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# ***Ethical Design***

## ***A Foundation for Visual Communication***

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
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# **Peter Buwert - Doctor of Philosophy**

## **Ethical Design A Foundation for Visual Communication**

### **Abstract:**

The central original contribution to knowledge proposed by this thesis is the setting forth of a conceptualisation of ethical theory specifically in relation to design, with a focus on visual communication design. Building on earlier work by design theorist Clive Dilnot in the area of design ethics and on philosopher Giorgio Agamben's formulation of the philosophical concept of potentiality, a way of thinking about the relationship between design and ethics is proposed which concludes that design is in fact always inherently ethical.

However, this conception of ethical design purposefully leaves questions of the qualification of good and bad unresolved, stating only that the ethical is the prerequisite condition in which both good and bad become possibilities. Design's significantly unethical capability to suppress and anaesthetise individuals' ethical experience is highlighted through a proposal of a process of an/aesth/ethics.

Observation of the relationship between design and ethics in the real world through a series of interviews demonstrates something of the complexity of design's relationship with ethics and the diverse range of positions, beliefs, attitudes and paradoxes abounding within the design profession when it comes to addressing the question of "good" design practice.

Six "sites" of ethics within contemporary design discourse are introduced and discussed. The ethicality of design practices in relation to these sites are then analysed through the lens of the proposed ethical framework: identifying strengths, weaknesses and potentials within these observed strategies.

The way of thinking about ethical design proposed here demonstrates potential in contributing to designers' ability to critically consider the ethicality of their own practices. From this foundation they may be better equipped to begin addressing the question of the qualification of the "goodness" of design.

In conclusion, proposals are made for how this framework could be practically developed and used to support and encourage ethical design in the real world.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, An/Aesth/Ethics, Criticality, Ethics, Graphic Design, Potentiality





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# ***Chapter 1: Good Design?***

## 1.1 Typography and Mein Kampf: The Complexity of the Issue

During a talk by communication theorist Oliver Vodeb at the Graphic Design Festival in Breda, the Netherlands in 2010, this exchange took place between Vodeb and Dutch design critic Max Bruinsma:

**Max Bruinsma:** There is not an intrinsic link between the craft of design and content. You can talk about the typography of Mein Kampf without mentioning the contents.

**Oliver Vodeb:** That's my point.

**Max Bruinsma:** You said the opposite just now.

**Oliver Vodeb:** My point is that the design profession usually speaks, for example about the typography of Mein Kampf, without connecting it to the effect that this typography had.

**Max Bruinsma:** These are different things.

**Oliver Vodeb:** Yeah well these are different things but you need to connect them together. That's the point, because if you don't do it, how can you actually think about design as a communicative practice, about design as a social practice? <sup>(1)</sup>

Vodeb's sentiment resonates with me, and seems as good a choice as any to serve as a motif with which to begin the introduction to this thesis and the research project which it represents.

What is good design? This deceptively simple question is in fact one of the biggest, most complex and most difficult questions which can be asked in relation to the professional field of design. It is also, I believe, one of the most important. The attempt to answer or otherwise in any way address the issue raised by this question, quickly and necessarily boils down to the underlying matter of what it might actually mean for design to be good. In attempting to negotiate around this terrain some major obstacles are quickly encountered.

The first of these is that a great variety of different ways of understanding the meanings of the concepts both of "design" and "good" exist. Subsequently when talking about such an issue, what each participant in the discussion imagines we are talking about is quite possibly radically different from that which every other is imagining. We find ourselves operating within a discursive space characterised by a diverse plurality of perspectives many of which upon closer examination may in fact prove to be almost entirely incompatible. Adding an exponential increase to the level of complexity here, even within each of these diversely varying perspectives, our criteria and units of measurement for quantifying what constitutes good design can be just as radically diverse and conflicting.

According to the perspective expressed by Bruinsma in the Breda exchange, the form and content of design must be evaluated according to separate criteria.<sup>i</sup> The question of the evaluation of the quality of the typography in *Mein Kampf*, technically should not be influenced in any way whatsoever by the unrelated matter of the meaning which the words in the book actually signify. Good design can do bad things, but surely we cannot blame the design itself for this? Design is nothing but a neutral vessel which unquestioningly bears content wherever it is bid. Don't shoot the messenger!

Vodeb on the other hand however, maintains that although such a radical separation of the evaluation of "goodness" of form and content in design may well be possible, we *should not* do so. Design cannot hide from its responsibilities as a socially significant activity behind a veil of assumed neutrality. The messenger and the message are not so easily divided. Form always bears content and content must always take form; the impact of the whole cannot be reduced to the sum of the independent natures of the parts. For Vodeb, a practical ethical implication overpowers a theoretically possible technical separation.

<sup>i</sup> Bruinsma's comments here serve to illustrate the possibility of a certain perspective. Although these words originate from his mouth I would not wish to characterise Bruinsma himself as a staunch proponent of such a position. Charitably, we should consider that elsewhere he has written with great lucidity of the designer's role as both form and content giver. (See for example (2))



The Vodeb/Bruinsma incident illustrates just one facet of the incredibly complex and conflicting world of the qualification of good design. How are designers to proceed here? Are we to evaluate design primarily in terms of aesthetics, functionality, or by which combination of any number of possible criteria: form, beauty, novelty, purpose, usefulness, fun, sustainability, efficiency? When our evaluation criteria conflict, how are we to reconcile these conflicting demands?

How is ethical design practice understood and how does it manifest itself within design today? Do designers actually desire to do/be good in their work? When designers do want to do or be good in or through their design practice, how do they approach this challenge? What forms can ethical design be understood to take? Is ethical design only design which addresses what we see to be explicitly ethical issues: work for charities, humanitarian, ecological, social or political causes? Or can everyday work carried out with integrity, dignity and respect be equally counted as ethical regardless of the intention or subject matter? What about internal matters such as working conditions within the profession? Can a humanitarian design project which addresses an urgent social need but which has been produced by unpaid interns be counted as good? What about the designer's relationship to the public? Should design be user-centred, human-centred, universal, local, slow, participatory, co-this or co-that? Is internal disciplinary critique of processes and practices a matter of mere organisation, or of ethics?

The primary motivation which lies behind this project as a whole is a concern that designers be more properly prepared and equipped to begin the journey of traversing this difficult terrain investigating and evaluating the "goodness" of design. Towards this end, the central contribution of this thesis is to lay out and communicate a certain way of beginning to think about and understand what it might mean for design to be good, by articulating a conception of design as a fundamentally and inherently *ethical* activity. It is hoped that this work might provide a solid theoretical foundation which will in the long run be both informative and ultimately useful to the designer who wishes to seriously consider whether or not their design activity is good, whether it could become better, and how this change might potentially be brought about.

## 1.2 Research Question/Aims

The central question at the core of the research presented here is this: *is design ethical?* It is important to emphasise from this very beginning point an initial declaration of the *ethicality* of design as the field of primary interest rather than, and in distinction to, the *goodness* of design. Questions of the evaluation of the goodness of design are complex and contentious. The question of whether or not design is or can be good, is in fact of central interest here; it could even be said to be the ultimate end-game towards which this project is oriented. Nevertheless, the specific trajectory of this investigation aims instead toward the more particular question of whether design is or can be ethical, and to what extent. Emerging from the other side of this investigation having achieved something of a perspective as to the nature of ethicality in design, the question of the potential goodness of design can be considered from a more adequate foundation.

The proposed question of the ethicality of design, begs two immediate clarifications which shape and structure the theoretical and philosophical body of the project. Firstly: what is the ethical? Secondly: what is design? Rather than foolishly attempting to set in stone fixed definitions to these complex and multipliciously conceived concepts, an approach is taken instead of setting forth certain specific ways of conceptualising and thinking about these ideas. It is hoped that these suggestions of ways of thinking about the terms in question might prove to be useful in contributing to the formation of practical strategies for reconciling these ideas in the real world of design practice. Having in this way presented ways of conceiving of both the ethical and design, the question of the relationship between these two within this conceptual frame can be considered.

This activity is necessarily philosophical and theoretical in nature. However a fundamental aim of this project is the foregrounding of implications of these ways of thinking for design in the real world. A vital stage of the research is that the theoretical ideas developed and laid out here are considered in contexts of real world design culture and practice.

The core research questions and aims of the project as a whole could therefore be summarised something like this:

1. What is meant by the ethical?
2. What is meant by design?

3. Based on these conceptualisations, is design / can design be ethical?
4. How do contemporary attempts at / approaches to ethical design practice compare to this theoretical conceptualisation?
5. How might ethical design be supported or encouraged?

It is my hope that through investigating these questions and aims, the promise of the title of this thesis might substantially be fulfilled: that in setting forth a compelling account of a way thinking about what it means for design to be ethical, the understanding of this ethical foundation might provide a platform which brings us closer to a position of being able to begin to discuss the goodness of design in a more rigorous and satisfying way than has previously been possible.

## 1.3 Overview: Motivation, Scope and Methodology of the Research

The focus of this research is on activities of design which fall within a broad conception of visual communication design. “Visual communication” is my personally preferred term to refer to what is more commonly called graphic design. In my opinion visual communication is the more expansive, open and inclusive of the two terms. Graphic design has certain traditional connotations in everyday use which limit and restrict the imagination slightly as to the range of design activities which fall within this designation. However, the two terms are used interchangeably throughout this thesis recognising graphic design’s status as the more commonly understood term. Typically, throughout the thesis “design” generally is shorthand for graphic design / visual communication design. Often, broader applications to other fields of design and design in general can be seen, and interpretations and extrapolations to these wider contexts are welcomed and encouraged. The focus of the study is on visual communication and its specific character and challenges: however, this broader context of design in general should always be kept in the reader’s peripheral vision.

The primary motivation lying behind this project is a concern that designers be properly prepared and equipped to be able to investigate and evaluate issues surrounding the “goodness” of design. Designers can consistently be found expressing beliefs that design is or should be a positive force for good within society, yet very often these beliefs and desires go unfulfilled. A great deal of earnest and at times excellent intellectual debate and practical work goes on, borne out of an apparent striving to fulfil the deeply felt potential capability to do good design. However, these activities are fragmented, typically focussing on individual projects and contexts and lacking perspective as to how these individual actions may or may not together constitute or qualify design as something good in itself. Looking for the basis upon which the many claims of design’s goodness are built, solid foundations are hard to find. The ground beneath good design’s feet is an unstable and shifting quicksand of vague hopefulness, positivity, and blind faith, pinned to the indistinct shadows of culturally ingrained utopian impulses.

More simply put, it appears that many designers want to do good in their work, find it very difficult to do so, and lack the appropriate knowledge and conceptual tools to even begin approaching the matter of attempting to properly understand why this is in order to begin working towards more robust approaches for authentically good design practice.

My personal motivation for undertaking this particular research project is inspired and fuelled by my observation of this widespread condition of frustration among many working designers, and by my own personal experience of this as a designer desiring to do good, but lacking any real understanding of how to achieve this.

## ***A Gap in the Discipline***

The basis upon which the research questions and aims identified above are founded, is the identification of a knowledge gap within the discipline of graphic / visual communication design. The nature of this gap is a lack of widespread, joined up, deep critical thinking in relation to the question of what it means for design to be good. This is not to claim that no thinking goes on within graphic design about these issues. Indeed, a great deal of thinking, talking and writing does occur.

A large number of published books present design work which is proposed or framed as socially, politically or ethically motivated and concerned. Monographs dedicated to the work of individuals ranging from Pierre Bernard<sup>(3)</sup> to Kalle Lasn<sup>(4)</sup> to Sister Corita Kent<sup>(5)</sup> to Michael Bierut<sup>(6)</sup> all make claims (at varying scales) about graphic design's potentially positive contributions to the world.

Beyond the focus on individual practitioners, there are a number of books which gather and curate collections of examples of graphic work oriented towards the good. Several of these revolve around directly political graphics, perhaps the best example being Liz McQuiston's *Graphic Agitation*<sup>(7)</sup> which offers an in-depth catalogue thematically organising examples of graphic work engaging with political contexts from the 1960's to the early nineties. Such books serve an important purpose by collecting significant and otherwise often difficult to find pieces of work together in one place and offering some educational historical context and commentary. However, beyond providing conveniently accessible archives for reference and inspiration, these catalogues of work offer little direct guidance for the practicing designer interested in doing good.

Showcase volumes such as Cranmer and Zappaterra's *Conscientious Objectives: Designing for an Ethical Message*<sup>(8)</sup> and Christopher Simmon's *Just Design: Socially Conscious Design for Critical Causes*<sup>(9)</sup> attempt to bridge this gap by presenting a range of case studies of design projects under the banner of good design. At a more directly instrumental level, books like David Berman's *Do Good Design: How Design Can Change The World*<sup>(10)</sup> Scalin and Taute's *The Design Activist's Handbook: How to Change the World (Or at Least Your Part of It) with Socially Conscious Design*<sup>(11)</sup> and Andrew Shea's *Designing for Social Change: Strategies for*

*Community-Based Graphic Design*<sup>(12)</sup> present themselves as how-to guides for those designers trying to do some good in the world. In the face of overwhelmingly complex challenges, these are admirable attempts to equip, encourage and inspire designers to do something instead of nothing. These books have an obvious value, but also have their limitations. They are necessarily simplistic, reducing carefully crafted projects dealing with complex sets of societal issues to bite-sized chunks presented often through one or two images and a couple of paragraphs of text. The constraints of these accessible formats inevitably boil down to instrumentalism: presentations of work and methods which go into some detail on *how*, but not *why*.

Such books operate on the largely unspoken assumption that designers should want to do and be good. The question of why designers should aspire to these ideals is rarely touched on in any meaningful way. Lucienne Roberts' book *Good: An introduction to ethics in graphic design*<sup>(13)</sup> is perhaps the only major accessible published book which explicitly sets out to address these more foundational questions of ethics in the context of graphic design. It consists of a potted selection of a variety of different perspectives on ethical theory and belief in relation to design. This serves as an interesting introduction for those new to the topic, but necessarily remains superficial, providing only a few brief glimpses into just some of the many theories, belief systems and personal perspectives which may be held by designers or by onlookers in relation to design. Much more than this cannot be reasonably expected from an accessible single volume introductory text. But where can the interested designer go from here? It's quite a step to go from an introductory section on the topic "Is it ok to be happy?"<sup>(13 p.94)</sup> to reading the original works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jeremy Bentham. There is a wide gap between superficial introductory populist design writing on ethics, and the underlying philosophical ethical theory. To bridge this gap what is required is high-quality in-depth but still accessible writing on ethics specifically by and for designers.

Older fields of design such as architecture and product/industrial design have relatively solidly established discourses on issues surrounding design's relationship to and role within society. In comparison to this, the much younger field of graphic design seems to dance around these topics like a distracted teenager, regularly touching on them and bringing them up, but failing to convert this sporadic activity into a coordinated and sustained productive discourse. Within popular graphic design discourse of magazine articles, essays, blogs, public talks and debates etc. there is a heritage of discussion and conversation relating to the social, moral, ethical, critical and political dimensions of design, and this does continue to the present day. However, this discourse seems to never quite reach the critical mass achieved in the more established design fields, and somewhat frustratingly remains relatively ephemeral. Without consistently sustained levels of activity, as time passes traces of what significant debate and discussion there is can

fade and be lost all too quickly. *Émigré* magazine is a typical case in point: a vibrant platform staging lively and critical graphic design debates from 1984-2005, it is now difficult to access, with only a handful of institutional libraries holding complete collections.<sup>(14)</sup>

Collections of essays and articles re-published in book form can preserve some of this evidence; for example the *Looking Closer* series<sup>(15, 16, 17, 18, 19)</sup> which, through the essays and articles collected in its five volumes, offers glimpses into many of the significant debates in the English speaking graphic design world from the 1990's to the mid 2000's (the third volume takes in a broader historical and geographical base). 2006's *Looking Closer 5* was the last in that series as editor Steven Heller observed a "curious midlife crisis"<sup>(16 p.xi)</sup> in critical design writing. At that time, he lamented the difficulty in identifying high quality critical writing on design worthy of inclusion in a printed book, and looked towards the internet to provide future platforms for preservation and dissemination of noteworthy design discourse.

The internet does indeed host a great variety of such content. It could even be possible to argue that more is being written and read on design than at any point in history. Of course the nature of the internet is that more is being written and read about everything and this does not in any case automatically tell us anything about the quality or content of what being written and read. In the case of graphic design discourse, my personal impression has been that while some great work does emerge, overall the increase in volume facilitated by the web involves a lot of covering and re-covering of ground already thoroughly traversed. The radically open and distributed nature of the internet which allows discourse to bypass traditional gate-keepers: editors, publishers etc. is the key to its success, but also its greatest weakness. For fields of knowledge stuck in their ways, the internet is a breath of fresh air, but nascent discourses such as the question of good in visual communication design need focus, critical mass, and solid anchors and frames of reference more than they need liberatory freedom from these.

Might academia provide these solid anchors? On the surface there seems to be a good deal of activity in academia surrounding ethical issues, with conferences and symposiums often proposing ethical themes for discussion. However, the conversion rate of this hubbub of top-level activity into high-quality outputs seems to be relatively low. As with popular design discourse, academic discourse on ethical design also seems to struggle to reach a self-sustaining critical mass. Search for peer-reviewed academic papers explicitly linking design practice and ethical theory and you may come across a range of isolated pieces engaging with very specific niches, for example Leslie Becker's proposals to resurrect the arcane practice of casuistry (case-based reasoning) in weighing up the goodness of a particular design,<sup>(20)</sup> or Philippe d'Anjou's

arguments for the appropriateness to design of a Satrean existentialist perspective.<sup>(21)</sup> Such isolated individual projects are interesting, but can hardly be described as constituting a sustainable collective discourse across the field.

Perhaps this failure to reach critical mass could be attributed to the lack of suitable supportive academic platforms. The online *Design, Philosophy, Politics*<sup>(22)</sup> journal under the editorship of Anne Marie-Willis has been the most notable exception to this rule, allowing a modest discourse to flourish with notable contributors such as Clive Dilnot, Tony Fry and Cameron Tonkinwise. A small number of PhD theses relating to issues of ethical designing published in recent years such as those of Matthew Soar,<sup>(23)</sup> Joanna Boehnert,<sup>(24)</sup> and Bianca Elzenbaumer<sup>(25)</sup> are also cause for some small seeds of optimism that a sustainable culture of academic discourse may be emerging in this area.

The biggest challenge for design academia remains its inaccessibility to non-academic designers. The dual hurdles of unaffordable conference fees and journal subscriptions, and impenetrable academic writing styles are enough to deter the engagement of almost all practicing designers. Policies of online open access are a step forward, but issues of academic style must be addressed simultaneously. In presenting an academic research project in the shape of this PhD thesis these issues are constantly present in the back of my mind.

I would emphasise again that these various observations on the state of design discourse are not indications of a lack of designers' interest or activity in relation to issues of ethics: there is plenty of this. Passion and energy in the quest for ethical design are not lacking. However, the majority of this energy is poured directly into practical considerations of how to achieve this end goal of good design, without having any real underlying understanding about what it means for design to actually be good or bad. Without these theoretical underpinnings to serve as a basic guide, much of the good thinking and activity which does go on is at risk of expending its energy without having any criteria by which to know whether or not it is on the right track.

## ***Approaching the Gap***

This project seeks to address this experienced and observed gap in the knowledge of designers by proposing one particular way of approaching the issue of design and designers' relationship with the good within the context of visual communication design, and exploring the potential usefulness of such an approach. This is not intended as a solution which will fill the knowledge gap. The gap is far too substantial to be plugged



by any single project. Rather, the goal of this project is to provide an example of the type of thinking which can productively contribute to a sustained collective project working towards addressing this gap. Thinking which is deep, but not myopically so. Focussing on one particular aspect of the issue, but without losing sight of the bigger picture of real life design practice operating within society.

The particular approach taken here is to begin with a focus primarily on the ethicality of design, starting by asking the question “is design ethical?” The specific ways in which the terms “design” and “ethical” are understood within the context of this investigation are set out in some detail within the body of the thesis in chapter three, however it is worth noting from this very early stage that the explicit choice to focus on the ethical rather than the good denotes a significant foundational distinction in the use of terms employed here. This is a distinction between morality and ethics.

There is a definite danger for confusion here as in everyday language these two words are often used interchangeably. Etymologically our contemporary words ethics and morals are in fact effectively synonymous – the Roman word *moralis* is a direct translation of the Greek *ethikos*.<sup>(26)</sup> Specialised usages are attributed in different contexts to each of the terms, however no clear conventions exist and usages can often be contradictory.<sup>ii</sup>

At this stage, without going into any depth it will be useful simply to declare the rules of the “language-game”<sup>iii</sup> being played within this project in relation to these two words. In the context of this project, I would propose that to talk of “the ethical” is to refer to something of a fundamental mode of existence in which qualitative differences are recognised in the ethical realm. To speak of “the moral” is to refer to socially constructed systems which are built upon the underlying bedrock of the recognition of ethical difference. Moralities are the ways in which we attempt to understand and implement structures for making measurements, judgements, classifications and suggestions about the ways in which we should live our lives.<sup>iv</sup> Questions of measuring and judging “the right” and “the good” are therefore questions which fall within the moral sphere. The ethical on the other hand does not so much make judgements as recognise the qualitative differences upon which moral judgements are based.

ii To illustrate this, take for example on the one hand sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who suggests that morality delineates a realm of responsibility, while to speak of ethics is to speak of socially created codes, laws and rules. Bauman calls for a morality without ethics, as in his reading of society the failure of the attempt to find universally applicable ethical laws has led to the floating of moral responsibility (which he implies is the true goal) away from individuals. (27 p.18)

However, on the other hand, English philosopher Bernard Williams talked of morality as a “peculiar institution [...] a special system, a particular variety of ethical thought” (28 p.174) which we would be better off without in order to allow the ethical to flourish free from “peculiar” structural moral constraints. Thus Williams essentially constructs a very similar argument to that of Bauman – that a certain desirable state in society is to be sought through internalisation of a way of being rather than through enforcement of external codes and laws – but with the positions of the words ethics and morals reversed and used to stand for opposite positions in the argument.

iii See Appendix A1 “On Definitions” for an explanation of the way Wittgenstein’s concept of language games is used in reference to definitions throughout this thesis.

iv To continue the previous analogy, according to our usages Bauman(27), Williams(28) and I appear to be playing for the same team; to be shooting towards the same goal. Although each having our own unique understandings of the concepts at play, there are definite family resemblances: one conception of a structural system of codes, laws and rules, and another of some more personal and inhabited experience. However, while Williams and I are wearing the same colours, Bauman seems to have opted to don a different strip. What Bauman means by using the word ethical bears resemblances to the meanings which Williams and I are indicating by using the word moral and vice versa.

## **Good Intentions**

The first stage in the methodology of this research project is largely represented by chapter two “Good Intentions” which assembles a body of empirical observation of salient experience of the relationship between design and ethics. The chapter begins with the reporting of ten unique narratives of the experience of working designers gathered through interviews. These ten accounts together demonstrate a diverse, multiplicitous, and conflicting plurality of attitudes, beliefs and approaches towards matters of ethics within real-world design practice. Recurrent issues of autonomy; tensions between ideal conceptions of design and commercial realities; economic pressures; respect, trust, value; compromising personal principles; qualities within design work (beauty, functionality, originality etc.); responsibilities of design; and issues relating to community culture and relationships, are just some of the more prominent ethically entangled subjects raised by the interviewees. Taking a step back to gain a broader perspective, emergent themes of frustrated utopian impulses and the pressures of economic precariousness are identified.

This observation and reporting of individual experience within design practice is not in itself an attempt to present a detailed map of the terrain of design ethics. Rather, it provides only an indicative survey drawing attention to some of the significant and notable issues and phenomena at play: an illustrative contextualisation which paints a backdrop, drawn from real-life experience, for the theoretical investigation of ethical design which will follow. However, the issues and themes which emerge from these unique narratives of design experience are significant and noteworthy in their own right. More than simply a scene-setting introduction they will in time, when seen in context of the whole thesis, make a valuable contribution towards the fourth aim of the research as set out in section 1.2, to investigate how contemporary attempts at / approaches to ethical design practice compare to this theoretical conceptualisation.

## **Ethical Design**

The second component of the methodology of the project, found in chapter three “Ethical Design”, is the assembly of a theoretical framework for understanding ethical design. This is constructed through research of theoretical literature which is synthesised to develop a proposal for a theoretical lens which is appropriate for understanding questions of the ethical within a design context. The setting up of this theoretical framework therefore directly addresses the first three research aims as stated in section 1.2:

What is meant by the ethical? What is meant by design? Based on these conceptualisations, is design / can design be ethical?

The central original contribution to knowledge proposed by this thesis is the setting forth of a conceptualisation of ethical theory specifically in relation to design (focussing on visual communication design, but with an openness to extension towards design as a whole). Building on central pillars of earlier work in the area of design ethics by design theorist Clive Dilnot, <sup>(29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34)</sup> and on philosopher Giorgio Agamben's formulation of the philosophical concept of potentiality, <sup>(35, 36, 37, 38)</sup> a way of thinking about the relationship between design and ethics is proposed which concludes that design is in fact always inherently ethical.

The ethical is "defined"<sup>v</sup> in the first section of chapter three as a mode of existence characterised by sensitivity to and recognition of qualitative differences between experienced potentialities. This "definition" is broken down, explained and unpacked through an exploration of four elements. The first three: *potentiality*, *singularity*, and *aesthetic sensitivity*, are conceived as necessary elements or pre-requisite characteristics which together create the potential environment for the ethical to be able to occur.

These three principles: *potentiality*, *singularity* and *aesthetic sensitivity* are drawn together in the suggestion, again following Agamben, that ethicality is not something to be possessed but is rather a *mode of existence*. The presence of all three is required to constitute ethical being. Where there is no potentiality, there can be no ethics. Where there is no encounter with the unique singularity of experience, we require no ethics. Where there is no aesthetic sensitivity, the ethical will remain undetectable despite staring us in the face.

The second section of chapter three considers a "definition" for design. Immediately design is recognised as a pluralistic concept which resists definition. The approach taken here is then to discuss some characteristic "family resemblances"<sup>vi</sup> which together provide some insight into the nature of design.

Conceptions of design which are extremely narrow – tying the activity to its observed products and outputs – or extremely broad – losing sight of design as a distinct activity separate from general human action – are rejected. Clive Dilnot's <sup>(29)</sup> suggestions of a range of fundamental capacities of design is taken as the starting point for setting out a conception of design based on three key characteristics: *transformation*, *configuration* and *critical sensitivity*.

v Again, see Appendix A1 for an account of the approach taken towards definitions throughout this thesis.

vi See Appendix A1 for an explanation of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances as used here.

These three characteristics together form not a definition but rather a way of describing design. This is offered as an incomplete and imperfect but indicative way of describing the complex phenomena of design. Bearing this in mind, the description of design laid out here could be summarised in this way: design is the negotiation and configuration of incommensurable singularities, which transforms and extends potentiality beyond the previously possible.

The third section of chapter three proposes a conception of ethical design based on a synthesis of the ways of thinking about the ethical and design developed here. This account of ethical design recognises significant correlations between the identified three key elements of the ethical: *potentiality*, *singularity* and *aesthetic sensitivity*, and the three characteristics used to formulate a description of design activity: *transformation*, *configuration*, and *sensitivity*.

Taking into account these relationships between the ethical and design, the conclusion of this chapter as to the ethicality of design in a theoretical sense, is that design is in fact always inherently ethical. A crucial caveat to this conclusion however is that though design is always ethical, this does not necessarily guarantee in any way that design will be good.

Keeping in mind the proposed distinction between the ethical and the moral, this conception of ethical design purposefully leaves questions of the moral qualification of good and bad unresolved, stating only that the ethical is the prerequisite condition in which both good and bad become possibilities.

Therefore, though authentic design is always foundationally ethical, it is proposed that this does not in any way bias design towards goodness. Here, a second significant contribution of the research to knowledge within the theoretical domain is advanced, as a significantly *unethical* capability to suppress and anaesthetise individuals' ethical experience is identified within design's very nature. This ever-present capacity of an inherently ethical design is proposed in the description of the possibility of processes of *An/Aesth/Ethics*: by which the ethical is anaesthetised through aesthetic means.

The chapter therefore concludes that design is a social force which should be treated with caution at all times. An uncritically optimistic trust should never be placed in the foundational ethicality of design: instead we must at all times remain vigilant, constantly interrogating our practice to determine whether our work is expanding potentiality and with that the ethical, or suppressing it.

These conclusions may appear pessimistic. The chapter ends with the suggestion of hope for inherently ethical design by proposing the possibility of what German philosopher of aesthetics Wolfgang Iser calls

a “blind-spot culture” <sup>(39 p.25)</sup> this being a culture in which conscious attention is purposefully drawn to our blind-spots: those areas of society which are systematically ignored and overlooked.

This possibility offers the hope that design is not fated to an/aestheticise but does in fact hold within itself the potential to nurture and promote the ethical if only the terms of its relationship with aesthetics would be renegotiated.

## **Design through the Ethical Lens**

The third component of the methodology of this project is presented within chapter four and draws the theoretical framework developed from the literature in chapter three together with empirical observation of six selected “sites” which are identified as significant areas of activity within attempts towards “good” visual communication design practice. Examination of these sites provides insights into the experienced realities of attempts towards ethicality within design, looking at reported attitudes, activities and behaviours which can be observed in these. Through this, an impression of the bigger picture of contemporary experience of the relationship between design and ethics can be built up. This corresponds to the fourth aim of the research set out above: to investigate how contemporary attempts at / approaches to ethical design practice compare to the theoretical conceptualisation set out in chapter three.

The six sites considered here are: the creation of and subscription to professional codes of ethics; the declaration of manifestos; observations of various “the designer as...” phenomena; direct design action for good; practices of design activism; and critical design practices. After first contextualising each of these sites as potential areas of ethical activity, the framework developed in chapter three is used as a specifically focussed lens to offer an analysis which reveals insights into the ethicality of each in line with this way of considering ethics. It must be remembered that this framework is proposed as just one possible way of thinking about ethical design. By utilising it in this way to critically analyse the six sites, the potential usefulness (alongside weaknesses and inadequacies) of this way of thinking in relation to practical design contexts can be revealed.

Use of the framework as an analytical lens in this way reveals varying degrees of ethical potential within each site. Significantly however, tension are identified in each site between ethical and an/aesth/ethic potentials.

The strength of the framework itself is in acting to reveal these potential an/aesth/ethic operations. In this way it is proposed that understanding of the way of thinking about ethical design developed in this project could aid practising designers in becoming aware of and better able to critically consider the ethicality of their own practice, particularly in relation to the previously invisible dynamic between ethics and an/aesth/ethics.

Proposals for the development and nurturing of a “blind-spot culture” which could address this conscious critical awareness of the ethical, which are introduced at the end of chapter three and returned to in final comments made in conclusion of the thesis in chapter 5, address the fifth and final aim of the research as set out in section 1.2: to investigate how ethical design might be supported or encouraged.

## 1.4 Original Contributions

The central original contribution to knowledge offered by this research is the setting out of one particular way of beginning to think about and understand what it might mean for design to be good, by articulating a conception of design as a foundationally and inherently *ethical* activity.

The nature of this fundamental ethicality is found in the recognition that design is always capable of the potential for both good and bad. Though the theoretical framework can offer no guidance as to how moral judgements between perceived values of good and bad should be made, the specific nature of the account of foundationally ethical design presented here can offer the insight that design always possesses capacities for the increasing or suppressing of ethicality. A second original contribution to knowledge can be found here in the development of an account of the operations of an/aesth/ethics within design activity.

A further methodological contribution to knowledge can be identified in the development of the interview methodology carried out as part of the research. The methods developed for the interviews carried out are innovative on two accounts. Firstly, an indirect approach was taken towards the subject matter. This meant that the subject matter of “ethics” was not disclosed to the interviewees at any point. The interviews were carried out as open discussions centring around the designer’s own work. This strategy allowed any discussion and reflection of ethical issues to arise naturally within a participant’s self-led narrative on their own terms. The second innovation can be found in the development of an in-depth immersive qualitative analysis technique similar to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, a method most commonly used in fields of psychology. The development and application of this methodology is a contribution to knowledge in its own right. See Appendix B1 for details of these innovative characteristics of the interview methodology.

## 1.5 Limitations

### ***Audience / Dissemination***

In offering a firm theoretical foundation from which to consider questions of the ethicality of design, the ideas developed within this research project hold the promise of a potentially significant positive contribution to visual communication design practice, and indeed to wider realms of design practice in general. However, it is recognised that the academic format and structure of this thesis is not well suited for direct dissemination to non-academically minded practically-oriented working designers. For a project which is primarily interested in offering support and encouragement to practicing designers the fundamental incompatibility of academically framed research and the culture of design practice is an obvious limitation which should be recognised. In order to effectively reach working designers the content of this research will need to be translated and packaged into a format more suited to an audience of design practitioners. The work of effectively and appropriately translating academic design research for a practitioner audience offers scope for continuation of this project in future research (see section 5.5).

### ***Interview methodology***

In relation to the interviews carried out as part of this project (see chapter 2) choices made as to the size and makeup of the sample could be proposed as a limitation. Interviews were conducted with only ten participants. Though much effort was put into carefully selecting participants to represent a broad range of experience across the spectrum of working visual communication designers, this small sample could never be claimed to be representative of the profession as a whole. Achieving such a representative sample was never an aim of the methodology. The choice was made at an early stage to seek out a small number of unique perspectives, and to take a qualitative in-depth immersive approach which would treat each individual as a valuable site of knowledge in the world rather than merely as a statistical data point.

Such an approach necessarily privileges depth over breadth. Having finite resources in terms of both time and manpower the decision was made to interview ten individuals, and to focus selection of these individuals by disregarding extremity populations such as “celebrity” designers and students.

Populations of design students, though they are abundant and easily accessible, were disregarded primarily on grounds that the experience of learning design is quite distinct from that of working in design. This is not to say that this experience is any less interesting, but that it is not the primary focus of this research. There is



certainly scope for future research in interviewing design students and comparing their ethical narratives to those of working designers.

A case could be made that to disregard those operating at the top of their field at the “celebrity” level within design practice is to disregard the best examples of excellence within the field, thus disregarding a rich and valuable source of data. There is certainly some validity to this argument, and without doubt there is scope for future research in conducting a series of interviews with participants at this high level. The decision not to do so in the case of this project was made for two reasons. Firstly, extremely successful designers form a small minority and though these individuals undoubtedly have abundances of experience to recount, these experiences are likely to be relatively atypical in comparison to the experiences of those masses who make up the majority of the design profession. Secondly, those who ascend from the rank and file to reach celebrity status may become accustomed to the process of interviewing, and rehearsed in discussing their own lives and work. This potential for rehearsal forms an undesirable obstacle standing in the path of the desired un-self-conscious reporting of experience which is sought by the interview methodology used here.

### ***Selection of six sites***

Regarding the six potential sites of ethics in design practice which are each respectively contextualised, discussed and analysed in chapter four, a case could certainly be made that the decision to choose only six sites, and these six sites in particular, is a limitation of the research. The theoretical framework is tested only in light of these six contexts. There are many other areas of design activity which clearly present potentials for significant ethical dimensions. The six sites selected here are offered not as an exclusive list of the only areas where ethics may potentially be encountered within design practice. Rather they are presented as a sample of some areas which have been prominent within visual communication design discourse over recent decades. By choosing prominent examples, it is hoped that the relevance of the theoretical framework may be demonstrated, and the reader may begin to grasp how the framework could then be applied to other areas of design activity and culture.

## ***Chapter 2: Good Intentions***

## 2.1 Ethics and Design Observed

Where should an investigation of the complex sets of relationships existing in the realms of experience lying between design and ethics begin? As in any theorising in relation to a practical discipline, the best place to start is with experience.

What is vitally important is that any abstract theoretical mapping out of conceptions of design and ethics must clearly reflect and respond to actually experienced realities of the ways in which these words and their underlying concepts are used, understood and acted on in the real world. It would be far too easy to construct a neat theory which accounts for all eventualities and ties up all the loose ends within its own little universe, but which actually bears very little resemblance towards lived experience of the phenomena in question.

Here at the beginning then, prior to any theorising or philosophising, it is vitally important to spend some time exploring the ground on which our scene is set. The foremost purpose of this chapter is therefore to paint something of a picture of the experienced realities of the relationship between design and ethics, by exposing some of the attitudes, activities and behaviours which can be observed within this dynamic. This scene-setting exercise will not by any means be a complete or perfect representation of the conclusive

absolute truth of design ethics as it is experienced today. In fact, quite the contrary, it is hoped that one of the outcomes emerging from this activity would rather be a perspective on the very pluralistic multiplicity and complexity of the design/ethics question, revealing the folly of any attempt to conclusively map out “the way things are” in this area. Rather than a conclusive mapping exercise, this first activity takes shape only as a survey indicating and highlighting a few notable points and phenomena: a sketch which hopes to capture something of the character of the subject without getting lost in the detail.

At this point, ideas of ethics, ethicality and the ethical are considered in the broadest conventional everyday language sense as ideas relating to a realm of experience characterised by qualities measured on a scale between good and bad. Chapter three of this thesis will go on to set out a much more specific philosophical and theoretical account of the ethical specifically in relation to design. However, at this stage, these initial observations of experienced relations between design and ethics are explored in the more general, undefined but largely commonly understood, sense.

As a first level introduction beginning to explore these issues of design and ethics, this chapter reports insights emerging from a series of ten interviews conducted with practicing visual communication designers. The idiosyncratic narratives of these ten individuals initially serve the function here simply to stand as evidence of the real-world existence of a wide pluralistic diversity of perceptions, views, attitudes, experiences, insights and perspectives held by practising designers regarding ethical dimensions of their activity. From this initial presentation of diversity and plurality, two pertinent discourses of frustrated utopianism and precariousness are identified and briefly contextualised.

## 2.2 10 Narratives on Ethical Design

Although sparse in comparison to more established fields, a considerable body of literature relating to ethical matters exists within graphic design discourse. Chapter four of this thesis will go on to discuss six potential sites of ethicality within design activity which have been selected based upon recurring themes drawn from these journalistic, academic, cultural and critical discourses. From these sources, certain pictures of design practice can be constructed, however these are just that: pictures conveniently framed through cultural discourses. Phenomena observed and reported within discourses will always be interpreted, packaged and presented in ways which are shaped and mediated by the nature of that discourse. Apparently insignificant omissions and exaggerations build up to form neat, convenient, communicable narratives in which views and perspectives almost inevitably tend towards polarising depictions of simplified ranges of positions within any given topic.

Consideration of such existing discourses is key to understanding some aspects of the contemporary character of a discipline. However, this knowledge must be anchored to real-world experience or risk becoming nothing more than a second level analysis of the discourse itself, rather than of the phenomena towards which the discourse refers.

Seeking such a real-world anchor to ground this investigation firmly in authentic experience from the very start, a series of ten interviews with practising designers from across Scotland was carried out. The purpose of these interviews was not to formulate, verify or support any hypothesis, but rather simply to discover some indications of the type of ethics related issues which designers are actually interested in, how these arise and the terms on which they are discussed. The activity is conceived as a process of gathering narratives of individuals who exist in complex situations and who each have their own unique design/ethics perspectives to reveal.

For an in-depth account of the methodological foundations and practicalities of the interview method developed to carry out and analyse these interviews, see Appendix B1: Interview Method. To summarise this process very briefly, interviews were conducted with ten individuals who make a living in one way or another through visual communication design in Scotland. The purpose of these interviews was to uncover some indications of the type of ethical issues which practising designers might actually be concerned with in their ordinary day-to-day work. To avoid immediately biasing the trajectory of these conversations towards a regurgitation of the conventionally expected ethical discourses within the field (sustainability,

payment of interns, speculative pitching etc.) a method was developed by which participants were simply invited to talk about their own personal experience of design practice. The subject of ethics was not explicitly mentioned or raised at any time either in arranging or carrying out the interview. Any reference to ethical issues which would then emerge in the course of the interview would be much more likely to arise on individual terms closer to the interviewee's own. Once carried out, analysis of the interviews focussed on giving voice to an authentic representation of the ethical issues which did naturally emerge within the accounts produced by the participants within the interview process. These spontaneously emerging ethical perspectives, attitudes and insights could provide a useful reality check to those mainstream ethical narratives circulating in the ether of design discourse.

It is hoped that the resulting insights into the ethical world-views of these particular visual communication designers will provide some empirically grounded initial points of reference which can serve to indicate something of the shape of the contemporary landscape of relationships existing between the ethical and design.

## **Interviews**

Ten visual communicators were interviewed as part of this study. This small number reflects the depth of the approach in seeking to do justice to individual accounts. It should also be reiterated that the gathering of these narratives does not constitute a major component of this research project in itself, but rather primarily has been undertaken with the aim of serving as an anchor, holding accountable the claims of design discourse against narratives of the real world experience of practitioners.

The individuals selected to be part of this small sample were therefore carefully chosen so as to represent a spread of different experiences within the boundaries of visual communication. There is of course no such thing as an "average" designer, however potential candidate groups of students and "celebrity" superstar designers were disregarded from the start on grounds of their experiences being potentially too atypical from that of conventional everyday working practice. It was decided to try to reflect experiences of senior, mid and junior level designers within both studio and freelance settings. The designation of visual communication design was set to mean any discipline or activity of designing which communicates visually: from graphic design, to web-design, to motion, to illustration. The table below presents the make up of the sample. (Table 1)

Name	Based in	Age	Years Experience	Education	Studio	Freelance	Job Title	Prestige		
								High	Medium	Low
Lesley	Glasgow	46-55	30	College		X	Graphic Designer			X
Lee	Aberdeen	36-45	20	Degree		X	Proprietor/Director		X	
Robert	Aberdeen	36-45	17	Degree	X		Creative Director	X		
Erik	Aberdeen	36-45	17	College	X		Creative Principal	X		
John	Aberdeen	26-35	8	Degree	X		Creative Designer		X	
Laura	Aberdeen	26-35	6-8	Degree	X		Developer & Studio Manager			X
Chris	Glasgow	18-25	5	Postgrad		X	Illustrator/Architecture Student		X	
Justin	Edinburgh	18-25	4.5	Degree		X	Digital & Motion Designer		X	
David	Glasgow	18-25	2	Degree	X		Junior Designer			X
Keith	Aberdeen	18-25	1	College	X		Designer/Developer			X

Table 1: Interview Participants

These ten individuals represent a fairly broad cross section of experience within visual communication design in Scotland. Six work within studio or agency environments, while four operate independently in some form of what is described here as freelance work. There is a good spread of levels of experience and seniority. Six identify primarily as graphic designers working across a range of media, two are focussed on web design, one works mostly in motion and animation and one is an illustrator.

Each individual was invited to take part in a conversation surrounding their work (again, for more specific details of the interview method see Appendix B1). From the same initial stimulus to “Tell me about this project...” each interview took its own unique course as the participants led the discussion into areas of their own particular interests. In each interview, ethical issues arose and were discussed on the terms of the interviewee with minimal prompting.

Written summaries of the in depth interpretive analysis conducted in relation to each interview account highlighting key themes and issues identified for each interviewee can be found in appendix B7. In order to provide an indicative overview of emergent themes, simplified lists representing key themes identified through analysis within each narrative can be found in appendix B2. It must be remembered that these are only an extremely simplified presentation of a much deeper analysis.

Though many similar themes are identified across the multiple accounts gathered here, any attempt to crudely merge or combine this qualitative data to claim correlations etc. between the various narratives would be misguided. Each narrative must be valued as a unique site in itself.

This is not however to say that no connections can be made between these narratives, or that claims to the significance of commonly emerging themes cannot be made. Having identified key ethical themes as expressed by each participant within their own narrative, the next level of analysis is to look beyond each individual account to see what connections and comparisons can be made with others in the sample and further beyond this to ideas at wider levels of the profession, societal and theoretical discourse. Connecting individual narratives to wider discourses draws out the relevance and importance of these unique idiosyncratic perspectives. Fragments of this analysis can be found throughout the thesis as connections and links are made from issues being discussed back to the interview narratives. The key distinction to be maintained here is that any connections and claims made as to common themes developing across multiple narratives are made at the level of discourse rather than at the level of individual accounts.



## Ethical Discourses Emerging from Unique Narratives

Analysis of each interview narrative seeks to make sense of and give voice to the unique perspective of the interviewee. As stated above, each of these individual accounts must be respected as a unique site of knowledge on its own terms. The existence of recurrent similarly expressed common themes and concerns should not be treated quantitatively, crudely counting these to claim the most frequently mentioned as somehow the most significant or important. The presence of recurrent themes can however be recognised as indications of the existence of discourses.

A vast array of discourses at different levels relating to, or being proposed as relating to, issues of ethics can be identified within the ten narratives examined here. Each individual practitioner expresses complex and often contradictory attitudes and perspectives on a wide variety of issues. The overall impression gained is of a group of individuals expressing a great diversity of perspectives on a wide range of complex ethically related issues.

Some of the more prominent themes identified through the interpretive analysis carried out relate to ideas of: autonomy; tensions between ideal conceptions of design and commercial realities; economic pressures; ideas of respect, trust and value in relation to designers' activity; the compromising of personal principles; debates around qualities such as beauty, functionality and originality within design work; the responsibilities of design; and issues relating to community, culture and relationships regarding design work. (For summaries mapping these identified themes back to individual interview narratives see appendix B3)

### **Autonomy** <sup>(B3.1)</sup>

In terms of autonomy several of the designers, in different ways, express desires to gain increased control their own activity. Some express frustration at lack of autonomy within the realities of service based commercial work in which the client holds the power. Levels of perceived autonomy within client-based work are connected by some to perceived levels of trust and respect from the client. Others, with varying degrees of success, have attempted to achieve greater autonomy by changing their ways of working, moving towards freelance work or entrepreneurial strategies.

By selling his illustrations in limited editions through selected outlets, Chris appears to have had some success in walking a fine line maintaining economic viability and control over his own activity. <sup>(B7.1)</sup> Lee

attempted to branch out into greetings cards partly through a desire to gain a greater level of autonomy in his work, but soon found that the freedom of working for oneself was limited within the boundaries of an aggressive industry. <sup>(B7.8 Lee)</sup>

### ***Tensions Between Ideal Conceptions of Design and Commercial Realities*** <sup>(B3.2)</sup>

Tensions between perceptions of how design should operate in an ideal sense, and encountered realities of commercial practice in the real world are commonly expressed. Various accounts, both positive and negative, of the realities of having to constantly compromise with clients in commercial work are found. On the more positive side, responsibility to do good work on the client's behalf is invoked along with suggestions that better client relationships result in greater flexibility.

A common theme is frustration at not being able to achieve desired personal standards for quality in design work due to the imbalance of power in favour of the client. This links back to impressions of lack of respect for the design profession from clients. Levels of cynicism are expressed ranging from pragmatic acceptance of the nature of commercial work, to general disillusionment, to complete loss of passion for design. Frank admits that though he still enjoys his work he has become cynical to a degree, pragmatically often considering it as just a job. <sup>(B7.3)</sup> For designers such as David and John the disillusionment is more extreme. <sup>(7.4, B7.2)</sup> Both recount how they used to enjoy designing as a hobby on their own time, but through exposure to commercial practice have lost all passion. Where design used to be enjoyable it has become nothing more than a means to earn a living. A common coping strategy in response to this disillusionment appears to be the ability to almost entirely dislocate and separate professional activity from personal.

### ***Economic Pressures*** <sup>(B3.3)</sup>

The economic imperative to earn money in order to pay the bills is strongly felt. Uninteresting but lucrative "bread and butter" commercial work is described by some as an inescapable but pragmatically necessary reality. Desires to avoid compromising personally held principles due to economic pressure are expressed, however this is not always easy when mortgages need paid and families need fed. Strategies of entrepreneurship and freelancing appear to offer some potential to escape "the grind" of conventional commercial work by earning a living on one's own terms. However, these strategies come with their drawbacks. While offering some degree of economic autonomy, they often also require sacrifice in other areas such as security and sociability. As Lee found with his greeting card venture, to set out on your own is to hazard considerable economic risks. Justin, Lee and Lesley talk of a perception of relative freedom in

freelance work, but all miss working with others.<sup>(B7.5, B7.8, B7.9)</sup>

### ***Respect, Trust, Value*** <sup>(B3.4)</sup>

A recurrently expressed theme is the desire for designers and design activity to be valued, respected and trusted by others engaging with design. Many insecurities and tensions felt in practice seem to stem from this root as designers feel undervalued and underappreciated. Desires are articulated for design to be respected as a legitimate profession, and for clients to act in ways which indicate this desired level of respect by providing designers with greater autonomy, placing trust in designers' riskier, more interesting and more creative ideas. For Lesley, whose priorities lie primarily with family, having loyal reliable clients who evidence their respect and trust for her by paying on time is enough to satisfy even when the work itself is not interesting.<sup>(B7.9)</sup>

### ***Compromising Personal Principles*** <sup>(B3.5)</sup>

Questions of good and bad work are complex, often possessing multiple simultaneously conflicting dimensions. While some talk of drawing a line at working for certain clients – Frank, Robert and Lee all suggest they would never work for far-right political parties<sup>(B7.3, B7.10, B7.8)</sup> – several accounts tell of situations in which deeply held personal principles have been transgressed due to pressures exerted from various directions. David talks of how, despite holding strong anti-consumerist beliefs, his everyday work supports consumerism.<sup>(B7.2)</sup> Frank gives examples of times when he has transgressed his personally set ethical boundaries due to the economic pressure of employment, but also in pursuit of interesting creative work. He talks of feeling guilt for having designed packaging which made unhealthy children's snacks appear nutritious, but also tells of how, despite hating smoking and the damage it does, some of his favourite clients were tobacco clients due to the "wildly creative" nature of the work.<sup>(B7.3)</sup>

### ***Qualities Within Design Work: Beauty, Functionality and Originality*** <sup>(B3.6)</sup>

In terms of qualities proposed as indicators of the value of good design, beauty, functionality and originality are concepts which are commonly discussed. While superficial "style" is often denigrated, some speculate upon a certain value being found simply in bringing beautiful visual artefacts into being. Originality is prized by some as a virtue of good design, but David questions the blind pursuit of originality at the cost of good ideas.<sup>(B7.2)</sup> Ideas of functionality or fitness for purpose are found in various forms from articulations of design as a problem solving endeavour to suggestions that excellence in functionality of communication is

a social responsibility. Robert suggests that to reduce design to a mere combination of form and function is to miss out on its true value. He proposes that the true nature of design must be to help improve people's lives. <sup>(B7.10)</sup>

### ***Responsibilities of Design*** <sup>(B3.7)</sup>

Various responsibilities are implied, or attributed to design by the interviewees. The idea suggested by Robert that design should be about improving people's lives surfaces in different forms across multiple accounts where it is expressed in varying strengths. While Robert effectively claims that "helping" is an indispensable component of authentic design, <sup>(B7.10)</sup> Lesley suggests that her work for businesses and charities is essentially almost exactly the same in terms of process (they're both trying to get people to do what they want them to do" <sup>(B7.9)</sup>) however she would always prefer to do work which helps others as she finds it more satisfying.

Frank identifies a duality within design's operations in society. He recognises an ideal sense for design in which "obviously it should in theory make life easier for people" however he also recognises what he sees to be the reality that "we're obviously ultimately trying to sell shit to people that they don't actually need." <sup>(B7.3)</sup> Questions of responsibility are not clear cut however. While Frank identifies design's complicity in aspects of the operation of consumerism within society as a negative, Robert talks of the designer's responsibility both in terms of helping businesses achieve their goals, and in terms of helping people in their lives by achieving aspired to lifestyle ideals through consumerist material acquisition. <sup>(B7.10)</sup> Individuals can look at the same situation and perceive very different stories. A diverse array of responsibilities are recognised within design by different individuals: from primary responsibility to the client; to broadly conceived responsibilities towards society in a general sense; to ideas of limited discipline specific responsibility. Lee suggests that design will not be able to save the world, but that it must be responsible for its own limited sphere of influence. <sup>(B7.8)</sup>

### ***Community, Culture and Relationships*** <sup>(B3.8)</sup>

The final discourse identified here as significant, is a broad category which refers to a diversity of issues revolving around relationships between those involved with or affected by the design process, and with the cultural environment within the design profession.

In terms of the culture within the field of design practice, some express the importance of mutual trust,

respect, honesty and openness between client and designer, or between colleagues, management and employees within a studio. Good relationships are seen by many to be a key foundation of the production of good work. Keith values the constructive and supportive wider community of designers which he finds online.<sup>(B7.6)</sup> Robert, from his position of seniority, talks of the importance of nurturing a healthy studio environment in which employees feel valued and respected.<sup>(B7.10)</sup> Justin's decision to become a freelancer was partly motivated by his desire to escape the pressures of expectations to work long hours within a studio environment. However, working on his own much of the time, he now misses the social aspects of team working.<sup>(B7.5)</sup>

Lesley and Lee prioritise family life within the work/life balance they achieve through freelancing.<sup>(B7.9, B7.8)</sup>

Lesley's approach to the business side of design is heavily relational; almost all her work is picked up through personal relationships and word of mouth and she often barter and trades with others for services.<sup>(B7.9)</sup>

## **Summary: Plurality / Frustrated Utopianism / Economic Precariousness**

The story of ethical experience within design practice as told from ten unique perspectives here appears not to be a straightforward case of simply knowing what the right thing to do is, and then seeking to find ways to do that.

The ethical narratives of these ten designers are complex, full of conflict and constant compromise. Glimpses of earnest desires to strive for ideals are often revealed, but just as often these aspirations are quashed by pragmatic resignation to cultural and economic "realities". It is not uncommon to find expression of apparently paradoxical explicit contradictions existing within designers' own accounts, as an individual knowingly acts against their own better judgement, violating their own principles, doing the opposite of what they themselves have defined as the good (this might be elsewhere be called cognitive dissonance,<sup>(1)</sup> akrasia,<sup>(2)</sup> or enlightened false consciousness<sup>(3)</sup>).

Taken as a whole, the ten unique narratives of ethical experience within design practice gathered here through interpretive analysis of the interview accounts, present a diverse and pluralistic array of existing ethical concerns. Each individual operating within design has their own unique experience and perspective, and holds their own unique values and principles. There is much common ground, but there is also much conflict, with many opposing or incompatible positions being expressed. Opposition, conflict and

incompatibility does not only exist between different accounts, but this complexity can also be found existing within a single individual's own narrative.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman articulates the complex pluralistic and fragmentary nature of contemporary ethical experience in this way:

The once unitary and indivisible 'right way' begins to split into 'economically sensible', 'aesthetically pleasing', 'morally proper'. Actions may be right in one sense, wrong in another. Which action ought to be measured by what criteria? And if a number of criteria apply, which is to be given priority?<sup>(4 p.5)</sup>

The interviews carried out here serve to demonstrate that not only are there as many perspectives on ethics as there are individuals, but that in fact the plurality of ethical perspectives exceeds this. Coherent unified positions are not guaranteed even within the mind of a single subject. In order to do the concept of ethical design justice, this diverse plurality must be recognised from the start.

This investigation need not however resign itself to total relativism and particularism. While individual perspectives on ethics must be recognised as radically unique, many discourses on ethics within the field of design exist which can be engaged with in meaningful ways. Discourses are not unified concrete positions but are spheres of constantly shifting debate which evidence areas of contention.

While no one "issue" emerges as the single key to unlocking this complex web of design ethics, it is possible to identify the broad area of tensions between experienced commercial "realities" and ideal conceptions of design activity as a significant discourse which can be seen to extend its roots deeply throughout designers' ethical experience as observed here.

In various ways, each designer interviewed expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their experience of the reality of design practice. For some however, the origins of this dissatisfaction appear to lie deeper than the superficial and manageable everyday frustration of having to comply with client's unreasonable demands (Frank talks of jobs in which clients have point blank refused a design concept because a colour conflicts with their football loyalties<sup>(87.3)</sup>).

A deep unhappiness can be observed within a significant proportion of the interviewees which appears to stem at least in part from a perception of being constantly pulled, pressured, and torn between economic imperatives to make a living and pay the bills on the one hand, and the seeking of autonomy, creative freedom, respect and value within practice on the other.

Two interconnected pertinent discourses which can be observed within the interviews carried out here and which can be seen to be potentially significant to this investigation, are discourses which might be referred to as a sense of frustrated utopianism, and of an endemic condition of economic precariousness within design practice.

### ***The Frustrated Utopian Ambitions of Graphic Design***

The suggestion that design suffers from a condition of frustrated utopian ambition stems from recognition of a commonly observed mismatch within the mind of the designer between what design is imagined to be, and what it is experienced to be.

Design is frequently imagined, presented, described and proposed as a world bettering, people helping, life improving, problem solving activity. However lived experience of professional design activity in the real world, though regularly paying lip service to this utopian optimism, more often than not fails to live up to these socially motivated ideals.

Very few people consciously choose to work in a profession which they believe to be fundamentally bad. No one really wants to be a bad guy. No doubt members of even the most vilified professions – drug dealers, executioners, hedge fund managers, traffic wardens – rationalise their daily activities, at some level actually believing them to be justifiable. In their eyes, perhaps the beneficial outcomes outweigh the less socially popular aspects of the job: the good outweighs the bad. It's not unusual to believe that you are, all things taken into consideration, fundamentally the good guy.

There is however a distinctly tangible sense felt within the field of graphic design that graphic design really is a genuinely good thing *in its own right*. This sentiment may not regularly be shouted from the rooftops, but it can be found bubbling away below the surface all across the field as designers casually make comments inferring that the purpose of their vocation is not really just to make attractive letterheads, but actually rather *to help people*: improving their daily lives and increasing their personal wellbeing (whether by making their letterheads more attractive, or by more radical interventions).

This streak of utopian optimism is of course neither universal, consistent, nor uncontested within the field. In fact, though common, it can at times appear to be a fairly unpopular attribute: publically tolerated only at low levels and in certain contexts.



Fig 1: Artefacture. Design Will Save the World  
Fig 2: Frank Chimero. Design Won't Save the World



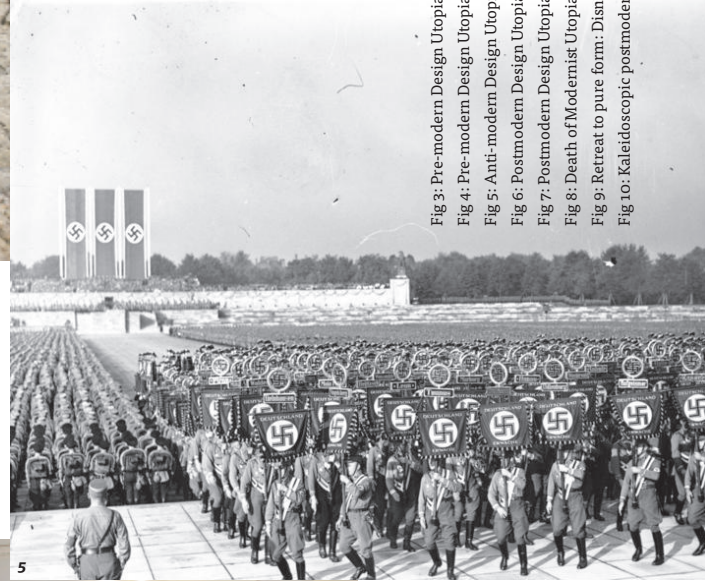


Fig 3: Pre-modern Design Utopias: Mayan Civilisation  
 Fig 4: Pre-modern Design Utopias: Ancient Greek Civilisation  
 Fig 5: Anti-modern Design Utopias: Nazi Design - Nuremberg Rally  
 Fig 6: Postmodern Design Utopias: Zine Culture  
 Fig 7: Postmodern Design Utopias: Memphis  
 Fig 8: Death of Modernist Utopianism in Architecture: Demolition of Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe Housing Complex  
 Fig 9: Retreat to pure form: Disney Concert Hall LA, Frank Gehry  
 Fig 10: Kaleidoscopic postmodern schizophrenia: Eiffel Tower, Las Vegas

In illustration of the touchiness of designers on this subject matter, consider the example of an incident occurring a number of years ago which brewed a squall in the proverbial design blogosphere teacup. San Francisco based design studio Artefacture began selling a T-shirt which proudly proclaims in all caps, the none too subtle slogan “DESIGN WILL SAVE THE WORLD”. (Fig 1)

Some time after this, designer Frank Chimero created a poster in response the t-shirt, also in all caps reading “DESIGN WON’T SAVE THE WORLD: GO VOLUNTEER AT A SOUP KITCHEN YOU PRETENTIOUS F\*\*\*”. (Fig 2) For a few weeks the teacup rocked back and forth with debate.

This rather trivial confrontation serves to illustrate two polar opposite perspectives on the utopian potential of design. On the one side we have the hopelessly utopian. On the other, the merely hopeless.

Although not uncontested then, there does appear to exist deeply within graphic design a certain distinctive trace of utopian belief. Where does this optimistic utopian thinking apparently widely present within designers and frustrated by commercial realities come from? An argument could certainly be made for a strong, if subconscious, conceptual linkage between the utopian tendencies of design and modernism.

Historian Nikolaus Pevsner famously proposed William Morris as a “pioneer of modern design.”<sup>(5)</sup> Such mainstream historical narratives would have us drawn links between utopian modernism and socially oriented design activities such as those epitomised by Morris through his politically radical anarchist/ socialist Arts and Crafts agenda.

As is well known, the radical anarchist/socialist ideals of William Morris’ Arts and Crafts design have been thoroughly absorbed, disarmed and transformed by the capitalist system into nothing more than beautiful luxury products sold in exclusive boutiques.<sup>(6)</sup> The various subsequently recognised stages of utopian modernist design have each suffered similar fates.

The pseudo-canonical historical narrative of the “Bauhaus tradition” in Western design education provides another mainstream reinforcement of the story of utopian modernism developing and emerging in tandem with, and reflecting, cultural conditions across wider society. The evolutions of educational approaches and philosophies from the Bauhaus in Germany (1919-33) and Vkhutemas (1920-30) in Russia, onwards through László Moholy-Nagy’s New Bauhaus in Chicago (1937-49>) to the German Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (1953-68) are typically depicted as embodied reflections of the underlying desires of foundationally utopian modernist beliefs.<sup>(7)</sup>



However the evolving modernist design principles emerging from these respective educational eras, of form giving, service of society through productive industry, and increasingly dogmatic belief in processes of scientific rationality each failed to bring about the materialisation of utopia. Corresponding developments coming to a head in the rise and subsequent fall of the design methods movement<sup>(8)</sup> and ideas of design as the solving of wicked problems<sup>(9)</sup> only served to demonstrate the complete inadequacy of this trajectory towards rationality based conceptions of design to bring any meaningful contribution in the human social dimension to the table.<sup>(10, 11)</sup>

Despite the manifest failures of the utopian modernist project in design, the impact of almost a century of sustained, deeply ingrained, educational and cultural modernism is difficult to shake off. No matter how post-modern (or whatever is post- that) we believe ourselves to be (or, for that matter how modern we perhaps never were<sup>(12)</sup>) the characteristically modernist desire to save the world through some form of rational systematic design process apparently persistently endures within the minds of contemporary designers.

Although utopianism and modernism come hand-in-hand, we should not uncritically mistake this correlation for causation. Utopian tendencies can be easily identified within both pre- and post- modern design activities. Since the dawn of humanity, prehistoric and ancient civilisations have employed design in their pursuits of decidedly pre-modernist utopias. More recently, the German Nazi regime, though violently anti-modernist, used design to great effect in seeking to bring about its own vision of utopia. Post-modern design tendencies, though often characterised in terms of an explicit rejection of modernist utopianism, can still be seen to seek their own utopias though these are of quite different forms to those imagined under modernism. (Figs 3-10)

Was modernism ever the source of utopian impulses, or did these impulses already exist within design? Does utopianism persist within design merely as an obstinate remnant of modernism, or does the partial retreat of this cultural construct actually allow rediscovery of an inherent utopian nature emerging from within design itself?

Alternative narratives to that of the exclusive correlation of utopian design and modernism must be allowed. One such alternative might identify a relationship between the increasingly recognised failure and frustration of design's inherent utopian impulses, and the increasing professionalization and industrialisation of the idea of design throughout the development of twentieth century culturally-modernist conceptions of the design industry. Although the construction of the case for the details of such

a proposal is an argument perhaps to be explored at another time, outside of this current investigation, the impact of professionalisation, industrialisation and general commercialisation must be recognised as significant factors at play within contemporary ethical experience within design. Some of these issues will be picked up in coming discussion of the discourse of economic precariousness within the design industry.

Wherever it might stem from, it appears that utopianism, encountered in a wide variety of different attempts to improve the world through design, is a recurrent characteristic within design practice. The frustration and failure of these utopian tendencies to succeed is equally common.

Individuals' varied responses to experience of the constant frustration of these deeply held utopian tendencies range from anxiety, to disillusionment, to cynicism, to fatigue and exhaustion. How are we to proceed when faced with complex ethical situations in which it appears to be almost entirely impossible to do the right thing even if we believe we know what that would be.

Faced with such situations Zygmunt Bauman observes ethical coping-mechanisms such as the "floating" of responsibility through the separation of our-selves from our-actions in role-performing.<sup>(4 p.19)</sup> In these same impossible situations, philosopher Peter Sloterdijk diagnoses the mental condition of cynical "enlightened false consciousness" which allows us to continue working despite full and complicit awareness of the presence of irreconcilable ethical conflict.<sup>(3 p.5)</sup>

Such survival strategies allow individuals to continue operating while experiencing this mental tension. However, the sensitivity of designers to incidents such as the "Design will save the world" t-shirt, demonstrates that these suppressed emotions are never far from the surface.

For those who have tried (and failed) to save the world through design, the t-shirt's message is perceived as something of an arrogant and naïve slap in the face. The message of Chimero's response poster may not in fact be representative, as characterised above, of the merely hopeless, but rather of earnest, ethically engaged individuals who cope with their perceived personal inability to directly save the world through design, by attempting to save their local world in other ways outwith office hours.

In observing the complex relationships between design activity and ethics, this should be borne in mind. Designers are individual human beings, who generally do want to do good, and strive to be good in their activity. However, these good intentions inevitably are frustrated to varying degrees as they come up against externally imposed constraints. Observation of the operations of design and designers within the real world is therefore not observation of design and designers alone, but is rather observation of design

activity taking place in response to quite specific social, political and cultural constraints. Without doubt in the case of professional design activity the most significant force operating as a constraint upon design is economics.

### ***Economics: Pressure and Precariousness***

The activities of the contemporary professional design industry are constrained and restricted to service of commercial ends within the boundaries of the capitalist economic system. Though it is possible for design to operate within this system for the good of many socially beneficial projects, the cold profit-seeking logic of capitalist economics inevitably and unavoidably creates friction and tension with the broader horizoned socially focussed utopian thinking which underpins many designers' optimistic self-image. Design and ecology researcher Jody Boehnert describes what she sees as a fundamental incompatibility between the socially utopian impulses of design and the fundamentally economically focussed nature of the design industry in this way:

the practice of design, understood as a socially beneficial activity engaged with building a better world, is integrally in conflict with the design industry due to the epistemological, ontological, and ideological assumptions embedded into and reproduced by capitalism, the economic system that determines the priorities of the design industry. While the concept of design as involved with creating a better world is the dominant rhetoric in the industry and reflects the stated intentions of many if not most designers, designers also simultaneously have other, often obscured and conflicting intentions, determined by the systemic priorities of the design industry.<sup>(13 p.120)</sup>

Boehnert suggests the root of the tension and anxiety which exists within the minds of many designers regarding their experience of the frustration of their desires to be ethically good and/or do ethically good work in design practice, lies within a failure to recognise the crucial distinction between design as an abstract ideal and the design industry as a version of this ideal constrained within the boundaries of a capitalist economic system.

Surgeons and butchers are both professionally concerned with the cutting of flesh and bone, however the respective contexts in which this cutting activity takes place are quite different. A surgeon might reasonably be expected to have a good shot at butchery, however a butcher would not generally be considered to be appropriately equipped to operate on a living creature. One would not want to mistake one's butcher for

one's surgeon. This is not to say that surgery is to be considered the more worthwhile or noble task, only that there are important differences to be recognised between the two.

In the same way the design industry should not uncritically be assumed to be equivalent to design as conceived in an ideal sense. Design is used within the design industry, but the design industry does not represent everything that design is capable of doing.

Frustrations arise where design is uncritically equated with the design industry, as designers wishing to act within the full potential they recognise within their innate sense of design as an ideal, come up against the concretely imposed boundaries of the design industry. The obvious solution to avoid this would be simply to operate as designers outwith the boundaries of the design industry, where such restrictions do not exist. However this is much easier said than done.

A consistently observable reality of human experience is that, while in exceptional circumstances individuals may heroically sacrifice their comfort or safety in pursuit of an ideal, at the level of normal everyday life the abstract ideals, values and principles of morality and ethics are more often than not relegated to the status of luxuries to be pursued only once immediately perceived needs have been met. In the insightful words of German playwright Bertolt Brecht "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral" – "First the feed, then the morals."<sup>(14)</sup><sup>i</sup>

As is evidenced in the interviews carried out here, the need to earn money to pay the bills is a prominent theme emerging within interviewees narratives. This commercial imperative is often seen as a direct impediment to autonomy and creativity. At times, it is admitted that economic pressure directly forces the compromising of personally held values and principles. For designers such as David and John, the realities of commercial practice have caused them to lose much if not all of their passion for design. As design researcher Bianca Elzenbaumer (of design duo Brave New Alps<sup>(15)</sup>) notes "it is widely accepted that designers, at some point, will necessarily need to make a choice between financial stability and meaningful work."<sup>(16 p.38)</sup>

Elzenbaumer identifies precariousness as the key economic feature of design practice today, this being constituted by "lack of material welfare, stability and security."<sup>(16 p.38)</sup> Her PhD research paints a grim picture of this prevailing economic culture within contemporary graphic design practice as exploitative, competitive, and damaging to health. Her overview of the pervasive widely accepted realities of the

i My translation: the German word "Fressen" as opposed to "Essen" is reserved for the feeding of animals rather than humans, and is used by Brecht here to emphasise this underlying animalistic aspect of human morality and ethical thinking.

situation is as follows:

Being passionate about one's work, jumping from one commissioned project to the next, accepting new commissions even when overworked, keeping several commissions going at the same time, accepting work even when underpaid, establishing bulimic work patterns, having work taking over life, doing without sick pay, paid vacations and unemployment compensation, having no or only minimal social protection, while just about making it to the end of the month: this is what working as a designer today involves for many between the ages of 25 to 45, irrespective of the type of projects undertaken.<sup>(16 p.40)</sup>

The results of this firmly established and self-perpetuating culture lead to common observations of:

bulimic work and chaotic sleeping patterns, unhealthy eating habits and to the abuse of legal and illegal substances to keep themselves productive and, thus, competitive in the market. [...] high levels of stress and anxiety, which in turn result in strained bodies, exhaustion, burn-out, premature heart attacks and strokes as well as mental and emotional disorders and depression.<sup>(16 p.41)</sup>

Designers are presented with no alternative other than to operate within the design industry. To work within this industry is to be forced to operate under these prevailing economic pressures in which burdens of cost, risk, and good will are outsourced by clients and borne by designers.

Escape from the grind of low paid, high pressure studio work to freelance practice is seen by some as an attractive route towards gaining autonomy within work, and does seem to provide some noticeable increases in satisfaction, as is evidenced by accounts of those such as interviewees Chris, Justin, Lee and Lesley. However, striking out on your own bears significant risks with increased exposure to economic precariousness and decreased access to support networks. As Elzenbaumer points out, freelancers are inevitably judged only to be as good as their last project, and therefore:

Should that chain of "performance" break – due to exhaustion, illness, family life, a too critical turn in one's practice or for any other reason – most designers risk slipping into the daily struggles of the highly educated yet precarious creative crowd.<sup>(16 p.41)</sup>

Elzenbaumer proposes that this condition of precariousness plays a direct role in effectively forcing designers to give up on social, political and ethical engagement within their design practice. Such desires and tendencies are commonplace amongst design students but soon evaporate once these young

designers are exposed to the workplace.<sup>(16 p.38)</sup> Stretched to the limits and exhausted by the undertaking of commercial work necessary in order to earn enough to pay bills and put food on the table, such pursuit of earnestly desired utopian impulses becomes nothing more than an always just out of reach dream of an ill afforded luxury.

These themes, observed emerging from within the interpretation of interview narratives carried out here, of the potential for conditions of economic precariousness to suppress and frustrate ethical utopian aspirations as they emerge and exist within design culture, are significant issues to be borne in mind in the context of this project.

Alongside identification of specific discourses such as these, the other significantly identified emergent theme which should be emphasised and reiterated at the close of this section is the observation of a diverse plurality of competing, conflicting and simultaneously co-existing conceptions of ethics amongst practicing designers. There is no single common experience of ethics in design. Each individual travels their own unique path, often heading in quite different directions. The themes identified here are points where these paths cross and converge.

The insights presented here emerge from observation of unique individual ethical experience within design practice. In chapter four, six potential sites of ethical activity within design practice as observed and discussed by others within literature are identified and examined. Discussion of these six potential sites of ethics within design practice illustrates a range of experiences, observed and documented through design discourse, which together raise a variety of significant contexts, issues and implications regarding the relationship between design practice and ethics. Adding this to the picture of the plurality of unique ethical positions, attitudes and beliefs existing among individual designers as evidenced through the interview narratives presented earlier in this chapter, a deep, rich and complex picture of the landscape of design ethics begins to emerge.

In the face of this immensely complex reality, the apparently simple question “is design ethical?” appears somewhat less straightforward. In order to make any headway in making sense of the question of ethical design, a conceptual framework must be constructed. This is the task of chapter three, which seeks to address the first three research aims of this project by proposing a way of thinking firstly about the ethical, secondly about design, and thirdly (combining these first two) about ethical design. Once in possession of this conceptual framework, the task of unravelling some of the complexity of ethical experience in the context of design, though no less complex, deep and rich, becomes at least a little less daunting.



It must of course be remembered at all times that the conceptual framework being proposed here is not presented as a claim to the key to conclusive absolute truth which will unlock the matter and solve all problems. This is quite purposefully and openly a presentation of one possible way of thinking about these issues, based on clearly stated assumptions and foundations. This way of thinking is offered up to be tested as to its potential usefulness as in chapter four it is applied in the analysis of the ethicality of the six sites discussed there. And so, throughout chapter three, which is substantially abstract, conceptual and theoretical in nature, it will be valuable for the reader to maintain in the back of their mind a constant awareness of the real-world contexts and experiences of design practice set out in this chapter.

## ***Chapter 3: Ethical Design***

## Ethical Design?

The overarching aim of this project is to seek some better understanding of what it might mean for design to be good. The approach taken towards this aim is the investigation of this central research question: is design ethical? The preceding section has provided something of a contextualisation to this issue, setting the scene by sketching an indicative picture of some of the unique attitudes, perspectives and practical strategies of designers observed as they attempt to exist and practice ethically in the real world.

This section takes a step back from the front-line world of the practising designer to consider more reflectively what it really would mean for design to be ethical in an ideal theoretical sense.

What is the goal of this search for an abstract ideal understanding of ethical design? From the beginning, the sense that what is being sought is an ethics *for* design should be immediately discounted. This would be to suggest that this is essentially an activity of selecting the most suitable pre-packaged ethical theory for design from a range of existing options. Locke or Levinas? Kant or Kierkegaard?

There is nothing wrong with adapting and applying such existing ethical theories towards and into the context of design activity. This is normal and inevitable, in the same way that such ethical principles are

applied in all areas of human activity, from supreme courts to football pitches. However, each of these contexts has its own unique character.

The aim of this project, is not simply to investigate how general ethical principles can be applied to the context of design. Such applications of externally constructed ethical theories will always be open to the suspicion that they are merely holding back the tide, supplying a veneer which transforms un-ethical or neutral design into ethical design. If the validity of the external ethical system were to be brought into doubt, design would be left without an ethical leg to stand on. An authentic understanding of ethics within the context of design, must not rely on external forces for its validity. It must emerge from within design activity, specifically in relation to design.

This investigation seeks to explore what the unique character of design ethics might be, whether there is an inherently ethical dimension to design, and what implications recognition of this ethical dimension might have for design practice.

Conversely, any potential ethics discovered lurking deep within design must stand up to scrutiny outwith design. Design theorist Clive Dilnot, writing of the search for an authentic design ethics warns of the danger of constructing an insular discipline specific conception of ethics:

However much some would like it, we cannot simply develop a cozy set of design-ethics that will swaddle current practice in a cocoon of easy moral probity (much like “green architecture” attempts with current building practices). What we need in fact is an ethics – or an ethical principle – that is, at the same time, adequate as ethics per se.<sup>(1 p.7)</sup>

An authentic design ethics must stand with validity both in application to design but also outwith design as self-evidently ethical in itself. To construct a self-contained, self-referential (and therefore most likely tautological) ethics of design which does not withstand exposure to the contexts within which design finds itself in the world, would be a pointless endeavour.

This chapter is composed of three sections which correspond to the first three aims of the research as stated in section 1.2. The first explores an approach to the ethical, the second explores an understanding of design, and the third synthesises these two to propose a conception of ethical design. These conceptions of the ethical, design and ethical design are not at any point presented as absolutes to be unconditionally accepted by all. Rather they are presented as possible practical ways of thinking about these abstract ideas, which together constitute, it is argued, a reasonable and ultimately potentially useful account of the

relationship between the ethical and design.

The first of these three sections, which introduces the approach to the ethical, begins with a brief clarification of the distinction proposed here between morality and ethics. Through the setting out of this distinction at an early stage, this conception of the ethical is revealed as meta-ethical in nature. This is to say that though understanding of “good” design practice remains the overall aim of the project, this first focus is primarily interested in the foundational roots and origins of the ethical.

## 3.1 The Ethical

### 3.1.1 Bad Morality

In a discussion on the concept of politeness, Jacques Derrida provides us with an example of the peculiar phenomenon which we might call “bad morality”. Derrida proposes that “It is impolite to be merely polite, to be polite out of politeness.”<sup>(2 p.9)</sup> The principle of politeness cannot be conceived of simply as the fulfilling of a duty of responsibility to be polite to others. Rather, the fulfilment of genuine politeness contains within it an inherent requirement not to be polite merely out of a sense of duty. To make a gesture of politeness when one does not mean it – when what one really desires and means is to be rude – is in fact precisely to be rude: to act in direct violation of the principle of politeness. As Derrida suggests: “Polite silence can become the most insolent weapon and the most deadly irony.”<sup>(2 p.21)</sup> However perhaps even worse, is for an action of politeness to be entirely motivated by the requirement to fulfil solely the duty to be polite. Under such a circumstance the whole concept of politeness – which is based around some sense of recognition, responsibility and respect for an other or others – is eradicated, as recognition, responsibility and respect are directed only towards the abstract principle – the rule – and not in relation to the other at all. Derrida argues that:

A gesture “of friendship” or “of politeness” would be neither friendly nor polite if it were purely and simply to obey a ritual rule. [...] It must not even take the form of a rule, and certainly not of a ritual rule. As soon as it yields to the necessity of applying the generality of a prescription to a single case, the gesture of friendship or of politeness would itself be destroyed. It would be defeated, beaten, and broken by the ordered rigidity of rules.<sup>(2 p.7-8)</sup>

In another example which illustrates this same crisis of morality from a different angle, Theodor Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia* that “Human beings are forgetting how to give gifts”:

Real gift-giving had its happiness in imagining the happiness of the receiver. It meant choosing, spending time, going out of one’s way, thinking of the other as a subject: the opposite of forgetfulness. Hardly anyone is still capable of this. In the best of cases, they give what they themselves would have wished for, only a few shades of nuance worse. The decline of gift-giving is mirrored in the embarrassing invention of gift articles, which are based on the fact that one no longer knows what one should give, because one no longer really wants to. These goods are as relationless as their

purchasers. They were shelf warmers (Ladenhueter) from the first day. Likewise with the right to exchange the gift, which signifies to the receiver: here's your stuff, do what you want with it, if you don't like it, I don't care, get something else if you want.<sup>(3 Aphorism 21)</sup>

To give a gift – precisely something which is given with no expectation of reciprocity – out of a sense of obligation – without generosity – collapses the whole concept of gift giving. Inherent within the idea of the gift is the same double duty which Derrida talks about in reference to politeness: that the fulfilment of the first duty to be polite out of responsibility and respect, or to give gifts out of generosity, relies upon a crucial second duty to not carry out this action merely out of duty. If one feels compelled to give a gift because of some social rule, some moral obligation, this is not a gift at all but merely an object of exchange, the payment of a debt. It is possible in this way to see the “exchange” of presents at Christmas as a depressingly ungenerous institution. We place ourselves under the anxiety of having to anticipate who might give us a gift so that we might be prepared to properly reciprocate and will not suffer the embarrassment of not appearing to be spontaneously generous by having a counter-gift prepared with which to return the favour.

(4)

These illustrations of the possibility of rude politeness and ungenerous gift giving highlight the danger at the heart of morality. Moral structure alone cannot guarantee the outcomes of the good and the right which are its goals. In fact, to the contrary, moral structure can actually become a hazard standing in the way of sincere attempts to work towards the truly good and/or right. Bad morality, is that which fulfils the requirements of a given moral system, but which somehow still falls short of the spirit of the aims towards which that system was constructed. Bad morality is not immoral. It is moral: it fulfils the moral requirement. However, despite meeting the letter of the law, it sidesteps the spirit of the law. This is precisely what is so bad about it.

Morality, although it ostensibly deals with questions of judgement and valuation of the good and the right, is in fact incapable of recognising goodness and rightness outwith the self-referentiality of its own structures. When morality fails and becomes bad morality, by what measure can those earnestly following the moral code become aware of their divergence from the “good” path?

The recognition of bad morality must come from outwith the realm of morality, from a sphere which is not interested so much in the letter of the law as the spirit. This sphere is the ethical.

The ethical is the ground from which morality rises and the conscience with which (if attended to) morality

is kept in check. The ethical precedes moral judgement of the good and the right and has little interest in valuations and judgements. This is the sense in which the concept of the ethical will be discussed here. The ethical is a realm of sensitivity in which differences are perceived primarily in terms of relative values rather than in relation to absolute standards.

Counter-intuitively, while it would seem that only the moral deals with questions of goodness and rightness, the moral is in fact incapable of sensing these values outwith its own structures. Morality is blind towards its own subject matter. Ethics on the other hand, despite preceding the evaluation and judgement of such concepts, cannot help but constantly be aware of these as its very essence is found in the sensitivity towards value differences.

In seeking to uncover some deeper understanding of what it might mean for design to be “good”, it is the ethical towards which this project now turns its attention.



### 3.1.2 Ethics at the End of Ethics

In pursuing an understanding of the ethical, the approach proposed here could be thought to be somewhat unorthodox. It does not go down the route of investigating, weighing up the merits and weaknesses of, and on this basis advocating subscription to one (or more) traditional approaches to thinking about ethics which generally consist of attempts to define, understand and deal with the ethical by constructing “theories” of ethics. Neither does it make any claim or attempt to conceive of an entirely new theory of ethics to supersede or improve upon all those which have gone before.

Rather, the approach will be to attempt largely to bypass the minefield of traditional ethical theory at this stage, instead proposing to proceed by setting out merely to identify some features of the ethical which might be helpful in coming closer to an understanding of the more fundamental character of this phenomena. Of course this activity is ethical theorising of a sort, but my hope is that by pursuing the idea of the ethical at a more radical elementary level (radical in the sense of *radix*: root), this project might not immediately flounder and drown in a vast ocean of higher level ethical/moral philosophy which it is not able to do any justice in this setting and which, while certainly relevant, may not prove actually to be the most productive avenue available in gaining access to the issue at hand.

There are of course many competing theories of ethics each with their ardent supporters and detractors. In certain times and places certain approaches may become more popular, rising to prominence while others fall away. One thing we can say for sure is that no single approach has of yet been able to conclusively please “all of the people all of the time”. An ethical “theory of everything” has of yet, not materialised. My intention here is not at all to discount and devalue the entire field and activity of ethical theory by suggesting that it has “failed” in some way, but simply to draw our attention to the fact that activities of ethical theorising have not yet produced a truly conclusive account of the ethical and appear unlikely to be able to do so in the foreseeable future. The project proceeds in full acknowledgement of this, with no delusions or ambitions of being able to find a satisfactory “answer” to the question of ethics. Rather, setting out from the starting point of the recognition of the experienced limitations of ethical theory, it seeks only to reveal some aspects and characteristics of the ethical which might later prove useful when the time comes to return our attention more explicitly to the subject of design.

It is not at all difficult to reveal some indications of the obvious limitations of ethical theory. One well-trodden strategy for bringing these to light is the use of philosophical thought-experiments such as the classic “Trolley Problem” and its many variants, which serve to exemplify precisely those situations in which

ethical theory falters.<sup>(5)</sup> The basic premise of such thought experiments is that a situation is encountered in which a choice must be made between a range of possible actions leading to certain consequences, the question posed being: which is the right or best thing to do in such a given situation? These experiments become interesting when certain variables within the situation are changed in order to expose contradictions in our ethical reasoning.

In the classic version of the trolley problem, you are the driver of a runaway trolley car (tram) hurtling towards a group of five track maintenance workers on the line ahead. They have no chance to escape and will undoubtedly be killed by the impact of the trolley. Although the brakes of the trolley are not working, you notice a side-track onto which you would be able to turn, thus saving the lives of the five workers. However, you also notice that on this side-track there is a single maintenance worker also with no chance of escape and who also would undoubtedly be killed were you to divert the trolley.

Faced with this situation, most people typically respond that they would divert the trolley car, often making a justification that it is the better of two bad options to kill one than to kill five. However, even at this initial level of the illustration an argument may sometimes be made that passively allowing the tram to take its course only amounts to letting five people die, while making the decision to actively divert the trolley entails actually making an active decision to *kill* one person, which might be seen by some to be less admissible than simply *letting people die* despite the five to one ratio.

Bringing this dilemma to the fore, the “fat man” variation of the experiment places us not as the driver of the trolley car but in the position of an onlooker standing on a bridge over the tram lines. Now apparently wholly detached and uninvolved from the situation unfolding before us, we merely observe the runaway trolley car careening towards the five unsuspecting maintenance workers. This time there is no side track, only certain death for the workers. There seems no hope for those five lives until we notice that standing next to us on the bridge is an extremely fat man whose bulk would undoubtedly be enough to derail the trolley and bring it to a stop thus saving the five workers, were he only to happen to fall off the bridge and into the path of the oncoming trolley. Being that the fat man has very poor balance and is standing very close to the edge, a tiny push would be all that it would take for the participant of the thought-experiment to save five lives.

In this “fat man” variation, very few people admit to believing that it would be “better” to push the fat man, actively killing one in order to save five lives, even though the majority of people in the first iteration may have chosen to divert the first tram based on exactly this same principle.

Such hypothetical scenarios serve to demonstrate the inherent inconsistencies and contradictions in our attempts to find rational principles for what the right thing to do might be. These thought-experiments are merely basic illustrations designed to indicate something of the complexity and conflict involved with the realities which we face daily by existing in the real world. While proponents of innumerable different schools of ethical thought – consequentialists, deontologists, virtue ethicists, communicative ethicists and so on – each have their own rigorously considered responses to these hypothetical problems, among the many competing branches of ethical theory which seek to offer us guidance, there are no conclusive winners.

For most of us, we do not have to strain our minds too far to come up with real-life parallels to these hypotheticals in which conflicting ethical demands require the making of necessarily compromised if not impossible decisions. For most of us, these everyday decisions rarely involve life or death consequences. However, although the stakes may seem lower, the principles remain the same. Even down to the micro level of the most insignificant and seemingly unimportant matters, we struggle to work out what the best or right thing to do is. We live lives of constant compromise and conflict.

The narratives of the designers interviewed for this project discussed in chapter two are full of examples of this. Lesley is extremely uncomfortable working part-time for a dishonest boss who regularly lies to clients, yet continues the work in order to have a steady income which pays for things she would otherwise be unable to afford, such as an iPad for her son.<sup>(B7.9)</sup> Frank gives examples of work which he knows has transgressed his personal moral boundaries, but which he continued to do in order to pay the bills.<sup>(B7.3)</sup> As David sees it, almost everything he does at work actively supports consumerism in direct contravention of his personal anti-consumerist beliefs, yet he chooses to carry out this work in order to earn a wage.<sup>(B7.2)</sup>

Matters of right and wrong are rarely clear cut in the real world. Convictions and beliefs tied to ideals about right action, regularly clash with deeply felt responsibilities to family or other social imperatives.

Knowledge of the Aristotelian virtues, Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, John Rawls' veil of ignorance, Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative rationality or any number of other excellent and carefully considered principles of ethical theory may inform our understanding of ethical reasoning and decision making; however, these ideas ultimately are found lacking, somehow seeming empty or hollow when faced with the irreducible complexity of real life situations.

While many of us might often actually agree on what just *seems* or *feels* like the right course of action to

take considering certain given circumstances, ethical theory struggles to create rational theories which can consistently account for the apparently rationally inconsistent intuitions which lead people to generally agree on what just “seem” like the right choices. In the face of such uncertainty, the very value of the activity of ethical theorising is brought into question. If ethical theory cannot help us find satisfactory answers to the complex ethical situations which we encounter, what purpose is it serving?

An excellent summation of the situation which those disillusioned with the promises of ethical theory find themselves in, is American philosopher John Caputo’s description of the encountered situation which he characterises as “the end of ethics”:

The end of ethics means instead that for certain philosophers – for this is a philosophical position, with all the usual complexities and perplexities that accompany such thinking – the business as usual of ethics has given out and the ethical verities that we all like to think are true, the beliefs and practices we all cherish, are now seen to be in a more difficult spot than we liked to think. The end of ethics is thus a moment of unvarnished honesty in which we are forced to concede that in ethics we are more likely to begin with the conclusions, with the “ends” or triumphant ethical finales we had in mind all along, and worry about the premises later. Waiting for firm theoretical premises to bolster and back up our ethical beliefs is a little like waiting for a proof of the veracity of perception before dodging out of the way of a projectile barreling at our head.<sup>(6 p.111)</sup>

In some ways, this sense of thinking “at the end of ethics” as described by Caputo is very much in alignment with the spirit of this inquiry. Thinking in such a way casts no doubt on the good intentions, rigour and philosophical value of ethical theory, but maintains a scepticism as to whether traditional approaches to such activity will ever be able to fulfil our desires of achieving any conclusive resolution in relation to ethical matters as experienced in real life. Thinking at the end of ethics is not destructive thinking attempting to negate or bring about an end to ethical theory, but is rather, as Caputo puts it “affirmative” of the ethical as “something it dearly loves” without being “positive” in the sense of seeking to set out ethical programmes to be positively imposed and implemented.<sup>(6 p.113)</sup> Thinking at the end of ethics proceeds from the same original passion for the ethical which has always motivated ethical theory, only diverging from traditional ethical-theoretical endeavours when it comes to methods; eschewing such positive programmes which constitute the main activity of ethical theory not in a spirit of treason or heresy but rather one of affirmative iconoclasm:

The end of ethics means that the business of ethics is to be conducted with a little more fear and

trembling than philosophers have been wont to show. To a certain extent, the end of ethics is a little bit like the death of God for people who still believe in God: it clears away the idols and allows a more divine God to break out. In just the same way, the end of ethics clears the way for a more ethical ethics, allowing the very ethicalness of ethics to break out, while insisting that most of what passes itself off as ethics is an idol.<sup>(6 p.113)</sup>

Thinking at the end of ethics is committed to the essence of the ethical above and before all other structures, habits and historical precedents. As such it is radically open to alternative approaches to thinking in relation to the ethical.

To attempt in this way to think of ethics beyond ethics, of the ethical at the end of ethics – in essence to begin thinking of the ethical precisely in those situations where all our thinking on ethics seems to fail – is of course not a straightforward task. However, it is not an impossible one.

This approach of thinking of the ethical at the end of ethics establishes a foundation which will allow us to interface with issues of ethics in relation to design, sidestepping an in-depth foray into ethical theory without discounting the importance of that activity. Thinking at the end of ethics recognises the value of the philosophical debates of ethical theory, but also the limitations of these activities. It allows these discussions to continue uninterrupted while it politely excuses itself and moves on to consider other things. For now, perhaps the best way to explain my approach will be without further ado to simply begin to lay out more precisely the shape of my thinking on the ethical.

The ethical might tentatively be “defined”<sup>(A1)</sup> here as a mode of existence characterised by sensitivity to and recognition of qualitative differences between experienced potentialities. The coming sections will endeavour to break this statement apart and unpack more of what is meant in declaring this very particular use of the word.

In this break-down there are four parts. The first three correspond to three concepts – *potentiality*, *singularity* and *aesthetic sensitivity* – which are conceived as necessary elements or pre-requisite characteristics which together create the potential environment for the ethical to be able to occur. The fourth element is the suggestion that the ethical only comes into being as a *mode of existence* which is characterised by the first three elements. This is to say that the ethical is not simply knowledge of, or desire to possess, these characteristics, but actual inhabitation and instantiation of them in one’s very act of being.

### 3.1.3 Potentiality: The Ethical as the Experience of Being One's Potentiality

In the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's book *The Coming Community* there is a short section of little more than five hundred words, simply entitled "Ethics."<sup>(7)</sup> This tiny text contains the seed of an idea which blows many of our common ways of thinking about ethics out of the water. This is the idea of *potentiality*. As I will eventually go on to suggest here (section 3.2.2), the idea of potentiality is an absolutely vital and inherent although rarely consciously referenced concept for design.<sup>i</sup> However, in order to reach that point it is necessary here to explore what this concept entails and the implications proposed by Agamben in the ethical context.

Potentiality is by no means a novel or original thought of Agamben's and he makes no such claim. The value of Agamben's *Ethics* text is not in its novelty but in its pinpoint condensation of what many might otherwise easily brush off as an abstract philosophical meandering into a sharp precise stab which cuts straight to the heart laying bare the raw organ of ethics.

What precisely is the nature of the apparently explosive ethical implication of potentiality contained within Agamben's *Ethics* text? The passage begins in this way:

The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible – there would be only tasks to be done.<sup>(7)</sup>

The first suggestion which catches us off guard here and thoroughly disorients our common sense of the ethical, is the immediate disqualification of duty, responsibility and obligation from ethical experience.

If the ethical is not to be found in such ideas as these – which have traditionally been thought of as central pillars of ethical theory – where then is it found? Agamben goes on to suggest that:

the only ethical experience [...] is the experience of being (one's own) potentiality, of being (one's own) possibility – exposing, that is, in every form one's own amorphousness and in every act one's own inactuality.<sup>(7)</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Mark Jackson<sup>(8)</sup> and Clive Dilnot<sup>(1)</sup> have also each in their own ways, recognised a profound significance of Agamben's *Ethics* text for the context of design.

According to this account, the ethical is not found in a requirement to fulfil any obligation or “destiny” that *must*, *ought* or *should* be done: rather it is said to be found *only* in “the experience of being (one’s own) potentiality”<sup>(7)</sup>

But what does this mean? To understand how one might reach this conclusion that the ethical actually has nothing to do with actions in relation to responsibility or obligation, and everything to do with inhabiting “potentiality”, we must first understand a little more of the concept which is referred to by this word potentiality.

In his essay *On Potentiality*, Agamben traces the concept back to the writings of Aristotle claiming that since then (“at least” i.e. not ruling out its importance prior to Aristotle) it has in fact been an idea which has “occupied a central position”<sup>(9 p.177)</sup> in Western philosophy. However, vitally, Agamben begins by framing his discussion of the concept not just as a historical study of a dead word used exclusively by philosophers, but as an investigation of a very much living phenomenon which “has never ceased to function in the life and history of humanity”<sup>(9 p.177)</sup> and which on this basis is worthy of our attention, today even perhaps more urgently than ever before.

Seeking to tease out some of the implications of this apparently ubiquitous but relatively unrecognised aspect of human experience, Agamben begins his investigation of the concept by asking the question of what it really means for a person to say “I can” or “I cannot” do something, take some action, exist in a certain manner of being.

## The Existence of Faculties

To suggest that one can or cannot do something, is to suggest a potentiality: the existence of a potential or possibility. However, as Agamben reveals, potentiality is not as simple as it might appear on the surface. Bearing in mind the first question of what it means to say “I can” or “I cannot”, Agamben poses a second question: what it means to have a “faculty” which is to say an existing power or capability.

To have a faculty is to possess something. For example a typical human has sensory *faculties* of sight, smell, taste etc. The operation of these faculties in relation to potentiality might appear at first to be relatively simple to grasp: since I have the faculty of smell therefore I have the potential to sense smells, I have the faculty of vision therefore I have the potential to see. However, in this which appears as an apparently

simple straightforward banality, there lies an aporia identified by Aristotle; this is the problem of the status of the existence of a faculty.

It is obvious that the faculty of smell exists when one is smelling some pleasant or unpleasant odour. In such a moment the potentiality to be able to smell is experienced as an actuality of sensory experience. However, quite often we may be unaware of any odour. In such a circumstance of anaesthesia (the absence of *aisthesis*: sensation/perception) when the potentiality to smell is not being fulfilled and brought into actuality, what do we mean when we say that the faculty of smell, the potentiality to smell, exists?

The solution which Agamben proposes, via his reading of Aristotle, is that to experience potentiality is to experience *the presence of an absence*. To be able to say that “I can” do something is to recognise that I am in possession of a faculty which can be applied in relation to a potentiality in order to enact that which is absent.

A distinction is made, again following Aristotle, between two types of potentiality: generic and existing. Generic potentiality is a potentiality which is possible, but whose actualisation would involve some transformation of the current situation. For example, any one of us might have the potential to be able to hold a conversation in fluent Mandarin. However, this potentiality will not be enacted into actuality until we have learned to speak fluent Mandarin and gained that faculty. In other words, my generic potentiality to speak Mandarin (a language which I currently cannot speak) is of a similar nature to my generic potentiality to be able to walk on the moon. I am certainly capable theoretically, but a transformation must first take place in order for me to reach the position in which I am able to choose whether I will open my mouth and begin speaking Mandarin, or to lift my foot and start taking footsteps on the lunar surface. My current generic potentiality to take these actions can only be experienced as an absence because I have not yet come into possession of the capability to be able to enact it.

Generic potentiality is potentiality which does not yet properly *belong* to an individual, and as such is not therefore particularly useful in assisting us with most enquiries relating to the potentiality of individuals. My generic potentiality to be able to converse in Mandarin allows me to make a declaration – which is functionally incontestable due to its extreme vagueness – that “I can” one day potentially do it. However right now the truth is that “I can” only *not* speak Mandarin. I have no choice as to whether I am able to enact my generic potentiality in relation to this matter. Try as hard as I might, until I undergo the transformation of gaining the knowledge of how to speak Mandarin, it is relatively meaningless for me to say that I am choosing not to enact my potentiality.



In the same way, my potentiality to one day be the prime-minister of the United Kingdom cannot be denied, however for me to assert that I am currently in possession of this potentiality to be the prime-minister right now should I want to be, and that I am just not choosing to enact this potential at this very moment as it simply doesn't suit me and I have other things to be getting on with, is quite ridiculous. As such, generic potentiality is a concept of limited interest: limited to vague aspirational "I can" statements which do not relate to the present moment, and therefore with little meaningful contribution to make towards the question of what it means to say "I can-not".

Existing potentiality on the other hand, is a potentiality which an individual does already possess even when they are not actualising it. It exists precisely as the presence of an absence. Agamben uses the examples of the architect who has the potential to build and the poet who has the potential to write, both of whom retain their identity even when not immediately engaged with the activities of building or writing.<sup>(9 p.179)</sup>

"I can" speak English if I choose to because I am already in possession of that faculty of being able to speak English. However, crucially, in the same way that "I can" speak, equally "I can-not" speak if I choose. When I choose not to speak, I still retain my faculty of English speaking even though it is not currently being enacted and experienced. This is the absence which is actually present, the sensation which exists as anaesthesia. Whether I choose to speak or not, my existing faculty and potentiality remain unchanged; no transformation is required within me.

## Potentiality/Impotentiality

In this way it can be seen that potentiality is experienced as the presence of a faculty which remains present even in absence of its enactment, but furthermore that potentiality and *impotentiality* are actually one and the same. Agamben quotes Aristotle from his *Metaphysics* saying that: "Impotentiality [...] is a privation [an absence] contrary to potentiality. Thus all potentiality is impotentiality of the same and with respect to the same."<sup>(9 p.181)</sup>

Understanding this relationship between potentiality and impotentiality unlocks the insight which allows Agamben to conceive of the ethical in the radical way which he suggests. He summarises this foundational potentiality/impotentiality relationship thus:

This relation constitutes the essence of potentiality. To be potential means: to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential. They *can be* because they are in relation to their own non-Being. In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness.<sup>(9 p.182)</sup>

The crucial element to be grasped here is that philosophical potentiality is not simply a state of not-yet-being as our everyday language sense of the word might suggest to us. Impotentiality is not the suppression of potentiality but rather the potentiality to actively not be doing something.

As Agamben writes elsewhere, "'Impotentiality' does not mean here only absence of potentiality, not being able to do, but also and above all 'being able to not do,' being able to not exercise one's own potentiality."<sup>(10 p.43)</sup> To say "I cannot" is not the negation of "I can" but an equal declaration of something "I can" do; which in this instance is to actively not be doing the action in question.

Taking an action is not a simple matter of a crude binary switch between potentiality and actuality, between possibility and reality. Being in a state of not-smelling or not-seeing does not in any way diminish the potentiality to smell or see contained in the sensory faculties of smell or vision. In potentiality and impotentiality – conditions respectively of being capable of doing, or being capable of not doing – potentiality is always fully actualised, regardless of whether an action takes place or remains a possibility not being enacted. This is what Agamben refers to in his reading of Aristotle in which he concludes that potentiality "*preserves itself* as such in actuality."<sup>(9 p.183)</sup> Potentiality cannot be switched on and off; it exists in modes of qualitative difference.

With the rejection then of the binary opposition of potentiality and actuality, we find ourselves faced rather by a continuous qualitative spectrum of potentiality experienced in modes of both potentiality and impotentiality. The exclusivity of presence *or* absence – to be or not to be – is replaced by what Agamben calls the "specific ambivalence of all potentiality"<sup>(10 p.44)</sup> – to be *and* not to be – the ability to be able to say both "I can" and "I can not". This is the point at which potentiality becomes a crucial concept in relation to the ethical.

# Potentiality: The Fundamental Experience of Ethics

Potentiality is an idea which defines human consciousness in that, as Agamben writes,

human beings are the living beings that, existing in the mode of potentiality, are capable just as much of one thing as its opposite, to do just as much as to not do. [...] other living beings are only capable of their own specific potentialities [...] human beings are the animals capable of their own impotentiality.<sup>(10 p.44)</sup>

Whether or not we agree that potentiality is exclusively human, or rather maintain that animals also may be capable of it, is actually inconsequential to the point here, which is that potentiality – whether fundamentally human or not – is the condition under which the ethical appears.<sup>ii</sup>

Finding oneself existing in a mode of potentiality; being equally as able to do as to not do something, the issue which arises is: which option to choose? Once it is possible for me to say both that “I can” and “I cannot” do something, which should I? On what basis do we make decisions to enact our potentiality or impotentiality (to act or to act by not acting) in response to an encountered situation?

Traditional ethical theory approaches might suggest that such choices are resolved by application of a certain principle which has somehow along the way, whether by nature or nurture, been adopted and internalised. Beginning instead to think of the ethical through the lens of potentiality, unlocks a perspective to the foundations of ethics.

Where there is no potentiality there can be no ethics. This is the foundation which Agamben builds on in his *Ethics* text when he declares that ethics is incompatible with destiny, claiming that without potentiality, which is to say the genuine capability to freely choose to act or not act, there would “be only tasks to be done.”<sup>(7)</sup> Conversely therefore, and this is the radical insight, wherever there is potentiality, there is the ethical.

Awareness of this ethical arises in human consciousness as the experience of the inevitable falling short of the fulfilment of potentiality, or as Agamben puts it, the exposure of “in every act one’s own inactuality.”<sup>(7)</sup> Every potentiality by its nature contains multiple possibilities not all of which can be enacted. A choice must be made, consciously or subconsciously, which necessarily leaves alternative possibilities

ii Some of course might disagree with Agamben's suggestion of the exclusivity of potentiality, and therefore, of ethics to humans alone. It is self-evident that a machine has no potentiality and no ethics; it can only do what it does, it is incapable of freely not-doing. However, many might argue that animals are capable of both doing and actively not-doing. Either way, the question of whether ethics and potentiality are exclusively human elevatory principles which separate us from “base” animals, or whether animals are capable of ethical being, is actually inconsequential to this point that potentiality and ethics, whatever life-form they might arise within, exist hand in hand.

un-actualised. The uncertainty in knowing whether the possibility which one chooses is the best one, is the fundamental experience of ethics.

## Freedom for Both Good and Evil

Agamben conceives in this an ethical reformulation of the theological doctrine of original sin which, as traditionally conceived of under a framework of morality, refers guilt to the result of a previously taken action. Under Agamben's suggestion of an ethical principle of original sin, "guilt" occurs constantly as the default state in relation to the impossibility of enacting all the possibilities of a potentiality:

Humans, in their potentiality to be and to not-be, are, in other words, always already in debt; they always already have a bad conscience without having to commit any blameworthy act. [...] humankind fails itself in a certain sense and has to appropriate this failing – it has to *exist* as *potentiality*.<sup>(7 p.44)</sup>

In order to follow this train of thought it is vital to maintain the distinction between the ethical and the moral alluded to earlier in the discussion of the possibility of "bad morality." (section 3.1.1) Morality is the sphere of law: of obligation, responsibility, ought, should, must. It is the sphere of guilt and judgement; of right and wrong, good and evil. The ethical on the other hand wishes to know nothing of such things.

The truly ethical is not concerned with the pursuit of good and the suppression of evil, but is rather the condition of freedom which allows the *possibility* of both good and evil. The ethical does not fear guilt, but recognises it as an indicator of its existence. Agamben writes:

To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is, in the sense we have seen, *to be capable of one's own impotentiality*, to be in relation to one's own privation. This is why freedom is freedom both for good and evil.<sup>(9 p.183)</sup>

Questions as to the judgement of good and evil in relation to the ethical are therefore misplaced, or at least do not come naturally to this realm. To ask what is ethically good or evil is not to seek identification of any particular act to be celebrated or condemned, rather it is to ask under which circumstances the potentiality for both good and evil exists and under which it does not.

Agamben therefore identifies true ethical “evil” in the individual’s

decision to remain in a deficit of existence, to appropriate the power to not-be as a substance and a foundation beyond existence; or rather (and this is the destiny of morality), to regard potentiality itself, which is the most proper mode of human existence, as a fault which must always be repressed.

(7 p.44)

Potentiality must be maintained as the foundation of ethics, as without it the very possibility for ethics dissolves and the concept becomes meaningless. Moralities which decree exactly what must be done, which spell out the precise shape and limit of responsibilities, and which announce guilt based on failure to achieve these proclaimed standards, dissolve ethics as they deny the possibility of potentiality.

Potentiality must be the basis of the ethical, and therefore is ultimately also the foundation of true morality. Were we to *know* for sure what good was and how to achieve it, we would have no need either for ethics or morality, we would simply be good, effectively remaining blissfully ignorant of guilt, responsibility, obligation etc.

The possibility which comes only through the existence of potentiality, of freedom for both good *and* evil, is what allows us to be able first to recognise differences between potentialities in the realm of the ethical, and then ultimately to make judgements of these in realm of the moral.

Without potentiality – the possibility of being able to choose to act or not to act – we would have no way of recognising any qualitative value difference between actions. We would ultimately be incapable of either good or evil. It is only our ability to recognise these qualitative differences in the ethical realm which will ultimately allow us to freely strive and struggle to search for and attempt to choose the good. As Agamben writes:

The greatness – and also the abyss – of human potentiality is that it is first of all potential not to act, potential for darkness. [...] What is at issue here is nothing abstract. What, for example is boredom, if not the experience of the potentiality-not-to-act? This is why it is such a terrible experience, which borders on both good and evil.

To be capable of good and evil is not simply to be capable of doing this or that good or bad action (every particular good or bad action is, in this sense, banal). Radical evil is not this or that bad deed but the potentiality for darkness. And yet this potentiality is also the potentiality for light.<sup>(9 p.181)</sup>

### 3.1.4 Singularity: The Ethical Emerges in Relation to Encounter with Singularity

The second element in my tripartite scheme of ethical pre-requisites, I will refer to as *singularity*. This principle of singularity, in essence, is the principle that the ethical emerges only and exclusively in relation to the encounter with absolutely previously unknown unique situations which demand of us a response which we are utterly unprepared for.

This principle appears to run directly against the grain of traditional approaches to ethical theory which invest much effort in activities of preparation for future ethical encounters; the search to discover and elucidate general rules which can be internalised ready to be applied to not yet encountered ethical situations in order to assist us in choosing what our responses to these will be. The principle of singularity to the contrary claims that the readiness which such pre-emptive ethical activity promises – keenly as we might desire it – is in fact an impossibility. The ground-zero location of the ethical – the foundational root of its emergence and existence – is identified precisely in the response to the unknown, which by virtue of its very unknown-ness can never be prepared for.

The suggestion of the encounter with singularity as a pre-requisite foundation for the ethical stems out of the previously discussed relationship between potentiality and the ethical; that the ethical exists where there is potentiality, and that conversely where there is no potentiality there can be no ethics. The argument for singularity as a pre-condition for ethics emerges from this basis in response to the search for what the optimum conditions for potentiality to emerge and be recognised might be.

What is meant here by singularity is the absolute uniqueness of any given moment of experience (what Mikhail Bakhtin would call the unique “once-occurrent event of Being”<sup>(11)</sup>). This moment is always new, never entirely a repetition of a previous state, and therefore always contains within it some element, however insignificant it may seem, of the unknown. Although this moment may appear to bear resemblances to past experience, it is never and can never be exactly the same experience. Thus all experience can be said to be singular experience, and it is the authentic encounter with this absolutely new, unknown, unique singularity which I would propose as the optimal condition in which potentiality comes into being and can be recognised.

## Encounter with the Unknown

The reason that potentiality is best experienced in encounter with the singular, is that it is only within recognition of the unknown that potentiality truly can flourish. When we encounter a known situation, a situation which we feel bears close resemblance to other similar situations which we have experienced perhaps many times, our recognition of the potentialities within that situation will inevitably be influenced by our previous experiences. What was our response then? How did that turn out? Should we just do the same again? The more familiar a situation is, the narrower our conception of the possibilities available will become. Where we encounter the totally unknown, we have no past experience to fall back on and are forced therefore to confront potentiality in a more unlimited open and full sense. In the encounter with the new, we cannot rely on past precedent but must respond in relation to the potentiality of the situation. The converse of this is, of course, that wherever the unique singularity of experience is not recognised to whatever extent, potentiality and therefore the ethical is, to that same extent, suppressed.

It is fairly easy to see how this might apply to situations which present an obviously novel ethical challenge, such as, for example, the possibility of human cloning, or ideas of justice in relation to a global internet with no respect for national borders and jurisdictions. These are situations which have never before in history been possible, but have now through technological advance become issues which we must face. In such instances as these, our attempts to fall back on past experience looking for some here's-one-I-made-earlier ethical principle to apply in order to know what is best to do, fall short. All past precedent can do is supply us with ill-fitting analogies. If we really want to get anywhere with such issues, we must deal with them on their own radically new and unique terms.

It is less easy to identify singularity and its relevance to the ethical in those situations which seem to us to be very familiar, but it is here where recognition of singularity arguably matters most. Take for example the depressingly common and recurrent experience of encountering the demand of a street beggar.

For the vast majority of people, although there are many possible options for action upon encountering the begging other, we are most likely to resort to enacting a typical social norm; choosing between a suppressed range of socially acceptable options, commonly either the conventional faux-apologetic grunt which signifies the shallow pretence to not have any spare change, or of simply crossing to the other side of the street Pharisee style.

In such familiar circumstances, the diverse potentiality available in the situation is suppressed. Choices are

limited to a small range consistent not with what I would *like* to believe to be my ethical principles, but really only with a miserable principle of consistency; that I feel that I should act consistently and therefore since I feel that I can't help everyone, it is only fair that I won't attempt to help anyone. In suppressing sensitivity towards the potentiality of the situation, the ethical in the situation is suppressed. Crucially this dual suppression occurs as a result of one's denying of, or failing to continuously recognise, the unique singularity of each newly encountered situation: that each beggar is a unique human being, not an inevitable feature of the urban environment. I regularly choose not to even attempt to help a fellow human presenting themselves to me as in need, because of a whole host of "reasons" (read: excuses) gathered through past experience.

The generalised application of past experiential knowledge to the present is of course an entirely necessary survival mechanism which protects us from the experience of the present as a kaleidoscopic barrage of novelty which Fredric Jameson has described (after Lacan) as the schizophrenic encounter with nothing but "a series of pure and unrelated presents in time."<sup>(12 p.26)</sup> It must be acknowledged that experience must and will always play a part in our perception of the present. However wherever the persistent generalisation of past precedent renders our decision making in the present automatic, we suppress the potentiality which exists in the singular situation set before us and which our generalised principles based on past precedent have no knowledge of.

This is to say that whenever we respond to an encountered situation by simply applying a pre-prepared ethical rule or principle, we have in fact by means of our pre-emptive strike actually side-stepped the properly ethical altogether, replacing it instead with yesterday's stale ethics.

## **Responsibility**

The principle of singularity requires that the truly ethical response be made in response to the absolutely unique situation which is being immediately encountered. This is to say that when I encounter the same street beggar day after day, my reliance on a pre-determined principle which tells me that I can do nothing to help and therefore should do nothing, in no way absolves me of ethical responsibility for each and every unique singular encounter.

In each singular encounter in which I rely on a general principle I actively suppress the true potentialities



available. Although I can attempt to hide from responsibility behind a rule, this in no way diminishes the ethical demand to in each unique instance again choose to make this choice from among the many available within the potentiality of the situation.

It should be noted that the notion of “responsibility” invoked here is not any suggestion of a positive responsibility in the sense of an obligation to choose one particular possibility over any other; it is not a moral demand to fulfil the responsibility to help another human being for example. Rather this is only a basic and radical responsibility merely to *respond* in some way. As John Caputo writes, to blindly rely on a pre-determined rule of principle is to shirk this radical responsibility:

The singularity of this situation makes demands upon me to which I must respond, elicits a choice from me for which I do not have the comforting recourse to universal rules. I must respond, be responsible, in a deep and radical way. If all I had to do would be to invoke a rule, pull the lever to a universal principle, it would be much easier – it would not take much agonizing, much fear and trembling – and it would be far less “responsible.” If things turned out badly I could always blame the rule, the universal. “I would like to help you,” injustice says, “but rules are rules.” “I understand your situation,” injustice says, “but it is the principle of the thing that prevents me.” “Don’t blame me, I do not make the rules. I just work here. I am just doing my job.” Seen thus, the singular is always the exception, the excess, that which exceeds and excepts itself from the sweep of universality, from the horizon of predictability and foreseeability.<sup>(6 p.119)</sup>

For Caputo, this recognition of singularity as the ground-zero location of ethics is the crushing blow which lays bare the insurmountable inadequacy of ethical theory which attempts to make pronouncements as to generalisable ethical principles:

Ethical judgements occur in the singular, in the unprecedented and unrepeatable situations of individual lives. That means that we can never say a law or a principle is just, for that would be too sweeping and pretentious, the manifestations of its injustice being just around the corner, and certainly not that a human being at large is just [...] At most we might say, with fear and trembling, that a singular event was carried out with justice. But we would want to underline the “fear and trembling,”<sup>(6 p.112)</sup>

The philosophical foundations of this conflict between learned past experience and encounter with unique singularity could be staged in terms of *generalism* or *principlism* versus *particularism*.

## Cracks in Reality: Accidentalism

Views which could be labelled as generalist or principlist are typified by the belief that rationally discovered universal ethical principles can be consistently applied generally across a range of diverse situations.

Particularism on the other hand – which is a relatively recent contender on the philosophical scene criticising and offering an alternative to the traditionally dominant principles-based approaches in ethics – denies the possibility that abstract principles can be applied universally, proposing instead that each situation must be dealt with on a case by case basis according to the unique formulation of its *particular* circumstances as they are encountered.<sup>(13)</sup>

Slavoj Žižek has suggested that all contemporary conventional theoretical/philosophical ethical endeavours can be categorised in terms of, and can in fact be seen to be fundamentally framed in reference to the question of universality which sits at the heart of this debate:

Today the philosophical approach to ethics seems to be split between three options: attempts to provide a direct ontological foundation for ethics via some substantial (communitarian, for example) notion of supreme Good; attempts to save ethical universalism by sacrificing its substantial content and giving universalism a proceduralist twist (Habermas, Rawls); and the ‘postmodern’ attitude, where the quintessential and only all-encompassing rule is to be aware that what we perceive as ‘truth’, our own symbolic universe, is merely one in a multitude of fictions, and thus not to impose the rules of our games on the games of others - that is, to maintain the plurality of narrative games.<sup>(14 p.273)</sup>

As has already been stated, the approach of this project is neither to conduct an in-depth study of the entire history of ethical thought nor to argue for one theoretical approach as the winner over all others, but rather simply to seek to identify some useful characteristics of the ethical. It is in this spirit, and in the affirmative but iconoclastic spirit of searching for the ethical at the end of ethics, that the singular is proposed as a characteristic pre-requisite element of the ethical. While this concept has obvious connections with the theoretical sphere of ideas surrounding universality, generalism and particularism, it is proposed here as an observation of a basic phenomenon which can be seen to exist prior to these ensuing debates. The roots of the proposal of the concept of singularity arise from a sense of the limitations of ethical theory in relation to both universality and particularism. This strategy maintains a grain of faith that an exploration at the end of ethics (to use Caputo’s words) may just as well discover the beginning of ethics (in the same sense that cosmologists search the ends of the universe for traces of its beginnings).

Žižek suggests that it is possible to conceive of ethics outwith traditional conceptual limitations of categorisations in relation to universality/anti-universality, and in this way to move beyond ethical theory to the ethical at the end of ethics. His suggestion for how this might be possible is in relation to Jacques Lacan's concept of the traumatic symbolisation resisting Real:

the Real which is experienced in the encounter with the abyss of the Other's desire (the famous '*Che vuoi?*' 'What do you want [from me]?'). There is ethics – that is to say, an injunction which cannot be grounded in ontology – in so far as there is a crack in the ontological edifice of the universe: at its most elementary, ethics designates fidelity to this crack.<sup>(14 p.274)</sup>

Žižek's suggestion that the ethical is in fact found in these cracks in the "ontological edifice of the universe", in this "traumatic Real", is to situate the ethical not in our conception of reality itself but rather precisely in our fundamental inability to ever comprehensively and conclusively come to terms with reality. Wherever we fail to fully understand and comprehend reality, there is the ethical. This proposal radically re-imagines the whole activity of ethical theory, shifting it from being an activity of the pursuit of knowledge to one whose central element is characterised by its very un-knowable-ness.

These cracks in our reality which Žižek identifies in Lacan's Real, Caputo finds reference to in the writings of Kierkegaard, Levinas and Derrida in the shape of the concept of the "wholly other."<sup>(6 p.113)</sup> He describes it thus: "The wholly other refers to something importantly unforeseen, unanticipated, unexpected, for which we are unprepared, something that exceeds our horizon of expectation."<sup>(6 p.114)</sup>

It is evident that ethical theory is incapable of comprehending these cracks. Caputo describes its attempts to do so through the analogy of the accident:

the premises invoked in ethical theory always come too late, after the fact. To this way of thinking, ethicists appear rather like the crowd that gathers around the scene of an accident to see what has just happened. [...] An accident is something that happens to us beyond our control and outside the horizon of foreseeability. Our theories and principles, whose whole aim and purpose is to prepare us for and foresee what is coming, were still in bed at this early hour of the day. [...] as soon as something *new* or *different* happens ethical theory is struck dumb, the crowd gathers around the scene, and everyone starts buzzing, until finally it is agreed that we should all have seen this coming.<sup>(6 p.111-112)</sup>

Like a crowd gathering around the aftermath of an unforeseeable accident, ethical theory is fated to

always arrive late. It cannot deal with the new until after the fact, when it is no longer new. Generalised or universal principles based on past experience simply cannot ever be capable of dealing with the new and unknown. The ethical itself is however always present and encountered in the accident itself, whether we choose to recognise it as such or not. To continue blindly to apply pre-determined principles speaks of the failure to recognise the new and unknown elements of the singular situation. Such failure to recognise singularity ultimately results in the suppression of potentiality and therefore the suppression of the ethical. In order to recognise what is new, unique and properly unknown in the singular and in this way to avoid the subconscious suppression of potentialities and of the ethical, what is required is sensitivity.

### 3.1.5 Aesthetic Sensitivity: The Ethical Contingent on Aesthetic Sensitivity

The third of the three pre-requisite characteristics of the ethical to be advanced here, completing the triad along with potentiality and singularity, is aesthetic sensitivity. This, in essence, is to suggest the crucial principle that ethical experience cannot take place where there does not first exist sensitivity in order to be able to recognise existing potentialities within the singularity of an encountered situation.

Just as when in possession of the perfect knowledge of the good – being as in the position of God – the ethical as we know it implodes,<sup>(14 p.294-296)</sup> equally so, in the complete blindness of the absolute lack of sensitivity, the ethical cannot be experienced. In a sense this is what Agamben refers to when suggesting that the only ethical evil is to exist in a state of denial of one's own potentiality.<sup>(7)</sup> To exist in a state in which one lacks the capacity to recognise ethical matters as they arise and are encountered, is to exist in a necessarily un-ethical state. To be un-ethical in this way is therefore not by any means to be "bad" or "evil" in the conventional sense, but rather simply to be utterly ignorant of the ethical. Persons existing in a state characterised by such a deficit of sensitivity would most likely assume at all times that they are being and acting well, when in actuality although this might be the case, they could easily be being or acting in ways which would horrify themselves, were they only in possession of the capacity to be able to perceive it (this capacity being precisely what they lack).

### Blissful Ignorance

In one sense, this unethical state of course appears to correspond to the picture painted in Genesis of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden existing alongside the animals in blissful ignorance of the knowledge of good and evil. In which case is it not then in fact better altogether to be blissfully ignorant and wholly unaware of ethics – to remain in a fundamentally un-ethical state – than to spend our lives constantly striving and struggling towards an some unachievable conception of goodness in the realm of the ethical? Remember that the ethical as formulated here provides no achievable goal or standard to meet but rather – in line with Agamben's ethical reformulation of the doctrine of original sin<sup>(7)</sup> – provides only a constant reminder of our incessant, inevitable and necessary failure, lack and guilt.

What have we to gain then in possessing the sensitivity to be able to perceive and recognise the ethical?

Would we not be better off without this capacity, remaining blissfully ignorant and therefore technically innocent un-ethical beings? In principle this sounds like an attractive option. However, it is not in fact a possibility available to normally functioning humans. Only those afflicted with psycho/socio-pathic tendencies (including babies and young children) are capable of the insularity required to be able to exist in such an un-ethical state of innocent ignorance. The more typical human experience is one which is constantly invaded by the demand of the other: the encounter with one, or many, other human beings who are like me but who are not me, and who seem to each have their own desires and requirements which come into conflict with mine.

## **The Demand of the Other**

To attempt to suggest that remaining ignorant of ethics – being wholly un-ethical – would be a state to be equally or preferably valued to that of being ethical, would be to make the assumption that the best way of being is the existence which evades guilt, and based on this to therefore propose that the best way to evade guilt is to collapse the ethical altogether, thus rendering all ethical concepts meaningless. The encounter with the other however, challenges the viability of this argument.

It is worth noting that several branches of ethical theory acknowledge this social encounter with the other as central to ethical experience. Some systems in fact go so far as to identify the fundamental root of the ethical in this inter-human encounter rather than from any inherent characteristic arising within the self-contained individual (for example Emmanuel Levinas,<sup>(15)</sup> Martin Buber,<sup>(16)</sup> Knud Ejler Løgstrup<sup>(17)</sup>).

Each encounter with the other is experienced as an invasion into my self-contained insular personal space of previously un-ethical innocence. Within the insular personal space of my mind and inner being, I might have certain desires which I wish to pursue in order to maintain my survival and happiness. The nature of the invasion experienced in the encounter with the other is an ethical demand to recognise the other as a being which also has its own insular personal space in which it also desires things, many of which may conflict with my desires.

In perceiving this other as some-other-thing which is in some way like me but which is not me, my un-ethical space has been invaded by a potentiality which consists in my ability to now be able to choose whether to continue pursuing only my own desires, or to compromise my own pursuit of happiness in

order that the other might be less hindered in the pursuit of theirs.<sup>iii</sup>

To ignore the existence of this potentiality – to continue as before but now feigning ignorance of the demand of the other – is to no longer be in a state of innocent un-ethical blissful ignorance, but rather one of wilful ignorance brought about through suppression or rejection of the sensitivity to notice this potentiality.

Of course coming to recognise a potentiality through sensitivity to the other by no means requires that one must always capitulate to the other's desire and demand. Rather, in gaining this awareness one becomes merely equipped with some knowledge of the range of possibilities available on the continuum between purposefully oppressing the other on the one hand, and wholeheartedly serving them on the other.

There is a crucial distinction to be made between not being in possession of a faculty, which is to say the ability to act in relation to a potentiality, and existing in a state of denial regarding a potentiality upon which one is capable of acting. Adam and Eve in the garden begin in a state of truly blissful ignorance. Properly lacking any aesthetic sensitivity, they are completely incapable of discerning potentialities. They can only do or not do, they cannot choose to say both "I can" and "I cannot".

However, once the fruit has been eaten, this awareness of potentiality is thrust upon them. Their first recorded action tellingly is to hide, covering their naked bodies in recognition of the gaze of other, a previously meaningless concept. This sudden requirement to be covered, acquired in response to their becoming aware of their own nakedness, comes about not in response to a moral prohibition on nakedness – no law or prohibition of any kind, apart from not to eat the fruit, has yet been spoken – but rather in the ethical recognition of the other's sense of dignity which is experienced not as a moral demand to be fulfilled but in response to the recognition of the newly experienced ethical sensation of a qualitative value simultaneously experienced on the range between dignity and shame.

It should be noted that nothing in the situation changes between pre and post fruit eating; Adam and Eve were naked before, but were simply unaware of either their own dignity or that of the other. Nakedness does not suddenly become "bad" upon the consumption of the fruit. To continue being naked would be no sin, as sin does not yet exist. All that has changed is that Adam and Eve have become aware of their potentiality to be not-naked. The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil could just as well be called the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of potentiality.

<sup>iii</sup> This "other" could be another human, an animal, or some anthropomorphised element of the natural or artificial environment; an abstract concept endowed with its own desires, for example a river pursuing an imagined "desire" to flow towards the ocean.

It is not sin which is unleashed upon eating the fruit, but rather the sensitivity, the ability to be able to perceive, recognise and know that alternative possibilities exist, not all of which can be chosen and some of which necessarily must lead to less favourable consequences. It is this knowledge of what might have been which is felt as guilt. And there is no possibility of return to innocence from this point. To attempt simply to deceive oneself and deny a potentiality which actually exists, is simply still to make a choice within potentiality.

## **Insensitivity: Intolerant Tolerance**

To situate this discussion in a more concrete contemporary ethical context let us look to an example given by German philosopher of aesthetics Wolfgang Iser in relation to the principle of tolerance:

Tolerance without sensibility would be merely an empty principle. Imagine just once a person who has made all of the maxims of tolerance his own perfectly, yet who in everyday life lacks the sensibility even to notice that the intuitions of others are different on principle and not just a matter of some arbitrary lapse, that is, that it's not a case of deficit, but of cultural difference. Such a person would never be embarrassed by so much as having to make use of his fine maxims of tolerance, but rather would incessantly practise imperialisms and oppressions – but with the clearest of consciences and in the securest beliefs that he's a tolerant person. Sensibility for differences is thus a real condition for tolerance. – Perhaps we live in a society which talks too much of tolerance but possesses too little sensibility.<sup>(18 p.27)</sup>

Iser's example of intolerant tolerance demonstrates the inadequacy of an exclusively insular personal conception of the ethical. While an individual or a certain group might be able to deceive themselves that their actions are acceptable in line with their internal standards, in genuine encounter with the other these internal sufficiencies come to be questioned.

It is here that aesthetic sensitivity becomes a necessity for the ethical. Just as without the capability to sense differences, adherence to the principle of tolerance becomes a meaningless gesture, so in all ethical matters, without sensitivity to the potentialities inherent within the situation, the ethical itself becomes nothing but an empty shadow of what it proclaims to be.



## Aesthetic Imperatives

The *aesthetic* character of this sensitivity towards the ethical realm is significant although the nature of this significance is perhaps not immediately obvious. In the various essays contained in his collection *Undoing Aesthetics*, Wolfgang Iser attempts to uncover and lay bare some aspects of the operation of the aesthetic in society, and in doing so begins to tease out some of the subtle but deep links and connections between the aesthetic and the ethical.<sup>(18)</sup>

The epistemological root of our word aesthetic, comes from the Greek *aisthesis* referring to the *sensuous* but which indicates within this a double sense of both perception and sensation. The perceptive element relates to the cognitive recognition of, as Iser puts it, “genuine sensuous qualities such as colours, sounds, tastes and smells.”<sup>(18 p.62)</sup> The element of sensation on the other hand relates to the more emotional evaluation of the sensible “on a scale of *pleasure* and *displeasure*.”<sup>(18 p.62)</sup>

As Iser draws out, even at this original aesthetic level it is possible to begin to identify elements of the ethical actually emerging from within the aesthetic itself. He identifies two fundamentally aesthetic ethical imperatives, for which he puts forwards the neologism *aesthet/hic* – an obvious contraction of aesthetic and ethical – which is intended for use to “designate those parts of aesthetics which *of themselves* contain ethical elements.”<sup>(18 p.61)</sup>

The first of these emergences of the ethical from within the aesthetic he refers to as the *vital imperative*; in which aesthetic sensibility serves the primary ethical goal of the preservation of life. At this level the rudimentary ethical goal of continued survival is facilitated by raw aesthetic perception and sensation. This primordial aisthesis initially serves us to identify distinctions between those objects and situations beneficial or detrimental to our survival. It is practical cognition expressed on a scale of pleasure and displeasure. This can be obviously seen in the instinctive “preference” of a young child for warmth over cold, and in dislike of bitter foods which would indicate toxicity etc. This imperative to sustain life is the first foundational ethical imperative, and one which emerges with and through aesthetics. Therefore Iser classifies it the first *aesthet/hic* imperative. This vital aesthet/hic imperative is ethics at a primordial level, bearing little resemblance to the complex creature we recognise as ethics today, but it is a starting point nonetheless. As Iser writes “It served life, keeping yourself alive, and survival (*zen, soteria*) – but not yet the good life (*eu zen*).”<sup>(18 p.63)</sup>

The second aesthet/hic imperative which Iser advances is the *elevatory* aesthetic imperative: that

which *requires* us to rise above raw *aisthesis* sensation to a higher level of perception in which aesthetic sensibility serves not only the vital functions of survival but of judgement, reflection, communication and pleasure perceived autonomously from vital concerns and often prioritised and privileged over them. This is elevatory in two senses, firstly that such perceiving must take place in a state of reflection “raised above” the immediate pleasure/pain concerns of survival, but secondly, because it is this ability to rise above purely physical vital concerns in which, Welsch suggests, is found the “anthropological difference”<sup>(18 p.64)</sup>; that which sets us apart from those other living creatures and inanimate objects who lack this capacity for higher level reflection. He draws attention right back to Aristotle who suggested that what makes humans different to the animals is their ability to recognise and act upon not just the raw vital sensuous values of useful and harmful, but also the “higher predicates”<sup>(18 p.64)</sup> like better and worse, just and unjust, beautiful and ugly, harmonic and discordant: distinctions whose recognition requires abilities of reflection and communication. Welsch emphasises the absolute importance of this seemingly innocuous observation, writing:

So the elevatory imperative – the call to climb above immediately sensible determination in favour of a pure perceiving, on the one side, and of a higher delight, on the other – is directly linked with the anthropological difference, with humans’ Being as humans. Insofar as we are living creatures, the vital imperative is our first aesthet/hic imperative too and the elevatory imperative just the second. But, insofar as we are *humans*, the elevatory imperative is our constitutive and decisive imperative. In human terms it is the categorical imperative *par excellence*.<sup>(18 p.64)</sup>

The human-ness of humanity is found in positive response to the demand to rise above matters of base survival. One who fails on this account to rise above mere physical existence by possessing aesthet/hic sensitivity, though walking and humanoid in form, cannot be said to be human in the full sense of the word.

Such an unethical figure is found in the horrifying “Muselmann”, a name given to the living dead of the Nazi concentration camps; the empty shell of a human being who has been de-humanised in every way. In stark opposition to the picture of Adam and Eve, there is nothing “blissful” about the Muselmann’s ethical ignorance.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Giorgio Agamben documents eyewitness accounts of these Muselmänner, quoting from among others the testimony of Jean Améry:

The so-called *Muselmann*, as the camp language termed the prisoner who was giving up and was

given up by his comrades, no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions.<sup>(19 p.41)</sup>

The human who has relinquished his ability to “rise above” is really no human at all.

The testimonies of this absolute degradation and annihilation of humanity within a human being as witnessed in the camps are not however exclusively limited to the brutally physically and spiritually oppressed internees. Agamben quotes Bruno Bettelheim’s assertion that Rudolf Höss, the Nazi commander of Auschwitz, despite his healthy physical condition while in his post, was also worthy of being counted among these walking dead:

While his physical death came later, he became a living corpse from the time he assumed command of Auschwitz. That he never became a [Muselmann] was because he continued to be well fed and well clothed. But he had to divest himself so entirely of self respect and self love, of feeling and personality, that for all practical purposes he was little more than a machine functioning only as his superiors flicked the buttons of command.<sup>(19 p.57)</sup>

In this implied sense, humanity is not a physical, but a mental condition. It exists wherever one maintains the ability to recognise something of the higher predicates above and beyond mere existence, whether that be some glimpse of dignity, self-respect, beauty or whatever. Those who give up on this elevatory potentiality, whether as the result of unimaginable oppressions inflicted upon them, or simply through a slow but ultimately totalising process of the unquestioning following of orders and the relentless failure to think, have essentially relinquished their grasp on what it means to be human.

It is in this sense that Welsch posits aesthetic sensitivity as the ultimate human categorical imperative: if there is something which humans “must” do – because to not do this means to lose something of what it means to be human – it is to maintain our grasp on the capability to rise above the physical. It is through this elevatory aesthetic imperative to seek to rise above the raw physical sensuous, that we can begin to recognise connections and linkages between the aesthetic realm and phenomena which we may more easily recognise as ethical.

The examples of Welsch’s intolerant man and the Muselmann serve to demonstrate how the absolute lack of aesthetic sensitivity precludes the existence of ethics. It is perhaps however worth elaborating from another angle two of the underlying elements at work here which further stress the importance of the

specifically aesthetic nature of the sensitivity which enables the ethical: aspects of aesthetic plurality and justice.

## Aesthetic Plurality and Justice

Welsch summarises the relevant dynamic of these two elements under the heading of “justice to the heterogeneous”<sup>(18 p.70)</sup> drawing on the thoughts of Theodor Adorno. Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* is a dense work which talks at length on topics relating to epistemological issues of unity, universality and equivalence versus incompleteness, the particular and the different. Adorno speaks out against the uncritical assumption that equality and justice naturally go hand in hand, simultaneously positing a distinction between two types of implied justice; legalistic and aesthetic:

In large measure, the law is the medium in which evil wins out on account of its objectivity and acquires the appearance of good. [...] Law is the primal phenomenon of irrational rationality. In law the formal principle of equivalence becomes the norm; everyone is treated alike. An equality in which differences perish secretly serves to promote inequality.<sup>(20 p.309)</sup>

Formal equality of all before the eyes of the law would appear to be a rationally desirable condition. What Adorno points out is that where such equality is manufactured among people through the crushing of genuinely existing differences, this cannot properly be called just, becoming instead a bad morality. Reinforcing this point elsewhere, he writes:

An emancipated society however would be no unitary state, but the realization of the generality in the reconciliation of differences. A politics which took this seriously should therefore not propagate even the idea of the abstract equality of human beings. They should rather point to the bad equality of today, [...] and think of the better condition as the one in which one could be different without fear. If one attested to blacks [...], that they are exactly like whites, while they are nevertheless not so, then one would secretly wrong them all over again. This humiliates them in a benevolent manner by a standard which, under the pressure of the system, they cannot attain, and moreover whose attainment would be a dubious achievement.<sup>(3 Aphorism 66)</sup>

A principle of radical equality such as that demanded in principle by modern legal systems can in fact become nothing more than a principle of homogenisation. Under such a system justice can be done to the

homogenised average figure but never to the unique, different and heterogeneous. The truth is, that while it is absolutely necessary to seek common grounds and patterns in society, in reality there is no universal homogeneity, only heterogeneity, or to put it another way: the singular.

Generalising systems of legalistic justice might seek, out of good intentions, to avoid unfairly excluding anyone by ensuring that all are treated equally. However in doing so, in a fundamental sense, all are treated unjustly as none are recognised fully in their unique singularity and difference. It is only through openness to the recognition of differences that justice can properly emerge, and this occurs through the aesthetic.

The aesthetic counterintuitively is inherently open to justice towards the heterogeneous precisely because it operates on a fundamental principle of exclusion. The sensation and perception of something always occurs with reference to that which it is not, the void from which the object is abstracted. The aesthetic always relies on the anaesthetic. It never assumes or demands equality but rather relies on difference and exclusion for its foundations. The aesthetic is comfortable with diversity and plurality and conversely cannot stand the injustice of equality, at least in the sense that where equality reigns the aesthetic has already been exorcised.

The dynamic of aesthetics and anaesthetics of course goes both ways. Proper aesthetic sensitivity requires a balance and coexistence of the aesthetic and the anaesthetic. Each requires the other. As Welsch points out: "A basic aesthetic law states that our perception needs not only invigoration and stimulation, but delays, quiet areas and interruptions too." An-aesthetisation can come about through hyper aestheticisation; an overloading and overwhelming of aesthetic sensitivity leading to a distinctly homogeneous numbness: "Where everything becomes beautiful, nothing is beautiful anymore; continued excitement leads to indifference; aestheticization breaks into anaestheticization."<sup>(18 p.25)</sup>

Proper aesthetic sensitivity, neither repressed nor self-exorcising, is by its nature attentive towards that which is different and excluded. While legalistic justice is interested in generalisable blanket principles which can apply to a range of situations, aesthetic justice embraces the plurality of the singular in which each unique situation or individual is dealt with according to its uniqueness and difference (this should not at all to be mistaken for any form of relativism). Aesthetic justice is more interested in the exceptions to the rule than the greatest good for the greatest number. Welsch writes:

In that reflected aesthetic consciousness is sensitized for fundamental differences as a matter of principle it is able to recognize and to respect the peculiarity and irreducibility of forms of life more

easily than widespread social consciousness, which denies alterities rather than acknowledging them. Hence an aesthetically sensitized awareness can also become effective within the life-world by illuminating, clarifying and helping out. The readiness is constitutively built in to be critically attentive of borders and exclusions, to see through imperialisms and – being, as a matter of principle allergic to injustice – to intervene wherever excessive domination is found and wherever the rights of the oppressed must be espoused.<sup>(18 p.26)</sup>

The aesthetic's predisposition towards "justice to the heterogeneous"<sup>(18 p.70)</sup> allows us to see how it is in fact specifically *aesthetic* sensitivity which best allows us to conceive of the ethical; manoeuvring in relation to genuine potentialities encountered within the singularity of experience.

### 3.1.6 The Ethical as a Mode of Existence

To be ethical is not to possess some special knowledge, or to be involved in the undertaking of some activity, it is rather to *be* – in the sense of to *exist* – in a certain way: a mode of existence. The nature of this ethical mode of existence is characterised by aspects of potentiality, singularity and aesthetic sensitivity as discussed above.

In summary, in order to “be” in an ethical mode of existence, an individual must be in possession of the capabilities of aesthetic sensitivity which allow them to be able to recognise the existing potentialities within the encountered singularity of a certain situation.

To be *un-ethical* therefore is not to act in a manner contradictory to certain upheld principles but rather to fail to be in an ethical mode of existence; in Agamben’s words, to choose to “remain in a deficit of existence”.<sup>(7)</sup> This un-ethical mode of existence can occur through the absence of any one of the three prerequisites elements which in the complexity of experience of reality are more often intertwined rather than distinct. As in a borromean knot, to lack one of the three disintegrates the whole.

Where there is no potentiality, there can be no ethics. Where there is no encounter with the singular unknown, we require no ethics. Where there is no aesthetic sensitivity, the ethical will remain undetectable despite staring us in the face.

Where these three do exist, it becomes possible for a person to be in an ethical mode of existence. However, it is absolutely vital to note that being in an ethical mode of existence, which is to say being ethical, in itself actually has very little to do with being “good”, certainly at least in the everyday language sense by which when we say “more ethical” we generally mean “more good”.

To be in an ethical mode of existence according to the way of thinking which I have laid out here, is simply to be in a state in which both good and bad are possibilities. While on this basis being ethical makes no promises towards the good, being unethical absolutely denies the possibility of wilful goodness; that is to say that it does not at all deny the possibility of being good, but rather it denies the possibility of being either good or bad by any means other than merely by accident or coincidence.

To illustrate this principle, let us use some of the characters which have appeared so far to exemplify three possibilities for un-ethical being in terms of: pre-ethical being, post-ethical being, and in-denial-of-ethical being.

## Pre-ethical Being:

Adam and Eve in the garden (pre-fruit-incident) exemplify a pre-ethical un-ethical state. No awareness of the alternative possibilities of existence contained within potentialities as of yet exists. Those who in this way have not yet become capable of ethical being – this might include babies and young children – exist in an un-ethical state in which ideas of good and bad are truly meaningless conceptions. The pre-ethical state is that of blissful ignorance, but also must be recognised as a state of the fundamental lack of conscious cognitive freedom as a result of the impossibility of wilful choice between ethical potentialities.

## Post-ethical Being:

The Muselmann, the mummy or husk of a human being, is such a horrifying figure precisely because of what it used to be and is no longer. It is the human who has lost their humanity and with this all possibility of the ethical. As such this infinitely pitiful individual regresses to a post-ethical un-ethical state in which the possibility of perceiving potentialities has been lost. The living dead of Auschwitz were rendered incapable of higher level aesthetic sensitivity and therefore of ethics, having been fully de-humanised by external forces of oppression.

## In-denial of Ethical Being:

The question of pity in relation to the second type of Muselmann as identified by Bettelheim in the Nazi Rudolf Höss is more complex. Such individuals, it is suggested – as Hannah Arendt also suggested of Adolf Eichmann<sup>(21)</sup> – have been transformed into post-ethical un-ethical beings through no irresistible oppression but rather by a process in which they themselves are entirely complicit. The nature of this un-ethicality is selective and involves a necessary self-deception. Höss and Eichmann carried out their horrifying actions in the moment (if we are to believe their accounts) fully believing that they were being ethical. It is in this sense that we might categorise this most disturbing perversion of the ethical as *in-denial* ethical being.

As Welsch's intolerant man remains entirely unaware of his intolerance due to his belief that he is a tolerant man, so Höss and Eichmann were able to carry out their actions fully satisfied in their own ethicality and in unthinking denial of their fundamental lack and inability in regard to aesthet/hic sensitivity. Through the prolonged and systematic failure to think, resulting loss of sensitivity and therefore of recognition of potentiality, these self-created Muselmänner render themselves ethically dead by living in subconscious denial of existing potentialities actually available to them. To be precise, this is in fact not an un-ethical



position at all, only the denial of an authentically existing ethicality hidden behind the superficial façade of another. This is the true nature of the only ethical “evil” as declared by Agamben.<sup>(7)</sup>

### 3.1.7 Summary: The Ethical

In summary, this section has sought to set out one quite particular way of thinking about the concept of the ethical. This way of thinking proposes a clear distinction between morality and ethics; morality pertaining to judgements as to the rightness or wrongness of certain actions, while the ethical is conceived as the deeper underlying sensitivity which makes no judgements but rather allows an individual to recognise such qualitative value differences in the first place.

Potentiality is proposed as the foundation of the ethical, following Giorgio Agamben's articulation of the concept. Without potentiality – existing possibilities for alternative courses of action or inaction – the very possibility of ethics dissolves and the concept becomes meaningless. Where no significant choice between potentialities exists, recognition of qualitative value differences between actions becomes an impossibility thus collapsing the ethical and simultaneously also rendering higher level moral judgements of good and evil impotent.

The concept of singularity introduces the idea that the ethical is encountered exclusively in the demanded response to absolutely unique unknown unforeseen events. Failure to recognise the unique nature of encountered events is therefore a failure of ethical responsibility. The mechanistic blanket application of moral frameworks is therefore potentially ethically irresponsible. John Caputo provides the metaphor of accidentalism, in which moralistic ethical theorising is compared to crowds gathering around scenes of accidents; able to discuss what has happened but incapable of predicting the next catastrophe.

The principle of singularity consists in the realisation that the ethical only comes into being and must be encountered in the unforeseeable unique moment of experience. This leads directly to the proposal here of the principle of aesthetic sensitivity: that ethical responsibility relies upon the sensitivity to be able to recognise potentialities existing within encountered singularities.

Where aesthetic sensitivity does not exist to recognise these conditions, the subject remains (either blissfully or wilfully) ignorant of ethical responsibility. The aesthetic nature of this sensitivity is crucially important. Wolfgang Iser argues that the ethical can in fact be seen to emerge from within the aesthetic realm. Ethical principles of pluralism and justice are argued to be inherently aesthetic in nature. A case could on this basis be made that it should be possible to increase engagement with ethical responsibility through the cultivation of aesthetic sensitivity. However, possibilities for the aesthetic to suppress the ethical also arise as hyper-aestheticisation overwhelms and numbs the senses effectively becoming an-

aestheticisation: production of a radically un-ethical state.

These three principles: potentiality, singularity and aesthetic sensitivity are drawn together in the suggestion, again following Agamben, that ethicality is not something to be possessed but is rather a mode of existence. The presence of all three is required to constitute ethical being. Where there is no potentiality, there can be no ethics. Where there is no encounter with the singular unknown, we require no ethics. Where there is no aesthetic sensitivity, the ethical will remain undetectable despite staring us in the face.

This account of the ethical is not proposed as a theory of ethics, but as a series of meta-ethical observations of the nature of ethics. These combined insights represent a proposal for one possible, reasonable and ultimately potentially useful, way of thinking about the ethical.

This way of thinking addresses the first of the five aims of this research – What is meant by the ethical? (see section 1.2) – and constitutes the first step towards the overall aim of this chapter in investigating the question of the ethicality of design. The next section seeks to establish an equivalent understanding of the concept of design itself.

## 3.2 Design

### 3.2.1 What is Design?

The previous section sets out not a conclusive (and therefore potentially exclusive and reductive) “definition” of the ethical, but rather a way of thinking of the ethical as a mode of existence which comes into being through aesthetic sensitivity to the encounter with potentialities within the specific singularity of any situation. The aim of this project remains oriented towards gaining some understanding of what it might mean and look like for visual communication design to be “good”. Having made the case for a distinction between the ethical and the moral, the ethical has been identified as the foundational concept ultimately underpinning and orienting issues relating to the evaluation of good-ness.

The third section of this chapter, working with this conception of the ethical, will investigate to what extent design is inherently, or is capable of being, ethical. However, in order to investigate this with any clarity, we must first tackle the second research aim of this project (see section 1.2) by clarifying what is meant by the term *design*.

### Design as a Pluralistic Multiplicitous Concept

Design is a pluralistic concept. It does not have one single unified meaning. To introduce one’s occupation to a stranger with the simple phrase “I’m a designer” inevitably prompts the inquiry “What kind of design?” Design is a word which means many things to many different people in many different contexts. To simply talk of “design in general” without any qualification as to what is meant, is to open one’s argument to all sorts of misunderstandings and misrepresentations, as it is entirely probable that the listener is thinking of something completely different from that to which the speaker has been referring.

Casual attempts at definition of the word design typically begin with lists of standard dictionary entries and etymological roots which tell us that design is linked to ideas of drawing, marking out, patterning, planning, purposing, even scheming, and that it finds application as both a noun naming the outcomes of a process and as a verb referring to the process itself. Such simplistic literal definitions and historical roots are however of little use to us in the attempt to discover a deeper sense of what the concept means and how it is used in application in contemporary discourse and practice today.

In illustration of the complexity of contemporary usage, Paul Micklethwaite's 2002 PhD project *What is Design? An empirical investigation into conceptions of design in the community of design stakeholders*<sup>(22)</sup> identified forty one senses in which design was conceived among the study's participants. (Fig 11) Ralph and Wand's 2007 paper *A Proposal for a Formal Definition of the Design Concept* collates thirty three different formal definitions of design found in existing literature before adding their own spectacularly vague offering to the fray.<sup>(23)</sup> (Fig 12)

That so many interrelated but distinct senses of meaning of a word can be found circulating in common usage, serves to demonstrate the inherent ambiguity and multiplicity of this term, and warns of the inevitable inadequacy of reductionistic attempts to posit simple "definitions" for the concept.

How then, might such a diverse ill-defined and ambiguous concept, thought of by so many people in so many different ways be approached? Andrew Blauvelt has observed that recognition of the apparently almost infinite pluralism of perspectives on the nature of design can lead to a less than desirable situation in terms of design's ability to conceive of itself as a field or even an area of activity:

It is no wonder that graphic design today feels like a vast formless body able to absorb any blows delivered to it—lacking coherency and totally dispersed. This absence of a critical mass or resistant body is at the heart of the current malaise. One might argue that graphic design today no longer exists in the form (or body) we once knew it. So scattered and destabilized are its constituent elements that any attempt at definitions becomes meaningless.<sup>(24 p.9)</sup>

Blauvelt suggests that design may yet be able to save itself from this "malaise" of disciplinary formlessness by reclaiming a sense of critical autonomy. This may indeed be an excellent plan; critical autonomy is certainly a characteristic to be desired by any discipline or field. Getting to the point at which a level of critical autonomy can be claimed and collectively owned by the field more or less as a whole is however still a challenge if the first hurdle of actually finding any stable common ground for the identity of the field itself has not first been negotiated.

The diversely plural natures of conceptions of the idea we call design pose a formidable obstacle in the path of attempts to define design. However this does not mean that there cannot be any pragmatic way of meaningfully coming to terms with the concept. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's thoughts on the possibilities for defining complex concepts prove useful here.

He uses the example of games to illustrate how a category may possess no universal set of defining

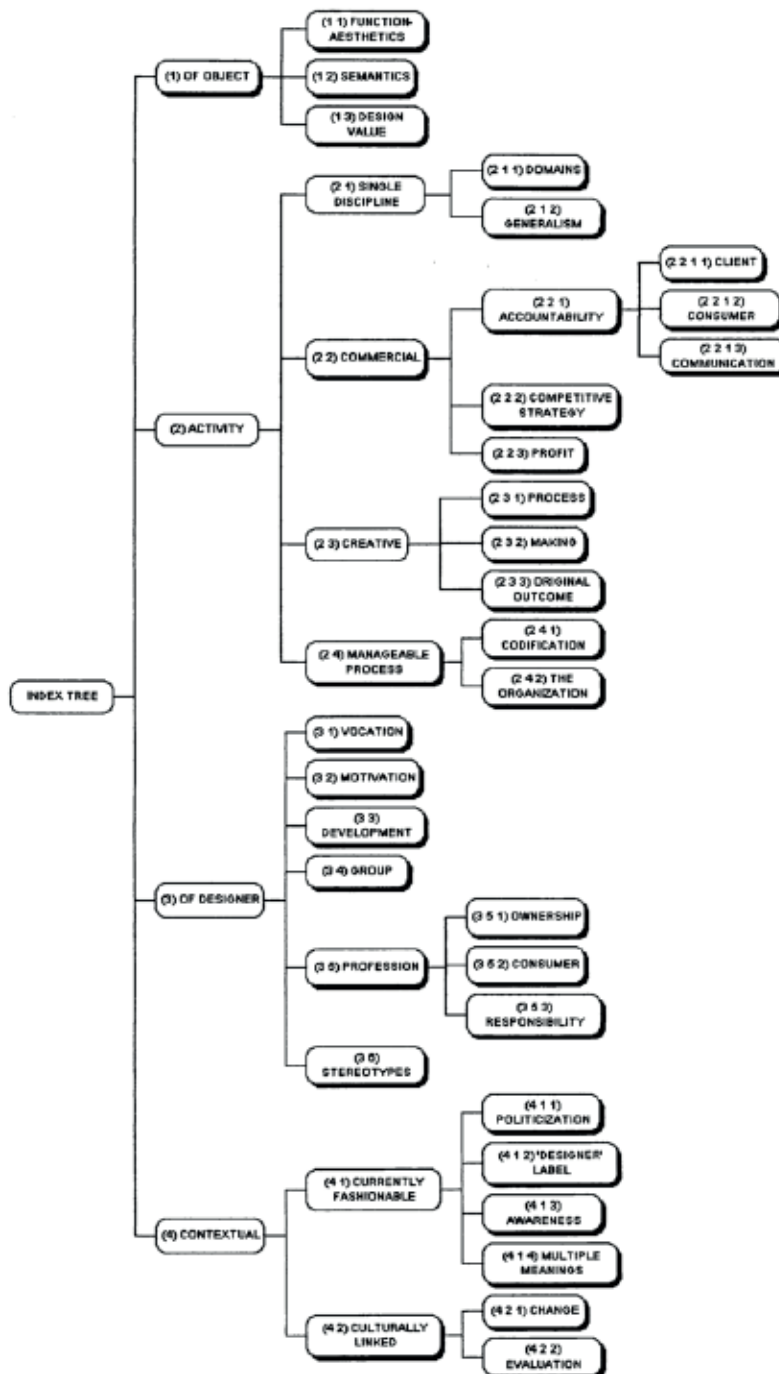


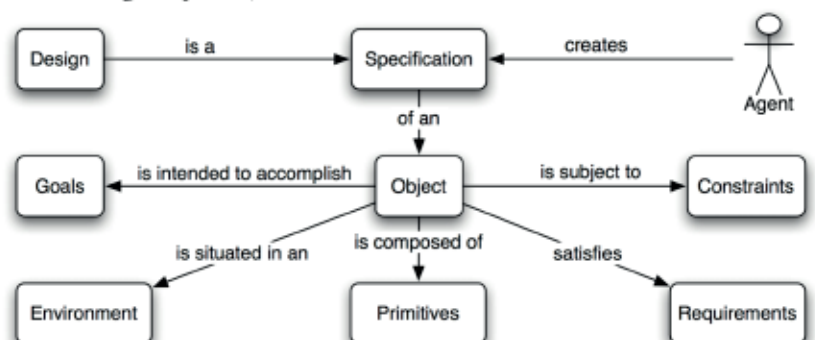
Fig 11: Paul Micklethwaite's data template of encountered design definitions  
Fig 12: Ralph and Wand's conceptual model of design (as a noun)

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## Design

(noun) a *specification* of an *object*, manifested by some *agent*, intended to accomplish *goals*, in a particular *environment*, using a set of *primitive components*, satisfying a set of *requirements*, subject to some *constraints*;

(verb, transitive) to create a design, in an environment (where the designer operates)



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characteristics, yet through the principle of “family resemblances” still be recognised as a unified concept: “For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.”<sup>(25 p.31)</sup>

The multitude of possible conceptions of design might often seem as far removed from each other as the game of hide-and-seek is from the game of poker, yet somehow, although many factors tell them apart, it may in fact be possible to find that some sense of a unifying concept does envelop these diverse members.

The word design is an unstable, ambiguous and multiplicitous concept comprised of many interrelated and overlapping usages. Yet this does not detract from its validity in any way. Recognising this pluralistic nature of design, the requirement for a singular universal “formal definition” of the type proposed by Ralph and Wand<sup>(23)</sup> following their appraisal of the diversity of existing definitions, can be seen as a fundamentally misguided endeavour.

Nevertheless, in order to proceed in discussing the concept of design further with clarity and precision within the context of this project, it will be helpful to explain some sense of the rules of the “language-game” which this thesis is playing with the word design. In order to clarify and explain the particular ways in which the concept design is being understood here, this section will begin by first excavating the surrounding ground, discussing some of the approaches which inform common ways of talking about design.

The initial conflict staged here is that between narrow and broad conceptions of design: approaches which either fall short of offering any useful understanding of design by focussing too closely on the outputs and contexts of design activity, and those which vastly overshoot the mark by presenting such a broad depiction of design that it becomes essentially meaningless and indistinguishable from human activity in general. Following this, possibilities for a pluralistic multiplicitous conception of design based on non-exclusive but indicative descriptive characteristics of the capacities of design will be discussed.

## **Design as a Narrow Field of Activity**

One temptingly pragmatic strategy when considering the nature of design, is to begin by specifying a particular context of design in terms of a classification based on output: i.e. product design, graphic design, service design, system design, interior design, engineering design, software design, fashion design etc. This

might seem on one level to be a sensible if not even necessary step to take. It seems self-evident that the concerns of a graphic designer working on a corporate identity system are quite different from those of an engineer designing a component part for the internal working of a machine. Are these not entirely different activities which should be discussed on their own terms?

Of course in some sense this is true, and specification of a particular context can indeed often be helpful. However, simply segmenting design into smaller chunks based on common interests, activities and outputs does not diminish the conception of some underlying idea of design which pervades all these sub-fields. This is the same principle by which the division of the overall idea of games into board-games, card-games, team-sports, games of skill etc. is helpful in allowing us to understand aspects of specific instances, but does not in any way lessen the idea of games as a whole.

Clive Dilnot points out the inconsistency in the common sense reasoning by which we would often intuitively describe design as an activity, yet seek to see design classified according to its outputs. Giving an example of this, he describes how typical responses to the question "What is the social significance of design?" will more often than not:

refer the questioner either to the products of design activity (the results of design process; objects, systems and their social value) or to the problems design 'solves' (social, technical and human problems and needs which designers tackle and which are important as problems) or to the uses to which designed objects are put (the needs which designed products or systems satisfy, the social value of the material realization of these needs in forms which enable the maximum satisfaction given the available constraints).<sup>(26 p.140)</sup>

In defining design in such ways in reference to the products and effects of design, the activity of design itself disappears from the equation leaving us none the wiser as to what it actually is which has brought about these products and effects. To equate design itself with either the problem or solution, context or resulting condition, of a given example of design, is not in any way helpful to gaining an understanding of the actual design part of the equation. Design, whatever it might be, evidently occurs somewhere between, and in the interaction between, these before and after states and cannot be simply reduced to a simple metonymic labelling of design-as-this-or-that-output labelled according to "the most visible and obvious aspect"<sup>(26 p.141)</sup> which emerges from the designing activity, whether that be a solution to a problem, a change in conditions or some produced form: design-as-posters, design-as-furniture, design-as-social-policy, design-as-whatever-Apple-produce-next etc. To define design in such ways through equation with the ends which it is seen



to produce, is a vast over-simplification which effectively cuts out and ignores most of whatever it is that design actually is.

Richard Buchanan raises the important point that even though it may appear to be a practical, pragmatic and useful strategy to classify design according to categories of activity such as the design of “*symbolic and visual communications*”, “*material objects*”, “*activities and organized services*”, and “*complex systems or environments for living, working, playing and learning*”,<sup>(27 p.9-10)</sup> when we actually examine the activity of designers, we find that much of the time, design activity does not occur solely within one area. While designers might be labelled with a professional classification, design activity itself seems to have little respect for such contextual boundaries. As Buchanan writes:

It is easy to understand that industrial designers are primarily concerned with material objects. But the research reported in design literature shows that industrial designers have found new avenues of exploration by thinking about material objects in the context of signs, actions, and thoughts. [...] Comparable movements are evident in each of the design professions: their primary concern begins in one area, but innovation comes when the initial selection is repositioned at another point in the framework, raising new questions and ideas.<sup>(27 p.11)</sup>

In any close inspection, hybridity and interdisciplinarity can be seen to be the norm not the exception across all fields of design. When disciplinary boundaries are so easily and regularly crossed, the question arises as to the descriptive accuracy and usefulness of such classifications.

As Andrew Blauvelt has noted, falling back on conceptions of the identity of design which are tied merely to its material appearance as commodities aligned to various categories of media outputs – a case of the simple “choice of vehicles for delivering a message”<sup>(24 p.9)</sup> – is not simply a neutral pragmatic strategy exercising no impact on the nature of design itself. Conceiving of design in the narrowest sense of material production tacitly promotes the perception that design is nothing more than this: “Implicit in this reductive understanding is the denial of graphic design as a social practice and with it the possibility of disciplinary autonomy.”<sup>(24 p.10)</sup>

Design is not merely the products of its activity. If it were, we would have no need of the word; it would suffice to talk directly of these products. As Dilnot puts it, the word design refers to a much broader “pluralistic and multiple activity, a synthesis of heterogeneous activities defined not by the separate activities but by their integration.”<sup>(26 p.141)</sup> In our discussion of the concept we must bear in mind this

pluralistic broad nature, which encompasses both material and social dimensions. However, in taking care not to blinker ourselves with such a narrow field of vision that the concept disappears entirely, we should also be mindful that there may be a point at which the embrace of broad pluralism renders a term so all-encompassing as to become effectively meaningless by virtue of its indeterminacy.

## Design as Encompassing All Activity

An example of a popular and often quoted statement which supports a broad conceptual definition of design is the declaration made by Victor Papanek in his 1985 book *Design for the Real World* which states that:

All men are designers. All that we do, almost all of the time, is design, for design is basic to all human activity. The planning and patterning of any act toward a desired, foreseeable end constitutes the design process. [...]

*Design is the conscious and intuitive effort to impose meaningful order.*<sup>(28 p.3-4)</sup>

This statement definitely invokes a sense of design as process and activity rather than as product, output or effect. It is a sharp and catchy phrase to which many designers have intuitively felt some affinity. However, this famous quotation is an abridgement. The passage reads in full:

Any attempt to separate design, to make it a thing-by-itself, works counter to the inherent value, of design as the primary underlying matrix of life. Design is composing an epic poem, executing a mural, painting a masterpiece, writing a concerto. But design is also cleaning and reorganizing a desk drawer, pulling an impacted tooth, baking an apple pie, choosing sides for a back-lot baseball game, and educating a child.<sup>(28 p.3-4)</sup>

The problem here is that design, defined in this way as encompassing the whole spectrum of human activity in all its variety and banality, potentially becomes nothing more than a synonym for intentional human activity. As Norman Potter wrote in his 1969 book *What is a designer?* an acute difficulty arises:

if the word 'design' is used without reference to any specific context – used, for instance, as a blanket term to cover every situation in which adaptation of means to ends is preceded by an abstract of intent [...] Beyond this point, the word must refer to recognizable products and opportunities, or

become hopelessly abstract.<sup>(29 p.10)</sup>

If the name design can be given to all human efforts to impose meaningful order; from mathematical modelling of the optimal form of the wings of a next generation spacecraft, to pairing socks, that word ceases to be genuinely meaningful. This is not to deny that this word usage is possible, or to suggest that it would be in any way “wrong” to use the word in such a way (in everyday language the word design is often used to refer to a great diversity of tasks). However, in seeking to understand the nature of design as a distinctive activity, this all-encompassing usage is not particularly useful.

If essentially all human activity is design, what then is not design? Even a complex pluralistic concept requires some sense of boundaries or limitations. There is a balance to be struck in coming to some useful understanding of the concept which acknowledges both the broad sense in which many aspects of human activity can be seen to contain elements of designing behaviour, and the narrower sense in which design is conceived as phenomena within a pre-defined range of specialised activity. As Potter notes: “Every human being is a designer. Many also earn their living by design.”<sup>(29 p.10)</sup> A truly meaningful conception of design would do well to remember these truths, favouring neither one absolutely but finding a balance which upholds the inherent complexity of the term while remaining properly useful.

## Herbert Simon’s “Definition”: Change and Preference

It would difficult to conduct a discussion around the contemporary meaning of the word design without reference towards Herbert Simon’s famous (or perhaps, due to its ubiquity, now “infamous”<sup>(30)</sup>) often quoted assertion that design is the devising of courses of activity which seek to change “existing situations into preferred ones.”<sup>(31 p.111)</sup> This is a description of design as an activity detached from any particular context or product but positing instead, as essential and immanent to the nature and existence of the design phenomenon, a certain abstract yet specific effect of a change in conditions towards a preferred state. Might such a conception of design provide the more balanced – not too narrow, not too broad – route which we seek?

Judging by the frequency of its citation in design literature, Simon’s “definition” evidently rings true in some sense for a great many even today over forty years after it was first published.<sup>iv</sup> In context, the full quotation

iv In crude indication of this, an enquiry on Google Scholar among the 16,096 articles citing Simon’s *Sciences of the artificial* for search terms of ““existing situations into preferred” + design + definition” returns 395 articles, 165 of which date from 2010 onwards. The same search not limited to citations of Simon’s book brings up 709 results, 279 of which date from 2010 onwards (searches conducted 17/04/2014).

from Simon's 1969 *Sciences of the artificial* reads:

Historically and traditionally, it has been the task of the science disciplines to teach about natural things: how they are and how they work. It has been the task of engineering schools to teach about artificial things: how to make artifacts that have desired properties and how to design.

Engineers are not the only professional designers. Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones. The intellectual activity that produces material artifacts is no different fundamentally from the one that prescribes remedies for a sick patient or the one that devises a new sales plan for a company or a social welfare policy for a state. Design, so construed, is the core of all professional training; it is the principal mark that distinguishes the professions from the sciences. Schools of engineering, as well as schools of architecture, business, education, law, and medicine, are all centrally concerned with the process of design.<sup>(31 p.111)</sup>

This description of design is slightly less all-encompassing than Papanek's, at least placing some boundaries around the concept: firstly delimiting design to the activity of the *devising* of courses of action, then setting a bar which limits qualification of these courses as design to those which aim to change existing situations into preferred ones.

However, Simon's is still an extremely broad vision of design, generously ascribing design as a phenomenon central to all "the professions" from medicine to sales. Professional designers, those who earn their living by some specialised application of design, might be less comfortable with this generosity. Simon's formulation, at this level, appears to offer little contribution to the task of discovering more precisely where this specialised sense of design which gives professional designers their innate sense of identity might originate from.

Another contentious element in Simon's formulation which in common-sense terms appears to make perfect sense, but which should perhaps be approached with much greater caution than it often is, is the inclusion of *preference* as a key component of design: preference as the primary motivation for change.

Anne-Marie Willis in her editorial to the 2013 edition of *Design Philosophy Papers* on *Design, change and Politics* highlights the exact issue I would seek to bring attention to here:

When people cite Herbert Simon's definition of design (as they frequently do) as an activity that seeks to Change Existing Situations Into Preferred Ones, this is usually an entrée into what they

really want to discuss, which is “how do designers do this?” [...]

But what's been overlooked in Simon's oft-repeated definition of design is the change bit – the move from existing to preferred is glided over as if obvious. If pressed to name the gap between the existing and the preferred, those who cite Simon would perhaps say something like – better functionality, performance, convenience, efficiency, aesthetic appeal, and so on. The parameters of change are assumed as given, as issuing from the client, thus they are circumscribed, delimited, not an issue.

Today it is the nature of change that is the issue. The need for significant change has become harder to ignore as circumstances turn more critical. The design professions, which in the service of capital, ushered in the modern world of manufactured wonders that brought ease, convenience, entertainment, diversion, delight to millions of people, are increasingly having to deal with the negative fallout of this history as it refuses to be consigned to history and as it rolls on to defuture every corner of the globe.<sup>(32 p.1-2)</sup>

Design may be an activity concerned with devising courses of action aimed at bringing about change, but change at what cost and in whose interests? Preferred by whom? The largely unexamined role of preference in design is a burning ethical issue particularly, as Willis so strongly emphasises, in recognition of current social, economic and environmental realities.

It would be easy to allow the inclusion of this element of preference to slip past one's critical guard. It seems to make such obvious sense. Preference undoubtedly plays a role in design, but how central is this role in relation to the very fundamental identity of design? To a great extent of course, most if not all design is undertaken in pursuit of change towards some preferable future state. Who, after all, would design towards un-preferred change?

It seems absurd to imagine that a designer might consciously design towards some future state which they do not desire, to bring about changes which they would not prefer over the current situation. Yet, recall the testimony of those designers such as Frank<sup>(B7.3)</sup> who confess to undertaking design work whose outcomes they may well find disagreeable. In such cases the designer works towards change in accordance with an expressed preference. However, this preference is not their own, rather that of the client. Such cases serve to demonstrate an insufficiency and over-simplification in the direct appeal to change towards preference as a foundation of design.

While preference is a player in the design game, it is not a simple matter involving working towards a certain desirable end. Matters of preference in our complex world are matters of antagonism, conflict and power relations. To speak of preference in design is to speak of ideology.

It would perhaps be entirely unfair to criticise Herbert Simon for failing to provide a fully formed and unproblematic definition of design when he himself makes no explicit claims to ever having intended to craft a definition in the first place. As this task is also not one of definition but rather one of delineating a certain sense of meaning – some characteristics and family resemblances – in relation to the concept of design I will put aside for the moment these criticisms of Simon's phrase as a definition. Read instead as a *description* of design, there are several positive elements here which suggest the beginnings of a not-too-narrow but not-too-broad and therefore properly meaningful conception of design. That the activity of design is inherently interested in devising and delivering plans for altering current states through manipulation of the artificial, is an observation which hold seeds of promise unfortunately choked by the thorns of over simplification when the phrase is abstracted and applied as a catchy stock-quote. Can the seeds of these positive contributions suggested in Simon's "definition" flourish in a more carefully considered approach?

## **Design as Capacities: Clive Dilnot's Expansion of Simon's Definition**

One individual who cannot easily be accused of uncriticality and who appears to embrace Simon's definition, often quoting and referring to it in his writings, on one occasion even calling it "the best and simplest definition of design we have,"<sup>(33 p.183)</sup> is Clive Dilnot. Dilnot's embrace of Simon's description of design is however by no means unqualified. In a 1998 conference paper, his response immediately following a quotation of the well known passage reads:

To which we can only say: as if! While we would most of us feel that Simon is essentially correct in the logic [of] his arguments – even if, tellingly, few of us would today dare articulate them as strongly as Simon has done here – and [in the] truth of Simon's observations.<sup>(34)</sup>

Dilnot effectively suggests that despite the obviously idealistic naivety of Simon's neat formulation, which evidently does not sit well with our experience of design as encountered in reality, there is nevertheless some deeper intuitively appealing truth and logic to which Simon's formulation testifies, however

imperfectly. Although he himself has never claimed or suggested this, it is possible to identify a strand running through Dilnot's writings on the subject of design ethics which could be read in some sense as a project of the defence, elaboration on, and moving forward of Simon's well-meaning but awkwardly oversimplified formulation: a project of the articulation of a less catchy and quotable, but more careful and rigorous conception of design.<sup>v</sup>

Nowhere does Dilnot ever attempt or claim any sort of formal definition of his own for design. Instead, in various places and ways, he describes a range of aspects of design's multiplicitous pluralistic character which together, through their family resemblances build up a useful picture of the concept.

In a presentation at a colloquium on the subject of metadesign in 2007, he articulated seven capacities of design.<sup>(35)</sup> These "nodes of capacities" as he calls them, are: firstly, the capacity for planning, organising and creating scenarios; secondly the capacity for transformative interventions in existing situations; thirdly the capacity for criticality in relation to what "is" (this criticality leading to conceptions of transfiguration of these existing realities); fourthly the capacity for translation; the mediation between humanity and its surrounding objects.

The fifth proposed capacity of design is configuration, which Dilnot states "is really what design is all about."<sup>(35)</sup> He proposes configuration in two ways, firstly the simple sense in which configuration of structure informs how something is disposed to act, giving the example of how the human skeleton is configured in a certain arrangement which allows a certain range of actions. Secondly he introduces the idea of configuration in the negotiation of incommensurability (this will become a key idea discussed later here in section 3.2.2). This is design's capability to discover configurations which negotiate and resolve – not perfectly but pragmatically – apparently incommensurable elements and demands existing in a given situation. An example of an apparently incommensurable might be the conflict between the demands for speed and safety in the design of a car: the safest car does not move at all, the fastest car becomes increasingly unsafe.<sup>(37)</sup> The resolution of such conflicts is a fundamentally designerly task.

Dilnot's sixth capacity of design concerns making (poesis): the production and exploration of the *artificial*. This poetic capacity encompasses not only the act of making but the knowledge which comes through this: the continuous discovery of what the possibilities for artifice might be for human beings.

Finally, the seventh of Dilnot's capacities of design is that is that design is a mode of acting which is propositional. This is to say that design speaks, that it has something to say, that it is not silent but rather

<sup>v</sup> See for instance specifically: (1, 33, 34, 35, 36)

that it actively contributes to a discourse. Dilnot attempts to explain the nature of design's propositional activity "typographically" by suggesting that all design fundamentally comes into being saying "!!": both an exclamation "THIS!" and a reflexive question "THIS?"<sup>(35)</sup> Although this might seem a slightly peculiar way of phrasing it, the suggestion is that design is never speechless, neutral, existing without comment, but is rather both discursive and reflexive, always declaring and questioning through its very existence.

These seven capacities of: planning; transformative interventions in situations; criticality towards reality with a view towards its transformation; translation between beings and objects and vice versa; configuration and the negotiation of incommensurability; poetics/the possibilities of artifice; and a declarative/reflexive propositional nature, might not be the most obvious character traits which spring to mind when we think of design. Neither can they be easily condensed into a catchy roll-off-the-tongue soundbite. However this list of family resemblances – however odd looking the family might be – offers a much more useful description of this thing which we commonly refer to as design than those attempts to define it either by its products and effects (which crucially fail to show us design itself at all), or by snappy all-encompassing broad declarations claiming that almost all human activity is design (which effectively collapse the need for the word to even exist as it becomes absolutely synonymous with any other banal description of human activity).

So far, this section has considered some of the common approaches towards conceptualising design in order to now be able to proceed with greater clarity in situating and setting out the way of thinking about the term which will be used in this project. Attempting to avoid setting up yet another conclusive/exclusive definition of design, yet seeking to in some useful and communicable way summarise, organise or otherwise formulate the conceptualisation of design under which this project operates, the coming section will propose three key characteristics central to this way of thinking about design. This approach follows along lines similar to Dilnot's thinking in terms of describing some capacities, abilities and characteristics of design.



### 3.2.2 Three Key Characteristics of Design: Transformation, Configuration, Critical Sensitivity

In his 2005 Archeworks papers *Ethics? Design?* Dilnot provides the clearest and most fully worked out example of what can be read as his attempt to redeem Simon's change-towards-preference phrase by indirectly unpacking, expanding and ruminating upon some of the implications of this "definition" in more precise terms. Within the Archeworks text we find statements such as the following, which effectively forms a sort of undeclared expanded and more carefully considered version of Simon's definition of design:

Essentially design is nothing else but the encounter with given realities (actualities, situations, circumstances, conditions or experiences) in terms of their transformative possibilities and potentialities. Design opens these possibilities through initiating a process of negotiation with the given which extends the boundaries of the previously possible.<sup>(1 p.16)</sup>

Note the retention from Simon's formulation of elements of change (transformation) and the artificial (extending boundaries of existing reality) but crucially, the disappearance here of the contentious word "preferred" in favour of a more careful formulation in terms of the negotiation of possibilities and potentialities.

Here is a compelling case for the recuperation of Simon's definition, reframed and worked through in more careful terms, which draws much closer to a satisfactorily rigorous pluralistic and multiplicitous conception of design.

Building on these suggestions and the preceding discussion as a foundation, an account will be set out here of three characteristics of design: transformation, configuration and critical sensitivity. Together these interdependent concepts paint what will be argued to be a coherent, and most importantly useful, picture of design, which will then be taken forward into discussion of the ethicality of design.

#### Transformation: The Extending of Potentiality

Firstly, a crucial and necessary indicator of the presence of design is that where there is design change must take place. The activity of design must involve some transformation from one state to another. This should be immediately qualified by the clarification that this transformation need not always be physical

or material. There is a strong sense within design that a significant part of its fundamental nature is related to activities of devising, planning, or marking out which take place prior to the physical instantiation of these plans. The transformation of design very often is experienced in the encounter with some materially changed object or environment; however, this encountered object stands only as a testament to the primary conceptual transformation which has taken place. The verb sense of the word design refers to this intangible process of transformation, the noun sense to the material evidence which testifies to this process having taken place.

The fundamental nature of the intangible transformation of design is the transformation of potentiality: the extending of the reality of a situation beyond what previously was, not necessarily by causing a change in physical actuality, but through the extension of what is possible.

The bringing into being of a new physical state through material transformation is the bringing into actuality of a potentiality. Design can do this, but so, to use a trivial example, can an automated tea brewing machine. Where previously there was the potentiality for tea to exist in the pot, as the timer clicks on in the morning reality is transformed as potentiality becomes actuality. This transformative change is not design. Yet the machine stands testament to the fact that at some point design has taken place; not in the transformation of the cold water to hot tea, nor even in the complex and carefully worked out process of bringing the machine into existence, but somewhere prior to that. In a world in which people had to make their own tea in the morning, the design of the automated tea machine extended the bounds of potentiality of that universe. Before any physical transformation had taken place, potentiality was transformed and extended through the process of imagining a course of action by which tea might make itself. We can in this sense see the merit of Simon's assertion that design is to do with the devising of courses of action aimed towards transformation of current states.<sup>(31 p.111)</sup> Yet there is a significant nuance to be recognised here that the element of design in this formulation resides not in the material transformation of actuality, but in the extending of potentiality by which that material transformation comes into existence not as reality but as imagined potentiality.

In his 2009 paper on *Some futures for Design History?* Dilnot writes of the error of limiting our thinking of design to some conception of a closed loop within either the mentality of market or of the functionalist imperative that form follows function alone.<sup>(38)</sup> To think of design in such ways as a process which fulfils identified needs, fitting its products towards already existing and identified desires, is to miss out on what it is that design really does. Dilnot introduces an idea of the "territory" of design, an imagined space which

delimits what design can do. The shape of this territory is paradoxical; however unlike Doctor Who's bigger-on-the-inside TARDIS<sup>(39)</sup> (which I have always considered to be an example of a rather pathetic paradox very easily imagined and visualised for television) the territory of design is always bigger *on the outside* (something much more difficult to envisage):

if closure is not complete, this means that the territory of design is not identical to the market for design. In fact, of course, we know that the configurative space that design inhabits (to which it owes the conditions for its phenomenal coming-to-be) cannot fully be closed. [...] the territory of design – its possibility, the range of its capacities – always exceeds its actualization. Were it not so, design could not exist.<sup>(38 p.378)</sup>

The paradox of the territory of design, is that design can always do more than it could ever do, more than is even possible, precisely because what it actually does is to transform and extend possibility itself by discovering and devising plans to bring about previously unimaginable, impossible courses of action.

If this all sounds rather mystical we need only think of some examples to bring us back to earth. In the case of the original design of the automobile, recall the (most likely apocryphal) quote attributed to Henry Ford on the subject of user input on the design of his automobiles: "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses."<sup>(40)</sup> Regardless of whether Henry Ford ever uttered such a phrase, the issue illustrated is that prior to the invention of motor vehicles, the territory of vehicular possibility extended to ideas for more efficient versions of vehicles which already existed. Yet design's nature is to expand the realms of possibility. Within a closed loop territory the car could not have been conceived. Because design's true territory is always bigger than what is possible to imagine, it was possible for something previously impossible to be imagined, and a course towards the coming into actuality of the apparently magically self-powering motor vehicle was devised.

Of course the design of the motor car did not happen through a single eureka moment experienced by one exceptional individual designer, but through a long and complex process of small steps taken by many over time, which eventually were brought together into what we now recognise as the automobile. Yet we should not trick ourselves into thinking that this observable evolutionary process by which most designs come into being demonstrates that potentiality is not expanded through design, as if design consisted only in the bringing together and organisation of existing possibilities. The reality is that the theoretical devising, the abstract extension of potentialities, almost always occurs simultaneously and in tandem with gradual experimental stages of real world transformations of actuality. As such it would be very difficult (and a

pursuit of questionable value) to separate entirely the abstract extension of potentiality from the material transformation of actuality. Such a pursuit becomes tempting when looking back upon what are seen as finished designs in historical perspective, particularly “milestone” designs such as the first motorcar. In looking back on objects, it is too easy to think of them as ends of design processes rather than as moments in the continuous extension of possibility.

In a contemporary context, consider the continuing efforts to work towards a manned expedition to the planet Mars. Such a mission at this time is nothing more than an imagined potentiality. The devising of a course of action which may lead to such a voyage ever taking place is a process of design. At this point, many stages of this process have and are taking place; technologies are constantly being developed and refined from their precursors initially devised in the original space race which in their turn expanded upon the possibilities of preceding terrestrial technologies. However, the forms of many aspects of the design of the mission to Mars cannot yet even be imagined, such as a solution for protecting astronauts from the damaging effects of powerful cosmic radiation.

It is relatively easy to see the principle of the transformation of potentiality at work in such culturally significant “mile-stone” examples as the design of the motor car and the mission to Mars, but this principle is present in all design from the macro to the micro.

The vital principle is that design exists wherever change occurs through the transformation and extension of existing potentiality. Change and transformation of material conditions may often be an indicator of this, but must be recognised only as an indicator of the underlying primary transformation in possibility. To clarify the relationship between transformation of materiality and potentiality, consider again some of Papanek's proposed instances of design.

Papanek suggests that “cleaning and reorganizing a desk drawer”<sup>(28 p.3)</sup> may be considered design. According to the principle of the extension of potentiality, this activity might well be considered as design if it is argued that through this activity the state of the drawer is being transformed from a state of chaos to a state of conscious order which has previously not existed in this location. If this is the case, then design is indeed taking place here, as the potentiality for this drawer to become clean and organised according to a new scheme can be seen as a meaningful transformation of the potentiality of the drawer. If however, this drawer used to have a particular scheme of organisation which over time has fallen out of use as items are carelessly cast into the wrong compartments, and this cleaning and reorganising activity is simply a reinstatement of the original system, we cannot meaningfully refer to this activity as design. Despite

a marked physical change in state, no new extension of possibility – no previously unimagined state of existence for the contents of the drawer – has occurred.

This principle can be even more obviously observed in Papanek's further suggestion that "baking an apple pie"<sup>(28 p.3)</sup> can be considered to be design. Without doubt, the first time someone devised a scheme to create a delicious treat by baking apples inside pastry, this was a process of design. However, is it really in any way meaningful to refer to the habitual weekly baking of apple pies according to a recipe, as design? Though with each subsequent baking, the ingredients are changed and transformed into a pie following the pattern of the original design, this is no extension of possibility, merely a repetition of previously discovered and defined activity.

Of course this does not preclude the existence of design activity in relation to the baking of apple pies. Each variation of the previously established formula can be seen to be an extension of the potentiality of the pie: this may be the subtle addition of a new spice, or a more radical reimagining and reengineering of the whole dessert genre. The physical production of a new pie in the pattern of previous pies is simply production. The imagining of a new pie different to any pie ever produced (however small this difference is) is a process of design.

In one final illustration of this point, consider Papanek's assertion that design is "executing a mural."<sup>(28 p.3)</sup> The execution of murals is grouped alongside the composition of poetry, the painting of masterpieces and the writing of concertos: activities traditionally considered to be artistic endeavours. These artistic activities could certainly be considered design according only to the principle that at their heart are processes of bringing into being new and unexplored aesthetic forms which extend the potentiality of their respective genres. It would seem that the activity of creating murals should pass this test equally easily. However, Papanek's choice of language in describing the "execution" of a mural raises a question here as to the nuances and peculiarities of the complex relationship between the design process and production.

Let us imagine two scenarios for the creation of a mural. (Fig 13) In one, the muralist carefully draws out a plan for the mural on paper, then scales it up and paints it into the space. In another, the muralist begins by applying paint to the wall and lets the scheme develop intuitively until it is decided that the mural is complete. According to common sense, the first muralist might be thought to be the designer, having devised a careful plan first before engaging in the production of the artefact. The second muralist might be considered an artist more than a designer, having worked according to no particular plan other than what felt right. Both produce a mural, but surely only the first can be said to have been designed?

This common sense intuition however would be mistaken. When carefully viewed through the lens of design as the transformation and extension of potentiality, it can be clearly observed that both muralists do in fact engage in design, the only difference is the stage at which the design takes place in the process. The first muralist undertakes their design prior to opening a can of paint, the second does their design continuously throughout the process of painting, never ceasing to design until the piece is completed.

The first mural designer could quite conceivably design the mural then pay a “mural technician” to carry out the scheme. It could even be mechanically printed and pasted up (or even directly painted by a machine such as Jürg Lehn’s Hektor (Fig 14)). This activity of “executing” the design need not involve any design at all, merely the labour of blindly following the predetermined plan. Papanek’s choice to use the word “executing” allows for the potential absence of design from the activity.

More often than not, the intellectual labour of devising a design which truly extends the boundaries of potentiality in a given context, and the physical labour of bringing about some physical transformation as part of the instantiation of this design plan, overlap in time occurring simultaneously or in iterative feedback loops. In the case of the execution of a mural, it is easy to imagine how in many cases the muralist conceives of an initial design which is then executed, but that in this execution the design is modified as textures and features of the physical mural surface are incorporated, as elements just don’t look right and are modified, or as better ideas which occur during the process of painting are incorporated on the fly.

The principle that transformation, not simply of physical form but of the boundaries and limits of potentiality, is a key characteristic of design allows us one relatively straightforward measure by which to identify design.

## Configuration of the Artificial

The idea that configuration is in fact a central characteristic of design has already been mentioned as the fifth of Dilnot’s seven capacities of design. At a superficial level it is fairly easy to see how the idea of configuration can be closely tied to design. Etymologically the word configure derives from the Latin prefix *con* meaning together, and *figurare* meaning to shape or form.<sup>(41)</sup> The linguistic roots of configuration thus are found in the idea of shaping after a pattern, which bears more than a passing resemblance to certain understandings of design. Contemporary usage of configuration tends to connote ideas of the combination



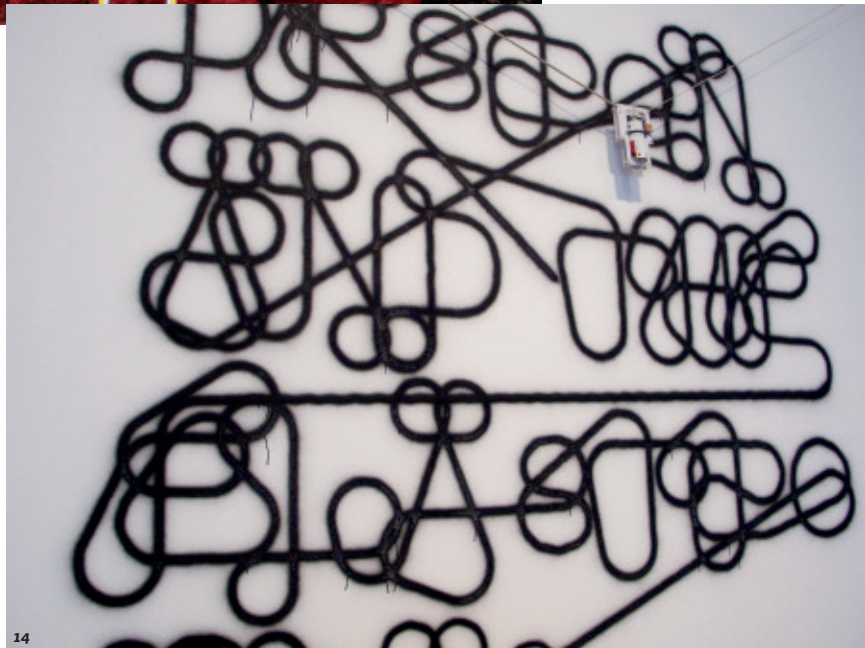


Fig 13: Stephen Powers Love Letter in progress at 47th and Market

Fig 14: Design and the Elastic Mind: Hektor spray-paint output device by Jurg Lehni and Uli Franke

Fig 15: No Smoking Symbol

Fig 16: Steven Powers in Dublin 2013



or arrangement of elements according to some scheme, planned or accidental, which forms a whole.

Observing what designers do, it certainly seems that configuration of elements is an important part of design activity. The design of a home involves the configuration of materials typically in the form of walls, roofs, windows and doors etc. in order to create a suitable space which provides shelter for living in. The design of a vehicle for transporting people and goods involves configuration of a source of propulsion with some appropriate space for storing passengers and their things. Configuration of course does not exclusively refer to the bringing together of arrangements of physical components but can just as easily refer to configuration of less tangible elements. The design of a poster involves at one level the configuration of ink and paper, but more fundamentally in terms of the communicative intention, requires a configuration of culturally and socially meaningful symbolic visual elements which combine to communicate a certain message or information.

How a whole is configured, the manner in which its constitutive elements are combined and interact, dictates to a great extent the capabilities for how that whole can act or be interacted with. An obvious example of this is how the configuration of bones in a skeleton disposes a body to act in certain ways: the unique configuration of bones and vessels within the body of an owl allows it to twist its head through a remarkable rotation; those creatures with opposable thumbs find it much easier to open jam jars than those without; most fish and shark's spines flex horizontally, while dolphin's and whale's flex vertically, each configuration allowing distinct capabilities.

A home configured with a very small low entrance may not appear to lend itself to the needs of an extremely tall person; however, if the house is an igloo designed primarily for warmth in an extremely cold environment, this entrance offers obvious benefits regardless of one's height. A train designed in such a way as to be able to transport large numbers of people and luggage at high speeds is of limited use if its body is configured in such a way that it is too wide to enter the railway station as the French train operator SNCF discovered to their cost in May 2014.<sup>(42)</sup> The image of the simplistic visual device of a crossed out cigarette may communicate one clear message about smoking, however another differently configured image featuring a cigarette may instigate a quite different form of communication by stimulating a diversity of more complex thoughts. (Figs 15, 16)

In each of these examples of design, choices made as to configurations of elements have an effect on the potential capacities of the configured whole. Based on such observations, it seems fairly straightforward to suggest that one of the characteristic functions of the activity of design is configuration towards the



creation of certain capacities.

However if configuration is to be proposed as a vital characteristic of design, there must be some further qualifications: firstly, that design configuration is configuration of the artificial; secondly, that the specifically designerly nature of this configuration of the artificial is found in negotiation of incommensurable elements within a configuration; and thirdly, that the nature of the skill required of designers in order to negotiate this configuration of incommensurable elements into a functional whole is not a purely technical skill but an activity which requires the designer's possession of the specific capacity which will be described here in terms of the ancient Greek concept of *phronesis*: practical wisdom.

## The Artificial

A proper understanding of configuration in design must take into account the reality that design's interventions in the world take place within the realm of the artificial. The artificial is that which is fundamentally opposed to nature: that which is not naturally occurring but which has been brought into existence through configurational interventions. Herbert Simon, in his 1969 book "Sciences of the artificial" in which he posits design as one of these eponymous sciences, marks out the artificial in opposition to the natural as that which has been brought about by human purpose as opposed to natural law.<sup>(31 p.3)</sup> He suggests that "[t]he world we live in today is much more a man-made, or artificial, world than it is a natural world. Almost every element in our environment shows evidence of human artifice."<sup>(31 p.2)</sup>

This might seem to be a great exaggeration when we observe nature all around us. Simon pre-emptively defends his assertion against accusations of gross exaggeration, stating that he may plead guilty to slight overstatement but not by much, indicating that we must carefully consider the boundary between what is natural and what is artificial:

To say that an astronaut, or even an airplane pilot, is obeying the law of gravity, hence is a perfectly natural phenomenon, is true, but its truth calls for some sophistication in what we mean by "obeying" a natural law. [...] A forest may be a phenomenon of nature; a farm certainly is not. The very species upon which we depend for our food our corn and our cattle are artifacts of our ingenuity. A plowed field is no more part of nature than an asphalted street and no less.<sup>(31 p.3)</sup>

To oppose the artificial to nature is to suggest to that wherever we configure or reconfigure the situations

which we encounter in our lives in order to adapt them to our own goals and purposes, we create the artificial. Given such parameters it becomes increasingly difficult to find authentic examples of the natural, and Simon's assertion of its pervasiveness comes to seem much more reasonable.

Clive Dilnot however goes much further than Simon and actually makes the claim that our contemporary human experience of reality is one in which the artificial has become the ultimate "horizon and medium of our existence"<sup>(33, 36, 38)</sup> eclipsing the natural entirely. He suggests that this vanishing point of the natural occurred simultaneously with mankind's newly found capability to be able to wholly obliterate the natural by artificial means. This moment was marked by two "watershed" events: firstly, the American use of nuclear weapons against Japan in 1945; and secondly, the realisation of impending manmade environmental catastrophe through global warming. Knowledge of our own power to wipe out all nature as we know it is experienced as "a break not only with the past but with the continuity of the future."<sup>(33 p.184)</sup> Design theorist Tony Fry talks of this idea in terms of "defuturing."<sup>(43)</sup> When the artificial has the power to obliterate not only the natural environment, but natural law in the very concept of time itself (at least from humanity's perspective of having a future to move forward into) the realm of the natural comes to be eclipsed and subsumed as just one more set of elements to be artificially configured towards our human aim and purpose of continued future existence.

Dilnot's position merits some serious consideration in terms of our contemporary attitudes towards reality. What effect does the realisation of the concrete possibility that humanity may now be capable, through its own actions, of depriving itself of a future, have on the ways we think and act? The significance of this question in relation to design is difficult to overstate.

Design in all its forms is essentially an activity of the creation and transformation of the artificial through configuration. Whether the artificial constitutes the absolute horizon of our experience of reality, or merely constitutes a large chunk of this experience, design at a meta level is the key process in shaping and bringing about this realm of artifice. This meta level conception of design as the shaper of the artificial through configuration would be a broad conception of design encompassing almost all human activities of configuration towards an aim or purpose. In order to find a more precise understanding of design in this configuration activity, further criteria by which to identify specifically designerly configuration as opposed to mere generic configuration must be sought. One such criterion may be found in the idea of design as the configurative negotiation of incommensurability.

## Negotiation of the Incommensurable

A key characteristic of design activity is the ability not just to constitute the artificial through configurations, but to devise configurations which negotiate and resolve – not perfectly but functionally – apparently incommensurable elements and demands existing in a given situation.

A clear introductory summary of this is provided by Philip Sargent in a paper on design science:

It is a common observation that design, both commonplace redesign of existing products and radical design of entirely new products, involves trade-offs between different goals. These goals may be expressed in entirely different terms, for example the requirement that a car be both fast and safe; or they may be precise but only be capable of evaluation using different principles, such as the requirements that a car body minimize radio-interference and provide mechanical support during motion.<sup>(37 p.389-390)</sup>

A key part of design's nature is this negotiation of multiple complex and competing elements which have no perfectly logical resolution. Such situations have often been described as “wicked problems” after Rittel and Webber's initial suggestion.<sup>(44)</sup> A wicked problem is one to which there is no definitive optimum solution, but rather a myriad of possible solutions which may be preferable from different perspectives for different reasons. The “solving” of such a problem entails the balancing or weighting and counterbalancing of these many different perspectives and success criteria in order to produce an outcome which may not be right or optimal, but which is hopefully acceptable.

While the wicked problems discourse can be useful in considering what it is that design does, the terminology of “problem solving” is not particularly helpful and is perhaps better avoided altogether. In many of the complex contexts in which design operates, the idea of solving problems does not seem to be relevant. Design as an activity of the transformation and extending of potentiality through the configuration of the artificial is a much more complex matter than this. Instead of problem solving then, which supposes a correct solution to a given problem, it is proposed that design activity might be more appropriately thought of in terms of the negotiation of incommensurabilities.

In his Archeworks papers, Clive Dilnot stages an opposition between two approaches to artifice: technology and design. Technology proceeds according to strategies of “domination” seeking concrete universal solutions to defined problems. Where an incommensurable “wicked” problem is encountered, technology knows no other strategy than to stubbornly proceed in attempting to resolve the unresolvable.

Design is differentiated from technology by its ability to embrace the indeterminacy and un-solvability of incommensurability. Dilnot argues that:

Design differs *actively* from technology in this respect. Whereas the latter will seek to reduce incommensurability to those (objective) laws which it *must* obey – the former is concerned to identify, *and give active weight to*, the diversity of elements and requirements that will make up its negotiative and creative-synthetic work.<sup>(1 p.33)</sup>

Dilnot suggests that design is an inherently *relational* activity, always negotiating between multiple positions rather than seeking to resolve these into one single universally “correct” position:

Negotiation happens, in design as elsewhere, because the moments in a conflict, or the requirements of a design problem, are incommensurable in a deep sense, that is they cannot be reduced to a single plane of representation out of which a calculation can be made to produce an optimum solution (as can be done in technology). If incommensurable elements and/or requirements cannot be so reduced then negotiation must occur. Design is a process of negotiating incommensurability, literally so in the sense of establishing dialogue with those involved in the situation, and configuratively so in the sense that what, in the end, design creates is a configuration in which incommensurables are reconciled not passively or definitively but as a proposition (*this* resolution, in *this* way, responding to *these* circumstances).<sup>(1 p.31)</sup>

The nature of the activity of design as the transformational potentiality-extending configuration of the artificial is one of negotiation with, rather than domination over, context. This is the key differentiating factor between technological configuration and design configuration, which sets design apart as a distinct area of human activity in relation to artifice. As Dilnot writes: “Whereas technology erases incommensurability, design celebrates it and uses it as the starting point for creative work.”<sup>(1 p.34)</sup>

In order to understand how designers are able to undertake the activity of negotiating the incommensurable where technologists fail, one more concept will be advanced: the idea of the practical wisdom of *phronesis*, which mediates between pure abstract and applied technical knowledges.

## Phronesis

The ancient Greek concept of *phronesis*, commonly translated as referring to practical wisdom, offers one potential perspective on the matter of *how* the negotiative work of design can be carried out. Phronesis practical wisdom is to be contrasted with other wisdom/knowledge related values such as *episteme* which refers to a conception of disinterested pure knowledge, and *techne* which refers to ideas of craftsmanship and technical skill. Aspects of technological configuration within design production certainly rely upon *techne*; however, it will be proposed here that the foundation of the uniquely designerly negotiation of incommensurability is found within *phronesis*.

The practical wisdom of *phronesis* describes a conception of knowledge, understanding and judgement which consists neither of the disinterested abstract theoretical exercises of *episteme*, nor as the purely technical mechanical craft knowledges of *techne*. *Phronesis* is rather a wisdom which unites and embraces both reflection and action. It is not primarily concerned with either pure knowledge or with knowledge entirely derived from activity; rather its wisdom exists in the negotiation between these two.

This corresponds with Dilnot's description of the relational work of design as

a (more than) three-way negotiation between the demands and the needs of the subject, the limits of the possible (which includes, of course, what is socially, economically and politically possible – as well as what is physically possible) and transformative action.<sup>(1 p.29)</sup>

*Techne* and the sphere of technological activity pursues the attainment of perfect ideal universal solutions, and as such always necessarily falls short. Glass is never perfectly clear. Wheels are never truly mathematically circular. Constructed buildings always compromise on the perfection of the architect's blueprint. As John Caputo puts it "in *techne* the passage from the ideal to the real, the universal to the singular, is a movement of loss of formal perfection."<sup>(6 p.119)</sup>

In contrast to this, design based on *phronesis* has no intention of achieving perfect ideals. Instead it begins with vague ideas for possibilities and seeks to enhance currently existing imperfect states by transforming them into different imperfect states.

Caputo, considering *phronesis* in the context of ethics, gives the example of courage: an ethical ideal which can be known, but which in each encountered singular situation must be negotiated using *phronesis* wisdom:

So Aristotle would tell you that courage as a schema is a matter of dealing with an approaching danger in a manner that is not too rash and not too timid. On the one hand, courage is practical wisdom not practical stupidity: it is not courage but foolishness to stand in front of a bus that is out of control in order to prevent it from crashing into a crowd of people. But neither is it courage to just take off and head for shelter without taking a certain measured risk in warning others of the danger and helping them seek safety. But just how much is enough and not too much? Well, that is where the *phronesis* comes in; that is where you will have to use your judgment, which you should have been practicing or exercising before now, in order to know how to decide what to do here and now, which depends upon the circumstances.<sup>(6 p.119)</sup>

Phronesis is the practical wisdom of the negotiation of the incommensurable. It cannot be codified into a set of rules or guidelines, as each newly encountered situation requires a fresh negotiation. This negotiation between episteme theoretical knowledge and techne technical skill which constitutes phronesis, is what sets design apart from mere technology in the configuration of the artificial.

## Critical Sensitivity

Design cannot be fully conceived in terms of transformation and configuration alone. Design so imagined could be carried out by machines mindlessly transforming existing situations through reconfigurations of existing realities. Such machines through application of algorithms might certainly be capable of devising courses of action which result in changes in existing situations, but to what extent could we really call that design? Without some element of conscious intentionality, design would be nothing more than a process of either entirely random or deterministic algorithmically prescribed permutations. This is the point at which Herbert Simon felt the need to add the element of preference to his formulation in order to avoid this mechanistic fate. However, as has already been discussed, the choice of preference as the essential factor in motivating design directions introduces issues of power relationships and ideology which, while certainly present in design, unnecessarily complicate the equation at this fundamental level of attempting to describe in the most basic terms what the nature of design is. Instead of discounting Simon's formula on account of this, Dilnot offers the insight that Simon's definition is in fact a secondary level analysis of design, and that in order to properly and more fully understand design we must first posit a deeper primary analysis of that which must take place before preference can become a contributing factor:

Take for example Herbert Simon's famous definition of design. Often evoked as a justification for instrumental action, the 'devising of courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones'(Simon 1996: 111) is in fact secondary not primary. The process which ends with the realization of previously unforeseen possibilities cast into a new configuration, begins from an understanding that it is possible to critically discern amongst the potentialities existing within a situation those that can form the basis of a new (preferred) entity. No motivation for setting in train the 'devising of courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones' happens without an initial apperception that what-is is in some manner deficient vis-à-vis what could be.<sup>(36 p.178-179)</sup>

What Dilnot proposes is that the ultimately basic foundation which must exist in order for design to come into being, is *critical sensitivity*: the phronetic capacity to discern potentialities and imagine possibilities for how things could be different than they are in any given existing situation. A machine may be able to compute the optimum choice between a range of available options, but a genuine designer must possess the ability to be able to devise a course of action which aims towards an option which does not yet exist even as a possibility. The only way that this is possible is through the possession of properly aesthetic (in the sense discussed in section 3.1.5) sensitivity in relation firstly to what exists, but vitally and more importantly to the relationship between what exists and what could potentially exist.

In order to be able to truly undertake genuine design activity a designer must necessarily inhabit this realm of critical sensitivity, which brings us back to Dilnot's concept of "the territory" of design. The nature of the territory of design, is one of the interface between actuality and potentiality: of a critical dynamic between perceived pasts, presents and futures, and pasts, presents and futures which were not, are not, or have not yet been actualised, but could have been or could yet be.

Dilnot elaborates on this fundamental potentiality/actuality dynamic inherent within design, and the necessity for sensitivity which arises within this:

The territory of design therefore is not one thing but at least three things: it is what was and is actualized (all that we experience as design; in a museum, in a course, as a pedagogy, a professional practice, in an exhibit, in a book), it is what could have been actualized but was not ('roads not taken' – and they are of course myriad) and what remains to be actualized, the realm of possibility that design, as a social practice, as configurative practice and as I shall later say, as a realm of capacities, perennially explores (even if, socially speaking, in the most limited and limiting

of circumstances). The boundaries of none of these realms are clear, they shift according to the market (always interested in naturalizing notions of design and in 'adjusting' these notions to its own interests) but also in terms of how we cognize what design 'is' and what it might be – and how that cognition is reflected in practice and in thought.<sup>(38 p.378)</sup>

In summary, this is to say that without the critical sensitivity to be able to perceive potentialities within the unique singularity of an encountered situation, the transformative configurative work of design simply cannot take place.



## 2.3.3 Summary: A Useful Description of Design

This section has conducted an investigation into the nature of design. Design has been recognised as a pluralistic concept which resists definition. The approach taken here has then been to discuss some characteristics of design – “family resemblances”<sup>(A1)</sup> – which together provide some insight into the nature of design.

Conceptions of design which are extremely narrow – tying the activity to its observed products and outputs – or extremely broad – losing sight of design as a distinct activity separate from general human action – were rejected. Clive Dilnot’s suggestions of a range of fundamental capacities of design were used as the starting point for setting out a conception of design based on three key characteristics: transformation, configuration and critical sensitivity.

The idea of transformation recognises that the fundamental activity of design is to extend the boundaries of existing realities by imagining and proposing new possibilities. Design is in this way seen as an activity of the transformation of potentiality.

Configuration is proposed as a second key trait of design activity, characterised specifically as configuration of the artificial. Negotiation of incommensurability was recognised as the factor which sets design activity apart from merely technological contributions to artifice. Phronesis wisdom which mediates between abstract and applied knowledges offers a way to understand how design is capable of negotiating incommensurabilities.

Finally, critical sensitivity to both recognise existing states of reality, and how these could potentially be altered, is proposed as a necessary prerequisite to design’s work.

These three characteristics of transformation, configuration and sensitivity together form not a definition but rather a way of describing design. This is offered as an incomplete and imperfect but indicative way of describing the complex phenomena of design. Bearing this in mind, the description of design laid out here could be summarised in this way: design is the negotiation and configuration of singularities, which transforms and extends potentiality beyond the previously possible.

## 3.3 Ethical Design

### 3.3.1 Correlations Between Design and the Ethical

The first two sections of this chapter, in investigating the first two research aims of the project (see section 1.2), have described ways of thinking about concepts of the ethical and design. Armed now with these conceptualisations, the third aim of this research is to address the question of the relationship between these two. Is design, or can design be, ethical, and if so to what extent?

In short, according to the accounts of the ethical and design laid out here, it will be proposed that these two concepts do in fact share deep links and similarities. Based on the nature of these connections, this section will conclude that design is indeed, by its very fundamental nature, ethical.

The table below (Table 2) crudely indicates some of the more obvious correlations which it is possible to draw between the two concepts.

Table 2: Correlations Between the Ethical and Design

	Potentiality	Singularity	Sensitivity	Mode of Existence
The Ethical	The ethical becomes possible only in experience of potentiality	The ethical emerges in relation to encounter with singularity	The ethical is contingent on the recognition of difference through aesthetic sensitivity	The ethical is a mode of existence as opposed to a state to be achieved by following moral rules
Design	Design involves the transformation and extension of potentiality	Design involves the negotiation of incommensurability in the encounter with singularities	Design requires critical sensitivity to be able to perceive potentialities to be transformed and extended	Design requires the immanent possession of practical wisdom ( <i>phronesis</i> ) over and above raw technical skill ( <i>techne</i> )

#### Potentiality

In the accounts set out here, potentiality is a central concept for both design and ethics. The ethical is possible only where potentiality genuinely exists and can be engaged with. A key characteristic of design is that design extends and enlarges the boundaries of potentiality, creating new potentialities in addition to those existing. This capacity of design is an inherently ethical one. The extension of the boundaries of potentiality must also necessarily be an extension of the possibilities for the ethical.

## Singularity

Singularity is also a key component in both design and ethics. It is proposed here that the ethical emerges specifically in relation to that which is radically new and previously undiscovered: the singular. Design's fundamental work is identified in the labour of configuration, specifically that involving the negotiation of the incommensurable. Such activity can only properly be undertaken in relation to the unique singularity of each newly encountered design context. The context of singularity is a necessarily ethical context. No previously learned response can be applied to this radically unknown situation. A properly ethical response of the consideration of potentialities is demanded. The activity of design in attempting to negotiate the incommensurability of the singular, and in so doing of transforming and extending the boundaries of previously existing potentiality in accordance with the above principle, is therefore a fundamentally ethical activity.

## Sensitivity

Aesthetic sensitivity is identified as playing a vital role in genuine ethical experience, both in terms of the positive requirement for sensitivity in order to be able to recognise potentialities, and in terms of the negative flipside whereby the absence of this sensitivity absolutely denies the possibility of the ethical. On the design side, it is also suggested that aesthetic sensitivity towards existing realities is vital, but furthermore that this required sensitivity for design must also possess an element of criticality. The designer's aesthetic sensitivity must not be content simply to perceive what exists, but must also extend towards speculative sensitivity in relation to what does not yet, but could, exist. Without such critical aesthetic sensitivity the designer would remain trapped within the boundaries of existing reality, unable to conceive of any of the infinite possibilities for extending the limits of potentiality.

Proper aesthetic sensitivity is a precondition for both the ethical and genuine design. Where it is absent, neither can occur. This observation adds yet more weight to the case that design and ethics are deeply linked.

# Mode of Existence

## *Similarities*

There are some parallels which can be drawn between design and the account of the ethical as a mode of existence to be inhabited rather than something to be possessed or known. The foremost perhaps of these is the observation that both design and ethics require more than simple rule-following. To approach either design or ethics in such a legalistic technical manner causes these concepts to implode and disappear.

In the case of the ethical, the following of rules and precedents violates all three principles of the experience of potentiality, encounter with authentic singularity, and possession of aesthetic sensitivity (which is required to recognise these preceding two). The routine suppression of the realm of possibilities through legalistic codifying is a necessary part of human society. Were it not, we would be paralysed by choice: cast adrift on an ocean of seemingly infinite possibilities with no criteria by which to begin navigation. However, necessary as it might be for pragmatic social existence, the formulation and following of rules and codes is not something which the ethical can tolerate. Codification transforms authentic ethical sensitivity into morality. As Cameron Tonkinwise writes: “a code of ethics is, if not an outright oxymoron, better called a morality.”<sup>(45 p.130)</sup>

In the case of design, the ever present close proximity of craft, method and technical skill can easily obscure our thinking on this matter. It may often appear that designers operate according to predetermined sets of techniques, simply selecting and applying the appropriate procedure for the given context. The design methods movement of the 1960's (characterised by figures such as L. Bruce Archer, John Chris Jones, Christopher Alexander Horst Rittel et al.<sup>vi</sup>) and the more recent design thinking movement (typified by IDEO and the D.School, the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford and surrounding figures such as Tim Brown and David Kelley<sup>(49, 50)</sup>) are examples of research and practice which can be seen to stem from this underlying belief. Although technical skill is essential and always will remain a crucial and integral part of the design process, this must not be confused with the unique core of what makes design design.

In a keynote speech at the Spring 2014 Cumulus conference in Aveiro Portugal, Adriano Duarte Rodrigues addressed the relationship between technical experience and artistic activity, writing of the complexity of this close relationship in which technical components of activity become naturalised leading to our difficulty in being able to conceive of them separately:

vi For an overview of the design methods movement see: [46, 47, 48]

One of the consequences of technical objects becoming naturalized is a tendency to confuse the domain of art with the aesthetic experience. The artist tends to give their activity an appearance of spontaneity, in that the technical component of their activity becomes increasingly imperceptible. Forms tend to erase the structural marks, the scaffolding that supports them; the performance of the dancer tends to appear as the spontaneous and gracious behaviour of a body in motion. The piano player executes a work in such a natural manner that the audience is led to forget the demands of the years of learning, and have the illusion that anyone could perform the same work with equal ease.<sup>(51)</sup>

These remarks can be applied as easily to design as to art. Just as in the hand movements of an experienced piano player it is difficult to distinguish muscle memory from intuitive musical ability, so it can be difficult to distinguish the boundaries between technical skill and underlying fundamental design activity in the labour of a capable designer. In any authentic design process the two are inextricably intertwined.

Yet, while design almost always involves some element of learned technical skill, the presence of technical skill alone does not by any means indicate the presence of design. Technical skill can be learned by mechanistic repetition. Those pies baked by a master baker who has produced many thousands of apple pies will undoubtedly, in the quality of their form, testify to the technical skill of the craftsman. However, this skill alone cannot tell us whether this baker is also a designer: whether over the course of his career he has in any way designed the apple pie, changing or improving it from the recipe he began with. He may instead simply have spent years striving to achieve perfection within defined limits, edging ever closer to the level of quality set by a previous pie-master.

As the ethical cannot be found through rule following, so design cannot be identified in raw technique alone. Something more is required. Two ideas which can help to identify this mysterious other, are the idea of excess and the concept of *phronesis*.

In terms of excess, this is the principle that design, like ethics, is not concerned with meeting some minimum required level, but rather always seeks new territory, going beyond the previously defined parameters of reality. The encounter with a truly ethical situation requires a radically new response which exceeds and extends the previous state of ethics. True design emerges in the encounter with a situation which design has not previously addressed. New, expansive and excessive potentialities must be explored in the negotiation of this incommensurable singularity.

Similarly the concept of *phronesis* allows us to conceive of design as an activity which employs practical wisdom in the negotiation of incommensurability in order to expand potentiality. This is to be contrasted and opposed to *techne* knowledge which works towards (but can never achieve) ideal forms within the limits of existing realities. While *techne* can follow rules and traditions, *phronesis* must cut its own path. A true designer must rely not on their technical skills alone but on the *phronesis* practical wisdom which they have cultivated within themselves.

In these ways, design rejects rule-following and other externally imposed limiting and containing frameworks. The foundations of design are found instead within a radical adaptability in being able to negotiate paths through new and unknown situations and contexts towards uncharted territories. This account of design bears distinct similarities to the description of the ethical laid out here as a mode of existence which is allergic to the rule-following and codifying of morality, requiring instead the capabilities to develop new and unique responses to new and unique encounters.

The precondition for being able either to design or to act ethically cannot be met through the accumulation of previously gained existing knowledge or skill alone. Instead the crucial element of this state is found in the inhabitation of a state of preparedness: of readiness to deal with the unknown encounter. Caution should however be exercised in the conclusions drawn from this observed similarity.

## ***Differences***

While the ethical and design can in some ways be seen to share some ground in relation to the inhabitation of a foundational mode of being, this same principle of the ethical as a mode of existence also draws to our attention an important distinction between the ethical and design.

Even for those professionals who would find some element of their personal identity in being self-describing designers, design itself cannot be said to be a way of being. Rather it is better understood as just one among many human capacities. While it may be possible to *be* in an ethical mode of existence, the idea of *being* in a state of design makes little sense. Instead we might rather say that it is possible to possess the capacity for design.

Recall Agamben's example illustrating potentiality/impotentiality in the architect and the poet (section 3.1.3). To be an architect, poet or designer does not mean that one is constantly and continuously enacting one's potentiality to build, write or design, but rather that one has already within oneself the capacity to do so should one wish to. It would be tempting here to describe design as an activity to be undertaken, but

perhaps it is best to retain the strict nuance that design is best conceived as a capacity to be enacted. Sight must of course not also be lost of the fact that the word design will inevitably also be used to describe the resulting consequences of this activity or enactment of the design capacity.

The ethical, in opposition to this, is neither activity nor capacity, and furthermore leaves no trail of artefacts or other evidence of its existence. Strictly speaking, according to the way of thinking set out here, one cannot undertake or enact ethics, rather one can only inhabit the ethical. Ethics is not a potential capacity which lies dormant until it is enacted. It is perhaps possible to imagine the ethical rather as a *quality* of all activity (and inactivity) which can be either present in varying degrees or entirely absent.

While they might then bear some similarities, the thing which we call design is of an entirely different order to the thing which we call the ethical. The ethical is a way of being which is either inhabited or not. Design is a capacity to be possessed, which can then be used or not used. Laid out as such we can begin to conceive of the possibilities for the relationship between these two.

### 3.3.2 Conclusions: Is Design Ethical?

The conclusion proposed based on the preceding discussion is that design is always ethical, and that where design appears not to be ethical this is because it is not truly design. In making this case, as a reminder, the argument should first be reiterated that being of a different order and therefore entirely distinct from morality, the ethical actually has very little to do with our conventional ideas of good and bad.

Activities can be undertaken either ethically or unethically and this can be observed according to their alignment with the characteristics of potentiality, singularity and aesthetic sensitivity. Just as apple pies can be designed or merely manufactured, it is quite possible for the baking of apple pies to be undertaken *unethically* if this baking activity is carried out in the complete lack of sensitivity towards the potentialities available in the situation. It is equally possible for apple pies to be baked ethically as part of a negotiation of perceived potentialities.

Imagine an example of one such unethical pie baking situation, in the case of a labourer who mechanistically bakes pies. He creates excellent pies but has no sensitivity as to the potential effects of his delicious produce. Any such effects are merely coincidental. Compare this to the case of a kindly individual who bakes an apple pie for a new neighbour as a welcome gift, or a wicked witch type character who bakes a poisoned apple pie for an unsuspecting victim. Such pies are loaded with social and interpersonal potential. They are conceived in sensitivity to specific situations and the possibilities therein, and are likely to have significant impacts upon these situations. These pies, regardless of the good or bad intentions of their producers, are both ethical.

The overall conclusion of this conception of ethical design propose here is then, that design is immanently ethical, however, that this immanent ethical nature of design does not guarantee or positively bias acts of design towards “good.”

To claim that design is ethical, is not to claim that design is good, but rather only that it always possesses within its operations potentiality for both good and evil.

The previous section discussed how design and the ethical share common ground in terms of principles of potentiality, singularity, sensitivity and to a limited extent the inhabitation of a certain mode of existence. Based on these coinciding depictions of design and the ethical, it is possible to see that someone engaged in unethical baking such as the labourer in this example cannot be said to be designing, yet those



engaged in the ethical activity of baking pies to welcome a neighbour or to poison an enemy most likely are designing. Here the principle that all designing is also necessarily ethical can be seen to emerge.

Design, both as an activity and as the evidence of this activity, is an ethical phenomenon. It cannot fail to be ethical because its foundational constituent elements are ethical.

In order to be design, design must transform and extend potentiality, which is a fundamentally ethical occurrence.

In order to be design, design must negotiate with the unique singularity of situations, which is a fundamentally ethical encounter.

In order to be design, design must possess the critical aesthetic sensitivity to be capable of awareness of both the conditions of existing realities and of speculative excessive potentialities, which is a fundamentally ethical sensitivity.

Finally, in order for design to be design it must exceed the limitations of raw craft, method and technical skill, and inhabit a way of being characterised by practical wisdom, which is a fundamentally ethical mode of existence.

Design is immanently ethical, but it must be noted that while design is always ethical, the ethical is not always design. Design is the junior partner in this relationship. Ethics encompasses design and extends far beyond design's limited reach.

It is quite possible for design to be ethical – to emerge from within an ethical mode of existence and to possess ethical qualities – but it would plainly be ridiculous to suggest that the ethical must always be design. The ethical and design, although linked, should not be treated as in any way synonymous or equivalent: design may be an immanently and therefore a necessarily ethical activity, but it does not therefore follow that ethics is an activity of design.

## **Design is Ethical, so What?**

In this chapter a case has been laid out which cumulatively argues that design is ethical, but that this conception of foundational ethicality is really a separate issue from conventional everyday notions of

moralistic ethics which are closely tied to value judgements of good and bad. The coming section seeks to address two possible misinterpretations of the significance of these conclusions. These possible reactions are firstly the impression of anti-climax, and secondly the possibility of misconstruing a subtle optimism in the argument.

In terms of anti-climax, it is wholly understandable that one possible reaction to the conclusion that design is ethical but that this has nothing to do with perceived values of good and bad, is that of disappointment. Undoubtedly this seems to be an anti-climax. I for one would certainly have hoped for more. It is all very well to be able to declare that design is ethical, but if this truth has very little tangible bearing on pragmatic issues relating to questions of how to practice design well – that is to say ethically in the conventional everyday sense – then so what? This abstract theoretical quality of design, if not fully grasped for all its consequences, may appear to be entirely insignificant to issues of real world practice.

The potential for a misconstrual of a subtle optimism in the conclusions of the inherent ethicality of design might arise in a failure to adequately grasp the seriousness of the proposal that design's ethicality has no positive bearing on its goodness. If the principle which states that the ethical nature of design means that design has only the potential to be both good and bad, is understood within a contextual frame which still maintains that ethicality is a positively valuable characteristic in itself, then an optimism that things will probably, all things considered, turn out alright in the end may creep in.

This could lead to a complacency and misplaced trust in an abstract conception of design which somehow may be understood to magically self-regulate itself towards the good: "now that we know that design is ethical we can relax." Like the invisible hand of the free market, we should be wary of placing our hopes for the harmonious future of humanity in an inanimate concept put into practice in inconceivably complex situations by imperfect individuals.

By considering some of the potential conventional ethical effects of a foundationally ethical design, this final section of this chapter sets out to demonstrate that the argued for inherent ethicality of design is neither insignificant (anticlimactic), nor something we can afford to become complacent about (misplaced optimism). This argument is constructed by examining more closely the capacities that a foundationally ethical design has both to encourage and to suppress the potentiality for good and bad in a given situation. Design can sensitise us to the ethical, but crucially, by the very same processes it can also anaesthetise.

### 3.3.3 Design An/Aesth/Ethics

One of the key claims of this project, set out at some length earlier in this chapter, is that a central operation of design is the opening up of potentiality. Wherever true design takes place, potentiality is extended and the ethical comes into being. What must not be forgotten in this process is that potentiality can be extended in varying degrees and in different directions. Each transformation and extension is ethical, but the unique characteristics of these transformations and extensions may be seen to be more or less preferable by those observing or affected by them. This is the point at which the ethical and the individually determined culturally influenced moral “good” can come into conflict. Any given extension of potentiality may be preferable to some, yet disadvantage another individual or group.

Considering what the perfect design might be, one definition could be the design which simultaneously extends potentiality for the absolute benefit of all in all dimensions. Such a design would solve all problems and render the need for future design obsolete. In the perfect negotiation of all variables, incommensurability would be rendered commensurable and the possibility of design itself would implode as it does itself out of a job. Of course the result of such a design is found only in the more exuberant accounts of heaven or other infinitely perfect utopias. The idea of such a perfect design serves here only to offer an abstract perspective of theoretical (im)possibility, allowing us to begin to consider experience of ethical design in the real world not only in terms of its achievements but also, and equally importantly in terms of what it fails to achieve: its deficiencies and shortcomings.

Evidently - most obviously in the urban West, but increasingly globally – our experiences of life are becoming more and more aesthetically mantled and mediated. Wolfgang Iser summarises the contemporary “tableau of aestheticization processes” in this way:

‘Aestheticization’ basically means that the unaesthetic is made, or understood to be, aesthetic. This is exactly what we are currently experiencing all around. This aestheticization might not follow the same pattern everywhere, and the type of aesthetic glaze applied to the non-aesthetic can be different from case to case: in the urban environment aestheticization means the advance of what’s beautiful, pretty, styled; in advertising and self-conduct it means the advance of staging and life-styling; with regard to the technological determination of the objective world and the mediation of social reality through the media ‘aesthetic’ above all means virtualization. The aestheticization of consciousness ultimately means that we no longer see any first of last fundamentals, rather that reality for us assumes a constitution which until now was only known to us from art – a constitution

of having been produced, being changeable, unobligating, suspended, and so on. In its details then, aestheticisation results in varying ways, but taken collectively the result is a general condition of aestheticization.<sup>(18 p.7-8)</sup>

Of course, human life, culture and society has always been aesthetic. However, increasingly there is a perception of an exponential expansion and acceleration of the aesthetic, reaching further and saturating more completely all areas of human experience.

Dilnot, following Simon, describes design as “precisely that which [...] mediates being in relationship to artifice”<sup>(1 p.46)</sup> Conceiving and observing design along these lines as a central actor involved in creating, shaping and sustaining our perceptions of the world surrounding us, heavily implicates this activity in the constitution of our sensory and perceptual experience of the social environment. Visual communication design, in producing and mediating so much of the communication rich surface of our contemporary environment plays a particularly active role in this aesthetic production.

Design is implicated in the increasing aestheticisation of human reality.<sup>vii</sup> Recognising this in conjunction with the proposition that design is an inherently ethical activity (neither good nor bad but capable of both), the question which must be asked in order to gain a perspective as to the deep significance of the ethical operation of design within society is: what effects can this inherently ethical design be observed producing through its contributions to aestheticisation?

The accusation levelled here at design as observed in its work mediating being and artifice in the world, is that in constituting our everyday environment design regularly encourages the creation of the mere impression, appearance and sensation of the ethical without engaging the presence of genuine ethical being. This occurs as design consciously or unconsciously projects misleading, deceptive, constrained or incomplete accounts of the transformation of potentialities.

This is to say that, in the real world, design, while remaining inherently ethical, often actually operates to suppress ethicality.

Perhaps the most obviously visible concrete examples of this phenomenon surrounding us in the affluent developed world can be identified in those products of “ethical consumerism” such as Toms “One for One” shoes, Fairtrade coffee from Starbucks and brands such as *One* in the UK which uses profits from its bottled water to fund clean water projects in Africa. (Figs 17-19) The premise of such initiatives is that it is possible to

vii For alternative perspectives on design's aestheticisation of reality, see Neil Leach's *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*<sup>(52)</sup> and Susan Buck-Morss' essay *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered*.<sup>(53)</sup>

do good in the world without having to go out of your way: all gain, no pain. The One website at one point stated: “You don’t even need to change your habits, just the products in your shopping basket.”<sup>(54)</sup>

These products are certainly well meaning, and without doubt do bring about a great deal of good in the world. However, what is the scope of this good and should we be satisfied to operate within these boundaries? While handing out free shoes, should we not also consider why it is that children should be in such desperate poverty so as not to possess their own in the first place? While sipping our Starbucks should we not wonder why global fair trading is the exception not the norm? While quenching our thirst on bottled water which has travelled hundreds of diesel miles from source to mouth, should we not pause to consider our own potential contributions to climate-change related water shortages in Africa? What change would really be “preferable” here? More often than not, instead of spurring us to action on these issues, the products of ethical consumerism instead furnish the consumer with a pre-packaged sense of satisfaction in a job well done.

Each of these examples stands to demonstrate an instance where design simultaneously both opens and constrains a space of ethical potentiality. In response to a specific encounter with singularity (shoelessness, unfair trade, drought) these designs set up something of a straw man potentiality. Failing to adventurously expand potentiality they instead promote a constrained transformation which satisfies our aesthetic sensitivity to the perceived ethical dilemma only to a minimal extent, and in so doing cutting off possibilities for further ethical exploration of the true range of possible courses of action available to us.

Such ethical consumerism operates to assuage guilt and permit *akrasia* (*akrasia*: to act against one’s better judgement: knowing the right and yet not doing it<sup>(45)</sup>). We may be quite aware of possible approaches to the ethical in response to the given encounter, yet instead of stepping in that direction, we are easily seduced by a pain-free alternative which looks very much like an ethical response and provides us with the sensation and displayable symbolic social value of ethical living which we desire, but without demanding that we change our behaviour or radically alter any of the underlying systems contributing to the originally perceived ethical dilemmas. As Slavoj Žižek writes on the subject of ethical consumerism: “since what really matters is the experience, why not go only for that, bypassing the clumsy detour through reality?”<sup>(55 p.53)</sup>

As we trade in our ethical states of being for aestheticised simulations of these, we *feel* ethical but simultaneously we diminish our capacities for *being* ethical as we become comfortable with and no longer question our everyday activities. When the ethical impulse becomes a means solely to achieving the *sensation* of ethical being, an aestheticised short circuit bypassing the necessity for the ethical act to



17



18



19

Fig 17: Tom's "One for One" shoes  
 Fig 18: Fairtrade Coffee from Starbucks  
 Fig 19: One Water



actually take place at all inevitably occurs as the path of least resistance.

We might call this phenomenon an/aestheticisation. The concept essentially functions on the principle that in the absence of any substantial encounter with singularity and transformation of potentiality, an *aestheticised experience* of the appearance and sensation of ethicality can function to override our authentically ethical aesthetic sensitivity, effectively providing a believable enough permission-slip allowing us fail to act ethically. That is to say, we can provide ourselves with the aesthetic sensation of ethical being without the inconvenience of actually having to *be* ethical. Effectively, we anaesthetise ourselves to ethical sensitivity through processes of aestheticised ethics: an/aesth/ethics.

In the next chapter, as the ethicality of the six observed strategies towards ethical design practice discussed in chapter two are examined through the lens of the conception of ethical design set out in this chapter, several instances of an/aesth/ethics at work within design practice will be identified.

This is where the true significance of the inherently neither good nor bad but ethical nature of design lies. Design's inherently ethical nature in its ability to open potentiality in varying degrees, means that it is equally capable of both promoting and suppressing the ethical. Recognition of this capacity of design, is recognition of the subtle yet deeply significant ethical power of design. Perhaps most significant is the realisation that this ethical power is always present in all design, not just in that which consciously overtly strives towards the good.

The proposal of the an/aesth/ethical nature of design is a significant insight into the operation of design within society. Through this insight the assertion that design is ethical but neither good nor bad is revealed not, as it first might have appeared, as an anti-climactic conclusion but as a deeply significant one.

A proper understanding of the ramifications of this ever-present an/aesth/ethic nature should also dispel any misconstruals of optimism in the proposal of the foundationally ethical nature of design. Design is a social force which should be treated with caution at all times. An uncritically optimistic trust should never be placed in the foundational ethicality of design: instead we must at all times remain vigilant, constantly interrogating our practice to determine whether our work is expanding potentiality and with that the ethical, or suppressing it.

## Hope for Ethical Design: Towards a Blind-spot Culture

Is design necessarily fated to create and sustain inherently unethical conditions of an/aestheticisation? Does design, for all its sporadic utopian ambition actually pose a constant danger to society? This rather gloomy train of thought brings to mind certain critical accounts of widespread aestheticisation such as those voiced by leader of the Situationist International Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*,<sup>(56)</sup> and by philosopher of postmodernity Jean Baudrillard in positing the Hyperreal Simulacra.<sup>(57)</sup> Such accounts would give the impression of a largely pessimistic outlook for ethical aesthetics by inferring that because the aesthetic is observed creating and sustaining an/aestheticised conditions, aesthetics cannot now behave in any other way than to dig us deeper into these states.

Are aesthetics in this way a lost ethical cause? I do not believe so. We must not forget the vital component of the ethical which has earlier been identified in aesthetic sensitivity (section 3.1.5) and the specific insights drawn from the work of Wolfgang Iser which reveal that the ethical is in fact intrinsic to and emergent from within aesthetics. The very same aesthetic capabilities which divert and numb, are equally capable of drawing attention and returning sensation to those areas which have been anaesthetised.

As Iser writes, in a state of total aestheticisation our overwhelmed senses lose track of that which has been excluded. However a different configuration of aesthetic forces could produce different results entirely:

Total aestheticization results in its opposite. Where everything becomes beautiful, nothing is beautiful any more: continued excitement leads to indifference; aestheticization breaks into anaestheticization. It is, then, precisely aesthetic reasons which speak in favour of breaking through the turmoil of aestheticization. Amidst the hyperaestheticization aesthetically fallow areas are necessary.<sup>(18 p.25)</sup>

Aesthetic strategies – those which lie at the heart of design activity – are perfectly placed to carve out these fallow areas in ethically an/aestheticised realities. Aesthetic interventions can create the necessary spaces for reflection in which attention and awareness in relation to the exclusions and blind spots we have created for ourselves can be recovered.

A shift in the gear of aesthetic production from hyper embellishment, enhancement and experience, to a more reflective mode which draws attention to that which we do not notice would be able to foreground precisely the objects of our inattentions, nurturing an atmosphere of much greater sensitivity to differences,



exclusions, oppressions and intolerances. This possibility, which Welsch calls a “blind-spot culture,”<sup>(18 p.25)</sup> offers the hope that design is not fated to an/aestheticise but does in fact hold within itself the potential to nurture and promote the ethical if only the terms of its aesthet/hic nature would be renegotiated.

To be clear, a blind-spot culture would not be a culture which celebrated or treasured its blind-spots. Rather, it would be a culture which seeks to expose and illuminate these blind-spots wherever they can be found. Currently prevailing modes of aesthetic activity rely largely upon the attention grabbing powers of spectacular aesthetic interventions to focus our attention exclusively onto a chosen object. Inevitably in such exclusive perceptive focussing exclusion must occur, and cognitive blind-spots in our awareness of the bigger picture of the given context are created. In opposition to this, the everyday principles and operations of a blind-spot culture would be fundamentally oriented towards consistently and actively distributing perceptive attention towards those areas which might normally be ignored and overlooked.

Consistency of approach must be key to such a strategy, hence the emphasis on *blind-spot-culture* rather than *blind-spot-technique* or *method*. The blind-spot-culture would not be merely another tool to be added to the kit. It would be a deep seated shift in the very culture of aesthetic production: a shift away from exclusive rhetorical focussing, and towards inclusive, open, distributed aesthetic strategies.

How can the emergence of such a blind-spot culture be encouraged? What could practical ethical aesthetic strategies to subvert an/aestheticisation and encourage genuinely ethical aestheticisation be for design, which for so long has been a principal contributor to an/aestheticisation? These questions pose difficult yet not insurmountable challenges in the pursuit of ethical design practice.

## ***Chapter 4: Design through the Ethical Lens***

## An analytical framework for considering the ethicality of design

Chapter three began by setting out one particular way of thinking about the complex realm of the ethical. According to this way of thinking, the ethical is a way of being in the world – a mode of existence – which is evidenced wherever potentiality is transformed and extended in relation to the encounter with the unique singularity of experience as recognised through aesthetic sensitivity. *Potentiality, singularity, and aesthetic sensitivity* are identified therefore as the key concepts in considering matters of ethicality.

The second section of the chapter addressed the question of the nature of design, again offering one possible way of thinking about this complex concept. According to this way of thinking design is seen to be the process of transforming and extending potentiality through configurative negotiation of the incommensurable. The practical wisdom (phronesis) required to discern potentialities and imagine possibilities for how perceived existing realities could be reconfigured, relies upon the presence of critical aesthetic sensitivity within the designer, both to recognise states of current existences, and ways in which these could become other than they are. In this way *transformation, configuration, and sensitivity* are identified as central characteristics of design.

The third section of the chapter considered the relationship between these conceptions of the ethical and design, presenting the case that design is in fact by its very nature inherently ethical. Design's central characteristics of transformation, configuration and sensitivity require significant engagement with the key indicators of ethicality: potentiality, singularity and aesthetic sensitivity.

Authentic design transforms and extends potentiality, which is a fundamentally ethical occurrence. Authentic design negotiates configuration within the incommensurability of the unique singularity of situations, which is a fundamentally ethical encounter. Authentic design must possess the critical aesthetic sensitivity to be capable of awareness of both the conditions of existing realities and of speculative potentialities, which is a fundamentally ethical sensitivity. Finally, in order for design to be design it must exceed the limitations of raw craft, method and technical skill, and inhabit a way of being characterised by practical (phronesis) wisdom, which is a fundamentally ethical mode of existence.

In considering these linkages between the ethical and design, a perspective on ethics specifically tailored to the context of design emerges. This conception of ethical design lays a foundation for the construction of an analytical framework which may be productively used in consideration of matters relating to the ethicality of design practice as observed and experienced in the real world.

This way of thinking proposes that all authentic design is already inherently ethical; however the nature of this ethicality may manifest in different ways and in varying degrees. When considering to what degree a particular design process, practice or phenomenon may be considered to be ethical, and what the characteristic nature of this ethicality might be, analysis can proceed by considering each of the key concepts laid out in the conceptualisations of the ethical and design set out here.

In considering the nature of an ethical design phenomenon, to what extent can this phenomenon be seen to be bringing about transformations and extensions of potentiality? Is this design demonstrating configuration of incommensurable elements encountered in the unique singularity of experience? Crucially, what is the nature of this configuration? Does it demonstrate the presence of some level of critical aesthetic sensitivity within the design process in recognising a range of possibilities for transformative change? Investigation of questions such as these allow the building up of impressions of the particular flavour and character of an instance of ethical design.

As two sides of the same coin, alongside insights into the nature of the ethicality of phenomena within design this framework also reveals areas where potential suppressions of ethicality through an/aesth/ethics

may be occurring.

This analytical framework is not fixed but flexible, and must be approached in a holistic way. It is not a toolkit which measures ethicality on a scale by placing checkboxes against key indicators of potentiality, singularity, aesthetic sensitivity, transformation, configuration and critical sensitivity. These key concepts are not simply criteria to be identified, but should be considered perhaps more as paths which reveal exploratory access routes into the difficult terrain of design ethics.

The framework is proposed as a flexible practical aid providing a solid theoretical foundation for rigorous critical analysis of real world experience. It does not promise a closed system for measurement and quantification of ethics within design. What it does provide is a starting point from which to begin engaging with a range of issues of ethics and an/aesth/ethics in relation to unique irreducibly complex contexts as they are encountered.

The body of this chapter proceeds by introducing the cases of six selected potential sites of ethics within design practice. Each of these six sites is presented, contextualised, then analysed through the lens of the conceptualisation of ethical design developed and set out here in chapter three. The analyses presented for each of these six sites demonstrate the flexible holistic use of this conceptualisation of ethical design as an analytical framework, each taking into account and considering the unique context of the site in question. Having presented these brief analyses, a broader analysis of the use of this framework in considering the bigger picture of contemporary design ethics is offered.

## **Six Potential Sites of Ethics in Design Practice**

The bulk of this chapter is divided between six sections, each pertaining to an observed potential site of ethics within visual communication design practice. These “sites” are locations within the realms of design activity, practice and experience where ethical actions, values, qualities and beliefs have been observed or claimed. The claims and observations of ethicality presented here are drawn from the various branches of what could be broadly termed design discourse: the space in which debates, claims, commentaries, critiques and conversations relating to design are staged by designers, critics, academics, historians and other interested observers, through journalistic, academic, popular, and professional literatures, lectures, talks, blogs, and of course through designed artifacts themselves.

Each branch of design discourse has its own interests, aims and agendas, as of course does this project. These particular six areas which can be seen to emerge as themes within design discourse have been selected here to represent a variety of the ways in which issues of ethics are approached, considered and engaged with within design. No claim is being made here that these are six categories which contain all ethical activity within design. Similarly, these six are not being claimed as the only six sites of ethics within design activity.

The particular six areas of design activity which have been chosen for consideration here are as follows: the creation of and subscription to professional codes of ethics; the declaration of manifestos; observations of various “the designer as...” phenomena; direct design action for good; practices of design activism; and critical design practices.

Each of these sites has carefully been selected as a significant example which addresses a particular approach and context of ethical activity within design. Professional designers might reasonably be expected to turn to codes of professional ethics for guidance on ethical matters. Manifestos are generally considered to represent significant political and ethical motivations and desires. The various “designer as...” phenomena potentially represent ethically motivated desires within graphic design to self-reflexively transform and evolve as a discipline. Design action which attempts to directly bring about “good” in the world evidently is intertwined with issues of ethics. Practices of design activism also have obviously close links with ethics but with a focus on activist practice and process. Design practices which claim criticality as their key characteristic might also be reasonably expected to be of some ethical significance.

The six sites selected here are presented only as an illustrative sample of some strategies, approaches and attitudes towards issues relating to ethicality within design practice. The aim of this marking out of observed and reported experience within design practice is not a detailed map of this terrain, but rather a survey indicating and highlighting a few significant and notable points and phenomena. By examining the shape of a few selected sites which provide insights into the experienced realities of attempts towards ethicality within design, looking at reported attitudes, activities and behaviours which can be observed in these, an impression of the bigger picture of contemporary experience of the relationship between design and ethics can be built up.

Discussion of each of the six sites begins with a largely descriptive overview of the site in question. Though each section seeks to contextualise its respectively identified phenomena, these are not historical surveys. The primary interest in discussing each site is to prise out and identify possible ethical implications in each

of these areas of design activity. The purpose of these contextualising sections when taken as a whole is to provide an overview of the pluralistic variety of different ways of approaching the question of ethicality which can be found to exist within design practice. The final part of each of these six sections then proceeds to make use of the specific way of thinking about ethical design developed here (in chapter three) to present brief analyses of the ethicality of each site. In this way, an insight into the ethicality of each site according to the way of thinking about ethical design proposed by this project is offered.

This two stage process of contextualisation according to general ethical terms, then analysis according to the specific usage of ethical design developed here, allows a broad overview of the ethicality of various strands of observed design activity to be constructed. In this way an indicative (but by no means complete or exhaustive) picture of the nature of ethicality within contemporary design practice begins to emerge, both in terms of the diversely pluralistic conventional understandings of ethics, and in the more specific sense being proposed here. By presenting these dual narratives side by side, it is hoped that the constructive and complementary value of the proposed analytical framework will become evident.

## 4.1 Professional Integrity: Codes of Ethics

One strategy in the quest towards ethical design is the attempt to create and implement professional codes of ethics in one form or another. The common sense rationale for such activity is evident: in a situation where a group of individuals united by a certain occupation is endeavouring to carry out this activity “well” according to some commonly understood standards, it seems to be a perfectly sensible step to take to formalise a set of rules, principles or guidelines which set out these standards for all to see and agree on and which can then be referred to in cases of disagreement or confusion which might ensue in the encounter with the complexity of real-life situations and pressures.

It would be remiss to conduct an investigation into the ethicality of design without considering the role played by professional codes of ethics in design. Does the existence of a code of ethics ensure ethical behaviour throughout a profession? If design activity is undertaken in compliance with an ethical code does this therefore make the design ethical? What functions can such codes of ethics really play in influencing the ethicality of a profession? Is design even a profession, and what difference would this make to the functioning of its ethical codes and to the question of whether design is ethical?

The coming section will discuss issues surrounding the institution and functioning of ethical codes, and consider some examples of such codes in the design context. Hopefully this will provide some perspective as to the role which can reasonably be expected from codes of conduct in relation to the ethicality of design.



## 4.1.1 Professional codes

In the most general sense, “codes” surround us in almost all fields of human activity: the rules we create when playing a game; the social conventions which govern our general everyday interactions with other people; the laws we institute at national and international levels of government. When a group of individuals united by their common trade or employment begin thinking of themselves as a profession, it is reasonable to expect that some form of activity surrounding the institution of professional codes will soon begin to take place.

Design, in comparison with established professional fields such as architecture, engineering, law, accountancy, medicine etc. is relatively new on the professional scene, and as such the landscape of professional organisations relating to design is something of a wild-west. While what are seen as traditional professions such as those mentioned above can be expected to have regulatory bodies backed by governmental legislature, design’s offerings are much less authoritative, existing typically somewhere in the realm between voluntary membership support clubs (AIGA), and advocacy groups promoting a pro-design message (The Design Council). The question of the authority of professional bodies within design particularly in relation to issues of regulation and accreditation or certification of designers, is a recurrent theme in design discourse closely tied to the question of the professional status of the field.<sup>i</sup>

Debates around the pros and cons of professional certification and their underlying question of whether design can or should be rightly called a profession are matters which lie outside of the scope of this project. Perhaps here it will suffice to briefly refer to the work of Michael Davis, professor of philosophy at the Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions at the Illinois Institute of Technology (CSEP), who describes a profession as “a number of individuals in the same occupation voluntarily organized to earn a living by openly serving a certain moral ideal in a morally permissible way beyond what law, market, and morality would otherwise require.”<sup>(3 p.442)</sup> In this way Davis reminds us that a profession comes into existence not by any legal institution or authority but by a voluntary organisation of individuals who identify themselves as such by collectively operating according to some initially unwritten (but often quickly formalised) *convention* regarding their common activities. He adds to this the vital qualification that, while membership of a profession is a conscious voluntary choice (as opposed to a legal classification), a group claiming to be a profession can only properly be considered as such if all of its members can reasonably be held to account according to their convention regardless of whether they have personally signed up to it. For example, a

<sup>i</sup> The debate between Ellen Shapiro, Gunnar Swanson and Michael Rock on professional certification in graphic design (as documented in Looking Closer 2(1 p.155-170)) was by no means a new one even then in the early nineties, and, neither side having conclusively won out (although non-certification certainly is the prevalent status quo) continues to occasionally resurface even over twenty years later.<sup>(2)</sup>

convention among doctors is that they should do no harm to a patient. Even though an individual doctor may never have sworn any personal oath or signed any legal contract stating this, should they break the convention by willingly doing harm to a patient, that doctor will no longer in the eyes of the profession be considered to be a doctor.

As such, design's status as a profession depends on the extent to which such conventions can be found to exist among its would be members. While this question of design's technical professional status is interesting, it will not be pursued further here. In any case, regardless of whether design according to technicality is really a genuine profession, a scandalous pretender, or simply a "profession *in utero*"<sup>(3 p.444)</sup>, the reality is that for the most part designers appear to greatly desire recognition as professionals and functionally tend to operate under the assumption that this is what they are. The fact that designers routinely label themselves as such (as "designers" rather than merely as people who design) and the existence of the multitude of "professional" organisations relating to design, are evidence enough to demonstrate this.

One of the supposed advantages of membership of a professional organisation is that those signing up and being accepted are generally expected in doing so to also sign up and adhere to a professional code which sets out minimum standards of behaviour expected from a registered member of the profession. While professional bodies in design tend to be distinctly lacking in authority and popular mandate in comparison to those of the traditional professions, such relatively small and weak professional organisations that do exist still do often devise and publish professional codes in one form or another for the benefit and guidance of their members. What is of interest to this project is the question of what role these formalised professional codes might actually be reasonably expected to play in the designer's attempts to practice ethically.

In order to investigate this, the content of codes published by a selection of professional organisations for design will be examined. But first, it is important to briefly acknowledge and consider what roles a professional code can be seen to play and some of the functions which it can take on.

## 4.1.2 A Framework for the Roles and Functions of Professional Codes

According to Mark S Frankel, previously director of CSEP, “A profession’s code of ethics is perhaps its most visible and explicit enunciation of its professional norms. A code embodies the collective conscience of a profession and is testimony to the group’s recognition of its moral dimension.”<sup>(4 p.110)</sup> He suggests that there are three types of code, not exclusive but conceived as on a continuum in which all three types are likely to exist simultaneously in any one given code: *aspirational* codes which declare ideals to strive towards; *educational* codes which seek to aid understanding and interpretation of activity within the profession; and *regulatory* codes which provide rules as a basis for monitoring and discipline. Frankel suggests that much criticism of professional codes is misplaced due to fundamental misunderstanding or failure to properly consider the multiple functions of a particular code. It is on this basis that he sets out eight common functions which a code can perform within the continuum of aspiration, education and regulation.<sup>(4 p.111)</sup>

The first of these functions is the use of a code as an *enabling document* “simplifying the moral universe and providing a framework for organizing and evaluating alternative courses of action.”<sup>(4 p.111)</sup> In this way a code can function to remove uncertainty and bring clarity in ambiguous or complex situations by enabling an individual professional to take actions based on reference to the clearly predetermined framework which has been set out and agreed.

The second function is as a *source of public evaluation* by which the public is informed of the expectations they may reasonably hold of members of the profession. The third function is one of *professional socialization* by which the code functions to strengthen the identity, unity and allegiance of members in regard to their profession. The fourth function is to *enhance [a] profession’s reputation and public trust* by which the code becomes a tool which wins support and positive feeling or allays fears and lack of confidence within the public toward the profession. This is seen as necessary for the continued functioning of a profession within society. However the potential for manipulation of public impressions as “a matter of strategy rather than morality”<sup>(4 p.112)</sup> is a cause for concern. Frankel’s fifth function also contains a critical edge suggesting that a code can function to *preserve entrenched professional biases* as the status quo is protected and deviant ideas are censored.

The sixth function is the code as *deterrent to unethical behaviour* by which some combination of the threat of disciplinary sanctions contained within the code itself as consequences for non-compliance, and

the peer pressure of fellow members committed to the conventions of the profession, functions to deter violations of the code.

The seventh function is that the code can provide a *support system* which strengthens the individual's voice against external pressure to compromise standards, the principle being that it is much easier to stand against the unconscionable demand of client, colleague, employer, or society as a member of a profession defending its collective ideals, rather than as a mere individual.

Finally the eighth of Frankel's functions is *adjudication* by which the code provides a pre-agreed standard by which disputes and conflicts can be resolved.

Canadian business ethics researcher Mark Schwartz also describes eight senses in which codes are understood to function by identifying metaphors invoked on the subject in interviews.<sup>(5)</sup> These eight metaphors can be seen to bear some obvious similarities to Frankel's functions although they are by no means identical. Schwartz's identified metaphors are the code as: a *rule-book* clarifying expected behaviour; a *sign-post* encouraging consultation of others to determine judgement on behaviour; a *mirror* offering self-reflective perspective as to the acceptability of behaviour; a *magnifying glass* encouraging caution and reflection before acting; a *shield* allowing professionals to protect themselves from unreasonable requests; a *smoke detector* warning of potentially unacceptable behaviour; a *fire alarm* which allows for the reporting of violations; and finally as a *club*, which encourages good behaviour through the threat of discipline.

What is important to draw from the discussion of both Schwartz and Frankel's work is the inference that any attempt to understand the role of codes in a profession must engage and acknowledge these multiple realities, motivations and functions inherent within such documents. This knowledge will help to avoid dismissing a certain code or codes in general on the basis of failure to meet a goal which they were either fundamentally unsuitable for or never intended to meet.

And so in acknowledgement of this, one of the primary goals of this investigation of professional codes in design is to identify what functions these codes might fulfil in the larger question of design ethics and on this basis to clarify the role which they might actually be reasonably expected to play in encouraging, supporting (or potentially detracting from) ethical design.

Placing Schwartz's eight metaphors for the operation of codes alongside Frankel's eight functions of professional codes, together with his suggestion of the three common modes of professional codes (aspirational, educational and regulatory), a theoretical lens can be constructed through which to examine

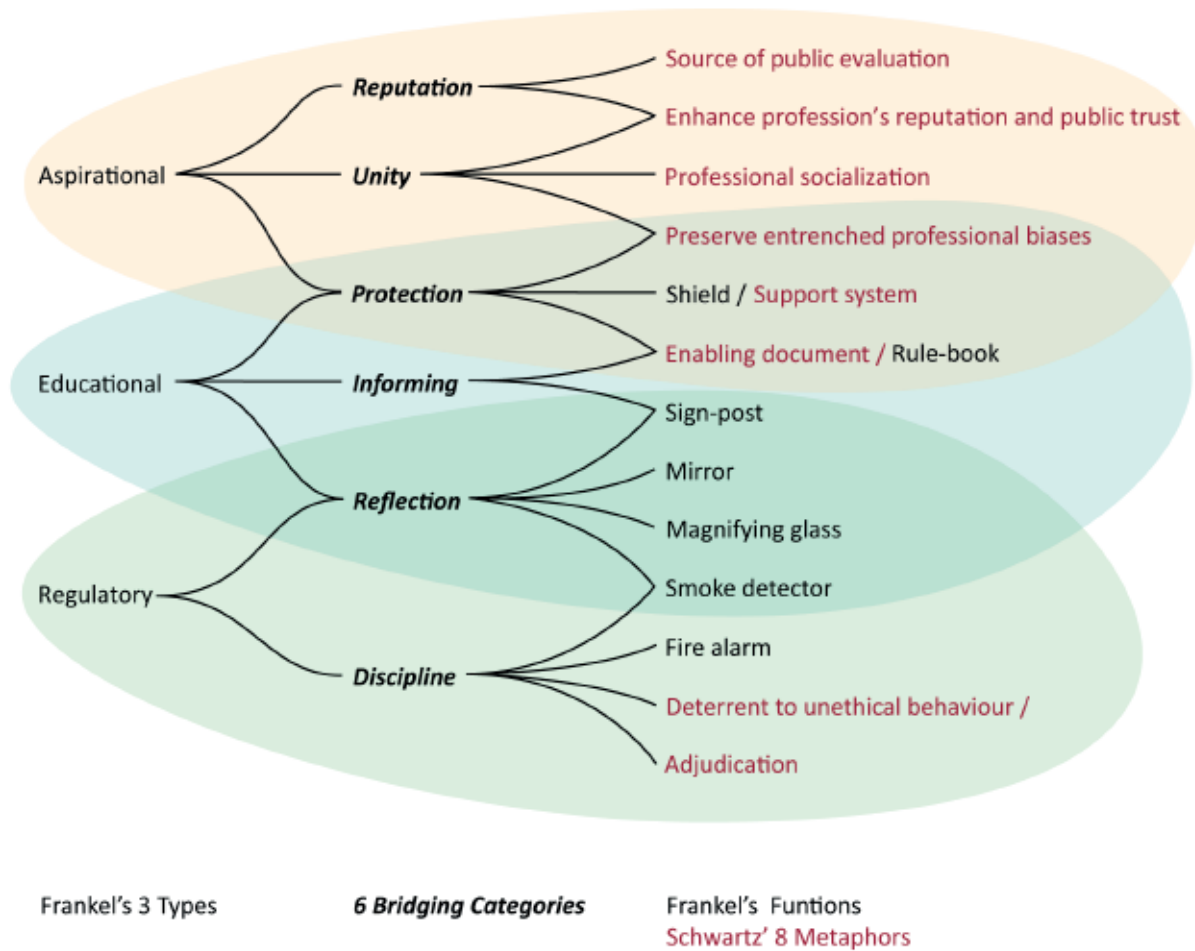


Diagram 1: Functions of Professional Codes

the roles and functions of professional codes in design.

Diagram 1 shows a simplistic visualisation of some of the complex relationships which it is possible to conceive between the variously suggested aspects of the functioning of professional codes as laid out in the three schemes discussed here. For example, Schwartz's suggestion of the metaphor of the code as a mirror could be seen to function both in an educational sense, by which the practitioner gains self-reflexive understanding of their own activity, and in a regulatory sense, by which the understanding gained through this reflective perspective aids the practitioner in modifying their behaviour to come into line with what they see to be acceptable standards.

Bridging between the three overarching modes and the more specific functions and metaphors, six themes consisting of reputation, unity, protection, informing, reflection and discipline, have been identified which provide a useful and practical framework to interface with all three schemes in this investigation of the specific design context.

### 4.1.3 A Survey of the Ethical Codes of Fourteen Design Organisations

In an attempt to present something of a general overview of the current landscape of professional codes in design a sample of fourteen English language codes published by design organisations from around the world has been selected. Despite being limited to the English language, the sample includes codes from six countries across four continents – Australia, Canada, Malaysia, New Zealand, UK and USA – plus two international bodies.

Although the specific design interest of this project is visual communication design, codes have been included from a variety of design fields in order to explore what level of consensus exists across not only graphic and visual design fields, but design in general. Table 3 shows the organisations which make up the sample. Six of the chosen organisations exist exclusively in relation to graphic or visual communication

Field	Acronym	Full Name	Nationality	Membership (01/04/2014)
Graphic/Visual Communication	AGDA	Australian Graphic Design Association Limited	Australia	14889
	AIGA	AIGA, the professional association for design	USA	>25000
	GDC	Society of Graphic Designers of Canada	Canada	>1300
	ICOGRADA	International Council of Communication Design	International	Organisational
	RGD	The Association of Registered Graphic Designers	Canada	3085
	wREGA	Graphic Design Association of Malaysia	Malaysia	Not published
General Design	CSD	The Chartered Society of Designers	UK	>3000
	DIA	The Design Institute of Australia	Australia	Not published
	DINZ	The Designers Institute of New Zealand	New Zealand	760
Industrial Design	ICSID	The International Council of Societies of Industrial Design	International	Organisational
	IDSA	The Industrial Designers Society of America	USA	>3200
Illustration	AOI	The Association of Illustrators	UK	Not published
Interior Design	BIID	The British Institute for Interior Design	UK	<2000
Design and Business	DBA	The Design Business Association	UK	>400

Table 3: Organisations Sampled

design plus one in relation to illustration. Three groups exist for design in general, representing a range of sub-fields. Two are professional bodies for industrial design. One represents interior design and one represents design in a context of business.

Each of these bodies has published some form of professional code of ethical conduct for use by its members. Having obtained the codes of ethics/professional conduct of each of the organisations, this investigation sought to find out what specific themes and issues are addressed by each, and what patterns emerge from this which might reveal something about the role these documents are capable of playing in design activity.

Upon considering these documents as a collection, what becomes immediately obvious is that there is a great deal of common material shared among many of the codes. Several of the documents make it quite clear that they are in fact based on a historically prior code; for example the AGDA Code of Ethics which was ratified by the AGDA membership in 1996 states clearly that it is based on the ICOGRADA “Model Code of Professional Conduct” originally published in 1987. In all of the codes it is clear to see instances where the language of certain sections or articles mirrors one or more other codes.

Taking just one example, regarding the issue of fair criticism of the work of other professional designers, eight out of the fourteen codes include some linguistic permutation of the article which in the ICOGRADA model code reads: “A designer must be fair in criticism and shall not denigrate the work or reputation of a fellow designer.”<sup>(6 p.5)</sup> (i.e the AIGA standards of professional practice state that: “A professional designer shall be objective and balanced in criticizing another designer’s work and shall not denigrate the work or reputation of a fellow designer.”<sup>(7 Item 2.4)</sup>) The language of the two codes relating to industrial design do not follow the same linguistic template but both do include articles which reference a similar principle; the IDSA code talks of “commenting only with candor and fairness regarding the character of work of other industrial designers.”<sup>(8)</sup> and the ICSID code speak of offering only “objective, constructive criticism”<sup>(9 p.3)</sup> where appropriate.

It appears that there is widespread consensus on this issue of fair criticism towards colleagues across graphics, industrial design and design in general. In this particular instance, as permutations of one form of the principle appears across all the graphics related organisations plus two of the general design organisations we can speculate that the original article may have appeared in the ICOGRADA model code, and has been subsequently picked up and used by the others without major linguistic changes as the principle has been considered to ring true in its encountered form. The appearance of the very similar

principle in quite different linguistic forms in the two industrial design codes suggests that this is not a simple case of peer-pressure copying, but that this is potentially rather a generally felt principle which also emerges independently across design disciplines.

In an authentic professional culture, such similarities across professional codes should of course be expected and provide something of a reassurance of the existence of some level of consensus as regards commonly held standards within the profession.

By closely reading the fourteen codes and identifying the individual principles expressed throughout each, then grouping these into common themes emerging between and across the codes, as the example of fair criticism above demonstrates, forty one separate themes which occur in at least two or more of the codes were identified. These themes are presented in the table 4 (overleaf). Themes relating to common issues have been clustered under sub-headings and the whole scheme has been organised according to four identified emergent categories which are placed here in no particular order: articles relating to the profession/organisation itself; articles relating to responsible business with an external perspective; articles relating to responsible business with an internal perspective; and articles relating to social responsibility. However, these themes could just as easily be organised according to an alternative scheme of categories or none.

A rough summary of some of these emergent themes across the fourteen codes may provide some indication of the general content of these ethical codes for design. Those items which have been categorised as relating to profession/organisation, are largely administrative principles to do with commitments to be made by members to the professional organisation in terms of payment of membership fees, submission to authority of the organization, commitment to acting in compliance with the code, as well as more general proclamations of commitment to the profession itself and to the fulfilling of legal obligations etc. Those articles grouped under the title of responsible business with an external perspective relate generally to responsibilities and fair expectations in dealing with clients. These range from commitment to confidentiality in business dealings, to prohibitions on conflicts of interest, to principles in relation to fair payment and the regulation of unpaid work. Also found are articles in relation to good practice in the commissioning process and the fulfilment of contractual obligations.

In the category relating to responsible business with an internal perspective, themes can be found relating to best practices for treating fellow professionals with respect in terms of fair competition and criticism, as well as commitments of responsibility towards employees and towards education both of others and



in terms of continuing professional development. Items are also found relating to fairness and honesty in representations of self and of others in promotions, and in relation to issues of authorship and intellectual property.

The final category of social responsibility contains principles which profess general responsibilities towards

RELATING TO PROFESSION/ ORGANISATION	Commitment to professional excellence
	Members commitment to compliance with code
	Commitment payment of membership fees
	Responsibility to notify organisation of bankruptcy
	Protecting value of membership
	Recognising jurisdiction of foreign professional bodies
	Submission to disciplinary action and consequences
	Commitment to fulfilling legal obligations
	Expert witness
RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS – EXTERNAL	Responsibility to clients
	Confidentiality
	Conflict of Interest 1 Prohibition on working for competing clients
	Conflict of Interest 2 Prohibition of work in which personal interest conflicts with professional duty
	Conflict of Interest 3 Prohibition of benefits which impair impartiality
	Conflict of Interest 4 Benefiting from recommendations
	Fair Remuneration 1 Payment
	Fair Remuneration 2 Prohibition of unpaid work
	Fair Remuneration 3 Exceptions to prohibitions of unpaid work
	Fair Remuneration 4 Regarding design competitions
	Contracts 1 Commissioning
	Contracts 2 Openness and clarity
	Contracts 3 Subcontracting
RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS – INTERNAL	Respect for colleagues 1 Fair and open competition encouraged
	Respect for colleagues 2 Prohibition of unfair competition
	Respect for colleagues 3 Accepting projects worked on by others
	Respect for colleagues 4 Prohibition on receiving payment for recommendations
	Respect for colleagues 5 Fair criticism and prohibition of denigration of others
	Responsibility towards employees
	Education 1 Commitment to education of others
	Education 2 Commitment to personal continuing professional development
	Promotions 1 Honesty in representing self
	Promotions 2 Honesty in representations of others
	Promotions 3 Promotions involving others
	Credit 1 Authorship
	Credit 2 Intellectual property rights
	Credit 3 Plagiarism and copying prohibited
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY	General responsibility to society and to avoid doing harm
	Commitment to aesthetic community/cultural standards
	Ethical values: honour/dignity/truthfulness/honesty/integrity/competence
	Upholding human rights, and against unfair discrimination
	Responsibility for environment

Table 4: Grouped Themes

Table 5: Distribution of Themes

	RGD	DINZ	WREGA	GDC	BIID	AGDA	CSD	AIGA	ICOGRADA	DIA	IDSA	ICSID	AOI	DBA	
Confidentiality															14
Responsibility to clients															12
Prohibition on working for competing clients															12
Plagiarism and copying prohibited															12
Ethical values: honour/dignity/truthfulness/honesty/integrity/competence															12
Authorship															11
Responsibility for environment															11
Exceptions to prohibitions of unpaid work															10
Prohibition of unfair competition															10
Prohibition on receiving payment for recommendations															10
Fair criticism and prohibition of denigration of others															10
Prohibition of work in which personal interest conflicts with professional duty															9
Accepting projects worked on by others															9
General responsibility to society and to avoid doing harm															9
Members commitment to compliance with code															8
Submission to disciplinary action and consequences															8
Benefiting from recommendations															8
Honesty in representations of others															8
Promotions involving others															8
Commitment to professional excellence															7
Recognising jurisdiction of foreign professional bodies															7
Payment															7
Openness and clarity															7
Prohibition of unpaid work															6
Honesty in representing self															6
Upholding human rights, and against unfair discrimination															6
Protecting value of membership															5
Regarding design competitions															5
Subcontracting															5
Commissioning															5
Commitment to personal continuing professional development															5
Commitment to aesthetic community/cultural standards															5
Commitment payment of membership fees															4
Commitment to fulfilling legal obligations															4
Prohibition of benefits which impair impartiality															4
Fair and open competition encouraged															4
Commitment to education of others															4
Intellectual property rights															4
Responsibility to notify organisation of bankruptcy															3
Expert witness															3
Responsibility towards employees															3
	32	31	28	28	24	23	22	21	20	19	19	15	9	9	

Number of codes which mention theme

Number of themes mentioned in single code:

	RELATING TO PROFESSION/ORGANISATION
	RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS – EXTERNAL
	RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS – INTERNAL
	SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

society, community, the environment, and human rights, and towards upholding abstract values such as honesty, integrity, and truthfulness.

Table 5 (inside foldout) shows an indication of the distribution of the presence of each of these forty one themes within each of the fourteen codes. The table is organised with the themes on the Y axis sorted by order of how many of the fourteen codes they appear in. Along the X axis the fourteen codes are sorted by the number of themes which appear within each. This arrangement in itself of course reveals nothing particularly meaningful about the content of the codes themselves. It is included here simply as an indication of the level of consensus and crossover between the codes on certain issues.

Some observations can be made in relation to the most and least commonly occurring themes across the documents. The principle of confidentiality in dealings with clients is the only theme which appears in all fourteen codes included in the sample. Closely following this, appearing across twelve out of fourteen documents each, are themes of responsibility to clients; prohibition on working for clients in direct competition; prohibition of plagiarism; and the upholding of any one or more of the ethical values of honour, dignity, truthfulness, honesty, integrity, or competence.

Working down the table we find that the least common themes occurring in multiple documents are the responsibility to notify the professional organisation upon bankruptcy; the responsibility to serve as an expert witness if required; and suggestions of responsibility towards employees.

The bankruptcy and expert witness articles do not seem to be principles which are widely held across the design profession as a whole. Upon closer examination, we can discover that the three codes which do contain these, the RGD, GDC and wREGA codes contain largely similar content throughout. This could potentially be explained by noting that Canadian graphic designer David Berman was instrumental in the writing of both the Canadian codes, and acted as advisor to the writing of the more recent Malaysian document. Based on this knowledge we can perhaps speculate that these articles may be more a quirk of a Canadian preference reflecting that unique context and also appealing to the Malaysian group, rather than principles which emerge out of an authentic widely held consensus among designers in general.

It does seem slightly surprising however to find the theme of responsibility towards employees languishing here in joint bottom place in terms of its frequency of occurrence. Do designers not believe that they should act responsibly in their relations with their employees?

To conclude that because responsibility towards employees is a principle which does not appear in the majority of these documents, it is not a principle which the majority of designers would uphold, would be an obvious fallacy. It could be entirely possible that designers do not give two hoots about their employees, but this claim should not be made based simply on the fact that this theme occurs relatively rarely in designers' ethical codes. The narratives recorded in the previous chapter through the interviews with practising designers suggest quite the opposite; that those designers who have colleagues working under them in hierarchy do in fact care quite a lot about the welfare of these employees. For some reason or other however, this principle which can be observed to exist among designers, has not been widely included in design's codes of ethics.

This example illustrates an important point in how we must carefully understand the content of these codes of ethics. The themes which occur most frequently across the codes issued by different design organisations are not by any means necessarily the most valued and important ethical principles held by designers in general. And vice versa there may be ethical principles which occur infrequently or not at all in these codes, which are actually held in general by designers to be vitally important if not central to their ethical worldviews.

A visualisation such as Table 3 only shows us in which documents certain themes occur. It tells us nothing about the relative importance of those themes which do occur, and nothing about any assumed principles which may have been deemed either too obvious and self-evident to include, or as lying outwith the remit of the professional ethical code.

While we can see that confidentiality is a principle which has widespread consensus, we cannot tell from its prevalence alone whether this principle is valued more highly than the commitment to upholding human rights and the condemnation of unfair discrimination which is mentioned by only six out of fourteen documents. It is entirely probable that a significant proportion of designers, if asked to weigh these two themes against each other in terms of importance, might prioritise the fundamental rights of others over professional conventions of client confidentiality. Of course, in a situation in which these two principles conflict, either principle may well win out depending on the specifics of the circumstances. The mere presence of themes within a code of ethics tells us very little about the relative weighting of these.

Equally important to recognise is that the absence of a certain principle does not mean that it is not valued by designers. For example, these documents are entirely silent on specific matters such as whether designers should beat their children or hunt elephants for their ivory tusks. These codes neither encourage

nor prohibit participation in such activities. The absence of reference to such issues of course does not tell us that designers are entirely indifferent towards child beating and the ecological impacts of the ivory trade, but at best can offer us an indication that such issues have not been considered by those involved in writing the codes to be central to the specific aims and purposes of the document.

It is also worth noting at this point that those codes which contain reference to a greater number of the forty one themes should not, based on this observation alone, be considered to be in some way “more ethical” than those which contain relatively fewer items from the list. We must not forget that the items contained within these documents form collections curated with a specific purpose and context in mind, and in this context, in general these articles address issues relating specifically to the professional practice of design within the boundaries of a remit set by the organisation.

This is why, in investigating the bearing which codes of ethics have upon the ethicality of design, we must be careful not to jump to conclusions based solely on the volume or nature of the content of these codes, confusing this with the purpose towards which these codes have been produced, and the matter of whether or not they are in fact capable of fulfilling this purpose.

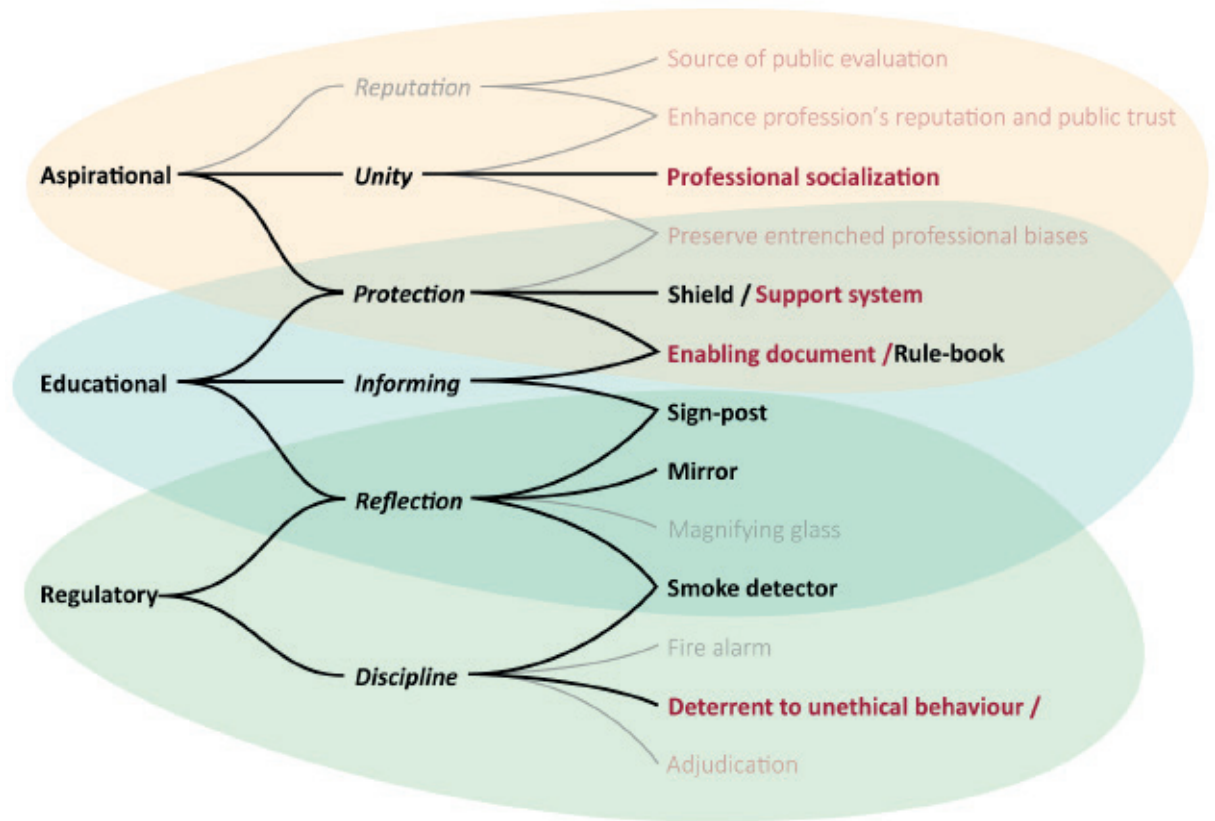
## 4.1.4 Codes in Perspective

So far in this section it has been suggested that a professional code of ethics is instituted by a group who recognise themselves as members of a profession and who wish to formalise some commonly held standards of behaviour within this profession into a document which, it is inferred, should be applicable to and offer a standard of accountability for all members of this professional group. Within design there are quite a number of professional organisations which publish codes of ethics, and in examining fourteen of these codes it has been suggested that these codes do show the indications of some level of consensus across design as to their content. A framework which might help us to understand the roles which professional codes of ethics can play has also been proposed based on Frankel and Schwartz' research. In this coming section, this framework will be used to discuss the question of what role these codes might actually be reasonably expected to play in relation to the ethics of professional design.

Looking at the forty one themes identified across the content of the fourteen codes examined here, it is easy to see how most of these codes can in fact simultaneously play almost all of the roles which professional codes of ethics are capable of playing as set out in the framework above.

If we consider the codes of the professional design organisations looked at here in relation to all of the component parts of each of the three schemes, Frankel's three senses, his eight functions, and Schwartz' eight metaphors, plus the addition of my own six bridging categories which are combined in the model depicted in Diagram 1, we can see that these codes touch on almost all of the possible functions of professional codes laid out here.

It is possible to read individual articles as often simultaneously fulfilling several criteria at once. Take for example the connected principles of the prohibition of unpaid work and suggestions of instances when this general rule might not apply (i.e. pro bono work for charity). These articles serve in an educational sense, informing practitioners of the circumstances under which payment or non-payment for work is seen to be appropriate in the eyes of the profession as a whole. This knowledge can be used by the practitioner as a protective shield against unfair expectations from clients (speculative pitching for example) and as a support system in knowing that other designers also hold this stance. This knowledge that the profession as a whole stands together on this issue also therefore functions as an aspirational source of unity and professional socialisation, helping to build up and inspire a stronger sense of designers as a profession united around common values. In a further sense, these principles can function in a regulatory manner both in terms of allowing practitioners to reflect upon and change their own behaviour, and also through



the exertion of peer pressure on fellow practitioners to operate in accordance with the conventions laid out in the codes.

Read in these ways then, the codes which include these two themes can be seen to function in all three of Frankel's aspirational, educational and regulatory senses, and, by merit of fulfilling a variety of the components of Frankel and Schwartz' respective eight part schemes, tick the boxes of at least five out of six of my suggested meta-categories: unity, protection, informing, reflection and discipline (Diagram 2). These functions could of course be read differently and in practice may function in ways unexpected and different still. The point remains that even at the level of individual principles, these codes of ethics are capable of fulfilling multiple roles.

Considering these documents as a set of complete codes which represent some form of consensus across the design profession, it does not appear that any parts of the framework set out here are entirely neglected. We might observe that relatively few articles directly address Frankel's function of adjudication procedures to be carried out in cases of dispute or discipline; however it could equally be observed that many of the principles contained within the codes provide the basis upon which such adjudication procedures –however they might be organised – might be based. For members who have pledged their commitment to the code, the code itself stands as judge over their activity; it must only be determined



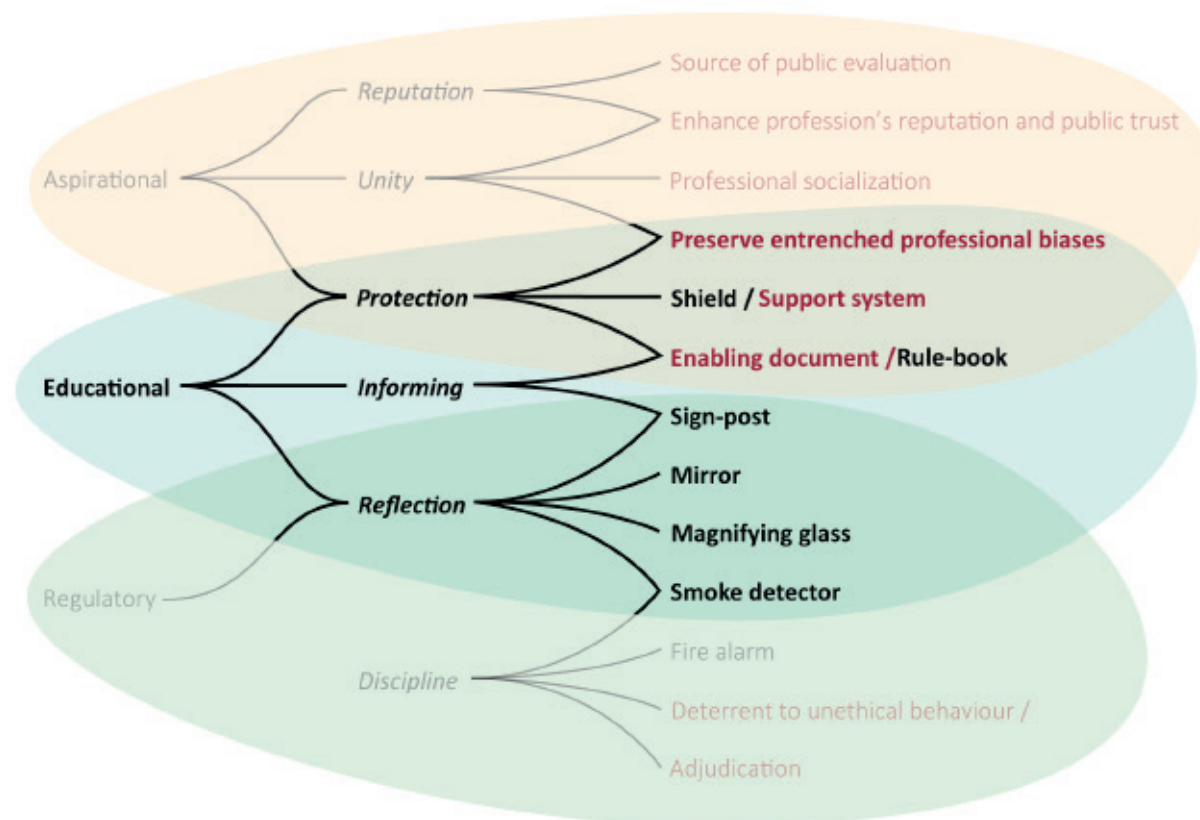


Diagram 3: Educational Function of Codes at Personal Level

whether actions have taken place within or in contravention of the standards set by the code.

Some general weaknesses can however be identified in the functioning of professional codes of ethics in design, and these can be found not at the personal level of the practitioner's commitment to a certain code, but rather at the broader level at which the profession as a whole is committed to the principles contained within the code.

It is relatively easy to see how the educational aspects of a code of ethics in terms of informing, protection and reflection can function at an individual level. A designer can sign up to a certain code of ethics, learn from that code certain principles to apply in his activity, check his activity against these principles and use these principles as a support to justify and defend his actions to others. (Diagram 3)

However, the aspirational and regulatory functions of the enhancement of professional reputation, inspiration towards professional unity and the deterring of certain behaviours through threat of discipline, are functions which rely not only on the commitment of individuals to the code, but crucially on the existence of the kind of widespread professional convention which Davis talks of.<sup>(3)</sup> Any meaningful fulfilment of these aspirational and regulatory functions relies upon the reaching of a critical mass of consensus and commitment to the principles expressed with the codes at a profession-wide level. Without

this broad consensus, these functions remain weak, partial and unauthoritative: unlikely to be fulfilled.

In terms of enhancing the reputation of design, the public are unlikely to increase their perceptions of the trustworthiness of the design professions based on designers' commitment to a code of ethics, if a critical mass of designers do not subscribe to this code of ethics.

In terms of the regulatory role of discipline, designers are unlikely to be motivated to regulate their behaviour based on threat of discipline from an organisation which does not represent or command the respect of a significant proportion of designers. When membership of a certain body commands no prestige or respect, the threat of the condemnation of or expulsion from this body will instil no fear.

This is an issue for the design organisations who have produced these codes. Most do not command any authority based on a foundation of popular mandate. The case of the Chartered Society of Designers based in the UK illustrates this matter. In 2011 the CSD gained the ability to officially award the designation of Chartered Designer to its members on authority of Her Majesty the Queen. Technically this is the same level of authority bestowed upon chartered architects in the UK, a distinction which carries great weight and authority. However, simply being able to award an authoritative sounding designation does not mean that the designation automatically carries authority. The title of chartered architect is based on the completion of seven years study in accredited institutions. Without it you cannot practice as an architect in the UK. The "Chartered Designer" designation on the other hand carries very little authority if it has even been heard of. Membership of the UK based and oriented CSD scheme is claimed at over 3000 across 34 countries. Considering that there were upwards of two hundred and thirty two thousand designers in the UK as of 2010,<sup>(10)</sup> the percentage of UK designers who are choosing to recognise the value and authority of the chartered designation is rather pathetic. The authority of the CSD code of conduct and its ability to shape and influence the ethical culture of the UK design profession is thus also equally limp.

Although as has earlier been stated, the issue of professional accreditation is a matter for discussion elsewhere, where such schemes do exist carrying genuine authority (such as in Ontario, Canada with the legislatively backed RGD programme),<sup>(11)</sup> they certainly seem to provide something of a spine to the regulatory and aspirational aspects of professional codes. If membership of the organisation is respected, valued and backed by authority, there is at least a greater chance that designers will aspire towards the ethical ideals set out by the organisation, and feel some pressure to act in accordance with the consensus of the group as to what acceptable behaviour entails.



It appears that the current landscape of design organisations is in general not an environment which is conducive to encouraging strong profession-wide commitment to the principles of any code issued by these organisations. Regardless then of whether there is a consensus across these bodies as to what the content of an ethical code for design should look like, the ability of these organisations to inspire profession-wide subscription to and compliance with these codes appears generally to be weak, particularly when compared with that of the traditional professions.

At this point we must however step back in order to gain some perspective. To recap once more: there are codes of ethics which are issued by professional organisations for design, and there is some level of consensus among these codes as to their content. The content of these codes can be seen to fit within conventional expectations of the type of content which professional codes contain and the type of roles which they can be expected to fulfil. However, though the content of these codes reflects a certain consensus, there remains a question as to whether the organisations which issue these codes carry enough authority to inspire commitment to applying these principles in practice at a profession wide level: whether these codes truly reflect what Davis terms a professional convention.<sup>(3)</sup> For the purposes of our present inquiry however, issues such as these are secondary.

The common sense assumption would be that professional codes of ethics, conduct, practice etc. issued by professional bodies might play some part in guiding and policing the ethical behaviour of designers as they go about their professional activities. This certainly appears to be the spirit in which they are created and instituted. It is generally assumed that a code of ethics is capable of playing a role in creating, defining and ensuring professionally acceptable standards of ethical behaviour in the designer. Upon what foundations are these assumptions built? As has been set out here, professional codes can play a range of different roles in their attempts to moderate behaviour. The crucial question to be asked in the context of this investigation is whether the roles which these codes are capable of fulfilling – regardless of whether they are currently fulfilling these – have any bearing on the question of the fundamental ethicality of design and if so, what the nature of this influence is.

## 4.1.5 Through the Lens: The Ethicality of Professional Codes of Ethics

Considering activity surrounding design's professional codes in light of the specific way of thinking about ethical design as set out in chapter three, what can be said about the impact or influence of codes of ethics on genuine ethicality within design practice? An analysis undertaken through the lens of the conceptualisation of ethical design as developed here, reveals that the form, structure and content of codes of professional ethics in design are not predisposed towards encouraging or promoting experience of the ethical as a foundational way of being. In fact quite to the contrary these codes of ethics, by implicitly defining and tying down the ethical to a certain set of predetermined issues and contexts, may in a sense actually operate to suppress authentic engagement with the ethical. Worst of all is the potential danger that subscription to a professional code creates the *sensation* of ethicality in the absence of authentic ethical being. In this way, ironically, ethical codes can be seen to operate as an/aesth/ethics.

The ethical problem with design's professional codes is not at the level of the individual articles and the issues which they draw attention to. The majority of these articles certainly concern what can be understood to be ethical issues in a conventional sense. Where the root of the problem with these documents can be found, is in the subtle effects which subscription to a code of ethics can have on a practitioner's attitude towards and interactions with the ethical.

Essentially, the case against the ethicality of design's codes of ethics is that instead of encouraging and regulating ethical behaviour, they can have the effect of decreasing the quality of the individual practitioner's active personal engagement with ethical reasoning. Ethical initiative and responsibility can come to be placed primarily in the blanket authoritative formalised structure of the code rather than being discovered afresh in relation to the unique ethical challenges of each encountered context.

The institution of a legalistic framework for ethics ties the ethical down to a set of predetermined situations and principles. The formal code cannot foresee or address issues which fall outwith these and therefore potentially has little to contribute in these areas where ethical reasoning is most needed. Furthermore the identification within a code of a specific set of particular issues affecting the field, can create an impression that these issues do in fact constitute the totality of ethics within the field. Ethical issues which are not specifically addressed within the code may not be recognised as ethical at all and therefore may potentially not come to be addressed in an appropriate manner.

It is worth repeating here a previously partially cited quotation from Clive Dilnot on the topic of the nature of an authentic design ethics in comparison to the idea of an ethics *for* design:

it cannot be a question of there being an ethics that can be simply *applied*, an ethics that renders a practice morally justifiable but does not otherwise engage or transform it. There is such an ethics of course – but a very poor ethics it is. Such an ethics (of professional practice) is specifically designed *not* to engage substantive questions but merely to regulate aspects of the designer-or-architect-client relationship. [...] This is the form of ethics which seeks to tie ethical norms to (quasi)-legal prescription. Its effect is to determine that only those aspects of practice so covered need be thought ethically. All other moments, including all those that have to do with substantial questions of practice and design, are thereby licensed to be free of ethical determination.<sup>(12 p.10)</sup>

Dilnot flags up the two key elements of this critique. The first is that the setting in stone of ethical principles potentially significantly reduces the practitioner's perception of their own need to engage in a process of constantly questioning and revising their ethical reasoning. Rather than having to assess the complexities of individual situations, faith can be placed in the authority of the code, which can then simply be referred to and enacted. This is of course a perfectly sensible pragmatic strategy to a certain extent: relieving the burden of having to individually wrestle with complex issues by being able to refer to a conventional standard agreed upon by peers. Problems arise however when a situation is encountered which is not directly addressed by an article of the code. Principles developed from tried and tested predetermined solutions to pre-existing issues are not well suited to coping with unforeseen challenges. The practitioner who relies blindly on the code is not accustomed to independent ethical reasoning and may not be adequately equipped to resolve, or even recognise, such a situation.

In such a situation the code can be seen to operate as an an/aesthetic, offering the aesthetic sensation of ethicality, while in reality operating to decrease sensitivity towards the genuinely ethical.

The consequences of this subconscious delegation of responsibility away from the individual and onto the code, may lead directly to the second hazard highlighted by Dilnot, which is the potential for a code to actually appear to permit any behaviour not explicitly addressed. A code of ethics which either presents itself as a complete encapsulation of ethics for design, or which is functionally taken as and understood to be such, effectively then implies that anything which is not contained within its articles is not an ethical issue.

Again this is an an/aesthetic operation. Subscription to a code provides an aesthetic sensation of ethicality which numbs the individual to their responsibility to be sensitive towards the potentialities surrounding their activity.

To give this a practical context, an issue such as the employment of unpaid interns is a contentious area within the profession today. Many companies make use of such arrangements, while many others decry them as exploitative. If a designer involved in the employment of interns subscribes to a code of ethics which specifically states that a designer should be fairly paid for the work they do, then it would be expected that this designer would be able to apply this principle and enact a policy of paying interns fairly. If however the code subscribed to is entirely silent as to issues of fair payment, then the designer may feel able to employ unpaid interns with a clear conscience. As far as they are concerned, because it does not *forbid* such practices, the code effectively *allows* them to employ unpaid interns.

This critique of the legalistic nature of codes extends to a further level of subtlety. Even where a rule is adhered to within a code, this does not guarantee that the underlying ethical principle is being upheld. The extremely tenuous link between the obeying of rules and the fulfilment of principles which motivate the creation of these rules, is perhaps most obvious to see in the behaviour of toddlers, who often seem to take the greatest pleasure in finding ways to follow instructions while blatantly disregarding and circumventing the underlying principle. I recently observed the child of a friend, who upon being taught not to touch the oven door as it might be hot, edged closer and closer to within millimetres of the glass, at which point he stuck out his tongue in order to get as much of his body as close as possible to the forbidden fruit without breaking the rule.

Ideally it is imagined that rules perform the function of permitting good behaviour. In practice, it is possible for them to function as they often effectively do for children: as markers which delimit the boundaries of what you can get away with before you get into trouble. In the example of unpaid interns in the design industry it is possible to imagine a scenario in which a studio could potentially subscribe to the principle that designers should be paid fairly for their work, yet still employ unpaid interns by interpreting the principle in such a way that an intern is not yet considered to be a fully-fledged designer and that unpaid internships are simply part and parcel of the reality of the process of *becoming* a designer who is worthy of being paid fairly.

Codes of professional conduct are legalistic systems which can be interpreted, misinterpreted and potentially abused in order to justify certain behaviours. It is possible to see in this way how codes of

professional ethics can in fact operate to permit and allow behaviours which are contrary to the values which they originally aimed to promote.

According to the conception of the ethical proposed in this thesis, codes of professional ethics are evidently not in themselves actually ethical. Considered according to the key features of the ethical set out here, the professional codes are found to be wide of the ethical mark on all counts.

One of the key principles of the conceptualisation of the ethical as set out here is that recognition of the presence of the ethical requires a level of aesthetic sensitivity in order to be able to properly begin to recognise the issue which is at stake. Codes of professional ethics present themselves as complete self-contained systems which can provide answers, solutions, and processes towards achieving good practice. The way that these codes are structured however can actually be seen to function to an/aesthetically discourage the engagement of sensitivity in relation to the authentic roots of the issue at stake. When the code provides pre-packaged solutions, what need is there to investigate the nature of the issue further?

In terms of the principle that the ethical comes into being in encounter with the unique singularity of experience, this same provision of neatly pre-packaged general purpose solutions disarms and squashes the likelihood of engagement with the truly unique nature of the situation being dealt with.

In terms of the requirement that the ethical exists only where possibilities exist for potentiality to be transformed, ethical codes are sadly lacking. These inanimate structures can only suggest a limited range of possible reactions to events, and standardised ideas of good practice. They cannot possibly engage in any meaningful way with possibilities that events and situations might change and evolve. The reality of legalistic ethical codes is that they must always be a step behind, and therefore cannot be of much use in terms of discovering new unexplored territories.

Taking these observations of how ethical codes facilitate, or rather fail to facilitate sensitivity, singularity and potentiality, we can see that their structures are not disposed towards encouraging the practitioner's inhabitation of ethical being as a mode of existence. Instead of guiding the designer towards an active consciousness and sensitivity towards the genuinely ethical elements in encountered situations, codes of ethics encourage a blanket paint-by-numbers approach in which a tried and tested solution can simply be applied to a given conundrum.

According to these criteria, it is possible then to claim that in some ways professional codes of ethics can in fact be seen to be *unethical* in terms of their potential abilities to suppress or discourage engagement

with the key building blocks of authentic ethical experience. The legalistic structures of these documents subconsciously encourage blind rule following rather than active interpretation of the possibilities available within unique situations.

This analysis suggests that, according to the terms as set out in this thesis, codes of professional ethics might be better thought of as exercises in morality rather than ethics. Conceptually separating the ethical from the moral in this way, makes possible the identification of what Dilnot refers to as a “very poor ethics”<sup>(12 p.10)</sup> as not in fact an ethics at all but rather a morality.

In the case of professional ethical codes, the validity of the code within a certain profession depends upon the extent to which there is a widespread consensus among a significant majority of members of the profession as to the content of the code. Among the fourteen codes published by design bodies which were examined in this study, there is a great deal of consensus, or at least a significant lack of explicit contradiction. This would suggest that the principles listed in these codes are generally held to be true within the profession. This widespread internal acceptance within the group is not however a sufficient basis to compel anyone either within or outwith this group to accept these principles. There will always be some who disagree or hold conflicting principles to be true.

Morality alone has no method for arbitrating between coexisting conflicting pluralistic moralities. Each conflict boils down to a simple case of your morality against mine. Inevitably then, the final call will then be made in most cases simply on the basis of perceived power, on the authority of either force or majority consensus. In order for morality to operate as anything more than the mere puppet of power, it must be constructed upon a deeper foundation. This foundation must be the ethical.

If an individual is inhabiting an ethical mode of existence – being sensitive towards potentialities within the singularities of uniquely encountered situations – then a much wider range of possible courses of action towards achieving the underlying motivations of that individual’s moral framework will be recognised. Acting only within the moral framework there is very little possibility for questioning the structures of this morality. Acting from a position of an awareness of a deeper ethical foundation however, allows the pursuit of the authentic goals of a morality, and creates space for criticality in relation to the legalistic rules and structures which have been formed in pursuit of that morality.

What are the implications for this in practice? In the example of unpaid internships, imagine two designers faced with this conundrum. Both subscribe to the same professional code of ethics which

makes no mention of the payment of interns. The first designer might take a very literal approach to the interpretation of the code, surmising that as the question of the payment of interns is not included in the code it is not considered by the design profession as a whole to be an ethical issue *for design*. Therefore he makes the choice either to pay or not to pay his interns quite contentedly in the knowledge that this decision has no impact on the status of his “goodness” as a designer.

The second designer upon consulting his code, also sees that there is no reference to payment of interns. This designer however considers the issue in light of the spirit of the code which he interprets to be largely concerned with maintaining honour and respect for the profession. He makes the decision as to whether to pay his interns on the basis of a consideration of what level of honour and respect he believes them to be due. While the first designer acts by applying an interpretation of a moral principle, the second negotiates an ethical choice by considering the potentialities available within the situation i.e. the possible range of implications which choosing each option might entail.

Each designer may choose either to pay or not to pay his interns. The question of the ethicality of the decision does not depend on the outcome of the choice but on the unseen process by which the decision is made. The ethical designer bases his decision upon a critical sensitivity towards perceived existing potentialities within the situation. The unethical designer justifies his choice by appeal to the letter of the code. This designer still feels ethical, an/aesth/ethically producing a manufactured sensation of ethics through use of the code.

Ethical negotiation is a vital foundation required in order to be able to implement a moral code ethically. The critique of professional codes of ethics presented here is not that these codes are dangerous or bad in any way, but rather that the way in which they are presented in legalistic formats as lists of detailed principles and rules is more likely to encourage blind an/aesthetic rule following than critically engaged ethical inquiry. If uncritically understood to be more than simply a reflection of existing moral conventions within the field, professional codes can potentially encourage/permit inattention to genuinely ethical aspects of encountered situations. Therefore, as strategies for working towards the development of a more authentically ethical design practice, professional codes of ethics in their present forms are not particularly promising avenues.

Should the use of professional codes of ethics in design be entirely rejected and abandoned on this basis? Many desirable effects can be seen in the use of these codes. Subscribing to an ethical code allows an individual to measure their own activity according to the standards of the professional convention

which the code claims to reflect. Codes of ethics seek to clarify, publicise, preserve, promote and enforce consensually agreed professional conventions as to what constitutes good practice in what might otherwise be an entirely unregulated field. In offering this critique of the ethicality of ethical codes it is important to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Using the conceptualisation of the ethical proposed in this thesis as a lens through which to scrutinise the potential of ethical codes, what can be gained is a perspective as to the extent of the role these codes can reasonably be expected to play in relation to the ethicality of design. Legalistic codes of ethics are revealed to be moral rather than ethical in nature. What this effectively means is that their central function is limited to offering guidance within the boundaries of an existing moral framework. The codes themselves are passive and play no role in the development of fresh ethical reasoning other than to serve as a reflection of existing norms which may be challenged.

What must also not be forgotten is that the explicit context of these codes is that of the *profession*. The guidance offered is explicitly targeted and tailored within the boundaries of professional concerns and expectations and in relation to specifically professional contexts. What this effectively means is that these codes have very little to contribute to any conception of design activity which does not conform to profession norms i.e. industrial, commercial norms. The codes might offer practical, pragmatic, useful advice for the professional designer who operates within a conventional client/commission centred conception of the profession. However, for those designers who view themselves as professionals, yet challenge these received conventions of what constitutes professional practice (through trans-disciplinary, speculative, relational, participatory practices etc.), the content of these codes may be felt to be largely irrelevant.

The very possibility that there could be radically differing views as to what constitutes the design profession illustrates exactly the problem which haunts these codes. While professional practice remains conventional, professional codes which reflect the normative conventions of this profession may well be adequate to meet the needs of practitioners. As soon as anything unconventional occurs or is encountered, the practitioner is hung out to dry, left with the choice either to attempt to force the encountered situation to conform to the existing moral framework (which, like hammering a jigsaw piece into the wrong place, is unlikely to lead to an ideal outcome) or to abandon the framework altogether.

If professional codes of ethics are to be used within design as part of a strategy towards the development of more authentically ethical design practice, they must be properly recognised as merely reflections of the consensus of a certain group of designers operating within certain existing conceptions of professional



practice. Without this recognition they may continue to be presumed applicable to all areas of design practice, which is not in fact the case.

In order to recognise and address the ethical implications of situations and encounters which fall outside of or in conflict with the existing knowledge and assumptions upon which existing professional codes are founded, an active ethical awareness and sensitivity, which precedes and critically interrogates existing conventional moral frameworks, must be cultivated in designers. Where this foundation exists, professional codes may play an appropriate and useful role in providing a reflective account of professional conventions which can offer a positive contribution to the overall ethical health of design practice.

## 4.2 Revolution/Evolution: Manifestos

### 4.2.1 Manifestos

A manifesto typically takes the form of a public declaration making clear the views, beliefs and agenda for future action of the individual or group making the proclamation. The etymology of the word manifesto can be traced back to the Latin root of the word manifest, coming from *manus* for hand (as in *manual* labour) and *fendo* to hit or strike (as in offend, defend, fencing).<sup>(13 p.375)</sup> The criminal caught in the act of stealing has his hand struck; his guilt is plain for all to see. Something manifest, is something self-evidently true. A primary characteristic of the manifesto, following in this etymological trajectory, is often therefore the bold, confident, public, assertion of truth claims as self-evident. Manifestos are rarely subtle, cautious, tentatively argued theses. They are bold proclamations which recognise no requirement to justify themselves. The United States Declaration of Independence is not phrased in the form of a request, application or polite notification to King George III. It is a *declaration*. In the famous preamble, the authors do not make any attempt to argue the case for the unconditional equality of men, rather they simply declare that “We hold these truths to be self-evident.”<sup>(14)</sup>

Manifestos may be conceived of in many different ways. There is no set formula for what constitutes one. It appears that almost any proclamation may be declared by the issuer to be a manifesto. Many proclamations not explicitly named as such by their issuers subsequently come to be labelled as manifestos by external observers. Were there to be a set formula for the creation of manifestos, it is likely that many manifestos would go out of their way to break this mould. However, if seeking the broadest non-prescriptive overview of their general operation, manifestos typically will be oriented towards one or both of two general aims: identity and purpose.

Where manifestos primarily serve as statements of identity, they confidently assert the key principles and characteristics which the issuing body has identified and wishes to project as central to the nature of their identity. Where manifestos declare a purpose, their proclamations often take the form of a call to arms: a passionate statement perhaps condemning certain circumstances which have led to the creation of undesirable present situations, and calling for immediate action towards the creation of a new more preferable state of affairs. Often these two are combined, as a manifesto simultaneously introduces and announces the arrival of the proclaimer, through their proclamation of the death of the old and the birth of the new.

Historically, the use of manifestos has tended to be popular among political and artistic groups. Two of the most famous manifestos ever published are the political *Manifesto of the Communist Party* published in a pamphlet by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in 1848,<sup>(15)</sup> and the artistic *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* written by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909.<sup>(16)</sup>

Marx and Engels' manifesto proclaimed the founding aims of the Communist political movement, prophesying the overthrow of the ruling elites by the uprising of the oppressed proletariat. As the famous concluding line of the document reads: "Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win."<sup>(15 p.519)</sup> Taking up its place within culture as the political manifesto par excellence, the impassioned revolutionary style and language of Marx and Engel's manifesto set something of a precedent or yardstick of cultural expectation against which all subsequent manifestos are inevitably compared, whether their content is primarily political or not.

Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism*, which could be proposed as the artistic manifesto par excellence, uses equally fiery poetic language to call for the overthrow not of a political state, but a cultural one:

So let them come, the gay incendiaries with charred fingers! Here they are! Here they are!... Come on! Set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the museums!... Oh, the joy of seeing the glorious old canvases bobbing adrift on those waters, discolored and shredded!... Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly!<sup>(16)</sup>

Though it may at first appear that the artistic manifesto is simply an appropriation of the political manifesto into the artistic context, Marinetti's "artistic" manifesto is an example which excellently illustrates that, though artists may often utilise the manifesto form in relation to their art, the fundamental nature of the manifesto is nevertheless always political.

At a foundational level, all manifestos are political simply by virtue of their being publicly issued (whether to a broad open public or a constrained limited public). A proclamation issued into public space becomes a social interaction. The choice to issue a manifesto publicly indicates the desire to produce some effect within that public. Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* makes no attempt to hide the political nature of its artistic agenda. The purpose of making a public proclamation of the aims of the Futurist project is not simply to keep the public abreast of recent developments within the self-contained artistic practices of the Futurists. Rather the manifesto announces to the public Futurism's goal to fully revolutionise the public, culture, society and politics simultaneously. The excerpt below demonstrates the interwoven and

inseparable combined artistic and political agenda of the Futurist movement as articulated by Marinetti:

7. Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man.
8. We stand on the last promontory of the centuries!... Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed.
9. We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.
10. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice.<sup>(16)</sup>

All manifestos issued publicly – whether apparently revolutionary or conservative, whether perceived as benign or abhorrent in content – through the act of their publication testify to the existence of some socio-political agenda. Manifestos with a political focus always have implications for culture, and, as the other side of the same coin, manifestos with a cultural focus are always political.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, emergent groups of designers were hot on the heels of their avant-garde artist contemporaries in joining in the manifesto frenzy. Graphic design not yet having become established as an independent field at this point, the earliest design manifestos emerge from adjacent architectural and artistic movements. Walter Gropius 1919 *Manifesto and Program of the State Bauhaus*,<sup>(17)</sup> Rodchenko and Stepanova's 1921 *Program of the First Working Group of Constructivists*,<sup>(18)</sup> and El Lissitzky's 1923 *Topography of Typography*<sup>(19)</sup> could be considered as early examples which verge on the territory of graphic design. The first manifesto explicitly concerned with the production of visual communication is perhaps the manifesto of the Mexican union of technical workers, painters, and sculptors (*Manifiesto del Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores*) issued in 1923.<sup>(20)</sup> These early examples of design manifestos, along with the artistic manifestos of their day, are united in being found to be situated firmly in the political sphere, following the model of the political manifesto by earnestly addressing themselves towards the advancement of society, only proposing strategies for the achieving of this through primarily aesthetic means rather than through direct political action.

Following this initial flurry of activity, the middle period of the twentieth century appeared to provide less fertile ground for the design manifesto. By the time Ken Garland drafted his *First Things First Manifesto* in 1963, it appeared that the manifesto had become, as he described in his own words, a “totally unfashionable device.”<sup>(21 p.7)</sup>

In recent decades the manifesto has made something of a popular comeback. Although perhaps not so incendiary as it once was the manifesto is prevalent in contemporary society. Today, manifestos are everywhere, and as such have perhaps lost something of their power. After decades spent prophesying revolutions of all flavours, the fiery passionate manifesto is perhaps suffering revolution fatigue, finding it difficult to escape ironic pastiche of its own ubiquitous format. In contemporary society the identity form of the manifesto is more prevalent than the statement of purpose. Explanatory statements of values are more common than declarations of revolutionary intent.

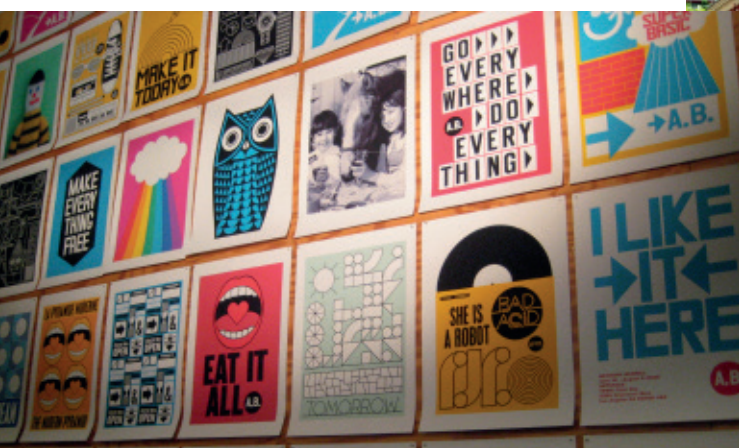
A steady democratisation of the manifesto appears to have occurred. No longer the exclusive reserve of political and artistic groups – powerful elites and edgy subversives – individuals and organisations of all varieties employ manifestos as part of their everyday personal or corporate brand-management and promotion strategies. The manifesto has come to be seen as an efficient way to introduce oneself, broadcasting key characteristics, values and aspirations in an easily digestible format. This democratic populist exponential expansion of the manifesto could be considered an empowering force; a simple and useful communication tool available to all.

However, when the manifesto becomes truly ubiquitous, does it lose some of its impact? A garden centre just off the A90 in Scotland proudly displays its manifesto in the café which, alongside a commitment to the environment, fair trade, and the use of local and fresh produce, also proclaims a passionate commitment to their “famous” herb scones. (Fig 24) In being applied to the most banal of circumstances, has the manifesto itself become completely banal?

Browsing the websites of designers today, alongside the project descriptions, portfolio images and contact details it is not uncommon to also find the designer’s or studio’s manifesto. These contemporary design manifestos are mostly *designers’* manifestos, rather than manifestos about or for design, a nuance which is significant. While they may very often contain content relating to the designer’s beliefs about the nature and purpose of design activity, their primary purpose is most often to communicate the designer’s individual (or collective) beliefs on design rather than to propose that these beliefs should be adopted by others.

Artistic/Cultural >>> <<< Cultural/Political			
		1776	The United States Declaration of Independence (Thomas Jefferson et al.)
		1848	Manifesto of the Communist Party (Marx and Engels)
		1850	The Anarchist Manifesto (Anselme Bellegarrigue)
	Realist Manifesto (Gustave Courbet)	1855	
		1905	The October Manifesto (Nicholas II)
	Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism (Filippo Tomaso Martetti)	1909	
	Cubist Manifesto (Gleizes and Metzinger)	1912	
	Vorticist Manifesto	1914	
	Suprematist Manifesto (Kazimir Malevich)	1915	
	Dada Manifesto (Hugo Ball)	1916	The Manifesto of the Sixteen (Kropotkin, Grave et al.)
	De Stijl (Theo van Doesburg et al.)	1918	
	Manifesto and Program of the State Bauhaus (Walter Gropius)	1919	The Fascist Manifesto (Fasci di Combattimento)
	Program of the First Working Group of Constructivists (Rodchenko and Stepanova)	1921	
	Manifiesto del Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores		
	Topography of Typography (El Lissitzky)		
	Surrealist Manifesto (André Breton)	1924	
		1925	The Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals (Benedetto Croce)
		1928	The Cannibal Manifesto (Owsald de Andrade)
	Outline of the Art of Advertising Manifesto (Fortunato Despero)	1929	
	Art Concret (Otto G. Carlsund et al.)	1930	
	Manifesto of Mural Painting (Mario Sironi)	1933	The Regina Manifesto (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) The Humanist Manifesto I (Wood Sellars and Bragg et al.)
	Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art (Leon Trotsky)	1938	
		1944	The PKWN manifesto (Polish Committee of National Liberation)
	White Manifesto (Lucio Fontana)	1946	
	Interventionist Manifesto (Edgar Bailey et al.)		
	Mystical Manifesto (Salvador Dali)	1951	
		1955	The Russell-Einstein Manifesto (Bertrand Russell et al.)
	Gutai Manifesto (Jiro Yoshihara)	1956	The Southern Manifesto (Richard Russell et al.)
		1957	Report on the Construction of Situations (Guy Debord)
	Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto (Gustav Metzger)	1959	
	Neo-Concrete Manifesto (Ferreira Gullar)		
	Manifesto of Industrial Painting (Guiseppe Pinot-Gallizio)		
		1960	The Manifesto of the 121 against the Algerian War (Mascolo, Blanchot, Schuster) The Sharon Statement (M. Stanton Evans et al.)
	The Chelsea Hotel Manifesto (Yves Klein)	1961	
	I Am For An Art... Manifesto (Claes Oldenburg)		
		1962	The Port Huron Statement (Tom Hayden et al.)
	Fluxus Manifesto (George Maciunas)	1963	
	First Things First 1964 (Ken Garland)	1964	
	Non-Straightforward Architecture: A Gentle Manifesto (Robert Venturi)	1966	
		1968	The SCUM Manifesto (Valerie Solanas)
	Maintenance Art Manifesto (Mierle Laderman Ukeles)	1969	
	The Laws of Sculptors (Gilbert and George)		
	Women's Art: A Manifesto (Valie Export)	1972	
		1973	For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto (Murray Rothbard)
	Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan (Rem Koolhaas)	1978	
	Architecture Must Blaze (Coop Himmelb(l)au)	1980	New Libertarian Manifesto (Samuel Edward Konkin III)
		1985	A Cyborg Manifesto (Donna Haraway)
	Ten Principles for Good Design (Dieter Rams)	1987	
	First Diasporist Manifesto (RB Kitaj)	1989	
	Manifesto (Lebbeus Woods)	1993	
	Manifesto and Vow of Chastity (Dogme 95)	1995	
	The _____ Manifesto (Michael Betancourt)	1996	
	13 Propositions of Post-Modern Architecture (Charles Jencks)		
	People's Communication Charter	1998	
	An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth		
	Stuckist manifesto (Billy Childish and Charles Thompson)		
	First Things First 2000 (Lasn, Dixon, Poynor et al.)	1999	
	Disrepresentation Now (Experimental Jetset)	2001	
	Kyoto Design Declaration (Cumulus Association)	2008	
	Things I have learned in my life so far (Stefan Sagmeister)		





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#### A manifesto

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, photographers and students who have been brought up in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable means of using our talents. We have been bombarded with publications devoted to this belief, applauding the work of those who have flogged their skill and imagination to sell such things as:

cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste, aftershave lotion, before-shave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorants, fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons.

By far the greatest time and effort of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity.

In common with an increasing number of the general public, we have reached a saturation point at which the high pitched scream of consumer selling is no more than sheer noise. We think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on. There are signs for streets and buildings, books and periodicals, catalogues, instructional manuals, industrial photography, educational aids, films, television features, scientific and industrial publications and all the other media through which we promote our trade, our education, our culture and our greater awareness of the world.

We do not advocate the abolition of high pressure consumer advertising: this is not feasible. Nor do we want to take any of the fun out of life. But we are proposing 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 on our skills will be for worthwhile purposes. With this in mind, we propose to share our experience and opinions, and to make them available to colleagues, students and others who may be interested.

Edward Wright  
Geoffrey White  
William Slack  
Caroline Rawlence  
Ian McLaren  
Sam Lambert  
Ivor Kamilish  
Gerald Jones  
Bernard Highton  
Brian Grimby  
John Garner  
Ken Garland  
Anthony Freshaug  
Robin Fior  
Germano Facetti  
Ivan Dodd  
Harriet Crowder  
Anthony Clift  
Gerry Cinnamon  
Robert Chapman  
Ray Carpenter  
Ken Briggs

Published by Ken Garland, 33 Oakley Sq NW1  
Printed by Goodwin Press Ltd, London NE8

Fig 20: Anthony Burrill Prints

Fig 21: Stefan Sagmeister Aporism

Fig 22: First Things First: A Manifesto 1964

Fig 23: Experimental Jetset Disrepresentation Now!

Fig 24: Glendock Garden Centre Café Manifesto



24

In a short essay on the extremely personal nature of Stefan Sagmeister's practice, Rick Poynor quotes Lewis Blackwell from the book *Whereishere* discussing an observed shift among the work of graphic designers away from direct political engagement and towards expression of personal identity:

As the creative operatives (designers, writers, architects, directors and so forth) are increasingly doubtful of any meaningful direction in their work (beyond its power to involve and entertain themselves in a sense of performance) so they forgo being responsible for trying to effect changes in their audience. Instead, they are simply struggling to assert their own existence.<sup>(22 p.66)</sup>

Poynor observes this swing towards personal identity expression in design culture not as an entirely novel emergence of self-centredness, but rather only as a development in the modes of expression of designers' already existing beliefs in their own self-importance: a move from the "egotism required to believe you have something to say that an audience might want to hear" towards "the narcissism of thinking that you deserve an audience simply because you are you."<sup>(22 p.66)</sup>

Sagmeister's practice does often demonstrate a spectacular self-obsession, famously making use of his own flesh as a canvas in the ultimate gesture of self-reflexivity. Many of his self-directed projects involve the manifesto-like proclamation of snappy aphorisms. (Fig 21) His 2008 book containing twenty one of these personal statements, *Things I have learned in my life so far*<sup>(23)</sup> can be read as a manifesto of an extremely personal nature in this way.

Such snappy, quotable and visually appealing graphic manifesto forms are understandably popular. Anthony Burrill's woodblock typographic posters (Fig 20) function in a similar way, serving both as personal manifesto-like proclamations of self-evident truth claims, and aesthetically desirable purchasable objects simultaneously.

It is possible to speculate that the trend for the inwards looking personal identity focussed manifesto in contemporary graphic design culture could be attributed to a combination of appreciation for and emulation of celebrity design manifesto projects such as Sagmeister and Burrill's, alongside a legacy of the educational use of manifesto-writing briefs in art schools and colleges. The manifesto-project has been a staple in many design courses both as a way of engaging students with design history and aiding self-reflection on the student's formation of their personally held principles as a designer. Cargocollective and Behance portfolios of student designers are therefore awash with aesthetically pleasing manifestos composed of snappy Sagmeister style maxims in bold Burrill style type.



This is not to say that designers are no longer engaging with social, political and ethical issues in their manifestos, only that there has been an observable shift in the dominant emphasis from primarily outwardly focussed preaching aimed at inspiring direct change out there in the world, towards an inward focus; strategies perhaps more closely aligned to Michael Jackson's proposal to start with the Man in the Mirror and Ghandi's call to "be the change you want to see in the world" than Marx and Engels' call for the workers of the world to unite in casting off their chains.

Experimental Jetset's 2001 *Disrepresentation Now!* manifesto (Fig 23) (prepared as part of a participatory design experiment planned for the 2001 AIGA Voice conference in Washington DC which was cancelled due to the 9/11 attacks) provides an example of a manifesto which discusses political and social issues relating to design, but primarily serves as a justification for the designers' own particular approaches and techniques:

We believe that abstraction, a movement away from realism but towards reality, is the ultimate form of engagement. We believe that to focus on the physical dimensions of design, to create a piece of design as a functional entity, as an object in itself, is the most social and political act a designer can perform.<sup>(24)</sup>

This manifesto serves in some ways as a public defence of Experimental Jetset's working practices rather than as a declaration of future focussed aspirations, demonstrating that manifestos can be employed towards a variety of purposes.

Canadian designer Bruce Mau's 1998 *Incomplete Manifesto for Growth* follows a slightly different model perhaps bridging somewhere between the inwards looking personal identity focussed manifestos and those declaring specific socio-political aims. It is composed of 43 statements such as:

1. **Allow events to change you.** You have to be willing to grow. Growth is different from something that happens to you. You produce it. You live it. The prerequisites for growth: the openness to experience events and the willingness to be changed by them

18. **Stay up late.** Strange things happen when you've gone too far, been up too long, worked too hard, and you're separated from the rest of the world.

28. **Make new words.** Expand the lexicon. The new conditions demand a new way of thinking. The thinking demands new forms of expression. The expression generates new conditions.

43. **Power to the people.** Play can only happen when people feel they have control over their lives.

We can't be free agents if we're not free.<sup>(25)</sup>

Mau's manifesto functions to communicate something about the identity of his studio, its beliefs and ways of working, while also serving in a more political role as a public proclamation of these beliefs offered as a programme to be adopted and expanded by the wider design community.

Dutch designers Metahaven categorise Mau's manifesto as being of a "poetic" type as opposed to an argumentative "fortress" model.

Mau's manifesto becomes a programme centred around the transgression of programme. The political consequence is that the commonly accepted separations between professional and personal engagement are overruled. Design is taken out of its limited mandate of professional operations, and is brought into the realm of imagination, possibility and contradiction.<sup>(26)</sup>

Mau's forty three statements are poetic in a certain sense, leaving some room for interpretation. However Metahaven are perhaps too enthusiastic in their portrayal of Mau's manifesto as radically breaking free from the constraints of the professional status quo. Though the statements do possess a degree of lyrical ambiguity which might encourage imagination, possibility and contradiction, the context of the Incomplete Manifesto for Growth is always implicitly assumed as the conventional model. While it might inspire designers to develop and explore unconventional working practices, there is nothing here which encourages the possibility of radical restructuring or reimagining of the systems and structures according to which graphic design operates in society.

The manifesto format brings with it cultural connotations of the radical and revolutionary. The tamest most constrained of proposals can be imbued with surprising rhetorical power, the exciting aesthetic sensation of the revolutionary, simply by being presented in a snappy manifesto style.

A notable contemporary trend making use of the rhetorical device of the revolutionary connotations of the manifesto format is the contemporary application of the design manifesto with an instrumental, functional business focus. A case in point might be the manifesto prominently displayed on the website of the studio edenspiekermann (Spiekermann being Erik Spiekermann, a signatory of FTF2000). The currently displayed edenspiekermann manifesto consists of the following seven statements:

**We work for your customers.** We may have to take their side at times.

**Challenge us.** Complacency is the enemy of great work.

**We don't give answers.** Unless we can explore your question.

**We are not suppliers.** Partnership gets the best results.

**Talk to us.** We thrive on feedback.

**Trust us.** You hired us because we do something you cannot.

**Pay us.** Our work adds to your bottom line, so invest in our future.<sup>(27)</sup>

This manifesto does not present itself as a revolutionary call to arms; however use of the manifesto format retains some of the exciting emotional sensation which such calls bring.

This document forms part of a carefully constructed brand and expectation management business strategy. This manifesto is directed specifically at prospective clients, proposing a partnership model of business over the dominant service or "supplier" based model conventionally expected. In a sense then, there is a revolutionary purpose to this manifesto. This revolution is a subtle one, constrained to the internal processes of professional design – part of a carefully planned strategy to renegotiate power relations within the commercial design service transaction.

Though the manifesto publically declares certain fundamental beliefs of the studio, and in this way acts as a proclamation of identity, the primary function of the manifesto is almost entirely pragmatic. This purposefulness however, is of an entirely different order to the traditional declarations of purpose found in manifestos such as Marx and Engel's Communist manifesto. While a traditional manifesto might declare a purpose or project to be achieved, stating this as a potential future goal, the edenspiekermann manifesto is employed as a tool in an attempt to actively bring about desired change. For designers who spend the majority of their time engaged in activities of corporate identity and branding, the manifesto can become just one more tool in the box.

In a certain sense a manifesto is always a tool: one employed to communicate a message declaring something of the identity and purpose of the proclaimer. In this way the manifesto has always been used as a part of the broader strategies of individuals and groups towards achieving their overall aims. This is a grey area, however. When use of the manifesto format becomes entirely engineered as an instrument to bring about a certain direct effect in a public, it is possible to speculate that a line can be crossed whereby the

document in question becomes just another layer of branding and ceases to function as a manifesto.

In its now common corporate/commercialised applications, reimagined as merely a facet of brand-management, the manifesto blends into and is subsumed by the background noise of contemporary consumer culture. However, as the fundamentally political activity of confidently publically proclaiming truths as self-evident, the manifesto does retain the potential to *offend*, to *strike* out from the white-noise babble of contemporary culture with claims of truth. Such activities are unfashionable, yet this may be precisely where their power lies.

The manifesto is a form of public communication and as such – even in many of its apparently banal contemporary uses – is at its heart a fundamentally political intervention. Whether by declaring what one stands for, or by calling for a revolutionary change in culture and society, the manifesto always has political and therefore social and ethical implications.

This section works towards exploring the potential of manifesto related activities as strategies contributing towards designers' pursuit of ethical practice. Although there are many examples of design manifestos to choose from, the issue will be primarily investigated here by considering the example of the First Things First manifesto (hereafter FTF), first published in 1964 (FTF64) and again in a revised form as First Things First 2000 (FTF2000) in 1999.

FTF is perhaps the most thoroughly over-discussed document within graphic design discourse (competing for the title with Beatrice Ward's Crystal Goblet essay<sup>(28)</sup>). I choose it as an example with hesitancy; the debate particularly surrounding the second revised publication (FTF2000) has been documented and discussed from all angles, both in the design press and in academia.<sup>(29, 30, 31)</sup> There is a certain palpable sense that this horse has long since expired and as such it would be appropriate to stop flogging it. It would be really quite nice to move on and talk about something new. However, although an extensive discourse surrounds FTF, elevating it as a mountain among the molehills of events in graphic design literature, much of this documented discussion remains at a tit-for-tat superficial level in which individuals set out their competing perspectives in what are essentially opinion pieces. The coming section uses the well-trodden debate surrounding FTF2000 as a skeleton upon which to flesh out discussion of the potential application of manifestos as strategies towards bringing about more ethical design practice.

## 4.2.2 First Things First, and Over and Over...

The First Things First manifesto is seminal to contemporary graphic design history. It stands as one of the foremost symbols of the attempt of graphic designers to stake a claim to social, political and ethical responsibility in their work.

The history of the original 1964 First Things First manifesto is well documented by Rick Poynor in his contextualising essay which accompanied the publication of the revised and updated FTF2000 manifesto in *Adbusters*,<sup>(32)</sup> *Émigré*<sup>(33)</sup> and the *AIGA Journal*.<sup>(34)</sup> As Poynor's "brief history" recalls, the original manifesto was drafted by British graphic designer Ken Garland during a meeting of the *Society of Industrial Artists* in London on the 29<sup>th</sup> November 1963, at the end of which Garland read out the draft to much applause and support from the assembly. Four hundred copies of the document were printed in January 1964 with a list of twenty two signatories. (Fig 22) The manifesto reached a much wider audience than might have been expected when it made its way into the hands of Anthony Wedgewood Benn (Tony Benn) with whom it evidently struck a chord as he had it reprinted it in its entirety in his column in the *Guardian* newspaper. This in turn led to Garland's appearance on the BBC's *Tonight* news programme discussing the manifesto. The manifesto was published over the coming months in an array of design periodicals both in English and in translation, leading to the rapid spread of its message both nationally and internationally.

The manifesto itself begins by depicting the contemporary state of graphic design as one dominated by the "methods and techniques of advertising" and expresses the dissatisfaction of the signatories with this condition, condemning the goals of these practices as "trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity." The call to arms of the manifesto is not to abolish advertising altogether, or to "take any of the fun out of life" but is rather a proposal of a "reversal of priorities in favour of more useful and lasting forms of communication." (FTF64)

Poynor's condensed contextualisation and summary of the significance of the original manifesto runs as follows:

That First Things First struck a nerve is clear. It arrived at a moment when design was taking off as a confident, professionalized activity. The rapid growth of the affluent consumer society meant that there were many opportunities for talented visual communicators in advertising, promotion and packaging. [...] For Garland and the other concerned signatories of First Things First, design was in danger of forgetting its responsibility to struggle for a better life for all.

The critical distinction drawn by the manifesto was between design as communication (giving people necessary information) and design as persuasion (trying to get them to buy things). In the signatories' view, a disproportionate amount of designer's talents and effort was being expended on advertising trivial items, from fizzy water to slimming diets, while "more useful and more lasting" tasks took second place: street signs, books and periodicals, catalogues, instruction manuals, educational aids and so on."<sup>(21 p.8)</sup>

Though FTF "struck a nerve" in 1964, the reversal in priorities called for evidently did not bring about a revolutionary shift towards more meaningful and lasting forms of communication. Though many were perhaps inspired at an individual level, the powerful current of mainstream design was not diverted. Consumerism only continued to expand and increase as the dominant force in society, and design, in general, continued to follow the carrot on the stick. Discussion on issues of social responsibility in design did not disappear by any means. Strong strands of oppositional discourse and practice developed and grew. However these outposts of countercultural resistance remained very much marginal as the chief energies of the design industry continued to be employed in support of the status quo.

Interest in FTF was rekindled in 1994 by publication of an article in *Eye* magazine by designer Andrew Howard entitled "There is such a thing as society."<sup>(35)</sup> In it Howard reflects that "What makes the manifesto interesting today is the realisation that its premises appear as radical now as they did 30 years ago. And more significantly, the issue it addresses is as unresolved now as it was then."<sup>(35)</sup>

Howard recognises a value in the general sentiment of FTF64 in attempting to call upon designers to renegotiate their position within the production of culture and society:

As designers whose work is concerned with the expression and exchange of ideas and information and the construction of the visual vocabulary of day-to-day culture, we must establish a perspective on where we fit into this scheme. We must ask in what ways our function helps to organise consciousness. We must also discover to what extent and in what ways the solutions, vocabularies, and dialogues that we are able to conceive and construct are determined for us. The 'First Things First' manifesto was an attempt at least to address these issues.<sup>(35)</sup>

However, he then goes on to criticise FTF64's failure to go far enough. The original manifesto states that it is "not feasible" to abolish high pressure consumer advertising. Howard sees this as a limp climb-down, extinguishing the flames of its own initially revolutionary language. He suggests that this concession waters

down the revolutionary thrust of the argument into a proposal for the “same cake, sliced differently” when actually “what is needed is a different cake altogether.”<sup>(35)</sup>

Having come across FTF64 in relation to Howard’s article in *Eye*, Chris Dixon and Kalle Lasn republished the original manifesto in their *Adbusters* magazine in 1998. In 1999, having been encouraged by graphic designer Tibor Kalman and given permission by Ken Garland, Dixon and Lasn together with Rick Poyner and others redrafted and revised the original FTF64 manifesto, publishing the new version with a list of thirty three signatories as *First Things First Manifesto 2000* (FTF2000) initially in the pages of *Adbusters*, *Émigré*, the *ALGA Journal*, *Blueprint*, *Eye*, and *Items* magazines. The manifesto was subsequently republished in a range of contexts as far afield as Japan, the Czech republic and Norway.<sup>(22 p.142)</sup>

Perhaps in response to Howard’s and others’ criticisms of the original wording of FTF64, the updated FTF2000 manifesto repositioned the original argument slightly. No longer conceding that the abolition of advertising is infeasible, FTF2000 calls for “a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning.” FTF2000 recognises that “Commercial work has always paid the bills,” but challenges the wholesale acceptance of the contemporary commercial context as the status quo default position for all design which leads to the situation in which graphic design potentially finds its primary identity and purpose (“many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do”) in the commercial service-to-client relationship.

While FTF64 called for more useful and lasting forms of communication, FTF2000 also calls for more democratic forms of communication. While the language of FTF64 vaguely alluded to design’s failure to contribute to “our national prosperity,” FTF2000 proposes that by continuing to operate according to prevailing advertising/marketing/branding models of practice, designers are:

supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.  
(FTF2000)

FTF2000 states that “Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design” and calls for an expansion of debate and expression of new perspectives through design practice to challenge the cultural dominance of consumerism which is otherwise “running uncontested.”

The publication of FTF2000 stimulated some considerable discussion within graphic design culture,

# Comparison of Original Texts of First Things First 1964 and 2000

FTF64	FTF2000
We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, photographers and students who have been brought up in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable means of using our talents.	We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, art directors and visual communicators who have been raised in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable use of our talents.
We have been bombarded with publications devoted to this belief, applauding the work of those who have flogged their skill and imagination to sell such things as:	Many design teachers and mentors promote this belief; the market rewards it; a tide of books and publications reinforces it. Encouraged in this direction, designers then apply their skill and imagination to sell
cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste, after-shave lotion, before shave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorants, fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons.	dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles.
By far the greatest effort of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity.	Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design. The profession's time and energy is used up manufacturing demand for things that are inessential at best.
In common with an increasing number of the general public, we have reached a saturation point at which the high pitched scream of consumer selling is no more than sheer noise.	Many of us have grown increasingly uncomfortable with this view of design. Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.
We think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on. There are signs for streets and buildings, books and periodicals, catalogues, instructional manuals, industrial photography, educational aids, films, television features, scientific and industrial publications and all the other media through which we promote our trade, our education, our culture and our greater awareness of the world.	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 programs, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.
We do not advocate the abolition of high pressure consumer advertising: this is not feasible. Nor do we want to take any of the fun out of life.	
But we are proposing 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 on our skills will be for worthwhile purposes.	We propose a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication - a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning. The scope of debate is shrinking; it must expand. Consumerism is running uncontested; it must be challenged by other perspectives expressed, in part, through the visual languages and resources of design.
With this in mind we propose to share our experience and opinions, and to make them available to colleagues, students and others who may be interested.	In 1964, 22 visual communicators signed the original call for our skills to be put to worthwhile use. With the explosive growth of global commercial culture, their message has only grown more urgent. Today, we renew their manifesto in expectation that no more decades will pass before it is taken to heart.
Edward Wright Geoffrey White William Slack Caroline Rawlence Ian McLaren Sam Lambert Ivor Kamlish Gerald Jones Bernard Higton Brian Grimby John Garner Ken Garland Anthony Froshaug Robin Fior Germano Facetti Ivan Dodd Harriet Crowder Anthony Clift Gerry Cinamon Robert Chapman Ray Carpenter Ken Briggs	Jonathan Barnbrook Nick Bell Andrew Blauvelt Hans Bockting Irma Boom Sheila Levrant de Bretteville Max Bruinsma Siân Cook Linda van Deursen Chris Dixon William Drenttel Gert Dumbar Simon Esterson Vince Frost Ken Garland Milton Glaser Jessica Helfand Steven Heller Andrew Howard Tibor Kalman Jeffery Keedy Zuzana Licko Ellen Lupton Katherine McCoy Armand Mevis J. Abbott Miller Rick Poynor Lucienne Roberts Erik Spiekermann Jan van Toorn Teal Triggs Rudy VanderLans Bob Wilkinson

Table 7: Comparison of Original Texts of First Things First 1964 and 2000



provoking passionate responses both in support and criticism. In reflection on the period immediately following the manifesto's publication Rick Poynor recounts a list of selected "barbs and catcalls" thrown in response to the manifesto and its signatories: "Naïve. Elitist. Arrogant. Hypocritical. Pompous. Outdated. Cynically exploitative. Flawed. Rigid. Unimaginative. Pathetic. Like witnessing a group of eunuchs take a vow of chastity."<sup>(22 p.141)</sup> Poynor curates these insults like a butterfly collector displaying prize specimens. For him, the ferocity of public response is evidence of the manifesto's impact and significance. FTF2000 stimulated a broad, open and public debate (within the field) on a range of matters from ethics and social responsibility to the very identity of graphic design. With a certain hint of pride in playing his part in provoking this debate Poynor writes: "In fifteen years as a design writer, I have never observed anything in the design press to compare with the scale, intensity and duration of international reaction to *First Things First*."<sup>(22 p.141)</sup>

The discussion opened up by FTF2000 stretches on to the present day, more or less in iterations of its original form. The fourth instalment of the *Looking Closer* series of collections of *Critical Writings on Graphic Design* begins with a carefully curated selection of texts harvested from design discourse over the first two and a half or so years following the publication of FTF2000.<sup>(29)</sup> These well chosen texts serve as a distillation of the ensuing (and at times rather rowdy) public debate, illustrating examples of the central perspectives and viewpoints on the issue which, in various forms, still persist and continue to be expressed to the present day.

By way of very brief summary, key perspectives expressed within the debate are as follows. On the supporting side, the general sentiment and aims of the manifesto as a call for graphic design to take greater interest in social and ethical responsibility are upheld. Reservations from this camp are generally expressed along the lines that the manifesto's call to arms does not go far enough. At the extreme end, Kalle Lasn calls the manifesto's "mindshift" to bring about full scale revolution.<sup>(36)</sup> More temperately, Matt Soar argues that FTF2000 is less revolutionary than its language might initially suggest, and makes the case that FTF's primary purpose is not in fact a call to arms at all but is rather one of consciousness raising provocation.<sup>(37)</sup>

On the detracting side, opinions are expressed to the effect that the nature of design as a service industry must be recognised. Nico Macdonald argues that pragmatically and realistically the best way for designers to serve society is to serve their clients well. Personal political and ethical beliefs should be pursued through good citizenship outside of the workplace.<sup>(38)</sup> Michael Bierut criticises the elitism of the manifesto's top-down proclamations suggesting that they are disconnected from the everyday experiences of the majority of working practitioners and represent naïve oversimplifications of complex real-world issues.<sup>(39)</sup>

Further voices attempt to diffuse the inevitable stalemate in the debate between opposing binary perceptions of idealism and realism. Loretta Staples pitches the manifesto as an opportunity for design to critically examine its own operations.<sup>(40)</sup> Monika Parrinder and Andrew Howard propose different strategies for reorienting conceptions of design responsibility from questions of content to those of practice. Parrinder proposes tactics of refusal and active non-participation,<sup>(41)</sup> while Howard argues that form as well as content must be addressed in considering design's social responsibilities.<sup>(42)</sup>

2014 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Garland's original proclamation. An event in Poland, *Manifest Fest*, at which Garland and Poynor spoke, commemorated the anniversary.<sup>(43)</sup> (It should be noted Garland no longer speaks publically about FTF, evidently being sick to the back teeth of endlessly covering the same ground.<sup>(44)</sup>) Also in 2014, an unofficial (i.e. not linked to any original signatory) online project published its own revision of FTF as *First Things First 2014: A Manifesto* adding an emphasis on the web and a democratised open access sign-up mechanism.<sup>(45)</sup>

Such activity demonstrates if nothing else the persisting level of interest in the manifesto and the issues of social responsibility it raises which continue to bubble below the surface of contemporary graphic design culture. While the 2014 manifestation of FTF demonstrates continuing interest in the ideals expressed in the manifesto, the online project also simultaneously stands as testament to the field's failure despite fifty years of discussion, to adequately resolve the debate in any meaningful way.

An article on the Eye magazine website describes Cole Peters, instigator of the unofficial 2014 project, looking forward to the critical backlash against his incarnation of FTF which would be expected according to the pattern of the 1964 and 2000 manifestos.<sup>(46)</sup> The notable absence of any such significant debate in the wake of FTF2014 speaks perhaps more of an apathy and fatigue within design discourse than of widespread acceptance of the core message. The web-facilitated democratisation by which any designer can become one of "we the undersigned", while offering a nod to democratic participation, does not achieve the powerful impact of political allegiance it naively hopes for. In the age of the Facebook petition, signing up to causes online has perhaps become less a political act than a leisure time amusement.

The debate on FTF2000 was at times heated and passionate, but also thoughtful, critical and reasonable on both sides. Over time, the initial tit for tat of knee-jerk responses in letters pages of design magazines mellowed as individuals on both sides became less defensive and more willing to engage with each other's concerns. Having initially been a vocal critic of FTF2000, Michael Bierut actually became a signatory in 2001 presumably through the online signing mechanism which Adbusters installed on their website in response

to criticisms of the elitism of the exclusive list of signatories. Poynor quotes Bierut's explanation for his change of position:

"I made no secret of my misgivings when *FTF* was first published [...] I felt then – and still feel now – that it presents designers with an implied world of black-and-white choices. Yet a good manifesto paints a picture of stark contrasts, and *FTF* has launched a worldwide debate that has elevated our profession and, by challenging us to respond, has made us better designers. Bad design is made by designers who don't think about what they're doing or why they're doing it. Whether you agree or disagree with it, *FTF* makes designers think. I support thinking designers and I support *FTF*."<sup>(22 p.149)</sup>

Bierut's decision to support the overall aims of the manifesto came about not through any significant change in his views and criticisms regarding the content of the document, but rather through a recognition that, despite these imperfections and flaws, the overall impact of *FTF2000* as a manifesto had been to stimulate a productive and healthy debate among the profession regarding its content and themes. It is this productive process of disagreement, debate, discussion, and consideration which can reveal to us some insight into the value of manifestos as ethical strategies in design.

In the case of *FTF2000*, it is unclear to what extent the manifesto could be judged to be a "success." In fact it is questionable whether such a question can or should in fact be asked of a manifesto. *FTF2000*'s aim of "a reversal of priorities in favor of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication" is proposed not as a simple to implement quick fix, but as an aspirational ideal to strive towards. As Rick Poynor writes in response to criticisms of the ambiguity of *FTF2000*'s call for "a new kind of meaning":

The phrase's virtue, [...] is its openness. It suggests a degree of honest uncertainty, indicates a provisional path with the prospect of territory to be discovered and makes no secret of the awesome scale of the task.<sup>(22 p.149)</sup>

Unimaginative literal interpretations of manifestos almost inevitably find manifestos to be unrealistic, idealistic, naïve, black and white, oversimplifications of complex realities which fail to offer pragmatic real world solutions. Such interpretations may be entirely true; however they fail to engage with the true nature of the manifesto which is not generally to lay out a sensible realistic plan of action, but rather to provoke, aspire and inspire in the hope that one day those ideals which appear hopelessly unrealistic today might become possibilities.

Considering *FTF2000*, what is relatively easy to observe, is that a manifesto may serve as an effective

strategy for opening up debate on an issue or issues. Success in this dimension does not rely at all on the achievement of the manifesto's stated aims in the real world. The example of FTF illustrates how a manifesto – precisely due to the naturally ambiguous, playful, imaginative, unconstrained poetic aspects of its character – is able to function not just as a crude tool employed in pursuit of an agenda, but as part of a broader overall strategy to question and challenge existing knowledge and received wisdom which, when closely examined, may be found lacking and in need of improvement or replacement.

## 4.2.3 Through the Lens: The Ethicality of Design Manifestos

To literally interpret and understand a manifesto as an instrumental tool or a shopping list of demands, is to misinterpret and misunderstand the full potential which these proclamations can have. It must be remembered that manifestos by their nature are not simply pragmatic plans but, rather, are poetic, speculative, aspirational/inspirational provocations.

An insight which emerges by considering both supportive and critical contributions to the FTF2000 debate is that of the significance of the impact of a manifesto should not be measured by the degree to which the stated goals of the manifesto are eventually achieved. Looking back, perhaps the most significant impact and effect of FTF2000 has been in the provocation of a public debate within design discourse on issues which otherwise might not have been discussed so widely, openly or with such intensity.

Taking this into consideration, the question of the extent to which design manifestos can be considered ethical strategies for design practice, relies neither on whether the content of a particular manifesto is judged to be good or bad, nor on the possibility of stated goals being eventually achieved. The ethicality of FTF2000 does not depend on whether its proposal to replace the primacy of “the methods and techniques of advertising” with more meaningful forms of communication is understood to be a worthwhile, worthless, realistic or impossible goal.

Considered through the lens of ethical design constructed in chapter three, it is possible to examine the operation of manifestos within design and conclude that they can be seen to serve as ethical strategies provided that they serve to open up spaces of potentiality.

Where a manifesto provokes debate and opens new imaginative spaces in which previously unconsidered possibilities can be weighed up, the ethical is brought into being. However, this conclusion is proposed with the qualification that not all manifestos will necessarily operate in this way. Merely calling for the expansion of potentiality is not enough. In order for the ethical to occur there must be a corresponding engagement with possibilities for change.

Much of the criticism of the FTF manifestos takes the form that these documents represent mere posturing: all talk and no action. If this absence of responsive action is found to be the case for any manifesto, then that manifesto is indeed truly ethically worthless. If the existence of a manifesto has absolutely no impact

on the world then it cannot be ethical. However, the uncritical implication which might be drawn from this, that action alone is to be valued in ethics, must be challenged.

Action itself is not ethical. Action is only ethical when it transforms and extends potentiality. All sorts of activity can occur in the complete absence of ethics. Recall Agamben's description of the unethical state of determinism, characterised specifically by the reality that "there would be only tasks to be done."<sup>(47)</sup> Elevating action as the measure of ethical value is a critical error. To do so also crucially fails to recognise possibilities for inaction as action: the enacting of impotentiality must also be considered as action (section 3.1.3).

The success of a manifesto as an ethical strategy for design depends not on its ability to stimulate action through a call to arms, but rather on its ability to operate as a stimulus to open up spaces of possibility: the creation of authentic potentialities.

As the flipside of the manifesto's capacity to ethically open up space for potentiality there is also potential here for the manifesto to operate in an an/aesth/ethic capacity. Manifestos can present and frame possibilities for change in ways which actually decrease the likelihood of significant change taking place. One example would be the wording of FTF64 in conceding that the abolition of high pressure advertising "is not feasible." This claim is presented within the context of a manifesto which otherwise through its form encourages the aesthetic sensation of revolution. Within this expansive revolutionary aesthetic context, the smaller subtler closing down and denial of actually existing possibilities for change within the profession are more likely to go unnoticed. These interventions are however no less significant.

Bruce Mau's *Incomplete Manifesto for Growth* operates as a whole in the same way. Mau's document, by presenting itself within the manifesto format creates the aesthetic sensation of a revolutionary call to arms while actually functioning only to encourage exploration *within* established professional boundaries.

An/aesth/ethic criticism could also be suggested where proposed change called for within a manifesto appears to over-promise, presenting false hopes which may in reality act to suppress the bringing about of real change. It could be suggested that some of the more extravagant claims for change within revolutionary manifestos are then not in fact ethical but merely fantasy, spectacular diversions which in reality operate to make any change less likely. This may be true in some cases; however these must be cautiously examined.

The Communist manifesto remains political and active today in painting a picture of an idealistic alternative

to our existing capitalist system despite the historical failures of actually existing communism. The apparent unlikelihood of the aims of communism being achieved in the world today in no way diminishes the continuing ethicality of this manifesto as an extension of potentiality which exists in the staging of the mere possibility of an alternative to capitalist society. What counts is that the aims articulated represent distinctly different alternative possibilities which can productively contribute towards critical evaluation of perceived existing realities.

Considering this, FTF's more extravagant claims should not be immediately written off simply because they may be considered to be unrealistic. Some may think it unrealistic to think that graphic design possesses any significant power to challenge the "uncontested" dominant social narrative of consumerism. Yet to simply write such suggestions off as fantasy is to nihilistically assume that the way things are must always be the way things will be. If only the realistic was ever proposed, progress would quickly become synonymous with entropy as society consigns itself to endless iterations of sameness which only become less interesting with each cycle.

An authentically ethical manifesto brings about a transformation of perceptions of potentiality, bringing into question assumptions that the current state of reality is inevitable and natural. When a possibility that things could be different is proposed, and the fragile artificiality and constructed nature of the status quo is thereby exposed, possibilities that things could change become more than just fantasy: they become existing potentialities. Even where the proposed goals of a manifesto are evidently not yet possible, any extension of potentiality is an ethical outcome.

Authentically ethical manifestos operate to extend and transform potentiality. The proposed profession wide mind-shift in priorities which FTF calls for has not yet been brought about within design, yet the act of proposing the idea itself has served to open up debate which, among certain groups within design, has expanded ideas about what design could be. This is an ethical outcome. Wherever it operates to genuinely open up, extend and transform potentiality (and not as an an/aesth/ethic), the manifesto as a format and as an activity can therefore be seen to be a potentially fruitful ethical strategy for design.

## 4.3 The Designer As...

*Set out into uncharted territory. But if you do, if you really do, something tells me you'll no longer recognize what you're doing as design. Because that will no longer be what it is. For this new work, as a new kind of practice, will need a new name.*

*And we don't know what to call it yet.*

-Loretta Staples <sup>(40 p.43)</sup>

In the preceding section on professional integrity, the status of design as a profession was briefly discussed, observing that designers certainly appear to operate on the assumption that together they form a profession. Designers think of themselves not merely as people who happen to do design, but at a deeper level align themselves to a core identity found in being a designer. The activities of instituting codes of professional ethics stem from this recognition of foundational designerly identity. However, a peculiar phenomenon has been observed in various forms in graphic design discourse over the past few decades in which, if we are to believe the hype, certain segments of the design profession are clambering over each other to no longer be just designers. Still recognising and maintaining their foundational identity in being designers, these designers are searching for more.

Claims have been vocalised in graphic design discourse over the past few decades for the observed emergence of such diverse roles as the designer as author, translator, performer, director, producer, entrepreneur, researcher, publisher, reporter, and curator among others.<sup>(48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54)</sup> It appears that graphic designers will try their hand at pretty much anything. Are these assertions of graphic design's desire to inhabit multiple personalities evidence that the field has been suffering an identity crisis?

What might lie behind these peculiar developments within graphic design culture? Why, for certain individuals, is the idea of simply being the designer as designer no longer felt to be a sufficient basis upon which to found one's identity? Behind each designer as... phenomenon lie specific sets of social, cultural, economic and political circumstances which combine in such ways and with enough intensity to prompt a designer to feel that they must carve out a new space in which to construct their professional identity.

My interest in these matters in the context of this project is a curiosity as to the ethical dimensions of the motivations which might prompt these apparent attempts at identity reconstruction. While this ethical



dimension might not be immediately obvious its significance should not be underestimated.

In illustration of this potential significance, we might initially speculate in two ways as to the underlying motivations which prompt designers' desires to broaden the range of activities permissible within their professional remit. The first possibility might be that there is a matter of some deep dissatisfaction with the perceived current range of possibilities available to the designer within existing professional categories. Does the itchiness within the designer's own skin stem from some sense of frustration caused by what might be perceived as unjustly imposed disciplinary boundaries which constrain or limit the fulfilment of desired potentials? If the profession of design is in some way structurally constrained, limited, frustrated, perhaps even oppressed, then there would appear to be an ethical issue to be confronted here.

Alternatively, a less negative perspective might suggest that perhaps design wishes to expand its boundaries simply because it has outgrown its own skin. Has design gone as far as it can go within its traditional confines and, having reached the limits, wishes to sail onwards into the unknown? The ethical implication is perhaps less obvious here, but is no less significant. If design is expanding into previously uncharted territory what is its purpose now to be? While our default position on ethics can tend to focus on issues of conflict resolution – how to fix what might be broken, i.e. what we should *not* do – issues of purpose and progress – where to go next, i.e. what we *should* do – may be equally ethical issues.

In the coming section, three related “designer as...” phenomena as they have been observed by both practising designers and interested commentators will be discussed: namely the designer as author, the designer as producer, and the designer as entrepreneur. The investigation of these symptoms of apparent identity crises within graphic design is undertaken with the aim of unpacking some of the ethical dimensions of evolving contemporary graphic design practice. Are these observed designer as... phenomena evidence of nascent ethical strategies in design, reflecting emergent patterns of behaviour through which designers are either consciously or subliminally striving towards new modes of ethical practice?

### 4.3.1 The Designer as Author

The idea of the designer as author will be familiar in one form or another to anyone who possesses a cursory knowledge of graphic design history and discourse since the early 1990's. The issue of authorship has been a prominent topic of debate within the field during this period. In essence, the principal concerns of the debate are the extents to which a designer can or should be considered responsible for not only the form but also for the communicative content of a given design: to what extent can the designer be considered to play an "authorial" role in the communication process. Is the designer merely a form-giver tasked only with passively relaying content provided by others (client, commissioner), or does the designer also have a role in shaping and even creating content?

At the heart of the issue, is the question of the autonomy of the designer. What level of responsibility does the designer have to the author of provided content which they have been tasked with communicating through graphic form? To what extent should the designer expect to be *free* to express their own authorial desires, manipulating shaping and creating content on their own terms?

The subsequently discussed thematic developments of the designer as producer and entrepreneur are essentially extensions of this same dilemma, whose emergence serve if nothing else to testify to the continuing failure of this issue to be adequately resolved. This section seeks to set out an understanding of who, or what, the designer as author is. However, working towards this aim, the elephants in the room must first be acknowledged and dispatched by discussing what design authorship is not.

The first common assumption which must be refuted is that design authorship is not the same as design writing. The production of texts of design history, commentary, criticism and journalism does not constitute design authorship. This is merely textual/literary authorship taking design as its subject.

Etymologically, the word authorship is derived from a root of meanings related to increasing, enlarging, instigating, founding, originating and creating which can be traced back to the Latin "augere" (which also gives us the word augment).<sup>(13 p.165)</sup> While this original creation sense of authorship may in fact be at the heart of authentic design authorship, it is not difficult to see how confusion can quickly arise as to all intents and purposes in contemporary everyday English language use, authorship is primarily a literary concept.

Our first reference for the author is the one who writes. Any and almost all other uses and applications

of the concept of authorship in the English language today functionally operate by way of analogy to the creative act of writing text. An immediate confusion almost unavoidably arises in attempting to conceptualise graphic design authorship due to the coincidental reality that one of the primary materials which graphic design works with, is text.

Existing for so much of the time in such close proximity to the presence of literary authorship, graphic design seems at times simply too close to literary authorship to be able to attain a clear perspective of its independent functioning in relation to the underlying concept to which the functional linguistic analogy of authorship refers. (Figs 25-29)







The second “elephant” is the connection of graphic design authorship with certain stylistic trends. The specific phrase “the designer as author” entered design discourse as the title of a 1991 article in *Blueprint* magazine in which Rick Poynor discusses the reception of an emergent new breed of D&AD award winning British graphic designers whose work, he asserts, is characterised not by the “undecorated, amusing, graphically direct ideas” favoured by mainstream designers of the day, but rather by “multi-layered text zones and image-fields of mind-boggling complexity and doubtful legibility.”<sup>(48 p.98)</sup>







Restraint, clarity, efficiency and witty persuasion were out. Layers of ambiguity, idiosyncrasy, intertextuality, personal expression and general aesthetic complexity were in: “The unambiguous statement has been transformed into an annotated visual text.”<sup>(48 p.98)</sup> Poynor’s inference was that these graphic designers were no longer content to play the role of mere delivery boys (and girls) for other people’s content; they were seeking to become graphic authors, creators of communicative meaning content in their own right.

Poynor’s 1991 article did not invent the idea of graphic design authorship out of the blue. What it did do was provide a convenient and catchy name for a phenomenon which had been a long time brewing. To a certain extent, ever since, “designer as author” has become a loaded phrase within graphic design culture, immediately conjuring associations with certain stylistic idiosyncrasies and emergent trends particular to that period of the 1980’s and 90’s. An enduring guilt-by-association lingers in the minds of many, effectively rendering design authorship synonymous with what are often clumped together under the labels of “new wave” and/or “postmodern” tendencies in graphic design. Aesthetic stylistic trends particular to a specific point in time and culture are to this day still for many the first connotation brought to mind by the mention of design authorship. (Figs 30-35)

Extracting the concept from this narrow frame and exploring it at a more foundational level will be

empiricism (or positivism), which claims that observation is the key to knowledge. \*\*\*

The  and its associated equipment—such as  and —are the primary tools of empirical knowledge. The logical positivists attempted to analyze language into a minimal set of direct experiences, claiming that all languages can be reduced to a core of observations, such as big, small, up, down, red, or black. With , Neurath translated a physical theory into a visual practice. The sign  is positive because as a picture, it is based on observation:  is logical because it concentrates the details of experience into a schematic mark. Neurath aimed to combine the mechanical empiricism of photography with the rational structures of mathematics and geometry. ●

Although Neurath believed that pictures are objective and universal, the meaning of international signs are culturally specific. We understand, for example, that  represents *lavatory for men* and  *lavatory for women*. Yet the reference to toilets is left unexplained. A functional description, such as  and , might denote the difference between facilities more directly, but the signs' conventional meaning still would have to be learned. We distinguish  as male because he is contrasted against the figure .

gender is marked by a stylized reference to a garment sometimes worn by Western women. In the D.O.T. system,  refers to "people" in general except where he is contrasted with . Thus  does not mean drinking fountain for men; nor does  mean elevator for men; and nor does the sign  mean waiting room for men— stands in for men generically. The only place  appears in the D.O.T. system besides on lavatory doors is in  the sign for ticket sales. Here, where one person is offering a service to another, the designers deemed it appropriate to show  assisting .

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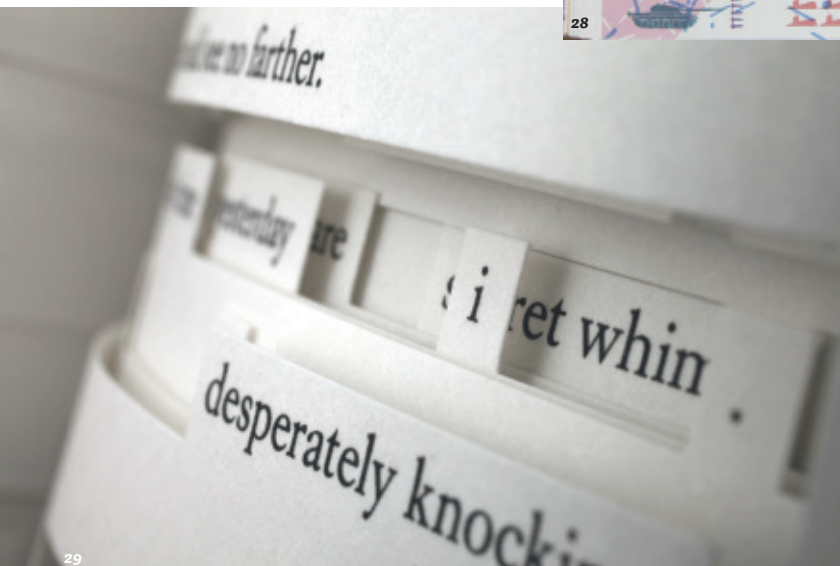
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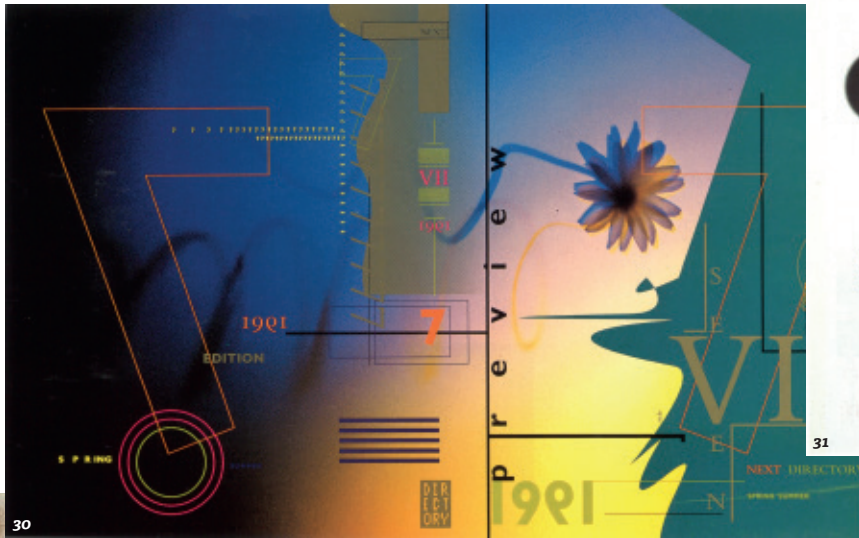
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Fig 25: Modern Hieroglyphs: visual essay by Ellen Lupton and J Abbott Miller  
Fig 26: Design by an author: Chip Kidd's novel, The Cheese Monkeys  
Fig 27: Co-authorship: S,M,L,XL by O.M.A, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau  
Fig 28: Artists Books: Warren Lehrer, French Fries  
Fig 29: Writing with design: Jonathan Safran Foer's Tree of Codes





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Fig 30: Why Not Associates. Next Directory Seven. 1991

Fig 31: P Scott Makela. Image as Weapon. Poster/Mailer for Walker Art Centre. 1992

Fig 32: Carlidge Levene. Burton Property Trust: 250 St Vincent Street Brochure. 1989

Fig 33: April Greiman "Does It Make Sense?" Design Quarterly #133, 1986

Fig 34: Allen Hori. Art For Life. Poster for Aid for Aids Research Detroit. 1990

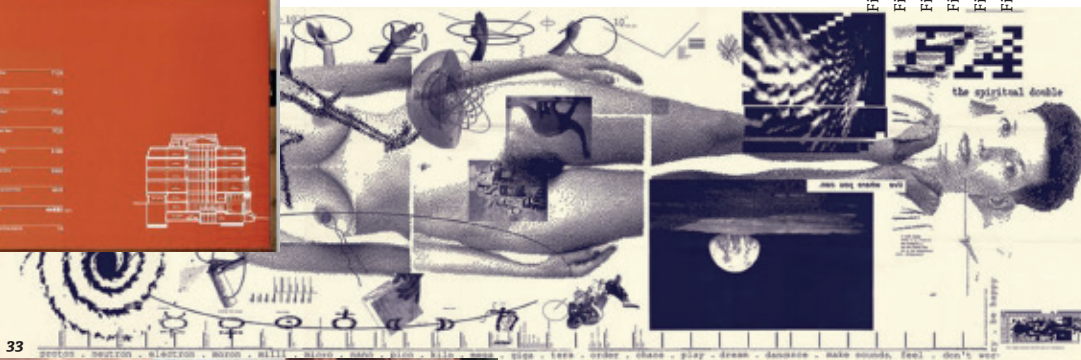
Fig 35: Edward Fella. Morris Bros: A sustained Vision. Detroit Focus Gallery. 1987



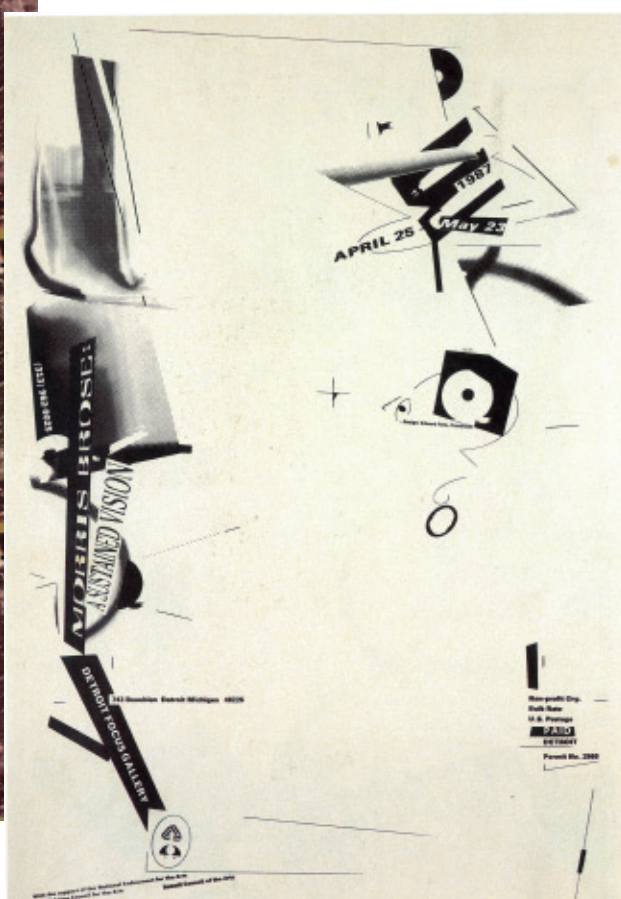
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necessary in order to allow its true significance to the activities of graphic design to become apparent. Design authorship is not a style, it is a phenomenon which can be observed to varying degrees throughout the history of design across styles, periods and cultures.

A third misconception which must be combatted, is the suggestion that design authorship primarily has to do with rejection of the client relationship in favour of self-initiated work and personal expression. Proponents of such an idea might point towards well-known examples such as Stefan Sagmeister's self-obsessed personal projects (Figs 21, 36), Paula Scher's maps (Fig 38), Anthony Burrill's typographic posters (Figs 20, 39), or Daniel Eatock Felt-Tip Prints (Fig 39), suggesting that these designers are pursuing authorial strategies by undertaking exploratory personal projects in which the client is primarily themselves. The logic runs that if there is no external force imposing a direction upon the design, then this authorship must originate within the designers themselves; therefore these are examples of design authorship.

This is perhaps true; however it would be an entirely unfounded leap to tie authorship exclusively to client-less self-direction on this basis. The question of authorship in design runs deeper than the name on the invoice (or lack of). Designers can pursue authorial strategies independently or within the client relationship.

Many designers, take Ed Fella (Fig 35) or Marian Bantjes (Fig 37) as examples, exhibit strong easily recognisable personal authorial traits across both personal and commissioned work. These authorial traits are qualities which lie deeper than mere surface style, and which also transcend the economic commissioned/self-commissioned status of any specific job.

Shawn Wolfe is a designer with a distinctly recognisable style; however merely having an easily identifiable personal style does not meaningfully constitute authorship. Wolfe's visual style is in fact a reflective amalgam of influences drawn from American popular and commercial culture.<sup>(55)</sup> Considered in terms of visual aesthetics alone then, it could be accused of being simply derivative of existing forms. The authorial qualities within Wolfe's work exist not just in the visual style, but in the larger overall strategies of how this style is applied, in which contexts and to what ends.

Wolfe's pre-2000 design for the fictional (anti-)brand Beatkit was clearly a self-initiated project, yet again this alone does not qualify the work as authorial. Wolfe's visual tropes turn up throughout his commercial work in the music industry, and some of the most interesting Beatkit related design appears within commercially commissioned contexts. (Figs 40-41) The authentic authorial nature of Wolfe's design

is not found either in idiosyncratic visual style or personal self-commissioning/expression. Wolfe's design authorship can be found throughout all his practice, whether self or client commissioned, in his consistent strategies of subversion of corporate consumer culture.

A meaningful conception of design authorship must not rely on principles of literary authorship, of purely aesthetic style, or of self-initiation. The remainder of this section pursues a more affirmative understanding of how authorship might productively be conceived in the context of design. In what might appear at first to be an ironic twist, this understanding of the role of authorship in design will be opened up through an exploration of the emblematic proclamation of the death of the author.

The apparent demise of the author famously proposed by Roland Barthes in 1968,<sup>(56)</sup> should not have come as a surprise to anyone familiar with developments in literary and linguistic theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By this point, the author had been in palliative care for some time. Barthes simply publically put him out of his misery. The proclamation of the death of the author forms part of a much larger paradigm shift in linguistic, literary and ultimately cultural theory: the shift from modern to post/late-modern conceptions of cultural structures through developments of structuralism and post-structuralism. Dutch design critic Els Kuijpers succinctly describes the development of the situation at the turn of the 1970's:

Down with the mimetic theory of representation that holds language to be a faithful reflection of reality and locates meaning in things – so prominent in Realism. And down with its opposite, the intentional theory, in which language is nothing but individual speech and meaning is situated in the author – so important for Romanticism. They are replaced by a constructivist theory of language that sees language as a symbolic production in which meaning is constructed by using systems of representation, concepts and signs. Everything has become language, the world does not exist, it is unutterable, incapable of being caught in words.<sup>(57)</sup>

The tremors of this seismic cultural shift had been felt in relation to authorship at least as far back as 1946 when William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, in their essay *The Intentional Fallacy*, argued against the assumption that there is any logical link between the intentions of the creator of a work of art or literature and the meaning of that work.<sup>(58)</sup> This argument brings into doubt the romantic notion that the author directly communicates with the reader.

Barthes 1968 death of the author essay begins by recounting the enduring popular understanding of literary authorship which Wimsatt and Beardsley's line of thinking had criticised:





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Fig 36: Sagmeister & Walsh, The Happy Show 2012  
 Fig 37: Marian Bantjes, Valentines 2011  
 Fig 38: Paula Scher, Typographic Maps  
 Fig 39: Daniel Eatock setting up Felt-tip Print with Anthony Burrill prints in background, at Graphic Design Now in Production exhibition, Walker Art Center, 2011  
 Fig 40: Shawn Wolfe and Ellen Forney, The Stranger Magazine, Crisis of Meaning cover, 1997  
 Fig 41: Shawn Wolfe, RemoveInstaller Front Page ad, The Stranger Magazine, 1999



The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us.<sup>(56 p.143)</sup>

In this traditional view of authorship, the author is identified, recognised and sought out as the primary source of *authority* on a work. Barthes proposes that though attitudes towards cultural works might still reflect this belief to a great extent, this authoritative figure of the author has in fact been removed, undermined, destroyed (hence its death) by the new understandings of the operation of cultural "texts" in society which had been developing as part of the larger paradigm shift:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.<sup>(56 p.146)</sup>

According to the developing cultural world-view, the meaning of a text is no longer considered to be directly dependent, influenced or "nourished" in any way by the intentions of the original author: instead it is understood to be continuously written or rather "performed" in the present moment as it is actively interpreted and translated by the reader.<sup>(56 p.145)</sup> The imagined God-like figure of the author who dictates the one true singular authoritative meaning of the text is dead. The reader takes on the role of actively constructing the meaning of a text by a process of making connections with other existing texts and their meanings. As Barthes writes:

a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focussed and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.<sup>(56 p.148)</sup>

Barthes' death of the author is not therefore a suggestion of any absence or lack of authorship, an author shaped gap in society. It is not authorship itself which has died but rather the traditionally perceived

authoritative figure of the author as the sole locus of meaning creation. The author's supposed role in originating meaning has been supplanted by the reader's subjective interpretative activity. The *relocation* of the author would probably have been a more appropriate, though less catchy, title for the essay.

In any case, Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author is emblematic of the contemporary paradigm in which authorship is understood as a social process.

Michel Foucault's 1969 essay "What is an Author?"<sup>(59)</sup> goes much further than Barthes' in addressing the status of the concept of authorship as a social construction. A reading of Barthes' essay alone might suggest that authorship has become a social construction only as a result of the latest cultural paradigm shift. By conducting a brief history of authorship, Foucault argues that the nature of authorship has always been socially constructed. In place of authorship as a role to be enacted, Foucault proposes authorship as a discourse. What the death of the most recent dominant discursive construct of authorship actually reveals to us is that whatever an author might be, it cannot simply be located in an individual: authorship is not simply an active role to be played by an individual, but can also be seen to be a *function* of discourses within society.

The relatively arbitrary rules by which we assign authored status to certain works, hint at the constructed and therefore ever evolving nature of the authorship function:

...in a civilisation like our own there are a certain number of discourses endowed with the "author function" while others are deprived of it. A private letter may well have a signer - it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor - it does not have an author. An anonymous text posted on a wall probably has an editor - but not an author. The author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society.<sup>(59 p.211)</sup>

Foucault suggests that our modern individual focussed conception of authorship (the one supposed to have recently passed away) emerged in tandem with ideas of the possibility of ownership of the content of texts. Prior to this recognition of penal accountability, little attention was paid to the matter of which individual might have created any particular cultural artefact. Once it came to be conceivable that someone might be held responsible and therefore punishable for the effects of materials judged to be transgressive by those in power, the idea of the producer's individual ownership of the content of cultural productions became necessary. Without a definable author, there would be no one upon whom to pin the

blame.

Foucault recounts how originally in scientific endeavours the mark of authorship served to demonstrate authority in making truth claims. However as discourses of rationality and objectivity began to become established, the *absence* of subjective authorship came to reinforce the weight of scientific truth. As regards literature the opposite switch took place; sacred stories passed through oral traditions would be performed with no requirement for an author to seal their social importance. Yet now, the meaning and value of texts is closely tied to our understanding of their authorial origins.<sup>(59 p.213)</sup>

Recognition of authorship may superficially appear to be merely a simple matter of crediting creativity in producing an idea or ownership of that idea. However, this crediting within society signifies status, value, and crucially power. Authorship's appearance as a soft cultural concept belies its political nature.

Claims to authorial status are political. They are claims to the power and authority which a particular society at a particular time ascribes to the authorial role. Claims to design authorship are exactly this. Calls for recognition of authorial status emerge from frustration with perceptions of the designer's currently ascribed social role, and from perceptions that achieving recognition of authorship will offer a more desirable position within society.

The designer as author is a discourse linked to desires to obtain a certain degree of power within existing socially constructed systems. Design authorship is neither a style, a literary undertaking, nor a self-indulgent escapist flight from reality (though this is not to say that these three are in any way excluded from occurring within the phenomenon). The recurring emergences of design authorship reflect attempts by designers to take control of their own identity: attempts to become autonomous.

This seeking of autonomy should not be uncritically conflated with a rejection of the client relationship in favour of self-commissioning. Rather, it reflects the attempt to negotiate and stake a claim to the right of the individual designer to control their own work within design practice, whether client- or self-commissioned. The political power sought in design authorship is not power over any other party but power over the designer's own activity. For many, the idea of design authorship represents a breaking away from the idea of design as abject subservience to the client, and the regaining of some notion of autonomous dignity and responsibility within professional relations.

Authorial strategies in design are not constituted by textual authorship, post-modern stylistic tendencies or self-initiation. However correlations can often be recognised between authorship and these characteristics

where they are employed as part of the designer's attempts to achieve a level of author-like autonomy within their work. Seen from this perspective, the various trends observed in relation to ideas of the designer as author are superficial symptoms of an underlying condition. Phenomena linked with the narrative of the designer as author are reactions in response to deep perceptions of a deficit of autonomy within designers' professional activities.

The designer as author could then potentially in this way be argued to be a fundamentally ethically motivated phenomenon. It represents attempts on the part of designers to reclaim a desired degree of control over their own activities, either within commercial contexts, or by rejecting these.

However, it is quite possible that within the context of the established narratives of graphic design discourse, it is perhaps too late for this ethical dimension to emerge as a uniting overarching narrative in the story of the designer as author. Connotations of writing, style, and self-commissioning are deeply ingrained into the collective consciousness. The widespread failure of the designer as author narrative as an empowering route to autonomy is evidenced most strongly by observation of subsequent emergences of other designer as... phenomena.

## 4.3.2 The Designer as Producer

In 1998 Ellen Lupton proposed the idea of “the designer as producer” as an alternative to the existing concept of the designer as author.<sup>(49)</sup> In a short essay, Lupton acknowledges that the idea of the designer as author has enlivened debates and encouraged graphic designers to expand their ways of thinking about what graphic design could be. However, presumably alluding to a recognition of the death of traditional models of authorship which hinge on “a nostalgic ideal of the writer or artist as a singular point of origin”<sup>(49)</sup> Lupton proposes production as a concept which might better reflect the materialistic and social dimensions of the realities of graphic design practice.

The underlying principle of Lupton’s critique is relatively sound. Having taken the culturally pre-loaded word “author” as its frame of reference, it was perhaps entirely predictable that the designer as author discourse would almost inevitably be susceptible to digressions towards debates centring around a heroic, romantic, individualistic conception of the figure of the designer as isolated creative genius borrowed from literary and artistic models of authorship.

The idea of the designer as producer attempts to address this imbalance, by recognising that processes of meaning making do not take place only in the mind of the author, but in negotiation with the complex social and political realities of a world populated by others.

By reorienting the debate towards a conception of authorship anchored to material social production rather than heroic personal creation, Lupton evidently seeks to suggest a terminology more appropriate to the realities of design activity, and which might therefore be able to reroute the discourse around some of the pitfalls and dead ends which had developed within popular contemporary discussions of design authorship.

In order to make her case for a mental shift towards thinking of the designer as producer, Lupton draws on an essay by German philosopher Walter Benjamin, based on a lecture delivered in Paris in 1934, entitled “the Author as Producer.”<sup>(60)</sup> In her essay Lupton presents a rather literal, simplistic and naïve reading of Benjamin’s argument, proposing a swing away from thinking of authorship as a mystical power of individual creative genius towards a conception of a process of authorship which takes place through material production. The implication is that in order for the designer to achieve autonomy, what is required is authentic ownership and control not of the content of communications, but rather of the means of production. Though these intentions seem well placed, Lupton’s oversimplified application of Benjamin’s

ideas at times verges on promoting an anti-intellectual wholesale rejection of engagement with authorship:

Whereas the term “author,” like “designer,” suggests the cerebral workings of the mind, production privileges the activity of the body. Production is rooted in the material world. It values things over ideas, making over imagining, practice over theory.<sup>(49)</sup>

While this is perhaps an accurate description of characteristics of production, it overshoots the mark of Benjamin’s point, which is not that production should be privileged above, before or instead of authorship, but rather that authorship and production are in fact inseparable social processes.

For graphic design this perspective is a vital one. Historically, the notion of the role of the producer of visual communications as a figure separate and independent from the creator of communicative content arises only relatively recently as a result of divisions of labour, in which the processes of material production came to be perceived increasingly as specialised technical tasks to be carried out after the initial stage of creative authorship is complete.

With each technological advance in the production/reproduction of visual communications – from calligraphy to lithography to movable type etc. – the skills required to fabricate and replicate the material forms of visual communications demanded ever greater technical skill. Not everyone with a message to communicate could also be a specialist in technical production, and so roles emerged and professions were instituted in order to provide these specialised services. This pragmatic division of labour sowed the seeds of a mental separation between authorial acts of creation, and mechanistic processes of production.

Lupton’s emphasis on production as the central characteristic of design reflects her aim in attempting to redress the imbalance between authorship and production resulting within this division. The implicit assumption of the designer as author agenda reflected the widespread social consensus that authorship is the more prestigious of the two roles. The designer as producer is to a certain extent then proposed as a corrective measure attempting to mediate some of the excesses of certain tendencies emerging from under the banner of the designer as author, which may indeed have swung too far towards an emphasis on individual authorship at the cost of the recognition that production is also a significant factor in the staging of communication.

Where Lupton’s essay begins to slide a little however is in a failure to recognise that for the majority of designers, the author/producer balance had not shifted away from production in the first place. For this mainstream of designers who still largely conceive of design primarily as production, Lupton’s invoking

of Benjamin's call to take control of the means of production potentially reads as permission to continue privileging form and process over communicative content, only with the offer of increased feelings of empowerment, autonomy and control to be achieved through a renegotiation of industrial power relations.

It is unfortunate that Lupton's reading of Benjamin falls at the last hurdle in this way. Her conclusions sound so promising:

The challenge for designers today is to become the masters, not the slaves of technology. There exist opportunities to seize control – intellectually and economically – of the means of production, and to share that control with the reading public, empowering them to become producers of meaning.<sup>(49)</sup>

In advocating that the focus of activities of meaning creation should be located primarily in processes of production themselves, her argument falls into the very trap which Benjamin attempts to warn of. In order to gain better understanding of this it is necessary to examine Benjamin's original argument.

In *The Author as Producer*, Benjamin – addressing the context of the increasingly tight grip of Fascist control over all areas of cultural production in 1930's Germany – raised his concerns as to the potential side effects allowed to sneak in to the communication process through the historically produced mental separation of authorial content from production processes. He argues that the social practices of literary authorship, particularly the question of the writer's autonomy, cannot properly be considered in isolation from the conditions under which the means of production are controlled and operated. According to Benjamin then, in order for the author to have true creative autonomy they must not only be capable of controlling the operation of the means of production, but also of fundamentally changing these structures. The division of labour between authorship and production is an *alienation* not only of labour but of communication itself.

In this alienated dynamic the separation of authorship from production diminishes the power of both equally. Evidently within the context of the political climate of the time (1930's Germany) in terms of the social implications of this critique, the stakes were high. Those who control production effectively control the message. The apparent freedom of the author is subject to and constrained by those who have the power over publishing and broadcasting media. Benjamin writes of the extremely difficult position of the oppositional German intellectual of the day:

Since, on the one hand, the newspaper is, technically speaking, the writer's most important strategic position, and since, on the other hand, this position is in the hands of the enemy, it should

not surprise us if the writer's attempt to understand his socially conditioned nature, his technical means and his political task runs into the most tremendous difficulties.<sup>(60 p.91)</sup>

The political autonomy of the author is only autonomous in so far as those in control of the means of production allow. Those authors who fail to take an active role in processes of production are, according to Benjamin, fated to be nothing more than "men of mind":<sup>(60 p.91)</sup> sterile intellectuals who play no active role in the shaping and influencing of society.

This critique is not some crude Marxist hatchet job painting a simplistic black and white picture of the struggle of the free heroic author against the controlling agents of production. Benjamin recognises the complex realities of those working within the systems and industries of cultural production at all levels. He addresses the tragic naivety of those who believe that simply operating out of the right motivations or commitments ("tendencies" in Benjamin's language) provides a sufficient foundation for the emergence of "good" communication.

Pre-dating Marshall McLuhan's declaration that "the medium is the message"<sup>(61)</sup> by several decades, Benjamin asserts the crucial difference between "merely supplying a production apparatus and changing it."<sup>(60 p.93)</sup> He quotes his friend the playwright Bertolt Brecht on the potential political implications of the failure of producers of culture to face up to this alienated dynamic:

Believing themselves to be in possession of an apparatus which in reality possesses them, they defend an apparatus over which they no longer have control, which is no longer, as they still believe, a means *for* the producers but has become a means to be used *against* the producers.<sup>(60 p.98)</sup>

Regardless of what the intentions or motivations of the workers who operate within the systems of production might be, if these apparatuses of production are set up to operate in a certain way, in favour of certain interests, and if the workers have no effective power to be able to change these structures, then the overall effect of the apparatus will eventually inevitably function to promote its own interests rather than those of either the author or the producers.

Ultimately the medium is the message, and no amount of good intentions alone can change this. Benjamin argues that the only way for both authors and producers to be able to create authentic communications which satisfy their wishes for both the desired quality and motivations (tendencies), is to get their hands dirty taking control of the apparatuses of production, either through fundamentally changing existing structures, or by becoming "pioneers" creating their own.<sup>(60 p.102)</sup>



The core value of Lupton's suggestion in proposing the idea of the designer as producer is that production – if correctly conceived according to Benjamin's originally intended terms as necessarily intertwined and inseparable from authorship – can function as a conceptual enabling strategy offering a reflection of the underlying, and perhaps subconscious, motivation and desire on the part of designers to take control of their own disciplinary apparatuses and become pioneers of new spaces in which their activity is afforded greater levels of authenticity and autonomy.

Lupton's simplistic reading of production as a liberating force in its own right falls into the trap of assuming that it is enough for the graphic designer to be fully in control of the apparatuses of form-giving. This way of thinking leads to attitudes such as that expressed by Michael Rock in his 2005 anti-designer-as-author rant "Fuck Content" in which he declares that "Our content is, perpetually, Design itself."<sup>(62 p.15)</sup> Such a perspective is nothing more than a cleverly argued rehashing of design's traditional modernist retreat from responsibility, as Kenneth Fitzgerald puts it: "nihilism posing as revelation."<sup>(63 p.94)</sup> To self-impose boundaries limiting graphic design's territory to only that which directly pertains to the formal aspects of producing and reproducing artefacts of visual communication, is to bury one's head in the sand, giving up on the idea that communication design has any political or social dimensions. Fitzgerald, turning Rock's conclusion around, retorts that: "Design isn't a glossy and empty abstraction of itself. It's by and for people. Our content is, perpetually, ourselves."<sup>(63 p.94)</sup> Designers who retreat from production of content within a social context to production for production's sake, to modify Brecht's words, believe themselves to be in possession of an apparatus which in reality possesses them, defending an apparatus over which they have unwittingly voluntarily relinquished control.

The simplistic reading of production as a liberating force in its own right proposed by Lupton and advocated by Rock among others, fails to recognise the vital role which authorship must still play in processes of meaning making.

The critique is sound that authorial content which takes no consideration for the processes of production of form will inevitably be subject to the power and control of others. The call to take control of the means of production is therefore also a valid proposal.

The danger however with the simplistic designer as producer model presented by Lupton is that it becomes a get out of jail free card releasing the designer from responsibility for authorship as evidenced by Rock's attitude. To take this approach would in fact be to merely replicate what has become the modernist status quo of the designer as form-giver. If the designer wishes to truly take control of their activity, they must not



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Fig 42: William Morris' Kelmscott Press. The Story of the Glittering Plain. 1984

Fig 43: Malik Verlag: George Grosz, John Heartfield. Neue Jugend. 1917

Fig 44: Mike Gunderloy's Factsheet Five (no.36): a zine of zines. 1991

Fig 45: Lars Müller Publishers. Democracy: An Ongoing Challenge. 2013

Fig 46: Dexter Sinister, Just-In-Time Workshop & Occasional Bookstore, 38 Ludlow Street (Basement South), New York

Fig 47: Urs Lehm of Rollo Press

Fig 48: Issues of Abäke's Slow Alphabet





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Fig 49: Studio Squash. Filo Stand

Fig 50: Draplin Design Co. Field Notes journals

Fig 51: Gavin Strange. Shirley Creamhorn and Shithawk vinyl toys

Fig 52: Sugar For All. Typo Spinners

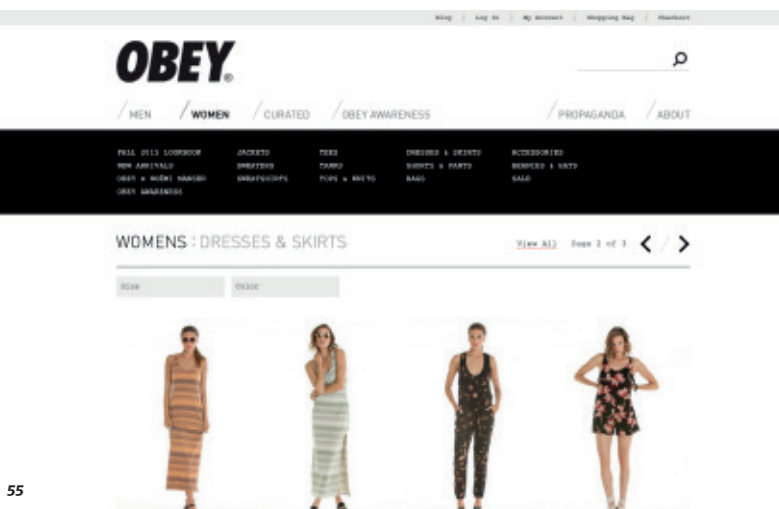
Fig 53: Best Made Co. Wonderful Forever, National Parks Series screen-printed map

Fig 54: Best Made Co. "Courage" American Felling Axe

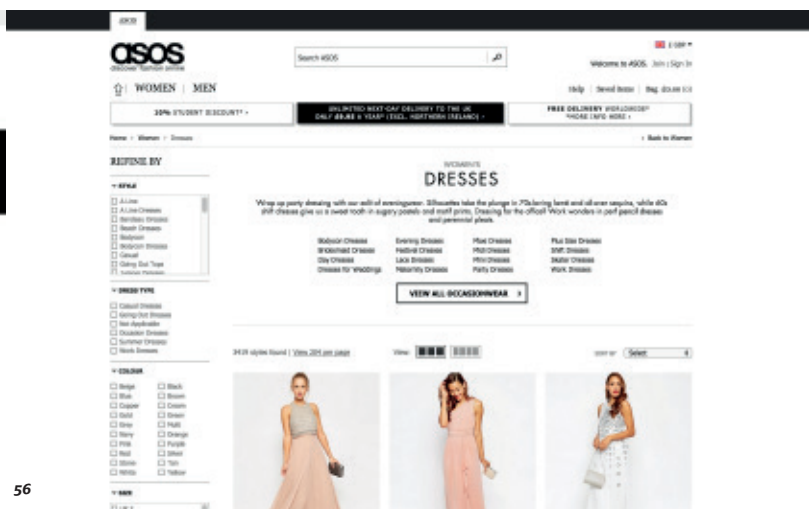
Fig 55: Obeyclothing.com

Fig 56: ASOS: discover fashion online

Fig 57: Deborah Adler Design. ClearRX Medication System for Target



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simply be the designer as producer, but the designer as author as producer.

Lupton's initial proposal of the emblem of the designer as producer has its flaws, many of which can charitably be put down to the challenges of attempting to condense the subtleties of the thoughts of one of the key thinkers in early 20<sup>th</sup> century European modernity into a short essay targeted towards a populist graphic design audience. Nevertheless, the idea of the designer as producer is far from being an empty concept.

Throughout design history designers have been taking control of production, attempting to claim power and autonomy for themselves. In the 1890's William Morris set a pioneering example establishing his own *Kelmscott Press* in order to control all aspects of the design and production of books: having paper made to his specifications, designing his own typefaces, conducting detailed research into the optimal "rules" of composition.<sup>(64)</sup> (Fig 42) In 1917 John Heartfield founded the politically radical *Malik Verlag* publishing house right under the noses of the censors, cleverly subverting the German authorities by effectively obtaining a publishing licence for the banned journal *Neue Jugend* via a bureaucratic loophole.<sup>(65 p.7)</sup> (Fig 43) The zine subcultures of the 1970's – 90's from punk to Riot Grrrl imagined a radically alternative vision of media creation, production and distribution to that offered by mainstream commercial publishing.<sup>(66)</sup> (Figs 6, 44) Within mainstream publishing models, designers such as Lars Müller have taken commercial publishing into their own hands. Since 1983, somewhat in the tradition of Morris, Müller has been publishing beautiful books on topics relating to his personal interests.<sup>(67)</sup> (Fig 45) More recently, designers have attempted to critically challenge modes of production through unconventional, experimental strategies. Operating from a New York basement as a "Just-In-Time Workshop & Occasional Bookstore" Dexter Sinister combine publishing activities of design, editing, production and distribution under one roof using cheap printing processes (RISO) to produce small runs of printed material on-demand in order to reduce waste.<sup>(68)</sup> (Fig 46) Urs Lehni's *Rollo Press* also makes use of cheap Riso printing to regain control of the publication process.<sup>(69)</sup> (Fig 47) The collective Åbäke pursue a "parasitic" strategy publishing issues of their "I am still alive" magazine and letters of their "slow typeface" exclusively within the pages of other established publications. (Fig 48)

Issue #21 of Åbäke's parasitic magazine appears within the catalogue for the Ellen Lupton and Andrew Blauvelt's 2011 *Graphic Design: Now in Production* exhibition at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis.

<sup>(70)</sup> For the exhibition, Lupton and Blauvelt use an expansion of the idea of the designer as producer as their "curatorial framework or thesis" to justify, organise and categorise their selections of work chosen to represent the past decade or so of graphic design practice (in a largely North American/Western European

context<sup>(71)</sup>). The curators describe how following this framework they

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.

(72 p.10)

The idea of the designer as producer can clearly be seen as an extension of the same underlying desire to expand and explore design's potentials which motivates the designer as author phenomena. Although Lupton's initial articulation of the idea strayed close to proposing a naïve faith in the abilities of materialistic aspects of design production alone to rejuvenate the field, the fuller more diverse picture presented by the range of strategies included within *Graphic Design Now in Production* at least demonstrates the potential of production as a useful lens through which to consider design's continuing attempts to expand its own horizons. The third designer as... phenomenon to be considered here, the designer as entrepreneur, can be seen as a further extension within this pattern although in a different direction.

### 4.3.3 The Designer as Entrepreneur

The foremost proponent of the idea of the designer as entrepreneur is Steven Heller, who offers the concept as a direct extension following in the trajectory of ideas of the designer as author and producer.<sup>(51)</sup> In 1998 Heller wrote an essay for the AIGA journal entitled “The Attack of the Design Authorpreneur” calling for deeper engagement with the entrepreneurial dimension within the contemporary discourse on design authorship.<sup>(74)</sup> In the same year, he had the words “and entrepreneur” added to the title of the *Designer as Author* MFA program which he had co-founded at New York’s School of Visual Arts in 1996. Today the course is simply entitled “MFA Design,” with the subtitle “the graduate program for the design entrepreneur.”<sup>(75)</sup>

Heller proposes entrepreneurship as an idea which may finally be capable of offering designers resolution to their existential angst where ideas of authorship and production had previously failed:

Design authorship was wishful design thinking – a dream that designers could ultimately command their own creative destinies while contributing something of value to the culture. Design entrepreneurship, on the other hand, is a more demonstrative business construct, moving beyond traditional service design into self-starting and self-sustaining design endeavors. The design entrepreneur movement (drumroll please) demands that designers take greater responsibility as creators of their own marketable products. Consequently, design entrepreneurs are not merely hand-maidens to business; they are a new breed of barons and baronesses, intimately ruling their own fiefdoms (as long as they can find markets).<sup>(76 p.33)</sup>

Entrepreneurialism is offered to designers as the panacea which can finally deliver long sought after autonomy for practitioners. All that is required is a good idea, a good grasp of intellectual property law to protect the idea from theft, ability to secure capital to commercialise the idea, a gap for the idea in the market, a good marketing strategy, receptivity of the market towards the idea, nothing going wrong along the way, and heap-loads of luck. Simple.

Despite the obvious risks involved in exposing oneself to the open market, many designers do act in entrepreneurial ways. Online marketplaces such as *etsy.com* and *notonthehighstreet.com* provide outlets for entrepreneurial graphic designers to play on the “cool” factor of graphic design, selling graphic design products as commodities in the form of prints, cards, t-shirts, laundry baskets, place mats, tote bags etc. Crowd-funding sites such as *kickstarter.com* work both ways, allowing members of the public to buy into

future designs, while offering designers new ways to raise the capital required to bring their ideas to market.

Some design entrepreneurs draw directly on their experience of graphic design practice to target the market of graphic designers. Vlad Butucariu's experience of the peripatetic, laptop-toting nature of contemporary graphic design practice led directly to the design of Kickstarter funded *Flio* portable laptop stand.<sup>(77)</sup> (Fig 49) Aaron Draplin's *Field Notes* notebooks have achieved a cult following by appealing to a certain distinctly graphic-designerly material fetish (Fig 50) and are available alongside a vast range of Draplin Design Co. merchandise: from t-shirts, to trucker caps, to combs, plectrums, pencils, keychains, bottle openers and so on.<sup>(78)</sup> Also appealing to the internal graphic design market, toys seem to be a recurring theme, from Sugar For All's *Typo Spinners*<sup>(79)</sup> (Fig 52) to the plethora of vinyl toys such as Gavin Strange's *Droplets* and *Shirley Creamhorn and Shithawk*.<sup>(80)</sup> (Fig 51)

Other entrepreneurial forays are less obviously graphic-design related. Graduate of Heller's SVA programme, Peter Buchanan-Smith's *Best Made Company* produces some beautiful maps with screen-printed typography; however their flagship product range is a line of bespoke handcrafted felling axes. (Figs 53, 54)

The designer as entrepreneur seems just as willing as the designer as author, and as producer to transgress disciplinary boundaries. Buchanan-Smith's axes are certainly unconventional extensions of the graphic design field, but do possess a certain distinctly graphic quality. Sold from a downtown Manhattan boutique at up to £350 a pop, these axes are unlikely to see much felling action. Destined for display they serve primarily then as visually communicative objects, exuding a message which speaks of the values of the discerning owner.

Not all transdisciplinary design entrepreneurship ventures are as convincingly true to their original designerly nature. The commercialisation of Shepard Fairey's popular image as a subversive street artist into various lines of merchandise reaches a peak of emptiness in his *OBEY Clothing* venture. The principles of the brand are described by the website in this way:

Aligned with his populist views, clothing became another canvas to spread his art and message to the people. The clothing is heavily inspired by classic military design, work wear basics, as well as the elements and cultural movements Shepard has based his art career on. Through designers Mike Ternosky and Erin Wignall, Shepard works to create designs that represent his influences, ideals and philosophy.<sup>(81)</sup>

Looking at the product range, aside from sweatshirts and tees explicitly featuring Fairey's artwork, it would



be difficult to differentiate most of the clothes from products available in mainstream high street stores. Aside from the odd glimpse of Fairey's signature rendering of Andre the Giant's menacing eyes, the website could easily be mistaken for ASOS. (Figs 55, 56) Almost all traces of the ambiguously subversive pseudo-revolutionary substance which constitutes Fairey's visual communication practice have been stripped out, leaving only an ethereal distilled aura of apolitical revolutionary cool attached now only to the brand name rather than any inherent quality in the product itself.

Examples such as OBEY Clothing in which aggressive entrepreneurial commercialisation renders the marketed product/service completely unrecognisable from the designer's original work, illustrate some of the hazards of the idea of the designer as entrepreneur.

Where lies the boundary between design entrepreneurship and just plain entrepreneurship? If there is no difference, then does the idea of the designer as entrepreneur have any more value than the idea of the designer as commuter, tooth-brusher, meal-preparer, asthmatic and so on? Furthermore, what is unique about the graphic designer as entrepreneur? Many proposed examples of graphic design entrepreneurship sound suspiciously like indie-marketed product design with a graphic element.

Heller's suggestion that entrepreneurship can offer the autonomy which designers have been seeking for so long, hinges upon the inference that design as entrepreneurship bypasses the need for a client within the design process, thus allowing the designer fully autonomous control of their own projects. In actual fact, design entrepreneurship merely relocates the client, shifting from a centralised to a diffuse "democratised" model in which the commissioning client is directly replaced by the market. Whether this shift results in any significant increase in autonomy is highly questionable. Direct subservience to the client is merely replaced by indirect subservience to market whims.

The implicit ideology of the designer as entrepreneur model is deeply conservative. Its unspoken message is that those designers with genuinely great designs will succeed, that the weak will fall and the strongest will rise, and through this process of natural selection society will be improved. No longer restricted by the agendas of the powerful (clients), the playing field of individual enterprise is open to all. However, when success or failure is decided on the whims of the consumer driven open market what room is there within this model for social, ethical concerns?

Alongside Peter Buchanan-Smith, the other big success story of the SVA's design entrepreneurship programme is Deborah Adler, designer of the *ClearRX* prescription medication packaging system.<sup>(82)</sup> (Fig



57) Inspired by an incident in which her Grandmother accidentally took the wrong medication due to the poor design of existing prescription labels, Adler's came up with the ClearRX system as her SVA MFA thesis project. American retailer Target picked up the design and rolled it out across their nationwide network of stores. This example would suggest that there are opportunities for socially beneficial design to thrive within an entrepreneurial model. All that is required is for the designer to produce a proposition which is recognised by an appropriate segment of the market which is willing to invest.

However, despite this possibility for socially, ethically oriented design to emerge and thrive on the open market, significant limitations of this model must be recognised. Entrepreneurship will always be limited to operating within social and economic status quos.

Yes, a design such as ClearRx has clear, immediate social benefits: improving safety in medication taking. However, design conceived within an entrepreneurial framework dependent upon markets for support, is effectively limited to activities of optimisation of current systems. Entrepreneurship struggles to thrive where markets do not yet exist, or where proposed ideas run contrary to the beliefs held by existing market forces.

It is quite possible to imagine designers developing proposals for reconfigurations of existing prescription medication systems which change the system for the better in radical ways. Some of these proposals might run contrary to established market interests, for example, strategies for more effectively communicating the very-real long-term dangers of the creation of drug-resistant superbugs posed by over-reliance upon antibiotics. Such a design, if effective, might have the effect of decreasing prescriptions for certain common drugs. Though one would hope that they would have the public interest at heart, it is difficult to imagine a commercial pharmacy spontaneously volunteering to fund such a design project and thus purposefully decreasing their own business. Design entrepreneurship may find itself limited in this way. Not truly free after all, but only free within the constraints of what others are willing to support.

The idea of the designer as entrepreneur represents the absorption of some of design's more far-reaching radical impulses within the consumer capitalist economic system. The designer's deep desire for freedom to practice design autonomously within society, is repackaged and represented as the opportunity of autonomy to design within the free market.

### 4.3.4 The Ethicality of the Designer As...

The variously observed designer as... phenomena – three of which have been considered here – represent attempts by designers to expand the boundaries of their own discipline, and fundamentally to seek autonomous control over their own activities. Such activities would certainly appear to have an ethical dimension when conceived either as resistance against external constraints imposed upon the discipline, or as expansive, exploratory and emancipatory impulses seeking to discover new directions and purposes for design activity. The nature of the ethicality of these phenomena will now be considered in more detail using the theoretical perspectives developed in chapter three as a lens to focus this analysis.

The above discussion acknowledges claims which have been vocalised in graphic design discourse over the past few decades for the evolution of design into a variety of different trans-disciplinary directions: the designer as... this or that. These are understood in different ways as attempts by designers to expand the boundaries of their own discipline, and fundamentally, to seek autonomous control over their own activities. In this discussion potentially ethical dimensions can be perceived, either as resistance against external constraints imposed upon the discipline, or as expansive, exploratory and emancipatory impulses seeking to discover new directions and purposes for design activity. What conclusions can be made as to the ethicality of these designer as... phenomena in light of the specific conceptualisation of ethical design set out in chapter three?

In the first instance, designers' attempts to expand, extend and re-imagine the boundaries of their activity can clearly be seen to be attempts to extend potentiality for design. The nature of such extensions of potentiality are in relation to potentialities for what design as an activity and discipline is considered to be capable of. If design is considered to be only capable of giving form to the ideas of others, then the idea of the designer as author – the designer who actively authors new ideas through the process of giving form – is an extension of design's potentiality and is therefore ethical in this sense.

In the same way, where design is considered to be a merely intellectual pursuit whose bringing into physical existence depends upon others who control the means of production, then the act of taking control of the means of production and regaining autonomy to produce freely is an extension of design's potentiality and is therefore ethical in this sense.

The case of the designer as entrepreneur is somewhat more complex. There is certainly an extension of design's potentiality in designers' rejection of subservience to the client as they claim the independent

autonomous mantle of the entrepreneur. However, while potentiality is extended here, it is extended only within the quite specifically defined already existing boundaries of market economics. Though this is transformation into a different way of operating, it is questionable whether this constitutes any significantly extended increase in the designer's autonomy. Subservience to client is merely traded in for subservience to market. Though this transformation can in one sense be seen to be ethical, from another perspective it looks very much like an an/aesth/ethic which, while extending some selected potentialities, suppresses others.

It can be seen then, that to the extent that designer as... phenomena do extend design's boundaries in search of autonomous responsibility in design practice, these expeditions are of an ethical nature in this sense. However, not all designer as... phenomena extend potentiality for design in meaningful or significant ways. In some cases, what might initially appear to be extensions of potentiality resulting in the impression of the achievement of desired increases in autonomy may in actual fact prove to be nothing more than the trading in of one set of restrictive forces for another set – albeit perhaps less visible and with a slightly different flavour.

It should be noted that the nature of this proposed ethicality produced by re-imagining and extending possibilities for design practice is ethicality only in relation to the meta-level conception of what design is capable of doing. This is to say that while some ethicality within design may be recognised here, this particular insight does not actually directly relate to questions of the ethicality of individual instances of design work.

Émigré magazine cannot be argued to be more ethical than Creative Review simply because its design is often linked with designers' attempts to extend design's boundaries by claiming authorial status. Books produced by Dexter Sinister or Rollo Press cannot be argued to be in themselves more ethical than books published by Phaidon merely because the processes used in bringing them into existence transform design's status within production relations. Aaron Draplin's notebooks cannot be argued to be more ethical than Moleskine's purely by merit of having been created, marketed and sold by a graphic designer.

Each of these designs may or may not be ethical, but that ethicality depends upon whether that design extends and transforms potentiality in any way by provoking an aesthetically sensitive response to encounter with the singularity of experience.

The ethicality of designer as... phenomena is found not in the design outputs which emerge out of these

trans-disciplinary practices, but at the level of these practices themselves. Design as a practice becomes ethical in this way when it brings its own nature under scrutiny, interrogating and challenging what are assumed to be the unchangeable natural realities of disciplinary boundaries, and exploring possibilities in which design could burst out from these, becoming something new and different.

To recognise ethicality within designer as... phenomena is to recognise a recurrent characteristic of inherently ethical *expansiveness* flowing out from somewhere deep within design. Where this ethical nature emerges it seeks to cast off external oppressions, assume autonomous responsibility for its own actions, and explore new directions for design activity by constantly expanding into new territories.

This ethical dimension is the logical conclusion which results from Dilnot's suggestion of the bigger-on-the-outside territory of design (section 3.2.2).<sup>(83)</sup> Authentic design, in order to remain true to its own nature, must always seek to expand into new ground. The various designer-as... phenomena represent moments where designers have felt the need to re-name their activity (or observers have re-named the activity of designers) as the naturally expansive activities of design clash with culturally established disciplinary boundaries.

In an essay reflecting upon such re-definitions of design, James Goggin proposes that a general broadening of perspective in relation to graphic design, collapsing all disciplinary boundaries, would do away with the apparently constantly felt need to re-invent the field:

I would argue that graphic design has always occupied a unique position between reading, writing, editing, and distribution and is a discipline nuanced and expansive enough in its everyday activities and processes to make renaming unnecessary. Rather than seeing "graphic design" as too narrow for the multidisciplinary of contemporary practice, designers, design critics, and historians might instead widen their own perceptions of what exactly the term can logically encompass.<sup>(84 p.55)</sup>

Contending that graphic designers already undertake a wide variety of diverse tasks and regularly inhabit multiple roles in their everyday activities often without even recognising this themselves, Goggin proposes that the nature of graphic design might better be considered as being located "everywhere and nowhere" rather than within defined boundaries.

This slightly ambiguous position, a distinctly in-between discipline that is both everywhere and nowhere, is to our benefit, allowing graphic design to talk without boundaries to a wider audience, while also enabling us to infiltrate and use the systems of other disciplines when desired and where

The idea of such a radically undefined conception of graphic design is appealing in some ways. It would certainly do away with the need to constantly struggle against imposed boundaries wherever they are encountered. The pragmatic ability of such a “spectral” defining conception to function helpfully for designers as they go about their everyday business is however somewhat questionable. The conversation explaining to a stranger what one does is already awkward enough for graphic designers without removing all concrete anchors to existing disciplinary boundaries.

There may be some value within internal design discourse in encouraging broader trans-disciplinary understandings of the nature of graphic designers’ own activity. However, some essence of what it means to be a graphic designer must be retained. In order for graphic design to continue to exist as a field of activity it must have some boundaries. Defining a field as completely boundary-less functionally collapses the field, rendering the concept meaningless.

If design is understood according to the foundational characteristics of transformation, configuration and critical sensitivity as set out in chapter three however, then it is not difficult to see how the restlessness of design within imposed boundaries can be explained not by a yearning for a fundamentally boundary-less nature, but rather through inbuilt tendencies to always desire to expand those boundaries which currently are thought to exist. As Dilnot writes: “the territory of design – its possibility, the range of its capacities – always exceeds its actualization. Were it not so, design could not exist.”<sup>(83 p.378)</sup>

Wherever design seeks to expand its areas of activity, it transforms and extends its own potentiality. As is discussed above, these transformations can be more or less significant, potentially even constituting an/aesth/ethic simulations of genuine expansion. Therefore, though not every attempt to increase design’s territory will be successful in bringing about a significant change, design’s underlying desire to constantly evolve and expand – of which designer as... phenomena are merely a symptom – can be seen to be a fundamentally ethical characteristic of design.

## 4.4 Direct Action: Design for Good

Direct action is, on the face of it, the most straightforward and easiest to understand strategy commonly applied by designers attempting to practise design ethically. Simply put, it is design *for* good. The thinking behind ethically motivated direct design action is conventional design thinking. The very same creative processes, methods and techniques which are applied by designers day in day out are now put to work not just in order to pay the bills but specifically in service of causes, clients and briefs deemed worthwhile in an ethical, social or political sense.

Designers with strong personally held convictions relating to a certain cause will often undertake such work at a loss, on a pro-bono unpaid basis or at an otherwise reduced rate. However design can of course be used as direct action for good in a fully paid commercial context. Canadian graphic designer and design code of ethics guru David Berman, argues that designers need not quit their jobs, close their commercially oriented studios or work entirely for free in order to use design to directly make a difference for good in the world. As part of his *do good design pledge* he proposes that designers instead make this commitment: “I will spend at least 10 percent of my professional time helping repair the world.”<sup>(85 p.153)</sup>

He clarifies: “Let me be clear: I am *not* asking you to work for free. I am simply asking you to make sure that at least four hours of each professional week is spent on projects that are socially just.”<sup>(85 p.154)</sup> Such suggestions that a portion of a designer’s effort be consciously and routinely set aside for explicitly socially, ethically motivated work are relatively common.

Aside from (typically aspirational) commitments to spending varying percentages of work time focussing on what are identified as good projects, and possible reductions in the amount of money changing hands in relation to these jobs, the nature of the design process largely continues to follow standard models of conventional practice. What sets design-for-good apart from merely good design, is the prominence of an explicitly social, political or ethical *intention* on the part of the designer.

Three broad categories of activity could be proposed in loosely summarising some of the operations of direct design action for good within the fields of visual communication design. Firstly, design can be applied in attempt to solve an identified problem. Secondly, design can be applied to communicate beneficial or positive messages to a public. Thirdly, design can be applied in attempt to create aesthetic effects which directly improve quality of life.

## 4.4.1 Design for Good: Problem Solving

Design is often considered to be a problem solving activity. Graphic design is often called upon in situations where visual communication is considered to be either not working efficiently or operating in a dysfunctional way. A prime example of this would be the infamous “butterfly ballot” used in Palm Beach County, Florida during the United States presidential election in 2000. (Fig 58)

In American presidential elections, there is no single standardised ballot paper. States and individual counties use their own designs. The “butterfly ballot” paper used in Palm Beach was heavily criticised in the wake of the 2000 presidential election after an unexpectedly high number of votes were found to be either spoiled or cast for Reform candidate Pat Buchanan. This gave George W. Bush the edge in the county and contributed to his controversial success in winning the presidency. Election supervisor Theresa LePore who designed the ballot paper in question is reported to have taken the decision to spread the names of presidential candidates across both pages of the ballot so that the type size could be increased in order to help elderly voters read the text.<sup>(86)</sup> Suspicions endure that voters intending to vote for Al Gore were confused by the imperfect alignment of this two page design with the single column of electronic voting buttons running down the centre, and ended up either voting twice and thus spoiling their ballot, or accidentally voting for Buchanan.

Did poor graphic design throw the result of the entire election? Some have gone as far as to claim that these two badly thought through pieces of paper, by potentially handing power to George W. Bush against the democratic will of the people, can be held directly accountable for the U.S.’s invasion of Iraq along with all other political decisions made during that presidential term.<sup>(85 p.9)</sup> In the wake of this controversy – a rare occasion when graphic design comes under public scrutiny in a genuinely significant socio-political context – AIGA focussed their *Design for Democracy* project on developing clear guidelines and examples of best practice to be used in the design of future voting materials across the United States. (Figs 59, 60)

Since 2000 the Design for Democracy project has produced a variety of materials and guidelines for use in elections including working with the *U.S. Election Assistance Commission* to develop national polling place and ballot design guidelines for the 2008 election, and producing a series of *Field Guides to Ensuring Voter Intent* for use by election officials in 2012.<sup>(87)</sup> (Fig 61)

Another example of design being employed for good in the interests of governmental democracy is the UK government’s own website gov.uk, which launched in beta in 2012 as a radical redesign of the existing







- Benefits**  
Includes tax credits, eligibility and appeals
- Births, deaths, marriages and care**  
Parenting, civil partnerships, divorce and Lasting Power of Attorney
- Business and self-employed**  
Tools and guidance for businesses
- Childcare and parenting**  
Includes giving birth, fostering, adopting, benefits for children, childcare and schools
- Citizenship and living in the UK**  
Voting, community participation, life in the UK, international projects
- Crime, justice and the law**  
Legal processes, courts and the police
- Disabled people**  
Includes carers, your rights, benefits and the Equality Act
- Driving and transport**  
Includes vehicle tax, MOT and driving licences
- Education and learning**  
Includes student loans, admissions and apprenticeships
- Employing people**  
Includes pay, contracts and hiring
- Environment and countryside**  
Includes flooding, recycling and wildlife
- Housing and local services**  
Owning or renting and council services

- Money and tax**  
Includes debt and Self Assessment
- Passports, travel and living abroad**  
Includes renewing passports and travel advice by country
- Visas and immigration**  
Visas, asylum and sponsorship
- Working, jobs and pensions**  
Includes holidays and finding a job

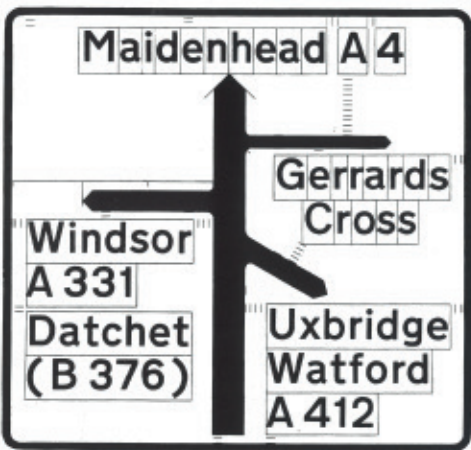
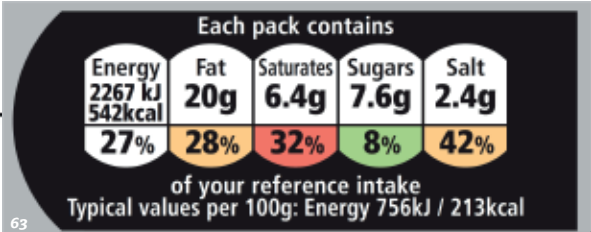


Fig 62: GOV.UK  
Fig 63: UK food nutrition label traffic lights system  
Fig 64: Harry Beck, London Underground Map 1931 (detail)  
Fig 65: Margaret Calvert and Jock Kinneir, Road signage layout diagram  
Fig 66: Erik Spiekermann, Düsseldorf Airport wayfinding system  
Fig 67: Paula Scher, Pentagram, NYC Parks Signage, before  
Fig 68: Paula Scher, Pentagram, NYC Parks Signage, after

online presence of the government. (Fig 62) Previously a range of disconnected websites provided piecemeal, patchy and unreliable access to a limited range of services and information from various government bodies. Gov.uk was created by the newly formed department the *Government Digital Service* (GDS). Acting like designers rather than stuffy government officials, their self-described approach to the project was: “we’re building GOV.UK the way Google build Google and Amazon build Amazon.”<sup>(88)</sup>

The GDS quickly developed a set of ten design principles<sup>(89)</sup> upon which to base the design of a single *digital service* (specifically *not* a website) to address 667 identified needs of users of a government website.<sup>(88)</sup> These principles read more like a manifesto for good digital communication design than a government policy. Crucially these were not merely design principles but design principles for a democratic governmental website. The tenth principle enshrines the democratic principle of openness in the design: “Make things open: it makes things better.”<sup>(89)</sup>

The resulting site, though initially criticised for its bland aesthetic (“like an expired domain page”<sup>(90)</sup>) has generally been a great success, making access to government services and information simple and clear. Gov.uk won the Design Museum Design of the Year Award 2013.<sup>(91)</sup>

Design is quietly used for “good” in many everyday visual communication contexts. The traffic lights system for consistently and clearly displaying nutritional information on the front of food packaging which was launched in the UK in 2013 is an example of another simple design intervention which often goes unappreciated as design, but which provides a useful service to millions of people every day.<sup>(92, 93)</sup> (Fig 63)

Mapmaking and wayfinding materials and signage for public transit systems, on roads, in airports and other busy public places is another important but often overlooked design intervention. Consider the impact which the influence of Harry Beck’s London Underground Map has had on the travelling experience of countless millions around the world since he first devised his graphic representation of the tube network in 1931. (Fig 64) Kinneir and Calvert’s system for UK road signage has had an equally inestimably significant impact. (Fig 65)

Good design can not only make a huge difference to the speed, ease and enjoyment of a traveller’s journey, it can also mean the difference between life and death in case of fire or accident etc. Erik Spiekermann recalls how the primary consideration in his design for the signage in Düsseldorf Airport (Fig 66) was safety, as the context of the commission was in the wake of the 1996 fire which killed sixteen people unable to find their way out of the burning building partly due to badly designed fire exit signage:



The architects wanted the signs “out of the way of the beautiful architecture,” as they put it, which would have repeated the previous mistakes. We had to insist that we were not hired to make the place pretty, but actually make the airport function properly.<sup>(85 p.viii)</sup>

Graphic design can be applied as direct action out of a motivation to improve the lives of others even in the most mundane contexts. The quality of the signage being used in New York City Parks is certainly not a life or death matter. Pentagram Partner Paula Scher, when approached by the NYC parks department to redesign their logo, negotiated with them, agreeing to do the logo and identity work only if they would allow her to redesign all their public park signage.

For years, in the apparent absence of any overall strategy, the NYC Parks department had been erecting a messy uncoordinated mishmash of signs around the entrances to the city’s parks in the attempt to communicate with the public (in 20 different languages depending on the neighbourhood) and cover themselves against any liability for incidents occurring within the parks. (Fig 67) Scher felt strongly that the chaotic mess of these signs was an “eyesore” which detracted from the city and only served to convey negative messages about these public spaces: “here’s clean up after your dog, here are a million don’t do this things, you go to the park and there’s everything that you can’t do.”<sup>(94)</sup>

Her solution was to design a modular system of polymer signage units which could be assembled in different configurations and added to over time to meet the individual needs of each of the city’s parks. (Fig 68) The design offers a smart, unified identity to the parks, tackles the language issue by relying on symbols, and designs out the proliferation of visual mess over time. The parks department employs hundreds of staff to manage over 1700 parks,<sup>(95)</sup> so a key part of the design was creating a system for consistent implementation of the units (Scher estimated it could take up to ten years to roll out the system across all parks). Scher refers to the project as “the nicest present I ever gave New York.”<sup>(94)</sup>

## 4.4.2 Communication for Good: Positive Messages

Another common way in which visual communication design is employed for good, is in attempts to communicate beneficial information and positive messages to the public.

It would be an understatement to say that this is a broad category. Almost all visual materials issued by government bodies, NGOs and socially oriented special interest groups which are produced with an aim to helpfully/usefully inform a public on an issue could potentially fall within this class.

Designs may take the form of explicitly informative or educational interventions. Traditionally, public spaces such as notice-boards in community centres and waiting rooms in doctor's surgeries have been typical homes for posters and pamphlets serving such purposes in the interests of health and social care agendas. The rise of the internet and social media has provided a vast expansion of virtual notice-board space which can accurately target specific demographics or spread virally through user sharing and participation.

The 20 minute illustrated online documentary *The Story of Stuff* released online in 2007 communicates a message about societal and environmental sustainability through its narrative on the bigger picture of the lifecycle of consumer products.<sup>(96)</sup> (Fig 69) The website *Slaveryfootprint.org* launched in 2011 invites visitors to discover issues relating to the realities of modern day slavery by staging an interactive survey to provide a personally tailored answer to the question "How many slaves work for you?"<sup>(97)</sup> (Fig 70)

Contemporary causes make full use of the power of diverse media platforms and participation through social media to promote positive messages. Sport England's 2014 *This Girl Can* campaign to encourage women to overcome fear of judgement – which can be a barrier to participation in sport and exercise – is typical of this contemporary approach, combining a television advert with a multi-platform participative social media element.<sup>(98)</sup> (Fig 71)

The communication of positive messages as direct design action for good is motivated by recognition of pressing social, political and ethical issues, and tends to use whatever tactics promise to be most effective in achieving some progress towards addressing these issues in the real world. In seeking efficiency and maximal impact, by far the most common tactics employed towards these ends are those of advertising and marketing.

As part and parcel of the maximum impact mindset of the advertising communication model, shock techniques have often been employed in the name of good. Children's charity Barnardo's controversial

*Giving Children Back Their Future* campaign (1999-2000) is an infamous example.<sup>(99)</sup> One advert featuring the image of a baby boy in the place of his adult self preparing to inject heroin, was particularly controversial.<sup>(100)</sup> (Fig 72) The adverts sought to communicate a message that child abuse is linked to serious problems in adulthood, and to draw attention to the good work that Barnardo's do in attempting to protect children from such abuse.

The 2006 *It's not happening here, but it is happening now* campaign by Amnesty International sought to highlight the contemporary reality of human-rights abuses by placing images of torture and violence into transparent advertising panels in public space, thus, at first glance, giving the visual impression that the abuse was occurring in that place.<sup>(101)</sup> (Fig 73) Such hard-hitting shock tactics predictably continue to periodically crop up in advertising campaigns with ethical aims. However their use has always been controversial and questions of their appropriateness and effectiveness are contested. Individual instances of "Shockvertising" may be effective in producing some immediate and lasting impacts, but there are suggestions that the overall effect of repeated and sustained exposure to such tactics leads to a lessening of this impact.<sup>(102)</sup>

In recent years it has been possible to observe something of a shift in tone in design for advertising for good, away from strategies relying on negative reactions of fear or disgust and towards more positively framed tactics of emotional empowerment.

The *Cancer we're coming to get you* campaign for Cancer Research UK's Race for Life launched in 2013 offers a good example of this shift. The "fight" against cancer is presented not as a sombre war of attrition, but as an empowering revenge-based vigilante street-fight/dance-off (less Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, more Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* in pink). (Fig 74)

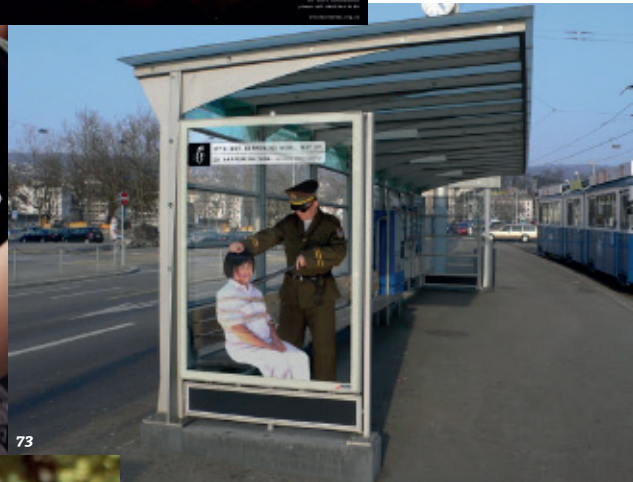
The new brand of advertising for the communication of positive messages relies less on depiction of unpleasant realities and more on creation of an aspirational tone to motivate engagement with issues and action towards change. Strong visuals and uplifting soundtracks are used not so much to construct arguments as to directly implant emotion.

Another notable phenomenon in which design is employed to communicate positive messages is in the expression of emotional solidarity responses to tragedies and disasters.

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on New York, Milton Glaser, designer of the iconic original "I (heart) NY" logo, revised and added to his original design to create a poster reading "I (heart) NY more



Fig 69: The Story of Stuff  
 Fig 70: Slaveryfootprint.org  
 Fig 71: Sport England. 'This Girl Can'  
 Fig 72: Barnardo's 'Giving Children Their Future Back' advert  
 Fig 73: Amnesty International's 'It's not happening here, but it is happening now' campaign  
 Fig 74: Cancer Research, 'Race for Life' advert





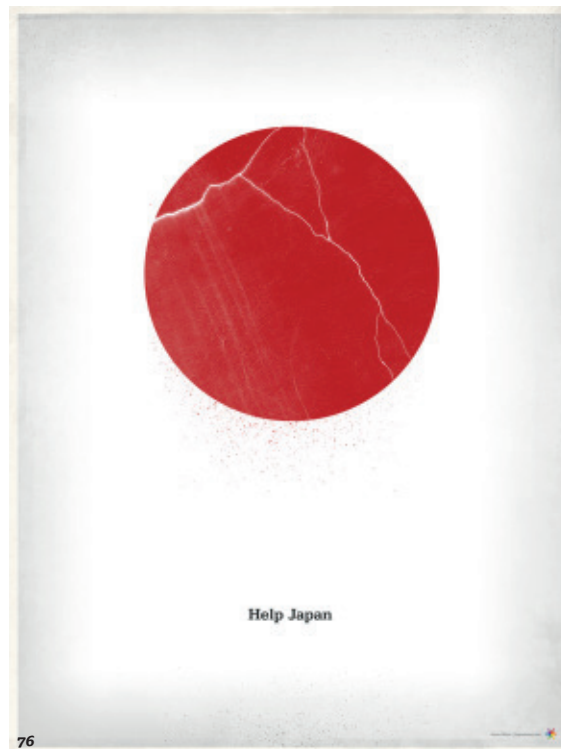
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I ♥ NY  
MORE  
THAN  
EVER

BE GENEROUS. YOUR CITY NEEDS YOU. THIS POSTER IS NOT FOR SALE.

Illustration by Milton Glaser. Photo: © 2011 American Red Cross. All rights reserved. This poster is not for sale.

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Help Japan

Fig 75: Milton Glaser. I Heart NY More than Ever

Fig 76: James White, Signalnoise. Help Japan

Fig 77: Inevitable derivations: Japan More than Ever

77

I ♥ JAPAN  
MORE  
THAN  
EVER  
がんばれ日本!

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Kaya Kato, Junko Shimizu, Patrick Bradley, Austin Power, Hiroki Otsuka, Yoko Furukawa, Lisa Alva,  
Shigeki Suzuki, Kiko Takahashi, Mike Stinner, Tereasa Hughes, Heidi Nakano, Sergio Colares,  
Masa Konomi, Akane Kodori and more

{graphite}



than ever” with the original red heart bruised. (Fig 75) Glaser produced the poster out of a “need to respond to this incomprehensible tragedy.”<sup>(103)</sup> The poster, though distributed freely and explicitly marked as not for sale, has served as a fundraiser for the FDNY. The poster is not primarily intended as a fundraiser however, rather as a symbol of unity, resilience and collective healing for the community of New York. The state of New York initially objected to the “bruising” of the heart, apparently feeling that any recognition of injury might appear as a sign of weakness. Glaser contended that “the first step toward healing is acknowledging that one has been hurt.”<sup>(103)</sup>

Another example of the emotional solidarity response design is the “Help Japan” poster created by Canadian graphic designer James White in response to the Earthquake and subsequent Tsunami which hit Japan in March 2011. (Fig 76) Proceeds from the sale of the poster went to the Canadian Red Cross to fund disaster relief efforts in Japan. Within two days the first print run had sold out raising \$7250.<sup>(104)</sup>

The poster could be said to be “good” both aesthetically (arguably) and in the sense that it raises awareness and money to help the disaster relief effort. However, pausing to consider the operation of the material artefact of the design itself, things are perhaps not as straightforward as they seem. As one online commentator put it:

Let’s say I did buy one of these posters: what on earth am I supposed to *do* with it? Hang it in my living room like some overly aestheticized/sanitized symbol of a blindly horrific natural disaster that I had no direct experience of? Or, worse, as some sick, bragging monument to my own willingness to “help”? To be honest, the only sane thing to do with a poster like this might be to just burn the thing as soon as it arrives in the mail.<sup>(105)</sup>

Kenneth Fitzgerald concisely sums up the uncomfortable questions which arise on the back of such sincere attempts to use design for good in the wake of tragedy: “was the work about the tragedy or about the poster? Was disaster an excuse almost to design a poster?”<sup>(106)</sup>

Design can communicate information and inspire and stimulate emotional responses and effects. However the relationship between the good intentions of the designer and the actual implications of the resulting effects on human individuals and society is not a simple one.

### 4.4.3 Beauty for Good: Aesthetic Enhancement

The third strand of the operations of design for good to be briefly examined here is the employment of visual communication design in the attempt to directly improve quality of life by aesthetically enhancing human environments. Of course the vast majority of visual communication design interventions are intended as aesthetic improvements to what already exists either by replacing something with a more beautiful version or by adding new beauty to what already exists. In this sense design of any kind which is deemed to be beautiful in some way, however that might be measured, always has a socially beneficial role to play. Beautiful books, business cards, shop signs, bus tickets, all to a certain extent can be argued to “improve” the human environment at least in a limited aesthetic sense. However, perhaps the most obvious and easily discussed format to serve as an example of overtly intentional design for aesthetic enhancement of the human environment is the mural.

Murals have a strong social, political and ethical heritage, which can be traced throughout the twentieth century; from Northern Ireland’s political murals of the 1970’s, back to the Mexican muralism which developed in the 1920’s becoming popular and controversial in the United States in the 30’s with major commissions such as San Francisco’s Coit Tower murals and Diego Rivera’s *Man at the Crossroads* (destroyed before its completion in 1933 due to objections over the inclusion of a portrait of Lenin).

Murals can be employed towards a variety of socially motivated purposes. London’s *Battle of Cable Street* mural (1979-1983) (Fig 79) depicts the 1936 clash between police and groups within the local community who united to block the path of a fascist march led by Oswald Moseley. *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1978-84) (Fig 80) depicts the history of California from the perspective of minorities. *The East Side Gallery* (1989) (Fig 81) in Berlin stands as a memorial for freedom, representing the history of separation, the euphoria of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the hopes of the people of Berlin for the future.

Operating in this traditional sense, murals are interventions in public space which visually communicate stories and narratives. Visual communication techniques can however also be used in less directly narrative ways to bring value to a location simply by intervening in the visual environment.

The uplifting messages of Steven Powers’ vibrant *Love Letters to the City* bring unexpected joy to urban environments. (Fig 78) The *Favela Painting* projects instigated by artists Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn (Haas&Hahn) in Rio de Janeiro since 2005 provide skills training and employment to members of local communities to enable them to use colour and design to provide a public visual representation of the





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Fig 78: Stephen Powers. Love Letters to the City, 2010  
 Fig 79: Battle of Cable Street mural, London, 1983  
 Fig 80: Judith Baca with SPARC. The Great Wall of Los Angeles, 1984  
 Fig 81: East Side Gallery, Berlin, 1990



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Fig 82: Haas&Hahn. Favela Painting Praça Cantão

Fig 83: Dulux Let's Colour advert screenshot

Fig 84: Dulux Let's Colour advert screenshot

Fig 85: The Making of the Dulux Let's Colour Project screenshot

creativity, optimism and vibrant community life which already exists in these favelas, so often written off as hopeless slums. Visual beauty is employed to bring unrecognised social beauty to life. (Fig 82)

Design interventions of aesthetic enhancement can be seen to have potentially ethical, social and political dimensions. While aesthetic enhancement can be employed as a strategy for direct design intervention for good, there is potential for a short circuit to be made in which the *image* of aesthetic enhancement can be employed as a symbolic element in communications which are in fact not primarily direct interventions for good at all.

Paint manufacturer Dulux's *Let's Colour* project was publically launched in 2010 with an extremely well produced television advert showing a time lapse montage in which cheerful volunteers use Dulux paint to bring colour to a variety of previously white/grey public spaces in different countries around the world.<sup>(107)</sup> (Fig 83) The implicit message is that the application of colour (donated by Dulux) brings joy, life, energy and community spirit to these previously sad, dull, decrepit colourless spaces.

The end results look remarkably similar to images of Haas&Hahn's Favela Painting project, however beneath the superficial visual similarities, there are significant differences between the two. Haas&Hahn's projects in the favelas of Rio involved living and working within each community intensively for extended periods of time in order to let the project grow organically and authentically. Local residents were employed and trained as painters. Regular community barbeques became a key element of the project's methodology. The painting of the favelas in bright colours is a reflection of the life and energy already present within these communities.

The Dulux project presents itself as a direct design intervention of aesthetic enhancement charitably donating the vitality of colour to drab lifeless communities. The rainbow array of bold blanket colours being plastered across the surfaces of buildings in sped up time lapse, makes a powerful visual impact within the context of the original film. No doubt Dulux's donation of free paint to communities was generous and appreciated, but one can't help wondering whether the residents of the ornately decorated courtyard in India really would have chosen to paint every single surface in exactly the same flat shade of purple had they been given the choice. (Fig 84)

It is difficult to shake off the impression that the socially motivated community engagement side of the project is a secondary consideration to the primary goal of creating a powerful visual message in order to (literally) paint the Dulux brand in a good light. If viewed critically, the project which so speedily and boldly

transforms spaces by rolling them head to toe in blanket colour, can seem fairly crude and perhaps a little insensitive to the pre-existing characters of the original spaces. Blink and you'll miss it, but a brief shot in a making-of documentary promoting the project actually shows an existing mural being painted over.<sup>(108)</sup> (Fig 85)

The Favela Painting projects use aesthetic enhancement as a direct design intervention in the lives of those living in the spaces in question. Haas&Hahn's design process is undertaken in close collaboration with members of communities to enable that particular community to produce aesthetic enhancements of its own environment in order to communicate a message about itself to the wider world.

The Dulux project uses the image of lives being improved through aesthetic enhancement all across the world, as part of a design strategy to communicate a message. In this sense, the advert itself actually functions not primarily as design for good, but as design which employs the image of design-for-good as a symbolic component of a communication. In part the content of this message is intended to communicate something about the power of colour to improve life. The positive emotional element of this surface level message however does not stand alone but is put to work in support of the more specific underlying message that Dulux paint can bring about this effect. While Dulux representatives may talk a fine talk about the power of colour to improve human quality of life, the underlying aim of a profit seeking paint manufacturer will always be to sell more paint. Wherever design is ostensibly applied as direct action for good within the context of commercial advertising, the commercial interests of the client will inevitably become a factor of significance to the operation of the communication.

Dulux's *Let's Colour* project demonstrates that the use of design as a direct intervention seeking to make a positive difference in the world is not always entirely innocent and purely motivated. The aesthetically produced emotional effects created by the image of the positive impacts of design interventions, can become part of a second level design strategy which puts these warm fuzzy feelings to work in aid of ulterior commercial motives (i.e. selling paint).

It would seem that the motivations of designers for undertaking direct design action for good must necessarily be ethical. It would also seem logically apparent that the content of these visual communications would be ethical in nature. However, questions can be raised as to the ethicality of the operation of these strategies. The design processes used in developing these interventions and the forms which their outputs take, are conventional design processes and forms. As such, it can be questioned whether there really is anything particularly ethical about these design processes and outputs themselves



which would set these actions apart from any other act of design. Is design simply therefore a neutral tool to be used to communicate content provided by a client? Does the ethical value of these design interventions rely entirely then on the ethicality of this content? If this is the case, how are designers to identify and differentiate between good and bad, ethical and unethical content? Are the good intentions and motivations of the designer enough to ensure authentically ethical outcomes for design?

## 4.4.4 Through the Lens: The Ethicality of Design as Direct Action for Good.

Activities of design as direct action for good have been introduced and discussed here as actions which are undertaken by designers out of intentions and motivations to create positive social, political and/or ethical effects in society. It would seem immediately apparent that such strategies, being primarily concerned with social, ethical and political content would therefore be inherently ethical. However, some aspects of the examples discussed above begin to hint that the operations of design within society are in fact much more complex than this simplistic equation (that good intention, plus good content, equals good design) would suggest.

Design which uses conventional methods to intervene on behalf of what are deemed to be good causes, effectively testifies to a belief that design itself is fundamentally neutral. The message content of the design is therefore privileged over concerns of form and process which are considered only as impartial tools to be applied. The ethicality of any given design is therefore almost entirely dependent upon judgements as to the ethical value of the intention of the design.

Design-for-good delineated in this way as design *intended* for good is an almost entirely meaningless concept. The identifying mark of such good design is the presence of either good intention on the part of the designer, or good content provided by the client. Tautologically, good design is in this way defined as design for good. No objective system for the measurement of understanding of “good” at any point on this continuum is provided. As such the whole endeavour falls victim to the perpetual crisis of human moral thinking. The goodness of each individual instance of design can only be assessed according to its own merits within the subjective frame of reference of each individual encountering it. Direct design action for good operates in the absence of any uniquely designerly conception of what good design actually is. The only imperative is that it must be done.

In light of this lack of clarity as to what constitutes ethicality, suggested strategies for designers to pursue good design through pledges to commit a certain percentage of their working week to “socially just” causes (Berman et al.<sup>(85)</sup>) can be seen to be extremely naïve.

If designers are to spend ten percent of their professional time working on worthwhile projects, how are they to identify and qualify these? Perhaps the real issue with such titling systems is that once criteria have been established to identify which projects make this ethical grade, surely then all work falling short of this

mark must be condemned as un-worthy. When only ten percent of your activity is deemed according to your own standards to be socially beneficial, this makes something of a mockery of the whole idea of attempting to “repair the world.”<sup>(85 p.153)</sup>

As the case of the conflicting views of interviewees Robert and Frank demonstrates, (section 2.2) what one designer identifies as a socially beneficial intervention, another may condemn as socially damaging irresponsible behaviour.

In illustration of the complexity of the matter of discerning good from bad within a model of direct design action for good, consider design’s engagement with advertising, a medium which presents itself as an efficient and effective vehicle to be used by design in pursuit of direct action for good.

While Sport England’s *This Girl Can* offers a strong, empowering, positive message calling on women to take control and overcome social pressures to look a certain way while exercising, (Fig 86) the overwhelming tide of advertising continues to present the opposite. The medium proves to be the message.

The system of advertising is neutral to the extent that it has no socio-political bias towards any issue. All that it rewards is success. If *This Girl Can* succeeds in bringing about a shift in perceptions of what it means to look good while exercising, this is one isolated success for that cause. However, the vast majority of advertising surrounding issues of women’s fitness continues to present images of the mythical non-jiggling, non-sweating “perfectly” toned female body. Adverts such as 2015’s controversial Protein World “Are You Beach Body Ready?” poster are all too common, presenting an explicitly sexualised unrealistic image of the female body.<sup>(109)</sup> (Fig 89) However even those fitness related adverts which present themselves as carrying an emancipating message of female fitness/ body image empowerment often still functionally operate to perpetuate and strengthen existing social pressures. Nike’s 2015 “Better for it” campaign by Wieden + Kennedy unveils the inner exercise-related struggles of what are presented as “real” women in an apparent attempt to encourage this population in their efforts. None of the host of slim women featured in the adverts could however be accused of appearing to be unfit. (Fig 87) Another supposedly empowering campaign also by Wieden + Kennedy for Nike from 2005 features individual “real” female body parts accompanied by sassy celebratory texts. Some of the images used however would not look out of place on the cover of a lad’s mag, while the supposedly empowering text appeals to distinctly un-liberatory gender stereotypes: “My butt [...] is my ambassador to those who walk behind me [...] herds skinny women away from the best deals at clothing sales.” (Fig 88)

Conventional, tried and tested aesthetic techniques which are known to produce certain effects and impacts on the viewer operate in these examples in distinctly an/aesth/ethic capacities. On the surface they tell one story, while simultaneously numbing and obscuring other ulterior motives.

These adverts employ established design techniques in attempt to achieve certain goals in society. The same methods used in service of what might be judged to be a worthwhile socially beneficial goal, can just as easily be employed to create equally effective impacts in aid of causes which some might feel quite uncomfortable with. There can be no criticism of the methods and processes used towards one end without equally criticising all uses of such techniques. Selective criticisms of the intentions of certain designs must therefore be pitched at the level of content and intention only.

In the same way, those apparently good problem solving projects improving the clarity of public communications discussed earlier (section 4.4.1) – ballot papers, airport signage, nutrition labelling – may each individually be deemed to be good, but there is nothing inherent in the neutrally conceived design process which guarantees that the outcomes of these projects will be good. The same design techniques used for these noble aims could just as easily be applied towards what are judged to be bad, or evil ends.

Design for good often subconsciously imagines the methods and techniques of design to be neutral, romantically assuming that this neutrality means that the good will win in the end. The value of the content of the message being communicated, is in this way privileged over matters of *how* the message is being communicated. The uncritical common conception is that design's role in design for direct action towards good is simply to provide an efficient vehicle for the message. Very little critical thought is applied to the effects which the form provided by design for this content might have on the message.

In the introductory essay to the book *Conscientious Objectives: Designing for an Ethical Message*, Steven Heller presents exactly this uncritical attitude:

But in the final analysis, ethically responsible design is only as good as the message it projects or the information it conveys. If the message is bad then the design has no value; if the design is bad, the message suffers. So design must enhance, and good responsible design makes people think, question, learn and act.<sup>(110 p.17)</sup>

Such a perspective, by privileging message content over designed form, simultaneously both over- and under-estimates the power of design.

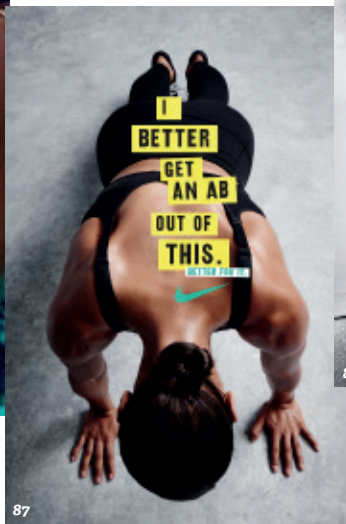
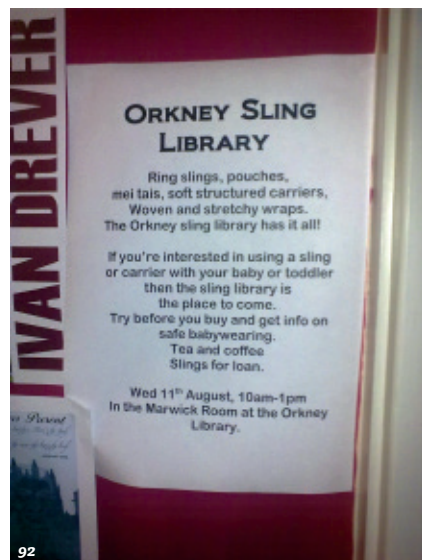


Fig 86: Sport England. This Girl Can: Brrrrring it on. 2014  
 Fig 87: Wieden+Kennedy. Nike Women "Better for it". 2014  
 Fig 88: Wieden+Kennedy. Nike Women "My Butt". 2005  
 Fig 89: Protein World. Are you Beach Body Ready? advert. 2015  
 Fig 90: Window graphic responding to Protein World controversy, Central Baptist Church, Edinburgh. 2015  
 Fig 91: Young Hampsters Nice Colours In Stock. Lothian Road, Edinburgh 2014  
 Fig 92: Orkney Sling Library. The Reel, Kirkwall. 2010  
 Fig 93: National Front flyer. Aberdeen. 2011  
 Fig 94: Slimfreeze UK. Lothian Road, Edinburgh. 2015





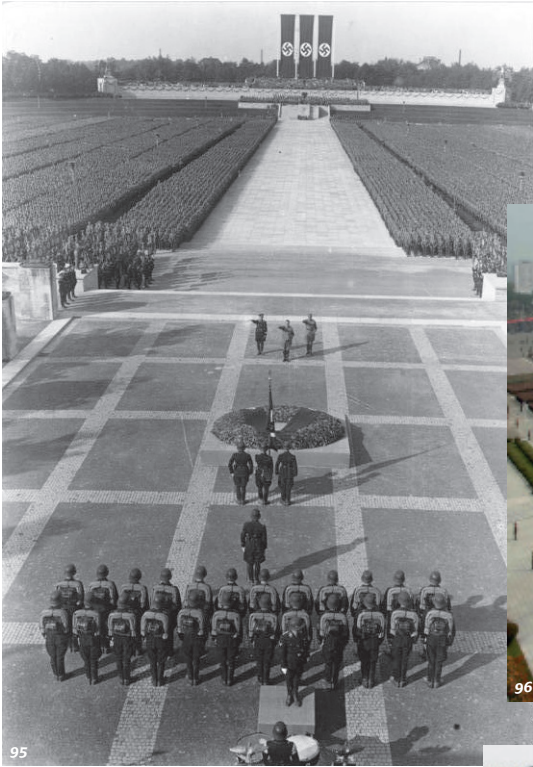


Fig 95: Nazi pageantry, Nuremberg Rally, 1934



Fig 96: Military Parade, North Korea



Fig 97: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL)



Fig 98: Ken Garland. Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament banners outside Windsor Castle, 1963

In suggesting that communication of a message can directly suffer due to poor design, it overestimates the power of design by indirectly implying that bad design equates to bad communication. Of course graphic designers like to believe that their work can improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of visual communication, and there are certainly times when visual communication is a matter of life and death: think of Erik Spiekermann's example of the failure of signage during the 1996 Dusseldorf airport fire, or the importance of clear labelling on medicine packaging. However the vast majority of visual communication going on in the world happens without any involvement from professionals. It may at times be messy, ugly and inefficient, but somehow society keeps ticking over. Obviously poorly thought through design can cause misunderstanding, misinformation, and confusion. However the harsh reality which professional design would perhaps prefer not confront is that, the vast majority of the time, so called "badly designed" communication works just fine.

A hand-scrawled poster placed on the pavement outside a local pet shop declaring "Young Hampsters Nice Colours in Stock" (Fig 91) is unlikely to win any awards either for design or spelling. Yet this poster gets the message across. It is difficult to imagine in this context that any amount of beautiful typography would lead to drastically increased rodent sales. In fact, in the image saturated urban environment, this sparse scrawl actually stands out from the crowd.

Comparing examples of technically "bad" amateur design it is clear to see that the matter of ethical value judgements in relation to message content is not in any way connected to the technical quality of design. Only those vehemently opposed to "safe-babywearing" could object to the message and aims of a poster for the *Orkney Sling Library* found posted on the notice board of a café in Kirkwall. (Fig 92) Only those opposed to principles of racial and religious tolerance could fail to object to the message of a National Front flyer posted through my letterbox. (Fig 93) Both are amateur designs with few technical design merits. Neither message should be accepted or rejected on grounds of the quality of the design alone.

Design appears to be relatively weak in this sense then. Its power should not be overestimated in making a case for the importance of design to the communication of ethical messages. However it would equally be a mistake to underestimate the role which design can play in this communication.

Whether amateur or professional, technically poor or excellent, design plays a significant role in the mediation of social communication. Design through its inherent an/aesth/ethic capacities is capable both of numbing and returning sensation in relation to ethical issues. It is perhaps easiest to identify an/aesth/ethics at work through aestheticisation as is visible in the Nike women's fitness adverts referred to earlier



which, while preaching one message, use aesthetics to subtly promote certain other conditions as natural. In the case of the Protein World beach body advert, this an/aestheticisation strategy backfired, opening up debate on acceptable assertions of ideal body image, as viewers found the visual rhetoric of the hyper-aestheticised image of the skinny model offensive.

Interestingly, considering this possibility of the viewer's rejection of overt aestheticisation, it is possible to speculate that the anti-aesthetic aesthetic of poor amateur design may be just as effective in an/aesthetising as the strategies of full blown hyper-aestheticisation. A technically badly designed poster outside a local beauty salon (Fig 94) may get away with employing almost exactly the same visual rhetoric as the controversial Protein world advert. Poor design may effectively assist the potentially offensive content of such cases in slipping beneath the public's increasingly sensitive aesthetic awarenesses. While our guards may be raised to potential manipulations of the psyche by professional design, we may allow uglier amateur Trojan horses to slip by unnoticed.

On this matter Max Bruinsma was in fact partially correct when he asserted – as he is quoted in the introduction to chapter one this thesis (section 1.1) as saying – that “there is not an intrinsic link between the craft of design and content.”<sup>(111)</sup> Excellent design can be put to work in service of what are seen to be evil ends, just as poor design can serve noble causes, and vice versa. It is however precisely this lack of any intrinsic link between the technical excellence of design and conceptions of the value of a message's ethical content which makes design such a potentially extremely powerful social, political and ethical force.

It is precisely *because* they are not directly linked to values of message content, that the methods and techniques of the craft of design can apparently be applied with equal force and effectiveness towards *any* end. This apparently innocuous observation holds truly terrifying consequences. For evidence of the significance of these we need look no further than the history of twentieth century totalitarianism. The most potent historical example of this application of technically excellent and supremely effective design towards what are now judged to be “evil” socio-political ends must be the total design of the Nazi Third Reich. (Fig 95) Ironically considering the naivety of his statement quoted earlier here, Steven Heller's own book *Iron Fists* catalogues examples of the chillingly effective graphics of not only Hitler's Nazi Germany but also Mussolini's Italy, Lenin and Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China.<sup>(112)</sup>

If tempted to brush off these uses of design as historical quirks which have long lost their power over contemporary man, one need only think of the vast spectacles which continue to be employed in North Korea, (Fig 96) or the chillingly effective visual communication methods used by terrorist groups such as ISIS

to vastly amplify their influence throughout the world. (Fig 97) Indeed, some might even identify Western consumer capitalism as a totalitarian system which exerts its power through design – not by the will of a dictator or party but through its cold internal systematic logic – controlling, shaping and subduing society through the ubiquitous inescapable spectacle of commodity abundance.<sup>ii</sup>

The common received wisdom summarised by Heller's statement that "ethically responsible design is only as good as the message it projects or the information it conveys" effectively suggests that a design has ethical value only if the message being communicated can be deemed to be ethically good. Such thinking confuses the issue of responsibility by subsuming value judgements relating to form within value judgements relating to message content. This makes the former subject to the latter and therefore creates the impression that responsibility lies with the author of the message, not the designer of the form.

During the 1960's, British designer Ken Garland (author of the original First Things First manifesto) worked on various projects for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). In 1963 he designed a series of simple black banners which could be cheaply produced by the various branches of the CND to bring on a protest march from Aldermaston to London. (Fig 98) Garland recounts how the banners were generally seen to be a tremendous success, bringing a unity and power to the march: the impression of an invading army or revolution taking place. Reflecting later on the design however, Garland became quite uncomfortable with this success and the way it had been achieved:

I, was not happy. Because I thought that what was wrong with them was that they were too successful. We had these banners arrayed all along Piccadilly the big road we walked along and Trafalgar square where we demonstrated. And they looked great.

They reminded me very unpleasantly of the Nazi banners you know those long dangly things with the white circle and the black swastika. [...] I decided it was not a good idea to have lots and lots and lots and lots of identical things. So I persuaded them never to do this again, and they never did it again.<sup>(115)</sup>

The processes, methods and techniques of design can create powerful effects in society. Garland's insight however, is that these effects can be put to use in support of vastly differing causes. The effect produced by the CND banners was largely the same as that produced by Nazi pageantry. If the same design process could be used equally effectively for both, Garland wanted nothing to do with it.

ii See Guy Debord's account of the shift from concentrated, to diffuse, to integrated spectacles: (113 , 114)

Garland recognised that designing for raw impact and effectiveness alone would not satisfy his criteria for ethical design. His discomfort arose from a deeply felt notion, to the contrary of Heller's statement, that authentically ethically responsible design must consist of something *more* than merely the content of the message it conveys. The processes of design generate vehicles which not only convey but also mediate, shape and change content. As such these processes and the mediating forms which they create, must also be considered as integral forces in the question of the ethicality of design. Here lies the blurred boundary between individual acts of design-for-good, and the beginnings of practices of design activism.

It seems apparent that while it may be entirely possible for direct strategies of design-for-good to produce ethical outcomes, such strategies supply no coherent or consistent ways of critically considering the nature of the supposed ethicality of their own activity. The status of this approach as a potential strategy for ethical design must be brought into question in light of examples which demonstrate that exactly the same methods can be used equally effectively by different groups with entirely different and opposing agendas.

The an/aesth/ethic capacity of this neutrally conceived design is considerable. The most obvious example of this, touched upon earlier within the context of aesthetic enhancement, is that of the comparison of Haas&Hahn's favela painting projects and the Dulux Let's Colour campaign. Haas&Hahn's immersive methodology draws out and reflects the authentic character of stigmatised places and their inhabitants in its design interventions within those locations. In this way the design's aesthetic qualities enhance authentically existing characteristics, increasing sensitivity to these. Dulux's superficial project on the other hand employs design to fabricate a spectacular aesthetic gloss which numbs and decreases sensitivity to authentic ethical issues skilfully substituting an emotional sensation for meaningful ethical engagement.

In terms of engagement with potentiality, individual design actions may well extend potentiality within their unique circumstances. Campaigns like This Girl Can offer an alternative social narrative to that constantly presented by the majority of advertising. Paula Scher's NYC Parks signage system, merely by altering the visual impression of the gateway to a neighbourhood park, might have a subtle but powerful effect within that neighbourhood, inspiring feelings of civic pride within local inhabitants and encouraging increased use of the public space which might in turn lead to increases in community spirit, decreases in vandalism, graffiti, littering and street crime. Stephen Powers' murals transform grim urban environments into vibrant, ambiguous, thought provoking spaces. Small design interventions, by extending potentiality in small ways, can lead to significant change.

Such extensions of potentiality may come about through the presence of aesthetic sensitivity leading to

an authentic encounter with singularity and subsequent negotiation with incommensurability. This brings about the transformation of potentiality. Certainly therefore in this dimension individual instances of design-for-good can be seen to be authentically ethical. However, the question of whether direct design action for good constitutes an ethical strategy for design practice is an entirely different matter.

While an individual design may negotiate with incommensurability in the singularity of a situation and thereby extend potentiality in a significant and meaningful way, the processes of design as direct action for good do not constitute coherent purposeful unified ethical strategies. This is to say that while the outputs of direct design action for good might have ethical effects, the practice, by implicitly claiming neutrality, may in fact be found to be largely unethical.

Design practice which relies upon tried and tested conventional methods, employing these tactically in order to achieve maximum impact within a given situation, fails to engage with the full authentic realm of potentialities for how design could be used not only to solve a perceived problem, but to actually alter and transform the social reality within which that problem is perceived.

Such design practices, therefore fail to constitute inhabitation of an ethical mode of existence within design practice. Existing conventional methods are relied upon as rules. The design process is emptied of potentiality as these rules are followed in pursuit of predictable impacts. Un-focussed exploratory tendencies within design, the moments where potentiality can unexpectedly extend itself in unforeseeable directions, are minimised.

Crucially, an approach of design for good which relies upon an imagined foundation of the neutrality of design's processes, is unethical as it fails to inhabit and take ownership of its own ethical agency. To assume that responsibility for one's own actions lies elsewhere – acting as if responsibility for the communicative content of design work lies solely with the client or author – is to abdicate one's ethical being.

In order to inhabit an ethical mode of existence, the designer must take full responsibility for their own actions, acknowledging the potentially powerful influence which their aesthetic interventions can have upon a message.

In light of this discussion it can clearly be seen that, according to the conception of ethical design set out here in chapter three, strategies of direct design action for good, are not in fact ethical as a category. Individual design acts may be ethical, however the mere intention to undertake design for good does not in any way in itself constitute ethicality.

## 4.5 Design Activism

From subversive ancient graffiti, to the satirical cartoon, to propaganda, to the protest poster, the rich history of visual communication design's active engagement with social, political and ethical issues long predates recognitions of the existence of graphic design as a discipline. In the preceding section, uses of conventional design practices employed as direct action for good were discussed. The focus of this section is on areas of design activity which initially appear to have significant crossover with activities of design-for-good. These are practices of design activism.

These two descriptive terms, design activism and design-for-good, may initially sound like synonyms, merely two ways of discussing the same phenomena. However, this section will argue that, when considered as strategies towards ethical design practice, there are significant differences between the two approaches. The first task of this section then is to set out the case for design activism as a distinct approach towards ethical practice above and beyond the mere application of conventional design methods in support of what are considered to be good causes.

Initial investigations of design work commonly held up as examples of activist practice might suggest some personality traits common to these activities. Tendencies towards focussed, targeted, communication of direct issue-based messages can be broadly seen. Outputs are often cheaply, hurriedly produced, with a sense of immediacy, urgency and earnest concern for the issue at hand. Looking for patterns in areas of content addressed by work commonly referred to as design activism, something of an "anti" theme could be identified: anti-corruption, anti-war, anti-discrimination, anti-oppression etc. Design activist strategies often appear to be to attempt to disrupt common or dominant knowledge or beliefs and/or to inform the target audience of an alternative message. It would also appear that design activism's interventions are often self-initiated, as the designer acts on behalf of a cause rather than a client.

So far, these descriptions could be equally applied to projects of direct design intervention for good as described in the previous section. Where lie the differences between these two? Is it a matter of positivity/negativity: design-for-good being interested in promoting positive messages to improve society, while design activism protests, resists, attacks and attempts to dismantle that which is socially undesirable? Alternatively, does the distinction lie exclusively within internal processes of design practice? Could it be suggested that design-for-good and design activism are two alternative routes, each using different methods of development but both working towards producing outputs which fulfil largely identical

functions in the real-world? Or does the key difference lie in the self-initiated, client-less nature of many design activist interventions? The coming section will argue that though there may be some truth to the proposed differences suggested above, the reality of the nature of design activism is more subtle and complex than this.

Design activism is proposed here as a distinct strand of design activity, which differs significantly from design-for-good. Its attitude is not exclusively negative or anti- anything. It is not exclusively destructive. It can also build up and construct positively. However, its interventions are fundamentally and primarily *disruptive* in nature. Though the material outputs and effects of design activism may superficially appear similar to those of design-for-good, design activist practices are not exclusively concerned with outputs, but equally value design's practices and processes themselves as integral elements of their interventions in society. As to the matter of self-initiation, both design-for-good and design activist interventions can occur with or without the presence of client and payment. The key distinctions which set design activism apart would therefore appear to lie with matters of process and practice rather than in relation to issues of content, output, impact or economics.

## 4.5.1 Defining Design Activism

Several definitions have been offered attempting to capture the essence of design activism, a concept which is widely recognised but understood in many differing ways.<sup>iii</sup> Alastair Fuad-Luke, in his book *Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World* offers this definition:

Design activism is 'design thinking, imagination and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and/or economic change.'<sup>(118 p.27)</sup>

While this description promises to offer the beginnings of a useful criterion by which to identify and measure design activism, Anne Thorpe has questioned its helpfulness in application, noting that Fuad-Luke's own book goes on to appear to contradict the simplicity of his own definition by including "so many diagrams, tables, and lists of the landscape for design activism that the reader is again left feeling that design activism is too varied for a single definition."<sup>(119 p.2)</sup>

Proposing an alternative, Thorpe builds on conceptions of conventional political activism, centring around ideas of key concepts of *protest* and *resistance*, to offer four basic criteria which, she proposes, together define design activism:

- It publicly reveals or frames a problem or challenging issue.
- It makes a contentious claim for change (it calls for change) based on that problem or issue.
- It works on behalf of a neglected, excluded or disadvantaged group.
- It disrupts routine practices, or systems of authority, which gives it the characteristic of being unconventional or unorthodox – outside traditional channels of change.<sup>(119 p.6)</sup>

While this "definition" is considerably more specific in relation to what constitutes activism, it is noticeably lacking in making connections between this politically rooted conception of activism and the specific character and work of *design* activism.

Thomas Markussen suggests that though design activism has much in common with political activism, attempts to understand it should not rely solely on concepts and theories borrowed directly from political

<sup>iii</sup> For an insight into some of these many perspectives on design activism see Guy Julier's 2013 special issue of *Design and Culture Journal*, or proceedings of the 2011 Design History Society "Design Activism and Social Change" conference upon which Julier's special issue is based: (116, 117)



Fig 99: Gargantua. Honoré Daumier

1831



Fig 100: Simplificissimus Poster. Thomas Theodore Heine

1897



Fig 101: Votes for Women. B.M.Boye

1913



Fig 102: "Apres L'Execution" Le Mot 1 no.5. Paul Iribe

1915



Fig 103: "Bas Les Masques?.. Viola!" La Batonnnette no.41. Paul Iribe

1916



Fig 104: Neue Jugend. Malik Verlag

1917



Fig 105: Die Pleite. Malik Verlag

1920



Fig 106: Adolf der Übermensch. John Heartfield

1932



Fig 107: Nie. Tadeus Trepkowski

1953



Fig 108: Aldermaston to London Easter 62. Ken Garland

1962



Fig 109: Black Power/White Power. Tomi Ungerer

1963



Fig 110: End Bad Breath. Seymour Chwast

1967





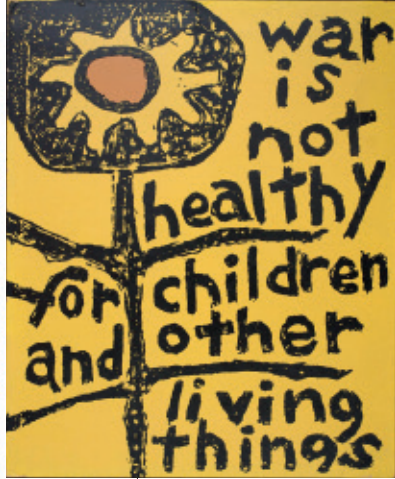


Fig 111: War is Not Healthy for Children and Other Living Things. Lorraine Schneider

1967



Fig 112: The Struggle Goes On. Atelier Populaire

1968



Fig 113: Beauty is in the Street. Atelier Populaire



Fig 114: The Police Speak to You Every Evening at 8. Atelier Populaire



Fig 115: Black Dwarf 13 no.1. Robin Fior (See Fig 145)



Fig 116: And Babies? Art Workers Coalition

1969

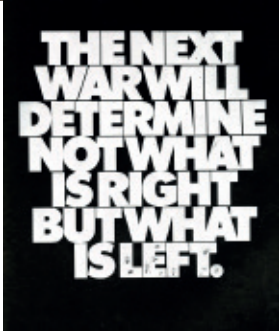


Fig 117: The Next War... Herb Lubalin

1972



Fig 119: Let's Go. Grapus



Fig 118: The Child in the Industrialised Society. Grapus

1976



Fig 121: Northern Carnival Against the Nazis. David King

1978



Fig 122: Apartheid in Practice. David King



Fig 123: "The Fire God Symphony" Dazibao. Huang Xiang (Image Democracy Wall Beijing 1979)



Fig 124: If the unemployed are dole bludgers, What the fuck are the idle rich? Redback Graphix

1979



Fig 125: Touched the Women. Judy Seidman

1981



1983

Fig 126: Truisms, Jenny Holzer



1987

Fig 127: He Kills Me, Gran Fury



1989

Fig 128: New York Crimes, Gran Fury



Fig 129: Kissing Doesn't Kill, Gran Fury

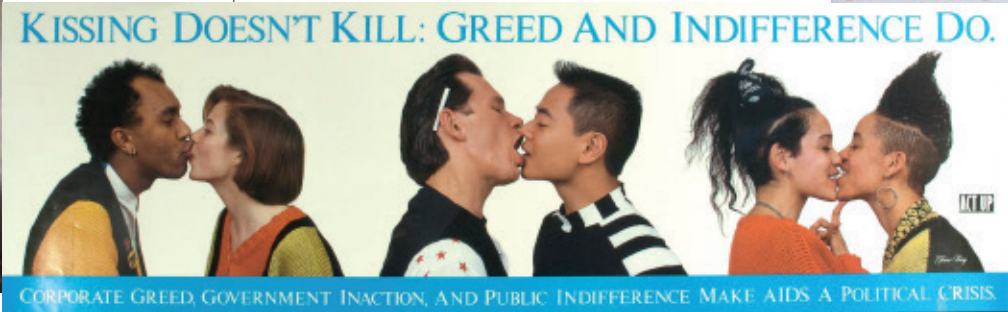


Fig 130: Your Body is a Battleground, Barbara Kruger



1991

Fig 131: Colors Magazine 1, Oliviero Toscani, Tibor Kalman



Fig 132: Celebrating Change, Inkahoots

1994

Fig 133: APEIS Rally, Ne Pas Plier



1996

Fig 134: Joe Chemo, Adbusters



1997

Fig 135: Use a Condom/Bugs, James Victore



1998

Fig 136: Children are the Rhythm of the World, Atelier de Création Graphique





Crackdown on the digital  
of the world

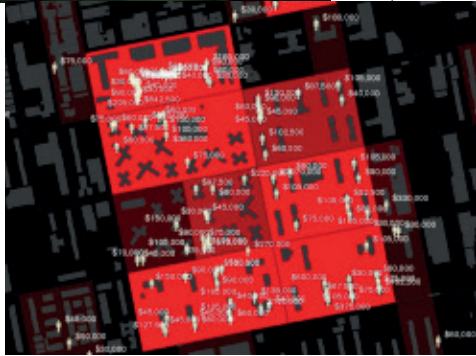


Fig 137: Garbage Problems. Centre for Urban Pedagogy

2002

Fig 138: Million Dollar Blocks. Spatial Information Design Lab

2006

Fig 139: Face Shields. Climate Camp

2007

Fig 140: Everything is OK. MINE, Christopher Simmons

2008

Fig 141: Hope. Shepard Fairey



Fig 142: Hopenhagen. International Advertising Association

2009

Fig 143: Oil & Water do not Mix. Anthony Burrill

2010



Fig 144: Before I Die. Candy Chang

2011



Fig 145: London, Cairo, Rome, Tunis. Deterritorial Support Group (See Fig 115)

Fig 146: Occupied Times of London

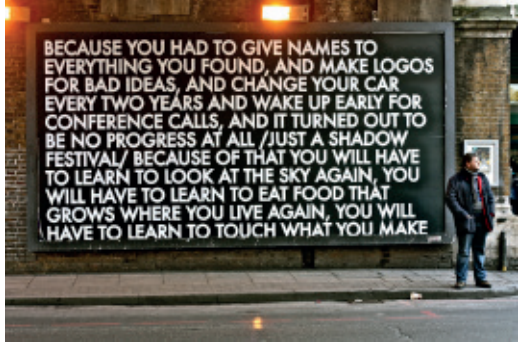


Fig 147: Billboard Poem. Robert Montgomery

2012



Fig 148: Kony 2012: The Worst. Invisible Children



and sociological discourse. As Markussen puts it, the design element of design activism, “that which is truly unique and singular to the *design act*” must not be neglected: “The design act is not a boycott, strike, protest, demonstration, or some other political act; instead, it lends its power of resistance by being precisely a *designerly* way of intervening in people’s lives.”<sup>(120 p.38)</sup>

Markussen points out a lack of clarity in current understandings of design activism as to exactly how it works, why it matters and crucially what differentiates it from its “sister arts” of political and artistic activism.<sup>(120 p.38)</sup> Just as design activism should not be wholly equated with political activism, it should equally not be equated with artistic activism, though it also shares many characteristics with such practices and the borders between the two are often indistinct. Markussen suggests that while many of the techniques and strategies employed may be similar, the designerly perspective has different aims and achieves quite different effects. He maintains that artistic activism continues to be influenced by the projects of historical avant-gardes in seeking cultural revolutions and utopias through the expansion and redefinition of the boundaries of art.<sup>(120 p.39)</sup> Design activism, charts a path somewhere between the political and the artistic, employing aesthetic strategies with more directly immediate political goals in mind. Markussen therefore proposes that “it is precisely in the intimate interweaving between aesthetics and the political that an interesting answer to the activist nature of design activism is to be found.”<sup>(120 p.39)</sup>

Markussen critiques Thorpe’s attempts to categorise instances of design activism according to existing sociological typologies, as this strategy fails to account for the uniquely designerly nature of design activism’s interventions, which in any case resist simple categorisations, often straddling and subverting the neat conceptual tidiness of Thorpe’s scheme.<sup>(120 p.40)</sup>

Returning to Fuad-Luke’s book, Markussen picks up on his identification of disruption as the key feature in design activism, specifically a notion alluded to in the idea of “beautiful strangeness” that the disruption which design activism instigates is of a primarily aesthetic character. However, the aesthetic nature of this disruption is only hinted at in Fuad-Luke’s book, which thereafter focusses largely on the social and political problems, issues and contexts towards which design activism is employed.<sup>(118 p.6)</sup> As a result of this, Markussen concludes that Fuad-Luke’s book “leaves the question of how design activism works on its own conditions unanswered.”<sup>(120 p.41)</sup> Instead it serves to offer a “rich toolbox of techniques and methods that designers can use to engage people [...], but these methods are not tied specifically to design activism.”<sup>(120 p.41)</sup>

Building on the strengths present in both Fuad-Luke and Thorpe’s imperfect definitions, and attempting

to locate design's position between the poles of political and artistic activism, Markussen proposes a conception of design activism based on French philosopher Jacques Rancière's notion of "disruptive aesthetics":

The notion of disruptive aesthetics embraces two key aspects of design activism. On the one hand, design activism has a political potential to disrupt or subvert existing systems of power and working, and consuming. On the other hand, design activism shares an aesthetic potential with art activism in its ability to open up the relation between people's behaviour and emotions – between what they do and what they feel about this doing. In creating this opening, design activism makes the relationship between people's doing and feelings malleable for renegotiation. Understanding how the micro-political and aesthetic aspects come together in design activism (as compared to political activism and art activism) defines the crux of the problem.<sup>(120 p.39)</sup>

Imagining design activism as a practice of disruptive aesthetics in this way frees design to no longer be simply a method or tool to be employed as part of strategies of political activism. This would be the instrumental model of design-for-good. Practices of disruptive aesthetics maintain a political focus but do not approach this according to the conventional model of aggressive competitive political power struggle. The disruptive aesthetics of design activism are at heart radically politically revolutionary in a non-violent, non-power-seeking way. The key to this "unsettling" non-violent political nature is the character of the aesthetic act, which:

introduces new, heterogeneous subjects and objects into the social field of perception. In so doing, the aesthetic act affects people's experience in a certain way: It reorients perceptual space, thereby disrupting socio-culturally entrenched forms of belonging in and inhabiting the everyday world.

<sup>(120 p.44)</sup>

Design activism, according to Markussen's model, does not seek political power through achieving uniform consensus in society. Rather, it subverts such blanket power by foregrounding dissensus, seeking to "disrupt the self-evident ways in which existing systems of power control and dominate certain groups in our society."<sup>(120 p.48)</sup>

Markussen's use of Rancière's idea of disruptive aesthetics provides a way of reconciling the political and aesthetic aspects of design activism without losing anything of the unique designerly nature of such practices. Considering examples of design which might be proposed as instances of design activism, this

account of disruptive aesthetics does appear to have some merit in helping to clarify the differences between straightforward design-for-good and practices of design activism.

The poster as a format is perhaps the archetypal form of graphic design activism. Quickly and cheaply reproduced and distributed, it is ideally suited to the widespread transmission of messages in public space.

For many, the first thought conjured by any mention of socio-politically oriented posters, will be the image of the historical propaganda poster. Heroic figures, block colours, bold emotive slogans. However, while such images are certainly oriented towards bringing about socio-political change by aiming to inspire direct action, they do not merely by merit of this alone constitute instances of design activism.

The crucial difference between propaganda and authentic design activism is the issue of the orientation of these visual interventions in relation to power. The propaganda poster, certainly in its more blunt historical forms, seeks to use design to convince and persuade the viewer towards a position of consensus in which all will be in agreement and against which none can argue. In pursuing these strategies of persuasion and manipulation through visual rhetoric, it follows the models, methods and techniques of conventional design.

Authentic design activism on the other hand steps beyond conventional rhetoric based modes of practice which seek to establish consensus, instead aiming purposefully to disrupt existing consensus: “disrupting socio-culturally entrenched forms of belonging in and inhabiting the everyday world.”<sup>(120 p.44)</sup>

Crucially, authentic design activism does not merely disrupt, seeking dissensus for dissensus sake. As Thorpe writes:

In addition to disrupting, activism always reveals, unveils, or frames an issue. In a classic sense, activism often reveals an injustice or wrongdoing, but it may also frame a better alternative—it may be generative.<sup>(119 p.5)</sup>

The aim of design activism’s disruption of entrenched forms is ultimately generative: to unveil possibilities in which things could be different, thereby making action towards these alternatives possible.



## 4.5.2 Activist Practices

Throughout the years the poster format has been consistently employed in many different ways as part of interventions designed to disrupt, unsettle and unseat passive acceptance of such “socio-culturally entrenched” narratives of societal normality. Consider John Heartfield’s photomontage posters challenging dominant fascist ideology. (Fig 106) The Art Workers Coalition’s shocking “And Babies?” poster challenged public perceptions of the Americans as the good-guys in Vietnam. (Fig 116) Robert Montgomery’s billboard poems disrupt commercial selling space offering anti-spectacular alternative narratives. (Fig 147) The multi-ethnic face poster “shields” used by Climate Camp protestors re-imagine the poster as an actively non-violent weapon. (Fig 139) Each of these examples, along with many of the other selected examples featuring in the timeline at the beginning of this section, makes use of conventional visual communication design knowledge and skills to a certain extent, but crucially steps beyond the confines of this professional activity to disrupt and unveil. Through this process it becomes something more socially meaningful and significant.

The posters of the *Atelier Populaire* produced during the civil unrest in Paris in May 1968 offer an informative example of the operation of the disruptive aesthetics of authentic design activism in counterpoint to conventional direct design action. (Figs 112-114)

The *Atelier Populaire* was established in the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris during the events of May 68 as students and staff occupied the building, setting up a workshop to produce visual materials in support of the people’s movement. Hundreds of posters were produced, each being hastily designed and screen-printed by hand typically in a single colour, with bold simple images and hand drawn lettering.

The resulting designs are stylistically crude, yet are full of a raw energy, reflecting the exciting, optimistic, revolutionary atmosphere of the historical moment. The *Atelier* operated as a collective. Authorship of posters was never attributed to any one individual but always to the group as a whole. By general agreement posters produced in this collective spirit by the *Atelier* were to serve only the purposes of the immediate struggle and should never be sold: “to display them in bourgeois places of culture or to consider them as objects of aesthetic interest is to impair both their function and their effect.”<sup>(121)</sup> Hundreds of artists, designers and volunteers with no previous experience of visual communication passed through the workshop each contributing to the collective effort. An informal “school” of sorts teaching the basics of screen-printing was even set up to allow those visiting from outlying areas to set up their own workshops upon returning home. Materials and food for the volunteer “workers” were donated by sympathetic local businesses and individuals.<sup>(122)</sup>

The Atelier Populaire is certainly an interesting historical moment, but how might the value of its work as design activism be measured? During the famous public debate between Wim Crouwel and Jan van Toorn in Amsterdam in 1972, Crouwel casts scorn upon the amateurish visual productions of the Atelier:

Look at Paris 68! The posters they made there are all obvious cases of amateurism; not a single one of them has any value. Not one of them is a good piece of design that really tries to convey an idea. It is all clumsy work that comes across as sweet, pleasant, full of feeling, but not as tough. Good designers could have conveyed the content much more strongly and this could have brought the movement more success.<sup>(123 p.35)</sup>

Crouwel suggests that the tried and tested conventional methods and techniques of expert professional designers might have been more effective in efficiently and accurately communicating the messages of the Paris movement. This may well have been the case; however Crouwel's analysis is fundamentally misplaced.

The goals of the Atelier Populaire were not the same as those of a corporate client wishing to efficiently convey a message to the public. The Atelier Populaire came into existence not primarily out of a motivation to transmit messages to the public, but rather through a desire to find a way to allow the public to communicate with one another.

Crouwel's comments on the Paris posters in the Amsterdam debate come in reaction to Van Toorn's criticism of the failure of the logical systematic design methods advocated by Crouwel to identify in any meaningful way with those they address within socio-political protest contexts. Van Toorn's retort to Crouwel's suggestion that expert designers could have brought success to the Paris movement is as follows:

Why then did those designers fail to contribute? Because they are incapable of giving adequate answers. So all that remains is amateurism. The people in our profession have no answers.<sup>(123 p.36)</sup>

Practices of design activism often appear to develop through a recognition of this insight. While conventional professional methods may be effective in producing certain effects particularly in regards to the transmission of information, they are found wanting in their ability to fulfil other more dynamic socially related purposes. Design activism makes use of established methods and techniques of design where appropriate, but where these are found to be inadequate, it sets out beyond the boundaries of these to establish alternative ways of working.

Dominant models of existing contemporary professional design knowledge tied up with efficiency and

communicative effectiveness through visual rhetoric, had little in common with the spirit or aims of the radically democratic participative people's movement of Paris May 68 and therefore had little to contribute to their cause. The establishment of a collective, democratic, self-organising, peer-to-peer educating, self-replicating "people's workshop" was in itself the most significant act of design activism at work in the Atelier Populaire. The "amateur" posters produced were only one output of this practice of design activism.

A legacy of the design activism of the Atelier Populaire passed down through French design groups such as *Grapus*, *Atelier de Création Graphique*, *Nous Travaillons Ensemble*, and *Ne Pas Plier* among others. These groups developed sophisticated aesthetic graphic languages while, to varying degrees, retaining and developing aspects of cooperative social organisation such as communal authorship and democratic participation.

*Ne pas plier* is a particularly interesting example in terms of design activist practice due to their explicit emphasis on engaged collaborative processes of production, distribution and use of designed artefacts rather than on the artefacts themselves. (Fig 133) Gérard Paris-Clavel of *Ne pas plier* described the group's approach to the operation of objects of design in social reality in this way:

For *Ne pas plier*, an image is not an inert object to be contemplated, nor is it a political tool in itself. Only when inserted into action or struggle does it produce political effects; only when carried by individuals or groups does it come alive, generating meaning in return. The static image, frozen on the wall, is countered by an image that is carried, used, overwritten, et cetera – drawn into a social and human dynamic.<sup>(124 p.101)</sup>

*Ne pas plier*'s strategies of design activism are tied less therefore to the particular aesthetics of a certain image, and more to ensuring that this image operates within society in a way which matches up to its underlying social aims. Accordingly, aspects such as scale and spread of distribution become vital elements within the design: "With ten images you might get into specialised magazines, you might be called an artistic progressive. But with 40,000, you are using a social, person-to-person approach to distribution."<sup>(125)</sup>

*Ne pas plier*'s design activist practice did not stop with the designer. A central element was the involved participation of concerned publics in shaping, distributing and using designed materials within the bigger social picture.

Participation seems to be a key theme in recent contemporary and emerging design activist practices. Projects such as Candy Chang's "Before I die..."<sup>(126)</sup> wall and Christopher Simmons' "Everything is OK"<sup>(127 p.6-7)</sup>

barrier tape are examples of a new breed of design interventions. These essentially are ideas offered to the public to be taken, used and shared in whatever way they wish. Such unfocussed design activism is radically democratic. It suggests a starting point but leaves the rest to the public.

## 4.5.3 Trojan Horses

In concluding this overview of design activism as a strategy towards ethical design practice, a critical analysis of two relatively recent incidents offers warnings as to the potential for design to appear activist in nature while remaining fundamentally conventional in operation. A case such as the International Advertising Association's 2009 "Hopenhagen" campaign at the Cop-15 climate change conference is fairly transparently in-authentic, effectively serving as a thinly veiled corporate greenwashing exercise.<sup>(128)</sup> (Fig 142) However, identifying design activism's Trojan horses is not always such a straightforward task.

Shepard Fairey's 2008 Barack Obama "Hope" poster (Fig 141) might appear to be a prime example of effective design activism. The poster's design was entirely self-initiated by Fairey, being picked up on the back of his popularity as a street artist and serving as part of the grassroots movement in support of Obama during his 2008 presidential candidacy. Quickly becoming an icon symbolising the hopes of Obama's supporters for political change, the poster is supposed to have played a role in inspiring and motivating the public to bring about desired political change by voting for Obama. However, an analysis of the design by Clive Dilnot reminds us that it would be a politically catastrophic error to confuse the aesthetic emotional *sensation* of political change produced by the image, with the actual occurrence of genuine change in the real world.<sup>(129)</sup>

Dilnot calls on Roland Barthes' classic analysis of the fundamentally un-democratic nature of the operation of the political portrait in society. Applying Barthes' assessment to the Fairey poster, Dilnot identifies the same functions of "paternalism", "anti-intellectualism" and the "spiriting away" of true politics found in the electoral portrait at work in the Obama image.<sup>(129 p.10)</sup>

Though the production and distribution of the image give the impression of a radically democratic grassroots activist operation, the message delivered by the visual rhetoric of the image disarms this, turning shared democratic responsibilities into aspirational qualities to be found in what is no longer Barack Obama the man but the Obama *icon*. Dilnot writes that:

For politics as whole, this is baleful – the word is an understatement. That truth and agency are defined not as belonging to the collective singularities of all in their role as citizens, but by displacement only to the instruments and agencies of power institutes in even the most 'democratic' societies a fissure that permanently vitiates their operations. Displacement, we should recall, is the most basic of all ideological operations. *It is the structural evasion of what is the case.*<sup>(129 p.11)</sup>

What “is the case” is that, for all he came to be an icon for, the actually existing version of this symbol of hope and change has (not for want of good intentions or effort, but in actuality) achieved little which would have by its own volition engendered the pre-disbursed political sensations inspired by the image alone.

Quite to the contrary, a generation of enthusiastic socio-politically concerned individuals who wholeheartedly bought into the image have received a reinforcement at a deeply personal emotional level of what Barthes described as the “elitist essence” of the “paternalistic nature of elections.”<sup>(130 p.91)</sup> This is the affirmation that politics is not in fact concerned with the good of all but with the rise and fall of distant aspirational figures. In summary of the case Dilnot diagnoses: “The problem with the political poster therefore is that even while rhetorically evoking the political, it operates to reduce the *capability* to act politically.”<sup>(129 p.10)</sup>

Critically considered then, Fairey’s political portrait, in following the conventional visual-rhetorical format of the political portrait, does not amount to an intervention constituting authentic design activism. The image is focussed on promoting the dominance of one faction (Obama) within the confines of conventional political power struggle. As such it operates much more within the propaganda design-for... tradition than that of the disruptive aesthetics of design activism.

Rather than disrupting the “socio-culturally entrenched forms of belonging in and inhabiting the everyday world”<sup>(120 p.44)</sup> the Fairey poster merely creates an aesthetic effect (perhaps powerful, perhaps effective) which inspires the aesthetic emotional sensation of political change without disrupting anything significantly from the status quo.

A second example of this ability of conventional design methods to disguise themselves as activist interventions is provided by *Invisible Children’s* “Kony 2012” campaign. The half hour long “Kony 2012” video called for action to speed up the capture of International Criminal Court indicted war criminal Joseph Kony, leader of the LRA militant group active in central Africa. At the time, it was the fastest ever online video to reach one hundred million views, achieving this within six days of its publication. Within these first few days, fifty-eight percent of young American adults had become aware of the previously obscure charitable organisation and their campaign to “make Kony famous.”<sup>(131)</sup> Countless non-profit organisations campaigning for years on similar issues could only dream of such levels of exposure.

However, despite all the appearances of having created ex nihilo an engaged grassroots movement armed



with bracelets, t-shirts, posters and social media, the success of Kony 2012 was short-lived. The passion of millions of young people inspired by a slickly designed video and online campaign to “stop at nothing” on their path to “shaping human history” somehow failed to translate into physical action in the real world. Invisible Children’s flagship awareness raising event “Cover the Night” was a complete washout as supporters turned out to be somewhat less passionate in person than they were on Facebook.<sup>(132)</sup>

Just as in Dilnot’s Barthesian analysis of the operation of the political poster, in this case it is possible to consider how the powerfully designed rhetorical evocation of ideas of empowerment, participation and involvement so effectively produced by the Kony 2012 video actually operated to reduce capabilities to act when it came down to it. The sensation of being a part of a triumphant, powerful, emancipatory, world-changing movement had already been pre-dispensed by watching the video, wearing the wrist band and sending a tweet. The design of the campaign, so successful from the moment the video starts to play in immediately inspiring aesthetic sensations of active involvement in a world-changing participatory movement, with the same stroke cut short the hunger to actively participate further.

To recall Jan van Toorn’s argument against professionally perfect protest graphics, perhaps the perfection of this professional design in aid of an activist cause made the critical error of failing to identify with those it addressed. An invitation to participate does not in itself transform conventional design into activist practice.

## 4.5.4 Through the Lens: The Ethicality of Design Activism

This section has proposed an understanding of design activism which centres not on the outputs of design, but on processes and practices of design. The key element to the nature of these design activist practices is the notion of disruptive aesthetics: that authentic design activism disrupts entrenched perceptions of social realities and simultaneously in doing so generatively unveils alternatives. Practices of design activism authentically identify and connect with the publics to whom they are addressed. Professional design-for-good/protest/activism is criticised as failing in this regard.

Design activism often involves levels of public engagement and participation although the presence or appearance of this does not in itself constitute authentic design activist practice. Design can outwardly appear and present itself as activism while remaining firmly within conventional design-for... models of operation. Cases such as Hopenhagen, Fairey's Hope poster, and Kony 2012 all produce the aesthetic impression of activism while neither disrupting existing entrenched social realities, nor unveiling alternatives to these in any significant ways.

Though the material outputs and effects of design activism may superficially appear similar to those of instrumental strategies of direct design action aimed at the good of society, environment, politics etc. design activist practices are not solely concerned with outputs, but equally value design's practices and processes themselves as integral elements of design's interventions in society. Key recurring themes within design activist practice such as protest, resistance, aesthetic disruption, and the unveiling of alternatives, are not simply produced, but are rather *enacted* through the design process.

In this way, in comparison with design-for-good which relies upon intention, design activism can be seen to fundamentally consist in a deeper more foundational attitude. Rather than a temporary position taken up in relation to the immediate goals of individual projects, authentic design activism, as conceptualised here, is a consistent enduring orientation assumed throughout a designer's practice. Design activism can be seen to be not merely an activity but actually, to a certain extent, a way of being within design: a mode of existence. In investigating the ethicality of design activism in light of the way of thinking about ethical design set out in chapter three here, this is a promising start. What remains to be ascertained is the extent to which the nature of design activism as this way of being within design practice can be considered to be foundationally ethical.

In short, where design activism proceeds in the ideal sense set out here through practices of disruptive aesthetics, design activism can be seen to be a foundationally ethical domain of practice. By bringing into being specifically aesthetic disruptions of what is uncritically accepted as existing reality, and then also unveiling alternatives, authentic design activism by definition extends potentiality through a process of demanding aesthetically sensitive responses from the subject encountering the singularity of the aesthetic disruption of the design activist intervention.

The only “rule” which design activism follows is that that which exists should be disrupted, brought into question, and shown to be alterable. The use of aesthetic methods to bring about this generative disruption and unveiling, demands a degree of individual aesthetic sensitivity from the viewer. This exploratory interactive dimension increases possibilities for genuine engagement with issues rather than simple acceptance of presented forms.

At an individual level design activists are likely to be deeply committed to their chosen causes, however design activist practice in a generic sense is entirely ambivalent towards the moral value of this or that project. It is quite possible and not at all contradictory then, for multiple design activists to be operating around a single issue with differing or completely opposing agendas. The moral beliefs and goals of these designers may conflict, however their diverse attempts to bring into being aesthetic disruptions which unveil alternative possibilities concerning the issue in question are all equally ethical in nature. In fact from an authentically ethical perspective, the presence of multiple conflicting aesthetic disruptions which publically stage dissensus by bringing to light apparently irreconcilable conflicts and divisions, can only be seen as a desirable thing. Foregrounding dissensus rather than consensus and thus unveiling possibilities for a multiplicity of different potential future directions, extends potentiality down all these possible paths. Design activist practice in this ideal sense can therefore be seen to be deeply ethical.

However, a key concern flagged up in earlier discussion of design activism is the potential for design to outwardly appear and present itself as activism while remaining firmly within conventional design-for... models of operation. Cases such as Hopenhagen, Shepard Fairey’s Hope poster, and Kony 2012 all produce the aesthetic impression of activism while neither disrupting existing entrenched social realities, nor unveiling alternatives to criticised realities in any significant ways.

Though in an ideal sense, authentic practices of design activism may be foundationally ethical, the ethical potential of disruptive aesthetics can easily slip into the unethicity of an/aesth/ethics.

The case of Hopenhagen demonstrates how design can be used as a tool to co-opt and re-purpose the image and aesthetic sensation of activism. Design was used to create the appearance of environmental activism in order to stimulate predictable warm fuzzy positive emotional responses in the hope that these positive feelings would transfer to the corporate sponsors of the campaign. By creating an aesthetic spectacle which provides the aesthetic sensation of ethicality which would naturally be created through engagement with activism, design is capable of an/aesth/ethically suppressing engagement with authentic activism.

In a similar way, in a critical analysis it is possible to argue that Shepard Fairey's Hope poster for Barack Obama's 2008 presidential election campaign, rather than opening up spaces of potentiality within democratic politics, actually operated in some capacity to suppress these potentialities. By pre-disbursing the aesthetic sensation of political progress the poster created an an/aesth/ethic effect suppressing sensitivity within individual citizens to the ever-present need to play an active role in the continuous re-construction of democratic society.

By relying upon the existing, conventional, culturally understood and predictably received visual rhetoric of the propaganda poster, Fairey's design act fails to constitute an authentic aesthetically disruptive activist intervention. Instead it functions at least partially as an an/aesth/ethic, desensitising citizens to potentialities available to them as they place their hopes for democratic progress in a fallible man rather than in themselves.

Again in the case of Kony 2012 the same an/aesth/ethic principle can be seen at work. While various reasons could be speculated upon as to why the physical participation element of Kony 2012 turned out to be such a damp squib, in this mix it is certainly possible to observe the workings of an/aestheticisation. Just as in Dilnot's analysis of the operation of the political poster, in this case it is possible to consider how the powerfully designed rhetorical evocation of ideas of empowerment, participation and involvement so effectively produced by the Kony 2012 video actually operated to reduce capabilities to act when it came down to it.

The aesthetic experience of the sensation of being a part of a triumphant, powerful, emancipatory, world-changing movement had already been pre-dispensed by watching the video, wearing the wrist band and sending a tweet. The design of the campaign, so successful from the moment the video starts to play in immediately inspiring aesthetic sensations of active world changing participatory involvement, also anaesthetises with the same stroke, cutting short the hunger to actively participate further.

The apparent catch-22 here of course is that the better the aesthetics of the design in captivating, drawing in and involving the individual, the greater the potential for an/aestheticisation. It is extremely unlikely that Kony 2012 would have been such a success had their video not been so well designed and produced. Yet perhaps the campaign might have enjoyed longer lasting and more meaningful impact had it offered a less polished, less completely aestheticised experience, instead of negating its own itch with its simultaneous scratch.

This question of an/aestheticisation – of the simultaneously anaesthetising potential of the aesthetic – is one which designers seeking to be truly ethical in their work must address. Failure to do so leaves the keen but naïve designer open to the possibilities of applying their considerable skill and expertise towards projects which display a surface of ethicality but which may in fact effectively serve to suppress ethical potentials as the above examples demonstrate. In the worst of these cases good design can become an unconsciously deceptive veneer legitimating ideological positions or behaviour patterns which the designer would never have set out to support.

In summary, authentic practices of design activism which pursue consistent strategies of disruptive aesthetics in order to unveil alternatives to existing realities – thus transforming and extending potentialities – are fundamentally ethical. However such a picture of activist design practice is no doubt an abstract ideal. Actually existing design activism is likely to be messy, compromised and imperfect. Potentials exist for practices of design activism to be misunderstood, misused and even abused, leading to the creation of an/aesth/ethic effects. However wherever the kernel of this ideal ethical foundation can be found within authentic activist practice, the potential for ethical design exists. The foundational location of design activism can be found within practice and process rather than in designed outputs. As such in a certain sense it may be possible to argue that design activism constitutes some degree of foundationally ethical mode of existence within design practice.

## 4.6 Critical Practices

So far, five observed potential sites of ethics in design have been introduced and discussed in this chapter: the institution of codes of professional design practice; the proclamation of design manifestos; re-imaginings of the designer as...; direct interventions of design-for-good; and practices of design activism. The sixth and final area of activity to be considered in this chapter is proposed here under the banner of critical practices. This category has been left until last partly because perhaps of all the sites considered here it is the most difficult to discuss, and partly (and this forms an integral part of the difficulty in discussing its nature) because this category of critical practices appears to encompass and envelop many activities which could also be seen to fall within the boundaries of the other five strategies.

Attention should immediately be drawn to the conscious pluralisation of critical practices in the titling of this section. While several quite specific conceptualisations of critical design practice exist within design discourse, these each refer to quite specific moments and phenomena. Disciplines of architecture, industrial/product design and graphic design each have their own specific understandings of the term referring to particular moments and movements within those disciplines. Yet even within each of these fields, there is considerable diversity and disagreement as to conceptualisations of critical practice.<sup>(133, 134, 135,</sup>

136, 137)

Contemporary notions of critical practice in architecture find their roots in 1960's "radical design" groups who proposed experimental speculative projects such as Archigram's Walking City, and Superstudio's Continuous Monument. (Figs 149-152) The concept of critical architecture found a less fantastic, more theoretically engaged treatment at the hands of figures such as, Peter Eisenman<sup>(138)</sup> and Michael Hays<sup>(139)</sup> who built on the ideas of critical theorists from Adorno to Derrida to Tafuri, identifying concepts of criticality such as refusal, negation and resistance in design practice.<sup>(134)</sup> However even in identifying the nature of critical architectural practice, the roots of post-criticality were being discovered. Hays wrote in 1984 of a separation between criticality of culture and of form, warning that in the pursuit of autonomy, by reducing itself "to pure form, architecture has disarmed itself from the start, maintaining its purity by acceding to social and political inefficacy."<sup>(139 p.17)</sup>

Critical architecture's resistance to dominant cultural conventions formed part of a critical project aiming towards construction of new more authentic modes of architecture. (Figs 153-155) As George Baird summarised, initial hopes were for "an architecture that would not accept the terms of reality as they

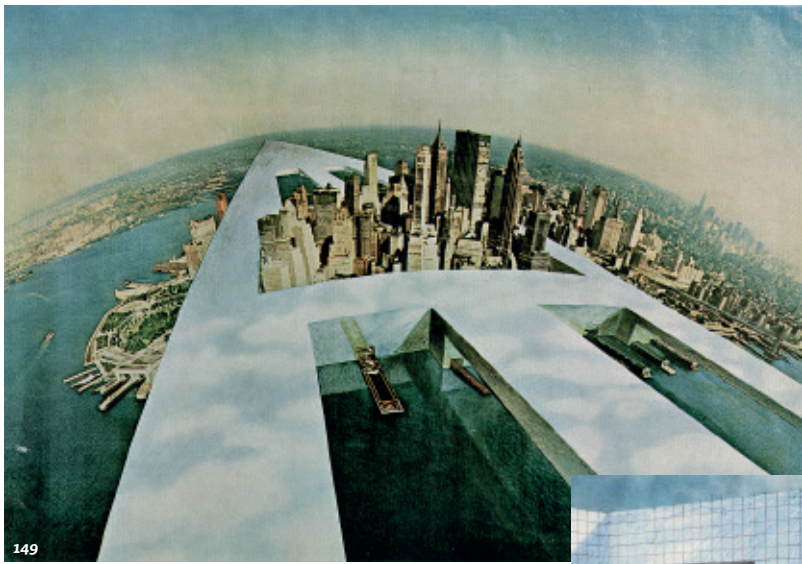


were presented. [...] and would, by inference, transform that entire urban entity itself into something new.”<sup>(134)</sup> However, as such transformative critical projects failed to materialise in the real world, even former champions of criticality such as Eisenman retreated from political, social and economic issues into internal questions of autonomy and pure form. This post-critical architecture, according to observers such as Baird and Reinhold Martin, lacks any “actual, affirmative project” finding its substance not in what it is against, but rather in what it is not against, as, in Martin’s words, a “nonoppositional, nonresistant, nondissenting, and therefore nonutopian form of architectural production.”<sup>(133 p.1)</sup>

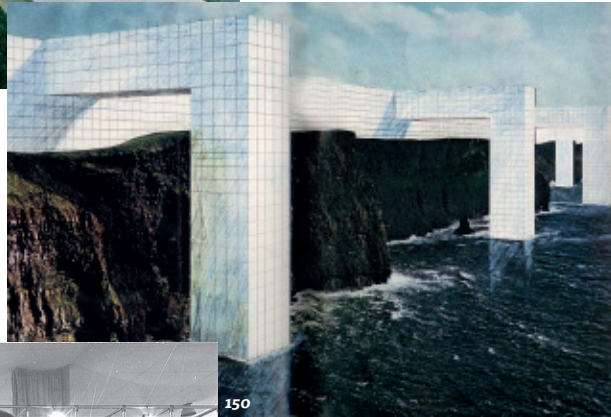
Within the fields of product/industrial design, ideas of critical practice may also be traced back to notions of radical design, anti-design, and conceptual design: from Superstudio’s Continuous Monument tie-in Misura furniture series in the 70’s (Fig 151) to Memphis’ post-modern design in the 80’s (Fig 7) to Droog’s conceptual design in the 90’s. (Fig 156) More recently the term has been associated with (if not monopolised by) the work of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby and the Design Interactions programme at the RCA.<sup>(140)</sup> (Figs 157, 158) This contemporary conceptualisation of critical design is closely tied to notions of speculation, design fictions and diegetic prototypes. The products of such critical speculative practices are not really the material products themselves at all, but the cognitive effects of defamiliarisation, estrangement, reflection, discussion and debate which these provocations stimulate in the minds of the public.<sup>(141)</sup>

While the existence of these precedents of critical practice within other design fields should be acknowledged, this section attempts to take a broader view of criticality within design practices, not relying upon these existing specific usages from architectural or product/industrial design alone, but rather considering whether a larger, deeper striving towards ethical practice can be identified within these moments (and within specifically graphical understandings of critical design, which will be explored) but also within more general notions of critique and criticality within design.

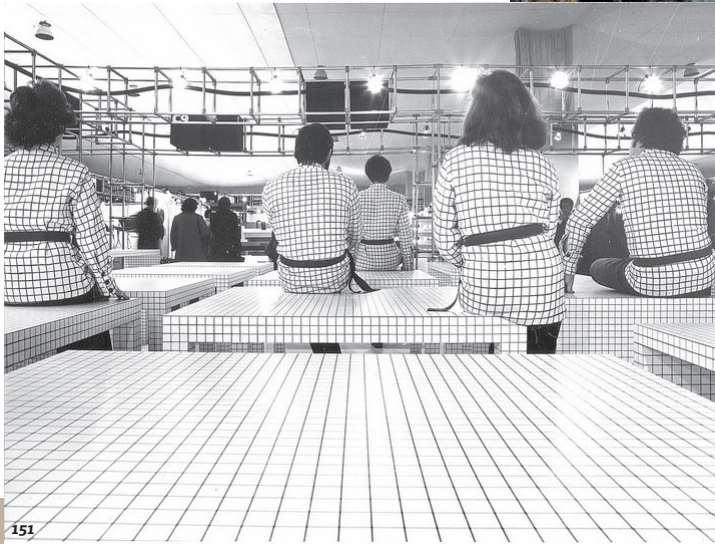
These notions of critique, criticality and the taking of critical positions are central to any understanding of critical practices. The idea of the critical is a concept which is relatively easy to grasp in context and in application. However, though it may be relatively straightforward to understand in an ordinary sense within real-world contexts, criticality is much more difficult to conceive of as an abstract idea outwith these contexts. The critical as experienced in everyday life always appears in relation to some-thing: the object or objects which are being critiqued. Even the post-critical relies upon pre-existing notions of criticality upon which to pin its reactionary non-resistance and therefore its existence. Conceiving of an essential nature of critical practice – criticality as a methodology independent of specific contexts – is not as simple as it



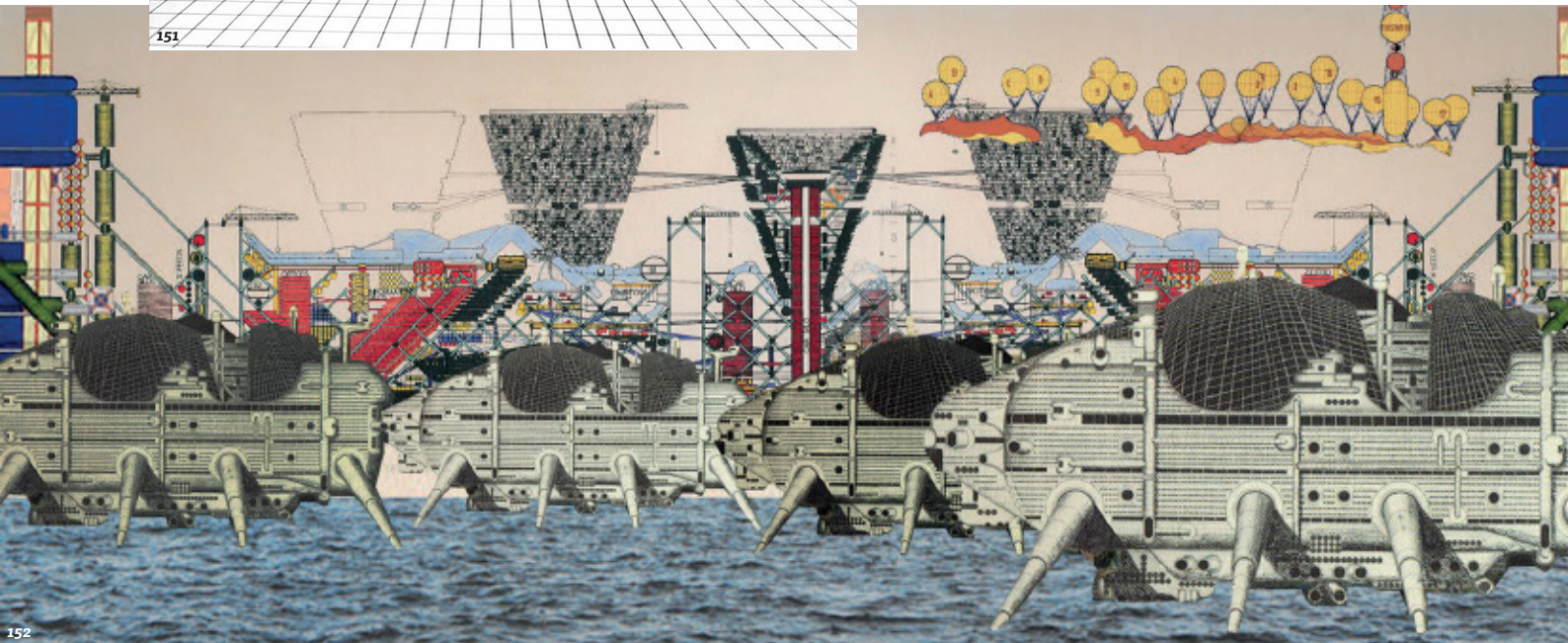
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Fig 149: Superstudio. The Continuous Monument. 1969  
 Fig 150: Superstudio. The Continuous Monument. 1969  
 Fig 151: Superstudio. Misura Furniture. 1970  
 Fig 152: Ron Herron. Archigram. Walking City. 1964



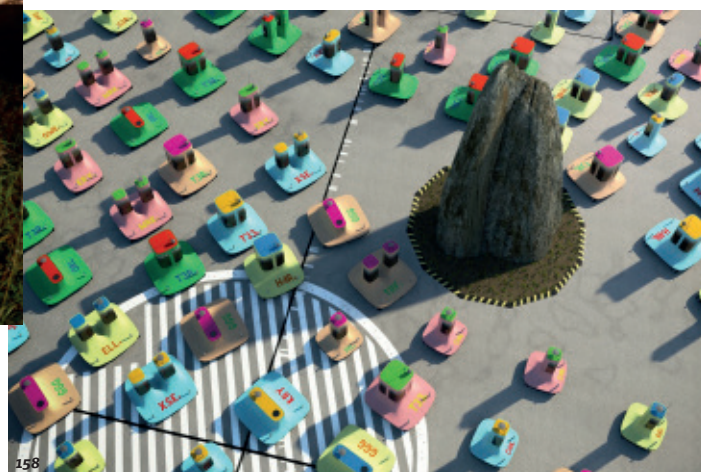


Fig 153: Frank Gehry Nationale-Nederlanden building, Prague. 1996  
 Fig 154: Peter Eisenman, Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. 2004  
 Fig 155: Diller & Scofidio, Blur Building. 2002  
 Fig 156: Droog, Chest of drawers. 1991  
 Fig 157: Dunne and Raby, Foragers. 2009  
 Fig 158: Dunne and Raby, United Micro Kingdoms. 2012/13

might initially appear to be.

Philosopher Judith Butler argues that though the abstraction of critique from its particular contexts would appear to deprive it of meaning, it is in fact possible to conceive of critical practice as an authentic activity in itself, being found in a “stylization of the self”:

The critical practice does not well up from the innate freedom of the soul, but is formed instead in the crucible of a particular exchange between a set of rules or precepts (which are already there) and a stylization of acts (which extends and reformulates that prior set of rules and precepts). This stylization of the self in relation to the rules comes to count as a “practice.”<sup>(142)</sup>

Authentic critical practice is not simply a method to be applied when critique is required, but is rather a holistic way of being which is taken on by the critical practitioner in relation to their work.

Therefore, while many instances of design which might fall within the five sites previously discussed in this chapter could be considered to be critical in terms of acting to stage, present or mount a critique of something, not all of these interventions will have emerged from authentically critical design practices.

However, while critical practices as *practices* exist independently of the specific contexts and objects which are to be critiqued, the actions and interventions brought about by critical practices, in order to be critical, must still be critical *of* something.

In a lecture delivered at the *IASPIS Forum on Design and Critical Practice* seminar in Stockholm in 2008 entitled “Critical of What?” design theorist Ramia Mazé provides a helpful summary of three possible types of criticality which critical practice might entail in design.<sup>(143)</sup> She proposes firstly that critical practice can be self-reflectively oriented towards a designer’s own individual practice. This reflective practice may aid the designer in achieving new understanding of their own work: how it currently operates and how it could potentially change. Mazé identifies the second context for criticality in design at the level of disciplinary discourse, raising questions from within design as to the nature and operation of design as a discipline. Depending on perspective, this can take the form of either constructively building and developing the field, or deconstructing and distributing it. In the first two of these three, design practice – first at a personal level, then as discipline, profession and culture – is itself essentially the object of critique. The final approach to critical practice suggested by Mazé is that design can orient its criticality outwards, towards issues existing within wider society. She summarises:

Criticality within our own personal practice can be seen in how we reflect upon our methods in order to locate our voice and articulate our position; criticality within a community of practice or discipline can be about trying to challenge traditions or paradigms; and criticality can also be targeted towards other issues and ideas outside design altogether. What is common to all is that critical practice is about using what we know, what we have, our skills, our work, to raise, explore and make public a critique. It is about acknowledging that designers have power – and that the powerful visual and material means of design can be used to build a unique form of critique.<sup>(143</sup>

p.396-397)

So far the possibility of the existence of an abstracted notion of critical practice within design has been explored. The remainder of this section is concerned with an exploration of how these abstract practices of criticality may be manifested within real-world visual communication design practice, first by considering specific existing usage of the term “critical graphic design” within the field, then by examining two more specific models of critical practice beyond this: adversarial and dialogical design.

## 4.6.1 Critical Graphic Design

Conscious usage of the term “critical graphic design” as an explicit concept has emerged in graphic design discourse only within the last decade. Typically the term’s public debut is traced back to the 2007 exhibition at the Architectural Association in London: *Forms of Inquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design*.<sup>(137)</sup>

(Fig 159) In the words of curators Zak Kyes and Mark Owens, the exhibition featured:

a loose network of fellow-travellers whose work mobilises graphic design as a specifically critical activity. More specifically, it involves work that is motivated by a shared impulse to reframe the circumstances surrounding contemporary graphic practice by using intuitive modes of investigation to probe the boundaries of the discipline and to explore the mutual exchange and shared lineage between graphic design and architecture.<sup>(144 p.317)</sup>

Since *Forms of Inquiry* launched the term into design’s public consciousness, the idea of critical graphic design as “a thing” has endured, perhaps elusively, marginally and peripherally, but persistently nevertheless.

Despite evidence of persistent faith in the idea from certain quarters, doubts as to the stability and credibility of the concept have been raised. In October 2014 Rick Poyner in his column in *Print* magazine, cast doubt on the continuing existence of the phenomenon, posing the question “Has the term ‘critical graphic design’ run its course?”

the tendency has never seemed adequately debated, never quite real, [...] If something significant for professional practice had been going on—I’m using “professional” in the widest sense—then one would expect to see many articles discussing it in the design press, yet the subject has been greeted largely by indifference. [...] one would struggle to name even five designers who have, since the [Forms of Inquiry] exhibition, proven to be publicly and strongly committed to the rubric and what it might represent.<sup>(145)</sup>

Is there, or was there ever any significant essence, identity, or core of vital foundational substance to this particular idea of critical graphic design?

A peculiarly elusive unity could be identified within the radical diversity of the group of designers connected with the critical graphic design “movement”. Would this emerging “loose network of fellow-travellers” constitute a critical graphic design “movement” or would it perhaps prove rather merely to be an observed “moment”? Itinerant design commentator Nick Currie described his first impressions of the



exhibition in this way: “I felt I was in the presence of a group of friends [...], people who were thinking differently from others in their field, but thinking differently in the same way as each other.”<sup>(144 p.361)</sup>

This network of differently thinking friends certainly appeared to be loose, lacking any immediately obvious coherency. However, two subsequent exhibitions – Ellen Lupton and Andrew Blauvelt’s *Graphic Design Now in Production* at the Walker Art Centre in 2011, (Fig 160) and Jon Sueda’s 2014 *All Possible Futures* at the SOMArts Cultural Centre (Fig 61) – featured many of these same designers. Events such as 2008’s IASPIS Forum of Design and Critical Practice also appear to confirm this core group as practitioners central to the concept.<sup>(144)</sup> This could be taken as evidence of the existence of a cohesive movement within the field. On the other hand it could be interpreted merely as a self-fulfilling prophesy perpetuated by a critical graphic design clique. (Table 8)

Whether or not it constitutes a movement, the repeated exposure of this associated network of “friends” and “fellow-travellers” certainly solidified some idea of the existence of a specific conceptualisation of critical graphic design within the disciplinary discourse.

Although the individual practices and outputs of designers connected to this concept are indeed radically diverse, there are some common themes which can be identified.

Work labelled as critical graphic design is often (although not by any means always) pursued on a non-commercial, self-initiated or speculative basis, rejecting client/service based models of graphic design practice.

With their (un)corporate identity project for the Principality of Sealand,<sup>(146)</sup> (Fig 162) Dutch group Metahaven pioneered a self-initiated mode of speculative working which they have continued across various subsequent projects. They undertake projects for “clients” whose contexts align with their own personal research interests often without being approached by or gaining consent from this client. In terms of self-initiation there would appear to be crossovers here with strategies of design authorship, production and entrepreneurship as discussed in the earlier section on the designer as... (section 4.3). Self-initiated critical graphic design may share many similarities with these strategies. What sets it apart is the presence of a critical perspective.

In being wholly self-initiated, Metahaven’s work could be seen merely as design-authorship, however their in-depth, sustained and theoretically informed “research” approach (“Design as Investigation”<sup>(147 p.16)</sup>) into issues of digital/technological mediation of power and democracy in society adds a distinctly critical

dimension to their work.

Operating from a New York basement as a “Workshop & Occasional Bookstore” Dexter Sinister use cheap printing processes (RISO) to produce small runs of printed material, combining design, editing, and publishing production under one roof.<sup>(68)</sup> (Figs 46, 163) As such their activities would appear to fall firmly within designer-as-producer territory. However, as will be discussed below, in Dexter Sinister’s case production is not taken into the designers’ hands only for its own sake out of a desire for autonomy

### Critical Graphic Design Clique:

Designers featuring in two or more of the following exhibitions

Forms of Inquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design (2007)	Graphic Design Now in Production (2011)	All Possible Futures (2014)
	Åbåke	
	Laurent Benner	
	David Bennewith	
	Peter Bil’ak	
	Sara De Bondt	
	Julia Born	
	Laurenz Brunner	
	Emmet Byrne	
	Catalogtree	
	Sulki and Min	
	Mevis & van Deursen	
	Daniel Eatock	
	Paul Elliman	
	James Goggin (Practise)	
	Urs Hofer	
	Will Holder	
	Experimental Jetset	
	Na Kim	
	Rafael Koch	
(Curator)	Zak Kyes	
	Urs Lehni	
	Jürg Lehni	
	LUST	
	Karel Martens	
	Metahaven	
	John Morgan	
	NORM	
(Curator)	Mark Owens	
	Radim Peško	
	Project Projects	
	Manuel Raeder	
	Dexter Sinister	
	Jon Sueda	(Curator)
	Michael Worthington	

Table 8: Critical Graphic Design Clique



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(although this is undoubtedly one factor at play). Dexter Sinister's "Just-In-Time" approach to publishing takes production-critique to another level through the more complex motivations of a specifically oriented critical agenda.

A key and consistent theme appears to be the challenging of existing professional and disciplinary conventions. This disciplinary critique may be instigated in varying degrees. Projects such as Laurent Benner and Jonathan Hares' 2004-2006 and Laurenz Brenner's 2007-2009 editions of *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books* catalogue, (Figs 165, 166) represent relatively subtle challenges to conventions of material production and expectations of traditional formats. The more radical end of the spectrum ranges from Dexter Sinister's interventions in the conventional production of graphic communications, to the far extremes of the immaterial, relational, conceptual graphic design practices of groups such as Redesigndeutschland and Åbäke.

Benner and Hare's catalogues challenge traditional conventions of book design by curating perfectly replicated samples of pages from winning books (printed by the original printers on the original paper stock) within the catalogue, thus staging a "hypermateriatisation of the medium and the message."<sup>(148)</sup>

Brunner's catalogues on the other hand operate on an altogether different principle, functioning not simply as catalogues of competition winners, but developing a deeper engagement with ideas of the very nature of books themselves, becoming meta-books: reflections respectively on the past, present and future of the book as a format.

Responding to an invitation to design the catalogue for the 2008 Whitney Biennial, Dexter Sinister instead proposed to set up their own alternative press office as a critical "mirror" within the exhibition. Designing and producing responses and reactions reflecting on unfolding events on the spot, they proposed to open spaces for discussion by slowing down reception, adding complexity and depth to communication.<sup>(149)</sup> (Fig 164)

Taking satirical Teutonic stereotypes to the extreme, Redesigndeutschland proposed to do as their name suggested, following a ten point plan set out in a manifesto. (Fig 167) The group's design propositions include an ideal format for portrait photography, internationalising grammar and completely decimalising time: "1 day have 100 hours. 1 hour have 100 minutes. 1 year have 1000 days."<sup>(150)</sup>

Åbäke's diverse activities range from designing (more or less) conventional books; to parasitically publishing a typeface one character at a time within the pages of other publications over a projected timeframe of

thirty seven years; to running a record label; to preparing food for, and “performing” public trattoria events.

<sup>(151)</sup> (Figs 168-171)

Towards the more extreme end of this spectrum, it can begin to become difficult even to recognise critical graphic design practices as graphic design. These types of intervention highlight a further common strand within critical graphic design practices: the idea of “conceptual design.”

In a certain sense all design inevitably involves some degree of “concept” however, in order to be truly conceptual following the model of conceptual art, design would, as Nick Currie writes “have to cut its ties with objects, materials and practicality. The concept would have to become sufficient, in and of itself; the idea would have to be the finished design.”<sup>(152)</sup>

Currie identifies in this casting off of the material constraints of conventional graphic design in favour of the conceptual, an essence of what it might mean to pursue critical graphic design: “Freed from clients and briefs, freed from production, the graphic designer’s imagination becomes relational, meditational, didactic; a form of inquiry.”<sup>(144 p.373)</sup>

If practices of critical graphic design are defined or united by anything then, perhaps it is by a restless, ever shifting, exploratory nature, constantly defying conventions and expectations, constantly breaking the rules.

Where such pioneering exploration is undertaken in reaction and as a challenge to existing disciplinary conventions, it constitutes authentic critique. Critical graphic design thus fulfils its critical promise. However, far too easily, critical exploration challenging formal and conceptual conventions loses sight of its criticality, becoming merely formal and conceptual exploration.

Perhaps the worst potential fate for critical graphic design, is the danger of becoming nothing more than a style. Metahaven reproduce apparently endless variations on their jarring glitch-textured, stretched and warped, digi-referential aesthetic “house style”. (Fig 172) As long as their central concerns remain with issues of internet/digital mediation of power/freedom etc. then this “style” makes some sense as it forms an integral component of their critical approach. Cause for concern arises in the visual productions of designers such as the Design Displacement Group (DDG), which – though presenting a highly conceptual premise of being sent back in time from the year twenty thirty four – are aesthetically almost entirely derivative of Metahaven’s visual language. (Fig 173)





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REDESIGN  
DEUTSCHLAND

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Fig 162: Metahaven. Principle of Sealand Identity Project

Fig 163: Dexter Sinister Basement Interior

Fig 164: Dexter Sinister. Commander's Room Office, True Mirror, Whitney Biennial 2008

Fig 165: Laurent Benner and Jonathan Hares. The Most Beautiful Swiss Books catalogue 2006

Fig 166: Laurent Brunner. The Most Beautiful Swiss Books catalogue 2009

Fig 167: Redesigndeutschland. Standard Portrait





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Fig 168: Abake. Slow Alphabet  
Fig 169: Abake. Utopia in Utopia  
Fig 170: Abake with Martino Gampier and Alex Rich. Tratoria Circolare  
Fig 171: Abake. Limb Typography  
Fig 172: Metaphor. Wikileaks Dark Store  
Fig 173: Design Displacement Group. Design Displacement Group wishes you a prosperous 2024

Following in the footsteps of the slides from critical to post-critical architecture, this empty self-referential image of critical graphic design masks a descent into what is in actuality un-critical or post-critical design. Andrew Blauvelt was among the first to highlight post-critical tendencies within graphic design in an article in *Émigré* in 2003 in which he laments:

Slowly, but surely, any critical edge—either real or imagined—to design has largely disappeared, dulled by neglect in the go-go nineties or deemed expendable in the subsequent downturn. However, the reason seems not a factor of cyclical economies, but rather the transfiguration of a critical avant-garde into a postcritical *arrière-garde*.<sup>(153 p.9)</sup>

Post-critical graphic design, though still exuding the impression of criticality, by retreating towards design's own internal concerns, runs dangerously close to being critical of nothing other than criticality itself. Francisco Laranjo has described the fundamental nature of such inwardly focussed work:

The lack of ideology is the ideology. It is one which, perhaps unwittingly, blurs, confuses and ignores what critical has been known to mean in the past. The 'aesthetic critique' reconfigures what the word 'critical' can mean in relation to graphic design, thereby liberating the word and allowing it to be attached to virtually any kind of practice that deviates from an uncritical approach to design. This opens up two additional possibilities: 1) the critical as criticoool – visual formulas can be developed in order to rapidly make a project look critical; and 2) the critical as simply a synonym of thinking. As a result, there is no need to bridge – or justify – any gap between theoretically-grounded research/critique, visual output and effect.<sup>(154 p.24)</sup>

The self-referential graphic language employed by DDG will be understood only by other designers with an existing interest or knowledge of existing critical graphic design practices.

The *Critical Graphic Design* tumblr blog reaches what must surely be the terminal velocity for the post-critical graphic design in-joke, staging a sea of open-submission cynical, irony-drenched, self-referential critical graphic design related memes.<sup>(155)</sup> While some gems can be found<sup>iv</sup> the majority of content is mind-numbingly self-referential and completely impenetrable to anyone not closely familiar with existing critical graphic design trends.

Currie warns that such in-jokes, along with corresponding "pretension" and "intellectual over-compensation" are a constant danger which more artistically leaning conceptual critical design hazards, as

iv See for example: *Introduction to Typography: I've Murdered and I'll do it Again*<sup>(156)</sup>

the meeting of art and design runs the potential risk that rather than critically building on the strengths of either “the worst of both worlds” are uncritically amplified.<sup>(157)</sup>

The inwards retreat to the safety of self-referential cliques brings dangers of the loss of criticality. Equally so does the expansion outwards into playful strategies of purely formal experimentation. Criticality always requires an object: it must be critical of something. To lose perspective of the object of criticality, is to lose criticality altogether.

Writing on such strategies of playfulness Currie questions their effects, lamenting the lack of criticality in one such “playful” project by Åbäke: (Fig 171)

And what are my friends in Åbäke doing, bringing their “limb typography” project to Tokyo? Well, it’ll make a great audience participation event [...] But where’s Åbäke’s ethical edge this year? They have one. Has it been sacrificed to design’s increasing need to be an event, to be playful, to be fun, to be eternally childish, and to remove itself as much as possible from production – that is, from the turbulent world [...] where disasters happen and where resource wars are fought? [...]

So, although the best play is a form of inquiry, there is a difference between pure play and critical inquiry – a difference between childhood and adulthood. That difference consists in keeping an ethical perspective, and being prepared to shift from speculation to production, from theory to practice.<sup>(144 p.375-377)</sup>

Here lies a crucial point which must be addressed in the consideration of the ethical potentials of critical practice within graphic design. What is the purpose of criticality within graphic design? What contributions can graphic design critique make in society?

There undoubtedly are ethical dimensions which can be addressed by critique both at the level of an individual designer’s personal practice, and at the level of disciplinary conventions. However, as long as more pressing ethical issues continue to persist in the external world, and while design supposes that it can contribute constructively towards these issues, engagement with these inwards focussed self-reflective applications of criticality will seem short-sighted, indulgent, if not even perhaps negligent. If design is capable of social, political and ethical critique, what does it say about the ethicality of critical graphic design that it chooses to focus much of its efforts on critiquing the minutiae of design’s internal processes?

In summary, within contemporary discourse, the term critical graphic design refers to a quite specific set

of activities often related to a particular group of designers, a critical graphic design “clique”. Within this sphere of activity the work of groups such as Metahaven and Dexter Sinister demonstrate possibilities strategies through which design might mount critiques of social, political, ethical issues within wider society. However, much activity connected with critical graphic design is focussed inwardly upon graphic design’s own existing conventions and practices. According to Ramia Mazé’s three identified types of criticality within design practice, critical graphic design has potential for the third type of external social critique, but most of the time appears to be largely focussed on the first two types: self-reflexive and disciplinary critique. Certainly, the post-critical tendencies emerging from within critical graphic design identified by Blauvelt and Laranjo, appear to constitute a retreat from and rejection of overt criticism of the external world.

In the remainder of this section on critical practices, possibilities for critical practices in visual communication design will be explored beyond the confines of the critical graphic design phenomenon by considering models of adversarial and dialogical design practices.

## 4.6.2 Adversarial Design

Adversarial design is a concept advanced by Carl Disalvo which builds on the political philosophy of agonism to propose that design can not only be applied as a tool in support of political systems, but that it can actively bring about conditions in which authentic politics can occur by producing spaces for truly democratic confrontation, contestation and participation within society.

Disalvo builds this notion on the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe makes a distinction between “politics”: the organisational practices and institutions of society (voting, parliaments), and “the political”, which is “the very way in which society is instituted.”<sup>(158 p.8)</sup> Critiquing contemporary political philosophies which propose that unified consensus is the goal of democratic politics – and on this basis seek to overcome and eliminate conflict and disagreement within society – Mouffe instead identifies conflict and dissensus as integral and wholly necessary elements of a healthy political society. Antagonism is an inevitability of human coexistence, which cannot simply be denied. Rather than ignoring differences or seeking to crush opponents Mouffe instead proposes a shift from antagonism towards *agonism*. An agonistic democracy is built upon a mutual understanding and respect between conflicting parties who treat each other not as enemies, but as adversaries. Mouffe writes:

While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents.<sup>(158 p.20)</sup>

As Disalvo puts it, “the term *adversary* is used to characterize a relationship that includes disagreement and strife but that lacks a violent desire to abolish the other.”<sup>(159)</sup> Taking Mouffe’s principle out of the realms of political democracy into the social world in which we encounter designed objects and systems, Disalvo makes the case for design’s ability to stage agonistic adversarial dissensus.

Central to Disalvo’s case for the agonistic capabilities of adversarial design is the belief that design in all its forms is always already political: that rather than merely passively, neutrally conveying messages, it actively intervenes to stimulate and produce new meanings.

As a normative endeavour, design stands in contrast to disciplines or practices that produce descriptions or explanations alone. Design attempts to produce new conditions or the tools by



which to understand and act on current conditions. In the process of doing so, designers and the artifacts and systems they produce assert claims and judgements about society and strive to shape beliefs and courses of action. Claiming and asserting that things should be other than they are and attempting to produce the means to achieve that change are not neutral activities. Positioning design as a normative endeavour has consequences: it opens the practice and products of design to ethical, moral and political critiques.<sup>(159)</sup>

Disalvo contrasts the design *for* politics approach of AIGA's Design for Democracy ballot and election design initiatives with the Spatial Information Design Lab's Million Dollar Blocks project, which he proposes as an example of agonistic political design.

While the redesign of ballot papers and election materials serves an important purpose in supporting existing democratic structures, this design is not in itself political as it merely supports existing systems rather than opening debate as to potential ways in which democratic political processes in society could be changed and improved.

The Million Dollar Blocks project on the other hand constitutes a radically political intervention through its staging of information relating to the registered addresses and costs of incarceration of American prison inmates. What could potentially be dry statistical data is used to create maps which graphically demonstrate where the prison population in American cities is coming from. The name of the project derives from the discovery that in several locations over a million dollars a year is being spent to incarcerate residents of single street blocks. (Fig 174)

Rather than neutrally conveying information this design intervention opens up space for debate on issues of criminal and social justice in urban areas. The focus is shifted from locations of crime, and identities of victims to questions of urban inequality. What factors might conspire to cause criminalisation of entire geographic areas? How can this situation be changed? Could public money currently spent on imprisonment be better spent towards making changes in social conditions?

Designs such as the Million Dollar Blocks project which are adversarial in nature, are fundamentally political and, because of this, also deeply critical. The nature of this adversarial criticality is more open in character, less directly focussed, than the specific critical agendas of practices of direct design intervention or activism. This open-ended character does not make it any less critical however. Adversarial design's criticality, though unfocussed, runs deeper than that present in purely interventionist strategies. Adversarial design



interventions are in fact direct actions of activism. The crucial factor which distinguishes adversarial design acts, is that their critical nature is broader and less deterministic than that of strategies which set out from fixed critical positions.

In attempting to determine the fundamental characteristics of critical practices of adversarial design Disalvo identifies two key strategies commonly at work: revealing hegemony, and reconfiguring the remainder.

Disalvo again draws on Chantal Mouffe adopting Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's conceptualisation of the term "hegemony." Mouffe and Laclau move forward from traditional Marxist understandings of the word tied up with overbearing centralised power, to instead conceptualise of hegemony as a fluid, constantly shifting, malleable social construction.<sup>(160)</sup> The effect of this for Disalvo is that

This view of hegemony shifts the agonistic effort away from striving to overcome hegemony and toward participating in an ongoing process of exposing and documenting current hegemonic practices so they can be examined and questioned.<sup>(159 p.35)</sup>

The first stage in critical agonistic design is to reveal existing hegemonic conditions, not simply in order to expose the realities of social power relationships, but equally if not more importantly, to expose the fragility and changeability of these existing conditions: opening space for explorations of how these conditions could be altered.

The authentically critical attempt to reveal realities of prevailing hegemonic conditions leads directly to Disalvo's second suggested strategy for adversarial design practice: reconfiguring the remainder. This he describes as "an agonistic tactic of including what is commonly excluded, giving it privilege, and making it the dominant character of the designed thing."<sup>(159 p.64)</sup>

In the case of the Million Dollar Blocks project then, the design reveals hegemony by presenting issues of criminal justice not according to conventional narratives, but through identification of a previously invisible pattern within the "data" of urban society. Reconfiguration of the remainder occurs as this pattern is provocatively re-configured through a "combining of components and concepts together in unexpected, exaggerated, or otherwise purposefully atypical ways."<sup>(159 p.63)</sup> This reconfiguration foregrounds the perspective of a marginalised group within the dominant narratives of social justice. This "remainder" (the prison population) are ascribed an unexpected degree of humanity, being reconfigured from statistics to individuals through the simple intervention of being represented by their home addresses.

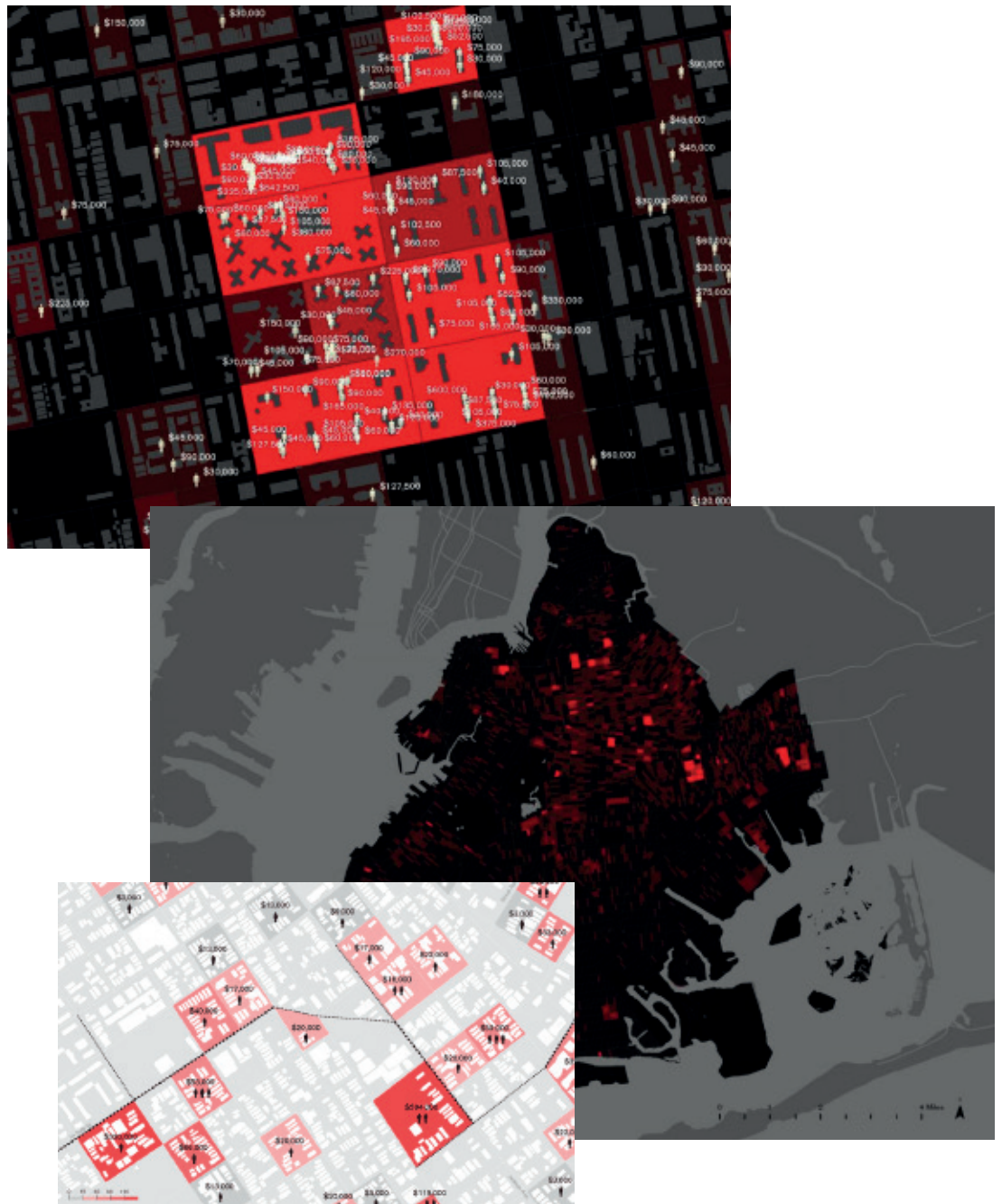


Fig 174: Spatial Information Design Lab. Million Dollar Blocks

This simple intervention through graphical visualisation does not promote any specifically resolved critical agenda, but equally is by no means a neutral presentation of unbiased raw data. As Disalvo writes:

Centrality, or neutrality, is impossible in agonistic pluralism because the broad and divisive differences of positions are considered to be constitutive of the political condition. *Bias is required to do the work of agonism.* A visualization that is agonistic cannot just present the facts. An artefact of information design is made agonistic by the extent to which it identifies and represents contestable positions or practices.<sup>(159 p.43)</sup>

Adversarial design constitutes a deeply critical practice. Although open ended, it always contains a critical position. The very possibility of uncontested consensual resolution in the political, social and ethical issues which are the raw material of communication within society is rejected. Adversarial criticality is directed not towards the attempt to resolve the impossible, it seeks instead to open up spaces in which to constructively stage the critically engaged pluralistic dissensus and conflict which is at the heart of healthy democratic society.

Adversarial design is not without its critics. Matt Kiem has drawn attention to the failure within Disalvo's account to recognise the existing political nature of design within society.<sup>(161)</sup> The socio-political status quos which adversarial design might seek to bring into contention are already products of design. If design is proposed as an agonistic "solution" to social issues, its complicity in bringing about these conditions must also be recognised. By failing to recognise the designed nature of political systems, Disalvo's notion of adversarial design sets its own boundaries within existing political status quos thus limiting its potential impacts to marginal improvements and evolutions of what already exists. Disalvo's decision to rely upon examples from the fields of human computer interaction also has a detrimental effect on the strength of his argument. In the face of more immediately pressing present socio-political issues (climate change, social inequality, political corruption etc.) potential concerns regarding human-robot relationships have a distinct hint of (future-) "first-world-problems" about them.

Mouffe's theories of agonistic democracy also have their detractors. Eva Erman constructs a technical argument against Mouffe's foundational claim that social/ethical/political conflicts are by nature irreconcilable and that democratic consensus through deliberation is therefore impossible.<sup>(162)</sup> Agonistic democracy must always rely on some minimal degree of consensus and deliberation in order to establish the agonistic space in which to stage adversarial dissensus. This "minimally consensual" establishment of the agonistic space is, in fact, the key point of the process at which adversarial design is supposed to operate. As

such the agonistic character of adversarial design itself could be questioned. However, Kei Yamamoto offers the suggestion that both Mouffe's argument and Erman's critique are too strong; the opposition between agonism and deliberation, dissensus and consensus, need not be an exclusive binary.<sup>(163)</sup> Both consensus and dissensus have their roles to play in social discourse.

Despite the imperfections of Disalvo's formulations of an observed phenomenon of adversarial design practice, there is undoubtedly merit to the idea that design has the potential to play a dynamic social, political and ethical role in society by creating agonistic spaces and constructive adversarial relationships between conflicting individuals and groups.

## 4.6.3 Dialogical Design

The key reference point for the idea of dialogical design in graphic design practice is Dutch designer Jan van Toorn who has been consistently proposing and developing the concept through his work and writings for over four decades. Van Toorn opposes the *dialogical* mode of production of visual communications to a conception of a dominant *classical* mode which operates according to a logic of unified, focussed, direct transmission of meaning from sender to receiver. Van Toorn describes the dialogic approach as:

a connective model of visual rhetoric with a polemic nature and polyphonic visual form. A storytelling structure that seeks to reveal the opposing elements of the message and opts for active interpretation by the spectator.<sup>(164 Acetate Insert)</sup>

Dialogical design is proposed by Van Toorn not merely as another style or method to be added to the array of options available to practicing designers, but rather as a social necessity which is required in order to work towards the creation and maintenance of authentic conditions of democracy within society. His critical analysis of the operations of graphic design within society (constructed upon readings of theorists such as Habermas, Tafuri, Debord, Bourdieu, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, Marcuse, Hardt and Negri etc.) is of a discipline which has almost entirely and unconditionally surrendered responsibility for its own actions within social, political and ethical realms, failing to recognise the powers and potentials which it actually does possess within society and must take responsibility for:

It is striking with how little political awareness designers think about the meaning of visual mediation in a socio-cultural sense at the present time. The discipline has abandoned the previous mental space in which it reflected on its social role and has therefore lost the critical distance that determined its relation vis-a-vis the client's brief. It has not only distanced itself from argumentative and moral capacities, but this has also led to a situation that inevitably reduces the strategies, methods and visual resources of communication design to the technological and formal aesthetic sphere.<sup>(164 p.10-11)</sup>

Design which follows the classical approach to communication operates only within a limited sense of what design is truly capable of in terms of the facilitation and mediation of communication within society.

Van Toorn describes the difference between the two in terms of their engagement with the three components of the philosophy of language: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The classical approach

to communication design, by complying with the culturally dominant perception of the existence of a distinction between form and function, limits itself to the level of purely aesthetic interventions at the level of form, which corresponds to syntax in the linguistic model.

Dialogical design however, refuses to accept the separation of aesthetic syntax/form from meaning and content, which corresponds to semantics in linguistics. The designer who fails to recognise their own active role in shaping semantic meaning through the creation and manipulation of syntactical aesthetic forms, abandons their responsibility for the effects of the communication which they facilitate.

As Dutch design critic and historian Els Kuijpers, writes on Van Toorn's work, the key recognition in dialogical design is that

meaning does not lie in the image itself, but is found in the relations between images, in other words constructed by the designer. [...] For it is the designer who produces meaning through the selection and organisation of word and image on the page, the structure within which and the way in which he places the elements in relation to one another. Editing with an agenda. That is what the production of meaning requires.<sup>(57)</sup>

Design which does not fully take responsibility for the production of meaning within created form also cannot adequately engage with pragmatics, the corresponding level of linguistic philosophy concerned with the relationship between meaning content formed through engagement with external context, and the internal semantic meaning conveyed by the syntax.

Dialogical design as proposed by Van Toorn seeks to subversively manipulate syntax in order to produce new complex and socially significant levels of meaning by bringing the semantic content of the message into a designed confrontation with realities existing beyond the design itself. In this way the design does not passively conform to dominant socially accepted ideologies but stages an argumentative dialogue with conceptions of reality at the level of pragmatics.

In order to achieve this active and open argumentative nature rather than merely adding another layer of designed commentary to the web of existing ideologies present within society, Van Toorn proposes reflexivity as a key element within dialogical method. This is the act of specifically and overtly drawing attention to the ideologically motivated created and manipulated nature of the designer's interventions. Van Toorn describes the operation of the dialogical method in this way:



The central precondition for this manner of communicating is that the 'subversive' way of dealing with the conventions is made explicit at the semantic and syntactic levels of the message. Thus, the addressee experiences a perceptible tension between the usual representation of reality and the subjective intervention; the encoder's mentality and interpretation become clear to the decoder, both at the level of content and at that of form. In this way, the message acquires an open character, in the sense of an internal dialogue between 'objective representation' and subjective intervention by the encoder, which might be called essayistic or epic (in the sense intended by Bertold [sic] Brecht).

This means that the unidirectional patriarchal structure of the conventional communication process is disturbed, and that the message obtains an argumentative nature. By calling the communicative illusion of the official realm into question by means of a divergent aesthetic manipulation and a normative attitude as regards content, the spectator/reader is – consciously or unconsciously – invited to engage in active interpretation.<sup>(164 p.33-34)</sup>

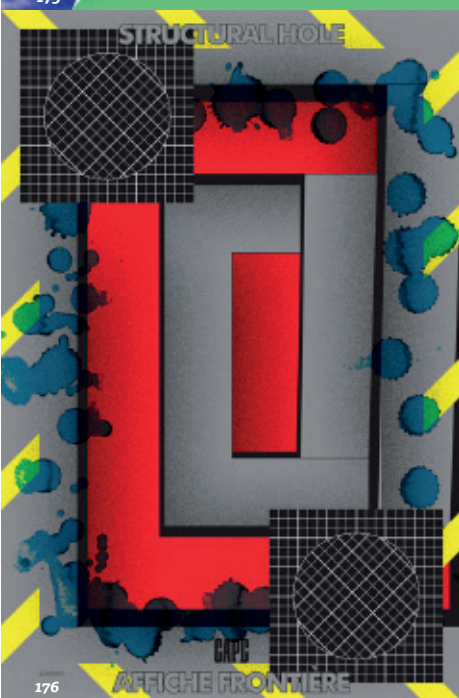
This principle of active interpretation on the part of the interpreting viewer is of central importance to the operation of dialogical design. Rather than being persuaded of the incontrovertible truth of the message content presented by a design, the viewer is presented with a visually proposed argument. The reflexive nature of the designed form reveals the socially and ideologically constructed nature of this argument. The effect is that rather than being aesthetically manipulated and convinced to choose a predetermined position from a limited range of options offered by the design, the viewer is invited to engage in an internal mental dialogue with presented content, through which they may develop their own position in relation to the matter in question.

Achieving such an authentically dialogical effect through design is an extremely difficult task. Often the dialogical method is misunderstood and misrepresented as a simple process of combining multiple conflicting messages within a visual composition in order to force active interpretation on the part of the viewer as no one clear message emerges from a design. Such misunderstandings might propose that the most important aspect of the method is the creation of an open space leaving room for interpretation within communication.

Metahaven, for all their apparent theoretical fluency, appear to occasionally fall into this trap. Much of their internet related work could be argued to create a dialogical effect by making use of an aesthetically complex constructively ambiguous digital-culture referencing formal syntax. (Fig 175) However other projects



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Fig 175: Metahaven. Come to Iceland. Bring Data  
Fig 176: Metahaven. Affiche Frontière. Structural Hole  
Fig 177: Jan van Toorn. 1972/73 Mart Spruijt Calendar  
Fig 178: Jan van Toorn. Museumjournaal vol.24, no. 4. 1979  
Fig 179: Jan van Toorn. Mens en Omgeving poster Debeyerd museum 1984  
Fig 180: Jan van Toorn. PTT annual report. 1987



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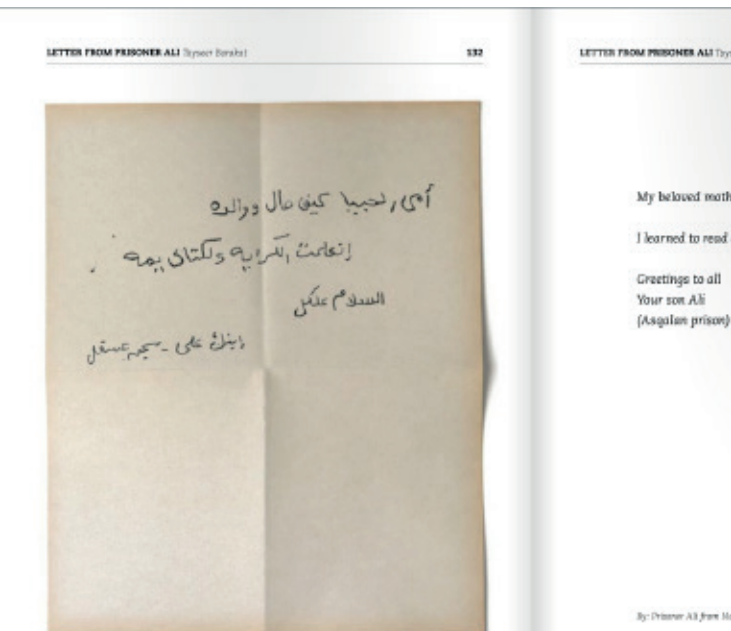
182



Fig 181: Subjective Atlas of Palestine. Good Morning Palestine  
Fig 182: Subjective Atlas of Palestine. Maps of Palestine  
Fig 183: Subjective Atlas of Palestine. Twelve Ways to Eat Chickpeas  
Fig 184: Subjective Atlas of Palestine. Imagining a Currency  
Fig 185: Subjective Atlas of Palestine. Letter from Prisoner Ali



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walk this fine line less successfully. The series of ten posters placed around the border of the inner city region of Bordeaux as part of the *Affiche Frontière* project are aesthetically interesting, ambiguous, and certainly offer plenty of room for interpretation. However without prior knowledge of the nature and aims of the project, the posters themselves do not actually stage an argument which the viewer might enter into dialogue with. (Fig 176) This is not to say that such design does not stimulate dialogue, but rather that this dialogue is unlikely to relate to the socially significant subject matter which the designers intended.

Dialogical design cannot rely upon ambiguous open-to-interpretation aesthetic form alone. As Oliver Vodeb argues, the empty aesthetic fetishes of design cannot on their own amount to socially significant communication:

Jumping on the bandwagon of anti-signifiers just in order to masturbate in terms of 'all right this leaves room for interpretation': that's a very weak argument. [...] I don't think having a more or less empty signifier is having a dialogical approach.<sup>(111)</sup>

To a certain extent the nurturing of a degree of constructive ambiguity is required in dialogical design in order to create the hook which draws an inquisitive mind into the process of active dialogical interpretation. However, authentic dialogical design is neither indiscriminate nor indeterminate. Van Toorn often describes his process as one of precisely calculated intertextual visual journalism. The mere throwing together of multiple visual "texts" does not constitute an argument. Authentic dialogical design stages a precise argument within a specific context, but does so in a manner which, rather than concluding this argument and thereby shutting down dialogue on the issue, opens up a space for debate which previously did not exist.

While much of Van Toorn's work would appear at first glance to be composed of scrappy compositions of entirely unrelated images, closer consideration of this form within its original context reveals carefully constructed visual narrative strategies which stimulate guided exploratory trains of thought leading the viewer towards a position in which they must make judgements and decisions for themselves in relation to the presented visual argument.<sup>v</sup> (Figs 177-180)

Authentic dialogical design operates as a critical practice, effectively demanding a degree of critical thought from the viewer as it subversively disrupts the conventional operations of visual communication.

In illustration of the distinctive difference between classical and dialogical modes of communication

<sup>v</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Van Toorn's method, see Els Kuijpers' *and/or: on contradiction in the work of Jan van Toorn* (165)

consider the example of maps. If the aim of communication is to efficiently and accurately transmit data from sender to receiver, then the classical mode of communication is the most appropriate choice. If, for example, one wishes to navigate between two points in an unknown part of the country, then an Ordnance Survey type map may prove to be useful. The design of such a map is focussed entirely upon the use of well known and understood visual codes and signs which correspond to geographical landmarks in order to allow the viewer to efficiently identify their current location and devise a route towards their destination.

However, if one's purpose is to gain some meaningful understanding of the *character* of a particular nation, region or city, then the usefulness of such a map designed within the classical mode will prove to be extremely limited. An example of the result of a dialogical approach to the visual communication of such complex pluralistic meaning content might be the found in a project such as Annelys de Vet's Subjective Atlas of Palestine. This atlas presents multiple "maps" of the territory of Palestine created by inhabitants. These maps collectively present a rich narrative of life within this country. Complex cultural and political issues are brought into the subjective human social dimension. One "map" presents twelve different ways to eat chickpeas, while another presents letters sent home to families by prisoners held in Israeli detention camps.<sup>(166 p.119-122)</sup> (Figs 181-185)

Dialogical design is concerned with communication contexts where complex, pluralistic, socially significant multiple levels of meanings exist. In such contexts, traditional values of clarity and efficiency prized within the classical mode of communication can do nothing other than detract from the possibility of authentic communication which reflects the true complexity of real-world experience.

The dialogical approach recognises the impossibility within certain contexts of offering a conclusive authoritative presentation of content, and proceeds rather to acknowledge the constructedness of social reality by pursuing an explicitly staged storytelling approach to the message.

By staging a constructed narrative rather than a presentation of incontrovertible fact, dialogical design invites the active participation of the viewer in critical interrogation, investigation and judgement of the presented story. In this way, critical thought can be stimulated in contexts where established conventional modes of thinking are entrenched.

The documentary films of Adam Curtis, such as *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (2011) and *Bitter Lake* (2015), provide a good example of the operation of such strategies of dialogical storytelling.





Fig 186: Screenshots from Adam Curtis' Bitter Lake. 2015



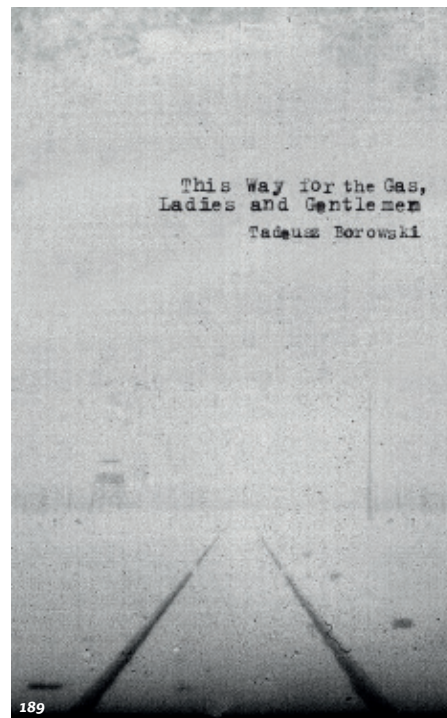
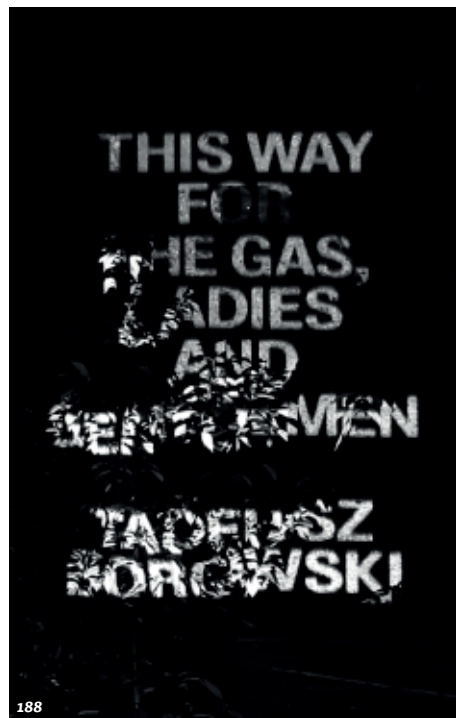
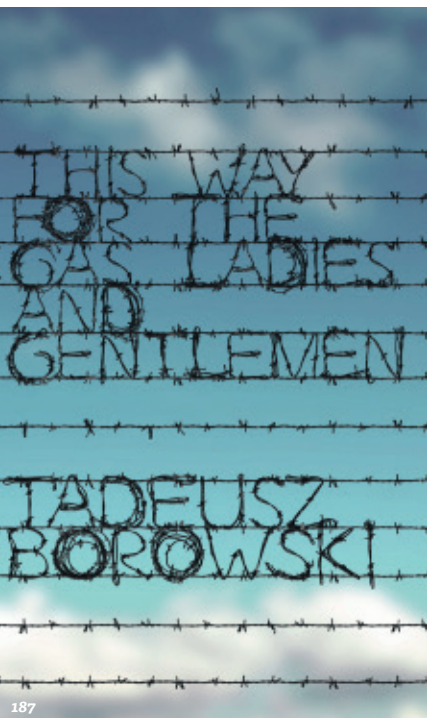


Fig 187: Anna Zysko. Competition winner  
 Fig 188: Aliza Dzik. Competition entry  
 Fig 189: Peter Chmela. Competition entry  
 Fig 190: David Gee. Commissioned cover



(Fig 186) Curtis weaves together found archive footage to construct unexpected fresh narratives about well known historical and cultural phenomena and events. His trademark techniques of rapidly cutting montage, overlaying of titles, deadpan voiceover, and use of alternative pop music backing tracks combine to create a radically unconventional break from the expected conventional experience of contemporary documentary film. The viewer, having expected the conventional slick documentary presentation of authoritative reality, is disoriented by the encounter with a jarring, aesthetically rough around the edges presentation of a complex multi-faceted narrative. Rather than being presented as “the way things really happened” this story is encountered as one possible way of viewing events, constructed out of a messy array of found fragments of reality. In this way the viewer is invited not merely to passively accept the presented argument but rather to actively, critically and dialogically engage with the content.

A final illustration of the operation of dialogical visual communication, can be uncovered through consideration of a series of entries to a competition to design a cover for Tadeusz Borowski’s collection of short stories “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen.”<sup>(167)</sup> The book recounts aspects of Borowski’s horrific experiences as a prisoner within Nazi concentration camps between 1943 and 1945. Many of the entries to the competition predictably rely upon mimetic visual representations of objects symbolic of the holocaust and concentration camps: train tracks, clouds of smoke, stars of David, brutal looking guards, emaciated prisoners, barbed wire etc.

Anna Zysko’s winning entry literally writes the title and author’s name in barbed wire in front of a blue sky with wispy clouds above and billowing smoke below. (Fig 187) This design is undeniably extremely effective in employing established visual tropes to communicate the subject of the book. It clearly falls within the classical mode of production.

Aliza Dzik’s entry takes a less directly literal approach by using a harshly projected light to form the cover text, which fragments and disintegrates as it falls against foliage and concrete. (Fig 188) Aesthetic sensations of the imagined fear and tyranny of the constant observation of the watchtower provide the communicative link which anchors the design to its context. This design is less straightforward and offers greater room for interpretation and critical engagement than Zysko’s. However, the narrative of this design remains unidirectional. The argument visually staged here is one-sided, stimulating an emotional response which draws the viewer in, stimulating interest in exploration of the theme, but not providing any further level of content to feed this inquisitiveness.

Referencing Borowski’s horrific camp “job” unloading arriving prisoners from arriving transports, many

entries to the competition make use of images of train tracks. Peter Chmela's design employs this symbol, the receding tracks so famous from the entrance to the Birkenau camp, presented as a disintegrating grainy historical photograph decaying into snow, mist and white noise. (Fig 189) The use of faux typewritten text reinforces the historical emphasis of the design. Chmela's design again follows the classical model. Any room for interpretation in the image is confined to an initial struggle to perceive the shapes of train tracks and a distant guard tower. Once these symbols have been identified, existing cultural understanding does the rest.

David Gee's design, commissioned by competition organiser John Bertram also uses a photograph of receding train tracks, however Gee's image is a contemporary one, presented in full colour taken, by the looks of it, on a warm summer's afternoon. (Fig 190) Bertram quotes Gee explaining how his idea for the design

came after noticing that there is a common visual language for books of this nature: black and white imagery, black letter text, grungy effects; all employed to do most of the work for the reader. I used a colour photograph to contemporize the cover and emphasize that these events did not occur in black and white. They happened on beautiful days as often as they did on overcast, grey, gloomy days, and this only serves to deepen the horror.<sup>(168)</sup>

A masterful combination of existing visual symbols can very easily, as Gee puts it, do the work for the reader. Gee's design, defamiliarises the symbol of the receding train track. The expected convention is that this symbol speaks of a historical event. Gee creates a dialogical intervention, subverting this convention by jarringly bringing the historical event into the present. The design does not present an account of fixed reality, but proposes an argument which the viewer must respond to.

Dialogical design is not a design method or technique. It is a mode of communication which can be brought about through application of a variety of interventions which subvert the dominant classical mode of communication. At its heart, dialogical design is a critical practice which provokes active interpretation and engagement with the social construction of meaning within the mind of the viewer. The object of dialogical design's criticality is not therefore primarily the subject matter towards which an individual project is oriented. Dialogical design's criticality is found first and foremost in relation to communication itself.

## 4.6.4 Through the Lens: The Ethicality of Critical Practices

This section has considered a range of design practices supposed to contain a central element of critique or criticality. A distinction has been noted between practice which happens to contain elements of criticality, and innately critical practices. In a truly critical practice, it is the practice itself, independent of context and subject matter, which is critical. Critical practices are ways of being within practice, which inevitably result in work which embodies criticality in one way or another.

Critical practices within design, according to Ramia Mazé, can be seen to take one of three possible orientations, with critique being focussed either sance against externally-j fax either self-reflectively towards a designer's own individual practice, at the level of the design community and disciplinary discourse, or outwards towards society.<sup>(143)</sup>

Specific contemporary usage of the term "critical graphic design" has been discussed, as linked to a loosely defined group of designers whose work has been collected and curated under a particular understanding of criticality which for the most part conforms to the first two of Mazé's orientations. Though the range of subject matter dealt with by these critical practitioners is very often ostensibly socially and politically oriented, the criticality within these practices is most often oriented inwards, being directed towards design practice itself at a personal or discipline wide level.

The two subsequently discussed notions of adversarial design and dialogical design are oriented outwards towards wider society and public life beyond the design discipline. Adversarial design's core operations of seeking to stage socially productive adversarial dissensus through revealing hegemony and reconfiguring the remainder, place the activities of this critical practice firmly within the realms of real-world politics.

Discussion of the idea of dialogical design concludes that the object of the criticality within this practice is communication itself. This does not however mean that the primary criticality of dialogical design is oriented towards a critique of the operations of the discipline of communication design. The object of dialogical design's criticality is communication occurring in the real social and political world. Rather than posing an inwardly focussed critique in order to improve communication design's methods and techniques, dialogical design's critique operates directly within society by disrupting conventional processes of communication at the receiving end.

The examples of “critical graphic design”, adversarial design and dialogical design discussed here represent just a few of a great diversity of possible conceptions of critical practices within graphic design. Armed with the conceptualisation of ethical design laid out in chapter three, the final section here proceeds to ask the questions: is critical practice ethical, and if so what is the nature of this ethicality?

According to the account of the ethical set out here, it must be recognised that criticality is in itself inherently ethical. Criticality always involves the recognition of the possibility that things could be other than they are. The fundamental nature of critique is to propose that an existing state is inadequate and could be improved. This recognition of the possibility of difference is a recognition of potentiality which results from aesthetic sensitivity applied in the encounter with the unique singularity of experience.

Therefore criticality in itself is inherently ethical.

Critical design practice is neither a method nor a technique but is rather a holistic way of being in relation to design practice. Critical *practices* within design represent not merely the enactment of ethical actions through design, but are in fact ethical modes of existence. Therefore, if criticality is at the heart of one’s design practice, this practice can be seen to be inherently ethical.

In this abstract sense then, it can be seen that critical design practices are in fact ethical. But what is the nature of this ethicality? Three orientations of critical practice within design have been recognised. Does the orientation of a critical practice affect the nature of its ethicality?

Each of the three orientations identified by Mazé<sup>(143)</sup> – self-reflexive, intra-disciplinary and outwardly/socially oriented – are ethical in the sense described above. They each operate by extending potentiality through recognition of possibilities for difference.

The only significant difference between these three types of critique then, is that the extension of potentiality brought about via these practices takes place within different contexts and with different purposes.

Criticality applied self-reflexively within one’s own practice produces recognition of expanded potentialities to be explored within this personal practice which may lead an individual to discover new perspectives, directions, methods, techniques and applications for their work. The individual designer must make ethical choices as to which direction to follow, and what impact this might have upon their work and its reception by others.

Criticality applied at the level of discipline not only extends potentialities for the individual practitioner, but for the collective. Critical practice at this level issues challenges to design as a whole. Possibilities that design itself could be changed and transformed are revealed. Ethicality is brought into being at the level of the group which must face up to these challenges to established conventions. The primary impacts of intra-disciplinary critical practice are on design practice itself. Of course, significant transformation of design's ways of operating will inevitably have effects and impacts wherever this transformed design is enacted in real-world contexts.

Critical design practice which is oriented outwards towards the staging of critique within real-world social situations, acts to directly produce extensions of potentiality in these real-world social situations. The first two orientations of critical practice work to transform design, and their effects are limited to matters concerning design practice. This third externally oriented mode of critical practice seeks to directly transform society itself.

According to the understanding of the ethical set out in this project, each of these three types of critical practice certainly have the potential to be ethical. Within this understanding of ethicality, there is only ethical and unethical, there is no possibility that some types of ethical design might be more ethical than others. What has been identified within this way of thinking about ethics however, are the operations of an/aesth/ethics, by which design can inadvertently operate to suppress the full possibilities of ethical extension of potentiality. Can any traces of an/aesth/ethics be found within the critical practices examined earlier here?

As was considered during discussion of the critical graphic design phenomena, there are certainly potentials here for critical design to slip into un- or post-criticality: losing sight of productive criticality altogether through a self-absorbed and self-referential focus on form, aesthetics, pure experimentation, play, and criticality of criticality.

Where critical graphic design becomes myopically fixated upon graphic design's own processes and internal concerns, it can lose sight of graphic design's communicative social purposes and potentials. Experimentation and exploratory play within design may lead to ethical criticality, but in order for this to occur, some practical perspective must be kept in mind as to the impacts which these innovations might have upon design as it operates in the world. As Nick Currie pointed out, the ethically vital element of criticality which must be preserved is the readiness "to shift from speculation to production, from theory to practice."<sup>(144 p.377)</sup>



In the case of adversarial design, Matt Kiem draws attention to this same potential pitfall whereby the theoretically ethical criticality of a critical design practice can fail to connect with the real world by again focussing too closely on its own interests and not considering the bigger picture. Disalvo's examples of adversarial social robots are described by Kiem as examples of a

technophilic fetish that attracts far more attention than it deserves. In a world where (by design) the vast majority of people are systematically deprived of the socio-material means to create healthy lives, and where (again by design) companies continue to profit from materially intensifying the lives of the wealthy [...] exploring the nuances of human-robot relations on the premise that this will be a major problem in the future seems to me a somewhat indulgent distraction.<sup>(161 p.36)</sup>

Disalvo's future-first-world-problem social robot examples may helpfully demonstrate something of the theoretical operation of an adversarial design approach, however in order to constitute a significant critical and thereby ethical transformation of potentiality, the potential logic of these examples must be able to be demonstrated at work in situations which might have genuine impacts here and now. Without some indication of how these speculative principles might be applied in existing real-world contexts, they remain at best pure ungrounded speculations, and at worst, an/aesth/ethic suppressions supplying the empty impression of criticality without offering any realistic possibility to practically enact this potential.

As regards dialogical design, an/aesth/ethic effects can be observed where the dialogical approach is flattened and simplified to a simple technique of the combination of complex and conflicting visual symbols. Simply providing an all you can eat buffet of imagery to be interpreted at will by the viewer does not constitute a dialogical approach. An authentic dialogical approach carefully stages an argument which the viewer is then invited to actively engage with and make sense of in relation to the context of a proposed framework.

While traces of an/aesth/ethic effects can be found here, each of the three orientations of critical practice within graphic design offer significant potentials for ethical design practice within their respective contexts. Self-reflexive criticality offers possibilities for individuals to expand potentiality within their own practices. Intra-disciplinary critique offers the chance for design to transform itself and extend its own boundaries. Outwards looking critique allows design to intervene directly, creating spaces for open consideration of ranges of transformational potentialities within social reality.

No one of these should be said to be more significant than the others. A healthy ethical design culture

requires a balanced combination of all three. If a perspective on the balance between these modes of criticality within design practice and the potentials for an/aesth/ethics contained within each can be maintained, this should encourage conditions which provide a solid foundation for the potential flourishing of ethicality within design practice.

## 4.7 Through the Lens: Summary

The picture of the relationships between design and ethics observed throughout the interview narratives presented in chapter two and in discussion of the six sites of potential ethicality in design in this chapter, is one of diversity, complexity and plurality in designers' approaches towards these issues. Designers do certainly appear to care about ethics, and to desire to do good. However little consensus as to what this actually means, can be found to exist.

The almost tragic dimension to this image, which comes across most strongly in the interview narratives of chapter two, is the recognition of a profession composed of individuals who often fervently desire to do good, but find themselves lacking any adequate way to take on the vast complexity of ethical experience, as apparently insurmountable obstacles are encountered in reality. The six sites discussed in this chapter represent designers' diverse attempts to tackle these issues, with varying degrees of success and failure.

The aim of this project has been to make some headway towards the goal of eventually being able to offer a contribution towards the goal of better equipping designers with a way of encountering and coming to terms with the realities of ethical experience in design. The theoretical explorations of chapter three form the foundation of one way of thinking about ethical design which it is proposed could form the basis of such a contribution.

The analyses of the six sites of potentially ethical activity in design, presented here in this chapter towards the end of each respective section, each make use of the theoretically grounded analytical framework developed and presented here in chapter three. While not constituting an instrumental toolkit, this framework can function as a useful lens to focus critical analysis. A summary of just some of the insights emerging through this analysis of the six sites could be presented as follows.

# Summary of Six Analyses Through the Lens of the Analytical Framework

Applied to the context of professional codes, the analytical lens reveals the function of these codes to be primarily moral rather than ethical in nature. Such codes can offer practical guidance within the boundaries of existing professional conventions. However wherever any new, unexpected, previously unencountered circumstance presents itself, these documents have little to contribute. In this way these moral codes can be seen to be largely incompatible with the ethical requirement to be capable of responding to the encounter with unique singularity in experience.

The lens reveals a distinctly unethical an/aesth/ethic dimension whereby these moral codes can act to suppress ethical potential within design by encouraging blind reliance on the code rather than active sensitivity to potentialities within encountered situations. In this way professional codes can be seen to play an important role within the profession, but this role must be recognised both for what it is and what it is not.

In relation to the use of manifestos within design, looking through the lens it can be seen that where they operate freely in their poetic, speculative, aspirational/inspirational functions as provocations, manifestos are in fact ethical by nature. Literal interpretations of manifestos as instrumental tools or shopping list like activities towards achieving desirable design futures fail to recognise the value of manifestos as potentiality extending provocations. However, wherever they operate to genuinely open up, extend and transform potentiality, manifestos can be seen to be potentially fruitful ethical strategies for design. As a caveat to this optimism, it is recognised that manifestos can function in an an/aesth/ethic capacity. The revolutionary aesthetic aura of the format can operate to mask suppressions of authentically existing potentialities.

Analysis focussed through the lens reveals that designers' attempts to expand, extend and re-imagine the boundaries of their activity are attempts to extend potentiality for design. Therefore "designer as..." phenomena which do extend design's boundaries in search of autonomous responsibility in design practice are ethical in this sense. It should be noted that this ethicality is recognised in relation to design's internal processes and does not in any way guarantee that design work produced from these positions will be ethical in nature.

However, not all designer as... phenomena extend potentiality for design in meaningful or significant ways. Attempts to re-imagine the designer as entrepreneur actually only expand design's potentiality within

already existing, and extremely restrictive, economic boundaries. In such a case, perceived restrictions upon design's activity are merely traded in for a different set of less visible an/aestheticised restrictions.

To recognise ethicality within designer as... phenomena is to recognise a deeply ethical recurrent characteristic within design which seeks to cast off external oppressions, assume autonomous responsibility for its own actions, and explore new directions for design activity. Not every attempt to achieve this will be successful. Of the three examined here, each are imperfect in varying degrees. However design's underlying inherently expansive desire to constantly evolve and transform itself – of which the designer as... is merely a symptom – is a fundamentally ethical characteristic of design.

In relation to strategies of direct design action for good, application of the analytical framework reveals that design practice which relies upon tried and tested conventional methods, employing these tactically in order to achieve maximum impact for good within a given situation, can quite easily take place in the absence of any significantly ethical foundation. Design-for-good which relies upon content, method or intention as its ethical basis fails to engage with the full authentic realm of potentialities for how design could be used not only to instrumentally solve a perceived problem, but to actually alter and transform the social reality within which that problem is perceived. In this way it is possible to see that what might superficially appear to be socially beneficial design action may be wholly lacking in terms of ethicality.

The same design techniques can be used equally effectively for both good and bad. With recognition of this must come not claims of professional neutrality but of individual responsibility. Implicit assumptions of the neutrality of design's processes should be rejected, alongside uncritical assumptions that good intention, plus good content, equals good design.

Considering strategies of design activism through the lens of the analytical framework, the central notion of disruptive aesthetics leading to the generative unveiling of alternatives can be seen to correspond with the ethical principle of the transformation and extension of potentialities. Furthermore the specifically aesthetic nature of this disruption demands the engagement of aesthetic sensitivity within a subject in response to the singularity of the aesthetic disruption of the encountered design activist intervention. Based upon these principles, design activism in an ideal sense is argued to be a site of authentically ethical design practice.

However, potentials exist for practices of design activism to be misunderstood, misused and even abused, leading to the creation of unethical an/aesth/ethic effects. Examples of Hopenhagen, Shepard Fairey's

Obama Hope poster, and Kony 2012 among others demonstrate how design can project the aesthetic impression of ethical activism, while actually operating to suppress the fully available range of potentialities within a situation.

The final analysis of critical practices recognises that criticality, as a process which necessarily involves the recognition of possibilities that things could be different than they are, is inherently ethical, being essentially a recognition of potentiality resulting from aesthetic sensitivity applied to the encounter with unique singularity. Authentic critical practice is neither a method nor technique, but is rather a holistic way of being in relation to design practice. This represents not the mere enactment of critical ethical action through design, but rather an ethical mode of existence within design practice, at least in this ideal sense.

However, significant possibilities for this ethical critical practice to far too easily slip into un-ethicality by losing sight of connections with social reality and lapsing into an/aesth/ethics are also identified. Fixations with internal processes, self-referentiality, experimentation and pure play, and “criti-cool” criticality-of-criticality can supply empty impressions of criticality without actually engaging in meaningful transformations and extensions of potentiality in the real-world.

Viewed through the lens of the analytical framework, however, it is possible to see that critical practice which maintains an awareness of the contexts of its criticality and of the an/aesth/ethic potentials within these offers a promising platform and foundation for the flourishing of ethicality within design practice.

The analyses of these six sites presented in this chapter are not presented as conclusive final judgements on each of these subjects. Rather these stand as examples of how the proposed analytical framework might be used to consider matters of ethicality within such contexts. Looking through the same analytical lens no doubt there will be areas within these analyses which many would disagree with, offering alternative interpretations. Such an outcome is to be welcomed. The framework seeks not to serve up decisive answers to the problems of design ethics. Indeed, a foundational principle recognised in the development of this framework is the practical impossibility of achieving such an outcome. Instead the framework seeks to establish a common language which might allow interested parties to engage together in productive debate on these matters.

The analyses presented here demonstrate that the framework does show some promise as a foundation which might potentially aid designers and others in becoming aware of and able to think critically about the ethical dimensions of design practice. An awareness of the concepts of potentiality, singularity, aesthetic



sensitivity, transformation, configuration and critical sensitivity, equips the interested individual with this foundational common language for engaging with the complex and pluralistically understood realities of ethical design experience.

The separation within the framework of matters of morality and ethics allows a baseline conception of ethicality to be engaged with prior to the level of moral judgements of good and evil. Having established this foundation, such matters of culturally subjective judgement can be engaged with at least in the knowledge that some relatively stable bedrock of ethicality exists.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution which this framework brings to critical consideration of the ethicality of design activity, is the perspective on the dynamic between ethics and an/aesth/ethics. In each of the six sites considered here, tensions between potentials both for ethicality and an/aesth/ethics emerge. While questions of morality will remain essentially subjective and open to endless debate, the way of thinking about ethical design proposed here offers a practically useful way of considering how a given design may be operating to expand or suppress ethical potentialities within a situation.

Some potential has been shown here for this way of thinking to productively open up the massive complexity of the ethical dimension of design. The next stage must be for this potential be tested by putting this framework to the test in the real world. Admittedly the way of thinking about ethical design proposed here is not yet in a form appropriate to the needs of practicing designers.

Designers typically are a generally practically minded non-academically oriented population. This is not at all to suggest that designers are anti-intellectual, or that they “don’t read” as the commonly perpetuated myth would have many believe. What is plain to see however is that this piece of work on its current form is academically oriented. It would indeed be difficult to imagine many designers choosing to wade through this thesis in its current format in order to engage with the ideas contained within, and put these to the test in their practice. In order to send these ideas out into the real world of design practice, it is quite clear that the framework developed in this thesis must be translated into a more digestible and accessible format. This would then allow the ideas presented here to be tested much more rigorously by practicing designers, educators, observers and critics in relation to real world practice and experience.

## ***Chapter 5: Conclusions***

## Conclusions

The aim of this thesis has been to make some useful contribution to knowledge regarding the complex question of what it might mean for visual communication design practice to be “good.” The approach taken has been to begin by recognising the vastly diverse pluralistic range of simultaneously existing, competing, conflicting and often contradictory perspectives and beliefs held by individuals and groups in relation to this question. Recognising this complex reality, the strategy of the project has been to pursue an investigation of the specific question “is design ethical?” Pursuit of this inquiry has proceeded in full acknowledgement that many alternative ways of investigating this issue could be taken, and this is just one possibility among these. It is not however conceded that this acknowledgement will necessarily relegate the claims of the project to absolute relativistic particularism in which the mere possibility of differing conclusions precludes a consideration of the significance of the argument presented here.

Openly recognising that the argument presented here represents one quite particular way of thinking about this issue, all that is asked is that in considering this argument it be taken on and fully engaged with according to the terms set out in this way of thinking. It is not claimed that the conclusions presented here represent the one conclusive truth of the matter; rather what is claimed is that this way of thinking, if

properly engaged with, is capable of constructively contributing towards designers' understanding of the complex actually experienced realities of design as encountered in the real world.

As stated in the introductory chapter to this thesis (section 1.2) several core aims of this project stem from the central question *is design ethical?* These are:

- What is meant by the ethical?
- What is meant by design?
- Based on these conceptualisations, is design / can design be ethical?
- How do contemporary attempts at / approaches to ethical design practice compare to this theoretical conceptualisation?
- How might ethical design be supported or encouraged?

In this concluding chapter, the various ways in which these aims have been addressed throughout the project will be considered and summarised in turn, and some remarks as to the overall significance of these conclusions will be proposed alongside suggestions as to directions for continuation and development of this research trajectory.

The main body of this project as presented here begins in chapter two which, based on empirical observation, presents a depiction of the vast diversity of ways in which ethical issues are encountered, experienced, understood, discussed and debated in relation to visual communication design activity within contemporary design practice, culture and discourse. The ten narratives gathered through interviews with working designers reveal a wide array of complex and often conflicting ethically entangled concerns. Some of the more prominently featuring recurrent issues are: desires for autonomy; tensions between ideal conceptions of design and commercial realities; economic pressures; respect, trust, value; compromising personal principles; qualities within design work such as beauty, functionality and originality; responsibilities of design; and community culture and relationships. Taking a step back, broader emergent issues of a sense of the frustrated utopian ambitions of graphic design, and economic pressures including the constant threat of precariousness, were identified.

The remainder of the chapter offers an indicative survey of six selected "sites" identified as significant areas of activity within recent attempts towards "good" design practice: the creation of and subscription

to professional codes of ethics; the declaration of manifestos; observations of various “the designer as...” phenomena; direct design action for good; practices of design activism; and critical design practices. Each of these sites represents a particular approach and context of ethical activity within design. Each site has its own particular concerns and raises its own issues.

Chapter two as a whole then, serves to set out an indicative overview of the diversity and complexity of contemporary experience of the relationship between design and ethics. Faced with this diverse pluralistic landscape of observed experience in which the question of ethics in design is understood in a great many different ways, it becomes apparent that any attempt to make a useful contribution towards addressing the question *is design ethical?* must necessarily first explicitly set out the ways in which it is understanding and working with the terms *design* and *ethical*.

The first two aims of this project are therefore to set out what is meant in this context by ethical, and by design. These aims are approached explicitly in this way not as the declaring of definitions, but as descriptions of the ways in which these words are being understood and conceptualised in this project. In this way, rather than steamrolling the diversity of empirically observed existing ways of considering ethical design, these meanings are offered up in addition to and in acknowledgement of existing perspectives and beliefs.

Beginning by addressing these two initial aims, chapter three then proposes a synthesis of these as a way of addressing the third aim which asks whether, based on the ways of conceptualising ethics and design set out here, design is, or could potentially be, ethical. This conceptualisation of ethical design is proposed as a supplementary layer of understanding on top of existing knowledge: a theoretical framework offered for consideration of its potential to prove practically useful as part of a strategy for approaching the question of ethical design in the real world.

## 5.1 What is Meant by the Ethical?

The first main section of chapter three sets out in detail the nature of the particular understanding of the ethical being used here, beginning with a clarification of a proposed distinction between morality and the ethical. Morality pertains to judgements as to the rightness or wrongness of certain actions. The ethical is the deeper underlying sensitivity which allows an individual to conceive of differences in values to begin with.

Acknowledging the immense complexity of the ethical realm, and the apparent inability of existing ethical theory to offer satisfactory universal resolutions to the ethical conflicts encountered in everyday experience, John Caputo's suggestion of the possibility of thinking beyond "the end of ethics" is introduced.

<sup>(1)</sup> This allows investigation of the ethical to look beyond some of the impasses of traditional ethical theory, recognising the value of established schools of thought, but seeking a deeper meta-ethical understanding of the nature of the ethical dimension of life. This deeper perspective allows greater possibilities for identification of the ethical dimensions emerging from within design practice rather than simply being imposed from the outside.

The ethical is "defined"<sup>(A1)</sup> here as a mode of existence characterised by sensitivity to and recognition of qualitative differences between experienced potentialities. This "definition" is broken down, explained and unpacked through an exploration of four elements. The first three: *potentiality*, *singularity*, and *aesthetic sensitivity*, are conceived as necessary elements or pre-requisite characteristics which together create the potential environment for the ethical to be able to occur. The fourth element is the suggestion that the ethical only comes into being as a *mode of existence* which is characterised by the first three elements.

Potentiality is proposed as the foundation of the ethical, following Giorgio Agamben's articulation of the concept.<sup>(2)</sup> Without potentiality – existing possibilities for alternative courses of action or inaction – the very possibility of ethics dissolves and the concept becomes meaningless. Where no significant choice between potentialities exists, recognition of qualitative value differences between actions becomes an impossibility thus collapsing the ethical and simultaneously also rendering higher level moral judgements of good and evil impotent.

The concept of singularity introduces the idea that the ethical is encountered exclusively in the demanded response to absolutely unique, unknown, unforeseen, events. Failure to recognise the unique nature of encountered events is therefore a failure of ethical responsibility. The mechanistic blanket application



of moral frameworks is therefore potentially ethically irresponsible. Caputo provides the metaphor of *accidentalism*, in which moralistic ethical theorising is compared to crowds gathering around scenes of accidents: able to discuss what has happened but incapable of predicting the next catastrophe.<sup>(1)</sup>

The principle of singularity consists in the realisation that the ethical only comes into being and must be encountered in the unforeseeable unique moment of experience. This leads directly to the proposal of the principle of aesthetic sensitivity: that ethical responsibility relies upon the sensitivity to be able to recognise potentialities existing within encountered singularities.

Where aesthetic sensitivity does not exist to recognise these conditions, the subject remains (either blissfully or wilfully) ignorant of ethical responsibility. The aesthetic nature of this sensitivity is crucially important. German philosopher of aesthetics Wolfgang Iser argues that the ethical can in fact be seen to emerge from within the aesthetic realm.<sup>(3)</sup> Ethical principles of pluralism and justice are argued to be inherently aesthetic in nature. A case could on this basis be made that it should be possible to increase engagement with ethical responsibility through the cultivation of aesthetic sensitivity. However, possibilities for the aesthetic to suppress the ethical also arise as hyper-aestheticisation overwhelms and numbs the senses effectively becoming an-aestheticisation, the production of a radically un-ethical state.

These three principles: *potentiality*, *singularity* and *aesthetic sensitivity* are drawn together in the suggestion, again following Agamben, that ethicality is not something to be possessed but is rather a mode of existence.<sup>(4)</sup> The presence of all three is required to constitute ethical being. Where there is no potentiality, there can be no ethics. Where there is no encounter with the singular unknown, we require no ethics. Where there is no aesthetic sensitivity, the ethical will remain undetectable despite staring us in the face.

## 5.2 What is Meant by Design?

The second section of chapter three considers a “definition” for design. Immediately design is recognised as a pluralistic concept which resists definition. The approach taken here is then to discuss some characteristics of design – “family resemblances”<sup>(A1)</sup> – which together provide some insight into the nature of design.

Conceptions of design which are extremely narrow – tying the activity to its observed products and outputs – or extremely broad – losing sight of design as a distinct activity separate from general human action – are rejected. Clive Dilnot’s suggestions of a range of fundamental capacities of design<sup>(5)</sup> are taken as the starting point for setting out a conception of design based on three key characteristics: *transformation*, *configuration* and *critical sensitivity*.

The idea of transformation recognises that the fundamental activity of design is to extend the boundaries of existing realities by imagining and proposing new possibilities. Design is in this way seen as an activity of the transformation of potentiality.

Configuration is proposed as a second key trait of design activity, characterised specifically as configuration of the artificial. Negotiation of incommensurability was recognised as the factor which sets design activity apart from merely technological contributions to artifice. Phronesis wisdom which mediates between abstract and applied knowledges offers a way to understand how design is capable of negotiating incommensurabilities.

Finally critical sensitivity to recognise both that existing states of reality, and how these could potentially be altered, is proposed as a necessary prerequisite to design’s work.

These three characteristics of *transformation*, *configuration* and *sensitivity* together form not a definition but rather a way of describing design. This is offered as an incomplete and imperfect but indicative way of describing the complex phenomena of design. Bearing this in mind, the description of design laid out here could be summarised in this way: design is the negotiation and configuration of incommensurable singularities, which transforms and extends potentiality beyond the previously possible.

## 5.3 Based on these conceptualisations, is design / can design be ethical?

The third section of chapter three proposes a conception of ethical design based on a synthesis of the ways of thinking about the ethical and design developed here. This account of ethical design recognises significant correlations between the identified three key elements of the ethical: *potentiality*, *singularity* and *aesthetic sensitivity*, and the three characteristics used to formulate a description of design activity: *transformation*, *configuration*, and *critical sensitivity*.

Potentiality is a central concept for both design and ethics. The ethical is possible only where potentiality genuinely exists and can be engaged with. Design extends and enlarges the boundaries of potentiality, creating new potentialities in addition to those existing. This capacity of design is therefore an inherently ethical one. The extension of the boundaries of potentiality must also necessarily be an extension of the possibilities for the ethical.

Design's fundamental work is identified in the labour of configuration, specifically that involving the negotiation of the incommensurable. Such activity can only properly be undertaken in relation to the unique singularity of each newly encountered design context. The activity of design in attempting to negotiate the incommensurability of the singular, and in so doing of transforming and extending the boundaries of previously existing potentiality in accordance with the above principle, is therefore seen to be a fundamentally ethical activity.

While the ethical is depicted here as contingent upon the recognition of difference through aesthetic sensitivity, it is suggested that design requires critical sensitivity to be able to perceive potentialities to be transformed and extended. Proper aesthetic sensitivity is therefore a precondition for both the ethical and for design. Where it is absent, neither can occur. This observation adds yet more weight to the case that design and ethics are deeply linked.

In terms of the requirement that the ethical must be experienced as a mode of existence similarities and differences are identified. Both design and ethics as conceptualised here rely upon more than mere rule-following. As morality is therefore distinct from ethics, the technical *techne* craft knowledge of design is separable from the more fundamentally designerly *phronesis* practical wisdom required for authentic design activity to occur.

It does not make any sense however to suggest that design, like the ethical, must be inhabited as a mode of existence. Rather, design is better thought of as a capacity possessed by an individual which can lie dormant, or be enacted as required.

Taking into account these relationships between the ethical and design, the conclusion of chapter three as to the ethicality of design in a theoretical sense, is that design is in fact always inherently ethical. A crucial caveat to this conclusion however is that *though design is always ethical, this does not necessarily guarantee in any way that design will be good.*

The ethicality of design consists specifically (as with all ethicality according to this conceptualisation) in the potentiality for both good and evil, rather than in any bias towards the good.

Potential reactions to this conclusion of either a sensation of anti-climax or of a misplaced optimism in the suggestion of inherent ethicality, are addressed in a final discussion which introduces the concept of an/aesth/ethics.

The social significance of the “ethical but not necessarily good” diagnosis for design is drawn out by exploring design’s capacities to both promote and suppress ethicality in the real world. Design is capable of transforming and extending potentiality in varying degrees through its aesthetic operations. In the best cases this opens possibilities for exploring new ethical possibilities. However, it is possible for design to employ aesthetics to provide the appearance and sensation of the ethical transformation of potentiality where this is not in fact actually occurring. In such cases we anaesthetise ourselves to ethical sensitivity by aestheticising ethics: *an/aesth/ethics*.

Chapter three therefore concludes that design is a social force which should be treated with caution at all times. An uncritically optimistic trust should never be placed in the foundational ethicality of design: instead we must at all times remain vigilant, constantly interrogating our practice to determine whether our work is expanding potentiality and with that the ethical, or suppressing it.

These conclusions may appear pessimistic. However, a suggestion of hope for inherently ethical design is proposed in the possibility of what Wolfgang Iser calls a “blind-spot culture.”<sup>(3 p.25)</sup> This possibility offers the hope that design is not fated to an/aestheticise but does in fact hold within itself the potential to nurture and promote the ethical if only the terms of its relationship with aesthetics would be renegotiated.

## 5.4 How do Contemporary Attempts at / Approaches to Ethical Design Practice Compare to this Theoretical Conceptualisation?

Chapter two engages with the nature of recent and contemporary attempts and approaches towards ethical practice in design in some detail. Following chapter three, being now equipped with what has essentially developed into a theoretical framework for a particular way of conceptualising ethical design, this framework can be turned back onto the observations of design activity collected throughout chapter two as an analytical lens capable of addressing the fourth aim of the project: the gaining of some understanding of how observed real life experience of design ethics measures up against the theoretical conceptualisations developed here.

The aim of this project has been to make some headway towards the goal of eventually being able to offer a contribution towards better equipping designers with a genuinely helpful way of encountering and coming to terms with the realities of ethical experience in design. The purpose of the reflexive application of the framework back as a lens onto observed experience is therefore to test this framework to attempt to discern whether (and if so, to what extent) this abstract, conceptual, theorising could prove to be practically useful in the real world.

Chapter four draws the theoretical framework developed in chapter three together with the empirical observation of the six potential sites of ethics within design discussed in chapter two. The framework is used as a lens through which to analyse these sites in order to reveal something of the nature of the ethicality contained within each design context. By utilising it in this way to critically analyse the six sites, some perspective on the potential usefulness of this way of thinking in relation to practical design contexts is revealed. Use of the framework as an analytical lens in this way reveals varying degrees of ethical potential within each site. Significantly however, tension are identified in each site between ethical and an/aesth/ethic potentials.

Viewed through the lens of ethical design developed here, professional codes of ethics in design are seen to function largely rather as *moral* codes which, through the formalisation of concrete rules and guidelines actually discourage authentic sensitivity towards potentialities existing within encountered ethical contexts. Despite in this way having the potential to actively suppress engagement with the full range of ethical possibilities in a given situation, these codes nevertheless continue to provide the aesthetic sensation of

ethics, thus potentially operating in an an/aesth/ethic capacity.

Manifestos can be seen to be potentially fruitful ethical strategies for design where they operate freely in their poetic, speculative, aspirational/inspirational functions as provocations which act to extend potentialities for what design could be in the imaginations of designers. The revolutionary aesthetic aura of the manifesto format can however be seen to act in an an/aesth/ethic capacity wherever this revolutionary form is uncritically substituted for revolutionary content.

“Designer as...” phenomena which represent designers’ attempts to extend, expand, transform and re-imagine the boundaries of design activity are simultaneously attempts to extend potentiality in response to perceived restrictions within existing disciplinary boundaries. As such these phenomena are inherently ethical. However, these expansions of potentiality can be less expansive than they might first appear. The example of the designer as entrepreneur demonstrates how the aesthetic appearance of expanded autonomy can in fact be nothing more than an an/aesth/ethic trade in for a different set of equally restrictive constraints.

Perhaps the most controversial insight made visible through the lens of this analytical framework is the suggestion that design undertaken out of good intentions in aid of what is believed to be a good cause, can in fact occur in the absence of any significantly ethical foundation. Direct design-for-good which relies upon content, method or intention as its ethical basis fails to engage with the full authentic realm of potentialities for how design could be used not only to instrumentally “solve” a perceived problem, but to actually alter and transform the social reality within which that problem is perceived. When it is abundantly clear that the same design techniques can be used equally effectively for both good and bad, such design can be seen to be unethical. This is not because of the possibility of bad rather than good outcomes, but rather due to the failure to recognise any significant difference between these two states. Without this analytical lens, design-for-good may appear to be perfectly ethical, exuding the aesthetic gloss of ethicality which masks the potentially an/aesth/ethic reality.

Design activism on the other hand, understood as practices of disruptive aesthetics which generatively unveil alternatives, can be seen to transform and extend potentiality in response to encounters with authentically sensitively experienced realities. On this basis design activism can be said to be ethical in an ideal sense. However, potentials exist for these practices to be misunderstood, misused and even abused, leading to the creation of an/aesth/ethic effects. Examples of Hopenhagen, Shepard Fairey’s Obama Hope poster, and Kony 2012 among others demonstrate how design can project the aesthetic impression of



ethical activism, while actually operating to suppress the fully available range of potentialities within a situation.

Criticality, as a process which necessarily involves the recognition of possibilities that things could be different than they currently are, is inherently ethical and therefore so are design practices which build upon criticality as their cornerstone. Authentic critical practice is understood here neither as a method nor a technique, but is rather a holistic way of being in relation to design, thus representing not the mere enactment of critical ethical action through design, but rather an ethical mode of existence within design practice.

However possibilities for ethical critical practice to far too easily lose sight of connections with social reality are also identified. Fixations with internal processes, self-referentiality, experimentation and pure play, and “criti-cool” criticality-of-criticality can supply an/aesth/ethic impressions of criticality without actually engaging in meaningful transformations and extensions of potentiality in the real-world.

These analyses of the six proposed potential sites of ethics in design set up quite a clear distinction revealing how the specific understanding of ethical design developed here stands apart from those at play in real-world interactions as observed throughout chapter two. It is clear to see that this way of thinking does not reflect the fragmented pluralistic conventional ways of thinking on ethics within design. Instead, it proposes one particular way of considering these issues which might prove ultimately to be helpful for designers encountering these in the complexity of the real world. By removing the dimension of morality from the equation at the earliest stage, this way of thinking is able to achieve a degree of critical distance in order to create a space for considering the issues at play at the level of the ethical.

Through the analyses of the six observed potential sites of ethics within design set out in chapter four, the strength of the proposed way of thinking about ethical design in its function as an analytical framework can be seen in acting as a two edged sword to simultaneously reveal the potential for ethicality and for an/aesth/ethic capacities within each of the analysed contexts.

These example analyses begin to demonstrate how a framework for considering foundational ethicality *prior* to concerns of moral judgement of good and evil, right and wrong, could in fact prove to be useful for practising designers, by offering conceptual strategies to equip the designer with ways of coming to terms with the encounter with the complex realities of ethical experience in design.

This framework is constructed upon the explicit premise that it has nothing to say regarding direct

questions of the judgement of the moral “goodness” of design. However, by providing a way of thinking about ethical design which allows designers to become more consciously aware of, and able to critically consider, the *ethicality* of their own practices, the framework represents the provision of conceptual scaffolding for designers to begin constructing the solid foundations which will allow these direct and pressing questions – of the moral judgement of goodness – to be approached from more reliable ground than the previously available constantly shifting conceptual quick-sands.

Perhaps, if these conceptual strategies were available to designers in an easily digestible format, some of the conditions of anxiety, internal conflict and ultimately resigned acceptance of prevailing conditions revealed by the interviewees in chapter two could be avoided. The simple intervention of the provision of a way of thinking about the foundational ethicality of design in terms of the extent of actually existing possibilities for both good and bad provides an empowering perspective to the individual within that situation. This way of thinking shifts the focus from one of the inevitable unchangeable elements of reality, to one which seeks out all the possibilities in which things could be different.

In terms of the observed sense of frustrated utopianism, grinding designers down as they constantly fall short of their own subconsciously culturally imposed standards and aims within their own activity, thinking in the way set out here shifts the narrative from an exhausting negative perception of continuously falling short, to a positive one of constantly finding and identifying possibilities for improvements.

In the same way this shift in perspective flips the overwhelmingly oppressive perception of very real economic pressures at play in the experience of design professionals, allowing instead an empowered perspective which seeks authentic opportunities for using design to escape the inevitability of this dominant system.

Starting in this way to connect the perspectives offered by this analytical framework with practical contexts such as these begins to reveal some of the ways in which the final aim of this project – the question of how ethical design might be supported or encouraged – might be addressed.

## 5.5 How Might Ethical Design Be Supported or Encouraged?

One outcome from this project is the proposal that the way of thinking about ethical design developed here shows potential as an embryonic form of what could be developed into a practical aid to assist working designers in their engagements with the complexities of real world ethical situations encountered in design contexts. It is proposed that this conceptual framework could in this way constitute a support to those seeking to design ethically, or to inhabit ethicality as an integral part of their design practice. Considering each of the six sites of ethics in design which have been discussed and analysed here, thinking with this framework offers not only critique but also constructive possibilities for the supporting and encouraging of ethical design within these contexts.

Designers facing a complex ethical conundrum or crisis of conscience within their practice may turn towards a professional code of ethics for guidance. Armed *also* however with the conceptual framework proposed here, these designers gain the perspective that the agreed conventions of the profession can offer generic guidance but cannot act as a full replacement for authentic sensitive critical engagement with the complex reality of the issue at hand. This way of thinking provides few answers, but offers support for the designer seeking to ask the right questions.

This conceptual framework allows the designer to be able to recognise whether good and bad are even possibilities within the work which they are producing, and more specifically and significantly, to recognise *where* these possibilities arise and can be found. The designer desiring to do good by committing ten percent of their working time to charitable causes, upon examining their own practice through the lens proposed here, may discover that the potentialities for good and bad within their practice lie not in the question of *who* the client is, but in issues of *how* they approach their design practice both for charities and commercial clients.

By making visible the previously invisible dynamic between ethics and an/aesth/ethics within design contexts, this conceptual framework equips the designer to be able to recognise areas where their practice, though projecting all the appearances of ethicality, is in fact representing only a suppressed engagement with the full range of potentialities available within the given situation.

Designers desiring to do good, whether through direct action, activism or critical practice, may be able to use the framework in this way to self-reflexively analyse their own activities, identifying areas where the

aesthetic sensation of ethics has overtaken ethicality itself, and conversely those areas where authentic potentialities are being expanded and transformed through their design interventions.

In the same way, by looking through this lens, those who wish to transform and evolve the disciplinary boundaries of design itself may gain helpful perspectives which allow them to discern meaningful extensions from superficial shifts within existing constraints. In these ways, glimpses of the potentially constructive practical usefulness of this way of thinking about ethical design can be seen. What has been achieved in this project represents the necessary first stage to demonstrate the potential relevance of this way of thinking to real world design. This is but the first step towards the aim of the project to speculate upon ways in which ethical design might be supported or encouraged.

## **Scope for future research**

It is hoped that the groundwork laid here in setting out a way of thinking about design as foundationally ethical, but also (because of this) capable of an/aesth/ethic effects, will be taken on by others and will ultimately be found to be helpful in contributing to the development of strategies for the support and encouragement of ethical design. In general I would not venture to second guess the potential engagement of others with these ideas by speculating as to the potential shape and form of these yet to be developed strategies here. My hope for the theoretical framework proposed in this project is that it would open up avenues for thought in this area which could not previously have been imagined. As such any speculative mapping out by me of these practical strategies would be of extremely limited value. However, it would be appropriate at this point to make a few suggestions as to possible directions for future research into this area.

Following directly on from this project, perhaps the most obvious first steps to further research would be to extend the work started here of testing the theoretical framework in analysis of existing examples of design practice and experience. A broader variety of potential sites of ethical activity could be considered through the proposed analytical lens. This testing of the analytical framework should also be extended to more specific individual cases of design activity. Only through a sustained, rigorous and critical testing against a broad range of real world experience will the inevitable flaws and deficiencies in the framework be fully brought to light in order to strengthen and develop this theoretical construction.

However, the aim of this research is to make a helpful contribution to the capabilities of the practising designer, and as such it is vitally important that this work does not remain theoretical. At some point the focus of research in this area must shift from analysis of existing design activity, to practical integration of the theory into design activity itself. If the way of thinking about ethical design developed here can be integrated into design practice, there will be an opportunity for researchers to observe and analyse any effects and impacts of this conceptual shift.

It is recognised that, in its current form, the proposed theoretical framework presented here is far from ready to be offered to working designers as a practical aid in the real world. The process of translating and packaging this theoretical framework into a suitable non-academic form for dissemination to practising designers, though not perhaps research in itself, will be a necessary step on the way to further testing of these ideas in practice. Until working designers are able to easily access and understand these theoretical ideas, they will remain theoretical.

The most obvious way to achieve a broad and accessible dissemination of this work would be to re-write it in the form of an accessible book. This is an opportunity I would like to pursue. Such a long-term, long-form, ambition would be well supported by a sustained strategy of shorter-form writing for popular non-academic platforms within contemporary design discourse. My hope would be that as I myself pursue these parallel trajectories in writing, aspects of the research may get picked up, criticised and tested by both researchers and designers, and that any and all ensuing debate would productively contribute towards improving the quality of the theoretical work.

Another area where there is scope for future research to build on the work done here, is in relation to the interviews carried out and the methodology developed as part of this process. A project which I myself am planning is to return to the original ten interviewees, now that a period of time has passed, to see how their individual narratives have developed. Beyond this, more and different demographics of designers could be interviewed to gain deeper insight into contemporary ethical experience in design activity. Studies into the insights of groups such as successful “celebrity” level designers and students, which were ruled out of this study could be carried out.

Carrying out more interviews using the interview methodology developed for this project would be a worthwhile task in itself in terms of developing this methodology. What would be very interesting to do would be to carry out a parallel study using a different interview methodology to explore the same issues of ethical experience in design. The insights gained from each set of interviews could then be subjected to a

comparative analysis in order to gain some perspective as to what the particular value of the methodology developed here might be.

These are just a few suggestions of areas offering scope for future research based on the work carried out in this project which could be picked up on by others. Here at the end of the project, I would venture to describe (in an extremely roughly sketched out form) one area of potential research which I myself am particularly interested in and hope to pursue in future work in my own design practice by taking the theoretical framework developed in this project and applying it practically in real world design contexts.



## 5.6 Visual Communication for a Blind-spot Culture

This particular area – my interest in which precedes and underlies my original motivations for taking on this PhD project in the first place – concerns issues surrounding the political role and power of visual communication design within democratic society. In an increasingly visually oriented and dominated society, the activities of visual communication design would appear to be increasingly deeply implicated in questions of politics and power. Both historical perspective and contemporary experience clearly demonstrate the apparently apolitical neutrality of graphic design as it is used equally effectively in the name of both democracy and totalitarianism, justice and injustice. The deeply concerning conclusion which must follow this observation is that a genuinely neutral apolitical design will inevitably be employed most effectively by those forces within society which are already dominant and powerful. Design's ability to oppose these dominant forces is therefore relegated to a position of constant weakness. What hope is there for a conception of design as an active force within a healthy democratic society in which the views of both the powerful and the powerless are to be considered of equal value? Is it possible to conceive of design as an egalitarian positive force within democratic society, or does design in fact pose a constant threat and danger to ideals such as equality, tolerance and free speech?

Considering this context prior to embarking upon this PhD project I found myself unable to make any satisfactory inroads towards an understanding of how design could possibly be imagined as a social good in its own right. Temptations to succumb to the vague utopian optimism prevalent among socially minded graphic designers were constantly fended off by encounters with examples in which the same design methods and techniques used in a "good" project were applied towards undesirable ends, only often with more significant impact.

Unable to differentiate between good and bad design according to any criteria other than my own subjective judgements as to the designers intentions and the desirability of the resulting impacts of the design, I lacked any framework for understanding even what it was that I was looking for in my search for an ideal visual communication design for democracy.

Armed now however with the framework developed throughout this project, it is possible to move constructively forwards towards the investigation of models of design which might show promise towards fulfilment of such a goal.

One avenue of investigation towards such an end would be to begin with Wolfgang Iser's tantalising

proposition of the possibility for the creation of a “blind-spot culture.”<sup>(3 p.25)</sup> This would be to begin investigations as to how design might be applied in ways which draw attention to those significant areas of social life which are currently ignored and marginalised: the aesthetic interventions of design returning sensation to those areas which have been an/aestheticized.

Through an investigation pursued along lines such as this, it is possible to see how a greater understanding of the operations of foundationally ethical design (as understood according to the terms set out in this project) might begin to reveal the shape of what an ideal communication design for democracy could be.

Such an investigation need not seek to reinvent the wheel by striving to develop entirely new ways of designing. Much work of great value already exists. What has been missing are the tools to understand the value of these existing practices, and the abilities to differentiate the ethical from the unethical, from the an/aesth/ethic. Having applied this way of thinking towards already existing design in order to understand the foundations upon which we stand, only then can this way of thinking be most productively applied towards the consideration of potentialities for as yet undiscovered developments in design practice.

For me, the path of greatest interest lies in a deconstruction of the processes of dialogical design which can be investigated through a careful dissection of the methods and approaches of individuals such as Jan van Toorn and Adam Curtis. This deconstruction would aim to reveal deeper understanding of the operations of key features within these practices such as reflexivity (the making evident within the design of the subjectively constructed nature of this intervention), defamiliarisation (the making strange of that which has come to be accepted as normal) and heteroglossia (the introduction of multiple conflicting viewpoints within the staging of the visual argument). These features could then be tested in practice to determine what effects various permutations of these have upon the ethicality of a design intervention and the potentials for such consciously ethical interventions to return sensation to areas of social life which have been an/aestheticized. Precedent for such radically aestheticizing anti-an/aesth/ethic attempts toward the creation of a blind-spot culture can be found within the historical practice and theoretical writings of poet, playwright and theatre director Bertolt Brecht. It is towards the investigation of possibilities for such Brechtian, dialogical, blind-spot culture seeking models of visual communication design practice that I turn my attention upon completion of this project.

This is but one among many possible avenues of investigation towards which the research represented by this thesis offers a contribution, opening up new dimensions and perspectives. The central contribution of this research is to lay out and communicate one particular way of beginning to think about and understand

what it might mean for design to be good, by articulating a conception of design as a foundationally and inherently *ethical* activity. The nature of this fundamental ethicality is found in the recognition that design is always capable of the potential for both good and bad, and possesses capacities for the increasing or suppressing of ethics through the operations of an/aesth/ethics. This work lays the groundwork for this way of thinking which, it is hoped, will in the long run be able to be transmitted in an appropriate form to designers and those interested in design, and prove to be both informative and ultimately useful to the designer who wishes to seriously consider whether or not their design activity is good, whether it could become better, and how this change might potentially be brought about.



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## Chapter 5

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## Appendix B

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# ***Appendices***



# ***Appendix A***

# A1: On definitions

Saint Augustine famously had a bit of a problem defining the concept of time: “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know”<sup>(1 p.224)</sup> As it turns out, the word time is far from the only linguistic construct which suffers from this slipperiness. All human language ultimately breaks down under sustained scrutiny. The fundamental nature of words is that they are nothing but noises or collections of inscribed shapes which stand in the place of something else. The forms, audible or visible, of words themselves are entirely meaningless, but become meaningful as they are used as symbols pointing towards some understood meaning. What is truly amazing about language, is that these formal constructions, words and combinations of words, are never merely meaning-full or meaning-filled, but always meaning-*overflowing*. A word is not a vessel capable of containing or controlling a complete and precise body of meaning to be accurately delivered from speaker to listener. Were we to search for a metaphor for the word’s delivery of meaning, we might perhaps find more satisfaction in the image of a flaming arrow than that of a bullet. While the message of a bullet is a complete, self-contained, and self-sufficient dead weight of lead, the true message of a flaming arrow is not the arrow but the fire which takes up a life of its own upon impact, now relying on the target for fuel and relatively indifferent towards the vehicle which delivered it.

Units of language, as bearers of meaning, are not static, accurate, tied-down chunks of predetermined “data” which slot neatly into allocated positions, but are fundamentally much more chaotic, wild, living things which can be put to use, but which are never truly tamed.

Our experience of using language day-in-day-out is constantly - although more often than not subconsciously - that described by Augustine. We are quite able to cognitively operate within ourselves and to communicate with others by linguistically referring to meaningful concepts as we understand them, employing a variety of words and phrases which functionally stand for our meaning. However, upon closer inspection, these linguistic forms fail to do justice to the symbolised concept. We all functionally know what it is that we are referring to when we employ the word “time”, yet the word in itself offers us nothing at all helpful in aiding us to know *what* time actually is.

Of course it is fairly obvious that the form of a word does not in itself aid us in understanding the meaning of that word. As the Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out, declaring the name of a chess piece to be the “king” does not tell us anything about how this king operates or what its purpose is.<sup>(2 p.15)</sup> Only in

the knowledge of the rules of the game of chess and how the piece designated “king” operates, does the connection of the word king to a particularly shaped playing piece on the chess board take on its intended significance.

Wittgenstein begins his discussion on the topic of the meaning of language in his book *Philosophical Investigations* with another quote from Augustine: a quote referring to the infant’s learning of words through observation of adults making the sound in relation to the object.

When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.<sup>(2 p.2)</sup>

While this seems a fairly innocuous, obvious and uncontroversial observation of the process of infant language acquisition, Wittgenstein criticises the over-simplified idea of language which can develop from this type of observation: “In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.”<sup>(2 p.2)</sup> The case which Wittgenstein makes, is that though this might at first seem to be the obvious truth, it is not in fact the case: words do not directly, universally and reliably correlate to meanings.

Language is not a system statically anchored to concrete reference points. In fact, the word “system” appears to be a poor choice of vocabulary to use to describe language. Under close examination, language does not appear to be particularly systematic, and this is precisely Wittgenstein’s criticism of Augustine’s description:

Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises “Is this an appropriate description or not?” The answer is: “Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe.”

It is as if someone were to say: “A game consists in moving objects about on a surface according to

certain rules . . .”—and we replied: You seem to be thinking of board games, but there are others.

You can make your definition correct by expressly restricting it to those games.<sup>(2 p.3)</sup>

The idea of games is not just an opportune example, but a concept which Wittgenstein develops as he begins talking of language not as a system but as a “multiplicity of language games.”<sup>(2 p.10)</sup>

The idea of “language-games” is applied in several different senses, this lack of definition and a certain playfulness being part of its essential character. As alluded to in the quote, there are a great many different ways of describing the concept of games. None of these definitions comprehensively and entirely encompass and explain the whole idea in its fullness, but there are similarities, relationships and things in common which allow us to conceive of the general category of games despite there being no universal principle which unites all of the members:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” — but look and see whether there is anything common to all. — For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look! — Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. — Are they all ‘amusing’? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.<sup>(2 p.31-32)</sup>

The idea of language, like the idea of games, cannot be encompassed by a single universal definition, but, also like games, *can* be conceived of in a gathering of a multitude of smaller unique and idiosyncratic instances not identical in every respect, but connected by a web of similarities, resemblances and relationships. Through this web, it is possible to conceive of a whole: the language-game, which is made up of the multiplicity of language-games.

Just as there is no single set of rules, no all encompassing definition for “games” in general, there is no fixed absolute set of rules for language-games as a category, rather their very existence is continually created within the simultaneous multiplicity of all language-games. The existence of language is constantly in a fluid state of re-creation as “new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.”<sup>(2 p.10)</sup>

In this fluid state of the multiplicity of language-games questions as to the right and wrong usage of words dissolve. How are we to proceed in communicating meaningfully on any topic under these circumstances? What hope is there for Augustine in finding a way to communicate his tacit knowledge of what time is to the one who asks him to explain it? What hope is there for us in the endeavour to discover what it is that we might actually mean or wish to mean by using the word “good” in relation to design?

Wittgenstein describes the complex web of interrelationships between the multitude of diverse instances of games as:

a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. [...] I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”<sup>(2 p.32)</sup>

These “family resemblances” allow us to conceive of a way of understanding meaning in language without requiring reference to concrete universal referents.

Wittgenstein’s suggestion is that by recognising the complex and diverse realities of language use through the concepts of language-games and family resemblances, we can come closer to being able to properly investigate the objects of our interest, those meanings underlying the words we use to stand for them.

The apparent difficulty with investigations dealing with language (and what other kind of investigation is there in human thought?) is that in the absence (or impossibility) of a precise definition for something, we are unable to reasonably deny or reject alternative conflicting definitions and usages offered by others. Awareness of language-games and family resemblances allows us to break out from the constraints of the structural forms of language itself and focus our attention rather on the revealing *usage* of words: how we have come to use them in these ways, and what it is that we really mean and are referring to when we use them. As Wittgenstein writes (in a comment which coincidentally steers this tangent back toward the subject of our interest here: the meaning of the word “good”), the fundamental difficulty with investigations which get hung up on the formal structure of language is that at a purely structural level there is no right or

wrong usage of words:

Anything – and nothing – is right. – And this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics. In such a difficulty always ask yourself: How did we learn the meaning of this word (“good” for instance)? From what sort of examples? in what language-games? Then it will be easier for you to see that the word must have a family of meanings.

(2 p.36)

In parallel with Augustine’s example, when we use the word good in everyday language we generally know what we mean. We might very often not agree with others as to whether certain identified things are good or not and to what extent, but when someone identifies something as such, we at least know roughly what it is that has been asserted about the item in question. So what is it that we roughly mean by “good”? On this matter, and on all such matters of the definition of complex terms, in the context of this project let us follow Wittgenstein’s advice to not proceed by searching for a definition, but rather by investigating the language-games and family of meaning with which this word is involved.



## A2: Research Paradigm

The trajectory of a research inquiry is unavoidably shaped and influenced by the researcher's underlying beliefs – consciously or subconsciously held – about the nature of research inquiry in general: what can be known and how this knowledge can be found and communicated. Such beliefs collectively form what can be referred to as a research paradigm. Egon Guba roughly describes the idea of a paradigm “in its most common or generic sense” as “a basic set of beliefs that guides action”.<sup>(3 p.17)</sup> Every researcher's research actions are at a fundamental level – though they themselves may at times not be consciously aware of it – guided by these basic philosophical beliefs.

A typical strategy for investigating and understanding research paradigms is to consider the paradigm holder's responses to the three questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology. Guba offers a neat summation of these:

*The ontological question.* What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it? [...]

*The epistemological question.* What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known? [...]

*The methodological question.* How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?<sup>(4 p.108)</sup>

Ontology relates to our beliefs as to “how things *really* are”. Do we believe that reality is a single universally discoverable phenomenon to which we all have equal access through our experience, or rather an idiosyncratically experienced construction which exists uniquely within the mind of each living creature? Ontological beliefs such as these are often depicted on a scale between realism on one side and relativism on the other. Such philosophical foundations might at times seem several degrees removed from the practical activity of research; however their importance and influence must not be forgotten or underestimated. For example, in the case of research in relation to design, the researcher approaching from a realist ontological position might easily assume that the actual reality is that it is possible to discover optimal solutions to identified problems which will be universally “correct”, “right” or “best” for everyone at all times, thus producing a certain perspective on the nature of design activity. A design researcher approaching from a more relativist position may instead believe that there can only be compromised

responses to situations which will always satisfy some more than others. This belief may produce a radically different conception of what design is capable of doing.

Epistemology relates to the question of what it is possible to *know* about reality, whatever our ontological beliefs may be. Again, it is possible to consider epistemological positions on a continuum between realism and relativism. An ontological realist who considers reality to exist in a state which can be experienced by all, may subsequently hold the epistemological belief that we can therefore come to common understandings and knowledge of this reality which will be valid for all people. An ontological relativist who believes that reality is mentally constructed in each unique mind, may, based on this, hold the epistemological belief that there is very little which we can know for sure about anything in any universal or generalisable sense and so we must focus on unique individual experience.

Epistemology is typically seen to exist beneath ontology in terms of hierarchy. Ontological beliefs form the philosophical foundation and certainly have a major influence on epistemology. However we must not make the mistake of positing a direct correlation between either realist or relativist ontologies and epistemologies. It is quite possible to hold ontologically realist beliefs as to the nature of reality, while maintaining an epistemologically relativist position. The ontologically realist design researcher may believe that there are universally optimum solutions, while also believing that we cannot possibly *know* what these are. More difficult, yet still possible is the simultaneous inhabitation of ontologically relativist and epistemologically realist positions. Such beliefs might be found in the researcher who believes that reality is in every way a fabrication of the mind, but that the structures and conventions produced between individual minds coexisting in society, effectively construct realities real enough to be known and understood in concrete ways.

In design practice, this is not an unusual situation: think of the principles that much visual communication operates on, using combinations of images which in terms of communicative meaning content are extremely ambiguous and undefined yet which nevertheless do function to communicate relatively concrete messages by stimulating commonly understood cultural significances. Few visual communication designers today would inhabit a radically ontologically universalist (realist) position in relation to the meaning content of visual images. An example of such a position might be Otto Neurath's Isotype picture language, a method for visually communicating information through symbols which Kinross and Lee have argued attempted to operate according to a rhetoric of neutrality.<sup>(5, 6)</sup> Neurath was a member of the Vienna Circle, a radically anti-metaphysical group of philosophers whose thinking was characterised by the

denial of anything which could not be verified by a pure logical process. Just as this early form of logical positivism has long since fallen out of favour philosophically, so relatively few designers today would claim a universality to the communication potential of images.

The question of research methodology is where the majority of what is seen as research activity happens and is the most visible of the three facets of the research paradigm. However, it should rightly be seen to exist below both ontology and epistemology in hierarchy. The ways in which one is able to conceive of going about the activity of seeking to gain knowledge will obviously be influenced by what one believes knowledge can be, and to what extent and in what ways one believes it can be known. Methodology is concerned with practical matters of how to gain access to knowledge within the frameworks of our ontological and epistemological beliefs about the world.

As a part of this process of seeking to find knowledge, individual methods may be developed and applied in specific circumstances to specific ends, but we must not confuse these methods with methodology itself. Methodology is not any specific technique or collection of such methods, but is rather the practically oriented strategy to whose ends methods and techniques are recruited. The shape and form of this methodological strategy arises from the underlying ontological and epistemological beliefs of the researcher.

The academic literature on approaches to research is littered with names and labels indicating various traditions, trends or schools of thought in relation to research paradigms. These are commonly depicted along some form of the realism/relativism axis. Towards the realist end of the spectrum, we find groupings

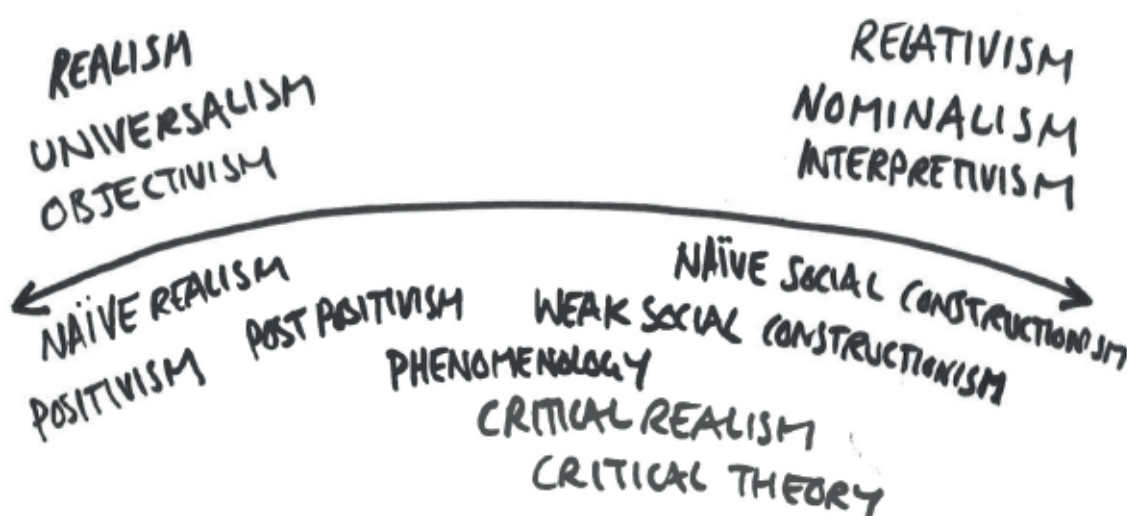


Diagram 4: Approaches to Research on a Realism/Relativism axis (...isms)

such as naïve realism, objectivism, positivism and post-positivism. In the relativist direction we find terms such as interpretivism, social constructionism in naïve and weak forms, critical realism and critical theory. Such labels can be helpful in communicating some aspects of differences between research approaches, but they are also problematic. Phenomenology is a commonly mentioned research paradigm which is relatively difficult to place in relation to others in terms of its placement on a realism/relativism continuum. Phenomenological methodologies can be undertaken in either a descriptive or interpretative spirit, each of which would place it in quite different locations on such a spectrum. Those approaches which would be ontologically realist but epistemologically relativist or vice versa are difficult to place in such schemes. The middle ground becomes rather crowded and chaotic while those labels pushed to the extremes – such as naïve realism and positivism at one end and naïve social constructionism at the other – can in our worst abuses become little more than thinly veiled insults to cast at research which we dislike.

Better practice – a more honest and charitable way of appraising research – is to consider instances of research according to their own particular paradigm in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology. Understanding something of the researcher's perspective on these three issues allows the reader to gain an insight into the true foundations of the research. Armed with this knowledge we are in a much better position to critically appraise and locate the content of this research in relation to that of other research carried out under the influence of alternative paradigms. In the hope that it will in this way be useful, I will therefore set out here a brief description of the paradigm which guides the research of this thesis in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology.

# Ontology/Epistemology/Methodology

My personal ontological beliefs are firmly realist. I do actually believe that an absolutely one hundred percent true and real reality exists. In my personal life I would not hesitate to make outrageous claims as to the nature of this truth and as to my belief that this can be known in a personal way. However, in the research context my epistemological approach is more relativistic. Although my ontological belief remains that one single reality actually exists, my epistemological belief is that it would be entirely unreasonable to make any claim that we could possibly comprehend this reality in any other way apart than from our own uniquely subjective personal perspective. I do however believe that we share enough common experience to be able to comprehend many things in roughly similar or at least collectively understandable ways. According to conventional labels, my epistemological position could possibly be located among what are generally portrayed as the mid-relativist categories somewhere in the territory of critical realism, phenomenology, weak social constructionism and critical theory paradigms. Of all the text-book formulations I have come across, the one which most closely describes my approach is David Harper's description of *critical realist social constructionism*:

Researchers adopting this position (or a 'moderate constructionist' or critical theory approach) take the position that, alongside an awareness of the importance of studying qualitative data in detail, it is also important to go beyond the text in order to add a further layer of interpretation – by setting what is said in a broader historical, cultural and social context. These researchers, then, make certain ontological claims about pre-existing material practices which can influence discourse and thus they draw on some arguments similar to those of the critical realists [...] whilst also drawing on social constructionist ideas. This grouping could be said to be ontologically realist but epistemologically relativist.<sup>(7 p.92)</sup>

Such a description sums up certain aspects of my approach. I would maintain the ontological belief that there is some truth to reality, but reject the positivist epistemological doctrine that this can be universally measured and verified in such a way which would convince others of this single truth. At the same time I would agree to a certain extent with the social constructionists that a great deal of our reality is constructed through social relations, however I would stop short of the more relativist social constructionism which might propose that all reality is pure social construction. Guba writes for example that: "'Reality' exists only in the context of a mental framework (construct) for thinking about it."<sup>(3 p.25)</sup> While I would not in any way deny that our human experience is of course always mediated by subjectivity, I cannot follow Guba to the

strong relativist social constructionist conclusions which flow from the ontological root of his position:

Constructivism thus intends neither to predict and control the “real” world nor to transform it but to *reconstruct* the “world” at the only point at which it exists: in the minds of constructors. It is the mind that is to be transformed, not the “real” world.(3 p.27)

Thus I would rather side with the critical realists who reject this ontological relativism in favour of the attitude that reality is socially constructed but that this occurs in actually existing reality not only in the subjective imaginary of the mind. Mats Alvesson nicely sums up this critical realist position:

Critical realists consider positivism and social constructionism as too superficial and non-theoretical in their way of doing research; analysis of underlying mechanisms and structures behind phenomena is what it takes to create theories that are not just concentrates of data. This orientation also has a radical vein: what is important is not just to explain the world but also to change it.<sup>(8 p.39)</sup>

In a similar way my research is fundamentally concerned not only with the observation of reality or perceptions of reality, but with considerations of how this reality could be otherwise, and whether these alternative possibilities would be preferable.



# ***Appendix B***

# B1: Interview Methodology

I would describe the interview method developed and applied in this study as an oblique or indirect method. Somewhat counterintuitively, what this means is that even though my specific motivations for conducting the interviews are to ultimately look for insights and perspectives in relation to ethics, I purposefully avoid framing the interview in this context and in fact also to a certain extent avoid overtly asking questions which might lead the interviewee towards discussion of such topics.

Instead then of conducting interviews on the subject of ethics in the context of design, my method has been to conduct interviews on the subject of design, and then see what ethical narratives emerge at we travel down the path which the interviewee's responses lead us on. By going about the interviews in this oblique way, those ethical insights which do emerge are much more likely to come about on the terms and reflecting the personal interests of the interviewee, rather than being provoked on my terms and reflecting my interests as the interviewer.

In contacting potential interviewees and arranging the interviews then, what I have proposed is simply a conversation about design, starting with some discussion of the designer's own work (see appendix B4 for example text of initial email towards arranging an interview). Before the interview took place, each participant was given the same document explaining a little about the interview which simply states:

I'm trying to find out how visual communicators working in various design related fields across Scotland think and talk about their activity. The plan is to record conversations about design and see what insights emerge. I'll have some questions to stimulate discussion, but there are no right or wrong answers. All you have to do is speak as yourself from your own unique personal viewpoint and experience.

(for the full document see appendix B5). I believe this is an accurate description of the interview method; a conversation focussed around the interviewee's viewpoint and experience of design. Therefore I do not believe there is any form of deception occurring here due to my decision not to disclose my interest in ethical issues. To the contrary, this indirect method which places the power to set the agenda of the interview firmly into the hands of the interviewee, has been developed precisely out of a desire to avoid my own subconscious twisting, moulding and shaping of the interviewee's responses to conveniently fit my own agenda.

The obvious risk of this strategy of course is that the interviewee may not say anything which remotely comes close to resembling ethical discourse. This is simply a risk which has to be faced head on. By purposefully not directly asking the question, any claims which I might attempt to make as regards the lack of a response to this question are obviously going to be built on extremely shaky foundations. However, if I do not directly ask the question, yet still find that relevant and interesting narratives in relation to this issue arise, these narratives can become a rich source of much significance. In addition, we would now have the added bonus that this material has been produced on the interviewee's own terms.

As I hope is demonstrated through the discussion of my analysis of the interviews which were carried out, this gamble paid off as each designer in their own way offered a rich wealth of ethical perspectives on their own terms which together paint a picture of some of the ways in which practicing visual communication designer are thinking about and considering ethics in relation to their work.

Developing this oblique method for gathering the perspectives of designers through interviews was not a straightforward task. Before I go on to discuss the practical details of the method used here, it will be important first of all to discuss and clarify some of the underlying philosophical foundations of this method.

## Foundations for an interview method

In the use of any interview method we must not lose sight of the fact that, as in all matters of research methodology, issues of ontology and epistemology again rear their heads. Interviewing is not simply a process of tapping participants' brains to extract data from them. We must recognise that an interview experience exists within a complex web of social tensions, and that the conclusions and significances we draw from interview material will very much depend upon what we believe the status of this material is. Mats Alvesson discusses several possible ways of thinking about approaches towards interview research, talking in terms of neopositivist, romantic and localist approaches, before adding his own further category of reflexivity.

Alvesson writes that "[t]he *neopositivist* is eager to establish a context-free truth about reality "out there" through following a research protocol and getting responses to it, minimising researcher influence and other sources of bias."<sup>(1 p.15)</sup> This position could be described as both ontologically and epistemologically realist. There is reality, and we can know it.

The romantic on the other hand “advocating a more “genuine” human interaction, believes in establishing rapport, trust and commitment between interviewer and interviewee, in particular in the interview situation.”<sup>(1 p.16)</sup> Such an approach might be placed more centrally on ontological and epistemological realist/relativist axes. The romantic interviewer searches for depth and authenticity in human interaction, seeking insights into an actually existing reality, but one which is personal and idiosyncratically tied to the interview situation.

The localist approach emphasises that interviews “must be seen in their social context. An interview is an empirical situation that can be studied as such, and it should not be treated as a tool for collecting data on something existing outside this empirical situation.”<sup>(1 p.16)</sup> Localist methodologies represent much more nominalist if not relativistic epistemologies: that experience can only be properly known in its unique existential context, and that any extrapolations away from this lose the essence of the original.

Alvesson’s suggestion of reflexivity is effectively a call for acknowledgement of the simultaneous value of a plurality of methods:

The ideal is to maintain an awareness that there is more than one good way of understanding something, and there is a great risk that the one chosen may hide more interesting understandings. Reflexivity means working with multiple interpretations in order to steer clear of traps and/or to produce rich and varied results.<sup>(1 p.25)</sup>

While such an approach is obviously relativistic, this specific relativism which calls for “conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from different angles”<sup>(1 p.25)</sup> is quite comfortable with embracing a mixture of simultaneously ontologically and epistemologically opposing approaches including non-relativistic ones. The principle is that there are different approaches, and that each of these can contribute to understanding and knowledge in different ways.

Whichever, or whichever blend of these approaches we might subscribe to, what is plain is that we must not be so naïve as to maintain that data gathered through interview methods will simply reveal “reality” to us. Even staunchly realist positions acknowledge the contested nature of speech as they attempt to reduce and minimise these ambiguities by exerting certain controls upon the gathering and analysis process.

The interview method developed and deployed within this study acknowledges the complexity and difficulty of attempting to somehow discover or reveal knowledge from accounts gathered in interviews. The challenge recognised is in offering authentic accounts of each individual participant’s narrative of

design experience which reflect their unique perspectives, yet which also are able to contribute in a meaningful way to a larger discussion on the state of ethics within design.

# IPA: Giving Voice, and Making Sense

The method developed is similar in some aspects to the psychological research approach described as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is interesting because, as the name suggests, it combines a concern for phenomenological observation of an individual's unique experience, with an interpretative element which seeks to view this experience in a wider context and through this to extrapolate some broader social meaning and significance from the personal. Larkin, Watts and Clifton describe the two aspects of IPA as “giving voice” and “making sense”:

At the heart of this perspective (and hence at the core of any piece of IPA research) lies a clearly declared phenomenological emphasis on the experiential claims and concerns of the persons taking part in the study (something which clearly distinguishes it from discourse analysis, for example). Hence, an IPA researcher must approach their data with two aims in mind. The first aim is to try to understand their participants' world, and to describe 'what it is like'. [...]

The second aim of the IPA perspective is to develop a more overtly interpretative analysis, which positions the initial 'description' in relation to a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context. This second-order account aims to provide a critical and conceptual commentary upon the participants' personal 'sense-making' activities.<sup>(2)</sup>

On the surface it sounds like the IPA approach is simply a two stage process: first, disinterested observation of unique subjective experience; then a second level interpretation of the wider significance of this. However IPA, as explained by Larkin et al. is fundamentally non-dualist; a proper understanding of the phenomenological foundation upon which it is based reveals that – as Edmund Husserl, the “father” of phenomenology was – it is “profoundly set against the dualistic separation of egos from worlds (and hence in the modern parlance, the separation of subject from object).”<sup>(2 p.105)</sup>

A mistaken understanding of phenomenology might suggest that it is interested only in how phenomena appear subjectively to individuals, as opposed to how things *really* are, which would be left to the so-called hard sciences to determine. Larkin et al. emphasise the profound point which Husserl was attempting to make in establishing the phenomenological approach:

that the *only* certain or objective knowledge humans could have of anything would have to be attained via processes of consciousness (for we must inevitably encounter the world through that



medium). In one sense, then, he brackets out the whole question of whether a reality exists which is separate from us (and our thoughts about it). In another more profound sense, his view offers us the possibility of a completely fresh interpretation of the word 'reality', which acknowledges that the term is indeed derived from a verb which means 'to think'. Following this interpretation through, we might suggest that 'reality' is better understood to mean something approximate to 'what is thought about things in general' (see Bohm, 1980 for a full outline of this argument), rather than 'how things really are when thought is removed' (which seems to be the typical modern interpretation).<sup>(2 p.106)</sup>

In this way then, phenomenology properly conceived is not dualistic, separating subject and object, but is rather a unified approach to knowledge, one which confounds our expectations of ontological and epistemological positionings by essentially maintaining that we cannot conceive of these separately.

Larkin et al. help to clarify this through reference to Martin Heidegger's assertion that our very nature as human beings is characterised by "Dasein", the property of "being-there"; we are never, and cannot ever be a disinterested neutral observer of phenomena but are "always somewhere, always located and always amidst and involved with some kind of meaningful context."<sup>(2 p.106)</sup> We are never just persons, but always persons-in-context, and we cannot escape the fact that our perceptions of reality will always come into existence through the lens of this context.

The crucial point is that this being-in-context is inescapably our only way of understanding reality. Heideggerian phenomenology starts with this epistemological position and must work backwards to ontology – those beliefs about what the fundamental nature of reality actually is. Very briefly, the Heideggerian position on reality is that ontologically things do of course exist independently of human beings' perception and understanding of them; however, to us as human beings, the existence of these things means literally absolutely nothing until we are able to conceive of them through our position of being-in-the-world. A thing may exist, but it remains a *no-thing* until it is encountered and recognised as *any-thing* by a person-in-context.<sup>(2 p.107)</sup> As such, in what way can we really say that "things" exist at all prior to our perception of them? This is no relativistic denial of the existence of reality: rather it is a shift in perspective of the goalposts of what we mean by reality and existence.

The passage from David Bohm's 1980 book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* referred to by Larkin et al. in the quotation above, offers a clear explication of this way of thinking:

What, then, is the origin of the word 'reality'? This comes from the Latin 'res', which means 'thing'. To be real is to be a 'thing'. 'Reality' in its earlier meaning would then signify 'thinghood in general' or 'the quality of being a thing'. It is particularly interesting that 'res' comes from the verb 'rerī', meaning 'to think', so that literally, 'res' is 'what is thought about'. It is of course implicit that what is thought about has an existence that is independent of the process of thought, or in other words, that while we create and sustain an idea as a mental image by thinking about it, we do not create and sustain a 'real thing' in this way. Nevertheless, the 'real thing' is limited by conditions that can be expressed in terms of thought. Of course, the real thing has more in it than can ever be implied by the content of our thought about it, as can always be revealed by further observations. Moreover, our thought is not in general completely correct, so that the real thing may be expected ultimately to show behaviour or properties contradicting some of the implications of our thought about it. <sup>(3 p.69)</sup>

The foundations of Heideggerian phenomenological approaches to research therefore lie in the recognition that our only way of interfacing with reality is through our phenomenological experience of being-in-the-world. The "P" in IPA type research methodologies is obviously the phenomenological element emerging from such a combined epistemo-ontological foundation, but the "I" for Interpretative is also equally rooted here.

A stereotypical criticism of phenomenology is that it is too purely descriptive, seeking to furnish us with an accurate insider-perspective depiction of an individual's experience but not having much more to say beyond this. An IPA type methodology absolutely rejects this. If all human understanding of the world is equally grounded in experience of being-in-the-world, then yes one important step towards understanding will be investigation and exposing of experience: *giving voice* to this experience for all to consider. However, simply giving voice to experience does not in itself constitute research. The necessary second stage is *making sense* of this experience. This interpretation is not an optional add-on but a recognition of something which always takes place in the gathering and presentation of accounts of experience. The most positivist objectivist methodologies may claim simply to present raw experience, but this presentation will always, no matter what "scientific" procedures have been implemented, have been interpreted in some way. Instead of claiming objectivity, an IPA approach foregrounds and makes conscious the interpretative element. It seeks to openly investigate what meanings might be contained within this investigated experience which has occurred within a specific context, also being particularly aware of the context of data-gathering and what influences this might have on the participant's reporting of their

phenomenological experience.

As I have already alluded, this IPA type approach as described by Larkin et al. in reference Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenology, bears several similarities to my approach in developing an interview method for this project. I did not set out to conduct interviews with designers out of a motivation to produce an account of the objectively verifiable truth and reality of practicing designers' contemporary attitudes towards ethics in their work. Instead what I have sought to do, is to develop a method which hopes to do some justice in giving voice to the experiences of designers in the specific moment and time of the unique situation and context which they find themselves in.

However simply giving voice to the narratives presented to me by the designers I interview will not get me any closer to my research aims. In attempting to present meaningful accounts of these unique individual experiences, I must go beyond the merely descriptive reporting of the designers' experiences and move into interpretation of these accounts within a broader context. In this way, these idiosyncratic unique accounts can become indicators of important issues which have implications far beyond the specific boundaries of the particular situations from which they have emerged.

If phenomenological reporting aims to reveal something on its own terms as it presents itself, interpretation is the vitally important process which seeks to bring light to those things which present themselves as something else than what they are. The nature of reality understood as described here as fundamentally filtered through consciousness therefore requires this further interpretative process. As Larkin et al. write:

If the objective reality we discover is partly dependent upon processes of intellectual construction and hence upon our various modes of subjective engagement with the world [...], then any analysis of our intellectual constructions must also reveal something of the objective reality. An account produced by a research participant can hence be used thematically to reveal something very tangible and very real about the constitution of the 'object' we are studying.<sup>(2 p.110-111)</sup>

The interviews I have carried out with designers are presented as unique narratives reflecting individual experiences. However, these face-value accounts of persons-in-context must also be interpreted within that broader context; taking into account the perspectives of social pressures and theoretical ideas which shape, form and influence the individual's encounter with the world and which work together to form these conceptions of reality.

Through this simultaneous methodology of giving voice and making sense, insights which reach much

further than the specific contexts of the interviewees can be uncovered, insights which may potentially prove to have something useful and meaningful to say to the larger issues of the entanglements between design and ethics which are of interest here.

# Summary of interview method

Practically then, in terms of how this methodological foundation has been worked out into an interview method, I have already mentioned the first principle by which the interviews are set up without mentioning in any overt way the subject of ethics so as not to bias the trajectory of the interview from the start. By giving the interviewee the power to choose the initial direction of conversation, it is hoped that their own voice in terms of their interests and experiences may be allowed to emerge more authentically than it might in response to a more specific socially charged enquiry. Of course the context of design work has been chosen and declared, specifically a suggestion that we might begin by talking about some recent work which the designer has been involved with.

The interview method is therefore by no means completely free-form and un-directed, although some effort is put into making it appear to be at least relatively relaxed and informal. From initial contact with potential interviewees through to the end of the interview itself I try to create an informal atmosphere and rapport with the interviewee. It is emphasised that there are no specific questions to be answered, only some topics to be discussed, starting with the interviewee's own work. In actual fact I enter into each interview armed with the same rough structure of question prompts which can be employed when necessary to stimulate conversation. However digressions and tangents from this are pursued wherever the interviewee seems interested.

## Structure

The questions chosen as prompts have been carefully chosen to stimulate conversation about the designer's work first of all at a fairly conventional level, simply asking about the recent project which the interviewee has in mind. This allows the interviewee to set their own agenda, tone and language from the start. From this relatively loose beginning, using the prompts the conversation may be guided towards opportunities for the interviewee to discuss topics relating to questions of value – what is good/bad/successful design? Eventually, questions which might be more open to ethical interpretations such as whether design has a role in society, and to what extent design has responsibilities in this are asked.

Although each interview starts in the same way, an important principle of the method is that the conversation should be allowed to flow whichever way the interviewee takes it. My list of question prompts

Table 9: Interview Questions

Prompt	Fuller Form Question	Rationale for asking
<b>Project</b>	Tell me about this project.	To get the designer talking about their work on their own terms. The decision to ask about the designer's own work is taken in order to provide a subject material which they are familiar and comfortable with. This first question provides an opportunity to hear the designer talk in their own language about design and design related issues, with very minimal influence or direction from me apart from the suggestion that I would like to hear their own perspective on their own work.
<b>Process</b>	Can you talk me through your process in developing this piece?	This question is simply a prompt to encourage the interviewee to speak more about their work.
<b>Constraints</b>	What were some of the constraints or limitations you had to work within?	Another prompt to encourage the interviewee to speak more about their work.
<b>Viewer</b>	Do you think the viewer would understand this piece in the same way that you intended it to be understood?	This question is conceived as a slight provocation, raising what could possibly be seen as a challenge to the narrative which the designer has been telling about their work, to prompt further discussion, perhaps even defence of this work.
<b>W goals?</b>	What were you trying to achieve as the designer here? What were your goals?	This question seeks to provoke clarification or more explicit explanation of rationales for the direction of work.
<b>Measure Success?</b>	Do you think this was a successful project? How would you measure success in this project?	Asking about success is an attempt to prompt the designer to talk about the values and qualities which they see as key to success: these perspectives can open up wider insights into the designer's attitudes and motivations in design. The question of measurement opens opportunities for discussion on ideas of subjectivity/objectivity and different ways of considering the value of design work.
<b>Generally</b>	Thinking a bit more abstractly now about design in general...	Shifting point in the interview away from exclusively personal work to thinking about design as a whole.
<b>Good D?</b>	What qualities do you think make a design a good design?	The choice to use the ambiguous word "good" is deliberate, allowing the interviewee to take this whichever way they wish.
<b>Bad?</b>	What makes a bad design?	Similarly with "bad" although obviously this is likely to mirror in opposite the senses discussed in response to the previous prompt.
<b>W is D?</b>	What do you think design is?	An opportunity to open up wider reflection on the subject of design in general.
<b>W Ders Do?</b>	What do you think it is that designers fundamentally do?	An opportunity to reflect on the activity of designers.
<b>Purpose?</b>	What do you think the purpose of design is, if you think there is one?	The question of purpose probes the designer's views not simply on the how and what of design, but now their perspectives on "why".
<b>Biggest Issue in D?</b>	What do you think the biggest issue facing design is today?	This question suggests ideas of challenges or problems in design. Asking what the biggest issue in design is gives the interviewee an opportunity to talk about what they might see as more negative aspects of design.
<b>Perfect World?</b>	What would design be like in a perfect world?	This question, following the previous, prompts an imagining of a design world without problems, which can reveal much about perspectives on perceptions of existing negative aspects through the imagining of positives.
<b>Power...?</b>	If you had ultimate power to change any one thing about the way design is, what would you change?	This prompts similar discussion of what are seen as negatives in design and how they might be changed.
<b>Role of D in Soc?</b>	Do you think design has a role in society?	This question gives an opportunity for the interviewee to express ethical perspectives. This is included late on in the interview so as not to set an ethical tone too early, and it must be recognised that responses to this question will have been influenced by the trajectory which the discussion has taken so far.
<b>Resp?</b>	Do you think design has responsibilities?	Asked in context of response to the previous question, this question prompts further consideration of the designer's perspective on the strength of design's role in society, whether it might be seen as a responsibility or optional.
<b>Fuel</b>	What fuels you as a designer?	This question prompts the interviewee to consider their motivation and continuous inspiration to continue in designing.
<b>Reading</b>	Do you read magazines/blogs about design?	This question looks to establish a picture of what outside influences and perspectives are contributing to the designer's world-view.
<b>Theory</b>	What role does theory play in your work?	This question would seek to establish something of the designer's perspective and conception of "theory", what this might mean to them. In carrying out the interviews, this question was rarely asked.



may or may not be used, or may be used partially or in a different order as those topics naturally arise in the participant's conversation.

Table 9 shows the standard set of note-form prompts in the left column as they would appear in my notebook to be used during the interview. The middle column shows the fuller form of the question as it might be asked, although the specific form of each question would change depending on the nature of the interview up to that point. The right hand column shows some of the reasons for choosing these specific questions, and the type of responses which it is imagined they might provoke.

In contacting each participant, it is made clear from the start that their personal identity and any potentially identifying details in what they might say during the interview will be anonymised and replaced with place-holder details. Each participant is made aware prior to the interview that I would like to record and transcribe our conversation and that parts of this transcription may potentially eventually feature in my thesis and other publically accessible research papers. The assurance of anonymity is made in the hope that it may work towards creating an environment in which the interviewees feel they can talk more openly about some issues than if they were concerned about potential for offending clients, colleagues or competitors. In anonymising the interviewees' identities, new names were chosen for each participant using an online baby-name database. Other identifying details are exchanged for non-identifiable generic substitutions which retain the flow of the original speech.

On the back of the document mentioned previously (appendix B5) which was sent to each participant explaining motivations and hopes for the interview, there is a series of questions which each participant is asked to fill in which serve to provide some sort of rough demographic information as regards age, level of formal education, number of years of experience in design etc. As well as this, a selection of more personal questions asking for instance what the participant's favourite designer, film, book, newspaper etc. was also included. One reason for including this was simply out of interest to see whether any patterns emerged between these personal preferences and interview content, but an important part of the reasoning was also to subtly reinforce the personal emphasis of the interview; that the stated purpose of the interview is to record the participant's personal viewpoint and experience, not to quiz them in relation to specific issues.

Perhaps the simplest and most concise way to further explain the working out of the practicalities of this interview method would be to consider an example of one of the interviews carried out. Let us consider the case of "Robert".

The demographic information gathered tells us that Robert is aged between 36-45, that he is creative director of a design studio, that he is educated to honours degree level and has seventeen years of design experience. I meet Robert in a Coffee shop, I buy us both a drink, we make some small talk and I confirm with him that he is comfortable for me to record our conversation before I turn on the audio recorder. I properly begin the interview then by saying: "So maybe a good way to start is maybe to think about a project you've been working on and maybe talk through that..." Robert then begins talking about his work. I do not ask another question for the next forty minutes as Robert continues to speak. During this time, he covers a lot of interesting content which will provide rich material for analysis. As long as he is quite happy to continue talking and is speaking about his personal perspectives on design, I am quite happy to continue to let him speak. Eventually, I pick up one point which has surfaced a few times in Robert's monologue:

P: Maybe I can just pick up on a couple of points...

R: yeah sure.

P: I think one of the things that's quite clear in your strategy is this idea of helping, helping the client, and that's what kind of design is for, is that the purpose of design?

This question logically follows the agenda set by Robert, but also matches with my prepared framework of questions allowing me to focus in on this prominent feature of his account and giving him an opportunity to elaborate and clarify his position. At a natural break in his speech I take the opportunity to ask one of my prompt questions which seems natural in context of what Robert has been speaking about:

R: Anyway... I do tend to rant on a bit.

P: no no it's good. Emm what do you think, do you see there's any big problems in design as a kind of industry: big issues like if you could sort out, could change one thing what would it be?

When Robert again brings up the recurrent issue of design being used to help people in their lives, I take the opportunity to ask a further question which digs deeper into this:

P: Do you think, talking about all these things that design can do, and helping people, do you think there's ... what about the situation when sometimes you might not want to help a client with a particular goal that they might have that you maybe don't agree with, what about that?

This question does not appear on my prepared list, but makes sense in the context of the discussion. When

Robert goes on to talk of political issues in design I take the opportunity to ask whether he thinks design has a role in society which is a question from the list. To finish up the interview I ask what fuels Robert as a designer.

In all then, throughout the interview, after the initial invitation to speak about his work, I ask only five questions which generally follow naturally in the flow of Robert's conversation, but receive in return a largely unprompted wealth of material.

Each interview is allowed to take its own direction. In some interviews I work more methodically through my list of prompts as the interviewee is less chatty. In other's still, the thread of conversation leads far away into new and unexpected territory. Although in each case the interviewee was asked for 30-45 minutes of their time, the actual lengths of the interviews varied. The shortest interview lasted just twenty three minutes while the longest lasted over one hour and forty minutes. In each case where the interviewee seemed keen to talk for more than the initially suggested forty five minutes I would make a judgement call as to whether to politely wrap up the session or to continue and allow the interviewee to continue expressing their views points. Often very interesting material emerges later on in the interview process as the interviewee relaxes and speaks more openly and freely. In several cases, once the audio equipment had been turned off the participant would make interesting points which I took notes of in my notebook.

## Sample

Ten visual communicators were interviewed as part of this study. This small number reflects the depth of the approach in seeking to do justice to individual accounts. The aim in conducting these interviews was to gain some understanding of the perspectives of practicing designers and as the particular focus of the research is on visual communication design it was decided to select a sample based on these initial criteria of being designers making a living within visual communication. This immediately excluded students from the sample. At the other end of the spectrum, it was decided to avoid a strategy of seeking to interview well-known high-level "celebrity" or "star" designers who are seen as leaders in the field. Such superstars may well have fascinating perspectives, but these are likely to be relatively unconventional, emerging from the privileged world of a small elite of individuals with a generally ab-normal experience of the design profession. What was felt to be of more relevance to this study would be the perspectives of those involved at the more conventional level of everyday design work.

The in-depth method chosen necessitated a small sample size. The individuals selected to be part of the sample were therefore carefully chosen so as to represent a spread of different experiences within the boundaries of living-making visual communication. It was decided to try to reflect experiences of senior, mid and junior level designers within both studio and freelance settings. The designation of visual communication design was set to mean any discipline or activity of designing which communicates visually: from graphic design, to web-design, to motion, to illustration.

The somewhat arbitrary geographical boundary of Scotland was set as a reasonable constraint to avoid unnecessary travel when this sample could easily be satisfied within that area. The decision to keep the area as broad as Scotland rather than focussing on one specific city or region was to achieve some diversity and avoid the unbalanced influence of a single particular regional professional culture (e.g. design in Aberdeen is noticeably influenced by the presence of the oil industry).

Participants were recruited through contacts in a targeted manner rather than randomly or opportunistically. Some contacts were made by identifying individuals from a database of designers who had previously been involved with the university, others were made through personal contacts.

Table 10 below shows some details of the makeup of the final sample.

These ten individuals represent a fairly broad cross section of experience within visual communication design in Scotland. Six work within studio or agency environments, while four operate independently in what is classified here as freelance work. There is a good spread of levels of experience and seniority. Six identify primarily as graphic designers working across a range of media, two are focussed on web design, one works mostly in motion and animation and one is an illustrator. Only two are female. This was not by design but simply by virtue of who responded to invitations to be interviewed. Gender was not considered as a primarily significant factor in selecting the sample, and I believe that it has not proved to be a significant factor in analysis.

## **Analysis**

The process of analysis begins in the interview itself. During each interview I take notes of the interviewee's account in my notebook. Immediately afterwards I write down my initial impressions of the individual and any points which appeared at the time to have been of particular importance to their narrative as

I had experienced it being relayed to me. As soon as possible after the interview has taken place I begin transcription of the audio files recorded. This lengthy and painstaking process helps me to become very familiar with the text content of each interview. One of the reasons for attempting to conduct this transcription as soon as possible after the event itself is to be able to have not only the audible speech content available to me in transcribing, but also fresh recent memories of body language and tone of voice etc. which help to build a more complete impression of the human interaction of the interview situation. As I have already discussed, an important primary goal of this interview method is the attempt to authentically give voice to the perspectives which the interviewees have presented to me as the interviewer. The interview situation is not a scientific laboratory setup, but a human interaction between the participant and myself, and so every effort is made to immerse myself into that environment in order to be able to report the experience through the transcription as authentically as possible. A sample transcript from one interview can be found in appendix B6.

Having transcribed the interviews in this way, I now have a text with which to work, although I would emphasise that the conception of “text” here is not simply the written text of the transcription but the deeper more multi-modal understanding which can only have come about through personally being involved in the experience of the interview situation.<sup>(4)</sup>

The next stage of analysis is to closely examine this text, reading through the transcriptions several times and making notes as to the content expressed by the interviewee. By doing this, a picture emerges of the

Name	Based in	Age	Years Experience	Education	Studio	Freelance	Job Title	Prestige		
Lesley	Glasgow	46-55	30	College		X	Graphic Designer			X
Lee	Aberdeen	36-45	20	Degree		X	Proprietor/Director		X	
Robert	Aberdeen	36-45	17	Degree	X		Creative Director	X		
Erik	Aberdeen	36-45	17	College	X		Creative Principal	X		
John	Aberdeen	26-35	8	Degree	X		Creative Designer		X	
Laura	Aberdeen	26-35	6-8	Degree	X		Developer & Studio Manager			X
Chris	Glasgow	18-25	5	Postgrad		X	Illustrator/Architecture Student		X	
Justin	Edinburgh	18-25	4.5	Degree		X	Digital & Motion Designer		X	
David	Glasgow	18-25	2	Degree	X		Junior Designer			X
Keith	Aberdeen	18-25	1	College	X		Designer/Developer			X

Table 10: Interview Participants

prominent themes articulated in the interview situation by the interviewee.

It is at this stage of the analysis that I begin to focus my activity towards attempting to identify and give voice to the ethical elements in each individual's interview narrative. Still being concerned to offer an authentic presentation of the interviewee's account, this means looking not primarily for what I consider to be ethical issues, but rather searching to identify those issues which are presented in any way resembling an ethical concern or interest on the interviewee's own terms. For each interview I write up a summary of these emergent ethical issues and topics, which discusses them in the context of the interviewee's account.

This stage of the analysis which on the surface is ostensibly concerned with authentically giving voice to the ethical content of the interviewee's account (what would be the P in IPA), is of course not simply a matter of descriptive reporting, but inevitably must also be a process of my interpretation and making sense of the interviewee's presented narrative (what would be the I in IPA). This interpretation is not simply my personal opinion and perspective on what the interviewer has said, but rather takes place within the rigorous immersive interpretative phenomenological method in which the content of speech material gathered through the interview is understood not as a straightforward reflection of reality extracted directly from the brain of the interviewee, but as the product of a human interaction and social factors in a specific situation. Interpretation is therefore not a limitation but a vital stage of the data analysis.

The depth of analysis conducted in relation to each interview account cannot be easily conveyed through simplistic tables as might be expected in a coded thematic analysis. A written summary is able to reflect slightly more but must also be recognised as only a summary. For each interviewee, a summary which highlights the key themes and issues identified through my interpretive analysis has been written. These summaries can be found in appendix B7. Nevertheless extremely simplified tables summarising emergent themes in each narrative can be found below. This is only an extremely simplified presentation of a much deeper analysis.

A temptation wherever "data" is presented in lists or tables, is to treat this data as if it is quantitative data. It must be remembered here that the lists presented here are summaries of key themes identified through a qualitative interpretive analysis. Though many similar themes are identified across multiple accounts, any attempt to crudely merge or combine these lists to claim correlations etc. between these multiple accounts would be misguided. Each narrative must be valued as a unique site in itself.

This is not however to say that no connections can be made between these narratives, or that claims to



the significance of commonly emerging themes cannot be made. Having identified key ethical themes as expressed by each participant within their own narrative, the next level of analysis is to look beyond each individual account to see what connections and comparisons can be made with others in the sample and further beyond this to ideas at wider levels of the profession, societal and theoretical discourse. Connecting individual narratives to wider discourses draws out the relevance and importance of these unique idiosyncratic perspectives. Fragments of this analysis can be found throughout the thesis as connections and links are made from issues being discussed back to the interview narratives. The key distinction to be maintained here is that any connections and claims made as to common themes developing across multiple narratives are made at the level of discourse rather than at the level of individual accounts.

Emphasising again that tables included here are only simplified illustrative presentations summarising deeper analysis, following the summaries of emergent themes, further tables are included below indicating how these themes could be mapped onto larger discourses. In this way the existence of common concerns can be recognised surrounding discourses of: autonomy; economic pressures; tensions between ideal conceptions of design and commercial realities; ideas of respect, trust and value in relation to designers' activity; the compromising of personal principles; debates around qualities such as beauty, functionality and originality within design work; the responsibilities of design; and issues relating to community, culture and relationships regarding design work. Codes attached to each theme identified within an individual account can be used to trace these uniquely emerging issues back to their origins.

These categories are not proposed as an exhaustive list of all discourses present within these ten narratives. They are merely some broad categories which are proposed in order to convey an overview of some of the key ethical discourses which have been identified across the set, through interpretive analysis of each individual narrative.

## B2: Emergent themes (summary)

### B2.1 Chris

C1	Desire for autonomy
C2	Imperative to earn money
C3	Desire to avoid compromising principles due to economic pressures
C4	Entrepreneurial strategies as route to autonomy
C5	Desire to separate personal and commercial aspects of practice
C6	Beauty as a worthwhile end in itself
C7	Conflict between pleasing client and meeting personal standards of good work

### B2.2 David

D1	Loss of passion for design through commercial work
D2	Design not a hobby anymore
D3	Importance of continuous learning
D4	Compromise with client constant reality
D5	Conflict between pleasing client and meeting personal standards of good work
D6	Desire for design to be valued / respected
D7	Pressure to create "original" work
D8	Importance of functionality / fitness for purpose
D9	Links commercial work with consumerism
D10	Compromising Principles due to economic pressures
D11	Pragmatic acceptance of consumerism as reality despite personally held anti-consumerist beliefs
D12	Demonstrates ability to separate work from personal principles

### B2.3 Frank

F1	Cynicism through experience
F2	Pragmatic acceptance of compromise with clients
F3	Loves job, but through experience increasingly considers it as "just a job"
F4	Desire for design to be valued / respected by clients
F5	Design should (in theory) make life easier for people
F6	But... ultimately "trying to sell shit to people that they don't need" (consumerism)
F7	Drawing the line at working for certain political parties
F8	Ability to undertake work which directly conflicts with personal beliefs
F9	Trade-off between personal convictions and opportunity to do creative work: hates smoking but enjoyed creative challenge of tobacco advertising
F10	Doing interesting work with integrity is prized over both economics and ethics

F11	Demonstrates ability to separate work from personal values: aware of having compromised personal principles in past
F12	In a business to make money: to pay the mortgage, bills etc.
F13	Fitness for purpose: design has to work
F14	Functionalist neutrality perspective on design
F15	Bread and butter work supports enjoyable creative work
F16	Beauty as a worthwhile end in itself
F17	Prohibition of plagiarism / importance of developing personal style / originality

#### B2.4 John

J1	Cynicism through experience
J2	Complete loss of passion for design through commercial work
J3	Design no longer a hobby
J4	Desire for design to be valued / respected
J5	Pragmatic acceptance of compromise with clients
J6	Desire for design industry to improve itself
J7	Perceives externally imposed economic/cultural boundaries upon design's activity
J8	Motivated by money: financial success
J9	Motivated by desire for respect from peers
J10	Good design = technical quality and originality

#### B2.5 Justin

T1	Desire for autonomy achieved through freelance work, regaining work/life balance
T2	Disapproval of unpaid internships
T3	Desire for value/respect as an individual achieved through freelance work
T4	Importance of good personal relationships with others to work
T5	Freelance autonomy allows to undertake personal work
T6	Responsibility to do good work for client, not for personal satisfaction
T7	Frustration with low quality work leads to call for standards or accreditation of some kind
T8	Social role of design found in responsibility for excellent communication

#### B2.6 Keith

K1	Values constantly evolving nature of discipline
K2	Functionality valued over aesthetics
K3	Suggests mutual client/designer respect can be achieved through good working relationship
K4	Design's purpose is to achieve the client's aims
K5	Disapproval of lack of originality evidenced by trend following
K6	Values community support

## B2.7 Laura

L1	Frustration with economic restraints on projects which dictate ability to produce quality work
L2	Client trust equated with desired autonomy to pursue interesting work
L3	Need to earn money
L4	Compromise with client constant reality
L5	Personal satisfaction with work comes second to client satisfaction
L6	Design's purpose as problem solving
L7	Design to be valued as professionals by clients and trusted by them on this basis
L8	Social role of design found in responsibility for excellent communication
L9	Importance of giving credit where due / prohibition of plagiarism
L10	Openness valued within supportive community of colleagues

## B2.8 Lee

E1	Design enjoyable because doesn't feel like a job
E2	Flexible working fits around family life
E3	Interesting work makes work interesting
E4	Dabbles with entrepreneurial strategies seeking autonomy and new challenges, but returned to balance between conventional working and entrepreneurship due to challenging economic realities
E5	Places value on good functionality for user above client's demands
E6	Design not political, but responsible for its own spheres of influence
E7	Design cannot save the world, but can do some good
E8	Drawing the line at working for certain political parties
E9	Deep engagement with issues valued over superficial styling
E10	Misses social element of team working
E11	Values relationships built with steady clients
E12	Autonomy connected with trust from client
E13	Good relationships with client to work together to "bend" and "accommodate" rather than compromise

## B2.9 Lesley

S1	Respect and trust found in clients who loyally provide regular work
S2	Happy to sacrifice creative autonomy, being used as a tool, when respected in other ways
S3	Need to earn money: identifies respect in clients who pay promptly
S4	Work/Life balance: flexible working fits around family life
S5	Finds satisfaction in application of technical skill
S6	Family prioritised over career progression

S7	Designer as Entrepreneur: designer as dog-sitter
S8	Local relational outlook: barter and trade for services + word of mouth
S9	Beauty as a worthwhile end in itself
S10	Design should improve people's lives
S11	Gains greater satisfaction from work which connects on a personal level
S12	Values honesty in professional relations

#### B2.10 Robert

R1	Desire to see respect for design as a legitimate profession
R2	Respect connected to desired levels of autonomy
R3	Mutually earned respect and trust between client and designer will result in better work
R4	Design's purpose is helping lives
R5	Design helps businesses achieve goals and helps people towards achieving lifestyles
R6	Design cumulatively has social impact at a historical level
R7	Form and function: fitness for purpose: design has to work
R8	Unpalatable commercial work "a necessary evil"
R9	Drawing the line at working for certain companies or political parties
R10	Mutual respect cannot exist between parties with incompatible agendas
R11	Responsibility to employees and colleagues to not force them to cross a line of conscience
R12	Importance of trust, respect and openness between colleagues
R13	Importance of personal creative projects

## B3: Themes mapped to discourses (summary)

### B3.1 Autonomy

C1	Desire for autonomy
C4	Entrepreneurial strategies as route to autonomy
T1	Desire for autonomy achieved through freelance work, regaining work/life balance
T5	Freelance autonomy allows to undertake personal work
L2	Client trust equated with desired autonomy to pursue interesting work
L3	Need to earn money
E4	Dabbles with entrepreneurial strategies seeking autonomy and new challenges, but returned to balance between conventional working and entrepreneurship due to challenging economic realities
E12	Autonomy connected with trust from client
S2	Happy to sacrifice creative autonomy, being used as a tool, when respected in other ways
S7	Designer as Entrepreneur: designer as dog-sitter
R2	Respect connected to desired levels of autonomy

### B3.2 Tension between ideal design and commercial reality

C5	Desire to separate personal and commercial aspects of practice
C7	Conflict between pleasing client and meeting personal standards of good work
D1	Loss of passion for design through commercial work
D2	Design not a hobby anymore
D4	Compromise with client constant reality
D5	Conflict between pleasing client and meeting personal standards of good work
D12	Demonstrates ability to separate work from personal principles
F1	Cynicism through experience
F2	Pragmatic acceptance of compromise with clients
F3	Loves job, but through experience increasingly considers it as "just a job"
F11	Demonstrates ability to separate work from personal values: aware of having compromised personal principles in past
J1	Cynicism through experience
J2	Complete loss of passion for design through commercial work
J3	Design no longer a hobby
J5	Pragmatic acceptance of compromise with clients
J7	Perceives externally imposed economic/cultural boundaries upon design's activity
T6	Responsibility to do good work for client, not for personal satisfaction
L1	Frustration with economic restraints on projects which dictate ability to produce quality work
L4	Compromise with client constant reality
L5	Personal satisfaction with work comes second to client satisfaction



E1	Design enjoyable because doesn't feel like a job
E12	Autonomy connected with trust from client
E13	Good relationships with client to work together to "bend" and "accommodate" rather than compromise
R8	Unpalatable commercial work "a necessary evil"

### B3.3 Economic Pressures

C2	Imperative to earn money
F12	In a business to make money: to pay the mortgage, bills etc.
J8	Motivated by money: financial success
L3	Need to earn money
S3	Need to earn money: identifies respect in clients who pay promptly
F15	Bread and butter work supports enjoyable creative work
R8	Unpalatable commercial work "a necessary evil"
L1	Frustration with economic restraints on projects which dictate ability to produce quality work
J7	Perceives externally imposed economic/cultural boundaries upon design's activity
C3	Desire to avoid compromising principles due to economic pressures
D10	Compromising Principles due to economic pressures
S7	Designer as Entrepreneur: designer as dog-sitter
E4	Dabbles with entrepreneurial strategies seeking autonomy and new challenges, but returned to balance between conventional working and entrepreneurship due to challenging economic realities

### B3.4 Respect / trust / value

D6	Desire for design to be valued / respected
F4	Desire for design to be valued / respected by clients
J4	Desire for design to be valued / respected
T3	Desire for value/respect as an individual achieved through freelance work
K3	Suggests mutual client/designer respect can be achieved through good working relationship
L2	Client trust equated with desired autonomy to pursue interesting work
L7	Design to be valued as professionals by clients and trusted by them on this basis
S1	Respect and trust found in clients who loyally provide regular work
S2	Happy to sacrifice creative autonomy, being used as a tool, when respected in other ways
S3	Need to earn money: identifies respect in clients who pay promptly
S12	Values honesty in professional relations
R1	Desire to see respect for design as a legitimate profession
R2	Respect connected to desired levels of autonomy
R3	Mutually earned respect and trust between client and designer will result in better work
R10	Mutual respect cannot exist between parties with incompatible agendas

### B3.5 Compromising principles

C3	Desire to avoid compromising principles due to economic pressures
D9	Links commercial work with consumerism
D10	Compromising Principles due to economic pressures
D11	Pragmatic acceptance of consumerism as reality despite personally held anti-consumerist beliefs
F7	Drawing the line at working for certain political parties
F8	Ability to undertake work which directly conflicts with personal beliefs
F9	Trade-off between personal convictions and opportunity to do creative work: hates smoking but enjoyed creative challenge of tobacco advertising
F10	Doing interesting work with integrity is prized over both economics and ethics
F11	Demonstrates ability to separate work from personal values: aware of having compromised personal principles in past
E8	Drawing the line at working for certain political parties
R9	Drawing the line at working for certain companies or political parties
R11	Responsibility to employees and colleagues to not force them to cross a line of conscience

### B3.6 Qualities of good design work: beauty / functionality / originality

C6	Beauty as a worthwhile end in itself
S9	Beauty as a worthwhile end in itself
F16	Beauty as a worthwhile end in itself
D8	Importance of functionality / fitness for purpose
F13	Fitness for purpose: design has to work
F14	Functionalist neutrality perspective on design
L6	Design's purpose as problem solving
E5	Places value on good functionality for user above client's demands
R7	Form and function: fitness for purpose: design has to work
S5	Finds satisfaction in application of technical skill
K2	Functionality valued over aesthetics
E9	Deep engagement with issues valued over superficial styling
T8	Social role of design found in responsibility for excellent communication
J10	Good design = technical quality and originality
T7	Frustration with low quality work leads to call for standards or accreditation of some kind
D7	Pressure to create "original" work
F10	Doing interesting work with integrity is prized over both economics and ethics
F17	Prohibition of plagiarism / importance of developing personal style / originality
K5	Disapproval of lack of originality evidenced by trend following
E3	Interesting work makes work interesting
R3	Mutually earned respect and trust between client and designer will result in better work

### B3.7 Design's responsibilities

F5	Design should (in theory) make life easier for people
F6	But... ultimately “trying to sell shit to people that they don’t need” (consumerism)
S10	Design should improve people’s lives
R4	Design’s purpose is helping lives
E6	Design not political, but responsible for its own spheres of influence
E7	Design cannot save the world, but can do some good
R6	Design cumulatively has social impact at a historical level
R5	Design helps businesses achieve goals and helps people towards achieving lifestyles
T6	Responsibility to do good work for client, not for personal satisfaction
K4	Design’s purpose is to achieve the client’s aims
L8	Social role of design found in responsibility for excellent communication
L9	Importance of giving credit where due / prohibition of plagiarism
R11	Responsibility to employees and colleagues to not force them to cross a line of conscience

### B3.8 Community / culture / relationships

D3	Importance of continuous learning
J6	Desire for design industry to improve itself
J9	Motivated by desire for respect from peers
T2	Disapproval of unpaid internships
T3	Desire for value/respect as an individual achieved through freelance work
T4	Importance to work of good personal relationships with others
K1	Values constantly evolving nature of discipline
K3	Suggests mutual client/designer respect can be achieved through good working relationship
K6	Values community support
L10	Openness valued within supportive community of colleagues
E2	Flexible working fits around family life
E10	Misses social element of team working
E11	Values relationships built with steady clients
S1	Respect and trust found in clients who loyally provide regular work
S4	Work/Life balance: flexible working fits around family life
S6	Family prioritised over career progression
S8	Local relational outlook: barter and trade for services + word of mouth
S11	Gains greater satisfaction from work which connects on a personal level
S12	Values honesty in professional relations
R3	Mutually earned respect and trust between client and designer will result in better work
R10	Mutual respect cannot exist between parties with incompatible agendas
R11	Responsibility to employees and colleagues to not force them to cross a line of conscience
R12	Importance of trust, respect and openness between colleagues
R13	Importance of personal creative projects

## B4: Initial email sent to potential interviewees

Dear \*\*\*\*\*,

My name is Peter Buwert and I'm a design researcher based at Gray's here in Aberdeen. As part of my PhD research I'm investigating the ways in which designers talk about their own work and how they understand and imagine the processes of visual communication. \*\*\*\*\* suggested your name to me as someone who might be willing to participate in my research.

Over the summer I'm looking to record short informal conversations with a range of designers across Scotland. What the process would involve would be simply arranging to meet at a time and place which suits you (work, home, coffee shop, pub, anywhere) and having a discussion for around 30-45 minutes about a couple of pieces of your own recent work. Of course I'd buy you a drink etc.

I'd record our discussion and use the transcript in my research but your identity and details of any work discussed would be anonymised. There are various other details of the research process designed to ensure the protection of personal data etc. that I would explain to you as we arrange to meet.

It would be great if you were willing to take part. I'm looking to gather the perspectives of designers from a cross-section of the industry so it would be great to get your insights and perspectives from your position as an experienced senior creative working within an established studio.

Like I say it would be great to be able to record your perspectives so I hope you'll be able to take part. If you have any questions at all please just ask.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Regards

Peter Buwert

## **B5: What's this all about?**

**(Explanatory document sent to all participants, including demographic questionnaire overleaf)**

## *What's this all about?*

I'm trying to find out how visual communicators working in various design related fields across Scotland think and talk about their activity. The plan is to record conversations about design and see what insights emerge. I'll have some questions to stimulate discussion, but there are no right or wrong answers. All you have to do is speak as yourself from your own unique personal viewpoint and experience.

I'll be recording audio and video but only to help me transcribe our conversations. This data will be kept securely and will only be used by me in my research. In the transcriptions, your name and any identifiable personal or project related details will be anonymised and substituted for generic placeholders.

We'll start by discussing a recent example of your own work, so it would be great if you could come with something in mind. It can be anything you like. Depending on what it is, maybe you could bring it, or some images of it along with you so we have something to refer to.

The research project which our conversation will contribute to, will result in a PhD thesis and possibly other publicly accessible academic papers. Your insights, experiences, views and opinions will add an invaluable dimension to this work.

*Thanks for agreeing to take part.*



### *Demographic:*

Because I'll be anonymising your personal data it will be useful to know a few pieces of information which will help me to organise all my interview transcripts. It would be very helpful if you could find a moment to quickly fill in this info before we get started:

**Job Title:**

**Age:** 18-25 / 26-35 / 36-45 / 46-55 / 56+

**Approx no. years design experience:**

**Formal education level:**

**My favourite...**

Designer:

Film:

Book:

Music:

Cultural Venue:

Human being:

Mode of transport:

TV channel:

Radio station:

Newspaper:

## B6: Sample interview transcript

Frank - Late morning - Coffee Shop - Aberdeen – July 2013	Emergent Themes
<p>[We have a brief discussion about whether we should move to a quieter area of the coffee shop for sound quality for the recording. I'm happy where we are, and give a brief explanation of what it is that I'm looking for out of the interview:]</p> <p>P: What I'm really after is just the way in which you talk about your work and various things and see what kind of emerges from that really.</p>	
<p>Ok, hopefully my cynicism won't shine through. When I first joined the industry I was all fresh eyed, and thought... but as you get older... you might discover that as we, depends on what the questions are like.</p>	<p>Self description as “cynical” /jaded as a result of experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cynicism</li> <li>- Loss of idealism</li> </ul>
<p>P: I thought we'd just start by talking about some of your work.</p> <p>[Frank brought along printouts of case studies used as part of a presentation on studio work]</p> <p>Do you want to start straight on to that or? The first part is really all about [studio] who we are who our clients are, but I'll show you some of our... [Refers to printout]</p> <p>This is work we did for a client called [DataOil] and this is a very typical sort of job that we have,</p>	
<p>we get a lot of... specifically, we always used to avoid oil work as such because that's what everybody in Aberdeen kind of goes for.</p>	<p>Desire to be different to everyone else: to stand out</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Used to avoid “oil” work because that's what everyone else does</li> </ul>
<p>But recently I would say it probably makes up, I'd say at least 80% of our client base now, which is frustrating to a degree because it's obviously not wildly inventive, and it's not... you can get into, we do [Independent Drinks Company (IDC)] which I'll touch on later and that's a lot more interesting from a day to day perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Oil now makes up 80%: frustrating because it's “not wildly inventive”</li> </ul>

<p>but the other, the flip of the oil side stuff is it's very easy to do, and it's basically bread and butter money. And you get the nice jobs, the beer labels; we're doing packaging for a rum project at the moment which is really interesting. So I'd say that balance is probably about right, 80-20 sort of bread and butter work like this.</p>	<p>- Work balance: 80% Bread and butter work to 20% interesting work</p> <p>Necessary to do "bread and butter" boring work, interesting work is a bonus which makes it worthwhile</p>
<p>But this is a real typical example this company [DataOil], this was their identity. [refers to original logo] Nobody knew what it represented, what the icon was, and also there's a contact lens solution packaging that has exactly the same logo, so they discovered this and then panicked. So they came over and said "look we want a rebrand". Again we always ask the question, I mean who are you? the target audience is always the key one, but you know what are your objectives? what are you trying to get across in a brand? why you feel the need to rebrand is often a big one. A lot of times they actually don't know and it's just they think it's a good idea,</p>	<p>- Process</p>
<p>and there have been instances, not that often 'cos obviously we don't get any money for it, where we've said to a company, look your brand is actually fine, maybe the application isn't the best but the actual brand itself is fine, don't touch it,</p>	<p>Willing to turn down work which is not in client's interests even if it means loss of income</p> <p>-Sometimes the right thing is to do no design.</p>
<p>and it's interesting, a lot of clients when that does happen they're very surprised, they assume you're just going to charge your X thousand pounds for to come up with nonsense but to actually go back and say what you've got is fine, it's actually quite refreshing.</p>	<p>Clients are surprised by honesty and integrity: they find it refreshing</p> <p>-Client's pleasantly surprised by not being ripped off</p>
<p>But in the example like this with [DataOil] we go through their brief which sometimes can be very extensive. More often than not, it's very flimsy, they don't really know what they're after, so that's why they've come to us. But the first thing we come up with is this key brand attributes I use word clouds and so on. [refers to word clouds and tables with words related to brand values highlighted] This one, there's certain words that keep popping up, and certain things they really need to get across, some more than others. And we, we'll present this to the client in the pitch, we then go through all of them and then go through ones that we think are key and angles that we can take with design work, and this says [picks out two key phrases] these are all the key things that really came out. From there what we've</p>	<p>-Process</p>

<p>done is... [refers to page with 15 potential logo variations] this is actually quite extensive, because they were throwing a lot of money at this job, they really wanted to – sometimes they'll only be throwing a couple of grand at it and we'll just go and show them three examples – of these ones we tried to actually come up with identities which reflect each of these I think the five key statements, and so from there, it's almost like a grid, you know this one can also be applied to other ones and so you show them all this work</p>	
<p>but to be perfectly honest, when you're presenting the rationale in particular, you actually just see the client sort of switching off, all they want to see is a logo on screen, and then there's an instant love or hate reaction to it. This one was as soon as the one they went with came up, they all said "oh yeah I really like that" and they kind of switch off to the other ones. But you can see there's 15 identities there which is quite over the top for what we normally present, but they all tie into these attributes to a lesser or greater degree.</p>	<p>Understanding of intuitive irrational aspects of designs' success</p> <p>-Success of project pitch often client's intuitions</p>
<p>The one they actually went for, it's on the next page, that was the one we actually ended up with, not actually my favourite identity, but the icon itself actually sums up exactly what they do. [refers to final logo: composed of simple geometric shapes radiating in density from left to centre then reversed radiating out of colour in negative space centre to right] What this company actually do, [explains company's central principle of data processing and how this is reflected within the visual rhetoric of the shape and colour of the logo], so they actually hooked into, that wasn't the one that visually they liked "that's a cool logo" or whatever but that was the one that did actually, that sums up what they do in a very simple iconic way so that's what they ended up with.</p>	<p>- Best design isn't always most attractive but one which works best</p>
<p>They've now gone and completely destroyed it and bastardised the whole thing and their website's a nightmare... I don't want to go into it... all we did was come up with the logo which we then gave to their current, they've got in-house designers and a web, and they've just completely ruined it.</p>	<p>- Client left to own devices ruins what was a good design</p> <p>Implication: design should be done by designers</p>

But that's not really our problem it's what they did.	<p>- Not our problem anymore</p> <p>Our responsibilities have been fulfilled, what they do with the design now is up to them</p>
P: did you give them guidelines on how to use it which they just ignored?	
Yeah and it always happens, they always ask for, and we're pretty, I mean normally they won't mess about with the logo as such but it's more the application and you'll know yourself it's such an easy thing to get wrong.	
So that was that one, next one [IDC][refers to image of [IDC] bottles: five pages design variations] it's obviously, I mean everyone, and that's kind of, not our marquee client 'cos it, financially, it actually doesn't bring that much in, although everyone knows who they are, it's a really cool brand, it's won loads of awards. And people, even our oil clients, when we do our client presentations, they see [IDC] "oh right you're the guys who do that".	<p>- Worthwhile losing money to do interesting work:</p>
The kudos of being attached to it actually outweighs the, to be honest actually a lot of the jobs we do we probably lose money on with [IDC] but it's a good loss leader as they call it, it brings in other clients. This is their current one and this job they came to us recently and they actually wanted to rebrand. Not rebrand as such but all their packaging they wanted to redo but retain the sort of [IDC] spirit, which is a very difficult thing to do. And we knew going into this job, and there was a huge amount of time invested in this, but we knew the actual chances of any of it happening were almost nil, 'cos their branding is so strong. We did a lot of client research and a lot of their customers; Sainsbury's, Tesco, were saying, "no. Why would you rebrand? You don't want a rebrand, leave it as it is." So we knew going into it, it was a loss leader.	<p>Loss leader worth it to gain kudos</p>
So this is their current branding, and basically what this shows is very slight progressions from the original one, right through. I mean that's a very subtle one, just tidying up slightly and these are all, we like to go in generally, even with a logo pitch with a safe option on one extreme then the other one is one that's right out there that like completely blows their mind and generally don't happen, but then one in the middle as well which kind of balances those two out. And again this is similar to what we have here, I think there's five different options: it goes from being	<p>-Process</p> <p>- Client's generally choose conservative directions offered</p>

<p>very safe, which this is, and they generally speaking they do kind of err more towards that end of the scale.</p>	
<p>Just flick through these, again just introducing new elements to it, new typefaces, we actually, when we presented this we did it in their bars and went in when it was shut, cleared out all their fridges and filled it up with, so we had to print these out, cut them out, apply them. Huge job, but well worth it. Again, then we actually started to look at removing elements of branding. The text in this, you can't actually read it, but it was actually anti-design "we're not one of these, we're not Budweiser, we're not into branding" so we stripped out all elements of design and so on, which they found interesting but ultimately never happened. Actually introducing completely new elements but it's still, obviously a [IDC] product. Going into introducing like an arranged/designed by other artists so they could update you know street artists, graffiti artists. This one actually, may go ahead. Well ultimately they kept their branding, which we knew they would, but they might start introducing like limited edition bottles going to graffiti artists and it actually ties into their ethos quite a bit where, I mean they've got 15 bars now I think; a lot of them have graffiti, the ones in [English city] have graffiti on the walls. So that was that.</p>	<p>- Willing to invest time and lose money because the work is exciting: "Huge job, but well worth it"</p>
<p>[refers to image of luxury ice cream packaging design concept: white colour base][Regional Ice Cream Brand (RICB)] ice cream I don't know if you're aware of them, another client we do, they wanted to come up with umm, this was shown [in the presentation from which the printout comes] really as an interest in what, how the project happened and why it actually ended up like it was, they the initial, they were coming up with a more premium product still had to be a [RICB] product but it was more pitched higher up against Haagen-Dazs, Ben and, sorry not Ben and Jerry's yeah Green and Blacks and these sort of things, so the initial pitch went really well and this was the option they went for they really liked this type of graphical style, all going well, started to lay it out and then one day the managing director was walking by the office, the [RICB] office, saw this on the screen and was "oh what's that?" and hated it, didn't want anything to do with it and it was pulled there and then, and so he came to the next meeting and said "no I want to see a product on there, has to be on a black product da-da-da-da" and that was what he wanted to see, [very conventional luxury ice cream packaging in the style of any supermarket luxury home-brand: black colour base] which is just so mundane so boring, and [RICB] as a company are actually really really interesting, they're quite quirky, everything's done by wind farm, and they're very, quite a quirky company, and so</p>	<p>- Compromise: Company director vetoes design for what he wants to see.</p> <p>- Standing up to client for the right design</p> <p>- Working with clients to make conservative work a bit more interesting</p> <p>How to deal with client who know what they want, but is wrong</p>



<p>that's what he demanded that he sees. But then again rightly again we said "look this isn't really what you want to do" and so did the other marketing people at [RICB] and then the throwaway comment and somebody said "I'd actually like to see... it needs to be posh... something like a cow with a tiara on" and everyone's like "uh ok" but then we went away and actually cottoned onto that, it's actually quite a good idea, so , we went back with these are sort of initial ideas [cows with tiaras on: white colour base] they said "no, no it needs to be a bit more us, a bit more quirky" so they want to see Andy Warhol based cows [Warhol coloured screen-print style cows with tiaras on] which is just, also again coming up with the word "Posh Cow" it's quite and aggressive tactic, but there's one out there called "skinny cow" which there was a bit of problem so. And then ultimately, this isn't the final design but it's similar to what we ended up with [normal coloured cows with tiaras on: black colour base] so it's just interesting how it can go from almost going through, and that to the first one they're so different but its again it's a little bit safe but there's a bit of quirkiness to it. But we actually had to do a photo-shoot with the cows. So that's basically what we ended up with, these posh cows. And that's kind of it,</p>	
<p>I mean we do , as I say there's always at any given time probably, I've got six projects on the go at the moment which you have to kind of keep spinning and then go to another one and there's what 5 in the studio? So that's probably about right I'd say anything between about 30 and 50 jobs on the go at any one time, prioritising is obviously a really difficult thing to do, it's a big part of the job, you have to kind of go in the morning, look at your work and juggle things about, cos generally speaking the client wants it, they don't care that you've got other clients, they want it there and then. So, that's kind of it.</p>	<p>- Juggling multiple jobs: prioritising. Pressure from clients.</p>
<p>P: Can we just pick up on one of these projects, maybe the first one the [DataOil] I just wonder, would you count this as a successful project?</p>	
<p>Eh, yeah, It's kind of as a designer you do have to compromise quite a lot, this one it probably wasn't the logo, well no I mean as soon as we did it we knew that icon fully represented what they did, and it's actually quite unusual, you see icons all over the place especially with oil companies and quite frankly they mean nothing.</p>	<p>- Compromise</p>
<p>And there's obviously there's a lot, and we know a lot of our competitors do it, they come up with something they like the look of and then they tack on a rationale behind it, more often than not is a lot of nonsense. I'll hold my hands up I've been guilty of it in the past.</p>	<p>- Criticism of designers who do work then rationalise it after the fact.  - Integrity implied in not doing this</p>

	- Admits having done this in the past
It was an interesting one that they actually hooked into what the icon represented, because to be honest you don't really get a chance to tell that story I mean you can't sit and explain "oh our icon..." but they did I mean they hooked into it and I was quite surprised so yeah I'd say it was a successful one,	- Success: client really got on board with design on their own terms without having to be convinced etc.
again as we touched on before it's a shame that they have subsequently completely ruined it but that's kind of not really our, you do have to sort of distance yourself	- Knowing when to let the client do as they please with their own money/brand/design.
and even if we retain a client sometimes they'll want to see something, some of them are very, a lot of them will let you get on with it and they trust you but a lot of them will be very, they'll dictate exactly what they want, the layout and everything the colour and you do, it gets to the point where you have to walk away and say "ok we'll do what you want, we're saying it's wrong, we recommend you do this, but if that's what you wanna do, you're the client" so there is an awful lot of that.	- Some clients trust you, some dictate every detail: sometimes you just have to give in, tell them you think it's wrong but do what they want.
As a young designer, when I first went in, it was so hard to take but as you get older you do start realising that it's not a work of art it's a business thing and it's all about making money at the end of the day.	-Used to find it difficult to compromise, now rationalises: "it's not a work of art it's a business thing and it's all about making money at the end of the day"  [If the purpose of design work is conceived as making a living, it is found acceptable to compromise integrity of design to ensure primary objectives: getting paid]
P: Do you think... you've talked about how the client got that message from it, and they kind of got that on their own, do you think from the end user, people who are looking to, you know people in the oil industry, to you think they get that message as well?	
Ehmm that's a tricky one, I don't ... I mean they add the strap line underneath	- Idealism vs. realism in

<p>[DataOil strapline: one of their previously identified keyterms] ehm... possibly... is the answer. I would, I'm quite cynical and I think a lot of people do look at things, so ultimately it does have to look professional it has to kind of just in the type face you use the colours you use it does have to kind of talk about or hint of a company's ethos if you like, but without being too prescriptive and saying this is what we do but not think it's a valid question I do think an awful lot of even something as successful as the BP logo for example we went to a presentation by the guy who did that and the story behind is fascinating the reasoning and everything but the end user just sees this thing, says "oh that looks cool" and that's it.</p>	<p>design rationales</p> <p>Cynical about design's precise communication: realistic that most people only require something that looks "right": "cool" or appropriate</p>
<p>And I do think that's a big part of what we do, we have to make something look good. You obviously want to tie in all these messages and reasons behind everything but you do, it kind of goes against everything I've just been saying but you do have to make it look good and fit for purpose as well, obviously some logos can look really cool but are more befitting a nightclub than they are a multinational oil company but that's a balancing act you have to get that right</p>	<p>-At the end of the day: appearances are vital, things have to look good</p>
<p>but I think looking at the back story to these you realise what a logo should look like, I think it's fairly obvious to be honest you know what I mean but maybe I dunno maybe as you get older, and I've been doing this for 17 years now and I think you innately realise if something does work or doesn't.</p>	<p>- Experience = innately just knowing when something works or doesn't</p>
<p>P: That's interesting... as the designer you see that whole process the whole story, whereas obviously the viewer doesn't see any of that...</p>	
<p>Yeah and we actually use that a lot in our pitch process as well. Sometimes you won't even give a creative rationale, you'll just go up and show the logo. You give a brief bit of blurb about each one but let something natural just take its own course and they'll ultimately in theory end up with the correct logo, one that speaks to them.</p>	<p>- Recognising that the design has to speak for itself</p> <p>- The right design will speak to the client</p> <p>Integrity: not pushing a client to choose what the designer wants but letting the design "take its own course" to get to the right solution</p>
<p>I mean it keeps going, I hate that word cool 'cos that's not what we do, but that's what the clients are looking for at the end of the day. Some are a bit more switched on and they kind of realise what they're after,</p>	<p>Recognition that what the client is often looking for is just something that looks cool: only some are "more switched on" to what they</p>

	need
and we've gone into pitches and with a logo like that for example, I remember one, the logo we did was blue, royal blue the guy looked at it and was "I'm not doing that I'm a Celtic fan no chance of doing that." It's like, "well we can make it green if you need to". It's kind of they leap on these things, but I have actually done logos where one for a friend who said "I don't care what it looks like as long as it's green 'cos I'm a Celtic fan" It's like "ok what does green have to do with your industry or what it says about..." you do get an awful lot of that,	<p>- Celtic fan: The client wants it in green</p> <p>Compromise: will accommodate client's unreasonable requests but will try to work through them to get the best design</p>
but again these ones, the worst case scenario is when you go into a pitch where you present top sort of 5,6,7, people 'cos everyone's got different opinions, this was actually a key one 'cos there were probably about 10 people in this, we presented to the entire board, and it became a bit of a slagging match they started saying "I don't like that because of this..." it actually becomes very negative because instead of saying "I like that because" it's "I don't like that one because" It becomes very negative and you have to kind of police the whole thing it's quite an interesting process. And in a sense if I remember rightly this one it wasn't everyone's sort of favourite visual one but everyone liked it and they kind of as a process it filtered down they ended up with that one although other people liked other ones more, there were certain things. So that happens quite a bit as well it's actually again it comes back to that compromise some people say "ok that one because I prefer that one but I can see that you're saying about that"	- Crowd-crit: becomes very negative
P: I suppose there's two ways that could go, is it like you say a process of filtering so you end up with something, but I suppose sometimes you could say, is it "design by democracy" but actually no one gets what they want?	
There is an element of that but a big part of what we do is actually when you're in a conversation like that actually slowly directing people towards what we think is correct and it is a really fine art it's not a case of just arguing. You kind of almost imply that it's their idea, you kind of pick on something they said "oh what you said about that... that actually ties in really well with" and it kind of gives them ownership of it and makes them think that they've chosen the styles, it's almost like sleight of hand like a magician would force a card on somebody it's similar, but again that's not something you can do straight away that comes after time, 'cos presentation to clients as well that's actually a big part of graphic design is that you have to pitch these to a client and it's such a hard thing. I've seen designers completely freeze in a presentation and it's difficult, it's really hard the more people	- Managing/steering clients to the right decision: a fine art: implying that it was their idea: giving ownership

there are it's very very difficult.	
<p>P: We'll move on just talk about design more generally. What are the kind of qualities which you think makes a design a good design or what makes a bad design.</p> <p>Design in general or designer?</p> <p>P: whichever...</p>	
<p>Yeah it's a really difficult question it depends what you're actually looking at obviously branding design it has to instantly looking at it straight away and without having to be told a story or whatever like we were talking about with the [DataOil] it has to instantly look like it works, look like the face of the company, or at least present the company in a way that you want it depends it's like a chicken and an egg; do you want your logo to look like a part of your company or do you want your company to be what your logo represents it to be if that makes sense. That's ultimately what it's about, it has to look and convey a message whatever that message is about your company.</p>	<p>- Purpose of branding design: to convey a message about a company</p> <p>Fit for purpose</p> <p>Design must work on its own without the designer having to defend it</p>
<p>Another thing really getting into the boring details of it but it's hugely important, and something that a lot of designers get wrong is how easy it is to use that logo in application. You know does it reverse out, can you embroider it? Does it work well on a website? Can you have different versions, landscape versions, portrait? Those are things that generally people don't take into account when they initially design stuff. It can work to your favour, or it can work against you in a pitch where you look, I mean these are all there's a certain feel to all of these, they're all very simple, quite iconic, there's not an awful lot of detail in them. Whereas some designers just go in and blow them away "wow look at that shazaam!" and then say yeah that'll be yeah but when you try putting it on a cup or embroider it into, oil industry you have to embroider it into overalls things like that. So that is actually, it's a much overlooked part of successful design I think.</p>	<p>- Importance of thinking through the boring details like application, not just blowing away the client with a great looking idea which can't be embroidered on a boiler suit.</p>
<p>I mean I, it's another, a lot of designers will have their own style and I can tell you out of all those logos [the 15 [DataOil] logo options] in the studio who designed which one just by looking at them 'cos I know, but you develop, we all kind of ended up with very similar style, what we brand sort of [Studio] style if you like. Whether that's because myself and [...] the creative director are very, you know maybe a designer will show us something and we'll say "yeah but it doesn't work... do this" I don't think it is that I think it's just genuinely people do they start going towards the</p>	<p>- Conscious of own authority influence in studio</p>

same point as far as design goes but then again,	
fit for purpose is a word we always come up with and that, you're looking at signage and so on again people can tend to overdo them try to really go over the top but at the end of the day it has to work and that's ultimately even if you don't like the look of it or you know you don't think it looks cool or whatever, it has to work whatever it's being used for.	- Fit for purpose: " but at the end of the day it has to work"
P: Do you think that is ... if you were saying there's a purpose to design is that...	
That to me is the ultimate thing about design it has to convey the message, if you're trying to sell something it has to instantly get to the point and sell it, if it's signage it has to be instantly recognisable, easily used. Website design is something that, we do a lot of web work now and obviously it can look really nice but it has to work it has to be the user experience if you like it has to be simple and not confusing not cluttered. I mean I'm a huge fan of less is more which is why when you talked about the "your favourite designers" why I always go back to Peter Saville 'cos to me he was always a master of that, Alan Fletcher as well, you strip out all the bull-shit, all the cool, the nonsense elements and get right down to what it is that you're trying to do.	- Ultimate purpose: to convey the message
And then there's I think it was Alan Fletcher that came out with a quote, I think it's, I'm probably going to get this wrong... "your design should always say look at this not look at me" so in a sense it's not like "wow look at that logo isn't that amazing" or look at that poster isn't it beautiful, it should be this is what we're trying to sell here, a company a product whatever and that should come across in it, it shouldn't be nothing else other than that.	- Ideology: neutrality of design: design = a vehicle for the client's message
P: What do you think are some of the biggest issues facing design today?	
The biggest problem from our point of view is the perception of design as being almost, dunno we're seen as being a bit arty-farty it's almost like a luxury, and we always see it whenever there is a bit of a crisis financially, one of the first things to go is the marketing budget. We would always argue the case that "no that's not what you should do, this is the time you should be investing in marketing and making the most out of your brand your products and so on, stand out from your competitors" And we do, we genuinely believe that, it's not just a case of "shit we're losing money here we need to get..." it's something we genuinely believe in, I mean I genuinely believe that design is a really important tool to any business, any product. But I think	<p>- Problem: perceptions: Expertise not taken seriously</p> <p>- Design not valued as an "important tool to any business", rather it is looked down on as unnecessary adornment.</p>



<p>there is a perception that it's just seen as a bit of adding bells and whistles to something that's unnecessary.</p>	
<p>A big part of the problem that we get now is that you'll get stock photograph places like Shutterstock, I-stock all these, you go in type in company logo and you get thousands of icons and all you do is you type up and so you can effectively have something that'll look again it'll look... but it's not fit for purpose and this is where we strongly argue our case but same with websites you can go on you can get really actually quite nice CMS [Content Management System (website back end)] packages for next to nothing well a lot of them are free and I mean we're charging for our websites for a big company you'll be looking at 20-50 thousand pounds. It's hard to justify that and again it comes back to the perception of "well why do I need to spend 50 thousand pound when I can go on and do it myself". Obviously when clients do go on and do things themselves they bollocks them up and they make a complete pig's ear of it and that's what we always try and explain and again it's hard to say that to a client but I'd say yeah that's the biggest problem is perception. I think that's probably it to be honest.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Undermining of expertise by stock sites.</li> <li>- Concern for client's to get good quality design which works rather than cheap fixes which aren't fit for purpose.</li> </ul>
<p>P: So if you could, if you could change anything, have ultimate power to change something about design what would it be?</p>	
<p>It would be the client's perception definitely, again it's a classic designer's quote that it would be a great job if it wasn't for the clients. But I do, designers can, well do, they get too precious over their work and don't like criticism but one of the biggest things I think designers need to consider is; if your client doesn't like it, generally speaking your client is going to be like his target audience so if he doesn't like it there's a good chance the target audience won't like it. And so quite often if a client says no I don't like it, because XY and Z, generally they're right, and it's hard to take that on the chin, but more often you go away, you redo it, you know with their comments on board and you do end up with a much much stronger design at the end of it. So yeah, it's something I would actually change is the designer in general seems to think that he knows his job so he's right all the time, so I would change that as well. I would change our client's perception but I would also change designer's perceptions of clients as well, they're almost seen as a barrier to good design, whereas it goes back to the point we made earlier that a design should work and it's not about what you think in your head is right or looks good and looks cool, it has to work. The client knows probably better than we do what works and what doesn't. They won't know why something works, but if they don't like something</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Problem with Client's perception of design, but also with designers attitude towards clients</li> <li>-Respecting client's expertise in their field</li> <li>- Would like to see mutual respect for expertise and intuition between design and other professions</li> </ul>

there's normally a reason for it. ...	
And the money, I'd also bring a lot more money to it. I mean joke asides it goes back to perception of what clients are prepared to pay for a job. I personally it's so important, branding is massively important and so in theory clients would pay more for it and designers would get paid more. Certainly the design studio it's hard to really make a good amount of money out of it because of that problem because of the perception I think. It's ok if you've been in the industry for a while and you start moving up the scale and yeah it does, it's a great job. But to go in as just a graphic designer it actually doesn't pay well at all. If it's something that you actually want to do, it's a damn shame I think.	- Desire to see design valued and respected by society in monetary terms.
P: What do you think the role of design is in society?	
In society? There's probably two parts to that, one of which is good and one is bad.	- Design is both good and bad for society
The good one is obviously it should in theory make life easier for people. Not just graphic design, product design, everything. Ultimately I think, we try and make life easier for people, whether that's again signage, you can instantly go into a hospital and know where you're going straight away, road signs and so on. Product design is massively important for that.	- Design should make people's lives easier " Ultimately I think, we try and make life easier for people"
The downside to our role in society is that we're obviously ultimately trying to sell shit to people that they don't actually need.	- "The downside to our role in society is that we're obviously ultimately trying to sell shit to people that they don't actually need"
And that where, I think there's a certain amount of cynicism that comes in from people. It does get tarred with that brush and I think to a degree rightly so, we do, designers are,	- People are "rightly so" cynical about design - "tarred with that brush" suggests a feeling of unfairness in others condemning all design as bad.
some of the things, food packaging in particular all this sort of, it's like you're making things look organic, you make them look handmade or they're from a farmhouse just down the road when you know damn well they're not, and they're full of crap,	- admits existence of unethical practices: dressing "bad" products up in "good" disguises
but that's the down side to it and I think it should really be addressed. I think there	- admits problem exists,

should be a lot more stringent rules to packaging and so on and design in general.	suggests it should be addressed, but by whom? Inference is by some external regulator.
P: do you come across that kind of conflict in your work in the studio?	
To a degree, food packaging, we've packaged food, one job that springs to mind, we did it, it was aimed at schoolchildren and we knew damn well this product was absolutely shocking what was in it but we went in with this thing that made it look healthy it made it look like, you know, there's happy smiling children on the... and ehm yeah you feel a bit of guilt for that.	Deception  - Admits having done work in the past which attempts to deceive  - Does feel guilt
I mean there are certain clients that if they came in we wouldn't work with for example ehm, my boss might disagree with that but there's certain political parties for example that I certainly would never work for.	- Immediately, almost in attempt to make up for or justify wrong-doing, moves on to make clear the line which he would not cross: "certain political parties"
The flip of it is I mean I hate smoking, I hate cigarettes, I hate the damage they do, but, as a graphic designer that's like one of the, well it used to be, not so much anymore now that they've really cut down the advertising but it was massively, wildly creative, the stuff you came up with, to work around, that's actually in a bizarre kind of way is part of the job I enjoy, it's working round there's obviously huge restrictions now on what you can do with advertising, but how you can kind of circumvent those restrictions even to the point of being borderline breaking the law.	- Trade off between personal convictions and opportunities for interesting and challenging work. Willing to compromise one for the other  - hates smoking but loves working for tobacco clients  - working round restrictions, bending rules is enjoyable
But no there are, I think you do have to have morals to a degree, but at the end of the day we're in a business to make money, to pay our own bills to pay your mortgage so I'd like to think I do have morals but I know I have broken them in the past.	- Morals seen as an optional luxury which comes second to priorities of paying bills.  -Would "like to think" he has morals, but knows he has broken them.
P: Just finally, where do you get your inspiration from generally, what your kind of "fuel" is ...?	
Day to day, I'm constantly, if I'm driving to work I'm looking at all the signage or the graphics on lorries, I'm constantly everything I look at to the point it drives my wife	Inspiration in everything

absolutely insane, if I'm in a shop I'll be picking up "oh look at that" and food packaging in particular, but just everything, I walk down a street I'm always looking at absolutely everything. It's something I've always done. Even before I got into graphic design I was always aware of branding and why people did what they did.	
I don't, when I was younger I used to buy Creative Review and Grafik and all these things, and I kind of find that now, now that I'm older I find that a bit self-defeating, 'cos we see it a lot in student portfolios that we get in. You can tell they've looked at a blog and they've not really thought about the answer to a graphic problem themselves, they've kind of gone away thought, "oh that looks good" and they've just ripped it off.	Doesn't follow design trends: lead to lack of originality
There's actually something in here which it blew me away when we saw it. Yeah this. [refers to print out showing two posters with exactly the same typographic feature image in different colours] That came in from a student in his portfolio saying blah-blah-blah-blah and then a few months later that came in: completely separate. And it actually transpires it's from, there was a blog, a design blog and it was a typography thing and they've just lifted it and it's really really bad, so I actually brought that in saying "don't bother you need to develop your own style."	- Plagiarism by students
It's good to be influenced to a degree but you need to look at a piece of design and understand why it works and how it works and then go away and do your own take on that. I mean everyone's influenced, I've got my own style and I know it's very Alan Fletcher-y Peter Saville-y but not because I look at that and go "Oh I love their stuff I'm going to copy that". It's because I look at it and think wow that works and that works because XZ and Z and I try wherever possible to reflect that in my work.	Good to be influenced but not to copy
Is that us?	
P: Yeah that's great that's 40 minutes so I won't take up any more of your time.	
If you've got any other questions just email them through and I'll try and answer them. Hopefully that's been helpful, and I've not waffled on too much.	
P: No that's good that's what I want. My nightmare is that I'll be talking to someone and they'll just be giving one word answers.	
Yeah that's it I mean it is, it's such a, design in general is not a black and white, that works, that doesn't, there are, there's huge amounts of grey and cross over, and ...	- Shows passion for design. Claims to be cynical and that it is "just a job" now

It's good I mean hopefully you do end up doing something with design cos I mean I genuinely love it I really enjoy my job I mean now as I say I'm getting older a bit more cynical it is just a job. When I first went in it was about I want to do penguin novel covers and album artwork, you can do that and I do do a lot of self-initiated work at home but nothing ever happens with it, but there are certain ideas that are generated by them that you do apply later on in life so it's good, it's a constant thing but... there you go ... anyway I hope that was of some use to you.

that he's getting a bit older, yet talks passionately and seems to genuinely care about it.

## B7: Interpretive summaries

### B7.1 Chris

Chris is an architecture student based in Glasgow who has over the past few years been involved in various international humanitarian architecture projects including being instrumental in setting up a charity to facilitate some of these projects. As well as his architectural practice/studies, Chris is a successful illustrator. I identified Chris as a candidate for interview in the hope of gathering something of an outsider perspective of someone who undertakes visual communication practice at a professional level but not as their central career. General impressions of Chris are of a thoughtful and thinking person who carefully considers his work on many levels.

A major theme of Chris's narrative is of a conflict between personal and commercial interest in his illustration work. Chris undertakes his illustration primarily as a mode of self-expression, but is excited that others like and are willing to pay for his drawings. He likes the idea of sharing his work with others but also does not want to feel like he is in some way corrupting the personal nature of his work by "spreading myself too thinly". As such, though he has had some considerable success in selling many of his images he also wishes to maintain control of this proliferation by keeping sales to limited editions and selected contexts in order to "keep my work slightly more precious":

And I think the reason I want to limit it on the other end of that, just protecting the specialness slightly, I don't want to become completely everyday and I don't want to, for people who, like I said before have invested in me, on some level, to feel like I've cheapened myself or I've sold out, so part of it's respecting that.

Chris feels that his illustration is more like art practice rather than commercial illustration, and wishes to avoid the feeling of "sell[ing] out". He talks of how, looking back at his work he can tell which drawings were done out of pure personal expression and interest and which were more consciously financially motivated, those drawings he might not be so interested in but which he knows will sell well. He feels these pictures might look the same to anyone else, but to him they lack the depth of the personal work and this bothers him slightly.



If he had to make a living out of his illustration he suggests that he would have to make a conscious separation between his personal and commercial work.

When asked how he would measure success in his illustration, he talks of how commercial success can be fleeting, mentioning the example of one of his designs which was featured on a t-shirt for a major high street clothes store. Although initially he got a buzz from this, within a few months the design was gone. He feels that real success is longer lasting.

the things that feel best is when someone has an art print up in their house and they tell me that they look at it and they love it. You know, I've had a couple of times when people have told me that they have one of my prints up and when they have visitors they always get to chat about it, or when they're sitting having their breakfast they like looking at it. And that's quite special rather than it just being in the [high street] store for a few months, there's something special about someone enjoying it and dwelling on it a little bit more.

The other major theme in Chris's narrative is of a belief in the validity of beauty in its own right. In response to the question of what impact his illustrations might have in the world, Chris answers:

That's an interesting question. Ehm (pause). I think that there's validity behind trying to create something that's beautiful, I think, ehm beauty is kind of an end unto itself, it doesn't have to have an impact, it doesn't have to have a social impact or an agenda behind it. I think something which is inherently just beautiful has a whole lot of worth, just by itself. I don't know if I can necessarily claim that like, my work has, I wouldn't want to say that my work has inherent beauty about it, but I, that's what I'm kind of striving towards and I think that is valid in and of itself. I would love to, to find how illustration can have a social impact and can have an impact beyond itself, but to be honest I have no idea how that works and right now just ehm just creating something beautiful is enough.

I find this particularly interesting considering the explicit social focus of Chris' architectural practice. He describes his illustration as an introverted practice in comparison to his architecture which strives to be social and participatory in nature (although he admits that this is a striving not necessarily a reality). He suggests that perhaps because on one level he sees his illustration as less significant than his architecture he allows it to himself as a personal indulgence.

He would like to combine and converge his two practices architecture and illustration to work closer

together and talks about potentially thinking about the use of murals even though he knows this goes against much current architectural thinking and convention:

“Yeah, which is kind of at odds to how we’re taught architecture. Or at least current architectural thought where there’s a general disgust against any sort of ornamentation that isn’t, isn’t worth something, that isn’t functional? And kind of going back to what I said before, sometimes something which is beautiful just has its own validity, I feel like, there’s validity in like making a building beautiful beyond its sort of, beyond just a basic form beyond... I think it’s true that architecture is beautiful when it’s stripped back and it’s simple and it’s pure, eh. But I question whether it’s really all that wrong to just paint something to make it better. (laughs) Like some things are better when they have nice paintings on them so why not do that with buildings as well. And that is at odds with what a lot of architects say and think. It’s maybe not so at odds with what the public thinks.”

## B7.2 David

I meet David from his office after work and we walk to his home where we conduct the interview before meeting some mutual friends for a drink. Some of the insights below are observations recalled from our informal conversation while walking to and from his home outside of the formally recorded interview.

David is a 25 year old junior designer who has been working at a graphic design studio in Glasgow for two years. He seems to enjoy his work although he does appear to express some regret that his attitude towards design now seems to be more pragmatic than passionate. After recording the interview, while showing me examples of his work, he told me that while he used to design in his spare time as a hobby for the pleasure of it, the thought of doing design outside of work is no longer appealing. It no longer seems like fun but just like work.

Within the workplace, David seems quite content with his role as a junior designer, understanding fully and content with the fact that the work given to him will often be jobs with smaller budgets for the reason that he is cheaper to employ than a senior designer. He shows respect for the experience of his more senior colleagues and values their advice and guidance. He seems quite happy to be in his position on the bottom rung, acknowledging that he has a lot to learn and is learning a lot. He does not mention any restrictive or oppressive professional pressures from management or colleagues in any negative terms, rather, he seems satisfied that he is given relative freedom to organise the workload assigned to him and that he gets to work on relatively interesting projects. In this environment it is perhaps not surprising that he is quite comfortable to “just do what I’m told”. The only examples of professional discomfort he cites are times when the technical skills expected of him have required a steep learning curve. However he attributes this not to unreasonable expectations from his superiors but rather to the failure of his university education to equip him with the technical skills required by the modern workplace. He mentions placement students who will often come to the studio with inadequate skills and unrealistic expectations of what working in the design industry is really like. While they might be extremely talented they often lack technical or team working abilities. He tells me that while other members of staff, so used to the constant stream of placement students, might be tempted just to ignore them, he makes a particular effort to attempt to spend time with these students helping them to gain something from the placement experience which will help to prepare them for the workplace.

We start the interview by discussing a recent project David has been working on. Initially his conception of

what constitutes a successful design appears to be a fairly simplistic and straightforward matter of primarily pleasing the client, fulfilling or surpassing their expectations and desires or as he puts it “hitting the right buttons”. He expresses a little frustration that often the direction of design work is “very much dictated by the client more than I thought and it’s more than it should be as well”. Compromise is a constant and necessary reality of the job and although his inference is that it may sometimes lessen the quality of the work, the ultimate measurement of success is whether the client “comes back for more” which very much relies on keeping them happy. He talks with some pride of one major client which the agency has held onto for fifteen years despite competitive tender processes. With less pride, in response to the later question of what one thing, if he had ultimate power, he would change about design, he admits that the agency are “quite guilty” of pandering to client’s whims perhaps to the detriment of design quality for fear of losing business to cheaper and more convenient online design services. He obviously struggles and goes back and forth in his mind between the reality that “you’ve got to please them cause you don’t want to lose them” and his desire to see design expertise valued and recognised:

“these people are coming with their money, spending thousands on design, for designers who know their market and they’re designing for a reason I think it should be more... I mean basically the client wants to change things a lot and stuff they want it their way they’d like something but maybe try this, but at the end of the day it more or less always comes down to what the client does but it should be more that the designers should, that’s their, they’re not doing it for no reason they’re designing to try to appeal to a certain market to a certain area and then the client will like that but then want it their way, it’s hard to explain but I think it should be more, less about what the client thinks, cause you always meet in the middle basically.”

Clients come to designers seeking their expertise, yet when it comes down to it, find it difficult to let go of their projects and trust in this expertise. This behaviour can leave the designer feeling frustrated and undermined in their expert role.

A recurring theme in David’s narrative which is perhaps relevant to this is the problem of originality. When asked what the purpose of design is, he suggests that “in the commercial world [...] it’s creating something new so it attracts people”, yet when asked to identify some of the biggest issues in design today, he highlights the difficulty in coming up with new ideas because “to a certain degree most ideas have been thought of”. He suggests that this problem of originality is the reason why so many contemporary adverts rely on surreality for their originality:

“because they’re so surreal people remember them more cause they’re not so generic cause most ideas or things have been done before, so the best way to stand out is to become, to do something completely outlandish and I don’t think that’s a problem but, I think in a way it is.”

The problem which David potentially feels but struggles to directly identify could perhaps be linked to his earlier discussion of the question of what bad design is. Identifying bad design as something which is unoriginal and not fulfilling its purpose, he talks of how he initially struggled, on coming into the job, with the less visually exciting, more mundane “functional” jobs:

“I was used to trying to make something look really great, visually aesthetic but what I struggled with when I started working in the industry was working with, trying to make things that were more generic. I found that quite hard. So to the eye it would maybe look like bad design cause it’s just generic and boring but it’s good design cause it works for what the client is or the target market.”

Realising that what is often graded in qualifying “good” design is the originality of the visual appearance, and having come to recognise that there is also value in the generic, boring yet functional in design, David perhaps feels that clients who come with a predetermined solution in mind are often looking for the wrong things from a design, and can push projects away from better solutions towards lower quality ones which look more like what they initially imagined. If clients could trust and respect the specialist expertise of designers a little more, perhaps the outcomes would be of a higher quality. In turn, with recognition of higher quality outcomes, designers’ expertise might be more respected. David’s implied fear is the opposite, that by pandering to client’s desires in order to avoid losing them to cheaper competitors, the industry becomes involved in a race to the bottom.

When asked the question “What do you think makes a design a good design?” David gives a fairly conventional answer:

“Well I guess in the commercial industry it’s all about what sells you know whether it works, whether it serves its purpose.”

The idea of fitness for purpose is a fairly conventional and classically invoked criteria for good design. What interested me was David’s recurring phrase: “in the commercial world/industry”. I probed him on what he meant by it:

P: You've said a couple of times about like "In the commercial world" and things, is that, that's kind of suggesting that there's something else which is not commercial?

D: Yeah well I think that's just because I come from an art background as well so, it depends on the way you look at things, cause fundamentally it's just about consumerism my job really. I studied consumerism and all my artwork was about trying to get away from that and then anti-consumerism kind of thing but I've ended up in a job that's exactly the opposite of what I was trying to do.

P: How do you feel about that?

D: I don't feel , I don't feel bad about it. I think if you think about it too much you can feel guilty in a way but I don't think, it's not like I'm working for an oil company or anything. But yeah. That's just the way the world works and you know consumerism is, it's just the way it is. So you have to either embrace it or, you know fight it and lose the battle.

David is strongly aware that what he does every day in his job directly conflicts with his personal convictions. More than that, these are not personal convictions which can easily be sidelined as outside the reaches of his professional environment: during his time as a design student, his work was focussed on anti-consumerist themes. Obviously it has been quite a shift for him to move in a relatively short period of time from designing for anti-consumerism to designing for consumerism.

It is interesting that even though his job is, self-admittedly "just about consumerism" - the very opposite of what he personally stood for, at least at one time - even though he chooses to do this job, and expresses no real objections to any specific instances of objectionable consumerist work, he still, perhaps subconsciously, feels the need to distance himself personally from "the commercial world" by at least naming it, thus allowing the possibility for the existence of something else: another world outside of the commercial. However this verbal distancing by naming appears to be the only acknowledgement of this possibility.

David's tone is not a negative one of weary resignation or disillusionment, rather one of pragmatic acceptance. He appears to remain relatively positive. As I suggested earlier, his attitude towards design does seem to be pragmatic where perhaps it used to be more passionate. It appears that he simply separates what is now just a job, from personal convictions which perhaps don't match up with the reality of the available opportunities in real-life. The necessary defence is to simply not "think about it too much" in order to avoid getting pulled down by negative feelings that might result.

For David, design is now a 9-5 occupation which has its own self-contained challenges, successes and satisfactions. As a junior designer he has responsibilities for the work which he does, primarily a responsibility to the client to deliver what has been asked for, however questions beyond that, of the type of work or direction of the studio are the responsibility of more senior figures in the company.

As to the wider role which design plays in society, he still maintains that design has a “big influence” in proliferating consumerism: on the way we perceive and are attracted to products and services. He does also suggest that one of the purposes of design is “problem solving” but plays down the social significance of this;

“well graphic design is not really benefiting people’s lives like you know product design would do but graphic design is kind of more about visual... stuff. I suppose web design though that’s making peoples’ lives easier but I don’t really do that.”

David seems to inhabit something of a slightly dualistic attitude towards the social/ethical in design, he appears to be conscious of issues of concern on a personal/conceptual level, but is content to pass over these at the level of practical action. An interesting side-note to our meeting which characterises this is the case of a job which he mentions as being scheduled on his diary for the next working day. Arriving at his home prior to recording the interview, he mentions this scheduled job to his girlfriend which is marked in his diary simply by the names of the clients, a national lager brand and a veterans support charity. His girlfriend who works in a field related to social care immediately raises a major ethical objection to the collaboration between a producer of alcohol and a charity which deals with military veterans many of whom suffer from alcohol dependency later in life. However, when I ask David about this job during the interview, he discusses only the practical arrangements of timetabling the work. I then ask what he would do in a situation where he was given a job that he wasn’t happy working on. He answers simply that he would: “Just deal with it. I’ve not really been in that situation.” It was surprising to me that within half an hour of having heard a strong criticism of what the project could potentially entail, he makes no reference to this suggested dilemma. It would be wrong to read too much into this, it could be that he is simply unwilling to judge the project before he knows more about it; as he says “I haven’t been briefed on it yet, I just know that I will be working on that”. Nevertheless I think the incident is noteworthy.



## B7.3 Frank

Frank (Male: 36-45) is a senior creative at a successful Aberdeen design studio who has around 17 years direct graphic design experience. His responses to the demographic questionnaire demonstrate that Frank displays typically graphic designerly discerning cultural preferences: the kind of preferences which although not high-brow or elitist by any means (and which perhaps pride themselves in being the opposite of this), nevertheless do take pleasure in exercising high-brow-type recognition and judgement of certain levels of quality within popular culture and experience (what could be described as the “no-brow” approach). Disdaining the Kindle in implied favour of the authentic book experience, watching BBC4 and listening to BBC 6Music radio are key indicators of this. In person Frank comes across as an interested, friendly, talkative and intelligent individual who is enthusiastic about design and greatly enjoys being a designer. He is evidently fit and health-conscious, mentioning his love of cycling in the questionnaire and drinking a skinny latte when we meet. Our conversation takes place late morning on a weekday at a city centre coffee shop. Frank has brought along a print out of a presentation of work by the studio which contains images of the case studies which we will discuss.

### Key themes

The key themes which emerge from Frank’s narrative are: a dynamic between a pragmatic/realist position and more idealist views which he self-describes as “cynicism”; desire for design expertise to be valued and respected; and a recognition of a current state in which design’s role in society is simultaneously both good and bad.

### Voice of experience: Idealism vs. Pragmatism

Frank starts the interview with an immediate qualification/apology “Ok, hopefully my cynicism won’t shine through. When I first joined the industry I was all fresh eyed, and thought... but as you get older...” Throughout his narrative there are regular references to this shift which Frank refers to. While he himself initially calls it cynicism, I might more charitably call it the voice of experience. Often while talking about the process of working with clients toward acceptable design outcomes, Frank speaks of situations could be frustrating but which he has learned to rationalise pragmatically. He talks of a corporate identity project which was a successful project in his eyes according to various criteria, however since the work has been completed and handed over to the company, the studio feel that their good work has been let down:

They've now gone and completely destroyed it and bastardised the whole thing and their website's a nightmare... I don't want to go into it... all we did was come up with the logo which we then gave to their current, they've got in-house designers and a web, and they've just completely ruined it. But that's not really our problem it's what they did.

Despite expressing some frustration at this development, Frank's attitude towards the incident is that this kind of thing just happens and has to be accepted. Over the years he has worked in the design industry, Frank has learned to adapt to what are seen as everyday realities which have to be dealt with rather than stressed about. He is quite aware that the circumstances under which design takes place are often not ideal and that therefore work must be often compromised, but he is not bitter about this and instead accepts this state of affairs as necessary reality. Speaking of the identity job he says: "it's a shame that they have subsequently completely ruined it but that's kind of not really our, you do have to sort of distance yourself." This distancing is a coping mechanism which seems to work. Faced with the most unreasonable requests, Frank is able to put the job into perspective (as just "a job") and do the best that he can within the given parameters. He talks of jobs in which clients point blank refuse a design concept because a colour conflicts with their football loyalties:

we've gone into pitches and with a logo like that for example, I remember one, the logo we did was blue, royal blue the guy looked at it and was "I'm not doing that I'm a Celtic fan no chance of doing that." It's like, "well we can make it green if you need to". It's kind of they leap on these things, but I have actually done logos where one for a friend who said "I don't care what it looks like as long as it's green 'cos I'm a Celtic fan" It's like "ok what does green have to do with your industry or what it says about..." you do get an awful lot of that,

The issue of having to make compromises with clients (even the most unreasonable ones as above) is dealt with in a pragmatic way:

sometimes they'll want to see something, some of them are very, a lot of them will let you get on with it and they trust you but a lot of them will be very, they'll dictate exactly what they want, the layout and everything the colour and you do, it gets to the point where you have to walk away and say "ok we'll do what you want, we're saying it's wrong, we recommend you do this, but if that's what you wanna do, you're the client" so there is an awful lot of that.

As a young designer, when I first went in, it was so hard to take but as you get older you do start

realising that it's not a work of art it's a business thing and it's all about making money at the end of the day.

While he once found these situations challenging, over the years Frank has learned to deal with them by distancing himself personally from the work, now seeing it primarily as a business which needs to serve clients in order to make money. Despite rationalising design in this way he has not lost his passion for it, only perhaps shifted his perspective: "I mean I genuinely love it I really enjoy my job I mean now as I say I'm getting older a bit more cynical it is just a job."

Frank is aware that design does not always live up to the claims which designers can make for it's operation. He talks of how the conceptual graphic symbolism carefully worked into a logo design was a factor contributing to the success of the project as the client really identified with that graphic story. I asked him whether he thought the end user would also understand that same message:

Ehhmm that's a tricky one, I don't ... I mean they add the strap line underneath [Company strapline] ehm... possibly... is the answer. I would, I'm quite cynical and I think a lot of people do look at things, so ultimately it does have to look professional it has to kind of just in the type face you use the colours you use it does have to kind of talk about or hint of a company's ethos if you like, but without being too prescriptive and saying this is what we do but not think it's a valid question I do think an awful lot of even something as successful as the BP logo for example we went to a presentation by the guy who did that and the story behind is fascinating the reasoning and everything but the end user just sees this thing, says "oh that looks cool" and that's it.

Frank takes a realistic view that quite often all that is required from a design is for it to fulfil the expectation for that type of output: if it's a logo, then often all that it actually has to do is look "cool".

There is a balancing act here. On the one hand Frank is critical of design practice which focusses on creating good looking visuals first, then supplies the client with bogus justifications after the fact:

and we know a lot of our competitors do it, they come up with something they like the look of and then they tack on a rationale behind it, more often than not is a lot of nonsense. I'll hold my hands up I've been guilty of it in the past.

Yet on the other hand, he readily admits that most design does not really need to operate at a massively complex deep level but can get away with at the bare minimum not looking wrong for its context :

that's a big part of what we do, we have to make something look good. You obviously want to tie in all these messages and reasons behind everything but you do, it kind of goes against everything I've just been saying but you do have to make it look good and fit for purpose as well, obviously some logos can look really cool but are more befitting a nightclub than they are a multinational oil company but that's a balancing act you have to get that right.

Frank tries, in his practice, to find this balance, letting designs speak for themselves to the client, rather than pushing them to choose his favourite:

Yeah and we actually use that a lot in our pitch process as well. Sometimes you won't even give a creative rationale, you'll just go up and show the logo. You give a brief bit of blurb about each one but let something natural just take its own course and they'll ultimately in theory end up with the correct logo, one that speaks to them.

Frank talks of the skills involved in managing this process and creating the conditions in which the client can find the right design on their own terms. Somewhat paradoxically he talks of this in terms of "directing" the client towards the outcome which they don't know they want yet (the one the designer already know to be the correct one):

a big part of what we do is actually when you're in a conversation like that actually slowly directing people towards what we think is correct and it is a really fine art it's not a case of just arguing. You kind of almost imply that it's their idea, you kind of pick on something they said "oh what you said about that... that actually ties in really well with" and it kind of gives them ownership of it and makes them think that they've chosen the styles, it's almost like sleight of hand like a magician would force a card on somebody it's similar, but again that's not something you can do straight away that comes after time

## Value of Design

It is interesting that the biggest problem which Frank identifies in design is the issue of clients perceptions of design: that they see it as a frivolous luxury not an essential for business. Yet Frank also sees this working both ways: clients may not value and respect design, but designers are equally guilty of failing to respect and value the client and their expert knowledge of their own field. In a typically nuanced response from Frank to the question of what one thing he would change about design he says:

It would be the client's perception definitely, again it's a classic designer's quote that it would be a great job if it wasn't for the clients. But I do, designers can, well do, they get too precious over their work and don't like criticism but one of the biggest things I think designers need to consider is; if your client doesn't like it, generally speaking your client is going to be like his target audience so if he doesn't like it there's a good chance the target audience won't like it. And so quite often if a client says no I don't like it, because XY and Z, generally they're right, and it's hard to take that on the chin, but more often you go away, you redo it, you know with their comments on board and you do end up with a much much stronger design at the end of it. So yeah, it's something I would actually change is the designer in general seems to think that he knows his job so he's right all the time, so I would change that as well. I would change our client's perception but I would also change designer's perceptions of clients as well, they're almost seen as a barrier to good design, whereas it goes back to the point we made earlier that a design should work and it's not about what you think in your head is right or looks good and looks cool, it has to work. The client knows probably better than we do what works and what doesn't. They won't know why something works, but if they don't like something there's normally a reason for it. ...

In a more direct addendum, he brings up the issue of financial investment signifying value, trust and respect:

And the money, I'd also bring a lot more money to it. I mean joke asides it goes back to perception of what clients are prepared to pay for a job. I personally it's so important, branding is massively important and so in theory clients would pay more for it and designers would get paid more. Certainly the design studio it's hard to really make a good amount of money out of it because of that problem because of the perception I think. It's ok if you've been in the industry for a while and you start moving up the scale and yeah it does, it's a great job. But to go in as just a graphic designer it actually doesn't pay well at all. If it's something that you actually want to do, it's a damn shame I think.

## **Design's Role in Society**

By far the most interesting insight which came out of this interview for me, is Frank's complex attitudes toward the role of design in society. From the outset, Frank demonstrates strong socio-political awareness and interest, answering the "My favourite...human being" question with Nelson Mandela, and justifying his

choice with a brief discussion of Mandela's role in the development of his socio-political awareness growing up:

"I'd probably go for Mandela because growing up I was always aware of him in the news, and how much he actually split public opinion in the UK, which seems strange looking back on it – it was a period of realising that people have polarised views on issues I assumed people would take for granted, (i.e. basic civil liberties) which opened my eyes a bit..."

His description of reading the Times "despite its right-leaning tendencies" is also suggestive of his political position and awareness.

His response to my question "What do you think the role of design is in society?" is very interesting:

In society? There's probably two parts to that, one of which is good and one is bad. The good one is obviously it should in theory make life easier for people. Not just graphic design, product design, everything. Ultimately I think, we try and make life easier for people, whether that's again signage, you can instantly go into a hospital and know where you're going straight away, road signs and so on. Product design is massively important for that. The downside to our role in society is that we're obviously ultimately trying to sell shit to people that they don't actually need. And that where, I think there's a certain amount of cynicism that comes in from people. It does get tarred with that brush and I think to a degree rightly so

Frank is aware that design "in theory" design's role in society is to make people's lives easier. Yet simultaneously design's main activity is "trying to sell shit to people that they don't actually need" which, it is implied, is an activity which does not improve people's lives or make them easier in any genuinely worthwhile way.

Frank seems capable of simultaneously inhabiting and constantly switching between opposing positions. He condemns design for selling people "shit they don't actually need" then uses the phrase "tarred with that brush" which seems to suggest some idealist injustice: that design should not be accused of such debased acts (the type of thing "advertising" (shudder) does). However he then does admit that it is quite right that design should be accused of these things.

I ask him if he comes across this kind of conflict in his own work:

To a degree, food packaging, we've packaged food, one job that springs to mind, we did it, it was

aimed at schoolchildren and we knew damn well this product was absolutely shocking what was in it but we went in with this thing that made it look healthy it made it look like, you know, there's happy smiling children on the... and ehm yeah you feel a bit of guilt for that.

Despite feeling guilt, there is nothing in Frank's tone which suggests that he would not undertake similar work again. However, he does immediately - and almost as if attempting to justify himself or make up for his guilt - launch into an explanation of which clients he would definitely not work for. This is a classic instance of the "where do you draw the line" ethical question. He explains:

I mean there are certain clients that if they came in we wouldn't work with for example ehm, my boss might disagree with that but there's certain political parties for example that I certainly would never work for.

It seems that certain ethical values are absolute while others are of lesser importance and are therefore more flexible/optional. He would "certainly would never work for" certain political parties despite being quite willing to do work in other areas which might challenge his personal morals:

The flip of it is I mean I hate smoking, I hate cigarettes, I hate the damage they do, but, as a graphic designer that's like one of the, well it used to be, not so much anymore now that they've really cut down the advertising but it was massively, wildly creative, the stuff you came up with, to work around, that's actually in a bizarre kind of way is part of the job I enjoy, it's working round there's obviously huge restrictions now on what you can do with advertising, but how you can kind of circumvent those restrictions even to the point of being borderline breaking the law.

There is a trade off taking place here between personal convictions and the opportunity to do technically interesting, challenging and therefore enjoyable work. If the conditions are right, it is acceptable to sacrifice one for the other.

When the conditions in which design work takes place are within an environment which has already been rationalised as "just a job" and distanced from personal emotional attachment, perhaps it is easier to rationalise and distance professional activity from personal ethical convictions? Frank's final words on the matter are:

But no there are, I think you do have to have morals to a degree, but at the end of the day we're in a business to make money, to pay our own bills to pay your mortgage so I'd like to think I do have



morals but I know I have broken them in the past.

## Fit for Purpose / Neutrality

For Frank, design is primarily a business, his conception of what design *is* and what it is *for* reflect this. He repeatedly returns to the idea of “fitness for purpose” when talking about design. When asked about the purpose of design he says:

That to me is the ultimate thing about design it has to convey the message, if you're trying to sell something it has to instantly get to the point and sell it, if it's signage it has to be instantly recognisable, easily used. Website design is something that, we do a lot of web work now and obviously it can look really nice but it has to work it has to be the user experience if you like it has to be simple and not confusing not cluttered. I mean I'm a huge fan of less is more which is why when you talked about the “your favourite designers” why I always go back to Peter Saville 'cos to me he was always a master of that, Alan Fletcher as well, you strip out all the bull-shit, all the cool, the nonsense elements and get right down to what it is that you're trying to do.

His further discussion of a quote which he attributes to Alan Fletcher (actually from Canadian designer David Craib), reveals more of this underlying design ideology:

And then there's I think it was Alan Fletcher that came out with a quote, I think it's, I'm probably going to get this wrong... “your design should always say look at this not look at me” so in a sense it's not like “wow look at that logo isn't that amazing” or look at that poster isn't it beautiful, it should be this is what we're trying to sell here, a company a product whatever and that should come across in it, it shouldn't be nothing else other than that.

This is a textbook instance of a classic ideological stance in graphic design typified by - and often to this day invoking - the metaphor of the crystal goblet drawn by Beatrice Warde, a publicist from the monotype corporation, during an address in 1930.<sup>1</sup> The crystal goblet metaphor suggests that a true wine connoisseur chooses to drink wine from a near invisible crystal-clear glass because only an invisible carrier allows the contents to be properly appreciated. In the same way typography (and the inference is, all design interventions) should be “invisible” in order to allow the content to be truly appreciated and understood.

<sup>1</sup> Warde, B. *The crystal Goblet: or why printing should be invisible*. *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*, p.39

Frank's narrative suggests that he subscribes to this ideal of neutrality in design, along with a certain functionalist view which often accompanies it. The purpose of design is to fulfil a purpose, a good design has to therefore be "fit for purpose". This is the primary and most important job of a design, not to look good, but to work:

fit for purpose is a word we always come up with and that, you're looking at signage and so on again people can tend to overdo them try to really go over the top but at the end of the day it has to work and that's ultimately even if you don't like the look of it or you know you don't think it looks cool or whatever, it has to work whatever it's being used for.

## **Interesting work:**

Frank enjoys his work. It appears that he values the challenges of the job and the satisfaction of doing good and interesting work above all else. He describes how the studio used to avoid doing work for the oil industry due to a desire to stand out from the crowd: "because that's what everybody in Aberdeen kind of goes for". However now he estimates that 80% of their work is for the oil industry because "it's very easy to do, and it's basically bread and butter money." He is able to justify doing this work "which is frustrating to a degree because it's obviously not wildly inventive" as a necessary compromise which gives the studio stability allows them to undertake the other 20% of their work: the interesting part which makes it all worthwhile.

For Frank, it seems that doing interesting work is his primary imperative. Doing interesting work is worth the compromise on the ethical principle of being different to the competition through not doing oil work (it should be noted that the ethical element here is in being different, not in objection to the nature of oil work). Doing interesting work is also valued above making money.

Frank describes the frustratingly un-creative oil work as a reasonable trade off against the much more creative work which the oil income allows the studio to undertake, such as work for an independent drinks manufacturer which is interesting and enjoyable but which loses the studio money:

The kudos of being attached to it actually outweighs the, to be honest actually a lot of the jobs we do we probably lose money on with [Independent Drinks Company] but it's a good loss leader as they call it, it brings in other clients.

Frank's enthusiasm for this client seems to extend beyond even the economic principle that this "loss

leader” eventually brings in new business which makes up for the money lost. He describes a re-branding exercise undertaken for the client, which the studio went into knowing that it would result in no change and no profit, but which they still spent an inordinate amount of time and effort on:

we actually, when we presented this we did it in their bars and went in when it was shut, cleared out all their fridges and filled it up with, so we had to print these [labels] out, cut them out, apply them [to all the bottles]. Huge job, but well worth it.

It struck me that Frank and the studio undertook this work not for the long-term economic advantage, but purely because it was fun to do. It is also worth remembering Frank’s willingness to design for cigarette companies despite his strong personal emotional opposition to the product: this willingness is attributed to the “wildly creative” nature of the work.

Frank’s values of what constitutes good design include a strong element of integrity. He talks of times when the best design is to do no design: when the client’s current design provision is sufficient and it would be disingenuous to do work for them and charge them for an unnecessary and unhelpful service.

and there have been instances, not that often ‘cos obviously we don’t get any money for it, where we’ve said to a company, look your brand is actually fine, maybe the application isn’t the best but the actual brand itself is fine, don’t touch it, and it’s interesting, a lot of clients when that does happen they’re very surprised, they assume you’re just going to charge your X thousand pounds for to come up with nonsense but to actually go back and say what you’ve got is fine, it’s actually quite refreshing.

It is clear that the satisfaction of doing good work with integrity overrides certain other economic and ethical barriers. For him it is a higher ethical imperative. This reminds me of William Morris’ discussion of what motivates us to work in his essay “Useful work versus Useless Toil”:

What is the nature of the hope which, when it is present in work, makes it worth doing?

It is threefold, I think - hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself; and hope of these also in some abundance and of good quality; rest enough and good enough to be worth having; product worth having by one who is neither a fool nor an ascetic; pleasure enough for all for us to be conscious of it while we are at work; not a mere habit, the loss of which we shall feel as

a fidgety man feels the loss of the bit of string he fidgets with.<sup>2</sup>

## Plagiarism

Frank also talks of the importance of not copying other designers' work. He shows me an example of two students' work, brought in separately as part of their portfolios for review, which included an image almost exactly the same which had been copied by both students from a blog site. He condemns this behaviour and talks of the importance of developing "your own style":

It's good to be influenced to a degree but you need to look at a piece of design and understand why it works and how it works and then go away and do your own take on that. I mean everyone's influenced, I've got my own style and I know it's very Alan Fletcher-y Peter Saville-y but not because I look at that and go "Oh I love their stuff I'm going to copy that". It's because I look at it and think wow that works and that works because XZ and Z and I try wherever possible to reflect that in my work.

## Parallels:

**Akasia/Enlightened False Consciousness:** Frank knows the good and bad inherent in design: he knows the right and yet chooses not to do it. He has alternate satisfying ethical framework within the activity of design. There is little thought to the external consequences: "yeah you feel a bit of guilt for that." but no indication of commitment to act differently. In fact, "morals" are seen as an ideal which may or may not come into play: "I'd like to think I do have morals but I know I have broken them in the past."

**Ideology:** Design seen as a business first and foremost ("it's not a work of art it's a business thing and it's all about making money at the end of the day") lends itself to views of functionalism and neutrality. This ideological perspective on design immediately limits its critical social role.

**Morris:** what is good work? For Frank, good work is interesting, challenging, creative work which gives him enjoyment in doing it and satisfaction in seeing the client provided with something which is going to help them. This can be seen as ethically short-sighted but it cannot be denied that it is a valid ethical stance.

## B7.4 John

John (male, 26-35) describes his job title as “creative designer” and has approximately 8 years design experience. Along with two others he set up his own studio in Aberdeen in 2011, which focusses on digital as well as what he describes as “more traditional” graphic design. We meet at the studio after work which is a surprisingly nice space for such a young company.

The overwhelming impression which emerges from John’s narrative is of cynicism, a pessimistic and negative outlook on the design industry in Aberdeen and a general loss of passion and enjoyment in doing design work.

### **The grind:**

From the very beginning of the interview, John flags up what appears to be the key issue: he used to enjoy designing, but now that it is a business and a job, with all the pressures which come with that, he no longer enjoys it:

That would be why I started, and I loved it, I used to go home after school and do things, muck about, Flash 2. Remember going about trying to work out how to get things to tween and move and do all that kind of, and that’s where that stemmed from, design and stuff, but it gets pulled away from you when you get asked to do things to tight deadlines and be creative on and off. Find that difficult.

Later he discusses that this was one of his motivations to set up his own business, in the hope that he would have more control over decisions and regain some of his lost enjoyment:

one of the reasons why I set up myself was I wanted to be able to look at things in my own way. And I wanted the opportunity to speak to people and say, “what about doing this, what about... nobody’s going to do this up here so why don’t you do it”. So that was for me the only bit of excitement that I could possibly get from design up here.

However it seems that he has not found what he was looking for by setting up the studio, instead he has added the responsibility of maintaining the business to his problems:

I think anyone who also runs a business will have a different side of things as well, they’ll see the

bitter, you've just got to do things for money, you know you've just got to be a prostitute and just get on with it. Whereas when you're employed by someone else you always know how to do things better you're always sitting there thinking "I wouldnae do that, I wouldnae so that no you should just tell them tae fuck off" nah you know.

It seems where John had hoped for greener grass, he has instead found harsh and unpleasant business realities.

John feels, as he himself describes it, like a "prostitute" forced by financial pressures to do whatever the client wants against his better professional judgement in order to assure the survival of the business. He attributes his slide into this feeling of negativity at least in part to his feeling that the work which he is doing is meaningless:

I said to you before, when I was at school, I used to go back and learn different pieces of software and to allow me to be able to do things that I had in my head. And that passion leaves. It leaves really quickly when you're doing things which have got so little value. The clients that people work on down south. It must be a good feeling knowing that they contribute to something whereas up here, I'm pretty sure designers would feel they don't contribute that much. They do their job, they do what's asked of, but most people won't love them I would suspect, and I think that would come down to purely the types of jobs that people are working on and the opportunities they get to improve. Yes, you'll get people who'll say "oh but you can make a job of what you want, you can do whatever". You can't. It doesn't work like that.

## **Feeling undervalued:**

This thoroughly depressing statement flags up several issues at play here related to perceptions of the value of work. John feels that his work does not contribute to any meaningful purpose, and therefore it holds very little value to him. He also feels that his work is not valued, is undervalued or devalued by his clients and (specifically Aberdonian) society in general. He goes as far as to say at one point that he thinks that "a value for design up here is close to nil."

John's response to the question of what one thing he would change about design if he could, speaks of a feeling of injustice in the value of design expertise being undermined and undervalued:

I would want to stop it being something that people feel that they can do, everyone feels they can

design, I think there's a big misconception of people understanding what design can actually do and how it can benefit people. An industry which I feel suffers more than what we do is copywriting. Copywriting is essentially the industry of people writing text for publications and because most people who are employed can write, (most people) they think that they can change copy, they can do things, they can, "that's not how it should sound, it should sound blah-blah-blah" it ends up getting wrecked, in the end essentially somebody's job is worthless because "that's not how I would have done it" or blah-blah-blah.

It seems that John uses the example of copywriting as a surrogate for his frustration at clients who think they know how to design better than professional designers do. When the expert designer finds themselves in a position of economic servitude to the non-expert in such a way that it is fully expected and understood that their job and duty is to fulfil whatever whims and desires the client might have, professional dignity and self-worth is bound to suffer.

## **Aberdeen economy (the grass is greener...):**

John attributes a lot of his dissatisfactions to the peculiar business environment which exists in Aberdeen due to the predominant economic monoculture of the oil and gas industry. John blames a lot on this peculiar Aberdeen marketplace. He accuses established design firms in the city of becoming complacent and lazy because the oil industry supplies so much easy and unchallenging work:

Everyone has got their own bunch of clients that they've worked with, they've played golf with, they've gone to school with, they've a' done all this incestuous things between each other and there's no real fight to improve on what we actually do.

It does seem that there's something of a recurrent "the grass is always greener on the other side" theme here. John does later speculate as to what it might be like working in another environment looking at Aberdeen from the outside:

They might come out with the opposite side of things, up here we're cocooned with money, if you can get the right job, you'll get quite a big value for things. They might be fighting tooth and nail down there to scrounge small value jobs, and have the worst case scenario where they're having to deliver high quality design, so they might be thinking down there "I want to go to Aberdeen and do fuck all and get paid ok".



John is aware that the Aberdeen economy provides something of a privileged bubble which he himself benefits from. However he feels that the abundance of work going around lessens the quality of design, and that if there was less work, designers would be forced to step up their game and become less complacent:

If there was a real feeding frenzy, there was only a hundred customers to go around people and they were all having to fight and the only thing they could do was communicate what they do with whatever we do whether it be a brochure or a magazine, I think at that point, they would soon respect what damage can be done or what benefits could be done but there's as I say there's no real need for that.

## **Measurement of success:**

John suggests that the majority of design work in Aberdeen involves business to business ("B to B") communication rather than business to consumer ("B to C"). In such a market, he suggests that it is very difficult to measure the impact of design. When I ask John how he would what he thinks makes a design project successful, his primary gauge of success is commercial gain for the client. This is a problematic benchmark in a business to business marketplace however:

it comes down to back to the B to C and B to B aspect of things. There's not much buying and selling gone online in Aberdeen so it's very difficult to have a strong I suppose gauge whereas if you were an online retailer if you were a shop, your sales go up or your sales go down and it's a lot clearer so the honest answer would be achievement is based on the client and if they're happy,

Ultimately, John feels that often his only measure of success is whether the commissioning client is happy with the work done:

a lot of the time, to be honest, as a project is successful if the client thinks it's successful, there's not many independent checks in place which I suppose check achievement or check if goals have been met, it always seems to be done via a chairman's nod. You know it's always like if the boss is happy we're happy ehm. That would be how it would work to be honest up here.

Of course, John is aware that this is a superficial satisfaction based solely on the client's imagination of the impact of the work, and which involves no actual measurement of the real impact which the design will have. As such, unable to make the case for the efficacy of design, regardless of how happy the client might be, the overall effect is that design becomes undervalued:

your essential goal is to make sure the chairman is happy and it looks better than his mate's who works for another company. Design is an undervalued eh industry up here. It'll only be valued when a company sees a direct advantage.

In this environment of undervaluing of design, John's own measures of personal satisfaction in his day-to-day work are similarly low:

if a client wants it and you're happy with it, do it. Just get it done. What I mean by if you're happy with it: if it's something that's going to actually be feasible technically to get done and it's not going to cost twice as much as what you're charging them.

It is perhaps no surprise to find negativity and lowered ambitions and expectation from a designer who operates in an atmosphere in which he perceives that the value of design is seen as "close to nil", where clients constantly undermine the designers' expertise by effectively suggesting that they know better, and where designers find themselves unable to convincingly articulate the value of their work.

It should be noted that in describing how rare it is for clients in Aberdeen to be willing to take risks, he does describe a client what he had in the office that day, who enthusiastically embraced what is implied to be a more edgy, risky design proposal put forward by the studio:

So we had them in today and we showed them some concepts that we were thinking of, some different types of websites that don't really get done and the guy, sold his previous company for 200 million so he's a serious guy: "Love it. That's what we should be doing. Let's do it, let's go for it." That type of opinion doesn't happen a lot. You don't get anyone coming in saying I want to be different, I want to take a gamble, I want to be judged here, you know essentially that's what you're doing if you do something that people are, haven't seen before or aren't sure about, you get judged so people don't do it.

John suggests that the generally conservative approach of clients to commissioning design in Aberdeen could be due to the reality that those doing the commissioning are most often middle managers, rarely in a position to take responsibility for making risky decisions, and as such tend to err on the side of what they see as 'safety'.

## Biting the hand that feeds:

I posed the suggestion to John that his relationship to his work seemed to be quite ambivalent. In response, he himself invoked the metaphor of biting “the hand that feeds me”.

It certainly does seem that his relationship to design is complex and conflicted. His thoroughly pessimistic and disillusioned exterior is presented as the result of the experience of constant frustrations in the everyday realities of attempting to do good work. His defence against a hypothetical optimist is telling:

Yes, you’ll get people who’ll say “oh but you can make a job of what you want, you can do whatever”.

You can’t. It doesn’t work like that. You just have to look at any P+J or oil and gas magazine or see anything, you’re working between probably five different styles of adverts.

He describes a situation in which a competitor responded to a recent graduates opinion that there are no opportunities to do good work in Aberdeen:

[he] completely destroyed her by saying, “that’s not true, there’s companies up here who deal with massive national companies, the market’s there, there’s the internet, there’s flights, people, there’s no boundaries between doing business”. That’s all bollocks. You’ve got to be in an environment in which you’re surrounded by people willing to challenge things and to improve things and to be better. So if you’ve got a competitor down your street who’s doing something which blows you out the water, you’re going to have to fight harder and you’re going to have to do,

John suggests that it is the nature of the environment of both competitors and clients which limits possibilities to do anything interesting or different, and seems resigned to this as an entirely inescapable limitation. However it is interesting that he does mention another Aberdeen studio who he believes avoid these limitations by taking a different approach and diversifying to other types of clients further afield.

For all John’s criticisms of the local Aberdeen economy and the crushing limitations it as alleged to place on his work, he seems to have no ambition to leave Aberdeen and its privileged position “cocooned with money”. It could be that John is just someone who likes a moan. It could be that he has personal reasons which mean he cannot leave Aberdeen. It certainly appears that he sees greener grass elsewhere, but whether he would find it so green when he got there, I’m not sure.

## Primary motivation:

When I ask John what fuels him as a designer, he declares that what he seeks is economic success and the respect of those around him:

Eh I suppose what fuels me would be success. And recognition, that would be the honest answer, success in the form of ehm financial money ehm and recognition in the form of awards, ehm being respected by your peers I think that's an important thing. Getting respected by family ehm.

He fantasises about finding some way to make enough money to escape from the grind of work in order to regain control over his actions:

it's publicised nearly every single day that there's another company that's made 50 million from fuck all really, and I suppose it's one of those things that it would be nice, that would be nice to keep away from this and try and really go for that and push for that, try and find some mechanism to get out of this and start being able to pick and choose what you do. Ehm. If I won the lottery tomorrow I would give up what I'm doing, cause I don't enjoy it. I enjoy certain parts of things, I enjoy when something clicks and it's exactly how you want it to look and how it functions, I enjoy that, but the hoops that you've got to go through and everything that's around it, I wouldn't really enjoy.

I ask him what he would do if he won the lottery. He suggests the standard millionaire dream lifestyle:

What would I do? I would probably do a bit of travelling, get a couple of houses in different places, try and live in other places and just just kind of relax. I know I would always come back to it. Cause this is not an artificial career that I've picked, I've probably done something which you've avoided which is do a hobby. I used to as I say I used to go back and I used to be doing this stuff all the time, in what I would class as my spare time my free time. Now I couldn't think anything worse than going home to design a website for someone, it would be fucking horrendous.

This insight that, even though he can imagine nothing better than to get away and escape from design, he would "always come back to it. Cause this is not an artificial career" reveals that underneath his jaded pessimism John still harbours some idealism for the abstract core of design which he used to enjoy. His "hobby" has been ruined for him by the realities of pursuing it as a business.

## Good design:

When asked to define what makes a good design as opposed to a bad one, John invokes ideas of technical quality and of originality. He suggests that there is first of all a minimum standard of production quality and that this “design” is nothing to be celebrated but should in fact be simply “a given”. This minimum quality is what sets professionals apart from amateurs.

Above this minimum level of production quality, what sets a design apart as good is “the concept”. Designs can be produced to the highest quality but the key factor for John is the originality of the underlying concept:

if you were speaking about an advert, what are you trying to achieve, how are you going to do that, how are you going to manipulate whoever’s looking at this advert to do what you want, that for me is how it, if I would look at something, you see a lot of tv adverts and you know obviously it’s on tv, that are shot well to look nice, a lot of the stuff that Sachi and Sachi do recently has been in my mind horrendous, things that they jump on the back of T-mobile for example shot really well, ehm it looks nice, they managed to capture this vibe of social networking but what they end up doing is these crowd-sourcing type events which they’ve manipulated to, they’ve made to happen, they’ve hired actors, but worse they’ve copied an idea that they’ve seen on youtube that’s got two million hits. And for me that’s really disappointing to see because advertisers in my head, the top guys, the TBWA’s the Sachi’s they should be the guys saying “this is an idea”, not, not “aw this idea’s really cool we should do this”. So for me that’s how I gauge something as a designer is if I’ve seen it before,

John talks of manipulation in two ways here which is noteworthy. Firstly he talks of manipulation as an integral part of the design process, a challenge which has to be resolved in order to achieve the goals of the project which – as implied in this example - for an advert, is to get someone to “do what you want”. The ethics of this manipulation are not questioned. In fact, John is really quite interested in how this manipulation can be achieved and talks admiringly of the methods used by others in this, obviously finding inspiration in this:

If I feel that the concept is, if I get the concept, if I understand what they’re trying to achieve, if I understand how they’re trying to sell something what type of marketing how they’re trying to do that as well and it’s interesting to look at some adverts and say ehm who they’re trying to aim for you know whether it’s cleaning products and they’re using females or whether it’s guys they’re

using all these different factors in advertising I think it's fascinating cause you can clearly see what they're trying to achieve, ehm.

However a second type of manipulation is condemned on an implied ethical principle. This inadmissible manipulation is that in which the slickly produced T-mobile advert - in the hope of replicating the popularity of someone else's original concept - produces a derivative unoriginal concept which it hopes to pass off as original by manipulation of the aesthetic form of the advert. The plagiarism of an original concept and the masking of this through technical aesthetic skill violates John's ethical principle of originality.

## **Compromise:**

Another implied ethical issue which arises in John's narrative is that of the need for compromise between client and designer. Despite painting a negative picture of clients as often undermining and undervaluing designers' professional expertise, John also recognises, on the flip-side, the importance of the designer's role in this:

A lot of the time as well I've worked with designers who want it to be their way or no way and for me that's frustrating because they're not actually giving the client the benefit of the doubt to listen to them and they're being pig headed they believe that they know best and a lot of the time we don't, we're doing things which we feel are the best and designers become very attached to what they don't like anyone changing things even though you give a designer something they did six months ago and they'll sit down and they'll go "oh ok I should have maybe moved that or done something differently" but at the time of doing it you become so attached you don't like people criticising. So designers are just as much to blame to be honest. You've got to know when it's being objective and subjective, when the client's being subjective and when I'm being subjective you've got to know and you've got to step back and think, you know he's paying the bills, what he's asked for is actually fundamentally not a massive step away, he feels that's going to sell his company better than I think it is so he's paying it, it's his company, do it.

John recognises that the client knows their own business and has every right to hope for the best design work possible from the designer commissioned to do the work. While recognising all the negatively experienced factors of the industry already discussed, John also sees from the client's perspective. John hopes for client relationships in which both client and designer can recognise what are subjective and

objective elements in the job. Obviously the difficulties arise in disagreements when both parties believe they are the ones being objective.

## **Student Motivations:**

One final insight worth noting here is his assertion that students perhaps don't really understand what design is, and that if they did they would not choose to study it or to pursue a career in it. He suggests that it is an easy option to study at university, with a relaxed studying atmosphere and little responsibility. His final comment on this matter is slightly cryptic:

I don't know if it is something that people think is a good place to be: design. I don't know if it is. I think it might on the outset it might seem quite comfortable, where you can play your music, you can be quite casual, you can go on the internet all day. Do all those things, but with that comes some type of I suppose moral responsibility where you're getting paid to do a job and I suppose again up here, your weaknesses wouldn't be exploited quite as much as they would be if you were having to deliver a commercially successful product to a company so maybe it is something that people should do up here because you'd get away with it up here but...



## B7.5 Justin

Justin is a 25 year old digital and motion designer with four and a half years design experience. Having begun his career working in design agencies he has recently made the decision to go freelance and is currently mostly working on animation and motion projects as a freelancer providing services to studios and agencies.

Overall impressions from Justin's narrative are of a designer who really enjoys what he does and is motivated by a constant desire to improve his skills and do better work. His recent decision to go freelance seems to be a conscious career decision to avoid what he sees as negative aspects of the design agency environment and allow him to focus on the work which he enjoys while also giving himself the freedom to do his own personal work. Justin describes his previous time in agency employment in similar terms to those which David describes his current experience: overworked and no longer enjoying design. For Justin, going freelance has allowed him to enjoy his work and his life again.

### Freelance vs. Agency

Having worked for several years in commercial design agency studio environments, Justin has made the decision to set up as a freelancer on his own. He has developed a specialist motion graphics skillset which allows him to find a steady stream of work, but doing this as a freelancer rather than as an employee of an agency allows him the freedom and flexibility which he felt he did not have working in such an environment.

One of the major downsides of working within an agency is said to be the culture of working late in order to get projects finished which is taken for granted and expected but which Justin puts down to simple poor time management or the taking on of unrealistic workloads. Although he still has to occasionally put in long hours as a freelancer he feels much more in control of his work/life balance, being able to take a breaks between projects. Within an agency he felt constantly run down by the endless grind of constant work on top of expectations to work late and with no hope of equivalent time off. Being freelance, Justin also enjoys being able to focus on one project at a time rather than having to balance many projects at once.

An aspect of the industry which he doesn't like in addition to the late working culture is the culture of unpaid internships.

Asked to compare agency work to freelance in terms of job satisfaction, Justin says that freelance is much more satisfying in terms of variety, freedom and flexibility.

He also feels that as a freelancer he is perceived differently, more as an individual and less as a faceless employee which he seems to prefer:

“Also feel like I’m exposed a lot more which is interesting because when you work in an agency you’re kindof like, well kindof nobody in a sense as in it’s the agency which has the face, that’s what the agency is doing but not you as an individual but as soon as you become a freelancer then you’re putting yourself out there and, people know it’s like you that they go to for work, so you kindof get perceived a bit differently I think by people in other agencies or clients. It’s really strange, but it’s a good thing I think, it’s definitely good.”

Justin suggests that the job security of agency employment can be a negative thing as it encourages complacency as the designer knows they will be paid regardless of how good their work is. It seems that Justin is driven and motivated in some ways by the pressure to do good work to get a good reputation in order to get more good work.

## **Good work**

Asked to describe what makes a good project, Justin suggests three ingredients: a client open to experimentation, having a good amount of time to be able to achieve a decent quality outcome, and having “the right people” involved. He talks of how it is much easier to work with some people than others and this makes all the difference. Justin talks of the importance of personal relationships to a good work environment. He suggests that in smaller agencies which work well everyone is friends, and in larger and expanding agencies this is lost. He does miss this friendship aspect which is lost in freelancing when he has little time to build friendships with those he works with.

## **Personal work**

The freedom of freelance allows him to enjoy designing on his own time when he is not working, to be able to design for pleasure and to experiment in this outwith the constraints of responsibility to the client.

He describes the importance of experimentation: “and if you’re not experimenting then you’re not learning new things.” and suggests that experimentation can occur within commercial work, but that this

is necessarily limited by constraints of time and budget. As mentioned above, his ideal client would be one open to experimentation as part of the project, but he recognises that there will always be limits to this when something has to be delivered. In personal work there are no such restrictions.

## Responsibility

Justin suggests that when he first started as a junior designer he was more interested in doing what he thought would be great work than in trying to do the best work for the client. He suggests that the agency structure encouraged this through the separation of designers from clients.

“I think before when I was in the agency it was like I wanted to make the nicest thing like to eh it was more for me, although it would be nice if it did well too, which is a bit selfish. I think all designers are like that to some extent.”

It seems that Justin has a strong sense of responsibility to the client to do the best work he can for them because it is their project. Now that he is freelance he feels this pressure more acutely as the success or failure of a client's project reflects directly on him personally rather than on a faceless studio.

He is frustrated by those designers who produce what he sees to be substandard work for clients:

There was a client I did work for recently, we did this really nice animation and then I got sent through a video that they'd just done last week for the same client but by another studio, and the quality of that was unbelievably bad it just, nothing like, I don't know what they were thinking. It really frustrated me because I know that they probably charged about the same amount that we did, and they've done them something that's just nowhere near the standard that it should be. Eh so things like that, that just really annoys me, we need some sort of level.

He suggests that he would support some form of accreditation for designers which would set a minimum standard for quality of design work and hopefully restore some of the reputation of the profession which is eroded by poor quality work.

He thinks that a system of accreditation could work.

Currently he suggests that it is too easy for designers to hide a lack of skill behind excuses of subjectivity.

He gets much of his inspiration from online sources but is selective, describing how much content is

derivative but there are inspirational gems to be found.

## **Purpose/Social role of design**

When asked if design has a role to play in society, Justin answers immediately “Oh yeah totally” and suggests that its social role is the same as its general purpose which he has earlier defined in the case of communication design as the conveying of information with clarity, efficiency and simplicity. Asked if this is a responsibility he suggests that the level of responsibility depends on the nature of the project being undertaken, that its ok for some projects to just be “fun and exciting, and weird” but that some have to be informative.

## B7.6 Keith

Keith is a junior designer/developer aged between 18-25, who has been working in an Aberdeen web design studio for around one year since completing his HND in visual communication at college. The studio is relatively small and deals mainly with local clients.

The main topics of Keith's conversation tend towards web-design specific issues often technical in nature and relating specifically to the business of designing web-sites and client/designer interactions within this. His outlook is generally positive, even when discussing difficulties with clients or projects he seems to feel that things always work out for the best.

### Web-design perspective

Keith's focus is obviously on the job at hand and most of his discussion is focussed specifically on issues relating to web-design. He talks of the compartmentalisation of tasks between design and development, the visual and coding aspects and how these are often passed around the team although the client may have the impression that one person has seen it through from start to end. He often references web specific terms. The technical aspects of the job are obviously a major part of what he does.

Asked what fuels him as a designer he says that the interactivity element of web-design and the ability to discover and explore new ways of engaging the user is what appeals to him in opposition to print design which he sees as more limited.

His outlook on design is positive. Asked what he would change about design if he could change anything, he says he wouldn't change anything as he is happy with the way that web-design is constantly changing and evolving:

"So, I don't know if there's anything I would change about design, as long as it stays sort of like rolling process of, you know, new things being discovered every day, and pushing things to their limits which I think is what design is still doing at the moment, that I don't think we necessarily need to worry about, design, and where it's going cause I think it will always, evolve."

### Good/Bad Design

Asked what makes a good design, he suggests that it is important that it not only looks nice but also "works

nice". In his college studies he says that visual aspects were more important but since working in the studio he has come to see that functionality and usability are the most important aspects in a web-design.

What I class as bad design? Umm bad usability, em at the beginning and I often see like college it was more about the looks of a web-site em whether the website was pretty and whether they had like cool transitions and that, em and although that is still very important like [inaudible] because usually what people see first ehm how a site is put together is often a big one, cause you can have the most complicated site map in the world with pages linking into different pages and if the navigation or how pages are linked together is broken or make no sense to the user, it ruins everything, so I think as time's gone on, I have learned mostly that it can look pretty as it can but as long as it works and it works well, often the best thing about the design is if it sort of, feels right.

In terms of what he counts as a good project, he describes some of the various problems that can occur during development, from changes from the client's side in terms of what their business does or changes in the market which shift the aims of the design mid-project, to technical development problems which the client never sees but which make the designer feel "down" at the end of a project. However, he suggests that the client is always happy in the end and that makes it worthwhile. An ideal project for him would be one which has "a nice clean run through of the site from start to finish without any major hiccups". The best outcome is when the design looked nice from the start and ends up still looking nice as well as working well at the end.

What also marks a good project to Keith is one where you're not sick of it by the end.

## **Client Relationships**

Keith is positive about client relationships suggesting that the idea that clients are somehow "evil" is a "really horrible misconception". He talks of how clients can have some "weird ideas" but that these generally come from good intentions only needing the designers advice and guidance on how to better achieve the intended aims without going "over the top". If the designer can offer a clear rationale for why the design should be the way they suggest rather than the client's idea, then he believes that the client more often than not respects the designer enough to go with their professional judgement. Keith suggests that "the client is always right at the end of the day because it's their company and they know what they're wanting." He talks of "working with" the client to negotiate the best result:

“what they wanted to get out of that, is, is right, they want to communicate as much as they can, so really it’s just working with them on sort of toning back some of their ideas, cause often they don’t, they won’t know what it’s like in the end, cause they can have ideas on what they want on a site, ehm but until you actually see it in action, well they’ll probably realise that it was a bit too much ehm whereas, because we have a bit more experience in sort of trial and error? We can advise them. Client’s can ask for some weird things: fonts and colours that just don’t go; layouts of pages that just seem a bit awkward, but eh a lot of people do trust the designer.”

When asked what the purpose of design, Keith equates this literally with the client’s purpose for the commissioned design: to help the client achieve the aims they set out to achieve.

## **Subconscious design**

When asked if design has a role in society, Keith talks of how design is sometimes perceived as “just fancy things” however he hopes that at some subconscious level people do appreciate and value good design:

“I hope that more people can tell the difference between bad design, ehm but then at the same time you still get sort of emergency signs written in comic sans, so there’s a few people out there that you don’t understand. (Laughs) Ehm but no I like to think that on a subconscious level, design’s important cause it does lead people to choose brands and that. Which probably is why a lot of brands end up being stereotypes of each other, ehm”

No indication is given of any further role for design in society than brand differentiation.

## **Trends**

Something Keith does not like is the way that web-designers “jump on board of current trends” and bandwagons. He says it drives him “insane” when people replicate something which they think is “cool” for no other reason until everyone is gets sick of it and moves onto the next new thing.

## **Good People**

Keith suggests that there is a “good group of people” online who reciprocally post, promote and draw attention to good design.



## B7. 7 Laura

Laura is aged between 26-35, has an honours degree in digital media design and 6-8 years on and off design experience. At the time that we meet, she is just starting to return to the small web-design studio part-time initially working back to full time after 8 months maternity leave following the birth of her second child. Having initially started as a designer, her role in the company has developed towards front-end development (the more technical side of web-design, involved with producing the functional interactive interfaces for web-pages).

As someone working exclusively with digital web-media it is not surprising that technical issues are recurring themes in Laura's narrative. The biggest single issue which arises is that of a frustration with budget restraints limiting the possibilities to do the best possible work. The other big theme is that of trust; greater trust from clients means a greater degree of autonomy to come up with the best designs.

Web-technologies move very quickly, the current major shift has been a move to responsive design which means designing sites which will work equally well on a range of devices with different screen sizes. This is generally accepted now within the industry as best practice, however it is an expensive process. The studio deals a lot with small local businesses and Laura talks with some frustration of the external pressures from the industry to do responsive design when many of their clients simply do not have the budget to pay for it:

you know responsive design is something that's kind of crept in gradually and now it's like "you must be doing it or you're not a real designer," which is rather irritating cause a lot of people don't have the budgets to account for it. This is the problem if you've got someone who's got two grand to spend on a website, you can't possibly do a good responsive website for that kind of money, and make a profit, so it's working within that can be very frustrating.

Web-design takes a lot more time to implement than graphic design for print, and therefore when jobs take longer than expected the studio's profit margins are cut into if not altogether lost. The challenges of working to within budget parameters is evidently a prominent concern in Laura's mind.

When I ask her what some of the biggest issues in design at the moment are, the first one she raises is the issue of budget restraints:

Unfortunately it always boils down to money because, the biggest issues that we ever have is that we want to do things that are top-notch and you know beautiful and well designed but that takes

time and unfortunately time is money. So if somebody does not have the money to spend, then you know we don't have the time to make something the way that we would necessarily want to make it.

The challenge of working to within a budget is seen as a direct challenge to the ability to do high quality work. Her feeling is that:

if it wasn't for that then everything would be fantastic. Unfortunately the way the world is with budgetary constraints you've just got to compromise occasionally, and compromised work comes out of it.

Laura talks of compromise in two senses: the compromise which results from having to be less ambitious than they would like with a project due to a client's limited budget, but also of compromises to be made between client and designer.

When I ask her how she would categorise a project as successful looking back on it, she lists three criteria:

Number one: did we make any money? Number two: is the client happy? Number three: are we happy with what we've done, with what we did? Because ultimately if you haven't made a profit, they project's not really a success. If the client's unhappy, it can't really be classed as a success. And if we've had to compromise too much to make the client happy then unfortunately no matter what they tell you: you're being paid by a client to do a job and if they want something you disagree with, you've kind of got to give it to them.

The first two criteria, making a profit and pleasing the client are seen as crucial to the success of a project. The third – how satisfied the studio are with the work – is desirable but is often sacrificed to the other two through compromise.

Laura's view of design is very much as a business which operates in service of the client's goals and desires. When I ask her what the purpose of design is, her answer revolves around solving various "problems" for the client:

Purpose of design? To solve a problem. Either, for us with our clients, it's either to get them noticed, to sell something, or to increase their client base, or to ehm refresh their brand identity,

The major challenge to achieving these goals is once again money:

It comes down to how can we solve the problem within the parameters of what the person's got to spend. And a lot of compromises have to be made. And the trick is trying to do it without it looking like compromises have been made.

However another major challenge is attributed to the client themselves. While Laura suggests that most of their clients do "value our opinion and what we do", they do get the occasional client who:

just thinks that you don't, they know best, and they will not ehmm accept any advice or any input from you, they just want you to do exactly what they've said that they want and they're not prepared to put any or take any advice.

While sometimes compromise with the client is necessary and acceptable, there is a certain point at which the designer feels that they effectively have had not significant input into the work other than to replicate the client's vision against their professional judgement. In such situations, the studio will still do the work but will not put their name to the finished product:

And unfortunately sometimes you've just got to suck it up and say "oh fuck it I'll just do it" [under breath].

In that circumstance I'm ashamed to say we tend to just not put our name on it. [Laughs] We didn't really do anything so we tend just not to, we don't own up to having been the ones to have done it unfortunately.

It seems to me that this strange and obviously, to Laura, regrettable ("ashamed [...] unfortunately") situation is the inevitable result of taking the view of design as a service provider to the client. The obvious comparison here is with Robert's attempts to negotiate a different relationship with the client by being seen not as a supplier of design but as a partner.

The issue of trust is identified by Laura as the other big issue of design, and it is this which is at the root of the tension felt in the unsatisfactory compromises between client and designer. Laura states that the big issue is:

people not trusting us to do our job. You get a lot of people who want to micromanage every element of a project which doesn't give you the freedom to do what you're paid to do, and it can take so much longer.

When the client wishes to control every element of a project, it evidences a fundamental lack of trust and respect for the professional expertise of the designer.

Laura recognises that the designer obviously cannot have complete freedom because “at the end of the day you’re dealing with people’s brand, their livelihood, sometimes their life’s work” however she emphasises that the designer must be allowed a certain level of autonomy in order to do the best possible work. Without this the work will be constrained and will suffer.

There client/designer relationship is complex and difficult to negotiate. Talking about the issue of handing over control of website maintenance to clients, Laura describes it the relationship as “a horrible game of trust”:

“you’ve essentially got to trust your own coding that it won’t break and trust that the other person at the other end is going to look after it, and put the right content in the right places, it’s like a horrible game of trust cause it’s your name that’s on it. And people are very quick to judge

It’s the same dynamic at work in both directions: the client can find it difficult to trust the designer with, as Laura says, their “brand, their livelihood, sometimes their life’s work” while the design studio are loathe to put their reputation on the line for design work which is compromised by non-designers’ uninformed preferences.

## **Social Role**

In response to the question of what the role of design in society might be, Laura talks of the importance of communication in society and design’s role in that, saying that:

Our job is to make sure that that is done in the most beautiful and efficient a way as possible. Our client’s all want to communicate with people, that’s the reason they have websites, they want to have the blog, and the news and the twitter feeds and everything in one place and I suppose what we do is try and tie it all together.

## **Responsibilities**

In response to the question of what responsibilities design might have, Laura talks of the importance of giving credit where it is due and making sure that all sources are legal, legitimate and appropriately

compensated. This is a positive expression of the importance of avoiding plagiarism.

## **Openness**

Laura says that their work is fuelled by their good relationships with their clients and that they try to keep the atmosphere of the studio as open and accessible as possible. This also extends to the internal relationships between staff:

there's a good ehm friendship in the office and people have a laugh and a joke and we can all be very truthful about peoples work and I think all that sortof fuels our process anyway,

## B7.8 Lee

Lee is 42 years old and claims around 20 years design experience. He is the proprietor/director of his own design studio which essentially is his own well established freelance practice. He appears to operate in a fairly privileged position in which through his experience he has built up a client base and is able to work flexibly as and when he likes. Initial impressions are of a thoughtful, experienced and confident designer. He seems to enjoy his work and certainly likes to talk about it.

### Not a job

Lee is obviously passionate about what he does, he talks at great length about his work and in great detail.

He seems to suggest that the key to his enjoyment of design is that he has never considered it to be a job.

Asked about what motivates him as a designer he says:

“But in terms of inspiration and what makes me continue is, it’s never ever felt like a job, it always feels like it’s play time, you know just, when you get to, I’m 42 now, and I’ve got a lot of friends and some who are successful and some who are... you know haven’t quite [inaudible] their potential. I don’t see myself fitting in either of those cause it still feels like, it’s not a job. When they talk about their jobs it’s about going in and having an argument with their boss – I don’t have a boss anyway – but they, I just don’t fit that way, I never have fitted that way, I mean my working pattern is all over the shop”

Lee describes how he works hard but in a way which fits in with his family life: he organises his working day around picking his kids up from school etc. and will often work later at night rather than during the day.

He describes how for some people design can be a 9-5 job which they go home from and forget about, and that this is perfectly valid as a lifestyle choice, but for him this is not the case.

He discussed how there is inevitably a lot of dull work to be done in graphic design but that he thinks most of what he does is not dull:

“but there is an awful lot of graphic design work which is dull. And I’m just glad I’m not doing that, you know it just never seems dull anyway. Funnily enough again this was a thought this morning was that since joining LinkedIn -which I’m not sure why I did it to be honest – but [laughs] there

are about 5 or 6 people now who have got in touch through obviously people who know me blah-blah-blah saying that "I am a graphic designer, I'm working for X company in Scotland or Aberdeen, but I'm looking for other work" and the companies they're working for are places like print/repro companies and things like that and of course they're looking for other work because the work they'll be doing is *dull*. And, but you need that as well. That needs to happen too and it's the same in any other industry, you know even in oil industry you'll get people who are doing cutting edge stuff but you'll also be doing, getting people who are assembling tools for the rest of their lives, so it's not, you can't as an industry, as a designer not even a graphic designer, as a designer, you are going to have the whole gamut from dull boring to unbelievably interesting and ground-breaking and hopefully you can try and work your way and be comfortable in your own skin."

Lee counts himself lucky that the work which he gets to do is generally not dull but "involving":

"There are so many aspects to design, there are so many aspects of even describing design and the core one for me and it seems that I've been very lucky that the jobs that I get involved in, and we occasionally do bread and butter stuff, but most of it is involving."

Lee describes how in 2006 he took his work in a completely new direction when after the birth of his son and the death of his father he realised that:

"I was designing with my eyes closed. I'd got to a point in my life where I was picking up jobs, I was charging a lot of money for them and I'd got to the point where I was proficient enough technically as well as graphically where I could basically just do whatever I wanted to and it would work and the client would be happy and I was not in any way happy whatsoever because it was you know money was coming in it was great, there was no [inaudible] whatsoever. So when those things happened I did a really rash thing, which was I threw, ooh 30 grand at doing greetings cards which is a completely different business. This was a case of, up until that point designing for clients, now let's make a product and see what sticks. And it was a roller coaster ride for three years, so for three years at that point, we produced a lot of greetings cards, went to a lot of trade shows, and it wiped it's face."

Lee and his partner left the greetings card business after a few years having covered costs and made regular income for that time, but deciding it wasn't the business for them. He now sells customised typographic prints online as a regular income. It seems that the mixture of this work with his client work suits his flexible



work/life style.

## Focus on user

Lee seems to have a distinct focus on the needs of the end user of design rather than the immediate desires of the client. When talking about an NHS signage project it seems he was very aware that the most beautiful design might not be the best design decision:

“And sometimes your infographics need to work. The thing is, this isn’t something where people are necessarily visually literate, so it has to be simple, it has to be pared down as much as possible, and yet do it’s job”

In the same project he talks of measuring success in terms of having answered the brief but measures this not by the standards of how happy the NHS are with the project but by the fact that the signage system he designed seems to work for the public who are the end customers.

## Authorship

The second example of work which Lee has brought is an example of the customised prints he sells via a popular online marketplace website. The customer specifies some variables including choice of text and Lee produced variations of the design for them. He talks about how this is an interesting process as he as the designer has specified the variables and produced the artwork yet the customer will see this as their own creation and he as the designer effectively disappears.

## Responsibility

When asked about the level of responsibility the designer has for his work in society when he as the designer is effectively invisible, Lee suggests that there is definitely a level of responsibility. He suggests that his own work is not political due to its content typically not having a strong enough message to be considered as such, but he talks of how the designer cannot escape responsibility by hiding behind excuses of interpretation: he suggests that there is always a level of manipulation of interpretation which the designer must take responsibility for:

You’re talking about interpretation then. If you’re talking about interpretation then instead of message then I think that there’s almost a given in my head that you know you have to understand

that something will be open to interpretation. But let's not get too pedantic about this because what I do isn't political. The message isn't strong enough for that, but you still have a bit of responsibility and I think that's where it crosses over so this isn't about, this is more about, if you have a message that can be misinterpreted or reinterpreted, emm I'm struggling to find, I suppose you could do that with the NHS stuff maybe, but nothing I'm doing has got a particularly strong message, as in a message that's, that is open to interpretation in many different ways or could be misinterpreted. So if you have as a designer, do you have a responsibility? Hell yes you do actually, and you know, it's not good enough just to say "but I've just done this thing and it's not up to me how it's read" I think there's more manipulation in that process than just that. But um, but I also, the converse argument of that, is uhm, that you can't entirely dictate how a design is going to be received. I'm sure I've got a really good example but I can't think of it right now.

In terms of design's social role he twice alludes to his belief that design cannot "save" the world or anything of that nature, but instead does suggest that design can help and be used for some good. "Now, you know, design isn't a saviour really of anything so it's not going to sort out social issues or anything like that but it can help."

At one point Lee suggests that he doesn't work for oil companies anymore because he's no longer "in that sphere". I ask whether he would object to working for oil companies, at which point he remembers that he has recently worked for an oil company, then goes on to consider whether there would be any client he would not work for:

"So yeah I don't object to working... I think I would probably object to working for... would I? Would I, would I, would I, would I? Would I object to working for anybody? I'd obviously object to working for people who are just completely politically off the radar for me, for obvious reasons like the BNP or something like that, that's a given. But there's a big kind of thing, and it doesn't happen anymore which is would you work for a tobacco company, and that doesn't really happen. Again in the 80's you had all these fantastic adverts for the likes of Benson and Hedges and Silk Cut which were very abstract and very intriguing, because they couldn't show people puffing away they had to rethink what they would do. Would I work for a tobacco company? Probably, I'm not, I don't have any major moral high ground on it, but it doesn't happen any more anyway."

## Good work

Lee describes how the design which he likes to be involved in is “deep” not “superficial”. He describes how 15-20 years ago it was common for studios to be “style led”:

“so they had a house style, and that’s where they would come from, so you would approach them because you like the look of what they’d done in the past. We were never ever about that. It kind of jars with me. The notion that, and I don’t think it really happens as much anymore but certainly at the times 15 years ago 20 years ago, ehm I think design is a response, it should be a response and it should be an informed response as well so that’s getting into it finely, and I think when design goes wrong it’s surface so it’s a, I’m very wary of using terms like wrong actually because it’s not when it goes wrong because if you’re designing a magazine cover it’s all surface you know it’s, that what it’s it’s a piece of ephemera it’s that kind of thing. Ehm, but the design that I like doing is, I like being involved in not necessarily doing is deep, you know gets into something and it goes into the unknown a little bit for me anyway and I don’t claim to be knowledgeable in everything my customers, my clients do, but that’s the excitement, to get into that.”

At one point he talks of how he misses working as part of a design team, he seems a very sociable person and often seems to emphasise the social relationship aspect of working with clients and stakeholders. His major clients are public bodies with whom he seems to have good relationships, he talks of the importance of trust which allows him the freedom to take the deep approach which he prefers in his work:

“but that’s also to do with not only the pattern of working but to do with the clients I’ve got, so even though I’ve got people like the NHS and social work and children’s support services, they are very deep in terms of the content, but then the other side of what I do is working for arts organisations so that’s the city and the shire’s arts development teams so they have a similar way of working, a similar you know it’s really great working for them because I can throw out design concepts and they’ll run with them for a little bit, they’ll let me have a free reign and there’s a trust involved in all that.”

He talks later of the importance of working *with* the client and not dictating to them what the right thing to do is:

“I don’t feel that way. I think you do as a designer know better about design because it’s your business, but you also need to bend a little bit sometimes and you need to accommodate things

like that. Otherwise it's not design. I think design is a process, you know it's about speaking to people, it's about thinking about their needs however bizarre they could be. And if you really feel something is not right, then you say "no actually, that's, I disagree with..." usually you can work around it. So it's a bit of a, about... powers of persuasion as well I think."

## B7.9 Lesley

Lesley (46-55) is a part-time freelance graphic designer who has been working in the design for print industry for approximately 30 years. Having trained at college level she initially worked as an art-worker for a printer before being made redundant around 11 years ago and setting up as a freelance graphic designer. We meet in a coffee shop near her home in a suburb of Glasgow.

### Autonomy vs. Trust, Respect

Lesley refers to her work as “low end design” which is “quite basic and boring”. The majority of her work is for local clients who tend to be small businesses, charities or other small organisations (rugby club, dog agility team, etc.). She specialises in print design which means that the majority of her work is concerned with design for producing business stationery, leaflets and other printed promotions and communications, signage, and any other flat printed materials.

The nature of the type of work she tends to do would generally be considered by most graphic designers, as it is by Lesley herself, to be “low-end” non-glamorous and unexciting work. It is interesting that despite, and in full knowledge of this, Lesley still appears to enjoy her work and has a generally positive attitude towards it. While several of my other interviewees express concern, discomfort and frustration with a perceived lack of autonomy in their work, Lesley is quite comfortable to be treated simply as “a tool” for clients to use to achieve their desired designs. Describing the typical way in which a job might come about she says:

Client comes to me looking for a logo, sometimes, they know exactly what they want and sometimes they don't know what they want at all so if they know exactly what they want it's easy, they're just using you as a tool to get what they want looking right

When I ask her whether she is ok with being used as a tool she replies that at first she found it hard, but now her main concern is more to have steady reliable work. Talking of one client who is very specific about what they want and doesn't allow her any creative freedom (“you put any sort of nice wee touch of design into it and they switch it right back”) she explains

It was kinda hard at first, but I've been working for them now, well I've been self-employed for 10 years? I've even lost count, at least 10 years. Maybe coming up for 11 years self-employed and they were one of my first companies so they sort of I'm their designer. And because they're a charity,

when business all fell apart and there was hardly any business work coming in cause everyone was cutting back, the charity kept on giving me work, so they're like my main customer now.

The complaint of some of the designers I have interviewed is that the client's inability to provide a space of autonomy to the designer demonstrates their lack of respect and trust in the professional designer. From Lesley's perspective, she values the respect and trust demonstrated by a client's loyalty to her in continuing to give her work while jobs from other clients disappeared, even though the nature of this work does not give her much creative freedom.

This theme of feeling valued and respected by the client is also brought to the fore in Lesley's comments on the payment practices of clients. One of the reasons she likes to work for charities is that they consistently pay on time ("they never ask you to do something until they've got the funding to pay for it which is nice as well, they're good payers."), while she expresses quite some frustration at the payment practices of some business clients. When I ask her what one thing she would change about the design industry she voices her obvious strong feeling of the injustice of clients assumption that they can commission and benefit from design services then not pay for this work promptly (common business practice is to leave the payment of invoices until the last possible date, 30, 60 or sometimes even 90 days after the work has been received):

I think people should pay you the minute they have it. I don't understand, well not particularly for design but for print, why if you walk into a shop and take a shirt off a rail and walk out without paying are you done for shoplifting and in industry like design you haven't got to pay for it until way way way after they've already been using it,

Lesley values custom from clients who give her regular work and pay for it promptly. To her, these concerns outweigh any desire to do interesting/exciting work.

## **How to not lose the joy of design: Part-time, Priorities,**

What factors could explain Lesley's laid back attitude towards design which contrasts so starkly with that of, for example, the attitudes expressed by John in my interview with him? Both Lesley and John admit to doing work which is, most of the time, not wildly creative, yet John is frustrated and disillusioned, while Lesley claims to have "never not liked it, I've always quite enjoyed it."

I put this question to Lesley, and she suggests that perhaps her failure to lose the joy of the job might have something to do with the fact that she only works part-time. She does admit to sometimes being bored

with the repetitive uncreative work but then launches into an in-depth explanation of a more interesting project which her tone seems to suggest makes up for the less interesting periods:

Hmm, I don't work full time at it. I sometimes get a bit bored with the [Care(Charity)] stuff when it's quite but they're just doing a big revamp, they've got a really cool little leaflet that works like [folds a piece of paper into a square fold out leaflet format] they've maybe got about ten different types. So that's the front, that's page one, we never know what page that is, we call it the flippy-flappy, it's got to be a stand alone page that one, so that's a spread and you open it up that's six pages and that's the back it's got all the contact details on it.

As she describes this project, I notice her skill in folding a sheet of paper incredibly quickly and accurately from a flat sheet into a perfect little booklet. Her years of experience show in her obvious technical skills, yet she refers to a part of the paper construction as "the flippy-flappy". I think this small incident offers two further insights into why, perhaps, she has not lost the joy of her work.

Firstly she has excellent technical skills in working with paper, which is a major part of print design; she obviously enjoys the technical elements of design, the parts which don't necessarily require high-end conceptual autonomy. Another example of this is found in her enthusiastic description of a CD packaging project in which she developed a technical design solution for holding the disc into the packaging. These are "low-end" jobs but she finds satisfaction and creativity in the things which she is good at, the more traditional technical elements which some designers today might overlook.

Secondly, her use of the term "flippy-flappy" demonstrates that she does not feel the requirement to use pretentious designer language. She demonstrates no interest in design "culture" stating that she "wouldn't know even know who any designers were". She does not take design too seriously. Just after I had turned off the recorder at the end of the interview Lesley told me about the experience of one of her colleagues from her time working at the printers in Glasgow. He had left around the same time that she was made redundant and had set up his own studio and worked extremely hard to make it a success, taking it very seriously. Eventually he realised that he was investing all his time and energy in the business to make it the success it was, so that he could earn money to be able to take time off to spend with his family. He decided to down-size the business and found that he actually made more money and now had more time to spend with his family as he was no longer exhausting himself striving to succeed.

Lesley's priorities in life are not focussed on making it big in design. Her central concern seems to be family.



She talks of going freelance as the “best thing that ever happened” partly because it allowed her to work from home which worked out well for family life: being nearby for her two sons and her father. Mid-way through the interview her father calls her:

[phone rings] It’s my dad. [brief phone conversation] He calls quite a lot. That’s the good thing about working from home, he comes up and chaps on the door, comes and has a cup of tea or his lunch or something, he doesn’t stay long, he’s just lonely.

Recently she took on some regular work for a local newspaper doing layout which she describes as “absolutely and utterly dead boring. Dead easy though. Could do it in your sleep.” She took this work on even though she doesn’t enjoy it and it is relatively low paid in comparison to her normal rates, so that she could have a guaranteed income for a few months in order to be able to purchase an i-pad for her son’s Christmas. Design is not Lesley’s whole life, it is something she enjoys and which she does to earn money not to survive but to support her other higher priorities in life.

One of the advantages of working part-time from home is that it affords Lesley the freedom to pursue other interests. In an unexpected turn in the conversation, she admits that she “did diversify into pet-sitting for a while: that was good money, cause I could do it alongside, cause I was working from home so I did some daycare for dogs.”

Although this might seem like a bolt from the blue, it actually quite nicely sums up Lesley’s integrated approach to life and work. The majority of her clients are gathered either through a direct personal connection or through word of mouth references. Her dog-sitting has allowed her to avoid having to cold-call to look for work (something which she greatly dislikes and is uncomfortable with) as she simultaneously gained income and extra graphic design clients. She describes various relationships built with clients through chance personal encounters:

There’s one client who got a puppy on the strength of me looking after it when it was a puppy. That’s quite a good set-up, cause he’s a computer expert, I do all his design for him, and he fixes my computer for me. But we usually pay each other, and there’s another girl who I look after her dog, she’s actually one of my biggest business customers she’s got a clinical trials research company ehm out walking the dog, met her “oh you’re a designer aren’t you, I’m looking for a logo” huge company now. Started off there was three of them and now they’re international she’s got branches in America, and I do all their design work.

Several of her professional relationships involve some element of in-kind exchange. She talks of a cook-book project coming up with the man who runs her exercise class in return for free classes. Although she has some international clients, her approach is definitely fundamentally local. Immediately after describing her work as “basic and boring” she describes some instances of her work:

If you come out of here and turn left you’ll see a shop front that I’ve designed and as you go through the area you’ll see estate agents boards that I’ve designed, all the window graphics – now he doesn’t actually use me for print anymore because I refused to do the print cheap he uses snappy print or something for that and they’re crap, he comes to me if he’s got a very expensive house to sell or something – but I did all the design work for him. And around the corner as well there’s another estate agent, the one on the corner I did all that shopfront and you’ve got one in Bearsden as well I did and round the back just over there actually there’s another estate agent called [EA], I never designed the logo but she uses me to do all her other stuff, she’s done a car recently, actually I need to finish that off, [...] It’s quite good when you’re walking about and you see stuff that you’ve designed on the side of a bus or something and “oh I designed that”

Lesley recognises the importance of design to local businesses. She tells of how she chose a builder to do work on her house:

the reason he got the job off of us was, he was a couple of hundred pounds more expensive which is nothing in the grand scheme of things. There was two reasons he got the job, 1. Because I had been told he was quite efficient, the other builder that we were considering we’d been told that he had too many jobs on at one time and your job would run late, and the other one was had a really nice logo which he’d applied to the sign of his van, and he came and he was smartly dressed and he came with the quote on this letterhead and I was like “Oh I really like your letterhead” and he’d been a signwriter, he’d worker for a signwriting company as joiner and he’d ended up being a builder and I have done four or five corporate identities and logo designs for the companies he’s set up since he built my extension.

A little investment in design can tip the balance in favour of one small business over another. Many small businesses operate on very tight budgets, so Lesley’s “low-end” freelance approach appeals to this niche.

## Purpose of Design

As far as the purpose of design is concerned Lesley conceives it in terms of visual communication, with simple visual attractiveness rated over “selling” or concretely achieving anything. The purpose of design is:

To get an image across, whether it be to sell something or encourage people to do something or sometimes to just make something look attractive to the end user the person that’s reading it or looking at it. Doesn’t even have to sell something or do something it just has to be attractive.

When asked whether design has a role in society, Lesley answers:

yeah definitely. I think there’s a lot of design goes into a lot of things that people don’t realise has been designed but because it’s been well designed it makes somebody’s life, or makes that action just, even just forms you know bits of publicity that require you to do something. If it’s well designed and the right information’s there and the right questions are asked then it has an impact on... don’t know if it has an impact of society but it certainly has an impact on the individual that’s having to do something. If you get a form that’s complicated or doesn’t ask the right questions...

She is aware of the pervasiveness of design throughout the whole of our environment and the effect which this can have on our activities in daily life. She suggests that people don’t realise the impact that designed environment has on improving their lives, or making them more difficult if it is done badly.

## Helping lives

Lesley had earlier suggested that she preferred working for charity clients because they tend to give her regular work and pay on time. I asked her whether this was the only reason she preferred charity work or whether there was something in the nature of the work which also made it more satisfying. Her answer reinforced her belief that design has the potential to help people in their lives:

“I just think you feel as though, see that survival guide, you know that whoever used it in the end it was going to make their life easier, same with the guy that wrote it, you know the amount of information that he put into that that was just going to make these people’s lives easier. Well charity’s just always going to be more satisfying than designing a brochure to sell machine parts.”

For her, there is something inherently rewarding in doing work which can be seen to have a direct positive impact however small on someone’s life. This could also be a key element to Lesley’s satisfaction with her

“low-end” work. The majority of her work is either for people she knows at a personal level, or for charities whose work is helping people. Her levels of personal satisfaction in this work with personal and emotional significances are likely to be much higher even though the nature of the work itself is dull.

When I ask her whether the process is any different with charities and businesses she suggests that it is the same: “they’re both trying to get people to do what they want them to do.” However she finds greater satisfaction in working for charities.

## **Honesty**

Lesley talks of the importance of honesty in her work. She says that she is “a great believer in just telling the truth” talking of a recent job which went wrong when the printed material failed to arrive on time for an event. It is simply easier to tell the truth than to lie and get caught out. She tells how her part-time employer at the local newspaper is constantly lying to her clients about when work is going to be finished etc. Lesley found this very difficult and is happy to no longer be working there at the moment although she may return as she enjoyed the social aspect.

## B7.10 Robert

Robert is Creative Director of a successful graphic design studio in Aberdeen. He is aged between 36-45 and has around 17 years experience in the design industry. We meet in the afternoon at a coffee shop in the city centre. Robert likes to talk; I ask very few questions throughout the interview as he is happy to talk at length on a variety of subjects with very little prompting from myself. It is not until around 40 minutes into the recording that I actually ask a question. The topics of conversation are therefore very much Robert's, not my own, which is very interesting considering the high proportion of content which can be seen to have an ethical dimension.

My primary impression of Robert is of a man who is passionate and enthusiastic about his business. The key themes which emerge from the interview are: his desire to see design respected, recognised and valued as a legitimate expert profession; his concern for good process and working environment as necessary factors which contribute to being able to do the best design work; and the theme that design should (with perhaps the suggestion that this is in fact an imperative) aspire to more than simply fulfilling form and function, but in fact to "helping" people in whatever they are doing.

### **Design: Recognition, Respect, Value**

An image which stands out for me from the whole interview, is Robert's assertion that what he wants from clients is "to be treated in the same way as an accountant and a solicitor is". This really struck me as a remarkably unusual viewpoint, something which I had never heard from a designer before. Generally, designers would tend to look down upon accountants, solicitors and other "suits" as almost the "anti-creatives". There is a certain pride among "creative" workers such as designers in being exactly the opposite of what are seen as restrictive, stuffy, unimaginative, systematic, bureaucratic professions. Yet here is a senior creative, wishing that his clients would treat him like an accountant. The reasoning behind this unusually expressed desire is not anything to do with the creativity of the discipline, but rather to do with the levels of *respect* given to the established professions.

Robert feels that established professional fields such as accountancy, law, architecture etc. are respected by their clients and given a certain level of autonomy to practice their expertise on the client's behalf thus indicating a level of trust. Designers on the other hand, he feels, are not shown this trust and respect, but

rather are often treated as mere “suppliers”. Over the past two years, Robert’s studio have been trying to change the way their business operates, attempting to emphasise to clients the idea of thinking of the studio not as *suppliers* of branding and communication services, but as *partners* in these activities.:

“We don’t sell mugs you know, we don’t. We don’t sell washers. It’s a partnership so don’t tell us what you need, [...] if their accountants were doing their books they wouldn’t interrupt them to kind of change how they did their books, they would let them get on with it, so it’s a similar kind of thing.”

A relationship conceived as a partnership implies mutual responsibility. This is what Robert is after. He recognises that greater recognition and trust must be earned and evidenced:

“For us to do the best work we can do, we must get the trust of our client we must demonstrate what we’re doing is doing the job you know? It has to be measurable in some way.”

This is more easily said than done. Part of the solution according to Robert is the management of client’s expectations of how design works and what it does:

“there’s no magic bullets, there’s no quick fix to anything, if you want to achieve something, you have to invest in time, you’ve to invest in design and you have to be a little bit patient’ So if they want to improve sales, it’s not rocket science you’ve just got to put a bit of spend and a bit of creativity across all channels for a set amount of time and keep at it. This whole brand partners belief thing is about controlling clients’ expectations of what our job actually is...”

While the designer has a responsibility to ensure that the client understands what is realistically possible, and also that things may often not work first time and could require iterations over a period of time, the client also must share responsibility. Robert absolutely believes in the power of design to make a difference to a business, however the success of a design relies not only on the strength of the promise which the design makes, but also on the ability of the client to keep that promise to the user/consumer. He is aware of the potential misuses of design:

“how many businesses do you know out there whose service and product is absolutely shite but with good branding and good design - they’ll soon be caught out - but they can be recognised they can get customers and obviously they’ve then got to live up to that promise; they often don’t, but design can help differentiate ”

Robert is pushing for a greater sense of equally recognised mutual responsibility between designer and client. He believes that if both parties would credit the other with a little more respect and trust in their respective expertise, better design work which works better for its purpose will result.

Robert feels that design often fails to communicate the realities of, and reasons behind its successes and failures. If design could improve this and come up with better ways to explain and communicate its effects in tangible ways, it might be easier for clients to trust the designer with a little more autonomy.

## **“Helping lives”**

Robert is quite clear as to what he believes the purpose of design is, or rather should be. He talks of how design is often conceived in terms of “form and function” and agrees with this to a certain extent, but is not satisfied that this is *all* that design should be:

“it’s absolutely true it is form and function. If it didn’t have one or the other it wouldn’t be design. If it’s without form it’s engineering, if it’s without function it’s art so its form and function but I think that’s a pretty kind of low level way to think about it. I think even Spiekermann, Erik Spiekermann himself, he says it’s about helping lives and that’s what it is.”

As an example of what he is talking about, he describes the recent experience of visiting a relative in hospital:

I recently had to go to hospital quite a lot to visit a relative and this is a boring project but the wayfinding the signage inside the hospital is absolutely terrible, now what they’ve done is in the intensive care unit they’ve invested in these fake ceiling, fake roofs and they’re backlit, and they’ve got fake trees, and they’re terrible, and the reason I know about them is that’s one of our clients, and they’re telling us “Oh they’ve made a huge difference”. Now I was in that intensive care unit visiting a relative at three o’clock in the morning: it makes no fucking difference. What would have made a great difference was if the signage had been good enough to get me from the car park to the intensive care unit without wandering around like a lost boy you know?

In Robert’s eyes the purpose of design is to help people in their lives in whatever task they are interested in. As far as he is concerned the expensive screens in the hospital are a distraction which exemplifies a common perspective on what design is: more, newer, shinier and bigger = better. Actually his experience of the environment tells him that what would really make a difference to the lives of those having to enter



the hospital would be an improvement in the sign-age for way-finding. This kind of work might often be overlooked as “boring” but it is actually the intervention which would make a real difference.

His narrative seems to suggest some perception of a hierarchy of the potential which certain jobs, by their nature, have, to help people in their lives. He describes the websites which the studio does for oil companies as having “probably not a lot” of opportunity, whereas websites for property companies they work for have much more potential to make a difference. It seems this potential to “help” is linked to how personal and emotionally involving the task is. Helping someone find a new home or job ultimately has deep personal and emotional impact. Robert describes it: “you’re helping that person make a life-changing kind of choice. That’s for me where design lives.” Conversely: “that’s why the businesses design work can sometimes be harder to emm to get a sense of it because there’s less emotion in business you know?” Design’s ability to “help” people in their lives is situated at a very human personal level:

If you’re helping someone find a new house, or you’re helping someone find a new job in terms of you’ve re-branded a recruitment agency, you’ve built a website and its helping somebody find a, your work is directly helping somebody find a new job that’s something great about that or you’ve redesigned the way-finding at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and you know a family that has arrived at 3 o’clock in the morning can find accident and emergency without having to stop anybody and ask, that for me that’s what design should be that’s the kind of thing you should be feeling, that’s really, “I know that my work has done that”.

Robert seems to be primarily motivated by the reward of satisfaction in knowing that his work is directly helping another individual. However at a wider social level, Robert’s response to the question “Do you think design has a role in society?” speaks of an awareness of the significant impact which design has on society. Every decision which a designer makes, add to and constitutes our designed environment, building a collective impact:

yeah I think because everybody in everyday life is surrounded by design good or bad and this comes back to helping people, going back to, whether its signs on the street, the forms you fill in, the shops you go to, the ... whatever it is you’re surrounded by decisions that designers have made for good or for bad.

Robert also talks of this impact in the longer term suggesting an idea of legacy:

the artists and architects and philosophers and writers hundreds of years ago, they formed society:

designers are very much part of that now as well, obviously it's the superstar designers that we're talking about but whether it's architecture, products, fashion, some graphic design: Jonathon Ive, Jonny Ive, the cultural impact he himself has had will be measured in years to come so I think definitely, definitely and that's going back to the helping people.

What I find to be very interesting in all this is his conception of what constitutes "helping". Immediately following his comments on the society-shaping historical legacy of design he makes this statement:

And when I say helping people I also mean just providing stuff that people want to buy, cause that's I suppose nowadays people buy stuff to aspire to a lifestyle ideal that they have in their head I suppose that's helping them as well in that.

For Robert, helping people to buy products in order to achieve a lifestyle ideal to which they aspire is an admirable, desirable and ethical act on a par with that of helping people to easily navigate a hospital building in a time of high emotional stress. For him this is a perfectly legitimate and worthy goal.

It is interesting to compare Robert's comments here with Frank's. In response to the question of the role of design in society Frank also talks of the role of design being to "make life easier for people" and also mentions the example of hospital signage. Frank also mentions design's role in promoting consumption of products, however his perspective on this is quite different to Robert's. Frank states: "The downside to our role in society is that we're obviously ultimately trying to sell shit to people that they don't actually need." While Frank sees promotion of unnecessary consumption as a negative thing in society, Robert sees it as a positive, as it is *helping* people to achieve their desires.

I personally would tend to identify more with Frank than with Robert on this issue. I would agree with Robert's observations of the powerful influence of design in shaping society in terms of immediate behaviour and environments as well as long term historical paradigm shifting legacies, however it is precisely because of this that I find his statement about design assisting consumerism led lifestyles so uncomfortable. Hearing these two consecutively expressed thoughts, my immediate reaction is to recognise consumerism as the dominant social paradigm of our age, the historical legacy which design is creating. Being someone critical of the effects of consumerism – socially, economically and ecologically - I am uncomfortable with this being seen as design's greatest achievement in "helping" humanity. The questions which immediately spring into my mind are: why are people aspiring to these lifestyle ideals which require consumption of products?; who creates these desires and aspirations, planting these seeds in

people's heads?; should designers unquestioningly supply products to fit people's every desire?

There is little evidence of this type of critical questioning of the underlying structures of society within Robert's narrative. Something I can't quite work out is that Robert does let out a little chuckle immediately after making his statement about helping people by "providing stuff that people want to buy", yet his tone appears to be entirely sincere. Perhaps he does recognise and find humorous some element of paradoxical absurdity in his own statement? Perhaps not.

The recurring theme in Robert's narrative is that design should be helping people. As far as he is concerned he is striving to achieve this wherever and to whatever extent possible in the everyday work of his studio. The terms in which this is expressed almost suggest that he in fact sees "helping" as an imperative in design: that design without the element of consciously attempting to help, is not worthy to be called design at all:

thing is there's another level for me it's yeah, design at it's very lowest level, the wedge in that door has form and function and it's helping that door stay open but there's got to be something more than that. [...] And yeah if it's not doing that then I dunno what it is.

It is clear that Robert upholds "helping" as a central if not indispensable foundational element of design. To him this is something of an ethical imperative and according to such criteria he finds no ethical inconsistencies in undertaking his day to day work.

Ethical frameworks within different ideological frameworks can be equally earnest, but result in radically different opinions, actions and outcomes. Robert's definition of helping includes both the emotional personal level and the more abstract level of business: "it is form and function but it's about helping people whether that's person in the street, or helping a business achieve their goals." From this position, helping a business achieve increased profits is an ethical act in the same way that helping an individual with a personal goal is one.

I ask Robert about situations in which a client might ask to be helped with a particular goal which he would disagree with. His response, mirroring in the opposite his account of levels of worthiness in design which helps, speaks of levels of un-worthiness in design jobs which run against the designers conscience:

Yeah I think as a designer you, I think ah it's easy to say this cause it's never really happened to us, but I think, I think you have to listen to what your conscience says, I would personally find it very difficult to work with a company I disagree with, I mean properly disagree with you know: I don't

particularly like oil and gas companies obviously but we work with them as a necessary evil but you know if there was a political party I didn't agree with or a company that was exploiting certain things or certain areas then I think there would be a problem

Here the idea of "drawing the line" emerges. Robert later states that, despite being a Labour supporter he would work for the Conservative party ("cause I don't see them as evil you know"), but would definitely not work for the BNP or another group who he had strong ethical objections to.

Part of the reason Robert invokes for not being able to work with clients with whom he fundamentally disagrees with, is that he believes the mutual trust and respect he has already suggested is necessary to achieve the best design work, cannot exist between parties with fundamental unbridgeable differences:

and I think if you're going to be true to design if you're going to try to do the best job, it's this partnership again, you have to have a common agenda, and that common agenda can't have those things.

Robert suggests that personal disagreement's between individuals can be overcome in the interests of the job, however "when it comes to the morals of design, yeah I think that's, that's for the individual to decide I suppose."

Robert is conscious that in his senior position within the studio, the decisions he makes about clients and jobs taken on, have an ethical implication for others working in the studio:

I think, if you going to be true to design and true to your clients cause as a guy who runs a design studio I also have a responsibility for the people who work in it – I don't like saying work for me cause I don't think about it that way – but my colleagues, they wouldn't be happy if I suddenly turned round and said "right, we're doing work for North Korea or something" you know! I'm exaggerating to make a point but you know what I mean.

Robert seems to be suggesting that there are multiple responsibilities to be maintained and balanced: to be true to design; to be true to clients; to not put colleagues in an uncomfortable position where they are forced to make the individual decision to go against a company decision to do work which would violate their conscience. The implication is that he feels it is his responsibility to choose to work with clients who are not so unacceptably objectionable (they may be objectionable up to the level of a "necessary evil") that mutual trust and respect between all parties cannot create the conditions for high quality design work to

result.

## Process and Environment

This brings us on to the final major theme which I have drawn out from Robert's narrative. That of his concern to create and maintain good processes and environments within the studio in order to be able to produce the best work possible. The recurrent concepts here are trust, respect, honesty and transparency, between clients and the studio, and between the members of the team within the studio itself.

Robert discusses at length some of the developments which they have implemented in their working processes such as no longer producing visuals when pitching for new clients, and no longer creating detailed web-page mockups for clients in web-design work. In the example of speculative pitching - a controversial process by which several studios or designers are asked by a single client to produce unpaid concept pitches in competition to "win" the paid project - Robert feels that it is in fact disrespectful to the client to produce advanced visuals showing what the finished work might look like without undertaking the in depth design process in order to get to that end result. They might produce visuals for a client they are already familiar with, but:

a new company you don't know? You don't know what their strategy is, you haven't got used to how they work and who their customers are. To go away after on briefing session and say right this is what your company should look like? No way. So we just don't do it any more.

The reasoning behind these decisions returns to the idea of managing client's expectations in order to do the best work. Instead of dazzling the client with beautiful images which promise the world but which may well fail, Robert's studio hope to demonstrate and explain to the client that design is not a quick-fix, but a long-term iterative partnership which requires deep understanding and investment. It is important to be honest and transparent about the reality that the design or designers may initially fail and the project may require multiple iterations before it achieves its goal.

Robert also talks at length of the importance of trust, respect and openness within the studio context. He talks of how important teamwork is and how that teamwork relies on openness and vulnerability to each other to accept criticism quickly and constantly in order to be able to work together on projects.

Robert is obviously proud of and inspired by his colleagues and is talks enthusiastically about the nature of the creative environment of the studio and the ways in which they maintain this. In comparison to other

interviewees Robert does not seem to have lost any of the joy of designing.

He talks of the importance of being involved with non-productive side-projects “Just little things that break away from the corporate day-to-day work” which inspire and keep design from becoming stagnant “cause in the end of the day its your job and your hobby and I think you know you need to keep it fresh and sometimes you can’t always keep it fresh by working with corporations”.

Robert gets most animated when talking about the everyday aspects of studio life such as:

it’s a weird little thing that’s started at [our studio] we decided everybody would take a turn baking cake on people birthday’s so what’s happened is, the cakes themselves are just standard cakes but the design and the icing of them is getting more and more kind of ridiculous, everybody’s trying to outdo each other every time so its like some in-joke and it’ll be kind of done in icing and so it’s quite funny and for me that’s inspiring, that’s just having like fun with your colleagues, and you know you work better in those situations, ehm just like at uni, you need to to have that little fun side of things,

It seems that Robert takes the nature of the studio environment seriously as a responsibility to his colleagues personally (“at the end of the day you’re trying to make sure everybody’s you know, not insane”) and in the knowledge that a more creative relaxed and enjoyable environment creates the conditions which will allow better work to be produced.

