

Encounter

Since moving to London, I've spent countless hours on the Underground – standing across from the same adverts, watching them repeat station after station.

These adverts are intended to be persuasive: structured, tested, and optimised – yet research suggests that dialogue between designer and audience is limited.

I began to wonder: what if design became a conversation rather than a broadcast?
Could the public shape the outcome before it's printed across the city?
And could that participation lead to more effective work being produced?

That question became the key starting point for this project.

Investigating the System

Through collecting and dissecting Underground adverts, I began to map their hidden structures. I found them to be predictable. All seemed to feature the same content; a headline, an image, a logo, and a call-to-action of some sort.

The system behind the design felt modernist too – rational, ordered, and closely tied to the grid... Although modernist connotations tend to link back to mid-century design, its ideology still rings true today.

As Josef Müller-Brockmann argued in *Grid Systems in Graphic Design*, modern designers pursued order and clarity as their highest principles. On the Underground, that legacy remains. The same ordered systems still shape how adverts are built – but it's modernist authority now hides in plain sight, absorbed into what we see as normal.

I wanted to expose this structure and adapt it – to see what happens when systems intended for control become collaborative. This became my central question: what happens to authorship and the direction of visual outcomes when systems of control are opened to collective input?

To explore this, I turned to code – building a system that could facilitate the exploration into these questions through practice.

Building a Generative System

Using various technologies and coding languages, I developed a digital system capable of generating common ad layouts automatically – using a digital reinterpretation of the modular grid systems often found in Müller-Brockmann's work.

Media theorist Lev Manovich writes that new media is modular and variable – assembled from independent elements that can endlessly recombine. This generator works in that way.

Each advert is a variation, built from rules rather than aesthetic intuition.
I'm not designing outcomes, I'm designing conditions for outcomes to appear.
Authorship begins to dissolve into the logic of the system itself.

Feedback and Collective Authorship

To explore this further, I expanded the prototype into a public design and feedback tool; Co-former.

Users can log in, create and generate outcomes inspired by TfL ads, compare these, and ask the public to vote for what resonates most. Each vote shifts the rankings, revealing collective preference in real time.

Philosopher Bruno Latour says that every actor in a network, human or non-human, holds agency. Here, designer, algorithm, and audience operate together, forming distributed authorship.

The system doesn't seek consensus; it helps to visualise disagreement – a record of taste, bias, and behaviour. As Roland Barthes famously said, "The birth of the reader must come at the cost of the death of the author." In this system, that death becomes literal: outcomes survive not by the designer's taste, but by collective choice.

Contamination and Control

Working through this, I felt my role shift: I was no longer author, but facilitator – one part in a wider network of creation.

The feedback I collect is shaped by who participates and who doesn't. Preference and authorship blur, outcomes become increasingly data-driven, shifting the emphasis from the designers intention to the audiences response.

The question shifts from what looks right to what resonates. That shift from aesthetic judgement to data-driven choice is the argument this work proposes.

It reframes design itself from an act of expression to a process of measurement and negotiation.

What the System Reveals

What began as an analysis of adverts evolved into an encounter with systems – social, digital, and ethical. Across this work, a common question arises: Who holds authorship when systems design themselves?

Co-former is still a prototype, but it proposes a shift – design as a platform for feedback, not control. Perhaps this is what contemporary design demands – not an end to authorship, but a redistribution of it.

To share authorship.

To listen through data.

And to let the encounter itself do the designing.