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Rethinking The Ethics Of Photoshop

Retouching is its own form of fake news. Can an oath change a problem that stretches from fashion to product design?

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5 MINUTE READ

Ten years ago, a set of five oaths called the **Designers Accord** aimed to establish a code of ethics around sustainability in the design industry. More than 1,000 design firms and organizations voluntarily adopted the accord, as well as thousands of individuals from 100 countries and six continents, helping to raise awareness about eco-friendly design while giving designers a concrete way to engage clients in conversations about sustainability—today, a commonplace practice.

Now, the designer Sarah Krasley is trying to create a new kind of accord, this time for those in the business of making images. She calls it the **Retouchers Accord**, a **Hippocratic oath** for authenticity in images. The first draft of the five-part oath, modeled after the Designers Accord, places an impetus for change on the entire system, from casting directors to graphic designers to photographers to businesspeople. It recognizes the role of images in body image and self-confidence—like how Photoshopping razor-thin models to look even more frighteningly skinny can impact perceptions of beauty for adolescents. It also asks those who sign on to emphasize practicing empathy and integrity, learn more retouching techniques that embody the accord's values, and become evangelists for the cause.



“The downstream impacts of the design decisions that postproduction artists and retouchers are making are causing public health problems,” Krasley says. “You have young women and men looking at those pictures and thinking their body needs to look like that in order for them to be beautiful, to be loved or accepted.”

Krasley, who runs the design consultancy **Unreasonable Women** and launched **a line of customizable swimwear for women** in 2015, began to think about unhealthy image-making practices when she and her team were photographing models in their swimsuits.

She contemplated airbrushing the models' cellulite, believing this might make her products more appealing to customers, but felt unsure about if that was ethical. Krasley began to look around for best practices for retouching images, but had no luck. She decided to leave her models' cellulite alone and instead host a symposium of people from different areas of the image-making industry in order to start a conversation and create the code of ethics she felt was missing.



Swimwear X [PHOTO: VIA UNREASONABLE WOMEN]

In January, the group of retouchers, postproduction artists, graphic designers, models, industry businesspeople, editorial decision-makers, stylists, and photographers met to discuss what the accord should encompass. Now, their first draft is online, and Krasley is soliciting comments from the public. When the comment period closes on February 28, she will convene with the organization's board of directors and finalize the oath, then open it up to companies and individuals to voluntarily sign on. She says she already has several large institutions on board, though she declined to share which ones.

"A voluntary pledge is a really amazing first step," Krasley says. "You're promising to do something and then relying on your own creativity and the collective knowledge of the community you're part of to help you make good on the thing you promised to do."

BETTER DESIGN COULD HOLD THE KEY TO LESS RETOUCHING IN IMAGES

Retouching itself isn't inherently bad. It's often used for fixing things like a cord that ends up in the shot or flyaway hairs, helping make shoots go faster, thus making them more cost-effective. For the female-led retouching studio [Feather Creative](#), retouching mostly means adjusting lighting and color. "The reality of retouching is more mundane," says Linn Edwards, one of the studio's cofounders. "We make samples look right, make photos fit page layout, remove tourists from the background of a shot."

Still, when retouchers are directed to drastically alter women's bodies, the results are not only [embarrassing](#), studies [have shown](#) that doctored images that only depict idealized, unattainable forms of beauty can really impact body image among adolescents.

Krasley hopes that the Retouchers Accord will help raise awareness on an industry-wide level and encourage more people involved in the process to [rethink the images they're creating](#).



[IMAGE: VIA [PHOTOSHOP DISASTERS](#)]

However, the Retouchers Accord isn't just about body image—a lack of image authenticity can be misleading in other ways if used without any ethical guidelines. For Lance Green, a freelance graphic designer who attended the Retouchers Accord Symposium, image manipulation in product design needs to be rethought as well.

“With product design, the end product images, the hero image, those are highly manipulated as well. It's hard when someone higher up is asking to create a fantasy of a product and an image, when you know it's a complete lie,” Green says. “It's tough to put that out there and have people believe it. But that's often how it's done. You sell the idea before the end product.”

Green says that the conversation about being more authentic in images is a difficult one to have with clients, and that having a framework like the Retouchers Accord would give him a starting place. And as a freelancer, the oath would give him something to indicate his set of values. “If you could be sought out by companies for this, if it's something that a company shows off too, then designers might be more interested in working for that company.”

The Designers Accord provides helpful precedent for how the Retouchers Accord might work in practice. DA founder and influential designer [Valerie Casey](#) established a set of five simple steps that gave designers a more tangible way to act on their values. Casey now sits on the board of the Retouchers Accord, giving Krasley strategic advice based on her experience. But Casey's influence wasn't the only reason that half a million people signed on to the Designers Accord—it also had good timing. A 2003 [report from California's Sustainable Building Task Force](#) found that a 2% increase of upfront investment in green design for buildings results in an average of 20% savings over the course of the building's life. By the time the Designers Accord arrived in 2007, the cultural shift toward sustainability—likely influenced by the green-building rating system LEED—was already underway. Today, promoting eco-friendly design is no longer a difficult conversation to have with clients—it's a well-established practice that designers and companies are proud to uphold.



Perhaps the Retouchers Accord will give the image-making industry a similar way to take actionable steps toward standing up for their values around retouching. The **body positivity movement** and outrage against magazines and advertisements that retouch models in unnatural ways has been around for years, and social media has helped reveal the downsides of retouching to a larger audience and empowered people to speak up about it. If timed right, the Retouchers Accord could be the tipping point toward real change.

Ultimately, the Retouchers Accord is a symbolic gesture. Time will tell if the oath will have the same kind of reach as its predecessor, but in a highly visual world where photos can no longer be trusted to tell the truth, the Retouchers Accord could serve as an antidote to our post-truth time.