



WORDS
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PHOTO
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WORD: KNOLLING

The fascinating history of the flat lay.

Etymology: In 1987, in the quiet after-hours at Frank Gehry’s furniture shop, a janitor named Andrew Kromelow invented what has become one of the most ubiquitous aesthetics on Instagram today. As Kromelow cleaned Gehry’s shop, he would gather stray tools and experiment with arranging them in a grid-like pattern. He called the practice “knolling,” after the hard angles of Knoll furniture, a popular brand that Gehry was designing for at the time. Today, knolling more often refers to the art of spacing out objects on a flat surface at tidy angles to one another and photographing the arrangement from above.

Meaning: By the 2000s, Kromelow’s recreational passion had found its way onto the radar of fellow aesthetes. In 2009, sculptor Tom Sachs declared it the mantra of his studio (“Always Be Knolling”) and a 2010 feature on Sachs by influential blogger Todd Selby introduced the term to an even broader audience.¹ Then, in 2013, Andrew Kim wrote *90 Degrees: An Experience About Knolling*, a book extolling “the beauty and functionality of knolling.”

Soon, social media influencers, graphic designers, art directors and advertisers everywhere were turning to knolling for visual punch. When placed in a knolling layout, even the most mundane objects are rendered significant, perhaps even beautiful: food items, beauty products, the contents of a celebrity’s purse.

Although today some knollers opt for a less angular flow to their flat lays, the method has changed little since 1987. Knolling allows creators to influence people’s thinking or behavior. Designers use it to create tapestries of pattern, shape and color that lull readers into lingering on the page or pausing briefly in the infinite scroll of their social feed. And advertisers can imply an association by grouping items within a frame: Showing a brand’s entire range—whether skincare products or mountaineering equipment—encourages consumers to view them as a set that should be purchased in its entirety. And thus, a design tool for one janitor became a marketing ploy for us all.

(1) Sachs even produced a manual instructing his staff on how to knoll. At this point, the emphasis was still on knolling as a practical solution to tidying a working space. Step two of the manual was “Put away everything not in use. If you aren’t sure, leave it out.”