USING FINE ARTS METHODS IN DESIGN EDUCATION TO ADVANCE GRAPHIC DESIGN AS A FORM OF RESEARCH AND INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT:

I don't know what the question will be
I don't know what the answer will be
That's what gets me in the studio each day
        John Renoylds (New Zealand Painter)

An increasing number of graphic designers are regularly involved in experimental, self-generated, non-client work. What they seem to have in common is a critically reflective approach to their practice. Grounded in current teaching practice this paper explores how conceptualising graphic design as a form of research and inquiry reflects this contemporary condition. I suggest that the use of Fine Arts methods is an effective way to develop a research orientation to the study of graphic design. The Fine Arts have a long tradition of employing strategies for asking critical questions through images and objects that design can utilise to adopt a more speculative and questioning approach to it's practice. I discuss some examples that I have used in my own design teaching, drawn from the long and rich history of art theory and practice.

INTRODUCTION

What is design education for? To teach students how to think. Not what to think, but how to think. A curriculum rich in thinking skills, in my mind, is the single most important consideration for design education. In this paper I reflect on an approach to design teaching built on two main ideas: 1) that

conceptualising graphic design as a form of research and inquiry can reflect the contemporary condition of the field, and open up new ways of thinking for graphic designers; 2) that using Fine Arts methods to approach design as a form of research and inquiry develops in students a critically reflective disposition in relation to their subject, vital for practitioners to operate a level of innovation in the field.

This paper uses phenomenological methods to interpret actual teaching and learning experiences. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual. It allows the researcher to engage in investigating their own experience (Marton & Booth, 1997). The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to identify phenomena
through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation. In the current work this translates into using observation and reflection to analyse teaching methods in order to better understand their effects on student learning.

The concepts of 'contextual action research' and 'reflective practice' are used as part of the phenomenological method. Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practice is concerned with an individual's own reflection on his/her professional practice. Action research (an inquiry into teaching practice carried out within the context of an educational setting), together with reflective practice (an approach adopted by practitioners wishing to improve understanding of their practice), is an approach widely adopted in educational research by teacher-researchers.

In this instance I draw on my own teaching experiences and reflections to unpack what the use of Fine Arts methods can offer to graphic design education. I do this mindful of the changing context of the field, and offer a conceptualisation that utilises research processes and the habitual reflection it engenders, as a way to extend design teaching and learning.

The first part of the paper describes the context in which contemporary designers work. The next section introduces a way of conceptualising graphic design practice that extends it beyond a traditional problem-solving, client-driven model and into a research and inquiry mode that makes use of an

extended range of methods, in particular, Fine Arts methods. I also discuss ways in which principles of teaching and learning theory are linked to this approach. The final section provides an account of student project work recently completed under this teaching model.

CONTEXT

Unlike the Fine Arts, graphic design has developed without a great deal of critical or historical reflection. Still a relatively young field, it lacks the established history of theory and criticism that the Fine Arts enjoys. Graphic design has historically been pre-occupied with serving the design industry, and been much less concerned with critically challenging its own nature and purpose. However, there has always been, and continues to be, some designers that hold a more critical disposition in relation to their discipline, and who work with a more research-oriented approach to their practice.

Critically engaged design practitioners seek to question the conventions embedded in contemporary design culture, contributing to a history of experimental practice in and through design. Increasingly, designers are describing what they do as research, inquiry, and simply 'work'. They talk about their *practice* as designers, rather than simply talking about end products. They draw on a range of sources and approaches from within, as well as outside of the design field, and are often uncomfortable with disciplinary splits to describe what they do. For example, in an interview for Print magazine Steven Heller asks UK designer/artist Daniel Eatock about his split practice. Eatock explains: "My art is my design and my design is my art" (Heller, 2008:44) Eactock considers the term 'graphic design' to be "an umbrella for many things" (Heller, 2008:44).

London based designer Paul Elliman, who prefers to call himself a designer in order to "get on with the kind of work I want to get on with" (Sfligiotti, 2011:124), experiments with technology, language, typography and the human voice as part of his design practice. Like Eatock who seeks alignments, paradoxes, chance circumstance, loops, impossibilities and wit encountered in everyday life, Elliman too has an interest in the everyday, turning ordinary objects into letters for his project 'Found Font' (aka Bits).

The conceptual approach taken by both these designers, based in the art of observation and connection, demonstrates how contemporary designers are using a wider range of processes and approaches to inform their practice, including methods more traditionally aligned with the Fine Arts.

The boundaries between art and design are continually shifting. There is a long history of debate on the similarities and differences between them, and in recent times a lot of talk of the ways they are converging. Well-regarded design critic Rick Poynor has observed the meeting of the two fields commenting recently that: "The distinction between the two disciplines [art and design] is becoming increasingly hard to locate" (Poynor, 2005:1). Poynor also cites Barbara Bloemink, curatorial director at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York, as observing this condition and predicting its future: "As we move forward through the twenty-first century, distinctions between design and art are likely to become increasingly difficult to define" (Poynor, 2005:1).

With regard to education, the most recent version of the UK subject benchmark statements for art & design make note of this convergence when describing the 'nature' of the subject: "The boundaries of art and design have become increasingly blurred, and many disciplines within the subject have become generic and interdisciplinary but less singularly focused" (QAA, 2008:4).

Cross-overs between art and design have a long history. Authors of a recent symposium that examined the different modalities that have been building up between art and design note significant historical parallels to current 'experimental' practices: "The phenomena of the conjunctions, encounters, interferences, overlappings, and even the confusing of art and design are not new. They have punctuated the phases of 'modern art': Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, Secession, Werkbund, De Stijl, Constructivism, the Bauhaus (Greff, 2007:6). Major trends in recent times that bridge the art-design divide include: labelled products by artists; designers producing limited edition pieces and even unique items, or creating installations; art borrowing from graphic design (e.g. work by the 'Superflex' art collective); and the development of speculative and/or experimental design.

Exhibitions, symposiums and conferences continue to examine relationships between art and design, and showcase contemporary forms of investigative, speculative and critically orientated design. To name just a few: 'On Purpose: Design Concepts', Arnolfini, UK, 2008, 'Forms of Inquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design', 2007; 'What If? Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design', Moderna Musset, Stockholm, 2000; 'Contemporary Art • Contemporary Design, Symposium', Geneva University of Art and Design, 2007.

Perhaps the most recent example is the design exhibition 'Graphic Design: Now in Production', at the Walker Art Center, in 2011. In the catalogue introduction to this exhibition, editors Andrew Blauvelt and Ellen Lupton note: "We have sought out innovative practices that are pushing the discourse of design in new directions, expanding the language of the field by creating new tools, strategies, vocabularies, and content" (Blauvelt & Lupton, 2011:10). This exhibition reflects the scale of change in graphic design the last two decades, expanding from a specialized profession to a broader, more pluralistic field that use the tools of graphic design for actioning ideas and doing things in the world.

Traditionally, graphic design has been seen as a problem solving activity, engaged primarily in a discussion of stylistic concerns. Adopting a research-driven approach, an increasing number of graphic designers today are questioning the definition and limits of the field. In an interview with Dutch design group 'Metahaven', they describe their interest in design as a tool to ask questions, taking it beyond a purely problem solving model and into a problem finding one. They place an emphasis on research as an operating mode, and utilise this approach as a way of taking design out of its more comfortable mode of critiquing details of visual form: "We think that research has the potential to bridge to other fields and in-between positions and take our discussion beyond the stylistic differences" (Ericson et al. 2009:251). In a similar way, graphic designer James Goggin (UK) approaches his work from a critical perspective. Goggin talks of his approach to design as a "critical engagement with context" (Ericson et al. 2009:35). A

critical eye on the systems and processes in which graphic design operates drive his practice-based research explorations.

As designers continue to expand the discipline they operate in, design education needs to be responsive to these changes. It should reflect the contemporary context of the discipline. University graduate profiles commonly state that students should have "an understanding and appreciation of current issues and debates in the fields of knowledge studied" (University of Auckland Graduate Profile).

While art and design may have different purposes, be judged by different criteria, and have different audiences, they also share many characteristics. Artists and designers use many of the same techniques, processes and methodologies in the creation of their work, and the fields share important conceptual characteristics. With regard to education, the subjects are often taught alongside each other, or even together, as in the case of my own University department. Many of the subject skills and understandings are shared across courses. For example, while noting the differences between the two subjects, the UK subject benchmark statements for art and design state that the subjects "share numerous defining qualities" (QAA, 2008:3). Descriptions of knowledge and understanding, and lists of attributes and skills are grouped together for both subjects.

Central to the teaching approach explored in this paper is the proposition that graphic design education can positively benefit from looking more closely at how it can utilise methods more traditionally aligned with the fine arts in order to 1) extend designers skills in *how* to think and 2) ensure education responds to the changing nature of the field, including the current expansion of contexts in which graphic designers are operating and the continual shifts in the boundaries between art and design.

CONCEPTUALISING GRAPHIC DESIGN AS A FORM OF INQUIRY AND RESEARCH

So how are we to respond through our teaching and curriculum to the complex, contemporary scene of graphic design practice? An orientation I have found to be productive is to conceptualise graphic design as a form of research and inquiry, rather than simply as a means of visual problem-solving. This can open up the practice of graphic design as a mode through which one can operate at a more experimental, explorative, critical level. Noble and Bestley (2005) introduce the idea that work done under the guise of experimental or explorative graphic design has opened the way for research methodologies to become a more active part of a designers' repertoire:

"In many instances these [speculative & experimental practices] offer new visual grammars and graphic forms and often focus on areas of graphic design previously constrained and under-examined by a singular, commercial definition of the discipline. This recent concentration upon the processes and methods involved in graphic design, the *how* and the *why* has allowed the area of research methodologies to take on a greater degree of significance to the subject" (Noble & Bestley, 2005:27).

When designers ask questions about their practice, research processes are engaged. Research is a generative process. It actively expands ideas, processes, and connections. It questions the limits of existing ideas; it demands a process of experimentation and critical reflection; it allows students to "elucidate underlying ideas, issues and theoretical perspectives, and to understand the context within which work is made" (Danvers, 2003:55). A research orientation to the subject recognises design as a deeply reflexive process, whose practice is its own research, and whose inquiry motivates its further practice.

Opening up the subject of design as a form of research and inquiry, a wider range of methods and approaches can be utilised by designers, including Fine Arts research methods, which I have found to be a particularly productive aspect of this model with regard to teaching design. Before I turn

to a detailed discussion of examples from my own teaching practice, a note about how this approach links with aspects of effective teaching and learning.

RESEARCH, REFLECTIVE PRACTICE & LEARNING THEORY

Practice-led research takes the nature of practice as its central focus, and seeks to add to our shared store of knowledge in a more general sense. It is usually carried out by practitioners at post-graduate levels of study. If we see one of the roles of undergraduate education as preparing students for future study, including research degrees, then we take on a responsibility to provide our students with experience in research.

Conceptualising graphic design as a form of research and inquiry engages students in the skills of reflection and criticality. Research problematizes seemingly acceptable situations and opens up space for reflection. Research processes and critically reflective practice go hand in hand. Reflecting on their practice, and the practice of graphic design generally (its methods, processes, nature and purpose), students raise questions that open up research processes.

Learning theorists have connected reflective practice with various desirable features of learning, including deep learning. Hinett (2002) describes the dual functions of reflective practice:

"Reflective practice, the term most commonly used in formal educational settings, can be seen as both a structure to aid critical thinking and improve existing understanding and a method for promoting autonomous and deep learning through enquiry" (Hinett, 2002:2)

The habitual reflection that research creates is also a skill that can be productively applied to other aspects of the learning journey. Reflection on our own learning (meta-learning) for instance, can help raise awareness of ourselves as learners, helping us to see how we can direct and make changes to our learning. Schön's (1983) concepts of 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action' also represent instances where the general skills of reflection can help learners to observe and make use of unexpected

situations during the development of work, or make sense of actions after the event and learn from experience.

Critical reflection is also central to Transformative Learning Theory, an adult education based theory. Mezirow (1991) states that "By far the most significant learning experience in adulthood involves critical self-reflection - reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting" (Mezirow, 1991). Facilitating an approach to learning based on a research orientation that encourages students to be critically reflective in relation to their field of study develops habits of reflective behaviour useful in a range of situations.

TEACHING EXAMPLES

Fine Arts methods offer a range of possibilities for extending thinking by designers. Some that I have used in my design teaching, drawn from the long and rich history of art theory and practice, include themes such as: 'Materiality', 'Systems & Seriality'; 'Chance, Appropriation, & Transformation', and 'The Readymade'. In this final section I offer examples of two methods that I have used with students to approach graphic design projects with a more open and inquiring perspective, based in conceptualising graphic design as a form of research and inquiry.

The degree course that I teach on (a Bachelor of Fine Arts) is an interdisciplinary art and design programme. During stage one of the degree, students are introduced to a range of disciplines including: painting, printmaking, sculpture, photography, graphic design, and time-based art. During stage two and three students are able to self-select projects offered within these discipline areas. Titled 'Fields of Practice' projects, these courses offer students the opportunity to explore a topic relevant to an area of contemporary art or design practice. I have been regularly involved in offering graphic design projects within this curriculum structure. The following examples draw on these teaching experiences.
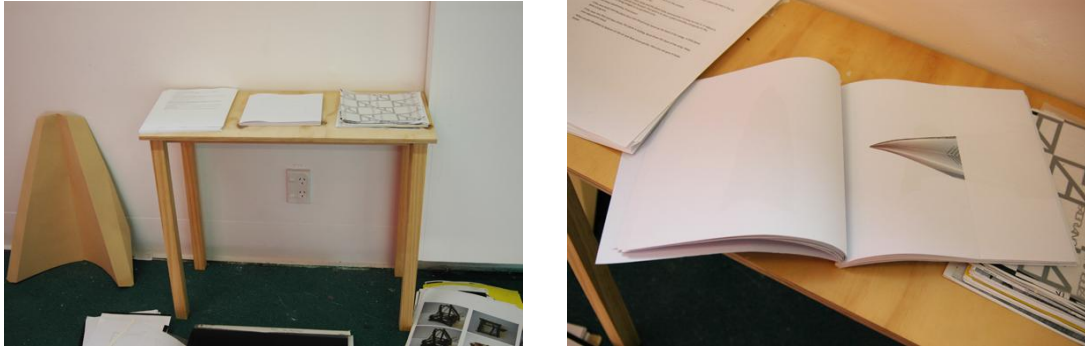
1.1 EXAMPLE 1: MATERIALITY

Figure 1 & 2: 'Origami Book', Ji Yoon Do, Studio 3, BFA Student

One of the major ways of thinking and making in art has been a concern with how art functions via its material qualities or its 'materiality'. Materiality in art can be described as a concern for the ways in which material qualities are sensed, interpreted and understood. These qualities may manifest as objects (as in the case of painting or sculpture), or as experience (as in video, sound or performance art). Surrealism, Dada and Cubist collage were all hugely influential in developing materialist imaginaries that we still inhabit today.

Using a Fine Arts research approach that involves interpretive looking at materials to ask 'what does the material itself propose, imply or evoke?' a third year student investigated origami in terms of its materials and the language of its making. The degree to which origami objects uniquely embody a sense of their own making was explored. The materiality of origami was considered to be "papers ability to enfold and unfold". The project began with interpreting the ability of paper folding to present simultaneous effects, "What from one side is unfolded is from the other side enfolded, and one can change and even invert the relationship by folding the paper one way or the other" (Student Ji Yoon Do).

Looking to works of art that are fundamentally established within their materiality, (for example, Eva Hesse's tactile forms that confront a viewer first through their materiality, and Dorothea Rockburnes' folded prints that explore and manipulate the *materiality* of paper), was significant to the development of this project. Similar strategies that call attention to the qualities of materials and the making process, and how these can create

meaning effects, were employed. The student was engaged in thinking not only about an appropriate shape and form that 'fits' content (immediate design concerns), but was also concerned with the inherent material qualities of that form, to create a design that refers to its own materiality, to its own physical dimension using folding, unfolding, cutting and perforation. This added an extra dimension to the learning experience. In the design of the final outcome, a book, the student was able to use this new understanding of materiality and consider the book first and foremost as a physical object, employing references to the materiality of the book itself in communicating meaning.

1.2 EXAMPLE 2: SYSTEMS & SERIALITY

Figure 3 & 4: 'Knitting Patterns', Studio 3, BFA Student

In 2012, I was involved in a 'Fields of Practice' design project titled: 'After Reasonable Research' (borrowed from an exhibition of the same name of artists' books and related material exploring the encyclopaedic form). Students were asked to create a printed publication from originally generated content. The final form of the publication was left quite open and could include poster(s), book(s), foldout items, charts, or any combination of these. The opening statements of the project brief were as follows:

"We construct the world and it's meaning through the systems of representation that we use. Many artists and designers have attempted to defy those conventions, to break the rules of various systems of representation, and to push at the definitions of representation… In this

project we will investigate the use of various existing graphic systems and how we can use them in new ways" (BFA Fields of Practice Studio Project: Design, Tara Winters, 2012).

To orient students to this challenge, the concept of 'system as medium' in art was used as a way to set up the project as a research inquiry, rather than, for example, asking students to design to pre-determined formats using existing forms of visual representation –"create a magazine layout using illustration and text" – for example.

The concept of system as medium has operated across different art-historical periods and across a diverse range of artistic practices. In particular, the use of linguistic and /or photographic means in place of paint or conventional art materials characterises the work of many of the artists who, in the latter half of the 1960's, rejected the representational methods of the past (Rorimer, 2001:155). The internal logic of various linguistic, cartographic, photographic and numerical sequences and serial systems have been used by artists such as Hanne Darboven, On Kawara, Mel Bochner, and Sol le Witt to act as primary visual elements and organising principles. Many of the approaches and methods of these artists were used as resources for this course.

For example, Mel Brocher's experiments with how two-dimensional formats refer to sculptures three-dimensionality (e.g. his series of photographic 'paintings') provides a way for students to consider the duality of the simultaneously factual and fictional nature of photography as a system of visual representation. Brochners' work challenges assumptions about the representational transparency of photography. His work revolves around a "desire for an art that did not add anything to the furniture of the world, and resulted in an analysis of how something is to be perceived and understood rather than in the construction of an object with a decidedly spatial presence" (Rorimer, 2001:182).

As a response to this project brief, a third year student set about inventing her own image generating system by translating the information from knitting patterns into grids of text that created unique visual patterns. The

student describes the process as "translating codes for patterns into patterns of code" (Student B). Various combinations of stitches from the original knitting patterns were translated into groups of letterforms and translated into lines of text as per pattern instructions. For example, the letter 'P' = 'Pearl stich', the letter 'K' = 'Knit', and 'X' represented the instruction 'Multiple of / Multiply by'. The text codes were then repeated to create original visual equivalents of 'scarf's' and other knitted garments.

A set of printed publications were designed to communicate how the pattern generating system worked. This included a vertically very tall booklet, a series of fold-out pamphlet–style items, and pattern instruction sheets. A set of visual translations of original knitting patterns were presented as finished images. The outcomes were built on the idea that the operation of a system, set up and running, can be credited with as much importance as the authors design of the work, relating strongly to the themes present in much artwork that uses the concept of 'system as medium'.

The work of many artists involved in using 'systems as medium' serve as good examples of how the various systems of visual representation we use to carry meaning are constructed systems that can be challenged, questioned, and exposed. Art has a long history of not just simply utilising these systems, but also critically engaging with how they function. Instead of simply re-using them, artists have challenged and exposed how they operate through their work, and sometimes re-invented them. This critical approach to the nature of systems of communication is vital for the field of design to operate at a level of innovation.

CONCLUSION

Graphic designers are using new strategies and models to question and challenge the limits of their field, seeking new directions and contexts to work in. Some practice between the fields of art and design, making use of methods from the Fine Arts to practice design in a more critically orientated way. To reflect this changing nature of the discipline I have integrated methods more usually associated with Fine Arts teaching into graphic design teaching. This has been achieved by engaging students in a

conceptualisation of graphic design as a form of research and inquiry, and through establishing projects that utilise topics and themes that require students to engage in Fine Arts research processes. This approach has complimented the development of general reflective thinking skills by students, skills that can be applied to other aspects of learning including meta-learning activities.

Reflecting on this teaching approach, it is apparent that the students have developed new ways to think, and have adopted a more speculative and questioning approach to their graphic design project work. They have been engaged in critically analysing the systems and means we use to communicate ideas, and, in the project modules mentioned specifically in this paper, been involved in the manipulation of systems of visual representation, and concerned with materiality and meaning effects.

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