully mocked by them in the group, was proving difficult to recreate now that there was more at stake than spite. No irony was lost on L when their experiments with automating the writing yielded encouraging results. Since LLMs had become publicly available they had, naturally, been profitably integrated into every kind of word-processing software. L didn't need to seek out suitable source

material to give it. They already had hundreds of PDFs, shared among the group: annual reports of the fossil fuel multi-nationals, sustainability pledges of the big technology companies, transcripts of court proceedings and their accompanying legal statements. They were bloated things, hundreds of pages long, puffed-up on the premise that business as usual could be countenanced by graphic design, sanitised with pull quotes and pastel charting. Now L's concern was managing the volume of text they were generating. Versions of each of the book's planned sections could be spat out exponentially quicker than they could actually be read. But L's anxieties were eased. The computer manoeuvred them into the position of editor. L thrilled at the prospect that they were most probably engaged in precisely the same activity as was simultaneously taking place within the company itself. While someone in its London headquarters was prompting an LLM to regurgitate the company's corpus of pacifying doublespeak in order to issue another officially sanctioned platitude, L was preparing to have the company appear, quite without warning, to excoriate itself.

L wanted to be able to say that they had personally written the first paragraphs. The letter from the company CEO. The high-level summary. The C-suite tl;dr. They did try to moderate their sarcasm. L picked out the main points and rewrote them. Adverse conditions. Unfavourable landscape. Risky landscape, unpredictable conditions. Always start with a weather metaphor. They right-clicked some images of the CEO and brought one into the document. Now the words began to flow from that glib mouth. The company has failed to mitigate risks compounded by concurrent legal actions. Yes, yes it has. Risks associated with an adverse legal landscape have not been sufficiently mitigated. Could not be sufficiently mitigated. Unprecedented legal circumstances have conspired. Have proven. Unprecedented legal circumstances have proven impossible to navigate. To chart a course through. We're at sea now. Bringing forward. Thereby bringing forward. Therefore we are bringing forward. Say it with agency! Quickening the process which the company initiated. Advancing toward. Advancing the company's progress toward its key goal. Own it, you're the fucking CEO. Accelerating the company's strategic transition from an international oil company to an integrated energy company, focusing on low carbon energy and sustainability. Securing the country's critical energy assets. Enhancing energy security, allowing the government to manage energy resources. Allowing energy resources to be managed nationally in a way that ensures stable supply and pricing for consumers, particularly during the transitional period when market conditions may be volatile. Protected. Shielded from the worst of the headwinds. Market headwinds.

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No window grey wall daylight bulb insomnia. Chinese printing trips were exhausting for C. Waiting interminably in an apartment inside the print factory for London-time communications, sleepless C would fantasise about ignoring whatever arbitrary changes would eventually be demanded by the artist, half-apologetically couched by the gallery. Just for a thrill. To get them through the trip. They would first politely acknowledge the requests, then punctually modify the layout, outputting and sharing a new PDF for approval by email. Then just change it back. Close the document without saving. Like scratching ugly logos off printing plates. Because it was better before and because they could. The gallery wouldn't know for another month when the books eventually arrived and by then nothing could be done. They weren't going to scrap the whole run just because some trifling thing was left out or a comma wasn't changed to a semi-colon. Anyway, the mistake could be explained away by a mix-up with the versions. If it got really tense, C could blame the printer. The gallery had no direct contacts there. Everything went through C. There was no reproach. That's all assuming anyone would notice. Assuming they even have a protocol for checking. Maybe they'd have forgotten the request by then. A PDF arrived in their inbox, that's it as far as they're concerned. That was that done. By the time books are delivered they'll be too busy down-in-the-details of the next PDF to check if that thing on that page ever, as a matter of fact, got changed. C could probably even give the printer a completely different file, get a completely different book printed, and the gallery wouldn't even notice until it was pointed out to them.

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L had been reloading the tracking website since the night before, urging it to show that the shipment information was in the system. They had to keep thinking methodically, to focus on the sequence of events. Nervous energy worked against them. The delivery address couldn't be connected to the group, L was totally sure of that. The advance copies of the book would be delivered there, probably on the second day after dispatch. At some point on that day, when they didn't appear at the gallery, someone would be told to find the catalogues. Track them, fucking well get them here now. That person would then discover that they had been delivered somewhere else. They would contact the courier to have them retrieve and redeliver. They might complain to the designer. But they'll be busy with the exhibition install, L reassured themselves. All that mattered to L was that the main deliveries, to be sent by sea freight to the distributors, had to leave Shenzhen before the gallery saw the advance copies. After that they couldn't be stopped or turned around.

How L would have loved to be there to see the reaction. At the gallery. What the fucking hell is this? Is it all of them or just this box? Fuck me. Calls. A video conference. The designer first. It would be tough for them. The printer, if they even knew how to contact them. And the company?! How would they hear of it? The gallery would be so absorbed in the immediate implications that it won't occur to them to find some PR person at the company and reach out to them. And say what exactly? We've accidentally produced a lavish publication which very convincingly purports to announce that your company, despite having recently reported incredible profits, is to be nationalised …

L had visualised all of these eventualities endlessly during their night shifts. They liked to picture themselves reacting to this publication as if they had nothing to do with it. As if they had been asked to comment on it for a podcast. Doomscroll? Or a journal. Something with a name and some credibility. Jacobin, New Left Review, a publication whose audience had a modicum of political literacy. They would have to call this what it was. It was theft. Or property destruction. A new genre of white-collar crime, L might say, if that wouldn't feel too self-aggrandising. The gallery would sue the perpetrators, if they could identify them, and they would be right to. Nonetheless, L would admit, this group had achieved some notoriety. Their book, taken as what it pretended to be, made important insinuations. And its design really was very convincing. There was something urgent about it, L's commentary would conclude, however toothless its conspiracy would inevitably prove.

L refocused on the next step. As soon as they were certain that the first boxes had arrived, and that the main shipments had departed, they were to start contacting news sites. Talking points: What would the gallery do with them? 2500 hardcover books. Would they be pulped? Sent back to China? If just one major site would carry the story then there might be enough public sentiment to force them to — what? — give them away? The book would probably become a collector's item. Like Luigi Mangione's sweater. The group would have produced the most fetishised commodity on the internet, if only for a week or two.

The ping came on the third morning. Someone in the group had checked the gallery website. It had been updated. L followed the link, bracing themselves to read the first line of a statement condemning what they had done. The book was listed for sale. But how? There was an image of the cover. Not the mock-up that had already been circulated but an actual photograph — apparently taken in the studio at the gallery. How? They had the book. They must have had it since yesterday to get this page up. Was it really possible that nobody had looked inside? Had the delivery been taken in by someone on the front desk who thought it should go to the shop manager and not the curator or the sales manager or the director? Had the artist forgotten that it was due — overdue! — and neglected to demand the gallery staff chase it? No chance. L's surging paranoia wouldn't entertain any of that. More messages were popping up, confused. L had already gleaned.