

text begins: “

When David Byrne moved to New York City in the 1970s, the art that excited him most was work done in the theatre by the makers of experimental performances: Robert Wilson, the Wooster Group, Mabou Mines and others. Their influences can be seen in Byrne’s work with his band Talking Heads, for example in the stage design and choreography of their 1983 concert film *Stop Making Sense*.

Like so many laboratory experiments, the performances of these theatre makers are made to demonstrate how people’s conscious intentions are but a small part of a larger forcefield, made up of the unconscious, the body, mass media, diverse cultural frames, and so on. Robert Wilson, for example, uses slow motion on stage over extended periods of time to experiment with his audience’s perception. He believes that we experience sensations of the world around us on what he calls an ‘exterior screen’, but that we also become aware of things on an ‘interior screen’, for instance in dreams and daydreams.<sup>1</sup> He found that during his long theatrical performances, people in the audience tend to slip into a state of reduced consciousness, where interior and exterior images mingle so that they become indistinguishable. Wilson uses this situation to offer his audience a chance to become aware of the rigid frames and perceptive barriers that we need to define our perceptions.<sup>2</sup>

*Quotes begin: “*

*David’s work communicates. But on a level beyond words. On a level that bypasses the logical, rational centers of the brain and goes straight to the part that understands without thinking. In this way it works just like music does – slipping in there before anyone has a chance to stop it at the border and ask for papers.<sup>a</sup>*

This might be a description of Byrne’s aesthetic, but in fact it is David Byrne writing about the design of David Carson.

*To get the ‘I’ out of the song is the ultimate compositional coup, whether in music or in design. Having a non-style is more slippery, amusing and surprising than sticking to one nice recognizable look. It’s a way of staying half-awake, or noticing things, enjoying things and learning to love things – especially the vernacular and banal things that have been relegated to the garbage heap of design.<sup>b</sup>*

This might be a description of Byrne’s aesthetic, but in fact it is David Byrne writing about the design of Tibor Kalman.

While European theatre is traditionally based on a fixed text, to which music, movement, architecture and scenography may be added, in performance theatre, any element may be used as the basis of a production, to generate radically different productions in which different performance ‘languages’ are interwoven.<sup>3</sup> With this in mind, it is worth considering the role of graphic design in the work of David Byrne. After all, Byrne has now published four books of photography, always in combination with writing: *True Stories* (1986), *Strange Ritual* (1995), *Your Action World* (1998), and *The New Sins* (2001). He also has some of the qualifications of the professional graphic designer. He spent two years at art schools, one of them the Rhode Island School of Design; and in the course of his career, after the Talking Heads had become too famous and too busy to stick to the practice of doing their own design work, he worked with a number of high-profile maverick designers: Tibor Kalman/M&Co., David Carson, Stefan Sagmeister, and recently Dave Eggers.

### Beyond words

Design is more than graphic design: it is doorknobs, our underwear, all buildings, even entire landscapes. And it is not just what we see, but also what we hear, read, and think, the way we do business, our religious beliefs. We are saturated by designs and intentions; like fish in the water, we accept without reservations the stuff that we swim in and breathe. What would it be like to notice the water as if for the first time? We would perhaps notice all kinds of surprising connections between forms. Clouds that are shaped like doorknobs, suits imitating car upholstery, factories that sound like musical

performances, financial conventions resembling an unseemly joke, sacred icons that reproduce the window of an out-of-fashion furniture shop. In short, David Byrne's design philosophy.

### Gesamtkunstwerk

But how to evade the narrowing limitations of intentional style and logic, whether in songwriting or in design? The sleeve design for the Talking Heads' album *Speaking In Tongues* contains some useful clues. The expression that Byrne chose for the title of this album, 'speaking in tongues' (from the Biblical story of Pentecost), indicates the 'divinely inspired' jabbering by people in religious trance. Anthropological research has shown that the utterances of people who are speaking in tongues are not, as conventional wisdom holds, related to their native language or even to their religious convictions. People are not made to speak in tongues by their religion, but the opposite is true: the speaking in tongues is caused by specific bodily changes, which in turn drive religious belief.<sup>4</sup>

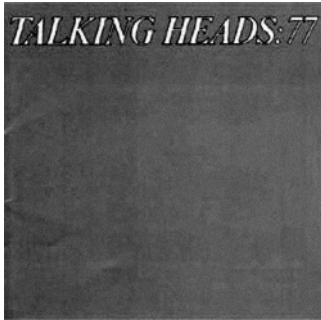
*On most songs of Speaking In Tongues I wanted to show that you could use texts that literally made no sense at all. Groups of words that depicted something or evoked a certain mood or feeling. That was rather difficult, but I considered it to be an interesting challenge. It meant the words had to fit together on a purely auditive level.<sup>c</sup>*

What kind of graphic design can illustrate these concepts? At Byrne's request, Robert Rauschenberg designed a cover: a circular collage of colour photos, separated out into the process colours cyan-blue, magenta-red and yellow. The blue separation is printed on the back of a transparent plastic sleeve, the yellow on the front, and the magenta on a circle which has been added to the front and can be turned. The record itself is made of transparent vinyl. This creates a 'dial-a-picture' system, since the photos on the red component have been shuffled, which means that a spectator has to turn this part of the sleeve in order to get a clear, full-colour picture of a part of the collage. The photos Rauschenberg used for his collage are a jumble of arbitrary objects like a bicycle or a garden hose, and of photos from magazines, advertising and the like.<sup>5</sup>

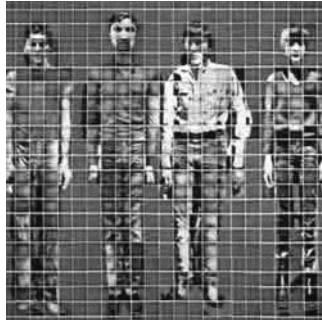
Rauschenberg is famous not only for his collage paintings, but also for his work with composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham from 1952 to 1964. Their collaborative performances did not simply submit music, dance, and set design to a common plot or synthesising plan. The arts coexist in the same time and space, but are independent of each other, and rely (to use a term that was coined by Cage) on the 'polyattentiveness' of the audience. This new 'Gesamtkunstwerk' refused to stamp a single overall style on a work, something Cage associated with authoritarianism, and aimed instead to keep art open for radically heterogeneous elements. This openness allows equal attention to any aspect of the making of art; it also facilitates shifting one's attention to formerly hidden aspects and combinations. Aesthetic as well as ethical in nature, 'not making the ego the subject', but attuning to 'some function outside the individual, isolated self', this attitude was of crucial importance to the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s.

### Mandala

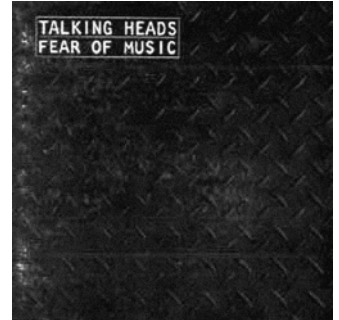
However, Rauschenberg's sleeve design for *Speaking In Tongues* turned out to be too complicated to be produced in the numbers that



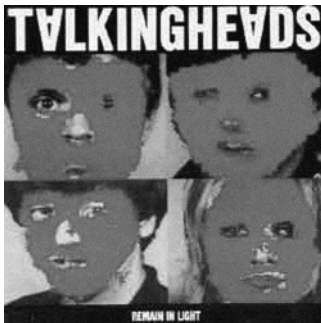
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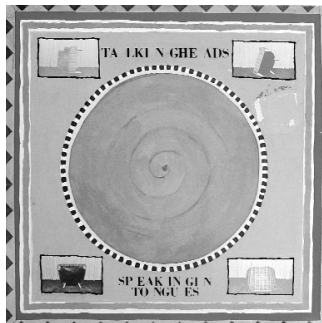
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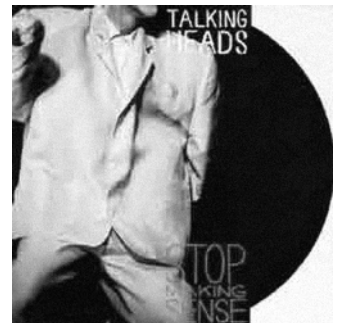
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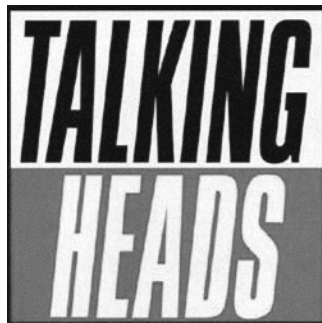
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**Talking Heads' covers/credits**

1. *77* (1977): design by David Byrne

2. *More Songs about Buildings and Food* (1978): design by David Byrne

3. *Fear of Music* (1979): design by Jerry Harrison

4. *Remain in Light* (1980): computer generated images by Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth with MIT programmers Walter Bender, Scott Fisher and others; typography by M&Co

5. *Speaking in Tongues* (1983): design by David Byrne; typography by M&Co

6. *Stop Making Sense* (1984): design by David Byrne; photo by Adelle Lutz, typography by Pablo Ferro

7. *Little Creatures* (1985): design/painting by Howard Finster

8. *True Stories* (1986): design by M&Co / Bridget DeSocio, Michael Hodgson with Jeffrey Kent Ayeroff.

9. *Naked* (1988): concept by David Byrne; painting by Paula Wright; design by M&Co

Overlay: Robert Rauschenberg's original version of the *Speaking in Tongues* sleeve

were needed for the entire edition of the million-selling album. Byrne designed a substitute cover that could be produced conventionally: a painted circle, surrounded by four images of a chair in the corners of the cover. If Rauschenberg's sleeve design points to one source of Byrne's conceptual approach, this design indicates another: the psychoanalytic theories of Carl Gustav Jung, with their distinctive interest in the archetypal forms of the collective unconscious and in comparative mythology.

In Jungian terms, Byrne's design is a 'mandala': mandala being a Sanskrit word that means circle. According to Jung, its symbolism includes all concentrically arranged figures, round or square patterns with a centre, and radial or spherical arrangements. As Jung wrote, mandalas symbolise 'nothing less than a psychic centre of the personality not to be identified with the ego', they are 'concerned with the images that refer directly and exclusively to the new centre as it comes into consciousness.'<sup>6</sup> Jung even described a mandala, as seen in a dream, that corresponds closely to Byrne's cover design: 'A circular table with four chairs round it. Table and chairs are empty.' Jung's own comment on this was: 'The mandala is not yet "in use".'<sup>7</sup> What could be more fitting for Byrne's intention to make popular songs that are not direct expressions of the private emotions of the singer-songwriter, but rather performances of archetypal experiences?

The combination of Cage's aesthetics with Jung's psychoanalytic theory gives an indication of Byrne's ambitious artistic programme. It can be outlined by the concepts of heterogeneity, polyattentiveness, comparison of different mythologies and archetypes. Again, how can this be manifest in graphic design? Two other examples from Byrne's own work may provide some clarification.

#### Juxtaposition and process

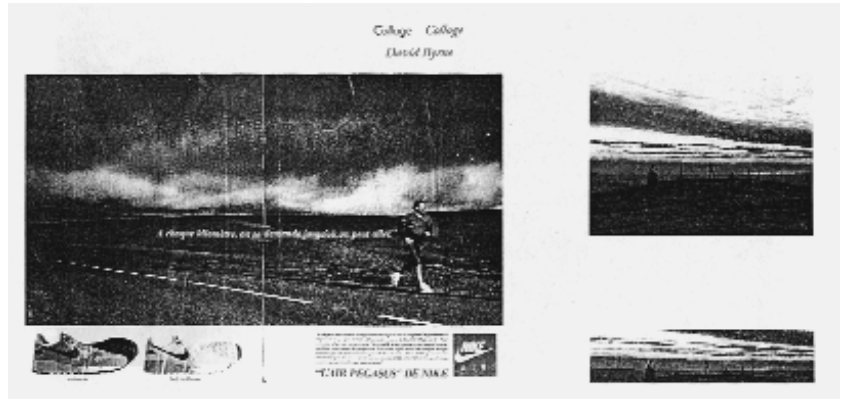
Byrne designed the cover for the Talking Heads' second album, *More Songs about Buildings and Food*. The front consists of a grid of 23×23 Polaroid photos of the band members, each photo rendering a small detail. As these snaps almost, but not quite, fit their neighbours, due to minute changes in perspective, pose and lighting, their combination produces a recognizable but uneasy group portrait: a high-tech cubist grid. The back cover reproduces *Portrait USA*, the first colour photo-mosaic of the USA, produced by General Electric with the assistance of the National Geographic Society and NASA. This computer-processed synthesis of satellite photos represents the entire landmass of the USA in a single smooth image. The juxtaposition – the image of four ordinary persons made problematic, the image of an entire country processed to be taken in a single glance – raises doubts about the intentions, standpoints and strategies of these two photographs, until front and back cover begin to oscillate between icon and riddle.



To me *The Forest* is less a piece than a process. A process of discovering what it is we are made of. What kinds of ideas, what prejudices, what propaganda fills us up, what we think is beautiful and what we think is ugly, what we consider Nature and what we think is God.<sup>d</sup>

What do structures, buildings, materials and surfaces reveal about the people who made them? If a culture is one mind, an individual composed of many human cells, what are its products, its creations, art? There are no aesthetic accidents... even the seeming chaos on the streets is intentional... the resulting complaints and criticisms of our urban environment are, in turn, also part of that environment. The occasional rupture is part of the texture.<sup>e</sup>

M&Co used to have a little hole-in-the-wall office on 57th Street, and sure enough, one feature of the office was a hole in the wall, behind which the receptionist sat.<sup>f</sup>



Another example is a simple collage, reproduced in the theatre programme for *The Forest*, a music-theatre piece that Byrne developed in collaboration with Robert Wilson on the occasion of West-Berlin's celebration of the city's 750th anniversary. The play concerned itself with the unresolved questions of romanticism, and with the contemporary relevance of romantic mythology.

His collage illustrates what he means by this. It combines a contemporary magazine ad with an almost similar image in the style of the German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. Both images present people silhouetted by backlighting, in a heroic juxtaposition of man and nature. The text in the ad for Nike shoes spells out the romantic sublime experience: 'surpassing yourself ... running ahead of a threatening thunderstorm.' High-tech running shoes, marketed by addressing a long-standing desire for romantic myths.

### Self-reflexive company

Byrne's work speaks of a strong preference for design that is about design, that is reflexive insofar as it raises questions about the many conventional languages of design. Where needed, he does this with emphatic questions about the nature of design, or with statements meant to tilt the reader's habitual glance.

Byrne prefers to collaborate with designers whose work also demonstrates reflexive and performative qualities. David Carson experiments with making typefaces more exciting by adding distortion and chaos, often hovering on the border of illegibility. Stefan Sagmeister stubbornly questions whether even the most lavish graphic design manages to touch people's hearts, even going so far as to have all the type for a design conference poster cut into his own skin, then taking a photograph to use as the poster. Tibor Kalman employed visual parodies, and built a hugely successful career by ironically exploiting the contradictions that underlie the design profession, musing that 'A designer is a professional liar because he's hired not to make the properties of a product clear but to enhance the product beyond its truth.'<sup>8</sup> To complete this list of collaborators, Dave Eggers published an incessantly self-reflexive autobiographical novel, and named it *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.

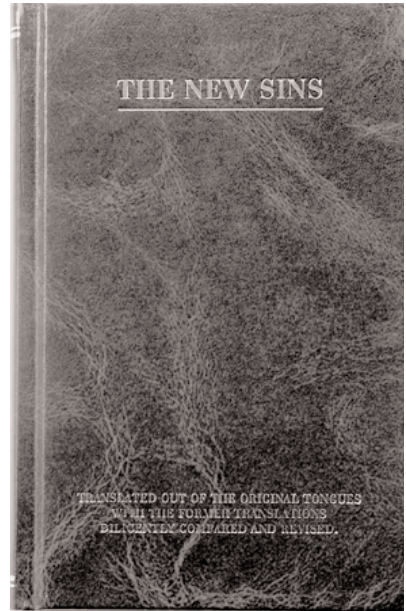
*Almost everything I have experienced in my life: books, art, music, film, magazines, cars, furniture, clothes, fast or frozen food, even people sometimes, have been in reproduction. Copies. Mass produced or reproduced... But of course, this IS the authentic for my generation. The idea of an aura of authenticity surrounding an object is strange and foreign to us.<sup>9</sup>*

*I am lost... like most people in the West my loss of faith is sad and dangerous... We take the strangest things as substitute for our lost faith: art, psychiatry, work, scientific logic, fashion, the digital future, communism, money, and self improvement courses... All of them might work a little while and then we have to move on to the next one.*

*We sense that the things, objects and places around us are alive, not just the dead matter that science would have had us to believe. We sense the world around us as a living organic system... with something like a soul... And the arts, including photography, are something we have that has remained somewhat uncontaminated... they are means of touching the parts that the official stuff can't reach.<sup>11</sup>*

*The impulse to attribute human attributes to objects is not stupid or wrong, as many scientists keep telling us time and again... we cannot be separated from the objects that surround us. They animate and imitate us just as much as we imitate objects and animate them. By breathing a soul into dead objects, we feel and understand that the world is truly alive, not just existing as an aggregate of dead objects and lifeless landscapes.<sup>1</sup>*

*God created Sins! ... Sins are woven into the fabric of our lives. ... To abandon and ignore sin is to ignore and reject God's handiwork.*



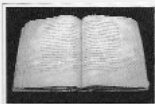
### New testament

Byrne's most recent book, *The New Sins*, is best read with an open mind for the simultaneity of ironic and serious intentions.

Commissioned in 2001 by the Valencia Biennial, it is a bilingual English/Spanish book of text and photos, designed by Dave Eggers to resemble religious literature, especially the catechisms that are often presented at graduations and religious ceremonies. Pocket-sized, bound in wine-red imitation leather and lettered in gold, it is the kind of book one might find on a hotel room bedside table, or get offered in the street by Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishnas, or followers of Scientology, trying to make converts. As such, it follows logically from Byrne's long-standing interest in unorthodox religious literature, those fascinating books (photographed in *Strange Ritual*) that according to Byrne 'promise the world and in most cases deliver disappointment.'

The visual and literary qualities of such literature have been imitated carefully. The front cover carries the legend 'translated out of the original tongues with the former translations diligently compared and revised.' The Old Testament is mimicked, in sentences such as 'The Heart is like the Sea, wherein dwells the Leviathan, and creeping things innumerable.'<sup>9</sup> And apart from the graphic features, the juxtaposition of photos and text undermines any projection of symbolic meanings. The text is rife with 'key words' printed in red, in capitals or underlined; many words and phrases begin with capitals; and ample use is made of rhetorical questions, non-sequitur arguments, bewildering admonitions and wild metaphors. The general drift of the text, however, is an appeal to the reader (especially the art-conscious, culturally aware, contemporary reader) to find and consider the structures of belief in unsuspected locations, outside the traditional framework of religion.

# THE NEW SINS



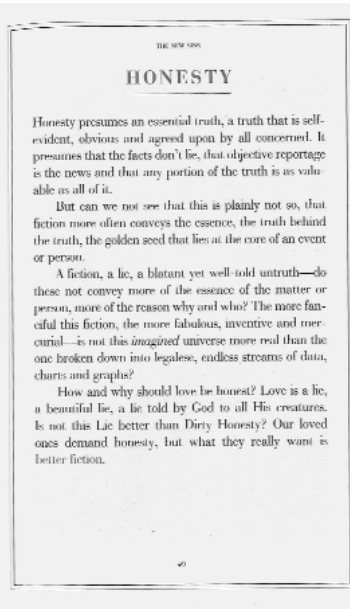
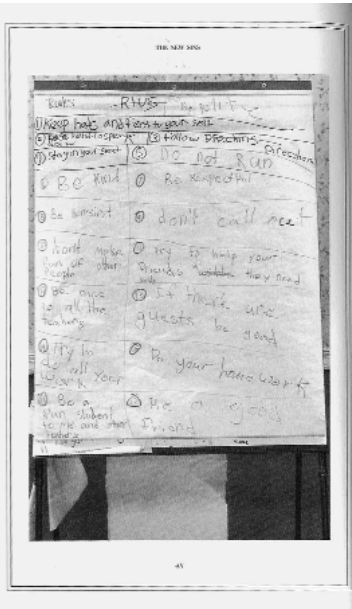
TRANSLATED OUT OF THE ORIGINAL TONGUES  
WITH THE FORMER TRANSLATIONS  
DILIGENTLY COMPARED AND REVISED.

SELF-PRONOUNCING TEXT  
CENTER COLUMN REFERENCES  
KEY WORDS IN (R-1)



Commissioned by

THE BETTER EMANCIPATED SERVITORS FOR HEAVEN  
In loose consultation with the  
SECOND CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF TOMORROW  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK & COLUMBUS, OHIO, RESPECTIVELY



*Sins are made by Him – to enjoy and use until they have been eventually understood. Each culture and the society make their sins – sins are not eternal, fixed and forever. They are constantly and eternally in flux.<sup>1</sup>*

*Hope allows us to deceive ourselves into thinking that life is parcelled into discrete chunks – that our lives are stories with beginnings, middles and ends. That there IS narrative, linearity, and not chaos, chance and luck.<sup>k</sup>*

” :quotes end

Byrne enumerates ten new sins: charity, sense of humour, beauty, thrift, ambition, hope, intelligence/knowledge, contentment, sweetness, honesty, and cleanliness. Each is characterised by a brief explanation and a photograph, mixing humour, religious metaphor, exaggeration and irony. A fold-out page at the centre of the book adds more categories of sin in a hierarchical structure (after Dante’s *inferno*): sins of extreme self-control, sins of self-denial, sins of extreme logic, and sins of ideological adherence.

All in all, it seems safe to conclude that Byrne’s new sins spring from neglect: neglect of the accidental, the juxtaposed, the unintended, the allegorical, the heterogeneous, the reflexive. Aren’t those also the sins that are most often committed by design?

” :text ends

## Quotes references

- See Byrne’s Introduction in Lewis Blackwell, *The End of Print: The Graphic Design of David Carson*, (London, Lawrence King Publishing, 1995)
- Byrne, ‘The Holy Grail of No Style’, in Hall and Bierut (ed.), *Tibor Kalman: Perverse Optimist* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), p.87.
- Byrne, interviewed by Herman van der Horst and Bart van de Kamp, *Muziekkrant Oor* nr.1, 1986), p.12.
- Byrne, text in the booklet of his CD *The Forest*, February, 1991.
- Byrne, insert in *Parkett* nr.23, 1990, p.120/126.
- Hall and Bierut (ed.), *Tibor Kalman: Perverse Optimist* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), p.87.

## g. Byrne, ‘End Notes’, in *Strange Ritual: Pictures and Words*, (London, Faber and Faber, 1995).

- Byrne, interviewed by Elisabetta d’Erme in *Alias*, weekly insert with *Il Manifesto*, 1998.
- Byrne, interviewed by Marco Puntin, *Il Progetto* nr. 4, 1998.
- Byrne, leaflet published by Aktionsforum Praterinsel, Munich, Germany, to accompany his show *Glory! Success! Ecstasy!* *3 Animations*, 1998.
- Byrne, *The New Sins*, (New York, McSweeney’s Books, and London, Faber and Faber, 2001), pp.13–15.
- Byrne, *The New Sins*, (New York, McSweeney’s Books, and London, Faber and Faber, 2001) p.39.

## Text references

- See Theodore Shank, *American Alternative Theatre* (Macmillan, London, 1982), pp.125–7.
- Byrne collaborated with Wilson on two of the latter’s major productions: *the CIVIL warS* in 1984, and *The Forest* in 1988.
- See Richard Schechner, *The End of Humanism: Writings on Performance* (New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), pp.20–21; and his *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), p.221.
- Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on culture and performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.241.
- Rauschenberg had already made similar work in the sixties, *Revolvers*, consisting of a series

- of large transparent disks full of photographically reproduced images, mounted in special holders. These pieces were made for art collections, whereas the album cover was intended for mass production; some 25,000 copies were printed.
- C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (second edition). *Collected Works*, vol. 12, (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p.41.
- C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (second edition). *Collected Works*, vol. 12, (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968) p.186.
- Tibor Kalman, quoted in Liz Farely, *Tibor Kalman: Design and Undesign* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1998).
- Byrne, *The New Sins* (New York, McSweeney’s Books, and London, Faber and Faber, 2001), p.47.