LAYERING

Layering creates the illusion of depth in the two-dimensional picture plane, literally and metaphorically. Overlapping forms, illusions of transparency, sizes of elements, and locations within the picture plane create the perception of layers. In dynamic media, things can be layered in time. Elements can move between background and foreground along an imaginary Z-axis, passing in and out of time.

While messages typically take two-dimensional form, designers often create the illusion of depth through layering. Where things are positioned in the illusory depth of the picture space communicates their importance and expresses meanings associated with location. Designer Chip Kidd's cover for the book, *1Q84*, layers a translucent veil over the photograph of a woman's face (Figure 3.52). Author Murakami tells the story of a young woman who enters an unreal, imaginary world. Kidd's design translates the theme as a hardcover image of the woman covered by a translucent vellum book jacket that diffuses her face in

a white, parallel existence. The typographic title switches from white type on the hardcover to unveiled portions of the woman's face on the jacket. The layered illusion is both material and metaphorical.
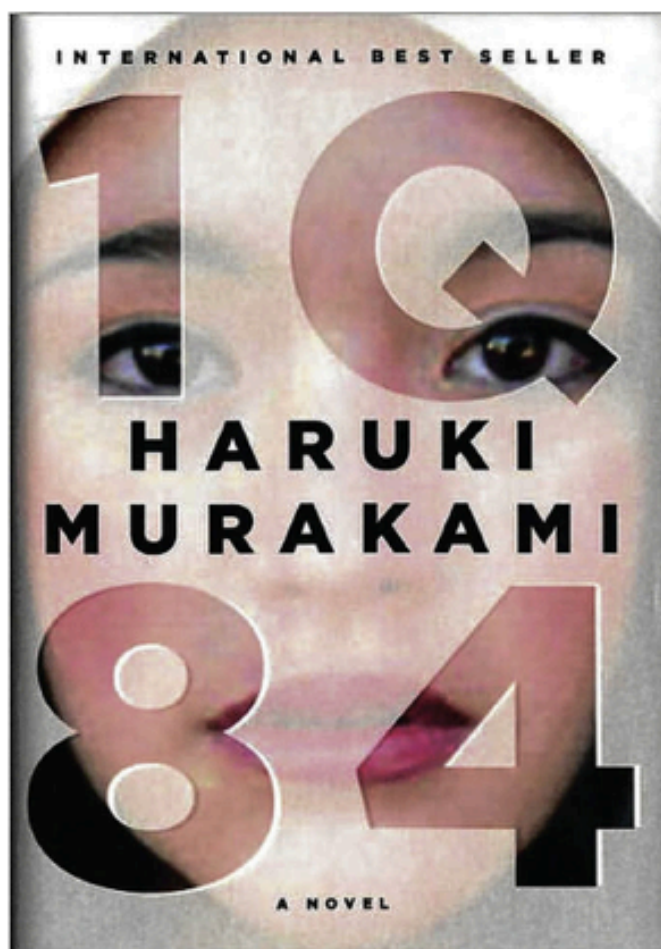

Figure 3.52
1Q84 book cover, 2011 Chip Kidd
Kidd's design for Haruki Murakami's story of a woman passing into an alternate reality, existing in two planes

simultaneously, uses layering to describe the narrative. The text is printed on a translucent vellum book jacket, while the woman's face is printed beneath on the book's hard cover.

2.12.

the lappetites   eliane radigue
                  kaffe matthews
                  ryoko
                  antye greie agf

the lappetites is a laptop group playing with digital and sonic living
games for composition — 4 women from different backgrounds and
different generations

4.12.

heaven and   record release concert
              »sweeter as the years roll by«
              [staubgold 87]

tony buck   drums
steve heather   percussion
martin siewert   guitars
zeitblom   bass

david cunningham   solo electric
guitar + effects

dj alec empire   [eat your heart out/dhr, berlin]
dj markus detmer   [staubgold/quecksilber, berlin]

maria am ostbahnhof
[an der schillingbrücke / friedrichshain]

Figure 3.53

25 Jahre Freunde Guter Musik poster (Twenty-fifth Anniversary of Friends of Good Music), 2008 © Cyan Berlin

The poster by Cyan uses transparency to layer a collection of everyday household appliances from the past. Color establishes a visual hierarchy among the items and typographic elements, deepening the illusion of space and keeping the composition from becoming an overall pattern.

We perceive things that are closest to us as more important, more recent, or more aggressive than things in the distance. They demand our attention. Things that appear as transparent overlays are elusive, ethereal, or transitory. These meanings result from both our physical and cultural experiences. For most of us, the past is "behind us" and the future is "ahead." But in other cultures, the past is what we can see—what is known and in front of us—and the future is yet to be seen. In this sense, the illusion of layers is an *embodied* concept that has much to do with our own physical location in space; we attach cultural significance to these positions (Figure 3.53).

Layering can override other spatial cues. For example, we generally think that smaller things are farther away

in space than things that are large. Several words set in different point sizes, for example, could be perceived as close or far based solely on their sizes. Absent of any other cues—such as overlap, focus, or color—we judge distance by the size of letters and placement in vertical space. But by layering one word on top of another, the smallest type moves forward, overriding the other positional cues (Figure 3.54).

The development of design software, such as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, made it simpler to layer elements than under photomechanical processes of the past. Prior to design software, images were layered photographically in the darkroom through sandwiched negatives, overprinting (one ink on top of another), or reversing out of one image and printing back with another. These were complicated processes that were often unconvincing. The spatial complexity of work since the 1990s is due, in large part, to the layering capacity of technology. It represents a contrast to mid-twentieth-century approaches to imagery, which frequently used flat geometric shapes or simple overlapping elements that could be silhouetted easily.

The design firm 2x4 uses layering to create a surprising union between historical artwork in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum collection and contemporary visitors, interpreting the campaign theme of "Art Comes to Life" (Figure 3.55). In this example, attention is drawn to a "not so perfect" assemblage that, on the surface, appears to be a complete whole. This is not simply an attempt to increase the illusion of depth in the two-dimensional surface of the posters, but a deliberate construction of experience through the integration of discrete forms. The layering successfully collapses time as well as space—the art of the past with the museum viewer of the present.

Layering, therefore, can present us with an implied hierarchy of elements for our attention. Elements that "rise to the top of the pile" in the illusion of depth or assert themselves ahead of others in time (for example, in interactive media) typically demand that we process them first. Layering can also build connections, a "third meaning" that arises from the assembly of an image that is significantly different from those of the single elements alone. In this sense, layering demands that we visually process the structure of the

composition to get through the competing levels of meaning.
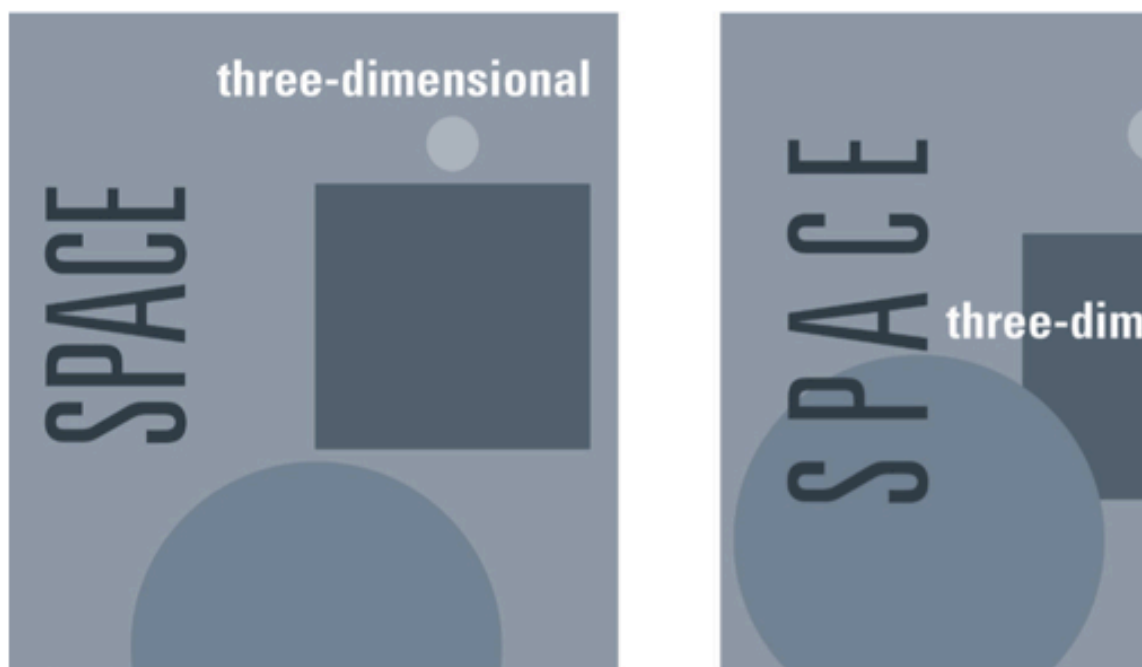
Figure 3.54
Layers
The two compositions contain exactly the same elements in the same colors and sizes. The composition on the left flattens space because no elements overlap. The composition on the right pushes some elements forward, even when color or size suggests they are more likely to be in the distance.

Figure 3.55
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Campaign 2x4
The campaign by design firm 2x4 uses layering to integrate the contemporary audience with artifacts from the museum's collection, expressing the theme "Art Comes to Life."