

2020-12

# Message Journal, Issue 4: DESIGN POLITICS What are the politics of your design and what is the design of your politics?

## Multiple authors

Huus, A., Isleifsdottir, D., Jones, P. and Squire, V. (eds.) (2020) Design Politics: What are the politics of your design and what is the design of your politics? Available at

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/16761>

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Graphic  
Communication

Nº4

Design  
Research

MESSAGE

DESIGN

POLITICS

ISSN

2732-4192 (Print)

ISSN

2732-4206 (Online)



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Communication

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POLITICS



# MESSAGE 4

## Graphic Communication Design Research

First published in the United Kingdom in 2020 by University of Plymouth Press, New Cooperage Building, Royal William Yard, Plymouth, Devon PL4 8AA, United Kingdom.

ISSN 2732-4192 (Print)  
ISSN 2732-4206 (Online)

ISBN 978-1-84102-449-3 (Print)  
ISBN 978-1-84102-448-6 (Epub)

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Introduction:  
Message 4  
Graphic  
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Research

Peter Jones

For this issue we wanted to create an arena where our discipline could discuss the nature and context of its role from an overtly political perspective. Whilst we felt in our bones there was an appetite for this, we were far from certain about its nature, scope and size. Consequently, the call for *Message 4* was, to say the least, somewhat of a gamble. Thankfully, our hunches and speculations seem to have been close to the mark. We received more submissions for this call than the previous three issues combined.



There was also an anticipation (albeit in hindsight a rather naive one) that some submissions might be positioned around conventional left, right and/or sustainable ecological perspectives. This did not really transpire. Nonetheless, we are very happy to say that the creative, eclectic and diverse nature of the responses has resulted in a range of exemplars that reflect the varied nature, concerns and foci of our vibrant discipline.

These extend from John Calvelli's philosophical dialectic on the fundamental nature and origin of images, their use and effects, to Elizabeth Herrmann's self-initiated craft-based approach, to do good locally and make a social contribution.

Both of these papers are also examples of the higher than usual number of submissions from North America, a substantial proportion of which relate to the politics of cultural and/or racial identity, such as Omari Souza's, 'Racist Motifs in Everyday Branding'. In the Editors' experience, Graphic Communication designers have frequently created messages that highlight and/or address subjects such as this - however, from an academic perspective, the field has been inclined to leave the interrogation and analysis of these subjects to others. We hope the papers contained in this issue represent a zeitgeist that will be maintained.

Apologies to the authors not mentioned here, but due to the number and variety of submissions it is not possible in this short introduction to refer and do justice to all of your original and insightful contributions. The increased response rate and rise in content has also initiated a change in focus from the printed to the digital publication. If you are reading this in the EPUB version, you will also see that the designer has not only created a conventional sequential structure for *Message 4*, but also an alternative curated route. This structure rather cleverly meshes together a diverse range of papers under the themes of Agency, Values and Education: thank you Tang for this. A big thank you also to the authors for your contributions, your diligence in addressing any adjustments suggested, plus your patience regarding the delay in publication. We would also like to thank everyone else who has contributed to *Message* and made it possible, in particular the peer reviewers and the Editorial Board - thank you everyone.

For the calls for *Message 5* and the impromptu *Message C-19* special issue, please visit <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/message/message-journal>.

Peter Jones  
July 2020



# Rethinking Graphic Design and the Design of Historical Arguments

Camila  
Afanador-Llach

Keywords

Graphic design

Humanistic inquiry

Scholarship

Digital humanities

Historical

arguments

Visualization

In this essay, I explore and imagine a design practice at the intersection of graphic design and humanistic inquiry within academic contexts. I look into design not just as a practical tool to shape content for effective communication, but as a method to frame and visualize knowledge. In questioning what graphic design can be<sup>1</sup>, I reflect on design education and scholarship to imagine possible futures for the discipline. With increasing access to technology and the blurring boundaries between producers and consumers, the context for graphic design practice is rapidly shifting. Practitioners and educators can expand and rethink the scope and relevance of graphic design today by looking outside disciplinary boundaries.

In the first part I look at discussions on critical design, graphic design research, and scholarship. By mapping relationships between graphic design and the humanities, I explore the role of design in humanistic inquiry and the Digital Humanities<sup>2</sup>. Through humanistic inquiry, scholars think through the issues that we face in the world today by asking fundamental questions about people and societies. Posing design processes as humanistic inquiries can bring larger goals of interpretation, argumentation, and communication of our cultural moment to the center of the designer's role.

In the second part I discuss visualizations in historical research and explore the visual presentation of historical arguments. I discuss examples of my ongoing work, where I explore the visual presentation of arguments based on historical events and their potential to shed light on contemporary issues. Engaging with the presence of a Hispanic identity in the U.S., I seek to pursue inclusive ways of telling stories of places. I conclude with a reflection on the potential to link together design practices with the humanities to establish future hybrid methodologies, curricula, and academic practices free of disciplinary boundaries.

## **PART I: Expansive and Boundless Graphic Design**

Graphic design connected to the structures of knowledge production in academia can shift the areas of influence of the discipline. The often cited 'First Things First: A Manifesto' (Garland, 1964) is a historical precedent on the discontent of graphic designers with a professional practice often connected to the structures of capitalism. The manifesto's call for more lasting forms of communication expressed an urge to find a 'new kind of meaning' away from product marketing. The renewed version of the manifesto first published in *Eye* magazine, continued to express this urgency in the context of 'the explosive growth of global commercial culture' (Barnbrook, J. et al, 1999). This inquiry is recurrent within the discipline and comes with the assumption that there is something more to the way graphic design commonly operates as professional practice. It also leads to questions about the strength of the foundations of graphic design as an academic discipline. Assuming that what is missing in graphic

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1 My interest in this subject started when as a graduate student I stumbled upon the book *Citizen Designer*, which, through a compilation of texts by educators and practitioners, ultimately asks if design can be more than a service for clients (Heller, 2007).

2 The Digital Humanities is a term that encompasses the production of experimental scholarship in the humanities mediated by computational techniques, digital publication, and collaborative practices.

# Graphic design responds to changing technologies for publication and distribution of content and has the potential to influence diverse areas of knowledge.

design is a theoretical apparatus that equates to other academic disciplines (Frascara, 2006), an area of focus for designers in academia is to work towards the production of theory for the field. I propose that we examine critical design, graphic design research, and cross-disciplinary dialogues to shed light on ways forward for the discipline.

The absence of criticality in design practice and the expansion of graphic design beyond print left graphic design lacking a specific medium and defined largely by the communication artifacts it produces (Blauvelt, 2003). The focus on artifacts like posters, books, brand identities, magazines and websites, among others, is still part of how graphic design is understood and taught in some design programs. The artifacts, often linked to sub-areas of practice like editorial design, branding, packaging, web design, and information design, tend to place emphasis on form and production, obscuring other thinking processes that could be at the core of the discipline. A shift from 'object thinking,' to 'systems thinking' (Davis, 2012a) can inform how graphic design education evolves in the years to come. By changing the spotlight from visual

forms and media, graphic design can be framed as a discipline that plays a role in visual forms of argumentation and knowledge presentation.

Graphic design responds to changing technologies for publication and distribution of content and has the potential to influence diverse areas of knowledge. It can be framed as discipline that partakes in different knowledge areas and that is not tied to singular methods of making. Through alternative ways of practicing, graphic designers work as independent thinkers and makers, imagining the boundaries of what traditionally has been called graphic design. However, the term ‘graphic design’ is historically tied to printed matter as the material base for the discipline which brings back the question of whether or not it is comprehensive enough to embrace everything that ‘graphic design’ means in contexts of education and practice. Regardless of what seems to be an ongoing identity crisis for the discipline, the critical autonomy of graphic design can come from framing it as a pluralistic discipline that cannot be encased and labeled, and that is seeking to transgress disciplinary boundaries.

Design practices outside market-driven endeavors work under the assumption of broader implications of design practice in society and its role to shape the future. These practices have been framed and conceptualized under subfields like critical design, speculative design, discursive design, adversarial design, and transition design, among others (Dunne and Raby, 2013; Tharp, 2019, DiSalvo, 2017; Irwin, 2015). Often discussed within design disciplines, critical design has been theorized in greater depth in architecture and industrial design. Design researcher Matt Malpass defines the role of designers working in critical design as one where they use their skills to focus on ‘design work that functions symbolically, culturally, existentially, and discursively’ (2015, p.60). Motivated by larger disciplinary, cultural, and social questions, critical design has also been described as a hybrid practice between fine art and design that is meant to operate outside functionalist frameworks (Betsky, 2003, p.14). Examining critical design as a framework to conceptualize graphic design education and practice can provide paths to transform the discipline, enabling it to respond to future contexts of practice.

Critical design is not an established field within graphic design and is used and interpreted in different ways depending on the context. Graphic designer Francisco Laranjo points out the need to discuss and define what critical graphic design can or should be and offers that ‘graphic design must be capable of debating and openly scrutinising how form is addressing and informing the issues at stake [...] and be able to challenge and build upon what other disciplines are producing in relation to the same issues’ (2015). This desire for designers to engage in a critical practice can involve establishing disciplinary dialogues that question the foundations and future of the discipline. It can also involve graphic designers being able to measure the impact of their work in society through a research-based approach to their work. In academic settings, critical design can also be examined as a point of departure to engage with critical theory from other fields.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps critical design is a pathway to articulate how graphic design can become a discipline grounded in research and critical theory.

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3 For example, the Critical Design Lab, is a multidisciplinary collective that ‘draws on the methods of critical and interrogative design, intersectional feminist design theory, and crip technoscience to address thorny questions about embodiment, technology, space, and power’ (Critical Design Lab, no date).

## From Critical to Research-Based

Critical design practice has the potential to ‘push the boundaries of the discipline through debate with non-design disciplines (anthropologists, social scientists, ecologists) in a public arena’ (Bale, 2016, p.105). The specifics of how these debates can take place is a subject of exploration, but expresses the value of disciplinary dialogues. Graphic design has been defined as an integrative field with the potential to create bridges within disciplines that deal with communication, expression, interaction, and cognition (Swanson, 1994). Designers can take the role of translators and facilitators to engage in cross-disciplinary dialogues. Swanson argued that design in its lack of subject matter has the capacity to connect multiple disciplines and addressed the need for graphic design to evolve from vocational training to a broader view of design education.

Similarly, Jorge Frascara points out that the heritage from the avant-garde movement<sup>4</sup> in graphic design history fails to consider graphic design for its communication and social significance, and not just from an aesthetic perspective (Frascara, 2006, p.28). Breaking apart from this heritage is a slow process, especially in smaller graphic design programs,<sup>5</sup> and requires defining and implementing new core competencies for graphic design education. Such competencies could embrace equally the intersections of form, content, context, and changing professional practices. A guide in the process of evolving curricula is *Design Futures*, a research project that examines trends shaping the context for design practice (AIGA, no date).<sup>6</sup> Pointing out that craft-driven design processes fall short in the context of current professional practice, the trends speak to the need for designers to make connections across disciplines when design knowledge is insufficient. Liberal arts education and Contextual Studies courses as the foundation of design programs are where the interactions between theory and practice are established. Developing the field further as an academic discipline also requires that we integrate design history, criticism, and research into the core of postgraduate academic programs that have been slow to adapt curriculum to change.

Design educator Meredith Davis (2012a) has been a proponent of building a culture of design research to transform the curricula in conversation between

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4 The avant-garde movement is tied to the New Typography movement that brought graphics to the forefront of the artistic avant-garde in Central Europe, influenced by graphic designer Jan Tschichold and his book *Die Neue Typographie* (1928).

5 In the undergraduate graphic design program I teach on, the curriculum still follows a logic based on the type of graphic design artifacts that students should be able to design (magazines, visual identity systems, packaging, websites, motion pieces, etc.).

6 The document was produced by AIGA, the professional association for design in the United States. The seven trends look at the designer’s new roles in 1) facing complex problems with a systemic view, 2) aggregation and curation in contrast to fixed communication strategies, 3) designing for experience using research methods focused on people, 4) accountability of designers for producing positive social and environmental consequences with their work, 5) foresighting, contextual intelligence and argumentation, 6) using data as a material and the ethics attached to it, and 7) the use of research methods to anticipate design outcomes (AIGA, no date).



educators and professionals. One of the obstacles, she points out, is the lack of such culture in most MFA programs, which are still considered the terminal degree to enter most academic positions in the United States. In my experience, the MFA can serve as a transitional space between traditional professional practice and critical practices, but depending on the program, it might not be a space that prepares students for research and scholarship in academia. For graphic design scholars, engaging in dialogue within the academic community in their institutions is an entry point to research cultures and the opportunity to find how their work can be influenced by theoretical frameworks and research methodologies. These interactions, which can be the basis for collaborations, can inform the way we rethink the graphic design curriculum and the inclusion of research methods as core to graphic design education.

A clear delimitation of what constitutes research in graphic design needs consensus within the academic community. Designer and educator Robert Harland (2015) states that ‘research has been a neglected pursuit in graphic design’ and identifies experimentation and contextualization as the main principles of graphic design research while questioning ‘whether graphic design can develop a capacity for research and theorizing that leads rather than follows’ (Harland, p.95). In contrast, Sue Walker (2017), Professor of Typography at the University of Reading, UK, argues that graphic design research is well-established with significant and rigorous research in history, theory, and practice<sup>7</sup>. This ties to ongoing discussions about what is considered graphic design research in academia and what are the criteria that institutions use to evaluate its impact.

Walker acknowledges that there remains potential for methods and frameworks born within the discipline ‘to contribute new knowledge and understanding about materiality, making, and the relationship to broader social, political, cultural, and economic contexts’ (2017, p.557). The lack of methods and frameworks developed within the discipline is the common missing area pointed out by multiple scholars (Davis, 2012; Frascara, 2006; Harland, 2015; Skaggs, 2017; Walker, 2017). The missing ‘theory *from* graphic design’ is tied to the lack of a research culture within the discipline. The growing numbers of doctorate programs in design seem to be the natural place for these knowledge and theoretical frameworks to be developed. This theoretical infrastructure can help reinforce the cross-disciplinary potential of graphic design (Walker, 2017). The potential for graphic design to evolve into a research-centered discipline can also be explored in dialogue with disciplines in the humanities.

### **Disciplinary Dialogues in Education: Design and the Humanities**

A way to identify the connective tissue between graphic design and the humanities is to look at theories and principles that inform design education and practice. In the book *Graphic Design Theory* (Davis, 2012) the author examines critical theory from psychology, linguistics, and political philosophy, among others, and explores their capacity to inform graphic design education and practice. As an inherently

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7 The projects compiled by Walker include projects based on the study of collections and archives, some that fall into what is considered ‘cultural history’ or ‘visual culture’, research on printing history, the role of visual /communication in public service, and information design for health, among other projects, often within what she calls graphic design ‘sub-disciplines’: ‘typography, way-finding, book and periodical design, interaction design, illustration, exhibition design, branding, and corporate identity’ (Walker, 2017, p.550)

interdisciplinary field, Davis states that graphic design ‘concerns itself with issues of the humanities and social sciences’ (2012, p.234). With a similar purpose, other books like *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field* (Armstrong, 2009) and *Graphic Design Discourse: Evolving Theories, Ideologies, and Processes of Visual Communication* (Hongmin Kim, 2017), contribute to the compilation of historical and contemporary texts that inform and influence design practice. How these texts influence design education and practice is an area of exploration.

The perspective of scholars in the humanities is also helpful in identifying how theory and practice talk to each other in design education. English professor Susanna Kelly Engbers proposes strategies to use rhetorical theory for design students to help them analyze visual, verbal, and material texts to improve their own work. She argues that ‘an understanding of the rhetorical triangle illuminates one of the most vital intersections between design and the humanities’ (2018). The rhetorical triangle presents relationships between writer, audience, text, and context. Engbers elaborates on the process to apply such theory and build bridges between studio and humanities courses. This theory for graphic design comes from the experience of a professor working closely with design students and understanding how the theoretical underpinnings of her discipline are relevant in design education.

Working in a similar context, in the paper ‘Designing Philosophy’ Lewis and Harkan (2017) explore the use of infographics to present complex philosophical concepts visually to art and design students. They argue that translating verbal communication into visual communication can make texts more approachable. The infographic synthesizes and analyzes the key concepts in a text by Heidegger and is used as a pedagogical strategy for students to access an otherwise complex text. By recognizing the tension between both forms of communication, a dialogue between the verbal and the visual is established. This is one layer in the relationship between visual artifacts in graphic design, and writing and interpretation in the humanities.

Another relevant field of convergence with design practice is anthropology. The focus on user-centered design (UCD) methods in design, correlates with anthropology’s aim as a discipline to understand culture by observation, analysis, and fieldwork. From a theoretical perspective, scholar Dori Tunstall (2012) proposes design anthropology as a decolonized practice to bridge knowing and making, with the intention to avoid design becoming another colonizing practice. The ethical considerations that come from understanding the values that designers embed into the objects and systems they design, can be informed by theory in design anthropology. Mapping and studying further the relationship of graphic design to theory in the humanities is a task worth pursuing in seeking to establish the theoretical apparatus of the discipline.

### **Critical Graphic Design Scholarship**

Lacking a culture of research, scholars trained originally as graphic designers have opportunities to develop their scholarship under what Jessica Barness and Steven MacCarthy describe as an emerging model for design scholarship. In such a model ‘research informs teaching and is conducted to create new knowledge for the discipline’ (Barness and MacCarthy, no date). The methods of inquiry that the model proposes include critical making, critical design, and design authorship.

Engaging in critical practices requires an enhanced, rigorous approach to scholarship—a strategic integration of making and writing—that moves beyond industry practice and fine arts traditions, and is distinctly relevant to the design discipline (Barness and MacCarthy, no date).

Conceptualizing design scholarship as humanistic inquiry can bring larger goals of interpretation, argumentation, and communication of our cultural moment to the center of the designer's role.

Understanding a tenured academic position as a place to contribute to the future of one's discipline, the research path for graphic design scholars can be multidimensional and in conversation with other academic disciplines. It points to the need for graphic design educators to engage in writing as central to their academic activity and the importance of working towards the future of design education offering not just training for professional practice but a path for future graphic design scholars. An engagement in academic collaborations to consciously create the spaces

of cross-disciplinary dialogues is also an area for individual scholars to explore in their institutions. Rebecca Ross offers a discussion about the value of graphic design as research and its potential to contribute to the advancement of academic disciplines and the definition of impact of academic research:

the intrinsic qualities of graphic design—with its experimental approach to form and circulation of knowledge as aspects of its production—mean that as a field of research it has the potential to make distinct and significant contributions to the wider definitions, perceptions, and relevance of contemporary academic research, and to contribute productively to a broader recalibration of the concept of impact (Ross, 2018).

Conceptualizing design scholarship as humanistic inquiry can bring larger goals of interpretation, argumentation, and communication of our cultural moment to the center of the designer's role. In engaging with humanistic inquiry through design processes, design scholars can address complex problems in conversation with academic research in other areas. Janet Murray (2011) points out that an important characteristic of humanistic inquiry is its capacity to include multiple frameworks of interpretation, and highlights how it fits the expansive and inquisitive nature of the design process. The contributions by designers to the relevance and dissemination of academic research could take the stance of what is described as public humanities—a term used by cultural institutions to describe projects that make academic knowledge accessible to the general public.

## **PART 2: Humanistic Inquiry and Design**

A few years ago, my sister became interested in learning to write HTML and CSS to design her website. She is a historian and at the time was writing her PhD dissertation on Latin American history. Besides the traditional academic endeavors of writing and reading, she began to think how to visualize her research using digital tools and wanted to learn from graphic design to imagine how her research could reach broader audiences. I was starting a full-time academic appointment and was defining my academic identity and scholarship, after having mostly practiced design in the industry. I was coding her website and making maps for her dissertation, while she was editing my writing and asking me the *so what?* question. We started talking about our disciplines and why we were both interested in swapping our skill sets. Our conversations naturally lead us to the Digital Humanities (DH), a term that encompasses the production of experimental scholarship in the humanities mediated by computational techniques, digital publication, and collaborative practices. The types of projects in the field normally focus on the design and production of digital tools or platforms to achieve scholarly and research goals and it is broadly described as digital scholarship.

The engagement of designers in the DH has been discussed through the lenses of 'critical making'. In this approach, 'critical making [is] a framework for understanding and analyzing practices that challenge the sometimes arbitrary boundaries of the disciplines' (Barnes and Papaalias, 2015). In a special issue of the journal *Visible Language*, entitled *Critical Making: Design and the Digital Humanities* the editors, designers Jessica Barnes and Amy Papaalias, argued that 'design and the digital humanities share common ground as disciplines, philosophies, mediums, practices,

and tools' (2015, p.9). Under the DH, knowledge production in the humanities and making in the design disciplines become part of the same territory. Professor Janet Murray, states that '[f]rom a humanities perspective, the design of digital artifacts is *a cultural practice like writing a book or making a film*' (Murray, 2011, p.1). The digital artifacts that often result from DH projects occupy a space of emergent and hybrid scholarship that break the traditional forms of knowledge production and publication.

The addition of digital forms of publication to the previously dominant print culture shared by both graphic design and the humanities can bring both fields together. Jeffrey Schnapp (*Digital Humanities* - Jeffrey Schnapp, 2014) refers to the possibilities within digital scholarship and sees the DH as a disruption in humanistic research, one that promotes experimental engagement with how knowledge is conveyed and communicated. Trained as a cultural historian, Schnapp delves into experimental scholarship through collaborative practices in the MetaLab in Harvard University, and sees himself as a 'knowledge designer'. In this intertwined practice between humanistic inquiry and design, he sees 'research questions [are] attached to design propositions where you have to think what your knowledge looks like'. Graphic design, as a discipline concerned with shaping content for effective communication, has a natural place in such practices.

At the core of this discussion is the difference between representation of knowledge and the design of tools or platforms that generate new knowledge. In her book *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*, scholar Johanna Drucker (2014, p.20), expresses the need to develop the field of visual epistemology in relation to fields in the humanities that have not traditionally relied on visual communication. She outlines the graphic principles for the production and representation of knowledge, shedding light on the links between knowledge and visual forms. Her methodological foundation relies on a variety of disciplinary approaches, like formal systems, universal principles of design, gestalt, semiotics, and computational vision, among others, to provide a rich context for the understanding of graphic forms as they exist in the domain of the humanities. The role of visual forms in conveying, representing, and generating knowledge could become an area of study in the design curriculum that involves visual culture and visual literacy.

In discussions about the DH it is more common to hear about the relationship between humanistic inquiry and computing. Scholarly digital projects offer opportunities for design researchers to explore the role of design in the generation and representation of knowledge (Burdick and Willis, 2011). In the book *Digital Humanities*, the authors (Burdick, et al., 2012) acknowledge that modeling knowledge in digital platforms requires the perspectives of humanists, designers, and developers and that 'design in dialogue with research is simply a technique, but when used to pose and frame questions about knowledge, design becomes an intellectual method' (Burdick et. al, 2012, p.13). Design in this context serves as a framework of thought, interpretation, understanding, and communication of research.

Designers and researchers, Uboldi and Caviglia also elaborate on the relationships between designers and humanities scholars by stating that 'the humanities inquiries themselves can be conceived as design processes' (2014, p.216). The tasks designers engage in, in their daily practice cover a wide range of activities like planning, management, design, and production of digital projects. Planning and executing digital projects under a user experience design perspective can provide a flexible framework for digital scholarship projects. From abstract to concrete project phases, the user experience (UX) process that moves from strategy, project requirements, information architecture, design of schematics or wireframes, to visual design of a digital product, is suitable to be repurposed for humanistic inquiries.

The definition of design as an intellectual method suggests that the design process as a flexible and adaptable system can engage and respond to any subject matter. More importantly, that design is an essential part of a team effort that combines multidisciplinary skills, perspectives, and methods.

The settings where such collaborations occur in academia are research centers and labs often called ‘digital humanities lab’, or ‘digital scholarship lab’. The teams that are part of these centers are scholars in diverse areas in the humanities, students, staff with computer science backgrounds and in some cases UX designers. An example is the Roy Rosenzweig Center of History and New Media, that was created in 1994 and whose mission is to democratize history using digital media by reaching and including participation of diverse audiences. Working with an open-source logic, the Center has created tools and platforms that support scholarship and dissemination in the humanities. Such tools support the work of scholars, particularly historians, in activities like compilation of sources of information, organization of content, analysis, interpretation, and digital publication.

### **Designing Historical Arguments**

As a designer, understanding the work of historians has led me to see the fundamental importance of the role designers can play in visualizing historical arguments.

Historians interpret historical evidence to formulate arguments and conceptual frameworks through which to understand the past. They ask questions such as why things happened, how people and societies have functioned, and what led to the world that we have today. This knowledge usually takes the form of written text that can be accompanied by pictures, maps, and timelines to implicitly enhance the reader’s understanding and remembrance. The argument that is supported with historical evidence is often presented in the form of a book or an academic article. The aim of presenting arguments in the form of visualizations or information graphics is to create a broader comprehension of historical events. For designers to engage with such content is an opportunity to disseminate historical knowledge and help diverse audiences make sense of current social and political circumstances.

Visual forms to represent time and space have been used throughout history by people in different disciplinary fields. Eighteenth century examples of timelines and charts show intentions to explain history, change over time, and continuity, by presenting events in chronological order. Despite being powerful tools, timelines have been often discarded by historians as superficial chronologies that cannot grasp the complexities and interpretations of historical events (Rosenberg and Grafton, 2013). For designers, this type of visual device is a practical way to organize information and communicate chronological events to broader audiences. It is very common to find the use of timelines in exhibition design to provide needed context for historical events. Designers creating this type of chronological representation shape and organize content for clarity and access. But the endeavor of creating visuals for historical research also lies in the hands of people from different disciplinary areas.

The use of visualizations in history is performed from different perspectives and techniques, including temporal structures and spatial structures, like maps. Historian John Theibault (2013) highlights the rhetorical dimension of visualizations<sup>8</sup> in history

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8 He refers to visualizations as images derived from processing data that present information more efficiently than narrative text.

and their capacity to communicate to an audience. Theibault refers to examples of visualizations that are not self-explanatory and need long context and instructions to be read. Graphic designers, information designers, and journalists create these types of visualizations in their professional practice to make information accessible and understandable. The lack of an expert point of view from designers might be one of the reasons why some of these visualizations need an instruction page. Historians should not be expected to become designers, but there is space for acknowledgement of other fields that have expertise and the start of a dialogue.

### **A Hispanic U.S.**

Visual representations of arguments based on historical events have the potential to shed light on contemporary issues. In my engagement with historical narratives, I am interested in pursuing more inclusive frameworks and decentralized ways of telling stories of places. I look at historical narratives and seek ways to synthesize the narrative into a visual form, often a screen-based visualization. My current inquiry revolves around the presence of a Hispanic identity as part of the history of the United States long before the massive immigration of the last decades. I engage with this subject as a means to challenge the current violent anti-immigration rhetoric, while exploring how visualization supports historical research and argumentation.

Evidence and argument are essential components in the production of scholarship in history (Henige, 2006). I am not arguing for designers to become historians, rather to explore and experiment with the relationships between argument, evidence, and visualization. Historical arguments, usually articulated in long narrative texts, can be visualized and made accessible to a broader range of people. But how to visualize an argument, or how can a visualization or an interface make an argument evident? I have engaged with this question in two ways.

In the first project *Hispanic U.S.*, I relied on historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's (2014) book *Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States*. The main argument of the book is that a Hispanic identity has been part of the U.S. for long before the massive immigration of the last decades. He provides evidence to support this argument by tracing the presence of Spanish settlers and events surrounding the early Spanish presence in the history of the country. To visualize this argument, I focused on finding traces of the book's argument by looking at cities and towns in the U.S. that were once part of the Spanish monarchy or the Mexican republic, or that were named after a city, a person, or a word of Hispanic origin. I created a dataset to collect stories behind these names in an urgency to reveal, understand, and celebrate the diverse and multicultural history of the U.S.

The resulting visualization (Figure 1) is an interactive map of the country that shows the cities and towns collected in the dataset. Each place has information about the origin of the name, as much as I was able to find from reliable sources. The layer of information that the map reveals speaks to a multiculturalism that has been in place since the foundation of cities right across the country. The predecessor for this project was the book *Repeated Cities* (Figure 2) – a book that visually linked homonymous cities and towns between Spain and Latin America referring to processes of colonization. By looking at names as identifiers I questioned the origins of the identity of places. This process was devoid of any links to scholarly sources but explored the synthesis and representation of a historical process. I aimed to use maps for understanding and questioning the narratives of place that often are permeated by the supremacy of some groups over others. It is my intention to talk about the Hispanic past and Hispanic future of the country.

I am aware that such an approach could trace back the heritage from other cultures and more importantly, the Native-American heritage also present in names that did not disappear after the processes of colonization. The map, with the addition of many more layers of information about the origin of names, could represent the complex and multilayered history of the country where each ethnicity is equally celebrated. It could be seen as a testimony to the idea that countries do not have fixed identities.

On a second process of inquiry around how to visualize such argument, I engaged with primary sources.<sup>9</sup> I worked with a collection called the ‘Spanish Land Grants’, available at Florida Memory, a digital archive housed at the State Library and Archives of Florida. The Spanish possession of the state of Florida ceased in 1821. The collection includes drawings of plats and written documents from the early 1820s created by landowners and land surveyors. The purpose of these documents was to represent and describe the physical qualities of people’s land to prove ownership to U.S. authorities after Spain ceded the territory of Florida to the United States. The maps I selected to work with contain labels written in Spanish that are documentary traces of the Hispanic history of the state. The maps offer a glimpse into the visual representations of these fragments of land and the English translations symbolize the period of transition. The visual interface (Figure 3) is a tool to explore the maps and highlight, through the original language of the documents, an aspect of the history of the state that is often unknown and that also speaks to the fluid identity of places.

Representing an argument in a visual format is an act to bridge design practices with the humanities in the hope of establishing methodologies for collaborative interdisciplinary endeavors. Archives are not neutral repositories of information and the categories in which they are organized and the intention of the archive reflect worldviews and interpretations about the world. The design of digital interfaces, including the information architecture behind them is an act of interpretation that influences the way we understand and present to the public the issues at stake. Designers can ask themselves what assumptions they make about people and their stories with the organization, categorization, and visual presentation of content, and to what ideologies they are subscribing by doing so. Much experimentation and inquiry remain to be done around the ways in which collections of primary sources can be used as datasets to create visualizations. One place of encounter between designers and digital humanists could be precisely in the building of digital archives in which data modeling and visualizations start out as a key methodological component.

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9 In historical research, a primary source is an artifact or document that was created at the time under study. That is the case with documents and other materials found in historical archives.





Figure 1. Hispanic U.S. (2016) Interactive map created using Mapbox. Available at: [camilaafanador.com/hispanic-us](http://camilaafanador.com/hispanic-us). Image courtesy of Camila Afanador-Llach.



Figure 2. Repeated Cities (2011). Image courtesy of Camila Afanador-Llach.



Figure 3: Spanish Land Grants (2017). Interface to explore the collection available at [camilaafanador.com/spanishgrants](http://camilaafanador.com/spanishgrants). The collection can be found in [floridamemory.com](http://floridamemory.com). All photographs and images are offered under the terms of the Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0 indicating that there is no known copyright. Image courtesy of Camila Afanador-Llach.

In this approach, graphic design creates a link with humanistic inquiry to explore the relationships between argument, evidence, and visualization of historical events.

### **Conclusion**

The projects presented in this article are exploratory iterations with the goal of rethinking graphic design practice within academia and in conversation with our cultural moment. My motivation is fueled by today's dominant Anglo-centric and anti-immigration rhetoric and a desire to contribute to ways in which graphic design transforms itself into a discipline engaged in shifting hateful rhetoric, among other endeavors. In this approach, graphic design creates a link with humanistic inquiry to explore the relationships between argument, evidence, and visualization of historical events.

Presenting arguments in the form of visualizations or information graphics can create a broader comprehension of history to non-specialized audiences. Designers can collaborate with humanities' scholars acting as translators to make academic language accessible. Such practice would serve to equally advance the disciplines involved. This is particularly useful for spreading the results of historical research in media such as newspapers and for connecting historical narratives into memory institutions such as museums, libraries, and archives.

The creation of digital scholarship is a fertile ground for cross-disciplinary dialogues to happen in the interstitial space between theory and practice. This is also the chance to expand the role of designers in the context of academic collaboration. In this sense, Ross states that 'a closer relationship between graphic design and university-based research presents an opportunity to broadly reconsider relationships between publishing, publics, and knowledge production' (2018, p.316). Such spaces can prepare the ground for theory from graphic design to flourish. Most designers thrive in collaborative settings, and these spaces within academia are the ones that should be sought.

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# The Intersection of Electoral Politics and Design Education

Anne Berry  
Sarah Rutherford

Keywords

Design education

Voting

Elections

Information literacy

Social impact

Critical thinking



## Design education serves as a platform for building information literacy and engagement in social impact design

AIGA, the professional association for design defines the role of designers by speaking to the symbiotic relationship between design and technology:

...most of today's design work focuses on people's digital experiences and the role technology plays in their everyday lives. From smartphones to voice-, gesture-, and sensor-activated devices, *designers actively connect us with other people, information, and services through an array of digital technologies. These designers address the nature of people's interaction with digital information, as well as the visual form and subject matter of communication. User experience (UX) designers also create digital tools and systems through which people produce their own content and engage with others who share common interests.* Software design supports an increasingly technology-aware environment that reads and responds to everything we do (emphasis added, AIGA, 2019).

In addition to the range of responsibilities the role of a designer now entails, the technological advancements that have opened new doors for creative output have also made design tools available to a wider audience (Visocky O'Grady, 2013, p.3). Whereas developing digital graphics may have once been the sole domain of a professionally trained designer, anyone with access to creative software now has the ability to generate their own content, be it a poster or a website. Additionally, social media applications such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter have served as new and powerful platforms for creating and sharing content, including news. The increasing popularity of these social media platforms, however, which 'collect and present news stories from a wide variety of outlets, regardless of the quality, reliability, or political leanings of the original source' has led to increases in the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Center for Information Technology and Society, 2019).

Relatedly, the spread of 'fake news' – that is, stories that are not true yet widely disseminated through social media 'for the purpose of generating revenue, or promoting or discrediting a public figure, political movement, company, etc.' (Dictionary.com, 2019)<sup>1</sup> – presents both a challenge and an opportunity for design educators. Knowing that design students are already navigating a social media-rich communication landscape that encompasses a variety of formats and applications, educators can (and must) prepare students with the critical thinking skills necessary to distinguish between fact and fiction. At the very least, educators must instill in students the necessity of evaluating where information is coming from and accurately citing source materials.

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1 There is a measure of disagreement over how the term 'fake news' is used and defined. Though it often refers to stories or information that are factually untrue, the term has become politicized. Consequently, it may also refer to 'a political strategy of labeling news sources that do not support their positions as unreliable or fake news, whereas sources that support their positions are labeled reliable or not fake...' (Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., and Aral, S., 2018 p.1146). Within the context of this article, we are using the colloquial definition adopted by Dictionary.com and the organization First Draft.

It is also fair to state that what is considered true or real and what is considered fake can be interpreted based upon one's perspective or experiences. For the purposes of this article, however, we are focusing specifically on information that is created and disseminated in ways that are *intended* to undermine democracy; this isn't simply about seeing things differently.

To complicate matters further, American elections have been and continue to be under threat from foreign interference. In addition to digital hacks that began in 2016, the Russian government has exploited political divisions through 'information warfare' campaigns explicitly targeting social media networks as early as 2014, in order to influence voters and affect the 2016 turnout (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019).

Given this complex set of circumstances, in which the general public faces a continuous deluge of misinformation and disinformation through their social media networks, the need for what designers refer to as social impact design or, colloquially, 'design for good' – a term encompassing the work of designers using their skills for the betterment of society or common good (Cooper-Hewitt, et al., 2013) – could not be more imperative. As an emerging field, best practices for social impact design are still being debated (Cooper-Hewitt, et al., 2013) and questions remain about the challenging and sometimes misguided attempts to effect change within complex political, social, and cultural systems (Janzer and Weinstein, 2014). The roles of privilege and cultural bias in shaping outcomes, for example, are fundamental factors that designers may or may not be equipped to address and which they may handle with varying degrees of success. Valid critiques of social impact design, however, do not negate the central contention that empowering students to be active and informed participants in a democratic society and advocate on behalf of the issues and people they care about, should be prioritized in design classrooms. Many of the arguments made over the last several decades about the need for designers' contributions in the area of social impact, notably brought to the fore via the first edition of Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* in the early 1970s, are even more prescient on the heels of the 2016 U.S. election and its aftermath. And yet, the technological advancements that have been made in the intervening years have put American democracy in a distinctly 21st-century tech- and information-driven peril.

By developing a greater understanding of the challenges ahead, educators can utilize information literacy in design education as a method for cultivating knowledgeable, politically engaged, and civically minded students. Equipped with both information literacy and communication design tools, students are more likely to be prepared to confront the spread of misinformation and disinformation.<sup>2</sup>

### **Repercussions of interference and misinformation disseminated through social media**

The 2016 U.S. presidential election put information literacy's significance into sharp focus. Foreign interference by the Russian government, thoroughly documented by a variety of news organizations and detailed in the *Report On The Investigation Into*

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<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that the terms 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' are defined differently; whereas both words refer to information that is incorrect and are used somewhat interchangeably in reference to 'fake news', disinformation is distinguished by a deliberate attempt to deceive (Merriam-Webster, 2019, 2019a; Wardle, 2017).

*Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election*, a.k.a. ‘The Mueller Report’ (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019), was two-pronged. The ‘interference operations’, carried out by Russian intelligence, involved hacking and the distribution of stolen electronic materials in order to damage Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Secondly, a social media campaign to ‘provoke and amplify political and social discord in the United States’ was implemented by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) through support from a Russian oligarch (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019). Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram enabled the spread of misinformation and disinformation. As detailed in the Mueller Report, these efforts were intended to help, then Republican candidate, Donald Trump.

FBI Director Christopher Wray and Special Council Robert Mueller III both gave public testimony in July of 2019 – during senate hearings and congressional hearings respectively – confirming that the Russian government plans to continue interfering in American elections (Chiacu, 2019; Siddiqui, 2019).

The catastrophic repercussions of ‘fake news’ on the U.S. 2016 presidential election represent one small part of the larger global impact of information warfare. Facebook has been a particularly powerful and dangerous facilitator in this regard, a source for spreading rumors, misinformation, disinformation, and extremist propaganda. Despite initially being a conduit for helping to bring about the Arab Spring revolution, for example, Facebook also facilitated the flow of distortions that led to backlash and polarization, putting activists’ safety at risk (‘The Facebook Dilemma’, 2018). Internationally recognized, Filipino-American journalist Maria Ressa, targeted by President Rodrigo Duterte in part for her efforts to fight fake news spread online by his supporters (Ellis-Petersen, 2019), describes Facebook as ‘an information ecosystem that just turns democracy upside down...where lies are truth’ (‘The Facebook Dilemma’, 2018). Despite warnings, Facebook also provoked ethnic tensions that led to genocide in Myanmar (‘The Facebook Dilemma’, 2018), and became embroiled in a scandal with consulting firm Cambridge Analytica, which gathered personal data from millions of Facebook users without their knowledge or consent to use for political ads and messaging (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018). A narrow view from an American perspective, consequently, does not minimize the degree of damage wrought on an international scale. Rather, it serves as a microcosm of broader systemic problems and provides design educators with steps that can be taken within existing curriculum building to equip students with the skills necessary for engaging in the existing media landscape.

### **The role of information literacy becomes increasingly significant in a social media-rich culture**

Information literacy is characterized by the ability to ‘recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information’ (Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), 2000). Five contributory standards require that an information literate person be able to do the following:

- Determine the type and extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically and incorporate information into his or her knowledge base
- Use the information to accomplish a specific purpose

Appreciating the potential impact of not being information literate, especially within a democratic electoral system, has serious repercussions for the health of a democratic society.

- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and use the information ethically and legally (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000).

These competencies reflect the value the academic community, and by extension society, places on education and information. And though the ACRL standards apply to American college students across the board, designers' roles as

arbiters of communication make the significance of learning these skills all the more pressing. Perhaps most importantly, moreover, information literacy fosters ‘personal empowerment’ and prepares individuals for a lifetime of learning (Association of College and Research Libraries, 1989):

Information literacy, while showing significant overlap with information technology skills, is a distinct and broader area of competence. Increasingly, information technology skills are interwoven with, and support, information literacy (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000).

Many of the fundamental principles of information literacy are already integrated into design research and creative processes regardless of the language used to describe it (Visocky O’Grady, 2013, pp.5, 30). However, the increasing breadth of social media’s presence as a source of news as well as political, social, and civic engagement (PEW Research Center, 2018a), along with easily accessible digital tools and the evolving roles of designers, places greater responsibility on design educators to emphasize information literacy as an integral part of design education and design practice.

Appreciating the potential impact of *not* being information literate, especially within a democratic electoral system, has serious repercussions for the health of a democratic society. Consequently, we aim to explore what these challenges mean for design educators and design students.

To tie the various threads of design, technology, information literacy, and social impact together, it is helpful to note that over 72% of Americans use ‘some type of social media’ (PEW Research Center, 2019a). And though 18–29 and 30–49 year olds represent the highest percentage of users respectively, social media use by older Americans is also increasing. Additionally, ‘YouTube and Facebook are the most-widely used online platforms, and its user base is most broadly representative of the population as a whole’ (PEW Research Center, 2019).

### **Voting and election cycles serve as a method for building information literacy skill-sets**

Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z who ‘make up a clear majority of voting-eligible adults in the United States’ have traditionally not exercised that power (PEW Research Center, 2018b). And though this same group outvoted the Baby Boomers in the 2018 midterms, surpassing expectations (PEW Research Center, 2019), focusing on voting and election cycles as part of design curriculum can, we believe, help design students build critical thinking and information literacy skills, and spark their interest in civic engagement.

### **Design students are steeped in social media, where misinformation and disinformation run rampant. Being information literate is a necessary skill-set that will enable them to become effective researchers, critical thinkers, and designers**

Whether working with images and text or developing systems or experiences, designers are continually involved in the process of researching and moderating and creating content. Beyond knowing where to turn to find the necessary resources

and information, designers must take the initiative to become educated on any given subject, picking up additional skills along the way. As a result, utilizing reputable sources, especially when working on behalf of clients, is a basic requirement. Students may be monitoring their own social media accounts or monitoring employers'/clients' social media accounts as part of their design practice, or promoting work, projects, and collaborations. Regardless, they must demonstrate their ability to discern fact from fiction.

Additionally, the spread of misinformation and disinformation is partly attributed to individual, human interaction. Technology alone, therefore, cannot resolve the communication issues that perpetuate interference. The health of a democratic society relies upon the active participation of its citizens, so the public must do its part to stay informed, distinguishing legitimate news sources from disreputable sources. Changing public attitudes may not be designers' primary responsibility, however, designers still carry a responsibility to promote and practice information literacy.

As previously stated, a large segment of the American population uses social media on a regular basis, with Generation Z and Millennials making up the highest percentage (PEW Research Center, 2019a). The expansive reach of social media combined with the application algorithms that enable misinformation and disinformation to spread quickly create a precarious news and media environment, and experts are split on whether or not the situation will improve over the course of the next decade (PEW Research Center, 2017). It is possible that the rise of fake news and deterioration of our 'information ecosystem' will cause further societal and political destabilization (PEW Research Center, 2017). There are numerous hurdles to overcome with respect to restoring the public's faith in the trustworthiness of the media on a broad scale, however, design educators have the ability to empower individual students on a localized level, providing them with the expertise they need to confront these very real and serious challenges.

### **Design educators have a responsibility to teach information literacy and critical thinking in their courses**

As was seen in the wide-reaching acceptance of fake and non-factual news articles and social media content in the 2016 election, information literacy and critical thinking are key to helping individuals evaluate the credibility of sources. However, the average person will rely on their innate reasoning skills rather than interrogating the origin or intention behind information they consume (Perkins, et al, 1983; Douglas, 2000). The ability to think critically and understand the validity of information are foundational components of a university education and provide counters to narrow reasoning that supports only the individual perspective. However, critical thinking skills must be taught and practiced (van Gelder, 2005). It is crucial, then, for students to learn and practice critical thinking skills across all aspects of the university curriculum, especially within their degree courses.

Design educators are uniquely poised to promote critical thinking and information literacy skills across both visual and written content. In the design classroom, critical thinking is naturally practiced through critique when students evaluate the work of others and incorporate comments into revisions for their own work (Thiessen, 2017; Whittington, 2004; Wong, 2011). However, it should also be the responsibility of design educators to help students understand how to conduct

research, evaluate the validity of sources, synthesize information, and think critically, with an end goal of creating visual work that communicates responsibly.

One effective method for integrating critical thinking study in the classroom is a discussion-based pedagogy (Dallimore, et al, 2008). Class discussion contributes to the development of critical thinking skills in a way that passive listening does not (Tsui, 2002). Discussion-based courses allow students to test or challenge ideas, shape arguments, practice active listening, and synthesize information (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999). Students build critical thinking through discussion by sharing ideas verbally, hearing feedback, and potentially modifying the substance of their thoughts or how their thoughts are shared (Tsui, 2002).

Discussion is naturally fostered in the design classroom through critique but can also be integrated into the teaching of subject matter to allow students to form their own perspectives and practice informed, respectful communication. To this end, covering topics that might be considered challenging provides an effective platform for developing informed opinions and fostering tolerance (McCoy, 2003). When teaching charged subjects though, it is important to introduce topics and shape discussion in a way that supports a willing exchange of ideas and provides strategies to include all students (Pace, 2003).

Instructors should provide the background, structure, and modeling to aid the development of perspectives informed by critical thought. Productive discussion relies on participants taking on dispositions that foster critical thinking and discovery, which includes active participation, the consideration and appreciation of others, listening rather than internally composing responses, and using factual evidence and logic as the basis for arguments (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999). Additionally, participants must have an appropriate basis of knowledge to participate, which implies that the instructor is scaffolding this content ahead of discussion.

**Framing electoral and voting-themed content as a social impact design problem asks students to engage with the topic in a way that promotes civil discourse and the consideration of user needs**

Electoral politics provide a basis for discussion-based assignments as the topic likely affects most students in the classroom, creating personal investment. In addition to looking at attitudes and actions around voting, barriers to voting, or other institutionalized components of the process, students can add value to the discussion by sharing their personal experience with voting and voting systems. In order to help students develop informed opinions and accept new information or challenges to their belief structure, instructors should integrate this content in a guided manner. This means prioritizing student interaction, preparing students to discuss issues in an informed way, promoting openness to other viewpoints, and modeling how to challenge arguments respectfully, not guiding students to a predetermined conclusion (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999).

If design educators wish to encourage rich discussion, it is not enough to merely plug electoral content into assignments. Simply assigning a poster encouraging people to vote without exploring the host of issues that affect attitudes towards voting – personal motivation, access for individuals with differing abilities, barriers to voting meant to exclude marginalized populations, etc. – robs students of the opportunity to investigate, challenge, and address those issues in a meaningful way. Both of the case studies presented in this article used structured discussions to frame the assignments,

providing prompts to help students consider their own perspectives as well as the experiences of others when examining challenges to the voting process. Considering voting as a user experience problem encourages research and reflection to understand user-centered issues and underlying structures or systems that contribute to poor user experience.

Additionally, viewing voting as a user-focused design problem challenges students to think carefully about messaging and provides opportunities to develop information literacy by putting written content in the hands of students. In the case studies within this article, both assignments required students to develop messaging in addition to creating the visual design. In each instance, the content students created had to be nonpartisan. Adding the constraint of developing nonpartisan content requires students to figure out where the universality of the voting message lies. Finding a nonpartisan hook that was still engaging or provocative to their audience required students to apply critical thinking skills to translate information into targeted content.

### **Counterargument**

One counterargument to our position is that focusing heavily on topics related to politics could potentially alienate students or create a perception that politicizes design in their eyes. Students can be alienated when they feel their views are in the minority, contributing to a ‘spiral of silence’, which relates to perceptions of public opinion. ‘[W]hen people feel they are in the minority, they become cautious and silent, thus further reinforcing the impression in public of their side’s weakness’ (Noelle-Neumann, 1991, p.259). The process ‘spirals’ as minority views have weaker and weaker representation.

There is a general perception, supported by research, that faculty at American universities are more liberal than conservative (Gross, 2013; Klein and Stern, 2009). While conservative students may express appreciation for the exposure to differing viewpoints, they often still feel marginalized or are reticent to share their personal perspectives (Journell, 2017). Additionally, students might hesitate to share their opinions in class when they perceive the instructor to have differing views (Henson and Denker, 2007). Instructors must be vigilant about how students are recognized for what they share in class. If only comments that correlate with the instructor’s personal views receive affirmation, this may silence students with opposing views for fear of embarrassment or negative impact to student grades (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999).

Overall, these concerns should not prevent instructors from integrating electoral content into class assignments. When handled with sensitivity and purpose, electoral content can enrich the learning environment. While the pre-eminent American designer Paul Rand thought design students should remain apolitical to avoid a ‘cluttered’ mind (Rand, 1997, p.123), it could be argued that within contemporary culture, this kind of ascetic neutrality is irresponsible or even unethical (Bennett, 2010; Szenasy, 2003). Considering the current political climate in the United States where documented threats to democracy from foreign powers are still being actively perpetuated (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019), design educators must use the opportunity to help students see how they can apply the skills they are building to engage people and counter misinformation and disinformation.



## Case Studies

### Building Community Power: Voting Engagement Campaign

In the summer of 2018, we were approached by AIGA's Design for Democracy committee to develop educational content for their Building Community Power (BCP) initiative, conceived in partnership with Nonprofit VOTE, to target first-time voters. Expanding on the existing Building Community Power framework, we co-authored a Voting Engagement Campaign assignment promoted by AIGA National and the AIGA Design Educators Community (DEC).

The assignment brief tasked students with finding creative ways to improve voter enthusiasm and boost turnout for the 2018 U.S. midterm elections. Their ideas would then become part of a 'free online gallery of original, nonpartisan social media graphics and messaging' for public distribution and use by Nonprofit VOTE's 3,000+ partners (see addendum A, AIGA Design for Democracy, Building Community Power: Voting Engagement Campaign). Students were required to do the following:

- Develop a promotional graphic, series of graphics, animation, or combination of graphics and animations that serve as a call to action, informing the public about the impact voting has on communities.
- Help members of the community circumvent barriers that may prevent them from registering and/or showing up to cast their ballots.

Among the list of learning objectives, students were also asked to demonstrate that they could identify a target audience and the target audience's needs; create a communication strategy that provided information about voting and voter registration; and generate messaging that could potentially be integrated into a variety of social media platforms.

Along with the project brief, the accompanying Instructor Resource Guide provided suggestions to assist educators in introducing and activating the assignment in their classes (see addendum B, Building Community Power Instructor Resource Guide). Activation activities included a structured verbal discussion on individual participation in communities and which communities might benefit from assistance in increasing voter turnout. The goal of this introductory discussion exercise was to help students understand how messaging can be framed along themes other than demographics. Additionally, an affinity diagramming discussion exercise guided students through consideration of barriers to voting in order to help students empathize with targeted audience populations and develop appropriate messaging. Recommended reading for the exercise covered barriers including disabilities, victims of domestic violence, felon disenfranchisement, homelessness, and English-only election materials. 'Extension Activities' illustrated options for expanding the original assignment and helping students shape their participation on a local level. Suggestions included working with on-campus groups to develop messaging, expanding the assignment into a larger campaign, or integrating user testing, among others. Instructors were also encouraged to adapt the assignment for use in their classrooms.

The BCP assignment was integrated into the Fall 2018 sections of ART 493: User Experience Design/User Interface Design and ART 446: Graphic Design for Social and Cultural Contexts at Cleveland State University (CSU). The ART 493 curriculum was not focused on voting, however, the 2018 U.S. midterm elections provided an

opportunity to engage students on the topic of civic engagement through the lens of user experiences. In advance of the introduction of the BCP assignment and over a period of one to two weeks, students reflected on a series of journal writing prompts that helped tie their personal experiences to the experiences of others. Some of the reflections were integrated with class discussions. Below is a sampling of the various prompts, adapted from the Instructor Resource Guide:

- What feelings/emotions come to mind re: the topic of voting + elections?
- If you've ever voted, what have your voting experiences been like?
- What might be some of the barriers to voter registration and/or voting?
- How might you redesign a better voting process?
- Which communities are you a part of? Spend a few minutes listing the various groups you are associated with, whether based on geography, shared interests, or other commonalities.
- Of these various communities, which might need the most help or support in increasing voter turnout?
- What are some ways you can engage members of these communities? As a designer, what role can you play in helping to build community power or assist with community needs?

Lastly, students were asked to reflect on another series of questions that became the inspiration for their design concepts:

- How can you use design to create a better voting experience for a given community?
- Impact: Identify two to three issues in the upcoming midterm that affect you and/or your communities; bring documentation to class

Students brainstormed ideas and topics that they were most passionate about to inspire the graphics. They were simultaneously challenged to maintain nonpartisan messaging; students struggled to separate their personal opinions from language that remained objective. We subsequently engaged in additional conversation about the importance of nonpartisan communication, even as students attempted to find ways of inspiring their audience to take action. Results of their efforts can be seen in Figures 1–5.

The assignment materials were distributed by both the national AIGA BCP initiative and the AIGA DEC and were adapted by instructors across the United States. Nearly 400 social media images were submitted to the Building Community Power open gallery for free use by individuals and organizations hoping to engage in conversations around voter engagement. In the courses profiled here, students were encouraged, but not required, to submit their work to the open gallery. Several student images developed as a part of the assignment were used as successful examples in the national project impact report, demonstrating the value of developing messaging and intent within the assignment framework.

Leading students through a series of reflections before officially starting the project was, in retrospect, an important part of cultivating investment in the topic. Additionally, gathering informal feedback via their own social networks outside class and discussing challenges that voters in underserved and/or marginalized



Figure 1: Your Vote is Your Voice.



Figure 2: Remember to Vote.

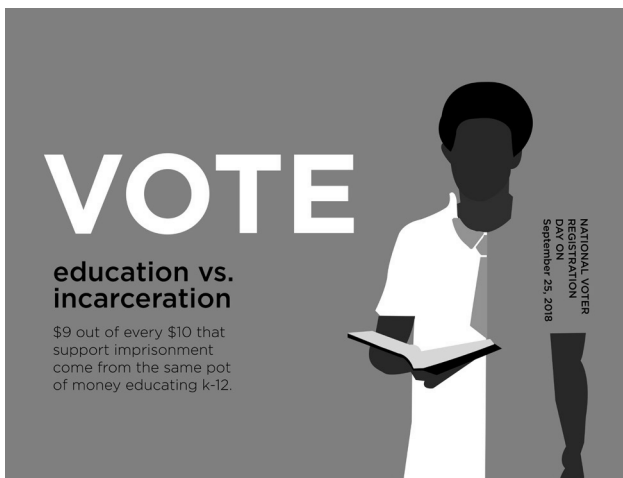


Figure 3: Education vs. Incarceration.



Figure 4: Okay Ladies, Now Let's Register to Vote (from ART 446).



Figure 5: All Votes Free.

communities potentially face – in some cases, the same communities students aligned themselves with – helped students identify systemic challenges and barriers that they may not have previously considered. Lastly, though students focused their attention on how they were communicating with a given audience, the in-class activities helped them become more informed and increased their enthusiasm about the importance of civic participation. The outcomes in terms of student attitudes and deliverables were generally positive. However, in developing a similar Get Out The Vote project in the future, I would spend more time facilitating conversations about nonpartisan messaging. It was exciting to see students’ passion, yet they had trouble shaping their ideas into language that was both persuasive and free of political bias. Additional time for collecting audience feedback and making revisions is also a necessary change.

### **Instagram Playground**

Graphic Design for Social and Cultural Contexts (ART 446) is a senior-level course at CSU where students use design research methodology to inform problems in the realm of social impact design. In the fall of 2018, students participated in an eight-week collaborative assignment to create an interactive pop-up installation aimed at voter engagement for a Millennial and Gen Z audience. The concept was based on popular ‘Instagram playground’ immersive art installations like the Museum of Ice Cream, Dream Machine, and The Color Factory, designed to facilitate interactivity and create vignettes specifically for sharing photos on social media. The challenge for students in the course was to add an element of civic engagement to the installation experience.

Students were given a 12 foot by 7 foot space in the biennial People’s Art Show, hosted by The Galleries at CSU. The space was sectioned off using a movable wall and was divided into four ‘rooms’, with a student team assigned to each room. One additional communications team developed a visual identity and promotion strategy for the installation.

The assignment began with an initial research phase covering voting engagement among the target audience and visual research into the ‘Instagram playground’ concept. The assignment was scaffolded by the Building Community Power assignment detailed above, so the class had already developed some familiarity with the topic of voting among the target audience. The prompt for the assignment was centered around voter engagement specifically as a means to keep content nonpartisan, though, through their research, students found that some barriers to voting access are considered to be partisan issues in the United States. As they shaped their content and inspiration, students had to think critically about how to engage audiences in a nonpartisan manner while driving emotional connection.

Students were asked to ‘consider how the Instagram playground segment might evoke emotion, play, or interactivity while communicating the value of creating a voting plan and voting in the midterm elections’. They were also prompted to ‘think about what kind of emotions might promote engagement with voting’ (see Addendum C for the full assignment). Students developed pitches individually for segments of the installation and the class voted on which four proposals worked best to create a cohesive experience. The authors of the selected pitches became team leads and collaborators were assigned by the instructor. Four students self-selected to be on the communications team.

Once the teams were assembled, the class collaborated on the physical arrangement and naming of the installation. Students decided to name the installation ‘Grow the 40’, based on the staggering statistic that about only 40% of eligible voters

participate in American midterm elections (Fairvote.org, 2019). Each team was given a budget of \$250 for their installation segment. Teams pre-built many components of their segments during class (one hour and 15 minutes, twice a week) over a period of four weeks, then transferred their materials on foot to the gallery a short distance away. In the end, students created an installation layout that guided visitors through an experience that provided opportunities for interaction, play, and discovery.

Each of the spaces was given a nickname based on the intended user experience. The movable wall that users first encountered was thus called 'invitation'. It included an overview of the installation and content that helped frame the experience. The next segment, nicknamed 'truth', brought to life a physical representation of the 40% of eligible voters statistic, with large paper balls representing voters and nonvoters to make a visual impact regarding the lack of voter turnout. The third segment, nicknamed 'surprise', was a darkened space hidden completely from view unless visitors passed through the installation. This space contained a mirror for selfies overlaid with the phrase 'Make them represent you' and was lit with red and blue high contrast lighting. The fourth space, nicknamed, 'wonder' was a call to action. After visitors left the darkened selfie 'room', they reentered the bright gallery to see walls plastered with the message 'I will vote' in languages predominantly spoken on the Cleveland State campus. The aim was to encourage voting based on photos with the promise in the background. See figures 6–9 for photos of the finished installation and communications materials.

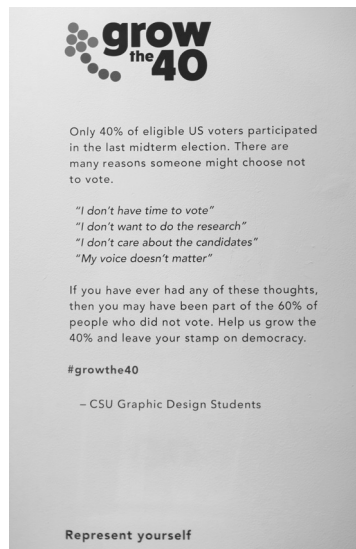


Figure 6: Information panel © Emma Flynn.

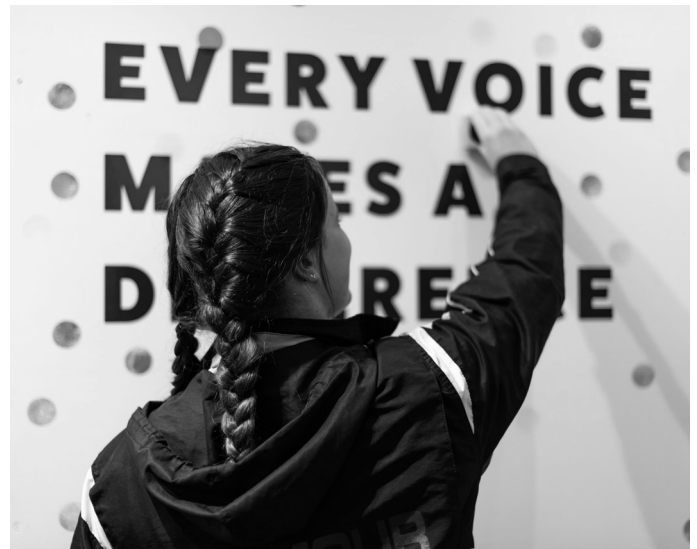


Figure 7: A visitor interacts with the installation © Emma Flynn.



Figure 8: Takeaway cards.



Figure 9: A selfie in one of the installation 'rooms'  
© Emma Flynn.

Design educators  
need to be more intentional  
and systematic in making  
information literacy a  
foundational piece of their  
curricula.

The assignment had several purposes. The first was to prompt students to examine their own relationship with voting. 18 to 24 year-olds have been the lowest-voting demographic in every American presidential election since 1964 (Census.gov, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). An assignment focused on voter engagement might encourage them to vote if they had not previously planned to do so. Additionally, students were asked to translate research data into an experiential built space designed to stimulate reaction in the moment and motivate visitors to vote on election day. One final intention of the assignment was to facilitate collaboration in the building of a physical space. While other collaborative assignments exist within the curriculum, no other assignments included physically building something on this scale.

Student reception to the project collected via group evaluation sheets at the end of the project was generally positive. They appreciated the opportunity to engage in an assignment unlike any others in their degree curriculum and the challenges that came along with building an exhibition that included physical, three-dimensional structures. As with many collaborative classroom projects, some groups worked together more effectively than others. If I were to implement a similar assignment in a future course I would require concepts to be redeveloped after testing with the proposed construction materials as there were some issues with stability and professional quality. I would also require user testing so students could see how people interacted with the installation and get feedback on whether their designs elicited the intended effects on users.

### **Conclusion**

As we know from prior experience in the United States, clarity and accuracy of information is paramount when it comes to maintaining a healthy democracy. Though the disastrous butterfly ballot design issues that wreaked havoc in the 2000 presidential election are significantly different to the design-related misinformation and disinformation issues we are continuing to deal with post-2016, the results are similar: questions about fairness arise and throw election results into question. Designers cannot do much, at least in real-time, about a poorly designed ballot. By being more informed citizens through information literacy and critical thinking, however, they *can* fight back against the information warfare and foreign interference that poses a serious threat. Technology companies' collective responsibility aside, furthermore, being able to critically evaluate information is perhaps the most crucial way that individuals can actively work against the viral spread of disinformation and misinformation (Ireton and Posetti, 2018; West, 2017).

Design educators need to be more intentional and systematic in making information literacy a foundational piece of their curricula. By asking students to think critically about voting issues, conduct research, consider how their own experience affects their viewpoints, and then distill what they've learned into the creation of content for targeted audiences, design educators can provide students with opportunities to expand their notions of what it means to be a responsible steward of information. Through assignments that explore electoral content, educators can help students understand what it means to be a politically engaged and civilly-minded designer – how to use their skills to help generate positive social impact.

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## BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER Voting Engagement Campaign Instructor Resource Guide

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### HOW TO ACTIVATE THIS ASSIGNMENT IN YOUR CLASSROOM

The following content serves as a guide for introducing the AIGA Design for Democracy, Building Community Power, Voting Engagement Campaign to students and conducting thoughtful discussions about issues around voting engagement and access. The assignment prompts provided below can be used as they are or adapted to fit with curricular objectives.

In addition, instructors are encouraged to incorporate some of the extension activities to broaden the assignment scope into a larger campaign or give students the opportunity to craft customized messaging in collaboration with audience segments listed in the target audience section.

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### BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER RESOURCES

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[Building Community Power, Background Information](#)

[Building Community Power, Remaining Nonpartisan](#)

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### DEADLINE CONSIDERATIONS:

**Submissions must be received by September 25, 2018 in order to be included in AIGA's online resource library.** Setting an additional deadline in advance of the September 25, 2018 National Voter Registration day deadline is strongly recommended.

If materials are developed after your state voter registration deadline has passed, messaging should focus on activating eligible voters and getting them to the polls.

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### ACTIVITIES TO SPARK IDEATION

#### Verbal Discussion (30–40 mins)

It may be helpful to begin the Voting Engagement Campaign with a discussion about the nature of community. Asking students to identify the various communities they are connected to can establish the relevance of the assignment to their lives. The following prompts can assist in revealing insights and opportunities for messaging:

- **What communities are you a part of?** Spend a few minutes listing the various groups you are associated with, whether based on geography, shared interests, or other commonalities.
- **Of these various communities which might need the most help or support in increasing voter turnout?**
- **What are some ways you can engage members of these communities? As a designer, what role can you play in helping to build community power or assist with community needs?**

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#### Affinity Diagram Exercise (30–40 mins)

Conducting an affinity diagram exercise can help students brainstorm ideas for messaging or reveal opportunities for further research. Alternatively, if students are collaborating with groups on their respective college or university campuses, this same activity can be used to better understand the perspectives of their target audience/s. Affinity diagramming requires vigilant facilitation, however, so supervision by an instructor is recommended.

**Process:** An affinity diagram is a method of collecting responses from multiple people and quickly gaining consensus. Participants write ideas on post-it notes (one thought per post-it), then attach them randomly to a board. Next, individuals from the group move the post-its into like categories without talking. The participants then assign names to each affinity group, resulting in general categories

AIGA Building Community Power 2018

**ADDENDUM A: AIGA Design for Democracy, Building Community Power: Voting Engagement Campaign © AIGA.**



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# Addendum

**ACTIVITIES TO SPARK IDEATION (CONTD.)**

of concern. This technique is an effective tool for forming consensus within a group and pulling unified themes from participant responses. Ask students to respond individually to the following prompts and then work together to build consensus.

**What are the barriers to registering to vote?**

**What are the barriers to voting?**

**Note:** You may find it useful to assign reading ahead of this exercise in order to help students become more familiar with specific voting barriers that may be outside of their lived experiences. Conversely, you may wish to use this exercise as a jumping off point for further research, by highlighting barriers with which students may not be familiar.

**Suggested readings for the affinity diagram activity:**

**Barriers for local elections:**  
<https://www.ncsaps.gov/why-dont-millennials-vote-in-local-elections/>

**Disabilities:**  
<https://mit.rutgers.edu/content/projecting-number-eligible-voters-disabilities-november-2016-elections-research-report>

**Domestic violence victims:**  
<http://specialexperience.com/voting-in-your-state/special-circumstances/voting-and-domestic-violence/>

**English-only registration forms:**  
<https://www.ncsaps.gov/english-only-registration-creates-barriers-for-voters/>

**Felon disenfranchisement:**  
<http://reimagingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Felony-Disenfranchisement-Frames.pdf>

**Homelessness:**  
<https://www.ncsaps.gov/voting-in-your-state/special-circumstances/voting-and-homelessness/>

**POTENTIAL THEMES FOR RESEARCH AND MESSAGING**

Alternatively, if you would like to direct your students to specific messaging points, try focusing on one or more of the following themes:

- Voter registration
- Barriers to voting (see suggested readings above)
- Early voting
- Forming a voting plan / getting to the polls
- Voter suppression.

**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

- Consider working with a campus student group to develop and test messaging. Contact your campus activities organizations to find potential collaborators.
- Take an interdisciplinary approach by collaborating with another department such as communications, political science, sociology, or social work to develop messaging and identify target audiences.
- Expand project content into a campaign that includes printed ephemera like postcards, posters, or stickers.
- Ask students to develop an entire social media strategy plan that identifies their target audience and places their work in the context of a larger campaign.
- Present this exercise as a collaborative research project in which students are responsible for conducting an in-depth investigation into their target audience and collaborating to establish an art direction and messaging.
- Incorporate user testing, ask students to develop multiple concepts with varying messages to subsequently test on social media.

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**AIGA STUDENT GROUPS**

Faculty advisors for AIGA student groups may prefer to implement this project as an AIGA activity. The students can also hold events to promote voter registration and voter engagement. Suggested activities:

- Hosting a movie night in which participants are encouraged to either register to vote or confirm their voter registration.
- Inviting a local nonpartisan voting advocacy group to campus to conduct a campus voter registration drive
- Inviting a local nonpartisan voting advocacy group to an AIGA meeting to talk through local ballot initiatives
- Planning a voter caucus event to help get eligible voters on campus to their respective polling locations.

**SHARE YOUR PROJECT**

Consider sharing your adapted assignments to the AIGA Design Education Community Design Teaching Resource Facebook summer 2018). Additionally, you are invited to share any documentation highlighting student process development, collaborations with local community members or other student groups, and photos chronicling implementation of Voting Engagement Campaign graphics or other deliverables via the Google Drive link shared on the Building Community Power website.

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

The AIGA Building Community Power open gallery initiative has been adapted as an educational resource by Azme H. Berry (a.h.berry@caseohio.edu) and Sarah Rutherford (s.a.rutherford@caseohio.edu), both Assistant Professors of Graphic Design at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio.

AIGA Building Community Power 2018

## ADDENDUM B: AIGA Design for Democracy, Building Community Power: Instructor Resource Guide © AIGA.

**ART 446** Fall 2018 **Project 1: Voter Engagement in the Built Environment: Creating an Instagram Playground**

Graphic Design for Social and Cultural Contexts  
*Project Description*

**Description:** Instagram playgrounds are manufactured spaces designed to create interesting vignettes and backgrounds for photos, specifically for engagement on social media. These spaces are increasingly popular and incorporate elements of fine art, interior decoration, and environmental graphic design. Is there however, potential for this exercise in vanity to create impact around social issues? Working in teams, you will collaborate to conceive and build an Instagram playground installation at the 23rd People's Art Show at the Galleries at CSU. Your goal will be to engage the public around the issue of voter engagement and creating a voting plan. Your specific target audiences will be Millennials and Gen Z.

The class will be divided into five teams. Four teams will work on conceptualizing and building the Instagram playground segments and a fifth team will develop a visual identity and execute a promotional strategy to drive attendance at the exhibition opening and throughout the course of its run.

The installation will be contained within a 12' x 6' footprint and feature four distinct segments. Individual students will develop pitches for segments of the installation and the class will vote on which four proposals will work best to create a cohesive experience. The authors of the selected pitches will become team leads and collaborators will be assigned.

Consider how the Instagram playground segment might evoke emotion, play, or interactivity while communicating the value of creating a voting plan and voting in the midterm elections. Think about what kind of emotions might promote engagement with voting.

The show will be up from October 26 to December 7. You will also need to consider how the installation may change to remain relevant after Election Day on November 6.

**Requirements:** Develop a pitch for one segment of the installation. Your pitch should include a clear sketch drawn to scale (can be created digitally), a list of materials, and reference photos if needed. Aim to create a unique experience that embraces the voter engagement concept, rather than recreating existing Instagram playground experiences.

The Communications team will be responsible for developing a visual identity and marketing plan. This includes developing a press release for media outlets and a social media strategy and can be extended to other promotional components like posters and guerrilla marketing. Work for this group will extend beyond 10/18 and lead up to the exhibition.

After teams have been assigned, members will work together to construct their installation segment off-site. Installations must be able to be disassembled and transported to the Galleries for the final installation.

Teams will primarily be working in class, but some work outside of class may be necessary. Consider wearing work clothes that can be soiled during the building stage.

Materials will be purchased using course lab fees from specified retailers.

All teams will compile a final process report that documents their concept, rationale, process, final deliverables, and public engagement.

PAGE 1

## ADDENDUM C: Instagram Playground Assignment Sheet © Sarah Rutherford.



# Ecological Mourning and the Work of Graphic Communication Design

John Calvelli

Keywords

Ontological design

Design futures

Epiphylogenesis

Neganthropocene

Sustainment

design

### Note on the text

Shortly following the turn of the new millennium and dotcom crash, the concern for human ‘sustainability’ began to grow. In the design sector, this emerged mostly with the architecture and product design sectors. Although Susan Szenasy, the design critic and editor of the design magazine *Metropolis* pointed to the massive amount of paper waste that had accumulated through the activities of the graphic design profession, this didn’t seem to get to the heart of the problem of our discipline’s role and responsibility for the crisis. In the essay that follows, I suggest that it is the *image* that lies at the crux of the problem – and its solution. Although the image doesn’t seem to have the heft of the steel girders specced by architects or exhibit the conspicuous consumer waste left over from the work of product designers, it is the image that lies at the heart of human unsustainability. In what follows, I propose a way of looking at the image, on the one hand, as the very stuff of human consciousness and thus as consciousness of time, and on the other hand as the end product of graphic communication design. This, I hope, may provide us with a means not merely to design kinds of futures, but may allow for the sustainment of future as such.

### The Unsustainable Image

We live in an unsustainable world. We have been reminded of this in recent years due to the current and projected future effects of human-induced climate change. Notwithstanding the widespread knowledge of the threat to human future, human patterns of unsustainable behaviour seem entrenched. One could be forgiven for assuming that this knowledge would lead to fundamental change in our ways of being and acting on all levels, from the workings of politics and economics to the structuring of academic disciplines and the practices of the professions. Instead, we find in general a stunned silence, pockets of denial, and occasional efforts at mitigation.

Design is at the heart of the problem, as it was design that opened the way toward the artificial world it is our burden to sustain, and it was the design of the machine that enabled the burden to grow vastly greater.

It is the discipline of visual communication that most directly deals with the image; but within this discipline, the role of the image in the production of unsustainability has mostly been ignored. This is unfortunate: we ignore the image at our peril. As we will see, it is the image – in the form of *imago*<sup>1</sup> – that is the link between our artificial world and the neural networks forming our cognition. Relative to the power the image holds over us, we design and use images recklessly. If it were to be our goal to reshape our relation to the world in a way commensurate with the threats we face, we would need to rework our relation to the image. Humans live in a multiplicity of worlds concocted from images; these have a great, but often invisible effect upon the one world, Earth, that matters.

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1            ‘Imago’ is the Latin word for ‘image’. It can also refer to a ghost or phantom, an idea, or an echo. It was introduced into psychoanalysis by Freud and Jung, and later in the work of Lacan. I employ the term to refer in general to the image, prior to or outside of its artefactual status.

The imago shimmers,  
and is fecund. It shimmers  
in the crossings it makes,  
from artefact to brain and  
from past to future.

### Artefact and Image

It is the characteristically human behaviour of designing a world outside of ourselves that has designed us as a 'successful', and thus unsustainable species. Design is an ethological<sup>2</sup> behaviour of the species *Homo sapiens*, dependent upon a prior increase in the use of the hands with concomitant development of the neocortical area of the brain.<sup>3</sup> At some point during this long process, lasting over two million years, the first tool was created; and with the tool, human consciousness. According to Bernard Stiegler, this happened in a moment of rupture, dividing an undifferentiated present into past, present and future. The gesture of raising an arm with rock in hand, then

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2 'Ethology' is the study of animal behaviour, or human social behaviour from a biological perspective. In this sense, design is seen as a characteristic behaviour of the species *Homo sapiens*, prior to it being considered a cultural artefact.

3 The neocortex is the most recently evolved part of the brain, that which distinguishes *Homo sapiens* from prior hominids.



lowering it in anticipation of a strike capable of splitting another rock into a blade and the rock's remains, brought with it the consciousness of *future*. Once hit, what remained – the primitive tool – contains the memory in rock of its making. An image of the *past* has been recorded, with human consciousness becoming the first unintended consequence of the making of tools, beginning the work of design (Stiegler, 1998, p.158).

The tool is the memory of the next tool, in an iterative process of artefactual production. It begins with a process of making-sensible, a cognitive process of making a 'look' out of the object at hand. The look – what I call *imago* – is created in the embodied process of a grappling with the object-becoming-artefact; it may also be created in an act of perception guided by memory. In the latter case, it is the *image-schema*<sup>4</sup> (Heidegger, 1997, p.68–71) that provides for the possibility of transmission, as an ontological phenomenon that lives in the in-between space between the sensible object and materialising neural networks. The imago shimmers, and is fecund. It shimmers in the crossings it makes, from artefact to brain and from past to future. It shimmers in neural transience, as networks begin to form. It is fecund, as in its shimmering it may be anything. It must be something or it will disappear. It will be recomposed as future, in artefactual production to come. Human conatus<sup>5</sup> assures its promulgation, as the human perseveres in its being only as imago.

We use the artefact; we crave the imago. If we created artefacts as a beaver builds its dam, we would be as beavers, continuing to use these artefacts until they wore out or we felt an environmental pressure to change. Under the mediation of the imago however, passing fluidly between artefact and brain, atoms and neurons, a plasticity<sup>6</sup> developed between our forming organ and the artefact it formed. Yet the living human brain is of a different order than that of the matter from which artefacts are made. It is this differential from which craving begins.

*To crave* introduces a different intensity of conatus than that of the beaver. Our human drive no longer simply operates between organism and environment. The organism has become a self, and the environment a world. The present bifurcates into past and future. The self, based on the past, imagines a world and a future. If, as Spinoza states, 'each thing, as far as it lies in itself, strives to persevere in its being' (Spinoza, 1996, p.75), the human being tries to achieve this in an imagined world, in a future to come. Human unsustainability is thus a structural condition. The image we have of the world always exceeds our present condition. To make up the difference we introduce new artefacts into the world, creating a new world-image which, once again,

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4 Based in Heidegger's critique of Kant, an image-schema allows us to make -sensible concepts from the pure datum of our experience of the world. Unlike Kant, Heidegger emphasizes the role of the imagination in providing a 'look' from the datum of experience of the world (Heidegger, 1997).

5 'Conatus' refers to the drive to *persevere* that is present in all beings. It is a key concept in the philosophy of Spinoza. See below.

6 The term 'plasticity' is used prominently in both the arts and, more recently, in brain science. In a series of books (beginning with *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic*), Catherine Malabou has articulated the concept philosophically and politically. Her operative definition focuses on the capacity of something to be moulded and to hold a form once moulded, as well as its potential to explode.

exceeds our condition. Unsustainability thus exists both as an experience of lack, and as material consequence of the abundance of artefacts we have produced as compensation. It is an ontological condition of human being. It is also an expression of entropy.<sup>7</sup>

### Negentropy

As we know from the second law of thermodynamics, entropy in the universe is always increasing. The universe, itself, is unsustainable. Nonetheless, as quantum physicist Erwin Schrödinger articulated in 1944, life is a temporary form of negative entropy, or *negentropy*, structures of complexity that, for a time, are able to resist entropic force (pp.70-71). In our planetary ecosystem, plants metabolise photons received from the Sun as energy during the process of photosynthesis, thus manifesting a temporary negentropy. Animals then feed on and metabolise plants, in order to maintain negentropy during the course of their lives. Humans not only feed on both plants and animals, but in addition metabolise inorganic matter (such as steel), resulting not only in negentropic biological structures (including neural networks and the images they form) but in designed artefactual structures as well.

Negentropy always leaves entropy in its wake, as Schrödinger remarked: ‘the essential thing in metabolism is that the organism succeeds in freeing itself from all the entropy it cannot help producing while alive’ (p.77). For a non-human animal, metabolism is always directly in service of the organism’s health and vitality, by securing itself in benevolent habitats, finding food to eat and in the use of energy to escape predators. In humans, however, much of our metabolism is involved in artefactual production, a more complex and less direct strategy to secure existence. We must metabolise the earth, often in dramatic ways, in order to produce artefacts as an intermediary step towards the final goal of promoting our health, vitality and protection. This negentropic activity results in considerably more production of entropy.

### Image and Entropy

Images are a more indirect form of human negentropy than are artefacts. Yet they gave us the past and the future, and with it a crucial tool to help us stay ahead of the game: the capacity to gauge our production of entropy. It’s a dangerous tool, a *pharmakon*<sup>8</sup> (Stiegler, 1998), as images create worlds that captivate and waylay us, that come between us and the world itself. Yet images may also summon us: the image of

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7 Entropy refers to the tendency of any system to move toward an increasing state of disorder.

8 ‘Pharmakon’ is a concept derived from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which is related to the English word ‘pharmacy’. A *pharmakon* may be either a remedy or a poison. Plato uses the term in reference to the technology of writing, of which he was suspicious.

The younger philosophers at the time, the Sophists, relied on writing as a tool to construct arguments for the purpose of winning arguments in court – in contrast to Socrates, for whom philosophy was undertaken convivially in oral discussions with friends and citizens.

For a modern analysis of the concept see ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ in *Dissemination*, by Jacques Derrida, 1981.



Figure 1. *The Blue Marble from Apollo 17* Astronaut photograph AS17-148-22727). December 7, 1972. Courtesy NASA Johnson Space Center.

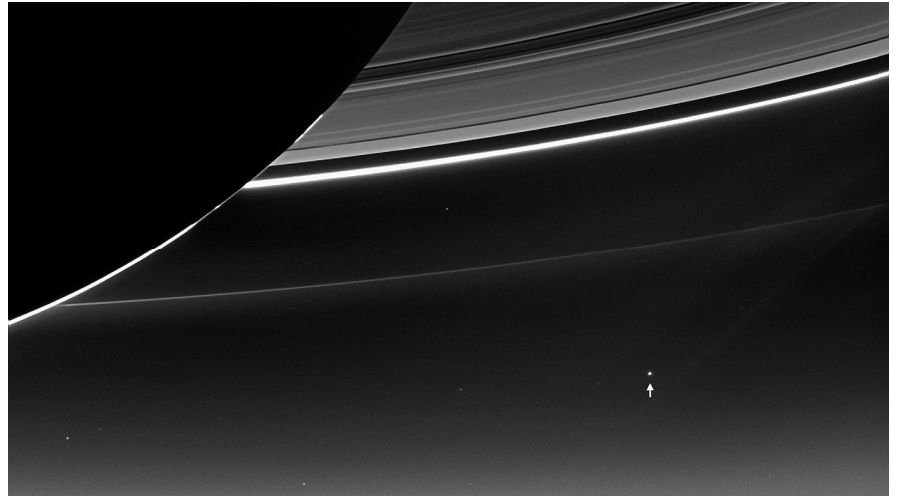


Figure 2. *The Day the Earth Smiled*. Earth from Saturn, taken on July 19, 2013 during the Cassini-Huygens mission. Courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech/Space Science Institute.

This framework of knowing and making – knowledge for its own sake versus knowledge of how-to – has remained in force in various forms to this day.

our Earth as a precious and fragile whole isolated in black space, taken by the Apollo 17 crew in 1972, might have summoned not a few to the nascent disciplines of ecology and environmental science. Over the next four decades, as a result of the artefactual development of computer-assisted imaging techniques, we became able to model scenarios of our planet's changing climate and demonstrate with increasing certainty the entropic effect we were having on the ecological systems that support us. A more recent image – a colossal and collective selfie – gives evidence of the vast perspectival territory our species now inhabits by proxy or prosthesis: taken in 2013 by the roving robotic spacecraft Cassini and relayed to NASA, the sublime rings of Saturn frame a

tiny bluish dot within vast black space. No longer beckoning as an icon of human hope, our Earth simply exists, an illuminated rock of relative inconsequence, as Nietzsche imagined in 1873:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of 'world history', but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die. One might invent such a fable, and yet he still would not have adequately illustrated how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature.... [O]nly its possessor and begetter takes it so solemnly – as though the world's axis turned within it. But if we could communicate with the gnat, we would learn that he likewise flies through the air with the same solemnity, that he feels the flying centre of the universe within himself. (2006, p.114)

Whether magnificent, troubling or inconsequential, these images of our planet imply the entropy left in their wake. What thinking or action do they suggest? What dispositions are appropriate for how we approach our lives?

### **The Art-Design Rift**

Once the rise of complex civilisations began with the specialisation of crafts in Mesopotamia and elsewhere, social stratification and inequality increased. This continued during the rise of the Greek city-states, accompanied by an evolving philosophical discourse on categories of knowledge, *viz.*, between *epistêmê* and *technê*. Beginning with Aristotle, the distinction between these two terms becomes clear: *epistêmê* denoting scientific knowledge and *technê* denoting craft (Parry, 2008). Within this opposition, *epistêmê* is the privileged form of knowledge practised for its own sake by the free man and philosopher, with *technê* practised by craftsmen and slaves.

This framework of knowing and making – knowledge for its own sake versus knowledge of how-to – has remained in force in various forms to this day. However, the series of social, intellectual and technological shifts that occurred during the preamble to the Industrial Revolution inaugurated a rift between two different forms of *technê*. A new ecology of knowledge and practice develops between the fine arts, on the one hand, and design and craft on the other. Craft becomes increasingly marginalised. Some artists become designers of applied art, providing decorative qualities to the mass manufactured goods coming off the factory line. Others become fine artists, whose practice of making becomes ennobled by its lack of functionality and the artists' pursuit of *epistêmê* (Calvelli, 2009).

This epistêmê is no longer that enjoyed by the free man and philosopher of ancient Greece. Rather, along with technê it is chained to the abstract law of capital – M-C-M<sup>9</sup> – creating a society of disciplinary specialists who are able to embody the law in productive ways. The discipline of design, in its capacity of making not only artefacts as such, but the images we consume with them, is now wedded to this abstract machine of which Marx famously remarked, ‘has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together’ (Marx, 1848). Today’s environmental scientists have merely confirmed this with their emission and climate studies showing the same pattern.

Although it is easy to point to design as the harbinger of unsustainability, it is this ‘bad ecology’ (Bateson and Bateson, p.489) of epistêmê, technê and capital that is both originary and consequential.

### Acting on the Future

We have understood that the future is in question, in a way dissimilar to before. As our technological and artefactual capacities have developed, the consequences of our actions have become more intense, creating pressure on the ecosystems that we rely on. Our uniqueness as a form of life resides in our inseparability from the artificial world we have created around us. Yet these complex negentropic forms we create leave the potential for disaster in their wake.

We have developed sophisticated means to model the future, which tell us we must change now, in fundamental ways, if we are to avoid the worst of consequences. Yet our efforts are meagre relative to the stake that is involved, and our results even more so. Great change is needed, but we more or less go on as before, seemingly oblivious to what the future holds. The image holds us in thrall, like a cocoon around our being. Each thread of this fantastic construction is a world we have imagined to be, and together they comprise a seemingly safe and secure habitat in which we may live. We live in worlds woven around other worlds, which exist in the one world to which we are all unknowingly subject – Earth, where we store all the entropy produced by the effects of our weaving. Our cocoon of images won’t protect us from our entropy. Neither can we be assured that a benevolent metamorphosis will follow.

Since the first hominid<sup>10</sup> tool production we have woven our images, in both cognitive and material forms. We created the image of past and future nestled around a conscious present. We created types of futures, and left interpretable pasts in their wakes. How can we play with these images today? What post-pupal futures are possible? Are we part of that future or are we what is left behind in its wake?

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9 Marx’s definition of capitalism: Money (M) is invested in a commodity (C), which is sold for a profit (M’).

10 Australopithecus was the last species of the genus *primate*, living from 4.18 to about 2 million years ago. As the first bipedal primate, the use of hands facilitated gestures of grasping and communication that hadn’t existed before. This led to growth of the brain’s neocortex. All of these new traits facilitated the early skill of toolmaking. See Stiegler, 1998.

## Tracing the Image

*Besides this, remember that the production of the images is as quick as thought (Epicurus, no date).*

The image begins in the development of the proto-hominid technical object, through an originary grammatisation<sup>11</sup> of time into past, present and future (Stiegler, 1998). It is a work of bodily plasticity, with changes occurring between feet and hands, between thumbs and other fingers, between arm, brain and skull cavity – and between rock, brain and tool. In and as plasticity, artefact becomes image, thought and future. The changes made to countless rocks over this vast chunk of time inscribe themselves as new, neocortical living tissue and the genetic mutation that carries it along. The evolutionary process itself is thus grammatised into two forms: one shared with all biological creatures and operating on the gene; and one specific to humans and taking place ‘by means other than life’ – in the interaction between the human and the technical object – in what Stiegler terms *epiphylogenetic* evolution (1998, p.140).

There are some early grammatisations, however, which do not necessitate the production of a technical artefact. Body movements, rhythms, organised sounds and harmonies are grammatised, marking the emergence of symbolic behaviour. Facial musculature is grammatised in order to allow discrete sounds to be made, forming the basis of spoken language. It may be true, as Stiegler asserts, that toolmaking was responsible for the growth of the neocortex and thus of a properly ‘human’ consciousness; nevertheless, tool-based epiphylogenesis would not account for an independent evolution of early symbolic behaviour.<sup>12</sup>

For evolution to take place, a form of heredity is needed, a replicator that passes down new traits to succeeding generations. For classical evolutionary theory, it is the gene that is the replicator responsible for this. In epiphylogenesis, it is assumed that it is the technical object that takes on the role of replicator: one views a prior tool in order to discern how to make another one. What then is the replicator for early song and dance for example, or for language? In the 1970s, Richard Dawkins proposed the ‘meme’ as a replicator, as a unit of cultural information that was stored

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11 Grammatization refers to the process of making useful distinctions. For instance, in order for an infant – or an early hominid – to develop the capacity for spoken language, it is necessary to *grammatise* facial musculature in order to produce meaningful and repeatable sounds.

12 Stiegler, in *Technics and Time 1*, takes some care in attempting to define epiphylogenesis as affiliated with, but other than evolution (p.135, pp.140–42). When Stiegler was first forming his concept of epiphylogenesis, geneticists had not yet understood the workings of epigenetics, a form of hereditary replication based on the chemical marking of the gene from one generation to the next. Jablonka and Lamb, in their 2006 book *Evolution in Four Dimensions* have proposed four modes through which evolution can take place: genetic, epigenetic, imitation and symbolic. The theory of memetic evolution, based on the work of Dawkins (1976), Dennett (1995) and Blackmore (2007), can be understood to be a hybrid of Jablonka and Lamb’s imitative and symbolic evolutionary modes. The imago may be considered a replicator that also is situated between the imitative and symbolic modes.

in the mind, and that was replicated by being passed between mind and mind via imitative behaviours or via intermediary material artefacts (pp.189–201). Imitation, however, is a form of heredity that we share with other animals, so it doesn't explain characteristically human behaviours. The sequence of bodily movements replicated through imitation might be a scene from the ballet 'Swan Lake'; however, it might only be the rhythmic chewing of a tree trunk by a young beaver, in imitation of its parent, that will become part of the beaver's dam.

### The Imago

It is the *imago* that is the replicator for human-based, non-genetic, viz., epiphylogenetic evolution. The imago is a metamorphic and migrating phantasm operating between rock-hard and neural-wet substrates. Its plasticity allows for a migration between brain and artefact, and artefact and brain, setting the stage for either Stieglerian technics or for any other non-artefact-based symbolic activity, stimulating an evolution of shared symbolic worlds.

It is the imago that is transferred from the face of the artefact to neural networks in the brain, arising from early technical and gene-based neocortical development in the combined activity of doing and looking. At first, the imago primarily allowed us to make better tools, directly affecting our biological survival amongst animals better equipped for predation than us. Enabled by the slow genetic evolution of the brain that created the neocortex, as well as the epigenetic behaviours of toolmaking, the imago begins its proliferation in artefacts, gestures and sounds and in neural networks in the brain. Eventually, the imago usurped the gene's stalwart and regulative primacy, as a new form of replicator whose natural habitat is the human brain. A process of *unnatural* selection<sup>13</sup> was thus enabled, producing symbolic and technical forms and forming the basis of human cultures (Fry, 2012, p.76).

### Co-evolution

Human beings evolve by means of a co-evolution between these two replicators, the gene and the imago. It is the latter that leads, in an epiphenomenal process; but until the point that some have theorised, when our biological substrate is abandoned, or when we become subject to overwhelming catastrophe whether man-made or not, it will be our genes, in the end, that determine our species' viability for survival. Until then, we will need to negotiate carefully between the two replicators in our co-evolutionary adaptation. This isn't simple or direct.

Well-being, for example, is the most fundamental form of cognitive effect for all species, as at its basis is the attempt by an organism to respond to threats against its being. Human well-being is experienced relative to two replicators and the ecosystems in which they are found. Imago-based well-being may be produced by watching a television show, attending a political rally or by something as simple as getting in the driver's seat of a car. Biologically-based well-being may be experienced as waking up after a good night's sleep perhaps, or by going for a walk in the woods on a beautiful day. In pursuit of an imago-based form of well-being, we have created the potential conditions for perilous forms of future threat to our biological well-being. The well-being of a nation, for example – a complex form of cognitive effect shared by a multiplicity of individuals – can and has taken precedence over the need to take action

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As differentiated from Darwinian *natural* selection.



on the mitigation of climate change, even as we know that inaction will likely result in serious future threats. The future is a cognitive construction and thus irrelevant to biologically-based behaviours of threat avoidance.

Evolution happens non-teleologically:<sup>14</sup> we become better adapted to an ecosystem through random operations of recombination and mutation in a given environment. In gene-based evolution, genetic variations are produced as offspring, with each (except in the case of identical twins) inheriting different recombinations of genetic material from their parents. In imago-based evolution, cognitive variations are produced as descendants, with each idea, artefact or symbolic gesture made up of different recombinations of original source material. In both cases of gene- and imago-based evolution mutation can happen, introducing new forms into the ecosystem.

### Imago and Preference

Human consciousness and intentional action are byproducts of this process of recombination and mutation. Prior to conscious, intentional action, a process of unconscious pre-selection has taken place from among possible cognitive worlds. Recombinations and mutations of imagos form cognitive worlds – political ideologies, educational frameworks, or musical styles – which are selected through individual preference, based on prior cognitive worlds acquired from the time of our birth. Once acquired, a cognitive world will allow for the selection of further imagos and worlds based on compatibility with existing ones, as well as allowing for the continued exercise of preference.

Preference may be consciously assumed, but it is unconsciously directed, based on the existence of individual variation. We can illuminate this by considering Jakob von Uexküll's notion of *umwelt*, for which he uses the example of the tick. An *umwelt* is a given perceptual life-world of an animal. The tick's *umwelt* is elemental: it only contains three 'markers', or carriers of significance:

1. The odour of butyric acid secreted through the skin glands of mammals;
2. The blood temperature of mammals, which is 37°F;
3. A non-hairy spot on the mammal's skin.

In other words, in its limited *umwelt*, the tick follows its preference for light, for the smell of butyric acid, for a certain warmth and for bare skin (Agamben, 2004, p.47–49).

Each species of animal has a unique *umwelt* – except for us. According to von Uexküll, a singular *umwelt* exists for each individual human being. We are makers of *umwelten*, each with a different set of markers. The preference of the tick is for its three markers; the preference of the human is based on the distribution of a multiplicity of markers that humans make for each other. Through their existential activity, innumerable recombinations of imagos are formed into a multiplicity of cognitive worlds.

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14 Oxford University Press defines teleology as 'the explanation of phenomena in terms of the purpose they serve rather than of the cause by which they arise'. There is no *purpose* or *end* toward which evolution is directed; it is a random process, non-teleological.

Although there does not appear to be any stopping rule that would prevent the creation of additional worlds, there are limiting factors that shape cognitive worlds into particular forms. The first of these limits are biological, in that our cognitive worlds, locatable in the brain, are subject to the constraints of time and space. We might speculate and deduce concepts that exist outside of time and space, but there is a limit, as Kant proposed, that stations our conceptual work within the temporal and spatial world that we can know. Culture is also a profoundly limiting force, as it defines linguistic, symbolic and behavioural dispositions that are formed by preselected sets of imagos. We are thrown into culture by the accident of our birth, and pick up our beliefs and dispositions based on the imagos available within the larger cultural ecosystem. Disciplines are another related form, choosing certain ecosystems of ideas and methods of verification to establish worth among self-selected members. The processes of individuation and construction of the ego further limit the construction of worlds, by choosing some for protected status to facilitate identity construction.

### **Power and inequality**

Power is an overarching limitation of cognitive worlds, effected through the distribution of imagos based on *arkhē*<sup>15</sup>. The grounding assumption of this *arkhē* is that a disposition to act assumes, in another, a disposition to be acted upon, and justifies the belief that ‘a determinate superiority is exercised over an equally determinate inferiority’ (Rancière, 2010, p.30). This becomes a form of the *naturalised artificial*, where unequal distributions of power are taken as given for any specific cognitive world, and that assigns unequal values to different cognitive worlds according to assumed criteria of value.

These unequal distributions of power within and between cognitive worlds are themselves justified through cognitive means, as Plato did in his assignation of classes in *The Republic*. The work of design and style, linguistic usage or taste are only a few of the multiplicity of ways in which power may be justified and naturalised through aesthetic means, within the larger framework Rancière calls the *distribution of the sensible*<sup>16</sup> (Rancière, 2004).

The effects of these forms of the naturalised artificial may be, and often are extreme, as can be seen when considering the collision of cognitive and cultural *umwelten* that took place, and continues to do so, between indigenous Americans and migrating Europeans. The slavery and oppression following first contact was the result of an *arkhē* based on the multiple cognitive worlds European humans had lived within – biblical and messianic, military and technological, and economic, for example – and that led to an assumption of the inequality of rights held by a colonising power over the colonised.

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15 ‘Arche’ is a ancient Greek word meaning ‘origin’ or ‘first principle’.

16 Rancière’s translator, Gabriel Rockhill, defines the distribution of the sensible as ‘the system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime’ (Rancière, 2004).

It was only under the law  
of capital, powered by  
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that the imago underwent  
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divinity to commodity

## Fracking the Imago, Refining the Image

If the imago has so much power – if it can bring us to a cliff overlooking our own extinction – then what about the image? Does the bordering of the imago upon the artefact in the form of an image – a picture – accelerate us toward an end or cause a material friction that restrains it?

Images have been used in a multiplicity of forms, within a multiplicity of cultures, forming different ontological horizons.<sup>17</sup> The materiality of the image extended life as presence when confronted with death, in the pure image in the form of the corpse. Representations and markers of the dead were carriers of significance that grew cognitive worlds out of respect for the absent life (Belting, 2011). With the birth of writing, new and powerful imagos were set in bone or stone as signs, to communicate with divinities, set judgements into law and to commemorate imperial victories. In painted icons images brought to earthly existence the subtle body of a resurrected god, and a reminder of human weakness and redemption. Images proliferated and were exchanged, once becoming portable and virtual, celebrating both divine and earthly power as well as the beauty of the values of the nobility. The imago morphed and migrated within and between ontological epochs, displacing space under new conditions of visibility and reception, bonded onto and as various material substrates.

It was only under the law of capital, powered by the burning of fossil fuels and stimulated by the quickening rhythms of life, that the imago underwent the great transfiguration, metamorphosing from divinity to commodity and migrating under conditions of interminable mass reproduction. Gods, monarchs and aristocrats lost their aura under the sign of the commodity: the imago was attached to goods referring to other goods and still to others, in a materially-fuelled race for immateriality. Released from its traditional supports that placed the imago in a determined time and space, the mirror-play of signifiers *dis-placed* identities under an influx of objects.

As images became mediatised, consciousness became commodified and proletarianised (Stiegler, 2010). Media factories transmogrified subjects into objects for the purpose of consuming other objects. Objects and already-objectified subjects were dematerialised into bits for the purpose of easy exchange. Biotic mass became the intermediary between the fossilised remains of past catastrophes and a machinic infrastructure producing future catastrophes to come. The imago lubricated all, using its metamorphic and migratory power to ease the transition from one catastrophe to another.

## Distribution Centres

It was and is the skeleton M-C-M' that sucked the energy out of the Earth and directed its temporary spoils to some and not others. All human activity was directed toward the embodiment of this skeleton: some to frack the energy, others to transform it into consumable forms and still others to enact the collective *auto-da-fé*.

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17 An 'ontological horizon' can be defined as the a boundary that distinguishes between what we assume to exist and what we consider not to exist.

The distribution was almost seamless. The imago stabilised all the cognitive worlds through repetitive, interminable and ubiquitous transformation. Change assured more of the same. Novelty was the rock one could stand on. People took ownership of their roles – as producer, consumer, destroyer – with conative force, and hoped for the best. Few took stock when the real returned, this time with a vengeance.

### **Recalling the Imago**

As linear, time is at once running out and infinitely deferred. As we eye the return of the real, time speeds up but *re-places* us to where we always were, in a state of increasing ontological exhaustion. We don't need more time; we need a different kind of time, and for that we need to *re-call* the imago. The imago, if you remember, is the mother of time and space in the form of anticipation and memory. We inherit its plasticity, as the imago continues to enfold time and space, producing futures and moulding their shapes and borders. It is time to enact our comprehension of the imago's journey over time and space – it is time to *make time*.

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# From High to Low and High Again

Kristen Coogan

Keywords

Style cycle

Design history

Fashion

Aesthetic

innovation

Context



In the film, *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), Meryl Streep does a favor for cheap, vernacular visual culture by offering viewers a history lesson. When co-star, Anne Hathaway, experiences one of Hollywood's quintessential before and after tropes – frumpy intern turned uber-glam fixer – Streep takes note. Leading up to this metamorphosis, Hathaway's intolerable preference for a life built on creative intellect over a rapid pursuit in high fashion directly conflicts with Streep's zeal for the fashion forward elite.

Reacting to Hathaway's dismissive use of the word 'stuff' to describe two avant-garde yet indistinguishable blue belts under review, Streep unleashes vitriol, linking Hathaway's 'lumpy' blue sweater to the chic blue belts. Streep gives Hathaway's sweater provenance, tracing the lifeless top all the way back to the explosion of the color cerulean in Oscar de la Renta's and Yves Saint Laurent's early 2000s runway shows, which influenced eight other brands to use cerulean before a tired looking blue entered mainstream department stores and landed in Hathaway's hands from a pathetic bargain bin.

Ouch.

If we ignore Streep's acrimony and instead model her logic to analyze style – observe the past to appreciate the present – we awaken design history and develop methods for decoding contemporary visual culture. Drawing parallels between the past and present brings the past to life. Imagine applying this thinking to a design history pedagogy.

Studying history in the age of Wikipedia, Instagram and Snapchat warrants a reimagined pedagogy. While still curious, the Gen Z minds sitting before us have been conditioned to have shorter attention spans, seek instant gratification and multi-task to a fault. They came of age in a digital culture and thrive in an active and sensory studio setting. This hyper-accessible and hyper-exposed condition demands a new pedagogical model – as stewards of design history, we have to reframe the past in the language of today to teach the designers of tomorrow. We have to meet digital natives on their own media-saturated turf.

Building on this idea, we can decode the evolution of style and forecast stylistic innovation. According to the steps loosely outlined by Streep and more succinctly by Lorraine Wild in *Eye* (Sandhaus and Wild, 2000), we critically observe style as a linear thread repeating itself over and over:

And one of the things I love about form is how once someone invents something that is visually interesting, other people pick it up and it becomes a style. It is chic for graphic designers to say that they abhor style, but that is one of the bigger shibboleths of design. Style – the invention of it, its proliferation to the point that it becomes cliché, its death and its inevitable revival – is a sign that design is alive over time. I have invented a chart called the '*Great Wheel of Style*' [Figure 1] to try to describe this relentlessness: it's amazing that designers think they can avoid it! (Sandhaus and Wild, 2000).

Wild posits that style and 'good design' are intertwined; that 'good design' creates intrigue and gets consumed by the mass market, which superficially hijacks and proliferates form, resulting in cliché, embarrassment, then death, followed by fetish, revival, and curiosity, until we again arrive where we began: with style (Sandhaus and Wild, 2000).

An awareness of  
design history helps  
contextualize the work of  
these designers. We can  
knit the past to the present  
and begin to forecast  
the future.

The cycle runs persistently throughout history to present day. This postmodern, hyper-exposed and hyper-accessed reality threatens stylistic novelty, while the past offers a wellspring of formal, conceptual and philosophical inspiration. This essay attempts to draw formal, conceptual and philosophical parallels between the past and the present both as a lesson in design history and a critical analysis of style – as well as championing real-time design history as a new pedagogy, where pop-culture becomes a critical component of a design history discourse.

An entirely formal example illustrates this phenomenon and lays the foundation for the rest of the essay: Russian Constructivism and Diane von Fürstenberg. In the 1920s, the Bolsheviks named Constructivism the official Communist form. The Bolshevik State invited Russian Constructivist artists Liubov Popova and Varvara



Figure 1: 'Great Wheel of Style', Lorraine Wild, 2000. Used with permission by © Lorraine Wild.

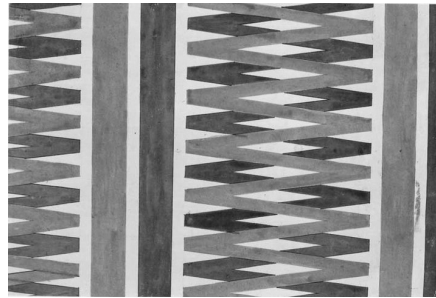


Figure 2: *Textile Design*, Liubov Popova, 1923–4. Used with permission by © Tate London.

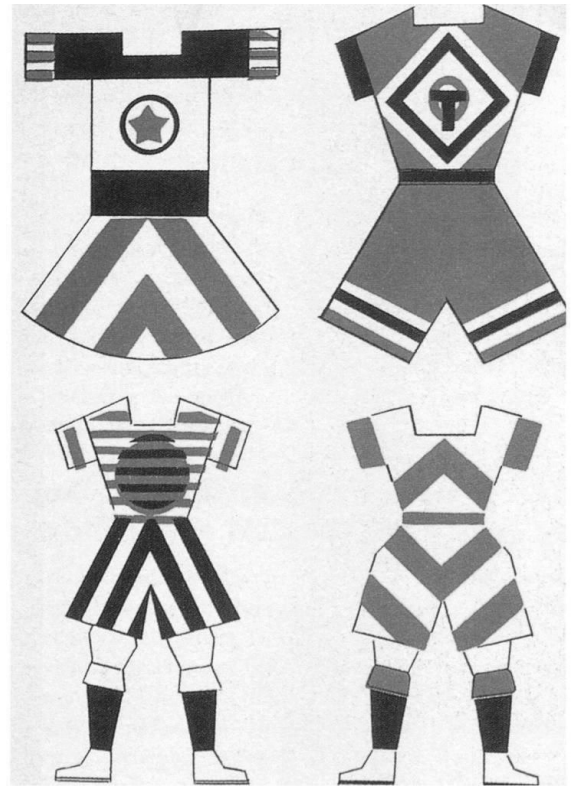


Figure 3: *Designs for Sports Clothing from LEF no. 2*, Vavara Stepanova, 1923.

Stepanova to create original cotton textiles for mass production by the First State Cotton Printing Factory (Rodchenko and Popova, 2009). With the Russian avant-garde in full swing, the USSR endeavored to 'construct' a utopian, proletarian society to broadcast the benefits of Communism to the rest of the world.

With State support, artists both embodied and promulgated Bolshevik ideology through their creative pursuits. Popova and Stepanova used textile designs as a platform to advance the Communist mission. The women incorporated Bolshevik themes portraying collectivism, mechanization, labor, and progress through flat, stylized iconography, purified geometries and simplified color palettes reminiscent of Malevich on repeat (Figure 2).

Woven into everyday life, the fabric functioned as a form of propaganda. Popova embraced the task with gusto, creating more than a hundred highly inventive patterns for mass production. After Popova's death, Osip Brik quoted her as saying:

No single artistic success gave me such profound satisfaction as the sight of a peasant woman buying a piece of my fabric for a dress (Rodchenko and Popova, 2009).

Self-professed artist-engineers, Popova and Stepanova along with Alexander Rodchenko and Vladimir Tatlin viewed the body as a vehicle for production, and clothing as a player in that system. Simplified, hygienic clothes reflected the period's values: efficiency, practicality and productivity (Figure 3). The gender neutral and

utilitarian production clothing ('prozodezhda') and specialized clothing ('specodezhda') cast a legacy over contemporary fashion (Dorofeeva, 2013; Homsapaya, 2011; Lodder, 2010).

Familiar, simple and daring geometric prints reemerged in Diane von Fürstenberg's iconic wrap dresses (*Enzo wrap dress*, no date). The two-dimensional patterns allude to Popova and Stepanova fabrics in the classic red, black and white Constructivist color palette. How does this stylistic lifting resonate in a contemporary setting? Von Fürstenberg textiles are merely formal derivatives, detached from any avant-garde symbolism. We can situate ourselves on Wild's '*Great Wheel of Style*', somewhere between fetishism and revival.

Similarly, a host of other contemporary fashion designers unapologetically recycle Russian Constructivism textile and clothing design, including Dries van Noten, Miu Miu and BCBG – where 'broad stripes that outlined the handkerchief hemlines of dresses and tops and color-blocked geometric shapes' recall the Russian avant-garde (Constructivist Chic, 2010). Collections over the past decade reintroduced utilitarian and genderless contours in textiles laced with minimalist geometries, color-blocking and vivid palettes. They quote history as a tactic for innovation – separating out the idea from the form, resulting in fetishizing, i.e. form devoid of its symbolic logic and meaning.

Fetishization courses through high fashion before the original 'good design' mutates, and crash lands into a bargain bin – cue Meryl Streep's denunciation of Anne Hathaway. An awareness of design history helps contextualize the work of these designers. We can knit the past to the present and begin to forecast the future. We can use this model as a vehicle for innovation, a barometer of 'good design' and a pedagogical template.

But, is it possible for the formal *and* conceptual integrity of the past to endure in the realm of 'good design' today? Sometimes 'good design' is not the goal, but innovation or revival is. To trace the evolution of a visual language through Wild's '*Great Wheel of Style*', picture the birth of the Memphis Group in 1970s Milan, Italy. Founder Ettore Sottsass crossed over from 'corporate Italy' to the muddy waters of early postmodernism. Sottsass left industrial design giant, Olivetti, abandoning modular furniture and cubicle office space design to undo the prevailing conventionalism governing his corporate existence.

Sottsass found himself in the eye of a perfect storm of modernist disruption. He resisted high-paying consumer driven design jobs in favor of collaborations with pioneering artists, architects and critics, including SuperStudio and Archizoom. The Museum of Modern Art invited Sottsass and fellow avant-garde artists to submit ideas for speculative architectures to its 1972 exhibition, *Italy: Design for New Domestic Landscapes* (Ambasz, 1972). Sottsass rendered otherworldly environments and interiors, merging dystopian and utopian ideas about how we live and program space (Figure 4). These collaborative collages depicted majestic landscapes superimposed with grids, symbolizing synthetic invasions to the natural world.

Primed for change, Sottsass next encountered the off-the-wall work of Peter Shire while reading a 1977 edition of New Wave *WET* magazine. Shire, who fetishized 'ugly design', submitted a teapot for publication and, in doing so, spellbound Sottsass. Shire endeavored to be a potter and spent the 1960–70s honing his craft in Los Angeles. His pieces 'were sculptural, geometric interpretations of the traditional teapot, complete with sun-bleached pastel glazes, uncanny angles, and a jumbled collage of parts' (Klingelfuss, 2018).

Sottsass invited Shire back to Milan where together they founded the Memphis Group, an artist collective steeped in the cult of the ugly. Sottsass and the other artists felt liberated by an implicit capriciousness in their work 'freeing them to take massive aesthetic risks, toying with the "conscious(ly) ephemeral" nature of style' (Muller, 2018).

Shire quips:

We were going to let it all hang out, and if it didn't work out, we'd say that's what it was meant to be. It was a face-saving device...It made it interesting and gave us a talking point – one of many (Muller, 2018).

The group's emboldened industrial designs represented a break from Modernism and launched the New Wave with brilliant, jewel tone color palettes adorning idiosyncratic geometries, new-age kitsch, and functional impracticality. Functional objects flaunted random collisions between two- and three-dimensional blocks while furniture pieces subscribed to this same template, a chair or couch comprised outrageously colored upholstered wedges mashed together (Figure 5).

Graphic designers like April Greiman (Greiman 1980; Greiman 2015) and Dan Friedman contributed their own stylistic innovations, using technology and dark room experiments resulting in early Macintosh 8-bit aesthetics. Greiman's designs from this period reflect her formal Swiss training coupled with Memphis-inspired, California New Age (Figure 6-7) while Friedman took a more disciplined radical modernist approach.

At this point, the New Wave and the Memphis Group met the mass market. Both David Bowie (Figure 8) and Karl Lagerfeld bought entire collections to furnish their New York and Paris apartments, respectively (Morby, 2016). The style quickly ballooned out of its sub-cultural roots to the mainstream and the 1980s were aglow. The iconic forms became a sort of kit of parts and soon every surface, interior and textile was venerated in Memphis inspired aesthetics.

1980s sitcom *Saved by the Bell* and 1990s hit *Pee Wee's Playhouse* looked like the Memphis Group vomited onto the shows' interiors from the bowls of bad taste (Claass HAUS, 2017). The style quickly went from fad to cliché to generic, soon entering the lowest vernacular markets like airport gift shops where, in any hub across the country, you could find a white mug with a 2" x 2" grid overlapping a pastel (pink, blue, green, yellow) triangle, reading 'Your City' in Mistral script.

Once the market digested and expelled the last vestiges of the overworked style, the cycle began again. Fetishized in Dior's 2011 runway show (Blanks, 2011; Kate, 2011) – with models adorned in mint green, pale yellow and baby pink tops, wide, red waistbands and black and white diagonally striped skirts – and adopted by ever-elusive and exclusive Supreme for skateboard decks, the look was once again 'interesting' i.e. cool and hip. The mainstream took notice. Retail outlets, including American Apparel, redirected the spotlight and the style was once again inescapable (Carson 2018).

Today, London-based graphic artist, Camille Walala, judiciously honors the Memphis Group's legacy, with her refreshed Memphis-inspired interior design at high-end boutique Opening Ceremony in Tokyo, as well as architectural facades around the world (*Tokyo: Opening Ceremony Store Relocation* (no date)).

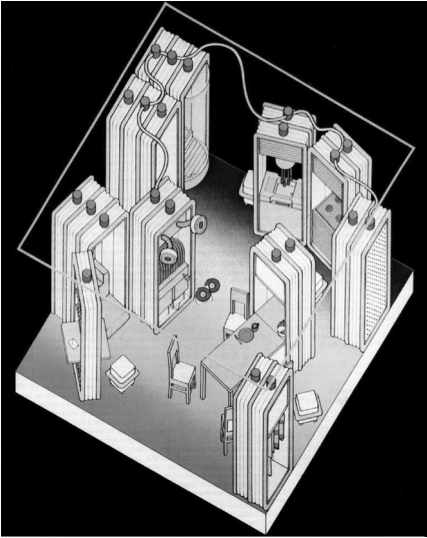


Figure 4: *Preliminary Project for Microenvironment*, Ettore Sottsass, 1971. Used with permission by © Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 5: *Memphis-styled interior*, Memphis Group, 2011. Used with permission by © Wikipedia.



Figure 6: *WET Magazine*, April Greiman and Jayme Odgers.



Figure 8: *Big Sur*, Peter Shire, 1986. Used with permission by © Post Design Gallery.



Figure 7: April Greiman, *California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) viewbook*, 1970s. Used with permission by © April Greiman.

If Walala is the current and logical end point to Memphis's style evolution, she's elevated the work back into high culture. Tracing the work from its origin or destination sheds light, underlining the market's influence on style and form – from high to low and high again. The Memphis equation remains unique because its off-spring resides in our contemporary consciousness, despite being cycled through the digital realm. An entirely new essay could be written on the impact of technology on history, and the speed at which styles come and go. But instead, let's appreciate the completeness of the '*Great Wheel of Style*' here, as a lens to understand the history and stylistic provenance of the ubiquitous 1980s form.

Putting form aside, how do conceptual approaches cycle through history and impact style? Julia Born's *Title of the Show* exhibition (Born, 2009) vis-à-vis Le Corbusier's 'The Engineer's Aesthetic and Architecture' essay illustrates conceptual recycling: a rebirth of new ideas in a contemporary context. In 2009, Leipzig, Germany's Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst (GfZK) invited Julia Born and Laurenz Brunner to showcase the work of their collaborative practice. Born and Brunner presented commissioned and non-commissioned pieces, providing a narrative on their multi-disciplinary practice through a highly conceptual show. Work on view included type experiments, exhibition catalogs, books, posters, postage stamps and surrealist games (Born, 2009). The graphic designs were organized within human-scaled editorial layouts composed on the gallery wall, complete with oversized captions set on a towering grid and folios appearing every eight or ten feet (Figure 9). Windows, radiators, floors, corners, and lights constrained the larger-than-life spreads. Underlining the relationship between art, design and architecture, the effort invited users to interact with and consume the content in new ways.

The scaling and rescaling didn't stop there. Born also designed the show's eponymous exhibition catalog, creating literal book spreads using Johannes Schwartz's unadulterated photographs of the gallery walls (Figure 10). The very windows, radiators, floors and corners that impeded the initial installation appear on the printed pages. The editorial proportions clash with the gallery's architecture and throw the book's page numbers, captions and gutters off-kilter, captivating the viewer. The catalog completely resituates graphic design exhibitions as well as book design.

Could Born have been building on Le Corbusier's 'The Engineer's Aesthetic and Architecture'?

The Architect, by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit; by forms and shapes he affects our senses to an acute degree and provokes plastic emotions; by the relationships which he creates he wakes profound echoes in us, he gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world, he determines the various movements of our heart and of our understanding; it is then that we experience the sense of beauty (Le Corbusier, 1965).

Le Corbusier insists structure and rationality are fountainheads for beauty. Julia Born's experiment typifies Le Corbusier's thinking. Her formal moves depend exclusively on structural and architectural constraints. When Le Corbusier talks about forms and shapes acutely and profoundly influencing the way we understand our world, he may as well be describing *Title of the Show*. Born dismantles our expectations for a graphic design show, and in doing so reveals her conceptual scaffolding – twice (!) – first in three, then two dimensions.



Figure 9: *Title of the Show*, Julia Born, 2009. Used with permission by © Stefan Fischer.



Figure 10: *Title of the Show*, Julia Born, 2009. Used with permission by © Johannes Schwartz.

Architectural order, purity, harmony and geometry shape Born's exhibition, while Born reiterates these same concepts in her catalog design (Le Corbusier, 1965). The architecture could be described as an enormous sketch of the two-dimensional document; mass, surface and plan fully on view. And the result moves us, challenges us and relocates us vis-à-vis Born and Brunner's work. Like Le Corbusier, Born's 'style' directly reflects the engineer's aesthetic attitude.

Evaluating Born's design using Le Corbusier's philosophy expands our conceptual thinking and appreciation of history. First, we have a new framework with which to interact in the contemporary gallery space. We can reorient ourselves in the visible scaffolding, revealing Born's thinking and making. Second, we can experience Born's work in real time. Giving substance to Le Corbusier's highly philosophical ideas grounds his intellectual approach in the concrete. This is what our audience wants. We want the challenge of the big idea, delivered in small, digestible pieces. The resonance lasts.

Is a deep conceptual foundation the pre-cursor for edgy, marginal design? To what extent do these outliers result in commercial success? Then and now conceptual duo – New York Dadaist, Marcel Duchamp, and streetwear impresario, Virgil Abloh – can shed light on these questions.



At the peak of the Futurist and Cubist movements, painter Duchamp put down his brushes in lieu of *readymades*. Newly transplanted to New York via Paris, Duchamp elevated the Dadaist's credo when he assigned new meaning and purpose to ordinary objects, completely blurring the line between high and low. Duchamp's first *readymades* were initially spurned by New York's high art society – but, ultimately, the critics couldn't look away.

Pieces like *Fountain* (Duchamp, 1917) (Figure 11) dismantled a critical discourse concerning 'what is art?' and 'where does art occur?', thrusting Duchamp into the headlights of the conceptual art movement. With *Fountain*, Duchamp famously resituates the urinal by submitting it to a jury-free art show at New York's Armory. Following his submission, he found himself at the center of a controversy surrounding the appropriateness and relevance of *Fountain* among more conventional entries.



Figure 11: *Fountain*, Marcel Duchamp, 1917. Used with permission by © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2020.

Despite the show's advertised un-juried status, *Fountain* was rejected and Duchamp anonymously launched a viral movement, arguing for *Fountain's* inclusion, insisting that ideas – not forms – sustained art (Howarth, 2000). At the same time, he resigned from the Society of Independent Artists, recognizing that the organization lacked the audacity needed to forge new conceptual waters and inch ahead of Paris as the international zeitgeist (Howarth, 2000).

Duchamp created *readymades* for the duration of his career in the arts, every time challenging his audience to rethink the work based on a thought or an experience, rather than an analysis of form or beauty. Duchamp intentionally used the most banal, everyday objects to strip down the thinking to his core objective: write a new narrative, assign new meaning (Howarth, 2000).

Fast forward to 2013, when self-made entrepreneur Virgil Abloh launches his fashion brand, Off-White. Off-White features quotidian pieces: from backpacks, bags, beachwear and belts to sneakers, tops, towels, underwear and wallets and everything in between. There is nothing exotic or unapproachable about Abloh's articles – you encounter these garments on a daily basis. Even more distinctively, Abloh rejects scarcity as a vehicle designed to build value – Off-White appears in over 24 retail locations and high-end department stores.

Abloh elevates his brand through storytelling. Like Duchamp, Abloh is subverting our expectations and challenging us to be an active and vocal audience. Ordinary objects become extraordinary through strategic applications of white, all capital Helvetica messages.

A red, wool scarf reads 'SCARF'; a black canvas tote bag reads 'GOODS'; a pair of black leather cowboy boots read 'FOR WALKING'; a wallet says 'BI-FOLD'; a credit card holder says 'CARD'; a fitted black knit turtleneck dress reads 'DRESS' down the right thigh; and so on (Off-White, no date). Utterly stripped-down garments coupled with utterly stripped-down Helvetica activate both the wearer and the observer. The narrative fluctuates according to its context. It draws the wearer out of submission to another designer's vision and gives the wearer agency. The wearer seizes Abloh's conceptual baton, and moves the narrative down the field. The wearer finishes the story. And this is the magic of Abloh: the ability to triangulate thoughts between the wearer and the observer.

Framing Abloh's work in the conceptual art canon developed in part by Duchamp allows us to better appreciate Abloh's impact and Off-White's value. Like Duchamp, he resituates ordinary items into extraordinary circumstances. He builds an experience. Like Duchamp, that experience is contextual and timeless. Duchamp created a road map for artists borrowing from low culture, resituating ideas, and reinserting that same object back into high culture. Abloh's work occupies the same periphery as Duchamp, his market value relies entirely in the presentation of a thought. Abloh struck conceptual capitalist gold.

Up to this point, we've outlined how formal and conceptual styles cycle through history. Can a philosophical appropriation yield an interesting result? What happens when stylistic quotation becomes a communicative device? Earlier we discussed how Diane von Fürstenberg, Dries van Noten and their contemporaries blended multiple style influences to invent a new sort of Constructivist-inspired bric-a-brac. In this example, Shephard Fairey and his studio, Studio Number One, more overtly appropriated the Russian movement in their 2009 campaign for Saks.

To recap: the Russian State sponsored the Constructivist art movement designed to disseminate political doctrine. Collectivism, universality, practicality, industriousness, and purity evoked the new Soviet utopia. In practice, the general population, classified as a blue-collar proletariat, supported the State through industry and adopted the Communist ethos as a display of nationalism. The State tried – and failed – to control all aspects of proletariat life, promulgating a deep and rigid Nationalist philosophy that ultimately backfired, leading to decades of social, religious and political oppression and later, persecution.

The Constructivist aesthetics yielded pure and simple forms in the red, black and white Communist color palette. Abstraction became a universal language engaging an illiterate peasant population. El Lisstitzky's iconic designs *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* and his work for Mayakovsky's *For the Voice*, display primary shapes and type as image. Type was meant to be seen and heard. For those who could not read, the graphical orientation of the type offered a reading, seeing, intuiting simultaneity.



176. Родченко А.  
Киноглаз. Реж. Дзига Вертов. 1924

Figure 12: *Kino Glaz (Film Eye)*, Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1924. Used with permission by © Museum of Modern Art.

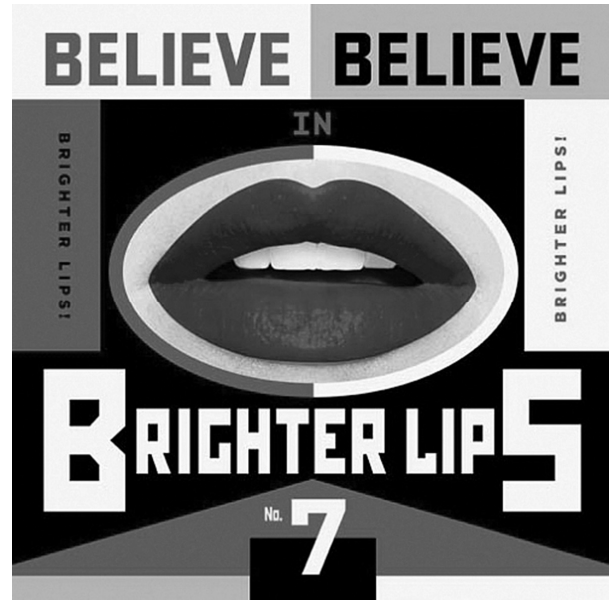


Figure 13: *Saks WANT IT campaign*, Studio Number One, 2009. Used with permission by © Saks and © Studio Number One.

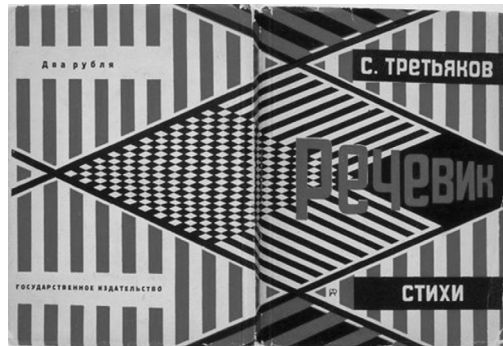


Figure 14: *Rechevik. Stikhi (Orator. Verse)*, Aleksandr Rodchenko, 1929. Used with permission by © Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 15: *Saks WANT IT campaign*, Studio Number One, 2009. Used with permission by © Saks and © Studio Number One.

The dynamically composed forms conjure a vision of the new world, ‘constructed’ through a new visual architecture.

When Studio Number One adopted a nearly identical graphic language for its Saks *Want It* campaign, the meaning was lost. In fact, for a high-end retailer like Saks to use the Constructivist methodology to sell expensive goods to a privileged and exclusive customer base is a complete assault on the Soviet mission. But, let’s give Studio Number One and Saks the benefit of the doubt as we unpack this regurgitation (Figure 12–13).

It goes without saying that the Saks campaign is formally breathtaking. The thick red and black stripes, hard-edged color blocks and basic geometries create a severe and an almost reverent formal architecture. English language messages written in geometric, Cyrillic inspired letterforms connote Russian typography (Figure 14–15).

# Taking a holistic view, we can activate the past to decode the present and forecast the future.

Studio Number One also incorporates black and white photography in the spirit of Communist youths gazing toward an idealized future; although the Saks youths appear more glamorous and sophisticated than their proletariat predecessors.

To think Studio Number One's work is just a formal riff on Constructivism would be naïve. Studio Number One and its founder, Shephard Fairey, openly impart a political attitude, with a legacy of generating graphic design propaganda and a published studio manifesto advocating for a hyperawareness of one's own visual culture (Studio Number One, no date). So, what were Studio Number One and Saks really endorsing in 2009?

2008 saw the international economy come to a grinding halt, collapsing the national debt market into a thunderous heap of dust. The housing bubble burst, investment banks shuttered, retirement accounts evaporated, the auto industry limped its way to safety with a trillion-dollar government bailout – people across the entire economic spectrum felt the aftershocks.

As with earlier economic recessions, the impulse towards restraint is real, and in this case curbing spending was more than just a whim as the unemployment rate skyrocketed. At the same time, history tells us that spending in a recession is the best way to stoke the economy. Cash flowing through the system serves as kindling for financial recovery.

The planning for Studio Number One's Spring 2009 *Want It* campaign undoubtedly coincided with the Fall 2008 global financial crisis. Saks and Studio Number One arguably assumed a patriotic stance with the *Want It* concept. We experienced a repeat performance of art and politics converging, where an abstract and universal form language drove behavior in a way that potentially benefited the country – and undeniably Saks's and Studio Number One's own self-interest, no less. Unlike the other examples cited here, the guiding philosophy remains intact, justifying Studio Number One's literal quotation from the Constructivist formal dictionary. Another conceptual mechanism played out: rather than stylistic innovation, the graphic designs fueled a patriotic fire (Landry, 2014).

These examples illustrate how a deep knowledge of design history provides a framework for appreciating the contemporary landscape. Building this structure into design history pedagogy provides students with an atlas to navigate conceptual relationships between then and now, contextualizing pop culture and demystifying bygone days. Taking a holistic view, we can activate the past to decode the present and forecast the future. Furthermore, we can instill young designers with an appreciation for the past as a benchmark for originality and creative disruption.

Lorraine Wild's *Great Wheel of Style* presages sources for originality when delineating the life cycle of form, beginning with stylistic innovation, followed by adoption, proliferation, overuse, cliché, death, fetish and inevitable revival. She notes the role the market – i.e. the consumer – plays in distorting an agreed-upon notion of 'good design' to mass appeal and the relentlessness of the cycle.

To that end, the historical movements mentioned here are all prolific, overused, clichéd and even dead. Their fetishization and revival in a contemporary setting freshens up overly familiar content, repeatedly situating us at ground zero in stylistic breakthroughs. Starting with Constructivism and Diane von Fürstenberg, we learn how a deep knowledge of the past underpins innovation. Von Fürstenberg and her contemporaries developed a new style through historical quotation. With Sottsass and Walala, we experience the totality of the *Great Wheel of Style* – with stylistic gyrations corrupting its pedigree until Walala firmly implants the revival back into high culture. Relating Julia Born to Le Corbusier shows us how disciplines cross-pollinate, and values and philosophies from one practice apply to another, fueling a new graphic design experience. Building on Le Corbusier's 'The Engineer's Aesthetic and Architecture', Born develops a fresh exhibition style. Similarly, with Off-White, Abloh parlays Duchamp's method for constructing narratives into a new material style. Abloh reorients his audience, challenging us to define aesthetic inputs and outputs. And finally, we witness Studio Number One hijacking the Constructivist ethos to fire up patriotic feelings through literal stylistic quotation.

Like history, 'good design' is subjective and culturally dependent. The examples cited here arguably reside in the canon of 'good design'. A cross section of each example reveals a common layer: a reliance on history buoys formal, conceptual and philosophical decisions. The burden remains on us to translate the formal, conceptual and philosophical past to be good innovators. We are left with the question: Is history the foundation of 'good design' and therefore a critical component of design studio pedagogy?

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# Speculative Graphic Design: The Idiot's-Eye- View

James Dyer

Keywords

Speculation

Intention

Interpretation

Idiocy

Everyday realism



Speculative designs tell stories about imaginary futures, they generate subversive commentaries about what is thought to be proper and possible in the present (Dunne and Raby, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Due to their almost theatrical nature, they are often prototypical and short-lived. Consequently, they rarely land in the hands of ‘end-users’ because the speculative design process is not driven (or hindered) by the production of commodities for a commercial market. With the erasure of end-users, it appears that speculative designers have ultimately abandoned their traditional authority as makers of objects of desire for consumers (Forty, 1986). However, there is an inadvertent authorial hangover in speculative design that has not been addressed in recent criticism. This hangover develops a tension between the designer’s intent and the public’s interpretation, that is to say, between the speculator and spectator. As a way to renegotiate that tension, this paper implores speculative designers to reconsider two previously overlooked aspects of the speculative in design. Firstly, the activism-like performance of objects as means to provoke ‘mindfulness’ (Niedderer, 2004), and secondly the situated seamy everydayness of designs (Wakkary et al., 2015). With the embellishments of these situated and performative characteristics of speculative design, the judgement of ‘proper’ speculation should not be to consider how well the planned intention of the designer has been realised, but instead, how well the designs motivate others to speculate in unintended ‘co-critical’ ways (Ihde, 2006). As such, is it time for designers to embrace the unavoidable ‘semiotic collapse’ – that vanishing point of transparent communication in graphic design – as a way to foster idiosyncratic, unimagined, spontaneous speculations? This paper imagines speculative design beyond a designer’s planned intent. It is contended that speculation can also be derived from everyday experiences, this is particularly notable from the idiomatic interpretations of the ‘idiot’: the speculator *par excellence*.

### Speculative Design

In 2013, designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby wrote *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. Their book compiles speculative works from across diverse design-oriented disciplines. For Dunne and Raby, these works can be called ‘speculative’ because they are a ‘catalyst for social dreaming’ (2013, p.vi). However, the (socio-)speculative aspect of these designs seems to be more ideal than actual. The present paper argues that speculative designs are in some way closed off from the open modes of (social) speculation they claim to provoke. This can be illustrated with two examples from Dunne and Raby’s *Speculative Everything*. Firstly, Jaemin Paik’s 2012 speculative design film *When We Live to 150* (Dunne and Raby, 2013, pp.44-46), and secondly product designer Revital Cohen’s *Respiratory Dog* (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p.64).

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1 Dr Spencer Roberts’ process-philosophical framing of graphic design research and pedagogy is his own original and unique territory, which he unrestrainedly introduced to me over years of generous supervision. I sincerely wish him the best in his ambitious future works. Thanks to Dr Rowan Bailey and Nick Deakin for their generous support in the development of this paper.

Jaemin Paik's film, *When We Live to 150*, is framed as a 'catalyst' for addressing the socio-economic consequences of extending human life. Paik considers how living to the age of 150 could strain traditional family dynamics. In the project, Paik speculates about a family-share system, whereby familial relationships are arranged by contract rather than kin. Notably, Paik does not design marketable products, this is a trope of speculative design. Instead, she communicates her speculations through a series of photographs and a short documentary. In the role of researcher, Paik addresses the current striving for long life – such as in transhumanism (Bostrom, 2005) – but it is unclear when the 'social' aspect of this 'social dreaming' occurs. If this speculative project is about provoking and amplifying reactions, as it claims to be in the role of 'catalyst', then where is the platform for the reactionary debate, the dialogue, the discussion, if ever, between designer and public, or public and institution? Often, the responsibility of 'social dreaming' in speculative design is left exclusively to the visionary-like designer. As such, it is not suggested that *When We Live to 150* is devoid of speculation, this is not a semantic quarrel between what is and what is not appropriately identified as speculative, critical, or discursive design (Auger, 2013). Instead, it is the capacity for these speculative designs to support any kind of open public speculation that is unclear. For instance, does speculative design generate open opportunities for those with the means to make that may lack expertise, a sort of 'citizen designer', for example (Heller and Vienne, 2003)? The importance of 'openness' in speculative design is approached later in the paper.

In another example, Revital Cohen's *Respiratory Dog* (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p.64) – from the 2008 series *Life Support* – speculates on the ways animals are treated as resources for humans. The project features a greyhound with a bellow strapped to its back. As the dog walks, the bellow mechanism pumps air into the human's lungs. Cohen's work speculates about future relationships between humans, animals, and technology. Ultimately, the role of 'the speculator' still belongs exclusively to the quasi-authorial designer. In other words, the agency of the designer seems to be prioritised over the political consequences of their designs. The way that *Respiratory Dog* is accessed by the public 'spectator', on the other hand, is through well-staged photographs and technical illustrations. This leaves the spectator ambivalently witnessing a previously unimagined dog-operated respiratory machine. Therefore, there is no speculative 'exchange' in this supposed 'social dreaming' (2013, p.vi).

It seems to be common, in speculative design, for the designer to be detached, and for their designs to be transcendent, which leaves the spectator in a mute state of interpassivity. As such, the social public, who are supposedly being drawn into speculative frames of mind through these provocative designs, are left watching designers speculate for them. This is what makes speculative designs ostensibly closed. It is curious to consider how closed these speculative designs actually are despite the fact that they claim to be promoting open social exchanges by inviting speculation. The following section argues this may be the consequence of withdrawing speculative designs from commercial contexts.

### **Spectating Not Speculating**

By now, it is well known that Dunne and Raby have a distaste for the overly conservative and economically viable commercial designs of the 1980s. Speculative design antagonises commercialism, it embellishes the broader social, economic and political contexts of design that have receded in the last 30 years. In this way, Dunne and Raby are bravely calling for a 'pluralism in design, not of style but of ideology and values' (2013, p.9), which is motivated 'beyond the commercial' (2013, p.6). Generally,

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speculative designs are critical concept designs, which purport to open debates about the present social imagination and future social potential, this is already well established in contemporary critical design writing (Auger, Dunne and Raby, 2019). However, as has been argued, it is not clear when, if ever, these political movements of social imagination are supposed to happen, and it is not obvious how people other than designers could make them happen.

With the erasure of unknown end-users, which would normally be accounted for in traditional commercial graphic design – such as in considerations of ergonomics, financial viability, marketing, and so on – the predominant way speculative designs are accessed is through the documentation of their transient existence. As such, more often than not, these speculative happenings occur in closed off quasi-exclusive ways because they exist outside of a public (commercial) reality, such as Philips Design Probes' *Microbial Home* (Etherington, 2011), which was only exhibited for a week in the Piet Hein Eek gallery. As such, their prop-like artefacts must be documented and exhibited as things of past speculation, such as James King's *Dressing the Meat of Tomorrow* (2006), which is a project predominantly made up of photographs of models

of speculative foods. Evidently, there is no liveliness to these speculations. Arguably, this is because the deliberative and adversarial speculations in public forums, such as the commercial market, are lacking in speculative design.

As such, by producing and consuming their own designs, speculative designers have, probably unintentionally, turned themselves into their own ideal users; they act out the intended interaction without the complexities of (mis)interpretations. Consequently, this is what makes a purportedly open speculative design reliably speculative because it is ostensibly closed off from the possibilities of any error or confusion that may intervene into and undermine that planned speculation. In this way, speculative designers are still broadly operating in the context of a 'service industry', though not a traditional one. Ultimately, speculative design appears to be a designer-exclusive performance that precludes the possibility of 'erroneous' interactions and spontaneous 'false interpretations' by the consuming public.<sup>2</sup> This can be referred to as the designer's authorial hangover. Later in the present paper, the authority of speculative designers is undermined by the conceptual persona of 'the idiot'. However, the constructive value of interpretation over intention must first be established.

It appears that speculative designers are at an impasse. They believe in a world that can be changed through ideological intervention, however, to maintain the meaningfulness (speculative intent) and purposefulness (correct application) of their designs, they must be understood 'properly'. That is to say, speculative designs emerge out of a pluralist ideology of open indeterminacy. But by stepping out of the commercial market, the conditions of possibilities of speculative designs contract to prioritise their more determinate-like intentions.

There is no dispute that these designs are speculative, but they are only speculative in ways they are intended to be. Consequently, this exclusivity delimits speculation – as an open, critical, contemplative interpretation – to be a closed designerly plan. This is why speculative designs are performed and exhibited from within controlled designer-friendly environments, such as the studio, the gallery, the film set, the stage, the archive, and so on. Therefore, the condition of open indeterminacy – such as in the situated complex ecologies of public lives, which have incidentally been marginalised in speculative design – is only appropriate for speculative designers when it is a resource to be de-signed into more determinately fixed 'speculative' things. For instance, the fixity of King's *The Meat of Tomorrow* (2006), Philips' *Microbial Home* (2011), and Cohen's *Respiratory Dog* (2008) belies the complexity of intensive farming, waste pollution, and anthropocentrism. Furthermore, the capacity to (re)animate these designs through potentially disruptive, or contradictory public speculation is not possible because the designs are not available for those speculative public exchanges.

If we accept the worldview proposed by Dunne and Raby – that there are transformative ways to negotiate what is considered to be kinetically possible, plausible, probable, and preferable (2013, pp.2-6) – then the potential of those speculative designs cannot be fixed either. In other words, at a greater or lesser intensity, change through speculation must be possible at all levels. However, it is evident that the open multistability of things endorsed by speculative design is not afforded in the designs themselves, instead it is only the justification for

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2 All consumption is metabolised. The German for metabolism translates as 'material exchange' (*Stoffwechsel*). Generally, this (social) material exchange is compromised in speculative design.

their production. This is most notable because the moment of speculation and the resulting speculative artefacts are almost always curiously absent from speculative social interaction. In which case, in speculative design, the intent of the designer is prioritised over the private idiosyncratic interpretations of the public. Despite these designs supposedly being catalysts for speculation, they are instead the documentation of speculation after the fact. In this way, speculative designs have a curious anachronistic texture to them, which is probably why they often appear to be prematurely twee or kitsch. As such, is speculation only open to those educated knowers with disciplinary directives? Is it possible to be unschooled and uninitiated in these seemingly proper procedures, whilst still being speculative with the productive connotations that 'speculative design' has? These themes will be returned to in the concluding sections of the present paper. To understand historically how speculation can occur beyond the intended plan of the designer the following section turns to literary theory.

### **The Intentional Fallacy**

In the midst of an emergent American New Criticism, literary theorists William Kurtz Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe Beardsley wrote of an 'intentional fallacy' in literary criticism (1946). Similar to the early 20th century method of practical criticism, Wimsatt and Beardsley opposed the notion of a definitive, hermetic intention from an author in a text and instead emphasised the role of meaning-making from the reader's interpretation. Wimsatt and Beardsley claim that the 'intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work' (1946, p.468). Primarily, Wimsatt and Beardsley propose, this is because 'the poem' (read: design) 'belongs to the public' (1946, p.470) and is therefore 'detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it' (1946, p.470). By making the text social, Wimsatt and Beardsley challenge the original authority of the author. If this new critical line of argument is followed in speculative design, then speculation can occur beyond the intended plan of the designer and can unfold idiosyncratically through open social interpretations. In this way, interpretation can be considered a mode of speculation in itself.

Returning to graphic design, interpretative (or: counter-intentional) speculation can be illustrated in three ways, via context, association, and relation. The internet memes commonly called 'graphic design fails' are used as examples; these are commercial graphic designs that exist beyond a designer's intent. For example, a poster in a shop window features a photograph of a woman in a suit, her hand is extended out towards the viewer, below it states 'accepting resumes' and underneath the poster, beyond the intent of the designer, in the direction of her outstretched hand is a bin. This could be considered an idiosyncratic meaning due to the design's specific situated context. Alternatively, in another 'graphic design fail', the American 'Do It' hardware store sells a pack of single-edge razor blades. Their 'Do It' logo is at the top of the package, below it is an illustration of a razor blade, further below the illustration, in red block capitals, it reads: 'satisfaction guaranteed'. Outside of the designer's intent, the design – with razors, goading encouragement, and claims of satisfaction – can be interpreted as something promoting self-harm, this could be called meaning by association. Designer Bruno Munari writes about these curious unintentional graphic

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events<sup>3</sup> whereby public interpretation – for example, by context or association – takes precedence over the designer’s intent. Munari claims, they are designs ‘far from the mind of the designer’ (2008, p.88). For example, he describes how

every figurative element of the poster that is cut by the right- or left-hand edge will inevitably combine in some unforeseen way, with the poster next door (2008, p.88).

However, we can expand the poster-to-poster relation to be a poster-to-world relation. As a networked entity, there are countless combinations of unforeseeable graphic events that exist ‘far from the mind of the designer’. In Munari’s example, this could be considered meaning by relation. As such, whether by context, association,

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3 The ‘graphic event’, to coin a term, is the (often unintended) plurality and indefiniteness of a graphic design. As an everyday happening, the graphic event is what a situated graphic design becomes in the banality of mundane reality.

or relation, it is possible to see how graphic designs ‘go about the world’ beyond the intent of the designer. Taking examples from ‘graphic design fails’, as a kind of semiotic collapse, we can accept that once designs are made public, they inherently exist in a ‘peculiar possession’ (Wimsatt and Beardsley, p.470). Therefore, in a seamier sort of everyday ‘social dreaming’, the capacity for speculation already extends beyond the designer’s special censorship.

So far it has been proposed that the authorial hangover of speculative designers is amplified by the absence of their designs from more commercial settings, this is because the ‘intention’ of the designer has taken precedence over the public’s ‘interpretation’. The literary argument for the intentional fallacy frames interpretation as an almost inevitable, constructive, and possibly agonistic, alternative to any given intention. It is in this way that the present paper finds open public interpretation, as a proper kind of ‘social dreaming’, to be a process of speculation. As a way of characterising what is lacking in speculative design, the following section introduces the idiot as an everyday, unschooled, speculator. This is because the idiot is always imminently – that is to say, in a situated, embodied, capacity – interpreting the world in more or less unintended and oblique ways. In other words, the idiot is not quite getting what others get, but is always (creatively) making of it what they can, this is what makes them the speculator *par excellence*.

### The Idiot

An experience of reality that undercuts convention is speculative, it is like an absurd wandering curiosity. In this way, speculation cannot exclusively be a specialism, or a discipline, or a means to an end. By refocusing the aperture of speculative design in this way, the intent of the designer – as researcher, critic, or author – is backgrounded and the murky unplanned pluralism of private-public interpretations is brought to focus in the foreground. The process of making meaning through speculation is not the unique responsibility of designers, as producers and consumers of their own speculations. Instead, it is an everyday contingent process dependent on, amongst other things, the idiosyncrasies of context, relation, and association. This ushers speculative design out of the void-like space of the designerly ideal – in the studio, gallery, archive, and so on – and surrenders speculative design to the lively and playful social dreaming that it purports to encourage. As a consequence, speculations do not necessarily have any immediate practical use. Arguably, it has been the designer’s drive for a more practical, or ‘literal’, utility that has worked to ‘censor’ speculation. In a similar vein, Barthes claims:

Every reader knows that, if he is prepared not to let himself be intimidated by the censorship implicit in literal readings: does he not feel that he is re-entering into contact with a certain beyond [...] that is what is called *dreaming* (1987, p.69).

The ‘reader’, in this case, is the conceptual persona of the ‘idiot’. In the present paper, the idiot is used as a means to explore the speculative possibilities – that ‘certain beyond’ – of everyday graphic design.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Similarly, cultural theorist Mike Michael supports the idiot as a resource for addressing speculative design’s contribution to Science and Technology Studies (2013).

In *What is Philosophy?* (2009) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari frame the idiot as a ‘private thinker’ that ‘wills the absurd’ (2009, p.62). They claim the idiot has no ‘wish for indubitable truths’ instead the idiot ‘wants the lost, the incomprehensible, and the absurd to be restored to him’ (2009, p.62). The idiot can be framed as the conceptual persona of a public that experiences the everyday realism of graphic design on the fringes of the designer’s ideal intent. In this way, the idiot is a troubling persona for a graphic designer. If the designer’s job is to codify a particular intention in a sign – whether it is a ‘message’, an aesthetic sensibility, or an ideology – from the idiot’s-eye-view the intention is not ‘received’. In this way, transparency, for the idiot, is the vanishing point of communication in graphic design. Instead of ‘getting’ the intention, the idiot only ‘makes’ of it what they can, which is dependent on context, relation, and association.

Etymologically, the idiot is someone incapable of ordinary logical reason, they are the uneducated ‘layperson’ lacking specialism or profession. From *idios*, meaning ‘one’s own’, and *idioumai*, meaning ‘appropriate to oneself’, it is the public’s private subjective experience that fixates the present paper’s definition of the idiot. The idiot is a peculiar mixture of critical whims and tastes that are specific only to themselves, this is their personal distinctness. Arguably, everyday idiocy is more or less a primitive psychosensory process of speculation. As such, speculation is the idiot’s discourse, but the idiot is an underappreciated voice in speculative design, possibly because there is no systematic or rational (read: designerly) way to be idiotic. However, this does not mean that the idiot is incapable of designing (speculatively).

For example, we can imagine the frenzied amorphous collections of everyday graphic images. Consider the pavement dramas that occur between littered streets, shopfront advertisements, and passers-by; generally, these are obsolete associations. However, for the idiot, this is the zone of speculation, it is a place for a *trouville* (lucky find), which is unaccountable in the designer’s plan. Playfully, this is where meanings, messages, narratives, and purposes are educed through speculation. Unintentional associations connect, disconnect and reconnect freely. Taking inspiration from the Surrealists, an idiot’s speculation comes from these ‘fortuitous encounters’ with designs. This is the ‘peculiar possession of the public’ (Wimsatt and Beardsley, p.470) that is willing to witness (dreamily) that ‘certain beyond’ (Barthes, 1987, p.69) where designs exist ‘far from the mind of the designer’ (Munari, 2008, p.88). This is not an attack (*ad hominem*) on designers as hopeless communicators, but instead it is a political argument that we must consider the unintentional as an everyday speculative experience. The idiot is not cut off from the systems, structures, and ideologies that speculative designers attempt to make visual, instead they are an underimagined, almost censored, public aspect from within that ecology of systems, structures, and ideologies.

The desire to design out miscommunication for the sake of exacting speculation is a fallacy because the ability for an object to be ‘speculative’ is not dependent on the object having unique speculative qualities, such as being politically charged or being aesthetically avant-garde. Instead, it is the open access to potential excess that encourages us to creatively speculate. For example, IKEA’s flat pack furniture is notoriously open to misinterpretation and error, this is because its surplus potential to become something other than what is intended is foregrounded in its ‘flatness’. Furthermore, this flat characteristic has also given rise to an ‘IKEA hackers’ community, where speculative DIY projects that reinterpret and modify the IKEA



furniture beyond its designed intentions are shared and reviewed. It is this equivalent potential for speculation through excess – or what could be called a sort of noumenal freedom, or ontological liberalism – that is being denied in speculative design. Following this line of argument, a difference arises between asking ‘what if’, as Dunne and Raby do, and ‘could it be’.

For example, in an online video from 2017, a group of children try to use an audio cassette tape (ViralHog, 2017). One child holds the cassette, without player, to his ear and strains to hear for something. Another one suggests putting it in the TV, she is corrected by her brother: ‘they didn’t have TVs back in those days’. The other child, holding the cassette to his face, like a mask, looking through the reels, suggests ‘you look at the music video through here’. These young speculators are not asking ‘what if’ – in terms of, what if the thing we know was actually something else – they are asking ‘could it be like this’. As such, they are exploring the inevitable surplus of the de-signed object without primary (prejudicial) knowledge or the desire to sustain an assumed (speculative) intention. This is the politics of an unknowing idiot’s-eye-view.

This kind of idiocy is politically speculative because it enforces disagreements that are not based on a set of established modes of contestation. Whereas speculative designs are reliant on the tension between what is speculatively ‘possible’, and what is more or less rationally established to be plausible, preferable, and probable (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p.5). In contrast, due to their unregulated nature, the political tensions of idiotic speculations exist in advance of these already established differences; the speculating children are not opposing anything they already know to exist, they are not contesting the plausible, preferable, and probable characteristics of a cassette by asking, as speculative designers do, ‘what if’ the cassette was something other. Instead, in the interactive process of understanding the cassette, they extend it out from relative unintelligibility into a more intelligible, but nonetheless idiotic, speculative existence. This is why idiocy is such an animating mode of speculation because it is so unsettling.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the idiot is ‘the uninitiated, private, or ordinary individual as opposed to the technician or expert’ (2009, p.221). Evidently, from the idiot’s perspective, the ability to freely speculate about everyday things is dependent on the ontologically kinetic nature of things. However, it is also clear that the risks of ‘error’ – in the dynamic uncertainty of things in the world – is generally closed off in the speculative designs compiled by Dunne and Raby. This is because, by their nature, designers de-sign already open things into more determinate, fixed and therefore closed things. The error, in this instance, would be an idiotic intervention that corrupts a designer’s intended speculation. However, there is a productive and transformative quality to the idiosyncratic perspective of the idiot’s-eye-view that is not being acknowledged in speculative design. As such, how can speculative design foster the idiot’s deregulated attitude, unschooled perception, and uninitiated character?

Unbounded by tradition, the idiot enquires in seemingly improper and uncustomary ways. Amongst the frenzy of everyday graphic images, the idiot makes new interpretations of things by (constructively) mistaking the designer’s intent, such as in the ‘graphic design fails’. In doing so, the idiot provokes an acknowledgement of the precariousness and theatricality of graphic design. There is something suspiciously complicit when the total message is purported to be received ‘loud and clear’, as if transparent communication is actually possible, when we know it is always out of reach but so ‘tantalisingly close’ (de Vries, 2012). In a state of lucid debilitation,

the idiot is able to interpret graphic images in a way unintended by the graphic designer. In that moment when a 'given' designed intention overflows into an idiotic interpretation it is unbounded and 'open' to uncensored speculation. As such, to be more than just curious examples of speculations past, speculative designs could provoke idiotic speculations by being more open platforms for this indeterminacy and difference. Speculative design should give voice to idiocy and work to secularise speculation.

It has been argued that speculative designers have, possibly inadvertently, achieved a more traditionally closed form of design by relying on the ideal determination of their designerly intent; their objects must be properly planned and properly used. This is a much more organised treatment of speculation, which undermines the more process-generative characteristics of everyday things-in-the-world. Consequently, there needs to be a level of uncertainty in speculation for it to regain zeal and contemporary social relevance. By opposing the authorial hangover identified in a designer's speculative intent, the present paper has embellished the public's private role of interpretation, which is characterized in the conceptual persona of the idiot. Ultimately, this paper strives to imbue speculative design with a more concrete, seamy realism of everyday life from the idiot's-eye-view. This paper concludes with two aspects of existing design practices that should be brought closer to contemporary speculative design as a way to support everyday (idiotic) speculations.

## Conclusion

It is admirable that Dunne and Raby have encouraged designers to think of design outside of marketability. However, if they are no longer designing for consumers and are instead designing for citizens (as they claim) then there must also be a shift in the participant-citizen's intrigue, drive, and desire. Arguably, this could be better achieved by considering two under-appreciated qualities of speculative design. Firstly, their activism-like performance, and secondly, their situated everydayness.

Designer Kristina Niedderer claims that some designs have the capacity to evoke mindful interactions as well as behavioural change. She uniquely categorises these as 'performative objects' (2007). For Niedderer these are 'objects in social contexts' (2007, p.3) that 'make their users perform in a particularly mindful way' (2007, p.4), whereby mindfulness is the 'attentiveness of the user towards the social consequences of actions performed with the object' (2007, p.4). For instance, Niedderer originally trained as a goldsmith and silversmith, in 1999 she made *Social Cups* (Niedderer, no date). These are a series of silver cups in the shape of wine glasses but without stems or bases. Their rounded bottoms make them too unstable to stand on their own, but each cup has a connector on its side to link with neighbouring cups, when a few are attached together they form a stable structure (2006, pp.3-4). Therefore, when lifting a cup to drink and returning the cup to the table, people must interact and communicate. It is in this way that *Social Cups* provoke mindful behaviour. For Niedderer this 'raised some debate about the potential and value of the object to influence interaction' (2006, p.4). The users of these cups can, to an extent, be creative with the possibilities of the object as they speculate about their function and purpose. In her doctoral thesis, Niedderer claims:

'Social Cups' require the user to decide how to work them, thus implying some kind of responsibility [...] This causes questioning, reflection, and

finally action that becomes socially meaningful, because of the social context (2004, p.141).

When considering speculative design in these terms, the mood of mindfulness is lacking. Whilst the designers are considering counter-intuitive, or subversive ways to renegotiate social habits, what the beholder experiences does not provoke them to speculate in a uniquely mindful way. That is to say, the beholder must already be mindful of design and its traditions to find these speculative designs to be speculating. However, if speculative designers were working to provoke mindfulness in others, rather than to communicate their own mindfulness, this may foster idiocy in a shared social context. In other words, by stepping away from that popular modernist fantasy of designs being precise hermetic units, speculative designers should make ambiguous designs for the sake of confusing speculation; they must embrace the unavoidable semiotic collapse. In doing this, they will give a platform to more open 'connected ecologies' (Blauvelt, 2008) of idiocy in everyday life, and they will foster the often-shadowed aspects of a public's private interpretations of designs for the sake of social dreaming.

Considering the absence of speculative design from the grubby realism of everyday life, researchers Ron Wakkary, William Odom, Sabrina Hauser, Garnet Hertz, and Henry Lin, offer a situated alternative, they call this a 'material speculation' (2015). They use 'actual artefacts' that are situated in the home to conduct 'critical inquiries'. They claim, to recognise the 'depth and quality of emergent possibilities, that material speculations be a lived experience rather than simply an intellectual reflection' (2015, p.9). Arguably, they are promoting a kind of banal realist speculation. For instance, the 'table-non-table' is a low aluminium chassis with hundreds of sheets of paper stacked on top. The table is motorized and slowly moves in a random direction for 5 to 12 seconds every 20 to 110 minutes.

The table lived with one household for five months, became part of two households for six months and three weeks respectively, and became part of two households in a preliminary deployment for several days in Vancouver, British Columbia (2015, p.7).

As a 'material speculation', they claim that the table-non-table 'provoked a range of speculations as participants attempted to make sense of its purpose and place within their homes' (Wakkary, et al., 2015, p.7). There is something idiotic about negotiating the odd 'unfitting' behaviours of a motorized table, it is as if the idiot that lived with these designs is willing 'the incomprehensible, and the absurd to be restored to him' (Deleuze and Guattari, p.62). This situated speculation addresses the challenges of the absent designer, and the transcendent designed artefact, such as in many of the examples Dunne and Raby offer in *Speculative Everything* (2013). In situated 'material speculations' speculations are imminent in their everydayness.

Considering these two examples, in general, contemporary speculative design lacks, what could be called, 'mindfulness' and 'situation' in the everyday. In judgement, 'good' speculative design is not concerned with how well a person can pursue the threads of another's speculation, but instead how much they are compelled to speculate for themselves *non finis*. If we preserve the notion of an inherently

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rational designer logic in speculation, then we are still holding on tightly to the malignant conflict between supposed improper shadowy interpretations and proper authoritative specialist intentions. Surely, this is the 'regime of truth' that a speculative designer could so convincingly undermine for the sake of those inspiringly idiotic, fortuitous, everyday, wandering curiosities.

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Free!\*

Reclaiming  
'freedom' from  
the neoliberal  
lexicon

Cathy Gale

Keywords

Critical pedagogy

Freedom

Educational field

Neoliberal lexicon

Emancipatory

Neoliberal habitus



Intellectual and creative freedom underpins traditional notions of university. In late capitalism's restructuring of education not only have pedagogic frameworks adjusted to corporate values and business models but the language of social justice and freedom has been seamlessly absorbed into a neoliberal habitus. 'Free' has entered the neoliberal lexicon in a distortion of Freire's (1993) essence of education as the practice of freedom – the means by which people deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world – now usurped and muddled into a global discourse of consumption. This impacts on graphic design because its professional and pedagogic practices are not only entrenched in a market-driven culture but actively serve to facilitate and feed its growth. Drawing on Freire (1993), bell hooks (1994) and Giroux (2011, 2014a, 2014b) a critical reflexivity is brought to bear on the slippage of 'freedom' from agency and action to maintenance of the status quo. From 'free' schools in an unregulated competitive academic marketplace, to free speech in universities and galleries, the words we use to frame ideas and ideologies in the social field of design education require the closest scrutiny. 'Free' – so often associated with the asterisk, the small print, the catch and the clause which subverts the emancipatory offer – is interrogated as a social product. True freedom comes at a price.

### **Introduction / terms of engagement**

Free\* So often associated with the asterisk, directing your gaze to a block of dense small print, detailing the clause (available to those with property/bank account only), the catch (for a limited period only! Tied to a phone, gym, or media provider, if you don't remember to cancel the contract before the end of the 'trial period'), the conditions (you may lose your house, car, dog, social status, if you fail to keep up with payments), often negating the emancipatory offer (of a lifetime!) advertised. Buy One Get One Free! The exclamation mark adding impetus to the invitation to discover more about this (very) special offer. In the early part of the 20th century, the free giveaway emerged as an effective advertising strategy, serving to enhance the attraction of the main product being promoted. But 'Free' comes at a price. A hidden cost that is usually shouldered by the consumer.

When employed as a prefix, 'free' suggests autonomy, a release or exemption from constraints, confinement or rules. For instance, the free jazz movement that emerged in 1960s U.S. sought expressive musical agency (liberation) and emotional intensity through improvisational methods that broke with the perceived limitations of regular tempos, and chord construction. However, in recent populist political discourse free movement, free speech and free trade have perceptively shifted to less emancipatory contexts of meaning, retreating to the nostalgic myths of empire (U.K.) in a neoliberal exercise of nation (re-) building. Freedom of movement places the four fundamental freedoms guaranteed by EU law – labour, capital, goods and services – on a par with the free movement of people within the same market (rather than as a socio-cultural dynamic). Political and media rhetoric around free movement (related to Brexit, in the U.K.) has exposed not only socio-economic inequalities and racial bias (Warrell and Pilling, 2019) but has also revealed the manipulation of social media sites and data mining by right wing groups seeking to disrupt and distort democracy, as illustrated in *The Great Hack*, directed by Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim (2019). Free trade seeks to eliminate barriers to global commerce that take the form of tariffs and quotas, to facilitate economic growth and wealth for all partners. But a lack of

regulatory controls, including the protection of workers' rights has led to appalling working conditions, health issues and large-scale tragedies in addition to a disastrous environmental impact. Free speech, in the guise of a political/human right (enacting the U.S. First Amendment to the Bill of Rights), has excused/legitimised the worst excesses of extremism, trolling and hate speech (racist, homophobic, Islamophobic, misogynist) in the public domain (Ellis-Peterson, 2017; Blasdel, 2018). 'Free' thus acts as a conditional in a socio-economic and political framing of language.

'Free' has entered the neoliberal lexicon in a distortion of Paolo Freire's (1993) essence of education as the practice of freedom – the means by which people deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world – now usurped and muddled into a global discourse of consumption. Drawing on Freire (1993), bell hooks (1994) and Henry A. Giroux (2011, 2014a, 2014b) a critical reflexivity is brought to bear on the slippage of freedom from a transformative process underpinned by intellectual curiosity to its current uses in the commodified market of design education, marked by increased bureaucracy, metrics, surveys and conformity. In Giroux's (2014a, p.6) words:

Critical learning has been replaced with mastering test-taking, memorizing facts, and learning how not to question knowledge or authority... this pedagogy of market-driven illiteracy has eviscerated the notion of freedom.

For Freire, (1993) education is a pedagogical and political act, which interrogates oppressive power relations and seeks to free marginalised and dehumanised groups from its control, resisting conformity and constraint. Should the language of freedom be a political feature of design and pedagogic practices? Neither education nor graphic design are neutral activities, from the strategic deployment of visual data and diagrams to edited photographs and film footage, design has always manipulated image and word to inform and persuade. Graphic design cannot claim to mediate a solely technical/digital process of transmitting information from A to B but actively creates and disseminates meaning (Fiske, 1990, p.39) through words (and images), which act as the 'bearers and generators of ideas... [which, then] metaphorize and metabolize into one another by a kind of spiral evolution' (Baudrillard, 2003, p.xiii). Nomenclature and the semantic components of design (theory and practice) overlap with a social sphere predominantly framed by market forces. As a techno-social discipline, graphic design is not only entrenched in a neoliberal culture of expansion and accumulation but actively serves to facilitate and feed its growth. The language of design has been co-opted by the language of commerce in the form of a capitalist creep into all spheres of public life: a profit-driven socio-economic system, which reinforces inequality, exploitation, conformity and dispossession (Fisher, 2009; Giroux, 2014a, 2014b). Yet, as Victor Margolin (1989, p.26) argues: 'The better we understand the process by which values are transformed into material [and visual] culture, the more we can consider alternative transformations'. Building on Raymond Williams' (1976) *Keywords* – a critical comment on the cultural usage and slippage of language – this paper, thus, proposes a hypothetical new entry, one of many new terms needed for a changing global landscape in which graphic design seeks to re-define its social efficacy and authenticity.

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First, this essay will examine the fluidity and social production of (visual) language and meaning in relation to the socio-philosophical notions of (neoliberal) habitus and (educational) field (social and institutional arenas) developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1991). For Bourdieu, (1991) language is a historical formation framed by socio-political and economic forces, which compete to control and empower the modes of expression of certain classes or social groups. The same methods are also employed to disempower other groups. Social semiotic theory (Kress and Leeuwen, 2001, 2006; Kress, 2010) connects linguistic theory with the everyday generation of

symbolic meaning, embodied in the artefacts and visual tools of graphic design. For the purpose of this essay, I'm adapting Bourdieu's (1991) concept of the habitus to frame the contemporary conditions of design education and practice, renamed the neoliberal habitus. Within this context the field of education forms a focal point for reclaiming Freire's (1993) emancipatory notions of critical pedagogy considered in the internal social spaces of academia, described by Giroux (Giroux and Purpel, 1983) and hooks (1994) as the hidden curriculum, and externally in media and government articulations of socio-economic conditions. For Giroux, (2014a, p.37) critical pedagogy provides dialogic tools for unpicking, deconstructing and reformatting design terminology, framing 'pedagogy as a mode of critical intervention'. In this way, design students and tutors are challenged to disrupt norms and assumptions by asking difficult questions through provocative works, actions and ideas, enacting the intellectual and creative freedoms that underpin traditional notions of university. Students are, thus, encouraged to reclaim freedom as active critical agents of change rather than passive consumers of knowledge (Freire, 1993; Giroux, 2011; hooks, 1994).

The choices we make as designers are intrinsically political. Every design subtly persuades its audience one way or another and every design vocabulary refers directly or indirectly to history and context, despite claims of neutrality (Buchanan, 1989). With every decision in the design process we (designer-educators) have the potential to exclude, reconfirm, subvert or privilege socio-cultural norms and socio-economic power structures: values that become embodied in design artefacts, technologies and messages. Design's indispensable ubiquitous presence in everyday communication media and the man-made world puts designers in a position of responsibility, to be critically vigilant, to challenge 'common' knowledge, and through critical reflexivity and visual syntax (McCoy, 1990), to interrogate the inherent political, economic and socio-cultural conditions of the discipline. If critically unchallenged, design will continue to be responsible for shaping a biased cultural landscape articulated through homogeneity rather than the tension of difference.

Many terms and phrases deployed in design discourse and pedagogic practice are adapted from tangential disciplines such as sociology and philosophy, a few travel less far, from art and architecture. Whether the journey is short or long, the recontextualised terminology is often perceived, valued and employed quite differently, due to often intangible 'formations and distributions of energy and interest (Williams, 1976, p.11). Words such as 'neutral', 'universal' and even 'critical' are subject to socio-historical modification and significance within design debate and commentary. Using 'ideology' as an example, the final section will consider the manipulation of certain words through design (intention, strategy and political propaganda) to achieve control over symbolic discourse in the public domain. Acknowledging graphic design's acquisitive and amorphous nature, this paper proposes a new edition of Raymond Williams' (1976) *Keywords*, designed as a dialogic addition to the terms in which design is understood and the words used to frame its activities and intentions in the neoliberal habitus.

## **1. The socio-cultural process of (visual) language**

Graphic designers are adept at direct (veracious) and more subtle (disingenuous) strategies, which deploy words, images and technologies as instruments of persuasion, as tools of information and disorientation, and as symbols of power and constraint. We adapt the codes and interrelations of (visual) language to mould notions of belonging, difference, identity, freedom and resistance. For Bourdieu, (1991) such

power is culturally and symbolically created, continually reaffirmed and validated through social structures. Language should, thus, be viewed not only as a method of transmission such as that framed by John Fiske (1990) in communication studies, but as a mode of communication infused with agency through which groups and individuals pursue their own interests. In Bourdieu's (1991) notion of the habitus, the acquisition of cultural capital is facilitated through ingrained habits, insights and skills that we all gradually accumulate over time from childhood. Absorbed from the immediate sphere of our life experiences, this knowledge helps us to navigate through the social complexities of daily life, decoding experiences, behaviour and language in acts of socio-cultural survival (for some) or advancement (for others). For Bourdieu, this knowledge is so embodied in each person's sense of self that it is often mistaken for natural privilege and position rather than as a culturally inculcated set of attributes, leading to entrenched stereotypes. The habitus is not a fixed or permanent social environment but is open to change quickly in response to unexpected stimuli or events or more slowly over extended historical periods of stability. Such mutability affords design educators the opportunities to address, challenge and change ingrained norms, decolonise the curriculum, and reconfigure practice.

### **1.1 Neoliberal habitus**

For Giroux, (2018) neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology of our times, defined as a kind of common sense, which justifies the necessity for austerity and socio-economic inequalities as an inevitability, reinforcing the marginalisation of certain groups as natural (Bourdieu, 1991). As the educator, writer and theorist Mark Fisher (Fisher, 2009, pp.2-8) puts it, 'capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable' leading to:

a widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.

Giroux (2014a) argues that since the 1970s, neoliberalism and free-market fundamentalism have grown to shape all aspects of life: a casino style of capitalism that erases 'critical thought, historical analysis and any understanding of broader systemic relations' (Giroux, 2014a, p.2). Fisher's (2009) articulation of capitalist realism is comparative with the socio-linguistic space we might call the neoliberal habitus: its ideologies have infiltrated educational vocabulary as a form of common sense restructuring of markets and everyday social life (Giroux and Sardoč, 2018).

Different uses of spoken and visual language reiterate the respective positions and power of each speaker within the social field, from the studio/classroom, to urban street corner, to job interview or political campaign on social media platforms. The manner of these discursive interactions often reproduces the authority of the speaker, who has the freedom to interrupt, to ask questions, to be heard, and to what extent. In contemporary discourse, democracy is defined as freedom, but only in terms of individualised self-interest rather than social responsibility, according to Giroux (2014a, p.3). 'Free' is employed in a neoliberal strategy of social atomisation, an insidious tactic for restricting community/collective power in preference for individualised entrepreneurial liberty (Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2011, 2014a).

Within the neoliberal habitus, Bourdieu's (1991) notion of the field is applied to the context of design education and pedagogic practices. For Bourdieu, (1991) fields are distinct arenas or markets that can include art, religion and law as well as education. Each has its own distinct rules, knowledge, and forms of capital. Thus, all interactions and linguistic exchanges in academic institutions form situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies, embodying traces of the social knowledge that are expressed. It could be argued that as the pedagogic practices of HE are often situated on a campus (institutional positioning in a competitive property market): the academy is a habitus, within which the hidden curriculum intensifies mechanisms of power and social inequality (Giroux and Purpel, 1983; hooks, 1994).

## 1.2 Educational field

In the neoliberal restructuring of education, not only have pedagogic frameworks adjusted to assimilate corporate values and business models, but also the language of social justice, freedom and community has been monetized and reformulated to meet the needs of the market. The field of education is shaped by the market forces at work in the contemporary neoliberal habitus and not by the broader socio-economic or ecological matrix of its conditions. Giroux (Giroux and Sardoč, 2018) suggests that neoliberalism is 'a powerful pedagogical force – especially in the era of social media – that engages in full-spectrum dominance at every level of civil society' (Giroux and Sardoč, 2018). Now framed as a tool of corporate power, all aspects of education are measured in terms of time and space, from analogue and digital learning tools, to school meals, extra curricula (club) activities, and teaching assistants. Asset-stripping has led to staff paying for children's breakfasts or laundry, parents running sponsored marathons to help fund basic resources, and schools shutting on Friday afternoons (BBC, 2019). Giroux (2014a, p.18) defines education as 'a public arena where ideas can be debated, critical knowledge produced, and learning linked to important social issues' such as democratic freedoms and the collective mobilisation of power. In this context, critical discourse enables academics and students to 'takes risks, imagine the otherwise, and push against the grain' (Giroux, 2014a, p.18). Freedom is thus considered in the language of current educational policy externally (the language used to talk about design education) and internally (the language used within educational contexts, such as studios, curriculum, conferences).

The emancipatory nature of knowledge gained through learning is examined through the lens of a neoliberal habitus defined by corporate values and capitalist fundamentalism. Thought remains in the sphere of freedom, therefore the studio is framed as a political space and critical discourse a political act underpinned by students engaged in learning as critical agents of change. As Giroux (2011, p.40) puts it, 'critical thinking cannot be viewed simply as a form of progressive reasoning; it must be seen as a fundamental political act'. In terms of critical awareness and engagement, hooks (1994) translated Freire's (1993) notion of 'conscientization' to her own pedagogic practices: 'I entered the classrooms with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer' of knowledge (hooks, 1994, p.14).

In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1993) identifies a difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination. Such conformity, he suggests, has its origins in fear, an attempt to establish security which is preferred to the risks associated with liberty. In a risk-

averse culture, freedom in the form of agency and autonomy is a threat to the familiarity of homogeneity, and is confused with the maintenance of the status quo (hooks, 1994, p.4). The illusion of freedom and autonomy invokes another illusion, namely the myth of equality (Medina, 2005, p.117). The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his rules and principles resist change, 'in a way that reveals their own fear of freedom. Critical consciousness, they say, is anarchic... [and] may lead to disorder' (Freire, 1993, p.35). Freedom would require a rejection of the oppressor's rule, replacing it with both individual and collective autonomy and responsibility. For Freire's (1993, p.32) notion of the capitalist oppressors, 'money is the measure of all things, and profit is the primary goal'. One result of this fear is a form of depoliticization that works its way through the social order, removing social relations from the configurations of power that shape them, and substituting emotional and personal vocabularies for political ones in formulating solutions to political problems (Giroux and Sardoč, 2018).

### **1.3 There's no such thing as a free school (meal)**

The relationship between education and freedom or 'free' is a contested one, in England. Since the introduction of student fees in 1998, which were trebled in 2006 and again in 2012–13 rising to £9,250 per student per year, this association has become more distorted. Initial efforts to expand university access by Labour, were extended by successive Tory (Conservative Party) governments and transformed into an explicit monetising of higher education in a market competing for the highest league table results, student satisfaction, employability and research funding. In this context 'The "like" button has replaced the critical knowledge and the modes of education needed' for positive long-term impact on society, according to Giroux (2014a, p.71). An exponential increase in bureaucracy, testing and performance targets have become ends in themselves (Fisher, 2009, p.43): 'in the case of school and university inspections, what you will be graded on is not primarily your abilities as a teacher so much as your diligence as a bureaucrat' (Fisher, 2009, p.52). The language of efficiency and accountability have made education central to political debate and policy (Giroux and Sardoč, 2018). In 2009, the Browne Report made higher education an adjunct of corporate values and interests (Giroux, 2014a, p.56), leading to reduction in arts provision in schools and funding cuts for the arts and humanities. The recent Augar review (Crown copyright, 2019), compiled by a former banker, indelibly links teachers' performance with educational excellence, and 'value for money' with graduate salaries and employability.

The landscape of state schools has changed even more profoundly: in 2010, the U.K. Tory government introduced a free school policy initiative seeking to drive up standards and increase freedom of (parental) choice. Extended use of the term in 2015, to incorporate academies, builds on the Education Act of 2011, which proposed that any new school required by a local council (which retains the legal responsibility to place all children in school but no powers to influence or control these institutions) privileges the free school or academy in every context. 'Free' in this context is framed as free from state control, preferencing business methods underpinned by a blind faith that the power of commerce alone will affect academic excellence through competition. Many schools have been forcibly removed from local authority control, and parents' protests are growing as the promoted benefits of the free schools and academies policy has come under a more critical light. Reports of students disappearing (given fixed term exclusions) in the run-up to GCSEs, shrinking

resources and increased behavioural issues disrupting classes (due in part to cuts to teaching assistants) are revealing cracks in the system, according to a *Guardian* newspaper editorial (*The Guardian*, 2018). Parents are having to take legal action to secure the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) support their children require, something councils are legally obliged to provide (Savage, 2019). The BBC (2019) recently reported on several schools closing early on Fridays because of funding shortages, identifying a lack of basic resources such as pencils in addition to a shortage of teaching assistants, leading to a ‘breaking point’ for schools in England (Pidd and Adams, 2019).

What remains ‘free’ at HE level is thought and critical engagement in a ‘problem-posing’ mode of education (Freire, 1993, p.52). In this pedagogic process, ‘Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it’ (Freire, 1993, p.52). As Williams (1976, p.11) points out, in periods of turmoil and change, such as war, or in environments such as the university, meaning can change rapidly: different linguistic formations and distributions of energy and interest are enabled when strong feelings and important ideas are embodied in the words chosen. This state of flux could provide universities with the most favourable conditions (Williams, 1976) for critically interrogating contentious words and terms, such as ‘free’, and affecting new symbolic democratic associations.

## **2. Critical discourse as an agent of change**

In the educational field, critical discourse is framed as a tool of active change, an engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994) in which students are ‘co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher’ (Freire, 1993, p.54). By contrast, Freire’s (199, p.49) ‘banking’ method of learning anticipates a passive sense of certainty in a ‘ready-to-wear approach [that] serves to obviate thinking’ where students merely receive, file and store information. As Bourdieu (1991) calls on the sociologist to be more critically reflexive in their own habitus, attentive to unwittingly reproducing bias and prejudice, so the design practitioner and tutor must also engage in an equally conscious reflection on the social iniquities of the discipline. For instance, in ‘A Manifesto for Decolonised Design’ Dana Abdulla of the collective Decolonial Design (Abdulla et al., 2019) has sought to expose the implications of Eurocentric modernist styles and tacit knowledge in traditional design/pedagogic values, which assume a ‘universal’ (visual) language of design through ‘timeless’ typography. Not only must the language of graphic design’s core principles be unpicked, but also the social structures in which only the privileged voice is heard in the studio/classroom, blog and conference podium. A critical pedagogy therefore does not seek to increase the volume of certain privileged voices at a time of heightened emotional discourse (Williams, 1976, p.12), most evident in the emotive post-and-respond dialectic of social media. Instead, new voices are sought to help reconfigure and redefine the discipline’s terminology as an inherent component of its social power structures. As Anne Bush (2016) points out:

By bringing the interests of the loudest voices into the foreground, the internet exposes a general desire among readers to fall in line rather than stand out... The result is often the confirmation of bias rather than the transformation of perspective.

Critical design pedagogy is, thus, an agent of freedom, a tool for transformation, which helps to create a critical community charged with ‘constructing a network that



questions and illuminates everyday practice – making it visible’ (Armstrong, 2009, p.7). In collaborative discourse between student and tutor, this process of constructing language and meaning is subject to a critical interrogation, which embraces difference in the search for truth and authenticity. For Freire, (1993, p.45), ‘knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and with each other’. Reciprocity is central to the performative engagement of this dialogic process: the teacher/tutor acts as a catalyst who invokes participants to become more actively engaged in learning (hooks, 1994, p.11). While home was a place of conformity for hooks (1994), her all-black school was a place for reinvention of possibilities. Yet, with racial integration came a rapid transformation: ‘Knowledge was suddenly about information only’ (hooks, 1994, p.3) disconnected from how the students lived or the anti-racial struggle they were a part of. Obedience and conformity were the new lessons, reinforcing white stereotypes of power while ‘too much eagerness to learn [or question] could easily be seen as a threat to white authority’ (hooks, 1994, p.3). hooks (1994, p.30) reflects on breaking through ‘collective academic denial [to] acknowledge that the education most of us had received and were giving was not and is never politically neutral’.

Exacerbated by capitalism’s conflation of commerce and culture, neoliberalism has appropriated and distorted the language of freedom in education, limiting its meanings to self-interest and consumerism (Giroux and Sardoč, 2018). A reconfirmation of the status quo is at odds with a critical approach to design education and pedagogic practice that seeks to challenge discourses constructed and disseminated with the purpose of normalising misogyny, racism and demonization of the poor, for instance. By contrast, ‘an emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of natural order, must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be mere contingency’ (Fisher, 2009, p.17).

### **3. Design as a catalyst for socio-economic and political change**

There are undeniable political dimensions of graphic design practice within the civic and corporate spheres. The words we use to name and frame ideas are key instruments of social interaction, whether in the form of visual or verbal transmissions: in this sense, graphic design is a social production of knowledge (Bourdieu, 1991) and a context-dependent system. Graphic design’s visual language is the product of a complex set of techno-social, historical and political conditions bearing traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce, varying according to ethnicity, class and gender. Social semioticians Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2001) argue that as design is a multimodal discipline, contemporary messages may be designed across simultaneous touch points to reach diverse audiences and users. Social semiotics is defined as ‘the processes and effects of the production and reproduction, reception and circulation of meaning in all forms, used by all agents of communication’ (Hodge and Kress, 1988, p.161).

In a social semiotic framework, designers are framed as part of a multimodal discourse in which meaning evolves, and is reconfigured through familiar signs used in unfamiliar ways, through new social networks and technologies (Kress and Leeuwen, 2001, pp.120-121). As Kress (2010, p.11) puts it in *Multimodality*, ‘modes are the result of a social and historical shaping of materials chosen by a society for representation’. Modality, derived from linguistics, is ‘interpersonal and *produces*

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shared truths aligning readers or listeners with some statements and distancing them from others. It seems to create an imaginary “we” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p.155).

As a social activity, graphic design can be seen as an integrated mode of articulating and defining (visual) meaning in the socio-cultural sphere. Far from a fixed or univocal code of communication, a social semiotic framework extends design discourse to encompass a more participatory process of constructing visual resources, adding something new, changing social knowledge into social inter-action (Kress and Leeuwen, 2006, p.5). As a pedagogic principle, Katherine and Michael McCoy’s leadership of Cranbrook Academy of Art sought to challenge the limitations of ‘universal’ modernist designs through a rich studio-based discourse in ‘a visual transaction that parallels verbal communication’ (McCoy, 1990, p.15). In a translation of semiotic theory to design practice, McCoy (1990, p.16) developed a *seeing and reading* teaching framework at Cranbrook: the viewer receives stimuli in both modes in a visual discourse, simultaneously intuitive and perceptual, in an extension of the gestalt process of perception. The terms in which graphic design have been perceived and located tend to privilege technical, concrete artefacts and platforms such as the poster, billboard, website, app, rather than the nebulous conceptual mediation of messages and meaning. But, the tools and means of production deployed by graphic designers in the process of public discourse cannot be disconnected from the matrix of socio-cultural values and assumptions within a neoliberal habitus. The persuasive power of visual communication underpins the cultural and consumer capital of graphic design, a field that has gained in prominence as social media and global communications networks have become the dominant sources of information and influence.

As Tony Fry (2011) and Dunne & Raby (2001) argue, all design is political, either through reinforcing or subverting the status quo. Design has always been rhetorical (Buchanan, 1989, but the rise of populist political rhetoric, which exploits the informal authenticity of Twitter and social media, makes no effort to disguise its bias, preferring aggressive binary declarations to reasoned argument. Graphic designers, thus, have a choice whether to challenge the capitalist reality (Fisher, 2009) of relentless production, consumption and waste or to sustain the status quo and facilitate the absorption of capitalism and neoliberal ideologies within the discipline’s pedagogic practices. With greater critical reflexivity, graphic design can be equipped with the discursive tools and social knowledge to invoke transformative change, questioning its assigned role in a capitalist reality of ingrained socio-economic inequality (Fisher, 2009).

Design education is thus reimagined as the ‘engine room of the reproduction of social reality, directly confronting the inconsistencies of the capitalist social field’ (Fisher, 2009, p.26). Not only are the tools of graphic design under a process of continual advancement and dissemination to the broader public, but also its identity is based on shifting socio-economic conditions within a precarious linguistic habitus. What the designer-actors in this social game need is a new set of terms – keywords – to orientate disciplinary discourse towards a more transformative critical process of dialogic power.

#### 4. Reclaiming freedom: Towards new keywords in/for design

In Williams' (1976) *Keywords*, more than a hundred common but confusing words are examined, in the form of a cultural analysis rather than an etymological study. He argues that some words, such as 'culture' are particularly complex due to their socio-historical development, significance and impact on other systems of thought. We often don't 'speak the same language' as other groups, we have different values associated with words and their meaning, or there are intangible modulations of the word's 'formations and distributions of energy and interest' (Williams, 1976, p.11). 'No single group is "wrong" by any linguistic criterion, though a temporary dominant group may try to enforce its own uses as "correct"' (Williams, 1976, p.11). Rather than trying to reduce the complexity of usage, Williams identifies the variations of use over time and context to reveal the nuances of purpose, which remain as underlying traces. As Baudrillard (2003, p.11) argues, all 'sign value is fleeting and fluid': the words we use speak to each other forming a symbolic social exchange. In a vernacular social semiosis of change, Bill Bryson (1990) notes the different meanings of 'nice' in *Mother Tongue: The Story of the English Language*: first recorded in 1290, nice meant stupid and foolish. Later, Chaucer employs nice to mean lascivious and wanton, changing over the next 400 years to stand for 'extravagant, elegant, strange, slothful, unmanly, luxurious, modest, slight, precise, thin, shy, discriminating, dainty, and – by 1796 – pleasant and agreeable' (Bryson, 1990, p.71).

As an example of the political deployment of keywords, 'ideology' and 'idealism' has stood for both praise and blame, encountering a 'reversal of meaning in relation to art and social thought' during the 18th and 19th centuries when it began to acquire a sense of falsification (Williams, 1976, p.152). In his attack on democracy, Napoleon Bonaparte undermined the principles of ideology, which he aligned with revolutionary forces, and employed the word as a pejorative (19th century). As an 'adjective describing the class or social group which it represents or serves', ideology is framed as mere illusion, 'a sense of abstract, impractical or fanatical theory' (Williams, 1976, p.154). Napoleon's use of ideology as a term of abuse survives in modern criticism of social theory coexisting with more altruistic and powerful concepts of collective socio-economic transformation. Idealism is thus 'obviously a word which needs the closest scrutiny whenever it is used' (Williams, 1976, p.153). Perhaps during times of heightened emotion some words are more symbolically weighted than others? A recent campaign (Flood, 2019) to rewrite and reframe the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of 'woman' highlights the entrenched sexism in the public lexicon: a bias, which is cemented and legitimised by inclusion on such a recognised publishing platform.

As mediators of meaning, graphic designers and educators must take responsibility for the socio-cultural impact of the tools they use to inform, persuade and entertain in the public domain. From this position, 'design' itself is a term that is subject to diverse interpretations, partly because of its different modes as a noun, adjective and verb, but also because of the social and professional contexts of its use. As Giroux (2014a, p.49) argues, a critical reflexivity is essential:

...to bridge the gap between how society represents itself and how and why individuals fail to understand and critically engage such representations in order to intervene in the oppressive social relationships they often legitimate.

If graphic design educators and practitioners want to be at the forefront of democratic resistance, they must reclaim more socially progressive and hopeful visions of the future through the language of freedom.

In a contribution to contemporary (design) discourse, a new edition of Williams' (1976) *Keywords* is therefore proposed, which collects and considers the complex interpretations and deployments of key concepts and terms in the discipline. This is important to design education because, as Giroux (2014b) argues, words are being weaponised in a battle for symbolic dominance, and democracy is being strategically disrupted to manipulate electoral processes:

Freedom and hope have not been eliminated; they have been reconfigured, stripped of their emancipatory potential and subordinated to the logic of a savage market instrumentality and individualization of the social.

From 'free' to 'universal' to 'design' the words and images we use to define ourselves and our place in the world require engaged educators to actively select and deploy tools that are appropriate to the task. A new *Keywords for Dialogic Design* could exploit the discipline's central role in capitalism and the consumer landscape by creating counter-arguments, empowering design's critical voice through the same persuasive tools that are used to reinforce the neoliberal common sense (Giroux and Sardoč, 2018). It is, after all, graphic designers who are proving so effective in the global right wing populist game of democratic disruption, visualising polarisation and fear with a vernacular authenticity that chimes with the 'man in the street'. If graphic design educators and practitioners want to be at the forefront of democratic resistance, they must reclaim more socially progressive and hopeful visions of the future through the language of freedom.

## 5. Conclusions

The ideologies that underpin graphic design as a mediator of public discourse cannot be disconnected from the matrix of values and assumptions in which the work is created and disseminated, nor from its tools, platforms and pedagogic practices. As social semiotic theory notes (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2010), words and images are fluid signs in a multimodal discourse that can shape and reconfigure meaning. Sign-makers such as designers, but also the general population and (arguably) political campaigners, can make and remake meaning in the everyday. Thus, neoliberal values are being embedded in contemporary (visual) communication and language, naturalised as cultural norms that will be continually reinforced if they remain uncontested. In this neoliberal habitus, adapted from Bourdieu (1991), the (higher) educational field is one of few social spaces 'that offers a protective space to question, challenge, and think against the grain' (Giroux and Sardoč, 2018). As such, all teaching and all design practices are political either through reconfirming or subverting the status quo (hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2014a; Fry, 2011; Dunne and Raby, 2001). If the discipline's commentators, students, academics and practitioners do not remain critically vigilant, leading an engaged critical pedagogy, the terms with which design education, freedom and democracy are defined will emasculate the discipline's critical agency: the intellectual and creative freedom to disagree, to ask 'why?'

The critical pedagogies of hooks (1994) and Giroux (2014a, 2014b) reveal discursive tools for challenging the status quo, linguistic utterances that become a form of dialogic political practice in design and educational fields. (Visual) language is the product of a complex set of social, historical and political conditions. By empowering

students to question the neoliberal conditions of their studies and lives, it is hoped that more actively engaged critical agents of design will emerge from art and design schools. Agents who not only reclaim the sphere of freedom afforded at university, but also who are attuned to challenging the manipulation of language around democracy and design. These meaning-makers must fight for the very definition of 'democracy' in order to affect positive societal change, subverting the (mis-)use of language in the social situations of education, which have sustained colonial power relations. In this context, a new Keywords for Dialogic Design is proposed as a tool kit for tomorrow's critical discourse and design, reclaiming 'freedom' within the discipline's lexical terrain.

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# Countering 'Fake News' in the Design Classroom

Anne M. Giangiulio

Keywords

Border issues

USA – Mexico

border

Border Studies

Graphic Design

teaching

Civic engagement

in Graphic Design

How can I empower  
my, mostly Latinx<sup>1</sup>,  
students to become active  
participants in standing  
up for themselves, telling  
their own stories and  
influencing cultural shifts  
so that the border is  
portrayed in an  
honest way?

In 1964, Ken Garland, along with 20 other designers, photographers and students, published *The First Things First Manifesto* (Garland, 1964). It railed against the trivial applications of mainstream advertising ('hair restorer, slimming diets, fattening diets, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons') and proposed instead:

A reversal of priorities in favour of the more useful and more lasting forms of communication. We hope that our society will tire of gimmick merchants, status salesmen and hidden persuaders, and that the prior call of our skills will be for worthwhile purposes.

Its solution was to focus efforts of design on education and public service tasks that promoted the betterment of society. In the year 2000, 33 visual communicators reiterated the 1964 statement with *First Things First Manifesto 2000*,

There are pursuits more worthy of our problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programmes, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help (Barnbrook, et al., 2000).

Almost 20 years later, 'alternative facts' and 'fake news' certainly qualify as major social and cultural crises today. Who better to devise methods to combat these calamities than visual communications designers? How do (or indeed, should) graphic communication designers counter misdirection and falsehoods through illuminating meaning, knowledge and facts? An ideal venue to pose this question is a university-level graphic design classroom. After all, college campuses are breeding grounds of discovery, debate, and safe places to hash out and establish real truths. This is where students are taught to think critically, to discern fact from fiction through research, and form the skills that will take them into responsible adulthood.

I teach graphic design to undergraduate students on the U.S.–Mexico border at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). It has a majority Mexican-American student population (about 80%), which is the same demographic as the city around it. Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, it is a region that has often been in the news. To those of us who actually live on the border, this national and international attention is usually seen as unwelcome due to its inaccuracy and negative spin. I often ask: how can I empower my, mostly Latinx,<sup>1</sup> students to become active participants in standing up for themselves, telling their own stories and influencing cultural shifts so that the border is portrayed in an honest way? As Bernard Canniffe states in his foreword to *Developing Citizen Designers* by Elizabeth Resnick,

As educators we are called to advocate for the underserved, teach, and reach out to those who are not represented – for the disenfranchised. As

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1 Latinx is the gender-neutral alternative to Latino, Latina and even Latin@. Used by scholars, activists and an increasing number of journalists (Ramirez and Blay, 2016).

designers we are charged to engage, interact, and produce that which has a societal impact (Resnick, 2016).

For it is when students can tell their own stories, that the stories are more likely to be accurate. Life on the border has a unique set of benefits (binationalism and bilingualism are a matter of course) and challenges (issues of identity and isolation: are we American? Mexican? Can we be defined?). This border region is traditionally underserved and underrepresented. The area, on the far west tip of Texas, is somewhat isolated, can be tough to get to, and is on a different time zone than the rest of the state. It is an eight and a half hour drive from the Texas state capital of Austin to El Paso, and usually two flights away from other major metropolitan cities in the U.S.

This can cause a disconnect between the region and the rest of the state, country and world. As such, it is crucially important that El Pasoans get the word out for themselves about their own reality. The needs of this population are just as important as those of others of the state and country and must be understood clearly before they can be met. State governments should reflect state populations to best represent them, yet only 10 percent of elected officials in Texas are Latinx – about 1.3 million throughout the state live in areas with no representation at the local government level. El Paso has had just five ethnic Hispanic mayors in its 146-year history (and currently has not had one in close to 15 years). The imbalance is especially acute at the highest levels of local government. In a state where Hispanics make up 38 percent of the population, only about 10 percent of Texas mayors are Hispanic. In the halls of county government, Latinx representation has largely stagnated over the past two decades. In 1994, Latinx made up 10 percent of county commissioner positions; today, the percentage has inched up just slightly to 13 percent – even though the state’s Hispanic population nearly doubled over that time (Diaz, 2016; Schwartz and Hill, 2016). Statewide election experts and Hispanic officeholders in some of the state’s most underrepresented regions say the disparity defies easy explanation. They point out several factors: Texas laws that have made registering to vote more difficult; redistricting efforts designed to dilute Hispanic influence; and a virtual abandonment by statewide political parties. And even in districts with favorable demographics, Hispanics often turn out in small numbers (Planas, 2019). With such a long tradition of being ignored, it is no wonder that Latinx voters, who skew Democratic, feel that their vote does not matter. However, November 2018’s midterm elections proved this is changing. A surge in turnout across the state narrowed Republican Senator Ted Cruz’s margin of victory to just 2.7 percentage points. Democrats picked up a dozen seats in the Texas House, and several of the most conservative politicians either lost or saw their margins of victory dwindle.

Locally, residents and activists say the lack of representation can mean their community needs go unmet. The results of this can be devastating, from funding not being allotted for infrastructure like flood prevention and repair of cracked roads, to inadequate healthcare and education. According to a report from the U.S. Census Bureau, a Hispanic or black child in Texas is three times more likely to live in poverty than a white child. Communities with a large Hispanic population, like El Paso, are among the poorest in the state and border communities have the highest poverty levels. El Paso has the fourth highest rate of children living in poverty in Texas. Even though Hispanics make up 38 percent of Texas’ population, they make up more than half of the state’s poor population, with 51 percent of Texas Hispanics in poverty. The report also says that Hispanic and black households face a gap of tens of thousands of dollars in income from those of white and Asian Texans (United States Census Bureau, 2018).

It is clear – the word is not getting out about El Paso, its population, and its needs. This is where design can make a huge impact. This paper uses case studies and qualitative inquiry methods to challenge design educators to see beyond training exercises in the classroom, and to find a stronger relational understanding among their life experiences, those of their students, and changing perceptions of the world. Over five decades since Ken Garland’s manifesto was proclaimed, design’s ultimate goal goes far beyond packaging hair restorer or branding slimming diets, to educating the masses about the truth of the world in beautiful and easy to understand ways.

### **Case Study #1: Exhibit Design of *Why Do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?***

Case Study #1 was a real-world project designing the display cases for an on-campus exhibit at UTEP entitled *Why Do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?* I collaborated with a colleague within my Department of Art, Daniel Carey-Whalen of our Museum Studies area, to better distill and display the results of UTEP Criminal Justice Professor Dr. Theodore Curry’s interesting study *Why Do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?* This study was spotlighted online in March 2015 by UTEP news:

In today’s oft-heated debate over immigration policy in the United States, many argue that arrivals from other countries have a negative impact on the country and even contribute to rising crime rates. At The University of Texas at El Paso, a team of researchers is working with new data to prove that, in fact, the opposite is true (Garibay, 2015).

For over a year, 50 UTEP student researchers worked alongside three professors to create a methodologically sound survey, determine a geographic canvassing strategy, and conduct face-to-face polls with more than 1,100 people living in over 200 immigrant neighborhoods throughout El Paso County asking about their perceptions of safety in their respective neighborhoods.

In the current political climate that seems to be so anti-immigrant, studies like this are important. My students’ job as designers for this project was to help publicize the facts and shed light on the real statistics and actual research findings so that they could become as much in the public consciousness as comments broadcast by political candidates that are based upon misconceptions and downright bigotry instead of actual facts.

El Paso has been ranked as one of the top three safest large U.S. cities since 1997 and the safest for the last three years (Aguilar, 2019). How can this be? Haven’t we been led to believe that poor neighborhoods in this country are dangerous and should be avoided? Aren’t immigrants desperate people? – the sort more likely to steal, be violent, and commit crimes in general? U.S. President Donald Trump justifies his hard-line immigration policies by repeatedly claiming, without evidence, that undocumented immigrants are bringing waves of crime into the U.S. In his presidential announcement speech of June 16, 2015, then-candidate Trump stated,

When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re

bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people (Trump, 2015).

In May 2019, President Trump declared during a Florida rally that an 'invasion' of immigrants was bringing in an 'unbelievable' amount of crime. He asserts that his long-promised U.S.–Mexico border wall will 'MAKE AMERICA SAFE AGAIN' (Trump, 2016). But El Paso's population is made up of a majority of Mexicans and Mexican-American immigrants, and it is a very safe place (Mosbergen, 2019). It is exactly this type of false rhetoric that has given the border a reputation of being a place of fear and lawlessness.

Make-believe words have very real effects on the economy of the region. Studies have not yet been done to determine how much this misperception keeps away tourists, or businesses, skilled laborers and professionals that may want to relocate here and bring their dollars with them. Meanwhile, it is border residents who suffer the effects of the spread of misinformation. Beyond garnering an unsubstantiated bad reputation, there is a physical, aesthetic cost. El Pasoans and the unique Chihuahuan Desert region, within which the city lies, have paid for the militarization of the border – in the form of ugly walls, barbed wire fences, and armed guards. In 2006, Congress authorized 700 miles of border barrier. El Paso had a section of steel bollard fencing put up between 2008 and mid-2009. According to Western District of Texas Federal Public Defender Maureen Franco,

It had no effect on us whatsoever other than it diminished the natural beauty...

It didn't require a wall (Timm, 2019).

In fact, what actually kept crime down in El Paso was Operation 'Hold the Line', implemented in 1993, which stationed 400 Border Patrol agents across the border and implemented new technologies that effectively sealed a porous border. *The New York Times* reported at the time that the effort stopped thousands of people crossing every day, crime started dropping immediately and day laborers began obtaining permits to cross the border legally instead of crossing on foot. The city was cleaned up and made safe with limited force (Brinkley, 1994).

Armed with all of these facts, I gave the 16 students in this intermediate-level *Graphic Design 4: Typography* class three weeks, working both individually and in teams, to organize among themselves and design 12 cohesive display panels.

The students did site visits, both of the on-campus exhibition space and of the areas in the city where Dr. Curry conducted his interviews. Some of my students were surprised to find that Dr. Curry's interviews took place in their very own neighborhoods. Carey-Whalen's Museum Studies students did not have the knowledge and technical expertise to actually create and design the show's displays, so they were tasked with identifying a venue on campus to hold the show and were the ones to actually mount and install the placards and images that my students designed, in the display cases.

Dr. Curry and Professor Carey-Whalen met with the design students in class to present the facts and answer their questions. Curry then provided the student designers with the research, all text files, and other information that was to be included in the exhibition. As part of their preliminary research, my students had to



Figure 1. Students from the Graphic Design 4: Typography class working in teams to design the *Why do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?* exhibit, 2015. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 2. Students from the Graphic Design 4: Typography class working in teams to design the *Why do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?* exhibit, 2015. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 3. Exhibit panel and video created by design students Alessandra Anello and Diego Bujalil for the exhibit *Why do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?*, 2015. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 4. Exhibit panel created by design student Adriana Hernandez for the exhibit *Why do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?*, 2015. Image courtesy of the author.

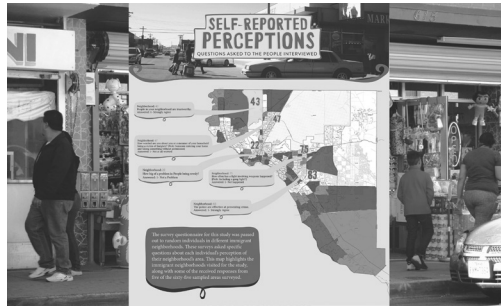


Figure 5. Exhibit panel created by design student Kiani Acosta for the exhibit *Why do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?*, 2015. Image courtesy of the author.

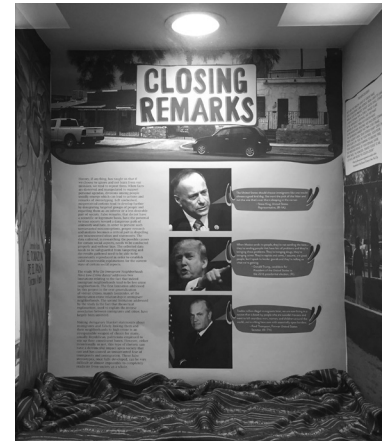


Figure 6. Exhibit panel created by design student Mark Zuñiga for the exhibit *Why do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?*, 2015. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 7. Dr. Theodore Curry tests the device design student Gisel Estrada created to explain the Central Limit Theorem used in compiling the data for the exhibit *Why do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?*, 2015. Image courtesy of the author.



familiarize themselves with the figures provided by Dr. Curry. This was daunting to my students who were not familiar with such quantitative, number-heavy data. I divided the students into teams. Each would be responsible for a different panel in the exhibit which would focus upon a unique aspect of the study. As they visited the neighborhoods featured in the study, they made notes and took all their own original photographs to be used in their final designs. The student designers needed to organize the information in a logical and simple way using the skills they had already learned that semester in the class, like designing multi-page documents using a grid with the text layout program Adobe InDesign. The exhibition nicely met the students' learning criteria while also filling a real need in the community.

The final exhibit took on many formats and included text panels, infographics, illustrations, an interactive device to display the Central Limit Theorem implemented by Dr. Curry (Giangiulio, 2015), an edited video with musical accompaniment, and a custom-designed typeface based upon the hand painted signage often seen in these barrios.

The student who designed this typeface, which she named Tiendita, after the "little shops" often found in these Mexican-American immigrant neighborhoods, is now working on developing it further to be sold online. One of the panels depicts "Immigrant vs. Criminal Profiles". That is, the characteristics that immigrants often possess and how they differ wildly from those of criminals. Namely, immigrants possess a strong work ethic, have long-term goals, have family support and want to keep a "low profile". On the other hand, criminals typically possess a weak work ethic, have short-term goals, virtually no support from family, and have a "high profile." These differences truly do make sense once they are put on display.

My students oversaw the printing of their graphics while the Museum Studies students trimmed, mounted, installed, and arranged their designs in the twelve cases. This project continues to attract much attention both for its multidisciplinary nature and for its positive message about immigrants at a time when certain politicians want to paint the opposite picture. The project was also featured on local radio station 88.5 FM KTEP's program *State of the Arts* (2015).



Figure 9. Exhibit panel created by design student Johnny Barragan for the exhibit *Why do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?*, 2015. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 8. Tiendita, or "little shop", typeface designed by student Ana Ruiz and used by the class for the exhibit *Why do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?*, 2015. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 10. Opening reception for the exhibit *Why do Immigrant Neighborhoods Have Low Crime Rates?*, 2015. Image courtesy of the author.

## Re-Branding the Border

Case Study #2 was based upon another intermediate-level *Graphic Design 4: Typography* class studying the history of design and applying it to the contemporary purpose of re-branding the border. Of course, learning about typography means learning history – understanding the time, technology, and people that produced certain looks and styles of letter and mark-making. This included examining travel posters. Railroad companies, airlines, and government tourist agencies commissioned the production of many posters advertising destinations to which one could journey using their respective mode of transport or the pleasures that would be enjoyed once there. My students viewed posters by the great A.M. Cassandre for journeys by rail and trans-Atlantic ocean liner as well as works by E. McKnight Kauffer of the 1920s that lure the viewer to travel on the London Underground or those from the 1940s and 50s with Pan American and American Airlines. Students also studied Herbert Matter's Swiss National Tourist Office posters of the 1930s that evoke the fun and excitement of skiing the Swiss Alps. They also examined Work Projects Administration (WPA) posters produced from 1936 to 1943 and posters by lesser-known artists designing for clients ranging from the Australian National Travel Association to the Official Tourist Bureau of Batavia, Java. We examined posters made less than 20 years ago by David Klein and Robert Swanson for the travel site Orbitz as well as the more recent *Visions of the Future* poster series by a creative team known as The Studio at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory that reference bygone styles.

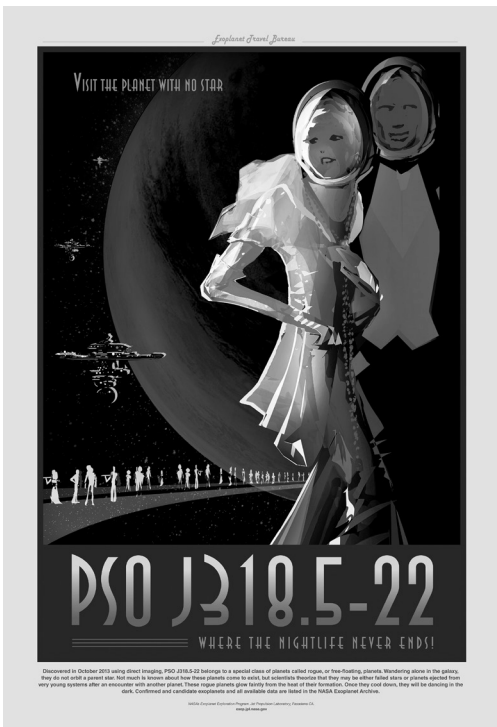


Figure 11. Poster illustrated by Joby Harris as part of the creative team of visual strategists at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, known as The Studio. Harris states, 'We wanted to evoke a sense of elegance, so we leaned heavily on 1930s art deco for this one. It's sort of retro-future fantasy, but again, there's a bit of real science inspiring it', (Greicius and Jackson, 2018). Image courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech.

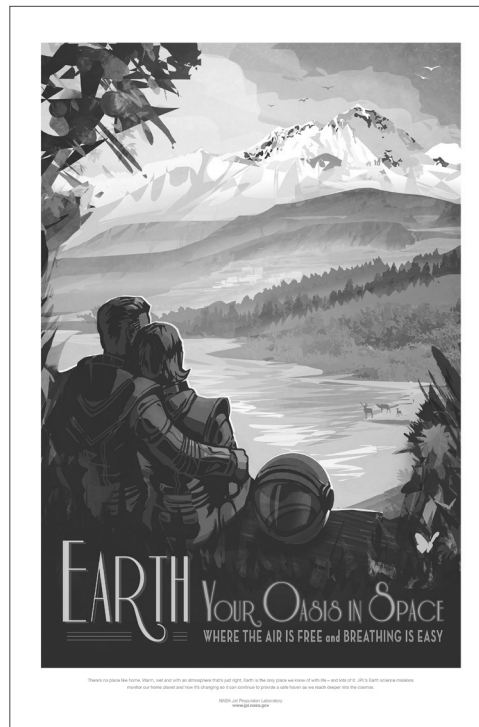


Figure 12. Poster illustrated by Joby Harris as part of the creative team of visual strategists at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, known as The Studio, 2018. Image courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech.

Understanding the original purpose of these posters – to sell a place to an audience, or to sell the means of transport of getting there is what led to the idea of wanting to “sell”, or re-brand, the border. For all the reasons stated already in this paper, there is much beauty to the border, but you would not know it from the over-militarized picture that is painted of it on the news. El Paso is a city divided by the majestic red granite Franklin Mountains, foothills of the Rockies. Franklin Mountains State Park is the largest urban park in the U.S. Its 24,247 acres cover roughly 37 square miles and are completely located within the El Paso city limits.

The Chihuahuan Desert in which El Paso lies boasts 3,000 plant species, including more than 500 of the world’s 1,500 species of cactus. In its desert scrub and arroyos (dry creek bed ravines) roadrunners and quail scurry after earless lizards. While golden eagles search among the agave and creosote for black-tailed jackrabbits.

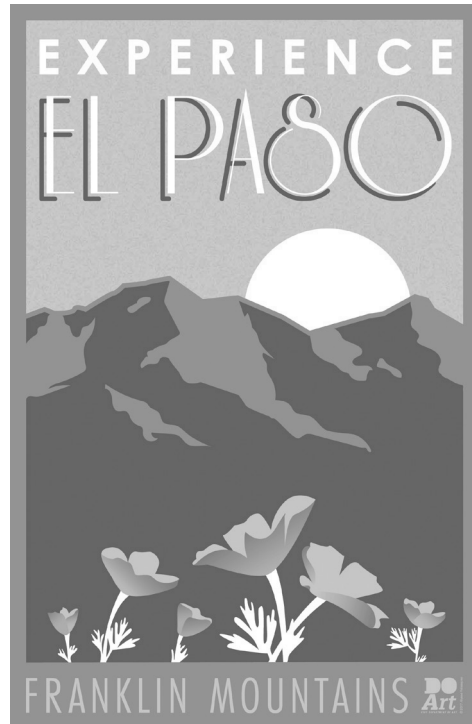


Figure 13. Poster by design student Alyssa Velasquez, 2017. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 14. Poster by design student Melissa Trejo, 2017. Image courtesy of the author.

There are stunning vistas from atop the mountains where one can see for hundreds of miles.

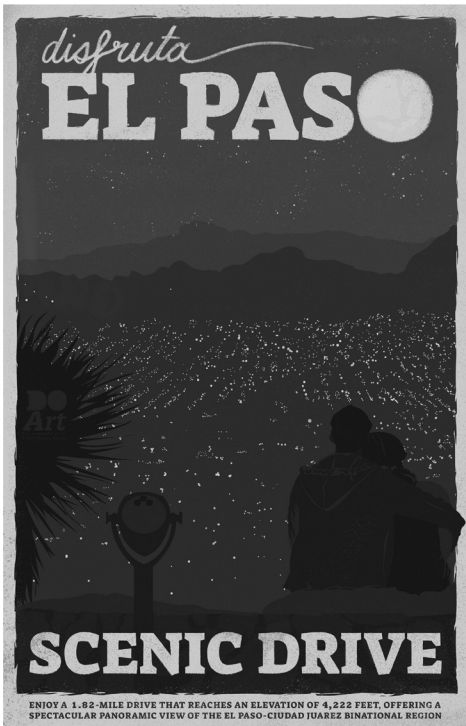


Figure 15. Poster by design student Mariana Ramirez, 2018. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 16. Poster by design student Narda Avila, 2017. Image courtesy of the author.

There's a fascinating history of Spanish conquistadors building the adobe missions that are still in use and date from the 1680s, not to mention the Tigua Native American tribe that was in this area long before that.

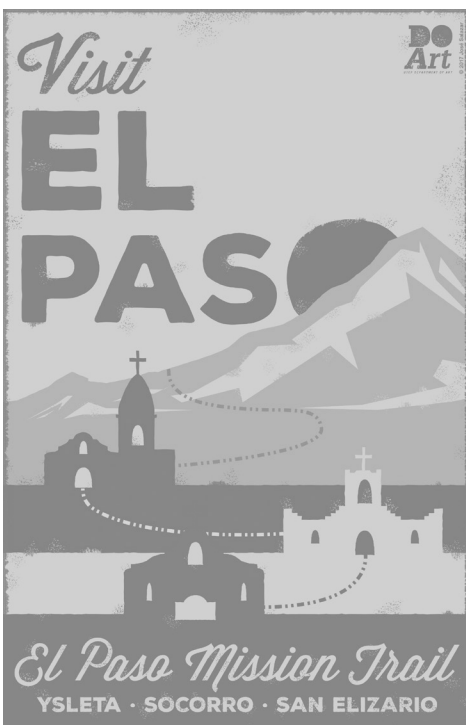


Figure 17. Poster by design student José Salazar, 2017. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 18. Poster by design student Ociris Alvarez, 2017. Image courtesy of the author.

There is lovely and important architecture and historic neighborhoods from a building boom before the turn of the 20th century as a result of the railroad first coming to town in 1877. However, you will never hear about such things on news reports about the border.

There is a community that loves its Mexican neighbors to the south because they are related to them, have married them, work and play with them, adore their food, music and culture, *are* 'them', and believe the notion of building a wall to separate 'us' from 'them', again because we are all the same people, is absurd.

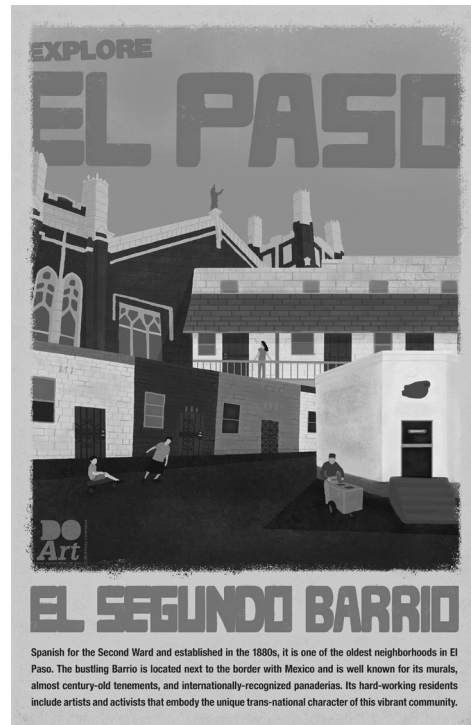


Figure 19. Poster by design student Ricardo Covarrubias, 2018. Image courtesy of the author.

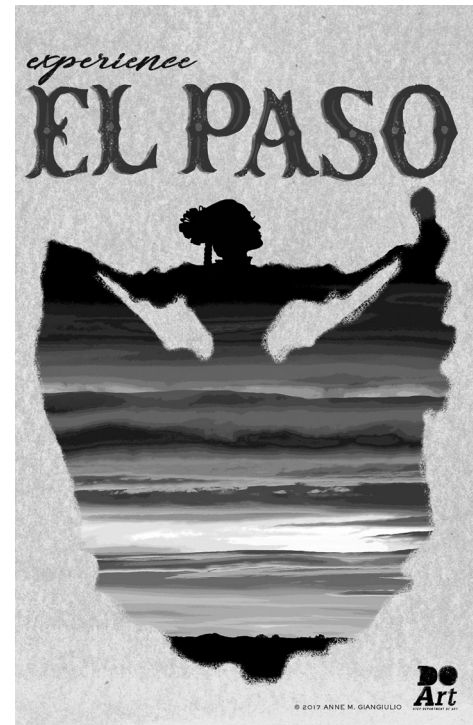


Figure 20. Poster by Anne M. Giangulio, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist and author.

To us, Mexico is not another country, but rather an extension of ourselves. It is hard to explain this to those not from here. Perhaps imagine building a wall between where you live and the next closest town to you, and then requiring a passport to get there, or when you go there, sometimes the line to get there will be shut down by immigration and you need to wait three hours – to get to class, work, family. This is the ridiculousness imposed upon the border by people who do not live here. It is a reality about which the majority of the world is completely ignorant. Communities along the border are tired of being pawns in distant games. Basically, El Paso is an amazingly complex place and home to over 600,000 proud people. It is more than meets the eye and much more than the negative publicity. All places really are.

Using these vintage and vintage-inspired tourism and travel posters as their inspiration, I had students choose areas or aspects of El Paso that make the city special to them while making it also look desirable to tourists. For students born and raised here, this sometimes meant actually needing to research a place they took for granted or thought they knew really well. When native El Pasoans are surprised by the rich history and facts they discover, then it is clear that the city must do a better job of spreading the good news about itself.

In October of 2017, this project was featured by *Print* magazine's Steven Heller in his *Daily Heller* online blog, in which he asked me the following questions:

**Has anything occurred since these posters were produced to impact perception in a positive or negative way?**

I think when you elevate an aspect of your city to poster-topic status, you start to better appreciate what's been under your nose perhaps your entire life. Many of these students were born and raised in El Paso, and at first it was hard to look at their surroundings in that way. We just take things like the Franklin Mountains, or that we can easily walk to another country, for granted. Residents who are now seeing these posters get excited that their city looks *good*, really good, and that pride comes back. It was a pride that Trump and others were slowly eroding in us, or making us doubt our greatness. I didn't want my students to sugar-coat El Paso, or to convey it in an untruthful light. I demanded honesty and wanted them to convey their own experience with their city.

**Has this been cathartic for the students?**

For sure! It channels that negative energy they feel after watching the news into appreciation for their city and the unique people, places and heritage here. I am hoping of course that these posters will gain even more exposure and thus even more catharsis (Heller, 2017).

Since that time, I have assigned some version of this poster assignment to my students. The posters are then sold to the public at Chalk the Block, El Paso's largest arts festival which takes place every October. The event attracts over 40,000 visitors and the posters completely sell out. I feel this response shows, perhaps, that beyond the fact the posters are well designed, their audience is hungry for these positive, honest depictions of their hometown.

**Beyond #ElPaSoStrong**

In April 2019, El Paso again made it into "The Top 10 Safest Metro Cities" list, compiled by the security company Safewise (Edwards, 2019). Just four months later however, on August 3, 2019, this fabulous city lost that title, not to the violence Trump forever invokes – by Hispanic "rapists", "drug-dealers" or "criminals" from across the border – but to the bloodletting of a white man who drove over 10 hours from Allen, Texas

No one should convince us otherwise or try to tell our stories for us when we can do it for ourselves. From an economic and political standpoint, much is at stake in getting the stories right.

bent on killing Hispanic families. On this date a gunman shot and killed 22 people and injured 24 others while they were out Saturday morning shopping at an El Paso Walmart. As happens in all-too-many American cities that have suffered this same fate of a mass shooting, residents were stunned. “How could this happen here?” was a reaction shared by the entire city.

A heinous act that was meant to destroy, or at least, beat down the spirit of a majority-minority population wound up having the opposite effect. This border community was determined to band together and support the victims and their families. The #ElPaSoStrong hashtag sprang up immediately on Instagram. A city that has a median income of just \$44,431 and a poverty rate of 20.3% was able to raise over \$4.7 million for both the El Paso Community Foundation's victims' fund and the Paso Del Norte Foundation's fund just days after the shooting. A portion of this money was a result, once again, of design coming to the rescue. Local print shop/apparel business Viva La Mocha made significant donations to the fund. Viva La Mocha's owner, Monica Monarrez, designed an El Paso Strong shirt. She, along with other print shops Chuco Relic and Proper Printshop practically halted all their other daily operations and banded together to solely produce and sell the \$20 shirts and donate the proceeds to the El Paso Community Foundation. At last tally, the three businesses donated over a quarter of a million dollars with more to come. "It has been crazy," Chuco Relic owner Chelsie Evaldi said. "We already knew the El Paso community was great and so I think this gives them an opportunity to be part of it as well" (Heck, 2019). In addition, all local funeral homes donated their services free of charge to families of the victims. "This is one of the most tragic events in El Paso's history. My heart and prayers go out to the families who lost a loved one, as well as to the survivors and to our entire community who are mourning at this time," Salvador Perches, owner of Perches Funeral Home said. "We must unite as a community to help those directly impacted by this tragedy" (Cross, 2019). In a story that made national news, Antonio Basco's wife of 22 years was killed in the mass shooting and her passing means that Basco has no relatives left. Basco, who runs a mobile car wash business in El Paso, told the funeral home planning the service for his late spouse, Margie Reckard, that he wanted to invite members of the public to attend her visitation. The funeral home was then inundated with support from people who never knew Basco or his wife. Hundreds stood in a line snaking around the church and on the blocks beyond waiting more than two hours in 100 degree Fahrenheit temperatures to attend the funeral (Burch, 2019).

All of this proves that El Paso is a lovely community whose needs deserve to be met and who thrives the best it can in spite of the disadvantages imposed upon it by ignorant or misinformed lawmakers far away. The challenge is for design educators here and around the world to identify the unique needs of their areas, whatever they may be, and devise ways to network within their own university, or with local non-profits, and community activists to identify projects suitable for collaboration to get at specific truths. It is vital to note that classroom projects must also be kept non-partisan and for 'the common good' to avoid conflicts of interest as university resources often depend upon state funding. The world is a complex place and one person's viewpoint can never possibly convey all the nuances that exist. One person's truth may vary from someone else's, but there is room for both at the world's table. We know our own facts because we live them daily. No one should convince us otherwise or try to tell our stories for us when we can do it for ourselves. From an economic and political standpoint, much is at stake in getting the stories right. Design educators must encourage their students to express themselves and tell their stories through what they know best. Design projects in the classroom can provide them with the outlet to voice their truth in beautiful, meaningful ways to their audience.



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Cards for  
Humanity:  
Constructing  
Meaningful  
Communities  
Through  
Unsolicited Do-  
Good Design

Elizabeth Herrmann

Keywords

Letterpress

Calling cards

Barter

Networking

Community

Reciprocity

Resource sharing

Craftsmen

Entrepreneur

Alternative

business models

Cards for Humanity

## Saint Paul and the Broken Bones

Performing at the Jannus Live music compound, Paul Janeway found a 60-foot tarp wadded up behind an amp and tugged. It wouldn't budge. The harder he pulled, the more emphatically he delivered the lyrics to *I'll Be Your Woman* (2016)<sup>1</sup>. Given the amount of time it took for the stagehand to realize that Paul was actually struggling and to help untangle the blue bundle so that he could drag it mid-stage – it was clear that this antic was ad-libbed. The courtyard was consumed in smiles and passionate sound.

Wrapped snugly inside the tarp, desperate attempts to escape were few and far between. Saint Paul disappeared for the majority of the song but the crinkling of vinyl added to the authenticity of his delivery and indeed, this was a live and unique experience. He saw an opportunity and finally broke through.

This gripping experience is ingrained in my mind. I think about it frequently. I love the authenticity of the antics and how the performance enhanced the music. The spectacle was as entertaining as the discography and kept everyone on edge. As a graphic designer, I often wonder why my level of captivation is seldom matched in the visual arts. I have also noticed how success is, relatively, more egalitarian and achievable in the music industry than the visual arts. Fans follow and support musicians like their own friends and family. Their connections run deep. Why is that? And what can professional visual craftsmen (which I define as all traditional fine artists, applied artists, tradesman, makers, and craft artists) learn from this?

1. Currency systems can undermine the respect and value of craftsmen.
2. The experiences craftsmen share with patrons are just as valuable as their products.
3. Alternative forms of representation are more likely to draw attention to contemporary craftsmen.

I have focused my research and social design work on finding ways to address these issues, starting with my first book *Co-Lab: Collaborative Design Survey* (2015)<sup>2</sup>. My endeavors culminated in the practice-based project Cards for Humanity. Here, I was able to test and observe first-hand an experimental barter exchange program in Tampa Bay, Florida, providing free letterpress-printed business cards for visual craftsmen in return for promotional support for the project.

When the goal isn't about making commodities, earning money, or establishing fame, many visual craftsmen prefer producing quality work to compromising their craft. I discuss these ideas in detail, especially as they relate to alternative sustainable career models for professional artists and designers that uphold *craftsmanship and community* above everything else. Saint Paul was going to be a preacher. But as a frontman for a rock band, his sermon stood out.

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1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrFmJik2cVg>

2 <https://www.bispublishers.com/co-lab-collaborative-design-survey.html>



Figure 1. An eclectic selection from Cards for Humanity © Elizabeth Herrmann 2019.

### **Merit: Underpaid or Undervalued?**

The problem is that many visual craftsmen want to work for reasons other than money or fame, yet have to rely on marketing themselves in some capacity. Most of the artisans that I know make creative work on the side for their own pleasure. But lacking certain credentials, they struggle to find an appropriate place to promote and sell their work outside their studios and websites. Drowning in a sea of stimuli, it's tough to be noticed as a visual craftsman today, even within one's own community. It's even harder to make a career of it.

In order to discuss sustainable alternative career choices, let's establish a particular view on the idea of *arbitrary merit*.

- A. The value of the creative work is irrelevant in comparison to the work itself. Labor is not financially valuable. In this example, time does not justify value, nor does the cost of materials. Value is the amount of regard

that something deserves as determined by the craftsman and agreed upon by the buyer. In many societies, value is translated into a monetary figure, as it is assumed that the versatility of options that money provides will offset the exchange. Money is a *reflection* of value, but it's worthless without comparison and arbitrary without societal acceptance. The value of something is not the same as its compensation, which can take many forms.

B. The value of money varies when exchanged between different people, even when the items exchanged remain the same. For instance, a fair transaction between Chris and Steve is not the same as the deal between Chris and Jessica. For many craftsmen, transactions involving handcrafted work are personal and depend on the situation and the recipient. Arts negotiation is like poker. It can be very strategic and defensive. The value of the work depends more on the players involved, and how they read one another. It's less dependent on the hand, or creative work.

Money can cause ruthless game playing, straining relations and leaving both the craftsman and client feeling undervalued. A transaction is predicated on the rhetoric of the craftsman's sales tactics. Like a bluff, clients may not know the difference between good and bad design and call anyway. Conversely, craftsmen aren't always the savviest with commerce and may lack the skill of selling their work for what it's worth. This can cause problems with earning the respect of clients. A mediocre craftsman can be more valuable to a client than a rockstar of the industry. And craftsmen can be paid more for something that took an hour versus something that took weeks to complete. Value and monetary payment rarely align and sometimes money isn't the best agreement. Understanding the value of a craftsman and their craft in relation to a client is a variable that's difficult to determine. Graphic designer and author Adrian Shaughnessy discusses this in his book, *How to be a Graphic Designer Without Losing Your Soul* (2005):

My creative philosophy has always been to do good work regardless of the budget. I tell myself there is no such thing as a bad job. This "philosophy" has a shamelessly commercial aspect to it. It comes from a conviction that great work always gets noticed, and work that gets noticed leads to more and better assignments (Shaughnessy, 2005).

But not everyone thinks this way. Professional integrity is a craftsman's respect for their craft and colleagues. Unfortunately, the quality of the work is at the mercy of the transaction. In practice, formal and conceptual merit is sometimes overlooked if the negotiation doesn't value the work. Instead of turning down a sale or renegotiating, monetary rewards can overrule judgements of creative quality, personal reputation, and professional integrity. This is why money is not a good indicator of, or encouragement for, valuable work. It's a calculation that weighs on all craftsmen at some point in their career, as many are undervalued.

Within the realm of graphic design, there have been many controversial debates regarding integrity, notably culminating in the profession changing its name from Commercial Art to Graphic Design and now Visual Communication as designers see the need to become less submissive to commercial operatives. Ken Garland's and Kalle Lasn's *First Things First* manifestos of 1964 and 2000 respectively, were a professional plea for designers to promote artistic responsibility by working for reputable clients, choosing valuable content, and upholding respectable work. Figureheads such as design educators and rockstars of the profession endorse these career ethics, promoting both quality craftsmanship *AND* fair compensation. But balancing these variables can be hard when the rest of society generally values money over craft. This contributes to the decline in craftsmen's professional integrity, especially in semi-urban parts of America, including my hometown. While it's easy to say that there's no excuse for bad design because the DIY design scene is foolproof with quality prosumer tools and affordable online software, this doesn't account for every craftsman's distinctive skills of originality and authorship.

### **Developments in Design Appreciation**

Are there any alternatives that afford designers the ability to focus on producing quality work while adequately supporting their practice? Graphic designers Martin Venezky and Stefan Sagmeister have experimented with alternative career models that value their work and their time above everything else. Through Appetite Engineers, Venezky is able to focus on lengthy formal experimentation with big projects and a limited number of clients. In describing his creative process, Venezky reflects how, 'This pure, meditative investigation has become meaningful enough to me that it is now an end in itself, and I have dedicated much of my time toward its development' (Venezky, no date). Similarly, Mooth (2013) interviews Sagmeister about a sabbatical he takes to develop his personal design research every seven years:

The year that I took off was really planned and conducted to do design experiments. It had less to do with me and much more to do with design. And I think it turned out to be a good investment for our clients, because there were ideas that were developed that could be applied after the studio opened again.

But Venezky and Sagmeister demonstrate lofty career models, which may not seem obtainable to a fledgling professional craftsman who's just getting started.

An interesting thing is developing in the world of comedy and show entertainment. Functioning as both broadcasters and content-producers, affordable internet gatekeepers like Netflix, YouTube, Amazon, SoundCloud, and iHeartMedia are redefining the media scene to prioritize well-crafted original material, experimentation, and diversity of content. Realizing their capabilities and influence on mass audiences who are hungry for smart, niche, racy entertainment, these broadcasters jumped on the opportunity to produce content-specific programs that beat FCC-controlled television and radio. It's refreshing to discover unknown comedians, actors, writers, and directors on alternative mainstream media, that doesn't normally pass through old mass media channels. For instance, self-initiated and self-produced podcasts such as 'The Joe Rogan Experience', '99% Invisible', 'Reply



Living in a mid-sized community with a limited cultural presence, many were destined for any kind of paying job.

All', and 'TED' are picked up by mass audiences, enabling eclectic new talent and ideas to gain a seat at the table. Some prominent designers are riding this wave and initiating their own podcasts, such as James Victore's 'Dangerous Ideas' and Debbie Millman's 'Design Matters'. By creating experiential and performative news that attracts followers, podcasts can help raise the value and popularity of a craftsman's brand. These alternative media channels combine the best of both worlds – the affordability of mainstream broadcasting with the production quality delivered by savvy auteurs.

#### **Trade Work**

As a design educator preparing my students for the professional world, I noticed how many recent graduates struggled with balancing the ethics of fair compensation and quality design at their first design job. They had an especially hard time accepting the reality of not making work they were proud of, or engaged in. Living in a mid-sized community with a limited cultural presence, many were destined for any

kind of paying job. Alumni who had low-level design jobs that lasted more than two years, often burnt out quicker, abandoned their design ambition, and settled on an unfulfilling, undervalued career. I found this very upsetting. However, the alumni that made money through alternative means often continued making quality design work for themselves and the freelance clients they deemed worthwhile.

'Trade Work' is the career model I promote to my students. By this, I intend both meanings of the word: 1. Developing one's skills in a specialized area of one's craft, while 2. Exchanging goods or services with others. Art and design school affords students the time to develop their portfolios as generalists, and internships help with job experience, however many alumni do not have the means to start their own studio or specialize their services immediately upon graduation. Most are employed as low-level production monkeys or in-house designers. It's hard for enthusiastic creative newbies to maintain an altruistic positive attitude despite their workplace or the clients they're dealt. So instead of trying to make the stars align, I promote the idea of protecting one's creative passions until they can find a way to merge the two. Sustainable quality craftsmanship can initially be supported by *any* paid work, grant, scholarship, sponsorship, or residency. This affords craftsmen time to continue developing their practice, expose their process, and build a community of patrons, clients, followers, and friends.

This is how I conceived Cards for Humanity, a design for social change initiative that promotes underprivileged and under-appreciated emerging craftsmen in my community, through custom, handmade, calling cards. The objective is to improve the representation of the underground art and design scene in the Tampa Bay area through an experimental collaborative cause that involves an open call for all craftsmen seeking promotional assistance. The project tests a new model for human-centered networking, community building, collaborative arts barter, and unsolicited design production based on the belief that trading creative services is more effective to develop meaningful communities and aid arts careers, than treating colleagues as clients or networking through impersonal online outlets. Unlike the popular game, Cards *for* Humanity aims to make quality design accessible to any needy or curious craftsman in Tampa Bay.

In 2017, I acquired a tabletop platen letterpress and was wondering what to do with it. My first gig had me design and print calling cards for Kevin Yoder, an Amish furniture designer from Sarasota, Florida. Kevin wasn't able to compensate me monetarily, so we agreed to a barter exchange. I produced an edition of 500 letterpress-printed cards and he agreed to build me a sturdier work table for my press. As teaching is my primary source of income, I enjoyed the flexibility of working with clients in this manner, making what I wanted and trading creative services. With the help of a modest research grant provided by the University of South Florida (USF), I produced *pro bono* calling cards for 55 local craftsmen and small businesses. Within a year, I developed a robust portfolio of letterpress work and gained lots of experience. Despite wanting to profit monetarily, I knew it was more beneficial to establish friendships and create a body of well-crafted work, so that I could eventually establish myself as a credible printmaker, worthy of paid work.

What makes Cards for Humanity unique is that I provide a free creative service without any precursory circumstantial problem or prompt. Industry standards of professional practice in America encourage graphic designers to be protective of their time and craft, especially regarding speculative work and *pro bono* favors. However, newly-minted craftsmen starting their careers generally don't have the means to

afford a designer for their personal logo, business cards, and website. Often they end up resorting to online creative and print services, where generic stylistic treatments are applied to template-based formats. This is hardly a viable option for someone who works in the realm of artistic ingenuity. Cards for Humanity helped completely unestablished artists the most, as the cards not only put newbies on the map, but boosted their confidence and initiative. Says ‘upcycler’ Jenny Shea: ‘I do it because I love to give new life to cast-off objects. This project has helped me to clarify my business goals.’ (Shea, 2019). From the initial 55 craftsmen who sought my help, Cards for Humanity was by far the most popular amongst visual craftsmen, followed by musicians. Requests from visual craftsmen even surpassed those for bridal invitations and I had many more visual craftsmen hit me up after this initial trial round, as the project gained popularity. Here is a detailed breakdown:

*31 Visual Craftsmen*

- 9 Designers
- 6 Photographers
- 3 Craft Artists
- 3 General Fine Artists
- 3 Furniture Designers
- 2 Printmakers
- 2 Sculptors
- 2 Painters
- 1 Fashion Designer

*11 Musicians*

- 2 Bands
- 2 Drummers
- 1 Bass Player
- 1 Guitar Player
- 1 Singer
- 1 Classical Pianist
- 1 Music Therapist
- 1 Marimbist
- 1 Audio Engineer

*13 Other Craftsmen*

- 2 Writers
- 2 Sign Language Interpreters
- 2 Arts College Administrators
- 2 Recreational Clubs
- 1 Sailor
- 1 Belly Dancer
- 1 Home Brewer
- 1 Actor
- 1 Veterinarian

While I recognize AIGA’s Standards of Professional Practice (1994) agreed upon by professionals of the American design industry regarding *pro bono* labor, spec work, and fair compensation, I also question its relevance in an age where there are so many new ways for designers to profit. For instance, many professional design rockstars take time out of their day to critique followers’ work on social media. This design activity is offered voluntarily and uncompensated monetarily, but is effective from a perspective that values building a community and a studio’s reputation.

I met Todd Brininger, the owner of a photo developing studio, on a road trip through the small town of Bowling Green, Ohio. Whenever I need film developed, I ship it to Todd. In exchange, I make calling cards for him. Says Todd:

Bartering is the oldest form of currency and still one of the most effective ways to promote your business. If I’ve done a solid for someone, they become an advocate for me and that is the best advertising. It’s priceless when a client shares their good experience with someone else and that’s how we get many new jobs (Brininger, 2019).

Caroline Woolard is another fabulous example of an artist flipping design systems. Instead of working for a client or consumer, she thinks about tools that benefit craftsmen and deter competitive isolation. She designs digital platforms for

knowledge and resource sharing and curates non-monetary transfer economies that build physical networks between people so that more creative work can get done. This is based on the idea of ‘cognitive surplus’, defined by New York University author Clay Shirky (2010) as the free time that individuals have to engage in collaborative activities through new media. Because creative colleagues shouldn’t have to be clients, she started three very successful exchange initiatives targeting different user-audiences: OurGoods<sup>3</sup>, which is a barter network for resource sharing skills, spaces, and objects, Trade School<sup>4</sup>, which is an international network of self-organized classes sustained by bartering, and BFAMFAPhD<sup>5</sup>, which is an arts education collective that analyzes cultural equity in the arts and creates pedagogical tools that help fellow students and educators.

### Alternative Entrepreneurial Models

All visual craftsmen need to let go of the perception that their careers are valuable in obvious ways, such as selling their work or services, and instead need to focus on doing what they love! Collaborative designers Tim Hoover and Jessica Karle reinforce this idea through 30 interviews in their book, *Kern and Burn: Conversations with Entrepreneurs* (2013)<sup>6</sup>. In an interview I had with Tim and Jess (Hoover and Karle, 2014) they say ‘trust yourself – not because you have all of the answers, but because together, you and your friends are smart enough to figure it out. Time and time again, we heard through our interviews that designers learned as they went. 99% of people will never try the thing they really want to try. But designers set themselves apart by experimenting. Don’t quit your job today, but work on the weekend, and go after whatever you want’.

Many famous artists are rethinking their business model, as the products of their creativity are depreciating in the digital age. Cheap reproduction prints sold at indie markets, spec work on 99designs, and 1.5¢ business cards from Vistaprint are the equivalent of musicians’ albums being shared online for free. When the work isn’t valuable anymore, craftsmen are forced to find new ways of representing and financing their careers. According to Garland (2009), Radiohead led the way in 2007 when they broke up with their label EMI, and digitally sold their album *In Rainbows* with a button that said, ‘Pay What You Wish’<sup>7</sup>. Since then, many savvy musicians have shifted their financial plan to rely more on shows and merchandising. I’m encouraging visual craftsmen to follow this trend with similar peripheral enterprises. For instance, some graphic designers have initiated side projects like subscription-based blogs and printed magazines that provide an excuse to develop a remarkable body of work, while also continuing to promote the artist, and earn them some money. *Colors* by

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3 <http://ourgoods.org/>

4 <https://tradeschool.coop/about/>

5 <http://bfamfaphd.com>

6 <https://co-lab.dewlap.club/kern-and-burn/>

7 [https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/sections/monitormix/2009/11/the\\_in\\_rainbows\\_experiment\\_did.html](https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/sections/monitormix/2009/11/the_in_rainbows_experiment_did.html)

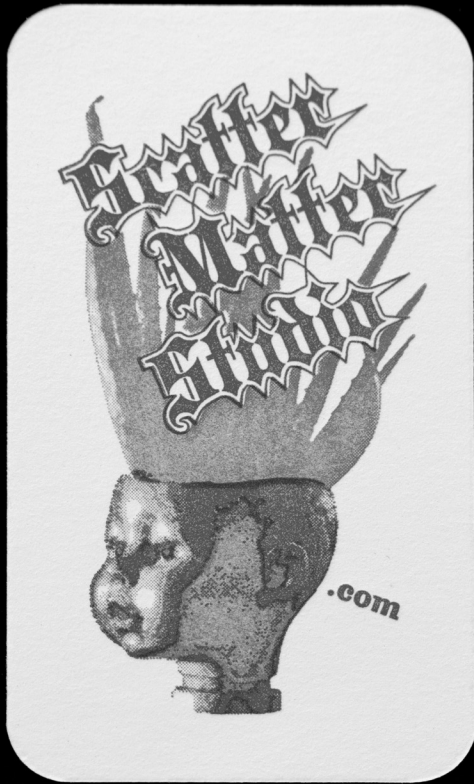


Figure 2. Cards for Scatter Matter Studio, The Vaginyls and Denzel Johnson-Green © Elizabeth Herrmann 2019.

Tibor Kalman<sup>8</sup>, *McSweeney's* by Dave Eggers<sup>9</sup>, *Twice* by Abbott Miller<sup>10</sup>, *No Zone* by Nicholas Blechman<sup>11</sup>, *Lined & Unlined* by Rob Giampietro<sup>12</sup>, and *Tidal* by Anna Wolf<sup>13</sup> are a few notable examples of publications that helped finance larger endeavors.

Thrifty craftsmen are also jumpstarting their careers and saving money by banding together. The Pencil Factory<sup>14</sup> in Brooklyn, New York and Copycat<sup>15</sup> in Baltimore, Maryland are two examples of repurposed factory buildings fashioned into artist compounds and affordable living spaces. With artisans for neighbors, arts barter and equipment sharing is rampant, affording craftsmen the time and space to establish themselves. In 2005, Village Type<sup>16</sup> initiated an online collective where a 'union of eleven type foundries decided to go at it together'. Whether digitally or in-person, collectives provide a supportive foundation for visual craftsmen to cultivate their careers.

Patreon and Kickstarter aren't the only solutions. Even though it doesn't sound as enticing, low-paid or unpaid work for social causes can prove to be valuable in the long run, as it boosts the artisan's reputation within their community and reaches new audiences. Craftsmen should consider donating work, engaging in community art projects like public murals, volunteering at events, publishing open-source papers and books, conducting public lectures and workshops, networking at indie markets, and promoting online shops through social media. Opportunities like these eventually enable craftsmen to utilize a *sliding scale* that's customized to the client's financial capabilities, which is how I now manage Cards for Humanity. Separation of one's profession and finances can be difficult to figure out, but it's a valid alternative to a consumer-driven market where deserving clients may not be able to afford quality work.

I recently made business cards for Dr. Janell Dowling, a house-call veterinarian in Tampa. Frustrated working for a corrupt monopolized industry, she eventually started her own small business Vet2Door, whereby she makes in-person visits to pets who are not able to leave their home. In a conversation I had with Janell, she said:

I'm at a point where a house call lasts two hours. But I love it because I feel like I'm making friends, not business. It would be so nice to permanently remove the concept that excess equals success. Just remember that we still need to survive. We need to get paid for our talents. I struggle with this also! If we don't, then all that money out there is going towards million-dollar yachts. I will totally support you. Giving away your business cards

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- 8 <http://www.colors magazine.com/en/home>
  - 9 <https://www.mcsweeney s.net>
  - 10 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2wice>
  - 11 <https://www.nicholasblechman.com/nozone-2>
  - 12 <https://linedandunlined.com>
  - 13 <https://www.annawolf.com/tidal>
  - 14 <https://pencilfactory.biz>
  - 15 <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2012/03/22/149061691/peek-inside-the-copy-cat-building-where-baltimore-artists-work-and-live>
  - 16 <https://vllg.com>

is like giving away little pieces of art from you! People are going to want to know where these came from. I think it's neat to get business cards from an artist – it's super trendy and I haven't seen business cards that were so artsy like this before. (Dowling, 2019).

Aside from new entrepreneurial setups, emerging craftsmen should also consider alt-thinking tactics when promoting their business. As Cards for Humanity focuses on graphic identities, the project tests experimental methods for representing craftsmen as remarkably unforgettable. It's helpful to discuss the roles of gatekeepers in order to develop our perspective on successful alternative marketing practices.

### **The Media Monopoly**

Prominent gallery owners, managers, and curators personally represent select artists based on a checklist of credentials that include a MFA, extensive exhibition history, pre-established popularity, pedigree, and demonstrative artwork value. Rampant exclusivity discourages craftsmen from even joining the traditional visual arts scene, as acceptance is often based on factors that are irrelevant to the actual work itself. In an attempt to elevate the profession, gatekeepers can actually stifle it as well.

Esteemed galleries, trade publications, blogs, schools, fairs, and conferences are the most mainstream opportunities for representation for visual craftsmen. But these forms of publicity often act as a niche club for craftsmen worshipping and learning from one another. On the other extreme, online galleries lack the power to reach new and mainstream audiences, as they are primarily browsed by a handful of people who receive a direct link and view it once.

Instagram is currently the most effective mainstream social platform that has the popularity and potential for craftsmen to promote their work outside the visual arts community, leading to new opportunities and social connections. According to Clarke (2019), Instagram recently reached a maximum of one billion active monthly users. 71% of users are under the age of 35 and 80% of users follow at least one business. Following Facebook, Instagram is the second most influential social network worldwide. I struggle to think of a more popular and accessible broadcasting platform where the average person can consume their daily dose of indie visual culture. This is less than ideal however, as a lot of traffic is social garbage and other commercial interests. Instagram doesn't filter for quality control and paid business accounts reach the top of popular hashtag lists, making it harder to discover good content from emerging craftsmen. Vero<sup>17</sup>, which means 'truth', is new to the social media scene, purporting to be an IG-replacement without ads and claiming to have more original content. This sounds great in theory, but Vero isn't very popular in the States.

Modified mainstream media channels might make sense in some situations when controlled by altruistic people, as craftsmen can at least gain status and legitimacy, while also improving visual culture. But when considering representation and profit, gatekeepers in the visual arts are losing relevance, as craftsmen can more easily achieve mainstream status without permission, credentials, and buy-in. I argue it's time to drastically change the promotional experience for visual craftsmen to better reflect the nuanced viewership of our time. People like learning new things, meeting new people, and most importantly, being entertained.

## Creating Relevant Arts Experiences

A personal connection between the artwork and the audience is often lacking. Entertainment is one of the greatest missed opportunities for improvement in the fine and applied arts. ‘A quality arts community is based on entertainment and enjoyment of any situation or setting. Entertainment will always elevate the experience’, says Joe Tessitore (Tessitore, 2019) bass player for the band Shark Nasty, who recently moved from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to the Tampa Bay area, and discovered Cards for Humanity through other local musicians. Craftsmen often find more fulfilling careers when they invert the commercial model to value *experiences* more than the manifestations of the work itself.

Participatory studio experiences such as maker/hackerspaces, community print shops, and alternative schools that offer DIY accessibility are honorable methods for craftsmen to network and gain publicity. Monetizing the creative process through live performative demonstrations allows craftsmen to profit in alternative ways by selling access to equipment, materials, and knowledge instead of relying on the work. Although these approaches are working to varying degrees of success.

The main issue I’ve noticed is the sizable price tag attached to ‘the studio experience’. This somewhat defeats the purpose of having an open studio, since people who can’t afford the equipment wouldn’t have the means to splurge on a limited-access membership. It’s disappointing to see makerspaces that are expensive to join, have insufficient equipment, are understaffed, and that provide exclusive workshops. Otherwise, these would be incredible opportunities with the potential to activate the community through artistic endeavors. Second Saturday ArtWalks<sup>18</sup>, Free Art Fridays<sup>19</sup>, Localtopia Fairs<sup>20</sup>, Urban Mural Tours<sup>21</sup>, and occasional Drink & Draws also open studios to the public, which helps break down status barriers through food, drink, and conversation. But the challenge here is figuring out how to make these events less of an excuse for partying.

Opportunities for curating unique interactive community engagement isn’t limited to these formats. Combining non-traditional prompts with varied artistic mediums and alternative techniques expands the impetus for conceiving engaging arts experiences, along with society’s ancient perception of how the visual arts should function. For instance, experiences can be based on social occasions, geography, and niche objectives, like Raubdruckerin’s urban excursions to print manhole covers on t-shirts or collaborating with the Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) to fabricate stylish Mini Bajas from bamboo. Visual craftsmen benefit from cross-disciplinary collaboration with experts outside their profession. Partnerships broaden the purview of artistic mediums, creating new tasks and applications, and increasing the craftsman’s social relevancy. Designers are equipped to help conceive, curate, and market community-specific visual arts experiences.

There are a handful of self-aware, well-intentioned artists and designers working hard on improving the quality of the visual environment in Tampa Bay. As fresh blood rises to the top, artisanal entrepreneurs are starting gigs that emphasize

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18 <https://stpeteartsalliance.org/artwalk/>

19 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/FAFStPete/>

20 <https://localtopia.keepsaintpetersburglocal.org>

21 <https://www.visitstpeteclearwater.com/photo-tour/st-pete-urban-mural-tour>



the experience over the work. For instance, axe throwing. At Raider Axe Lodge, you can take your 'booskie' out for a cultured evening appreciating both the artistic craftsmanship and cathartic functionality of an axe through games. This is a unique and amusing interactive experience. Participants not only witness the artist's impressive body of work, but they have fun playing games and may eventually invest in an axe of their own. This takes the idea of Peter Buchanan-Smith's Best Made Co. to the next level. Granted, not all visual art is functional, but something can be learned from this unique model of experiential visual display and apply it to other mediums and settings. Instead of going to the movies, people are clamoring for new media events. Escape Rooms like Rabbit Hole are also popular in the Tampa Bay community, immersing people in quality art and design while engaging them on a deeper intellectual level with their immediate surroundings. Arcades like Lowry Parcade and The Pinball Arcade Museum are making a resurgence as well, and offer fantastic opportunities for visual craftsmen to design everything from the artwork in video games, to machines, and murals. These are all unique immersive artistic experiences that employ the skills of varied craftsmen.

To adapt Cards for Humanity into an interactive experience, I created a mobile rig. One of the benefits of a tabletop platen press is that it weighs less than 100lbs and occupies less than a cubic foot of space. Equipped with a tub of wood type and vintage ads from the 1950s, I am able to travel to local events such as Saint Printersberg<sup>22</sup>, conduct free demos, and have guests design and print their own postcards on the spot. People are curious about the antique and love to learn about classic printmaking processes. They're also more willing to invest in a \$5 print when given the opportunity to make it themselves. Other letterpress printers in Tampa Bay offer this particular experience, and it has helped boost interest in letterpress printing tremendously, inevitably leading to more work.

These examples demonstrate a major shift in the commodification of the visual arts, and how the consumer market is primed for more experimental and experiential entertainment. The creative industry should more seriously consider how to activate people as participants – not just captive viewers, and the best way to do that is by breaking down the status barriers and testing new commercial models. Designing a new experience is just as important as the product and its maker.

### **Re-Examining Networks**

Artists and designers need to build connections with a range of people in their community. Distinguishing *connections* from *clients* is important, as visual craftsmen should build their network based on the merit of their engagements versus a justification of their time. Craftsmen sometimes overlook the big picture: their name is more likely to be remembered by having positive interactions with individuals in their community, rather than promoting their name under Hollywood spotlights. This is especially true in a small town with a limited art and design presence, as is the case within my community. Because actions speak louder than budgets and portfolios, surviving as a do-good craftsman depends on a positive attitude and an earned reputation in one's community.

Currently, Facebook invites and LinkedIn requests are the standard means of networking, announcing gigs, and sharing information with followers. This is somewhat effective in the sense that people know things are happening. Despite the cute animations however, posts and digital messages are not compelling methods of visual communication. People are informed but many aren't activated to go and do something. While online networking capabilities obviously allow a broader and more customized social network, that doesn't always effectively guarantee its effectiveness. Promoting an artist in their local community is necessary preliminary groundwork for building a richer network. A good online impression is solidified by an artist's reputation within their local community. Because a blossoming arts career depends more on who you know, social networking requires a combination of both physical and digital means.

Designer and educator Andrew Shea elaborates on this idea by providing strategies for how graphic designers can effectively work with local grassroots organizations in his book *Designing For Social Change* (2012)<sup>23</sup>. Says Andrew:

earning the trust of the community will help you connect emotionally with community members and their problems, and will help you take pride in your design solution. IDEO's engagement tool Design for Social Impact highlights the importance of building empathy and refers to "Empathy Field Trips" as a central part of community engagement for people who have little or no knowledge of that community.

It's easy to overlook how a craftsman's empathy, or community-consciousness arises from a niche where personal strengths and interests fulfill a need in the community. Take good care of your people and they will take care of you. While pedigree and portfolios matter, a visual craftsman's professional survival relies on who they know and the context in which the community knows them. Acquaintances from online social networks won't help in a world that remembers reciprocity.

Many designers are engaging in similar unsolicited and unprompted design-for-good collaborative gigs where building a community helps fledge personal studio careers more than traditional client relations and strategic networking practices. Detroit SOUP for example, is a social design initiative where local citizens gather together for a pot-luck meal and listen to friends pitch ideas for community-based art projects. *\$10 gets you soup, salad, bread, and a vote!* Proceeds raised from the events are donated to one project that citizens choose. SOUP is an incredible jumpstart to a craftsman's career, as the chosen projects usually develop into something that grows legs beyond their local community.

Physical calling cards facilitate meaningful relationships because they demand in-person interaction and offer a memento of the shared experience. In order to build personal connections, it's helpful for craftsmen to put themselves in a space where people are forced to come in contact. When interviewing my clients, I learned that the craftsmen with smaller versatile enterprises who sell cheaper work at indie markets, financially benefitted the most from their cards. Mini investments at popular events lead to bigger commissioned endeavors, as craftsmen have the opportunity to meet people, talk face-to-face, and develop relationships.



Figure 3. Letterpress coasters and cards in progress © Elizabeth Herrmann 2019.



Figure 4. A promotional piece offering free letterpress calling cards © Elizabeth Herrmann 2019.

When I initially started the project, I gave people the benefit of the doubt and anticipated that exchanges of kindness via barter or mutual advertisement would happen naturally. This was not the case.

This is how I met James Lamont at Cage Brewing. After a lengthy conversation about rock music and green transportation, I offered to help him. James writes *Radical Beat*<sup>24</sup>, an online fringe journal focused on the intersection of underground music and radical politics. To help facilitate his interactions with people at gigs, I made dicey Dead Kennedy's-inspired cards that read, 'Never too drunk to write'. Says James:

a physical interaction, even a short one, features some of the stuff that I'm always wishing for online. Questions, feedback, compliments, all of which we are generally too distracted to have time to type out, in my experience. As much as I bash materialism, the tiny dopamine hit of getting a pleasant physical object could help someone stay invested in conversation, assuming they were somewhat interested to begin with (Lamont, 2019).

People are constantly bombarded with phony-feeling UV-coating-blistering-off wallet-chapped business cards in a stock design from a digital printer. Letterpress is far from that. The materials are modest and the designs stand out. The quality of an embossed print is noticed before its content. Cards for Humanity deliberately challenges the medium with designs that cylinder and platen presses were never intended to print. A unique physical token of one's acquaintance is unique to a generation accustomed to online networking. Recipients enjoy tiny handcrafted works of art that clearly show an investment of time and effort. 'I don't always save a business card. I usually just scan them and toss them. But when I get something that is obviously handcrafted, it stays with me', says Chris Chow (Chow, 2019), a local computer engineer who found out about Cards for Humanity when receiving a card I made for another client.

### **Sustainable Social Practices**

One of the main issues I address through Cards for Humanity is memorable representation without taxation. I custom designed and letterpress printed free cards for the first 50 artists. I would say this recipe worked out well, as I received many requests and positive responses from my community. Through alternative funding such as indie markets and an online shop, I was able to segue the business into a sliding price scale, so that 'the answer is always yes'. This way, I can maintain credibility and accessibility for anyone in need of a unique identity and distinctive cards. In return, happy clients, hopefully, promote the project every time they hand out a card, developing my network of connections.

The Reciprocity Principle says that we often repay the things that others do for us. So if I do you a favor, you're likely to return it. The Cards for Humanity project is founded on this idea, aspiring to build a collective network of local craftsmen. When I initially started the project, I gave people the benefit of the doubt and anticipated that exchanges of kindness via barter or mutual advertisement would happen naturally. This was not the case. I believe this is because American society has assumed the

perspective that they're owed something and entitled to it. Or perhaps people fear the idea that nothing is actually free and strings are attached. Although this unrequited response was not representative of everyone, it definitely characterized more than half of my demographic. In his book *Cognitive Surplus: How Technology Makes Consumers Into Collaborators* (2010)<sup>25</sup>, New York University Professor Clay Shirky talks about how people willingly donate uncompensated time and effort to difficult open-source online projects, yet *in real life*, people expect to be paid for jobs that require the same amount of effort. Why is that? I believe it's partly because free labor must be *engaging* or *fulfilling* in some capacity: you *want* to do it. So I adapted my project to become more game-like, and wrote a few 'House Rules' with terms that players were prompted to read and agree to upfront, including:

1. Deal all 500 cards within six months of receiving them.
2. Recruit at least one new craftsman who needs cards.
3. Write an artist statement or brief description of your gig in 150 words.
4. After six months, answer a few interview questions to assess your experience and outcome.
5. Spread the word! Please return the favor and help promote Cards for Humanity through your circles of colleagues and friends.

I found that this basic framework helped remind people that they were engaging in a charitable *exchange*. Being clearer with the things I expected from clients also ensured that the project could continue. I later revised the rules to include specific due dates. Even though this wasn't as important to me, it was helpful to activate participants who needed more structure.

Cards for Humanity demonstrates how reciprocity helped solidify new relationships. When people invest in someone, they share an implicit responsibility for their success. It's beneficial for clients to claim that they're involved in a successful community-arts project, which is why I think my clients promote the endeavor. One-sided relationships don't last. Making an acquaintance isn't as meaningful as two people helping one another. This is how a supportive social network forms and activates collectives through mutual collaboration.

### Show Your Bones

Before becoming a mainstream musician, Paul Janeway started out like every other talented and undiscovered artist. Paul doesn't even know how he made it this big. That's because he's modest. Paul started small, did something different, and worked closely with his community in Birmingham, Alabama.

I like sharing this example because it's what inspired me to start Cards for Humanity and I hope other creatives can benefit from the ideas tested in this project. There are alternative career models for creatives wondering how to make unique arts experiences and build rapport in their community. Many cultural Samaritans with like-minded aspirations of improving their visual culture are updating antiquated

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25 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive\\_Surplus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_Surplus)

professional practices. Cards for Humanity demonstrates how it takes sincerity, passion, dedication, and cultural investment to acquire a respectable professional network and how specialized craftsmen can support their careers without relying on monetary compensation. It takes time to build an honest, legitimate network, and find one's place in it.

Cards for Humanity can be viewed on the website, [cardsforhumanity.co](http://cardsforhumanity.co).

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# Political Awareness and Engagement Through Banknote Design

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Keywords

Activity Theory

Graphic Design

education

Banknote design

Political awareness

Political

engagement

## **Introduction**

**G**raphic design communication courses have the potential to aid students in acquiring new skills, increase critical thinking and integrate theoretical concepts. Educators may be given the freedom to express their political viewpoints even within a classroom setting but do not always embrace opportunities to incorporate political awareness and engagement into the education they impart to their students. What may be lost for students are social, economic and cultural understandings associated with the work they create as well as a sense of agency or even acceptance that designers have a role in determining the ultimate form and impact their work takes in the public sphere.

This article will focus on a class project assigned to intermediate graphic design students in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. This article will not provide an extensive survey of the history and policies associated with banknotes, but will present opportunities for political awareness and engagement for students through a banknote design project. The students were asked to create a reimagined history through the design of banknotes that were required to be utilitarian in usage, and contemporary in design. The students created banknotes that reimagined the effects of empire, colonisation, culture, political upheaval and outside economic and military forces on a nation. Their work represents a political activity and can be understood and evaluated through a theoretical framework.

Activity Theory will be used as a framework to understand the forces at work in creating the student projects and to analyse the interconnections between the classroom community of instructor and students. The theory allows for the study of different forms of human practices as development processes and the interlinking of both individual and social experience. The theory derived initially from Soviet Psychology and has become an emerging multidisciplinary and international community of scientific thought. The theory was not used to predict the outcomes of the project but to understand what role multiple factors had in affecting the learning experience for students. This article will explain why the theory was applied to examine the banknote project, develop an activity system and chart the different factors that affected the learning experience of students and the outcomes of the project. Banknotes will be defined as cultural artefacts that are tied to different understandings of cultural and political value. The role of community in an activity system will be explored with a focus on the perceived political viewpoints of the instructor and the effects of classroom diversity in altering levels of social activism and agency. Examinations of the critique process as a way to challenge participants and share in the labour of an activity will also be shared. The diverse themes present in the students' work will be discussed to understand the scope of the students' political interests. Finally, the results of student surveys after the completion of the banknote project will be interpreted to analyse the effects of the project on students' political awareness and engagement levels.

## **Activity Theory as a Lens and Framework**

Activity Theory has been used in graphic design and communication studies (Appiah and Cronje 2013; Tan and Melles, 2010) and is an excellent lens and framework for analysing design practice. The theory provides qualitative analysis of real-world practice and uncovers a depth of data rather than seeking an overview of large sample sizes. The theory provides diagrammatic processes and theoretically informed depictions of interdependencies between stages of design and problem solving and

focuses on the activities of an individual in relation to a community. The theory is also rich in descriptions on a wide range of activities and differentiates specific types of actions, without falling into rigid definitions.

The beginnings of Activity Theory date as far back as the 18th and 19th century to classical German philosophy, which focused on developmental and historical ideas and the active and constructive role of humans. Soviet Cultural-Historical Psychology and the work of Lev Vygotsky, Alexei Leont'ev and Alexander Luria are key to understanding how the theory works and may be applied. Leont'ev and Luria added to the work of Vygotsky and associated these theories to the term 'activity'. Activity can be defined as human interaction with an objective reality grounded in human interaction with the environment. The theory also considers social/cultural properties of the environment in an objective manner and expresses that activity is a form of making, directed to an object. An object can be manifested physically into an idea and activities can also change the final form of an object and the motivations for creating the object. Mediation is carried out by a 'tool' which can be both enabling and limiting in an activity.

Yrjö Engeström's third generation Activity Theories and views on Expansive Learning will be a primary lens for the analysis of the banknote project. Engeström's implementation of the theory fits well into design communication practice because of Engeström's focus on work process and change management. Engeström's system of activity in the shape of a structure of nested triangles will be discussed and will help to describe the process and developments that occurred in the banknote project. Engeström's model was inspired by Vygotsky's initial ideas of mediation and his triangular model of a subject, object and mediating artefact (Figure 1) as well as building upon earlier activity system models created by Leont'ev. Engeström's activity system represents the relationship between an individual subject and their object, which is transformed through collaborative activity into an outcome. Engeström

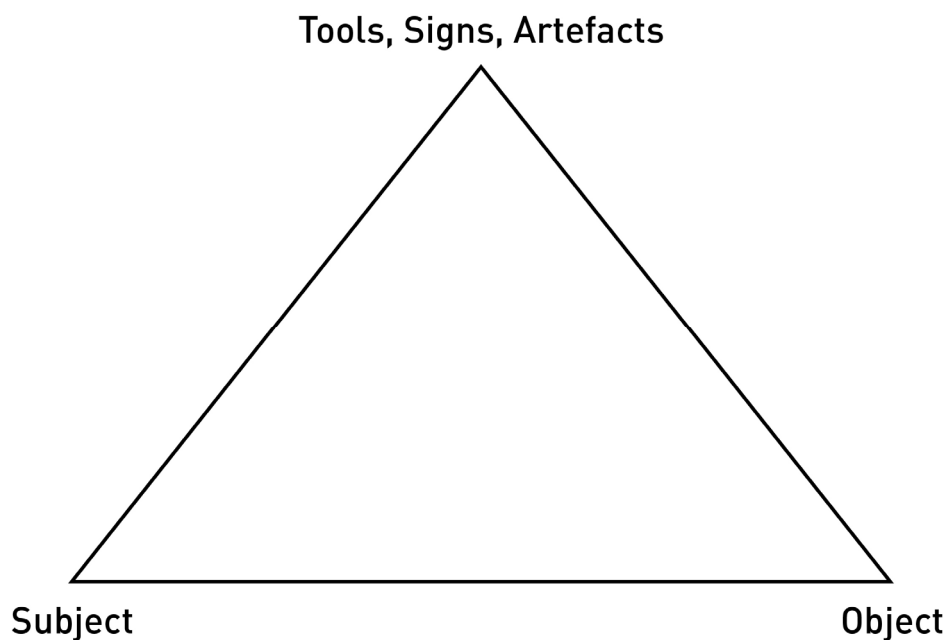


Figure 1: Vygotsky's first generation activity system diagram. Recreated by Chae Ho Lee.

suggests that different activities produce outcomes which are changed relationships based on all the factors that make up the activity (Engeström, 1987, pp.47-59). This model speaks to the relationships between the subject, their object and the outcome, the community, the environment of the system, rules associated with the activity, instruments of production and the division of labour. The general characteristics of each element in the activity system under study in this article, according to Engeström's model, include the following:

*Subject:* The subjects in this article are graphic design students at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Most of the students are in the second semester of their design studies degree; have completed introductory coursework in composition, layout, typography and have been exposed to design history and semiotic principles.

*Community:* The primary community indicated in this article includes the students and instructor. The enrolment of students in the course ranged from 9-18 students each semester. The enrolled students in the course can be considered a temporary but established community, most of whom have shared other classes with, and been exposed to, each other for varying lengths of time, both in and outside of class.

*Instruments:* Instruments are defined as the tools students used to complete their work. This includes desktop and laptop computers, graphics illustration and image manipulation software, digital cameras, black and white laserjet and colour inkjet printers as well as online image libraries and databases.

*Rules:* The rules of the banknote project were established at the beginning of the project and required careful attention in the creation of a final printed outcome that was believable as a banknote but did not break any laws regarding the counterfeiting of currency. General design guidelines and professional practices were encouraged related to composition, use of colour, typography, legibility and readability. The object was also required to be contemporary in appearance and to fit within the context of the 21st century and beyond rather than look vintage or dated in appearance.

*Division of Labour:* The project is set within a design studio that employed class critique sessions in the analysis of in-progress work. In addition to the classroom studio, students were required to work on aspects of the project in the computer lab: a co-working space which encouraged discussions outside of class, and casual and often spontaneous mentoring from other students.

*Object:* The object of the project was to create four printed, colour banknote designs (two banknote bills, back and front) mounted on black presentation board with a protective tracing paper cover sheet and archival high resolution PDF files.

*Outcome:* The project was assigned in order to help the students improve upon their informational and visual researching abilities. Students needed to demonstrate the ability to work proficiently with images, text and symbols within a small printable space. It was hoped that students would integrate knowledge gained from other courses at the University and acquire a broader view of the impact of design in society, encouraging a sense of social activism and agency.

To many people, the design process can be opaque, partly because the factors that create a design are seldom analysed. The activity system of the banknote project can be charted diagrammatically into a triangle that expresses many factors that affect design outcomes (Figure 2). Each aspect of the triangle expresses a system of interconnectivity with maker and community relationships and patterns of collaboration. This system illustrates levels of design and communication engagement that don't follow a linear process but consist of multiple parallel activities performed by different participating student designers. Charting the different factors that make up an activity can provide insight into the influencing factors within a design project. Analysis is also needed in order to better understand contradictions, developments and to reconstruct the experience of the subject and community. Engeström advocates for a rigorous analysis of activity systems and divides them into three areas: (a) object-historical analysis, (b) theory-historical analysis, and (c) actual-empirical analysis. Each of these three analysis areas will be elaborated upon in the following paragraphs with a focus on the objects, community and outcomes of the activity system (Engeström, 1987, pp.254-255).

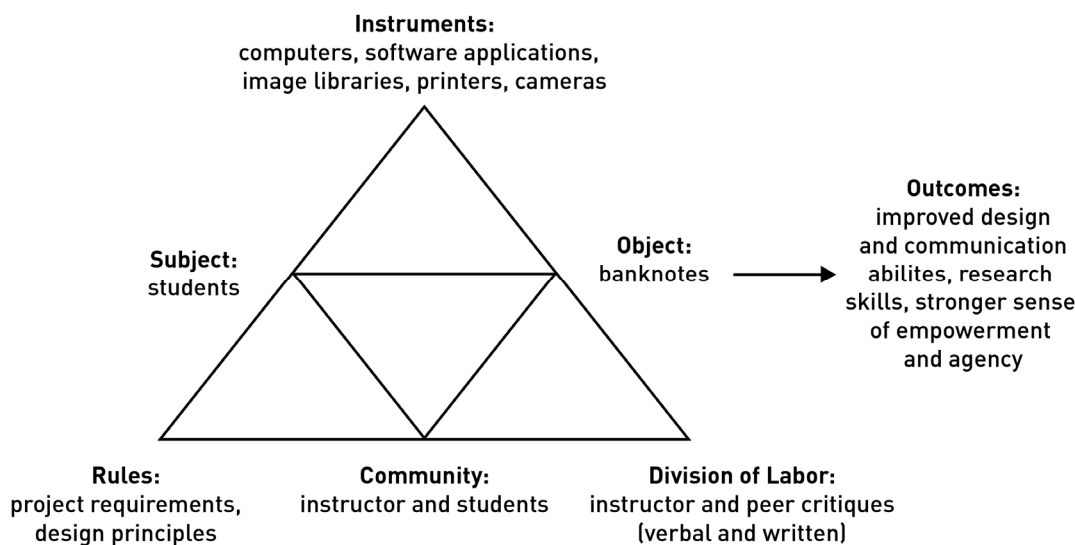


Figure 2: Engeström-inspired banknote project activity system diagram. Created by Chae Ho Lee.

## Banknotes are Cultural Artefacts

Object-historical analysis is focused on uncovering the identity of an object, its transformation and its centrality within a system. Design and communication solutions begin with defining the object or problem of focus. Without understanding the object of focus in this activity system, banknotes, it would be difficult to grasp their historical relevance, uniqueness as a form and political nature. A banknote can be referred to as a bill, paper money or note and has a long history in the world that has progressed until today. The oldest surviving banknote is attributed to the Chinese Emperor Hiao Tsung in the early 12th century. However, records of the use of banknotes were discovered as far back as the 10th century and linked to the Chinese Emperor Chen Tsung. Early Chinese paper currency was abandoned due to the inflation it caused and paper currency didn't really catch on in Europe and the West until the 17th century.

Notgeld, or in German 'emergency paper currency', and scripts were printed during a period of hyperinflation following World War I and demonstrates the visual potential of banknotes and their ability to influence art and design movements. Over 36,000 types of notes were issued by over 3,500 private and state-owned companies, banks and municipalities. Notgeld designs ranged from historical and heraldic to folk subject matter. The designs displayed in Notgeld included morbid imagery such as the grim reaper or had a modern and minimal aesthetic such as the designs created by famous designers such as Herbert Bayer that presented a better future for the country. The artists and designers of Notgeld expressed themselves freely and explored within the illustration and design of banknotes ideas and themes that would later influence artistic movements such as Dadaism, Expressionism, New Objectivity and Modernism.

Banknote design is inevitably political. The U.S. Educational Series banknotes of 1896 created a great deal of controversy when female figures on the \$5 silver certificate were depicted with naked breasts. Many banks refused to accept the notes following the protests of several women's societies in Boston, and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing went so far as proposing to add a drape to cover the bosom of the figure of the \$5 vignette design for the 1897 series of notes. More recently, many Americans were disappointed with the delay and possible cancellation of a new design for the U.S. \$20 bill with a portrait of the famous American abolitionist and political activist Harriet Tubman. Tubman was born a slave, but escaped slavery and went on 13 missions that rescued approximately 70 enslaved people. Her portrait was to replace the portrait of Andrew Jackson, the seventh President of the United States and a known slave owner and merchant who over his lifetime may have owned nearly 300 slaves. Preliminary designs for the Tubman note were created after Jacob J. Lew, President Barack Obama's final Treasury secretary, proposed the idea of a Tubman bill. There is speculation that Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin delayed the design of the Tubman note by six years in order to avoid the possibility that the current U.S. President Donald J. Trump would cancel the proposed Tubman design as well as create more controversy on the matter. While running for President, Trump called the decision to replace Jackson with a new Tubman note as 'pure political correctness' (Wright, 2016). Plans for the new \$20 Tubman bill were also removed from the Treasury Department's website after Trump took office (Rappeport, 2019) suggesting a lack of regard for the project and preventing further political controversy. These examples of the controversies associated with banknote design illustrate the impact they have on the identity of a nation and their cultural impact on a society.

# Consciousness is extremely important during the process of dividing labour.

According to Activity Theory, artefacts can be defined as instruments, signs, language, and even machines. Artefacts mediate between an actor and the object of doing and carry with them particular cultural or historical remains from that development. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory looks at artefacts and people as embedded in dynamic activity systems. Banknotes are artefacts most often tied to a nation and expressions of nationalism that create and transmit national symbols to the world. Banknotes communicate, educate, inform and promote national aspiration as well as encourage a national identification, allegiance, and possibly feelings of self-sacrifice. Banknotes must assert a sense of security and reliability and are only worth the paper they are printed on. It is the assigned cultural understandings and belief that they have value, that allows banknotes to have a vital role in societies.

The students created what may be termed as fantasy, fun, art, or private issue notes. These type of notes are created by an individual and not issued by a bank or authorised by a specific government entity. For the purposes of this article the term banknote will be used to describe the reimagined cultural artefacts the students created. In the examination of different examples of money and banknotes the students realised that what they were creating was a culturally mediated artefact. The students' design task was not only to create a physical representation of money but also to add a cultural value to what they were creating.



## **Dividing the Labour of Creation**

Theory-historical analysis is focused on secondary artefacts such as concepts and models and how they are utilised in an activity system. Communities use shared concepts and models in order to engage in an activity and begin a process of mediation. Communities also require a social gathering and accumulation of information and experiences in order to survive. Engeström's views on community focus on two relationships: rules mediating between the subject and the community and division of labour, and those mediating between the object and the community. The banknote project was never intended or presented as a group project, but the contributions made from other students and the instructor did impact the banknote outcomes. Different critique and evaluation techniques also opened up new concepts and models for students to use during the design process.

Consciousness is extremely important during the process of dividing labour. Activity Theory asserts that participants in the community assess their actions based on how they will affect members of the community, and roles are self-assigned or influenced by community members. The way in which instruction occurred in the design classroom created opportunities for both individual and class discussion. Critiques of student work in progress are a primary method by which students are asked to both articulate the current state of their work and express future developments on their projects through a social context. Each project was discussed at every critique and transparency in reactions to the work were encouraged. Reactions by the community to student work directed many of the decisions that students made. The stronger the reaction, whether positive or negative towards the work shown, the more likely the student was to keep or change design choices.

Students began their projects by first listing their initial research focus for their project. Students at the beginning of the project were required to choose one focus after listing 10 of their own research options, and to explain their choices. When asking the students to explain why they chose the subject for their banknotes, students were often asked by the other students how their chosen subject related to them as an individual. Arbitrary decisions were given less weight and were debated more than informed choices. Most students would defend their project focus by explaining a personal or historical connection to the subject, an interest since childhood or simply an interest that had never been fully explored in their life. These discussions formed many new rules and boundaries for the students in their individual work. If certain design decisions couldn't be explained or argued for they were often eliminated. In many ways the community helped to make final project determinations and connections, including decisions that students didn't realise needed more justification or would not have altered on their own.

Many students took on roles during critiques such as instigators of conversations, supporters of ideas, seekers of affirmation, questioners of intent and silent observers. Diverse classroom critique communication methods were used to optimise participation from students in order to transcend student class roles. Critique methods included traditional open critiques where all students are allowed to make comments and a focused critique where one student was assigned to critique a different individual's work, following which the floor was opened to the entire class for further discussion. Anonymous written critiques were presented and required in-progress work to be passed among the class with constructive feedback. Other teaching methods included passing around project printouts that could be marked

and drawn on and project comments written on notecards tacked next to the work on critique walls that would open up class discussions. Offering students different ways to communicate in the classroom community allowed them the opportunity to hear, read and interpret suggestions and comments in a manner that would best register with them on their own individual cognitive levels. Some students were very reluctant to vocalise or engage themselves in group situations and would rarely speak in group critiques but would write or draw in an expressive and much more candid manner during written or markup critiques. Some students were more vocal, when they only had one student's project to focus on rather than have to make comments for each member of the class. Requiring students to articulate their ideas in a uniform manner leads towards forced and often unproductive interactions within the community of instructor and students. What was perceived as 'shyness' from students could lead to both a perceived lack of engagement and stagnancy in the process of producing refined student outcomes. Each student had to be seen as an individual participant and differences in communication methods utilised that best met each student's comfort level and proficiencies.

### **Instructors and Diversity in Communities**

It is helpful to describe the political environment of the students within this study in order to understand their political engagement levels. The University of Hawaii at Manoa has seen a great deal of political engagement in recent years primarily focused on long-standing issues related to indigenous rights, sovereignty and environmental stewardship. Protests have primarily focused on the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) atop Mauna Kea on Hawaii island. Opposition to the \$1.4 billion telescope project prompted multiple demonstrations at universities in Hawaii, California and Canada as well as a blockade of the access road to Mauna Kea by faculty, staff, students and community members. However, closer examination of student political engagement at the University through a search of events, activities and groups on and off campus, shows the student body does not appear as politically engaged as a whole. The chartered student organisations at the University list very few politically related activities and among the list of current and past Registered Independent Organisations (RIOs) totalling nearly 250 groups composed of students, faculty and staff, there are no groups that clearly list political awareness or engagement as part of their mission statement. A general lack of strong political engagement by students at the University seems to also parallel the fact that the State of Hawaii continues to have the lowest voter turnout of any State in the United States. Rather than focusing on the political activism occurring or not occurring at the University, this article will focus on the community created by the instructor and students within the classroom, and will observe and analyse a more manageable and focused examination of guided and peer-influenced learning experiences for design communicators.

Community is extremely important in the development of an outcome and for the subjects' experience within any activity system. Lev Vygotsky, the founder of Social Constructivism and whose work was one of the main inspirations behind Activity Theory, believed that students bring a great deal of prior knowledge into the learning environment that is often repeated in a loop possibly affecting the ability of students to learn in a new and more effective manner. Vygotsky rejected the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget's notion that learning could be separated from social constructs. Learning for Vygotsky occurs at an interpsychosocial level for the individual and at an

intrapyschological level with others. This was referred to by Vygotsky as a zone of proximal development in which student knowledge cannot reach a maximum level of potential development without group learning and the pivotal contributions of an instructor who manages and initiates these learning communities (Vygotsky, 1980, p.85). Activities are socially managed and contextualised in a design communication studio and managed through an instructor. This community defines an activity system and determines how communities function in ways that support the activity of community members.

Activity Theory acknowledges the important role of instructors in the learning process. An aspect within the design process that may not have been reviewed is the important role that instructors have as both reliable sources for information and moderators of discussions within these communities. Students' impressions of a professor's political views do appear to have some effect on their educational experiences. Studies have examined the role of the perceived politics of instructors to the learning experiences of students. The greatest effects seem to occur when political views are measured against student political views. In a well-cited study by Kelly-Woessner and Woessner (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner, 2006, pp.498-500) it was shown that students who perceive their professors to share their political views rated courses in class evaluations more favourably than students who perceived their professors to have differing political views. Instructors who were also seen as political moderates were rated less favourably by students who identified themselves as politically liberal. Instructors were put in a difficult position when political viewpoints were shared and they ran the danger of scoring lower in student reviews if they did not share perceived similar political viewpoints. It is important to note that making students feel politically comfortable in a classroom situation is not the main goal of any course. What is demonstrated by studies such as this is that students need to confront new and controversial ideas in order to develop critical thinking or broaden their perspective of the world even when instructor evaluations are at risk. Interactions between students and instructor may alter or adjust the viewpoints of members and lead to a transformative process if members of a learning community come with different expectations, life experiences and viewpoints

In Activity Theory, it is acknowledged that the process of creating mediated objects is not harmonious. Different perspectives and voices emerge that alter the dynamics of an activity system. Accepted practices and positions are questioned and through an expansive and collaborative approach new models of thinking may be formed. Diversity experiences during college have a great effect on the formation of political viewpoints and an interest in social activism/agency for students. Many studies suggest that exposing college students to both classroom and non-classroom diversity experiences generated positive experiences and promoted movement towards social activism/agency (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado et al., 2003; Lopez, 2004; Nelson Laird et al., 2005). A well-known study on the effects of diversity experiences by Pascarella, Salisbury, Martin and Blaich (Pascarella et al., 2012, pp.488-492) shows an increase in social activism/agency among students who enrol in courses that focus on diversity topics, issues and experiences as compared to those that do not. Two scales were used for the study. An 'interactional diversity' scale consisted of nine items that included factors such as how often a respondent had serious conversations with students from a different race or ethnicity, participated in a social/cultural awareness workshop or had serious conversations with students of different religious beliefs, political opinions or personal values. The second scale included a classroom diversity

scale consisting of questions that asked students the number of courses taken during the first year of college that focused on diverse cultures and perspectives, issues of women/gender, and issues of equality and justice. The findings as early as the first year of college from this study of 2,974 students at 19 post-secondary institutions suggest that exposure to classroom and interactional diversity experiences during college enhances the development of social activism or social/political activism. According to the results of this study, these diversity experiences also persisted regardless of institutional racial context, institutional type and previous orientations toward social/political activism. The study also revealed the positive effect of interactional diversity on the development of increased political liberalism during the initial year of college.

Although the design course described in this article was not diversity focused, the high levels of diversity at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, amongst a number of factors, created a great deal of opportunity for these types of experiences among the design students. The University is known to have nationally high rankings for factors such as racial, gender, geographic and age diversity. The undergraduate student ethnic population is 38.9% Asian, 17% White, 11.4% Hispanic/Latino, 3.6% Non-Resident Alien, 2.9% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 1.5% Black or African American, 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native and 24.7% ethnically unknown. The design classes that participated in the banknote project came from very diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and were given the freedom to choose their own banknote design research focus. This resulted in a diversity of banknote topics, interests and incorporation of life experiences that fuelled the presentation of politically oriented research, charged discussions and encouraged active oral and visual engagement throughout the project development. It was rare to see students choose similar topics for their banknotes or fall into the same political affiliations. The community of students and instructor were educating each other about their project and in the process engaging in the presentation of their individual political viewpoints.

### **Project Descriptions and the Challenges of Activity Theory**

Actual-empirical analysis evaluates internalised and invented models used by participants in an activity. What is analysed in the activity are its motivations, conditions, structures and any models used by an activity. Class notes and observations of the student work in progress and project grading evaluations were used to generate a great deal of insight and evidence that supports the idea that the banknote project generated more political engagement. Descriptions of the progress of the project reveal that student work began in an ambiguous form and required a great deal of interpretation and conceptualisation in the process of developing an outcome. This led towards an investment of personal and cultural attachment. Final outcomes reveal that the themes and subject matter of banknotes were varied in location, cultural context and time period.

Many of the students focused on issues related to sovereignty and nationhood for colonised and indigenous peoples in Hawaii (Figure 3), New Zealand, Okinawa (Figure 4), the United States, Canada and the Basque area of northern Spain. Students were interested in creating banknotes that reflected self-governance and independence for indigenous populations because of their own ethnic or ancestral connections to these places or from travels or knowing someone from these nations, countries and tribes. Students were able to research and evaluate the legitimacy of a foreign nation's claim to a territory or state and the future of its indigenous

population. By reimagining a place through the design of a banknote, students explored how a culture could have developed without interference from a foreign entity as well as evaluate the shared values and beliefs of a colonised population that would have carried through to the 21st century. Students were able to compare and contrast lifestyles of the past and present, note significant changes in societal beliefs and find ways to integrate their own ethnic and cultural background into their work.



Figure 3: Banknote design based on legends related to the Hawaiian gods Kanaloa and Kane. Created by Emma Kam during second year of BFA.



Figure 4: Banknote design celebrating the distinct arts and cultural practices of Okinawa. Created by Jana Sasaki during second year of BFA.

Ethnic and cultural reconnection to places that have or had their own banknotes was of interest to students who chose to focus on redesigning banknotes from countries such as Scotland, Japan, China and the Philippines. The redesign of these banknotes steered away from traditional political representations of famous political figures. The images that were chosen by students explored issues related to the cultural significance and ecological beauty of the fauna and flora native to these areas, historical kingdoms and regions that fell out of dominance in these countries, the importance of religious beliefs, cultural practices and careful depictions of the

arts. Students often used local and regional focuses in their banknote designs such as landmarks, festivals and shrines specific to areas their families had a historical connection with. Local and regional preferences in the depictions of certain banknotes expressed a desire to reconnect to an ethnic and local identity rather than national one.

Student banknotes focused on pivotal moments in history such as the defeat of the Spanish Armada by England, the purchase of Alaska from Russia by the United States and the North Vietnamese victory in Vietnam. Students were interested in these significant historical moments because of their retelling by family and friends or through their studies in history, social and political science courses during their secondary education and at university. Students gained a much more detailed and focused understanding of these events because they were required to communicate them visually to viewers. Many of these events also had no imagery or representations that could be easily used on a banknote so students would often have to layer imagery or express events, people and places through a combination of images, text and symbols. Hierarchical arrangements were also created contrasting the scale of images and text while still maintaining both legibility and readability of images and text.

Banknotes were inspired by the culture of different societies and their associated narratives. Norse mythology and *The Tale of Genji* (Figure 5) were narratives students focused on in their banknotes. *The Tale of Genji* banknote focused on a feminist reinterpretation of the famed Japanese novel that chose to highlight female characters in the story rather than the main protagonist, Hikaru Genji. Popular culture was also inspirational for students who chose to incorporate patriotic historical figures from the Revolutionary War with American football teams, and for students who focused on Korean K-pop and its formation by corporate entities. The blending of narratives was a challenge for the students because of the difficulty in articulating events on a small printable area as well as picking crucial moments within a story. Creating banknotes that have a neutral tone is difficult, because most images contain indexical relationships. The individuals depicted on the banknote are often elevated to a heroic status and students were often challenged to understand whether or not individuals in literature and popular culture were deserving of such status.

Students were also interested in exploring themes that dealt with the future. Several students chose themes related to space travel and the colonisation of planets such as Mars. Martian banknotes illustrated the cultural significance of the planet to ancient Romans and Mayans. One student was interested in depicting banknotes that focused on a world currency (Figure 6). She chose to highlight the migration of whales and birds and compared that to developments in aviation and maritime exploration. These themes were often utopian in premise because they assumed a coming together of all countries in a united effort to reach shared understandings and to achieve.

Although Activity Theory did help to focus on areas of concern within an activity system, it does have problems for design practice analysis. Detailed descriptions of an individual's workflow can be difficult to fully observe and document. Many students created large portions of their work outside the classroom and discoveries and insights weren't always made during periods of instruction. Despite the simplicity of the activity system it provides a vocabulary to speak to the issues and to the development of meaningful and detailed descriptions of the activities undertaken by each of the participants. Students were able to create work that was professional in appearance, well researched and that pertained to their political interests and beliefs.



Figure 5: Banknote design exploring Japanese narratives within The Tale of Genji written by noblewoman and lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu. Created by Shelly Amine during second year of BFA.

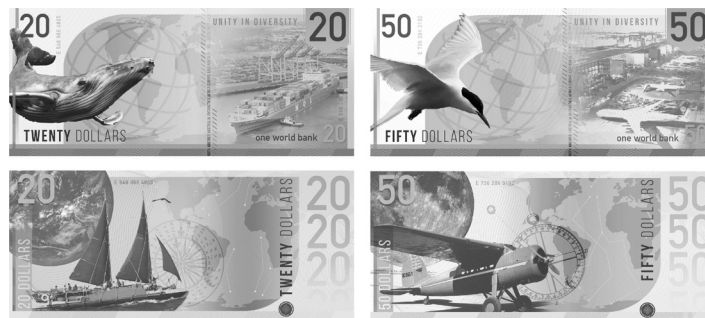


Figure 6: Banknote design imagining a world currency inspired by the migration of animals and the exploration of unknown territories. Created by Stephanie Wolfe during second year of BFA.

### Outcomes: Students Respond

Four different student classes from across four separate semesters totalling 46 students were surveyed after the completion of each of their banknote projects. Although a small sample size, student survey responses reveal relevant quantitative and qualitative data supporting the impact the banknote project had on increasing student political awareness and engagement. Prior to working on the banknote project, the students we surveyed scored themselves, on average, between 2-6 on a scale of 1-10 in their political activity and engagement. After working on the project students scored themselves on average between 5-8. There was an average of 2-3 points gained in both political awareness and engagement after working on the project. Students who scored themselves as gaining only 1-2 points after working on the banknote project did go on to elaborate in the survey that they gained more knowledge or awareness of politically-related issues and activities through the project. One student wrote: ‘after this project I had a better understanding of some global issues and politics

in Europe and was able to compare and contrast similar issues within the United States' (Anonymous, 2018–19). This statement reveals the possibility for even more political awareness of international political issues and that political awareness can be enhanced even among already politically active individuals.

Based on the results of the survey, the students seemed to have a clear way of defining what political awareness and engagement meant to them, and that the banknote project did foster a noticeable increase in both political awareness and engagement. It is important to note that the surveys were distributed after the completion of the project and grades for the project were already assigned. Students were not compelled to fill out the survey or asked to affirm a positive response to the project. Students filled out the survey anonymously and were asked to fill out the surveys without faculty, staff or other students in attendance. There was also no discussion of the project before the survey was given out and results of previously given surveys were not related to the students.

Questions in the survey sought to understand how students defined both political awareness and engagement. Students defined political awareness and engagement in a similar manner with written descriptions that focused on both a current knowledge of events as well as politics and its relationship to a community. Descriptions defining political awareness and engagement included the following (Anonymous, 2018–19):

Political awareness is not only keeping up with current events in your community but also being educated in international laws that affect countries as a whole.

Political awareness to me is being informed about what is happening in politics, knowing and understanding the different stories in politics. How it impacts me and the community.

Political awareness involves an understanding of and desire to maintain up-to-date knowledge of local, national, and/or international governments and how systems of power and control are being managed in society.

Political awareness and engagement are two different things. Political awareness would be how much a person knows regarding the current politics and economic issues, while political engagement would be more acting on the subject/topic that they are politically aware of.

When asked in the survey if the design of a banknote had value to a society, most of the surveyed students said 'Yes'. Students were prompted by the survey to explain their answer further. Responses often focused on the importance of an expression of history, values and identity (Anonymous, 2018-19).

The designed money of a country is important because it tells the history of a country, or where they are now. It is a way to express a changing economy of rise of power within that country as well as provide a unique quality of that country. Like a flag, it is an identifiable trait/characteristic that others learn in order to understand another country.



Who and what  
is represented in any  
interpretation of a culture  
or society is bounded by  
the political viewpoints  
of an individual.

The design of money pinpoints that country's values and history, since money is something that we see every day, the design needs to be visually interesting and apparent to where it comes from.

The design of currency in particular can condense a country's history and identity into a kind of visual shorthand. Likewise, because currency is legitimised by the state and sees widespread use and public exposure in a society, currency design can influence perceptions of, and identification with, a country.

## Conclusion

Designing a banknote, even as a student project, has many limitations. There are imagined and real hazards in the creation and alteration of a banknote. Counterfeiting U.S. currency is a federal crime and violates Title 18, Section 471 of the U.S. Code with a 15-year incarceration term if convicted. Possession of counterfeit United States currency can also lead to incarceration if it is done with the intent of passing it on as real currency. Even the photocopying of currency and certain government documents can result in a fine of \$5,000 U.S. dollars and a criminal sentence. To ensure that the students did not break any laws in creating a banknote, strict design requirements were enforced during and after the design process. Banknotes were required to not look like money in current usage, students were also not allowed to photocopy any real currency to use as examples, the printed sizes of the currency could not be the same size as current currency and had to be printed at larger than legal currency size. Students were also required to only print their work on one side, to ensure there would be no confusion between their work and banknotes in current circulation. These rules and restrictions allowed students to reimagine banknotes with a sense of safety and with regard for the significance and need for security of images, illustrations and symbols related to each nation.

Activity Theory is optimistic in that it proposes that human beings are self-determining through the creation of cultural artefacts. Vygotsky believed that people have the power with the things they use to change and control their behaviour. By organising, grouping, sorting and putting things together for their own purposes subjects have a power over their desires. The subject's agency, their ability to change the world and their own behaviour are the main points of focus. Instructors give the subject, students, a task or problem to solve and it is the subjects' responsibility to add meaning, which reframes the tasks involved. By allowing the students the freedom to choose and interpret the historical events they wished to portray in this project, the students were involved in a political activity. Who and what is represented in any interpretation of a culture or society is bounded by the political viewpoints of an individual. An activity system was created in the designing of the banknote with contradictions and tensions within it. How this was mediated is extremely significant. Political awareness and engagement was encouraged by having the students make a determination on the value of the images, illustrations and symbols they chose to use on their banknotes and was aided through a diverse community formed by the instructor and students.

Design is an activity that can be obsessive and self-absorbed. Designers, vested in their own work, often believe their output will have the same appeal to others as it does to them. What designers create may ultimately become a tool or instrument to be used by an end user with little or no regard for the designer's intent. Communication demands shifting the perspectives between design and use. Political awareness can be cultivated by students when informational resources and new frameworks to identify a student's political interests and motivations are provided. Engagement in local and global politics can be attained by having students work on projects that merge their historical knowledge, self-directed research and co-creative actions into ultimately political outcomes. To be both informed and active citizens of the world, students must analyse and present their own political viewpoints and this may begin through the reimagining of the histories and politics of a people and place.

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# Personal value thinking in graphic communication design education –

The introduction of  
a clarification tool  
for students

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Keywords

Values

Value clarification

Value thinking

Graphic

communication

design

Education

Sustainability

## 1. Introduction

Graphic Communication Design has long had an appetite for change. Since the first draft of ‘The First Things First Manifesto’ (Garland, 1964), to the *The Living Principles for Design* (AIGA, 2009) and beyond, efforts to transform the discipline have been ongoing. This is comparable to third-level education. An array of frameworks, manifestos, and publications such as the *Ico-grada Design Education Manifesto* (Ico-grada, 2011) and *The Designers Accord—Integrating sustainability into design education: The Toolkit* (The Designers Accord, 2009) have aimed to support educators in fostering sustainable development minded students. As a result, education around sustainability has increased. But Dritz (2014) suggests that often professional designers attribute sustainable activity to themselves, not their education. With this in mind, *should education focus more on harnessing personal values to foster graduates with sustainable development mindsets?*

Design students and graduates need to develop personal awareness to benefit their individual design practice, as well as to benefit sustainable development. Baha et al. (2018) recognise the need for junior designers to tune into their identity, to be confident in contributing to ‘good’<sup>1</sup> design-driven innovation. Returning to the frame of sustainability, Ockerse (2012) argues that students should be educated from the inside-out, to ‘design from the core’ (ibid); a process of developing a profound sense of knowing in design practice, which brings a new and potentially impactful perspective on sustainability. These authors recognise the need for students and graduates to develop personal awareness, so that design can contribute to the betterment of individual practice and beyond.

In the context of sustainability, many courses are exclusive to postgraduate students. This means that students earlier in their education are excluded from learning in this way, at least if this is considered in the context of titled courses. *Can a facilitation of students’ deep understanding of their personal values, earlier in their education, lead to a more inclusive approach to fostering sustainable development minded graduates?* This has become a core research question in co-author Lettis’ research. *Design Futures* (AIGA, 2019) presents the skills a graduating designer should have in the near future. The skillset is broad, which is challenging for the student. The introduction of personal values earlier in education might equip students with the confidence to navigate a subjective path in their design education, eventually giving junior designers the confidence to contribute more successfully in professional situations. A question arises: *is it appropriate to introduce students to personal values early in their design education, and if so, how might this be achieved?*

This research does not suggest that undergraduate education is not harnessing personal values. Several courses at undergraduate level offer education related to values and the development of the designer’s identity, etc. However it is less clear what precise processes are used to clarify and integrate personal values into practice. There is a lack of published research relating to processes that foster ‘design from the core’ (Ockerse, 2012) in Graphic Communication Design Education. *What might be the best process to allow students to develop a strong identity through the use of personal values in Graphic Communication Design Education?*

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1 The term ‘good’ has long been discussed in Graphic Communication Design and Education, in terms of various perceptions of what it means. In the context of Baha et al. (2018), a paper focusing on product design, students’ personal perspectives on ‘good’ are harnessed so that students can develop a set of ‘good’ principles for themselves.

# Education for Sustainable Development is now widely accepted as integral to nurturing universally-focused student practice at all educational levels.

## **2. Context and structure of the research**

This research seeks to develop a process of 'personal value clarification and integration', which facilitates undergraduate Graphic Communication Design students in personal value thinking. It describes the work of two researchers, Napier, who designed an original process of value integration in the USA, and Lettis, who is developing and evaluating an updated process in a broader study, in Ireland. This paper draws on the early stages of that study.

In this paper, the theory of, and case for, value thinking is described. The theory of Napier's original 'process of integration' (Schiff-Napier, 2009) is illustrated, as is a step-by-step description of the process as experienced by students, which is also linked



to theory. Napier identifies a requirement for a method of value clarification during her research.

Separately, Lettis embarks on an Action Research study. Lettis trials Napier's process and validates the opportunity to identify and amalgamate a method of value clarification into the process. Value clarification theory is explored within the frame of Education for Sustainable Development, which will be defined. Lettis begins to design and evaluate an updated method.

Research methodology is explained, and the development of the updated process is described over two cycles of research. The updated process is also described and linked to theory. Effects of the updated process are explored. Findings focus on functionality, potential for 'design from the core', and potential relationships to encourage sustainable development mindsets. Conclusions are made and the limitations of the research are acknowledged. Ongoing work is then outlined.

### **3. Theoretical background – value thinking**

#### *3.1 Value thinking in Education for Sustainable Development*

Value thinking is a core mode of thinking encouraged in Education for Sustainable Development, which;

...develops and strengthens the capacity of individuals, groups, communities, organizations and countries to make judgments and choices in favor of sustainable development (UNECE, 2009, p.15).

Since the publication of Agenda 21 the UN Action Plan for Sustainable Development, (UN, 1992), awareness of Education for Sustainable Development has increased. It is becoming a focus of national and international education policy, an example being UNESCO's *Education 2030—Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action* (2016). Education for Sustainable Development is now widely accepted as integral to nurturing universally-focused student practice at all educational levels. The Sustainability Education Framework for Teachers (SEFT), is a sample framework for Education for Sustainable Development and describes four modes of thinking that are required to develop this type of mindset (Warren, Leanna and Rider, 2014). The modes of thinking are systems, future, strategic and value (or values) thinking. There are many definitions of value thinking across the literature. It has been described as 'the ability to collectively map, specify, apply, reconcile, and negotiate sustainability values, principles, goals, and targets' (Wiek, Withycombe and Redman, 2011, p.209). This definition might suggest thinking outside oneself. This research terms this 'general value thinking'.

#### *3.2 Personal value thinking*

Value thinking also involves thinking of oneself. This research terms this 'personal value thinking'. Thorpe (2007) describes the connection between the personal and sustainability:

Many of the issues confronting us in the landscape of sustainability are those that feel more personal than professional, for example, your

connection to nature, your politics as a citizen, or your willingness to put your personal resources toward ecological sustainability. (Thorpe, 2007, p.195).

A clear awareness of this connection can be prompted by value thinking. A connection to values can be nurtured through facilitation of general value thinking, but personal value thinking deserves particular focus. In an educational context, it has the potential to promote a deep connection, a transformative moment. This has been termed the 'educative moment' (Garrison, Östman and Håkansson, 2014, p.184), where students not only become aware of their values, but sometimes have to grapple with conflicts between them. These moments are unexpected 'minor catastrophes' that open up creative possibilities (ibid). This incendiary moment can provide a lens for students to explore other core modes of thinking, such as systems, future, strategic and general value thinking – as illustrated in Figure 1. Personal value thinking has the potential to give students the confidence to use their perspectives to make decisions. The authors suggest this requires further investigation, due to the impact it can have on students' decision-making during their practice.

### *3.3 Personal value thinking in Graphic Communication Design*

Validated processes of personal value thinking in Graphic Communication Design Education are infrequent. Evidence of processes often describe general value thinking, where the student engages in activities like role-play, empathy research or personas to understand another's perspective (IDEO, 2015). Quam (2016) commends value thinking as a mode of thinking that encourages students to think universally, at a time when there is a strong focus on the self (Quam, 2016). This research argues that there *should* be a focus on the self, and that personal value thinking processes should be developed and tested for their effect. Napier had developed and tested a process of general and personal value thinking for Graphic Communication Design students (Schiff-Napier, 2009).

## **4. The first 'process of integration'**

### *4.1 Introduction*

Napier developed the first 'process of integration' to facilitate the identification and integration of values into design practice. The process allowed students to work together in a co-design context, and facilitated a transparency around values. Napier first created a series of methods, which focused on the use of 'designerly tools' and the intentional practice of 'reflection-in-action' (Schiff-Napier, 2009) and began to test it in 2010 with senior students within a visual communication design course, and then with another researcher in 2012 (Benson and Napier, 2012). Core to the process was the concept of value thinking. While at the time, Wiek et al's definition had not yet been developed, the use of designerly tools was key to enabling students to 'collectively map, specify, apply, reconcile, and negotiate sustainability values, principles, goals, and targets' (Wiek, Withycombe and Redman, 2011, p.209).

### *4.2 The theory of the first 'process of integration'*

Napier began by investigating how to enable designers to integrate both personal and holistic values such as 'environmental stewardship, economic prosperity, social

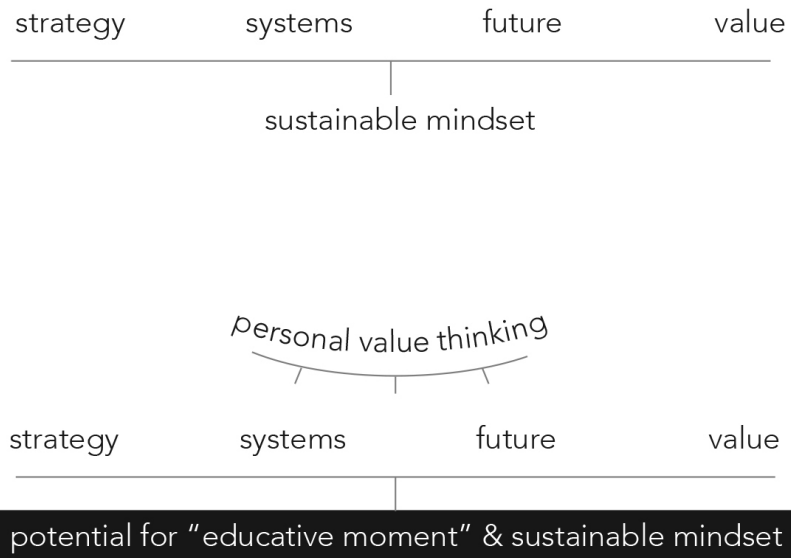


Figure 1. Potential of personal value thinking © Gwen Lettis (2019).

responsibility, and cultural vitality<sup>2</sup> into their design processes, for the purpose of making more sustainable decisions. Research questions that drove the investigation focused on understanding what a process of integration could be, and how designerly tools could enable this process.

The broad notion of designerly tools provided a lens through which to view tools for integrating values into the process. Designerly tools are

...ones that enable those who use them to engage in a participatory experience of creating tangible artefacts and/or as a way to create and communicate knowledge. Artefacts can be used to inform researchers about peoples' context, desires, concerns, needs and constraints... and can facilitate the construction of shared knowledge (Lindquist and Westerland, 2004, p.1).

Designerly tools are generative, in that they allow people to make artefacts as a way to express and externalise knowledge, thoughts, and ideas. Key to these kinds of tools, is the emphasis on being visual. Liz Sanders, founder of 'MakeTools' and author of 'Convivial Toolbox', describes the landscape of generative tools that designers use in participatory or co-designing processes, as a new language that is predominantly

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2 Napier used these terms based on sustainability literature such as *The Living Principles for Design* framework (AIGA, 2009), which used 'environmental protection, social equity, economic health and cultural vitality'.

visual (Stappers and Sanders, 2003). Not only do tools allow designers and those they are working with to be more intentional and visual, but they also allow for reflection-in-action throughout the process of designing.

Donald Schön, author of *The Reflective Practitioner*, emphasises the importance of dialogue with the material, and that ‘the material responds to the practitioner’s questions’ (Schön, 2017). Schön believes that

...when somebody reflects in action...he does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation...he does not separate thinking from doing (Schön, 2017, p.30).

Within Napier’s research, a ‘process of integration’ was developed to test out different kinds of designerly tools in order to enable students to integrate personal and holistic values when making design decisions, through intentional reflection-in-action.

#### *4.3 Steps in the first ‘process of integration’*

##### ***Step one***

The process included first, using tools to reflect on students’ own process of designing, then identifying specific actions they could take within the process. A high-level design process was adapted from Min Basadur, creator of Simplex and renowned leader in the field of applied creativity (Basadur, 1998). It comprised three phases: Problems/Opportunities, Ideas and Solutions – Figure 2. Students listed prominent actions on sticky notes and placed them within distinct phases on a large visual of the design process.

##### ***Step two***

The next step prompted students to think about what values they bring to the process. An example of a prompt would be: ‘What are the factors that inform and influence the questions you ask, the decisions you make, and the things that you do during your process of designing?’ This was first done using a simple written list.

##### ***Step three***

Students then selected two or three factors that were most important to them and created visual collages to tell a story about what inspires and motivates them, to include those values into their contexts of designing. The collages became not only visual, tangible representations of the values they bring into the design process, but also artefacts as sources of personal inspiration and motivation.

##### ***Step four***

The fourth step was to map selected values to the diagram of the defined process. Students were asked to consider during which phases their values came into play, and whether or not they placed more emphasis on certain values during certain phases than others.

##### ***Step five***

In step five, students considered how their values came into play when designing, and were provided with a visual framework that connected environmental stewardship, economic prosperity, social responsibility and cultural vitality. Students

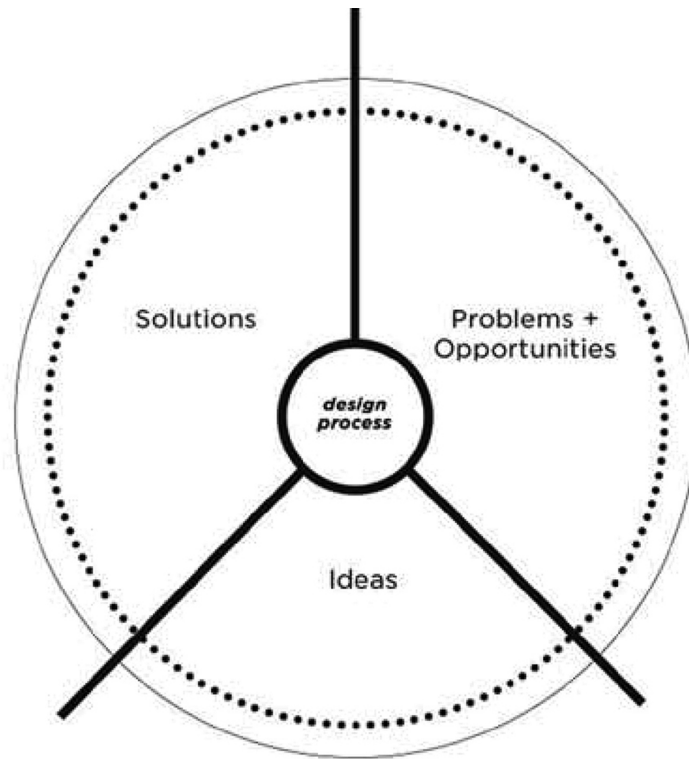


Figure 2. 'The Design Process' by Basadur (1998), adapted by Napier, P., 2010. © Creative Education Foundation Pr. (1998).

used sticky notes again to map their selected values by placing them within this framework. The proximity of their value to the holistic value communicated emphasis or priority.

### **Step six**

The tools and activities in the first five steps were intended to help individuals or teams collectively shape how they viewed and developed a problem space to work within, at the very beginning of the design process. They also informed how the individual or team then used a particular set of questions in step six, in order to help them navigate through the design process with these values at the forefront.

A set of cards with prompt questions were created to help designers to slow down – to inspire generative thinking, conceptualising, and criteria for evaluation. The cards posed questions which referred back to their defined perspective to see why, how and what personal and holistic design values were connected to what was being designed.

The importance of integrating this process into current curriculum and projects, versus simply tacking it on as a separate assignment, was that students were able to situate values within a broader process of designing, making it easier to identify where responsible decision-making took place within one's own process. Figure 3 presents the process. Figure 4 presents a diagram of the steps. Figure 5 shows the steps in action.

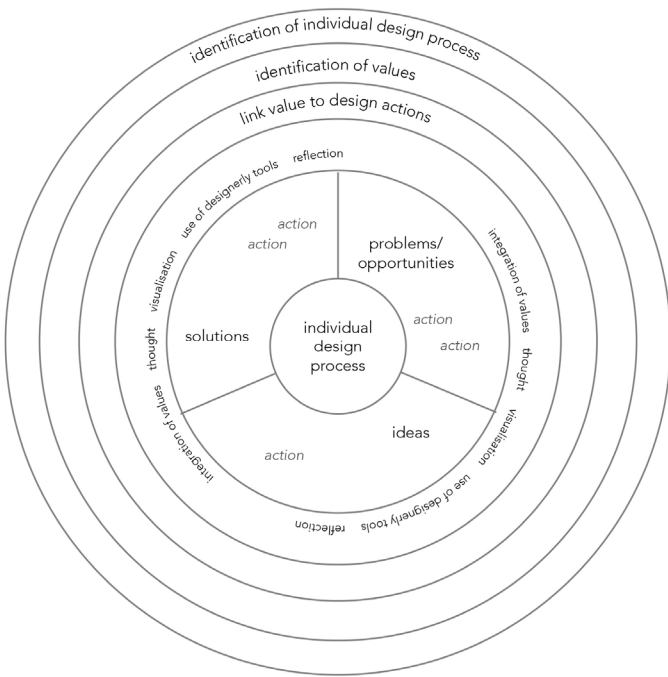


Figure 3. The first 'process of integration', adapted from Benson and Napier (2012) © Gwen Lettis, 2019.

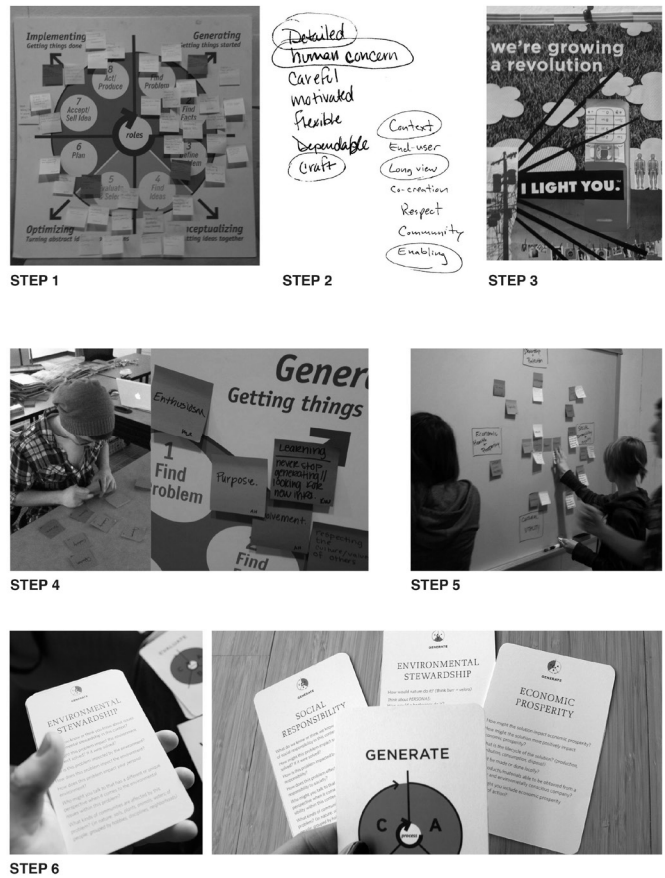
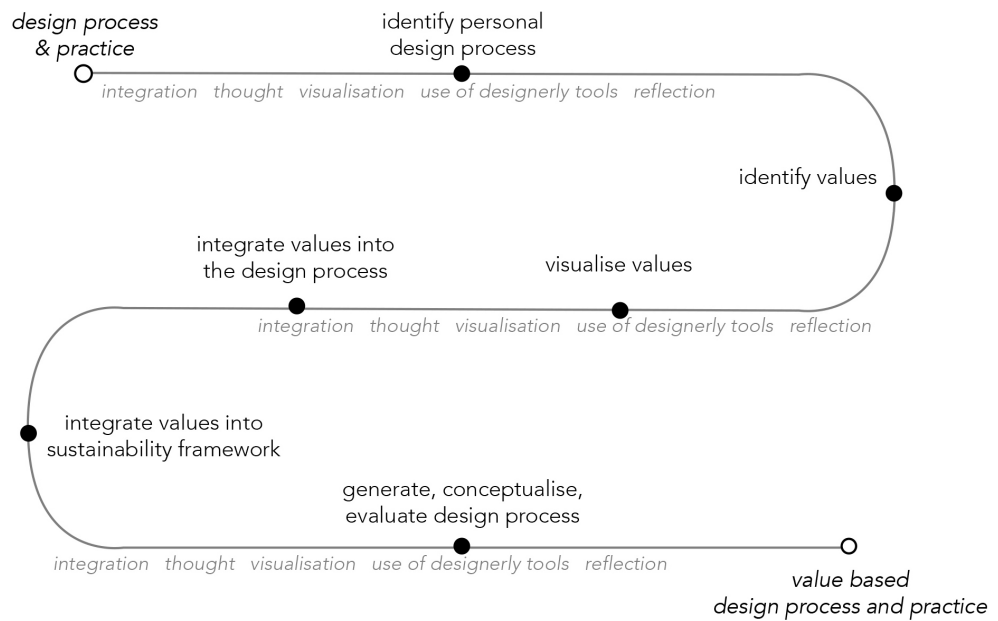


Figure 5. Steps of the first 'process of integration' in action. Design in step 3 by Vessley, J., 2010. Design of graphics and photos by Napier, P., 2010 © Pamela Napier (2010).

Figure 4. The first 'process of integration' – steps of the process, adapted from Benson and Napier (2012) © Gwen Lettis (2019).



#### *4.4. Opportunities for further development of the ‘process of integration’*

This initial research offered a conceptual demonstration of how generative and experiential tools, which focus on visualisation and reflection, can reveal connections between values and the process of designing. For Napier, initial challenges pointed to a lack of overall understanding of values, how to define and clarify them, and how to incorporate them into the design process in a more intentional way. Therefore, more exploration into value clarification was needed.

Separately, having read about the ‘process of integration’, Lettis felt that it had potential to increase students’ personal awareness in their design. She decided to trial the process with a group of year four GCD students in Cork Institute of Technology (CIT), Ireland. She carried out the trial which comprises cycle one of her broader study. At the end of the cycle she concluded that more exploration into value clarification was required. Simultaneously, Napier was drawing similar conclusions.

### **5. A new ‘process of value clarification and integration’**

#### *5.1 Introduction*

At this stage, Lettis began to investigate how values are clarified in Education for Sustainable Development, as its aim is to develop sustainable development minded graduates. Soon it was evident that the act of clarifying values in a psychological frame had potential, as it can facilitate autonomous behaviour development.

#### *5.2 Value clarification – in a psychological context*

It is important to clarify the meaning of the term ‘values’ and the ‘psychology of values’ at this point. Values are ‘trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or group’ (Schwartz, 2007, p.1). Therefore, one might describe the psychology of values as the scientific study of the use of those principles.

Schwartz and Butenko (2014) communicate the theory of basic values in a graphic wheel. The wheel potentially provides a means for value clarification and assessment of value shifts.

Schwartz et al. (2012) suggest that though values are universal, any group or individual can have different value priorities. i.e. we may hold a number of values, but which we choose to enact depends on the situation. There are nineteen values in total. The values radiate outwards to categories that ‘portray relations of conflict and congruity among values’ (Schwartz et al., 2012, p.664). The wheel can be used a variety of ways. This study is framed using the following categories: self-transcendence, openness to change, self-enhancement, conservation, though in student responses some of the sub-sections – the nineteen value categories are referred to (Figure 6).

Values that are adjacent to each other are said to be compatible, and those opposite are in conflict. ‘The closer any two values in either direction around the circle, the more similar their underlying motivations’ (Schwartz, 2012, p.10). A questionnaire related to the wheel provides a means for participants to identify values and to evaluate value priorities. The wheel allows participants to observe where their values sit, and whether their values are aligned or conflicted.



Figure 6. 'The motivational circle of values', Schwartz, and Butenko (2014), adapted to highlight sections only by Lettis, G., 2019 © John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

### 5.3 Value clarification – in a sustainable development context

Murray, Douglas-Dunbar, and Murray (2014) use a previous version of the model alongside other psychological theory, when facilitating value clarification and assessing value shifts in relation to sustainability. In order to do so, they need to decide what 'sustainability values' are.

Based on an in-depth investigation into the history of the psychology of values, Murray, Douglas-Dunbar, and Murray (2014) conclude that mobilising intrinsic values, rather than advocating new ones, might lead to sustainable development behaviour. These values relate to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and can be autonomously satisfied from within.

Previously, Murray and Murray (cited in Murray, Douglas-Dunbar, and Murray, 2014) identified values such as 'respect, compassion, justice/fairness, integrity, and nature/life' common in sustainably orientated organisations. Therefore, they can be considered 'sustainability values'. In Schwartz's wheel, self-transcendence describes similar values, e.g. universalism – concern (a commitment to equality, justice, and protection for all people) (Schwartz and Butenko, 2014, p.800). So, the wheel has potential to facilitate categorisation of 'sustainability values'.



It is important to briefly explain other areas on the wheel. ‘Openness to change’ includes sub-sections such as ‘self-direction-thought’ and ‘self-direction-action’ and is mainly concerned with learning. ‘Self-enhancement’ includes sub-sections like ‘power-dominance’ and ‘achievement’ and is, as one might expect, self-focused. ‘Conservation’ includes sub-sections like ‘security-personal’ and focuses on ‘safety and stability’.

Considering adjacent values have similar underlying motivations, ‘openness to change’ and ‘conservation’ are related to ‘self-transcendence’. Value shifts from the first two to the latter have the potential to facilitate sustainable development.

#### *5.4 Rationale for use of Schwartz’s theory of values*

Schwartz’s value wheel model was chosen for a number of reasons: it can practically facilitate clarification and value categorisation; it is based on in-depth investigation into psychology and Murray, Douglas-Dunbar, and Murray (2014) have already contextualised the model in the frame of Education for Sustainable Development. The model itself has been refined over a number of studies (Schwartz, 2007; Schwartz, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2012; Schwartz and Butenko, 2014) and there is strong evidence to suggest that it functions cross-culturally (Schwartz, 2012). Lettis proceeded to design a new process of value integration inclusive of this method of clarification.

## **6. Research methodology**

### *6.1 Research methodology – Action Research*

Having recognised an opportunity to develop a new process, Lettis embarked on an Action Research study. Action Research can be seen as ‘a systematic, reflective study of one’s actions, and the effects of these actions, in a workplace, organizational, or community context’ (Riel, 2019). This study uses Riel’s Action Research model (Riel, 2019), which can be seen in Figure 7. This approach aligns with the iterative characteristics of the design process itself in that planning, action, analysis and reflection lead to iteration in developing a solution. Discussion and collaboration between researchers, students, and staff are valid in the Action Research approach. This is inevitable and contributes to the development of the research.

### *6.2. Research introduction and aims*

#### *6.2.i Cycle one*

Lettis read about the potential of value thinking and discovered Napier’s process, as described in section 2. This constitutes the study and plan phase in Riel’s model (2019). Having decided to trial the process, she facilitated students taking similar steps to the original process, using similar materials, etc. Amendments were made to account for module limitations and educational context. For example, in this module, it was important for students to be able to work easily by themselves in their layout pads. Therefore, A3 worksheets were designed. Figure 8 shows some examples of student work, and the research methods used in this cycle are outlined below.

#### *6.2.ii Cycle two*

Having uncovered potential research opportunities, Lettis studied methods of value clarification in Education for Sustainable Development, as described in section 5. This constitutes the study and plan phase of cycle two, as per Riel (2019). She began to build a new process. The aims of cycle one and two are presented in Figure 9.

locate a problem you care about

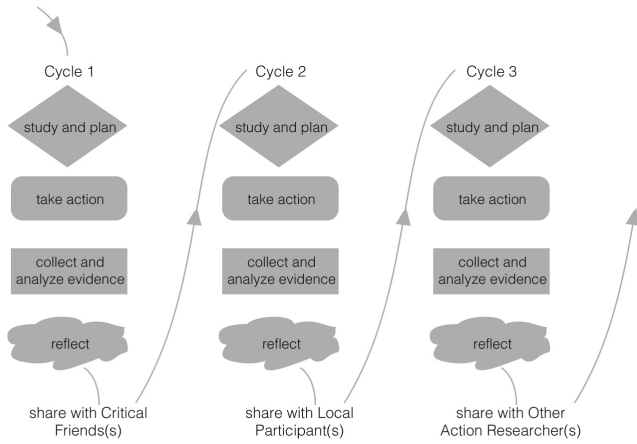


Figure 7. The iterative process of action research, Riel (2019), adapted to restyle only by Lettis, G., 2019. © Centre for Collaborative Action Research, Pepperdine University (2006–2019).

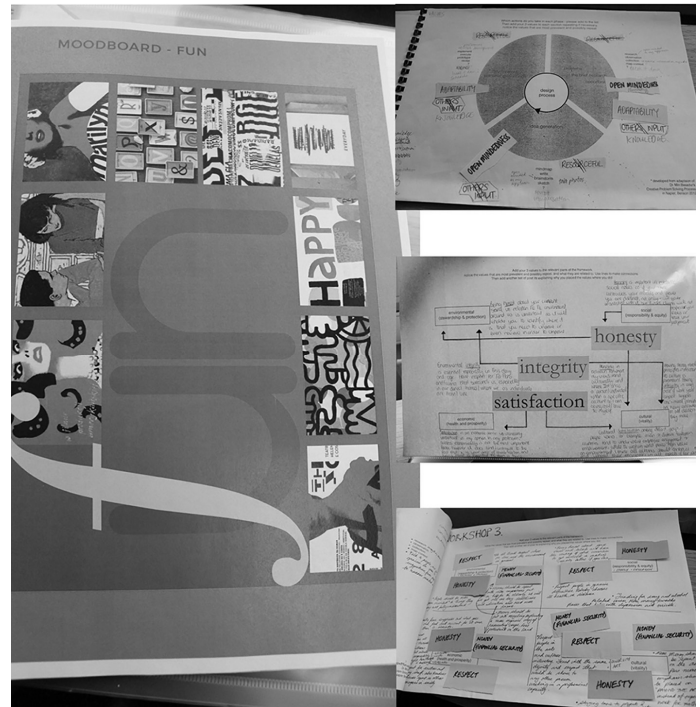


Figure 8. Examples of student work from cycle one, year four visual communication student group (2016), photos by Lettis G., 2016 © Gwen Lettis (2016).

Aims of cycles one and two; to evaluate	
Cycle one	Cycle two
Small scale study undertaken with final year students	Study undertaken with year three students
	if value clarification occurred as a result of the new tool
how A1's 'process of integration' functioned	how the new process functioned
students' lived experience of the process	students' lived experience of the process
if there were potential research opportunities	If there were potential research opportunities in the frame of development and evaluation of the process
	if there was evidence of learning related to the aims of the 'process of integration'
	if there was a shift in value focus

Figure 9. Aims of cycle one and two © Gwen Lettis (2019).

### 6.3. Research methods

This section details the research methods used within both cycles. In an Action Research context, research methods develop as the study does, therefore variation between cycles occurs.

#### 6.3.i Data Collection

Due to varying aims in cycles, there is one variation in data collection. In cycle one, students reflected on their experience as part of an assignment, to capture as much open feedback as possible. Students were informed that reflection was voluntary and would not be assessed as part of their assignment.

In cycle two, students were asked to answer sentence completion items pre- and post-project. This was to evaluate value shifts. The items began with the statement, 'As a designer I will...'. Ten answers were permitted. The responses were categorised according to Schwartz et al.'s wheel. It is important to bear in mind that value clarification was facilitated, so any value shifts were autonomous. Data collection methods for both cycles are shown in Figure 10.

#### 6.3.ii Sampling, interview approaches, and data analysis

Sampling, interview approaches, and data analysis types are presented. Figure 11 and Figure 12 present the methods for cycle one and cycle two consecutively. As explained in section 6.3.i, research methods vary from cycle to cycle. For example, sampling for interviews in cycle one was voluntary. In cycle two, sampling was voluntary and purposive. Interviewees were chosen from a broad range of students based on higher numbers, more availability and willingness to participate. Variation in the cycles is acknowledged.

<i>Data collection</i>	
<i>Cycle one</i>	<i>Cycle two</i>
written material	sentence completion items - pre and post-project
interviews	interviews
observation of classes – field notes and reflection	observation of classes – field notes and reflection

Figure 10. Data collection in Cycle one and Cycle two © Gwen Lettis (2019).

*Cycle one*

Research methods	Written material	Interviews	Observation and reflection
Sampling type	Convenient (data that was possible to capture was captured)  Students described their experience of the process of integration as part of a written submission	Volunteer (interviewees volunteered)	-
Interview type	-	Semi-structured (allowed flexibility)	-
Interviewer	-	Independent (to avoid bias)	-
Data analysis	Thematic Analysis - patterns across the data were identified through referral to the initial aims of the study.  Data was coded manually at this point		

Figure 11. Sampling, interview approaches and data analysis in Cycle one  
© Gwen Lettis (2019).

*Cycle two*

Research methods	Sentence completion items	Interviews	Observation and reflection
Sampling type	Convenient (data that was possible to capture was captured)  Students had to complete these items to progress project	Purposive (researcher chose varied group of participants)  Volunteer (interviewees volunteered)	-
Interview type	-	Semi-structured (allowed flexibility)	-
Interviewer	-	Independent (to avoid bias)	-
Data analysis	Thematic Analysis - patterns across the data were identified through referral to the initial aims of the study.  Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) - the experience of the individual is in focus and subtleties such as context, language, and tone are considered.  Data was coded into using software and was refined over three rounds to ensure rigour		-

Figure 12. Sampling, interview approaches and data analysis in Cycle two  
© Gwen Lettis (2019).

### 6.3.iii Student participation

Figure 13 and Figure 14 show student participation in each cycle.

#### Cycle one

	Registered for module	Engaged in module	Provided written feedback	Provided interviews
Student numbers	18	16	16	2

Figure 13. Student participation in Cycle one © Gwen Lettis (2019).

#### Cycle two

	Registered for module	Engaged in module	Provided one form of data - (value questionnaire only)	Provided partial set of data - (value questionnaire or/and sentence completion items, or/and interview)	Provided full set of data - (value questionnaire, sentence completion items, and interview)
Student numbers	28	27	27	6	6

Figure 14. Student participation in Cycle two © Gwen Lettis (2019).

## 7. Implementing the new ‘process of value clarification and integration’

This section details the new process and how it was implemented in cycle two. It was trialled through two projects (within cycle two) with year three, on a visual communication course (the penultimate year). The process was integrated into projects on a twelve-week module – ‘Typography Experimental’, which Lettis teaches.

The steps in the process are presented in Figure 15. Figure 16 presents an overview of accompanying activities, tools and resources and a rationale for the steps. It is clear that the original process has been developed but that the new process is inclusive of the original, with the main developments being methods of value clarification and goal identification. Thinking, reflecting, visualising and the use of designerly tools, as per the original ‘process of integration’ are core to the process. Goals provide motivation to enact values. Figure 17 shows the process steps in action. Figure 18 shows one student’s work.

In project one, students designed a poster, which included content that read, ‘I will...by being...’. For example, ‘I will bring people together by being all-embracing’. At this point, students had clarified values through the questionnaire, and had chosen a value with which to work, in the context of a selected goal. They communicated their value and goal through the poster – similar to Napier’s students’ collages. In project two, students created a value-based CV and project proposal for an organisation of

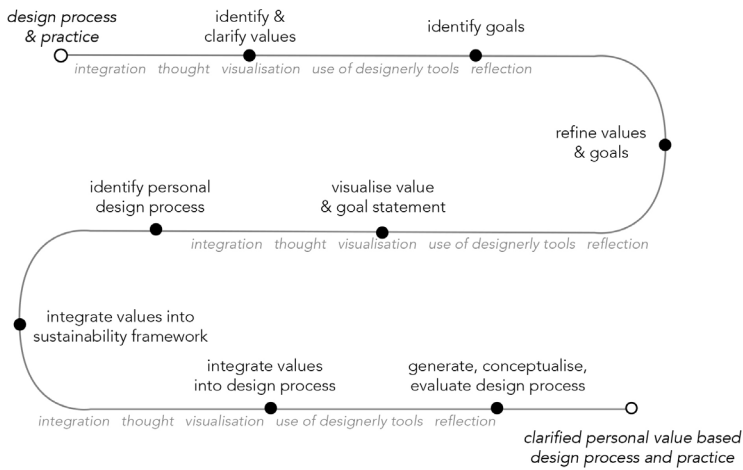


Figure 15. Steps in the new 'process of value clarification and integration' © Gwen Lettis (2019).

	<i>Aim</i>	<i>Activity, tools and resources</i>	<i>Reason</i>
1	Identify and clarify values	Introductory lecture slides Value questionnaire excel Value thesaurus sheet hand out	Values act as lens to work through process
2	Identify goals	Goal setting exercise & worksheets	Goals can motivate value enactment
3	Refine values and goals	Value and goal statement exercise – student notebooks	Focus required to refine lens
4	Visualise value and goal statement	Moodboard and poster – students choice	Visualisation to make tangible artefact that serves as reflective tool
5	Identify personal design process	Worksheets (based on original process)	Individualisation of design process through the lens of values
6	Integrate values into sustainability framework	Worksheets (based on original process)	Individualisation of sustainability perspective through the lens of values
7	Integrate values into design process	Worksheets (based on original process)	Practical and tangible connection between values and design
8	Generate, conceptualise, evaluate design process	Commitment worksheets	Content creation based on how reflection on process can be translated into practical development

Figure 16. Steps in the new 'process of value clarification and integration', with an overview of accompanying activities, tools and resources and a rationale for the steps © Gwen Lettis (2019).

their choice. Students developed individual content based on their chosen value and goal. The content included;

- CV information
- introductory paragraph
- value and goal
- rationale for organisation choice
- brief project proposal
- ten commitments to their design career

Students then designed the CV and proposal, with a focus on visualising their value. Figure 19 shows an example.

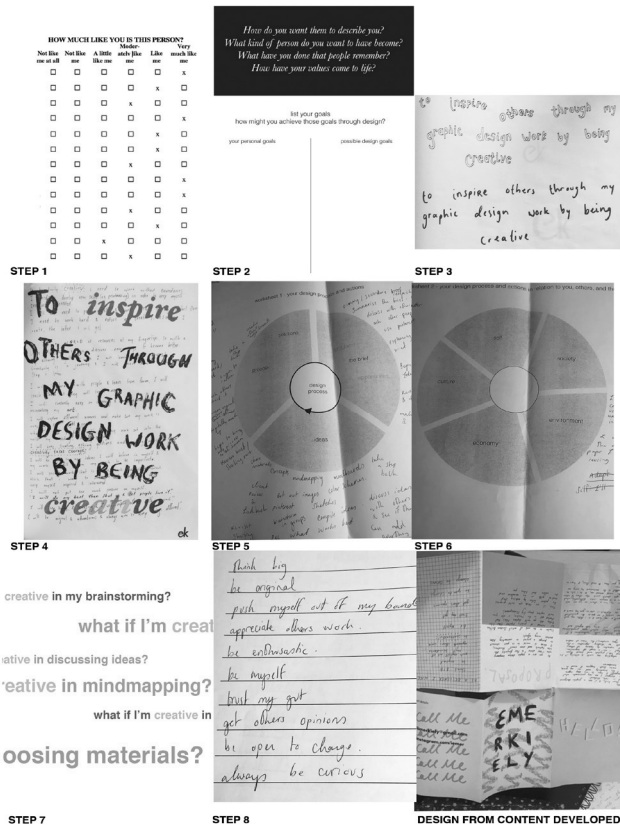


Figure 17. Steps in action – the new ‘process of value clarification and integration’, year three visual communication student group (2017), photos and non-student visual material © Gwen Lettis (2017).

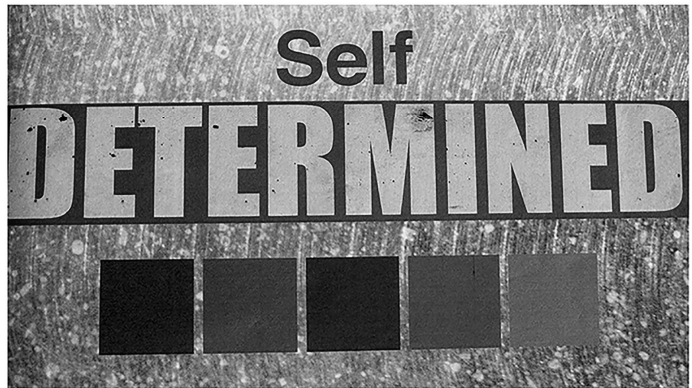


Figure 18. Examples of student work from cycle two, design by O’Callaghan, C. (2017), photos by Lettis, G. (2017) © Gwen Lettis (2017).



Figure 19. Example of CV and proposal in cycle two © Monika Szykiewicz (2017).

## 8. Findings

### 8.1 Findings from cycle one

The main findings from cycle one are as follows;

- There was some confusion around the process
- Responses indicated that value integration had occurred

Albeit confusion may have arisen because of first-time implementation, it seems more likely that it was due to a lack of clarity around values. One student stated:

I initially wrote down values that I didn't have, but the ones I wanted. I was confused, and thought it was values about college work, not core values...I soon realised in the workshops that it was core/personal values (Anonymous, 2016).

It became evident that defining values is complex.

At the beginning, I found this particular exercise quite strange and I wasn't sure what values I should use. I chose the wrong values to start with and those did not seem to help me come up with an idea for what it is that had value to me? (Anonymous, 2016).

During a phone interview between Napier and Lettis on 15 January, 2017, Napier confirmed that students struggled to define and clarify values in her experience. Lettis concluded that students need a verified way to do so. *So, how could students clarify personal values?* Lettis began to look at value clarification in Education for Sustainable Development. This marked the beginning of the development of a new process.

Students were also uncomfortable exploring values late in their education. Lettis concluded this supported the notion that values should be explored earlier.

Figure 16 presented the steps of the new process in contrast to Figure 4. Figure 20 demonstrates the new process in contrast to Figure 3.

### 8.2 Findings from cycle two

#### 8.2.i Personal awareness reflecting value clarification

Students were asked general questions in relation to clarification, to ensure evidence of clarification was not provoked. Responses suggested development of personal awareness, resulting from value clarification. One student said:

...it kind of gives a bit more meaning to the design I guess, because it kind of makes you think you know, why you're doing it, and so it gives you a better, like a deeper kind of thought I guess, like a bit more meaningful if that makes sense (Anonymous, 2017).







more free it was definitely more enjoyable...I actually did enjoy the whole process... ) (Anonymous, 2017).

#### *8.2.v Ownership of design or process*

Integrating clarified values appeared to facilitate students in taking ownership of their process. Some students described taking time to think, and to reflect throughout using their values as a guide. One student said:

It was a very interesting process as I gained a better understanding of my design process and the effects it has. I learned after doing these exercises that it all matched up back to the eulogy exercise I had done earlier from my values where I scored highest in self-direction in thoughts and actions (Anonymous, 2017).

#### *8.2.vi Value clarification + the first process of integration*

Responses suggested that the method of clarification and the original process merged successfully. Students described activity and results intended for both, such as clarification, thinking, reflection-in-action, visualisation, and integration.

#### *8.2.vii Unusualness and uncertainty in the process*

Some students described the process as unusual. This is not necessarily negative, but it does indicate that clarification and integration had not occurred by year three on this course. One student said that earlier introduction would have made the experience easier. Another said:

I suppose it's something we don't really think about when we're designing, we don't really think about our values or how it could affect our design so it was just a different approach I suppose that took me a while to get my head around (Anonymous, 2017).

Students also articulated a sense of being unsure in the learning space. They described needing time to develop clarity, which they say occurred as they progressed through the work. One student said:

...initially I wasn't sure, it kind of took me a while to get into the project. The first two weeks maybe I wasn't sure if it was going to relate, and if I could relate to it. But then as the project went on it got easier.

### 8.2 viii Links to sustainability – shifts in value focus

The sentence completion items allowed Lettis to evaluate value shifts. Responses were categorised based on descriptions in Schwartz and Butenko (2014).

In the pre-item, students often answered in relation to ‘openness to change’. An example is *‘learn new things everyday’*. This might be expected as participants are students. They also responded with answers related to ‘self-transcendence’, such as *‘make the world a better place’*. Students answered far less often in relation to ‘self-enhancement’, an example being *‘be successful’*, and conservation, an example being *‘make my loved ones proud’*.

In the post-item, students responded more often with answers related to ‘openness to change’. Often the answers in the post-items were more specific and active such as *‘listen to everyone’s opinions’*. Students responded less often with answers related to ‘self-transcendence’, and less again with answers related to ‘self-enhancement’ and ‘conservation’.

## 9. Discussion

The discussion focuses particularly on findings from cycle two. Cycle one allowed Lettis to begin to develop a new process. During cycle two the new process formed and evolved to a point where it could be tested and evaluated for impact.

### 9.1 Personal awareness and value clarification

The new process resulted in value clarification, contributing to personal awareness in Graphic Communication Design Education. Students recognised that knowing their values is beneficial to their practice, and potentially to the broader areas of the environment, society, economy and culture. Both Napier and Lettis had concluded separately that a method of clarification was required. Findings suggest that the introduction of the clarification tool (Schwartz, 2012) satisfied this requirement. Specifically, it is clear that clarification occurred based on students’ autonomous articulation of values, in design outcomes and responses in interview.

Students clarified values and demonstrated actions intended by the original process such as thinking, use of designerly tools, reflection-in-action and visualisation. This shows that amalgamation of the two method sets is successful.

### 9.2 Ownership of design and resulting emotion

The autonomous nature of the projects facilitated students taking ownership of their process. Students described enjoying this freedom. Responses particularly related to visualisation. This is particularly important in the context of the use of ‘designerly tools’ (Lindquist and Westerlund, 2004) and the use of visuals as artefacts for reflective purposes (Stappers and Sanders, 2003). These feelings can contribute to the mobilisation of intrinsic values, which may lead to behaviour development, which is the ultimate requirement.

Students require a knowing of themselves and graduates require a confidence to contribute professionally (Ockerse, 2012; Baha et al. 2018). Students may begin to ‘design from the core’ and navigate a pathway through ever-changing professional landscapes as documented in *Design Futures* (AIGA, 2019).

### 9.3 Unusualness and uncertainty

Students often felt uncertain in the learning space. This can be seen as both negative and positive in the context of the study. Negative feedback related to functionality will contribute to developments, but unease might also suggest a struggle with personal values, perhaps reflecting an occurrence of the ‘educative moment’ (Garrison, Östman, and Håkansson, 2014). Students also expressed the need for time during the process, to develop clarity. This suggests reflection-in-action is happening, as Schön (2017) recommends, and indicates sufficient time is facilitated for reflection. The sense of unease might also support the idea that the process should be introduced earlier, so students can become more comfortable in harnessing their values.

### 9.4 Relation to sustainability

In relation to links between sustainability values and individual values, these results are mixed. Students’ increased focus on ‘openness to change’ is positive, as students should express a desire to learn while in education. *Can this be considered further confirmation that the tool is a valid clarification tool?* Specifically in relation to sustainability, one can argue that this increased focus on learning might lead to a sustainable development mindset, since this area is adjacent to ‘self-transcendence’ on the wheel.

There was a decreased focus on ‘self-transcendence’ – which includes ‘universalism’ and ‘benevolence’. Superficially, this is a negative result in the context of the study. One might argue though, that a shift towards ‘openness to change’ indicates students are becoming clearer about their learning aims. This active clarity might contribute to students’ development towards ‘self-transcendence’.

After engagement, students focused less on ‘self-enhancement’, an area less related to sustainability according to Murray, Douglas-Dunbar, and Murray (2014). This shift suggests less focus on the self. Students also focused less on ‘conservation’. This might suggest a development in confidence, which might facilitate ‘design from the core’.

## 10. Limitations of the research

It is acknowledged that findings are not generalisable. They demonstrate the initial stages of development within a specific educational context. Though indications are that this process has potential for students, in the context of clarifying values and utilising them for personal and broad benefit.

Also it is recognised that the researchers are educators in the study. Researcher involvement is valid in Action Research, and is considered valuable to gain rich data. As shown, attempts to avoid bias were built into the Action Research, but some bias is inevitable as interpretation is unavoidable.

Sampling numbers are small. Qualitative research does not rely on large numbers. The use of smaller samples allows a focus on the in-depth experience of the individual, leading to a deep understanding of the subjective experience.

## 11. Conclusions

The suggestion is that implementation of the 'process of value clarification and integration', resulted in clarification, contributing to personal awareness in Graphic Communication Design Education. This is important. It can lead to congruent behaviour development, which in turn may lead to 'design from the core'. In the same frame, responses indicated a sense of positivity as a result of participation, which can potentially lead to intrinsic motivation and onto behaviour development. Responses also suggest that the process might facilitate the 'educative moment'. These developments have the potential to foster sustainable development minded design graduates.

Students displayed evidence of learning related to the aims of the original process, which shows its aims were met, that amalgamation of methods occurred, and that the original method has been developed. However the evidence also indicates that perhaps students should be introduced to values earlier.

It is not clear whether the addition of a means of clarification facilitated shifts towards universal values; in this context the results are mixed. It is important to restate that value shifts were facilitated, not propelled. It is clear that students were focused on self-development at this time. Whether a more significant shift occurs in future cycles of research remains to be seen.

## 12. Ongoing work

Students provided feedback that will contribute to the development of the process. Lettis has begun to explore implementing the process with students in year one. Earlier implementation is supported by Napier's research. In her presentation 'response\_ability', she states:

Students entering higher education institutions to study design, should be introduced to these concepts at the very start of their education, and build their skills and understandings through a scaffolding of integrated experiences (Napier, 2010).

Lettis will continue to develop this process and evaluate it in the context of developing 'design from the core' and encouraging sustainable development. It is hoped that the process will eventually contribute to developments in Graphic Communication Design Education and Graphic Communication Design.

We are often encouraged to put our values aside in professional contexts. This research suggests we do the opposite and embrace them.

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Passive, Brutish,  
or Civil?  
Racist Motifs  
in Everyday  
Branding

Omari Souza

Keywords

Cultural history

Advertising

Politics

Graphic design

Cultural criticism

Race

Semiotics

Stereotypes

Just as a spoken language communicates through structured sentences, visual languages depend on essential elements and the rules for combining them in order to communicate. Roland Barthes used a system of the signifier (word/image/object) and signified (meaning) as the two elements of this language (Sturken and Cartwright, 2018). For example, in his book *Mythologies*, Barthes dissects the structure of nightly news. He describes the use of typography and constructed sets with which the news is broadcast as being mediated signs employed to give the perception of professional, objective, and unmediated reality.

Who we are as individuals, each habit and belief that we hold, is an extension of the rituals and structures of our various cultures (Storr, 2018). We are inevitably shaped by the language of visual symbols presented by those who wish to change or maintain those rituals and structures. Our society is steeped in visual narratives, often utilized by journalists, politicians, and other opinion leaders to perpetuate cultural 'myths' about the products they offer and the consumers who 'need' them. In this consumer-based society, designers play a vital role in crafting visual narratives, they are of key importance in determining how individuals view the world through the kaleidoscopic lens of the visual symbols of advertisement. These narratives are used to illustrate the dynamics of social power and ideology that we use to create meaning.

The characteristics and symbols historically used to represent blacks in advertising have forged permanent images into the American psyche. This essay will explore motifs and symbols used in the Jim Crow era and draw comparative analysis between them and those used in current print designs and advertisements. Through examples of visual narratives from each era, we will explore how they objectify African Americans or utilize racist symbols in order to sell commercial goods. Through this exploration we will gain greater understanding of how design has contributed to Western biases against African Americans.

### **Branding**

A brand is a visual symbol that signifies a consumer's purported social status. Designer Hank Willis Thomas explores the connection between modern brands and the genesis of the concept in his series *Branded* (2003). He connects the original meaning of branding (to burn signs of ownership onto the flesh of livestock), to the history of slavery, and then the relationship of product branding to black culture. In the modern context, this forced branding of human beings has been meaningfully done away with. However, voluntary branding has replaced it as a way for individuals lower on the social hierarchy to show their loyalty to those above them. This new form of branding does not demonstrate ownership, rather it is used as a form of social mobility for those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Corporations work hard to convince customers that it is in their best interests to associate themselves with a brand.

The reason that brands want to exert influence over culture is simple: profit, they are not necessarily thinking about how it will affect ideas of hierarchy.

Brands distribute signs that consumers can interact with, use, and remake. Brands are often equated with feelings of authenticity, patriotism, and community – means by which people make meaningful connections to others (Sturken and Cartwright, 2018). Those with the ability to exercise influence continuously over time are able to shape culture and solidify ideas of hierarchy. The reason that brands want to exert influence over culture is simple: profit, they are not necessarily thinking about how it will affect ideas of hierarchy. Brands want people to integrate their messaging into their very identity. They do this because it is much harder to convince someone to change their identity than the type of material in their shoe. This is the key to understanding how one group acquires authority, imposes order, or achieves

hegemony through branding. Brands wield their power to set forth an idealized version of their customer, one that the customer wants to identify with because they see in it some of the things that they either see in themselves or want to. Consistency of displayed power, specifically that power to mould identity, is internalized in the minds of consumers, eventually conveying natural authority to a brand or to those associated with it.

Take Nike apparel, for example. Once known as Blue Ribbon, Nike, Inc. is an American multinational corporation engaged in the design and selling of footwear and apparel. The name 'Nike' was chosen by Jeff Johnson, a Blue Ribbon employee, in homage to the Greek goddess of victory. The goddess is symbolic of the desire to win, and the Nike 'Swoosh' represents her speed and power. The principles and culture that structure the image cannot be separated from the viewers and how they interpret the image and ultimately from the circumstances in which the image is displayed and observed. Images generate meanings for the interpreter, but those meanings are interpreted through all of these elements working in conjunction. Because the images and icons used to support a brand exist in a world that contains ideologies, they must interact with those ideologies, for harm or for good. Occasionally an image or icon is powerful enough to create and shape an ideology by itself. These ideologies are affirmed by the social institutions that characterize their society.

Phil Knight, the company owner of Nike, knew the company's name and logo needed to reflect modern symbols of victory for his products to be considered the tools of winners. Social ideologies create notions not only of the way things are, but also of how things should be. Nike's pairing of the Swoosh symbol with athletes such as Michael Jordan, Mia Hamm, Roger Federer, Serena Williams and Tiger Woods created a connection between the products and the champions who endorsed them. The products (object/signifier), in turn, became considered the choice of champions (meaning/victory). And the brand thus sells the idea that in order to become a champion, buying into the brand is a necessary first step.

Nike not only sell sports apparel, but commodifies an idealized self, which is only actualized through purchasing their products. As such, the consumer participates in what the Frankfurt School called 'pseudo individuality', an experience of selfhood promoted by the cultural industry. Pseudo individuality refers to the ways that culture forms can define and interpolate viewer-consumer-users as individuals, while in reality, they are selling an homogeneous experience (Sturken and Cartwright, 2018).

The Nike products (object/signifier), on their own, are powerless. On the contrary, the ideologies that inform social perception are powerful. We as consumers encounter these sorts of images and texts primarily as customers and re-users, not as direct producers. The Swoosh's potency is dependent on the influence of its supporters. The social power of an item's supporters impacts our thoughts about and impressions of the social groups with which we identify. Groups that don't identify or conform with our group are viewed as the maligned 'other'. In his *Branded* series, designer Hank Willis Thomas comments on the depths of this culture. He connects the original meaning of branding (which was to burn signs of ownership onto the flesh of livestock), to the history of slavery, and the relationship of product branding to black culture. In the image *Scarred Chest* (2003) the Nike logo (object/signifier) is burned into the flesh of an African American's torso. This refers not only to the intensity of consumers' devotion to brands but also to the violence of embodied commodification (Sturken and Cartwright, 2018).

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Branding has become not just a way of selling goods, but an inescapable mode of everyday communication. Within the context of advertising, the concern is whether the industry is contributing to either reinforcing or challenging the social hierarchy. Like gender, race is also a social construction that changes over time and from place to place. Promotional industries utilize design to communicate expectations about race and ethnicity, just as they do about cars, clothing, or coffee shops. Moreover, they can influence how the diverse communities that make up the world perceive one another.

### **The passive black**

Africans and their descendants who were once bought, sold, and traded as a commodity, were unable to control social perceptions of themselves. The commercial narratives that described them did not include the possibility of an idealized self, but rather the subservient self who provides the ideal for others. The social institution that governed their existence bred the ideology of their racial inferiority. While all racial groups have been satirized in the United States, none have been satirized as often or in as many ways as African Americans.

During the institution of slavery, the representation of African Americans, specifically African American males, indicated that they were passive. The use of blackface, which became popular in the 19th century, was a standard tool utilized to perpetuate that perception. White actors popularized minstrel shows, portraying stereotypes of black behaviour as senseless, disordered, and comedic (Smiley and Fakunle, 2016).

Popular literature and media portrayed enslaved blacks as content with their place in society. In literature, the character of Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is portrayed as an older black slave who is devoted to his white master. Samuel Jackson's portrayal of Stephen in 2012's *Django Unchained* echoes characteristics of Uncle Tom. Additionally the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939) portrays content slaves, specifically the role of Mammy.

Characters (sign/object) such as Aunt Jemima (pancake mix), Uncle Ben (rice), and Rastus (Cream of Wheat) have remained as constant reminders of the servile positions African Americans once held (meaning). Aunt Jemima, the first living trademark of a company, has been a vital tool for advertising campaigns since 1889. Utilized for over a century, the pancake mix figure represents the continuity of the Mammy stereotype (Smiley and Fakunle, 2016).

The depiction of Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus are not the only holdovers from slave-based stereotypes. 2018–19 saw a series of controversial fashion designs, by popular brands such as Prada, Gucci, Burberry, and H&M. Within a few short months of one another Gucci released a wool jumper with an attached face mask that blatantly recalled blackface; Burberry's show at 2019 London Fashion Week featured a hoodie with a noose around the neck of its product; H&M released an advertisement of a black child modeling a hoodie printed with the phrase 'coolest monkey in the jungle'. Prada released a Pradamalia fantasy charm named Otto, which also drew criticism for its visual similarities to minstrel show characters (McDermott, 2019).

Depictions of blackness as submissive, absurd, and comedic mirrored the level of control majority whites had over the black body and mind. This state of inferiority is echoed in W.E.B. DuBois' writing on how whites viewed freedom as a way to 'spoil' and 'ruin' black people (Smiley and Fakunle, 2016). According to David Pilgrim:



Figure 1. Illustration of Aunt Jemima ready mix pancakes pack, courtesy of Faiza Amir.

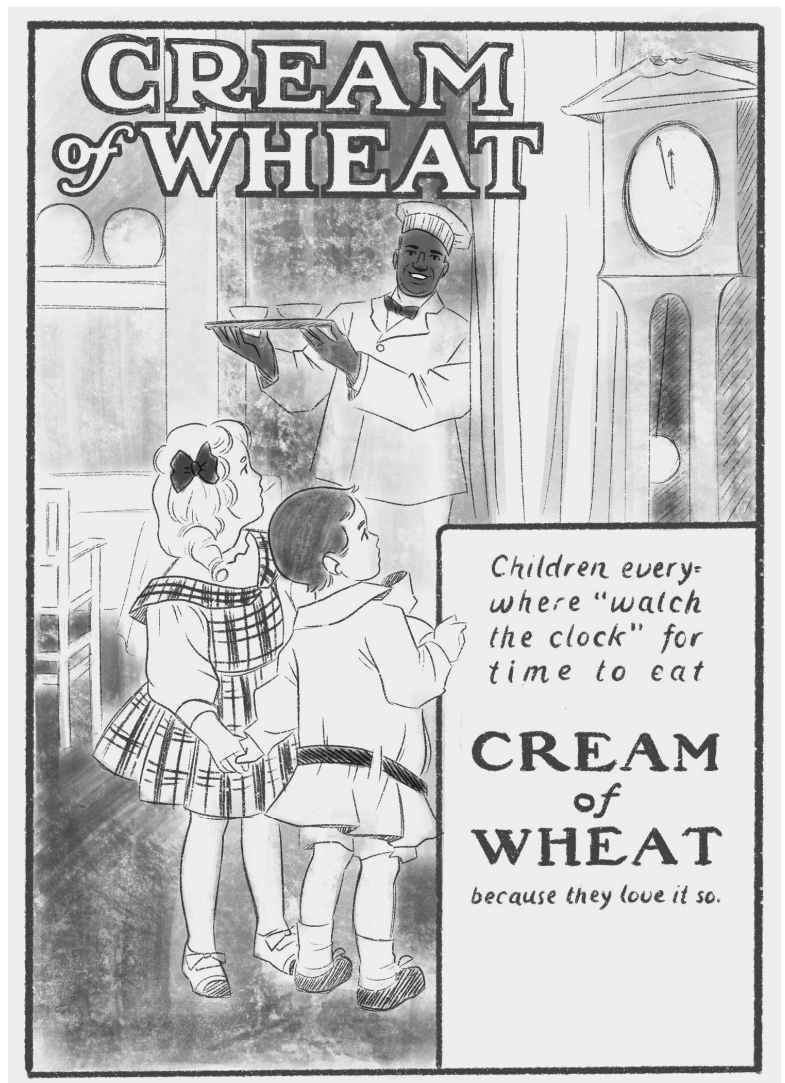


Figure 2. Illustration of Cream of Wheat advertisement, courtesy of Faiza Amir.



These portrayals were pragmatic and instrumental. Proponents of slavery created and promoted images of blacks that justified slavery and soothed white consciences. If slaves were childlike, for example, then a paternalistic institution where masters acted as quasi-parents to their slaves was [sic] humane, even morally right. More importantly, slaves were rarely depicted as brutes because that portrayal might have become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Pilgrim, 2016).

The image of submissive blackness ended after the American Civil War. During the period of Reconstruction (1865–1877), newly freed blacks began to obtain social, economic, and political rights with the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. These new civil protections saw the establishment of African American communities such as Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which was referred to as ‘Black Wall Street’; the building of schools now known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the election of the first two black U.S. Senators.

### **The brutish black**

Wealthy whites feared the political power that newly freed black people could acquire via voting, and poor whites saw blacks as competition in the labor force. Thus the rise of the Jim Crow era began, which was solidified by the Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This caused a transition in the depiction of African Americans from compliant and submissive servants to savages and brutish monsters, threats to the status quo. The black brute, who was innately large and animalistic, functioned as a tool to link African Americans to criminality.

The motifs and ideas found in literature and advertising are often echoed in paintings and designs. This is in part because training in fine and commercial art often takes place within the same art colleges and departments. These motifs not only influenced creatives of the same era, but those of subsequent generations as well.

In 2011, Nivea created a series of print advertisements for its Revitalizing line of men’s skincare. The objective of the campaign was to feature a well-groomed man discarding the decapitated head of a scruffier version of themselves. The clean-shaven face that each model kept was intended to symbolize the potential of utilizing Nivea skin care products. This ad concept was designed to fall under Nivea For Men’s broader campaign, ‘Look Like You Give A Damn.’ What sparked outrage about this ad series was the difference between the copy written for the white lead model and that for the black lead model. The ad featuring a white lead read, ‘Sin City isn’t an excuse to look like Hell.’ The spot using a black lead featured a neatly dressed model hurling the decapitated head of another black man with an afro and beard. The ad’s message, ‘Re-civilize yourself’ (Tsang, 2017).

The visible difference between the two subjects was limited to skin color and hair texture, as well as the suggestion that one was less civilized due to external appearance. African hair texture has long been scrutinized for not complying with Eurocentric standards. The widely distributed ad implied that African American hair (as some have suggested about the body), needed to be controlled and maintained to be culturally accepted. Sign – unkempt black male, signified – uncivil.

Thomas Nelson Page became one of the first writers to introduce a literary black brute. In 1898, his novel *Red Rock* included an offensive character named Moses, a corrupt black politician obsessed with raping white women (Pilgrim, 2016).

The idea also made its appearance in the controversial 1915 epic *Birth of a Nation* by D.W. Griffith. The film depicted the Ku Klux Klan as saviors of a post-Civil War South overwhelmed by Northern politicians and freed slaves. The assertion that black brutes were, in large numbers, sexually assaulting white women became the public rationalization for the lynching of black males, most notably the murder of Emmett Till.

In 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till, an African American from Chicago, was brutally murdered for allegedly whistling at Carolyn Bryant, a white woman who was a cashier at a grocery store. His attackers were Bryant's husband and her brother. The two men beat him nearly to death, dug out his eye, shot him in the head, and tossed his body into the river. The men were caught, tried, and found innocent by an all-white jury. Emmett Till, a native of one of Chicago's middle-class black neighborhoods, was visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi at the time of his death.

The fear of the rape or sexual assault of a white woman by an African American male would have devastating effects on African American communities. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1921, a young white woman accused a black male of sexual assault. This resulted in the deaths of roughly 300 African American residents and left more than 9,000 residents homeless after white mobs destroyed the Greenwood community.

Writer George T. Winston once claimed, 'When a knock is heard at the door [a white woman] shudders with nameless horror. The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust. His ferocity is almost maniacal. A mad bull or tiger could scarcely be more brutal. A whole community is frenzied with horror, with the blind and furious rage for vengeance' (Pilgrim, 2016).

The depiction of African American males as brutes continued its significance into the early 20th century. These depictions of black criminality resulted in the passage of stricter sentencing guidelines in prison and the expansion of the 'war on drugs' in the second half of the 20th century. Stricter prison guidelines grew the American prison system exponentially, by 700% (Moore et al., 2019). During this time campaigns for 'tough on crime' policy emerged as a popular soundbite for elected officials. For example, George H.W. Bush's presidential run used a smear campaign tactic, famously known as the 'Willie Horton' ad. This 1988 presidential campaign TV spot created by Bush's supporters was an intended attack on his Democratic opponent Michael Dukakis. Dukakis, the then-governor of Massachusetts, supported his state's 'weekend pass' program, which allowed imprisoned individuals to leave prison for a day or more to work or go home. The spot featured convicted murderer William 'Willie' Horton, who had escaped while on a weekend furlough, and went on to rape a woman and stab her fiancé in a brutal 1987 home invasion.

While the ad overtly discussed a single black man, the subliminal and larger takeaway was that Willie Horton's face became synonymous with all blackness. As political science professor Claire Jean Kim said in a 2012 PBS special (Kim, 2012), 'the insinuation is, if you elect Governor Dukakis as president, we're going to have black rapists running amok in the country'.

Lastly, a prime example of how the brute image still thrives in society today is the April 2008 *Vogue* magazine cover of professional basketball player LeBron James and supermodel Gisele Bündchen. *US Vogue* was widely criticized for the image, which saw Bündchen being held by the much larger NBA player in a manner which resembled a vintage 1917 World War I poster. The poster depicted a gorilla holding a white woman; the caption beneath the title 'Destroy this Mad Brute.' James' posture in combination with his face in mid-roar and Bündchen dressed in a gown similar to the one worn by the poster's female lead, provoked allegations of racial stereotyping (Morris, 2008).

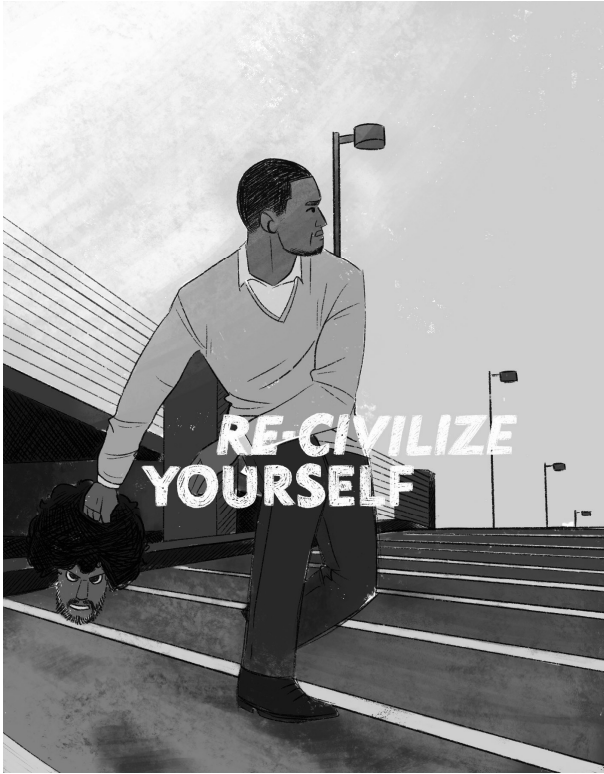


Figure 3. Illustration of Re-civilize yourself advertisement, courtesy of Faiza Amir.

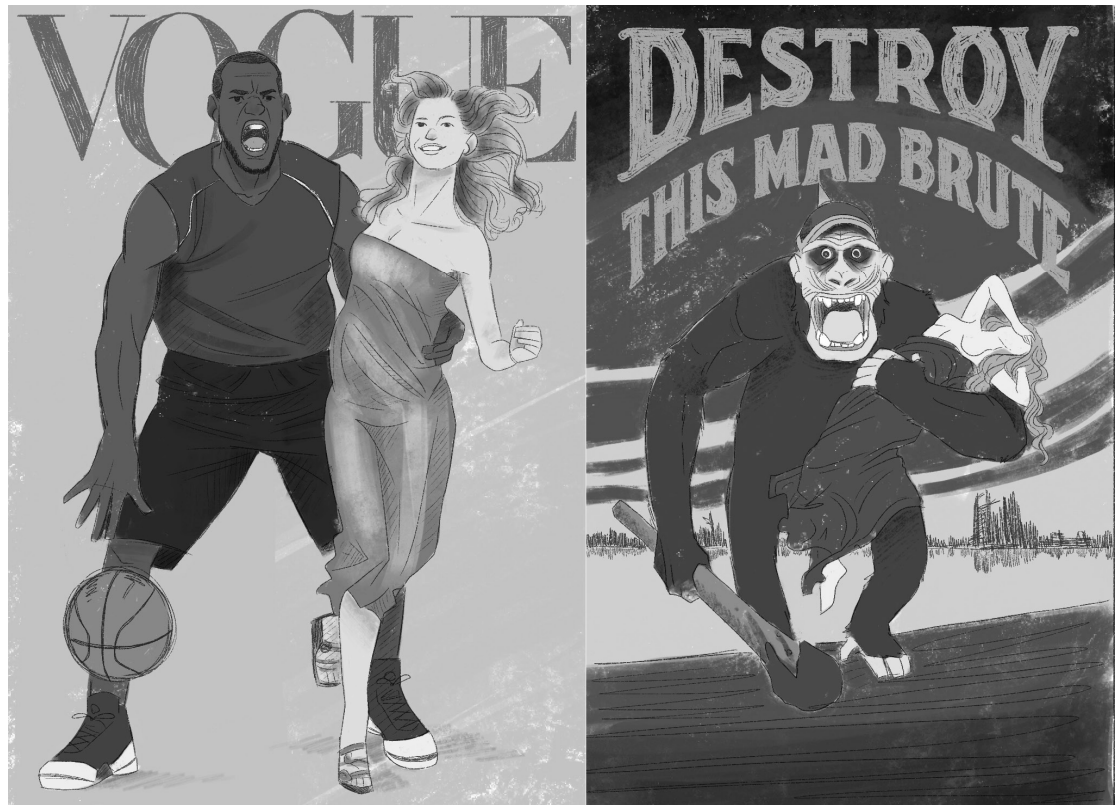


Figure 4. Illustration of Vogue cover, courtesy of Faiza Amir.

Figure 5. Illustration of Destroy this Mad Brute poster, courtesy of Faiza Amir.

These types of images that draw on past racial stereotypes and myths reinforce criminalization, and are now coded with terms such as ‘thug’ today. The brute caricature was a fallacy, and a myth adapted to maintain social control mechanisms as well as to sustain the white fear of black communities. The brute caricature traditionally re-emerges in popular culture whenever African Americans gain or push for social equity. According to sociologist Allen D. Grimshaw. The most oppressive techniques used on African Americans, whether rural lynchings or urban race riots, have taken place when blacks have been perceived as refusing to accept a subordinate position (Pilgrim, 2016).

### **Current ramifications of the brutish black image**

I believe there are parallels between this ideology and current interactions between African Americans and police officers. African Americans and Hispanics are 50% more likely to experience some form of force in their interactions with police than their white counterparts (Fryer, 2016).

From the infamous Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965, to the public beating of Rodney King, Bryant Allen, and Freddie Helms in the 1980s and 1990s, the relationship between African Americans and police has been historically tenuous and fraught with violence. The recent deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Walter Scott and Samuel Du Bose have heightened tensions regarding the use of force when policing black neighborhoods (Fryer, 2016).

Michael Brown, was an 18-year-old African American man who was fatally shot twelve times while unarmed by 28-year-old police officer Darren Wilson in the city of Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. Eric Garner, was a 27-year-old male who was choked to death while being arrested for illegally selling cigarettes, he was also unarmed. Walter Scott, a 33-year-old male, was stopped because of a non-functioning third brake light and was shot eight times in the back while attempting to flee, also unarmed. Samuel Du Bose, was stopped for failure to display a front license plate and while trying to drive away, also unarmed, was fatally shot once in the head.

For the many police officers accused of shooting an unarmed male of color, fear has been essential to their legal defense. ‘When I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding on to Hulk Hogan,’ the Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson said, of his encounter with Michael Brown (Sanburn, 2014). The language utilized harkens back to the brutish stereotypes of black males. In many instances the officers explained that their level of intimidation was rooted in their inability to control the person in front of them; for that reason violence seemed imminent.

### **The civil black**

In July 1839, a slave revolt lead by Mende captives took place on *La Amistad*. Enslaved in Sierra Leone, the Mende captives were being transported from Havana, Cuba, to their purchasers’ plantations. The African captives were able to take control of the ship, killing some of the crew and ordering the survivors to sail the ship to Africa.

The Spanish survivors, however, secretly maneuvered the ship north, and *La Amistad* was captured off the coast of Long Island by the brig USS *Washington*. The Mende and *La Amistad* were interned in Connecticut while federal court proceedings were undertaken for their disposition. The owners of the ship and the Spanish government claimed the slaves as property, but the US had banned the African trade and argued that the Mende were legally free. Because of issues of ownership and jurisdiction, the case gained international attention.

Understanding what and who Africans were has traditionally only been possible once knowledge has been filtered through the lens of the colonial gaze.

The Amistad Committee (the Committee) was founded in 1839 by Lewis Tappan, Simeon Jocelyn, and Joshua Leavitt. They organized the legal defense and raised money for the Mende Africans during their imprisonment. The Committee, sensing that they had to win the battle of perception in addition to the legal battle welcomed the assistance of any sympathetic artists. During this time period, the negative portrayals of the Africans were no different from those of African Americans who appeared in popular literature and public art galleries. In an attempt to win the battle of public opinion prior to the litigated case, the Committee commissioned Nathaniel Jocelyn to paint the portraits of abolitionists and of the slave revolt leader Joseph Cinqué.

From the beginning of Western exploration into African lands, the one thing Africans and their descendants have been unable to do is articulate their own existence. Understanding what and who Africans were has traditionally only been possible once knowledge has been filtered through the lens of the colonial gaze. As articulated by author Dr. Joy Degruy in her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (Degruy, 2017), colonialism was not limited to armies or forced oppression. It also expressed itself in narratives, which attempted to dehumanize Africans and justified oppression. Despite much social progress, such as the end of slavery, the end of segregation, and legislation outlawing redlining, aspects of the colonial gaze continue to find their way into popular culture, misrepresenting African-Americans and dehumanizing their existence for an audience who may be none the wiser.

Countering this view of Africans, Cinqué's portrait by Jocelyn presented him with a toga reminiscent of Greco-Roman philosophers and a cane staff held similarly to shepherds in Christian art. Cinqué's painted image utilized the symbols of Western society in order to humanize his existence. These images of Cinqué fueled an already established market for abolitionist imagery in the United States and England, as well as unfolding a publicity campaign for the release and return of the captured Africans.

Historically, the work of a designer has been centered largely on 'the hows'. The focus has been on ways to solve commercial problems for customers while overlooked, perhaps, has been the immense influence designers have on culture and society. Designers produce visual narratives, and thus, cultural 'myths' of products and their respective consumers. Race, like any other cultural myth, is socially constructed. By dissecting social, cultural and historical meaning in images we can explore the dynamics of social power and ideology that produced them. While historically, in America overt racist imagery was more prominent, cultural shifts of intolerance to blatant racism have made this less acceptable. This does not mean that these images no longer exist but rather that they live on as coded narratives, gestures, signs, and symbols to indicate difference. If the design community takes into account the social impact of the imagery narratives we create, this community could influence the way society understands and treats the humanity of others.

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Countering  
the Othering  
of Others:  
Illustration  
Facilitating  
Empathy

Dave Wood

Keywords

Illustration

Visual

communication

Graphic novels

Othering

Bearing witness

Populism

We appear to be living within a ‘post-truth’ Anthropocene, and bearing witness to the rise of xenophobic rhetoric in mainstream political campaigns by reactionary *populist* politicians (Lazaridis and Tsagkroni, 2016; Stocker, 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018)<sup>1</sup>. These *populists* are communicating visually with imagery and tropes reminiscent of 1930s fascism (Durrheim et al., 2018). In doing so, they are actively employing a narrative of *othering* vulnerable people in society (Greven, 2016) that they deem useful to spread their messages of fear and distrust for right-wing political ends. As current designers and illustrators, Pastor Niemöller’s final line in his 1946 poem, ‘First they came’, remains a sobering reminder of the horrific implications of facilitating this right-wing political normalisation of the *othering* of our fellow human beings: ‘Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me’. While Visual Communication Design<sup>2</sup> is in itself politically neutral, it can be used to enact socio-cultural behavioural change (Frascara, 2004) positively or negatively. This paper will highlight two case studies of two research-through-illustration projects, called Freedom City (2016/17), and Fulfilling Lives (2017/18). In these two illustration projects the illustrators explored how a positive use of visual communication can be employed to counter negative societal narratives, which *populist* politicians (Lazaridis and Tsagkroni, 2016, p.240) rely on to normalise fear and hate of vulnerable people and minorities. This normalisation of prejudice fuels an US vs THEM communicational situation that dehumanises fellow humans, which then is exploited by *populist* politicians to garner support for their ‘inflammatory rhetoric’ (Stocker, 2017, p.129). In each project, the illustrators had to develop their own understanding of (and empathy for) the *other* to challenge the negative stigma in society, by creating a fresh visual space to debate the *othering* of *others*. The two subject areas they worked on were the meaning of human freedom, and the life-worlds of people with complex needs. Employing a political design act of *proposing* new narratives (Sims, 2016, pp.440-443) of other people’s lived experiences, the illustrators followed a method of collectively bearing witness by using illustration to facilitate empathy of the *other*. In doing so, illustration was used to counter the *populist* attempt to normalise fear in our society of our fellow human beings.

## 01 Introduction

This paper details two projects that enabled illustration students to explore the visual language of being human, and the ‘horizontal connections’ (Fry, 2011, p.25) between the power of the images and audiences, to challenge societal prejudice and stigma. In the present political climate, with the rise of populist reactionary politics across the world aided and abetted by parts of the media (Mazzoleni, 2008; Lowles et al., 2017),

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1 Acknowledgements: We wish to thank the following people and organisations who have made this project successful. The European Regional Development Fund, and the Creative Fuse team (especially Dr Elena Gorman), Ray Middleton and Fulfilling Lives, Changing Lives, Oasis Aquila Housing, Roots and Wings, Sara Ogilvie, Northumbria University School of Design internal funding, and Seven Stories: The National Centre for Children’s Books. Illustration examples used © Georgie Mosley and © Angus Martin.

2 A disciplinary term of *Visual Communication* places the emphasis not just upon the method [design], but also on the objective [communication] and how it is communicated through its use of media [visual] (Frascara, 2004, p.4).

it does seem that the lessons of the darkest period of 20th century history are being forgotten or ignored (Durrheim et al., 2018). When one politically dominant group dehumanises with impunity a vulnerable group in society, we know from the aftermath of the Weimar Republic in 1930s Germany (Peukert, 1992) that only horror follows.

In this paper, the definition of *populist* is ‘a synonym for Far Right/extreme-right politics.’ *Populism* is a ‘style of politics which presents society in terms of a conflict between “virtuous and homogeneous people” and “a set of elites and dangerous others”’ (Lazaridis and Tsagkroni, 2016, p.241). With this strategy of *othering* THEM, *populists* ‘promise to give voice to a people [US] who feel that they have been’ previously politically neglected (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018, p.ix) – but this targeted populace [US] are seldom the homeless, the addicted, the people from a vulnerable minority. *Populists* talk in ‘the language of Everyman’ to ‘seek to establish an emotional connection with the public through inflammatory rhetoric [...] framing their language as “common sense”’ (Stocker, 2017, p.129).

Visual communicators cannot passively stand on the sideline when we see design outcomes being co-opted in *othering* the *other* and normalising fear and hatred in our societies (Durrheim et al., 2018). On 16th June 2016, on the same day that the British MP Jo Cox was murdered on a street (BBC News, 2016) by a Far Right extremist (Wilkie, 2016), Nigel Farage, the then leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) unveiled the Breaking Point poster. This poster showed a snaking column of non-white refugees walking towards the viewer with the tagline ‘Breaking Point: The EU has failed us all. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.’ This poster directly referenced Nazi propaganda of the 1930s and 1940s. Prominent people from across the political divide criticised the poster’s visual language as a racist dog whistle (Durrheim et al., 2018). The composition of the poster matched a scene from a Nazi propaganda film with commentary about refugees ‘who flooded European cities after [WW1] – parasites, undermining their host countries.’ It was also discovered that UKIP’s graphic designers had Photoshopped out the only white face in their poster. The origin of the photograph used by UKIP to suggest that foreign migrants were ready to enter the UK if we did not Brexit, was actually from October 2016, and showed ‘a picture of thousands of refugees crossing into Slovenia from Croatia during the height of the migrant crisis’ (Hopkins, 2016). The white face that was replaced in Breaking Point was of a border guard escorting the people seeking refuge (which is a human right). In the new context in this *populist* poster a white face would have been *off message*, and so he was replaced by another brown face.

This principle of *othering* constructs a communicational situation centred on an US vs THEM scenario. *Othering* ‘is uniformly applied by right-wing *populists*, but the definition of “the other” varies pursuant to nationally specific conditions’ (Greven, 2016, p.5). The THEM – the *other* – are always the scapegoats to socio-economic problems that *populists* over-simplify to gain support for their political aims (Lazaridis and Tsagkroni, 2016, p.240). As Pastor Niemöller’s final line in his 1946 poem reminds us of the horrific implication of facilitating the political normalisation of fear and hate, ‘Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me,’ we as designers and illustrators must not allow ourselves to become complicit in this debasement of our creative skills. Just as Shakespeare’s character Shylock reminds us of our shared humanity when he asks his tormentors, ‘If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?’ (Shakespeare, 2015, 3.1: 61-

63); we as illustrators and designers must be empathic in our decision-making when crafting visual communication to ensure the message is ethical and humane.

This paper adopts a case study methodology, philosophically framed within a Pragmatic constructivist (Merriam, 1998) qualitative analysis model. Within this Pragmatic model the question of how illustration can facilitate empathy in the viewer for the lived experiences of others, will be analysed from inductive reasoning and phenomenological interpretations. The two projects selected as cases to examine, were both developed from a progressive starting point: Freedom City (2016–17) focused on the importance of human freedom, and Fulfilling Lives (2017–18) began with the aim to challenge stigma against people with complex needs. Mahatma Gandhi's mantra of 'be [part of] the change that you wish to see in the world,' and Take One Action!'s belief that 'small actions lead to big ones, and that we all make a difference' (Take One Action!, N.D-a), inspired both projects.

To evaluate how effective these two illustration projects were in facilitating empathy as a phenomenon, it uses the proposition of design as a political act of *proposing* (Sims, 2016, p.443). It will study the illustrators' perspectives from the data collected from observations, documentary interviews, the rationale document, and analysis of the illustrations produced (Harrison et al., 2017). By phenomenologically centring the illustrator as a positive facilitator of behavioural change (Frascara, 2004, p.19) through their illustration skillsets, it empowered the illustrators to take small actions in their chosen visual communication outcomes to champion the *other* in society. The results of these small illustrative actions will be compared against fourteen Far Right tropes (Eco, 1995) that *populist* politicians are worryingly selecting from as 'tools for mobilising support' (Durrheim, et al., 2018).

This principle of illustratively interpreting a micro human story was integral to the heart of both projects' success, and to the aim of connecting people through creativity to inspire individual action on a small scale and lead to a progressive change within the wider world. Take One Action! believes that, 'we know that human stories reflecting global issues in microcosm are often the most powerful' (Take One Action!, N.D-b), and Visual Communication designers have empowerment as 'an agent of influence on the social implications of delivering a visual dialogue' (Forlizzi and Lebbon, 2006, p.52). Therefore, it 'would be a fundamental error to believe that in design one can deal with the form independent of content, or with [the] sensorial, independent of the cognitive and the emotional' (Frascara, 2004, p.65). Frascara goes as far as saying that the designed outcome 'is fundamentally about performance' in communicating any intended message (*ibid.*, p.12).

The Freedom City and Fulfilling Lives projects helped the illustration students to understand how the relationship between words and images impacts on how they positively or negatively visually communicate meaning. To counter the destructive *populist* narratives of fear and hate currently being disseminated within our societies using the *other* as scapegoats, the two projects engaged the illustrators to arrive at their own understanding of empathy for the *other* in society. The illustrators were encouraged to 'bear witness' and to research, contextualise and interpret the lived experiences of people from different places, times and situations. By doing so, they in their own way learnt how to challenge the normalisation of destructive societal stigmas that are used to *other*.

By giving the illustrators the space to research their own positions on freedom and complex needs, they arrived at personal political decisions to illustratively propose narratives from and about those seldom heard voices.

## 02 Bearing Witness as a Political Act

In 2016, the Freedom City project was created in advance of Newcastle's official 2017 celebration of the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's honorary doctorate by the University of Newcastle. This illustration project explored the boundaries and injustices of human freedom as part of a second year Contextualisation and Interpretation module. Then in the 2017–18 Fulfilling Lives project, the same student illustrators used short graphic novellas to provoke dialogue with the public and social service providers, to challenge the stigma of vulnerable humans with complex needs. This live brief was channelled through a Narrative and Social Commentary module. The illustrators used sequential narrative illustration to re-interpret the personal testimonies of two people in Newcastle with complex needs.<sup>3</sup> The resulting illustrations were disseminated within public arenas to facilitate societal impacts.

Some of the Freedom City illustrations were exhibited in 2017 within the cafe area of Seven Stories in Newcastle. The exhibition was entitled *Illustrating Freedom* as a “fringe” event to the main Freedom City celebrations across the city (see Fig. 1). Seven Stories is the National Centre for Children's Books, and many different people, from visiting families to locals, frequent its cafe. This illustration exhibition ran from 8th November 2017 to 29th May 2018.

During this period, the same students' Fulfilling Lives strips were published in a graphic novel anthology called *#WhatDoYouSee?* (see Fig. 2). Panels from these strips formed the visual core for Fulfilling Lives' social media campaign of the same name, to continue to challenge stigma. The production of the anthology was funded by a Creative Fuse North grant from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). This anthology was to be used by Fulfilling Lives in their outreach work to address the stigma of complex needs, to contribute to reducing the significant social and economic costs associated with it, and to improve the lived experience of people who have complex needs.

Both of these projects will be examined in more detail as case studies in the next few sections of this paper. But first it is important to discuss how illustration can positively counter the *othering* of *others* in modern society as a conscious humanitarian political act. With any such outward act of support or empathy, the insurgent Alt-right<sup>4</sup> voices criticise and mock such acts as ‘virtue signalling’ (Wendling, 2018, pp.100-101). Sims, in his chapter ‘The Politics of Design, Design as Politics’ (Sims, 2016) frames the issue of design as a political act of three possibilities, ‘Prescribing, Publicizing, and Proposing’ (p.443). It is in the third of Sims' political possibilities that the two illustration projects situate themselves. By giving the illustrators the space to research their own positions on freedom and complex needs, they arrived at personal political decisions to illustratively propose narratives from and about those seldom heard voices.

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3 Complex needs are defined as people exhibiting at least two of the following conditions: homelessness, current/historical offending, problematic substance or alcohol misuse, and mental ill-health.

4 Defining Alt-Right: it is a reactionary political movement that began online in 2016 through forums such as 4chan. It is not simply a white supremacy movement as ‘it can also be anti-globalisation, anti-establishment, anti-Semitic, racist, misogynist, etc.’ (Wendling, 2018, p.227).



Figure 1. The Illustrating Freedom exhibition and the illustrators involved in the Freedom City project.

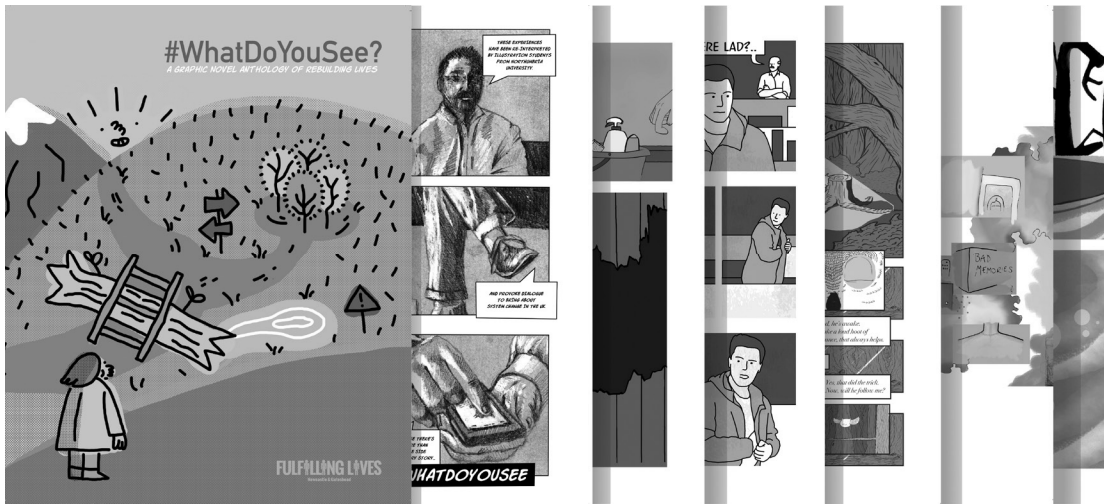


Figure 2. #WhatDoYouSee? The Fulfilling Lives graphic novel anthology (page samples of the five strips plus the illustrated introduction).

There was no personal virtue for the illustrators in doing this, it was just effective visual communication. Any signalling is in the remit of Visual Communication Design. What each illustrator did was use illustration ‘as a means for sparking reflection and debate’ (Sims, 2016, p.443) first amongst themselves in crits, and then in society via exhibiting, social media, and a printed book. They used the illustration process as a ‘transformative redirective practice’ to intentionally undercut and remake the current political thinking of *othering* the *other*. They used illustration as ‘another path to [...] the political’ deconstruction of *populist* misdirection and falsehoods (Fry, 2011, p.135). To give an example of this act of transformative redirective practice in the two projects through *proposing*, we will now look to the underpinning theoretical framework of the Quaker principle of Bearing Witness.<sup>5</sup>

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5 The Quakers acknowledge that they ‘are in the midst of a broad and many-faceted social movement in which there is a growing convergence in the world views [where] common conceptions are emerging, conceptions of truth, meaning, the relations of feeling to reason, and the nature of the self. These are yielding a new set of leading ideas and empowering practices for the reconstruction of our culture’ (Cox, 2014, pp.194-195).



This principle of Bearing Witness is rooted within a religious lived experience which ‘embodies the seeds for a culture [...] radically different from the one dominant today.’ (Cox, 2014, p.184). This principle now intersects with a more secular activism, having been taken up by environmentalist and human rights activists, such as Greenpeace, to provoke a path to positive action. Activists embed themselves within a political situation as eyewitnesses to ‘wrong-doing’ that ‘creates a moral responsibility to inform others and take action’ (Leonard, 2010, p.xii). This concept of Bearing Witness has been developed within art activism, beyond embedding first-hand observers within on-going political situations, into acts of ‘community or collective witnessing’ (Bennacer, 2008, pp.64-76).

Within the Freedom City project, the illustrators were facilitated, through the teaching on their Contextualisation and Interpretation module, to employ a process of collectively bearing witness to the lived experiences of others’ experiences on the meaning of human freedom. This was then built upon in their Fulfilling Lives project, when they researched into the realities of living with complex needs.

The graphic-journalist Joe Sacco provides a strong example of how illustration can be utilised to collectively bear witness on human rights issues for his readers, by visualising the lived experiences of people in Bosnia (2004, 2005, 2011) and Palestine (2003, 2009). These are people who, by being *othered* as something less than human (in both cases through anti-Muslim rhetoric), have suffered violently at the hands of renewed nationalist *populism*. He states that, ‘there is nothing literal about a drawing. [An illustrator] assembles elements deliberately and places them with intent on a page’ (Sacco, 2012, p.ix). It can be further argued that the ‘revelatory strength’ of the illustrations ‘operates with evidentiary force’ that triggers an ‘affective response’ in the reader as a form of witnessing (Chute, 2016, p.255).

Art Spiegelman frames the comic strip and graphic novel medium ‘where history and the personal past can collide’ (Raeburn, 2004, p.25). By doing so this sequential illustration medium offers a way to visually communicate seldom heard voices. This use of comic strip as bearing witness can engage readers in phenomenologically encountering individual lived experiences beyond their own life-worlds.<sup>6</sup> It can be seen as a democratisation of the staging of non-elite themes in narratives (Ranci re, 2013), where, as Chris Ware believes, readers ‘make the strip come alive by reading it, by experiencing it beat for beat’ (Baetens and Frey, 2015, p.96). Ware states that illustrators ‘take pieces of experience and freeze them in time’ in the panels on a comic strip page. Each illustration panel ‘is inert, lying there’ waiting for the reader to complete the act of collective witnessing of another person’s life-world. The illustrators in the Fulfilling Lives project used graphic novellas in this way, utilising the comic strip medium to stage their own interpretations bearing witness on the life-worlds of other human beings. In the next two sections, these ideas will be explored with more context.

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6 Life-world is a Husserlian term that describes ‘the world of the natural attitude of everyday life’ for each of us (van Manen, 1990, p.7).

### 03 Case Study 1: Freedom City Project 2016–17

The Freedom City project aimed to engage the illustrators to use illustrations as a political act to spark ‘reflection and debate’ (Sims, 2016, p.443). The student illustrators were provided with eight short texts that explored how others have fought for (and lost) freedom through non-violent actions, using books, pens, metaphors, and impassioned speeches across time and continents. The eight texts on freedom the illustrators were given were:

1. Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream...’ speech;
2. Maya Angelou’s poem ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’;
3. ‘First They Came...’, a poem by Nazi death camp survivor Pastor Martin Niemöller;
4. Malala Yousafzai’s United Nations ‘Youth Takeover’ speech;
5. 17th century English radical Gerrard Winstanley’s ‘*The Digger’s Song*’;
6. Extracts from Mahatma Gandhi’s ‘The Great Trial 1922’ statement;
7. 18th century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft’s, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (extract);
8. Nigerian poet Melody Thaila Kuku’s ‘Freedom Is Not Yet Freedom’ poem.

These speeches, poems, songs and writings explored human freedom from different socio-cultural and political perspectives, especially from women, people of colour, and working-class voices. The illustrators were tasked to read the texts and create a set of six illustrations that proposed a view on what freedom means.

The illustrators were briefed that they could choose to either select lines across a range of texts, or choose a single text and explore its stanzas or paragraphs. This research into interpretations of freedom the students engaged in took them from the 1960s American Civil Rights Movement, to 16th century radicalism within post-Civil War England, forward in time to 21st century Pakistan, and back to 20th century pre-independence India. It made them consider freedom from non-Western perspectives, including feminist, anti-colonial and radical ideas for the meaning of freedom, and how it can be expressed. The research gave the young illustrators new insights into how to interpret the meaning of freedom to create fresh illustration outcomes.

The illustrators were encouraged to explore the ‘revelatory strength of the image’ (Chute, 2016, p.255) by researching behind the words to understand and contextualise, on personal and global scales, the testimonies of people with radically different lived experiences. From these initial critical examinations, the students isolated and discussed the revealed experiences of freedom. This discussion led them to judge which were first-hand accounts, which experiences were filtered through the writers, and which were metaphorical or allegorical.

The students had to become critically aware of illustration’s role in storytelling, especially on the relationship between sequential thinking and narrative, in order to produce a set of six illustrations on human freedom. This could be six individual illustrations or six illustrations that worked as a sequential series of related images. It was the illustrators’ choice. Finally, to put the work into an environment where it would provoke discussions about freedom amongst the public, some of these illustrations were exhibited in 2018 in the *Illustrating Freedom* exhibition at Seven Stories (see Fig. 1).

#### 04 Case Study 2: Fulfilling Lives Project 2017–18

The contextualisation and interpretation skills that the student illustrators learnt in the Freedom City project, were transferred in the next semester to their Fulfilling Lives project. This was a live assignment that had been negotiated and planned with Ray Middleton, Systems Broker at the Newcastle charity Fulfilling Lives. The live project was set within a Narrative and Social Media module.

Fulfilling Lives' third sector work helps people with complex needs, and its outreach work helps to improve the support services they need. To do this they challenge the stigma of how society sees people with complex needs. Its outreach work with service providers counters the *othering* of people whose lives involve homelessness, offending and abuse of alcohol and/or drugs. Fulfilling Lives is an eight-year programme from a core partnership between Changing Lives, Oasis Aquila Housing and Mental Health Concern in Newcastle and Gateshead. Its goal is to make an impact on changing how society sees these people, so that it is not for their complex problems but for the potential they have as human beings.

It was from this *proposing* position that Ray Middleton asked the illustrators to help Fulfilling Lives to facilitate a *system change*. Fulfilling Lives wished to challenge the negative narrative of social problems in society. They wanted a way to value and amplify the voice of these people as 'Experts by Experience' of complex needs. From Fulfilling Lives' experience there was a frustration with the lack of societal understanding and support for vulnerable people with complex needs. This was due to social service providers negatively stereotyping these people as difficult and 'hard to reach', people who take up too much time to deal with. This is because one area of social services (e.g. Housing) could only deal with one aspect of a person with complex needs (e.g. Homelessness), and wouldn't address the other needs such as offending, drug abuse, etc.

Fulfilling Lives' outreach work facilitates a more holistic approach to the needs of these people. This work tries to halt the downward spiral of those who, without more effective, empathic support would suffer declining mental ill health, and engage in further substance misuse, and further criminal offending. In Fulfilling Lives' experience this discrimination was due to a wider issue of societal stigma influencing governmental decision-making. This issue was a result of *othering*. By working directly with social services through workshops, Fulfilling Lives tries to build a sustainable reversion of homelessness and the exclusion from mainstream society of fellow humans, by building stronger empathic connections between social service providers and people with complex needs. Middleton wanted to use illustration to find ways to help the general public understand the lived experiences of people with complex needs and not discriminate against them.

Middleton provided the illustrators with audio of two anonymised testimonies from a man and a woman with complex needs who were his clients. Each testimony was a personal story – a snapshot of a complex, chaotic life – and like all stories its themes and events could be retold in different ways to connect with readers. These testimonies were created in Middleton's counselling sessions, using a dialogic methodology he had developed as part of his PhD called 'Ladder for Life'. This methodology facilitated the personal development of each Fulfilling Lives client, allowing them to speak of their past, present and future lived experiences in a non-linear way.

The illustrators were tasked to focus on the emergent themes in each testimony of living with complex needs, interpreting a narrative arc from a chosen theme into a 12-page graphic novella. The intention was for Fulfilling Lives to somehow use these illustrated strips in their social service provider outreach work. Later, through the ERDF Creative Fuse grant, five of the best strips were published in *#WhatDoYouSee?* a graphic novel anthology. Alongside this anthology, the funding supported a Twitter social media campaign with the hashtag #WhatDoYouSee? This campaign used

1	The cult of tradition.
2	The rejection of modernism.
3	The cult of action for action's sake.
4	Disagreement is treason.
5	Fear of difference.
6	Appeal to social frustration.
7	The obsession with a plot.
8	The enemy is both strong and weak.
9	Pacifism is trafficking with the enemy.
10	Contempt for the weak.
11	Everybody is educated to become a hero.
12	Machismo and weaponry.
13	The Voice of the People – an emotional response of a selected group of citizens.
14	Use of an impoverished vocabulary to limit the complex and critical reasoning.

Table 1: Fourteen Common Features of Fascism (Eco, 1995).

illustrated panels from the anthology strips to provoke further discussions online. Both the Freedom City and Fulfilling Lives case studies will be examined in more depth in the next section, to examine how the principle of collectively bearing witness with illustration can be used to propose and counter the *othering* of fellow human beings.

## 05 Illustration Countering the Normalisation of Othering

The over-simplified trope of the *other* (THEM, the scapegoats) that *populists* use to gain political support (Lazaridis and Tsagkroni, 2016, p.240) is one aspect of a larger insidious Far Right playlist of tropes. The author and semiotician Umberto Eco grew up in Mussolini's Fascist Italy in the 1940s, and observed, at first hand, Italian Fascism and German Nazism. In his article for *The New York Review of Books* (Eco, 1995), he discussed the features shared between various forms of Fascism. He discussed 14 common features of Fascism that various modern-day *populists* are echoing in their rhetoric (see Table 1). What these tropes share in regard to *othering* is that they build on a fear of difference [5], an appeal to social frustration in society [6], a contempt for the weak [10], and in doing so they manipulate a selected group of citizens (US) into emotional responses [13] against the *other*. By reducing media and rhetoric into soundbites (e.g. 'Make America Great Again', 'Take Back Control') *populists* are impoverishing vocabulary that limits the complex and critical reasoning (14).

In both illustration projects, it was important that the illustrators engaged in complex and critical reasoning. In Freedom City, within a framework of bearing 'collective witness' (Bennacer, 2008), the illustrators researched, contextualised and interpreted the eight texts on freedom into a set of six illustrations. Whereas later in the Fulfilling Lives project the same student illustrators had first-hand testimony from people living with complex needs, in Freedom City the illustrators had to engage in complex critical thinking from indirect sources around the meaning of freedom. This critical thinking was beneficial to them, as by the time the illustrators began working on the graphic novellas, they had developed their own methodology to contextualise and interpret other people's first-hand lived experiences.

In a small way, just as Take One Action! advocates that 'small actions lead to big ones' (N.D-a), the illustrators' own engagement as they contextualised and interpreted their illustrations in both projects, was in direct opposition to a *populist* mindset. The illustrators endeavoured, within the constraint of a 12-page graphic novella, to maintain and communicate the 'emotional meaning' (Raeburn, 2004, p.21) of complex needs. This was communicated in the strips through an intersection between the structures of what's drawn and what's written, with each panel illustration's drawn lines inherently suggesting 'authenticity and intimacy' (Baetens and Frey, 2015, p.98). In this way, each illustrator's visual interpretation was also underpinned by Middleton using a 'Ladder for Life' methodology within the recording of both audio testimonies.<sup>7</sup> This gave each authentic personal narrative a complex temporal structure, which throughout both interviews jumped from the present to the future, and then to the past, and back again.

Whether autobiographical or not, the directness of drawn panels in combination with any written textual elements allows the illustrator to tell narratives that can be more localised and more personal. Its panels and gutters offer the narrative 'a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments' that the reader can construct mentally as 'a continuous, unified reality' (McCloud, 1994, pp.66-67). In each strip, the illustrator

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7 To aid the illustrators' contextualisation of the main themes to interpret through their illustrations, the two audio testimonies were also transcribed into a 12-point narrative breakdown. Each illustration student was randomly assigned one person's testimony (male or female client). They then listened to the testimony, and read the transcript as a story structure with a beginning, a middle and an end.

interpreted a specific narrative to discuss complex needs, presenting to the reader an interpreted illustrated narrative 'of what is remembered as having been experienced' (Pedri, 2015, p.145). These new narratives first emerged through sketching and group discussions (Sattler, 2010, p.213), resulting in deeper critical discussions around different life-worlds and lived experiences. This critical discussion led to each illustrator expanding their own understanding of complex needs, which in turn informed their illustrations. These final illustrations exhibited greater empathic depth and emotional maturity, because as the project progressed each illustrator challenged their own prejudices to get to the empathic human story. To evidence this, two illustrators' work will be discussed in more detail below, so comparisons and parallels can be made between the earlier work on their Freedom City project, and their graphic novella for Fulfilling Lives.

### 05a Freedoms and Flatwater High – Student G

In her two illustration projects, Student G went beyond the literal facts and investigated the realities behind freedom and complex needs. This critical approach led her to examine the concept of only understanding the freedom we had after we have lost it, and to understand personal inner conflicts within people with complex needs.

This led her to adopt two different metaphoric devices. In her Freedom City six illustrations Student G used flowing water as a way to visually communicate different freedoms, and the act of crying to show the loss (see Fig. 3). In each illustration freedom flows but is lost by the individual. As the set of illustrations proceeds, the loss of freedom is suggested (e.g. (2) silenced = political prisoners, (3) drowning = migrants), until by (6) the character has realised that freedom is innate in us, and shared. In Flatwater High (see Fig. 4), Student G took an actual positive event, canoeing, from the audio testimony, and used that to represent the inner conflict within people with complex needs that society fails to see.

Through her critical examination and then choosing suitable visual metaphors to hook audiences' attention to help them to understand others' lived experiences, Student G showed empathic depth and emotional maturity in her illustrations. Student G in the Freedom City work, created a character as an *Everywoman*, a single abstracted human character who embodies different situations and emotional responses to the loss of freedom. In her graphic novella, the male figure is shown within an existential moment of inner conflict between remaining in a state of, and being free from, chaos and addiction; if only he can make one small change to set off on a path to recovery.

Student G discovered within the confines of her illustrations ways to *propose* 'emotional meaning' (Raeburn, 2004, p.21) with as much 'authenticity and intimacy' (Baetens and Frey, 2015, p.98) as she could within the mark-making of her drawing. Her choice of texture and colour within the illustrations was controlled, to bring her audience into an intimate communicational situation to emotionally engage with each moment. Student G's intent, as she explained in an interview in a Creative Fuse North East documentary, is as follows: 'I really hope that after people read this novel, they can get a more positive mind-set from it' (Creative Fuse North East, 2018).

In her graphic novella, she played visually with the reader allowing them to discover through reading that the man 'feels as if he is in a bubble where no one can reach him' (Student G, 2017). She was knowingly facilitating the reader to collectively bear witness to the very human cry for help. Unlike the *populist* politician exploiting

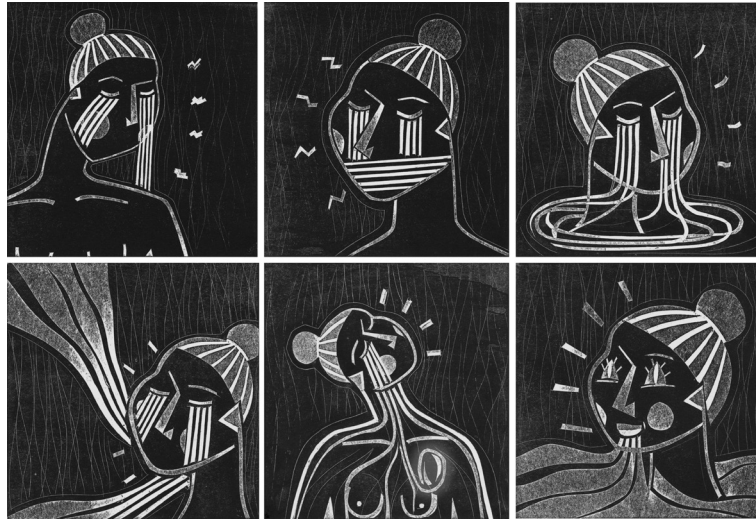


Figure 3. Based on loss of freedom themes in the eight texts, it visualises loss as flowing tears. A single figure experiences loss of freedoms in different contexts, each as a metaphor for different socio-cultural groups mentioned in the texts. (Student G, 2016).



Figure 4. Flatwater High page – In these panels, the Fulfilling Lives client's testimony of his internal conflict is expressed through examining his heroin addiction while illustrating him in his happier place of canoeing. One activity takes him out of himself positively (canoeing) while the other is destructive (addiction). Flatwater High captures a sense of isolation, self-destruction, and a desire to escape the cycle. (Student G, 2017).

their *Everyman* persona to emotionally manipulate voters (see Table 1:13), Student G's use of an *Everywoman/Everyman* in her illustrations quietly suggests to her audience the '*There but for the Grace of God, go I*' concept of this could be me. Her characters are human. They may be stylised and strange looking characters, but they are still recognisably human.

### 5b Freedoms and Josh Cooper 27/03/2003 – Student M

Student M's approach to freedom and complex needs, took his critical examination of indirect and direct lived experiences to two illustrative solutions that would definitely place his audience in the role of observers. To do this, he explored the concept of freedom from a truly global position. He was inspired by Melody Thaila Kuku's poem 'Freedom Is Not Yet Freedom', and he illustrated 'that the whole world is in the cage' (Student M, 2016) through the use of cubed life-worlds.

Student M utilised these cubed life-worlds as a framing of diminishing freedoms, as illustrated metaphorical cages in which people are imprisoned. The intersecting lines of latitude and longitude meant that, like a cake, pieces could be gradually removed. As the pieces are removed, the scenes inside the globe change to reflect the different lived experiences of people's sense of freedom mentioned within the eight texts. As an audience, we are bearing witness to the removal of freedom from other humans, while we also see the fallout from this loss (see Fig. 5) as pieces vanish.

In his graphic novella, he presents the reader with a meta-narrative from the first-hand testimony of one of Fulfilling Lives' clients with complex needs. In the invented character of Josh Cooper, Student M gives us a window into a young man's life where one wrong move could become a life-long struggle to exist. In the strip, Student M, through his critical examination of complex needs, uses subtle visual devices to stress how our everyday could flip into a negative declining spiral of addiction, homelessness, and mental health issues that any of us could (through poor decision-making) slip into. In his story (see Fig. 6), as the shopkeeper chases the teenager after shoplifting, we see a man injecting in the alleyway – this is the Fulfilling Lives' client whose testimony Student M is interpreting. He makes an appearance much like Dickens' ghost of Christmas Yet to Come warn of a dark possible future. In the next page a lone figure is at the end of the alleyway as a passive observer to the drama unfolding. Here Student M evokes Hitchcock by giving himself a cameo within his own narrative of Josh's life-world.

By placing himself and the Fulfilling Lives' client in a fictionalised narrative of a young lad, Student M is proposing that any of us could be in this scenario. In both his projects, Student M is drawing us into hypothetical situations to collectively bear witness to lived experiences that are universally human. The empathic depth and emotional maturity Student M developed in his illustration work brought about a profound change in him, and Middleton recognised the power of what Student M was doing in the *Josh Cooper* strip when he selected it for the anthology. Student M, in the second panel on the right-hand page breaks the *fourth wall* and directly looks the reader in the eyes to almost say: 'This could be you, or your child'. Josh is no longer a potential criminal and a societal pariah, he is any of us who makes a stupid decision. Whatever made Josh make the decision to shoplift, he is still human.



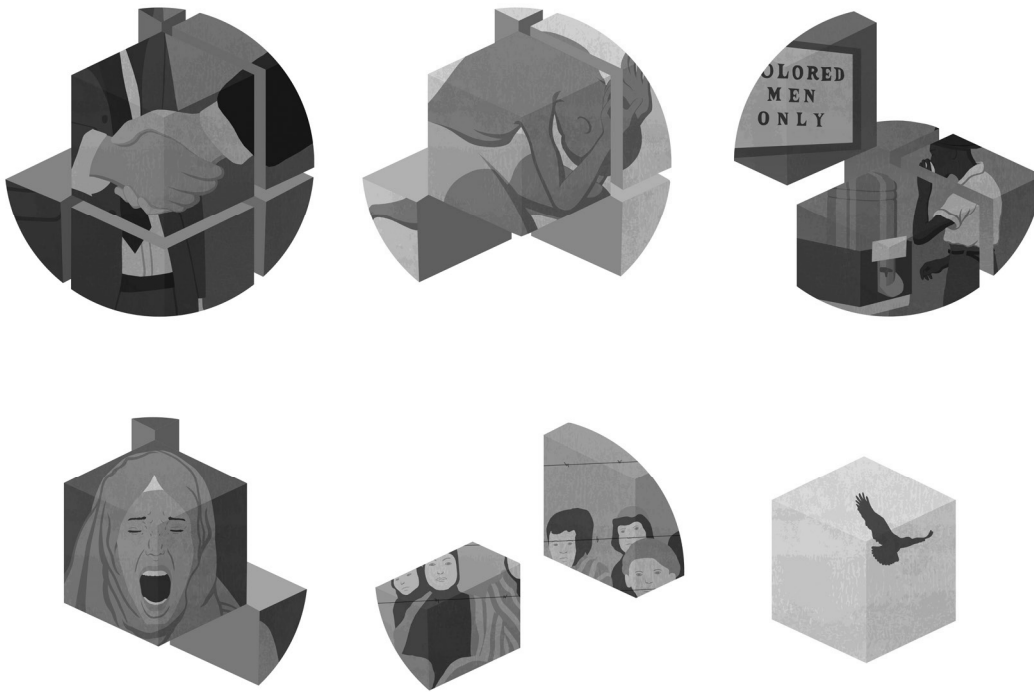


Figure 5. The globe is cut up as human freedoms within different minority groups are removed, mirroring Niemöller's warning, and as our freedom is curtailed in the last illustration, with the bird in an illusion of flying free while contained in a small box. (Student M, 2016).

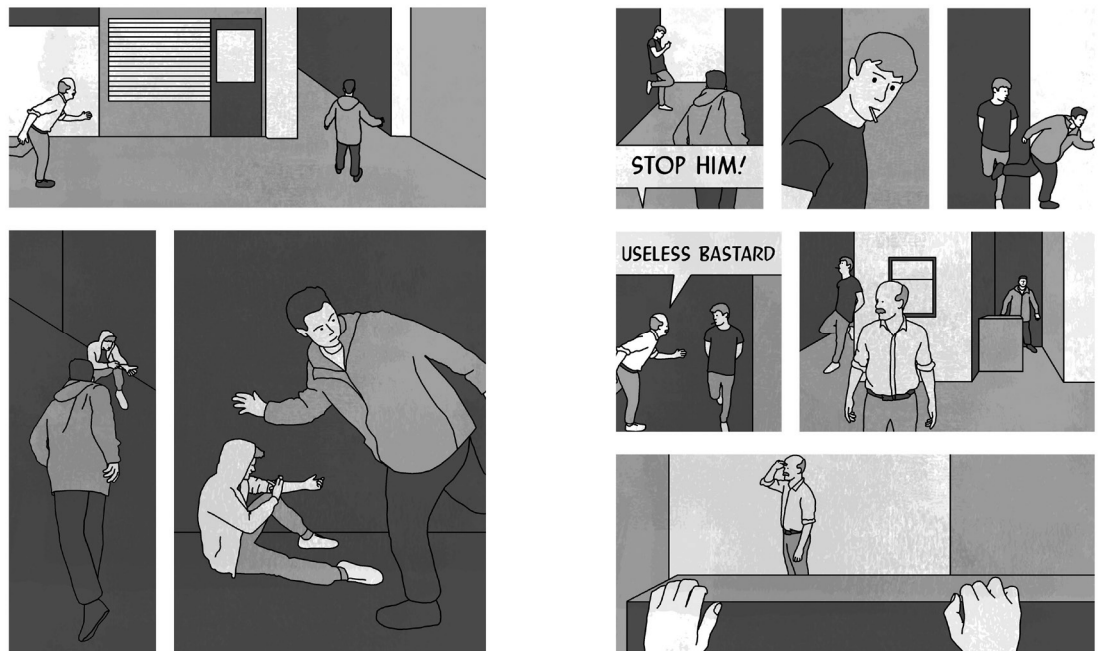


Figure 6. Josh Cooper 27/03/2003 Graphic Novella page panels. In this pivotal narrative scene, the young shoplifter Josh escapes down an alley pursued by the shopkeeper, passing a possible future him in the figure of the addict. This was a meta-narrative that gave cameo roles to Student M and to the Fulfilling Lives client, by showing how easy it is to slip into his life-world through the invented Josh character. (Student M, 2017).

## 06 Implications of Illustration Proposing Dialogue

Through their small political acts of using illustration as single and sequential images, the illustrators used their creative skills to collectively bear witness to the lived experience narratives of our fellow human beings. In doing so, the illustration students opened themselves up to empathise with people other than themselves, and lived experiences that (hopefully) they would never negatively encounter beyond these projects. They began to realise how illustration can be utilised to counter a *populist* trope of *othering*. By using illustrations to positively *propose* and provoke dialogue in a wider socio-cultural context, societal perceptions of fellow human beings could be addressed, and the hidden voices could be amplified in new communicational situations that were not didactic. Student N explains his approach to visualising the lived experience of a voiceless person. ‘because we didn’t see what [the Fulfilling Lives clients] looked like we had to visualise what we thought they would look like. Several ideas kind of came about. We pulled out metaphors from real life that [the public] may find easier to understand.’ (Creative Fuse North East, 2018). These metaphors that Student N mentions are *proposed* dialogic provocations that the students progressively framed. By doing so, the illustrators created complex visually communicated empathic alternatives in direct opposition to the *populist* tropes that seek to appeal to: social frustration [6], contempt for the weak [10], and the fear of difference [5] which they manipulate to present as the authentic ‘Voice of the People’ (see Table 1).

The UKIP 2016 Breaking Point poster that was discussed in the introduction, is one such example of *populists* employing these tropes through visual communication outputs. The Breaking Point poster was rightly criticised for its dog whistle racist crudity (Durrheim et al., 2018; Hopkins, 2016), but the populists in the UK are not deterred from this criticism, and are still utilising visual communication design to push Far Right tropes to the population. In October 2019, the Leave.EU organisation<sup>8</sup> tweeted an openly xenophobic, anti-German and jingoistic social media Brexit meme with the tagline ‘We didn’t win two world wars to be pushed around by a Kraut.’<sup>9</sup> The meme depicted the German Chancellor Angela Merkel in a pose with an outstretched arm, in order to scapegoat a European ally as responsible for the current constitutional crisis within the UK. They utilised several Far Right tropes [1, 2, 7, 9, 14] (see Table 1) to heavily imply that a modern democratic German politician is just the same old ‘Nazi’ that Britain defeated in WW2.

During their module work, none of the illustrators were exposed to any *populist* tropes in Table 1, other than the historical implications of *othering*. This was crucial as the illustration students were never consciously countering any of the 13 remaining tropes listed by Umberto Eco. Pedagogically, in a constructivist way, each student was responsible for their own visually communicated messages in their illustrations. They were in Freedom City, inspired by Gandhi’s *be the change* mantra, and in Fulfilling Lives by the client’s aim to challenge stigma in society. The implications of

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8 Nigel Farage, the former leader of UKIP at the time he unveiled the Breaking Point poster in 2016, was heavily involved in Leave.EU before he set up the Brexit Party.

9 There was immediate criticism to this Leave.eu graphic from across the UK political spectrum and beyond (Keay, 2019), and the offending graphic was later deleted. Leave.EU’s co-founder Arron Banks admitted it went ‘too far.’ But by that point, the offence had already been delivered, and the *populists* had *othered* the German nation.

# They rejected any prior prejudices, and instead engaged in debates within their crits as to their ethical responsibilities

this philosophical positive framing on the student illustrators' research and ideation phase, meant that they all individually acted as positive visual agents of the voices of the *othered* in society. This meant that the illustrators' development work challenged tradition, embraced differences, and championed the weak without judgement.<sup>10</sup> The visual language the illustrators employed (mostly without any text) offered the viewer or reader a dialogue, which would engage them in a new communicational situation and which would provoke in them further complex and critical reasoning.

All the illustrators, before developing their freedom illustrations and graphic novellas, engaged in weeks of research into lived experiences that were not their own. They rejected any prior prejudices, and instead engaged in debates within their crits as to their ethical responsibilities of illustrators to bear witness in order to visually communicate lived experience. This phenomenological acknowledgement of prior prejudices facilitated each illustrator to reveal for themselves (before visually

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10 Unlike the xenophobic Leave.eu graphical meme that played on crude *Boy's Own* war comic attitudes from the 1970s.

communicating to a wider audience their narratives) the full complexity, alien situations, and motivations of other people. By engaging in this action, they developed an empathy for the lived experiences of others.

This research into lived experiences of others led the illustrators to research mental health services, the implications of drug use and dependency, and homelessness. By researching beyond their own personal experiences, they engaged in complex critical thinking and learnt how to visually interpret another human's lived experience (Wolk, 2007, p.121). The illustrators' own social and creative comfort zones were challenged through a process of sketching and further group discussions (Sattler, 2010, p.213) on the lived experience and implications of stigma. By engaging in this way, the illustrators learnt to form their own authentic social commentary voice, and created powerful illustrations and graphic novellas. Student J describes this process, for an illustrator, as 'a really natural thing to do to help tell somebody's story, because a single image could tell a story but doing a graphic novel helped get more depth into it' (Creative Fuse North East, 2018).

## Conclusion

This paper has used two illustrations as case studies on facilitating empathy through illustration to counter the *othering* of *others* in society. For the act of politically *othering* to be successful, each of US has to make a decision to stigmatise other humans. Once we go down that road, we have to disassociate that person or group of people as THEM, because of course none of US could ever be like THEM (see Table 1:14).

The case studies have utilised a Pragmatic philosophical model through a constructivist analysis using the illustrations created, observations from group crits, documentary video and the students' own written rationales. Using such a constructivist analysis, this paper provides 'a rich holistic description that illuminates one's understanding' (Merriam, 1998) of how illustration can be used to effectively counter the *othering* of *others* in society through a political act of *proposing* (Sims, 2016). In doing so, society's weakest voices were visually amplified. Fulfilling Lives, the client in the graphic novel project, is currently still using the illustrators' work in its outreach work to challenge stigma. The student illustrators, through a constructivist pedagogy focused on collectively bearing witness to complex lived experiences that were not their own, found their own critical reasoning and empathy. This empathy was then inherent in how they visually communicated a snapshot of another's lived experience.

In Student M's Josh Cooper strip (see Fig. 6), his own cameo appearance in Josh's story as a disinterested bystander, stares out of the page at the reader. This stare breaks the narrative *fourth wall* to remind us that we are actually in this society, and if we lose the empathy through fear (or hate) of others, we normalise dehumanisation. *Populists* around the world are now circling our democracies (like Student M's flying bird in his final Freedom City illustration, see Fig. 5) for opportunities to swoop and split society to secure power for their Far Right agendas.

Like the young Josh Cooper contemplating his next move, we as visual communicators have some hard thinking to do. Do we want to facilitate *populist* agendas as in the Breaking Point poster or the EU xenophobic graphical meme? Or do we stand with our fellow humans to resist and counter *othering* through our actions and outcomes within Visual Communication Design?

¡No pasarán!

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Re-  
contextualising  
Illustration to  
Inform Sexual  
Consent –  
#JustSoYou-  
Know

Dave Wood

Keywords

Illustration

Rape crisis

Sexual consent

Re-contextuali-  
sation

Steering group

Information pack



This paper will discuss two illustration projects that helped Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland (RCTN) expand their outreach across the North East of England<sup>1</sup>. These were *Hope Solidarity Liberation*, 2017, and *#JustSoYouKnow*, 2018, which ran consecutively over 12 months with second year illustration students. The first project was to produce illustrations to help RCTN to fundraise. RCTN ran this as a competition challenge to the students, with the winning illustrator's work being made into tote bags, mugs, and other merchandise. All the participating illustrators were rewarded with a gallery exhibition where the students could sell their work, and raise additional funds for RCTN. The second project called *#JustSoYouKnow* re-contextualised some of the illustrations from the merchandise competition into a new campaign to aid RCTN's outreach work. The aim of this second project was to counter young people's misunderstanding of sexual consent, and to challenge prevalent myths about what constitutes rape. The illustration project lead chaired an interdisciplinary steering group, to advise RCTN on re-contextualising the illustrations as the core for a new RCTN information pack. This steering group's interdisciplinary team, to help develop the information pack, came from design, illustration, law, forensic science and social science. Through the collegial alliance in the steering group, many new perspectives were discussed that enhanced the visual communication of the sexual consent information cards. This paper will outline how the same sets of illustrations worked across two different contexts, to positively impact on the visual communication of two different RCTN messages in support of women. Throughout these two projects, the illustrators learnt how their skills as visual communicators could be positively employed, and how a re-contextualisation of purpose opened up new communicational situations (Frascara, 2004, p.13) for their illustrations within real-world social issues.

## 01 Introduction and Background

Professor Jorge Frascara argues that visual communication outcomes – designs and illustrations – are ‘fundamentally about performance’ (Frascara, 2004, p.12). The aesthetics within visual communication outcomes are the hooks to grab and retain attention, to allow the audience to understand the intended message being visually communicated. As facilitators for visually communicating intended messages, graphic designers and illustrators operate from a ‘perspective of proximity’, as they craft the visual solution, while their client operates from a ‘perspective of intention.’ What completes this triadic relationship is the intended audience, who interprets the intended message from a ‘perspective of reception’ (Bergström, 2008, pp.32-33). Obviously, to successfully achieve this reception of a visually communicated message, every Visual Communication Design output relies on semiotics to connect the audience with the message.

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1 Acknowledgements: We wish to thank the following people and organisations who have made this project successful: Jacqui Hall and Sue Pearce from RCTN; Laura Rothwell, Director at CRYSTLSD; The European Regional Development Fund and the Creative Fuse team (Dr Elena Gorman and Dr Kate Lampitt Adey); our interdisciplinary steering group (Dr Ruth Lewis, Dr Brian Brewis, Sophie Carr and Josh Aitken); Rashida Davison, Director of The Globe Gallery; and Roots and Wings.

From a Pragmatic philosophical position taken from John Dewey (1980), the aesthetic hook is not only a cognitive thing, but it is also emotionally embodied, engaged with, and experienced by, the viewer. It can be argued that aesthetics is 'instrumentally valuable *and* satisfying in itself' (Shusterman, 1991, p.9). Pragmatically, the instrumentality of aesthetics 'is connected to experiential quality and value' (Petersen et al., 2004, p.271), and it is not predefined but emergent through its reception by an audience. To do this, the design and/or illustration 'must be strong enough to emerge clearly from its context. This is done through elements of form and content', and its content 'has to be relevant to the interests of the viewer' (Frascara, 2004, p.58). Frascara reminds us that 'looking is not a passive act. We do not look in order to see; we look to understand, and to find what we want. Signification and relevance are major determinants for calling attention' (ibid.).

This paper builds on this thesis of the aesthetic power within visual communication, to discuss how, in two illustration projects, this was enacted to help support Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland (RCTN) with two different intended messages. As part of RCTN's 40th anniversary year, they collaborated with the illustration pathway of the BA (Hons) Graphic Design degree to use illustration to help RCTN with their aim to challenge rape culture. Rape culture can be defined as:

A complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself.' (Buchwald, E., Roth, M. and Fletcher, P.R., 1994, p.xi).

The subject of rape culture was a prominent issue that needed addressing in society, especially amongst young people and their understanding of sexual consent. RCTN, like many similar rape support centres, have limited financial resources to cover all their outreach work. The two illustration projects that will soon be discussed focused on one set of illustrations produced for one intended message, which were then re-contextualised into a second use with a different intended message. In both cases, the illustrations' aesthetic power to attract and retain attention performed in two different ways. The two projects were *Hope Solidarity Liberation* (2017), and *#JustSoYouKnow* (2018). This paper will first outline, as the client, RCTN's intentions first for fundraising merchandise illustrations to help them towards their £40,000 target in 2018, and then, with the securing of funding from an ERDF Creative Fuse grant, their new intention to use the same illustrations to help RCTN's outreach work with young adults. Each project was examined, by considering how the illustrators' and designers' proximity to the content was re-contextualised with a new message for a different audience's reception. An interdisciplinary steering group, formed from illustration and graphic design, social science, applied science, and law, facilitated this re-contextualisation of illustrations from fundraising merchandise to information cards on sexual consent.

To find ways to visually engage a broader audience through illustrated merchandise, without focusing on any reference to acts of sexual violence.

## **02 Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland**

RCTN is ‘the longest established Rape Crisis Support Service in the UK’, having been operating since 1978 in England’ North East (RCTN, 2017). In September 2017, RCTN’s Co-CEO Sue Pearce launched an exclusive illustration competition with the new second year illustration students on BA (Hons) Graphic Design degree at Northumbria University. RCTN’s advisory creative communications team at Crystalsd brokered this project. The project was integrated as a live brief, directly into a Contextualisation and Interpretation module, by the illustration project lead.

RCTN has helped women and girls who contact them, ‘who identify as Lesbian, Bi, Trans and/or Questioning; Black, Minority Ethnic and Refugee women; and disabled women’ (RCTN, no date). RCTN were contacted in 2017–18 by 667 people who had experienced sexual violence (RCTN, 2019). They wanted to use illustration as a means

to engage with a mass audience beyond the women they help. They wanted illustration to raise much-needed funds in 2018 to help it continue its important work in the region. The significance of 2018 was that it was RCTN's 40th anniversary year, and the Chair of RCTN's Trustees, Sue Griffiths, would be launching an initiative in January 2018 'to raise £40k during our 40th year of campaign' (RCTN, 2019, p.3). As a charity, RCTN is reliant on grants and fundraising, and it had limited financial resources. Without new funding streams, its work to support 'the emotional, psychological and/or physical distress of women and girls who have experienced sexual violence' (RCTN, 2017) would be curtailed. Its outreach work aims 'to educate the public in the nature of sexual violence and its impact' (RCTN, 2017), but the illustrated merchandise was not directly tasked with this aim.

RCTN needed new ways to fundraise, so RCTN challenged the illustrators to create new illustrated fundraising merchandise for its year-long fundraising event in 2018. The challenge for the student illustrators was to find ways to visually engage a broader audience through illustrated merchandise, without focusing on any reference to acts of sexual violence. While RCTN's objective focuses on responding to the extent of physical and sexual violence on women over the age of 13, its merchandise had to address a different need and audience. The merchandise illustrations were to focus on the positive messages of hope, solidarity and liberation. These were three keywords that the women who RCTN had helped had used to describe the support they gained.

Each illustrator was tasked to create a set of six illustrations interpreting these keywords. Only one illustrator's work would be selected in the competition to become printed merchandise, but all the eligible students' work would be exhibited in a gallery. In the next section, the *Hope Solidarity Liberation* illustrated merchandise project will be outlined, before the re-contextualisation of the illustrations will be examined in the second project. Two immediate impacts from this collaboration between RCTN and the illustrators were important to achieve. The first was that the use of illustration would clearly benefit RCTN by helping it to continue its outreach work. The second was that the student illustrators taking part would gain valuable professional development as illustrators. The illustration project lead ensured that this would be through direct contact with RCTN as their client, and the wider opportunities for the illustrators to monetise their illustration skills, such as the gallery exhibition.

### **03 Hope Solidarity Liberation Illustrated Merchandise Project**

The positive impact of illustration to draw people into a new 'communicational situation' (Frascara, 2004, p.13) rests in the power of the aesthetic. Frascara describes three functions of a visual communication outcome that are essential. First, it needs to aesthetically attract audience attention. Second, it needs the aesthetics to retain that attention. Third, it needs to aesthetically communicate its intended message. But aesthetics 'should never become a distraction' (Frascara, 2004, p.85). Visual Communication Design as a design discipline (comprising of graphic design and illustration), has the power to ignore or even belittle the needs of human beings, if its sole purpose is to service the production and consumption of a capitalist society. Thankfully, this is not always true and visual communication design can be neutral. The intent for the commission of a designer or illustrator is what drives the creative outputs that they produce.

In this regard, the illustrators entered the *Hope Solidarity Liberation* project with a sense of responsibility to the aesthetic responses in their illustrations, to address their client RCTN, and to the wider general public needs as RCTN's target audience.

One of the illustrators found working for RCTN as her client both daunting and a big responsibility, when tasked with interpreting the three important RCTN keywords of hope, solidarity, and liberation. The illustrator as a visual communicator is dependent on the success of their illustrations semiotically communicating the required messages to the intended audience, through the careful crafting of the aesthetic to hook their attention. The successful impact of the illustration or design is dependent on the attitudes, behaviour and knowledge of the audience. The audience's reception is socially constructed and the intended meaning is drawn 'from the network of social interactions' (Dourish, 2004, p.99) that the audience have previously experienced, and which inform their world views.

With this in mind, RCTN briefed the illustrators to avoid the literal and the obvious connection to rape and sexual violence. RCTN wanted to see the illustrators' unique, creative, positive interpretations of the three keywords hope, solidarity and liberation. RCTN needed merchandise illustrations that would be aesthetically striking, liberating, and desirable to the merchandise-purchasing general public. The illustration cohort taking part comprised of 10 students, three of whom were international students from South Korea, Indonesia, and Taiwan. They had the freedom to choose the type of merchandise they wished to design for, from the following categories: a) greetings cards, postcards, stationery sets, art prints; b) t-shirts, scarves, tote bags; and c) ceramics, cups, plates, mugs. The illustrators approached this brief in a variety of ways (see Fig. 1) from the abstract to the figurative, and from the spiritual to the metaphorical.

Three illustrators chose to illustrate cards and art prints (a), five illustrators chose to illustrate for t-shirts, tote bags and scarves (b), and two illustrators chose to illustrate on mugs, cups and dishes (c). None of the illustrators had any prior experience of working in these media. So, through the modular tutorial and group crit support, the illustrators' understanding of how the technical requirements and limitations of their chosen medium affected the development of their illustration solutions grew. Some of the issues that they needed to address, such as materiality, caused the most reflection in the cohort. The concepts of printing on fabrics, and the concave and convex surface areas of ceramics, were real-world requirements and limitations. The illustrators' own experimentations around these issues led them to some exciting illustration solutions.

Two illustrators focused on a figurative approach within their six illustrations for t-shirts and greetings cards, creating visual narratives of the re-empowerment and recovery of a young woman in only six illustrations. In a similar way, another illustrator from Seoul employed the shapes and functionality of cups and saucers to tell the story of another young woman's reconnection with her social world. She used a series of interconnecting circular journeys around the rims of stacked dishes (and the outside of cups) to build her illustrated narrative. One illustrator who also chose to illustrate for ceramic merchandise, took a hybrid figurative/abstract approach by choosing a silhouette of a flying figure soaring above the world, using a limited but effective colour palette. Another, also using a silhouette approach, illustrated dance and bodily movement in response to the three keywords. She intended these to be on tote bags, so that the illustrated dancer's movement would be accentuated by the fabric as the tote bag was carried.

One Indonesian illustrator and another from Taiwan used their own cultural references when making a set of illustrated art prints. A traditional Indonesian women's dance called Bedhaya Ketawang was re-interpreted to contextualise the keywords in a more symbolic and abstract way. The Taiwanese illustrator focused on

aspects of spirit as a way to interpret the keywords. In doing so, she created beautifully haunting, non-figurative illustrations that utilised colour and environments to evoke the sense of strong spirit. Finally, one student illustrator pushed himself further into a complete use of abstraction to express hope, solidarity, and liberation as illustrations. He focused on t-shirts and scarves, and experimented with ink splats and geometric shapes to express the personal feelings and journeys to recovery from sexual assault through a raw energy of mark-making.

The pedagogical approach to this live brief was two-fold. Firstly, as a merchandise project RCTN's Co-CEO came in as a client to set the design problem in its context. Then over 12 weeks the student illustrators interpreted the three keywords into their set of six illustrations, targeted to the merchandise options they had chosen. Secondly, at a client presentation in December 2017, RCTN chose the winning illustrations for Crystalsd to produce into the merchandise. The RCTN team, comprised of the joint CEO and junior members from across the charity, selected a short list of three illustrators. Part of their criteria focused on the financial implications of the illustrators' chosen material e.g. ceramics, silk scarves, t-shirts, etc. Although aesthetically all the student submissions were strong, the financial costs were something that RCTN had to factor into their final selection. The winning student's illustrations featured a young woman over six illustrations, in a loose narrative of her story of regaining her liberation from sexual violence, visually communicated through her body language. This range of designs provided RCTN with images to use on mugs, tote bags and cards, and it captured the journey of the women who RCTN help – the women who describe this help as a journey of *Hope Solidarity Liberation*.

All the participating student illustrators were invited by RCTN in October 2018 to exhibit their work at the Globe Gallery in Newcastle (see Fig. 2). At this exhibition, this illustrated merchandise was launched, and most of the students also sold original art and prints, raising £270 in commission towards RCTN's £40k 2018 fundraiser. This satisfied the illustration pathway's objectives for the illustrators' professional development. At this exhibition, the designed outcome of the second collaboration with RCTN was also launched. During the 12 weeks of the *Hope Solidarity Liberation* competition, no one had foreseen that these illustrations would later, in 2018, be re-contextualised into a new second-use context. This second rights use of the illustrations will be examined later in this paper, but first the *#JustSoYouKnow* project will be explored.

#### **04 #JustSoYouKnow Sexual Consent Information Pack**

As the *Hope Solidarity Liberation* project was coming to its conclusion in December 2017, the illustration pathway project lead secured a Creative Fuse North grant of £10k from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). This grant money was to fund two illustration projects working directly with local organisations. One £5k project was already in preparation, so RCTN were asked in January 2018 if they would like to continue their collaboration in a new project. This project would follow the same model as the first Creative Fuse North project already being run, and would be comprised of a targeted illustrated publication, supported by the use of the illustrations in a social media campaign.

Working with Jacqui Hall from RCTN, the creative intention of this new collaboration was to repurpose the visual language from some of the *Hope Solidarity Liberation* illustrations into a new context. This new context would utilise the aesthetic power of the illustrations to now help dispel rape myths and to inform young adults

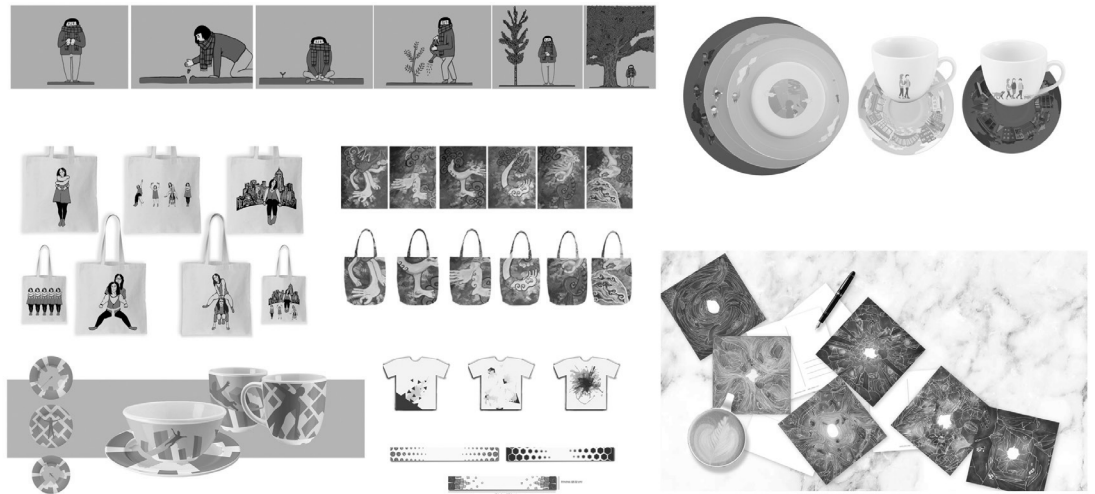


Figure 1: A selection of the Hope Solidarity Liberation merchandise illustrations.



Figure 2: The Response Exhibition at the Globe Gallery, Newcastle (October 2018).

on sexual consent. This approach allowed the illustration pathway team to explore with the students how second rights use of their illustrations can professionally benefit them. Also, a re-contextualised second use of the illustrations they had just created meant that while still studying on their degree they would also benefit from a published outcome that had a real-world impact. RCTN had suggested that the myths surrounding rape were unhelpful when clarifying issues of sexual consent for young male and female adults. In the UK rape is defined as follows:

- (1) A person (A) commits an offence if –
  - (a) He intentionally penetrates the vagina, anus or mouth of another person (B) with his penis,

- (b) B does not consent to the penetration, and
- (c) A does not reasonably believe that B consents.

(2) Whether a belief is reasonable is to be determined having regard to all the circumstances, including any steps A has taken to ascertain whether B consents. (Sexual Offences Act 2003).

The six rape myths that were important to dispel (Lewis, 2018a) by informing young adults about sexual consent were:

1. Most rapes are committed by strangers;
2. Once a man is sexually aroused, he can't control himself;
3. If the victim has been drinking, she is partly responsible;
4. Victims who have been sexually assaulted are likely to be hysterical, very upset;
5. False allegations of sexual assault are very common;
6. Women like men to be active in pursuing them.

Questions about the difficulty of women and young girls' disclosure of an assault, and thus the naming of the experience as sexual violence, were relevant to answer in this new design project (Lewis, 2018a). The themes for the new illustration project began to develop from conversations with RCTN about rape facts versus myths. But, in order to decide what the re-contextualised illustrations would be visually communicating in the design of a new RCTN publication/social media campaign, further guidance would be needed.

In a second rights use context, the original *Hope Solidarity Liberation* illustrations would be working hard in a new communicational situation, and not all the illustrations produced would be usable. The illustrations that would eventually be selected would have to quickly attract and retain the attention of a different audience, in order for the new information to be effectively visually communicated. To ensure the effectiveness of this new reception from illustrations produced for fundraising, the illustration project lead formed a new interdisciplinary steering group of experts to advise on the new intended message.

The ERDF Creative Fuse grant tendering process in December 2017 had engaged a Newcastle-based design company, Roots and Wings. With this design team on board, the new RCTN *#JustSoYouKnow* project began in April 2018. Through regular steering group meetings, the discussion on rape myths and rape culture focused on issues of informed sexual consent for young adults, and RCTN's requirements for the information pack were outlined (Hall, 2018b). *#JustSoYouKnow* would be an information pack aimed at young women and men aged 16-21, written in an authentic tone of voice, and made freely available. The authentic written tone and the corresponding illustration would need to attract and retain the audience's attention. Eight illustrators' work, from the original cohort of 10, was eligible to be re-contextualised in this new project. This provided the steering group and the design team with 48 illustrations from which to select the eight most relevant images to inform young people on sexual consent.

Over the course of the project, the decision was made to move from the production of a printed book, to the creation of a printed set of information cards. This new *#JustSoYouKnow* printed pack of information cards (see Fig. 3) would need to



bring the myths/scenarios/situations alive to young adults, without seeming to preach. The text used on the cards to address the sexual pressures young people face around making consensual sexual decisions would be punchy, as it needed to convey several parallel points of relevant information. RCTN decided that the written information would challenge perceptions of coercion versus consent, and address issues of self-blame, the stigma in reporting rape and sexual assaults, toxic masculinity and sexual entitlement, and to educate against the normalisation of online social media abuse. The card information would also need to conclude with a “...and the law says this” statement, and point the readers to RCTN’s support services. The Creative Fuse grant funded a print run of 2000 packs.

This paper’s next two sections will examine how the steering group pooled research and expertise, and then guided RCTN to select the best illustrations to use for the most effective design outcome.

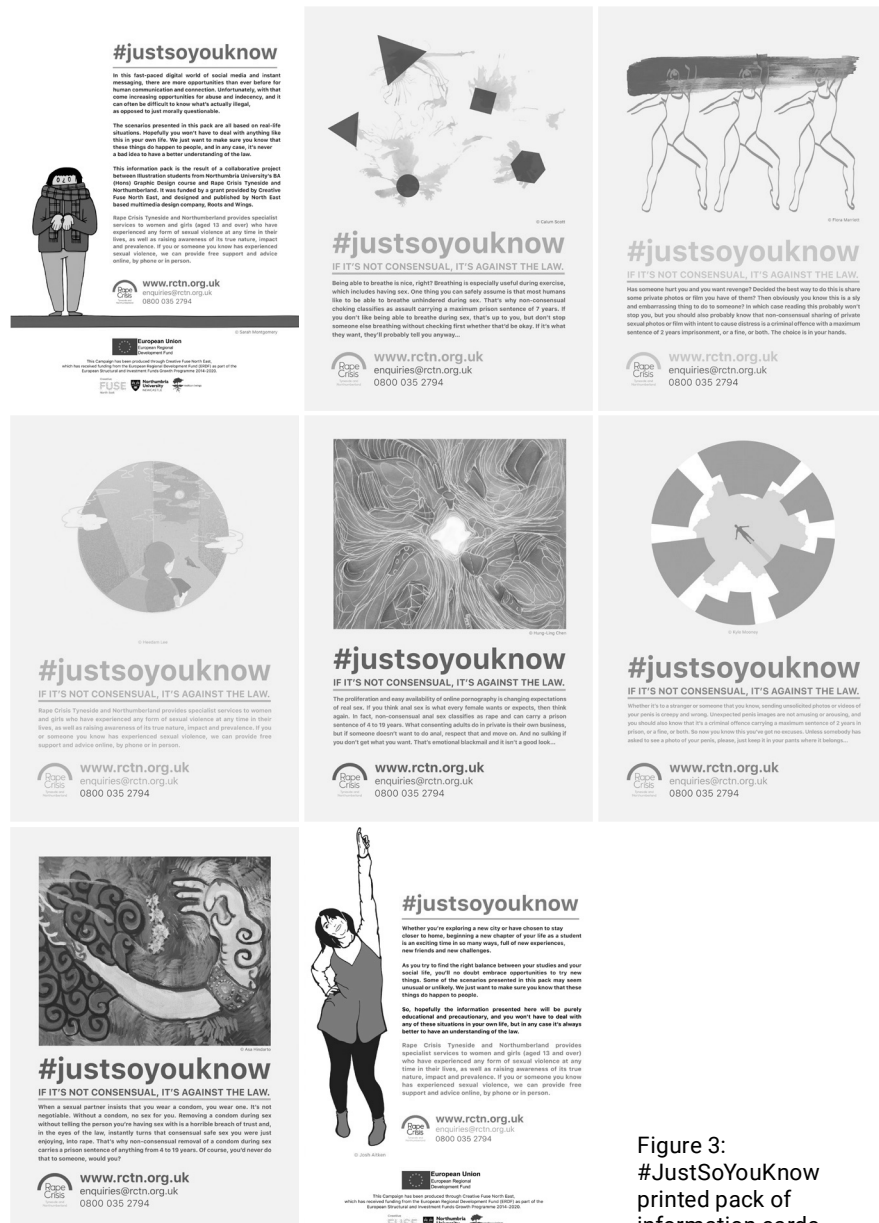


Figure 3: #JustSoYouKnow printed pack of information cards.

## 05 The Steering Group Research Alliance

While the *Hope Solidarity Liberation* project was well underway at the tail end of 2017, the illustration project lead began to prepare for the new RCTN 2018 Creative Fuse project. He knew from RCTN that they were also involved in working with another academic in Northumbria University, and although it was not a prerequisite of the ERDF funding, the illustration lead thought it would be a good collegial move to involve other academic experts in this new RCTN illustration project. As a result, at the end of November 2017 he emailed potential colleagues across Northumbria University's faculties to see if he could set up a collegial alliance as a project steering group.

Through this action to drive new cultural discussions to support the development of the RCTN project, he secured the support of two colleagues to begin such a research alliance: an Associate Professor and Head of Subject for Sociology, International Development, and International Relations and Politics; and an Associate Head of Applied Sciences, Health and Life Sciences, who had previously been a senior Forensic Scientist leading Wetherby Forensic Science Service's sexual offences team. Both colleagues brought their research and experience to the illustration project steering group.

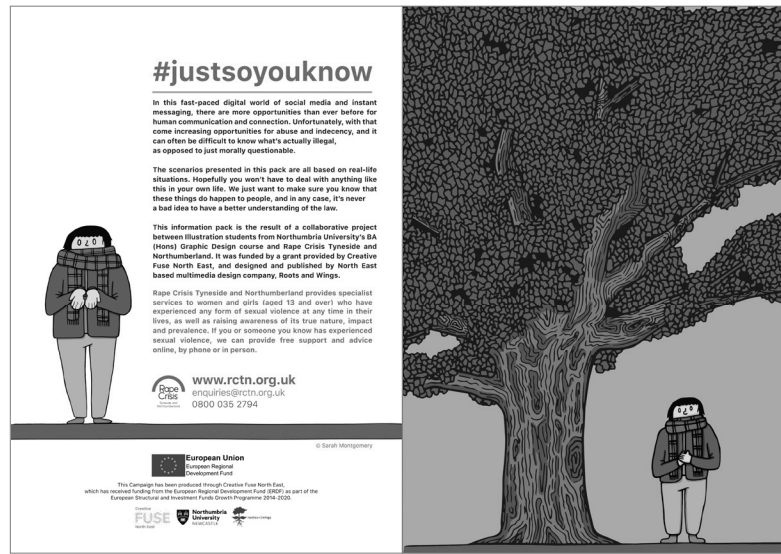
The first official meeting of the steering group wasn't until April 2018, when the *#JustSoYouKnow* project officially began. By this point, the steering group had grown in members. We had brought on board a colleague from the Northumbria School of Law, who could advise the project on the legal implications of sexual consent, and sexual assault. The design team from Roots and Wings, and a student representing the illustrators provided the creative side in the steering group.

Through this research alliance from Visual Communication Design, law, forensics and social sciences the *#JustSoYouKnow* project grew in scope and ambition. Originally the planning was for an illustrated book of some sort, plus the visual assets for an associated social media campaign. Over the course of three steering group meetings between April and June, the designed output gradually morphed into a pack of information cards. It was felt that the book idea would be too constrictive in its ability to connect with the young target audience. Separate cards would be more flexible as a printed format, as cards could be used individually.

Whether a book or an information pack, the central challenge to the design team and to the steering group was that the illustrators' work must be dominantly re-purposed into this new communicational situation. There would be eight out of the original 10 illustrators whose work must be used. The design team estimated that a maximum of 10 myths/scenarios/situations would financially be possible. Through careful planning, the steering group decided that this information pack would feature eight sexual consent scenarios.

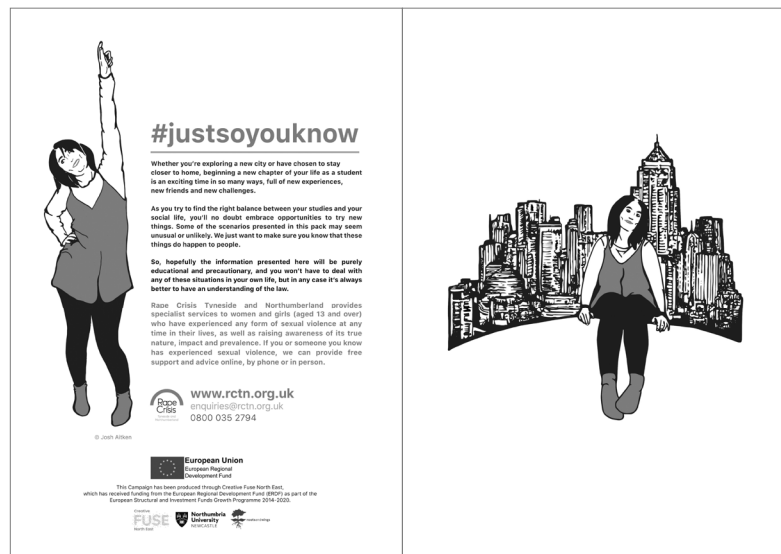
## 06 Re-contextualisation of Illustrations

RCTN identified the following six topics that young people currently have to navigate around sexual activity: *choking, anal sex, sexting, stealthing, date rape drugs, and revenge porn* (Hall, 2018a). There were eight illustrators whose work needed to be repurposed. RCTN thought it would be beneficial if Rape Crisis information had its own separate information card (Hall, 2018b). As the young adult target audience for the information pack may or may not be students, it was agreed that there should be two versions of the Rape Crisis card, one aimed at students, and one at non-students (see Fig. 4).



Front

Reverse



Front

Reverse

Figure 4: Two different female characters were selected from the eight students' work to begin and end the information pack. One female character was chosen as the pack's first card (left) as the character's body language is a bit nervous in stance, which was a good way to attract and retain a new young reader; the second young woman's body language (right) suggested a confident calm persona as the final card.

This decision brought the number of cards in the pack to eight, which meant one illustrator per card. As each card featured one sexual consent topic, the design team were challenged to select from each students' set of six merchandise illustrations one image that would be the aesthetic hook for the topic of each card. In regard to the two Rape Crisis information cards, the requirement would be to carefully select the illustrator/illustration to set the best tone for each variant audience. Added to this art directing from the design team, the steering group decided the cards would be double-sided, so more targeted information could be contained.

The illustration would be featured on the main information side of the card (see Fig. 3), and on the reverse would be a screenshot<sup>2</sup> of a social media conversation about the featured sexual consent topic. This conversation would be either an existing (but anonymised) actual social media conversation, or a fictionalised version of conversations that RCTNs clients have reported. The language used would be carefully copywritten to contain subtle advice on consent without sounding *preachy* to the young adults. The case was made that the cards would not and could not provide ‘all the answers’ to sexual consent (Hall, 2018b), or make it feel emotionally ‘easy’ for the reader to read (Lewis, 2018b) i.e. the young audience would need to take the subjects seriously.

As the audience’s personal understanding of each topic would emerge from the social media conversations on the reverse, the chosen illustration would not only have to aesthetically attract and retain the reader’s attention but would also have to offer a contrast to the heavier subject detail from the conversation screenshot overleaf. Each card was also colour-coded with a different feature colour to differentiate each topic. All the contextual information about the sexual consent topic was on the illustration side of each card. This included the hashtag, an overview of the card’s topic (copywritten for the young adult reader), RCTN support contact information, and a statement of legality of the featured actions. It was important for educational purposes that this statement of legality was included, and crucial for young men and women to be made aware of the legality of their sexual intent and consent.

With each card’s design visually communicating a separate sexual consent topic, it should all holistically work to facilitate a ‘reasonable belief in consent’ in the young people (Brewis, 2018). The two Rape Crisis information cards would also act as bookends to the separate cards in the pack. On each card’s reverse the feature illustration was used as a full-page image without any text or logo (see Fig. 4).

Once the design of the cards was underway, a decision had to be made about how to contain the cards. The final decision was a budgetary decision in favour of a simple belly band and sticker to seal the pack. The hashtag *#JustSoYouKnow* and RCTN’s details were to be prominently featured on the band. One particular illustration set’s character was selected by the design team to become the *female face* of the pack. This worked well, as when the cards were all collated with the two Rape Crisis information cards placed as bookends, the sticker sealing the belly band naturally worked with the underlying card to show the full illustration of the young woman (see Fig. 5).



Figure 5: The stickers to seal the pack’s belly band featuring the young female character.

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2 This screenshot would be a faux screenshot created by the designers in the style of Facebook, Twitter, etc.

Future visual communication design research could examine how first rights, and then subsequent rights usage of existing illustration(s) can help students not just understand the commercial value of their creative outcomes, but also how far the illustrators' images have the power to visually communicate new meanings when the context is changed by second rights use.

## 07 Positive Impacts and Conclusion

Working with RCTN on two different projects, the student illustrators learnt how one of their illustrations can positively visually communicate two different RCTN messages by changing its context. In the first module-based *Hope Solidarity Liberation* project, the illustrators worked hard on crafting the visual communication of each of their six merchandise illustrations. They understood through research and experimentation how their illustrations would aesthetically attract the general public to purchase the merchandise. This was difficult for them to learn, as many false premises had to first be worked through in tutorials and group crits, for the illustrators to feel confident in their final outcomes.

With the *#JustSoYouKnow* project, the illustrators were exposed in a positive way to the benefits of second rights usage of their existing illustrations. While this project's scope did not include directly teaching the new illustrators to write contractual agreements, it did show them the benefits of retaining the copyright in their illustrations through licensing usage. Illustration agency Handsome Frank and the Association of Illustrators advises that,

Retaining the rights to an image is incredibly important for an illustrator, because over time it opens a potentially huge secondary revenue stream for them [...] you have a way of monetising your previous work without having to create new images (Handsome Frank, 2018).

It was within this professional development scenario that the illustrators' eight pack illustrations were selected and used in a new context to attract and inform young adults on issues of sexual consent. The eight illustrators were centred within the decision-making on the visual communication of the pack cards, with a representative of the student illustrators on the steering group, and the illustration project lead chairing it. This resulted in the use of strong and confident illustrations of young women in the information card packs (see Figs. 4 and 5). Also, some of the illustrators helped RCTN to compile the cards into the packs. In volunteering at the end of the project, they found 'an increased appreciation for the work' which they had created to help RCTN the previous year (Montgomery, 2019). In their final academic year in 2018, all the student illustrators received copies of the compiled *#JustSoYouKnow* information packs for their portfolios.

The involvement of student illustrators in live projects helps them to experience first-hand how to perform within a professional commission, while remaining within the safe environment of continuing study on a degree. The students' collaboration with RCTN over two projects, raised new research questions. Future visual communication design research could examine how first rights, and then subsequent rights usage of existing illustration(s) can help students not just understand the commercial value of their creative outcomes, but also how far the illustrators' images have the power to visually communicate new meanings when the context is changed by second rights use.

These two RCTN projects, *Hope Solidarity Liberation* and *#JustSoYouKnow*, demonstrated how illustration could be used to positively impact on society, to help to counter misdirection and falsehoods around sexual consent. At the private view of the Response illustration exhibition at Newcastle's The Globe Gallery in October

2018, most of the illustrators benefited from selling the framed originals and prints. By raising revenue from their work for themselves they gained crucial commercial validation as illustrators. These sales also benefited RCTN by generating a further £270 in commission towards their 2018 £40k fundraising campaign, and by soft launching *#JustSoYouKnow* to an invited audience. One of RCTN's aims was 'to educate the public in the nature of sexual violence and its impact' (RCTN, 2017). The re-purposing of illustrations created for a RCTN fundraising drive, certainly aided in providing young adults with authentic information on sexual consent. By January 2019, RCTN were enquiring about a second print run, as supporters were asking for more information packs – *#JustSoYouKnow*.

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# ***WHAT ARE THE POLITICS OF YOUR DESIGN AND WHAT IS THE DESIGN OF YOUR POLITICS?***

Published by  
University of Plymouth  
Press 2020

