

Analog Magic

An old artist's trick reveals a fresh point of view.



Musicians are using anamorphic tricks to complement their tunes. Designer Simon Lemmerer helped hip-hop duo Bam & Mr.Dero create typography from salvaged instruments for the covers of their two EPs, *This* and *That*, and an LP, *This & That* (top). ok Go's music video "The Writing's on the Wall," produced by 1stAveMachine, featured a panoply of anamorphic illusions and received more than twelve million views on YouTube (bottom).

At 3 a.m., after nearly 60 botched takes in which directors accidentally stepped into the camera frame and band members got splattered with paint a beat too soon, ok Go completed its music video "The Writing's on the Wall." The odds were stacked against the June 2014 release—the band could afford to rent its filming location, a 100-square-foot warehouse in a dense Brooklyn neighborhood, for only one day, and they wanted to pull off dozens of visual tricks in one continuous take. Every staffer from production company 1stAveMachine and each band member had to be perfect, together. And finally, it happened.

That awe-inducing feeling when chaos becomes clarified is exactly what you get from the anamorphic illusions that make the video so popular (with twelve million views and counting). The geometric perspective trick known as anamorphosis distorts an image so that it is perfectly viewable from only one vantage point. For example,

as bass player Tim Nordwind climbs a ladder, viewers see a tire, an amputated mannequin and a roll of toilet paper, among other jetsam. When he reaches the 20-foot pinnacle and turns his face to the camera, which is pointing downward in a bird's-eye view, the tower of trash aligns to form Nordwind's face, with a singular red stapler to represent his lips. Voilà! Out of a confusing mishmash comes the satisfaction of understanding. Without any digital effects, anamorphosis is analog magic.

"We wanted you to feel as you do when a magician creates something incredible right in front of you," says co-director Aaron Duffy. "You get this tension in your stomach, this feeling that more incredible things can happen in the world than your logical brain can allow for."

Anamorphosis may appear to be the latest visual trend—just last year leaping from sidewalk chalk art into ads for the Honda CR-V



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Felice Varini has been a prominent creator of anamorphic art installations since the 1970s. Varini's *Trois Ellipses Ouvertes en Désordre* (2014) covers nearly 100 rooftops in Hasselt, Belgium (top left). The artist's *Suite d'Eclats* (2013) by Varini at Le Hangar à Bananes in Nantes, France (bottom left). His *Vingt-trois disques évidés plus douze moitiés et quatre quarts* (2013) at the Grand Palais in Paris, France (right).

and Apple's most recent keynote—but this magic is ancient, or at least Renaissance. The Paleolithic Lascaux cave paintings in southwestern France are said to include the beginnings of perspectival anamorphosis—the horses and cows were painted so that they appear in proportion from the ground, but stretched up close. Leonardo da Vinci's notebook sketch of an eye is the earliest indisputable example. The eye is distorted when viewed straight on, but perfect from the side. Other anamorphic paintings were revealed through cylindrical mirrors, enabling artists to encrypt messages. According to art professor Dan Collins of Arizona State University, the illusion was used for the seediest of subjects—"the erotic, the scatological, the occult and the politically controversial."

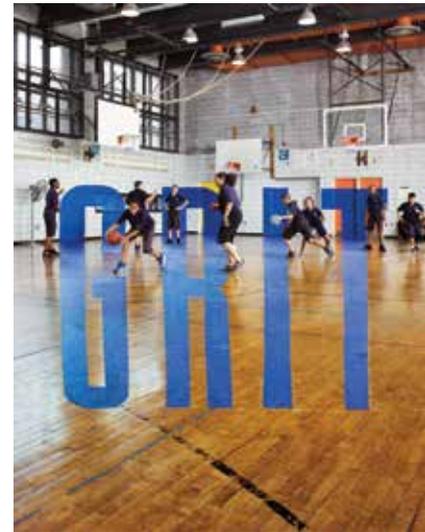
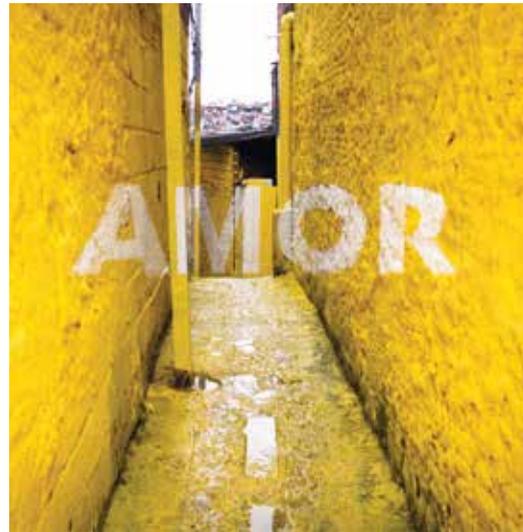
"It is not the kind of image you can dwell upon," Collins says. "Rather, it is like something seen out of the corner of the eye, or glimpsed at high speed, or seen through a keyhole."

In the Renaissance, it wasn't all peep shows and poop jokes. Anamorphosis went mainstream through Hans Holbein the Younger's 1533 painting *The Ambassadors*. Between two stately diplomats, a blob of paint on the floor confuses the viewer. From the side, a ghastly image is revealed: a human skull. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan interpreted the straight-on view as phallic, the oblique view as mortality staring back at us and a final stage in which the viewer becomes aware of herself in the act of seeing.

Anamorphosis shows us the limits of our vision and our consciousness. "You're treating your own mind's eye like it's a camera," says Duffy.

In the 1970s, anamorphosis experienced another resurgence, through Swiss artist Felice Varini, who painted whole city squares with geometric perspective artwork. Varini was nominated for the 2000/2001 Marcel Duchamp Prize. Recently, he encircled the Belgian city of Hasselt with giant interlacing rings that can be viewed from a single vantage point—the rooftop lounge of the Radisson Blu Hotel. The white pattern graces nearly 100 buildings, including the city's cathedral. To create the artwork, the Radisson projected lights to etch the outline across Hasselt, and painters applied their brushes to rooftops atop cherry pickers.

Though geometric perspective images have been with us for centuries, anamorphosis is having a moment in today's branded world. Recent examples of the trick are far less risqué or philosophically mind-altering. Apple's keynote address to announce the iPhone 6 and Apple Watch begins in a large warehouse with computerized type, "Here's to those who have always..." Then the camera pans to show large, fragmented letters strewn across columns and walls that line up to reveal "seen things differently." Ironically, this trick is hardly different—in fact, it's become widespread.



Anamorphism adds a surprising vantage point to wayfinding graphics and editorial photography. Pentagram partner Paula Scher’s environmental design for Bloomberg helps its staffers find the fifth floor (left). Madrid, Spain, art collective Boa Mistura brighted a São Paolo, Brazil, favela with *Luz nas Velas* (2012), anamorphic installations that carry positive messages, such as this one: *Amor*, or love (middle). Doyle Partners and photographer Stephen Wilkes created this photo (right) for the *New York Times*’ feature “What if the Secret to Success is Failure?”

Social media users gobble up examples of anamorphosis. Viral chalk drawings that appear 3-D on asphalt include a medieval army, two politicians falling down a well and even a terrifying hell-scape. Pinterest pinners share anamorphic typography adorning startup offices. Since 2008, the online magazine *Illusion*, an influential publisher of anamorphic images, has grown from 15,000 to 1.6 million digital subscribers.

“There seems to be a boom of interest in recent years,” says Adriana de Barros, founder and editor-in-chief of *Illusion*, “and 2014 has been remarkable with the diversity of work made in perspective illusion, from sculptures to murals.”

Designer Joseph Egan, whose own anamorphic typography thesis for Chelsea College of Art and Design received attention on Designboom, Colossal, Pinterest and other sites, says, “It’s that split second of realization and instant reward which make the process so well suited for social media.” Egan’s project emblazoned the phrases “it’s a point of view” and “it’s more than just print” in red paint across white walls and a hallway to highlight the beauty and contours of both architecture and typography. “Graphic design can be so much more than a purely two-dimensional experience,” he says.

In this digital era, it’s the hand-drawn, painstakingly built and impressively coordinated live experiences that still hold the power to inspire audiences. In videos, Duffy says, there’s a growing trend of using real stunts in the physical world, as opposed to post-production 3-D animation. “I can get excited about something that has really happened in space,” he says.

But the trick’s increasing popularity has created difficulties for some. Designer Simon Lemmerer proposed anamorphic typography EP covers for the hip-hop duo Bam & Mr.Dero just before “The

Writing’s on the Wall” was released. “That was a bit of a downer,” he says. “We had a little delay and made a few changes to our project.” In the end, the two EPs, *This* and *That*, and an LP, *This & That*, feature anamorphic letters built solely out of musical equipment. “We drove around the city for three days rescuing old instruments from junkyards,” Lemmerer says. Then they placed tracing paper with an outlined glyph in front of a tripod-fixed camera and carefully set every object, with one eye behind the camera and other helpers stationed near the ceiling, hanging monochromatically painted instruments from nylon threads. The result shows musical clutter finely shaped into a single neon glyph.

Anamorphic imagery’s growing popularity has even stirred up controversy. ok Go’s production company for “The Writing’s on the Wall,” 1stAveMachine, later produced the Apple keynote, and the band claimed that some of its ideas were stolen. In response, Duffy points to anamorphosis’s long history. Co-director Bob Partington says he’s glad more creatives are contributing new perspectives to the illusion. “I think it can be pushed even further,” he says. “It feels like that world could grow.”

As for the future, designers say they’re excited to see creators interacting with anamorphic illusions in real time, as ok Go does in its music video. “I can only see it becoming more popular if a brand makes a real leap of faith and commissions a permanent installation in an interesting space or does something completely original with the technique,” Egan says. “More often than not, a brand will want exactly what they have seen done before, just with their logo instead of somebody else’s. It only remains relevant when someone is innovating.”

For this ancient trick to surprise audiences, creatives must continue to find new geometric—and artistic—perspectives. [ca](#)