THE KILLING FIELDS

Wherever there are leftover land mines, there's an urgent need for warnings. That's where design comes in.

By John Emerson

Figure C2: Hazard sign - square

Figure C1: Hazard sign - triangle

IN A TIME OF "smart weapons," land mines are especially dumb. The problem results from a pernicious consequence of design: Land mines are indiscriminate. They lack a safety or "off" switch; they can't be aimed, unlike other weapons; and they don't know the difference between soldiers and civilians, guerrillas and peacekeepers, trucks and aid workers, livestock and children. Land mines linger as the scattered remains of war, months and years after peace treaties are brokered. This was the abiding concern of the architects of a watershed treaty to ban land mines, which in December 2007 marked its 10-year anniversary. In that time, the global use, trade, and production of mines has declined, but hard work lies ahead for demining teams, doctors, survivors, activists—and graphic designers.

One way that designers are responding to this global crisis is to develop materials for mine awareness and advocacy. They're creating websites, posters, leaflets, billboards, T-shirts, and other educational materials that warn about the dangers of mines and, in some cases, call for them to be banned altogether. In mine-riddled countries like Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Angola, to name just a few, trainers use booklets, posters, and comics to teach adults and children to stay away from mines, or what to do if they or others are injured. Often, these materials rely on images instead of words to reach a nonliterate or young audience, and the problem of creating understandable representations across cultures is a particularly pressing design challenge.

In these cases, posters are often printed on fabric, which is more durable than paper and is easier to clean and to transport in any number of climates or conditions. In some cases, messages are smuggled on the back of other media—printed on the cover of a notebook or backpack, for instance, or posted as warning signs sponsored by a local business or an international brand. Sometimes a local business—or even a multinational one, like Coca-Cola—will donate a wall for a mural or funds for signage to display an anti–land mine image alongside a promotional message.

This is no average PSA: Land mines, often undetectable without special equipment, are weapons of mass destruction in slow motion. They have killed or injured hundreds of thousands of people all over the globe, claiming an estimated 1,500 new casualties each month—a new victim every 29 minutes. Land mines and unexploded munitions affect every corner of the globe, including more than 75 countries around

Opposite: A warning sign for land mines, using a design **(above)** recommended for international use by the United Nations Mine Action Service.

Photographs by Brad Dickson


DANGER
MINES

PRINT, APR/MAY 1956

"Unpredictably, art can blossom from Arcadian leisures or wounds of war, in sunny gardens or stinking jails." —Editor's letter in an issue devoted to Italian design, page 16.

Left to right: The cover of *Superman: Deadly Legacy*; a poster calling for the ban of land mines and promoting the Fourth International NGO Conference on Landmines in Maputo, Mozambique; a mine-risk education poster, produced by the Organisation for Mine Clearance & Afghan Rehabilitation, designed to raise awareness of dangerous mines and unexploded ordinance in Afghanistan. **Opposite:** Hand-drawn mine-awareness poster from Cambodia.

the world. They have killed or maimed more people than chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons combined. They shatter lives and crush economies; fertile land can't be farmed when mines are present. And mines don't just kill, they maim: They usually destroy the victim's legs, feet, or hands. Indeed, they're designed to do so; enemies use more resources caring for an injured soldier than a dead soldier. But when the soldiers go home, the mines keep killing.

The challenge for designers is to create visual materials that are compelling and visually arresting enough to keep people from their everyday activities—crossing fields or borders, for instance—and, in the case of children, picking up strange objects or even just running across an open field. Affected communities must pick up where the military minds leave off and keep civilians away from harm.

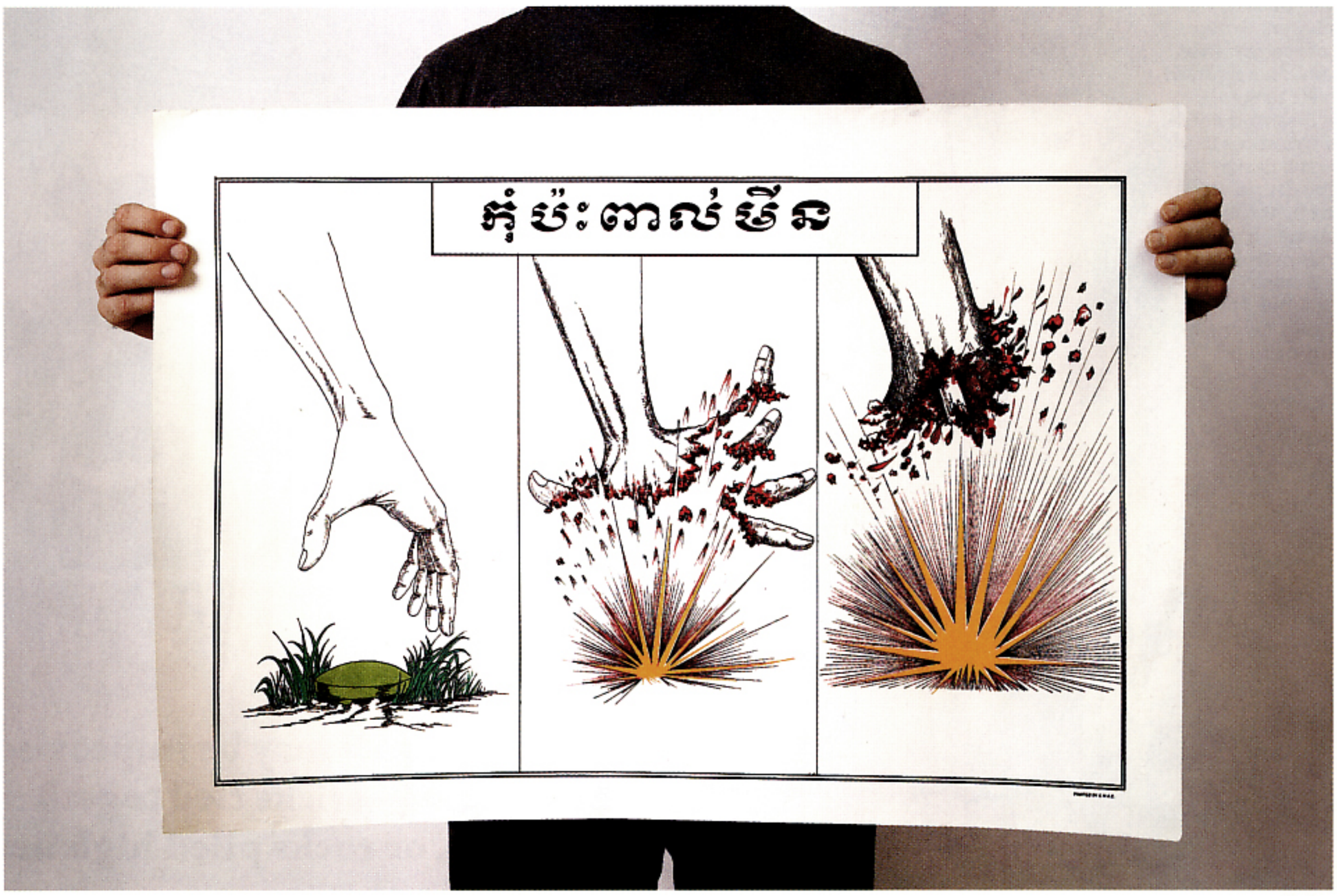
This is where designers and local communities can work together: The white skull and crossbones on a bright red background against a red triangle, for instance, is a common warning symbol where land mines are found. It's one of the icons defined in the 1996 Amended Protocol II to the U.N. meeting on conventional weapons—one of only a few international treaties to include a style manual. When signage is not available, the manual recommends placing rows of alternating colored rocks near the suspected land mine site. Still other symbols may be improvised on the spot—sticks tied together in a cross or rocks piled high near a dangerous object.

Because nearly one-third of land mine victims are children, mine-education material for the young constitutes a special class of design. When designers swoop in from outside an affected area without engaging the local community, the creative impulse can prove counterproductive—and even dangerous. Relationships to various forms of media differ from place to place, and from age group to age group. While it's tempting to try to duplicate a success in one area, materials may be inappropriate in another.

One example is *Superman: Deadly Legacy*, a comic book produced in 1996 by DC Comics, UNICEF, and the U.S. Department of Defense, translated and then distributed through the Kosovo school system. A second edition, which also featured Wonder Woman (known as *Mujer Maravillosa* in many Latin countries), was distributed in Spanish via the Ministries of Education in Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica.

A Portuguese version was planned for Angola and Mozambique, but the project was soon halted after complaints from the

THIS PAGE: POSTERS COURTESY HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (CENTER) AND BRIAN LIU/TOOLBOXDC (RIGHT). OPPOSITE: POSTER COURTESY HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH



respective countries. Mine-awareness groups had realized that the book—which had not been field-tested before distribution—was transmitting the wrong messages: If you find yourself in a mined area, Superman will fly in and save you. The comic also informs readers, erroneously, that it's fine to retrace your footsteps out of a minefield. A subsequent evaluation in Kosovo found that while the comic books were suitable for children ages 10 to 14, children ages 7 to 9 inferred incorrect and even dangerous messages from them.

With this in mind, mine-awareness programs like Adopt-a-Minefield and Handicap International have increasingly engaged with community liaison teams and conducted peer-to-peer programs, listening to and working more closely with the people living day to day in mine-affected areas to develop culturally appropriate tools and narratives together. Designers and other artists in mine-producing countries, including the U.S. and the U.K., have also created innovative visual materials to advocate for ceasing the use of mines. In addition to posters, websites, and television spots, designers have turned to package design and environmental graphics to publicize—and dramatize—this crucial issue. A number of firms, agencies, and organizations (such as Rapp Collins Singapore and underground activists "Ricardo" and "Mulungo" from Mozambique) have sought to bring the experience of mines home with street theater or stunts: simulating minefields composed of Frisbees planted in parks, for instance, or planting land mine-warning signs in public places in the United States, the U.K., and Spain—countries in which civilians are largely safe from mines. Ad campaigns focusing on the grisly effects of mines dramatize the loss of limbs by a variety of visual means, from the poetically evocative to the squeamishly explicit.

The United Nations CyberSchoolBus project "Schools Demining Schools," initiated in 1997, brought together teachers and students around the world in online forums to educate about mines and take action against them. The site hosts downloadable teaching units on mines, and sponsored regular Q&A sessions via e-mail with land-mine survivors, activists, and government officials. Years before blogs became a household word, students worldwide were receiving weekly diary updates from demining teams in the process of clearing school grounds in Mozambique and Afghanistan. Later, the schools held bake sales and other local fundraisers to help fund mine clearance. (Disclosure: I was one of the designers on this project.)

The images of celebrities like Princess Diana and Paul McCartney (and events built around those images) have also raised considerable awareness and funds to support land-mine survivors and demining operations. Design in this context helps spread the word, makes the

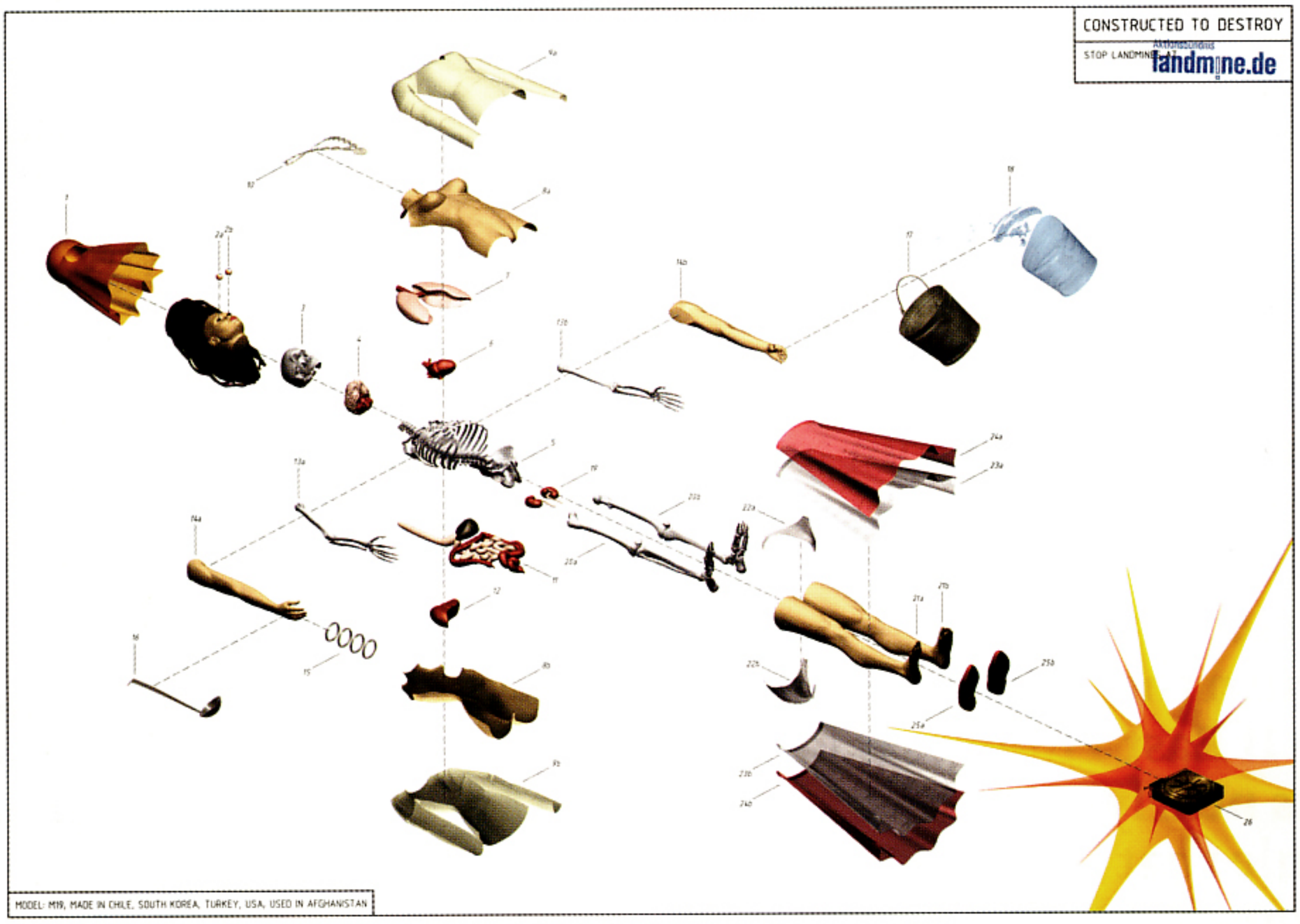
Top to bottom: Children in Angola with comic books distributed by the Mines Advisory Group; Afghan policeman after spray-painting a disabled anti-aircraft tank to promote *Disarm*, a documentary film about land mines by the design studio ToolboxDC; postcard published by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines promoting a 2004 land-mine conference in Nairobi. The Valmara 69 antipersonnel mine is pictured.

Other symbols may be improvised on the spot—sticks tied together in a cross, or rocks piled high near a dangerous object.

PHOTOS COURTESY SEAN SUTTON/MAG (TOP), BRIAN LIU/ TOOLBOXDC (CENTER), POSTCARD COURTESY HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

PRINT, JAN/FEB 1968

"The campaign broke rules: In big headlines it told voters not to vote for a Negro; it told voters in one ad to vote for Stokes' opponent, Seth Taft; and it changed themes in midstream." —"Advertising and Politics: The Cleveland Mayoral Campaign," page 17.



issue visible, and ultimately, builds political will for policy change.

But what difference does all this activity make? Plenty. As of this writing, 155 countries have signed on to the international treaty banning the use of land mines. It's hard to imagine this happening without political pressure at home. And it's hard to imagine this pressure existing without designers to reach ordinary people with illustrations of how mines can devastate neighborhoods and nations.

Important as it was, though, the 1997 treaty has not yet put an end to the danger. While most of the world has stopped using and producing mines, and more than 40 million mines have been destroyed globally, 13 other nations—including China, India, Pakistan, Russia, and the U.S.—continue to make and use them. The U.S. military has said it hopes to overcome the weapon's flaws by designing "smarter" mines that are easier to locate, that expire after a time period, can be detonated remotely, or can better recognize vehicles. But relying on a piece of plastic to determine tanks from tractors is a risky proposition. Mine-disposal teams have observed that duds and failure rates of self-destruct mechanisms are higher in the field than in the lab. Is this the answer? Or is the focus on innovation doing more harm than good?

Above: Magazine ad designed in 2006 by Scholz & Friends Berlin for Aktionsbündnis Landmine.de. The text reads: "Constructed to Destroy. Stop Landmines. Model M29, Made in Chile, South Korea, Turkey, USA. Used in Afghanistan." The campaign won a number of advertising awards in the U.S. and Europe.

The nonpartisan U.S. General Accounting Office determined in a 2002 study that the U.S. military's use of self-destructing land mines in Iraq in 1991 was not only inefficient, but also dangerous to U.S. troops. The study cites a Defense Department report noting that even when self-destructing land mines were appropriately cataloged and marked, malfunctioning self-destruct mechanisms posed a danger to military personnel and a deterrent to the movement of troops they are intended to protect.

All of these innovative design ideas may ease the conscience of military strategists, but designers can't give these explosives a relaxed trigger mechanism, or a way to see a boy making his way home, or the kind of mind needed to decide that there will be no more killing today. Fundamentally, land mines are indiscriminate weapons. The true solution is for countries still using land mines to join the rest of the world in banning these weapons. In this case, the best design is no design. Ⓟ