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From Wish You Were Here? to GAMSWEN and onto Designed Dissertations: Connecting the design studio with writing in design

Keywords

design
dissertation
writing
studio
lectures
practice
connectivism

Introduction

This review describes the evolution of three art and design ‘writing’ projects delivered during the contextual studies courses of the undergraduate Graphic and Digital Design and 3D Digital Design and Animation programmes in the then Communication Media for Design Department at the University of Greenwich’s School of Architecture, Design and Construction. This review briefly tells the story of how and why these projects have developed over the past five years.

Contexts

Attendance 50%, average mark 50% and plagiarized 50%; A slight exaggeration, but this is how it came across to me when in 2007 I started to assess the seemingly half-hearted essays that were being produced by the 30 first-year B.A./HND graphic and digital design and 3D digital design and animation students, in our design department. The reasons for this unsatisfactory state of affairs were not immediately apparent, as the lecturers were very lively, delivering exciting material to sparky students.

Additionally, I was one of a team of design dissertation tutors, and although there was some high-quality writing being produced by the third-year design students, many were in the 'let's get it out of the way before we go on to the proper work of our practice' variety. Some students enjoyed, some hated and many muddled through producing writing and research that was disconnected with their lives, design and their studio work. The position of writing in relation to the practice that went on in the design studio seemed semi-detached at best.

Having just been appointed a 0.5 senior lecturer with responsibility for the contextual studies delivery within the department, there was a responsibility to find out why so many students had issues with writing and why most had to invent complex and convoluted strategies to even put pen to paper or fingers to keys. I wanted to go beyond the beaten path of excuses of blaming a plethora of problems for these occurrences. Dyslexia and other barriers to processing and presenting written information were and still are an issue with many students. We have students from a variety of 'academic' educational backgrounds and we have paying students from abroad. Rather than the usual tired resignation, I wanted these reasons, and others, to be celebrated and challenged. To cut a short story even shorter, based on a broad research survey, I produced a report for the department on the then current debates on the position of writing in art and design higher education in the United Kingdom and internationally. At the start of this research process it soon became clear, as I had suspected all along, that a great deal was being said and put into practice in this field. Having just come out of an especially constructive experience of practice-based visual arts doctoral research where the debates about the relationships between writing, theory, research and practice had raged for over twenty years, I was not at all surprised that they were afloat elsewhere in art and design education.

The work carried out by Julia Lockheart and John Wood and many others, for Writing-PAD (Writing Purposefully in Art and Design) at Goldsmiths and elsewhere nationally and internationally became central to the articulation of this report. Their rethinking and research gave me the conceptual ammunition to propose to the school and the department a shift in the way contextual studies, and especially writing, was delivered and employed by the students. It was at about this time that Writing-PAD started to publish the *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, which

has been a publication I always turn to when doubts, external and internal, creep in about the validity of how writing is now being delivered in the design department.

After the report was given to the Head of School and to the Head of Department, action was taken to move the position of writing from something that seemed to only happen at the tail end of courses to one that occurred continuously during the contextual studies classes. Two of the first-year briefs were rewritten with this conceptual shift in mind, and the design dissertation course was manipulated to encourage and enable students to involve more of their studio practice and practical skills. In the next sections I will sketch out how these ideas were put into practice.

Wish You Were Here?

The first year's first term's writing brief for the course 'Art and Design in Context' was redrawn and called *Wish You Were Here?* It involved the students carrying out in-depth research into two artists or designers, one of their choice and one given to them by their tutor. This 'getting under the skin' research then had to be transcribed into a three-way fictional conversation between the student and the other protagonists. The aim of the brief was to introduce the students to 'academic' research and its various relationships to the practice of writing. The aim of the project is to help create a greater understanding of the importance of thoughtful questions and effective questioning in these types of research and writing processes. It was, and still is, a writing 'icebreaker' where short yet continuous 'postcard'-length texts, along with complementary illustrations, between the participants in this three-way docu-fiction 'conversation' were the indicated outcomes. This year's student blogs can be seen on the course blog (Andersdotter 2011).

The outcomes of the project have developed from being mainly a series of handwritten postcards or letters to their often long dead artist/designers to now including all the varieties of digital and social communication channels. This imaginary 'seance' has become electronic, and the results are often creatively and conceptually electrifying. Bringing artists and designers together in this fictional space enabled a depth of thinking that the previous essay element had rarely achieved. Examples such as Banksy meeting Chris Marker (Figure 1), Barbara Kruger conversing with Edward Hooper (Andersdotter 2011) and Eva Hesse writing to Jules Cheret (Figure 2) have been constructed.

Gamswen

In 2008, following on from the first term's contextual studies programme, the second term consisted of a lecture series that was loosely based on some twentieth-century Modernist and postmodernist ideas that have influenced design. The course consisted of twelve 1–2-hour lectures/



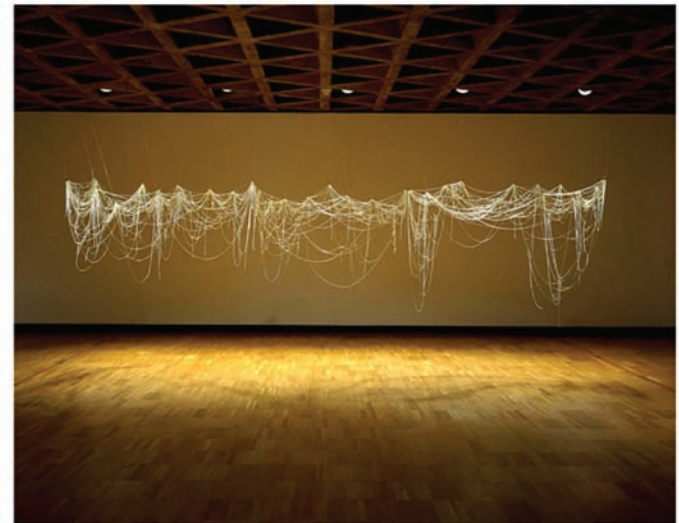
Figure 1.

Dear Jules,

My name is Eva Hesse and Hannah suggested I talked to you so we could maybe find some inspiration from each other's work. I already know so much about you so maybe you would like find something out about me.

Well I am also dead like you but unfortunately I didn't die of old age like you, I died at 36 from a brain tumour and only had a short career because of this but the work I did has obviously had an impact. My main work was installations using light, dark and shadows. I understand that this is huge contrast from 2D poster designs but maybe it will help to compare notes as they say.

This is some of my work closer to my death



Hope to hear from you soon,

Eva Hesse

Figure 2.

seminars in a traditional lecture hall. The students were then summatively assessed on a 1500 – 2000-word essay based on a series of given titles they could choose from. Although the lectures were on relevant topics, and intelligently and enthusiastically delivered, the attendance was poor. The essays were dry, often pseudo-attempts at ‘academic’ writing.

As this was an unsatisfactory situation for all concerned I decided to construct a brief that attempted to mitigate most of these factors. Called GAMSWEN it introduced two concepts to the course. The first was that the role of note-taking was seen as a key element to the understanding of the ideas being expressed in the lectures. The students were asked to think of themselves as ‘investigative journalists’ attending a press conference, writing for a magazine or newspaper (hence *news* and *mag* backwards for the brief’s title). So that this did not become just another note-taking exercise, the second half of the brief was to write up the lectures into a series of articles, which were then produced as a designed and physical publication: a magazine, pamphlet or newspaper (see Demetriou 2012, Figure 3; Hidalgo 2012, Figure 4; Weaver 2012, Figure 6).

The aim was very simply to link what the students were learning in their design courses, and typography, layout and other design processes to the history and concepts they were learning about in these series of lectures. The reasons for being at the lectures were now made explicit in the way the brief was constructed by having to take notes, and these notes were then directly linked to the written and designed outcome. Now that there is five years’ worth of GAMSWEN publications the students are clearly able to see what is expected of them (see Nurse 2012, Figure 5; Sobhy 2012, Figure 7).

This structure also enables the students to iteratively develop their writing skills in a framework that allows for their design skills to be used to enhance the communication of complex conceptual concepts. This year’s (2012) 90 design students produced some outstanding and thoughtful writing in imaginatively designed publications (Ingham 2012b). The use of course blogs (Ingham 2012a, 2011b, 2010b) and individual blogs (Ingham 2012c) to gather all their design and writing work into one space has also helped the integration of practice, theory and research. Their online presences have also helped the students write for an audience and use the peer-to-peer opportunities made available by this type of social media. They now write more, on average 4000 words as opposed to 1000, and are more analytical, coherent and stylish in their content (Ingham 2012b). Above all, the students appear to enjoy both the act of writing and the processes of getting their writing to a professional publication standard.

Designed Dissertations

I have always seen the *Wish You Were Here?* and GAMSWEN projects as ways of introducing the students to the design dissertation experience that starts at the end of the second year and continues through until just after the winter break in their third year

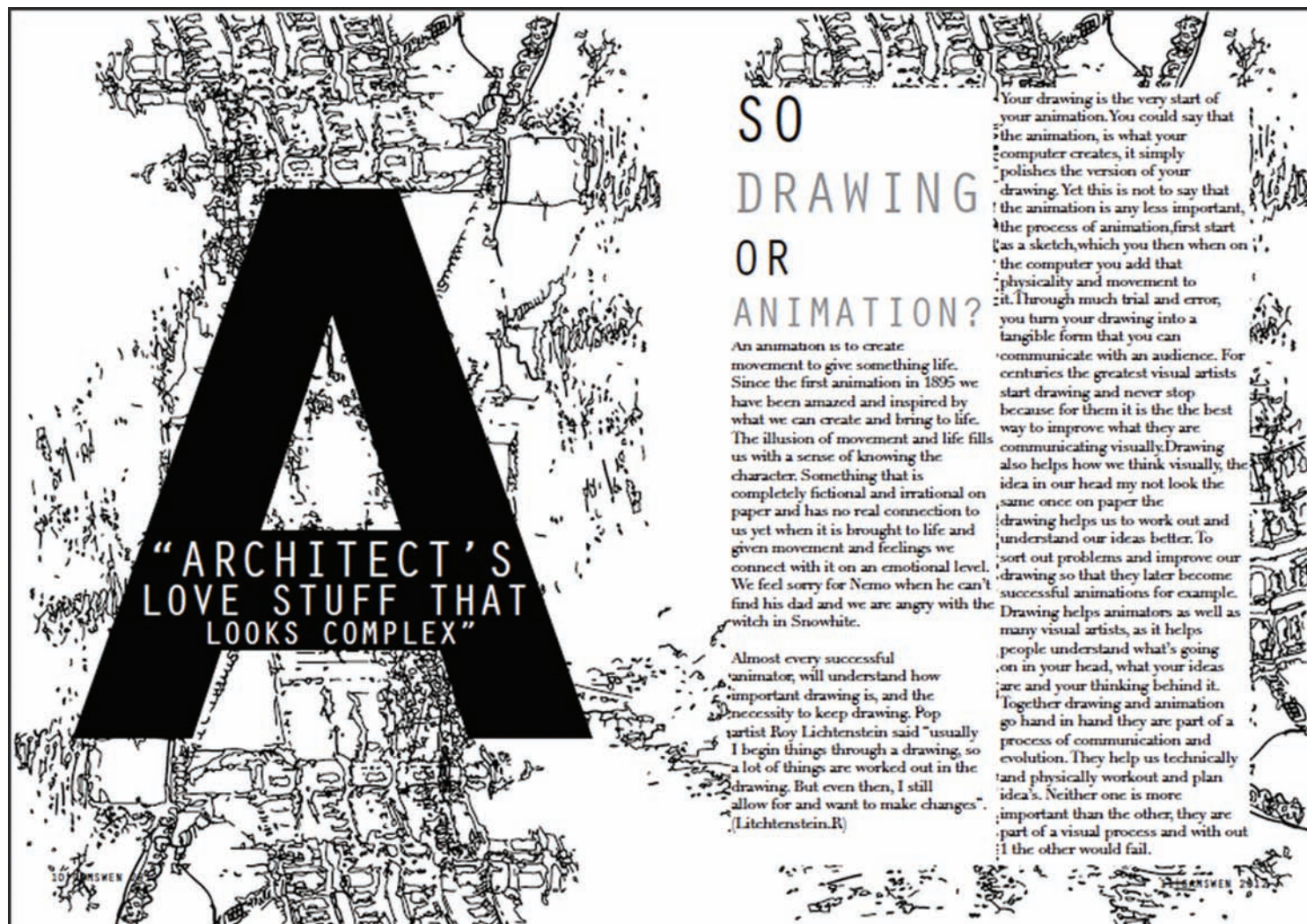


Figure 3.

OF NIEL SPILLER

SUCH AS A SCULPTURE FROM 1966 BY SALVADOR DALI WHICH HE MENTIONED WAS CALLED LILITH. WHO WAS A BAD WITCH LIKE WOMAN. THIS INSPIRED HIM TO CREATE THE MAIN SCULPTURE WHICH HE HAD PLACED IN THE MIDDLE OF HIS MAIN VISION OF HIS ISLAND. HE WAS QUITE MAD WHEN IT CAME TO POPULATING HIS ISLAND AS HE TALKED ABOUT THIS INTERESTS TURNING INTO TREES AND TREES TURNING INTO TREES COMING OUT OF HIS HEADS BRANCHES WE WENT ON TO CREATE MACHINERY. WHICH HE EVEN PLACED IN THE ISLAND AS BIO-TECHNOLOGY WHICH HE WAS INSPIRED FROM AN IMAGE FROM MY OVERALL EXPERIENCE OF THIS LECTURE WAS THAT TO ME IT WAS CONFUSING ON WHAT IT WAS ACTUALLY CREATING HOWEVER IT GOT ME MORE INTERESTED INTO SURREALISM BECAUSE HIS WORK MIGHT MEAN SOMETHING TO HIM BUT IT COULD SYMBOLISE OR MEAN SOMETHING ELSE TO ANOTHER PERSON

This lecture began just as strange as the previous lecture with Niel Spiller, I was sceptical and knew that this was going to be a long 90 minutes of art work which looks interesting but very strange and confusing in the way it would be explained, so lets see how it went. We began with the work and mainly the work of Salvador Dali, born in 1904 to 1989, the talk started off with this strange museum which is based in Barcelona, it consisted of golden mannequins which were on the museum, through out this lecture I learnt that this artist loved "NOUVEAU BEAUTY AND THE TERRIFYING" working on mannequins. One of my favourite art works that was mentioned in this lecture was Salvador Dali's Surrealist Funhouse, this was part of the Worlds Fair of 1939 which was held in New York, as it states in blackpool boutique. cook, In Dali's own words it was an Upside down world of dreams. This to me makes me think Dali was crazy as this fun house consisted of a giant pink stucco building, which contained inside chamber of swimming showgirls, a room with a woman asleep on a 76ft long bed, a man's body shaped as a birdcage and a vintage Cadillac taxi where inside the taxi it would be raining.

ORNAMENTAL

Figure 4.

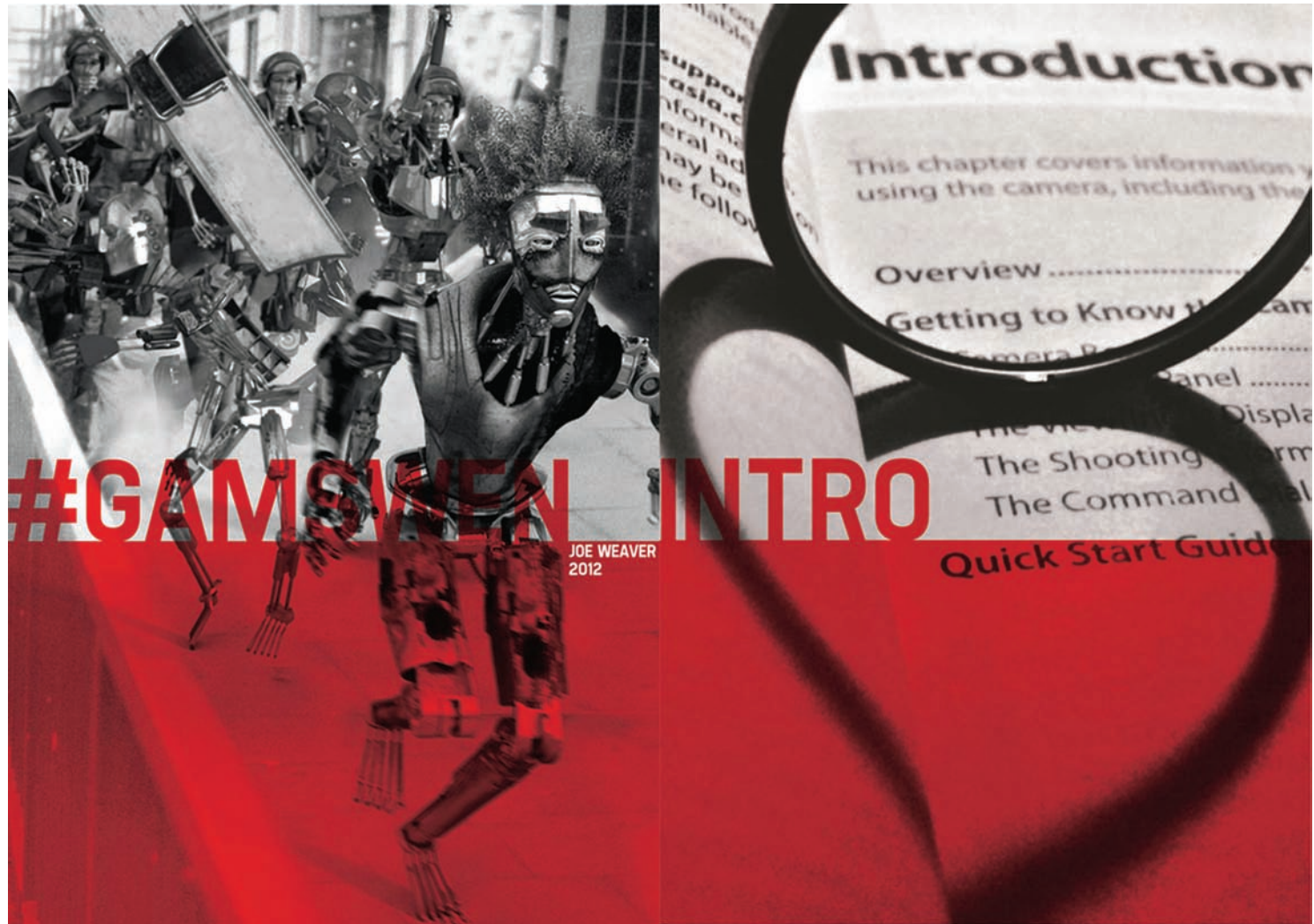


Figure 5.



Figure 6.

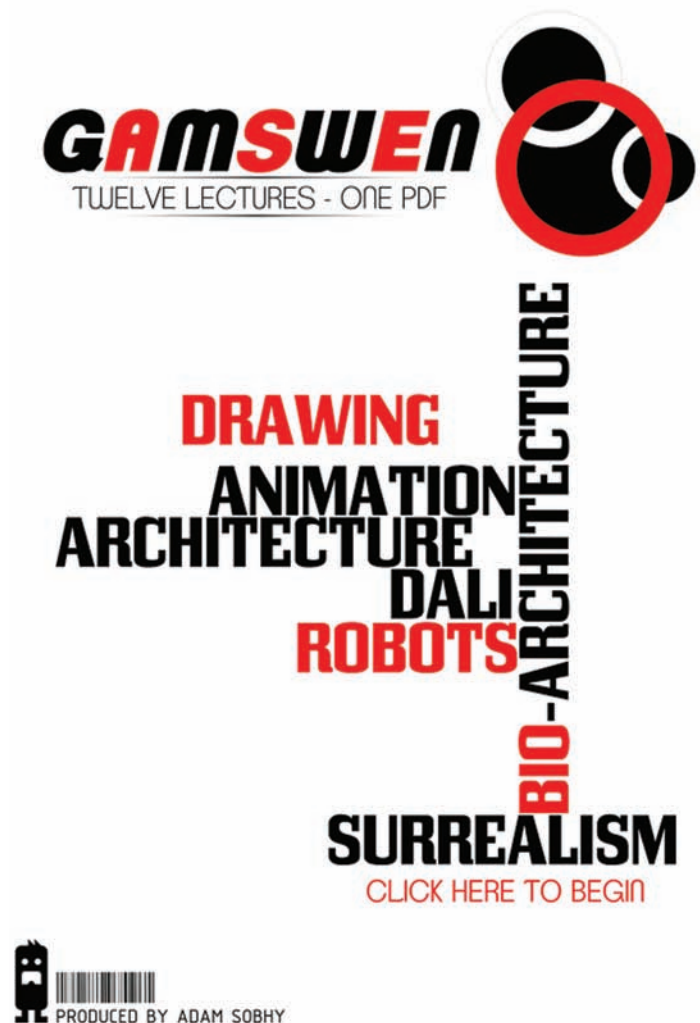


Figure 7.

LECTURE 2

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VAUGHAN OLIVER

Vaughan Oliver is a British Graphic Designer based in Epsom London and is known for his work in Music more specifically the designing of record covers for bands and artists such as The Pixies and Cocteau Twins on the 4AD label, Scott Walker and many more. He has been working in his field for over 30 years.

He started the lecture by talking about the role music plays in his work and how it can be used as a tool to inspire and change the mood of the listener. The main reason he became a designer and specifically a designer of record covers was the ability to combine the two things he loved and obsessed about the most art and music. His favourite artist is Salvador Dali. He also talked about his dislike of typography lessons in school and how he had to follow certain rules when he prefers to break away from such limits as they seem to hinder creativity.

In the 1980's he worked with his friend Ivo Watts Russell who was just about to set up his own independent record label and Vaughan worked as a freelance designer for three years before becoming full time, he worked on designing logos and all promotional material.

One of the topics he covered really hit home to me when he started to talk about not creating works that follow a trend, and for us as designers to find our own voice. This really made me think and look back at the style of the 3D works I was creating and I did notice that I was creating works that fitted around a particular trend and from now on I am going to try to develop my own brand that would make me stand out.

I have enjoyed this lecture and have taken a lot from it.

To check out some of Vaughans Work [click here](#)



(see Ingham 2012d, 2011a, 2010a). These introductory writing briefs enable the students to see the connections between what they are doing in the studio and the writing they are asked to do about art and design issues. They try to foster a harmonizing relationship between all aspects of their programme of study. They also enable the students to critically challenge these relationships (see Bennett 2011a, 2011b; Papastathi 2011, 2011a; Kinugawa 2011).

The main modification in the design dissertation was to see it as a piece of research rather than a piece of lengthy writing. This then enabled us to connect the research practices that were happening in the studio with some of the methodologies and practices that are used in theoretical research (Charles 2012) (Figure 8). We also introduced a design element to the submission, whereby the students were allowed to and encouraged to think of the content of the research as something to be published (Dennis 2012, Figure 12; Ward 2012, Figure 9). We had found that even though illustrations were always asked for, where relevant, the dissertations tended to have the look and feel of a traditional academic dissertation. The students struggled to produce 'academic' writing and were being compared to other programmes of study where essays were the main mode of production.

This simple switch in thinking has meant the students are less 'frightened' of the idea of writing a 10,000-word dissertation and are seeing it more as a part of their design processes. It still has to be a critically and coherently argued piece of thinking, but the emphasis is now also on how the research is communicated. Now the writing and research carried out for the dissertation becomes a design project in its own right and is something that would go in their design portfolios (see Crustna 2012, Figure 11; Parenthoux 2012; Parker 2012, Figure 10).

Conclusions

Ideas generated by Writing-PAD and the *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* have been the mainstays behind the gradual change in the way writing has been taught to and with the students in the design department. I have taken a great deal from the general aims of these exciting initiatives and inspiration from the specific instances espoused online and on paper. In many ways the changes have not been hugely radical but I think have been very effective. I believe the students' writing has improved both in 'academic' terms and even more importantly in terms of its relationship to their studio practice. We now have 89% attendance, 69% average mark and 0.9% plagiarism. These are some of the indications that the relationships between writing design and the design studio are now in a healthier state of affairs than five years ago.

Chapter one

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Chapter two

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Chapter three

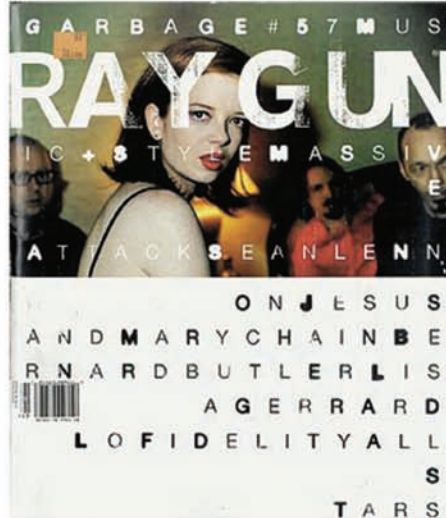
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Conclusion

Bibliography

experimental approach of a typographic layout created for ray gun magazine, the design by David Carson uses the basic colours of print which are cmyk,

04



(Carson, D 2000).
experimental



THE CMYK IS A SUBTRACTIVE COLOUR, USED IN COLOUR PRINTING, AND IS ALSO USED TO DESCRIBE THE PRINTING PROCESS ITSELF.

(Baggetta, M.
R 2000)

Figure 8.

Monologue

11 January 2012

Emile: Who's London Riots?



as we as designers played role in contributing agast 2011. Furthermore, I believe that utare designers to understand just what to and to help them realise that their own insidered when accepting commissions. For : deemed immoral to accept work from a taining provocative images of ladies if you

Above image cited in London riots: Sony distribution centre on fire in Enfield the Daily Mirror (2011)
Left image cited in Police Ranks Swell to Stem Riots, Londonriots.org.uk (2011)

Misconception

Page 2

Misconception Monologue

11 January 2012

How do you teach your kids right from wrong?

Durkheim discusses the value of normality

Haralambos and Holborn (2007) state that the definition of deviance is to stray from an accepted path and that many sociological definitions of deviance simply elaborate on this idea. Therefore, from this perspective deviance is generally defined by those acts that do not conform to the norms and expectations of a particular social group. Many social theories delve into and try to explain the reasons for deviance in society. Perhaps the most commonly used sociological perspective which was coined by Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons in the late nineteenth century is known as functionalism. Durkheim describes society as an organism such as the human body and suggests that if biologists wanted to know how the body worked they would begin by analysing the separate parts such as the brain, the heart and the liver. However if they simply analysed the separate parts they would be unable to explain how life was maintained (Haralambos and Holborn, 2007). Durkheim likens this analogy to society and suggests that to understand any part of society, the varying parts or groups must be seen in relation to society as a whole (ibid). Thus when analysing a part of society from a functionalist perspective you must examine its contribution to the whole of society and not just its immediate social groups.



Image cited in: Stress hormone found in children who watch parents argue. Impactlab.net (2008)

beliefs about what is right or wrong in society. For example in England values such as honesty, privacy, ambition and individual achievement are important (Haralambos and Holborn, 2007). This perspective places an emphasis on social cohesion and suggests that when the consensus of the agreed norms and values are broken deviance will occur (ibid). Durkheim's theory of functionalism suggests that deviance is generated by society itself for its own wellbeing and that deviance is in fact functional (Durkheim 1938, 2007). Advocates of functionalism agree that for society to operate functionally crime is an inevitable aspect of society and agree that methods of social control are necessary to maintain



social order (Jamrozik and Nocella 1998). Furthermore, functionalists suggest that it is only when rates of deviance are exceptionally high or low that society becomes dysfunctional (Haralambos and Holborn, 2007). By using this theory to analyse the root cause of the London riots of 2011 it would be perfectly acceptable to assume that they were caused by the breakdown and malfunction of a particular element of society. One example could be that parents have failed to instil accepted morals and norms into their children and have consequently produced members of society who do not conform to the accepted beliefs of society who do not believe or understand that burning, looting and rioting are not appropriate ways to behave, children that have grown up in broken homes where arguing and inconsideration is everyday life. Another example could be a change in the way

punishment.

Therefore, if we were to analyse the London riots from a functionalist perspective we would not point the blame at anti social behavior or consumerism but on the breakdown of our society as a whole. A functionalist perspective would assume that it is the inability of parents to educate their children correctly in socially accepted ways of behavior that is responsible for the deviance in London.

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Who is Emile Durkheim?

Born in April 1858, many consider Durkheim to be the father of sociology. Durkheim is generally associated with his work on functionalist theories of sociology. The core of his theory stemmed from a belief that people are the product of their social environment and that people's behavior is influenced by significant others or role models. During his life Durkheim published many books as well as giving a large number of lectures on various areas of sociology such as religion, suicide and deviance. As a teenager Durkheim's ambition was to attend an esteemed college in Paris. He realized that to achieve his dream he would have to work very hard in order to fulfill his ambition to gain entry into the prestigious 'Ecole Normale Supérieure'. In 1879, Durkheim achieved his dream and gained entry, joining other well known sociologists, philosophers and political leaders at the prestigious institute. In 1881 Durkheim graduated and became a teacher of philosophy. 5 years later he was commissioned 'Chargé des Cours de Pédagogie et de Sciences Sociales' meaning that he was put in charge of the social sciences at the university. Whilst working at the university Durkheim was able to dedicate a large amount of time to writing and studying and soon became interested in a particular theory of human

Figure 9.

There once was a young man, who upon growing up, began to contemplate life along with all the troubles and trials that it brought. He travelled to seek out an old, wise hermit – Lao-Tse. This old man was said to have all the answers to life, and the understanding that would unlock the secrets of true happiness. Upon finding this man, he began to learn, through quality time, conversation and the gradual feeding of wisdom, of this magnificent concept – Tao. (Borel, 1923.)

Tao as God

The Rhythm of Life: Based on the Philosophy of Lao-Tse is a translation of a story by Henri Borel. The synopsis is that which is stated above, opening this chapter. What is Tao? According to Lao-Tse, Tao is all around us. (Borel, 1923, Pg. 24) He describes Tao as the equivalent to the western concept of 'God', although not personified, but an all powerful force, an eternal Omni-presence that holds everything in the universe in perfect balance. He speaks of Tao being both present as everything, and present in everything, controlling the flow of the universe, all the natural life cycles in the world – including the human life cycle, from birth through until death. He also uses nature for many examples, such as

the power that controls the rolling in and out of the waves, the birds flying overhead etc. He is saying that Tao is the balance system of the universe, the rhythm of life itself. Tao is what makes life work.

How does this relate to design? It begins to illuminate the mystery of what makes for good 'effective' design. Before proceeding, it will be helpful to draw a simple metaphorical parallel. If we look at life, or existence, as Lao-Tse portrays it, we can see that Tao is the rhythm of life, and is what holds life together, or 'makes it work'. If we then say that life is a metaphor for design, then what makes design work? Surely it would be Tao, but what is the metaphorical equivalent of Tao in design?

Tao in Everything

Lao-Tse teaches that Tao is existent within everything. (Borel, 1923, Pg. 24) So what is inside design? A design comprises of components – individual units that are placed together in such a way as to work to achieve a goal. (Krause, 2004, Pg. 44-45.) Examples of these components could be colour, text, images, shapes etc. These things are the ingredients of design. Anyone can be given the ingredients to make a cake, but without knowing how to use the ingredients in the correct way, they are at risk of being misused, or rather used in a way that restricts their full potential to be accessed. Could it be that components within a design are its Tao? The components deliver the message, and unless the message is Tao, or rhythm, then it seems that this is not the case.

This is confirmed by Lao-Tse. Components in a composition are intended to be seen by the audience, whereas Lao-Tse clearly states: 'In that which you see is Tao, but Tao is not what you see.' (Borel, 1923, Pg. 25) Here Lao-Tse is suggesting that Tao is existent, but unseen. This means that the components in the design cannot be the Tao we are looking for in design. If this is the case, then we can look back to our earlier definition of rhythm, and observe how that led us to examine modernism and some of the devices used by the modernist designers. The typographic grid, for example, is not normally seen in a final produced layout (Ideabook, 2011). However it is still there, underneath the components, holding them all in their correct place. It could be described as an invisible and authoritative force underpinning the face of a design. This description would match that of Tao from Lao-Tse's perspective. The grid, like Tao, holds things in their place, in balance. In the previous chapter we discovered that the correct use of a grid brings consistency, structure and organisation to a layout, just in the same way these characteristics of rhythm are brought to everyday life through Tao. Could it be that the use of a grid in a layout is a potential manifestation of Tao in design?

Let us return to the idea of information hierarchies, which we touched upon also in the first chapter. The information hierarchy too, like the grid, as we examined previously, creates rhythm for a reader when they are digesting information. Thinking more about the hierarchy, it seems that a hierarchy is not any concrete thing as such, it is not a component of design, but unlike the grid it can still be seen, or can it? It is a separate device that results from the relationship formed between other components in a layout. You cannot have an information hierarchy without any information to give order to, but when the information required for a hierarchy is present, the hierarchy forms automatically. A hierarchy can be identified in a layout, but is its concept concrete enough for it to be seen? Let's look at Fig. 3 here.

Fig. 3 shows a very basic layout design by Josef Müller-Brockmann. Here we can see that a hierarchy does exist, as if we were asked to point it out, we could point to the components which we would deem 'most important', (Juni-Festwochen Zürich' being the most prominent, 'Stadttheater' the second most etc.) and explain which ones come first. However there is no concrete visual object which we can physically point to and say, 'Hierarchy'. From this I believe we can safely say that, the hierarchy is, like the grid, at work, but unseen. This fits into both what Lao-Tse says about Tao, being unseen, and also into our parallel. So from this we can say that the hierarchy is another manifestation of Tao in design.

Fig. 3 - An Information Hierarchy at work



Figure 10.



INTERACTIVE
OLD &
THE NEW,
MEDIA:

*Mind - Body - Medium.
Birth of Interactivity.
Cells & Organs of interactive Media.*

Interactive media, although seeming rather new, has been present throughout history, evolving exponentially with the development of existing and new technologies, and has been spreading rapidly throughout the world with art and design having taken the latter under their wings. For most of us humans, metaphorically described as 'fish' that are unaware of the mediating water that surrounds us (McLuhan, 1994), a good starting point, would be to question our understanding of the word medium itself, before diving into the complex world of interactivity. Through this chapter, we will discuss the roots of interactive media, understand the nature of this new type of medium, its evolution along the years and focus on its primary characteristics.

Figure 11.



Figure 12.

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