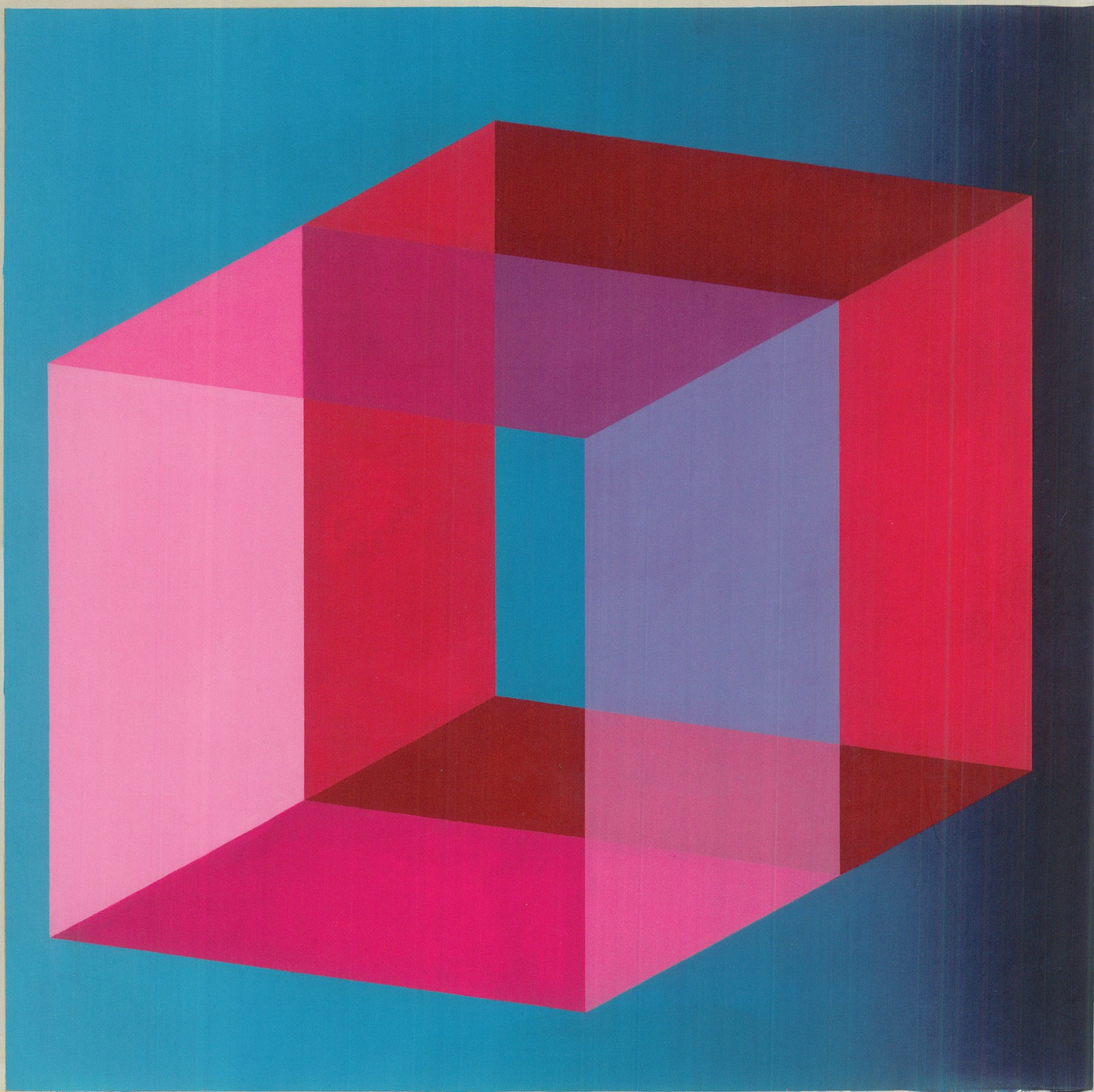


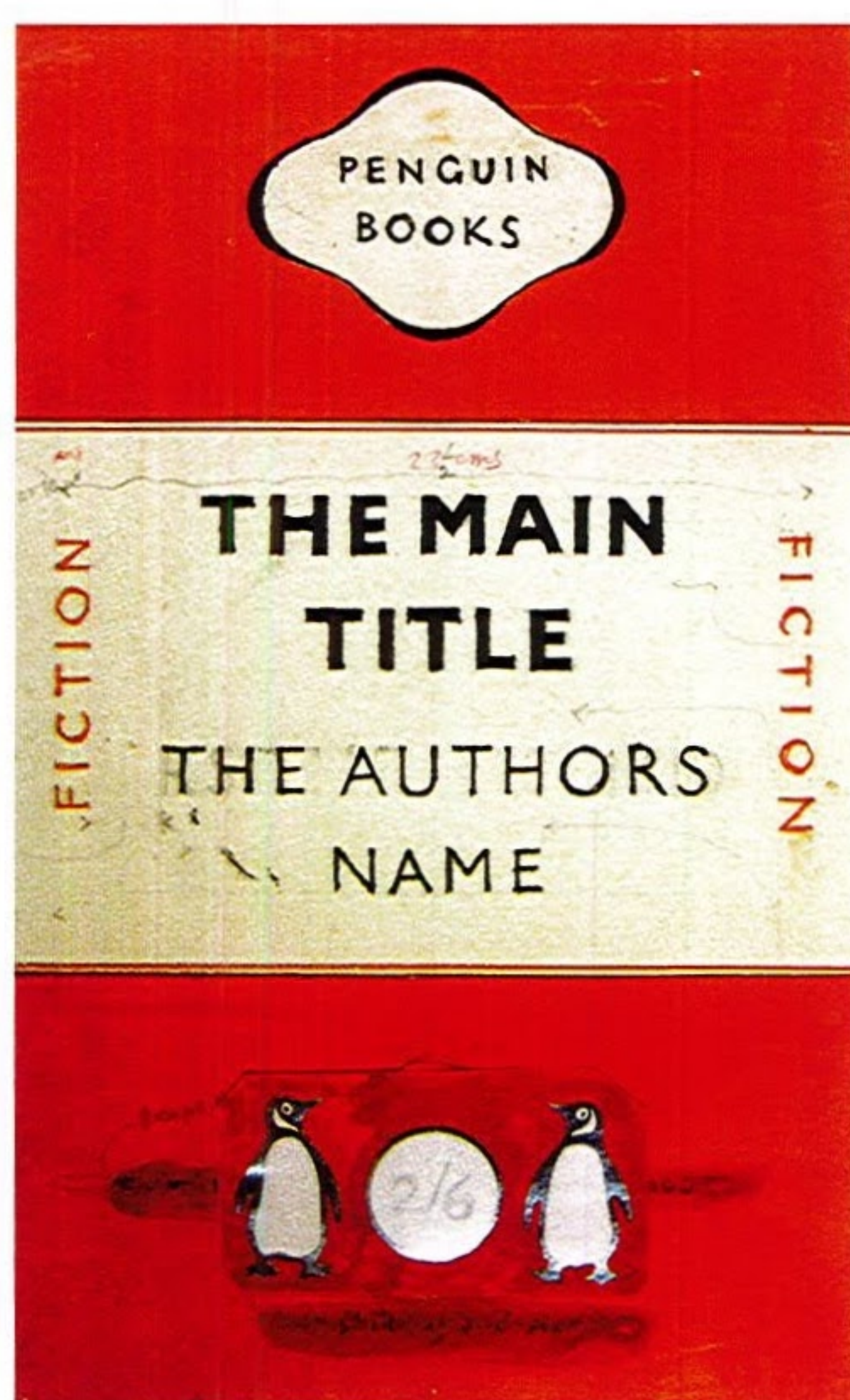
IN SHADOWS I BOOGIE

Harland Miller



*COVER VERSIONS: HARLAND MILLER
AND THE ART OF DESIGN*

CATHERINE INCE



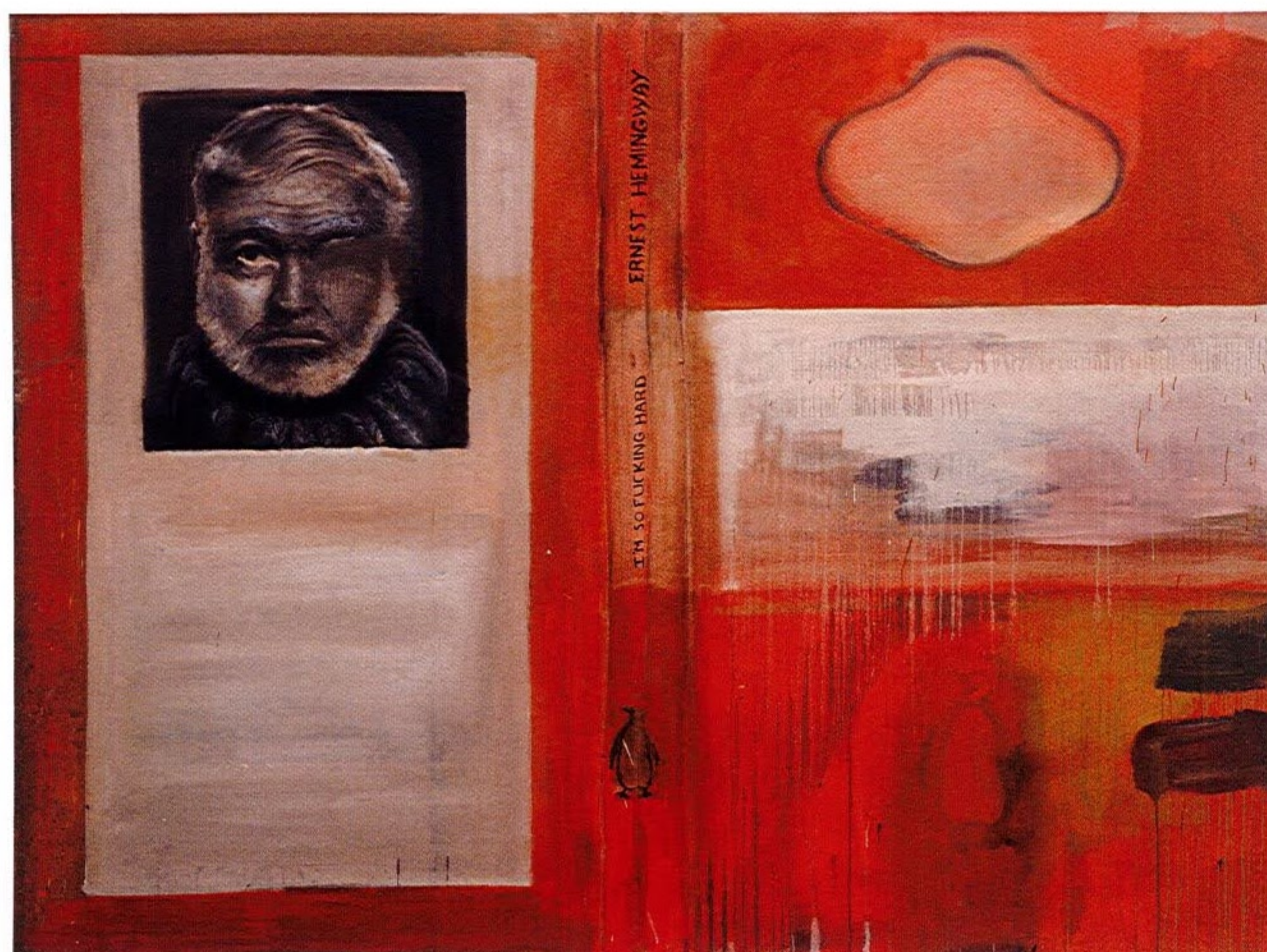
Jan Tschichold's experimental layout, 1948, for a design reform of Edward Young's original 1935 Penguin Books cover design

Harland Miller's love affair with the book, and the Penguin paperback in particular, grew out of his father's compulsion for buying job lots of books at local auction houses in the hope that he would discover a valuable first edition. Miller's father – who worked at the Rowntree's confectionery factory in York, where the artist grew up – would frequently return home with a box full of mixed books, which usually contained everything from a Haynes car manual to the ubiquitous Penguins. When Miller moved to Paris in the early 1990s, he came across the classic Penguin editions again and his interest in making cultural commentary through text and wordplay found its ideal form:

When I found a box of Penguin books outside a French second-hand bookshop in Notre Dame, I realized that the design of those classics would throw all the focus onto the title of the book – which is exactly what I wanted to do.¹

Miller likens the design of the Penguin 'classic' to Mark Rothko's Colour Field paintings but with 'graphic furniture',² and his painterly depictions of battered, creased or foxed paperbacks recall the visual complexity and looseness of Abstract Expressionism. But thinking through his paintings in the context of design history, one can identify a different set of associations at work and appreciate Miller's direct engagement with the language of design as much as the history of painting. Anyone British looking at his best-known 'book' paintings will recognize the classic Penguin paperback – the company's first cover designs featuring the orange colour-field cut through the middle with a thick band of white – almost without thinking. The brand image was established through this series of books and has become, in the public imagination, a British design icon as immediately identifiable as Harry Beck's London Underground map, the AEC Routemaster bus, Giles Gilbert Scott's red telephone box or the Mini motorcar of Alec Issigonis. In 2009, all of these designs were celebrated alongside the Penguin paperback with a special set of postage stamps of ten British Design Classics, thus marking as unequivocal an already understood status in the canon of design history.

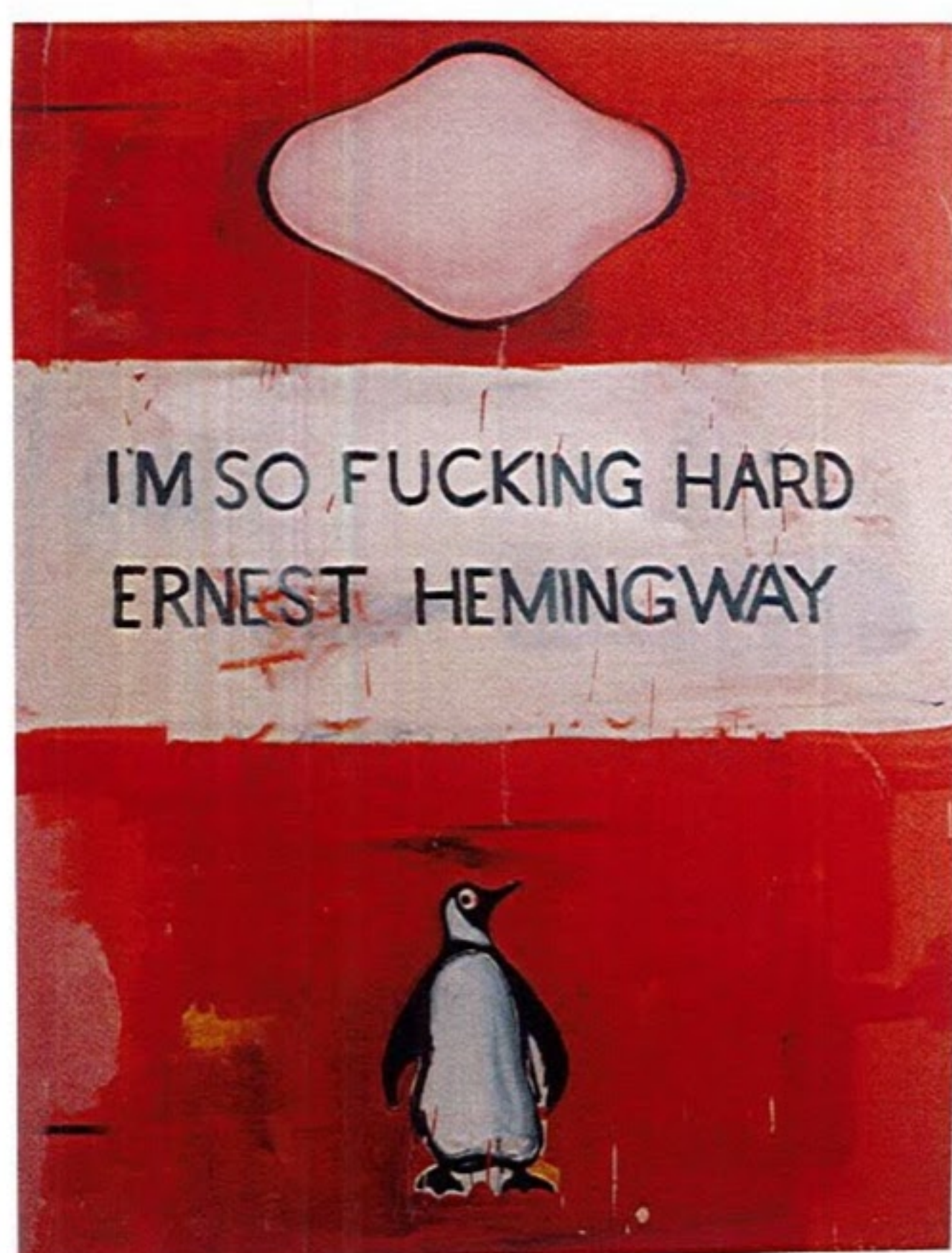
Penguin Books was founded in the early 1930s by Allen Lane, then managing director of publishing house The Bodley Head. Their first paperback books launched on 30 July 1935. Edward Young, the company's office junior and subsequent production editor, designed the first ten titles issued that summer, including Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, and introduced the simple horizontal divisions of the cover design, with a central white band for author and title typeset in Gill Sans. Colours were used to indicate subject matter: orange for fiction, green for crime, dark blue for biography, cerise for travel and adventure, and red for plays. The cartouche on the upper band carried the publisher's name while Young's 'penguin' logo appeared on the lower band.³ The covers were fresh and modern and intended to appeal to a new book-buying customer. At just sixpence per copy – the price of a packet of ten cigarettes at the time – Penguin had to sell a lot of books to make the finances stack up. By selling in outlets beyond the traditional bookshop and thanks to their eye-catching, pocketable designs, the company had sold more than three million books by the time it reached its first anniversary. Penguin became synonymous with the socially democratic ambitions of the era



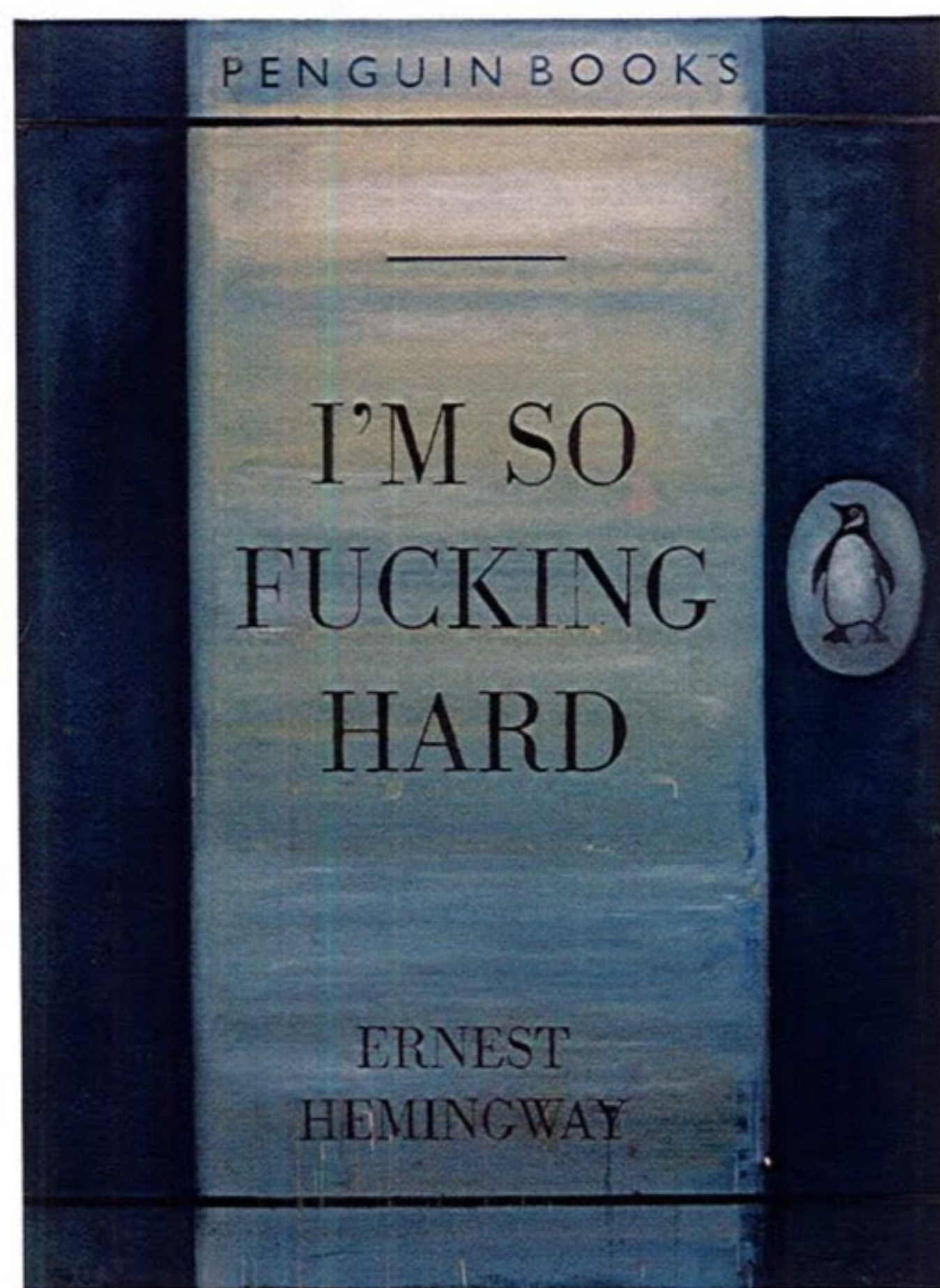
I'm So Fucking Hard, 2002, oil on canvas, 213 × 310 cm (83 7/8 × 122 1/16 in)

and revolutionized access to high-quality writing, making it affordable and available to everyone. For cultural theorists such as Eric Hobsbawm, this was 'the most effective form of intellectual diffusion... [particularly for] the rapidly growing body of the aspiring and politically conscious self-educated.'⁴ At the end of his seminal text *The New Typography*, German typographer and designer Jan Tschichold made a case against the book as a luxury object – he observed that German books were the most expensive in the world – by stating the need for a contemporary typographic form suited to 'inexpensive books for people, not luxury books for snobs'.⁵ It comes as no surprise that a shared outlook towards good, modern design and its application to publications intended for the widest possible consumer market – the average working person – brought Penguin and Tschichold together. In 1947, Tschichold joined the company with the aim of improving typography and composition across a wide-ranging family of titles and series and a production run of nearly 15 million books per year. Tschichold compiled a set of composition rules and also reformed Penguin's classic horizontal grid with a 'subtle facelift of all aspects of the cover designs, from the size, weight and position of each element of the typography to the drawing of the logo'.⁶ Tschichold's experimental layout of the reworked cover, with its washed painted colour bands, hand-drawn letters, marque and logo, and pencil and correction marks, shares a formal connection to Miller's first Penguin book painting, *I'm So Fucking Hard – Ernest Hemingway* (2001). Both, in their own way, are studies of books coming into being. They are the representation of iconic design and the moment before it takes on its 'perfect', mass-produced form.

I'm So Fucking Hard (2002) appears again a year later, this time painted as an entire book-cover layout complete with spine and a back-cover treatment featuring a partially scrubbed-out photo-realist portrait of Hemingway. The penguin logo on the spine is just legible and although missing its Penguin Books legend, the cartouche and other expressively painted elements of 'graphic furniture'



I'm So Fucking Hard – Ernest Hemingway
2001, oil on canvas
215.9 × 157.5 cm (85 × 62 in)



I'm So Fucking Hard – Ernest Hemingway
2002, oil on canvas
213 × 155 cm (83 7/8 × 61 in)

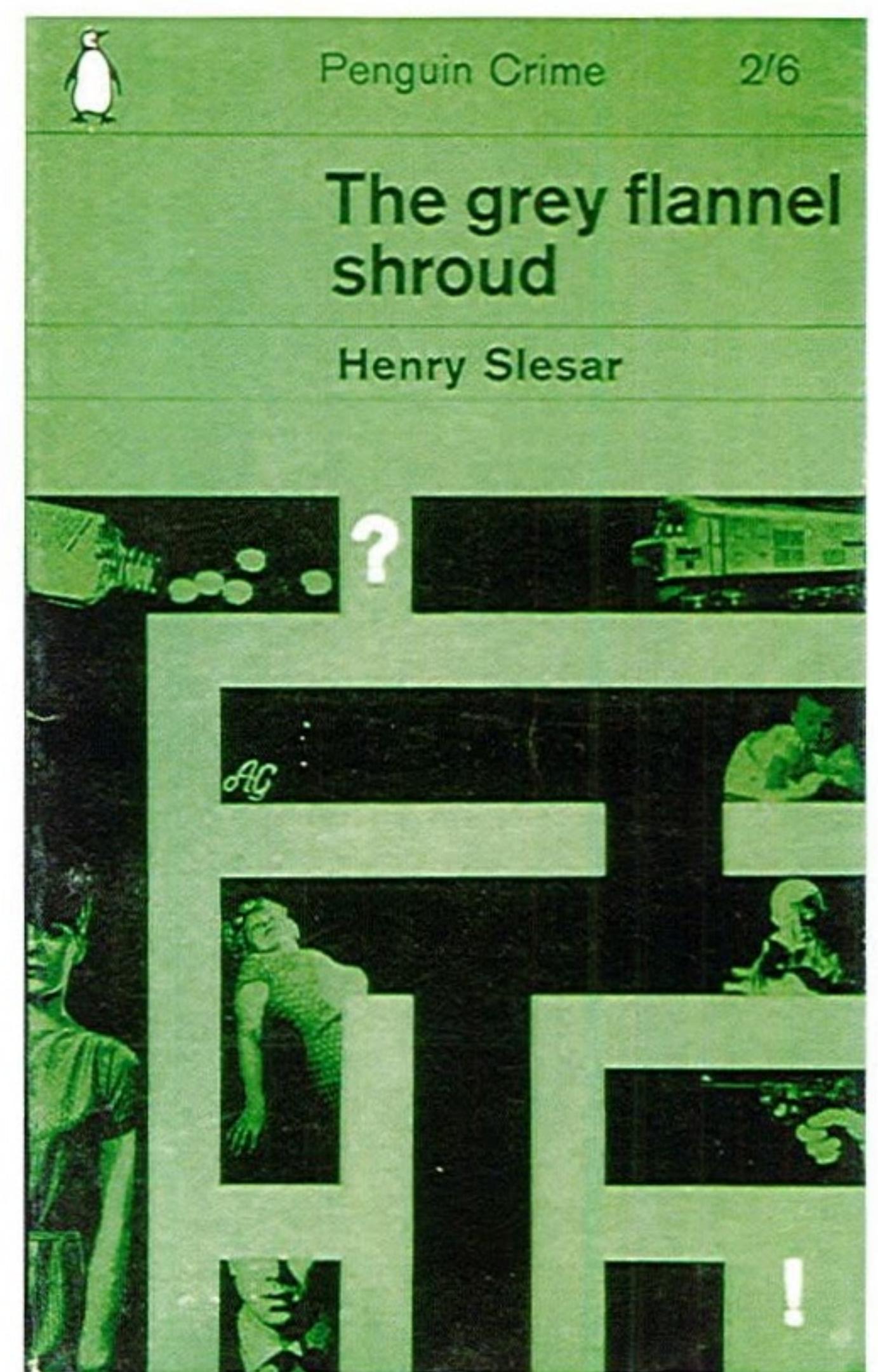
immediately locate the viewer and make this the most object-like of Miller's early works. In 1951, Tschichold introduced the grid cover layout; the same elements – colour-coded banding, penguin logo and centrally positioned author and title text – were rearranged vertically and sometimes included an accompanying illustration or additional blurb about the book's contents. Miller painted further versions of *I'm So Fucking Hard* (2002) on the vertical grid with both blue- and orange banding. This self-titled 'Fiction' series of paintings, which include the witty and wry, 2002 titles *Too Cool to Die*, *Rags to Polyester – My Story* and *International Lonely Guy – My Story*, were made at the same time Miller began to explore another of Penguin's book series. The Pelican imprint, which appeared in 1937, was intended for the 'interested layman' and presented serious original writing on such nonfiction subjects as modern art and architecture, the social sciences, economics, astronomy and archaeology.⁷ The first in the series was George Bernard Shaw's 1928 book *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism*. An Edward Young-designed flying pelican replaced the penguin logo and while the series conformed to the tripartite grid in blue and white, there was occasional variance that introduced more bands or added relevant drawn or photographic illustration to the central band. For Miller, the essay-based Pelican editions 'addressing social problems, were like a bird swooping over a landscape, going in and picking things up in its large, pendulous bill'.⁸ Miller called these first Pelican book paintings the 'Bad Weather' series. Each was titled with a place name from the north of England and with a subtitle drawn from popular culture or resonant of a familiar slogan but phrased just off-pitch and humorously closer to the reality than the empty aphorisms typical of the world of advertising: *Whitby – The Self Catering Years* (p.12) or *Grimsby – The World is Your Whelk* (p.17). The 'Bad Weather' paintings are gestural and degraded, almost as if the surface colour of the book had been worn away to the natural paper stock underneath. Miller's affection for the Penguin paperback as an object – battered, used, stained – mirrors the life of these books still in circulation today. The second-hand paperback holds a special status and is treasured by the bibliophile who relishes its well-thumbed pages, worn cover and particular aged smell.

Penguin's covers varied greatly within the structured composition system at work within their design identity, and Miller's rigorous enquiry charts the subtle and episodic evolution of the Penguin book in design terms. He rarely paints covers with illustrations – words and wordplay are the thing – although there are occasional detours to figurative representation. Penguin design transitioned in the 1960s and 1970s under the guidance of Italian designer Germano Facetti, who was brought in as art director to make the classic Penguin product more contemporary and appealing to a younger market. Miller's 2009 *Can I Get Involved in Your Crisis* (p.151) is a green 'Crime' series cover featuring the Marber grid developed by Romek Marber, a Polish émigré and one of a number of new-generation designers, including Brian Sewell and Derek Birdsall, working on Penguin's prodigious output at this time. The revived Penguin output saw simple, graphic abstract illustrations replace the more ornamental designs of the preceding decades. The labyrinthine

maze of Miller's cover painting and the often jagged and distorted silhouettes of Marber's designs are particularly resonant of the arresting and symbolic graphic images created by the American designer Saul Bass in the mid to late 1950s. Bass pioneered a new approach to film production and advertising design, and his powerful campaigns for films such as Otto Preminger's *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955) and *Exodus* (1960) remain as influential today as they were at the time. The 1960s also saw a refreshed Pelican imprint and the introduction of the Penguin 'Plays' series in 1964, which featured series titling designed by Denise York, whose dotted lettering recalls theatrical lights. York's cover designs mimicked the classic horizontal grid but intensified the colour-field approach. She replaced the central white band with sometimes two or three colours overprinting in places to give the impression of an even greater range to the palette. The history of Penguin cover design – albeit a selective interrogation – can be found in Miller's body of work; he paints Penguin 'Plays' covers in their first incarnation, designed by John Miles (see pp.198–201), as well as York's later versions (pp.202–19). The 'Poetry' series, developed in the early 1960s, is also referenced for a time, while a few paintings echo the more painterly illustrations that appear on covers of the 1970s or the poster-like freestyle of Alan Aldridge's short-lived run as fiction art director at the end of the 1960s. Miller has likened his preoccupation with Penguin paperbacks to Andy Warhol's consistent presentation of the Campbell's soup can:

I suppose it was a bit like Warhol's Campbell's soup cans being about what he ate for dinner every day – these Penguins were what I ended up reading every day, because I was living in Paris and I'd bought a bunch of them second-hand.⁹

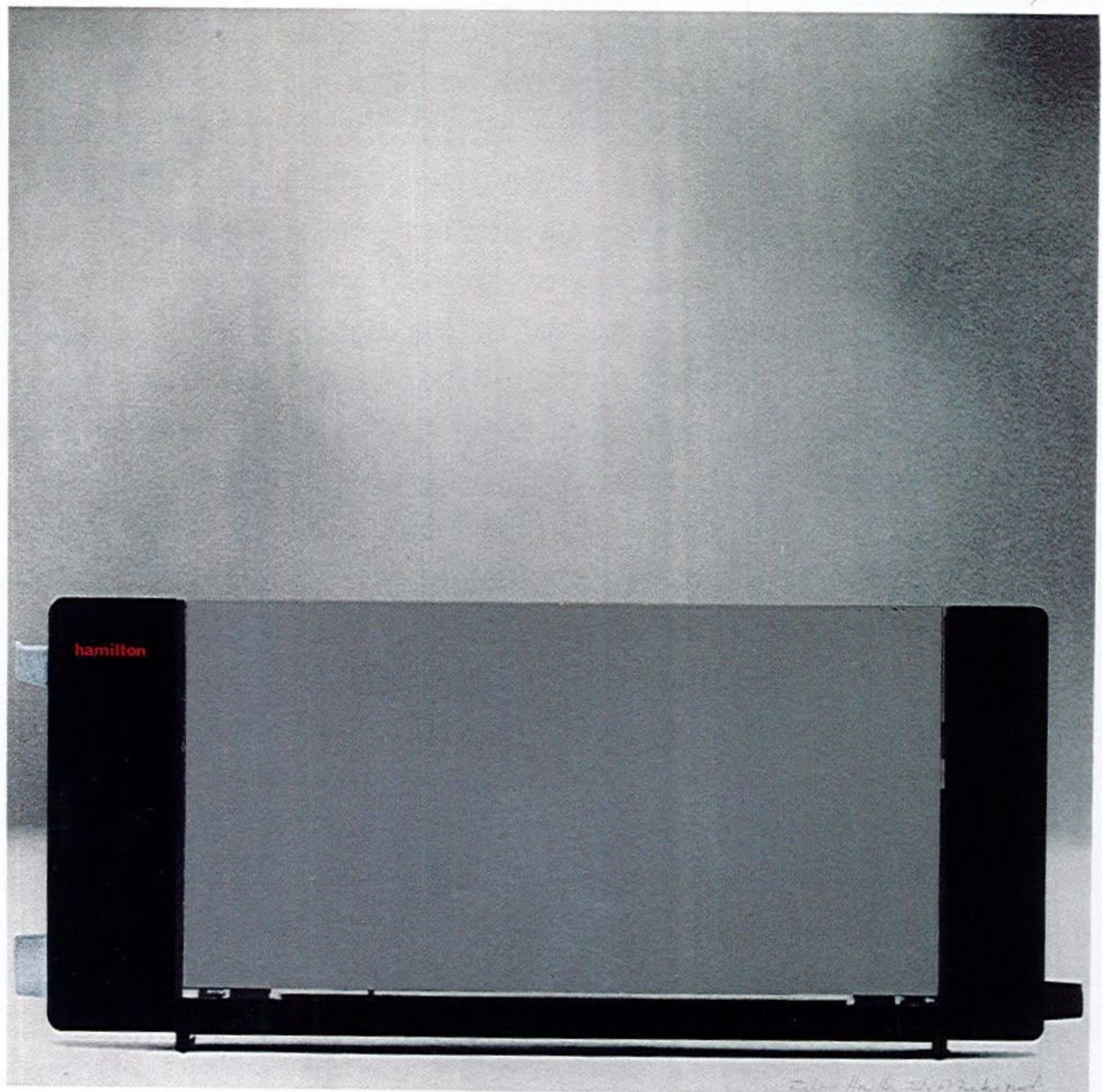
Surveying his oeuvre, it becomes clear that Miller possesses a deeper reverence for Penguin and the commercial art of the graphic designer than this statement suggests. Although his titles subvert and play with the limits of acceptability in publishing terms (it's only in recent years that swear words have appeared on book covers and usually with a well-placed asterisk to lessen the offence, at that), Miller's respect for the Penguin brand is clear and can be compared to Richard Hamilton's similar study of the constructed identity of Braun products. Like Miller, Hamilton drew on the world around him and, alongside his peers in the Independent Group, explored the varying forms of popular and consumer culture of the day across disciplinary boundaries. He was particularly interested in modern design and technology, embracing with zeal the work of continental European figures associated with the Bauhaus school of art and design such as László Moholy-Nagy and Max Bill. For Hamilton, Penguin's classic design would have been tainted with the nostalgia of the inter- and post-war periods, and lacking the progressive vision of the future that he sought to explore within his own work. References to domestic consumer products circulated through his work, but it wasn't until the mid-1960s that Hamilton's representation of design took a more serious, rather than parodying, tone. Design critic and writer Alice Rawsthorn notes in her appraisal of Hamilton's relationship with design that 'rather than poking fun at consumer culture as he had once done... Hamilton depicted the industrial artefacts that he considered worthy of thoughtful



Romek Marber's design for *The grey flannel shroud*, Penguin Books, 1963



Saul Bass' design for *The Man with the Golden Arm* film poster, 1955



Toaster

Richard Hamilton, *Toaster*, 1967
screenprint, lithograph and polyester on paper, 58.4 × 58.4 cm (23 × 23 in)

consideration with a seriousness that was markedly more subversive than his earlier satire.¹⁰ Braun products were of particular interest to Hamilton, with the approach to their form stemming from the Ulm School of Design, Germany (Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm), established in 1953 by ex-Bauhaus student Max Bill together with Otl Aicher and Inge Aicher-Scholl. Ulm tutors consulted for Braun – working with other designers at the company such as Dieter Rams, who would go on to be Braun’s head of design – and by the end of the 1950s had developed a clear design language rooted in the modernist principles of simplicity, efficiency and clean lines that had similarly driven Tschichold at Penguin. In Hamilton’s series of Braun-related works, the artist repeatedly constructs and deconstructs the brand’s identity and symbolism through a careful and studious analysis of its design products, from formal and material qualities to logo design and advertising language. The ready-made design object was one worthy of consideration for its aesthetic merits, and Hamilton’s stylized photographs and collages of products like Braun’s HT 2 toaster, designed by Reinhold Weiss, were intended to ask the following question:

Does the neutrality of Duchamp or the studied banality, even vulgarity, of the subject matter in most American Pop Art significantly exclude those products of mass culture which might be the choice of a NY Museum of Modern Art ‘Good Design’ committee from our consideration?¹¹

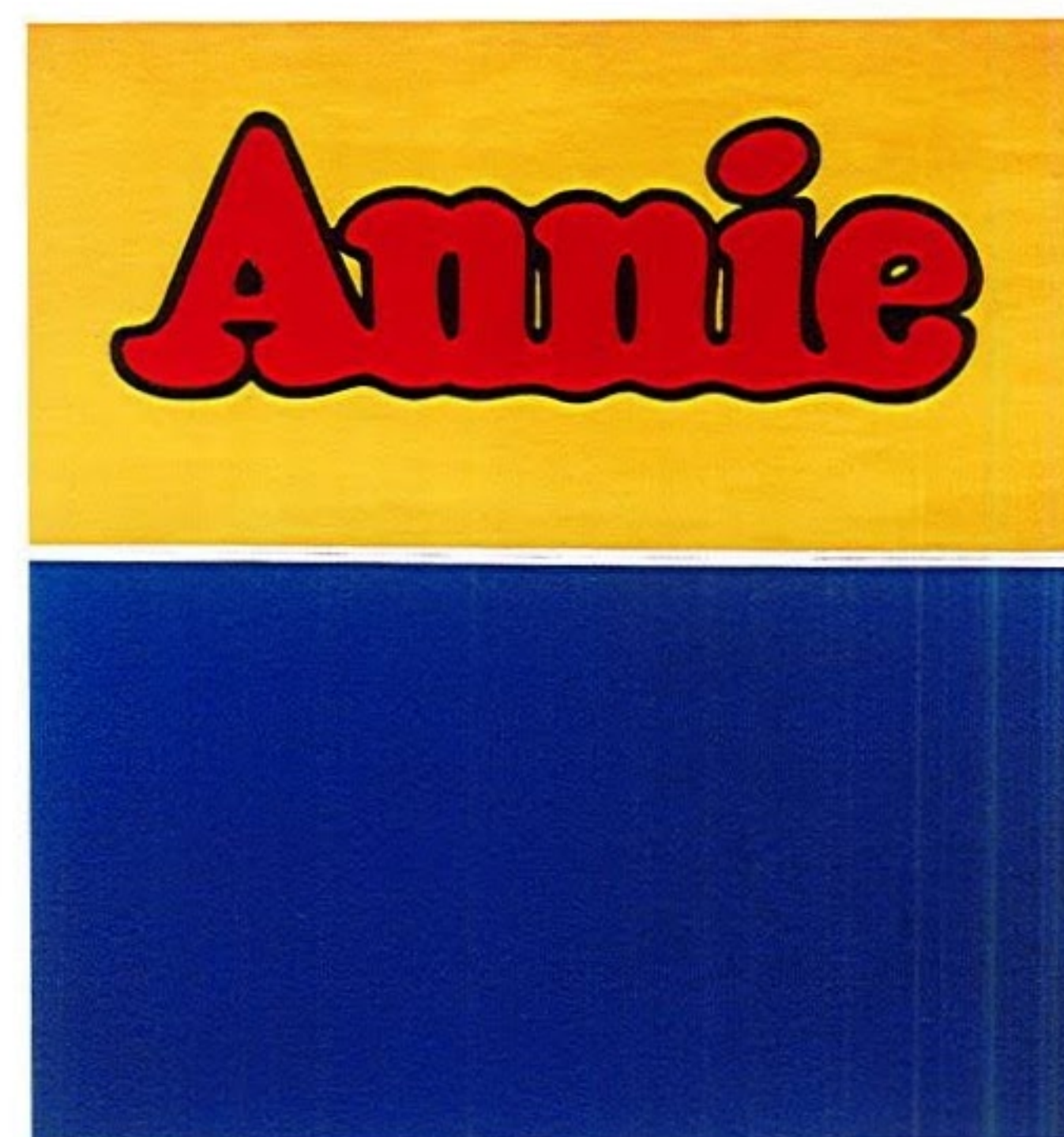
In some of his toaster works and in ‘The Critic Laughs’ series, Hamilton replaces the Braun logo with his own name. This play with

authorship in relation to a consumer brand devoted to the coherence and uniformity of its output does not undermine Braun but highlights Hamilton's deep respect and admiration of the company's designs and his understanding of the complexities of the semiotics at play with such mass-manufactured 'anonymous' objects. Similarly, Miller inserts himself as the author of many of his book-cover paintings – although he has not painted a work called *Slow Down Arthur, Stick to Thirty*, the title of the novel he published in 2000.

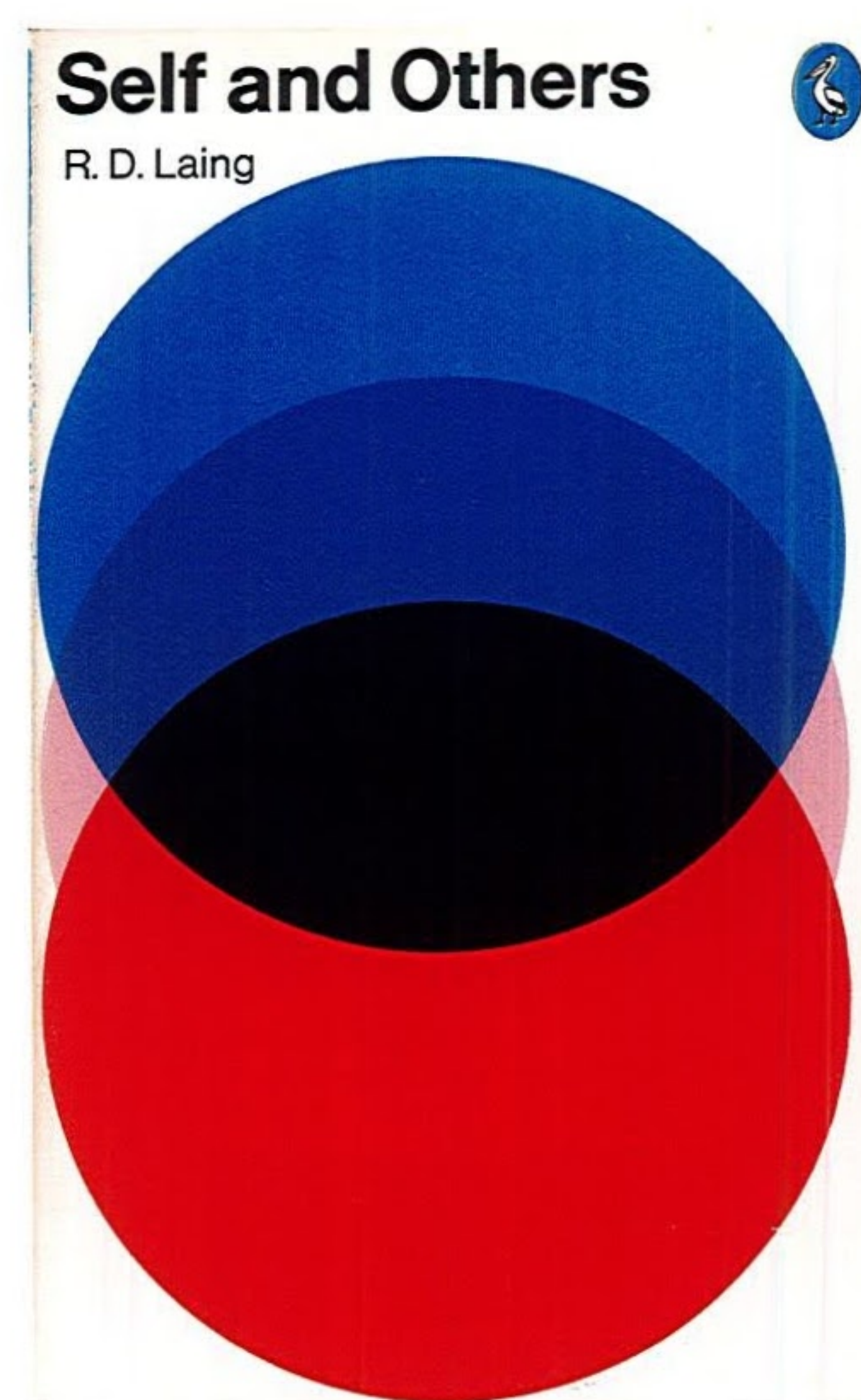
Hamilton and Miller share a reverential attitude towards the design ethos of brands such as Braun or Penguin, and their thought and rigorous investigation into the design icons of the twentieth century are consciously sincere and optimistic. Miller cites Ed Ruscha as an influence and, as with Hamilton, the American artist's exploration of the material culture of popular, mass-produced products or American post-war design subjects was rooted in his training and experience in commercial art practice. Works such as *Annie* (1962) or *Actual Size* (1962, p.40) are painterly renderings of American products where the word is emphasized for impact. Ruscha loves language and visual wordplay, using both single 'hot' words like 'Annie' and 'Spam', and longer phrases or sentences, often characterized by their ambiguous or humorous meanings. His typographic execution of painted words is careful and precise, rendering the words themselves objects of design as much as of linguistically resonance. In recent years, Miller has painted his own cover designs, not based on the rational Penguin grid but drawing on the influence of the Pelican social sciences series of the 1970s, such as Germano Facetti's cover for R. D. Laing's *Self and Others* of 1975. In Miller's own take on the abstract geometry of popular psychology books from this period, text, graphic shape and colour are tightly composed and interrelated, often using graphic illusion and the dynamic effect of overprinting to shift the meaning of word and image. Titles and wordplay reference and question the hippie-derived philosophy of the 1970s and, in the case of paintings such as *Back on the Worry Beads* (p.64), *Another Non-Doctor Afternoon* (p.84) or *Hate's Outta Date* (p.82), ask wry questions about the commodification of social and cultural experience.

In an interview for *Studio International*, Miller reflects on the positive attitude of the post-war era and the practical 'pre-jargon' of the time and his own search for equivalent popular maxims and an authentic language suited to today. Talking about working up *Hate's Outta Date* from illustrator Robert Crumb's phrase 'Keep on Truckin', Miller said that he was 'trying to come up with something now that would have that same mass appeal, a sort of bumper sticker appeal, but that actually sounded dated too – [it had] a tie-dye feeling about it.'¹²

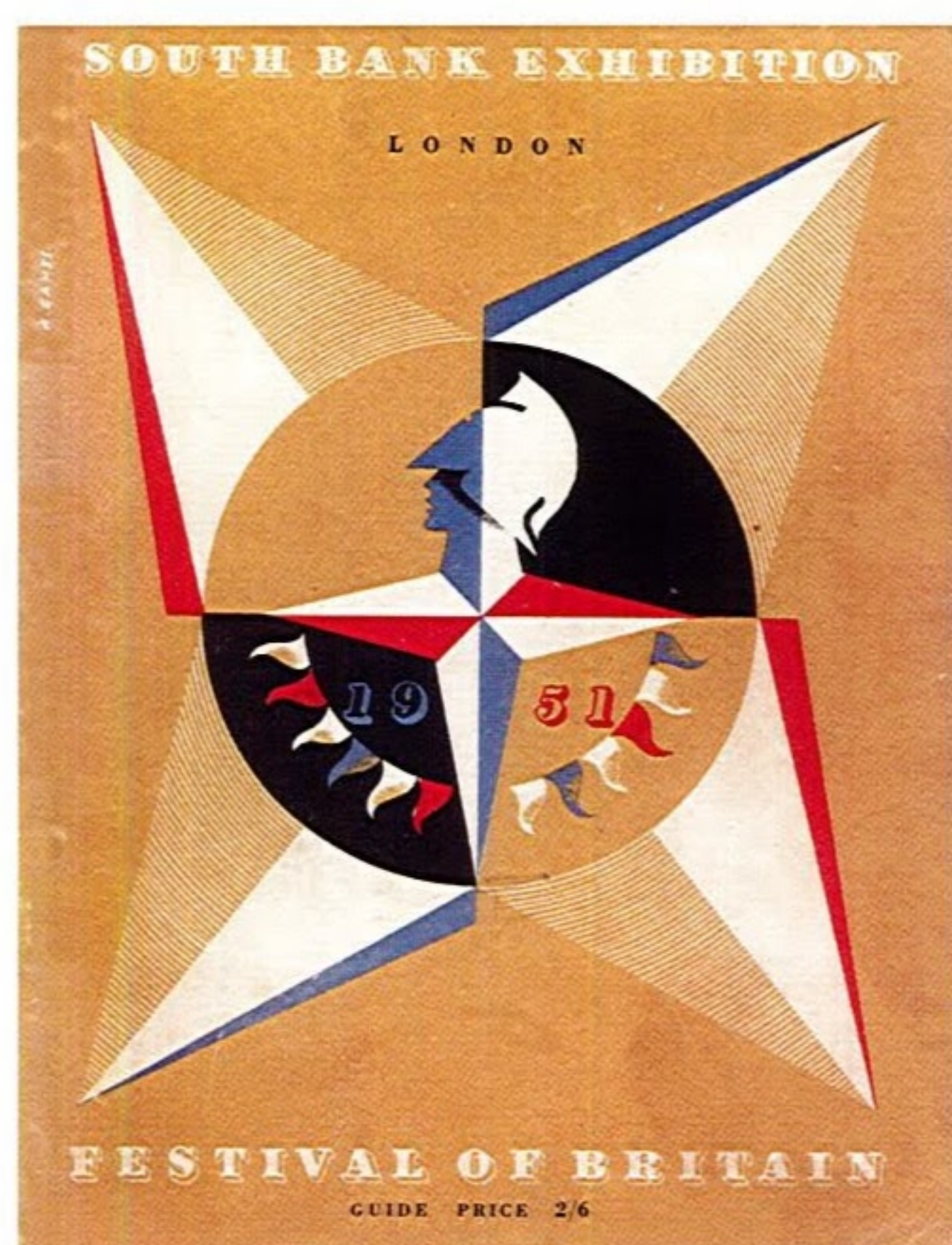
Miller's work raises questions concerning the recent and growing trend for monetizing design icons and about brand commodification for quick profit. This is a particularly hot topic in Britain in our era of nostalgic 'austerity chic' – think 'Keep Calm and Carry On' – which is often viewed by critics as a sinister misreading of the positive benefits of the welfare state that is contributing to its ultimate destruction. Alongside a slew of 'Blitz-spirit' products originally issued by the Ministry of Information, such as reissued 'Make Do and Mend' manuals or posters asking people to 'Dig for Victory', the marketplace for the



Ed Ruscha
Annie, 1962
oil and pencil on canvas
181.6 × 170.2 cm (71 1/2 × 67 in)



Germano Facetti's design for
Self and Others, Pelican Books, 1975



Abram Games' design for the Festival of Britain, 1951



Campbell's Warhol-inspired limited edition soup cans, 2012

discerning 'design-literate' consumer is awash with merchandise depicting and celebrating the design legacy of London Transport, post-war Brutalist architecture or – everyone's favourite sacred cow – the 1951 *Festival of Britain*. Penguin caught on to the possibilities of their own brand after initially threatening to sue Miller for copyright infringement, arguing that he was bringing the brand into disrepute with his subversive, satirical and profane book titles. After a lengthy exchange and a meeting at Penguin headquarters in London, the company relented and decided to embrace Miller's conceptual project, eventually commissioning him to make work for the company and giving him access to their archives. Penguin perhaps saw the commercial potential in their own brand, in the way that brands such as Campbell's likely enjoyed an upswing in sales from Andy Warhol's repeated study of their soup-can packaging. The explosion of ancillary 'Penguin' goods using the 'classic' horizontal grid of the 1930s and 1940s has not relented since their first appearance in the mid-2000s, and you can now buy mugs, notebooks, posters, tea towels, tote bags and all manner of domestic products in a wide variety of colours and permutations. Writers and critics such as Owen Hatherley are scathing about the 'nostalgia machine' such commodification and fetishization represents, while others bemoan the dilution of such a cherished cultural brand.¹³ Penguin themselves have defended the rollout of the Penguin ideology from 'good cheap books' to 'good cheap products', arguing that anything that ultimately leads a customer to new ideas and a love of books and reading is a good thing.¹⁴ Miller himself has said in an interview with his friend and kindred spirit Jarvis Cocker 'that the merchandising misses the point, I think – it's too clean. What people really like about these books is the more visceral nostalgia – the smell, or the fact that some school-kid has written abuse on the author's head in biro.'¹⁵

Harland Miller's body of work is many things, not least a testament to the history of a British publishing house of the twentieth century. The words of John Makinson, chairman of Penguin Random House at the time Miller was about to be sued by the company, sum up this singular and purposeful enquiry: '...although it's obviously his take on the Penguin design heritage, it is amazingly true to the spirit of the Penguin cover. They're sardonic, playful, ironic... but mostly they're rather beautiful images.'¹⁶

1 Harland Miller interviewed by Jessica Draper in *Studio International*, 19 June 2016, <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/harland-miller-interview-to-night-we-make-history> Accessed 1 July 2018.
2 Jade Angeles Fitton, 'Why 2017 is the year for artist Harland Miller', *FLUX magazine* <http://www.fluxmagazine.com/artist-harland-miller/> Accessed 1 July 2018.
3 For an excellent overview of the history of Penguin Books and their cover designs see *Penguin by Design: A Cover Story 1935–2005* by Phil Baines, published by the Penguin Group in 2005.
4 Eric Hobsbawm, *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century*, The New Press, London and New York, 2013, p.163.
5 Jan Tschichold, *The New Typography*, translated by Ruari McLean, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2006, p.227.
6 Baines, p.57.
7 Baines, p.22.
8 Harland Miller interviewed by Jarvis Cocker in *The Guardian*, 5 May 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/05/art.art> Accessed 1 July 2018.
9 Harland Miller interviewed by Jarvis Cocker in *The*

Guardian, 5 May 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/05/art.art> Accessed 1 July 2018.
10 Alice Rawsthorn, 'Richard Hamilton and Design', in *Richard Hamilton*, Tate Publishing, London, 2014, p.131.
11 Richard Hamilton, 'Object / Multiple', in *Collected Words*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1982, p.73.
12 Harland Miller interviewed by Jessica Draper in *Studio International*, 19 June 2016, <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/harland-miller-interview-to-night-we-make-history> Accessed 1 July 2018.
13 See Owen Hatherley, *Ministry of Nostalgia: Consuming Austerity (Keep Calm and Carry On)*, Verso Books, London, 2015.
14 Tony Davis in *The Guardian*, 17 November 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/nov/17/penguin-designs> Accessed 1 July 2018.
15 Harland Miller interviewed by Jarvis Cocker in *The Guardian*, 5 May 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/05/art.art> Accessed 1 July 2018.
16 John Makinson interviewed by Michael Stott in the *Financial Times*, 7 September 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/3d0970b4-3687-11e4-95d3-00144feabdco> Accessed 1 July 2018.