

THÉÂTRE
NATIONAL
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EDUARDO PAVLOVSKY

INTERPRÉTÉ PAR JEAN-LOUIS BÉRARD

POTESTAD

MISE EN SCÈNE JEAN-LOUIS TRINTIGNANT

LA MORT DE MARGUERITE DURAS

MISE EN SCÈNE SOPHIE PINCEMAILLE



The work of one of France's
most original graphic voices
bristles with contradictions

Hybridity
Algeria
France
Digital design
Mac culture
Tradition

Ugly-beautiful

1, Theatre poster
commissioned by Centre
culturel français d'Algier.
Shows vintage typography,
contemporary photography
and bold hatching mixed
together with unselfconscious
swagger. Not a typical theatre
poster; as Toffe says, 'I don't
like things to look like they
should look.'

His personal and professional nom de plume - Toffe - suggests a character played by Jean-Paul Belmondo in a light-hearted French gangster movie. In fact, his real name is Christophe Jacquet and he's a French graphic designer. His work, a well kept secret in international design circles, fizzes with daring thinking and unexpected imagery; but it is his recurrent use of provocative and often jarring juxtapositions that is the most appealing aspect of his graphic design. His best work is a bittersweet mixture of 'ugly' computer default settings and 'beautiful' decorative touches; he mixes ranged-right Times New Roman with elegant filigree linework; he fuses nineteenth-century typefaces with hybrid digital fonts. His work has the aesthetic and conceptual heft that comes from being created by someone with iron hard inner convictions.

Although not much known outside of France, Toffe is an important, if somewhat enigmatic figure within the French design scene. As Etienne Hervy, the editor of French graphic design magazine *Etapes*, notes: 'He is regarded by French designers as a one-off, a kind of curiosity. Someone who is somewhere else - in an intellectual sense. But there is a strong group of young designers who follow him and occasionally work with him on big projects, usually after being impressed by him during one of his workshops or visits to their school. If you disregard big stars such as M/M, or before them Grapus, he's one of the few French designers to have this kind of "court" - the word is too strong, but I'm not sure what the right English word would be.'

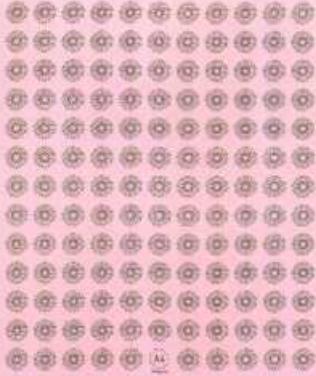
Toffe's work defies easy categorisation. It is undeniably French, yet it seems to look beyond Gallic culture for added resonance, finding it at least

partly in universal digital culture. His work is recognisably postmodern in its eclecticism and its lack of reverence for cultural and graphic design conventions. But this is only half the picture: his eclecticism is not promiscuous, it is calculated and suffused with intellectual purpose. 'We can consider his work as postmodern design,' notes Hervy, 'but the French design scene did not really explore this area because Grapus had another response to modernism. In my opinion, this is a really important point about French design.'

Toffe was born in Paris, and still lives there. 'I live in the south of the city,' he explains. 'My studio is also my home. The area is cosmopolitan with lots of babies and families.' He went to the Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-arts in Paris to study painting and sculpture. 'It was very formal,' he recalls. 'Students received a classical art education. Emphasis was on drawing from the nude, and no graphic design was taught at all. But while I was there I discovered the Apple Mac computer. This was in 1984. A friend had an early Mac Plus - it was so new it even had American voltage. This was a nuclear moment for me. I decided to become a graphic designer on the spot.'

Evidence of Toffe's momentous encounter with the computer is still vividly present in his work today. The distinctive aesthetic flavour of early graphics software packages - bitmapped lines, vectorised paths, default typographic formatting and the easy repetition of graphic shapes - are recurring motifs in his design: 'I use a lot of default settings in my work,' he says. 'I like people to see the nature of the machine I have used.' The little grey Apple box, the runt-like ancestor of today's sleek

pour Jean Sénaç



malek alloula

Rev. Béla L. Nagy 2000

Quel est le rôle de l'assurance dans la sécurité sociale ?

Il existe deux types d'assurances : l'assurance sociale et l'assurance privée. L'assurance sociale est un système de protection sociale qui couvre les personnes en cas de maladie, de handicap, de vieillesse ou de décès. Elle est financée par les cotisations versées par les salariés et leurs employeurs. L'assurance privée, quant à elle, offre des garanties supplémentaires ou complémentaires aux bénéfices fournis par l'assurance sociale. Par exemple, elle peut couvrir les dépenses liées à la recherche médicale, à la chirurgie ou à la physiothérapie.

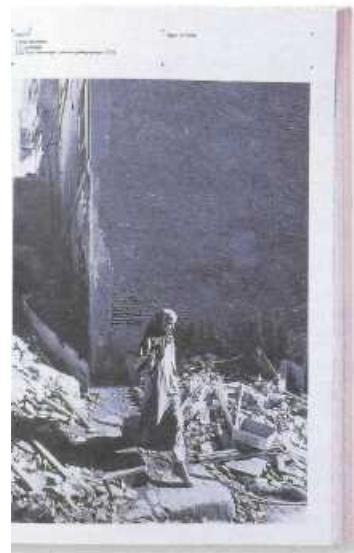
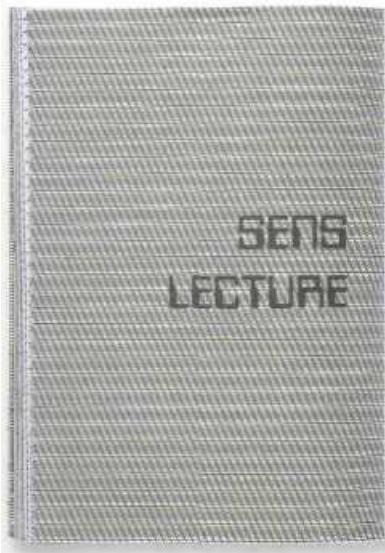
Quels sont les avantages de l'assurance sociale ?

L'assurance sociale offre plusieurs avantages : elle est accessible à tous les citoyens, elle est financée par les cotisations versées par les salariés et leurs employeurs, elle offre une couverture complète et universelle, et elle est gérée par des professionnels qualifiés.

Quels sont les inconvénients de l'assurance sociale ?

Il existe quelques inconvénients avec l'assurance sociale : elle peut être coûteuse pour certains individus, elle peut prendre du temps pour traiter les demandes, et elle peut ne pas couvrir toutes les maladies ou les conditions de santé.

Ensuite, il faut faire évoluer les connaissances du sujet et de ses besoins. Cela passe par l'acquisition de connaissances en vue d'assurer la sécurité de l'environnement et de l'individu. Il faut également développer des stratégies pour assurer la sécurité de l'environnement et de l'individu. Ces stratégies doivent être basées sur des données scientifiques et techniques. Elles doivent également prendre en compte les besoins et les préoccupations des personnes concernées.



ergonomically sculpted G5S and iBooks, ignited within Toffe a deep-seated passion for the digital - or what the French more poetically call, *le numérique*. I was enchanted by the computer,' he notes. 'It gave me a sense of power. It did for me what the Internet does now. It meant that people all over the world were using the same machine. I was using the same machine as someone in America. I used MacPaint and Mac Write. I recently met Bill Atkinson, the guy who created MacPaint, and I thanked him profusely. What really excited me about the Mac was the "undo" function. You can't undo a drawing or a painting. I found this psychologically *stimulating*. *I was also obsessed with repetition. I had been making repetitive sculptures - bas reliefs - and this seemed to be a bridge for me between art and graphic design.*'

After art school, Toffe made personal work using the computer. He produced prints of bitmapped graphic doodles using a dot matrix printer. But because he could only generate A4 sheets, everything had to be laboriously assembled by hand, and on top of everything, he found it hard to sell any work. 'I was told my work was too experimental, too new,' he recalls. 'And of course I could never repeat what I'd done, because everything was hand-assembled. But I told people that I was a graphic designer and I began to do logotypes and theatre posters for friends.'

DEAD FISH AND EXPANDED POLYSTYRENE

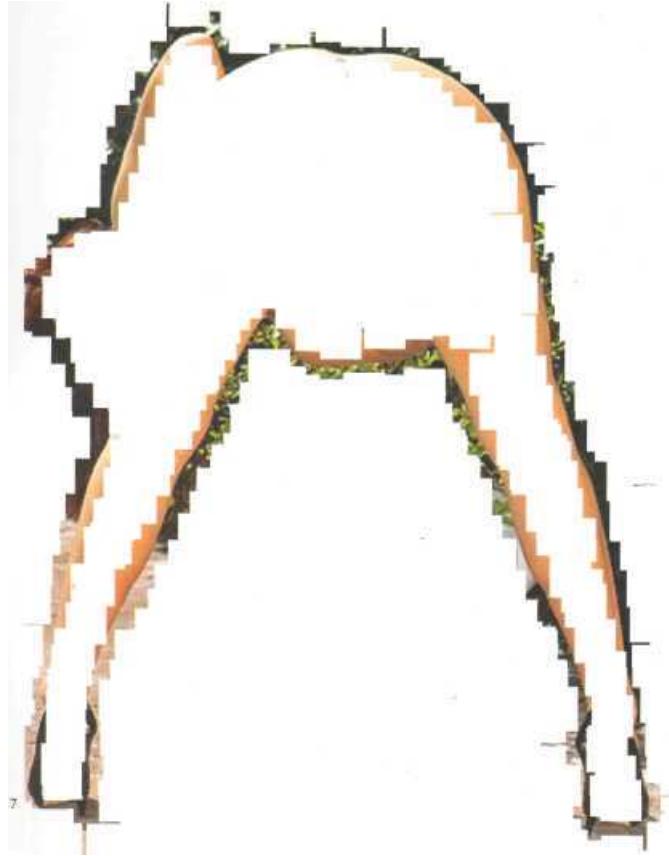
I first met Toffe in France in February 2005 at the International Poster and Graphic Arts Festival of Chaumont. An exhibition of his work was one of the event's main attractions. The show - a retrospective of his print and

2-5. Book devoted to French poet Jean Senac. The book is monochrome throughout, and makes extensive use of Times New Roman, a recurring stylistic reflex found throughout Toffe's work. Much of the text in the Senac book is ranged right, 'because Arabic is ranged right'. This bravura display of book design says as much about Toffe as about Senac. 'I like Derek Birdsall's Shaker book,' he notes. 'The subject is *baring* to me, *bat Birdsall's* design makes it interesting.'

6 (opposite). Poster for Toffe's one-man show at the 2005 Chaumont poster festival. The lettering is a graphical representation of the expanded polystyrene pallets used to display the exhibits; the fish are typically Toffeian - unexpected and laced with symbolic meaning. He has made fonts out of fish.



إعادة إنتاج عام، كريستوف جاكى المنسنة توف



7. Personal work. One of a series of heavily pixelated renderings of pornographic images. Toffe employs vernacular images throughout his work, transmuting them into his graphical vision of the world around him.



8-10. Document produced for Museum de la Cour d'Or, City of Metz, In the east of France, to mark the centennial of 'Art Nouveau'. It investigated the relationship between Art Nouveau artists (Galle, Prouve, Daum) and new industries at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Photography is by Toffe's 'life partner' Isabelle Chanel. The document was intended both for the general public and the contemporary art world.



digital output - was held in an imposing church (la Chapelle des Jesuites) in the town centre. It was a remarkable exhibition in a remarkable location. The church's seating had been removed and replaced with stacks of industrial-sized, moulded pallets of expanded polystyrene which were used to display the work. Resembling vitrines from a futuristic museum, the white polystyrene units (inhuman and repetitive) were placed next to the carved white stone (organic and formal) of the church's grand interior, making yet another robust Toffe-ian statement of opposites.

The notion of contradiction was further enhanced by the show's striking poster: Toffe's name was rendered in isometric letterforms constructed out of linear renderings of the polystyrene trays which were then superimposed over a mound of dead fish. The Christian symbolism of the fish carried a hint of playful provocation: here was a show held in a fully functioning, consecrated Catholic church, yet which featured secular work including heavily bitmapped pornographic images, and a large amount of material originally produced for an Algerian - and therefore Muslim - audience.

Seven months after Chaumont, Toffe is sitting in my studio in London talking infectiously about his work, his family (his wife is a photographer and he has a sixteen-year-old daughter) and French colonial history. Listening to him talk on a swelteringly hot day, with his rich French accent and his only occasionally faltering English, it becomes clear that he has chosen graphic design as a mode of personal expression rather than as a comfortable career option. Yet he has none of the hectoring desire to champion art over design so often found among designers who regard self-expression as their *sine qua non*. In fact, he is disparaging about

contemporary art, dismissing the recent Venice Biennale, which he attended, as an 'art supermarket'. His pantheon of heroes reveals his preference for artistically inclined design: 'I am influenced by Constructivism. By Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and the others. When I look at Rodchenko and El Lissitzky, I'm glad I call myself a graphic designer. There's a big problem in France. You have to be graphic design or art, you can't be both. This is shit. I am happy to say that I am a graphic designer.' He also confesses to a love of Paul Rand and Giotto.

Yet despite his convivial and unaffected manner, it is not easy to imagine him working with corporate clients: 'If I do a commercial job,' he says, 'it is always 50 per cent me, 50 per cent the client. I don't want to have to change what I do to make clients happy. This is very important for me. I won't become technical or functional just to please a client. I want to be just like I am when I'm with my friends: my bad habits, being stupid or drunk. I want to be automatic. I have to keep the same response, the same reflexes, no matter who I am dealing with. In my mind, there is no difference between doing a job for a corporate client or doing my own show at Chaumont. So yes, I will work for corporate clients, but I prefer cultural clients.'

DESIGN FOR A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP

Many of the bigger European nations creak under the weight of their colonial pasts. The French occupied Algeria from 1830 onwards, finally withdrawing in 1962, after a decade of guerrilla warfare. Today, Algeria is an Islamic state, and French rule has bequeathed a troubled cultural legacy, as well as many unhealed scars.



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cneai =

11-14. Catalogue and identity for CNEAI, a publicly funded French arts institution, revealing Toffe's trademark obsessions with vernacular photography and illustrative vectorised paths.



The Centre culturel français d'Alger (CCF) is dedicated to 'the renewal of a dialogue between the two banks of the Mediterranean.' Under the auspices of the French government, the CCF is committed to 'contemporary thought and creation, artistic gestures, risk-taking and discovering ideas.' This cauldron-like arena is where Toffe and his studio have produced some of their most significant work.

There is a very complicated relationship between France and Algeria,' he notes. 'The director of the cultural centre, Aldo Herlaut, is an interesting man. He asked me to do the centre's visual identity. In my studio, I worked with an Italian designer called Gianni Oprandi, he was one of my students and I've worked with him on other projects. Together we made a style manual for all the centre's communications. Also we did many other individual projects, including posters and leaflets.'

The visual identity for CCF is one of Toffe's most compelling graphic statements. As is customary, it bristles with internal contradictions. It is a stew of Arabic and European signs and tropes. It is a genuine hybrid: nothing is authentic; everything is artifice. Yet it is rooted in French typographic tradition and the noble grammar of Arabic ornament. And like the polystyrene pallets in the church, it contains some unlikely and provocative gestures. 'The use of a hexagonal motif might have been regarded as dangerous,' he tells me. 'The French ambassador thought it was dangerous. It might have been seen as the Ka'bah, the cube-like shrine in the courtyard of the Sacred Mosque in Mecca, toward which Muslims face in daily prayer. In fact, it's a graphic representation of the shape of France. To make it acceptable, I used a nice French blue for the shape. I also adapted

15. Logo for Centre culturel français d'Alger (CCF). The hexagonal box is a graphical representation of France; the colouring, typography and decorative linework signals a fusion of Arabic and Gallic culture.



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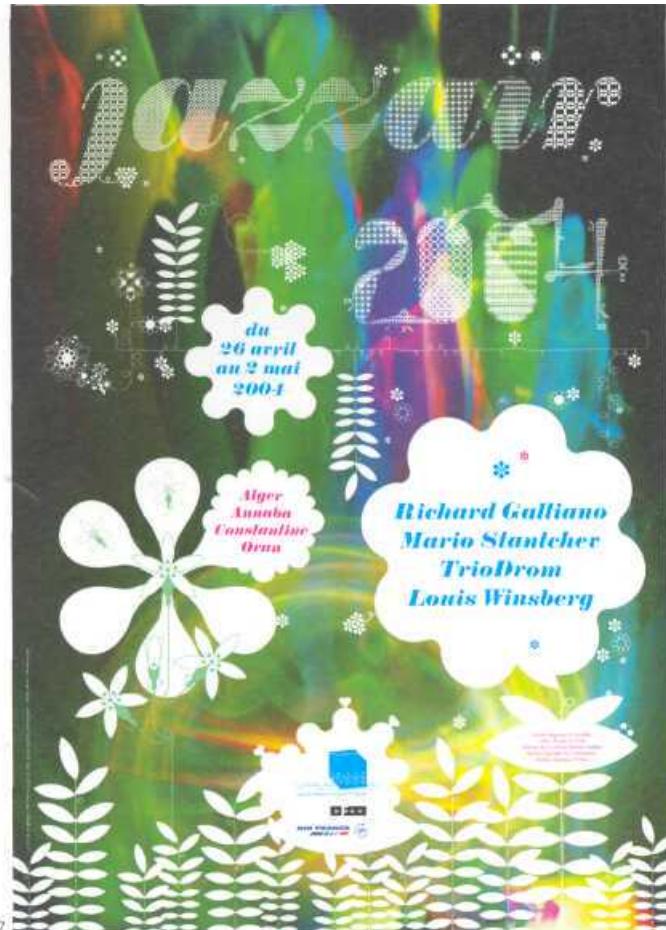


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the classic French typeface Normandie. It predates the French occupation of Algeria in 1830. It's like Mistral and Banco - typically French. Of course, I didn't use it straight; I doctored it. I hope the identity is provocative, and not colonialist. But I can't help my French heritage. I can't just throw it away.'

At a time when Islamic fundamentalism is a powerful global presence, and when there is great concern in the West about the depiction and reporting of Arabic culture, Toffe is untroubled by notions of sensitivity. He plunders Arabic lettering with cavalier abandon, its essence extracted and used as abstract decoration. As he explains: 'We developed an approach using vector drawings to create a wire-like line that we could use to make abstract Arabic lettering, without it being readable. The motifs used in the CCF identity are based freely on Arabic lettering - we kept the movement of the line. Arabic typography is like handwriting. It flows. I don't think they find it disrespectful. They treat it like a gift. They view it in the same way they view cakes and delicacies, which are very important in Arabic culture. Eating, nice colours, icing, these are things that give pleasure.'

Another striking piece of graphic design produced under the CCF banner is Toffe's book devoted to the French poet Jean Senac (b.1926). Senac was a protege of Albert Camus, but the relationship became strained by Sénan's fervent support for Algerian independence. Sénan, a homosexual, became an Algerian citizen and his love for his adopted nation runs through his poetry. He was murdered in Algeria in 1977. The book, titled *pour jean senac*, is a *tour de force* of graphic expression. It is laden with his trademark signs and symbolism. It is also a bravura display of the designer as editor. No conventional editor would ever produce a book like this. It is clearly the



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16-18. Literature for CCF
Alger showing Toffe's preoccupation with melding traditional typefaces with a Gallic accent, computer default settings and whimsical graphic imagery. The colours are deliberately 'pretty' in homage to the colours of Arabic confectionery.

work of a visual artist engaging fully with the book's subject matter, and using the rich gestural language of graphic design to impart a layer of visual commentary that adds to the accumulated pleasure of handling and studying this volume.

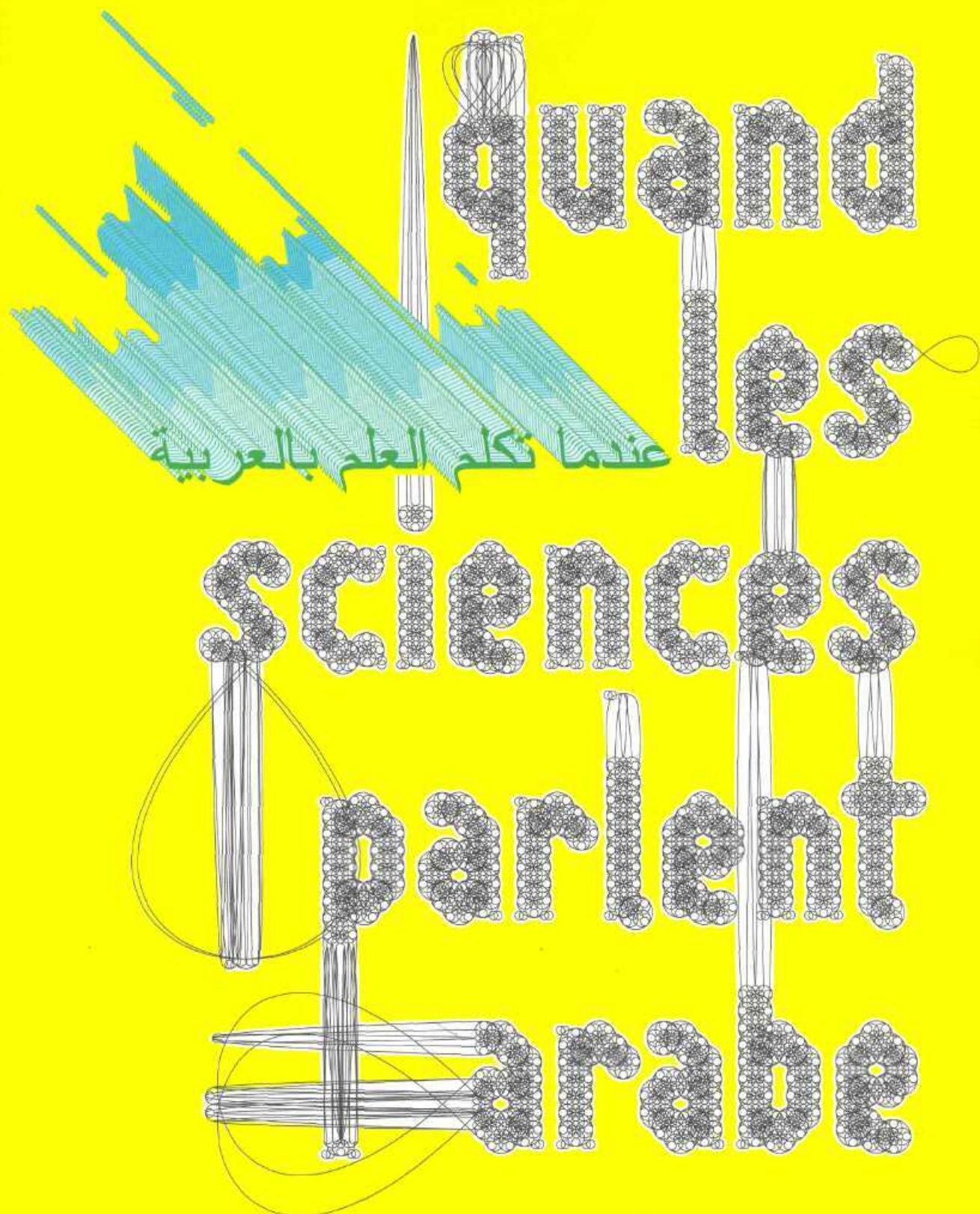
'The Senac book project was important to me,' says Toffe. 'When people pick up this book they say, not "who is Jean Senac" but "what is this book about?" Half of it is actually about my studio. It was an open brief, we were free to do what we wanted. The book was not economically successful for me, but you don't remember that when you look back.'

'When you consider the Senac book,' says Etienne Hervy, 'it's about two people, but the great talent of Toffe in his contribution to the book is that he succeeds in integrating his artistic creation into the design process of the book. To be honest, I consider it's all about personal conviction. He is the real "point" of all his work.' What might be presumed to be graphic design arrogance comes over in the pages of this book at least, as inspired and visionary thinking. The book is a dazzling artefact made all the richer by an intrusive design presence.

Face to face Toffe is arrogance-free. He is charming, modest and delightful company. But in his professional life he has a steely hardness that might easily be interpreted as arrogance. As Hervy, a long-time admirer, says: 'He has the generosity you often find in egocentric people. He does great design because he knows he is one of the best. This kind of arrogance is a French speciality that you also find in Grapus, M/M and Labomatic. It's not a literal arrogance, more a conviction that designers can make great things by the use of their personal expression.'

du 25 novembre 2004 au 12 janvier 2005 * 13:00 - 17:00 *

* *palais de la culture * alger **



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