I first encountered Metahaven's work at a time when graphic design still felt like a force to be reckoned with, even as its 'heroic' phase, defined by the early 20th century avant-gardes, already felt like a distant dream. It was gradually becoming clear that 'branding', the name of the game back then, was nothing like what our European artschools-cum-designschools were trying to convince us graphic design was.

In a series of projects eventually collected and published as Uncorporate Identity, Metahaven unmasked graphic design and branding — which at the time looked benign, uninspiring and dull as ever — as anything but harmless and powerless. Branding in particular, borrowing its visual vocabulary from graphic design, has become instrumental for the deployment of soft power by hegemonic nation-states leaving little choice to smaller peripheral unbranded nations but to 'join the brandwagon', as Metahaven put it. This has resulted in some catastrophic visual identities of newly formed Eastern European nation-states (my home country Slovenia included), often executed by foreign branding agencies for mind-boggling costs. The situation mirrored that of the realpolitik of these newly founded states which, after the fall of communism, were left with no other alternative but to surrender to the network power of transnational organisations such as the EU, the IMF, NATO, etc. The financial crisis of 2008 eventually demonstrated exactly how unequal these peripheral nations actually were in these new and old organisations.

Coming from one of these nations, I hated this new world and I hated Metahaven for showing me how graphic design, a profession I have chosen and enjoyed, has been equally (often unknowingly) complicit in the creation of this opaque new world order. I wished that design would remain that elusive crystal goblet that Beatrice Ward wrote about, but I knew they were right. Graphic design perhaps never was the crystal goblet and now it was revealed to me as something much worse. And yet, there was some sort of satisfaction in that realisation: sure this was terrible, but there was a sense of empowerment as well ... if only this force could be used for 'our cause'. And I knew or hoped Metahaven felt the same. Initially trained as graphic designers, they have cared for the design community as much as they were irritated by its lack of engagement and self-reflection. 'We are not useful,' they wrote in their 2008 design manifesto 'White Night Before a Manifesto' addressed at the broader design community, whereas the 'we' still implied they felt a part of it.

Fast forward approximately 15 years later to Australia, where

a surprise win by the conservative right-wing coalition in the 2019 federal election was enabled, by some accounts, by a social media blitzkrieg. Topham Guerin, or TG, a boutique digital marketing agency from New Zealand initiated what was dubbed a '24-hour meme machine'. Focusing on quantity and not quality of output, TG produced up to 30 unique social media 'designs' a day that required their team to produce a new output app. every 20 minutes. In the words of one of the company's founders: 'You're going to slap some Calibri font on a shitty ... reused meme and you're going to publish it and then you get onto the next one, and ... that content is going to do better than the thing that your poor graphic designer spent a week on. Sad but true.'

In 2020, the world has moved beyond what we used to understand as graphic design and even branding. So, it appears to me, have Metahaven. They have adopted new mediums that are more appropriate for the stories they want to tell and the issues they want to bring forward. It is not surprising that they are no longer situated within the field of graphic design, which has suffered even further blows to its relevance with the replacement of any semblance of a critical design discourse by the incessant automated curated terror of Instagram's suggestions algorithm. Graphic designers' current obsessions with yet another 'minutely different neo-groteseque Helvetica revival' as Metahaven put it for yet another fictional branding project of a local cafe-cum-bookshop does not seem to help either. All this is true, and I hate Metahaven again, for yet again pointing this out to me. But even worse, it seems they have completely lost all hope that graphic design can ever really deliver what might, in the end, only have been some art or design historian's dream of what really happened at the beginning of the previous century.

Ziga Testen, 2020.