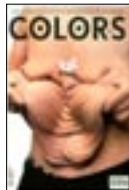
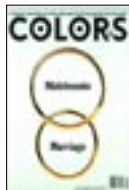
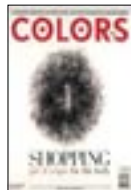
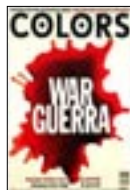
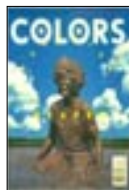
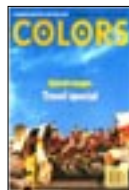
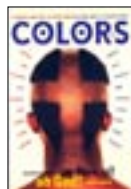
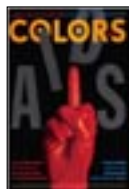
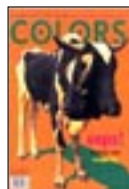
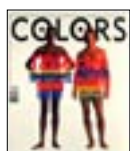


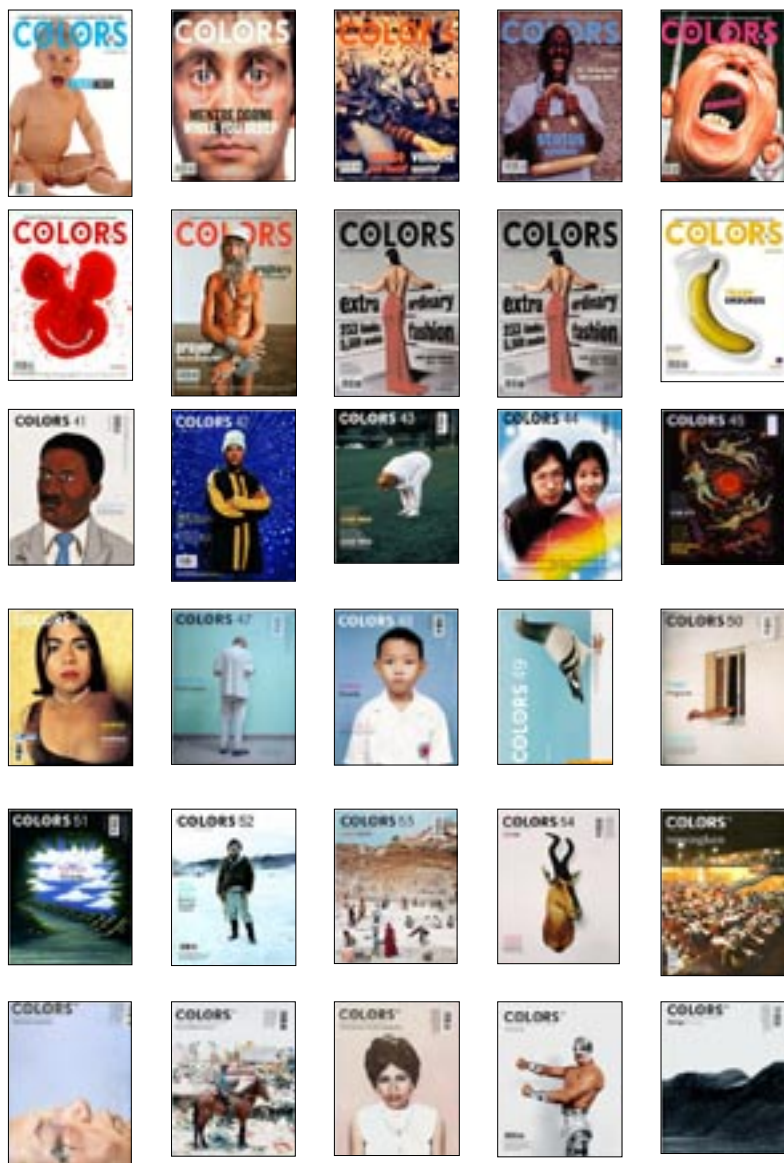
COLORS⁰⁰

Colors Magazine and the Tyranny of the Theme

Themes Temas







Every issue of COLORS magazine to date. Format changes are also indicated.

BIRTH

**IMMIGRA-
TION**

EVOLUTION

RACE

STREET

ECOLOGY

AIDS

RELIGION

SHOPPING

SPORTS

TRAVEL

HEAVEN

NO WORDS

WAR

WEALTH

A TOWN

GET A JOB

SHOPPING

ANIMALS

MARRIAGE

SMOKING

HAIR

GIFTS

DEATH

FAT

TIME

HOME

TOUCH

TOYS

HEART

WATER	NIGHT	VENICE	STATUS	MAMMA
MONO-CULTURE	PRAYER	EXTRA/ ORDINARY FASHION	EXTRA/ ORDINARY FASHION	TRASH
REFUGEES	ROMA	ELDERLY	PUBLIC HOUSING	STAR CITY
VOLUNTEER	MADNESS	SCHOOL	TOURS	PRISON
THE ROAD	ROLANDO TRUJILLO	SLAVERY	FOOD	BIRMINGHAM
VIOLENCE	SLUMS	PHOTO STUDIO	TELENOVELAS	ENERGY

The themes of the first sixty issues of *COLORS*. Format changes are indicated.

COLORS MAGAZINE AND THE TYRANNY OF THE THEME

Can a publication about time or water or color be anything but broad and simplistic? Over the last thirteen years, COLORS magazine has answered that question with a resounding “Sometimes.”

Ever since COLORS 4, which was devoted to Race, each installment of the magazine has been organized around a single idea. COLORS is not alone in its reliance on themes. In fact, many publications where graphic designers play a prominent editorial role have a systematic approach to content. There is a similarity between the visual systems that designers use to organize information and editorial strategies like lists, taxonomies, and themes that they commonly employ. Perhaps themes appeal to designers because they enable a sort of “snap-to-grid” editorial style that resembles the process of graphic design. But does this totalizing approach clarify or simplify?

FITTING

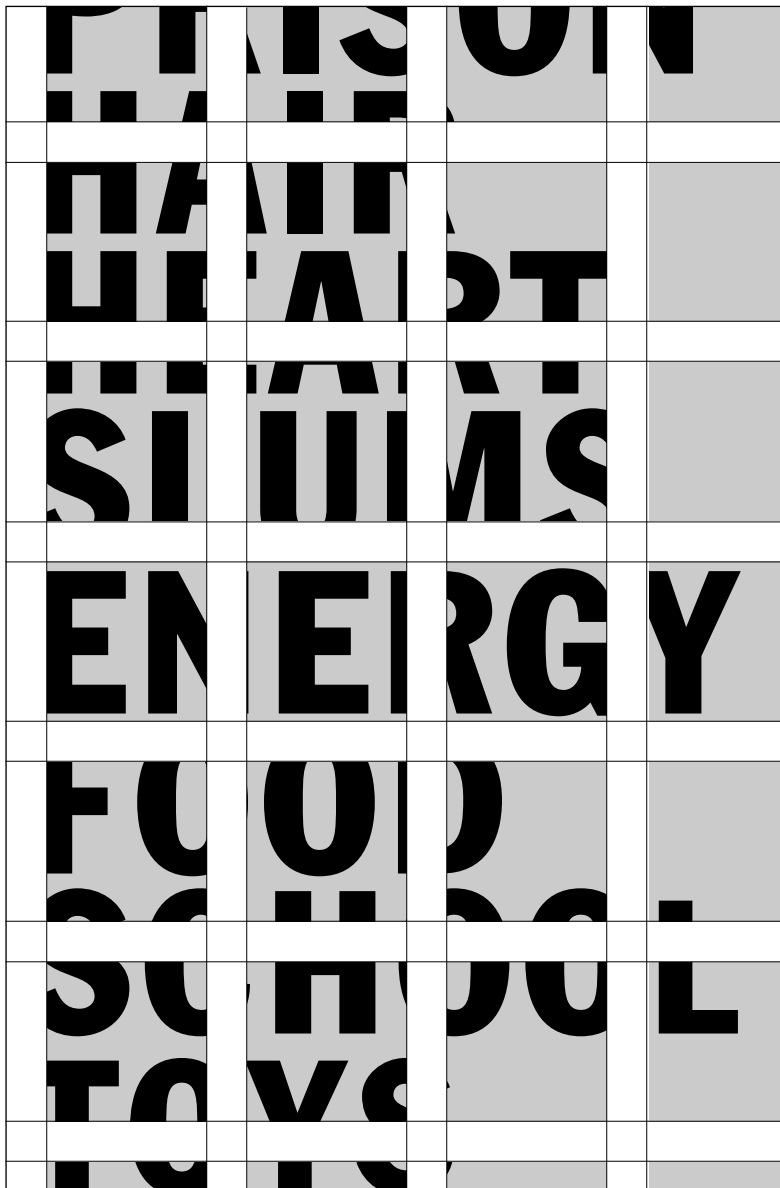
WITH

**THE
THEME**

Themes are the editorial equivalent of the typographic grid: they help distribute content and provide a baseline against which an editor can create contrast and rhythm.

Themes are the editorial equivalent of the typographic grid: they help distribute content and provide a baseline against which an editor can create contrast and rhythm. Tibor Kalman, the first editor-in-chief of *COLORS*, explained, “To create stories I invented an imaginary matrix based on a map of Manhattan: avenues were themes and streets were subjects, so an avenue like sports would be intersected with streets like architecture, fashion, and food.”

This was an ingenious system for generating unexpected story ideas, but it also reveals a potential problem with the way themes impact the editorial process. Populating the matrix can become an end unto itself, where “fitting with the theme” is the only litmus test for content. At the very least, a matrix that generates three issues on shopping in two years deserves a second look.



“We would think of the story we wanted to do, get the visuals right and at the end the captions or story were written to fit the images.”

There are three primary reasons why *COLORS* has remained so faithful to the theme. First of all, a magazine published in multiple languages and distributed in over a hundred countries has to rely on the broadest possible means of communication. The theme filters the infinite possibilities of “a magazine about the rest of the world”—the stated goal of Oliviero Toscani who started the magazine as an extension of the United Colors of Benetton advertising campaign. Secondly, *COLORS* was initially under the creative control of a photographer (Toscani) and a graphic designer (Kalman). This led to an unusual editorial process. Mark Porter (art director, *COLORS* 9-12) remembers, “We would think of the story we wanted to do, get the visuals right and at the end the captions or story were written to fit the images.” This kind of reverse engineering characterizes the use of themes

The best issues of the early period turned the convention of the theme on its head. For example, COLORS 13 contained no words.

as well: themes organize the magazine before it even exists. Finally, COLORS was funded entirely by Benetton and was distributed through their vast network of stores, so it did not have the financial constraints of a normal publication. For most other magazines, the premium value of advertising real estate, especially in the first third of the book, prohibits the kind of continuous full spread imagery and photo essays that are a staple of COLORS.

The financial freedom and unique hierarchy at COLORS has led to innovation, and some moments of brilliance. The best issues of the early period turned the convention of the theme on its head. For example, COLORS 13 contained no words. COLORS 12 used a single color—blue—to render the theme of heaven. At its worst, the global perspective of COLORS was so broad and the humanist voice so idealistic that the maga-

Gutiérrez is a designer with a thoroughly Spanish identity. This cultural rootedness provided a point of view contrasting sharply with Kalman's global, multi-cultural perspective.

zine came across as naïve. After Kalman's departure this was particularly true. It wasn't until another graphic designer took creative control of the magazine that the device of the theme was used in a more nuanced way.

Fernando Gutiérrez first got involved with COLORS when Tibor Kalman invited him to art direct the wordless thirteenth issue. After Tibor's departure, Gutiérrez continued to work with Oliviero Toscani intermittently and eventually redesigned the entire magazine. Although he continued to use the theme as an organizing principle, Gutiérrez had a different way of employing it.

Despite being born in London, Gutiérrez is a designer with a thoroughly Spanish identity. This cultural rootedness provided a point of view contrasting sharply with Kalman's global, multicultural

**DO
THEMES**

CLARIFY

OR

SIMPLIFY

?

perspective. Toscani described Kalman's editorial style as proceeding from his "optimistic American attitude" – "that moralistic way of putting things." The difference in perspective can be seen in how the cover of the magazine changed under Gutiérrez. Although Kalman did not design the cover (he was quite proud that he was in charge of the content of the magazine and not just its form) under his leadership, the cover was usually a clever twist on the theme – the travel issue showed an image of an airplane accident, the ecology issue showed a cow with two heads, etc. Under Gutiérrez the cover photography was more gritty and direct. The prison issue shows a prisoner's arms dangling out of his cell; the slums issue shows an actual slum.

Wit was less prominent in the new *COLORS* and the idealism of the early issues disappeared. The maga-

Where Kalman pushed the magazine to be comprehensive and cover stories in the broadest possible way, the new COLORS was much more concerned with depth and specificity.

zine took on more specific themes and replaced Kalman's anthropological visual language with a journalistic style. Where Kalman pushed the magazine to be comprehensive and cover stories in the broadest possible way, the new COLORS was much more concerned with depth and specificity. COLORS 52 focused on a single person, Rolando Trujillo, who lived on the remote island of Tierra del Fuego, 800km from Antarctica. Another issue was devoted exclusively to the city of Birmingham in the UK.

While continuing to work on COLORS Gutiérrez started MATADOR in collaboration with Alberto Anaut, an editor of the Spanish daily newspaper EL PAIS. Instead of choosing a theme for each issue, Gutiérrez and Anaut came up with a theme that would last them for almost thirty years. Each issue explores the Spanish national identity through one of the twenty-

nine letters of the Spanish alphabet. The tension of scale between a single letter and an entire nation is a classic graphic design strategy.

COLORS is a case study in how graphic designers tend to systematize the editorial process. Over its tenure, the magazine has been a laboratory for the integration of design and editing. It makes sense that the paradigm of the visual system has been applied so readily to content in magazines created by designer/editors. The question is, should organization supersede quality?

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