Handling the Creative Process of 'Olha pra Ti!'

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[Drawing/Characters/Comics]

Abstract

This paper delves into the creative process of project 'Olha pra Ti!' ('Look at You!'), a book/journal for teens to reflect about their relationship with their bodies through drawing/writing, developed in the context of the Masters in Design. A project with peculiar origins – a graphic style looking for a purpose – went through a goal oriented visual reformulation, which, in turn, led to a complete project restructuring. We identified the importance of creating a comfortable, private, supported and flexible experience, and how these could be accomplished through the book's physical and graphic features. We analyzed a reference project and various plastic languages and techniques liable to be 'dissected'. By putting the contents of the book to the test, the personal experiences of the author served as a starting point for the illustrations. By anchoring the definition of the remaining content levels, illustration conquered an essential role in the project and opened it up to a bigger audience (from just girls to any teen). The diversity of visuals our book achieves is only possible, because design and audience-centered choices were combined to create an experience that takes full advantage of its format and expands it in space and time. As a future development, a usability test is intended to be done.

Keywords

Illustration; Creative Process; Activity Book; Adolescence; Self-Reflection; Body

1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that adolescence is a period of great change and learning, affecting our biological, psychological and social development [1]. During this period, it can be shocking to have the way we think of ourselves be confronted with our new image in the mirror, let alone to learn that our physical appearance has a set of values attached to it that we have no control over. In an image and beauty dominated world, the views teens have about their bodies are even more affected, easily influencing their self-worth. The fact that the inseparable mind-body connection is frequently forgotten [2], just leaves the body to be scrutinized as an object in a vacuum apart from the human being. And although adolescence is a very sensitive time, it also allows for great intervention opportunities, thanks to brain plasticity [1]. So, creating a safe space for teens to express their emotions and reflect about themselves and the world, with as little external influence as possible, is becoming more important than ever.

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Just like writing, drawing is a tool to manipulate information and create meaning [3]. By drawing, anyone can create a personal visual language that develops self-understanding. They can also evaluate their progress by comparing marks from different times. Additionally, drawing provides a great metaphor for life's struggles: you draw, erase, redraw, give up, start again... which teaches patience and dealing with failure. Art therapy testifies this by recognizing the need for self-expression and the power of drawing to turn negative emotions into positive outcomes [4].

It's with all of this in mind that project 'Olha pra Ti!' ('Look at You!) was conceived. The name itself has a double meaning, encouraging people to value what shows through the mirror and through the artwork. But the project had a peculiar origin: Starting with a graphic style characterized by the casual representation of the female body, we paired it with a female teen audience (13-18 year olds). And so, we decided to create an illustrated body-self-reflection journal, not only meant to be casually used at home, but also to support therapy sessions as a tool for discussion. Its structure was divided into word themed sections, each representing a factor that can influence body satisfaction. But, by completing the first layout experience (Fig. 1), we understood that the illustration's role was decorative and tone dominating. We recognized that body images would serve as a 'lecture' and prevent teens, not only to think independently, but also to focus on other facets of the human experience besides the body.

Realizing that the project outgrew the art style and presented various goal compromising issues, highlighted that the intervention levels weren't well defined or respected. By delving into how this project was reformulated, we intend to discuss how illustration and design can inspire self-expression through a comfortable, private, supported and flexible experience. This means that illustration should be the first level of information and a basis for teens to take command of. Typography should be a complement developed with intent. The format should enhance the flow of the experience. The activities the book proposes should be clear, challenge teens' cognitive, emotional and creative levels and not interfere with each other: If writing – about what? If drawing – not only about what, but also how?

2. The Interactive Book

As the digital landscape evolves, so does the importance of elevating printed books to a rich sensory experience. This can be done through interactive books, not only by exploring their graphic and physical capabilities, but also by extending the experience in space and time [5]. These books are characterized by their dependence on the 'reader' to develop the interactive elements [6]. But the digital and the physical don't have to compete with each other, they can actually be combined to further develop engaging and

Fig. 1. Filipa Pereira, 2019. First layout experience of section 'Crescimento' ('Growth'), a 250x175mm spread. Pictured is the title, the illustration, a dot grid background on the right page, a definition presented as if the book talks to the teen ('Progress you made since you were born and that turned you into who you are.'), and one of the three discussion topics, presented as if the teen is beginning a thought process ('When I was little, I remember feeling...').

From the start, we recognized the importance of using a casual and clear language for a closer approach to the teen.

81

HANDLING THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF 'OLHA PRA TI!'
Filipa Pereira and Graça Magalhães ▪ {filipa.pereira, gracamag}@ua.pt

continually updated non-linear stories [5]. If all of these possibilities are well applied and not distracting, interactive books have great educational potential, mixing disciplines and enhancing the cognitive, aesthetic and emotional development [6]. Furthermore, Neves' remarks [5] about the importance of organizing and establishing a hierarchy of content levels, presents this as a great principle to determine the order of content discovery with illustration taking the main role in our project.

Although the inspiration for 'Olha pra Ti!' started with *I Am a Rebel Girl – A Journal to Start Revolutions* (Fig. 2) it didn't take us long to understand the constraints of digital imagery. The illustrations of this interactive book are composed of colorful, bold and stylized shapes combined with blank spaces, where girls answer the proposed drawing/writing exercises. This extremely defined style in conjunction with the extremely defined intervention spaces creates a separation, a stark contrast that will make most hand-made expressions feel lackluster in comparison and, as a consequence, will inhibit action, for fear of ruining the beautiful book. Therefore, finding *Livro (de Atividades) para Massajar a Imaginação* (Fig. 3), proved to be exactly the main project reference that we needed. The book is structured in 3 parts that celebrate people's singularity and gradually challenge and increase autonomy through supported drawing exercises [7].

Fig. 2: Spread from *I Am a Rebel Girl – A Journal to Start Revolutions*, 2018.

Fig. 3: *Livro (de Atividades) para Massajar a Imaginação*, 2013, page from the first, second and third part, respectively.
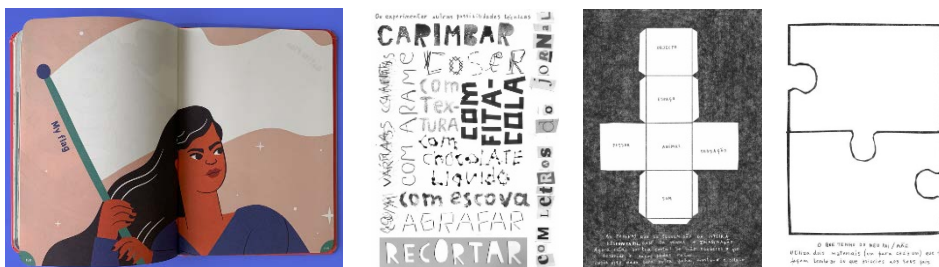
3. The Synergy of Image and Text as Dissectible Visuals

To fix the imbalance of the image and text roles, identified in the first layout experience, we must understand how these two elements can be manipulated, as Cruz says [8], 'in continuity with each other', so each one adds irreplaceable value and text isn't placed in a dominant position. The fact that text exists in a duality of verbal and sensible meaning, allows great experimentation in the realm of illustration, even going as far as purposefully presenting text exclusively for its graphic qualities. This means that the same combination of color, texture, composition, gesture and rhythm applicable to illustration, could also be applied to text. This would result in a relationship of agreement between the two (or disagreement – creating interesting tensions and nuances), or, if only working with text, between its treatment and its meaning. Cruz's writings allow us to conclude that compromising the immediate legibility of text should not deter from playing with its graphic qualities, for this furthers the synergy between text and illustration/meaning.

During our research, we found practical solutions to what is described above. Even if they don't include text, their principles, techniques

and graphic treatments could be applied to it. Overall, these artworks present a dynamic harmony and a handmade feel that could be dissected into the necessary steps to get to the end result. With the proper support and instruction, it's not hard to imagine people with little art experience replicating most features of these artworks and adapting them to their needs. 'Dissectible graphics' don't require extensive layering, blending or editing, nor do they require exquisite technique or materials, they can actually be very pressure free. What is welcome is a 'good eye', but that can be achieved with practice. The inclusion of a 'human touch' in our project's illustrations is important, not only because it encourages action, but also because it embraces diverse expressive responses.
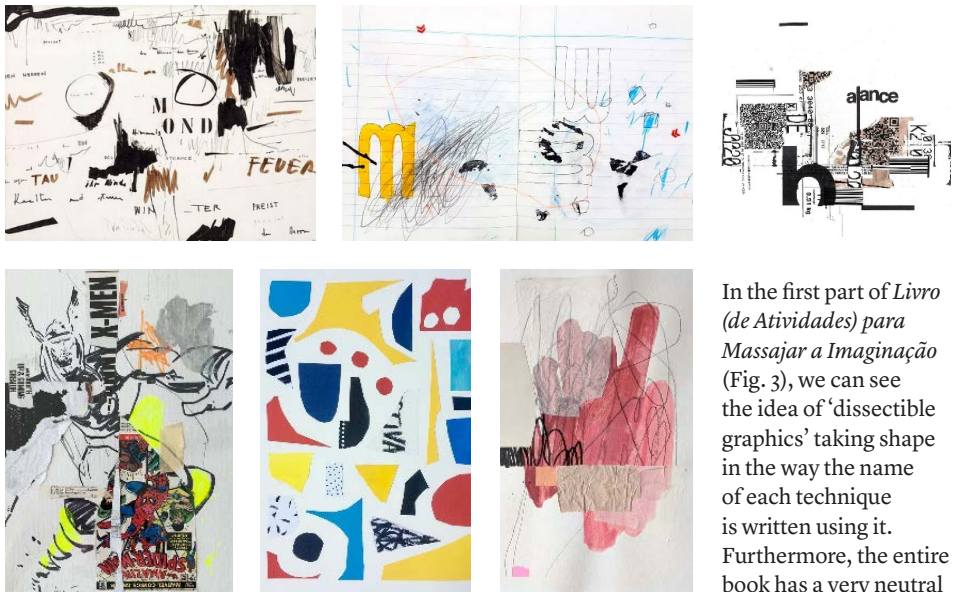
In the first part of *Livro (de Atividades) para Massajar a Imaginação* (Fig. 3), we can see the idea of 'dissectible graphics' taking shape in the way the name of each technique is written using it. Furthermore, the entire book has a very neutral and concise style that

Fig. 4: Mira Schendel, n.d.

Fig. 5: Bea Mahan, 2020.

Fig. 6: Milan Doctor, 2020.

Fig. 7: Justin C. Harder, 2020.

Fig. 8: Isis Navarro, 2020.

Fig. 9: Masha Adamova, 2020.

bleeds to both image and text, inviting stylistically diverse responses: irregular outlines, mostly pencil and charcoal textures, exclusive use of silhouettes and greyscale. As for individual works related to art, design and illustration, we selected a few examples: In Schendel's contemporary artwork (Fig. 4) we see how words walk the line between handwriting and scribbles, which are juxtaposed with expressive strokes in a simple and neutral color scheme. In Mahan's (Fig. 5) graphic art the outline of a letter is repeated in different orientations and in an unrefined manner, which is brought forward by the scribbles and shapes layered on top. Doctor's graphic design collage (Fig. 6) reuses graphic details of common packaging, like bar codes, QR codes, and sequences of letters and numbers. The legibility of characters is tested with interesting cuts, layers and compositions. Harder's illustration work (Fig. 7) testifies how a textured abstract style has a rich potential to be combined with more concrete figures in a successful manner. Navarro's collage art (Fig. 8) proves how simple cut-

HANDLING THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF 'OLHA PRA TI!'
Filipa Pereira and Graça Magalhães ▪ {filipa.pereira, gracamag}@ua.pt

83

outs and colors can create efficient and interesting rhythms. Adding custom handmade patterns (some of which can be composed of letters) to this recipe results in a more personal composition. Finally, Adamova's artwork (Fig. 9), although not including text, shows how structural lines can ground expressive brush strokes and create a 'clean chaotic' look. In the presented artworks, describing the use of text without describing its graphic treatment is impossible, because they are so deeply interconnected.

4. Project Reformulation

After abandoning our initial art style, we explored an accessible, abstract, dynamic and intuitive alternative. During this stage we quickly learned about the importance of subtlety and synthesis of composition and color, which is easy to lose when working with mixed media. We also understood that every step needs to be well thought out, but 'happy accidents' are welcome as well. Recognizing the artwork as finished is a conscious decision, because it's always possible to build on top of what's done (a great bonus for a project that asks for the participation of its audience). Each graphic experience was analyzed to identify patterns of what works and what could be improved, gradually building up our practical knowledge. And so, we arrived at some general conclusions of what features could be used: abundant white space; clean appearance; expressive and imperfect lines; intentional (un)alignment; text as illustration; different textures and types of paper; diverse paper cutting techniques; minimal color palette; controlled distressed effects; and silhouettes. Since this new graphic language has no gender related values, we decided we should broaden our audience from teen girls to any teen, since body satisfaction issues are not exclusive to females.

Having established some ground rules for illustration, it was time to do the same for the format. After considering various options, we reevaluated the concept of 'book' and selected the accordion bookbinding. While regular book spreads would break the flow of work inside each section, this special bookbinding does precisely the opposite - it can be interacted with page by page and as a whole, entirely spread out. We decided on individually applying it to each themed section. To store the sections, we created a box (Fig. 10) exclusively assembled by notches, to be opened flat and completed by the teen.
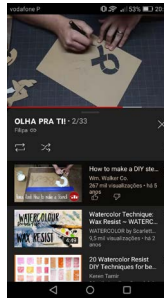
With a defined surface to work on, the next step was to decide on how to propose action through the contents. Out of hundreds of words connected to body experiences, we settled on seven: 'self-criticism', 'self-care', 'beauty', 'comments', 'body', 'growth', and 'rights' – the ruling themes for each section. Although, in the beginning, we considered including a definition of each word, we instead decided on giving the teen the necessary tools to come up with personal definitions: neutral questions for self-reflection – the writing component. To add an element of art therapy to the book – the drawing component – we chose accessible art techniques and conceptually related them to each one of the words. Having this established, we created specific art exercises for each section, but had to find a way to give the necessary technical knowledge to our

audience. While *Livro (de Atividades) para Massajar a Imaginação* does this exclusively through illustrations, we felt we needed a deeper level of instruction: video tutorials (Fig. 11) through printed QR codes (extending the book beyond its physical limits and connecting it to digital media) and illustrations showcasing the diverse possibilities each technique allows

The final step was assigning a general place for each content level. As we wanted illustration to be the dominant element, we searched for ways to disguise text and make it a discoverable feature. We also didn't want it to look foreign on a space for personal expression. The solution we came up with pushes the interactivity levels of the accordion bookbinding further: by defining different page widths, we created a layered effect and the illusion of more pages in the same length of paper. These flaps can hide text and extensions of the visible illustrations, creating playful compositions. When the section is closed, the reader is exclusively confronted with illustrations, but, by flipping the pages, the reader discovers the remaining hidden contents. We also further explored the idea of hiding text by applying different codes and cyphers, depending on the context (which teens could use as well). This adds a deeper level of privacy and interactivity, expands on the use of QR codes, and turns text into a more abstract element. Finally, touching on the intention of stimulating autonomy, as the pages progress, the contents of the sections are meant to gradually occupy less space, increasing the intervention areas.

Fig. 10: Illustrated box template, 550x363mm, outside cover, to be printed in off-white 400g/m² paper (temporary image).

Fig. 11: Screen shot from one of the placeholder video tutorials found on YouTube: 'How to make a DIY stencil', by Wm. Walker Co., 2016; a technique included in one of the book's exercises. As a future development, it would be expected the creation of custom video tutorials, which could even be published in a custom platform separate from the main social media sites. The access to the tutorials and complete video playlist is done by scanning, with a smartphone camera, the QR Codes printed throughout the book.

5. Creative Methodology

To create the final book, we started with the first section - 'Self-Criticism', to which we assigned the stenciling technique. The intention was to correlate the positive and negative outcomes of self-criticism with the positive and negative stencil silhouettes. To familiarize ourselves with this technique, we started by answering the exercise we created for this section, to understand the diversity of achievable results and test firsthand how well the exercise was proposed. After completing the written component, we used the answers to come up with a group of keywords that could be translated into visual elements. This stage of creation was extremely personal, meaning that there was an inherent subjectivity to the creation of the illustrations that adds an empathetic aspect to the project: the teen can see that there are people sharing similar experiences. Confronting the visual results of the exercise, allowed us to create a list of different manifestations of stenciling. We wanted to make sure most of them were included in the section to provide visual inspiration. The techniques and keywords gathered when we tested the exercise were distributed to three defined zones, helping to

HANDLING THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF 'OLHA PRA TI!'
Filipa Pereira and Graça Magalhães ▪ {filipa.pereira, gracamag}@ua.pt

85

anchor our creative course of action in each of them, while leaving the rest of the space open to intervention. Zone 1 is the 'cover' of the section, inter-acting with all the visible parts of the layers – the group can't disclose the purpose of the section. Zone 2 is the main area of contents where the bulk of what the audience needs to know to perform on the book is displayed. Finally, zone 3 is the transition area, where contents start to 'retrieve' in favor of white space. With this system we then took the accordion format and planned every single detail (shapes, colors, typography, materials and composition) and used this reference to create the final illustrations, mak-ing sure the layers coincided with each other, with minimal digital editing required. This entire process was so successful, that it was used for the rest of book, but streamlined along the way.

Much of our visual results are created in a three-dimensional man-ner. It's not just brush strokes on paper, it's the way paint accumulates in certain areas and spreads thin in others. We play with paper folds and crinkles and rips, we explore the interaction between materials. Light and shadows are purposefully introduced through textures. All of this to keep visual noise to a minimum. All of this to showcase that materials can 'record' states of mind in the moment of artistic creation. Although the audience will never experience the full extent of our illustrations' plastic qualities, a flat reproduction still serves as an introduction to the tactile opportunities each technique offers.

Diversity being the main feature of the book, we couldn't help but to take this opportunity as a fun challenge, a chance to rethink what we took for granted – this project's initial art style – and run completely in the opposite direction. We (re)discovered techniques and visual languages. What we benefitted from this project, artistically and personally, is what we hope teenagers will get as well.

6. Final Design Choices

The defined content zones were more of a guide than a rule, because fol-lowing them strictly would go against achieving diversity. We can clearly see this by comparing 'Self-Care' (Fig. 12) with 'Rights' (Fig. 13). While the first concentrates the title in just one small area, and uses the rest of the space to play with different shapes; the latter breaks the title into its parts and spreads it throughout the composition, but still keeping it discover-able. Another element that tends to jump around from zone to zone is the QR code: sometimes appearing in zone 2, like in 'Self-Care', and some-times in zone 3, as in 'Comments' (Fig. 14 & 15). When possible, the QR code is partly visible when the section is closed, as it can be used in favor of the composition's structure.

Some sections were more challenging than others, a fact our audi-ence will surely feel too. 'Body' had the most agile creative process of all, because it solely relied on performance painting/drawing techniques, great to ground us in our bodies. These techniques are so accessible that they are commonly introduced to children in kindergarten. They are very much a result of feeling the moment, so, they're very instant. In 'Beauty', proposing the use/modification of dry leaves, to think about natural
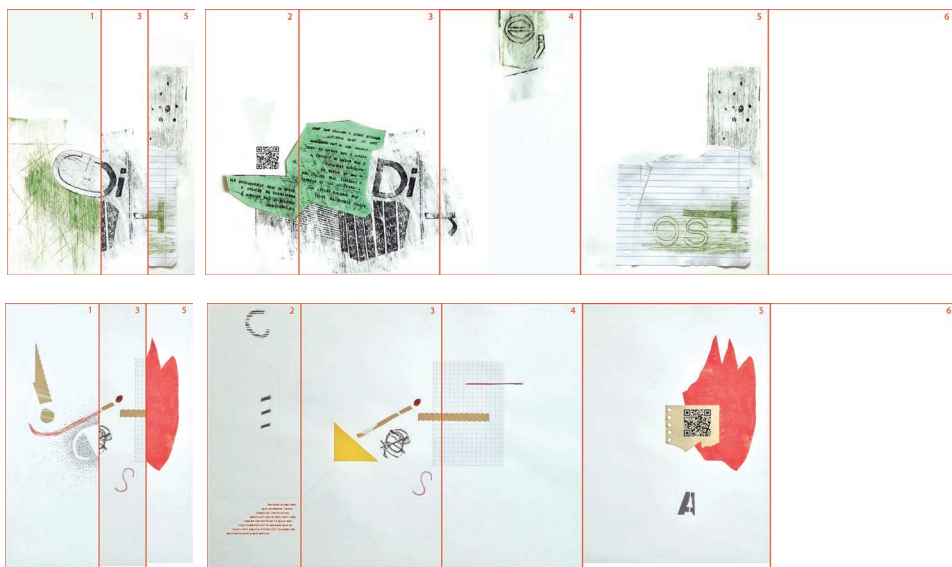
beauty and attainable beauty, creates a particular case: applying leaves in art is very straightforward, but drying them requires a preparation of close to a month, extending the activity beyond the confines of the book. However, the most demanding section was 'Comments', because the assigned technique was pop-ups - chosen to invite reflection about the nature of the comments that 'pop-up' above the rest. Although they're based on simple fundamentals, pop-ups, being collapsible three-dimensional structures, can require a lot of trial and error. We were forced to design extra elements for this section and contemplate the simplest way to introduce them, while still not overcomplicating the manufacturing process. Like the sheet that includes the necessary codes to decipher the book, we decided to include the pop-up pieces in two A4 sheets inside the box. Teens would then cut the pieces off them and follow video instructions to assemble the paper constructions we designed. This guided assemblage would be a practical introduction to pop-ups and perfectly compliment the tutorial about the technique's fundamentals. Building the pop-us, we were mindful to keep the structures simple but effective, using the most basic principles and 'bringing them to life' through textures and outlines.

Color was an element that went through a lot of thought. In the beginning, we excluded it completely, which worked on the first section, but not so much on the second: 'Self-Care' combines painting with tea and watercolor pencils – tea representing something that is relaxing and good for our bodies. Tea paintings don't look exactly like watercolors, and combining tea with watercolor pencils creates beautiful effects that get lost if shown just in greyscale. As a consequence, we thought it was important to display all the color nuances the technique offers. We decided to use, on the book, a base of neutral colors and an accent color when necessary, depending on the technique and theme. As a result, while 'Self-Care' displays ochre, brown and black built around the color of tea, 'Comments' uses bright yellow and brick red next to brown, black and white. We felt it was important to use color to help the pop-ups jump out. We chose yellow because it could be interpreted either as an alert or as something joyful, and we chose brick red because it offered a variant of another primary color and worked as a link between the accent color and the neutral base, tying everything together.

As for text, we chose to present it in a range of graphic treatments. For titles, letters can be written out expressively (like in 'Self-Care', for a more relaxed look), carefully (as in 'Beauty', to express the tension

Fig. 12: 'Self-Care' closed (210x297mm) and open (840x297mm) (temporary photos).

HANDLING THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF 'OLHA PRA TI!'
Filipa Pereira and Graça Magalhães ▪ {filipa.pereira, gracamag}@ua.pt

87

between organic and geometric/artificial) or with the help of a template (as is the case with 'Rights', stressing the idea of something that can't be changed, 'written in stone'). It's not essential for the title to be completely legible, as the exercises fill all the remaining gaps. The only thing that is essential is for text to merge with illustration. Additionally, the exercises are always presented with a small challenge that 'blends' them with the rest of the composition. In 'Self-Care', we used the Pigpen Cypher, because its simple geometric shapes were similar to the symbols for play, pause, forward and backward – included in the composition because they reflect the cycles of self-care. In 'Beauty', relating to the use of leaves, we compare the section to a botanical journal, presenting text as its calligraphic writings. The numbers before the description-

Fig. 13: 'Rights' closed and open (temporary photos).

Fig. 14: 'Comments' closed and open without pop-ups (temporary photos)

looking text form the combination to find the reading order of the words. In 'Rights', because the chosen technique – tetra pak intaglio printmaking – has the constraint of printing the reverse of the original image, we use that factor in our favor to display reversed text, to be read through a mirror.

Fig. 15: Pop-ups from zone 2 of 'Comments' assembled (temporary photo).

7. Conclusion

Livro (de Atividades) para Massajar a Imaginação had a major influence in 'Olha pra Ti!', but our goals allowed us to come up with distinguishing solutions that assert our uniqueness. The nature of our book's exercises lead us, not only to take full advantage of the book's physical boundaries,

but also to expand them in space and time, through digital extensions and interaction with the environment. Having video tutorials to instruct the technical basics to our audience, freed illustration to explore and depict deeper and more precise technical applications. Color assumed a pivotal position by bringing forward each technique's specific nuances, allowing the viewer to experience and dissect the reproductions as close as possible to what would be attainable with the original illustrations. Such a diverse project, with such a mixture of techniques and graphic treatments could easily look unfocused and unrelated, but the fact that we stick with our 'zone 1-2-3' layout, added with the fact that all the sections share the same level of dynamism, thoughtfulness, accessibility and expressiveness, creates a result that we like to call 'intentionally controlled chaos'. This idea goes in hand with the purpose for which the book was created: to control the 'chaos' within through intentional reflective work. In our book, design choices and audience-centered choices (like the inclusion of neutral questions to guide the creation of personal definitions) share the same level of importance. Without one of these parts, the project would be unequipped to fill its purpose from the start. After establishing the book's attributes through careful conscious decisions, we want to observe their general adequacy through a usability test.

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